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Headlines friday 24 march 2023

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A runner passes a boarded-up shop in London in April 2020, weeks after the launch of the business support programme. Photograph: Andrew Redington/Getty Images

[Economic policy](#).

Only 1% of £1.1bn lost in Covid business scheme recovered, report finds

National Audit Office urges ministers to learn lessons of losses in England resulting from fraud and error

[Peter Walker](#) *Political correspondent*

[@peterwalker99](#)

Fri 24 Mar 2023 02.00 EDT

Just 1% of the estimated £1.1bn lost from the government's Covid business support programme in [England](#) as a result of fraud and error has been recovered so far, the public spending watchdog has said in a report urging ministers to learn lessons from the scheme.

The “overwhelming majority” of fraud and error occurred during the initial incarnation of the grant scheme launched in March 2020, which did not require prepayment checks, the National Audit Office (NAO) said in its report on the rushed-through efforts.

The total of £1.1bn [lost in grants](#) amounted to just under 5% of the total for the scheme, according to business department statistics. The latest figures of retrieved money, collated by the newly renamed Department for Business and Trade (DBT) and cited by the NAO, showed that only £11.4m of that has been recovered – 1% of the amount lost.

The report sets out the sheer speed at which the eight separate grant schemes for businesses, administered by local authorities, were developed and launched, noting that the business department was only asked by the Treasury in late February to examine how such a system might work.

The first version began from 11 March, with a second on 17 March. As early as 19 April, the report says, local authorities had made 484,000 payments totalling £6bn, more than 50% of the total handed out in what was the biggest such support programme beyond the furlough scheme.

Matters were not helped by a lack of any shared contingency plan between local and national government on how to support businesses in the event of an emergency, the NAO said, with councils generally only hearing about new schemes when they were announced publicly, at which point they were already dealing with queries from local businesses.

One result of the accelerated timetable was the initial wave of fraud and error. Later versions of the grants not only used prepayment checks but also had access to much more accurate local information about businesses.

The report calls for the DBT and Treasury, working with councils, to draw up formal contingency plans by the end of this year about similar financial support if there is a future national emergency, using the lessons of the Covid scheme.

Gareth Davies, the head of the NAO, said the business department and local government “deserve credit for working quickly to set up and distribute grants to businesses”, but that the full impact of fraud and error remained unclear.

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“The government does not yet know the impact of these grants – in terms of maintaining jobs or how much support might have been given to businesses which did not need it. Without such an assessment, an overall judgement about the value for money of the schemes remains open,” he said.

“The government’s experience of working at speed with local authorities to channel financial support during the pandemic offers important lessons should similar crises occur. The new Department for Business and Trade can now use these lessons to improve contingency planning and to build government resilience for responding to future national emergencies.”

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From left: Sajid Javid, Gavin Williamson and Robert Buckland.
Photograph: PA/Rex Shutterstock

[Politics](#)

Over 170 ex-ministers and officials take jobs linked to old policy briefs since 2017

Transparency International says its report raises questions over conflicts of interest in Westminster

[Rowena Mason](#) *Whitehall editor*

Fri 24 Mar 2023 02.00 EDT Last modified on Fri 24 Mar 2023 06.33 EDT

More than 170 former ministers and senior officials have taken private sector roles related to their old policy briefs in the past six years, research has found, with Sajid Javid, Robert Buckland and Gavin Williamson among the Tory MPs declaring lucrative second jobs in the last few weeks.

A report from Transparency International found large numbers of ex-ministers and senior officials were going straight from their government jobs into private sector roles relevant to their former responsibilities, which it said raised serious questions over how potential conflicts of interest are managed in Westminster.

It found 30% of those taking jobs after holding senior office were hired in a similar area to their government role, with the highest prevalence among former defence and education office holders. Overall, 177 out of 604 jobs since 2017 were linked to the former policy responsibilities of government ministers and officials.

Duncan Hames, the director of policy at Transparency International UK, said: “Britain’s revolving-door watchdog has proved powerless to stop former ministers and officials cashing in on the contacts they made in public service.

“The [Greensill](#) saga highlighted just how easily former politicians can secure privileged access to government for their new paymasters – with potentially huge implications for public policy and the use of taxpayers’ money.

“While most ministers and senior officials take care to avoid potential conflicts when leaving office, this research shows the potential for abuse of the ‘revolving door’ remains significant and demonstrates the need for a regulator with teeth.

“Tighter controls on lobbying for private interests, and replacing the present advisory committee with a statutory body that can effectively police the revolving door would better protect the public from it being so abused.”

The research comes as large numbers of Tory MPs from the Boris Johnson and Liz Truss governments appear to be taking on second jobs amid fears within the party that many could lose their seats or be consigned to opposition after the next election.

The former ministers Williamson, Buckland and Javid were among those to declare well-paid second jobs on the last register of members' interests, all of which are in the same sector as their former briefs.

They have all been approved with no concerns by the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments (Acoba) which has long been criticised for being toothless in its inability to veto appointments or enforce any lobbying restrictions.

Javid, a former chancellor and health secretary, is taking a £300,000 a year role as an adviser to the Jersey-based investment firm Centricus Partners. He is being paid about £2,500 an hour for the job, after saying he would not stand again at the next election.

Williamson, a former education secretary, took up a post as a £50,000 adviser to RTC Education, a firm run by the Tory donor Selva Pankaj, while Buckland, a former justice secretary, has become a senior counsel for Payne Hicks Beach solicitors for £4,000 a month.

The former business secretary Jacob Rees-Mogg has returned to an unpaid role as director of his personal company Saliston, and Jake Berry, a former Tory party chair, has taken an unpaid role as director of the energy company Palatine Power.

Philip Davies, a Tory backbencher, has been appointed as a consultant on regulation and public policy at the National Pawnbrokers Association, paid £1,000 a month, while Bim Afolami, a former Tory vice-chair, has become a £2,000 a month partner in the professional advice firm Warre Constable.

Current senior Tories have also been signing up for extra work, with the deputy chair, Lee Anderson, accepting a £100,000 a year job at GB News.

Johnson has not taken any jobs since departing as prime minister but has earned millions [from speeches](#) to private firms and enjoyed tens of thousands of pounds in accommodation and hospitality from Tory donors.

MPs rushed to scale back and drop second jobs around the time of the [Owen Paterson lobbying scandal](#) that led to the former environment

secretary being censured and ultimately losing his seat in a byelection.

However, there has recently been an uptick in MPs taking jobs that increase their pay. Johnson's government had indicated it might put a limit on second jobs in terms of hours or pay but the proposal was dropped last year.

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Deutsche Bank shares tumble as fresh banking sell-off grips Europe and US – as it happened

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The Bank of England governor, Andrew Bailey, expects inflation to ‘fall sharply really from the early summer throughout the rest of the year’.
Photograph: Maxian/Getty Images/iStockphoto

[Bank of England](#)

Bank of England boss urges firms to hold back price rises or risk higher rates

Andrew Bailey says interest rates will have to rise again unless inflation falls

- [Wetherspoon's boss: hospitality holding off price rises could be 'catastrophic'](#)

[Phillip Inman](#)

[@phillipinman](#)

Fri 24 Mar 2023 05.51 EDTLast modified on Fri 24 Mar 2023 14.39 EDT

The Bank of England governor, Andrew Bailey, has called on businesses to hold back price rises, telling them that [interest rates will need to rise again](#) unless inflation falls.

Bailey, who was speaking after the [central bank raised its base rate](#) on Thursday to a 14-year high of 4.25% from 4%, said inflation was too high and the central bank would need to take further action unless it began to fall by the summer.

The warning came after the latest official data showed the annual rate of [inflation unexpectedly rose to 10.4% in February](#), from 10.1% in January. The Bank of England's official inflation target is 2%.

"We've got to get inflation down," he said. "Inflation is too high at the moment. Now we think that it will fall sharply really from the early summer throughout the rest of the year. And we're pretty confident about that.

"But it hasn't come down yet and we had some news earlier this week which was a bit higher than we expected it to be, there were probably some temporary factors in there," he said.



Andrew Bailey: ‘When companies set prices I understand that they have to reflect the costs that they face.’ Photograph: Reuters

Speaking on BBC Radio 4’s Today programme, Bailey added: “I would say to people who are setting prices: please understand if we get inflation embedded interest rates will have to go up further,” he said.

“When companies set prices I understand that they have to reflect the costs that they face. But what I would say, please, is that when we are setting prices in the economy and people are looking forwards we do expect inflation to come down sharply this year and I would just say please bear that in mind.”

Last year, Bailey told workers to restrain wage demands or risk further interest rates rises to prevent inflation becoming embedded. His comments caused a storm of protest from trade unions who argued that wage rises were well below inflation and most workers were suffering a sharp decline in their standard of living.

The most recent labour market figures show wages growth in the private sector stalled last November and has remained flat since then.

Asked if he thought companies were profiteering, and pushing prices higher than they needed to, Bailey said he had no evidence to support this concern but wished business owners to consider price restraint.

Research on company accounts by the [UK’s largest private sector union, Unite](#), earlier this month found that large corporations had fuelled inflation with price increases that went beyond rising costs of raw materials and wages.

Highlighting a trend [dubbed “greedflation”](#), [analysis](#) of the top 350 companies listed on the London Stock Exchange showed that average profit margins – a company’s revenue above the cost of sales – had risen from 5.7% in the first half of 2019 to 10.7% in the first half of 2022.

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Economists have become increasingly concerned that multinational corporations have passed on higher prices to increase profits and improve profit margins, pushing inflation to a level that is not warranted by increases in raw materials or wage rises.

Nestlé and Procter & Gamble are [among the big global businesses](#) to increase profits and protect profit margins over the last year.

Responding to Bailey's remarks, the Unite general secretary, Sharon Graham, said a "lacklustre acknowledgment" by the central bank that companies had played a role in rising prices was a welcome development. But she said the governor had failed to understand "the depth of the profiteering crisis".

"Andrew Bailey's lacklustre acknowledgment of the role price rises are having on inflation is a step forward after years of targeting workers," she said. "However, [he] is still refusing to acknowledge the depth of the crisis. The UK is in the grip of a profiteering epidemic – it is greedflation, not workers' wages, that is fuelling the cost of living crisis.

"The profits of Britain's biggest firms have spiked 89%. So to claim that there is no evidence of excessive profiteering just isn't credible.

Policymakers seem determined to remain prisoners of a broken economy. They need to wake up.”

The European Central Bank recently [discussed the potential impact of profiteering](#) by companies as a source of inflation, although it has yet to disclose its conclusions.

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Indie supergroup Boygenius: ‘Anything that starts a fire in you is the stuff of life’

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Illustration: Joren Joshua/The Guardian

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

You be the judge: should my girlfriend get over her addiction to lip balm?

Damilola says Sade is obsessed with lip balm. She doesn't see a problem with it, but is she glossing over the issue? You decide

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



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

Fri 24 Mar 2023 04.00 EDT Last modified on Fri 24 Mar 2023 22.03 EDT

The prosecution: Damilola

Sade is obsessed with lip balm and applies it hundreds of times a day. I think it's bad for her

My girlfriend Sade has an unhealthy obsession with lip balms. If she doesn't have one at hand, she freaks out. She literally can't sleep until her lips are coated in something.

She says her lips get super dry if she doesn't use balms and butters. But I think that's because her body has got accustomed to them. I once showed her an article about "lazy lips", which suggested that if you apply lip balm

too often it does more harm than good, because your lips become reliant on the product and lose the ability to moisturise themselves. Sade said it was rubbish – but if she goes without lip balm for a day, she complains about dry lips. That's not normal. Most people should be able to go a day without lip balm. I certainly can.

Sade has about five pots of Carmex on the go right now. One is mouldy

Ten years ago, when we first got together, she carried a little tin of Vaseline in her pocket. She had every flavour: the green one, the pink one, the cocoa butter one. But one day she read about how petroleum jelly comes from crude oil, so switched to Carmex. I recommended a beeswax lip balm and have even bought her some natural ones over the years. She uses them for a bit but then reverts to Carmex, which is slightly annoying as the ones I buy are more expensive and, I think, better.

But while her products may change, the obsession remains. She sleeps with lip balm under her pillow. She has about five pots of Carmex right now, all well past their best. One is black and mouldy around the lid; another is covered in sand from a recent holiday. They are all half-finished because she panic buys a new one when she can't find the others. I remind her that they aren't cheap any more. Recently she paid £5 for a pot of Carmex at a petrol station, which I found a bit outrageous.

Bedtimes are held up if she can't locate her lip balm, and she puts it on first thing in the morning and then about a million times throughout the day. Her habit is expensive and it's probably not very good for her, so I'd like to try to wean her off it.

The defence: Sade

I've loved the feeling of balm on my lips since I was a child. It's pricey, but doesn't do any harm

I admit that I am reliant on my lip balms – I can't really say why. The obsession started when I was a child. I developed chapped lips one day

while walking to school in the cold with my mum. She put some Vaseline on my lips and I liked how it felt, so I kept using it after my lips healed.

I used to love all the limited-edition Vaselines – I had one in every colour and flavour. The cocoa butter one was the best. But I switched to Carmex after I read that it's better for you.

The ingredients in lip balms don't cause addictions. I've done my research

Dami moans that I leave half-used tubs of Carmex around our home, but it's hard to finish one. I actually can't remember ever getting to the bottom of one – I always lose them first. Dami hates that I buy another pot before I've located the half-used ones. He also reminds me that lip balms aren't cheap any more, which he's right about. We're in a cost of living crisis but I recently paid £5 for a pot of Carmex. It didn't help that I found two lost pots when we got home.

I remember when they used to be 99p, so I get his frustration – the cost of my collection adds up. But when I need my lips moisturised, I don't really care – I'll use whatever I can get my hands on. At night I can't sleep until I've applied some balm.

The ingredients in lip balms can't cause addictions – I've done my research – but I'm probably addicted psychologically. I think it's just a harmless habit. I also have loads of lip glosses and soft lipsticks. I just love having something on my lips.

I once read about how much petroleum jelly women ingest from licking balm off their lips. That was a bit worrying – Dami joked that I probably have a big ball of jelly in my stomach as I've been applying it for most of my life.

I don't plan on giving up my balms, and I don't think my obsession is that serious. Dami has bought me some more natural lip balms over the years

and I use those too, but the Carmex is my favourite. I always joke that he'll have to prise it from my cold dead hands before I give it up.

The jury of Guardian readers

Should Sade stop using so much lip balm?

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Damilola needs to realise that there are way more important things to worry about. Let Sade use her lip balm if it helps her get through life – God knows, it's hard enough at the best of times. Case dismissed: release the prisoner!

Paddy, 63

I totally understand the need to have lip balm close by at all times (I do, too). If she is using her own money to buy it, that's her choice. However, I do think Sade should toss out her older pots.

Molly, 28

While I don't think there's anything that wrong with a lip balm habit, albeit one as extreme as this, Dami is clearly stressed out by it and worried about

Sade. She should be more receptive to that and at least try to cut back.

Benjamin, 26

Damilola's concern about the drying chemicals in some brands is well founded, and routine scavenger hunts for lip balm are stressful and time-consuming. Sade should trial the more natural brands to try to wean herself off – and try to store them somewhere she'll remember.

Becky, 26

Damilola needs to realise that everyone's partner does a couple of things the other finds disgusting. If lip balm is the most revolting thing Sade is into, Damilola should be grateful – you're lucky she doesn't have a nose-picking habit.

Anita, 33

Now you be the judge

In our online poll below, tell us: is it time for Sade to smooth things over with Damilola and lay off the lip balm?

The poll closes on Thursday 30 March at 10am BST

Last week's result

We asked if Alex should stop [farting in front of his girlfriend](#), Astrid.

51% of you said yes: Alex is guilty

49% of you said no: Alex is not guilty

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New high scares ... (Left to right) Christina Ricci, Steven Krueger, Samantha Hanratty, Tawny Cypress, Jasmin Savoy Brown, Juliette Lewis, Sophie Thatcher, Melanie Lynskey, Sophie Nélisse, Ella Purnell and Warren Kole in Yellowjackets. Photograph: Brendan Meadows/Showtime

[TV review](#)[Yellowjackets](#)

[Review](#)

Yellowjackets season two review – this wonderfully imaginative sequel is even better than last time

Juliette Lewis is sublime, Christina Ricci finds her perfect co-star and you're constantly kept on your toes with parallel timelines and tons of creepy thrills. What a follow-up!



[Leila Latif](#)

Fri 24 Mar 2023 03.00 EDTLast modified on Fri 24 Mar 2023 03.01 EDT

After the 2021 press tour [for the slasher movie Halloween Kills](#), a video [of Jamie Lee Curtis went viral](#), highlighting just how many times she uttered the word “trauma”. She was speaking about one of the most common problems with “elevated horror” – genuine suspense and terror being sidelined to give room to heavy-handed metaphors for trauma. What truly elevates Yellowjackets above most contemporary horror is that it provides space for the psychological impact of spending 19 months starving while your friends die around you, without forgoing nauseating gore, gruelling tension and acerbic wit.

There was so much to recommend the first season of [Yellowjackets](#), a word-of-mouth hit that switched between the past and the present with two sets of cast members – one playing the younger characters, the other playing their more mature incarnations. It followed the 1996 plane crash of a high school football team, who ended up stranded in the wilderness and doomed to come of age battling the elements (and one another) before rescue. In the present, the survivors face blackmail, addiction, murder and PTSD. Supernatural elements continue to keep things ambiguous; it's never entirely clear what was created by paranormal forces and what was the result of hallucinatory mushrooms or fractured psyches.

The second season picks up two months later for the young survivors, devastated in the wilderness after the first snow froze their team captain, Jackie, to death. In the present there has been no leap forward in time, but things are not looking much better. Taissa (Tawny Cypress) has just won her run for state senator, but frequently dissociates into a strange feral state that sees her murder the family dog; Christina Ricci's delightful sociopath Misty has got away with killing a PI using fentanyl-laced cigarettes, but fears she has lost her friends; Nat (Juliette Lewis) has a suicide attempt interrupted by her own kidnapping, and is going through withdrawal while tied to a bedframe. Meanwhile, Shauna (Melanie Lynskey) is trying to get away with murdering her lover, Adam, while rebuilding her marriage to high school sweetheart Jeff. Although ostensibly we know where the teens in the past ended up, there are still big questions as to who, or what, torments them in the present.

This interweaving of timelines and narratives gets more complicated with the introduction of adult versions of the disturbed spiritual leader Lottie and straight-talking Van, played by Simone Kessell and Lauren Ambrose respectively. We also deviate from the two established timelines and flash forward to the teens' rescue. To make matters even more complex, the show introduces fantasy sequences and unreliable narration, and scenes seen through Taissa, Shauna and Lottie's perspectives cannot be taken at face value.



Future imperfect ... Christina Ricci as Misty in Yellowjackets. Photograph: Kailey Schwerman/Showtime

But rather than making the show incomprehensible, this season improves upon the first by keeping the audience perpetually on its toes, allowing for jump scares, body horror and some wonderfully imaginative twists. This is no better realised than in the bacchanalian revelry of episode two, where the starving teens hallucinate their way out of confronting the horrific reality of their actions. Similar blackly comic and surreal elements continue throughout, which, alongside a truly banging 90s alt-rock soundtrack, break up what could otherwise be unrelentingly miserable.

The darkest of laughs are mined from the bizarre co-dependent bond young Misty forms with musical-theatre geek Crystal (Nuha Jes Izman) and the equally dysfunctional one in the present with fellow amateur detective Walter (Elijah Wood). Ricci and Wood prove perfect foils for each other, adept at playing dangerous weirdos you can't help but root for. While social outcast Misty is forging new connections, the most significant pivot in character comes from Nat, who is no longer lumbered with a downward spiral of snorting and slurring. Nat gets some of the answers she's been so desperately craving early on in the season, and Lewis stunningly performs the nuances of tentative empathy and glimmers of optimism within a deep chasm of grief. Her characterisation is enhanced further by her younger

counterpart, Sophie Thatcher, who despite only slight physical similarities, has an uncanny resemblance to Lewis's performance, making Nat a pillar of strength and a broken fuck-up at the same time.

As the six episodes that were provided for review conclude, some of the biggest mysteries from season one have been solved – but a new set of questions have been seamlessly introduced. Will our characters get away with the staggering number of crimes they have committed? How many more taboos are there left to break? Could Misty finally get a boyfriend? One thing that feels assured is Yellowjackets will continue to clear the high bar it sets for itself and be about way more than just “trauma”.

Yellowjackets season two is on Paramount+

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Bordeaux city hall set on fire amid protests over France pension changes – video

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Why Macron's pension plans have stoked so much anger in France

Protests against raising of retirement age reached most intense level yet on Thursday

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[Archie Bland](#)

Fri 24 Mar 2023 08.10 EDTFirst published on Fri 24 Mar 2023 05.36 EDT

Since Emmanuel Macron [forced through his plans](#) to raise the pension age in France last week, public dismay over the change to a fiercely protected feature of French social policy has been bubbling. On Thursday night, at the end of the ninth day of nationwide protests since January, that anger reached boiling point.

The most visible symbol of the tensions came in video from Bordeaux, where the [doors of the city hall were set alight](#) after a day of intensifying action on the streets. The blaze was quickly put out by firefighters. But all across the country, the unpopularity of Macron's plans was plainly visible. The authorities put the number of people on the streets at 1.1 million, while unions said it was about 3.5 million.

In a major embarrassment to the French president, a planned state visit by King Charles on Sunday [was postponed on Friday as a result of the unrest](#).

The severity of the clashes between protesters and the police – and scale of the wider movement – suggest that the fight against the changes is far from over.

Macron's role | How interview raised tensions

Macron addresses nation after strikes and protests paralyse France – video

On Wednesday, Macron [made a live TV appearance](#) to defend his plan to raise the official retirement age in France from 62 to 64 – and if any of his opponents were hoping for a message of compromise, they were sorely disappointed. Macron ruled out any change to the deeply unpopular policy, and also rejected calls for a reshuffle of his government or the resignation of his prime minister, Élisabeth Borne. He said he had only one regret: “That I have not succeeded in convincing people of the necessity of this reform.”

That was one of the triggers for the scale and intensity of Thursday's action – but the protesters' anger is not limited to Macron's management of the situation, or even the pension proposals. They say that the president's move to force the reforms through without a vote has raised wider concerns about the state of French democracy.

Thursday's protests | An optimistic mood – then vandalism and teargas



Protesters in Strasbourg on Thursday. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

The protests since Macron pushed through his pensions policy have been on two tracks: on the one hand, an optimistic and [sometimes festive](#) spirit during union-organised daytime marches; and a darker mood during unofficial actions at night.

Thursday followed that pattern again, with largely peaceful marches during the day, including one in Paris with an attendance estimated to be 119,000 by police and 800,000 by unions. Later, the [BBC reported](#) that “as soon as police showed up, [it] all kicked off”. As well as the fire in Bordeaux, there were clashes in the capital, [Kim Willsher reported](#), with *casseurs* (smashers) in masks wrecking bus shelters and newspaper kiosks, breaking windows and throwing stones at police, who used teargas to disperse them. In Rouen, a woman reportedly had part of her hand blown off by a teargas grenade.

Protesters smash shopfronts in central Paris over pensions reforms – video

The two sides predictably disagreed on who was to blame for the escalation. The French interior minister, Gérald Darmanin, called the *casseurs* “thugs” and blamed “mostly young” protesters on the “far left”. But Marylise Léon,

the deputy secretary general of the CFDT union, called the trouble “a response to the falsehoods expressed by the president and his incomprehensible stubbornness”. She added: “The responsibility of this explosive situation lies not with the unions but with the government.”

Thursday’s protests were seen as particularly significant in part because they were the first measure of how effective Macron’s attempt to assert his authority had been. Even the government’s tally suggested that more people were on the street than at any point since he enacted the policy, and the total was the largest since a nationwide rally on 7 March. One quick index of the breadth of the anger can be seen in this [Le Monde map](#) of the demonstrations across the country.

The pensions plan | Why Macron says it is necessary – and why the public disagree



Macron has rejected calls for the resignation of his prime minister, Élisabeth Borne. Photograph: Anne-Christine Poujoulat/AFP/Getty Images

Macron’s policy of raising the pensions age is not his first attempt: he abandoned a broader effort to change France’s hugely complex pensions infrastructure during his first term after huge street protests and as the

coronavirus pandemic hit. This time around, he has taken a simpler approach: instead of merging the country's 42 separate pension schemes, he argues that asking people to work for two more years can make the system sustainable in the long term.

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Macron, who cannot run for office again, insists that the changes – which were part of his second-term manifesto – are crucial and worth the sacrifice of his already-diminished popularity. Supporters point out that French men retire two years earlier than the EU average, and French women a year earlier. They reject tax increases as an alternative model, saying that France already has an unusually high tax burden, and say that demographic changes make some kind of change inevitable: while there were 2.1 workers for each retiree in 2000, the ratio was 1.7 in 2020 and is expected to reach 1.2 by 2070.

The French public is fiercely protective of a system “seen as the cornerstone of the country's cherished model of social protection”, Angelique Chrisafis wrote in this [explainer on the debate](#) last week. They are proud of the fact that French pensioners are less likely to live in poverty than those in most other European countries.

While a deficit in the system is expected over the next 25 years, [independent analysis by the pensions advisory council](#) says the figures “do not support the claim that pensions spending is out of control”. That leads critics to argue that Macron’s approach is too combative and stark, and to claim that he is instead prioritising tax cuts for businesses even as he tries to get the national deficit below an EU target of 3%.

Versions of the debate in France are likely to be reproduced elsewhere over the coming years. The World Health Organization predicts that the world’s over-60 population will double by 2050. And the Group of 30 consultancy expects pension shortfalls to be the equivalent of 23% of global output by the same year, [Bloomberg reports](#).

What happens next | Deep unpopularity of plan suggests no rapid resolution



Riot police face protesters during violent clashes in Paris on Thursday.
Photograph: Kiran Ridley/Getty Images

Poll after poll suggests that the protesters are not out of step with French public opinion, with big majorities against Macron. Two-thirds of people support the protesters, while Macron’s approval rating is 28%. Macron’s

decision to force his plan through parliament without a vote is opposed by 82% of voters, and 65% want protests to continue even if the proposals become law.

Nonetheless, amid [calls for a public referendum](#) and moves by opposition lawmakers to rescind the new law before it is implemented, Macron has shown no sign of backing down, though some believe he may remove Borne once the immediate crisis has abated. Protests are likewise expected to continue – which accounts for the postponement of Charles’s visit.

The president and his allies are likely to use the sporadic violence of Thursday’s demonstrations as a way to drive a wedge between the protest movement and the rest of the French public. But most observers believe opposition to the plans is too baked in for that tactic to succeed, and that even if he prevails on this policy, he is likely to be hamstrung for the rest of his presidency.

One likely beneficiary: the far-right leader Marine Le Pen, who has said she would overturn the changes as part of her “de-demonisation” strategy and is [viewed as the public figure](#) who best embodies opposition to the proposals.

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2023.03.24 - Opinion

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‘Detachment from reality, whether it is denying the state of the country or having a heated pool built when many voters can’t heat their homes, is arguably Rishi Sunak’s most striking quality.’ Photograph: Jordan Pettitt/PA

[Opinion](#)**Rishi Sunak**

Behind the smile, smart suits and ‘reasonable’ solutions lies Rishi Sunak the authoritarian

[Andy Beckett](#)



‘Technocrat’ is too bland a label. His administration is proving just as extreme as those of Truss and Johnson

Fri 24 Mar 2023 02.00 EDTLast modified on Fri 24 Mar 2023 05.52 EDT

In some ways, this has been a good year so far for Rishi Sunak. His young government has produced a succession of solutions to problems that have dogged the Tories for years, from the [Channel boats](#) to the [Irish border](#). These solutions may well not work; but until that is clearly the case, the impression of a problem-solving prime minister has been created, in studied contrast to the chaos left by his two predecessors.

After this week’s [privileges committee hearing](#) and their Commons defeat over the Irish border, Boris Johnson and Liz Truss seem even more discredited. Meanwhile, much of the media – always ready to give the Tories another chance – is beginning to present Sunak as someone who might save his party, and even the country, from total disaster.

From the Financial Times to the Telegraph, the word often used to describe him is “[technocrat](#)”. It’s usually a label applied to politicians who try to modernise countries such as Italy – places that British journalists like to

think are much more stuck and old-fashioned than us – and many voters in Britain probably don't know exactly what a technocrat is. But the neat, vaguely futuristic sound of the word gives a good sense. In western democracies, technocrats are generally seen as clever, rigorous and a bit aloof, but practical rather than ideological. After a decade of overambitious radicalism on both the right and the left, you might imagine that a technocrat is exactly what this country needs.

But there is a big and underexplored problem with this benign view of Sunak's premiership. For all his shirt-sleeved photo shoots, his can-do summits with foreign leaders and his emphasis on how "reasonable" his policies are, his government is proving just as extreme as those of Truss and Johnson.

In its legislation, rhetoric and more hidden manoeuvres against [strikers](#), protesters, lawyers, refugees, [civil servants](#), the BBC and seemingly any group that displeases the Tories or their supporters, the Sunak administration is enthusiastically continuing the Conservatives' post-Brexit journey into dark waters. In January, before many of its most authoritarian policies had even been unveiled, the civil liberties group [Human Rights Watch](#) warned that "the most significant assault on human rights protections in the UK for decades" was already under way.



‘In its hidden manoeuvres against strikers, protesters and seemingly any group that displeases the Tories, the Sunak administration is continuing the Conservatives’ post-Brexit journey into dark waters.’ Photograph: May James/Reuters

So far, commentators have tended to see the apparent contrast between the technocratic Sunak and the nastier, more populist version as baffling – or as clever tactics, the government tailoring its messages to different audiences. But both interpretations rely on a highly questionable assumption about Sunak and about technocrats: that they are basically moderate. Yet the style of politics he has adopted, and his professional and personal background, are not necessarily reassuring influences at all. What if his elite, business-school worldview is not a check on his government’s extremism, but the opposite?

Technocrats do not always make good democrats. Technocratic government is usually about a small number of experts, with a high opinion of themselves, coming up with supposed answers to a country’s problems, which other politicians, the state bureaucracy and the rest of society are then told to follow. This is the approach being followed by Sunak’s recent summit buddy [Emmanuel Macron](#), in his hugely controversial attempt to raise the French pension age by presidential decree rather than a vote in parliament. The strikes and other protests his actions have provoked suggest that top-down, technocratic government may be harder in economically stressed times.

But technocrats have been involved in far worse projects than Macron’s. The dictatorships of General Franco in Spain and General Pinochet in Chile, for example, were eagerly served by technocrats who saw the absence of democracy and the existence of a police state as ideal conditions in which to conduct socially disruptive economic experiments. Sunak’s government is nowhere near as repressive, yet its latest [public order legislation](#) – which means that soon “police will not need to wait for disruption to take place” before they “shut protests down”, in the government’s words – could certainly come in handy if the [collapse in living standards](#) forecast for the next two years finally brings furious Britons out on to the streets.

His immense wealth could also be inclining him towards authoritarianism. A prime minister who, in the middle of an accelerating climate crisis, is happy to have the electricity grid upgraded to heat his new [swimming pool](#) is one who may defend the interests of fellow members of the 1% by any means necessary. The catastrophic carbon footprints of the super-rich ought to be one of the issues of our age. But Sunak seems more interested in sending [climate activists to jail](#).

Being rich does not necessarily make Tory politicians callous or illiberal. Two of the wealthiest members of Margaret Thatcher's government, Michael Heseltine and Peter Walker, were also two of its less rigidly rightwing figures. But Heseltine and Walker had made their money in activities that involved quite a lot of contact with ordinary Britons, such as property development, publishing and takeovers of industrial companies. Before politics, Sunak worked for hedge funds and the financial services giant Goldman Sachs: businesses more detached from most voters' economic realities. And detachment from reality, whether it is denying the threadbare state of the country or having a heated pool built when many voters [can't heat their homes](#), is arguably Sunak's most striking quality.

Governing as an authoritarian technocrat, who will protect the winners of our ever more unequal economy, could still be reasonably effective politics. Research in 2020 by the political scientists Tim Bale, Philip Cowley and Alan Wager found that the crucial voters who left Labour for the Tories in 2019 were "[significantly more authoritarian](#) ... than even your average Conservative voter".

Given the state of the country, their record in government, and their position in the polls, winning the next election looks difficult for the Tories; but they could hold on to enough of these illiberal voters to achieve a narrow defeat. Narrow loss or not, if the party has to decide which path to follow out of opposition, the choice may well be between two versions of hard-right politics: one populist and one technocratic.

Sunak's most significant achievement as leader may be to entrench authoritarianism in his party. Something to worry about, perhaps, if you're ever tempted to see him as just a geek in a smart suit.

- Andy Beckett is a Guardian columnist

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‘Teachers are speaking out about the impact of inconsistent processes, unpredictable inspectors and the strain of waiting weeks, months and years for an inspection to be announced.’ Photograph: Russell Hart/Alamy

[OpinionOfsted](#)

Teachers live in fear of Ofsted’s punitive inspections. It needs reforming now

[Rebecca Leek](#)



We're not afraid of scrutiny and we all want to make our schools better – but this process is not the way to help children thrive

Rebecca Leek is executive director of Suffolk Primary Headteachers' Association

Fri 24 Mar 2023 04.57 EDTLast modified on Fri 24 Mar 2023 13.28 EDT

Ofsted is younger than me. And yet, for those of us who have been in education for a couple of decades, the inspection regime is part of the furniture. Its presence permeates school classrooms, offices, staffrooms and corridors. The idea of it not being around seems unimaginable – but now calls for its reform are becoming hard to ignore.

In the wake of the death of [Ruth Perry](#), a headteacher who took her own life while waiting for the publication of a damaging Ofsted report, the floodgates have opened. Teachers across the country are speaking out about the impact of inconsistent processes, unpredictable inspectors and the strain of waiting weeks, months and years for an inspection to be announced.

As executive director of the Suffolk Primary Headteachers' Association, I hear these voices all the time. At a recent meeting I listened to heads share their experiences. One, a head of two schools, was able to tell the group how different the two experiences had been. I asked, "Is there anything you wish you had done to prepare better?" His reply was no: it was impossible to predict what happened during the last inspection and he knows the next one will be different again. He also told us that the process – and especially the waiting game – had done nothing to help the school.

Like many things in schools, the inspection system has a language and a rulebook of its own. There are different timeframes depending on which category a school is currently in. For example, if the school was labelled "requires improvement" overall at its last inspection, Ofsted claims it will revisit [within 30 months](#) (as opposed to four years for a "good" or "outstanding" school). It often doesn't.

Ofsted judges schools on four key areas (or five, depending on the type of school), which include: quality of education; behaviour and attitudes; personal development; and leadership and management. Under the current system, a school that is marked "good" in four out of five areas can still receive a headline judgment of "inadequate" – as happened at Perry's school – and this is the word displayed everywhere, including on estate agents' search engines.

There has been anger against the backlash, too, from those who see Ofsted as a saving grace in a school system that has failed their child. I have worked with children with special educational needs and disabilities and I have worked with their parents, who often feel they are battling for better provision. They see Ofsted as essential in safeguarding their children's education. But teachers are not afraid of professional dialogue and scrutiny, and we're certainly not calling for "mass deregulation", as I saw suggested on Facebook this week. School leaders are proud creatures and they *really care*. School improvement and changing things for the better, day in and day out, is their bread and butter.

There are countless ways the inspection programme could change for the better, as well. One improvement would be separating out what is currently

called “quality of education” from areas that are more befitting of an annual audit approach. For example, a school’s recruitment procedures *can* be checked relatively swiftly. Was there an advert for a role, did it mention safeguarding, are there interview notes on file, is there a complete career history, were references sought? This should not be left for years on end.

The current framework handles the different sizes and phases of schools (infants, juniors, etc) very poorly. The “deep dive” model in current inspections is where an inspector will pick a subject to scrutinise with the teacher who leads it. That might work well in a large secondary school, where heads of departments are well-placed to talk through their subjects. But there are schools here in Suffolk, and across the country, where there are three classrooms and three teachers. The headteacher might be one of them.

This approach leaves a class of 25 children without their teacher for a number of hours on the day of the inspection. There is no slack in a small primary school.

But if you really want to find the hottest outrage at the current model, I suggest you make friends with the [early_years sector](#). I have heard countless anecdotes about inspectors sharing with early years leads that they have never taught in early years education – and they “don’t know much about it”. This precious zone of a school, where the most magical phase of child development happens, should be given the expert attention it deserves. Instead, early years specialists are hit with questions such as, “Why is that child not sitting at a desk?”, when the child is playing intently with small objects under a table, and is three years old. Ofsted must do better.

Finally, headteachers’ names do not need to be on inspection reports. Our job is to share responsibility and create a healthy networked model whereby everyone is committed to improving the school. Quality Care Commission inspections of GP surgeries do not carry a doctor’s name, and it’s the same with inspections of hospitals. As Perry’s sister, Julia Waters, said, [calling for a review](#) of the entire inspections system: “We do not for an instant recognise Ofsted’s ‘inadequate’ judgment as a true reflection of Ruth’s

exemplary leadership or of the wonderful school she led selflessly for 12 years.”

As the week has progressed and the voices calling for reform have become louder, Ofsted has managed to make one, dismissive [statement](#) in five days. Stopping school inspections would be “against children’s best interests”, said its chief inspector, Amanda Spielman on Friday. It appears there is little interest in reform. At what point will the inspectorate recognise that it requires improvement?

- Rebecca Leek has been a senco, headteacher, CEO and school governor. She is currently the executive director of the Suffolk Primary Headteachers’ Association
- *In the UK and Ireland, Samaritans can be contacted on 116 123, or email jo@samaritans.org or 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*



‘I’ve had some great cocaine nights with my children.’ Novelist Hanif Kureishi at his home in west London. Photograph: Sarah Lee/The Guardian

[OpinionDrugs](#)

Taking drugs with your children? Gen Z won’t even want to share a beer with us

[Zoe Williams](#)



Hanif Kureishi talks of cocaine nights with his kids. He makes the whole issue sound simple. I can't believe it is

Fri 24 Mar 2023 03.00 EDTLast modified on Fri 24 Mar 2023 05.03 EDT

“Say nothing, she’s going to use it,” my 13-year-old daughter said to my 15-year-old son, like a Miranda warning. It was the week after the novelist [Hanif Kureishi](#) had tweeted: “I’ve had some great cocaine nights with my children, and I know friends who take MDMA with their kids, though this isn’t something I would do, out of the fear of talking too much.”

Before I even considered too deeply whether I’d ever take drugs with my kids – obviously this is a purely hypothetical, what-if question – it seemed useful to know whether they’d ever take drugs with me. Even though they said nothing, in case I used it, I knew the answer would be no. They’re very anti-drugs, for which I blame/thank the school.

There are some areas of parenting that pit one sacred rule against another, and render it impossible to obey both: drug-taking is one. I take honesty and openness pretty seriously, because it corrupts if you lie to your children; it role-models mendacity, and opens up the possibility that there are secrets so

dark that you, the putative authority, have to hide, which leaves who in charge, exactly? And yet at the same time, obviously, my first and overwhelming priority is that they remain alive and, in an ideal world, sane, so I would never want to normalise high-risk behaviours, create mini-adventurers who'll try anything once, even if they have no idea what's in the anything.

Unfortunately, to square these imperatives, I'd have to go back in time and be a completely different teenager. The thing that freaks me out about the condition of youth, having such a keen interest in the aforementioned remaining alive, is not the stupid things I might have done in the 80s, but the way we reacted when things went wrong. Terrible, life-changing things happened to people I knew, especially on LSD – third-degree burns, psychotic episodes – and far from seeing any of that as a deterrent, I took a kind of idiotic, trenches attitude that if that bullet had the name of someone I knew on it, it was now statistically less likely for any bullets to have mine.

It would be unrealistic, in other words, to take the path of moralising and “Just say no”. The path I've landed on instead – volunteer nothing, answer a direct question truthfully, make everything sound very expensive and confusing, amp up the nausea – is rockier and I don't know yet how it'll play out. At the moment, the kids don't even vape, which according to the tabloids makes them the last two non-vaping teenagers in the country.

Taking drugs with your kids is the same tension between openness and protectiveness, writ larger, with a second question bolted on: what's the drug? Obviously, we're assuming by now that they're adults – I mean, it's all illegal anyway, but taking drugs with children shoots way past legality into abuse. If the aphorism is, “First they idolise you, then they see through you, then they forgive you,” now that they're adults, with luck, they're well into forgiveness. This should mean questions like, “Are you an authority figure to them, and are you torching that authority to their detriment by trying to be their friend?” are probably in the past.

I'd find it hard to get aerated about people who'd smoke dope with their kids. I'd wonder who on earth would want their children to see their coked-up personality. I can see Kureishi's point that MDMA is like a truth serum,

so certainly best to avoid if you wouldn't take one of those en famille. Boomers and generation X don't really understand ketamine, so that would have to be the kids' idea. I know drug technology has moved on a lot, but I still cannot in a million years imagine taking LSD with your treasured offspring, not least because it would result in intense anxiety about what you'd just done to their psychic ecosystem.

This is all probably a moot point anyway. The generations seem to be getting more clean-living and puritanical as time goes on. By the time gen Z are all fully of age, they won't even join us for a beer.

- Zoe Williams is a Guardian columnist
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Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin in St George's Hall at the Kremlin, Moscow, 21 March 2023. Photograph: XINHUA/Xie Huanchi/EPA

[OpinionChina](#)

Brokering peace in Ukraine would be good for Xi and China: is he adroit enough to pull it off?

[Yu Jie](#)

The war is a test of China's ability to manage its interests. Putin, Zelenskiy, the EU, the global south: it's trying to keep them all on side

Fri 24 Mar 2023 04.00 EDTLast modified on Fri 24 Mar 2023 09.34 EDT

The Moscow summit between the Chinese president, Xi Jinping, and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, was described as a visit that may [change the world order](#) by many international media. Xi's visit came at a time of great need for isolated Putin, but the rest of the world remains

puzzled about precisely how far China will go in supporting Russia in its horrific war in Ukraine.

While China demonstrates a willingness to maintain the status quo in its relationship with its biggest nuclear neighbour, Xi has still not provided a straightforward answer on exactly what kind of support is on offer, beyond deepening bilateral trade ties and [elusively worded](#) further coordination in international affairs. Nor is there a clear next step for Beijing's "peace plan" until a call between Xi and the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, takes place.

Judging from the joint communique issued by the two leaders, Beijing rehashed a call for [political settlement](#) on Ukraine. But the document offers little detail on how Kyiv and Moscow can reach that without military withdrawal by Russia.

The communique also tellingly omits any inclusion of the previously touted phrase of a ["no limits" partnership](#) with Russia, first referred to in January 2021. Instead, Xi stressed a relationship based on "no-alliance, no-confrontation and no-targeting against any third parties". The removal of the no limits partnership almost certainly displays a new sense of agonising on Beijing's bilateral ties with Moscow.

Putin's mistaken gamble that the law of the jungle would prevail for his invasion ended when an international criminal court [arrest warrant](#) was issued. It would be unwise for Beijing to involve itself further, putting at risk its own nascent efforts to rehabilitate ties with major European economies. Russia, on the other hand, has been keen to exploit China's ambivalence by presenting Xi's visit as Beijing's full endorsement of the invasion, and proving Putin still has friends in high places.

But China's reasons to sustain its ties with Russia go well beyond the Kremlin's military adventure. The two countries share a border of 4,300km – about the equivalent of the width of [Europe](#). Generations of Chinese leaders managed to settle the border between the two after holding some 2,000 meetings up to the turn of the century. The painful memory of the

issues between the Chinese Communist party and its Soviet counterpart is much alive today among Beijing's political blue bloods.

China simply cannot afford to have sabre-rattling on its [eastern borders](#) with the US and its allies, while Moscow may also provoke a security threat. Beijing may well learn that intricate geography combined with high-octane rhetoric of a partnership with no limits comes at a heavy price.

Its long-term alignment with [Russia](#) is increasingly bound to their common resentment of US hegemony, not by shared values. Deepened bilateral cooperation in recent years has allowed the two countries to demonstrate a great-power status on the world stage to counterbalance the dominance of the US.

While part of Chinese public opinion amplifies Beijing's pro-Russia narrative, it is not because parts of the population have any particular or real affection towards the country. Rather, it is a direct result of negative public perception towards the US, and incidents such as the painful memory of [Nato's bombing](#) of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999. Such strong currents in public opinion also require that Chinese leaders should not openly appear on the side of the west.

Meanwhile, China is making a renewed push to strengthen ties with the global south, which [does not see](#) the war in Ukraine in as black and white terms as the west does. Xi's trip to Moscow equally signals to an audience in many other non-western countries, along with its recent involvement in the successful restoration of ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia – a diplomatic coup that caught many observers off guard.

Its continual talk of energy and food security may also strike a chord with developing countries that are taking the toll of the negative knock-on economic impacts from this war. Many non-western countries are still attempting a post-Covid economic recovery with revived trade and investment – not a booming defence industry.

Russia's war has left the west more firmly united than it has been in years. As China's relations with the US have plunged to new lows, Chinese

leaders also want to avoid alienating the EU, one of the country's biggest trading partners. Actively brokering peace in [Ukraine](#) may well help China to secure less hostile conditions for its own economic recovery, but it would also require China to be explicit and upfront about the limits and red lines with its partner in the Kremlin.

This war continues to test China's ability to adroitly manage several conflicted interests. But to avoid Soviet-style confrontation, a simple phone call between Xi and Zelenskiy may prove necessary as a starter to steady this precarious balancing act.

- Dr Yu Jie is a senior research fellow on China in the Asia-Pacific Programme, Chatham House

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2023.03.24 - Around the world

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Airstrikes in the city of Deir el-Zour, Syria. Photograph: Twitter

[Syria](#)

US strikes Iran-backed group in Syria after deadly attack on coalition base

Airstrikes in retaliation to attack on base in north-east by suspected Iranian-made drone that killed US contractor

Reuters

Fri 24 Mar 2023 12.24 EDTFirst published on Fri 24 Mar 2023 00.17 EDT

The [US military](#) has carried out airstrikes against Iran-backed forces in retaliation for an attack that killed an American contractor and wounded five US troops.

A day after the deadly attack on US personnel in Syria, which Washington blamed on a [drone of Iranian origin](#), sources said a US base in Syria's north-east was targeted in a new missile attack. US officials said there were no US casualties in the incident on Friday.

The latest violence could further aggravate already strained relations between Washington and Tehran amid stalled efforts to revive a nuclear deal and Iran's military support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

"We're going to work to protect our people and our facilities as best we can. It's a dangerous environment," the White House national security spokesperson, John Kirby, said on CNN.

Although US forces stationed in [Syria](#) have been targeted by drones before, fatalities are rare.

The Pentagon said the US strikes by F-15 jets on Thursday targeted facilities used by groups affiliated with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC).

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a group that monitors the war in Syria, said the US strikes had killed eight pro-Iranian fighters in Syria.

Reuters was unable to independently confirm the toll.

Iran's state Press TV, which said no Iranian had been killed in the attack, quoted local sources as denying the target was an Iran-aligned military post, but saying that a rural development centre and a grain centre near a military airport had been hit.

"We will always take all necessary measures to defend our people and will always respond at a time and place of our choosing," army general Michael "Erik" Kurilla, who oversees US troops in the Middle East, said in a statement.

The US strikes were in response to an attack earlier on Thursday by a drone against US personnel at a coalition base near Hasakah in north-east Syria.

Three service members and a contractor required medical evacuation to Iraq, where the US-led coalition battling the remnants of Islamic State (IS) has medical facilities, the Pentagon said.

The other two wounded US troops were treated at the base, it said. On Friday, the Pentagon said the injured personnel were in stable condition.

A US base at the Al-Omar oil field in Syria was targeted with a missile attack on Friday morning, according to the Lebanese pro-Iranian TV channel Al Mayadeen and a security source.

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Kirby said that attack was ineffective and there were no US casualties.

It is not uncommon for Iranian-backed groups to fire missiles at US bases in Syria after they are hit with airstrikes.

US forces were first sent into Syria during the Obama administration's campaign against IS, partnering with a Kurdish-led group called the Syrian Democratic Forces. About 900 US troops are in Syria, most of them in the eastern part of the country.

[Location map](#)

US troops have come under attack by Iranian-backed groups about 78 times since the beginning of 2021, according to the US military.

The US deployment, which former president Donald Trump nearly ended in 2018 before softening his withdrawal plans, is a remnant of the larger global war against terrorism that had once included the war in Afghanistan and a far larger US military deployment to Iraq.

While IS has lost the swathes of Syria and Iraq it ruled over in 2014, sleeper cells still carry out hit and run attacks in desolate areas where neither the US-led coalition nor the Syrian army exert full control.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/24/us-strikes-iran-backed-group-in-syria-after-attack-on-coalition-base>

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A statue of the goddess Minerva at the University of El Salvador with a green headscarf symbolising support for ‘Beatriz’ in the historic case on abortion rights. Photograph: Marvin Recinos/AFP/Getty Images

[Women's rights and gender equality.](#)

‘Historic moment’ as El Salvador abortion case fuels hopes for expanded access across Latin America

Human rights court hears seriously ill woman denied procedure as advocates call for change in region with world’s most restrictive abortion laws

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Julia Zulver in San Salvador

Fri 24 Mar 2023 03.00 EDT Last modified on Sat 25 Mar 2023 02.26 EDT

Human rights activists in Latin America hope that a historic court hearing over the case of a Salvadoran woman who was denied an abortion despite her high-risk pregnancy could open the way for El Salvador to decriminalize abortions – and set an important precedent across the region.

The inter-American court of human rights (IACHR) this week considered the historic case of the woman, known as Beatriz, who was prohibited from having an abortion in 2013, even though she was seriously ill and the foetus she was carrying would not have survived outside the uterus.

The audience marked the first time that the IACHR has discussed the consequences of the country's total criminalization of abortion.

In El Salvador, abortion is fully criminalized in all circumstances, and can be punished by up to 8 years in prison. Women can also be [charged with aggravated homicide](#), which holds a 30- to 50-year prison sentence.

Beatriz's case has been taken up by feminist organizations in [El Salvador](#) and across the region who hope it could create legal changes in access to sexual and reproductive rights, including abortion, in Latin America.

Beatriz was a young Salvadoran woman who sought an abortion to end her pregnancy in 2013. She suffered from lupus, arthritis and renal failure, and the fetus she was carrying suffered from anencephaly and would not survive outside the uterus.

She appealed to the Salvadoran supreme court of justice, which denied her request for an abortion. She was eventually permitted to have an emergency C-section after she became gravely ill; her baby lived only a few hours. Beatriz died after being involved in a minor traffic accident in 2017, in part due to her ongoing physical weakness.

Anabel Recinos, a lawyer with the Citizens' Group for the Decriminalization of [Abortion](#), one of the groups representing Beatriz's family, described the hearing as "a historic moment".

"The laws on abortion are going to change," she said.

During the audience, held in San José, Costa Rica, the seven judges heard from Beatriz's family, as well as from two doctors involved in her case.

Dr Guillermo Ortiz Avedaño told the judges that although the pregnancy was high risk given Beatriz's health, his hands had been tied in terms of offering her an abortion.

Marcia Aguiluz, legal director for Latin America at Women's Link Worldwide, said: "[Dr Ortiz's] testimony made it clear that the penalization [of abortion] doesn't only impact women but also medical professionals."

Doctors, nurses and other medical professionals can receive up to 12 years' jail if they are found to have supported a woman to have an abortion.

Aguiluz said: "This case is crucially important for El Salvador. If we have a favourable result, the decision will reveal that these laws have led to the

deaths of women in the country.”

Latin America has the most restrictive abortion laws in the world. Six countries completely [prohibit the procedure in all cases](#).

In November 2021, [the Inter-American court determined](#) that El Salvador was responsible for the death of another woman, known only as Manuela, who was given a 30-year prison sentence after suffering a miscarriage in 2008.

Catalina Martínez Coral, director of the Center for Reproductive Rights’ Latin America and Caribbean office, said she hoped the court would rule that the criminalization of abortion went against the American convention on human rights and violated a wide range of human rights.

“It would mean that all countries that penalize abortion will have the update their legislation in accordance with the Inter-American court’s decision, which means they will have to end their criminalization,” she said.

Martínez Coral worried, however, that the court’s decision might rely on “perceptions of risk” to life and health. “These risks are very subjective ... If we decriminalize abortion based on exceptions... we are leaving women exposed to the subjectivity or the interpretation of the medical personnel.”

After the two-day hearing, the court is expected to take a month to write their arguments. A final decision is expected by the end of the year.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/mar/24/historic-moment-as-el-salvador-abortion-case-fuels-hopes-for-expanded-access-across-latin-america>



Arikompan the elephant at the Periyakanal plantations in Idukki district on Thursday. Photograph: PTI

[India](#)

A team of vets, four ‘kumki’ and one tranquilliser dart: the plan to capture Kerala’s marauding elephant

Known as ‘Rice Tusker’ for his insatiable hunger, the 30-year-old pachyderm has been terrorising the Indian region for years

[Amrit Dhillon](#) in Delhi

Fri 24 Mar 2023 00.05 EDTLast modified on Fri 24 Mar 2023 15.22 EDT

The trail of destruction left by an elephant in Kerala could finally come to an end on Sunday as a crack team of experts plan to capture him.

The team of 71 vets, forest officers and field workers have identified a specific spot among the wooded hills in Idukki district where Arikompan –

which means the Rice Tusker, because of his love for rice – comes every couple of days to cool off in water.

The plan is to ambush him at the spot and remove him from the area, where he has trampled 10 people to death and crushed 60 shops and homes.

As elephant habitats shrink across [India](#), elephants like Arikompan have increasingly ended up near human communities in their search for food. The encounters usually end badly for both elephant and human.

His favourite targets have been the government food shops scattered all over the district which distribute free wheat, sugar and rice to people below the poverty line. Once, he waylaid a truck that was carrying rice and other grains to those shops.

Arikompan is about 30 years old and the area has been his stomping ground since childhood.

Elephants are adored by many in Kerala, they have their own fan clubs where admirers wax lyrical about their personalities and physical features, and no special ceremony is complete without a resplendently decorated elephant to lend majesty to the occasion.

“We respect elephants in Kerala but this one has gone too far for too long now,” said Sheeba George, an Idukki district collector. “People can’t sleep at night for fear that he will come crashing through the doors or windows.”

The mission and its large team will be led by Arun Radhakrishnan Sobhana, who said: “Once he comes to the area we have identified – a flat piece of land, not a hilly area which won’t work – one of our team will get as close as he can, to about 50 metres, to shoot a tranquilliser dart at him.”

The team will not be wearing special protective equipment. “The only thing that can help us if anything goes wrong is a good pair of legs for running.”

If the dosage is about right for the roughly 3,300kg elephant, he will become calm and docile in 45 minutes and the team will converge on him for the trickiest part of all – getting Arikompan on to a truck loaded with a huge cage before the ketamine solution wears off.

The key members will be four *kumki*, or captive elephants, deployed for such operations to catch rogue elephants. They will travel 340km from their camp in Wayanad to Idukki to lend their heft.

“We will tie his legs,” Sobhana said. “One *kumki* elephant will pull from the front, the second will push from the rear and on each side – an elephant will, basically, frogmarch him up the ramp and on to the truck.”

While the rest of the team has vast experience of capturing elephants, it is only Sobhana’s second time. But he is not nervous. “My team have done this about 20 times at least so they are veterans and I am in good hands,” he said, adding: “If we don’t succeed on Sunday, we will keep trying until we do.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/24/kerala-elephant-mission-to-capture-arikompan-the-rice-tusker-india>



An asteroid estimated to be 40-90 metres in diameter will pass between Earth and the moon on Saturday US time. Photograph: Nasa/AFP/Getty Images

[Asteroids](#)

‘City killer’ asteroid to pass harmlessly between Earth and moon

Rare close encounter will occur this weekend, when the space rock will be visible through binoculars and small telescopes

Associated Press

Thu 23 Mar 2023 21.16 EDTLast modified on Fri 24 Mar 2023 15.23 EDT

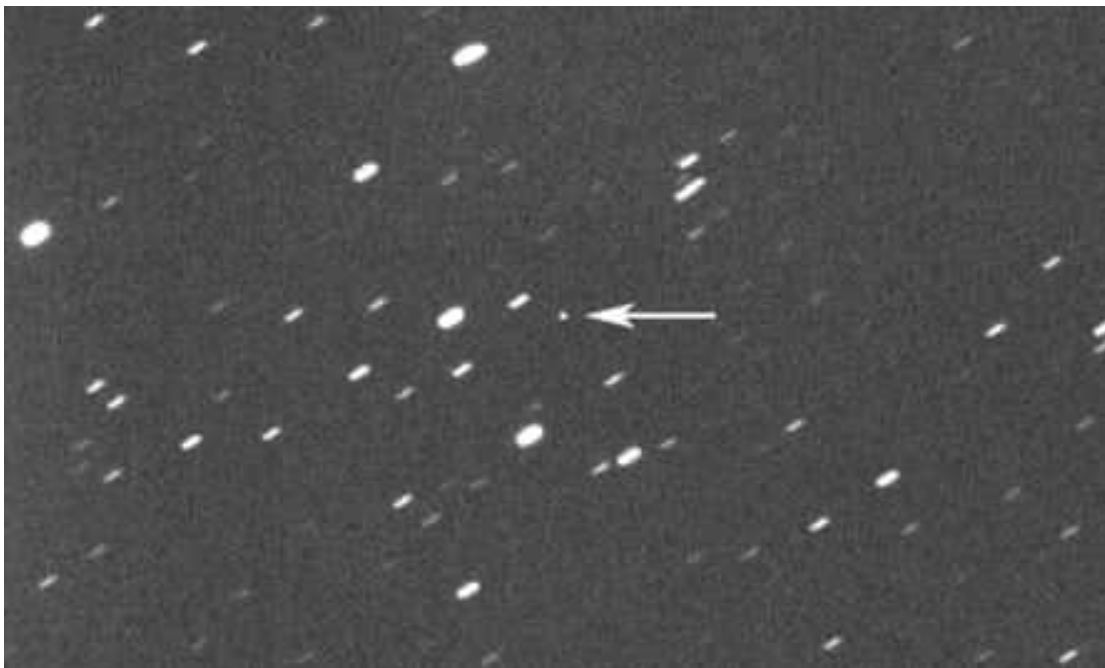
An asteroid big enough to wipe out a city will pass harmlessly between Earth and the moon’s orbit this weekend, missing both, while providing scientists a chance to study the object close up.

Asteroid flybys are common but [Nasa](#) said it was rare for one so big to come so close and that events like this occurred only about once a decade.

Scientists estimate its size to be somewhere between 40 and 90 metres in diameter.

Discovered a month ago, the asteroid known as 2023 DZ2 will pass within 515,000km of the moon on Saturday US time and, several hours later, fly past the Earth at about 28,000km/h.

The close encounter will provide astronomers the chance to study a space rock from just over 68,000km away. At less than half the distance from here to the moon, the asteroid will be visible through binoculars and small telescopes.



Asteroid 2023 DZ2, indicated by arrow. Photograph: Gianluca Masi/AP

“There is no chance of this ‘city killer’ striking Earth, but its close approach offers a great opportunity for observations,” the European [Space](#) Agency’s planetary defence chief, Richard Moissl, said in a statement.

Astronomers with the International Asteroid Warning Network see it as good practice for planetary defence if and when a dangerous asteroid is discovered that could hit Earth, according to Nasa.

The Virtual Telescope Project will provide a live webcast of the close approach.

The asteroid won't be back our way again until 2026. Initially there seemed to be a slight chance it might strike Earth when it returned, but scientists have since ruled that out.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2023/mar/24/city-killer-asteroid-to-pass-harmlessly-between-earth-and-moon>

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View of Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. Avi Loeb is or organizing expedition to Papua New Guinea to look for fragments of an object that crashed off the coast of its Manus Island in 2014. Photograph: Design Pics Inc/Alamy

[UFOs](#)

Harvard physicist plans expedition to find ‘alien artefact’ that fell from space

Avi Loeb organizing \$1.5m search to Papua New Guinea to look for interstellar object that crashed into ocean in 2014

[Maya Yang](#)

Fri 24 Mar 2023 01.00 EDTLast modified on Fri 24 Mar 2023 12.11 EDT

A prominent Harvard physicist is planning a Pacific expedition to find what he thinks might be an alien artefact that smashed into the ocean.

Avi Loeb [announced](#) that he is organizing a \$1.5m ocean expedition to Papua New Guinea to look for fragments of an object that crashed off the

coast of its Manus Island in 2014.

Loeb noticed the object in 2019 and identified it as the first interstellar meteor ever discovered – meaning it originated outside our solar system. According to Loeb, the meteor’s interstellar origin was confirmed to [Nasa](#) in April 2022 by the Department of Defense’s space command.

Loeb and his team also concluded that the meteor was tougher than all other 272 meteors in Nasa’s Center for Near Earth Object Studies catalog.

“Intrigued by this conclusion, I established a team that designed [a two-week expedition](#) to search for the meteor fragments at a depth of 1.7km on the ocean floor. Analyzing the composition of the fragments could allow us to determine whether the object is natural or artificial in origin,” Loeb wrote in a post on Medium.

“We have a boat. We have a dream team, including some of the most experienced and qualified professionals in ocean expeditions. We have complete design and manufacturing plans for the required sled, magnets, collection nets and mass spectrometer,” he added.

According to Loeb, it is possible that the meteor is tough “because they are artificial in origin ... launched a billion years ago from a distant technological civilization.”

The ocean expedition is expected to use a ship with a magnetic sled deployed using a long line winch. The team will consist of seven sled operations, as well as a scientific team.

“We will tow a sled mounted with magnets, cameras and lights on the ocean floor inside of a 10km × 10km search box. A number of sources have been used to narrow the search site to this relatively small search box,” Loeb and his team [wrote](#).

The size of the fragments to be potentially found by Loeb’s team will depend on the composition of the meteor. For an iron meteorite, the physicist predicts about a thousand fragments larger than a millimeter. If the

meteor is of stainless-steel composition, Loeb's team expects to find larger sizes with tens of fragments larger than a centimeter.

Loeb said that in case his team recovers a "sizable technological relic" from the expedition, he promised Paola Antonelli, the curator of the Museum of Modern Art, that he will bring it to New York for display.

The expedition is expected to launch this summer, the Daily Beast [reports](#).

"There is a chance it will fail," Loeb, who is co-founder of the \$1.755m [Galileo Project](#) that is tasked with searching for extraterrestrial signs, told the outlet. Nevertheless, he remains adamant about the mission.

"Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence," he said.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/24/harvard-physicist-pacific-expedition-first-interstellar-meteor>

Headlines thursday 23 march 2023

- [Live Tories fear if Johnson is suspended over Partygate then Uxbridge could be lost in byelection](#)
- [Partygate Boris Johnson facing formal reprimand for misleading parliament](#)
- ['Johnson in peril' What the papers say on Thursday](#)
- [Explainer What Johnson said - and how it stacked up](#)

[Politics live with Andrew Sparrow](#)Politics

Keir Starmer publishes tax returns, revealing he paid £118,000 in last two years – as it happened

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'Complete nonsense': key moments from Boris Johnson's Partygate grilling – video

[Boris Johnson](#)

Boris Johnson facing formal reprimand for misleading parliament

MPs investigating Partygate scandal have denounced former PM's 'flimsy' explanations before committee

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

[Pippa Crerar](#) *Political editor*

[@PippaCrerar](#)

Wed 22 Mar 2023 15.57 EDT Last modified on Thu 23 Mar 2023 06.44 EDT

Boris Johnson faces being formally reprimanded for recklessly misleading parliament after MPs investigating the Partygate scandal denounced his “flimsy” explanations and suggested he had wrongly interpreted Covid guidance.

The former prime minister was left fighting for his political career after a tetchy three-and-a-half-hour evidence session in which he repeatedly claimed No 10 parties, with alcohol and little social distancing, had been “necessary” for work purposes.

Harriet Harman, the chair of the privileges committee investigating whether Johnson deliberately misled MPs over lockdown gatherings, expressed dismay at the “flimsy nature” of assurances he received that events were within the rules.

Bernard Jenkin, a senior Conservative MP on the committee, told him that the cross-party group of MPs did not agree with his interpretation of the guidance. “The guidance does not say you can have a thank you party and as many people in the room as you like,” he added.

Boris Johnson asked whether bottles of alcohol 'necessary for work event' – video

Their comments appear to indicate the committee is considering concluding that Johnson deliberately misled the House of Commons when it reports back after Easter, although sources suggested it was possible they could recommend a sanction just short of that required to prompt a byelection.

Johnson’s dramatic return to the political limelight came as Rishi Sunak struggled to keep the Conservative party on track after a turbulent year, narrowly avoiding an overly damaging Commons rebellion on Brexit and [finally publishing his long-awaited tax details](#) in the middle of the lengthy evidence session.

Sunak won a vote on his revised plan for post-Brexit Northern Ireland trade, with 22 of his own MPs voting against the deal including Johnson and Liz Truss, meaning he did not have to rely on Labour votes to get it through.

The prime minister was accused by political opponents of “sneaking out” his tax details, which he first promised to release last summer, and which showed he made nearly £2m last year through income and capital gains, mostly from US-based investments.

Johnson has attempted to draw Sunak deeper into the Partygate scandal by suggesting that if Covid rules had been broken in Downing Street, then it [should also have been “obvious” to the current prime minister](#) as he spent time in the building.

Boris Johnson tries to draw Rishi Sunak into Partygate scandal – video

In its interim report this month, the committee said the evidence “strongly suggests” breaches of guidance should have been obvious to Johnson, as he

drew up the rules, and he may have misled parliament four times when he said all the rules and guidance had been followed.

At the start of the hearing, Johnson swore an oath on the King James Bible and said that “hand on heart” he had not lied to the Commons, but apologised for “what happened on my watch”. Yet he said the committee had “nothing to show” that he had been warned about illegal parties during lockdowns.

He strongly defended multiple lockdown events as having been “essential”, including one where he was pictured raising a glass at a leaving do. However, he admitted on social distancing guidance: “I’m not going to pretend that it was enforced rigidly.”

Johnson suggests ‘unsocially distanced farewell gatherings’ were allowed under guidance – video

Johnson has argued that evidence gathered from No 10 officials “conclusively” shows he did not deliberately mislead parliament, as he was “repeatedly” assured by No 10 aides that no rules – as opposed to coronavirus guidelines – were broken.

Jenkin suggested he should have sought advice from lawyers, rather than political aides. Harman said: “If I was going at 100mph and I saw the speedometer saying 100mph it would be a bit odd, wouldn’t it, if I said: ‘Somebody assured me that I wasn’t.’”

An increasingly exasperated Johnson denounced the committee’s questioning as “complete nonsense”, but he finally admitted that he did not get assurances from his staff that Covid guidance had been followed in No 10 at all times.

In newly released evidence from the committee, Simon Case, the cabinet secretary, denied giving Johnson any assurances that Covid rules and guidance were followed at all times in No 10. He said he was unaware of anyone else there giving assurances, either.

Jack Doyle, the former prime minister's then director of communications, said he was unsure of Johnson's statement that he had been "repeatedly assured no rules were broken", adding that "these are difficult things to say".

The evidence also shows Johnson agreed to delete a proposed line for prime minister's questions stating that all guidance had been followed after a warning, his former principal private secretary Martin Reynolds said.

The fresh documents laid bare the level of disdain felt by No 10 over the allegations, with Doyle advising a colleague when first approached by the media over the story in November 2021: "Just be robust and they'll get bored."

Johnson did, however, acknowledge that people might have thought "we were doing something that other people weren't allowed to do" if they had seen photos of the gatherings, five of which he personally attended.

Yet he said he believed they were all within the rules, despite police subsequently issuing 126 fixed-penalty notices, and claimed he would have told businesses from the Downing Street podium that it was up to them whether they held leaving events during the pandemic.

There was no mention during the hearing of the gathering in the No 10 flat on 13 November 2020, which Johnson has already admitted he attended, but which neither Sue Gray nor the Metropolitan police properly investigated.



A video grab from footage of 13 November 2020 gathering. Photograph: STF/PRU/AFP/Getty Images

Johnson launched a direct attack at Harman over tweets in which she suggested he may have misled the Commons, saying her comments were “plainly and wrongly prejudicial” to the inquiry, but that he would trust the committee to act impartially.

In one heated set of exchanges, Johnson refused to explicitly disown supporters, who have called the committee “a kangaroo court”, arguing that the best way the MPs could prove their fairness would be to exonerate him of any wrongdoing. Footage of the session showed his lawyer, Lord Pannick, raising his eyebrows and shaking his head.

Johnson said he did not like such terms and did not want the committee to feel intimidated, but added: “I think that people will judge for themselves, on the basis of the evidence that you’ve produced, on the fairness of this committee. I have every confidence that you will show that you can be fair.”

Pressed by another Tory MP, Alberto Costa, on claims the process was inherently unfair, Johnson said: “I believe that if you study this evidence impartially, you will come to the conclusion that I have given.” He added

that it would be “utterly insane” for him to have misled parliament and unfair for MPs to conclude he had.

The former prime minister prompted laughter for drawing on senior civil servant Sue Gray’s report into [Partygate](#) for evidence, despite spending weeks arguing that it was discredited after she was offered the role as chief of staff to Keir Starmer.

The stakes for Johnson are high. If the committee decides he “recklessly” misled MPs, he faces being suspended from parliament. A suspension of 10 sitting days or more triggers a recall petition that could lead to a byelection in his west London seat.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/mar/22/boris-johnson-facing-formal-reprimand-for-misleading-parliament>

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Boris Johnson's appearance before MPs dominates UK front pages on Thursday. Composite: Metro / The Guardian / Mirror / The Times / Daily Mail / Daily Express / The Daily Telegraph / i

[What the papers say](#)[Newspapers](#)

‘Johnson in peril’: what the papers say after former PM questioned over Partygate

Front pages offer a mixed response to Boris Johnson's appearance before the privileges committee

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

[Jonathan Yerushalmy](#)

Wed 22 Mar 2023 21.59 EDT Last modified on Thu 23 Mar 2023 06.44 EDT

Boris Johnson's three-and-a-half hours of evidence before the privileges committee dominates the UK front pages on Thursday, with the former prime minister described as "agile", "defiant" and "rattled".

The **Guardian** leads with "'Flimsy' Partygate answers leave Johnson on the brink". The paper's political editor says he faces being ["formally reprimanded for recklessly misleading parliament"](#).

Guardian front page, Thursday 23 March 2023: 'Flimsy' Partygate answers leave Johnson on the brink pic.twitter.com/LeA6TCCQfN

— The Guardian (@guardian) [March 22, 2023](#)

The **Times** has "Johnson fights for his future," reporting "the committee has to decide whether Johnson misled MPs. If they decide that he did so intentionally or recklessly, they may find him in contempt of parliament".

The paper adds that a suspension of "ten days or more would make a by-election ... almost inevitable".

Thursday's Times: Johnson fights for his future
[#TomorrowsPapersToday](#) [#TheTimes](#) [#Times](#)
pic.twitter.com/XbzAkm5En4

— Tomorrows Papers Today (@TmorrowsPapers) [March 22, 2023](#)

"Johnson in peril after angry clashes with inquiry", is the assessment in the **i**. Reporting on the hearing, the paper says "Former prime minister loses his cool and shouts 'complete nonsense' at MPs questioning him".

Thursday's front page: Johnson in peril after angry clashes with inquiry [#TomorrowsPapersToday](#) pic.twitter.com/4V3QKdXQ3h

— i newspaper (@theipaper) [March 22, 2023](#)

The **Telegraph** splashes with: “Johnson besieged but defiant”. The paper says that he “hinted he could refuse to accept the inquiry’s verdict”.

However, analysis elsewhere on the front page could spell trouble for the former prime minister, with the paper’s associate editor writing, “The cults of Boris and Brexit are simultaneously imploding”.

The front page of tomorrow's Daily Telegraph:

'Johnson besieged but defiant'[#TomorrowsPapersToday](https://t.co/x8AV4OoUh6pic.twitter.com/9fz5NUmkxY)

Sign up for the Front Page newsletter<https://t.co/x8AV4OoUh6pic.twitter.com/9fz5NUmkxY>

— The Telegraph (@Telegraph) [March 22, 2023](#)

The **Mail** chooses to lead its front page with a comment piece from Sarah Vine: “Harman’s face was thunder. Boris was as agile as a cat. Pure box office but, after four nit-picking hours, had a single mind been changed?”

The columnist focuses on the entertainment value of the hearing, describing Johnson as, “the Captain Jack Sparrow of British politics”.

Thursday's [@DailyMailUK](https://t.co/e2KAbESFMw) [#MailFrontPages](#)
[pic.twitter.com/e2KAbESFMw](https://t.co/e2KAbESFMw)

— Daily Mail U.K. (@DailyMailUK) [March 22, 2023](#)

The **Express** focuses on the moment that Johnson swore his oath at the start of the hearing, with the headline, “Boris: hand on heart I did not lie to house”.

Thursday's front page - Boris: Hand On Heart I Did Not Lie To House
[#TomorrowsPapersToday](https://t.co/K7FDEt4EKC) <https://t.co/K7FDEt4EKC>
[pic.twitter.com/5hjnzNguiA](https://t.co/5hjnzNguiA)

— Daily Express (@Daily_Express) [March 22, 2023](#)

The **Metro** has “Boris: the backlash”, reporting that “rattled Johnson gets grilled by MPs for hours”.

Tomorrow's Paper Today ☐

BORIS: THE BACKLASH

- ☐ Rattled Johnson gets grilled by MPs for hours
- ☐ Swears on Bible he didn't lie to parliament
- ☐ Snaps: 'You don't know what you're saying'
- ☐ Squirms over slogans and bottles of beer [#TomorrowsPapersToday](#)
pic.twitter.com/DjBGD34MIJ

— Metro (@MetroUK) [March 22, 2023](#)

Scotland’s **Daily Record** is more forthright in its analysis. Under the banner, “Ex-PM’s lame lockdown party excuses”, the paper leads with the headline, “Ol’ blue lies is back”.

Tomorrow's Daily Record leads on Boris Johnson saying he had to attend lockdown-busting booze-ups in No10 to boost morale after “difficult” days at work [#TomorrowsPapersToday](#) [@sgfmann](#)
pic.twitter.com/DMvYUncQ2v

— The Daily Record (@Daily_Record) [March 22, 2023](#)

Finally, the **Mirror** says Johnson has been accused of “insulting Covid families with a string of Partygate excuses”, under the headline: “Just drinks after a difficult day? Plenty of people were having difficult days, Boris”.

Thursday's front page: Johnson's party excuses
[#TomorrowsPapersToday](#)<https://t.co/SCahVPvqe6>
pic.twitter.com/6E9R1IBxS9

— The Mirror (@DailyMirror) [March 22, 2023](#)

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'Complete nonsense': key moments from Boris Johnson's Partygate grilling – video

[Boris Johnson](#)

[Explainer](#)

Boris Johnson had a lot to say about Partygate – but did any of it stack up?

Nowhere to hide for former PM as he was finally cross-examined on lockdown gatherings in No 10

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

[Aubrey Allegretti](#) *Political correspondent*

[@breeallegretti](#)

Wed 22 Mar 2023 15.46 EDT Last modified on Thu 23 Mar 2023 06.42 EDT

After 16 months, [Boris Johnson](#) was finally forensically cross-examined over Partygate – live on TV and for nearly four hours.

Previous attempts to do so in brief media interviews or through questions posed in the Commons chamber allowed him to obfuscate or run down the clock.

But in front of the cross-party privileges committee on Wednesday, there was nowhere to hide. His explanations were earnest, but did they stack up to scrutiny?

Johnson said pictures showed him working at events

Displayed on screens around the committee room were photos, showing Johnson at some of the rule-breaking events.

As MPs on the privileges committee talked about the strict lockdown rules in place at the time, images beamed out of the then-prime minister surrounded by colleagues.

“It is clear in No 10 we had real difficulties ... in maintaining social distancing,” Johnson said, seemingly acknowledging he could not deny what everyone in the room could see with their own eyes.

But he stressed “we had no choice but to meet” – and that it would have been impossible to place a “forcefield” around each person in No 10.

In his defence, Johnson said the 2-metre rule could be reduced to one – with mitigations: screens, masks and the like.

Inevitable questions arose about why he was less than 2 metres away from colleagues without such mitigations. The reply he mustered was: “You don’t see Perspex screens there, but that doesn’t mean there wasn’t sanitiser and efforts to restrict the spread of Covid.”

There was no clearcut explanation of how the social distancing rules had been complied with, given the abject lack of other measures, as seen in the pictures.

Johnson also seemed to stand by his insistence that the events were work-related. “I will believe until the day I die that it was my job to thank staff for what they had done,” he said of a leaving do.

Given many workplaces felt they had to forgo leaving dos during lockdown, it was an explanation the committee are unlikely to find convincing.

The Tory MP Bernard Jenkin pressed him on whether he would have said at a press conference in front of the famous “hands, face, space” podium that “unsocially distanced farewell gatherings could be held in the workplace”.

Johnson replied: “I would have said that it’s up to organisations, as the guidance says, to decide how they’re going to implement the guidance.”

The idea that all the gatherings were work events was further undermined when Johnson confirmed his wife, Carrie, their son and his interior designer, Lulu Lytle, were present for his birthday celebration in the cabinet room in May 2020.

Many of the people there were “very largely the same officials” due to hold a meeting immediately after, said Johnson.

A quick reply that undercut that argument came from the Labour MP Yvonne Fovargue. “Presumably your wife and the contractor were not attending that meeting,” she said.

Another situation in which Johnson found himself stuck was when Lee Cain, his media chief, put in writing that he had concerns about a “BYOB” garden party in May 2020.

While the former prime minister said he had “no hand” in organising the event and was told about it just before he headed to join the 40 or so members of staff outside, Cain was said to have called it a purely social function.

Johnson denied that, and said he could understand why anyone who might have seen the event could have thought the rules were being broken – but insisted that would have been a mistake.

'Complete nonsense': key moments from Boris Johnson's Partygate grilling – video

Different approaches were taken to naming officials

Johnson was unable to name senior advisers who told him that no Covid rules were broken in No 10.

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Jack Doyle, his former head of communications, had suggested that was the case – but only for one specific event, the Christmas party on 18 December 2020.

And a reference was deleted by Martin Reynolds, the prime minister’s principal private secretary, from the 8 December PMQs prep file that referred to “guidance” – separate from legal obligations – being followed at all times.

Johnson referred vaguely to officials who did give him the broader assurance he later repeated in parliament. But asked who they were, the answer came: “I can’t name these officials. I don’t know if I can. I think that most of them have indicated they don’t want themselves to be named.”

An agreement was made that Johnson would write to the committee privately, to give further details.

But he took a more laissez-faire approach to naming other officials.

Unprompted, when a disagreement broke out about how many people were at a leaving do for two civil servants in No 10 on January 2021, Johnson named them.

“Sorry, forgive me, I shouldn’t mention the names,” he said, prompting those around him to sink their head into their hands.

Why Johnson did not correct himself sooner

To judge how seriously Johnson treats the fact he misled parliament, a major part of the questioning was about why he failed to correct the record sooner.

Having told MPs on 1 December 2021 that all guidance was followed in No 10, it took him until 25 May 2022 – more than five months – to admit just how wrong that statement had been.

Johnson claimed the long wait was because he wanted investigations by Scotland Yard and the senior civil servant Sue Gray to conclude.

He said he had not wanted to give an “inevitably incomplete account” while active inquiries were under way.

Validity of Sue Gray’s report doubted by Johnson – in parts

After his allies spent weeks suggesting Sue Gray’s report had been fatally undermined by the announcement earlier this month she had been [offered a job with Labour](#), it was still relied on plenty by Johnson.

In a moment of frustration when he was told the privileges committee was not relying on her report, he sighed: “It seems quite incredible to me that we now can’t adduce what she had to say after extensively interviewing people.”

He relied on her report twice in his defence.

Johnson pointed to having been told by her she did not think the threshold of criminality had been reached, and that she estimated there were 15-20 people at an event where it had been otherwise suggested more than 20 attended.

But elsewhere, he seemed to cast doubt on Gray's findings. "I don't know what value we now attach to it," he sniped.

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Rishi Sunak publishing his tax return completes a pledge he made during the Conservative party leadership contest in 2022. Photograph: Victoria Jones/PA

[Rishi Sunak](#)

[Explainer](#)

Sunak's tax return: the questions that remain unanswered

Details of his blind management arrangement and what offshore interests the prime minister has are still unclear

- [Rishi Sunak publishes long-awaited personal UK tax returns](#)

[Anna Isaac](#)

[@Annaisaac](#)

Wed 22 Mar 2023 14.42 EDT Last modified on Wed 22 Mar 2023 17.55 EDT

Rishi Sunak, the prime minister, has [published a summary](#) of his UK and US taxes from 2019-2021.

It was meant to complete a pledge to publish it, made during his [run for the Conservative party leadership last year](#). However, it leaves some major questions unresolved.

What is in Sunak's blind management arrangement?

The tax statement confirms Sunak holds some of his financial interests in a blind management arrangement, as he has previously declared.

The income it generates is from “a single US-based investment fund”, the tax statement released on Wednesday said.

The makeup of the assets this arrangement holds has come under intense scrutiny as Sunak has been party to a range of highly market-sensitive discussions as chancellor and prime minister.

However, this tax statement offers no detail of the fund's contents, such as whether or not the prime minister holds an interest in the Covid 19 vaccine-maker Moderna, which supplied the UK government. Sunak's former employer, the hedge fund Theleme Partners, is known to have been a major investor in Moderna.

He has previously [declined to say](#) whether he holds or held shares in Moderna.

The tax statement suggests the fund manages money on behalf of other individuals, but we do not know who they are.

What are the terms of the blind management arrangement?

There is no legal definition of what such an arrangement consists of, and blind trusts or arrangements such as Sunak's can differ in several ways.

The tax statement does not explain the detail of the arrangement that governs Sunak's interest.

Blind management arrangements can run a spectrum: Sunak could have no involvement in any decisions about it at all, or he could be laying out a detailed strategy, suggesting sectors and classes of assets, even if not making day-to-day buy or sell decisions.

Whatever Sunak's instructions might be, the former independent adviser on ministerial interests Sir Alex Allan said he was ["satisfied with the arrangements"](#), as did the Cabinet Office. But the public is still in the dark.

What about offshore interests?

Sunak and his wife, Akshata Murty, who is wealthy in her own right thanks to a stake in her father's software company, Infosys, have a range of financial interests in jurisdictions including the US, India and UK. Some of these interests have also been held in offshore locations, some of which are tax havens.

For instance, Theleme Partners, Sunak's former hedge fund, is registered in the Cayman Islands. He was [a founding partner of the firm](#), and one of the executives managing its US office.

He left Theleme in 2013, when he returned to the UK to launch his political career. It is unclear if he retained either interests in Theleme's fund itself or some of the individual stocks that he bet on, or against, during his time at the firm. The tax statement sheds no light on this.

Will we ever see the returns in full?

Sunak held a US Green Card until October 2021. This was resigned after advice from the US authorities.

In order to sustain a Green Card, you have to file tax returns in the US, something that Sunak's spokesperson has previously confirmed he did. However, this piece in the puzzle of Sunak's financial interests has not been published in full.

All of the Green Card returns while he was an MP – the period from 2015 to 2021 – might offer some detail on any worldwide income, “including income from foreign trusts and foreign bank and securities accounts”, according to guidance from the US Internal Revenue Service.

Instead, the statement shows only the years 2019-2021.

Does this disclosure really follow precedents set by David Cameron and George Osborne?

The former prime minister [David Cameron](#) and former chancellor [George Osborne](#) both published some details of their tax affairs, effectively setting the precedent that informed Sunak's financial disclosures, according to officials.

Osborne and Cameron also both made statements about foreign income.

Osborne's noted that he “has no other sources of income or capital gains, from either the UK or overseas and has no offshore interests in shares or anything else”. Cameron's statement detailed how he had sold shares in Blairmore, an offshore investment company managed by his father, and said he had “no other sources of taxable income or gains, either from the UK or overseas”.

Sunak's statement, which is compiled by his accountants, differs slightly in its wording. They say: “We are not aware of any other taxable sources of income or capital gains from either the UK or overseas.”

It does not detail interests, only income and gains.

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Elon Musk has a strong affinity for the poop emoji (though there is no evidence he owns a sign). Composite: The Guardian/Getty Images

[Twitter](#)

Twitter's been sending press the poop emoji. Why does Musk love it so much?

The email auto-reply isn't the first time the CEO has embraced the symbol as he works to own the libs

[Matthew Cantor](#) in Los Angeles


[@CantorMatthew](#)

Thu 23 Mar 2023 01.00 EDTLast modified on Thu 23 Mar 2023 17.40 EDT

How would [Twitter](#) describe its own relationship with the media?

With a poop emoji.

That was the company's seemingly on-the-record reply to an emailed question from the Guardian. To be fair, it's now the automatic reply to any inquiry directed to press@twitter.com, as Elon Musk [announced on Sunday](#) – presumably forcing many journalists to resist asking how he would describe himself.

It's not the first time the CEO has wielded the emoji with such eloquence. When Twitter's ex-boss Parag Agrawal offered him a detailed explanation about why it would be difficult to estimate how widespread bots are on the platform, Musk replied with the same image last May. Twitter cited that reply in its lawsuit seeking to force Musk to complete his purchase of the platform, prompting him to explain with trademark brevity that “ = BS”.

Why, exactly, does a 51-year-old man appear to be stuck in Freud's anal stage? Psychoanalysts contacted by the Guardian seemed reluctant to weigh in, but it comes as little surprise to Magdalena Wojcieszak, a professor of communication at the University of California, Davis. Musk, she says, is wooing supporters by employing the language of populism.

It's “an indicator of this deeper trend of trivialization of public and political discourse in the United States”, Wojcieszak says. “One of the aspects of populist discourse and populist politicians or populist rhetoric is simplicity. It's the appeal to the common folk, anti-intellectualism, anti-elitism.” That's in line with Musk's longstanding persona as an unconventional businessman with a penchant for bluntness.

The emoji feeds into an “us v them” mentality, Wojcieszak notes – “the good, virtuous us, the ones who are – in the case of Donald Trump, for instance – the real Americans, the patriots, and Musk is feeding into that.” In the eyes of his allies, he's mocking the “them”, the perceived leftists in universities and the media, who might never recover from their exposure to a cartoon image of feces with eyes.

Musk's own political affiliations can be difficult to decipher; he has described himself as a centrist and voiced support for both major US parties. As Jeremy Peters [wrote in the New York Times last year](#), he “seems more spiritedly anti-left than ideologically pro-right”. Still, his recent tweets

and actions – including sitting with Rupert Murdoch at the Super Bowl and showing off the gun on his bedside table – feel clearly aligned with conservatives.

That might not be bad for business, according to Wojcieszak. Before the Muskification of Twitter, many on the right perceived it to be biased against them. His attempts to own the libs might be helping to bring them back, even if it costs the platform some lefty users. And because there are few alternatives to Twitter, Wojcieszak says, many of those who disagree with Musk have stuck around. Plus, even if the libs hate what he says, stunts like this bring plenty of press attention, Wojcieszak points out. “Free coverage is good coverage,” she says.

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Whether his apparent strategy to win new users is working isn’t clear. In November, about a month after Musk bought Twitter, independent research showed [evidence of growth in the US](#), though the overall picture was murky. A study released in January, however, showed an [overall decline in US users](#) – with Democrats quitting at higher rates than Republicans or independents.

Should we expect other companies to follow Musk's lead? Will Facebook respond to critical inquiries with an iron-fist emoji? Will Sotheby's employ the barfing face? Will Amazon use a gif of Jeff Bezos's rocket? It's all unlikely, says Wojcieszak.

"It's very risky for most companies who cannot afford that kind of bold move," she says. Musk can because he's so rich – "but also because he's not only a businessman, he's a public figure. So that generates publicity for him."

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Illustration: Raj Dhunna/The Guardian

[OpinionWater](#)

Never mind the H2O: this scheme to move water from Severn to Thames could be the new HS2

[George Monbiot](#)



England's water woes have a solution. But trying to move vast volumes of water from west to east is not it

Thu 23 Mar 2023 02.00 EDTLast modified on Thu 23 Mar 2023 15.24 EDT

It's a classic end-of-pipe solution. Rather than addressing the problem at source, it piles one problem upon another. Yet, like so many disastrous schemes, it is now developing a momentum of its own. The political capital being invested in this project threatens to make it the next HS2.

The south-east of England is permanently threatened by water shortages. A shocking lack of planning and investment by the water companies, alongside their gross failure to reduce demand and conserve supplies, ensure that as [drought looms again](#) the stupidest of all solutions begins to look attractive. Rather than properly managing its supplies, Thames Water wants to pipe huge volumes across the country from another catchment: the Severn.

Upstream solutions are never more fitting than when managing water. There's a clear hierarchy of responsible action. First, you should seek to reduce demand. The UK has one of [Europe's highest levels](#) of household

water consumption, and in England we each use, on average, [141 litres a day](#). Countries that take water conservation seriously use much less: just over 100 litres in Denmark, 95 in Belgium. Compulsory water metering would bring us closer to the Danish level, but the government has [ruled it out](#).

Worse still, the private abstraction of water from rivers and aquifers in England is [effectively unmonitored](#): a shocking scandal. Amazingly, the businesses abstracting water have no obligation to use meters. The system is entirely “self-regulated”, which means not regulated at all.

The second obvious step is to reduce leakage. Thames Water has the highest leakage rate in England, losing around [635m litres a day](#). Again, the government has done almost nothing to ensure this improves. On the contrary, since 2002 the water industry regulator, Ofwat, has allowed water companies not to fix leaks if the [cost of doing so is greater](#) than the financial value of the water being lost. The logic of capitalism, in this privatised industry, trumps the logic of public service and resource protection.

The third step is to use [nature-based solutions](#) to hold back water in the catchment, releasing it slowly to reduce the extremes of droughts and floods. Reconnecting rivers to their floodplains, allowing them to braid and meander, letting new wetlands form, reintroducing beavers: this rewilding enhances the resilience of the water system. But the UK has been dismally slow to adopt it.

If these measures are still insufficient, the next obvious step is to build new reservoirs. But [no new reservoir](#) in the UK was commissioned for 30 years, following privatisation in 1989. The last to be constructed was Severn Trent's Carsington Water in Derbyshire, officially opened in 1992. Now [three are being built](#), but none, so far, in the Thames region. Thames Water has been [seeking to build one](#) at Abingdon, but has run into local opposition.



Flood defences being installed in Bewdley, Worcestershire, after persistent rain resulted in flood warnings along the River Severn, 10 January 2023. Photograph: Jacob King/PA

Before the water companies and their regulators have addressed the underlying failures, they seek to engineer their way out of the crisis. They want to build a 90km pipeline from the River Severn at Deerhurst in Gloucestershire to the Thames at Culham, in Oxfordshire, to pump water into the Thames when its levels are low.

The pipeline would shift, when river levels are low, 500m litres a day from the Severn to the Thames. This is a little less than the volume leaking from Thames [Water](#) pipes every day.

To compensate, in part, for the reduction in the Severn's flow, the government bodies and water companies planning this project intend to do five daft things. One is to divert water from Lake Vyrnwy – the Welsh reservoir [built controversially](#) to supply north-west England – and [send it down the Severn](#) instead.

One is to repurpose water that would otherwise have been extracted at Shrewsbury and also used in the north-west, returning it to the Severn to supply the Thames. Worcester and its environs will also lose part of their

supply. The sewage works at Netheridge on the lower Severn would have its flow diverted upstream, so the wastewater enters the river just below Deerhurst, where the giant pipe to the Thames will begin.

The most extreme solution is to redirect the wastewater from the vast Minworth sewage treatment works outside Birmingham that currently flows into the River Tame, a tributary of the Trent. Instead, through another pipeline, this sewage water would be pumped into the River Avon, a tributary of the Severn.



‘When water levels in the Thames are low, they are likely to be low in the Severn, regardless of these diversions and discharges.’ Photograph: PA Images/Alamy

This project, in effect, shifts the supply problem from one part of the country to another. True to form, London and the south-east would gain, while the west and north-west would lose. If water is diverted from these regions, they lose resilience. Spare capacity declines. Local farmers can no longer adapt to a changing climate that might increase their need for water. Water companies may have to start abstracting more from other rivers, such as the Dee, which already shrinks to its rocky bones in dry summers.

When water levels in the Thames are low, they are likely to be low in the Severn, regardless of these diversions and discharges. Despite higher rainfall in the west of England and Wales, the river systems there still come under pressure. Already, the Severn catchment suffers from [severe over-abstraction](#). One of its tributaries, the Teme, [dried up completely](#) last summer. Aquifers are shrinking, wetlands are drying up. Conservation groups are desperately [seeking to restore them](#).

If wastewater is diverted from the Tame to the Avon, it could radically alter the Avon's chemistry and temperature. It would also change the olfactory properties of the water – in other words, the smell. The River Severn is, in theory, protected partly because it supports runs of salmon and other migratory fish. Salmon navigate by smell, returning only to the place where they hatched. If the smell changes, they are less likely to find their way home.

The wastewater from Netheridge, when pumped upstream, would [pollute a longer stretch](#) of the Severn than it does today. Similar issues may afflict the Thames, whose catchment has an entirely different geology to the Severn's. Rivers are complex systems whose ecologies we have scarcely begun to understand. Messing even further with their natural flow should be the last of all options.

What could explain these perverse priorities? Well, they may have something to do with the new financial incentives Ofwat has created for water companies to [trade water](#) with each other. They could have something to do with the way the [regulators have been captured](#) by water industry priorities, which ensure [dividends and bonuses](#) come first and unprofitable work such as reducing demand and stopping leaks come last. They could have something to do with the deep dysfunctions of England's system; the world's only [fully privatised water supply](#).

The next, critical stage of approval for this dangerous scheme begins on [30 March](#). Anyone who lives in either catchment, or who cares about our declining rivers, should mobilise to stop it.

- George Monbiot is a Guardian columnist

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Police officers on Horse Guards Parade in November 2021. Photograph: Dan Kitwood/Getty Images

[OpinionMetropolitan police](#)

Scrapping the Met isn't enough. There are radical – and proven – alternatives

[Owen Jones](#)



Only a small proportion of rape, burglary and violent crimes are actually solved by the police

Thu 23 Mar 2023 04.00 EDTLast modified on Fri 24 Mar 2023 00.20 EDT

The Metropolitan police cannot be reformed: it must be given its final rites and buried for good. I made this argument in the [first column I ever wrote](#) for this newspaper, nearly a decade ago: the case is surely even more compelling now.

By finding “institutional racism, sexism and homophobia” within the force, Louise Casey and [her review](#) have underlined a basic fact: most of the capital’s population cannot trust the Met with their safety. It is, as Doreen Lawrence puts it, “[rotten to the core](#)”. It took the murder of her son for London’s police force to be first damned for “institutional racism” by the [Macpherson report](#) nearly quarter of a century ago. And yet nothing changed, aided by a culture of denial among politicians, such as the then-Labour justice secretary, Jack Straw, who said, a decade later, the [judgment no longer applied](#).

This time, the politicians coo, things will change. But are they right? The home secretary, Suella Braverman, is committed to crudely cultivating a reputation as a cartoon villain, not to reform; and given [both she](#) and the Met's commissioner, [Mark Rowley](#), have dismissed Casey's judgment of institutional bigotry, the requisite measures to overcome it will not be taken. While Keir Starmer promises his government "[will lead police reform](#)", his repeated defence of former commissioner Cressida Dick showed that his instincts are to genuflect before powerful institutions, not to fight for justice.

But scrapping the Met – that is, accepting the current institution is irredeemable and finding other institutions to carry out its functions – isn't enough. This is a moment to reconsider the entire system of policing.

Police officers like to style themselves as a “thin blue line” that prevents society from collapsing into violent anarchy. But this is undermined by an inconvenient fact: only a tiny proportion of crime is actually solved by police officers. In 2021, for example, [19 out of every 20 burglaries](#) and [violent offences](#) went unsolved in England and Wales, as did 98.7% of rapes. In four out of 10 cases closed, a suspect hadn't even been identified. In the vast majority of cases, crime is simply not something dealt with by the police.



‘The Met’s commissioner, Sir Mark Rowley, dismissed Louise Casey’s judgment of institutional bigotry.’ Photograph: James Manning/PA

Neither can all too many police officers credibly claim to form a thin blue line between safety and violence. Eight out of 10 officers across the UK accused of domestic violence between 2018 and 2021 [kept their jobs](#), as did [more than half](#) of Met officers found guilty of sexual misconduct between 2016 and 2020. Include Casey’s disturbing findings of widespread homophobic, racist and misogynistic attitudes among police officers, and it is delusional to conclude the Met are the great protectors of the civilian population.

In practice, much of what the police do across the country is deal with social harms committed by people who are disproportionately poor and/or in need of mental health services. Misdemeanours perpetrated by people on lower incomes are far more policed than those of the rich, which is why you are 23 times [more likely to be prosecuted](#) for benefit fraud than tax fraud, even though tax crimes cost us all nine times more. Neither is it surprising that an institutionally racist police force is [far more likely](#) to stop and search Black citizens than their white counterparts.

And yet our political elite cling to a myth – that the starting point for solving social harms committed by mostly poor people should always be the police. Those challenging this mantra are dismissed as completely divorced from reality. But there is nothing naive about acknowledging that one model has manifestly failed, and looking for other answers – such as rolling back the very frontiers of policing.

In some examples, this is straightforward. If you have a mobile phone or a bike stolen, the police will almost certainly not bother to investigate: you are contacting them for a crime reference for insurance purposes. Why are the police, rather than a specific agency, charged with this task?

Moreover, crime itself flourishes in contexts of economic insecurity like bacteria in a petri dish. So a war on poverty and insecure housing would be a far more effective answer to our problems than expanding police numbers. So too is a massive expansion in mental health services: nearly half of

prisoners suffer from anxiety or depression, while an astonishing 60% have suffered a [traumatic brain injury](#).

But there's a counter-argument: addressing root causes of social harm is all well and good, but what about crimes in the here and now? For inspiration, it's worth looking across the Atlantic. In Denver, for instance, a [team of health workers](#) deal with incidents involving non-violent, vulnerable people, such as trespassing and mental health crises. These are cases previously dealt with by police, but which is more appropriate? Or take the city of Eugene, Oregon, where an agency of young medical workers and mental health counsellors called Cahoots – Crisis Assistance Helping Out on the Streets – have been dealing with incidents previously responded to by armed cops. In 2019, Cahoots dealt with 20% of all calls to the city's public safety communication centre; of those 24,000 calls, [just 311](#) needed police backup.

So let's make the Casey Review an opportunity to consider profoundly different – but workable – alternatives to the broken status quo. London's disgraced [Metropolitan police](#) force must go – but only as a first step, before we abandon our illusions in policing for good.

- Owen Jones is a Guardian columnist
- ***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](#).***



Eight of the 71 Gambian children who died in cases linked to Indian cough syrup. Clockwise from top left: Isatou Jobarteh, Sulayman Fadera, Babacarr Njie, Ismaila Danso, Aminata Dambelleh, Mohamed Kijera, Adama Saidy and Lamin Sagnia. Photograph: Reuters

[Opinion](#)[Global development](#)

Children are dying. We need a worldwide medicines treaty to avoid further tragedies

Dinesh S Thakur and Prashant Reddy Thikkavarapu

Recent deaths linked to drugs made in India underline the need for a global framework for quality control and swift cross-border action when things go wrong

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Thu 23 Mar 2023 02.00 EDT Last modified on Thu 23 Mar 2023 02.02 EDT

In the last six months, there have been four global alerts from the World Health Organization (WHO) for “Made in India” medicine where patients have either died, been blinded or suffered adverse incidents.

Two alerts, [one in October](#) and the [other in January](#), were for adulterated cough syrups manufactured by two different Indian companies. These syrups are suspected to have caused the deaths of [up to 71 children in the Gambia](#) and [18 children in Uzbekistan](#). A [third alert](#), in December, involved a cancer drug sold in Yemen and Lebanon which was found to be contaminated with dangerous bacteria. The [fourth](#) alert, in February, was for eyedrops sold in 55 countries that the WHO recommend be removed from circulation due to quality issues.

In addition, in February, the United States Food and Drug Administration (USFDA) [sounded an alert](#) over “Made in India” eyedrops found to be contaminated with drug-resistant bacteria suspected to have caused the death of one patient and adverse events, including blindness, in a total of 55 patients in 12 states.

The response from India's government, which generally boasts of the country being the "pharmacy to the world", has oscillated between blaming the affected countries, conspiracy theories and typical non-action. For example, the [immediate response](#) to the WHO alert in the Gambia was to blame that country for not testing the medicine before dispensing it to patients. The health minister [then claimed](#) there was an attempt to sully India's international reputation as a manufacturer of quality medicine.

The more grating response was a coarsely worded letter sent by the Drug Controller General of India to the WHO in December, [accusing it](#) of maligning the character of the Indian pharmaceutical industry without adequate evidence that the "Made in India" cough syrups could have been linked to the deaths of the 71 Gambian children. This was despite the fact that the WHO tests found toxic amounts of diethylene glycol and ethylene glycol in the syrups collected from the Gambia.

More recently, Gambian doctors and the American government's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [published a study](#) that "strongly suggests" that the Indian cough syrups caused the deaths in the Gambia.

The Indian response to the tragedy in Uzbekistan was slightly better, since the state drug regulator admitted that testing revealed the syrups were contaminated, and the manufacturers were arrested. But for a truly responsible public health-oriented response, India should have also warned other countries to whom the same cough syrup was exported to remove it from circulation. State-level Indian drug inspectors involved in the investigation, who confirmed that the company was exporting to multiple countries, have publicly [expressed their concerns](#) on the urgency of informing other countries in order to prevent further casualties.

These tragedies and the response of the Indian government raise two important issues from a global health perspective.

First, the efficacy of existing international mechanisms to guarantee quality in cross-border commerce of medicine. Created in 1969 by a resolution of the World Health Assembly, the current framework to regulate the quality of medicine is a [self-certification mechanism](#) that depends entirely on national regulatory authorities of exporting countries to issue a "certificate

of pharmaceutical product” (COPP) along with each export consignment. This certificate guarantees to the importing countries that the medicine has been manufactured in a facility that complies with “good manufacturing practices” as recommended by the WHO; that all product information including labelling is authorised by the certifying country; and that the product is authorised to be placed on the market of the certifying country.

We cannot find a single instance of prosecution by Indian authorities, despite evidence of brazen data fraud

Under this mechanism, the WHO has no real authority to conduct inspections. Trading partners of countries like India are essentially at the mercy of Indian regulators to be competent at their jobs.

This is precisely why developed countries like the US and much of Europe send their own drug inspectors to India to check manufacturing facilities. Over the past decade, these inspectors have uncovered a plethora of scandals in manufacturing facilities and clinical research organisations which generate regulatory data for pharmaceutical companies.

India’s national drug regulator has mostly turned a Nelson’s eye toward all these scandals. We cannot find a single instance of prosecution by Indian authorities, despite evidence of brazen data fraud.

The knowledge of efficient foreign inspections among the Indian pharmaceutical industry has given rise to dual-track manufacturing in India. Facilities monitored by American and European inspectors produce better-quality medicine than those that cater to developing countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia who cannot afford to send their regulators to India to inspect manufacturing facilities.

It is this precise problem that needs to be solved through an international treaty if we are to avoid future tragedies.

The second issue, particularly relevant after these multiple cross-border deaths, is the urgent need for an international legal framework to allow

swift cross-border investigations, mandatory sharing of information after a tragedy and a compensation mechanism for victims.

These investigations are also necessary to enable emergency public health measures such as a swift recall of contaminated medicine from the global market before more patients come to harm. There is currently no international legal framework to govern such investigations or to ensure that compensation is payable to cross-border victims.

Over the years, the pharmaceutical industry has managed to protect its interests through international treaties like the [Trips agreement](#) on trade-related intellectual property rights, which forced every country to protect patent rights of the industry. Why then has the global health community failed to use international law to hold the pharmaceutical industry liable for its misdeeds?

The writers are co-authors of [The Truth Pill: The Myth of Drug Regulation in India](#) published by [Simon & Schuster](#)

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Always playing a blinder ... Swansea City. Photograph: Athena Pictures/Getty Images

[OpinionSoccer](#)

How can I get my whites white? Should I be doing my laundry at 40C? 60C? 90C?

[Adrian Chiles](#)



No one knows how to tackle mud, grass and blood stains better than the chaps responsible for looking after white football kit. So I headed to Swansea City

Thu 23 Mar 2023 03.00 EDTLast modified on Thu 23 Mar 2023 10.55 EDT

How does one get one's whites whiter? I've washed at 40C and 60C and even 90C, with and without the pre-wash. And no joy. I have a friend from St Helens who runs a B&B in North Carolina and she swears blind she achieves perfect whiteness with a cold wash. Cold! I'll believe it when I see it.

I've long wondered what it must be like to be in charge of a white-kitted football club's kit. I had to find out. I paid [Swansea City](#) a visit, at their training ground on a windswept corner of the Gower peninsula. The car park, as is standard at these places, resembled the Geneva Motor Show. But the players' marvellous motors were of no interest to me; I only had eyes for the kit room.

Michael Eames, the Swans' kit manager, has been doing the job man and boy – his predecessor in the role was his mum. Michael and his assistant,

Shaun Baggridge, seemed slightly alarmed at my level of interest but patiently explained that the secret to whiter whites is that there is no secret. Hard work and persistence pay off. They can't even wash them at 60C lest the sponsors' names start peeling off. So 40C it is.



Coventry City's infamous brown away kit. Photograph: PA Images/Alamy

All they have is a big machine, some detergent and two spray bottles at a sink nearby. One bottle contains a well-known stain remover, the other bleach. Mud, grass and blood stains are all a nightmare. "It all goes in there," he said, pointing to the machine. "And then over there," he said solemnly, pointing at the sink and the bottles. "And then back in the machine, and then the sink again, and the machine and so on until it's white again."

Impressive stuff. Forty-odd years ago Coventry City famously sported a brown away kit. "Even to this day," boasts the club's website, "it is still voted among the worst strips of all time." But by God, I bet they loved it in the laundry.

- Adrian Chiles is a broadcaster, writer and Guardian columnist
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File image of the USS Milius guided-missile destroyer. China said the warship illegally intruded into its territorial waters in the South China Sea. Photograph: Issei Kato/Reuters

[China](#)

US Navy rejects China claim that warship ‘illegally’ entered part of South China Sea

China’s military said guided-missile destroyer USS Milius intruded into China’s territorial waters near the contested Paracel Islands

[Helen Davidson](#) in Taipei and agencies

Thu 23 Mar 2023 01.12 EDTLast modified on Fri 24 Mar 2023 12.08 EDT

The United States has denied Chinese claims that a US destroyer was driven out from waters around the contested Paracel Islands after it “illegally” entered the area in the [South China Sea](#).

In a statement on Thursday, the Chinese military said the guided-missile destroyer USS Milius illegally intruded into China’s territorial waters, without the approval of the government, undermining peace and stability in the busy waterway.

The United States Navy, however, declared this to be false.

“The USS Milius is conducting routine operations in the South China Sea and was not expelled. The United States will continue to fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows,” a statement from the US Navy 7th Fleet said.

The Paracel Islands are a disputed archipelago spread across about 7 square km in the South China Sea. China has de facto control of the islands and has built installations and outposts, but Taiwan and Vietnam also claim ownership.

[Map locating the Paracel islands](#)

Similar interactions have occurred in the past, including in July last year when the Chinese army again claimed it “drove away” a US destroyer from the area.

The US’s Indo-Pacific Command at the time said China’s statement was “false” and the US ship was conducting a freedom of navigation operation (Fonop), in line with international law. The Fonop sought to challenge restrictions imposed by various parties including China, Taiwan and Vietnam, on “innocent passage” through the disputed area, and to challenge China’s claim of straight baselines which enclose the Paracel Islands.

“The United States upholds freedom of navigation for all nations as a principle. As long as some countries continue to claim and assert limits on rights that exceed their authority under international law, the United States will continue to defend the rights and freedoms of the sea guaranteed to all,” it said at the time.

Posts on the Indo-Pacific Command’s social media accounts confirm multiple US Navy exercises in the east Asian region in recent days, including the East China Sea, the Philippine Sea, and the South China Sea.

Tension between the United States and China has been growing in the area.

The United States has been shoring up alliances in the Asia-Pacific seeking to counter China’s assertiveness in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, as Beijing seeks to advance its territorial claims.

With Reuters

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The scene outside the British high commission in New Delhi after the yellow security barriers were removed. Photograph: Manish Swarup/AP

[India](#)

India reduces security outside UK high commission in New Delhi

Barriers also removed from high commissioner's residence after Sikhs protest at Indian mission in London

[Amrit Dhillon](#) in New Delhi

Thu 23 Mar 2023 05.28 EDTLast modified on Thu 23 Mar 2023 05.44 EDT

New [Delhi](#) has reduced security outside the British high commission and the high commissioner's residence in the Indian capital, removing the usual yellow metal barriers that provide an extra layer of protection.

Political analysts say it is retaliation for the UK police failing to stop a violent protest by Sikhs outside the Indian mission in [London](#) on Sunday when they vandalised the premises and pulled down the Indian flag.

“I do believe it is retaliation because the [Narendra Modi](#) government believes in muscular diplomacy,” said Parsa Venkateshwar Rao Jr, a columnist for the Tribune newspaper in India.

The protesters were venting their anger over a [hunt in India for a self-styled Sikh preacher, Amritpal Singh Sandhu](#). Punjab police have been scouring the state since Saturday for Sandhu, who advocates a separate Sikh state.

New Delhi felt the police in London had been remiss in allowing the Sikh protesters to get so close to the Indian high commission in Aldwych. The protest has continued this week but police have kept it across the road from the Indian mission.

On Wednesday, Indian staff inside the London mission taunted the protesters outside by unfurling a giant Indian flag that was larger than the one the protesters had pulled down.

India’s ministry of external affairs summoned the British deputy high commissioner on Sunday to explain the lack of security. “India finds unacceptable the indifference of the UK government to the security of Indian diplomatic premises and personnel in the UK,” the ministry said in a statement.

The British high commission said it did not comment on matters of security.

Sikh protesters in London oppose the crackdown in Punjab on Sandhu. The police want to arrest him on charges of abduction, inciting violence and disturbing social harmony.

They launched a search for him on Saturday but he remains on the run. Though Sandhu has been sighted on CCTV cameras on several occasions in different vehicles and in disguise, he remains elusive.

The swift retaliation over security comes soon after the Modi government hit back at the UK over a BBC documentary critical of his role during 2002 violence against Muslims in Gujarat.

After the documentary was broadcast last month, [tax officials raided the BBC's office in New Delhi](#) looking for evidence of financial wrongdoing.

Arati Jerath, a regular political commentator on the NDTV news channel, said Modi was playing to the gallery because his supporters love it when he “flexes his muscles” at foreign powers, particularly western countries.

“With the UK, there’s an extra dimension, an anticolonial hypernationalism that tends to play out. One of his strongest pitches to his followers is that he has made India a country to reckon with,” said Jerath.

Other commentators are waiting to see whether India also reduces security at the US embassy in New Delhi. Sikhs in San Francisco held a similar protest outside the Indian consulate on Sunday when they broke through barricades and smashed windows.

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TikTok CEO shown video threatening committee chair during Congress hearing – video

[TikTok](#)

TikTok CEO grilled for over five hours on China, drugs and teen mental health

Shou Zi Chew attempts to play down concerns over data and privacy as lawmakers call for ban on Chinese-owned app

[Kari Paul](#) in San Francisco and [Johana Bhuiyan](#) in New York

Thu 23 Mar 2023 19.58 EDTFirst published on Thu 23 Mar 2023 03.00 EDT

The chief executive of [TikTok](#), Shou Zi Chew, was forced to defend his company's relationship with China, as well as the protections for its youngest users, at a testy congressional hearing on Thursday that came amid a bipartisan push to ban the app entirely in the US over national security concerns.

The hearing marked the first ever appearance before US lawmakers by a TikTok chief executive, and a rare public outing for the 40-year-old Chew, who has remained largely out of the limelight as the social network's popularity soars. TikTok now boasts tens of millions of US users, but lawmakers have long held concerns over China's control over the app, which Chew repeatedly tried to assuage throughout the hearing. "Let me state this unequivocally: ByteDance is not an agent of [China](#) or any other country," Chew said in Thursday's testimony.

Questioning got off to a forceful start with members of the committee hammering Chew on his connection to executives at TikTok's parent company, ByteDance, who lawmakers say have ties to the Chinese Communist party. The committee members asked how frequently Chew was in contact with them, and questioned whether the company's proposed

solutions to US data security concerns would offer sufficient protection against Chinese laws that require companies to make user data accessible to the government.

Chew's claims of independence from the Chinese government were undermined by a [Wall Street Journal story](#) published just hours before the hearing that said China would strongly oppose any forced sale of the company. Responding for the first time to Joe Biden's threat of a national ban unless ByteDance sells its shares, the Chinese commerce ministry said such a move would involve exporting technology from China and thus would have to be approved by the Chinese government.

Lawmakers also questioned Chew, a former Goldman Sachs banker who has helmed the company since March 2021, over the platform's impact on mental health, particularly of its young users. The Republican congressman Gus Bilirakis shared the story of Chase Nasca, a 16-year-old boy who killed himself a year ago by stepping in front of a train. Nasca's parents, who [have sued](#) ByteDance, claiming Chase was "targeted" with unsolicited self-harm content, appeared at the hearing and grew emotional as Bilirakis told their son's story.

"I want to thank his parents for being here today, and allowing us to show this," Bilirakis said. "Mr Chew, your company destroyed their lives."



Dean and Michelle Nasca, the parents of the late Chase Nasca, at the hearing. Photograph: Michael Reynolds/EPA

Driving home concerns about young users, congresswoman Nanette Barragán asked Chew about [reports](#) that he does not let his own children use the app.

“At what age do you think it would be appropriate for a young person to get on TikTok?” she said.

Chew confirmed his own children were not on [TikTok](#) but said that was because in Singapore, where they live, there is not a version of the platform for users under the age of 13.

Chew, who has kept a relatively low-profile during his two years as CEO, spent much of the five-hour hearing stressing TikTok’s distance from the Chinese government, kicking off his testimony with an emphasis on his own Singaporean heritage. Chew talked about Project Texas – an effort to move all US data to domestic servers – and said the company was deleting all US user data that is backed up to servers outside of the country by the end of the year.

Some legislators expressed skepticism that Project Texas was too large an undertaking and would not tackle concerns about US data privacy soon enough. “I am concerned that what you’re proposing with Project Texas just doesn’t have the technical capability of providing us the assurances that we need,” the California Republican Jay Obernolte, a software engineer, said.

At one point, Tony Cárdenas, a Democrat from California, asked Chew outright if [TikTok](#) is a Chinese company. Chew responded that TikTok is global in nature, not available in mainland [China](#), and headquartered in Singapore and Los Angeles.

Neal Dunn, a Republican from Florida, asked with similar bluntness whether ByteDance has “spied on American citizens” – a question that came amid reports the company had [accessed](#) journalists’ information in an attempt to identify which employees leaked information. Chew responded that “spying is not the right way to describe it”.



Shou Zi Chew, TikTok’s CEO, leaves the hearing. Photograph: Jim Watson/AFP/Getty Images

The hearing comes three years after TikTok was formally targeted by the Trump administration with [an executive order](#) prohibiting US companies from doing business with ByteDance. Biden revoked that order in June

2021, under the stipulation that the US committee on foreign investment conduct a review of the company. When that review stalled, Biden demanded TikTok sell its Chinese-owned shares or face a ban in the US.

This bipartisan nature of the backlash was remarked upon several times during the hearing, with Cárdenas pointing out that Chew “has been one of the few people to unite this committee”.

Chew’s testimony, some lawmakers said, was reminiscent of Mark Zuckerberg’s appearance in an April 2018 hearing to answer for his own platform’s data-privacy issues – answers many lawmakers were unsatisfied with. [Cárdenas](#) said: “We are frustrated with TikTok ... and yes, you keep mentioning that there are industry issues that not only TikTok faces but others. You remind me a lot of [Mark] Zuckerberg ... when he came here, I said he reminds me of Fred Astaire: a good dancer with words. And you are doing the same today. A lot of your answers are a bit nebulous, they’re not yes or no.”

Chew warned users in a video posted to TikTok earlier in the week that the company was at a “pivotal moment”.

“Some politicians have started talking about banning TikTok,” he said, adding that the app now has more than 150 million active monthly US users. “That’s almost half the US coming to TikTok.”

TikTok has battled legislative headwinds since its meteoric rise began in 2018. Today, a majority of teens in the US say they use TikTok – with 67% of people ages 13 to 17 saying they have used the app and 16% of that age group saying they use it “almost constantly”, according to the Pew Research Center.

This has raised a number of concerns about the app’s impact on young users’ safety, with self-harm and eating disorder-related content [spreading on the platform](#). TikTok is also [facing lawsuits](#) over deadly “challenges” that have gone viral on the app. TikTok has introduced features in response to such criticisms, including automatic time limits for users under 18.

Some tech critics have said that while TikTok's data collection does raise concerns, its practices are not much different from those of other big tech firms.

"Holding TikTok and China accountable are steps in the right direction, but doing so without holding other platforms accountable is simply not enough," said the Tech Oversight Project, a technology policy advocacy organization, in a statement.

"Lawmakers and regulators should use this week's hearing as an opportunity to re-engage with civil society organizations, NGOs, academics and activists to squash all of big tech's harmful practices."

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Soldiers conduct military drills in Taiwan. British MPs have urged the UK to do as much as possible to help Taiwan defend itself. Photograph: Sam Yeh/AFP/Getty Images

Taiwan

British MPs call for ‘as much help as possible’ for Taiwan to defend against China

Delegation of British lawmakers met Taiwan’s president during visit to the island this week amid a deteriorating UK-China relationship

- [China-Taiwan tensions explained in 30 seconds](#)

[Helen Davidson](#) and [Chi Hui Lin](#) in Taipei

Thu 23 Mar 2023 02.18 EDTLast modified on Thu 23 Mar 2023 02.19 EDT

A British parliamentary delegation to [Taiwan](#) has called for the UK government to give “as much help as possible” to Taiwan to defend itself against China.

The visit by the British-Taiwanese All-Party Parliamentary Group to Taiwan this week included a meeting with President Tsai Ing-wen, and discussions of British defence exports which supply Taiwan’s submarine program.

Bob Stewart, Conservative MP and leader of the delegation, said on Wednesday that Taiwan was “on the front line of democracy, and autocracy”.

Stewart confirmed the group discussed the UK supply of equipment to Taiwan’s submarine program.

“It came up in part, but the message we are taking back is that we should assist Taiwan in its defence as much as possible,” he said.

Speaking after their meeting, Tsai thanked the UK for “reaffirming the importance of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait” including at the G7 and other multilateral meetings.

China’s Communist party government claims Taiwan as a province, which it intends to annex, by force if necessary. Taiwan’s democratically elected government and the vast majority of its people reject the prospect of Chinese rule.

UK sales of defence-related equipment for Taiwan’s submarine program increased dramatically in 2022. In the first nine months of 2022, the British government granted 25 licences, totalling £167m (\$206m), to companies exporting submarine-related components and tech to Taiwan. The figure, reported earlier this month by Reuters, was [more than the previous six years combined](#), and up from £3.3m approved in 2008, the first year of such exports to Taiwan.

The report prompted China's foreign ministry to accuse the UK of undermining peace and stability in the Taiwan strait, and committing "a serious violation of the one-China principle".

The one-China principle is a domestic Chinese edict which encompasses its claim over Taiwan. Other governments maintain their own one-China policies, which dictate the varying levels of recognition given to China's principle.

Western nations, predominantly led by the US, have shown increasing support to Taiwan, even if they do not recognise it as a sovereign nation, instead maintaining formal diplomatic ties with Beijing.

The UK is among many western nations whose relationship with China has deteriorated. In November, prime minister Rishi Sunak used his first major foreign policy speech to [signal the end of the "golden era"](#) of relations between Britain and China. This month the Aukus security agreement, aimed at countering China, was formally announced by the UK and US to help [supply Australia with nuclear-powered submarines](#).

Wen-ti Sung, a China and Taiwan expert with the Australian National University, said Aukus raised the stakes for the UK in the Indo-Pacific regional order. "More active exploration of greater cooperation with Taiwan, a key part of this puzzle, can help Britain preemptively manage its own risks and where possible help preventing crisis from occurring."

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Ugandan MP Asuman Basalirwa addresses the country's parliament during the debate on the anti-homosexuality bill. Photograph: Abubaker Lubowa/Reuters

[Uganda](#)

UN urges Uganda to block 'worst in the world' anti-LGBTQ+ bill

Proposed laws in Uganda would mean death and life imprisonment for some LGBTQ+ crimes

AP in Kampala

Wed 22 Mar 2023 18.16 EDTLast modified on Wed 22 Mar 2023 19.11 EDT

The UN has urged Ugandan president, Yoweri Museveni, to block an anti-LGBTQ+ bill that has harsh penalties for some homosexual offences, including death and life imprisonment.

“The passing of this discriminatory bill – probably among the worst of its kind in the world – is a deeply troubling development,” Volker Turk, the UN high commissioner for human rights, said in a statement.

In the US, national security council spokesperson John Kirby said if the law were enacted Washington would consider imposing economic sanctions on Uganda if the bill were signed.

He noted that this would be “really unfortunate” since most US aid is in the form health assistance, especially anti-Aids assistance.

[Uganda’s legislature passed the bill late on Tuesday](#) in a protracted plenary session during which last-minute changes were made to the legislation that originally included penalties of up to 10 years in jail for homosexual offences.

In the version approved by lawmakers the offence of “aggravated homosexuality” now carries the death penalty. Aggravated homosexuality applies in cases of sex relations involving those infected with HIV as well as minors and other categories of vulnerable people.

According to the bill, a suspect convicted of “attempted aggravated homosexuality” can be jailed for 14 years, and the offence of “attempted homosexuality” is punishable by up to 10 years.

The offence of “homosexuality” is punishable by life imprisonment, the same punishment prescribed in a colonial-era penal code criminalising sex acts “against the order of nature.”

The bill was introduced in February by an opposition lawmaker who said his goal was to punish “promotion, recruitment and funding” related to LGBTQ+ activities in this east African country where homosexuals are widely disparaged.

The bill now goes to Museveni, who can veto or sign it into law. He suggested in a recent speech that he supports the legislation, accusing

unnamed western nations of “trying to impose their practices on other people.”

“If signed into law by the president, it will render lesbian, gay and bisexual people in Uganda criminals simply for existing, for being who they are,” Turk, the UN rights chief, said in the statement. “It could provide carte blanche for the systematic violation of nearly all of their human rights and serve to incite people against each other.”

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday that the US had “grave concerns” about the bill, adding that it would hamper tourism and economic investment, and “damage [Uganda](#)’s reputation”.

Jean-Pierre added: “No one should be attacked, imprisoned, or killed simply because of who they are, or who they love.”

Anti-gay sentiment in Uganda has grown in recent weeks amid alleged reports of sodomy in boarding schools, including a prestigious one for boys where a parent accused a teacher of abusing her son. Authorities are investigating that case.

The recent decision of the Church of England to bless civil marriages of same-sex couples also has inflamed many, including some who see homosexuality as imported from abroad.

Homosexuality is criminalised in more than 30 of Africa’s 54 countries.

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Headlines monday 20 march 2023

- [Boris Johnson Ally claims he will not get fair hearing at Partygate inquiry](#)
- [Live Boris Johnson set to submit dossier, saying he didn't deliberately mislead MPs](#)
- [Policing Met has no 'God-given right' to exist without public trust, says top police chief](#)
- [Live Bank shares slide after UBS agrees 'emergency rescue' of Credit Suisse](#)
- [Banking Global shares tumble after emergency rescue of Credit Suisse](#)



Photograph issued by the Cabinet Office dated 13 November 2020 showing Boris Johnson at a gathering in 10 Downing Street. Photograph: Sue Gray Report/Cabinet Office/PA

[Partygate](#)

MPs' Partygate verdict on Boris Johnson may not arrive until May

Release of ex-PM's defence dossier thought to be imminent, but privileges committee not expected to publish final report until April at the earliest

[Aubrey Allegretti](#) and [Peter Walker](#)

Mon 20 Mar 2023 15.28 EDTFirst published on Mon 20 Mar 2023 05.07 EDT

MPs investigating [Boris Johnson](#) over his Partygate denials are not expected to release their final report on whether he misled parliament until next month at the earliest, the Guardian has been told.

After the former prime minister submitted what was termed a “bombshell” 50-page dossier laying out his defence on Monday afternoon, sources suggested a verdict by the privileges committee would come after Easter.

Reports on Tuesday morning, though, suggested the committee would publish Johnson’s defence dossier later today.

Legal advisers and Commons officials were combing through the dossier “in the interests of making appropriate redactions to protect the identity of some witnesses”, a spokesperson for the committee said.

They added: “The committee intends to publish this as soon as is practicably possible.”

With the Commons in recess until 17 April and local elections several weeks later, which the committee would not want to be accused of influencing, sources indicated a ruling may not be made until May.

When the final report is drawn up, Johnson will also be given two weeks to review it and respond. There are concerns that if the committee finds he did mislead parliament, then Johnson could use this period to build a campaign against it.

Taxpayer-funded legal support for Johnson is set to last until 30 April, and the Guardian understands the privileges committee intends for its inquiry to be completed before the summer.

However, there are questions over how much closer towards the summer a vote on any potential sanction would come.

While Johnson is the only witness that the committee has called to be questioned at a public hearing, a source suggested he could be summoned back again if there was a need to ask him further questions in person.

Johnson’s defence dossier is said to contain new evidence that the privileges committee has not yet published. It reportedly contains a message from Jack Doyle, the former prime minister’s then director of communications,

showing Johnson was given a “line to take” that no rules were broken that he later relied on when giving the same assurance in parliament.

A source close to him stressed they were cooperating with the committee and added: “We have nothing to hide.”

As Johnson’s allies escalated attacks on the inquiry, Downing Street defended the cross-party group of seven MPs who have been investigating the issue of whether he misled parliament for around 10 months.

Rishi Sunak’s spokesperson pointed to a defence of the committee by [Penny Mordaunt](#), the leader of the Commons, saying she had set out “how parliamentarians should engage” with the process.

Last week, Mordaunt told MPs that attacks on the committee were “a very serious matter” and its members were “doing this house a service”.

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She added those running the inquiry should be “permitted to get on with their work without fear or favour”, and that a “very dim view will be taken of any member who tries to prevent the committee from carrying out this serious work”.

No 10 also denied reports that announcements on pensions, energy and crime had been pushed back due to concerns that Johnson's showdown with the committee would overshadow them.

Sunak's spokesperson insisted it was "wrong to say that government business changed" as a result of the timing of the hearing.

One of Johnson's closest allies, his fellow Tory MP Conor Burns, suggested there were concerns about the impartiality of the Labour chair of the privileges committee, Harriet Harman.

He told the BBC: "I rate Harriet Harman highly, but she did tweet in April 2022 that if [Johnson and Sunak] admit guilt, by which she said was accepting a fixed-penalty notice, then they are also admitting that they misled the [House of Commons](#)."

"Boris Johnson contests that, but it seems to me the person who is chairing this committee has predetermined it and that causes me a degree of anxiety for parliament's reputation in handling this with integrity."

Alexander Horne, a former legal adviser to parliament, said that some attacks by Johnson's supporters – including calling the privileges committee a "kangaroo court" – could themselves constitute contempt of parliament.

Robert Hayward, a Tory peer and elections expert, also suggested an attempt at a comeback by Johnson would not go down well. He said on Monday that another Tory leadership contest ["would be an utter joke"](#).

If the privileges committee finds Johnson misled MPs, it could recommend a suspension from the Commons. A ban of 10 days or more could trigger a recall petition in Johnson's constituency, and result in him being ejected from parliament. MPs will get a free vote on whether to approve any suspension.

[Politics live with Andrew Sparrow](#)Politics

Commons privileges committee suggests it won't publish Boris Johnson Partygate defence dossier today – as it happened

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/live/2023/mar/20/boris-johnson-dossier-privileges-committee-partygate-inquiry-tories-labour-uk-politics-live>



Hewitt became the ‘chief of the chiefs’ as NPCC chair in 2019 after serving as a Met assistant commissioner. Photograph: Reuters

[Metropolitan police](#)

Top police chief says Met has no ‘God-given right’ to exist without public trust

Martin Hewitt, outgoing NPCC chair, says new leader deserves time to turn things around after series of scandals

[Vikram Dodd](#) *Police and crime correspondent*

Mon 20 Mar 2023 02.00 EDT Last modified on Mon 20 Mar 2023 03.36 EDT

The [Metropolitan police](#) has no “God-given right” to exist in its current size and form if it cannot regain the trust and confidence it has haemorrhaged after a series of scandals, the leader of Britain’s police chiefs has said.

Martin Hewitt, chair of the National Police Chiefs’ Council, said that the new Met commissioner, Mark Rowley, [had been unflinching in taking on](#)

[the challenges](#) facing Britain's biggest force and deserved time to turn it around.

A report from Lady Casey [is expected on Tuesday to severely criticise the Met](#) for multiple failings including misogyny, racism and homophobia.

In a wide-ranging Guardian interview to mark his departure as NPCC chair and retirement after three decades in policing, Hewitt said it would take years to regain lost trust.

Hewitt also warned that policing was facing severe financial pressures, with the need to make hundreds of millions of pounds in savings.

Hewitt said that the criminal justice system was no longer “effective” and failing too many victims due to underinvestment as well as Covid backlogs leading to unacceptable delays.

He cited the six-year delay the victims of the 2017 Grenfell fire had suffered without finding out if anyone would face criminal charges. “It is upsetting and wrong”.

Hewitt became the “chief of the chiefs” as NPCC chair in 2019 after serving as a Met assistant commissioner.

The force's reputation has been shredded after years of scandals including [the murder of Sarah Everard by Wayne Couzens](#) and the [serial rapist David Carrick](#). In both cases police blunders had failed to stop the Met officers earlier in their criminal careers.

Hewitt said the crises were as bad as any in his three decades as an officer: “There's no doubt that it feels as difficult now as it has ever felt.

“I honestly can't think of a point in 30 years when I was more depressed about the service and about being part of it ... It made me ashamed.”

He accepted that policing's “leadership” had questions to answer and that police culture and processes needed reform, with all forces – not just the

Met – having work to do. “Ultimately the leadership of an organisation ... sets the tone within the organisation, sets the processes.”

Hewitt told the Guardian that failure to restore trust – currently about 50% of those questioned say they trust the Met, meaning it is just clinging on to legitimacy in London – could damage the ability to fight crime.

Hewitt said: “It’s not being melodramatic, but the role and the position of policing is fundamental to society, in terms of how our society runs, and that sense of rule of law, that sense of feeling secure, that sense of being able to trust policing.”

The vast majority of officers were as disgusted as the public, and chiefs were determined to reform, he said. The NPCC chair denied leaders had turned a blind eye to wrongdoing but added: “You can’t police where there is no legitimacy from the public. No organisation has a God-given right to continue existing as it does. That’s going to be a matter for others to look at.”

He stressed that Rowley had made changes in his first six months as commissioner, and said : “My city needs to have confidence in the police force. Mark is going a long way to really taking on the issues that I think matter to Londoners, and needs to be given the opportunity to deliver on that.”

The Met represents about one quarter of policing in England and Wales and leads the national counter-terrorism effort. Plans under consideration when Theresa May was home secretary [could have transferred that responsibility to the National Crime Agency.](#)

Policing’s focus for two years has been on trust and confidence but the NPCC chair warned forces faced new financial hardship.

From 2010 to 2019 the Conservative government cut police budgets as part of austerity, then decided to replace the 20,000 officers lost across England and Wales.

Hewitt said new pain was coming, with the NPCC believing inflationary pressures dictate savings of at least £400m.

He said forces were still damaged by austerity and “recovering”, but also dealing with other indirect effects: “A lot of the demand that we deal with to try and help the public is as a result of austerity in other parts of the public sector. What austerity did to social services, to community services within local authorities, to the general capacity that local authorities had, look at the level of demands that policing deals with that is as a direct result of mental health.

“If you talked about something like 40% of what comes into policing being non-core policing in one form or another, it would not be an unrealistic figure.”

Hewitt said government must order a review of the whole justice system urgently.

”The criminal justice system has been under enormous pressure for some time ... particularly from the victim perspective, the criminal justice system at the moment does not work for victims almost from start to finish.

“I think you could argue that lots of victims end up failed.”

Hewitt, who came to public prominence during the Covid crisis, revealed some in government wanted even more draconian lockdowns and told of how he and other police chiefs had battled to protect their operational independence

Hewitt was in numerous high-level meetings as the crisis erupted in 2020 and condemned the former health secretary Matt Hancock, who in leaked messages dismissed the police as “plod” and claimed they were doing the government’s bidding: “It’s an offensive word for a former government minister to use, entirely disrespectful.”

He said that, during tense discussions, while the then home secretary Priti Patel and policing minister Kit Malthouse respected the operational independence of chief constables, others wanted more direct central control

of how fiercely the lockdown would be policed: “So at every turn, and with every decision there were always going to be questions about, quite frankly, how hard is this enforced?”

“You would have elements of government that wanted everything to be completely locked down, no one can do anything. You had other elements that were much more about: we need to give as much freedom as possible.”

He said the current home secretary, Suella Braverman, was wrong to claim police were wasting their time because they were woke and politically correct: “I don’t share that view. I think that day in day out, what the police service does, because mostly because of the nature of the job, is that we deliver common sense policing.

He added: “Politicians have gotta do what politicians are doing, you know, they’re doing politics, I’m doing policing.”

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Investors consider legal action over Credit Suisse deal; Downing Street says UK banking system is safe – as it happened

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UBS's rescue of Credit Suisse will lead to fears of job losses at both banks.
Photograph: Jaap Arriens/NurPhoto/Rex/Shutterstock

Banking

UK and US shares climb as banks and ministers aim to calm Credit Suisse fears

FTSE 100 rises and European banking shares are up after early jitters over what UBS takeover deal means for bondholders

- [What are AT1 bank bonds – and why are Credit Suisse's wiped out?](#)
- [First Republic's shares drop after downgraded credit rating](#)
- [Nils Pratley: Swiss solve one problem at Credit Suisse, but create another for bondholders](#)
- [Comment: Bonds were seen as a safe haven – but they are central to this bank crisis](#)

[*Anna Isaac*](#) , [*Graeme Wearden*](#) and [*Mark Sweney*](#)

Mon 20 Mar 2023 14.35 EDTFirst published on Mon 20 Mar 2023 05.11 EDT

Stocks climbed on Monday in London and New York after central bankers and politicians sought to soothe jitters triggered by the [emergency rescue of Credit Suisse](#) during the weekend.

Central banks in the UK and eurozone issued statements aimed at reassuring investors that – unlike the controversial approach taken by the Swiss authorities in the [Credit Suisse](#) deal – their jurisdictions would follow a hierarchy in which equity holders would lose out before bond holders.

“The UK’s bank resolution framework has a clear statutory order in which shareholders and creditors would bear losses in a resolution or insolvency scenario,” the Bank of England said. The prime minister’s official spokesperson also sought to offer reassurance, telling reporters the British banking system “remains safe and well capitalised”.

The FTSE 100 closed up 68 points higher, after starting the day firmly in the red. London-listed banking shares also mainly recovered to positive territory, after a heavy sell-off first thing. [Standard Chartered](#) and Barclays were still down, by 3% and 2.3% respectively.

European banking shares as measured by the Stoxx [Europe](#) 600 Banks Index were up 2% on Monday afternoon, after falling 3% during the morning. UBS rebounded to be up 2% after the deal to rescue its fellow Swiss bank and rival Credit Suisse over the weekend. Credit Suisse was down 56%.

US banking stocks were also up in early trading, with the notable exception of [shares in First Republic Bank, which slumped more than 17%](#), after reports it may need to raise more funds despite a [\\$30bn \(£24bn\) rescue last week](#).

That bailout encompassed 11 of the biggest names in US banking, including JPMorgan Chase, Citigroup, Bank of America and Goldman Sachs. On Monday, the Wall Street Journal reported that the JP Morgan chief executive, Jamie Dimon, was leading talks with the other bank bosses to pump more cash into the ailing San Francisco-based lender.

The earlier jitters on European markets were partly prompted by the terms of the rescue deal, which saw holders of \$17bn of Credit Suisse's bonds – [additional tier 1s \(AT1s\)](#) – wiped out, while equity investors were not as badly affected.

The global litigation firm Quinn Emanuel Urquhart & Sullivan announced it was in discussions with a number of holders of Credit Suisse's AT1 capital instruments about possible legal action in response to the terms of the rescue deal. It said it was putting together a team of lawyers from Switzerland, the US and the UK.

Shares in the troubled San Francisco-based bank First Republic tumbled more than 18% even as most US banking stocks gained.

The losses followed a further downgrade to its debt by S&P Global. Moving the bank's credit rating further into junk territory, S&P said the lender's recent \$30bn deposit infusion from 11 big banks may not solve its liquidity problems.

Eurozone regulators also issued a statement on Monday morning in an attempt to reassure markets that the [Credit Suisse](#) deal has not changed their position on the hierarchy of debt when a bank fails.

The Single Resolution Board (SRB), the European [Banking](#) Authority and ECB Banking Supervision said they welcomed the "comprehensive set of actions taken [on Sunday] by the Swiss authorities".

They then spelled out to investors that they would force losses on equity holders, before investors holding AT1 bonds, despite the Credit Suisse deal inverting this order by wiping out its AT1, or "CoCo", bonds.

The German chancellor, Olaf Scholz, added his voice to the chorus of leaders welcoming the action by Swiss authorities over the weekend, while also noting the stability of Germany's banking system: "The situation is not comparable to 2008-09," his spokesperson said. "The German banking system is well positioned," they added.

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The various moves appeared to ease concerns, with all big European indices turning positive after the statement was issued, having been negative when trading began on Monday morning.

While investors' nerves appeared to steady somewhat, concerns over what the UBS-Credit Suisse tie-up would mean for jobs began to build.

London's Canary Wharf is home to about 5,500 Credit Suisse employees, ranging from investment bankers and asset managers to technology and risk and compliance teams.

UBS has said it will run down the investment bank division of Credit Suisse, and UBS's UK former chief executive, Mark Yallop, told BBC Radio 4's Today programme that he thought job losses were "inevitable" in the merger.

It is unclear what the merger will mean for UBS's employees, too. It has UK offices in London, Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, Newcastle upon Tyne and Edinburgh.

The concerns about future job prospects will not stop staff receiving bonuses at Credit Suisse, however.

Fears over job cuts come after central banks took [coordinated action](#) on Sunday night to try to shore up confidence by agreeing measures to ensure banks in Canada, the UK, Japan, Switzerland and the eurozone would have the dollars needed to operate.

The US Federal Reserve, the Bank of Canada, the Bank of England, the Bank of Japan, the European Central Bank and the Swiss National Bank announced they would increase liquidity through daily US dollar swaps.

The change is a modest expansion of an existing programme in which the Fed each week pays dollars to other central banks in exchange for local currency.

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Emily Watson: 'I was wary of Hollywood – I think I've been proved right.'
Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

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‘There was cruelty and unpleasantness’: Emily Watson on school, stardom and sex scenes in her 50s

[Ann Lee](#)

The actor grew up in an alleged cult and was expelled after her explicit role in *Breaking the Waves*. She discusses method acting, the #MeToo movement and mixing work and family



[@_ann_lee](#)

Mon 20 Mar 2023 02.00 EDT Last modified on Wed 22 Mar 2023 11.42 EDT

Emily Watson had big plans to turn up for our interview looking immaculately made up, but then family members started getting sick and her morning fell apart. “When my husband’s ill, chaos descends,” she says, with a sigh. Despite this, she doesn’t seem ruffled. If anything, she is serene and calm, her skin glowing and those expressive blue eyes as piercing and soulful in life as they are on screen.

We meet at the [BFI Southbank](#) in London, a regular haunt of hers over the years, to talk about her new film *God's Creatures*. Dressed in a short black dress, a black corduroy jacket and a black and white scarf, she has a gentle presence. In the film, she plays Aileen, a devoted mother whose love for her son, Brian ([Paul Mescal](#)), is tested when he is accused of rape by an old flame, Sarah (Aisling Franciosi).

Set in a remote Irish fishing village, the gothic drama is a gut punch, its muted sense of dread building to a grim climax. Watson is captivating as a woman torn between doing the right thing and her instinctive desire to protect her family. "She loves her son too much and always has – it's obsessive," she says, sipping coffee. "He's been enabled by that love and has become manipulative."

It's the latest in a long line of complex and demanding characters. Watson, 56, has a quiet magnetism that is fascinating to watch, relaying vast oceans with a look. And she can turn emotional turmoil into something white-hot and visceral, whether it's as the careworn mother in *Angela's Ashes* or the determined nuclear physicist in HBO's series *Chernobyl*.



Paul Mescal as Brian O'Hara and Emily Watson as his mother Aileen in *God's Creatures*. Photograph: Courtesy of A24 undefined

To prepare for her role as Aileen, the manager of a seafood processing plant, Watson learned to gut salmon (“Truly gross”), fillet mackerel and haul oysters. Filming took place while Ireland was still in strict lockdown. The cast had to isolate in separate cottages on the Donegal coast and got to know each other over Zoom before rehearsing in an abandoned hotel for 10 days.

After being cooped up for so long, Watson couldn’t wait to let loose. “We’d been sitting on our backsides for a week and there happened to be a ball in the room [where we rehearsed],” she says. “So I said: ‘Let’s start throwing the ball.’ I didn’t realise Paul’s a GA [Gaelic Athletic] superstar. Then we played hide and seek. We just went around and screamed. It was really fun.”

Watson had no idea who Mescal was when she received the script. “I was like: ‘Who’s this? Oh, he’s in a thing that’s quite popular. I’ll go and watch that.’” After she had binged [Normal People](#), the BBC drama that made him an instant heart-throb, she was converted. The decision to cast him as the darkly enigmatic Brian, she says, was inspired. “Because the entire world is in love with him. They can understand why Aileen is like, he’s perfect and can do no wrong. He is a very, very lovely man. To work with somebody who’s that talented and so eager and inquisitive was a treat.”

She compares the film, which was co-directed by Anna Rose Holmer and Saela Davis, to a Greek tragedy with a timely message about sexual assault. When the allegations come to light, the tight-knit community rallies round Brian, leaving Sarah out in the cold. “We are a society that has allowed that and the woman has no agency in that situation,” Watson says.



Watson and Stellan Skarsgard in Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* (1996) – her first film role. Photograph: Moviestore/REX/Shutterstock

She reflects on the #MeToo movement. “The conversation on sexual assault has become louder and clearer over the last few years. You really have to pay due to those women who were the first ones who stood up and went: ‘This happened, join me.’ That was incredibly brave to start that ball rolling. The conversation has been big, but has there been any change?” She brings up [Sarah Everard](#), who was murdered by Wayne Couzens, a Metropolitan police constable, in 2021. “It feels like this is a systemic problem that is baked into the way all our institutions are structured.”

Having acted in several stage productions as a member of the Royal Shakespeare Company, Watson's first role in film was [Breaking the Waves](#), a harrowing psychological drama by the Danish auteur Lars von Trier. She was sensational; a hurricane of raw emotion as Bess, the deeply religious wife of an oil rig worker who asks her to have sex with other men after he is paralysed in a freak accident. It was a challenging role that required full-frontal nudity. “It was pretty terrifying,” she admits. The role gained Watson her first Oscar nomination.

Offers came flooding in from Hollywood after that. But even then, she could sense that it was not a safe place to linger and decided to remain in

London. “My background was in theatre. I was a bit of a snob about the whole spandex universe and wary of Hollywood. I got out there and went: ‘This just doesn’t smell right.’ I think I’ve been proved right. You’re not really quite sure why everything feels a bit off.” She remembers clearly this “sense of not being allowed to be yourself and be free”. It was a familiar feeling that reminded her of her childhood, she says. “So I think my bullshit radar is pretty alert.”



Watson as Jacqueline du Pré in Hilary and Jackie (1998). Photograph: Maximum Film/Alamy

Childhood – is she talking about the School of Economic Science (SES)? “Yes,” she says. Watson’s parents, an architect and an English teacher, were members of SES, a controversial organisation influenced by orthodox Hinduism and alleged to be a cult. It ran St James, the west London school Watson and her older sister, Harriet, attended. In 2005, [an inquiry into the partnering boys’ school](#) found evidence of criminal assaults on pupils that took place in the late 1970s and early 1980s. While the inquiry centred on the boys’ school, the judge said that there had been complaints of verbal humiliation and pupils being struck at the girls’ school.

“There was extreme behaviour, cruelty and unpleasantness that was very damaging for some people,” says Watson. “I’m sure it’s a very different

place now, but [the SES] was a very young organisation that had no protection built in for the welfare of children.

“There are very beautiful things around it as well that you learn as you’re growing up. I was quite conflicted. I think those organisations keep people close through fear. A lot of religions work in that way. It’s a lot of unravelling to try and see the wood for the trees.”

As a child, Watson was “dutiful, well-behaved and curious”. The family lived in north London and didn’t have a television so she read a lot. “Books were my way of escaping,” she says. She dreamed of becoming a writer.

At secondary school, she was cast in her first play, a production of Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, as Celia. Acting was fun but more of a lark than a future vocation. “I didn’t think that I was the kind of person who could do that – there were other people who were much more suited to it.” Eventually something clicked and she became swept up in the magic of becoming someone else. After a degree in English at the University of Bristol, she went on to train at the Drama Studio London.

When she was 29, she was expelled from the SES organisation for having played such an explicit role in *Breaking the Waves*. She knew it was the right time to leave. “If it hadn’t been that it would have been something else. This was something that they very strongly disapproved of.” There was a confrontation. “I stood up for myself, and that was that. It was a tough moment in my life, but a defining moment and a very strengthening moment. You learn from these things.”

Watson earned her second Oscar nomination in 1999 for Hilary and Jackie, playing the cellist Jacqueline du Pré, whose career and life were cut short by multiple sclerosis. There were roles in *Punch-Drunk Love*, *Gosford Park* and *Synecdoche, New York*. Watson was considered for the part of Bridget Jones at one point, and turned down several high-profile films including the lead in *Elizabeth*, which went to Cate Blanchett. She also turned down *Amélie*, which made Audrey Tautou a star. Director Jean-Pierre Jeunet had written the part of the shy waitress in the whimsical French romantic comedy for Watson, but she didn’t think her French was strong enough.

“Show business is a revolving door,” she says. “Helena Bonham Carter turned down *Breaking the Waves*. It’s one of those things.”



Watson and Daniel Day-Lewis in *The Boxer* (1997). Photograph: Maximum Film/Alamy

Watson worked with [Daniel Day-Lewis](#) on Jim Sheridan’s gritty IRA drama *The Boxer*. The now retired actor is famous for going to extreme lengths to prepare for his roles. On the shoot, she asked him why he put himself through it. “He said to me: ‘I’m not a good enough actor not to.’” While Watson wouldn’t call herself a method actor, she has her own approach. “I need to immerse myself very fully for a role. It’s really about kidding your body that this is real. You can find all sorts of different ways of tricking yourself.”

Sometimes this process can be a little bit too effective. In 2015, she starred in the BBC drama *A Song for Jenny*, playing Julie Nicholson, whose daughter, Jenny, was murdered in the 7/7 bombings in London. Watson was so overwhelmed by the role that she sought out therapy. “Despite saying: ‘This didn’t happen to you, babe, you’re the actress, don’t be such an idiot,’ I found myself just very wobbly, very tearful and not able to cope with things.” Her father had died around the same time from bone-marrow cancer.

Just before his death, Watson received an OBE for services to drama. As soon as she left the ceremony at Buckingham Palace, one of her father's neighbours called to tell her to come immediately. She rushed to his side in Dorset. "It wasn't the end, but it was bad and I spent the night in the hospital." She took off the dress she had worn to the palace, "because I didn't think I could spend the night on the sofa in the dress, so I was in my Spanx". But she got the chance to show her father the award, "and that was quite the thing".

Being creative is like having a dog that you have to walk every day

Watson has been married to Jack Waters, a former actor turned potter, since 1995. They met at the Royal Shakespeare Company and live in south London with their two children, Juliet, 17, and Dylan, 14. "Somebody once said to me, you'll probably be in four or five significant relationships in your life, and it could be they are all the same person," she says of their long marriage. "You know, it's work. Keeping those columns balanced is really important. And that's really hard."

Watson admits she finds acting much more straightforward than managing the chaos of domestic life. "I can just give myself in a single-minded way to something. Trying to be a mum and work and meet everybody's needs and make everything add up, that's really hard. I'm not brilliant at it. But we're wobbling on."

She writes when she can. "Being creative is like having a dog that you have to walk every day. And if you don't, you start eating your own forearm, I find." She likes to dash off poems, but strictly for her eyes only ("It's very under my pillow, for me"), although she did compose one recently for her sister's wedding. Does that mean we might be seeing a collection of poems published sometime soon? "No, my toes are curling as we speak."

But there are other things on the horizon. Watson is about to do a few days on the film adaptation of Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These*, alongside Cillian Murphy. She has also been cast as one of the leads in *Dune: The Sisterhood*, HBO Max's prequel series to Denis Villeneuve's 2021 remake, a rare venture into sci-fi for her.



Watson as a nuclear physicist in the HBO series Chernobyl (2019).
Photograph: PictureLux/The Hollywood Archive/Alamy

While the actor once branded Hollywood an “ageist, sexist old pig”, she acknowledges that the industry is changing, with more opportunities for older women, especially in TV. “A lot of the audience are women and a lot of those women are above the age of 25. They want to see their lives reflected. They want to see the issues that they are interested in examined.”

In 2017, she starred in the BBC thriller [Apple Tree Yard](#), playing a scientist ensnared in a steamy affair with a mysterious man. Older women are not often seen as sexual beings on screen, but the show was heralded for its celebration of middle-aged female sexuality.

Watson recalls turning 50, the same week the series came out, and seeing herself on the front of a magazine. “I was like: this doesn’t fit. If I’d said to myself 15 years ago, this is where you’re going to be at 50, I’d have gone: ‘You’re kidding me.’ Because you turn to mums in your 30s and grannies in your 40s.” But she has managed to resist being sidelined. “There’s been some really meaty stuff in my later years. I just want to go where the interesting things are happening and see if I can muscle my way in.”

God’s Creatures is in cinemas from 31 March

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‘Inspiration is for amateurs’ ... Clarke amid all the things he offers to be.
Composite: Matthew Richardson/Getty/Alamy/Antonio Olmos

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‘A billion listens? Is that a lot?’ John Cooper Clarke on penning possibly the world’s favourite poem

[Ben Beaumont-Thomas](#)

I Wanna Be Yours, a love poem that rhymes Ford Cortina with vacuum cleaner, has been a school text and a wedding staple. But now, thanks to TikTok and Arctic Monkeys, it has gone spectacularly global. So who was it written for?



[@ben_bt](#)

Mon 20 Mar 2023 02:00 EDTLast modified on Mon 20 Mar 2023 13:44 EDT

Forget TS Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, Philip Larkin’s *High Windows* and Sylvia Plath’s *Lady Lazarus*. While those works may have more cultural heft, for sheer popularity no 20th-century British poem can touch John Cooper Clarke’s *I Wanna Be Yours*. In this love poem, to prove his devotion, an abject Clarke offers to metamorphose into everyday items: “I wanna be your vacuum cleaner, breathing in your dust / I wanna be your Ford Cortina, I will never rust.” The work became an irreverent favourite at

weddings soon after being written in 1982, and its addition to the GCSE English syllabus in the 1990s brought it to a younger generation. One of those studying it was Alex Turner of Arctic Monkeys, who later said: “It made my ears prick up in the classroom, because it was nothing like anything I’d heard.” Turner eventually adapted it into the ballad that closes out the band’s most successful album, 2013’s AM.

Thanks in part to another new audience, teens finding it on TikTok, the band’s version of I Wanna Be Yours is now wildly, improbably popular: it will clock up its billionth stream on Spotify this week, having spent months on the platform’s Top 50 songs chart, not in the UK but globally. This slow ballad, with Clarke’s poetry referencing setting lotion and electricity meters, sticks out a mile next to K-pop and Puerto Rican reggaeton. Spotify says the song is most popular in the US, Indonesia, Mexico and Brazil; the band’s label Domino says the song’s popularity is particularly growing in India, the Philippines and Turkey. If it was previously Britain’s favourite wedding poem, it’s now quantifiably the world’s favourite British poem, full stop.

“Is that a lot?” says 74-year-old Clarke, when I tell him about the billion streams milestone. “An American billion is different to a British billion – and I don’t know what either of them is. But it’s a fuck of a lot of listens.”

I Wanna Be Yours was written as a “sweet counterpoint” to the punkier stuff Clarke had made his name with, some of which even hit the UK Top 40 in the late 70s: surrealist beat poetry, withering character studies, pissed-off social commentary. The poem appeared on his album Zip Style Method, recited over an echo-heavy, neo-doo-wop backing: imagine Roy Orbison if he was from Salford and had lost the will to sing. “That wasn’t my idea, I gotta be honest,” he says of his musical backings. “But I couldn’t think of an argument against it. ‘Who plays spoken word records more than once?’ And I kind of believed that at the time.”

I occasionally read it at weddings myself, for friends. I get a dinner out of it

He says I Wanna Be Yours is a “deeply felt romantic Valentine poem” and that he’s a natural romantic “to a sadistic degree”. But he splutters nervously when I ask about the woman it was written for: “There have been so many!” He argues that it wasn’t born out of romantic feelings anyway, but graft. “Inspiration is for amateurs – I’ve got a living to make! It’s an actual nine-to-five job, though obviously it spills over into the evening if you’re on one. You’ve got to put the hours in.”

The vacuum cleaner line opens the poem. “There were all kinds of new usurpers of the Hoover, so the term was already resident in the public imagination. I tapped into that. Then I thought, ‘What else is useful?’” The next line originally featured a Morris Marina. “I had a second-hand one at the time, but I thought, ‘Bit naff.’ It’s not got the clout of Cortina. Funny how some words are better than others.”



‘Unlike anything I’d ever heard’ ... Alex Turner. Photograph: Peter Parks/AFP/Getty Images

Later lines have Clarke offering to become a teddy bear, a coffee pot and an umbrella, and adding: “I wanna be your electric meter / I will not run out / I wanna be the electric heater / You’ll get cold without.” It is about, he says, “elevating yourself to the level of a commodity for the person of your

desire. When you're in love with somebody, you want to be useful to them, indispensable even."

I Wanna Be Yours is perhaps so loved because it's the polar opposite of playing hard to get – a feeling heightened by Clarke's live readings of it, delivered with a relentless drive, like a man who's rushed up to you with a fistful of petrol station daffodils. This is why it works at weddings, too: it's the one place, particularly in eye-rolling, cynical Britain, where you can get away with saying this stuff – as wedding celebrant [Claire Lawrence](#) explains.

"If you Google 'wedding reading inspiration', I Wanna Be Yours comes up every single time," says Lawrence, "amid a load of really quite slushy readings. It's the alternative for people who don't want to be too Hallmark card." Older couples tend towards saying stuff about soulmates and eternity, but Lawrence says that with younger people, "the everyday is a theme that comes up a lot, the mundanity. Sitting with somebody having a cup of tea, doing the big shop." I Wanna Be Yours, a love poem pledging eternal devotion that's full of mundane detail, ticks both boxes. But, she warns, "it's a hard one to read well. You've got John Cooper Clarke or [Arctic Monkeys](#) in the back of your head. You can't just get your Uncle Philip to have a go at it – you need someone with chutzpah."

Wedding planner [Linzi Barford](#) says the poem fits into broader trends, too: the Monkeys link makes it popular amid a current craze for music-festival-style weddings, while couples facing a cost of living crisis are rejecting tradition. "There are barns where every weekend you can pay £35,000 and get the same wedding as everyone else, with the same readings. People don't want to do that." Or if you do have a traditional wedding, complete with meringue-y dress, I Wanna Be Yours can be a neat bit of iconoclasm. "In the wedding industry," says Barford, "there's a huge thing about 'your wedding, your way'. But we all know what it's like with parents! So a reading is a way to stamp your own personality."

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It is to weddings what Always Look on the Bright Side of Life is to humanist funerals

Clarke says that when he stays in a hotel where there's a wedding going on, quite often the couple will rush over and say they've just read his poem out. Occasionally he delivers it at weddings himself, for friends: "I get a dinner out of it. It is to weddings what Always Look on the Bright Side of Life is to humanist funerals."

You probably wouldn't play Arctic Monkeys' version for your first dance though – it's more funereal than marital. Turner's steady delivery is very different to Clarke's and he tweaks and adds lyrics – there's a killer bit of changed emphasis when he sings "let *me* be the portable heater", suggesting a love rival that isn't there in the poem.

Clarke is utterly in love with the band's version. On a prosaic level, it has made him "a lot of PRS", referring to royalties, and has substantially boosted his profile: he's touring sizeable UK venues this month. "I was never actually on the sausage" – rhyming slang for dole – "as this is what I do, this is my job, and sometimes I'm doing better business than others. But thanks to a great extent to the lads sticking me into the pop world again, everything has gone from strength to strength."



‘I was never actually on the sausage’ ... Clarke on stage at Alexandra Palace, London, in 1980. Photograph: David Corio/Redferns

More profoundly, Clarke sees Turner (who couldn’t contribute to this article while on tour in Asia) as a kindred wordsmith, and goes off on some fascinating songwriting analysis. On I Wanna Be Yours, the previously smooth Turner deliberately stumbles as he sings the wordy line “at least as deep as the Pacific Ocean”. Clarke says it’s the “humanising” moment of the song, one that shows you “nobody’s perfect” – and Turner does it through the rhythm and musicality of the words themselves, rather than with his singing voice. “When you use this MO, of putting too many words per line, you’re actually depriving yourself of the opportunity to inject soulfulness in the vocal delivery – your main concern is getting the language out there, making it fit,” Clarke says. “So there’s no extraneous baring of the soul.”

He compares Turner to Chuck Berry in this regard, citing a line from Berry’s Brown Eyed Handsome Man. “‘Way back into history, 3,000 years in fact, ever since the world began’ – he doesn’t need to put ‘in fact’ in there. But Chuck couldn’t bear to leave that gap. It makes it just that bit more intimate and conversational. That ‘in fact’ should fuck it up, but it doesn’t.” Another example from the same song: “‘Milo Venus was a beautiful girl, she had the world in the palm of her hand / lost both her arms

in a wrestling match to meet a brown eyed handsome man.’ You couldn’t get a Rizla in there. Every millisecond is spoken for. Fantastic!”

It was a revelation that Abbey Clancy was a fan of my work

When Arctic Monkeys played Earl’s Court for the release of AM, they invited Clarke along, and teed up their encore with I Wanna Be Yours. “Balloons falling from the ceiling: the big finish,” Clarke wistfully remembers. “And I was reading an interview in one of the papers with” – he says this next name with the reverence of a monk addressing a newly canonised saint – “Abbey Clancy, who was very enthusiastic about Arctic Monkeys’ new album, mentioning I Wanna Be Yours as her favourite track. It was a revelation that she was a fan of my work, without necessarily knowing about it. I was thrilled.”

The biggest thrill, though, is that I Wanna Be Yours has helped to lift up poetry itself. “Any work of art,” says Clarke, “that has any lasting, transcendent value – a painting that haunts you through life – you say it’s ‘poetic’. Unlike all the other arts, poetry is the one everyone gives a go. I believe everyone’s written a poem at some point. It’s the easiest, most accessible – a pen and a piece of paper and off you go. You don’t even have to be literate – you could record something. But it’s perceived as a minority of a minority who are interested in poetry. I don’t know why it’s got that reputation. Songs aren’t that far from poetry – as Alex has pointed out.”

John Cooper Clarke [tours the UK](#) from 24 March to 10 June. Arctic Monkeys’ new album The Car is out now on Domino. Linzi Barford’s wedding planning company is [That Black & White Cat](#). [Claire Lawrence](#) is a celebrant for weddings across the east Midlands and beyond, and [offers advice on TikTok](#).

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Girls walking to school on the outskirts of Sadr City. Photograph: Ghaith Abdul-Ahad

[Iraq war: 20 years onIraq](#)

Guns, cash, and frozen chicken: the militia boss doling out aid in Baghdad

Former Shia fighter who had murderous reputation during civil war now offers help to city's widows and orphans

[Ghaith Abdul-Ahad](#) in Baghdad

Mon 20 Mar 2023 01.00 EDT

On a recent warm afternoon, a white, American-made SUV drove down the streets of the eastern Baghdad district of Sadr City. In the passenger seat sat an older militia boss, and behind him were two bodyguards, his five-year-old son, and a Kalashnikov. Their first stop was a small grocery shop, where a young man with a mop of ginger hair was busy serving customers.

One of the bodyguards beckoned to the young man, who came hurriedly and stood a respectful distance from the car. The militia boss stopped toying with his automatic pistol, pulled out a brown envelope from a large stash on the dashboard, and gave it to the young man, while one of the bodyguards handed him a small plastic bag from the back of the car.

“Go, my son,” said the boss in a husky voice. “This is your salary for this month, and a frozen chicken for your lunch.”

The young man accepted the largesse, bowed his head, and mumbled a few words of gratitude. A look of boredom flickered across the militiaman’s face, as he listened to a couple of old men who had gathered around the car, cheering, saluting, and calling upon Allah to bless the benefactor.

The car sped away, and the militia boss went back to toying with his gun. He told his bodyguards, who were stuffing money in more brown envelopes, that the young man’s father, who used to roam the streets selling sweets from a pushcart, was killed in 2015 when protesters tried to storm the Iraqi capital’s fortified Green Zone, which had been set up by the Americans after the invasion of 2003. “He is an orphan and he works in the shop to support his mother and sisters,” he said.

“May Allah curse all those people in the Green Zone,” replied one of the bodyguards.

Throughout the day, the car trudged through the crowded streets, sometimes driving down narrow alleys or across a flat dusty landscape dotted with concrete shacks, where children sifted through mounds of rubbish looking for plastic bottles and cans to resell. At one point the car drove along the bank of a 10-metre-wide canal flowing with green oily sewage. They made more than a dozen stops at houses that were no bigger than a small brick room with tiny holes for windows, some with corrugated metal sheets for roofs, and floors of bare earth.



Lakes of sewage waters and refuse on the outskirts of Sadr City.
Photograph: Ghaith Abdul-Ahad

At each stop the scene was repeated: the militia boss passed a brown envelope stuffed with cash, a bodyguard gave a frozen chicken, and cheers and calls for blessings came from the recipients, who were invariably either widowed women or orphaned children whose menfolk had died in the cycles of violence that have engulfed Iraq since the US-led invasion in 2003.

One elderly woman, after receiving her envelope and frozen chicken, complained to the militia boss that her four mentally unwell boys were beating her up. She pointed at a young man, who stood naked but for a loose shirt, chained to an electricity poll next to a grocery shop, and said she didn't know what else to do. The young man stood humming to himself while passersby ignored him.

"Look around you – there is so much misery in this city," said the militia boss. "Whatever I can do to help, I do, and with my own money, because no one is here to help those people." He added: "People come to me constantly seeking aid, but we only give to widows and orphans who don't receive a state pension."

He said that he found the people who were really in need using the same spy network he had used to track his enemies during the brutal, sectarian civil war fought between 2004 and 2008 as the country fell apart. “We send our intelligence teams to investigate them and vouch for them.”

But that day, as he was making his rounds, he did make an exception. A shop owner pointed to a house and said the man who lived there, a tea seller, could barely walk and the family were very poor. One of the bodyguards went to the door and called on the father to come out. A few minutes later a frail barefoot man came out, dragging his right leg behind him, with his right arm visibly shaking. They gave him an envelope, and the boss told his men to add the family to their list.



Iraqi soldiers in Baghdad in May 2006. Photograph: Ghaith Abdul-Ahad

A militia boss turned philanthropist

The militia boss was in his mid-50s, and walked with a dignified gait, making religious references as he spoke. Illness and two decades of war had left their mark: stooping shoulders, deep wrinkles around his eyes, and scars from multiple injuries. He wore a black tracksuit, with a black keffiyeh draped loosely over his bald head. His trimmed moustache and beard were dyed jet black. His men called him “Boya”, a diminutive of father in

Arabic. “We were children when we first started to fight under his command,” said one.

Before he became a philanthropist concerned with the wellbeing of Sadr City’s poorest people, his name struck fear into the heart of Baghdadis, as he and his men had committed some of the worst atrocities during [the civil war](#).

Before that, he was a special forces NCO in the Iraqi army. He described that period as “the age of ignorance” before he found the “right path” and became a disciple of the charismatic Shia cleric Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, whose sermons had channelled the anguish of the impoverished masses in Baghdad and the southern provinces during the years of sanctions between 1990 and 2003. The cleric’s charisma and popularity probably contributed to his assassination along with his two eldest sons in 1999.

Al Sadr’s youngest son, [Moqtada al-Sadr](#), inherited not only his father’s network of clerics and his masses of devotees, but also his anti-American stance, which soon led to clashes between his followers – [the Mahdi Army](#) – and the Americans in the years after the US invasion. The militia boss now distributing frozen chickens was one of the hundreds who picked up arms and fought the Americans in the streets of Baghdad, Najaf and other Shia cities.



Moqtada al-Sadr delivers a speech after Friday prayers at the Great Mosque of Kufa in the city of Najaf in November 2022. Photograph: Qassem Al-Kaabi/AFP/Getty Images

“We were poor and we fought with the scarcity of the weapons we had. People sold their furniture, their wives’ gold, to buy ammunition, but we had God and the banner of Imam Ali on our sides,” he said.

He told the driver of the SUV to take a detour and go down a wide two-lane thoroughfare, crowded on that afternoon with taxis, pickup trucks and motor-rickshaws. “This was our hunting ground,” he said. “We attacked the Americans every time they passed down this street. No one dared leave their house after sunset. Death was certain.

“Not everyone knew how to fight street battles, but I was in the special forces in Saddam’s army, and they used to drop us by helicopter into Kurdish villages to hunt for the guerrillas: the trick is to attack and withdraw.”

Of course in these glorious street battles, neither he and his men, nor the Americans, paid any attention to the civilians amid whom they were fighting. Twenty years later, some houses are still pockmarked with bullet holes.

The militia leader said his four eldest sons and his two brothers were captured by the Americans, but they never managed to get to him, because he never spent two nights in the same place and never owned a mobile phone. “These are spy devices invented by the Israelis to enslave us,” he said, pointing at a smartphone.

‘They killed people, we went after them’

By 2004 the war had shifted. Jihadis keen to start a civil war began targeting Shia neighbourhoods with car bombs, kidnapping and slaughtering Shia men. “Our fight became against two enemies, the Americans and the Takfiris,” he said, using a term for Sunni extremists.

And here is where the militia leader’s murderous reputation began spreading. Driven by a desire to avenge the killing of Shias, he and his men [started raiding Sunni neighbourhoods](#), allegedly to kill “terrorists” but in reality kidnapping any men they found there.

Using ambulances, police trucks or black Opel sedans used by senior officials, they drove through police and army checkpoints unmolested. Sometimes their raids were conducted in coordination with the ministry of interior special forces, another infamous organisation that emerged during the civil war.

The militia chief’s name became a franchise for a multitude of gangs and militias that kidnapped, maimed and killed thousands. “They killed a lot of our people with their car bombs, but we went after them. I made the people of [the Baghdad neighbourhood] Adhamiya scared like chickens.”

He quickly rectified his comment, saying: “I swear by Allah we never killed in vain. We brought them here [to Sadr City], we interrogated them. And after they confessed to murder, a Shia cleric would issue us a fatwa. And only then would we execute them.”

Avenging the Shia became a lucrative business, he confessed, although he said it was “other commanders” who would extort ransom money for the “terrorists” they captured.

The bodies of those murdered by the Shia militia were dumped in mass graves, not far from where he was distributing aid that day.

As he spoke, his youngest son, squeezed between his father's loyal bodyguards, fiddled with the barrel of a Kalashnikov taller than him.

The crowded streets of Sadr City

Sadr City has always been an overcrowded place, inhabited by poor people. The large working-class suburb that once sat on the eastern flanks of Baghdad is now an integrated part of the city after its urban expansion in recent decades. It was first devised in 1959, to house mostly peasants who had migrated from the south to escape the brutal feudal lords and lived in reed huts on the outskirts of Baghdad.

[Map of Baghdad showing Green Zone and Sadr City](#)

Originally named Thawra [Revolution] City, it was a hastily and cheaply constructed housing project, built on a grid pattern, and divided into sectors each containing 1,100 identical two-storey brick houses. In 1982 new residential blocks were added – along with eventually unsuccessful attempts to solve chronic sewage problems – and it was renamed Saddam City.

After the invasion it became the stronghold of Moqtada al-Sadr and his followers, and acquired its current name. But it's most commonly known as al-Madia, The City. A place home to a large number of writers, musicians and artists – and a place where weapons are traded, documents are forged and military deserters have always found shelter.

In the 20 years since the invasion, its population has tripled. The crowded houses have been divided into smaller and smaller units, and Sadr City's boundaries have expanded further to the east to accommodate waves of even poorer migrants from the south.



New houses built on the outskirts of Sadr City by migrants from the countryside. Photograph: Ghaith Abdul-Ahad

Even Sadr City is beyond the reach of some. Many newcomers have settled on parched agricultural lands on outskirts that have been bulldozed and parcelled into tiny plots of land. New suburbs of cinder-block hovels have risen in recent years, forming slums behind the slums. Cars slowly negotiate the dirt roads with their gaping potholes. Dogs roam in fields of rubbish, where children collect plastic bottles and cans and sell them for recycling. Jungles of electrical wires are rigged between houses, siphoning electricity for the city's main grid, and raw sewage is discharged into open canals, from where cat-size rats swarm into homes. Drinking water is sold from plastic tanks slung from the back of motorcycle rickshaws. These are the territories where the militia boss distributes his charity.

Sajad is short and stocky and dressed in a cream-coloured dishdasha and a long checkered keffiyeh. Like most residents of this wretched neighbourhood, he came to the Iraqi capital from the impoverished southern province of Ammara.

“At least here in Baghdad, you can work three or four days a week as a porter in the market, a day labourer, or open a stall selling tomatoes and

vegetables and make 10k dinars (\$6) a day. In the south, there is nothing but hunger,” he said

He held out his hands towards the dirt lane in front of his small house: “Before each election, politicians come and promise to pave the roads, bring us electricity and running water, and then they disappear.”

A torn Iraqi flag fluttered from the neighbourhood school, “The Rising Dawn”. It was built in 2014, with prefabricated containers, but the roofs sagged and were covered in corrugated metal sheets and the walls are rusty and cracked. In the summer it is stifling hot, and in the winter it drips with rain, but because of a shortage of local schools it is attended by four shifts of students each day.

On a recent afternoon, dozens of girls filled the dirt lane outside the school, jostling between the dozens of TukTuks parked outside, their pink headscarves bobbing up and down, as another group of girls trudged in the opposite direction, heading to class.



Schoolgirls finishing their classes in the outskirts of Sadr City. Photograph: Ghaith Abdul-Ahad

“Although summer is very hot without electricity, it’s more merciful on us than winter,” Sajad said. “Because when it rains, the streets turn into swamps and sometimes schools close because the children sink up to their knees in mud.”

Farther to the east, beyond a small lake where tankers discharge the city’s sewage, where a carcass of a dead cow floated between plastic bottles and trash, lay an area known as Sadda, which means a dam in Arabic. Once part of the city’s flood defences along a river that has long since dried up, it became a dumping ground for Sunni victims of the civil war. Locals would bury their bodies under a thin layer of dirt, marking each grave with a piece of scrap metal or any other random object.

But what in 2009 was a mass grave is now a densely populated neighbourhood, as the city spread. “People often find bones and human skulls when they dig latrines,” said one local.

In the sectarian narrative of post-2003 Iraq, the Shia – who make up most of the population – were promised a place at the top of the new social order. Instead, for two decades, they became cannon fodder, while a small elite of politicians, warlords, militia commanders and their cronies have become billionaires. This deep social divide has allowed men like the militia boss to rebrand themselves as philanthropists.

“Don’t ask me why the state does not care for those people,” he said. “Ask me why the Shia clergy abandoned those people, why they invest in private hospitals, universities and factories – are those Shia more worthy of that wealth? Why do the ‘Big Turbans’ travel to London and Iran for medical help while these people – Shia like them – are living in these hovels?”



A makeshift cemetery for victims of sectarian killing on the eastern outskirts of Sadr City in 2008. Photograph: Ghaith Abdul-Ahad

‘Here I am among my people’

At one point during the civil war, the militia boss – like Moqtada al-Sadr himself, and many other Shia commanders – fled to Iran. While he was there, he says, the Revolutionary Guards (IGRC) encouraged him to form his own militia, splitting from the Mahdi Army. He says he refused. “My loyalty was and always will remain to Moqtada, he is my leader. Only a whore would change her allegiance for money.”

A few years later, he returned to Iraq, and found a comfortable place for himself in the fat margins of the corrupt Iraqi state, benefiting from government contracts and other deals. Twenty years after the invasion that ignited a civil war and granted power to men like him, there has been no accountability for those who stoked the conflict or murdered civilians.

Many of his fellow commanders, who fought in the same streets, have since become political leaders, fielding candidates in parliamentary elections, and controlling economic empires that siphon billions of dollars from the state budget. Twenty years on, he is still essentially a local militia boss, a glorified neighbourhood thug.

“I am happy here in this neighbourhood,” he said. “I can go live anywhere in Baghdad, but here I am among my people, they are my true protection.”

As he finished making his payments, he told the driver to go into a sidestreet, not far from where he fought the Americans. The car turned into an alley, and entered a large yard. Inside were a dozen or so armoured pickup trucks that had once belonged to the Iraqi army.

“These are all mine – and I have men and a lot of ammunition, too,” he said. “I keep them ready in case I ever need to use them again.”

[The Iraq invasion: 20 years on, with Ghaith Abdul-Ahad](#)

Join Ghaith Abdul-Ahad who will be talking to Devika Bhat in a livestreamed event on his powerful new book: [A Stranger In Your Own City](#) on Monday 27 March 2023, 8pm–9pm BST. Book tickets at theguardian.com/guardianlive

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A faecal microbiota transplant capsule, made using a stool donated by Linda Geddes. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

[How to have a healthy gut](#)[Medical research](#)

Keep taking the crapsules: how I became a faecal transplant donor

Faecal transplants might help treat illnesses such as arthritis, diabetes and cancer. And one day it could be as simple as taking a pill made from a stranger's poo. Our writer volunteers a sample

[Linda Geddes](#)

Mon 20 Mar 2023 03.00 EDTLast modified on Mon 20 Mar 2023 14.07 EDT

To my fellow travellers, I'm sure the package I'm carrying looks like a lunchbox. Circular, and dark blue, with a Tupperware-style lid, it is precisely the kind of vessel you'd transport a soup or salad in. I've even sealed it inside a freezer bag, to contain any leaks. Or smells.

I walk slowly and with care across Westminster Bridge, because any trip could prove disastrous. As I enter St Thomas' Hospital and head for the infection department on the fifth floor, I realise the object I'm carrying is still warm, and, despite my preparations, I'm sure I can detect a faint whiff of something ripe, like camembert.

It is, in a word, a turd. Freshly laid, and brimming with bacteria, the doctors I'm delivering it to believe such faeces could be the future of medicine. I've carried mine across London to be made into capsules – that someone else will ultimately eat.

If the thought of swallowing the bacteria from another person's poo fills you with horror, consider Carol Goble. A string of infections with *Clostridioides difficile* (*C. diff*) – a gut bacterium that can cause severe diarrhoea and stomach cramps – had left her afraid to leave the house, or even eat. [Antibiotics](#) didn't help, and by the time she was offered capsules of another person's poo bacteria, she'd lost three stone in weight. For her, a faecal microbiota transplant (FMT), as it is officially known, was transformative. "It has completely changed my life and I feel like I'm back to myself again – it is amazing," she said.

The human gut contains trillions of bacteria, many of which play important roles in keeping us healthy, but occasionally a few microbiological "bad apples" can throw the whole system out of whack. Increasingly, though,

doctors are realising that restoring a healthy balance of bacteria could help to treat a range of different ailments, from brain disorders to metabolic disease, to arthritis. It could even improve cancer patients' responses to treatment. And it all begins with a poo like mine.

The idea of using faeces to treat disease isn't entirely new. Approximately 1,700 years ago, a Chinese doctor called Ge Hong urged patients suffering from severe diarrhoea to consume "[yellow soup](#)" to cure their illness, a practice that apparently continued for centuries.

More recent attempts at FMT have largely involved introducing it from the other end of the gastrointestinal tract – most commonly via a long thin instrument that deposits the preparation in the colon. For now, the only [licensed application](#) is the treatment of recurrent *C. diff* infections – although clinical trials exploring other disease areas have exploded in recent years.

C. diff bacteria usually live harmlessly in the colon alongside other species, but sometimes they start to take over – most commonly after a course of antibiotics – and produce a toxin that makes their hosts unwell. Such infections can prove fatal; in the US, *C. diff* infection is associated with [15,000-30,000 deaths](#) each year. Standard treatment involves antibiotics, but about 20% of patients develop repeated infections, like Goble.

Since 2014, the UK's [National Institute of Health and Care Excellence \(Nice\)](#) has recommended FMT as an alternative for patients who have experienced at least two previous infections. The success rate is impressive, with about [85% of people cured](#) after a single transfer. In November, the US Food and Drug Administration also approved its [first faecal microbiota product](#) – a liquefied preparation of stool, administered via an enema into patients' intestinal tracts.



‘It is, in a word, a turd’: Linda Geddes transports her contribution in a sealed plastic carton. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

Although delivering bacteria via the back passage is effective, it isn’t particularly comfortable or convenient for patients.

Enter capsules – or “crapsules” as they’re known in the trade. Compared with traditional FMT, “they are a gamechanger in terms of making FMT far more accessible, easier and cheaper,” says Prof Simon Carding at the Quadram Institute in Norwich, who plans to launch his own trial of FMT to treat myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME) later this year.

By the time I arrive at the St Thomas’ lab carrying my precious cargo, a battery of clinical tests has already pronounced one of my previous poos to be free from parasites, Sars-CoV-2, antibiotic-resistant organisms and an array of other bugs capable of causing gastrointestinal illness. I’ve also been declared generally fit and healthy, and free of various blood-borne viruses, including HIV and hepatitis.

Such rigorous screening is essential, and one reason why [DIY faecal transplants](#) are to be avoided. “You wouldn’t want to just take any person’s stool sample and turn it into a capsule and swallow it without checking to see that they don’t have any diseases and infections that they can transmit,”

says Dr Simon Goldenberg, consultant microbiologist and infection control doctor at Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust.

Désirée Prossomariti, a research biomedical scientist, takes my sample and opens it inside a biosafety cabinet. Watching her scoop my poop into a series of plastic containers feels uncomfortable: it's not often we hand over something so intimate, nor so laden with cultural taboos, to a fellow human.

Prossomariti reassures me that she views faeces as "just another type of specimen". "A lot of people get grossed out by it, but it is not much worse than blood. Besides," she adds, "in my personal opinion, it is not the most disgusting thing you can work with."

"What is?" I ask.

"Sputum," she says. "That's awful."

The samples she is preparing will undergo further tests, to ensure I haven't picked up any additional bugs since my last screening. The rest of my poo is weighed, and two-thirds of it – 100g – is scooped into a sterile flip-top sports bottle, along with 200ml of saline, and shaken into a slurry. The liquefied poo is filtered then centrifuged to remove any undigested food; this suspension is spun again at a higher speed to remove the saline and concentrate the bacteria into a soft pellet. Finally, Prossomariti adds a sugar solution, which will protect against ice-crystal formation during the next step, and tips the silky brown fluid into a petri dish. She puts this into a freeze dryer overnight, to remove any remaining water.

The bacterial cake that emerges is exquisite: pale golden brown, and etched with fine lines that give it the appearance of cross-sections of wood, or a dusty window that Jack Frost has gone to work on. Prossomariti takes this wondrous material and crushes it into a dusty powder, which she scoops and packs into five large red capsules.

Holding one in your hand, you'd never guess what it contained. Weighty, yet odourless, they are designed not to spill their contents until they've passed through the stomach and entered the small intestine. In truth, they look unimpressive: like any other drug you might receive in hospital.

But who would swallow such a medicine?

Helen, 45, is one of about 40 patients enrolled on a trial at St Thomas' Hospital to test whether FMT could help eradicate antibiotic-resistant bacteria from people's bowels. Such organisms present a growing and serious threat to global health, rendering even relatively simple infections potentially deadly.

The bacterial cake that emerges is exquisite: pale golden brown, with the appearance of cross-sections of wood

Helen experienced unpleasant bloating after catching typhoid in Ghana and being treated with antibiotics for it. Further tests revealed antibiotic-resistant bacteria living in her bowels. When she was invited to participate in the trial, she didn't hesitate.

“Ultimately, I thought ‘I’ve got nothing to lose, and if this can help, not just personally, but with the research, then why not?’” she says. “We put our bodies through much worse things than this – even alcohol or smoking – so I was sure I’d be able to cope.”



The bacterial cake made from Linda Geddes's poo. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

Though Helen doesn't know whether she received bacterial capsules or placebo ones, her symptoms have cleared up: "I'm hoping they gave me the real stuff, and that they're doing their job."

Antibiotic-resistant bacteria are just the start. Other labs are exploring whether FMT could be used to treat [arthritis](#), [type 1 diabetes](#), or even help people with neurological disorders, such as [autism](#) and [Parkinson's disease](#).

Modifying someone's gut bacteria to treat gastrointestinal disorders makes intuitive sense, but it is a greater leap to see how it could be beneficial for some of these other disorders. Considering their wider relationship with the immune system is a good starting point, says Prof Tariq Iqbal, a consultant gastroenterologist and co-founder of University of Birmingham's Microbiome Treatment Centre. "The gut is our biggest interface between the environment and the immune system, and is key to programming it. Certainly, in a condition like inflammatory arthritis, you could down-regulate an overactive immune response by treating an imbalance in the gut microbiome."

When it comes to brain disorders, such as Parkinson's, the mechanism may be more complicated. However, one theory is that an overgrowth of harmful gut bacteria could damage the [gut lining](#), allowing substances that would normally be excluded from the blood to filter through.

Another possibility is that certain gut bacteria produce substances that can get into the blood, and damage tissues further afield.

FMT capsules aren't the only option being explored. At [Microbiotica](#), a biotech company based near Cambridge, researchers are trying to identify populations of beneficial gut microbes that could be cultured in fermentation tanks, and then packaged into oral capsules, without ever having seen a poo.

"The problem with [existing products] is they are donor-derived, which means you are going to have a variable product," says Tim Sharpington,

Microbiotica's CEO. "Certain donors produce fantastic response rates, and others less so. This leads us to the conclusion that there are certain bugs or groups of bugs in there which are good, but there are also certain bugs which are bad."

Microbiotica's scientists are trying to identify which of the thousands of microbial species in a typical gut are responsible for the beneficial effects of FMT. The hope is that these could be individually grown in fermentation tanks, and packaged together into capsules to produce more consistent therapeutic effects. And they are setting their sights on one of the most feared diseases of all.

Cancer immunotherapy can be extraordinarily effective, but it only works in a subset of patients – typically about 40% in the case of patients with melanoma skin cancer. Identifying them is still something of a guessing game but, increasingly, studies are hinting that there may be differences in microbiomes of immunotherapy responders and non-responders.

This research took a compelling twist in 2021, when two separate research groups, [one in the US](#), [the other in Israel](#), announced that they had taken stool material from advanced melanoma patients who had responded well to immunotherapy drugs called checkpoint inhibitors, and transferred it into non-responders, prompting some of these patients to show improved clinical responses.

Microbiotica has since analysed this and other data to try to identify which bacteria were responsible for the effect. All of the bacteria are commensals, meaning they live on our body surfaces without causing us harm, and may perform useful functions, such as protecting us against pathogens or training our immune cells to function properly. Sharpington won't divulge the names of the bacteria, not least because four of the organisms are "unknown to man, outside our company".



Research is ongoing into the therapeutic effects of faecal microbiota transplants for more diseases. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

He believes the bacteria are interacting with immune cells called dendritic cells residing in the gut lining, which can tweak the tone of the wider immune system. Quite possibly, different subgroups of bacteria have different therapeutic effects: those that appear beneficial in inflammatory diseases such as arthritis or ulcerative colitis, seem to dampen certain immune responses, whereas those associated with people's response to cancer immunotherapy have stimulatory effects, Sharpington says. The company plans to launch its own trial of the bacteria it has identified in melanoma patients later this year.

Identifying and growing specific species of bacteria for transplantation won't necessarily be straightforward, warns Iqbal: "The gut microbiome consists of trillions of microbes. Just choosing 15 or so different components, and hoping they're going to engraft into that ecological niche, is quite a difficult thing to do." Even so, he agrees this approach is probably the future of FMT. The adage "one man's trash is another man's treasure" never rang truer.

In the future, people might consider banking their own stool in youth, just as they do their eggs or their babies' cord blood, in case they need to

repopulate their gut with healthy bacteria in later life.

There's still a way to go before faecal transplants, in whatever form, make it into mainstream medicine – although recent Nice and FDA recommendations for *C. diff* show that it is possible. Getting over the “yuk” factor remains a significant barrier: according to Goldenberg, less than a third of patients with antimicrobial-resistant infections that he approached were willing to enrol on his oral capsule trial – although that could change if such treatments proved effective in large-scale clinical trials.

If they do, faecal transplants could provide an affordable solution to some of mankind's most pressing challenges – from diseases of ageing to antimicrobial resistance. And who could pooh-pooh that?

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2023/mar/20/faecal-transplant-donor-healthy-gut>

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2023.03.20 - Opinion

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Demonstrators dressed as Tony Blair and George Bush with blood on their hands protest at the Chilcot inquiry publication launch in London in 2016.
Photograph: Chris J Ratcliffe/Getty Images

[The Iraq invasion: 20 years on](#)

How many of those calling for Putin's arrest were complicit in the illegal invasion of Iraq?

[George Monbiot](#)



Gordon Brown, Condoleezza Rice and Alastair Campbell are as responsible for an illegal war as the Russian leader's 'henchmen' they condemn

Mon 20 Mar 2023 03.00 EDTLast modified on Mon 20 Mar 2023 09.01 EDT

It goes beyond hypocrisy. It's an assault on memory. Gordon Brown, calling for a special tribunal to punish the Russian government, correctly states that an act of aggression – invading another nation – was identified by the Nuremberg tribunal as “the supreme international crime”. It is, he [wrote in the Guardian](#), not just Vladimir Putin who should be prosecuted, but also his “henchmen”. These include members of the Russian and perhaps Belarusian national security councils, and a range of political and military leaders. All should be held to account for this “manifestly illegal war”, he [wrote](#) on his website.

[Condoleezza Rice](#), who was George W Bush's national security adviser, was asked of Russia's aggression on Fox News, “when you invade a sovereign nation, that is a war crime?” She replied: “It is certainly against every principle of international law and international order.”

Brown and Rice are right about Russia. Its government, in invading Ukraine, has clearly committed the crime of aggression, a crime in which, as Brown points out, its senior officials are complicit. The same applies to the US and UK governments, which invaded [Iraq](#) 20 years ago today. Among the most senior perpetrators were Rice and Brown.

The seventh of the [Nuremberg Principles](#), which Brown cites in calling for Russian prosecutions, points out that “complicity” in a war of aggression “is a crime under international law”. Both officials would clearly qualify as complicit. Rice was one of the architects of the war. Brown, as a cabinet member, was party to the decision. As chancellor of the exchequer, he financed the war.

No one can credibly deny that the invasion of Iraq met the Nuremberg definition. The Chilcot inquiry, whose terms were set by Brown when he was prime minister, was forbidden to pronounce on the legality of the war. But it [concluded that](#) “the UK chose to join the invasion of Iraq before the peaceful options for disarmament had been exhausted. Military action at that time was not a last resort.” In other words, it failed to meet the [UN charter’s criteria](#) for legal warfare. The former law lord, Lord Steyn, came to the [same conclusion](#): “In the absence of a second UN resolution authorising invasion, it was illegal”. The former lord chief justice, Lord Bingham, [called the Iraq war](#) “a serious violation of international law”. A Dutch inquiry, led by a former supreme court judge, found that the [invasion had](#) “no sound mandate in international law”.

The attackers went out of their way to eliminate peaceful alternatives. Saddam Hussein desperately [sought to negotiate](#), eventually offering everything the US and UK governments said they wanted, but they [slapped his hand away](#), then lied to us about it. When the UN sought diplomatic solutions, US officials went into what they called “thwart mode”, [sabotaging negotiations](#).

When the head of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, José Bustani, offered to resolve the impasse over weapons inspections in Iraq, the US government [illegally ousted him](#). The first government to support his sacking was the [United Kingdom’s](#).

The government in which Brown was chancellor was repeatedly warned that its planned invasion would be illegal. A year before the war, the then foreign secretary, Jack Straw, explained that for a [war to be legal](#), “i) There must be an armed attack upon a State or such an attack must be imminent; ii) The use of force must be necessary and other means to reverse/avert the attack must be unavailable; iii) The acts in self-defence must be proportionate and strictly confined to the object of stopping the attack”. None of these conditions applied. The Foreign Office, according to its deputy legal adviser, Elizabeth Wilmshurst, consistently counselled that an [invasion would be unlawful](#) without a new UN resolution. She explained that “an unlawful use of force on such a scale amounts to the crime of aggression”. A [Cabinet Office memo](#) warned: “A legal justification for invasion would be needed. Subject to Law Officers’ advice, none currently exists.”

As for “law officers’ advice”, the then attorney general, Lord Goldsmith, warned that there were only [three ways](#) in which an invasion could be legally justified. They were “self-defence, humanitarian intervention, or UNSC [UN security council] authorisation. The first and second could not be the base in this case.” The government failed to obtain UN security council authorisation. At the Chilcot inquiry, Lord Goldsmith testified that, after he gave advice Tony Blair didn’t want to hear, the [prime minister stopped asking](#). Just before the war, though the facts had not changed, [Goldsmith changed his mind](#).

There is another way of saying “crime of aggression”: an act of mass murder. The invasion of Iraq killed hundreds of thousands of people. We cannot be more precise than that, as the invading forces refused to [measure the carnage](#). But it is almost certainly the greatest crime against humanity so far this century. Blair, Brown, Bush and Rice are as guilty of a “manifestly illegal war” as Putin and his close advisers.

But who gets prosecuted is a matter of victors’ justice. For example, until it [issued a warrant](#) last week on another charge for the arrest of Putin and one of his officials, there had been 31 cases brought before the international criminal court. Every one of the defendants in these cases is [African](#). Is this because Africa is the only continent where crimes against humanity had

occurred? No. It's because Africans accused of such crimes do not enjoy the political protections afforded to the western leaders who perpetrate even greater atrocities.

Instead of facing justice, the killers walk among us, respected, revered, treated as the elder statesmen to whom media and governments turn for counsel. Brown can pose as an august humanitarian. Alastair Campbell, who oversaw the compilation of the “dodgy dossier”, which provided a [false case for war](#), and is therefore as [complicit](#) as any of Putin's “henchmen”, has been thoroughly screenwashed: in other words, rehabilitated, like other grim political figures, by television. He is now treated as a kind of national agony uncle.

There has been no reckoning and nor will there be. This greatest of crimes has been so thoroughly airbrushed that its perpetrators can anoint themselves the avenging angels of other people's atrocities. To quote King Lear: “Plate sin with gold, and the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks: arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw does pierce it.”

- George Monbiot is a Guardian columnist

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US soldiers stationed inside one of Saddam Hussein's former palaces in Tikrit, Iraq in 2004. Photograph: Stefan Zaklin/EPA

[OpinionIraq](#)

Compare Iraq with Ukraine. It's clear the era of US global supremacy is over

[Jonathan Steele](#)



Washington's power is suddenly threatened by a newly confident China and disquiet among leaders in the global south

Mon 20 Mar 2023 04.00 EDTLast modified on Mon 20 Mar 2023 11.35 EDT

It's a useful coincidence that the 20th anniversary of George W Bush and Tony Blair's illegal attack on Iraq falls only a matter of weeks after the anniversary of Vladimir Putin's illegal attack on Ukraine. Neither war was authorised by the UN. Both are marked by massive destruction and huge loss of life.

The Bush/Blair invasion and occupation of Iraq, and its chaotic consequences, have taken the lives of more than a million Iraqi civilians, [according to one survey](#). US forces committed innumerable war crimes, not least the torture of captured soldiers. At the [Abu Ghraib](#) detention centre near Baghdad, US officers humiliated Iraqi prisoners in violation of the Geneva conventions. The invasion provoked widespread resistance, but US counter-insurgency tactics involved raids on villages that led to [massacres of unarmed civilians](#).

The world reacted to the Bush/Blair war with disapproval, but almost no action was taken against them. There were no state-imposed sanctions on the US or Britain. No investigators from the international criminal court took evidence to substantiate prosecutions for war crimes. A few individuals and some human rights organisations called for Blair to be indicted on the charge of [committing the crime of aggression](#), but no government approached the UN with a resolution to open a criminal case against them.

Now consider the very different reaction to Vladimir Putin's illegal war on Ukraine. Virtually every western government, following the US's lead, has slapped sanctions on Russia's exports. Russia's financial holdings in US banks have been frozen. Putin's friends have had their yachts and other property [impounded](#) – and then a few days ago the international criminal court [issued an arrest warrant for Putin](#) for war crimes involving the illegal deportation of children from Ukraine.

The contrast in the global reaction to the two wars is instructive. Nothing better illustrates the differential between Russia's meagre international authority and that of the US. For Putin it is humiliating. He may like to think of his country as a superpower, but in reality, beyond holding a massive nuclear arsenal, [Russia](#) has little global clout and few foreign friends. Putin is widely criticised for trying to recreate an old-fashioned empire by seizing land and intimidating states on Russia's western and southern borders.

The US, for its part, runs a new style of non-territorial empire with great success. It enjoys enormous political and economic influence on every continent, dominates the international financial system, and operates 750 military bases in more than 80 countries. Most of the world dare not oppose Washington's writ.

Some analysts argue that if Russia is defeated in its current war on Ukraine, Europe will be able to enjoy a post-imperial system of peaceful relations and autonomy on the continent for the first time in history. They forget Nato. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization began in 1949 and [still continues](#) in part as an instrument for US hegemony in Europe. Allies may

decline to participate in US military operations, as France and Germany [boldly did](#) over Iraq in 2003, but they do not publicly denounce them as illegal or call for sanctions.

Europeans and some Americans, including past and present senior officials, who argued against the expansion of Nato after the demise of the Soviet Union – or even advocated the alliance’s dissolution now that the enemy was gone – were never going to achieve their goals. The Baltic states and Poland craved the protection of the imperial American umbrella, which the US military-industrial complex was not going to give up in any case.

Equally unattainable was the proposal that Nato should invite the Russian Federation to join, thereby promoting post-cold war reconciliation. It was not to be. Even though Russian leaders, both Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, were keen to end the division of Europe, Washington would not open the alliance to a new member who could match the US’s nuclear potential and might question its political priorities.

Now, 30 years after the demise of the Soviet Union, there are signs that the unipolar world of US dominance may be coming to an end. The main challenger is not Putin’s Russia, but an increasingly confident China. Leaders in the global south are also stirring. In the first flush of shock over Russia’s aggression against [Ukraine](#) in February last year, more than 140 UN states voted to condemn it. But only around 40 countries in total have joined the US in imposing sanctions on Russia. As the west floods Ukraine with military hardware, the notion that it is merely helping to defend Ukraine looks questionable to many Asian, African and Latin American states who suspect the end goal to be regime change in the Kremlin.

A [survey](#) by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) reveals a significant shift in public opinion in several key countries. People want to see a quick end to the war in Ukraine, even if it means Ukraine giving up western-supported aspirations to victory and accepting the temporary loss of some territory. It is not only citizens of authoritarian China who think this way. So do citizens in India and Turkey.

Josep Borrell, the EU’s foreign policy chief, told the Munich Security Conference last month: “I see how powerful the Russian narrative is, its

accusations of double standards.” France’s Emmanuel Macron said he was “shocked by how much credibility we are losing in the global south”.

Some fear a new cold war, this time between the west and [China](#). Looking 10 years ahead, others expect to see a multipolar world in which states will not be pressured to align themselves with one side or the other. Either way, in spite of the resurgence of US power in Europe as a result of the war in Ukraine, the era of US supremacy in the rest of the world may soon be over.

Jonathan Steele is a former chief foreign correspondent for the Guardian and the author of *Defeat: Why They Lost Iraq*

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Illustration: Matt Kenyon

[Opinion](#)[Gary Lineker](#)

**The Gary Lineker affair was a
warning: the culture war will come for
us all in the end**

[Nesrine Malik](#)



The government's cruelty towards migrants isn't a ringfenced issue, far from the lives of everyone else. In reality, nobody's rights are safe

Mon 20 Mar 2023 02.00 EDTLast modified on Mon 20 Mar 2023 03.21 EDT

The UK's hostile environment is spreading. Just days ago, the country was [downgraded](#) in an annual global index of civic freedoms, as a result of the government's "increasingly authoritarian" approach towards bodies that speak out against policies on anti-racism, refugee and asylum seeker rights, and the climate crisis. The Tory obsession with immigration in general, and lately small boats in particular, has become a gateway for even wider oppression.

The [Gary Lineker affair](#) seemed like a victory, but really it was a warning. He is reinstated, the BBC is cowed, and the Conservatives are nursing a bloody nose having lost this round in the culture war. But all it illustrated was the strength of the chokehold the right has on our ability to speak against its agenda without vilification. When significant resources are directed towards scapegoating and punishing those whose rights have been

taken away by a government, the result is a country where everyone's rights are by extension removed. Disagreement is turned at once into dissidence.

The arguments by which that process happens are well rehearsed. If you deviate from rightwing lines on race and immigration you are unpatriotic, out of touch, elitist, actively working against the interest of the British people. Through the perversion of policy creation and enforcement, plus organisations such as the Home Office, and the dominance of political culture by a pliant rightwing press and a [clearly compromised BBC](#), the Tories have successfully limited freedoms that go way beyond what happens at our borders.

The first is your right to speak up, something that those in charities, civil society bodies and legal practices who criticised the government's policies on race and immigration found out long before Lineker did, and with far less public profile and support. The [“activist lawyers”](#), the [“do gooder”](#) refugee charities, the “campaigning” black journalists [slammed](#) for daring to question the government's sacred story on Britain's racial Eden – they have for years been labouring under the sort of restraints and rhetoric that in any other country would elicit pious concern from our politicians.

It doesn't stop there. Even our ability to be served by the institutions of government is undermined. A Home Office shot through with cruelty and paranoia fails not only immigrants but British citizens, wrongfully deporting them, [wrongfully](#) stripping them of citizenship, refusing them their right to marry [foreigners](#) and settle in the country, and giving British universities the jitters by trying to cut migration by [targeting](#) international students, the non-EU portion of which [pays](#) about 17% of British university's income. For an institution that is all about upholding the law, the Home Office regularly [breaks](#) it, driven rabid by its obsession with not appearing a “soft touch” to immigrants.

And it doesn't even stop at these failing organs of government. Cynically putting controls on immigration as a central policy has led government ministers into wild foreign policy adventures. In 2016, victimising migrants swallowed our entire politics. The leave campaign was a masterclass in how

the flapping of butterfly wings end in a storm – we cannot let the country become captured by broadly unchallenged immigration hysteria, no matter how sheltered we are from it, without paying for it somehow further down the line. And so we sacrificed our freedom of movement, along with so many other losses, cultural and economic, which continue to be revealed.

Still, ever oblivious to the dangers, we allow our public discourse to remain saturated with messaging that portrays anyone who supports immigrants as an enemy that needs to be purged, while handwringing about what is the most “appropriate” language of protest. Those who rushed to criticise Lineker for his intemperate language comparing the government’s small boats announcement to 1930s Germany seem to have forgotten that, shortly after writing an article imploring people to recognise the good that immigration does for the country and not to “fall for the spin” of Brexiters, Jo Cox was murdered by a man who hoarded Nazi memorabilia, and [in court](#) gave his name as “Death to traitors, freedom for Britain”. Another Labour MP, Rosie Cooper, almost met the same fate when a neo-Nazi affiliated to the banned far-right group National Action [plotted](#) to kill her. She was only saved by the actions of a whistleblower.

The links between state propaganda and violence are inescapable. In September 2020, a man carrying a large knife entered a London law firm and launched a “violent, racist attack” targeting an immigration lawyer in which a staff member was injured. The law practice claimed that “responsibility and accountability for this attack ... lies squarely at the feet of Priti Patel”, who had days earlier [said](#) that “activist lawyers” were preventing the removal of migrants.

Despite all that the toxic immigration debate has cost us – lives, rights, freedoms – there is still a listlessness among progressives to see it for what it is. That is, not just a humanitarian issue, or a fixation of the political right that is ringfenced from the rest of politics, but a moral panic which the [Conservatives](#) have leveraged for electoral success and a relevance that is renewed with every immigration “crisis”. Particularly blinkered are the influential progressives of Labour governments past who have found second lives as social media lightning rods and podcasters. They spend a lot

of time being appalled by Brexit and fiercely critical of Tory policies while ignoring the toxic narratives on race and immigration that caused them.

“Liberals across the world always think ‘it won’t happen to me’ whenever what are considered to be fringe groups are attacked by the right,” says Jonathan Metzl, author of *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment is Killing America’s Heartland*, a seminal work arguing that racism deployed deftly by the right persuades white people to vote against their own interests. “There’s a lot of denial, dismissal and elitism,” he says – a reluctance to recognise how the rights of minorities are linked to those of majorities, as well as a lack of “message discipline” on the left that squarely negates, not just protests, rightwing messaging on race and immigration. This failure leads to “catastrophic consequences” for liberals who are being outflanked by the politics of resentment everywhere, in Israel, Hungary and the US.

A realisation of this may have stirred last week when it became clear that this stifling monoculture had come for someone such as Lineker, a man not only popular, but more importantly, a member of that ostensibly immune liberal tribe. But the reality is that nobody is protected in the culture war. Not in a country consumed by an addiction to performative cruelty towards those who arrive here only to shoulder the blame for all our economic mismanagement and political failure. An immigrant shivering on the beach or languishing in detention may be a long way from your life, but the government has sketched a line, long and winding, that connects you. When you speak up for them, you speak up for yourself.

- Nesrine Malik is a Guardian columnist
- ***Do you have an opinion on the issues raised in this article? If you would like to submit a response of up to 300 words by email to be considered for publication in our [letters](#) section, please [click here](#).***

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He wore a yellow ribbon ... Oscar takes a breather. Photograph: Alex Telfer/The Observer

[OpinionDogs](#)

My dog has been given a yellow ribbon that says: 'I need space'. Can I get one as well?

[Emma Beddington](#)



After a lifetime of indifference, my ailing mutt has become anxious around other dogs – but the vet’s solution has amazing potential

Mon 20 Mar 2023 03.00 EDTLast modified on Mon 20 Mar 2023 03.23 EDT

I took Oscar, our morose, ancient whippet, to the vet this week. Nothing serious: his failing body and my failing wallet spend half our lives there (a friend texted recently: “I have joined [Dignity in Dying](#) on the strength of Oscar,” which I’m unsure how to interpret). There are unexpected upsides, mainly the other animals; I met a cat called Corbyn last time.

Drawing up Oscar’s arthritis shot, the nurse asked for a progress report. How is his zest for life? (Absent, as it always has been.) What’s his opinion of stairs? (Against.) Does he enjoy food? (The costlier the better.) Is he still waking at 5am? (Look at my ruined face: you tell me.) I mentioned as we chatted that, after a lifetime of disdainful indifference, he has become anxious around other dogs – conscious of his own frailty, I suppose. He barks and gets upset if they want to play. “I’m going to give you

something,” she said, rummaging in a cupboard. Dog Xanax for us to share? No, a yellow ribbon that reads “I need space”.

I hadn’t heard of [the “Yellow Dog” campaign](#), but apparently it has been running since 2012. The idea is to provide an instant visual cue to identify dogs that would prefer to be left alone for various reasons – they are in training, they are recovering from surgery, they are traumatised or, like Oscar, they are just old and fed up.

It’s a great idea. Why don’t we have them for people? It could be an excellent way to smooth over some of our pandemic-induced social awkwardness and uncertainty. Imagine if you could know at a glance whether a person doesn’t want to be touched, or is a hugger or an air kisser (maybe even specify which side they start on – such a minefield).

I want several for myself, starting with a “No spatial awareness” one to tie on the car when I’m trying to park. “I can’t do small talk” would be handy at parties, then “Incapable of sharing” for small-plate restaurants and “Ssssh” for train journeys. Actually, perhaps I need only one ribbon: “Perimenopausal”.

- Emma Beddington is a Guardian columnist

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2023.03.20 - Around the world

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- Malawi President asks for help after cyclone damages half of country
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Paetongtarn Shinawatra, daughter of exiled former Thai prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, is leading in opinion polls ahead of the election. Photograph: Rungroj Yongrit/EPA

[Thailand](#)

Thailand: Paetongtarn Shinawatra leads polls as country heads towards election

As parliament dissolves, party of Paetongtarn, whose father was deposed in 2006, has best chance of forming majority

[Rebecca Ratcliffe](#) *South-east Asia correspondent*

Mon 20 Mar 2023 05.05 EDT Last modified on Mon 20 Mar 2023 06.20 EDT

Thailand's parliament has been dissolved, paving the way for an election in May that will pit military-linked candidates against the daughter of the former prime minister [Thaksin Shinawatra](#).

King Maha Vajiralongkorn has endorsed a decree to dissolve parliament, according to an announcement in the Royal Gazette on Monday. An election must be held between 45 and 60 days after the house's dissolution.

The Thai prime minister, Prayuth Chan-ocha, 68, who first came to power in a coup in 2014, will run for re-election under a new party, United Thai Nation. However, he is permitted to serve for only another two years before reaching the eight-year term limit, [according to a ruling by the constitutional court](#). Prayuth is also trailing behind the opposition candidate, Paetongtarn Shinawatra, and her party, Pheu Thai, in the polls.

Paetongtarn, 36, who is expected to be nominated as Pheu Thai's candidate, has said she is campaigning to win by a landslide. Parties associated with the billionaire Shinawatra family have won the most seats in every election since 2001.

They have also been ousted from power repeatedly; Paetongtarn's aunt Yingluck was forced from office by a court ruling in 2014, and Paetongtarn's father Thaksin was ousted by a military coup in 2006. Both Thaksin and Yingluck live in exile.

The family is loathed by the royalist military establishment, but remains incredibly popular in rural areas of the north and north-east.

Thaksin's former party, Thai Rak Thai, was the "only party that credibly proposed policies and delivered on these policy promises in a way that concretely improved the wellbeing of people on a large scale," said Napon Jatusripitak, a visiting fellow at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore. "It has an enduring impact on people's political preferences."

Even if Pheu Thai performs well, however, the party may not be able to put forward a prime minister. "Pheu Thai is the only party that currently stands a credible chance of forming a majority in the house, but it happens to be the least likely to secure the support of the senate," said Napon. Thailand's 250 senators, who were appointed by the military, vote alongside the 500-member House of Representatives to select a prime minister.

The party would probably need to collaborate with existing political parties, whether these were in the current opposition or the ruling coalition, said Napon. This could involve a deal with the former army chief Prawit Wongsuwan, who was once a close ally of Prayuth but is running as the candidate of the ruling party, Palang Pracharath. Prawit, 77, has sought to pitch himself as a unity candidate who can bridge Thailand's political divides.

Anutin Charnvirakul, 56, leader of the Bhumjaithai party and the current health minister, who championed the decriminalisation of marijuana last year, has also been cited by some analysts as a potential contender.

May's elections will be the first to be held since [youth-led mass protests in 2020](#) shook Thailand's establishment by calling for the powers of the country's monarchy to be curbed, and for the military-backed constitution to be rewritten.

The protests halted in 2021, as the authorities [began to file legal charges](#) including under the strict lese-majesty law, which carries a sentence of up to 15 years in prison. At least 1,890 people, including 284 young people under 18, have been charged under various laws.

Move Forward, the only party that has backed calls for reform of the lese-majesty law, has reportedly softened its rhetoric on the issue in the run-up to the election.

It was unclear what impact the election could have on young people if they felt their views were not represented, said Napon. "Does it produce the kind of political apathy as you see elsewhere? Or will it lead to extra-parliamentary-style politics, going out on the streets and more protests?"



Donald Trump speaks at CPAC in Orlando, Florida, on 26 February.
Photograph: Chandan Khanna/AFP/Getty Images

[Donald Trump](#)

Trump in panic mode as he braces for likely charges in Stormy Daniels case

Manhattan district attorney expected to file criminal charges against ex-president for payment to adult film star in 2016

[Hugo Lowell](#) in New York

[@hugolowell](#)

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Donald Trump is bracing for his most legally perilous week since he left the White House, with the Manhattan district attorney likely to bring criminal charges against him over his role in paying hush money to adult film star [Stormy Daniels](#), as he huddled this weekend to strategize his legal and political responses.

The [former US president](#) has posted in all-caps on his Truth Social platform that he expected to be “ARRESTED ON TUESDAY OF NEXT WEEK” and called for his supporters to engage in protests – an ominous echo of his tweets urging protests in the lead-up to the January 6 US Capitol attack.

Trump’s post was nothing more than guesswork about when Alvin Bragg might bring charges, sources close to Trump said, after he saw media reporting that the district attorney’s office had contacted the US Secret Service about security in the event of an indictment.

The grand jury in New York hearing evidence in the resurrected 2016 hush money case is now expected to hear from one more witness on Monday, making it unlikely that an arrest would come the following day because it could take additional hours to draft charging papers.

That witness is [reportedly](#) Robert J Costello who is appearing at the request of Trump’s legal team. Costello was once a legal adviser to former Trump lawyer Michael Cohen but the two have since fallen out. Costello’s testimony is likely to be aimed at undermining Cohen’s.

But the frenzied posts from Trump reflected his deep panic and anxiety over the imminence and likelihood of criminal charges, the sources said, not least because he is powerless to stop the district attorney’s office from moving forward with a case that will take the US into new legal territory as Trump revs up his 2024 campaign for the Republican presidential nomination.

Trump and his allies have suggested in recent days that an indictment in the hush money case could benefit him politically – the Republican base might see the years-old case as a genuine “witch-hunt” as he has claimed – but it is also true that Trump himself is deeply fearful of criminal charges.

Trump discussed the hush money case every day last week, and his advisers say they have run through various scenarios in the event of an indictment, including whether he would initially travel to New York for an arraignment, or appear remotely from his Mar-a-Lago resort.

Trump has expressed interest in appearing in person at the Manhattan criminal court, where he believes he can turn proceedings into a spectacle before a gaggle of reporters, sources said, and raised the prospect on Saturday afternoon as he travelled to Oklahoma for an NCAA wrestling championship.



Every grand juror hearing evidence in the case reportedly questioned Trump's former attorney Michael Cohen – suggesting they found him to be a compelling witness. Photograph: Justin Lane/EPA

But some members of his legal team have advised against making such an appearance in person, citing security issues among other concerns, and have suggested he allow them to negotiate an agreed-upon surrender date and a remote initial appearance when they are notified of charges.

Trump's legal team has separately focused on a defense strategy. The outside counsel – Joe Tacopina and Susan Necheles – have reasoned that a hush money case centered on campaign finance violations could be weak after a similar [prosecution against Democratic senator John Edwards](#) failed in 2012.

If the indictment alleges the hush money violated campaign finance laws, the Trump lawyers are expected to argue that it fails the “irrespective test” –

that Trump would have paid Daniels irrespective of the 2016 campaign to avoid the embarrassment because he was already a public figure.

Trump may face an uphill struggle with those arguments, given the fact that having “mixed motives” to protect himself personally and to protect his campaign could leave him liable, and the timing of the payments suggests there was an urgency to pay the money before the end of the 2016 campaign.

In response, the Trump legal team is expected to argue that because Daniels tried to sell her story about an affair with Trump in 2011, and she was told then to “leave Trump alone. Forget the story”, that proves her silence was desired long before Trump was running for president.

Trump’s lawyers recently made these arguments to the district attorney’s office when Necheles went in to urge Bragg to drop the case, the Guardian [previously reported](#). But all signs indicate that Bragg will move ahead with the case all the same in an unprecedented indictment of a former US president – and one seeking to return to the Oval Office.

The investigation concerns \$130,000 that Trump made to Daniels through his then lawyer Cohen in the final days of the 2016 campaign. Trump later reimbursed Cohen with \$35,000 checks using his personal funds, and Cohen pleaded guilty in 2018 to federal charges involving the hush money.

The district attorney’s case is likely to focus on how Trump and the Trump Organization handled the reimbursements. According to court filings in the federal case, the Trump Organization falsely recorded the payments as legal expenses, referencing a legal retainer with Cohen that did not exist.

The district attorney’s office has had at least seven top Trump aides and advisers testify before the grand jury in recent weeks, including Cohen, who testified for around two hours on Wednesday – his second appearance – and every juror was said to have asked a question, suggesting an engaged grand jury.

That is a typical sign for prosecutors as they weigh potential charges, legal experts say, because it could indicate the grand jury found him to be a

compelling witness – and a jury at an eventual trial might be similarly convinced.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/mar/19/trump-manhattan-criminal-charges-hush-money-stormy-daniels>

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President Chakwera visiting flood victims in Blantyre, Malawi. Photograph: Esa Alexander/Reuters

[Global development](#)

Malawi president declares half of country damaged by cyclone

Lazarus Chakwera blames global heating for hundreds of deaths and asks for aid to address ‘vast’ structural devastation and long-term climate mitigation

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[Tracy McVeigh](#)

Mon 20 Mar 2023 02.00 EDT Last modified on Mon 20 Mar 2023 07.43 EDT

President Lazarus Chakwera of Malawi has said that nearly half of his country has been damaged by Cyclone Freddy, which has killed hundreds of people and become the [longest-lasting tropical storm](#) on record.

In an exclusive interview, the president asked for help from the international community and said the structural destruction was vast.

“This demonstrates that climate change issues are real and we are standing right in the path of it,” said Chakwera, who added that the climate crisis had the potential to keep “a national like [Malawi](#) in perpetual poverty”.

By Saturday, the death toll in Malawi stood at 438 and families and rescuers spent the weekend digging through mud and rubble, often with their bare hands, looking for the missing.

“The damage is across 13 districts, almost half the country, and it is not just the numbers of our people who have lost their lives, but the damage and

devastation,” said Chakwera, who added that while the country’s early warning system had saved lives in some lower-lying areas, it had failed in others, and the landslides that devastated the city of Blantyre had been especially unexpected.

“We need everyone’s help and support for this tragedy to be mitigated,” he said. “We are suffering and we can’t meet the needs. We have set up temporary camps and food is needed, shelter, yes, but must go past that and build stronger because of the damage.

“Some 36 roads are broken, nine bridges washed away, and cases still where people are stranded, whole villages we can’t reach.

“It’s not just here and there, we are at the receiving end of the worst of the climate change.

“I just feel that we need to be talking about this, keeping the conversation alive. It’s not a matter of saying be charitable to your neighbour, this has to do with loss and damage, this has to do with responses that are not tokenism.”

The 67-year-old former pastor pointed out that Malawi had been hit by three cyclones within 13 months.

“We had been trying to build back from Cyclone Idai in 2019, and then the pandemic, now Freddy.

“We are in a perpetual cycle of trying to pull ourselves up and getting knocked back down.”

Cyclone Freddy first developed off Australia in early February and travelled almost 5,000 miles across the Indian Ocean, making landfall twice in south-east [Africa](#), bringing torrential rains, high winds and killing more than 700 people across Mozambique, Madagascar, Zimbabwe and Malawi, including 16 onboard a Taiwanese-flagged ship. As it dissipated on 15 March, meteorologists said it was the longest-lasting and most travelled tropical cyclone ever recorded.

Chakwera said he visited Blantyre hospitals on Friday. “It is clear there will be psychological as well as social needs because of the depth of trauma people have suffered,” he said. “Even the doctors need support as well after dealing with so much trauma.

“Once the rains subside we will need to help these families stand on their own two feet. We need roads, we need hospitals and schools. Otherwise we are in big trouble. Malawian people to their credit are resilient people. So many of them grow up poor, it’s part of life.

“This is what we were trying to change. To give hope that Malawi can become a developed nation with industrialisation, to give young people more of a future than sustenance farming, to have modern sustainable agriculture. This is the vision we wanted to be casting, a country that can stand on its own feet.”

Last month, Nick Hepworth, executive director of [Water Witness International](#), [criticised the British government](#) for slashing its contribution to the £90m Building Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Extremes and Disasters programme, known as [BRACC in Malawi](#), as part of the UK’s 2021 [cut to the aid budget from 0.7% to 0.5%](#) of GDP.

Chakwera said: “We understand that the British government has had its own problems. But from 2015 to the moment, the help that has come from the British government has significantly been reduced.

“We need help, significant help from everyone, but we cannot necessarily be pointing the finger at one government because we understand everybody has troubles.

“The devastation and impact of this is the worst yet we have seen – many people have told me they have never seen anything like this in their lifetime.”

With all the problems the world is facing, calamity is something people get used to, he said, urging people not to “get weary” of helping.

On Saturday, the British minister for development and Africa, Andrew Mitchell, said 27 members of the UK International Search and Rescue Team and six emergency medical personnel had left Birmingham airport for Malawi.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/20/malawi-president-asks-for-help-after-cyclone-damages-half-of-country>.

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Taiwan's former president Ma Ying-jeou says his trip to China is to strengthen non-government and student exchanges. Photograph: Sam Yeh/AFP/Getty Images

[Taiwan](#)

Former Taiwan president to visit China in unprecedented trip

Ma Ying-jeou's tour is first since end of civil war and comes amid intensifying efforts by China to subsume Taiwan

[Helen Davidson](#) in Taipei

[@heldavidson](#)

Mon 20 Mar 2023 08.39 EDTFirst published on Mon 20 Mar 2023 02.14 EDT

Taiwan's former president Ma Ying-jeou will visit China this month in the first visit by a current or former leader since the defeated Nationalist Chinese government fled to the island at the end of the civil war in 1949.

The high-profile visit has been presented by Ma and his party, the opposition Kuomintang (KMT), as a chance to boost friendly cross-strait exchanges at a time of extreme disconnection, which has been driven by [Beijing's plans to annex Taiwan](#) and exacerbated by the pandemic. However, it is also likely to [fuel domestic political division](#) between the KMT and ruling Democratic Progressive party (DPP) over relations with China.

Ma's office said the trip was scheduled for 27 March to 7 April, with stops in Nanjing, Wuhan, Changsha, Chongqing and Shanghai. However, local media reported Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council had not yet received a report about the planned trip, as required of former presidents.

The visit by Ma, who served as president of the Republic of [China](#) – Taiwan's formal name – from 2008 to 2016, comes amid increasing efforts by Beijing to have Taiwan subsumed into the People's Republic of China as a province. Through military and diplomatic pressure, Beijing hopes to achieve what it calls "reunification" peacefully, but has not ruled out using force. Taiwan's people and government – both the ruling DPP and the KMT party, now in opposition – reject the prospect of Chinese rule.

Representatives for Ma, and the KMT party, have emphasised the trip's purpose as one of ancestor worship – a traditional Chinese practice of paying respect to deceased ancestors - and strengthening non-government and student exchanges between Taiwan and China.

"Former president Ma believes that young people on both sides of the strait understand each other," said Hsiao Hsu-tsen, the executive director of the Ma Ying-jeou Foundation. Hsiao said such exchanges were increasingly urgent given the hostilities between the two governments.

"The more contact between students, the more friendship between the two sides. The deeper the friendship, the lower the chance of conflicts."

The KMT party is a proponent of friendlier ties with China, but opposes reunification and denies it is pro-Beijing. The DPP, led by Tsai Ing-wen in

her second and final presidential term, has been labelled “separatists” by Beijing.

Ma’s proposed visit will occur around the same time that Tsai is scheduled to visit the US and is expected to meet the US speaker of the House, Kevin McCarthy. That visit, confirmed earlier this month, is expected to aggrieve Beijing, which opposes any act that could lend legitimacy to Taiwan’s sovereignty. After the former US speaker Nancy Pelosi [visited Taiwan last year](#), the People’s Liberation Army surrounded the main island with days of live fire military exercises.

Ma’s planned visit prompted headlines and debate in Taiwan ahead of a presidential election early next year and coming shortly after a controversial visit to Beijing by the KMT’s deputy chair, Andrew Hsia, in February. Hsia was accused by members of the ruling DPP of “courting the Communists”.

The delegation would also visit sites related to the second world war, the 1911 revolution, and the Sino-Japanese war, Ma’s representatives said. Hsiao would not rule out Ma meeting senior Chinese officials.

“The trip is to central China, we have not arranged to go to Beijing,” Hsiao said. “As guests, we are at our hosts’ disposal.”

The Taiwan Policy Centre, a Taiwan-based thinktank, said the visit raised questions about whether Ma “represents a relevant and appreciated voice for either the party or the nation on [cross-straits policy]”, and warned against any attempt to conduct “unofficial ‘united front’ negotiations on state to state matters”.

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Florida's Republican-dominated legislature, backed by Governor Ron DeSantis, has already passed a raft of laws limiting discussion in schools of gender, sexuality and periods. Photograph: Douglas R Clifford/AP

[Florida](#)

Florida considers ban on discussion of menstruation before sixth grade

Planned Parenthood advocates say the 'absurd' draft legislation regarding periods would present a 'reductive and binary view of sex'

Agencies

Sun 19 Mar 2023 23.26 EDT

Florida lawmakers are considering a draft law to strengthen state control over sex education that its sponsor says would ban any instruction in schools about menstrual cycles before the sixth grade.

The proposal comes as Florida's Republican-dominated legislature, backed by Governor Ron DeSantis, has already passed a [raft of laws](#) limiting discussion in schools of gender and sexuality and reducing the emphasis on diversity in public schools.

The latest proposal, from Republican Stan McClain, would allow instruction in "acquired immune deficiency syndrome, sexually transmitted diseases, or health education" only in grades six through 12, generally meaning for children aged 12 to 18.

McClain confirmed at a recent committee meeting that discussions about menstrual cycles would also be restricted to those grades.

Girls typically have their first periods between the ages of 10 and 15, but some do so as young as nine.

"Imagine a little girl in fourth grade, going to the bathroom and finding blood in her panties and thinking that she is dying," state representative Ashley Gantt, a Democrat, said in a video posted on Instagram.

"She doesn't actually know what's going on. And her teacher does not even have the ability to tell her that this is a part of life."

"So if little girls experience their menstrual cycle in 5th grade or 4th grade, will that prohibit conversations from them since they are in the grade lower than sixth grade?" asked Gantt.

"It would," McClain responded.

He defended the bill as a way to make sex education more uniform statewide and give parents more leverage over curricula, and later said he was open to amending it, media reports said. The bill passed the subcommittee by 13 votes to five.

Planned Parenthood decried the legislation, saying it would take "total control from local school districts in approving sex ed curriculum and give

it to the State Department of Education” while presenting a “reductive and binary view of sex” and stigmatizing LGBTQ students.

The policy and political director of the Florida Alliance of Planned Parenthood Affiliates, Annie Filkowski, condemned the legislation as “absurd”.

“This bill shines a bright light on Florida’s political leaders’ perpetual thirst for power,” she said in a statement, calling it ridiculous to ban young students from discussing periods with their teachers.

DeSantis, who is seen as the leading rival to Donald Trump for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination, has [framed such laws as a commonsense pushback](#) to excesses prompted by progressive activism.

But critics say conservative legislatures in Florida and elsewhere are trying to impose their own values on others while curbing free-speech rights and preventing students from having a well-rounded education.

With Agence France-Press and Association Press

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Headlines tuesday 21 march 2023

- [Police Met found to be institutionally racist, misogynistic and homophobic](#)
- [Rishi Sunak PM fails to say if his daughters could trust Met in wake of shocking report](#)
- [London Doreen Lawrence says Metropolitan police are 'rotten to the core'](#)
- [Police Met has 'nowhere to hide' after damning Casey report, say campaigners](#)

Institutional racism, misogyny and homophobia 'pervades' Met police, says Dame Louise Casey – video

[Metropolitan police](#)

Met police found to be institutionally racist, misogynistic and homophobic

Author of landmark report says Met can ‘no longer presume that it has the permission of the people of London to police them’

- [Analysis: the fall of a British institution](#)
- [Case study: ‘I’m scared of the police’](#)
- [Explainer: what Casey says about the Met](#)

[Vikram Dodd](#) *Police and crime correspondent*

Mon 20 Mar 2023 20.01 EDT Last modified on Tue 21 Mar 2023 05.11 EDT

The [Metropolitan police](#) is broken and rotten, suffering collapsing public trust and is guilty of institutional racism, misogyny and homophobia, an official report has said.

The report by Louise Casey, commissioned by the Met after one of its officers abducted Sarah Everard, taking her from from a [London](#) street in March 2021, before raping and murdering her, is one of the most damning of a major British institution .

The 363-page report details disturbing stories of sexual assaults, usually covered up or downplayed, with 12% of women in the Met saying they had been harassed or attacked at work, and one-third experiencing sexism.

Lady Casey said that the lifeblood of British policing was haemorrhaging and her report warned that “public consent is broken” with just 50% of the

public expressing confidence, even before revelations about the force's worst recent scandals.

She pinned the primary blame on its past leadership and said: "Public respect has fallen to a low point. Londoners who do not have confidence in the Met outnumber those who do, and these measures have been lower amongst black Londoners for years.

"The Met has yet to free itself of institutional racism. Public consent is broken. The Met has become unanchored from the Peelian principle of policing by consent set out when it was established."

The report found a bullying culture, frontline officers demoralised and feeling let down by their leaders, and discrimination "baked into the system".

Casey revealed that one Muslim officer had bacon stuffed in his boots, a Sikh officer had his beard cut, minority ethnic officers were much more likely to be disciplined or leave, and Britain's biggest force remains disproportionately white, in a capital that is increasingly diverse.



Louise Casey arriving for a press briefing of her review, which found the Met to be guilty of institutional racism, misogyny and homophobia.

Photograph: WPA/Getty Images

Stop and search and use of force on powers against black people was excessive, found the report for the Met – which stops more people per head of population than any other force.

A catalogue of suffering by women included frequent abuses by senior officers, including one subjecting a female junior to repeated harassment and an indecent act. She complained and told the inquiry: “It would have probably been better to suffer in silence, but I couldn’t do that. He got away with everything, I was made to look like the liar.”

Casey said the Met was failing on so many levels the crisis is existential, and if not fixed could end in its dismemberment: “If sufficient progress is not being made at the points of further review, more radical, structural options, such as dividing up the Met into national, specialist and London responsibilities, should be considered to ensure the service to Londoners is prioritised.”

Casey said austerity had deprived the Met of £700m but the cuts made by the force left its protection of children and women as inadequate.

Already crushingly low convictions of rapists were made worse by fridges that housed rape kits being broken, or being so full that evidence was lost, and cases dropped with rapists going free because of police bungles. Casey claimed in one instance someone ruined a fridge full of evidence by leaving their lunchbox in it.

Casey said the Met had blown repeated chances to reform by official inquiries over the decades and warned the force must not cherry-pick the reforms it likes. It should implement her recommendations as a whole, she said.

But a gap and potential high level clash was emerging after Casey’s report was published, with those who oversee and run the Met having had the report for days.

Sir Mark Rowley, the force's commissioner since September, said he would not use the labels of institutionally racist, institutionally misogynistic and institutionally homophobic that Casey insisted Britain's biggest force deserved.

Police chief refuses to describe Met racism, misogyny and homophobia as 'institutional' – video

But one of the two people who hired him – and thus can fire him – made clear he agreed with Casey's damning verdicts.

Sadiq Khan, the London mayor, has not previously used the term “institutional” about prejudice in the force he oversees since coming to office. He will be chairing a new oversight board for the Met, in effect placing it in a form of special measures for the foreseeable future.

Khan said: “The evidence is damning. Baroness Casey has found institutional racism, misogyny and homophobia, which I accept.

“I'll be unflinching in my resolve to support and hold the new commissioner to account as he works to overhaul the force.”



Demonstrators during a protest in memory of Sarah Everard on 15 March 2021. The report said said cultures of ‘blindness, arrogance and prejudice’ are prevalent in the Met. Photograph: Ian West/PA

Rowley said he wanted more time to study Casey’s recommendations, but said he accepts the findings. He said he accepted Casey’s factual findings about racism, misogyny and homophobia in his organisation and they were systemic, but neither he nor the Met would accept they were “institutional”, claiming it was a political term.

Rowley, battling to avoid being the last commissioner of the Met in its current shape and form, said: “I have to use practical, unambiguous, apolitical language ... I don’t think it fits those criteria.

“It’s simply a term I’m not going to use myself.”

Asked if he was not accepting the finding, Rowley said: “I’m accepting we have racists, misogynists. I’m accepting, we’ve got systemic failings, management failings, cultural failings.

“This is about an organisation that needs to become determinedly anti-racist, anti-misogynist, anti-homophobic.

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“I’m not going to use a label myself that is both ambiguous and politicised.”

The current Home Office is opposed to the idea of institutional racism.

Until now, Rowley has generated a small degree of hope with his vows to reform, but Andy George, the chair of the National Black [Police Association](#), said: “The commissioner is wrong to once again fail to accept the Met is institutionally racist. We risk repeating history and cannot let this moment pass as another missed opportunity.”

Both Rowley and his deputy, Dame Lynne Owens, had served previously as assistant commissioners in the Met and both said they would reflect on why they had missed the disastrous state the force was falling into.

Rowley repeated an apology to the people of London and vowed he would deliver sweeping reform.

Casey’s 363-page report details how both Wayne Couzens, who murdered Everard, and the serial rapist David Carrick were spawned by Met errors and toxic cultures in the force.

Despite clues to their danger both were given a gun, passed vetting and served in the parliamentary and diplomatic protection command, which Casey said should be “effectively disbanded”.

She found officers making offensive remarks about rape and racially abusing a black colleague using the term “gate monkey”.

Some firearms officers, the report said, defrauded the taxpayer, buying iPads with public money, night vision goggles they could not use for work, and hotel stays for fun.



Sadiq Khan, the mayor of London, said he accepted Casey's findings of institutional racism, misogyny and homophobia. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

Meanwhile, the Met was so elitist and hierarchical that frontline officers – most likely to be the point of contact for the public – were run ragged and neighbourhood policing had been decimated.

Casey also said the Met should accept it is institutionally corrupt, as branded in 2021 by the official inquiry into the murder of the private eye Daniel Morgan, which the Met rejected.

The report said cultures of “blindness, arrogance and prejudice” are prevalent, and Casey added: “The Met can now no longer presume that it has the permission of the people of London to police them. The loss of this crucial principle of policing by consent would be catastrophic. We must make sure it is not irreversible.”

She added: “It is rot when you treat Londoners in a racist and unacceptable fashion. That is rotten.”

Keir Starmer, the leader of the Labour party, said: “The racist, sexist and homophobic abuses of power that have run rife in the Metropolitan police

have shattered the trust that Britain's policing relies on and let victims down.

“For 13 years there has been a void of leadership from the Home Office, which has seen Britain's policing fall far below the standards the public have the right to expect.”

Home Office officials insist they have put police reform measures in place. Suella Braverman, the home secretary – who with Khan appointed the commissioner, backed Rowley: “It is clear that there have been serious failures of culture and leadership in the Metropolitan police.

“I will continue to hold the commissioner to account to deliver a wholesale change in the force's culture.”

Harriet Wistrich, of the Centre for Women's Justice, said Casey's findings were “without precedent in its unswerving criticism of a corrupt, institutionally racist, misogynistic and homophobic police force”.

She said the two government inquiries after the Couzens scandal should be given greater powers and placed on statutory footing.

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Rishi Sunak: ‘There needs to be a change in culture and leadership.’
Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

[Police](#)

Rishi Sunak fails to say if his daughters could trust Met in wake of shocking report

Prime minister says trust in police has been ‘hugely damaged by things we’ve discovered over past year’

[Jamie Grierson](#)

[@JamieGrierson](#)

Tue 21 Mar 2023 05.03 EDTFirst published on Tue 21 Mar 2023 04.21 EDT

The prime minister has failed to say if he believed his daughters could trust the [Metropolitan police](#) after a shocking report lambasted the force for its institutional racism, misogyny and homophobia.

The publication of the [report by Louise Casey](#), commissioned by the Met after one of its officers abducted, raped and murdered Sarah Everard in March 2021, has been called one of the “darkest days” in the force’s history.

Sunak has [spoken previously of his fears for his daughters’ safety](#) when out alone, adding that men take their own safety for granted.

In the wake of the publication of the Casey report, Sunak was asked on BBC Breakfast on Tuesday if his daughters could trust the Met and failed to back the force.

“Of course we need the answer to that question to be yes,” he said. “Clearly at the moment trust in the police has been hugely damaged by the things that we’ve discovered over the past year.”

Rishi Sunak unable to say if his daughters can trust Met police– video

Sunak said there needed to be a “change in culture and leadership” in policing.

“There needs to be a change in culture and leadership,” he told BBC Breakfast. “And I know that the new Metropolitan commissioner will no doubt reflect on the findings of Louise’s report, but is already making changes and that’s right, because what was happening before is simply shocking and unacceptable.”

Sir Mark Rowley, who was appointed as commissioner of Britain’s biggest police force in September last year, insisted the force was rooting out “toxic individuals”.

He described the findings in the report as “deeply worrying”, adding that you could not read the report and not be “upset, embarrassed and humbled”. But he maintained the force was tackling many of the issues raised by Casey.

“We’ve got toxic individuals, some of whom who’ve got concerns about their predatory behaviour. We’ve got people suspended. We’ve got people

under investigation. We are rooting them out of this organisation,” Rowley said.

He said he accepted the force had “racists, misogynists and homophobes in the organisation”.

And while he conceded there were “systemic failings, management failings and cultural failings”, Rowley said he would not use the term “institutional” because he thought it was “a very ambiguous” term.

Police chief refuses to describe Met racism, misogyny and homophobia as 'institutional' – video

“Everyone uses different definitions,” he said, adding there were “toxic individuals” in the Met who were in the process of being removed. Rowley declined to give a number on how many there were and said an update on this work would be published by the end of March.

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Rowley played down suggestions that a new name, following the example of the Royal Ulster Constabulary becoming the [Police](#) Service of Northern Ireland, could help address the lack of confidence in the Met.

“I think people just see it as a brand and I think there’s a danger with that,” he told BBC Radio 4’s Today programme.

He also pointed to concerns he would have with any significant restructuring or break-up of the force.

“We can create chaos and an appearance of business and energy by doing some big structural thing,” he said. “Actually, it will just get in the way of getting under the surface and digging deep, lifting stones and dealing with what’s there and changing the culture.”

The Met has lurched from scandal to scandal in recent years, including Everard’s murder by serving officer Wayne Couzens, and serving officer David Carrick being unmasked as one of the UK’s most prolific sex offenders.

The review painted an alarming picture of how crimes against women and children are investigated. Officers rely on “overstuffed, dilapidated or broken fridges and freezers” instead of fast-track forensic services, the report also said.

A lunchbox was found in the same fridge as rape samples, the appliances are so full they have to be strapped shut and last summer one fridge containing rape kits broke down – meaning the kits could not be used as evidence, it said.

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Doreen Lawrence: ‘The force has had almost 30 years to put its house in order. It has not done so, either because it does not want to or it does not know how to.’ Photograph: Michael Melia/Alamy

[Metropolitan police](#)

Doreen Lawrence says Metropolitan police are ‘rotten to the core’

Mother of teenager murdered in racist attack in 1993 says Casey report findings come as ‘no surprise’

[Jamie Grierson](#)

[@JamieGrierson](#)

Tue 21 Mar 2023 04.43 EDTLast modified on Tue 21 Mar 2023 09.16 EDT

The mother of the murdered black teenager Stephen Lawrence has said the [Metropolitan police](#) are “rotten to the core” after the publication of a damning report into the force’s culture.

[Louise Casey's report](#), commissioned in the wake of the murder of Sarah Everard, condemns Scotland Yard for its institutional racism, sexism and homophobia.

Doreen Lawrence said the review's finding that the Met was institutionally racist came as "no surprise" to her, more than 24 years after Sir William Macpherson came to the same conclusion in his report into the handling of her son's racist murder.

She said: "It comes as no surprise to me that the report from Baroness Louise Casey has found that the Metropolitan police is riddled with deep-seated racism, sexism and homophobia. My suspicion that racism played a critical part in the failure of the Metropolitan police to properly investigate my son's death in 1993 was borne out by the Macpherson report.

Institutional racism, misogyny and homophobia 'pervades' Met police, says Dame Louise Casey – video

"Since then, despite repeated reassurances that the Metropolitan police had learned lessons from its failures, discrimination in every form is clearly rampant in its ranks. It is not, and has never been, a case of a few 'bad apples' within the Metropolitan police. It is rotten to the core."

Discrimination is institutionalised within the Met and it needed changing from top to bottom, Lady Lawrence said.

She said any reluctance or refusal to accept that institutional racism existed within the police service would mean any attempt at change was doomed to failure.

"Since my son's death and the recognition of institutional racism by Sir William Macpherson, the force has had almost 30 years to put its house in order," she said. "It has not done so, either because it does not want to or it does not know how to."

She said Casey's report and its findings were the last chance for the Met to get it right, and if it did not it must be forced to do so.

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“As it stands, the public who the police are meant to serve is being failed and the home secretary, who has ultimate responsibility for policing, has to be held accountable and take appropriate action,” she said. “I suspect a lot of people will feel, like me, that enough is enough and change is needed. And needed now.”

Stephen Lawrence, an 18-year-old aspiring architect, was stabbed to death by a gang of racists on Well Hall Road in Eltham, south-east [London](#), on 22 April 1993. Two men were convicted of the murder in 2012 but others remain free.

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Institutional racism, misogyny and homophobia 'pervades' Met police, says Dame Louise Casey – video

[Metropolitan police](#)

Met has ‘nowhere to hide’ after damning Casey report, say campaigners

Sadiq Khan promises to hold police force to account after report highlights institutional misogyny, racism and homophobia

- [Met police found to be institutionally racist, misogynistic and homophobic](#)

[Jamie Grierson](#)

[@JamieGrierson](#)

Tue 21 Mar 2023 02.00 EDTLast modified on Tue 21 Mar 2023 17.25 EDT

Women’s rights campaigners have warned the damning Casey report into culture at the Met has left the force with “nowhere to hide”.

Dame Louise Casey’s 300-page report found institutional misogyny, racism and homophobia persists within Britain’s biggest police force.

The report was commissioned by the Met in the wake of the kidnap, rape and murder of [Sarah Everard](#) by the serving police officer Wayne Couzens.

Andrea Simon, director of the End Violence Against Women Coalition, said: “This damning report leaves the Met nowhere to hide when it comes to the depth of its problems with institutional misogyny, racism and homophobia.

“There is however a long history of such revelations about the Met – including on undercover policing stretching back to the 1980s and beyond,

to the findings of the [Macpherson report](#), and numerous police inspectorate reports since – we demand that today’s report finally initiates a tangible shift in the operation of policing in the UK. If not now, then when and at what cost?”

Simon said that “words can only go so far”, adding “many women and girls rely on the police when seeking safety and justice, and we will be looking to the government to see what concrete actions they take to transform their experiences”.

Jamie Klingler, co-founder of Reclaim These Streets, a social justice organisation which successfully brought a legal challenge against the force [over its handling of a planned vigil for Everard](#), said: “The report speaks volumes and the volume is too loud for the Met to hide from.

“The report removes any possibility of the discussion being about if the cultural issues are systemic. The Met is racist, sexist and homophobic, no more whataboutery, no more talk of bad apples. This is root and branch.”

She added: “That teams trying to get justice for women are dealing with faulty fridges overflowing with samples from rape victims while spending fortunes arming a subsection of the DPP unit within the force that just happens to be housing rapists like Carrick and Couzens is a despicable choice made by the Met leadership.”

The family of Jack Taylor, one of serial killer [Stephen Port’s victims](#), called for a public inquiry into the Metropolitan police.

Taylor’s sisters Donna and Jenny Taylor said an inquiry was needed to understand “how and why this force is failing people so badly”.

In December 2021, inquest jurors found that “fundamental failures” by the police left Port free to carry out a series of murders, as well as drug and sexually assault more than a dozen other men in Barking, east [London](#).

“Someone needs to take responsibility for tackling issues such as homophobia, someone needs to own it,” the Taylors said.

“Not one person has. We still feel that if Jack had been a girl the whole situation would have been dealt with differently from the start.

“You can’t put it right and change the culture if you don’t know what’s going wrong, why it’s going wrong, or fail to fully investigate the root of the problems.”



Louise Casey arriving at Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre for the press briefing of her review on 20 March. Photograph: WPA/Getty Images

The London mayor, Sadiq Khan, said: “The evidence is damning.

“Baroness Casey has found institutional racism, misogyny and homophobia, which I accept. She has described the Met as defensive, resistant to change and unwilling to engage with communities.”

He said he would be “unflinching” in holding new Met police commissioner, Sir Mark Rowley, to account.

“I want to assure Londoners that I’ll be unflinching in my resolve to support and hold the new commissioner to account as he works to overhaul the force,” he said.

“The Met has many committed, professional police officers and staff who want to be part of this change.

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“I see police reform as a critical part of my mayoralty and I will not be satisfied until Londoners have the police service they deserve – one that is trusted, representative and delivers the highest possible service to every community in our city as we work to build a safer London for everyone.”

The Labour leader, Sir Keir Starmer, laid the blame for the report’s findings at the feet of the Home Office, saying the department had a “void of leadership”.

“The racist, sexist and homophobic abuses of power that have run rife in the [Metropolitan police](#) have shattered the trust that Britain’s policing relies on and let victims down,” he said.

“For 13 years there has been a void of leadership from the Home Office, which has seen Britain’s policing fall far below the standards the public have the right to expect.

“The scale of change required is vast. But the lessons I witnessed from policing reform in Northern Ireland show that it can be done.”

Jodie Beck, policy and campaigns officer at Liberty, said: “It’s shocking that even as more and more horrific stories are breaking about the conduct of serving officers, far from stripping away the powers that make these abuses possible, the government continues to hand even greater powers to the police.

“It’s deeply concerning that the current political thinking across the board appears to prioritise increased police powers, when we know that the powers of the police are so broad that they will always be open to abuse.”

Ken Marsh, chair of the Metropolitan Police Federation, said: “I think it is a bit disingenuous to say there could be another David Carrick or [Wayne Couzens](#) in the Met police.

“I don’t think we will see another person like that in the police.”

He added: “We absolutely accept the findings but we have to be a little bit careful here. Are we saying every Met police officer is racist and homophobic? That is quite dangerous.

“Met colleagues are on their knees. We have a broken force, they are just leaving in their droves.

“It is quite scary what we are creating here. The punishing of police just does not stop. The new commissioner has made a vow to change what is going on and is changing what is going on.”

This article was amended on 21 March 2023 because Ken Marsh is chair of the Metropolitan [Police](#) Federation, not the national Police Federation as an earlier version implied.

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James Coupland: ‘I thought: “If my landlord can do this, then I can make money, too.”’ Photograph: Courtesy of James Coupland

[Social media](#)

The improbable rise of landlord influencers: ‘I’m not taking advantage

of anybody'

Buy-to-let property videos are increasingly popular on TikTok and other social media platforms. But is this a route to financial freedom or a get-rich-quick scheme doomed to fail?



[Simon Usborne](#)

Tue 21 Mar 2023 02.00 EDT

James Coupland started his [Instagram](#) account more than 10 years ago, posting unremarkable photos showing him with his mates, or in the gym. After giving up on a career as a footballer, he was studying for a sports performance degree while trying to make a name in fitness. But none of his posts were getting more than a few dozen likes.

Then, in March 2020, came the pivot.

Coupland had by then become a landlord. In 2016, when he was 21, he had bought a £53,000 house in Goole, east Yorkshire, with a £5,300 deposit from his savings and a cheap mortgage. Inspired rather than frustrated by the £95 weekly rent he was paying for a basic student houseshare in Leeds,

he thought: “If my landlord can do this, then that’s a way I can make money, too.” He moved in, learned DIY on YouTube and sold the place a year later for £92,500. He invested the profits in the next house and started building a modest buy-to-let portfolio.

Shouting about being a landlord hadn’t occurred to Coupland, but during the first UK pandemic lockdown he began posting photos of his properties and DIY exploits – mostly before-and-after shots and how-tos. These, too, made a modest impact until, in early 2021, someone suggested [TikTok](#).

Coupland, who is 28 and lives in York, was sceptical. “I didn’t think anyone was going to be interested in this stuff,” he says. “But I posted my first video and woke up the next morning to 60,000 views. It just spiralled out of control.”

Thanks to TikTok’s mysterious algorithms and Coupland’s knack for producing fast-cutting clips with snappy captions and dance-music soundtracks, he now has almost 435,000 followers and has racked up 30m views.

His most popular clip, with 7.2m views, is a 52-second tour of a three-bedroom house cut to Darude’s trance track Sandstorm. Coupland had bought the house for £47,000 and was carving out five en suite bedrooms that he was planning to rent at £100 a week each, for a total of £26,000 a year.



‘I’ve seen a huge difference in the quality of refurbishments’ ... one of the properties James Coupland has renovated. Photograph: Courtesy of James Coupland

Coupland, who added a “kerching” cash-register sound effect to the video every time he said “£100 a week”, is now one of the biggest names in a burgeoning online community – that of the landlord influencer. Across social media apps, landlords with big followings are revealing the tricks of the trade, often using the #PropertyTok hashtag.

Some influencers present themselves as gurus who preach the virtues of wealth creation and “passive income” in expensive training courses. In this world, landlordism is no longer seen as the preserve of moneyed middle-agers with half an eye on retirement, but a lifestyle and route to “financial freedom” for young people who might otherwise feel starved of opportunity.

Other influencers are anxious to challenge perceptions of landlords as agents of avarice who hike rents, skimp on maintenance and drive up house prices. They are keen to point out that they, too, are being squeezed by [soaring interest rates](#), costs and tightening regulation.

But not everyone is inclined to be sympathetic to the purported plight of landlords, or the content being generated by these influencers. Critics accuse these accounts of perpetuating a broken housing market by projecting the image of homes as get-rich-quick assets to a new generation.

“Good landlords have a lot of obligations and responsibilities and I think there’s a risk in selling these models as an easy way to make money,” says Dan Wilson Craw, the deputy director of the campaign group [Generation Rent](#). He is referring to models such as houses in multiple occupation (HMOs), or shared dwellings such as student houses or converted office blocks, and a controversial version of subletting known as “rent to rent”, AKA Rent2Rent.

I get called every name under the sun, leech, scum ...

James Coupland

The [National Residential Landlords Association](#), which has more than 100,000 members, sees a potential reputational threat. “Landlords are not a universally well-perceived group in the first place,” says Chris Norris, its policy director. “And I think what a lot of this content does is highlights the excesses.”

Norris hears echoes of the [Inside Track](#) scandal. The firm used ads and mailshots to tempt customers to purchase buy-to-let properties in the UK, the US and Spain; thousands were left out of pocket when it collapsed in 2008. “What’s different now is that TikTok gets these messages out to a wider audience and you’ve got an awful lot of people who may be quite inexperienced and won’t necessarily know how to verify what they see,” Norris says.

He also questions the notion of property ownership as a source of passive income. “It’s not passive if you’re doing it right,” he says.

Coupland is keenly aware of such criticisms and says responsible landlords such as him suffer as a result of the actions of a rogue minority. “I get called every name under the sun,” he says. “Leech, scum ... I try to explain that I’m not doing this to take advantage of anybody.”

Coupland, who takes pride in his own HMOs (he says they look a lot nicer than the houseshares for which he paid vast amounts in his 20s), also suggests that throwing open the door to properties via social media is helping to raise standards. “I’ve seen a huge difference in the quality of refurbishments,” he says. Yet even he says his primary goal is to “inspire people to get into property”. He now offers training via his James Property Academy, and has noticed a surge in comments and follows from people as young as 16 – something that he finds heartening. “It’s quite inspiring, because when I was that age I was still kicking a ball around,” he says.

Samuel Leeds, who grew up in a modest house in Walsall in the West Midlands, is one of the loudest and most controversial voices in landlord influence. He left school at 16 and trained as a plasterer. “We were turning a place into a HMO and I remember the builder telling me how much money the owner was going to make. I thought: ‘Jeez, that’s interesting.’”

At a property-business networking event, Leeds, who is 31, found mentorship and a sense of belonging. Just before he turned 18, he bought his first property, in a relative’s name (he was too young to get a mortgage). He says he has since been involved in more than 450 property transactions.



Samuel Leeds: ‘My gift, without being arrogant, is that I can make complicated things pretty simple.’ Photograph: Krystian Data

Leeds began broadcasting his activity on YouTube in 2016; he joined TikTok in 2020. He has posted hundreds of videos that have scored almost 40m views in total with titles such as: “Rent2Rent Explained for Beginners”; “The Last Book You Will Ever Need to Read” (one of his own); and “23K a Month at 23” (in which he interviews a fellow landlord).

In 2017, Leeds started selling training via his company Property Investors, which hosts £1 live events, including his “Rent to Rent Revolution” tour, and charges up to £12,000 for 12 months of coaching. He describes himself as a kind of class warrior on a mission to democratise property ownership. “I think that message is quite liberating to a lot of people who are earning the minimum wage and struggling with [the cost of living crisis](#),” he says. “My gift, without being arrogant, is that I can make complicated things pretty simple.”

Leeds says his training has reached as many as 20,000 people and he is anxious to point out the positive reviews. But not every customer has been happy; Leeds has been accused of overstating the ease with which students can make money and of using libel law to shut down critics.

The Guardian reported last year that solicitors acting for Leeds had issued legal proceedings or threats of lawsuits [against 15 people or property websites](#) who they said were part of a coordinated attack on Leeds. They included Carrie Jones, the sister of Danny Butcher, a soldier from Doncaster who killed himself after paying £13,000 for Leeds’ training. Jones denied making any defamatory comments.

Leeds, who lives in a big house in Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire, tells me he was “heartbroken” when he learned about Butcher’s death, but adds: “It’s outrageous to try to pinpoint that on the training course. There’s no link.”



Vanessa Warwick: ‘There are people out there looking for an easy fix, or a way out of a desperate situation.’ Photograph: Jon Hawkins/Surrey Hills Photography

Vanessa Warwick, a former MTV presenter who runs Property Tribes, an online platform for landlords, has also been sued by Leeds; she has launched a counterclaim against him for defamation and harassment. Leeds denies these allegations, while Warwick has denied being involved in a Facebook group that has been critical of Leeds.

Warwick, who has been a landlord for 30 years, tells me she has wider concerns about the role of some property influencers. “There are people out there looking for an easy fix, or a way out of a desperate situation, who may be impressionable or naive and will be attracted to these ‘wealth-creation experts’,” she says.

Leeds insists he understands the duty of care he has to his students. “When anyone invests thousands of pounds in their education with my company, that comes with a huge level of responsibility,” he says. “We tell people to only invest in training that they can afford.”

In a video that Leeds posted to YouTube in 2019, he dispenses property advice in a park and boasts about his success. Three curious teenagers

appear to interrupt him. During a conversation, Leeds tells them: “Here’s my advice: get out of education, because schools don’t teach you to be rich – they teach you to get a job, which sucks.” Does he stand by that advice? “No,” he says, suggesting now that he was trying to make a point about the lack of financial literacy teaching in schools. The video, which is titled: “Samuel Leeds Tells Kids to ‘Quit School’”, has had more than 10,000 views.

Meanwhile, some sceptical veteran landlords are joining the TikTok party. Rick Gannon, 51, started buying and selling houses in Nottingham 27 years ago. Things ticked along quietly until, in 2011, he quit his job as a police officer to become an HMO specialist. He says he has about 150 tenants in properties worth £8m.

Gannon soon started to notice landlord gurus on Facebook and YouTube. “It was all: ‘How I became a millionaire in a day,’ and people driving around in rented Ferraris and walking on the beach in Dubai, saying: ‘I’ve got all of this through property,’” he says. “I wanted to show people the reality.”

Starting on Facebook in 2015 and TikTok in 2021, Gannon has posted hundreds of videos about life as a landlord, including callouts to leaks and other problems for tenants. “I’m showing people that tenants are our customers and that we’ve got to look after them.”



Rick Gannon: 'I wanted to show people the reality of being a landlord.'
Photograph: Peter James Morgan

Gannon is rare among TikTok landlords in talking much about tenants at all, although he doesn't hesitate to share their misdemeanours (his policing background is evident in videos such as "Party House Busted"). He thinks tenants make up more than half of his audience. "I get inundated with messages from all over the country asking about their rights and whether their landlord has done something illegal," he says. The overall impression of his feed is that being a landlord is a lot of hard work.

Coupland also comes across as industrious, with plenty of videos of him at work, wearing a T-shirt bearing the logo of a major tool company (one of his sponsors). Without naming anyone, he says he has little time for some of the "huge egos" with whom he shares a platform. But he is not averse to a bit of bragging.

In one of his latest TikTok videos, he thanks his fans for helping him reach 200,000 followers on Instagram. A dizzying reel of images charts his rise from student to property influencer; it includes shots of him on a jetski, on a sunlounger, and in an HMO room strewn with £10 and £20 notes.

“It’s amazing,” Coupland says when I ask him what it is like to get more than 1m views for a TikTok clip, only a few years after his fitness pics were slipping into the void. “When it first happened, I was going crazy – ‘Oh my God, I can’t believe it’ – whereas now, if I don’t hit a million views I get upset.”

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Priya Tew in her kitchen. Photograph: Millie Pilkington/The Guardian

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I'm a dietitian. This is what I eat in a day

From morning tea to a plant-based dinner, Priya Tew on the food choices she makes to stay on top form

As told to [Anna Berrill](#)

Tue 21 Mar 2023 03.00 EDTLast modified on Tue 21 Mar 2023 05.40 EDT

7am: get up, have breakfast

After I've told a few children to get ready, I start my morning with green tea. Breakfast is around 8am and usually a bowl of porridge with milk, chopped banana, cinnamon, peanut butter and a sprinkling of pumpkin seeds. I'm [wheat-intolerant](#) so oats help balance my blood sugars, which means I don't get hungry for longer, and they've also got good, soluble fibre in them, which is great for our digestive system. I always want to find ways to add extra plants to my diet, which is why I add the seeds, and having that banana means I'm getting a prebiotic which, again, is good for my gut.

Studies show breakfast is key for children; it helps their cognitive function. We've always had a rule with my children that they should have a wholegrain cereal (Weetabix, oats, Shredded Wheat), and then they can add some toppings: a little sweet cereal like Rice Krispies, and fruit such as berries or banana.

8.30am: off to school, then work

I go on the school run at 8.30am, then I'm straight into work at 9am, either doing consultations or teaching [pilates](#). Generally, I'll have a morning snack, something quick like a protein bar with dried fruit and seeds, which keeps me fuller and more satisfied than a couple of biscuits. I don't like to have more than three cups of caffeinated tea in a day, it affects my pelvic floor and can upset some people's gut. If I want more, I'll switch to something herbal.

12-1pm: lunch

Recently, this has been homemade soup with oatcakes or wheat-free bread. I air-fry or roast butternut squash, add things such as carrots, tomatoes, homemade chicken stock, spices (cumin, coriander, turmeric), ginger and garlic, then blitz it all up. Otherwise, lunch might be [rye bread](#) with avocado, chopped cherry tomatoes and a little cheese, or roasted vegetables with a grain. I try and get a couple of portions of fruit and vegetables in here, so having vegetables roasted in advance or soup that I can heat up is perfect. Some research suggests we should have [30 different types of plants in our week](#), but this can include things like nuts, seeds and some grains. I would encourage people to go for seven [portions of] vegetables a day. And consistency is key; the gut likes us to have that routine, in terms of vegetables, fibre, fluid and, of course, movement.

I teach pilates most evenings, and I come out of class a slightly nicer person

Afternoon: dark chocolate, back to work, then pick-up

I often have a few squares of dark chocolate after lunch, which gives that little sweet hit and moment of pleasure. Then, I'm normally in and out of clinic, doing paperwork, or possibly a one-to-one pilates session. I tend to get hungry towards the school run, so I will grab a piece of fruit on my way out.

5.30pm: dinner, pilates and pudding

We all eat together around 5.30pm. Spaghetti bolognese with plant mince is one of our go-tos – you can get so many vegetables into it – or a stir-fry with half chicken and half tofu or kidney beans. Again, it's beneficial to be eating a variety of plants across the week, so I try to get two portions per person on the plate. We'll often do homemade pizzas, too, where I'll make the sauce and dough, using brown bread or buckwheat flour for extra fibre.

I teach pilates most evenings, and I come out of class a slightly nicer person. I think pilates can help with digestion; the breathing used is known

to be beneficial for releasing tensions that we can be holding on to in all areas of the body. I come in from my studio around 8.30pm and, once the children are in bed, I'll have fruit with mango Greek yoghurt, because of the calcium and beneficial bacteria, which is good for my gut health. I'll add almonds as they're another plant, but also because they're giving me protein and fibre, and that's going to keep me going overnight.

10pm: bed

I'm not a particularly good [sleeper](#), and if I eat too late or have too heavy a meal that has an impact because the body is still actively digesting. I tend not to eat after 9.30pm, and I always have water next to my bed. I drink four to six pints a day; staying hydrated helps your digestive health, making sure that everything gets pushed around the system and forms a stool. We want to make sure we've got the fibre, but also the fluid.

Priya Tew is a dietitian, pilates teacher and author of [The Complete Low FODMAP Diet Plan](#)

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The Casey review heard accounts of the problems faces by some officers and civilian employees. Photograph: Leon Neal/Getty Images

[Metropolitan police](#)

‘I’m scared of the police’: Met report unearths misogyny, homophobia and racism

Female, black and gay police officers told Casey review alarming stories of incidents inside the force

- [Met police found to be institutionally racist, misogynistic and homophobic](#)



[Jamie Grierson](#)

[@JamieGrierson](#)

Mon 20 Mar 2023 20.01 EDT

The Casey review has unearthed a [series of alarming stories](#) exposing misogyny, homophobia and racism inside the Metropolitan police.

‘We’ve looked at the figures, use of force isn’t being used enough’

A [Metropolitan police](#) officer, G, described a disturbing session where a group of new officers were brought together and shown numerous examples of video footage in which force had been used against the guidelines of “proportionate, legal, accountable and necessary” but were presented as examples of good practice and proportionate use of force.

One example included footage of a Taser being used on a man who was in hospital, wearing a hospital gown and not presenting any sign of danger.

G spoke about her experience of working on a Sapphire team investigating rape and other sexual offences, and the resourcing issues they faced. She told the review that the unit's freezers, which held and preserved evidence obtained from victims and survivors of sexual violence including swabs, blood, urine and underwear, would be so full it would take three officers to close them: one person to push the door closed, one person to hold it shut and one to secure the lock.

All the fridges used for rape kits were in bad shape, packed full and ruining evidence.

In the heatwave in 2022, G said one freezer broke down and all the evidence had to be destroyed because it could no longer be used.

‘I lost consciousness, he raped me’

A was a victim of domestic and sexual abuse at the hands of a fellow Met officer during a long-term relationship, the report says.

During one of her first postings she met her abuser, X, and they started a relationship.

The abuse escalated significantly and A was regularly attending work clearly distressed and with bruising on her wrists and face. She says the abuse was an open secret on their team but few people wanted to speak up.

“He smacked me round the face, I lost consciousness, he raped me,” she told the review. “I had a black eye, a split lip.”

An investigation was opened, closed and reopened, but within days of the murder of Sarah Everard by Wayne Couzens, a serving Metropolitan police officer, A says she received a one-line email from the Directorate of Professional Standards (DPS), the Met's complaints body, saying they had decided to take no further action on her case.

‘It's your word against his’

L is a female officer who was sexually assaulted in the workplace on multiple occasions by a more senior male officer.

L says the officer would frequently touch her inappropriately: forcing her to sit on his lap, touching her on intimate parts of her body while she was getting changed in the communal changing rooms, and deliberately bruising her arms while claiming he was demonstrating “officer safety moves”.

L undertook a video interview, and a witness of her abuse provided a full written account. Months later, she found out by chance that the case had been dismissed.

She said: “It’s your word against his” and said her abuser had a “long, unblemished career in the Met”.



Photograph: Leon Neal/Getty Images

‘The only difference was that I was a woman’

N is an officer who has been consistently bullied in two of the Met’s specialist commands, where she has been targeted for her gender and labelled as a “troublemaker” for calling out problematic behaviour.

Both specialist commands where N has worked are heavily male-dominated and she found she struggled to fit into the culture and was made to feel isolated and miserable. “I had been a police officer for longer, been in [the command] for longer ... I had all the skills – I could drive, I could shoot – I could do anything that they could. The only difference was that I was a woman.”

Incidents included officers ignoring her calls on the radio, rubbing her name out when she signed up for overtime, ignoring text messages and emails she sent, even when these were operational, giving her tasks no one else wanted to do, and sitting in silence when she attempted to join in conversations in the carrier vehicle or on long car journeys.

‘Just banter’

A gay female officer, known as B, reported a male officer after he told her his “balls were cold” and requested that she should “warm them up” while working together alone on a night shift.

She said this officer had a reputation for making other women cry with comments about their policing abilities and their bodies, and there was an unofficial rule that women wouldn’t usually work with him.

After she refused and did not laugh off his comments, she says the officer would no longer speak to her while they were working together, other than to shout at her in front of colleagues.

B reported his behaviour and was told it “wasn’t the worst thing in the world” and was probably just “banter”.

In another case study recorded in the report, C, a gay man, recalled that, in the first team he worked in, his colleagues were obsessed with his sex life and would continually ask inappropriate questions in briefings or around the police station, such as: “Are you a giver or a taker?”

He said there was a particularly “laddy” culture when working in carriers with groups of male officers, where offensive comments would be brushed

off as “banter” and there was a pressure to put up with this to be accepted and fit in.

The suspect was ‘one of their own’

D is a longstanding member of Met staff and a victim of abuse and coercive control at the hands of a Met police officer, Officer Y.

After she ended the relationship, she says Officer Y’s behaviour escalated further, leading her to call the police on several occasions. She says her complaints, and the fears of her children, were either ignored or treated with complacency by Met officers.

She asked to be moved but was told the case would take some time as the suspect was “one of their own”.

Social services were so concerned that they submitted a report to the Met raising questions about whether Officer Y was fit to have contact with vulnerable people and fulfil his role as a police officer.

It took five months for the new unit to conclude that no criminal case would be brought against Officer Y.

‘I am scared of the police. I don’t trust my own organisation’

E is a gay officer who has been the target of a sustained campaign of homophobia from inside the Met.

He has been subject to malicious rumours that he is involved in party drugs and that he is having sexual relationships with senior male officers, which is the reason for having been given training opportunities or favourable postings.



Photograph: Victoria Jones/PA

E has seen evidence of WhatsApp groups among serving officers joking about trying to stop and search him off-duty and using homophobic language. When E raised his treatment, he says the Met's response was to brush off his experience.

"I am scared of the police. I don't trust my own organisation," he told the review.

‘Regretted relationship’

F is a Met officer who, while serving on a specialist unit, was groomed and coerced into a sexual relationship by a more senior colleague, Officer Z.

When F ended the relationship and reported the abuse, she says senior officers in her unit did not take it seriously.

On one occasion, an officer drew attention to a video of F "twerking and gyrating" with friends as evidence that she was lying about being uncomfortable with the behaviour of Officer Z on the same night. The DPS never met F.

She was informed that they would be taking no further criminal action against Officer Z. An officer emailed her to say they were of the opinion she had merely entered into a “regretted relationship”.

‘You have to try and be invisible as a black woman’

H, a black female officer, described a “horrific” misogynistic workplace culture where colleagues were “sex-obsessed” and would openly rate and grade female colleagues and members of the public on their appearance.

H says she was sent to work with a male officer who was known to like young black women.

She says he was an “awful character, committing lots of sackable offences” but seemed to be unsackable.

H describes an occasion where she was told her hair looked like she had been in an “electricity socket” 10 minutes after she had taken a shower following a physical training session.

“You have to try and be invisible as a black woman,” she told the review.

‘A Metropolitan police officer can continue to help those in need and yet be an abuser himself’

J is a female civilian who was in a relationship with a male Met police officer for several years, during which time he became controlling and coercive. He blamed her for his abusive behaviour, wearing down her self-esteem by telling her she was always wrong and he was always right.

His behaviour later escalated to physical violence. After the first occasion that he assaulted her, he told her if she tried to report it to the police he could deny it as there was no physical evidence. After this assault she was able to leave the relationship, seek the help of a women’s refuge, report his abuse to the local police and move away from the area.

“I find it terrifying and shocking, how a Metropolitan police officer can continue to help those in need and yet be an abuser himself.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/mar/21/im-scared-of-the-police-met-report-unearths-misogyny-homophobia-and-racism>

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Louise Casey arrives at Queen Elizabeth II conference centre to brief the press about her review into the standards of behaviour and internal culture of the Met. Photograph: WPA/Getty Images

[Metropolitan police](#)

[Analysis](#)

Louise Casey's report on the Met police: the fall of a British institution

[Vikram Dodd](#) Police and crime correspondent

Analysis: Metropolitan police again found to be institutionally racist, sexist and homophobic – and in need of radical reform

- [Met police found to be institutionally racist, misogynistic and homophobic](#)

Mon 20 Mar 2023 20.01 EDT Last modified on Tue 21 Mar 2023 08.53 EDT

Here we all are again.

The venues change, [as do the decades](#), the people who chair the inquiry differ, as does the Metropolitan police commissioner vowing to act.

About a quarter of a century ago, in a cake box pink building in south [London](#) where he held hearings, the evidence he heard led Sir William Macpherson to conclude the Met was institutionally racist.

The former judge concluded this at least in part explained why the killers of Stephen Lawrence had escaped justice.

Then, unlike now, the then commissioner Paul Condon accepted the label.

This time it is even worse: the Met is again found to be [institutionally racist, sexist and homophobic](#), and Louise Casey says it should also accept the finding of an earlier inquiry in 2021 that [it is institutionally corrupt](#).

It may be an understatement to say this is a cataclysmic disaster that has befallen the [Metropolitan police](#), the people it serves, the trust it has squandered and the bullied and overworked staff repeated leaders have let down.

Lady Casey's report details the fall of a British institution, tumbling harder than any organisation at the centre of national life has managed before, and one that is so crucial to society.

It is not just a London issue. Not just because the Met has national functions such as counter-terrorism, but because its size makes it about one-quarter of policing in England and Wales.

Institutional racism, misogyny and homophobia 'pervades' Met police, says Dame Louise Casey – video

Its repeated scandals, as Casey details, its bungled response or cover-up, is buffeting forces across the country, dragging down trust and confidence even hundreds of miles from the capital. "It's always the Met," is a refrain

among other chief constables, and their tolerance of their fellow chiefs in London is thin to nonexistent, where once there was support. And they have made the Home Office aware of the drag effect of the better resourced London force's inability to clean up its messes, and generate new ones.

Crime and policing will be a key issue in next May's London mayoral election, and general election. [Polling for the Home Office, seen by the Guardian, already shows a high fear of crime](#), and low confidence much will be done about it.

The fall of the Met came and accelerated during a time when a series of reforms meant police were supposed to be under more scrutiny and face more accountability than ever. Even if the Met leadership was deficient, we should never have got even close to this dire position.

Several organisations have questions to answer about whether acts of omission or commission played a part in Scotland Yard squandering public trust. Now on certain measures trust is at 50%, when in 2017 it was 17% higher. As one senior Met insider said: "It is a hard swing to happen to an institution so quickly."



HM Inspectorate of Constabulary praised the Met after the arrest of Patsy Stevenson and others at the Clapham Common vigil for Sarah Everard.

Photograph: Hannah McKay/Reuters

Those with questions to answer include the London mayor's Office for Policing and Crime – first under Boris Johnson when he was mayor, then under Labour's Sadiq Khan and his deputy for policing, Sophie Linden.

The current mayor may have earned some redemption by pressing the Met to change and ousting Cressida Dick as commissioner. But also among those charged with holding the Met to account were a succession of Tory home secretaries. Unique among forces the Met has two political bosses.

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary was late placing the Met in special measures, instead under its previous leader, Sir Tom Winsor, [praising the Met and condemning the force's critics after it waded into mourners for Sarah Everard on Clapham Common](#) after her murder by a Met officer. Winsor also praised Cressida Dick.

The Independent Office for Police Conduct faces constant claims of being too lax about allegations of Met wrongdoing, though its report on the [Charing Cross police station hate messages](#) helped end Dick's commissionership.

Anyone watching the London Assembly's police and crime committee is more likely to hear praise for the Met than a well thought out and well researched question, with the occasional exception of the Green party members.

[Denis Healey's line](#) that being attacked by Geoffrey Howe was “like being savaged by a dead sheep” is a pretty accurate description.

Casey notes in her report: “The system as a whole does not hold or deliver real consequences where failures persist.”

Casey places the primary blame on the Met's past leadership, who condemned external critics, intimidated internal ones into silence, and reassured the public that everything was all right.

Can Sir Mark Rowley, who came out of retirement to start his commissionership in September turn the Met around and avoid being the last commissioner of the Met as we know it?

Both he and his deputy, Dame Lynne Owens, served previously at the top table of the Met, and say they will reflect on why they did not see more of the signs.

Among senior policing sources there is an increasing view that Rowley's stated hope to turn the Met around within the five years of his commissionership is an understandable aim, but if he merely stops the bleeding he will have done amazingly well.

Police chief refuses to describe Met racism, misogyny and homophobia as 'institutional' – video

“It is not achievable in five years,” said one senior insider. “This is a 10-year game.”

There is talk that if in a year to two years the Rowley plans are not showing results, the issue of whether the Met continues in its current form and size, starts to move to the foreground.

To reverse the fall of the Met, Rowley – a maths graduate – will need to reengineer the gravity of history.

Because past attempts to get the Met to accept it needs to radically reform, and then to get them to actually do it, have ended with today's damning and depressing report by Casey.

2023.03.21 - Opinion

- Sunak cares nothing for the 99% – and after his pensions hike for the rich, they know it
- Of course Boris Johnson is guilty of misleading parliament – stand by for another Tory civil war
- I learned a lot from making kimchi – about fermented shrimp, and about myself
- Until bankers have more to lose themselves, collapses like SVB and Credit Suisse will keep happening



‘This is a great political misjudgment, but it’s easy to see why Hunt was tempted.’ The prime minister, Rishi Sunak (left), with Jeremy Hunt and the Tory cabinet. Photograph: Stefan Rousseau/PA

[OpinionTax and spending](#)

Sunak cares nothing for the 99% – and after his pensions hike for the rich, they know it

[Polly Toynbee](#)



The PM and his chancellor thought they could hide the greed in plain sight, but focus groups show voters are aware – and angry

Tue 21 Mar 2023 02.00 EDTLast modified on Tue 21 Mar 2023 09.44 EDT

“Welcome to the pensions gold rush” and cheers for “The ultimate inheritance tax dodge”. Tory newspapers’ money pages whoop up the “super-charged” [pensions tax giveaway](#) to the wealthy: “The bigger your pot, the greater your savings.” Today, Labour [forces a vote](#) in the Commons against the chancellor’s surprise gift to the rich that removes any limit on tax-free pension contributions. These huge pension pots [can be handed](#) on free of inheritance tax to generation after generation unto the end of time – or until a Labour government abolishes the policy as soon as it gets inside the Treasury.

Pensions advisers are being inundated with calls from wealthy savers “looking for ways to protect their nest eggs from the risk of a Labour government”, [says the Daily Telegraph](#). The rich are shifting other assets into pension pots to save tax now, but the biggest draw is that their pensions have become the best escape from inheritance tax. Why do this? Jeremy Hunt’s excuse was to stop senior doctors retiring once they reached their

tax-free pension limit. How many of them? Here's the shocker: [only 105](#) left the NHS voluntarily for early retirement last year, according to the government's own figures. How easily he could do as Labour proposes, and make a special NHS pension plan for them, without this great bonanza for all highest earners. His cover is blown.

This is a great political misjudgment, but it's easy to see why Hunt was tempted. Look at previous Tory chancellors' popular triumphs in cutting inheritance taxes. In particular, he will remember George Osborne's 2007 party conference speech that changed the course of history. Osborne's promise that "[only millionaires](#) will pay inheritance tax" marked out "a new dividing line in British politics". Not only would the threshold rise to £1m but he pledged to "take the family home out of inheritance tax", because "in a Conservative Britain you will not be punished for working hard and saving hard". That spooked the then prime minister, Gordon Brown, out of calling an election that he would almost certainly have won at the height of his popularity, before the bank crash.

Will that magic work again to rescue these beleaguered Tories? Inheritance tax was always loathed: the Office of Tax Simplification's [report](#) called it "an almost uniquely unpopular tax" that only 22% of people saw as fair: people said it was "paying tax twice", though the OTS noted that many inheritances are in homes that never paid capital gains on soaring values. People (rightly) thought the very rich avoided it with trusts (the heirs of the Duke of Westminster [paid zilch](#)). Too many wrongly fear a tax that will never hit them: only [4% of estates](#) paid it in 2020, due to become 6.7% by 2028. (Incidentally, Liz Truss's government abolished the useful OTS.)



The then shadow chancellor, George Osborne, delivers the speech at the Conservative party conference in 2007 that changed the course of history. Photograph: Martin Argles/The Guardian

Hunt hoped that any cuts to pension and inheritance tax would be popular: people wouldn't notice that it does nothing for the 99%. What an error, when voters have strong views on pensions and fairness. They have spotted this only helps the very rich, not their puny pensions.

[Focus groups](#) in the so-called red wall seats by Public First show people well understand the injustice of this. A typical responder said it "is only going to benefit rich people because who the hell can save up a million pounds pension over their lifetime?" Liam Halligan, the economics editor of GB News, writes in the Telegraph of similar soundings in Doncaster: [a garage owner complains](#): "Who can afford to put tens of thousands of pounds each year into a private pension worth more than a million quid? No one I know." In a focus group in Derby, voters needed no prompting to protest against this "handout for the rich" when people "like them are struggling". Said one woman about the chance to put £60,000 into her pension tax-free: "I don't even get paid that, let alone having it to spare." Where Osborne posed dishonestly but cleverly as being on the side of ordinary voters over inheritance tax, Hunt's imitation has been rumbled as yet another Tory benefit for the 1%.

Yet the right to pass on inheritance is a visceral impulse, a primal instinct to enfold and favour your children and their children. Progressives struggle to swim against that emotional tide, believing just as passionately that the injustice of the accident of birth has to be mitigated and evened out – or levelled up – for any chance of offering what even Tories pretend to want: fair opportunities for all regardless of social background. Attitudes towards inheritance are the deepest of red/blue dividing lines. I once asked the geneticist Steve Jones how heritable is intelligence. “Nothing like as heritable as money,” he said wryly: money influences lives far more. Tory talk of every child fulfilling their potential is bogus when they always resist any serious intervention in the privileges of birth. But progressives have to tread with extreme caution in this delicate territory of family instinct.

On this ancient battleground, [two Tory MPs](#) on the Treasury select committee attacked Labour’s pledge to repeal the pension/inheritance giveaway. Anthony Browne said: “They’re playing the politics of envy. This is typical Labour anti-aspiration.” John Baron said Labour is promoting “class war”.

But class war has been in the very marrow of every Tory budget of the past 13 years: the same budget that raised the inheritance tax threshold to £1m also slashed benefits and public services. Remember Rishi Sunak [telling Tunbridge Wells Tories](#) that he was “undoing” the “formulas from Labour that shoved all the funding into deprived urban areas” to “make sure areas like this are getting the funding they deserve”. Most voters agree it’s not politics of envy to focus resources less on the haves than the have-nots. But on inheritance tax, that agreement is fragile.

Andy Summers, an associate professor at LSE who serves on the Wealth Tax Commission, lists the welter of reports from the [Institute for Fiscal Studies](#), the [Resolution Foundation](#), Tax Justice UK and others calling for inheritance tax reforms. As a modest step he, like they, advocates abolishing inheritance tax altogether by switching from taxing estates to taxing beneficiaries on receipt of lifetime gifts and bequests at their ordinary tax rates, hoping it would spread bequests more widely. Tories weep crocodile tears for “grieving families caught in the [‘death tax’ net](#)”

but much extra woe is caused by the awful complexity of probate. Taxing recipients would end that.

That also retains the moral and social value of intervening in the passing on of massive fortunes, in this new gilded age of runaway wealth perpetuating inequality into the far future. This time the majority – who have no chance of being charged inheritance tax – is not tricked into thinking tax breaks for the 1% trickle down to anyone else.

- Polly Toynbee is a Guardian columnist
- Join Polly Toynbee for a Guardian Live online event on Wednesday 31 May, when she will be discussing her new book, *An Uneasy Inheritance*. Book tickets [here](#)

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‘Johnson argues that the committee is packed with enemies who have already gone public with his guilt.’ Photograph: Tayfun Salcı/ZUMA Press Wire/REX/Shutterstock

[Opinion Boris Johnson](#)

Of course Boris Johnson is guilty of misleading parliament – stand by for another Tory civil war

[Simon Jenkins](#)



Just when there are more important things to be debated, it appears the Commons will again be distracted by party feuds

Mon 20 Mar 2023 09.55 EDTLast modified on Mon 20 Mar 2023 11.43 EDT

They fiddle while Rome burns. Forget Ukraine, the Brexit protocol or asylum seekers in Rwanda. What really has MPs worked up this week is whether [Boris Johnson](#) lied to them. They may as well ask, “Does he breathe?”

It has already taken [nearly three years](#) for the House of Commons to call the former prime minister to account for holding parties during lockdown. The Metropolitan police long ago [spent £460,000](#) investigating him, declaring him guilty and fining him. The current complaint is merely that Johnson “misled” parliament on the subject. Who does the Commons privileges committee want to believe, Johnson or the police, after three years of tedious publicity?

Clearly Johnson is guilty. The committee has spent nine months confirming it. The public is bored with being told it. After paying the fine, Johnson set

the record straight, albeit on the basis that he thought he was innocent. The committee has already altered the charge from deliberately lying to the House to “[recklessly](#)” doing so. Everyone could tell he was lying. His own party imposed a far more savage penalty than the police. It sacked him as leader.

In a 50-page defence [expected to be published](#) today, Johnson accuses the committee of playing with words over whether he really or even “probably” meant to lie. Officials advise him that the parties were classed as office events rather than Johnsonian raves. He also argues that the committee is packed with enemies who have already gone public with his guilt. On any showing this is a monstrous corruption of a judicial process that has his political future in its hands.

In a preliminary report on 3 March, the Commons committee gave a [strong rebuttal](#) of Johnson’s defence. He now looks as likely to escape conviction as [Alexei Navalny](#) before a Moscow court. The inquiry seems chiefly concerned with asserting the dignity and self-importance of backbench MPs. In reality, it is offering Johnson what he most craves: public attention and a chance to fashion a few juicy metaphors to grab the headlines.

Assuming the committee finds against Johnson, it will be for the Commons as a whole to decide if he should be sanctioned by suspension. If that is for 10 days or more it means expulsion and probably a byelection. That is the last thing the Conservative party needs just now, a Trump-like eruption of Johnson activists rampaging against Westminster’s kangaroo courts and setting him up to challenge Rishi Sunak after the next election.

In a week when parliament should be soberly debating the 20th anniversary of its gung-ho declaration of [war on Iraq](#), the Johnson hearing is an irrelevance. Wednesday’s promised four hours of examination is just short of Tony Blair’s defence of the Iraq war before [Sir John Chilcot](#) in 2016. It looks suspiciously as though it is the committee, not Johnson, that has brought parliament into disrepute.

- Simon Jenkins is a Guardian columnist

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Kimchi ... you know you can just buy it, don't you? Photograph: Nungning20/Getty Images/iStockphoto

[OpinionFood](#)

I learned a lot from making kimchi – about fermented shrimp, and about myself

[Zoe Williams](#)



I'm now living full-time in my own personal sunk-cost fallacy. It's a white-knuckle ride I really don't need to be on

Tue 21 Mar 2023 03.00 EDTLast modified on Tue 21 Mar 2023 03.23 EDT

Like all bad ideas, this enterprise started with me thinking: “I bet I could make this myself.” It was kimchi. Everyone really likes it: one kid likes it in a pancake, another likes it in a butter curry, a third likes it with falafel, which he calls “fusion” just to troll me. I like it when I have a hangover; Mr Z likes it on everything; my friend likes it but has rheumatoid arthritis and doesn't live anywhere near a Korean supermarket. The logic seemed to me almost inexorable: if everyone likes this thing, I bet I could make it myself.

So, newsflash everyone: your average kimchi is not vegetarian. It has a load of fish sauce in it, which yes, you can substitute with vegan fish sauce, except there is also fermented shrimp, and it really can't be overstated how not-vegetarian that is. There is a point in the fermentation lifecycle of a shrimp that it goes beyond even crustacea – in stench and intensity, it's basically reindeer. It's impossible to know what to do with this information: do I assume that the shop-bought stuff *is* veggie, which is fair, as I cannot read the ingredients (too small, also in Korean)? Do I cut the vegetarians

out of my homemade experiment, or just pretend to forget there is shrimp in it, which will take some doing, given that my hands, my face and all my clothes still smell very strongly of the controlled rotting of something that was once alive?

I'm now living full-time in my own personal sunk-cost fallacy. I have enough green plum syrup to make another nine gallons of kimchi, but for that I'm going to need more shrimp. I own the hardware (big jars) to start preserving everything, but only if the process is fermentation, as they are not airtight. If I take the route of being truthful about the shrimp, 40% of the planned recipients of the kimchi will not eat it. It's a white-knuckle ride even finding out whether it'll work, or if the cabbage takes the path of uncontrolled rotting instead. That is a lot worse than a waste; that's a disaster you have to literally bury, as I know from the time I tried to make lockdown sauerkraut.

The wisdom I have to impart here is that just because you like a thing, it doesn't mean you have to perform it yourself. Just buy it in a shop, where legit vegetarian variants are easily sourced. Stay in the audience, it's peaceful there.

- Zoe Williams is a Guardian columnist

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‘At Credit Suisse, although many executives were ousted over the years, they clearly did not lose enough individually to deter others from acting in similar ways’. Photograph: Edgar Su/Reuters

[OpinionBanking](#)

Until bankers have more to lose themselves, collapses like SVB and Credit Suisse will keep happening

[Natacha Postel-Vinay](#)

Those at the top need to have skin in the game – and know that risky decisions they make will affect them too

Tue 21 Mar 2023 04.00 EDTLast modified on Tue 21 Mar 2023 08.30 EDT

Executives at Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) and Credit Suisse took substantial risks. SVB proactively expanded the bank’s deposits, some might say excessively. These depositors were uninsured and undiversified. And back when interest rates were low, the bank invested significantly in [US](#)

[government bonds](#), which was fine at the time. But when there were signs that interest rates were rising and creating substantial [interest rate risk](#), managers left this portfolio unhedged and unchanged. How come SVB managers took those risks? It seemed that they lacked “skin in the game”.

The risks taken by executives at Credit Suisse were of a different nature, but still substantial. By becoming involved in such companies as the now defunct [Greensill](#) and [Archegos](#), the bank’s capital took a hit. The fines it has accrued after facing [scandal after scandal](#) have also bitten into its capital. It can be said that those involved also lacked skin in the game.

In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, there have been efforts on both sides of the Atlantic to ensure that future bailouts of depositors would involve as little taxpayer money as possible, and would penalise bank owners. The [Dodd-Frank Act](#) in the US, for example, seemed to promise that, should a bailout of depositors be needed, shareholders would take the hit. If a bank needed to be closed and restructured, shareholders would bear losses and some creditors’ bonds would be converted into stock, which could lead to substantial future losses. Regulations in the UK and the eurozone went in similar directions.

These were extremely welcome efforts. Differentiating depositors (who can know almost nothing about a bank’s operations) and bank owners (who should in theory know and monitor things a lot more) makes a lot of sense. The problem is that despite this new rulebook, significant cracks remain, meaning bank executives can still get out unscathed – and will continue to take risks that threaten the stability of the entire financial system.

Let’s take the SVB example. After its failure, [depositors were bailed out](#), and shareholders made to take losses. So far, so good. Except that some executives at the very top bore almost no losses at all – in fact, they made a profit. They sold their shares [two weeks before failure](#), when there was no public information yet about the state of SVB, so its shares were still high. The problem is that they did this perfectly legally. Here’s how.

Financial regulators have long recognised the potential for such behaviour, and have rules against what is called insider trading – the sale (or purchase) of shares motivated by internal information that is not known to the public yet. There is a sense in which executives always have more information than the public, but surely one can't bar them from selling their shares at all times? Therefore a law was passed that said an executive could file a plan to sell their shares one month in the future, since public information can change and share prices fall.

The executives filed exactly such a plan; and yet a month afterwards, the public still didn't know about SVB's difficulties – so share prices were still high and executives reaped a profit. There is therefore a discrepancy between what the law is trying to achieve and what it does achieve. A law has just been passed to increase the waiting period to three months – but is that really going to change the game? In this particular case, it would have; but in others it may not. One would guess that these executives made a prediction that they would not be penalised, so they took these risks without much skin in the game.

This calls for a fundamental rethink of shareholder liability rules. If executives want to decide exactly when to sell their shares – let them. But let's make sure they remain liable for any losses at the bank for at least one year. That way, executives remain free to sell, but remain liable for the bank's difficulties for a long time after.

Skin in the game is absolutely key to averting financial crises.

- Natacha Postel-Vinay is assistant professor of economic history at the London School of Economics
 - ***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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French government survives no-confidence votes amid protests – video

[Emmanuel Macron](#)

French government survives no-confidence votes amid protests

Trade unions have led strikes against proposed rise in pension age, which is now likely to become law

[Angelique Chrisafis](#) in Paris
[@achrisafis](#)

Mon 20 Mar 2023 14.59 EDTFirst published on Mon 20 Mar 2023 13.59 EDT

The French government has survived two votes of no confidence but [Emmanuel Macron](#) continues to face protests and strikes over his decision to use executive powers to push through an unpopular rise in the pension age.

Although the prime minister, Élisabeth Borne, avoided having to instantly resign, the president remains under pressure to break his silence and shore up the government amid growing anger in the streets. Opposition politicians in parliament accused him of arrogance, denying democracy and failing to learn from the *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests) anti-government protest movement four years ago.

Government insiders, opposition politicians and observers have raised fears that [France](#) could experience another round of spontaneous, anti-government revolt in cities and small towns – not just over raising the pension age to 64, but also because of distrust in the political system, only a few years after the *gilets jaunes* movement shook Macron's first term in office.

Some observers said one option for Macron in the coming weeks could be to replace Borne and reshuffle the government to try to reset his image.

The first no-confidence motion, put forward by Charles de Courson, France's longest-serving MP and a member of the small opposition centrist grouping Liot, was narrowly defeated – it fell short of the required absolute majority by only nine votes. A total of 278 MPs voted in favour.

The motion won the support of politicians from the leftwing grouping, Nupes, as well as Marine Le Pen's far right, independents and some MPs from the rightwing Les Républicains.

A second no-confidence motion tabled by Le Pen's party, National Rally, was rejected. After the government won both votes, Macron's proposed changes to the pension system are likely to swiftly become law. But France's constitutional council will be consulted on the law and opposition parties want to petition for a form of referendum.

Under Macron's changes, the minimum general retirement age will rise from 62 to 64, some public sector workers will lose privileges and there will be an accelerated increase in the number of years of work required to qualify for a full pension.

But tensions are likely to continue on the street in the coming days, with a major day of strike action and protests planned for Thursday. Macron is under pressure to address the nation and clarify how he intends for the government to keep working, and whether there could be a reshuffle. Macron's centrist grouping lost its absolute majority in elections last June, leaving the government in a weak position.

The no-confidence motions were called in protest at the government [using controversial executive powers](#) to push through the pension changes on Thursday without a parliament vote.

Macron had previously decided that the government should use article 49.3 of the constitution to bypass parliament, because he feared he could not garner enough support from lawmakers.

The centrist Courson, presenting the no-confidence motion, told parliament that the government's move to push through pensions changes without a parliamentary vote was a "denial of democracy". He said the proposals were unjust and had sparked "tension, worry and anger" in France.

Boris Vallaud of the Socialist party said the government had "perverted democracy" and shown "arrogance and disdain" towards parliament, opposition politicians, trade unions and insulted "the intelligence of citizens on their own future".

Olivier Marleix of the rightwing Les Républicains party, which the government will probably have to depend upon to pass any future legislation, delivered a blistering speech saying Macron must change his approach to power.

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Marleix said the problem was not changes to the pension system, the problem was Macron himself. He said Macron had divided France during six years in power, leading the country in an "isolated, narcissistic way, impervious to French people's lives". He added: "You must heed our warnings if you want to get to the end of your term." He said Macron had failed to learn from people's anger during the gilets jaunes protests.

Mathilde Panot of the radical left France Unbowed said French people felt “anger and disgust”. She said that even if the no-confidence motion failed to pass, Macron “had already lost” because of people protesting in the street.

Laure Lavalette, from the far-right National Rally, said Macron’s pension changes amounted to an act of unprecedented “social injustice”.

Borne said the changes amounted to a compromise “in the interests of the country” and would protect the social system.

A rare united front of trade unions has led street protests and on-off strikes since January in protest at the pension overhaul. Polls show two-thirds of the French public are against the plan. Since the bill was pushed through without a parliament vote last week, tensions have increased with spontaneous street protests in cities such as Paris, Bordeaux and Marseille, where there were arrests and clashes with the police.

Roadblocks and demonstrations at roundabouts were under way in some parts of [France](#) on Monday, including outside Nantes and Lorient. In Rennes, bins were set alight on a highway and cars were stopped. In Clermont Ferrand, the main rail station was briefly blocked.

The headline of this article was amended on 21 March 2023 to clarify that it is the French government that survived the no-confidence votes, not Emmanuel Macron as an earlier version said.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/20/emmanuel-macron-survives-first-confidence-vote-amid-protests>



Trump supporters held a rally in front of the district attorney's office in New York on Monday. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

[Donald Trump](#)

New York prepares for possible unrest if Donald Trump is indicted

Grand jury investigating ex-president over hush money payment to adult film star appears poised to complete its work soon

[Martin Pengelly](#) in New York and agencies

Tue 21 Mar 2023 14.43 EDTFirst published on Tue 21 Mar 2023 05.34 EDT

Law enforcement officials in New York on Tuesday continued preparing for possible unrest on the streets of Manhattan as a grand jury investigating [Donald Trump](#) over a hush money payment to the adult film-maker and star Stormy Daniels appeared poised to complete its work by criminally indicting the former president.

Barriers were brought to the area around the [Manhattan criminal courthouse](#) in the lower part of the island. Uniformed police were out in force. So were reporters and [protesters](#).

People holding placards bearing anti-Trump messages [chanted](#): “No one is above the law.” One pro-Trump protester was seen with a sign saying the Manhattan district attorney, Alvin Bragg, was funded by George Soros.

Soros, a progressive philanthropist, [gave money](#) to an advocacy group which supported Bragg for election. The protester’s sign echoed, if while misspelling “George”, Republican attacks on “Soros-funded prosecutors” which itself echoes [antisemitic invective](#).

Last weekend, Trump claimed without evidence [he would be arrested](#) on Tuesday. His representatives later said he was citing media reports and leaks and there was no indication his prediction would come true.

The grand jury did appear to take an important step on Monday by [hearing from a witness favourable to Trump](#), presumably so prosecutors could ensure the panel had a chance to consider testimony that could be seen as exculpatory.

It was uncertain if more witnesses might be summoned. But authorities mindful of the deadly riot by Trump supporters at the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 took steps to prepare for any violence that could accompany the unprecedented prosecution of a former president.

All New York police department officers were expected to be in uniform and ready for deployment, media outlets reported. Trump responded on his Truth Social platform, [complaining](#) that NYPD officers would be used to “put their greatest champion and friend in prison” while the “Soros-backed DA allows murderers and other violent criminals to freely roam the sidewalks of New York”.

CNN [said](#) law enforcement officials were treating Tuesday as a “high alert day”, though they had seen no credible threat.

A telephoned bomb threat [delayed](#) a hearing in a separate case involving Trump, a \$250m state civil suit over his business practices in another lower Manhattan court.

CNN also said police in Washington were “not currently tracking any direct or credible threats to the US Capitol”, according to an internal intelligence assessment.

Informed sources expected a grand jury would vote on an indictment on Wednesday, with an announcement on Thursday or Friday. Trump is due to hold his first large-scale rally of the 2024 Republican primary in Waco, Texas, on Saturday. Media outlets reported a likely surrender to authorities in [New York](#) on Monday.

A Trump campaign insider told the Guardian on Monday Trump would not resist extradition from Florida to New York.

Monday’s testimony to the grand jury came from Robert Costello. A lawyer with close ties to key Trump aides, Costello was invited by prosecutors after saying he had information to undercut the credibility of [Michael Cohen](#), the former Trump lawyer who became a key witness in the Manhattan investigation.

Costello advised Cohen after Cohen became entangled in a federal investigation into hush money payments to Daniels and another woman who claims an affair with Trump, the former Playboy model Karen McDougal, in 2018. Pleading guilty, Cohen said the payments were directed by Trump.

He became a vociferous Trump critic, testifying before Congress and the Manhattan grand jury. Trump, who denies having sex with either woman, has called Cohen a liar.

Speaking to reporters on Monday, Costello said he came forward because he did not believe Cohen, who pleaded guilty to federal charges including campaign finance violations related to the payments, and served time in prison, could be trusted.

“If they want to go after Donald Trump and they have solid evidence, then so be it,” Costello said. “But Michael Cohen is far from solid evidence.”

Cohen told MSNBC Costello was never his lawyer and “lacks any sense of veracity”.

There were no clear signs Costello’s testimony affected the investigation. Cohen was available for more than two hours in case prosecutors wanted him to rebut Costello but was told he was not needed, his attorney said.

The testimony came two days after Trump said he expected to be indicted and arrested and urged supporters to act, directing particularly hostile rhetoric towards Bragg. Trump claims Bragg is biased against him because he is a Democrat and because he is Black.

Late on Monday, CBS News said law enforcement sources had reported a “significant increase” in “threats and violent rhetoric online from domestic violent extremists”.

However, CBS also said that while officials were “continuing to monitor for credible specific threats”, they had “not identified any credible or direct threats to a person or property”.

- *Associated Press contributed reporting*

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A labourer carries a sack of onions at a market in Colombo. The IMF has approved a \$2.9bn bailout for the island nation. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

World news

IMF approves Sri Lanka's \$2.9bn bailout

President vows to get economy back on track through ‘prudent fiscal management and ambitious reform agenda’

Agence France-Presse

Mon 20 Mar 2023 21.58 EDT

The International Monetary Fund has approved Sri Lanka’s request for a \$2.9bn bailout, raising hopes for an easing of its economic crisis.

The IMF’s board confirmed it had signed off on the loan, clearing the way for the release of funds and kicking off a four-year programme designed to

shore up the economy.

The IMF managing director, Kristalina Georgieva, warned that Colombo must continue pursuing tax reform and greater social safety nets for the poor – and rein in the corruption that has been partly blamed for the crisis.

Sri Lanka's president, Ranil Wickremesinghe, said in a statement on Monday: "I express my gratitude to the IMF and our international partners for their support as we look to get the economy back on track for the long term through prudent fiscal management and our ambitious reform agenda."

Sri Lanka defaulted on its foreign debt in April 2022 as it plunged into its worst economic downturn since independence because of a major shortage of foreign currency reserves.

The Indian Ocean country of around 22 million people ran out of cash to finance even the most essential imports. Widespread protests over economic mismanagement, acute shortages of food, fuel and medicines, and runaway inflation [forced then-president Gotabaya Rajapaksa to flee the country and resign in July.](#)

Wickremesinghe replaced Rajapaksa as president and implemented tough spending cuts and tax hikes in an attempt to secure the IMF assistance. IMF staff had provisionally approved the bailout in September, but the final green light was held up until China, Sri Lanka's biggest bilateral lender, agreed to restructure its loans to Colombo.

Beijing had said this year it was offering a two-year moratorium on its loans to Sri Lanka, but the concession fell short of IMF expectations for the sustainability of the island's debt. Wickremesinghe said after China agreed to restructure its loans that he expected the first tranche of the IMF package would be made available within the month.

Colombo will also be banking on the IMF deal to unfreeze billions of dollars in foreign aid for projects suspended since Sri Lanka defaulted on its loans last year.



Michael Lodge, secretary-general of the International Seabed Authority at a 2022 assembly. Photograph: IISD/ENB

[Seascope: the state of our oceans](#)[Environment](#)

Row erupts over deep-sea mining as world races to finalise vital regulations

Head of seabed authority accused of abandoning neutrality at critical point with first commercial application imminent

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[Karen McVeigh](#)

[@karenmcveigh1](#)

Tue 21 Mar 2023 02.00 EDT Last modified on Tue 21 Mar 2023 06.06 EDT

Michael Lodge, a British lawyer and the head of the UN-affiliated body responsible for governing mining in the high seas, has been criticised by diplomats who claim he has been pushing them to accelerate the start of deep-sea mining.

A German diplomat said Lodge – the secretary-general of the International Seabed Authority (ISA) – has a duty of neutrality and has overstepped his role in resisting measures put forward by some council members that could slow down approval of the first mining proposals, [according to the New York Times](#).

Furthermore, in a tweet referencing the story, [Gina Guillén Grillo](#), Costa Rica's representative to the seabed authority, said yesterday: "Member states should drive the International Seabed Authority. Decisions must come from them & must not be pushed by those who have only administrative duties. Mining the seabed cannot be rushed [because] of the economic interests of a few."

The criticism of Lodge comes at a crucial juncture as the body is expected to receive an application for commercial seabed mining later this year. The authority, which is [meeting in Jamaica this week](#), is still writing regulations that would govern the process.

Germany and Costa Rica are among the increasing number of countries – including France, Spain, Chile, New Zealand and several Pacific nations – that have recently said they do not believe there is enough available data to evaluate the impact of mining on marine life. They have called for a “precautionary pause” or a ban on mining in the high seas.

Lodge has previously suggested environmental impacts from deep sea mining are “[predictable and manageable](#)”.

The German government [sent a letter](#) to Lodge last week expressing its concerns. In the letter, Franziska Brantner, Germany’s minister for economic affairs and climate action, said: “It is not the task of the secretariat to interfere in the decision making. In the past, you have actively taken a stand against positions and decision-making proposals from individual delegations.”

Brantner added that the German government “is seriously concerned about this approach”.

In a reply to Brantner the next day, [Lodge described those complaints](#) as “a bold and unsubstantiated allegation, without facts or evidence”.

Lodge said his job was to make sure the authority respects the “legal framework” of the law of the sea. He said his opening remarks on 8 March “did not refer to any specific proposal by any delegation” but were fully consistent with “the competencies recognised to me” and that it was false to suggest he had in the past taken positions opposing proposals from delegates. “This is untrue and I reject such a baseless allegation,” he said. He asked the German delegation to respect him and his staff and “not seek to influence them in the discharge of their responsibilities”.

Lodge made a statement to the New York Times saying that he places “high importance on the preservation and protection of the marine environment”,

and that he is working “to ensure that decision making processes around economic activity in the deep seabed is based on best available scientific knowledge”.

The row is a measure of growing tensions over who controls the agency, amid pressure from some UN nations to slow down ocean mining, while others want it to go ahead.

Duncan Currie, an international legal adviser to the Deep Sea Conservation Coalition and an official observer at the 8 March meeting, told the Guardian: “This is not just a row between diplomats. It is very significant. The executive organ is the council. It is not for the administrative body to be telling the council what decisions they should be making.”

The debate has heightened in recent months because the [The Metals Company](#), a Canadian mining startup, has said it intends to request approval this year to start mining as soon as 2024.

The small Pacific island country of Nauru is one of three states sponsoring The Metals Company, along with the Kingdom of Tonga and the Republic of Kiribati. In 2021, [Nauru triggered a two-year rule](#) that obliges the ISA to finalise and adopt regulations for commercial mining by July 2023.

According to a memo sent by the Republic of Nauru, if the ISA has not finalised regulations within the time frame, and a mining application has been submitted, then the authority should “nonetheless consider and provisionally approve” it, allowing for extraction to go ahead.

However, some authority members believe the agency is under no obligation to approve an application from The Metals Company and Nauru until the regulations are complete.

Diplomats were called to a virtual meeting on 8 March to discuss what to do if a mining application was indeed sent this year. As reported by the New York Times, some delegates suggested revisions to the permitting process that would strengthen the council’s ability to block the start of mining.

However, according to a copy of his [prepared remarks](#) Lodge warned delegates not to change established procedures. “It would be dangerous to disturb this balance,” he said. “We should let the system work as it is intended to do.”

Lodge said he did not intend to challenge any delegation’s proposals. But his remarks were interpreted that way by Germany, Costa Rica and France, the New York Times said.

A spokesperson for the ISA told the Guardian: “The role of the secretariat is not to pass judgment on the position of member states, but to facilitate negotiations and ensure that discussions are informed by the best available science and in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and the 1994 agreement. The secretariat carries out this mission carefully, deliberately and to the best of its abilities.”

The spokesperson added: “The regulations will only be approved should ISA’s members reach a consensus on its content. In the meantime, only exploration activities will be permitted.”

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Saad Ibrahim Almadi pictured in the US in August 2021. Photograph: Ibrahim Almadi/AP

[Saudi Arabia](#)

US citizen jailed for criticising Saudi Arabia's rulers freed

Saad Ibrahim Almadi was arrested in 2021 for social media posts on Yemen and the killing of Jamal Khashoggi

Agence France-Presse in Dubai

Tue 21 Mar 2023 05.37 EDTLast modified on Tue 21 Mar 2023 06.43 EDT

A US citizen sentenced to 19 years in a Saudi prison for social media posts criticising the kingdom's rulers has been released, his son has said.

Saad Ibrahim Almadi, a 72-year-old of Saudi origin, was arrested in 2021 for what his son, Ibrahim, described as “mild” Twitter posts on topics including the war in Yemen and the 2018 killing of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

In October, a [court sentenced Almadi to 16 years in prison](#). Last month, the sentence was lengthened to 19 years before his surprise release on Tuesday, Ibrahim said.

“Yes, he was freed five hours ago. He’s in his Riyadh home,” Ibrahim told AFP by phone from the US.

A travel ban imposed last year means he cannot leave the country, Ibrahim said. But he added that he intended to lobby for his father’s return to the US so he could receive treatment for medical issues including back problems and diabetes.

“The fight will continue ... He needs to come get his medical treatment from the US,” Ibrahim said.

Almadi’s case has risked further ratcheting up tensions between Riyadh and Washington, longtime partners that have recently been at odds over issues including human rights and oil output cuts approved by the Opec+ cartel.

The state department said last year it had “consistently and intensively raised our concerns regarding the case at senior levels of the Saudi government”, and that “exercising freedom of expression should never be criminalised”.

Saudi officials have not commented on the case.

The Gulf kingdom has come under fire for handing out what human rights groups describe as draconian sentences for social media criticism of its policies.

Nourah al-Qahtani, a mother of five in her late 40s, was sentenced last year to 45 years for using Twitter to “challenge” the country’s leaders. Salma al-Shehab, a doctoral candidate at Britain’s University of Leeds, [was sentenced to 34 years in prison](#) for allegedly aiding dissidents seeking to “disrupt public order” by retweeting their posts.

Ibrahim previously shared with AFP a list of Twitter posts he said had been used in evidence against his father – information he said had been

confirmed by the state department.

They included posts on taxes as well as controversial demolition work in Mecca, the holiest city in Islam, and the Red Sea city of Jeddah. One post questioned why [Saudi Arabia](#) was unable to prevent attacks by Houthi rebels from war-ravaged Yemen, where the kingdom heads a military coalition in support of the internationally recognised government.

Another referred to the “sacrifice” of Khashoggi, whose killing by Saudi agents inside the kingdom’s Istanbul consulate sparked global outrage.

Saudi officials also found an unflattering caricature of Mohammed bin Salman, the kingdom’s de facto ruler, on Almadi’s phone, Ibrahim said.

Ibrahim said his father had been instructed by Saudi authorities not to talk about the case – a claim that could not be independently verified.

“They made him sign a paper to not go public and not talk about his release. I’m the one who is talking about this one, because I want to increase the pressure to bring him back home,” he said. “If it’s up to him he’s going to stay silent about it. He thinks it’s better, but it’s not better for him. It’s better to talk about it and to fight.”

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Col Gen Oleksandr Syrskyi, Ukraine's second highest military commander.
Photograph: Vadim Ghirdă/AP

[Ukraine](#)

[Analysis](#)

Ukrainian top brass stirs the pot with talk of Bakhmut counterattack

[Dan Sabbagh](#) in Kyiv

As Russian observers hunt for clues of a spring offensive, Ukraine's land forces chief suggests an unlikely strategy

Sat 25 Mar 2023 04.00 EDTLast modified on Sat 25 Mar 2023 17.27 EDT

Spring has arrived in [Ukraine](#) – with late March temperatures an unreasonably high 17C along much of the frontline in the east. It means it is possible to declare, definitively, that the Russian campaign to knock out Ukraine's power grid has failed, and whatever happens next in the war, its people will not be frozen out of their homes, as was once feared when the cynical bombing campaign began on 10 October.

The reality, of course, was the missile strikes on key infrastructure had been largely abandoned at the end of January, with Russian missile stocks at 10-15% of prewar levels, according to Ukrainian estimates. Moscow's tactics are changing: Vadym Skibitsky, deputy head of Kyiv's military intelligence, [said in a TV interview](#) that it appeared military fuel and "logistics systems" were now being targeted.

There has been no shortage of bombing and fighting during the long winter, but in another sense little has happened. The battle for the small Donbas city of Bakhmut rages, as it has since May, but in recent weeks Ukraine's forces have been pushed back north and south of the city, leaving the urban centre increasingly isolated, its supply roads dangerously exposed. Drone footage depicts a battered urban landscape, although many buildings are still standing and troops are able to shelter in basements.

Ukraine drone footage shows scale of destruction in city of Bakhmut – video

As the weather turns, so too does talk of a Ukrainian counterattack. Kyiv's forces are gradually taking delivery of previously promised western tanks, fighting vehicles and other munitions, and some of them have been freshly trained in Britain, Germany or Poland. But the country's second most important commander, Col Gen Oleksandr Syrskyi, surprised most observers [when he suggested](#), on Thursday, that the place for a counterstrike could be in or around Bakhmut itself.

The attackers, predicted the commander of the country's land forces, would "lose strength and exhale" and so "very soon we will take advantage of this opportunity". While a counterattack is anticipated, Bakhmut is not the logical place for it: the city has only modest military value. The principal advantage for Ukraine to defend it is in the belief that doing so will finally bring to an halt the Russian offensive and hand Kyiv back the initiative.

Russian casualties in pursuit of the city amount to 20,000 to 30,000 according to western estimates. While it has been argued that Ukraine has been taking fewer casualties, it is frequently observed that Kyiv is losing some of its best soldiers against former prisoners signed up to fight for the

Wagner paramilitary group. A greater risk still is that Russia surrounds Bakhmut, leaving multiple brigades (Syrskiy cited four) besieged in the city, which could force Ukraine to use its western tanks to rescue them.

[Map of fighting in eastern Ukraine](#)

As for Syrskiy's remarks, a more likely interpretation is that the general is engaged in some simple misdirection – a version of *maskirovka* – a Russian military concept that encompasses western notions of operational secrecy with simple deception. Russia's military bloggers, most likely to be proxies for its key commanders, are increasingly preoccupied with the potential locations for a Ukrainian spring counteroffensive. Even talking about it in the context of Bakhmut keeps the idea in play.

What are most likely to be Ukrainian probing attacks on the southern Zaporizhzhia front are now getting [highlighted by Russian observers](#), including one at Novodanylivka earlier this week. Trying to cut off the land bridge to Crimea remains Ukraine's most obvious strategic move, which would be most simply achieved by attacking south on the Zaporizhzhia front – although the obvious counterpoint is that the Russians know the geography too.

A 23-minute [video interview](#) with the Wagner group boss, Yevgeny Prigozhin, released on Thursday is long on talking up a Ukrainian counterattack, although it appears full of exaggerations and misunderstandings. He suggests Ukraine has a reserve of 200,000, with 80,000 near Bakhmut – numbers Ukraine would be thrilled to have – and that Kyiv could sustain a multi-pronged offensive, even into Russia near Belgorod, which would be an attack that Ukraine's western backers would almost certainly not support.

The reality is that, as the year-long war has demonstrated, successful attacks are difficult. The protracted defence of Bakhmut shows how hard it is to capture even a small city, while Russia has had ample time to build up its fortifications. For Ukraine to succeed it will want to combine surprise, as it did with the September Kharkiv counteroffensive, with overwhelming force. Ukraine's commanders may feel they have that already, but it may also be prudent to build up further and wait.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/25/ukrainian-top-brass-stirs-the-pot-with-talk-of-bakhmut-counterattack>

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Rishi Sunak and his wife, Akshata Murty, are the wealthiest ever occupants of Downing Street, prompting accusations he is out of touch with the cost-of-living crisis facing millions of Britons. Photograph: FD/Francis Dias/NEWSPIX INTERNATIONAL

[Rishi Sunak](#)

Rishi Sunak's accountants urge retention of non-dom status

Evelyn Partners recently confirmed PM made around £5m in past three years, mostly through investments

[Kiran Stacey](#) *Political correspondent*

Sat 25 Mar 2023 04.00 EDT

Rishi Sunak's accountancy firm, a wealth management company that argued against removing non-domiciled status, has welcomed the government's tax breaks for wealthy savers and promises to minimise clients' capital gains tax.

Evelyn Partners signed off on the three-page summary of the prime minister's tax affairs which [Downing Street released](#) this week, showing that Sunak made around £5m in the last three years, mostly through his US-based investment fund.

That statement was released after months of delays and in the middle of Boris Johnson's [testimony to parliament](#) about Partygate, giving a sense of the sensitivity of the issue for the prime minister. Sunak and his wife, Akshata Murty, are the [wealthiest ever](#) occupants of Downing Street, and the prime minister has faced accusations that he is out of touch with the cost-of-living crisis facing millions of British voters.

His accountancy firm calls itself a “global network for global clients” promising to help manage their offshore assets and take advantage of the UK's tax code by using capital gains tax. It also promises to help set up “complex tax-advantaged investments” for its clients.

This week, [the Guardian revealed](#) the prime minister had benefited by £300,000 over the last three years from a decision the Conservatives took in 2016 to reduce CGT from 28% to 20%.

Last week, staff from Evelyn Partners wrote [a long post](#) on the firm's website analysing the effects of the budget for its clients but also making clear the firm's own views on policy. It cautions against Labour's policy of abolishing non-domiciled tax status, from which Murty benefited until [she gave it up](#) amid public outcry.

The day after the budget, the firm welcomed the fact that the chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, had not changed non-dom status, saying: “For the UK's domicile rules to remain competitive in Europe, we would prefer not to see further tinkering with the system, increasing complexity and decreasing confidence.”

It also welcomed the government's controversial decision to scrap the tax-free limit on lifetime pension contributions, which handed a significant tax break to the country's wealthiest pension savers. The firm argued this was

“a positive set of announcements for those looking to save for the future via a pension”.

A spokesperson for the firm said it had also argued against Conservative policy decisions in the past. For example, [in one article](#) it called Hunt’s decision last year to cut the amount of tax-free income people can claim from share dividends a “Viking-like raid on shareholders”.

The spokesperson added: “In respect of changes to taxation and pensions, our role is to assess the impact on our clients and provide them with advice according to their circumstances.

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“As experts in these areas, we will of course express our professional views on whether policy measures are positive or negative for our clients’ finances, irrespective of whoever is in government. We are strictly apolitical.”

Downing Street did not respond to a request for comment.

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It is possible to access the drugs through online pharmacies, meaning many people hoping to lose weight have sought a private prescription. Photograph: Joel Saget/AFP/Getty Images

Drugs

Rise of slimming jabs could lead to overseas trips to remove excess skin, UK surgeons warn

Exclusive: Surgeons raise concerns that people using jabs are unaware of risks of redundant skin

[From unbearable side-effects to cravings curbed: readers on weight-loss jabs](#)

[Nicola Davis](#) *Science correspondent*

[@NicolaKSDavis](#)

Sat 25 Mar 2023 03.00 EDTLast modified on Sat 25 Mar 2023 03.02 EDT

A surge in the number of people using slimming jabs to lose weight could lead to a rise in patients travelling abroad for tummy tucks or other surgery to remove excess skin, surgeons have said.

Drugs such as liraglutide and semaglutide, which could help people reduce their weight [by more than 10%](#), have been approved for use on the NHS for certain groups of people with obesity, although supplies of the latter under the brand name Wegovy have yet to arrive in the UK.

It is also possible to access the drugs through online pharmacies, however, meaning many people hoping to lose weight have sought a private prescription.

Surgeons have raised concerns that people using the jabs may not realise they could be left with excess skin.

“Whilst the newly introduced weight-loss drugs are not likely to produce comparable weight loss to bariatric surgery there is always the possibility that accompanying weight loss, a patient might be left with a degree of deflation and redundant skin. If this persists, then plastic surgery would be indicated to address the area,” said Marc Pacifico, the president of the British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons, noting that factors such as the degree of weight loss as well as the patient’s age and genetics can all affect how the skin behaves.

The Joint Council for Cosmetic Practitioners said any significant or rapid weight loss could cause problems with excess skin and that patients should be told of the risk.

“Liraglutide and semaglutide are prescription-only medicines and as such the patient must be fully informed of all side-effects, including excess skin, before agreeing to commence treatment,” it said.

Mark Soldin, a consultant plastic and reconstructive surgeon based in London, said he had seen rising numbers of patients seeking procedures to remove excess skin after using slimming jabs. “They were rare and are

becoming more frequent,” he said. “I anticipate a significant increase over the next few years.”

Soldin said skin tended to become loose on particular parts of the body after substantial weight loss, including the inner thighs, breasts, arms and sometimes back folds and buttocks if the weight loss had been significant.

Pacifico, however, said access to surgery on the NHS to remove excess skin was limited. “Most areas of the NHS do not fund post-weight loss plastic surgery any more, so on the whole this plastic surgery would need to be undertaken in the private sector,” he said.

According to the NHS, it costs about £4,500 to £6,000 to have a tummy tuck in the UK, plus the cost of any consultations or follow-up care, although Soldin said it could cost £7,000 to £10,000.

As a result, Pacifico said there was concern patients might seek cheaper procedures abroad.

“I would strongly warn against this as there might not be the safeguards and assurances that the drugs being used are of the same quality and provenance as those being prescribed in the UK,” he said.

Pacifico said that among the risks of plastic surgery abroad after weight loss was the inability to undertake proper research on a surgeon, as well as the risks associated with flying straight after significant surgery – such as blood clots.

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He also warned of a lack of structured and accessible follow-up with the surgeon and clinic. “Particularly as these forms of surgery carry a higher risk of wound healing problems, and post-operative wound infection issues than non-weight loss plastic surgery,” he said.

Soldin said guidelines on eligibility for procedures such as tummy tucks on the NHS differed across the UK.

“Getting body-contouring surgery after weight loss is part of a postcode lottery,” he said, noting that in south London patients wanting a tummy tuck after non-surgical weight loss must meet effective commissioning initiative criteria such as a BMI of 27 or lower, being a stable weight for 18 months and be experiencing significant problems associated with the excess skin – for example recurrent infections.

“Therein lies part of the problem because after losing weight, patients are going to want to have the body contouring surgery and realise that the NHS is not going to fund this unless they meet multiple criteria.”

Soldin echoed Pacifico’s concerns about cosmetic procedures abroad, adding that while the NHS would treat patients with life-threatening complications after such surgery, it would not tackle issues such as patients being left unhappy with how they looked.

Soldin advised that weight loss jabs were still new and said there needed to be a greater communication about who they were suitable for, as well as monitoring of patients using the drugs through primary care. But he said greater awareness of the potential impact of weight loss jabs also mattered.

“Perhaps it just needs to be emphasised that you may not be happy with your body after you’ve lost weight and then to fix that is not necessarily

going to be available on the NHS that is currently struggling to look after the health of the population,” he said.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2023/mar/25/slimming-jabs-overseas-trips-to-remove-excess-skin-uk-surgeons-warn>

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Weight-loss jabs Wegovy and Ozempic both contain semaglutide.
Photograph: Ida Marie Odgaard/EPA

[Obesity](#)

From unbearable side-effects to cravings curbed: readers on weight-loss jabs

Some have stopped treatment due to debilitating nausea while others have found the injections have reset their relationship with food

[Rise of slimming jabs could lead to overseas trips to remove excess skin, UK surgeons warn](#)

[Nicola Davis](#) and [Clea Skopeliti](#)

Sat 25 Mar 2023 03.00 EDT Last modified on Sat 25 Mar 2023 03.02 EDT

The promise of breakthrough drugs such as liraglutide and semaglutide to help people lose weight has been the [subject of extensive media coverage in](#)

[recent months](#), with Wegovy the latest such jab to be approved for use on the NHS for certain groups of people with obesity – although it has yet to become available.

With such drugs also available through online pharmacies by private prescription, a growing number of people have tried the jabs – including Ozempic, a medication that contains semaglutide, the same drug as Wegovy. While Ozempic is licensed for type 2 diabetes, its use in weight loss is off-label – or unapproved by regulators.

While experts have noted the jabs are exciting – not least as many people find it difficult to keep weight off through diet and exercise – there have also been concerns. There is the worry that lost weight may be regained when the jabs are stopped [and that the drugs do not tackle the root cause of obesity](#). Those using the jabs have also cited problems, including [a complete loss of appetite](#).

Almost 100 people responded to a Guardian callout to share their views. Many said they had turned to online prescriptions to access the drugs.

Their experiences ranged from significant, sustained weight loss, renewed energy and a zest for exercise, and fewer thoughts about food, to a reduction in weight that reversed once the jabs stopped. There were also reports of side-effects including extended periods of nausea, reflux and diarrhoea as well as concerns over the costs of private prescriptions and lack of support for those buying the drugs online.

Here, four people share their experiences of weight-loss jabs.

‘In short, it ruined my life’

For Rachel*, a 26-year-old living in London, weekly injections with Ozempic had a profound effect.

“In short, it ruined my life,” she says. “I would wake up every day feeling sick, and would often vomit first thing as soon as I woke up.”

Rachel, who had a body mass index of about 37, bought the drug through an online pharmacy. “I did reach out to my GP, and he said ‘you’re dreaming’ basically, to get it on the NHS,” she says.

She quickly encountered problems. “The injections themselves were incredibly painful,” she says, adding that a representative from the online pharmacy took three weeks to reply to her concerns.

Rachel also experienced bad bruising and fatigue. “The next few days after a dose I would have such an intense level of exhaustion that I could barely get out of bed.”

But Rachel says her desperation to lose weight meant she continued with the jabs.

“I think a part of me felt like I deserved to feel so awful as a punishment for my weight.”

However, Ozempic did not help her shed pounds. “All it did is make me throw my guts up but had zero effect on my appetite. In fact, food was the only thing that would settle the nausea so I ended up eating more than normal.”

After five months Rachel quit Ozempic.

“Now I’m out of the haze of it, the idea of physically puncturing myself with a needle every single week to inject a medical grade liquid whose side-effects can be life altering just to lose weight is the textbook definition of dysfunction,” she says.

“As a person who has struggled with their weight their entire life I think sometimes you start to feel like you would give literally anything, and there’s nothing worse in the world than feeling like you hate your body. But I know for a fact now there is, and it’s feeling sick every day.”

Rachel says she now uses the money she would have spent on a therapist instead.

“I think that is ultimately the way to treat it [being overweight] – it’s an issue of the mind more than it is the body and no amount of appetite suppressants can heal you like a therapist can because therapy doesn’t stop after you stop taking it. It’s gonna change your life really.”

‘I spent many years chained to unhelpful yo-yo dieting’

Taking Saxenda, a weight-loss drug containing liraglutide that is delivered by injection, has changed Anne’s life. The 49-year-old from Merseyside has struggled with her weight for decades and describes dealing with a complex and difficult relationship with food, dieting and her mental health.

“Food has been intrinsically linked with feelings and I have spent many years chained to unhelpful yo-yo dieting with limited long-term success,” says Anne, who works for a local authority. “Over the years I’ve had counselling and hypnotherapy. I’ve made improvements, but never succeeded in losing and keeping weight off – I gain weight very easily [even though] I’m active. My repeated failure over the years has led to depression, low self-esteem and obsession with food.”

After her GP refused to prescribe semaglutide, Anne got a private prescription for Saxenda via Boots Online and started taking the drug in April 2022. She says she used it for six months and lost about three stone in that time.

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“It is the happiest I have ever been. This has got me to a healthy weight and I’ve maintained healthy eating and lower calories. If I could get it on the NHS, or a lot cheaper, I would take it every day,” she says, explaining that she spent about £1,000 on the injections last year. “It’s very expensive and I make sacrifices to pay for it but my quality of life is much improved. I have accepted that maybe I will have to fund a few months every year to maintain my weight loss and happiness.”

In subsequent months after stopping the drug, she gained half a stone, and has recently started doing a “top up” course while trying to keep her dose low. But she is also trying to tackle the root causes behind her weight gain and patterns behind overeating. “I’m trying to work on other issues. I always thought the problem was weight, but the problem is actually anxiety,” she says.

‘The side-effects make my life a bit miserable’

For Andy, 50, the side-effects from his weekly Ozempic injection for diabetes have been brutal. He is often woken in the night by feeling sick, and suffers from regular nausea, violent belching, stomach aches and diarrhoea.

Andy, who lives in Somerset and is not working due to disability, explains that his diabetic nurse lowered the dose after he explained about the side-effects. He has been taking the drug for six months. “They said side-effects will go away after a while. It’s not as bad as it was six months ago but still makes my life a bit miserable – every day I’m feeling some kind of stomach problem.

“The stats they give you about your blood sugars and things like that, they’ve all gone down. So it’s doing me some good but I just feel lousy whilst I’m having to take it.”

He has lost about a stone so far, though weight loss was not the reason he was prescribed the drug. “If it’s something that keeps weight off permanently that’s fine, but my fear is when they tell me to come off it, the weight will just go back on,” he says.

Andy also says the drug has lessened his enjoyment of food. “You lose your appetite and taste for it. I’ve always quite enjoyed eating, it’s probably why I’m overweight. With cooking for myself – when the eating experience isn’t very pleasant, you lose interest in it.”

‘I realised how much food had been tormenting me’

But for Louisa*, 33, the experience of taking semaglutide has been liberating. Weight gain “has always been a problem” for the 33-year-old London-based finance worker, who also suffers from polycystic ovary syndrome.

“I’ve always struggled with cravings and having a big appetite,” she says. “Despite my best efforts, I have gained 20kg over five years.”

She began treatment in January 2021 after seeing a private endocrinologist. While she experienced some side-effects, such as nausea and stomach issues, she was able to counteract this by taking omeprazole, an indigestion treatment, with the injection.

Louisa says she lost 18kg within 15 months. “What’s incredible is that there was no struggle. Magically almost, my appetite was curbed and my cravings, gone. Only then I realised how much food had been tormenting me,” she says. “Now I can just have a cookie and feel satisfied without any fear I would devour the whole pack.”

It has made her realise how much time and energy she had spent fretting about her weight. “I feel like I wasted so much of my youth worrying about my weight, instead of pursuing other endeavours. So much self-discipline and willpower that I could have put into pursuing my dreams went into taming my cravings and punishing my body.

“It’s a shame to see Ozempic being reduced as yet another craze. I understand why people are cautious but people are forgetting that every medication has side-effects and pros and cons. There’s also an element of people thinking you need to lose weight ‘the right way’, but so many people spend years [trying to lose weight] and so many things in modern society make it really hard to lose and maintain weight.”

* Some names have been changed.

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‘Dad said: We’re going to follow Captain Cook’: how an endless round-the-world voyage stole my childhood

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Photograph: Jill Mead/The Guardian

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Blind date: ‘Most of my friends have heard the story of “Guardian Girl” by

now'

Madeline, 27, a PhD student, meets Sam, 28, an actor

Sat 25 Mar 2023 02.00 EDTLast modified on Sat 25 Mar 2023 07.06 EDT

Madeline on Sam



What were you hoping for?

A great date or a good story to tell the extended family at Thanksgiving.

First impressions?

Sam was a bit late but made up for it with his great conversation skills. I was a bit nervous and he really put me at ease. I also thought he was very cute, very open and a good listener.

What did you talk about?

Theatre. Rabies. Ghosts trapped in ice cubes. Nooch. Growing up with Harry Potter. Spicy food tolerance. My cultural adaptation to the UK – I'm from the US – and Maddie the dog.

Most awkward moment?

There were funny moments, but nothing awkward.

Good table manners?

Very good.

Best thing about Sam?

Probably his high emotional IQ – he is a great listener, is self-aware and really genuine and kind.

Would you introduce Sam to your friends?

Absolutely. He would be a natural fit.

Describe Sam in three words.

Kind, charismatic, sharp.

What do you think Sam made of you?

Probably that I was nervous (but glad to be on a date with him) and a reckless street crosser.

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 every Saturday. It's been running since 2009 – you can [read all about how we put it together here](#).

What questions will I be asked?

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

Can I choose who I match with?

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

Can I pick the photograph?

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

What personal details will appear?

Your first name, job and age.

How should I answer?

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

Will I see the other person's answers?

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

Will you find me The One?

We'll try! Marriage! Babies!

Can I do it in my home town?

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

How to apply

Email blind.date@theguardian.com

Was this helpful?

Thank you for your feedback.

Did you go on somewhere?

We did. That's where the haunted ice cube was.

And ... did you kiss?

I'll let Sam answer that.

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

I wouldn't have had to catch a train out of London. Conversation with Sam was so easy and fun.

Marks out of 10?

Sam and the evening as a whole were outstanding. So a 10! And – a spoiler – we're going on another date!

Would you meet again?

We will!



Madeline and Sam on their date.

Sam on Madeline



What were you hoping for?

A fellow member of the Guardian-reading, tofu-eating wokerati to have a few laughs with.

First impressions?

Maddy was lovely. I couldn't believe how easily the conversation flowed.

What did you talk about?

Acting. Her life in Seattle. Her PhD and her dance classes. Our families. How hilarious we thought the situation was and, eventually, Harry Potter.

Most awkward moment?

Probably how much Maddy hated her cocktail at the bar we ended up in after dinner: £22 for non-alcoholic Calpol, while we were sat right in front of the barman. It was funny, to be fair.

Good table manners?

We shared all our food.

Best thing about Maddy?

I found her so easy to listen and chat to, and we had some really big laughs. We sent our follow-up texts at the same time, which was just adorable.

Would you introduce Maddy to your friends?

Absolutely. Most of them have heard the story of “Guardian Girl” by now
...

Describe Maddy in three words.

Intelligent, kind, beautiful.

What do you think Maddy made of you?

Funny and a bit sweet. She put up with me translating everything into American English before eventually saying: “I know what A-levels are, Sam!”

Did you go on somewhere?

To the Calpol bar, a stroll through town and then I went with her to the station.

And ... did you kiss?

I’ll let Maddy answer that one.

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

It could have gone on longer. We were chatting for five hours but I felt we had so much more to say.

Marks out of 10?

We ended up outside platform 9¾ at King’s Cross station, which felt right
...

Would you meet again?

I’m already looking up a less Calpol-y bar for next time.

Sam and Madeline ate at [Rüya](#), London W1. Fancy a blind date? Email blind.date@theguardian.com



Do you think you have been treated unfairly over a parking ticket?
Photograph: Alex Segre/Alamy

Motoring

Parking tickets: how to challenge paying a fine ... and win

As number of tickets issued by private firms in Britain hits record high,
here are your options



[Jess Clark](#)

Sat 25 Mar 2023 03.00 EDT

The number of parking tickets issued by private companies has hit a record high, according to figures published this month.

An analysis of Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency data [by the PA news agency](#) shows the number of parking tickets issued by private firms in Britain soared by 24% in the second half of 2022 to reach 5.7m – an average of about 31,000 every day.

If you think you have been given an unfair ticket, what can you do to challenge it? Here we outline your options.

Check what type of parking ticket it is

First, establish whether the fine is from an organisation such as a local council, or from a private company.

The consumer and motoring disputes expert [Scott Dixon](#) claims that these often “look identical”, and that this “is done deliberately to confuse

motorists”.

He adds: “It is important that people understand the differences.”

The wording on the ticket can help you work it out. A penalty charge notice (PCN) or fixed-penalty notice (FPN) mean it is an “official” fine, which will have a different appeals procedure to a private company ticket.

Meanwhile, a private firm will give you a parking charge notice.

Once you have worked out what kind of fine you have been hit with, you can take the first steps to appeal.



Look at the wording on the parking ticket. Photograph: Glyn Kirk/AFP/Getty Images

Respond quickly

Regardless of which kind of ticket you have been given, it is important to take action.

Councils will typically offer you a reduced fine if you pay within 14 days. If you appeal, and this is unsuccessful, you should still be able to pay the

lower amount.

Some people might think that fines by private firms can be treated less seriously and maybe do not have to be paid. However, if you ignore the fine, it could be passed on to a debt collection agency.

Barrie Segal, the founder of [Appeal Now](#), said: “What tends to happen is people get very frustrated and annoyed. I’ve had cases where somebody has torn up the parking ticket and can’t read it to appeal, or where people have put the parking ticket in a drawer and forgot about it, and suddenly they’ve got to the next stage.”

Make sure it is correct

Make sure all the details on the ticket are correct, as it could be void if there is a mistake. For example, check the location and time match up with where you were parked.

Gather your evidence

Provide as much as possible. This could include anything with a time stamp, such as a receipt from your shopping, a work log or photographs.

If you get back to your car and find you have been given a ticket, take photos of signs and road markings.

Always look at the signs for starters. Are they clearly displayed?

Appeal Now’s Barrie Segal

Segal says: “Always look at the signs for starters. Are they clearly displayed, have you been given sufficient guidance to make an informed decision? That’s the crux of it.”

Councils should also consider any mitigating circumstances. For example, if you had to attend a hospital appointment that ran over, meaning you were late back to your car. Record any evidence of these mitigating circumstances, as they will form part of your appeal.

If that isn't possible, the next best thing to support your claim would be witness statements.

What is the appeal process?

If it is a local authority PCN on your windscreen, the first step is to write to the council within 14 days of being given the notice to make an informal appeal, explaining why you think the fine should be cancelled.

If it accepts your appeal, the fine will be cancelled. However, if the informal appeal is rejected, you will be sent a letter and a form called a notice to owner.

At this stage, you have to decide whether to pay the fine at the reduced 50% rate, or you have 28 days in which to make a formal appeal.

If this appeal is unsuccessful, you will receive a notice of rejection.



The appeals process for local authorities and private parking firms is different. Photograph: Lewis Storey/Getty Images

The final tool at your disposal is to challenge the decision [at an independent tribunal](#).

You should pay your PCN if the independent tribunal disagrees with your appeal. If you don't pay within 28 days, the penalty will go up by another 50%. The council can then take you to court. Your credit rating may be affected, and you may also have to pay court costs.

The process will be different for a private parking company. Check the instructions on the ticket for how to appeal, and be prepared to appeal more than once.

Dixon claims the first appeal will typically be rejected “because that is their business model – if they upheld every appeal, they wouldn't make any money”.

According to Citizens Advice, if the firm isn't a member of an accredited trade association, don't contact them unless they write to you first.

Only accredited trade association members can get your name and address from the DVLA – therefore, if a firm is not a member, it won't be able to contact you.

You can check the websites of the [British Parking Association](#) or [International Parking Community](#) to see if a firm is a member.

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Maggie O'Farrell: 'Describe myself in three words? Very unruly hair.'
Photograph: Camera Press

[The Q&A](#)[Life and style](#)

**Maggie O'Farrell: 'The worst thing
anyone's said to me? You'll never walk**

again'

The author on stammering, lying to her hairdresser, and her bad recycling habit

[Rosanna Greenstreet](#)

Sat 25 Mar 2023 05.30 EDT Last modified on Sat 25 Mar 2023 17.24 EDT

Born in Northern Ireland, Maggie O'Farrell, 50, went to Cambridge University and then became a journalist. Her first novel, [After You'd Gone](#), won the 2001 Betty Trask award. Subsequent books include the 2010 Costa book award-winning [The Hand That First Held Mine](#), and the memoir [I Am, I Am, I Am](#). Her latest novel is [The Marriage Portrait](#). The stage adaptation of [Hamnet](#), which won the 2020 Women's prize for fiction, is at the [RSC Swan theatre](#) in Stratford from 1 April to 17 June, and at the Garrick theatre in London from 30 September to 6 January 2024. She is married with three children and lives in Edinburgh.

When were you happiest?

Last summer, swimming in a waterfall in Cumbria with my daughters.

Which living person do you most admire, and why?

Darnella Frazier, the [teenager who filmed George Floyd's murder](#). It took astonishing courage to stand on the pavement in front of those policemen, and we all owe her so much.

What is the trait you most deplore in yourself?

Impatience.

What is the trait you most deplore in others?

Interrupting or talking over people. As a stammerer, I am particularly alert to this.

What was your most embarrassing moment?

I started stammering badly the first time I was on live radio, on Woman's

Hour on Radio 4. When I think about it now it brings me out in a cold sweat.

Aside from a property, what's the most expensive thing you've bought?

All my clothes are secondhand, but I did buy a pair of new silver Vivienne Westwood shoes to get married in, which I still have.

Describe yourself in three words

Very unruly hair.

What makes you unhappy?

I have to be outside at some point in the day or I get really unhappy.

What do you most dislike about your appearance?

My posture could do with a lot of improvement. It comes from sitting much too much over a desk.

If you could bring something extinct back to life, what would you choose?

A world without smartphones.

What is your most unappealing habit?

Recycling newspapers and magazines that nobody else has read yet.

What scares you about getting older?

Creaky joints.

What is the worst thing anyone's said to you?

"You'll never walk again." This was when I was eight or nine and recovering from viral encephalitis.

Would you choose fame or anonymity?

Something in between.

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What was the last lie you told?

I had a really bad haircut last week and said, “Yeah, it looks fine.”

What does love feel like?

Effervescence in the soul.

Which living person do you most despise, and why?

Anyone who eats nuts on a plane after an announcement saying there is a passenger with a life-threatening nut allergy. People do that more often than you think. Someone in my family suffers from life-threatening allergies and it is terrifying.

When did you last cry, and why?

Last week, while I was wet-wrapping my child’s chronic eczema.

What is the closest you’ve come to death?

How long have you got? I have written a memoir and the subtitle is [Seventeen Brushes with Death](#).

What is the most important lesson life has taught you?

To keep going and never give up, and to enjoy it to the absolute full because, at any moment, the curtain can fall.

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The bell of the Belmont Estate in Grenada, a former 17th-century slave plantation. Photograph: Georg Berg/Alamy

[OpinionSlavery.](#)

**My family owned 1,000 slaves and
profited from the trade: this is how I
am trying to make amends**

[Laura Trevelyan](#)



I left the BBC to fight for restorative justice. The £100,000 we have so far donated to Grenada should be seen only as a first step

Sat 25 Mar 2023 04.00 EDTLast modified on Sat 25 Mar 2023 07.03 EDT

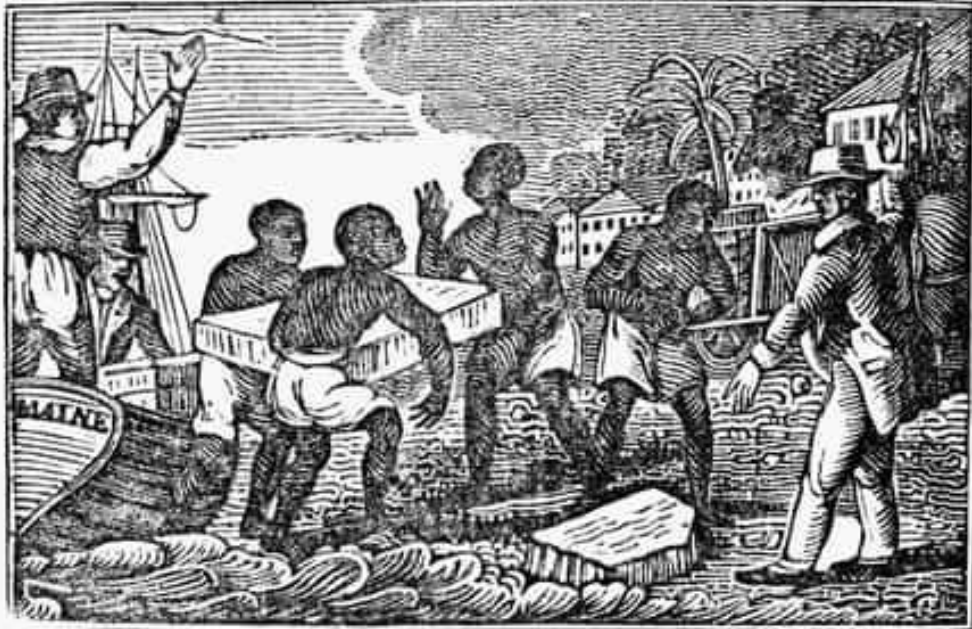
In 1833, when Britain finally abolished slavery, my ancestors were absentee owners of more than 1,000 enslaved people on the [Caribbean](#) island of Grenada. To the best of my knowledge, the Trevelyan family never set foot on the island. They enjoyed the profits that came rolling in from sugar harvested by exploited and brutalised enslaved people thousands of miles away across the Atlantic Ocean.

Like much of Britain, my ancestors never had to confront the face of slavery – or its sordid legacy. Generations later, my extended family spent a year debating how we could respond to the horrors of the past. The deafening silence from the descendants of slave owners, from other families like ours, causes unimaginable pain, Sir Hilary Beckles of the Caribbean Community's Reparations Commission told us. He convinced us of the power of an apology and encouraged us to lead by example.

So we wrote a [letter of apology](#) to the people of Grenada and decided to donate more than £100,000 to education projects on the island. After emancipation, most former enslaved people were illiterate. Helping Grenadian students build a brighter future through education seemed like the obvious way to try to repair the damage of the past.

In February, I travelled with six members of the Trevelyan family to [Grenada](#) to apologise in person. As we sat in the trade centre of Grenada's picturesque capital, St George's, preparing to deliver our apology, I grew anxious. Would we receive a hostile reception? What if this backfired horribly, and put back the very cause we were trying to advance? I could hear the drumming coming from a protest outside by a Rastafarian tribe, whose members felt the amount of money we were donating was wholly inadequate.

You could feel the raw emotion in the room. The Grenadian poet Nigel De Gale spoke before me of wanting to live like the slave master did, to see white people slave for him. I tried to keep my poker face intact, confronted with this powerful articulation of the anger so many must feel. It was against this backdrop that my cousin John Dower and I read out our apology to the people of Grenada. We hoped we could at least acknowledge the suffering our ancestors had inflicted on Grenadians, and perhaps encourage other families in similar positions to do the same. The country's young prime minister, Dickon Mitchell, graciously thanked us, and said he forgave us. It was an incredible relief.



Enslaved people unloading a ship's cargo of ice from Maine at Grenada.
Photograph: Granger/Historical Picture Archive/Alamy

Afterwards, I found the reaction in Grenada to be mixed. Some people were understandably upset to be confronted with the face of slave ownership, and wanted to know why we were giving such a small amount of money compared with the wealth our ancestors had accumulated. Once slavery was abolished, compensation was paid by the British government to the slave owners to make up for their loss of "property". In 1834, the Trevelyan family received the equivalent of about £3m in today's money. "I know it seems inadequate," I said, "but it's a first step." At the same time, I was heartened to hear of the healing power of our apology. "A burden that I didn't even know I was carrying has been lifted," one woman told me. "Thank you for coming forward."

Of course, it's not just my family that has benefited from this system of wealth extraction. Britain's Industrial Revolution was fuelled by money from the slave trade, making us a rich nation. After abolition, the Caribbean islands were left with an impoverished, mostly illiterate workforce – while Britain leapt forward into a golden age of prosperity.

When the UK needed a workforce after the second world war, the Windrush ship was sent to the economically distressed Caribbean colonies. Descendants of the enslaved came in their thousands to help build postwar Britain. Beckles has called this sordid legacy Britain's black debt. Now is the time to repay that debt.

This reckoning did not start with my family. Powerful questions in the wake of George Floyd's murder and the Black Lives Matter movement are forcing governments, institutions and families to examine their history. As the past recedes, it also comes into focus more clearly. The Dutch government has [apologised for the Netherlands' role in the slave trade](#), and established a fund to help tackle the legacy of slavery. The Church Commissioners have apologised for their links to the slave trade and established a £100m fund to try to address past wrongs.

Now, Trinity College, Cambridge – of which my great-grandfather the historian George Macaulay Trevelyan was master – is examining if it benefited from slavery. GM Trevelyan glossed over the slave trade in his bestselling histories of England. But today a new momentum is building; one that accepts that the wealth of European countries was built from transatlantic slavery, and tries to make amends.

The Labour MP [Clive Lewis](#), who is of Grenadian descent, recently asked parliament why the British government can't apologise for slavery and pay reparations, as our family has done. Since my trip to Grenada, I have been inundated with messages from families in similar positions to ours who want to know how to make things right. Last week I left the BBC, after a 30-year career, which was a joy and a privilege, to campaign for reparative justice full-time and encourage Britain to face up to its colonial debt. The coronation of King Charles in May is an opportunity to talk about the royal family's links to slavery. Commonwealth leaders from the formerly enslaved nations will be there in Westminster Abbey. As the king himself has said about the enduring impact of slavery: "This is a conversation whose time has come."

- Laura Trevelyan is a former BBC journalist who campaigns for reparatory justice

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'Complete nonsense': key moments from Boris Johnson's Partygate grilling – video

[Opinion](#)**Boris Johnson**

Why was Boris Johnson cast into the wilderness this week? Because a populist without a tribe is nothing

[Jonathan Freedland](#)



With Trump and Netanyahu wreaking havoc, Johnson's fall makes clear that only former allies can destroy these strongmen

Fri 24 Mar 2023 12.45 EDTLast modified on Fri 24 Mar 2023 16.28 EDT

How do you kill off a strongman? How do you drain the political life from the brand of nationalist-populist leader that's dominated politics across the democratic world in recent times? This week, we may just have got an answer.

Never say never and all that, but [on Wednesday](#) we watched the air go out of the Boris Johnson balloon, the former prime minister deflating before our eyes. While his fellow rightwing populists, the likes of Donald Trump and [Benjamin Netanyahu](#), continue to wreak or threaten havoc, it's instructive to work out exactly what did for Johnson. It could even be a formula to follow.

You might think the magic bullet would be hard evidence of appalling behaviour. That certainly exists in the Johnson case. His appearance before the Commons committee on privileges revived memories not just of the details of [Partygate](#) – the trestle tables, the raised glasses – but of the very particular rage those revelations provoked.

This week marked the third anniversary of a lockdown that was like nothing the country had ever endured before, requiring a suppression of the most elemental human instincts: to be close to others, to talk, to touch. The [Partygate](#) revelations stirred fury not only because they involved the rankest hypocrisy – those setting the rules were breaking them – but also because they suggested that the deprivations Britons had suffered were not, after all, universal or collective and therefore unavoidable, but rather were somehow optional. If you were a mug, you followed the rules; if you were smart, you ignored them.

Still, we've known about Johnson's unforgivable conduct for a while. It can't explain why this week he shrank before us. Could the difference be that on Wednesday we saw Johnson's arguments turn to mush? His defence rested on his insistence, tetchily repeated, that it was "[essential for work purposes](#)" that he turn up at staff gatherings, say a few words and drink a toast. Since those morale boosting get-togethers were "necessary" for the functioning of the UK government, he believed they were permitted under the rules – and therefore he was telling the truth when he told MPs all guidance had been followed. He would hold that view "till the day I die".

Consider that for a moment. If Johnson had been describing a day when, say, Downing Street had learned of an incoming missile strike on London, forcing staff to convene immediately in a small, sealed situation room where it was impossible for generals and ministers to keep 2 metres apart,

we might agree that, yes, those were exceptional circumstances and such a meeting was truly essential. But patting the back of a departing press officer? Lifting the spirits of a few spads? It's not exactly the elimination of Osama bin Laden. It meets no one's definition of "essential".

The proof is that next to no one else was doing it. Heads of hospitals, who would have loved to thank doctors and nurses who were daily saving the lives of others and risking their own, did not break out the bubbly and pass round the nibbles. They knew they couldn't. We all knew. There was no exemption for "work events".

And by what strange logic might the rules have allowed Downing Street staff to gather to wave off a policy aide or speechwriter they'd known for all of a few months, and yet bar families from saying farewell to their dying loved ones? Did Johnson really reckon the rules held that it was fine for him to see off some comms aide with a glass of fizz, but that the Queen had to say goodbye to her husband of 73 years wholly alone? Wednesday's hearing was proof that, while Johnson may have had Covid, he still hasn't the faintest idea what the pandemic meant for the people of this country.

And yet, even all that cannot alone explain the shrinking of Boris Johnson. Trump ticks those same boxes – reprehensible conduct, specious defence – but he remains Republican voters' first choice for president in 2024. Ditto Netanyahu, currently on trial for corruption, but back in power and pressing ahead with his [horrendous plan to neuter the Israeli judiciary](#).

Indeed, far from being weakened by being called to account, both men draw strength from it. Trump may well be indicted by a Manhattan court next week, and he is said actively to hope that he's arrested on camera, ideally with [his hands cuffed behind his back](#). That way he can play the rightwing populist's favourite role: victim. Trump will say, as Netanyahu says, that he is the victim of liberal prosecutors and an illegitimate system; that his legal woes are, in fact, a deep-state, elitist coup against him, the tribune of the people.

Johnson and his supporters tried that move this week. The ex-PM called the committee's investigation "extremely peculiar". Asked if he accepted its legitimacy, he gave the Trumpian answer that he would regard the

committee as legitimate if it cleared him, a response that had his own lawyer [shaking his head](#). Johnson's allies branded the hearing a "kangaroo court". Mid-session, Jacob Rees-Mogg [tweeted](#): "Boris is doing very well against the marsupials." Recall that Rees-Mogg likes to pose as a custodian of our unwritten constitution. In fact, he is a vandal in pinstripes, ready to undermine public trust in the very parliamentary democracy he pretends to cherish.

And yet, while that move still yields dividends for Trump or Netanyahu, it no longer pays out for Johnson. On Thursday, a poll of a Question Time audience that had mostly voted Tory in 2019 showed [not one person](#) thought he was telling the truth. Why has he fallen while those other men still stand? It's not that his crimes are more disgusting than theirs. So what's the difference?

It's that Johnson has lost his tribe. Trump was defeated in the 2020 election, but even now few Republicans dare defy him. Netanyahu faces protests from [within the Israeli military](#) and on the streets – following him even on his [Friday visit to London](#) – but most of his party remains behind him. In Britain, it's different: the Conservatives are abandoning Johnson.

That process only began with his defenestration last summer. Even in October, after the Liz Truss fiasco, at least [100 Tory MPs were ready to bring him back](#). That number has now dwindled. On Wednesday, [a mere 21 followed his lead](#) and voted against Rishi Sunak's Windsor framework for Northern Ireland. That's partly because they've seen the alternative: quiet, relative competence, which is kryptonite to rightwing populists, who thrive on drama and division rather than the dull business of actually getting things done.

If the Tories have finally given up their "Boris" habit, they deserve little credit. They came to it late and only when their calculus of self-preservation told them it was safe. But they have at least shown who – perhaps alone – can topple these would-be strongmen. The courts can't do it; even the voters can't always do it. The power, and responsibility, lies with those who acted as their enablers. The grim truth is that, too often, the only people who can bring down these terrible men are the ones who put them there in the first place.

- Jonathan Freedland is a Guardian columnist

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‘I want to hear much, much more about Ms Smith’s prison chaplaincy, the standout occupation in a resumé which tends toward the eclectic.’ Rupert Murdoch and his fiancée, Ann Lesley Smith. Photograph: Jenna Bascom Photography

[Opinion](#)[Rupert Murdoch](#)

**Never mind the lies on Fox News:
Rupert’s getting married again. Just be
happy for him**

[Marina Hyde](#)



I worry that the fuss about fraudulent election claims will overshadow the real story. It's love at fifth sight

Fri 24 Mar 2023 09.26 EDTLast modified on Fri 24 Mar 2023 14.14 EDT

“I was very nervous. I dreaded falling in love.” Ah, there goes newly affianced Rupert Murdoch, sounding for all the world like a widow who has previously lost her home and life savings in a romance scam to a guy falsely claiming to be an airline pilot. Dare she allow herself to open her heart again? Dare she, who has been hurt before, permit herself one last surrender to the possibility of completeness? Dare she, 15 minutes after [divorcing Jerry Hall](#) by email, clap eyes on a former dental hygienist, model, singer-songwriter, Bay area socialite and prison chaplain – and declare simply: “I want it”?

Reader, she dares. She *dreaded* falling in love, but she got back on the horse that bucked her and rode off. If not into the sunset, then certainly into the Delaware courtroom that is gearing up for a blockbuster libel trial against Rupert's Fox News for airing false and incendiary claims that the 2020 presidential election was fraudulently stolen from Donald Trump. Murdoch

[recently admitted](#) he had known his hosts were endorsing lies, yet allowed them to continue.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Who wants to hear about stolen elections when there are stolen hearts to celebrate? Let's tell this week's happy stories first: at the age of 92, Rupert Murdoch is engaged to be married for a fifth time, on this outing to one Ann Lesley Smith, 66. We await the official engagement portrait. (Murdoch was, of course, first painted in 1533 by Holbein, stretched across the base of his celebrated work [The Ambassadors](#))

Alas, this obviously hilarious news of the old boy's latest marital adventure has been met with the sort of strangled deference Murdoch tends to inspire in journalism. Though not, of course, to practise. The couple have marked the plighting of their ... troth, is it? ... by [giving a short interview](#) to Murdoch's New York Post, in which the proprietor declares: "We're both looking forward to spending the second half of our lives together." Or as the bride-to-be puts it: "I waited for the right time."

Well, quite. If there were ever a right time to marry [Rupert Murdoch](#), you'd have to say him being 92 was close to it. Though him being 110 would be better. As for what you get the couple who have everything as a wedding gift: anything other than a defibrillator.



A protest outside Fox News headquarters in New York, 28 February 2023.
Photograph: Justin Lane/EPA

If you're wondering what my favourite part of this entire fairytale is, I think I would have to alight on: everything. I want to hear much, much more about Ms Smith's prison chaplaincy, the standout occupation in a resumé that tends toward the eclectic. There is certainly plenty to enjoy in her characterisation of Murdoch as the humble beneficiary of largesse from the Almighty. "For us both," Ann claims to the New York Post, "it's a gift from God." Mm. I can't help feeling that if Madam's husband-to-be were truly to concede the existence of God, it would surely only be as a regional manager in his Churches division. The sort of guy you'd greet cordially on the annual facilities visit – but certainly wouldn't invite to the corporate retreat.

Murdoch himself fails to cite divine intervention. He says he first clapped eyes on his new fiancée at one of his properties. "Last year, when there was 200 people at my vineyard," he explained, "I met her and we talked a bit. Two weeks later I called her." A post-providential encounter – indeed, it's nice to think that there is a level of wealth at which you can simply wander out into one of your gardens and the help will have laid on someone for you to marry.

For her part, Ms Smith last wed a very rich man when she was 48 and the gentleman caller in question was 75 – he vexingly died a mere three years later after heart trouble, plunging her into an unfortunate legal battle with his children, who claimed she had indulged in “[financial elder abuse](#)”. The case was eventually dropped.

As for the timing of it all, it must be one of those mad instances of synchronicity that Murdoch broke the news of his love match just as his perilous court case was hotting up. In Delaware, his legal team this week argued that Rupert and other executives should not have to testify in Dominion Voting System’s defamation case against Fox News, on the basis that it would constitute “hardships” on said witnesses, and would “[add nothing](#) other than media interest”.

So if you thought this week’s most preposterous spectacle was [Boris Johnson arguing](#) that a man of his character would never lie, here’s a strong rival: lawyers for Rupert Murdoch’s empire arguing disdainfully that media interest is not the same as public interest. We didn’t hear much of that sentiment when – to pluck a completely random example from the air – the New York Post was carrying masses of detail about the sex life of Murdoch’s fellow billionaire Sumner Redstone.

By the time Redstone himself was 92, this required the active assistance of a retinue of care workers. Rupert’s paper slapped him with epithets such as “[horny feeble media honcho](#)”, gleefully [repeating claims](#) right down to the fact that the nurse would sometimes tell Sumner he had ejaculated “when in fact he had not ... Sumner appeared to believe him, not aware of the truth”.

Something to bear in mind, as the 92-year-old Murdoch looks likely to head to court next month for his money shot – and indeed down the aisle shortly after. Has Ms Smith’s God-given fiance always done as he would be done by? Juries literal and metaphorical will still be out.

- Marina Hyde is a Guardian columnist

- Guardian Live will host three events in June with Marina Hyde, in [London](#), [Leeds](#) and [Brighton](#). You can book tickets in person for all three, and the London event will be livestreamed. More information [here](#)

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Henny Beaumont on the contrasting fortunes of Johnson and Sunak – cartoon

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One of the three returned Parthenon fragments returned from the Vatican Museum to the Acropolis Museum in Athens, Greece. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

[Parthenon marbles](#)

Pope Francis returns three fragments of Parthenon to Greece

Carved heads of a boy, a horse and a bearded man, formerly in Vatican Museums, unveiled in Athens

[Helena Smith](#) in Athens

Sat 25 Mar 2023 06.19 EDTFirst published on Fri 24 Mar 2023 18.44 EDT

The desire of Pope Francis to right a wrong has led to the official return to Greece from the [Vatican](#) of three ornately carved fragments that once adorned the Parthenon.

As the sun set over Athens on Friday, the sculptures were unveiled on the upper floor of the Acropolis Museum, purpose-built within view of the

fifth-century monument to house the marbles.

“This act by Pope Francis is of historical significance and has a positive impact on multiple levels,” Greece’s spiritual leader, Archbishop Ieronymos II, told the crowded gallery of the Acropolis Museum where the works will be displayed. “My personal wish is that others will imitate it.”

A much larger collection of works removed from the temple in what are now viewed as highly contentious circumstances more than 200 years ago is still kept by the British Museum. The repatriated artefacts had similarly been part of the holdings of the Vatican Museums for more than two centuries.

The fragments depicting the head of a boy, the head of a horse and the head of a bearded man, had not only returned to where they were carved 5,000 years ago; their homecoming marked one more step to reunite artworks regarded as the high point of classical art, officials said.



The move by Pope Francis was of ‘historical significance’, said Greece’s spiritual leader, Archbishop Ieronymos II. Photograph: Petros Giannakouris/AP

Describing the pontiff's decision as heroic, Greece's culture minister, Lina Mendoni, said: "Initiatives like these show ... how the pieces of the Parthenon can be reunited, healing the wounds caused by barbaric hands so many years ago."

On Friday, the delicate task of reinstating the relics involved gloved workmen on a mechanised ladder removing the plaster casts that had been in their place. As the third fragment – the head of the bearded man – was inserted among the sculpted relief panels, some of those gathered wept in disbelief. A moment of silence was then followed by applause.



A sculpture depicting the head of a bearded man (right), alongside the replica it now replaces. Photograph: Petros Giannakouris/AP

Francis announced in December that he wanted to donate them to Ieronymos as "a concrete sign of his sincere desire to follow in the ecumenical path of truth". The head of the Orthodox church immediately agreed to give them to the Acropolis Museum.

From the outset the Vatican sought to dampen the rhetoric that has raged over the Parthenon sculptures, not least those in the [possession of the British Museum](#).

Its officials said that the donation was a religiously inspired move rather than a bilateral state-to-state return that could, or should, be emulated elsewhere. The Vatican Museums hold other priceless artefacts that Indigenous groups would also like to see returned.

Addressing the repatriation ceremony as head of the Vatican's delegation, Bishop Brian Farrell emphasised that the decision to return the fragments had "matured in the context of [Francis'] fraternal relations with the Orthodox church".

But while the gesture underscored the growing "spiritual closeness" between the two Christian institutions, the pope had clearly also chosen sides. Ending his speech Farrell said: "We assure you of our intimate joy at the realisation of your legitimate wish to have the Parthenon fragments at home in their place of origin."

In recent years Greece has [ramped up](#) its campaign for the reunification of the sculptures, spurred partly by "optimistic" signs of a shift in public opinion in Britain.

The two countries have been at odds for decades over statuary removed from the fifth-century BC temple at the behest of Lord Elgin, Britain's then ambassador to the Ottoman empire. Athens has long argued that the antiquities, acquired by the British Museum in 1816, were violently [detached](#) from the monument with the aid of marble saws. Hopes of the cultural row being resolved in the wake of widespread reports that the British Museum was engaged in [secret](#) talks aimed at "a win-win solution" with Greece appeared to be dashed last week when Rishi Sunak [rejected](#) any suggestion the treasures were on course to being returned to Athens.

But Greek officials say the Vatican's move will undoubtedly pile further pressure on London "to do the right thing".

"The pope has set a global example," said Prof Nikos Stampolidis, the Acropolis Museum's director, calling the repatriated fragments especially important as they came from three different areas of the Parthenon.

“We are doubly grateful, and honoured, that he has chosen to do this as the head of the Catholic church and not as the leader of the Vatican,” Stampolidis said. “In doing so he has spoken not just for the Holy See but for so many more people.”

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Donald Trump in Davenport, Iowa, on 13 March. Photograph: Scott Olson/Getty Images

[The Observer](#)[Donald Trump](#)

Trump lives rent-free in Americans' heads amid possible indictment

While the ex-president left the White House over two years ago, the Trump addiction is hard to beat as his legal perils dominate headlines



[David Smith](#) in Washington

[@smithinamerica](#)

Sat 25 Mar 2023 03.00 EDT Last modified on Sat 25 Mar 2023 15.05 EDT

When Donald Trump took his final walk from the White House, boarded a helicopter and vanished into a cold sky, millions of Americans [breathed a sigh of relief](#). With the former US president retired to his Mar-a-Lago estate, they reasoned, they would no longer live in constant dread of new scandals or impulsive tweets.

Two years and two months later, it turns out that [Trump addiction](#) is hard to beat. His legal perils have dominated headlines all week. Republicans continue to define themselves in relation to him. He remains the favourite for the party nomination in next year's presidential election. Trump is still living rent-free in the nation's head.

“The hope that Donald Trump would melt away into Mar-a-Lago seems sweetly nostalgic,” said [Jane Dailey](#), a history professor at the University of Chicago. “There is something about Donald Trump that fascinates and

grabs the gaze and holds on to it. Nothing seems to hurt him ever. It's just bizarre. Every single time we've thought he's gone too far, he's been rewarded."

Now 76, Trump has continued to make news and make himself impossible to ignore. His conduct before and during the January 6 insurrection was the subject of primetime congressional hearings. He inserted himself into the midterm elections for Congress and declared his [own presidential run](#). And now he is on the brink of becoming the first American president charged with a crime.

A grand jury in New York is [examining his involvement](#) in a \$130,000 payment made in 2016 to adult film star Stormy Daniels to keep her from going public about an alleged sexual encounter years earlier. Trump has denied the claim, insisted he did nothing wrong and assailed the investigation, led by the Manhattan district attorney, Alvin Bragg, as politically motivated.

With an indictment seemingly imminent, Trump last weekend used his Truth Social platform to predict that he would be arrested on Tuesday and call for his supporters to protest. With that single post, he triggered a week of breathless will-he-won't-he media coverage and speculation that demonstrated, far from moving on from Trump, America remains as in thrall to him as ever.

New York police erected security barricades outside the Manhattan criminal court and Bragg's office. News outlets deployed teams of reporters and braced for the spectacle of the former president in handcuffs. Fake [AI-generated images](#) of Trump being arrested received millions of views online. Pundits debated whether Bragg's case hinges on an untested legal theory and whether it will [benefit Trump politically](#) by galvanising his base.



A Trump supporter waves a flag outside Mar-a-Lago in Florida on 22 March. Photograph: Ricardo Arduengo/Reuters

Tuesday came and went without an arrest, though the prospect of it reportedly helped Trump [raise \\$1.5m in three days](#). The breaking news from the grand jury [was no news](#): it gradually became clear that it would not reach a decision this week. Trump fired off a barrage of messages on Truth Social, describing Bragg as an “animal” who is “doing the work of Anarchists and the Devil”.

He also contrived to turn his imminent disgrace into a loyalty test for Republicans who for nearly eight years have rallied around him over and over again.

Dozens of congressional Republicans gathered at a conference in Orlando, Florida, to discuss the party’s legislative achievements instead found themselves talking about Trump and his potential indictment. Kevin McCarthy, speaker of the House of Representatives, [told reporters](#): “I think you know in your heart of hearts that this is just political. And I think that’s what the rest of the country thinks. And we’re kind of tired of that.”

House Republicans drew comparisons with the Russian collusion saga and set about investigating the investigator. In a letter to Bragg on Monday, they

demanded communications, documents and testimony relating to the “unprecedented abuse of prosecutorial authority and the potential indictment” of Trump. [Bragg dismissed the effort](#) as “an unlawful incursion into New York’s sovereignty”.

Potential rivals in the 2024 Republican primary were also forced to respond, rushing to defence rather than risking alienating his base. Former vice-president [Mike Pence](#) said Americans do not want to see Trump indicted. The New Hampshire governor, Chris Sununu, and former New Jersey governor Chris Christie, a frequent Trump critic, suggested that he was being unfairly prosecuted.

Florida’s governor, Ron DeSantis, who has been [losing ground to Trump](#) in recent opinion polls, offered a mixed assessment when asked to address the potential indictment. He condemned Bragg as a “George Soros-backed” prosecutor “pursuing a political agenda and weaponising the office” but also said pointedly: “I don’t know what goes into paying hush money to a porn star to secure silence over some type of alleged affair.”

Just as in the 2016 election, when Trump received free media coverage [worth billions of dollars](#), these contenders were forced to talk about him rather than establishing their own identity or setting their own agenda. Political analysts suggested that it will be hard for any of his Republican rivals to cut through the noise.

[Monika McDermott](#), a political science professor at Fordham University in New York, said: “DeSantis keeps aligning himself more and more with Trump’s own views. He talks about the witch-hunt of the New York DA and is clearly trying to capture Trump voters and keep himself on their good side in case something happens to Trump.

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“But that’s not necessarily a winning strategy, because if Trump doesn’t have anything damaging that’s going to take him down, then DeSantis isn’t going to go anywhere. He can’t win Trump voters if Trump is still a viable option. For others, just getting room in the public sphere is going to be hard because Trump is the 500lb gorilla.”



An anti-Trump activist holds a sign in front of the Wall of Silence installation by Donna Ferrato on display at a park across the street from the Manhattan criminal court. Photograph: Mary Altaffer/AP

The hush money case is [only the beginning](#): Trump is under scrutiny from special counsel Jack Smith for his efforts to overthrow the 2020 election

and mishandling of classified documents after leaving office. In Georgia a prosecutor has been investigating whether Trump and his allies illegally meddled in the election in that state.

Although Trump's call for protests this week fell flat, the higher-stakes investigations are only likely to drive up the temperature and increase the potential for social unrest heading into the 2024 election. On Thursday [he wrote on Truth Social](#): "Our country is being destroyed, as they tell us to be peaceful!" – implying that peaceful demonstrations might not be enough.

Yet there is little prospect of the media ending its [obsession with Trump](#) given the way his perpetual dramas translate into ratings. Some commentators argue that his continued presence also suits Democrats just fine because he unites their coalition and has proven beatable in elections.

[Henry Olsen](#), a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center thinktank in Washington, said: "It's extremely depressing that elements of the left want to keep scratching at the national scab. It takes two to tango and we definitely have a willing partner in this. Alvin Bragg does not have to bring this prosecution and yet he chooses to do so. Let's apportion blame to all contributing actors."

Trump's enduring grip on the national psyche marks yet another break from his presidential predecessors, who have largely devoted their time to preserving their legacies through philanthropic work and [presidential libraries](#). Although Barack Obama continues to campaign on behalf of Democrats during election campaigns, he no longer drives news cycles.

Trump's refusal to leave the stage did not surprise [Sidney Blumenthal](#), a former senior adviser to Bill Clinton and biographer of Abraham Lincoln. "Our long national nightmare continues," he said. "It was a delusion to believe, even after the coup attempt and the insurrection of January 6, that Trump would just fade away and cease to be a factor and that politics as usual could be resumed between two normal political parties."

He added: "I don't know if it requires the brandishing of a cross and the wearing of garlic to deal with the vampire. It's entirely possible and even likely that Trump could be the Republican nominee and has a possibility of

re-entering the White House to, as he has promised, abrogate the constitution and the republic, destroy the western alliance and, in effect, rule as a dictator.”

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Protesters block access to the Frontignan oil depot in southern France after the government pushed pensions reform through parliament. Photograph: Pascal Guyot/AFP/Getty Images

[France](#)

‘Democracy is broken’: French public divided on pensions and protests

Seven people share their opinions of Emmanuel Macron’s plan to shake up the country’s retirement system

[Clea Skopeliti](#) and [Sammy Gecsoyler](#)

Sat 25 Mar 2023 04.00 EDTLast modified on Sat 25 Mar 2023 05.06 EDT

More than a million protesters took to the streets in France on Thursday after Emmanuel Macron’s decision to [force through legislation](#) to raise the minimum pension age last week.

The government [narrowly survived a no-confidence](#) vote on Monday after invoking article 49.3 of the constitution to bypass parliament for the bill.

There have been weeks of [strikes](#) and protests against the proposals to reform France's retirement system, culminating in [outbreaks of violence](#) in some cities during Thursday's national day of action.

Here, seven people in [France](#) share their views on pension reform and the protests.

‘I’m not averse to changing the system’

“The system is fed by the working population. If the retired population increases and the working population does not keep up, this will pose some problems. I’m not averse to changing the system but it should have been done with more consultation.

“The reforms are not fair to people who have physically demanding jobs and women who may take time off work for parenting and will now have to work for longer. It is also unfair for people who started to work at an early age – why should people who started work at 18 not be able to retire at 61?

“I attended a protest earlier this month. It was really relaxed and merry. There was no hint of adversity. There were people from industry, office jobs, firefighters and teaching staff. It was quite diverse.” **Remy, 47, teacher, Bordeaux**

‘There was no democratic process in the way it was done’



Noemie le Carrer attended several protests in Brest. Photograph: Noemie le Carrer

“I have attended all the protests in my city since February, although I’m nine months pregnant. In Brest, the atmosphere was peaceful and family friendly. Of course, there were people who started to be more violent but I never felt it was dangerous, though after I saw some damage [to buildings] on the news.

“The problem is not raising the pension age per se. The problem is that this reform does not make the difference between hard physical and dangerous jobs. Of course those who collect waste want to retire sooner – it’s a hard job.

“There was no democratic process in the way it was done – we feel very looked down on. The reason for this last protest is consequently more about Macron’s attitude, and his way of [ignoring] other suggestions, the unions and the people.

“The point of a representative democracy is to listen to other points of view existing in the country and compromise if possible. [Instead] article 49.3 was used.” **Noemie le Carrer, 36, climate researcher, Brest**

‘Pensions are quite generous in France’

“It is absolutely necessary, given life expectancy is growing longer and birthrates are going down. At the end of the day, someone would have to pay for the pensions that are quite generous in France. Had there been a conservative government in place, the new law would have been considerably tougher.

“[There are] huge heaps of rubbish piled up at the entrance of my flat, [\[because of the strikes\]](#) along all streets and on any open space available. No collection at all for more than two weeks.

“I am concerned that the government might recall the law, proving that the country cannot be reformed, and that the reputation of France overseas is declining.” **Axel Werner, 74, semi-retired consulting engineer in Paris**

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‘It creates disparity between the generations’



Arnaud Yzambart says the legislation will create disparities between generations. Photograph: Arnaud Yzambart

“I was not able to attend Thursday’s protest because of work, but I saw protesters passing by the restaurant – it was crowded and there was violence: teargas, fires.

“They’re asking future generations to make all the effort. Older people are not impacted; it creates disparity between generations. My grandad has been retired since 58 on [a very generous] pension.

“Maybe the question should be asked about current pensions and redistribution. Obviously we don’t want old people to be poor, but those with very generous pensions could have it limited.” **Arnaud Yzambart, 35, restaurant manager in Paris**

‘We never have demonstrations here’

“We are a very rural area. We never have demonstrations here normally but in recent weeks hundreds of people have taken part in them. To my knowledge this is a first. It is completely widespread.

“Most of the news focuses on big cities and the violence that may occur but this does not reflect the nation. Here it was a happy event; there was no violence at all.

“Most of rural France either voted for New Popular Ecological and Social Union (Nupes) or the far right. There is very little support for Macron here.” **Julie, 56, researcher in the Gard region**

‘It’s about the system of governance’



Jean-Baptiste Yasak joined a protest in Avignon. Photograph: Jean-Baptiste Yasak

“For me it’s not about the pension reform any more. It’s about the system of governance. Macron’s use of article 49.3 for the 11th time in his reign to bypass parliament feels like we are in a monarchy.

“I was at the protest in Avignon [on Thursday] morning and it was peaceful. There were slogans like Macron resign, others about retirement age, and others about article 49.3. People are really fed up.

“We want more autonomy for the regions, more decisions at the local level and more referendums. The concentration of power in Paris must end.

[Many] people feel democracy is very broken – that’s why there was low turnout at the last election.

“The anger is not going to go away. It’s gone [beyond the pension issue]. 49.3 was the cherry on the cake – people feel powerless, like they’re voting for nothing.” **Jean-Baptiste Yasak, 35, unemployed, Avignon**

‘It seems inevitable’

“It seems inevitable – we have one of the lowest retirement ages in [Europe](#). The population is getting older and there are fewer people to finance the system. It needs to change somewhere – no one is particularly happy with it, but that’s life.

“I haven’t attended the protests; they are increasingly ill-spirited. I can see smoke from the protests from my balcony. Some colleagues are scared to go to work. My sister got caught in the protest yesterday – there were some *casseurs*, people going around to cause mayhem. It was quite frightening.

“But for me the issue is the 49.3. It’s problematic that more things are being pushed through.

“I am increasingly worried Marine Le Pen will be elected next time because of Macron’s failure to unite France as he set out to do. Every year [the far right] gets a bit more ammunition against mainstream politics.” **Anna, 31, course administrator near Bordeaux**

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Ne’Kiya Jackson, left, and Calcea Johnson recently presented their findings at the American Mathematical Society’s south-eastern chapter’s semi-annual meeting. Photograph: WWL-TV

[New Orleans](#)

US teens say they have new proof for 2,000-year-old mathematical theorem

New Orleans students Calcea Johnson and Ne’Kiya Jackson recently presented their findings on the Pythagorean theorem

[Ramon Antonio Vargas](#) in New Orleans

Fri 24 Mar 2023 15.36 EDTLast modified on Fri 24 Mar 2023 18.38 EDT

Two [New Orleans](#) high school seniors who say they have proven Pythagoras’s theorem by using trigonometry – which academics for two millennia have thought to be impossible – are being encouraged by a prominent US mathematical research organization to submit their work to a peer-reviewed journal.

Calcea Johnson and Ne’Kiya Jackson, who are students of St Mary’s Academy, recently gave a presentation of their findings at the American Mathematical Society south-eastern chapter’s semi-annual meeting in Georgia.

They were reportedly the only two high schoolers to give presentations at the meeting attended by math researchers from institutions including the universities of Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana State, Ohio State, Oklahoma and Texas Tech. And they spoke about how they had discovered a new proof for the Pythagorean theorem.

The 2,000-year-old theorem established that the sum of the squares of a right triangle’s two shorter sides equals the square of the hypotenuse – the third, longest side opposite the shape’s right angle. Legions of schoolchildren have learned the notation summarizing the theorem in their geometry classes: $a^2+b^2=c^2$.

As mentioned in [the abstract](#) of Johnson and Jackson’s 18 March mathematical society presentation, trigonometry – the study of triangles – depends on the theorem. And since that particular field of study was discovered, mathematicians have maintained that any alleged proof of the Pythagorean theorem which uses trigonometry constitutes a logical fallacy known as circular reasoning, a term used when someone tries to validate an idea with the idea itself.

Johnson and Jackson’s abstract adds that the book with the largest known collection of proofs for the theorem – Elisha Loomis’s [The Pythagorean Proposition](#) – “flatly states that ‘there are no trigonometric proofs because all the fundamental formulae of trigonometry are themselves based upon the truth of the Pythagorean theorem’.”

But, the abstract counters, “that isn’t quite true”. The pair asserts: “We present a new proof of Pythagoras’s Theorem which is based on a fundamental result in trigonometry – the Law of Sines – and we show that the proof is independent of the Pythagorean trig identity $\sin^2x+\cos^2x=1$.” In

short, they could prove the theorem using trigonometry and without resorting to circular reasoning.

Johnson told the New Orleans television news station [WWL](#) it was an “unparalleled feeling” to present her and Jackson’s work alongside university researchers.

Calcea Johnson and Ne’Kiya Jackson are being encouraged to submit their work to a peer-reviewed journal after being

“There’s nothing like it – being able to do something that people don’t think that young people can do,” Johnson said to the station. “You don’t see kids like us doing this – it’s usually, like, you have to be an adult to do this.”

Alluding to how St Mary’s slogan is “No excellence without hard labor,” the two students credited their teachers at the all-girls school in New Orleans’s Plum Orchard neighborhood for challenging them to accomplish something which mathematicians thought was not possible.

“We have really great teachers,” Jackson said to WWL during an interview published Thursday.

WWL reported that Jackson and Johnson are on pace to graduate this spring, and they intend to pursue careers in environmental engineering as well as biochemistry.

St Mary’s Academy administrators did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Friday. Prominent alumnae of the school include judge Dana Douglas, who is the first Black woman to serve on the bench of the federal fifth circuit court of appeals, and renowned restaurateur Leah Chase.

Catherine Roberts, executive director for the American Mathematical Society, said she encouraged the St Mary’s students to see about getting their work examined by a peer-reviewed journal, even at their relatively young age.

“Members of our community can examine their results to determine whether their proof is a correct contribution to the mathematics literature,” said Roberts, whose group hosts scientific meetings and publishes research journals.

Roberts also said American Mathematical Society members “celebrate these early career mathematicians for sharing their work with the wider mathematics community”.

“We encourage them to continue their studies in mathematics,” Roberts added.

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Fort Hood in Texas. Two years ago another 20-year-old soldier, Vanessa Guillén, was murdered there by another soldier after reporting being sexually harassed. Photograph: Tony Gutierrez/AP

[US military](#).

Mother of female soldier who died at Texas base to travel from Mexico

Private Ana Basaldua Ruiz, 20, was found dead at Fort Hood having complained to her family about sexual harassment

[Maya Yang](#)

Sat 25 Mar 2023 05.00 EDTLast modified on Sat 25 Mar 2023 05.01 EDT

The mother of a soldier who was found dead at the Fort Hood, Texas, military base earlier this week will receive a humanitarian visa to come to the US from [Mexico](#) and will visit the post to demand answers surrounding her daughter's death.

Last Monday, Private Ana Basaldua Ruiz, 20, was found dead at the central [Texas](#) army post. Ruiz was a combat engineer and had served with the 1st cavalry division for the past 15 months, according to Fort Hood officials.

Ruiz was born and raised in the western Mexican state of Michoacán and became a naturalized US citizen through her father, who lives in Long Beach, California. Ruiz moved to the US two years ago while her mother lives in Michoacán with another sister, Noticias Telemundo [reported](#).

“Army [criminal investigation division] will continue to conduct a thorough investigation and gather all evidence and facts to ensure they discover exactly what transpired. Information related to any possible harassment will be addressed and investigated fully,” Fort Hood officials [said](#) in a statement.

Ruiz’s mother, Alejandra Ruiz Zarco, [told](#) media outlets that even though army officials said that her daughter died by suicide, she doubted the claims and said that her daughter was being sexually harassed at Fort Hood.

Speaking to Noticias Telemundo, Ruiz Zarco said that she was obtaining a three-month humanitarian visa to travel to the US to await the outcome of the army’s investigation into her daughter’s death.

“It’s a matter of honor,” she [said](#), adding that her daughter [said](#) that “very bad things were happening.”

Ruiz Zarco said that her daughter told her that an army superior “was harassing her”.

“She told me ‘mom, everyone wants me to sleep with them, but they are pretty assholes,’” Ruiz Zarco [recalled](#) her daughter’s words to Noticias Telemundo.

Ruiz’s father, Baldo Basaldua, echoed similar concerns to the outlet, [saying](#) that his daughter was planning to complete her three-year contract in August but that “she was no longer comfortable, that her whole life was wrong, that she wanted to die”.

The Latino civil rights group League of United Latin American Citizens has called for an independent FBI investigation into Ruiz's death.

“We have already informed the army that Lulac is demanding action and will not stand down until all the truth emerges about what happened,” Lulac [said](#).

“The comments her mother made were eerily similar to Vanessa Guillén's mother's comments,” Lulac's president, Domingo Garcia, [told](#) NBC, referring to a 20-year-old soldier who was murdered inside a Fort Hood armory two years ago by another soldier after she [reported](#) being sexually harassed.

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