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## Headlines

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## [Brexit](#)

# DUP leader keeps hopes of protocol deal on track as he declares ‘progress’ in talks

Jeffrey Donaldson says ‘big moment’ looming in Rishi Sunak’s effort to cut a post-Brexit deal with EU

- [UK politics live – latest news updates](#)



Jeffrey Donaldson (centre) departs after speaking to the media following talks with Rishi Sunak in Belfast on Friday. Photograph: Charles McQuillan/Getty Images

[Rory Carroll](#) and [Lisa O'Carroll](#)

Fri 17 Feb 2023 10.32 ESTFirst published on Fri 17 Feb 2023 03.30 EST

The Democratic Unionist party has kept on track Rishi Sunak's attempt to change the [Northern Ireland](#) protocol, declaring "progress" in Downing Street's talks with the EU.

Jeffrey Donaldson said on Friday a "big moment" was looming in the UK's effort to cut a deal with Brussels over [Brexit](#) trading arrangements for Northern Ireland. The DUP leader said his party would withhold judgment on any deal – which is expected next week – until it had seen the text.

His conciliatory tone, and the lack of preemptive condemnation, kept [Sunak's path to a deal](#) intact.

"The decisions that will be taken by the prime minister and by the European Commission will either consign Northern Ireland to more division or they will clear a path towards healing and to the restoration of the political institutions," Donaldson told reporters after meeting the prime minister in Belfast.

The DUP has paralysed the Stormont assembly and executive to protest the protocol and said it will restore power sharing only if a refashioned system meets [seven conditions](#).

"Clearly this is a big moment, the next generation of Northern Ireland and its people requires us all, I think, collectively to use our best efforts – particularly the prime minister and the European Commission president – to get these issues resolved and to get to a place where the political institutions can be restored," said Donaldson.

Progress had been made across a range of areas, he said. "But there are still some areas where further work is required."

Sunak, who left Belfast for Germany to meet EU leaders, elicited positive responses from other party leaders who had briefer meetings.

Sinn Féin was heartened by the "significant progress", said its leader, Mary Lou McDonald. "The bottom line is that we have to ensure that any deal

provides for ongoing access to the European single market, no hardening of the border on the island of Ireland and a protection of the Good Friday agreement in all of its parts.”

Colum Eastwood, the leader of the Social Democratic and Labour party (SDLP), said he was optimistic there would be a deal to restore power sharing. “I think most of the issues that the DUP have put on the table will be resolved, and we all know in every negotiation you don’t get everything you want.”

EU officials believe a deal on the Northern Ireland protocol is close, after talks between the UK foreign secretary, James Cleverly, and the EU official in charge of Brexit, Maroš Šefčovič, in Brussels on Friday. “Constructive engagement. Good progress,” Šefčovič tweeted, adding: “Hard work continues.” Striking a similar note, Cleverly said it was a “constructive meeting” and “intensive work continues”.

“We are in sight of the harbour, but we are not quite there yet,” one EU diplomat said, noting Šefčovič had detected a turning point in British attitudes since Sunak became prime minister. “The tone was fundamentally different from what we have seen over the past eight years ... [Sunak] is more interested in finding actual solutions than posturing and solutions that are just solutions in name only.”

Briefing EU ambassadors on Friday about the talks, “[Šefčovič] conveyed a sense of urgency that this is close”, said a second diplomat.

The EU is understood to have conceded ground on the issue of customs checks on goods moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. The UK had proposed a system of red and green lanes for lorries that would allow goods in the latter category to avoid customs declarations.

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EU officials believe a compromise with lighter checks is possible, because the UK has agreed to share real-time customs data to track the movement of goods.

The role of the European court of justice (ECJ) in policing the Northern Ireland agreement will remain, but there will be more layers of arbitration before disputes are referred to Luxembourg. Currently, the first port of call for disputes is a UK-EU “specialised committee”, but there will be additional venues for airing disputes about the protocol before going to the European court.

“As long as the ultimate arbiter is the ECJ I think there is room for more levels [of arbitration] below that and Šefčovič was very clear that the ECJ red line would not be crossed,” said the diplomat.

EU sources expect Sunak to announce a deal early next week, but remain unsure whether he can sell it to his Eurosceptic backbenchers and the DUP. “With the UK, you never know,” said an official. “We should hope [there is a deal] because I don’t see anyone else who is capable of doing it.”

“The question is, to what extent can [Sunak] convince his party members that there is enough meat for them to accept – to what in their eyes will always be a suboptimal deal.”

Meanwhile, David Jones, the deputy chair of the European Research Group of Eurosceptic Conservative MPs, which has said it is in “lockstep” with the

DUP, tweeted that Northern Ireland “must cease to be subject to laws made in Brussels”.

“It’s as simple as that,” he said. “Anything less won’t work.”

Speaking on Thursday night, Ireland’s deputy prime minister, Micheál Martin, said negotiations had been “serious and substantive” but further discussions were due over the weekend when Sunak was expected to meet the commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, on the sidelines of a security conference in Munich.

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[Politics live with Andrew Sparrow](#)**Brexit**

# Irish PM ‘quietly confident’ of NI protocol agreement within fortnight – as it happened

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## [Lancashire](#)

# Police release of Nicola Bulley's personal details 'as sexist as it comes'

Former victims' commissioner Vera Baird says revelations likely to hamper future missing person cases

'As sexist as it comes': ex-victims' commissioner condemns release of Nicola Bulley details – audio

[Josh Halliday](#) and [Robyn Vinter](#)

Fri 17 Feb 2023 17.29 ESTFirst published on Fri 17 Feb 2023 04.10 EST

The release of sensitive details about the missing woman Nicola Bulley was “as sexist as it comes”, the former victims' commissioner has said, as [Lancashire](#) constabulary come under further pressure over their handling of the case.

Dame Vera Baird condemned the force's “dreadful” decision to divulge medical information about Bulley, saying it was “the biggest error that I have seen for quite a long time”.

The Lancashire constabulary has faced growing scrutiny since [it revealed](#) that Bulley, 45, had had “significant issues with alcohol”, brought on by the menopause, before she disappeared three weeks ago.

Police searches have been focused on the River Wyre, into which she is thought to have fallen, though specialist divers have yet to find anything.

On Friday morning, Bulley's father, Ernie, spoke about the need for a breakthrough in the case.

“Every day is a struggle,” he told Sky News. “[We're] no further on from three weeks ago. [We] just need a breakthrough to give us some hope.”

Lancashire constabulary had come under increasing pressure to provide more details to the public in the days running up to the release of her personal information.

The force said on Friday it would conduct an internal review into the investigation, to be carried out by its head of crime, DCS Pauline Stables.

Suella Braverman spoke with Lancashire constabulary on Friday about her concerns over the disclosing of Bulley's personal information. A source close to the home secretary said she outlined her concerns during a meeting with the force's leadership.

"The home secretary today spoke with Lancashire police chief constable Chris Rowley and his senior team to discuss the handling of the investigation into the disappearance of Nicola Bulley," the source said.

"The home secretary asked to be kept updated on the investigation."

Rishi Sunak told broadcasters earlier in the day that, like the home secretary, he was "concerned that private information was put into the public domain" by officers.

The prime minister said he was "pleased that the police are looking at how that happened in the investigation".

The information commissioner also said he would be asking the police about their decision to make the disclosure.

John Edwards said: "Data protection law exists to ensure people's personal information is used properly and fairly. This includes ensuring personal details are not disclosed inappropriately .... We recognise that at this stage of an intensive, live investigation, the force must focus all their energies on the inquiry. But given the high-profile nature of this case, we will be asking Lancashire police to set out how they reached the decision to disclose this information in due course."

The row has overshadowed the marking of three weeks since Bulley disappeared from the Lancashire village of St Michael's on Wyre on 27

January after dropping her two children at school.

Baird, a barrister and former Labour minister who stepped down as victims' commissioner last year, described the divulgence as "a dreadful error" that risked hampering future missing person searches because families would "face the torment of not knowing whether to run the risk of gratuitously wrecking your relative's reputation by giving every detail away".

She told BBC Radio 4's Today programme: "I'm afraid this is the biggest error that I have seen for quite a long time. It's going to just, you know, very sadly, to undermine trust in the police yet further."

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Baird said she thought the police would not have released such sensitive details had a man gone missing: "It is a dreadful error to put this in the public domain for absolutely nothing and I'm afraid I think it's as sexist as it comes."

Keir Starmer said he felt uncomfortable to hear about Bulley's private life, though he was "well aware of the difficulties that investigators have when those that don't know the true facts start commenting and so my general rule is not to get too drawn in".

The Labour leader, who is a former director of public prosecutions, said: “I was very surprised to see what the police had put out there. I was not sure why that degree of personal information was necessary.”

In a statement released through Lancashire constabulary on Thursday, Bulley’s family [pleaded with the public](#) to stop the “appalling” speculation about the mortgage adviser’s private life.

Bulley’s family said they had been aware in advance that the force was planning to release personal information about “our Nikki” but stopped short of saying they had approved it. They added: “Although we know that Nikki would not have wanted this, there are people out there speculating and threatening to sell stories about her. This is appalling and needs to stop.”

Michael Vincent, the leader of Wyre council, said on Friday there were “lessons to be learned” by the force but that “they’ve done their best in difficult circumstances”. He said people in the village, which has a population of about 600, had hired an external security company because of the high level of interest in the case.

He told Sky News: “People have reported being sat in their living rooms in an afternoon watching television and people coming up to the windows, peering in, trying the doors. It’s been terrifying for them. These are typically older people extremely scared in their own homes. The residents have had to employ an external security company. That’s just not acceptable.”

Lancashire constabulary has referred itself to the police watchdog over the contact that officers had with Bulley on 10 January as part of a welfare check. The Independent Office for Police Conduct is assessing the information.

It remains the police’s “working hypothesis” that Bulley fell into the River Wyre while taking her dog, Willow, for a walk. Her phone was found still connected to a work conference call.

Officers have also searched the land surrounding the area where Bulley was last seen, including 300 buildings.

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## Hospitals

# Sewage leak figures prompt warning over state of England's hospitals

Exclusive: freedom of information requests reveal overspill on cancer wards, maternity units and A&E departments



An ambulance outside the Princess Alexandra hospital in Essex. The hospital trust recorded 40 sewage leaks. Photograph: Daniel Leal/AFP/Getty Images

[Andrew Gregory](#) *Health editor*

[@andrewgregory](#)

Fri 17 Feb 2023 01.00 ESTLast modified on Fri 17 Feb 2023 01.58 EST

Hospitals in England have recorded more than 450 sewage leaks in the last 12 months, data shows, putting patients and staff in danger and prompting warnings that the NHS estate is “falling apart” after a decade of underinvestment.

Freedom of information requests to [NHS](#) trusts by the Liberal Democrats found alarming examples of sewage leaking on to cancer wards, maternity units and A&E departments. The investigation also uncovered multiple cases of urine and faeces flowing into hospital rooms and on to general wards.

Health officials called the revelations shocking. In some instances, sewage leaks made entire hospital departments unsafe for patients and led to staff struggling to work because they felt nauseous and had headaches.

In total, there were 456 sewage leaks reported in the last year, although only 55 trusts responded, suggesting the true scale of the problem is much higher. It comes as the cost of overdue maintenance work on the NHS estate has soared to more than £10bn.

Ed Davey, the Liberal Democrat leader, said: “This is a national scandal. Our country’s hospitals are falling apart after years of underinvestment and neglect. Patients should not be treated in these conditions and heroic nurses should not have the indignity of mopping up foul sewage.”

He said there was still no sign of the 40 new hospitals promised by the government four years ago, and said the sewage leaks pointed to a wider neglect of the health service.

“At every turn, our treasured NHS is crumbling, from hospital buildings to dangerous ambulance wait times. The government needs to find urgent funds to fix hospitals overflowing with sewage. Patient and staff safety is a risk if ministers fail to act,” he said.

Leeds teaching hospitals NHS trust reported the highest number of sewage leaks in the last year, at 105, followed by North Tees and Hartlepool NHS foundation trust, which recorded 80.

At the Princess Alexandra hospital NHS trust in Harlow, Essex, where 40 sewage leaks occurred, staff detailed cases in written data logs. “Raw sewage smell is still ongoing and staff are struggling to work in these



conditions,” one report said. “They are all experiencing feeling nauseous, having headaches and feeling very tired.”

Another staff member raised the alarm that one part of the hospital had become unsafe as a result of a sewage leak, adding: “It was embarrassing to run a department that has sewage leaking everywhere and offensive odour.”

The cost of repairs and maintenance to NHS buildings that should have already been carried out – which does not include planned maintenance work – has reached £10.2bn, according to NHS Digital.

It has said £1.8bn needs to be spent on the “high-risk” backlog, classified as needed “in order to prevent catastrophic failure, major disruption to clinical services or deficiencies in safety liable to cause serious injury and/or prosecution”.

Rory Deighton, of the NHS Confederation, said: “Health leaders are clear that many of their hospitals are in desperate need of repair, as these shocking findings demonstrate further. No one working in the NHS wants this for their patients or staff.

“It is no wonder that nine in 10 of our members recently told us a lack of capital investment is undermining their efforts to reduce their waiting lists and is putting patient safety at risk. This has been building up over the last 12 years where UK capital funding has lagged behind peer countries, and the government needs to demonstrate it is gripping on to the problem as a matter of urgency.”

A spokesperson for Leeds teaching hospitals NHS trust said: “As one of the largest teaching hospitals in the country, we have a huge estate spanning from Victorian to state-of-the-art – over 520,000 square metres and across seven hospital sites.

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“While we have a comprehensive capital programme in place to ensure ongoing investment in our infrastructure, much of our estate is ageing. This causes a significant maintenance backlog, which inevitably leads to incidents such as leaks that require regular upkeep.”

Many of the leaks were minor, the spokesperson added, and a large proportion were caused by misuse, with inappropriate items being flushed into the system.

A spokesperson for the North Tees and Hartlepool trust said: “Staff reported 80 minor leaks to our estates and facilities team and there are no recorded major leaks to sewage.”

Michael Meredith, the director of strategy and estates at the Princess Alexandra hospital trust, said: “Sewage leaks occur across the site on a regular basis including below the ground, above the ground and in our basement. These are managed quickly and efficiently but they are unpleasant, especially where they occur in areas accessed by patients, our people or the public.”

He said the trust employs a 24-hour rapid response team to manage estate issues, and has a plan to deal with its maintenance backlog. “However, given the age and complexity of the estate and the delay in a decision around the funding for our new hospital, our backlog will continue to grow and will inevitably have an impact on service delivery.”

A Department of Health and Social Care spokesperson said: “While individual NHS organisations are legally responsible for maintaining their estates, we are investing record sums to upgrade and modernise NHS buildings so staff have the facilities needed to provide world-class care – including £4.2bn this year and £8.4bn over the next two years.

“More widely, we have invested £3.7bn for the first four years of the new hospital programme and remain committed to all schemes that have been announced as part of it.”

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## 2023.02.17 - Spotlight

- 'There is always the dangerous route' Fever Ray's Karin Dreijer on romance, ageing and kink
- You be the judge Should my fiance agree to open a joint bank account with me?
- Jeremy Pope interview An Oscar changes where the comma goes in your cheque
- 'It was a real shock' Constituents reel at Nicola Sturgeon's resignation

# Fever Ray's Karin Dreijer on romance, ageing and kink: 'There is always the dangerous route'

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[You be the judge](#)[Relationships](#)

**You be the judge: should my fiance agree to open a joint bank account with me?**



Illustration: Joren Joshua/The Guardian

Maura says it's practical, but Aiden is against it. You do the accounts and deliver the verdict

[Find out how to get a disagreement settled or become a You be the judge juror](#)



Interviews by [Georgina Lawton](#)  
[@georginalawton](#)

Fri 17 Feb 2023 03.00 EST Last modified on Fri 17 Feb 2023 13.26 EST

## **The prosecution: Maura**

*We trust each other, split our bills according to our incomes, so what's the big deal with a joint account?*

I met my lovely fiancé, Aiden, four years ago. Our relationship is based on trust and we have a lot in common. But as our wedding approaches, we have started talking about finances and he doesn't want a joint bank account.

At the moment, we are renting a small flat. We want to buy a home together and have kids. Once we are married, it will make sense to have a joint bank account. My parents had joint accounts and there were never really any issues around money.

My mum raised me and my brother and worked part-time, while my dad was the main breadwinner. They paid both their salaries into one account and trusted each other to withdraw from it as and when they needed.

I'd be happy to keep our individual bank accounts as well as opening a new joint one. But Aiden is completely opposed to joint accounts and only wants individual ones, even after we marry. I don't really understand why.

Once I have kids, a shared house fund makes sense, as I will be the one at home more with the baby more

We are open and honest with each other and have never really argued about money. Aiden works in finance and earns a lot more than me. When it comes to bills and rent, we make things equitable, not equal: he pays a larger share given his higher salary.

A few of my friends think I'm lucky to have a partner who does that, but I think it's fair. If one person in a relationship earns more than the other, and you love each other, they should pay more, it's pretty simple.

Once I have kids, it will make sense for me to be able to access a shared house fund, as I will be at home with the baby more. It makes running everything much easier, but Aiden says he wants us to retain financial independence. That feels strange to me. I also don't want there to be any secrets between us.

We haven't argued over this but have had a few heated discussions. One time, I stormed out of the room because Aiden wasn't hearing my point of view. He says it's healthier to have some separation, but won't say what he means by that. I don't want to keep going over this, but we are going around in circles, and he's not budging.



## The defence: Aiden

*A joint account is old-fashioned, and why should we start doing it now if we haven't before?*

Maura and I have had it pretty easy the past few years. We've not had any real hurdles or disagreements, but now we are about to get married, issues about finances are bubbling to the surface. I'm not in favour of putting everything into a joint bank account right now. I don't think it's necessary when we both have our own jobs. I also don't think it's healthy to have access to each other's money at all times.

For Maura, my stance is a big deal and she gets a bit upset whenever it comes up. She says, "Don't you trust me? Do you want me to ask for an allowance when I'm pregnant?" But she's jumping the gun. When we have kids we'll come to some arrangement to make things easier if she's doing most of the childcare and running the household, but at the moment I'm just focusing on where we are now.

It's important for Maura not to rely on me for everything and know she still has some independence

We are still relatively young and I just don't feel we need to pool all our earnings into one account to live as husband and wife. It's actually a bit old-fashioned, and if we haven't done it before, why do we have to do it now? I'm wondering why a bit of paper that says we are married is making Maura reassess our relationship.

At the moment we have our own accounts and pay our fair share of rent and bills. I pay more than Maura as she earns less than me, and I've been very happy to do that. When we eventually get a joint mortgage as husband and wife, I'd like to keep the same system and just pay our own portion off each month while keeping the rest of our salaries fairly separate, but Maura can't accept that.

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It's not like I'm tight. I pay a larger portion for our holidays and dates, as well as rent and bills. But I think it's important for Maura not to rely on me for everything and to know she still has some independence. I also like investing some of my money and tracking its progress. I guess I like having my own thing going on, too.

It's not a secrecy thing. I'm very open – but perhaps it is a “I like to manage my own money thing.” When we have kids we can re-examine this. But for now I think it's working absolutely fine.

## **The jury of Guardian readers**

**Should Aiden agree to a joint account with Maura?**

Aiden's defence doesn't stack up. What's the problem with the compromise of both joint and individual accounts? He makes a big deal about paying more for holidays and bills but seems far more interested in protecting his money and “financial independence” than sharing everything with his soon-to-be wife.

**Euan, 37**

If mutually agreed on, there's nothing wrong with husband as breadwinner and wife as homemaker. You're already following a traditionally gendered dynamic. It would make it less archaic to share money in a joint account so she doesn't have to ask for an allowance.

**Dora, 25**

I don't think Maura should force Aiden to open a joint account. Maybe they could come to a compromise and have an account which they both pay mortgage, bills and a little bit extra into. That way they will have a "joint" account but still have their own money.

**Sophie, 38**

Future life for you both will be full of changes. How you manage those should be mutually agreed and equitable for both. Mirroring Maura's parents' financial relationship when married excludes Aiden's views. Listen to each other and act together.

**Irene, 70**

I understand where Maura is coming from about wanting financial stability if/when they have kids, but Aiden is right that it's healthier to keep their money separate for now. As well as being able to spend on what they want, if they were to split up it could make untangling financial issues a lot easier.

**Laura, 35**

## **Now you be the judge**

In our online poll below, tell us: should Aidan agree to a joint account with Maura?

**The poll will close at 10am GMT on Thursday 23 February**

## **Last week's result**

We asked if Agnieszka should [stop telling people she's a vegan](#), given her dietary lapses at home.

**74% of you said yes – Agnieszka is guilty**

## 26% of you said no – Agnieszka is innocent

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## **‘An Oscar changes where the comma goes in your cheque’: Jeremy Pope on playing a gay marine**

[Ryan Gilbey](#).



‘A director alluded to what he saw as my inability to connect with a female co-star because I don’t sleep with women’ ... Jeremy Pope. Photograph: Matt Licari/Invision/AP

The Pose star, who stars in the military drama The Inspection, discusses Black masculinity, quitting a studio film over his sexuality – and his bodybuilding pastor father

Fri 17 Feb 2023 03.00 ESTLast modified on Fri 17 Feb 2023 05.02 EST

No one – other than Kaa the snake from The Jungle Book – has eyes like Jeremy Pope. Watch the 30-year-old actor in [The Inspection](#), in which he plays a young gay marine, or in the glittery TV series Hollywood or Pose, both co-created by Ryan Murphy (who recently called Pope “the future”), and it’s hard to deny the hypnotic power of his peepers.

They stay hidden for most of our video call today: he keeps his phone flat on the desk in front of him, with the camera pointing upwards, providing an intimate view of his nostrils. At least his mellifluous voice is music to the ears, even if he does have a habit of referring to himself in the third person.

Pope is calling from New York, where he is at the end of the Broadway run of *The Collaboration*, in which he stars as the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, opposite Paul Bettany as Andy Warhol. [The play premiered in London last year](#) and the actors have reprised their roles for a forthcoming movie version. “Playing Basquiat, it’s about the cost of being a Black individual taking up space in a white industry,” he says. “Which is sometimes what Jeremy Pope feels.” Theatre means “showing up for your character and leaving behind whatever you’ve got going on in the Jeremy Pope world.” He calls it “boot camp for actors”.

He attended an actual boot camp for *The Inspection*, in which he plays Ellis French, who joins the marines during the [“don’t ask, don’t tell”](#) era to win the respect of his scornful, homophobic mother. The film is based on the experiences of its director, Elegance Bratton, but Pope also drew on his own life. “It was healing. I was able to put into this character things I had dealt with personally. I could say things and affirm Jeremy Pope through Ellis.”

Such as? “He gets to a place of self-respect where he only moves toward what serves him, and that’s something I’ve had to navigate as a Black queer artist. There are certain rooms and energies that don’t serve you, and it’s not your job to contort yourself to try to be a version of you that isn’t authentic.”

Could he be referring to the unnamed studio film [from which he walked away](#) because the director doubted his ability to play a straight person? “Yeah. He alluded to what he saw as my inability to connect with a female co-star because I don’t sleep with women. As an actor, you don’t wanna feel like after every take you’ve got to go: ‘Didya believe it?’ I never want to be difficult, but you have to ask: ‘Is this pouring anything into my cup?’ So I walked away from a studio film. There will be others.”



With Paul Bettany last year in *The Collaboration* at the Young Vic in London. Photograph: Marc Brenner

Not long after, he got the call about *The Inspection*. “It was an affirmation that I’m doing what I am meant to be doing. I think how much of a gamechanger this film could have been for me growing up and wanting to be an artist, but not seeing that represented in the mainstream. You wonder: ‘Is that even possible? Is that something I can put up on my mood board?’”

His coiled, aching performance earned him a Golden Globe nomination, although no recognition from the Oscars. Can we agree that the Academy screwed up? He laughs, batting the question away diplomatically. “I honestly thought I was gonna feel something, like: ‘Oh *man!*’ And I didn’t. We were the little indie film that could. We shot it in 19 days on a limited budget. The fact that we were even part of the conversation – that’s the win.”

Pope doesn’t deny that an Oscar would have given him extra leverage. “As a Black artist, it does change where the comma goes in your cheque. I’ll always be blunt about that, because we’re looking for health insurance, we’re looking for longevity. But as a Black man in an institution that wasn’t necessarily built for Black people to thrive, I’m not *surprised*.” He concedes controversy has its uses. “It opens up a conversation for people to



rightfully be hurt and upset.” Soon, though, he is cheerleading again. “We made a [Full Metal Jacket](#) with a Black gay lead. Holy shit, that is transformative! It’s a seed planted for something bigger than us.”

When I got the lead in Cats, it was my dad who made my costume

Besides, it’s not as if he has been overlooked in general. In 2019, Pope became only the sixth person in the history of the Tony awards to be nominated twice in the same year for two performances: first as the gay chorister in Choir Boy (written by Moonlight’s co-writer Tarell Alvin McCraney), which was a role Pope first played off-Broadway in 2013; and second as part of the [Temptations musical Ain’t Too Proud](#). “I’m always intrigued by stories that challenge the idea of masculinity,” he says. “As a Black man, I’ve had to ask myself what masculinity is. And in the Black community, it’s so fragile. I love going headlong into that and starting a necessary dialogue about what we deem to be strong and powerful.”

It’s a subject that reaches back to his upbringing. Born and raised in Orlando, Florida, he divided his childhood between estranged parents: a mother who wanted to know “why I had so many friends who were girls” and a father who bought him Barbies and didn’t scold him for loving Britney Spears and the Spice Girls. “When I got the lead in Cats, it was my dad who made my costume,” he says.

Perhaps someone will write a script one day about his father, who was a pastor and a professional bodybuilder. Pope accompanied him to bodybuilding contests on Saturday nights, then attended his sermons on Sundays. Being around all those muscular men in skimpy underwear must have been intoxicating for a child starting to discover his queerness. “It was pretty intense, yeah,” he says, smiling. “The takeaway for me was the discipline it took combined with the vulnerability. Presenting their bodies on stage to be judged – it’s such a complex idea.”



With (*from left*) Ephraim Sykes, Jawan M Jackson, James Harkness and Derrick Baskin in the Broadway production of *Ain't Too Proud* in 2019. Photograph: Matthew Murphy

Pope speaks admiringly of his father – “I’m grateful to have been raised by a strong Black man who has always made space for emotion,” he says – although they did clash when he discovered his son’s internet habits. “I’d been looking at images of men in their underwear. When my dad caught me, I thought I was gonna vomit. I asked him what Bible verses I could read to change the way I felt. But he said: ‘The reason I’m upset is you lied to me.’ It wasn’t what I was doing; I had lied about what I was searching for. I dunno ...” He goes into a momentary slump, then perks up again. “Shoutout to my dad and to Black men having open conversations with their kids!”

Pope says it was confusing to hear this tender father deliver sermons about the sin of homosexuality. “I was still coming into my own and I felt he was speaking those words to me.” Were you expecting to go to hell? “For sure! That’s the only thing I knew. I kept feeling: ‘Is this gonna stop me from my greatness?’”

Coming to New York to study drama changed everything. “I could step away from being the pastor’s kid and begin asking: ‘Who is Jeremy?’”

Time for another shoutout. “Let’s shoutout to New York, because this city changed my life and it changed how I showed up for Jeremy Pope!”

These days, it’s positively commonplace to see Pope on a chatshow or at an awards ceremony wearing some high-fashion leather ensemble, or a snazzy suit over a bare torso. What does he look like when he is slobbering out? “Like this,” he says, gesturing to his beanie hat. “I’m either on or I’m off. For J-Pope, off is like: ‘Is there deodorant? I don’t know!’ Who knows if I’m wearing pants right now?” I tell him it’s a terrible tease to say such a thing when he knows our time is up. That is when, at last, he gazes into the camera and flashes those eyes. “The world will never know,” he says, grinning. Shoutout to Jeremy Pope.

The Inspection is in UK cinemas now

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## [Nicola Sturgeon](#)

# **‘It was a real shock’: constituents reel at Nicola Sturgeon’s resignation**

There is a sense of pride about the departing first minister in Govanhill, Glasgow, although some are less effusive



Nicola Sturgeon with people in Glasgow South when she was on the campaign trail in 2015. Photograph: Murdo MacLeod/The Guardian



*[Libby Brooks](#) Scotland correspondent*

Fri 17 Feb 2023 01.00 EST Last modified on Fri 17 Feb 2023 06.17 EST

Under sunless skies on Thursday, the residents of Nicola Sturgeon's constituency and the community activists who have worked with her since she became an MSP were reeling from her [shock announcement](#) that she is standing down as first minister.

At Larkfield community centre in Govanhill, Glasgow, where Sturgeon holds a monthly surgery, Anne Marie Miller said the resignation of Scotland's longest-serving and only female first minister was still hard to take in. "It was a real shock," says the former Labour councillor. "When she came in last Friday there was no hint."

She added: "She's a human being and a lot of politicians lack that. She's come up through the ranks and she knows what the issues are on the ground."

"There will always be people who want to take a pop at her because she's first minister but I've always found her very open."

What is evident is the strength and longevity of the relationships Sturgeon has built here, and the pride and protectiveness felt by the local groups that have witnessed her rise from party activist to a figure recognised on the national and international stage.

Raza Sadiq runs the Active Life Club on Dixon Road, where teenagers are streaming out of the school gates opposite to pick up lunchtime pizzas.

Founded in 1999, the year Sturgeon was first elected to Holyrood as a [Glasgow](#) regional MSP, the volunteer-run youth charity has seen her attend many events and meetings over the decades.

Most memorably, though, Sadiq recalls the club's 20th anniversary celebrations in 2019. "It was also the 20th anniversary of the Scottish parliament, she was meeting the Queen that day, but despite all those commitments she still came to our event.

"She was exceptional at talking to young people. She would sit on the floor with them and get up and dance with them. That's how accessible she is.

"I know people say different things about her, and I'm not affiliated to any party, but I was personally shocked that she's going."

On the streets, local people have almost all heard the news and most are willing to offer an opinion, with some referring to "Nicola" warmly, but others raising serious complaints about fly-tipping and community cohesion in the complex and diverse Glasgow Southside constituency.





Oonagh White, in the Glasgow South constituency, said Sturgeon ‘did a lot for Scotland’. Photograph: Murdo MacLeod/The Guardian

“She did a lot for Scotland and for Glasgow,” says Oonagh White, who works in marketing. “You were always aware of her out and about.”

White, in her 20s, describes Sturgeon as “a massive role model”, adding: “To see a woman in that position was pretty powerful.”

Paul Clark, a homeless worker, is less effusive: “She was the best of a bad bunch, but she’s still a politician and there were problems in the constituency that she didn’t want to touch.”

His friend Frazer Dougan says: “A lot of people are living close to the breadline around here. There’s not enough integration, for example with asylum seekers, and she should have taken more control.”

Nicola Sturgeon: the moments that marked her leadership – video

Fraser Stewart is director of the community-owned New Gorbals Housing Association, which has overseen the transformation of the notorious district over 30 years.

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He describes how Sturgeon was supportive of regeneration work long before she became first minister and how, on the dozens of occasions they met, the only time she was late was because she was helping an elderly constituent with their water supply.

“I remember one year she led the parade for the Gorbals fair. It was chucking it down but she trudged through the rain for half an hour, getting drenched, then stayed and spoke to everyone afterwards.

“This year she spoke at the fair again. There was no opposition in the crowd, even [from] people you know are not supporters of independence.” He adds – in contrast to Sturgeon’s own remarks on Wednesday that she feared she had become a divisive figure – “people don’t see her that way”.

He praises her energy, approachability and ability to take a brief “in a flash”. A significant minority of Glasgow Southside’s population are Pakistani and Muslim, and Stewart adds: “It was known within ethnic minority communities that she was batting for them.”

At her press conference on Wednesday, Sturgeon said she intended to remain as an MSP until the next Holyrood election but would not commit to standing again. “We’ve lost a star,” Stewart says. “People will be saying



‘remember when that [Nicola Sturgeon](#) used to be our MSP’, and they’ll remember that fondly.”

Sturgeon’s constituency campaign manager, Mhairi Hunter, has been watching the first minister knocking on doors in the area since 1997. “She’s a SNP activist before anything else. She loves knocking doors and going to community groups.”

In contrast to the protocol of national and international politics, Sturgeon views her constituency work as “somewhere she can be more herself”.

“It’s her home patch and she relishes the time she spends here.”

Among local party activists, the initial reaction was one of shock and dismay, says Hunter, “followed by understanding”.

“People have listened to what she said and digested it. They trust her judgment. People here know very well just how hard she’s worked all these years.”

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## 2023.02.17 - Opinion

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## [OpinionHousing](#)

# **Rats, mould, damp: one woman's story reveals the ugly truth about the UK's biggest housing association**

[Aditya Chakraborty](#)



A mother of three's struggle with Clarion reflects a system rigged to favour asset-owners while renters are abandoned



Chanel Sultan in her bedroom at home in south-west London. Photograph: Jill Mead/The Guardian

Fri 17 Feb 2023 01.00 EST Last modified on Fri 17 Feb 2023 08.08 EST

You will read the grim facts about Chanel Sultan's life in a minute, but first let's talk about her dreams. Like the law degree she has just started, or her hope to buy her own home. Like her years spent driving buses by day and working on her construction business in the evenings, all to feed her three children. Like reading self-help books and doing penance at the gym. "We can live lives that we really want to live," she says. "Not the ones we've been given." We sit in a house so run-down it laughs at any dreams, and I can't tell whether such faith is born of determination or delusion.

At night she can hear rats scratching around beneath the floorboards under her bed. She and her children have seen them scuttling about and found their rotting corpses, have even had their belongings chewed up. Over the few months they have lived in this Victorian terrace, the ferocious damp and mould have ruined their clothes and their furniture. The headboard and base of Sultan's own bed are so spoilt that they have been thrown away. In her bedroom, the mattress now sits atop cardboard packing boxes.

For the past few months, I have been talking with Sultan about this home that feels anything but homely. I've seen dozens of photos and videos of what she found on moving in last summer: exterior doors that don't lock, electric wiring exposed, rat droppings everywhere and a toilet bowl encrusted with faeces. And I've read emails and letters and all the back-and-forth as she's tried to get things fixed. With only partial success: visiting last week, I saw the damp on the walls, the plugged up rat holes, and, in the garden, the big black traps warning of poison inside.

This squalor was supposed to be her fresh start. After some hard years, the 38-year-old had just got remarried and fancied a new life in the suburbs of [London](#). On viewing, she'd had some worries, but the family were assured that central heating and double glazing would arrive at the property before they did. They were even asked to pick a colour for the new door. And since those promises came from the country's biggest housing association, Clarion, Sultan believed them.

Bad move. Not only were the works not done, but the previous resident left behind decades' worth of belongings. More extraordinary still was Clarion's response. Because Sultan had swapped with another tenant to move into the home, the housing association quoted the law that said it was up to the two of them to sort out the mess. After Sultan pleaded with the previous tenant, they moved everything – as far as the front yard. Some promised work was done but on other jobs Sultan kept getting fobbed off.



Chanel Sultan points out cracks in her wall. Photograph: Jill Mead/The Guardian

The filth drove the family to angry rows. Her eldest daughter moved out, while her teenage son tried sofa-surfing. The baby of the family, a shy fawn of a girl still in primary school, kept breaking down in tears. A longtime sufferer of poor mental health, Sultan felt herself slide into despair.

In emails she sent to the housing association, which I have seen, she reports a manager shouting down the phone: “I don’t care about your mental health, your mental health condition has nothing to do with the house,” and: “You will live there with the rats until we come and get rid of them.”

She tried to kill herself three times. After walking out into oncoming traffic, she wrote to Clarion: “I want to take my life. I am just too sad ... I don’t think I will ever be helped or understood.” The reply began: “I’m sorry to hear that the messages you received from [the previous tenant] caused you to want to end your life.”

When I contacted Clarion, it said: “We sincerely apologise to Ms Sultan. Every resident should be treated fairly, with respect and compassion.” It disputes some parts of her story that I haven’t mentioned, yet adds: “We are

determined to continuously improve the service we provide and we will learn from this case.”

It has made several similar statements over the past couple of years, as stories of appalling treatment of other tenants are [splashed on telly](#) or [brought to regulators](#). At the offices of Sultan’s Tory MP, Stephen Hammond, staff have to deal with Clarion on residents’ behalf every day. In the constituency next door, Labour’s Siobhain McDonagh made the papers in 2021 for estimating Clarion comprised [half her casework](#). It’s just as high today, the MP tells me: “I don’t think that their tenants and leaseholders will have seen any improvement.”

We could park all this at the door of a housing association that is too big to fail, yet is a serial failure. [Its board](#) features such establishment figures as Gavin Barwell, the housing minister just before Grenfell went up in flames, as well as big names who worked at Rothschild and Savills – but not one tenant. The chief executive of this charity, Clare Miller, [took home over £369,000](#) last year.



Boxes are stacked floor to ceiling in the front room of Chanel Sultan’s home. Photograph: Jill Mead/The Guardian



Yet, ultimately, Chanel Sultan has been failed by a society that scarcely notices people like her, let alone protects their rights. The weekend papers carry their property supplements, the BBC brings you Homes Under the Hammer. No such loving attention is paid to the 4 million households in England alone who rent from a housing association or a council.

For this piece, the Guardian's archivists went through five years of national newspaper stories and totted up how many focused on social housing. In a period that includes the aftermath of Grenfell, the cladding scandal and the [death of the toddler Awaab Ishak](#) from respiratory failure in a mould-infested home, there were 1,315 reports. Over the same period there were 6,312 articles – five times as many – on house prices alone.

In a country sharply divided between those who own assets and those who don't, the media and political system stands squarely behind the asset-owners. Looking at the first year of the pandemic for her new book, [Stay Home](#), Prof Becky Tunstall documents how far the then chancellor Rishi Sunak and the Bank of England governor, Andrew Bailey, went to prop up the housing market: cuts in stamp duty, mortgage holidays, lower interest rates, quantitative easing. The expensive medicine worked a treat. Where house prices had been forecast to plunge, the average home instead rocketed by £37,000 in one year. For households, she calculates, that sum “dwarfed” the value of furlough, help for the self-employed and the uplift for universal credit.

Meanwhile, renters are so unprotected that, to get a home fit for a human, Sultan had to go to superhuman lengths: numerous emails to Clarion, to the regulators, taking on solicitors, even complaining on TikTok – for which she was hit with a letter from Clarion's lawyers, even as its contractors set about doing more repairs. Hours after receiving my questions, the housing association got in touch with the family again – even offering to proof the house against rats. Clarion says: “We are pleased that the majority of work is now complete, with full completion due next week.”

Sultan reads books with titles such as Think and Grow Rich, yet the lives of her and her children have been stunted by not being rich – and no amount of magical thinking will change that. In a society that tells everyone they can



be whatever they want, she still aspires to be an entrepreneur, but she and her family have learned the hard way that promises are not reality. “I feel like I’m a prisoner of my circumstances,” she says. “Like, if you’re not a certain class, you’re not taken seriously.”

- Aditya Chakraborty is a Guardian columnist
- *In the UK and Ireland, Samaritans can be contacted on 116 123, or email [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org) or [jo@samaritans.ie](mailto:jo@samaritans.ie). In the US, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is [1-800-273-8255](tel:1-800-273-8255). In Australia, the crisis support service Lifeline is 13 11 14. Other international helplines can be found at [befrienders.org](http://befrienders.org)*
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## [OpinionChina](#)

# Liz Truss's delusional speech about China is digging the trenches of a second cold war

[Simon Tisdall](#)



Does she really think Xi's threats to Taiwan will be stopped by the sabre-rattling of the failed PM of a former colonial power?



Liz Truss speaking at the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China in Tokyo, 17 February 2023. Photograph: Philip Fong/AFP/Getty Images

Fri 17 Feb 2023 04.28 EST Last modified on Fri 17 Feb 2023 08.18 EST

There is a serious, calm and thoughtful discussion to be had about the western democracies' future security and economic relationship with China, and it is under way in Washington and European capitals. Judging by her confrontational, attention-seeking [speech in Tokyo](#) today, Britain's disgraced former prime minister Liz Truss is not part of it.

Truss, short of new ideas and insights, has defaulted to crowd-pleasing, hawkish positions that appear principally designed to facilitate a domestic political comeback at Rishi Sunak's expense. A "totalitarian" [China](#), she says, poses a global threat to the "free world". Britain should help rally regional countries against Beijing by building a "Pacific defence alliance" and an "economic Nato".

Truss also calls on G7 states, which will meet in Hiroshima in May, to prepare to impose tough sanctions on China if it further escalates its military intimidation of Taiwan. The self-governing island should be

admitted to international organisations from which it is currently excluded, she says – a red rag to Beijing. This stance echoed her previous, provocative call for Britain to [supply weapons direct](#) to Taipei.

Truss is right to suggest relations with China are at a critical point, illustrated by the absurdly hyped flap in the US that accompanied the shooting down of a Chinese surveillance balloon. But her proposals, if actively pursued, could intensify east-west tensions, deepen the divide and boost Russia's attempts to ally itself with Beijing – while doing little or nothing to enhance international security.

Her Tokyo speech raises two broader questions: is Truss truly looking for workable ways to mitigate the aggressive posture of China's president, Xi Jinping, or is she just posturing for hard-right, anti-China audiences in Westminster and Washington? Her position, including on the selective decoupling of economic relations, undercuts Sunak, who, like Joe Biden, has declined to classify China as a "threat".

Second, does Truss truly believe that Britain is still a global power with the political will, financial wherewithal and military firepower to intervene effectively in dangerous geopolitical crises thousands of miles from its shores? If so, she is truly delusional. Alone and adrift in a post-Brexit vacuum she helped create, Britain's ability to influence world events is diminishing rapidly. The defence and security of Europe, of which it is a part, and not the Asia-Pacific region, is the UK's primary strategic concern. Politically, she cannot admit that axiomatic fact.

Empty threats do not make good foreign policy – and we have been here before. In her [Mansion House speech](#) last year, shortly after the invasion of Ukraine, Truss insisted Russian troops must be forced back to pre-2014 borders – meaning expelled from Crimea and all of Donbas. "We are going to keep going further and faster to push Russia out of the whole of Ukraine," she declared. You and whose army, Liz? Did she mean UK forces should launch a ground war against Russia? The Kremlin certainly thought so.

Truss has hit repeat play in Tokyo, proving again that loose talk costs other

people's lives. There is no doubt Xi's threats to subjugate Taiwan by force, his bullying of neighbours such as the Philippines, his colonisation of the South China Sea and his criminal treatment of the Uyghur and Tibetan peoples are shocking and alarming. But it is likewise clear, or should be, that Xi, despite his domestic problems, will not be deterred by a former colonial power with blood on its hands that poses no credible kinetic or economic challenge. The danger, instead, is that he may double down – with Taiwan in his gunsights. A US general recently [predicted war](#) within two years – and that was [before the spy balloon](#) went up.

Yet what does calamity Liz do? She jumps in rhetorically with both feet, clichés flying. She can expect little support from the Biden administration. Likewise, Japan's leaders may be privately appalled, though too polite to say so. Like Taiwan's savvy president, Tsai Ing-wen, they [prepare for the worst](#) – and meantime try to manage the China relationship, not blow it up.

Taking on China is not like taking on Russia. Vladimir Putin's empire is built of straw. It will implode eventually, as happened to the Soviet Union in 1989-91. But China is too big to foil. Interdependence runs too deep, economic ties are too mutually valuable and shared challenges such as the climate emergency and nuclear proliferation are too pressing for the west to attempt to contain, let alone halt China's rise.

The western democracies have no sensible choice other than to continue to argue for their views and stand up for their values, issue by issue, while strengthening alliances, maintaining lines of communication and waiting for Beijing to modify its more objectionable behaviours, as Xi has recently started to do. Truss, with her siren calls, is digging the trenches of a second cold war. It's a war Britain and the west cannot win – and should not fight.

- Simon Tisdall is a foreign affairs commentator and former Guardian foreign editor

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[OpinionCentrica](#)

# The energy sector isn't 'broken', it's cooking on gas – if you're a profit-hungry shareholder

[Mathew Lawrence](#)



Under the current setup, delivering energy can only ever be incidental to the real business of reaping monster returns



‘The company announced it will pay a dividend to shareholders of more than £200m’: Centrica’s head office in Windsor, Berkshire Photograph: Maureen McLean/REX/Shutterstock

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Centrica, the company that owns British gas, has posted record profits of £3.3bn for 2022, more than tripling its results in 2021. The company [also announced](#) it will pay a dividend to shareholders of more than £200m, and will spend a further £300m on share buybacks. With the cost of living crisis deepening, and following the [prepayment meter scandal](#), the “monster” results have prompted outrage. That anger is more than justified.

British Gas is, of course, hardly the only energy company announcing staggering windfalls. In recent weeks, Shell reported profits of [over £32bn](#) for 2022, while BP [declared £23bn](#) for the year. As with British Gas, historic profits have been translated into spectacular rewards for shareholders. [BP](#), for instance, announced £11.8bn of shareholder payouts, over 14 times as much as it invested in “low carbon” activities. This is how the energy crisis, climate emergency and inequality intersect and intensify. As household bills soar, the energy companies are using surging profits to increase shareholder payouts and double down on fossil fuel production.



The profits of the energy sector are inseparable from soaring wholesale gas prices since Putin's invasion of Ukraine. However, looking beneath the bonnet of [Centrica](#) reveals three areas where exorbitant profits are being made: its commodity trading segment, where profits grew 20-fold to £1.4bn; the UK's woefully under-supplied gas storage sector, where profits more than quadrupled to £339m; and energy generation, where Centrica made a phenomenal 60% margin, thanks in large part to its stake in EDF UK's nuclear fleet.

Higher bills also feed their way into rising profits. Remarkably, Centrica's UK electricity supply segment produced its largest profit since 2018, despite the squeeze from massively higher wholesale costs. While this did not contribute significantly to overall profits, the lesson is clear: even suppliers that are comfortably cushioned by colossal profits elsewhere in the business will not shield customers from the energy crisis.



‘Shell reported profits of [over £32bn](#) for 2022’: a Shell petrol station in central London. Photograph: Vuk Valcic/SOPA Images/REX/Shutterstock

Given the public fury, how do the energy companies keep getting away with it? Why has such an obviously “broken” energy system not been reformed? The answer: despite appearances, it is not broken. By transferring and concentrating wealth upwards it is operating exactly as designed.

This is because the rules that govern the modern corporation – and the financial markets that discipline them – force the energy companies to operate in only one way. Their fundamental goal is not the delivery of secure, affordable, clean energy. Instead, it is the maximisation of shareholder wealth by delivering rising share prices and generous payouts. This is the root of the issue: the purpose of our privatised, for-profit energy system does not align – by design – with the needs of people and planet.

If the crisis is systemic, its resolution requires structural transformation. Given that external shocks are at the root of the energy sector's enormous profits, a deepening and extension of the windfall tax is a clear and urgent necessity. However, this does not resolve the dynamic that is driving the crisis: the generation and supply of power by privately owned corporations legally required to maximise shareholder wealth.

Given this, the most effective solution is the deployment of an older and more common tool used to manage shared infrastructure in the public interest: public ownership.

Taking not just British Gas, but the UK's wider renewable and nuclear energy assets, into public ownership can ensure the energy system is organised for the public good – and would eliminate value extraction for external shareholders. Moreover, it could be a spur to more rapid decarbonisation and the on-shoring of the green industrial supply chains of our post-carbon future.

Today, it is British Gas. Last week, it was the oil and gas giants. The reality is that this pattern of extraction – of financial wealth from households to shareholders, and of fossil fuels from the Earth – will continue without systemic change. Given the context, of a deeply entangled social and energy crisis, ambitious reform is the surest path toward an energy future that works for us all.

- Mathew Lawrence is director of Common Wealth and co-author of *Owning the Future* with Adrienne Buller
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## Opinion Women's rights and gender equality

# ‘Gender trolling’ is curbing women’s rights – and making money for digital platforms

Lucina Di Meco

Online hate has become a tool of the right and a lucrative business. It’s driving women out of public life, putting democracy and human rights at risk



Female politicians from around the world face torrents of online abuse. Top row, left to right: Manuela d’Ávila, Diane Abbott, Esther Passaris; bottom row: Sanna Marin, Julia Gillard, Nicola Sturgeon and Priyanka Chaturvedi. Photograph: Jeff J Mitchell, AFP, Getty, Alamy

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## [About this content](#)

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Listening to the resignation speech of Scotland's [first minister Nicola Sturgeon](#) this week, it was impossible not to think of the all-too similar words from former New Zealand [prime minister Jacinda Ardern](#) just a few weeks earlier.

Politicians are humans, too, as Sturgeon and Ardern reminded us, but the abuse women face online – [greater and more vicious](#) than that faced by male politicians – seem to dehumanise them, leaving some to wonder if the problem is a reflection of millennia-old misogyny, or an issue with technology.

[Monetizing Misogyny](#), the study released this week by [#ShePersisted](#), is the result of more than two years of research into the patterns and motives of [gendered disinformation](#) in several countries. It provides new insights into this question as well as a clear answer: the problem lies less in the misogyny per se than in its weaponisation by dark actors – and monetisation by digital platforms.



Jacinda Ardern during her final public appearance as New Zealand's prime minister, 24 January 2023. Photograph: Ben McKay/EPA

We interviewed dozens of female leaders and experts in [Hungary](#), [India](#), [Brazil](#), [Italy](#) and [Tunisia](#), analysing a large volume of horrifying social media posts against them, and we documented how gendered disinformation campaigns – followed by avalanches of hate, threats and abuse – have been deployed strategically by illiberal forces and authoritarian leaders to silence opposition and stifle calls for better governance.

As noted by [Karla Mantilla](#), the online “gender trolling” of women, particularly political opponents and journalists, is becoming an increasingly common feature of rightwing movements, and must therefore be understood as a deliberate strategy to silence them and “keep them in their place”.

These attacks aim to weaken not only the credibility of women who are attacked but also what they stand for

These attacks aim to weaken not only the credibility of the women who are attacked, but also what they stand for: women's equal rights, particularly sexual and reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ rights, liberal values and

inclusive, diverse democracies.

Let me give you some examples. When Manuela d'Ávila ran for president against Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil in 2018, a photograph of her five-year-old daughter was shared on social media alongside a rape threat. Progressive, young and vocal about gender equality, d'Ávila had been a target of gendered disinformation, with [multiple false stories about her posted online](#).

One such story claimed she went on a shopping trip to Miami to buy luxury goods while most Brazilians were suffering from deep financial distress – she never made that trip – and a Photoshopped image showed her wearing a T-shirt stating “Jesus is transgender” over a rainbow. In fact, her T-shirt read: “Rebel!”.

In May 2022, d'Ávila [announced](#) she would not run in last year's general elections for several reasons, including the frequent attacks she and her family had suffered over the years.



Manuela d'Ávila during her presidential run against Jair Bolsonaro in 2018.  
Photograph: REUTERS/Alamy

In 2018, Priyanka Chaturvedi, a member of the Indian parliament, filed a complaint to the Mumbai police after receiving an online rape threat aimed



at her 10-year-old daughter. Talking to me about her experience, Chaturvedi said: “Usually, it is the ‘IT cells’ – mostly unofficial but fully supported by the ruling party, that target women – especially women of the opposition. These attacks are frequent in nature and well-orchestrated, and it is not unfamiliar for politicians, even cabinet ministers, to also engage or ... initiate such kinds of attack.”

She said: “However, I refuse to just be a cog in the system and bow down to these cowards. I continue to persist despite the hate sent across my way, every day.”

But many others do not persist. Young women all over the world are being discouraged from speaking out or from considering a political career because of online misogyny and gendered disinformation.

These are just two of many examples of how gendered disinformation and tech-facilitated gender-based violence have become more central tools weaponised by autocratic and illiberal political leaders to silence opposition, reverse women’s and minority rights, and undermine democracy.

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The design of the major digital platforms is largely responsible for the hellscape currently experienced by women online. Harmful narratives are boosted and amplified through algorithms that make such content sticky and often viral, through recommender systems built to maximise attention, and features that facilitate its rapid and widespread distribution.

Hateful, sexist and outrageous content generates engagement – and profits for platforms.

In country after country, we documented how platforms have failed to tackle hate and disinformation against women political leaders, often turning a blind eye to requests from local civil society, while pledging to make small changes [that are largely cosmetic](#).

As the Indian journalist Swati Chaturvedi told me: “Hate is their business model – they are weaponising and monetising hate, at the expense of social cohesion and democracy.”

To address this, we need comprehensive approaches and legal frameworks that focus on transparency and “duty of care” for social media companies, with respect to the harm that is caused by their products. The Digital Services Act (DSA), approved by the EU last year, is a step in the right direction, establishing obligations for platforms like Google and Meta (Facebook) [for mitigating the risks their services create for society](#).

More democratic countries should go in that direction. Not doing so would mean not only allowing gendered disinformation and online abuse to run rampant, but could also lead to the destruction of the democratic institutions and human rights principles we hold dearest.

*Lucina Di Meco is the co-founder of #ShePersisted and a women’s rights advocate*



## 2023.02.17 - Around the world

- [Iran Protests flare in several cities amid continuing unrest](#)
- [Cyclone Gabrielle Temporary morgues set up in New Zealand as rescues continue](#)
- [Bruce Willis Retired actor diagnosed with dementia, family says](#)
- [Fox News Carlson and Hannity among hosts who didn't believe election fraud claims – court filings](#)
- [Australia 'Absurd and wonderful' Progress Shark becomes WorldPride icon](#)

## [Iran](#)

# Iran protests flare in several cities amid continuing unrest

Online videos from Tehran and other centres appear to show demonstrations including anti-government chants as execution of protesters commemorated

Protesters march through streets of several Iranian cities amid ongoing unrest – video

*Associated Press*

Fri 17 Feb 2023 01.39 ESTLast modified on Fri 17 Feb 2023 06.39 EST

Protesters in Iran have marched through the streets of multiple cities in the most widespread demonstrations in weeks, online videos purported to show on Friday.

The demonstrations overnight on Thursday marked 40 days since Iran executed [two men on charges related to protests](#) that began last year and went on to grip the Islamic Republic for month.

The initial unrest – which began after 22-year-old [Mahsa Amini died on 16 September, three days after her arrest by “morality police”](#) – morphed into one of the most serious challenges to Iran’s theocracy since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Videos showed demonstrations in Iran’s capital, Tehran, as well as in the cities of Arak, Isfahan, Izeh in Khuzestan province and Karaj, the group Human Rights Activists in [Iran](#) said. Associated Press could not immediately verify the videos, many of which had been blurred or showed grainy night-time scenes.

In Iran's western Kurdish regions, online videos shared by the Hengaw Organisation for Human Rights showed burning roadblocks in Sanandaj, which has seen repeated demonstrations since Amini's death.

Hengaw shared one video that included digitally altered voices shouting: "Death to the Dictator!" That call has been repeatedly heard in the demonstrations, targeting Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Other videos purportedly shot in Tehran had similar chants, as well as scenes of heavily protected riot police in the street.

Iranian state media did not immediately acknowledge the protests.

Since they began, at least 529 people have been killed in demonstrations, according to Human Rights Activists in Iran. More than 19,700 others have been detained by authorities amid a violent crackdown trying to suppress the dissent. Iran for months has not offered any overall casualty figures, though the government seemed to acknowledge making "tens of thousands" arrests earlier this month.

The demonstrations had appeared to slow in recent weeks, in part due to the executions and crackdown, though protest cries could still be heard at night in some cities.

Forty-day commemorations for the dead are common in Iran and the wider Middle East. But they also can turn into cyclical confrontations between an increasingly disillusioned public and security forces that turn to greater violence to suppress them, as they had in the chaos leading up to Iran's 1979 revolution.

Iran's hardline government has alleged, without offering evidence, that the demonstrations are a foreign plot, rather than homegrown anger.

## [Cyclone Gabrielle](#)

# Cyclone Gabrielle: temporary morgues set up in New Zealand as rescues continue

Facilities in Napier and Hastings announced as death toll climbs to eight with authorities warning that it is likely to rise further

'It's apocalyptic': locals faced with cleanup after New Zealand's Cyclone Gabrielle – video

[Helen Sullivan](#) and agencies

Thu 16 Feb 2023 21.04 EST Last modified on Fri 17 Feb 2023 07.38 EST

Authorities in New Zealand have set up two temporary morgues, as the death toll from [Cyclone Gabrielle](#), the country's most damaging storm in decades, climbs to eight.

A second volunteer firefighter, Craig Stevens, died in hospital after being caught in a landslide near Auckland earlier in the week. A body was also found near Napier on Friday morning, police confirmed. Officials have warned that the toll is likely to rise further.

Prime Minister Chris Hipkins toured the Hawke's Bay region on Friday, saying "the whole country" was feeling for communities affected.

"There are some people who are in a very, very fragile state.

"I just ask people to keep going, you know, we will get through this. We will come out the other side of it. But it is an exceptionally challenging circumstance at the moment."

Severe storms have cut off entire towns, washed away farms, bridges and livestock, and inundated homes, stranding people on rooftops. Ten thousand people have been displaced and by Thursday afternoon, 3,455 people had been registered by police as “uncontactable”, though some were likely to be multiple reports for the same person, authorities said.

Temporary morgues have been set up in Napier and Hastings as part of “standard practice”, a police spokesperson told news outlet Stuff.

“The facilities have been established as a precaution to ensure that any fatalities can be managed with care and respect, and in accordance with coronial processes. They are held there before being taken to a mortuary,” police said.

Cyclone Gabrielle: helicopter pilot balances on roof in 'daring' New Zealand rescue – video

The Prime minister, Chris Hipkins, arrived in Napier on Friday morning. “When you look from up on the hill at the extent of the damage it really is confronting just the true extent of the challenge that these guys have got in front of them,” he told a reporter for the [New Zealand](#) Herald.

Hipkins also said there was no evidence to support claims of much higher death figures or or injuries, RNZ reported.

“It’s no good to anybody speculating about how many people may have been injured or how many people may have died in this tragedy,” Hipkins said.

“We will certainly share that information as soon as we can but I have heard some outlandish claims out there at the moment that there is no evidence to support.”

Communication and access to a number of areas remained difficult, while surveillance flights were being undertaken to survey the damage and identify those who may be isolated. Convoys of trucks carrying essential items such as food, water, medicine and fuel were making their way into

remote areas and the defence force is using ships to transport needed items into areas of the east coast.



Police walk up on foot to check houses and search for bodies in Napier, New Zealand. Photograph: Kerry Marshall/Getty Images

Among the people confirmed dead earlier this week was a two year old girl named Ivy, who was swept away by the water and drowned. Her mother, Ella Louise Collins, recounted the death of her daughter, writing in a Facebook post, “The water was about 10 centimetres from the ceiling in our house and rose extremely quickly and violently”.

The family of four tried to escape to the safety of a neighbour’s roof, but were stopped by what she called “a sudden torrent of water which almost drowned us all”, and pulled Ivy away.

Collins said “she died very quickly.”

“Please give us time while we ground ourselves and navigate this impossible time.”

'Total devastation': New Zealand reels from Cyclone Gabrielle – video



On Thursday Hipkins [warned that there were some people for whom the police still held “grave concerns”](#), but added, “We believe the majority of those considered uncontactable simply cannot make contact with loved ones, so police are prioritising those who are in isolated areas.”

Urban search and rescue team leader Ken Cooper said one man had walked 70km from Putorino to Napier to give rescue workers help with their missions.

“That’s a day-and-a-half walk,” he told Radio NZ. “He walked to give us a list of people still trapped up in the east coast.”

In Hawke’s Bay helicopters and boats were being used to check on people in isolated communities, while search and rescue teams continued to operate.

Rescue efforts were likely to be boosted by news from MetService that it no longer had any weather warnings in place in New Zealand and sunshine was forecast for most of the North Island.

*Reuters contributed to this report*

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## [Bruce Willis](#)

# Bruce Willis diagnosed with dementia, says family

Family of Die Hard and Pulp Fiction actor, 67, releases statement to share diagnosis following retirement from acting owing to aphasia



Bruce Willis, who starred in the Die Hard franchise, Pulp Fiction and The Fifth Element. Photograph: Tolga Akmen/AFP/Getty Images

[Adrian Horton](#)

[@adrian\\_horton](#)

Fri 17 Feb 2023 02.15 ESTFirst published on Thu 16 Feb 2023 15.41 EST

Bruce Willis, who [retired from acting last May](#) as a result of aphasia, has been diagnosed with frontotemporal dementia, his family announced on Thursday.

In a [statement](#) posted to the website for the Association for Frontotemporal Degeneration, the Die Hard actor's family – wife Emma Heming, ex-wife

Demi Moore and daughters Rumer, Scout, Tallulah, Mabel and Evelyn – revealed Willis’s aphasia had progressed into a diagnosis of dementia. Problems with language and memory, which instigated [rumors about his cognitive state](#) and prompted his retirement in May 2022, are “just one symptom of the disease Bruce faces”, they wrote.

“While this is painful, it is a relief to finally have a clear diagnosis.”

The statement continued: “FTD is a cruel disease that many of us have never heard of and [which] can strike anyone. For people under 60, FTD is the most common form of dementia, and because getting the diagnosis can take years, FTD is likely much more prevalent than we know.

“Today there are no treatments for the disease, a reality that we hope can change in the years ahead. As Bruce’s condition advances, we hope that any media attention can be focused on shining a light on this disease that needs far more awareness and research.”

Willis, who got his start in TV on Moonlighting, was one of the most bankable stars of the 1980s and 1990s, known for the Die Hard franchise, Pulp Fiction, The Fifth Element, The Last Boy Scout, Twelve Monkeys, The Sixth Sense, Looper and Moonrise Kingdom. The 67-year-old was also the lead in several family comedies, most notably voicing a baby on Look Who’s Talking and its sequel.

Willis had continued his action career in the years leading up to his retirement, though with diminishing returns – in 2021, the Razzies, the annual awards given to the year’s worst films, [instituted a category](#) for “worst performance by Bruce Willis in a 2021 movie”. It [rescinded](#) the award following his aphasia diagnosis.

The family said in the statement: “Bruce always believed in using his voice in the world to help others, and to raise awareness about important issues both publicly and privately.

“We know in our hearts that – if he could today – he would want to respond by bringing global attention and a connectedness with those who are also

dealing with this debilitating disease and how it impacts so many individuals and their families.”

The family also called for more awareness and understanding of frontotemporal dementia. They said: “Bruce has always found joy in life – and has helped everyone he knows to do the same. It has meant the world to see that sense of care echoed back to him and to all of us.

“We have been so moved by the love you have all shared for our dear husband, father, and friend during this difficult time. Your continued compassion, understanding, and respect will enable us to help Bruce live as full a life as possible.”

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## [Fox News](#)

# Fox News hosts thought Trump's election fraud claims were 'total BS', court filings show

Comments by Tucker Carlson, Sean Hannity and Laura Ingraham revealed in \$1.6bn Dominion defamation lawsuit



Tucker Carlson, Laura Ingraham and Sean Hannity. Photograph: AP

[Richard Luscombe](#)

[@richlusc](#)

Fri 17 Feb 2023 10.20 EST Last modified on Fri 17 Feb 2023 11.16 EST

Hosts at Fox News privately ridiculed Donald Trump's claims that the 2020 election was stolen while simultaneously peddling the same lies on air, according to court filings in a defamation lawsuit against the network.

Rightwing personalities Tucker Carlson, Sean Hannity and Laura Ingraham are among those named in the [\\$1.6bn action](#) brought by Dominion Voting Systems, the seller of electronic voting hardware and software that is suing Fox News and parent company Fox Corporation for maligning its reputation.

“He’s acting like an insane person,” Hannity allegedly wrote of Trump in the weeks following the election as the host continued to push the so-called “big lie” during his top-rated prime time show, aided by a succession of election deniers he had on as guests.

Even billionaire Fox owner [Rupert Murdoch](#) was dismissive of the former president’s false allegations, the filing alleges, calling them “really crazy stuff” in one memo to a Fox News executive, and criticizing Trump’s scattergun approach of pursuing lawsuits in numerous states to try to overturn his defeat.

It was “very hard to credibly claim foul everywhere”, Murdoch wrote, adding in another note that Trump’s obsession with trying to prove fraud was “terrible stuff damaging everybody”.

Meanwhile, Carlson, one of the network’s [most prominent and controversial stars](#), was disdainful of Sidney Powell, a senior Trump attorney who repeatedly claimed Dominion’s machines flipped votes cast for Trump to Joe Biden.

“Sidney Powell is lying,” he wrote to a producer, the Dominion lawsuit alleges. He referred to Powell in a text as an “unguided missile” and “dangerous as hell”.

Trump, Carlson said, was a “demonic force” who was good at “destroying things. He’s the undisputed world champion of that. He could easily destroy us if we play it wrong.”

Fellow host Ingraham told Carlson that Powell was “a complete nut. No one will work with her. Ditto with Rudy,” referring to the former New York mayor and Trump supporter Rudy Giuliani.

Hannity, meanwhile, said in a deposition “that whole narrative that Sidney was pushing, I did not believe it for one second”, according to Dominion’s filing.

Other internal communications revealed that [Fox News](#) executives, hosts and researchers used phrases including “mind-blowingly nuts”, “totally off the rails” and “completely BS” to describe the false election theories they were publicly promoting.

All were included in a 192-page redacted summary judgment brief filed on Thursday at the Delaware superior court by Dominion’s attorneys. A trial is scheduled to begin in mid-April.

The company claims multiple Fox News employees deliberately amplified false claims that Dominion had changed votes in the 2020 election, and that Fox provided a platform for guests to make false and defamatory statements.

“From the top down, Fox knew ‘the Dominion stuff’ was ‘total BS’,” the brief states.

“Not a single Fox witness testified [in depositions] that they believe any of the allegations about Dominion are true. Indeed, Fox witness after Fox witness declined to assert the allegations’ truth or actually stated they do not believe them.”

The brief highlighted an 8 November 2020 interview on Maria Bartiromo’s show in which Powell insisted Dominion voting machines were used to engage in election fraud.

Bartiromo knew what Powell intended to say before the interview, according to the filing, in part because Powell had forwarded an email to her revealing her source came from a woman who got her information from “the wind”.

The Fox News executive responsible for Bartiromo’s show, David Clark, admitted in a deposition he “would not have allowed that claim to be aired”

if he knew about the “crazy” theory from the email.

The filing also shows how Hannity and others were critical of their own network for its [early call of Arizona for Biden on election night](#), which enraged Trump. Hannity texted Carlson and Ingraham that the call “destroyed a brand that took 25 years to build and the damage is incalculable”, while Carlson called it an “act of vandalism”.

Attorneys for the cable news station argued in a counterclaim that the lawsuit was an assault on the first amendment. They said Dominion had advanced “novel defamation theories” and was seeking a “staggering” damage figure aimed at generating headlines and chilling protected speech.

“Dominion brought this lawsuit to punish FNN [Fox News Network] for reporting on one of the biggest stories of the day – allegations by the sitting president of the United States and his surrogates that the 2020 election was affected by fraud,” the counterclaim states. “The very fact of those allegations was newsworthy.”

Fox responded to the new claims in a statement to [ABC News](#). “There will be a lot of noise and confusion generated by Dominion and their opportunistic private equity owners, but the core of this case remains about freedom of the press and freedom of speech.”

*Associated Press contributed to this report*

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## [Sydney WorldPride](#)

# Sydney's 'absurd and wonderful' Progress Shark becomes WorldPride icon

Australian Museum's installation is 10 metres long, sports a rainbow Lycra swimsuit and has captured the hearts of many



Progress Shark has become Sydney WorldPride festival's unofficial mascot and queer icon. Photograph: Abram Powell

[Samantha Lock](#) in Sydney

[@Samantha\\_Lock](#)

Fri 17 Feb 2023 00.19 ESTLast modified on Fri 17 Feb 2023 02.02 EST

When an event thrusts a city into the global spotlight, designing a mascot is a highly deliberated undertaking. But in [Sydney](#), where the month-long WorldPride celebrations have just commenced, it has happened entirely by accident.

And the result is a giant great white shark wrapped in rainbow Lycra.

In Australia's biggest city, the month-long WorldPride festival has begun and a 10-metre long statue called Progress Shark, has become its unofficial totem.

The Australian Museum exhibit – originally designed simply to welcome its hundreds of thousands of visitors – has become a viral sensation and accidental icon of WorldPride.

“As a queer person I have never connected to something so deeply as I have to Progress Shark,” said Laura Connell, 29, a Sydney-based artist. “It’s absurd and wonderful. It’s everything we never knew we needed.”

The prop, suspended five metres in the air, has gained international fame online, sparked dozens of memes and even prompted an Instagram fan account.

Hundreds have lined up to take a photo next to the larger-than-life sea creature.

“Progress Shark needs to be made a national landmark,” one fan said. “I would die for Progress Shark,” said another.

The museum tweeted earlier that it was [“blown away”](#) by all the support. “Progress Shark has captured the hearts of so many already,” it said. “He’s a male, he’s bigger than a great white shark normally gets but he’s scientifically and anatomically correct.”

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Artist George Buchanan brought the creation to life by sewing together the shark-sized Lycra leotard in her garage in south Sydney. “I had to measure the shark first,” she says. “It’s not symmetrical so it was difficult to get it right.”

The final result was a metres-long rainbow suit sewn together with 25lb fishing line.

“It’s very Aussie humour. It’s so silly. It’s just absurd,” she said. “What is seen as a menacing creature is now bringing so much joy and love.”

Kate Wickett, the festival’s CEO, said Progress Shark was just one of the 45 “rainbow moments” spread across Sydney as part of Rainbow City, one to celebrate each year of Mardi Gras. “It’s the unofficial mascot [Sydney WorldPride](#) never knew it needed,” she said.

Sydney’s lord mayor, Clover Moore, is also in support of the shark. “It’s your time to shine Progress Shark”, she said while tagging the [fan account](#) set up in dedication to the shark.

Art Simone, Australian drag performer and former contestant in RuPaul’s Drag Race, joined the online frenzy, writing: “Progress Shark is where it’s at!”

WorldPride started in Sydney on Friday and will run to 5 March. It will also coincide with the city’s 45th Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras where more than 500,000 people are expected to attend.

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## Headlines saturday 18 february 2023

- [Discrimination Unconscious bias training is ‘nonsense’, says outgoing race relations chair](#)
- [Storm Otto Thousands of UK homes face blackouts as wind gusts reach 80mph](#)
- [Live Russia-Ukraine war: Biden will send ‘message’ to Putin in war anniversary speech](#)
- [Nato Rishi Sunak to call for new charter to ensure ‘lasting peace’ for Ukraine](#)

## Race

# Unconscious bias training is ‘nonsense’, says outgoing race relations chair

Civil rights stalwart Colin Prescod says term risks avoiding real conversation about racism and systemic behaviour



Colin Prescod (left) and his successor as chair of the Institute of Race Relations, Dr John Narayan. Photograph: Handout

[Aamna Mohdin](#)  
[@aamnamohdin](#)

Sat 18 Feb 2023 02.00 ESTLast modified on Sat 18 Feb 2023 07.43 EST

The outgoing chair of the Institute of [Race](#) Relations has decried the widespread use of “nonsense” unconscious bias training, claiming it is an obvious sidestepping of tackling racial injustice.

The civil rights stalwart Colin Prescod, who is stepping down after 43 years, likened the modish phrase to the 1970s term “racial awareness”.

In a wide-ranging interview, the sociologist and cultural activist said he was proud of the role that his institute had played in putting institutional racism on the national agenda several decades ago, but was dismayed at the rise of terms such as [unconscious bias](#).

“We made arguments to the state even when we’re on platforms alongside them saying this was nonsense. It’s racism we want to talk about, it’s systemic behaviour we want to talk about, institutionalised racism we want to talk about, not unconscious bias or racial awareness,” Prescod said. “It’s the stuff that kills that we want to talk about, the stuff that stunts lives that we want to talk about, the stuff that deforms lives that we want to talk about.”

The outgoing chair pointed to the increasing concern of a school-to-prison pipeline in the UK, where young minority ethnic children excluded from schools are forced into pupil referral units where they are groomed by criminal gangs – a clear example of systemic racism, he claims. “To talk about unconscious biases is an obvious sidestepping of the matter. And it’s also wanting to let people off,” Prescod said.

The Institute of Race Relations (IRR) announced Prescod would be replaced by Dr John Narayan, a senior lecturer in European and international studies at King’s College London. Prescod will remain part of the IRR’s council, focusing on developing the IRR’s Black History Collection archive.

Prescod joined the IRR’s council in 1976 and became chair in 1980, during a volatile era. The institute responded to far-right attacks and marches, controversial policing operations and the 1981 riots – which it defined as “uprisings” – led by black and Asian youth in 10 cities across England.

Prescod intervened in many institutions, including writing letters to the Guardian. In a letter to the editor published in 1981, just weeks after the Brixton riots, Prescod wrote: “We have again witnessed the spectacles of politicians and others posturing as to the ‘causes’ of the ‘race problem’ and black people’s grievances. What is at immediate issue is not the question of general urban deprivation, let alone of immigrant numbers, or even a sudden breakdown in police-black relations, but the exceptional policing

practices used against the black community in Brixton over the past two decades.” He wrote many others.

The institute “insistently” talked about institutional racism then, but was in the minority and faced significant opposition, Prescod said. “In the end, it stuck because we then had the Macpherson report amongst others using a term which was not invented by them, but by communities of resistance.”

He added: “Ambalavaner Sivanandan [former director of IRR] and we at the institute were taking our cue from what the communities of resistance were saying. Institutionalised racism was not invented in the academy. It’s not invented by the politicians, it comes off the ground.

“It comes out of slow realisation where you start with one case that shows you injustice and after a while you pull that out and you realise that you’re looking at a whole string of things that tell you there’s something more than simply a wrongdoer in this situation.”

Prescod was not surprised at the government’s recent decision to drop crucial reform commitments made after the [Windrush scandal](#). “This is not unlike what happened after the Macpherson report, which says very clearly institutionalised racism exists. And this is not just in the police. Any number of institutions have been looked at in this kind of way. And everybody says yes, but then you look at what happened thereafter, how much was done in terms of recommendations,” he said.

When asked what he felt was the most significant change in Britain in terms of race, Prescod turned to a lyric from the British jazz band Sons of Kemet: “Don’t wanna take my country back, mate. I wanna take my country forward.” He said he finds it powerful black youth have claimed the country as their own.

“We now have populations here who are not thinking of themselves from some other place or going to some other place, but here, and are aware of their history of struggle. When Sons of Kemet says something like ‘we want to take our country forward’, notice all the words in the phrase.” He believes it shows a significant cultural shift of “new generations [of black

Britons] born here, belonging here, speaking with a different kind of authority”.

Prescod said while there was no room for “triumphalism” when looking at racial progress, he was leaving his position with some hope. “There is always resistance. It’s only too clear. If you look at any situation in which somebody starts to be down-pressed, you will realise that there is somebody who is saying: get off my back, get off my throat. We don’t simply curl up.”

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## [UK news](#)

# Storm Otto: about 1,300 Scottish homes remain without power as conditions clear

Met Office says storm, which left more than 60,000 homes without power at one point, has moved on to Scandinavia



A fallen tree on a car and van in Aberfeldy, Scotland, as a result of Storm Otto. Photograph: PA

[Hayden Vernon](#) and [Nadeem Badshah](#)

Sat 18 Feb 2023 13.15 EST First published on Sat 18 Feb 2023 02.20 EST

About 1,300 homes that lost power during Storm Otto had still not been reconnected to the grid as of Saturday afternoon, according to energy firms.

The Met Office said the storm had “well and truly cleared” but more than 1,000 homes in Aberdeenshire remain without power.

The forecasting body said the storm, which left more than 60,000 homes without power, has moved on to the continent and is now affecting Scandinavia.

Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks (SSEN) said it had restored power to more than 42,000 homes since the storm struck and was “confident” most of the homes still without power would have it restored by the end of Saturday.

It added that a small number of homes in isolated and rural areas were likely to remain off-grid until Sunday evening “at the latest”.

SSEN said it had sent food vans to the main areas still cut off from supply, which will serve food and drink until 9pm on Saturday.

Gusts of 75-80mph were recorded across parts of northern [Scotland](#) on Friday while trains and flights were cancelled and roads blocked by overturned lorries in northern England.

In England, Northern Powergrid said about 21,000 customers lost power, with one person still affected by 8.30am on Saturday.

A yellow warning for snow and ice was in place for central parts of Scotland until 9am on Saturday but milder conditions were expected over the rest of the weekend.



A damaged school roof in Carnoustie, Angus, Scotland, from Storm Otto.  
Photograph: Angus Council/PA

On Friday morning, a man was taken to hospital in a serious condition after a tree fell on a street in Sheffield.

South Yorkshire police officers were called to Endcliffe Vale Road at 8.50am.

A spokesperson said: “A man in his 50s was injured and was taken to hospital in serious condition. A property nearby was also damaged and structural engineers are at the scene.”

A tree toppled on to a Porsche on Granby Road in Harrogate, North Yorkshire, causing anxiety for drivers in the area.

Footage from fishing vessel shows huge waves caused by Storm Otto in the North Sea – video

Charlie Lowe, a 29-year-old cake business owner, photographed the crushed Porsche on her way to work, telling the PA news agency: “I felt shocked and I think it’s nerve-racking.

“I felt a bit nervous driving around Harrogate as a result.”

The storm, the first to be named this winter, was labelled Otto by the Danish Meteorological Institute.

It is the first named storm to directly affect the UK this storm-naming season, which began in September.

The first storm to be named by the Met Office or the Irish and Dutch weather services this season will still be Storm Antoni, in accordance with the 2022-23 storm name list.

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## [Ukraine war live](#)Ukraine

# Sunak urges allies to ‘double down’ on military support – as it happened

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## [Foreign policy](#)

# Rishi Sunak to call for new Nato charter to ensure ‘lasting peace’ for Ukraine

UK PM expected to urge leaders at Munich Security Conference to ‘double down on our military support’ for Kyiv

- [Russia-Ukraine war – latest news updates](#)



Sunak will use the conference’s sidelines to speak to EU leaders about the talks on post-Brexit trading arrangements in Northern Ireland. Photograph: Peter Nicholls/PA

[Aubrey Allegretti](#) *Political correspondent*  
[@breeallegretti](#)

Fri 17 Feb 2023 17.30 EST Last modified on Fri 17 Feb 2023 17.33 EST

Rishi Sunak will call on world leaders to ensure a “lasting peace” for Ukraine with the establishment of a new Nato charter to help the country [defend itself](#) “again and again” in the face of any future declarations of war by Russia.

Fresh from hosting the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, in the UK last week, Sunak is expected to call for countries to “double down on our military support” and warn that “the security and sovereignty of every nation” is at stake.

He will mark the approaching one-year anniversary of the Kremlin’s invasion of [Ukraine](#) by attending the Munich Security Conference, and urge fellow premiers not to “lose our nerve” in upholding sanctions and providing military kit.

Keir Starmer, the Labour leader, was also due to speak at the conference, but strikes at Munich airport meant a planned flight from Poland to Germany was cancelled. He had been in Ukraine, visiting Zelenskiy to affirm that a Labour government would be unwavering in its support for Kyiv.

Starmer’s space on a panel will be filled instead by David Lammy, the shadow foreign secretary, while the shadow defence secretary, John Healey, is also at the conference.

Although Sunak will use the sidelines of the security conference to speak to EU leaders about talk of an imminent breakthrough on post-Brexit trading arrangements in Northern Ireland, his main objective will be maintaining western unity against Russia.

“Now is the moment to double down on our military support,” the prime minister is expected to say. “When [Vladimir] Putin started this war, he gambled that our resolve would falter. Even now he is betting we will lose our nerve. But we proved him wrong then, and we will prove him wrong now.”

Pushing for a new [Nato](#) charter to protect Ukraine from future Russian aggression, he is expected to say: “We must demonstrate that we’ll remain by their side, willing and able to help them defend their country again and again.”

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Last year, the UK provided military aid worth £2.3bn, including tanks, other armoured vehicles, and anti-tank missiles. No 10 has committed to matching or exceeding that level of support in 2023.

A minute’s silence will be held at 11am on Friday 24 February to mark the anniversary of the invasion of Ukraine.

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## 2023.02.18 - Spotlight

- ['Eyes open, leap into the future' 100 centenarians' 100 tips for a life well lived](#)
- [Blind date I couldn't think of anywhere to take a sober person on a Friday night in Soho](#)
- [Eleanor Catton 'I felt so much doubt after winning the Booker'](#)
- [Artificial intelligence \(AI\) Revolution puts middle-class workers under threat this time](#)

# ‘Keep your eyes open – and leap into the future’: 100 centenarians’ 100 tips for a life well lived

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[Blind date](#)[Life and style](#)

## Blind date: ‘I couldn’t think of anywhere to take a sober person on a Friday night in Soho’



Stanley, left and James. Composite: David Levene/Graeme Robertson/The Guardian

Stanley, 26, who works in fashion, meets James, 30, who works in a bookshop

Sat 18 Feb 2023 01.00 EST



## Stanley on James

### **What were you hoping for?**

The chance to say I'd tried everything before I retire to a life of spinsterdom.

### **First impressions?**

Handsome and wearing a cool shirt. A bit quiet but I put that down to nerves.

### **What did you talk about?**

I spoke about the fashion industry and we identified parallels with his work. I moaned about cryptocurrency and he told me the plot of his favourite opera.

**Most awkward moment?**

There were silences that were a touch too long. I accused him of lying about a [famous Ukrainian ballet dancer having a Putin tattoo](#).

**Good table manners?**

No notes! It felt like Lady and the Tramp, as he was so well mannered while I had a lap full of crumbs. He was nice to the restaurant staff, too.

**Best thing about James?**

He doesn't waste energy on things that don't make him happy.

**Would you introduce James to your friends?**

Not sure that would be fair on James.

**Describe James in three words.**

Intelligent, calm, laconic.

**What do you think James made of you?**

It was impossible to tell: he gave very little away.

**Q&A****Fancy a blind date?**

Show

Blind date is Saturday's dating column: every week, two strangers are paired up for dinner and drinks, and then spill the beans to us, answering a set of questions. This runs, with a photograph we take of each dater before the date, in Saturday magazine (in the UK) and online at [theguardian.com](http://theguardian.com) every Saturday. It's been running since 2009 – you can [read all about how we put it together here](#).

**What questions will I be asked?**

We ask about age, location, occupation, hobbies, interests and the type of person you are looking to meet. If you do not think these questions cover everything you would like to know, tell us what's on your mind.

**Can I choose who I match with?**

No, it's a blind date! But we do ask you a bit about your interests, preferences, etc – the more you tell us, the better the match is likely to be.

**Can I pick the photograph?**

No, but don't worry: we'll choose the nicest ones.

**What personal details will appear?**

Your first name, job and age.

**How should I answer?**

Honestly but respectfully. Be mindful of how it will read to your date, and that Blind date reaches a large audience, in print and online.

**Will I see the other person's answers?**

No. We may edit yours and theirs for a range of reasons, including length, and we may ask you for more details.

**Will you find me The One?**

We'll try! Marriage! Babies!

**Can I do it in my home town?**

Only if it's in the UK. Many of our applicants live in London, but we would love to hear from people living elsewhere.

**How to apply**

Email [blind.date@theguardian.com](mailto:blind.date@theguardian.com)

Was this helpful?

Thank you for your feedback.

**Did you go on somewhere?**

I couldn't think of anywhere to take a sober person on a Friday night in Soho.

**And ... did you kiss?**

We didn't.

**If you could change one thing about the evening, what would it be?**

We both ordered the same thing so we didn't get to see more of what looked like an incredible menu!

**Marks out of 10?**

Not a lover of ratings, but he let me try his lemon sorbet so I'll give a big thumbs up.

**Would you meet again?**

Perhaps in a different setting. I felt James might be more suited to a coffee shop or the opera than central London on a Friday night.



James (left) and Stanley on their date



## **James on Stanley**

### **What were you hoping for?**

Attraction, engaging conversation and good food.

### **First impressions?**

Warm and engaging.

### **What did you talk about?**

His interest in fashion. Galliano's home furnishings. My interests in ancient Greek literature and my favourite translation of Homer. Family fragmentation. Our lives in London.

### **Most awkward moment?**

I splashed water in my lap; he dropped a wafer.

### **Good table manners?**

Impeccable – couldn't have asked for more.

### **Best thing about Stanley?**

He seemed genuinely interested in my background and didn't have an edge.



**Would you introduce Stanley to your friends?**

Of course.

**Describe Stanley in three words.**

Affable, inquisitive, honest.

**What do you think Stanley made of you?**

I'm not sure. It may have been to do with my lack of an accent or that he liked my shirt.

**Did you go on somewhere?**

The tube station.

**And ... did you kiss?**

No, there was a warm hug.

**If you could change one thing about the evening what would it be?**

We had shrimp for both courses, so we could have mixed it up a bit. Otherwise the food was great.

**Marks out of 10?**

8

**Would you meet again?**

I'd be happy to hang out.

*Stanley and James ate at [Barrafina](#), London WC2. Fancy a blind date?  
Email [blind.date@theguardian.com](mailto:blind.date@theguardian.com)*

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## Eleanor Catton: ‘I felt so much doubt after winning the Booker’

[Lisa Allardice](#)



‘A slightly outsider perspective’ ... Eleanor Catton. Photograph: Sarah Lee/The Guardian

In 2013, at 28, Eleanor Catton became the youngest ever Booker winner with *The Luminaries*. She talks about adapting the novel for screen, being shut out of her native New Zealand and why it has taken 10 years to write a follow-up



Sat 18 Feb 2023 04.00 EST

It has been 10 years since [Eleanor Catton](#) became, at 28, the youngest writer to be awarded the Booker prize. *The Luminaries*, a Victorian mystery set during the New Zealand gold rush, was the longest book to win in the prize's history and made her only the second New Zealand writer to have done so, after Keri Hulme. Since then, she has adapted it [for the BBC](#) and written a screenplay for [Emma](#) (both of which aired in 2020), got married and had a baby. But it has taken her a long time to get back to fiction, she says, when I visit her at home in Cambridge, where she is living with her husband, the American poet Steven Toussaint, as he studies for a PhD in divinity and philosophy of religion at the university.

“The Booker prize was life-changing, but it wasn’t self-changing,” she says. “Having a child is truly self-changing.” They have just returned from a trip to Auckland, her first visit home since the pandemic, and the first time her parents had met her two-year-old daughter. By coincidence, on the day we meet [Jacinda Ardern](#) announces she will be stepping down as prime minister of New Zealand. While Catton has been a fan, she says, she took the closing of her home country’s borders at the peak of the pandemic “kind of personally”. As Catton points out, when Ardern thanked her “[team of five million](#)” New Zealanders for the sacrifices they were making during lockdown, she failed to include all those who were stuck overseas, like Catton, who had just moved to the UK, “and who were also making an incredible sacrifice. They were a part of that team, but they weren’t honoured as such.”

Catton, now 37, often begins her sentences with the phrase, “I’ve thought a lot about this recently”, and she really has. Feeling “rather disgruntled” made it easier to write her new novel, *Birnam Wood*, a satire-cum-psychological-eco-thriller about a young guerrilla gardening collective, set in a fictional New Zealand national park. Most of the novel was written during lockdown and pregnancy; she finished the final sprint while her daughter was still tiny. “Steve would knock on my study door with the baby. I would feed her and then I would hand her back and keep going.”

*Birnam Wood* is Catton’s third novel. Her first, [The Rehearsal](#), an ingeniously crafted story about teenage girls and a sex scandal in a New Zealand high school, was published in 2008 when she was only 22, and reviewers eagerly welcomed an original new talent. Then came *The Luminaries*, sending her into a different stratosphere overnight. Winning the Booker may sound like every young writer’s dream, but it was a profoundly alienating experience, she says. “I just felt so much doubt all of a sudden. My book was selling in this crazy way. It felt so disproportionate to my relationship to it.”



Eva Green, left, and Eve Hewson in the 2020 TV adaptation of *The Luminaries*. Photograph: Album/Alamy

Then she found herself at the centre of a media “firestorm” in 2015, after [comments she made](#) at the Jaipur literature festival about New Zealand politicians – “neoliberal, profit-obsessed, very shallow, very money-hungry” – were picked up back home. She was accused of being a traitor and an “ungrateful *hua*” (Māori slang for an unpleasant woman), with even the then prime minister John Key sniping on breakfast television that she didn’t know what she was talking about and should stay out of politics. “It was an extraordinary smackdown,” she says. Her parents were doorstepped. The whole experience was “relentless and frankly devastating”. After an older man glared at her in the supermarket and let out an exaggerated disapproving sigh one day, she went home and didn’t leave the house for six weeks. “It just ruined me,” she says. “It knocked the joy out of me for a really long time.”

But the ordeal did lead her to finally write, and sell, a proposal for Birnam Wood in 2017. In response to Key’s jibe she immersed herself in history and political books, which “in a funny kind of way birthed the novel”. (She has the last laugh on Key, alluded to in the novel as the “moneyed politician” who reinstated chivalric titles in New Zealand before being knighted himself.)

The novel revolves around the New Zealand national obsession: property. The young anti-establishment members of the Birnam Wood collective want to use Thorndike Farm to grow produce, and American billionaire Robert Lemoine wants to buy it, posing as a survivalist who plans to build a refuge there as a cover for an illegal rare-earth mining operation. Characters are broadly divided along generational lines – idealistic twentysomethings Mira and Shelley, gen X baddie Lemoine and benign but smug baby boomers Lord and Lady Darvish, who actually own the land. Birnam Wood addresses many of today's hottest issues: the moral depredations of late capitalism, the dangers of rampant technology, surveillance, social media and environmental collapse, and the question of who is to blame for it all. While Catton shares her generation's anger at the boomers – for presiding over a period that has seen the introduction of university tuition fees, the financial crisis and an acceleration of the climate crisis for starters – the novel's sharpest satire is directed at her own tribe: well-meaning, left-leaning millennials.

The Luminaries was so baroque, it's almost camp. It was me having fun, seeing if I could do it

With its zeitgeisty subject matter, Birnam Wood couldn't be more different from The Luminaries, which some critics dismissed as pastiche and "costume drama". The novel was subjected to some rather sneery, sexist, and what Catton has called "[bullying](#)" reviews, especially in New Zealand, and particularly from "men over about 45". But she was also compared to George Eliot and Wilkie Collins, and to experimentalists such as Italo Calvino. Both The Luminaries and Birnam Wood are driven by a human greed to plunder New Zealand's natural resources. When Mira agrees to accept funding from Lemoine (unaware of his nefarious intentions, although his megabucks from drone manufacture might have set off alarms), Catton is making the point that in blaming the boomers we wilfully ignore other bad actors in the world. "Millennials are quite willing to cosy up to the tech gen Xers," she says. "We are all personally enriching billionaires like Elon Musk by freely giving away our data." Her mobile emits a timely buzz. "These minerals are in the phones that are around us all



the time. I want my iPhone. I want to be able to have the freedoms that it brings. We are all complicit.”

As with *The Luminaries*, she started her latest work with a title and a chart. Readers of that earlier novel will remember it was written according to a [complex astrological schema](#), where each character corresponded to a zodiac sign, created with the help of a website that tracked the planetary movements over 19th-century New Zealand. “*The Luminaries* was so baroque, it’s almost camp,” she laughs. “There was an element that was play for the sake of play. It was me having fun, just seeing if I could do it.”

With *Birnam Wood* she had a serious message. This time she looked not to the heavens but to the classics, with Shakespeare and Austen (and a little [Lee Child](#)) providing inspiration. From *Macbeth* she took not only the title (a wood of the same name plays a pivotal role in the Scottish king’s downfall), but drew up another intricate masterplan in which each of the main characters could be seen as *Macbeth*, with a corresponding Lady *Macbeth*, witches and so on. It sounds tricksier than it is: as the narrative perspective shifts, everybody could be the villain. She wanted to stop readers playing “the polarised blame game we are all used to in contemporary politics,” she explains. “You wouldn’t be able to say: ‘These are my people so they are obviously the good guys. These are the people that I despise so they are obviously the bad guys.’”

But it was working on the screenplay for *Emma*, which she had never read before (though she had seen the loose 90s adaptation [Clueless](#)), that finally impelled her to start writing in earnest in 2019. Collaborating creatively with other people was a relief from the “intellectual loneliness” she felt after the Booker. Like another Booker winner, [Damon Galgut](#), she says she would recommend a screenwriting sabbatical to any novelist struggling with writer’s block.



Catton at home in Cambridge. Photograph: Sarah Lee/The Guardian

“I didn’t want to write a book where nothing happened,” she says. “Where the book participated in any sort of apathy or nihilism by just kind of shrugging its shoulders and saying: ‘Well, actually, nothing is going to change, the writing is on the wall already.’ I wanted the book to show that actions do matter.”

And it wasn’t just about creating a pacy plot (although the ending will have you gnawing your knuckles). “It seems to me that morality has always depended on there being a difference between saying something and doing it: saying I am a good person and then doing a good action,” she says. This distinction, she believes, has been eroded in our digital world, where you are what you tweet. Five years ago she quit all social media and hasn’t looked back. “I think that it is distorting human nature,” she says. “It’s altering the way that we think. It’s altering the way that we exist in time.”

She compares tweeting to “throwing a paper dart into the void” with no idea who that dart will hit or any obligation to follow up. “There’s no engagement with all of the more human emotional considerations that would come into an actual debate. It’s no wonder that these things become so poisonous and so polarised and so insoluble.”



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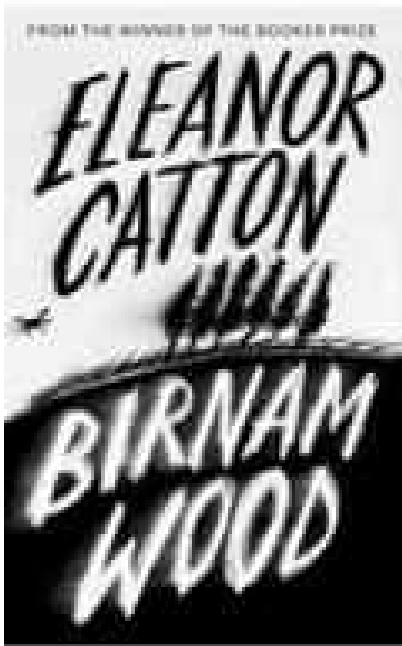
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In a set piece in the middle of the novel – by far the hardest part to write, she says – two Birnam Wood members have an argument that descends into ranting and mansplaining on one side and self-righteous sensitivity on the other: “‘Um, just so I’m clear,’ Amber said, ‘you’re saying that intersectionality is *bullshit*?’” Catton wanted to satirise the toxicity of so much public discourse, particularly on the left, which she feels has become

“a kind of purity test” in which you are judged on using the right language or not. “‘Is a woman a woman?’ for example. It becomes this kind of test.”

Researching psychological traits for her James Bond-esque villain Lemoine, she was struck by the similarities between our relationship to the internet and that of sociopaths to their victims. “Algorithms are flattering you by adapting themselves to what they think that you want; they can see what you desire and they’re very good at shapeshifting,” she says. “We’ve kind of become acclimatised to dealing with sociopaths, through our constant engagement with algorithms. It’s not an accident that there are so many sociopaths in positions of power.”

Catton has always had a “slightly outsider perspective” on New Zealand culture, a result, she believes, of having been born in Canada with an American father. The family – she is the youngest of three children – moved to Christchurch when she was small. Her father was a philosophy lecturer at the university, her mother a librarian. They didn’t have a television – her parents still don’t. “There was a very strong, almost moral, pressure that books were better,” she says, and the young Eleanor would sit for hours wrapped in blankets writing stories on the computer in the garage. Clearly, having wrestled her giant novel into a miniseries, Catton is a TV convert, and cites hit shows such as *The Wire* and *The Sopranos* as an influence on *The Luminaries* (one of the Booker judges described it as “a Kiwi *Twin Peaks*”). Her daughter is giggling at a cartoon in the other room as we speak.

She met Toussaint when they were both studying at the world-renowned Iowa Writers’ Workshop, for which she won a New Zealand scholarship in 2008, and where she would later teach. She had already published *The Rehearsal* and was at work on what would become *The Luminaries*. Together, the couple moved to Auckland in 2011. To call him her first reader, she says, would be to hugely underestimate the role he plays in her writing. They have “endless conversations”, sometimes – as with the dramatic ending of *Birnam Wood* – to the point of tearful arguments. “We are very explosive about it.”

Although the UK now feels like home, she can't resist returning to New Zealand in her fiction. Unlike so many writers, she is happy to talk about her next work, "a queasy immersion thriller" that will be called *Doubtful Sound*, after the remote fjord in the south-west of New Zealand where it is set. She has had the title for a long time – "I just think it is so beautiful" – but it was only in the final months of completing *Birnam Wood* that the story came to her.

A mysterious box has been delivered while we are talking. It turns out to be finished copies of *Birnam Wood* from Catton's publisher. The black and white jacket includes an endorsement from Stephen King that only came in at the last minute. "It's as good as it gets," King says of Catton's third book. An author would be forgiven for posting a photo on Twitter. But after all this time, Catton is happy to just share the moment with her husband and daughter.

*Birnam Wood* is published by Granta in March. To support The Guardian and Observer, order your copy at [guardianbookshop.com](https://guardianbookshop.com). Delivery charges may apply.

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## Artificial intelligence (AI)

### Analysis

# The AI industrial revolution puts middle-class workers under threat this time

Larry Elliott Economics editor

In the past, leaps in technology replaced low-paid jobs with a greater number of higher-paid jobs. This time, it may be different

- [How AI is changing every corner of the economy.](#)



Microsoft's Yusuf Mehdi announces ChatGPT integration for the Bing search engine earlier this month. Photograph: Jason Redmond/AFP/Getty Images

Sat 18 Feb 2023 02.00 ESTLast modified on Sat 18 Feb 2023 07.07 EST

The machines are coming and they will eat your job. That's been a familiar refrain down the years, stretching back to the Luddites in the early 19th century. In the past, step-changes in technology have replaced low-paid jobs with a greater number of higher-paid jobs. This time, with the arrival of artificial intelligence, there are those who think it will be different.

Politicians know that even in the best case AI will cause massive disruption to labour markets, but they are fooling themselves if they think they have years to come up with a suitable response. As the tech entrepreneur Mihir Shukla [said at the recent World Economic Forum](#) in Davos: "People keep saying AI is coming but it is already here."

Developments in machine learning and robotics have been moving on rapidly while the world has been preoccupied by the pandemic, inflation and war. AI stands to be to the fourth industrial revolution what the spinning jenny and the steam engine were to the first in the 18th century: a transformative technology that will fundamentally reshape economies.

Change will not happen overnight but, as was the case in previous industrial revolutions, it will be painful for those affected, as millions of workers will be. Previously, machines replaced manual labour, leaving jobs that required cognitive skills to humans. Advances in AI – symbolised by ChatGPT – shows that machines can now have a decent stab at doing the creative stuff as well.

[ChatGPT](#) is a machine that can write intelligently. Asked to come up with a version of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address in the style of Donald Trump, it will search the web for suitable source material and generate original content.

Launched by the San Francisco-based research laboratory OpenAI in November last year, ChatGPT notched up its 100 millionth user in [60 days](#). By contrast, it took Facebook two years to reach the same milestone.

Other new products will follow. The number of AI patents increased 30-fold between 2015 and 2021, according to a [report from Stanford](#)

[University](#) in California. Robots are becoming cheaper and more sophisticated all the time.

History suggests profound technological change presents significant challenges for policymakers. Each of the three previous industrial revolutions had a similar initial impact: it hollowed out jobs across the economy, it led to an increase in inequality and to a decline in the share of income going to labour.

AI threatens to have precisely the same effects, but with one key difference. Left unchecked, owners of the new machines will make enormous sums of money out of their innovations. Capital will see its share of income rise at the expense of labour. There will be a hollowing out of some sectors of the economy but there will be employment growth in other sectors.

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The difference this time is that the jobs most at risk will be white-collar, middle-class jobs, while many of the jobs created might be of the low-paid, dead-end variety. As Shukla noted in Davos, the days of humans processing mortgage applications are already numbered.

There are ways of dealing with some of these issues. Governments could invest more in education and training, so that workers have the skills they

need to make a decent living. They might explore ways of spreading the gains from the new technology. Silicon Valley entrepreneurs have been among the most vocal supporters of a universal basic income.

But whatever they do, policymakers need to act with care as well as speed. The economist Joseph Schumpeter popularised a phrase to describe how capitalism periodically reinvents itself. He called it creative destruction, and just such a process is in its early stages now.

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## 2023.02.18 - Opinion

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[OpinionIndia](#)

## **Modi's model is at last revealed for what it is: violent Hindu nationalism underwritten by big business**

[Arundhati Roy](#)



India's prime minister and the billionaire Gautam Adani each benefited from the other's rise – now their relationship is under scrutiny



‘Gautam Adani, left, and Narendra Modi have known each other for decades.’ Composite: Reuters

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India is under attack by foreign powers. Specifically the United Kingdom and the United States. Or so our government would have us believe. Why? Because former colonialists and neo-imperialists cannot tolerate our prosperity and good fortune. The attack, we are told, is aimed at the political and economic foundations of our young nation.

The covert operatives are the [BBC](#), which in January broadcast a two-part documentary called India: The Modi Question, and a small US firm called Hindenburg Research, owned by 38-year-old Nathan Anderson, which specialises in what is known as activist short-selling.

The BBC-Hindenburg moment has been portrayed by the Indian media as nothing short of an attack on India’s twin towers – [Narendra Modi](#), the prime minister, and India’s biggest industrialist, Gautam Adani, who was, until recently, the world’s third richest man. The charges laid against them aren’t subtle. The BBC film implicates Modi in the abetment of mass murder. The Hindenburg report, published on 24 January, accuses Adani of

pulling “the largest con in corporate history” (an allegation that the Adani Group strongly denies).

Modi and Adani have known each other for decades. Things began to look up for them after the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom, which raged through Gujarat after Muslims were held responsible for the burning of a railway coach in which 59 Hindu pilgrims were burned alive. Modi had been appointed chief minister of the state only a few months before the massacre.

At the time, much of India recoiled in horror at the open slaughter and mass rape of Muslims that was staged on the streets of Gujarat’s towns and villages by vigilante Hindu mobs seeking “revenge”. Some old-fashioned members of the Confederation of Indian Industry even made their displeasure with Modi public. Enter Gautam Adani. With a small group of Gujarati industrialists he set up a new platform of businessmen known as the [Resurgent Group of Gujarat](#). They denounced Modi’s critics and supported him as he launched a new political career as Hindu Hriday Samrat, the Emperor of Hindu Hearts, or, more accurately, the consolidator of the Hindu vote-bank.

In 2003, they held an investors’ summit called Vibrant Gujarat. So was born what is known as the Gujarat model of “development”: violent Hindu nationalism underwritten by serious corporate money. In 2014, after three terms as chief minister of Gujarat, Modi was elected prime minister of India. He flew to his swearing-in ceremony in Delhi in a private jet with Adani’s name emblazoned across the body of the aircraft. In the nine years of Modi’s tenure, Adani’s wealth grew from \$8bn to \$137bn. In 2022 alone, he [made \\$72bn](#), which is more than the combined earnings of the world’s next nine billionaires put together.

The Adani Group now controls a dozen shipping ports that account for the movement of 30% of India’s freight, seven airports that handle 23% of India’s airline passengers, and warehouses that collectively hold 30% of India’s grain. It owns and operates power plants that are the biggest generators of the country’s private electricity. The Gujarat model of development has been [replicated at scale](#).

“First Modi flew in Adani’s plane,” the bitter joke goes. “Now Adani flies in Modi’s plane.” And now both planes have developed engine trouble. Can they get out of it by wrapping themselves in the Indian flag?

Episode one of the BBC film *The Modi Question* (I appear briefly in the documentary as an interviewee) is about the 2002 Gujarat pogrom – not just the murdering, but also the 20-year journey that some victims made through India’s labyrinthine legal system, keeping the faith, hoping for justice and political accountability. It includes eyewitness testimonies, most poignantly from Imtiyaz Pathan, who lost 10 members of his family in the “Gulbarg Society massacre”, which was one of several [similarly gruesome massacres](#) that took place over those few days in Gujarat.

Pathan describes how they were all sheltering in the house of Ehsan Jafri, a former Congress party member of parliament, while the mob gathered outside. He says that Jafri made a final, desperate phone call for help to Narendra Modi, and when he realised no help would come, stepped out of his home and gave himself up to the mob, hoping to persuade them to spare those who had come to him for protection. Jafri was dismembered and his body burned beyond recognition. And the carnage rolled on for hours.



A Bajranj Dal Hindu nationalist brandishes an iron rod in Ahmedabad in 2002 Photograph: Sebastian D’Souza/AFP/Getty Images

When the case went to trial, the state of Gujarat contested the fact of the phone call, even though it had been mentioned not just by Pathan but several other witnesses in their testimonies. The contestation was upheld. The BBC film clearly mentions this. Vilified though it has been by the BJP government, the film actually goes out of its way to present the BJP's point of view about the pogrom, as well as that of the Indian supreme court, which on 24 June 2022 dismissed the petition of Zakia Jafri, Ehsan Jafri's widow, in which she alleged there was a larger conspiracy behind the murder of her husband. The order called her petition an "abuse of process", and suggested that those involved in pursuing the case be prosecuted. Modi's supporters celebrated the judgment as the final word on his innocence.

The film also showcases an interview with the home affairs minister, Amit Shah, another old pal of Modi's from Gujarat, who compares Modi to Lord Shiva for having "swallowed poison and held it in his throat" for 19 years. After the supreme court's "clean chit", the minister said: "Truth has come out shining like gold."

The section of the BBC film that the government of India has acted most outraged about was the revelation of an internal report commissioned by the British Foreign Office in April 2002, so far unseen by the public. The fact-finding report estimated that "at least 2,000" people had been murdered. It called the massacre a preplanned pogrom that bore "all the hallmarks of ethnic cleansing". It said reliable contacts had informed them that the police had been ordered to stand down. The report laid the blame squarely at Modi's door. It was chilling to see the former, but obviously still cautious, British diplomat who was one of the investigators on the fact-finding mission choosing to remain anonymous, with his back to the camera.





Narendra Modi receives a garland as he campaigns during the Gujarat state legislature elections last year. Photograph: Ajit Solanki/AP

Episode two of the BBC documentary, less seen but even more frightening, is about the dangerous divisiveness and deep fault lines Modi has cultivated during his tenure as prime minister. For most Indians it's the texture of our daily lives: sword-wielding mobs, saffron-clad god-men routinely calling for the genocide of Muslims and the mass rape of Muslim women, the impunity with which Hindus can lynch Muslims on the street, and not only film themselves while doing it but be [garlanded and congratulated](#) for it by senior ministers in Modi's cabinet.

Though The Modi Question was broadcast exclusively for a British audience, and limited to the UK, it was uploaded by viewers on YouTube and links were posted on Twitter. It lit up the internet. In India, students received warnings not to download and watch it. When they announced collective screenings in some university campuses, the electricity was switched off. In others, police arrived in riot gear to [stop them watching](#). The government instructed YouTube and Twitter to [delete all links and uploads](#). Those sterling defenders of free speech hurried to comply. Some of my Muslim friends were baffled. "Why does he want to ban it? The Gujarat massacre has always helped him. And we're in an election year."

Then came the attack on the second tower.

The 400-odd-page Hindenburg report was published on the same day the second episode of the BBC film was broadcast. It elaborated on questions that had been raised in the past by Indian journalists, and went much further. It alleges that the Adani Group has been engaged in a “[brazen stock manipulation and accounting fraud scheme](#)”, which – through the use of offshore shell entities – artificially overvalued its key listed companies and inflated the net worth of its chairman.

According to the Hindenburg report, seven of Adani’s listed companies are overvalued by more than 85%. Based on these valuations, the companies reportedly borrowed billions of dollars on the international markets and from Indian public sector banks [such as the State Bank of India and the Life Insurance Corporation of India](#), where millions of ordinary Indians invest their life savings.

The Adani Group responded to the Hindenburg report with a [413-page rebuttal](#). It claimed the group had been cleared of wrongdoing by Indian courts and that the Hindenburg allegations were malicious, baseless and amounted to an attack on India itself.

This wasn’t enough to convince investors. In the market rout that followed the publication of the Hindenburg analysis, the Adani Group lost \$110bn. Credit Suisse, Citigroup and Standard Chartered [stopped accepting Adani bonds as collateral](#) for margin loans. The French firm TotalEnergies has paused a \$4bn green hydrogen venture with the Adani Group. The Bangladesh government is reportedly seeking a reworking of a power purchase agreement. Jo Johnson, a former minister in the British government, and former prime minister Boris Johnson’s brother, [resigned as a director](#) of London-based Elara Capital, one of the companies mentioned in the Hindenburg report as tied to the Adani Group.

The political firestorm caused by the Hindenburg report brought squabbling opposition parties together to demand an investigation by a joint parliamentary committee. The government stonewalled, alarmingly indifferent to the concerns that managers of international finance capital might have about India’s regulatory systems. In the continuing budget

session of parliament, two opposition party MPs, Mahua Moitra of the All India Trinamool Congress, and Rahul Gandhi of the Indian National Congress, both of whom have raised questions about the [Adani Group](#) years before the Hindenburg report, stood up to speak.

Among the [questions Moitra raised](#) were: how did the home ministry give security clearance to the “A” Group for operating ports and airports while refusing to divulge the identity of one of its shareholders? How did the group amass about \$5bn in foreign portfolio investments from six Mauritius-based funds, all which have the same address and company secretary? On what grounds did the public sector State Bank and the Life Insurance Corporation continue to anchor investments in the group?

For his part, Gandhi [noted](#) the prime minister’s travels to Israel, Australia and Bangladesh, and asked: “In how many of these countries that you visited did Adani-ji get a contract?” He listed some of them: a defence contract with Israel, a billion-dollar loan from the State Bank of India for a coalmine in Australia, a 1,500MW electricity project for Bangladesh. Last, and most pertinently, he asked how much money the BJP received from the Adani Group in secret electoral bonds.

This is the nub of it. In 2016, the BJP introduced the scheme of electoral bonds, which allow corporations to be able to fund political parties without their identities being made public. Yes, Gautam Adani is one of the world’s richest men; but if you look at its rollout during elections, the BJP is not just [India’s, but perhaps even the world’s, richest political party](#). Will the old friends ever let us look at their account books? *Are* there separate account books?

Moitra’s questions were ignored. Most of Gandhi’s were [expunged from parliament records](#). Modi’s reply lasted for a full 90 minutes.

He did what he does best – cast himself as a proud Indian, the victim of an international witch-hunt that would never succeed, because he [wore the protective shield](#) made up of the trust of 1.4 billion people that the opposition could never pierce. This figure (a politician’s equivalent of inflating the value of his shares) peppered every paragraph of his spongy rhetoric, ridden with derision, barbs and personal insults. Almost every



sentence was greeted with desk-thumping from the BJP benches accompanied by the chant of “Modi! Modi! Modi!”

He said that however much filth was thrown at the lotus – the BJP’s election symbol – it would bloom. He never mentioned Adani once. Maybe he believes it’s not a debate that should concern his voters because tens of millions of them are unemployed, live in abject poverty on subsistence rations (delivered with his photograph on the packaging) and will not remotely comprehend what \$100bn even means.

Most of the Indian media reported Modi’s speech in glowing terms. Was it a coincidence that in the days that followed a number of national and regional newspapers carried a [front-page advertisement](#) with a huge photograph of him announcing another investment summit, this one in the state of Uttar Pradesh?

BBC offices in India raided by tax authorities weeks after Modi documentary released – video report

Days later, on 14 February, the home minister said in an interview, on the Adani matter, that the BJP had “nothing to hide or be afraid of”. He once again [stonewalled the possibility of a joint parliamentary committee](#) and advised the opposition parties to go to court instead.

Even as he was speaking, office premises in Mumbai and Delhi were being surrounded by police and raided by tax officials. Not Adani’s offices: [the BBC’s](#).

On 15 February, the news cycle changed. And so did the reporting about the neo-imperialist attack. After “warm and productive” meetings, Modi, President Joe Biden and President Emmanuel Macron announced that India [would be buying 470 Boeing and Airbus aircraft](#). Biden said the deal would support more than a million American jobs. The Airbuses will be powered by Rolls-Royce engines. “For the UK’s thriving aerospace sector,” Rishi Sunak, the prime minister, said, “the sky is the limit.”

So the lotus blooms on, in a bog of blood and money. And the truth most definitely shines like gold.

- Arundhati Roy is a novelist and writer. Her novel *The God of Small Things* won the Booker prize in 1997
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[Opinion](#)[Far right](#)

# Elon Musk has put every lost young man on Twitter in the crosshairs of the far right

[Katherine Denkinson](#)



Letting the expert online recruiters Patriotic Alternative back on the platform isn't a win for free speech but for fascism



Protesters led by Patriotic Alternative demonstrate against Drag Queen Story Hour at Tate Britain, London, on 11 February 2023. Photograph: Vuk Valcic/Zuma Press Wire/Rex/Shutterstock

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At the end of last year, the British far-right group Patriotic Alternative (PA) was allowed back on Twitter after a ban of nearly two years for an unknown transgression. Far-right groups immediately urged Elon Musk to “[be a hero](#)” and also reinstate the account of the group’s leader, Mark Collett. Three weeks later, they rejoiced as Collett’s account was returned.

The reinstatements appear to be part of Musk’s commitment to free speech. But if he knew anything at all about PA, he would realise that he has placed a target on the back of every disenfranchised and politically lost young man on [Twitter](#), many of whom are recruited to the far right via the platform.

Consider the cases of two young men who recently began lengthy prison sentences for far-right terrorism offences. [Daniel Harris](#), 19, is a far-right extremist now serving 11 years for creating videos that inspired mass shooters in the US. [Luca Benincasa](#), 20, who recently started a nine-year sentence, was a member of the proscribed neo-Nazi group Feuerkrieg Division.

Both men should be held to account for their behaviour, but their actions did not happen in a vacuum. They did not hatch from a swastika-stamped egg at 17 years old, determined to wreak havoc on the world. Their actions, and the beliefs that drove them, are the end product of years of indoctrination by online extremists.

Before becoming a journalist, [I worked with young men](#) like Harris and Benincasa and have spent a considerable part of my career since then tracking the far right online. I've seen first-hand how easily they fall for the rhetoric of extremist and fascist groups and can say, without hyperbole, that the longer groups such as PA are on Twitter, the more dangerous they will become.

Unlike the English Defence League and others content to down some beers and scream at the dinghies in Dover, PA and their ilk are tech-savvy PR machines; they know that optics matter and they're familiar enough with online culture to blend in with more acceptable rightwing groups when they need to. This is apparent in their tweets, promoting community-friendly litter picks and sharing pictures of cute red squirrels.

Their online recruitment began on gaming platforms, where PA has a history of coercing boys into the far right, appearing first on [Discord](#) then later on the [live chat feature in Call of Duty](#). (Both sites are aware of far-right organising on their platforms, and have committed to action, including banning accounts.) Far-right groups recognise, as the alleged human trafficker [Andrew Tate](#) did, that young men disillusioned with the current state of politics often need a strong voice to guide them, and have set out to make themselves the strongest voice in the room.

Beyond online gaming communities, fringe groups have been targeted as well. This was clear towards the end of the pandemic, when groups including PA had infiltrated anti-vax conspiracy circles so thoroughly that the latter became convinced that Drag Queen Story Hour was [a front for paedophile acceptance](#). Ostensibly supporting their anti-vax and anti-lockdown views, a post by Collett [on his blog](#) suggested his true intentions. Complaining that "any conspiracy theory ... or half-baked idea, is taken with the utmost seriousness ... [but one of the] forbidden subjects is that of

the [great replacement](#)", he revealed that his main goal was to push these collectives further to the right.

Like the young men who get sucked in by ["incel" groups](#), those who are susceptible to far-right influence are often lonely, isolated and unsure of how to connect with other people. They may have difficult home lives, or have been bullied and ostracised at school. Retreating into an online world, they find others in a similar situation. Their feelings are validated, their beliefs shared and their confidence that it's the rest of the world who are "wrong" gets a boost.

Playing on those insecurities, nationalist groups quickly begin confirming these young men's worst beliefs; they can't get a job because the government's gone "woke"; the girls who won't look twice at them are evil feminists out to emasculate western men; and the immigrants they're intimidated by are the real Big Bad, here to steal their lives, jobs and country.

Scary stuff for a teenager, but luckily the far right offers a comforting solution. Join us and be protected. Join us and be part of something. Join us and be somebody. This lasts until the combination of adolescent energy and zealotry turns tragic, and they are discarded. It is telling that none of the prominent online far-right groups have commented on the cases of Harris or Benincasa.

So what can we do to protect young men from their influence?

For the two who have just bartered their twenties for far-right approval, all we can do is hope they get the much-needed support that it will take to improve their lives. We owe it to those just starting out on their political journeys, however, to remove the harmful influence of PA et al from Twitter. By separating the far right from their intended prey, we enable reasoned discourse and the chance to explore the disillusionment of men such as those above, free from the influence of those with ulterior motives.

A win for fascism is not a win for anyone else. Even "free-speech absolutists" with billions of dollars.

- Katherine Denkinson is an investigative journalist whose work focuses on misinformation, conspiracies and the growth of the far right
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## [Opinion](#) [Scottish independence](#)

# Nicola Sturgeon couldn't settle the Scottish independence debate – but Brexit just might

[Jonathan Freedland](#)



Rejoining the EU is now the best argument for independence. But unionists will ask: is it worth risking another Brexit-style mess?





‘The end of the Salmond-Sturgeon era puts a question mark over the fate of the cause that once united them.’ Nicola Sturgeon at a independence referendum rally in Perth, Scotland, September 2014. Photograph: Murdo MacLeod/The Guardian

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Nicola Sturgeon’s announcement of her resignation brought some lavish tributes, but perhaps the highest praise came from Donald Trump. “Good riddance to failed woke extremist Nicola Sturgeon of Scotland!” [the former president thundered](#). “The wonderful people of Scotland are much better off without Sturgeon in office!”

Naturally, condemnation from Trump is a badge of honour. But the fact that he put out a statement at all was proof that the outgoing first minister has built a serious profile. Back in the 1990s, White House officials would marvel that the tiny population of Northern Ireland had somehow produced a clutch of world-class politicians, singling out the likes of John Hume, Martin McGuinness and loyalist leader David Ervine. “What are they putting in the water over there?” one Washington hand once asked me. For the last 20 years, you could ask a similar question of [Scotland](#) and the SNP. In his pomp, Alex Salmond was the most effective political leader in the

UK – and, as if lightning had struck twice, the same was true of his successor.

The end of the Salmond-Sturgeon era puts a question mark over the fate of the cause that once united them: the quest to take Scotland out of the United Kingdom. Less obvious is that that battle has become intertwined with another epic contest over a union of nations. As the sage of Strathclyde, John Curtice, puts it: “This is all part of the [Brexit](#) story.”

To be clear, that’s not why Sturgeon quit. A combination of the personal and the political explains that. In the first category, there’s the empty-tank exhaustion Sturgeon described on Wednesday. In the second, the darkening clouds in the SNP sky: an [ongoing police investigation](#) into the party’s finances and a row over gender recognition legislation that, in the words of Mark Diffley, an Edinburgh-based pollster who has worked for both the pro- and anti-independence sides over the years, saw Sturgeon “significantly out of step with public opinion” in Scotland.

Above all, Sturgeon faced a strategic impasse over the SNP’s defining issue. Polls show support for independence struggling to break through the 50% barrier (and recently [falling well short of it](#)), while there is no SNP consensus on how or when to secure a second referendum. The departing leader’s idea of using the next Westminster election as a [de facto plebiscite](#) faced stiff internal resistance.

Still, none of that obscures the centrality of Brexit in the Scottish debate. For one thing, it is Brexit that provides the justification for having another ballot on independence so relatively soon after the first one in 2014: leaving the EU was the “material change” that merits a second go. These days, the first argument Sturgeon and others make for Scotland exiting the UK is the chance to rejoin the [European Union](#). That makes sense in a country that voted by two to one to remain. Indeed, it fits with a broader trend.

In 2016, there were remain voters who had said no to independence and leave voters who had said yes. Since then, and especially since the fevered Brexit year of 2019, there has been a process of sorting – as previously unionist remainers shifted to yes, and previously nationalist leavers

defected to no. For a while, those movements seemed to cancel each other out. But given there are twice as many remainers as leavers in Scotland, there are more defectors from no to yes than the other way around – which is why average support for independence rose [from 45% to 49%](#). It's a Brexit effect. Or as Curtice told me: "Decline in support for the union is attributable to Brexit."

It leaves Scotland in a curious state of deadlock, stuck in a statistical dead heat between yes and no. Breaking that stalemate will require a choice, which boils down to which union, which single market, Scottish voters want to be part of. Do they want to be in the UK, separated by a border from the EU – or in the EU, separated by an equivalent border from England? After Brexit, there is no borderless option. Scots cannot be in a single market with both the UK and EU, as they used to be. Brexit has forced them to choose.

The result is a deep paradox. Independence looks like the obvious anti-Brexit position, offering a route to rejoining the EU. And yet, even though independence is backed by remainers appalled by the clear disaster of Brexit, the most potent argument against them is ... the clear disaster of Brexit. Unionists can say: "Don't repeat the Brexiters' mistake, breaking from a proven union in pursuit of some abstract ideal of sovereignty. We've all seen the damage that weakening ties with your nearest neighbour and trading partner can do." In reply, the yes campaign will be left sounding like the very Brexiters they abhor: "We may take an economic hit, but at least we'll be free."

Seasoned SNP hands are all too aware of the danger. One tells me that the independence case has to be presented as "the antithesis of Brexit": full, detailed and honest about the difficulties and trade-offs, rather than offering the slogans and hollow promises of the Vote Leave crowd. But that will require a credible answer to one of the toughest questions of all: how can nationalists be absolutely sure the EU will allow an independent Scotland to rejoin? Without that guarantee, they'd be selling the Scottish people a Boris Johnson- or Nigel Farage-style leap in the dark.

With Sturgeon's exit, it becomes ever clearer that while Brexit was a boost to the cause of [Scottish independence](#), its power as a cautionary tale could

also make it a great drag. It is not the referendum of 2014 that should haunt independence campaigners' dreams, but the fateful one that came two years later.

- Jonathan Freedland is a Guardian columnist
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## [OpinionPolice](#)

# The ghoulish online sleuths are shameful, but that's no excuse for how the police have treated Nicola Bulley

[Gaby Hinsliff](#)



Every British police force must learn from Lancashire's mistake: disclosing personal details is no way to respond to conspiracists



‘All that the detectives’ announcement achieved was to start a wild guessing game for hordes of self-appointed online truthseekers.’  
Photograph: Peter Byrne/PA

Fri 17 Feb 2023 09.27 ESTLast modified on Fri 17 Feb 2023 14.03 EST

She slipped through the smallest hole imaginable, an invisible rip in the fabric of a seemingly ordinary day. Nicola Bulley was there one minute, living a working mother’s familiar, multitasking life – walking the dog while taking a Teams call – and gone the next.

Barely [10 minutes elapsed](#) between Nicola bumping into a friend and someone finding her dog, minus an owner. How can a woman just vanish? We all feel the shock, and perhaps some have questions. But this week has been a masterclass in how not to answer them.

In the vacuum created by a three-week police investigation offering no leads, a ghoulish stream of amateur online sleuths and self-styled citizen investigators descended on the river meadows where Nicola disappeared, livestreaming their half-baked efforts on TikTok to much local distress. After police began dispersing them, [YouTuber Dan Duffy](#) uploaded footage of himself apparently being arrested, complaining about “what this



country's turning into. No freedom of speech." The armchair hounding of her friends and family on social media completes an enraging picture.

Detectives leading high-profile cases invariably face unhelpful distractions: psychics claiming to have seen visions, fantasists "confessing" to crimes they never committed, macabre selfie-taking tourists. Even reporters there to do their jobs can, en masse, overwhelm small communities. But social media vigilantes leading online witch-hunts based on having once watched Happy Valley or downloaded a true crime podcast, or content creators [trampling the riverbank](#), represent an additional pressure new to British police investigations – although there are echoes of what engulfed poor [Madeleine McCann's family](#). Lancashire police have my sympathies in grappling with this madness. But if what they disclosed this week about a missing woman's private life was an attempt to defend themselves under intolerable pressure, it was a [grievous mistake](#).

Initially, detectives announced Nicola had "vulnerabilities" identifying her as a high-risk missing person – usually code for thinking someone may conceivably be a danger to themselves – and asked reporters to respect the family's privacy by not inquiring further. All that achieved was to start a wild guessing game for hordes of self-appointed online truthseekers already bombarding accounts associated with her friends and family with pet theories.

So the police ended up clarifying that Nicola had issues with alcohol, and struggled with the menopause, a detail that seems creepily intrusive, if perhaps a misguided attempt at sympathetic context. Calling this victim-blaming feels wrong when we all hope she hasn't been a victim of anything, and when nobody should be ashamed of the mental health issues some experience in menopause. But at the very least, it seems unlikely to help find her.

Somehow here three dangerous streams have crossed: a sadly understandable mistrust of police attitudes to women, a conspiracist online culture that assumes everyone is hiding something, and the crass human impulse to make everything about *you*.

The amateur sleuths' bragging conceit is that they're smarter than everyone else; able to spot what everyone supposedly missed on grainy CCTV footage or in interviews given by a partner. But they're also recognisably the product of so-called "authenticity policing" on social media – a culture of calling out fake content, now colliding grotesquely with real policing.

The more time we spend in easily manipulated online worlds, the more suspicion becomes a life skill. We do need to figure out when something's filtered or Photoshopped; to understand that "reality" TV is scripted, and influencers' glossy lives not what they seem; to be sceptical of sob stories from strangers. But that vigilance can tip over too easily into hunting obsessively for minute or imaginary inconsistencies, and into trolling.

A popular 18-year-old TikTokker called [Annie Bonelli](#) has been pursued for years by users questioning whether the livid scar on her cheek is real, some breaking down her videos frame-by-frame as "evidence". The cookery writer and anti-poverty [campaigner Jack Monroe](#)'s every word is parsed by Twitter critics convinced she is richer than she lets on. It's cruel at the best of times, but in the middle of a police investigation it has alarming consequences.

What is to be done? Obviously, the TikTok circus should leave town. Parliament should consider the online harms bill in the light of social media giants once again lagging behind events. Every British police force must learn from Lancashire's experience. And we're reminded that [mental health in menopause](#) requires better understanding and treatment.

But for a mother of young daughters who vanished in an instant, all most of us can usefully do is hope against hope that she returns – and keep our theories firmly to ourselves.

- Gaby Hinsliff is a Guardian columnist



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## India

# Indian journalists say BBC raid part of drive to intimidate media

Media staff targeted for criticising BJP government fear tax raid is escalation of coercion



Police officers hold back news crews during the raid by tax officials on the BBC's offices in Delhi on Tuesday. Photograph: Anushree Fadnavis/Reuters



[Hannah Ellis-Petersen](#) in Delhi

Sat 18 Feb 2023 00.00 EST Last modified on Sat 18 Feb 2023 01.57 EST

“Did BBC Take Cash From China For Propaganda?” ran the opening title on the primetime news debate. As the flashy graphics of Republic TV, India’s hardline and overwhelmingly popular news channel, faded and its presenter Arnab Goswami appeared on the screen, he addressed millions of viewers across the country directly. “Ladies and gentlemen, our worst suspicions have been proved absolutely correct,” he said. “The BBC is funded by China.”

Two weeks later, on Tuesday, more than 50 officers from the income tax department [descended on the Delhi and Mumbai offices](#) of the BBC. Over the course of three days, officials went through documents, searched emails and cloned phones and laptops, according to BBC employees who were inside the building. At least 10 BBC employees, including five senior editors, were kept there for three nights until the “tax survey” was finally completed on Friday.

The government insisted it was simply carrying out routine checks. “There is absolutely no correlation between what the [BBC](#) has put out and what the

income tax authorities in India have done,” said Kanchan Gupta, an adviser at the ministry of information and broadcasting.



A screengrab from the Arnab Goswami hosted a debate on Republic TV with the title: Did BBC take cash from China for propaganda? Photograph: Republic TV

“This is not a raid or a seizure, it is a scrutiny process. From what I understand, at least 10 notices were sent to the BBC to come clean on certain issues before the documentary. The BBC did not respond to those notices, and that prompted the action.” A [statement from the Central Board of Direct Taxes](#) on Friday said the survey had detected “several irregularities and discrepancies”. The BBC has said it is cooperating with the investigation.

Yet the timing of the raids raised eyebrows, and was cited by many observers as an escalation of threats to press freedom and authoritarianism in India under the prime minister, [Narendra Modi](#).

In January, the [BBC had broadcast a documentary about Modi](#) in the UK that the Indian government had evidently loathed. The two-part series, called India: the Modi Question, examined rising tensions between Modi’s Hindu nationalist government and the minority Muslim population.

Most controversially, it revisited allegations that as chief minister of Gujarat, Modi had been complicit in the deaths of hundreds of Muslims during religious riots that broke out in 2002. Although the documentary cited previously unreported UK diplomatic cables, the allegations were not new, and had followed Modi for years. In 2012, he was cleared of all charges relating to the riots by India's supreme court.

The documentary was not released in India but the government went full throttle in condemning it, calling it "colonial propaganda", "hostile garbage" and evidence of western powers trying to undermine India's rise to a global superpower. Emergency laws were swiftly invoked to ban any clips or footage of the documentary being shared online.

A hate campaign portraying the BBC as corrupt circulated among rightwing social media users. In particular, the allegation that the broadcaster was being funded by India's foe China began to take hold, based on a [2022 report in the Spectator](#) magazine that the BBC had accepted advertising revenue from the Chinese company Huawei. Not long after, several of India's biggest news channels began alleging China was paying the BBC to create anti-India propaganda and it became the topic of multiple television debates, often featuring members of the ruling Bharatiya Janata party (BJP).

"It was a pattern we've seen so many times before," said Raqib Hameed Naik, an Indian journalist who runs Hindutva Watch, a website monitoring hate speech and disinformation on Hindu nationalist social media, from the safety of the US. "These fake allegations are first pushed by rightwing IT cells on Twitter, then they make it onto primetime television debates and eventually they end up with raids by government agencies."



The BBC documentary India: the Modi Question is shown on an outdoor screen in Kochi, southern India. Photograph: Arun Chandrabose/Getty Images

“The aim is always the same,” he added. “To silence critics of the government. They’re trying to create this single echo chamber, where only their message resonates and all the critical media is silenced.”

India has a chequered history of freedom of expression and press freedoms, mostly notably during the “Emergency” years in the 1970s when the then prime minister, Indira Gandhi, suspended the constitution and jailed and expelled journalists.

Since Modi came to power in 2014, some journalists and other media workers have alleged that a systematic silencing of critical reporting has taken place and that journalists have been targeted as “anti-national” threats to the state. In this year’s [World Press Freedom Index](#), India dropped down to 150 out of 180 countries, its lowest ranking on record.

Gupta denied there was a government crackdown on media. “This is not on the government’s agenda,” he said. “I really do not see the media cowing in



fear, sitting quietly in a corner. But media houses are not above scrutiny, the tax laws apply equally to them.”

A large number of newspapers, magazines, digital media and television news channels still exist in India, creating what can appear to be a vibrant media landscape. However, many in the sector describe an environment where mainstream news publications and channels, largely owned by figures who have corporate interests tied into the government, refuse to publish stories that criticise Modi, the BJP or those close to the ruling establishment.

“You have a landscape in India where the legacy media news organisations and channels are so compromised they have just become cheerleaders of the government,” said Abhinandan Sekhri, the CEO of Newslaundry, a digital news organisation.

Critics accuse the government of escalating its crackdown by introducing draconian legislation regulating digital media – including laws giving the government the power to decide what is fake news – and more news organisations have found themselves the subject of government investigations. While numerous Indian publications have been targeted, the BBC raids this week were a first for an international news organisation, though foreign correspondents based in India have faced increasing difficulties over visas and access to sensitive areas of the country.

As the raids took place, figures from the BJP doubled down on the BBC. Its spokesperson Gaurav Bhatia called the BBC the “most corrupt organisation in the world” while the vice-president Jagdeep Dhankhar, a BJP member, said that “sinister designs” who wanted to undermine the country should be “boldly neutralised”.

The BBC raid came as little surprise to Sekhri. Newslaundry – part of a small but defiant pool of digital media organisations which have refused to toe the government line – faced the same “survey” by income tax officers twice in 2021. “Whenever this government is displeased with the kind of coverage they’ve got in the news, their response is use the agencies for intimidation,” he said.

The harassment of Newslaundry did not stop after the raids. Failed attempts were made to file criminal charges against Sekhri and he still receives notices from the income tax department every two months or so, demanding documents. “I don’t even know what they are investigating us for,” he said. “It’s a drain on resources but it won’t change what we report.”

A very real fear now also exists among journalists that they will be prosecuted under stringent laws for producing critical work. Digital websites such as The Wire and magazines such as Caravan have faced raids and lawsuits for their reporting, while last year the journalist and fact-checker [Mohammad Zubair was arrested](#) and detained, following a sustained campaign against him on social media.

This month, the Keralan journalist Siddique Kappan was released from prison after more than two years, having been detained under terrorism laws as he was on his way to report on a high-profile gang-rape case. He has still not faced trial for the charges he says were politically motivated; among them, the accusation of stirring up religious hatred through his reports and laundering 5,000 rupees (the equivalent of £50).

“I was targeted because I have written pieces that have been critical of the ruling BJP and the government policies,” said Kappan. “The situation for independent journalists is dangerous in India and is deteriorating quickly. What happened to me was meant as a warning to others.”

Nowhere has the Modi government’s media crackdown been more visible and more effective than in Kashmir. Since 2019, when the government unilaterally stripped the troubled, Muslim-majority state of the autonomy it had enjoyed for decades – and subsequently imposed an internet blackout for 18 months – the media landscape has effectively been suppressed almost to the point of extinction.

Three Kashmiri journalists are still detained under draconian terrorism laws, while others who still attempted to report have been detained, beaten, faced constant harassment and interrogation by police and authorities and placed on an arbitrary no-fly list which bars them from leaving the country. Last year, the state’s press club was shut down.

“We had problems before 2019 but it was never this bad,” said Anuradha Bhasin, the executive editor of the Kashmir Times. “There’s been a systematic crushing of journalists and an overwhelming climate of fear so you won’t find a single critical story in the local papers anymore, the front pages just look like a publicity pamphlet for the government. It’s censorship by default now.”

Those in the region say the tactics increasingly being used against journalists elsewhere in India – heavy regulation, harassment by authorities, prosecution under terrorism and sedition laws – are straight out of the playbook that has effectively shut any independent media in Kashmir.

“Kashmir was an experimental laboratory where the Indian government managed to successfully silence the media,” said Bhasin. “That is now being extended to the rest of India in ways that are very brazen and very worrying.”

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## [North Korea](#)

# North Korea fires ballistic missile off east coast

Pyongyang confirms rapid launch drill after warning of strong response to upcoming US-South Korea military exercises



An intercontinental ballistic missile during a military parade in Pyongyang on 8 February. Photograph: KCNA via KNS/AFP/Getty Images

*Staff and agencies*

Sat 18 Feb 2023 04.38 ESTLast modified on Sat 18 Feb 2023 22.39 EST

North Korea has fired a ballistic missile toward the sea off its east coast, South Korea's joint chiefs of staff said, after Pyongyang warned of a strong response to upcoming US-South Korea military drills.

Japan's coastguard also said [North Korea](#) fired what could be a ballistic missile on Saturday.

On Friday, North Korea threatened an “unprecedentedly persistent, strong” response to South Korea and the US gearing up for annual military exercises as part of efforts to fend off Pyongyang’s growing nuclear and missile threats.

North Korea on Sunday confirmed it had fired a Hwasong-15 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) the day before in a “sudden launching drill” for mobile counterattacks against hostile forces.

The launch was conducted on an “emergency firepower combat standby order” given at dawn, followed by a written order from Kim Jong Un at 8am local time, KCNA said. South Korea’s military said it detected the missile at 5.22pm.

“The important bit here is that the exercise was ordered day-of, without warning to the crew involved,” said Ankit Panda, a missile expert at the Washington-based Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. “The amount of time between the order and the launch is likely going to be decreased with additional testing.”

North Korea fired an unprecedented number of missiles [last year](#), including intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) that could strike anywhere in the US, while resuming preparations for its first nuclear test since 2017.

Pyongyang may have created a military unit to operate new ICBMs, in line with its recent restructuring of the military, state media video footage from [a 9 February parade](#) suggested.

US-South Korea nuclear drills, called the deterrence strategy committee tabletop exercise, are scheduled for Wednesday at the Pentagon and will involve senior defence policymakers from both sides, Seoul’s defence ministry said.

The two countries are also planning a range of expanded field exercises, including live fire drills, in the coming weeks and months.

About 28,500 US troops are stationed in South Korea as a legacy of the 1950-53 Korean war, which ended in an armistice rather than a full peace

treaty, leaving the parties still technically at war.

*With Reuters*

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## [Turkey-Syria earthquake 2023](#)

# Three rescued from rubble 11 days after earthquake in Turkey

Rescuers still pulling survivors from beneath collapsed buildings in defiance of the odds



Hakan Yasinoglu was rescued in the southern province of Hatay, 278 hours after the 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck on 6 February. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

*Reuters in Antakya*

Fri 17 Feb 2023 17.28 ESTLast modified on Fri 17 Feb 2023 17.48 EST

Rescue teams have pulled three people alive from under collapsed buildings in Turkey, 11 days after an [earthquake that has killed more than 45,000](#), left millions homeless and sparked a huge relief effort.



Mosques around the world performed absentee funeral prayers for the dead in [Turkey](#) and Syria, many of whom could not receive full burial rites given the enormity of the disaster.

While many international rescue teams have left the vast quake zone, survivors were still emerging from under a multitude of flattened homes, defying the odds.

Hakan Yasinoglu, in his 40s, was rescued in the southern province of Hatay, 278 hours after the 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck in the dead of night on 6 February, the Istanbul fire brigade said.

Earlier, Osman Halebiye, 14, and Mustafa Avci, 34, were saved in Turkey's historic city of Antakya. As Avci was carried away, he was put on a video call with his parents who showed him his newborn baby.

“I had completely lost all hope. This is a true miracle. They gave me my son back. I saw the wreckage and I thought nobody could be saved alive from there,” his father said.

An exhausted Avci was later reunited with his wife, Bilge, and daughter Almile at a hospital in Mersin.

Experts say most rescues occur in the 24 hours after an earthquake. However, a teenage girl was saved 15 days after Haiti's massive 2010 quake, giving hope that more people may yet be found.

The death toll in Turkey now stands at 39,672, making it the worst disaster in the country's modern history. But this number is expected to rise further given about 264,000 apartments were lost in the quake and many people are still unaccounted for.

In neighbouring Syria, already shattered by more than a decade of civil war, authorities have reported more than 5,800 deaths. The toll has not changed for days.

The bulk of Syria's fatalities have been in the north-west, an area controlled by insurgents who are at war with President Bashar al-Assad – a conflict



that has complicated efforts to aid people affected by the earthquake.

The sides clashed overnight for the first time since the disaster, with government forces shelling the outskirts of Atareb, a rebel-held town badly hit by the earthquake, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported on Friday.

Neither Turkey nor Syria have said how many people are still missing after the quake.

For families still waiting to retrieve relatives in Turkey, there is growing anger over what they see as corrupt building practices and deeply flawed urban development that resulted in thousands of homes and businesses disintegrating.

One such building was [the Renaissance, which keeled over in Antakya, killing hundreds.](#)

“It was said to be earthquake-safe, but you can see the result,” said Hamza Alpaslan, 47, whose brother had lived in the apartment block. “It’s in horrible condition. There is neither cement nor proper iron in it. It’s a real hell.”

Missing Ghanaian footballer Christian Atsu, who played for local team Hatayspor, is also believed to have lived in the complex. Club manager Fatih İlek revealed on Friday that he had been scheduled to leave Turkey hours before the quake hit, but decided to stay after scoring an important goal for his team.

“This was his destiny. He had a ticket to go but because he scored, he changed his mind about leaving. He was caught in an earthquake on his happiest day,” said İlek.



## Paris

# Restored Paris public loo worth every penny of €2 charge

Lavatory de la Madeleine, opened in 1905, has been closed for 12 years but has been renovated to full belle époque glory



The Lavatory de la Madeleine was France's first public convenience. Photograph: Clement Dorval/Ville de Paris

[Kim Willsher](#) in *Paris*

Sat 18 Feb 2023 00.00 ESTLast modified on Sat 18 Feb 2023 08.11 EST

Paris authorities promise it will be worth every penny spent renovating France's first ever public convenience.

The Lavatory de la Madeleine, a belle époque jewel that opened in 1905, will cost €2 (£1.80) to use when it reopens on Monday.

It was fitted out in art nouveau and early art deco style with the finest materials: varnished mahogany woodwork, stained-glass windows, ornate ceramics, mosaics, brass taps and floor to ceiling tiles and has been listed as a historic building since 2011 when it closed.

Construites en 1905, les lavatories de Madeleine ont réouvert après 13 ans de fermeture ! Elles viennent s'ajouter aux plus de 800 toilettes et urinoirs publics à Paris.

Bravo [@karen\\_taieb](#) [@jdHAUTESERRE](#) [@2theloo](#) et merci aux équipes de la DVD ☐☐ [pic.twitter.com/XrsGNVMSvY](https://pic.twitter.com/XrsGNVMSvY)

— David Belliard ([@David\\_Belliard](#)) [February 14, 2023](#)

Inauguration avec [@David\\_Belliard](#) et [@jdHAUTESERRE](#) du Lavatory de la Madeleine qui rouvrira ses portes lundi prochain au public qui sera accueilli par l'équipe du concessionnaire [@2theloo](#) L'effet est immédiat : Un voyage hors du temps et plongée dans le Paris de la Belle époque ! [pic.twitter.com/UfBIX5x361](https://pic.twitter.com/UfBIX5x361)

— Karen Taieb ([@karen\\_taieb](#)) [February 14, 2023](#)

It was originally an exclusively ladies' lavatory – the nearby gents' constructed at the same time is now used by the public transport body RATP – but became mixed sex when several of the cabins were turned into urinals in the 1990s.

The lavatory, shut because of disuse and lack of maintenance, has taken 12 years to restore. The restoration of the woodwork, glass and tiles was finally completed last month but the toilets, sinks and taps have been replaced with similar modern models. An old shoe-shine chair, preserved on the site, adds to the impression of entering a grand “throne room”.

The idea of a public lavatory was inspired by those in London introduced in the 1880s. The underground facilities were intended to be not only useful

but beautiful and luxurious. Only six such toilets still exist in [Paris](#), one of which is on the Champs-Élysées.

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“It’s a journey back in time; a dive into the Paris of the belle époque,” Karine Taïeb, the deputy mayor of Paris in charge of heritage, said as she conducted a party of journalists around the conveniences this week. She said regrettably the toilets were not accessible to disabled people because they were too small.

The mosaic tiled entrance to the lavatory is still cracked and will undergo further restoration next year when the cause of the damage has been identified.

The Lavatory de la Madeleine will reopen to the public on Monday and remain open between 10am and 6pm every day. The €2 charge is to cover the cost of an attendant and cleaning. Paris city hall says there are 435 other free public toilets in the city.

This article was amended on 18 February 2023 to better convey the style of the lavatory’s design.

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## [Mississippi](#)

# Gunman kills six, including ex-wife and stepfather, in rural Mississippi

Suspect charged with murder after shootings around Arkabutla, in state's north



Law enforcement personnel investigate the shootings in Arkabutla, Mississippi, on Friday. Photograph: Nikki Boertman/AP

*Guardian staff*

Fri 17 Feb 2023 21.56 ESTFirst published on Fri 17 Feb 2023 14.11 EST

A lone gunman killed six people, including his ex-wife and stepfather, on Friday at multiple locations in a tiny rural community in northern [Mississippi](#), the sheriff said, leaving investigators searching for clues to what motivated the rampage.

The shootings all happened within the community of Arkabutla, the local television station NBC5 reported, citing the Tate county sheriff, Brad

Lance. Lance identified the suspect in custody as Richard Dale Crum, according to the Associated Press.

The suspect was facing charges of first-degree murder, Lance added.

Armed with a shotgun and two handguns, the gunman opened fire at about 11am and killed a man in the driver's seat of a pickup truck parked outside a convenience store in Arkabutla, near the Tennessee state line, according to Lance.

Deputies were working the crime scene when a second 911 call alerted authorities to another shooting a few miles away. After arriving at a home, they found a woman, whom the sheriff identified as the suspect's ex-wife, shot dead and her current husband wounded.

Lance said deputies had caught up with Crum outside his own home and arrested him. Behind the residence they found two handymen killed by gunfire – one in the road, another in an SUV. Inside a neighboring home, they had discovered the bodies of the suspect's stepfather and his stepfather's sister.

Crum was jailed without bond on a single charge of capital murder, and Lance said investigators were working to bring additional charges. It was not immediately known if the suspect had an attorney who could speak on his behalf.

That initial murder charge was for the killing of Chris Eugene Boyce, 59, the man who was shot outside the store. He had a Florida driver's license in his wallet, the sheriff said. Boyce's brother was in the truck with him and fled when the suspect attacked, Lance said, and he escaped unharmed.

Governor Tate Reeves' office said he had been briefed on the shootings.

“Everybody has crime, and from time to time we have violent crime, but certainly nothing of this magnitude,” Lance said in an interview. He added: “Without being able to say what triggered this, that's the scary part.”



Lane said the arrested suspect lived at one of the homes involved in the spree.

Reeves also said the state would make its “full resources ... available to law enforcement ... to investigate the situation”.

“I heard the gunshot from inside my house,” Ethan Cash, who lives near the store, told [WREG-TV](#). “I had just woken up and I look back here, and I see dude walking back here with a shotgun.”

Cash said he went to the scene and found one person who had been shot. He said he checked for a pulse but found none.

An elementary school and a high school in nearby Coldwater both went on lockdown while the suspect was being sought, according to the Coldwater elementary school Facebook page. A short time later, a second post on the page said the lockdown had been lifted and “all students and staff are safe”.

Arkabutla’s population is less than 300, and the community – about 45 miles south of the Tennessee city of Memphis – is near a reservoir that is a popular spot for fishing and other recreation.

A resident identified as April Wade told the Associated Press that most people in Arkabutla knew each other. “But if you don’t”, she added, “you know somebody who knows somebody.”

Speaking from a local tire store in the afternoon, Wade said she and her husband were aware of the shootings but had not heard the names of the suspect or victims.

“I think it’s crazy,” Wade said. “You do not expect something like that to happen so close to home.”

Arkabutla is also the hometown of Emmy, Grammy, Oscar and Tony award-winning actor James Earl Jones.

If Friday’s killings in Arkabutla are designated as a mass shooting, the number of these incidents in the US in 2023 as of Friday – the 48th day of

the year – will increase to least 73, according to statistics curated by the Gun Violence Archive. The archive defines a mass shooting as one in which four people are wounded or killed, not counting any attackers.

*[Gloria Oladipo](#) and [Ramon Antonio Vargas](#) contributed reporting*

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## Headlines tuesday 14 february 2023

- [Politics Liz Truss oversaw jump in credit card spending at Foreign Office](#)
- [Ford Carmaker to cut nearly 4,000 jobs in Europe, including 1,300 in UK](#)
- [Live Business: Ford announces 3,800 job cuts across Europe; FTSE 100 hits record high](#)
- [Live Rishi Sunak under pressure from backbench MPs to declare China a 'threat'](#)
- [China spy balloon 'Significant' debris retrieved, says US military](#)

## [Liz Truss](#)

# Liz Truss oversaw jump in credit card spending at Foreign Office

Guardian analysis of data shows officials spent more under former PM than predecessor Dominic Raab



Liz Truss, pictured giving a final speech as prime minister outside 10 Downing Street in October 2022, is under pressure to explain a number of spending items she approved, including meals at high-end restaurants. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

[Kiran Stacey](#) and [Sammy Gecsoyler](#)

Tue 14 Feb 2023 02.00 ESTLast modified on Tue 14 Feb 2023 02.02 EST

Liz Truss oversaw a major jump in spending on government credit cards at the Foreign Office when she took over, a Guardian analysis shows, with spending on restaurants, bars, leisure activities and hotels all rising sharply during her time in office.

An analysis of data collated by the Labour party shows officials spent far more on procurement cards under the former prime minister than they had under her predecessor, Dominic Raab.

Truss is already under pressure to explain a number of items of spending which she approved, including meals at high-end restaurants, large social functions and the use of Heathrow's VIP suite. The Guardian analysis suggests that she oversaw a broader culture of high spending when she was in one of the most powerful jobs in government.

Angela Rayner, Labour's deputy leader, said: "Liz Truss's track record of disrespect for taxpayers' money and reckless spending should have rung warning sirens, but instead the Conservative party elected her as leader."

The data comes from a database of more than 65,000 individual items of spending which Labour has collated through publicly available information.

The party said over the weekend that the cards, which allow officials to pay quickly and easily for items worth up to £20,000, had led to a "catalogue of waste", and promised to set up a new regulator to monitor their use.

Number 10 on Monday defended the use of the cards, saying they helped cut transaction costs and therefore government waste.

A Downing Street spokesperson said: "Everyone who spends taxpayers' money is aware that they are doing just that. As a government we are very responsible in how we use these cards, but it's important to understand that they are there to serve a purpose and the [National Audit Office] estimates that using these cards typically saves about 35% in transaction costs."

The Foreign Office is one of the heaviest users of the cards, often using them to pay for food, wine, events and furnishings for their offices and residences around the world.

A Foreign Office source said over the weekend that officials needed to spend on cards to be able to engage with dignitaries from other governments. But the information uncovered by Labour showed that they

often spent heavily on events involving Truss even when no foreign dignitary was present. In November 2021, for example, she and her team enjoyed two meals in Jakarta during a trip to Indonesia at a cost of £1,443.

The Guardian's analysis of the full figures show a marked increase in spending on GPCs under Truss, albeit during a period during which travel and entertainment became easier as lockdowns and travel bans eased.

In the 11 months from October 2021 to when she became prime minister in September 2022, the department spent just over £30m on the cards – 50% more than the last full 11 months of Raab's tenure.

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Labour has published more detailed data for 2021, which shows that during Raab's nine months in office, officials spent £114,363 on "leisure activities". In the three months of Truss' tenure, this came to £158,304.

During Raab's nine months, civil servants spent £134,016 on restaurants and bars, compared with £228,637 during Truss' much shorter tenure.

And while Raab's Foreign Office spent £640,660 on hotels in 2021, that increased to £668,378 when Truss was foreign secretary.

Both the Foreign Office and a spokesperson for Truss declined to comment.

Meanwhile, officials have defended the prime minister, Rishi Sunak, against claims he overspent while in charge at the Treasury. A spokesperson pointed out that the then chancellor stayed at five-star Hotel Danieli in Venice during a G20 meeting in 2021 because it was on a list of officially recommended hotels.

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## Ford

# Ford to cut nearly 4,000 jobs in Europe, including 1,300 in UK

US carmaker blames losses on rising costs and need to switch to electric vehicle production



An engine production line at Ford's factory in Dagenham. Photograph: Carl Court/Getty

*Staff and agency*

Tue 14 Feb 2023 10.49 ESTFirst published on Tue 14 Feb 2023 03.55 EST

The British car industry faces the prospect of further steep job cuts without urgent government support for electric vehicle investment, a union leader has warned, after [Ford](#) revealed 1,300 UK redundancies in its internal combustion operations.

The US carmaker said it planned to eliminate 3,800 product development and administration jobs across Europe, citing rising costs and the need to



speed up its switch from petrol and diesel engines to [electric vehicles](#).

Ford has said it would invest \$50bn (£41bn) in electric car production by 2026. However, it must also decide what to do with operations built around the internal combustion engine before [bans on sales of new petrol and diesel cars](#).

The Unite union, which represents many of the affected UK workers, said Ford's move highlighted the risks to thousands of British car industry jobs working on internal combustion technology. [About 100,000 UK automotive jobs](#) are linked to petrol and diesel technology, according to the government-backed Faraday Institution.

Ford said about 2,300 jobs will be cut in [Germany](#), 1,300 in the UK and 200 in the rest of Europe, adding that it intends to achieve the reductions through voluntary redundancies. Some 2,800 of the jobs will be engineering roles, while another 1,000 will be administrative jobs. Ford employs about 34,000 people in Europe, of which about 6,500 are in the UK.

Most of the UK job losses are expected to be in Ford's technical centre in Dunton, Essex, which is in charge of developing the Transit van. Transit diesel sales are expected to continue for several years longer than cars with internal combustion engines, but there will be little need for design work on diesel engines once the last [European emissions standards](#) are met in time for a 2025 deadline.

Des Quinn, Unite's national officer for automotive, said the move to cut UK jobs linked to internal combustion was not a surprise, but said a "zombie government" had no apparent plan to attract investment in electric car production to replace those jobs.

"We've been crying out for an industrial strategy," he said. "There is no plan for greening the car industry.

"Going electric you don't need internal combustion engines. You don't need people designing internal combustion engines. There is going to be more and more of this. Ford happens to be quick off the blocks."

Ford aims to retain 3,400 engineers in [Europe](#) who will build on core technology provided by their US counterparts and adapt it to European customers, according to Martin Sander, the general manager of Ford's European electric vehicle (EV) operations and head of its German business.

“There is significantly less work to be done on drivetrains moving out of combustion engines,” Sander said. “We are moving into a world with less global platforms where less engineering work is necessary. This is why we have to make the adjustments.”

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Ford's UK manufacturing operations are not thought to be affected by Tuesday's announcement, although they have previously been on the frontline of the transition. In December Ford [expanded a £350m plan to upgrade a gearbox plant](#) in Halewood, Merseyside, to produce drive units for electric cars – a welcome boost for British industry. However, it also [closed its engine plant in Bridgend](#) in south Wales in 2020. There remain long-term questions over the future of a diesel engine factory in Dagenham, in Essex.

The UK has so far had mixed results during the electric car transition. Honda closed its Swindon car factory in 2021, and BMW is planning to

move production of the electric Mini out of Oxford to China, while startup Britishvolt's government-supported effort to build a battery "gigafactory" collapsed into administration earlier this month.

However, Stellantis is upgrading its Vauxhall factory at Ellesmere Port in Cheshire to produce electric vans, and Nissan is planning a large expansion of electric vehicle production in Sunderland.

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## [Business live](#)Business

# FTSE 100 hit record closing high; US inflation slows slightly to 6.4% – as it happened

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[Politics live with Andrew Sparrow](#)Politics

# ‘Friction’ with EU due to Brexit has had impact on UK economy, Tory minister admits – as it happened

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## US national security

# ‘Significant’ debris from China spy balloon retrieved, says US military

Sensors and electronics pulled from waters off South Carolina, says military, after White House says Beijing’s surveillance program dates back years



US Navy personnel secure debris from a suspected Chinese surveillance balloon recovered in the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of South Carolina. Photograph: Us Navy/Reuters

[\*Richard Luscombe\*](#)  
[@richlusc](#)

Tue 14 Feb 2023 00.07 ESTFirst published on Mon 13 Feb 2023 12.07 EST

The [US military](#) has recovered “significant debris” from a suspected Chinese surveillance balloon shot down this month, the Pentagon has said, after the White House claimed China had been operating a high-altitude balloon program spying on the US and its allies for many years.

The US Northern Command said in a statement: “Crews have been able to recover significant debris from the site, including all of the priority sensor and electronics pieces identified as well as large sections of the structure.”

The balloon, shot down off the coast of South Carolina on 4 February, was the first of a series of mysterious objects shot down by the [US military](#) over an eight-day period in North American airspace.

However, China’s surveillance program, according to John Kirby, the [US national security](#) council spokesperson, dated back to at least the administration of Donald Trump, which he said was oblivious to it.

“It was operating during the previous administration, but they did not detect it,” Kirby said.

“We detected it, we tracked it. And we have been carefully studying to learn as much as we can. We know that these PRC [People’s Republic of China] surveillance balloons have crossed over dozens of countries on multiple continents around the world, including some of our closest allies and partners.”

There will be an all-senators classified briefing on Capitol Hill on Tuesday morning, the office of the Senate majority leader, Chuck Schumer, said, and the White House’s office of national intelligence will brief John Bolton, Trump’s former national security adviser, on Wednesday, CNN reported.

Separately in Japan, the Fuji News Network reported on Tuesday that Tokyo had concluded that the object that flew over Japanese waters near the south-western region of Kyushu in January last year was mostly likely a Chinese spy balloon.

Monday’s briefing took place amid growing criticism of the Biden administration for not revealing everything it knew about the unprecedented and [extraordinary sequence of events](#) beginning with the [downing of a suspected Chinese spy balloon](#) off the South Carolina coast on 4 February.

Biden, Kirby said, directed a broad assessment of China's intelligence capabilities when he took office. In response to recent events, Kirby said Biden had also now directed an interagency team "to study the broader policy implications for detection, analysis and disposition of unidentified aerial objects that pose either safety or security risks".

Kirby was unable to offer new details about the three most recent objects, including the missile strike on Sunday on an [unidentified "octagonal" flying object](#) above Lake Huron, Michigan, and other high-altitude objects shot down over [Yukon, Canada](#), on Saturday and [Deadhorse, Alaska](#), the day before.

But he said that authorities would know more once debris had been recovered from remote locations and analyzed. He said all three were much smaller and at a lower altitude than the Chinese spy balloon, but their origin, composition and purpose remained unknown.

"We assessed whether they posed any kinetic threat to people on the ground. They did not. We assessed whether they were sending communication signals. We detected none. We looked to see whether they were maneuvering or had any propulsion capabilities. We saw no signs of that," he said.

"[But] while we have no specific reason to suspect that they were conducting surveillance of any kind, we couldn't rule that out."

He said all three were shot down in "an abundance of caution to protect the security, our security, our interest and flight safety".

No evidence of 'alien or extraterrestrial' activity in shot-down objects, says White House – video

The Nato secretary general, Jens Stoltenberg, suggested on Monday the objects were part of a "pattern" of surveillance of the US and its allies by China and Russia, and an American air force commander said the US military had spotted Chinese spy balloons in the Middle East in "the recent past".



Canada's prime minister, Justin Trudeau, echoed those comments, saying: "I think obviously there is some sort of pattern in there. The fact that we are seeing this in a significant degree over the past week is a cause for interest and close attention.

Trudeau said that Canadian authorities had deployed "significant resources" to attempt to recover the object shot down over Lake Huron.

The Florida Republican Marco Rubio, vice-chairperson of the US Senate intelligence committee, claimed that unidentified aircraft had operated "routinely" over restricted American airspace for years.

"This is why I pushed to take this seriously & created a permanent [unidentified aerial phenomenon] taskforce two years ago," he [said in a tweet](#).

In a press briefing on Sunday, a senior air force officer said he could not eliminate the possibility of extraterrestrial activity. "I'll let the intel community and the counterintelligence community figure that out. I haven't ruled out anything at this point," Gen Glen VanHerck, head of North American airspace defense command (Norad), said.

But at the briefing on Monday the White House press secretary, Karine Jean-Pierre, said that the objects did not come from outside Earth. "There is no indication of aliens or extraterrestrial activity with these recent takedowns. I wanted to make sure that the American people knew that," Jean-Pierre said.

Melissa Dalton, assistant secretary of defense, echoed VanHerck, saying: "We have been more closely scrutinizing our airspace at these altitudes, including enhancing our radar, which may at least partly explain the increase in objects that we've detected over the past week."

Stoltenberg told reporters on Monday in Brussels that he suspected the incidents were part of an ongoing strategy of spying by Nato's rivals.

"What we saw over the US is part of a pattern where China and also Russia are increasing surveillance activities on Nato allies," he said, urging

member nations to maintain vigilance.

Lt Gen Alexis Grynkewich, commander of [US air forces central](#), appeared to back up Stoltenberg's assessment, telling reporters on Monday that Chinese spy balloons were spotted transiting the Middle East in the recent past, [according to foreignpolicy.com](#).

Meanwhile, Biden's secretary of state, Antony Blinken, is reportedly weighing a meeting with his counterpart in China's government, Wang Yi, at a three-day security conference in Munich scheduled to begin 17 February, according to [Bloomberg](#). Blinken had [postponed](#) what would be the first visit to Beijing by a senior US diplomat since 2018 in response to the Chinese balloon's intrusion.

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## 2023.02.14 - Spotlight

- My most romantic moment I thought my boyfriend had indigestion. He was actually about to propose
- What is 'sky trash'? And is it linked to the mystery objects shot down by US?
- V-Day What happens when you start trusting women? We have the receipts
- 'They aren't mean and they aren't trying to get you'  
Saving the copperbelly water snake

## [My most romantic moment](#)[Relationships](#)

# My most romantic moment: I thought my boyfriend had indigestion. He was actually about to propose

He had a bad back, our holiday to Naples had been cancelled and we decided to stay in with a Chinese takeaway. While my hands were covered in grease, his were sweaty with nerves



Illustration: Leon Edler/The Guardian

[Michael Cragg](#)

Tue 14 Feb 2023 01.00 EST

I don't go on many holidays. As a freelance journalist, I'm always paranoid about being forgotten by the time I've set up my out-of-office. But in late 2019, I figured I would run that risk. I booked a trip to Naples with my boyfriend, Ben. We found an Airbnb, planned a trip to one of the nearby

islands and meticulously mapped out all the best pizza restaurants within a 20-mile radius.

A week or so before we were due to leave, however, Ben put his back out. A last-ditch attempt to snap it back into shape via a trained professional only made things much, much worse. At this rate, he wouldn't be able to leave the house, let alone the country.

We decided we would have to ditch the holiday, a move that seemed to bring even more pain to Ben's already contorted face. Unbeknown to me, he had been planning to propose in Naples, ideally overlooking the sea, or on the balcony of a beautiful restaurant, or in between our 15th and 16th sfogliatella.



Michael Cragg and his fiancée in Naples.

To cheer ourselves up, we decided to order a Chinese takeaway, open a bottle of wine and gorge ourselves. For me, there is no happier place than when I'm sitting opposite Ben in our small kitchen, the only thing between us a heaving table full of sweaty rice, sticky chicken, sweet-and-sour sauce and "seaweed" dusted in brown sugar (we save the prawn crackers until the next day; I recommend you do the same).

By the end of the meal, Ben had a weird look on his face. I assumed this was either indigestion or a plea for more painkillers, but it turned out to be nerves. While my hands were covered in a film of congealed grease, his were getting increasingly sweaty. Just before I started putting the empty trays in the bin, he said he had a question to ask me. “Will you be my husband?” he blurted out, before producing a comically large (temporary) ring. I can’t remember exactly what happened next, but I definitely felt a lovely light-headedness, there were definitely tears and I definitely said “yes”.

Miraculously – let’s call it the power of love, a force from above – Ben’s back was 80% better by the next morning, so off we popped to Naples after all. We ate, we drank, we ate some more, and we spent the whole time enjoying being an engaged couple, which at that point was still our secret.

On a perfect evening, just as the sun was setting behind a pool of topless Italian water polo players, we staged a brilliantly cheesy engagement reveal photo and announced it all on Instagram. It wasn’t that we were ashamed of the Chinese takeaway version – a meal I will never forget – more that the London proposal felt personal. I didn’t need to take photos, because it will play in my mind for ever: just us two and the promise of prawn crackers.

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## [US news](#)

### [Explainer](#)

# What is ‘sky trash’ and is it linked to the mystery objects shot down by US?

Nearly 2,000 balloons are launched into the sky daily, to monitor everything from the weather to specific phenomena in space



A US Navy sailor conducts a search during recovery efforts of a high-altitude Chinese balloon shot down off the coast of South Carolina. Photograph: Us Navy/Reuters

[\*Jonathan Yerushalmy\*](#)

Mon 13 Feb 2023 23.07 ESTLast modified on Mon 13 Feb 2023 23.08 EST

Mystery still surrounds the latest flying objects shot down by the US over [northern Alaska, Canada’s central Yukon territory and Lake Huron in Michigan](#) in the last week.

Unlike the suspected Chinese surveillance balloon that was shot down off the coast of South Carolina on 4 February, US authorities have been mostly unwilling to speculate on where the last three objects originate from – or even to characterise what they are.

However, according to CBS's veteran national security correspondent, David Martin, officials have apparently not ruled out whether at least some of the unidentified aerial objects were so-called "sky trash".

## **What is sky trash?**

Sky trash – [much like space trash](#) – encompasses a variety of objects within the stratosphere, anywhere from 8km to 40km above our heads.

"All kinds of stuff has been launched over the years. Normally it falls to Earth but some accumulates," says Jonathan McDowell, an astronomer at Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics.

These objects – predominantly balloons – are used to monitor the weather, conduct scientific research that can't be done on the ground or to check things on Earth that can't be seen by a satellite.

"The simple fact is they're cheaper to fly than a satellite, you can put up many more ... and resolution can be better because they're closer to Earth," says Brad Tucker, an astrophysicist and an astronomer at the Australian National University.

These balloons are launched by governments all over the world, as well as by scientific research groups and private companies.

## **How much is up there?**

"I think there's a lot up there," says Tucker. "It could be anything purposefully put up: balloons to high-altitude drones. Or rubbish trapped in currents, like plastic bags and party balloons."



To take just one example: every day 1,800 weather balloons are launched worldwide, [according to the US National Weather Service](#), 92 of which are in the US alone. Each one carries an instrument to measure pressure, temperature and relative humidity. Of the tens of thousands launched every year, only 20% of these instruments are ever recovered.

Private companies are also responsible for launching thousands of balloons into space. Until 2021, Google launched hundreds of self-navigating balloons the size of tennis courts into the sky to beam internet to rural and remote areas.

The company behind the project, Loon, had some successes: in 2017 the balloons were used to deliver internet to 100,000 people in Puerto Rico in the weeks after a natural disaster. But there were also a number of incidents of Loon balloons blowing off course and crashing down on to farms or [power lines](#).

Loon balloons over Puerto Rico supplementing wireless coverage on the island.

Read more about Project Loon and how to track them at <https://t.co/npC7OtbvT> [pic.twitter.com/fP5oE4UgN2](https://t.co/npC7OtbvT)

— Flightradar24 (@flightradar24) [January 22, 2018](#)

Balloons are in fact such a ubiquitous presence in the stratosphere that there is an icon to monitor them on the Flight Radar website used to track aircraft.

“Most come down,” says McDowell. Those that do blow off course, “you’d expect them to lose pressure, leak a bit. Like with a party balloon, after a couple of months it’s not going to be well inflated.”

## **Can anyone send balloons up into the sky?**

In the US you need to comply with Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) regulations.

“You need transponders so planes know where you are. You need to provide a flight path. You’re in contact with regional airlines and you’re monitoring airspace,” Tucker says.

With a potential risk to planes, experts say the practice is well regulated, which is what makes these most recent examples so unusual.

Flying at above 20km, the Chinese balloon was close in altitude to most scientific and weather balloons, according to McDowell. “Airlines fly at 10km-12km, so they are well below where that was.”

But the more recent objects – shot down over the past week – have been lower.

“They were at a lot lower altitude of about 15km,” says Brad Tucker. “So at 15km you’re getting a bit too close.”

### [Graphic](#)

Tucker says the last three objects could have been old balloons that someone lost control of, experimental balloons or something more pernicious.

Every country abides by International Air Transport Association (IATA) standards, including for balloons. These standards cover everything from launch conditions to the altitude at which they’re allowed to fly.

“Either these weren’t meeting those standards because they were allowed to, or they were working outside normal protocol,” says Tucker.

## **Why are we only talking about it now?**

The sudden flurry of objects is at least partly explained by heightened vigilance. Since the discovery of the giant balloon, the Pentagon has scrutinised high altitudes more and radar system have been made more sensitive.

“In the past, the US just hasn’t paid much attention to those balloons, but this Chinese balloon was a gamechanger. And now, certainly, the Biden administration does not feel it can simply let these other objects pass through American airspace,” David Martin said on CBS’s Face the Nation.

“A month ago they might have looked at these things and said, that’s boring let’s ignore it,” says McDowell.

“A lot of the stuff they’re shooting down now will be found to be boring. Stuff from companies or government.”

## **Why are the most recent objects not being called balloons?**

On Sunday, Gen Glen VanHerck, who is tasked with safeguarding North American airspace, said the military had not been able to identify what the three most recent objects were, how they stayed aloft, or where they were coming from.

He said they were being called, “objects, not balloons, for a reason”.

“It may be that they’re being cautious,” says McDowell. “You might infer it’s a balloon but don’t know it’s a balloon. It’s hard to see what else it could be though.”

VanHerck also raised eyebrows when asked whether he had ruled out extraterrestrials. “I’ll let the intel community and the counterintelligence community figure that out. I haven’t ruled out anything.”

Experts, have however ruled out aliens. Tucker says that it’s likely “a lot of reports of UFOs could just be this sky trash we’re talking about.”

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## What happens when you start trusting women? We have the receipts



Célia Xakriabá: 'We are occupying spaces with our voices.' Photograph: Edgar Kanayko Xakriaba

The playwright V (formerly Eve Ensler) and a group of activists started a global movement for women's rights in 1998. On V-Day's 25th anniversary, they tell us what happened in their communities after they took action

*V (formerly Eve Ensler) and V-Day activists*

Tue 14 Feb 2023 01.00 EST Last modified on Tue 14 Feb 2023 14.03 EST

*The pushback against women in this moment is terrifying and vast. When we started the global V-Day women's movement after the publication of The Vagina Monologues, saying the word "vagina" out loud was taboo. It's not any more, but our work remains as pressing as ever.*

*Although we may not have ended violence against all women, trans and non-binary people, we have made a mark. We have disrupted the normal, been instrumental in changing laws and traditions, and deepened the understanding that we cannot end the violence without looking at all the intersecting violences: racism, capitalism, climate catastrophe, imperialism.*

*In the last 25 years, we have opened safe houses and the [City of Joy](#) in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and supported women in telling their stories and coming back into their bodies. We have stood in solidarity with communities struggling for liberation in the aftermath of Black women being murdered by the police in the US, and with women grappling with war, femicide, militarism, forced migration and resource depletion in Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Palestine, Congo, Haiti, Mexico, and in Indigenous communities from Brazil to South Dakota.*

*Most importantly, we have built a global network of gorgeous solidarity between women. These are some of our stories.*

*- V (formerly Eve Ensler)*

**Asali DeVan Ecclesiastes, executive director of efforts of grace, [Ashé Cultural Arts Center](#), New Orleans**



Asali DeVan Ecclesiastes. Photograph: Ryan Lash/Ted.com

It was after Katrina. Life was intense – you had to be two, three of your former self to make it in the city. You had to work your job, work on your home, work through the infrastructure failures, the bureaucratic BS, and work like crazy to keep from going crazy.

Mama Carol [poet and co-founder of the Ashé Cultural Arts Center] called a few times and told me to come write with a group of women about what we'd been going through. I didn't want to, not with my lil' bit of free time. I was having too much fun forgetting. Going out to see the bands, poets, drinking hard and dancing harder – living the glorious New Orleans barroom nightlife. *Nah, I ain't know no Eve Ensler ... yeah, I heard of the Vagina Monologues, NO, I don't feel like being in no white lady writing club talking about the federal flood of my black home.*

But you can't avoid or say no to Mama Carol, so one day I went.

All the women there were authentic, diverse, talented, wiiiiise, intergenerational, a smart AF collective of creative geniuses who helped make and remake community every single day. It will always be one of the biggest honors of my life to have been part of their group. Then there was V, a jazzy lil' woman, a black bob, red, red lipstick, and the most

mischievous eyes I'd ever seen outside of a child. I met those eyes and became an instant co-conspirator.

Together, we all created *Swimming Upstream*, a work of literature and performance art that is still the most honest, heart-wrenching, fun and beautiful telling of the Katrina story I've ever seen. Today, as I lead the same center where we met 15 years ago, I carry with me how to be a disruptive dismantler of systems and a luscious lover of life at the same time. Passion is just as appropriate in boardrooms as in barrooms, and often more impactful (unless you're an old-school twerker like me, lol).

It's a joyful revolution y'all, get onboard.

**Dana Aliya Levinson, writer, actor and transgender media consultant**



Dana Levinson on stage in 2017. Photograph: D Dipasupil/Getty Images

In 2016, I took part in a production of *The Vagina Monologues* that toured women's incarceration facilities, and one men's facility, around New York City. The cast was a mix of experienced actors and formerly incarcerated women. To say that the experience was life-changing is an understatement.



Not only was it eye-opening as an exercise in self-education, but I am a trans woman and had begun medically transitioning only a little over two years prior.

The experience of being brought into a group of women and made to feel a part of it was transformative. I performed the monologue that V had woven together from the experiences of multiple trans women, and through it, I felt seen. Because fundamentally, the monologue recognizes the experiences of trans women, no matter the era of our lives, as female experiences. It shifted hearts and minds through art.

The following year, I spoke at the [V-Day Artistic Uprising](#) in Washington Square Park. I had spent my weeks since that November, like many others, out on the streets protesting the incoming administration. I was acutely aware of the rising anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and the distinct challenges that my community would face in the coming years.

I remember arriving in the square and hearing V say that it was an uprising for the rights of women and all those who face gender-based violence – a term that includes all women, cis and trans, as well as other genders that face violence at the hands of misogyny. Immediately, I knew that I was in a space that recognized my experiences as valid, and most of all, that I wasn't a newcomer to dealing with it.

When I was called slurs in elementary school because I wasn't performing my assigned sex as expected, was that not misogyny? When I was beaten up in middle school for the same reasons, was it not misogyny? When I had to switch schools because of the violence I faced from boys who saw me as a threat because of the way I walked, talked and dressed, was that not misogyny? This noxious form of oppression didn't care what kind of body my femininity was housed in, only that it was to be punished.

While that experience may have been different from the experiences of cis women, what unites us is the common marginalization at the hands of a too-common form of oppression. Despite our differences in experience, we are in this fight together. Liberation for all means liberation for *all*.



## Célia Xakriabá, Indigenous activist and politician, Brazil



Célia Xakriabá. Photograph: Edgar Kanayko Xakriaba

Brazil is currently under an international microscope. What happens here affects the world, and the global community agenda has a direct impact on the work we are doing.

It is particularly important now, given the humanitarian crisis under way in Yanomami territories. The atrocities these communities are bringing to light demonstrates how [deforestation, the invasion of Indigenous territories by wildcat miners, and the rape of Indigenous girls](#), among other crimes, are spreading in the wake of violence against our homelands.

In 2019, we launched the Not One More Drop of Indigenous Blood moving protest, which took us to 20 European cities in 12 countries over a 35-day period, and culminated in our denouncing the Bolsonaro government before the international criminal court at the Hague.

V-Day's importance in our lives lies in its collective nature, and it helped support events on Earth Day and another organized by the Ancestral

Indigenous Warrior [Women](#) group, which enabled us to mobilize a caravan that drove across 10 Brazilian states last year to debate the bioeconomy, violence against women, and, most of all, the leadership role Indigenous women can assume in various decision-making forums, including universities.

Over the last four years of the Bolsonaro government's dereliction of duty, the only reason Brazil did not lose its place on the world stage is because the Indigenous peoples ensured its continued relevance. Indigenous peoples have been recognized by the UN as the best solution for curbing climate change: we account for 5% of the world population, but we protect over 80% of its biodiversity. In this, the global community also has a fundamental role to play, strengthening and, above all, funding the work being done on the ground on our Indigenous territories.

Now, as a congresswoman, I will be assuming the role of coordinator of the congressional investigation into the socio-environmental, socio-economic and socio-territorial crimes committed by the previous administration. Our voice will be heard: with the new minister for Indigenous peoples, Sônia Guajajara; the head of the Indigenous affairs foundation (Funai), Joênia Wapixana; and the secretary for Indigenous health, Weibe Tapeba, we are now occupying key spaces, and that is sorely needed.

**Rada Borić, Croatian activist, member of the Zagreb city assembly, president of the city gender equality committee**



Rada Borić. Photograph: V-Day

I was there in 1998, at the Here Theatre in New York City, when women in the dark cried softly or laughed shyly at the words spoken in *The Vagina Monologues*. At last, women talked about their vaginas – something about their own lives that needed to be spoken out loud.

I was there, over the years, in the theaters of Santa Fe and Belgrade, Nis and Helsinki, Sarajevo and Sofia, Brussels and Bukavu, Skopje and Stockholm. I witnessed how women waited for the play to end to share their stories, or to say the word for “vagina” in their own languages for the first time: *pička* and *vittu*, *pilu* or *mindza*. I was there at Madison Square Garden when over 18,000 women and men freely shouted “cunt!”

I was there when the V-Day movement was born – a global movement for women like me, who decided to use the energy that flowed from this art for political change. I was there when, across the Balkans, women who had been raped in the war sang *My Vagina Was My Village* as it became an anthem and helped heal war rape traumas. I was there in many places to witness how the words of pain, grief and tears grew into a resistance.

I was there in the squares where we organized events, protests and performances demanding justice for those who had survived violence and rape during conflicts and wars, under the patriarchal military regimes in Afghanistan or Iran, Congo, Syria or Palestine – and to celebrate our victories with dancing and singing. I was there when, in my own country, we changed the law to get compensation for survivors of sexual violence in war. I am here, 25 years later, even more determined to never give up until all women are free.

**Agnes Pareyio, anti-FGM activist, member of Kenyan parliament and founder of the [Tasaru Ntomonok Initiative](#) and V-Day Safe House for the Girls**



Agnes Pareyio and girls at the safe house. Photograph: Paula Allen

I underwent female genital mutilation at the age of 14. After I was married at the age of 18, I joined the women's NGO MaendeleoYa Wanawake, where I was the district coordinator. It is at this time that I turned my efforts towards female genital mutilation (FGM).



V asked me what I needed to do my work. I told her I walk for days from village to village talking to the Maasai people about the catastrophic effects of FGM. If I had a Jeep, I could get around a lot faster. V-Day bought me a jeep, which began to radically change my work. She then asked me what else I needed. That is when I told her my house was small and I could not accommodate the girls because most of them had started running to my house. I needed a shelter that could accommodate them. V-Day sent me money that I used to construct a safe house where the girls were protected from being mutilated while going through their academic life.

Twenty years later, hundreds of girls have lived there, avoided mutilation and early childhood marriage, gotten their education, jobs and independence. They have gone to universities and they have become role models to their siblings, and are now influential women in their communities.

## **Christine Schuler Deschryver, co-founder and director of the City of Joy, Bukavu, Democratic Republic of Congo**



V (center left) and Christine Schuler Deschryver. Photograph: Paula Allen

Across decades of horrific wars in the Congo, women's bodies became the battlefield, with multiple militias targeting us with the most extreme and cruel violence. Nobody seemed to care. We were alone with our own ghosts. I stopped believing in humanity.

When V first visited us in the DRC in 2007, her energy was different from the passive people who had come before, agreed it was all terrible, left and never came back. She seemed to know exactly who I was and encouraged me to deploy my long wings and be the real me – a leader. She trusted me and I started trusting myself again.

In 2008, V-Day invited me to New Orleans with thousands of people from around the world. Being in the Superdome with 30,000 people standing up for the DRC was something that I will never forget; the level of emotion and commitment to ending the violence we faced was very high. Those activists went on to raise \$500,000 towards the building of the City of Joy, the only place in the DRC run by Congolese women for Congolese women, where after being raped and mutilated, they can physically and mentally heal and return to their communities as leaders.

As climate catastrophe affected our communities, we became ecologists, creating the V-World Farm, where we have planted over 30,000 trees and educate women about how we will protect our Mother Earth in this time of emergency. We have graduated 1,902 women.

I've spent my entire life being called "too much" – too tall, too expressive, too radical, too emotional, too empathic, too feminist for an African woman. I couldn't find my place. It all changed. When you are valued, you are trusted, you are loved, you can move the mountains.

**Lu Pin, chief editor of Feminist Voices in China**



Lu Pin during a televised intervention. Photograph: One Billion Rising

The first time I heard about the V-Day movement was in 2001, when an American woman came to a monthly reading group that some friends and I had started, and brought a video of Harvard students performing The Vagina Monologues.

In April 2011, my colleagues and I began hosting a civic activism center in Beijing and were able to bring together some passionate young feminists. We began to imagine how we could speak out against gender violence in China.

I recalled a news photo I had seen on the internet of Turkish women protesting against domestic violence. I was impressed by the wedding dresses worn by some of the women at the front of the protest. So I purchased three white wedding dresses online. We staged a short protest in the downtown area of Beijing, dressed in bloodied white wedding gowns and wearing scar-like makeup, in front of many surprised and curious onlookers.

The police tried to stop us. In a country where protest is illegal, feminism is taboo and gender violence has long been normalized, this unprecedented public action by young feminists was significant. The action, known as the

Bloody Wedding Gown or Wounded Bride, was one of the earliest public advocacy campaigns by young Chinese feminists.

Three years later, five Chinese feminists, two of whom had played the “brides”, were arrested before International Women’s Day 2015 for planning a campaign against sexual harassment on public transportation. Between then and now, the Chinese feminist movement has been constantly repressed, but it has also been resilient and growing. In 2001, there were probably only a few hundred people in China who identified as feminists, whereas today there are millions.

## **Mily Treviño-Sauceda, executive director & co-founder of Alianza Nacional de Campesinas (US)**



Women from the Alianza Nacional de Campesinas with Mily Treviño-Sauceda. Photograph: Alianza Nacional de Campesinas

In my youth, I worked with my father as an organizer for the United Farmworkers. As a family, we fought exploitation in the fields where we worked. Many of us were fired for demanding dignity and respect.



I quickly learned about the abuses that farm worker women experience – particularly sexual harassment and violence. But we had no space to express ourselves. In spaces dominated by men, women were told to be quiet. We began to envision a women-led movement that would create safe spaces for farm worker women. So we started where we stood, and began to band together to fight back.

The American farm worker women movement had been working parallel to the V-Day movement for decades. Our paths finally crossed in 2012. That day, representatives from our 15 member organizations were present. Together, we organized many of our national *convivencias* (gatherings) and a funders' briefing. We also launched a Campesinas Rising campaign to raise awareness about our plight. These events are critical for farm worker women to share their personal experiences and devise strategies for change.

Our courage grows as we persevere and bring visibility to *campesinas'* struggles, which include the fight for fair wages and access to healthcare, and the imperative to break glass ceilings and shatter stereotypes that have been forced upon us. No woman should be abused, and that includes women doing the essential work in our fields.

## **Zoya, Afghan feminist activist and author**



Zoya, an Afghan activist. Photograph: Joyce Tenneson

Under the first rule of the Taliban, the world was silent about the suffering of Afghan women. The news of their crimes – such as public executions and beheadings, stoning to death, cutting of hands and more – were never covered by the media.

There was a rare exception: the women of V-Day. They came to be with us in Afghanistan. They published the story of Zarmina, an innocent woman who was brutally killed in the sports stadium in Kabul in front of her children and the public. They supported the City of Knowledge, an educational center that ran for many years and helped educate many women so they could thrive, becoming lawyers, doctors and businesswomen with good-paying jobs. We will never forget that.

Now, in our darkest hour, as the Taliban try to crush us again, nobody is more firm in their solidarity than our sisters in V-Day. In the meantime, we will continue to fight for every woman until all forms of fundamentalism, ignorance, inequality and oppression are eliminated.

**Monique Wilson, actor and activist, global director of One Billion Rising and V-Day organizer in Asia (Manila)**



Monique Wilson at a V-day event. Photograph: V day

I began producing The Vagina Monologues in September 2000 in the Philippines. In December that year, I flew to Tokyo to perform the part of the play about rape in Bosnia, as part of the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal that would take the Japanese emperor and the imperial Japanese army to task for the sexual crimes they committed against women during the second world war.

The women who were raped then had been labeled “comfort women”, as women in this position have been labeled all over Asia. As I sat on stage preparing to perform the monologue, I was overcome with fear and emotion. I was about to perform in front of 300 “comfort women” who were only now speaking about it, and I suddenly felt that I had no right to be up there on the stage speaking a story that was not my own. But then, from the stage, I saw women who had survived this abuse weeping with recognition.

From that moment on, the play became a catalyst for awakening, for consciousness and awareness raising, for collective political action. The play’s intersection with Gabriela’s Purple Rose Campaign – to end sex trafficking of Filipina women and children – had long-lasting impact,

including the passing of our anti-sex-trafficking bill (following 12 years of delay and inaction) after we performed the play in the Philippine congress.

That moment in Tokyo made me experience sisterhood and true interconnectedness. But most of all, this sisterhood gives me a sense of how powerful a movement can be when women come together – of how the world can change when women's voices are heard collectively. We are never going to be silent again.

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# ‘They aren’t mean and they aren’t trying to get you’: saving the copperbelly water snake

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## 2023.02.14 - Opinion

- My generation is sucking Britain's young people dry. Why are politicians too scared to admit it?
- How am I spending early middle age? Playing Phrazle – and other mesmerising word games
- False social media posts are hindering earthquake relief efforts in Turkey. You can help stop that
- Tell your partner you love them – not just on Valentine's Day, but every day

## OpinionGenerational inequality.

# **My generation is sucking Britain's young people dry. Why are politicians too scared to admit it?**

[Polly Toynbee](#)



The social contract between young and old is broken and inequality is out of control. The government must step in



‘Children of university educated homeowners receive six times more than children of renters.’ Photograph: lolostock/Alamy

Tue 14 Feb 2023 02.00 EST Last modified on Tue 14 Feb 2023 05.37 EST

A new anti-ageing therapy is causing Sima the lab rat to [far outlive](#) all the others in her scientific trial. What is this elixir of life? The blood of the young, whose plasma infusions reinvigorate her ageing organs. The symbolism is too good to miss: older people sucking up the housing, wealth and incomes of young people will be wanting their blood next.

Intergenerational injustice gets an occasional airing, but in budgets it gets forgotten. My generation, who were given everything, still go on taking: look at our lucky lives. The NHS was created for us to be born into. RA Butler’s Education Act provided schools, new universities opened with free tuition and grants. Many have the best ever pensions, whose excellent terms are unlikely to be repeated. The huge postwar expansion in council-house building helped many families. But then those homes were almost given away to the lucky, devastating the next generation needing somewhere affordable to live. State-owned utilities were sold off to us at knockdown prices, to make the UK Margaret Thatcher’s “share owning democracy”, leaving rip-off energy and water companies for those who came after.



Young people are worse off than we were at their age, which breaks a basic [social contract](#). Their earnings are lower, their rents are higher and they are burdened with student loans, on which they will soon be charged 6.9% interest, while triple-locked pensions [rise by 10%](#). There are 3 million pensioners in millionaire households, a number that has nearly quadrupled in a decade, says the Intergenerational Foundation.

Shall I continue to lay it on thick? Older people seriously underoccupy their homes: [67% of homeowners](#) of retirement age have two or more spare rooms, rattling around in houses badly needed for families.

The riposte to all this is often that, in the end, things get evened out: older people pass on their wealth in inheritances and lifetime gifts. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) has just published its analysis of an eight-year cohort of young people in their 20s and early 30s, finding that well-off parents in their 50s will provide [£17bn in gifts and loans](#) this year. Parents who can reach into their pensions (which George Osborne unwisely allowed people aged over 55 to do for the first time: his government said they could [buy Lamborghinis](#) instead of annuities) do so to help their children. Some take out second mortgages or release equity on their property, while those same family bonds mean large numbers of children care for frail older parents.



‘David Willetts, the chair of the Intergenerational Commission, came up with radical proposals to improve the lot of young people and see older people pay more tax.’ Photograph: Chris Radburn/PA Archive/Press Association Ima

Money is mainly passed on after death, but lifetime gifts are becoming more important – and they are accelerating the growth of inequality in this already most unequal country. Children of university-educated homeowners receive six times more than the children of renters: those receiving gifts are already high earners in their generation, likely to use funds for home-buying, as most homebuyers [under the age of 35](#) now rely on the bank of mum and dad. The [IFS is clear](#): “Those with higher incomes were more likely to receive a transfer [of money] and received larger amounts, in absolute terms and as a share of their income.” To them that hath shall be given, this we know.

All this is only too human. Of course parents want to help out if they can, rather than buy Lamborghinis while their children struggle to pay monster rents and impossible childcare fees. The inequality it exacerbates among the young is no more the parents’ fault than the remarkable good fortune that has greeted them all their lives and enriched them in old age. Blame is not the point.

When the social contract between generations is broken, when the distortion in distribution of wealth and income becomes too grotesque, it is for governments to redress. In these Tory years the government has done all it can to [widen the generational gap](#), spending more on the (voting) older people than on the young, while funds for education and skills fell as a share of GDP and Sure Start was axed.

For a brief moment mid-pandemic it looked as though young people would get generous recognition for the mental suffering and educational loss they had endured, locked in largely to save older people, not themselves. But like clapping for nurses, that [moment passed](#).

Let blame begin here, now the facts are known. Older people have to accept future budgets that rebalance the disparity between the ages. The ex-Tory minister David Willetts, whose recently updated book, [The Pinch](#), sent up

early warning flares, chaired the intergenerational commission on which sat a long list of distinguished economists. He puts blame like this: “It’s not evil to want to help your kids, but we are better parents than we are citizens.” As good citizens, he says, we should care about more than just our own children.

The commission came up with [radical proposals](#) to improve the lot of young people and see older people pay more tax, including towards their own care. Suggested remedies included a massive housebuilding programme, reforming regressive council tax to make expensive properties pay their share and a surcharge on second homes. Renters would have secure tenancies and jobs would have secure contracts with no zero-hours clauses. Agricultural and business escapes from inheritance tax would be abolished. It recommended levelling up capital gains and income tax rates to raise revenue from wealth.

Willetts also queried why Rishi Sunak had not brought back the national insurance health and social care levy the then-chancellor passed into law, which was subsequently dumped by Liz Truss. The commission ended with an eye-catching proposal for a £10,000 “[citizen’s inheritance](#)” grant to every 30-year-old, for housing, education or pensions. All that comes from a Tory, alas one so unusual he barely qualifies as such. Willetts says this great shift needs cross-party agreement, as happened with pension reform, but the likelihood of it being reached seems wildly improbable.

The Intergenerational Foundation backs all those commission proposals, and its director, Liz Emerson, adds in more radical wealth-spreading, such as charging capital gains tax on primary residences. Paul Johnson of the IFS recommends [radical reform](#) or abolition of unpopular inheritance tax, which could be replaced by taxing the recipients of lifetime gifts. Failure to charge capital gains tax or inheritance tax on pension pots after death is bizarre.

Ideas abound for relieving older people of their accretions of unearned asset wealth, to redirect towards the life chances of young people. Some of these things Labour will do, but not as yet enough. Politicians need to be brave enough to tell older people to be good citizens and vote for interests beyond their own. Not easy: I nearly caused a riot giving a lecture to older people

on a cruise ship about generational injustice. Sima the lab rat is a warning that longer lives must not mean sucking yet more life blood out of the young.

- Polly Toynbee is a Guardian columnist

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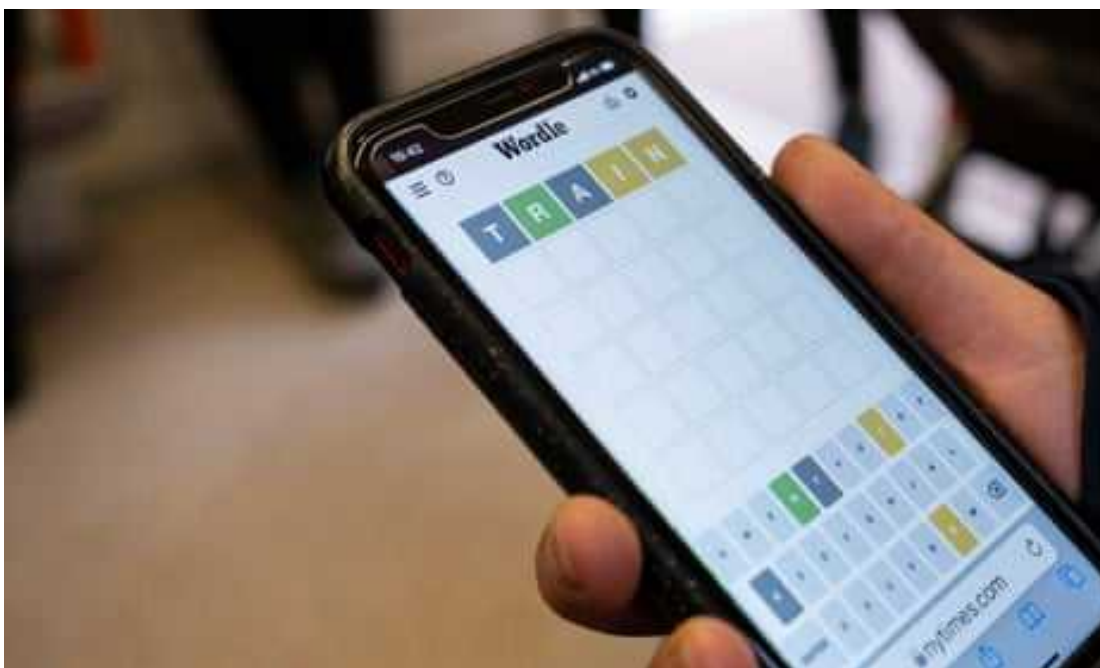
## [Opinion](#)[Puzzle games](#)

# How am I spending early middle age? Playing Phrazle – and other mesmerising word games

[Zoe Williams](#)



I lose time and burn up mental energy in pursuit of a dopamine rush that, as with all addictions, is a diminishing return. If only everyone else would join me



Wordle ... the thrill of the chase, followed by a feeling of emptiness.  
Photograph: Mike Kemp/In Pictures/Getty Images

Tue 14 Feb 2023 02.00 ESTLast modified on Tue 14 Feb 2023 15.08 EST

The problem with Wordle isn't that some people use it to show off to strangers or that it's especially time-consuming, or even that it's a bit of a waste of brain, but the minuscule feeling of emptiness once you have done it. All that thrill of the chase collapsed into the meagre satisfaction of arriving at something you're not even sure is a word, like "caulk". That is how I got hooked on [Quordle](#) – a four-word grid – just to delay the inevitable anticlimax. I cycled through [Heardle](#) (guessing a song, way too hard) and Worldle (guessing a country, in which I was mainly hamstrung by not being able to instinctively tell east from west). I had just enough discipline to avoid [Octordle](#), in which you have 13 guesses to reach eight words. Then I discovered [Phrazle](#), in which you have to find a whole phrase. I'll just have one quick go, I thought. I definitely won't commit.

This enterprise is just daft. The world is absolutely rammed with phrases. I had one easy win – "Beware the Ides of March" on the first try – and then I was hooked. Now I can lose a sizeable proportion of my mental energy for the entire day, getting to "until the cows come home". It doesn't even mean anything! The whole experience is one of aching meaninglessness, chasing

some combination of words that are either platitudes, demonstrably untrue, or long ways to say a thing that could be shorter. There's no skill in it at all that I can make out. It's not unusual for the phrase to contain so many weird combinations of letters that you have gone down a rabbit hole of whether there are any well-known axioms pertaining to the Balearic islands, before you finally land on "my birthday suit". I can't even bear to time how long it takes me, this daily three-act theatre of puzzling. "Word games" was not the addiction I expected so incredibly early in middle age. And the post-victory flatness, the diminishing dopamine returns, are still exactly the same – I'm just taking a more scenic route.

Anyway, I pass this on mainly to get everyone else to try it. A problem shared is a problem halved (both a platitude *and* demonstrably untrue).

- Zoe Williams is a Guardian columnist

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## [Opinion](#) [Turkey-Syria earthquake 2023](#)

# False social media posts are hindering earthquake relief efforts in Turkey. You can help stop that

[Abbas Panjwani](#)



Online misinformation exploits victims' traumatic experiences, and factcheckers need support as they work to debunk it





Relatives identify the body of an earthquake victim in Kahramanmaraş, southern Turkey. Photograph: Ozan Köse/AFP/Getty Images

Tue 14 Feb 2023 03.00 ESTLast modified on Tue 14 Feb 2023 03.47 EST

A video shared on social media shows a column of thick smoke billowing from a harbour-side building before a cataclysmic explosion. The caption says it is, incredibly, footage of a nuclear power plant in [Turkey](#) exploding after the earthquake that ravaged the country.

Except Turkey doesn't have any operational nuclear power plants. The footage actually shows a [fertiliser storage facility in the port of Beirut, Lebanon](#), exploding in 2020.

This video is just one of countless posts spreading on social media, falsely claiming to depict catastrophic events in Turkey. Ever since, factcheckers across the world, including Full Fact, have been trying to verify real events, to limit the spread of misleading and dangerous misinformation.

Factcheckers on the ground are especially stretched – last Tuesday, our counterparts based in Turkey, Teyit, got in touch to ask for support in stemming the tide of misinformation. Syrian factcheckers, Verify-sy, told us they have had to mostly stop their work due to the damage to their homes.

With the death toll now climbing to more than 33,000 people, it's crucial that those working on the relief efforts have access to good information online.

False information can directly hinder aid and disaster relief. People and organisations may be using footage they see online to help identify those affected, or reunite people with missing family members. As far back as 2017, the [Canadian Red Cross](#) was trying to educate people about the reliance of victims of a disaster on any information they can find. Misleading content online can prevent those trying to help people getting the right information and support. And for the people affected by this tragedy, the last thing they need to see is their social media feeds clogged with misinformation. Victims don't deserve to have their traumatic experiences exploited just for the sake of shares, whether well-intentioned or not.

In addition, some of these accounts are [directly asking for viewers to donate funds](#), allegedly for the relief effort. Given the inauthenticity of the content being posted, it's possible they are deliberately exploiting events for personal financial gain. Legitimate fundraising operations such as the Disasters Emergency Committee have now raised [more than £50m](#) – it's important that bad actors are prevented from trying to capitalise on the fact that so many people want to help.

Turkey: rescues continue 100 hours after quake – video report

It's understandable that people want to share footage of the tragedy, and more often than not, this is done in good faith. But when we see highly emotive breaking news stories take over our social media feeds, it creates an opportunity for misinformation to thrive.

When Russia invaded Ukraine last year, we saw a similar story emerge. It wasn't long before clips from previous wars, different countries and even video games were being shared across the internet, used to falsely illustrate the war. We [even had to fact check the BBC](#) after it used footage of an old Russian military parade that we had debunked the day before.

When this sort of tragic event happens, some people unfortunately want to find ways in which they can benefit from the widespread attention to the topic. In our monitoring of online content at Full Fact, we've seen accounts set up seemingly with the intention of just gaining influence by posting fake clips of the tragedy.

It's hard to stop the people who appear to be sharing this kind of misinformation for money or fame. But we know that most of them are not malicious, bad actors seeking to exploit a tragedy. They are simply people looking to find and share information in the wake of an upsetting event. And in situations like this, we all have a role to play.

When you see a video regarding the earthquake, the first thing to ask yourself is: does this seem plausible? The video claiming it showed a nuclear power plant exploding could be debunked with a quick Google search.

Ask yourself if anything in the footage seems obviously out of place? A video we've seen claiming to show a tremor in Turkey was actually from Nepal. How do we know this? The cars pictured have Nepalese, not Turkish, number plates.

With so much work being done by factcheckers worldwide, it's also worth checking if the video you're watching has been debunked already. And if you're still unsure, we have [a toolkit](#) for spotting misinformation online that anyone can access.

At times of such tragedy, we can all come together and play our part by being just a little more careful about what we share online. When bad information spreads, it can ruin lives, and in this instance, it can risk hindering the relief effort during a continuing disaster.

- Abbas Panjwani is assistant editor at Full Fact, an independent charity of factcheckers and campaigners

- ***Do you have an opinion on the issues raised in this article? If you would like to submit a response of up to 300 words by email to be considered for publication in our [letters](#) section, please [click here](#).***
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## Opinion Valentine's Day.

**Tell your partner you love them – not  
just on Valentine's Day, but every day**

[Susanna Abse](#)



Years as a therapist have taught me that silence ruins relationships. So forget the cards and the roses and celebrate each other



‘Perhaps we could treat this special day as a type of thanksgiving for couples; a chance to show gratitude for what we do have with our partners.’  
Photograph: Geoffrey Swaine/REX/Shutterstock

Tue 14 Feb 2023 01.00 EST Last modified on Tue 14 Feb 2023 02.20 EST

I popped into my local newsagent last week to pick up a copy of the Guardian newspaper and, as I stood in the queue, I realised I was standing next to a rack of Valentine’s Day cards.

I began to browse and was struck by how many of the cards were humorous. Some were just silly – “dim sum-body say it’s Valentine’s Day?”, or there was one with a couple in the bathroom – “Roses are red, violets are blue, you shave your legs while I do a poo!” But to my surprise, there were also a lot of cards that were very explicit – “Roses are red, I’m shit at poems. Fancy a shag?” These cards had a laddish, rather adolescent quality.

Where, I wondered, have the heartfelt cards gone? Where are the cards that talk about loving you forever; being the only one; sharing a life together?

It brought to mind a therapy session I conducted with a couple some years back. They were a long-married pair with grownup children and a deeply



entangled life. But on their 40th anniversary, the wife, who I'll call Mabel, said that she felt that she couldn't go on living with her husband, Cole, if there was never to be any romance between them. She'd waited patiently for him to show his feelings, but 40 years had passed and Cole had never told her with a straight face that he loved her, had never liked kissing her and had shrugged her off when she tried to hold his hand.

This failure to be genuinely open about his feelings was typified, she said, by his Valentine's Day cards. He was, she acknowledged, dutiful. She always got one, but it was never from him. Rather, he had cooked up an alter ego – Monsieur Mysterioso – who sent the card, signing off elaborate, cod-romantic declarations with a drawing of a Batman-style eye mask.



‘Where are the cards that talk about loving you forever; being the only one; sharing a life together?’ Photograph: Indranil Aditya/NurPhoto/REX/Shutterstock

It took some time to uncover why Cole found it hard to show his feelings, why he had needed to create this persona to tell his wife that he loved her. His childhood had been marked by parents who were cold and rejecting, which had made him extremely fearful of showing any need or vulnerability. His difficulty is certainly not unusual – many people are uncomfortable about showing they care, and worry that wearing their heart

on their sleeve will lead to it being pierced. The comic, crude sexual messages in those Valentine's cards are probably just another way that people hide their deeper feelings.

Indeed, in many relationships, the biggest challenge lies in putting emotions into words. Although some couples come to therapy because they can't stop venting about how upset, angry or let down they are, most come because years and years have passed and they haven't really said a word to each other about their feelings. The biggest risk to intimate relationships is silence and that silence might be our difficulty expressing loving feelings, as well as hating ones. But then is Valentine's Day really the time to begin a serious or difficult conversation about how things are going? Just this week, a couple declined a first consultation appointment on the 14th and frankly, I don't blame them – it would be like asking for a divorce on Christmas Day. Rather, perhaps we could treat this special day like Thanksgiving in the US – a type of thanksgiving for couples; a chance to show gratitude for what we do have with our partners, and to put aside our concerns about what is missing.

How do we do that? Most couples are rather strapped for cash at the moment, and the idea of a big night out with bells and whistles might feel quite intimidating. Some years ago, I worked on a project where couples were helped with their relationship in groups – one of the tasks we set them was for each partner to arrange an outing or activity that didn't cost more than a tenner. It was amazing how inventive the couples were and how much they enjoyed the challenge. One couple hired a tandem bike in Richmond Park, another couple played crazy golf and then had a picnic.

My own most memorable Valentine's Day was when I was a student and in love with a struggling actor. In the morning, my boyfriend disappeared into the kitchen to make tea and brought back a piece of toast carved into a heart and smeared lavishly with raspberry jam. It said a lot – much more than a bunch of overpriced red roses, or a rude, jokey card.

- Susanna Abse is a couple psychotherapist and author of [Tell Me the Truth About Love](#)
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## 2023.02.14 - Around the world

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- [Tim Scott Republican senator preparing presidential run](#)

## [Michigan](#)

# Three people killed in shooting on Michigan State University campus

Suspected shooter found dead off-campus with self-inflicted gunshot wound

Michigan university shooting: students barricade doors as three killed – video

*Guardian staff and agencies*

Tue 14 Feb 2023 00.53 ESTFirst published on Mon 13 Feb 2023 21.40 EST

At least three people were killed and several more injured in a shooting at [Michigan](#) State University, according to campus police. The suspected attacker died from what appeared to be a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

University police tweeted on Monday that shots were fired in two locations: near an academic building called Berkey Hall and an athletic facility known as IM East.

Michigan State University (MSU) police initially ordered students and staff to shelter in place after a report of shots fired around the school's East Lansing campus.

An alert was sent shortly after 8.30pm by the university's police department, advising students to "run, hide, fight".

After searches that went on for more than four hours, MSU police announced at 12.30am on Tuesday morning that the suspected shooter had been found dead off campus.

While appealing for information from the public, the police said it was unclear what the motive for the attack may have been and work to identify the suspect was ongoing.

UPDATE: The suspect has been located off campus. It appears he has died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. There is no longer a threat to campus and the shelter-in-place has been lifted.  
[pic.twitter.com/6s2KGvoKpV](https://pic.twitter.com/6s2KGvoKpV)

— MSU Police and Public Safety (@msupolice) [February 14, 2023](#)

Earlier in the evening, police released images of the suspect, describing him as a short male wearing a mask.

The Michigan governor, Gretchen Whitmer, was briefed on the shooting and tweeted her support for the community.

“Let’s wrap our arms around the Spartan community tonight,” she said, referring to the university’s athletic logo.

MSU’s flagship East Lansing campus, about 90 miles (145km) north-west of Detroit, has 50,000 graduate and undergraduate students. University police said all classes and campus activities would be canceled for the next 48 hours.

*Reuters and Agence-France Presse contributed to this report*

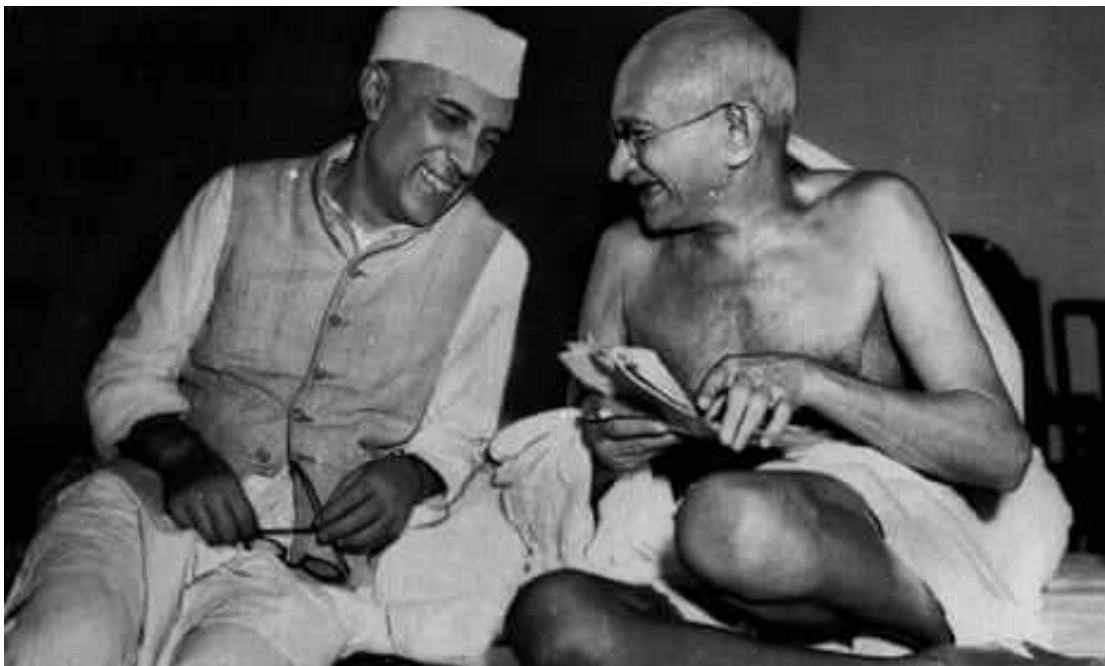
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## [India](#)

# India trying to prevent declassification of ‘sensitive’ 1947 Kashmir papers

Government documents fear letters about special status known as Bucher papers could affect foreign relations



Jawaharlal Nehru (left) – seen with Mahatma Gandhi in 1946 – granted Kashmir special status. Photograph: Max Desfor/AP

*Anisha Dutta*

Tue 14 Feb 2023 00.00 EST

India may prevent the declassification of papers from 1947 related to [Kashmir](#) as it fears the “sensitive” letters could affect foreign relations, according to internal government documents seen by the Guardian.

The letters, known as the Bucher papers, are believed to include political and military arguments for why India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal

Nehru, called for a ceasefire with Pakistan and provided special status to the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

For decades the region in the foothills of the Himalayas was given a separate constitution, a flag, and autonomy over all matters except for foreign affairs and defence. Those measures were seen by Kashmiris as crucial to protecting their rights in the Muslim-majority state.

But in 2019, under the Hindu nationalist prime minister, Narendra Modi, the government in [Delhi formally revoked the disputed state's constitutional autonomy](#), in an attempt to integrate it fully into India.

The decision tightened the government's grip over the region and stoked anger and resentment as a three-decade armed revolt continued to rage.

The Bucher papers refer to communications between Gen Sir Francis Robert Roy Bucher, who served as second commander-in-chief of the Indian army between 1948 and 1949, and government officials, including Nehru.

Over the years, several attempts have been made by activists to declassify the papers to throw light on the reasoning for article 370, which gave Jammu and Kashmir its special status.

A recent foreign ministry document seen by the Guardian said the contents of the papers should not be declassified yet. The papers contain “military operational matters in Kashmir and correspondences amongst senior government leaders on sensitive political matters on Kashmir”, the document said.

The papers have been kept at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, an autonomous body under India's culture ministry.

According to a source with knowledge of the matter, they reveal that Nehru was aware and informed of the military development in Kashmir, including Pakistan's attempts to use external military assistance to escalate the situation.

“Roy Bucher suggested a political approach to solve the escalating situation given military fatigue faced by Indian troops due to 13 months of military deployment, including taking the matter before the United Nations,” the source said.

That advice may have influenced Nehru’s decision to grant Kashmir special status. In 1952, the prime minister argued that the aspirations of the people of Kashmir should be respected. “I want to stress that it is only the people of Kashmir who can decide the future of Kashmir,” he told India’s parliament. “We are not going to impose ourselves on them on the point of the bayonet.”

The Bucher papers were handed over by India’s external affairs ministry to the Nehru museum and library in New Delhi in 1970, with a note saying they should be kept “classified”. They have remained in the library’s closed collection since then, the foreign ministry document said.

An Indian activist, Venkatesh Nayak, has filed multiple appeals to declassify the papers, a move that was initially rejected. However, in 2021 the Indian information commissioner ruled it was in the “national interest” but fell short of ordering the disclosure of the crucial documents. The order advised that the library may seek the foreign ministry’s permission to declassify the papers for academic research.

In a letter dated 12 October 2022 that has been reviewed by the Guardian, the chair of the museum and library, Nripendra Misra, wrote to India’s foreign secretary arguing the papers “are very important for scholarly research” and requested declassification.

“We have read the contents of the Bucher papers. Our view is that the papers need not remain ‘classified’ beyond the reach of academicians. We are opening papers of other important public figures also,” Misra argued.

India typically allows the declassification of archival documents after 25 years.

The foreign ministry argued in the document that the disclosure of the papers should be put in “abeyance” for the time being and advised that the

“sensitivity of Roy Bucher papers and the likely implications of their disclosure” should be examined further.

Sources say the government has yet to take a final decision on the matter.

The Guardian has contacted the Indian foreign ministry and the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library for a response.

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## US news

# United flight from Hawaii plunged to within 800ft of Pacific Ocean

Plane heading for San Francisco took steep dive shortly after takeoff in dramatic incident in mid-December



A United plane at San Francisco airport, where the plane was heading.  
Photograph: Louis Nastro/Reuters

[Julia Carrie Wong](#)

[@juliacarriew](#)

Mon 13 Feb 2023 12.02 ESTLast modified on Mon 13 Feb 2023 12.13 EST

A United flight from Maui to San Francisco plummeted to less than 800ft above the Pacific Ocean shortly after takeoff in December, an apparent near crash and previously unreported safety incident revealed by airline industry publication [the Air Current](#).

Flight tracking data analysis revealed that the Boeing 777-200 had reached an altitude of roughly 2,200ft when it began a steep dive, descending at a rate of about 8,600ft a minute. After dipping below 775ft, the flight recovered altitude and traveled to [San Francisco](#) without further issue.

The entire ordeal unfolded in heavy rain, lasted less than 45 seconds and was not mentioned in recordings of air traffic control radio calls reviewed by the Air Current.

United “closely coordinated with the [Federal Aviation Administration] and [Air Line Pilots Association, International] on an investigation that ultimately resulted in the pilots receiving additional training”, a United spokesperson, Josh Freed, said in a statement to the Guardian about the incident. “Safety remains our highest priority.”

The pilots had a combined 25,000 hours of flying experience between them and had “fully cooperated” with the investigation, Freed added.

The United flight’s close call came amid a period of turmoil for the US airline industry. Also in December, a Hawaiian Airlines flight preparing to land in Honolulu experienced “[severe turbulence](#)”. At least 36 people were [injured](#) on that flight, with 20 taken to the hospital and 11 listed in serious condition.

The storm system involved would go on to cause a major winter storm across the US mainland, triggering a [complete meltdown](#) by Southwest Airlines, which cancelled thousands of flights and left travelers stranded over the Christmas holiday weekend.

Two recent serious safety incidents have also resulted in investigations by the National Transportation Safety Board.

In January, two planes at John F Kennedy airport in New York [nearly collided](#) when an American Airlines plane crossed the runway ahead of a Delta plane that was accelerating for takeoff. The American Airlines pilots involved in that case have refused to give investigators recorded interviews,

and they have been sent subpoenas seeking to compel them to testify, the NTSB said in [a statement](#) last week.

And last Sunday, two planes at Austin-Bergstrom international airport had a [near miss](#) when air traffic control cleared them to land and depart on the same runway at the same time.

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## Global development

# **Sudan court sentences three men to hand amputation for stealing**

The verdict, the first of its kind in almost a decade, has shocked many who fear country is sliding back into state extremism



Sudanese protesters shout slogans during a 2020 demonstration against legal amendments they consider to be in violation of Islamic law. Photograph: Mohammed Abu Obaid/EPA

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[Zeinab Mohammed Salih](#) in Khartoum

Tue 14 Feb 2023 01.30 EST Last modified on Tue 14 Feb 2023 06.17 EST

Three Sudanese men have been sentenced to hand amputation for stealing, the first time in almost a decade that such a punishment has been handed down in the country's courts.

The three men in their 20s were convicted of stealing gas cylinders in Omdurman, Sudan's most populous city, which sits across the Nile River from the capital, Khartoum.

The verdict was handed down two weeks ago but has just come to light, in a case that will further worry many who fear Sudan is sliding back into state extremism, 15 months after the [military coup](#) which destabilised the country and halted its transition to democracy.

The men were also sentenced to three years in prison for mischief and fined 2,000,000 Sudanese pounds (£3,000) as compensation for the theft.

The men have been taken to Koper prison in north Khartoum, where the sentence is to be carried out at an unspecified date. The prison currently

holds former president Omar al-Bashir, who was ousted in 2019 after a public uprising, and his aides.

Samir Makeen, the men's lawyer, said: "Unfortunately, despite the political change in the country, nothing has changed in terms of the rights of the people, it was a change on the surface."

In a statement, the African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies, a rights organisation operating from Uganda, accused the Sudanese authorities of not giving the three men a fair trial. It said the trial had taken place "without legal representation, [with the] failure of the court to explain to the accused the gravity and penalty of the offences and the reliance of court on the confessions as the only evidence to convict the accused".

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In August 2021, Sudan signed the UN convention to stop torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment, which should have led to many laws in the criminal code being redrafted to align with international human rights laws, "but that never happened because there's no real will to do that by the people who hold the power. That's why we keep seeing such cases every now and then", Makeen said.

Sudan has been ruled by Islamic laws since September 1983. The laws were frozen for three years under the democratically elected government of Sadiq al-Mahdi, and reintroduced by Bashir when he came to power in an Islamist-backed coup in 1989.

After Bashir was ousted in 2019, some progressive laws were introduced, such as the criminalisation of female genital mutilation and the abolition of flogging. However, the October 2021 military coup ended a two-year transition to democracy, and several unpopular and regressive public order laws have been reintroduced.

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## [US elections 2024](#)

# Republican senator Tim Scott preparing presidential run – report

Only Black Republican in Senate set to challenge Donald Trump for nomination, Wall Street Journal says



Tim Scott speaks in front of Donald Trump and Lindsey Graham in North Charleston, South Carolina, in February 2020. Photograph: Patrick Semansky/AP

[Martin Pengelly](#) in New York

[@MartinPengelly](#)

Mon 13 Feb 2023 17.10 ESTLast modified on Mon 13 Feb 2023 17.34 EST

South Carolina senator Tim Scott is reportedly taking steps to seek the Republican presidential nomination in 2024.



Reporting the news, the Wall Street Journal [cited](#) anonymous sources “familiar with his plans”. Jennifer DeCasper, a senior adviser, said the senator was “excited to share his vision of hope and opportunity and hear the American people’s response”.

A stringent conservative but also the only Black Republican in the US Senate, Scott, 57, has worked publicly if unsuccessfully with Democrats on attempts to agree to [policing reform](#).

Last August, he appeared to confirm his ambition for a presidential run.

His book, [America: a Redemption Story](#), contained small print including a description of “a rising star who sees and understands the importance of bipartisanship to move America forward” and saying “this book is a political memoir that includes his core messages as he prepares to make a presidential bid in 2022”.

Scott’s publisher, Thomas Nelson, apologised for what it called an “error ... not done at the direction or approval of the senator or his team”.

Concrete steps made by Scott have included [appointing co-chairs](#) of a fundraising Super Pac and plans to speak in South Carolina and Iowa, two early voting states.

The [report](#) about Scott’s plans came two days ahead of an expected campaign launch by another South Carolina Republican, Nikki Haley, a former governor who was US ambassador to the United Nations under Donald Trump.

Still the only declared candidate for the 2024 nomination, Trump [spoke](#) in New Hampshire and South Carolina last month. He has already secured support from the other South Carolina senator, Lindsey Graham, the governor, Henry McMaster, and US House members.

The Florida governor, Ron DeSantis, is Trump’s only serious challenger in polling concerning the notional field, in which Scott [generally scores 1% or less](#). Last week, a Washington Post-ABC News poll [showed](#) Haley

performing better but splitting the anti-Trump vote, thereby handing victory to the former president in a putative three-way race.

Trump has begun to attack DeSantis but has not turned his fire on Haley, despite her preparing to renege on [a vow not to run if he did](#).

Both Scott and Haley are often mentioned as potential vice-presidential picks, Haley representing youth and diversity (Haley is 51 and Indian American).

On Monday, John Barrasso of Wyoming, chair of the Republican Senate conference, [told the Journal](#) that Scott “truly believes that God is great and America is great and we are provided with incredible opportunities. So I think a Ronald Reagan ‘Morning in America’ hopeful America vision is one that Tim has, lives and breathes and is really needed in our country.”

On the flip side, Ed Kilgore, a Democratic operative turned columnist, suggested Scott might actually have his eye on 2028.

Scott, Kilgore [wrote for New York Magazine](#), might really be “engaging in a sort of starter presidential campaign in order to build contacts and positive name ID for a future run ... a respectable start, a signature moment or two, and a graceful exit from the 2024 contest may be the real goal”.

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## Headlines monday 13 february 2023

- [Defence policy UK plans security review after spate of mysterious objects over America](#)
- [US 'Octagonal' flying object shot down near military sites in Michigan](#)
- [Brexit David Frost urges UK to 'embrace' exit from EU and warns of plot to unravel deal](#)
- [EU Brexiter's claim 'sellout' after Tories discuss rapprochement](#)

## [UK security and counter-terrorism](#)

# UK fighter jets always on standby, Sunak says after US shoots down objects

Prime minister will do ‘everything it takes’ to keep country safe as Britain conducts security review

- [US shoots down ‘octagonal’ flying object near military sites in Michigan](#)



A suspected Chinese spy balloon drifts to the ocean after being shot down off the coast in South Carolina. Photograph: Randall Hill/Reuters

[Kiran Stacey](#) and [Kevin Rawlinson](#)

Mon 13 Feb 2023 10.15 ESTFirst published on Mon 13 Feb 2023 04.14 EST

UK fighter jets are on standby to shoot down Chinese spy balloons if any are spotted in British air space, the prime minister has said.

Rishi Sunak said Typhoon planes were ready at all times in case the UK came under threat from balloons such as the one US officials said they shot down last week.

Meanwhile the UK is conducting a security review after four unidentified objects were spotted in US or Canadian air space in just over a week. US fighter jets shot down the fourth of these [over Lake Huron](#) on Sunday.

Sunak said: “I want people to know that we will do everything it takes to keep the country safe. We have something called the ‘quick reaction alert force’ which involves Typhoon planes which are kept on 24/7 readiness to police our air space.”

He added: “I can’t go into detail on national security matters, but we’re in constant touch with our allies and we’ll do whatever it takes to keep our country safe,” he added.

Separately, the defence secretary, Ben Wallace, said: “The UK and her allies will review what these airspace intrusions mean for our security. This development is another sign of how the global threat picture is changing for the worse.”

On Sunday, the US military shot down [the fourth flying object](#), with the air force general overseeing North American airspace indicating he would not yet rule out any explanation for the objects – including extraterrestrial ones.

No 10 would not comment on the origin of the balloons over North America. But asked whether Sunak believed in extraterrestrial life, his spokesperson said: “He is more focused on terrestrial issues.”

The high-altitude unidentified object shot down on Sunday was described as an “octagonal structure” with strings attached to it.

It is understood to have been the same item that was picked up by radar over Montana on Saturday. It was struck by an air-to-air missile launched by F-16 fighter jets and had been flying across the Great Lakes region at 20,000ft, a height that could have posed a risk to civilian aircraft.

The Pentagon said the object appeared to have travelled near US military sites and posed a threat to civilian aviation, as well as being a potential tool for surveillance.

### [Map of locations where objects shot down over North America](#)

Beijing insisted the first balloon shot down by the US on 4 February after crossing its airspace was being used solely for meteorological purposes. But Washington has dismissed this, suspecting it was a spy craft. And the Telegraph reported that the UK's defence review will show whether or not changes to surveillance of British airspace are necessary to protect against similar craft.

The UK transport minister Richard Holden said Chinese spy balloons may have already been deployed over the UK. Asked on Sky News whether it was possible that "Chinese spy balloons have already been used over the UK", Holden said: "It is possible. It is also possible, and I would think likely, that there would be people from the Chinese government trying to act as a hostile state."

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He added: “I think we have to be realistic about the threat these countries pose to the UK.”

Alicia Kearns, the chair of the Commons foreign affairs select committee, said: “British airspace is protected by an exceptional quick reaction force, which has proved itself very capable against unknown and hostile aircraft.

“The US will share with us and Five Eyes allies its conclusions on the capabilities of the Chinese balloons, and at that point an internal review of our ability to identify, track, disrupt and destroy these balloons will be undertaken.”

Wallace has previously said he would have reacted to the first balloon in the same way as the Pentagon did, had it appeared in British skies.

That one was followed almost a week later – on Friday – by an unknown “car-sized” object flying in US airspace off the coast of Alaska that the US military again shot down.

The Canadian prime minister, Justin Trudeau, said on Saturday that he [ordered a US warplane to shoot down an unidentified object](#) that was flying high over northern Canada.

Beijing admitted that another balloon spotted flying over Latin America earlier this month was from [China](#).

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## US military

# US shoots down ‘octagonal’ flying object near military sites in Michigan

Military general says he will not rule out any explanation as fourth object is downed over North America this month

- [China ‘spy balloon’ wakes up world to new era of war at edge of space](#)



A US Air Force F-16 fighter jet. The fourth flying object was shot with an air-to-air missile over Lake Huron. Photograph: Jack Guez/AFP/Getty Images

[Ed Pilkington](#)  
[@edpilkington](#)

Mon 13 Feb 2023 02.36 ESTFirst published on Sun 12 Feb 2023 16.37 EST

The US military has shot down [a third flying object](#) over North American airspace in three days, as the air force general overseeing the airspace said



he would not rule out any explanation for the objects yet.

The high-altitude unidentified object, described as an “octagonal structure” with strings attached to it, was shot down over Lake Huron in [Michigan](#) on Sunday.

It is understood to have been the same item that was picked up by radar over Montana on Saturday. At the point it was struck by an air-to-air missile launched by F-16 fighter jets, it had been flying across the Great Lakes region at 20,000ft, a height that could have posed a risk to civilian aircraft.

“I’m glad to report it has been swiftly, safely and securely taken down,” the state’s governor, Gretchen Whitmer, said.

The Pentagon said the object appeared to have travelled near [US military](#) sites and posed a threat to civilian aviation, as well as being a potential tool for surveillance.

Three unidentified flying objects have been downed in as many days, after a large balloon was shot down off the coast of South Carolina on 4 February. That object was claimed by [China](#), although Beijing has insisted it was involved in innocent weather research.

Gen Glen VanHerck, who is tasked with safeguarding US airspace, said the military had not been able to identify what the three most recent objects were, how they stayed aloft, or where they were coming from.

VanHerck said the US had adjusted its radar so it could track slower objects, and that the three most recent objects were being called, “objects, not balloons, for a reason”.

Asked whether he had ruled out extraterrestrials, VanHerck said: “I’ll let the intel community and the counterintelligence community figure that out. I haven’t ruled out anything.”

A defence official subsequently told Reuters that the military had not seen any evidence that the objects were extraterrestrial.



A suspected spy balloon in the sky over Billings, Montana. Photograph: Chase Doak/AFP/Getty Images

Military personnel equipped with specialist diving gear designed for the extremely cold water of Lake Huron were expected to be deployed quickly to search for pieces of the destroyed object.

On Friday, an object about the size of a small car was downed off the coast of Alaska, followed by a similar flying object over Yukon, in [Canada](#), on Saturday.

'Unidentified object' taken down over Canada, Justin Trudeau says – video

The US and Canadian military are attempting to recover the other objects that were shot down last week. Searches via sea and land are operating amid severe weather conditions.

The Democratic majority leader of the US Senate, Chuck Schumer, told ABC's This Week on Sunday he had been briefed by the White House and that officials were now convinced that all of the first three flying objects were balloons. He put the finger of blame firmly on China.

“The Chinese were humiliated – I think the Chinese were caught lying,” he said. “It’s a real setback for them.”

Hours later a spokesperson for the White House national security council [tried to tamp down](#) some of Schumer’s rhetoric, saying it was too early to characterise the two latest flying objects shot down over Alaska and Canada. Definitive answers would have to wait for the debris to be recovered, the official said.

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[Map showing locations of shot-down objects over North America](#)

Schumer said US military and intelligence agencies were “focused like a laser” on gathering information on the flying objects and then analysing what steps needed to be taken to protect American interests in future. He called it “wild” that the US government had no idea about the balloon spying program until just “a few months ago”.

The Canadian military were attempting to reach pieces of the object that was taken down within Canadian airspace on Saturday. The vessel fell over a remote, rugged area of Yukon.

The object, described as cylindrical, had been flying at 40,000ft over Canadian territory and was considered a risk to civilian air traffic.

Searches by the US military were also continuing in difficult circumstances off the coasts of Alaska and South Carolina, with some debris from the first balloon to be destroyed - the largest of the four objects – having been retrieved and taken to military laboratories for analysis.

Though the Chinese government has admitted owning the balloon, it has insisted it was used only for weather research.

The Pentagon has disputed this, saying early indications suggest the balloon was carrying powerful equipment that could intercept communications. The balloon, flying at 60,000ft, was tracked by the US military for several days as it traversed the national airspace, having initially been spotted off the coast of Alaska on 28 January.

The air force decided to wait until it was over the Atlantic before shooting it down out of concern for civilians on the ground, the Pentagon said.

Schumer defended that decision on Sunday against mounting criticism from Republicans who have castigated Joe Biden for failing to act immediately. By following the balloon across the country, the US had gained “enormous intelligence” on what the Chinese were doing, he said.

Schumer predicted the entire object would be pieced back together in the coming days. “That’s a huge coup for the United States,” he told ABC’s This Week.

The confluence of four downed flying objects in a week has raised tensions on both sides of the US and Canadian border. and It has also generated political stresses internationally. The secretary of state, Antony Blinken, [postponed the first visit](#) to Beijing by a senior US diplomat since 2018 in response to the intrusion of the Chinese balloon.

In China, local news outlets cited by [Bloomberg News](#) reported on Sunday that the government was preparing to bring down an unidentified flying object said to have been spotted over the port of Qingdao. Fishers in the area had been told to be alert, according to the reports.

*Reuters contributed to this report*

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## **Brexit**

# **Sunak was unaware of Gove attendance at Brexit discussion, No 10 says**

Spokesperson stops short of criticising minister, while Tory source dismisses David Frost ‘plot’ claim as ‘pathetic’



No 10 said Michael Gove had made clear he attended in his capacity as a governor of Ditchley Park, where the summit was held. Photograph: Tejas Sandhu/SOPA Images/Rex/Shutterstock

*[Jessica Elgot](#), [Lisa O'Carroll](#) and [Kevin Rawlinson](#)*

Mon 13 Feb 2023 09.55 ESTFirst published on Mon 13 Feb 2023 04.28 EST

Rishi Sunak was unaware of Michael Gove's attendance at a private meeting of prominent former leave and remain campaigners to discuss Brexit, No 10 has said.

Sunak's spokesperson suggested the prime minister had first become aware of Gove's attendance at the two-day summit when he read about it [in the Observer](#).

No 10 stopped short of criticising Gove for attending, though it would not say Sunak was happy with the attendance. "Private individuals are able to come in and discuss whatever they wish. From the government's position, we are focusing on further maximising the benefits from [Brexit](#)," the spokesperson said.

Government sources said there was some irritation that there was no warning about Gove's attendance, because of the delicate party management involved during talks on the Northern Irish protocol. One said there were "eyebrows raised" in No 10, but said it was unlikely Sunak would raise it personally with the cabinet minister.

The conference was attended by senior members of Keir Starmer's frontbench, including the shadow foreign secretary, David Lammy, as well as the former chief Brexit negotiator Oliver Robbins.

David Frost, another former chief Brexit negotiator, has criticised the event, which had the title "How can we make Brexit work better with our neighbours in Europe?", and he urged ministers to "fully and enthusiastically embrace the advantages of Brexit".

The two-day summit, revealed by the Observer on Sunday, was also attended by the Tory grandees Michael Howard and Norman Lamont; the shadow defence secretary, John Healey; the former Treasury permanent secretary Tom Scholar; the pro-leave crossbench peer Gisela Stuart, and business leaders and diplomats. It was held at the historic Ditchley Park retreat in Oxfordshire.

On Monday, Lord Frost referred to it as "a further piece of evidence that many in our political and business establishment want to unravel the deals we did to exit the EU in 2020 and to stay shadowing the EU instead".

Attempting to explain the presence of prominent Brexit backers at the meeting alongside former remain supporters, he told the [Daily Mail](#): “That’s why so many of those responsible for Theresa May’s failed backstop deal were there, while I and those who actually delivered the Brexit agreements were not.”

No 10 said Gove had made it clear he had attended in his capacity as a governor of Ditchley. One attender said Gove was honest about some of the shortcomings of Brexit, but they said it was wrong to suggest he had expressed regret. They said Gove argued the case for how Brexit would work in the long term, including in growth industries such as gene editing.

No 10 said Sunak was “focused on making sure we deliver on the benefits of [Brexit]. Whether that’s taking control of the migration system, freeports, creating jobs and investment, and obviously we’re going through reviewing EU laws now to see what more can be done. We’ve seen some of those quite recently with some of the environmental reforms we’ve brought in, for example. There is much more to do and that’s what the review of EU law is about.”

Asked if Gove should have been speaking on the issue outside his brief, the spokesperson said: “The public will judge departments and the secretary of state on the work they are delivering. I think you’ve seen from the department in recent days, whether it’s on housing, for important issues like Grenfell, or levelling up, the secretary of state is working hard.”

The Observer revealed that a confidential introductory statement acknowledged that there was now a view among “some at least, that so far the UK has not yet found its way forward outside the EU”, with Brexit “acting as a drag on our growth and inhibiting the UK’s potential”.

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A source who was there told the paper it was a “constructive meeting” that addressed the problems and opportunities of Brexit but dwelt heavily on the economic downside to the UK economy at a time of global instability and rising energy prices.

But Frost said: “Brexit doesn’t need ‘fixing’. It needs this Conservative government, elected with a huge mandate on a Brexit programme, to fully and enthusiastically embrace its advantages instead of leaving the field to those who never wanted it in the first place.

“I and millions of others want the government to get on with that instead of raising taxes, deterring investment and pushing public spending to its highest level for 70 years.”

One senior Conservative party source who attended the summit dismissed Frost’s portrayal of the conference as a “secret plot” to “unravel” Brexit as “rather pathetic”.

“It is an overreach and a misunderstanding of what the conference was about, which was about the future of UK and EU relations, which is a perfectly sensible subject to discuss,” the attender said.

Frost’s comments come after the UK and EU reiterated their commitment to finding “joint solutions” to differences around the post-Brexit Northern Ireland protocol. There is mounting speculation that a deal is finally on the cards to reduce red tape on trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

This article was amended on 13 February 2023. An earlier version called Gisela Stuart a Labour peer. She is a crossbench peer.

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## [Brexit](#)

# Brexitters claim ‘sellout’ after Tories discuss rapprochement with EU

Nigel Farage, John Redwood and Lord Frost rail against news of senior Tories joining cross-party summit to tackle failings of Brexit



The private summit was held at Ditchley Park in Oxfordshire, where Michael Gove is a governor. Photograph: Adrian Sherratt/Alamy

[Kiran Stacey](#) *Political correspondent*

Sun 12 Feb 2023 18.44 ESTFirst published on Sun 12 Feb 2023 16.34 EST

Prominent Brexit supporters have hit out at senior Conservative figures after the Observer revealed [they had taken part in a private cross-party summit](#) entitled: “How can we make Brexit work better with our neighbours in Europe?”

John Redwood, the prominent Brexit-supporting Tory MP, and [Nigel Farage](#), the former leader of the UK Independence party, criticised those

attending the summit at Oxfordshire's Ditchley Park retreat, including the cabinet minister Michael Gove.

Redwood [tweeted](#): "Instead of talking of sellout at private conferences the UK establishment needs to complete Brexit and use its freedoms."

Farage meanwhile [said](#): "The full sellout of Brexit is under way. This Tory party never believed in it."

The Mail also reported comments from former [Brexit](#) negotiator and ex-cabinet minister Lord Frost, who said: "Brexit doesn't need 'fixing'. It needs this Conservative government, elected with a huge mandate on a Brexit programme, to fully and enthusiastically embrace its advantages instead of leaving the field to those who never wanted it in the first place."

The criticisms came after the Observer reported details of the discussions, which involved frontbench MPs from both main parties, as well as diplomats, foreign policy experts and prominent business figures.

The politicians included Gove, who helped lead the Vote Leave campaign, as well as the former Tory leader Michael Howard and the former Conservative chancellor Norman Lamont.

Attendees from Labour included the shadow foreign secretary, David Lammy, and the shadow defence secretary, John Healey. Peter Mandelson, the former Labour cabinet minister, chaired the event.

A source with knowledge of the summit told the Observer: "The main thrust of it was that Britain is losing out, that Brexit is not delivering, our economy is in a weak position."

Gove did not comment on the talks, although a source said he attended in his capacity as a governor of Ditchley, where it was held.

Those involved are understood to have talked at length about the Northern Ireland protocol, which is under discussion between UK and EU officials. The British government is hoping to reach a deal to overturn the protocol,

which governs trade across the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, within weeks.

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Ministers in London have introduced legislation which would allow the UK to override the protocol unilaterally – though that has been shelved while talks with the EU are proceeding.

Redwood tweeted: “Pass the NI protocol bill so NI is fully part of the UK and take back full control of our fish for starters.”

Both Labour and the Tories are committed to keeping Britain out of the EU, and both say the country will stay out of the single market as well.

However members of both parties have talked about how they can repair relations with the EU even outside those institutions.

Bloomberg [reported last week](#) that the prime minister, Rishi Sunak, has asked his senior ministers to draw up plans for rebuilding links with EU countries after years of acrimony. The newswire reported that the plans focused on areas including defence, migration, trade and energy.

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## ‘Please don’t email me’: the secretive collectors of obscure TV memorabilia



Scott, with items from his memorabilia collection. From left: a dress that belonged to Dame Vera Lynn, the Phantom Flan Flinger outfit from Tiswas,



an original Mr Blobby suit, Angie Watts' outfit from EastEnders and Mr Bean's suit. Photograph: Martin Godwin/The Guardian

They spend thousands on pieces of Del Boy's carpet and props from Noel's House Party – and they'd rather you didn't know too much about them. We step inside the world of television nostalgia



[Amelia Tait](#)

Mon 13 Feb 2023 01.00 ESTLast modified on Mon 13 Feb 2023 08.25 EST

It's hard to imagine that Mr Blobby is worth three times as much as John Lennon. In 2011, the Beatle's tooth fetched £19,000 at auction, while on 26 January this year, someone on eBay agreed to pay £62,101 for an original – but crucially never used – 90s BBC costume of the pink and yellow Noel's House Party star. So, perhaps it's not surprising that the buyer ended up backing out, and tens of thousands of pounds weren't spent on a bulbous belly, wobbly eyes and that trademark polka dot bow tie.

Then again, perhaps it is. Little known to most of us, there is a ferocious, often highly secretive trade in British TV props. In 2019, for example, a painting from the 80s sitcom 'Allo 'Allo! sold for £18,000 – The Fallen Madonna With the Big Boobies is officially worth just a grand less than a molar pulled from Lennon's head. It's not quite the £2m that [an original R2-](#)

[D2 can go for at auction](#) – or the £3.5m someone once paid for a Batmobile – but it's still big money.

Scott has two Blobbies, and he would rather you didn't know his surname nor where he lives. Twenty-odd years ago, the 54-year-old hearse and limousine dealer bought an original Mr Blobby costume because he wanted to cheer up his dad.

“My dad was disabled for 16 years with a brain tumour and my wife and I bought a couple of bits to make him laugh,” Scott says. One of those bits was Blobby. “We put it next to him and he laughed and said we were mental.”

Scott bought Blobby from a collector and, from that moment on, became a collector himself. He now owns Del Boy's green Ford Capri and the even more famous yellow three-wheeler from Only Fools and Horses, as well as the original Phantom Flan Flinger costume from 70s children's show Tiswas. While Scott remains coy about some of his possessions, he's happy to share that he has Mr Bean's suit and shoes, plus “Anita Dobson's outfit from EastEnders when dirty Den divorced her, watched by 30 million people”.



Mr Blobby and Scott at home. Photograph: Martin Godwin/The Guardian

The first Blobby that Scott bought stands in his hallway ready to greet guests with its unblinking lash-lined eyes. His second Blobby – bought years later from a BBC employee – is kept in storage.

“It’s best of British, really,” says Scott of his collection – he also owns props from reality competition Britain’s Got Talent. Scott is seeking funding for his own museum, but in the meantime says: “We’re probably going to take the collection out on the road and speak about it to Women’s Institutes and Lions clubs.”

Decades ago when he started collecting, Scott had to hunt far and wide for memorabilia and had “door after door after door” slammed in his face. Today, he has built a reputation and many sellers come directly to him. That’s not the only thing that’s changed. “Many, many years ago, people were throwing things in the skip. They couldn’t give it away,” Scott says, adding: “Years ago, stuff was cheap, but now the internet has made everything valuable.”

In 2021, a single square of carpet from Del Boy’s flat sold for £700. One lonely plastic wall panel from a 2013 episode of [Doctor Who](#) fetched £350, while people have bought the original faces (just the faces) of Thomas the Tank Engine and his friends after they were listed online for £1,250 each. A piece of wallpaper from the BBC series Sherlock is available for £294.99.



Del Boy and Rodney's Reliant Regal van. Photograph: Jonathan Hordle/Rex Features

It's hard to overstate just how obscure certain lots are. At present, Wales-based artefact collectors the Prop Gallery are selling a 1in sticker from Thomas and Friends for £225; a production-used miniature of Pingu's best mate, Robby the Seal, for £3,495; plus a bottle of Peckham Spring tap water from Only Fools and Horses for £14,995.

Who, beyond Scott, parts with their pounds and pays these prices? It's not always easy to find out. The millionaire owner of an original puppet from a beloved 1950s children's TV series replied: "Please don't email me" when asked if he'd like to chat.

"When a lot of money changes hands, people tend to like remaining anonymous," says Andrew Stowe, associate director at East Bristol Auctions, which has sold props from *The Two Ronnies*, *Fawlty Towers*, *'Allo 'Allo!*, and *Wallace and Gromit* (unrelatedly, the auctioneers also once sold Mahatma Gandhi's spectacles). While some buyers like to flaunt their purchases, Stowe says many prefer privacy – revealing the location of an expensive item could affect a buyer's insurance premiums or be an invitation to burglars.

Stowe helped sell 'Allo 'Allo!'s Fallen Madonna after a couple who bought it at a school charity auction in the 90s decided it was time to let it go. "It sold to a gentleman who lives in France, very close to where the series was set," Stowe says. "He collects artwork and he's got it on his wall alongside some of the world's most famous artists. There's genuine pieces of art worth hundreds of thousands of pounds and right in the middle is this prop from a BBC sitcom."

To authenticate obscure props, auction houses have to "screen match" them to scenes, an often painstaking process. Sometimes, there are other clues. Mark Sach is the director of [the Original Memorabilia Company](#) in Colchester; a few years ago, he sold the purple suit Peter Kay wore in his 2005 Comic Relief recording of (Is This the Way to) Amarillo. It went for about £5,500.

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The Fallen Madonna with the Big Boobies from ‘Allo ‘Allo. Photograph: Jamie Jones/Shutterstock

“It was a perfect onscreen match, that was our starting point,” says Sach. There was also documented proof that the suit had previously been sold at a charity auction, and it was signed by Kay. A dry-cleaning ticket was discovered in the inside pocket. The yellow slip read: “Due Fri. Mrs Gargan”. Which, Sach says, turned out to be Kay’s wife’s surname.

When buyers obtain this powerfully nostalgic memorabilia, some stick it on the wall, others lock it away in storage, and still others star in KitKat adverts. Chris Balcombe is a 62-year-old photographer from Hampshire who owns an original Doctor Who Dalek with sections dating back to 1963, plus two other replica Daleks. In the early 00s, he climbed inside a replica to feature in a chocolate bar ad featuring British entertainment figures.

“I remember going to a big multiplex and asking the manager if I could just watch the adverts before the film,” Balcombe says. “They let me – but they kept an eye on me.”

While Balcombe normally lies and says his Daleks are in a storage unit, he confesses now that they live in his “secure” garage, near his lawnmower. He owns numerous other Doctor Who masks, costumes, heads and



weapons, and even a bottle of fictional soft drink Bubble Shock featured in the spin-off series *The Sarah Jane Adventures*.

“I can’t remember what triggered it at all,” Balcombe says of his 25-year hobby. “Basically, I had some money to spend, and nostalgia comes into this hugely.” Balcombe never hid behind his sofa when watching *Doctor Who*, but remembers cuddling up with his mum and dad when the Daleks were on screen.

Although Balcombe’s memorabilia collection is primarily centred on *Doctor Who*, he owns a few other props. One is a Yamaha DX7 keyboard that was regularly used on *Top of the Pops*. Another is a chequebook from 70s gameshow *Blankety Blank*. Another – that he doesn’t often mention – is a medal from *Jim’ll Fix It*.



Peter Kay in his purple suit. Photograph: Scott Wishart/Alamy

While some props become less desirable over time, others become more valuable. “What things are valuable today and what things might be valuable in a few years’ time is solely driven by nostalgia,” says Tim Lawes, director of UK consignments at Propstore, a memorabilia auction house with London and Los Angeles offices. “Movies from the early 00s and the 90s are now seeing big price increases and that’s purely because

people who grew up with those films are now thirtysomething, fortysomething, and they have some disposable income.” In 2021, Propstore sold Will Ferrell’s Elf costume for £218,750. Twenty-odd years ago, Lawes sold a Mr Blobby costume for about £5,000.

Blobby, as a chaotic staple of the 90s, could certainly fetch a pretty price today, but no auctioneer or collector I speak with thinks the (notably never used onscreen) eBay costume was really worth £60,000. Scott isn’t prepared to reveal the most he has spent on an item, but says “every last penny” he earns has been put into props. His favourite item in his collection by far is his original Mr Blobby, purely because he bought it for his dad, who died seven years ago.

Every prop Scott owns is because of his own personal connection to a show. “That’s what I’ve done over the years, is just made that connection with my memories as a kid,” he says. “You never know the value of a moment until it’s a memory.”

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# **‘Obsessive? This is who I am!’ How Lesley Paterson funded her 16-year Oscar dream – by winning triathlons**

[Simon Hattenstone](#)



Lesley Paterson ... 'I will do anything to make what I want happen.'  
Photograph: Graeme Robertson/The Guardian

Paterson's debut film, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, is up for nine Academy Awards. It could not have been made without her earnings as an athlete – and the drive that made her swim a mile with a broken shoulder



Mon 13 Feb 2023 01.00 ESTLast modified on Tue 14 Feb 2023 10.13 EST

In 2011, Lesley Paterson was interviewed in Scotland's Daily Record after becoming the off-road triathlon world champion. The headline crowed: "I beat my demons to be world champ ... now I want an Oscar." It was hard to know whether Paterson was rash, brash or simply delusional. The athlete had no track record in film. By then, she had spent five years trying and failing to remake the first world war epic All Quiet on the Western Front. It felt like a grand folly. Even her loved ones thought it was a pipe dream.

This week, Paterson is up for the best adapted screenplay Bafta for All Quiet, alongside her co-writer Ian Stokell and director Edward Berger. On 13 March, she will attend the Academy Awards, where she hopes to win her Oscar for best adapted screenplay. In total, the film has been nominated for nine [Oscars](#).

It took Paterson 16 years to get it made. Along the way, star actors and directors pulled out, funds went awol and Paterson subsidised her dream with her winnings from triathlons. It's a heroic tale of endurance worthy of a movie in itself.

Today, Paterson is on the campaign trail. Make no mistake: the Scot, who lives in Los Angeles, wants those gongs. We meet at the Guardian's office in London. Congratulations on the film, I say. "Thank you so much," she says, followed by a triumphant roar that verges on the indecent. "Yeeeeeeeeeahhhh!!!" Paterson is a tiny, fiery ball of muscle. Whereas most of us are covered in fat, she appears to be wrapped in polythene. Her eyes are the bluest I have seen and scan the world with fierce intensity. Her speech is turbocharged, only breaking when she stuffs an energy bar or homemade rice-flour cake into her mouth.



Lesley Paterson during the 2012 ITU triathlon elite women's race in Birmingham, Alabama, in 2012. Photograph: Kevin C Cox/Getty Images

She admits that, for good or bad, she has hardly ever met anyone the same as her. "My husband calls it a feralness, like a 'Don't mess with me' thing. Nice on the outside, but there's a little undercurrent. I will do literally anything to make what I want happen.

"I don't mean in a bad way. I won't murder someone or be horrible to someone, but if it means getting up at 2am to fit it in, that's what I'll do." She again quotes her husband, Simon Marshall, a psychology professor and now her partner in writing. "He says I'm like one of those toys you wind up and point in a direction and it just goes. I've always been like that. My mum said I came out of the womb running. I've always been so driven. Everyone criticises me for it or has done in the past, like: you're so intense, or you're so obsessive. But this is who I am!"

At times, she says, her friends have wanted to stage interventions. What does that involve? "Settling down, being more normal, more balanced. I fucking hate that word. *Balanced!* What does that even mean? Because I'm so driven, my biggest fear is that I'm selfish, but you have to be selfish to be the best in the world."

Paterson, 42, grew up in Stirling. She was one of four siblings born to a sporty surveyor father and an artsy hotel manager mother. By seven, she spent her Saturday playing rugby for Stirling County in the morning and doing ballet in the afternoon. Of course, Paterson being Paterson, she didn't merely dabble.

She remembers holding her father's hand as they watched her brother on the rugby pitch. "I said: 'Dad, that looks a lot of fun. I want to do that. There's mud, there's boys, I get to beat up on them – I want to have a go.' And he's like: 'Yeah, but you'd be the only girl,' and I said: 'I don't care – I want to have a go.'" Was she tough? "I was really tough, because I was the youngest of four and my brother was the next up and he used to beat the shit out of me."

Her father took her to practice; she impressed and won a place in the team, playing at scrum half and inside centre. "I loved it. I was the ducker and diver, in and out of rucks. I was quick and nimble and dynamic. I would say that's my personality – dynamic. We played all over Scotland. I was the captain and only girl in the league. We ended up winning the Scottish championships when I was 10." She tells the story as if there is nothing remarkable about it.



A scene from All Quiet on the Western Front. Photograph: Netflix

After rugby, she would turn up at ballet with muddy knees. One of her sisters went on to become a professional baller dancer. Was Paterson as good as her? “I’d say yes. To be honest, anything I turn my hand to I work harder than anybody else, so I’m always going to be better than them.”

She had to stop playing rugby at 12 because it was regarded as unsafe to play with boys and there was no girls’ team. Paterson was distraught, but then her father introduced her to fell running. It was tough and dirty and she loved it every bit as much as rugby. Paterson had started to feel alienated from her peers, particularly girls. Running with her father and his friends gave her something different. “I find incredible solace in the land. Running through the hills in Scotland was super-poetic to me. It made me feel special, like I was experiencing something no one my age was. I wasn’t interested in what young people were doing. I didn’t want to get drunk, I didn’t want to go shopping.”

When she was 13, her father introduced her to the local triathlon club. “It was fucking awesome,” she says. Paterson is not only one of life’s great achievers; she is also one of life’s great swearers. “I’d go out on these 50-mile bike rides when I was 14 years old with a bunch of plumbers, welders and builders. I just loved that. If you don’t keep up you’re dropped. Tough shit.” And, of course, she soon outpedalled them. By 15, she was representing Scotland in the triathlon, and then Great Britain. In endurance races, power-to-weight ratio is more important than overall strength, which is why she could often beat the best men.

She was on a high. Then, in her late teens, she fell to Earth. A technical change in triathlon rules meant that competitors had to be top swimmers to stand a chance of winning. As swimming was her weakest discipline of the three (cycling and running are the others), she was done for. Paterson missed out on the 2002 Commonwealth Games and retired. She began to loathe triathlon with the same passion she had loved it. “I swore that I would never do another triathlon as long as I lived.”

That was when she started her second life. Paterson was 21 by this point; she had graduated in drama from Loughborough University, met Marshall and got married. They moved to California, where Marshall, who is 10 years older, had got a job. She did an MA in theatre, alongside any number

of odd jobs from working on a production line with ex-cons to flogging ice-cream, and spent three years trying to make it as an actor. The closest she got to success was starring in a [video for the David Gray song Alibi](#).



‘The people I’m meeting right now! It’s bananas.’ Photograph: Graeme Robertson/The Guardian

She rethinks what she said earlier about being good at anything she turns her hand to. Actually, she says, she was a hopeless actor. “I’m also really shit at things that involve attention to detail and I’ve not got a lot of patience. I think I’d be a shit mother,” she says chomping on another piece of cake.

By her mid-20s, she had discovered what she really wanted to do – write and produce movies. She teamed up with Stokell, a former journalist, to write screenplays. Both of them adored the German anti-war novel [All Quiet on the Western Front](#), written by Erich Maria Remarque and published in 1928. “The theme of the betrayal of the youthful generation meant a lot to me,” she says. “And my personality has always been that fight against the upper brass. I’m for the everyman. I’m a lefty.” They took out an option on the book.

Soon after, Paterson's third life started. She was 27 and visiting her parents in Scotland. She had kept fit since retiring from triathlon and no longer felt so negative about the event. She decided to enter the Scottish championships for the fun of it – and won. Then she discovered a new form of triathlon, Xterra, which involved running and cycling in rough terrain. It was perfect for her. In 2011, at 31, she won the first of her five world championships.

It wasn't a straightforward victory. She finished the swim in pole position only to find her bike had a flat tyre. "I was like: 'Are you fucking kidding me? I'm in the world championships, this is my best chance ever to win and I've got a flat tyre!'" That was a pivotal moment in my life. It was like: what do you do with that obstacle? Do you give up, or say: 'I'm going to use that and just go for it'?" She went for it, made up six minutes against the leader in the 10k run and, against the odds, won.

Meanwhile, she and Stokell were still hoping to get the film made. But there were endless setbacks. Daniel Radcliffe said he would love to be in it, but there was no money. In fact, there was minus money. "I mean, we had people go to jail. That's how bad it got." And still they kept going. Did it become a joke? "It did to everybody else, but not to us." Paterson used the \$20,000 prize money for winning her first world championship to renew their option on the film.

In 2012, she won two world titles. Again, the prize money was used to keep the dream alive. But, in 2013, she contracted Lyme disease and was bedridden for six months. As she struggled with her health, money got tighter and tighter. By 2015, she was well again, the option was up for renewal and she was desperate for dosh. "I thought: right, the field isn't super-duper-strong. I can probably do quite well."





Paterson during the Xterra Nationals triathlon in Utah in Sept 2011.  
Photograph: Jim Urquhart/AP

In off-road triathlons, competitors ride the course in advance, so they know the terrain. In her pre-ride, she broke her shoulder. “I didn’t know it was broken, but I couldn’t lift it up. I had this big chat with Simon, like: ‘What the fuck are we going to do?’” By now, Marshall, who co-wrote the sports psychology book *The Brave Athlete: Calm the F\*ck Down and Rise to the Occasion* with Paterson, was also helping with the script for *All Quiet*. “How am I going to swim, how am I going to hold on to the bike? So I tested it on the bike and I could kind of prop my hand up on the bar. Running was easy. Swimming? Nah, not a chance in hell. He’s like: ‘Well, you’re really good at the one-arm drill. And I thought: ‘You’re right, and I’ve got a good kick, and I think I can get through this with one arm – it’s only a mile.’ So I started, and I took a lot of painkillers.”

When she came out of the water, she was 12 minutes behind the leader; by the end of the bike ride, she was in second place. Eventually, she won the race. The \$6,500 prize money was again put to renewing the option, which cost between \$10,000 and \$15,000 a year.

In 2018, she won two more world titles, with the winnings again used to keep the film alive. She and Marshall also remortgaged their house. All in

all, they spent about \$200,000 over 16 years to maintain the option. Finally, in 2020, it was announced that *All Quiet on the Western Front* was going into production as a Netflix original film; it would be made in the German language and directed by Berger. It premiered at the Toronto film festival last September and launched on Netflix the month after. By the time it came out, with the war in Ukraine raging, this hellish vision of life and death in the trenches felt extraordinarily resonant.

Paterson says she knew all those years ago this was going to be her way into the film world. And so it has proved. “The people I’m meeting right now! It’s bananas,” she says. “I’m meeting Spielberg.”



Ian Stokell, *All Quiet* star Felix Kammerer and Lesley Paterson at a Netflix event in 2022. Photograph: Vivien Killilea/Getty for Netflix

What opportunities does she hope *All Quiet*’s success has opened up for her? “My ability to get in front of people and to be able to sell myself, but in the nicest way. To say to people: ‘You want to work with me because I’m going to work harder than anybody else and I’ve got great ideas.’” Her only disappointment is that Marshall didn’t get a joint screenwriting credit. Is he upset? “Yes, in the nicest way, because he’s such a lovely man. It’s hard for him.” As for Stokell, she no longer writes with him. “I’ve never argued as much with anyone as I have done with him. But he’s like a brother to me

and we're the best of friends now." So much so that he is currently living with Paterson and Marshall.

She insists this is just the start of her film career, with her and Marshall as a writer/producer double act. Paterson hopes a psychological thriller they wrote together will be shot in the Highlands later this year. Has she got the money? "A little bit. I'm looking for more."

As she polishes off the final piece of cake, I remind her of the interview 11 years ago when she said she was planning to win an Oscar next. She laughs. "It's ridiculous," she says. "Ridiculous." Does she remember saying it? "Oh yes." Was it a throwaway comment? "No," she says. "Deep down, I really did believe it."

*All Quiet on the Western Front is available to stream on Netflix*

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## [Rihanna](#)

### [Review](#)

# Rihanna's Super Bowl half-time show: a welcome return for pop's relaxed queen

The star zipped through her many hits with ease at her first show in four years, but there was a much-needed electricity missing



Rihanna performs during halftime of Super Bowl LVII. Photograph: Caroline Brehman/EPA



[Adrian Horton](#)

[@adrian\\_horton](#)

Sun 12 Feb 2023 22.31 EST Last modified on Mon 13 Feb 2023 09.27 EST

Four years since her last live performance, seven since her last studio album, Rihanna wasted no time to make a statement during her return to the stage at the [Super Bowl](#) half-time show. There was no entrance montage to her set, no musical build-up; we opened close up on Rihanna's face, chin down as if readying for battle, her presence after years of pop music absentia an exclamation point unto itself. Dressed in a fittingly bold red suit, the Barbadian singer commanded a floating stage perched scarily high above the field, launched into a hard kickoff of her discography with Bitch Better Have My Money, and with one sweep of her hand over her belly, seemingly announced her second pregnancy just nine months after the birth of her son.

Such is the power of Rihanna, a mega-celebrity whose charisma and famously relaxed charm (and successful fashion and beauty businesses) have carried her through a long musical hiatus and at times overshadowed her extensive catalog of hits. Her halftime show capitalized on her reputation as being unbothered and effortlessly cool – no musical guest, barely any choreography, no stress or strenuousness, a possible huge pop

culture news drop as a casual aside. (Her publicist has since confirmed the pregnancy.) At times she seemed a half beat behind her army of white-clad, hard-elbowed backup dancers. She floated, at certain points literally (and seemingly without fear of heights) above the expectations of an all-gas, no-brakes half-time show, with a detachment that could read as admirable self-possession or as frustrating boredom.

Which doesn't really matter – [Rihanna](#) is an artist who understands the power of her presence, both in seriousness (how a strut on stage counts as entertainment unto itself) and as a bit (she at one point fielded a makeup compact from a backup dancer, a nod to Twitter jokes about her turning the show into a Fenty ad). Rihanna's catalog is so extensive – she has 14 number one hits, the fourth most of all time – that any setlist (and there were 39 of them, according to her press conference) will be on some level a letdown. The final product served as a reminder of just how many immediately recognizable, still banging songs Rihanna delivered between the years 2007 and 2016, and also as an underwhelming, almost too-comfortable return to the musical spotlight.



Photograph: Dave Shopland/Rex/Shutterstock

By the laws of time and a 13-minute set, there were some disappointing exclusions (nothing from Anti other than Work? No SOS?), but Rihanna's



set powered through many of the hits – Where Have You Been All My Life, Only Girl in the World, We Found Love, Rude Boy inflected with the saucy, definitely not for family-friendly television S&M, Cake mixed in with Pour It Up. Her takeover of Kanye’s All of the Lights, as if the rapper weren’t even on the track, was a high point of undeniable energy and cultural power – an reminder, in just under 10 minutes, that Rihanna has *so many good songs*.

So many, and sung (or inflected on top of a backing track) flawlessly enough, to essentially let the numbers carry the performance for her. The singer committed to a minimal amount of choreography, at times barely moving or assuming the role of commander of her impeccable dancers. The middle section, zooming through later-era hits such as Work or DJ Khaled’s Wild Thoughts, had the impression of an afterthought – Rihanna giving the bare minimum, commanding the world’s attention with a shrug. Whether true or not, it works with her image as a relaxed queen after years of nearly unmatched pop music grinding (in the eight years between 2005 and 2012, she released seven albums). But it’s not necessarily the energy one expects from a Super Bowl performance, where performers such as The Weeknd in 2021, or Jennifer Lopez and Shakira in 2020, meet the pressure of the spotlight with intense, clear perfectionism.

Still, the journey ended on a high built on another high: the nostalgic reassurances of Umbrella, sung with a standing mic and dramatic red cape as Rihanna rose once again on her freakily high floating stage, and a full-belt version of Diamonds. That stage, wired to somewhere beyond our view, was visibly shaking during the final number, and yet still Rihanna seemed unbothered. It was a fitting final note for a set that relied more on star power than delivery - alone in the sky, fireworks overhead and surrounded by a sea of cell phone lights, Rihanna was above it all.

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## Movies

# Super Bowl 2023: the biggest new movie trailers

From Scream VI to Fast X, the most expensive night of the year for new ads saw a string of enticing new trailers



A still from Scream VI. Photograph: Photo Credit: Philippe Bossé/Philippe Bossé





[Benjamin Lee](#)

Sun 12 Feb 2023 22.54 EST Last modified on Mon 13 Feb 2023 10.02 EST

## **Dungeons and Dragons: Honor Among Thieves**

The resurgence in popularity of Dungeons and Dragons, and role-playing board games in general, meant that a tussle broke out over who owned the rights to bring it to screen with Paramount ultimately winning out. It's not the first time someone has tried although for those who endured 2000's reviled adaptation starring Jeremy Irons and Thora Birch, they might choose to pretend that it is. This one looks to be very much made from the Guardians of the Galaxy template – old rock music, raucous tone, wink-wink humour – which has, admittedly, started to get a little tired in recent years but the presence of Hugh Grant is enough to keep one at least mildly curious.

## **Scream VI**

It's been quite the journey for the Scream franchise in the last decade and change. The fourth instalment was such a box office flub that an entire

planned trilogy was canned, leading to the slasher moving to television for a series that barely anyone even knew existed. After that was rebooted to even lesser fanfare and rights moved to Paramount, it was then announced that it would return to the big screen, a move seen as predictable in the current oversaturated horror landscape yet unnecessary. But last year's *Scream* then became a surprise smash, making \$140m worldwide and electrifying a new, younger fanbase, and so we're now at a place where *Scream VI* is being given the full blockbuster treatment: 3D and 4DX screenings, a bloated two hour plus runtime, countless teaser posters and that big game spot. It shows us a bit more of what we've seen already: the gang is now in New York, fan favourite Hayden Panettiere is back and there's a precarious extended setpiece involving a ladder. New York, new rules, new franchise to run into the ground.

## **Fast X**

The 10th *Fast and Furious* film (11th if we're counting spin-off *Hobbs and Shaw*) is also the fifth most expensive film ever made with reports suggesting a budget of \$340m, not too shabby given how the series was seen as dead in the water way back when. It's now it's one of the most extravagant franchises we have, with the 10th adding Brie Larson, Jason Momoa and Rita Moreno (!) to join returning cast members such as Helen Mirren, Charlize Theron and Cardi B, and the novelty this time around is that it'll be the first F&F film to feature electric cars. Other than that our first real look shows more of the same: gravitationally impossible stunts, gravelly voiced threats and more talk of the importance of family than an episode of *Love Island*.

## **Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania**

Technically not a trailer for the latest Marvel release *Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania* but a branded tie-in, this brief, nay pointless, spot sees Paul Rudd's miniature superhero feel judged for drinking a beer by an actual ant. But it turns out his bottle of Heineken is actually of the zero

alcohol variety which, if the ant had actually tried it, would actually be reason for more judgment...

## 65

It's turning out to be a big old year for four-beers-in B-movies, as shown already by M3gan and Plane, and later this month with the self-explanatory Cocaine Bear but a few weeks after that, we'll get the great pleasure of watching the often rather self-serious Adam Driver tackle dinosaurs in the nutso-looking thriller 65. He plays a pilot who crash-lands on Earth but somehow it's 65 million years ago so things go south real fast. Please let him punch a dinosaur in the face, please.

## The Flash

Finally, the superhero film that we thought might never come out seems as if it is actually coming out. Thanks to the increasingly worrying and menacing behaviour of star Ezra Miller, The Flash had been surrounded with question marks. Would it get re-edited? Would it be recast? Would it be thrown away? But with the actor seeking help for their problems, the DC publicity machine is in full flow and our, ahem, flashy first look is now here. As we already knew, it's a film heavily in debt to the most recent Spider-Man movie, bringing together Batmans past and present but whether people are ready to forgive Miller and make it an equal-sized hit remains to be seen.

## Transformers: Rise of the Beasts

With Paramount riding high still from the success of the jumpstarted Scream and Top Gun franchises, it makes natural sense that the studio's biggest ever series would return. From the looks of this new tease of the new Transformers film, the next chapter appears to be closer to Bumblebee, the spin-off that didn't make much money but found its audience over time. It stars Anthony Ramos in what seems to be a more contained character-led

story, which given the wild excess of the franchise's lowest moments, is not a bad thing.

## **Creed III**

The third instalment in one of the only current franchises that's yet to put a foot wrong, Creed III brings star Michael B Jordan behind the camera, acting as both lead and director. He's up against Jonathan Majors, also on bad guy duty in Ant-Man 3 this season, and early word suggests test screenings have been going remarkably well. There's no Stallone this time around, and early word also suggests he's not best pleased about that, but hopes are high for another knockout.

## **Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny**

A closer look here at Harrison Ford and his creepily de-aged face for the new Indiana Jones movie, a sequel hoping to undo the damage that Kingdom of the Crystal Skull allegedly did (\*whispers\* it really wasn't that bad). We also get more of new villain Mads Mikkelsen and sidekick Phoebe Waller-Bridge. But can a Spielberg-free Indiana Jones (from James Mangold) do the job?

## **Air**

Ben Affleck and Matt Damon back together after 2021's cruelly under-seen The Last Duel to tell the story of how Nike's Air Jordans changed a number of games. It has a nice old-fashioned robustness to it, from its starry cast to its underdog narrative and should prove to be a nice early summer treat when it hits cinemas in April.



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

# A new start after 60: at 63 I finally paid off my debts – and ditched the credit card

After overcoming her addiction to drinks and drugs, Suzy Morrison realised she also had an unhealthy relationship with money. Two years later she was solvent – for the first time in her life



Suzy Morrison ... ‘I couldn’t keep hold of money. I never learned how to save.’ Photograph: Supplied image

[Paula Cocozza](#)

[@CocozzaPaula](#)

Mon 13 Feb 2023 02.00 ESTLast modified on Mon 13 Feb 2023 04.35 EST

As a child, Suzy Morrison eyed her father’s pay packets. He worked in the woollen mill in Milton, New Zealand, and each week he handed Morrison’s

mother a plump manila packet. “I was very interested in that envelope,” Morrison says.

Nothing was said about the money, but sometimes while she tried to sleep Morrison heard arguments drift through the ceiling to her bedroom: her mother had spent too much. On those nights, while she lay anxiously listening, Morrison began to fear money, its secrecy and scarcity; and from those first kernels of fear grew decades of debt. She was 63 when she finally became solvent.

As a child, Morrison felt “deprived – because where was my ‘real mother’?” She had been adopted at 10 days old. Now, at 74, she looks back and sees that she “was really well cared for” by her adoptive parents. “But I was waiting all the time for my ‘real parents’ to come and get me.”

From the age of 15, she worked in a local diner, and there she waited again, for “a handsome prince” or a film-maker, because although she didn’t act, she hoped she might be “like those actresses who were discovered at the drugstore”.

Morrison was getting her own pay packet by then, “but I couldn’t keep hold of it. I could not,” she says. “I never learned how to save money.”

At 17, Morrison married a musician who looked after their finances. By 19, they had separated. She had begun “to have a problem with alcohol”. Over the years, she became addicted to other substances, including cannabis and opiates, somehow managing to hold down a job and raise two daughters while funding her dependency by selling drugs.

She entered a 12-step recovery programme in her late 30s. Life “began to transform” – she stopped using – but Morrison’s relationship to money did not.

Becoming easy in my skin feels like a radical act

“I thought: ‘When I earn more, I’ll be OK.’ But it didn’t work like that.” In her 40s, she returned to education, studying to become a social worker, then training as a counsellor. “But no matter what I earned,” she says, “I always spent a bit more.” She thinks now that she did this “to keep the shame and the embarrassment and the discomfort going”.

She was forever lending or borrowing 10 bucks. “I thought: ‘I’m just going to have to keep bullshitting my way through.’”

With alcohol and drugs, she had chosen a path of abstinence, but it is impossible to abstain from money. “I had to learn to be in a relationship with it,” she says.

She happened to be reading the self-help book *The Artist’s Way* by Julia Cameron “to help remove a block I could feel in me”. Reading the bibliography, she stumbled across another title by the same author, *Money Drunk, Money Sober*. With the help of friends, she began to follow its tips.

The book recommended attending Debtors Anonymous, another 12-step programme. By the time Morrison arrived at her first session in 2012, she was 61 and NZ\$15,000 in debt, the equivalent of about £7,600 at the time. She hates the word “budget” – which “clenches and feels like probation” – but in Debtors Anonymous she learned to make a spending plan.

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At 63, she cleared her credit card, and disposed of it. “I was solvent,” she says. “That was a really happy day.”

Now Morrison works as a counsellor, gives Addiction 101 workshops and [webinars](#), and supervises women who work helping addicts. She has learned to ask for a fair price for her services. “Before, I wouldn’t have been able to do that. Deep down, I felt unworthy, that I was lucky to have the work,” she says.

Changing her relationship with money has changed her relationship with herself, her sense of self-possession. “I’m at ease in my own skin. There’s none of that fraud or impostor thing. Becoming easy in my skin feels like a radical act,” she says. “So much time and money and energy are spent trying to convince us that we are never enough.”

Most of all, Morrison says, she continues to live out her belief in remaining “open and teachable”. It has taken years to build the “friendly relationship” with money that she now enjoys. But, she says, “I trust the timing. When the student is ready, the teacher appears.”

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

## 2023.02.13 - Opinion

- Putin has unleashed private armies on Ukraine – and a man who could become a dangerous rival
- The Tories have revealed their battle plan for a new kind of class war
- Feeling guilty for putting your baby in nursery? That suits the government just fine
- Is commuting good for you? I miss the break between work and home

## [OpinionRussia](#)

# Putin has unleashed private armies on Ukraine – and a man who could become a dangerous rival

[Samantha de BERNER](#)



Is Yevgeny Prigozhin, head of the notorious Wagner group, a Kremlin-sanctioned bogeyman or a real threat to the president?



‘In the last few months, Yevgeny Prigozhin has taken on prerogatives normally reserved for the president himself.’ Prigozhin, centre, at a ceremony for a Wagner Group mercenary in Volgograd, Russia, September 2022. Photograph: Sipa US/Alamy

Mon 13 Feb 2023 01.00 ESTLast modified on Mon 13 Feb 2023 13.59 EST

The [rise of Yevgeny Prigozhin](#), a Russian oligarch, Putin confidant and head of the notorious Wagner private military company, is a sign of the erosion of the rule of law in Russia. It shows that the state is willing to tolerate extreme, unaccountable violence as long as it serves its interests. This could ultimately become a threat to the regime itself.

Prigozhin is a private citizen who was previously a restaurant magnate – known as “[Putin’s chef](#)” due to the president’s patronage of his restaurants and catering firms. But at some point in 2014, he co-founded the Wagner Group along with former Russian military personnel, and has since become a major player in Russia’s military campaign in Ukraine.

In the last few months he has taken on prerogatives normally reserved for senior government officials or the president himself. And yet he has no official legal function either in the government or the military – and the

Wagner company itself is technically illegal as private military companies are outlawed in [Russia](#).

When Prigozhin began recruiting for soldiers in [Russian prisons](#) in the late summer of 2022, offering them a pardon in exchange for six months' service in Ukraine, Russian lawmakers were unable to explain on what legal basis he was operating. [Under Russian law](#), only the president can pardon convicted felons, and freeing them before the end of their term requires a drawn-out legal process. However, in late January, after the first batch of Wagner convict soldiers were sent back into society as free men, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov stated that the pardons were [completely legal](#), but that some decrees were kept secret.

Many assume that the Kremlin allows Prigozhin to operate in a legal shadowland so that it can wash its hands of Wagner's actions should they become too extreme. An unofficial army offers the regular army an opportunity to deny responsibility for excessive losses in men or territory, or in an instance where it faces allegations of war crimes in the field. This implies a parallel army, ready to accept its role as a subordinate or scapegoat.



‘Yevgeny Prigozhin was known as ‘Putin’s chef’ due to the president’s patronage of his restaurants and catering firms.’ Prigozhin (left) with Putin

in Moscow, November 2011. Photograph: Reuters

Prigozhin, however, has shown signs that he won't accept a purely subordinate role. He openly criticises and challenges state officials, including top generals. And the ministry of defence and Wagner have openly contradicted each other in claiming responsibility for recent Russian gains in Donbas. Prigozhin recently announced he was [no longer recruiting in prisons](#). Although he claims that this is because he now has enough men, it could be a sign that the defence ministry is trying to clip his wings.

Prigozhin recently asked the [Russian parliament](#) to introduce changes to the law to make criticism of his convict soldiers illegal. The Duma speaker responded by asking the parliamentary security and defence committee to study the question. If the requested changes are made, this could seriously complicate the prosecution of former convict soldiers for any new crimes. By giving such a free rein to Prigozhin, the Kremlin is creating a state-sanctioned culture of criminal violence.

Even before last year's invasion of Ukraine, Wagner [had a reputation for](#) summary murders, rape and extreme violence. A dire recent example of this was the filmed sledgehammer killing of a Wagner deserter from Ukraine, who had been returned to Russia in a prisoner exchange. Prigozhin [praised the killing](#) and Peskov stated that the murder [was not government business](#). When the state openly accepts that it no longer holds the monopoly of the use of force, it is sending one of two messages: state and criminal violence have blurred into one, or else it is no longer in control.

Other private armies are also on the rise. Defence minister [Sergei Shoigu's](#) private army, Patriot, has been operating in Ukraine since 2014, and oligarch Gennady Timchenko's private army, [Redut](#), originally created to protect his company's gas field, is also present in Ukraine. Not to mention the Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov's army. On 7 February the gas giant Gazprom announced [it was creating](#) its own private military company.

Wagner is the most prominent, with an estimated 50,000 members operating in Ukraine alone, and the only one led by an operator who is behaving more and more like someone seeking real political influence; Prigozhin, indeed, is sometimes touted as a [successor to Putin](#). In one of his [latest video](#)

[appearances](#), he addresses the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, from the cockpit of an Su-24 fighter-bomber, challenging him to a duel in the skies in exchange for territory in Ukraine. This suggests that Prigozhin not only considers himself a peer of Zelenskiy, but has scant regard for diplomatic protocol in international relations, under which only another head of state should address his or her counterpart directly.

I have spoken, off the record, to a former KGB officer and a Russian oligarch, who both maintain that Prigozhin is intentionally hyped up as a bogeyman, to be presented to Russian audiences who fantasise about regime change. The warning is clear: if Putin goes, things could be worse.

Whether or not Prigozhin is a puppet whose strings can be cut at Putin's will is ultimately irrelevant. Criminal violence is now tolerated and is becoming institutionalised in Russia. For now, Putin still seems to be in control. But by delegating the use of force to non-state actors, he is giving them a taste of power that could become unmanageable the day the regime shows signs of weakness. The world needs to be prepared for the chaos that will ensue.

- Samantha de BERNIERE is an associate fellow in the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House and a political commentator on LCI television in France



## [Opinion](#)Conservatives

# The Tories have revealed their battle plan for a new kind of class war

[Owen Jones](#)



The promotion of Lee Anderson reveals a lot about who is and who isn't considered working class in Britain





‘Lee Anderson’s status is the product of a redefinition of class – on cultural rather than economic lines.’ Photograph: UK Parliament/Jessica Taylor/PA

Mon 13 Feb 2023 02.00 EST Last modified on Mon 13 Feb 2023 04.44 EST

Boris Johnson’s Brexit has been a dismal failure, heralding only falling investment and stagnant growth. If you want an admission of this truth, look no further than Saturday’s revelation of a secretive, two-day [cross-party summit](#) of remainers and leavers that took place last week in a grand Oxfordshire retreat to address this national fiasco.

But let’s not forget who the victims are here: as in all crises, it is the working class who suffer the most from our politicians’ malice – the same people Tory Brexiteers deceitfully claimed to champion, but know nothing about.

Indeed, in his younger years, our current prime minister was honest about the gilded circles he inhabited. “I have friends who are aristocrats, I have friends who are upper class,” said a youthful [Rishi Sunak](#) in a BBC documentary recorded in 2001. “I have friends who are working class ... Well, not working class.” He spluttered it out, as though the very notion was absurd. In an unequal society profoundly segregated by class, privileged people see the lives of most of the population as exotic and alien:

stereotypes emerge, after all, because supposed fellow citizens inhabit different worlds.

This brings us to the recent appointment of Tory MP [Lee Anderson](#) as the party's vice-chair. Anderson has made his name by making crude and provocative public interventions, such as saying he would boycott watching the England football team because of the anti-racist gesture taken by its players, or supporting the return of the death penalty.

In recent years, media outlets and politicians have treated the likes of Anderson as emblematic of working-class voters: a category they often see as, to be blunt, a white man in his 50s or 60s with a Midlands accent and reactionary opinions. Rishi Sunak, who enjoys a family fortune twice that of the king, presumably believes that Anderson represents a direct hotline to working-class England. But the new Tory vice-chair also serves another function: to portray opponents of rightwing dogma as out-of-touch metropolitan elitists.

Rightwingers masquerading as tribunes of the people are nothing new, but as it's revealed that Tory ministers are splashing public cash on [luxury hotels, chauffeurs and travel](#), it looks increasingly beyond parody.

There has been in recent times a deliberate attempt to muddy public understanding of what social class means. For instance, it's notable that commentators often seem to consider Anderson as some kind of authentic voice of "ordinary" people, but not, say, the RMT's Mick Lynch, another white man of a similar age. Why? Because Lynch has a subversive conception of class, whereby those without wealth or power can pursue their interests through collective action. Anderson's status, on the other hand, is the product of a redefinition of class – on cultural rather than economic lines. For the new right, to be working class doesn't mean having nothing but your labour to sell, but being opposed to rootless, urban progressives who favour immigration, multiculturalism and "wokery".

The result is that younger generations have been effectively excluded from the category of working class. This is even though they have a very good claim to it. After all, many are in low-paid and insecure jobs, they own

precious little capital – home ownership has collapsed among younger adults – and have been at the sharp end of austerity.

At the same time, they are more socially progressive than any previous generation – from immigration to LGBTQ rights – and are far more likely than their grandparents to have grown up with migrants, people of colour, or gay or transgender children. It is notable that most of those judged to be working class by pollsters and then aged under 35 [voted for remain in 2016](#). Yet they are rarely portrayed in Britain as members of the working class. Why?

A rightwing media ecosystem has much to do with it: many newspapers barely conceal their contempt for younger people, denouncing them as entitled snowflakes. There are enough unrepresentative, rightwing millennial provocateurs to sustain this image, too. According to the government's own statistics, the national media is the [second most socially exclusive profession](#) after medicine, barring entry to most ordinary younger Britons and stripping media coverage of their lived experience.

As for the world of politics: well, the Tories have simply spent years calculating they don't need the votes of the young, relying on older voters to make up for their deficit among the under-40s. [Labour](#), meanwhile, treats the young as expendable voting fodder who are disproportionately concentrated in urban seats where the party racks up huge majorities anyway. One of the reasons Labour's support in so-called red wall seats has been depleted is many younger voters have left small towns for urban constituencies, taking their Labour votes with them. As such, younger voters are not regarded as marginal voters who need to be courted, and are ignored by both main parties.

But while it has been possible until now to marginalise this younger working class, a reckoning may be coming. Recent research found that millennials have defied the political trajectory of previous generations by refusing to shift right as they age. This means the Tories may find they are [running out of demographic road](#). And while they are set to play a pivotal role in delivering what looks like a Labour victory at the next general

election, Keir Starmer may find these voters are far from docile when he is in office.

They have, after all, suffered most from the Tories' ruinous rule, and if the multiple injustices they face – stagnating living standards, a lack of secure, well-paid work and an ever more suffocating housing crisis – are not addressed, they may well force the next government to listen.

Britain's new working class has been silenced, but perhaps not for much longer.

- Owen Jones is a Guardian columnist

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## [Republic of Parenthood](#)Childcare

# Feeling guilty for putting your baby in nursery? That suits the government just fine

[Rhianon Lucy Cosslett](#)



We need to start thinking in Britain of paid childcare as a life-enriching right, not a slightly uncomfortable necessity



‘The educational and social benefits of childcare are rarely highlighted.’  
Photograph: Alex Hinds/Alamy

Mon 13 Feb 2023 03.00 EST Last modified on Mon 13 Feb 2023 11.57 EST

In the end, it was Mariah who did it. I had been trying so hard not to cry, and in fact was feeling quite cheerful about the baby starting nursery and me reclaiming some precious time, which I am mostly planning to use by lying on the floor. Besides, the bairn is a socialite, so is thrilled to be hanging out with so many other babies. The first day of settling in went well. I was feeling buoyed. Until [Always Be My Baby](#) came on, that is.

I wept. People said I would, but the force of the emotion surprised me. “It can be hard for the mums,” the kindly staff had said. You’re telling me. I thought I had got used to the mixed emotions that come with parenthood. I hadn’t foreseen bawling at 90s pop hits. But I know that some songs will always be different for me now. They’ll come on in shops when I am 50 or 60 or 70 and hit me with the full force of how it feels to love him and miss him at all the ages he has ever been.

A week earlier I had gone to Foyles to sign some books, and while I was waiting I asked a staff member in the children’s section for a book on separation anxiety. The book she brought me was *Owl Babies*, a classic of

decades' standing. In it, the baby owls wake up to find their mother gone. They suspect she is hunting for food for them, but still, they are scared ("I want my mummy!" is the constant refrain). Of course, she comes back. I almost started crying right there in the bookshop.

The question is, who has the separation anxiety: me or the baby? I said goodbye (you must always say goodbye, they say, rather than slipping out), waited in reception until the allotted 20 minutes were up, and returned to discover that he had been fine. This was a fact that I found both cheering and faintly disappointing. When he had a meltdown the next day, I felt that same mix in reverse: cheered that he does in fact need me, disappointed that I didn't get to go and have a coffee on my own.

"Mummy's back, Mummy always comes back," I say to him. I think he knows it, because he has, after that one big cry, settled remarkably quickly. They do it very slowly at his nursery, so for the first four days I didn't make it past reception. Now, when I drop him off, he barely looks at me. He has a day of playing ahead of him.

Some people can be judgmental about childcare, even now, when both parents almost always need to work outside the home to support their children. There seems to be this persistent idea that it's always best for every child to be at home with their mother. The educational and social benefits of childcare are rarely highlighted. On the baby's first day, a staff member dressed as a dragon and danced for the babies to celebrate the lunar new year. I am simply never going to do that. Aside from it possibly being culturally insensitive, I am too tired.

I suspect the notion that nursery is something families pay for when they have no choice comes from the fact that the British state still heavily relies on the unpaid labour of mothers to keep the show running: this is so deeply ingrained that paid childcare is barely ever thought of as a right, more a slightly uncomfortable necessity. In other countries, people feel entitled to it in a way many don't here, because lots of us feel too guilt-tripped. It's a form of ambient gaslighting, really, and it works. Women cobble together the patchy hours (often with part-time work or help from relatives), and their careers pay a price. They are giving so much, yet there's a niggling notion that it still falls short. It can feel like playing a doomed game of



Tetris, in which the different components of your life don't fit together properly, so there's always a little gap you feel guilty about.

(Despite suggestions the government [might increase its childcare offer](#) in England, I have little faith that anything it implements will be radical enough to drastically improve affordability and availability.)

In my case, the guilt thankfully didn't last. But I am lucky: he will go for two and a half days a week, and besides, I have been too ill to feel overly upset – we all caught a hideous cold the minute he enrolled, naturally. Still, it feels like a sea change. Suddenly, I have some time. It is a shock that I had not expected. As Rachel Cusk wrote: “I realise that I had accepted each stage of her dependence on me as a new and permanent reality, as if I were living in a house whose rooms were being painted and forgot that I ever had the luxury of their use. First one room and then another is given back to me.”

Once I have stopped sneezing, I tell myself that I will embrace the new spaces in my life. I will work, mostly, but I will also catch up on reading, I will see friends, I will swim. (I tell myself this, but if my first day of freedom is anything to go by, I will spend it doing things for him: babyproofing our home, and buying him little jumpers from charity shops.)

At the same time, I feel a tug of sadness that the days where the only space we needed was the size of a bed, lit by a lamp that shone through the endless night, with him at my breast; my body the border to his world and his to mine. And I will cry all over again.

## **What's working**

After resisting the dogma of baby-led weaning, the baby and I are finally at a place where we are comfortable with him handling and eating bigger bits of food. We arrived here thanks to the glory of the Melty Puff. Before I became a parent, I had assumed everyone was giving their baby cheesy Wotsits, but these are an apparently healthier alternative, designed for young kids. Though I know a couple of mums who overdid it on the wine



and ended up snaffling several packs of said puffs, I think I'll stick to my favourite brand of fluorescent crisp. Still, the baby is a fan.

## What's not

Sleep deprivation has reached a dangerous level, and something must be done. When I'm not fantasising about hiring an elite sleep trainer to do the dirty work for me, I'm imagining checking into a hotel – just for one sweet, blissful night. It used to be Claridges, or the St Pancras Renaissance Hotel, but now the Premier Inn next to McDonald's would do.

- Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett is a Guardian columnist and author of [The Year of the Cat](#)

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## [Opinion](#) **Commuting**

# Is commuting good for you? I miss the break between work and home

[Emma Beddington](#)



How do you switch off at the end of the day if there's no journey involved?  
Gardening? Sex? Crisps?



The experience of ‘rolelessness’ during the commute may create a mental space for ‘psychological role transition and recovery.’ Photograph: Tejas Sandhu/SOPA Images/REX/Shutterstock

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If you’re reading this standing in a stationary train’s vestibule, squeezed between a furtive flosser and someone eating a keto breakfast of hard-boiled eggs and sardines, while everyone listens to Jolyon on speakerphone review the new draft pitch deck, take heart: commuting is good for you.

It’s the second outing I have spotted for this argument. In 2021, the Harvard Business Review [asserted the value of commuting in setting and maintaining boundaries](#) between work and home selves, thus avoiding burnout. Now the concept is back, with US researchers [further exploring the role of the commute as a “liminal space”](#) that allows for psychological detachment and recovery from work. There are psychological as well as physical and temporal dimensions to the commute, they argue, and “the experience of rolelessness” during it may create a mental space for “psychological role transition and recovery”.

I’m not sure anyone on a (supply your preferred failing rail operator here) commuter service is now enjoying their “rolelessness” or experiencing

recovery. Think of all the proper therapy you could get for the price of a season ticket, for a start. Unsurprisingly, the researchers do note that on days when commutes were more stressful, participants “reported less psychological detachment from work and less relaxation”.

The soul suck is real: I saw a tweet last week from someone whose commute neighbour had clipped his fingernail on to her lap. Yet, there *is* something in this idea that commuting can be mentally beneficial. My past commutes have been a mixed bunch: the best was the Brussels tram stuffed with garrulous eccentrics (including one man who mused for 20 minutes about whether it would be possible to milk a rabbit). The absolute nadir was schlepping to Brentford with morning sickness; the sight of an Upper Crust can still make me heave.

Now I’m working from home I don’t stop working so much as lapse into blank staring. I used to walk the dog, but now he’s so old and baffled by his own limbs, he barely gets through the front door before demanding to go back inside. Instead, I move to the sofa for more motionless sitting, frequently ignoring the large, bright rectangle in the corner of the room in favour of the small, sweaty rectangle in my hand, rationalising that someone might need me urgently. No one ever needs me urgently, but I will continue queasily poking my phone, perhaps doing some light catastrophising as I brush my teeth, then falling asleep to dream of mistakes and lawsuits.

The bleed of work into not-work happens to everyone now that reminders are available in our pocket 24/7, but for homeworkers, especially, the blurred physical boundaries are bound to erode mental ones. [Right-to-disconnect campaigners](#) are valiantly trying to legislate around this and the wider expectation of workers being permanently available, but part of the problem is human nature, and that may be harder to address. I occasionally think longingly [about the TV series Severance](#), in which the characters’ work and home selves are completely separate, a switch in their surgically altered brains flipped by their creepy corporation employer in the lift. Admittedly, it’s not – spoiler alert – an unqualified success.

Perhaps a “temporal” liminal space does help. I asked how others wind down. Mostly it involved drinking. Other options included gardening,

knitting, snacks, gaming, piano, lying on the bed and moaning or watching men try out labour simulators on YouTube. A French person suggested a “*sieste*”, which I assume means sex. I’ve tried a couple of the suggestions. Alcohol: effective but probably unsustainable. Moaning: what I do all day. Gardening: at this time of year it’s just poking muddy sticks. Crisps are great – each crunch a tiny exhalation of stress – but I’m still looking.

We don’t need to commute, but wherever we work, we need a way to assert we are more than our jobs, more also than parents or partners or people with dishwashers to empty and bills to pay. What’s yours?

- Emma Beddington is a Guardian columnist

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## 2023.02.13 - Around the world

- [New Zealand Cyclone Gabrielle wreaks havoc as evacuations continue](#)
- [Middle East Israel to authorise nine 'wild' West Bank settlements](#)
- ['What shall we do?' Millions displaced in Turkey and Syria after earthquake](#)
- [Analysis Turkey earthquake death toll suggests lessons of 1999 were not learned](#)

## [New Zealand](#)

# Cyclone Gabrielle wreaks havoc across New Zealand's North Island as evacuations continue

Worst of the storm could coincide with Monday's midnight high tide, with people in some coastal communities and low-lying areas urged to leave



The effects of Cyclone Gabrielle at Mathesons Bay beach in Auckland on Monday, as parts of New Zealand's North Island were battered by high winds and rain. Photograph: Fiona Goodall/Getty Images

[Tess McClure](#) in Auckland

[@tessairini](#)

Mon 13 Feb 2023 00.47 ESTLast modified on Mon 13 Feb 2023 23.02 EST

New Zealand prime minister Chris Hipkins has warned the worst is yet to come as [Cyclone Gabrielle](#) sparks evacuations, rising flood waters and power outages across the North Island.

“Things are likely to get worse before they get better,” Hipkins said. “Extreme weather event has come on the back of extreme weather event.”

The cyclone has hit an already-waterlogged region, [much of it still recovering](#) from devastating flooding a fortnight ago.

Communities in coastal regions continued their evacuations on Monday, with concerns that a midnight high tide and storm surges would coincide with the worst of the storm. Hipkins warned communities not covered by evacuation orders to “be prepared, stay inside if you can, and have a plan in the event that you need to move”.

The low pressure weather system was creating storm surges – a phenomenon whereby overall sea levels rise, independent of wave height, inundating coastal areas.

New Zealand’s National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research (Niwa) announced a “record” storm surge of 0.7m, in addition to waves of up to 12m off the northern coast.

Mandatory evacuations were ordered along the entire eastern Bay of Plenty coastline – an area covering about 400 homes – as well as for 100 homes in the Whakatāne district in the Bay of Plenty region.

The Ōpōtiki district council incident controller, Gerard McCormack, told Radio New Zealand the worst of the cyclone was due to hit around the same time as high tide in the middle of the night.

“We’re expecting large sea swells, inundation. The rain is coming now,” he said.

'There will be destruction': Cyclone Gabrielle approaches New Zealand's North Island – video

Elsewhere, councils asked those in vulnerable areas to evacuate themselves. In the coastal city of Whangārei, the council urged residents of the central



business district to self-evacuate, saying the entire area was vulnerable to flooding.

By Monday afternoon, almost all of the top half of the North Island was covered by localised states of emergency including in [Auckland](#) – New Zealand’s largest city of 1.7 million people – as well as in Northland, Coromandel, Ōpōtiki, Whakatāne, Tairāwhiti and Hauraki.

About 46,000 homes, mostly in Northland, remained without power. Power companies said the conditions were highly challenging as the storm continued, with trees falling through lines and blocking roads. National forecaster MetService said it had broken its record for “red” weather warnings issued around the country, and wind gusts of 150-160km/h were recorded.

As evacuation centres prepared food and clothing packages on Monday afternoon, the government announced an extra \$11.5m in funding for cyclone relief – much of it to be distributed to community groups and providers, as well as food banks and disability services. Announcing the funds, Hipkins said 25,000 people already needed assistance with food, clothing, shelter, bedding and accommodation.

“Our social service agencies are stretched to capacity,” he said. “Many people just haven’t been able to catch a break ... People have lost their homes and their vehicles, families are facing additional challenges getting children back to school. And many families will be facing anxiety and distress.

“The need in the community is significant, and the effect of the repeated weather events has compounded that.”

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## Palestinian territories

# Israel to authorise nine ‘wild’ West Bank settlements

Security cabinet announces recognition of areas built without Israeli authorisation, after series of attacks in East Jerusalem



The Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, said on Sunday that he wanted to ‘strengthen settlements’, which are illegal under international law. Photograph: Reuters

*Agence France-Presse in Jerusalem*

Mon 13 Feb 2023 04.02 EST Last modified on Mon 13 Feb 2023 16.03 EST

Israel’s security cabinet has announced it will authorise nine settlements in the occupied West Bank after a series of attacks in East Jerusalem, including [one that killed three Israelis](#).

“In response to the murderous terrorist attacks in Jerusalem, the security cabinet decided unanimously to authorise nine communities in Judea and

Samaria,” the office of the prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, said in a statement on Sunday that included the name [Israel](#) uses for the West Bank.

“These communities have existed for many years, some have existed for decades,” it said.

The so-called “wild” settlements were built without authorisation from the Israeli government.

“The civil administration higher planning committee will be convened in the coming days to approve the construction of new residential units in existing communities in Judea and Samaria,” the statement said.

It said the “security cabinet had made a series of additional decisions in the framework of the determined fight against terrorism” including strengthening security forces in Jerusalem.

Netanyahu said earlier on Sunday during a meeting of his government that he wanted to “strengthen settlements”, which are illegal under international law.

More than 475,000 Israelis live in settlements in the West Bank, which is home to 2.8 million Palestinians.

Netanyahu also announced that his government wanted to submit legislation to parliament this week to revoke the Israeli nationality of “terrorists”.

The measures apply to Israeli Arabs and Palestinians with resident status in East Jerusalem, part of the city annexed by Israel.

The announcements come amid an outbreak of Israeli-Palestinian violence.

A Palestinian killed three Israelis, including two children, in an attack on Friday in Ramot, a Jewish settlement neighbourhood in East Jerusalem, and Israeli forces killed a Palestinian teenager in a raid in the northern West Bank on Sunday.

The conflict has claimed the lives of at least 46 Palestinians since the beginning of the year, including combatants and civilians, nine Israeli civilians and one Ukrainian woman, according to an AFP count based on official Israeli and Palestinian sources.

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[Turkey-Syria earthquake 2023](#)

## ‘What shall we do?’ Millions displaced in Turkey and Syria after earthquake



People walk past a ruined building in Samandağ, Turkey. Photograph: Alessio Mamo/The Guardian

A week on, hundreds of thousands of people are sleeping out in the open, often in sub-zero cold

[Deniz Barış Narlı](#), [Ruth Michaelson](#) and [Lorenzo Tondo](#) in Adana

Sun 12 Feb 2023 13.29 EST Last modified on Sun 12 Feb 2023 16.22 EST

A week after two 7.8- and 7.6-magnitude earthquakes levelled swathes of southern [Turkey](#) and northern Syria, hundreds of thousands of people are sleeping in the open in often sub-zero conditions.

In Turkey's southern province of Hatay, one of the areas hardest hit by the quake and where some citizens said it took emergency teams days to arrive, many sleep in their cars or in makeshift tents under market stalls, with nowhere else to go.

In a speech last Wednesday at a tent city in Kahramanmaraş, close to the quake's epicentre, the president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, pledged that the state would provide immediate help to the displaced. Those whose homes were destroyed or who did not know if it was safe to return would be housed in hotels, he said. "We can never let our citizens stay on the street."





People displaced by the earthquake in a makeshift tent city near İskenderun.  
Photograph: Alessio Mamo/The Guardian

The vice-president, Fuat Oktay, said more than 1 million people were living in tent encampments. At night, the temperature dips to as low as -9C .

The situation is even worse in [Syria](#). “As many as 5.3 million people in Syria may have been left homeless by the earthquake,” the Syria representative of the UN high commissioner for refugees, Sivanka Dhanapala, told a press briefing. “That is a huge number and comes to a population already suffering mass displacement.”

In the Çukurova district of the Turkish city of Adana, volunteers distributed hot soup in what was previously an open-air market. Survivors clustered around a phone-charging unit.



People gather in front of a truck distributing food, clothes and other items in Samandağ. Photograph: Alessio Mamo/The Guardian

Sitting on the edge of a playground nearby, across from the tent she now calls home, Tülin Çiroğlu said she was grateful for the volunteers. “God bless our people. They offered food and blankets to everyone. They never left us hungry,” she said.

Çiroğlu, her husband and son initially sought refuge at a mosque in the days after the quakes. Despite little visible damage to their house, Çiroğlu said they were afraid to return, fearing it might collapse.

°I've been looking for a house for three days. I inquired about renting a home two days ago. But it was too expensive, we can't afford it, she said. Landlords were now demanding exorbitant rates, she added.

While touring ruined towns, Erdoğan doubled down on his pledge to rebuild swiftly. “We’ve planned to rebuild hundreds of thousands of [buildings](#),” he said during a visit to Diyarbakır, in the country’s east. “We will start taking concrete steps within a few weeks.”

Days earlier, he had promised that all of the destroyed buildings across a vast swath of southern Turkey would be rebuilt within a year, a pledge that appeared remote as officials struggle to comb through towering piles of rubble.



People displaced by the earthquake in front of destroyed buildings in Nurdağı. Photograph: Alessio Mamo/The Guardian



Avni Bulut was rescued alive from beneath a building after an earthquake struck the Turkish town of Varto in 1966. Fifty-seven years later, another earthquake had struck. He was now living in a tent with his family in Çukurova.

“Our conditions are good here. We have access to food, toilet, electricity. But I went to İskenderun two days ago to attend a funeral of a relative of mine who died in the earthquake. There were hardly any tents there,” he said.

“We would go if they said our house was safe. Otherwise, I don’t know what to do. We have no choice but to stay here. We just cannot afford to relocate. I have a child in Izmir, maybe I can make it there.”

Others said they would risk returning home even if their houses were dangerously damaged, simply because they had no other place to stay.



People try to get warm by a fire in a makeshift tent city near İskenderun. Photograph: Alessio Mamo/The Guardian

“We were not be able to stay in tents. It becomes cold at night. I have a little baby and he gets cold if we sleep in a tent. That’s why we had to return

home,” said Buse Ersoy, who has lived in her car and at relatives’ houses since the earthquake.

Ersoy remains unsure whether her home is secure, as emergency workers from Turkey’s disaster management agency AFAD are yet to inspect it. Her family said the elevator cables in her building had snapped and that several fractures were visible.

“What shall we do? We had nowhere to go. We had to go back to our house,” Ersoy said. She said her parents were having to sleep in a conference room with up to 25 other people in a hotel in Adana.

Officials and medics said 29,605 people had died in Turkey and 3,574 in Syria, bringing the confirmed total to 33,179. The UN aid chief Martin Griffiths said he expected the death toll to at least double.

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## [Turkey-Syria earthquake 2023](#)

### [Analysis](#)

# Turkey earthquake death toll suggests lessons of 1999 were not learned

[Bethan McKernan](#) Middle East correspondent

Stricter regulations were promised after quake two decades ago, but poor construction has played major role in latest disaster



People among the ruins of their collapsed apartment block after earthquake in Turkey in August 1999. Photograph: Staton R Winter/EPA

Sun 12 Feb 2023 10.43 ESTLast modified on Sun 12 Feb 2023 11.33 EST

In 1999, more than 17,000 people were [killed in an earthquake](#) near the Turkish city of Istanbul. In the aftermath, authorities promised stricter building regulations and introduced an “earthquake tax” aimed at improving preparedness in a country that sits on two major geological faultlines.

Ankara's slow response to the disaster, however, played a large part in bringing Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development party (AKP) to power: the newly formed party won elections in 2002 by an overwhelming majority, promising transparency and to rebuild the economy, ruined by a stock market crash.

Nearly 24 years later, after Monday's [even deadlier earthquake](#) and aftershocks, people across Turkey are searching not just for missing loved ones but also for answers.

After another quake in 2011 in which hundreds died, Erdoğan, then the prime minister, blamed poor construction for the high death toll, saying: "Municipalities, constructors and supervisors should now see that their negligence amounts to murder."

But with nearly 30,000 people now dead in [Turkey](#) alone – a number that continues to rise – and more than 1 million people left homeless, it is becoming clearer that endemic corruption and lax enforcement of building codes have exacerbated the crisis.

Erdoğan, now the president, made construction the engine of the Turkish economy; reliance on cheap foreign credit funded new motorways, hospitals and residential and commercial towers all over the country until the Turkish lira collapsed in 2018.

On paper, Turkish building safety standards are among the best in the world, and they are regularly updated with specific rules for earthquake-prone regions. Concrete must be reinforced with steel, and load-bearing walls and pillars must be distributed in such a way to avoid "pancaking", when floors stack up on each other after collapsing vertically.

But Turkish and international geologists, urban planners, architects and earthquake response specialists warned for years that even many modern structures across the country constituted "[rubble in waiting](#)" because building codes had not been properly followed.

Violations were not sufficiently penalised to deter construction companies and investors from cutting corners, but experts say the problem was largely ignored because addressing it would be expensive and unpopular.

At the same time, the population in many of the worst-hit areas of Turkey has increased in the last decade due to an influx of millions of refugees from neighbouring Syria fleeing civil war. It is unclear from government budgets how the earthquake tax – estimated to have raised \$3bn (£2.5bn) since the 1999 disaster – has been spent.

The Turkish government has periodically held so-called “construction amnesties” since the 1960s, in which construction companies and building owners have had lacking safety certification waived for a fee – a policy that is believed to have generated billions of lira. The last amnesty was in 2018, and just a few days before the latest earthquakes struck, Turkish media reported that another was due to be discussed in the cash-strapped Turkish parliament.

In the 10 affected provinces of Turkey, up to 75,000 buildings were granted such amnesties over the years, according to Pelin Pınar Giritlioğlu, the head of the Istanbul engineering and architecture union chambers.

Hospitals and other public buildings, as well as residential and commercial blocks, are among the estimated 25,000 structures that were destroyed or damaged. Proper enforcement of safety codes would have meant a “completely different picture now”, said Hakan Süleyman, a researcher in the department of earthquake engineering at Istanbul’s Boğaziçi University.

“The death toll would have been greatly reduced, as buildings that are designed to withstand earthquakes are less likely to collapse. The damage to infrastructure would have been minimised, which would have helped to speed up the recovery process,” he said. “In the long run, investing in earthquake-resistant buildings not only saves lives, but also reduces the overall cost of recovery and rebuilding after a disaster.”

Late on Saturday, Turkey’s vice-president, Fuat Oktay, said 113 people across the country suspected of slipshod or negligent construction that may have contributed to the catastrophe had been arrested, and another 20

suspects had been identified. The developer of an upmarket 12-storey apartment complex built in Antakya in 2013 was arrested as he attempted to board a flight to Montenegro on Friday night, police said. He told prosecutors that his company had followed all the relevant procedures and legislation.

The justice ministry has promised to punish anyone found responsible, announcing the establishment of earthquake criminal investigation units, and prosecutors have begun gathering samples of buildings for evidence on materials used in construction. Many more arrests are expected, but blaming building contractors is unlikely to assuage a rising tide of public anger at government policy.

“I have been dealing with earthquakes for 53 years but never experienced such a disaster before. It is true that we were not expecting an earthquake of this scale, in this area, so it was unforeseen in that respect. But it is also clear that most of the destruction is a result of human failures,” said Prof Övgün Ahmet Ercan, a member of the Turkish chamber of geophysical engineers’ earthquake advisory board.

Erdoğan has pledged that reconstruction will be completed in one year, a seemingly impossible task given the scale of the destruction across a vast area. But with national elections scheduled for May that were already poised to be a crucial test after his 20 [increasingly authoritarian](#) years in power, the president’s political future is riding on how he handles the fallout.

“Building earthquake-resistant structures is not difficult ... but the past has demonstrated that lessons are rarely taken after catastrophes in Turkey,” Süleyman said. “The recent earthquakes have highlighted the need for change once again, but the real test will be in the government’s ability to enforce regulations and build safer structures in the future.”

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## [Scottish independence](#)

# SNP top leaders urge overhaul of Sturgeon independence plan

Westminster chief and president say conference on outgoing leader's strategy should be delayed

- [UK politics live – latest news updates](#)



The first minister announcing her departure on Wednesday. Photograph: Getty Images

[Aubrey Allegretti](#) and [Severin Carrell](#)

Thu 16 Feb 2023 04.57 ESTFirst published on Thu 16 Feb 2023 04.02 EST

Nicola Sturgeon's resignation could prompt a major rethink around her plans to fight the next UK general election as a de facto referendum on independence, the Scottish National party's leader in Westminster has suggested.

After the shock announcement of the [first minister's departure](#) on Wednesday, Stephen Flynn said the special conference due to be held next month on Sturgeon's plan should be pushed back to give the new leader time to set out their intentions.

"I think it's sensible that we do hit the pause button on that conference and allow the new leader the opportunity to set out their vision," he told Sky News.

That proposal was supported by Mike Russell, the party's president, who told BBC [Scotland](#) on Thursday: "There is a question to be asked as to whether that should be postponed whilst the leader comes into place."

Russell, one of the SNP's most senior figures, said Sturgeon had touched on that prospect in her speech on Wednesday. Although he supported Sturgeon's stance on how to fight the next general election, he said: "I think it's a matter that needs to be discussed."

The conference was organised to approve Sturgeon's highly controversial proposal but it is one Flynn and others inside the SNP have widely criticised, and is deeply unpopular with voters. There is speculation at Holyrood it may now be repurposed as a leadership hustings event for SNP members in the Edinburgh area.

Jostling will begin in earnest among [potential replacements for Sturgeon](#), who served as the first female first minister and spent decades in frontline politics – outlasting all the leaders both in Holyrood and Westminster she worked alongside.

The SNP's national executive committee is scheduled to meet online at 6.30pm on Thursday to discuss the timing for a leadership contest. Russell has said he expects that process to be "shortened" and for there to be a "contested election".

Nicola Sturgeon: the moments that marked her leadership – video

Sturgeon's push to use the next general election, expected to be held in 2024, as the main battleground for another independence push caused controversy within the SNP. Some believe she was anticipating heavy opposition to the plan, and the outgoing first minister acknowledged in her resignation statement it would have been dishonest to chair the conference, knowing she was minded to quit soon after.

Flynn, who became Westminster leader of the SNP in December, said party figures were "going to be discussing and debating the merits" of the treatment of the next general election as a de facto referendum.

But he added: "I personally think that party conference should be paused, for obvious reasons. I think the new leader should have the opportunity and indeed the space to set out their position, their values and their intentions going forward."

Asked if the position of treating the next general election as a de facto referendum was "dead" on BBC Radio 4's Today programme on Thursday, he said the party should give the next leader space to set out their "agenda".

As speculation mounted about who could replace Sturgeon, Flynn said he had "not seen anyone throw their name in the ring yet" and declined to say who he would most like to see lead the SNP.

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Flynn ruled out taking up “the big task” himself, and said he had “no doubt there’ll be a number who will consider themselves as being capable of taking on the challenge”.

While Sturgeon has said she will remain as first minister until her successor is chosen, the SNP’s national executive committee has not yet published a timetable for the election of its next party leader.

Early possible contenders to succeed Sturgeon include Keith Brown, the SNP’s deputy leader; the finance and economy secretary, Kate Forbes; the constitution secretary and former Westminster leader of the party, Angus Robertson; the deputy first minister, John Swinney; and the health secretary, Humza Yousaf.

A protracted leadership election, given pressures on the NHS and the cost of living crisis, is likely to be capitalised on by opposition parties. Douglas Ross, the leader of the Scottish Conservatives, said the Scottish government should focus on issues that “really matter to people”.

Kenny MacAskill, the deputy leader of the pro-Scottish independence Alba party, argued on Thursday that Sturgeon’s departure should lead to a recognition that the cause was about more than “one individual or one party”.

He told the Today programme the SNP was “one part of the independence movement” and should use Sturgeon’s departure “to recalibrate, to recognise that there have been strategic flaws, to look for a new direction”.

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[Nicola Sturgeon](#)

# Royal Mail workers vote overwhelmingly to continue strikes – as it happened

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## [What the papers say](#) **Newspapers**

# ‘I want my independence’: what the papers say about Nicola Sturgeon’s resignation

Newspapers react to the sudden departure of Scotland’s first minister and what it means for the SNP and the UK



UK newspapers cover the resignation of Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland’s first minister, on Thursday. Composite: Metro, The Daily Telegraph, The Herald, The Guardian, The Times, Daily Record, Financial Times, i

[Virginia Harrison](#)

Wed 15 Feb 2023 21.35 EST Last modified on Wed 15 Feb 2023 22.11 EST

Nicola Sturgeon’s [surprise resignation as Scotland’s first minister](#) fills newspaper front pages, along with what the move may mean for the future of Scottish independence.

Scotland's **Daily Record** splashes with "I want my independence" alongside a picture of a smiling Sturgeon waving from a window. The paper says the "physical and mental impact" of the job was a major factor in her decision.

Thursday's Record: I Want My Independence  
[#TomorrowsPapersToday](#) [#DailyRecord](#) [#Record](#)  
[pic.twitter.com/5djRy5FuTi](https://pic.twitter.com/5djRy5FuTi)

— Tomorrows Papers Today (@TmorrowsPapers) [February 15, 2023](#)

Another Scottish paper, the **Herald**, quotes Sturgeon: "I am an human being as well as a politician" and says "First minister stands down after eight years, giving candid resignation".

Tomorrow's front page of the Herald □  
Nicola Sturgeon stands down with fantastic insight and exclusives from [@HTScotPol](#) [@mrdavidbol](#) [@kacnutt](#) and [@andrewlearmonth](#)  
[pic.twitter.com/OXQFt2CMmw](https://pic.twitter.com/OXQFt2CMmw)

— The Herald (@heraldscotland) [February 15, 2023](#)

The **Mail** leads with "Tearful Sturgeon quits ... with her dreams in tatters". It writes the move leaves Scotland's independence bid "in chaos".

Thursday's Mail: Tearful Sturgeon Quits... With Her Dreams In Tatters  
[#TomorrowsPapersToday](#) [#DailyMail](#) [#Mail](#)  
[pic.twitter.com/20bADXbfev](https://pic.twitter.com/20bADXbfev)

— Tomorrows Papers Today (@TmorrowsPapers) [February 15, 2023](#)

The **i** newspaper has "Independence dream fades as Sturgeon quits politics".



Thursday's i: Independence dream fades as Sturgeon quits  
[#TomorrowsPapersToday](#) [#iNewspaper](#) [pic.twitter.com/3bFS3saELF](#)

— Tomorrows Papers Today (@TmorrowsPapers) [February 15, 2023](#)

The **Times** take on the moment is “Huge boost to unionism as Sturgeon steps down”, writing that the politician’s resignation represents a “generational setback” for Scottish independence.

Thursday's Times: Huge boost to unionism as Sturgeon steps down  
[#TomorrowsPapersToday](#) [#TheTimes](#) [#Times](#)  
[pic.twitter.com/v3VGgp4852](#)

— Tomorrows Papers Today (@TmorrowsPapers) [February 15, 2023](#)

The **Guardian** has “Sturgeon quits citing brutality in politics”.

Thursday's Guardian: Sturgeon quits citing brutality in politics  
[#TomorrowsPapersToday](#) [#TheGuardian](#) [#Guardian](#)  
[pic.twitter.com/SPQPmakgMc](#)

— Tomorrows Papers Today (@TmorrowsPapers) [February 15, 2023](#)

The **FT** leads with “SNP at the crossroads after Sturgeon steps aside as Scotland’s first minister”.

Thursday's FT: SNP at the crossroads after Sturgeon steps aside as Scotland's first minister  
[#TomorrowsPapersToday](#) [#FinancialTimes](#)  
[#FT](#) [pic.twitter.com/3SY3c1Y3Xp](#)

— Tomorrows Papers Today (@TmorrowsPapers) [February 15, 2023](#)

The **Telegraph** has “Sturgeon brought down by trans row”, writing that the outgoing SNP leader’s “radical approach” to transgender rights “cost her the support of her party”.



Thursday's Telegraph: Sturgeon brought down by trans row  
[#TomorrowsPapersToday](#) [#DailyTelegraph](#) [#Telegraph](#)  
[pic.twitter.com/Bbg9HDY7sg](https://pic.twitter.com/Bbg9HDY7sg)

— Tomorrows Papers Today (@TmorrowsPapers) [February 15, 2023](#)

The **Metro** runs pictures of Sturgeon and former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn with its headline “Sturgone ... Corbinned”.

Thursday's Metro: Sturgone....corbinned [#TomorrowsPapersToday](#)  
[#Metro](#) [pic.twitter.com/uxlBx7qdGS](https://pic.twitter.com/uxlBx7qdGS)

— Tomorrows Papers Today (@TmorrowsPapers) [February 15, 2023](#)

The **Daily Express** leads with developments in the search for Nicola Bulley. Sturgeon's resignation features above its splash with the headline: “Is the future of our union safer now Sturgeon has gone?”

Thursday's Mirror: Nicola's turmoil [#TomorrowsPapersToday](#)  
[#DailyMirror](#) [#Mirror](#) [pic.twitter.com/fOrzyo9D8U](https://pic.twitter.com/fOrzyo9D8U)

— Tomorrows Papers Today (@TmorrowsPapers) [February 15, 2023](#)

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# Nicola Sturgeon's best photo ops: in pictures

**September 2019**

Nicola Sturgeon takes part in a fun dress-up in pink in support of the charity Breast Cancer Now in the Scottish Parliament Photograph: Ken Jack/Getty Images

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## Whatever happened to middle age? The mysterious case of the disappearing life stage



In their prime ... middle-aged stars Halle Berry, Hugh Jackman, Naomi Campbell, Pharrell Williams, Jennifer Lopez, Idris Elba, Elizabeth Hurley, Tom Cruise and Reese Witherspoon. Composite: Guardian

Midlife used to mean settling down, going grey and buying a lawnmower. But with relaxation no longer an option, has the concept lost all meaning?

[Anita Chaudhuri](#)

Thu 16 Feb 2023 01.00 EST

Amid all the recent commentary about [John Cleese resurrecting Fawlty Towers](#), one fact struck me as even more preposterous than the setting's proposed relocation to a Caribbean boutique hotel: when the original series aired, Cleese was only 35 years old.

When it comes to screen culture, middle age isn't what it used to be. People magazine gleefully reported last year that the characters in [And Just Like That](#), the rebooted series of Sex and the City, were the same age (average 55) as the Golden Girls when they made their first outing in the mid-80s. How can that be possible? My recollection of the besequined Florida housemates was that they were teetering off this mortal coil, but then everyone seems old when you are young.

Meanwhile, a popular Twitter account, [The Meldrew Point](#), has the sole purpose of celebrating people who, implausibly, have reached the age the actor Richard Wilson was when he appeared in the first episode of One Foot in the Grave (19,537 days). It's hard to believe, but these 53-and-a-half-year-olds include J-Lo, Renée Zellweger, Molly Ringwald, Julia Sawalha and Ice Cube.



Looking good at 53 ... Jennifer Lopez. Photograph: Phillip Faraone/Getty Images for The Recording Academy

Back in the day, 40 was the marker for midlife, but now, finding consensus on when middle age begins and what it represents isn't easy. The Collins English dictionary gnomically defines it as "the period in your life when you are no longer young but have not yet become old". The Encyclopaedia Britannica says it is between 40 and 60. Meanwhile, a 2018 YouGov survey reported that most Britons aged between 40 and 64 considered themselves middle-aged – but so did 44% of people aged between 65 and 69.

"There's no point trying to impose chronological age on what is or is not middle age," says Prof Les Mayhew, the head of global research at the International Longevity Centre UK. "With people living longer, your 30s are no longer middle age; that has switched to the 40s and 50s." But even then, he believes putting a number on it is meaningless. "In some cases, in your 50s, you might be thinking about a second or even third career, but for others you might have serious health problems and be unable to work.

"Governments are always trying to impose these labels of administrative convenience for things that are supposed to happen at a certain age – for example, you are allegedly an adult at the age of 18 and you aren't old enough to receive a state pension until 66. Totally arbitrary. Meanwhile,

GPs want you to book in for a ‘midlife MOT’, which is a great jazzy concept to get out of what should be happening – an annual health check-up.”

Patrick Reid, 53, is a London-based financial trader who has an unusual perspective on age. “I went to university late; I was 23 and other students used to say to me: ‘Oh, you’re so old!’ Then, after working for 15 years as a programme scheduler on BBC Two, I decided to change career. I turned up for my first day on a futures trading desk in my best suit with a Guardian under my arm. The place was full of these 21-year-olds in jeans going: ‘Who the hell is this?’

“Then, eight years ago, I went through another change. I’d been a bit of a party animal; it wasn’t agreeing with me. I decided to take steps to get happier and fitter. I feel so lucky now that I can go to the gym, run my own business and have a holistic outlook on life. Age has no meaning to me, except sometimes I do look in the mirror and say: ‘Oh yeah, I am actually 53.’”



Left, the Golden Girls, aged between 51 and 63; right, the cast of And Just Like That, in their mid-50s. Composite: Cine Text/Allstar; WarnerMedia Direct/HBO Max



Middle age once had a purpose of sorts, a time that offered the stability and continuity that used to come from having a job for life. Now, it's not just your employment that might feel precarious, but your job function itself. [Research from the Institute for the Future](#) reported that 85% of jobs that will exist by 2030 don't exist yet.

“This used to be a stage where you slowed down to enjoy life. It allowed a person to take stock and reassess,” says Julia Bueno, a therapist and the author of [Everyone's a Critic](#). “Now, it's: ‘Retrain to be a psychotherapist!’ I think middle age reflects that you've still got life in you; you're embracing a last hurrah. But I'm also aware that some people feel pressurised to reinvent themselves, to look fantastic, to not slow down or age gracefully. There's the pressure to put retinol on your face, or erase or glam the greys. You're not allowed to just be grey – it has to be glamorous.”

Bueno works with many women who have become mothers in their 40s, even 50s, and considers this another important shift. “Having a newborn in your arms does throw hackneyed ideas about middle age out of the window.”

The very words “middle age” can cause strong negative reactions. Roz Colthart, 49, runs a property business in Edinburgh alongside studying for a master's degree. “Middle age as a term makes you feel a bit yuck. The term ‘middle’ is so vanilla; who wants to be average? You're no longer young, but you're not an old sweetie that people are going to give up their seat for on the bus, either. Yet middle age is actually a fantastic place to be. It's just the judgmental attitudes towards it that are depressing.”

Colthart does not tick many of middle age's traditional boxes. “I don't have a husband; I don't have children. There is a pressure on people that we have to conform with the life cycle according to what age we are.”

When I was in my 20s, I thought 40 was really old. But now I'm there, I feel younger and fitter than I've ever been

It's true that, in the past, midlife was associated with a particular set of life circumstances – a mortgage, a spouse, children, a lawnmower. But for



many, these life stages are happening later, if at all. It must be harder to feel like you are in the pipe-and-slippers phase of life when, at 40, you still live in a flatshare and don't own a sofa, let alone a home.

Dalia Hawley, 41, lives in Wakefield and is what marketers would term a "geriatric millennial". She lives with her partner and their three chickens and runs a skincare business part-time. "I might be classed as middle-aged to some people, but I don't feel it. Part of me does sometimes feel as if I should own a house or have a full-time job, but then I think I couldn't imagine anything worse. I've never earned enough to get a mortgage. When I was in my 20s, I thought 40 was really old. But now I'm there, I feel younger and fitter than I've ever been."

So what age does she consider to be old? "I'm not sure there is such an age. It's more a question of whether someone can live independently. For example, both my parents are in their late 70s and still go travelling in their caravan. I don't think of them as being old at all."

The crime writer Casey Kelleher, 43, is another midlife millennial. She is equally scathing about the idea of being middle-aged: "I feel as if I'm only now starting my life. My first son was born when I was 17 and my second at 20. I met my husband a couple of years later. The kids have left home and now we are reassessing our lives." While most of her friends are setting down with young families, she is contemplating travelling, moving abroad or working with foster children.

"Midlife isn't a plateau," she says. "I don't like the phrase 'over the hill', as if the best times are behind you. Considering how long we might live, it's worth savouring every single day."

Kelleher finds that writing older characters is exciting. "The stakes are much higher in midlife. By then, people have richer life experiences, lifelong friendships, real love, loss, pain and heartbreak. Characters have more to lose if things go wrong. The way that characters, particularly female ones, between 40 and 60 are depicted by my generation of crime writers and on TV has started to change. Just look at [Happy Valley](#)."

The stories we tell about being a particular age are powerful because they reflect what is expected of us, what possibilities might await. Sharon Blackie, a psychologist and the author of [Hagitude: Reimagining the Second Half of Life](#), says that in recent years, for women, at least, the cultural discussion has shifted so that menopause has eclipsed middle age as a significant transition. “The interesting thing is that menopause can happen at all different ages – mid-40s, mid-50s and beyond – rather than one age.” Certainly, high-profile documentaries such as Channel 4’s documentary [Sex, Myths and the Menopause](#), and [online communities such as Noon](#), have changed the conversation.

Blackie observes that, in folklore, the hag, while appearing to be the epitome of people’s fears about ageing, is actually a positive archetype. “The hag is a woman, from menopause onwards, who is not defined by their relationship to anyone else. They are not someone’s mother or daughter or wife; they have their own power, their own way of being in the world. There is a freedom to not belonging to anyone that allows them to come to fruition in the world.”



Madonna, age 64, at the Grammy awards earlier this month. Photograph: Kevin Mazur/Getty Images for The Recording Academy

It's a comforting theory, but I am not sure the world has caught up with it yet. You need only witness the wave of vitriol directed at Madonna's smooth-cheeked appearance at the Grammys to realise that there is still widespread fear about how women choose to tackle the ageing process.

And what of men? In the past, the male midlife crisis had a well-trodden set of cliches, from the red Ferrari or Harley-Davidson to the trophy wife. Are these still relevant? These days, the term seems to be associated more with anxiety, depression and the search for meaning than with the quest for leather trousers. I even came across an academic paper entitled *Dark Night of the Shed: Men, the Midlife Crisis, Spirituality – and Sheds*.

“Although men don't experience the same cataclysmic physical change as women in midlife, many of the men I speak to do go through a significant psychological change around the age of 50, which can be accompanied by a similar sense of grief and loss that women go through with menopause,” says Blackie. “Carl Jung theorised that the first half of life was about working in the outer world, developing your identity, career and family. He viewed the second half of life as being about turning inward, searching for meaning, spiritual or otherwise.”

For many men, a less esoteric way of addressing existential angst is to embrace a punishing fitness regime. Yet, while this is generally a healthy thing, the body doesn't lie. Devoted tennis player Geoff Dyer, the 64-year-old author of [The Last Days of Roger Federer](#), a meditation on late middle age, recently had elbow surgery. “Three months after the operation, by which time I was supposed to be able to play tennis again, I saw the surgeon and told him it hadn't worked. I'd gone from being a coolish middle-aged person with an elbow problem to an old and frail invalid.

“He showed me the MRI, which proved it had worked, and said to keep at it, keep doing the physical therapy. And he was right. I'm now restored to full fitness. It might not seem like that to you if you saw me hobbling around the court, but I am in a state of youthful-seeming bliss.”

Dyer is similarly exasperated that he cannot drink much any more. “Boozing takes a fearsome toll as you get older. I say that with some

authority, because we had a dinner at home in LA on Saturday where I had a skinful of delicious red wine – by London standards, a modest amount – and felt like 100-year-old sludge for 24 hours afterwards.”

Dispensing with middle age is comforting: if we never face up to being in the middle, we never have to contemplate the end

And therein lies the problem with all our “age is just a number” mental gymnastics. Dispensing with middle age is comforting because if we never face up to being in the middle, we will never have to contemplate the end. Until we are forced to, that is.

A good friend of mine turned 60 recently; he summed up the experience as “a sudden cold-water splash of finding yourself facing terms like ‘geriatric’ and ‘senior’ and feeling utterly disconnected from any real sense of what your biological age means, other than the onset of physical decrepitude and declining eyesight”. The rude awakening was largely caused, he said, because “when we get to our 50s, we kid ourselves that it’s just a last gasp of the early 40s, when it isn’t at all”.

Researching this article, I was struck by the fact that not a single person I spoke to was happy to own the badge of middle age. But back in the day, the term was viewed as a state rather than a trait. A person was middle-aged because that was their actual stage of life, not simply labelled as such because they were uncreative, tedious or, heaven forfend, unproductive. As someone who went back to university at 56 and is planning to launch a business, I am as guilty of a failure to relax as everyone else. Are we all just frantically trying to stave off the inevitable?

Bueno recalls being at a 50th birthday party at a pub with funky music. “People were having a great time. We were all bending ourselves out of shape, leaning in to talk to one another.” You might think they were discussing important ideas and plans for the future, but you would be wrong. “Everyone was shouting the same sentence: ‘I can’t hear a bloody thing!’”

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## [Nicola Sturgeon](#)

# Unfazed by the future, Nicola Sturgeon left on her own terms

Scotland's first minister seized control of the narrative and timing, leaving no obvious successor



Scotland's first minister, Nicola Sturgeon, announced her resignation at a press conference in Edinburgh, saying her decision came from "a deeper and longer-term assessment". Photograph: Xinhua/Rex/Shutterstock



*[Libby Brooks](#) Scotland correspondent*

Thu 16 Feb 2023 01.00 EST Last modified on Thu 16 Feb 2023 08.05 EST

For those close friends who got a text from [Nicola Sturgeon](#) in the hours before she publicly announced her resignation as Scotland's first minister, it was the timing and not the fact of her departure that came as the almighty shock.

But Sturgeon is a woman who likes to craft her own narrative. For months, the first minister has been buffeted by decisions not of her making – the supreme court ruling that she cannot hold a second independence referendum without Westminster approval, the UK government blocking Holyrood's gender recognition bill – as domestic headwinds [around the NHS](#), [education](#) and transport grew ever more unfavourable.

And so on a lacklustre spring morning in the middle of recess, she seized back control of her own story with a delicately detonated political bombshell. She [leaves her party with no obvious successor](#) and those same challenges unresolved – and herself, at the age of 52, as she stressed today, with plenty of road ahead of her.

Nicola Sturgeon: the moments that marked her leadership – video

The superlatives flooded in from supporters and opponents alike, describing Scotland's first female first minister, who has led her party to political dominance for nearly a decade, as “formidable”, “unparalleled”, “tireless”.

So began the inevitable parsing of her resignation speech, itself praised for its honesty and humility – particularly in contrast to recent UK prime ministerial resignations. Those familiar with Sturgeon's sensibility [were mindful too](#) of recent remarks from former New Zealand premier Jacinda Ardern, someone with whom Sturgeon is known to feel a kinship.

That Sturgeon was ready to leave the role she has occupied since she seamlessly replaced Alex Salmond in 2014 was no secret. For at least 18 months, she has been dropping regular hints and allusions to her post-Holyrood future: telling Vogue in October 2021 that she and her husband, SNP chief executive Peter Murrell, had discussed fostering, and [the Guardian in August 2022](#) that she looked forward to “just not feeling as if you're on public display all the time”.

All of which seemed jarring for a politician who was also claiming to be up for the fight over a second referendum and the gender bill.

But still the abruptness of the announcement was a surprise, although the explanation given was straightforward enough: with a special conference in March to decide the next steps on independence strategy, she wants to leave the SNP – and [her successor](#) – “free to choose” without her.

The immediate speculation was whether Sturgeon was anticipating heavy and humiliating opposition to her preferred option of [running a future election as a de facto referendum](#) at the special conference – or what other domestic catastrophes had yet to emerge.

While she insisted at her press conference that the ongoing row over the placement of transgender offenders in women's prisons was not “the final straw”, this was also the moment when she revealed most emotion, appearing close to tears as she told reporters: “I will always be a voice for inclusion ... I will always be a feminist.”



While Sturgeon has been consistently robust in her defence of her reforms, those working closely with her acknowledge how difficult the last few weeks of [relentless and increasingly personal criticism](#) have been, overlaying the regular denunciations of her deeply held feminist beliefs during the passage of the gender recognition reform bill through Holyrood, with hundreds of (mainly) female protesters booing her outside the parliament building and wearing T-shirts with the slogan: “Nicola Sturgeon, destroyer of women’s rights.”

“People can only take so much” says one SNP veteran, but this applies as much to her experience leading the country through the pandemic, and the Salmond saga which played out concurrently.

Jeane Freeman, whose friendship with Sturgeon was cemented when she worked as her health secretary during the pandemic, told the Guardian: “It’s inevitable that going through something as relentless and all-consuming takes its toll, as I know personally. I don’t think any of us know the impact it has had on us until we’ve had space and time to reflect on it.”

Sturgeon has also previously discussed her lack of time to fully reflect on the “toxic horribleness”, as she described it last summer, as the Salmond saga – which saw two high-profile investigations into the Scottish government’s handling of [harassment complaints made against the former first minister](#), constant calls for her to quit, and ultimately her being [cleared](#) of misleading parliament.

Maybe now the time has come for such reflection for the woman whose mammoth contribution to post-devolution politics has yet to be fully assessed.

Her unerring ability to “speak human” brought her to an audience well beyond Scotland, particularly during her daily Covid briefings, and she remains one of the few politicians in the UK recognised by her first name alone – an electoral boon not enjoyed by any of her potential successors.

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While the level of adoration may have calmed since the high point of “Nicola-mania” during the 2015 election campaign when she was regularly mobbed by adoring and sometimes tearful admirers demanding selfies, she remains a popular and trusted figure.

In her resignation speech she warmly thanked “my SNP family”, the party she joined as a serious-minded 16-year-old in the 1980s, when support for independence was marginal and membership was not about forging a career in politics.

Sturgeon’s leadership style is often criticised for her keeping a tight-knit group around her – unlike Salmond’s unruly court – with regular complaints from both Holyrood and Westminster groups that she fails to engage with the party’s rank and file.

This can partly be explained as personality: she describes herself as naturally reserved and shy, but has spoken out about profoundly personal experiences of miscarriage and menopause, saying she feels an obligation as the first woman in her office to “move the dial a little bit”.

Meanwhile, younger women politicians emerged to salute her as a personal inspiration, with social media this afternoon peppered with testimony – not only from SNP members – from those who say they would not have considered entering public life without her example.

MP Amy Callaghan toppled the former Lib Dem leader Jo Swinson in 2019 and Sturgeon's delighted fist-pumping reaction, caught unintentionally on camera, went viral at the time. Callaghan, who suffered a brain haemorrhage in 2020, spoke warmly of Sturgeon as "a great source of knowledge and strength during my campaign, and also through my ill-health".

Those who know Sturgeon well highlight her comments on Wednesday on the polarisation of Scottish politics, and its "brutal" nature – especially for women. They praise her insight in recognising the point where her own leadership, or the perception of it, has itself become a barrier to change.

While she leaves the independence question in deadlock, she insisted her decision to step down was anchored in what was right "for the country, for my party and for the independence cause I have devoted my life to".

While she indicated she may not stand again for Holyrood at the next Holyrood elections in 2026, she said that her commitment to that cause was unwavering.

"Whenever I do stop being first minister," Sturgeon told the Guardian in August 2022, "I'm still going to be relatively young. This would not always have been true of me, but a life after politics doesn't faze me.

"The world is my oyster."

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# No coach, no agent, no ego: the incredible story of the ‘Lionel Messi of cliff diving’

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[My most romantic moment](#)[Life and style](#)

## My most romantic moment: a Vespa breakdown on one of the world's deadliest roads



Illustration: Leon Edler/The Guardian

My boyfriend was not keen to rent a scooter on the Amalfi coast, but I insisted it would be romantic, sexy and a little bit dangerous. What could possibly go wrong?



[Kathryn Bromwich](#)

[@kathryn42](#)

Thu 16 Feb 2023 01.00 EST

It was August 2010, the Amalfi coast. My then-boyfriend and I had decided to go on holiday to Sorrento in the south of Italy, and predictably it was 40C, which (even more predictably) did not agree with his complexion. I remained adamant that this was an extremely agreeable temperature, and a pleasant change from the English weather, by which (being half Italian) I am perpetually offended.

I was even more bullish about the idea that it would be romantic – sexy, and a little bit dangerous – to rent a Vespa and whiz down the coast to Positano and Amalfi, where we would eat pistachio gelatos and drink minuscule coffees in architecturally striking piazzas. “Absolutely not,” said my boyfriend, explaining that he had never ridden a scooter. “We are 100%

renting a car,” he insisted. I refused to budge. Like Jennifer Coolidge’s Tanya in *The White Lotus*, I was set on the Vespa trip, and no amount of pleading about “the world’s deadliest roads” was about to change that.

A few days into the holiday he relented, and we rented a scooter I deemed suitably vintage-looking. A perfunctory three-minute demonstration followed, then we were on the road, fumes sputtering behind us. We felt the breeze on our skin as we sped up and away into the dazzling scenery, the sunlight turning everything it touched a shimmering gold. It was exactly how I had imagined it would be, except for the faint whiff of petrol that seemed to be getting stronger. “Is the fuel meant to go down this quickly?” one of us asked, about 20 minutes in. It’s probably fine, we agreed, until five minutes later we were almost out of gas and in the middle of nowhere, my boyfriend’s shoes and shorts soaked in a mysterious oily liquid. We drove, then pushed, the scooter to the nearest village, where an amused mechanic informed us that one of the tubes was leaking and we were lucky to have reached his establishment in time.



Kathryn on the trip.

Nearly an hour and quite a few euros later, the scooter was fixed. “Great,” I said, “let’s go to Positano.” “You’ve got to be joking,” said my boyfriend. I

was not. We went on, up the narrow streets and twisting hills, the oncoming traffic zooming around blind corners towards us. We drove much more slowly this time, allowing irritated motorists to overtake us, increasingly aware of the very real possibility of serious injury, yet still working through our list of destinations, ticking off Positano, Praiano and Amalfi before I allowed us to return to Sorrento. Somehow, a few asphalt-grazed knees aside, we got through the rest of the day in one piece.

Two years later, my boyfriend proposed; 10 years after that, we got married (*meglio tardi che mai*, as they say in Italy – better late than never). During this time, there have been many small and large acts of affection, but in terms of sheer reckless stupidity – and is that not what young love is truly about? – the terrifying Vespa day still holds a special place in my heart. It didn't end up being the romantic trip I had envisaged, that is true. But agreeing to do something that scares the absolute hell out of you, and might conceivably get you killed, just to indulge your partner's clichéd whim is by far the sweetest thing anyone has done for me. Next time, though, we'll probably rent a car.

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## 2023.02.16 - Opinion

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- When asylum seekers are attacked, don't be surprised: the UK system ensures that will happen
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- Cheddar and stout?! Salted caramel?! This messing with hot cross buns has to stop

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## In praise of the ‘15-minute city’ – the mundane planning theory terrifying conspiracists

[Oliver Wainwright](#)



The frightening prospect of greener, people-friendly streets and convenient amenities has sent the online right – and Tory MPs – into a tailspin



Protesters against 15-minute cities and the Covid-19 vaccination in Leeds, 11 February 2023. Photograph: Martin Pope/SOPA Images/REX/Shutterstock

Thu 16 Feb 2023 01.00 EST Last modified on Thu 16 Feb 2023 13.54 EST

There's an international socialist conspiracy afoot, and it wants to make it easier to walk to the shops. Fringe forces of the far left are plotting to take away our freedom to be stuck in traffic jams, to crawl along clogged ring roads and trawl the streets in search of a parking spot. The liberty of the rush-hour commute, the sanctity of the out-of-town shopping centre and the righteousness of the suburban food desert is under threat as never before. The name of this chilling global movement? The "[15-minute city](#)".

Westminster can often seem like a badly scripted spoof of itself, but rarely has parliament descended into parody as far as it did last week, when the Conservative MP for the South Yorkshire constituency of Don Valley, Nick Fletcher, launched a [plucky tirade](#) against the concept of convenient, walkable neighbourhoods. "Will the leader of the house please set aside time for a debate on the international socialist concept of so-called 15-minute cities and 20-minute neighbourhoods?" he asked, in an ominous tone. "Sheffield is already on this journey, and I do not want Doncaster, which also has a Labour-run socialist council, to do the same."

It is not the first time that an [online conspiracy theory](#) has made it into the Commons chamber, but it may be one of the most surreal. Simply put, the 15-minute city principle suggests you should have your daily needs – work, food, healthcare, education, culture and leisure – within a 15-minute walk or bike ride from where you live. It sounds pleasant enough, but in the minds of libertarian fanatics and the bedroom commentators of TikTok, it represents an unprecedented assault on personal freedoms.

“Creepy local authority bureaucrats would like to see your entire existence boiled down to the duration of a quarter of an hour,” warned a furious presenter on [GB News](#) last week, as if describing a plot line from Nineteen Eighty-Four. The 15-minute city, he suggested, was a “dystopian plan”, heralding “a surveillance culture that would make Pyongyang envious”.

Never before has a mundane theory of urbanism been such a lightning rod for outrage. It’s like suggesting that public parks are part of a sinister plant-worshipping plot to demolish our homes and replace them with grass. Or that public transport is the work of a satanic bus cult. Some online forums have claimed that the 15-minute city represents the first step towards an inevitable [Hunger Games society](#), in which residents will not be allowed to leave their prescribed areas. They see it not as a route to a low-traffic, low-carbon future, but as the beginning of a slippery slope to living in an open-air prison.

As one irate TikToker [shrieked](#), while jumping around his room in disbelief: “You’re going to have to apply for a fucking permit to leave your zone!” (Although he also ascribed the 15-minute city plans to the Tories, so it’s not quite clear which deranged Reddit forum he got his information from).



A protester at a demonstration against 15-minute cities, London, 10 December 2022. Photograph: Martin Pope/SOPA Images/REX/Shutterstock

There are lots of [good reasons](#) to interrogate the cute logic of the 15-minute city – could it actually lead to further social segregation? Would wealthy residents, and their money, remain in the prosperous enclaves? Who is providing the services and where do they live? – but the threat of our rights being curtailed by travel permits isn't one of them.

The conspiracy theory pot was given a powerful stir in December, when the Canadian rightwing culture warrior Jordan Peterson decided to get involved. “The idea that neighbourhoods should be walkable is lovely,” he [tweeted](#), in a post that has since clocked up 7.5m views. “The idea that idiot tyrannical bureaucrats can decide by fiat where you’re ‘allowed’ to drive is perhaps the worst imaginable perversion of that idea,” he continued, “and, make no mistake, it’s part of a well-documented plan.” Peterson quoted a tweet that featured the telltale hashtag #GreatReset, referring to the World Economic Forum’s post-pandemic economic recovery plan – widely used in the stranger corners of the internet as a byword for a shadowy global conspiracy intent on robbing us of our freedoms. The anti-vaccine, pro-Brexit, climate-denying, 15-minute-phobe, Great Reset axis is a strong one.

So where did the fear come from? Many of the UK conspiracy theorists highlight that these “un-British” ideas of urban walkability emanate from France, so they must be distrusted on principle. Worse than that, they point out, the ideology has been driven by a bearded Colombian scientist with radical roots. The ideas had been around since [the 1920s](#), but the 15-minute city phrase was coined by Carlos Moreno, esteemed professor at the Panthéon-Sorbonne in Paris, who was once a member of a leftwing guerrilla group in the 1970s. And now he’s coming for your cars.

“Their lies are enormous,” Moreno said in a [recent interview](#), describing some of the claims made by his critics. “You will be locked in your neighbourhood; cameras will signal who can go out; if your mother lives in another neighbourhood, you will have to ask for permission to see her, and so on,” adding that they “sometimes post pictures of concentration camps.”

Moreno first promoted his concept of *la ville du quart d’heure* in 2016, but it gained international attention when the mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, adopted it as part of her [re-election campaign](#) in 2020. She promised she would close off roads and turn them into public plazas, plant more trees and turn schools into the “capitals of the neighbourhood”, open to everyone for sports and recreation in evenings and at weekends.

The pandemic proved to be a powerful trial for how a 15-minute city might work in practice, and led to bodies such as UN Habitat, the World Economic Forum, the C40 Global Cities Climate Network and the Federation of United Local Governments championing the cause – which also helped to boost unhinged fantasies that it is all part of a grand global scheme of totalitarian oppression.

More recently, the principles have gained traction in the UK, with Oxford, Birmingham, Bristol, Canterbury and Sheffield councils considering 15-minute city ideas. Cue outrage from those with no other cause left to flog. “The climate change lockdowns are coming,” [tweeted Nigel Farage](#), in response to Canterbury’s innocuous traffic filtering scheme, while Oxford’s plans triggered similar ripples of incredulous fury.

“Oxfordshire County Council yesterday approved plans to lock residents into one of six zones to ‘save the planet’ from global warming,” screamed one [alarmist headline](#). “The latest stage in the ‘15-minute city’ agenda is to place electronic gates on key roads in and out of the city, confining residents to their own neighbourhoods.” The claims had zero basis in fact, but they poured further fuel on the fire of those battling low-traffic neighbourhoods, and their fellow band of assorted [culture warriors](#).

It seems fitting that a leaflet drop warning against Oxford’s traffic filters plan was organised by Not Our Future – a new pressure group led by none other than Fred and Richard Fairbrass of 1990s band turned anti-vaxxers Right Said Fred. Too sexy for their car? Maybe they could try cycling to the shops instead.

- Oliver Wainwright is the Guardian’s architecture and design critic
- ***Do you have an opinion on the issues raised in this article? If you would like to submit a response of up to 300 words by email to be considered for publication in our [letters](#) section, please [click here](#).***

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## OpinionImmigration and asylum

# When asylum seekers are attacked, don't be surprised: the UK system ensures that will happen

[Daniel Trilling](#)

The violence in Knowsley is symptomatic of a dysfunctional approach that makes vulnerable refugees even more vulnerable



‘Hotels provide an easy target for the far right, and the way the Home Office has hired them out creates new potential for resentment.’ The Suites Hotel in Knowsley, Merseyside, 11 February 2023. Photograph: Peter Powell/PA

Thu 16 Feb 2023 02.00 ESTLast modified on Thu 16 Feb 2023 02.22 EST

Friends of Firsat Dag, a 25-year-old Kurdish asylum seeker, said he came to the UK to escape violence. Instead, he was stabbed to death in a park on his way home from a night out. It wasn't an isolated incident. In the weeks



surrounding his murder, gangs followed refugee children to and from school – one five-year-old boy was attacked with a baseball bat, according to an anti-racist campaign group – while hundreds of local residents held angry protests at the housing of asylum seekers in their deprived neighbourhood.

This is exactly the kind of violent escalation that many must fear happening after the [riot in Knowsley](#) last Friday. In fact, [Dag's murder](#) took place more than 20 years ago, in Glasgow in the summer of 2001. Then, as now, inflammatory political rhetoric played a part: in the early 2000s, Britain was in the grips of a tabloid-driven moral panic over asylum. Far-right groups were also trying to whip up anti-refugee sentiment, holding demonstrations in other parts of the country.

A xenophobic backlash is always a risk when immigration becomes a fought-over political issue. Britain is not alone in that: in recent months Ireland [has seen attempts](#) by its tiny far-right scene, sensing an opportunity in tough economic times to stir up resentment of asylum seekers. But while politicians are rightly criticised when they pick up far-right talking points, there is another, underlying source of trouble here – the asylum system itself.

For more than two decades, the British state has aimed to keep people seeking refuge walled off from the rest of society. They are banned from working while they wait for their claims to be heard and must subsist on [meagre payments](#) administered by the Home Office – £45 a week, or £9.10 if placed in a hotel – in parallel to the regular benefits system. Unless they are independently wealthy, asylum seekers can't choose where to live, instead being sent to various parts of the country under a dispersal policy that often isolates them from any family or community networks they may have.

The logic behind the system – which is the result of both Conservative and Labour governments – is that holding people in limbo while the state decides on their asylum cases is a way of reducing hostility. If asylum seekers can't work, so goes the argument, there can be no accusations that they are stealing other people's jobs. If people are scattered widely and kept in penury, then they are less easily accused of being a drain on the state.



‘A complete halt to Channel crossings is unlikely – unless Sunak means he merely wants people to go back to stowing away in lorries.’ A lifeboat bringing migrants ashore at Dungeness beach, May 2022. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

In reality, it has the opposite effect. Subsistence payments and precarious housing, however much these might compound the trauma of people who have fled war and persecution, are maliciously spun as freebies. Accommodation has long been placed in poorer parts of the country – partly for reasons of cost, but also because residents of wealthier areas have more power to make a fuss. (In 2020, civil servants [apologised](#) for their “error” in placing asylum seekers in the well-heeled Essex town of Witham – which just so happened to be the constituency of Priti Patel, home secretary at the time.)

A system that treats its subjects as unwanted material to be tidied away is always likely to breed stigma. And the system has been getting worse. In 2012, the coalition privatised asylum accommodation, adding a [chaotic market dynamic](#) to the mix. Since 2020, the “emergency” use of hotels requisitioned by the Home Office [has soared](#), initially as a pandemic measure but more recently because a growing backlog of asylum claims means the private contractors have run out of space.

Hotels provide an easy target for the far right, and the way the Home Office has hired them out – at short notice and with little local consultation – creates new potential for resentment. (One Knowsley resident [told the Guardian](#) this week that beyond the immediate trigger for the protests, people were unhappy that the Home Office had taken over a hotel used by many locals for their weddings.)

These processes were well under way before Suella Braverman took over, so what does it mean to have an even more hardline home secretary? She presents herself as the politician who can end the dysfunction at the Home Office and stop asylum being seen as a weak spot for the Tories. In her [inaugural speech](#) to civil servants, she signalled that there would be a more cordial relationship with staff [than under her predecessor](#), speaking of their “wellbeing”. A source with knowledge of the Home Office tells me that anonymous briefings against civil servants, once commonplace, seem to have stopped for the moment.

But the dysfunction continues. In November, a [whistleblower claimed](#) the department was hiring temporary, inexperienced staff from customer service jobs at McDonald’s and Tesco to make “life or death” decisions on asylum cases, in an effort to clear the backlog. Staff were so unhappy at the overcrowding, unsafe and unhygienic conditions at the Manston processing centre in Kent last autumn that one civil service trade union took the [Home Office to court](#).

Braverman’s “invasion” rhetoric is clearly a problem, but so too is her boss’s decision to make “stop the boats” one of his government’s [five key pledges](#), even if he expresses himself more politely. Braverman has thrown the Home Office fully behind this goal: her [decision last month](#) to drop several measures recommended by the review into the Windrush scandal is one result. But a complete halt to Channel crossings is unlikely to be achieved – unless Sunak means that he merely wants people to go back to stowing away in lorries, as they largely did until 2020.

As things stand, the government risks [a repeat](#) of Cameron’s net migration pledge, which inflamed public hostility towards immigration and created an incentive for yet more punitive policies to come. If that happens, the source

suggested to me, then we are also likely to see a return of the “blame game” between ministers and civil servants.

It is easy in these circumstances to feel as though the situation is hopeless, for lack of alternatives. Labour proposes to make the system more humane and efficient, but not to change its fundamental logic. Its leading MPs even [seem to support](#) a new Home Office scheme to electronically tag some asylum seekers. But wider reaching change is possible. The Scottish government’s [“new Scots” strategy](#) aims to undo some of the damage done by the asylum system run from Westminster by offering people support in accessing education, healthcare, job training and language skills, as well as making connections with people in the communities where they are housed, from the day they arrive.

This is a direct challenge to the British state’s efforts at segregation. One reason the Scottish government has the confidence to do this is that Glasgow – which remains the UK’s largest asylum dispersal area – now boasts a local [culture of resistance](#) to overbearing immigration policy. It didn’t happen by accident. These things need to be built, often by ordinary people and activists who see through the cynical claim that migrants’ rights come at the expense of those of their neighbours.

- Daniel Trilling is a contributor to *Broke: Fixing Britain’s Poverty Crisis*, which is published on 30 March 2023
- ***Do you have an opinion on the issues raised in this article? If you would like to submit a response of up to 300 words by email to be considered for publication in our [letters](#) section, please [click here](#).***

## OpinionUFOs

# **Most UFOs – like the Chinese spy balloon – can be explained away. But what about the other 2%?**

[Heather Dixon](#)



As a UFO investigator, it's my job to be sceptical and rigorous. Yet an air of mystery remains – and I hope it always will

- Heather Dixon is head of national investigations for the British UFO Research Association



‘I have never seen any definitive proof that a UFO has been extraterrestrial in origin, but I don’t close my mind to the possibility.’ A photograph apparently showing four UFOs in Salem, Massachusetts, 1952. Photograph: Popperfoto

Thu 16 Feb 2023 04.00 ESTLast modified on Thu 16 Feb 2023 12.23 EST

Sometimes they appear in the form of an orb of light, high in the sky, that seems to pass through solid objects such as trees and buildings. Sometimes it’s a strange mist that descends out of nowhere. In an increasing number of cases, an object that can’t be seen with the naked eye shows up clearly in a photographic image.

These are examples of UFOs – literally, unidentified flying objects – that are spotted in UK skies every day. In the wake of the US shooting down a suspected [Chinese spy balloon](#), plus three other objects it has yet to identify, experts say there are going to be a lot more of [these kinds of sightings](#). As a UFO researcher, I treat these things with scepticism and scientific rigour, but part of me hopes they will never be fully explained.

As the head of national investigations for the [British UFO Research Association](#) (Bufora), I’m one of a team of people who investigate such sightings, which are sent to us by the public at a rate of hundreds a year.



Often they come as grainy mobile phone footage taken at dusk or from a moving car, but we also require witnesses to fill in [a detailed form](#) explaining what they saw, heard, felt and even smelled at the time of the event. We promise to treat sightings confidentially, objectively and with scientific rigour. In 98% of cases, we find they have a simple explanation.



‘When Elon Musk’s SpaceX first launched its Starlink satellites in 2019, we were inundated with sightings of small pinpricks of light moving steadily across the night sky.’ Starlink launch, Kennedy Space Center, Florida. Photograph: Joe Marino/UPI/REX/Shutterstock

Typically, when we receive a report at Bufora, I take a look and pass it on to our photographic analyst, Mark Easen. Objects most commonly turn out to be drones, aircraft (sometimes military aircraft), satellites, meteors, balloons, lanterns or birds. When Elon Musk’s SpaceX first launched its [Starlink satellites](#) in 2019, we were inundated with sightings of small pinpricks of light moving steadily across the night sky, sometimes 50 or 100 at a time. By finding out where witnesses are at the time and what airports, military bases or other facilities are nearby, we can usually identify the objects they’ve observed. It’s important to know what they’ve seen with the naked eye, because often a UFO will turn out to be a speck of dust on the camera lens, a tiny insect flying into shot or the [reflection of a seatbelt](#)

[buckle](#) in a car window. First, we rule out the obvious. If it looks like a plane and flies like a plane, it's usually a plane.

Reports follow patterns and trends that reflect the changing media landscape. In our not-too-distant past, unexplainable phenomena tended to be reported as fairies or goblins – things people saw in the folklore and mythology of the day. Now, sci-fi books and films affect the way people interpret what they have seen. There's a particular type of sighting that we call high strangeness sightings (HSS), when someone feels they have been up close and personal with something of unknown origin – and during the 1990s, when [The X-Files](#) was hugely influential, as many as 8% of sightings reported to us were HSS. They're usually rare, but I saw them increase again during lockdown. People were scared, and understandably so.



‘During the 1990s, when The X-Files was hugely influential, many sightings reflected the TV series.’ Photograph: Pictorial Press Ltd/Alamy

I became interested in space when I lived in the US in the 1970s and early 80s, where my dad was an aeronautical engineer for Nasa. But I've always been interested in extraordinary human experiences – things outside the boundaries of what we understand. The UFO subject embraces a huge and diverse landscape: science, religion, folklore and myth, the paranormal,



neuroscience and philosophy. I've learned a lot about the way memory works: once you lay down an experience into long-term memory, each time you access that memory it is slightly edited. You add to it things you've seen, conversations you've had, a TV programme you saw. I never think people are foolish when they report a UFO; I'm just fascinated by the ways we interpret reality.

I'm often asked what I believe about extraterrestrial life, and whether it will ever make contact. After all, about 2% of the UFOs we hear about *can't* be identified – yet. In all the years I've spent looking at the evidence, I have never seen any definitive proof that a UFO has been extraterrestrial in origin, but I don't close my mind to the possibility. I'm sceptical – to do this work properly I have to be. But, as [JBS Haldane wrote](#): “It is my suspicion that the universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we *can* suppose.”

Personally, I think there will be a rational explanation for the objects that have been shot down by the US military recently. But there are still mysteries, and I think there always will be. I wonder what narratives humans will invent to explain the sightings of tomorrow, and what science fiction will come up with next. Will science and expert analysis be able to explain all of these things, eventually? I suspect not. I hope not.

- Heather Dixon is head of national investigations for the British UFO Research Association

## [OpinionEaster](#)

# **Cheddar and stout?! Salted caramel?! This messing with hot cross buns has to stop**

[Adrian Chiles](#)



Once again, overexcited chefs are ruining a delicious seasonal delight with their unnecessary ‘twists’. And don’t get me started on the liberties they take with turkey



If it ain't broke ... Photograph: Mark Liddell/Getty Images

Thu 16 Feb 2023 02.00 EST Last modified on Thu 16 Feb 2023 02.26 EST

Easter is seven weeks away, but already I'm cross about [hot cross buns](#). A blamelessly simple seasonal offering bearing multiple messages of joy: Christ is risen; the days are getting longer; winter is over; spring is coming. Take your pick: there's something for everyone.

So why mess with hot cross buns? On our shelves now are to be found: red velvet hot cross buns; cheese, tomato and oregano hot cross buns; salted-caramel blondie hot cross buns; and West Country mature cheddar and stout hot cross buns.

And these are early days. There's time aplenty for new outrages against this centuries-old tradition to see the light of day. I'm indebted to [@sarahvanpelt](#) on Twitter for pointing this out: "I don't want [to] over exaggerate but I think we can attribute part of our decline as a nation to when we started fucking about with Hot Cross Buns." I don't think Sarah exaggerates one jot. This kind of thing needs stamping out.

A similar thing happens every year in the run-up to Christmas. For weeks on end, every cookery page and television programme features recipes for

turkey *with a twist*. Why the need for the twist? You can't be bored of turkey, surely? You only have it once a year, for heaven's sake. If it's turned out dry in the past, it's because you've overcooked it, so instead of twisting away with inappropriate herbs, spices, stuffings, week-long brinings, etc, just learn how to cook it properly. OK, twist up your bog-standard bolognese or bangers and mash if you must, but leave the once-a-year turkey alone.

And the hot cross buns, too. I mean, there's plenty going on in them, anyway. Sultanas, mixed peel, mixed spice, zest of this and that – what more do you want?

There's precedent for hot cross bun legislation – restrictions on their sale were imposed in the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I. It's time to look at this again and stamp out the twisting, which is verging on heretical. Intervention is needed, before we twist ourselves to death.

Adrian Chiles is a broadcaster, writer and Guardian columnist

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## 2023.02.16 - Around the world

- [Joe Biden FBI searched University of Delaware in documents investigation](#)
- [China Welfare protests escalate as hundreds voice anger over health insurance cuts](#)
- [Formula milk Most health claims 'not backed by evidence', report finds](#)
- [Island fever Japan sees its archipelago double in number after recount](#)
- [Twitter Elon Musk reportedly forced algorithm to boost his tweets after Super Bowl flop](#)

## Joe Biden

# FBI searched University of Delaware in Biden documents investigation

Justice department looking into how classified documents came to be found in US president's home and former office



Joe Biden is being investigated by the FBI after classified documents were found in his home and former office. Photograph: Mandel Ngan/AFP/Getty Images

*Associated Press*

Thu 16 Feb 2023 01.00 EST Last modified on Thu 16 Feb 2023 09.15 EST

The FBI searched the University of Delaware in recent weeks for classified documents as part of its investigation into the potential mishandling of sensitive government records by [Joe Biden](#).

The search, first reported by CNN, was confirmed to the Associated Press by a person familiar with the matter who was not authorized to discuss it

publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity. The person would not say whether anything was found.

A justice department special counsel is investigating how classified documents from Biden's time as vice-president and senator came to end up in his home and former office – and whether any mishandling involved criminal intent or was unintentional. Biden's personal lawyers disclosed in January that a small batch of documents with classified markings had been found weeks earlier in his former Washington office, and they have since allowed [FBI](#) searches of multiple properties.

The university is Biden's alma mater. In 2011, Biden donated his records from his 36 years serving in the US Senate to the school. The documents arrived on 6 June 2012, according to the university, which released photos of the numbered boxes being unloaded at the university alongside blue and gold balloons.

Under the terms of Biden's gift, the records are to remain sealed until two years after he retires from public life.

Biden's Senate records would not be covered by the Presidential Records Act, though prohibitions on mishandling classified information would still apply.

The White House referred questions to the justice department, which declined to comment. The University of [Delaware](#) also referred questions to the justice department.

The university is the fourth known entity to be searched by the FBI following inspections of Biden's former office at the Penn Biden Center in Washington DC, where records with classified markings were initially found in a locked closet by Biden's personal lawyers in November, and more recently of his Delaware homes in Wilmington and Rehoboth Beach.

Those searches were all done voluntarily and with the consent of Biden's legal team.

The FBI took six items that contained documents with classified markings during its January search of the Wilmington home, Biden's personal lawyer said. Agents did not find classified documents at the Rehoboth Beach property but did take some handwritten notes and other materials relating to Biden's time as vice-president for review.

The justice department is separately investigating the retention by former president Donald Trump of roughly 300 documents marked as classified at his Florida estate, Mar-a-Lago. The FBI served a search warrant at the home last August after months of resistance by Trump and his representatives to returning the documents to the government.

The FBI also searched the Indiana home of former vice-president Mike Pence last week after his lawyers came forward to say they had found a small number of documents with classified markings. A Pence adviser said one additional document with classified markings was found during that search.

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## China

# Wuhan welfare protests escalate as hundreds voice anger over health insurance cuts

Crowds of retirees gather in cities of Wuhan and Dalian to protest against cuts as local government coffers feel strain of years of Covid policies



Demonstrators outside Zhongshan park in Wuhan, China, protest on Wednesday against changes to medical benefits. Photograph: Social Media/Reuters

*[Helen Davidson](#) in Taipei, and agencies*

Thu 16 Feb 2023 00.52 ESTLast modified on Thu 16 Feb 2023 01.07 EST

Crowds of hundreds of older people took to the streets in the Chinese cities of Wuhan and Dalian on Wednesday in escalating protests against changes to the public health insurance system.

The protests were sparked by cuts to monthly allowances paid to retirees under China's vast public health insurance system. The changes, gradually introduced since 2021, come as local government finances are strained following years of strict and [costly zero-Covid policies](#).

On Wednesday, a crowd of demonstrators rallied in front of a park in the central Chinese city of Wuhan for the [second time in a week](#). Video posted on social media showed security guards by the entrance to a popular scenic spot, Zhongshan park, forming a human chain to prevent more demonstrators from entering. Crowds pushed against officers, while some videos showed people singing the "Internationale". The song, also an anthem of the Chinese Communist party, has been a feature of some recent protests and been used to accuse the party of straying from its origins.

A separate protest, comprising hundreds of retirees, was also staged outside Wuhan's city hall. Pictures shared on social media appeared to show local officials meeting some of those demonstrators for negotiations.

Hundreds of people also rallied on Wednesday morning over the same issue more than 1,200km away, in the north-eastern city of Dalian, a witness confirmed to Agence France-Presse.

"Give me back my medical insurance money," the crowd shouted in one video, which the news agency geolocated to the city's Renmin square, where a number of local government buildings are situated.

In another video, a large column of police are seen guarding the city government building.

Total numbers of Wednesday's protesters ranged from hundreds to thousands, across media reports. At last week's protests witnesses reported some participants [being taken away by police](#). Local residents at the time said the retirees had threatened to take to the streets again on 15 February unless the government responded immediately.

According to social media posts collated by [a protest monitoring account](#), some public institutions in central Wuhan were closed for the day on Wednesday. There also appeared to be an increase in the number of community activities organised for the city's older people, and some residents alleged security officers were preventing them from leaving their residential buildings, citing "public health insurance reasons".

"These old people can come out [to protest] not only for themselves but also for future generations," said one supporter on social media. "Medical and social insurance without a contract is a Ponzi scheme of CCP. If you don't go on the streets today, your children and grandchildren will become slaves for generations."

Another said: "If you reduce the basic living allowance for the people, who would trust the government in the younger generation?"

The protests in Wuhan, a city of 11 million people, have been exacerbated by the fact that its officials are largely unaffected by the changes, analysts have said.

"Civil servants and public institution staff are still entitled to subsidised medical assistance insurance on top of the employee health insurance scheme," political risk consultancy SinoInsider said in a note.

"Senior and retired CCP (Chinese Communist party) cadres have long had access to generous medical treatments at public expense and without having to pay for basic healthcare insurance."

Local governments could "compromise and meet protester demands early" rather than engage in a drawn-out dispute, the firm added.

On Thursday, China's state planner and finance ministry announced policies aimed at stimulating spending on housing and unlocking consumer savings that have been built up during the pandemic.

The announcements, reported by state media, also included measures to help older people, improve childcare services and encourage couples to

have more children.

Localised protests are not rare in China, but a spate of rallies across multiple cities last year with a shared focus on Covid restrictions and their social impact rattled authorities, who worked quickly to shut them down and arrest participants. There was also speculation that the sudden lifting of zero-Covid restrictions just weeks later was also connected to the protests.

*Additional research by Chi Hui Lin*

*With Agence France-Presse*

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## Nutrition

# Most health claims on formula milk 'not backed by evidence'

BMJ report found nutritional benefits cited by multibillion-pound industry lacked scientific references



Millions of parents use formula milk in what has become a lucrative global industry. Photograph: imageBROKER/Alamy

[Andrew Gregory](#) *Health editor*

[@andrewgregory](#)

Wed 15 Feb 2023 18.30 EST Last modified on Thu 16 Feb 2023 11.35 EST

Most health claims on formula milk products have little or no supporting evidence, researchers have said, prompting calls for stricter marketing rules to be introduced worldwide.

Millions of parents use formula milk in what has become a multibillion-dollar global industry. But a study published in the BMJ has found most

health and nutritional claims about the products appear to be backed by little or no high-quality scientific evidence.

“The wide range of health and nutrition claims made by infant formula products are often not backed by scientific references,” said Dr Ka Yan Cheung and Loukia Petrou, the joint first co-authors of the study. “When they are, the evidence is often weak and biased.”

Cheung and Petrou, from Imperial College London, added: “We also found that many ingredients were linked to several claims, and some claims were linked to multiple ingredients. It’s essential that the industry provides accurate and reliable information to consumers, rather than using vague or unsupported claims as marketing tools.”

The study found that existing marketing curbs on formula milk are failing to stop companies from using controversial claims to promote their products. Rules governing the way the products are sold to customers are “failing to effectively limit the use of claims in marketing of breast milk substitutes”, it found.

The research examined formula products across 15 different countries and found that most products carried at least one health or nutrition claim. The authors highlighted how such claims are controversial and are banned in some countries.

They assessed how the products were marketed across Australia, Canada, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Spain, the UK, and the US. The team examined 814 infant formula products. The products carried an average of two claims each.

The researchers found that the most common claim types were “helps/supports development of brain and/or eyes and/or nervous system”; “strengthens/supports a healthy immune system”; and “helps/supports growth and development”.

When references were provided, 56% reported findings of clinical trials while the rest were reviews, opinion pieces or other types of research including animal studies, the BMJ reported. Only 14% of citations that referred to clinical trials were prospectively registered, and 90% of claims that cited registered clinical trials carried a high risk of bias.

The BMJ added that 88% of registered trials had authors who either had received formula industry funding or were directly affiliated with industry.

“Multiple ingredients were claimed to achieve similar health or nutrition effects, multiple claims were made for the same ingredient type, most products did not provide scientific references to support claims, and referenced claims were not supported by robust clinical trial evidence,” the authors said.

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They concluded: “Despite previous attempts to change the landscape of infant formula marketing ... progress in regulating infant formula claims is slow. Transparency is still lacking about health and nutrition claims linked to infant formula. We have identified a high prevalence of claims on infant formula products in multiple countries that seem to have little or no scientific substantiation.”

Dr Daniel Munblit and Dr Robert Boyle, senior co-authors for the study from Imperial, added: “There is a clear need for greater regulation and oversight to ensure that these claims are supported by sound scientific evidence and to protect the health and wellbeing of our youngest and most vulnerable populations.”

This article was amended on 16 February 2023 to change the main image to one more appropriate to the text.

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## [Japan](#)

# Japan sees its number of islands double after recount

Digital mapping leads to around 7,000 new islands being discovered though it's unlikely to expand Japan's territory, media reports say



Shiretoko peninsula in Hokkaido, Japan. The country's island count has doubled from past official figures, an upcoming survey is expected to show. Photograph: AP

[Justin McCurry](#) in Tokyo

Wed 15 Feb 2023 23.37 ESTLast modified on Wed 15 Feb 2023 23.42 EST

It can't be easy keeping count of the number of islands scattered around an area of more than 370,000 square kilometres, in a country that is regularly subjected to volcanic activity and extreme weather.

While Japan has seen the [formation of new islands](#), and the [quiet disappearance](#) of another, geographers have said official statistics showing

it is made up of around 6,000 islands are way off the mark.

Using digital mapping technology, geographers will soon announce that Japan's island count is actually double the previously recognised number, according to media reports.

In the first survey of its kind for 35 years, the Geospatial Information Authority of [Japan](#) has totted up a total of 14,125 islands – 7,273 more than previously thought.

The government body, which is due to release its findings within the next few weeks, said the new information was unlikely to change the size of Japan's territory or territorial waters, according to the Kyodo news agency.

The authority launched the new study following criticism that the previous data were out of date, meaning the actual number of islands could be dramatically higher.

An MP from the ruling Liberal Democratic party called for a recount, telling parliament in 2021 that “an accurate understanding of the number of islands ... was in the national interest”.

In the last survey, released in 1987 by the coast guard, paper maps were used to tally islands – defined as land masses with a circumference of at least 100 metres – resulting in the previously accepted figure of 6,852.

In the most recent study, officials used the same size criterion, but counted islands using digitised maps and cross-referenced the information with past aerial photographs and other data to exclude artificially reclaimed land, Kyodo said.

Some of Japan's 47 prefectures comprise huge numbers of islands. The northern prefecture of Hokkaido – one of the four main islands, along with Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu – has 1,473, according to the new survey, while Nagasaki in the south-west has 1,479.

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## Elon Musk

# Elon Musk reportedly forced Twitter algorithm to boost his tweets after Super Bowl flop

A tweet from Joe Biden got triple the impressions than Musk's game time post, sending engineers scrambling to boost their boss



Twitter engineers were reportedly alerted in the early morning by the CEO's cousin to revamp the algorithm. Photograph: Dado Ruvic/Reuters

[Kari Paul](#)

Wed 15 Feb 2023 16.50 ESTLast modified on Wed 15 Feb 2023 17.06 EST

Twitter chief executive Elon Musk rallied a team of roughly 80 engineers to reconfigure the platform's algorithm so his tweets would be more widely viewed, tech news site [Platformer has reported](#).

A disgruntled Musk called for an emergency effort after a tweet he sent during Sunday's Super Bowl game failed to achieve as much engagement as a tweet from Joe Biden, interviews and internal documents reviewed by Platformer have revealed.

The effort was sparked when a tweet from the president, who has 37m followers, generated nearly 29m impressions while a similar tweet from Musk – who has 128m followers – generated little more than 9.1m impressions.

A Twitter employee and cousin of [Elon Musk](#), James Musk, posted urgently in the company Slack at 2.30am the following Monday morning, asking all employees who can code to participate. “Any people who can make dashboards and write software please can you help solve this problem,” he wrote. “This is high urgency.”

Engineers then deployed a new algorithm that artificially inflated Musk's tweets by a factor of 1,000, ensuring that more than 90% of Musk's 128.9m followers see them. Many who do not follow Musk are also being served his tweets in their feed through the “For you” tab of the app's home page, which curates tweets from a number of accounts, including those a user is not following.



Elon Musk checks his phone during Super Bowl LVII in Glendale, Arizona. Photograph: Caitlin O'Hara/Reuters

Musk seemed to publicly confirm the move, in his own way, posting a meme about [forcing followers](#) to read his tweets. He also told followers to “stay tuned” while Twitter [makes adjustments](#) to the algorithm.

The decision to devote internal resources to promoting his own tweets comes amid ongoing reports about Musk’s obsession with his own impressions on the platform. Last week, a report from Platformer also revealed Musk had fired a principal engineer at Twitter who told him views on his tweets [had decreased organically](#), with interest in the erratic CEO waning. Users have complained since Twitter made its “For you” page the default feed on the platform in January that Musk’s tweets were appearing more frequently.

Musk, who purchased Twitter in October 2022 for \$44bn, has made a number of additional changes to the platform in the intervening months, allowing the return of previously banned accounts like that of Donald Trump, changing the process for Twitter verification, and [revoking free access](#) to the platform’s API, or application programming interface.

Amid ongoing criticisms of his decisions as chief executive, Musk has promised to step down and [find a replacement](#) as soon as later this year. Current employees have described a harrowing environment at the company, [which laid off](#) nearly half its workforce in November 2022. At the time, Musk defended the cuts and other cost-cutting measures, stating the company was losing \$4m per day.

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