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## The Observer view on South Africa's problems

[Observer editorial](#)

For all the corruption of recent years, Cyril Ramaphosa's 'rainbow nation' can still make good on Nelson Mandela's values



A woman clears debris from the street after violence and looting in Durban last week. Photograph: Guillem Sartorio/AFP/Getty Images

A woman clears debris from the street after violence and looting in Durban last week. Photograph: Guillem Sartorio/AFP/Getty Images

Sun 18 Jul 2021 01.30 EDT

Today is the anniversary of the birthday of Nelson Mandela, the first president of a free [South Africa](#) and a global symbol of tolerance, sacrifice, integrity and the battle against racism.

When, in 2009, the UN declared 18 July [a day to honour Mandela's values](#), South Africa was still seen worldwide as a success story. The “rainbow nation” had overcome the violent racial oppression of its past and was fighting apartheid’s toxic legacy of economic inequality. It had one of the most progressive constitutions in the world and a steady record of economic growth. The challenges the new democracy faced were all too evident, but South Africa’s recent history seemed a message of hope for us all nonetheless.

This weekend, it is despair that dominates. Days of violent protest, looting and vandalism have left the country staggering. The economy was already faltering even before Covid struck and has now sustained a further catastrophic blow. President Cyril Ramaphosa, [who took power in 2018](#), has called for steadfast defence of South Africa’s democracy against what he says is a deliberate attempt to prompt an insurrection. The rule of law looks shaky. Racial tensions are high. The chances of a tolerant, prosperous future now look dim.

So what went wrong? In 2007, the African National Congress, the ruling party, selected Jacob Zuma as its leader. Two years later, Zuma became president too. The contrast with Mandela, canonised as a secular saint, was stark. No one would describe Zuma as a model of probity. He did, however, have impeccable credentials as a frontline fighter in the battle against apartheid and was popular with the party’s grassroots.

Over the next nine years, Zuma presided over an assault on South Africa’s institutions, public utilities and government. Graft contaminated almost every corner of public life, unemployment and crime soared after years of decline. The health service and the police suffered very badly. Zuma and his supporters said they were helping the poor. In fact, many were helping themselves.

Eventually, Zuma was ousted and Ramaphosa took over. The former labour activist turned tycoon set about cleansing South Africa’s Augean stables. This is a herculean task but one Ramaphosa has approached with grim determination, even if his execution has been slow. A problem has been trying to manage the factional battles within the ANC. Ramaphosa leads a moderate coalition within the ruling party and has wide support. But his

efforts to avoid the confrontation with those still loyal to Zuma have failed. Zuma's imprisonment on contempt of court charges sparked the unrest and it appears to have been instigated by his followers.

Perhaps if Ramaphosa had been less concerned with the internal politics of the ruling party and had hit harder or earlier to enforce the rule of law, the events of recent days could have been avoided. All too often, ANC politicians have put the interests of the party above those of the country. Ramaphosa, too, may be guilty of this. If his country is to prosper, this must stop.

But though many will despair for South Africa, this newspaper is not among them. The *Observer* supported the anti-apartheid struggle through its darkest days, celebrated the downfall of that evil regime and still believes in the capacity of South Africans to create a better country for all citizens. Recent days have seen appalling violence but also communities coming together to clear the shattered glass, protect vital services and help those left without bread.

Those who hoped to derail Ramaphosa's efforts at reform are unlikely to succeed and their failure will strengthen South Africa's democracy. This should give hope to all those who care about this troubled, inspiring country.

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# The Observer view on the lifting of Covid restrictions

[Observer editorial](#)

Amid the chaos that surrounds it and the likely economic and human cost, ‘freedom day’ has a hollow ring



International scientists have warned that the relaxing of almost all social restrictions aimed at controlling Covid-19 is a ‘dangerous experiment’. Photograph: Maureen McLean/REX/Shutterstock

International scientists have warned that the relaxing of almost all social restrictions aimed at controlling Covid-19 is a ‘dangerous experiment’. Photograph: Maureen McLean/REX/Shutterstock

Sun 18 Jul 2021 01.00 EDT

This week marks the second anniversary of Boris Johnson’s premiership. It has been a painful two years for the country. Much of that has been down to a pandemic that has claimed the lives of more than 4 million people worldwide. But Johnson’s incompetence, his lack of integrity and the leadership vacuum at the heart of his government have all resulted in the UK suffering more than necessary.

Johnson's rank unfitness for office is evident in his lack of a domestic policy agenda: his "[levelling up](#)" speech last week was devoid of substance on how his government might seek to reverse the impact of a decade of spending cuts on the least affluent parts of the country, together with the unequal impact Brexit is forecast to have in the coming years. It is evident in the way Brexit has played out so far: the ideological drive for a hard Brexit with no consideration of the consequences for the stability of Northern Ireland or the damage done by threatening close allies with breaking international law. It is evident in the way the government tries to stoke divisive culture wars over whether footballers should take a stand against racism in order to distract from its own incompetence. But most of all, it is evident in the higher-than-necessary death toll that has resulted from Johnson time and again acting too slowly to control the pandemic and taking unjustified risks in relaxing social restrictions too quickly. Tens of thousands of people are grieving the loss of relatives and friends as a result.

Tomorrow's relaxation of almost all remaining social restrictions aimed at controlling the outbreak – from the opening of nightclubs to compulsory requirements to wear masks in indoor public spaces – is one of the most important moments yet in this pandemic. But it is happening as infection rates are rising, many international scientists are warning that the UK government is effectively embarking on a [dangerous experiment](#) and amid some of the most confusing and chaotic public health messaging of the entire pandemic.

The argument in favour of removing the remaining social restrictions is that the population has sufficient levels of immunity through vaccination and that to wait until more people are fully vaccinated could risk a third wave hitting the NHS during the winter when it is even more stretched. But the government's previous efforts last March to let the virus spread while there was less pressure on the NHS went horribly wrong. It is true that more than half the population have the protection of a vaccine, but modelling by the government's scientific advisers still predicts between 80,000 and 160,000 hospital admissions due to Covid by the end of the year and between 9,000 and 18,000 more deaths, assuming the protection from vaccines [does not wane](#). The chief medical officer, Chris Whitty, has warned that with the number of hospital admissions doubling every three weeks, the UK could find itself reimposing social restrictions [in a matter of weeks](#). Countries that

have relaxed restrictions, such as the [Netherlands](#) and [Israel](#), have ended up reimposing them.

Moreover, the chaotic messaging around 19 July makes it difficult for the public to know what they should be doing to keep themselves and others safe. At first, the lifting of the requirement to wear a mask was touted by ministers as a symbol of “freedom day”; now, we are being fed the conflicting message that we should wear them even though they are not compulsory. The emphasis on personal responsibility when so much of pandemic control is about collective action to protect each other makes little sense. There is no consistency in the government’s approach, which appears to be driven by politics and symbolism rather than the scientific evidence: why drop the requirement to wear masks, a very low-cost intervention, while still requiring those who are double-vaccinated and who have had a negative PCR test to self-isolate for 10 days if they have been in contact with a positive case? Why allow nightclubs to reopen while insisting those who are fully vaccinated returning from a country with lower infection rates than the UK quarantine for 10 days? If there is logic or evidence behind these decisions, the government has not shared it, which risks undermining public appetite to comply. The strategy is being overseen by a new and inexperienced health secretary, Sajid Javid, who has himself just tested positive for Covid.

The government’s decision to open up even further was clearly driven by a belief this would be better for the economy. Yet accelerating infection rates – [one in 95](#) were infected with Covid last week, the highest infection rate since mid-January – mean that while we may all be able to do more in theory, the reality is that essential services such as the NHS, the police, food supply chains and schools are being hampered by the vast numbers of people being asked to [self-isolate](#) by track and trace. Hospitality businesses are also having to close at short notice because of staff shortages. Would it not be better to live with more restrictions, but a greater level of collective certainty about what we can and cannot do? The risk is that the cost of any future social restrictions that will need to be introduced as a result of letting the virus spread unchecked now will dwarf the cost of the extra government support that would have been needed to support hospitality businesses through continuing restrictions over the summer.

There remains no risk-free strategy for coping with Covid. Yet the government's decision to proceed with its self-styled freedom day despite the surging infection rates driven by a more infectious and vaccine-resistant variant is looking more ill-judged every day. One of the most important lessons of this pandemic has been that the precautionary principle is essential in controlling a virus that spreads exponentially: the costs of inaction can be far, far greater than the costs of action. It is a lesson that Boris Johnson has repeatedly ignored and too many people have paid the price with their lives.

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# We came, we surfed, then Covid forced us to pee in a layby on the way home

[Kitty Empire](#)



The dilemma coming to a staycation near you: what do you do when one of you tests positive four days into a holiday?

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Nanjizal beach near Penzance in Cornwall - believe the hype. Photograph: Alamy Stock Photo

Nanjizal beach near Penzance in Cornwall - believe the hype. Photograph: Alamy Stock Photo

Sat 17 Jul 2021 10.00 EDT

Planning a staycation? My 12 longed-for days in Cornwall shrank to four thanks to a certain virus we are to be living with, sans restrictions, as of tomorrow. It was a tantalising micro-break. Two surfing lessons, one indulgent poach in a hot tub, one portion of fish and chips and one absurdly scenic hike. [Nanjizal beach](#) – believe the hype – was deserted apart from two very patient geologists.

Then the app pinged a family member, who later tested positive. We had been ascribing his mild symptoms to too much fun. We debated options – self-isolate in an Airbnb we were due to leave or risk a hefty fine to drive home to best ensure biosecurity. A wild guess suggests this may happen to a few people this summer so I offer up my experience, with the deep understanding that these are, absolutely, first-world problems. Many minutes on hold to 119 resolved our dilemma. Yes, we could go home if we didn't stop and ate only at drive-throughs and used petrol pumps with pin pads. Reader, we peed in a netty layby. I can exclusively reveal that Stonehenge

from the A303 looks like a Styrofoam mock-up. There could have been something in my eye.

## Quarantine tunes

The holiday that wasn't was soundtracked by [\*Book of Rules\*](#), a great, seven-hour dub and roots reggae mix compiled by MC Taylor of ace Americana outfit Hiss Golden Messenger. Key track: [Right, Right Time](#) by Johnny Osbourne, one rewound over again, a blend of mellifluous soul, minimal instrumentation and righteousness. "Whatever we sow on creation, we shall surely reap," Osbourne sings. "We will get paid in the right time."

Self-isolation brought plenty of comfort-watching and comfort-listening. While everyone has been fussing over the *Friends* reunion, it's to reruns of the peerless *Frasier* I have turned for my 90s kicks. Out of all the things I should be listening to, getting across or appraising for work purposes, one album has stood out. Chapeau, as they say on the Tour de France highlights programme (another peerless distraction), to Welsh electronic producer Koreless for the fidgety, arpeggiating wonder that is his debut album, *Agor*. Ten years in the making, it matched my internal weather strangely well.

## Stream damning

Last week, the cross-party groups of MPs investigating the economics of streaming published an eye-opening report. Most of us know that streaming is absurdly unfair to artists, but the extent of it remains breathtaking. You know something's amiss when the co-founder of Spotify, Daniel Ek, can find £2bn down the back of his sofa in a [renewed attempt to buy Arsenal](#).

The report spoke of "pitiful returns" for the creatives who compose the soundtracks to our lives, while exposing a vast superstructure of middlemen skimming off their percentages – not much reaping for a heck of a lot of sowing, if you're a tune-maker. A "[complete reset](#)" of the market is needed; the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport recommends referring the entire industry to the Competition and Markets Authority and a "[broad and comprehensive](#)" range of legislative reforms.

Ah, legislative reforms. Over to the government, whose *simpatico* for musicians and the wider UK entertainment sector is famous. You know, the government that denied adequate Covid support to artists, music festivals, small venues and freelancers, the “[Philistines](#)” whose Brexit deal makes it ridiculously difficult for bands to tour Europe. Those guys. They’re really going to dismantle an unfair system and build back better, curbing the power of the major record companies to ensure talent and hard work are justly remunerated.

## Kitty Empire is the Observer’s pop critic

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**Observer comment cartoon**

**Boris Johnson**

## **The Walrus and the Carpenter, Boris and Rishi style – cartoon**

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## What will happen in the UK's third Covid wave?

[David Spiegelhalter](#) and [Anthony Masters](#)

Models can give us an idea, but are very sensitive to what we don't know



‘Even with fixed assumptions about the epidemic, chance produces wide prediction intervals.’ Photograph: Alamy

‘Even with fixed assumptions about the epidemic, chance produces wide prediction intervals.’ Photograph: Alamy

Sat 17 Jul 2021 12.30 EDT

Mathematical models simulated vast numbers of possible futures for after the UK government lifts Covid restrictions in England from [19 July](#). Many sources of uncertainty mean we don’t know which one, if any, of these projections might occur.

First, even with fixed assumptions about the epidemic, the play of chance produces wide prediction intervals. For example, assuming people substantially relax their cautious behaviour after 19 July, the [Warwick models](#) lead to peak Covid hospital admissions of 900 to 3,000 a day around the end of August.

Second, there is uncertainty about the assumptions, leading to extremely complex [sensitivity analyses](#). Warwick has a default assumption that two doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine is 94% effective against hospital admission, compared with an “optimistic” 97% and a “cautious” 90%. These differences may not seem large, but perhaps it is better to think of 94%

effectiveness as 6% ineffectiveness. This means the optimistic assumption of 3% ineffectiveness will roughly halve the number of admissions compared with the default. Similarly, 90% vaccine coverage means twice as many unvaccinated people as an uptake of 95%, with serious impacts. Such “reframing” usually goes the other way, when a potentially worrying 2% mortality rate from surgery can be turned into a more reassuring 98% survival rate.

The way people behave after restrictions are lifted will also have huge effects: a reproduction number of 1.2 may sound similar to 1.4, but after four viral generations new infections will be about 85% higher under the latter epidemic.

The appropriate mathematical structure of the model is also uncertain, so it is good to have independent teams. Imperial’s [model](#) has higher estimated admissions than Warwick and the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, projecting a peak of Covid hospital admissions of around 5,000 a day under high efficacy. A final source of uncertainty comes from all models being inadequate: events may happen outside what the model can describe.

The [Sage modelling sub-group](#) notes: “All results are highly sensitive to the modelling assumptions, and extensive sensitivity analyses have been performed.” We can be certain of an exit wave, but not about its scale and duration.

David Spiegelhalter is chair of the Winton Centre for Risk and Evidence Communication at Cambridge. Anthony Masters is statistical ambassador for the Royal Statistical Society

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[OpinionRichard Branson](#)

# If sending yourself into space is the ultimate publicity stunt, what next for Richard Branson?

Catherine Bennett



Britain's own rocket man has arrived to challenge Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk. Hurrah!



Richard Branson carries crew member Sirisha Bandla on his shoulders after their flight to space at Spaceport America, New Mexico. Photograph: Andres Leighton/AP

Richard Branson carries crew member Sirisha Bandla on his shoulders after their flight to space at Spaceport America, New Mexico. Photograph: Andres Leighton/AP

Sun 18 Jul 2021 03.00 EDT

Thinking, maybe, that it brings some purifying wonder to the pointless exercise, space plutocrats like to emphasise that their wish as grown men to ride in a space rocket dates from more innocent times. “Ever since I was five years old I’ve dreamed of travelling to space,” [Jeff Bezos](#) says. Specifically to ride upwards for roughly as far as Huntingdon is from London, float for a few minutes, then come back again? It only increases your respect for the tots who settle for Disneyland.

Beating Amazon’s founder to it last week, [Richard Branson](#) also aimed to bring to his somewhat shorter (turn back at Newport Pagnell) Virgin stunt, a flavour of *Le Petit Prince*. “I was once a child with a dream, looking up at the stars,” the author of *Screw It, Let’s Do It* offered as the origin myth behind a video of him bobbing about in his space suit. It may be an incongruous thought for anyone who has come, after a lifetime’s exposure,

to understand Branson's dream as primarily that of making money and hoisting nearby women into the air. But fair enough, he was probably innocent once, even if it doesn't, like any early interest in the stars, come across in his autobiography, *Losing My Virginity*.

At the time of the moon landings, the teenage entrepreneur was already living in a commune, where “there was lots of talk about free love, and lots of practice of it”. One of Branson’s guiding principles, stressed in *Screw It*, is that “sex appeal” is good for a brand. “Definitely, sexy is very cool. I want Virgin to be the coolest brand on the planet and for that, I’m prepared to dangle in the buff over Times Square, fly over Everest in a balloon, or find myself on a bunjee [sic] 100 feet below a helicopter in a skydiver position, to be landed among 100 buxom and beautiful female lifeguards...”

Or, as last week, to go almost into space then pose with a female crew member, [Sirisha Bandla](#), sitting on his shoulders. Whether this shift towards a more dignified woman-carrying technique signals, along with his inspirational address, the mature Branson’s wish to distinguish his mystical space tourism experience from previous jaunts, or just some vague awareness that #MeToo complicates things, it certainly seems to have lacked the PR impact of earlier iterations featuring, say, Dita von Teese or an upside down Pamela Anderson (“The photographers couldn’t keep their eyes off her nature-defying breasts that flipped right out”). Though even if he had, as in the old days, hired a portable woman in a red outfit for the occasion, some grudging press accounts of his expedition, with some yet more disrespectful tweets, have contributed to the impression that if we are not yet entering a post-Branson age, this ubiquitous figure, unavoidable at least since he gave Margaret Thatcher a boat ride up the Thames (“her profile cut through the wind like a bowsprit, and not a single strand of hair had blown out of place”), may finally be becoming his own, declining asset.

Supposing anyone ever wanted to look at [Branson kitesurfing](#) with a naked woman on his back (“I only wish I had eyes in the back of my head”), it is hard to believe such an image could now – excepting, no doubt, in some likeminded sections of the space tourism market – achieve much beyond widespread nausea. Which must represent progress, of a sort, since he bundled [Kate Moss](#) around the wing of a Boeing 747. Whatever a less offensive Branson could mean for humanity, it obviously presents marketing

challenges for Virgin as a company, assuming they've been studying online commentary on their mascot.

For if Branson's rocket performance represented, as well as a ticket promotion, a stab at corrective profundity, this improved messaging still only seems to have reminded people who may have missed him dressing up as a Zulu warrior or as [Che Guevara](#) or – quite a favourite with him – a [woman](#), of his other, arguably still more disquieting habits, from paying no personal income tax in the UK [since he moved](#) to the tax-free British Virgin Islands (BVA), to, in connection with Virgin Care, [suing the NHS](#). It has evidently not reached parts of Twitter that Branson lives in the BVA purely, [he explains](#), for health reasons. Nor does Branson's well-advertised closeness, along with Thatcher, to Nelson Mandela and Princess Diana now placate internet critics reminded by the rocket trip that this amateur statesman recently [sought a UK state subsidy](#) when the pandemic grounded Virgin planes and last week took off from a base built with the [help of \\$220m](#) from earthbound US taxpayers.

Until Bezos gets in his rocket [this week](#), then Elon Musk's crew in his, it's hard to distinguish how much of the negative or unimpressed public responses to such ascents is Bransonophobic, how much a verdict on space exploration and how much a growing suspicion of men who, with the colossal means to address climate disaster, would rather burn their wealth on projects that even they occasionally admit are juvenile. There may, perhaps, be something peculiarly irritating, for anyone aware of Branson's personal and commercial [contribution](#) to airline emissions, to see him bloviating about the "beautiful Earth" he wants customers to look at, on their £180,000 rides, so they subsequently "[work very hard](#) to try to do magic to it to look after it". As for Virgin Galactic, it has hopes of a supersonic travel business.

Whatever it does for – or to – space exploration, Branson's latest outing does appear, beyond any of his previous exploits, genuinely to have advanced public understanding of his own public-relations strategy, one that served him so well in an era more hospitable to women-jugglers, before Bezos and Musk got going. "Anything," he wrote in 2006, "however outlandish, that generates media coverage reinforces my image as a risk-taker who challenges the establishment." If Branson has inadvertently torched this signature principle then, yes, something good did come out of that rocket.

# Catherine Bennett is an Observer columnist

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## **Despite the racist trolls, the evidence is clear: England is becoming a kinder place to live**

[Sunder Katwala](#)

Toxic bigotry is in retreat across society, though social media can make us feel otherwise



A poster of England football players Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho and Bukayo Saka – all of whom received racial abuse after the final - at Waterloo station. Photograph: Amer Ghazzal/REX/Shutterstock

A poster of England football players Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho and Bukayo Saka – all of whom received racial abuse after the final - at Waterloo station. Photograph: Amer Ghazzal/REX/Shutterstock

Sun 18 Jul 2021 02.00 EDT

Football's fairytale summer ended on a sour note. The final itself was lost on penalties. But it was the ugly scenes of [Wembley disorder](#), the [online racism](#) directed at three young players who missed their penalties and partisan arguments over who was to blame that signalled a return to Earth.

[Gareth Southgate](#) has emerged as a bridging leader, able to blend tradition and modernity. His young team wore the badge with pride, belted out the national anthem and held firm on taking the knee. The inclusive pride in the country was celebrated by the #EnglandTogether campaign, which rallied civic voices across all faiths and none behind the [simple message](#) “football is coming home – and it’s a home we all share” coined by imam Qari Asim.

To stand up for that vision, we need vigilance – without alarm – to face down the toxic racist fringe. So we should talk about how post-tournament

anti-racism had a more than 99:1 share of the argument online. There is nothing contingent about Marcus Rashford's place in people's affection. He does not become any less English because the ball hits the post.

So it was moving to see the hundreds of messages of pride and protection left for Rashford as people in Manchester responded with deep affection to the disappointment of the missed penalty and the idiotic and abusive way his mural was vandalised. This coincided with online racist abuse. That the graffiti was not overtly racist made it no less important to counter with love and pride.

The reaction in Manchester showed us that England is probably a kinder country than it was when David Beckham's petulant red card at the 1998 World Cup provoked a torrent of abuse. The national media stoked that anger, but red tops and broadsheets were kinder this time.

But I find calls to ignore the online racist trolls tone deaf too. Despite the retreat of racist attitudes across society, I receive more racist abuse than 30 years ago – there are far fewer bigots, but social media has emerged. Anybody from an ethnic minority background who speaks publicly about race is just a click away. For prominent political and sporting voices, this is incessant, giving them a different, unequal experience of public life.

There is a hypocrisy in Twitter and Facebook's media statements declaring that racist abuse has no place on their platforms while they maintain pro-racism rules. When I reported a tweet sent to me – “you will never be British, racism is the basis of the nation” – I was told it was not in violation of the rules.

Footballing success helped the players win the symbolic argument about taking the knee, with the boycotters routed and the booing drowned out as a growing majority of fans supported the gesture, with a third still opposed. Having stood their ground, the players could decide to show the bridging spirit in victory that has largely gone missing in national politics in the Brexit era.

They could choose to retire the gesture – as an advance, not a retreat – by securing substantive investments in anti-racist reporting offline and online,

grassroots inclusion and commitments to tracking how the level playing field on the pitch can transfer to the dugout, boardroom and press box.

It would be naive to think that Euro 2020 could end the “culture war” but it has usefully drawn some boundaries on the pitch. The right discovered that “anti-woke” identity politics are a liability when they take on not some crazy student scheme, real or imagined, but target, from a minority position, young national heroes. MP [Steve Baker’s](#) call for his fellow Conservatives to show more empathy across generational and ethnic divides on racism mirrors efforts on the left to appeal across towns and cities, generations and ethnic groups.

England is an unusual country, a stateless nation with no public recognition in our more consciously multinational United Kingdom. Having cheered for England, Scotland and Wales at [Euro 2020](#), sports fans will back Team GB at the Olympics and – four nations again – at Birmingham’s Commonwealth Games next year.

That intuitive understanding of most sports fans that we have more than one flag and more than one national identity is much rarer in politics and civic society. But Southgate should not remain the main public champion of an inclusive England. If we want the England football manager to focus on how to deploy his attacking talents with more confidence, it is time for civic England to find its voice in speaking for England too.

There are more opportunities to use sport’s power to connect – the [Rugby League World Cup](#) in England this autumn will be a big deal in the north, while England’s Lionesses will try to win the European Championship on home soil next summer.

Those of us working for social connection need a much clearer public story of how to join the dots and use such high-profile moments to help forge a broader movement to bridge divides. Without that, efforts to celebrate what we share may risk being received as an establishment-led endorsement of the status quo. As the major [Talk Together](#) research report, led by Jill Rutter, sets out, narratives of unity need to be combined with a clear account of the need to change policy and practice to bridge our ethnic, faith and social class divides.

I have always believed that England will win the 2026 World Cup. This young team will peak at the right team to end 60 years of hurt, with perfect symmetry, 30 years after Euro '96. So we sang Three Lions again in the car on the school run on Friday morning. It already evokes nostalgia and regret for our Euro 2020 summer, but it is still a song of anticipation too. Let's speak out for a shared England of hope, but we can't rely on football to do all the work.

Sunder Katwala is director of British Future and former general secretary of the Fabian Society

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## For the record

This week's corrections

Sun 18 Jul 2021 01.00 EDT

An article ([Buffalo on track to hail America's first socialist city mayor in 60 years](#), 11 July, page 36) should have said that India Walton, the Democratic party nominee in Buffalo, New York, would become the first socialist mayor of a “major” US city since 1960.

Other recently amended articles include:

[Fake voters exist only in Boris Johnson's fevered imagination](#)

[Murder cases reopened in wake of Sally Challen appeal](#)

[10 of Britain's prettiest seaside villages](#)

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[Observer letters](#)[Pensions](#)

# Letters: don't blame us pensioners for financial shortfall

Older citizens have contributed to society for decades, and many rely on the state pension



Many older people are dependent on the state pension. Photograph: Kirsty O'Connor/PA

Many older people are dependent on the state pension. Photograph: Kirsty O'Connor/PA

Sun 18 Jul 2021 01.00 EDT

Will Hutton lumps pensioners together, equating us all with a wealthy elite (“[Ending pension lock is a start, but there's no easy fix to the yawning generation gap](#)”, Comment). We are not all wealthy with the perks Hutton sets out and many are dependent on the state pension, one of the lowest in Europe. Saying pensioners are the beneficiaries of cuts in overseas aid or lack of refunding of students’ fees is tantamount to implying we are less worthy of keeping out of poverty.

Hutton writes that “Britain is stuck with no revenue streams to build a fairer society”, yet fails to mention the billions of pounds that extremely wealthy people have hidden away in tax havens in order to avoid contributing to the community. So who is to blame for the shortfall? It certainly is not us pensioners. Please stop blaming us. We have contributed all our lives and if some of us have a bit more, then we pay tax on it. That is not an excuse to cut the state pension for those who do rely on it.

**Carol Terry**

London SW18

## **Awful plight of those with ME**

As the parent of a young woman who has suffered with myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME) for 21 years since the age of eight, I was deeply moved by your article on long Covid in children (“[Their childhood has been stolen](#): calls for action to tackle long Covid”, News).

But while I was relieved that so much attention is being paid to a new chronic and horrific condition, I felt like weeping for my daughter and the thousands like her, who have been ignored, disbelieved and vilified for years, not least by many medical professionals who should have been there to help and support them.

Like long Covid, ME typically follows a viral infection. Even when such an infection is easy to discover (as in the case of the Epstein-Barr virus) and precedes the onset of ME, the lack of a diagnostic test means that the symptoms of sufferers are often misunderstood as psychological, with the result that the need for vital biomedical research into ME has been consistently dismissed by successive governments. It would seem that it always takes a tragedy for action to be taken; perhaps the tragedy of long Covid will bring action for the desperate plight of those with ME.

**Kathy Goodchild**

St Albans, Hertfordshire

## **Boris Johnson, fake fan**

Andrew Rawnsley reminded us that Boris Johnson, not known as a football fan, donned a “Boris No 10” England shirt to demonstrate his support for the national side at Euro 2020 (“[This England team aren’t playing for the Tories’ version of the country](#)”, Comment).

This was a display of shameless opportunism by our cynical and hypocritical prime minister who, in response to the England squad taking the knee in support of anti-racism, said that he believed in action, not gestures. I do hope his idea of action is more substantial than mealy-mouthed words of support while playing the clown dressed in a replica football shirt.

**Mike Pender**

Cardiff

## **Public health must come first**

While the roadmap is coming to an end, Covid-19 remains a threat to public health. No one wants endless cycles of legal restrictions and lockdowns, but the idea that we should be relaxed about rising cases is wrong and damaging to public health. The vaccination rollout is a huge success and enables us to move closer to the normality we crave. However, millions have yet to receive the full protection of two jabs.

Our members, public health and environmental health professionals, alongside colleagues in local government, social care and the NHS are facing rising pressures and seeing the stark consequences of a third wave: illness, complications, hospitalisations and deaths. The human and economic cost of long Covid is only partially understood.

The government must promote effective public health measures because personal responsibility will not be enough.

First, we must remember that public health is an enabler of recovery. As we look beyond 19 July, we should be guided by a simple reality: there is no health without wealth and no wealth without health. Public health interventions, designed and implemented with businesses, can boost public confidence and create safe environments. Some businesses have already requested customers to continue to wear face coverings.

Second, we know what works in limiting the spread of Covid – washing hands, wearing face coverings in crowded indoor places, socialising outdoors, working from home if possible, opening windows and good ventilation systems, isolating people with the virus and providing financial support. Let's keep doing it. Finally, a sense of collective spirit is the unsung hero of the pandemic and will continue to be vital. Living with Covid is not the same thing as letting it rip. We should proceed carefully, not recklessly.

**Dr Jeanelle de Gruchy**, president of Association of Directors of Public Health; **Christina Marriott**, chief executive, Royal Society for Public Health; **Professor Maggie Rae**, president of the UK Faculty of Public Health; **Julie Barratt**, president of Chartered Institute of Environmental Health

## Legalising drugs saves lives

A spokesman for the Dutch justice ministry said: “People who take a pill or sniff coke at weekends are partly responsible for keeping criminals in business”, but this is less than half the truth (“[The top journalist, the mafia boss and the gunman: Dutch fear the rise of ‘narco crime’](#)”, World news). Prohibition keeps criminals in the drugs business as it did in the alcohol business in the US in the 1920s. Under prohibition, competition is conducted by gangs that provide careers to young men willing to take risks and use weapons.

Alcohol is liquid and has a low ratio of potency to volume and therefore needs to be delivered to customers in large vehicles bought and driven by adults. Powders and pills, having a high potency ratio, are very light and can be distributed in small packets by teenagers on bikes or on public transport, which is why the victims of knife crime in the UK are so young.

Although Covid-19 has caused more deaths in the UK in two years than drugs have in the last 50, our new health secretary has suggested our approach to the virus should be based no longer on rules, but on responsibilities, so the question arises: why shouldn't the same apply to drugs? Why shouldn't even the hardest drugs be legalised and Boris Johnson's “free-born Englishmen” be made individually responsible for their use so that children don't have to go on being stabbed?

**Christopher Eddy**  
Swindon, Wiltshire

## Labour's Brexit blunder

William Keegan is correct in saying that Keir Starmer was right to be a Remainer and that Brexit is a disaster, but wrong to say Starmer was right to call for a second referendum (“[The PM is no Machiavelli: his ruthless streak serves only himself](#)”, Business). Once the referendum was agreed, Labour had to abide by its outcome. Had the result gone the other way, would Remainers have agreed a second referendum?

I cannot comprehend why Labour, and other parties didn't insist on a threshold to be passed for the result to be binding. Labour should have accepted the result and stated categorically that it would negotiate something akin to the EEA deal, protecting jobs, rights at work and free movement. Had that been the case, perhaps we wouldn't be in the mess we are, led by liars and mediocrities.

**Jol Miskin**  
Sheffield

## Greed has no place here

Not all Oxbridge colleges have succumbed to greed (“[The real rivalry between Oxford and Cambridge is how low they can go for money](#)”, Comment). At Oxford University, the permanent private halls in general, and my own Regent's Park College in particular, have never accepted donations from Middle Eastern potentates, Russian oligarchs or those who oppress the poor. We preferred to send our graduates to Africa, the Caribbean and India to preach, teach and heal. We are poor but unsullied and aim to stay that way.

**Malcolm Bishop**, honorary fellow, Regent's Park College, Oxford

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## **Gross inequality stoked the violence in South Africa. It's a warning to us all**

[Kenan Malik](#)



The country's social contract has broken, fuelled by corruption and extreme poverty



A worker sits in a looted shop in Soweto, Johannesburg. Photograph: Siphiwe Sibeko/Reuters

A worker sits in a looted shop in Soweto, Johannesburg. Photograph: Siphiwe Sibeko/Reuters

Sun 18 Jul 2021 02.30 EDT

‘It feels qualitatively different this time.’ There are few people I know in South Africa who don’t think this about the [carnage now engulfing the nation](#). Violence was institutionalised during the years of apartheid. In the post-apartheid years, it has rarely been far from the surface – police violence, gangster violence, the violence of protest. What is being exposed now, however, is just how far the social contract that has held the nation together since the end of apartheid has eroded.

Many aspects of the disorder are peculiar to [South Africa](#). There are also themes with wider resonance. Events in the country demonstrate in a particularly acute fashion a phenomenon we are witnessing in different ways and in degrees of severity across the globe: the old order breaking down, with little to fill the void but sectarian movements or identity politics.

The immediate cause of the violence was the [15-month sentence](#) imposed on former president Jacob Zuma for refusing to testify at a corruption inquiry.

The protests in Zuma's stronghold of KwaZulu-Natal have, however, morphed into something bigger and more menacing. A combination of people made desperate by poverty and hunger, gangsters seeking to profit from mayhem and political activists settling scores has brought unparalleled turmoil to the country. Corruption may have ensnared Zuma, but it's not confined to Zuma. In a country in which politics is defined by state patronage, corruption is a central feature. It has allowed for a tiny black middle class to join the ranks of already-rich whites. And, together with social and economic policies that largely benefit the wealthy, it has also helped create the [most unequal society in the world](#).

Black lives often matter less, but some black lives seem to matter less than others

More than half the population lives in poverty, a [quarter in extreme poverty](#). Unemployment stands at [more than 32%](#). Among youth, [three out of four are jobless](#).

All this has been exacerbated by Covid, devastating lockdowns and government incompetence. Over the past year, almost two-thirds of households had run out of money to buy food in the previous month and almost one in five [experienced weekly hunger](#). And this was before the government [stopped Covid relief payments](#), which will make desperation even more unbearable.

And then there is police violence. In the year 2019/20, there were 629 deaths at the hands of the police and 216 cases of [alleged torture](#). South African police appear proportionately to kill [more than twice as many people](#) as their American counterparts. Yet, while global attention has, rightly, been paid to police killings of African Americans, the far more ferocious police violence in South Africa has received much less interest – even within the country. Black lives often matter less, but some black lives seem to matter less than others.

For South Africa's black population, hopelessness and rage arise from the sense that everything has changed and yet so little has. Apartheid has gone. Black people have the vote. For many, though, the country has, in material

terms, barely advanced. Apartheid had an immensely dehumanising impact on communities, but it helped to forge social bonds and channel anger into the movement for liberation. The dehumanising effect of post-apartheid policies has served only to erode the social fabric.

As the failure to tackle poverty has eroded support for the ANC, it has responded by leaning more into the politics of division, leading people to turn their anger at each other. There have been waves of violence, directed against migrant workers, much of it stoked by politicians. Many have also exploited divisions between apartheid-defined categories of people, such as “blacks”, “coloureds” and “Indians”.

The black population is the primary victim of inequality: 64% of black people live in poverty compared with just 1% of white people. Nevertheless, inequality is an issue not of race but of class: the main divisions now lie within the black population. As the World Bank’s report on inequality puts it, “increasing inequality within the black and Asian/Indian population” has “prevented any decline in total inequality”. In a political process built on sectarianism and racial and ethnic division, it’s a narrative few politicians want to pursue.

Even radical movements that claim to speak for the masses, such as the Economic Freedom Fighters, still frame the issue as a racial conflict between black and white. In response to the violence, local organisations have sprung up to help clean up the mess, distribute food and medicines, protect the community. Optimists see this as a spark for a new kind of politics. Pessimists fear they will be engulfed by the same sectarianism that shapes so much of politics.

What is happening in the country is a tragedy for the people of South Africa. It is also a warning for the rest of us.

Kenan Malik is an Observer columnist

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# National security is threatened when politics is in thrall to cash

[Nick Cohen](#)



It's not just a party matter when politicians pay little heed to who gives them money



Prince Charles with Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall and her nephew Ben Elliot, who is the Conservative party co-chairman. Photograph: Chris Jackson/Getty Images

Prince Charles with Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall and her nephew Ben Elliot, who is the Conservative party co-chairman. Photograph: Chris Jackson/Getty Images

Sat 17 Jul 2021 14.00 EDT

The sight of Winston Churchill's grandson being threatened with legal action for passing on warnings about a political influencer's dealings with a hostile foreign power ought to stir the national memory. A tingle of an alarm perhaps. A feeling that patriots should be given a hearing, not shut down by London lawyers charging £500 an hour to any passing member of the global super-rich.

Last week, the *Financial Times* [told](#) how the former Conservative MPs Sir Nicholas Soames and Charlotte Leslie passed memos that reportedly dealt with the past dealings in Russia of a businessman and philanthropist named Mohamed Amersi to Ben Elliot, the co-chairman of the Conservative party.

Amersi and his Russian-British partner, Nadezhda Rodicheva, have given the Tories more than £750,000 since 2017. In the leadership election, Amersi found he had backed every horse by giving £10,000 each to [Jeremy Hunt](#), [Michael Gove](#), [Boris Johnson](#) and [Rory Stewart](#). Whoever won would be in his debt, apart from Stewart, that is, who returned the money.

Elliot read the memos. He wasn't concerned and accepted another 50 grand from Amersi. Amersi found out about the private memos. Elliot did not pass them on to him, I am told; they came via a third party. He hired Mishcon de Reya and Carter-Ruck to threaten Soames and Leslie with actions for libel and breach of data protection and says he has already spent close to £300,000 on legal fees.

Amersi seems to want to insert himself into one of the most sensitive areas of foreign policy by setting up an alternative organisation to Soames's and Leslie's Conservative Middle East Council. He is the sole named

shareholder of a group called the Conservative Friends of the Middle East and North Africa.

It is a matter of [public record](#) that Amersi made part of his fortune doing deals in 2005 with a business empire that a Swiss tribunal found to be controlled by an associate of Vladimir Putin. Amersi was accused in a separate 2006 lawsuit in the southern district of New York of trying to “extort” a \$2bn payment from a businessman on behalf of a Russian oligarch.

Russia and China want to influence British politics. One way to do it is to give money to the ruling party and run front organisations

In 2002, an English high court judge described Amersi’s conduct as “lamentable” and his evidence as “unreliable”. Amersi told the *FT* that the judge behaved like a “farmer” who did not understand the sophisticated world of business. When I spoke to him, he alleged that the judge was biased. He added: “I believe in freedom of the press.” Asked why then he was threatening Soames and Leslie, he said that it would be for the courts to decide the truth of the matter. He added that he had made \$7m by the time he ended his dealings with [Russia](#) in 2007 and the money had gone on an apartment in Dubai and not to the Conservative party. As for the New York court case, he denied he had ever been involved in extortion.

He appears determined to go to court and perhaps the truth will come out there. But as anyone who has followed Russian attempts to manipulate western democracies will know, this story has not come from nowhere.

I have spoken to many Conservative sources who are concerned about the way their party is heading and equally concerned that the security services are evading their responsibilities. One security source said MI5 could not intervene in party political matters. He quoted the “Wilson doctrine”, Harold Wilson’s rule that the security services should not tap the phones of MPs. As no one is suggesting they should, but should, rather, look at attempts to manipulate governments, the response missed every available point. I should add that the *Observer* tried to talk to MI5 but, perhaps inevitably, it didn’t answer our questions.

Let me move away from the Amersi case to explain why there is so much fear about where Johnson is taking party and country. Russia and China want to influence British politics. One way to do it is to give money to the ruling party and run front organisations. In the 2010s, [Sergey Nalobin](#) of the Russian embassy set up the Conservative Friends of Russia. In 2015, his diplomatic visa was revoked after the security services intervened.

What would happen to a Conservative Friends of Russia today? Who would the security services warn if they could pluck up the courage to do their duty? The intelligence and security committee's Russia [report](#) explained why MI5, MI6 and the National Crime Agency backed away from investigating Russian involvement in the Brexit referendum. It was a political "hot potato" and no one wanted to face the backlash from the right that scrutiny might bring. The report added that Russian money had created a growth industry of "lawyers, accountants, and estate agents" in London who acted as "enablers".

One enabler is Ben Elliot, whose company [Quintessentially](#) provides "concierge services" to oligarchs, including advice on what art and wine to buy and on how to get their children into the best schools. Quintessentially has a Moscow office. There's money there, so why not? Amersi was a client and was photographed enjoying a party with Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, Elliot's aunt and wife of our future king.

In the past, MI5 would have talked to the cabinet secretary. But today's cabinet secretary is Simon Case, who is relatively young and inexperienced and a Johnson appointee.

Which leaves our own dear prime minister. Such is the decadence of the Johnson regime, no one expects anything of it. Johnson has rich men pay for his [holidays](#), his [decorators](#) and even the [food on his plate](#). To say he is up for sale is to underestimate the case against him. He has already been bought.

The Johnson premiership marked our transition from a society with residual notions of honour to a country where money is all you need.

Once, you had to abide by a code if you wanted to join the establishment. If you were caught breaking it, you had to go for fear your vices might

discredit the wider elite. Today, if you pay enough to the right politicians, they will offer you a concierge service and ignore anyone who asks boring questions about the national interest. The old Britain of good chaps who could be relied on, occasionally, to do the right thing has died. We do not have a government of good chaps any more, only of bad actors.

Nick Cohen is an Observer columnist

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## [Vaccines and immunisation](#)

# Pressure builds on ministers to reach a decision on Covid vaccines for children

Sage scientist warns current wave risks being longest yet, with ‘eye-watering’ hospitalisations and deaths possible

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Sage member Prof John Edmunds said the current wave of Covid cases and hospitalisations is likely to be higher for longer. Photograph: Simon Dawson/Reuters

Sage member Prof John Edmunds said the current wave of Covid cases and hospitalisations is likely to be higher for longer. Photograph: Simon Dawson/Reuters

Nicola Davis and Rowena Mason

Sat 17 Jul 2021 02.00 EDT

Pressure is growing on ministers and advisers to reach a decision on vaccinating children against Covid as a Sage scientist warned the current wave risks being the longest yet, with “eye-watering” hospitalisations and deaths possible before the end of the year despite the vaccine rollout.

In June the UK’s Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) [approved the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine for use on children aged 12-15](#). In making its decision the MHRA said the jab is safe and effective in this age group and that the benefits outweigh any risks. The jabs are already given to children in some other countries including [5m aged 12 to 15](#) in the US.

[However](#) opinion among experts as to whether the jabs should now be made available to older children in the UK appears to be divided.

While some have suggested there is a delicate balance of risks and benefits to the move, as well as ethical conundrums given vulnerable people in many poorer countries have yet to be jabbed, others stressed it is necessary to prevent disruption to education, reach herd immunity and prevent children becoming ill, including with long Covid.

The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) has made recommendations to the government on the matter, the Guardian understands. But ministers have yet to reveal what the advice says and what policy decision has been made – a hold-up leaving some committee members baffled.

“It is out of our hands as we only advise ministers,” one JCVI member said. However another person with knowledge of the situation suggested JCVI discussions may be ongoing, with data on the ratio of benefits to risks incomplete.

A senior Tory MP said some government medics were still “struggling with the idea that it might not be ethical and perhaps not even lawful” to vaccinate children when it might not be in their personal interest, even if it was in the interest of wider society.

The delay comes as England prepares to [lift almost all coronavirus restrictions on Monday](#), while data shows [estimated one in 95 people](#) in the community in England had the virus in the most recent week.

02:38

### How your mask protects other people – video explainer

Scientists have urged the government to release details of the JCVI advice. Speaking to the Guardian, Prof John Edmunds, an expert in infectious disease modelling at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, and a member of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage) and the modelling sub-group Spi-M, cautioned the current situation is different to past waves.

“[With] the previous waves, we have curtailed them by going into lockdown and so they have been quite sharp peaks,” he said, adding that meant cases and subsequently hospitalisations are brought down quickly. But the government’s plan was for no further lockdowns.

“I think that is an inherently more risky situation and the second thing about it is that I think we are likely to get a much longer wave than we have seen before,” he said, with hospital admissions relatively high for quite a long time, as modelled by Spi-M experts.

“Those epidemic peaks are long, drawn-out affairs” which could result in high cumulative numbers of hospitalisations and deaths over the rest of the year, he said. “That’s why you end up with what looks like really eye-watering, horrible numbers of deaths and hospitalisations.”

Assuming no waning in protection offered by the Covid vaccines, modelling from Edmunds and colleagues suggest between about 82,000 and 160,000 Covid hospitalisations by the end of the year and between about 9,000 to

18,000 more deaths, depending on how public behaviour changes from Monday.

Edmunds said he supported vaccinating secondary school-age children, ideally over the summer holidays, and backed calls for the release of the JCVI advice.

Dr Michael Head, senior research fellow in global health at the University of Southampton, also called for the JCVI's decision to be released. "Given the UK is opening up society and in essence simply exposing children to a high burden of Covid-19, it would be good to have a decision from the JCVI very soon," he said.

However Sir Andrew Pollard, head of the Oxford Vaccine Group, said it is right the focus is elsewhere. "At this moment the focus is rightly on ensuring high uptake of vaccines in adults to minimise the risk to the public health and pressure on the NHS," he said.

The Department of [Health](#) and Social Care was approached for comment.

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[Boris Johnson](#)

## **Johnson to press ahead with lifting Covid rules despite worry over case numbers**

Scientists and health experts urge the government to scrap ‘dangerous experiment’ as UK daily cases breach 50,000

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Friday on Oxford Street in London, as infections in the UK broke the 50,000 daily Covid cases threshold and England prepares for the imminent lifting of most restrictions. Photograph: Tayfun Salci/Zuma Wire/Rex/Shutterstock

Friday on Oxford Street in London, as infections in the UK broke the 50,000 daily Covid cases threshold and England prepares for the imminent lifting of most restrictions. Photograph: Tayfun Salci/Zuma Wire/Rex/Shutterstock

[Robert Booth and Heather Stewart](#)

Sat 17 Jul 2021 06.13 EDT

Boris Johnson is set to lift Covid restrictions across England on Monday despite Downing Street conceding concerns over rapidly rising case numbers as more than 1,200 international scientists and health experts [urged the government to scrap the “dangerous experiment” of “freedom day”](#).

[Ministers shelve plans to tweak Covid app as cases in England surge](#)

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New daily infections in the UK broke the [50,000 threshold](#) on Friday for the first time since mid-January and official figures showed one in 95 people in England are estimated to have the virus – more than quadruple the rate in the middle of June, when the prime minister set 19 July for lifting most of the country’s last infection control measures.

A No 10 source said that “in terms of case numbers and projections” the picture was now “worrying”, with the UK over halfway to the 100,000 daily infections predicted by the health secretary, Sajid Javid, after curbs are lifted. Johnson had warned of 50,000 daily cases by 19 July but said the link with hospital admissions and deaths was all but broken.

Prof Chris Whitty, the chief medical officer, [said](#) on Thursday that restrictions may need to be reimposed in as little as five weeks, before the end of the summer holidays.

“I don’t think we should underestimate the fact that we could get into trouble again surprisingly fast,” Whitty told a Science Museum webinar. “We are not by any means out of the woods yet on this, we are in much better shape due to the vaccine programme, and drugs and a variety of other things. But this has got a long way to run in the UK, and it’s got even further to run globally.”

On Saturday, former health secretary Jeremy Hunt echoed Whitty's comments, saying the situation was "very serious" and warning that the government must be prepared to "change directions" if Covid cases continued to rise over the summer and into the autumn.

"The warning light on the NHS dashboard is not flashing amber, it is flashing red," he told BBC's Radio 4 Today programme. "Covid hospital patients are doubling every two weeks. That means we are heading for 10,000 Covid hospital patients by the end of August, which is about 20 times higher than this time last year. It is a very serious situation."

Hunt, who is now chairman of the Commons health and social care committee, added: "I think coming into September we are almost certainly going to see infections reach a new daily peak going above the 68,000 daily level, which was the previous daily record in January.

"If they are still going up as the schools are coming back I think we are going to have to reconsider some very difficult decisions. How we behave over the next few weeks will have a material difference."

['A no-brainer': readers on whether they will wear a mask after 19 July](#)  
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Asked whether restrictions could be reimposed, however, the No 10 source said: "We're not in that place."

The soaring infections, driven by the more transmissible Delta variant, forced managers at the South Tyneside and Sunderland NHS foundation trust to ask staff to postpone holidays due to "extreme pressure" after Covid patients there increased from two to 80 in a month. Infection rates in England are highest in South Tyneside, Newcastle upon Tyne, Blackburn with Darwen, Burnley and Manchester. A high "ping" rate by the [NHS](#) test-and-trace app is causing staff shortages, with bin collections from Liverpool to Bristol the latest service disrupted.

On Friday it [emerged](#) that ministers have shelved proposals to urgently overhaul the app, however, which currently detects if a person has been

within 2 metres of someone with Covid for more than 15 minutes and tells them to isolate for 10 days.

No 10 did not deny reports that people had been pinged through walls but said this would not affect a “large number” of people. It was a “matter for individuals” if they wanted to close windows at home to stop getting told to isolate, a spokesperson said.

Manufacturers have also warned staff shortages “escalated significantly” this week with Stephen Phipson, chief executive of trade body Make UK, warning of “more and more companies being affected by isolation, with not just an impact on production but a hit to actual shipments of goods going overseas”.

In a further sign that Downing Street has abandoned the notion that its roadmap is “irreversible”, the prime minister’s spokesperson also declined to rule out reimposing some lockdown restrictions but said Johnson wanted to avoid it “given the huge economic, social and health costs there are as a result”.

02:38

#### How your mask protects other people – video explainer

Contingency plans which outline “reimposing economic and social restrictions at a local, regional or national level if evidence suggests they are necessary to suppress or manage a dangerous variant”, are available, the Downing Street source said, but these would only be used as a “last resort to prevent unsustainable pressure on the NHS”, which it is not currently facing.

But Lord Bethell, a health minister, signalled there would be no return to mandatory mask wearing, which will be dropped in most settings from Monday. He told the Lords: “Were we to mandate it, what is the option for the country? Are we going to issue tens of millions of fines to those who do not wear masks? If they do not wear them, will we lock them up in prison?”

Infection rates have risen so fast they are about to outrun the number of first vaccinations being administered in [England](#). The number of first jabs delivered daily is close to plateauing at about 50,000 a day leaving one in

eight adults – including more than 40% of 18- to 29-year-olds – still unvaccinated.

[The Guardian view on Boris Johnson's Covid experts: sadly on tap, not on top | Editorial](#)

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Johnson earlier this week moderated his previously buoyant tone over the unlocking as infections, hospitalisation and deaths from Covid rose, saying: “It is absolutely vital that we proceed now with caution.” But with just days to go until restrictions on indoor mass gatherings are scrapped, an alliance of 1,200 health experts [endorsed a letter to the Lancet journal](#) that demanded the government halts its plan altogether.

They warned the strategy “provides fertile ground for the emergence of vaccine-resistant variants”, putting the UK and the rest of the world at risk. At an emergency summit, government advisers in Israel, New Zealand and Italy were among those who sounded alarm bells about the policy.

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## Record 35m people will be offered free flu jab to ease pressure on NHS

Vaccine drive comes amid warnings of a nightmare winter as immunity falls due to Covid restrictions



Experts fear Covid restrictions have lowered population immunity to flu after cases fell by 95% last winter. Photograph: Mary Altaffer/AP

Experts fear Covid restrictions have lowered population immunity to flu after cases fell by 95% last winter. Photograph: Mary Altaffer/AP

*Nicola Davis* Science correspondent

[@NicolaKSDavis](#)

Fri 16 Jul 2021 19.01 EDT

The largest flu vaccination programme in UK history is to be rolled out this year, ministers have said, with jabs offered to all school pupils aged under 17.

[Last year free flu vaccines were expanded](#) to all adults over 50 and children in the first year of secondary school but this year the plans are even bigger, with secondary school pupils up to Year 11 included in the programme.

From 31 August, vaccines will also be offered to all children aged two and three , primary school pupils, people with certain health conditions, unpaid carers, pregnant women, close contacts of immunocompromised individuals, and frontline health and adult social care staff.

In total, officials say they expect the jab or nasal spray vaccine to be offered free to more than 35 million people. A record 19 million seasonal flu jabs were administered in winter 2020

[Is the UK in for a bumper flu season this winter?](#)

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The announcement comes just days after a report commissioned by the chief scientific adviser, Patrick Vallance, suggested the health service could face a [nightmare scenario this winter](#), in part because people's immunity to respiratory infections such as flu was likely to have fallen as Covid restrictions reduced their spread.

The Royal College of General Practitioners has said cases of flu in the community last season [were about 95% lower](#) than normal.

“The flu vaccine is safe, effective and protects millions of people each year from what can be a devastating illness,” said Dr Yvonne Doyle, medical director at Public [Health](#) England.

“Last winter, flu activity was extremely low, but this is no reason for complacency as it means fewer people have built up a defence against the virus. Combined with the likelihood that Covid-19 will still be circulating, this makes the coming flu season highly unpredictable.”

The UK’s health and social care secretary, Sajid Javid, said the Covid vaccination programme showed the positive impact vaccination can make.

“With the nation getting closer to normal life, we must learn to live with Covid-19 alongside other viruses and we’re offering the free flu jab to millions more people to help keep them safe this winter,” he said.

Lawrence Young, a virologist and professor of molecular oncology at the University of Warwick welcomed the announcement, which he said reflected concerns about how the inevitable winter surge of respiratory virus infections will be managed.

“Vaccinating elderly people and most vulnerable with a flu jab at the same time as they receive a Covid booster jab is a possibility. This is currently being evaluated in a clinical trial,” he said. “It will be important to have an efficient testing regime in place that is able to discriminate between different respiratory virus infections to guide clinical management.”

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## [Coronavirus](#)

# Ireland lift quarantine visitor rules for GB-based children with vaccinated families

Young children and vaccinated adults will no longer need a PCR test when border reopens on 19 July

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Dublin airport. From Monday Ireland will be loosening border controls, which have been among the strictest in Europe. Photograph: Niall Carson/PA

Dublin airport. From Monday Ireland will be loosening border controls, which have been among the strictest in Europe. Photograph: Niall Carson/PA

Lisa O'Carroll  
@lisaocarroll

Fri 16 Jul 2021 06.22 EDT

Irish families in Great Britain banking on visiting family for the first time in a year have been given the green light to travel to [Ireland](#) quarantine free if parents are Covid free and vaccinated.

In an update to its website, [the Irish government](#) made clear that vaccinated adults would not have to provide a PCR test or quarantine on entry. It has also loosened the rules for children over seven to bring them into line with the rest of the EU, eliminating the prohibitive costs of Covid tests for under-12s.

It also confirmed late on Friday for the first time that children would not have to quarantine if travelling with vaccinated parents.

“Children of any age, travelling with accompanying vaccinated or recovered adults will not be required to self-quarantine post arrival. However, where one accompanying adult needs to self-quarantine, then all children must also self-quarantine,” it said.

“Currently, children between the ages of seven and 17 must have a negative RT-PCR test in order to travel into Ireland, even with fully vaccinated or recovered adults. Children aged six and under do not need to take a RT-PCR test prior to travelling to Ireland. From 19 July, children aged 12 and over will be required to have a negative RT-PCR test to travel into the country,” it said.

[Irish people in Great Britain to get green light to visit friends and family](#)  
[Read more](#)

Irish people living in Great Britain have described the lack of information from the Irish government as “appalling”. Last week it [announced the borders were opening again](#) to non-essential travel for the first time since January but gave no confirmation it would accept NHS vaccinations or whether children had to test and quarantine.

While the government continued to decline to answer press inquiries in relation to children, Ryanair [issued a notice to its own passengers](#) that from Monday under 18s who have a negative PCR test would not have to quarantine after arriving in Ireland.

Ryanair's website states clearly that from 19 July "Both EU and UK children between the ages of 12 and 18 will still require a negative PCR test, to travel to Ireland with their families, but will not have to quarantine".

Many Irish people living in Great Britain have said they are desperate to visit parents, some who have not seen their grandchildren for two years, but were still unclear whether it was safe to book a ferry or flight.

One parent who contacted the Guardian, said: "I'm Irish living in UK with a 12-year-old and seven-year-old who haven't seen 89- and 85-year-old grandparents in Ireland for two years now. Due to fly next week but completely unclear about requirements. PCR tests are prohibitive – logistically and financially – so it's appalling the Irish authorities don't provide clarity in whether they're required, despite me and my wife being fully vaccinated."

Ireland has had one of the strictest border closures in [Europe](#), with non-essential travel banned since January, leaving entry open to limited categories such as hauliers, supply-chain workers and those with compassionate grounds to visit.

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# Delays aggravate debate over Covid jabs for UK children

Analysis: opinion is becoming sharply divided in the absence of official recommendations

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A key question is whether the benefits of vaccinating children outweigh any risks and particularly whether the benefits extend beyond the protection afforded to adults. Photograph: Maureen McLean/REX/Shutterstock

A key question is whether the benefits of vaccinating children outweigh any risks and particularly whether the benefits extend beyond the protection afforded to adults. Photograph: Maureen McLean/REX/Shutterstock

[Nicola Davis](#)

[@NicolaKSDavis](#)

Sat 17 Jul 2021 02.00 EDT

The delay in deciding whether to vaccinate children over 12 against Covid is unlikely to help resolve what is already a contentious issue.

[A survey by the Office for National Statistics](#) has found that almost 90% of parents in England would favour giving their children a vaccine if offered, and school leaders have also [backed](#) jabs for pupils.

[Up to 100 UK children a week hospitalised with rare post-Covid disease](#)

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Opinion among scientists, however, [is less clear cut](#). A key question is whether the benefits of vaccinating children outweigh any risks and in particular, whether those benefits extend beyond the protection afforded to adults by reducing spread of the disease from younger age groups.

Some argue that the direct health benefits to children may be low because they are rarely seriously affected by the infection, although there have been reports of long Covid and a complication called multi-system inflammatory syndrome.

“Given the low risk of Covid for most teenagers, it is not immoral to think that they may be better protected by natural immunity generated through infection than by asking them to take the \*possible\* risk of a vaccine,” Prof Robert Dingwall, a sociologist and member of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation(JCVI), tweeted last month.

Other experts question [whether it is morally right](#) for countries to be giving jabs to children while other nations have yet to vaccinate their more vulnerable groups.

Proponents say the benefits of vaccination outweigh any risks both in terms of children’s health and their education, and that jabs have the potential to reduce disruption to schooling. [Nearly 840,000 pupils](#) were out of class for Covid-related reasons last week.

“Although relatively mild in a high proportion of cases, Covid-19 does still make children poorly. Individuals are being hospitalised, and there is emerging evidence around long Covid in paediatric populations,” said Dr Michael Head, a senior research fellow in global health at the University of Southampton. Without vaccinating children is it unlikely the herd immunity threshold will be crossed given highly transmissible forms of the virus such as the Delta variant, he said.

“We know from existing vaccine rollouts that young adults are safely protected, and millions of older children in the US have been immunised,” he added, saying the JCVI’s decision on the issue should be made public soon.

Prof John Edmunds, a member of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies and the Spi-M modelling sub-group, is among other prominent scientists who have backed the release of the JCVI recommendations. Secondary school pupils should be vaccinated over the summer before the start of the new academic year, he said.

While debate continues, the delay in publishing the JCVI recommendations is not only likely to cause further frustration, while the impact of vaccinating children on the epidemic via the modelling of cases has yet to be completed.

“JCVI has not made any recommendations regarding children and Covid vaccines,” one of the Spi-M participants said. “Spi-M has thus not produced anything regarding children.”

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## [Coronavirus](#)

# England's Covid unlocking is threat to world, say 1,200 scientists

International experts say 'unethical experiment' could allow vaccine-resistant variants to develop

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Thousands of people marching through London on 27 June calling for all restrictions to be lifted. Photograph: Wiktor Szymanowicz/NurPhoto/Rex/Shutterstock

Thousands of people marching through London on 27 June calling for all restrictions to be lifted. Photograph: Wiktor Szymanowicz/NurPhoto/Rex/Shutterstock

[Ben Quinn](#)

[@BenQuinn75](#)

Fri 16 Jul 2021 09.03 EDT

Boris Johnson's plan to lift virtually all of England's pandemic restrictions on Monday is a threat to the world and provides fertile ground for the emergence of vaccine-resistant variants, international experts say.

Britain's position as a global transport hub would mean any new variant here would rapidly spread around the world, scientists and physicians warned at an emergency summit. They also expressed grave concerns about [Downing Street's plans](#).

Government advisers in New Zealand, Israel and Italy were among those who sounded alarm bells about the policy, while more than 1,200 scientists backed [a letter to the Lancet journal](#) warning the strategy could allow vaccine-resistant variants to develop.

An adviser to New Zealand's government told the summit he and his colleagues were astounded at the approach being taken in England.

"In New Zealand we have always looked to the UK for leadership when it comes to scientific expertise, which is why it's so remarkable that it is not following even basic public health principles," said Michael Baker, a professor of public health at the University of Otago and a member of the New Zealand ministry of health's Covid-19 technical advisory group.

Also participating was Prof José Martín-Moreno of the University of Valencia, a senior adviser to the World Health Organization (WHO), who said: "We cannot understand why this is happening in spite of the scientific knowledge that you have."

Others warned the British government's approach would be imitated, for political expediency, by authorities elsewhere.

"What I fear is that that some of the worst impulses in many of our states will follow the UK example," said Dr William Haseltine, a former Harvard

Medical School researcher and a pioneering Aids researcher who chairs Access Health International, a New York-based thinktank.

“I am extremely dismayed to see the [very rapid rate of increasing infections](#) in a population that is vaccinated pretty much like we are.”

Prof Christina Pagel, the director of University College London’s clinical operational research unit, told the meeting: “Because of our position as a global travel hub, any variant that becomes dominant in the UK will likely spread to the rest of the globe. The UK policy doesn’t just affect us. It affects everybody and everybody has a stake in what we do.”

The letter to the Lancet said: “We believe the government is embarking on a dangerous and unethical experiment, and we call on it to pause plans to abandon mitigations on July 19, 2021.”

“The world is watching the current avoidable crisis unfold in the UK,” said Dr Deepti Gurdasani, a clinical epidemiologist and senior lecturer at Queen Mary University of London, who is taking part in Friday’s summit.

She [added](#) on Twitter: “Let’s be under no illusions – we are in a country where our government is taking steps to maximally expose our young to a virus that causes chronic illness in many. Our govt is ending all protections for our children including isolation of contacts of cases in schools & bubbles.”

The summit, facilitated by [the Citizens](#), a journalism NGO, [was being broadcast live on YouTube](#) at noon UK time.

02:38

How your mask protects other people – video explainer

The concerns expressed in other countries comes after Prof Chris Whitty, the chief medical officer for England, warned on Thursday that the number of people in hospital with Covid-19 could reach “quite scary” levels within weeks, as cases soared caused by the more contagious Delta variant and the lifting of lockdown restrictions.

Whitty said in a webinar late on Thursday, [hosted by the Science Museum](#), that hospital admissions were doubling about every three weeks, and that the current low numbers of Covid admissions could rise to serious levels in the next couple of months.

New coronavirus infections in the UK are at a six-month high, according to government figures, and the number of people in hospital and dying with Covid are at their highest level since March. Thursday's data showed 3,786 people in hospital with Covid and another 63 virus-related deaths.

Downing Street, which has defended the lifting of all remaining legal restrictions on social gatherings in England on 19 July, is hoping the rapid rollout of vaccines will keep a lid on the number of people becoming seriously ill.

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## [Coronavirus](#)

# Covid countdown brings heartbreak and hope for Irish pubs

When the country entered lockdown just before St Patrick's day last year owners were hopeful they'd be back within months

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Some pubs in Ireland will have been shut for almost 500 days when they are finally allowed to open – if all goes well. Photograph: Paul Faith/AFP/Getty Images

Some pubs in Ireland will have been shut for almost 500 days when they are finally allowed to open – if all goes well. Photograph: Paul Faith/AFP/Getty Images

*Rory Carroll* Ireland correspondent

[@rorycarroll72](#)

Sat 17 Jul 2021 03.00 EDT

The 2009 romantic comedy [\(500\) Days of Summer](#) has nothing to do with Irish pubs but could end up as an epitaph for some of them.

When [Ireland](#) entered lockdown just before St Patrick's day in 2020 pub owners hoped to reopen after a few weeks, or at worst a few months.

A ticking clock on the [website](#) of the Licensed Vintners Association (LVA), which represents Dublin's pubs, shows the number of days, hours, minutes and seconds that some of its members have been waiting to reopen.

On 16 July it showed 487 days. If all goes well they will be able to open by 26 July, day 497. By then the government has promised to let indoor hospitality resume for customers who are fully vaccinated or have recovered from infection.

It will mark the end of one of the longest such lockdowns in Europe and a step toward recovery for an industry that prides itself as a cultural and social institution.

For some pubs it will be too late. Dozens have shut and many more are expected to follow them into oblivion when banks, landlords and other creditors come knocking later in the year.

“It’s been absolutely devastating,” said Noel Anderson, chairman of the LVA. “The impact on the industry is as severe as it can get. The real test will be when government [financial] supports start dwindling off.”

In the box office hit film Summer is the name of a young woman who enchants – and breaks the heart of – a character played by Joseph Gordon-Levitt.

For Irish pubs the season feels equally capricious. Those that serve food were allowed to open under strict conditions in June 2020, only for indoor hospitality to shut again in September after a fresh wave of infections.

Pubs were allowed to serve takeaway pints in winter and spring, and last month those with outdoor seating were permitted full outdoor service. About two thirds of pubs across [Ireland](#) operate under such limitations. Those with no outdoor options remain shuttered.

“I’ve a number of friends nearly closed for 500 days,” said Anderson. “For them it’s been tortuous to watch while other people trade well and you have to wait your turn.”

Those with outdoor service obsessively scan the skies and check weather apps because rain and wind – ever-present threats to an Irish summer – chase away customers. A downpour during last Sunday’s Euro 2020 final sabotaged hopes of a bonanza.

Joe Cahill, the manager of McLoughlin’s in Dun Laoghaire, south Dublin, is looking forward to opening his doors soon. “I’ll be just delighted to be getting back. I’ve missed meeting the customers, the bit of craic, the banter.”



Joe Cahill, manager of McLoughlin’s pub in Dun Laoghaire, south Dublin.  
Photograph: Rory Carroll/The Guardian

Ireland and the UK were the only European countries where alcohol consumption did not fall during the first covid wave, according to a study in the journal Addiction, suggesting a big shift to drinking at home.

Cahill knows two regulars who have installed bars in their homes but he is confident the pub's health measures, including an air quality monitor and new air conditioning unit, will entice people back. "We offer a social service as much as anything else."

Avril McKeever, the owner of McKeever's Bar & Lounge, a 153-year-old pub 30 miles north of Dublin that has no outdoor service, is excited but wary about reopening.

She had to dump stock during the first lockdown and tried [delivering beer by drone](#) but ended up shuttered for more than a year. "How did I stay sane? A miracle. I've been painting, cleaning, gardening, done everything."

She plans a cautious opening. "We're going to buy the bare necessities and if we run out of stock, tough luck." McKeever worries about looming bills, about the Delta variant triggering another lockdown, about customers not returning for fear of the virus. "I can't see it ever being the same because there'll be an awful lot of nervous people."

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[Opinion](#)[Boris Johnson](#)

## **What a week for England, when arse-flare guy looks like our brightest spark**

[Marina Hyde](#)



The security meltdown at Wembley, beamed live to the world, was topped only by the prime minister's 'levelling-up' gibberish



'Against the backdrop of the Wembley fiasco, it's hugely impressive to find Johnson & Co still somehow talking about a 2030 World Cup joint bid with Ireland this week.' Photograph: Vuk Valcic/SOPA Images/REX/Shutterstock

'Against the backdrop of the Wembley fiasco, it's hugely impressive to find Johnson & Co still somehow talking about a 2030 World Cup joint bid with Ireland this week.' Photograph: Vuk Valcic/SOPA Images/REX/Shutterstock

Fri 16 Jul 2021 08.35 EDT

Boris Johnson's major speech to explain the "[levelling-up](#)" agenda opted instead to completely level it. I can't say I've ever cared for this phrase "levelling up". It has base notes of Fred West. The fact that no member of Johnson's government seems to know what it is reinforces the suspicion that it's a good place to bury bad motives. I can no longer hear the phrase used by a cabinet minister without picturing the individual in question smoothing over some wet concrete and congratulating himself on some good "levelling up".

The prime minister had the chance to create new images, of course, but preferred to brutalise metaphor. We learned from this celebrated prose

stylist, mere words apart, that the economy is both “poised to recover like a coiled spring” and “slowly and cautiously picking itself up off the floor”. It was hardcore gibberish. I refuse to believe there was anything on his autocue, unless it was the words: “YOU’RE ON YOUR OWN, BIG BOY – WELCOME TO YOUR ANXIETY DREAM.”

Johnson’s hair, always ridiculous, now seems to have reached animal rescue stage. The PM resembles one of those old English sheepdogs that charities put on sad-music fundraising adverts, with a voice saying: “When Boris came to us, his coat was so matted he was effectively blind ... ” Or maybe he’s the star of an 80-minute Netflix movie in which the sheepdog somehow becomes president, and we end up learning a lot – if not about politics or ourselves, then definitely about the Netflix commissioning process.

The speech, supposedly months in the planning, was so bad it reminded me of the gold standard in this department – the one where he went to a Yorkshire police academy in 2019, shortly after winning the leadership election, and served up something so disturbingly weird that it gave a woman police officer standing behind him a whitey. Instead of stopping to help her, he bulldozed sociopathically on with his talking points.

That said, the great levelling-up letdown was a perhaps fitting end to the week. It certainly has been a few days to savour in the story of this septic isle. Consider just this one sequence of events. On Sunday afternoon, a pissed and coked-up England fan put a flare up his arse to delight onlookers and the wider internet. On Sunday evening, THAT guy joined thousands of other ticketless fans in successfully contriving to breach the “security arrangements” – sarcastic airquotes only, please – for the Euros final at Wembley. And on Wednesday the Met chief, Cressida Dick, was not being relieved of her job, but being made a Dame Commander at Buckingham Palace, having long ago been anointed as one of the people in public life who not only cannot fail but must somehow be advanced further, no matter the cock-ups.

What a country. Hello, world! The security operation for a major international tournament final, at 8pm after all-day drinking, was so hopeless that it was outfoxed by *arse-flare guy*. Worse still, the Met seem both keen to offload this on to the Wembley authorities and to stress that despite people

openly organising on social media channels in the days leading up to the final, they had no intelligence about plans to breach security. And yet, the only intelligence you really need is “living in England”, “knowing what some people are like”, “seeing how other countries hosting finals do it” and “having the first clue or foresight about anything”.

This simply does not happen at stadiums in other countries and at other tournaments. (City centres are different; there was an attempt to [storm a fanzone](#) near the Eiffel Tower in Paris at the final of Euro 2016.) At every international tournament final I’ve attended, cordons begin far away from the stadium, and there are several of them. Not at Wembley, of course, which was redesigned by architects who appeared not to understand what it was for, and allowed the whole scheme to spiral wildly over budget as one of the most notoriously worst-run public construction projects, even by the UK’s own exacting standards. (In 2007, £1m was spent [on photocopying alone](#).)

It now seems incredible to remember how patronising various England blazers were when South Africa won the 2010 World Cup bid, with bigwigs forever telling people that England would probably be required to step in and host once it was clear a country “like that” couldn’t get it together. But there was no ticketless storming of Soccer City when the final came to be played in Johannesburg. There were no arse-flares.

Despite this, the Met [could be found eulogising](#) its Sunday performance all week long. Not for them the self-flagellation to which 19-year-old penalty-missers submitted themselves. According to one senior officer, they had “deployed one of the most significant and comprehensive policing plans” ever used at a football match. As [Dick herself put it](#): “I’m very proud of my officers and the command team.” Yet another Cressida-based statement to which the only reaction can be: fuck me, what would it take?

Against this backdrop, it’s hugely impressive to find Johnson & Co still somehow talking about a 2030 World Cup joint bid with Ireland this week. Guys? GUYS? WHAT ARE YOU EVEN THINKING? After Sunday’s chaos, don’t even bother putting a bid together, unless you honestly can’t think of another way to spaff some of our money up a wall. The scenes at Wembley were so utterly fiascoid that your bid would be seen as auto-satirical, unless you’re willing to covertly shovel billions of pounds to

nameless Fifa ExCo members. Actually, if the last year of Covid contracts has taught us anything, it's perhaps that you are willing to do business along those lines. Would it help if any of them were mates of Matt Hancock? Maybe the head of one of the more obscure football confederations once pulled him a pint.

As for the rest of the final fallout, there have been few more unedifying political spectacles recently than that of the PM and assorted cabinet idiots trying to reverse-ferret over their sustained refusal to condemn those booing the England players taking a knee. By yesterday, Stone Island prime minister Boris Johnson was claiming never to have said them things. “I always said that it was wrong to boo the England players,” he lied, live on telly. What can you say? Maybe his spokesman was “hacked”, like some rando’s Twitter account. All in all, the kind of week over which it would be better to draw a heavy veil. If that really was the government’s big idea, then we’re not so much running on fumes as on arse-flares.

- Marina Hyde is a Guardian columnist
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# **Starmer says he'll ‘sweat blood’ for votes – now he must look beyond his inner circle**

[Zoe Williams](#)



The Labour leader needs ideas to flow in from everywhere – not just from the closed-shop of the leader of the opposition’s office



‘Keir Starmer has been out meeting people in Blackpool, having promised to ‘sweat blood’ to win over voters.’ Photograph: Anthony Devlin/Getty Images

‘Keir Starmer has been out meeting people in Blackpool, having promised to ‘sweat blood’ to win over voters.’ Photograph: Anthony Devlin/Getty Images

Sat 17 Jul 2021 04.00 EDT

Why are so many people – from the footballer Tyrone Mings to the [anti-racist campaigner Shaista Aziz](#) to the cricket fan (don’t mention the Conservative leadership) John Major – so much more visible, straightforward and effective in opposing the government than the actual opposition? It’s possibly because they don’t have a Loto, or a leader of the opposition’s office.

The Labour leader, Keir Starmer, has been out meeting people at a listening event in Blackpool, where he’s promised to “[sweat blood](#)” to win over voters. Yet his problems may be closer to home.

Starmer’s office is currently in flux. [Morgan McSweeney](#), [Jenny Chapman](#) and [Ben Nunn](#) – chief of staff, political director and head of comms – have all left, Chapman for the House of Lords. Deborah Mattinson started last

week as a strategist; Luke Sullivan, late of the whip's office, [takes over from Chapman](#).

These changes raise two irresistible questions. The first is about focus groups, since Mattinson, as founder of Britain Thinks, is considered their champion. How revealing are they, and what does it do to a party when it's led by them, or perceived to be?

This has been a fissure in the [Labour](#) party since the 90s dominance of Philip Gould – for so long that the row has become marital in tempo, conducted in shorthands and huffs, rife with misunderstandings, not all of them deliberate.

Mattinson, also the author of [Beyond the Red Wall](#), is close enough to the focus-group format to know what its limitations are. She is no slave to the fallacy of a block of immovable public opinion, and has always emphasised the one through-line all groups say: that Labour won't start to succeed until it differentiates itself from the Conservatives. This is like focus group jiu-jitsu: “You want to know what we think? We won’t really know what to think until you tell us what you think.”

Certainly, the dispiriting sense of the past few months, that Labour strategy was to be slightly to the left of the Tories, leaving space for racists to still support them because the “red wall” had spoken, is not the inevitable consequence of conducting swing-voter fieldwork.

Yet the concept remains problematic. The dominant driver in an interaction between strangers is that nobody wants to look stupid, so very high levels of consensus emerge quite quickly, whether that's in a boardroom or a vox pop. Once recorded, any residual texture or difference is flattened out by the commentary; subsequent focus groups are then informed by the knowledge of what a “generally held” opinion looks like.

Specific to the Labour party is a vicious circle, vividly illustrated at Starmer's Blackpool event: when the party isn't making bold statements that get traction, people have to reach quite far back into the larder to find something not-stupid to say about them. So voters were bringing up Gordon Brown's gaffe with [Gillian Duffy](#) from 2010, and saying the word they most associated with Labour was “debt”. This creates the impression that Labour

has over a decade's worth of bad blood to wash away, which fosters ever greater caution on the issues they should be strongest on, such as antiracism and a radical approach to public finances.

Focus groups are at their best when everyone acknowledges that it's not a questionnaire, it's a co-creation, and everyone explicitly brings something to the discussion. Message testing – “I'll give you my line, you tell me what you think of it” – is one example. Another is the citizen's jury: “tell me what you think, let me try and change your mind”.

They're at their worst when the researchers style themselves as completely impartial. It's not that the process produces bad opinions; rather, that it creates the illusion of very strong, concordant views that, parlayed into a political strategy, quickly become ridiculous.

The best example of recent times is when focus groups repeatedly said they didn't want to see Covid “politicised”. Particularly at the height of each wave, they responded viscerally against any suggestion that one politician might gain advantage over another, using human tragedy. A mood of restraint fell over the opposition.

This sounds reasonable, mature and compassionate, but only if we understand politics as something tawdry. If a politician said: “I will fight for a country where your health isn't hanging by the thread of your income and race”; “I will fight so that the heroes of the pandemic are treated as heroes, and paid as heroes”; “I will fight corruption and callousness”; all those statements would have been political, but nobody outside the government would have cried politicisation!.

The second question is about Loto itself: how as an entity it came to be seen as something so defining of the party's stance, yet also so remote, so bunkerish, so removed from the rough and tumble of the parliamentary party and unhitched from the slower gears of the party apparatus.

None of the complaints about Loto originated with Starmer's recently departed team. Corbyn's office was at constant war with the rest of the party; built few bridges outside it, particularly after the referendum; was full of people appointed in one another's image; and, true of every Loto since the

institution began informally under Blair, became more unresponsive and paranoid the worse things were going.

“It’s always a bit remote,” one former staffer told me. “You can’t have Billy Backbencher wandering around the office when things are going wrong.” This becomes something like a self-chosen siege, though, when things are going wrong all the time.

At its heart, this is not about the individuals of any Loto; nor about teams of individuals, even when they’re all white men thumping on about diversity everywhere except their own office. Oppositions come alive when there is a constant stream of ideas flowing in from everywhere: from MPs, from academics; from trades unions and their regional branches; from community organisers and third-sector campaigners (all these people, incidentally, would be kicked out of a focus group for being too partisan).

Not only must ideas flow in; every interaction has to be gold. It has to turn that person into a warrior for the opposition’s cause. This is the only thing that everyone agrees Blair was good at, pre-1997, and the only thing no Labour opposition leader since has been able to replicate. Without it, the best organised focus group on earth will always be calling into the same void: “What do we think? We won’t know until you tell us what you think.”

- Zoe Williams is a Guardian columnist
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Lockdown livingFamily

## What did Covid teach me? It's time for my kids to look after each other

Sindhu Vee

It was all going according to plan until my youngest interrupted Succession to ask, 'Mama, what is a genocide?



'I liked to think my parents made me do exactly what they wanted, but the fact is that even they couldn't.' Photograph: Getty Images

'I liked to think my parents made me do exactly what they wanted, but the fact is that even they couldn't.' Photograph: Getty Images

Sat 17 Jul 2021 04.00 EDT

It was during one of the lockdowns of 2020 – I forget which sub-type – that I decided to go Extremely Indian Mother on my (mixed-race) kids by announcing that the two teens, Kid One and Kid Two, were to be responsible for the online schooling of their youngest sibling, Kid Three (year four, they can handle it).

This would involve doing all the things the school had assumed parents would simply be able to drop everything for: sitting in on lessons, completing the homework, doing science “experiments” with baking soda and cleaning up the mess afterwards. I pulled out the big [desi](#) mum guns: “I did everything for you two – and what are you doing with yourselves anyway? Plus it’s practice for when you have kids: you’ll thank me one day.”

Unsurprisingly, very loud protests ensued. “You can’t assume I will have kids just because I have a uterus,” whined one. “I’m already feeling anxious about *not* having exams,” moaned the other. As a parent it is my duty to help them navigate tough moments and come to a sound decision, so I told them if they refused to help, I’d cancel their phone contracts. Suddenly everyone was on the same page.

And the title of that page was Lockdown Parenting Is Too Much Parenting, Someone Else Has to Step In And Frankly It Can Be Anyone. I firmly believe – and spending endless hours with my children during the lockdowns has done nothing but reinforce this notion – that parents are not supposed to be responsible for their progeny for every waking second. There’s a reason they say “it takes a village” – because if it didn’t then nobody would ever have a second (or third) child.

Delegating Kid Three’s home schooling did not go quite according to plan. The Zoom lessons themselves were just about fine, and the mandatory daily fight to the death between the siblings was never about the teaching arrangements I’d instituted – it was always about a missing phone charger. No, my plan failed because the teens advanced Kid Three’s knowledge in several unexpected fields, and I was left to clean up the mess.

One day, while I was watching [Succession](#) – Logan Roy was just about to have a stroke in a helicopter – Kid Three interrupted to ask, “Mama, what is a genocide?”

Things were exhausting enough without having to parent at the level this line of inquiry required. I set aside the more important question of the moment (is Logan dead?), took a quick mental tour of what it would take to give her a satisfactory answer, and realised what a bad idea it was. If you are

going to explain what genocide is to a child, you need to pick one. I'm not saying anyone has a favourite genocide, but in picking one to discuss in depth, you learn a lot about your own biases.

Why was I being subjected to this with no warning? It was like being mugged by my own child. One moment I'm immersing myself in the most grotesque flaws of the Logan family and the next I'm being asked to examine my own.

“Why are you asking anyway?” I said. “Because Kid One said doing homework with me was worse than being in a genocide.” I stared at her, trying to stop my mouth from twitching into a smile, and said: “Oh well, that’s stupid. And wrong. Go tell him I told you that.” Off Kid Three skipped and I dispatched a terse text with renewed threats of phone-contract removal.

[Sindhu Vee: ‘The funniest word? Discombobulated is a contender’](#)  
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I realised then that even with the threat of the most unpalatable consequences, I couldn’t ever bend my children completely to my will, and I can’t really blame them. I liked to think my parents made me do exactly what they wanted, but the fact is that even they – super-strict, traditional, Indian – couldn’t: I chose to live outside India, I married a European, my children eat meat and I’m a standup comedian. This was not my parents’ plan, but they’re OK with it. As my mother says: “You are a quite OK wife, a very focused mother. You are like me in how you tell your jokes – and like your father in all the angry moods you have.”

Even if my kids don’t behave exactly as I wish, they will have something from me in them, and when that blossoms, everything will seem perfect. I recently heard Kid Two quietly chanting the Hanuman Chaleesa (the 40-verse hymn for protection devoted to the Hindu monkey god) in bed one night after she had been terrified by watching [The Conjuring 2](#). My kids haven’t been steeped in religion, but it filled me with joy that she had absorbed my beliefs. I thought of scaring her the next night to see it happen again.

Of course these moments of quiet joy don't last long. A few days after genocidlegate, I was watching more Succession, wondering which of my kids might marry someone as dim as Tom, and thinking proudly about my ability to manage the more tedious aspects of parenting, when Kid Three walked in and asked tenderly: "Mama, what's a thunder-nonce?"

"Darling," I said, "come sit over here and let's talk about genocide."

Sindhu Vee is touring the UK from September with Alphabet. Tickets from [sindhuvee.com](http://sindhuvee.com)

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[OpinionSpace](#)

# Why are billionaires obsessed with going to space?

[Thomas Moynihan](#)

If civilisation perishes on planet Earth, Musk, Bezos and Branson seem to think humans have a backup elsewhere



British billionaire Richard Branson arrives at Spaceport America, New Mexico, on 11 July. He subsequently flew 53 miles above Earth in a craft made by Virgin Galactic. Photograph: Patrick T Fallon/AFP/Getty Images

British billionaire Richard Branson arrives at Spaceport America, New Mexico, on 11 July. He subsequently flew 53 miles above Earth in a craft made by Virgin Galactic. Photograph: Patrick T Fallon/AFP/Getty Images

Fri 16 Jul 2021 10.30 EDT

Branson, Bezos, Musk: why are these billionaires, with all their worldly riches, fixated on space travel? The Tesla founder, Elon Musk, [argues](#) that in becoming “multiplanetary”, humans might gain “failsafe” protection from the risks of extinction or planetary collapse, while Amazon’s Jeff Bezos

speaks of “[saving the Earth](#)”. If civilisation perishes on one planet, these billionaires seem to think we have a backup elsewhere.

Bezos, Musk and Richard Branson seem animated by a lofty goal: securing the future of humanity by going into space. Many have dismissed this as [billionaire bravado](#) that pays little attention to real, down-to-earth problems such as environmental collapse. Worse, others say it echoes rapacious, historic land grabs. But “going to space” and “saving the human race” are ideas that have long captivated people on Earth. Their shared history shows why we remain captivated by this prospect, regardless of who, right now, are its cheerleaders.

For centuries, the west worked on the assumption that the universe was [full of life](#) and intelligence. The alternative – that humans were essentially alone, an oasis of intelligence surrounded by lifeless, barren void – was too difficult to accept. Many presumed other planets were populated with creatures essentially identical to us. Because of this, no one acknowledged that the end of the Earth would simultaneously spell the end of human life. And there was no reason to imagine humanity migrating to other planets to bring life to a non-living universe. Writers [imagined](#) making trips to visit other celestial bodies and their humanoid occupants, but not permanently settling these spaces.

But by the Victorian period, some began acknowledging that the destruction of Earth might spell the end of human life in the universe. Scientists started putting deadlines on Earth’s future. They thought the sun was burning its fuel, shrinking and cooling. Writers such as HG Wells [suggested](#) that humanity might relocate to inner-solar system planets such as Venus as the sun died. Yet huddling around the dying stellar ember would only prolong the inevitable. Estimates were pessimistic: by the end of the 1800s, physicists predicted there were only several million years of sunshine left.

The first genuine proposals for crewed voyages to other stars came about in the early 1900s. In the 1920s, the British-Indian geneticist [JBS Haldane](#) ventured that, should humanity ever settle other star systems, its future – migrating from sun to sun – could be tens of trillions of years long. He [warned](#) that if we remain bound to the Earth, our entire future would be only a vanishing fraction of this. Haldane saw that humans might be living at the

very beginning of human history, and that their best achievements may lie ahead – if they left their birthplace. But others have been sceptical. In 1962, CS Lewis predicted that interplanetary travel would merely establish a “new colonialism”.

By the 1960s, the question of whether there is life in our cosmic neighbourhood was finally being actively tested. Satellite dishes were scouring the skies for signals of other civilisations. The search has found nothing; only silence. Unlike Wells’s generation, scientists now know there are no advanced civilisations on Mars. The possibility that we are the only civilisation in the Milky Way – and even the entire observable universe – has been firmly established. Space exploration is not a “new colonialism”, in the common understanding of the term, because at least within our solar system, anywhere we settle will be devoid of complex life.

[To obscurity and beyond: did Richard Branson really make it into space?](#)  
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Since the creation of nuclear weapons, human extinction has no longer been a distant prospect like the dying sun that troubled earlier physicists. Nuclear missiles that are capable of destroying our species have made this threat imminent and anthropogenic. In this precarious post-nuclear context, writers and thinkers such as Isaac Asimov and Stephen Hawking have hinted that, if we care about safeguarding humanity, there might be a rush to settle Mars. If humanity eventually becomes “interstellar”, we may be living during the very first infinitesimal of civilisation’s entire history. The peaks and preponderances of what [could be achieved](#) may lie in that future.

But in the immediate term, we urgently need to confront extreme risks such as the climate crisis, emerging viruses and the possibility of engineered pathogens. Not only would this improve the lives of the living, but it would also safeguard the lives of everyone who might come after them. Currently it’s only astronauts or billionaires such as Musk and Bezos who are able to fleetingly exit the Earth’s atmosphere. It’s true that Earth will one day become uninhabitable as our sun ages, and that the wider universe will remain potentially capable of supporting complex life for aeons beyond this.

Yet whether humans ever get a shot at settling other planets depends entirely on the actions of people who are currently alive. For this reason, our immediate priority should be safeguarding our environment and ensuring everyone is protected from extreme risks.

We have created the means to destroy ourselves and are presiding over the collapse of our environment – yet we haven't developed the institutions or collective wisdom to prevent this. Before humans begin embarking on grand, multigenerational projects such as reaching the stars, protecting people from these extreme risks is an urgent task for the present.

- Thomas Moynihan is a research associate in history at Oxford University, and the author of X-Risk: How Humanity Discovered Its Own Extinction
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US voting rights

## US democracy faces a momentous threat, says Joe Biden – but is he up for the fight?



Joe Biden: 'We're facing the most significant test of our democracy since the civil war. The Confederates back then never breached the Capitol as insurrectionists did on January the 6th.' Photograph: Evan Vucci/AP

Joe Biden: 'We're facing the most significant test of our democracy since the civil war. The Confederates back then never breached the Capitol as insurrectionists did on January the 6th.' Photograph: Evan Vucci/AP

The president's speech in Philadelphia decried Republicans' assault on voting rights but critics say it offered few answers, especially on Senate rules that let the minority to block reform



*[David Smith](#) in Washington*

*[@smithinamerica](#)*

Sat 17 Jul 2021 02.00 EDT

Few in the audience applauding Joe Biden could have questioned the sincerity of his warning about a momentous [threat to American democracy](#).

But they may have walked away with lingering doubts about his ability to meet the moment or answer fears that even the office of the presidency will be found politically impotent in the face of the challenge.

[‘Have you no shame?’: Biden decries Republican attacks on voting rights](#)

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“We’re facing the most significant test of our democracy since the civil war,” [Biden said in a speech](#) on Tuesday in Philadelphia, recalling the mid-19th-century conflict that left more than 600,000 people dead. “The Confederates back then never breached the Capitol as insurrectionists did on January the 6th.”

The president added pointedly: “I’m not saying this to alarm you; I’m saying this because you should be alarmed.”

Yet while Biden was praised by voting rights activists for correctly diagnosing the sickness, albeit somewhat belatedly, [he was criticised](#) for failing to offer a cure. He concluded his 24-minute speech with the exhortation “We’ve got to act!” but did not provide a battle plan.

At stake are the basic principles of democracy: who gets to vote, how they exercise that right and who gets to decide what vote counts. Since Biden’s victory over Donald Trump last November – a result that Trump and many Republicans [refuse to accept](#), citing bogus claims of fraud – that right has been under a coordinated, relentless assault as never before in modern times.

This year 17 states have enacted 28 new laws to make it harder for people to vote. There have been nearly 400 voter suppression bills introduced in 48 states, according to [the Brennan Center for Justice](#).

Some measures aim to reverse the vote-by-mail expansion that was put in place in the 2020 election due to the coronavirus pandemic. Others try to strengthen voter identification requirements, curtail hours and locations for early voting and ballot drop-offs or increase the risk that voters could be intimidated by poll watchers.

Campaigners say that people of color, young people and poor people would be the biggest losers. These groups are generally more likely to vote Democratic than Republican. Civil rights leaders met Biden at the White House earlier this month and appear to have convinced him that “the 21st-century Jim Crow assault is real”, as he put it on Tuesday.

The speech in Philadelphia, the birthplace of American democracy, was “a good first step”, according to [Chris Scott](#), chief political officer of the group Democracy for America. “I think that’s what a lot of us, especially in the progressive movement, have been calling for,” he said.

“The part that really stuck with me was invoking Congressman John Lewis in saying, ‘Freedom is not a state; it is an act.’” And so that’s why I say the speech is the first part but we are asking him to take action on this.”

Never once in his remarks did Biden mention Washington DC’s version of the F-word: filibuster. This arcane procedural rule in the Senate enables the

minority to block debate on legislation. Last month Republicans used the filibuster to [stall the For the People Act](#), which would create national standards for voting that could prevent some of the restrictions imposed by red states.



Senator Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona has said opposes scrapping the Senate's filibuster rule. Photograph: Jim Lo Scalzo/EPA

Former president Barack Obama has called the filibuster "a Jim Crow relic", a reference to its long history of thwarting civil rights legislation. Biden, who served in the Senate for 36 years, could push for its abolition or reform from his bully pulpit and by privately making the case [to sceptical Democratic senators](#) such as Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona.

Scott continued: "We cannot get any meaningful reforms passed as long as we still have this filibuster in place and so one of the greater problems is seeing him be able to have the ability of some of his predecessors. I think of [Lyndon B Johnson](#) and how he was able to leverage his experience in the United States Senate to get his own party members to fall in line."

"When we have members like [Joe Manchin](#), like Kyrsten Sinema, we have to have them actually fall in line because what we're seeing is Mitch

McConnell do what he does best. Whether or not he's majority leader or minority leader, he always finds a way to handcuff whatever progress we actually want to get done.”

Fears were expressed during the Democratic primary campaign that Biden is a boxer, not a fighter, whose faith in an age of political chivalry and bipartisanship is ill-suited to the bloodsport of the Trump era. On Tuesday he urged the passage of both the For the People Act – “a national imperative” – and [John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act](#) but both appear doomed under current Senate rules.

In [an interview with the Reuters news agency](#) following the speech, the civil rights leader Al Sharpton pointed out that Biden did not mention the filibuster, adding that he had just spoken to the president. “And he said to me just now, ‘Al, we’re still working through where we are going to be on that.’ He’s not committed yet.”

Biden’s passivity on the issue was thrown into sharp relief by more than 50 Democratic legislators who [abruptly flew out of Texas](#) in an attempt to derail Republican efforts to pass voting restrictions in the state. The group came to Washington, gave impassioned speeches outside the US Capitol and met Kamala Harris, the vice-president who is leading White House efforts on voting rights.

[Leah Greenberg](#), co-executive director of the progressive grassroots movement Indivisible, said: “It’s inspiring, it’s exactly what should be happening. Everybody in the country should be looking at what they are doing and asking themselves, how do I fight just as hard for the right to vote as these Texas Democrats are doing?

“One, they’re holding up the legislative process, but two they’re making a stand and actually bringing that fight to Washington and seeking help from the federal government and now it’s on all of us to rally to that cry.”

Greenberg also urged [Democrats](#) to be similarly aggressive regarding the filibuster. “Both Manchin and Sinema, while they’re clear that they will not abolish the filibuster, have in the past both entertained discussions around

reforming it to try to return it to its real purpose, from the talking filibuster to things like having quorum limits go down over time.



Congresswoman Joyce Beatty, center, chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, and other activists lead a peaceful demonstration to advocate for voting rights in the Hart Senate Office Building in Washington on Thursday. Beatty and eight others were arrested. Photograph: J Scott Applewhite/AP

“These are the kinds of things that the Democratic caucus should be talking about, because the idea that we are going to fundamentally leave our democracy unprotected because of this legislative loophole from the late 1700s is just absurd.”

She added: “Fundamentally, President Biden could say that out loud. He hasn’t yet even called for reform so for him to say, ‘I’m doing everything I can’ when he literally hasn’t even made the call for legislative reform that would be necessary to pass the For the People Act just doesn’t pass the smell test.”

Some Democrats are seeking creative ways to break the stalemate. James Clyburn, the House majority whip, has suggested creating a carve-out to the filibuster for legislation applicable to election law or other constitutional

changes, which would give Democrats a way to pass their voting rights bills with a simple majority, rather than 60 votes.

Clyburn, who arguably did more than anyone to secure Biden's victory in the Democratic primary, [told reporters on Wednesday](#): "I think President Biden should weigh in. All I want him to do is express support for it."

Biden has also argued that legislation is not the only tool, noting that the justice department will challenge the onslaught of voting rights restrictions and focus on dismantling racially discriminatory laws. One such intervention is already under way in Georgia.

But the issue continues to threaten Democratic unity and shine a light on the limits of the presidency – or the man who currently holds that office. Adam Jentleson, executive director of the pressure group Battle Born Collective, [said in a statement](#): "On voting rights, President Joe Biden is failing to meet the moment.

"There is a wide gap between his rhetoric and his leadership. In his speech, he described the conservative assault on our democracy as an existential threat, yet he refused to endorse the obvious solution, which is to pass voting rights legislation and reform the filibuster to do so, if necessary."

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## [Haiti](#)

# The assassination of Haiti's leader remains shrouded in mystery: 'We may never know'

Authorities are still struggling to understand the motives and masterminds behind the first killing of a Haitian president since 1915



A photo of slain Haitian president Jovenel Moïse sits below the national flag in a memorial outside the presidential palace in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.  
Photograph: Joseph Odelyn/AP

A photo of slain Haitian president Jovenel Moïse sits below the national flag in a memorial outside the presidential palace in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.  
Photograph: Joseph Odelyn/AP

[Joe Parkin Daniels](#) in Bogotá and [Tom Phillips](#)

Fri 16 Jul 2021 15.55 EDT

Giovanna Romero remembers her husband, Mauricio, as a caring father who called home every night when he was out of the country on work. He did so as usual on the night of 6 July – from where, exactly, she isn’t sure – to remind her and their children he loved them and tell them to take care.

“I’ll call again soon,” the retired Colombian soldier promised – a pledge he would be unable to keep.

The next time Romero saw her spouse was in the early hours of 9 July, when a grisly and devastating video was sent to their daughter’s mobile phone.

It showed the 45-year-old’s corpse splayed on a street a thousand miles north in Port-au-Prince: one of three alleged Colombian assassins gunned down after they had supposedly stormed the home of [Haiti](#)’s president, Jovenel Moïse, and shot him dead.

“That’s when all this started to take over our lives,” said Romero, fighting back tears as she remembered her final phone conversation with a man she insisted had done nothing wrong. “Nobody can imagine how difficult a situation like this is until they go through it themselves.”



Mauricio Romero, a retired Colombian soldier, was killed after the assassination of Haiti’s president, Jovenel Moïse. Photograph: Family handout

Romero is not the only one still struggling to fathom the motives and masterminds behind Moïse's assassination, which has rattled Haitian society and sent shock waves around the globe. Investigators in Colombia, Haiti and the United States were this week poring over an increasingly perplexing international murder mystery whose perpetrators reputedly included more than 20 hired guns from Colombia; a former Haitian guerrilla; a convicted cocaine smuggler and DEA informer called "Whiskey"; a US-based evangelist with dreams of becoming Haiti's president; and a Miami security firm which apparently took its name from the television series 24.

In the hours after Moïse was shot dead in his bedroom, in the early hours of 7 July, one of his neighbours compared the saga to an Agatha Christie novel. A week later it owes more to Frederick Forsyth.

[Why were Colombian guns for hire allegedly key to Haiti assassination plot?](#)  
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"It is a huge enigma," said Robert Fatton, a Haitian politics professor who has been tracking the whodunnit with growing puzzlement. "The more I listen to the contradictory news, the more I think that we may never know who the heck did this ... Your guess is as good as anyone's. We are in a completely bizarre situation."

Haitian authorities have claimed the intrigue revolves around Christian Emmanuel Sanon, a 63-year-old Haiti-born pastor from Florida who they say flew into the Caribbean country last month on a private jet.

Police claim Sanon had "political objectives" to achieve and recruited a band of Colombian gunmen from a Florida firm called the Counter Terrorist Unit Federal Academy – an apparent reference to Jack Bauer's fictional outfit in the television drama 24. On Friday, the Washington Post reported claims that Sanon had hoped to lead a multibillion-dollar reconstruction of his crisis-stricken homeland, whose modern history is a tapestry of manmade and natural disasters, and was rooting for a popular revolt that would force Haiti's unpopular president from power.

But many are skeptical of the narrative developing around Sanon, who has reportedly denied involvement in the first assassination of a Haitian

president since 1915.

Fatton said it was “crazy” to imagine that an anonymous figure like Sanon might have been in a position to become Haiti’s leader. “Why pick this guy, who is completely unknown in the political circles in Haiti?” he asked.

[‘It’s a hotbed’: Miami’s role in Haiti murder plot fits decades-long pattern](#)

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“You have plenty of Haitians in the diaspora who really think they have a mission to save the country – but no one takes them very seriously because they don’t have a political base and they don’t have a political party,” he said.

Fatton said his growing sense was that the murder had been an inside job commissioned by “people within Haiti who had some sort of an interest in disposing of Jovenel Moïse”.

Fulton Armstrong, an American University Haiti expert who headed the CIA’s branch there in the early 1990s, said his gut also told him the crime was the work of what US officials once called Haiti’s MREs: “the morally repugnant elites”.

“I usually think of them as the funders and the winkers and nodders to most conspiracies [in Haiti]. They really do have the ability to move things around … to buy stuff, to do communications, to do weapons,” he said, before admitting: “But it’s a shot in the dark.”

In the absence of hard facts, a profusion of theories have been spreading, including sensational claims – quickly rubbished by the Haitian police – that the architect was in fact one of Haiti’s top politicians.

On Wednesday, the Colombian broadcaster Caracol claimed investigators suspected Haiti’s interim prime minister, Claude Joseph, had ordered the hit and had attended a meeting with Moïse’s alleged killers in the weeks before his death. Haiti’s police chief, Léon Charles, called the claim “a lie” while his Colombian counterpart, Gen Jorge Luis Vargas, said he had no information suggesting Joseph was involved.

On Friday, Gen Vargas said investigators suspected Joseph Félix Badio, a former official in Haiti's justice ministry may have ordered the murder, for reasons that remain unclear.

In Haiti, meanwhile, there were reports that Moïse's former security chief, Dimitri Hérard, was being held in solitary confinement amid bafflement that not a single one of the president's bodyguards had been injured during the deadly raid.

Romero, 43, is still battling to comprehend the death of her husband, who left their home in south Colombia in early June after receiving what she described as a "totally legal" job offer from a former army colleague called Dubernay Capador.

Romero said Capador, a 40-year-old who was also killed in Haiti, promised her husband work as a bodyguard that "could lead to bigger things". After packing a bag with Bermuda shorts and T-shirts, Romero set off for the airport and flew to the Dominican Republic, from where he would travel overland to Haiti.

On Friday, Colombia's police chief said investigators believed Capador and a second Colombian called Germán Rivera had been well aware their mission was to kill Haiti's president, for reasons that remain unclear.

But Romero was adamant her husband was innocent. "Mauricio – as those that know him will surely tell you – was never capable of knowingly getting involved in all that. He was a good man," she insisted, calling for an international investigation into a crime that has upended her life and puzzled the world.

"It's the smears that hurt ... but I have no time to cry. I have to keep going. The priority is to get [his] body back on to Colombian territory," Romero said. "Once he's here, maybe the lump in my throat will go away."

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[Trees and forests](#)

# ‘Enough with the burning’: EU executive accused of sacrificing forests

Campaigners criticise European Commission strategy that allows continued burning of trees for fuel



The European Commission’s forest strategy includes a goal to plant 3bn trees across the EU by 2030. Photograph: Gaizka Iroz/AFP/Getty

The European Commission’s forest strategy includes a goal to plant 3bn trees across the EU by 2030. Photograph: Gaizka Iroz/AFP/Getty

*[Jennifer Rankin](#) in Brussels*

Fri 16 Jul 2021 10.38 EDT

The EU executive has been accused of “sacrificing forests” after it published proposals that would allow trees to continue to be burned for fuel.

The charges of “accelerating climate breakdown” through wood-burning were made on Friday as the [European Commission](#) unveiled its forest strategy, which includes a goal to plant 3bn trees across the EU by 2030.

The forest strategy is part of a [broader plan to confront the climate and nature emergencies](#) and put the EU on track to cut emissions by 55% by the end of the decade, a mammoth bundle of [legal proposals](#) known as “Fit for 55”.

Campaigners said the commission had not gone far enough to tighten the rules on wood that can be burned for fuel. A draft update to the EU’s renewable energy directive proposes banning the biomass industry from taking wood from “primary forests” – virtually untouched ancient woodlands, which account for just 3% of all EU forests.

In the next tier of “highly biodiverse forests”, wood for biomass would be limited “to ensure no interference with nature protection purposes”, the commission said. Overall “the use of whole trees for energy production, whether from the EU or imported, should be minimised”, while subsidies for biomass from tree stumps and roots will be phased out.

Lina Burnelius, project leader at Protect the Forest Sweden, said the commission had failed to address one of the key drivers of forest degradation – counting forest biomass as renewable energy. “Fit for 55 is harmful to forests and insufficient to tackle climate change. We are in desperate need of honest policies that include all our emissions in the statistics.”

The European Commission had chosen “to sacrifice forests rather than admit that current EU bioenergy policy is making the climate crisis worse”, she said. “Enough with the burning. We cannot just switch from burning one climate disastrous fuel to another”.

Burning wood for electricity [releases more carbon into the atmosphere than gas or coal](#), and many scientists are sceptical that planting trees to repay the “carbon debt” squares with commitments under the [Paris climate agreement](#).

Earlier this year, more than 500 scientists wrote to European Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, and other world leaders, calling on them to end all subsidies for wood burning. “Regrowing trees and displacement of fossil fuels may eventually pay off this carbon debt, but regrowth takes time the world does not have to solve climate change,” stated the [letter](#), whose

signatories included Jean-Pascal van Ypersele, a former vice-chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. “Trees are more valuable alive than dead both for climate and for biodiversity.”

In response to the Guardian, the EU environment commissioner Virginijus Sinkevičius said the EU strategy clearly states that “whole woods” were to be avoided for biomass. “Our aim is very clear: the forests have to play a vital role, a contribution to our Fit for 55 target, for our 55% [emissions-reduction] target.”

He suggested “most” EU member states were not burning whole trees for biomass “because economically it doesn’t make sense”. Instead, he said, biomass producers were “usually” using tree parts “that are not used anywhere else” and whole wood “is used in the value chain for products that actually store carbon for a much longer time”.

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A recent [report](#) from the commission’s scientific advisers shows that 49% of the EU’s woody bioenergy comes from residues and wastes from logging and timber processing, such as branches and sawdust. A further 37% comes from “low-quality” stemwood (trunks) and immature trees cut down for forest management, while 14% of biomass was from an unknown source, which researchers suspect to be trees, rather than waste wood.

Demand for biomass has surged in the last two decades under EU targets to generate energy from renewable sources.

Sini Eräjää at Greenpeace said demand for biomass had been driving wood extraction. The “tweaks” proposed by the commission to protect a small part of EU forestland, she said, “would allow the industry to extract more wood from any of the other forests, which is of course bad for climate”.

The final version of the law will have to be agreed EU governments and members of the European parliament.

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## [Afghanistan](#)

# Afghans flee to eastern Turkey as Taliban takes control amid chaos

Some pay smugglers to take them to Istanbul as withdrawal of US troops rekindles fears of civil war



Afghan youths take a break from walking on the rails of the Trans-Asya express, which runs between Van and Ankara. Photograph: Ruşen Takva

Afghan youths take a break from walking on the rails of the Trans-Asya express, which runs between Van and Ankara. Photograph: Ruşen Takva

*[Bethan McKernan](#) in Istanbul and Ruşen Takva in Van*

Fri 16 Jul 2021 08.50 EDT

Twenty-eight days into their journey out of [Afghanistan](#), a woman and her five children are sitting in the shade near a bus station in Tatvan, a town on the shore of Lake Van in eastern [Turkey](#).

She is waiting for a smuggler, who was paid in advance, to take the family to Istanbul. Tired and dirty, the younger children are playing in the dust and laughing; the youngest boy wants a piggyback. The smuggler is two days late.

“My husband died fighting the [Taliban](#) in Ghazni,” she said. “There are fierce battles there now. We used the mountain road [to Iran] and got stopped by Turkish soldiers at the border, but they let us go. We have walked for days ... My children are getting sick. It’s a very difficult situation.”

[Chaos has quickly engulfed Afghanistan](#) following the withdrawal of US and Nato troops after 20 years fighting against the jihadist movement; the Taliban claim to be in control of 85% of the country, kindling fears of renewed civil war.



A family from Ghazni who left Afghanistan 28 days ago, wait in Tatvan, eastern Turkey, for a smuggler to take them to Istanbul. Photograph: Ruşen Takva

While it is too early to tell whether the militants' advance will spark a fresh exodus of Afghan refugees outside the country's borders, according to the UN Refugee Agency, since January about 270,000 people have fled their

homes and are internally displaced, bringing the total uprooted population within [Afghanistan](#) to more than 3.5 million people.

At least some are already trying to get out. A family of 16 from Herat who left Afghanistan after a relative was killed by the Taliban and were then [trapped for nearly three weeks at Istanbul's airport](#) have been moved to a repatriation centre.

### [taliban map](#)

A relative in the US is unable to reach them frequently, as their phones have been confiscated, and it is unclear whether the family's application for international protection is being processed. The Turkish interior ministry did not respond to requests for more information on the family's situation.

Larger numbers of people are also making their way overland to [Iran](#), and then Turkey: the Guardian saw at least 1,900 people crossing the border, most of whom appeared to be Afghan, travelling into Van province over two nights this week.

Breaking up into smaller groups of about 30 people, the refugees and migrants from Afghanistan, [Iran](#), Pakistan and Bangladesh waited for a flashlight signal from Yukarıtulgali village, 800 metres away – a sign the path was free of border guards – before hurrying through the darkness.

Afganistan'da, Taliban'ın güç kazanması sonrası on binlerce Afgan uyruklu mülteci ülkelerini terk etmeye başladı. Ülkelerinden yola çıkan mülteci kafileleri, gruplar halinde İran üzerinden Türkiye'ye girmeye başladı. [pic.twitter.com/SuWQrfUdai](https://pic.twitter.com/SuWQrfUdai)

— Ruşen Takva (@RusenTakva) [July 11, 2021](#)

Those with enough money will try to reach Europe; others, such as the Ghazni family waiting in Tatvan, aim to find work in Turkey's cities.

“There is a spike in people crossing from Iran to Van every summer. A lot of the time the Afghans who come are already living undocumented in Pakistan or Iran, but we are watching for a possible new influx thanks to the US

troops leaving,” said Mahmut Kaçan, a Van-based lawyer specialising in immigration and asylum cases.

“Afghans end up living in limbo here; they don’t even have basic rights. The UN also stopped resettling Afghans from Turkey to third countries back in 2013, except for extremely vulnerable cases,” he said.

Turkey is the world’s biggest host of refugees and is home to approximately 4 million: the majority are Syrian, at 3.7 million, but Afghans make up the second biggest group. In 2020, 23,000 Afghans applied for international protection in Turkey, according to data available on the directorate general of migration management’s website.



An Afghan couple walk under the summer sun on the Erciş-Bitlis highway. The woman is pregnant. Photograph: Ruşen Takva

Earlier this week, the Turkish interior ministry spokesperson, İsmail Çataklı, sought to downplay reports of a fresh wave of refugees, saying video and photographs of long lines of people walking in single file along roads in Iran, just 700 metres from the Turkish border, did not mean they would be able to enter Turkey.

Ongoing work to put up security walls, observation towers, floodlights and wireless sensors along Turkey’s borders with Iran and Iraq were 90%

complete, he said, adding that “when the project is completed, terrorism, illegal crossing, smuggling, cross-border crimes will be prevented.”

## [Afghanistan's neighbours step up efforts to prevent civil war](#)

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The journey, like many migration routes, is extremely dangerous. As well as border defences and the threat to women of sexual violence from smugglers and fellow travellers, overcrowded and unsafe transport has led to deaths and drownings in Turkey. At least 12 people were killed last week after a smuggler's minibus overturned on the highway, and 60 people drowned after an unseaworthy boat capsized on Lake Van last month.

On the Tatvan highway, which runs parallel to the shores of the vast salt lake, a group of four young Afghans and one Pakistani came off the road to rest and eat as the midday heat made it too difficult to continue.

They shared some bread, tomatoes and halva between them, faces burnt from days walking in the summer sun.

“The Taliban tried to recruit me,” said one of them, who gave his name as Shorab. “We couldn’t stay. We just want to live in a place where there is no war.”

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## New South Wales

# Sydney lockdown shock as Gladys Berejiklian admits NSW has failed to ‘quash’ Covid outbreak

Fears for Fairfield, Liverpool and Canterbury Bankstown residents, while shutdown of construction sector expected to cost \$800m to \$1bn per week

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Coronavirus testing at Fairfield showground. NSW premier Gladys Berejiklian announced residents from Fairfield, Liverpool and Canterbury Bankstown LGAs would be prevented from leaving the area for work, unless they are health or emergency services workers. Photograph: Brook Mitchell/Getty Images

Coronavirus testing at Fairfield showground. NSW premier Gladys Berejiklian announced residents from Fairfield, Liverpool and Canterbury Bankstown LGAs would be prevented from leaving the area for work, unless they are health or emergency services workers. Photograph: Brook Mitchell/Getty Images

[Nino Bucci](#)

Sat 17 Jul 2021 02.28 EDT

Lockdown restrictions in Greater Sydney will be drastically tightened after the New South Wales premier, [Gladys Berejiklian](#), conceded measures introduced three weeks ago were failing to stop an outbreak of more than 1,000 cases.

Berejiklian made the changes after repeatedly denying in the past week that there was any need to harden restrictions, saying people could use their “common sense” to decide whether they were an essential workplace that had to stay open.

But as the state recorded 111 Covid-19 cases – including 29 who had been in the community while infectious – Berejiklian said there was no choice but to pull the trigger on the toughest restrictions implemented in [New South Wales](#) during the pandemic. She insisted the government had not received health advice at any other time during the outbreak that had justified the measures announced on Saturday.

[Covid Australia live news update: NSW announces 111 new cases and new Sydney lockdown restrictions; 19 cases in Victoria](#)  
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The entire construction industry will be closed, essential businesses have been defined for the first time, meaning hundreds of others will have to

close, and the residents of three local government areas in Sydney's south-west will be unable to leave unless they are health or emergency services workers.

A man in his 80s from south-western Sydney has died, the third death of the outbreak, while 75 people remain in hospital, 18 in intensive care, six requiring a ventilator.

"We want to make sure we have a no regrets policy," Berejiklian said. "We want to make sure we get out of this lockdown as soon as we can."

Berejiklian repeatedly made reference to wanting to "quash" the outbreak, and to the fact there was "no perfection during a pandemic".

"We have certainly prevented thousands and thousands of cases but we haven't managed to quash the curve and that is why the New South Wales government is taking further action from today.

"I know that many people will be very angry and upset with me, with the government, but please know that we're making these decisions for no other reason than because they are the right decisions.



“We want to get out of this as quickly as possible. This Delta variant has been a challenge for every single nation on the planet. We are no different from that.”

The decision to prevent residents from Fairfield, Liverpool and Canterbury Bankstown local government areas leaving for work, unless they are health or emergency services workers, was taken after a significant proportion of the state’s positive cases were recorded there (80 of 111 on Saturday, 60 of which were in Fairfield).

John Gilmore, the chief executive of Community First Step, a not-for-profit organisation based in Fairfield, said that while the decision was not unexpected, it still came as a shock.

He has grave concerns about the well-being of residents in the area, many of whom come from culturally and linguistically diverse and low socio-economic backgrounds.

Food insecurity was an increasing problem and there remained concerns about the ability for some school children to learn remotely, with Gilmore hearing stories about multiple children in the same household only being able to access a single smartphone to do their schoolwork. He said communities who may have already felt isolated because of their ethnic backgrounds or language barriers were feeling more alone than ever.

“I am absolutely in favour of lockdown and advocating that it should go ahead, but the longer it goes on the more it impacts on our communities,” Gilmore said.

The Unions NSW secretary, Mark Morey, said that the decision to shut down construction and non-essential work meant the federal government’s jobkeeper wage subsidy had to be revived.

The shutdown of the construction sector is expected to cost \$800m to \$1bn per week.

“The combined effect of closing retail, construction, hospitality, events and other industries is a mammoth hit to household incomes,” he said. “While

lockdown is now the only option, the onus is on the state and federal governments to provide economic security.”

The Business NSW chief executive, Daniel Hunter, said he supported the need for a tougher health response but said the economic fallout would be immense.

“There’s no sugar coating that it will have a huge impact on all businesses right across NSW,” he said.

[Scott Morrison urges Apec leaders to ramp up mRNA vaccine production and boasts of Australian economy](#)

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The NSW chief health officer, Kerry Chant, said on Saturday that the 81,928 tests received was a record.

She urged people throughout the state to be vigilant, as there had been sewage detections of the virus in suburbs without a positive case, and a group of workers from Sydney who later tested positive had been permitted to work in regional areas in the state’s west and north.

In [Victoria](#), the state recorded 19 new cases, all of which were linked to existing cases. The Victorian health minister, Martin Foley, said that on average each new case spent 1.5 days in the community.

The state is in the second day of a five-day lockdown.

“Our public health team is responding quicker than they ever have before because this virus is moving quicker than it ever has before,” Foley said. “It shows the value of going hard, and going early to make sure that we get our arms around this as quickly as we possibly can.”

Victoria’s Covid-19 testing commander, Jeroen Weimar, said there were more than 10,000 primary close contacts who have been identified and 165 exposure sites, with significant outbreaks linked to the MCG, an apartment complex, and a school.

*This story was amended on 18 July to correct the number of people who had died in the latest Sydney Covid outbreak*

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# Food strategy calls for £3bn sugar and salt tax to improve UK's diet

Report says changes in eating habits must be accelerated to meet targets on health and climate



The proposed levy could put 1p on a bag of crisps and 7p on a Mars bar, and would hit the poorest consumers hardest. Photograph: i4images premium/Alamy

The proposed levy could put 1p on a bag of crisps and 7p on a Mars bar, and would hit the poorest consumers hardest. Photograph: i4images premium/Alamy

[Patrick Butler](#) and [Damian Carrington](#)

Wed 14 Jul 2021 19.01 EDT

Ministers are being urged to levy a £3bn sugar and salt tax as part of a “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity” to break Britain’s addiction to junk food, cut meat consumption by nearly a third and help tackle climate change.

The government-commissioned [National Food Strategy](#), drawn up by the restaurateur Henry Dimbleby, says the UK population's "malfunctioning" appetites and poor diets – fuelled by consumer and manufacturer's reliance on processed food – place an unsustainable burden on the NHS and contribute to 64,000 deaths each year.

Its most eye-catching recommendation is a levy of £3 a kilo on sugar and £6 a kilo on salt sold wholesale for use in processed food, restaurants and catering, which it says would be a world first. This would raise up to £3.4bn a year, some of which should fund an expansion of free schools meals to an extra 1.1 million children and an overhaul of Britain's food and cooking culture.

[School meals, cooking culture and farm tech: key points of the food strategy](#)  
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The proposal, which could put 1p on a bag of crisps and 7p on a Mars bar, was criticised as regressive as it would hit the poorest consumers hardest. However, Dimbleby believes the tax would incentivise manufacturers to reduce salt and sugar levels by reformulating products.

The strategy underlines the damage caused by the food and farming sector to nature and the climate. "Our eating habits are destroying the environment, and this in turn threatens our food security," it states. "The next big shock to our food supply will almost certainly be caused by climate change, in the form of extreme weather events and catastrophic harvest failures."

Ministers must accelerate changes in people's eating habits and food culture if the UK is to meet its targets on health, climate and nature, it says. The UK's consumption of meat and ultra-processed food would have to drop by nearly a third and its fruit and vegetable intake rise by 30% by 2032.

Cutting current levels of meat consumption would reduce the greenhouse gas emissions and other pollution from livestock and free up farmland for forests and peatlands that can absorb carbon dioxide, as required to meet the UK's net zero emissions target by 2050.

The strategy rules out a meat tax, which proved much more unpopular in a survey than the salt and sugar taxes, calling it “politically impossible”. Instead it suggests “nudging” consumers away from meat, such as by putting veggie sausages alongside meat ones, which is known to push sales up. It also backs plant-based meats as replacements in processed foods.

Brexit also figures in the strategy, which calls on ministers to guarantee high food standards in future trade deals. Lower standards would “mean exporting all the environmental harms we wish to avoid, while undercutting – and potentially bankrupting – our own farmers,” the report says.

Dimbleby said the pandemic had been a “painful reality check”, with obesity a major factor in the UK’s high Covid death rate. The UK is the third fattest among the world’s richest nations, with three in 10 of the adult population obese.

Describing the food system as a “logistical miracle” and a “disaster”, Dimbleby said government interventions were key. “Education and willpower are not enough. We cannot escape this vicious cycle without rebalancing the financial incentives within the food system.”

He added: “Some of our recommendations will be met with protests from those industries whose business models are shaped to fit the current food system. Change is never easy. But we cannot build a sustainable, healthy and fair food system by doing business as usual.”

Other key food strategy recommendations include:

- Taking 5-8% of today’s farmland out of production to meet net zero goals and the government’s target of protecting 30% of land for nature by 2030. The report says 20% of farmland produces just 3% of calories.
- A series of initiatives to support diet in deprived communities, including trialling a scheme to let GPs prescribe fruit and vegetables to patients who are food insecure or suffering from the effects of poor diet.

- Introducing an “eat and learn” initiative for schools, involving food lessons and the reintroduction of food A-levels, to help renew declining culinary skills across every social class. “It’s time to take food education seriously,” the strategy says.

The chef and campaigner Jamie Oliver said: “This is no time for half-hearted measures. If both government and businesses are willing to take bold action and prioritise the public’s health, then we have an incredible opportunity to create a much fairer and more sustainable food system for all families.”

The independent National Food Strategy was commissioned in 2019 by the then environment secretary, Michael Gove, and [produced an interim report](#) last year. The government has promised to produce a white paper in response within six months.

Dimbleby was a co-founder and shareholder in the Leon restaurant chain in 2004 along with businessman John Vincent. The chain was [sold in April for £100m](#). He was previously commissioned by Gove to write the [School Food Plan](#) in 2013, which led to the partial reintroduction of free school meals in primary schools.

Luke Pollard, the shadow environment, food and rural affairs secretary, said: “This is a massive wake-up call to fix Britain’s broken food system … The government should be working to ensure every family can afford for their children to get a healthy hot meal every day. Britain’s high food and farming standards must be protected in law not watered down in trade deals.”

The environment secretary, George Eustice, thanked Dimbleby for the report and said the government would respond within six months setting out priorities for the food system.

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## [Long Covid](#)

# Long Covid has more than 200 symptoms, study finds

Calls for national screening programme as symptoms revealed range from brain fog to tinnitus

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A Covid-19 patient being treated in an ICU unit in India. People who have had the virus can later experience a variety of symptoms. Photograph: Xavier Galiana/AFP/Getty Images

A Covid-19 patient being treated in an ICU unit in India. People who have had the virus can later experience a variety of symptoms. Photograph: Xavier Galiana/AFP/Getty Images

*Linda Geddes Science correspondent*

Thu 15 Jul 2021 19.00 EDT

The largest ever international study of people with long Covid has identified more than 200 symptoms and prompted researchers to call for a national screening programme.

The study found the myriad symptoms of long Covid – from brain fog and hallucinations to tremors and tinnitus – spanned 10 of the body's organ systems, and a third of the symptoms continued to affect patients for at least six months.

A national screening programme would help produce a better understanding of how many people are affected and the kind of support they would need, the researchers said.

The researchers also called for the clinical guidelines for assessing patients with suspected long Covid to be widened beyond cardiovascular and lung-function tests.

Athena Akrami, a neuroscientist at University College London, and senior author of the study, said: “A lot of post-Covid clinics in the UK have focused on respiratory rehabilitation. It’s true that a lot of people have shortness of breath, but they also have a lot of other problems and types of symptoms that the clinics need to provide a more holistic approach to.”

She said that she was still experiencing symptoms 16 months after becoming infected with coronavirus, adding: “There are likely to be tens of thousands of long Covid patients suffering in silence, unsure that their symptoms are connected to Covid-19.

“Building on the network of long Covid clinics, which take GP referrals, we now believe a national programme could be rolled out into communities able

to screen, diagnose and treat all those suspected of having long Covid symptoms.”

The [study](#), published in the Lancet’s journal EClinicalMedicine, surveyed 3,762 people with confirmed or suspected long Covid from 56 countries. It identified 203 symptoms, of which 66 were tracked for seven months.

The most common symptoms were fatigue, post-exertional malaise (where people’s health worsens after physical or mental exertion) and brain fog. Other effects included visual hallucinations, tremors, itchy skin, changes to the menstrual cycle, sexual dysfunction, heart palpitations, bladder control issues, shingles, memory loss, blurred vision, diarrhoea and tinnitus.

The researchers also captured the progression of symptoms over time. “After six months most of the remaining symptoms are systemic – things like temperature regulation, fatigue, post-exertional malaise – and neurological [affecting the brain, spinal cord and nerves],” Akrami said.

11:06

Inside a long Covid clinic: ‘I look normal, but my body is breaking down’ – video

Respondents with symptoms lasting longer than six months, a total of 2,454, said they experienced an average of 13.8 symptoms during the seventh month.

Across the course of their illness, patients’ symptoms affected nine organ systems on average. “This is important for medical researchers who are looking for the underlying [disease mechanisms], and also for doctors that provide care and treatment because it suggests they should not just be focusing on one organ system,” said Akrami.

About 22% of the people who participated in the survey reported not being able to work – being fired, taking prolonged sick or disability leave, or quitting – due to their illness. And 45% required a reduced work schedule.

Meanwhile, a review led by researchers at the University of Birmingham and published in the Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine, found that

those who experienced more than five symptoms of Covid-19 during the first week of infection were at significantly greater risk of developing long Covid, irrespective of age or gender.

Separate research flagged the substantial strains that could be placed on health and social care systems in the coming years, as a result of Covid-related complications that occurred during the acute phase of illness among those patients who were admitted to hospital. It found that half of those hospitalised with Covid-19 developed at least one additional complication during their stay, while a quarter of patients were less able to look after themselves when they were discharged from hospital than before they had the virus. This impact on self-care was even higher among those with neurological complications such as strokes or meningitis.

“Being admitted to hospital with breathing problems is not a complication in itself, the complication is if they get a pneumonia on top of that, or a blood clot or an acute kidney injury,” said Dr Annemarie Docherty, an honorary consultant in critical care at the University of Edinburgh, who was involved in the study.

The study, which was published in [The Lancet](#) and involved more than 70,000 people in 302 UK hospitals, found that the most common complication was sudden damage to the kidneys causing them to not work properly. This affected one in four of those admitted to hospital with severe Covid. It was followed by lung complications, such as pneumonia or severe inflammation of the lungs, which affected around one in five patients; and heart complications, such as heart attack, inflammation around the heart or an abnormal heart rhythm, which affected just over one in eight (12%).

Although men and over-60s were most commonly affected, 27% of 19- to 29-year-olds and 37% of 30- to 39-year-olds who were admitted to hospital also experienced at least one complication.

“I was actually really quite surprised, because I was expecting the same relationship that we see with death – in other words, that the complications would [primarily affect] the frail and elderly people,” said Prof Calum Semple at the University of Liverpool, the study’s chief investigator. “I was really quite distraught to see that we were talking about young people, who

were previously fit and well, having complications such as an acute kidney injury.”

He warned that policymakers must consider the risk of complications for Covid survivors, not just deaths, when making decisions around easing restrictions. For instance, someone with an acute kidney injury will require ongoing monitoring and may require kidney dialysis or transplantation. They could also be at increased risk of cardiovascular disease and osteoporosis in later life because their kidneys are no longer properly regulating their blood pressure and bone minerals.

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[Germany](#)

## At least 58 dead in Germany as heavy rains bring catastrophic flooding

Parts of Belgium, France and Netherlands also badly affected as unprecedented rainfall wreaks havoc

01:39

'Catastrophic' flooding hits western Germany leaving dozens dead – video report

[Philip Oltermann](#) in Berlin

[@philipoltermann](#)

Thu 15 Jul 2021 15.41 EDT

At least 58 people have died and dozens more are missing in [Germany](#) after much of western Europe was inundated by record rainfall that brought devastating floods.

"Climate change has arrived in Germany," the environment minister said, as the country reeled from the sight of destroyed buildings, upended cars and people stranded on rooftops.

Weather experts said rain in the region over the past 24 hours had been unprecedented, as a near-stationary low-pressure weather system also caused sustained local downpours to the west in France, the Netherlands and [Belgium](#) where media reported that eight people had died.

Angela Merkel expressed shock at the scope of the flooding. "I grieve for those who have lost their lives in this disaster," the German chancellor said during [a visit to Washington DC](#). "We still don't know the number. But it will be many."

Everything would be done to find those still missing, she said, adding that “‘heavy rain and flooding’ doesn’t capture what happened”.

In the town of Schuld in the Eifel mountains 70 people were reported missing after several houses collapsed overnight.

### [Germany flooding map](#)

“It was catastrophic,” said 65-year-old Edgar Gillessen, whose family home was damaged. “All these people living here, I know them all. I feel so sorry for them, they’ve lost everything,” he told Reuters. “A friend had a workshop over there, nothing standing, the bakery, the butcher, it’s all gone. It’s scary. Unimaginable.”

Across Rhineland-Palatinate state 28 deaths were confirmed by the evening. “There are dead people, there are missing people, and many who are still in danger,” said the state premier, Malu Dreyer. “We have never seen a catastrophe like this,” the Social Democrat politician added. “It is truly devastating.”

The full extent of the damage in the region was still unclear after many villages were cut off by flood water and landslides that made roads impassable. Videos posted on social media showed cars floating down streets and houses partly collapsed.

01:45

'It went so fast': villagers describe destruction as flooding hits western Germany – video

In the neighbouring western state of North Rhine-Westphalia, at least 30 people died, including two firefighters who drowned during rescue missions.

In at least four separate incidents, in the cities of Cologne, Solingen and Unna, people died after being trapped by the floods in their cellars. In Leverkusen, a hospital with 468 patients had to be evacuated overnight following a power failure, after the Dhünn River breached its banks.

As Germans prepare to go to the polls in September to [choose a successor to Merkel](#), the extreme weather could heighten awareness of global heating, a topic with which the Greens, running second to Merkel's conservatives, have so far failed to dominate the agenda.

“Climate change has arrived in Germany,” said the environment minister, Svenja Schulze. “The events show with what force the consequences of climate change can affect us all, and how important it is for us to adjust to extreme weather events in the future.”

On national broadcaster ZDF, the news anchor Claus Kleber pointed out that low-pressure areas were nothing new in the region. “But the fact that they are becoming more common has to do with the Arctic and the air above it getting warmer and weakening the jet stream,” Kleber said. “Therefore it has to do with climate change.”

Annalena Baerbock, the German Greens’ co-leader and candidate for chancellor, returned from her holidays to attend the situation, but did not immediately make the connection between the floods and the climate crisis.

“The destructive extent of the floods is shocking,” Baerbock said. “My thoughts and sympathies are with the people who mourn for loved ones, worry about the missing and look after those carrying injuries.”



Devastation in the Ahr River after heavy flooding in Schuld, Germany.  
Photograph: Sascha Steinbach/EPA

Bernd Mehlig, an environment official from North Rhine-Westphalia, told WDR the situation being experienced by the state was ordinarily only seen in winter. "Something like this, with this intensity, is completely unusual in summer," he said.

According to the energy network operator Westnetz, 200,000 people were affected by power outages in the two western states.

The army was deployed across North-Rhine Westphalia to help stranded residents, and rail, road and river transport has been disrupted in the country's most populous state.

The weather system brought down 148 litres of rain per square metre within 48 hours to a part of Germany that usually receives 80 litres in the month.

The German weather service issued an extreme weather warning for parts of three western states, while Hagen, a city of 180,000, declared a state of emergency after the Volme River burst its banks.

Hagen's crisis team said water would reach levels seen not more than four times a century in coming hours and warned everyone who lived near the town's rivers to move to higher ground immediately, public broadcaster WDR reported.

Parts of Hagen were described as being isolated by high waters and all but inaccessible. Soldiers had to be sent to clear some areas of the city. Residents were also told to leave one district of the regional capital Düsseldorf.

01:00

Germany floods: stranded residents rescued by helicopter from rooftops – video

One care home in Hagen had to be evacuated, while across the region firefighters were busy pumping water out of hundreds of cellars. In one

hospital, flood waters caused lifts to fail.

A firefighter died when he lost his footing in flood waters and was swept away, authorities told WDR. Two men, aged 53 and 81, were missing elsewhere in the region.

Armin Laschet, the premier of North Rhine-Westphalia [and the conservatives' candidate to succeed Merkel](#), cancelled a party meeting in Bavaria to return to his home region on Thursday, where praised the work of the rescue services.

Across the border in Belgium, the Vesdre River broke its banks and sent masses of water churning through the streets of Pepinster, close to Liège. A rescue operation by firefighters went wrong when a small boat capsized and three elderly people disappeared. “Unfortunately, they were quickly engulfed,” said the mayor, Philippe Godin. “I fear they are dead.”

In eastern Eupen, on the German border, one man was reported dead after he was swept away by a torrent. Another man was reported missing in eastern Belgium.

01:20

Aerial footage shows flooding across Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands – video

Thousands of people in the south of the Netherlands were urged to leave their houses quickly to escape floods as rivers were on the brink of bursting their banks.

Several towns and villages along the Meuse river in the province of Limburg strongly advised people to seek refuge until at least Friday afternoon, as there was a large chance that their home would be flooded in the coming hours.

Water levels on the Meuse and the Rur reached record levels on Thursday. In Valkenburg, in the far south of Limburg, close to the Belgian and German border, floods had already engulfed the town centre, forcing the evacuation of several nursing homes and destroying at least one bridge.

Germany's weather service on Thursday warned of further heavy rain in Wuppertal and the Ennepe-Ruhr-Kreis region.

*Associated Press contributed to this report*

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## UK ‘not out of the woods yet’ says Whitty – as it happened

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## Vaccines and immunisation

# Australian government scales back supply projections for AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine

The new forecast has cut the estimated doses available in August and September by up to 10%

- [Covid-19 vaccine rollout tracker](#)
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The prime minister Scott Morrison holds a vaccine vial at a CSL manufacturing facility in Melbourne. CSL scaled back production of the AstraZeneca vaccine in June as it had to make an unrelated antivenom. Photograph: Getty Images

The prime minister Scott Morrison holds a vaccine vial at a CSL manufacturing facility in Melbourne. CSL scaled back production of the AstraZeneca vaccine in June as it had to make an unrelated antivenom. Photograph: Getty Images

[Nick Evershed](#) and [Christopher Knaus](#)

Thu 15 Jul 2021 02.53 EDT

The government has quietly scaled down projections of how many AstraZeneca doses will be available in Australia in the coming weeks, while downplaying a huge gap between the amount being locally produced and original Covid-19 vaccine supply targets.

Last month, under significant pressure over the vaccine rollout, the federal government released a planning document estimating how many doses would be distributed over the rest of 2021.

[The document, titled Covid Vaccination Allocations Horizons](#), estimated the commonwealth would distribute between 2.2m and 2.6m AstraZeneca doses a week to the states, general practitioners and the aged care and disability sector in July and August.

Overnight the government [released a new document](#) that cut that estimate to between 2m and 2.3m doses available each week for August and September, a potential reduction of up to 10.7%.

[Australia plans to shelve AstraZeneca Covid vaccine by October](#)  
[Read more](#)

Both forecasts are more than double the actual level of production of AstraZeneca vaccine planned by Australia's domestic vaccine manufacturer, CSL.

CSL told the Guardian it was only expecting to manufacture 1m doses a week from the second half of July onwards. CSL production in the past month has also been well down on its usual levels.

Throughout June, production was scaled back at CSL's Melbourne facilities because it had to produce an unrelated antivenom.

Production fell from the 1m doses a week in May to 232,000 in the week commencing 7 June. Production hovered at between 676,000 and 720,000 for the rest of the month.

### [Weekly vaccine availability by type v projected availability](#)

The government was consulted about the interruptions, CSL said.

When asked how it could originally project two months of AstraZeneca doses allocated at at least 2.2m a week, when CSL was only planning to produce 1m doses a week, the federal health department said it had no concerns about the local supply of the AstraZeneca vaccine.

It said its projections were calculated using a combination of forecast supply figures handed to government by vaccine manufacturers and “stock on hand”, which includes a reserve of second doses held by the commonwealth.

That second dose reserve will be released throughout July and August, the government said.

“The commonwealth does not anticipate any difficulties in supply of locally produced AstraZeneca vaccine,” a spokesman said.

### [‘Not time for blame game’: former Atagi representative says Morrison’s AstraZeneca comments ‘unfair’](#)

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The new vaccine rollout plan also increases the projected amount of Pfizer available in August, from between 650,000 to 750,000 doses under the old plan to 900,000 to 1m under the new plan.

It also suggests a slight reduction in the number of Moderna doses available in September, but then increases the projected numbers of Moderna from mid-October onwards.

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CSL expects production of AstraZeneca to ramp up shortly.

“In consultation with the government, production of antivenoms was scheduled through the period to ensure stock levels for these lifesaving products are maintained – this is closely planned around manufacturing of the AstraZeneca vaccine,” a spokesperson said.

“While these activities are undertaken on the fill and finish line at Seqirus, production of bulk vaccine continued at our CSL Behring site, and we expect volumes to ramp-up to around a million doses per week from the second half of July.”

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## [France](#)

# France protests: clashes with police on Bastille Day amid anger at tighter Covid rules

Demonstrations in Paris and other cities over plan for mandatory vaccinations for health workers and vaccine pass for public places

- [See all our coronavirus coverage](#)

01:13

France protests: Bastille Day clashes with police amid anger at tighter Covid rules – video

*Agence France-Presse*  
Thu 15 Jul 2021 09.25 EDT

Police have fired teargas to disperse demonstrators in Paris, as thousands of people protested throughout [France](#) over new coronavirus restrictions.

Protests began in the French capital on Wednesday morning as the annual military parade for the traditional Bastille Day parade was taking place along the famous Champs-Élysées watched by president Emmanuel Macron.

[WHO warns of ‘chaos’ if individuals mix Covid vaccines](#)

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The demonstrators are unhappy at the decision announced on Monday [to oblige health workers to get vaccinated](#) and bring in a vaccine health pass for most public places.

Unvaccinated people would require, for example, a negative test result to enter restaurants.



A protester tries to kick in the window of a shop in Paris. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

Since the announcement [a record number of French people booked appointments](#) for Covid-19 jabs.

“This is in the name of freedom” was the message from some of the protesters.

In one area of the French capital police fired teargas to disperse the crowd.

The declared route was not respected, the prefecture of police said in a tweet, condemning the “throwing of projectiles” and lighting of fires by the protesters.

Throughout Paris some 2,250 people protested, while other demonstrations took place in Toulouse, Bordeaux, Montpellier, Nantes and elsewhere. The French authorities put the total number of protesters at 19,000.

[Delta variant gains ground in US as outbreaks highlight vaccine divide](#)

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The interior ministry said that there were altogether 53 different protests throughout France.

“Down with dictatorship”, “down with the health pass” protesters chanted.

One of them, Yann Fontaine, a 29-year-old notary’s clerk from the Berry region in central France, said he had come to demonstrate in Paris arguing that the imposition of a health pass equalled “segregation”.



Police and protesters in Paris. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

“Macron plays on fears, it’s revolting. I know people who will now get vaccinated just so that they can take their children to the movies, not to protect others from serious forms of Covid,” he said.

The French government on Tuesday defended its decision to impose Covid tests for unvaccinated people who want to eat in restaurants or take long-distance trips, as the country looks to avoid a surge in more contagious Delta cases.

“There isn’t any vaccine obligation, this is maximum inducement,” government spokesman Gabriel Attal said then.

“I have a hard time understanding, in a country where 11 vaccines are already mandatory... that this could be seen as a dictatorship,” he said, adding that after a year of studying the vaccines “the time of doubting is long past”.

The rules will be relaxed for teenagers who have only been able to get the jabs since mid-June - “Making summer hell is out of the question,” Attal said.

According to an Elabe opinion poll published Tuesday, the new safety measures have a large majority of approval amongst French people.

Around 35.5 million people – almost half of France’s population – have received at least one vaccine dose so far.

At the start of the pandemic, France had some of the highest levels of vaccine scepticism in the developed world.

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### Maternal mortality

## Nepal sees huge rise in maternal deaths as Covid keeps women at home

Health workers fear deaths could reach levels not seen this century as up to 90% miss check-ups and many opt for home births

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Nepal has no midwives so women give birth with the help of auxiliary nurses or skilled birth attendants. Photograph: Prakash Mathema/AFP/Getty Images

Nepal has no midwives so women give birth with the help of auxiliary nurses or skilled birth attendants. Photograph: Prakash Mathema/AFP/Getty Images

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[Rojita Adhikari](#) in Kathmandu

Thu 15 Jul 2021 02.00 EDT

Earlier this month, 21-year-old Lakhu BK decided to have her baby at home in her village in the far west of [Nepal](#). She had feared contracting Covid-19 if she went to a health centre. She lost her life giving birth.

“I thought my daughter-in-law will die from [the] virus but did not think she would die from being unable to give birth,” said her mother-in-law, Pamfi BK, 50.

By the time the family sought medical help, it was too late. “Her baby had already died. We somehow managed to deliver a dead baby, but I could not save her life,” said Urmila Acharya, an auxiliary nurse at Dhaulagoha health centre in Kalikot district, where Lakhu died.

Lakhu’s tragic story is being repeated across Nepal as the country grapples with a second wave of coronavirus. Since April, Covid-19 cases have risen sharply: as of 13 July, Nepal had [recorded](#) 657,139 cases and 9,400 deaths.

Nepal’s maternal health services were fragile before the pandemic. The country has no midwives so women give birth with the help of auxiliary

nurses like Urmila, or skilled birth attendants.

But since the start of the pandemic, maternal deaths have soared. According to the department of health, 258 women died as a result of pregnancy or childbirth between March 2020 and June 2021. Thirty-three women had Covid-19. In the year before March 2020, the country recorded 51 maternal deaths.

Neonatal deaths have [also increased](#), from 13 deaths per 1,000 live births before lockdown to 40 deaths per 1,000 live births during the first lockdown.

Health workers fear that the second wave of infections could see maternal death rates reach levels not seen in the country this century.

“Normally, around 45 women come for the antenatal checkups in our health post but since April more than 90% of pregnant women are not in contact,” said Acharya. “We tried to reach out to them via phone but we barely spoke to 10 women.”

Lakhu was one of those who stopped attending appointments.

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Bayalpata hospital serves five districts in the region, including Kalikot. It is the only well-equipped medical centre in the region. Staff have seen a huge decline in antenatal checkups and deliveries over the past four months.

“Ninety per cent of women stopped coming for checkups and few came for delivery,” said Dr Mandeep Pathak, the hospital director.

The hospital typically has two to three deliveries a day, mainly critical cases referred from health posts or district hospitals.

“I have been working in this hospital for five years and have been observing the maternal health situation in these areas closely. I have not seen pregnant women as vulnerable as now. It’s like pre-2000 era,” said Pathak.

“We had to shut down our hospital for a week in April as our 23 staff tested positive, and I don’t know where those expected delivery cases went,” he said.

Before 2000, Nepal had a maternal mortality ratio (MMR) of more than 500 deaths per 100,000 live births. The past two decades have seen the [number fall](#) to 186. The UN has set a [global goal](#) to reduce the MMR to fewer than 70 by 2030.

“Maternal deaths have gone noticeably up due to the fear of coronavirus and lack of transportation during lockdown,” said Dr Punya Poudel, section chief at the maternal and newborn health section of the department of health.

“We know pregnant women are more vulnerable in this pandemic and we are working to restore the health system.”



Checkup rates on pregnant women in Nepal have plummeted after the government issued a stay at home message due to high Covid rates.  
Photograph: Bikram Rai/AFP/Getty Images

Paropakar maternity and women’s hospital, the oldest and best [maternity hospital](#) in the capital, Kathmandu, recorded a more than 50% decline in antenatal checkups since the pandemic.

“People call me asking if my hospital has Covid patients or not,” said hospital director, Sangeeta Kaushal Mishra. “A woman died in Kathmandu a few months back when she pushed [for] delivery at home.

“The problem is that government delivered only one main message to the public: that the virus is dangerous and people should stay at home. We did not think about pregnant women. We did not deliver a separate message to the pregnant women that they should visit hospital regularly and deliver [their] baby at hospital,” she said.

“The government failed to make people understand that the virus is not as dangerous as a critical pregnancy, and this is going to make our maternal mortality rate the highest in a decade.”

Nirmala Mijar, from Bajura district in the west of the country, says she has not had a proper antenatal checkup for five months. The 20-year-old fears visiting a health centre for her first pregnancy. “I am so scared to go to the nearest health post after hearing they have had cases of coronavirus,” she said. “I am giving birth next month and I am still confused whether I try home delivery or go to the health post.”

Sabina Thapa, an auxiliary nurse at the local health centre, says the antenatal services have not fully resumed since an outbreak of Covid-19 among staff in April. “I am so worried for the pregnant women in this village, as they are not getting proper assessment of their pregnancy,” she said.

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Illustration: Bratislav Milenkovic

## The long read

# No cults, no politics, no ghouls: how China censors the video game world

Illustration: Bratislav Milenkovic

China's video game market is the world's biggest. International developers want in on it – but its rules on what is acceptable are growing increasingly harsh. Is it worth the compromise?

by [Oliver Holmes](#)

Thu 15 Jul 2021 01.00 EDT

In the years after it was founded in 1999, the Swedish video game company Paradox Interactive quietly built a reputation for developing some of the best, and most hardcore, strategy games on the market. “Deep, endless, complex, unyielding games,” is how Shams Jorjani, the company’s chief business development officer, describes Paradox’s offerings. Most of its biggest hits, such as the middle ages-themed Crusader Kings, or Sengoku, in which you play as a 16th-century Japanese noble, were loosely based on history.

But in 2016, Paradox decided to try something a little different. Its new game, Stellaris, was a work of sprawling science fiction, set 200 years in the future. In this virtual universe, players could explore richly detailed galaxies, command their own fusion-powered starship fleets and fight with extraterrestrials to expand their space empires. Gamers could choose to play as the human race, or one of many alien species. (My personal favourite dresses in a lavish golden cape and has a head like an otter’s, with soft reddish-brown fur, dark eyes and a black snout. Another type of alien is a sentient crystal that eats rocks.)

The game was an instant hit, selling [more than 200,000 copies](#) in its first 24 hours. Later that year, Paradox decided to take Stellaris to China. This would mean navigating the country’s notoriously tricky censorship rules, but given that China was, at the time, home to an estimated 560 million gamers, the commercial appeal was irresistible.

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Paradox had been burned in China before. In 2004, the ministry of culture [had banned](#) another one of its releases, Hearts of Iron, confiscating CD-

Roms and shutting down websites that sold the game. It wasn't hard to see why. Hearts of Iron was set during the second world war and touched on numerous sensitive issues – not least by portraying Tibet as a sovereign country. The [Chinese ministry of culture](#) accused the game of “distorting history and damaging China's sovereignty and territorial integrity”. (China argues that Tibet has been an inextricable part of its territory for centuries.)

The company was not concerned about a repeat of 2004. Unlike Hearts of Iron, Stellaris was a game set in the distant future, involving intergalactic travel and aliens. Still, to help navigate the Chinese market, the developer partnered with the Chinese megacorp Tencent, [the biggest game publisher in the world](#). As part of the deal, Tencent [bought 5% of its shares](#). Paradox was so confident of success that in December 2016, it took the unusual step of [announcing](#) that it would launch in China even before a licence had been granted.

“From our perspective, it should have been largely problem-free because it doesn't deal with any nations, Chinese or otherwise,” said Jorjani. It did not pan out that way. “Working through the ministry of culture, the censorship is not a super-clear process,” said Jorjani. “It's a bit of a black box.” Five years after its big announcement, Stellaris has never officially launched in [China](#).

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China is the world's largest market for the world's largest entertainment industry. Today, the number of Chinese gamers, [about 740 million](#), is bigger than the entire populations of the US, Japan, Germany, France and the UK combined. Its domestic market is worth [more than \\$45bn a year](#). Yet, for decades, China has had a stop-start relationship with the entire industry.

Video game consoles started to arrive in China in the late 80s – some legally imported from Japan, others smuggled in to avoid high customs taxes – and arcades popped up around the country throughout the 90s. Like many governments around the world, the Chinese authorities were wary of this emerging interactive entertainment, and worried about its impact on young people. Around the turn of the century, Chinese officials and the media started to describe games as “digital opium” or “electronic heroin”. In 2000, the Communist party banned gaming consoles and arcade machines outright.

But the ban did not include personal computers, and pirated copies of video games became widely available on the black market.

Today, Allison Yang Jing is an established game developer in Hong Kong, but at the turn of the millennium she was a 13-year-old living in western China. “Families would buy their children a home computer because they believed it was a way to boost grades at school,” she told me. “But most of the parents would complain later that ‘This is not a study machine, it’s just a console.’”



Esports fans at the Tencent V-Station watch the live broadcast of the League of Legends S10 finals in Shanghai in October 2020. Photograph: Barcroft Media/Getty

At the time, home internet was slow, so children started going to internet cafes to play PC games. Yang Jing remembers playing strategy games such as Age of Empires and Starcraft. There was a constant battle with parents and schools, who wanted to clamp down on gaming. “Teachers would go to cafes to catch students,” she said. Over the next decade, millions more would flood into internet cafes, as PC gaming flourished, creating an increasingly attractive market for international developers.

Any foreign gaming companies looking to operate in China are legally obliged to have a local partner. For Chinese firms such as Tencent and NetEase, this was a goldmine. These tech giants, the Chinese equivalents of Facebook or Google, have regularly part-acquired foreign video game firms and then helped them access the lucrative Chinese gaming market. One of the first and biggest deals came in 2011 when Tencent made an agreement with the American developer Riot Games. Riot went all in, selling a 93% stake to Tencent for a reported \$400m. Four years later, it sold the remaining equity and become a [wholly owned](#) subsidiary of Tencent.

Shortly after the 2011 deal, a game designer at Riot's headquarters in Los Angeles was called in for a meeting. After Tencent's takeover, office life at Riot had been filled with the usual paranoia that comes with a new owner. "You know how it is with acquisitions. They say: 'Oh, everything is going to be the same.' But it eventually changes," said the designer, who asked to remain anonymous.

They had been working on League of Legends, a fantasy-inspired online battle game. Today, League of Legends is one of the [most popular](#) games in the world, with tens of millions of people playing every day. But back in 2011, it was still on the rise, and breaking into China was key. At the meeting, some designers discussed plans to create an altered version for the Chinese market. This process, known as "localisation", usually involves translating the text and dialogue of a game, setting up new servers to allow the game to run smoothly online, and ensuring the content complies with the publishing rules of the country.

According to the designer, Riot managers had provided a PowerPoint presentation that she assumed Tencent had made for them, although she didn't know for sure. The slides explained some of the hurdles they would need to overcome. First, Chinese regulators are notoriously squeamish about gambling, strong violence and nudity – not only in games, but in TV and film, too. This is partly because the country does not have an age-rating system. Daniel Camilo, a Shenzhen-based specialist in publishing games in China, [has said](#) the government's mindset is that "if something isn't fit for one person, it isn't fit for anyone".

The Chinese body responsible for censorship, the National Press and Publication Administration, has some very clear rules – no copyright infringement, for instance, and no sharing state secrets – but most of its guidelines are less precise. Works that “endanger social morality or national cultural traditions” are banned; as is media that “promote cults and feudal superstitions”. This vagueness gives the censors almost unlimited power and flexibility when it comes to deciding what is and isn’t allowed. Many of the rules come down to the “moral paternalism” of Beijing’s leadership, says Lokman Tsui, an expert on Chinese censorship. “They really see themselves as moral authorities – not just the authority on the truth, but also the authority on morality.”

In 2011, the designer at Riot learned of an unwritten rule that no video game can show characters emerging from the ground, as if rising from the dead. There were other rules of thumb, too. “There can’t be exposed bones or ribs hanging out,” she told me. If a game features skeletons, developers reworking it for China will simply add on flesh. Nor can games feature realistic-looking blood. “There was a vampire character, and instead of red, [the blood] had to be black,” she said.

The team at Riot was also asked to consider the Chinese market’s assumed preferences when designing characters. Some of the advice struck the designer as sensible. One slide focused on the importance of not mixing styles of dress from across Asia, which can be confusing, offensive or simply ridiculous to a Chinese audience – the equivalent of a British character in a French beret.



A woman plays Tencent's smartphone game *A Great Speech, Clap for Xi Jinping* in 2017. Photograph: Andy Wong/AP

Other recommendations were almost comical. “They said things like, ‘they [Chinese gamers] don’t really love grotesque monsters, goblins and ogres,’” the designer recalled. “They like the pretty, young, more anime style.” She remembers a long discussion about “butts” and the subtle differences between drawing them for east and west. Another time, they talked about mermaids. “A mermaid is great because she has a female torso and fish bottom,” she was told. “Here’s what’s not great: a fish head and sexy legs.”

It is hard to distinguish what Chinese gamers truly want, and what the industry, or the Chinese Communist party, has decided for them. Yang Jing, the Hong Kong-based developer, believes the assumption that the Chinese market prefers “beautified” games is a misconception. She said the industry has stumbled in its attempts to cater to children and women, who make up a large proportion of Chinese gamers. “There are games that are supposedly catering to the female market, but most female players find them very shallow and sexist.”

Looking back on the 2011 meeting, the designer didn’t feel there was any censorship of ideas or politics – it was purely a question of aesthetics. At

that point, she said, there were no “Chinese overlords” directing the American company on what it could or could not put into its games.

A decade later, the situation looks very different. Since Xi Jinping took power in 2013, China’s government has become increasingly repressive at home, and increasingly resentful of international criticism of its handling of pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong and [human rights abuses](#) in the western province of [Xinjiang](#). According to an industry insider who helps foreign developers enter the Chinese market, those developers haven’t yet realised how restrictive the situation has become: “All these developers I talk to think everything is fine and dandy, whereas everything is on fire, and we should be panicking.”

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By now, China’s growing influence on Hollywood is well known. In 2018, for instance, Paramount Pictures [partnered with Tencent Pictures](#) to produce an upcoming sequel to Top Gun. In a trailer, Tom Cruise’s iconic bomber jacket had a key difference to the one from the original 1986 film – [a stitched-on Taiwanese flag had been removed](#). (Beijing regards Taiwan, a self-ruled democracy, as a breakaway province of China.) In 2020, the US arm of Pen International, an association of writers that seeks to protect free expression, published an [explosive report](#) on how decisions in Hollywood, including the content, casting, plot, dialogue and settings of films were increasingly “based on an effort to avoid antagonising Chinese officials”. It wrote that during the past decade or more, “domestic patterns of censorship and control have extended beyond China’s borders”.

Something similar is happening in the world of video games. In 2019, the US developer Blizzard, creator of massively popular games such as World of Warcraft and Hearthstone, [expelled a top professional gamer](#) from an international esports tournament and took back his winnings after he expressed support for Hong Kong’s pro-democracy movement. Chung Ng Wai, a player from Hong Kong known by the name Blitzchung, had given a live interview in which he said in Mandarin, “Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times”. After a backlash against Blizzard’s decision, the company’s president, J Allen Brack, apologised and admitted it had “moved too quickly”. The prize money was returned, and Blitzchung’s one-year ban was reduced to six months. Later, when asked in an interview if Blizzard’s

partners in China, NetEase, had an influence on the decision, Brack replied: “Was NetEase in conversation around this issue? They were, certainly.”

In the wake of the Blitzchung affair, the US developer Riot Games [backed the ban](#) on political speech, saying official broadcasts of its tournaments were not a place for “personal views on sensitive issues (political, religious, or otherwise)”. Blizzard and Riot have interests in China. But more recently, paranoia about upsetting Beijing has spread deeper into the industry. In December 2020, a major European game publisher, GOG, [pulled the release](#) of a game that was mocking of President Xi, even though it has no Chinese investors and had not planned to sell the game in China. The horror title had featured subtle artwork comparing Xi to Winnie-the-Pooh, a common insult against the leader whose appearance has been likened to the cuddly bear.



The Gamers for Freedom protest at BlizzCon in Anaheim, California in 2019 in support of Ng Wai ‘Blitzchung’ Chung. Photograph: Brian Cahn/Zuma Wire/Rex/Shutterstock

If re-editing a movie for release in China can be tricky, changing a video game often involves a whole different level of difficulty. Whereas a film is essentially a linear series of shots, many video games are mazes of interwoven systems. Imagine that a European developer wants to release a game in China, but there is a level in which a player assassinates a Chinese

general. In a game, killing that general may lead to the player stealing his pistol, which will then affect how difficult the game becomes dozens of hours later on. The gun could be referenced in vast reams of branching dialogue. Feature film scripts average about 100 pages, whereas some games have hundreds of different potential endings that unfold according to how you play. I once reviewed [a video game](#) that had a 4,000-page script. All this can make it incredibly hard to amend games to satisfy the censors – if one part of the game is removed, the rest can collapse.

Facing the prospect of such expensive and time-consuming reworks, developers might simply decide it's not worth the trouble. Battlefield 4, a Swedish-made and US-published game in which you fight the Chinese military after a coup and can blow up buildings in Shanghai, was never going to make it past the censors.

Other developers, enticed by the promise of hundreds of millions of players, go back to the drawing board. One of the highest-grossing video games of all time, the Korean-developed PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG), was not officially released in China because it was deemed too violent, with players killing each other until the lone survivor is declared a winner. In 2017, Tencent partnered with the Korean developer, promising to ensure that the game accords “with socialist core values, Chinese traditional culture and moral rules”. Getting past the regulators required creating a completely new game. Peacekeeper Elite, as the modified version was called, had no blood and no death – when a player was eliminated, they simply [kneeled and waved goodbye](#) before vanishing.

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China's government runs a gargantuan system of direct censorship – in 2013, it was estimated to be employing [2 million people](#) to monitor and censor internet content – but perhaps even more important is the way it enforces a climate of self-censorship. The scholar Perry Link once [described](#) the threat posed by Chinese censors as being less like “a man-eating tiger or fire-snorting dragon” than “a giant anaconda coiled in an overhead chandelier”. He continued: “Normally the great snake doesn't move. It doesn't have to. It feels no need to be clear about its prohibitions. Its constant silent message is: ‘You yourself decide.’”

In the video game industry, as in many sectors, most censorship is not about top-down directives. Because the official guidelines are so vague, foreign developers tend to abide by a fuzzy, speculative and ever-changing set of unwritten “rules”, many of which are gleaned from trial and error. Time travel, for example, is considered best avoided. “I’m not 100% sure why,” said the industry insider I spoke to. “But from what I heard it’s because the government doesn’t want the people to think there is a possibility of going back in time and changing the party regime.” Lokman Tsui, the Chinese censorship expert, suggested this may be true, pointing out that history and science fiction have sometimes been used to surreptitiously criticise the government. “For a while, history was a loophole for discussing political stuff,” he said. “You would tell tales to make political commentary. I don’t know if that is similar for time travel, but I can imagine there is some similar logic going on there.”

In recent years, the industry insider, who works to help western developers in China, has found his job increasingly difficult. Growing restrictions on the internet meant he could no longer access Facebook, Twitter or YouTube, which he needed to promote his client’s games, or online game publishing platforms, which he used to sell the games. Even previously reliable VPNs had stopped working. To get around this, he would regularly travel to Taiwan, where the internet is not tightly controlled.

Then, in 2018, the government announced it was halting the release of any new games, Chinese or international. The ban lasted nine months. No official reason was ever provided. Chenyu Cui, a Shanghai-based analyst at the video game consultancy firm Omdia, said it was partly a response to complaints from parents that their children were addicted to gaming. Other explanations include an internal power battle by regulators, or a panicked attempt by authorities to rein in companies such as NetEase and Tencent, which had grown immensely rich and powerful in a very short time. “It was kind of a slap on the wrist to Tencent, to say, ‘Yes, you are a multibillion conglomerate, but you still have to obey the Chinese government,’ ” said the insider. This slap on the wrist caused Tencent stocks to plunge by 40% in just a few months, [wiping \\$200bn off its value](#) – a hit it took a long time to recover from.



Gamers at the Shenzen Game Fair in 2017. Photograph: RaymondAsiaPhotography/Alamy

During the freeze, authorities introduced even stricter regulations on video games, such as an outright ban on blood, no matter the colour. Games that fail three times to pass the byzantine review process – which includes submitting videos, screenshots and often tens of thousands of words explaining what the game is – may be permanently blocked. Meanwhile, an online game ethics committee [was established](#) to “implement the spirit of the National Propaganda”. The Communist party-backed Global Times reported that the body would block games that “violate family ethics” by portraying “homosexuality or pregnancy before marriage”.

Although the market reopened in 2019, the ban has left behind a fear that Beijing could pull the plug at any time. Before the shutdown, Tencent usually had a hands-off approach when working with developers, said the insider. Now, he said, they are under far more pressure to control the content of their games. After the government expressed frenzied alarm around gaming minors, Tencent added an “anti-addiction system” to its mobile games, announcing that it would check players’ identities and ages, and limit children aged 12 and under to one hour of play daily. (Since then, [Tencent has implemented](#) face-recognition technology to verify the age of users.) The company has also [unveiled new titles](#) that promote patriotic themes. In

autumn 2019, Tencent collaborated with the state newspaper People's Daily to produce Homeland Dream, in which players can make "Chinese" cities or provinces – including Hong Kong and Taiwan – more prosperous with real-life policies implemented by Beijing.

Some international developers I have spoken to say they can tailor games for China without changing their operations elsewhere. They play down the censorship, pointing to the fact that China tolerates [a grey market](#) in which players can buy foreign games that haven't been approved for domestic consumption by using Steam, the largest online distribution platform for PC games. But even that is changing. This year, [an "official" Chinese version](#) of Steam was launched, with just a few dozen games. If China were to restrict access to the global version, it would drive many more developers into the censorship process, or else risk losing millions in sales.

My interview with the insider was in late 2019, and at the time he was happy to speak on the record. "We're always vocal about China," he told me. "It's really good that somebody big is doing a story on this, so we can get the word out." But when I went back to him recently, ahead of publication, he had become nervous and requested anonymity. He said he believes his Chinese staff's phones are being monitored, and he is worried. "It's really turning into a dystopia."

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To their strongest critics, Tencent and NetEase effectively play the role of a private arm of the government's censorship operation. There is no doubt that Tencent's founder, Ma Huateng, and NetEase's CEO, Ding Lei, have capitalised on the country's move towards a more open economy in the past two decades, while always trying to keep on the right side of the authorities. But many international video game companies see Tencent and NetEase as helpful allies in working around censorship, rather than more sinister enforcers of the government line. Tencent itself says it wants the companies it invests in to "operate independently".

In April 2021, Ma [became China's richest man](#), with an estimated fortune of \$63bn. Min Tang, an assistant teaching professor at the University of Washington Bothell, wrote a dissertation on how capitalism and power structures shaped Tencent, but even she found it hard to understand how

close Ma was to Beijing. “Not much documentation reveals Tencent’s government relations,” she wrote, “except for the known fact” that, after rising to prominence in business, Ma became a deputy in parliament.

Even less has been written about NetEase’s Ding Lei. He founded the company in 1997 and offered one of China’s first internet services. Ding became the country’s first internet and gaming billionaire in 2003, and today Bloomberg’s Billionaires Index puts [his net worth](#) at \$34.7bn. Despite this, NetEase’s English-language presence on the internet is minimal – its official Twitter account has only about 5,000 followers.

Still, no Chinese company could rise to such power without a close relationship with the authorities, and the influence of these two companies goes far beyond video games. Tencent owns the messaging app WeChat, which has one billion users, and has been accused of using it [to surveil people](#), even outside China. (The company denies this, saying all “all content shared among international users” is private.) In China, the firm regularly shuts down WeChat accounts at the request of the government, including critical voices. Meanwhile, NetEase has a massive internet presence and has branched out into other seemingly unrelated industries, including, surprisingly, [pig farming](#).

When I spoke to video game industry workers inside Tencent and NetEase – none of whom were willing to provide their names – they framed China’s strict censorship rules as just one element of a global market in which *all* governments restrict culture. In Russia, for instance, portraying LGBT characters [can lead to a ban](#). In some Muslim-majority countries, smoking or alcohol consumption has to be removed. Some localisation experts refer to “geopolitical imaginations” – an assumed shared view of the world from country to country.

“It’s a tricky issue,” said a staffer at NetEase. “I think a lot of western observers assume that the things that end up being censored in games are things that only people in the government care about. In reality, they are sensitive to a lot of Chinese people, too.” But given the Communist party’s increasingly harsh restrictions on free speech, it is impossible to know to what extent the Chinese censors really reflect public opinion. Maya Wang, a senior China researcher at Human Rights Watch, says she believes that a fair

proportion of Chinese people actually are “very critical of the government, but the manipulation of the online environment has meant those voices are drowned out, creating this mirage that Chinese people are very nationalistic, which tells only part of the story”.



Pro-democracy activist Joshua Wong poses with the game Animal Crossing on Nintendo Switch in Hong Kong. Photograph: Tyrone Siu/Reuters

Ostensibly liberal governments also censor. Australia has a [particularly paternalistic](#) attitude to video games, restricting them much more than TV or film. In Europe, German regulators [have banned](#) scores of mainstream games for gratuitous violence. For this reason, some Chinese industry figures argue that singling out China is unfair. “The direction this conversation usually goes is people say [video game developers] are bowing their heads, or ‘kowtowing’. They use some shitty, racist, veiled language to say how people are trying to make money,” said one person at NetEase. He pointed out that age ratings of films, TV shows and video games are also a form of censorship that dictates artistic choices. Hollywood producers will make sure films are edited to get a PG-13 rather than an adult rating, because that means they can pack the cinemas with teenagers. “In the same sense, you can say *that* is censoring to try to make money,” said the NetEase staffer.

Frustration with the focus on China is motivated partly by a sense of double standards. Much of the global games industry, like the film industry, has long been shaped by a jingoistic American outlook. Just as action movies during the cold war often had Russian villains, video games since 9/11 have stereotyped Arabs and Muslims as henchmen to be gunned down. One upcoming game, called Six Days in Fallujah, portrays the events of a bloody 2004 [Iraq war attack](#) from the perspective of American soldiers. One gaming news website, Kotaku, mockingly [referred to it as “war crime simulator”](#). Indeed, the part of the industry that makes shooting games is [deeply entwined](#) with the US military. Games have been created specifically in order to recruit soldiers, and developers regularly collaborate with the US military – and gun makers – to create their games.

As China becomes more dominant in the market, developers will probably start censoring themselves from the outset, altogether avoiding themes that might offend Beijing. “It’s cheaper to make these adjustments during development than once the game is out,” said an employee at Tencent.

Asked if global game developers will now broadly self-censor their games to appease China, the NetEase source was combative, but said: “So if this is the soundbite you want, I will say, it will definitely happen. But the context that you frame that within is that this would happen with any market that was this large. Any opportunity that any producer has to make a ton of money by releasing their media within a certain market, they are definitely going to try their best to localise that content for that market. And that’s the whole point, that’s what we do, that’s how I’ve made my money for years.”

The impact of all this is unpredictable. But what is clear is that an entire generation is learning about the world through video games, and China now has significant influence over what is in them. People unfamiliar with video games often underestimate their cultural impact. So many children are learning history by playing the Assassin’s Creed franchise – in which each game is set in a different time period, from the medieval Middle East to Medici-era Italy – that the game’s developer, Ubisoft, implemented an educational mode in which players are given [guided tours](#) of games set in ancient Egypt and Greece. Would Ubisoft – which is 5% owned by Tencent and has an established presence in China – release a similar version set in China (or Tibet and Taiwan) and risk upsetting Beijing and blocking access

to the market for its other games? If the game were to cover sensitive historical topics, it would be a gamble. A few years ago, Ubisoft made a much smaller spinoff game based on Chinese history called [Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China](#), but it was not released in the country.

It's not just creative freedom that's at risk, but freedom of expression, too. Unlike other art forms, video games allow users, and not just makers, to express their creativity. In April 2020, Hong Kong activists used the Nintendo Switch game Animal Crossing: New Horizons to spread pro-democracy messages. The [popular island-life simulation game](#) allows users to decorate their game environment with their own designs, and famed activist Joshua Wong shared a screenshot on Twitter of his own in-game island with a banner reading "Free Hong Kong, revolution now". Shortly after, the game [was removed](#) from China's eBay-equivalent, Taobao.

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In retrospect, perhaps it was naive to assume that just because Stellaris was set in the distant future, it wouldn't attract much attention from the censors. Paradox's Shams Jorjani thinks the biggest problem was that the game gives players the power to choose how to govern their galactic empire. And "choose" is the critical word. Players might opt to run a religious death cult, a criminal enterprise, or, if they want, a democracy.

Paradox is not willing to compromise. "As a company, we're very clear what our values are. We are pro-democracy," Jorjani said. A handful of other big names in the industry have taken a similar stance. After the Blizzard controversy, Epic Games, the maker of [Fortnite](#), said it would never prevent someone from expressing their political views. This was particularly striking, as Tencent owns 40% of Epic. Still, the company's founder, Tim Sweeney, is in the rare position of being a controlling shareholder, which allows him to take a clear ideological stance. After the Blizzard ban, [Sweeney said on Twitter](#): "That will never happen on my watch." Another studio, Czech developer Bohemia Interactive, which sold an undisclosed minority stake to Tencent in February, has also committed to freedom of expression.

These developers are the exceptions. In a sign of just how anxious companies are about discussing China, most firms contacted with requests

for interviews for this article refused, including Tencent, NetEase, Riot Games, Electronic Arts, Activision Blizzard, Ubisoft (“the topic is quite sensitive”), GOG (“kindly decline to make any further comments on the topic”) and Krafton. Even companies that have, as recently as 2019, pledged to uphold free speech, such as Wizards of the Coast and Immutable, did not respond to requests for comment. Nor did the Chinese government and regulator.

[Fifa: the video game that changed football | Simon Parkin](#)

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Jorjani understands that companies with big stakes in China, such as Blizzard, are walking a tightrope. “Let’s put it this way, China is not our primary market,” he said. He acknowledged that if Paradox had to deal with lots of censorship in their own key markets, such as western Europe and the US, they might have to “rethink” their approach.

Still, he is clear there are no “edicts” on whether his game designer teams should avoid making political statements. “The main driving factor is interesting gameplay,” said Jorjani, “not so much anything else.”

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## Movies

Interview

# ‘Death in Venice screwed up my life’ – the tragic story of Visconti’s ‘beautiful boy’

[Ryan Gilbey](#)

Björn Andrésen was the striking child star of the classic film, the perfect embodiment of youthful beauty. Fifty years on, he is still haunted by the exploitation that continued long after filming



Angelic ... Björn Andrésen with Dirk Bogarde in Death in Venice.  
Photograph: Allstar/Warner Bros

Angelic ... Björn Andrésen with Dirk Bogarde in Death in Venice.  
Photograph: Allstar/Warner Bros

Thu 15 Jul 2021 01.00 EDT

Björn Andrésen was just 15 when he walked straight into the lion's den, being cast as Tadzio, the sailor-suited object of desire in Luchino Visconti's film [Death in Venice](#). Its release in 1971 made him not merely a star but an instant icon – the embodiment of pristine youthful beauty. Sitting alone in Stockholm today at the age of 66, he looks more like Gandalf with his white beard and his gaunt face framed by shoulder-length white locks. His eyes twinkle as alluringly as ever but he's no pussycat. Asked what he would say to Visconti if he were here now, he doesn't pause. "Fuck off," he says.

No one who sees *The Most Beautiful Boy in the World*, a new documentary about Andrésen's turbulent and tragic past, will be surprised by that answer. Visconti, he tells me, "didn't give a fuck" about his feelings. He wasn't alone in that. "I've never seen so many fascists and assholes as there are in film and theatre," says Andrésen. "Luchino was the sort of cultural predator who would sacrifice anything or anyone for the work." He makes his feelings about *Death in Venice* itself equally plain: "It has screwed up my life quite decently." Although he is an accomplished pianist, no one seems very interested in that side of him. "Everything I ever do will be associated with that film. I mean, we're still sitting here talking about it 50 years later."

The documentary includes footage of his audition, where he looks angelic but intimidated, not least when Visconti's interest in him becomes suddenly inflamed. The director issues a string of escalating demands: smile, walk round the room, remove your top. At that last one, the young Andrésen lets slip a nervous laugh, wondering if he has misheard. Soon, though, he is down to his trunks, shifting awkwardly as Visconti and his assistants evaluate his body.



‘Everything I ever do will be associated with that film’... Andrésen at the Lido in Venice. Photograph: MantarayFilm 2021

When he strolled into that audition, he was no stranger to the camera. His grandmother, who was raising him after the death of his single mother four years earlier, was a regular Mrs Worthington, dispatching him to auditions practically as soon as he could walk. He is happy to have starred in [Roy Andersson](#)’s 1970 debut *A Swedish Love Story* (“I was there at the start of his career!”) and wasn’t too perturbed making *Death in Venice*. “It was a cool summer job,” he says. It also sounds incredibly lonely. Visconti was an imposing figure who warned the crew to keep their hands off the boy during shooting, then dragged him off to a gay club after filming had finished.

Andrésen’s relationship with Dirk Bogarde – who played the ageing composer smitten with him – was nothing more than “neutral”. In his 1983 memoir *An Orderly Man*, Bogarde described him with a mixture of fascination and pity. “He had an almost mystic beauty,” he wrote. To preserve Andrésen’s complexion and poise, “he was never allowed to go into the sun, kick a football about with his companions, swim in the polluted sea, or do anything which might have given him the smallest degree of pleasure ... He suffered it all splendidly.”

It felt like a swarm of bats around me – it was a living nightmare

Bogarde's one complaint concerned the "slabs of black bubble gum which he would blow into prodigious bubbles until they exploded all over his face." Andrésen shrugs at the detail: "I don't remember that."

The late actor got at least one point right: "The last thing that Björn ever wanted, I am certain, was to be in movies." If Andrésen didn't already feel that way, the hoopla surrounding Death in Venice convinced him. The London gala premiere, at which he met the Queen and Princess Anne, was a breeze compared with the film's unveiling at the Cannes film festival, where he was mobbed by carnivorous crowds. "It felt like swarms of bats around me," he recalls in the documentary. "It was a living nightmare."



Escalating demands ... with Visconti on the set of Death in Venice.  
Photograph: Mario Tursi

For Kristina Lindström and Kristian Petri, the directors of The Most Beautiful Boy in the World, the footage from the Cannes press conference was uniquely revealing. The assembled hacks are shown laughing obsequiously at Visconti's jokes about Andrésen losing his looks. The young man simply appears bewildered. "There was no compassion or empathy," says Lindström. "He had the feeling of being used," Petri adds. "He was packaged as an object."

AndréSEN agrees. “I don’t think it’s ethically defensible to let a 16-year-old bear the burden of advertising the damn film,” he says. “Especially not when you come back to school and you hear, ‘Hi there, angel lips.’ A guy who’s in the middle of his own teenage hormone tempest doesn’t want to be called ‘beautiful’.” He thinks the adoration inhibited his development. “When you snap your fingers and you’ve got 10 chicks running after you, there’s no need to learn any social skills for dealing with the opposite sex.”

Worse was to come. In Japan, AndréSEN was dragooned into public appearances and musical turns, and plied with pills to help him survive the punishing schedule. In his early 20s, he found himself in Paris on the promise of an acting job. He was installed in an apartment by an older man and paid a generous stipend. Meals and gifts came his way from assorted male admirers; one composed love poems in his honour. The film is cagey about what happened during that year in Paris. “He didn’t talk about it,” says Petri, “and we didn’t want to dig any further than was necessary. He does say now that he doesn’t regret much, except for his time in Paris.”

There is a pervasive, necessary sadness to the documentary: we see AndréSEN discovering details about his mother’s suicide, and reflecting on the death of one of his own children. But what endures is its subject’s dry humour and buoyant, philosophical spirit. He is also a generous soul: though the movie makes clear that there was a dereliction of duty on his grandmother’s part, he is reluctant to add to the criticism. “Maybe she wasn’t the sharpest blade in the box,” he tells me. “But I got over it. I don’t have any demons left. I kicked them all out. I haven’t had a demon since ...” He thinks for a moment. “1992.”



Object of desire ... Andrésen and Bogarde in the film classic. Photograph: Allstar/WARNER BROS

He can pinpoint it that specifically? “Yes. I was sitting in my kitchen and they hopped out one by one. I gave them name and number and said, ‘You’re fired.’ ‘What?’ ‘You heard me.’ And that was it.” He claps his hands together briskly as if wiping them free of dust and dirt. What did the demons represent? “All kinds of anxieties and horrors and memories. I still have the memories but they don’t frighten me. I’m scared of very little these days. Too old for that.”

Andrésen is pleased with *The Most Beautiful Boy in the World*, if perhaps foggy on his reasons for agreeing to it, other than his friendship with the film-makers. “I’m not after attention,” he says. “I got an overdose of that 50 years ago.” The directors have their own ideas about why he let them follow him for the six years it took to make the picture. “After being a public figure for so long, I think it was nice for him to take back the story of his life,” says Petri. “We didn’t want Visconti experts or other talking heads discussing him.” Lindström nods enthusiastically: “I think Björn also liked that we wanted to do a cinematic film, and to do it beautifully, like *Death in Venice*.”

Andrésen is still acting, and still insisting it’s not the life he chose, though he did tell Lindström recently: “OK, I’m an actor.” She smiles at that: “At 66,

he finally said it!” He had a memorable role three years ago in *Midsommar*, as an elderly man who sacrifices himself at a pagan ceremony: he jumps off a cliff, then a bystander finishes the job by smashing his head with a mallet. “Being killed in a horror movie is every boy’s dream,” he laughs. It seems like a supremely perverse joke – to take the face that has bewitched millions of viewers and then destroy it. Perhaps *The Most Beautiful Boy in the World* is doing something similar, minus the mallet. Its message is clear: Tadzio is dead. Long live Björn Andrésen.

[The Most Beautiful Boy in the World](#) is in cinemas 30 July

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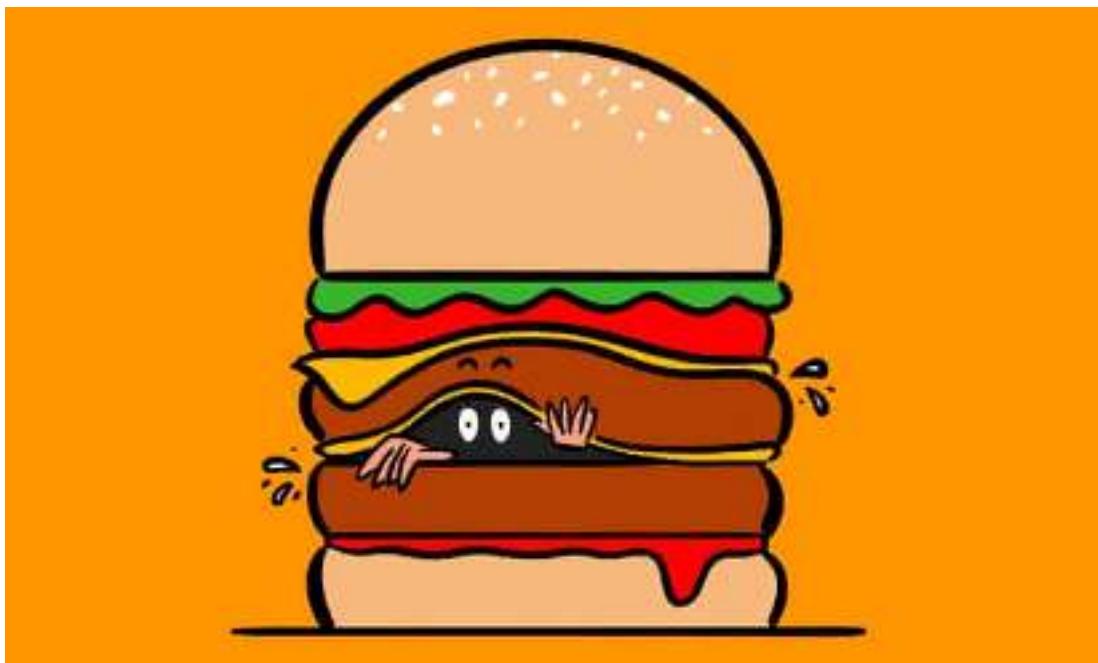
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## [Mental health](#)

# Burnout eating: how chronic pandemic stress can disrupt and destroy our diet

Over the past year, many of us have suffered from physical and emotional exhaustion. It is no surprise that people have turned to food for comfort



Under the bun ... are we getting buried beneath the weight of our comfort eating urges? Illustration: Steven Gregor/The Guardian

Under the bun ... are we getting buried beneath the weight of our comfort eating urges? Illustration: Steven Gregor/The Guardian

[Nicola Slawson](#)

Thu 15 Jul 2021 05.00 EDT

Naomi Boles hit a wall last October. “I wasn’t sleeping at all and I felt like I couldn’t keep going,” she recalls. “I was so stressed, and even when I was in bed my brain was constantly racing as I was worrying so much about my health, about my income, about my children. When I went to the doctor, it was like I’d reached a point where I couldn’t carry on any more.”

Nine months on, she is still recovering from that burnout. “I am finally getting to the point where I can be a bit easier on myself and not constantly be in this fight-or-flight mode,” she says.

Tests have ruled out multiple sclerosis. But Boles, a 29-year-old mother of three from Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, does have inflammation in her body, which seems to have been caused by stress. “They think I’ve developed an auto-immune disorder,” she says.

She has also discovered a lot about her mind. She has always relied on food to boost her mood and energy, but the comfort eating got out of hand during the pandemic. “When I was at my most stressed, and even as I have been recovering, food has been a real crutch for me,” she says.

This combination of burnout and overeating is far from unusual. Especially as since the start of the pandemic, many of us have been suffering from physical and emotional exhaustion, leaving us listless and overwhelmed, often with headaches and other physical symptoms. As the crisis drags on, we have turned to food for comfort, often choosing unhealthy snacks, takeaways and convenience foods because we are too exhausted to cook.

Boles was working in sales when the pandemic hit. She had just returned from maternity leave when she was furloughed by the luxury garden room company she worked for. Fearing she would eventually lose her job, in July she decided to start her own business. She had always wanted to be her own boss, so in one way Boles Bakery was a dream come true, but the upheaval has taken its toll.

“The stress of losing my job, starting a new business and having to home-school my kids meant I often ate far too much of the things I was baking, even though I have a gluten intolerance.

“I found the lockdowns really isolating and at first my friends and I would do a lot of Zooms but, after a while, they stopped. The further we got into the pandemic, the more it became almost a reflex to reach for food.”

It's always to do with how you're feeling. Our relationship with food is something we begin to form when we're weaning

*Arti Dhokia, dietitian*

In a recent study of [emotional eating during the pandemic](#), led by Katherine McAtamney of Birmingham City University, a quarter of participants reported that they were consuming more overall, while a third were eating less healthily.

Meanwhile, [Europe-wide research](#) led by Aarhus University in Denmark found that the pandemic had left Britons as the biggest comfort eaters in the continent, with the consumption of convenience foods up 29%, alcohol up 29% and so-called “tasty treats” up 34%.

None of this would surprise 22-year-old Liam Skillen, from Mansfield. Now working as a cafe assistant at a supermarket, as well as helping to care for his grandmother, he struggled after he was furloughed from his previous job in a cinema.

“I am trying to save to move out of my parents’ but had to put that on hold,” he says. “I’ve also been worrying about my grandmother as she had to shield on her own and I couldn’t go into the house and do the cleaning for her. With more time on my hands and more things to worry about, I found myself eating more.”



Illustration: Steven Gregor/The Guardian

Emotional eating has played a part in his life since he was a child. “Even in primary school if I had a tough day doing Sats, I would go and eat a load of chocolate that I wasn’t meant to eat,” he says. “Now if I have a bad day, I will eat half the cake I made the day before or order a pizza from Domino’s and eat the whole thing. My local Tesco also started selling Krispy Kreme doughnuts, which I love.”

It is not just the taste that makes Skillen reach for the cake or doughnuts. “One thing that I always say to my patients is that eating behaviours have very little to do with food and weight,” says Arti Dhokia, a dietitian with a special interest in mental health. “It’s always to do with how you’re feeling. Our relationship with food is something we begin to form even when we’re weaning.”

As children, many of us are told that chocolate is only for special occasions, Dhokia, who works for Circle Health’s rehabilitation hospital in Birmingham, says. “If you go through periods in your life of immense stress or experience something you feel you can’t control, then you’re going to start tying your emotions to food because food is one thing we can control. And, for some, their go-to will be the chocolate because it’s a treat they didn’t often get as a child.”

But this is an area where our bodies and minds combine to work against us. Carbohydrate-rich foods provide a sugar (glucose) high, Dhokia explains, as glucose is the primary source of energy for brain function, while protein increases the production of dopamine, the so-called feelgood hormone.

“Being stuck in a cycle of using food to fill a void or reduce stress often leads to feelings of guilt and shame afterwards – and periods of restriction to compensate for this,” Dhokia says.

“Restriction of foods, especially carbohydrate, can make us feel irritable, low in mood and cause difficulties with concentration. This is often followed by bingeing, which can lead to a feeling of euphoria due to the increase in glucose and dopamine. This effect can be short-lived, and can quickly become the new “normal”, requiring more and more of the same foods to achieve the effect, creating a mechanism similar to addiction. This further drives emotional eating.”

The government treats mental health and obesity very differently, but they are both so intertwined

*Dr Eleanor Bryant, eating behaviour professor*

The tendency to turn to food when experiencing stress, low mood or mental health problems is often overlooked when it comes to public health policy, says Dr Eleanor Bryant, an associate professor of health and eating behaviour at the University of Bradford. In the government’s latest obesity strategy, for example, mental health is mentioned just once, as something that obesity affects, and providing psychological support is not mentioned in the proposals to tackle obesity.

This is despite evidence highlighting the two-way association between depression and obesity. A 2010 study found that people who were obese had a 55% greater risk of becoming depressed, and people with depression were 58% more likely to become obese.

“The government treats mental health and obesity very differently,” says Bryant, who was part of a [study that explored burnout eating behaviours](#), “but they are both so intertwined. They’re aware of [obesity] in psychiatric

hospitals because weight problems are a huge issue with people with severe mental health problems – partly due to the medication they are on – but they are not seeing it as a population-level issue. If they [the government] did, they would have to fund it, and they are cutting funding to mental health left, right and centre.

“They tout solutions such as a sugar tax,” she continues, “yet there is so much more that could be done. No public health message can apply to everybody, but one size absolutely does not fit all when it comes to obesity management. There needs to be a much more tailored approach. The government needs to consider psychology more, and more mental health support needs to be rolled out on a free basis.”

This is something Helen Price (not her real name) would like to see. Now in her 40s, she has struggled with her weight and body image for most of her life and is often on a diet. While numerous doctors have told her she should lose weight, she says they have not helped her to access the necessary psychological support. “They always tell me to lose weight, as if I had never thought of it. They don’t offer any support and would never take into consideration the way food and mood are connected. In their eyes it’s just a simple case of eating less and moving more.”

Her negative feelings about herself have led her to use food “as a coping mechanism”, she says. When she chooses something that’s not very healthy, she feels bad about herself, setting off a vicious cycle. “Even smaller things make me turn to food. I ate three doughnuts yesterday because my car broke down and I thought I wouldn’t be able to go camping.”

She has tried cognitive behavioural therapy, via self-referral, and person-centred counselling, which she paid for privately, but neither has helped. And she gets no comfort from the discourse around body positivity. “I follow a lot of people on social media who are body-positive and post about feeling good whatever your size, as well as a lot of people who are anti-diet culture. I totally get what they are saying, but what if you do want to do something about how you look because you’re really not happy about it? If I don’t try and go on a diet, then am I just meant to accept that this is the way I look?”

Back in Buckinghamshire, Boles says it is “baffling” how little help she has been able to get for her emotional eating. “If I had anorexia or bulimia, I think [healthcare professionals] would make the link more with mental health, but they think that as I’m not starving myself, I must be OK.”

Dhokia says she has a point. “I have treated bariatric patients with BMIs of 50 to 60 who had massive issues with overeating, binge eating disorder and emotional eating, but we just didn’t have access to psychological services, whereas with anorexia you do.

[The science of healthy eating: Why are we still getting it wrong? - podcast](#)  
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“If you’ve got a BMI of less than 15, it’s very acute and very life-threatening, so you need immediate help, whereas obesity is quite slow-burning.” She suspects this explains the difference in prioritisation and approach.

In the meantime, many emotional eaters are at an all-time low.

“Whenever I’m going through emotional upheaval, food is the one thing I can rely on,” says Price. “The pandemic hasn’t helped things. The third lockdown was really trying for me. I am really close to my family and it was hard not seeing them. I thought my head was going to explode at times from the sheer magnitude of everything I was worrying about.”

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Cannes 2021

Interview

## Flag Day's Dylan Penn: 'I didn't know if I was capable of going toe-to-toe with my dad'

Xan Brooks



'I'm really affected by his presence and it's hard for me to take his stress' ...  
Dylan Penn. Photograph: Vianney Le Caer/Invision/AP

'I'm really affected by his presence and it's hard for me to take his stress' ...  
Dylan Penn. Photograph: Vianney Le Caer/Invision/AP

Her career has snaked from delivering pizzas to modelling, but Penn's latest job – starring in a Cannes drama alongside her dad, Sean – was the most daunting yet



@XanBrooks

Thu 15 Jul 2021 04.21 EDT

Dylan Penn receives guests high above the Croisette, in a sterile penthouse suite overlooking the sea. It's a perch befitting her status as visiting Hollywood royalty, the daughter of [Sean Penn](#) and [Robin Wright](#), starring alongside her dad in this year's Cannes competition. She's got her phone and her water and a stylist in the wings. She's been up here all day and won't descend until dusk. She has tickets to see the [new Wes Anderson film](#).

In the fact-based [Flag Day](#), her first major role, she plays Jennifer Vogel, the daughter of an inveterate conman. John Vogel describes himself as an entrepreneur with a broad portfolio, which is another way of saying that he's a bank robber, arsonist and counterfeiter; always up to no good, constantly looking over his shoulder. Jennifer wants to break free but can't quite cut the cord. "In my dreams, my father was always the prince," she explains.

Flag Day unveiled at the festival to largely respectful reviews. But it's a film that comes with an inbuilt irony klaxon: the tale of a woman who succeeds in spite of her father starring a woman who was cast – at least in part – because of hers. Penn Sr directs, plays John and says he couldn't imagine

anyone other than Dylan as Jennifer. His daughter, by contrast, was altogether less certain.



‘We complemented each other pretty well’ ... Sean and Dylan Penn in Cannes. Photograph: Jp Pariente/Laurent Vu/Sipa/Rex/Shutterstock

“Oh yeah, very hesitant,” she says. “I didn’t know whether I was capable of going toe-to-toe with my dad. So that was always daunting – the energy in the room with him both directing and acting. Because I’m really affected by his presence and it’s hard for me to take his stress.” She shrugs. “Also I felt he might be overbearing as a director and impose his choices on me, not allow me any space. But I could not have been more wrong. We complemented each other pretty well, I think.”

Having famous parents obviously helps in the business. But it also applies pressure, the sense of a high bar to get over. “Sometimes I walk into an audition and because of my last name there’s that added expectation. That can intimidate and inhibit me.” Another shrug. “But yeah, in the end, I think it’s an advantage.”

She was named after Bob Dylan, a singer she’s come around to more now she’s older, and has a younger brother, Hopper, named mainly for Dennis but also because he was constantly hopping about in the womb. She explains

that the family was largely raised in Marin County, outside San Francisco, a long way from LA. “Very outdoorsy. Very granola. Basically, it’s full of rich hippies.”

Penn’s not quite the ingenue: she turned 30 this year and worked as a model before circling back towards film. She took a starring role Condemned, an obscure 2015 slasher flick described by the [Hollywood Reporter](#) as “one of the most egregiously awful horror films in recent memory” and played a concierge in [Elvis and Nixon](#), alongside Michael Shannon and Kevin Spacey. She likes Gus Van Sant, Greta Gerwig and especially Woody Allen. She says Annie Hall is her all-time favourite film. One day, ideally, she’d like to write and direct her own work.



Breaking free ... Penn as Jennifer Vogel in Flag Day. Photograph: Allen Fraser/© 2021 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures Inc

I’m not sure she possesses a hard-luck story to compete with that of Jennifer Vogel, who pinballed between impoverished parents in blue-collar Minnesota and lived rough as a teen before training as a journalist. The closest she came was a few years post-high school, when she was drifting outside the family orbit and living on her own dime. “I left home at 18 and didn’t go directly to college,” she recalls. “And my parents were like, ‘Well, we’re not going to pay you to just fuck around.’”

During this time Penn worked as a waitress and a barista and spent six months as a pizza delivery driver. Sometimes, she says, she was mistaken for a stripper. “Well, what happened was that I started doing test shoots for modelling while working as a pizza delivery girl. So I would come from tests to deliver pizzas with a full face of makeup and people used to think it was a costume and that they were going to get more than just a pizza.”

The hours were awkward. The pay was horrible. But she now looks back on the job with something approaching nostalgia. “It was like a competition. You’re racing the other drivers to see who can get out the pizzas and get in the tips.” Her gaze jumps to the big picture window and the Mediterranean down below. “I liked it,” she says. “It was a different world.”

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# **The UK won't meet its ambitious climate goals by making spending cuts**

[Larry Elliott](#)



Boris Johnson may talk a good game on the climate crisis, but ordinary people need financial support to make changes



‘There is a tension between the colossal transformation being promised and the Treasury’s cheese-paring approach to public spending.’ Boris Johnson views a solar panel at ScottishPower’s Carland Cross wind farm in Newquay, Cornwall. Photograph: Jon Super/AP

‘There is a tension between the colossal transformation being promised and the Treasury’s cheese-paring approach to public spending.’ Boris Johnson views a solar panel at ScottishPower’s Carland Cross wind farm in Newquay, Cornwall. Photograph: Jon Super/AP

Thu 15 Jul 2021 02.00 EDT

There are many reasons why the government’s [decision](#) to cut the aid budget is dumb. High among them is the failure to see the link between poverty and climate change. If you want to convince people of the need to save the planet, it is a good idea to make sure first that they are not going hungry, have access to running water and can put their children through school.

The link between social justice and the green agenda applies domestically as well. Millions of people in Britain count the pennies each week because they are struggling to get by. Exhorting them to change their lifestyles or pay more to heat their homes is not enough. If the government is to meet its ambitious targets people who are less well-off are going to need plenty of help, but as things stand they are not getting it.

While the prime minister talks a good game on the climate crisis, the reality is that there is a tension between the colossal transformation being promised and the Treasury's cheese-paring approach to public spending. Cuts to the aid budget and [to universal credit](#) are part of the same mindset; it is hard to see how either will assist in the transition to carbon net zero by 2050.

Boris Johnson encapsulated the government's problem last week when he told MPs that households [would find it hard to pay](#) for air source heat pumps to replace gas boilers. "These things cost 10 grand a pop," Johnson said. "This is a lot of money for ordinary people."

It certainly is, and yet the prime minister also knows that securing the support of ordinary people is going to be vital if the government is to meet its ambitious climate goals. What's more, the backdrop to November's Cop26 summit – at which the UK is seeking tougher commitments from the global community – is of tighter budgets for those who are less well off. It is not just the £20 a week cut in universal credit. The rising cost of oil means fuel prices are up 20% on a year ago; jobs will be lost when wage subsidies are finally phased out in September. The TUC [reported](#) this week that more than a million children from key worker households are living in poverty.

Simultaneously, the government is looking to save money and speed up the green transition without prompting political pushback from those least able to meet the costs. This is impossible, which is why ministers are now playing for time and emphasising the role technological progress will play.

Yet delaying action is also problematic. The Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR), the government's spending watchdog, [said](#) last week that putting off taking decisive steps until 2030 would lead to a bigger fall in output and higher levels of debt than would be the case with immediate action.

It is easy to see why ministers would prefer to put off difficult decisions until another day. The Conservative party's newly won supporters in so-called red wall seats are precisely the group of voters most likely to be worried by rising energy bills and transport costs.

An alternative approach, [outlined](#) by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) this week, would be to marry the green agenda with a poverty-reduction agenda. The left of centre thinktank published a report by its environmental justice commission which suggested the public will hold a veto over the netzero process unless it is seen to be fair. Hilary Benn, one of the commission's co-chairs, summed it up when he said: "People must be at the heart of the UK's rapid transition to net zero, or else – to put it bluntly – it won't succeed." He's right about that.

The IPPR has a long list of proposals for ensuring voter buy-in – free public transport, a fund to help consumers switch to green products, higher public investment, guaranteed retraining for low-carbon jobs – all of which will sound expensive to a Treasury that is keen to repair the hole in public finances punched by the pandemic. Rishi Sunak's instinct will be to play hardball when the cost estimates come in for how much the state will need to pay to secure net zero.

[We're on a collision course with the planet. But with public support, that can change | Larry Elliott](#)

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In theory, greening the economy fits snugly with the government's other agenda: levelling up. The OBR says if ministers act now, the investment needed to achieve net zero adds 21% of GDP – or £469bn – to the national debt by 2050. That sounds a lot, but it would be spread over 30 years and is less than the increase in the national debt caused by the pandemic. And, of course, far less costly than doing nothing.

Canada has [shown](#) what can be done with the tax system to make the net zero transition smoother and fairer. Justin Trudeau's government introduced a revenue-neutral carbon tax in 2019, with money raised from polluters redistributed back to households to help them meet the cost of higher energy bills. Most households benefit.

It is now little more than three months until the Cop26 meeting, and despite what it says, the government's net zero strategy does not pass muster. There has been much less [urgency](#) than in Germany, France or the US, and no real evidence of a strategy. Over the next eight years, Joe Biden is proposing to

spend billions on making the switch to electric vehicles, ensuring infrastructure is more resilient to global heating, and on clean energy and new low-carbon technology. The US has a plan backed with serious money. Not just talk and cuts.

- Larry Elliott is the Guardian's economics editor
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# **Abolishing online anonymity won't tackle the underlying problems of racist abuse**

[Hussein Kesvani](#)

As a person of colour, I've suffered online abuse, but ending anonymity and mandatory ID verification each raise problems



‘You don’t need to be in the darker, closed-off corners of the internet to experience a deluge of harassment and abuse.’ Photograph: Alex Livesey - Danehouse/Getty Images

‘You don’t need to be in the darker, closed-off corners of the internet to experience a deluge of harassment and abuse.’ Photograph: Alex Livesey - Danehouse/Getty Images

Thu 15 Jul 2021 04.00 EDT

As a person of colour who has spent much of their life online, I've dealt with my fair share of racist abuse. From anonymous accounts on niche forums about anime hurling unprintable slurs, to more easily identifiable people –

with their real names and locations published – on Facebook and Twitter sending me death threats. As a result, I imagine that my tolerance for racial abuse on the internet is higher than average. I've even gone as far as [meeting people who have sent me torrents of online abuse](#) to try to understand what motivated them.

Even so, I still know – and feel – how awful it is. The posts, messages and emails stick with me long after they've been sent and the users have been blocked, reported and banned. It's a reminder that being treated as "other" and degraded is part-and-parcel of existing on the internet as a non-white person. Moreover, while there was a time when posting on forums was something relatively few people did, the dominance of participatory timeline media in our personal and professional lives has changed all that. You don't need to be in the darker, closed-off corners of the internet to experience a deluge of harassment and abuse.

It makes sense, then, that in the [wake](#) of England's Black footballers receiving a storm of racist abuse on their social media profiles after the Euro 2020 final, we have seen renewed calls for [mandatory ID verification](#) to allow people to have social media accounts. Since Sunday, more than half a million people have signed [a petition](#) calling for platforms to ban online anonymity, while organisations such as the [UK's Chartered Institute for Information Technology](#) have called for MPs to support ID verification – while maintaining the possibility for anonymity – on the grounds that social platforms should not be "consequence-free" areas for prejudice to run rampant. Demands for the end of online anonymity were vocalised earlier this year when a number of Black players were targeted and harassed [on social media](#), while the model Katie Price has told MPs that she would like to see anonymity removed as part of the online safety bill. It is a position that she has reached through the experience of seeing her son Harvey being frequently verbally abused online.

There is an argument that by forcing people to reveal themselves publicly, or giving the platforms access to their identities, they will be "held accountable" for what they write and say on the internet. Though the intentions behind this are understandable, I believe that ID verification proposals are shortsighted. They will give more power to tech companies who already don't do enough to enforce their existing community guidelines

to protect vulnerable users, and, crucially, do little to address the underlying issues that render racial harassment and abuse so ubiquitous.

First, it's worth noting that many social media platforms already require users to present some form of personal identification when using their services. Facebook, for instance, requires users to provide [their real names and phone numbers](#) when signing up: if challenged, they have to provide identification to prove their identities. Even on social media services such as Parler, which has been connected to movements such as QAnon and where white nationalist conspiracies run rampant, users have to upload a valid passport or driving license in order to be able to directly message people on the platform. While social media platforms are not under any legal obligation in the US or UK to hold valid identities of users, it's clear that even on platforms with ID requirements, harassment and abuse are abundant.

Second, the enforcement of mandatory ID verification could place vulnerable groups of people – from whistleblowers to persecuted minority groups seeking refuge – at significant risk. The Conservative backbencher David Davis has already [warned](#) of the censorious potential of the online safety bill, as it will require social media companies to remove any content that the regulator considers to be “harmful” or a potential threat to society. Mandatory verification poses a risk of criminalising dissidents or shutting off an avenue of expression for, say, migrants with precarious residency statuses. This is amplified when one considers what might happen if a tech company holding sensitive identification information is subject to hacking or an accidental data leak.

Perhaps more important, though, is that mandatory ID verification would allow certain politicians to act as if the issue had been solved, leaving underlying causes untouched. While social media platforms might provide a venue for the crudest forms of harassment, it is difficult to justify tech companies removing this material when such attitudes continue to exist in Britain's major newspapers and media outlets in the form of easy-to-share online content. It's not only online trolls who claim the current reckoning with racism in Britain is a capitulation to revolutionary Marxism – you can find that argument in respectable newspapers. When senior ministers such as Priti Patel refuse to condemn the booing of footballers showing their own

solidarity, they are effectively giving permission and encouragement to what might be termed anti-anti-racist sentiment. Indeed, the mistake that those advocating for mandatory ID verification make is not to believe that social media platforms make it easy to racially harass an individual without fear of exposure, but rather to assume that such behaviour happens in a vacuum.

[The abuse and hate I get when I speak out hurts – but shutting up isn't an option | Mehreen Faruqi](#)

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Indeed, many of the racist insults I have received from anonymous accounts have referenced [sensationalist newspaper stories about “Muslim grooming gangs”](#). Perhaps mandatory verification would limit the amount of openly racist abuse on the social platforms we all use, but it ignores the reasons why it is so prevalent and why it has so much purchase in these digital environments.

- Hussein Kesvani is the author of Follow Me, Akhi: The Online World of British Muslims
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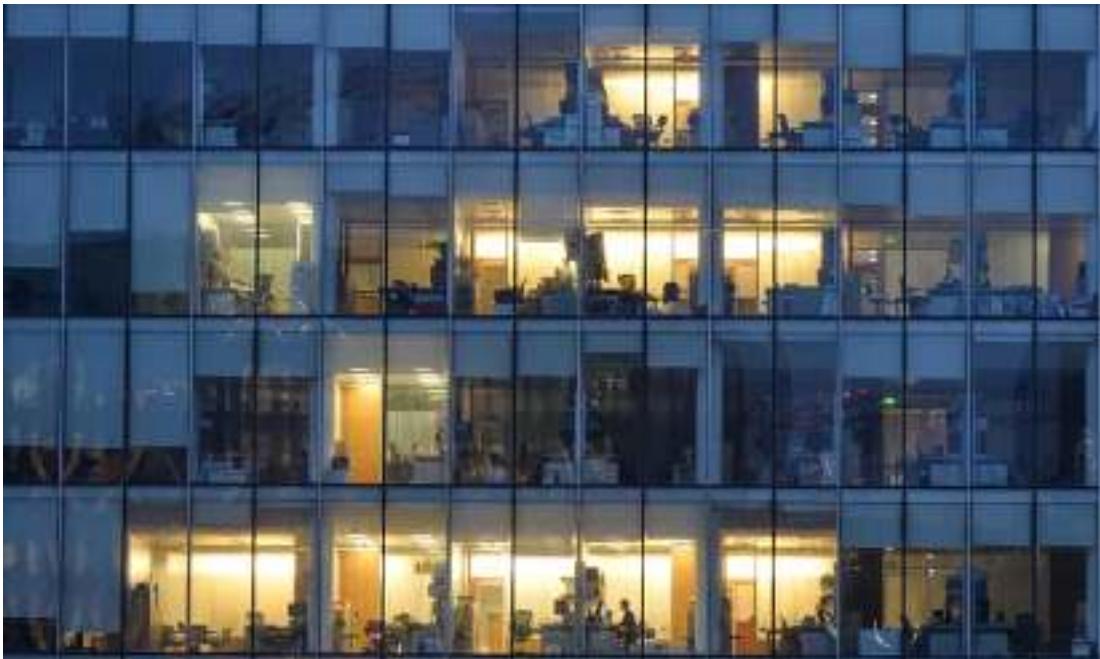
[Nils Pratley on finance](#)[Business](#)

## **More clarity in return to work guidance would help firms avoid liability**

Nils Pratley



Voluntary rules do not make it easy for companies to stay on the right side of health and safety law



Firms have been left little time before 19 July to carry out ‘suitable and sufficient’ risk assessments to stop the spread of Covid. Photograph: NurPhoto/Getty Images

Firms have been left little time before 19 July to carry out ‘suitable and sufficient’ risk assessments to stop the spread of Covid. Photograph: NurPhoto/Getty Images

Wed 14 Jul 2021 14.38 EDT

A combination of “mixed messages” and “rather obvious statements” was the Institute of Directors’ summary of the government’s return to work guidance for businesses. You can see what it means. Statements do not come much more obvious than the official Whitehall-endorsed definition of a face covering as “something which safely covers your mouth and nose”.

The mixed messages are more serious. Face coverings are no longer required by law but the government, in its guidance for office, factories and labs, says it “expects and recommends” that people continue to wear them “in crowded, enclosed spaces”. It lists a series of actions companies could “consider”, such as putting up signs.

The government cannot be expected to lay out precise guidelines for every workplace in the land, of course – common sense has done some of the work.

But the [vague nature of the instruction](#) to “consider” various precautions contrasts starkly with the heavy warning, emphasised in bold, that failure to put in place “sufficient control measures” may be considered a breach of health and safety law.

Therein lies the IoD’s real worry, probably shared by thousands of small businesses. How do employers stay on the right side of the law and ensure that their insurance policies are still valid? Just to add to the confusion, the document has landed less than a week before [“freedom day”](#), leaving little time to work on those “suitable and sufficient” risk assessments.

Companies will get on with it, and good practices will emerge. Return to workplaces will happen anyway. One cannot say, though, that these woolly guidelines will speed up the process.

## **Doorstep lender gets the better of the FCA**

The [Financial Conduct Authority](#) is jolly angry. Provident Financial’s “scheme of arrangement” to compensate customers of its doorstep lending business is backed by only £50m of the company’s money. A pot of such limited size, says the regulator, means punters who may have been mistreated could be “offered significantly less than the full amount of redress they are owed”.

What’s more, the FCA thinks the Provvy, which still makes decent money from its profitable Vanquis credit card and Moneybarn car finance operations, could dig deeper. “The reason that the group is not contributing more is that it has made a commercial judgment not to increase the funding because it could not justify that to its investors,” says the regulator. The £50m sum is “a potentially arbitrary figure”.

So what’s the FCA going to do about it? [Nothing](#). It will not go to court to oppose the scheme, which is what it did with another sub-prime lender, Amigo, a business with the novel model of getting a borrower’s friends or family to guarantee loans.

The difference, apparently, is that Provident is [giving up on doorstep lending](#) after more than 140 years and would simply pull the plug on the operation if

the scheme fails. As the FCA's letter puts it, creditors "are left with a 'take it or leave it' choice between a very low recovery under the scheme or a lower recovery (if any) in an insolvency".

To put it mildly, the position is unsatisfactory. Provident can't be legally forced into coughing up more, and its board won't be shamed into doing so. The FCA's stance is probably the only pragmatic one, but it could spare us the performance and get to the point: the rules are a mess.

## **Upper Crust boss should not be toasted for speedy exit**

Simon Smith is off "to pursue a new opportunity at a private equity-backed business", which presumably means an opportunity to earn more than he's been getting as chief executive of SSP, the operator of Upper Crust and a few other food and drink outlets seen at train stations and in airports.

SSP has had a horrible year as previously semi-captive customers evaporated. Smith had to take a pay cut in sympathy with furloughed staff, so perhaps it's not surprising he wants out.

But come on, he's been in charge only since May 2019 and still got £720,000 last year, so he probably wasn't surviving on baguettes. Successful chief executives of £2bn FTSE 250 companies – and nobody's grumbling about how Smith stabilised the show in the pandemic – are meant to hang around for more than two years and a bit.

The obligation is not obviously not contractual, but a little loyalty is expected, especially when a company is not yet out of the storm. Trade at SSP is still running at only 42% of 2019 levels. The "pursuing an opportunity" blather, incidentally, was the company's, rather than Smith's. He himself offered shareholders no explanation for checking out early. A poor way to sign off.

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# The pandemic prompted a wild transformation. I have become an exercise monster

[Deborah Frances-White](#)

I was up for nothing but lockdown walks and a spot of yoga until I sat on the Peloton saddle. Now, beat me if you dare ...



‘My husband predicted the most exercise I’d get would be assembling the Peloton bike.’ Photograph: Morsa Images/Getty Images (posed by model)

‘My husband predicted the most exercise I’d get would be assembling the Peloton bike.’ Photograph: Morsa Images/Getty Images (posed by model)

Thu 15 Jul 2021 02.00 EDT

I have never been interested in exercising until I’m out of breath. What’s wrong with yin yoga, which is basically hugging a bag? Or walking to the

park and sitting down and then walking to the ice-cream van and sitting down again? That all counts on my Fitbit.

However, during the worst excesses of lockdown the police kept shouting at us gentle strollers to “Keep moving!”, which made a wander up Primrose Hill in north London more like an enjoyable trip through [season two of The Handmaid’s Tale](#) – so I caved and ordered a Peloton bike. My husband predicted the most exercise I’d get would be assembling it. He was so wrong. Two nice masked men came and put it together. Hah!

I don’t know why going a smidgen faster than some advertising exec in Idaho is of any interest to me

I put on the special shoes and gingerly climbed on the machine, tuning in to a class with lots of more experienced riders. I could see my [cheery Peloton instructor, Cody Rigsby](#), jollying me along and I pedalled to try to keep up with the other people in my class who all had names on the leader board like “Ohio Mom 43” and “Sangria Sandra”. At first, I was always out of breath and last in the race, but one day I overtook Ohio Mom 43 for a full 90 seconds. I started to get a feelgood Peloton cardio high that’s like narcotics for healthy people.

[The Rishi Sunak workout: why his day begins with Britney, Peloton and blueberries](#)

[Read more](#)

The next day I outpaced Ohio Mum 43 and Spin City Sarah and finished ahead of both of them, like an urban indoor hero. I don’t want to brag, but I’m forced to – I’m now regularly top of the bottom third of riders. I’ve never been athletically competitive in the slightest. I don’t know why going a smidgen faster than some advertising exec in Idaho is of any interest to me. But I can tell you this – if Don Draped Her thinks he’s going to finish before me tomorrow in the 20-minute Pop Ride in front of Cody, my Peloton boyfriend, he can race me for it.

- [Deborah Frances-White is a comedian, writer and host of the podcast The Guilty Feminist](#)
- 

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## [South Africa](#)

# South Africa: 10,000 troops deployed and reservists called up to quell unrest

Warnings of looming humanitarian crisis as looting and violence hits food, fuel and medicine chains

02:01

South Africa grapples with unrest as looting and violence continue – video

*[Jason Burke](#) Africa correspondent*

Thu 15 Jul 2021 11.29 EDT

South Africa says it has put 10,000 soldiers on the streets and is calling up reservists for the first time for decades following days of looting and violence that have threatened food and fuel supplies across the country.

The death toll stands at 117, and more than 3,000 people have been arrested according to official figures, since the former president Jacob Zuma began a 15-month jail term, sparking [protests that rapidly turned into a wave of looting](#) of shops, malls and warehouses.

The unrest, which has been accompanied by attacks on communications facilities, roads and other critical infrastructure, has largely been limited to the provinces of Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal, but has hit goods and services around South [Africa](#).

Officials said on Thursday that the situation in Gauteng was calmer but remained volatile in KwaZulu-Natal, where 39 incidents were reported in the last 24 hours.

The number of troops deployed to reinforce overwhelmed police doubled for a second day running, to 10,000, a cabinet minister told a press conference.

The defence minister, Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula, [told parliament](#) she had “submitted a request for deployment of plus-minus 25,000” soldiers to the president, Cyril Ramaphosa.

It is unclear when the reinforcements might actually be deployed, as the mobilisation will take weeks to take effect. A full call-up on this scale has not been attempted since the end of the racist apartheid regime in 1994, experts said. It is also unclear if there are sufficient reserves available to fulfil the minister’s request.



A community member appeals to a crowd for calm in Vosloorus, Johannesburg. Photograph: James Oatway/Getty

The government had been under pressure to increase the presence of security forces to reassure frightened communities across a swath of the country. Images of crowds of looters hauling away refrigerators, large televisions, microwave ovens and crates of food and alcohol have been a visceral shock for many South Africans.

[Armed civilians have formed self-defence or vigilante groups](#) in many of the worst-hit areas, setting up barricades and, in some instances, opening fire on suspected looters. A group of commuter minibus operators armed

themselves with sticks and firearms on Wednesday and violently beat up suspected looters in the Vosloorus township in south-east Johannesburg.

Medics told the Guardian that emergency wards had been “flooded” with casualties with gunshot wounds. Health services in South Africa are already under massive strain as the country suffers a third wave of Covid-19 infections.

Other self-help groups have worked to protect and clean up shattered malls and other businesses, or to protect service stations.

The extent of the devastation is only now becoming clear. South Africa’s consumer goods regulatory body said that more than 800 retail shops had been looted, while in KwaZulu Natal, goods worth between \$400m and \$1bn have been stolen or destroyed, according to industry estimates. More than 200 shopping malls have been destroyed, damaged or looted.

President [Cyril Ramaphosa](#) met leaders of political parties and cautioned that parts of the country “may soon be running short of basic provisions following the extensive disruption of food, fuel and medicine supply chains”.

The state-owned logistics operator Transnet declared a “force majeure” on Wednesday – an emergency beyond its control – on a rail line that links Johannesburg to the coast because of the unrest.

In the port city of Durban, hundreds of people queued outside food stores hours before they opened as lines of cars also formed outside fuel stations. In Johannesburg, panic-buyers emptied supermarket shelves. In Soweto, bread was on sale from a delivery truck outside a large shopping mall as stores have either been looted or shut due to fears of vandalism.

The lootings have “seriously compromised our energy security and food security,” said Bonang Mohale, the chancellor of University of the Free State.

South African Petroleum Industry Association [sought to reassure consumers](#) on Wednesday, saying the availability of petrol and other related products in

the country was stable.

Christo van der Rheede, executive director of the largest farmers' organisation, AgriSA, said producers were struggling to get crops to market because of the logistical "shambles". He warned that if law and order were not restored soon, "we are going to have a massive humanitarian crisis".

Ramaphosa had initially deployed 2,500 troops at the start of the week to help the overwhelmed police force, before plans quickly changed to scale up the numbers to 25,000.

The deployment is extremely expensive, and an extra burden on South Africa's faltering economy.

Some analysts have attributed the breakdown of order to factional rivalries within the ruling African National Congress party.

Zuma was ousted by Ramaphosa in 2018 and handed himself over to police last week to serve a 15-month jail sentence for refusing to appear before a judicial inquiry investigating corruption during his nine-year rule.

The jailing of the former president was a significant victory for Ramaphosa, who leads a moderate and pragmatic faction of the ruling African National Congress party.

There is some evidence that followers of the former leader instigated at least some of the recent unrest in a deliberate effort to undermine rivals, possibly opening a way to a return to power or at the very least protecting their economic interests.

The targeting of communications towers, roads, fuel supply routes, port facilities and water plants suggests a strategy aimed at economic sabotage, experts have suggested.

Zuma's core supporters say he is the victim of a witch-hunt orchestrated by political opponents. The 79-year-old former anti-apartheid fighter has hitherto remained popular among many poor South Africans, especially in KwaZulu-Natal.

*Agence France-Presse contributed to this report*

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## [South Africa](#)

# Vigilante groups form in South Africa amid looting and violence

Citizens warned not to take law into own hands to protect property, as government plans to deploy 25,000 more troops

02:01

South Africa grapples with unrest as looting and violence continue – video

*[Jason Burke](#) Africa correspondent*

Wed 14 Jul 2021 21.05 EDT

Senior officials in [South Africa](#) have appealed to ordinary citizens not to take the law into their own hands as vigilante groups form following days of unchecked looting and violent protests across a swath of the country.

Thousands of soldiers have been deployed to help police on the streets, but law enforcement agencies still appear unable to stem ongoing attacks by crowds on warehouses, supermarkets, shopping malls, clinics and factories.

The country's defence minister, Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula, told parliament on Wednesday that she had requested around 25,000 more soldiers to be deployed on the streets.

In many parts of Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal, the two provinces hit by the violence, vigilante groups and armed community patrols have formed as anxious residents seek to protect their homes and businesses.

Speaking in north Johannesburg, [Bheki Cele, the police minister, called on ordinary people](#) to “work with the soldiers, you work with the police … your community in blue, those that work with the police station”.

He added: “We are fine with that. But the problem starts when they go for parallel structures; they go themselves and shoot the people and all that. Well, it is mob justice ... vigilanism when people take law into their own hands.”

The death toll from almost a week of unrest has risen to 72, some from gunshot wounds, and more than 1,750 people have been arrested.

The crisis was sparked last week when the former president Jacob Zuma was taken to prison [to begin a 15-month sentence](#) for contempt of court, after refusing to appear before a judicial inquiry investigating corruption under his nine-year rule, which ended in 2018.

Zuma’s decision to hand himself in was seen as a victory for the rule of law but protests organised by his supporters quickly evolved into [widespread violence and looting](#), with crowds breaking into shopping malls before turning on warehouses, service stations and distribution centres.

The unrest has so far been almost entirely limited to South Africa’s two most densely populated provinces: Gauteng, where Johannesburg, the largest city and economic powerhouse is located, and KwaZulu-Natal, Zuma’s home province.

Main roads in both provinces have been cut and supplies of food, fuel and medicine badly disrupted. A faltering Covid-19 vaccination programme has been hit along with other health services.

Though the unrest appeared to have subsided on Tuesday, scattered incidents of violence and arson were reported, with warehouses looted and burned in several locations.



A mother throws her child from a burning building in Durban, South Africa, following looting. Photograph: YouTube

A two-year-old girl survived unharmed after her mother threw her to safety as they escaped a burning high-rise building in Durban during protests.

The mother, 26-year-old Naledi Manyoni, told Reuters that she had been on the 16th floor when the fire started on Tuesday. She ran down the stairs with her daughter and made her way to a ledge above the street before tossing the toddler to a group of people below.

Many have been shocked by the failure of police to intervene to stop looters and have acted themselves to protect homes, property and businesses.

In Soweto, a historic former township and now suburb of Johannesburg, residents mounted guard over the only mall that has not been ransacked. In nearby Kliptown, small groups of local people tried to stop looters clearing out local food shops.

“We did our best to protect our community but there were just too many people. They just pushed us away. We never saw the police. It’s going to be really hard now ... really tough just to eat,” said Nkotozo Dube, 36, a former tourist guide in Kliptown.

Others set up makeshift barricades to block access to their neighbourhoods, or stood guard outside malls and other businesses that provide rare employment and basic services. In many places, local taxi firms have taken on the protection of key sites.

“The taxi industry … strongly warns those with intentions to loot to desist from any attempts as they will find the industry waiting,” [said Abner Tsebe](#), the chair of the South African National Taxi Council. “It is … in our interests to stand against this form of outrageous thuggery.”

Residents in parts of the south-eastern city of Durban, which has been hit badly by the disturbances, were reported to have concluded [informal agreements](#) to act as “backup” for police.

Government officials have sent mixed messages.

Oscar Mabuyane, the premier of the Eastern Cape province, on Tuesday congratulated people for “protecting their towns from any potential attacks by anarchists”.

There are fears, however, that the formation of such groups could lead to further deaths, and a rise in tensions between communities.

In Port Edward, a small town in western KwaZulu-Natal, residents set up barricades to protect homes. Carrying firearms, sticks, pepper spray and knives, they closely questioned anyone seeking to enter or leave their neighbourhood, warning that those who did would not be allowed back in.

“We wanted to go to buy groceries but they told us to go home and stay there. They were not overtly hostile but it felt like racial profiling. Now we are running out of food,” said Elisha Kunene, a lawyer staying in the town.

The National Hospital Network, representing 241 public hospitals already under strain from Africa’s worst Covid epidemic, said the looting and destruction was having dire consequence on hospitals, with staff in affected areas unable to get to work.

South Africa’s largest refinery, Sapref in Durban, has been temporarily shut down.

The billions of dollars of damage are a massive setback to an already weak economy, with investor confidence undermined and South Africa's image as a regional leader badly tarnished.

Some analysts have attributed the breakdown of order to factional rivalries within the ruling African National Congress party.

Zuma was ousted by South Africa's president, Cyril Ramaphosa, in 2018 after Ramaphosa took over the leadership of the ruling ANC the previous year.

Zuma's jailing was a significant victory for the moderate and pragmatic faction of the ANC and there is evidence that followers of the former leader instigated at least some of the unrest in a deliberate effort to undermine rivals, possibly opening a way to a return to power or at the very least protecting their economic interests.

Zuma's core supporters say he is the victim of a witch-hunt orchestrated by political opponents. The 79-year-old former anti-apartheid fighter has hitherto remained popular among many poor South Africans, especially in KwaZulu-Natal.

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Tokyo Olympic Games 2020

## **Olympics chief accused of insulting Hiroshima survivors with visit to atomic bombing site**

Survivors' groups say Thomas Bach should stay away, accusing him of using site to 'justify holding of the Olympics by force' despite pandemic

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Anti-Olympics activists hold placards during a rally against the stay of the IOC president Thomas Bach in Tokyo.

Photograph: Rodrigo Reyes Marin/ZUMA Wire/REX/Shutterstock

Anti-Olympics activists hold placards during a rally against the stay of the IOC president Thomas Bach in Tokyo.

Photograph: Rodrigo Reyes Marin/ZUMA Wire/REX/Shutterstock

*Justin McCurry in Tokyo*

Thu 15 Jul 2021 01.48 EDT

Residents of Hiroshima have called for the cancellation of a visit to Hiroshima by Thomas Bach, the [International Olympic Committee](#) (IOC) president, saying his presence there would “dishonour” victims of the [atomic bombing](#).

Bach, who has angered many Japanese by insisting on pushing ahead with the [Tokyo 2020 Games](#) during the coronavirus pandemic, is due to visit the city’s peace memorial park on Friday, the first day of the [Olympic Truce](#) adopted by the UN in 1993.

“Holding the Olympics under the current situation where many lives are lost [due to the virus] runs counter to the spirit of the Games that is supposed to

be a festival of peace,” said Kunihiko Sakuma, the head of a group supporting *hibakusha* – survivors of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – according to the Kyodo news agency.

[Olympics chief mixes up Japanese and Chinese at Tokyo Games presser](#)  
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Shuichi Adachi, a former Hiroshima bar association head, also opposed the visit in a statement submitted to the Hiroshima mayor and governor.

“President Bach using the image of ‘a peaceful world without nuclear weapons’ only to justify holding of the Olympics by force under the pandemic is a blasphemy to atomic bombing survivors,” said Adachi’s statement, written on behalf of 11 anti-Olympic and pacifist groups.

“An act like this does nothing but do harm to the global nuclear weapons ban movement.”



International Olympic Committee president Thomas Bach, right, speaks to journalists after meeting Japanese prime minister Yoshihide Suga in Tokyo on Wednesday. Photograph: Kimimasa Mayama/AP

An online petition opposing the trip has attracted about 75,000 signatures. The petition’s sponsors noted the poor timing of Bach’s visit, coming 76

years to the day since the Trinity nuclear test in New Mexico that led to the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki weeks later.

Bach said he was focused only on marking the first day of the Olympic truce. His visit was an offer of peace “and nothing else”, he said, adding: “This is the message we are going to send in the city of peace of Hiroshima. This will have nothing to do with politics. We will not politicise this visit in any way.”

Sueichi Kido, the secretary general of [Nihon Hidankyo](#), which represents survivors of both atomic bombings, said the organisation would not publicly comment on Bach’s visit, but added that he believed he should stay away.

“Thomas Bach has always said the Olympics will go ahead no matter what, and it feels like he is using Hiroshima to help his cause,” Kido told the Guardian, stressing that he was speaking in a personal capacity. “He says he is going in support of world peace, but I don’t trust anything he says. These Olympics are about making money for the IOC.

“Hibakusha are individuals, and some will welcome him, but I would rather he didn’t come,” added Kido, who was a child when an American B-29 bomber dropped a plutonium bomb on his home town of Nagasaki on 9 August 1945, killing 74,000 people.

Bach will meet Hiroshima’s governor, Hidehiko Yuzaki, and is expected to place a wreath at the peace memorial park, visit the peace memorial museum and view the A-bomb dome, [one of the few buildings left standing](#) after the attack on 6 August 1945.

An estimated 80,000 of Hiroshima’s 350,000 people were killed instantly; by the end of the year, the death toll would rise to 140,000 as survivors succumbed to injuries or illnesses connected to their exposure to radiation.

John Coates, an IOC vice-president, will visit Nagasaki on Friday, Tokyo 2020 organisers said. He will visit the peace park and peace memorial hall, where he will lay a wreath at a cenotaph for the victims.

Coates sparked anger earlier this year after he said the postponed Tokyo Games would “absolutely” go ahead even if the city was under a Covid-19 state of emergency.

Tokyo is now subject to emergency measures, including a ban on alcohol sales at bars and restaurants, until 22 August as it struggles to contain a sharp rise in cases. On Thursday, it reported 1,149 new infections, the highest number in almost six months.

Bach, who arrived in Tokyo last week, insisted cancellation had never been an option, describing the Games as an opportunity for the world to show solidarity during the pandemic.

“We, the IOC, will never abandon the athletes, and with the cancellation, we would have lost a whole generation of athletes,” he said in an interview with Kyodo. “So, cancellation for us was not really an option.”

Bach also plans to visit Sapporo to watch the women’s marathon on 7 August, and Fukushima, which will host softball matches just ahead of the opening ceremony on 23 July.

Tokyo was awarded the Games in 2013 after pitching them as proof of the country’s recovery from the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami disaster and resulting triple nuclear meltdown in Fukushima.

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## [Afghanistan](#)

# Afghanistan's neighbours step up efforts to prevent civil war

Rapid Taliban advances lead to meeting in Uzbekistan of over a dozen leaders and foreign ministers



US military personnel adjust US and Afghan national flags in Kabul.  
Photograph: Wakil Kohsar/AFP/Getty

US military personnel adjust US and Afghan national flags in Kabul.  
Photograph: Wakil Kohsar/AFP/Getty

[Emma Graham-Harrison](#)

Thu 15 Jul 2021 12.48 EDT

Afghanistan's neighbours are stepping up efforts to prevent the country sliding into a full-blown civil war after a [rapid Taliban advance](#) that caught the government in Kabul, its allies and much of the region by surprise.

At a meeting in [Uzbekistan](#) that opens on Friday, more than a dozen leaders and foreign ministers from regional powers will gather with the Afghan president, Ashraf Ghani, and senior American diplomats including the top US envoy for peace, Zalmay Khalilzad.

Officially the gathering is to discuss “regional connectivity”, but the focus in breakout sessions and bilateral meetings is expected to be the future of [Afghanistan](#). Pakistan’s prime minister, Imran Khan, and the Russian, Chinese and Indian foreign ministers are among those attending.

Turkey, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are sending their top diplomats, and the UN secretary general, António Guterres, will address the conference by video link.

“The conference is an opportunity to work out concrete solutions to assist the Afghan parties to reach mutual understanding and ensure the sustainability of peace in Afghanistan,” said Said Rustamov, Uzbekistan’s ambassador to the UK.

It will also allow central Asian nations to discuss regional cooperation “regarding the stabilisation and peaceful development of Afghanistan”.

### [Afghanistan stunned by scale and speed of security forces' collapse](#)

[Read more](#)

With the official US-brokered peace process based in Qatar stalling, there has been increased interest in other efforts to seek a negotiated end to fighting.

Iran organised the [first substantive talks in months](#) last week. Tehran had been talking about the initiative for months, said one senior official who was involved, but as the militants swept through the country they were apparently moved to action. “The names were finalised and the team committed only the week before,” the official said.

Those talks are part of a regional scramble to explore all possible routes to ending the violence, said Thomas Ruttig, the director of the Afghanistan Analysts Network.

“Such conferences are useful to keep all parties, Afghan and non-Afghan, talking,” he said. “To me this looks like, with the Doha process stalling, they aim to let a thousand flowers grow and hope at least one blooms when conditions allow.”

Afghanistan’s neighbours include many who have been wary of the US presence and the government Washington has backed. They will be happy to see the end of America’s war and the departure of US drones, planes and intelligence officers.

From the bitter experience of past civil wars, however, they also fear Afghanistan’s problems will spill across their borders, from extremist militants to desperate refugees, if the conflict escalates when US forces are gone.

The aftermath of the 1989 Soviet withdrawal from the country casts a long shadow. Millions of people fled to Iran, Pakistan and beyond and the country became a base for international terror attacks.

There is already evidence that the beginning of another exodus of civilians is under way as the militants have swept across Afghanistan. More than 1,000 soldiers have [fled across regional borders](#) to escape Taliban advances.

The spectre of the regional Islamic State group also looms, particularly alarming to countries whose own citizens went to fight for it in Syria and Iraq.

Although they may be surprised at the speed of the collapse, those in the region have been preparing for a different Afghanistan for many years. Most have been reaching out to the [Taliban](#), and even working with the group on practical issues.

Uzbekistan, for example, supplies much of Afghanistan’s electricity, and officials acknowledge they maintain a dialogue with the Taliban to keep the cross-border supply running.

After the militants seized [several of the main border crossings](#), including gateways to Iran in the west and Tajikistan in the north, these kinds of

pragmatic relationships are only likely to increase.

This week they also [claimed control of the Spin Boldak crossing](#) to Pakistan, a vital trade artery to Kandahar and beyond, one of the group's most strategic and lucrative gains yet.

### [map](#)

“You see a sense of surprise and alarmed reaction from regional powers to the speed of the Taliban advance, but the counterpoint is a lot them saw the writing on the wall as early as [Barack] Obama’s announcement that the US was going to draw down and withdraw nearly a decade ago,” said Andrew Watkins, a senior analyst for Afghanistan at Crisis Group.

“This is when countries including Russia, Iran and to an extent China began to get serious about issues that concerned them. They started improving border security, reaching out to the Taliban, preparing for worst case scenarios.”

### [Taliban claim Afghan border crossing with Pakistan in major gain](#)

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While most delegates will be looking to shape a post-American regional order, Washington is looking for favours. It wants a temporary haven for Afghans who helped its military effort, but who are still waiting for their refugee visas to be processed.

The [first evacuation flights](#) of these interpreters and other helpers stuck in administrative limbo are expected to begin this month, officials say, but no destination has been announced.

Diplomats are reportedly also [trying to find a military base](#) from which to hit groups such as al-Qaida if they regroup in Afghanistan, although that is likely to be a difficult brief.

No countries have expressed interest, and any plan to host troops in the region would almost certainly disrupt ties with Russia, a price Washington is

unlikely to want to pay, Watkins said. “Beyond the regional dynamics, Biden and his team have made very clear that Afghanistan has been deprioritised.”

This article was amended on 16 July 2021. Imran Khan is the prime minister of Pakistan, not the president as stated in an earlier version.

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## [Coronavirus](#)

# Summer chaos predicted as up to 1.6m in England told to isolate in a week

Government says its Covid app is unlikely to be adjusted to make it less sensitive for weeks

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The need to isolate after exposure to a confirmed Covid case will be dropped for fully vaccinated people in England from 16 August. Photograph: Yui Mok/PA

The need to isolate after exposure to a confirmed Covid case will be dropped for fully vaccinated people in England from 16 August. Photograph: Yui Mok/PA

[Aubrey Allegretti](#)

*@breeallegretti*

Fri 16 Jul 2021 08.07 EDT

Up to 1.6 million people in [England](#) have been told to isolate in a single week, Guardian analysis has found as the government said the Covid app is unlikely to be changed for weeks.

The number of new UK coronavirus cases climbed to 48,553 on Thursday – the highest since mid-January and the start of the third lockdown – with the upward curve showing no signs of abating, raising fears of a summer of chaos as businesses and households are hit by self-isolation. Sixty-three people were reported on Thursday to have died from the virus.

Ministers have warned the public to expect 50,000 daily cases by the time of England's major reopening on Monday, rising to 100,000 this summer, but said the success of the vaccine rollout means restrictions should not need to be imposed.

A week ago, after forecasts that [up to 10 million would be forced to isolate](#) within a six-week period, Jenny Harries, head of the new Health Security Agency, told MPs the government [planned to tweak the Covid-19 app](#) to make it less sensitive and account for the majority of adults now being vaccinated. The need to isolate after exposure to a confirmed Covid case will be dropped for fully vaccinated people in England from 16 August.

### [app pings](#)

On Thursday, however, communities secretary Robert Jenrick [said](#) while the government accepted the technology needed tweaking, “we’re going to give further thought to how it is a proportionate response”, adding: “The government is going to be setting out its plans [in the coming weeks](#), so I’m not going to pre-empt those.

“It is important we have the app, that we take it seriously and that when we do get those messages, we act accordingly,” he told the BBC.

Data published by the government and analysed by the Guardian found the number of people being urged to quarantine is rising sharply.

## quarantine

About 337,695 people were told to isolate by [NHS](#) test and trace for being identified as a close contact of someone who had tested positive in the week of 1-7 July, according to the latest statistics.

Over the same period, 520,194 people were also pinged by the Covid app. The number of schoolchildren forced into isolation because others in their “bubble” were positive Covid cases stood at 624,000 in the week of 2-8 July.

## schools

With the addition of those who themselves tested positive, totalling 194,005, that meant there were up to 1,675,894 people told to isolate over a one-week period in England. There may be a degree of crossover between the groups, with some individuals potentially being counted more than once.

The figure for the previous week stood at 1,206,612 – suggesting the number of people being urged to stay at home is climbing and could continue to do so after the dropping of nearly all Covid restrictions in England from Monday.

Jon Ashworth, the shadow health secretary, said the numbers were “staggering – even before [Sajid Javid](#) [the health secretary] throws all caution to the wind by scrapping vital protections like mask wearing”.

## [Pinging hell: NHS Covid app causing widespread staff shortages](#)

[Read more](#)

He told the Guardian: “With signs that testing is slowing, allowing infections to hit 100,000 without action could mean a summer of chaos and serious long-term illness for many people.”

Feryal Clark, a Labour MP, complained on Thursday that when she tried to book a PCR test through the government website, none were available in any region of England. Though the website did show tests could be booked in most areas later in the day, Javid’s Department of [Health](#) and Social Care admitted demand for tests was rising.

The Covid app, which monitors users' closeness to each other and pings them if they have spent more than 15 minutes within 2 metres of someone who later tested positive, was set to be changed to tune down its sensitivity.

Other complaints about the app include that it does not track people's vaccine status and therefore know of their decreased risk from Covid, whether the contact happened outside, or if screens may have helped reduce the chance of transmission.

A series of trials were run where close contacts were tested every day instead of needing to isolate but the results have still not been published, much to the annoyance of some government insiders.

A DHSC spokesperson said: “The NHS Covid-19 app is reducing the spread of coronavirus and prevented an estimated 600,000 Covid-19 cases and 8,000 deaths between September and December 2020.

“The app is doing exactly what it was designed to do – informing close contacts of someone who has tested positive for Covid-19 that they are at risk and advising them to isolate.

“As cases continue rising it is vital people are aware of their personal risk so they can make informed decisions on their behaviour to protect those around them.”

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## **UK Covid: new cases pass 50,000 for first time since mid-January with 1 in 95 in England testing positive last week – as it happened**

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## Labour concerned over management of flagship levelling up scheme

Leaders of £24m Stocksbridge fund include local MP, her husband, and others with personal or business links to plans



Aerial view of Deepcar through to Stocksbridge, South Yorkshire. Critics say the management of the £24.1m awarded to Stocksbridge highlights wider worries about oversight. Photograph: AP S (uk)/Alamy

Aerial view of Deepcar through to Stocksbridge, South Yorkshire. Critics say the management of the £24.1m awarded to Stocksbridge highlights wider worries about oversight. Photograph: AP S (uk)/Alamy

[Peter Walker](#), [Pamela Duncan](#) and [Niamh McIntyre](#)

Fri 16 Jul 2021 01.00 EDT

Labour has raised concerns about the management of a flagship [levelling up scheme](#) after it emerged that decisions about one local £24m fund were primarily led by a group including the local MP, her husband, and others with personal or business links to some of the plans.

Documents also show that the towns fund board for Stocksbridge in South Yorkshire, co-chaired by Conservative MP Miriam Cates, met [for eight months](#) before members began [filing details](#) of personal interests, and that the scheme of governance was [only published](#) after more than a year.

As well as Cates, her husband, David, also sits on the board, and a local businessman, Ian Sanderson, a [business partner](#) of David Cates.

The co-chair is Mark Dransfield, a local property developer from whom Miriam Cates rents her constituency office. He owns a [retail park in Stocksbridge](#) directly adjoining two of the proposed local regeneration schemes. Dransfield's sister-in-law, who formerly worked for his company, sits on a subcommittee.

Board members also include representatives from other local businesses, as well as from Sheffield council and the regional authority.

While there is no suggestion of any wrongdoing, critics say the management of the £24.1m awarded to Stocksbridge, just north of Sheffield, highlights wider worries about oversight by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), which is distributing the £3.6bn fund.

### [Towns trouser cash as billions earmarked for ‘levelling up’ in UK](#)

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The MHCLG has said it carries out governance reviews of towns fund boards before distributing any money. After [Labour](#) sought access to these, junior communities minister Luke Hall said they were “an internal process carried out by MHCLG officials and there are no plans to publish them”.

Sources in Stocksbridge say declarations of interest and other documents were produced after Sheffield city council expressed alarm at the lack of visible governance.

There are also concerns about potential perceived conflicts of interest given some of the projects earmarked for funding by the board. One would involve the regeneration of Manchester Road, the town’s main high street, which adjoins the Fox Valley retail park, which is owned by Dransfield’s company.

Another proposed idea is to build an [unusual funicular link](#) between the town centre and Fox Valley, billed as a way to move people up and down a steep hill and as a local tourist attraction.

The board is also seeking to spend at least £2m or more on an all-weather football pitch, even though Stocksbridge is not named on the Football Foundation's list of priority areas for new facilities in England.

However, others reject any conflict of interest, saying that a revitalised Manchester Road would be an alternative draw to Fox Valley, and that the funicular link is planned as part of a wider regeneration plan for the town.

Steve Reed, Labour's shadow communities secretary, said the public would be "alarmed to find that important regional development funding schemes are potentially open to serious abuse".

He said: "Ministers must publish towns deal governance reviews immediately and reassure taxpayers their money is being spent properly and projects are being delivered in their interests"

An MHCLG spokesperson said: "Town deal boards have clear processes for governance and decision-making, and for managing potential conflicts of interest. MHCLG has reviewed the governance of all town deal boards and found no cause for concern."

Miriam Cates's office was contacted for comment.

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## Death toll exceeds 180 as Germany and Belgium hit by devastating floods

Search for missing continues, with Netherlands, Switzerland and Luxembourg also affected

02:24

Severe flooding causes devastation in Europe – video report

*[Jon Henley](#) Europe correspondent*

*[@jonhenley](#)*

Sun 18 Jul 2021 01.42 EDT

The death toll from catastrophic floods in western Germany and [Belgium](#) has risen to more than 180, as emergency services continued their search for hundreds still missing.

The German president, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, said he was “stunned” by the devastation caused by the flooding and pledged support to the families of those killed and to cities and towns facing significant damage. It is Germany’s worst natural disaster in more than half a century.

“In the hour of need, our country stands together,” Steinmeier said on Friday afternoon. “It’s important that we show solidarity for those from whom the flood has taken everything.”

[The Ruhr river in Essen, North Rhine-Westphalia, before and after the flooding](#)

Authorities in the German state of Rhineland-Palatinate said that 110 people had died there, including at least 12 residents of an assisted living facility for people with disabilities, while neighbouring North Rhine-Westphalia put the

death toll at 43. One person died in Berchtesgadener Land, a spokeswoman for the Bavarian district told Agence France-Presse.

Officials warned the figures could rise further. Many people in the Ahrweiler district of Rhineland-Palatinate remain unaccounted for, although efforts to contact them were being hindered by damage to phone networks.

Experts said the European Flood Awareness System (EFAS) issued an extreme flood warning earlier this week and questioned why the toll was so high. Hannah Cloke, a hydrologist, [told Politico](#) the disaster was “a monumental failure of the system”.

The German weather service DWD said it had passed on the warning to local authorities, who should have been responsible for organising any necessary evacuations. The interior minister, Horst Seehofer, said Germany “must prepare much better” in future, adding that “this is a consequence of climate change”.

### [map](#)

Steinmeier called for greater efforts to combat global warming. “Only if we decisively take up the fight against climate change will we be able to limit the extreme weather conditions we are now experiencing,” he said.

Experts said such disasters were likely to happen more often due to climate change. “Some parts of western [Europe](#) ..... received up to two months of rainfall in the space of two days,” World Meteorological Organization spokesperson Clare Nullis said.

While she said it was too soon to blame the floods and preceding heatwave on global heating, Nullis said the climate crisis was “increasing the frequency of extreme events while many single events have been shown to be made worse by global warming.”

Belgium’s death toll has risen to 27 , with another 20 still missing. Most of the dead were found around Liège, a city of 200,000 people, despite an order for residents of central districts and areas bordering the Meuse River to evacuate.

Verlinden said water levels on the Meuse running into the Netherlands remained critical. “There are a number of dikes on the Meuse where it is really touch and go whether they will collapse,” she said.

The army has been sent to four of the country’s 10 provinces to help with rescue operations and evacuations, along with teams of emergency workers dispatched from Italy and France. Residents of some towns, including the resort of Spa, which has been under water since late on Wednesday, were being accommodated in tents.

While they have so far suffered no loss of life, Switzerland, Luxembourg and the Netherlands were also severely affected, with flash floods sweeping through the Swiss villages of Schleitheim and Beggingen, several towns in the Grand Duchy evacuated on Thursday, and thousands told to leave their homes in the southern Dutch city of Maastricht.

The water level in the Maas, as the Meuse is known in Dutch, reached its maximum forecast height in Maastricht on Thursday night but stayed below what authorities had termed the “doom scenario”, averting widespread flooding.



Flood damage in the Blessem district of Erftstadt, in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany. Photograph: Rhein-Erft-Kreis/AP

At least 550 households were evacuated in Roermond, while authorities in Venlo evacuated about 200 hospital patients due to the looming threat of flooding from the river. The caretaker prime minister, Mark Rutte, formally declared a disaster, freeing up state funds to pay for the damage.

By far the highest death toll was in Germany, where 114,000 households were without power and rescuers on Friday were focusing their efforts on helping people trapped in their homes in the town of Erftstadt, south-west of Cologne.

Regional authorities said several people had died or been reported missing after their houses collapsed when the ground beneath them sank suddenly in a major landslide. Aerial photos showed what appeared to be a massive sinkhole.

### Moselle water levels

“We managed to get 50 people out of their houses last night,” Frank Rock, a local official, said. “We know of 15 people who still need to be rescued ... One has to assume that, under the circumstances, some people didn’t manage to escape.”

Roads around Erftstadt were impassable, with rescue crews trying to reach residents by boat and having to rely on walkie-talkies to communicate. “The mobile network has collapsed. The infrastructure has collapsed. Hospitals can’t take anyone in. Nursing homes had to be evacuated,” a regional government spokesperson in Cologne said.

More rain was forecast for parts of the region, where water levels in the Rhine and its tributaries continued to rise. Nearly 1,000 soldiers have been deployed to help with rescue operations and rubble-clearing in affected towns and villages.

01:16

Devastating floods hit western Germany – video

At least 24 people were confirmed dead in Euskirchen, one of the worst-hit towns. Reporters on the scene described a normally well-ordered centre

transformed into a mountain of rubble and house fronts ripped off by the floods.

Thousands of people remain homeless after their houses were destroyed or deemed at-risk by authorities, including several villages around the Steinbach reservoir that experts say could collapse under the weight of the floods.

“I fear that we will only see the full extent of the disaster in the coming days,” the German chancellor, [Angela Merkel](#), said late on Thursday in Washington, where she is visiting Joe Biden, calling it a day “characterised by fear, despair, suffering”.

01:33

Merkel and Biden express sympathy for German flood victims – video

She said her government would not leave those affected “alone with their suffering,” adding that it was doing its “utmost to help them in their distress”.

The conservative governor of North Rhine-Westphalia, Armin Laschet, who is running to succeed Merkel as chancellor in elections due in September, called an emergency cabinet meeting for Friday.

### [Bad Neuenahr-Ahrweiler before and after the floods](#)

“It is a reality that extreme weather events will influence our everyday life more strongly in the future,” Laschet said, adding: “We have to continue down Germany’s path towards climate neutrality at a faster pace.”

But he also said that the problems caused by the climate crisis “cannot be solved in North-Rhine Westphalia, or Germany”. Malu Dreyer, the governor of Rhineland-Palatinate, said climate change was “not abstract any more. We are experiencing it up close and painfully.”

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[Flooding](#)

# Climate scientists shocked by scale of floods in Germany

Deluge raises fears human-caused disruption is making extreme weather even worse than predicted

02:24

Severe flooding causes devastation in Europe – video report

*[Jonathan Watts](#)*

*[@jonathanwatts](#)*

Fri 16 Jul 2021 01.00 EDT

The intensity and scale of the floods in [Germany](#) this week have shocked climate scientists, who did not expect records to be broken this much, over such a wide area or this soon.

After the deadly heatwave in the US and Canada, where temperatures rose above 49.6C two weeks ago, the deluge in central [Europe](#) has raised fears that human-caused climate disruption is making extreme weather even worse than predicted.

Precipitation records were smashed across a wide area of the Rhine basin on Wednesday, with devastating consequences. At least [58 people have been killed](#), tens of thousands of homes flooded and power supplies disrupted.

Parts of Rhineland-Palatinate and North Rhine-Westphalia were inundated with 148 litres of rain per sq metre within 48 hours in a part of Germany that usually sees about 80 litres in the whole of July.

01:45

'It went so fast': villagers describe destruction as flooding hits western Germany – video

The city of Hagen declared a state of emergency after the Volme burst its banks and its waters rose to levels not seen more than four times a century.

The most striking of more than a dozen records [was set at the Köln-Stammheim station](#), which was deluged in 154mm of rain over 24 hours, obliterating the city's previous daily rainfall high of 95mm.

Climate scientists have long predicted that human emissions would cause more floods, heatwaves, droughts, storms and other forms of extreme weather, but the latest spikes have surpassed many expectations.

01:00

Germany floods: stranded residents rescued by helicopter from rooftops – video

“I am surprised by how far it is above the previous record,” Dieter Gerten, professor of global change climatology and hydrology at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, said. “We seem to be not just above normal but in domains we didn’t expect in terms of spatial extent and the speed it developed.”

Gerten, who grew up in a village in the affected area, said it occasionally flooded, but not like this week. Previous summer downpours have been as heavy, but have hit a smaller area, and previous winter storms have not raised rivers to such dangerous levels. “This week’s event is totally untypical for that region. It lasted a long time and affected a wide area,” he said.

Scientists will need more time to assess the extent to which human emissions made this storm more likely, but the record downpour is in keeping with broader global trends.

[map](#)

“With climate change we do expect all hydro-meteorological extremes to become more extreme. What we have seen in Germany is broadly consistent with this trend.” said Carlo Buontempo, the director of the Copernicus Climate Change Service at the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts.

The seven hottest years in recorded history [have occurred since 2014](#), largely as a result of global heating, which is caused by engine exhaust

fumes, forest burning and other human activities. Computer models predict this will cause more extreme weather, which means records will be broken with more frequency in more places.

The Americas have been the focus in recent weeks. The Canadian national daily heat record [was exceeded by more than 5C](#) two weeks ago, as were several local records in Oregon and Washington. Scientists said these extremes at such latitudes were virtually impossible [without human-driven warming](#). Last weekend, the monitoring station at Death Valley in California [registered 54.4C](#), which could prove to be the highest reliably recorded temperature on Earth.



People watch the Ruhr in flood from the Brehminsel dam. Photograph: Action Press/Rex/Shutterstock

Daniel Swain, a climate scientist at the University of California in Los Angeles, said so many records were being set in the US this summer that they no longer made the news: “The extremes that would have been newsworthy a couple of years ago aren’t, because they pale in comparison to the astonishing rises a few weeks ago.” This was happening in other countries too, he said, though with less media attention. “The US is often in the spotlight, but we have also seen extraordinary heat events in northern

Europe and Siberia. This is not a localised freak event, it is definitely part of a coherent global pattern.”

The far north of Europe also sweltered in record-breaking June heat, and cities in India, Pakistan and Libya have endured unusually high temperatures in recent weeks. Suburbs of Tokyo have been drenched in the heaviest rainfall since measurements began and a usual month’s worth of July rain fell on London in a day. Events that were once in 100 years are becoming commonplace. Freak weather is increasingly normal.

Some experts fear the recent jolts indicate the climate system may have crossed a dangerous threshold. Instead of smoothly rising temperatures and steadily increasing extremes, they are examining whether the trend may be increasingly “nonlinear” or bumpy as a result of knock-on effects from drought or ice melt in the Arctic. This theory is contentious, but recent events have prompted more discussion about this possibility and the reliability of models based on past observations.

“We need to better model nonlinear events,” said Gerten. “We scientists in recent years have been surprised by some events that occurred earlier and were more frequent and more intense than expected.”

- *This article was amended to remove an outdated regional name.*
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## Alfresco dining boost in England as government extends pavement licences

Covid-stricken hospitality sector allowed to serve food and drink outdoors until September 2022

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Pubs and restaurants were allowed to serve guests on pavements last year to help offset the loss of indoor space due to social distancing. Photograph: Vuk Valcic/Alamy

Pubs and restaurants were allowed to serve guests on pavements last year to help offset the loss of indoor space due to social distancing. Photograph: Vuk Valcic/Alamy

*Rob Davies  
@ByRobDavies*

Fri 16 Jul 2021 01.00 EDT

Alfresco dining and drinking could become a permanent fixture in [England](#) after the government said it would extend “pavement licences” to aid the recovery of pubs, bars and restaurants hit by the pandemic.

The plan is part of a hospitality strategy, announced on Friday, aimed at a sector that has lost 10,000 premises, forgone £87bn in sales and shed more than 350,000 jobs across the UK since the onset of the coronavirus crisis.

Restaurants, pubs and bars were granted temporary leave to serve guests on pavements last year, helping to offset the impact of indoor floorspace lost due to social distancing requirements.

While restrictions on hospitality [and other sectors](#) are to end in England from 19 July, pavement licences will be extended by a year until the end of September 2022.

The change could become permanent, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) said, although that would require legislation.

Pubs will also be given a 12-month extension to temporary off-licences, also granted during the pandemic, that allow them to sell takeaway pints and meals.

MHCLG outlined the plans on Friday as it launched a hospitality strategy to be overseen by a council of industry leaders and government officials, including the junior business minister Paul Scully.

The strategy includes plans to boost recruitment in a sector that has been hit by staff shortages, despite suffering mass job losses over the past 18 months.

Jobseekers will be pointed towards hospitality openings via the Department for Work and Pensions, while the government will look at ways to improve training in the sector, including via apprenticeships and T-level qualifications.

At the same time, the government is launching a £150m fund to help communities save local pubs at risk of closure. Neighbourhoods will be able

to club together to raise funds to save their pub, with the government matching their investment up to a maximum of £250,000.

Kate Nicholls, the chief executive of the trade body UK Hospitality, said: “The pandemic has devastated the hospitality sector, and businesses are desperate to bounce back strongly and return to profitable trading.”

She said the strategy would help put the sector at the heart of efforts to regenerate high streets, which are facing an uncertain future amid difficulties such as mounting rent debt, [staff absences due to test and trace](#), and a shift towards online ordering in the retail sector.

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MCHLG said its hospitality strategy would also include help for businesses to reduce emissions and plastic waste, as well as measures to spur innovation by forging connections between hospitality startups and universities.

Nearly 12,000 hospitality venues in England are still unable to open under current restrictions but can do so from 19 July, according to industry analysts CGA and AlixPartners.

The change means that more than 8% of the UK’s 143,000 venues will be freed from restrictions.

Wales, Scotland and [Northern Ireland](#) are also due to lift restrictions in the coming weeks, although Scotland’s first minister, Nicola Sturgeon, has maintained a midnight curfew on pubs and bars from 19 July, with face coverings and 1 metre social distancing remaining mandatory indoors.

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US news

## Covid's racial impact in US clouded by failure to collect race and ethnicity data

Glaring absences in US data despite disproportionate effect on Black, Latino and Native American communities



Nationwide, race and ethnicity data was missing for 32% of fully vaccinated people as of 14 July, according to the CDC. Photograph: Matt Rourke/AP

Nationwide, race and ethnicity data was missing for 32% of fully vaccinated people as of 14 July, according to the CDC. Photograph: Matt Rourke/AP

*Amanda Holpuch in New York*

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Fri 16 Jul 2021 05.00 EDT

The full picture of the racial impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is clouded by systemic failures to collect race and ethnicity data, even in states that are leaders in promoting health equity.

In California, for example, a key benchmark for reopening and allocating vaccines doesn't fully incorporate race and ethnicity data. Meanwhile, nationally there remain glaring absences in testing and hospitalization data by race and ethnicity a full year after it was shown Covid-19 had a disproportionate effect on Black, Latino and [Native American communities](#).

Black Americans have the highest Covid-19 death rate nationally and [the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) estimates](#) that Native Americans, Latinos and Black people are two times more likely than white people to die of the disease.

The nation's top infectious disease expert, [Dr Anthony Fauci, said](#) in May that as society returns to "some form of normality", people should remember that "the undeniable effects of racism in our society" has created unacceptable disparities in Covid-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths.

"Covid-19 has shone a bright light on our own society's failings," Fauci said during a graduation ceremony in Atlanta.

Several public health experts who focus on health disparities told the Guardian gaps in reporting on race and ethnicity during the pandemic, and more broadly in health, have limited the deployment of resources in vulnerable communities and masked the true scope of Covid-19's toll.

The Cares Act requires people administering Covid-19 tests to collect data on race, but the federal rule is not enforced. As of 14 July, race and ethnicity data was not known for 40% of US Covid-19 cases, according to the [CDC](#).

Nationwide, race and ethnicity data was missing for 32% of fully vaccinated people as of 14 July, [according to the CDC](#).

In California, a national leader in promoting health equity, race and ethnicity data is missing from a standard it uses to [set benchmarks for reopening](#). California reserved 40% of its vaccine supply for census tracts in the lowest quartile of this standard, known as the Healthy Places Index (HPI).

The HPI brings together data on 25 factors such as income and education to show which areas are most socially and economically vulnerable during the

pandemic. But race and ethnicity data are separated from the combined factors in a “complementary” data set, a legacy of the state ban on affirmative action.

A critic of the index, University of [California](#) Los Angeles professor Dr Vickie Mays, said that requiring additional layers of data analysis to understand where race and ethnicity fit in the index creates dangerous delays in the government’s response.

“Those populations are undiscovered until somebody does additional analyses,” Mays said. “That is what inequity looks like.”

In a statement, California’s department of public health did not dispute the absence of race and ethnicity data in the HPI standard.

The agency said it “is committed to prioritizing equity” and highlighted its [equity dashboard](#), which shows Covid-19 data broken down by race and ethnicity. It also includes case data based on income and access to health insurance and notes that those issues, which can increase the risk of poor health outcomes, are “often the result of structural racism”.

The Public Health Alliance of Southern California developed the HPI and repeatedly highlights on its [website and in briefs](#) the important role race and ethnicity play in shaping health outcomes and in Covid-19.

The website also notes that race and ethnicity data are separate because of a 1996 California ban on affirmative action, known as Prop 209. California is one of eight states that blocks the government from giving jobs, educational opportunities or contracts based on race. [In November](#), California voters rejected a measure that would repeal the ban on affirmative action.

“In order to ensure the Healthy Places Index can be used in a variety of applications, including informing policy decisions, the Alliance has made additional, informational layers about Race/Ethnicity available on our online map,” the [HPI website said](#).

More integrated data sets for California do exist.

Mays and other UCLA researchers published [a predictive model](#) for Los Angeles county in November that includes definitive information on which racial and ethnic groups are most vulnerable. Like the HPI, it also includes other socio-economic factors, such as healthcare access and environmental risk.

Los Angeles county was [the center of the US outbreak](#) in the winter and the model accurately predicted that the most vulnerable communities, and therefore those that should be prioritized for vaccinations, were in areas where there are large groups of racial and ethnic minorities, low-income households and unmet social needs.

The model was [endorsed by Dr Edward Sondik](#), former director of the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics. Sondik said if this model was replicated across the US, "these insights could be extremely helpful for bringing the pandemic under control".

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Medical research

## Huge study supporting ivermectin as Covid treatment withdrawn over ethical concerns

The preprint endorsing ivermectin as a coronavirus therapy has been widely cited, but independent researchers find glaring discrepancies in the data



Ivermectin is a common drug used for treating parasites. A study saying it was an effective Covid treatment has now been retracted. Photograph: Soumyabrata Roy/NurPhoto/REX/Shutterstock

Ivermectin is a common drug used for treating parasites. A study saying it was an effective Covid treatment has now been retracted. Photograph: Soumyabrata Roy/NurPhoto/REX/Shutterstock

[Melissa Davey](#)

[@MelissaLDavey](#)

Thu 15 Jul 2021 13.30 EDT

The efficacy of a drug being promoted by rightwing figures worldwide for treating Covid-19 is in serious doubt after a major study suggesting the treatment is effective against the virus was withdrawn due to “ethical concerns”.

The preprint study on the efficacy and safety of ivermectin – a drug used against parasites such as worms and headlice – in treating Covid-19, led by Dr Ahmed Elgazzar from Benha University in Egypt, was published on the Research Square website in November.

It claimed to be a randomised control trial, a type of study crucial in medicine because it is considered to provide the most reliable evidence on the effectiveness of interventions due to the minimal risk of confounding factors influencing the results. Elgazzar is listed as chief editor of the Benha Medical Journal, and is an [editorial board member](#).

[Unreliable data: how doubt snowballed over Covid-19 drug research that swept the world](#)

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The study found that patients with Covid-19 treated in hospital who “received ivermectin early reported substantial recovery” and that there was “a substantial improvement and reduction in mortality rate in ivermectin treated groups” by 90%.

But the drug’s promise as a treatment for the virus is in serious doubt after the Elgazzar study [was pulled from the Research Square website on Thursday](#) “due to ethical concerns”. Research Square did not outline what those concerns were.

A medical student in London, Jack Lawrence, [was among the first to identify serious concerns about the paper](#), leading to the retraction. He first became aware of the Elgazzar preprint when it was assigned to him by one of his lecturers for an assignment that formed part of his master’s degree. He found the introduction section of the paper appeared to have been almost entirely plagiarised.

It appeared that the authors had run entire paragraphs from press releases and websites about ivermectin and Covid-19 through a thesaurus to change key words. “Humorously, this led to them changing ‘severe acute respiratory syndrome’ to ‘extreme intense respiratory syndrome’ on one occasion,” Lawrence said.

The data also looked suspicious to Lawrence, with the raw data apparently contradicting the study protocol on several occasions.

“The authors claimed to have done the study only on 18-80 year olds, but at least three patients in the dataset were under 18,” Lawrence said.

“The authors claimed they conducted the study between the 8th of June and 20th of September 2020, however most of the patients who died were admitted into hospital and died before the 8th of June according to the raw data. The data was also terribly formatted, and includes one patient who left hospital on the non-existent date of 31/06/2020.”

There were other concerns.

“In their paper, the authors claim that four out of 100 patients died in their standard treatment group for mild and moderate Covid-19,” Lawrence said. “According to the original data, the number was 0, the same as the ivermectin treatment group. In their ivermectin treatment group for severe Covid-19, the authors claim two patients died, but the number in their raw data is four.”

Lawrence and the Guardian sent Elgazzar a comprehensive list of questions about the data, but did not receive a reply. The university’s press office also did not respond.

Lawrence contacted an Australian chronic disease epidemiologist from the University of Wollongong, Gideon Meyerowitz-Katz, and a [data analyst](#) affiliated with Linnaeus University in Sweden [who reviews scientific papers for errors](#), Nick Brown, for help analysing the data and study results more thoroughly.

Brown [created a comprehensive document uncovering numerous data errors](#), discrepancies and concerns, which he provided to the Guardian. According to his findings the authors had clearly repeated data between patients.

“The main error is that at least 79 of the patient records are obvious clones of other records,” Brown told the Guardian. “It’s certainly the hardest to explain away as innocent error, especially since the clones aren’t even pure copies. There are signs that they have tried to change one or two fields to make them look more natural.”

Other studies on ivermectin are still under way. In the UK, [the University of Oxford is testing whether giving people with Covid-19 ivermectin](#) prevents them ending up in hospital.

The Elgazzar study was one of the largest and most promising showing the drug may help Covid patients, and has often been cited by proponents of the drug as evidence of its effectiveness. This is despite a peer-reviewed paper published in the journal Clinical Infectious Diseases in June finding ivermectin is “[not a viable option to treat COVID-19 patients](#)”.

Meyerowitz-Katz told the Guardian that “this is one of the biggest ivermectin studies out there”, and it appeared to him the data was “just totally faked”. This was concerning because [two meta-analyses](#) of [ivermectin for treating Covid-19](#) had included the Elgazzar study in the results. A meta-analysis is a statistical analysis that combines the results of multiple scientific studies to determine what the overall scientific literature has found about a treatment or intervention.

“Because the Elgazzar study is so large, and so massively positive – showing a 90% reduction in mortality – it hugely skews the evidence in favour of ivermectin,” Meyerowitz-Katz said.

“If you remove this one study from the scientific literature, suddenly there are very few positive randomised control trials of ivermectin for Covid-19. Indeed, if you get rid of just this research, most meta-analyses that have found positive results would have their conclusions entirely reversed.”

Kyle Sheldrick, a Sydney doctor and researcher, also independently raised concerns about the paper. He found numbers the authors provided for several standard deviations – a measure of variation in a group of data points – mentioned in tables in the paper were “mathematically impossible” given the range of numbers provided in the same table.

[Flu jab may reduce severe effects of Covid, suggests study](#)

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Sheldrick said the completeness of data was further evidence suggesting possible fabrication, noting that in real-world conditions, this was almost impossible. He also identified the duplication of patient deaths and data.

Ivermectin has gained momentum throughout Latin America [and India](#), largely based on evidence from preprint studies. In March, the World Health Organization [warned against the use of ivermectin outside](#) well designed clinical trials.

The conservative Australian MP Craig Kelly, [who has also promoted the use of the anti-malarial drug hydroxychloroquine](#) to treat Covid-19 – despite there being no evidence that it works – has been among those promoting ivermectin. Several Indian media outlets ran stories on Kelly in the past week after [he asked Uttar Pradesh](#) to loan the state’s chief minister, Adityanath, to Australia to release ivermectin. After this story was initially published, Kelly contacted the Guardian to say he disagreed with the statement that there was no evidence that hydroxychloroquine worked, and that he stood by his views.

Lawrence said what started out as a simple university assignment had led to a comprehensive investigation into an apparent scientific fraud at a time when “there is a whole ivermectin hype … dominated by a mix of right-wing figures, anti-vaxxers and outright conspiracists”.

“Although science trends towards self-correction, something is clearly broken in a system that can allow a study as full of problems as the Elgazzar paper to run unchallenged for seven months,” he said.

“Thousands of highly educated scientists, doctors, pharmacists, and at least four major medicines regulators missed a fraud so apparent that it might as well have come with a flashing neon sign. That this all happened amid an ongoing global health crisis of epic proportions is all the more terrifying.”

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[Drag](#)

# ‘Gender is a performance’: Scotland’s first ‘drag school’ sells out

Dumfries course teaches 11- to 18-year-olds how to create a persona, apply makeup and the history of drag



The Edinburgh-based drag queen Jordy Deelight will lead the workshops.  
Photograph: Stuart Walker

The Edinburgh-based drag queen Jordy Deelight will lead the workshops.  
Photograph: Stuart Walker



### [Libby Brooks](#)

Fri 16 Jul 2021 02.00 EDT

“You can use drag to explore anything you want to,” says Natalie Doidge, the organiser of what is thought to be Scotland’s first “drag school” for teenagers, which opens its doors later this month after facing down controversy.

“Drag isn’t limited to men dressed as women … and this course opens it out to anyone who wants to try it. It’s an exploration of [oneself] – especially for young people at the upper end of high school, when your life is just beginning and you’re thinking about who want to be. [Gender](#) is a performance, after all.”

Doidge, 23, has devised the five-day course along with King Dalby, 22, as part of Dumfries Youth Theatre’s summer programme. Both grew up in the town, are trainee producers at the theatre and want to create opportunities for young people living in rural areas like the south of Scotland.

The youth theatre, supported by the community platform Big Burns Supper, offers summer courses in comedy, dance and costume design as well as the drag school for those aged 11 to 18. It includes sessions on creating a

persona, makeup, performance and the history of drag artists going back to the Stonewall riots.

The course is now sold out, with half the places taken up by girls. But it attracted a barrage of criticism, particularly when the organisers initially proposed a similar daytime event for older primary-school aged children.

A significant number of online comments raised concerns about safeguarding and sexualising of children, with some referring to entirely false tropes about LGBTQ adults exploiting educational spaces to “groom” younger people.

Graham Main, the chief executive of Big Burns Supper, underlines that even for primary schoolchildren there is an accepted and appropriate level of LGBT discussion within the curriculum. “We’re experienced youth workers, and we’re working in primary schools on a weekly basis,” he says.

“So we have a thorough and trusted awareness of the approach required. We need to recognise that the conversation around these topics is accelerating so quickly amongst young people in the classroom. This summer event is just about putting a wee flag up to say: ‘It’s OK to be in the chess club, and it’s OK to be in this one too.’”

In a rural area with no designated queer spaces, he adds, an event like this has a ripple effect in terms of young people’s awareness and confidence.

The organisers were planning a daylong drag offering for children aged eight to 11 years, but after the online backlash they adapted it to a one-day LGBTQ youth space, with discussions of heroes and icons and the evolution of the Pride flag, fuelled by rainbow snacks.

The Edinburgh-based drag queen Jordy Deelight, who will be leading the workshops, said shows like [Drag](#) Race UK – the Glaswegian Lawrence Chaney became the first Scottish winner in March – have popularised the performance, and young people are also coming to it via YouTubers who are elevating makeup application to an art form.

Dalby adds: “A lot of the complaints were from people who didn’t really understand what drag is. People have this idea that drag is offensive, but it’s not – you can make fun of the ridiculous stereotypes, drag kings with fake abs, drag queens who go incredibly feminine then drop their voice. And then there are drag artists who think ‘Gender is stupid, I’m going to be a robot or an alien.’”

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Space

## The space race is back on – but who will win?



Chinese astronaut Nie Haisheng in the core module of Beijing's space station in July. Photograph: Xinhua/Rex/Shutterstock

Chinese astronaut Nie Haisheng in the core module of Beijing's space station in July. Photograph: Xinhua/Rex/Shutterstock

Alliances are shifting as states led by China and Russia compete with the US and tech entrepreneurs



[Luke Harding](#)

Fri 16 Jul 2021 05.39 EDT

Liu Boming took in the dizzy view. Around him lay the inky vastness of space. Below was the Earth. “Wow,” he said, laughing. “It’s too beautiful out here.” Over the next seven hours Liu and his colleague Tang Hongbo carried out China’s second spacewalk, helped along by a giant robotic arm.

Mission accomplished, the two taikonauts – China’s astronauts – clambered back into their home for the next three months: Beijing’s new space station. The core module of the station, named Tiangong, meaning “heavenly palace”, was launched in April. “There will be more spacewalks. The station will keep growing,” Liu said.

[Astronauts at China’s new space station conduct first spacewalk](#)

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Meanwhile, on Mars, a Chinese rover was exploring. Video shows the [vehicle trundling over a rocky surface](#). There is even sound: an eerie mechanical groaning. Since landing in May the Zhurong probe has been busy seeking clues as to whether Mars once supported life. There is no answer yet: so far it has travelled just over 410 metres.

China is only the second country to land and operate a rover on the red planet, after the US. The frantic tempo of the China National [Space](#) Administration's (CNSA) recent programme is reminiscent of the cold war, when Moscow and Washington were superpower rivals scrambling to put the first man in space and land on the moon.

Half a century on, space has opened up. It is less ideological and a lot more crowded. About 72 countries have space programmes, including India, Brazil, Japan, Canada, South Korea and the UAE. The European Space Agency is active too, while the UK boasts the most private space startups after the US.

Space today is also highly commercial. On Sunday [Richard Branson](#) flew to the edge of space and back again in his Virgin Galactic passenger rocket. On Tuesday, Branson's fellow billionaire Jeff Bezos is due to travel in his own reusable craft, New Shepard, built by the Amazon founder's company Blue Origin and launched from west Texas.



Billionaire Richard Branson floats in zero gravity at the edge of space on Virgin Galactic's rocket. Photograph: Virgin Galactic/Reuters

Non-state actors play an increasingly important role in space exploration. Elon Musk's SpaceX vehicles have made numerous flights to the

International Space Station (ISS), and [since last year they have transported people as well as cargo](#). Later this year Musk is due to send his own all-civilian crew into orbit – though he isn't going himself.

Even so, space still reflects tensions on Earth. “Astropolitics follows geopolitics,” says [Mark Hilborne](#), a lecturer in defence studies at King’s College London. Up there anything goes, he adds. “Space governance is a bit fuzzy. Laws are few and very old. They are not written for asteroid mining or for a time when companies dominate.”

The biggest challenge to US space supremacy comes not from [Russia](#) – heir to the Soviet Union’s pioneering space programme, which launched the Sputnik satellite and got the first human into space in the form of Yuri Gagarin – but from China.

In 2011 Congress prohibited US scientists from cooperating with Beijing. Its fear: scientific espionage. Taikonauts are banned from visiting the ISS, which has hosted astronauts from 19 countries over the past 20 years. The station’s future beyond 2028 is uncertain. Its operations may yet be extended in the face of increasing Chinese competition.

In its annual threat assessment this April, the office of the US Director of National Intelligence (DNI) described China as a “near-peer competitor” pushing for global power. It warns: “Beijing is working to match or exceed US capabilities in space to gain the military, economic, and prestige benefits that Washington has accrued from space leadership.”

The Biden administration suspects Chinese satellites are being used for non-civilian purposes. The People’s Liberation Army integrates reconnaissance and navigation data in military command and control systems, the DNI says. “Satellites are inherently dual use. It’s not like the difference between an F15 fighter jet and a 737 passenger plane,” Hilborne says.

Once China completes the Tiangong space station next year, it is likely to invite foreign astronauts to take part in missions. One goal: to build new soft-power alliances. Beijing says interest from other countries is enormous. The low Earth orbit station is part of an ambitious development strategy in the heavens rather than on land – a sort of belt and rocket initiative.



Liu Boming leaving China's new Tiangong space station earlier this month to go on the second space walk in the country's history. Photograph: Jin Liwang/AP

According to Alanna Krolkowski, an assistant professor at the Missouri University of Science and Technology, a “bifurcation” of space exploration is under way. In one emerging camp are states led by China and Russia, many of them authoritarian; in the other are democracies and “like-minded” countries aligned with the US.

Russia has traditionally worked closely with the Americans, even when terrestrial relations were bad. Now it is moving closer to Beijing. In March, China and Russia [announced plans to co-build an international lunar research station](#). The agreement comes at a time when Vladimir Putin’s government has been increasingly isolated and subject to western sanctions. In June, Putin and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping renewed a friendship treaty. Moscow is cosying up to Beijing out of necessity, at a time of rising US-China bipolarity.

These rival geopolitical factions are fighting over a familiar mountainous surface: the moon. In 2019 a Chinese rover landed on its far side – a first. China is now planning a mission to the moon’s south pole, to establish a

robotic research station and an eventual lunar base, which would be intermittently crewed.

[Far side of the moon: China's Chang'e 4 probe makes historic touchdown](#)

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Nasa, meanwhile, has said it intends to put a woman and a person of colour on the moon by 2024. SpaceX has been hired [to develop a lander](#). The return to the moon – after the last astronaut, commander Eugene Cernan, said goodbye in December 1972 – would be a staging post for the ultimate “giant leap”, Nasa says: sending astronauts to Mars.



Private firms such as Jeff Bezos's Blue Origin are maintaining the US's status as the world's greatest space power. Photograph: Chuck Bigger/Alamy

Krolikowski is sceptical that China will quickly overtake the US to become the world's leading spacefaring country. “A lot of what China is doing is a reprisal of what the cold war space programmes did in the 1960s and 1970s,” she said. Beijing's recent feats of exploration have as much to do with national pride as scientific discovery, she says.

But there is no doubting Beijing's desire to catch up, she adds. “The Chinese government has established, or has plans for, programmes or missions in

every major area, whether it's [Mars](#) missions, building mega constellations of telecommunications satellites, or exploring asteroids. There is no single area of space activity they are not involved in."

"We see a tightening of the Russia-China relationship," Krolikowski says. "In the 1950s the Soviet Union provided a wide range of technical assistance to Beijing. Since the 1990s, however, the Russian space establishment has experienced long stretches of underfunding and stagnation. China now presents it with new opportunities."

Russia is poised to benefit from cost sharing, while China gets deep-rooted Russian technical expertise. At least, that's the theory. "I'm sceptical this joint space project will materialise anytime soon," says Alexander Gabuev, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Moscow Centre. Gabuev says both countries are "techno-nationalist". Previous agreements to develop helicopters and wide-bodied aircraft saw nothing actually made, he says.



China's Zhurong Mars rover with its landing platform, which reached the planet in May. Photograph: CNSA/ZUMA Press Wire Service/REX/Shutterstock

The Kremlin has been a key partner in managing and resupplying the ISS. US astronauts used Russian Soyuz rockets to reach the station, taking off

from a cosmodrome in Kazakhstan, after the Space Shuttle programme was phased out. But this epoch seems to be coming to an end as private companies such as [SpaceX](#) take over. “I expect US-Russian relations to get worse,” Gabuev says, adding that Americans “no longer need” Russia’s help.

Moscow’s state corporation for space activities, Roscosmos, has faced accusations of being more interested in politics than space research. Last month the newspaper Novaya Gazeta reported that Roscosmos’s executive director of manned space programmes, former cosmonaut Sergei Krikalev, had been fired. His apparent crime: questioning an official decision to shoot a film on the Russian section of the ISS.



Yulia Peresild: heading to space. Photograph: Stephane Cardinale - Corbis/Corbis/Getty Images

The film, Challenge, is about a female surgeon operating on a cosmonaut in space, and has been backed and financed by Roscosmos . It stars Yulia Peresild, who is due to head to space in October with director Klim Shipenko. The launch seems timed to beat Tom Cruise, who is due to shoot his own movie on board the ISS with director Doug Liman.

[Space race 2: Russian actor bound for ISS in same month as Tom Cruise](#)

## [Read more](#)

Krikalev, who spent more than 800 days in space and was in orbit when the USSR collapsed, apparently told Roscosmos's chief, Dmitry Rogozin, that the film was pointless. Rogozin – its co-producer – has called on the west to drop sanctions in return for Russia's cooperation on space projects. Putin, Rogozin's boss, appears to not be very interested in other planets, though, and is more concerned with [nature and the climate crisis](#) these days.

"Space is one of the areas that has traditionally transcended politics. The Mir space station worked at a time of east-west tensions. There was symbolic cooperation. Whether this will continue in the future is really up for debate," Hilborne says. "The US is very sensitive about what happens in space."

Most observers think the US will remain the world's pre-eminent space power, thanks to its innovative and flourishing private sector. China's Soviet-style state programme appears less nimble. Despite ambitious timetables, and billions spent by Beijing, it is unclear when – or even if – an astronaut will return to the moon. The 2030s, perhaps? Will they be American or Chinese? Or from a third country?

It may well be that the first person to boldly go again doesn't merely represent a nation or carry a flag. More likely, they will emerge from a lunar lander wearing a spacesuit with a SpaceX logo on the back – a giant leap not only for mankind, but for galactic marketing.

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## [Coronavirus](#)

# From haircuts to clubs: how to stay Covid-safe after England's 'freedom day'



The Public Health England study identifies a 30-fold difference in the likelihood of catching the virus during different activities and events.  
Composite: The Guardian

The Public Health England study identifies a 30-fold difference in the likelihood of catching the virus during different activities and events.  
Composite: The Guardian

With the lifting of almost all remaining Covid restrictions confirmed for 19 July, a PHE study compares levels of risk across different activities and events

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*Linda Geddes and Charlotte Burton*

Fri 16 Jul 2021 06.26 EDT

It is the moment many of us have been anticipating for months, with excitement or dread: [so-called ‘freedom day’](#). The lifting of almost all remaining Covid restrictions in England from 19 July marks a turning point in our relationship with the virus, when “personal responsibility” becomes our primary means of avoiding infection. So, what should we prioritise to stay safe?

A [study](#) by Public Health England (PHE) scientists provides some clues. It identifies a 30-fold difference in the likelihood of catching the virus during different activities and events. Visits to other people’s houses and places that offer massages and haircuts are identified as the highest risk, while shops are the least risky.

The PHE researchers used contact tracing and genetic data from the UK’s second wave to determine whether the places infected people said they’d visited were where transmission actually occurred. The study has yet to be peer reviewed.

But there’s plenty we can do in all settings to boost our levels of protection. Here’s our guide to staying safe next week and beyond.

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## Getting a haircut



People wait for a haircut in central London: ‘Although the odds ratio is high, the total amount of transmission is quite low.’ Photograph: Wayne Tippetts/Rex/Shutterstock

While “personal services” such as visiting a hair salon, beautician or massage parlour were among activities associated with the greatest risk of catching Covid, that’s not to say we shouldn’t be going out for a haircut.

“It’s really important to say that although the odds ratio here is [very] high, the total amount of transmission is quite low,” said Prof Ewan Birney of the European Molecular Biology Laboratory, who was involved in the research. The biggest risk is likely to come from your hairdresser, masseuse or beautician being infectious rather than from other customers – particularly as these activities tend to involve being in close contact for prolonged periods in small spaces indoors and often face-to-face.

Although plastic visors, cleaning and taking customers’ temperatures at the door may feel reassuring, ensuring windows are open and that your hairdresser has been vaccinated are probably better ways of protecting ourselves. Another strategy could be to ask whether staff are taking regular rapid tests to pick up asymptomatic infections. Dr Nilufar Ahmed, a psychologist at the University of Bristol, said: “I think if people begin to ask these questions, then businesses will start to respond to that.”

## [Living in England: what are your plans on 19 July?](#)

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## **Going to work**



Commuters at Piccadilly station in Manchester. The planned removal of mandatory masks on public transport has worried scientists. Photograph: Christopher Thomond/The Guardian

Advice to work from home is coming to an end, but how safe will returning to the office be? In part, this will depend on how well ventilated the workplace is, said Dr Stephen Griffin, a virologist from the University of Leeds. Ideally, buildings should undergo ventilation assessments, but in the meantime “people should try and open windows and get a through-draft if they can”. [Commuting also carries risks](#), and the planned removal of mandatory masks on public transport in England has worried many scientists. In a confined space with poor ventilation, collective mask-wearing means less virus floating around in the air, making it safer for everyone, Griffin said.

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## **Childcare and schools**

The PHE study identified nursery schools as one of the higher-risk venues for Covid transmission. “Younger children are less likely to be able to maintain [social distancing] boundaries, just because they forget,” said Ahmed. They are also more likely to be asymptomatic, meaning unless they’re tested infections can go unnoticed and rapidly spread. Nurseries tend to be relatively small spaces, and young children have a proclivity for touching objects and surfaces – with their mouths as well as their hands.

Primary and secondary schools are also sources of outbreaks, although the PHE study found these were less risky. “Essentially, schools are a good place to spread the virus between young people, even despite the best efforts of schools, just because you’ve got lots of different households mixing,” said Linda Bauld, professor of public health at the University of Edinburgh.

But children don’t magically become infected out of thin air. Particularly for younger ones, the original source of any outbreak is often the adults in their lives. So, a key way to reduce school and nursery outbreaks is for parents to get double vaccinated.

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## Visiting friends

A key reason why the risk associated with social visits to friends’ houses is so high is because we tend to spend long periods of time in relatively close proximity, such as facing one another across the dining table or sitting next to one another on the sofa watching the football.

Gathering in the “safety” of your own home with friends and loved ones is also risky precisely because we perceive it to be safe. “That, for me, is the key part of that [PHE finding],” said Ahmed. “We generally feel safer around people we know and like, and we tend to interpret that safeness in quite global terms – I feel safe therefore I must be less at risk.”

Asking friends and relatives if they’ve recently taken a Covid test, how many vaccine doses they’ve had, and how long ago they had them can help you to accurately assess the risks, and consider safer options if necessary – such as meeting in a park or garden instead.

[We still need to take ‘precautions’ during the pandemic – so how will those differ from restrictions?](#)

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## Going to the pub or dining out



Friends share a drink at a beer garden in Camden Town, north London. Being conscious of space, and eating outdoors if possible will both help to minimise risk. Photograph: Peter Dench/Getty Images

Here, the degree of risk varies, depending on who you’re with, how closely you sit and whether you’re indoors or outdoors. It’s most likely the virus would transmit between groups of friends rather than strangers in this setting, said Catherine Noakes, professor of environmental engineering at the University of Leeds, speaking in a personal capacity. “Even though there will no longer be a requirement on social distancing, it doesn’t mean we suddenly have to be 50cm apart from each other,” she said.

Being conscious of space, and eating outdoors if possible will both help to minimise risk. However, even a pub beer garden can harbour hidden dangers. Griffin said being crammed around a small bench could still be risky “if you’re sat across from one another, and talking, so the range of

your droplets is such that you could still be exposing people". Queueing for the toilet or for a drink could be another transmission hotspot, if people are standing close together, without wearing masks, for protracted amounts of time.

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## Going shopping

Despite concerns about picking up Covid from contaminated groceries during the early months of the pandemic, most shopping is now considered relatively low risk. In part, this is because physical distancing is quite easy in a supermarket aisle, and because shoppers don't tend to loiter for long periods.

"Also, retail made an effort – though probably less in recent months – to limit the number of people going into those environments," said Bauld. "I think a lot of the risks in supermarkets are going to be more for the staff and the break rooms rather than the public," said Noakes.

Even though the risks are relatively low, significant numbers of retail-related infections have occurred because of the sheer number of people engaging in this activity. This risk may increase as people distance less, and fewer wear face coverings.

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## Nightclubs

Nightclubs will open their doors for the first time in over a year. Typically crowded spaces, packed with people who've been consuming substances that may diminish their inhibitions or sense of space and social responsibility, nightclubs are undoubtedly a high risk setting. Infections increased eight-fold following relaxation of Covid restrictions in the Netherlands, which included the reopening of nightclubs, prompting the government to reimpose restrictions after two weeks. Spain, too, backtracked on plans to reopen nightclubs nationally.

However, the risks could be somewhat reduced if clubs take up the government's recommendation of only admitting people who can show proof of double vaccination or a negative Covid test.

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## Outdoor festivals and sporting events



Festivalgoers attend the Gisburne Park Pop-Up festival near Clitheroe last July. Dangers include travelling to and from events. Photograph: Oli Scarff/AFP/Getty Images

The risk of catching Covid is much lower outdoors than indoors due to wind and fresh air dispersing and diluting the virus. However, bigger danger zones include travelling to and from events – particularly as car sharing and public transport often involve contact with people from outside your household.

An event branded “outdoor” doesn’t necessarily mean all elements are outside either: indoor toilets, enclosed refreshment areas and music tents filled with people singing and dancing are all areas where the virus is more likely to spread. The same goes for shops, and food and drink venues at sporting stadiums.

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## Experience: I was stabbed while playing Hamlet

The audience thought it was part of the play and gave us a round of applause. I remember thinking I was about to die



‘The doctors told me I had a traumatic brain injury.’ Photograph: Liam Murphy/The Guardian

‘The doctors told me I had a traumatic brain injury.’ Photograph: Liam Murphy/The Guardian

*Conor Madden*

Fri 16 Jul 2021 05.00 EDT

When I was cast in a travelling production of Hamlet in 2011, I was very nervous – Hamlet has an awful lot of lines. But I was 24 at the time, and having a leading role was a big deal.

We performed the show for six weeks without a hitch in a Dublin theatre. Then it transferred to Cork. Time was tight, which meant we didn’t get to

finish our technical rehearsal before opening night, which was going to be a full house: about 750 people.

The show went smoothly until the fifth act, when it was time to perform the swordfight between Laertes and Hamlet. We weren't using prop swords; they were solid steel. The stage in Cork was smaller than we were used to, and the actor playing Laertes and I got too close. We were exhausted – we'd been talking nonstop for two and a half hours on stage.

In the fight, Laertes is carrying a poison-tipped sword designed to kill Hamlet with just a scratch. But as he lunged forward to make the gesture, his sword stabbed my face. I felt a snap in my brain and fell to the floor. All the actors rushed on stage. The audience thought it was part of the play, and as the curtains went down they gave us a round of applause. I remember thinking I was about to die.

I was taken to hospital in an ambulance. I was slurring my words and had no balance, but the doctors said, "You seem fine. You're probably in shock." I went home and was sick all night. My parents took me back to hospital the next day, as my speech and balance were still not right. I had lots of MRIs, and I would run through my Hamlet lines as I lay down in the long tube, reciting "To be or not to be" as if I'd be back on stage the next day.

The doctors told me I had a traumatic brain injury. Even though the sword hadn't gone into my brain, the tip had bounced off my orbital bone and the energy kept going and passed through my head. My symptoms were typical of a stroke: I couldn't walk, talk or feed myself. They said I would survive, but I might not walk or talk properly again. I freaked out. It was also very traumatic for my parents. I was young, but they were suddenly looking at someone who'd lost control of his body.

I was in hospital for a month and in rehab for five more, learning to walk and talk again. It felt as if my identity had been stripped from me. I was a sprinter before the accident, but now I can't run. I have a limp still, with weakness on one side. I used to love riding mountain bikes, which I can no longer do. I have permanent double vision and ataxia (a neurological disorder that affects balance, coordination and speech). I can't drive.

I experienced PTSD after the injury. I would get irrationally angry, going from 0 to 100 immediately, which was horrible for people to see. Some people with brain injuries become addicted to alcohol or prescription painkillers. I didn't, but I can see how that can happen.

I was living in Dublin at the time and was really unhappy. So I moved back to my home town in the west of Ireland, which is much quieter. I live there now with my wife, Zara, whom I've been with since I was 14, and our six-month-old daughter.

### [Experience: I broke my friend's leg](#)

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I still act, and have played Hamlet many times since – just not with swords. I will never feel anything but love towards the actor who was playing Laertes. It was neither his fault nor mine, and it could easily have been him in hospital.

My court battle against the theatre company's insurers was more traumatic than the injury itself. It was a very adversarial process and it took three years to get to the high court. In the settlement, I got enough to buy my parents' house and the house next door. We're now living beside each other, mortgage-free.

I've since toured the world playing Hamlet in a production called [The Rehearsal, Playing The Dane](#). In the play, two other actors and I audition to play Hamlet in the first half, and then the audience votes on who gets the part for the second half. In every show, I tell the audience my story of being stabbed. No matter where I am, from Australia to China, they never believe me. Truth is stranger than fiction – they normally vote for the other guy.

As told to Ellie Harrison

Do you have an experience to share? Email [experience@theguardian.com](mailto:experience@theguardian.com)

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# **The limits of the Tories' 'war on woke' are becoming ever more apparent**

[Hugh Muir](#)



This was the week when Boris Johnson's approach to race backfired, alienating even the right of his own party



Steve Baker: ‘We just have to get alongside those players who are taking the knee, and understand they are not saying ‘defund the police’; they’re not anti-capitalist.’ Photograph: Simon Dawson/Reuters

Steve Baker: ‘We just have to get alongside those players who are taking the knee, and understand they are not saying ‘defund the police’; they’re not anti-capitalist.’ Photograph: Simon Dawson/Reuters

Fri 16 Jul 2021 01.00 EDT

On the basis that it is kind to feel the pain of others, one might reasonably ask: what can it be like right now to be a proper one-nation Tory? Those of us outside the blue tent cannot know, but there are clues as to how horrible it is getting in there.

Imagine how bad things have got if Steve Baker, the influential MP and the dogged soul who did so much to drag his party and us into the wilderness of Brexit and then to terrorise the PM into minimising lockdown restrictions – so no Guardianista he – feels willing and able to [rebuke Johnson](#) on how the party is now positioned on race.

“We just have to get alongside those players who are taking the knee, and understand they are not saying ‘defund the police’; they’re not anti-capitalist,” [Baker said](#). They were, he continued – stating a fact most can see

as blindingly obvious – seeking to show “solidarity with those who suffer racism”.

One can sense the anxiety when the England international Tyrone Mings very [publicly blames](#) Priti Patel for creating the toxicity that led to fellow players being racially abused after Sunday’s Euro 2020 final, and then the Conservative MP [Johnny Mercer](#), once tipped as a future party leader, says: “The painful truth is that this guy is completely right,” adding that he is “very uncomfortable with the position we Conservatives are needlessly forcing ourselves into”.

[Tory MP says party must change attitude towards taking the knee](#)  
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If they worry, it’s with good reason. By accident or design, Johnson and his retinue, with their nativism and culture warring, are taking quite the gamble with the future of their party.

Six years ago, when David Cameron was prime minister and things were bad but nowhere near as bad and chaotic as they are now, I made a [BBC radio documentary](#) about the Conservative party and its attempt to secure its future in diverse Britain by making itself more palatable to minority voters. We called it [Erasing Enoch](#) – referencing the notoriously racist 1968 speech by Enoch Powell that defined the relationship between the Tories and black Britain for a generation and more afterwards.

The thesis was that, contrary to the delusion liberals often have, there is a recognisable strain of conservatism within many minority communities that sits fairly easily with the values Tories like to claim for themselves: the ideas of self-reliance, of “traditional” families and financial prudence.

The biggest impediment to that is, and has always been, racism. You might earn enough to want to minimise your tax, or have pulled yourself up into the target demographic, but why would you vote for a party that treats you badly or clearly thinks ill of you? I put this to Grant Shapps, then party chairman. He said it was a top priority. I told him the Tories’ ability to repel minority voters seemed like a sort of genius in reverse.

Buoyed by research from the pollster Lord Ashcroft, even a leader with judgment as poor as Cameron's could see that in a changing world, with Tory-held suburban marginals not as white as they were, the party had to detoxify itself. Theresa May saw it too. True, she had the deranged preoccupation with immigration that gave us the appalling "[“go home” vans](#)" during her term as home secretary, and later the Windrush scandal. But she also had the nous to position her party as one determined to tackle "burning injustices". She set up a [racial equality taskforce](#). She said she was passionate about it, and she might have been. In any event, it was good politics.

And then came Johnson. It was never quite clear which way he would jump because, as we know, he doesn't passionately believe in much, save for his advancement and survival. But what he has ultimately chosen to do is to completely abandon detoxification for the more immediate, short-term gain of a "red wall" strategy. Detoxification was hard slog. Even in his [2019 landslide](#) only 20% of black voters voted Tory. In 2015 it had been [23%](#). Making grandiose step-change promises to predominantly white voters in previously Labour northern seats, pitting them against metropolitan diversity and southern "elites", was much easier.

But he doesn't have a step-change plan, and certainly no game-changing money with which to cement their loyalty. A "[levelling-up fund](#)" of just £4.8bn. A training pot of £111m. And from yesterday's big levelling-up speech in Coventry, £50m for new football pitches and a plea for ideas from the public. Hardly a new world. Even the new [royal yacht](#) project is getting £200m. Just this week, a group of 50 Conservative MPs called for extra investment in northern England. And what does his former aide Dominic Cummings say? "Crap speech (same he's given pointlessly umpteen times) supporting crap slogan."

So to plan B: the culture war, the war on "woke", the deliberate stoking of grievance to show that while his pockets are empty, his heart is full. Trump did it brilliantly; Johnson, confounding the accusation that he studies nothing, studied the former president well. And of course, our PM is a protege of the strategist Lynton Crosby, who wields division and rancour in politics like a surgeon wields a scalpel.

In one sense, it appears to have worked. The Tories ran off with Hartlepool; and thanks to Labour's weakness, Johnson still scores well in the polls. But something has gone awry – because the stance that seemed such a good idea when Johnson and Patel were giving succour to those who boo [England](#) players looks awful when so much of the country, including the new voters he is so desperate to retain, supports the heroic, maligned players. He drew a dividing line, and found much of decent opinion on the other side of it.

And this is why thinking Tories worry. He has trashed the strategy he inherited but shows no sign that he has full control or understanding of his own. Maybe those new seats will stay loyal if he continues to peddle division and grievance. They'd better, because in the meantime any hope that his grassroots will grow to be as diverse as his cabinet is for the birds. Rishi is there: great. So is Sajid Javid. Good for us, good for them. But so is Priti. You get the point. A diverse cast – but still, thanks to its star, a rotten show.

So in the aftermath of this week's debacle, with the anti-wokery having misfired, aligning those who say the party is anti-anti-racism with those who say it is Islamophobic, decent folk in the blue tent have a choice. Do they stick with Boris's own brand of identity politics, or resume the attempt to fashion a sustainable party attractive not just to a targeted group of working-class white communities but also to liberal Tories and Tory-minded minorities? Boris stands for Boris; we know that. But the others – what do they stand for?

- Hugh Muir is an editor at the Guardian

This article was amended on 17 July 2021. The Enoch Powell speech referred to was in 1968, not 1964 as an earlier version said.



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# On vaccine equality, the UK has failed to show the leadership the world needs

Mohamed Adow and Tasneem Essop

Britain has broken the promises Boris Johnson made before the G7 – a change of tack is necessary to make Cop26 a success



Boris Johnson at the G7 summit, when he had hoped to showcase ‘global Britain’ as a strong force on the world stage after Brexit. Photograph: Neil Hall/EPA

Boris Johnson at the G7 summit, when he had hoped to showcase ‘global Britain’ as a strong force on the world stage after Brexit. Photograph: Neil Hall/EPA

Fri 16 Jul 2021 03.00 EDT

Covid and the climate crisis are the two defining global crises of our time and Britain has a crucial role to play in addressing them both. As the Cop26 host, it will be responsible for overseeing a successful outcome at the UN climate talks in Glasgow in November.

Only a few weeks ago, before the prime minister hosted the G7, [Boris Johnson](#) promised the group of wealthy nations would vaccinate the world by the end of the year.

After failing dismally to deliver on this pledge, the UK government is trying to rush delegates to Cop26 a Covid vaccine in order to keep its climate conference on the road at all costs. The sudden and hurried announcement pushes those who want to attend Cop to [register for a vaccination by 23 July](#). This puts many people, especially in poorer nations and from vital civil society groups, in the invidious position of having to choose to get a vaccine before the frontline workers and vulnerable groups in their own countries.

This moral dilemma could be avoided if rich nations at the [G7](#), under the UK's leadership, had stepped up with a real plan to achieve global vaccine equity. They did not. Instead, they have perpetuated the vaccine apartheid we are experiencing.

More than 100 former presidents and prime ministers had written to the G7, urging them to bankroll at least two-thirds of the \$66bn (£48bn) needed by low-income countries for Covid vaccines. But rather than paying up the \$44bn that such an undertaking would cost, they instead offered a measly \$7bn.

These are the actions of a small, inward-looking government, not one taking its international responsibilities seriously

The former UK prime minister Gordon Brown lambasted Johnson's broken promises. He said the summit would be remembered as an "unforgivable moral failure". In Africa, Covid cases [rose by 25% last week](#). At the present infection rate, and to vaccinate only 10% of the most vulnerable among the population, the continent would need 225m vaccine doses. But the UK offered just 5m doses – 2% of what is required.

Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for less than 1% of the near billion fully vaccinated people around the world. According to [Oxfam, it would take 57 years](#) for the world to be safe from Covid-19 if the rate of vaccination in

low-income countries were to be maintained. This is unacceptable, morally reprehensible and shortsighted.

Not only has the UK failed to deliver enough jabs, it has blocked efforts to waive patents that would see global vaccine production accelerated. This makes a mockery of the G7's attempts to pose as allies of developing countries. They are not.

[Despite the grand words, this G7 falls devastatingly short on vaccines | Gordon Brown](#)

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So, the UK's offer of vaccinating delegates to attend Cop26 must be viewed against the backdrop of vaccine inequity. The offer cannot be the only intervention from the Cop26 and G7 president. Much more is required from it. Otherwise, it would appear the UK is interested only in keeping its United Nations show on the road and politically cashing in on the Cop climate summit, rather than actually doing anything meaningful to tackle the vaccine apartheid it has helped to create around the world.

These are the actions of a small and inward-looking government, not one taking its international responsibilities seriously. Nor does it appear to understand the importance of solidarity during a global crisis.

As the host of Cop26, the UK needs to be viewed as a trusted broker that can be taken seriously. All the talk of “global Britain” from Johnson suggested this would be one of the benefits of Brexit. However, we have seen a botched G7 promise on vaccines, a cut to international aid in the middle of a pandemic, and now a chaotic system to provide vaccines to delegates before Cop26.

For the UK's sake, for the fate of millions across the world and for the fate of the climate, we need to see Johnson change tack and lead.

- Mohamed Adow is director of [Power Shift Africa](#), a Kenyan climate and energy thinktank. He is a longtime observer of the UN climate talks.

- Tasneem Essop is executive director of [Climate Action Network](#), an international group of more than 1,500 civil society organisations working on the climate crisis, social justice and sustainability in more than 130 countries.
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# Why do we care about wet bulb temperature and could they have given it a better name?

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# If Covid-19 is a seasonal virus, why is it spreading during the summer?

[Francois Balloux](#)

Understanding seasonality can help us to work out when the pandemic is likely to be over



‘Covid will continue to evolve but will eventually reach its maximal transmissibility, which is expected to remain higher in winter.’ Photograph: Maureen McLean/REX/Shutterstock

‘Covid will continue to evolve but will eventually reach its maximal transmissibility, which is expected to remain higher in winter.’ Photograph: Maureen McLean/REX/Shutterstock

Fri 16 Jul 2021 04.00 EDT

There is a paradox at the heart of Sars-Cov-2 transmission that has yet to be fully explored. While it’s firmly established that the virus transmits best in winter, in common with most other respiratory viruses, the UK is currently experiencing a [summer surge](#). There have also been major Covid-19

epidemic waves in regions such as South America and India outside winter. Why is this?

From the beginning of the pandemic, one major question was to what extent Covid would display a seasonal behaviour with higher case numbers in winter. Most respiratory viruses in circulation, including the flu and the four endemic coronaviruses contributing to “common colds”, display strong seasonal patterns, with most infections happening in winter in each hemisphere.

The mechanisms behind this seasonality are complex and not fully understood. They include the direct effect of climatic variables: enveloped RNA viruses, such as Covid-19, survive best in cold, dry air and under low UV light exposure. There is also a major host behavioural component, with humans tending to spend more time in close contact in poorly ventilated spaces during winter.

Yet, a virus being seasonal does not imply it is unable to transmit at certain times of the year, as long as conditions are otherwise favourable for its spread. To best understand this, we must consider seasonality as just one of four major factors driving transmission. The other three factors are host behaviour, viral evolution and [rates of immunisation](#) in the population, provided by prior exposure to the pathogen and/or vaccination.

These four factors will all influence the dynamic of the pandemic. Infectious disease epidemiologists use a mathematical concept called the “R” number to describe the behaviour of epidemics. It represents the mean number of new infections caused by infected individuals over time. When R is greater than 1, every individual infects more than one new host on average, and the number of cases goes up over time. When R is less than 1, case numbers decrease.

Social distancing through behavioural changes, either voluntary or enforced by authorities, will decrease viral transmission. As multiple social distancing interventions are generally enacted together, and in conjunction with other factors, it can be difficult to estimate the effectiveness of each public health intervention in isolation. For example, the effectiveness of [school closures](#) is still hotly debated, in part because the impact of this measure remains

difficult to disentangle from confounding variables such as other behavioural interventions, seasonality or the emergence of more transmissible viral variants.

Viruses will always be under selection to become more transmissible. Entities replicating today will have ancestors that left more descendants. The ability to infect more hosts is key for the evolutionary success of viruses. Increased transmissibility can be achieved through various mechanisms, such as a higher viral load or by bypassing host immunisation, thus allowing variants to exploit a larger susceptible population. The Alpha variant that emerged in late 2020 was intrinsically more transmissible than previous lineages in circulation. The Delta variant, which is responsible for the current surge in the UK, is even more transmissible than Alpha, but also marginally more likely to infect people who are immunised through previous infection or vaccination.

Population immunisation through both prior natural infection and vaccination will decrease the R number, by reducing the fraction of the host population through which the virus can spread. As the proportion of the population that has been vaccinated and/or previously infected increases, the population approaches the “herd immunity threshold”, the point at which each infected host infects less than one person on average. This value lies at around 85% for the Delta variant, though, long-term, stable herd immunity against Covid is unlikely to be achieved because immunity will wane over time. Moreover, while current vaccines are remarkably effective at reducing transmission, morbidity and mortality, they do not block 100% of infections.

Population immunisation will continue to increase through vaccination and infection to reach an equilibrium value. The UK is likely getting close to this value already with more than [90% of the adult population](#) having antibodies against Covid. The proportion of the population immunised will constantly be pushed down by waning immunity, new births and the emergence of new viral variants capable of partially bypassing immunity, and pushed up by infection, reinfection and vaccination. Covid will continue to evolve but will eventually reach its maximal transmissibility, which is expected to remain higher in winter.

[As global covid vaccine passports become a reality, we have to make sure they're fair | Laura Spinney](#)

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With the majority of the UK population [being vaccinated](#) in the near future and a likely return to pre-pandemic contact rates, Covid is expected to soon reach its epidemic equilibrium. At this stage, three out of the four forces will have been removed. With seasonality obviously remaining, it is expected to start driving the epidemic dynamic, pushing R above 1 in winter and below 1 in summer. At this stage, Covid will join the 200 other seasonal endemic respiratory viruses in circulation globally. In short, we need to wait for the worst of the pandemic to be over before seasonality becomes the factor dictating the transmissibility rate of the virus.

The vast majority of infections in previously immunised people is expected to be fairly benign. We failed to eliminate Covid and are unlikely to do so in the foreseeable future. Although, thanks to effective vaccines and a remarkable viral surveillance infrastructure allowing us to update vaccines whenever needed, those lucky enough to live in rich countries are facing a much-tamed foe, in time likely comparable in its associated morbidity and mortality to the flu, or even the four common cold coronaviruses already in circulation.

The transition of Covid into endemicity is expected to happen progressively with epidemic wavelets of diminishing amplitude settling in the winter. This seasonal endemic state will be attained at a different time in various places. For most of Europe and the US, the transition towards endemicity is already well under way, and epidemic waves linked to massive morbidity and mortality, such as the ones we experienced before, are unlikely to occur in the future.

- Prof Francois Balloux is director of the University College London Genetics Institute

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[Vladimir Putin](#)

## Kremlin papers appear to show Putin's plot to put Trump in White House

Exclusive: Documents suggest Russia launched secret multi-agency effort to interfere in US democracy

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Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump. The documents appear to confirm the Kremlin possesses compromising material on Trump. Photograph: Evan Vucci/AP

Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump. The documents appear to confirm the Kremlin possesses compromising material on Trump. Photograph: Evan Vucci/AP

[Luke Harding, Julian Borger and Dan Sabbagh](#)

Thu 15 Jul 2021 06.00 EDT

[Vladimir Putin](#) personally authorised a secret spy agency operation to support a “mentally unstable” Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential

election during a [closed session of Russia's national security council](#), according to what are assessed to be leaked Kremlin documents.

The key meeting took place on 22 January 2016, the papers suggest, with the Russian president, his spy chiefs and senior ministers all present.

They agreed a Trump White House would help secure Moscow's strategic objectives, among them "social turmoil" in the US and a weakening of the American president's negotiating position.

Russia's three spy agencies were ordered to find practical ways to support Trump, in a decree appearing to bear Putin's signature.

By this point Trump was the [frontrunner in the Republican party's nomination race](#). A report prepared by Putin's expert department recommended Moscow use "all possible force" to ensure a Trump victory.

Western intelligence agencies are understood to have been aware of the documents for some months and to have carefully examined them. The papers, seen by the Guardian, seem to represent a serious and highly unusual leak from within the Kremlin.

The Guardian has shown the documents to independent experts who say they appear to be genuine. Incidental details come across as accurate. The overall tone and thrust is said to be consistent with Kremlin security thinking.



Vladimir Putin holds a meeting with permanent members of the security council on 22 January 2016 at the Kremlin. Photograph: Alexei Nikolsky/Russian presidential press service/TASS

The Kremlin responded dismissively. Putin's spokesman Dmitri Peskov said the idea that Russian leaders had met and agreed to support Trump in at the meeting in early 2016 was "a great pulp fiction" when contacted by the Guardian on Thursday morning.

The report – "No 32-04 \ vd" – is classified as secret. It says Trump is the "most promising candidate" from the Kremlin's point of view. The word in Russian is *perspektivny*.

There is a brief psychological assessment of Trump, who is described as an "impulsive, mentally unstable and unbalanced individual who suffers from an inferiority complex".

There is also apparent confirmation that the Kremlin possesses *kompromat*, or potentially compromising material, on the future president, collected – the document says – from Trump's earlier "non-official visits to Russian Federation territory".

The paper refers to "certain events" that happened during Trump's trips to Moscow. Security council members are invited to find details in appendix

five, at paragraph five, the document states. It is unclear what the appendix contains.

“It is acutely necessary to use all possible force to facilitate his [Trump’s] election to the post of US president,” the paper says.

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сознательного взрыва, что наверняка ослабит переговорную позицию будущего президента и его администрации; исходя из того, что основным и наиболее перспективным кандидатом на пост президента США от республиканской партии является Дональд Джон Трамп, личностная характеристика которого (Приложение 5 – личностная характеристика Дональда Дж. Трампа) характеризует его как психически нестабильного, импульсивного, неуравновешенного человека с комплексом неполноценности, фактически придерживающегося консервативных взглядов, а также учитывая некоторые события, вынесшие место во время пребывания его на территории РФ (Приложение 5 - личностная характеристика Дональда Дж. Трампа, пункт 5), возможно говорить о том, что в рамках текущей ситуации крайне необходимо всеми силами способствовать его избранию на пост президента США, так как

This extract from a secret Kremlin document gives details of the Russian operation to help an impulsive and ‘mentally unstable’ Donald Trump to become US president

This would help bring about Russia’s favoured “theoretical political scenario”. A Trump win “will definitely lead to the destabilisation of the US’s sociopolitical system” and see hidden discontent burst into the open, it predicts.

## The Kremlin summit

There is no doubt that the meeting in January 2016 took place – and that it was convened inside the Kremlin.

An [official photo](#) of the occasion shows Putin at the head of the table, seated beneath a Russian Federation flag and a two-headed golden eagle. Russia’s

then prime minister, Dmitry Medvedev, attended, together with the veteran foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov.

Also present were Sergei Shoigu, the defence minister in charge of the GRU, Russia's military intelligence agency; Mikhail Fradkov, the then chief of Russia's SVR foreign intelligence service; and Alexander Bortnikov, the boss of the FSB spy agency. Nikolai Patrushev, the FSB's former director, attended too as security council secretary.

According to a [press release](#), the discussion covered the economy and Moldova.

The document seen by the Guardian suggests the security council's real, covert purpose was to discuss the confidential proposals drawn up by the president's analytical service in response to US sanctions against Moscow.



Donald Trump after winning the Florida state primary in West Palm Beach, Florida, in March 2016. A report prepared by Putin's expert department recommended Moscow use 'all possible force' to ensure a Trump presidential victory. Photograph: Rhona Wise/AFP/Getty Images

The author appears to be Vladimir Symonenko, [the senior official in charge](#) of the Kremlin's expert department – which provides Putin with analytical material and reports, some of them based on foreign intelligence.

The papers indicate that on 14 January 2016 Symonenko circulated a three-page executive summary of his team's conclusions and recommendations.

In a signed order two days later, Putin instructed the then chief of his foreign policy directorate, [Alexander Manzhosin](#), to convene a closed briefing of the national security council.

Its purpose was to further study the document, the order says. Manzhosin was given a deadline of five days to make arrangements.

What was said inside the second-floor Kremlin senate building room is unknown. But the president and his intelligence officials appear to have signed off on a multi-agency plan to interfere in US democracy, framed in terms of justified self-defence.

Various measures are cited that the Kremlin might adopt in response to what it sees as hostile acts from Washington. The paper lays out several American weaknesses. These include a "deepening political gulf between left and right", the US's "media-information" space, and an anti-establishment mood under President Barack Obama.

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#### СПЕЦИАЛЬНАЯ ЧАСТЬ

Оказание влияния на политические системы государств, занимающих центральную роль в области ввода и расширения ограничительных мер в отношении РФ, подразумевает провокацию возникновения социально-политического кризиса в США, и может быть эффективно осуществлено только при реализации творческого сценария, в рамках которого должны быть выполнены следующие задачи:

а) Модуляция общественно-политической повестки в США со смещением её вектора в сторону delegitimization в общественном сознании государственной системы и будущего избранного президента.

The 'special part' of a secret Kremlin document setting out measures to cause turmoil and division in America

The paper does not name [Hillary Clinton](#), Trump's 2016 rival. It does suggest employing media resources to undermine leading US political figures.

There are paragraphs on how Russia might insert "media viruses" into American public life, which could become self-sustaining and self-replicating. These would alter mass consciousness, especially in certain groups, it says.

After the meeting, according to a separate leaked document, Putin issued a decree setting up a new and secret interdepartmental commission. Its urgent task was to realise the goals set out in the "special part" of document No 32-04 \ vd.

Members of the new working body were stated to include Shoigu, Fradkov and Bortnikov. Shoigu was named commission chair. The decree – *ukaz* in Russian – said the group should take practical steps against the US as soon as possible. These were justified on national security grounds and in accordance with [a 2010 federal law, 390-FZ](#), which allows the council to formulate state policy on security matters.

According to the document, each spy agency was given a role. The defence minister was instructed to coordinate the work of subdivisions and services. Shoigu was also responsible for collecting and systematising necessary information and for "preparing measures to act on the information environment of the object" – a command, it seems, to hack sensitive American cyber-targets identified by the SVR.



Vladimir Putin in 2016. The Russian president has repeatedly denied accusations of interfering in western democracy. Photograph: Sputnik/Reuters

The SVR was told to gather additional information to support the commission's activities. The FSB was assigned counter-intelligence. Putin approved the apparent document, dated 22 January 2016, which his chancellery stamped.

The measures were effective immediately on Putin's signature, the decree says. The spy chiefs were given just over a week to come back with concrete ideas, to be submitted by 1 February.

Written in bureaucratic language, the papers appear to offer an unprecedented glimpse into the usually hidden world of Russian government decision-making.

Putin has repeatedly denied accusations of interfering in western democracy. The documents seem to contradict this claim. They suggest the president, his spy officers and senior ministers were all intimately involved in one of the most important and audacious espionage operations of the 21st century: a plot to help put the “mentally unstable” Trump in the White House.

The papers appear to set out a route map for what actually happened in 2016.

A matter of weeks after the security council meeting, GRU hackers [raided the servers](#) of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and subsequently released thousands of private emails in an attempt to hurt Clinton's election campaign.



Hillary Clinton at the Democratic party's convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in July 2016. GRU hackers released thousands of private emails in an attempt to hurt Clinton's election campaign. Photograph: Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

The report seen by the Guardian features details redolent of Russian intelligence work, diplomatic sources say. The thumbnail sketch of Trump's personality is characteristic of Kremlin spy agency analysis, which places great emphasis on building up a profile of individuals using both real and cod psychology.

Moscow would gain most from a Republican victory, the paper states. This could lead to a "social explosion" that would in turn weaken the US president, it says. There were international benefits from a Trump win, it stresses. Putin would be able in clandestine fashion to dominate any US-

Russia bilateral talks, to deconstruct the White House's negotiating position, and to pursue bold foreign policy initiatives on Russia's behalf, it says.

Other parts of the multi-page report deal with non-Trump themes. It says sanctions imposed by the US after Russia's 2014 [annexation of Crimea](#) have contributed to domestic tensions. The Kremlin should seek alternative ways of attracting liquidity into the Russian economy, it concludes.

The document recommends the reorientation of trade and hydrocarbon exports towards China. Moscow's focus should be to influence the US and its satellite countries, it says, so they drop sanctions altogether or soften them.

## **'Spell-binding' documents**

Andrei Soldatov, an [expert on Russia's spy agencies](#) and [author of The Red Web](#), said the leaked material "reflects reality". "It's consistent with the procedures of the security services and the security council," he said. "Decisions are always made like that, with advisers providing information to the president and a chain of command."

He added: "The Kremlin micromanages most of these operations. Putin has made it clear to his spies since at least 2015 that nothing can be done independently from him. There is no room for independent action." Putin decided to release stolen DNC emails following a security council meeting in April 2016, Soldatov said, citing his own sources.

Sir Andrew Wood, the UK's former ambassador in Moscow and an associate fellow at the [Chatham House thinktank](#), described the documents as "spell-binding". "They reflect the sort of discussion and recommendations you would expect. There is a complete misunderstanding of the US and China. They are written for a person [Putin] who can't believe he got anything wrong."

Wood added: "There is no sense Russia might have made a mistake by invading Ukraine. The report is fully in line with the sort of thing I would expect in 2016, and even more so now. There is a good deal of paranoia.

They believe the US is responsible for everything. This view is deeply dug into the soul of Russia's leaders.”

Trump did not initially respond to a request for comment.

Later, Liz Harrington, his spokesperson, issued a statement on his behalf.

“This is disgusting. It’s fake news, just like RUSSIA, RUSSIA, RUSSIA was fake news. It’s just the Radical Left crazies doing whatever they can to demean everybody on the right.

“It’s fiction, and nobody was tougher on Russia than me, including on the pipeline, and sanctions. At the same time we got along with Russia. Russia respected us, China respected us, Iran respected us, North Korea respected us.

“And the world was a much safer place than it is now with mentally unstable leadership.”

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Maine

## Maine bans toxic ‘forever chemicals’ under groundbreaking new law

State is the first to enact a broad ban of PFAS compounds, which are found in everything from cosmetics to cookware



Maine is the nation’s first state to enact a broad ban on PFAS. Photograph: Robert F Bukaty/AP

Maine is the nation’s first state to enact a broad ban on PFAS. Photograph: Robert F Bukaty/AP

[Tom Perkins](#)

Thu 15 Jul 2021 21.01 EDT

Maine has enacted a groundbreaking [law](#) that will ban the use of toxic PFAS compounds in all products by 2030, except in instances deemed “currently unavoidable”.

Though states and the federal government have passed piecemeal laws regulating the dangerous chemicals’ use, [Maine](#) is the nation’s first state and

world's first government to enact a broad prohibition on the class of about 9,000 compounds, which are dubbed "forever chemicals" because they don't fully break down and accumulate in the environment and humans.

PFAS, or per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, are typically used to make products water and stain resistant. They're so effective that they're now used across dozens of industries and added to a wide range of products, including food packaging, cosmetics, cookware, waterproof textiles, guitar strings, dental floss, firefighting foam and stain protectors like Scotchgard that is commonly applied to carpet and furniture.

An increasing body of science has linked the chemicals to a range of serious health problems such as cancer, liver disease, decreased immunity, kidney disease, plummeting sperm counts, endocrine disruption, high cholesterol, birth defects and more.

Thursday's action follows several years of persistent pressure from public health advocates and independent scientists who say that the chemical class is categorically toxic to humans, even at very low exposure levels.

They applauded the law and noted that other states are likely to follow suit, which will put enormous pressure on industry to stop using PFAS and prompt the federal government to enact a similar ban.

[EPA considers placing limits on 'forever chemicals' in drinking water](#)  
[Read more](#)

"This policy sets a strong national precedent that sends a clear signal to industry that we need to move quickly toward safer chemistry and away from toxic chemicals like PFAS," said Sarah Doll, the national director of Safer States, a public health advocacy group that has pushed for stronger legislation at the state level.

Perhaps no chemical has come under such intense scrutiny in recent years, in part because of its ubiquity. PFAS are estimated to be in 97% of Americans' blood and contaminating drinking water for well more than 100 million people. Researchers have found the compounds at dangerous levels in all

corners of the globe, including in [rain](#), polar bears near the north pole, women's [breast milk](#), and [marine animals](#).

Public health advocates and researchers have argued that the only solution is an outright ban on the chemicals' production.

The law requires manufacturers that intentionally add PFAS to products sold in Maine to report their use to the Maine department of environmental quality beginning in 2023. The state will determine which uses are deemed "currently unavoidable," which could allow the chemicals to remain in items like medical devices.

The European Union is also [moving forward](#) with its own plan to phase out the chemicals' use in all products by 2030, though it has not yet been adopted as a binding measure.

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**Business live**

**Business**

# US retail sales in surprise rebound in June; eurozone inflation eases – as it happened

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[Burberry group](#)

# Burberry sales return to pre-pandemic levels as younger shoppers splash out

Luxury fashion brand reports revenues of £479m in 13 weeks to 26 June, up 86% on 2020



A giant Burberry handbag is towed into London on the River Thames in June. Photograph: David Taylor/Rex/Shutterstock

A giant Burberry handbag is towed into London on the River Thames in June. Photograph: David Taylor/Rex/Shutterstock

[Mark Sweney](#) and [Sarah Butler](#)

Fri 16 Jul 2021 09.11 EDT

The luxury fashion retailer [Burberry](#) has reported a rebound in sales to pre-pandemic levels driven by a boom in younger shoppers, with products including leather goods, jackets and shoes proving particularly popular.

Burberry, which operates 454 stores, concessions and franchises globally, said it had made an “excellent start to the year”, and the recovery had

allowed it to stop the discount price strategy employed in stores and online globally during the coronavirus crisis to try to drive sales.

### [Burberry's change of leader should not mean a whole new wardrobe](#)

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The luxury fashion brand reported revenues of £479m in the 13 weeks to 26 June, up 86% on the same period last year, and 1% on sales in 2019.

“Full-price sales accelerated as our collections and campaigns attracted new, younger luxury customers to the brand,” said Marco Gobbetti, who announced last month he would [stand down as chief executive after almost five years.](#)

“We have made an excellent start to the fiscal year,” said Gobbetti, who is to become chief executive at the luxury Italian group Salvatore Ferragamo. “Despite the continuing challenging external environment, we are very pleased with the progress against our strategy.”

Gobbetti’s departure has prompted speculation he will be followed out of the door by Burberry’s creative head, Riccardo Tisci, who Gobbetti brought to the British brand having previously hired him at the luxury brand Givenchy.

Julie Brown, the finance director of Burberry, said the company was “very, very confident of Ricardo’s position”. She said Tisci “remains very excited by the opportunity to continue to inspire our customers with his imprint on Burberry’s identity, reinforced by the response to his latest collection”.

Tisci’s creations helped spur strong growth in key categories including leather goods and outerwear for Burberry over the quarter while it was able to scale back discounting online and in its main stores.

Social media activity, featuring celebrities such as the footballer Marcus Rashford, the singer FKA Twigs and the model Kendall Jenner have also helped draw in younger shoppers despite restrictions on international travel which have hit tourist sales.

Burberry said sales of goods at full price were up 121% compared with last year, and up 26% compared with 2019. Full-price sales online more than doubled compared with pre-pandemic.

Full-price sales of leather goods and outerwear such as jackets, quilts and down doubled compared with last year, while there was triple-digit growth for shoe sales year on year.

Sales levels grew 146% year on year in Europe, the Middle East, India and Africa (EMEIA), 27% in Asia Pacific and 341% in the Americas.

The Americas region rose to pre-pandemic sales levels, up 34%. Sales in Asia Pacific have returned to pre-pandemic levels, up 7% compared with 2019, driven by a [boom in new shoppers in mainland China](#), which were 55% higher than pre-pandemic, and in Korea, where they rose more than 90%.

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However, sales in the EMEIA region remain 38% below pre-pandemic levels as the region continues to be hit by low levels of tourists and store closures because of Covid-19, particularly in continental Europe.

Burberry shares were down 4% in afternoon trading on Friday, making it the biggest faller on the FTSE 100.

On average, 11% of Burberry's stores were closed during the trading period, although this reduced to only 3% by the end of June as pandemic restrictions continue to be eased in most markets. However, more than a third of stores are still operating on reduced hours.

Susannah Streeter, senior investment and markets analyst, Hargreaves Lansdown, said Europe remained a "weak spot" for the brand as Covid restrictions affected trade.

"When the company is firing on all cylinders once more, there is good potential for growth across all channels. However, with new variants still disrupting economies around the world, there is still uncertainty ahead," she said.

“A big obstacle waiting to trip up the company on this catwalk of recovery is the departure of CEO Marco Gobbetti. He has been seen as the turnaround tsar for Burberry and investors are questioning the company’s ability to keep driving through the strategic turnaround without him in the front row.”

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## [Coronavirus](#)

# Republican lawmakers push to cast vaccine refusal as a civil rights issue

Bills in several statehouses seek to block employers from demanding Covid-19 immunization, even though few do



Protesters gather at Indiana University to oppose mandatory Covid-19 vaccinations for students and staff. Scientists have repeatedly found the benefits of preventing Covid-19 far outweigh the side effects of vaccines, which are generally mild. Photograph: Jeremy Hogan/SOPA Images/REX/Shutterstock

Protesters gather at Indiana University to oppose mandatory Covid-19 vaccinations for students and staff. Scientists have repeatedly found the benefits of preventing Covid-19 far outweigh the side effects of vaccines, which are generally mild. Photograph: Jeremy Hogan/SOPA Images/REX/Shutterstock

[Sajina Shrestha](#)

Fri 16 Jul 2021 05.00 EDT

State Republican lawmakers across the United States are pushing forward bills that prohibit vaccine mandates in an attempt to give the refusal to have a Covid-19 vaccine the same sort of legal protections as those often surrounding issues of gender, religion and race.

Many Republican states are introducing bills that outlaw vaccine mandates within state offices, schools and workplaces, even though vaccine mandates are not commonplace among employers. They also come as the vaccine rollout in the US has slowed markedly, even though the more contagious Delta variant is spreading rapidly, especially among unvaccinated people.

[Delta variant gains ground in US as outbreaks highlight vaccine divide](#)  
[Read more](#)

Covid-19 vaccines are life-saving medications whose side effects are generally mild. Independent expert panels have repeatedly found the [benefits of vaccination](#) far outweigh the [risk of potential Covid-19 infection](#). More than [185 million Americans](#) have received at least one vaccine dose.

“It’s sort of a solution looking for a problem,” said Lowell Pearson, a managing partner at Husch Blackwell, a firm that has been [tracking the bills](#). “We’re not seeing really any broad sense that employers are requiring vaccines in office settings, in manufacturing settings and other places like that.”

Montana passed a [bill](#) in April that banned employers from requiring vaccinations authorized under emergency provisions in order to get employment, targeting Covid-19 vaccines. Arizona has [pending legislation](#) that would make people exempt from receiving a vaccine if the immunization lacks full approval from the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

South Carolina introduced a [senate bill](#) that prohibits employers from firing, demoting and suspending employees who are unvaccinated.

The legislative push goes in hand in hand with the politicization of the vaccine effort by some Republicans, especially on its more extremist wing. While some Republicans have urged people to get vaccinated, others have sought to cast it as government overreach, often using highly provocative language. The extremist Georgia Republican congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene has likened the vaccination efforts to [Nazi Germany](#) and the Turning Point USA founder, Charlie Kirk, has compared it to [apartheid](#).

A recent [survey](#) by Politico also found that while Democrats supported vaccine mandates and vaccine passports, Republicans opposed, “the government or most employers infringing on their individual choice”. Another [poll](#) released by PBS NewsHour/NPR/Marist in March found that 41% of Republicans don’t plan to get vaccinated.

Some people refuse to get vaccinated because they are worried about the long-term side-effects and do not trust its FDA approval. All three of the Covid-19 vaccines administered in the US have received emergency use authorization. Experts say most Americans who have yet to be vaccinated are not inherently opposed to vaccines, but face a complex mix of logistical and informational barriers. Surveys show full FDA approval of vaccines could boost uptake particularly among this group. However, experts worry opposition to vaccination has hardened among [roughly one quarter](#) of Republicans.

These [Republicans](#) bills aim to prevent people from being forced to take the vaccine for employment or educational purposes.

Under the [guidance](#) of the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), employers have the right to require vaccination from their employees, a particularly important provision for preventing outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases, such as the flu, in places like hospitals. However, outside the health sector, many choose not to do so.

A recent [survey](#) of 660 employers found that 72% “will not require or do not plan to require vaccination before entering the workplace”. They are instead encouraging communication about the value of vaccination, offering scheduling flexibility and are considering on-site or near-site vaccination administration for employees.

“We have a long history, in this country, of employers not getting into the healthcare decisions of their employees for the most part,” Pearson said. “I think it’s respectful of that tradition and history.”

Instead of vaccine mandates, employers are pushing incentives, giving out rewards for employees who do get vaccinated. This adds a little bonus towards getting the vaccine and avoids possible lawsuits from being filed against the employers.

Kroger and Petco offer money to employees who can prove that they were vaccinated. Target provides up to four hours of paid leave for employees to get vaccinated and even pays for the taxi rides to and from the appointment. Krispy Kreme offered free donuts to people who showed their Covid-19 vaccination record card.

“I think most employers do recognize that there is some element of an individual choice of whether to be vaccinated,” Pearson said.

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