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Opinion**Billie Eilish**

Billie Eilish inspires awkward but vital conversations about porn

[Rebecca Nicholson](#)



Her candid admission might make it easier for parents to address the effects of such adult material on their children



Billie Eilish: 'I feel incredibly devastated that I was exposed to so much porn.' Photograph: Kevin Winter/Getty Images for Variety

Sat 18 Dec 2021 10.00 EST

Billie Eilish has just turned 20. Last week, talking to the radio host Howard Stern on SiriusXM, she [discussed](#) the impact that viewing pornography online, at a young age, had had on her. She explained that she was about 11 when she first saw pornography, and that it had given her nightmares, and affected her understanding and expectations of what sex should be. "I think it really destroyed my brain and I feel incredibly devastated that I was exposed to so much porn," she said.

The statistics about the age at which children first see pornography online, and the speed at which watching porn becomes normalised, particularly for teenage boys, make for grim reading. In 2019, the British Board of Film Classification commissioned a [survey](#) that suggested 51% of 11 to 13-year-olds had seen pornography online. In the majority of cases, this was accidental, and for younger children, in particular, it was traumatic. The study also revealed a disparity between what parents and children understood about the culture of sexual content: only 25% of the parents surveyed thought their child had seen pornography online, while 63% of those parents' children said that they had seen it.

The facts are plain, whether they are palatable or not: pornography is easy to access, and is very likely to be seen by those far below any age restrictions, which are hard, if not impossible, to enforce. Also last week, the children's commissioner for England, Dame Rachel de Souza, [urged parents](#) to "talk early, and talk often" to children about pornography and sexual harassment. She acknowledged that the conversation can be hard, but advised that parents and carers should "create the culture before the crisis. Children want to talk to their parents and carers about this. We know this because they've told us," she said.

There was a small ripple of backlash to what Eilish had to say, from pro-porn advocates who argued that she was treating all pornography as the same "bad" sort. I'm not sure that she should have had to assess the ethics of types of sexual content at that age, but what matters is that we listen to what she has to say, at 19, about her experiences of easily accessible and socially acceptable viewing of pornography.

To hear someone who has recently lived that and is contemplating its impact on her is a crucial piece of the puzzle, particularly for older generations whose experiences will have been so vastly different. It is a tricky conversation, but one that must be had.

Gregg Wallace, adjusting the menu to meet shifting tastes



Gregg Wallace: host of the *MasterChef: The Professionals* spinoff.
Photograph: Mike Marsland/WireImage

It is the time of year for the bombastic television finales to roll out, and after *Succession* turned a steady season into a magnificent one with a pat of Tom Wambsgans' shoulder, and *Strictly* ended what might be its loveliest run in recent memory, *MasterChef: The Professionals* also crowned its winner with an emotional and tense last episode.

I am a huge fan of the *Professionals* spinoff, which borrows Gregg Wallace from the original as host. The winner, Dan Lee, delighted everyone with his drool-inducing menu. I would like to try pretty much everything he made.

As a vegetarian, I will have to make do with drooling; as with most cooking programmes, *MasterChef: The Professionals* is heavy on meat and fish. Both the Vegetarian and Vegan societies last week criticised the show for its reliance on meat: their analysis showed that by the end of the semi-finals, only 10 out of 100 savoury dishes were vegetarian.

Unfortunately, this was just before a finals-week episode in which the Michelin-standard food prepared by the contestants was vegetable-based and zero waste. It looked amazing. While most people still eat meat, I

understand that for now the adjustment will probably have to be made by those who choose not to, though I have found a very happy middle ground.

Nigella Lawson's most recent cookbook, [Cook, Eat, Repeat](#), offers a veggie or vegan suggestion for almost every recipe that involves meat. It's casual and easy, and keeps everyone happy.

Isabelle Huppert: in the presence of greatness



Isabelle Huppert: a career without equal. Photograph: Christophe Archambault/AFP/Getty Images

The only time I meet famous people is when I'm interviewing them, which means that I very rarely get starstruck. In those situations it would be unprofessional, I think, to let my excitable fan-girl out in full. But there have been a couple of exceptions, the most notable of which was [Isabelle Huppert](#).

I tried to talk about films, I got tongue-tied, and I did a very poor interview because I was uncharacteristically giddy about being in a room with Isabelle Huppert, trying to talk about films. It was years ago, but I can barely think about it now without cringeing.

Then again, she is one of the greats, so perhaps it was forgivable. It was announced last week that Huppert will be given an honorary [Golden Bear award](#) at the Berlin international film festival. The lifetime achievement award will commemorate what has been “a career without equal”, according to the festival’s directors. Since it’s looking as though we may be spending a bit more time indoors, might I suggest an Huppert marathon to while away the hours? It might be the only thing that makes the real world look cheerful by comparison.

Rebecca Nicholson is an Observer columnist

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OpinionNorth Korea

The Observer view on a decade of North Korea under Kim Jong-un

[Observer editorial](#)

After his father's death, he was propelled to the top of the totalitarian dynasty. How has he been allowed to last so long?



People pay their respects at a mosaic depicting former leaders to mark the 10-year anniversary of the death of Kim Jong-il on 17 December.
Photograph: Kim Won Jin/AFP/Getty Images

Sun 19 Dec 2021 01.30 EST

How do tyrants survive? History is littered with examples of cruel dictators and despots who dominated their countries for years, oppressing millions of "subjects", and were never forcibly deposed. [Joseph Stalin](#) famously died in his bed at the age of 74. Mao Zedong lasted longer, dying of natural causes

in 1976, age 82. Spain's thuggish dictator, Francisco Franco, seized power in 1939 and was still in office when he died in 1975 at 82.

The obvious answer is fear. Other factors – cunning, chutzpah, charisma – play a role, too. But terror is the tool of choice for your typical tyrant. This is a lesson Kim Jong-un, North Korea's "supreme leader", learned at his father's knee. And when Kim Jong-il died, 10 years ago last week, his then 26-year-old son was propelled willy-nilly to the top of the totalitarian dynasty founded in 1948 by his grandfather, Kim Il-sung.

It was by no means certain in 2011 that young Kim Jong-un was up to the job of oppressing 26 million people. Analysts predicted he would soon be overthrown. Some in South Korea hoped for a democratic revolution. Aping his forefathers, Kim fell back on fear to survive. In 2013, Jang Song-thaek, his uncle and long-time mentor, was arrested and executed.

Purges of other senior officials swiftly followed. Then, in 2017, in a darkly Jacobean plot, Kim's elder half-brother, Kim Jong-nam, once viewed as heir to the dynasty, was assassinated by two young women wielding a nerve agent at an airport in Malaysia. Since then, no one has dared challenge Kim Jong-un's rule.

Further evidence of Kim's habitual, merciless brutality was provided last week by the Transitional Justice Working Group, a human rights organisation in Seoul, which published gruesome details of 23 public executions. Most of the shootings and hangings were not for crimes of murder or rape but for watching or distributing videos from South Korea, it said.

Kim's own visceral fear – that North Koreans may become "infected" by the superior living standards, democratic politics and public freedoms and media of the South – spurs paranoid behaviour. Restrictions on every aspect of working and personal life have tightened in recent years. To mark the anniversary of his father's death, North Koreans were reportedly instructed "not to drink alcohol, laugh, or engage in leisure activities".

The predictable result of Kim's 10 years of tyranny is a chronically impoverished, socially and economically backward country. It's a country

where food shortages bordering on famine conditions are common, where most people struggle to make a meagre living, and where state violence, corruption and the ever-present fear of a Stalinist prison gulag have reduced its citizens to terrified silence. North Koreans are Kim's hostages.

So the question must be asked again, but this time of the great powers: how does this tyranny survive? Dating back to the Korean war, China has the most to answer for. While Pyongyang's erratic behaviour causes problems for Beijing, its base calculation has not changed in 70 years: better a weak, dependent despot in the North than a strong, reunified Korea that, if South Korea's president, Moon Jae-in, had his way, would join the western camp.

The US and allies such as Japan have likewise failed to do enough to end this gross affront to international decency and law. For too long, they were content to isolate, sanction and ignore the North. Now that Kim has built nuclear-armed ballistic missiles capable of hitting an American city – the biggest “success” of his leadership – it may be too late to take him down, politically or otherwise.

Donald Trump, as is his wont, made matters worse with ego-driven summits that boosted Kim and achieved nothing. Now China and Russia tacitly conspire to maintain the status quo, while the US enacts additional, ineffective sanctions and fulminates impotently. For North Koreans, more decades of tyranny beckon.

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OpinionCoronavirus

The Observer view on a second Covid Christmas

[Observer editorial](#)

Boris Johnson's authority is fading fast just as the Omicron variant demands action and leadership



People queue for vaccinations against Covid at Chelsea FC Stadium on 18 December. Photograph: WIktor Szymanowicz/NurPhoto/REX/Shutterstock

Sun 19 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

The hope was always that Christmas 2021 would have a lighter, more joyous feel than a year ago. Not clear of the pandemic, but coping with it much better, with the vast majority of the population benefiting from the immunity conferred by vaccination. But the extraordinarily rapid spread of the Omicron variant has imbued this year's festive season with a gloomy sense of déjà vu.

The situation facing us now is materially different. A year ago, just a sliver of the population had received their first vaccination and social restrictions were the only way to hold off an impending second wave of Covid. Today, we have a much stronger wall of immunity as a result of vaccination and prior infection.

But the arrival of Omicron is a cause for grave concern. The [first case in the UK was documented](#) on 27 November; just three weeks later, and it is estimated to be the [dominant variant in the UK](#), accounting for four out of five positive test results in London. Daily case numbers are the highest they have been during the pandemic, and rising. This is being driven by Omicron's extra transmissibility: the number of Omicron cases is [doubling in less than two days](#).

The impact of Omicron on the NHS will depend on the degree to which catching it is associated with serious illness and hospitalisation. But as yet there is a lack of real-world data as to the strength of this link in the UK. We know that Omicron is more vaccine-resistant than Delta, with double vaccination providing much less protection against symptomatic infection, but a booster jab restoring this to very good levels. Estimates based on early data suggest that a booster jab is [80-86% effective against hospitalisation](#), compared with more than 95% effective against Delta. But better data on the link between catching Omicron and hospitalisation is not expected for at least another week.

The other route through which Omicron will affect not just the NHS, but all emergency services and essential infrastructure, is through staff shortages, as record case numbers lead to more people having to self-isolate than at other points during the pandemic. Guy's and St Thomas' Trust in London was forced to [cancel non-essential services and redeploy staff](#) to emergency medicine last week as hundreds of staff were self-isolating, and almost a third of fire engines in London [were out of action](#) last week, also due to staff shortages.

The lack of data means ministers are having to take decisions amid a high degree of uncertainty. Should the government swallow the cost of imposing further social restrictions in England before Christmas – as Wales and Scotland have already done – to try to slow the spread as a precaution, in

case of the entirely plausible scenario that the link between getting Omicron and hospitalisation is strong enough to pose a very serious threat to the NHS's ability to respond to this wave? Or should it wait until there is more data and hope for the best, but impose restrictions if needed later on? Compounding the high stakes is the reality that with a virus that is growing exponentially – particularly with as rapid a spread as Omicron – taking action later means imposing tougher measures for longer to flatten the curve of infections and hospitalisations, and that to wait might be to leave it too late.

In the face of these critical choices, it is vital that the public can trust [Boris Johnson](#) to make decisions in the national interest, based on the best data and scientific advice. Yet he inspires little confidence; partly as a result of his track record in consistently being too slow to act in the pandemic, which led to thousands of avoidable deaths in earlier waves. But also because weeks of self-made scandals have stripped him of all authority within his own party. These include the allegations of Downing Street Christmas parties that broke last year's Covid restrictions, which it seems implausible Johnson himself was not aware of.

This has left him an irrevocably weakened and damaged prime minister. Last week, 99 Conservative MPs [rebelled against the introduction of vaccine passports](#) for large venues even as Omicron was sweeping through the capital. The wing of his party that opposes necessary Covid restrictions is out of step with the nation, but will be even more emboldened by the Conservatives' shocking byelection loss in North Shropshire.

Johnson's political crises will therefore not only pull him away from the crisis at hand, but will discourage him from taking the timely action needed to protect the NHS for fear of further upsetting his rancorous party. And the whole cabinet is likely to be distracted by the potential for a Conservative leadership election, with contenders positioning themselves rather than focusing on the national crisis under way. It is already interfering with government public health communications: Johnson has struck a far more ambiguous note than the chief medical officer, Chris Whitty, in terms of advising people on reducing socialising before Christmas. Whitty's suggestion that people prioritise the social engagements that really matter to

them led some Conservative MPs to launch [disgraceful political attacks](#) on him.

There is still a chance that the link between catching Omicron and hospitalisation may be sufficiently weak to minimise the impact of the next wave on the NHS. Thanks to a stellar effort by the NHS, the booster vaccine rollout is proceeding apace, after a sluggish start that left the UK more exposed than it needed to be. But there is a very real risk that January 2021 is no less challenging than January 2020. We go into it with a prime minister no more competent than he was a year ago, but whose power and authority has all but leached away. It is a grim way to end the year.

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Opinion
Byelections

After the North Shropshire byelection – cartoon

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Opinion[Tom Hollander](#)

Christmas is the perfect time to rewatch Rev – the TV comedy that is never cruel

[Tim Adams](#)



Tom Hollander made us laugh at the hypocrisy of religion, but also showed us human kindness



Tom Hollander in *Rev*. Photograph: BBC

Sat 18 Dec 2021 12.00 EST

Of all the Christmas TV specials on repeat or catchup, the one I find most poignant, and funniest, is that episode of *Rev* in which Tom Hollander spectacularly fails to conjure some authentic spiritual feeling in his drunken congregation at midnight mass. The beauty of that series was that even in comically eviscerating the pieties and hypocrisies of the Church of England, Hollander never gave up on its potential for delivering simple human kindness.

When that episode came out, a decade ago, the census figures showed that 59.3% of the UK population still thought of itself as Christian. The [latest census figures](#), released last week, have seen that number dwindle to marginally over half of the country – 51%. Meanwhile, the proportion of those who profess “no religion” has risen six percentage points to 38.4%. As someone who ticks that latter box, the only time I’m ever at a church service these days, beyond weddings and funerals, is for an annual nine lessons and carols. This year, as always, I was fascinated by how readily my memory inhabited even the more obscure of those sung verses. “Veiled in flesh the Godhead see/Hail the incarnate deity,” I sang, with all the other once-a-year

attenders. And as ever, I sensed a flash of nostalgia for those childhood certainties – attributable, no doubt, to Charles Wesley and his peerless gift for rhyming propaganda.

Those in peril



Migrants arrive at the Port of Dover on a border force vessel on 17 December. Photograph: Henry Nicholls/Reuters

A couple of weeks ago, I was in Dunkirk, talking to some of those desperate people, young men and families, who were determined to head to the beaches in the dark and try their luck in navigating the 21 or more miles of the Channel crossing. Afterwards, I walked along those beaches in the sleet and bone-chilling wind. Standing looking out at the grey ocean, it seemed barely comprehensible that anyone's life – not least those of the people with whom I had just been chatting – could be so bleak that climbing into an overloaded rubber dinghy offered the best hope for the future. In recent days, in response to the [drowning of 27 people](#) at the beginning of the month, the EU border force has stepped up its efforts to prevent the crossings, employing a "hi-tech spotter plane" belonging to the Danish air force. Though the plane prevented a couple of launches, some dinghies still got across the Channel to the UK, while other groups, including young children, were rescued by the RNLI. The planes further militarise what is a

humanitarian crisis – safe routes for asylum seekers are the best (and cheapest) way to disrupt the traffickers and prevent more deaths this winter.

Let it snow



Snowflakes. Photograph: Jutta Kuss/Getty Images/fStop

Snowflakes have, in some political circles, acquired a bad name in recent years. One man who is at pains to restore to them their former magic is Kenneth Libbrecht, professor of physics at the California Institute of Technology. In the course of 20 years' research, Libbrecht has rewritten the science of ice crystals. This week, in time for Christmas, he will publish what is billed as [the grand unified theory of snowflakes](#) (a £98 stocking filler). Libbrecht's principle discovery is that there are two very distinct ways in which ice crystals are generated, which has to do with the complex structure of their surfaces and how they change with temperature. He also, Grinch-like, disproves the single "fact" that every child knows: in producing "designer" snow crystals, he has shown that, under lab conditions at least, two snowflakes can be exactly alike.

Tim Adams is an Observer columnist

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[Opinion](#)[Road safety](#)

Pity the poor, oppressed driver forced to share their roads with the rest of us

[Catherine Bennett](#)



We're still in thrall to the car – to judge by the lenient sentences for reckless motorists



Katie Price in 2019, after a previous driving ban. Photograph: Rymi, Diva/Backgrid

Sun 19 Dec 2021 02.00 EST

Reports from the frontline of the war on motorists have made distressing reading for some vehicle owners. With low traffic neighbourhoods (LTNs) surviving both physical and media assault, improved protections for pedestrians and cyclists in a [revised Highway Code](#) will weaken still further, they discover, a right to road domination long understood to be, if not divinely ordained, something even better: unassailable.

Howls of below-the-line outrage in traditionally motor-friendly media confirm that views on road use can still, given the number of cycling and walking motorists, be startlingly tribal. To make vulnerable road users safer, as the government intends with revised hierarchy at junctions, appears for the extreme motorised group to be a more grievous insult to their status, if possible, than the sight of a straggly planter where there was formerly a Land Rover's right to roam.

What, after all, is the point of a massive city-based 4x4 if it must now give way, as in the revised regulations, to a cyclist enjoying the right to ride safely in the middle of the road, or to go first at a junction? The rage is near

palpable. “Goes against the natural order of things,” offers one *Telegraph* reader. “Cyclists and pedestrians will die clinging on to their rights, while ordinary citizen motorists will rot in gaol at the taxpayer’s expense.”

What next for an oppressed and often unloved group whose only fault, beyond the environmental damage, is their involvement in the majority of vulnerable road user deaths? Could they soon face prison sentences for simply being a bit pissed and turning a car over? Permanent driving bans for, say, killing someone or quite reasonably driving over an extra-irksome cyclist? It may be some comfort to these persecuted drivers that UK targets for road casualty reduction were abandoned back in 2010. That Grant Shapps, the transport minister, introduces himself as a “petrol-head”. And whatever excruciating junction-based humiliations may lie ahead at the hands of pedestrians and cyclists, terrible drivers can still, as demonstrated last week, hope for leniency in the courts.

In the first of two cases that could, equally, have been designed to frighten potential cyclists off the roads, a Mr Alan Moult, aged 73, was jailed for chasing after a cyclist (including along a pavement) then running over him with his Land Rover Freelander. His victim, who had annoyed him, was fortunate to survive injuries including a fractured pelvis, torn genitals, six broken ribs and a punctured liver.

By itself, a dashcam recording in which the cursing Moult’s wife screams at him to calm down, makes a powerful case for acknowledging that cars, like kitchen knives, are murder weapons in the wrong hands. Since Moult’s conviction was for causing serious injury by dangerous driving, he was jailed for 18 months and chastised for behaviour that was “grossly disproportionate”. Locals can expect to see him back in his Freelander, a lifetime ban having presumably been judged over-harsh, after a three-year disqualification.

A reluctance to impose long bans seems to have coincided with the ‘stagnation’ of UK road safety.

In what can’t have been the best promotional week for Land Rover (an angry Range Rover driver was also charged for “nudging” Insulate Britain

protesters), another prominent customer, the minor celebrity and driving ban veteran [Katie Price](#), received a suspended sentence for driving when uninsured and disqualified. She was under the influence of alcohol and cocaine. The judge also imposed costs of £213, and a two-year driving ban – an arguably disappointing choice when a longer version could have protected the public from a motorised Price for [80 years](#). Then again, a speeding driver recently jailed – for 40 months – after killing a 15-year-old boy, was disqualified for three years.

A [reluctance](#) to impose long bans seems to have coincided with what the [Towards Zero Foundation](#) regrets as the “stagnation” of UK road safety. If the UK aligned itself with the UN’s target of a 50% (by 2030) reduction in road fatalities and serious injury, it argues, “we have the opportunity to save around 170,000 people from dying or experiencing life-changing injuries from road collision”.

Sussex police are considering [appealing](#) against Price’s sentence, which “could have and should have been much worse”. It might even, given her vast following, have doubled as one of those teachable moments recommended by [anti-knife crime experts](#): “An event or experience which presents an opportunity to learn something new or re-evaluate an existing belief.” In this case, to re-evaluate the existing belief that, whatever the *Highway Code* might say about junctions, car drivers belong at the top of the road-using hierarchy. A serial traffic offender who was lucky to trash nothing more than her own car, has, the public may instead have noted, been more forgivingly treated than the Insulate Britain pedestrians jailed in November. Their sentences of between three and six months (along with combined costs of £45,000) were [welcomed](#) as a deterrent by National Highways: “The judge’s decision will hopefully make people think again about carrying out reckless and dangerous protests such as these.”

Teachable moment: if you want to behave recklessly and dangerously on a road without incarceration, inconvenience, or even incurring a large fine, it’s advisable to do it inside a car. As for almost killing a stranger in a moment of madness: that too, as demonstrated by Mr Moult, is best done, for the avoidance of more stringent penalties, from a seatbelted position inside, for preference, one of the car industry’s more environmentally objectionable models.

Where does this leave the war on motorists (as the imposition of any road safety measures is traditionally known)? Some, no doubt, are likely to feel deeply their humbling by less magnificent road users.

“Pedestrians leap from the prow of my Morgan,” Boris Johnson wrote when a motoring columnist, “the bonnet connoting the size of my organ.” By way of compensation for this lost status they may, then, escape a good deal of future disappointment.

Catherine Bennett is an Observer columnist

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Observer lettersBusiness

Letters: in corporate Britain, greed is good

Why do we allow predator capitalists to prioritise their own gain at the expense of community wellbeing?



A silent walk to mark four and a half years since the Grenfell Tower fire.
Photograph: @MuradQureshiLDN/Twitter/PA

Sun 19 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

There are parallels between three Comment articles last week: “[Grenfell delivers yet more horrors. But the guilty still fail to take responsibility](#)”; “[So which of these politicians is a neoliberal? Not one of them](#)”; and “[Michael Sheen – knowing when you have enough is a rare trait](#)”. We may not live in a neoliberal society, but we certainly live in one in which corporate and personal greed has been prioritised above individual and community wellbeing.

There are many corporations whose conduct is not dissimilar to that of the companies that supplied the dangerous materials used on Grenfell Tower. Their chief executives are paid huge sums and are often rewarded with “honours” from the establishment. Yet they treat their customers with disdain and ignore their pleas of poor service and overcharging. As a school friend with whom I was reunited after 40 years put it: “I spent my career lying for my company.”

At the same time, there are companies that are not like this. They respond promptly and sympathetically to inquiries, and admit to fault when necessary. It is tragic that they are the exception, and that the “predator capitalists” continue to dominate our lives.

Bob Wolfson

Rudford, Gloucestershire

Lifeboat heroism

In “[If there's peril, I'll be there, says UK's youngest ever female lifeboat helm](#)” (News), it was heartening to read that the RNLI continues to make progress in recruiting women into its crews, although the youngest ever female helm was 18-year-old Elizabeth Hostvedt at Atlantic College in 1969.

More importantly, the article pays tribute to the Penlee lifeboat crew, lost 40 years ago, but says that lifeboat safety has vastly improved with better boats and volunteer training. Better boats, yes; better training, no. The RNLI has always had excellent volunteer training and the coxswain of the Penlee lifeboat, Trevelyan Richards, was a Cornish fisherman with over four decades at sea. He had already rescued four people and went in to save the remaining four. The lifeboat was overwhelmed by the savage storm and smashed to pieces. No training could have saved her. The unofficial lifeboat motto is “Never turn back”.

Ray Kipling, former deputy director, RNLI
Holt, Dorset

He that is without sin...

We should applaud the timely, brave and honest call from Emma John to reconfigure, if not explicitly restate, the doctrine of original sin in respect of our universal susceptibility to prejudice and discrimination (“[Do we really want to live in a culture of endless blame games when we’re all fallible?](#)” Comment). Perhaps we could do with an imaginative programme of instituting personal and collective penance in the form of a truth and reconciliation process. Without that, we become prisoners of our inevitable failings, paralysing our will to repent and build a more inclusive world.

The Anglican tradition of corporate confession and absolution in which we repeatedly and regularly acknowledge our sins and wickedness is necessary because it recognises that we can and, sadly, will relapse. The price of redemption is eternal vigilance of our potential for, in this case, prejudice and discrimination. It also applies to other egregious failings such as taking for granted the exploitation of the dispossessed in securing the advantages of affluence.

Paul Thomson

Mobberley, Cheshire

Having read and agreed with Emma John’s article, I feel that the blame culture has the powerful attraction of making us feel better about ourselves and, in some cases, links with the compensation culture. A much more positive way of addressing a situation is to value “Black Box Thinking”, as illustrated by Matthew Syed in the book of the same name. The black box is there so that what led to an aviation accident, which was invariably a combination of events, can be learned from and addressed without apportioning blame, because surely the important aim is to prevent it happening again rather than to blame and carry on as before. The cost of blame is that if we do not feel free to recognise and accept our own failures, we can never learn and progress.

Rosalind Wain

Clifton upon Teme, Worcestershire

Inappropriate irony

In his New York [Notebook](#) (World), John Sweeney writes that the “slut-shaming” of witnesses in the Ghislaine Maxwell trial “is, almost, a thing of beauty, a dark wonder to behold. You’ve got to admire the way Maxwell’s

multimillion-dollar attorneys break her accusers on the rack of their own human frailty. No one dare call it torture.” I would. I would add that torture, which is designed not to elicit truth but to terrorise, does not belong in a civilised society, as Sweeney knows. His would-be ironic comments are inappropriate and tasteless.

Michele Roberts

London SE5

Clued-up Sondheim

Imelda Staunton’s touching note on Stephen Sondheim (“[Those we lost in 2021](#)”, the New Review) mentions his love of puzzles but not a connection with the *Observer* that may now be generally forgotten. In March 1968, a dinner was held at the Café Royal in London to mark the paper’s publication of the 1,000th Ximenes crossword puzzle. Sondheim arrived late (he was not on the guest list) but told me that the event was the main reason for his transatlantic trip. He did the puzzle for many years, entering the associated clue-writing competitions with some success, perhaps his neatest effort being a clue to “hypodermic”: my rich dope is dispersed in solution. Note the clever use of “solution” to mean both fluid and answer.

John D Walsh

Swindon, Wiltshire

Cheers, drive

Séamas O'Reilly mentions his exasperation that British people don't thank their drivers as they leave a bus (“[Reward stickers rescue my furious son...](#)”, Magazine, last week). You should come to Cardiff, Séamas; almost everyone says “Cheers, drive” as they depart.

Anne Pritchard

Rhiwbina, Cardiff

The joy of cathedrals

I was surprised to read Jonathan Hauxwell's letter on the topic of refitting Notre Dame of Paris (“A rood awakening”, [Letters](#)). The notion that our forebears designed cathedrals to promote nothing but fear and physical

discomfort mischievously misrepresents. They certainly were and still are complex places. As for their builders and their intentions, the joy of *The Canterbury Tales* does not paint a picture of ordinary people in a state of terrorised submission as they purposefully made their way to Becket's cathedral. Rather, it expresses a sense of the dignity, humour and tragedy of lives often unavoidably painful and short. People have always known fear. They have also always sought out relief. Lazy secularism is poorly equipped to enter into the subjective medieval world of which it frequently knows next to nothing. All buildings are liable to be reinterpreted but we should not retrospectively distort layers of meaning which can and still do speak to many. I suggest Eamon Duffy's *The Stripping of the Altars* as a scholarly and faithful eye-opener to interested readers.

Dr Andrew Blewett

Exeter

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For the recordUK news

For the record

This week's corrections

Sun 19 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

The co-leader of a coronavirus study team at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine is Nicholas Davies, not Nicholas Wright ([Science tells us if next few weeks will be miserable – or just muted](#), 12 December, p4).

A reader who had had Covid posed a dilemma, saying the DHSC website states that PCR tests can't be taken within 90 days of testing positive ([Will a work trip to Poland mean 90 days of isolation?](#), 5 December, p59). We responded: “Given that the new rules oblige travellers to quarantine until they receive a negative test, this could mean three months of isolation.” In fact, all returning travellers must isolate until they receive the results of their day two PCR test, and for 10 days thereafter if the test is positive, but it is not the case that a negative test following a positive is required before they can leave self-isolation.

Susanna Sait, founder of The Goods Shed, Canterbury, was misnamed “Salt” ([The 50 most fabulous independent shops](#), 28 November, Magazine, p28).

An article about dream analysis misplaced Furman University in North Carolina; it is in South Carolina ([In your wildest dreams](#), 5 December, Magazine, p16).

Other recently amended articles include:

[Dispatches from the grassroots: Farmerama and the new wave of food media](#)

[Jonny Gray hat-trick inspires Exeter to easy win over Montpellier](#)

*Write to the Readers' Editor, the Observer, York Way, London N1 9GU,
email observer.readers@observer.co.uk, tel 020 3353 4736*

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OpinionIdentity cards

The Tories call it electoral reform. Looks more like a bid to rig the system

[Nick Cohen](#)



The party is doing all it can to disenfranchise every type of voter unlikely to support it



Illustration by Dominic McKenzie.

Sat 18 Dec 2021 14.00 EST

Picture the chaos at the next general election. Officials refuse to allow voters into polling stations because the Johnson government has denied democratic rights to everyone who cannot or will not produce photo ID.

Some are angry because they don't have the required documents. Others sound paranoid as they tell reporters they don't want to show passports and driving licences because they fear state surveillance. If nothing else, Covid has taught us the extent of the conspiratorial mentality. On election day the government reveals it is content to encourage a climate of paranoia, if it will give the [Conservatives](#) an advantage. Trust in the integrity of the election withers as the scale of voter suppression becomes apparent.

Last Monday, the Commons public administration and constitutional affairs committee, chaired, I must emphasise, by a Conservative MP, William Wragg, [said that if Northern Ireland were a guide](#), ID checks would cause turnout to drop by 2.3%. On this measure, the Tories would disfranchise about one million of the 47.6 million people [registered to vote](#).

Unlike Northern Ireland, the rest of the UK has no record of sectarian gerrymandering and civil war to justify controls. The facts of recent history do not concern Michael Gove. He has pursued vote rigging with Gollum-like obsessiveness since 2019. His oppressive intent is evident in the failure to produce proof that frauds are turning up at polling stations and stealing the identities of honest citizens. The protests of people denied the ballot would be everywhere in the media if that scare story were true. As it is, there was only [one conviction for impersonation](#) after the 2019 election, and the Commons committee described the government's pretence that there was a hidden epidemic of voter fraud as "simply not good enough".

It is evident in the speed with which the government is forcing its [elections bill](#) through parliament. It is evident in the lack of public consultation and bipartisan support. It is evident, above all, in the government's choice of targets.

In a satirical twist, the Conservatives have assigned the task of ending the level playing field of free and fair elections to Gove's Department for Levelling Up. They believe people without driving licences or passports will be poor and less likely to vote Conservative. I wouldn't count on that in every Leaver town, and nor do ministers. They are leaving nothing to chance. Expats, who are more likely than not to be Tories, will be able to vote, however long they have lived abroad. All foreign nationals will be denied the vote, however long they have lived in the UK. People over 60, who disproportionately vote Conservative, will be able to use their travel passes as photo ID. The young, who don't, won't.

If this were happening in Hungary or Zimbabwe, we would know what to say: a corrupt clique was bending the rules to maintain its power. We don't know what to say when election rigging happens in our own country because a self-satisfaction born of the UK's lucky history holds that "it can't happen here". Even when it is happening here. Protests about the elections bill are confined to a nerdy group of politicians, journalists and academics.

The fate of the Electoral Commission ought to shake the complacent. [Boris Johnson](#) is threatening the independence of the referee that protects against corruption. The elections bill allows ministers to set the "strategy and policy" the commission must follow. The government claims it has been

forced to act because of loss of confidence in the commission. The Commons investigation said there was no more evidence that the public had lost faith in the commission than there was of hordes of frauds at polling stations.

It warned instead of the danger of the government abusing its power to help it stay in office, even if abuse means undermining “public confidence in the effective and independent regulation of the electoral system”.

We risk becoming like the US where every vote is disputed by the losing side and lackeys replace impartial arbiters

We risk becoming like the US where every vote is disputed by the losing side, and impartial arbiters are replaced with political lackeys. Indeed, we are already on that path. Whether in the courts, broadcasting or the regulatory system, undermining checks and balances has been the modus operandi of this government.

The scandal that led to the [Conservatives losing North Shropshire](#) began when the cabinet organised an assault on Kathryn Stone, the parliamentary commissioner for standards. She found against Owen Paterson for promoting companies that were paying him £110,000 a year for his bespoke services. Johnson, himself the subject of Stone’s inquiries, wanted the rules changed to give him and his colleagues more freedom to sponge at will. Kwasi Kwarteng, the business secretary, showed his unfitness for public office by [saying he found it “difficult”](#) to see how Stone’s career could survive such an impertinence.

Stone saw off her enemies. By contrast, Lord Geidt, Johnson’s ministerial standards adviser, now cuts a pathetic figure. The credulous man actually [believed the prime minister](#) when he said he knew nothing about a businessman buddy, Lord Brownlow, paying for the refurbishment of his Downing Street flat until the media mentioned it in February 2021. A scrupulous investigation by the electoral commission found Johnson was tapping Brownlow for money in November 2020. Now Johnson wants to punish the Electoral Commission.

On Tuesday, Wragg wrote to Geidt to ask how he was independent when he did not appear to have the power to conduct proper investigations. “What steps are open to you if you feel that, in the course of an investigation, you may have been misled?”

The answer this government wants to hear is “none”, and not only from Geidt.

Once cautious Conservatives worried that, if they used their majority in parliament to hound their enemies, their opponents would one day turn the weapons they forged on the right.

Perhaps today’s Conservatives believe there will never be a Labour government that treats the Tory press the way they treat the BBC, or twist the rule of law and regulation of elections to suit the Labour rather than the Tory cause. After the revival of Labour and Liberal Democrat fortunes, you might find it ludicrous for Conservatives to think they can be in power for ever. If so, I urge you to look at how they are playing with electoral law to give themselves the best possible chance of doing just that.

Nick Cohen is an Observer columnist

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Headlines tuesday 14 december 2021

- [Coronavirus More Covid curbs possible but families can have Christmas together, says Raab](#)
- [Live UK Covid: lateral flow tests again unavailable online in England](#)
- [Boris Johnson PM facing 'plan B' revolt by MPs as NHS in crisis mode](#)
- [Explainer What are the biggest Tory rebellions in Boris Johnson's premiership?](#)

Coronavirus

More Covid curbs possible but families can have Christmas together – Raab

Deputy prime minister offers reassurance over gatherings as government faces record rebellion

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
- [See all our coronavirus coverage](#)



Dominic Raab, pictured earlier this month, told Times Radio: ‘I think people can look forward to spending Christmas with loved ones in a way that we couldn’t last year.’ Photograph: Witkтор Szymanowicz/NurPhoto/Rex/Shutterstock

Jessica Elgot Chief political correspondent
[@jessicaelgot](#)

Tue 14 Dec 2021 04.33 EST

Further Covid restrictions between Christmas and New Year are under discussion in government, [Dominic Raab](#) has said, but stressed he believed plan B measures should be enough to allow people to spend the season with loved ones.

Raab's comments came as Boris Johnson faces [the biggest rebellion of his premiership](#), with at least 80 Tory MPs planning to vote against the restrictions, which include additional mask-wearing and Covid passes for large events.

Asked if the measures, which also include guidance on working from home, were enough to stop the spread of the virus without further restrictions, Raab said: "These issues are always discussed but we have got plan B, that's what we think is required over the Christmas period."

The deputy prime minister and justice secretary told Times Radio he thought Christmas Day was safe to spend with family. "I think it is. I want to give that reassurance. I think people can look forward to spending Christmas with loved ones in a way that we couldn't last year."

On Monday, Sajid Javid said estimated daily Omicron cases hit 200,000 and the variant claimed its first life in the UK. The [government's campaign to give booster vaccines to more than 1 million people a day also got underway](#), prompting the NHS website to crash and people to queue in the street for up to five hours for their jabs.

Amid the alarming figures, Raab was forced to clarify on BBC Breakfast that nine people were in hospital with the variant, having previously sparked concern by saying there were around 250. A source close to Raab said he had misheard the question on Sky News. The correct figure is understood to be 10.

He acknowledged there were "teething problems" after people queued for hours for vaccines. "It does take a few days just to make sure we get to a steady state. We'll keep straining every sinew to make sure we can reach that target."

Defending the government's plan to introduce passes to show vaccine or test status, Raab said it was "crass" to compare the measure to Nazi Germany, as rebel MP Marcus Fysh had done. "I don't like that kind of language and I don't think it's appropriate," he told BBC Radio 4's Today programme.

But Tobias Ellwood, the former minister who now chairs the defence select committee, said the plan was illogical, even though he backed more widespread wearing of masks. "It's this final one to do with vaccine passports for large events, there are some practical implications as to how this will be enforced," he told Radio 4's Today programme.

"But, more importantly, you can go into a large venue with a recent negative lateral flow test, again that makes sense, but you can also turn up if you had proof of having two jabs, which may have been completed six months ago, so even with a new mutation you could actually be carrying Covid."

"Leadership is about taking people to where perhaps they didn't realise they needed to go, but they must understand the plan, and this is illogical at the moment."

Raab said Covid health certificates were not a "big step or a slippery slope" and said it would not discriminate against those who were unvaccinated because people could also provide a negative test.

"If you want to go into a crowded venue, I think most people would think that voluntarily as a matter of their own safety, but also [for] those around them, that that is a reasonable thing to do," Raab said. "I do understand the concerns and that's why we should have a proper debate."

"But, ultimately, I think people should vote for these measures; they are a proportionate, targeted approach given what we don't know and the precautionary approach we need to take, just temporarily, while we get to grips with Omicron."

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

[**Politics**](#)

MPs back all ‘plan B’ measures amid large Tory rebellion on Covid passes and mandatory vaccines – as it happened

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/live/2021/dec/14/uk-covid-live-lateral-flow-tests-unavailable-online-england-boris-johnson-booster-coronavirus-latest-updates>

Coronavirus

Covid: NHS in crisis mode as hospitals told to discharge patients where possible

NHS England asks hospitals to free up beds as estimated daily Omicron cases hit 200,000

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
- [See all our coronavirus coverage](#)



In a letter to hospitals, NHS England chiefs said patients who could be discharged to care homes, hospices, their own homes or hotels before Christmas to free up beds, should be. Photograph: Curtseyes/Alamy

[Rowena Mason](#), [Denis Campbell](#) and [Andrew Gregory](#)

Mon 13 Dec 2021 17.59 EST

The NHS was put on a crisis footing tonight as hospitals in England were told to discharge as many patients as possible while estimated daily Omicron cases hit 200,000 and the variant [claimed its first life in the UK](#).

Boris Johnson is braced for his biggest rebellion as prime minister on Tuesday, with about 80 Tory MPs confirmed to be preparing to vote against measures on working from home, Covid passports and more mask wearing. He will have to rely on Labour support for the votes to pass.

Amid a [scramble for tests](#) and [booster jabs](#), the country's doctors called for further restrictions to be imposed to stem the rise in cases and Downing Street did not rule out fresh measures.

In a letter to hospitals, [NHS](#) England chiefs said patients who could be discharged to care homes, hospices, their own homes or hotels before Christmas to free up beds, should be. The letter from NHS England's chief executive, Amanda Pritchard, and medical director Prof Stephen Powis said the service was facing a level 4 "national incident".

Hotels are already being turned into temporary care facilities staffed with workers [flew in from Spain and Greece](#) to relieve rising pressure on [NHS](#) hospital beds.

Hospitals and [GPs](#) have also been told to scale back normal services and limit care to those needing urgent attention so that NHS staff can be freed up to deliver boosters. Hospitals will undertake fewer non-urgent operations, but "highest clinical priority patients", including people with cancer and those who have been waiting a long time, will be given priority.

They have also been told to take ambulance-borne patients into A&E more quickly so that paramedics can get back on the road to answer more 999 calls, speed up efforts to bring in nurses from overseas to help tackle the NHS's lack of staff, and send as many patients as possible for surgery at private hospitals.

A campaign to give boosters to more than 1 million people a day got under way, prompting the NHS website to crash and people to queue in the street for up to five hours for their jabs.

But the British Medical Association said the vaccination campaign would not be enough to stop the spread of Omicron, with one in four still not eligible for a booster. They called for a return to face masks in pubs and restaurants, 2-metre social distancing indoors, limits on public gatherings, legal requirements for ventilation in schools and other settings, more rapid testing and advice to wear FFP2 masks.

No 10 insisted that the booster campaign was its immediate priority, with a senior government source describing the main strategy as “keep on jabbing”. But Boris Johnson refused to rule out tougher restrictions if necessary to maintain public health. No 10 said all options were still on the table, leaving open the possibility of closing schools “as a last resort” and bringing in curbs without consulting MPs “in extremis”.

Addressing MPs, Sajid Javid revealed there may now be as many 200,000 Omicron infections a day. He said around 20% of confirmed cases in England had been identified as the Omicron variant, and warned of “difficult weeks ahead”. In London, the centre of the Omicron outbreak, it accounted for over 44% of cases and was expected to become the dominant form within 48 hours, the health secretary said.

He said Covid passports would be toughened to require people to have a booster or recent lateral flow test (LFT) in the new year, risking inflaming Tory backbench anger against restrictions ahead of Commons votes on “plan B” restrictions.

Labour backed the government’s booster campaign and stopped short of calling for any new restrictions, with Keir Starmer saying it was Labour’s “patriotic duty” to vote for plan B.

The prime minister confirmed the first death of a patient with Omicron and 10 people hospitalised with the variant, saying people needed to “set aside” the idea that the variant was mild.

Meanwhile, head teachers warned of “chaos” in [schools](#), with high levels of staff and pupil absences and reports that some parents were planning to keep children home to avoid the virus before Christmas.

On the first day of the new vaccine campaign, 386,000 people in England are understood to have booked booster jabs – almost 50,000 an hour. But there was confusion over whether all eligible over-18s would be able to get a booster by the end of the year, with No 10 insisting they would, while the NHS cast doubt on the goal. Javid suggested the target was to “offer” rather than deliver the boosters.

Johnson and Pritchard launched a joint plea for the public to volunteer in vaccination centres, calling for tens of thousands of people to act as unpaid stewards and thousands to sign up as paid vaccinators. It is understood No 10 will also launch a new effort to reach the unvaccinated, using a publicity campaign potentially involving faith leaders and celebrities.

On Monday people trying to get LFTs were told they were unavailable despite a new requirement for Covid contacts to take them daily for a week.

The call from the BMA for tougher restrictions echoed warnings from scientists that vaccination alone would not be able to stop Omicron causing a dangerous second wave. Leaked documents from the UK [Health](#) and Security Agency showed on Friday that public health officials believe there should be “stringent national measures” by 18 December at the latest, with sources saying plan B will not be enough.

The BMA, which represents 150,000 doctors, is the first major medical organisation to call for stricter measures. Dr Chaand Nagpaul, BMA council chair, said: “Despite describing the current situation as an ‘emergency’ with a ‘tidal wave’ of infections on the horizon, the government’s response, relying entirely on the vaccine booster programme, is missing the wider measures required to control the spread of Omicron, including protecting millions of people who will not be eligible for the booster programme by the end of December.”

Chris Hopson, the NHS Providers chief executive, said the new guidance “gives an indication of what a monumental effort this will be”.

The former chair of the South African ministerial advisory committee on Covid-19, Prof Salim Karim, told BBC News early data from South Africa

looked good.

“In the past three waves, about two out of every three patients admitted were cases of severe disease, and right now we have only one out of four cases that is severe.”

However, it is important to note that South Africa has a younger population than the UK.

No 10 has been resistant to new measures before Christmas but is planning to review the situation on 18 December.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/13/covid-nhs-in-crisis-mode-as-hospitals-told-to-discharge-patients-where-possible>

Boris Johnson

What are the biggest Tory rebellions in Boris Johnson's premiership?

Vote on plan B Covid-19 restrictions likely to see largest number yet of Conservative MPs deviating from party line



Boris Johnson speaks during prime minister's questions last Wednesday.
Photograph: Jessica Taylor/AP

*[Jessica Elgot](#) Chief political correspondent
[@jessicaelgot](#)*

Tue 14 Dec 2021 02.04 EST

The first Covid rebellion

30 September 2020

The first signs of who would be the leaders of the anti-lockdown rebels in parliament began at the vote for the renewal of the [Coronavirus](#) Act 2020. Graham Brady, who chairs the 1922 Committee of Tory backbenchers, had put forward an amendment to give MPs more scrutiny powers that was eventually agreed in a deal with ministers.

This set the precedent that there would be a vote on “significant national measures with effect in the whole of England or UK-wide”.

Rebellion grows over curfews and fines

13 October 2020

Although about a dozen MPs rebelled over the [rule of six](#) a week previously, it was a new 10pm curfew and additional fines that prompted the biggest Covid rebellion yet as 42 MPs organised a symbolic vote against one of six restrictions that the Commons voted on. Labour formally abstained, but there were also 23 Labour rebels.

Chris Green resigned from his junior government role in protest at the new localised restrictions in his Bolton constituency, saying: “I believe that the cure is worse than the disease.”

The Rashford rebellion

21 October 2020

Far smaller in number but more consequential for Boris Johnson’s reputation. After a damaging row and U-turn over the summer, five Conservative MPs voted with Labour on extending free school meals after another compelling campaign by the footballer Marcus Rashford.

Those who did not rebel found themselves in the middle of another social media storm and another eventual U-turn by No 10 – leading to widespread anger at the ineptitude of Johnson’s response.

Widespread Tory rebellion over plans for tier restrictions

1 December 2020

Johnson suffered his biggest rebellion of his premiership when 55 MPs voted against a new Covid-19 tier system for England and another 16 abstained. The prime minister stood by the voting lobbies and personally pleaded with MPs to back him, but ultimately he was forced to rely on Labour's abstention to avoid defeat on a tightened system of measures that put 99% of England in the strictest tiers.

Rebels revived over delay to restrictions ending

16 June 2021

There was some Tory resistance to measures in 2021, but given the progress of the vaccine programme, there was little difficulty in parliament until Johnson made the call to delay the final stage of the roadmap on lifting restrictions.

Several Conservative MPs joined the rebel ranks at the vote – in which 49 Tories rebelled – saying they were particularly incensed by the uncertainty around gatherings like weddings. It was the second biggest rebellion on Covid.

Treasury sees off international aid rebels

13 July 2021

Tory opponents of the cut to international aid were confident they could band together with Labour and defeat the government. But in the end, the chancellor, Rishi Sunak, sprang a surprise vote, leaving them with little time to organise, and a concerted effort by No 10 meant many MPs were persuaded that the cut to 0.5% of GDP would be temporary.

Still, there were a significant number of high-profile rebels, including Theresa May, who voted against her party for the first time in a 24-year career as an MP.

Plan B restrictions introduced to combat Omicron

14 December 2021

Tuesday's vote is likely to register the biggest revolt of Johnson's premiership and leave him again reliant on Labour votes to pass the measures to increase mask-wearing and the use of Covid passports to enter mass events.

There are more than 70 declared Tory rebels, which would mean about one in three Conservative MPs are voting against the government – once you discount those on the government "payroll vote", which includes ministers, whips and parliamentary private secretaries.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/dec/14/what-are-the-biggest-tory-rebellions-in-boris-johnsons-premiership>

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2021.12.14 - Coronavirus

- [Omicron As focus turns to Covid boosters, what other measures could help?](#)
- [Research Covid passports could increase vaccine uptake](#)
- [Science Weekly Will boosters be enough to slow down Omicron?](#)
- [China Mainland reports first case of Omicron variant](#)

Coronavirus

As focus turns to Covid boosters what other measures could tackle Omicron?

Boris Johnson has not ruled out new restrictions but how effective could they be and what are the political risks?

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
- [See all our coronavirus coverage](#)

00:17

Timelapse shows 300-metre line for Covid booster jabs in central London – video

[Heather Stewart](#) and [Nicola Davis](#)

Tue 14 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

Ministers' focus may be a "national mission" to roll out booster vaccines to counter the dramatic rise of the Omicron variant, but the government has not ruled out new restrictions for England. Here we look at options on the table, how effective they could be at reducing the spread of coronavirus and the level of political risk for [Boris Johnson](#).

Mandatory isolation for all close Covid contacts

Effectiveness: 4/5

[From Tuesday](#), fully vaccinated contacts of people with confirmed Covid are asked to take a lateral flow test (LFT) every day for a week but do not have to self-isolate. So one half of a couple can keep going to the pub even if the partner they live with has Covid. And, while a positive LFT is a good indication that an individual is infected, a negative result does not mean they are not. With two Covid jabs offering little protection against infection with

Omicron, and households a key arena for transmission, requiring all contacts to isolate for seven or 10 days could have a strong impact – if adhered to. But not all infections or contacts are identified, so the approach has limitations.

Political risk: 3/5

Ministers will be very wary about opening the door to the return of the “pingdemic”. In July, when cases were rising rapidly, the government was forced to offer special exemptions from quarantine, and set up mass testing centres at workplaces, to prevent interruptions in key public services. If Omicron creates a “tidal wave” of cases, stricter isolation rules could bring significant disruption. For that reason, Conservative MPs would hate it. 3/5

Social distancing imposed in shops, hospitality venues and workplaces

Effectiveness: 2/5

Keeping a distance helps, but with a large body of evidence showing Covid undergoes airborne transmission, ventilation is also crucial. [According to a study](#) by researchers at the University of Cambridge and Imperial College London, in poorly ventilated spaces the coronavirus can spread further than 2m in seconds. Social distancing is also not possible in all workplaces, and those who can work from home have already been advised to.

Political risk: 3/5

Reintroducing social distancing would not only be unpopular with Tory libertarians, it would spark immediate calls for financial aid from the Treasury. Pubs, restaurants and theatres had to slash the number of customers they could serve when a distance rule in place, as well as investing in signage and other equipment. Returning to the 1m-plus or the 2m rule could feel like a dramatic step backwards for the fatigued public.

Covid passports – including boosters – for all public venues in the new year

Effectiveness: 2/5

Omicron's ability to evade vaccines to a greater degree than the Delta variant means vaccinated people could still pass on infections despite having a Covid certificate, albeit with boosters offering greater protection. There are also concerns that vaccine passports could [lead to discrimination or exacerbate inequalities](#). Experts have found that vaccine passports work best where jab uptake is low (it is high across the UK) and they are unlikely to convince anti-vaxxers to get jabbed. Their impact on transmission is likely greatest when the levels of Covid circulating are low.

Political risk: 4/5

Many Conservative MPs vehemently object to the idea of having to show an identity document (though they appear to apply the principle selectively: many recently voted in favour of voter ID). Any widening of the Covid certificates policy would be even more unpopular with backbenchers than this week's plan B package, and the government would almost certainly need Labour backing to pass it. It is less clear how voters would respond, though many have already been contentedly using the NHS Covid pass to attend large events.

Hospitality closures or an outdoors-only rule

Effectiveness: 3/5

Previous waves of Covid have seen outbreaks linked to settings such as bars and restaurants while experts have noted that alcohol can make people less [cautious in their interactions with others](#). Making service outdoors-only may reduce transmission but back-to-back gatherings over Christmas may blunt the impact of this measure.

Political risk: 4/5

Again, this would lead to calls for urgent financial backup for affected businesses, particularly if it came before Christmas. After weeks of Christmas advertising campaigns premised on 2021 making up for last year, voters would also be likely to react with despondency. It is unclear whether they would blame Johnson personally but the revelations about lockdown-busting parties in No 10 appear unlikely to have helped.

School closures for all but the children of key workers

Effectiveness: 3/5

Covid infections have raced through schools and data has shown that when classrooms are closed, for example over half-term, Covid cases fall – possibly in part because of less testing, but likely also because of reduced mixing. But school closures are based on the assumption that infections move from children to older groups. If infection levels are already high in other age groups, or two jabs are – as data suggests – less protective against Omicron infection, closing schools may have less of an impact than for previous waves. More work is needed on the chance of children being infected or developing severe disease with Omicron but there are also mental health considerations when it comes to school closures.

Political risk: 5/5

The government has repeatedly said school closures are a last resort in the pandemic. Robert Halfon, Conservative chair of the education select committee, said on Monday that they “have already had a devastating impact on young people’s education and mental health – we must not allow this to happen again”. No vote in parliament is needed, so backbench rebels can’t scupper any plan – but they could heap blame on Boris Johnson. As may exhausted teachers, and parents whose ability to work would be hit.

Lockdown: limiting gatherings and placing restrictions on leaving home

Effectiveness: 5/5

If contacts are reduced, the spread of the virus will slow – giving more time for people to get boosters and reducing the chance of a large number of people needing medical care at once. But how heavy handed such measures would need to be to have a sufficient effect is unclear. And there are downsides, including the mental health impact of such restrictions.

Political risk: 5/5

Even before a series of deeply damaging [lockdown-busting Christmas party allegations](#) engulfed the government, Downing Street was desperate to avoid

restrictions on socialising this winter. The public were largely stoical and compliant in winter 2020, when the Alpha variant led to last-minute limits on Christmas contact. But many Conservative MPs believe voters would not be so accepting again.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/14/as-focus-turns-to-covid-boosters-what-other-measures-could-tackle-omicron>

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Coronavirus

Covid passports could increase vaccine uptake, study suggests

Certification encouraged vaccination in countries with low coverage, especially among young people

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Coronavirus passports require people to have proof of complete vaccination, negative test, or a Covid-19 recovery certificate, to access public venues and events, such as restaurants or concerts. Photograph: Andy Rain/EPA

[Andrew Gregory](#) Health editor

Mon 13 Dec 2021 18.30 EST

[Coronavirus passports](#) could lead to increased uptake of vaccines, especially among young people, a study suggests.

Research by the University of Oxford found Covid-19 certification led to increased jab uptake 20 days before and 40 days after introduction in countries with lower-than-average vaccination coverage. Increase in vaccine uptake was most pronounced in people under 30. The modelling analysis was published in *The Lancet Public Health*.

Coronavirus passports require people to have proof of either complete vaccination, a negative test or a Covid-19 recovery certificate to access public venues and events, such as restaurants or concerts. As well as helping to prevent the spread of coronavirus in public venues, it has been suggested they may encourage more unvaccinated people to get vaccinated, particularly those who perceive their own risk of hospitalisation or death from Covid-19 as low.

[Prof Melinda Mills](#), the director of the Leverhulme Centre for Demographic Science at the University of Oxford and the study's lead author, said: "As mass vaccination programmes continue to play a central role in protecting public health in this pandemic, increasing vaccine uptake is crucial both to protect the individuals immunised and break chains of infection in the community.

"Our study is an important first empirical assessment of whether Covid-19 certification can form part of this strategy. Overall, we observed a significant uptick in anticipation of restrictions coming into place about 20 days before introduction, which lasted up to 40 days after, but the context of existing vaccination uptake, vaccine hesitancy, levels of trust in authorities, and pandemic trajectory was crucial to the impact."

Many countries have either introduced or are considering introduction of Covid-19 certification, but whether this public health intervention increases vaccine uptake is unclear. From Wednesday, NHS Covid passes showing full vaccination or a recent negative test will be required in England for entry to indoor venues containing more than 500 people, unseated outdoor venues

with more than 4,000 people, and any venue with more than 10,000 people, subject to a vote on Tuesday.

Some survey-based evidence has suggested that people reported they would be less likely to get vaccinated if Covid passports were introduced, while some countries have reported increases in uptake after the introduction of Covid-19 certification.

In the study, researchers linked data on Covid certification introduced between April and September this year to vaccination uptake in six countries where certification was legally required – Denmark, Israel, Italy, France, Germany and Switzerland.

The study used modelling to estimate what vaccine uptake would have been without Covid-19 certification in all six countries, based on vaccination uptake trends from 19 otherwise similar control countries without certification.

In countries where vaccine coverage was previously low, introduction of vaccine passports was associated with a significant increase in the number of additional vaccine doses per million people – 127,823 in France, 243,151 in Israel, 64,952 in Switzerland and 66,382 in Italy, according to the study.

Researchers found that in Denmark and Germany, where there were higher average vaccination rates, there was no significant increase in vaccination after the introduction of certification.

The study's co-author Dr Tobias Ruttenauer, from the University of Oxford, said: "We know that certain groups have lower vaccine uptake than others and it may be that Covid-19 certification is a useful way to encourage vaccine-complacent groups, such as young people and men, to get vaccinated.

"However, Covid-19 certification alone is not a silver bullet for improving vaccine uptake and must be used alongside other policies. Vaccine hesitancy due to lack of trust in authorities, which is common among some minority-ethnic and lower socioeconomic groups, may be addressed more successfully through other interventions, such as targeted vaccine drives and

community dialogue to generate more understanding about Covid-19 vaccines.”

The authors said there were limitations to their study. There was no data available to examine vaccine uptake by sociodemographic, gender and ethnic groups. They also emphasised that Covid-19 certification policies across the six countries were different for various reasons, and acknowledged that the causes of vaccine hesitancy are diverse across different countries, which may limit the generalisability of their findings.

The authors also raised several issues linked with Covid passports that policymakers should consider, including the risk of exacerbating inequalities among communities with lower uptake, generating inequality in access to public spaces where Covid-19 vaccine rollout is staggered by age, entrenching digital divides if passports are electronic, and data privacy concerns.

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[Science Weekly](#)

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Covid-19: Will boosters be enough to slow down Omicron?

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[China](#)

Mainland China reports first case of Omicron coronavirus variant

Appearance of highly transmissible variant poses serious threat to zero-Covid strategy

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Medical workers in protective gear at a Covid testing site in Ningbo, Zhejiang province. Photograph: Xinhua/Rex/Shutterstock

[Vincent Ni](#) China affairs correspondent

Mon 13 Dec 2021 14.03 EST

Mainland [China](#) has reported its first case of the highly transmissible Omicron variant in the northern city of Tianjin, posing what could be the

biggest threat to date to the country's zero-Covid strategy.

The Chinese authorities reported on Monday that the Omicron case was detected on 9 December from an overseas returnee, who showed no symptoms on arrival. The patient is being quarantined and treated in a designated hospital.

At the same time, the eastern province of Zhejiang has been battling a rise in new infections of the Delta variant in recent weeks.

Cases of Omicron – first detected in South Africa and labelled a “variant of concern” by the World Health Organization – have now been reported in more than 50 countries. At least [one person in the UK has died with Omicron](#), Boris Johnson said on Monday.

[China Covid cases](#)

Experts say that if not properly controlled, the variant could upend Beijing's strategy to fully contain the pandemic. Since last year, the method has guaranteed Chinese citizens a largely virus-free life, but it has also been met with criticism by some medical professionals, who argued for an alternative plan to coexist with the virus with a sufficient vaccination rate.

The first Omicron case in Tianjin comes as nearby Beijing gears up for the [Winter Olympics](#), which are to be held in February. The Guardian understands the patient has no association with the Games.

The arrival of the Omicron variant also coincided with Zhejiang – a province of 65 million people – battling against its first domestic cluster outbreak this year.

Among the 80 new locally transmitted cases with symptoms in mainland China on 12 December, 74 were identified in Zhejiang. In October, the province reported just one local case.

The outbreak in Zhejiang, a manufacturing hub and home to the e-commerce company Alibaba, led more than a dozen publicly listed companies to halt production on Monday. Their shares fell sharply as a result.

The companies said they would comply with the virus control measures imposed by the local government, which will decide when production can resume.

China Covid deaths

Among the worst affected cities in Zhejiang province is Shaoxing. Since 5 December, 123 of the 192 cases detected in the province were from the city of 5 million. A mass testing programme is under way.

Early this month, the Chinese region of Hong Kong – which runs a separate health system from the mainland – reported its first cases of Omicron. On Monday, the territory reported two additional cases of the variant, bringing the total to seven.

Hong Kong's health authorities said that both cases were imported from the UK, where the [health secretary, Sajid Javid, told MPs on Monday](#) that Omicron now represents 20% of Covid cases in England.

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[Succession](#)

Interview

Succession creator Jesse Armstrong on its thunderous finale: ‘That might be as good as I’ve got’

[Stuart Heritage](#)



Power struggle ... Kieran Culkin, Jeremy Strong, Sarah Snook and Brian Cox in series three. Photograph: Graeme Hunter

Season three of the hit show has made even more headlines than usual. We ask its British creator if he's had enough yet, if actor Jeremy Strong is doing OK – and if his character Kendall is actually Jesus

Warning: contains spoilers



[@stuheritage](#)

Tue 14 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

Yesterday, like much of the rest of the world, I watched the finale of the third season of Succession. And, like much of the rest of the world, I found myself buffeted by one astonishing twist after another – and a gasp-inducing climax that outdid even those of series one and two. Unlike my fellow viewers, however, pretty much the first thing I see after the end credits roll is the face of [Jesse Armstrong](#), the show's creator, popping up over Zoom and politely attempting to dissuade me from discussing the episode.

Unlike other big TV showrunners – who will happily explain, and sometimes over-explain, every single second – Armstrong prefers to remain hands off. He tries not to read the acres of theorising that [Succession](#)

inspires. Such post-match analyses, he says, can often feel like a tightrope walk. “There’s a bit of me that just wants to find out what the fuck everyone is saying about the show,” he says from his book-lined study in London. “But you can’t. It wouldn’t be good for me psychologically – and it wouldn’t be good for the creative process of doing the show.”

This reluctance to engage is partly down to his desire to preserve the reality of the show, which tells the story of billionaire Logan Roy, his media company WayStar RoyCo and his four children, all of them vying for dominance in the most dysfunctionally abhorrent ways. Once the creator starts explaining the background to all the decisions that go into making the show, he believes, the mystery that propels it starts to diminish.



‘There are multiple readings of Goodbye Mog’ ... Jesse Armstrong, referring to the book Logan Roy was reading. Photograph: Teri Pengilley for The Guardian/The Guardian

“I don’t want to say, ‘We had this for lunch on that day’ or ‘Kieran was wearing a hat, but we decided to give him another one because it made him look more military.’” He pulls himself to a halt, already imagining the thousands of “Roman Roy joins the army” theories that could be triggered by such a statement about the repellent, but very funny, character played by Kieran Culkin. “I’ve just made that up,” Armstrong quickly clarifies.

For weeks now, *Succession* has been stuffed with foreboding symbols of death. There have been crucifixes, health scares and – in a cliffhanger that obsessed the world last week – a dreadful accident. Worse still, the final episode opened with Logan reading the children’s book *Goodbye Mog* to his grandson. The book, about a cartoon cat, is explicitly about the death of a beloved character. You don’t put *Goodbye Mog* in a TV programme, I say, unless you’re planning to off someone. “Or do you?” counters Armstrong. “As you know, there are multiple readings of *Goodbye Mog*. You could probably list them. But this was probably more of a Marxist reading than a Freudian one.”

Kendall, the middle brother, did seem like he might take his life this season. Has he ever considered killing him off? “The writers’ room is an open forum where anything mad or weird that aggressively shakes up the show can be suggested and considered,” he replies. “But we never went down that road. We know Ken got to a low point, then an event happened. I wouldn’t disagree with anyone else’s interpretation of it – but in my mind, it was just a grey area of someone who has stopped looking after themselves.”

To hear Armstrong talk about it, all the real fun of *Succession* happens inside the writers’ room. That’s where all the plots are hashed out, all the themes debated until something like a roadmap to each season begins to form. It sounds like a world of total possibility and, whenever I even begin to approach something approximating a grand unified theory on *Succession*, the writers’ room is where he bats it back to.



Embattled brats ... Kieran Culkin, Sarah Snook and Matthew Macfadyen prepare for a showdown. Photograph: Home Box Office/HBO

Maybe, I say, it would be a good idea for Logan to just sell out and cut his kids loose, let the entitled brats stand on their own two feet. If they can make a success of themselves outside of WayStar, then they don't need it. If they can't, it's proof Logan was only keeping them around out of vanity. I check Armstrong's face for something – anything – that might validate my theory.

"Um," he eventually replies. "I'm gonna give you a, 'That's a good idea.' I buy the notion, but it's not good for me to talk about. If I said, 'Yes, that's right', it would be bullshit. I haven't got a conceptual framework of what happens. I don't mean to be a dick about it, but I don't have any good answers, or maybe they're only appropriate to discuss in the writers' room."

I retreat to safer ground. A recent New Yorker interview with [Jeremy Strong](#), who plays Kendall Roy, laid out his sometimes extreme ways of getting into whatever character he is playing. In The Trial of the Chicago 7, while shooting a protest scene, Strong asked a stunt coördinator to rough him up and also requested to be sprayed with real tear gas. "I don't like saying no to Jeremy," the film's writer and director Aaron Sorkin is quoted as saying. "But there were 200 people in that scene and another 70 on the crew, so I declined to spray them with poison gas."

The profile [attracted such fascination](#) (and mockery) that the likes of Sorkin, Jessica Chastain and Anne Hathaway felt compelled to leap to his defence. Has Armstrong spoken to Strong during this firestorm? Is he dealing with it OK? “He’s fine,” says the writer. “He’s fine. I’m in touch with all the actors. He’s good.”

With Strong so willing to go to similar extremes to reach the emotions needed to play someone like Kendall, I wonder if Armstrong ever goes through something similar. Does he, in the process of creating a show with so many peaks and troughs, find himself being chucked about by the emotion of it all? “Oh shit, I do, I do,” he says, suddenly much more animated, recalling a scene between Kendall and his sister Shiv. “I remember doing a rewrite where Shiv gives Kendall a hug. I found it very touching.” This isn’t always the case, he’s keen to point out. “Sometimes I can be a bit more of a scientist in a lab about it. You don’t want to get high on your own supply and start overestimating yourself, but I really am emotionally engaged.”



Extreme method actor ... Jeremy Strong in season three. Photograph: Home Box Office/HBO

He goes on to describe the season three finale’s most pivotal scene, which takes place in an Italian car park underneath the beating sun. It is a make-or-

break moment for the siblings in their battle with their father – a delicate scene they had to get right. Nevertheless, as Armstrong explains: “I was very present watching that scene being filmed. I was like a fan of Succession watching it.”

After Christmas, Armstrong will reassemble the Succession writers’ room and begin to piece together season four. It may or may not be the show’s last. He won’t say for sure, but he does seem overly concerned with the notion of overstaying his welcome. Speaking of the season two finale, the one that ended with Kendall publicly accusing his father of wrongdoing, he recalls thinking: “I hope I can write another as good as that. And I don’t know if I can. That might be as good as I’ve got.”

It wasn’t. This last season has seen Succession ascend to even greater heights – but Armstrong remains cautious. “You’ve only got so much plot, character and psychological capital,” he says. “One day it will be gone and you don’t know when that day is. The fear is that it’ll sneak up on you when you’re not looking.”

I have time to pitch one last Succession theory. Given all the plot swings with Kendall, and his very specific obsessions, is he Jesus? “This is part of the reason why I do and don’t like talking about the show,” Armstrong replies patiently. “That theory works, but it isn’t the key to the show because it’s not that kind of show. But you’d be very welcome to come into the writers’ room and say that, because we’d have a really good time talking about it.”

You’ve really made me want to visit the writers’ room, I say. He grins. “I find the period when the show’s going out really complicated, because there’s all this stuff I do want to know but I don’t want to know. But the writers’ room is almost pure pleasure. I always look forward to that.”

Succession is available to watch on demand on Sky and NOW.

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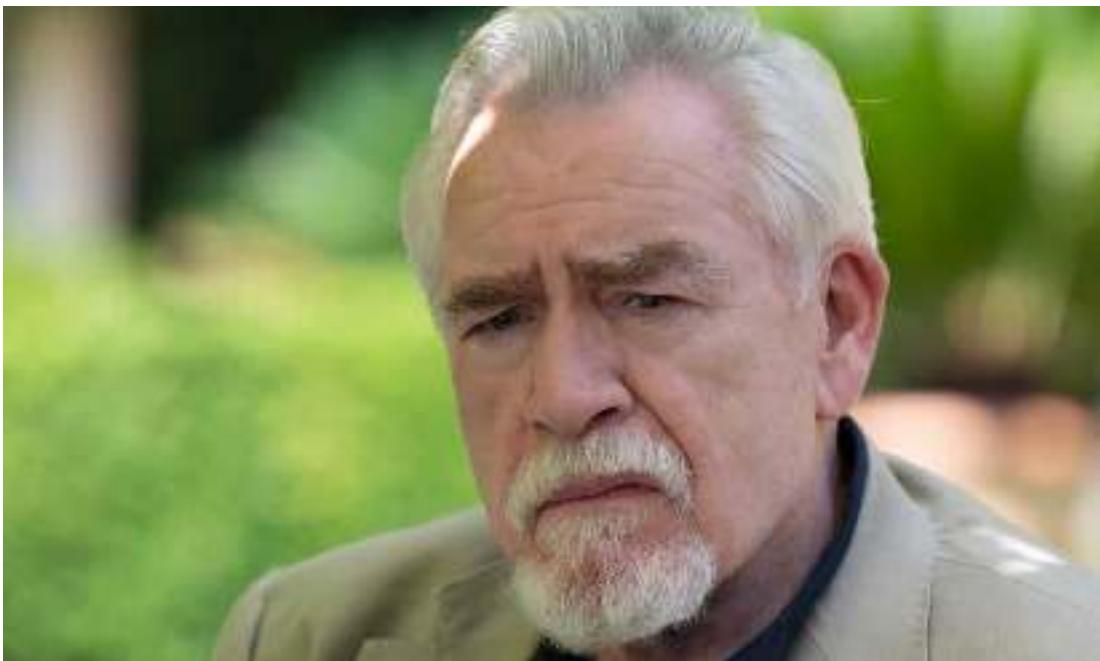
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Succession season three finale review – sheer sinister perfection



The best, amid stiff competition, it's ever been ... Succession. Photograph: Graeme Hunter

Just when you thought it couldn't get any more magnificently evil, Shiv, Kendall and Roman discover they have not just one parent who doesn't love

them, but two

[Succession finale recap: the most biblical betrayal of all](#)



[Lucy Mangan](#)

[@LucyMangan](#)

Mon 13 Dec 2021 17.15 EST

We begin with a moment of relief. Kendall did not die in the swimming pool (or, as his loving brother Roman puts it, become “Kurt Cobain of the fucking floaties”). Comfry saved him – though for *what* seems an ever more present question in Kendall’s mind, as he reappears at the villa after a night in hospital for observation still virtually catatonic with guilt and grief.

After that, the finale screws begin to tighten and – some of Roman’s best jokes of the season aside – don’t let up for the next coruscating, magnificent hour; probably the best, amid stiff competition, the show has ever done.

The rot – or should we say super-rot, given the family we’re dealing with – sets in when Matsson (Alexander Skarsgård, giving a lovely, light performance as the friendly fellow who will finally blow the Roys to pieces) decides he needs to be in charge of the new company if the merger between his and Waystar is to go through. Logan (Brian Cox, given a small,

devastating monologue about the state of the US and modulating seamlessly during it from unassailable force to man who might – just might – be weary of the game) sends Roman back to the wedding villa (“My mom’s getting remarried to a bowl of porridge, it’s all terribly moving”) so he can talk to Matsson alone.

At the villa, Greg is still courting his European duchess (“Off a couple of haemophiliacs and you’re king of Luxembourg!” says Tom encouragingly), the siblings stage a semi-intervention with Kendall that actually induces more of an emotional crisis in Connor (“I didn’t see Pop for three years but your spoon wasn’t shiny enough?”) and prompts Willa to comfort him by accepting his proposal. “Fuck it,” she says. “How bad can it be?” Ah, Willa.

After the wedding of Mommy dearest, at which Shiv gives – well, let’s call it a stirring speech, news reaches Shiv, Roman and Kendall that Logan is about to sell his empire, their inheritance, to GoJo. They convene in a dusty back lot for an extraordinary scene in which Kendall, sinking to the ground, confesses his role in the death of the waiter at Shiv’s wedding and his brother and sister must find, from somewhere buried by years of dysfunction deep within themselves, a way of comforting him in his despair. In another programme this would have been the apogee of everything. Here it comes but halfway through the finale, and the remaining half hour only builds from there.



Not one to rest on its laurels ... the Succession finale gets more devastating by the moment. Photograph: Graeme Hunter

In a car to Logan's villa, the children put together their plan to prevent Logan closing the deal and push him out of the company instead – “Full coup,” says Kendall, coming back to life before our eyes – via the supermajority they and their mother, Caroline, have that can block any change in control. Shiv calls Tom to get him onboard, too, and though Roman is unhappy they enter the villa united. And they stay so. But they forgot, alas, that they have not one parent who doesn't love them, but two. While they were carpooling rebellion, Logan was on the phone to Caroline and persuaded her to change the terms of the divorce agreement that gave them the supermajority. The game has been switched. And it is over. Roman begs Logan not to close the deal – for love of them, he says. “You should have trusted me,” is Logan's only answer. “Because I fucking win.”



The Wambsgans worm turned ... Tom. Photograph: Graeme Hunter

Again, a lesser show would have rested happily on its laurels there. But who told Logan the children were coming? Enter Tom, his soft features all concern for his wife and the blow she has been dealt. But Shiv saw her father press his shoulder as Logan left and knows that the Wambsgans worm turned. Because of the love she didn't have for him.

The third season of [Succession](#) started well then perhaps wandered a little far into the corporate weeds and let the family stuff, the emotional heft, fall by the wayside. But the second half gathered everything back up and the last four or five episodes were first-class rehearsals for the sheer perfection of the finale; the story tighter than ever, the writing acute and subtle (and never more so than in the callback to Tom's story of Sporus when, after Shiv's call from the car, he asks Greg to throw his lot in with him once more), brilliantly funny and wounding by turns.

A fourth season is now in the offing. It's hard to see how they can top this one. But isn't that what we always say?

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[Christmas](#)

Your niece is suddenly vegan! How to survive the 12 disasters of Christmas



Dietary doldrums ... be prepared for guests who switch their eating habits.
Photograph: JackF/Getty Images/iStockphoto

One guest is an antivaxxer, another is allergic to your cats, the turkey is still raw and your best friends are splitting up in the sitting room. Here is how to

face down festive fiascos



Zoe Williams

@zoesqwilliams

Tue 14 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

It's that time of year when you wake up sweating and can't figure out why. Did you accidentally wear your thermals in bed? Do you have tuberculosis? No, dummy, it's just that it's almost Christmas, it's your turn to play host, and the list of things that can go wrong on the 25th is long and wearying.

Can I recommend, before we drill into this list, a quick wisdom stocktake? Last year was the worst Christmas imaginable: every plan was kiboshed at the very last minute; non-essential shops closed before we'd done our shopping; people who thought they were going back to their families ended up at home and hadn't bought Baileys and crackers and whatnot; people who'd battled solitude for a year were stuck alone; people living on top of each other couldn't catch a break; people expecting guests were buried under surplus pigs in blankets, and beyond our under-or over-decorated front doors, the outside world was fraught with risk and sorrow, as coronavirus declined to mark the birth of the Christ child with any respite from its march

of terror. I'm not saying it couldn't be as bad as that again – just that it couldn't possibly be as *surprisingly* bad again.

There are some bridges you can't cross until you come to them; but others, you can get a head start on.

The turkey's too big for the oven!

How did you let this happen? It's not as though this meal is a surprise. You're right, I am using a harsh, judgmental tone for a reason. There is a tendency when we're around our families to default to a mean, buzzing internal monologue of: "You're useless / hopeless / incompetent", a discordant medley of everyone who ever made you feel bad, a proportion of whom, inevitably, are currently in your living room, expecting to be fed. Try not to do this to yourself. (Sure, easier said than done.)



In the pink, but not in a good way ... as a last resort, poach uncooked meat in stock. Photograph: GMVozd/Getty Images

Now, on to your oven/turkey dilemma: it seems counterintuitive to consult the Guardian's Felicity Cloake, creator of How to Cook the Perfect ... and author of many books, from Perfect to Completely Perfect, on a matter of such complete imperfection. Yet Cloake is ideal, with so many solutions that even to count them will calm you like a breathing exercise.

“Cut the legs off!” she advises. “They’re usually the thing that gets wedged in the oven element and send my temperature soaring. They should be relatively easy to yank off, but as with everything, there’s a YouTube video to help. If it’s still too big, take the wings off, too. If you’ve discovered far enough in advance, and it’s just that you don’t have room for the turkey and side dishes together, then roast the turkey first, cover it with foil, then carve it and cover it in hot gravy before serving.”

The turkey does fit in the oven – but you put it in too late and now everyone’s starving and it’s still half raw!

Cloake to the rescue again. “My first reaction would be: put it back in the oven and give them a few more crisps,” she says. But if they’ve already started drinking, you’re in a danger zone. They might sail past appetite on a sea of sherry, straight into [Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?](#)

“If you need to eat now,” Cloake continues, “I’d advise starting with the breast, which will cook first and which may well be ready even if the legs are still raw. It’s always worth double checking the temperature with a meat thermometer as turkey brown meat is quite dark and might look uncooked when it’s not.”

If it’s not cooked at all, take it out, “joint it and roast the constituent parts separately. If you’re really desperate, bring a large pan of chicken or vegetable stock to a simmer, then take the meat off the bone and poach it in that. It should only take a few minutes.”



Tofu makes the perfect standby for unexpected vegan guests. Photograph: Olena Mykhaylova RF/Alamy

Your pesky niece was a vegetarian last week and now, suddenly, she's a vegan, but nobody told you.

All those failsafe store cupboard solutions for the emergency veggie – the cheese toastie, the omelette – are out of the window. In a carnivore's kitchen, you will most likely be lacking what a vegan would consider the basics of special-occasion cooking: some kind of meat substitute, such as a burger made of pea protein; or fake cheese.

Always have a dairy-free supermarket puff pastry sheet in – they last a long time in the freezer, lend themselves to festive presentation and can be filled with anything – any mashed vegetable plus something like a tapenade. If there's no space in your oven, firm tofu in cubes, dusted in cornflour, deep fried, will make a random but delicious turkey substitute for your incredibly thoughtless, but presumably dearly loved, relative.



Self protection ... what to do with an anti-vaxxer at the feast. Photograph: Drazen Zigic/Getty Images/iStockphoto

One of your guests doesn't believe in vaccinations.

When we think of anti-vaxxers, especially in an intimate, family setting, we're often most comfortable channelling our indignation into the territory of health: that anti-science idiot is endangering *my* health, or grandma's, ergo they are selfish. Undoubtedly, they *are* much more likely to have caught Covid, and substantially more likely to pass it on, but if this is a deal-breaker, check ahead that everyone's vaxed and disinvite anyone who isn't.

Otherwise, try this thought experiment: if they couldn't get vaccinated – say they had an insurmountable needle-phobia – you might be much more worried about them as a Covid victim than as a carrier. So what you could be reacting to might not be the vector transmission but character traits – obduracy, narcissism, callousness. You almost need to take yourself out of it, in order to get the temperature down. They're not doing this *to you*. It's just a thing they're doing.

We tend to think about this as a question of etiquette – how can I be kind while making sure my boundaries are respected? But the world of political discourse has much more practical research on how we talk to each other across ideological divides. Ellie Mae O'Hagan runs the Centre for Labour

and Social Studies (Class) thinktank, and works on public attitudes related to the economy and culture wars. “The person whose methodology I like best is Anat Shenker-Osorio,” she says, “who divides people into base, persuadable and opposition.”

“Base” tends to mean broadly progressive, humane, reasonable. “Opposition” doesn’t mean right or left, but rather, “you’re the small segment of the population who cannot be moved, whatever the issue is. You’re ideologically hardline, you’ll probably read a lot of news and take the information that supports your existing view.” First, figure out who you’re dealing with. A persuadable person is “more likely to express uncertainty, more likely to contradict themselves, more likely to draw from their own experience.” An opposition mindset will be characterised by a long list of dodgy or diversionary facts and a great deal more certainty.

With a persuadable person, O’Hagan says: “Don’t tell them facts. That doesn’t work. Don’t myth-bust. What that tends to do is strengthen the myth in people’s minds. Start with a shared value and be clear that you see the good in them. ‘I can see that you really care about making sure that people are safe. I also care about that.’”

The advice on the opposition mindset is not to persuade them, but – in a political context – to alienate them. “If you don’t, usually you end up saying something so bland that you’re not really saying anything.” In an interpersonal context, this really means, just move on: don’t deliberately alienate them – realistically, you’re probably already not that close – but don’t get involved.

Interestingly, a (nameless by choice) spokesperson for the NHS said something similar – they divide vaccine attitudes into four: accepting; hesitant; resistant; hostile. They only communicate with the first three, and don’t engage with the fourth.



Bubbling under ... pondering the unsayable? Photograph: Pixel Youth movement/Alamy

Your uncle is drunk and itching to tell some home truths.

There's an argument that one person will always be spoiling for a fight, and that it's their Christmas, too. They've come all this way, so let them say whatever it is and shrug it off. Often, someone who wants to kick off will do it with a big, unsayable thing – that Donald Trump wasn't all bad, or Covid is a hoax, or some other conspiracy theory. O'Hagan says: "The one thing that's not discussed enough is that a lot of people who become Covid conspiracy theorists are people who really suffered during lockdown. They're seeking explanations for what was going on, because they were frightened and suffering." Try to respond to the hurt rather than the words.

Equally, some people just get eggy when they drink too fast, on which, my core suggestions are: make your first offer *not* champagne or any fizzy wine, which people always drink too fast because they're thirsty and excited, a lethal combination. Instead, make some really weak gin and tonics, which they'll also drink too fast but it won't matter. Then, when they move on to their next drink, they'll still be excited but at least they won't be thirsty.

You bought your brother something amazing and he got you something from Poundland

I had a friend who gave her brother a kidney and that Christmas, he gave her some tights from TK Maxx, and she weathered that. True story. So just have a word with yourself, eh?

Your wifi is acting up – and you've forgotten how to get away from one another without screens.

The reason Christmas is so fraught and occupies such a central place in our hosting anxieties is – parking your unique family dynamics – twofold. First, catering at scale is unfamiliar to many people. Second, spending hours in company doesn't suit a lot of temperaments. Introverts need downtime; extroverts feel offended. The core family of parents plus adult kids will usually have its own strategies to deal with all this, but add in some in-laws, neighbours, new girlfriends or boyfriends, and you're back to square one.



Game on ... make all activities optional. Photograph: MBI/Alamy

My family always used to have this enforced walk across a vast and dreary common, which went on for two hours, and when I describe it it sounds awful, but it wasn't, because it enabled us to split into twos and threes and have real conversations, rather than the stilted performances that whole-family groups scare up round a table. The main thing is to make everything optional and have a few options. Charades / snooze / wash up. Poker / TV /

walk the dog. Create legitimate escape routes for people who need them, otherwise they're really going to give you a pain in your butt by about 6pm.

One of your guests is allergic to cats – and you've got six.

In the old days, you probably wouldn't have got a cat if it meant your brother or best friend's boyfriend could no longer visit, but now, sheesh, 18 months with nobody ever visiting you and acres of home time – why not have four?

Hoover like a fiend ahead of time; the hair lying about might have much more of an effect than the animal itself padding in and out. Ventilate well, which you should be doing anyway. Make sure you have antihistamines, but also consider asking your guest to take one before they arrive, although not in a tone of voice that makes them feel like a nuisance.



Time to go home ... Photograph: RTImages/Alamy

It's way beyond your bedtime and your guests won't leave!

On this of all days, it's a conversation you can have ahead of time: who needs to stay over, how those who don't stay will get home, who's driving and will need elderflower cordial. All these practical details will give you a good idea of what your entertainment window will look like. However, our social muscles have atrophied somewhat; we've become less good at reading

cues and have simply forgotten what time things are supposed to end. Or maybe some of us are overexcited and want to spend more time together than ever. The first time my sister came over after the last lockdown, she left at 3am. Others are taking time to reacclimatise. We all just need radical openness: don't bother with all the Martha Stewart-ey tips, letting the wine run out and turning the lights up. Just say: "I'm tired, and I'm going to bed, and I know this isn't how we used to do things, but it doesn't mean I love you any less."



They'll split up when they're ready ... Photograph: LordHenriVoton/Getty Images/iStockphoto

The couple you've invited can't stand each other any more.

This is one of the weirdest things about the pandemic. Not seeing enough of people outside our household, all couples, I mean *all of us*, have got into quite idiosyncratic registers. I know couples who have become very saccharine in the way they talk to each other, couples who overshare to a degree that would put hairs on your chest, couples whose tone has become very rough and sarcastic, and none of it is immediately legible, so don't overreact. However, these are your guests – you know them pretty well or you wouldn't have invited them. And if they really can't stand each other, one or both parties will probably have told you. I'm afraid this is just awks

and your only strategy is to keep it off the table. They'll split up when they're ready, and Christmas Day at your house is nobody's idea of ready.

You realise your kids have crossed over into cynicism and will never experience the magic of Christmas again. Indeed, last year was probably their final true childhood Christmas, but you were too preoccupied to notice.

I would normally quote Marge Simpson – “Take all your bad feelings and push them down, all the way down, past your knees, until you’re almost walking on them” – but her children stayed the same age her entire life, so what does she know? The passing of time is just inherently sad.

Boris Johnson has just cancelled Christmas again!

A personal view: after everything that’s happened, including but in no way limited to the prime minister’s own bogus “childcare bubble” last Christmas, I find it extremely unlikely that anyone will be asked or expected to celebrate on their own in 2021. However, we may be asked to scale our plans right back, and find ourselves in our nuclear families with excess food mountains, or without any of the right food. If this comes to pass, look back over the things you’ve been worrying about, and you may find some silver linings.

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Hu Xijin, editor of the Global Times. Composite: Getty - Bloomberg

[The long read](#)

China's troll king: how a tabloid editor became the voice of Chinese nationalism

Hu Xijin, editor of the Global Times. Composite: Getty - Bloomberg

Hu Xijin is China's most famous propagandist. At the Global Times, he helped establish a chest-thumping new tone for China on the world stage – but can he keep up with the forces he has unleashed?

by [Han Zhang](#)

Tue 14 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

On 2 November, the Chinese tennis star Peng Shuai posted a long message on the social media site Weibo, accusing China's former vice-premier, Zhang Gaoli, of sexual assault. As soon as the post went live, it became the highest-profile #MeToo case in China, and one of the ruling Chinese

Communist party's largest public relations crises in recent history. Within about 20 minutes, the post had been removed. All mentions of the post were then scrubbed from the Chinese internet. No references to the story appeared in the Chinese media. In the days that followed, Peng made no further statements and did not appear in public. Outside China, however, as other tennis stars publicly expressed concerns for her safety, [Peng's apparent disappearance](#) became one of the biggest news stories in the world.

It wasn't long before Hu Xijin stepped into the story. Hu is the editor of the Global Times, a chest-thumpingly nationalistic tabloid sometimes described as "China's Fox News". In recent years, he has become the most influential Chinese propagandist in the west – a constant presence on Twitter and in the international media, always on hand to defend the Communist party line, no matter the topic. On 19 November, he tweeted to his [450,000](#) followers that he had confirmed through his own sources – he didn't say who they were – that Peng was alive and well. Over the next two days, he posted [videos](#) of Peng at a restaurant and [signing autographs](#) in Beijing.

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To many observers, this seemingly stage-managed footage, disseminated by organs of the Chinese state, was not reassuring. On 21 November, the International Olympic Committee spoke with Peng on a video call and declared that she was "doing fine". When this intervention still failed to convince many that Peng was safe, Hu took the opportunity to hammer home one of the central themes of his three-decade career in journalism: when it comes to China, the western media sees only what it wants to see. "They only believe the story about China that they imagine," he tweeted. "I'm surprised that they didn't say the lady who showed up these two days is a fake [Peng Shuai](#), a double." Those who continued to question Peng's safety, Hu wrote, were trying to "demonize China's system".

Hu's eagerness to reframe a story about sexual assault and censorship as a story about clashing political ideologies and anti-China prejudice is part of a significant change in the way China presents itself to the world. From the late 1970s onwards, as China was opening up but had yet to assume a major role in international affairs, it struggled to handle criticism from abroad. The

official response was usually some form of wounded denial, or a stilted demand that other countries stay out of its business. But over the past decade, as China's global power has grown, President [Xi Jinping](#) has pushed the country into a more confident, aggressive posture, and Hu, more than any other Chinese journalist, has become the voice of this pugnacious nationalism. On China's most popular social media platform, WeChat, the Global Times is reportedly the most read outlet.

"My English is almost all self-taught," Hu once said in a video on Weibo, "and in English, I'm most skilful at picking a fight." He has hyped up the prospects of military confrontation between the US and China over Taiwan. He has warned that if Britain infringes Chinese sovereignty in the South China Sea then it will be treated like "a bitch" who is "asking for a beating". He has compared India to a "bandit" that has "barbarically robbed" Chinese companies. He has [referred to](#) Australia as nothing more than "gum stuck to the bottom of China's shoe". He recently concluded an [article](#) with the question: "In the face of such an irrational Australia, shouldn't China be prepared with an iron fist and to punch it hard when needed, teaching it a thorough lesson?"

When he picks a fight with foreign officials on Twitter, Hu likes to take screenshots of the tweets and post them on Weibo, just to show his 24 million followers – most of whom are blocked from Twitter by the [great firewall](#) – that he's out there, defending China's honour. "The most important thing about Hu is that he has constructed a whole style of authoritarian, nationalistic rhetoric," Xiao Qiang, an expert in Chinese media at Berkeley's School of Information, told me. "His readers go around repeating the same things and spreading the same sentiments." Hu's combative approach has been taken up by a number of Chinese diplomats and spokespeople – often called "[Wolf Warriors](#)", in reference to a jingoistic Chinese blockbuster movie – who promote a "China first" philosophy and use social media to trash anyone they see as opposing Chinese interests. But where the Wolf Warrior diplomats are a recent phenomenon, people like Hu "have been propagating this idea for 10 years," says Xiang Lanxin, a professor of international politics at Geneva's Graduate Institute.

Hu's endless stream of quotable insults and invective stands out amid a sea of bland official statements, calls to "occupy new platforms for party

discourse”, and so on. Once you know his name, you see him quoted everywhere – the BBC, NPR, the Financial Times, the Washington Post, the Times, Reuters. In the past two years, the New York Times has mentioned him 46 times. “He’s willing to be quoted in the Xi Jinping era, when huge numbers of others – especially liberal commentators – have grown too nervous to go on-the-record with foreign journalists,” says Evan Osnos, who has written about [China](#) for the New Yorker since 2008. Hu has even become the subject of headlines in his own right. “Editor of Chinese state newspaper which routinely mocks Australia enjoyed LUNCH at our embassy”, reported Daily Mail Australia last year.

One reason for Hu’s ubiquity is that he has unparalleled licence to speak bluntly about politics. Hu’s domestic critics have described him as “the only person with freedom of speech” in mainland China, though that freedom is partly a reflection of his adherence to the CCP line. Hu’s insistence on thrusting himself into every passing controversy has earned him the nickname *diaopan*, or “Frisbee catcher” – like a loyal pet, he tries to bring every argument home for the government he serves.

Over the years, Hu has encouraged a kind of mystique around his connection with party leadership. “To be honest, I myself don’t know for sure to what degree I reflect the authority’s voice,” Hu told me when we spoke on the phone late last year. He likes to say that the Global Times’ success is a product of the market. But when I asked him if the paper is financially independent from the government, he eventually told me, after some back and forth, that the English edition receives government funding for providing overseas propaganda.

Where Hu once spoke for a hardline fringe of the Communist party, his newspaper’s aggressive China-first ideology is now ascendant. As one American author who stopped writing for the Global Times in 2011 put it: “With all those Wolf Warrior diplomats, it’s like the government has been Global Times-ified.”

In 2016, President Xi visited the Beijing headquarters of the People’s Daily, the largest newspaper group in China, which is run by the Communist party and publishes Hu’s Global Times. On his tour of the offices, as he passed

through the exhibition hall, Xi [pointed approvingly](#) to a display copy of the Global Times and declared himself a reader. Hu, it seemed, was successfully pursuing the propaganda strategy that Xi had laid out early in his presidency.

Hu's rise is hard to grasp without understanding the broader story of free speech in 21st century China. In the 00s, hundreds of millions of Chinese citizens came online and their voices became more audible. Starting in 2008, the People's Daily set up a dedicated team to monitor public opinion online. Its first few annual reports presented new digital platforms in a positive light, as a way to bring the government and its people closer. Weibo and other online communities were "a good tool for citizens to participate in and discuss politics," the 2010 report stated. During this period, journalists in China were afforded a little more freedom to do reporting that touched upon politically sensitive issues, though certain topics – such as the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, and the lives and conduct of top leadership – remained off-limits.

Starting in the early 2010s, and particularly from 2012, with the rise of Xi, this more liberal approach to public discourse was gradually reversed. "When Xi Jinping became president [in 2013], he was not interested in the voices on the internet," Xiao, the UC Berkeley professor, told me. "Instead, he perceived such voices as a threat to his power, and recognised that it was time for a complete crackdown." Posts on social media, such as Weibo, became increasingly monitored and censored. It became more common for web users to receive an "[invitation to tea](#)", a euphemism for a phone call instructing you to visit your local police station to answer questions about your online activities. From 2013, a growing number of citizens were suspended or banned from online platforms, detained or sentenced to prison. Drawing on media reports and court documents, an [online database](#) recorded more than 2,000 cases in which people had been punished or prosecuted for their online speech since 2013. The total number is almost certainly much higher.



President Xi Jinping visiting the People's Daily offices in Beijing in 2016.
Photograph: Xinhua/Alamy

In 2013, at the same time the party was tightening its grip on public discourse, Xi called a conference with propaganda officials from across the country, urging them to “tell the China story well”. That meant covering China in a way that was positive, engaging and harnessed new digital platforms. It meant proudly celebrating China’s achievements, rather than focusing on its imperfections.

Hu adapted fluidly to China’s new media environment, which was at once very online, obedient to the party line and international-facing. In his articles, social media interventions and interviews, he played the role of both dutiful defence attorney – there to deliver the party’s side of the story, no matter how implausible it might seem – and aggrieved relative of the accused, yelling out to the court that the prosecution and the judge were prejudiced or corrupt or stupid, or all of the above. It was a style that suited the tenor of Chinese social media, as well as the new self-image of the Communist party. Other party media outlets started to mimic Hu’s style, writing in a more colloquial manner. Even People’s Daily, famously stolid and voiceless throughout most of its history, encourages its commentators to be more “fun” and to grow personal brands.

In 2019, Xi visited the People Daily's office again. He asked the country's media workers to embrace new technology to "maximise and optimise propaganda impact" and "to promote the voice of the party directly into various apps and occupy new platforms for party discourse". As Xi cruised through the office, the People's Daily editorial team lined up and applauded. Among them was Hu in a dark grey jacket, smiling ear to ear.

No event seems to distil Hu's remarkable place in Chinese journalism like the Tiananmen Square massacre. Journalists are always proud to tell their readers that *they were there* when something significant happened. Hu does the same when it comes to Tiananmen, except that he inserts himself into this history in order to discredit it. References to the Tiananmen massacre are prohibited in China. Perhaps the only exception to this rule is the Global Times. When Hu writes about the subject, he paints it as a dangerous folly. "If the incident 32 years ago has any positive effect," Hu wrote this June, "it has inoculated the Chinese people with a political vaccine, helping us acquire immunity from being seriously misled."

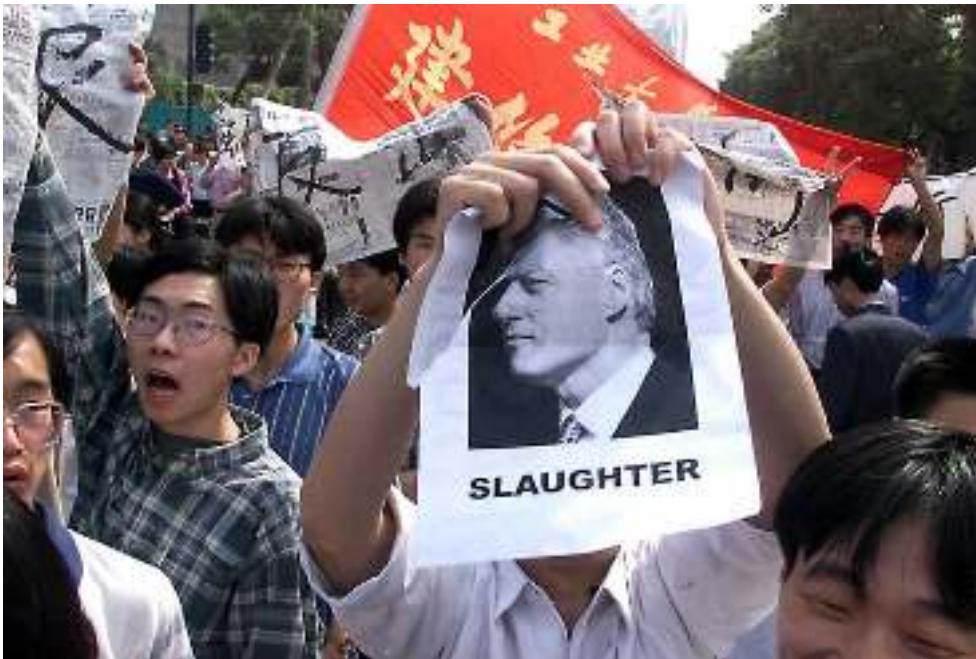
Hu was 29 when the pro-democracy protests began. He had been born into a poor, Christian, but otherwise traditional family. His father was an accountant at a factory that manufactured rockets, and his mother, who was illiterate, made embroidery with a sewing machine to bring in some extra income. At 18, Hu joined the People's Liberation Army and enrolled in its foreign-language college in Nanjing, where he majored in Russian. In 1986, still a military officer, he started a masters programme in Russian at Beijing Foreign Studies University. In the spring of 1989, when protests erupted across the country, Hu was months away from graduation. "I went to Tiananmen Square every day, chanting slogans like everybody else," Hu told a Chinese reporter in 2011. (Xiao, the UC Berkeley professor, who was a student at Notre Dame in 1989 and flew back to Beijing upon seeing the news on TV, laughed at the idea that Hu could have been there as a protester. He noted that the military college Hu attended is sometimes known as "China's cradle of 007s". "If he truly participated in the protest, god knows what his role was," Xiao said.)

Shortly after the violent suppression of the Tiananmen protests, Hu joined the People's Daily newspaper, where he spent two years as a researcher and

another two years as an editor on the night shift. At the time, China was more than a decade into Deng Xiaoping's push to develop a market economy. Hu was part of a group of journalists at the People's Daily who sought to create new revenue streams by launching a weekly newspaper called Global News Digest.

On 3 January 1993, 20,000 copies of the first issue, which included a story on Diana, Princess of Wales's split from Prince Charles, appeared on newsstands. The front page featured a grandiose message from the editors, which proclaimed that after 500 years of falling behind the west, and 14 years of economic reform, China was "saying goodbye to poverty and backwardness, like a giant dragon about to take off, standing tall in the east of the world, its head held high". Despite this lofty rhetoric, Hu claims there wasn't a clear vision at first. "We published whatever ordinary people liked to read," he told me.

The publication was filled with exotic stories about spies, royal romances, historical assassinations and children raised alongside wild animals. Most mainstream publications were so propaganda-heavy, so filled with party lingo and news of top leaders' endless meetings, that the arrival of the plain-talking, eye-catching Global Times must have felt like an episode of *Sex and the City* beamed into the middle of a long sermon. Articles from the 90s included The Dark World of the Russian Mafia, From Female Slave to Fashion Model, and The Unexpected Madness of Monks: Korean Buddhists' Rivalry Doused Monastery with Blood.



An anti-US protest in Beijing in 1999. Photograph: Stephen Shaver/AFP

A few months into his stint at Global News Digest, Hu's career was transformed when he was dispatched abroad to cover the Bosnian war for the People's Daily. In his memoir about the experience, published in 1997, he recalled thinking that the fact of a Chinese journalist reporting on a foreign war "was likely more newsworthy than whatever articles he has to file". To Hu, the conflict in Bosnia became the backdrop for a private battlefield in his mind, as he began measuring himself against the western journalists around him, whom he both admired and resented. "To be a soldier in a modern news war, I couldn't defeat the western reporters, but I congratulate myself for being able to even join them for a fight," Hu wrote in his memoir. (Almost a quarter of a century later, his Twitter avatar is a photo of him in Sarajevo, sitting on the curb taking notes.)

The book is sprinkled with a mixture of pride and vulnerability, as Hu struggles with his own inferiority complex: "Why can't I be the one who creates a sensation? Why can't a Chinese reporter be in the limelight?" he writes at one point. He admits that he spent his time obsessing over how to "look more like a real reporter", rather than focusing on reporting. "I couldn't stand being looked down upon, not only on a personal level, but also on the account of being Chinese – a fact that brings with it a kind of unbearable pressure for me." He carried this chip on his shoulder

everywhere he went. On one occasion, he turned up to a news briefing that was in Albanian. He didn't understand a word, but that didn't stop him from asking a question in English – not to seek an answer, just to assert his presence.

Hu returned to Beijing in 1996 and soon became Global News Digest's deputy editor. "I was a war and international affairs reporter, and my personal interest was fused into our coverage," he told me. In 1997, the paper changed its name to the Global Times, and in the next two years, circulation tripled. "China was becoming integrated with the world," Hu said. "In the past, international news were merely pieces of knowledge or information from remote corners of the world. Gradually, international news became more and more related to China, and the Chinese audience developed a keen interest in what's happening outside the country."

One international incident from this period symbolised that new reality. On 7 May 1999, a Nato bomb hit the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, killing three Chinese journalists. Officials from the US claimed that it was an accident and that the real target had been a Yugoslavian defence agency a few hundred metres down the road. But many people in China believed it was a deliberate attack, and anti-American protests erupted across the country. Two days after the bombing, the Global Times published a special issue, featuring a report by a Global Times journalist who had been speaking with the ambassador in the building just minutes before the explosion. According to Han Rongbin, a professor of international affairs at the University of Georgia, events such as the embassy bombing strengthened a collective sense of aggrieved national identity. "That's why some nationalists like to say that it was America who made them so nationalistic," he said.

As the Global Times grew, China's most powerful politicians watched with admiration. In 2004, when the paper published a column that criticised Chinese journalists for unthinkingly accepting American media narratives about the "war on terror", the foreign minister, Li Zhaoxing, said that he'd long been waiting to read such an article. "Journalism might be without borders, but journalists do have motherlands," wrote Li – in the Global Times – shortly after.

Later that year, the president of the People's Daily publishing group, Wang Chen, spoke at a seminar to discuss the "Global Times phenomenon". Wang said that the minister of foreign affairs and the head of the overseas propaganda office had repeatedly told him how much they loved the paper, and that the Global Times exemplified how to make propaganda readable. In presentations to advertisers during this period, the publication would tout its close ties with top leadership, claiming that its readers included "nearly 200 key leaders of the country at the party central, the state council, the central military commission and the National People's Congress". As soon as each issue was published, the presentation claimed, special messengers would deliver the paper to Zhongnanhai, the walled compound where much of the Communist party elite live and work.

Since 2005, when he took over the paper as editor-in-chief, Hu has expanded the Global Times to an operation of 800 staff, publishing six days a week in Chinese and in English. "We needed to expand our influence, and we couldn't do that without using English," Hu told me, explaining the decision to launch the English edition in 2009.

Looking back, the first few years of the English-language Global Times can seem like a strange interlude in the paper's history. Located in a rented office building outside the People's Daily compound, the English operation was largely separated from the Chinese one. Rather than rigidly following the nationalistic line, it afforded journalists some space to report on more sensitive topics. Around the time of the English edition's launch, the Global Times hired a dozen foreign editors. Their job was to ensure that stories in English read smoothly, but they had little say on editorial decisions. The English-language content was written mostly by Chinese journalists. James Palmer, who worked at the Global Times for seven years and is now a deputy editor of the American magazine Foreign Policy, told me that in the early days, the newspaper's English content was about 60% "banal", 20% "mad nationalistic stuff" and 20% "genuinely interesting".

Hu differentiated his paper from the other English-language party outlet, China Daily, by running stories on subjects such as dissidents and LGBTQ rights. "The Global Times was trying to make waves," Jemimah Steinfeld, a British former editor, told me. Staffers from this period remembered that Hu

liked to paint himself as a force for progress. All reforms begin with rule-breaking, Hu told a Chinese magazine in 2013. If your type of rule-breaking helps the country, eventually the government will give it approval. This, he said, is how progress in China works.



A copy of the Global Times in Beijing on 21 January 2021, the day after Joe Biden's inauguration in the US. Photograph: Thomas Peter/Reuters

According to Wen Tao, a Chinese reporter who worked for the English edition, Hu told staff to avoid self-censorship and to pursue whatever they considered newsworthy. Wen's pieces captured the everyday struggles of life in Beijing a decade ago: a poet criticising his local government's plan to cut down 20,000 trees in order to extend a road; a father trying to advocate for food safety, after his children got ill from adulterated milk formula, only to be put on trial himself. In February 2010, he broke a story about the dissident artist Ai Weiwei and other local artists [protesting](#) in downtown Beijing against the demolition of a residential complex. Afterwards, Ai visited the newsroom of the English edition, and was warmly welcomed.

The divergence between the English Global Times and the Chinese Global Times was striking. “Their reports depicted two different Chinas,” wrote Wen on his personal blog in 2016. Where the Chinese edition demonised international voices, the English edition reported “some realities” in an

attempt to show the outside world that the Chinese, too, enjoyed a free press. “If you didn’t look at the byline or the name of the paper, it could have very well been a story from the Wall Street Journal,” Wen told me.

It did not last. Not long after his Ai Weiwei story, Wen was asked to submit his resignation. “The paper was looking to push boundaries, but I probably overdid it a little bit,” Wen told me. Around that time, he ran into Hu in the elevator. Wen recalled the older journalist expressing frustration: sometimes you write your stories, hoping to make room for more reporting like this – only to find yourself being told to take a big step back. (Palmer told me that the Global Times “had a culture of two ‘serious mistakes’ every six months” and that Hu was “very regularly” told off by the propaganda authorities and other ministries.)

It is hard to tell to what extent, if any, Hu’s English-language Global Times reflected his own journalistic ideals, or whether, as Wen suggested, the licence given to its reporters was itself a kind of propaganda exercise, intended to give foreigners the impression that the Chinese press enjoyed greater freedom than it really did and that he, too, was a *real reporter*. At the very least, it seems that during this period, at the English edition, Hu was fairly committed to performing the role of a liberal-leaning editor. Palmer recalled that in their first meeting, Hu told him, unprompted, that he wanted democracy and freedom of speech in China, but that reform had to be gradual. In Wen’s view, Hu is a deeply conflicted figure. “On the one hand, he wanted to do journalism professionally, but on the other hand, he couldn’t change his position as a party man,” he said.

By 2011, as the government line on freedom of speech hardened, so did the editorial line of the Global Times. That year, the authorities detained Ai Weiwei for 81 days, and the Global Times denounced him in a series of Chinese and English op-eds, including one headlined “Ai Weiwei will be washed away by history”. “It was a very sudden pivot,” Palmer remembered. “And after that it just became worse and worse.” The American author who no longer contributes to the Global Times told me: “Their business model seems to have switched to being completely provocative and just to piss people off.”

Sometimes, one former editor told me, when an article seemed particularly inflammatory or outrageous, “we sent up a red flag, and they would be like, ‘No, that’s exactly what we want to say.’”

There are many ways to be an editor in chief, Hu told me as his mobile phones rang in the background. “Some people might use their energy on managing, but I devote more of my energy to content.” On the phone, Hu was polite and warm, in contrast to his aggressive online persona. He took long pauses before answering most questions, as if to compose mini-essays in his mind. Every day, he told me, his team “monitors” the internet in search of popular subjects, and once they land on an idea, they prepare a summary of the issue and brief Hu on it. Then Hu gets to work, turning it into a column. For each piece, his staff typically interview two or three experts, mostly government thinktakers and professors from top universities. According to Hu, this means that his columns “don’t only reflect my own opinion, but absorb the opinions of many people in our society. We represent a somewhat mainstream take in China.”

As the space permitted to alternative views has shrunk, it has become increasingly difficult to judge what proportion of China’s 1.4 billion people share the Global Times’ worldview. Scholars, journalists, writers, lawyers and activists have found their social media accounts suspended or erased because of their unspecified violation of the platform’s rules. These cases are so common and seemingly minor that they attract little international attention, but their collective effect is suffocating. In mainland China today, censorship and self-censorship are like the weather – you can complain about it, but you have to adapt to it. To rebel is to submit to the possibility of having your life ruined. Early last year, a 36-year-old woman, Zhang Zhan, decided to report from Wuhan as a citizen journalist. She was soon arrested and sentenced to four years in prison, and now, several months into a hunger strike, she is [on her deathbed](#). Most people in China don’t know about Zhang Zhan, and those who do tend not to think about what she represents – to do so would only lead to trouble.

That doesn’t mean that party-approved figures such as Hu are beyond criticism in mainland China. Hu’s critics include former contributors to the Global Times, who feel that since 2010, he has grown into an increasingly

absurd, even dangerous, caricature of himself. “You might have noticed that I rarely write for them any more,” Shen Dingli, a professor of international relations at Fudan University, who is on the Global Times’s go-to [list](#) of experts, told me in an email. “The reason is their inclination towards extreme nationalism.” Xiang Lanxin, who is based outside China, told me something similar, having been put off by Hu’s increasingly crude politics. He used to be a frequent contributor to the Global Times, but he stopped in the early 2010s when he sensed that Hu was “no longer interested in meaningful debates”.

Hu’s critics are particularly alarmed by enthusiasm for military solutions to problems. After a recent border scuffle in the Himalayas with India, Hu argued that the Chinese army should “ready themselves to launch into battle at any moment”. In another column, Hu suggested that China should build up an arsenal of 1,000 nuclear warheads. In September, the Global Times published an op-ed headlined “People’s Liberation Army jets will eventually patrol over Taiwan”. When I asked Hu about critics who accuse him of warmongering, he became agitated and denied suggesting that China should start a war. “What I said is that if Taiwan started to assault us, then we must fight back with overwhelming force,” he told me. (One wonders what kind of action would constitute an “assault” in his view.)

To Xiang, Hu’s influence is far more important than that of the headline-grabbing Wolf Warrior diplomats. Where diplomats can be silenced with one word from the top, the feelings of Chinese superiority that the Global Times stokes every day are far harder to control. “This newspaper has been leading popular mood in a nationalist direction for a long time, and the consequences of this are not to be taken lightly,” Xiang [told an interviewer](#) last year.

Occasionally, it can seem as if Hu is becoming a stranger in a sphere he helped build. In May, the Weibo account of the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission posted an image titled China Ignition vs India Ignition, contrasting a recent Chinese rocket launch with Indian cremation – a reference to the country’s surging Covid death toll. When Hu criticised the post and expressed sympathy for India’s plight, he was attacked by nationalists for being too soft on one of China’s principal rivals. A decade ago, on social media, Hu had seemed to be the No 1 flag bearer for Chinese

nationalism. Now his status is not so certain. On Weibo, while Hu was being criticised for insufficient national pride, one Global Times journalist asked: “Has Hu Xijin changed? Or, have the times changed?” The answer seemed clear.

Hu is 61, and rumours about his imminent retirement surface periodically. Yet he remains as zealous and full of fight as he was three decades ago. “He really is the soul of the paper,” Wen told me. “It’s very hard to imagine a de-Huxijinised Global Times.” The audience he once dreamed of as a young reporter in Bosnia – readers who don’t unquestioningly admire western journalism and instead cheer on their Chinese counterparts – has materialised. Each of his Weibo posts are followed by thousands of comments and tens of thousands of likes.

Hu likes to call himself a *shubianzhe*, an antiquated term for a guard stationed on the nation’s frontiers, keeping it safe. In just the past week, fulfilling this duty has involved insulting Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, comparing Hong Kong activist Nathan Law to a 6 January Capitol rioter, taunting the Australian prime minister, bickering with a Florida senator and posting numerous cartoons highlighting American hypocrisy. It is a ceaseless task. For now, Hu fights on.

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2021.12.14 - Opinion

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OpinionConservatives

Fear for a party that sees Boris Johnson as too far to the left

[Polly Toynbee](#)



The Tories are firmly in the grip of radicals who believe it is no longer ‘conservative’



Liz Truss and Jacob Rees-Mogg leave a cabinet meeting at 10 Downing Street in London, 7 December 2021. Photograph: Vickie Flores/EPA

Tue 14 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

The vultures are circling again, just two years after the Conservative party tore apart its last leader. Here is yet another “worst week” for the beleaguered prime minister, after his planned week announcing new crime policies switched to probes into possible Downing Street law-breaking. When getting “rat-arsed” at Tory parties becomes this year’s [topical panto joke](#), things have turned serious.

He faces a [major rebellion](#) on Tuesday, his Covid regulations likely to be saved only by Labour’s public health seriousness. The following day he faces another pasting at prime minister’s questions and on Thursday a byelection. With Labour [nine points ahead](#) nationally, North Shropshire may be held and yet still signal such a Tory collapse that statistically it [endangers Boris Johnson’s own seat](#). Voters knowingly elected a liar, but they rarely forgive chaotic incompetence.

Johnson’s fate rests with those who elevated him, the nexus of parties-within-a-party that hold the real Tory power. This week Steve Baker MP

relaunches Conservative Way Forward, founded to guard Margaret Thatcher's flame. These idolaters ask themselves "What would Maggie do?" with as little historical sense as those who claim to know the answer to "What would Jesus do?" A prime saboteur, Baker is an agent in all the rightwing caucuses that riddle the Tory party. He chairs the Covid Recovery Group, which is stirring the plan B rebellion; he is a core member of the European Research Group (ERG); a member of the Global Warming Policy Foundation, a group of deniers blocking climate-saving action; and founder of the Cobden Centre, promoting hardline free-market economics. As a sky-diving, born-again Christian who was baptised in the sea, Baker also belongs to the Cornerstone group for family, faith and flag, and voted against same-sex marriage.

All revolutionary insurgents need new causes. Baker's airy manifesto for the Way Forward in the [Sunday Telegraph](#) declares "the Conservative party is in the wrong place", accusing it of "carrying on with centre-left policies". In a litany of objections to Covid regulations, he protests: "Conservatives don't create societies where people must live and work in fear a minister might, without notice, impose restrictions on them." As Omicron arrives in over-filled hospitals, he [says](#) Johnson's plan B is "creating a miserable dystopia". Yet for all his low-tax yearning, Baker has just enough political sense never to say what public spending he would axe. Prof Tim Bale, a political party analyst, points to the reason: two-fifths of Tory members are over 65, cleaving to state-financed social care and the NHS.

Johnson's enemies, the remainder greybeards he threw out, such as Ken Clarke, Michael Heseltine and Dominic Grieve, may smile at the irony of seeing him now threatened by turbulent disrupters. This new cadre model themselves on the Trumpian Republicans of the Christian right. "I believe God means us to live in liberty," Baker [told the Financial Times](#). Does that stuff fly in North Shropshire?

Johnson would be in less trouble if his government was charging full-speed ahead in any direction. Instead, he dithers between levelling-up and small state austerity, zigzagging between slogans without policies, while laced into an eye-watering budgetary corset. Without fast-forward propulsion, governments topple. With gracious condescension, Baker [says](#) he's not

seeking Johnson's head on a plate, yet: "I want Boris Johnson to rescue his position," he says. "Things are not good."

If they tire of Johnson, Liz Truss is the obvious candidate to be his successor. Her brazen zealotry frightens many: Dominic Cummings calls her a "human hand grenade". A founder of the Free Enterprise Group and co-author of the notorious new Tory right manual [Britannia Unchained](#), her photo-ops mimic Thatcher imagery – in a tank, hugging a calf – yet she lacks her idol's political filters. Who else would try solving the childcare crisis by deregulating childminders to let them each take in [six two-year-olds?](#)

Conservative Way Forward is founded in a belief that the party is no longer recognisably conservative: if so, they are the entryists who subverted it over decades. Where Neil Kinnock rooted out the Militant tendency tearing at Labour's grassroots, the Tory party has always appeased its rebels. When Baker was chair of the ERG, Theresa May made him a minister. When Suella Braverman took over as ERG chair, she was similarly rewarded. Even her ERG successor, the outlandish Jacob Rees-Mogg, was swept up into government. The deputy ERG chair, Andrea Jenkyns, has been elevated to the whips' office, a bizarre appointment given the ERG's own hostile whipping operation.

Through failing to stand up for the conservatism of Harold Macmillan and Edward Heath, the Tory party has plunged further right than most of its voters. Just 200,000 largely rightist party members have for several decades selected none but Brexiters, libertarians and obsessive state-shrinkers. The result, according to Bale, is that the MPs they picked are now even further right than those party members.

About 100 Tory MPs may vote against plan B, well beyond the usual suspects, including relative moderates such as Tom Tugendhat and Tobias Ellwood. Some MPs feel pressure from local parties, while others are simply venting fury at Johnson's catalogue of failings. But remember this: those who vote against [measures to tackle Omicron](#) are irrationalists defying the best scientific opinion. Sir Graham Brady, the head of the 1922 Committee, calls these modest restrictions "Soviet-style": reaching for Stalin really is the end of rational debate.

Here is a party falling apart, eaten from within by failure to extirpate extremists. This is not primarily about Johnson's unfitness for office. It's about the bizarre and dangerous nature of the extreme party that put him in power and will replace him, as the whim takes it. This is about a party that has become unfit to govern.

- Polly Toynbee is a Guardian columnist
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OpinionCoronavirus

We must be frank about this booster campaign – it will mean longer NHS waiting lists

[Helen Stokes-Lampard](#)

Medics support the new campaign, but we know that non-Covid patients will suffer and that the wait will be harmful to them



A queue outside a Covid-19 vaccination centre at St Thomas' hospital in London, 13 December 2021. Photograph: WIktor Szymanowicz/NurPhoto/REX/Shutterstock

Tue 14 Dec 2021 04.04 EST

Just when we thought things were getting better, a new Covid variant is [making things worse](#). Some people are reacting with anger, some are reacting with disbelief, most – if the patients I have seen in the last 24 hours

are anything to go by – are reacting with a kind of fatalistic “what will be will be”. All these views are understandable.

The government’s response, which medical royal colleges across the UK support, is, bluntly, [to throw everything we have at this](#). That’s a move that’s being taken for one simple reason: there is, once again, a real danger the NHS will be overwhelmed. And according to the modellers, we’ll reach that point at some point in January, if not sooner. We cannot let that happen, but if we do nothing now, that is precisely what we will be facing in four weeks’ time.

It will not be easy. It will require everyone in the [NHS](#), and many others as well, to help deliver the one million booster jabs a day by the end of this month the scientists say we’ll need. It will be a herculean task.

But it’s not just the challenge of resources needing to be met that we must be ready for. There will be a need for huge amounts of patience and understanding by patients, many of whom have already waited too long for the tests, treatments and procedures they have been prescribed and promised. We had only just begun to tackle the backlog; with further delays, there will inevitably be a negative impact on the health and wellbeing of those patients waiting. We must also face the harsh fact that the waiting list itself will lengthen. It will also require – and this may be no less challenging for many – everyone to do their bit by going back to proper social distancing, getting ourselves fully vaccinated and appropriately boosted.

It is inevitable that tough choices need to be made. But, that doesn’t mean irresponsible choices. If a patient needs to be seen in the NHS, they should be seen, and while it won’t necessarily feel like business as usual for the next few weeks it certainly shouldn’t feel as if no regular business is being done at all.

And to be clear, no one is saying that we should “hit the pause button” on urgent care – that really does need to continue as closely as we can come to business as usual. And this is where we can all help: the more beds that are taken up with Covid patients, the fewer beds there are for those with other serious conditions who have been admitted via A&E departments. If that

part of the system gets clogged, it makes it harder to bring people in by ambulance. Covid will hit all of us if we aren't very careful.

Angry commentators seem to be seeking to blame anyone and everyone for this situation that is of no one's making. As soon as the science changed, the joint committee on vaccination and immunisation (JCVI) advice changed and the appropriately ramped-up response is what we are now seeing. These past few days have seen [records being broken](#) for boosters, but there's still more capacity now and even more being created. And we should be mighty proud of the NHS staff and the brilliant volunteers and army personnel for delivering those jabs and to the people who are prepared to queue, sometimes for many hours in the cold and the rain, to get one. This will save lives.

Of course, there are many other things we need to address if we are to chart a course through this pandemic. More doctors and nurses, more beds in social care and clearer messaging would be a great starting point. Two of those three will take time, but where we might start today is a more honest conversation about the scale of the problem before us, and a realistic assessment of what's achievable and what's not.

As chair of the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges it would be easy for me to say, "It's all going to hell in a handcart." It is not at that stage yet, but it will be soon if we don't all play our part.

- Helen Stokes-Lampard is a GP in Lichfield and the chair of the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges
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OpinionSex

Worried that Covid has stolen your sex life? Join the club

[Zoe Williams](#)



There has been a surge of anxiety among young people who fear they won't ever get the chance to lose their virginity. In this sexless era, they are not alone



Crowd control ... many festivals, such as Glastonbury, were forced to cancel by the pandemic. Photograph: Neil Hall/EPA

Tue 14 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

I didn't think I could sympathise more with young people, or be more acutely aware of how much they have been affected by the pandemic. Then I read about the surge in virginity anxiety. Message boards and counselling services are heaving with gen-Zers who missed all those Rubicon events – the festivals, the freshers' weeks, the parties where someone's parents actually went out – that might have been the night.

It wasn't that the moment passed; the moment simply never happened. With so much joyless practicality, so much caution, even something as mundane as the weather could derail things. It was meant to be everyone's hot girl/boy summer, but how are you meant to show the world your midriff when not even the sun will come out?

The anxieties are so poignant – would they be heading into their 20s without having had sex? Was it possible to miss the boat altogether? Could a lack of experience become such a millstone that you would be stuck with it for ever?

The trend was already towards having sex later in life – one in eight millennials had not had sex [before the age of 26](#), according to a survey in 2018. Compare that with their parents' generation, in which the figure was one in 20. But there is a major difference between being part of a long-term deferral and feeling as if you have been lassoed by circumstance, stuck at the basecamp, halfway up your mountain of awakening. This absolutely sucks. I won't say it's worse than getting your A-level grades [unfairly deflated by an algorithm](#), but I can imagine the world in which it feels worse.

The anodyne thing would be to say: cheer up, gen Z, it's bound to happen for you. Instead, I am going to share everything I have learned this year, through a combination of interviewing, earwigging and reading, about life on the other side – people who have already had sex and how much of it they have had in the pandemic.

In the statement-of-the-bleeding obvious column, it has been much easier to be in a couple than to be single, and much easier to be cohabiting than to be living apart. However, even if you were living that dream – hey, let's go the whole hog and call you married! – things were complicated. The National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles, which normally runs every 10 years, did a [mini Covid study](#) that found that three-quarters of cohabitants reported a change in their sex lives, which was more likely to be for the worse.

For some, it was the collapsing walls of their multiple identities. We all have different selves – worker, parent, carer, lover, comrade, pain-in-the-arse – and we switch between them via our daily rituals – the school run, the office, bathtime, cocktail hour, etc. When our rituals were obliterated, we couldn't find a way to toggle, which is a long and euphemistic way of saying we didn't feel horny. Those who were anxious lost their libido, but so did those who weren't. Maybe they were kidding themselves and weren't as relaxed as they thought.

Meanwhile, on the singles circuit, everything was 10 times worse – even once it was legal again. A background fear of disease ruined spontaneity and made us forget how to initiate anything. One STI doctor told me she had seen patients overreact to minor diagnoses because they had a generalised, irrational fear of contamination. Some people got used to solitude and

couldn't drag themselves back out of it; others became overwhelmed by the sheer brutality of dating sites. Long Covid sucked the life out of a lot of people, while a lot of others were simply overexposed to one another.

None of which is to say that reluctant virgins don't deserve the lion's share of our sympathy. Rather, if you think you have missed the boat, you ought to know that the boat you missed is dangerously underpowered and going round in circles. There will be another – better – one around the corner and you will be glad you missed the low-pleasure cruise.

Zoe Williams is a Guardian columnist

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/dec/14/worried-that-covid-has-stolen-your-sex-life-join-the-club>

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OpinionMasterChef

I love MasterChef, but does everything have to be so French?

MiMi Aye

The programme is an enthralling showcase for British restaurant food, yet ‘professional’ still seems to mean Michelin



‘The judges tend to be wary, upset or confused by anything not meeting the Gallic ideal.’ , Marcus Wareing, Gregg Wallace and Monica Galetti.
Photograph: Screengrab/BBC/Shine TV

Tue 14 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

There’s a moment in the current series of MasterChef: The Professionals where the contestants are asked to make filled agnolotti pasta for their opening “skills test”, and Gregg Wallace, in his role as the man on the Clapham omnibus, declares he can’t remember what shape they should be. And then it slowly dawns on us that the chefs aren’t sure what they should

look like either. And just when we're enjoying this schadenfreude, it is compounded by a brief, glorious eruption, as one of chef Kirsty's not-agnolotti makes a desperate leap for freedom from her pan – as if knowing its very existence is a crime against God. The chefs may well be professionals, the next big things of British fine dining, but they are also only human – such is the nuanced joy of the show.

Love it or loathe it, MasterChef: The Professionals is now in its 14th series, and it's still the single biggest showcase for where the British restaurant industry is at right now: its latest trends, its eccentric obsessions and its frustrating limitations. The dishes that appear tell us something about the food world outside the BBC studio, even when it's scallops and black pudding or rack of lamb with a red wine jus for the umpteenth time. Tonight the drama of "finals week" commences, as the remaining six chefs battle it out in front of an audience of millions – for the MasterChef winner's trophy, but also the huge career boost that will follow.

It's easy to account for the show's longevity. I spend half my time enthralled by the magic being performed by these kitchen wizards, and the other half in hysterics at seeing people who literally cook for a living somehow messing up bog-standard weekday meals: scrappy omelettes, rock-hard "soft-boiled" eggs, burst bangers and gloopy mash. It's this culinary whiplash that keeps me watching.

There's also an impressive emotional range to the many and varied facial expressions that Monica Galetti and Marcus Wareing pull, and Sean Pertwee's mesmerising voiceover: each husky word suggests he would like to get intimate with every single ingredient on every single plate. Just listen to him say "spicy, spreadable sausage" and you'll need a cold shower, as well as some nduja.

But – and there is always a but – when people in the UK are routinely buying jerk chicken ready meals for their dinner from Tesco, laksa for their lunch from Pret, and Thai green curry in their local pub (whatever their quality might be), why does so much of the food on MasterChef: The Professionals still come across as so conservative, and so, well, French? Sole veronique, which featured in one of this year's quarter-finals, was a dish invented by Auguste Escoffier more than a century ago.

Chocolate fondants – or fon-don’ts, as Gregg would have it – seem to have finally shuffled off the scene, but chocolate crèmeux, basically just a brick of custard, have become their successor, with just as high a failure rate. Sweet and savoury tuiles still crop up everywhere, and that cliched nemesis of every cook, the soufflé, is still a regular feature – although one contestant, John, at least gave his cherry soufflé an unexpected jaunty little shortbread hat worthy of Ted Lasso.

The truth is that “professional” in cooking still means an aspiration to Michelin-quality, which inevitably means French, or at least French in spirit. The Michelin guide was first published in France in 1904, but it still holds sway as the Oscars of the restaurant world. French dishes, classical techniques and the so-called “mother” sauces (classed by Escoffier as béchamel, espagnole, tomato, velouté and hollandaise) are still considered the foundation of all fine dining. This holds true beyond western Europe: the acclaimed Indian chef Vineet Bhatia has spoken of how when he was first cooking in New Delhi, his colleagues looked askance at his devotion to the local cuisine, as they had all been trained in, and were dedicated to, classical French cookery.

All this leads to judges being wary, upset or confused by anything not meeting the Gallic ideal, such as when one contestant, Charith, made the coconut custard and jaggery dessert watalappan – and which, to add insult to injury, Pertwee even described in his voiceover as “a Sri Lankan crème brûlée”. It’s equally jarring whenever a judge’s first response to a non-western dish is to query whether it can be “refined” or “elevated”, the uncomfortable implication being that its original state is automatically clumsy or primitive.

Thankfully though, it seems there is some dissent and self-awareness about these tropes even among the chefs’ ranks – one contestant, Ollie, remarked of his mackerel and apple dish that it was still “classical, but going to be nice”.

Indeed, it’s hard not to fall a little for all of the contestants. I have a soft spot for Matt the forager, whose main skill is his mastery of ancient and pungent herbs with names like football pundits, such as “costmary” and “spignel”.

As finals week begins, my money's on Daniel Marreiros. His take on his childhood gazpacho looked utterly divine, I'm a sucker for his Portuguese accent, and he really looks as if he could do with a good nap – and after the last few years we've had, don't we all?

- MiMi Aye is the author of *Mandalay: Recipes & Tales from a Burmese Kitchen*, and host of the food & culture podcast *The MSG Pod*
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Tunisia

Tunisia's president calls constitutional referendum followed by elections in 2022

Kais Saied, who is facing rising criticism after suspending parliament, says the public will be consulted ahead of the referendum set for 25 July



Tunisian president Kais Saied on TV to announce a referendum on constitutional reforms in July 2022. Photograph: Fethi Belaid/AFP/Getty Images

Reuters

Tue 14 Dec 2021 01.20 EST

The Tunisian president, Kais Saied, has announced a constitutional referendum to be held next July, a year to the day after he seized broad powers in moves his opponents call a coup.

Laying out the timeline for his proposed political changes in a televised speech, Saied said the referendum would take place on 25 July, following an online public consultation starting in January. Parliamentary elections would follow at the end of 2022.

Saied's announcement of a path out of the crisis has been awaited [since he suspended parliament](#), dismissed the prime minister and assumed executive authority.

While those moves appeared very popular after years of economic stagnation and political paralysis, opposition to his stance has sharpened, including from political parties and other major domestic players that were initially supportive.

The delay in detailing the path forward, and the two months it took Saied to name a [new prime minister](#), have added to concerns about Tunisia's ability to address an urgent crisis in its public finances.

The referendum date is Tunisia's republic day and the anniversary of his sudden intervention, which has cast doubt on the north African country's democratic gains since the [2011 revolution that triggered the "Arab spring" revolts](#).

Saied in September brushed aside most of the 2014 democratic constitution to say he could [rule by decree](#) during a period of exceptional measures, and promised a dialogue on further changes.

He said in Monday's speech that parliament would remain suspended until Tunisians vote for a replacement assembly on 17 December 2022, the date he has declared to be the official anniversary of the revolution.

The anniversary had previously been marked on 14 January, the date when autocratic ruler Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali fled the country, after agreement among political factions and civil society groups that took part in the uprising.

“We want to correct the paths of the revolution and history,” Saied said in his speech, after lambasting critics of his intervention.

Saied said he would appoint a committee of experts to draft a new constitution, to be ready by June ahead of the referendum.

A clear pathway to ordinary constitutional order may be important for Tunisia to secure international financial assistance as it struggles to finance its fiscal deficit and next year’s budget as well as debt repayments.

It has opened talks with the International Monetary Fund, but major donors have indicated they are not willing to step in without what they have called an “inclusive” approach.

There was no immediate comment from Ennahda, the biggest party in parliament, or from the powerful UGTT labour union. Mohammed Abou, a former minister, said in a televised interview that Saied’s “violation of the constitution” amounted to a coup.

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US foreign policy

Antony Blinken warns China to stop ‘aggressive actions’ in Asia-Pacific

US secretary of state opens his tour of south-east Asia with a speech pledging to defend US partners and ‘rules-based order’



Antony Blinken at the University of Indonesia in Jakarta where he said the US would ensure freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. Photograph: Reuters

Agence France-Presse
Mon 13 Dec 2021 23.54 EST

US secretary of state [Antony Blinken](#) has used a visit to Indo-Pacific to urge China to cease “aggressive actions” in the region, as Washington seeks to bolster alliances against Beijing.

President Joe Biden's administration [is trying to reset relations and reassert its influence in Asia](#) after the turbulence and unpredictability of the Donald Trump era.

Blinken's comments came in [Indonesia](#), the first leg of a tour of south-east Asia, the latest visit to the region by a senior US official in recent months.

In a speech outlining the US approach to the Indo-Pacific, Blinken said Washington would work with allies and partners to "defend the rules-based order" and countries should have the right to "choose their own path".

"That's why there is so much concern – from north-east Asia to south-east Asia and from the Mekong River to the Pacific Islands – about Beijing's aggressive actions.

"Claiming open seas as their own. Distorting open markets through subsidies to its state-run companies. Denying the exports or revoking deals for countries whose policies it does not agree with."

"Countries across the region want this behaviour to change – we do too," he said, during the speech at the University of Indonesia in Jakarta.

He added that Washington was "determined to ensure freedom of navigation in the South [China Sea](#)", and said Beijing's actions there threatened the movement of more than \$3tn worth of commerce every year.

But Blinken also stressed that "it's not about a contest between a US-centric region or a China-centric region – the Indo-Pacific is its own region", and said Washington wanted to avoid conflict there.

China claims almost all of the resource-rich South China Sea, [with competing claims](#) from four south-east Asian states as well as [Taiwan](#).

Beijing has been accused of deploying a range of military hardware including anti-ship and surface-to-air missiles there, and ignored a 2016 international tribunal decision that declared its historical claim over most of the waters to be without basis.

Blinken also said Washington wants to ensure “peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait”.

US-China tensions have soared over self-ruled, democratic Taiwan, which China claims as its territory and has vowed to retake one day, by force if necessary.

Blinken is seeking to highlight south-east Asia’s growing importance to US foreign policy on the trip, even as his administration has to contend with myriad other crises, from Iran to Russia.

Countries in the region face an increasingly tough task of trying to maintain good relations with both Beijing – a key trading partner – and Washington, vital to maintaining the region’s security.

Russia is also trying to assert its influence in the region.

After holding talks with Blinken on Monday, Indonesian president Joko Widodo met the Russian security council secretary, Nikolai Patrushev. After Indonesia, Blinken heads to Malaysia and Thailand.

The US-China relationship has deteriorated over a range of issues from cybersecurity and tech supremacy to human rights in Hong Kong and Xinjiang.

Biden has largely continued Trump’s hawkish stance on China, describing the Asian power as the pre-eminent challenge to the United States.

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Kim Kardashian West

Kim Kardashian passes ‘baby bar’ law exam

Reality TV star admits to her 71m Twitter followers ‘this wasn’t easy for me’



Kim Kardashian tweeted: “OMFGGGG I PASSED THE BABY BAR EXAM!!!!” Photograph: Seth Wenig/AP

Reuters

Tue 14 Dec 2021 04.47 EST

Kim Kardashian has cleared another hurdle in her unconventional quest to become an attorney.

The reality television star and entrepreneur tweeted on Monday that she had passed California’s first-year law students’ exam – a daylong test required of

aspiring lawyers in the state who were not taking the traditional path of attending an accredited law school.

“OMFGGGG I PASSED THE BABY BAR EXAM!!!!” [she wrote to her 70.7 million followers](#), posting photos of herself posing in an electric blue jumpsuit. “For anyone who doesn’t know my law school journey, know this wasn’t easy or handed to me.”

Passing the test – better known as the baby bar – means Kardashian can continue her legal studies and will be able to take the full bar exam.

[She said in 2019](#) that she was studying to become a lawyer through what is known as the Law Office study programme, in which would-be attorneys train under the supervision of an experienced lawyer or judge.

California is among the handful of states that has such a programme and is the only one with a baby bar.

Pass-rate information was not yet available for the exam Kardashian took on 26 October but only 21% of those who took it in June passed – less than half the rate for the state’s most recent regular bar exam.

The State Bar of California said baby bar results were confidential and it could not confirm Kardashian passed.

Kardashian, whose father Robert Kardashian was on OJ Simpson’s defence team during his 1995 murder trial, has previously said she wants to become a lawyer to work on criminal justice reform.

She is studying under the supervision of the attorneys Erin Haney and Jessica Jackson, whom Kardashian thanked on Twitter, saying they had brought her along to observe their court appearances.

Kardashian also noted she had failed the exam three times before passing. That made this her final opportunity: California typically allows people to take the first-year law students’ examination just three times but gave anyone who failed the June 2020 exam one extra try because of the Covid pandemic.

“I am so happy for her,” said Steve Calandrillo, the University of Washington law professor who tutored Kardashian on contracts via Zoom to prepare for the test. “She has worked so hard for two years now. It is not an easy exam.”

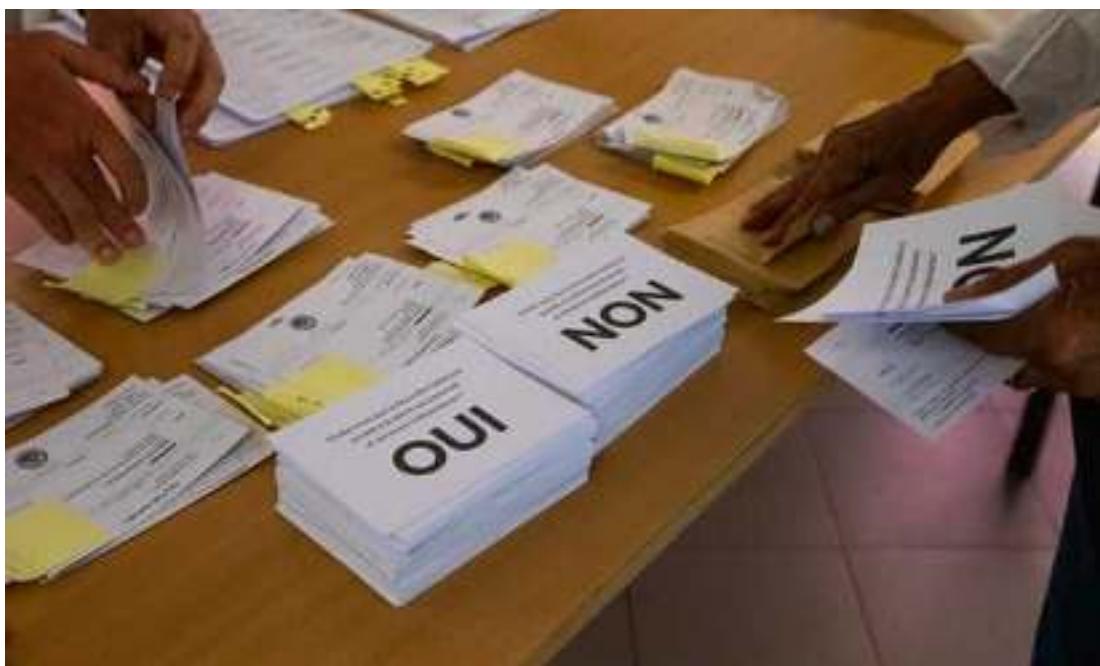
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The Pacific projectNew Caledonia

‘Null and void’: boycott clouds New Caledonia’s final poll on independence

Overwhelming vote to remain with France, but low turnout ‘weighs heavily’ on self-determination process, say observers



Ballot papers in the third referendum on independence for New Caledonia.
Photograph: Dominique Catton/The Guardian

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About this content

Guardian staff and agencies
Mon 13 Dec 2021 23.23 EST

Low voter turnout at New Caledonia's independence referendum "weighs heavily" on the French territory's self-determination process, election observers from the [Pacific Islands Forum](#) have said.

In Sunday's referendum, more than 96% of voters were opposed to independence from [France](#), compared with 57% in 2018 and 53% in 2020.

However, [there was only a 43.9% turnout of eligible voters after a boycott was called by Kanak leaders](#). They had called, unsuccessfully, for France to delay polling until 2022 to allow for a [traditional mourning period](#) for Covid-19 deaths.

The archipelago's indigenous people – who make up 40% of the population and are more likely to vote for independence – have been disproportionately affected by Covid-19. More than 60% of the territory's roughly 280 Covid deaths have been among Kanak and other Pasifika communities.

Pro-independence groups said they did not recognise the legitimacy of Sunday's vote, the third and final referendum to be held under the 1998 Noumea Accord, a peace deal struck to end a decade of violence.

Election observers from the Pacific Islands Forum, the region's main inter-governmental group, said a significant proportion of voters, mainly independence supporters, had not voted, a stance made known before the referendum.

"The spirit in which the referendum was conducted weighs heavily on the Noumea Accord and New Caledonia's self-determination process," the group said in a statement.

"Civic participation is an integral component of any democracy and critical to the interpretation and implications of Sunday's poll."

The observers, who are preparing a report on the election, were led by Fiji's foreign minister Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, with the forum's secretary general Henry Puna also travelling to New Caledonia.

The group met with New Caledonia's Congress president, Roch Wamytan, before he travelled to New York to raise concerns about the referendum at the United Nations on Thursday, and then to France.

The result was also called into question by the Melanesian Spearhead Group – an intergovernmental organisation made up of Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, as well as the Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front (FLNKS) of New Caledonia. The MSG tweeted: "We firmly support the call by FLNKS for the UN to declare the results of the 3rd Referendum null and void due to the 'non-participation' of the people of Kanaky. Voter turnout was below 50% of registered voters hence cannot be taken as the legitimate wish of the silent majority!"

One of five island territories of France in the Indo-Pacific, New Caledonia is the centrepiece of President Emmanuel Macron's plan to increase French influence in the Pacific. The nickel-rich territory is 20,000km from France,

with a population including 41% Melanesian (mostly Kanak) and 24% of European origin (mostly French).

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/14/null-and-void-boycott-clouds-new-caledonias-final-poll-on-independence>

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Gas

Gas prices near record highs as Berlin rejects pipeline from Russia

Germany says escalating tensions over Ukraine are one factor in Nord Stream 2 not getting green light

[Gazprom profits as Russia prospers from Europe's gas crisis](#)



Workers during the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline in the Leningrad region of Russia. Photograph: Anton Vaganov/Reuters

[Jillian Ambrose](#) Energy correspondent

Mon 13 Dec 2021 14.21 EST

Gas prices across the UK and Europe are on course to return to record highs after [Germany](#) said a controversial pipeline from Russia could not be approved amid deepening tensions on the Ukrainian border.

The German foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock, said the Nord Stream 2 pipeline could not be given the green light in its current form because it did not meet the requirements of EU energy law.

Baerbock added that the escalating tensions on Russia's border with Ukraine, [where the Kremlin has reportedly amassed 100,000 troops](#), was "also a factor" because Berlin had agreed with the US that the pipeline should not be used as a political weapon in Moscow's deteriorating relationship with Kyiv.

In response, Europe's benchmark gas price climbed by around 10% on Monday to a high of €116.75 (£142.56) per megawatt hour (MWh), just shy of the record closing price of €116.78/MWh set in early October, according to market price data from ICIS.

The UK's gas market price climbed to 296.35p a therm on Monday, just below the record closing price of 298.475p on 5 October, according to ICIS data.

Europe has experienced record high gas prices in recent months owing to a global squeeze on gas supplies. This has been compounded by a slowdown of Russian gas exports to the continent as negotiations over Nord Stream 2 have stalled.

Baerbock's rejection of the pipeline followed a decision last month [to suspend the permission process](#) because the project's ownership structure failed to comply with the EU's gas directive.

Tom Marzec-Manser, the head of gas analytics at ICIS, said some energy traders had held out hope that the pipeline would be able to deliver some gas this winter, and had reacted to signs of a further potential delay by driving prices back towards record highs.

Dmitry Peskov, the Kremlin spokesperson, told the Russian news agency Interfax the Nord Stream 2 development company was "working with the regulator and fulfilling all its demands. We just need to be a bit more patient."

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Germany has faced pressure from the US to block Nord Stream 2 over concerns that Russia could use the pipeline as a political weapon. The pipeline runs from Russia to Germany beneath the Baltic Sea, bypassing [Ukraine](#). This could make it easier for Russia to increase its military aggression towards Ukraine without fear of disruption to its gas exports, according to critics of the Kremlin.

US and EU leaders [fear a looming attack on Ukraine by Russia](#), which annexed Crimea in 2014. Kyiv has estimated that about 100,000 Russian troops are now deployed along the Russia-Ukraine border.

October's record UK gas market highs ignited fears that [factories would need to shut this winter](#) to guard against the financial blow of rocketing costs. The surge in prices is also likely to take its toll on [Britain's struggling energy supply market](#) after the collapse of 24 suppliers in a little over 12 weeks and record hikes in home energy bills.

The European Commission has reportedly put forward a voluntary system for EU countries to buy gas together to form strategic reserves to safeguard against a supply squeeze caused by a global surge in demand and lower exports from Russia.

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- [Covid live Experts call for stricter restrictions in England ‘very soon’, Omicron spreading fast in France](#)
- [Omicron Countries push to ramp up booster shot rollouts as Covid cases spike](#)
- [London Hundreds off work ill at leading hospital as Omicron cases surge](#)
- [NHS Hospitals could face surge in hospitalisations despite booster, scientists warn](#)

[Coronavirus live](#)

[Coronavirus](#)

Covid live: Germany tightens restrictions on travel from UK — as it happened

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Coronavirus

Omicron: countries push to ramp up booster shot rollouts as Covid cases spike

Daily infection numbers jump in North America and Australia, while French prime minister likens spread of Omicron variant to ‘lightning’

- [See all our coronavirus coverage](#)



Healthcare workers at a drive-through testing clinic in Sydney, Australia, as the city battles a surge in Covid cases. Photograph: Bianca de Marchi/AAP

Guardian staff with agencies
Sat 18 Dec 2021 02.30 EST

Countries around the world pushed to accelerate booster vaccination programmes to contain the spread of the Omicron variant as daily Covid

case numbers in Australia and New York hit records.

French prime minister Jean Castex on Friday likened the spread of the Omicron variant in Europe to “lightning”, adding it would be the dominant strain in [France](#) from the start of 2022, according to AFP.

Much remains unknown about Omicron, but authorities are concerned it may be more transmissible than the Delta variant, which has already put pressure on hospitals worldwide.

Castex said the “fifth wave is here and it is here in full force” as he announced new restrictions.

In an effort to stem the rising infections, he said France would also cut the time people become eligible for booster jabs down to four months after their second vaccination, from five months previously.

Calls for people to have booster shots intensified in other countries – including the UK, US and Australia – as Covid infections spiked.

Half of adults in the UK have now had a Covid-19 booster dose, Boris Johnson has said, after the programme was accelerated this week in the face of Omicron. A total of 26.3 million people aged 18 and over have received a vaccine top-up.

Despite the ramp up, the UK is facing [rising concern that hospitalisations from Covid](#) may pose major problems for the NHS in the winter.

The UK reported record Covid cases for a third day in a row on Friday, with 93,045 new cases, up 39% on the week. A further 900 people were hospitalised with the virus and 111 people died. The UK [Health](#) Security Agency confirmed another 3,201 Omicron cases, bringing the UK total to 14,909.

Other countries also saw Covid cases climb to record levels.

In the US, New York on Friday recorded 21,000 new Covid cases, the highest single-day total for new cases since testing became widely available.

“This is changing so quickly. The numbers are going up exponentially by day,” Governor Kathy Hochul said on CNN.

US officials intensified calls Friday for unvaccinated Americans to get inoculated, while an [appeals court moved to allow president Joe Biden’s Covid-19 vaccine mandate](#) for larger private employers. The decision reverses a previous ruling but Republican officials said they will appeal measure to supreme court.

Australia also battled surging Covid infections. The country reported record high new Covid cases on Saturday for a third day, with outbreaks growing in the two most populous states.

New South Wales, the country’s most populous state, [recorded its highest ever daily Covid case tally](#) on Saturday as Omicron and Christmas gatherings caused infection numbers to jump. Local health officials are [considering shortening the Covid vaccine booster interval](#) to four months, amid concern about Omicron.

Scientists are racing to discover more about the new variant, specifically how transmissible it is and whether it causes severe disease.

In a preliminary study, researchers led by Prof Neil Ferguson at [Imperial College London](#) found that vaccines are substantially less effective against Omicron than Delta and saw no evidence that Omicron is intrinsically milder than Delta.

At the same time, Pfizer, one of the chief vaccine makers, on Friday predicted the pandemic would last until 2024 and said a lower-dose version of its vaccine for children ages 2 to 4 generated a weaker-than-expected immune response, which could delay authorisation.

With Reuters, The Associated Press and Agence France-Presse

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Coronavirus

Hundreds off work ill at leading London hospital as Omicron cases surge

Non-essential services cancelled and staff redeployed to intensive care to treat influx of Covid admissions

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
- [See all our coronavirus coverage](#)



Guy's and St Thomas' trust said that more than 350 staff were off work and isolating due to Covid. Photograph: Alberto Pezzali/AP

[Denis Campbell](#) Health policy editor

Fri 17 Dec 2021 19.00 EST

Omicron is having a significant impact on staff at a large hospital trust with hundreds off work due to illness, leading to the cancellation of non-essential

services to tackle a surge in admissions driven by the variant.

Guy's and St Thomas' trust (GSTT) in London is preparing to redeploy staff to work in its A&E and intensive care units to cover for the growing number of staff who are off work sick.

It has seen the number of hospitalised patients with Covid it is treating jump by a third over the last week and is bracing itself for worse to come in the days ahead.

Rising Covid cases have also left London fire and rescue services with “unprecedented” staff shortages, the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) said, with almost a third of London’s fire engines out of action at points in the last week.

In a memo sent on Friday to staff in the emergency departments of the two hospitals it runs in south London, GSTT said: “Omicron is now having a significant impact on the work we are doing.

“This is being felt not only with the increase in patient attendances (Covid admissions have increased a third over the last week) but also on staff sickness and subsequent absence from work.

“Omicron is now the dominant variant, with over 60% of positive cases locally being due to this new strain and with a doubling rate of two days in the local community.

“London is once again at the eye of this current storm,” the memo said.

Hospital bosses across the NHS are finalising details of how they will deal with a potentially huge increase in the number of people which the new strain leaves seriously ill with Covid. Some doctors and scientists fear that the coming wave of hospitalisations could be even bigger than the peak of 39,000 cases seen UK-wide in January.

The UK reported record Covid cases for a third day in a row on Friday, with 93,045 new cases, up 39% on the week. A further 900 people were hospitalised with the virus and 111 people died. The UK [Health](#) Security

Agency confirmed another 3,201 Omicron cases, bringing the UK total to 14,909.

GSTT also told A&E staff that “as of yesterday there were more than 350 staff members off work and isolating across the organisations due to Covid – a 25% increase on the previous day.”

Amanda Pritchard, the chief executive of NHS England, ran GSTT until 2019. Boris Johnson said that staff in the intensive care unit at St Thomas’s had saved his life when he was hospitalised there with Covid in April 2020, during the first lockdown.

Omicron is forcing the trust to take action in order “to reduce the risk to all services and continue to deliver essential care to our patients”. As a result “all non-essential services have been stood down or reduced” and “staff are being identified for redeployment to core services such as ours.”

The memo also said that GSTT was already seeing “significant shortages” and had asked for personnel to be redeployed there “to ensure safe staffing levels are maintained over coming weeks”.

Chris Hopson, the chief executive of the hospitals group NHS Providers, said: “With over 93,000 new cases of Covid confirmed today, trust leaders are understandably anxious about the weeks ahead as the Omicron variant takes hold in the community and, inevitably, within the health and care workforce.

“We are already seeing NHS staff shortages in hotspots like London with worrying increases in the number of staff having to take time off work due to Covid-19 self-isolation or sickness. This is expected to rise in the weeks ahead.

“The knock-on effect on the workloads of remaining staff – who are already working incredibly hard given the huge demands on the service – is a major concern.”

There were similar issues with the London fire brigade, with almost 10% of operational firefighters either having tested positive or self-isolating,

according to LFB statistics for Thursday. The LFB said 141 firefighters had tested positive and 283 were self-isolating.

The FBU London regional secretary, Jon Lambe, said: “The new Omicron variant is having a devastating impact on the London fire brigade.”

According to London fire brigade statistics, 40 fire engines were unavailable for the day and night shifts on Thursday. There are 142 fire engines in London.

Up to 130,000 NHS staff in England could be off sick with Covid by Christmas Day, unless ministers take new steps to tackle Omicron’s rapid spread, the British Medical Association is warning.

A new analysis by the doctors’ union found that on current trends anywhere from 32,000 medics, nurses and other personnel will be infected by 25 December, and that “in the worst case scenario” more than 130,000 staff – one in 10 of the total – may be off sick.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/17/hundreds-off-work-ill-at-leading-london-hospital-as-omicron-cases-surge>

Coronavirus

NHS could face surge in hospitalisations despite booster, scientists warn

Drop in protection against Omicron variant may lead to ‘a large number of people’ needing treatment

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
- [See all our coronavirus coverage](#)



Scientists said booster doses would still be critical to help mitigate the impact of Omicron. Photograph: Amer Ghazzal/REX/Shutterstock

[Ian Sample](#) and [Nicola Davis](#)

Fri 17 Dec 2021 19.00 EST

Hospitalisations from Covid could pose major [problems for the NHS](#) as Omicron surges in the winter despite the acceleration of the booster

programme, leading scientists have warned.

In a preliminary study, researchers led by Prof Neil Ferguson at [Imperial College London](#) found that vaccines are substantially less effective against Omicron than Delta and saw no evidence that Omicron is intrinsically milder than Delta.

Their analysis of data provided by the NHS and the UK [Health](#) Security Agency showed that antibodies were 4.5 times less potent against Omicron than Delta. As a result, vaccine protection against symptomatic Omicron infection dropped to between zero and 20% after two doses, and between 55% and 80% after a booster.

But the early data suggests vaccine effectiveness against hospitalisation from Omicron may hold up better after a booster, with protection falling from more than 95% against Delta to between 80% and 86% against Omicron 60 days after the shot, depending on how fast booster protection wanes.

It came as data revealed that half of adults in the UK had now received a booster jab, with over 930,000 people having a vaccination on Friday.

Prof Azra Ghani, chair in infectious disease epidemiology at Imperial, said while 80% protection against hospitalisation was good from an individual perspective, at the population level, the drop in protection could still mean “a large number of people requiring hospitalisation” given how many people are expected to become infected.

“If you have enough cases per day, the resulting number of hospitalisations we think could still pose potentially major challenges for any health system,” Ferguson added. In [the report](#) released on Friday, the scientists say booster doses would be “critical” to mitigate the impact of future Omicron waves in countries with high levels of circulating virus.

Worst-case scenario modelling by the team, which assumes no change in people’s behaviour and no other interventions being brought in, suggests the UK could experience more than 5,000 deaths a day at the peak of the

Omicron wave, but Ghani said this was “an illustration of the need to act rather than a prediction”.

Graphic

Further data released in a [second report](#) shows Omicron is doubling every two days in England, with people more than five times as likely to be reinfected with the variant compared with Delta. Based on early data, any change in the intrinsic severity of Omicron is “at most limited” compared with Delta, the researchers find. Intrinsic severity refers to whether a variant itself causes milder or more serious illness, rather than people’s levels of immunity due to past infection and vaccination. “There’s no strong signal of an intrinsically reduced severity of Omicron versus Delta, but it is really very early days to make definitive judgments on that,” Ferguson said.

Dr David Strain, a senior clinical lecturer at the University of Exeter medical school, said waning immunity after a booster meant the jabs were “quite literally buying us a few months” until an Omicron-specific jab becomes available, although he noted it was hoped the [body’s T-cell response](#) would stop people getting seriously unwell even if antibodies waned.

However, he said a key concern with Omicron was the impact on [NHS](#) staffing, noting that even healthcare workers who had had boosters had tested positive.

“If the healthcare workforce decides to follow the prime minister’s advice and continue with all of the Christmas parties, some models suggest as many as one in eight healthcare workers will be either infected or isolating because of a close family contact within the next month,” he said.

Meanwhile the NHS is expanding its use of vaccination centres that are open around the clock in a bid to help reach the target of delivering 1m booster jabs a day that Boris Johnson has set.

The first 24/7 centre for the vaccine rollout opened at the Artrix theatre in Bromsgrove in the West Midlands. It delivered 500 top-up shots overnight on Wednesday and will continue offering an open-all-hours service until Christmas Eve.

“The night slots are popular with shift workers and people who want to avoid crowds,” said an NHS source.

But this weekend three other 24/7 sites will also be open, though each only for 36 hours: Morris House group practice in Haringey, north London; The Pharmacy in Shady Lane, Birmingham; and the Etihad Stadium, home of Manchester City football club.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/17/nhs-could-face-surge-in-hospitalisations-despite-booster-say-scientists-omicron>

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Christmas

Nice nibbles and virtual squabbles: how to Covid-proof your Christmas

If Omicron threatens to disrupt your plans, don't panic – here's a guide to making the best of it

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
- [See all our coronavirus coverage](#)



If you're missing arguments with siblings, consider scheduling one on Zoom for around 5pm on Christmas Day. Photograph: Antonio Guillem Fernández/Alamy



Alexandra Topping

Sat 18 Dec 2021 04.00 EST

So here we are again. Out are the plans to dust off your dancing shoes at the [Christmas](#) party, and in is the stockpiling of toilet rolls and boxes of chocolates for the long nights ahead.

With a “staggering” [increase in Covid cases](#) accelerated by the spread of the Omicron variant [predicted by medical advisers this week](#), many people are fearing that they will once again face Christmas in not-so-splendid isolation.

So what can you do to prepare for a brilliant Christmas – even if you or a household member tests positive for Covid and has to isolate over the festive period, or Christmas is cancelled once again?

Eat, drink and be merry

You’re going to need food and drink. Lots of it. Buy now or repent at leisure. This is the perfect moment to bake that extravagant cake you’ve dreamed of, or finally make use of the sourdough starter your annoying friend foisted on you after the first lockdown.

Jo Elgarf, an urban prepper who could frankly be forgiven for being a bit smug right now, suggests putting a pack of chicken or veggie alternative in the freezer with some frozen brussels sprouts and roasties, just in case. And buying chocolate: “If the worst comes to the worst, and you just sit there for the whole day eating a tin of Roses, is that really such a bad thing?”

The food writer Jay Rayner has one main tip: order in a crate of Baileys. He adds: “Plan your Christmas Day meal around the idea of filling the fridge with nice things for days to come. And stock up on nibbles. If your house does not contain cheese-flavoured pastry Christmas trees and Twiglets, it’s not even Christmas.”



Jay Rayner: where's my Baileys? Photograph: Suki Dhanda/The Observer

Other stellar suggestions [from Guardian readers on Twitter](#) include eating a Christmas dinner of pigs in blankets dipped in camembert because you can, make hot chocolate bombs or, failing that, make sure you have a list of takeaways that deliver on Christmas Day.

‘Tis the season for self-care

Christmas, even in a good year, can be a [time of heightened stress, loneliness and struggle for many people](#). Prof Vivian Hill, a chartered

psychologist and member of the British Psychological Society, suggests enjoying an isolated Christmas free of the myths of what Christmas “should be”.

“Have a think about what the authentic characteristics of a really good Christmas are to you, and try and plan how you could recreate them if you have to stay at home,” she says. “Doing something special for yourself and for the people you’re closest to is really key.”

Have a bath, go for a long walk, stay in your pyjamas, make sushi – do whatever you want, basically. “Christmas traditions evolve and develop over time,” says Hill. “Recognise there are other ways to celebrate.”

Schedule your family fallouts

For many people, Christmas is all about eating too much with family and friends. If that is impossible, perhaps open presents together via Zoom in the morning, keep the camera on during lunch and schedule a half-cut argument with your sibling at around 5pm. You could always spend your extra time inventing a machine you can pull a cracker with. An industrial bull clip will do the job for those lacking in imagination.

To temper your sadness, console yourself with the thought that you are doing the Right Thing, says Hill. “Maybe your gift to your friends and family is recognising you’re a risk and staying away.”

The gifts you could stop giving

Have you bought all your presents yet? If not, don’t panic, and don’t immediately turn to Amazon, says Tim Lane of [Ethical Consumer](#). “There’s loads of online ethical retailers that are great options for last-minute presents,” he says. “Or just buy less. If you want to consume ethically, cut down your consumption and maybe organise a secret Santa with your family as an alternative.”

For top organisational points you could wrap and exchange gifts on your doorstep with family members who live close enough now, just in case. If

they live in different parts of the country/world, it's probably too late. Don't sweat it, at least you have the perfect excuse.



No need to sling all your money at popular online retailers. Photograph: Jacobs Stock Photography/Getty Images

On the 10th day of isolation, my true love gave to me – a sought-after games console and a long, pitiless book

One bonus of an isolated Christmas is all the extra time to sit around mainlining chocolate orange and watching festive films. Excellent Guardian reader suggestions for passing the time include making as many anagrams as possible from the different Covid variants, reading War and Peace, chortling along with virtual gigs with [Always Be Comedy](#), creating a Christmas-themed mystery game to free Santa and the presents, knitting, crafting and doing a thousand-piece personalised jigsaw of your family while listening to Toto's Africa. Or you might have kids. In which case secure a lock on the bathroom door.

It's not all about you, you know

It really isn't. Many Guardian readers, altruistic souls that they are, suggest keeping others in mind rather than just feeling sorry for yourself. Buy some extra goods when festive stockpiling to drop off at the food bank like those run by the [Trussell Trust](#) or just donate; call an older person for a chat via [Age UK](#), [Independent Age](#), [Re-engage](#) or [Opening Doors](#); buy a toy for a vulnerable child via [The Toy Appeal](#) or [Family Action](#); buy a gift for a woman or child fleeing abuse with [Refuge](#); write to someone facing injustice in the world via Amnesty International's [Write for Rights campaign](#). That, friends, is the true [spirit of Christmas](#).

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US news

‘It’s a fraught moment’: Omicron puts brakes on US return-to-office plans

Employers are pausing efforts to call remote workers back in amid a renewed push for strikes and unionization



People, some wearing masks, in the Midtown area of New York City on 16 December. Photograph: Justin Lane/EPA

[Melody Schreiber](#)

Fri 17 Dec 2021 10.17 EST

Large US companies are now pulling back on plans to return to in-person work in light of the Omicron variant’s rapid spread across America.

Employers planning to call remote workers back into the office in the new year are now pausing those efforts, and they are wary of setting new return

dates only to push them back once again in the face of continued uncertainty and risks from the pandemic.

The pandemic is also driving changes in how in-person employees work, with a renewed push for strikes and unionization across several industries where workers have frequently faced long hours and unsafe conditions.

Alphabet's [Google](#), Meta, Apple, Uber, Lyft, Ford, DoorDash, DocuSign and Fidelity are among the companies that have delayed returns to the office.

"It's warranted, given the uptick that we've seen in cases," Bradford Bell, director of the Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies at Cornell University's ILR School, said. The delays also depend on where the offices are located, he said. "They're very much looking at this on a location-by-location basis."

Apple CEO Tim Cook told employees in a memo on Wednesday that the partial return to offices, planned for 1 February, was now pushed to a "date yet to be determined", after several other delays over the past two years. Cook offered employees a \$1,000 bonus to help improve their home offices.

Apple's offices remain open and employees are still going in to work in countries with lower Covid rates, he said. But he specifically pointed to the global rise in cases and the emergence of the Omicron variant as a cause for concern.

Google and Uber were among the first to announce the indefinite delays in early December after planning for early January returns. Google planned to reopen offices fully no later than 10 January, but has now delayed that deadline indefinitely, though offices in several places have already reopened.

Meta was planning to open early in 2022 but is now allowing workers to come back as late as June. Janelle Gale, the company's vice-president of human resources, [said](#) "some aren't quite ready to come back".

In contrast, Twitter went fully [remote forever](#) in October.

Lyft's offices will open in February, but workers can stay remote for the entirety of next year – one of the longest delayed returns, partly due to worries over Omicron and other variants that may emerge.

Fidelity Investments said on Monday it was pausing its return-to-work plans. DocuSign has delayed its [fourth attempt](#) to return.

DoorDash's corporate employees were going back to the office in 2022 in a hybrid approach, but now the company is waiting to see what the new plan should be.

Ford planned to return with a hybrid work model for employees working at the headquarters in January, but that is now planned for March.

Notably, hourly employees at Ford returned to in-person work in May 2020. And gig workers at Uber, Lyft, DoorDash and elsewhere have continued working through the pandemic, despite frequently [feeling unsafe](#) on the job.

About half of full-time workers surveyed in the US said their jobs could be done remotely, [according](#) to a Gallup poll. And nearly one-third of the workers said they never wanted to work in the office; the majority wanted a hybrid model.

In September, 45% of full-time employees were working remotely some or all of the time, with nine out of 10 remote workers wanting to continue that way, [according](#) to a Gallup poll.

One-third of employees who could work remotely are doing so, [according](#) to a survey from Willis Towers Watson, a global advisory firm. That number was expected to decline in 2022, before the advent of Omicron.

One of the challenges for companies is “trying to build momentum in terms of getting people back into the office”, Bell said. Companies are worried that if they open their offices before employees are ready, the momentum will stall – and they’re wary of forcing anyone back with office mandates. “So they’re waiting for the right time to really make that happen,” Bell said.

The pandemic could bring lasting changes to the ways we work – for those who have jobs that can be done remotely.

“It’s certainly a real issue” for those who can’t work remotely, Bell said. “I think that’s why we’ve seen an uptick in strikes and other things over the last several months where people are wanting – not necessarily a level playing field, but want their sacrifices recognized by their employers.”

In-person employees should continue to have support for working safely, including masking, distancing and vaccination mandates.

“All those things matter,” Bell said.

The US is experiencing record-low unemployment even as cases surge.

“It’s a fraught moment, and it’s a time where I think the power dynamic has really shifted, with the Great Resignation and the labor shortages,” Bell said. “It’s put labor in the driver’s seat,” with moves like the first Starbucks union, in Buffalo, New York, he said.

“Employees realize that they, to a certain degree, have the upper hand and so can really start bringing these issues to the forefront.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/17/us-omicron-return-to-office-plans-employers>

South Africa

South Africa says vaccines and natural immunity are limiting latest Covid wave

Global experts fear countries with older and more vulnerable populations may have different experience of Omicron variant

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People wait for their jabs in Cape Town. While hospital admissions and deaths have increased, health officials say they are at a lower level than in previous waves. Photograph: Nardus Engelbrecht/AP

Peter Beaumont

Fri 17 Dec 2021 11.05 EST

Vaccines and high levels of prior exposure to coronavirus in [South Africa](#) appear to be protecting against the more severe symptoms seen in the previous three waves of the pandemic, according to the country's health minister.

The suggestion that previous exposure to another variant of coronavirus – or vaccination – might provide protection from the Omicron variant [echoes analysis by South African experts earlier this week](#) that suggested prior exposure or vaccination gave a degree of protection from serious disease.

That has been backed by several reports, including by public and private health providers, that suggest a lower level of hospital admissions during the current wave.

Echoing the findings of Shabir Mahdi, a vaccine expert at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, the health minister, Joe Phaahla, told a news conference: “We believe that it might not necessarily just be that Omicron is less virulent, but … coverage of vaccination [and] … natural immunity of people who have already had contact with the virus is also adding to the protection. That’s why we are seeing mild illness.”

While there has been an increase in hospitalisations and deaths in [South Africa](#) in recent days, driven by the surge in cases of the Omicron variant, along with continuing infections by the Delta variant, health officials say it remains at lower levels than in previous waves.

Michelle Groome, from the National Institute for Communicable Diseases, said: “[We are] starting to see a slight increase in deaths nationally, but once again this level is very much lower even than the baseline period we were seeing between the second and third waves.” She added that these were “relatively small increases in deaths”.

Wassila Jassat, also from the NICD, said the number of people requiring oxygen was lower than in any previous period. “Patients do seem to stay for a shorter duration,” she said.

Phaahla said early indications were that infections may have peaked in Gauteng province, where cases initially surged. However, the latest figures

from the NICD showed Gauteng continued to account for most new Covid infections as of 16 December, at 27%, followed by KwaZulu-Natal (23%) and Western Cape (19%).

His comments came as the G7 group of countries called the Omicron variant the “[bigger current threat to global public health](#)”, saying it was “more important than ever” for countries to “closely cooperate”.

While South Africa’s experience with Omicron has been carefully watched around the world for evidence of how infections may progress, experts say populations with larger numbers of older and more vulnerable people may experience it differently.

Given how infectious the Omicron variant is, one of the most pressing concerns is that the very rapid and concentrated burst of infections that it provokes could overwhelm health systems because of the sheer numbers.

The South African press conference on Friday, however, goes to the heart of a number of the unknowns about the Omicron variant.

While it has been established that Omicron is more infectious and more able to evade neutralising antibodies provided by vaccines and prior exposure, questions remain over whether other aspects of the body’s acquired immunity to Covid-19 may be mitigating against more serious disease.

According to some experts, while Omicron may be more easily able to evade key neutralising antibodies that stick to the virus’s spike protein, [other tools in the immune system’s repertoire of defences](#), including so-called killer T cells, may still be doing their job.

A presentation given by Wendy Burgers, of the University of Cape Town, at a [World Health Organization symposium](#) into evidence of Omicron evading immunity earlier this week indicated preliminary research appeared to suggest that the body’s T cell response remained strong against Omicron.

That, however, remains in question, with England’s chief medical officer telling the House of Commons this week that there was a lack of “very good T cell studies” to establish whether this was happening.

South Africa has given 44% of its adult population at least one dose of Covid-19 vaccine, more than many African countries but well short of the government's year-end target. Among the over-50s vaccination coverage levels are more than 60%.

The latest information out of South Africa came as Omicron continued to spread rapidly around the globe with India – which suffered a devastating Delta outbreak earlier this year – reporting 101 cases in 11 provinces.

Denmark's prime minister, Mette Frederiksen, said theatres, cinemas, concert halls, amusement parks, museums and art galleries must shut down to contain the spread of coronavirus in some of Europe's toughest new measures.

The German health minister, Karl Lauterbach, also warned that he expected the Omicron variant to lead to a “massive fifth wave” of the pandemic.

Lauterbach, a former epidemiology professor, said during a visit to the Lower Saxony region that Germany must prepare for a challenge “that we have never seen in this form before”.

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Nick Evershed, Josh Nicholas and Andy Ball

The emergence of the Omicron variant has made it clear the pandemic won't be over until it is beaten everywhere.

But there has been a vast and continuing inequality in the global Covid vaccine rollout.

This mirrors other rollouts, such as the vaccine for diphtheria, pertussis (whooping cough), and tetanus, which has a vaccination rate as low as 41% in some countries.

In the case of Covid, inequality has been compounded by wealthy nations buying up doses, and the need to ramp up adult vaccination programs in countries that hadn't had them before.

This map shows how the Covid vaccine rollout has progressed globally, showing the number of doses administered per 100 people over time.

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2021.12.18 - Spotlight

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- [‘Why can’t I give it a go?’: How Rose Ayling-Ellis’ Strictly success is inspiring deaf youngsters](#)
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Interview

Ricky Gervais on offence, anger and infuriating Hollywood: ‘You have to provoke. It’s a good thing’

[Simon Hattenstone](#)



Ricky Gervais with Anti, the dog who plays Brandy in his sitcom After Life.
Photograph: Jay Brooks/The Guardian

He has made a career out of winding people up in everything from The Office to his Golden Globes speeches – but is the comedian's bark worse than his bite?



Sat 18 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

Ricky Gervais's assistant leads me past a huge, empty room to the top floor of an office above a shop on a swanky London high street. Gervais is sitting behind a desk at his computer in another huge, empty room, and looks as if he's just squatted the place. There is nothing that suggests this is his office, except for the branded mugs sitting on his desk; one shows his face, the second says Tambury Gazette, the fictional newspaper where Gervais's character, Tony, works in his hit Netflix series [After Life](#).

As soon as he sees me, he swings his legs off the floor and on to the desk. I expect him to say, "Right, shoot", as his fabulous fictional creation David Brent might have done, but he reins himself in. It's 20 years since Gervais made his name with [The Office](#), and it's often been difficult to know where Brent ends and Gervais begins.

Gervais, who is wearing his customary black T-shirt, tracksuit bottoms and trainers, gestures to a bottle of water on my side of the desk. “That’s for you,” he says magnanimously. I ask how he has changed since making The Office. “People normally think wealth and fame change you, but I don’t think they have, because by the time you’re 40 you already know who you are. I don’t think they’d change a 40-year-old like a 20-year-old.” The Office has been remade in 11 different countries, netting him a fortune in the process. How much is he worth these days? “*Oh come on! Fuckkkkin hell,*” he squeals in protest. He looks offended for a good second. ‘I’m sure there’s a news story that tells you. I’m doing all right. But I don’t want to be in print telling you how much I’ve got.’ It’s classic Brent. Gervais is worth an estimated £105m.

The trailer for season three of After Life

He is enjoying his greatest success since The Office and [Extras](#), the TV comedy about background actors that featured real stars playing themselves in an unflattering light. As Gervais is quick to point out, After Life was the most watched British comedy in the world in the past decade, having been viewed by more than 85 million people. And, as he is equally quick to point out, the series in which he plays Tony, a grieving widower, has moved many viewers to tears. Go to his Twitter account, where he has 14.5 million followers, and you’ll find endless retweets praising it, and his many other projects: “Have just watched [#AfterLife](#) for the fourth time now and @rickygervais still makes me cry”, “#AfterLife is the best comedy series I ever watched.” When not posting about his shows on social media, Gervais tweets photographs of animals, and reminds us to be kind to each other. Kindness is his big thing these days. If he can make the world care a little more, he feels he’s done a decent day’s work.

At the same time, he’s also come to be regarded as a scourge of “wokedom”. Last year he said: “There’s this new weird sort of fascism of people thinking they know what you can say and what you can’t.” In October, he told neuroscientist and writer Sam Harris: “I want to live long enough to see the younger generation not be woke enough for the next generation. It’s going to happen. Don’t they realise that, it’s like, they’re next.”

It's never been easy to pin down Gervais. Not least because he says that comments made in jest are too often taken literally. After reports suggesting that he believed *The Office* would be a victim of cancel culture today, he tweeted a clarification: "Someone said they might try to cancel it one day, and I said, 'Good, let them cancel it. I've been paid!' Clearly a joke."

Twenty years ago, if you saw something on TV you didn't like, you'd pick up a pen. Now you fire off a tweet and it makes the news

This tension between the kindly and the cantankerous – which seems to be on full display today – is also at the heart of *After Life*. Tony is a lovable louse or an odious do-gooder depending on your perspective.

Tony works for a local newspaper writing corny features and is inconsolable after losing his wife, Lisa, to cancer. At some point in every episode we see him watching old videos on his computer of the wonderful times they had together – playing practical jokes on each other, watching movies, drinking, playing with their dog, walking, laughing. They didn't need other people or children because they completed each other. And when she died, he was left with nothing but the dog, Brandy, for comfort. He contemplates suicide because life is so meaningless. But instead he decides to tell everybody what he really thinks of them, and calls it his superpower. If it all goes wrong in the end, he tells himself, he can still kill himself.

It is a MacGuffin that enables him to indulge a familiar Gervaisian trope – undiluted rudeness. His superpower often involves telling people they are fat. In the first episode, he calls a stranger a "fat, hairy, nosy cocksucker", a child a "tubby little ginger cunt", and his colleague "fat boy". Meanwhile, in a video recorded before her death, Lisa (no stranger to truth-telling herself) calls Tony a "fat, lazy, self-pitying lump" and a "fat twat".

Now Gervais is about to launch the third series of *After Life* – a first for him because he has never made more than two series of any of his TV sitcoms. Tony has evolved, and has discovered the limits of nihilistic nastiness. Kindness is beginning to get the better of him. The supporting characters in *After Life* constantly tell Tony how kind and funny he is. He comes to realise that caring, rather than not caring, is a superpower. *After Life* is a

potty-mouthed version of Frank Capra's [It's A Wonderful Life](#). Like George Bailey, Tony is rescued from despair when he is made aware of how much better he has made the world for others.

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Whereas *The Office* was universally lauded, *After Life* has received mixed notices – detractors have said it is heavily signposted and saccharine, while fans have marvelled at the mix of emotion and humour. I ask Gervais how it came about. “With most things I can remember how I thought of that joke and how it developed,” he says. Already I’m confused – I had assumed that it started with the idea of loss and grief. “So I was on tour in March 2017 with my show [Humanity](#), and I’ve still got that work ethic. I thought, I’m staying in castles and being chauffeur-driven, and I feel guilty about only working an hour a day. So I thought I should write something new.”

Gervais is mid-monologue. He doesn’t really allow for interruptions. He just talks till he runs out of steam, then asks what the question was. “*Humanity* was vaguely about free speech and the world changing. And I thought, ‘Why do we worry about what people say?’ Well, we worry about the consequences. But why do we worry about the consequences? Well, because you want to be popular and you don’t want to hurt people’s feelings. Well, what if you didn’t care, what if you had nothing to lose? I went, but why would you do that? Well, if you were going to die or nearly died. If you were going to kill yourself, and you didn’t. What could have happened to make you feel that bad? Because you lose the love of your life. Why didn’t you kill yourself? Because the dog was hungry.”

And there you have it: the genesis of *After Life*. Gervais comes to a stop, awed by his train of thought. “That all happened in *two minutes*. And then the rest is ... ” He trails off, not wanting to resort to cliche.

Gervais, 60, was born in Reading to working-class parents – a father who laboured on building sites, and a mother who did odd jobs while bringing him and his three siblings up. When he asked why there was such a gap

between him and the other children (he is 17 years younger than the oldest) his mother told him he was a mistake. It made him laugh. She often made him laugh. One day, when he was up earlier than usual, she asked if it was because he'd shat the bed.

Things came too easily to him, he says, so he didn't give his all – not at school, or work, or in his early days as a performer. "I was proud of passing exams without trying hard. Now, I look back and think, 'Well you're an idiot; imagine if you'd tried harder.'" He started a course in biology at university, then swapped to philosophy because it was a doss – seven hours a week instead of 40. "I didn't really study for three years. I feel a bit guilty about that, too."

He was lazy, he says. He watched comics on TV, told himself he was funnier than they were, but never did anything about it. The young Gervais was a pretty boy who modelled himself on David Bowie and [David Sylvian](#). In 1982, he formed Seona Dancing, a new-wave duo, with his best friend, Bill Macrae, and they got themselves a record deal in his final year at University College London. They released two singles on London records that flopped in the UK. Listen to More to Lose and [Bitter Heart](#) today and they could pass for 80s synthpop classics. Again, Gervais says he didn't give it his best, and the band were dropped. "You think, 'Fucking hell, that was it.'" He briefly managed Suede before they hit the big time, then settled for office life, working his way up to events manager at the University of London Union. He made extensive notes about the daft conversations, annoying habits, petty jealousies, rivalries, egos and office romances.

In his next job, at the London radio station Xfm – where he was "head of speech" – he employed [Stephen Merchant](#), 13 years his junior, as his assistant. Together, this odd couple (Gervais is a squat 5ft 8in, Merchant a lanky 6ft 7in) went on to create The Office with the help of the notes Gervais made in the previous job. It is such a beautifully structured, spare piece of writing, I say. Did Merchant help discipline you as a writer? "No, The Office was the first thing I'd ever tried my hardest at, and that was because I thought, 'What a privilege to have a second bite of the cherry.'" He pauses. "That's a big lesson I've learned. Working harder at something makes you better at it." Gervais is a master of stating the obvious as if it's a pearl of wisdom.



With Mackenzie Crook in *The Office*: ‘It was the first thing I’d ever tried my hardest at.’ Photograph: BBC

I ask if his quest for kindness marks a change. “Kindness, compassion has definitely been in my work of the last 10 years.” Then again, he says, look back to *The Office*, and at heart David Brent wanted to do well by people and be loved. “My stuff has always been quite existential – are we wasting our life? – through to *Derek*, which is about people at the end of their life, through to *After Life*, which is about people losing their life.”

In [Derek](#), a mockumentary about life in a care home, Gervais plays the eponymous hero as a gurning simpleton whom everybody loves. Although he denied that Derek was supposed to have disabilities, the sitcom caused controversy. Opinion was divided among those who found it offensive over whether Gervais was mocking or sentimentalising people with special needs.

I’m nobody’s champion. Get a better champion is what I’d say to anybody who thinks I’m theirs

The biggest change since *The Office*, he says, is the rise of [social media](#). “Nowadays you hear everyone’s opinions. If you go on Twitter for a day, you think there is a war going on, then you go outside for a walk and nothing’s changed. Twenty years ago, if you saw something on TV you

didn't like, you'd pick up a pen and go: 'Dear BBC, I'm absolutely horrified ... ' Nah, fuck it." He imitates somebody picking up a pen, then putting it down because it's too much effort. "Now you fire off a tweet and it makes the news. Twitter is like road rage."

It has to be said that he can rage with the worst of them. In August, he wrote about a group of people who were torturing and killing monkeys on camera: "I'm so fucking angry I don't know what to do. I could honestly kill the dirty, savage cunts that do this." In the same month, he tweeted in response to critics of Operation Ark, [Pen Farthing's mission to rescue animals from Afghanistan](#) and bring them to the UK: "Dear stupid cunts saying we shouldn't put animals before people ... "

Social media, he suggests, is the great equaliser. I assume he means that is a good thing, but no: "Twitter enables narcissism because it allows people to put in print and to publish alongside scientists and politicians their deeply held opinion. Like, I do a thing about save the rhino, and someone always goes: 'What about the kids in Syria?' And I want to go back: 'What are *you* doing about the kids in Syria?'"



With After Life co-star Anti: 'I'm portrayed as cruel and that I don't care what people think about me. It's not true. I do care.' Photograph: Jay Brooks/The Guardian

If Twitter infuriates him so much, why doesn't he get off it? "Marketing," he says. It's a brilliant tool for self-promotion. And, he adds, it's a great resource for humour. "As an observational comedian you usually have to go around prisons and asylums to meet the people I talk about, but now I can find out the score from my Hampstead mansion. Hehehehehehh!" He opens his mouth, displays the famous fangs, and laughs like a hyena. So he actively seeks out the craziness? "Yeah, I go fishing. I sometimes put out a tweet that I know is going to get me opinions. For example, I did a tweet asking what's the one thing you should never make a joke about. I got a thousand replies, and every one was different and funny." What amused him, he says, is that each response was as pious as it was wrongheaded.

Gervais's stance on appropriate subjects for a joke is simple – anything goes. In a democracy, he says, you have a right to offend and be offended, but you don't have the right to outlaw topics. The trouble is, he says, some people are not bright enough to get his jokes; they confuse the subject with the target. So, for example, when he said [Caitlyn Jenner](#) had not done much for women drivers (Jenner had been involved in an accident that resulted in a fatality), he wasn't ridiculing trans women, he was playing on the stereotype of bad women drivers, he explains.

Today, Gervais is a polarising figure. On social media, half the posters deify him as a champion of free speech standing up to the tyrannies of wokedom, while the other half accuse him of picking on the disadvantaged and punching down. Both interpretations are wrong, he says. "I'm nobody's champion. Get a better champion is what I'd say to anybody who thinks I'm their champion." And if he is not dividing people, he protests, he is not doing his job properly.

Gervais is certainly happy to attack the powerful. He has hosted the Golden Globes five times and never failed to offend Hollywood royalty. [In 2020](#), he accused the stars of enabling Harvey Weinstein by "acting like they don't see a thing", and being so venal that if Isis started a streaming channel, they would call their agent. His act is [uncomfortable, charmless, crude and brave](#). As the camera pans round the room, you can see the A-listers wincing.

Everything offends me. Not jokes or opinions. The first thing that springs to mind is animal cruelty. But everything. Stupidity

What he doesn't understand is the criticism he gets for giving the stars a tough time. "Do I pander to the 200 billionaires in the room or the 200 million people at home sitting in their pants drinking beer who aren't winning awards, who aren't billionaires? It's a no-brainer for a comedian. I'm a jester. I play to the other peasants in the mud. I wasn't going in terrible. Think of the things I could have said." He starts to give it the full Joe Pesci as he works himself into a rage. "Think of the *fucking terrible* things I could have joked about. It's off the charts – It's. Off. The. Charts – the terrible things I could say."

A second later, he's calmly telling me of the fans he does have among the glitterati. "[Robert De Niro](#) was just crying with laughter when I made a joke about Hugh Hefner and his young bride. He called me after a week and said: 'I wanna say you did a great job.' 'Oh man,' I said, 'I annoyed some people.' He said: 'Fuck 'em, they were jokes.'"

Earlier this year, [Ash Atalla](#), the producer of The Office, said that some of the jokes Gervais made about his disability left him feeling "a little bit uncomfortable". At the British Comedy awards in 2001, Gervais said that Atalla, who contracted polio as a child, was the show's "runner", called him "my little wheelchair friend", and said that he was "just the same as Stephen Hawking, but without all the clever stuff". Gervais looks shocked when I mention it. "Well if he'd said to me at the time he was uncomfortable with it, I wouldn't have done it. But he didn't." Atalla said that comedians who emerged in the 00s, such as Gervais, [Jimmy Carr](#) and [Frankie Boyle](#) would "see what you could get away with and then reverse-intellectualise it".



‘I’m offended all the time. Everything offends me.’ Photograph: Jay Brooks/The Guardian

Gervais still does it today. He tells me how he starts his latest live show, SuperNature, with a lesson in irony. “I say, ‘That’s when I say something I don’t really mean for comic effect and you, as an audience, laugh at the wrong thing because you know what the right thing is.’ I challenge them to be offended and they never are of course, because they get it.” Actually, he says, if nobody is offended, he’s failed. “You *have* to provoke! It’s a good thing. Learning provokes, science provokes, opinion provokes. Offence provokes.”

Is he often offended? “Course I am. I’m offended all the fucking time. Everything offends me.” What like? “Real things, obviously. Not jokes or words or opinions. The first thing that springs to mind is animal cruelty. But everything. Stupidity.” Is it true that he finds noise offensive? Absolutely, he says. He gives me an example. “I’m on a plane. There’s a guy there about my age, reading the paper. We’re about to take off, New York to London. First class, so I had nothing to moan about. But he was doing this.” Gervais yawns loudly, and makes a smacking sound with his lips. “I looked a couple of times to make sure there was nothing wrong with him, and he did it 10 times, and I went, ‘Sorry can you yawn *without* all the stuff after. And he went, ‘Oh sorry!’ And I thought, ‘Fuck me, I’ve got to sit here for another

six hours.' Hahahahahaha." Again the gnashers flash, and he's laughing hysterically. But he means it.

Gervais prides himself on his intolerance. There's the time he and his partner of 40 years, [Jane Fallon](#), could hear their neighbours' television through the wall. "We could *hear* what the programme was. It was really really loud." He makes clear the objection was his, not Jane's. "Again if it was a thunderstorm or herds of wildebeest or wolves, it wouldn't bother me, but if somebody's got the telly on a bit loud, it's like they're doing it on purpose. So I went round and knocked on the door, and this old lady answered and I said, 'Oh sorry, your telly's very loud.' She said, 'Oh sorry, I'm slightly deaf,' and I said, 'Oh sorry, don't worry.' As I went away, she said, 'And I hate to wear my hearing aid.'" He looks as if he's feeling the annoyance afresh after all these years. "I thought, 'Oh *why* did you tell me that?'"

Insults don't mean anything to me. If someone tries to insult me, I laugh. You can't ruin my day by calling me something

I ask why he is so obsessed with fat people. He looks surprised, and says he's not. Well, they are so often the target of Tony's abuse in *After Life*, I say, asking if he is sensitive about weight because he's been called fat? He says that couldn't be less true. "I didn't care about being fat when I was fat. And I still am a bit fat. Insults don't mean anything to me. I think they're funny. If someone genuinely tries to insult me, I laugh, because how can you insult me? I'm too happy. You can't ruin my day by calling me something." He says he and Jane could not be more content. They don't have children, they have little to worry about, and they adore each other. *After Life*, which Gervais also directed, was partly inspired by thinking about how meaningless life would be without Jane.

That's so interesting, I say, because you don't come across as a happy man. "I know. I *know*." You seem curmudgeonly, I say. "People think I'm angry on Twitter, and I'm never angry." He stops. Well, maybe occasionally he is. He tells me how he can't abide people crunching on apples or crisps. "Ugh, apples," he says. "Apples have got everything. Cos it's the crunch, then the too much in the mouth, then the sucking it in ... I need to go for another wee. It's an age thing."

On his return, he looks at his watch, says he can't believe the time, and he's got to head off. "I guess it was naive of me to think we'd just talk about After Life, wasn't it? Did we mention it *at all?*" His mood seems to have changed. Before he was grumpy funny. Now he's just grumpy.

I ask why he rarely gives interviews these days. "I don't like them. They give me too much anxiety. I'm not in control. I don't know what you're going to write. And I only do it so someone who hasn't heard about After Life will watch the show. If you didn't write about After Life, this would be *fucking pointless*. It would only be *bad*." He is talking with such venom. I give him a look. "No, no. I don't mean you. Don't take it personally, but I wouldn't do it, I wouldn't come to spill my heart out. I'll read it with anxiety. What's he said? What's that come across like?"

What will you worry about most? "Well, misinformation." I'm still sitting at the desk and he's hovering over me. "Misrepresentation. You being unfair. If you read a thing, it's 50% wrong. I mean trivial things. There might be the odd misquote, age wrong, where I was born, one of my brothers' names. You start realising everything's 50% wrong".

When you start off, you look at every review. Every bad one hurts. But now, there's so much it doesn't matter

Years ago, getting a good review from a critic meant more to him than a show being commercially successful. Not any more. "I've totally changed my mind. *Totally* changed my mind. When you start off, you look at every critic, every review, everything matters. Every bad one hurts you. But now, there's so much it doesn't matter. There's no one critic, no one paper – so the people are bigger."

And this is where social media – or at least his fanbase on social media – gets his approval. "That's why I go direct to the people, because I only ever cared about criticism because I thought it could make my show better. I only cared about winning Baftas because I thought people might watch the show. It was never about: 'Guess what Jane? The critics love me.' It was always about: will more people watch the show, will I sell more tickets?"

How does he think he is misrepresented by the media? “That I’m cruel and I don’t care what people think about me. It’s not true. I do care what people think about me.” If anything, you’re thin-skinned, aren’t you? “Well. I think it’s unjust. But then again, I don’t care enough to go and tell the world. In the early days, I just thought if someone slagged me off, ‘Where the fuck do they live?’”

I remind him of the time [Ian Hislop slammed](#) his standup show [Animals](#) in 2003. After that, he finished each gig by calling Hislop an “ugly little pug-faced cunt”. Ah, Gervais says, but this was actually a clever joke rather than foul-mouthed retribution. “The joke was he said that I was childish and used playground insults, so then I do a childish joke. I even called him up to ask if he minded me saying that. And he said, ‘Do what you want, but I just want to say I’m a fan.’”



Photograph: Jay Brooks/The Guardian

I’m thinking about what Gervais said about me not taking his dislike of interviews personally. Actually, it’s hard to take anything he says personally because he doesn’t seem to do personal. There’s been something strange about our meeting, but I can’t quite place what. Only towards the end, when we’ve been talking for more than 90 minutes, does it strike me that he has not used my name once. Nor has he asked what it is. In fact he’s not asked

me a single thing. Most interviewees engage on a basic level – where have you come from today, do you like your job, what do you think of this or that? Not Gervais, though. I don't think I've ever met anybody less interested in other people.

In After Life, Tony expresses his newfound kindness with dramatic gestures. Gervais doesn't seem to realise kindness is also about little things – learning a name, showing an interest, making people feel they matter, too. Perhaps it's all of a piece. Gervais's later work has tended to deal more with types than fleshed-out humans – so people with learning disabilities like Derek are sweet-natured; people who have lost loved ones are broken; Hollywood A-listers are hypocrites. Despite the sympathetic treatment of his newspaper staff in After Life, I sense he files journalists under "Bastards who get 50% wrong".

I assure him I will mention After Life, and ask about the allegations involving its producer Charlie Hanson. In May, it was revealed that Hanson, a longtime Gervais collaborator, had been suspended by Netflix during filming of the third series after 11 women made historical [allegations of sexual misconduct](#), including serious sexual assault, dating from 2008 to 2015 (during which time Hanson produced Derek and [Life's Too Short](#)). Hanson has denied all the allegations.

What impact has this had on Gervais and the show? "I got a call from Netflix saying there's been allegations. They said: 'We'd like to ask Charlie not to come in again.' I went: 'OK. Right.' And that is literally the last I heard about it." It must be devastating to hear these allegations about someone you've worked with so closely for 16 years? "Yeah, yeah. It's horrifying. I literally tried not to think about it at all. I don't think I should discuss it, because I don't know what's happening." Has he spoken to Hanson about it? "No, no, not at all." He seems to be counting on his fingers. "We've done four things over 20 years, and he's done, I don't know, 100 other shows, but obviously you're worried about that, too." Actually, Hanson has produced every Gervais sitcom apart from The Office, and two of his movies.

We head out of the huge, empty office on to the streets of Hampstead. It's not sunny, but he puts his Ray-Bans on – presumably as a disguise. Gervais

looks more recognisable than ever. He stops in the street to continue demonstrating why a joke from his 2011 Golden Globes speech was unfairly criticised. “I said the Golden Globe for special effects goes to the people who [airbrushed the Sex and the City poster](#). And I go: ‘Girls, we know how old you are, one of you was in an episode of Bonanza!’” He might have made the joke 10 years ago, but it still rankles that the cast confused the target with the subject. “Kim Cattrall said it was ageist. I said: ‘No it’s the opposite. I’m saying, what’s wrong with being 50?’ I hate that about Hollywood, where fucking George Clooney has to have a fucking 22-year-old girlfriend. Aaagh!”

A middle-aged man passes in the street. “And a very good joke it was too, Ricky,” he says. Gervais smiles. For the first time all day, he looks happy. Gervais tells me he is crossing the road here, and before I know it he has disappeared into the crowd.

The final season of After Life will be available on Netflix from 14 January

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Deafness and hearing impairment

‘Why can’t I give it a go?’: How Rose Ayling-Ellis’ Strictly success is inspiring deaf youngsters

Actor’s achievements helping others embrace deaf identity and pursue passions on own terms



Rose Ayling-Ellis and her dancing partner Giovanni Pernice performing on Strictly Come Dancing. Photograph: Guy Levy/BBC

[Rachel Hall](#)

[@rachela_hall](#)

Sat 18 Dec 2021 04.00 EST

Amid all the noise, glitter and razzle-dazzle, the most iconic moment of this year’s Strictly Come Dancing took place in complete silence. The music paused for several seconds while deaf actor [Rose Ayling-Ellis](#) and her

dancing partner Giovanni Pernice continued to glide elegantly across the floor.

The dance was intended as a tribute to the deaf community, but it has resonated far more broadly: as well as receiving a perfect score, the couple's performance has been labelled the "greatest ever" on the show, while an official BBC clip has been viewed 1.7m times on YouTube.

There has been a resounding (silent) cheer for Ayling-Ellis' success from the deaf community, who see her as a rare on-screen role model capable of inspiring deaf young people, who often struggle with pressures to fit into mainstream schooling, to embrace their deaf identity and pursue their passions on their own terms.

The show has also prompted a huge increase in interest in deaf culture and learning British Sign Language (BSL), with the Institute of British Sign Language and other providers saying they receive a rise in inquiries every time Strictly airs.

Paula Garfield, the founder of [Deafinitely Theatre](#), the UK's first deaf-led theatre company that runs the prestigious youth theatre Ayling-Ellis trained at, said she has seen a surge in interest from budding young deaf performers.

"Rose is so important as a positive role model. She's deaf, but she has a community, culture, language and pride in those – she's not trying to hide her deafness. She's saying, 'Don't be shy, you shouldn't be ashamed of using your first language, BSL, because it's beautiful and rich.' That's opening a lot of doors. She's saying deaf people can do anything they want to do," she said.

Garfield, who grew up in the 1970s, hopes that seeing people such as Ayling-Ellis on TV will spare deaf young people her experience of being pressured to learn to speak instead of being allowed to learn sign language, which resulted in her leaving school at 17 with a reading age of eight. "We felt invisible, it was a dark and depressing time."

She said attitudes in theatre had shifted over the past 10 years with BSL-led

performances becoming more common and mainstream productions increasingly integrating actors who communicate via BSL, such as Deafinitely alumnus William Grint, who is touring with the Royal Shakespeare Company. However, many drama schools remain inaccessible to deaf students, she said.



Rose Ayling-Ellis is the first deaf performer to appear on Strictly Come Dancing. Photograph: Guy Levy/PA

Garfield added that there is much mainstream theatre can learn from deaf culture, including the expressive nature of sign language, the increased emphasis on physicality and movement, and the use of a visual vernacular.

She underscored the importance of deaf-led “safe spaces” for young people to build the confidence to aim high. This is an approach shared by Hamilton Lodge, the specialist school for deaf children that appeared on Strictly to give a signed message of support to Ayling-Ellis.

“Children are often discouraged from using BSL. I’ve been working in education for 20 years and I’ve seen children damaged from traumatic experiences in the wrong placements. They have a very negative attitude about being deaf, and we repair that. It’s really important that they develop their deaf identity and all our children leave as confident and happy

individuals. Maybe with Rose at the forefront of people's minds that will permeate society and education," said Juliet Grant, head of school.

Hamilton Lodge, in Brighton, also emphasises building deaf awareness in the hearing population, since 11 million people in the UK are deaf or hard of hearing. Sam Caiels, deaf studies coordinator, has appreciated how Pernice has shown a "positive attitude" in finding creative ways to communicate with Ayling-Ellis.

Since this season of Strictly started she has noticed people responding to her differently, for instance lowering their face masks to enable her to lip-read. "Now Rose is on TV the hearing and deaf worlds are not colliding but merging," Caiels said.

Reframing deafness as something to be celebrated rather than a deficiency has a huge influence on how the school's pupils see themselves. Caiels recalled one student who arrived anxious about drama as she had never been picked for plays in her mainstream school. Within a year she had built the confidence to take up a role, and gave a "stunning" performance.

This chimes with the experience of Empress, a year 10 pupil who was among those to deliver the message to Ayling-Ellis. "I went to mainstream school, where I had lots of barriers and breakdowns in communication. When I got to Hamilton I received so much support and lots of deaf role models," she said.

Empress is pleased to add Ayling-Ellis to that list of role models. "It's about time – finally – that there is a deaf person on a high-profile programme," she said. "I've always avoided things like drama in the past, but I've looked at Rose and thought 'my god, she can do it, she's in EastEnders, why can't I give it a go?'"

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Supply chain crisis

Global supply chain crisis could last another two years, warn experts

As some bottlenecks ease others are just starting, meaning the post-pandemic economy ‘won’t return to normal any time soon’



China’s Ningbo Zhoushan port in Zhejiang province, a key shipping hub. A new Covid outbreak in the region has raised fears of further delays in the global shipping system. Photograph: China Stringer Network/Reuters



[Martin Farrer](#)

Sat 18 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

In Britain it's [alcohol](#), in Canada it's [maple syrup](#), while in Australia it's a [crucial additive for diesel trucks](#), and in New Zealand it's [brown sugar](#). These are just some of the many shortages affecting consumers and businesses around the world as industry experts warn that the supply chain crisis prompted by the coronavirus pandemic could last for many more months and even up to two years.

Although there are signs that some bottlenecks are easing, the onset of the Omicron Covid variant could lead to new shutdowns, sending another disruptive spasm through the global system.

The gravest appears to be an outbreak of Covid this week in the Chinese manufacturing hub of Zhejiang, which is home to the world's largest cargo port, Ningbo-Zhoushan. Tens of thousands are in quarantine under China's strict zero-Covid policy and some local authorities have urged workers not to travel home "unnecessarily" for lunar new year festival in February. "Further supply chain disruption is a significant possibility," economic analysts at Capital [Economics](#) said in a note.

Industry experts and economists believe the problems could persist as the finely calibrated network of world trade, already weakened by months of shipping backlogs, labour shortages and geopolitical tensions, remains “discombobulated”.

Maersk, one of the big three shipping companies, said the worst delays were still on the US west coast where ships were waiting four weeks to unload due to the lack of workers on land.



Maersk says the worst shipping delays are on the US west coast.
Photograph: Barcroft Media/Getty Images

This creates a chaotic “ripple effect” around the world with ships locked into tight deadlines and a glut of containers in some ports in the US and Europe, but not enough in ports throughout Asia.

“With winter, year-end holidays in North America and Europe, Chinese new year in Asia, the already stretched supply chain will get even further stretched as workers, truckers and terminals are off for holidays,” a Maersk spokesperson said.

“Normally we can absorb these seasonal impacts fairly quickly, but when already stretched, it just becomes a multiplier.”

“We do not see major improvements as long as we have line of sight, which is into 2022 ... Very likely that it continues thereafter and for North America even longer.”

In Felixstowe, the UK’s biggest container port, the dockside [remains clogged with containers](#) waiting to be emptied, meaning that empty containers coming back on trucks from inland warehouses have to be diverted to other ports.

Robert Keen, of the British International Freight Association, said driver shortages were being felt all over the world with port infrastructure not keeping pace with the container vessels. Covid was “an ongoing problem”, he said.

Flavio Macau, an associate professor specialising in supply chains at Edith Cowan University in Western Australia, said that fine-tuning could take years and that the world economy was still suffering from a kind of “high blood pressure” as it lurched from one disruption to another.

“Lockdowns are hopefully a thing of the past outside China, but there are still all kinds of restrictions in place to the movement of people, including workers with in-demand skills.

“My view is that supply chains still have high blood pressure, consistently showing arrhythmia. It will take to mid-2024 to get back to “normal”.”

As well as the possible shortages of Christmas drinks and sugar for festive treats, economies such as the UK and US [are facing rising inflation](#) across a range of goods from energy to apples as a torrent of demand puts pressure on insufficient supply.

Shipping accounts for the movement of at least 90% of goods around the world and the cost of transporting things by sea has rocketed in the past year. For example, the Drewry world container index measuring the cost of moving a 40ft container [is 170% higher than it was a year ago](#). The price on some particularly in-demand routes such as Shanghai to Rotterdam has increased by almost 200%; in the case of the Dutch port to New York, the cost has risen by 212%.

Basic consumer staples are spiralling in price because of higher shipping costs and heightened demand from consumers stuck at home for months and unable to spend any money on treats such as holidays and nights out. Coffee prices have doubled over the past year, [according to current data](#), as has the price of oats. Lumber, cotton, wheat and palm oil have all risen by more than 30%.

Not surprisingly, inflation has touched decades-long highs in western economies such as the US, Britain and Germany, bringing calls for [an end to the ultra-loose monetary policies](#) pursued by central banks since 2008.

Roy Cummins, who has worked in logistics for 30 years and until recently was chief executive of the Port of Brisbane in Australia, said there was some sense that things were improving but he estimated that constraints on the international shipping network were unlikely to be alleviated for the next two years.

His point is illustrated by the bottleneck of giant containers that has built up off the west coast of the US. With so many ships unable to dock and unload, more than 80% of the 434,000 20ft containers exported out of the Port of Los Angeles in September went out empty. Shipping companies can make up to eight times more money taking goods from China to the US, so it made sense to get the containers back to Asia rather than wait for them to be filled.

This has fulled huge imbalances throughout the system, he said: “The supply chains were discombobulated. Shipping capacity was quickly exhausted at the start of the pandemic because everyone planned for a big decline in demand but in fact there was a surge because people wanted to buy things. Then the supply side was hit hard with ports, warehouses and truck companies all short of workers.

“But you can’t flick a switch and get new capacity back on. New ships are not ready until 2023. Shipping supply should normalise within a year but does the economy normalise?”

Before the pandemic struck, the shipping industry had driven down the cost of transporting goods and had perfected the celebrated “just-in-time” system whereby commodities and spare parts were moved seamlessly around the

globe and delivered exactly when and where they were needed. This reduced corporate costs dramatically, for example by reducing or completely eradicating the need for on-site warehousing.

If the uncertainty continues and consumers carry on with online shopping splurges, Cummins says, “you will see ‘just-in-time’ becoming ‘just-in-case’ as companies build up inventories to guard against disruptions”.

Dennis Unkovic, a US corporate lawyer, trade expert and author of Transforming the Global Supply Chain, says the Covid crisis had shown that the system was dependent on a just-in-time model designed to run perfectly, “but that’s not what’s happened”.

The deterioration in relations between the US and China which led to trade tariffs and loss of trust was also having a bigger impact than hitherto recognised, he says, dislocating the mechanics of world trade that have been taken for granted for many years. Cyber-attacks and robotics have also made companies review their supply chains and source materials closer to home.

“For anyone expecting the post-pandemic world to return to ‘normal’, forget it. Whatever was considered normal before the pandemic is not coming back.

“Companies have to make the supply chain a priority,” he says. “If it breaks down we can’t say we didn’t see it coming.”

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‘Don’t start a sex scene when your mother-in-law is visiting’: how I wrote a novel in a month



‘It’s been a slog, I can’t lie, but there are positives that outweigh that’ ...
Tim Burton. Photograph: David Vintiner/The Guardian

In November, Guardian writer Tim Jonze joined half a million others taking part in National Novel Writing Month. Could he get to the end – and would it be any good?



[Tim Jonze](#)

[@timjonze](#)

Sat 18 Dec 2021 04.00 EST

The story goes that [Peter Cook](#) was at a party in the 1980s when a friend came up to him and declared that he was writing a novel. “Oh really?” the comedian replied. “Neither am I.” Many of us think we have a novel inside us, if only we had the time to write it without work, childcare and Wikipedia articles about the world’s most unusual deaths getting in the way. Some of us even give it a go: painstakingly crafting 600 words or so, before tweaking it repeatedly, fiddling with the font for a bit and then throwing the laptop out of the window.

That person was me. I could never get beyond a few hundred words because whenever I read back the faux-literary waffle I’d put on the page I’d think, “Well, that’s clearly not as good as [Cormac McCarthy](#),” and give up. Earlier this year I took a sabbatical from work and decided to use that time to write a novel, seriously this time. I was amazed by how much I got done: I cleared

out the cellar, sorted the garden and watched two seasons of [Succession](#). But the novel never got beyond the planning stage. Clearly, I needed a kick up the arse.

That came when I heard about National Novel Writing Month (or [NaNoWriMo](#)). Every November, aspiring writers are invited to try to write 50,000 words in just 30 days: it works out as 1,667 words every day. NaNoWriMo has been going since 1999 when San Francisco writer Chris Baty decided he wanted some company while he tried to bash out a book as quickly as possible. Of the 21 participants he rounded up, six managed to hit the total, and so it became an annual event. Last year more than half a million writers took part. It's rumoured that some agents have started to dread the deluge of terrible manuscripts that arrive in its wake. But among the inevitable dross have been remarkable success stories: [The Night Circus](#) author Erin Morgenstern credits NaNoWriMo with getting her into writing seriously: "I used to write a few pages and hate them so I'd stop. Having peer pressure and a deadline worked wonders."

Budding novelists are advised not to edit, or even look back at their work; instead they should just keep moving forward with a whopping word-count as their main goal. This "quantity not quality" approach is not entirely dissimilar to the advice writers such as [Stephen King](#) give: just get the damn thing on the page and worry about making it good later.

Now I am about to become a debut novelist, I decide to plan it in depth as soon as I've taken my two children swimming, sorted the food shop, found my mum a birthday present ... oh god, it's 1 November already ...

Day 1

When I tell my colleagues I'm about to write a novel one of them lights up at the possibilities: "You could write about anything," she says. "It could be about a ninth-century monk in Japan!" Hmm, yes it could, but I might run out of things to talk about once they'd gazed at Mount Fuji and, umm, eaten some rice.

I sign up to the NaNoWriMo website, which asks if I'm a Planner (spend days plotting everything methodically) or a Pantser (fly by the seat of your

pants). I'm definitely in Pantser mode, spending an hour at most sketching out the bare bones of my story – it's to be about a group of old ravers reuniting for a big night out in their 40s, told via flashbacks to their younger days. [Graham Swift's Last Orders](#) for the chemical generation, I tell myself.

The website asks me to pick a genre and I'm immediately stumped. Science fiction? Definitely not. Action? Not really. Erotic? Jesus Christ no. I decide that I should aim high and tick "literary". Then I change the status from "planning" to "in prep" and off I go!

I don't, it has to be said, have the idyllic writer's set up. No oak desk, vintage typewriter or noise-cancelling headphones for me. Instead I am on a laptop at the kitchen table. My day starts at 6am when my son and daughter get up, and ends at around 11pm when I go to sleep – with a full working day in between. That leaves precious little time for writing.

What hits me, somewhat naively, is how much stuff you have to invent ... literally everything!

Unsurprisingly, day one is a real slog: 67 words, 93 words, 128 words ... I've never checked a word count so often. Mercifully, work is quiet today so I get some done in spare moments. By around 5pm I arrive at 1,000 and spend the evening forcing out some turgid prose until it creeps over the daily minimum 1,667 mark. Phew. It feels good but it had better get easier than this.

Day 3

I don't know exactly what my novel is going to be yet, but I already know it won't be literary. I mournfully untick that box.

What hits me, somewhat naively, is how much stuff you have to invent ... literally everything! Every minor character's appearance, every venue's decor, every person's dialect. At one point I find myself Googling "popular Latvian women's names" because I don't know any. I also don't know why the character is Latvian but there is no time to question these things. Onwards I go.

But the questions keep coming. Why is it a cold day in this scene? Why is a helicopter circling overhead? Why does that character enjoy a relatively large degree of financial stability? There are so many decisions to make on the hoof. When one of my characters is at the doctors' he walks out having been prescribed antidepressants. Which is fine until that fact starts interfering with bits of my story later on. I should really go back and change it but I simply refuse to lose 237 words, so the poor chap stays on his meds.

Day 4

Something exciting happens around the 8,000 mark. I was worried my narrative might collapse into dust around this point, but instead I hit my stride. I can see the story stretched out ahead of me and it seems to fit the rough pacing of a novel. I start to know my characters a bit better and when they interact with each other it can result in wild bursts of speed-writing.

By following the NaNoWriMo mantras – stop overthinking! Banish your inner editor! Ignore the terrible prose! – the process of writing becomes genuinely liberating. Subtext, symbolism, or even consistency in a character's backstory can be fiddled with later. The whole point is to get your story down: all your self-conscious hang-ups are forced aside.

A problem has been brewing for a couple of days now: two of my characters are, to put it in literary terms, destined to bang

I start to think about my characters when I'm out and about, doing the school run or commuting. The project becomes all-consuming. And NaNoWriMo helps make it that way by gamifying the whole process: little badges light up when you hit 5,000 words for three days in a row. I resolve never to skip a single day's writing simply so I can one day see the “update your work every day” badge light up.

Day 9

There's a neat little graph on the NaNoWriMo site that plots your progress against where you need to be. Incredibly I've pulled ahead of schedule by 3,000 words. I am on fire! The new [Jack Kerouac](#) and I didn't even need amphetamine! But there is a problem, which has been slowly brewing in my

story for a couple of days now: I can't help but notice that two of my characters are, to put it in literary terms, destined to bang. Could I fudge that in some incredibly coy way? That's not really the spirit of NaNoWriMo, is it?

Day 10

If I had to deliver one piece of advice about writing a sex scene it would be this: don't do it while your mother-in-law has come to stay. Sadly, when you're doing NaNoWriMo all time is precious and so my characters are forced to get it on while my daughter is jumping on her grandma's lap about three feet away. I try to block them out, write as quickly as I can and then slam the laptop shut, feeling rather sordid and promising myself that nobody will ever read this ever again, including me.

Day 13

The weekends are where I'm struggling the most – there are pre-planned social events and I'm knackered from writing during every spare minute I have (the time it takes to boil the kids' pasta becomes a valuable 10-minute slot). I write in a doctors' waiting room. I write in the car while waiting for my daughter to finish gymnastics. But my 3,000 word head start has vanished.

Day 15

By 25,000 words I start to really struggle. At first it was exhilarating to throw off the shackles and plough forward with a stream of nonsense trailing behind me. But now I'm starting to forget what's even happened before: have these characters met already? Did this father have two boys or two girls? Is this guy the one with the Latvian-for-no-reason girlfriend?

Day 17

I make the mistake of glancing back at what I've written so far, which, no matter where I land, always seems like a bit of a shitshow. The lack of proper planning is showing now: the characters all speak with virtually the same voice (mine), or change personalities halfway through. The book is based in Leeds but it could be literally anywhere – Plymouth, Hong Kong, the moon – given how little description I've used.



‘I make the mistake of glancing back at what I’ve written so far ...’
Photograph: David Vintiner/The Guardian; Set Design: Elena Horn;
Grooming: Mira Husseini using Erborian

Day 21

I’m truly fed up of Google searches for things like “90s slang” or “Brickwork in Chapeltown circa 1998” or, embarrassingly, “How to make your characters likable”. (FYI, the latter request says get them to pet an animal early on, which is a relief as one of my characters does rescue an injured bird).

Day 24

My writing hours are 9am-10am and then 9pm-11pm, which is pretty full-on after three weeks, but the end is in sight now. I realise that, barring some major disaster, I am going to get to 50,000 words. I have grave reservations about my book. But the simple style of writing has worked in one way: there is an actual story on the page that at least makes some kind of sense. This feels like an achievement. And a revelation about how much is actually possible if you make it happen.

Day 29

A creative flurry sees me over the line with a whole day to spare. I can’t lie, it feels good! I’ve somehow written 50,107 words. Tomorrow, I will add a

couple hundred more to make that extra shiny badge light up. And then I will have a lie down.

Aftermath

Stephen King advises that you take a few weeks off before you read what you've written. Before I get to that stage I promise to finish off the story, which I think should come in at around 80,000 words. I sense what I have is quite bad, but just how bad I honestly won't know until I go back to it.

It's been a slog, I can't lie, but there are positives that outweigh that. The features I write for the Guardian when I'm not cosplaying as Graham Swift now seem to come together much quicker than they did before. I'd also been struggling, since about six months into the pandemic, with a strange malaise that had been hard to shake. This project, which I doubted I had the time or energy for, helped shake me out of it. My mental health got a significant boost.

Best of all, though, is simply the achievement that – good or bad – I have written (most of) a novel. Not everyone can say that. And if I bumped into Peter Cook at an 80s party to tell him I was writing one he would be forced to say: "That's extremely impressive Tim, well done you ... although why is there a Latvian woman in chapter one for no reason?"

Opening of Chapter One

From across the road, Sam took the opportunity to examine his friend. Robert Hunter was waiting for a break in the traffic, lurching from left to right, as if seriously contemplating leaping through the gap between trailing cars. He'd come straight from work: shiny brown brogues, a patterned shirt and waistcoat, hair slicked back. It made Sam think of a conversation he'd caught a snippet of at work: "Why does she keep setting me up with boys in bootcuts and pointy shoes?" What she'd been wary of was men like Hunter, and with good reason.

An agent's view

by Karolina Sutton of Curtis Brown, whose clients include Margaret Atwood and Haruki Murakami

Well done, Tim! You've completed a first draft and that's no mean feat. I have been given as little time to read it as NaNoWriMo has allowed you to write it, the clock ticking in the background for both of us

The novel is set in a university friendship group: a recollection followed by a reunion, all inspired by a group photograph.

University friendship groups have always fascinated first-time novelists. The boarding school or university experience closely follow a natural rhythm of a story with transformation and initiation written into its fabric. Throwing characters into a new group dynamic, taking away their safety net, making them step into adulthood and at the same time thwarting their journeys with reckless distractions are all tropes that have served writers well for centuries.

With little notice and a crushing deadline, Tim followed a good instinct of working his story into a classic Bildungsroman. It's an atmospheric and deeply felt novel committed to reconstructing an authentic 90s experience and it certainly succeeds on those terms. I liked its honest study of masculinity, specific to that decade, but although it felt authentic, I wanted it to be more surprising. For me, where the novel faltered was in its heavy use

of predictable tropes: infatuations, friendships, drugs and a death that felt far too familiar. If, as a novelist, you follow a well-trodden path, your readers' expectations for an original take, be it a voice or a plot twist, will be propelled sky high. I would say to Tim: if you want this story to fly then you need to bring something uniquely yours to it, a real point of difference.

As for the writing itself, I feel Tim showed an excellent instinct for individual scenes, but I would advise him to pay more attention to pacing between them. Some changes in point of view felt a bit ad hoc and the novel's first half was noticeably more developed than the rest, but that's only natural when writing to an impossibly tight deadline.

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2021.12.18 - Opinion

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Opinion**Boris Johnson**

The Brexit 'n' Boris formula was a winner for the Tories. Now it's falling apart

[Jonathan Freedland](#)



Johnson was a magnet for new voters. But many are appalled by his lies, and traditional Conservatives don't trust him either



Liberal Democrats Helen Morgan and Tim Farron at a rally in Oswestry, Shropshire, after her victory in the North Shropshire by-election, 17 December 2021. Photograph: Jacob King/PA

Fri 17 Dec 2021 11.32 EST

At last. For the first time since he became prime minister, Boris Johnson is paying a direct price for his actions. For two long years, he seemed to defy the laws of political gravity, somehow floating high in the sky when his conduct, whether his lies or [his failures](#), should have seen him crash to the ground.

His mishandling of the first phase of the pandemic was so disastrous, he presided over both the [highest death toll in Europe](#) and the deepest economic slump in the G7. It was a record of both calamitous misjudgment and [corruption](#), as contracts worth hundreds of millions were funnelled to those with friends in high Tory places. He appointed [useless ministers](#), several of whom became [mired in scandal](#). And yet Johnson remained aloft, riding the warm air currents of consistent leads in the opinion polls.

His admirers said he was a politician like no other, immune to the pressures that would bring down lesser mortals. That immunity fed a sense of

impunity. But in the early hours of Friday morning, among the fields and farms of North Shropshire, [Johnson fell to earth](#).

The Tories [took a beating](#) in this byelection, losing a seat they had held for the best part of two centuries. Only once before had they seen a [bigger collapse](#) of their vote to the Liberal Democrats (or its predecessor parties), and that was three decades ago. Talk to those involved, on all sides, and they agree that voters were driven chiefly by fury with the prime minister – over the revelations of Downing Street partying when the rest of the country was locked down against a killer disease, and what one minister calls the general “shitshow” of this government.

This result, coupled with a now steady if not huge Labour [poll lead](#), has Conservative MPs rattled. They are alarmed especially by the way the anti-Conservative voters of North Shropshire organised themselves, as Labour and Green supporters put aside their affiliations to vote for the candidate best placed to defeat the Tory. Tactical voting cost the Conservatives about [30 seats in 1997](#): if the next general election is close, and that pattern were repeated, it could make the difference between victory and defeat.

No less troubling for Conservative HQ is the prospect of Lib Dems revived: if Labour is to be in power, it needs the Lib Dems to do well, capturing Tory seats that are out of Labour’s reach. Little wonder twitchy Tory MPs are now debating how long they should give Johnson to get his act together: “one more strike and he’s out” or let him stagger on to contest the local elections in May. He has, says Ruth Davidson, been “[put on warning by his MPs](#)”.

Of course, we should not get carried away. It’s only one byelection, fought in deeply inhospitable conditions for the government – asking voters to back them in a contest triggered by an MP [resigning in disgrace](#). That said, it’s the specific contours of North Shropshire that should have Conservatives seriously worried. For they suggest that the formula that won the party its 80-seat majority in 2019 is disintegrating.

A core ingredient two years ago was Brexit. Johnson’s promise to Get Brexit Done forged a new electoral coalition and seemed to presage a realignment of British politics, allowing the Tories to make inroads in historically hostile

territory. That should have made North Shropshire doubly safe, not only as a Tory bastion since the Great Reform Act, but as a place where [60% voted leave](#). And yet the constituency spurned Johnson as vehemently as any remaine city.

To be clear, this was not a repudiation of Brexit – though farmers in the constituency, like others across the country, are livid at post-Brexit free trade deals that will, among other things, dump [cheap Australian beef](#) into the UK market. Rather it means that exit from the EU no longer performs the function it once did, acting as the glorious, redemptive promise for which all other sins might be forgiven. In 2019, voters were ready to overlook any misgivings they might have had about the Tories – including, in those “red wall” seats, the fact that they were Tories – for the prospect of getting Brexit done. Now, even in the Conservative heartland and even among hardcore leavers, departure from the EU is not enough to wash away the sins of [booze, nibbles and party games](#), or Paterson’s fat [Randox contracts](#).

A second ingredient was Johnson himself, the famed [Heineken](#) politician. Except in North Shropshire he became the man who repelled the parts every other Tory leader used to reach. That’s a reverse Heineken.

Throughout his career, including as mayor of London, Johnson’s trick, revered by his devotees as a superpower, was to appeal to voters who didn’t much like Tories. Indeed, his appeal was tacitly predicated on an understanding that the Conservative party was a damaged brand. But the events of recent weeks have seen that trick unravel, with Johnson becoming the very embodiment of the “same old Tories”.

One Conservative frontbencher says the prime minister has confirmed the suspicion many voters always had: that “when you peek behind the curtain, Tories are privileged, sneering elites who take the rest of us for fools”. Once cherished for defying the Tory stereotype of stuffy formality, Johnson now incarnates a much more poisonous set of tropes: that Tories believe it’s one rule for them, one rule for everyone else; that they look out for themselves and their mates; that they’re pampered and spoilt, laughing at those who are less lucky. That grates on those who lent their votes to Johnson in 2019, believing he was not like the others. But it rankles too with traditional Tories, like those who voted on Thursday, who have, says that Tory MP,

concluded that the prime minister is “someone whose morals and character they don’t like or respect”.

None of this is going to get better soon for the Conservatives. There is discontent across the kingdom, with voters in the north angry that “levelling up” remains more rhetorical than real, voters in the “blue wall” south angry about ugly housing developments dumped in their backyards, and all of them hit by the rising cost of living, rising interest rates, rising taxes and the prospect of losing their homes to pay for social care.

For Labour, a couple of big questions now loom. First, can it rely on tactical voting to work as smoothly in a general election as it did in North Shropshire, or does it need to make currently unspoken alliances with Lib Dems and the Greens more explicit? Second, does it serve the party better to see the Tories remove the prime minister, or would a wounded, tainted Johnson be easier to beat? As dilemmas go, these are far more comfortable than the ones that have tended to afflict the party in recent years. Indeed, with a newly vigorous shadow cabinet, Labour can look to 2022 with rather more confidence than it has felt for most of the last decade. The Tories may yet defy the odds and even the fates – but they can no longer defy gravity.

- Jonathan Freedland is a Guardian columnist
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Opinion**Conservatives**

Tories know Johnson lost them North Shropshire. They may now dispense with him

Katy Balls



Frustrated MPs across the party have little reason to support the prime minister unless he can quickly repair his rift with voters



Conservative candidate Neil Shastri-Hurst after losing the North Shropshire byelection, Shrewsbury, 17 December 2021. Photograph: Paul Ellis/AFP/Getty Images

Fri 17 Dec 2021 05.21 EST

After the local elections in May, cabinet ministers and supporters of Boris Johnson were keen to talk up a new decade of “Johnsonism”. The idea was that the Tories taking [Hartlepool from Labour](#) in the byelection was proof that the 2019 Tory electoral triumph was no blip. Instead, it was part of a wider political alignment that could see the prime minister outlast Margaret Thatcher.

After the result of the [North Shropshire byelection](#), that hypothesis is looking rather optimistic. Overnight the Liberal Democrats have managed to overturn a [majority of more than 20,000](#) in a seat that has been Tory since it was re-established in 1983. What’s more, the Lib Dems did so with votes to spare – earning a majority of 5,925.

[Graphic](#)

Given the Lib Dems only came [third in the seat in 2019](#) – with Labour second – it is more than a shock result. The [polling expert John Curtice](#) has

described it as 8.5 on the Richter scale. In other words, a political earthquake.

It points to problems ahead for the Conservative brand – and Boris Johnson’s own position. For the prime minister, it caps off a miserable month in which he has found himself under fire over Tory sleaze, Covid restrictions, “[partygate](#)” and general questions about his Downing Street operation.

Ever since the byelection was called, there were concerns in Conservative campaign headquarters over the vote. Given it was sparked by [Owen Paterson’s decision](#) to quit the Commons after a botched attempt by No 10 to spare the Tory MP a suspension over a breach of lobbying rules, it was vulnerable to an anti-Tory protest vote.

But what worries those Tories who have been out canvassing is that sleaze only came up occasionally. Instead, the complaints from voters that the [Conservatives](#) once relied on in the area pointed to a wider dissatisfaction with the party, and more specifically the prime minister.

As in [Chesham and Amersham](#) – which the Lib Dems also took from the Conservatives – traditional Tory voters complained that they were being taken for granted by this government. There is a feeling that “levelling up” has little to offer agricultural constituencies such as North Shropshire. What’s more, this result suggests that the factors that helped the Tories cruise to victory in 2019 are going fast. In a constituency that voted to leave, Brexit is a much less potent issue than it was two years ago.

Rather than Paterson, the issue that came up more regularly early on on the doorstep was [Johnson’s rambling CBI speech](#) to business leaders in which he waxed lyrical about Peppa Pig World. “They kept saying he just wasn’t a serious person,” says one Lib Dem working on the seat. To those in CCHQ, the focus on Peppa Pig didn’t come as a huge surprise – it chimed with their own intel.

As the campaign progressed, the conversation turned to “partygate”. Despite attempts by ministers to write off allegations over alleged breaches of Covid rules in Downing Street last year as a Westminster bubble story, it became a

live issue on the ground. “We were shoring up the vote and then the party video came out. We were done,” says one Tory staffer of the impact of the Downing Street video leak of [No 10 staff joking about a party](#).

One Tory supporter tasked with phone canvassing started to worry when not a single person they spoke to said they planned to vote Tory. The only glimmer of hope they had was that some supporters had opted for postal votes so backed the party before it all kicked off.

Ahead of polling day, there was talk that a Tory loss could trigger a [vote of no confidence](#) in Boris Johnson. There is clear anger among MPs, with John Redwood [taking to social media](#) to say it’s time for the government to “listen to Conservatives”. However, senior Tories are telling colleagues now is not the time for a leadership contest. The fact that parliament has risen for Christmas ought to give Johnson breathing space. “Everyone is furious, but they are also now at home so hopefully there can be a moment of reflection,” says one Tory MP.

But what if that moment of reflection leads MPs to conclude that Johnson has gone from being a voter asset to an electoral liability? The prime minister’s remaining allies argue that this is a midterm blip – that it is more common for the governing party to lose by-elections than to win them. There were also local issues that played a factor.

[Graphic](#)

But after a tricky few weeks for Johnson, it is impossible to separate the prime minister from the result. Tory MPs believe he was a key factor on the doorstep. The result points to issues in a general election. While by-elections are more vulnerable to protest votes, the North Shropshire vote shows how tactical voting has the potential to wound the Tories at the next election.

There is a particular concern among those MPs in Lib Dem-facing seats, of which there are about 50. But the problem goes further. “If we can’t keep a majority in a true blue seat that voted heavily to leave, where can we?” asks one frustrated Tory MP.

Most immediately, the North Shropshire by-election is a problem for Johnson's own authority. His MPs have been willing to begrudgingly put up with things they don't agree with – such as tax rises and Covid restrictions – when they believed Johnson had the support of the public. If they start to see him as the central problem, the calculation will change. Johnson will find it even harder to get his agenda through.

Already Tory MPs from across the party are openly discussing whether he can really lead them into the next election. As the prime minister takes a break over Christmas, he will need to use that time to work out how to regain the support of his party. Otherwise, 2022 will be his most turbulent year yet.

- Katy Balls is the Spectator's deputy political editor
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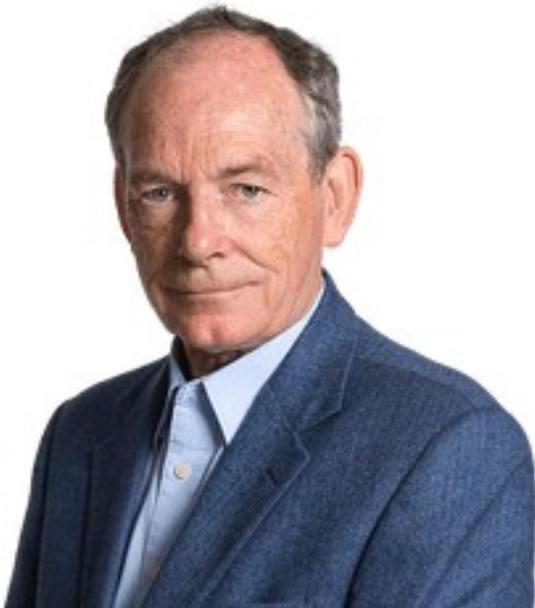
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OpinionPolitics

Weak, crumbling and falling apart – parliament is a lot like Boris Johnson

[Simon Jenkins](#)



This endless aggression is a tired way of conducting democracy. As we rebuild the House of Commons, let's remake politics too



‘Parliament woke up and hit back as Tory MPs took the opportunity to disagree with Johnson’s leadership and vote no confidence in him.’
Photograph: UK Parliament/Jessica Taylor/PA

Fri 17 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

Can there be a silver lining to the disaster that is Covid? It happens in wars when societies shift focus and priority. It should happen in pandemics, too.

Boris Johnson has adopted a presidential style of government. He rules, as we saw on Sunday, by television performance and press conferences during which he is in control. Apart from his weekly fisticuffs with Keir Starmer at prime minister’s questions, that is all the Johnson we get. As the political theorist and activist Thomas Paine once said, he touches the Commons “with an opium wand, and it sleeps obedience”.

This week parliament woke up and hit back. Tory MPs did not seriously disagree with the government’s Covid policy, which they knew would pass. But 100 of them took the opportunity to disagree with Johnson’s leadership and, in effect, vote no confidence in him. They gave him a formal warning.

With its blood pressure thus raised, can we hope that parliament might now take a serious look at itself? It has had a terrible year. MPs have been

[revealed as paid lobbyists](#). Many are moonlighting. Corruption allegations are rife. During lockdown the old chamber seemed tired and stilted. MPs found to their surprise that they could vote – and even speak – electronically from home, and no one noticed any difference. The Lords survived yet another [bought peerages scandal](#), its 783-strong membership apparently past all shame.

Next year parliament faces a new crisis. It must decide whether to move out to make way for yet another round of rebuilding. Most of the palace of Westminster was supposedly renovated in the 1980s, when asbestos was removed and architect Augustus Pugin's interiors restored. The interiors were said at the time to be “to a Versailles standard”. Since then the palace’s entire roof has just been replaced, at a cost of £80m, and Big Ben is in the process of being renovated over the course of five years and a further £80m.

Curiously, much of it seems to need doing again. The Commons in 2015 turned to Whitehall’s favourite firm of consultants, [Deloitte](#), with the architects BDP and the US Olympics contractor, CH2M in tow,. The conclusion was that the palace needed to be rebuilt. MPs were advised that they would need to [decant for four years](#) into a temporary chamber down the road off Whitehall, at a cost of £1bn. MPs said the chamber should be an exact facsimile, with even the voting lobbies recreated even if that meant, as it did, [demolishing the listed former department of health](#). The Lords, meanwhile, would take over the entire QEII centre, at a cost of £500m, complete with rooftop terrace restaurant.

The price of this whole operation began at between £3.5bn and £5.6bn. It has now soared, according to Meg Hillier of the public accounts committee, to [nearer £12bn](#). No one in parliament seemed to have any interest in challenging this. If the MPs were local councillors, someone would have sent in commissioners.

Since these proposals were first mooted, suspicion has grown that the Commons, or at least the taxpayer, was buying a pig in a poke. Lockdown has showed MPs that hybrid working can actually work. Most MPs do just three or four days in London and the Commons chamber is rarely full, except for during PMQs. Most serious parliamentary activity in terms of

select committee hearings and legislative work is in office rooms, and they could be anywhere.

If a decent were really necessary, it would clearly be an ideal opportunity for image-building, moving MPs and peers not just out of Westminster but out of London for the requisite three years. Nothing would convey more symbolically the sincerity of “levelling up”. The opportunity could also be taken to experiment with a non-confrontational chamber layout. Most democratic assemblies are arranged in a semicircle, conveying individual responsibility rather than Westminster’s baying mobs. The layout is thought to yield more reasoned and less partisan debate.

This would also be a moment to refresh parliament’s constitutional functions. Its deliberative role has long declined in favour of the press and broadcasting, and that is probably terminal. But its legislative role is important. Public bill committees should be given higher profile and their debates conducted in the open. During the recent German interregnum, Bundestag laws were argued, compromised and voted on, ad hoc, by multiparty committees. They were, I am told, remarkably non-partisan and successful.

Where the Commons most needs to reform itself is in its role as a check on the executive. The Speaker, Lindsay Hoyle, was furious this week at Johnson treating parliament with contempt. Important policy decisions, he said, should be reported to parliament before being announced on TV or to the press.

The trouble is that the Commons makes an awful press conference. It is set up as a bifocal battleground, with aggressive or defensive posturing at the dispatch box. If MPs want to hear ministerial announcements – as they should – they would do better to stage their own hearings in a sober setting and with sober questions asked. They have got to get over tradition.

The reality is that parliament is a weak not a strong institution. It lacks leadership or the confidence to reform itself. Like an archaic church, it takes refuge in precedent and tradition. There is never the right time to reform.

Lockdown has shown that upheaval and disruption can challenge old ways. Much of education can be performed online without formal lectures. So can the courts of law. Office work need not be shoehorned into a long commute and an eight-hour day. We can now shop at the touch of a button. I know of no one whose work and thus life has not been altered by coronavirus. This may be bad for some, but for others the cloud can have a silver lining. Those others should include parliament.

- Simon Jenkins is a Guardian columnist
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[Opinion](#)[Liberal Democrats](#)

People are angry – and now we've shown that Johnson's Tories can be beaten anywhere

[Ed Davey](#)

The brilliant Lib Dem victory in North Shropshire is part of a trend; the default setting of 'vote Tory' has been broken



'In Helen Morgan, voters in Shropshire saw a community activist who shared their anger at an underfunded health service and at soaring ambulance waiting times.' Photograph: Christopher Furlong/Getty Images

Fri 17 Dec 2021 05.41 EST

As the nights draw in and the days grow shorter, the people of North Shropshire have lit a flame of hope to brighten our nation.

The Liberal Democrats have defeated [Boris Johnson in Shropshire](#), just as we did in [Buckinghamshire in June](#). Two heartland Tory constituencies, more than 150 miles apart, written off as foregone conclusions at every past election. Until now.

[Graphic](#)

My party has shown that the [Conservatives](#) can be beaten anywhere – because across the villages, towns and cities of our country, people are fed up and angry.

Throughout the North Shropshire campaign, I spoke to lifelong Conservative voters who had decided enough was enough. Many told me loud and clear – they will never vote Tory again.

In North Shropshire and earlier this year in Chesham and Amersham we have seen a fundamental realignment of British politics, a generational shift, in which the default setting of “vote Tory” has been reset.

It is not just traditional Tory voters who backed the [Liberal Democrats](#) in this byelection. Once it became clear my party was the local challenger to the Conservatives, thousands of Green and Labour voters supporters voted for us too. That is a powerful message for the progressive future of our country – and a clear path for voting Johnson out of office.

It's important for our shared goal of beating Johnson and the Conservatives to remember that North Shropshire was not just about national issues and the national mood: it was very much also about community politics. I've always believed that you cannot change the country until you have won the trust of local communities.

Our new MP Helen Morgan is a fantastic local campaigner rooted in her community. On doorstep after doorstep she won us support.

02:34

'Common sense at the ballot box': Lib Dem Helen Morgan's victory speech – video

In her, voters in Shropshire saw a community activist who shared their anger at an underfunded health service and at soaring ambulance waiting times. They saw a local resident who understands the struggles their high street shops and local businesses are facing in a time of great uncertainty. Above all, they saw someone like them, who lives and breathes their community, and is determined to make local people's lives better.

The next few months will be tough for Britain. With Covid infections rising, schools shutting early, and the soaring cost of living hitting pockets hard, we need a government that will listen and act.

Yet in Johnson's Conservatives, we have a government and a party that's not even listening to the scientists and that's taking people for granted.

I want last night's results to show the British public that there is an alternative to the Conservative party.

The Liberal Democrats will stand up for communities and demand a fair deal for everyone. This means better schools, safer streets and an NHS given every resource necessary so everyone receives the care they need.

Delivering on that fair deal starts with listening to people. In North Shropshire, just as in Chesham and Amersham, we have shown that when a political party takes the time to listen people will give them a chance.

Thanks to the people of North Shropshire, the beginning of the end of Boris Johnson is finally here.

- Ed Davey is the leader of the Liberal Democrats and MP for Kingston and Surbiton
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2021.12.18 - Around the world

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- [Ukraine Russia issues list of demands it says must be met to lower tensions in Europe](#)
- [Elizabeth Holmes trial Jury deliberations begin for Theranos founder](#)
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- [Rod Stewart Singer and his son plead guilty to battery in 2019 Florida altercation case](#)

[The Observer](#)[Hong Kong](#)

Hong Kong ‘patriots’ election casts doubt over democracy as city enters new era

Critics describe Sunday’s vote as ‘illegitimate’ as Beijing tightens its crackdown on dissent and pro-democracy movement is wiped out



An overhaul of the electoral system has gutted the partial democracy Hong Kong once had and made it effectively impossible for the opposition to win a majority. Photograph: Anthony Kwan/Getty Images



Helen Davidson

@heldavidson

Fri 17 Dec 2021 16.00 EST

Days before Hong Kong's legislative council election, 15 months after it was supposed to be held, former legislator Ted Hui is on the phone from Adelaide railing against the government. In the southern Australian city he is far from the [Hong Kong](#) warrants for his arrest and instead in a place where, unlike many of his former colleagues, he can speak freely.

“For the Hong Kong people there are not many choices now but to accept illegitimate elections. The parliament is going to be a rubber stamp for Beijing and this election carries no democratic element at all.”

More than two years into a brutal crackdown on dissent by Beijing and its supporting government in Hong Kong, the city of 7.5 million people has been fundamentally changed. The pro-democracy movement has been crushed and its biggest advocates and fighters jailed, silenced, or sent fleeing overseas. Under a campaign dubbed “patriots run Hong Kong”, an overhaul of the electoral system has gutted the partial democracy Hong Kong once had, and made it effectively impossible for the opposition to win a majority.

“Anyone who’s not against the government is a ‘patriot’,” says Hui. “Anyone who doesn’t speak up against democracy and freedom is a ‘patriot’.”

The new system reduced the proportion of legislators Hong Kongers could directly elect from 53% to 22%. A restructured election committee, which appoints the chief executive from a Beijing-approved shortlist, now has the power to fill 40 of the 90 seats with its own members. The committee is comprised of 1,500 people chosen from among pre-vetted candidates by fewer than 5,000 [eligible voters](#) in September.

The new government vetting judges the past behaviour and current sincerity to ensure their genuine “patriotism” for Hong Kong’s ultimate rulers, the Chinese Communist Party. Just one candidate not considered strictly pro-establishment [was elected](#) to the committee, and numerous potential election candidates have already been disqualified.

Hong Kong authorities have issued arrest warrants for two other self-exiled activists who have made similar calls for Hongkongers to boycott or cast protest votes in the upcoming legislative polls under the city’s electoral laws, which they say apply internationally.

“These used to be spirited dynamic electoral competitions, and that was really special in Hong Kong,” says Jeffrey Wasserstrom, a Chinese history professor at the University of California, Irvine. “But I think it’s going to one of these things – like a lot of things in Hong Kong these days - that used to be notable for their vibrance and activity but are now notable for their absence.”



Fishmongers work next to campaign posters on the wall at a market in Hong Kong. Photograph: Peter Parks/AFP/Getty Images

Hui says the only choice now for people is to cast a blank or informal vote, or to boycott entirely.

Under laws passed in May, such calls are now illegal. At least three people have been arrested for allegedly sharing online messages to cast blanks, and there are arrest warrants for Hui and fellow legislator-in-exile, Yau Man-chun. A recent Wall Street Journal editorial saying “boycotts and blank ballots are one of the last ways for Hong Kongers to express their political views” drew warnings from the government of “necessary action” against the outlet for allegedly inciting others to not vote.

Conversely, earlier this year political parties were warned that failing to run candidates could be seen as a boycott, potentially breaching the national security law.

Elections postponed

Yet the government is brooking no claims that the changes have dampened Hong Kong’s democracy. Last week the director of Beijing’s Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office, Xia Baolong, declared Hong Kongers were

finally about to experience a real democracy, having wasted so much time “blindly seeking” the Western style.

“It brought social divisions, vicious fights, causing crises such as a disorderly society, an imbalanced economy and ineffective governance,” he said. “The Chinese people have never been so confident in the socialist democratic system with Chinese characteristics as they are today.”

The legislative council election was first scheduled for September 2020 but postponed for a year, citing safety concerns over the pandemic. It was postponed again after Beijing announced [the overhaul](#).

Observers suggested postponement and changes might have been driven less by Covid than the 2019 elections for the lower-rung district councils, when all but one seat were won by pro-democracy candidates, embarrassing a government which was insisting such views were fringe.

Nine months later, the chief executive Carrie Lam announced the first postponement for the major election.



Ten of thousands of protesters flood the streets of Hong Kong in July 2019.
Photograph: Kin Cheung/AP

A city changed

Hong Kong never obtained the universal suffrage promised at the 1997 handover from British to Chinese rule. But it had a vibrant opposition and a robust political system allowing democratic participation at most levels of government. Civil society was strong, and demonstrations frequent.

But then the 2019 pro-democracy protests brought the city to a standstill, drawing as many as one in four Hong Kongers to the streets and rattling authorities. A brutal crackdown followed, then the national security law, outlawing anything authorities deem to be secession, subversion, terrorism or collusion with foreign forces.

Among [the more than 130 arrested](#) under the law were 47 candidates, veteran campaigners and serving legislators for holding unofficial election primaries, a common feature of Hong Kong politics but later classified as illegal. Most have been remanded in jail awaiting trial, alongside [a growing list of political activists](#). The opposition camp resigned en masse in protest.

UK-based Hong Kong Watch and self-exiled Hong Kong activist Ray Wong launched a social media campaign “#Releasemycandidate” on Wednesday to call for a boycott of the elections and the release of the 47 candidates. Thirty-two of the candidates charged have remained behind bars for the past ten months after being denied bail.

The “#Releasemycandidate” hashtag was reposted by activists and politicians worldwide, including from the UK, Europe, Japan, Australia and the US.

“[T]he upcoming LegCo election doesn’t reflect the voices of Hongkongers and we demand the release of our candidates, the pro-democracy activists behind bars,” Hong Kong activist Joey Siu tweeted.

A sense of hopelessness, pessimism and fear now pervades the city. Of the prominent Hong Kongers the Guardian has interviewed in recent years most are now jailed or have fled overseas. Others decline to speak for fear they’ll

be accused of foreign collusion – as has happened to others like jailed legislator Claudia Mo.

In recent months civil society groups and unions have disbanded and been accused of foreign collusion and sedition. The creation or broadcast of “subversive” content has been criminalised, and Hong Kong’s vaunted judiciary was told it should reflect Beijing’s will.

In his speech last week Xia appeared to send an ominous warning to those he deemed “anti-China-Hong Kong rebels who forget their ancestors and collude with external forces”.

“No matter where they flee, they will eventually be nailed to the pillar of shame of history and will be punished as they deserve,” he said.

‘Distressed and disillusioned’

Recent polling has predicted a record low turnout for Sunday of less than 50%, even with the government opening up voting to Hong Kong residents on the mainland for the first time. On Wednesday Lam told Chinese state media that a low voter turnout was both meaningless and a positive sign for her administration.

“There is a saying that when the government is doing well and its credibility is high, the voter turnout will decrease because the people do not have a strong demand to choose different lawmakers to supervise the government.”

Hui describes her comments as laughable. “The regime is trying to manage expectations so people know that it will be OK to have a low voting turnout,” he says.

“I believe people have lost interest totally in the elections. They don’t feel engaged at all. I’d say the majority of the people will decide not to vote.”

Emily Lau, a veteran pro-democracy politician, recently told CNBC Hong Kongers had become distressed and disillusioned. “We probably have lost our freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, freedom of demonstration, maybe not forever, but for many, many years,” she said.

With opposition already crushed, the results of the vote won't make much of a difference, but people will still try to make quiet expressions of discontent, says Wasserstrom.

"It would be wrong to think of the Hong Kong story as over in that sense, but this is the kind of blow where something larger would probably need to change in the wider world in the way the CP governs as a whole for there to be a real shift."

Additional reporting by Rhoda Kwan

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Russia

Russia issues list of demands it says must be met to lower tensions in Europe

Contentious security guarantees Moscow is seeking include a ban on Ukraine from entering Nato



Russian truck-mounted rocket launchers during military drills near Orenburg. Photograph: Russian Defence Ministry Press Service/EPA

[Andrew Roth](#) in Moscow

Fri 17 Dec 2021 09.16 EST

Russia has put forward a highly contentious list of security guarantees it says it wants the west to agree to in order to lower tensions in Europe and defuse the crisis over [Ukraine](#), including many elements that have already been ruled out.

The demands include a ban on Ukraine entering [Nato](#) and a limit to the deployment of troops and weapons to Nato's eastern flank, in effect returning Nato forces to where they were stationed in 1997, before an eastward expansion.

The eight-point draft treaty was released by Russia's foreign ministry as its forces [massed within striking distance of Ukraine's borders](#). Moscow said ignoring its interests would lead to a "military response" similar to the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.

Vladimir Putin has demanded that the west provide Russia "legal guarantees" of its security. But the Kremlin's aggressive proposals are likely to be rejected in western capitals as an attempt to formalise a new Russian sphere of influence over eastern Europe.

The demands, spelled out by Moscow in full for the first time, were handed over to the US this week. They include a demand that Nato remove any troops or weapons deployed to countries that entered the alliance after 1997, which would include much of eastern [Europe](#), including Poland, the former Soviet countries of Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, and the Balkan countries.

Russia has also demanded that Nato rule out further expansion, including the accession of Ukraine into the alliance, and that it does not hold drills without previous agreement from [Russia](#) in Ukraine, eastern Europe, in Caucasus countries such as Georgia or in Central Asia.

Those proposals are likely to be viewed extremely negatively by Nato countries, in particular Poland and the Baltic states. They have warned that Russia is attempting to re-establish a sphere of influence in the region and view the document as proof Moscow is seeking to limit their sovereignty.

A senior US official said on Friday that the Kremlin knows that some parts of its proposals were "unacceptable".

The Nato head, Jens Stoltenberg, has already ruled out any agreements denying Ukraine the right to enter the military alliance, saying it is up to Ukraine and the 30 Nato countries. There are already major obstacles to

Ukraine entering the alliance, including its territorial dispute with Russia over annexed Crimea.

The Russia document also calls for the two countries to pull back any short- or medium-range missile systems out of reach, replacing the previous intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF) treaty that the US left in 2018.

The White House press secretary, Jen Psaki, said the US had seen proposals from Russia to start talks and was speaking with its European allies and partners, Reuters reported.

“There will be no talks on European security without our European allies and partners,” Psaki told reporters.

The Russian deputy foreign minister, Sergei Ryabkov, said on Friday that there was no deadline for talks but that Russia wants to begin negotiations “without delays and without stalling”.

“We can go any place and any time, even tomorrow,” he said in animated remarks.

Asked whether he thought the requests were unreasonable, he said no. “This is not about us giving some kind of ultimatum, there is none. The thing is that the seriousness of our warning should not be underestimated,” he said.

Dmitri Trenin, the head of the Carnegie Moscow Center, wrote that Russia’s public release of its proposed agreements “may suggest that Moscow [rightly] considers their acceptance by west unlikely”.

“This logically means that [Russia] will have to assure its security single-handedly, most probably by mil-tech [military technical] means,” he wrote.

Western countries have warned that Russia may be preparing an invasion of Ukraine in January as Russian tanks, artillery and missiles have massed near borders. The Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, has called on the west for additional aid in case Russia decides to launch a broader offensive.

On Friday, Ukraine said one of its soldiers was killed during fighting with Russian-backed separatists in the east of the country. He was reportedly

killed in an attack using grenade launchers and mortars.

The latest death brings Ukraine's toll in the simmering conflict to 65 since the start of the year, according to an AFP tally based on official figures, compared with 50 in 2020. The conflict in eastern Ukraine has so far left more than 13,000 people dead.

Russia has massed about 100,000 troops on its side of the border. Joe Biden has warned Putin of "sanctions like he's never seen" should his troops attack Ukraine. On Thursday, European Union leaders urged Moscow to halt its military buildup and return to talks led by France and Germany.

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Theranos

Elizabeth Holmes trial: jury to begin deliberations in Theranos founder's case

Former CEO faces a maximum of 20 years in prison on nine counts of fraud and two counts of conspiracy to commit fraud



Theranos founder Elizabeth Holmes is facing up to 20 years in prison as the jury begins deliberations in her fraud trial. Photograph: Brittany Hosea-Small/Reuters

[Kari Paul](#) in San Jose

Fri 17 Dec 2021 20.58 EST

After months of criminal proceedings that have gripped [Silicon Valley](#), the fate of Theranos founder Elizabeth Holmes now rests in the hands of 12 jurors.

A group of eight men and four women will consider whether to convict or exonerate Holmes, 37, on nine counts of fraud and two counts of conspiracy to commit fraud. Deliberations are expected to begin on Monday.

Holmes faces a maximum of 20 years in prison and has [pledged not guilty](#).

Throughout the trial and in closing statements on Thursday, the prosecution sought to prove Holmes knowingly lied to investors and patients, arguing she purposely oversold the capabilities of the company's devices to attain wealth and fame.

Calling [more than 30 witnesses](#) including investors, patients, and former employees, lawyers for the prosecution [painted a picture](#) of a founder hell-bent on making her technology succeed despite mounting evidence that her claims were largely baseless.

Prosecutor Jeff Schenk presented to the jury a recap of arguments that Holmes knowingly lied about the capabilities of [Theranos](#) testing, saying the evidence shows "she made the decision to defraud her investors and then to defraud her patients"

"She chose fraud over business failure. She choose to be dishonest with investors and patients," he said. "That choice was not only callous, it was criminal."

Holmes founded the company at the center of the case in 2004 after dropping out of Stanford, seeking to revolutionize the health care space with a machine that could perform a vast range of tests from just one drop of blood.

As a female founder in the male-dominated tech space, Holmes quickly soared to fame, attracting funding from big name investors like the former US secretary of state George Schultz and media mogul Rupert Murdoch. The company had amassed more than \$9bn in value when reports from the Wall Street Journal revealed major concerns in its revolutionary claims.

During the trial, multiple lab directors testified they warned Holmes about shortcomings of Theranos technology and were told to downplay such

concerns. Meanwhile, Holmes told investors the technology was working as planned.

In one particularly damning piece of evidence, Holmes doctored paperwork with pharmaceutical logos, implying the firms had endorsed her technology. Holmes admitted to doing so, saying, “I wish I had done it differently.”

Holmes, meanwhile, has maintained her innocence, claiming she relied on the word of scientists and other employees and believed the technology worked as advertised. She also alleged that her co-president and former lover Sunny Balwani had emotionally and physically abused her, influencing her to commit fraud. Balwani has denied these allegations and faces his own fraud trial in 2022.

In closing arguments on Friday, her lawyer Kevin Downey compared Holmes’s final days at Theranos to the experience of a captain valiantly trying to save a sinking ship.

Had Holmes committed any crimes, she would have been scurrying to jump overboard like a scared rat, Downey told jurors as he wrapped up roughly five hours of closing arguments.

“Did she leave?” he asked the jury. “No, she stayed. Why? Because she believed in this technology. She believed she was building a technology that would change the world.”

In late November, Holmes stunned those following the trial when she unexpectedly took the stand in her own defense. The move was a gamble on her part, opening Holmes up to cross examination from prosecutors eager to fact check her public statements against internal documents that contradicted them.

For more than four days the prosecution grilled Holmes on her initial testimony, implying Balwani was not abusive but warm and loving towards her and that she made decisions regarding the business on her own accord.

The jury could hand down a decision at any time, and it is speculated it will do so next week.

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[Philippines](#)

Typhoon Rai: rescue efforts continue after strongest storm to hit Philippines this year

Dozens die after super typhoon pummels southern and central regions of the country



Damage caused by super typhoon Rai after the storm crossed over Surigao City in Surigao del Norte province. Photograph: Philippine Coast Guard (PCG)/AFP/Getty Images

Agence France-Presse
Sat 18 Dec 2021 06.45 EST

At least 33 people have been killed in the strongest typhoon to hit the [Philippines](#) this year, official tallies showed on Saturday, with a charity reporting “alarming” destruction on islands that bore the brunt of the storm.

More than 300,000 people fled their homes and beachfront resorts as Typhoon Rai ravaged the southern and central regions of the archipelago, knocking out communications and electricity in many areas, ripping off roofs and toppling concrete power poles.

Rai was a super typhoon when it slammed into Siargao Island on Thursday, packing maximum sustained winds of 195 km/h (120 mph). On Friday, wind speeds eased to 150 km/h, the state weather forecaster said.

Aerial photos shared by the military showed widespread damage in the town of General Luna, where many surfers and holidaymakers had flocked for Christmas, with buildings stripped of roofs and debris littering the ground.

“Everything was flying, it was as if it was the end of the world,” Raphy Repdos, a tour operator visiting the island when the storm hit, told AFP.

A neighbouring island, Dinagat, had been “levelled to the ground” by the storm, governor Arlene Bag-ao wrote on Facebook, saying houses, boats and fields were destroyed.

“Walls and roofs were torn and blown off by Odette like paper,” Bag-ao said, using the local name for the typhoon.

“We have a dwindling supply of food and water. Electricity and telecommunications are down.”

The storm also lashed the popular tourist destination of Palawan island after ravaging the Visayas and the southern island of Mindanao.

“We are seeing people walking in the streets, many of them shell-shocked,” ABS-CBN correspondent Dennis Datu reported from hard-hit Surigao, which is on the northern tip of Mindanao and near Siargao.

“All buildings sustained heavy damage, including the provincial disaster office. It looks like it’s been hit by a bomb.”

The main roads leading into the coastal city had been cut off by landslides, fallen trees and toppled power poles, he said.

Rai's wind speeds eased to 150km/h as it barrelled across the country, dumping torrential rain that flooded villages, uprooting trees and shattering wooden structures.

It emerged over the South China Sea on Saturday and was heading towards Vietnam, the state weather forecaster said.

"This is indeed one of the most powerful storms that has hit the [Philippines](#) in the month of December in the last decade," Alberto Bocanegra, the head of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in the Philippines, told AFP.

"The information we are receiving and the pictures we are receiving are very alarming."

The overall death toll was least 33, according to official tallies.

"



A man walks beside damaged homes and toppled trees caused in Cebu city, central Philippines. Photograph: Cheryl Baldicantos/AP

Communications were still down in Siargao, which took the brunt of the storm, and Bocanegra said the organisation had "grave fears" for people

there.

The Philippine coast guard shared photos on social media showing widespread destruction with roofs torn off buildings, wooden structures shattered and palm trees stripped of fronds around Surigao.

Aerial footage showed swathes of rice fields under water.

Scores of flights were cancelled across the country and dozens of ports temporarily closed as the weather bureau warned that metre-high storm surges could cause “life-threatening flooding” in low-lying coastal areas.

The country’s second busiest airport in Cebu was damaged and flights have been suspended, Jalad said.

“The devastation is hard to explain,” said Joel Darunday, 37, a tour operator in the central island province of Bohol, who was hunkered down at home with his family when the storm ripped off the roof.

“It was very strong. The last time I experienced something like this was back in the 1980s.”

People began clearing fallen trees, branches and debris from roads as clean-up efforts and relief operations got under way in areas hit by Rai.

Verified photos taken in Lapu-Lapu city in Cebu province showed roadside buildings flattened by the storm, while sheets of corrugated iron roofing littered streets.

Rai has hit the Philippines late in the typhoon season – most cyclones typically develop between July and October.

Scientists have long warned that typhoons are becoming more powerful and strengthening more rapidly as the world becomes warmer because of human-driven climate change.

The Philippines is ranked as one of the world’s most vulnerable countries to the impacts of the climate crisis. It is hit by an average of 20 storms and

typhoons every year, which typically wipe out harvests, homes and infrastructure in already impoverished areas.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/18/typhoon-rai-at-least-12-killed-in-philippines-as-clean-up-begins>

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Rod Stewart

Rod Stewart and his son plead guilty to battery in 2019 Florida altercation case

The singer entered the plea to ‘avoid the inconvenience’ of a high profile court trial. Neither will do jail time or pay any fines



Rod Stewart and his son have pleaded guilty to battery in an altercation in 2019 with a security guard at an exclusive Florida hotel. Photograph: Matt Crossick/PA

Associated Press
Fri 17 Dec 2021 15.31 EST

British rock icon Rod Stewart and his son have pleaded guilty to battery in an assault case stemming from a New Year’s Eve 2019 [altercation with a security guard](#) at an exclusive Florida hotel.

Court records released on Friday show that the singer and his son, Sean Stewart, 41, entered guilty pleas to misdemeanor charges of simple battery.

“No one was injured in the incident and a jury did not find Sir [Rod Stewart](#) guilty of the accusation,” his attorney Guy Fronstin said in a statement.

“Instead, Sir Rod Stewart decided to enter a plea to avoid the inconvenience and unnecessary burden on the court and the public that a high profile proceeding would cause.”

Stewart, 76, a member of the US Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 2016.

His hits include Da Ya Think I’m Sexy, You’re In My Heart, Hot Legs and Maggie May.

The plea agreement, dated and signed Monday, means that Stewart and his son won’t have to appear in court and formal adjudication of the charge was withheld. There will be no trial.

Neither will do any jail time or be required to pay fines and won’t be placed on probation, Fronstin said.

The Stewarts were accused of a physical altercation with security guard Jessie Dixon at the luxury Breakers Hotel in Palm Beach on 31 December 2019, a stone’s throw from Donald Trump’s Mar-a-Lago resort club and residence.

The dispute involved Dixon’s refusal to allow them into a private New Year’s Eve party at the hotel.

Dixon said in court papers that Rod Stewart punched him in the rib cage with a closed fist and that Sean Stewart shoved him.

A spokesperson for Palm Beach state attorney Dave Aronberg, whose office prosecuted the case, said in an email that Dixon agreed with the outcome of the case.

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Headlines friday 17 december 2021

- [North Shropshire byelection Voters have given us a kicking, says Tory chair](#)
- [Live ‘One more strike and he’s out’, Tory MP says of Boris Johnson](#)
- [North Shropshire byelection Liberal Democrats win former safe Tory seat in blow to Johnson](#)
- [Analysis Earthquake delivers unhappy Christmas for Johnson](#)

Conservatives

Tory chair: North Shropshire voters have given us a kicking

Oliver Dowden says voters are fed up, and a senior MP warns Boris Johnson ‘one more strike and he’s out’

- [Politics live – latest updates](#)

02:34

'Common sense at the ballot box': Lib Dem Helen Morgan's victory speech – video

[Heather Stewart](#) and [Peter Walker](#)

Fri 17 Dec 2021 03.54 EST

The Conservative party co-chair [Oliver Dowden](#) has conceded that voters have given the government “a kicking” after the Liberal Democrats clinched an extraordinary victory in the North Shropshire by-election with a swing of 34%.

Boris Johnson is facing a backlash from Tory MPs after the result, which was worse for the government than even pessimists at Conservative campaign headquarters had feared.

00:49

Oliver Dowden says North Shropshire voters gave Tories a kicking – video

Helen Morgan, the Lib Dem candidate, won 17,957 votes, 5,925 more than the Conservatives' Neil Shastri-Hurst, while Labour's Ben Wood was third with 3,686. Turnout was 46.3%.

Dowden told BBC Breakfast: “Voters were fed up and they gave us a kicking. They were fed up with a byelection that was called because of [sleaze allegations](#); they were fed up with all the sort of [stories](#) that are going on at the moment.”

“I take it that they are saying to us that we need to focus on the core job at hand,” he added, suggesting this meant pressing ahead with the vaccine booster programme.

The Tories’ catastrophic performance in a seat they won comfortably in 2019 with a majority of nearly 23,000 has renewed concerns about the prime minister’s leadership. The senior backbencher Roger Gale told BBC Radio 4’s Today programme that Johnson must take personal blame for the result.

“The electorate wanted to send a very clear message to Downing Street that they were dissatisfied with the management of this government,” he said. “I think this has to be seen as a referendum on the prime minister’s performance and I think that the prime minister is now in ‘last orders’ time. Two strikes already, one earlier this week in the [vote in the Commons](#) and now this. One more strike and he’s out.”

[Graphic](#)

Johnson faced the biggest rebellion of his premiership earlier this week over Covid certification, with [100 Tory MPs](#) voting against the government.

Some MPs had suggested in advance that they could consider sending letters to Graham Brady, the chair of the backbench 1922 Committee, demanding a vote of no confidence in Johnson if North Shropshire was lost. It would take 54 such letters to trigger a vote.

The Liberal Democrat leader, Ed Davey, who was unable to attend the count in person after testing positive for Covid, said: “This result is a watershed moment in our politics and offers hope to people around the country that a brighter future is possible. Millions of people are fed up with Boris Johnson and his failure to provide leadership throughout the pandemic, and last night the voters of North Shropshire spoke for all of them.”

Graphic

North Shropshire is the second supposedly safe seat won from the Tories at a byelection this year, after the Lib Dems took the Buckinghamshire constituency of [Chesham and Amersham](#) in June.

Davey said: “From Buckinghamshire to Shropshire, lifelong Conservatives have turned to the Liberal Democrats in their droves and sent a clear message to the prime minister that the party is over.”

The Liberal Democrats now have 14 MPs. In her victory speech Morgan, a 46-year-old accountant and parish councillor, repeatedly targeted the prime minister, saying Conservative voters had been “dismayed by Boris Johnson’s lack of decency and [were] fed up with being taken for granted”.

The byelection was sparked by the resignation of the veteran Brexiter Owen Paterson after a botched attempt by the prime minister to prevent him being punished for paid lobbying.

Johnson’s decision to back Paterson crystallised Tory MPs’ concerns about his political judgment, and his authority has continued to be battered by a string of missteps and scandals – including the revelation of lockdown-busting parties in Downing Street.

Shastri-Hurst, the losing North Shropshire candidate, was derided by opposition candidates as a “lawyer from Birmingham” and at one point during the campaign repeatedly declined to say whether he thought Johnson was a man of integrity.

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Politics live with Andrew Sparrow

Conservatives

North Shropshire: PM in ‘last chance saloon’, says Ruth Davidson, as new Christmas party claims emerge – as it happened

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/live/2021/dec/17/north-shropshire-byelection-liberal-democrats-boris-johnson-tory-majority-live-updates>

Politics

North Shropshire by-election: Liberal Democrats win former safe Tory seat in blow to Johnson

Helen Morgan wins seat held by Conservatives for almost 200 years in by-election called after Owen Paterson resigned

02:34

'Common sense at the ballot box': Lib Dem Helen Morgan's victory speech – video

[Peter Walker](#) Political correspondent

[@peterwalker99](#)

Fri 17 Dec 2021 00.41 EST

The [Liberal Democrats](#) have won a stunning victory in the North Shropshire by-election, taking what had previously been a safe Conservative seat by a margin of nearly 6,000 votes, and capping a disastrous few weeks for Boris Johnson.

Helen Morgan, the Lib Dem candidate, won 17,957 votes, ahead of the Conservatives' Neil Shastri-Hurst, on 12,032, a majority of 5,925. Labour's Ben Wood was third, with 3,686 votes. Turnout was 46.3%.

The calamitous collapse in Conservative support – a 34% swing in a seat where they had a near-23,000 majority in 2019 – will prompt significant jitters among many Tory MPs, and is likely to raise questions about Johnson's future.

[Graphic](#)

It was a swing even greater than the 25% seen last June when [the Lib Dems won](#) the Chesham and Amersham byelection.

North Shropshire was seen as a notably greater challenge for the party, given it is a largely rural and strongly pro-Brexit constituency, one which has been Tory for all but two of the past 189 years, from 1904 to 1906. Morgan fought the seat in 2019 and came third, with 10% support.

The byelection was called [after the former environment secretary Owen Paterson resigned](#) in the wake of a botched attempt by Downing Street to save him from punishment for a serious breach of lobbying rules by rewriting the disciplinary system for MPs, which set off a string of damaging stories about other Tory MPs' second jobs.

It was fought amid a wider atmosphere of damaging claims for Johnson and his government over allegations of lockdown-breaking Downing Street parties and a major Tory rebellion over Covid rules.

In her victory speech, Morgan, a 46-year-old accountant and parish councillor, repeatedly targeted the prime minister, saying Conservative voters had been “dismayed by Boris Johnson’s lack of decency and fed up with being taken for granted”.

“Tonight, the people of North Shropshire have spoken on behalf of the British people,” she told the count in Shrewsbury. “They have said loudly and clearly: Boris Johnson, the party is over.”

While earlier prime ministers “believed in a sense of national service”, Morgan said, with Johnson it was “all about you and never about us”. She added: “Our country is crying out for leadership. Mr Johnson, you are no leader.”

The Lib Dem leader, Ed Davey, who was not at the count as he has tested positive for Covid, spoke to Morgan by phone directly after her speech. In a statement he called the win “a watershed moment in our politics”.

He said: “Millions of people are fed up with Boris Johnson and his failure to provide leadership throughout the pandemic and last night the voters of

North Shropshire spoke for all of them. This is the second stunning byelection victory this year for the Liberal Democrats - both in formerly safe Conservative seats.”

Leaving the count, Shastri-Hurst – who on Wednesday had declined four times during an interview to say that he believed Johnson was “a man of honesty and integrity” – gave no criticism of the prime minister.

Asked if Johnson was to blame, he said only that it had been “a disappointing result for us”, adding: “We’re 11 years into a Conservative government, by-elections are never an easy thing to do.”

North Shropshire has been a safe Tory seat since its creation

The result will also raise questions about the Tories’ choice of an outsider to be their candidate. Shastri-Hurst is a barrister from Birmingham, something which prompted annoyance among some voters.

As soon as the by-election was called, the Lib Dems sought to present themselves as the only party capable of beating the Conservatives, and poured enormous resources into the area. Labour’s Wood campaigned hard but received notably less support from his party HQ.

The by-election was seen as notably difficult to predict given both the short timetable and the number of candidates, totalling 14.

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Boris Johnson

North Shropshire byelection earthquake delivers unhappy Christmas for Boris Johnson

Analysis: PM's aides will be alarmed by the outcome and his MPs will be wondering: if the Tories can lose such a safe seat, what does it mean for them?



Tories will feel Boris Johnson mishandled the situation that led to the North Shropshire byelection. Photograph: Tayfun Salci/ZUMA Press Wire/REX/Shutterstock

*Peter Walker Political correspondent
@peterwalker99*

Thu 16 Dec 2021 23.44 EST

If it is something of a cliche that the [Conservatives](#) can be brutal in how they treat leaders who no longer feel like electoral assets, this is arguably all the more so for Boris Johnson, whose primary attraction for many of his MPs was his appeal to voters. If that has gone, he should be worried.

The key word is “if”. The Tories’ [loss to the Liberal Democrats of North Shropshire](#) – a seat they had held for all but two of the last 189 years – is an undeniable earthquake, but by-elections have particular qualities, not least the greater ability for opposition support to coalesce around one party.

They often do hold wider lessons for governments, though, even midterm ones that could expect to receive something of a kicking from the voters at the best of times.

What will alarm Johnson’s aides are the many reports from North Shropshire of not just annoyance with the government but some fairly significant and personal distaste for the prime minister.

This was a recurring theme of the last major by-election story, the Lib Dems’ overturning of a 16,000-strong Tory majority [in Chesham and Amersham in June](#), but here at least some of this could be explained by a strain of liberal, internationalist Conservatism in the affluent commuter belt seat.

[Graphic](#)

North Shropshire is very different: largely rural and strongly pro-Brexit. But here, too, [voters complained](#) about a sense of being taken for granted by the Tories, and also a feeling that Johnson was slippery, and not sufficiently serious.

Some Conservative MPs will thus awake on Friday with two calculations in mind. Firstly, if their party can lose a seat which had a near-23,000 majority, what would such a swing mean for them? Also, if voters dislike the prime minister in both Chesham and Amersham, and North Shropshire, where exactly is he still popular?

One consolation for Downing Street is that such mutinous thoughts will largely not be discussed with fellow MPs, as the political firebreak of the

Commons Christmas recess has begun, closing what has been perhaps the most politically damaging week of Johnson's career.

It included a buildup of damning publicity over two rolling stories: a series of reports of [allegedly lockdown-breaking parties](#) in Downing Street, Conservative HQ, and government departments; and the prospect of [more revelations about](#) how Johnson had the costly renovation of his official flat paid for.

Amid all this, Johnson was leading the response to a huge wave of the Omicron variant of Covid-19, which required the rushing-in of his plan B suite of restrictions, including a return to home working, further mask use, and the introduction of mandatory Covid certificates to enter venues like nightclubs and football grounds.

The latter plan was hugely unpopular among many Tory MPs, 99 [of whom rebelled](#) in a Commons vote on Tuesday, calling into question both Johnson's authority and his ability to further tighten Covid rules if, as many public health experts predict, the Omicron wave worsens.

Some Tories will note that the North Shropshire campaign was always going to be tricky for the government, given it was prompted [by the resignation](#) of the former environment secretary Owen Paterson, who had broken rules on paid lobbying.

North Shropshire has been a safe Tory seat since its creation

But even this, many will feel, was a situation mishandled by Johnson and his advisers. Paterson only stepped down [after Downing Street U-turned](#) on an attempt to save him from punishment by trying to unilaterally rewrite the entire disciplinary system for MPs, sparking a mass of stories about lobbying and second jobs.

02:34

'Common sense at the ballot box': Lib Dem Helen Morgan's victory speech – video

If, in contrast, Johnson had urged Paterson to quietly serve the 30-day suspension imposed as a punishment, that would all have ended this week, and the prime minister might have been going into Christmas in a happier position.

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2021.12.17 - Coronavirus

- [Live UK sees record uptake of boosters; G7 calls Omicron ‘biggest threat’ to global health](#)
- [NHS England hospitals dreading Covid staff shortages](#)
- [Explained What Omicron’s Covid ‘tsunami’ could mean for the UK](#)
- [Dentists Compulsory jabs ‘calamitous’ for services in England](#)

[Coronavirus live](#)

[Coronavirus](#)

Covid live: half of UK adults receive booster vaccine; Ireland sets 8pm curfew for hospitality venues — as it happened

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NHS

Hospitals in England draw up plans for significant Covid staff absences

Exclusive: Bosses urged to accelerate recruitment as number of ill staff triples in one London hospital

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
- [See all our coronavirus coverage](#)



A nurse works on a patient in the ICU. Medics say they are concerned about their ability to provide care if a significant proportion of colleagues are off sick. Photograph: Victoria Jones/PA

[Andrew Gregory](#) Health editor

Fri 17 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

Hospitals are drawing up contingency plans for “significant staff absences” to ensure they can still provide “essential” care for the most seriously ill patients, as health leaders warn the Omicron variant is already [triggering staff shortages](#) in the NHS.

Staff absences have tripled at one [NHS](#) trust in London in just a week, the Guardian has been told. Doctors say they are concerned about their ability to provide care if a significant proportion of colleagues are off sick.

Amid mounting concern that soaring numbers of infections could take out large parts of the health workforce, the chief executives of all hospitals in [England](#) have been urged to review staff numbers for the next three months and draft workforce plans “to ensure essential services can be maintained”.

Hospital bosses have also been told to begin training staff for potential redeployment immediately, according to a memo from Amanda Pritchard, the chief executive of NHS England, and Prof Stephen Powis, its medical director.

At the same time, hospital bosses are being urged to “accelerate recruitment plans”, bring forward the arrival of internationally recruited nurses, and offer staff options “to continue to contribute when they are unable to come into work, if they are able to do so”.

Chris Whitty, the chief medical officer, [warned on Wednesday](#) of potential issues with the NHS workforce, as he said the expected sharp peak of Omicron cases was likely to lead to lots of people, including healthcare workers, being ill at the same time. “We may end up with quite substantial gaps in rotas at short notice,” he said.

NHS bosses and medical leaders say the alarming spread of the Omicron variant was already causing staff sickness levels to “rise rapidly”, in particular [in London](#).

Danny Mortimer, deputy chief executive of the NHS Confederation, said: “Health leaders absolutely share the chief medical officer’s concern about the impact of coronavirus, including Omicron, on their teams and are seeing increased staff absences already. One of our members in London, for

example, has reported a tripling of absences in less than a week and we know that primary care, mental health, ambulance and community services are feeling this strain too.

“The last thing any health leader wants to see is their care for patients being disrupted, and they will do everything they can to minimise this. This is why it is so important that everyone eligible takes up their offer of [vaccine or booster](#), that they behave in a responsible way that will reduce transmission, and that the government stays close to the impact the spread of this new strain has on frontline patient care.”

Dr Sarah Hallett, co-chair of the BMA junior doctors committee co-chair, said she was “incredibly concerned” about the impact of the rapid spread of the Omicron variant on NHS staffing. “We’re already aware of this causing some problems in London, where we know cases are currently higher – and therefore this could be a worrying early sign of things to come across the country,” she said.

“With a record number of cases yesterday, those of us on the frontline are not just worried about what this means for a potentially drastic increase in hospital admissions, but also on our ability to provide care across both primary and secondary care if we have a significant proportion of staff off sick with the virus.”

Hallett said the NHS was “vastly understaffed” even before the pandemic, adding there were now about 100,000 unfilled vacancies in England. “We simply cannot afford to lose any more staff at this critical time,” she said.

Official data published by NHS England on Thursday showed that on 12 December, the most recent date for which figures were available, at NHS acute trusts alone 56,889 staff were away through sickness or self isolation. Of those, 12,240 absences were directly related to Covid-19, according to the data.

Saffron Cordery, deputy chief executive of NHS Providers, which represents NHS hospitals and mental health, community and ambulance services, said: “Trust leaders are telling us that Omicron is already creating staff shortages

in the NHS. In Omicron hotspots like London, absences are starting to rise rapidly. This is exactly what we would expect, given community infection rates are shooting up.

“This is being borne out in the latest data, which shows worrying increases in NHS staff having to take time off work due to Covid-19 self-isolation or sickness. The impact on the workloads for remaining staff is a major challenge given the huge service demand currently across the NHS.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/dec/17/hospitals-in-england-draw-up-plans-for-significant-covid-staff-absences>

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Coronavirus

What Omicron's Covid 'tsunami' could mean for the UK

Will the NHS cope? What's the worst case scenario? The key questions on the fast-spreading variant's impact

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
- [See all our coronavirus coverage](#)



The UK can perform about 800,000 PCR tests a day. Photograph: Narendra Shrestha/EPA

Ian Sample Science editor

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Thu 16 Dec 2021 14.16 EST

The rapid spread of Omicron across the UK has led public health officials and ministers to warn that, without action, the country will see 1 million infections a day by the end of the month. The consequences of the Omicron “tsunami” are far from clear, but a picture is beginning to take shape.

What will happen to the NHS?

This is the most crucial question. The answer depends on what fraction of the infections turn into hospitalisations, and how long people are admitted for. Last winter’s wave was driven by the Alpha variant, and before the rollout of vaccines it hospitalised about 22% of cases in the 65-and-over age group. The vaccine programme slashed that rate to 6%. Chris Whitty, England’s chief medical officer, has said that his worst case scenario for Omicron is a return to those pre-vaccination hospitalisation rates. More optimistically, he said a booster might provide better protection against severe Omicron than two doses do against severe Delta.

When will we know more?

The UK [Health](#) Security Agency expects to have reliable data on the severity of Omicron and the effectiveness of vaccines against hospitalisation in the week between Christmas and the new year, or more likely the first week of January.

Given the high levels of previous Covid infection and vaccination in the UK, most cases of Omicron are expected to be mild: even if antibodies fail to block infection, T cells are expected to hold up fairly well against severe illness. But according to Paul Hunter, professor of medicine at the University of East Anglia, 1 million infections a day would still put the [NHS](#) under considerable strain. That is because rather than being spaced out, the hospitalisations would happen all at once. “A million infections a day translates into a hell of a lot of hospitalisations, even if we get far fewer hospitalisations per case than we have in the past,” he said.

What about other impacts?

The problem for the NHS is that the wave of hospitalisations will coincide with staff becoming infected and falling ill, stretching the already overstrained health service. The same wave of infections and illness will impact across the economy with people off work to isolate, recover, or care for others. That could hit transport, such as bus services, and supply chains, with further knock-on effects. “The risk is that all these things could come together,” said Hunter.

Will testing keep up?

The UK can perform about 800,000 PCR tests a day, though capacity rises and falls. Typically fewer than half of people who are infected get a test, but with Omicron spreading so fast, daily case numbers could swiftly become unreliable. Alan McNally, a professor in microbial genomics at the University of Birmingham who helped set up the Milton Keynes Lighthouse Lab, said PCR tests were already pointless in the Omicron epidemic. “At current doubling rates, by New Year’s Day Omicron will be infecting 1 million people per day. PCR testing is a completely pointless exercise,” he said. “The outbreak is doubling quicker than you get a PCR result. It is now a useless tool.”

Will Omicron slow down?

Yes. While the Omicron epidemic is currently doubling at a staggering rate – every two days – the rapid rise in infections will slow down as immunity from Omicron infection and vaccination builds in the population, and people cut down on contact with others, don masks, and take other precautions, such as regular testing. Whether this is enough to keep daily hospitalisations below last winter’s peak – and flatten the curve – is unknown. “If we can weather it without the collapse of civilisation, we’ll be in a better position going forwards,” said Hunter.

Dentists

Compulsory Covid jabs ‘calamitous’ for dental services in England, says BDA

Thousands of dental staff will quit with ‘devastating consequences’ for patients, says dentists’ association

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
- [See all our coronavirus coverage](#)



Dental services are ‘already stretched to breaking point’ before the vaccine mandate for healthcare staff comes into effect, the BDA has said.
Photograph: Victoria Jones/PA

[Andrew Gregory](#) Health editor

Thu 16 Dec 2021 19.01 EST

Dentists' leaders have said mandatory jabs for healthcare staff will have a "calamitous" impact on dental services in England, as a survey revealed that one in 10 dentists have not been double-vaccinated.

MPs voted this week to approve regulations requiring [NHS](#) and social care staff to be vaccinated by April next year. All frontline health and care staff must be fully jabbed with two Covid-19 vaccines before 1 April or risk losing their jobs.

But the British Dental Association (BDA) said compulsory vaccination risked "dropping a bomb on a service already stretched to breaking point" because it meant that thousands of dental workers would quit. The mass exodus would have devastating consequences for millions of patients, it said.

The stark warning comes after a survey of high street dentists by the BDA found that 9% had not had a single dose of a coronavirus vaccine. The poll found a further 1% had only had one jab.

The survey of 1,642 dentists in [England](#) conducted this month found 10% had received two doses, while 78% had a booster. The remaining 2% of dentists declined to reveal their vaccination status.

Fewer than half (48.4%) of dentists estimated all nurses operating in their practices were fully vaccinated, with 58% saying the same for hygienists, according to the survey.

The poll found that 30% of dentists estimated dental nurses based at their practices would leave as a result of the mandate, with 14% of dentists saying they themselves were likely or extremely likely to quit.

The BDA said the NHS had not kept track of the number of dentists who were not vaccinated, because of the focus on hospitals and social care. Nevertheless, the mandate will also include dentists and dental nurses. The BDA said current standard operating procedures, which include twice-weekly Covid tests for staff, already set a gold standard for protecting patients and staff.

Eddie Crouch, chair of the BDA, said: “Mandatory vaccination risks dropping a bomb on a service already stretched to breaking point. We now face a grim new year where thousands of dental team members will walk as result of choices made by government, leaving thousands of vacancies that will never be filled.

“Dentists have supported the vaccine rollout, with many downing drills to play their part, but this is a road ministers must not go down. Dental services are already operating to a gold standard on safety. This mandate is a blunt instrument, which will have devastating consequences for millions of patients across this country.”

Dental patients are already struggling to access care and some have been told they may need to wait years for an appointment. In some parts of the country, patients have taken matters into their own hands as they struggle to access dental care, with [reports of patients pulling out their own teeth](#) while others have used DIY filling kits.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/dec/17/compulsory-covid-jabs-dentists-in-england-dropping-a-bomb-on-service>

2021.12.17 - Spotlight

- Russia-Ukraine crisis Where are Putin's troops and what are his options?
- On the Ukraine frontline Only the dead aren't afraid
- The 50 best films of 2021 in the UK, No 1 The Power of the Dog
- Environment How much indoor air pollution do we produce when we take a shower?



Russia-Ukraine crisis: where are Putin's troops and what are his options?

A visual guide to recent troop deployments, as tensions escalate

by [Andrew Roth](#), [David Blood](#) and [Niels de Hoog](#)

Fri 17 Dec 2021 00.00 EST

Why are there tensions?

Russia [has forward-deployed](#) hundreds of tanks, self-propelled artillery and even short-range ballistic missiles from as far away as Siberia to within striking range of Ukraine's borders. US intelligence has said Russia could launch an offensive by the end of January with as many as 100 battalion tactical groups (BTGs), comprising an estimated 175,000 troops. Current estimates say Russia has about 50 BTGs in the border region, already a significant force that could overrun Ukrainian defensive positions.

Russia's rhetoric has grown more belligerent. Vladimir Putin has demanded legal guarantees that Ukraine will never join Nato or host its [missile strike systems](#), concessions he is not likely to receive. He is also short on time. His troops cannot remain out of garrison indefinitely. By late winter he will probably have to launch an attack or draw down his forces in what would look like a retreat.

How did we get here?

In 2014 [Putin sent troops to annex Crimea](#), a mainly Russian-speaking region of Ukraine. Russia also incited a separatist uprising in Ukraine's south-east, clandestinely sending soldiers and weapons to provoke a conflict that grew into a full-blown war.

A [2015 peace deal](#) established a line of demarcation and called on both sides to make concessions. Since then low-level fighting has continued along the front, and both sides have accused the other of violating the agreement, which observers say is close to collapse.

[Map showing disputed regions in Ukraine](#)

Russia no longer wants to maintain the status quo and is looking for another way to assert control over [Ukraine](#).

What do we know about the deployments?

Many of the heavy weapons stationed near Ukraine arrived in the spring, when [Russia](#) put an estimated 110,000 troops with tanks and other heavy weaponry near the border. Russia returned some, but not all, of its troops to base in May after Putin secured a summit with Joe Biden.

[Map of Russian military deployments](#)

One of the largest forces to remain comes from the 41st Combined Arms Army, which is headquartered in Novosibirsk almost 2,000 miles away. Stationed at the Pogonovo training area south of Voronezh since spring, some of the 41st CAA forces have moved to Yelnya, a town in the Smolensk region closer to Belarus.



Equipment reportedly belonging to the 41st CAA near Yelnya on 9 November. Photograph: Maxar/AFP/Getty Images

The equipment includes motorised infantry, main battle tanks, rocket artillery and Iskander short-range ballistic missiles comprising an estimated six or seven BTGs, [according to an estimate](#) by the independent defence analyst Konrad Muzyka.

Tanks, motorised infantry and rocket artillery from the 1st Guards Tank Army headquartered in the Moscow region have been moved to the Pogonovo training area, according to Muzyka's estimates.



A satellite image taken on 26 November shows Russian troop locations at the Pogonovo training ground in the Voronezh region.



Two satellite photos of the Pogonovo training area on 26 November.
Photograph: Maxar Technologies, AP

Other recent movements show motor rifle brigades from the 49th Combined Arms Army moving towards Crimea. Artillery and air-defence assets from

the 58th Combined Arms Army have also been spotted in satellite photographs taken from above Novoozerne in western Crimea.



Equipment thought to be from the 58th CAA in Novoozerne on 18 October.
Photograph: Maxar Technologies, AP

There are also units permanently deployed near Ukraine from the 8th and 20th Combined Arms Armies. And Ukraine estimates tens of thousands of troops are stationed in the Russian-backed separatist territories of Donetsk and Luhansk.

What form could a Russian attack take?

A map released by Ukrainian military intelligence [in November](#) showed a worst-case scenario: Russian forces crossing the Ukrainian border from the east and attacking from annexed Crimea, as well as launching an amphibious assault on Odessa with support from Russian soldiers in Transnistria and troops sent in from Belarus. Some aspects of the plan, such as offensives from the east and via Crimea, already appear possible. Others, such as an attack from Belarus, appear to factor in troops that have not yet arrived in the region.

Russia could assert dominance with a less extensive operation. The head of Ukraine's military intelligence service [told the New York Times](#) that his nightmare scenario involved airstrikes and rocket attacks on ammunition depots and trenches that could leave the military incapacitated, leaving frontline commanders to fight on alone. They would fall, he said, if Russia launched a full-strength invasion. At that point Russia could seek to strong-arm Kyiv into a disadvantageous peace deal.

[Map showing invasion scenarios.](#)

Other options include sending a “peacekeeping force” or clandestinely deploying troops under the guise of separatist forces to Donetsk and Luhansk. From there they could reinvigorate the fighting along the frontline or seek to capture new territory.

According to the Institute for the Study of War, one option would be to break out from Donetsk to try to establish a land bridge connecting Crimea to territory near Rostov, as well as seizing the Kherson region north of Crimea and securing the North-Crimean Canal. Russia would need to capture Mariupol, a large city that is very well defended, to make this plan work.

The potential economic blowback of any new fighting would be enormous as the US and its allies are promising “significant and severe” sanctions in the event of an attack.

The last option may be the most likely: Russia seeks concessions from the west in negotiations while maintaining its troops along the border for a credible threat of escalation. Putin has said he believes high tensions are useful for Russia and he has already pulled back his troops from Ukraine once this year.

Nevertheless, analysts say that without a clear diplomatic victory, any drawdown could look like a defeat.

What is the role of Nord Stream 2?

The completion of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia to Germany via the Baltic Sea gives both sides an economic weapon. The pipeline would allow Russia to send gas to [Europe](#) without going through Ukraine, meaning Moscow could pile pressure on Kyiv without the risk that Kyiv would cut the gas supply route in retaliation. Ukraine has lobbied furiously against the project, saying it undermines its national security.

[Map showing where the Nord Stream 2 pipeline is](#)

However, the pipeline, which has become a pet project of Putin's, has not yet come online, and western governments have signalled that in the case of invasion, that may never happen.

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Russia

On the Ukraine frontline: 'Only the dead aren't afraid' – video

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2021/dec/16/on-the-ukraine-frontline-only-the-dead-arent-afraid-video>

Best films of 2021Jane Campion

The 50 best films of 2021 in the UK, No 1: The Power of the Dog

With Benedict Cumberbatch as a jeeringly malicious cowboy in 1920s Montana, Jane Campion's taut, western psychodrama, her first feature in over a decade, is our best film of 2021

- [Best films of 2021: the complete list](#)
- [More on the best culture of 2021](#)



Dark horse ... Benedict Cumberbatch's malign Montana rancher Phil.
Photograph: Netflix/AP



Peter Bradshaw

@PeterBradshaw1

Fri 17 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

The year's best film is a western, based on a novel from the 1960s (by Thomas Savage) when the western was a more accepted popular genre in both movies and books than it is now. But it modifies that genre, creating something more elusive and unmanageable: western psychodrama? Western gothic? And it tackles issues around sexual politics, toxic masculinity and family dysfunction in a very contemporary way.

The Power of the Dog is [Jane Campion](#)'s first feature film in over a decade, the last 10 years having been mostly taken up with her hit streaming-TV series, *Top of the Lake*, with [Elisabeth Moss](#). Maybe that project influenced the element of murder mystery in this latest film, whose title is taken from Psalms 22:20: "Deliver my soul from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dog!"

[Benedict Cumberbatch](#) and [Jesse Plemons](#) play two brothers, Phil and George, who run a cattle ranch in 1920s Montana. Phil is a sweaty roughneck: an instinctive and vicious bully who calls his brother "fatso",

encourages the ranch-hands to mock him and jeers at George's pretensions to fancy clothes and hats. In his self-important and self-congratulatory way, Phil is obsessed with the fact he is the one with the hands-on practical know-how to make the ranch work, unlike his milksop brother, because he learned these skills from a veteran rancher, now dead, called Bronco Henry. But Phil is also repressed and utterly reliant on George emotionally: these two grown men share a bedroom in their large house like little kids.

But which of these two is putting on airs? Who is putting on the act? The two brothers come from money: their rich, sophisticated and politically well-connected parents staked them in the business. There is an excruciating scene when the elderly couple come for dinner: George insists on dressing up in a tux. But Phil embarrasses everyone by showing up sweaty and dirty.

The existing tensions between the brothers explode into the open when George reveals to Phil that he has got married, to Rose ([Kirsten Dunst](#)) the widow who runs the cafe in town and has a sensitive teenage son Peter ([Kodi Smit-McPhee](#)), now to be George's stepson and heir. Rose is going to move in as the mistress of the house and Phil senses the immediate loss in his own status: he subjects Rose to a hateful campaign of harassment and makes Peter the subject of homophobic bullying. But then, a strange turnaround takes place: he makes friends with young Peter and declares he will take him riding in the remote hills where he will school him in the ways of ranching and being a man – the way Bronco Henry schooled him.

Cumberbatch makes Phil a vivid and horrible monster, all the more disquieting for his flashes of intelligence and cunning. When Rose brings her piano into the big house (an irresistible echo of the [earlier Campion classic](#)) and attempts to play Strauss's Radetzky March on it, Phil mischievously joins in on his five-string banjo, putting poor Rose off her stroke and revealing that he is, in fact, rather more musically talented than she is. But Kodi Smit-McPhee's performance as Peter matches him in presence and potency, and the story doesn't at all go where you think. It is a movie with lethal bite.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/dec/17/the-50-best-films-of-2021-in-the-uk-no-1-the-power-of-the-dog>.

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PollutionwatchEnvironment

How much indoor air pollution do we produce when we take a shower?

Chemicals that evaporate from personal care products are among pollutants that form ozone in summer smogs



Switching to non-aerosol personal care products would help control air pollution. Photograph: Peter Cade/Getty Images

[Gary Fuller](#)

[@drgaryfuller](#)

Fri 17 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

Many of us will find soaps, aftershave, perfumes and pampering products among our Christmas presents.

While most news articles on indoor air pollution tend to focus on [candles](#), the air pollution effects of the products that we use in homes are far wider.

The [fossil-fuel derived chemicals](#) that evaporate from printing inks, adhesives, coatings, cleaning agents and personal care products are now dominating the [pollutants](#) that form ozone in summer smogs and some types of particle pollution; exceeding the effects [of emissions from traffic](#).

The PhD student Amber Yeoman has been studying the air pollution [produced when we take a shower](#). Building a shower in the laboratory was not practical, so instead Yeoman and her team relocated their equipment next to a shower room in the University of York.

Sample pipes were installed in the shower room itself. Volunteers were each given the same supermarket products and asked to shower; starting with face washing and shower gel, followed by shampoo, conditioner, moisturiser and then aerosol deodorant.

One by one, volatile organic compounds were measured by Yeoman's equipment. Highly reactive limonene came mainly from the citrus smelling shampoo, benzyl alcohol from the conditioner and ethanol from the moisturiser. This was different for each person and those people that rinsed for longer produced fewer emissions. Other chemicals were seen too, possibly linked to laundry products used to wash each volunteer's towel (they brought their own) or their clothes. In other [experiments](#), Yeoman's equipment found that products worn by other researchers affected the air in her laboratory.

New attention is being paid to these products because of the cumulative impact of the emissions from our homes and the way they react together to form harmful air pollution. Control of air pollution that forms from personal care products will not be easy. The first step will be to make manufacturers responsible for the pollution from the products they sell. Switching to non-aerosol products would be another simple change. It is clear from Yeoman's work that any product labelling would have to reflect real-world use and also the fate of these chemicals in our [drains](#) and river systems.

Yeoman said: "Air quality labels would help communicate the possible negative impacts to consumers and it could well encourage manufacturers to change their products to attract health-conscious buyers. Cleanliness has also been equated with the presence of perfume, rather than the absence of

malodour. Changing this mindset has altered my personal buying habits toward fragrance-free products.”

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2021.12.17 - Opinion

- I ignored Strictly for 19 seasons – then fell for its hypnotic effervescence in minutes
- The UK hospitality industry needs its own furlough scheme
- Tom Kerridge The government has hung hospitality out to dry – I've lost £65k in bookings this week
- How are we supposed to just keep going? What a long grim year, again

What I changed my mind about in 2021 Strictly Come Dancing

I ignored Strictly for 19 seasons – then fell for its hypnotic effervescence in minutes

Lola Okolosie



I had always smugly refused to engage with the kitschly sentimental show, but who was I kidding?



‘John Whaite (left) and Johannes Radebe danced the cha-cha-cha, and I watched as my children sat mesmerised by the sheer joy in their performance.’ Photograph: Guy Levy/BBC/PA

Fri 17 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

In the creeping misery of post-summer, when dark, rainy days conspire with the grind of normal life to throw you into despair, Strictly Come Dancing dazzles like a glitter ball in the gloom. For nearly 18 years, avoiding Strictly’s omnipresence in the run-up to Christmas was a personal dogma. When asked for an opinion on who may be voted off or who would win, I’d respond with smug refusal to engage. I did not and *could* not watch the show.

My strong reaction was in part founded on my inability to understand how watching people who already had money and got paid more to dance badly could ever be called entertainment. Adding insult to injury, the contestants would invariably huff into cameras, gushing about being grateful for the “journey”. No, thank you.

Strictly’s brand of kitschy sentimentality grated. The likes of the former Conservative MP and Brexit party MEP, Ann Widdecombe, could be catapulted to national treasure status while taking vocal stances against

abortion and same-sex marriage. D-list celebs being offered another opportunity to cling on to their fading fame – I couldn’t understand how viewers lapped it up. Its sweet wholesomeness smelled off.

And then I had children. Now aged seven and nine, their insistent requests to watch Strictly couldn’t, unfortunately, be warded off with a simple “no”. No elicited a string of whys instead of the silence a parent might desire. Nor would they listen to arguments on how “the counterpart of sentimentality is ... brutality” (Carl Jung), or that “a sentimentalist is simply one who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it” (Oscar Wilde). The best I could do was to fob them off with a “maybe, let’s see”, and keep my fingers crossed that at school trading Pokémon cards would trump swapping opinions on who may face elimination the following week. But, as most parents know, the power of playground discussions among seven-year-olds is strong indeed. I lost. We were watching Strictly.

We began our Strictly journey in week two of season 19 and I wondered what great error had materialised in my parenting. How could my children (*mine*), in the era of streaming and on-demand TV, choose this out of the countless options stretching before them. To comfort myself, I rationalised that they’d eventually grow bored. How could they not? Other than the judges, who really has the stamina to watch the various missteps of 15 stars? If all else failed, I would resist by stealth. The moment the show came on, I would busy myself with dinner prep or ticking off an item on the to-do list.

It was all going to plan until the first duo came on. The TV chef [John Whaite and his partner, Johannes Radebe](#), the show’s first same-sex male couple, danced the cha-cha-cha, and I watched as my children sat mesmerised by the sheer joy in their performance. A one-off, I reasoned. Next, the presenter AJ Odudu and her partner, Kai Widdrington, danced the foxtrot to Amy Winehouse’s [Tears Dry on My Own](#) and I was ... humming? By the time the Dragons’ Den judge Sara Davies glided across the floor with her partner, Aljaž Skorjanec, I had shed all sense of cool detachment. Now I was harmonising with the band’s rendition of Cass Elliot’s Dream a Little Dream. There was a lump in my throat when Rose Ayling-Ellis, Strictly’s first deaf contestant, who has been tipped to win this year, teared up as she watched her best friends wish her good luck from their honeymoon. What was happening to me?

By week three, I tried to pull myself together. With my phone at the ready, I'd use Strictly's running time to get through the long list of interesting articles I stumbled across while browsing for something. Why, then, was I devouring a precis of the "[Strictly curse](#)" and wondering who would become a victim of its power this year? At this point I gave up the ruse. Who was I kidding? I was hooked.

It took mere minutes to fall prey to Strictly's hypnotic effervescence but, at the risk of sounding sentimental, there is depth beyond those sparkles. With each instalment, with all that glitter and pizzazz, Strictly teaches a lesson I hope remains long after the winners are announced. It is this: learning should be lifelong. It requires the good grace to listen and practise, which entails the vulnerability of failing. It is about having a go in spite of yourself, and most importantly finding enjoyment.

Bring on season 20.

- Lola Okosie is an English teacher and writer focusing on race, politics, education and feminism

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/dec/17/19-seasons-mere-minutes-strictly-come-dancing-effervescence>

Nils Pratley on finance**Hospitality industry**

The UK hospitality industry needs its own furlough scheme

[Nils Pratley](#)



Punters staying away by choice are hurting revenues just as lockdowns did. Rishi Sunak should step in



The Churchill Arms in Kensington, London. The Treasury may be starting to accept the argument that pubs and restaurants need support. Photograph: Vuk Valcic/Sopa Images/Rex/Shutterstock

Thu 16 Dec 2021 14.02 EST

The case for offering help to hospitality companies during the Omicron flare-up is overwhelming. Through no fault of their own, businesses have been left “in no man’s land”, as Simon Emeny, chief executive of London pub chain Fuller, Smith & Turner, puts it.

Pubs, restaurants and theatres haven’t been ordered to close, which presumably would automatically trigger a support package from the Treasury, as it did last year. Yet trade is suffering anyway because the public, sensibly, is taking notice of [the chief medical officer’s advice to tone down the socialising](#). Rishi Sunak, even before [he made his way back from several days in California](#), must have noticed reports of mass cancellations of restaurant bookings and pantomimes playing to mostly empty theatres.

The chancellor will also know what comes next if nothing changes. Once companies have salvaged the dregs from the holiday season, [job losses](#) will follow. If the revenue line isn’t moving, that’s what happens. When it comes to offering support, it shouldn’t matter if the process is driven by instruction

from Westminster or by consumers' behaviour. The effect on employees and employers is the same.

Since the Treasury, thankfully, seems to be edging towards accepting that argument, the question is what form of support is best. The easiest method is a furlough scheme tied solely to the hospitality industry, argued the Resolution Foundation persuasively this week.

First, the furlough structure was established last year and is well understood. Second, it's not hard to make it sector-specific; if necessary, test the fall in a company's revenues, which can be measured through VAT returns. Third, it's no use pointing to the 1.2m vacancies in the economy as an excuse for doing nothing; some of those vacancies may be about to disappear anyway.

The cost of a hospitality-only furlough scheme would be £1.4bn a month, the Resolution Foundation calculates, if it were pitched at the original level of 80% of wage support. Sunak might worry that the bill could balloon if the commitment were open-ended but, at the moment, there are reasons to believe the booster programme will work and that the Omicron wave, plus the economically damaging surge in workers isolating, will be over by spring.

If a January to March sector-specific scheme were to cost £5bn, the figure needs to be seen in the context of £46bn spent on furlough so far. In purely economic terms, it looks justifiable, just as it did last time: the aim is ensure hospitality companies survive to pay taxes and employ people.

It would be a jolt for Sunak to find himself making 2020-style arguments about protecting livelihoods and businesses. His recent messaging has been about restoring the public finances to the virtuous path of discipline. But the course of the pandemic has changed. A short detour is required.

More tears at Boohoo after another profit warning

It's time to forget the idea that [Boohoo](#) and the online-only fast fashion brigade were winners from the pandemic. That was the tale of the first wave,

when locked-down punters loaded up with “athleisure” wear and weren’t bothered if the kit didn’t fit perfectly.

The latest variation is different. The revival of going out (while it lasted) meant demand switched to smarter gear, and dresses definitely get sent back if they’re ill-fitting. Pre-pandemic, Boohoo used to reckon its return rate was in the low 30s, percentage-wise. Now it’s in the high 30s. Such differences matter in online logistics.

Worse still for Boohoo, it’s trying to sell into the US out of warehouses in Sheffield and Burnley. Air freight rates have soared and timetables have extended to 10 days, which is not ideal when half your pitch to the punters is about speed of delivery.

The net result was a thumping profits warning to go with the [milder one in September](#). Investors had once expected top-line profits of £200m-ish from Boohoo this financial year; now the company expects £117m to £139m. Trading profits margins, which used to be 10%-ish pre-pandemic, will land at 6% to 7%.

Whistling cheerfully, Boohoo reckons its problems are “transient in nature”. Well, maybe. Rather like the central bankers who have learned that “transitory” inflation can hang around, Boohoo would be unwise to bet the farm on the idea.

What it really needs in the US is a warehouse, but it’s only just choosing a location; it probably also needs one in continental Europe. Meanwhile, Covid’s next effect on trading patterns is anyone’s guess.

Boohoo shares, down 23% on Thursday, have fallen by two-thirds this year and stand at a five-year low. It’s hard to quibble with the market’s judgment that the current problems could be slower to clear than management expects. Rival Primark’s blanket refusal to join the online game looks smarter by the month.

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OpinionHospitality industry

The government has hung hospitality out to dry – I've lost £65k in bookings this week

[Tom Kerridge](#)

We urgently need support to save our restaurants, bars and coffee shops in the face of mass cancellations



‘Restuarants still have the same staff costs, the same rent and rates, the same costs for IT – they don’t disappear just because there are fewer customers.’
Photograph: Guy Bell/Rex/Shutterstock

Thu 16 Dec 2021 09.22 EST

In the last six days, more than 650 people have cancelled their bookings at one of my restaurants. If that’s happening to us – busy restaurants with a chef who has something of a public profile – then imagine what’s happening

to your local pub, coffee shop and the small independent restaurant around the corner. As soon as the government announced that people should [work from home](#) if they could, I began to lose sleep. For everyone in the hospitality business, it is looking like a bleak Christmas.

I spoke to a fellow chef yesterday who has a Michelin star, whose restaurant has lost 50% of its lunch trade for the next week and a half pretty much overnight. A two-Michelin-starred chef I know has had to close his restaurant between now and Christmas because a number of his staff have tested positive for Covid. This isn't just about the top-end restaurants though, it's throughout the entire industry – at the coffee shop in Marlow where I go, the owner told me that it was worryingly quiet. Many hospitality businesses take 20-25% of their yearly revenue in the December to January period. If up to a quarter of your revenue disappears, or is cut in half, that's the difference between profit-making and huge loss-making, which in turn will become closure.

In hospitality the margins are very small. The moment those percentages start getting chipped away or destroyed – a 50% of loss of lunch revenue is a massive drop in revenue – you're in trouble. You still have the same staff costs, the same rent and rates, the same costs for IT – they don't disappear just because you have fewer customers. In fact, some costs, such as utility bills, are rising. The loans that the industry took on to see businesses through the early pandemic were massive, and have to be paid back. Nor is this just about the people who work in my restaurants, or the 2.4 million people who work in hospitality: there is a massive supply chain that includes farming, agriculture and fisheries. Those producers will also be hit. This comes on top of Brexit – and I don't believe there is a single positive of Brexit for the hospitality industry.

I completely understand that public health is the most important thing, and the last thing people want to do is catch coronavirus and self-isolate when they've been looking forward to Christmas. I'm not blaming people for the cancellations. But when there is guidance to stay at home – but not mandates – there has to be some form of support for the industries affected. Hospitality feels it has been hung out to dry.

There is mixed messaging – if you have to put a mask on to go into a shop but you can go next door to the pub or the restaurant and don't have to wear one: that's very confusing for customers and businesses. The scandals about politicians' illicit [Christmas parties](#) have also increased public distrust of any measures the government does put in place.

At the moment, my businesses are OK; my restaurants are not throwing away food, but the revenue loss is worrying. For example, 650 people having cancelled equates in that particular restaurant to about £65,000 in revenue, which is huge. And the cancellations are still coming. A restaurant that should be operating at 90-100% over Christmas is now down to 50%. That's not a good position for any business, and this is in all likelihood just the start of it.

The next two or three years will be a huge uphill struggle to get on to an even keel. There will be many operators who will decide the last few years have been enough: there's too much debt, this is too heavy a burden to carry, and there is no light at the end of the tunnel.

The last lockdown demonstrated the importance of restaurants. People could still buy food and alcohol, but what so many found they missed was social connection, noise, energy levels. Whether it's a small local pub or coffee shop, or a celebratory occasion in a major, three-Michelin-star restaurant – these places are the beating hearts of our communities, an important part of the fabric of society. And they might not be there in the New Year.

- Tom Kerridge is the chef-patron of the Hand and Flowers in Marlow – the only pub in the UK to be awarded two Michelin stars

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[First Dog on the Moon](#)[Australia news](#)

How are we supposed to just keep going? What a long grim year, again

[First Dog on the Moon](#)



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2021.12.17 - Around the world

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US Capitol attack

Capitol attack insurrectionists flock to fundraising websites to raise defense funds

Portraying themselves as maligned American patriots and ‘political prisoners’, the far-right groups have raised over \$2m



A man calls on people to raid the Capitol as Trump supporters clash with police and security forces. Photograph: Joseph Prezioso/AFP/Getty Images

[Ed Pilkington](#)

[@edpilkington](#)

Fri 17 Dec 2021 02.00 EST

Trump supporters and members of far-right extremist groups who took part in the violent insurrection at the US Capitol on 6 January are raising hundreds of thousands of dollars from online crowdfunding sites by

portraying themselves as maligned American patriots, martyrs and “political prisoners”.

Several of the highest-profile participants in the “stop the steal” insurrection which attempted to disrupt Joe Biden’s certification as US president are raising substantial sums on fundraising sites. They include members of the far-right Proud Boys and many of the 6 January individuals being detained in a Washington DC jail, awaiting trial for allegedly attacking police officers.

In their donations appeals they are drastically rewriting history. Their scripts transform 6 January from what it was – a violent attempt to overthrow the democratic results of the 2020 presidential election on behalf of [Donald Trump](#) – into the fantasy that it was a peaceful and patriotic protest to uphold voter integrity.

“It’s shocking to say, but America now has legitimate political prisoners, en masse,” says the fundraising page titled American Gulag for Jan 6 Political Prisoners which has so far raised \$41,000. [The page](#), created by Jim Hoft, founder of the conspiracy site Gateway Pundit, claims that there are “scores of political prisoners wrongfully imprisoned as a result of the protest on January 6th”.

Scott Fairlamb, [the first person](#) to be sentenced for assaulting a police officer, describes the insurrection on his [fundraising page](#) as a “sea of America loving, American Flag waving patriots who came together from all over our great nation in support of our 45th President Donald Trump”.

Fairlamb has so far raised more than \$38,000 towards his goal of \$100,000. He [pledged guilty](#) to the assault and was sentenced to 41 months in prison.

The framing of his appeal to potential donors contrasts sharply with what actually happened on the day. Hundreds stormed the Capitol and five people died, including a police officer, with scores more injured.

[Court documents](#) point to videos that capture Fairlamb climbing scaffolding on the Capitol building and punching and shoving a police officer on the West Front of the complex. Another video catches him wielding a

collapsible baton and shouting: “What patriots do? We fuckin’ disarm them and then we storm the fuckin’ Capitol.”

Jake Chansley, the self-styled QAnon Shaman whose bearskin headdress and horns became an enduring image of the insurrection, has so far raised more than \$10,000 on his [online page](#), “Free Jake”. In his plea for money, he says he went to Washington on 6 January “answering the call that President Trump put out to his supporters”.

He admits he entered the Senate chamber and sat in the seat of vice president Mike Pence, but insists it was only to make a statement “that the people had showed up for work that day”. Chansley [pleaded guilty](#) to obstructing an official proceeding and last month was [sentenced](#) to 41 months in prison.

Richard “Bigo” Barnett, who became instantly infamous after a photo went viral of him inside House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s office with his boot up on her desk, has created his own [personal fundraising site](#) which purports to be a “legal defense fund”. It is unclear how much he has raised, but donors who give more than \$100 are [promised](#) a signed photograph (though not the image for which he is notorious because of copyright issues).

In his plea for cash, Barnett likens himself to Japanese Americans interned by the US government during the second world war. He also cites Thomas Paine’s 1776 pamphlet Common Sense which argues for the right of American colonists to stand up against the tyranny of the British government, claiming that he was acting on 6 January in the same spirit – standing up to the “tyranny” that gave Biden the White House.

“Richard believes that his actions were not criminal, but rather a constitutionally protected form of political protest.... He is asking for the support of America’s Patriots, who embrace the kind of America that stands up to the evils of communism and socialism, not bows down to it,” it says.

Barnett, who is out on bond, has been [charged](#) with breaking into the Capitol carrying a deadly stun gun walking stick. In social media posts before the insurrection he described himself as a “[white nationalist](#)”. By his [own admission](#), he stole a document from Pelosi’s office and wrote her a note that he left on her desk saying: “Nancy, Bigo was here, you Bitch”.

One of the striking aspects of the 6 January appeal for cash is not only the [large number of fundraisers](#) that have been set up for people accused of participating in the insurrection which stretch into the hundreds, but also the considerable sums of money they have been accruing over the months.

Brandon Straka, a prominent Trump supporter with more than half a million [Twitter followers](#) who has pleaded guilty to disorderly conduct, has [so far raised](#) more than \$178,000 for his “legal defense fund”.

A collective fundraising page for the 40 or so alleged insurrectionists who are being held in pre-trial custody has [so far raised](#) more than \$268,000. Created by a group calling itself The Patriot Freedom Project, it says the money will go to support “1/6ers” and their families who are being “politically persecuted for standing up to what they believe was a fraudulent election”.

[A tally by CNN](#) in September estimated that the total amount raised to support those accused of 6 January crimes may have exceeded \$2m.

Experts who track extremist fundraising online warn that the impressive flow of resources to alleged violent insurrectionists could have long-term consequences by giving succor to anti-democratic movements.

Megan Squire, a senior fellow at the Southern Poverty Law Center, told the Guardian that though the money was put to a variety of uses, from providing bail money and legal fees to paying bills, the scale of the funding was worrying.

“However it is used, there are consequences,” she said. “It definitely keeps them going and keeps them in business, which is not good for any of us.”

Squire said the donation sites also had the effect of spreading involvement in anti-democratic activities by making donors feel involved. “People view donating to events like January 6th as a way of participating from afar,” she said.

“It’s one step up from being a keyboard warrior to being a keyboard warrior with a wallet.”

Accused insurrectionists have been assisted in their fundraising efforts by the proliferation of sites that are willing to host their monetary appeals, even in several cases where the individuals have pleaded guilty or been sentenced to prison terms. The sites include AllFundIt, which was created by a Trump-supporting conservative blogger and which hosts the [Straka fundraiser](#).

[OurFreedomFunding](#) has provided a money-making platform to several of the Proud Boys extremists allegedly involved on 6 January. The site is currently promoting the fundraiser of Zachary Rehl, president of the Philadelphia chapter of the far-right group, which [states](#): “He has fought for all of us, now he needs us to fight for him”.

Rehl’s fund has so far raised more than \$40,000. He is in custody, having been part of a group of Proud Boys leaders who [allegedly began plotting to impede the certification](#) of Biden’s presidential victory by Congress as early as election day on 3 November.

On 7 January, Rehl posted on social media: “I’m proud as fuck of what we accomplished yesterday”.

The cash generating platform of choice for alleged insurrectionists is [GiveSendGo](#), which bills itself as the “#1 Free Christian Crowdfunding Site.” Today it is providing a home to 96 fundraising appeals relating to prosecutions following the Capitol insurrection.

Four of those appeals have each raised more than \$100,000 for their subjects.

Among the 96 fundraisers are appeals for several [military veterans](#) and former law enforcement officers charged with felonies on 6 January. A former army ranger, [Robert Morss](#) allegedly used his military training to [play a leading role](#) in organizing the violent attack on the Capitol.

[Ronald McAbee](#), a then serving sheriff’s deputy from Tennessee, turned up on 6 January wearing his own department’s tactical gear and spiked gloves with metal knuckles. Videos show him [assaulting](#) other police officers.

[Julian Khater](#) and [George Tanios](#) both have pages on GiveSendGo. They are [accused](#) of using powerful bear spray to attack Capitol police officer Brian Sidnick who died a day after the insurrection.

A medical examiner [found](#) that Sidnick died of natural causes.

The Guardian reached out to the co-founder of GiveSendGo Jacob Wells, but he did not reply to questions about the site's hosting of alleged insurrectionists' fundraising appeals. In a [statement](#) on the website, he calls himself a "committed Christian" who believes that "purpose comes from God".

On the website, Wells says he does not condone the use of violence for political gain and that "we unequivocally condemn those who threatened the lives of our elected leaders and the police officers who were simply doing their jobs". He does not explain, however, why his site is [still presenting](#) appeals for cash from individuals like Scott Fairlamb who has pleaded guilty and is imprisoned for assaulting a police officer.

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Kim Jong-un

From ‘tempestuous’ child to little rocket man: 10 years of Kim Jong-un

Some observers said he would survive a few months as the head of a nuclear-armed state but, a decade later, the North Korean leader has proved them wrong

- [Missile tests, horse rides and executions: Kim Jong-un’s leadership in pictures](#)

05:41

How has North Korea's Kim Jong-un held on to power so long? – video



Justin McCurry

Thu 16 Dec 2021 19.29 EST

It was not, perhaps, the image [Kim Jong-un](#) would have wanted to project in his first public appearance as the latest authoritarian leader of [North Korea](#) in 2011. As wailing citizens exhibited their grief along the snowbound streets of Pyongyang, Kim, then only in his late 20s, cut a forlorn figure.

Dressed in a long black coat, Kim walked with grim purpose alongside the hearse carrying his father, [Kim Jong-il](#), one hand resting on the bonnet of the 1970s Lincoln Continental, the other executing an awkward salute. He was later seen crying and drying his eyes at the burial service, in footage broadcast on state television.



Kim Jong-un walks beside the hearse containing his father, Kim Jong-il, in 2011. The transition of power led many to fear instability in the nuclear-armed country. Photograph: 朝鮮通信社/AP

The younger Kim's sudden ascent to lead an unpredictable, nuclear-armed nation on 17 December 2011 offered little indication of how – and for how long – he would rule the secretive state. Some observers predicted an early political demise for a young man who had yet to earn the loyalty of the inner circle of the ruling Korean Workers' party and the generals of the country's million-strong army.

The state machinery, observers predicted, would use the succession to exploit Kim's inexperience, plunging the country and the world into unprecedented uncertainty.

Just two days into Kim's leadership, Victor Cha, the former White House Asian affairs director, wrote: "Whether it comes apart in the next few weeks or over several months, the regime will not be able to hold together after the untimely death of its leader, Kim Jong-il."

Timeline

Kim Jong-un – a timeline

Show

8 January 1984

Kim Jong-un is born in Pyongyang, the youngest son of Kim Jong-il, who became North Korean leader in 1994.

10 October 2010

Kim makes a rare public appearance at a huge military parade in Pyongyang, standing beside his father, Kim Jong-il, to celebrate the 65th anniversary of the ruling Korean Workers' party.

30 December 2011

Officially made the country's leader when he is declared supreme commander of the Korean People's Army.

21 February 2013

Conducts his first, and North Korea's third, nuclear test.

12 December 2013

Jang Song-thaek, Kim's uncle and erstwhile senior adviser, is executed on Kim's orders for "treachery".

6 January 2016

North Korea claims it has conducted a test of a hydrogen bomb for the first time, describing it as an “act of self-defence” against the US.

4 July 2017

North Korea tests launches the Hwasong-14, its first intercontinental ballistic missile, capable of striking Alaska and US Pacific territories.

12 June 2018

Kim holds his first summit with US president Donald Trump in Singapore. Their meeting ends in a vaguely worded agreement to “denuclearise” the Korean peninsula.

27 February 2019 - 28 February 2019

Kim and Trump hold their second summit, in Hanoi, Vietnam, but it ends in failure after they disagree over sanctions relief in return for moves to dismantle the North’s nuclear arsenal.

8 April 2021

Kim warns the North Korean people of “severe” economic difficulties, due to the coronavirus pandemic, natural disasters and years of UN-led sanctions.

December 2021

Kim marks 10 years as North Korea’s leader, defying predictions that his youth and inexperience would see his regime fail in its infancy.

Was this helpful?

Thank you for your feedback.

Others, more in hope than expectation, predicted a new style of leadership under the “cosmopolitan” Kim Jong-un, who had been educated at an exclusive Swiss boarding school and professed a love for NBA basketball.

In the best-case scenario, its new, free-spirited leader would address the regime's nuclear ambitions and [appalling human rights record](#).

Now, as he embarks on a second decade in power, Kim leads a country assailed by international sanctions, natural disasters and the unprecedented challenges posed by Covid-19. A year that began with him being named general secretary of the Workers' party – his late father's title – has ended with fears over food shortages, the pandemic and the [economy](#), with a return to nuclear talks only a distant possibility.

In October 2020, Kim offered an extraordinary public apology to the people of [North Korea](#), tearfully acknowledging that he had failed to guide the country through difficult times. Faced with food shortages and more economic pain caused by the Covid-enforced closure of the border with China, he called on his people to embark on another “arduous march”, appearing to compare the situation to a 1990s famine during which hundreds of thousands of people died.

And yet, predictions that his regime is in danger of collapse are as hopelessly wide of the mark now as they were a decade ago.

A ruthless leader-in-waiting

Thirteen days after the death of Kim Jong-il, his youngest son was formally declared supreme commander of the Korean People's army, a year after he had been briefly introduced at a military parade. That appearance confirmed that the then 26-year-old was preferred ahead of his older half-brother, Kim Jong-nam, who had fallen out of favour in 2001 after an [embarrassing encounter](#) with Japanese immigration officials.



Kim Jong-nam, the exiled half brother of Kim Jong-un, was killed in Kuala Lumpur airport in 2017. Photograph: Shizuo Kambayashi/AP

“It was a mistake for some people to assume that he would be a reformer,” says Duyeon Kim, adjunct senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security. “Being educated in the west does not automatically mean one will subscribe to democratic values. At the end of the day, it’s all about ensuring the Kim dynasty lasts forever, so it is only natural that Kim will do anything to maintain a firm grip on absolute power.

“Kim has maintained his grip on power through a combination of the regime apparatus, keeping the elites happy who help sustain a Kim family leadership system, and employing brutal practices to enforce loyalty and eliminate threats.”

Addressing the first major party congress in decades, Kim in 2016 outlined his byongjin policy – a vision of a North Korea that married economic development with acquiring status as a genuine nuclear power.

He also revealed a “tempestuous” side that, according to [Kim Jong-il's former sushi chef](#), had marked him out as a leader-in-waiting when he was still a child. In 2013, he ordered the execution of his own uncle, [Jang Song-thaek](#), the once-powerful adviser who had walked immediately behind him

as they mourned three years earlier. Jang would be just one of dozens of officials purged or executed by Kim, whose determination to tighten his grip on power had made him deeply distrustful of many of those around him, including his own family.

Sixteen years after his unsuccessful attempt to visit Tokyo Disneyland, Kim Jong-nam was waiting to check in at Kuala Lumpur airport when two women – groomed by North Korean agents – smeared an oily substance on his face that turned out to be the nerve agent VX, one of the most deadly chemical weapons in the world. Twenty minutes later, he was dead. Few believe the assassination could have happened without the approval of [Kim Jong-un](#).



Kim Jong-un with his uncle Jang Song-thaek, a year before he was executed.
Photograph: KYODO/REUTERS

Kim Jong-nam and Jang Song-thaek were not the regime's only high-profile victims. In 2017, the world reacted in horror after the death of Otto Warmbier, an American student who had been detained in North Korea, reportedly after attempting to steal a poster as a memento of his visit. Although details of his death remain murky, we do know that the 22-year-old university student was medically evacuated from North Korea on 13 June that year and flown to the US, where he died on 19 June.

North Korea's 24 million people have also suffered under Kim, whose human rights abuses include the torture, humiliation and sexual assault of [criminal suspects](#) and the use of a [network of gulags](#) for the politically "impure".

Many of the [defectors](#) who have made it to the South during Kim's time in power said they had been motivated by worsening poverty and malnutrition. The regime's response – according to high-profile defectors, including [Thae Yong-ho](#), a senior diplomat at the North Korean embassy in London – was to resort to executions and killings as a form of "terrorism" to crush dissent.

The Seoul-based human rights organisation the Transitional Justice Working Group said it had identified hundreds of sites where witnesses say North Korea carried out public executions and extrajudicial state killings as part of an arbitrary and aggressive use of the death penalty designed to intimidate its citizens.

Meeting Trump the 'dotard'

At the end of 2016 the world held its breath with the election of a US president every bit as idiosyncratic as his North Korean nemesis. Fears grew that tensions fomented during the Obama administration could spill over into a military conflict as Donald Trump spent the first months of his presidency trading insults with the "[little rocket man](#)" in Pyongyang, who responded in kind with public denunciations of the "[dotard](#)" in the White House.

Having exhausted their arsenal of insults, the two men embarked on an unprecedented round of nuclear summity, in Singapore in 2018 and Hanoi in 2019, as well as a [historic meeting at the demilitarised zone](#), the heavily fortified border that dissects the Korean peninsula.



Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump shake hands on the border in the truce village of Panmunjom in the Demilitarized Zone in June 2019. Photograph: KCNA/EPA

Kim had embarked on a furious round of diplomacy that included [three summits with the South Korean president, Moon Jae-in](#), six meetings with Chinese leader Xi Jinping and one with Russian president Vladimir Putin.

The Singapore summit marked Kim's debut as a statesman and ended with a loose agreement to "denuclearise" the Korean peninsula. The Hanoi summit, however, ended in ignominy after the two leaders [failed to agree](#) on how North Korea would be rewarded for dismantling its nuclear weapons. To date, Kim has not abandoned a single nuclear weapon, and only this month, satellite imagery showed the regime continuing to produce nuclear-grade plutonium at its main Yongbyon plant.



Kim Jong-un and Vladimir Putin toast their summit in Vladivostok in 2019.
Photograph: Valery Sharifulin/TASS

At around the same time, Kim was in a strong enough position to begin crafting the North Korean state in his own image, albeit one that stylistically borrowed heavily from his grandfather, from his dark Mao suits and short-back-and-sides to his [visible weight gain](#).

He has since stepped out of the shadow of his predecessors, using a constitutional revision in 2019 to expunge all mention of his father's *songun* "military-first" policy. South Korean media reported this month that portraits of former leaders have been removed from meeting rooms, while officials now use the term "Kim Jong-un-ism" to underline the break with the ideologies of his predecessors.

"Kim has manipulated the strategic levers of power to survive and thrive," says Patrick Cronin, chair for Asia-Pacific security at the Hudson Institute in Washington. "He revived party power and discipline, co-opted elites, opened more markets, developed strategic arms, and balanced outsider powers."

Kim's greatest test

Much of what the outside world knows about North Korea comes from satellite imagery, [brave citizen journalists](#) equipped with contraband mobile phones, recent defectors, South Korea's spy agency, the North's state-run media and, inevitably, a degree of guesswork and speculation.

That applies as much to Kim's health as it does to his nuclear weapons. Official photos offered watertight proof that he piled on the pounds in his first few years as leader and that his weight had caused him [occasional discomfort](#). Prolonged absences from public life triggered speculation he was suffering a serious illness.

A three-week absence in 2020 sparked rumours of heart surgery, with some reports suggesting he had died. A more plausible theory – that he had simply been isolating as a precaution during the pandemic – emerged after Kim reappeared, apparently in good health.

More recent photos suggest the leader has been advised to make lifestyle changes and has subsequently lost enough weight to [tighten the strap](#) on his favourite \$12,000 watch. Little is known about his diet or drinking habits – we know his father was fond of Hennessy cognac – but he has frequently been [photographed with a cigarette in his hand](#). South Korean intelligence officials recently told MPs that an apparently healthy Kim had lost 20kg, and dismissed reports a body-double had been enlisted to make public appearances.



Kim Jong-un has used appearances with his wife, Ri Sol-ju to soften his public image at home.

Photograph: Rodong Sinmun/EPA

In the 10 years since he shed tears beside his father's corpse at the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun mausoleum, Kim has turned North Korea into a nuclear power, withstood unprecedented economic pressure from the UN security council and cemented North Korea's role as a constant source of geopolitical frustration for three US presidents and counting.

His greatest test, though, could be largely home-grown, says the Hudson Institute's Cronin. "The biggest unknown for Kim remains the true impact of Covid, which has stifled North Korean progress and may yet undermine the regime in ways not yet visible to the outside world," he says.

Some analysts expect Kim to mask pandemic and economic shortcomings by bolstering his reputation as a friend of the people, an image nurtured during photo opportunities with children and "ordinary" civilians, and public appearances with his wife, [Ri Sol-ju](#), with whom he reportedly has [three children](#) aged between four and 11.



Kim Jong-un poses with participants during the 8th Congress of the Korean Children's Union in Pyongyang, in 2017. Photograph: KCNA/Reuters

While drawing heavily on traditional methods of quashing dissent, Kim's public persona "is that of a loving supreme leader who cares most about his people's welfare and putting on a human face by openly acknowledging policy failures and even crying to tug at his people's heart strings, while trying to show the world that he is a normal leader of a normal state," says Duyeon Kim.

With UN security council sanctions still in place, warnings of more economic hardship and the prospect of an unvaccinated population facing another wave of Covid, North Korea's situation is anything but normal.

But having defied the odds for so long, the consensus is that Kim Jong-un is here to stay. As Cronin says: "More likely than not, North Korea will be celebrating 20 years of 'glorious' leadership under Kim."

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Marine life

First evidence that leopard seals feed on sharks, researchers say

The unusual discovery in New Zealand waters is based on the remains of scat and scars on seal's bodies



Leopard seals are apex predators but evidence that they attack sharks puts them in a tiny club of marine species. Photograph: Minden Pictures/Alamy

[Eva Corlett](#) in Wellington

@evacorlett

Thu 16 Dec 2021 20.38 EST

In a world first, [New Zealand](#) leopard seals have been found to feed on sharks, making them part of a tiny and exclusive club of marine predators that do so.

The [study](#), led by Krista van der Linde of leopardseals.org, found shark remains in the scat of leopard seals, and visible signs of struggle with sharks on seals' bodies, indicating the marine mammals predate on sharks, rather than scavenge their remains.

"We were blown away to find that sharks were on the menu," Van der Linde said.

"But then we also found elephant fish and ghost sharks were also being hunted by the leopard seals. These fish have large spines to help protect them from predators and sure enough there were wounds on the leopard seals, sometimes even big spines embedded in their faces. One leopard seal had at least 14 such wounds."



A leopard seal with a shark spine lodged in its face. Photograph: Kirsty Moffatt

Van der Linde is uncertain why the seals are targeting sharks, especially given how risky it is to hunt them. "There could be something nutritionally about sharks that makes them desirable, it could be sort of a treat for [the seals]."

Leopardseals.org was set up by Van der Linde and Ingrid Visser, an orca expert, to better protect, educate and research the seals. It has the largest collection of leopard seal scat in the world, gathered by researchers and volunteers who comb the coastline collecting it for the project, [in a bid to learn more about the rare animals](#). In 2019, a [still-working USB stick](#) was found in a one-year-old frozen scat sample.

“When we founded leopardseals.org, I knew we were going to find some interesting things, but this is the next-level of incredible,” Van der Linde said.

Leopard seals are already known as apex predators, who feed on penguins and other seals, but this is the first time evidence has been produced of them hunting sharks.

The leopard seals that arrive on New Zealand’s shores are originally from Antarctica. Their presence in the country’s waters is becoming more common, and research is trying to ascertain whether this is new, or whether more frequently reported sightings give the illusion there are more. The new diet research raises questions for Van der Linde over whether the seals are coming to New Zealand because there is more variation in the diet, and whether climate change could be affecting food sources farther south.

The researchers are still in the process of trying to determine whether leopard seals have always feasted on sharks, or if this is also new. “It kind of indicates to us so far that leopard seals are opportunistic predators that are coming to New Zealand and feasting on whatever they can get their jaws on.”

Van der Linde said it is very rare to see predators feeding on other predators, and that could have implications for the food chain.

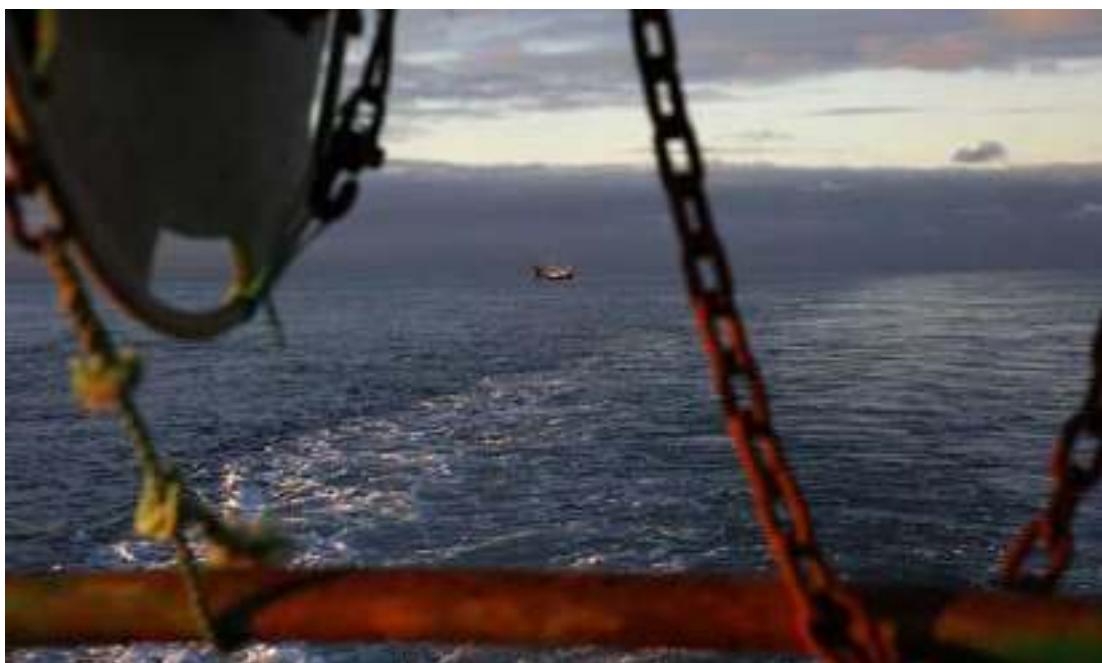
“A top predator feeding on another top predator is quite interesting in itself. If the leopard seals do keep increasing in the numbers and then that affects the shark populations, we really don’t know how that will affect things.”

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Seascape: the state of our oceansFishing

UK fishing licences for bottom-trawling could be unlawful, says Oceana

Permits for UK and EU vessels will hinder efforts to protect marine life and may break habitats directive, conservation group warns



Nearly a quarter of the UK's territorial waters are marine protected areas, but bottom-trawling and dredging is still permitted in 97% of those MPAs.
Photograph: Nicolas Garriga/AP

Seascape: the state of our oceans is supported by



[About this content](#)

[Karen McVeigh](#)

[@karenmcveigh1](#)

Fri 17 Dec 2021 01.20 EST

The British government's granting of fishing licences to more than 1,000 UK and EU vessels for 2022, which will permit bottom-trawling and dredging in marine protected areas, could be unlawful unless conditions to safeguard ocean habitats are imposed, the conservation group Oceana says.

In a letter to George Eustice, secretary of state for the environment, parts of which have been seen by the Guardian, the group warned that licences expected to be granted this month could contravene UK law. This includes the habitats directive, aimed at protecting vital marine ecosystems.

Bottom-trawling and dredging, which are highly damaging to the seabed, are still permitted in [97% of marine protected areas](#) (MPAs). Nearly a quarter of the UK's territorial waters are protected areas, set up to safeguard vital habitats and species including harbour porpoises and dolphins. The MPAs are the most prominent feature of the government's pledge to protect 30% of ocean biodiversity by 2030.

Melissa Moore, head of UK policy at [Oceana in Europe](#), said she expected the licences to be issued this month. “These licences could be massive supertrawlers or scallop vessels. Whether it is scooping up dolphins or dredging the seabed, this legislation is precautionary.

“The habitat directive is saying before you license you must prove that the licence won’t have an impact on the site,” she said. “The government has not done that.”



UK government has only banned bottom-trawling in two marine protected areas, with plans to include four more, including Dogger Bank. Photograph: Nicolas Garriga/AP

Oceana’s analysis found that of the 68,000 hours of fishing with damaging bottom-towed gear that took place along the seabed of protected areas off the UK shore last year, 39% was by British vessels, especially off [Scotland](#), 35% by French and the rest by other EU states.

Under so-called benthic MPAs – to protect species that live on the seabed – the government has so far banned bottom-trawling and dredging in only two of its offshore MPAs and plans to bring in a ban for four more, including in the Dogger Bank. At the current rate of progress, Oceana estimates it would take the UK until 2050 to properly protect all such vulnerable marine areas.

Moore said: “We need an immediate ban on trawling and dredging in all offshore marine protected areas as well as the inshore zone. To continue to license this destructive activity, when we know the damage it causes, and that it is illegal under various environmental laws, beggars belief. A simple licence condition should prohibit fishing in MPAs.”

Protecting marine habitats would help protect us from the climate crisis by sequestering and storing carbon, she said.

In its letter, Oceana said the government had failed to conduct an appropriate assessment of any significant effect of the impending licences on special areas of conservation as required under [regulation 28 of the offshore habitats regulations](#). Oceana also warned that the government could be failing to comply with marine strategy regulations requiring it to maintain [“good ecological” status by December 2020](#) and could breach its duty to conserve the marine environment under the [Fisheries Act](#), if the licences were granted without the necessary conditions.



A Greenpeace boat monitoring fishing in the Channel. The group described bottom-trawling in marine protected areas as ‘bulldozing national parks’. Photograph: Fionn Guilfoyle/Greenpeace/PA

A recent study estimated that [fishing boats trawling along the seabed release as much carbon as the aviation industry](#) puts into the atmosphere annually, and that carbon emissions in UK waters were the fourth largest globally from trawling.

In April, the government committed to adopting fisheries management for all its MPAs by 2024, after legal issues were raised by Oceana.

Greenpeace described bottom-trawling in marine protected areas as “bulldozing national parks”. Greenpeace UK’s head of oceans, Will McCallum, said: “It turns the seafloor into a disaster zone while also releasing planet-heating carbon in the process. It should be banned.

“So far, this destructive fishing method has been restricted in just two MPAs out of 64 – it’s a joke. If the government means a single word it said about being a global oceans champion, then the very least they can do is ban bottom-trawling and dredging from some of our most precious marine environments.”

A spokesperson for the Department for Environment, [Food](#) and Rural Affairs said: “To protect our vital fish stocks, all EU vessels granted access to fish in UK waters must comply with UK rules and regulations, including those on sustainability.

“We have already stopped [pulse-trawling](#) by EU and English-registered vessels in UK waters, and are working closely with industry to address their concerns surrounding bottom-trawling. Now we have left the EU, the MMO [Marine Management Organisation] has also consulted on additional safeguards for several of our offshore marine protected areas.”

The Scottish government said it would exclude all fishing from 10% of its seas by 2026. A spokesperson said: “As set out in the [programme for government](#), we will deliver fisheries management measures for existing marine protected areas where these are not already in place, as well as key coastal biodiversity locations outside these sites, by March 2024 at the latest.

“We will also designate highly protected marine areas, which will exclude all fishing activities, covering at least 10% of our seas by 2026.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/dec/17/uk-fishing-licences-for-bottom-trawling-could-be-unlawful-says-oceana>

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Global development

‘All I can think about is the children’s future’: drought devastates Kenya

Nomads’ herds are dying along with rare wildlife as the longest dry spell in memory edges pastoralists ever nearer starvation



Dead cows outside Eyrib village. The crucial rainy season brought only a few showers, wiping out livestock and putting millions of people at risk.
Photograph: Ed Ram/The Guardian

Global development is supported by



About this content

Ed Ram in Dahabley

Fri 17 Dec 2021 01.30 EST

Dahabley smells of rotting flesh. Bodies of starved cows lie in various stages of decomposition, after being dragged to the outskirts of the village in Wajir county, north-east [Kenya](#). They are added to on a near-daily basis and fester in the heat amid multiplying flies.

North-east Kenya is well used to spells of drought, but it is experiencing the worst in living memory. As the region's short rainy season, which starts in October, draws to an end, parts of Wajir have only seen small showers and other areas have had no rain at all for more than a year.

In October, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), a regional trade bloc, and the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization warned that 26 million people were struggling for food after consecutive seasons of poor rainfall in the Horn of [Africa](#).

Map showing Garissa, Wajir and Mandera counties near border of Somalia

Wild animals are dying and herders are reporting losses of up to 70% of their livestock. With conflicts raging in Ethiopia and Somalia, aid agencies

are struggling to assess the extent of the crisis. Now, as the next four-month-long dry season starts, there are mounting fears that large numbers of people will die.

In a round hut of woven sticks in Dahabley, Hodhan Issack, 22, is increasingly concerned about the health of her seven children. “I overthink things, and honestly, I think I’m going mad sometimes,” she says. “All I can think about is the children’s future.”

Her husband left to find work months ago. He occasionally sends money, but poor phone reception means they rarely speak. All 10 of their cows have died, and the three goats she has left from a herd of 50 are very weak and are surviving on the children’s leftover rice and maize.



Hodhan Issack with her son outside her home in Dahabley, Wajir county, Kenya. The prolonged drought is pushing pastoralist communities to the brink. Photograph: Ed Ram/The Guardian

Without making money from livestock, Issack can no longer afford monthly 500 Kenyan shilling (£3.30) school fees for her eldest two and they have not attended classes for a month. Her two youngest have thin hair and are visibly malnourished. Issack says she is struggling to cope. Mohamed Abdi, teacher

at Dahabley primary school, says there are only 60 pupils left out of 120 as families have left in search of pasture.

Animals are central to the way of life of nomadic communities across the vast semi-desert plains of northern and eastern Kenya. A healthy cow is worth about \$300, a goat \$50 and a camel \$1,000. Livestock act as both a bank account and a key source of food. The cows still alive in Dahabley are increasingly weak, sitting emaciated in the shade of gnarled trees around the village, with their value decreasing by the day.

Kusow Mohamed, 52, says that of his herd of 30 camels, 10 have died and the rest are thin, their fatty humps all but gone. Yet camels are one of the most climate-resilient mammals. “It’s unheard of,” says Mohamed, “we have never known them to die like this. Now we can’t afford to buy diesel to pump water from the village borehole.”

We have not had any rain here in 24 months. Some people lost everything and have migrated to the cities

Abdi Karim, Eyrib's assistant village chief

East of Dahabley in Eyrib, in Sabuli wildlife conservancy, small businesses and homes are boarded up and more than 70% of the residents have left, according to the assistant village chief, Abdi Karim. “We haven’t had any rain here in 24 months. Some people have lost everything and have migrated to the cities.”

River water has not flowed into the reservoir for at least eight months and people have been reduced to drinking salty water from boreholes. Wildlife is dying. In November, 10 giraffes, weak from lack of food and water, died after getting stuck in thick mud as they tried to reach a puddle of water in the middle of the reservoir. Their bodies were dragged out to prevent contamination of the reservoir and six left together are pecked at by birds as they lie on the outskirts of the village.

“We have lost 102 reticulated Somali giraffes in Wajir, Garissa and Mandera over the last three months,” says Sharmake Mohamed, chair of the North Eastern Conservancies Association.



The bodies of six giraffes, weak from lack of food and water, that died after getting stuck in mud. They were dragged out of the reservoir to prevent the precious water becoming contaminated. Photograph: Getty

Warthogs, oryx and ostriches have also been dying of thirst in the Sabuli wildlife conservancy. The region has also lost 30 hirola, also known as Hunter's antelope, a critically endangered species.

"That's 6% of the total that were left in the wild," says Mohamed. The drought is pushing wildlife, humans and livestock to compete for water and vegetation in areas that have seen small amounts of rain, creating human-wildlife conflict, where lions and cheetahs have been preying on livestock. The giraffes were trying to drink from the water source meant for the community, which created tension, Mohamed says.

"Drought has become very frequent over the last 10 years. We could attribute it to climate change," says Jully Ouma, disaster risk adviser for the [IGAD Climate Prediction and Application Centre](#).

The rainfall cycle is being disrupted by rising temperatures. Ouma says the extra heat "causes a pressure system that redirects movement of winds ... so moisture can be taken to areas where it used not to go". This can lead to a drought cycle in some areas and flooding in others.

The communities suffering from drought in east Africa are among those who do the least harm to the environment, but whose lives are the most severely affected by the climate crisis.

Muhumed Noor is chairman of Dujis village in Garissa, Wajir's neighbouring county. He points to the skeletal remains of cows that died a month ago. Nearly three-quarters of the villagers' cattle have died.



Dead cows rot near the village of Eyrib, Wajir county. Cattle represent savings as well as food for pastoralist communities. Photograph: Ed Ram/The Guardian

Three water trucks are parked in the middle of Dujis. "They are waiting for money," says Noor. The community has had to resort to buying water, at 45,000 Kenyan shillings (£300) for 10,000 litres.

"We need three [trucks] a week for the 350 households in Dujis," says Noor. But with no healthy livestock to sell, the community is struggling to pay the drivers, who refuse to leave without payment. "They will not go until they have got their money. They give us a timeframe – a week, a month. If we fail to pay there could be violence," he says.

“The rains have stopped now, so there is no hope of any other rain unless a miracle happens,” says Yusuf Abdi Gedi, Wajir’s local official for livestock and agriculture. The Wajir county administration is struggling to cope with the scale of the emergency and has hired 40 extra trucks on top of 18 of their own to distribute water. However, community leaders in Dahabley and Eyrib say they have not received government aid. “We have about 400 villages and we were not able to reach all of them,” says Abdi Gedi.

The authority’s efforts have been hamstrung by a lack of funds and it is now redirecting money from other projects to deal with the crisis. The actions of Mohamed Abdi, the former Wajir county governor impeached in April amid [allegations of corruption](#), is said to have exacerbated the problem. “Systems were not in place and there was not enough resilience-building done prior to the drought so what we are doing is only fire fighting,” says Abdi Gedi.



A camel herder looks for water for his livestock. The area has received less than a third of its normal rainfall since September. Photograph: Ed Ram/The Guardian

Abdi Gedi says Wajir has not received any extra funds from the national government since the president, Uhuru Kenyatta, [declared a national disaster](#) in September. That was supposed to “trigger support from the international community,” he says, adding that it had not happened to the extent needed.

Walking past the carcass of a dead oryx at the dried-up reservoir on the outskirts of Eyrib, Abdi Karim and his fellow teacher Abdikadir Aden say the chief of Eyrib is in Wajir asking the county government to send water.

“The government should look to their people,” Aden says. “Their people need them very much.”

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- [Live Covid: France bans UK tourists over Omicron; NZ reports first case of new variant](#)
- [Coronavirus Cases rise sharply at some UK universities as students head home](#)
- [Boosters Housebound elderly people waiting weeks](#)

Coronavirus

France to tighten Covid restrictions on travel from Omicron-hit UK

Government says travel will be limited to ‘essential purposes’ for vaccinated and unvaccinated

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
- [See all our coronavirus coverage](#)



Arrivals at the Eurostar terminal at Gare du Nord train station in Paris.
Photograph: Benoît Tessier/Reuters

*[Jon Henley](#) Europe correspondent
[@jonhenley](#)*

Thu 16 Dec 2021 05.21 EST

France will dramatically tighten restrictions on travel from Britain to slow the [spread of the new Omicron variant](#), effectively banning all non-essential journeys.

The government announced in a statement that incoming travellers would require “an essential reason to travel to, or come from, the UK, both for the unvaccinated and vaccinated” from midnight on Saturday (11pm GMT Friday).

“People cannot travel for tourism or professional reasons,” it said, adding that the British government had itself said that the UK would face “a tidal wave” of new infections fuelled by the Omicron variant.

France had therefore “chosen to reinstate the need for an essential reason for travel from and to the UK”, it said.

In addition, all arrivals from the UK will need a negative PCR or antigen test taken within the previous 24, rather than 48 hours, and will have to quarantine in France for seven days – reduced to 48 hours if they can produce a new negative test.

“All travellers from the UK must register before their departure on a digital platform allowing them in particular to give the address where they will be staying in France,” the statement said, adding that the quarantine requirement would be policed.

French citizens, their partners and children, as well as people legally resident in France and EU citizens travelling to their homes through France, would not have to demonstrate an essential reason for travel and would still be able to enter France, the government has said, but would have to comply with all other measures.

For all others, valid reasons for travel are essentially limited to documented family and medical emergencies, diplomatic missions, priority health workers, transport professionals, and those who can demonstrate that their journey is “economically necessary”.

The British transport secretary, Grant Shapps, [tweeted](#) that he had confirmed with Paris that the new restrictions would not apply to lorry drivers.

The ferry operator Brittany Ferries, however, described the French move as “a hammer blow to our Christmas season”. The transport and travel union TSSA called on the government to reinstate access to the furlough scheme for Eurostar and other cross-Channel travel operators.

The French government also said asked travellers from France who had planned to visit the UK to postpone their journey. “We will put in place a system of controls drastically tighter than the one we have already,” the French government spokesperson Gabriel Attal told BFM TV.

He said the policy was aimed at “tightening the net” to slow down the arrival of Omicron cases in France and to give time for the French vaccination booster campaign to make more ground.

“Our strategy is to delay as much as we can the development of Omicron in our country and take advantage to push ahead with the booster drive,” he said.

The latest figures released on Thursday showed new Covid-19 infections in the UK had reached the highest daily level since the early 2020 start of the pandemic, with more than 88,300 reported. France on Wednesday reported 65,713 new infections.

The tighter restrictions come during what analysts have said is a breakdown of trust between the British and French governments in the aftermath of Brexit over a range of issues from migrants to fishing and the Northern Ireland protocol.

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[Coronavirus live](#)

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Covid live: Italy reports highest daily cases since March; Canada's Omicron cases 'could overwhelm Ontario ICUs'

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Coronavirus

Covid cases rise sharply at some UK universities as students head home

Fears mass exodus before Christmas break could fuel spread of Omicron variant

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- [See all our coronavirus coverage](#)



Masked students sit in a socially distanced class at the University of Oxford, where there has been a rise in infections. Photograph: Laurel Chor/Getty Images

[Sally Weale](#) Education correspondent

Thu 16 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

The number of Covid cases has risen sharply at some [universities](#) as about a million students begin to head home for the Christmas break, prompting fears that the mass migration could fuel the spread of the virus.

Students have been urged to take Covid tests before they leave their [university](#) to travel to see their families – the vast majority on public transport – and again before they return in the new year, as well as getting their booster vaccinations.

But with case numbers increasing rapidly on some campuses, including Omicron infections, there are reports that students have decided to leave early to limit the risk of having to isolate over Christmas away from home.

Loughborough University and Imperial College London have moved learning online for most students for the last few days of term after a significant uptick in cases. Elsewhere, universities have urged staff and students to either cancel or scale back planned Christmas celebrations to limit mixing.

About 30 universities finished at the end of last week, but for most term will end on Friday and universities are following government guidance to retain face-to-face teaching to the very end, despite the [prime minister's wider call](#) for people to work from home in light of the rapid spread of Omicron.

Rowland Kao, a professor of epidemiology at the University of Edinburgh who contributes to the Spi-M modelling subgroup of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage), said outbreaks at universities had not been as severe as last year.

“However, any travel carries some risk and in particular has the potential for greater exposure during travel and also, importantly, to introduce mixing between age groups that would not be there at other times of the year.

“Thus students travelling should be cautious in regards to both physical distancing measures and with the use of lateral flow tests to try to detect presymptomatic infections.”

The University of Oxford reported a significant increase in infections, with more than 100 positive Covid-19 cases in the week ending 10 December and a 14% positivity rate, while the [University of Sheffield](#) reported a sharp rise to 81 cases among students on 14 December in a seven-day rolling average of 27.

Despite the increasing numbers there are no plans for staggered departures in December and for the January return, as were implemented [last year](#) to try to reduce the number of students travelling on the same day.

The government is instead relying on testing and high levels of vaccination among students. According to the Office for National Statistics, 90% of higher education students have had at least one vaccine dose, and 78% have had two. Everyone aged over 18 is expected to be offered a booster vaccine by the end of December.

The University and College Union (UCU), which represents university staff, urged the government to allow universities to move online for the final week of term, rather than risk unnecessary infections and isolation over Christmas.

“Sadly, as was the case last year, the government and the vast majority of institutions have ignored warnings from staff and unions and taken unnecessary risks,” said the UCU general secretary, Jo Grady. “With such poor leadership, it is little wonder some students have already voted with their feet and returned home for the year.

“The challenge now is delivering a safe return to learning in January. [Universities](#) must carry out new risk assessments before the start of the next academic term and ensure appropriate mitigations are in place to keep students and staff safe.”

A Department for Education spokesperson called on students to get their booster jab and keep testing regularly. “To minimise the spread of Covid over the holidays we are urging every student heading home to get tested before they leave and to test before they go back in the new term, and we are working closely with the higher education sector to make sure students can continue to benefit from in-person teaching.”

Universities UK, which represents 140 universities in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, added: “Universities are working closely with the health authorities and relevant government departments and will follow the most up-to-date public health advice to help keep the university community safe.”

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[Coronavirus](#)

Housebound elderly people waiting weeks for Covid boosters

Charities say vulnerable older people ‘overlooked’ amid pressure to meet target of 1m top-up jabs a day

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
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NHS staff involved in the booster rollout said some GPs are vaccinating other patients first to get their numbers up. Photograph: Kirsty O'Connor/PA

[Denis Campbell](#) Health policy editor

Thu 16 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

Housebound elderly people are having to wait weeks to get their booster vaccine, despite being a key priority group for top-up jabs, raising fears

about them being left at risk.

Charities have warned that older people are being “overlooked” in the NHS’s [rush to deliver the 1m boosters](#) a day that Boris Johnson has ordered to reduce the threat posed by the Omicron variant.

However, [NHS](#) staff involved in the booster rollout have privately told the Guardian that the longer time involved in jabbing the housebound, difficulty involved in transporting the Pfizer vaccine and million-a-day target has prompted some GPs and practice nurses to instead focus on vaccinating other patients, because they can get more done more quickly that way.

“Unfortunately we are still hearing from some older people who are housebound and who are struggling to get their booster jabs,” said Caroline Abrahams, the charity director at Age UK.

“An older person who is housebound and who hasn’t had their booster must be treated as a top priority for the jab, because without it they are undoubtedly at considerable risk of not only contracting the virus but of becoming seriously unwell too.”

She cited the case of a 91-year-old housebound woman living alone who had her first two doses from a district nurse but is “long overdue” getting her booster. “Her daughter has spent many hours searching online, trying to get someone to come to her mum’s house and give her the jab. When she finally spoke with her mother’s GP she was told the booster jab wasn’t their responsibility and she should contact the [local NHS] clinical commissioning group.”

Her daughter said: “Mum is in tears about trying to get the booster; without it, our family Christmas is at risk.”

Dame Margaret Hodge, the Labour MP for Barking and Dagenham, said: “I have had four terrible cases in my constituency where local housebound people have requested boosters from their GPs but have been turned down again and again. Some have been waiting up to a month to get jabbed, leaving them unsafe and at risk as the new variant spreads like wildfire.”

One is a woman who had her second dose in March. Her daughter has called her mother's GP many times over the past month about getting her the booster but failed to secure one. The woman is finally having it on Thursday. Another woman who is shielding because she is medically vulnerable, and whose husband and daughter died of Covid, had also tried unsuccessfully to get her GP to come and deliver one. She finally got hers on Monday.

[Reports on 6 December](#) said only 170,000 of the 470,000 people in England registered with the NHS as housebound had had their booster by then – just 36%.

A vaccine co-ordinator, who asked not to be named, said the time taken to travel to see the housebound and help them get jabbed, plus until this week the 15-minute post-jab observation period, meant some GP practices were prioritising patients in other settings.

Prof Martin Marshall, the chair of the Royal College of GPs, said boosting the housebound did present extra challenges but also that family doctors are doing their best to see them quickly.

He said: “Vaccinating people who are housebound is more logistically difficult than at vaccine centres, particularly using the vaccines that need to be prepared, stored and transported in specific ways. But GP-led teams will be working hard to do this in the most efficient way possible to ensure as many housebound patients are protected as soon as possible.”

Chit Selvarajah, the policy manager at older people’s charity Independent Age, said: “It is really concerning to hear reports that housebound people are struggling to get a booster jab.

“No vulnerable older person should be left behind as the booster programme is rolled out, simply because they cannot get to an appointment. It is vital that vaccinations at home continue for those who need it.”

An NHS spokesperson said: “Local NHS and GP teams are prioritising the housebound for their boosters and getting to them as quickly, and since Monday many more home visits have been made to ensure people are protected.

“If a housebound individual is able to get to a vaccination site for a booked appointment with help from a family member or friend, they should consider this option, while community transport services are also available to support people.”

Meanwhile, more than two-thirds of community pharmacies in England that offered to help deliver Covid booster jabs are still waiting for permission or have been refused, ministers have admitted, with some chemists having to wait 11 weeks.

The Liberal Democrats’ health spokesperson, Daisy Cooper, uncovered the low approval rate and long delays through a [written parliamentary question](#) answered by the vaccines minister, Maggie Throup.

The failure to give the green light to more pharmacies to become vaccination sites has raised questions about the NHS’s ability to deliver the 1m boosters a day. Fewer GPs are involved in the programme now than when first and second doses were given.

Throup said that by the end of September, 4,733 pharmacies had between them submitted 5,376 expressions of interest to deliver Covid jabs, but only 1,454 had been accepted – a 30.7% approval rate. Some applications were decided by NHS England rather than the Department of [Health](#) and Social Care.

Cooper said the delays were “shocking” and urged NHS England to speed up its decision-making to help the health service administer as many top-ups shots as possible.

An NHS spokesperson said: “There are nearly 1,500 pharmacies delivering boosters, compared to under 1,000 in October, and Monday saw a record number of vaccinations in pharmacies with over 185,000 people getting protected at their local pharmacy.”

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New South Wales

NSW Covid update: nearly 100 cases linked to Sydney Taylor Swift party as Newcastle residents urged to postpone celebrations

Some cases from the Metro theatre on Friday likely to be Omicron and at least 600 people who attended are now isolating as New South Wales recorded 1,742 new cases on Thursday

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As NSW reported a record high 1,742 new cases, at least 97 people who attended the Metro theatre's Taylor Swift party in Sydney have tested

positive for Covid. Photograph: Steven Saphore/AAP

Australian Associated Press

Thu 16 Dec 2021 02.52 EST

At least 97 people have caught Covid-19 at a Taylor Swift-themed dance party in [Sydney](#), as NSW cases escalate to record levels.

NSW [Health](#) issued an alert on Thursday evening about the “On Repeat: Taylor Swift Red Party” at Sydney’s Metro theatre, with at least 600 people who arrived after 9pm on Friday deemed close contacts.

NSW Health said it was likely some of the new cases were the Omicron variant.

The revellers must be tested and self-isolate for seven days, and their household contacts also need to be tested and isolate until they receive a negative result.

It comes after a man was ordered to pay \$10,000 after allegedly skipping self-isolation and then going clubbing in Newcastle before testing positive.

NSW police said the 20-year-old was directed to self-isolate at a Newcastle property from last Wednesday because he was a close contact of a positive case.

Instead, he attended a licensed premises on Wharf Road that night, and went to another person’s house on Saturday.

More than 200 people acquired the virus at a Wednesday night party at the Argyle House nightclub on Wharf Road.

Health authorities have ordered the cancellation of a Newcastle music festival and urged people to postpone Christmas celebrations as the regional city becomes the epicentre of the Omicron-fuelled outbreak in NSW.

The Lunar Electric music festival was due to take place in Newcastle on Saturday, boasting The Veronicas, Pendulum and Darude in its line-up.

But the government cancelled the event under a public health order on Thursday afternoon.

“NSW Health considered that the ongoing spread of Covid-19 in the Newcastle area ... presents too great a risk for the festival to take place this weekend,” the agency said in a statement.

The Hunter is the location of 633 of the record 1,742 new cases in NSW in the 24 hours to 8pm on Wednesday.

Health authorities believe the majority of the Hunter’s 633 cases are Omicron, but most have not been confirmed as the variant yet.

The cluster has been driven by super-spreading events at pubs and clubs.

Health authorities want the Newcastle community to seriously consider putting off social events until after Christmas to keep family gatherings safe.

An alert was issued on Wednesday night for another Newcastle pub.

Anyone who was at the Cambridge hotel on Hunter Street between 6.30pm on Friday and 2.30am on Saturday must get tested and isolate for seven days.

The government on Thursday extended the vaccine mandate for healthcare workers, bringing it into line with Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia.

All health practitioners – including doctors, nurses, speech pathologists and naturopaths and support staff working in public and private settings – must be double-dosed by 31 January.

The mandate previously applied only in public and private hospitals.

The number of cases reported on Thursday is a jump from the previous day's tally of 1,360 cases. The state has now recorded 122 cases of the Omicron variant.

The previous highest daily tally in NSW was recorded on 11 September, when there were 1,599 local cases.

There were no deaths recorded.

Authorities are hoping the high vaccination rates – 93.3% of adults are fully jabbed – will keep the stress on the health system to a minimum.

Researchers from UNSW's Kirby Institute have concluded two vaccine doses have little to no effect on the transmissibility of the Omicron variant but protection against severe disease – particularly with a booster shot – remains.

There were 192 people in hospital (up from 166), 26 of them in ICU (up two).

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GlaxoSmithKline

GSK/Sanofi Covid booster delayed by lack of uninfected people to test it on

Early trials show jab effective in people of all ages who have already received doses of any vaccine

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Covid-19 vaccine in needle Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

[Julia Kollewe](#)

Wed 15 Dec 2021 12.40 EST

Efforts by the [British and French drugmakers GSK and Sanofi Pasteur](#) to produce a Covid-19 vaccine have suffered a further setback, with final

clinical data on the jab and a potential launch delayed until next year as they struggle to find enough uninfected people to test it on.

The two vaccine specialists announced positive preliminary results from a trial that showed the vaccine raised antibody levels against Covid by nine to 43 times when given as a single booster shot in people who had already received doses of AstraZeneca, Johnson & Johnson, Moderna or Pfizer/BioNTech vaccines, for all age groups.

There were no safety concerns, according to an independent review body. It is the most comprehensive booster trial to date, said GSK and Sanofi.

The vaccine has suffered repeated delays, after a dosing error early on and initial clinical trials revealed it had failed to produce a strong immune response in older people. Sanofi has developed the antigen, the substance that induces the immune system to produce antibodies against it, and GSK is contributing its adjuvant, a substance that boosts the vaccine's immune response.

The booster trial is under way in countries including the US, France and the UK, and the jab is being tested on new variants including Omicron.

Separate late-stage trials of its use as a primary vaccine involve more than 10,000 volunteers aged over 18. The two companies said: "Regulatory authorities require phase III efficacy to be demonstrated in naive populations, ie participants who have never been infected by the Covid-19 virus."

Most volunteers were recruited for the phase III trial in the third quarter, at a time when the number of people infected with the virus surged globally because of the Delta variant. To generate enough data to allow the drugmakers to file their booster vaccine for regulatory approval, the trials need to continue into next year, with results expected by the end of March. They had aimed to publish them by the end of this year.

"These preliminary data show we have a strong booster candidate, whatever primary vaccine you have received," said Thomas Triomphe, the executive

vice-president of Sanofi Pasteur. “While pursuing a phase III trial is a challenge in a quickly shifting pandemic environment, we look forward to seeing the results to support submissions of our booster vaccine as quickly as possible.”

Roger Connor, the president of GSK Vaccines, added: “As the pandemic threat continues with the current dominant Delta variant and Omicron rapidly gaining ground, booster vaccines will continue to be needed to help protect people over time. The initial booster data are promising.”

GSK, which is run by Dame Emma Walmsley, is currently undergoing a [complex break-up](#), separating its consumer arm from its pharmaceuticals and vaccines business.

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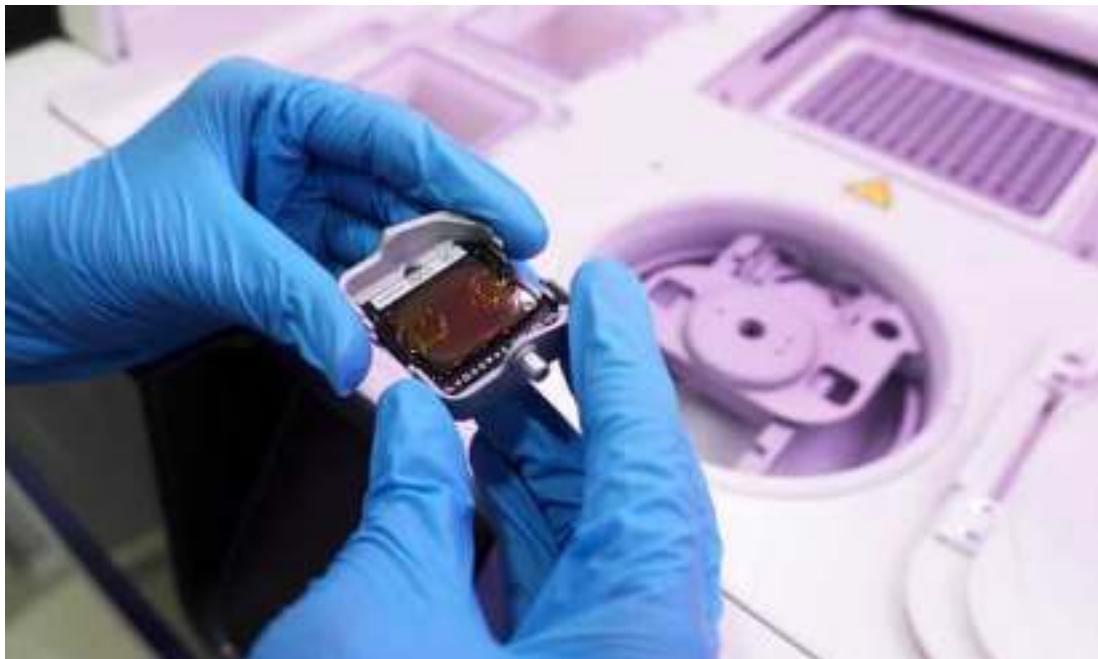
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Coronavirus

Omicron found to grow 70 times faster than Delta in bronchial tissue

Study of tubes between windpipe and lungs could help explain Covid variant's rapid transmission

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Work at a sequencing laboratory. Studies suggest Omicron may be more transmissible. Photograph: Sri Loganathan/Zuma/Rex/Shutterstock

Hannah Devlin Science correspondent
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Wed 15 Dec 2021 13.01 EST

The Omicron Covid variant has been found to multiply about 70 times quicker than the original and Delta versions of coronavirus in tissue samples

taken from the bronchus, the main tubes from the windpipe to the lungs, in laboratory experiments that could help explain its rapid transmission.

The study, by a team from the University of Hong Kong, also found that the new variant grew 10 times slower in lung tissue, which the authors said could be an indicator of lower disease severity.

Michael Chan Chi-wai, who led the work, said the result needed to be interpreted with caution because severe disease is determined not only by how quickly the virus replicates but also by a person's immune response and, in particular, whether the immune system goes into overdrive, causing a so-called cytokine storm.

"It is also noted that by infecting many more people, a very infectious virus may cause more severe disease and death even though the virus itself may be less pathogenic," he said. "Therefore, taken together with our recent studies showing that the Omicron variant can partially escape immunity from vaccines and past infection, the overall threat from the Omicron variant is likely to be very significant."

Graphic

Jeremy Kamil, an associate professor of microbiology and immunology at Louisiana State University Health Shreveport, pointed out that Delta, which turned out to be more pathogenic, showed a similar pattern of replicating more slowly in the lungs.

"These authors found Omicron replicates fantastically well – even far better than either Delta or the original virus – in bronchial tissue," Kamil said. "This could in some ways contribute to an advantage in spread/transmission between people.

"Of course, a huge component of Omicron's transmissibility in real life is going to be its potential to escape neutralising antibodies that protect against infection in the first place. It's very likely spreading well even between vaccinated people, especially those who haven't recently gotten a booster shot."

The initial data, [published online](#) and not yet peer-reviewed, came from experiments using lung tissue samples taken from patients during surgery. By 24 hours, the Omicron variant had replicated about 70 times more than Delta and the original variant. Although the bronchus is not the upper respiratory system, scientists said this could lead to people shedding more virus and passing on infections more easily.

The findings, together with other recent work showing Omicron [infects cells more readily](#), add to an emerging picture that the variant may be intrinsically more transmissible in addition to evading existing immunity.

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Illustration: Klawe Rzeczy

[The long read](#)

What Covid taught us about racism – and what we need to do now

Illustration: Klawe Rzeczy

We were told coronavirus didn't discriminate, but it didn't need to – society had already done that for us. But there is a path to a fairer future if we want it

by [Gary Younge](#)

Thu 16 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

In June 2020, I attended a Black Lives Matter demonstration in north London, not far from my house. My wife had found out about it from friends who'd found out about it on Facebook. We took the kids. Well over 1,000 people went; beyond my immediate circle, I only recognised a few there.

The soundsystem was poor and I couldn't hear what was being said from the stage. We took a knee like Colin Kaepernick while raising a fist like the Black Panthers and held the pose for eight minutes – the length of time Derek Chauvin kept his knee on George Floyd's neck. Then we clapped, chatted and made our way back to our locked-down homes. I have no idea who called the demonstration. It just happened and then it was gone.

In the weeks before and after, institutions made statements; reviews were announced; social media avatars changed; museums reconsidered their inventory; Labour-led town halls went purple; curricula were revised; [statues came down](#). Overnight, bestseller booklists were filled with anti-racist manuals and explorations of whiteness. This was the virus within the virus: a strain of anti-racist consciousness that spread through the globe with great speed, prompted by a video that had gone viral. Not everybody caught it, but everybody was aware of it, and most were, in some way, affected by it.

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All of this happened spontaneously. Like oil waiting for a spark, a dormant constituency of like-minded people were ignited. Whether they were people who had thought a great deal about racism but had found no meaningful way to intervene on the issue, or whether they had been converted from ambivalence to passion by the single event of George Floyd's death is not known. They were roused and found each other, just like we had that day in London.

It felt new, though nothing new had happened. The lived experience of racism for non-white people remains pervasive and unrelenting. A [YouGov poll](#) of ethnic minorities in Britain taken that same month revealed that a quarter have been racially abused multiple times, while almost half said their career development has been affected by their race. The polling showed significant differences between ethnic groups, as one might expect, but the broad thrust of the findings were similar for all of them.

In the US, the sight of Floyd being killed in real time was shocking, but news of it was not. The number of Black people being killed by the police in the US has remained [fairly constant](#) over the past five years. When the focus

shifted from the US to domestic inequalities in Britain and elsewhere, it became clear that here, too, there were no specific new grievances. We were not protesting against some new manifestation of racism in Britain, but the enduring nature of it. The YouGov poll from June revealed the percentage of non-white people who think racism was present in society 30 years ago is virtually identical to the proportion who think it is present today.

No single organisation spearheaded the mass protests that sprang up around Britain. The groups that had been doing anti-racist work over the years sought to catch up with the new mood. But this was not a moment of their making. People came to Black Lives Matter as though gathering under a floating signifier. There was no Black Lives Matter office or official. There were several groups who adopted the name; none counted more than a couple of dozen participants. Each drew on the energy that was generated around them; each went in their own direction.

Given that they were small, varied and mostly new, there was no representative entity to make concrete demands. But then, when it came to race, Britain was not short of demands. There had already been the 2017 [Lammy Review](#) (on racial disparities in the criminal justice system), the 2017 [McGregor-Smith review](#) (on race in the workplace), and the 2019 [Timpson Review](#) (on school exclusions). All of these were commissioned by the government; to date, none of the key recommendations have been implemented.

Neither the problems that had sparked this conflagration, nor the solutions that might solve them were new, either. [Stephen Lawrence](#) would have been 45 when these demonstrations took place. The previous three years had seen [the Windrush Scandal](#) and [Grenfell](#). Little had changed, apart from the urgent realisation that so little had changed for so many for so long.

The broadly positive response to the demonstrations was an indication that there was sufficient public support to, at least, embark on the kind of changes necessary. But the lack of real backing in parliament, and the absence of institutions that could force politicians to address longstanding racial inequalities, left little prospect of these changes actually happening. To shift that narrative, and avoid being constantly deflected by someone else's agenda, non-white communities will have to write our own story.

Evidence for the impact of British racism was mounting, in mortuaries and hospital beds, even as the demonstrations took place. The pandemic laid bare the structural inequalities with which we had all become familiar, and to which we had then become inured. The first 10 doctors to die from Covid were all non-white. “At face value, it seems hard to see how this can be random,” the head of the British Medical Association, Dr Chaand Nagpaul, said in early April. “This has to be addressed – the government must act now.”

The government did not act. The inequalities became more evident. In England, mortality rates among some Black and Asian groups were between 2.5 and 4.3 times higher than among white groups, when all other factors were accounted for.

There are good reasons why minorities would find themselves disproportionately affected. Black and Asian people are considerably more likely to live in deprived neighbourhoods, in overcrowded housing, experience higher unemployment, higher poverty and lower incomes, than white people. That means that during the pandemic they have been more likely to have to go to work, use public transport and live in multigenerational homes, and less likely to be able to effectively self-isolate. They have also been more likely to be in the kinds of jobs that demanded contact with the public, such as nursing, working in care homes, taxi driving, security and deliveries.

If ever there was an illustration of how the inequalities of race and class work together, this was it. Minorities were not more susceptible because they were Black or brown, but because they were more likely to be poor. Office for National Statistics data shows that those who live in deprived areas in England and Wales were around twice as likely to die after contracting Covid. Most of the people who live in those areas are white, but non-white people are considerably overrepresented. But the reason they are disproportionately poor is, in no small part, because they are Black and brown. The virus does not discriminate on grounds of race. It didn’t need to. Society had done that already.



A Black Lives Matter rally in London on 12 June 2020. Photograph: Alberto Pezzali/AP

This presented a gruesome, if important, opportunity. For at the very moment when the nation's consciousness was raised to the issue of racism through Black Lives Matter, we were presented with a clear example of how racism operates through Covid. Notwithstanding the handful of cases where non-white people were spat at, sometimes while being showered with racial epithets, there is no suggestion that anyone tried to deliberately make them ill with Covid. In other words, they were not disproportionately affected because individual people with bad attitudes did bad things to them. Their propensity to succumb to the virus wasn't primarily the result of people's uncouth behaviour, bad manners, mean spirits, crude epithets or poor education. For while all of those things are present, it is the systemic nature of racism that gives it its power and endurance.

Bequeathed through history, embedded within our institutions and entrenched in our political economy, racism is sustained as much, if not more, by compliance than intent. Take the Windrush scandal. The hostile environment policies announced by the coalition government in 2012 were not intended to ensnare people of Caribbean heritage who had been here for years. But the policies that demanded that landlords, employers and benefit agencies become border guards, checking people's citizenship and right-to-

work credentials, put the burden on some of the most economically vulnerable citizens to prove they were not illegal immigrants.

Michael Brathwaite, for example, had worked as a special needs teacher at a primary school in London for 15 years when a new HR department demanded a biometric card or passport to show that he was eligible to work in the UK. When he couldn't produce one – he was a citizen and didn't need one – he was summoned to a meeting with HR, his head teacher and his union rep.

"I was told that if I didn't have a biometric card I couldn't keep my job," [he recalled](#). "There was no kind of compassion towards who I am as an individual. That was the confusing thing, because I'd done nothing wrong – I was doing a fantastic job." The London school where Brathwaite taught was listed outstanding by Ofsted: for almost half the children there, English is not their first language. It proudly celebrates Black History Month.

I daresay all the people at that meeting in which he was fired had done racism sensitivity training at some point, and had sound, respectful relationships with non-white colleagues and parents elsewhere. Some of them might even have been Black. They needn't have been personally hostile towards Black people or immigrants. The system was already hostile. All they had to do was comply with it. (I am often invited to give paid talks about race and racism and asked to produce my passport before I can be paid.)

This is the system that left non-white people more vulnerable to Covid, and less able to survive it. In marked contrast to the brutality of the murder of George Floyd, Covid illustrated the banality of societal inequalities: the familiar, quotidian, bureaucratic complicity that results in far more deaths, even if they are far less dramatic.

Britain was nowhere near reaching this conclusion in the wake of Black Lives Matter. The political education spawned by the protests had been limited. The anti-racist sentiment it had unleashed was broad but shallow. Nonetheless, a critical mass of people was primed for the conversation that had been set in motion. A dynamic had emerged in which a significant

number of non-white people felt emboldened to challenge the racism that they witnessed and experienced, while white people's awareness was heightened and therefore they grew more receptive to the urgency and veracity of these challenges.

The evidence for this is partly anecdotal. Virtually everyone I know had some kind of meeting or interaction at their work that they considered in some way substantial. I got the impression that some of these engagements were quite uncomfortable, and productive – some colleagues talking candidly about how they felt while others listened, maybe for the first time, aware that they were implicated in whatever changes were necessary. Meanwhile, my inbox filled with invitations to talk to industry groups, staff networks and trade unions about how they might adapt. Neither my friendship circle nor my inbox are remotely representative. But they are indicative, at the very least, of the changes in the world immediately beyond me.

Elsewhere, there was evidence that things in the country were shifting. An Ipsos Mori poll from [May 2021](#) showed that more than half of British people think we need to do more to tackle racism, against just 13% who think we are doing too much. In August, significantly [more than half](#) saw taking the knee as very important in tackling racism in football; in March it was barely over a quarter. Another YouGov poll, taken after the Euros final, showed that [a third](#) of people who previously did not think racism was a problem in football now do.



The statue of Edward Colston after being retrieved from Bristol harbour in June 2020. Photograph: Ben Birchall/PA

There has, of course, been considerable resistance to this progress. The eruption of Black Lives Matter had predictably been misrepresented and distorted by the media, while the notion of systemic racism went either unreported, misreported or unexplained. Those for whom these debates, about systemic racism and [the legacy of colonialism](#), were new may have found it disorienting – like walking into a movie halfway through to witness a car chase and struggling to work out who is pursuing whom and why.

An [Ipsos Mori survey](#) conducted in July 2021, a year or so after the wave of BLM protests, revealed that while more than two-thirds of the country has heard of the terms “systemic racism” and “institutional racism”, still half did not have a good understanding of them. A YouGov poll from shortly before Floyd’s death showed that one in three Britons believe the empire is something to be proud, of and one in five think it’s something to be [ashamed of](#). In 1951, the UK government’s social survey revealed that nearly three-fifths of respondents could not name a single British colony. “The nationalist not only does not disapprove of atrocities committed by his own side,” George Orwell once wrote. “He has a remarkable capacity for not even hearing about them.”

But there is far more active hostility, too. Racially motivated hate crimes in England and Wales [rose 12%](#) in the first year of the pandemic, continuing a sharp trend upwards over the last five years. Neo-Nazi demonstrations around statues, booing the national team when they take the knee, mobilising to [take control](#) of the National Trust governing council to prevent further reckoning with its colonial and slave-sponsored inventory – all these things point to considerable hostility. We should not be too surprised by this. Where there is racism, we must assume there are racists; and when racism is being fought, we must assume the racists will fight back. However, while their attitudes are hardening, it does not appear that their numbers are growing.

We don't know if these shifts in public opinion are sustainable. Racism is itself a hardy virus that adapts to the body politic in which it finds a home, developing new and ever more potent strains. But if they are lasting, then that is a significant achievement. It is possible to change laws and practices without changing people's minds, but then those legal advances are vulnerable to backlash and repeal. By changing people's minds, you change the culture and lay the groundwork for significant changes in policy for the future, as well as for a new consensus. Dams may break, as they did over gay marriage. This is not a zero-sum game, in which you either change minds or laws – the two are symbiotic. But what you cannot do is dismiss one as irrelevant and the other as paramount.

If the potential of anti-racism became evident in this moment, so did its precariousness. There are three main reasons why the lessons that emerged from Covid in the wake of Black Lives Matter might not be heeded. The first is that while, in the population at large, there is a clear political constituency for this journey, there is little political will in parliament.

When the protests occurred, the Labour party, nationally, resorted to its historical default position of condemning racism but failing to embrace [anti-racism](#) as its antidote, leaving bigotry deplored but never challenged. It is apparently incapable of framing anti-racism in terms of class solidarity, or of asserting that British history contains atrocities as well as achievements. So when anti-racist protests do emerge, and even when they're peaceful, Labour leaders keep their distance for fear of alienating white voters. In this regard

Keir Starmer is archetypal. England's football manager, Gareth Southgate, showed more leadership and took more risks on the issue – [backing](#) the England players taking the knee and eloquently explaining why – than [Starmer ever](#) did. In practice, the Labour position has been to agree that Covid exposed structural racial inequalities, while being ambivalent about the protests that were trying to address them, and failing to come up with a coherent plan for tackling them.

The Conservative government took the easier, if more implausible route, of denying any significant racial component to Covid outcomes. When presented with evidence, often from its own reports, that suggested otherwise, it basically said that while it was not sure how to explain the racial discrepancy, it wasn't structural racism.



England manager Gareth Southgate comforts Bukayo Saka after losing the Euro 2020 final against Italy in July 2021. Photograph: Carl Recine/Reuters

Factors such as housing and jobs were more significant, government representatives claimed, and there were greater discrepancies, such as age. This merely proved that the government understood neither its own reports nor what structural racism actually meant. Almost all the studies on racial inequalities had already taken age and other factors into account. And the government referred to the fact that minorities were concentrated in the kind

of jobs and housing that made them more vulnerable, as though it were mere coincidence.

This combination of sloppy reasoning, inadequate attention to detail, toxic messaging and sophistry was emblematic of [the government's interventions](#) on race during this time. The fact that all this came from the most racially diverse cabinet ever seen in the UK simply illustrated the limitations of symbolic representation. If you focus, as many liberals do, on organisations looking different, even as they act the same, you end up not with equal opportunities, but photo opportunities. It's a form of diversity that Angela Davis [once explained](#) to me as: "The difference that brings no difference and the change that brings no change."

The equalities minister, Kemi Badenoch, a British-born woman of Nigerian parentage, is a case in point. She has publicly attacked two young Black female journalists, one for asking her [straightforward questions](#), the other for [doing a story](#) she disapproved of. In an [interview](#) with the Spectator, she lamented the "boom in sales" of books like Reni Eddo-Lodge's [Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race](#). "Many of these books – and, in fact, some of the authors and proponents of critical race theory – actually want a segregated society," she said.

They don't. But this wasn't just a statement in bad faith. It was bad politics. Just a few months earlier, after the protests erupted, Eddo-Lodge's book topped the UK book charts – the first time a Black author [had done so](#). Badenoch was not just complaining that the book was written, but that it was popular.

This was just one example of how the government in general, and Badenoch in particular, might have been out of touch with the public mood. The Sewell report was another. Chaired by Dr Tony Sewell at the head of a non-white group commissioned to investigate racial and ethnic disparities following the Black Lives Matter protests, it found only "anecdotal evidence of racism", but claimed it could "no longer see a Britain where the system is deliberately rigged against ethnic minorities". [Poorly researched, badly argued](#) and [academically illiterate](#), it failed on its own terms of producing a credible rightwing intervention into the nation's race debate.

The point here is not that their argument failed to take into account the relevant academic literature and practitioners' expertise, or to pull together a coherent response to the protests – it wasn't intended to. Sewell already had a history of [downplaying](#) the existence of institutional racism, and assembled the group in his own ideological image. The problem was that, despite significant promotion in the media, the insistence that Britain was a racial success story failed to chime either with non-white people's lived experience or most white people's perceptions. Seventy-one per cent of [people said](#) that either they had never heard of the Sewell report, or knew little about it. Of those who had heard of it, only a quarter had a favourable opinion of it. First condemned, then derided and ultimately discredited, it did not shift the race debate in Britain, but went largely ignored by all but those who held firmly to those views before it was written, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

The question of how we leverage the urgency and clarity of this moment to effect real and lasting change is a crucial one, which brings us back to that day in north London over a year ago. Nobody took our names; there is no way to reconvene that group. Its effect was powerful for those who were there, but fleeting.

The absence of structures or identifiable leaders in social movements has its benefits – it enables them to act quickly and allows new, young (often female) leaders to emerge who have previously been marginalised. But it can also mean a lack of democracy, clear direction, consistency or permanence.

The US has long-established Black-led institutions – such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Urban League, historically Black colleges, the African Methodist Episcopal church, and so on – which, for all their problems, can nurture, incubate and sustain these moments. In Britain, no such longstanding organisations exist. When it comes to activism, these deficits are not specific to anti-racism or Black Lives Matter. It reflects the nature of modern, progressive [social movements](#), from occupy Wall Street to #MeToo. Each one mobilised and energised large groups of people, transformed the political conversation and laid out

alternative visions for how the world might be understood. That is no small thing.

But they created space they cannot hold. After each surge, we are left waiting for the next sight of oil on the ground. We are at the mercy of spontaneous events that arise from structural inequalities and inequities.

Institutions offer the possibility of elaborating a coherent strategy on their own terms, rather than being buffeted by any and every incident that occurs. There are moments when Britain appears engaged not so much in a debate about racism as a litany of race-based tantrums: a media figure or politician says something reprehensible, prompting an outcry that in turn prompts an outcry about the outcry. Terms such as “[woke](#)” and “[culture war](#)”, deprived of any meaning they once may have had, are tossed around like confetti.

“The very serious function of racism is distraction,” Toni Morrison argued in 1975. “It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and you spend 20 years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn’t shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says you have no art, so you dredge that up. Somebody says you have no kingdoms, so you dredge that up. None of this is necessary. There will always be one more thing.”

There have been many things recently. The attacks on Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, and on the [Euro 2020 penalty takers](#), racism in the [Yorkshire cricket board](#), the [Sewell report](#). All of them are serious and important, though not all equally so. Each of them might, and usually do, reflect elements of what might be a broader agenda. But in the absence of a defined agenda, we end up being dragged into a “debate” about something Piers Morgan said, or [colourism](#) within the royal family.

The comprehensive and coherent response needed to combat the inequalities revealed through the Covid pandemic cannot be left to happenstance.

We should continue to demand that the government conduct a review into the racial disparities exposed and exacerbated by Covid. But we should hold out no expectations that they will do so, and none that they will do so

intelligently, in good faith. Nor should we expect much from Labour. They are not likely to be in power for some time, are more engaged in fighting among themselves than injustice in any case, and appear to be moving away from, not towards, the kind of structural changes we would need.

The point is how to channel that pressure, and then apply it. Here we have something of a precedent. Starting in 2018, the Guardian reported cases about British citizens being threatened with deportation, stripped of access to housing, health, employment and benefits for several months before it became known as the Windrush scandal and [cost a minister her job](#). The government was shamed into committing itself to finding out what had gone wrong and setting up a review. Once the pressure was off, its attention waned. But the review, overseen by Wendy Williams, continued. In several cities across the country, there were public meetings. I attended one in a church hall in Bristol, where local people spoke about their experiences.

One man had come to Britain from Jamaica with his parents when he was a baby. He applied for a driving licence, but was denied it because he couldn't prove he was British. "I contacted my MP and they said it sounded like an immigration issue," he said. "And I thought, how could it be, when I've never been out of the country?" Another had come aged 13, also from Jamaica, and had been here for 50 years – he has great-grandchildren here. After undergoing a mental health crisis, he had ended up in prison on remand. The charges were later dropped, but his time in prison meant his application for citizenship was denied.

Williams wrote her report with important recommendations. We wait to see if it will be heeded. Given that [only 5%](#) of the Windrush victims have been compensated so far, we should not hold our breath. But nor should that prevent us from learning some lessons.

Here is my proposal. We should do this again; only without the Home Office. We could hold a series of themed public meetings, independent of political parties, across England, on a range of issues, at which a few experts and practitioners in each field could lay out the challenges and then open the floor for people to bear witness (race in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland has its own dynamics, and will need specific proposals). Go back to

Bristol, for example, to do a session on education. Have David Olusoga, [who lives there](#), talk briefly about what changes he'd like to see in the curriculum; a local teacher talk about the challenges she sees in the classroom, and a parent-governor share their experiences: then have the audience talk about what they have seen and what they would like to see. The review would then go to Leicester, Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool, Bradford, Oldham, London, Luton (to name but a few), and in each place health, policing, arts, youth, crime, housing, immigration or employment (among other things) would be discussed. Standing somewhere between a citizens' assembly and a truth-and-reconciliation event, the evidence could then be collected and a report written reflecting the needs and interests of participants.

The aim would be threefold. First to hear, at a local level, what works and what doesn't when it comes to addressing racial disadvantage, and hopefully develop solutions that people own and can organise around. Second, to listen, be heard, bear witness and testify, shifting the emphasis from an inhuman system to the human consequences of that system. Third, to create the kind of mediated event that might engage a broader public about the challenges, remedies and obstacles to tackling systemic racism.



The director Steve McQueen in 2020. Photograph: Steve Bisgrove/Rex/Shutterstock

There is no shortage of expertise in the community that might be leveraged to make these high-profile, well attended events. [Steve McQueen](#) might document it; [Charlene White](#) or [Samira Ahmed](#) might moderate it; [Eddo-Lodge](#), [Nesrine Malik](#) or [Sathnam Sanghera](#) might write it through.

Following the Windrush review session in Bristol, [I wrote](#): “Were it not for the fact that the participants need the option of anonymity, the hearings should be televised. For it is in the unmediated bearing of witness of these Britons that the human cost of a malicious immigration policy might be more fully understood. It should be televised because the people who need to see it – those for whom immigrants are faceless, threatening figures without family, ambition or story – were not there.”

The perils in this plan for public meetings about Covid and racism are manifold. Nobody might show up; worse still, loud mouths, disruptors and control freaks might show up; it could descend into chaos or banality. If it is effective, then efforts to undermine it will be intense. And, of course, its weakness lies in the very reason why we need it, because in the absence of institutions we have been unable to formulate an agenda. Who will decide where, when, what and whom are questions that all offer opportunities to bicker, blunder and ultimately blow it.

No single event, or series of events, will remake a system centuries in the making, so ingrained that many do not even recognise it as a system at all. But such an initiative would be an attempt to convene in person, not just to protest, but to plan and ultimately strategise. To root the discussion and consequent intervention in the needs of communities most affected, rather than at the mercy of whatever happens next. So that we might meet deliberately. Take each other’s names. And build something on our own terms.

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Television

Adrian Chiles's Christmas Strictly diary: 'Unused to my tight outfit, I didn't get low enough for the lift ...'

I don't recall saying yes to the show. Perhaps I just stopped saying no. But all of a sudden, a champion dancer was on her way to train me – and to my dismay there was no turning back



Ready to 'enjoy the moment', with my Strictly dance partner, Jowita Przystal. Photograph: Guy Levy/BBC



Adrian Chiles

Thu 16 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

My invitation to appear on [Strictly Come Dancing's](#) Christmas Special came very late. Being a cynical soul, I assumed someone had dropped out, but I'm warmly assured this wasn't the case. I am nobody's idea of a dancer. It's not that I can't dance; I can dance with great exuberance, but only if I am alone. If anyone else is in the room, I become overwhelmed with shame and embarrassment and just kind of seize up. I know the advice is to dance like no one is watching, but I can't dance if anyone is watching.

This wasn't the actual [Strictly Come Dancing](#), one of our biggest TV shows, in which contestants, paired up with pro dancers, are subjected to the judgment of four experts and, even more harrowingly, a public vote. The Christmas Special is a bit of fun, in which half a dozen, erm, celebrities – dread word – do one dance for the purposes of general seasonal entertainment. OK, it's not as terrifying as the real thing, but it's still all about dancing. And therefore, not for me. Anyway, for most of the scant two weeks' preparation time available, I was away on holiday in an out-of-the-way village in south Wales. Can't dance, won't dance, away on holiday, no can do.

So why did I end up doing it? I'm honestly not quite sure. I don't recall ever saying yes; perhaps I just stopped saying no. But all of a sudden, a champion dancer from Poland called [Jowita](#) was on a train to Swansea. Her mission: to teach me, from scratch, how to do a ballroom dance, you know, like what they do on Strictly. Sheepishly, under cover of darkness, I found the holder of the key to the village hall, who gave me permission to use it for three intensive days of dance tuition.

By now I was getting messages from people I hadn't seen for years along the lines of, "This isn't true, is it?", "You can't be serious!", "God help you!", "This has made my Christmas," and so on. None of this affected my confidence one jot because, when it came to dancing, my confidence could get no lower anyway.



In desperation Jowita brought in an odd-looking metal bar to hang around my neck to keep my arms up. Photograph: Antonio Olmos/The Observer

My poor partner, Jowita Przystał, was raised in Czeladź, just north of Katowice. Twenty-seven now, she started dancing aged seven and took up ballroom when she was 12. Before her teens were done she was Polish Open Latin champion. Off she went to the US to join a dance company, with whom she worked on cruise ships, aboard which she danced, performing and rehearsing, eight hours a day for four years.

Her next move was to try her luck in the UK. She got to compete in the [BBC](#) talent show The Greatest Dancer. This she won, earning her a performance slot on Strictly, which in turn led to her being taken on as one of the show's professional dancers. This was her dream come true. I'm fairly sure that the same dream didn't feature a windy morning in a village hall on the Welsh coast and 16st of non-dancing, flatfooted, grumpy Brummie.

As far as I could see, I had three – and only three – things going for me. First, she was less than half my weight, so at least I'd be able to get her off the ground if required. Second, having never done any ballroom dancing, I had no bad habits to unlearn. Third, and most importantly, she was lovely – a quite brilliant, patient, endlessly encouraging teacher.

First off, she made it clear she couldn't do a lot with me until my appallingly hunched posture was straightened out a bit. "Shoulders back, Adrian, BACK!" she commanded, physically adjusting me. Half dancer, half chiropractor, she brooked no resistance. With my spine already aching in this unfamiliar straight position, the drumming in of the basic waltz step could commence. One two three, two two three, three two three, over and over and over again. Forwards, backwards, sideways and around in circles I'd go. Some bits I'd pick up quickly; others I'd struggle with but then suddenly grasp, at which point we'd return to the bit I'd picked up quickly, only to find that I'd completely forgotten it. On and on we battled as outside the wind whistled. Day turned into night. The odd local wandered by, puzzled at all the stomping and cursing emanating from the village hall.

I'm afraid that on this occasion, as I executed the lift, I accidentally broke wind

After five hours of this, we called it a day. She assured me I'd done very well and left me to stagger home. I couldn't have been any more knackered, mentally and physically, if I'd just had my first cage-fighting session. In the morning, to my surprise, I didn't feel too bad. I bolted down some breakfast and headed back to the village hall, where Jowita was already limbering up.

"Right then," she said. "Let's try the lift." Making full use of my weight and height advantage, it went quite well. Full of confidence, we tried it again,

but I'm afraid that on this occasion, as I executed the lift, I accidentally broke wind. She was polite enough to pretend not to have noticed. I was polite enough to forego breakfast before all subsequent rehearsals.

Over three days we did 15 solid hours in that village hall. The concentration required was painful, but at the same time a great release. If, like me, you've got ADHD, you'll know that anything demanding complete absorption is a blessed relief from all the other noise. I found I was rather good at picking things up quickly; unfortunately, I seemed to be even better at immediately forgetting them. "Don't worry," said my diminutive friend. "You've got this."

Holiday (if you could call it that) over, it was back to London and my first visit to the Strictly studio, where I was to learn my part in the big opening number of the Christmas show. Bashfully, I lumbered in wondering what fresh hell this would be. It turned out to be the closest thing to heaven I've come across in showbusiness. One after another, the pro dancers, from the UK, Russia, Italy, Ukraine, Australia, Slovenia, South Africa, and other places besides, came up to introduce themselves. As a body of men and women they're talented, fit and good-looking; if they weren't extravagantly nice with it, they'd make you sick. With one of them, Aljaž Škorjanec from Slovenia, I immediately became bromantically involved. I put him on the phone to my Croatian mum, whose language he speaks. "Ja sam uvijek dobro," I heard him tell her – I'm always happy. The following day I asked him about this. Was it really true? "When I'm dancing, I'm always happy," he confirmed. "How can you not be?"



Making full use of my weight and height advantage, the first time I tried the lift it went quite well. Photograph: Antonio Olmos/The Observer

My answer to that question at that moment would have been: “When you’ve no idea what you’re doing and you’re worried sick about looking a chump in front of millions of television viewers.” Still, I absolutely took his point. These people had something special going on; it looked like it was great to be them. Slack-jawed in wonder, I watched them all do their brilliant thing. Up close, what really blew me away was the sheer, uninhibited joy they exuded as they danced.

I’d always assumed the smiles were just painted on, but it turns out they’re smiling with their whole beings. “This is why I do it,” Jowita said to me. “With every dance, I can be whoever I want to be. Wherever I am, it’s like there’s nobody’s watching. I am free to be myself.”

I’ve known footballers fed up with football, politicians sick of politics and many journalists sick to death of everything. But I’ve yet to meet a dancer who didn’t love dancing. Admittedly, my sample size is small, but I think I’m on to something.

I was now motivated by a great desire to earn the respect of my new dancing friends and, more importantly, do Jowita justice. I was her first Strictly

partner; she deserved a trier. In rehearsal rooms all over London we laboured. The more progress I made, the further away I seemed to be from getting it right. Our dance, to a deceptively quick version of White Christmas, lasted two minutes. This, by my reckoning, involved nailing around 200 precise steps, for each of which my arms, fingers, head, backside, neck and various other bits of me all had to be doing something equally specific. I calculated this added up to about 10 million opportunities to cock things up. “You overthink! Stop overthinking!” demanded Jowita, her patience showing the first signs of wear.

The bad bits of ADHD were really kicking in now. As we went through the whole routine, instead of focusing on what I should have been doing at any given moment, I was busy regretting the move I’d just messed up and worrying constantly about a tricky one towards the end.

Also, critically, I just couldn’t get my arms – my “frame” – right until I’d sorted my feet out. Once my feet were sorted, my frame started coming together, only for my feet to then go to pot again. As we waltzed together, try as I might, I couldn’t keep my shoulders back and my elbows up in the right position. This wasn’t about posture, as Jowita thought; my shoulders were sagging in sheer disappointment at all the mistakes my feet were making.

In desperation she brought in an odd-looking metal bar to hang around my neck to keep my arms up. It was humiliating, but I didn’t care. If Jowita was happy, I was happy.

The legendary football manager Brian Clough would occasionally, just occasionally, give a player a thumbs up from the dugout. That player would do whatever it took to elicit another thumbs up from the great man. Jowita had something similar for me. Whenever I nailed a sequence, she’d exclaim “Nice!” with a big, contented smile. Never did I think one word from a small Polish woman, barely older than my daughter and only slightly heavier than my dog, could mean so much.



The dancers had something special going on. It looked like it was great to be them. Photograph: Antonio Olmos/The Observer

The time came to take our routine into the studio, in front of some actual people. I was sick with nerves, quite sure I'd lose my way completely. But it went rather well; I even got a nice "Nice!" out of Jowita at the end. At this point, my stupid mind went from being sure I'd mess it up, to visualising how badly I'd now feel if I did mess up the real thing when I knew I could actually do it. "Overthinking!" hollered my exasperated partner. "Stop it! You've got this. Please, stop thinking, stop worrying, enjoy the moment, be in the moment."

I was offered a fake tan not once, but twice, but managed to swerve it. The shirt – who knew! – was actually a bodice

Resolving to obey my dance teacher/chiropractor/life coach and cease all my stinking thinking, I got togged up for the dress rehearsal. I was offered a fake tan not once, but twice, but managed to swerve it. The shirt – who knew! – was actually a bodice, a kind of babygrow that I had to step into. The idea of this, as with the decidedly snug tailcoat, is to stop everything riding up when you raise your arms. After much pinning and fiddling by the wardrobe department, I was ready. Unfortunately, the nerves had kicked in

and I was desperate for the toilet, which meant everything had to be unpinned, the bodice stepped out of, and the whole palaver repeated. A rookie error.

It was time for our one dress rehearsal. After this, it would be the real thing. All was going swimmingly until we got to the lift and spin, the one bit I'd always got right. I'd crouch to lift her on to my shoulder, grab her knee and start twirling. On this occasion, though, unused to the tightness of my outfit, I didn't get low enough to pick her up properly. Something twanged in my back and, even worse, I couldn't find her knee among the complications of her voluminous dress. Frantically, I rummaged around for it in the folds of this frilly frock as we span, but to no avail. I'd still be spinning now if she hadn't yelled at me to put her down and finish the dance.

Facedown on the physio's table, I tried to put the dress rehearsal behind me. Soon it would be time for the actual televised performance. If you really want to know how well or otherwise I do, you'll have to watch on Christmas night. After that I may or may not end up living in another country under an assumed name.

So can I now call myself a dancer? I'm afraid I can't, as one moment illustrates. We were all wearily milling around chatting in the studio between run-throughs of a group routine. Suddenly the sound system started blasting out We Found Love by Rihanna. As one, the pro dancers all went berserk, only for the sheer joy of doing so. It was like being in an episode of Glee. I tried to join in but, inhibitions still rock solid, my feet had turned back to clay. No matter, it was a privilege to see what life can be like if you live for the moment and dance, yes, like no one is watching.

The Strictly Come Dancing Christmas Special airs on Christmas Day on BBC One and BBC iPlayer

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‘You immediately tell your friends to cancel their tickets’ – what’s it like to star in a flop?



‘I miscalculated’ ... Ken Stott in *The Prince’s Play*, which Richard Eyre put on at the National. Photograph: Tristram Kenton/The Guardian

How does it feel to go back on stage night after night in a play that's been mauled by critics and deserted by audiences? Richard Eyre and other directors and actors relive their trauma



[Mark Lawson](#)

Thu 16 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

Movies, TV shows and books can all get terrible reviews and small audiences, but the difference when this happens in theatre is that the actors have to go back on stage and remake the work just after critics have declared it disastrous. “It is so crushing for actors to have to go on night after night bearing the weight of failure,” says Richard Eyre, artistic director of the Royal [National Theatre](#) from 1987 to 1997. “And that’s one of the reasons actors are such stoics. For directors and writers, there’s a sense of disembowelment you carry round if you’ve had a major failure – but they can just fuck off to Tenerife, and some do. Actors are obliged to soak it up.”

Actor [Michael Simkins](#), who wrote the theatrical memoir *What’s My Motivation?*, says: “If I had to articulate what it feels like to be in the middle of a play you feel is dying on its arse, it’s a cold sense of dread, like battery acid in your stomach. After terrible reviews, a sort of numbness sets in that

is still there for the second night. You haven't yet fully processed it. The first thing you do is tell all your friends who have booked tickets to cancel."

Both men express sympathy and empathy for all involved in Moira Buffini's play *Manor*, which received a rare [one-star review](#) in the *Guardian*, and an even scarcer zero rating from the *Times*. That mauling also brought back memories for Jonathan Moore, a playwright, opera director and librettist who, as a young actor, appeared in Nicholas Wright's *The Gorky Brigade* at the Royal Court in 1979. Wright later wrote two of the National Theatre's most successful new plays – *Mrs Klein* and [Vincent in Brixton](#) – but his early work about Russian politics received brutal reviews. In the *Daily Mail*, Jack Tinker wrote: "The writer should be sent to the salt mines of Siberia to learn how to write." Moore remembers "looking up at one of the boxes by the side of the stage, and there was a guy reading a newspaper all through the play".



Zero stars ... *Manor* was recently savaged by critics. Photograph: Manuel Harlan

Simkins once suffered a stark example of the unevenness of an acting career. In the late 1980s, he portrayed a young Italian-American [opposite Michael Gambon](#) in Arthur Miller's *A View From The Bridge*, directed by Alan Ayckbourn. After playing to 97% capacity at the National, it transferred to

the West End for six months. Over the next two years, though, Simkins featured in two legendary disasters. As a bonus for the success of the Miller, NT artistic director Peter Hall invited Ayckbourn to do anything he wanted. He chose John Ford's 1633 revenge drama, 'Tis Pity She's a Whore.

"The first night party was in the Olivier theatre bar," recalls Simkins. "As I pushed open the door from backstage, four actor friends who had been in the audience all avoided my gaze as I headed towards them. They looked down into their drinks. Then someone struck up a conversation about a play he'd seen me in six months before." According to Daniel Rosenthal's book *The National Theatre Story*, 'Tis Pity half-filled (or worse) the 1,100-seat Olivier across 68 performances. Strikingly, Ayckbourn's official website, usually maintained punctiliously, still notes that the opening and closing dates of the show are "to be confirmed".

At a hit, people encourage each other to laugh and applaud. In a half-empty theatre, they ramp up each other's misery

Simkins seemed assured a happier experience when cast in Michael Frayn's 1990 play *Look Look*. Frayn's previous two shows – *Noises Off* and *Benefactors* – had been big London and New York hits, and propitiously this new work returned to the meta-theatrical comedy genre of *Noises Off*, one of the most successful plays of the 20th century. But where that play had been set backstage, *Look Look* dramatised an audience, so that ticket-buyers met a mirror image of the stalls on stage.

Simkins played the man in seat G15. During rehearsals, he "had the sense it wasn't working but I looked around and lots of people were laughing. So I thought it must be OK. There were vague murmurings between the actors at lunch, when we went off for our egg and chips. 'Do you think this is working?' But it was never fully articulated."

Peter Hall once wrote that no play that seriously fails to engage an audience at its first performance can be saved. "I remember," says Simkins, "the general sense, in the first couple of previews, that the opening 20 minutes worked wonderfully. Then it sort of died like a battery running down." Despite the dramatist "rewriting eight to 10 pages every day, on the first

night it was absolutely obvious the play didn't work." One critic reported that "one leaves the theatre open-mouthed at the sheer awful" spectacle, and another of "having no idea what the usually adept Mr Frayn thought he was up to".

In commercial theatre, failure brings economic stings for actors. Yet such was the commercial confidence in *Look Look* that Simkins had been "signed up for 52 weeks at a grand a week, by far the most I had ever earned". But after the reviews, he was looking at unemployment within a fortnight.



'£32.50 for this?' ... Stephen Fry in Michael Frayn's *Look, Look* at London's Aldwych theatre in 1990. Photograph: Alastair Muir/Shutterstock

Drama school includes no training for this: you have to learn on the flop. Jonathan Moore likens the experience of playing out the last weeks of a doomed show to "being in one of those football teams that has been relegated with nine or 10 games of the season still left. You want to keep your standards up as you're a pro. But you're only human so you feel crushed. There's a deep collective disappointment. And there's something about theatre crowds, that they tend to become a single entity. At a hit, 1,000 people encourage each other to laugh and applaud. In a half-empty theatre, they somehow ramp up each other's misery."

Theatregoers who show up for an unloved production are unlikely, says Simkins, to be short-changed by the cast. “There is a professional integrity. It’s often when plays are failing that actors kick in and really do their best. Conversely, in a copper-bottomed success, some of the actors stop trying. And it’s driven by fear because it’s always possible that the show where you decide to coast is the one where Ivo Van Hove has come in looking for actors for a 10-year global project.”

But in a catastrophe, even the best actors can crack. “In *Look Look, John Arthur*, who was playing one of the audience members, had to say: ‘I don’t know! £32.50 for *this*!’ And the line would float out across the stalls to an audience that actually had paid £32.50 – which was then West End top whack – for this. You have never heard such a terrible silence. And late in the run, there were a couple of nights when the silence was so cold that John started laughing.”

Whereas Broadway plays can close on the first night after poor reviews, British actors must carry on until the end of the scheduled run in subsidised venues, or through the two-week notice period of closure that West End managements are required to give. This requires support from the theatre team. There is a “duty of care” to those in a hated play, says Eyre, “and it is unforgivable not to support them. At the National, if it was my show, I’d go in to talk to the cast before the second night. And if it was someone else’s show that had destructive, poleaxing reviews, I’d go in to the dressing rooms with the director, and just exhort the actors not to take it personally or to heart.”

Before each performance of *The Gorky Brigade*, Moore remembers, the Royal Court’s then artistic director, Max Stafford-Clark, would appear at the dressing room doors and tell the actors: “Dunkirk spirit, eh, everyone?” There is also a particular atmosphere around a theatre with an unwanted project: “The stage door keeper gives you sympathetic looks. The box office people say: ‘Not that good I’m afraid.’”



‘There’s no way to disguise it, that was a catastrophe’ ... Mark Strong, James Grout and Colin Stinton in *Johnny on a Spot*, directed by Richard Eyre. Photograph: Tristram Kenton/The Guardian

Simkins and his colleagues on *Look Look* were regularly visited by Frayn, producer Michael Codron and the director Mike Ockrent. “We never felt abandoned. These were guys who don’t desert their post. I know a lot of producers – and certainly directors – who you never see again if things turn out badly. I’m not going to name them, but actors remember and it cuts very deep.”

Although Eyre’s artistic directorship was during one of the National’s strongest decades, he scheduled one of its least successful productions: 1994’s *Johnny on a Spot*. “There’s no way of disguising that was a catastrophe,” he admits, “and it was my vanity that caused it.”

Colleagues had proposed reviving *The Front Page*, Charles MacArthur’s newspaper comedy written with Ben Hecht. Eyre, though, had vivid memories of Michael Blakemore’s 1972 production of the play and was “not willing to invite comparison with a pretty well definitive production. So I thought we’d do this other Charles MacArthur play, *Johnny on a Spot*. And we did a reading and everyone thought it was marvellous, so I wasn’t alone in my madness.” One review called it “a one-joke disaster”, adding the

observation that the walls “rattle in sympathy” with the silent auditorium. The show played to only 28% capacity in the 1,150-seat Olivier auditorium across 43 dates.

Although disasters can provoke humour and even glee (smash flops are known to attract audiences who are drawn to gawp at the carnage like rubber-necking drivers on motorways) it should be remembered that livelihoods and even lives can be at stake. Eyre’s published diaries reveal that, during a run of unsuccessful shows that included the MacArthur, the artistic director was on prescription uppers and having suicidal thoughts. While critics must call what they see, there is a physical and mental toll from public failure.

Huge flops are mostly musicals, perhaps because they walk the thinnest line between great art and ridiculous artifice

If there were a formula for why shows fail, there would be no need for producers or reviewers. However, a study of the archives reveals some patterns. Huge commercial flops are predominantly musicals, perhaps because this is the dramatic form that walks the thinnest line between great art and ridiculous artifice. Strikingly, around two thirds of the National’s worst box office returns during 46 years at the South Bank are modern verse dramas, including Tony Harrison’s Square Rounds and Peter Oswald’s Fair Ladies at a Game of Poem Cards. Although Harrison has also had major NT successes – The Mysteries and The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus – there is some evidence that verse is off-putting. Harrison’s rhyming-coupled The Prince’s Play, directed by Eyre in 1996, sold only 31% of its tickets.

The remit of the National, though, is to take risks. “I don’t think of The Prince’s Play at all as a failure,” Eyre says. “I was slightly shocked when you listed that. I see it as good work of the sort the National should be doing. With The Prince’s Play, I miscalculated the popularity. It was something like 50 shows in the Olivier. At 25 performances, it might have done 66% business.”



Riskiest of all ... Square Rounds, a modern verse drama; the genre has the worst record at the National's box office. Photograph: Donald Cooper/Alamy

Picking the wrong stage is also a common factor across flops. Almost all the National's big disasters would have been minor disappointments in its smallest auditorium, the Dorfman (previously the Cottesloe). Manor stages small conversations at the front of the huge Lyttelton stage, with a towering set rising behind. Eyre hasn't seen the play, but is intrigued to hear its geometry. "That's interesting. You tend to have to find a way of reducing the Lyttleton stage and focusing audience attention on a much smaller part of the acreage. You have to find a way of compressing the space."

Another frequent theatrical post-mortem finding is bad timing. The Gorky Brigade, Moore thinks, "was much better than critics gave it credit for. But, at that time, Thatcher had just been elected and culture felt like a war zone for left-wing ideas, and we were doing a play set in post-revolutionary Russia!" Similarly, two stark National failures – Philip Martin's *Thee and Me*, which had half its performances cancelled, and *Greenland*, which was ridiculed by reviewers – approached the subject of climate change before it became fashionable.

In theatre, though, hope can soon follow despair, as Simkins found. “We got our closure notice for *Look Look* on a Monday. I was meeting a friend that night and Juliet Stevenson came down the stairs with her director from *Burn This*, which she was rehearsing. She said she was coming to see *Look Look*. I said, ‘Don’t bother, we’re closing’, and the director said, ‘Get this guy a script. We lost an actor tonight.’ Actors live on optimism – and that time it actually paid off. One moment, I was in the biggest flop in London and two weeks later I was on stage with John Malkovich in the success of the year.”

Stage frights: five infamous flops

Breakfast at Tiffany's (1966, Majestic, New York)

Broadway’s tradition of long preview periods creates a special small subset of productions that closed without actually opening. After watching the first preview, producer David Merrick cancelled all subsequent performances. “The announcement made Merrick a hero. Never before had a producer admitted at this stage that his show was a disaster,” notes Ken Mandlebaum in his entertaining *Not Since Carrie: 40 Years of Broadway Musical Flops*.



‘Favourite flop’ ... Warren Mitchell in *Dutch Uncle*. Photograph: McCarthy/Getty Images

Dutch Uncle (1967, Aldwych Theatre, London)

Playwright [Simon Gray](#) (1936-2008) was a connoisseur of his theatrical reverses across a series of diaries and memoirs and his “favourite flop” was this seedy bedsitter comedy. After a try-out run in Brighton, where Gray claimed to have witnessed a hotel receptionist warning guests to avoid the show, Dutch Uncle played to “groans of irritability, early and resonant departures, angry complaints at front of house” before closing. The Daily Mail critic argued for resuming the Victorian ritual of audiences booing bad plays.

Home Sweet Homer (Palace Theatre, New York, 1976)

One of the putrid sub-group of Broadway musicals that opened and closed with the same performance, this musical-comedy version of the classical Greek legend of Odysseus starred Yul Brynner, looking for a show to match his Broadway standard, *The King and I*. During a pre-New York tour, Brynner was suing the producers to get out of the show while his co-star, Joan Diener, finding that her name had accidentally been left off the theatre marquee, legally insisted the building was dressed in black, leading to fears that President Gerald Ford or Brynner had died.

Into the Night (Minskoff, New York, 1983)

Featuring at one point a high-kicking chorus line of an archbishop, priests and nuns, this show about the Shroud of Turin, a relic some Christians believe to be the burial shroud of Jesus, raised its \$3m capital from churchgoers, but their charity was not shared by critics and it closed after six performances.



Wing and a prayer ... Natalie Wright in *Bernadette*. Photograph: Tristram Kenton/The Guardian

Bernadette: The People's Musical (Dominion, London, 1990)

Another set of “angels” (as theatre backers are known) among the faithful staked the cash for this musicalisation of claimed appearances of the Virgin Mary at Lourdes in France. Unusually for a stinker, every night of the month it lasted was sold out but audiences had come not to pray but prey on a show universally judged carrion.

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Distraction disaster! Notifications are ruining our concentration – here's how to escape them



App attack ... being notified of a text from a friend, which you don't need to read straight away, can be surprisingly draining. Illustration: Guardian Design

Whether socialising with friends or completing a difficult task, a ping on your phone can destroy the moment. It is time to address the constant stream of interruptions



Amy Fleming

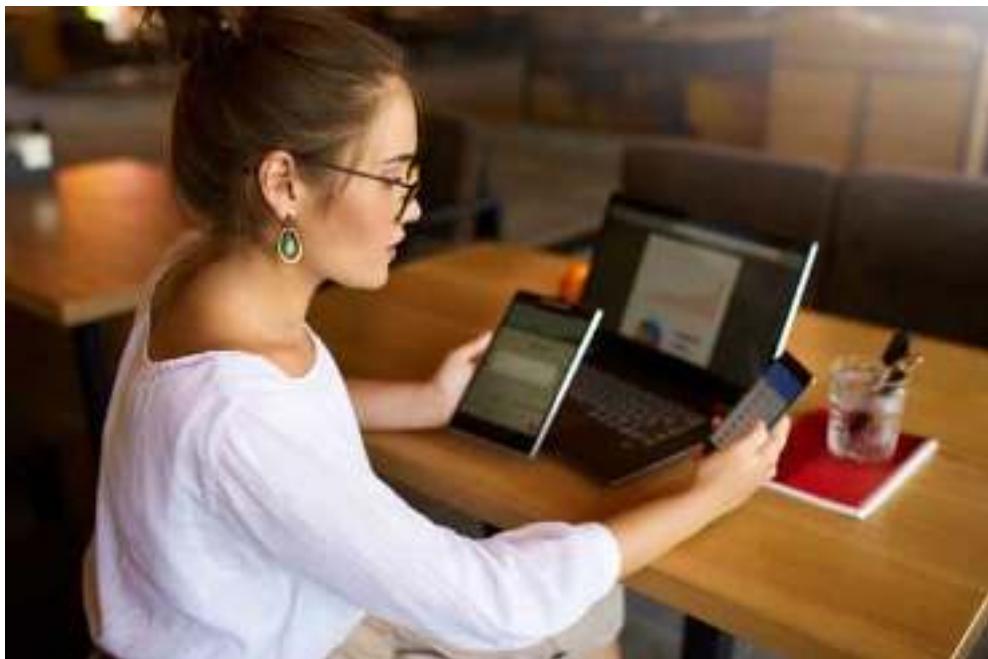
Thu 16 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

Joanie (not her real name), a clinical psychologist who lives in London, has three work laptops. This is not uncommon when you're spread across different NHS services. Sometimes, she feels like the 1980s synth supremo [Paul Hardcastle](#), who used to dart between keyboards when performing on Top of the Pops. Except that he wasn't always rudely interrupted by random notifications. "When I log on to one laptop," she says, "this automatic thing comes on called Netpresenter player. It's a ticker tape, like one of those bus-stop ads that keeps moving."

She quits it, because she needs to concentrate on writing up notes before her next meeting. But it keeps coming back with annoying notifications. "I've been in the middle of a session and it's started playing music and a video – usually things like, 'Don't forget to wash your hands properly', or, 'Hey, we're all meeting for a webinar in half an hour about staff wellbeing.'"

Joanie says her wellbeing would improve if it was easier to get her work done.

With increasing chunks of life handled online – from banking to entertainment to health – we have spiralled into [notifications hell](#). On a bad day, life can feel like one long stressy game of Space Invaders. You open a device to check the weather, only to be greeted with a barrage of invasive alerts – some interesting (you got paid!) and some irritating (a pointless post on your neighbourhood WhatsApp group, a software update ...) and before you know it, you've forgotten all about the weather.



Checking a notification quickly carries a significant mental cost.
Photograph: artiemedvedev/Getty Images/iStockphoto, posed by model

Scrolling down YouTube's endless list of video explainers for opting out of notifications provides a window into this distracting reality: "[Turn off annoying Outlook alerts](#)," "How to disable notifications in Google Chrome browser," "How to TURN OFF ALL notifications on ANY iPhone." PlayStation, Microsoft Teams, Facebook, Garmin smartwatch, the list goes on and on, because this is a constantly evolving situation and we can't keep up.

Joanie is a serial notifications disabler, but could do with watching the Teams and Outlook ones. The computer she uses most has recently started running [Microsoft](#) Teams to connect workers who either hotdesk or, since Covid, work from home. As she opens it, I hear a sophisticated chime that reminds me of airports, with their frequent announcements about gate closures for flights that aren't yours. She says that's the "activity" bell, heralding announcements that may or may not be relevant.

Then there's the general chat function, which notifies her about more meetings than anyone could possibly attend. "But even when I decline the invite, sometimes I still get all these pings of messages from the meeting saying: 'I can't see the slides.' So then you have to actively mute yourself each time." Email notifications needlessly pop up on Microsoft Outlook, and with young children, her personal phone is never far away, with its steady flow of reminders from school, and other pings and alerts she either needs or hasn't managed to eliminate.



'No one sits down to teach children how to turn the notifications off' ...
Photograph: Westend61/Getty Images, posed by models

On her third laptop, there's only a shared drive for files, and an email account. "I feel when I'm on that laptop, I can get my job done so much more easily, because you're choosing what you do."

Sophie Leroy, associate professor at University of Washington Bothell School of Business, is an expert in work interruptions, although many of her findings also apply to personal life. She puts notifications into two categories: “Notifications like work emails, where you are expected to provide an answer immediately, because of corporate norms, versus things that may not require a switch of your attention, like the Wall Street Journal, or your favourite store, and then you have to decide whether to switch or not.” Both are challenging.

Being notified of a text from a friend, which you don’t need to read straight away, can be surprisingly draining. “You’re like: ‘OK, what does my friend want?’ There’s uncertainty, and we don’t deal with uncertainty very well.” Ignoring it, says Leroy, is “cognitively difficult”. Self-control is required, and when it’s needed several times an hour, your brain will become exhausted. If your current task feels taxing, you’ll soon take a break to scratch some of your notifications itches. But even if you’re really keen to continue working, says Leroy, “when we use the resource of self-control, it depletes over time, and it’s going to be harder to ignore those notifications.”



A world of constant interruption ... Photograph: DjelicS/Getty Images, posed by model

Checking a notification quickly, so that it can be batted away and we can return to our work, might therefore seem the best option, but the mental cost is significant. “As the brain transitions between context,” says Leroy, “our train of thought has been broken. And when we go back to what we’re doing, the brain has a hard time remembering exactly where we were. Getting that momentum back, reaching the same level of concentration – that takes time. Even after a few seconds’ attention switch, coming back can be very costly.”

This may not be the end of the world in many jobs – but what if you work in something like healthcare? “If a nurse is interrupted during the administration of a drug to a patient,” says Leroy, “even if it’s a few seconds, there is a risk that they might either administer the wrong dose, or forget whether they had done it or not.” People understand this example, she says, yet don’t think it applies to them, but her research says otherwise.

Leroy gives people tricky tasks to focus on – such as reviewing CVs to find the most appropriate candidate for a given job description. People who are interrupted, she says, “are 17% less likely to choose the optimal candidate because of the cognitive costs associated with having to switch attention”. In notifications hell, productivity declines, as does the quality of your work.

All this means we are more likely to reach clocking off time without having finished our tasks, which then start eating up personal time – “recovery time”, says Leroy. “And that has a direct impact on wellbeing and mental health, because then there’s no time to disconnect.”



Getting that momentum back after being interrupted by a notification takes time ... Photograph: filadendron/Getty Images, posed by model

Even after we have clocked off, the notifications keep coming and we still check them, “because we have normalised it, not realising that if you’re having a good time with your kid, or with a friend, and you suddenly see a notification, you’re switching between different worlds and never being fully in the moment, or fully enjoying it. And that’s really critical for wellbeing.” One study has shown that [anxiety and depression](#) are higher among people who pay more attention to their devices than to their friends when socialising. [Another](#) finds that life satisfaction is lower.

And yet for those of younger generations, this state of constant interruption can define their early teens. Beth Walker is a psychology teacher in Yorkshire with four stepchildren, the youngest of whom are 13-year-old twin girls. “I worry about the amount of notifications they get in such a short space of time,” says Walker. “They have notifications from Snapchat, WhatsApp and text messages.”

She fears that the sheer weight of notifications puts pressure on them. “They feel the need to respond immediately. They can’t think: ‘I can just leave that until I’ve got a minute.’” And Walker suspects that they perceive social consequences if they don’t. “I think they believe their friends expect them to

respond straight away, otherwise maybe they're not as good friends as they should be.”

Anna Cox, professor of human-computer interaction at University College London, offers some reassurance. “We don’t have any good evidence that young people are more harmed, if you like, than anybody else.” But she concedes that one of the worst things about all our tech is that it’s designed to grab our attention, and comes with notifications switched on.

“I feel a lot of sympathy for young people, who get their first mobile when they’re 10 or 11 often, and no one sits down to teach them how to turn the notifications off. And so they do get bombarded by these things. I think we need to be doing a much better job of educating people of all ages.”

Lane says the twins’ older siblings (20 and 17) now treat their notifications with less urgency. “With the right guidance, as they get older, they are able to moderate. They still get as many notifications, but if they’re in the middle of doing something they will leave the phone for two hours, or whatever.”

Cox laments that many phone newbies are unaware of how to use night or do-not-disturb modes. “There were lots of reports of children being woken up through the night by someone texting them. When you see that it can impact people’s sleep, it’s not surprising that they’re stressed out. They’re exhausted.” Lane says the twins are still of an age at which they’ll hand over their phones before they go to bed, but it can be harder to force older teens to do so.

Those who have switched to remote working, meanwhile, might have waved goodbye to the distractions of open-plan offices, but, as with Joanie’s least favourite laptop, software is filling that nice, peaceful gap. “Previously, they might have had a phone on their desk, and email,” says Cox, “but now they’ve also got Teams and Slack and Zoom and they feel as if there are all these different things that they might be getting messages from.”

Cox says there’s no evidence that notifications hell is affecting our concentration skills in a permanent way. We can still pay attention when we really need to. Surgeons and truck drivers can still focus safely on their tasks

for hours on end. “But there is maybe a change in how we view the world,” she says. “What we really like is novelty. Before we had access to all of this technology, it was quite hard to find new things, right? It was exciting if you got a new book, or the next episode of EastEnders was on.” Now, of course, especially if we’ve not turned notifications off, there’s a constant flow of new content vying for our attention.

Like obedient puppies, tech has conditioned humans to react to notifications. Most of these digital nags are boring things, but because we occasionally get a high-reward one – a message from a new love, or an update on an exciting delivery, “we get this Pavlovian response,” says Cox, “where we end up thinking: ‘Oh, maybe this is an exciting one,’ and we want to respond to it straight away.” By now, most of us are familiar with the notion of the [dopamine hits that make phone-checking addictive](#). Dopamine is our motivational neurochemical – our wanting and seeking mechanism – and novelty is one of its key triggers. But the wanting part of our brains is mightier than the pleasure part, negatively weighting our desire to pleasure ratio. Which is why often, reading a notification feels like being a small child, unwrapping the biggest but most disappointing Christmas present.

Although notifications are bad for our productivity, brain power and mental health, the thought of going without them can be distressing to some, as a team of Spanish and US researchers discovered [in 2017](#) when they asked participants to do so for 24 hours. While the 30 who took up the challenge felt less distracted and more productive, they also felt, says the study, “no longer able to be as responsive as expected, which made some participants anxious. And they felt less connected with [their] social group.” Despite these gripes, after taking part, about two-thirds of them planned to change the way they managed notifications, and two years later, half had adhered to those plans.

“The struggle is real,” says Cox, but there are things we can do to minimise notifications hell. Tech companies, such as Microsoft, say they are trying to make such messages less annoying. “Our research has taught us that notifications and interruptions can be valuable and disruptive,” says Mary Czerwinski, a research manager at Microsoft’s Human Understanding and Empathy group, before flagging up new features the company has

introduced. Focus Assist, she says, “attempts to block social media and other app notifications so that users can work distraction-free for long periods of time.” And you can set a Focus Session timer within the Clock app.

But notifications will always come from somewhere. Your GP’s surgery, your kids’ school, your own weekly reminder that it’s bin day. Even simple things can help, suggests Cox, “like putting your phone in a drawer, while you get on with the boring work task. She also suggests compartmentalising and, where possible, having separate devices for work and personal life, or even having different user accounts on the one device. Some Android phones, she says, allow there to be two users. One could be work you, the other off-duty you. Turning off notifications for apps, and, she says, “those badges that tell you how many messages you haven’t read yet, will reduce the distractions”. With Facebook, she says, not only will you need to turn off notifications, but also emails. “You probably only want to know if someone else has logged into your Facebook account.” But equally, if you haven’t the brainpower for fiddly notifications admin right now, she says, “we shouldn’t be too scared and worried about it. It’s not cocaine.”



‘We have to be mindful about protecting our attention.’ Photograph: PeopleImages/Getty Images, posed by models

Leroy only uses email and texts, and chooses when she checks them. But she has developed a simple strategy for interruptions to reduce the mental burden of context switching, called the “[ready-to-resume plan](#)”. Before checking the notification, she says, “take a couple of seconds to write down where you were, and more importantly, what you were going to do next, or where you were struggling. And then you’re disengaged, and you address whatever is coming.” This helps your brain get closure on what you were doing. “So you’re more fully focused on the interrupting request. And then when you resume, you have a trace of where you were and are able to resume much faster.”

Similarly, if the notification requires action but isn’t urgent, don’t just let it hang. Make a note of it. “The brain does not do well with anything that is pending when there is no plan on how to deal with it,” says Leroy. “Writing down to go back and address Jerry’s email will help your brain relax about the fact that you have Jerry’s email pending.”

“We have to be mindful about protecting our attention,” she says. “We take it for granted. Understand that we have those cognitive limitations, and be humble about it.”

Every time Leroy loads a new app, she disables notifications. “That’s my default,” she says. As Cox adds, “These notifications do train us to respond. And they’re very effective. That’s why all the companies use them. And that’s why we need to fight, quietly, by switching them off.”

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Britain must find a new way out of its Covid doom loop

[Larry Elliott](#)



Focusing on double jabs and boosters ignores the global picture from which even this island nation is not immune

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A queue for booster jabs outside Manchester town hall on 14 December.
Photograph: Christopher Furlong/Getty Images

Thu 16 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

Britain is caught in a Covid doom loop, the pattern of which is becoming depressingly familiar. [A new variant](#) of the virus appears. It spreads rapidly. Restrictions are imposed to slow transmission rates and to take pressure off the NHS, but the economy suffers. Case numbers eventually fall and life gets back to something like normal. For a while, anyway.

For a government that constantly trumpets the idea of global Britain, the political focus is scarily narrow. A year-end target has been set for jabbing every adult in England, and every night the BBC dutifully reports how many more people have had their booster.

Once everybody has had a third jab, so the Downing Street mantra goes, this country will have [maximum protection](#) and the pandemic and economic recovery will be assured.

This line of argument is flawed for two reasons. First, the lesson of the last two years is that not everybody will come forward to be jabbed. Unless the

government is going to insist on compulsory vaccination – something which would be unworkable and politically impossible – a large minority of the population will remain unprotected against Omicron.

Secondly, the idea that Britain can somehow be walled off from the rest of the world is a nonsense. It is proving a struggle to hit the World Health Organization target of [vaccinating 40%](#) of the global population by the end of the year and in some parts of Africa [programmes have barely started](#). As the managing director of the International Monetary Fund, Kristalina Georgieva, said this month, the breeding ground for [new variants](#) is still out there. It is no coincidence that new variants have tended to be first detected in countries where vaccination rates are low.

Set against this reality, the idea that fully jabbing the whole of the UK provides permanent protection is the modern-day equivalent of the Maginot Line, the system of supposedly impregnable defences constructed by the French in the 1920s but which were easily circumvented by the Germans in the spring of 1940. Unless Britain is going to cut itself off from the rest of world, the booster campaign will only work for a limited period. Sooner or later another variant will show up.

There is a better and readily available solution: mobilise action at a global level to ensure vaccination rates in the poorer parts of the world match those in the developed west. That will require more money to [allow Covax](#), the vaccine arm of the WHO, to purchase more jabs. It will require countries that have procured more doses than they need to donate their surpluses. It will require changes to intellectual property rules so that countries in the global south can manufacture their own treatments. It will mean higher aid budgets to allow poor countries to improve their health delivery systems. Above all, it requires leadership and vision.

This won't be easy because in times of crisis there is a tendency for countries to become more insular and look after their own people. In this instance, however, there is no real distinction between looking after your own people and looking after people in Tanzania or Nigeria, where [less than 5%](#) of people have been double jabbed, let alone had boosters.

It is also worth considering what the alternatives are, because none are particularly attractive. One option is to lock down the country at the first sign of a new variant, no matter what the cost to the economy, education, mental health and personal liberty.

Another is to accept a higher mortality rate from Covid-19 as a price that has to be paid, with the hope that continued improvements in treatments for those who fall seriously ill mean the number of deaths fall over time.

In reality, Britain is stuck somewhere between these two extremes. Faced with the rapid spread of Omicron, large numbers of people have started to take their own precautions. They have [cancelled bookings](#) for Christmas parties, they are ordering takeaways rather than eating out, they are buying their Christmas presents online. It hasn't really mattered that trust in the government is low, because individuals are making their own risk assessments.

This is not a good place to be either. It spells trouble for an economy that was [barely growing in any case](#), and which is now operating without the security blanket of the furlough scheme, the wage subsidy scheme that ended in September.

The [IMF said](#) that Rishi Sunak should draw up contingency plans for a support package in the event that Omicron necessitates widespread enforced closures of businesses, and the chancellor would do well to take this advice.

Government policy goes through distinct phases. At first, ministers balk at tougher curbs on activity, saying it is too early to say how serious the health impact of the latest variant will be. The message to the public is that Britain must learn to live with the virus, but sooner or later there is a Downing Street press conference at which Boris Johnson says he is being forced, regrettably, to take sterner measures.

The argument this time is that the modest tightening of restrictions already announced, such as mask-wearing in most indoor settings, will be enough because booster jabs will provide sufficient protection for the public. Whether this line will persist once Christmas and the New Year celebrations are over remains to be seen. Given the rate at which Omicron is spreading, it

seems unlikely. To an extent, though, it doesn't matter because the economic damage is already being done.

So what should the government be doing? It would certainly make sense for the Treasury to announce a scaled-down version of the furlough targeted at the sectors suffering the worst. The Resolution Foundation thinktank estimates wage subsidies for 1.5 million workers in the hospitality and leisure sectors would cost about £1.4bn a month, a good investment given the much bigger cost of businesses closing for good.

There also needs to be a greater focus on getting those who are vaccine-hesitant to come forward for their jabs, with persuasion rather than demonisation the key. Some of those who are unjabbed are flat-out anti-vaxxers, but many are simply wary. Certain groups where vaccine rates are low – young women concerned about their fertility or people from ethnic minorities who are suspicious of the state – have reasons to be concerned. Compulsion and shaming are not the answers.

Above all, it is time for concerted multilateral action. The UK is not the only country trapped in its recurring nightmare. Other European countries had imposed much tougher curbs on their populations even before the arrival of the Omicron variant. There is no vaccination-in-one-country approach that will work. We are, to coin a phrase, all in this together.

- Larry Elliott is the Guardian's economics editor
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OpinionChristmas

Knights, princes and a Scottish castle: is this what women really want for Christmas?

[Anne Billson](#)

I've binged on Christmas romcoms to see exactly what modern-day fairytales are all about



'A feisty American blogger called Amber (Rose McIver) meets, marries and has a baby with A Christmas Prince, heir to the throne of Aldovia.'

Photograph: Netflix

Thu 16 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

Last week I suffered from film-induced whiplash. One minute I was watching Pablo Larraín's [Spencer](#), in which Diana, Princess of Wales's last Christmas with the British royal family is like being trapped in a haunted

mansion full of malevolent waxworks. The next, I was revelling in the adorable idiocy of *The Princess Switch*, in which a Chicago patisserie owner called Stacy swaps places with a lookalike duchess at Christmas, and falls in love with the Crown Prince of Belgravia.

We're not talking about the posh London district of the same name, but a fictional, Ruritania-style kingdom somewhere in the region of Romania, whose treasury must now be coining it from the [number of Christmas romcoms](#) being shot in and around its fancy castles.

If the House of Windsor's standing has been devalued by a lawsuit involving the Duke of York and the acrimonious familial rupture with Harry and his American wife, [Netflix](#) is busy restoring public confidence in monarchical systems, albeit imaginary ones. *The Princess Switch* trilogy shows that an American baker from a mixed-race background (Vanessa Hudgens playing three roles) can be warmly embraced by Mitteleuropean royalty.

Likewise, age-old traditions are nudged into the 21st century in the 2017 film *A Christmas Prince*. Here, a feisty American blogger called Amber (Rose McIver) meets, marries and has a baby with the titular prince, heir to the throne of Aldovia, the country next to Belgravia in the Netflix Christmasverse. Both trilogies feature diverse casting in which neither race nor sexual proclivity is ever remarked upon.

Indeed, in this year's [Single All the Way](#), the romcom formula is tweaked so the central couple are gay, but this causes not even a hint of disapproval in the New Hampshire host family, which sets about same-sex matchmaking with gusto. Truly these are all-inclusive fairytales for our times.

Christmas settings add shiny new baubles to familiar romcom cliches: not just precocious kids, airport dashes and mutual antagonism melting into romance, but also Christmas trees, Christmas markets, Christmas carols and snowball fights, to a degree where seasonal obsessiveness begins to feel almost as oppressive as *Christmasland* in Joe Hill's horror novel [NOS-4A2](#), where unhappiness is against the law. American women are forever finding themselves by travelling to some never-never European past where they are romanced by the local royalty – or aristocracy in the case of this year's *A*

Castle for Christmas, directed by Mary Lambert, probably still best known for 1989's scary Pet Sematary. But no scares here: Brooke Shields plays an American novelist called Sophie Brown who seeks refuge from a minor scandal by [burying herself in remotest Scotland](#), where she tries to buy a castle from an impoverished Duke (Cary Elwes). Cue Christmas jumpers, a full range of diverse supporting characters, and snowballs galore.

While the desire to marry above my station stopped at the age of eight, when I realised I couldn't get hitched to Prince Charles because having two Princess Annes would confuse the nation, I still wallow in the delusion that I might one day write a bestselling novel that will enable me to buy, if not a castle, then at least a one-bedroom flat. So Sophie's story speaks to me more than most. But while Christmas romcom heroines have flourishing careers, they also persist in nonfeminist dreams of true romance with a prince or (in 2019's A Knight Before Christmas) a knight in shining armour. What's the attraction? My guess is the allure of wealth, power and attention, although, as Spencer rams home, the real-life requirements of a royal family are the polar opposite of the romcom message of being true to yourself. As Spencer's Prince Charles points out, Diana must adopt a fake public persona if she is to survive.

But we can dream. Perhaps the whole point of Christmas romcoms is they enable us to bask, however fleetingly, in the delusion that we can have it all. [Love Hard](#), the smartest of this year's crop, deals in unvarnished truths: online dating profiles are invariably fake; Die Hard is a better Christmas film than Love, Actually; the lyrics of Baby, It's Cold Outside are worryingly sexually aggressive. But it still persists in the fib that you can't celebrate Christmas without a soulmate. As Joni Mitchell once sang: "A woman must have everything."

- Anne Billson is a writer and film critic
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OpinionConservatives

Conservative backbenchers are out of touch with the public — and fully removed from reality

[Martin Kettle](#)



The libertarian right correctly gauged voters' mood on Brexit, but rebelling on Covid rules could be politically dangerous



Conservative MPs listen as Sajid Javid explain the government's Covid plans, 14 December 2021. Photograph: UK Parliament/Jessica Taylor/PA

Wed 15 Dec 2021 11.58 EST

The Conservative government won the Commons vote; but it was so badly wounded by the revolt that it could not continue without change at the top. Boris Johnson will be aware that this is precisely the situation in which his hero, Winston Churchill, waded to power in May 1940. Neville Chamberlain's government had managed to win a crucial vote on the conduct of the war, but Tory rebellions and abstentions meant a new leader became inevitable. Johnson always craves comparison to Churchill, but the shoes in which he finds himself today are snugly those of Chamberlain.

Britain is not at war in 2021, but it faces a continuing emergency because of Covid. Further restrictions against the Omicron variant may be needed soon as cases continue to multiply, and Johnson has now promised another vote if they are. After Tuesday, when [100 Tories rebelled](#) and at least 16 deliberately abstained, Johnson cannot now win another victory like this week's without triggering far more acrimony and humiliation for himself and his party. That possibility really could be terminal, especially if the Tories lose the Shropshire North byelection.

[Tuesday's revolt](#) was not just a protest by the usual backbench suspects. It was an explosive fusion of several different forms of Conservative opposition against their leader at a particularly volatile time. The list of rebels was a rainbow coalition of Tories: it contained some new MPs and a lot of veterans, some remainers as well as many leavers, several centrists alongside a larger number on the party right. Very little else unites a Tory MP like Damian Green with one like Esther McVey, or Chris Chope with Tracey Crouch. But out-and-out exasperation with Johnson and his recent record certainly does. As one rebel MP, Charles Walker, put it, the vote was a “cry of pain”.

The Tory crisis is partly the consequence of Johnson’s off-the-cuff way of governing. In the turbulent and messy wake of Owen Paterson, the Peppa Pig speech, the lockdown Christmas parties and an opinion poll slide, Johnson went on TV on Sunday to announce ambitious vaccine targets and controls. There was no detail about how they were to be delivered, and parliament and the press were bypassed, presidential-style, not for the first time in Johnson’s career. Many on the backbenches and in government were furious.

Another part of the seriousness comes from this week’s spectacular reminder that the Conservative party is now practically ungovernable – something of which Johnson himself is both a symptom and cause. Backbench revolts have become more embedded in the culture, embodied by the regular presence, including again this week, of the 1922 Committee chairman Graham Brady among the rebels. Some of Tuesday’s rebels, such as Iain Duncan Smith and Edward Leigh, are serial offenders from the John Major era. Others acquired the habit under the coalition with the Liberal Democrats; Philip Hollobone (a teller on Tuesday) was the [most rebellious MP](#) of the 2010 parliament, and even voted against his own government’s Queen’s speech in 2013. Another MP of the same vintage, Steve Baker, is the most focused of the Tory backbench organisers. The 2019 intake, supposedly Johnson backers when they were elected, is itself now well represented in the rebel ranks by MPs such as Lee Anderson and Dehenna Davison.

Yet this week’s revolt also highlights the growing importance of rightwing libertarianism in the modern Tory party. In some ways the driving force of

this week's revolt, this libertarianism represents a striking break with the party's origins and past. Historically, the Tory party stood for order and authority, rather than the sovereign individual beloved by today's libertarians. Even Margaret Thatcher, who is often still seen as the modern Tory party's guiding light because of her economic individualism, argued that the party stood for what she called "ordered liberty". Unlike today's libertarians, Thatcher was never afraid to tell people how they should live their lives.

In today's libertarianism, Thatcher's economic individualism has spilled over into every other form of life. In this view of the world, every power given to every public official is a step towards tyranny, all departments of the state are malign empire builders whose existence threatens fundamental liberty, and all the checks and balances of liberal democracy, such as parliament and the law, are attempts to disarm the sovereign individual. It is a view that is both paranoid, massively overstating the threat from government action while largely ignoring the benefits, and politically self-destructive, since it is almost wholly at odds with the more balanced and pragmatic way that the public sees the same issues.

Nevertheless, this new ideological variant is proving highly transmissible on the backbenches. It is extremely infectious, and there have been several recent disturbing outbreaks. Graham Brady himself has described the UK government's earlier lockdown measures as going "full eastern bloc", and warned against being "pinged into the gulag". Backbench rebel Marcus Fysh told a BBC interviewer that he opposes the requirement to wear a mask and show a Covid pass because "this is not Nazi Germany" and Britain is not "a 'papers, please' society". And another rebel, Desmond Swayne, [said](#) the government's proposals were the work of an Orwellian Ministry of Fear and claimed that the Health Protection Agency was the creation of "Stalinist minds".

Where does this all come from? Paranoia over Covid regulations should perhaps be seen as first cousin to the intemperate exaggerations about British victimhood – made in some cases by the same people – that were part of the Brexit arguments. Leavers claimed that membership of the European Union destroyed all national sovereignty, and reduced a free people to vassal status from which Brexit would liberate and then empower

us. The reality has been more modest. Today's claim that to show evidence of a negative lateral flow test somehow makes Britain a police state is equally removed from reality.

The big difference between the politics of the two issues is in the mood of the public. The leavers won the referendum in 2016 and won the general election in 2019 on the back of it. In 2021, however, the public is consistently supportive of the more cautious approach to the pandemic that the rebels dislike. The more the rebels succeed in capturing the Tory party, therefore, the more dangerous the situation becomes for both Johnson and the party. If the rebels manage to block Johnson from taking future measures that have public support, or if they oust him in favour of someone who will toe their line on Covid regulations, the public may take its votes elsewhere.

- Martin Kettle is a Guardian columnist
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This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/dec/15/conservative-rebels-dangerously-out-of-step-public>

Beauty

The problem with my new wig? I resemble Miss Babs from Acorn Antiques

[Emma Beddington](#)



I was delighted with my hairstyle, until I made the fatal mistake of washing it. Everything has been downhill from there



Fringe beliefs ... Miss Babs (Celia Imrie, right) in Acorn Antiques
Photograph: Ronald Grant

Thu 16 Dec 2021 02.00 EST

As we enter another phase of national life so bleakly alarming that watching the news makes my face cave in like the Halloween pumpkin I haven't got around to binning yet, would you like to hear a trivial problem? Perhaps you have a microscopic violin that needs airing? That's rhetorical: tune up that tiny fiddle – I am having a bad hair day.

It's more like a bad hair month, actually, ever since I washed my new wig. I have alopecia and one major advantage of the condition is that I have dodged hair styling for 20 years. Once cut, my wig goes on my head every morning and just behaves.

Sadly, wigs do not behave for ever: they, too, go bald. This autumn I was reduced to elaborate combovers to hide bald patches and desperately WhatsApping my hairdresser, who, since we first met, has, inconsiderately, become stratospherically successful.

He finally squeezed me and my new wig in last month. Mesmerised by his unbroken flow of juicy anecdotes and deft cutting, I concurred

enthusiastically when he lifted the fringe speculatively, saying, “Let’s try it a bit longer, Em.” It looked great: there’s a reason he’s so in-demand after all. I left delighted, finally presentable without a woolly hat.

Swiftly thereafter, however, things went downhill. The wig has way more hair than I am used to, and requires maintenance I’m unqualified to provide. If I smooth the fringe, I look like Kurtan Mucklowe from This Country; if I let it have its own way, I become Miss Babs from Acorn Antiques. I’ve tried using straighteners, but the sound and smell of my hair sizzling are terrifying. I probably need a hairdryer, but the tiny travel one I use on my chickens on wet days is useless.

My hairdresser is now away coiffing someone on a beach in Mustique; I’m in Superdrug, dithering over “clay” versus “serum”. I suppose the wig will settle down eventually, once I have broken its spirit. Until then, I’m probably one of the few people who are delighted safe socialising is moving outside, so can be conducted in a beanie.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2021/dec/16/the-problem-with-my-new-wig-i-resemble-miss-babs-from-acorn-antiques>

2021.12.16 - Around the world

- [John F Kennedy US releases 1,500 documents about investigation into assassination](#)
- [Hu Xijin Outspoken editor of Chinese state tabloid Global Times retires](#)
- ['They punished me for having books' Schools in Cameroon terrorised by armed groups](#)
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[John F Kennedy](#)

US releases 1,500 documents about JFK assassination inquiry

Cables, memos and other documents shed light on Lee Harvey Oswald's Soviet and Cuban embassy visits



The JFK disclosure comes after Joe Biden set a deadline for the documents' release in October. Photograph: Brendan Smialowski/AFP/Getty Images

Associated Press

Wed 15 Dec 2021 17.36 EST

The National Archives on Wednesday made public nearly 1,500 documents related to the US government's investigation into the 1963 assassination of [John F Kennedy](#).

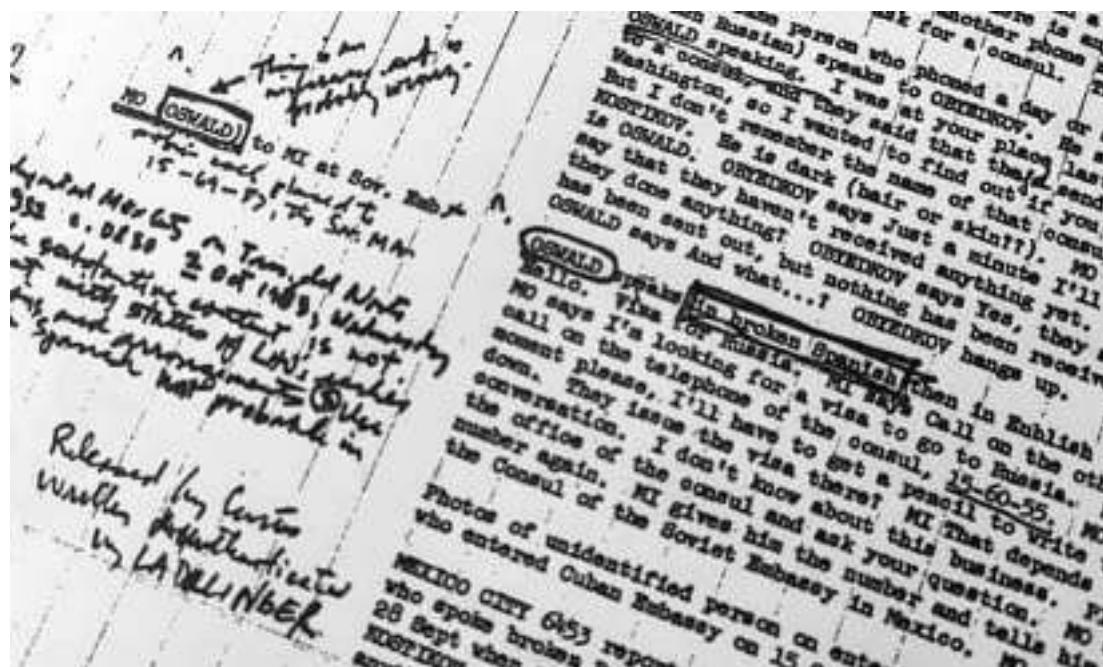
The disclosure of secret cables, internal memos and other documents satisfies a deadline set in October by Joe Biden and is in keeping with a

federal statute that calls for the release of records in the government's possession. Additional documents are expected to be made public next year.

There was no immediate indication that the records contained revelations that could radically reshape the public's understanding of the events surrounding the 22 November 1963 assassination of Kennedy in Dallas at the hands of Lee Harvey Oswald.

But the latest tranche of documents was nonetheless eagerly anticipated by historians and others who, decades after the Kennedy killing, remain skeptical that, at the height of the cold war, a troubled young man with a mail-order rifle was solely responsible for an assassination that changed the course of American history.

The documents include CIA cables and memos discussing Oswald's previously disclosed but never fully explained visits to the Soviet and Cuban embassies in Mexico City as well as discussion, in the days after the assassination, of possible Cuban involvement in the killing of Kennedy.



Part of a file from the CIA, dated 3 February 1968, titled Mexico City Chronology, about Lee Harvey Oswald's time in Mexico and contact with the embassy of the Soviet Union in Mexico City. Photograph: Jon Elswick/AP

One CIA cable describes how Oswald phoned the Soviet embassy while in Mexico City to ask for a visa to visit the Soviet Union. He also visited the Cuban embassy, apparently interested in a travel visa that would permit him to visit Cuba and wait there for a Soviet visa. On 3 October, more than one month before the assassination, he drove back into the US through a crossing at the Texas border.

Another memo, dated the day after Kennedy's assassination, says that according to an intercepted phone call in Mexico City, Oswald communicated with a KGB officer while at the Soviet embassy that September.

After Kennedy was killed, Mexican authorities arrested a Mexican employee of the Cuban embassy with whom Oswald had communicated, and she said Oswald had "professed to be a communist and an admirer of Castro", according to the cable.

One CIA document marked "Secret Eyes Only" traces US government plots to assassinate the Cuban leader at the time, Fidel Castro, including a 1960 plot "that involved the use of the criminal underworld with contacts inside Cuba".

Another document weighs whether Oswald, while living in New Orleans, might have been affected in any way by the publication in the local newspaper of an interview an Associated Press correspondent conducted with Castro in which Castro warned of retribution if the US were to take out Cuban leaders.

The new files include several FBI reports on the bureau's efforts to investigate and surveil major mafia figures like Santo Trafficante Jr and Sam Giancana, who are often mentioned in conspiracy theories about Kennedy's assassination.

Apart from the Kennedy investigation, some of the material will be of interest to scholars or anyone interested in the minutiae of 1960s counterespionage, with pages and pages of arcane details on such things as

the methods, equipment and personnel used to surveil the Cuban and Soviet embassies in Mexico City.

In blocking the release of hundreds of records in 2017 because of concerns from the FBI and the CIA, Donald Trump cited “potentially irreversible harm”. Even so, [about 2,800 other records](#) were released at that time.

The Warren commission in 1964 concluded that Oswald had been the lone gunman, and another congressional investigation in 1979 found no evidence to support the theory that the CIA had been involved. But other interpretations have persisted.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/15/john-f-kennedy-assassination-documents-released>

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[China](#)

Outspoken editor of Chinese state tabloid Global Times retires

Hu Xijin became leading voice of strident nationalism with millions of social media followers



Hu Xijin has stepped down as editor-in-chief of the Global Times, owned by the ruling Communist party's flagship newspaper the People's Daily.
Photograph: Bloomberg

[Vincent Ni](#) and agencies

Thu 16 Dec 2021 03.05 EST

A controversial Chinese state tabloid editor who became a leading critic of the west's [China](#) policy, emerging in the past decade as a prominent voice of strident nationalism, has announced his retirement.

Hu Xijin, a self-described former pro-democracy protester turned [outspoken newspaper editor](#), has helped usher in a new era of brash, assertive nationalism since taking the helm of the tabloid Global Times in 2005.

In a social media post on Thursday, Hu announced he had stepped down as editor-in-chief of the Global Times, which is owned by the ruling Communist party's flagship newspaper the People's Daily. He said he would continue to be a special commentator for the paper.

The 62-year-old wrote to his 24 million followers on Weibo that it was "time to retire". "I will continue ... to do everything I can towards the [Communist] party's news and public opinion work," he said.

Hu has regularly invited controversy through inflammatory tweets and strident columns, inside and outside China. Last year, he likened Australia to "chewing gum stuck on the sole of China's shoes" after Canberra joined Washington's call for an inquiry into the origins of Covid, and he called the UK a "bitch asking for a beating" after British warships sailed through contested waters last summer.

As well as drawing tens of millions of readers in China, Hu built a substantial social media presence internationally on Twitter – which is blocked inside China – with more than 460,000 followers, making him one of the most prominent pro-state voices on western social media.

This week, in a Twitter response to the US senator for Arkansas Tom Cotton, who criticised China for having "betrayed" America's trust, Hu responded: "I particularly like to see US politicians like you can only talk tough toward China, but can do nothing."

I know how much you want to strangle China's growth. Unfortunately, the US of you doesn't have such strength. I particularly like to see US politicians like you can only talk tough toward China, but can do nothing. [@SenTomCotton https://t.co/RUJnBS27P4](#)

— Hu Xijin 胡锡进 (@HuXijin_GT) [December 12, 2021](#)

Hu claims he participated in the 1989 pro-democracy protests at Beijing's Tiananmen Square before becoming a reporter, although later his ideological leanings hardened towards wholehearted support of the Communist party line.

"Hu defined Global Times as a newspaper that simultaneously pleases the party leaders and wins the market," said Fang Kecheng, a media researcher at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. "Without Hu, the newspaper might only be a mediocre paper unknown to the public. He is the major figure who started the commercial nationalism in China."

Since Hu took on the top role in 2005, the Global Times has acquired a combined 67 million followers on Facebook and Twitter, helping Chinese propaganda reach a wider international audience while domestic restrictions on online debate have tightened.

Outside China, Hu's commentaries are often cited by journalists as messages from Beijing's decision makers. But Hu is always ambiguous about his connection with China's leaders. "To be honest, I myself don't know for sure to what degree I reflect the authority's voice," he told the *Guardian* [recently](#). But he admitted that the newspaper's English edition received government funding for providing overseas propaganda.

Last month, amid speculation over the wellbeing of the Chinese tennis star [Peng Shuai](#), he tweeted video footage saying sources had told him Peng was alive and well. Earlier, Peng had written a long Weibo essay making sexual assault allegations against a top official.

In China, despite Hu's large following, he is a controversial figure who divides opinion. In recent months, he was alleged to have had extramarital affairs with two female colleagues. He has denied the allegation, saying in a blogpost that he was being blackmailed by the accuser, a deputy editor at the newspaper.

It is widely rumoured in Chinese media blogs that the People's Daily commentary writer Fan Zhengwei will replace Hu.

Additional reporting by Agence France-Presse

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/16/editor-of-chinese-state-tabloid-global-times-retires>

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Global development

‘They punished me for having books’: schools in Cameroon terrorised by armed groups

Human Rights Watch says armed separatists in anglophone regions have made schools a battleground, with hundreds of school pupils and teachers attacked, kidnapped or threatened



Schoolchildren, their parents and teachers hold a protest after gunmen opened fire at a school in Kumba, western Cameroon. Photograph: Josiane Kouagheu/Reuters

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[About this content](#)

[Lizzy Davies](#)

Thu 16 Dec 2021 01.30 EST

Armed separatists in Cameroon's anglophone regions have attacked, kidnapped and threatened hundreds of school pupils in nearly five years of violence that has forced more than 230,000 children to flee their homes, a report has found.

In a detailed analysis of the conflict that has gripped the English-speaking regions since 2017, dozens of students and teachers speak of brutal attacks by armed groups who have made education a battleground in their fight to form their own state.

Ilaria Allegrozzi, author of the Human Rights Watch (HRW) report, said it was essential that separatist leaders called off a school boycott, which was initially intended as a protest over injustices against English-speakers but which is now "destroying an entire generation of Cameroonians" by depriving them of an education.

"But most importantly, they should also start reining in their fighters," she said. "They should instruct their fighters to stop attacking schools. Schools

are not places that can be battlegrounds.”

The crisis in the anglophone regions began in late 2016, when Cameroonian security forces used excessive force against demonstrations led by teachers and lawyers angry about the perceived marginalisation of the anglophone education and legal systems.

Those protests were peaceful, but since 2017, when armed separatist groups seeking independence for the English-speaking Northwest and Southwest Regions declared an education boycott, at least 70 schools have been attacked, the report said.

More than 500 students, and at least 100 education professionals, have been attacked, it claimed, with at least 11 pupils and five teachers killed, and scores of others assaulted, harassed, and threatened for failing to comply with the boycott. Separatist fighters have also kidnapped 255 students, according to HRW.



A puddle of blood in a classroom after a shooting at a school in Kumba, western Cameroon. According to the UN, the attacks have left 700,000 students without education. Photograph: Josiane Kouagheu/Reuters

One woman, a 19-year-old secondary school pupil, from Buea, Southwest Region, recalled being abducted and brutally maimed by armed separatists

in January 2020, on her way back from school.

“They were armed with machetes and knives,” she said. “They blindfolded me so I could not see where they were taking me. We had to walk for a few hours. I was not given food. I slept on the ground outside for three days. The *amba* [separatist fighters] called my father and asked him to pay money for my release.

“On the third day, when I was about to be released, they cut my finger with a machete. One of the boys did it. They punished me because they found schoolbooks in my bag. They wanted to cut a finger off my right hand to prevent me from writing again. I begged them [not to], and then they chopped the forefinger of my left hand.”

In September, when schools were supposed to reopen for the new academic year, two out of three in Cameroon’s anglophone regions remained closed, leaving more than [700,000 students without education](#), according to the UN.

Those who do risk going to school often do it covertly, the report said.

“Many of my students do not wear school uniforms on their way to and from school,” said a chemistry teacher in Buea. “If they wear them, they can be at risk of being spotted by the separatist fighters on the road and attacked. Also, they don’t use school bags. They put their books and notebooks in shopping bags like those we use to go to the market to buy food.”

Allegrozzi said that although the report focused on attacks on education by armed separatist groups, human rights abuses have been committed by both sides.

“[Cameroonian] security forces also bear responsibility for serious attacks against civilians,” she said. “They have killed innocent people during abusive counterinsurgency operations. They have burnt hundreds of villages and homes across the two regions. So people have been really caught in the middle between a rock and a hard place.”

For many – nearly 600,000 people since late 2016, according to the UN – the only option is to flee. Among them are teachers and at least 230,000

children who have had to leave after attacks on education or their communities.

After a visit to Cameroon earlier this month, Jan Egeland, secretary general of the Norwegian Refugee Council, called on the international community to break its “deadly silence” on the country’s “education mega-emergency”.

“Cameroon is one of the world’s most forgotten crises,” he said. “Until the international community steps up its support and diplomatic engagement, children will continue to bear the brunt of the violence.”



Pupils during a lesson in Souza, western Cameroon. Many of the desks are empty at the school, with children afraid to attend classes due to the attacks.
Photograph: Daniel Beloumou Olomo/AFP/Getty

The Cameroonian government said it has deployed security forces to some schools to reassure teachers and pupils about safety. It has also mounted a “back to school” campaign over the past two years in an attempt to break the boycott.

But in its report HRW is critical of the authorities’ failure to bring the perpetrators of the attacks to justice. It said the armed groups “have enjoyed almost absolute impunity for their attacks on education”.

The organisation based its research on 155 telephone calls with people in Cameroon.

The separatist leaders, who belong to multiple groups, all disputed the findings of the report. One said it was “extremely biased to the degree that it is difficult to characterise it as anything other than as [sic] deliberate misinformation”.

Another accused Cameroon’s security forces of trying to “sully the good image and reputation” of the separatists by committing “atrocious actions including the burning down of schools” in nonmilitary attire.

A third said that as HRW had relied on telephone calls for its research it had “missed the dynamics in play” on the ground. It blamed the “appalling situation” on the government of Cameroon, adding: “It is clear from the skewed attitude of HRW that it blindly serves the purposes of those close to the ancient dictator Paul Biya.”

Biya, 88, has been president of Cameroon since 1982.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/dec/16/they-punished-me-for-having-books-schools-in-cameroon-terrorised-by-armed-groups>

Winter Olympics

Japan PM will not attend Beijing Winter Olympics opening ceremony

Fumio Kishida does not say if other officials will attend and it remains unclear if he will join US-led boycott over human rights



Japan's prime minister, Fumio Kishida, says he has 'no plans' to attend next year's Beijing Winter Olympics. Photograph: Sadayuki Goto/AP

[Justin McCurry](#) in Tokyo

Thu 16 Dec 2021 00.31 EST

Japan's prime minister, [Fumio Kishida](#), has said he will not attend the opening ceremony of the [Winter Olympics](#) in Beijing, but it is not clear if the country will join a US-led diplomatic boycott of the Games over human rights abuses.

Speaking in parliament on Thursday, Kishida said: “I have no plans at this point to attend” and did not clarify if [Japan](#) would send any officials to the event, amid reports that it was unlikely to snub the hosts altogether.

Kishida has said only that he will make a decision, possibly by the end of the year, based on Japan’s “national interest”, while media reports said ministers and politicians were likely to skip the Games, with Japan opting instead for the “face-saving” option of sending officials connected to [Tokyo 2020](#), including the president of the organising committee, Seiko Hashimoto.

[China](#) has accused the US, Britain, Canada and Australia of “political posturing”, and warned them they would “pay a price” after they announced they would not send delegations of officials and politicians to Beijing. Their athletes will compete, however.

Countries taking part in the boycott said they were protesting against China’s [human rights](#) abuses, including its treatment of Uyghur Muslims in [Xinjiang](#) province, the crackdown on democracy and freedoms in [Hong Kong](#) and the repression of Tibet.

The boycott has placed Japan, a key US ally in the Asia-Pacific, in a difficult position less than two months before the Games are due to open.

[Japan](#) has deep economic ties with China – its biggest trading partner – and will not want to appear to snub Beijing ahead of next year’s 50th anniversary of the normalisation of diplomatic relations.

In addition, Chinese officials supported the decision to go ahead with this summer’s Olympics in Tokyo, despite widespread public opposition due to fears over the coronavirus.

The South Korean president, Moon Jae-in, said this week his country would not join the boycott, describing the Games – which run from 4-20 February – as “positive” for Seoul’s relations with Beijing.

Wang Wenbin, a spokesman for the Chinese foreign ministry, welcomed Moon’s announcement, but warned Japan that “[politicising sport](#) is contrary to the spirit of the Olympic charter”.

In a break with other G7 nations, France, which is due to host the 2024 summer Games, has said it will send high-level officials to Beijing.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2021/dec/16/japan-pm-will-not-attend-beijing-winter-olympics-opening-ceremony>.

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Christchurch shooting

New Zealand honours ‘extraordinary’ bravery of 10 during Christchurch attacks

Highest honours went to Naeem Rashid, who died while challenging the gunman, and Abdul Aziz who lured the attacker away from others



Naeem Rashid charged at the Christchurch gunman, giving others at al Noor mosque time to flee. He was posthumously given the New Zealand Cross bravery award. Photograph: launchgood

Eva Corlett in Wellington

@evacorlett

Thu 16 Dec 2021 21.36 EST

Ten people who risked their lives to save others during the 2019 [Christchurch](#) mosque massacres have been honoured in New Zealand’s most

prestigious bravery awards.

“The courage demonstrated by these New Zealanders was selfless and extraordinary. They have our deepest respect and gratitude for their actions on that day,” said the prime minister, Jacinda Ardern. “Each of them put their life on the line to save others. If not for their collective actions, the loss of life could have been even greater.”

The list includes two awards of the country’s highest bravery honour, the New Zealand Cross – an acknowledgment akin to the New Zealand Victoria Cross for gallantry.

On 15 March 2019, a white supremacist gunman killed 44 people at al Noor mosque during Friday prayers before driving to the Linwood mosque, where he killed another seven.

Dr Naeem Rashid was posthumously awarded the New Zealand Cross, after he disregarded his own safety to challenge the attacker in al Noor mosque. As the gunman came into the main prayer room and began firing shots, the congregation attempted to flee, but Rashid ran at the gunman.

“In so doing, he enabled others to escape and paid the ultimate price with the loss of his own life. I want to acknowledge Dr Rashid’s wife and family particularly, who will know all too well that his acts that day were a reflection of who he was as a person,” Ardern said.

Rashid’s wife, Ambreen Naeem, said in a statement she was grateful for the award. “Today we can’t see him, but he has spread his message of peace and love, all over the world.”

Abdul Aziz was also awarded the New Zealand Cross for also displaying great courage and bravery challenging the gunman. Aziz shouted provocations at the gunman to get him to refocus his attention on him, with the intention of preventing further loss of life. Aziz’s actions deterred the gunman from re-entering the Linwood Islamic Centre and ultimately forced him to flee the mosque.

“To be honest with you, I couldn’t even have the time to think about anything, I just wanted to get that guy, that coward,” Aziz told [RNZ](#) on Thursday.

While Aziz hoped no one would ever have to get an award again for helping save their community from terrorism, he acknowledged it felt good to be honoured. “It means a lot to all our community and all the Muslims and for me too, because all those times we’ve been the target, and this shows that people are with us.

“It feels good, like you’ve done something good in your life.”



Abdul Aziz, a survivor of the Christchurch mosque shooting. Photograph: Vincent Thian/AP

There were also four awards of the New Zealand Bravery Decoration and four of the New Zealand Bravery Medal.

Senior constables Scott Carmody and Jim Manning were awarded the New Zealand Bravery Decoration for their exceptional courage in apprehending the gunman.

Canterbury District Commander Superintendent John Price said: “Jim and Scott are incredibly humble, but these awards are an important symbol of

much more of than two heroic individuals, they say something about who we are as New Zealanders”.

Ziyaad Shah’s bravery shielding another worshipper with his body in al Noor mosque, while the gunman shot at them, hitting Shah twice, was acknowledged with the New Zealand Bravery Decoration.

Liam Beale, also awarded this decoration, had been driving past al Noor mosque but left his vehicle as he heard gunshots and people screaming. He stopped people from heading to the mosque, and then helped victims.

Lance Bradford, Wayne Maley, Mark Miller and Mike Robinson were awarded the New Zealand Bravery Medal. “They placed their lives at risk, bravely searching for victims, assisting them and moving them to safety, while the gunman was active in the area,” Ardern said. “On a day of such terrible loss and suffering, the actions of these 10 individuals demonstrated the humanity, decency and compassion that New Zealanders value and hold dear.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/16/new-zealand-honours-extraordinary-bravery-of-10-during-christchurch-attacks>

Headlines monday 13 december 2021

- [Coronavirus Omicron Covid variant could overwhelm NHS even if less severe, says Javid](#)
- [Live UK Covid: non-urgent appointments to be postponed to help booster jabs rollout](#)
- [Analysis Booster rollout is short-term pain for long-term gain](#)
- [Covid UK booster jab rollout to increase to 1m a day to battle Omicron ‘tidal wave’](#)

Coronavirus

Omicron Covid variant could overwhelm NHS even if less severe, says Javid

No known Omicron deaths yet, says health secretary, as figures show hospitals at 94-96% capacity

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
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Hospitals, already operating at between 94% and 96% capacity, are under strain as Covid cases surge due to the Omicron variant. Photograph: Mark Thomas/REX/Shutterstock

[Peter Walker](#) and [Jamie Grierson](#)

Mon 13 Dec 2021 04.36 EST

Hospitals are already operating at between 94% and 96% capacity, the organisation which represents NHS trusts has warned, as [Sajid Javid](#) said that there had been no known deaths from the Omicron variant in English hospitals so far.

There were, thus far, 10 people in English hospitals with the variant, the health secretary said, stressing that even if Omicron turned out to be less severe overall than the Delta variant it is supplanting, the sheer number of cases would still put the health service under severe strain.

His comments came as Chris Hopson, the chief executive of [NHS](#) Providers, said a shortage of social care staff and the removal of some beds to control coronavirus infections meant hospitals were trying to operate with 30% to 35% fewer beds.

Hopson told Sky News: “For this time of year, the NHS is busier than it’s ever been before. That’s obviously a worry because it’s before the traditional winter peak in January and it’s before any kind of cases really coming into hospitals – that are now starting to do so – in terms of Omicron cases.”

NHS Providers, a membership organisation that represents NHS trusts, said hospitals were already operating at between 94% and 96% capacity.

Stressing the need for a massive increase in the number of booster jabs given during December, as [announced by Boris Johnson](#) in a televised address on Sunday evening, Javid said Omicron was spreading with enormous speed, already accounting for 40% of all Covid infections in London.

Asked about deaths from the variant, he told BBC Radio 4’s Today programme: “I don’t know of any confirmed cases at this moment. There are 10 hospitalisations right now confirmed in English hospitals. There are some also in Scottish hospitals.

“But in terms of hospitalisations and deaths, what we have learned about this virus is there is always a lag between infection and severe disease, hospitalisation and, sadly, death.”

The “phenomenal” spread of Omicron was unlike anything previously seen in the pandemic, Javid said: “Many people are claiming this is less severe but let’s see, let’s establish the facts. Even if it is less severe, a smaller percentage of infected people experiencing severe disease is still a huge number if put against a large number of infections.”

The “new national mission” of seeking to provide boosters, which have been shown to significantly increase protection against the variant compared with two doses, to as many adults as possible before the end of the month, would mean some non-urgent NHS appointments being postponed, Javid warned.

“These decisions are not easy, but at any one time there is only limited capacity in the NHS,” he said, stressing that this should not affect anything more urgent, such as checks for people with potential cancer symptoms.

Chart

On ramping up the booster campaign, Matthew Taylor, the chief executive of the NHS Confederation, which represents the healthcare system in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, told BBC Radio 4’s Today programme: “The health service was already under unprecedented pressure, and this is going to mean that other important parts of the NHS’s work are going to have to be put on the back burner in order to be able to deliver this.”

He added: “It’s really important the government is clear with the public about the consequences this is going to have for what the rest of the health service is going to offer.”

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UK Covid: Sajid Javid says Omicron makes up 20% of cases in England – as it happened

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Coronavirus

UK's 1m a day booster rollout is strategy of short-term pain for long-term gain

Analysis: next few weeks will be tough for anyone who relies on the health service as well as those who work in it

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A Covid-19 jab being given at an NHS mobile vaccination centre.
Photograph: Maureen McLean/REX/Shutterstock

[Denis Campbell](#) Health policy editor

Sun 12 Dec 2021 15.56 EST

The wording of the four home nations' chief medical officers joint statement on Sunday was undramatic but still ominous. "Transmission of Covid-19 is already high in the community, mainly still driven by Delta, but the emergence of Omicron adds additional and rapidly increasing risk to the public and healthcare services."

Given that "vaccine protection against symptomatic disease from Omicron is reduced ... hospitalisations from Omicron are already occurring and these are likely to increase rapidly", they added.

The growing threat means the urgent twin imperatives of all policy now are to save lives and prevent the NHS becoming overwhelmed by what Boris Johnson in his [televised address](#) called "the tidal wave of Omicron coming". The UK Health Security Agency has already warned that the new variant could produce 1m infections a day by New Year's Eve.

Johnson's message and tone made clear the urgency of the threat. He made clear that vaccination is the main – in reality the sole – meaningful tactic the government has chosen to pursue both outcomes, given another lockdown or anything resembling it is for now not on the cards.

As the prime minister said: "To hit the pace we need, we'll need to match the NHS's best vaccination day yet – and then beat it day after day. This will require an extraordinary effort." In simple terms that means doing 1m or more boosters a day from now on, especially as he brought the deadline for everyone in England to have been offered a top-up from 31 January to 31 December. Bear in mind that [the record number of jabs](#) administered in one day across the UK to date was 844,285 on 20 March and that the most since the booster rollout began in September was 699,192 on 10 November.

For an [NHS](#) already under the most intense pressure it has ever faced, this is a massive task. It means that for an undetermined period GPs and their teams will have to provide less of the care they usually give to patients as delivering huge numbers of boosters becomes their top priority. Hospitals will also come under more strain once Omicron leads to more people being admitted who are seriously ill.

As Johnson acknowledged, the “extraordinary effort” will come at a price. “As we focus on boosters and make this new target achievable, it will mean some other appointments will need to be postponed until the New Year. But if we don’t do this now, the wave of Omicron could be so big that cancellations and disruptions, like the loss of cancer appointments, would be even greater next year.”

He did not quantify how many fewer GP consultations, operations and outpatient appointments will now not happen in the weeks ahead. It is impossible to know what those numbers will be. But given GPs see more than 20m patients a month, they will be measured in the many millions. The backlog of people awaiting hospital care in England is already just shy of 6 million. The widespread cancellation of hip and knee replacements, cataract removals and other planned operations will send that soaring. This is a strategy of short-term pain for long-term gain.

The initial reaction from NHS bosses was one of support. As one official said: “NHS leaders will be fine with the plan as they recognise that the likely pressures from Omicron could be very serious. But they will need the PM and ministers to make clear that the number one and number two priorities are delivering the booster – and first and second doses to those who haven’t been jabbed – and dealing with medical emergencies. That means non-urgent ops and so on will likely be pushed back but hopefully this is for a specific period of time as we race to get as many people jabbed as possible.”

Hospital bosses are acutely aware of the terrible human cost of the huge backlog of people waiting for planned care, mainly surgery – anxiety, pain, inability to lead a normal life and in some cases less chance of surviving their illness – and have made strenuous efforts this year to perform as many non-urgent operations as possible. They will hate to have to start cancelling surgery again, especially as no one will be able to give patients affected any real sense of when they will finally be treated. But they will have to do it. GPs will feel the same about putting such a large amount of normal care on hold for patients but again have no choice.

But medical need does not magically disappear, though. The next few weeks, possibly months, are going to be tough for anyone who relies on the

health service as well as those who work in it. Both will hope that the sacrifices involved turn out to be worth it.

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Health policy

UK booster jab rollout to increase to 1m a day to battle Omicron ‘tidal wave’

Army to be deployed as part of effort to offer Covid vaccine dose to every adult by end of month

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03:52

Johnson addresses the nation as Covid alert level raised due to Omicron – video

[Jessica Elgot](#), [Aubrey Allegretti](#), [Haroon Siddique](#) and [Hannah Devlin](#)

Sun 12 Dec 2021 15.07 EST

Boris Johnson is gambling on an unprecedented ramping up of vaccinations, rolling out 1m booster jabs a day to stem an incoming “tidal wave of Omicron” and avoid imposing further restrictions.

The army will be deployed across the country to help rapidly accelerate the vaccine programme and GPs will be told to cancel appointments to dedicate resources to offering vaccines to every UK adult by the end of December.

In a televised address to the nation on Sunday night, the prime minister said he was “afraid we are now facing an emergency in our battle with the new variant, Omicron, and we must urgently reinforce our wall of vaccine protection to keep our friends and loved ones safe.”

Johnson, who is facing a major test of his authority this week as MPs rebel against new Covid restrictions, called the target “a national mission unlike

anything we have done before in the vaccination programme”.

It means vaccinating around 1 million people a day, up from 530,000 on Saturday. The UK record is 844,000 in March. All over-18s will be eligible from Monday, and NHS booking will open to that age group from Wednesday. Until now eligibility has been limited to over-40s.

Jabs will be available on Christmas Day, though demand is expected to be low.

On Sunday the [Covid alert level](#) was raised from 3 to 4, indicating substantial pressure on the NHS, after a further 1,239 UK cases of Omicron were confirmed, nearly double the number reported the previous day. Omicron is expected to become Britain’s dominant variant within days, and Johnson warned it could “overwhelm the NHS and lead to very many deaths”.

Announcing the booster offensive, Johnson said: “We know from bitter experience how these exponential curves develop. No one should be in any doubt: there is a tidal wave of Omicron coming.” He said two doses of vaccine were not enough, but scientists were confident that three would make a huge difference.

On Friday UK data suggested that three jabs provide 70-75% protection against infection with Omicron, while two doses given three or more months ago give 30% to 40% or less.

GPs and other vaccinators will be required to prioritise jabs over non-urgent care and reduce the number of other face-to-face interactions. Johnson will also scrap the 15-minute post-jab wait in order to speed through even greater numbers of people.

Forty-two military planning teams will be deployed across every region of the UK, and there will be additional vaccine sites and mobile units. There will be extended opening hours with more appointments early in the morning, in the evening and at weekends, and thousands more volunteer vaccinators will be trained.

Hospitals expect NHS England to declare a national incident within days, the Guardian has learned, making decision-making more centralised and likely leading to routine operations being cancelled with staff redirected.

The prime minister said it could not be taken for granted that Omicron was causing less severe illness. “Do not make the mistake of thinking Omicron can’t hurt you, can’t make you and your loved ones seriously ill,” he said.

Johnson is facing [open war in the Tory party](#) over the move to plan B restrictions, with the biggest rebellion since his election expected from MPs opposed to Covid passports for large venues and more mask wearing.

Up to 100 MPs could oppose the changes on Tuesday as Johnson battles on multiple fronts to contain the damage from reports of a [series of parties](#) in Downing Street last year, which have left MPs openly discussing a vote of no confidence.

The acceleration of the booster rollout, which will put Johnson under pressure to meet the target, is likely to be a key argument to reassure [furious Tory MPs](#) who have warned the prime minister they will not tolerate further restrictions.

Johnson will offer a number of concessions to the rebels, starting with an announcement that from Tuesday contacts of Covid cases will be able to take a [lateral flow test every day](#) instead of isolating if they have been vaccinated.

The Guardian understands that the red list for travel is likely to be scrapped in the coming days, given the worldwide spread of Omicron. The change would mean there is likely to be no enforced hotel quarantine for people returning from southern Africa, though travellers may be required to isolate at home.

Scientists warned that while booster jabs were crucial, they should be combined with restrictions on the size of gatherings. Prof Christina Pagel, of University College London, said some current policies appeared contradictory, including letting vaccinated people take tests instead of isolating after contact with a Covid case.

“Don’t go to work but go to parties. Get a booster, but it’s fine not to isolate if you’re vaccinated. It’s not consistent,” she said. “This idea that kids can go to school if someone in their house has Covid is just stupid. We should be saying no parties, no gatherings bigger than 10 people, say. We need to think about moving back down the roadmap and restricting contact.”

She added: “I just don’t think they [ministers] can say ‘this is it’ until Christmas when things are so uncertain.”

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- [Live Covid: Thailand to speed up booster jab rollout; South African president has ‘mild symptoms’](#)
- [Analysis What makes boosters more effective than the first two Covid jabs?](#)
- [The strain on hospitals is visible and visceral](#)

Coronavirus

How do I get a Covid booster jab in England – explained

The government's ambitious rollout and what it means for adults in England

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
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William Campbell from Gateshead receiving his booster jab last week at the Centre for Life vaccination centre in Newcastle upon Tyne. Photograph: Ian Forsyth/Getty Images

[Haroon Siddique](#) and [Denis Campbell](#)

Mon 13 Dec 2021 06.01 EST

Ambitious plans have been announced for all adults in England to receive their Covid booster by the end of the year.

What has changed?

Two weeks ago, the prime minister said every eligible adult would be offered a booster by the end of January. That has now been brought forward a month with all over-18s who had their second dose of the vaccine at least three months ago able to get their booster from Monday.

Why has the booster programme been accelerated?

Experts have said Omicron infections are doubling in the UK every two to three days and a report by the UK Health and Security Agency found that two doses of a Covid vaccine offers less defence against symptomatic infection from the Omicron variant than with Delta but a booster raised the level of protection.

How can you get your booster?

Everyone aged 18 and over will be able to go into a walk-in centre to get the vaccine from Monday. Some vaccine centres had already been allowing younger people to get jabs despite NHS England not officially offering boosters to under-40s (they were to be extended to over-30s before the prime minister's announcement). With age priority scrapped, it is likely to lead to a scramble by people to get vaccinated, particularly so their immune response kicks in before Christmas when many younger people will be intending to visit elderly relatives, who they will not want to risk infecting. A similar scramble is likely to occur on Wednesday when the NHS booking system will open for everyone aged 18 plus.

How many jabs a day will be needed for the government to hit its target?

By Sunday 46.7 million people had had a second dose, while 23.1 million had had a booster, a difference of 23.6 million. They will not all be adults but most will be, given second jabs for under-18s were only approved just

under a month ago. Even if there were 20 million adults still to have a booster that would require [administering almost 1 million doses a day](#), and that is without accounting for Christmas Day and Boxing Day when the appetite for giving and receiving boosters is likely to be low.

Is it achievable?

On Saturday, 592,337 people of all ages received a dose but totals are generally higher on Saturdays. The highest figure on a weekday last week was 527,342.

In May, it was reported that the government wanted to vaccinate 800,000 a day, rising to as many as one million people a day as part of a drive to save the British summer, amid the threat posed by the Delta variant. However, the peak reached in May was 762,361. The highest number of new vaccinations reported in one day in the UK was 844,285 on 20 March – a figure that will probably need to be surpassed every day to hit the government target.

To try to achieve it, Boris Johnson said the government will be deploying 42 military planning teams and setting up additional vaccine sites and mobile units and extending opening hours so clinics are open seven days a week, earlier and later. But it is still likely to require GPs and other health professionals to forgo other responsibilities to deliver boosters at a time when waiting lists for routine operations are at record levels and one senior health figure said the NHS is “on its knees”.

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[Coronavirus](#)

Covid news: volunteers asked to deliver UK jabs; Norway to tighten restrictions – as it happened

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Coronavirus

What makes boosters more effective than the first two Covid jabs?

Analysis: top-up vaccines make key changes to our antibody defences, reducing the threat from Omicron

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
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Blood tube for detection of the Omicron variant. A new generation of vaccines may prove to offer wide-ranging protection against new variants.
Photograph: dan74/Alamy

Hannah Devlin Science correspondent
[@hannahdev](#)

Sun 12 Dec 2021 13.31 EST

Covid-19, we should know by now, is a moving target. In autumn the rollout of boosters to older age groups was contentious. Now they're the single biggest focus. So why do boosters help so significantly compared with first and second jabs, and are we on a conveyor belt towards needing an ever-increasing number of top-ups?

Even before [Omicron](#), it was clear boosters would be required to maintain the levels of protection against infection, although protection against severe illness appeared to be holding up well.

Vaccines prompt the body to make neutralising antibodies that intercept Covid before the virus infects our cells, but circulating antibodies can wane over time. [Data from Israel](#), one of the first countries to vaccinate its population, showed a drop-off in protection against infection after only three months. It revealed that were people about 15 times more likely to be infected six months after their second dose compared with a few weeks after it.

Even if most people remain protected against serious illness, this waning immunity presents a significant public health issue when a proportion of adults remain unvaccinated or have immune conditions that leave them vulnerable.

Omicron has made the need for boosters more urgent. Mutations in the virus mean its spike protein now looks quite different from that of the original Wuhan strain that all current vaccines were designed to target. That in turn means antibodies from previous infection and vaccination will be less efficient at intercepting Omicron. Because they stick to the virus less vigorously, a higher quantity of antibodies is also required to compensate for them being less well matched.

Studies show that a booster dose increases the levels of antibodies significantly above the level seen after two doses, which some hope means waning immunity will occur more slowly after a third dose, though insufficient time has passed to determine if this is the case.

Early studies also suggest that the quality of antibodies is higher following a booster. The immune system continues to refine exactly which antibodies are selected and amplified based on subsequent encounters with the virus or vaccine, and studies suggest there is a broader, more potent immune response following a third dose.

There is also reason for some optimism that vaccines may hold up better against severe disease than against infection. The immune system has a second line of defence in T cells, which attack cells already infected. These tend to stick around longer and they recognise parts of the virus that are more highly conserved, meaning Omicron's mutations are less likely to throw them off the scent. So if antibodies are not good enough to stave off infection, T-cells can swoop in to bring the disease under control before it makes a person seriously unwell.

Laboratory data looks encouraging, but real-world outcomes are being followed closely in South Africa, the UK and elsewhere to answer this question, which remains one of the biggest uncertainties about how this wave will play out.

For now, vaccine makers are working on variant jabs that could be ready to deploy as soon as March, but tweaking current vaccines will leave the same vulnerabilities should Omicron in the future be overshadowed by another even more fast-spreading variant.

The next generation of vaccines, scientists hope, will not only be a good match to circulating strains but provide far broader immune protection so that they are effective against mutations. One possibility is a vaccine specifically designed to trigger a T-cell response to the viral replication machinery as opposed to the spike protein, which scientists have suggested could result in immunity lasting [years rather than months](#).

NHS

The secret NHS trust boss: the strain on hospitals is visible and visceral

The secret NHS trust boss

The chief executive of an acute hospital NHS trust in England talks anonymously about the pressures the service is facing



NHS beds are in short supply, forcing staff to make difficult decisions over which patients they should treat first. Photograph: Mark Thomas/Rex/Shutterstock

Mon 13 Dec 2021 02.00 EST

We've seen an increase in the number of people coming into my hospital trust over recent days. And we are sequencing them to check whether there's Omicron there. It's a slight increase, which you'd expect at this time of year. But we're ready to activate well-established plans for a surge in Covid cases

if that happens. For example, we've got a standing order of the wards we use for Covid cases and the services we close to deal with a Covid surge.

But I think this [winter will be worse](#) – it will be harder – than last year. The challenge is bigger because we're tackling the backlog of care, our A&E is incredibly busy, and also because of staffing problems. This isn't just Covid, though Covid is a factor. And this isn't just about people's difficulties accessing primary care. It's partly because people coming into hospital are much more severely ill than before.

Our stroke team say they're seeing people coming in who haven't been accessing some of the preventive interventions that might have stopped them getting so ill. And our gastro-intestinal specialists are seeing far more people with stage 3 or stage 4 cancers than previously. So there are things that haven't been picked up. That has a consequential impact on hospitals because patients' length of stay and recovery period are greater.

The strain on hospitals is very visible and quite visceral – you can see [ambulances queueing outside](#) and people sleeping on chairs because you can't get them into cubicles to be seen because too many sick [people are waiting for beds](#). But what we can't necessarily see is what's happening to all the people who are at home getting sicker. That's a very large, invisible problem.

Many of the people in our hospital are very old and very frail. They don't necessarily need to be in an acute hospital but they need to be in a bed somewhere, with someone looking after them round the clock. Social care is a massive, massive concern; not being able to get these people who are medically fit to be discharged out and home is what blocks up the "front door", our A&E.

We're going great guns at treating people on the waiting list. And this winter we're doing more than ever to protect that, as well as dealing with all the other pressures we have. We are holding beds for people on the waiting list who are having surgery. But that raises really difficult ethical dilemmas. Do you hold an intensive care bed for someone with an aneurysm that could kill them at any minute, or bring in someone who's just arrived through A&E

and needs surgery? Is there a bed for someone who comes in and needs a thrombectomy, a potentially life-saving operation after a stroke?

You can imagine how some of our staff feel about unvaccinated people with Covid eating into our supply of ICU beds when you're making these decisions, about whether someone with stage 4 cancer or an aneurysm can have an operation.

Workforce is a real problem. We're struggling to get enough healthcare assistants. We've lost 25% of our stroke care pathway because it's lost its community rehabilitation capacity that we just can't staff. And several very experienced consultants have said "I'm going to give you one more winter and then I'm off. I've realised through the pandemic that when I'm on my deathbed I'll remember the time I spent with my family and not the Saturday nights I spent doing an extra shift."

Our staff are resolute and they're still delivering absolutely fantastic care. But after the last 20 months they're pretty weary. It's mile 23 of a marathon, really – that's what it feels like – but the problem is that the finish line keeps getting a bit further away.

Staff are pretty worn out. And they're quite frightened about being redeployed into Covid wards again. The first time it was "once more unto the breach". But now, when it's like fifth time unto the breach, people are sick of the bloody breach. They don't want to go there again. A lot of staff are saying "I'm not going back into Covid wards". So that's going to be tough.

Staff will keep going and keep giving, because that's their values. But I worry about the public starting to lose confidence in us and losing faith in us because of their experience of this as well. It's a tough and frustrating situation. And there are no quick answers.

As told to Denis Campbell

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2021.12.13 - Spotlight

- 'Even the reindeer were unhappy' Life inside Britain's worst winter wonderlands
- Adam McKay Leo sees Meryl as film royalty – he didn't like seeing her with a lower back tattoo
- Rhik Samadder tries ... fencing Now I'm ready for the zombie apocalypse
- A new start after 60 'I was a globetrotting photographer. Then I stayed home – and my world expanded'

Christmas

‘Even the reindeer were unhappy’: life inside Britain’s worst winter wonderlands

They are the festive fairgrounds where no one is a winner. Santas, elves and bouncers discuss the Christmas gigs that made them question their life choices



No no no ... the ill-fated New Forest Lapland, which ended with its owners being sentenced to prison. Photograph: Chris Ison/PA



[Ammar Kalia](#)

Mon 13 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

Polystyrene snow, MDF grottos, stomach-churning rides and Santas with scratchy fake beards: as [Christmas](#) nears, 'tis the season for winter wonderlands. At their best, these immersive Christmas markets and fairgrounds delight visitors of all ages, while providing a reliable source of income for their owners. Britain's biggest winter wonderland, in Hyde Park, London, has pulled in more than 14 million people since it launched in 2005, with entry starting at £5 and attractions ranging from £5 to £15.

But visitors to lesser attractions often complain of poorly thought-out productions and inexperienced organisers. Well-documented holiday horrors include Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen's Birmingham attraction, which in 2014 was [forced to shut down after a day](#) following hundreds of complaints about cheap toys and long queues, and a [New Forest Lapland](#) whose owners were [sentenced to 13 months in jail](#) for misleading the public in 2008. "You told consumers that it would light up those who most loved Christmas," the judge told them in his summing up. "You said you would go through the magical tunnel of light coming out in a winter wonderland. What you actually provided was something that looked like an averagely managed summer car boot sale."

Punters may bear the full, wallet-emptying force of disappointment, but those working behind the scenes are often affected by poor conditions, low morale and inadequate or unpaid wages. We spoke to people who have worked at winter wonderlands over the years about their experiences and why many of them would never set foot in one again. Whether due to trauma or a lingering sense of guilt, almost all asked us not to use their real names

‘We only saw misery’: the elves

Jack: I graduated in 2002 and, with no idea what to do next, I decided to stick around and look for temp work. I laughed very hard when I realised an agency was taking applications to be one of Santa’s elves and applied half-seriously.

After a short phone interview, I got the job – I really could have been anyone off the street. The wonderland was at a massive conference centre, which seemed very impersonal. My main job was to welcome people in groups of 20 to 30, along with another elf. We had to act as if we were on a jet liner taking visitors to Lapland, with projected images of clouds behind us. We gave the families a speech to try to get the kids excited and then pretended the room was airborne. The whole thing was pretty embarrassing and ended after a few minutes with the “landing” and rows of blank faces staring back at us.

Lucy: For a couple of years, while I was a student and needed the money, I worked as an elf at a winter wonderland in a shopping centre. It was horrendous – we were essentially employed just to make sure that people didn’t jump the queue or try to sneak in for free. Christmas is meant to be a time for happiness, but we only saw misery – exhausted parents, insane children and short tempers all round. We had to endure everything from being shouted at to being made fun of – once a colleague even had a drink thrown on them.

The Santas had it great, though – they were paid more than us to endure a few minutes at a time dealing with excitable kids, before we ushered them all outside again to unwrap their disappointing presents. The whole thing was bleak.



The New Forest Lapland. Photograph: PA Images/Alamy

Jack: Sometimes I would also chaperone the kids to see Santa. But there were so many kids that we had 10 different Santas lined up together – if any of them still thought Santa was real, this made sure the fantasy fell apart. The whole experience was like being in a sausage factory, with a bell ringing every three minutes to bring a new group through. It was so dispiriting and fake and I was horrified to think how much families with four or five kids were spending. After a few weeks I realised I couldn't be part of it any more and quit. I never made it to Christmas.

'The kids were already crying': the Santas

Matt: If you are a man of a certain size and not averse to putting on a costume, Santa work is decent money each year. I've put in more than a decade doing stints and I really enjoy what I do; usually it brings the kids real excitement and it earns their parents some goodwill. But sometimes you have a nightmare job and it makes you question your life choices.

A few years ago, I was booked by a pretty large winter wonderland just outside London. It was a couple of weeks of solid work and even though it was a new event, it seemed too good to pass up. As soon as I arrived, things started to go wrong. It was a few rides and a tent with a chair in the corner

for me to sit on and see the kids, surrounded by a few reindeer that looked unhappy. Families began pouring in and there weren't enough staff to deal with the chaos – the elves were struggling to keep the groups in line, while parents kept wandering off to find managers to shout at.

It was such a tense atmosphere that a lot of the kids were coming to me already crying and there was no way we could make it any better for them – the illusion was ruined. After that first day, the person running the show was nowhere to be found. I never went back. I don't think the place lasted a week and I was never paid.

Tony: My business was hired to erect a tent for a winter wonderland at the Great Yorkshire Showground in Harrogate in 2014. [It was a miserable operation](#) – just half a fairground with a few reindeers. It was very tacky. Straightaway, people were complaining that they had been ripped off and, after two days, it was shut down for a “revamp”.

We didn't think it would reopen, so we went back to take the tent down and suddenly the fire doors to the grotto burst open and Santa came out in his full regalia, ripping off his white beard and shouting: “Fuck this – I'm not taking any more of youse! I'm off!”

It was very funny and surreal. I don't think the organiser was a crook – he was just totally out of his depth. A lot of these events are just fairgrounds with a bit of sparkle on the machines, but it takes a huge amount of effort to put on something good. Putting tinsel on your dodgems isn't quite enough.

‘I never even got my skates on’: the performer

Katie: I used to be a pretty good figure skater and the group I trained with would often get booked for Christmas performances. We would usually do a stint of themed winter wonderland gigs in full costume, which was welcome cash for the Christmas season. They would generally be pretty depressing shows, though, performing to half-empty tents on fake ice where we could often see members of the crowd walking out.

One year, we were set to do a series of shows at a winter wonderland up north – we had our transport and accommodation booked and headed to the

venue. When we got there, there was no one at the site – it was just a tent in a field. We called the organisers but they never picked up and we weren't sure if we had got the dates or the place wrong. It was only when we searched on Facebook that we saw all the angry comments from customers saying it had been cancelled without any notice. They hadn't even bothered to tell us, so we went straight home without even getting our skates on.

'I spent the day hiding': the stately-home worker

Sarah: I was between jobs five years ago and decided to do some temping before I found something more permanent. That is how I ended up working at a historic house largely staffed by volunteers who all had a very strange attachment to the place. They treated it as if it was theirs to run and, as a consequence, they hated the manager whose job it was to actually look after it.

One year, an events planner convinced the manager to put on a winter wonderland. The problem was, it is a centuries-old property and so can't hold fairgrounds or attractions. The person who put on the event neglected to mention that to customers, though, and they were inevitably furious and disappointed. All they had were sweets and a few people dressed up – supposedly as Frozen characters, but the costumes were so cheap you couldn't tell who they were. The volunteers also kept egging on the customers to complain so the manager would get into trouble.



Photograph: Jetra Tull/Alamy

There had always been rumours that the place was haunted and I spent that day hiding from angry visitors with an old volunteer who was dressed up as Father Christmas. He used to say the spirits of the house spoke through him and when I went to lock up at night once everyone had left, I could swear the doorstops were moving in the dark. I didn't last long after that – the volunteers would secretly hold seances, too, and it used to creep me out.

'It's worse than some clubs': the bouncer

Dan: I've worked security for years at all sorts of events and little compares to the experience of being at a winter wonderland with an alcohol licence. The combo of Christmas parties, pints and rides usually means that fights break out, as well as people throwing up and needing to be taken home. Once I saw a group of parents fighting because they thought one of the kids had pushed in front of the others in a queue. It is ridiculous – worse than some nightclubs. I just wish people had a bit more self-control.

'Never again': the organiser

Rob: I've thrown many successful events in my career but none have been harder, or gone worse, than the winter wonderland I agreed to put on with an

ex-friend of mine a few years ago.

He had an agreement to put on a fair with a grotto and all the trimmings for a couple of weeks and called me in to help as a business partner. I don't have many contacts in that area, so I called around and right from the off it was a total mess. Lots of the contractors we had agreed to use would either cancel at the last minute because they had better offers, or they would turn up and do a half-arsed job. Meanwhile, the tickets were selling very well.

It was clear we weren't going to be ready to open on the advertised date but greed got the better of my mate and so he let people arrive – inevitably bringing on an onslaught of complaints. We had no choice but to shut down a few days later because local papers were picking up the story and everyone was demanding their money back. Needless to say, it ruined our friendship and we made no money from the whole thing. I'll never do an event like it again.

Some names have been changed.

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Interview

Adam McKay: ‘Leo sees Meryl as film royalty – he didn’t like seeing her with a lower back tattoo’

[Steve Rose](#)



Adam McKay: ‘How does a society function when bad news is not an easy sell?’ Photograph: Emma McIntyre/Getty Images/Netflix Inc.

After politics in Vice and finance in The Big Short, director McKay is taking on the climate crisis in his star-studded ‘freakout’ satire Don’t Look Up

@steverose7

Mon 13 Dec 2021 02.00 EST

Adam McKay calls it his “freakout trilogy”. Having tackled the 2008 financial crash and warmongering US vice president Dick Cheney in his previous two movies, [The Big Short](#) and [Vice](#), McKay goes even bigger and bleaker with his latest, Don’t Look Up, in which two astronomers (Jennifer Lawrence and Leonardo DiCaprio) discover a giant comet headed for Earth, but struggle to get anyone to listen. It is an absurd but depressingly plausible disaster satire, somewhere between Dr Strangelove, Network, Deep Impact and Idiocracy, with an unbelievably stellar cast; also on board are Meryl Streep (as the US president), Cate Blanchett, Timothée Chalamet, Tyler Perry, Mark Rylance, Jonah Hill and Ariana Grande. It has been quite the career trajectory for McKay, who started out in live improv and writing for Saturday Night Live, followed by a run of hit Will Ferrell comedies such as Anchorman, Step Brothers and The Other Guys. “The goal was to capture this moment,” says McKay of Don’t Look Up. “And this moment is *a lot*.”



(From left) Jonah Hill, Leonardo DiCaprio, Meryl Streep and Jennifer Lawrence in *Don't Look Up*. Photograph: Niko Tavernise/Netflix

Was there a particular event that inspired *Don't Look Up*?

Somewhere in between *The Big Short* and *Vice*, the [IPCC](#) [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change] panel and a bunch of other studies came out that just were so stark and so terrifying that I realised: “I have to do something addressing this.” So I wrote five different premises for movies, trying to find the best one. I had one that was a big, epic, kind of dystopian drama. I had another one that was a *Twilight Zone/M Night* [Shyamalan] sort of twisty thriller. I had a small character piece. And I was just trying to find a way into: how do we communicate how insane this moment is? So finally, I was having a conversation with my friend [journalist and Bernie Sanders adviser] [David Sirota](#), and he offhandedly said something to the effect of: “It’s like the comet’s coming and no one cares.” And I thought: “Oh. I think that’s it.” I loved how simple it was. It’s not some layered, tricky Gordian knot of a premise. It’s a nice, big, wide open door we can all relate to.

Dick Cheney, the financial crash, planetary destruction ... these are not subjects most people would consider comedy material.

Yeah! I don’t know how you’ve been experiencing the past five years, but when I talk to my friends the basic thrust of the conversation is: “What the

holy F is going on?" And usually we swing between laughing at just how ridiculously over-the-top horrible it is and genuinely being frightened. When we were making the movie, I happened upon a fascinating book called Deep Survival. The author [[Laurence Gonzales](#)] studies why people survive insane accidents like getting lost at sea or lost in the woods, and one of the biggest things he found was that a lot of these people kept a dark sense of humour. I think there's something really – I hate to use a woo-woo word – but, healing about that. So yeah, I think laughter has got to be a part of how we deal with this.

How did you assemble such an incredible cast?

I had a couple of people I wanted right from the jump. Like, I wrote the roles for [Jennifer Lawrence](#) and Rob Morgan [as a sympathetic Nasa scientist]. I sort of had Meryl Streep in mind, but you never dare to think that you're going to get her. When she signed on, it then became just a cascading effect. And then when Leonardo DiCaprio came in, I realised there was this happy accident, where this stellar cast was actually enforcing the point of view of the movie: that we're constantly distracted by celebrity and bright colours, and low news versus high news, and contrarian points of view. Of course, it didn't hurt that they all happen to be brilliant actors. So yeah, it got slightly embarrassing. At one point I almost found myself apologising to my director friends.

You do at least manage to make both [Leonardo DiCaprio](#) and [Jennifer Lawrence](#) look terrible.

Well, thank you! I take that as a pure compliment. They had to be the opposite of the people that you'd want to chuck on the most popular talkshow in America, so, yeah, we did some hard work on that. And it's testament to them, as big, giant movie stars, that they were willing to play into that. I even said at one point to Jennifer: "Those bangs could look a little better if you wanted to." And she was like: "No, I like 'em." So yeah, they were down for the cause.



Jennifer Lawrence, Leonardo DiCaprio and Timothée Chalamet in *Don't Look Up*. Photograph: Niko Tavernise/Netflix

This is a work of fiction, but how much did you draw on real people for the characters?

All the characters are kind of an amalgam. I've been tracking the last five or six years what's been happening to the scientists in the States who are under political attack, and it's sometimes kind of funny to watch because some of them aren't made for giant PR tours. What you've seen are these climate scientists having to go front and centre and take on a billion-dollar industry of misinformation from fossil fuel companies and attacks from extremists and having people call for them losing their jobs. And I felt for them. It's not what they're built to do.

Politics and big tech are in the firing line, but as with the Anchorman movies, your main target here seems to be the media.

I think what happened, especially in the US, was everything became a sales exchange. Everything became a "customer is always right" interaction. And I think that goes across politics, it goes to broadcast media and, to some degree, print journalism. The only way you can stay alive is to maximise profits. And I'll date myself, but I remember when that wasn't entirely the case! I remember when broadcast journalism was about the esteem and doing good journalism. But it became part of the entertainment culture. So

now we're in this very dangerous place where it's hard to tell people bad news. How does a society function when bad news is not an easy sell, and everything is about selling?

We certainly see, er, a new side of Meryl Streep (no spoilers, but her character appears naked at one point). Was she up for that?

She is fearless. And yes, that is a body double. But you know who had a problem with it? Leo [DiCaprio]. Leo just views Meryl as film royalty ... although maybe royalty is not a compliment ... but as such a special figure in the history of film. He didn't like seeing her with the lower back tattoo, walking for a second naked. He said something to me like: "Do you really need to show that?" And I was like: "It's President Orlean; it's not Meryl Streep." But she didn't even blink. She didn't even bring it up.



Christian Bale as Dick Cheney in Vice. Photograph: Matt Kennedy/Annapurna/Kobal/Rex/Shutterstock

Talking of politicians, did you ever get any reaction from the Cheneys over Vice?

I did. I got two reactions. A friend of Christian Bale was at a party and said to Dick Cheney: "I know Christian Bale." And Cheney looked up at them and said: "Well, you tell Christian Bale he's a dick." And Christian's friend laughed, and Cheney said: "I'm not kidding." And then the second reaction,

and you've got to judge if this is me thinking too much of our movie, but I think it's pretty odd that [Liz Cheney just came out for gay marriage](#). And I do know, from seeing her timeline on social media, a lot of people gave her a hard time for betraying her sister [Mary, who is a lesbian]. For a Republican candidate in the state of Wyoming to come out publicly in support of gay marriage ... there is no political advantage to doing that. I just found that very curious.

You come from an improv and live comedy background. Do you still work like that? It sometimes looks as if nothing was planned in your Will Ferrell comedies.

Oh, it's definitely not planned. On the day, you just never can fully anticipate what it's like to see a beautifully designed set and perfect wardrobe and hair. There's just always something inspiring about that moment. So the actor, whether it's Will or John C Reilly or Adam Scott or Paul Rudd or Kathryn Hahn, will get inspired by the moment. I get the couple of takes as written, then I'll say: "OK, let's start screwing around." And I'll throw out an idea, and they'll take it and go somewhere else, and essentially what happens is we're all writing together. One of my favourite lines from any movie I've ever done happened in Anchorman, when Paul Rudd says of his cologne, Sex Panther: "60% of the time, it works every time." Jonah Hill is able to improvise a whole monologue. Like in this movie, [when his character is speaking at a political rally] he does a "prayer for stuff". That was entirely Jonah, entirely improvised.

You and Ferrell ended your professional partnership in 2019 after 13 years. What happened?

I think it was a matter of two things. Part of it was, I really love producing. Will likes producing, but he likes to keep it kind of manageable, and I really just was all for [doing] a lot of different stuff: podcasts, documentaries, series, all different kinds of movies. And I think we got to a point where he was getting a little bit tired of driving past billboards for stuff that we had produced, and he didn't even know we had produced it. I think also, there was a shift in the kind of comedies that Will and I had been making. They didn't feel ... you know, I wasn't maybe as excited by those.

Does it feel as if you couldn't make comedies such as Anchorman or Step Brothers today?

Yeah, I think without a doubt, it felt like that was over. Given what we're up against. It feels a little ridiculous to make those comedies now. But I still love great comedies. So I'm trying to play with: "What is the language now?" Because the way I'm experiencing the world, it's a ridiculous farce, but at the same time, it's also terrifying. When the president of the United States floats the idea of ingesting bleach, and then people in the country actually ingest bleach ... well, that's beyond the biggest slapstick comedy you could ever write. So I feel like in these last three movies, I'm trying to find that blend. Can that blend exist? I'm not entirely sure it can. But that is what we're going after.

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You still seem to have a lot of irons in the fire as producer, including the show of the moment, Succession. Did you know you were on to a winner with that series?

Sometimes you know. And this was one of those ones where I totally knew. We put it together. We shot it. But when I really knew was when I started watching episodes, two, three, four and five, and I stopped watching them like a producer and started just enjoying them. And that's when I started telling some people in my circle: "I think we got a good one here." To the point where Jesse [Armstrong, the show's creator], who is a much more restrained person than I am, was telling me: "Will you please shush up?"

Getting back to *Don't Look Up* and the looming apocalypse. Is there any cause for optimism?

Well, the one big optimism I have is that we have the science. It's right in front of us, for God's sakes. We have renewables, they have some interesting carbon-capture technology, we need to be chucking trillions of dollars at this. So I do know that if we got on our horse, science could solve this. We could do it. What's scaring me is just how scattered and all over the place and chasing-our-tails most of civilisation is right now. So I'm not optimistic in the near future. But I am optimistic in the future.

Don't Look Up is in cinemas now and on [Netflix](#) from 24 December.

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[Rhik Samadder tries something new](#)[Life and style](#)

Rhik Samadder tries ... fencing: ‘Now I’m ready for the zombie apocalypse’



‘I feel the rush of adventure in my bloodstream, and leave on a swashbuckling high ...’ Rhik Samadder at the London Fencing school.
Photograph: Linda Nylind/The Guardian

I get to wear a natty white jacket, insectoid mask and hold an épée like a pistol – my inner child could not be happier. En garde!



Rhik Samadder

@whatsamadder

Mon 13 Dec 2021 02.00 EST

Ever since childhood, I have wanted to be trained in the sword. But I have always believed one had to be born a musketeer for this to happen, or have a death to avenge, plus access to castle steps. But here I am at the [London Fencing Club](#) in Old Street, which is easier.

It's a few weeks before omicron takes off, and the government is pooh-poohing any talk of tightening Covid restrictions. I'm learning épée, the thin, pointy blade that most resembles a classic swashbuckling sword. My Russian-born coach, Anna Anstal, loves fencing épée. The opponent's entire body is a target, and there are no "right of way" rules governing who can score at a given moment. "You must think about the zombie apocalypse," she says. "Rules are no use with a zombie. The ability to strike first is all that matters." It's unexpected advice, her heavy accent giving it even more edge. I'm quite scared.

“Have you held a pistol before?” Anstal asks. I think we had different upbringings, I say. The “pistol grip” is the most common in fencing: blade gripped between thumb and forefinger, other fingers curled under, with surprising delicacy. The legs work far harder. We start with footwork drills, advancing up and down the 14-metre piste, front foot leading forwards, back foot for retreats. “Fast, fast!” shouts Anstal. It’s hard to keep my heels in line, so I quite literally veer off piste. I learn straight thrusts, lunges, an explosive flèche attack. I already feel like Arya Stark.



Rhik Samadder gets to grips with his épée. Photograph: Linda Nylind/The Guardian

We move to a padded pillar, to practise thrusts. I learn to gauge distance, never moving closer than I need to be. [Fencing](#) is about intelligence, Anstal explains. Something close to chess, or a conversation. “‘I’m going to hit your leg!’ ‘Not if I parry ...’ ‘That was a joke – I’m actually hitting your mask!’” she illustrates. Her idea of a conversation is terrifying, but I’m picking up technique faster than I thought possible. I loved swordfighting as a boy, I reminisce. “All children do,” she confirms. “Then they come here, realise it’s all footwork drills, and say: ‘Mummy, I want to go home.’”

Luckily, the school specialises in beginners’ courses for adults. The class around me is doing an intense warmup: shuttle runs, shuffle reps, squat

running – anything that murders the legs. I’m sweating, too, having idiotically worn a polo neck for extra protection. “Listen – my favourite sound,” remarks Anstal with a far-off look. It’s the sound of exhaustion, a faint, fatigued wheezing that fills the room. Odd.

There’s an alien appeal to fencing: those insectoid masks, stinging spines, the scrape and clash of metal. Yet with its elegant, all-white jackets and breeches, it’s also a sport of high tradition. Scores were originally tallied via soot on the blades, which marked the white clothes. (Although I suppose, even more originally, scores were settled by killing your opponent.) Now facing a mirror, sword pointed at my own chest, I learn parrying positions. Anstal divides my torso into numbered sections, like a butcher. *Quarte, sixte, septième, octave* – if I had known there was going to be so much French, I’d have dusted off my GCSE Tricolore textbook.

Anstal masks up, and teaches me to disengage, ie feint around an opponent’s parry with a tiny circular motion. I’m not striking hard enough, she says. It’s hard enough to remember technicalities of arm line and footwork, and like most beginners, I lack killer instinct. “Everyone starts out very nice,” smiles Tim Gadaski, manager of the club. “Then they get hit a few times, and things change.”

“I am in your country now, and I love democracy. So tell me what you want to do,” jokes Anstal, after an hour. Maybe practice more parries? She looks bored. “I think you should fight someone.” Huh? I’m not ready for that. But she is plugging a thin cable into my blade’s hand guard, threading it through an arm protector. At least I get to wear the natty white jacket. The class is setting up parallel pistes across the room. They face off with wires extending behind them, a marionette theatre of war. My opponent, confusingly also called Anna, salutes. My mask drops down. “En garde!” shouts Gadaski, stepping in to referee. Suddenly, I’m fencing for real.

Anna and I test each other, nudging blades. “Too defensive. You’re not doing anything,” shouts Gadaski. Anna thrusts. I instinctively deflect, then again. I can defend myself! It’s thrilling. “You’re wasting your parries,” coaches Gadaski. “You need to counter.” I try, though technique has disappeared. The winner is the first to 10 points and Anna is leading 6-4. She’s attacking at will, but I’m scoring off her attacks, too, machines

bleeping on both sides. Being hit doesn't hurt, but I'm tiring fast. The entire room sounds like a video game. Anna overtakes me. 8-7! I hadn't realised I was in the lead before. How? We both score. I steel myself, and concentrate. Maybe I'm Zatoichi, blind to my own abilities. I circle her blade, trying to stay on target. 9-9. We both lunge but I angle away, and have the reach. I've won!



Rhik takes on Anna ... Photograph: Linda Nylind/The Guardian

My inner child is jubilant. Fencing is a feeling like nothing else. Anna congratulates me, Anstal flashes a Slavic grin, acknowledging I have crushed my inner weakness. There must be something on those blades, because I feel the rush of adventure in my bloodstream, and leave on a swashbuckling high. I can legitimately declare myself trained in the sword. Zombies, you have been warned! Just let me consult my Tricolore first.

Would I go back?

To be stabbed with swords, and worked to exhaustion? Arya Stark raving mad? Maybe, as I definitely would.

Smugness Points

Yépée! 4/5

Want to suggest an activity for Rhik to try? [Tell us about it here.](#)

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A new start after 60: ‘I was a globetrotting photographer. Then I stayed home – and my world expanded’



Life cycle ... Roff Smith has been to more than 100 countries but is now absorbed by the places he visits on bike rides near his home on the south coast. Photograph: Roff Smith

His career took Roff Smith, 63, to more than 100 countries. But he started to feel jaded. Exploring his local area by bike led to a whole new approach to his pictures

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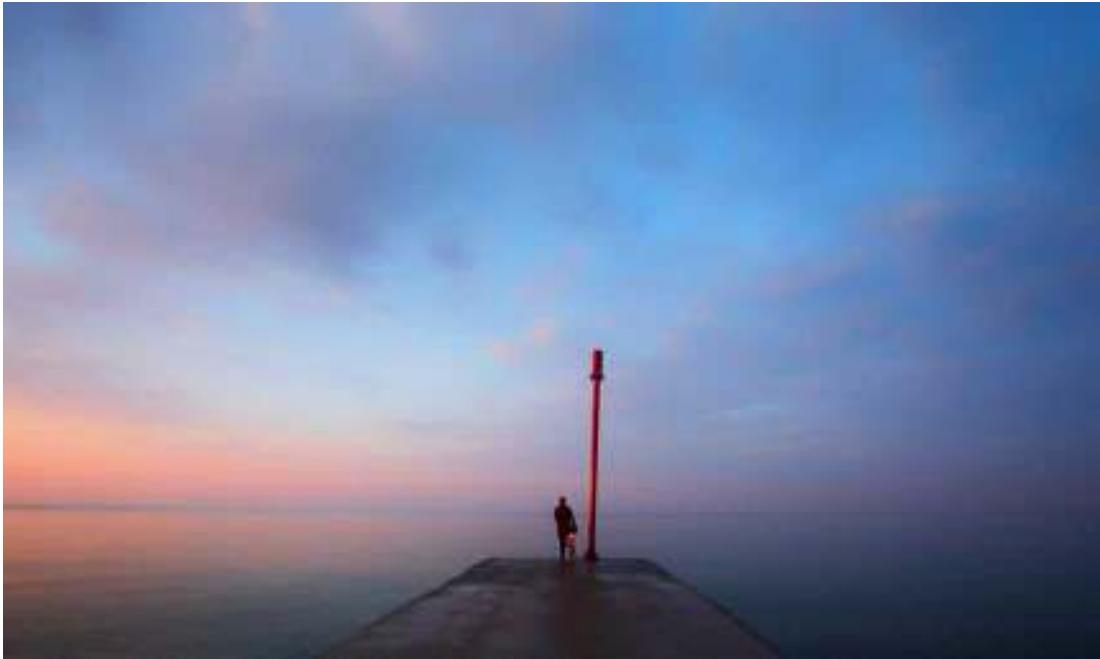
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Roff Smith's photographs show a solitary cyclist – Smith himself – in a painterly landscape. His wheels appear to turn briskly, but really the bike moves as slowly as it can without a wobble. As a writer and photographer for National Geographic magazine, Smith, 63, visited more than 100 countries, but now he has squeezed the brakes and shrunk his world. [His photographs](#) are all taken within a 10-mile radius of his home, and yet travel has never felt so rich to him as it does now.

Before the pandemic, he had already begun to feel jaded: air travel made “the world everywhere look the same”.

Then in March 2020 he returned from an assignment in Ecuador to St Leonards-on-Sea, East Sussex, to join his wife and two children, who are 18 and 20. The world shut its doors behind him. Madrid went into lockdown hours after he passed through; England soon after he arrived. After decades of flights, “There was nowhere to go.”

Instead, during lockdown, Smith took his camera, tripod and timer on bike rides locally. A distinctive style evolved in which he would ride slowly into his own frame, usually in “the blue hour” that precedes dawn.



Red sky in the morning ... Roff Smith and his bike before sunrise.
Photograph: Roff Smith

The images look serene, but making them was not. Smith had to master “the right body language, the bicycle language”, pick his outfits and time his entrance. “You can’t have your head disappearing in shadows. You’ve got to *find* yourself,” he says. It sounds like a spur to self-discovery, this practice of looking at an empty frame and imagining the space he would occupy. Does he see himself differently? “You become aware of how many shots have this sense of introspection, solitude,” he says.

I’ve seen the sun rise, listened to the aquatic life in the marsh or wildlife in the trees

Smith has been a keen cyclist for as long as he can remember. Momentous rides have acted as milestones in his life. His father died when he was nine and he was raised by his mother. He was often alone for whole days, cycling from the family house in White Mountains in New Hampshire “to Bearcamp river, a fabulous distance away” at 12 miles, with its beaver ponds, forests and swamps.

He was a voracious reader of books about explorers, and fancied himself on adventures too. “Even a bend in the road took on the quality of a chapter in a

book. I thought, travelling the world is going to be as exciting as this.”

National Geographic, to which he subscribed, thrilled him – especially a story of a bike trip along the Alaskan highway, which led him to write to the magazine, offering his services. He was only 17; they politely declined.

At 22, he emigrated to Australia. He wanted to go “far, far, far away”. Was there something he wanted to escape? “I just felt like I needed to strike out on my own,” he says. As the mining reporter for the Sydney Morning Herald, he jetted around the gold mines of Australia.

It wasn’t till he was 37 and recently divorced that Smith set off on his own epic ride “around Australia – a 10,000-mile solo trip”. It took him nine months, in the course of which he sold a series of his travels to National Geographic – “literally a childhood dream” – and, at a youth hostel in Perth, met his future wife. Although they moved to the UK and made a base together in St Leonards-on-Sea, Smith “jumped around a lot”, on assignment and also visiting his children from his first marriage in Australia.

Although his movements have shrunk since the pandemic hit, his world has expanded. Just like those early trips to the Bearcamp river, “miles mean something” again.

He cycles home “with a feeling that I have been places. I’ve seen the sunrise, listened to the aquatic life in the marsh or wildlife in the trees. I’ve got more of a sense of travel than if I were to hop on a plane.” He has not flown in nearly two years, and has no plans to do so. “It’s nice to be home,” he says. “But in a way it’s unsettling because you think, do I live *here*? In Europe?” He has American and Australian citizenship, but is really a citizen of his own two wheels: “I think I’m starting to identify with just being on my bike.”

- [Tell us: has your life taken a new direction after the age of 60?](#)
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OpinionViolence against women and girls

As a women's rights lawyer, here's my manifesto for fixing Britain's broken system

[Harriet Wistrich](#)

The attitudes of prosecutors and judges towards women are as bad as ever. We need radical change – and we need it now



An action by Refuge, the domestic abuse charity, to highlight the issue of women who have been killed by male police officers or former police officers. Photograph: Tolga Akmen/AFP/Getty Images

Mon 13 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

After the murder of Sarah Everard by a serving police officer earlier this year, a dam burst. Women came out on to the streets of Britain to protest against male violence, only to be met with police violence.

That dam is still flooding: at least 133 women in the UK have [died at the hands of a man](#) in 2021 so far. Countless more will have taken their own lives as a consequence of male violence. Women are tired of reading the names of the women killed by femicide each year, they are tired of reading about the increase in the [reports of sexual violence](#) and domestic violence, and they are tired of the failure of the criminal justice system to tackle the problem – as the [virtual collapse of rape prosecutions](#) over the past three years shows.

But perhaps for the first time in living memory, tackling the pandemic of violence against women and girls (VAWG) is high on the political agenda. I have been working in this area since the 1990s – as a lawyer and founder of the Centre for Women's Justice (CWJ), which aims to change the structural disadvantage women and girls face across the criminal justice system. In the past five years alone, I have represented survivors of the serial rapist John Worboys in their action against the Metropolitan police, which failed to investigate him; represented Sally Challen and other women who killed abusive partners; and am currently involved in a super complaint about the failure to address police-perpetrated domestic abuse. However, in my experience, the attitudes of prosecutors and judges towards women are as bad as ever.

While initial announcements from the government were knee jerk and ill thought through – such as undercover police officers in nightclubs or apps to track women's routes home – there may be substantial changes coming. This month, the government [announced legislation](#) that will put a new legal duty on local public bodies to tackle domestic abuse and sexual offences and has just announced plans for a new victim's law. Meanwhile, there is [growing pressure](#) to make VAWG part of the strategic policing requirement – which would bring it in line with other serious crimes such as organised crime and terrorism.

Increasing the resources of police and other criminal justice agencies and making the tackling of VAWG a national strategic priority would certainly go some way to reversing the impact of austerity. A decade of underfunding has brought the criminal court system to its knees, with fewer specialist

policing units, a dismantled probation service, fewer support services for women, and significant reductions in legal aid.

However, the comparison with the policing of terrorism may strike a chilling chord for black, Asian and minority women and men who have been adversely affected by the government's Prevent strategy, aimed at identifying and disrupting potential recruits to terrorism, which has helped mainstream discrimination against them. Such cynicism about government intentions is further embedded by the discriminatory [exclusion of migrant women](#) from the protections offered in the recent domestic abuse bill, the attack on the right to public protest in the police, crime and sentencing bill, and the curtailing of routes to refugee status for women fleeing abuse under the nationality and borders bill.

In October the home secretary, Priti Patel, announced a public inquiry into "issues raised by the conviction of Wayne Couzens". This could be an opportunity to undertake a deep, searching analysis of institutionalised misogyny within policing. However, the government's resistance to putting the inquiry on a statutory footing suggests the [prime minister's promise](#) to "fix" things in the wake of Everard's murder is not a serious one. So I am working with the backing of more than 21 national women's organisations to formally bring [judicial review proceedings](#) against the home secretary, to ensure this inquiry is the robust investigation into police-perpetrated abuse and violence against women that is so desperately needed.

So what does need to change if we are to begin to tackle the spectacular failings not only in policing, but across the criminal justice system? It is a question I am asked frequently. Instead of waiting for a public inquiry to provide answers, the CWJ has set out its [own manifesto for change](#). The central principle of this manifesto is that women have a right to live free from the fear of male violence, which curtails our liberty and undermines our full participation in society.

We do not propose new laws in our manifesto, but rather we ask for the urgent and effective implementation of the laws that already exist. We ask that those investigating and prosecuting crimes of violence against women, those who judge and sentence, and those who manage the risk of individuals convicted act with the united aim and understanding of how to prevent

further violence. We want radical transformation of the investigation and prosecution of crimes of VAWG, an end to victim blaming, police-perpetrated abuse tackled, and an understanding of who represents risk, to ensure criminal justice interventions are directed at the perpetrators and not the victim.

How might this work? Take the example of Effie (not her real name), a migrant woman we are advising, whose British partner – who had been physically and psychologically abusive towards her for months – called the police to their home, alleging she had physically injured him during an argument. At the time of this call, safeguarding concerns had already been raised by agencies, who recognised she was at high risk of harm from her partner. Yet instead of investigating who the “primary” perpetrator in the relationship was, the police arrested Effie and imposed strict bail conditions, which rendered her homeless and separated her from her breastfeeding child. She was convicted of assault, which we successfully appealed.

In another example, a parole board considering the release of a man widely reported to have drugged and sexually assaulted more than 100 women might ask itself whether to accept his account that he no longer represented a threat. This is exactly what happened with the case of Worboys. His release after just 10 years in prison was only stopped after I submitted [a judicial review challenge](#) on behalf of two of his victims.

Then there is the case of Sophie Moss, a vulnerable mother of two who died as a result of “prolonged” pressure to the neck at the hands of Sam Pybus. He was given just [four years](#) and eight months after the Crown Prosecution Service accepted his plea of manslaughter. Pybus claimed she “enjoyed erotic asphyxiation” (more commonly known as the “[rough sex defence](#)”, which is creeping in to murder cases).

Under our manifesto, a prosecutor may have questioned the idea that Moss “enjoyed” being strangled during sex on the say so of the man who killed her and another man who had had sex with her; and should have put other evidence before a jury, for example from the father of Moss’s children, which disputed the assertion she liked to be strangled.

Our manifesto recognises that all of this must happen within the framework of cultural change. As Mina Smallman – the mother of the two murdered sisters, Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman, whose bodies were photographed and shared on a police WhatsApp group – [said this week](#): “Those police officers felt so safe, so untouchable, that they felt they would take photographs with our murdered daughters.” She added: “There is more work to be done … we are part of the change that’s going to come in the culture of the police force.”

Only when there is an understanding of the structural inequalities between men and women, and the intersecting forms of discrimination that make some groups of women more vulnerable based on race, class and disability, will real change occur. In the meantime, we will keep fighting.

This article was amended on 16 December 2021 to clarify a reference to the Sophie Moss case. An earlier version said Sam Pybus “was given just four years and eight months for manslaughter after the CPS accepted his explanation that she ‘enjoyed erotic asphyxiation’.” The CPS says it did not accept the defendant’s account but brought a manslaughter charge due to insufficient evidence of intent to harm or kill.

- Harriet Wistrich is a solicitor and the director of the Centre for Women’s Justice
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OpinionChildren

The pandemic is a blow to mental health – and that means more missing children

[Francisco Garcia](#)

While most return ‘safe and well’, cuts in services mean too many are at serious risk of disappearing again



‘One in five children subject to a return interview with the charity Missing People has disclosed information about mental health issues.’ Photograph: Simon Dack Archive/Alamy

Mon 13 Dec 2021 02.00 EST

The first few years of life weren’t easy for Leo*. His mother was severely dependent on drugs, as were other members of his family. There were periods of neglect, and he was taken into the care of his local authority while still a very young child. Now 16, Leo lives in semi-independent accommodation. But his difficulties haven’t evaporated. Often he has felt

lonely and unwanted. On several recent occasions, Leo has been the subject of a missing persons report. When visited by caseworkers after returning, conversation has repeatedly turned to his mental health struggles. He just feels low most of the time.

Leo's story is not unique, just as the UK's missing persons crisis is nothing new: 170,000 people are [reported missing](#) every year, at a rate of one every 90 seconds. More than 70,000 are children and the majority, like Leo, boomerang in and out of sight repeatedly, perhaps living in care or unstable households. Though it's rarely possible to pinpoint one single cause leading to a disappearance, poor mental health is very often a significant contributing factor. One in five children subject to a return interview with the charity Missing People has disclosed information about mental health issues.

This much was true long before the pandemic. But the events of the past 18 months have only accelerated existing trends. In a report published by the social business and charity Catch-22, the link between children's mental health and missing episodes is made explicit. Its own data has shown that [mental health was a factor](#) in a third of all children's missing incidents reported between April 2020 and April 2021. The highest figures came between October and December 2020, in the teeth of lockdown and school closures. But even after the end of restrictions, rates have remained alarmingly high.

When someone returns after they have been missing, there is an invaluable chance to understand some of what led to the disappearance in the first place. And most missing people – whether adults or children – do return. The latest figures suggest that [90% of missing children](#) are back in sight within 48 hours. Statutory guidance in England and Wales now states that every one of these returned children should be offered an independent "[return home interview](#)" (known as return discussions in Scotland). They are supposed to offer the chance of an intervention, conducted by a trusted non-police body, such as Catch-22 or Missing People.

Leo's story is one of many. Take 15-year-old Alice*. Her relationship with her parents was already fractious, and lockdown exacerbated matters. Alice had quickly become isolated and found remote learning difficult. Already

living with several neurodivergent conditions, she had put herself under huge pressure to conceal her mental health struggles from her family. Even after the loosening of restrictions, arguments have persisted – mostly centred on schoolwork and seeing friends. Unable to cope at home, Alice has repeatedly gone missing and has begun to self-harm.

Clearly there is something deeply broken, in a year when [record numbers](#) of children and adolescents have been referred to mental health services in England. Between 2020 and 2021, NHS data shows there were 527,339 referrals in total, up 33% from 2019. The wider UK picture is just as troubling. In early December, it was revealed that nearly [2,000 young people](#) in Scotland had been waiting more than a year for an appointment with child and adolescent mental health services – a rise of 106% from 2020.

Statistics hardly represent the lives of increasingly vulnerable young people like Leo and Alice. For one consultant child psychiatrist in Liverpool who spoke recently to the BBC, the consistent [severity of self-harm](#) is the worst they'd ever seen. In times of severe distress, the likelihood of going missing only increases. The majority of missing young people might return “safe and well”, but there are many who don't. One in seven of those who completed return home interviews with Missing People had been sexually exploited.

Crises rarely emerge fully formed overnight. They tend to build over years. Cuts to children's mental health services are [nothing new](#), even if the effects of the pandemic have brought things to an unignorable boiling point. It's why one of Catch-22's key recommendations involves timely access to professional support. After all, collating scrupulous data from returnees is one thing; turning it into action is quite another.

Our society is riven by [deep inequalities](#), and the world of missing people is no different. For children living with poor mental health, in poverty or flitting in and out of the care system, the risk of disappearance is significantly increased. These are not academic questions – the stakes could hardly be higher. This summer marked a first in the history of Catch-22's missing services. A child with significant mental health problems had been reported missing and was later found to have taken their own life. They were just 14 years old.

- Francisco Garcia is a London-based writer and journalist
- *Names have been changed
- In the UK and Ireland, [Samaritans](#) can be contacted on 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.org or jo@samaritans.ie. In the US, the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) is at 800-273-8255 or chat for support. You can also text HOME to 741741 to connect with a crisis text line counsellor. In Australia, the crisis support service [Lifeline](#) is 13 11 14. Other international helplines can be found at www.befrienders.org

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Opinion[Boris Johnson](#)

Boris Johnson's crises boil down to one thing: contempt for the rest of us

[John Harris](#)



On everything from Covid to ‘levelling up’, the prime minister’s lies and empty promises drag the country deeper into the mire



Illustration: Matt Kenyon

Sun 12 Dec 2021 08.04 EST

The word contempt, I learned last week, is derived from the Latin *contemptus*, meaning scorn. My 2008 edition of the Oxford English dictionary defines it as “the feeling that someone or something is worthless or beyond consideration”; a more recent article in the magazine Psychology Today says that “empathy and contempt are polar opposites”, and warned that the latter always has a catastrophic effect on human relationships.

I was researching the word because of its increasingly regular use in headlines relating to the prime minister. Last Thursday, a [column in the Financial Times](#) was titled “Carelessness and contempt are at the root of every Boris Johnson crisis”. Over the previous few weeks, a writer in the Daily Telegraph has scolded Johnson for his “[contempt for business](#)”, while the Economist has [accused him](#) of treating “checks and balances with contempt”. Johnson has also been accused of having contempt for [NHS staff](#), former [coalmining communities](#), his [fellow MPs](#) and the [population of Wales](#): it is rare that a week goes past without some or other story about this element of his personality and politics, and the C-word being used.

There are two elements to all this: one is Johnson's Trumpish disdain for some of the most basic components of our democracy – the [rule of law](#), scrutiny of the [executive](#), an independent [BBC](#) (which he is now lashing out at yet again). The other is bound up with the prime minister's apparently dim and disrespectful view of his fellow human beings – which, as revelations about Downing Street parties pile up, is now at the heart of our politics. The latest story, broken by the Sunday Mirror, has its own specific details: Johnson on a computer screen, merrily asking quiz questions while his staff “huddled by computers”, “knocking back fizz, wine and beer” in defiance of restrictions on social mixing. But one very familiar element is present and correct: whatever privations the rest of us were enduring, says one source, “the PM turned a blind eye. He seemed totally comfortable with gatherings.”

This kind of contempt is there in Johnson's [serial untruths](#): lying, after all, often implies disdain for whoever the liar thinks can be misled. It is part of his strident ambition, and apparent habit of contemptuously using [people and causes](#) for his own ends. His [Peppa Pig speech at the CBI](#) was a case study in contempt for an audience. It is impossible, moreover, to separate this behavioural contempt from the disregard Johnson shows for conventions and institutions, because they ultimately boil down to the same thing, captured in the cliche of rules being for the little people.

Remember what a teacher at Eton [wrote to his father](#) in 1982: “Boris sometimes seems affronted when criticised for what amounts to a gross failure of responsibility ... I think he honestly believes that it is churlish of us not to regard him as an exception, one who should be free of the network of obligation which binds everyone else.” A justified retort, of course, would be that this is the exact mindset that Eton is designed to produce – but even in that context, Johnson seemed to be in a league of his own.

In ordinary times, a prime minister like that would be problematic enough. But in the midst of the apparently unending Covid crisis, the impression of arrogance and impunity that seems to have spread from Johnson to his aides and cabinet colleagues now feels actively dangerous. As evidenced by the government responding to the spread of the Omicron variant with what it calls [plan B](#), people are still being told to follow unprecedented rules and guidelines; and a more stringent plan C may soon follow.

If politics and power were the right way up, those at the top would at least do an impression of being serious and consistent in order to rein in any irresponsible parts of the population. But in England, we seem to have ended up with the exact opposite: a dutiful public boggling at a clique at the top who are, to coin a currently ubiquitous phrase, “taking us for fools”: shallow, reckless, and apparently contemptuous of the sacrifices people are still making, which will soon enter their third year.

Even now, with Labour suddenly pulling ahead in the polls and [speculation](#) mounting about Thursday’s byelection in Shropshire, do Johnson’s colleagues really understand how toxic this is becoming? The idea of the government smugly ignoring rules and obligations that apply to the rest of us is surely starting to define perceptions of much more than Covid restrictions. What, for example, of “levelling up”? The prime minister’s [broken promises](#) about the future of high speed rail have been widely portrayed as a fatal blow to the credibility of the whole idea. So far, the most visible aspects of the policy have centred on [haughtily insisting](#) that places compete for relatively trifling amounts of money; when the delayed levelling-up [white paper](#) finally appears, it will reportedly include plans to create US-style “governors” of English counties, but no [new spending commitments](#). The “red wall”, it is safe to say, is not yet aflame with excitement.

For all the hype surrounding levelling up, the absence of any emotional connection with, or serious plans for, the places the government says it wants to help is striking. Once again, the overwhelming impression is of contempt and condescension, and people being blithely offered something Johnson has no serious intention of delivering. Worse still, as proved by the [national insurance hike](#), the end of the [universal credit uplift](#) and his [regressive plans](#) for funding social care, things that he actually has done will make lives in so-called “left behind” places even harder. As governments often do, Johnson and his colleagues doubtless thought such moves would cause momentary upset before settling into irrelevance. The problem with the “taking us for fools” narrative is that it provides a catch-all context into which these things – along with the controversies about Tory MPs’ second jobs – snugly fit.

There are presumably people in the cabinet – let alone on the Tory backbenches – who are starting to yearn for a style of government that might

be more serious, substantial and mindful of the lives of ordinary voters. Their problem, perhaps, is that once their party decided to once again draw its top brass from the alumni of English public schools, the die was cast. David Cameron had his own version of the politics of contempt: what else was austerity? Like Johnson, he had a habit of saying whatever he thought would either get him out of trouble, or bring him more votes. Once he had left office, his work for the defunct finance outfit Greensill Capital suggested someone only too happy to wring money out of advantages that 99% of us could only dream about. But Johnson is surely something else again: so arrogant and thoughtless that he sometimes seems almost amoral.

I recently read Sad Little Men, the writer Richard Beard's eloquent book about private schools and the kind of leaders they produce, which shines light on Cameron and Johnson via his own story of an elite education. In his experience, contempt for the lower orders began with the idea that "everyone else was less special and often stupid", and blurred into indifference: "We saw from car windows the petrol stations and primary schools and Bovis homes in which less privileged lives played themselves out, but the hopes and dreams of these people didn't meaningfully exist for us, nor their disappointments and pain."

The story of a public enduring the worst effects of the pandemic while Downing Street partied on gives those words an awful potency: somewhere in that sentence, in fact, lies one explanation for both the mess this government is in, and the mire the rest of us have been dragged into.

- John Harris is a Guardian columnist
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OpinionChina

In China's new age of imperialism, Xi Jinping gives thumbs down to democracy

[Simon Tisdall](#)



Beijing is aiming for global ascendancy – but its leader's vision of world dominion is centralised, oppressive and totalitarian



A Chinese coast guard vessel near the disputed East China Sea islands. China claims almost all of the South China Sea, and has built military bases on artificial islands in the area. Photograph: AP

Sun 12 Dec 2021 07.00 EST

The US describes its newly announced diplomatic [boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics](#), backed by Britain and other western countries, as a protest against China’s “egregious human rights abuses and atrocities in Xinjiang”, where the Chinese Communist party (CCP) is accused of genocide, as well as its evisceration of Hong Kong’s democracy.

Yet a separate, lurking worry informs Washington’s action: that China may turn the games into a propaganda extravaganza, showcasing its growing strength to a global audience. Think *Gladiator*, and then think [Xi Jinping](#), China’s authoritarian president, acting like a latter-day Roman emperor exercising power over life and death.

It’s not a fanciful image. An independent tribunal’s report last week described the ghastly reality facing thousands of Uyghurs who suffer “[acts of unconscionable cruelty, depravity and inhumanity](#)”, including torture and organised gang rapes, in Xinjiang’s concentration camps.

As the world's athletes get a thumbs up to perform at the "people's games", Emperor Xi gives his uncounted, unseen victims a callous thumbs down.

It's difficult to regard Xi – with his unassailable dictatorial powers, his techno-fascist surveillance state that stifles dissent and oppresses minorities, and his aggressively expansionist foreign policy – as anything other than a totalitarian control freak with imperial fantasies.

Empires, especially Britain's, get a bad press nowadays. Their close association with colonialism, racism, slavery and other evils is reason enough. But the assumption that such abuses have been banished ignores what is happening in today's world, right under our noses.

Imperialism, in all its awful forms, still poses a threat. But it is no longer the imperialism of the west, rightly execrated and self-condemned. Today's threat emanates from the east. Just as objectionable, and potentially more dangerous, it's the prospect of a totalitarian 21st-century Chinese global empire.

Historically speaking, empire-building relies on three factors, or projections. First come overseas trade networks or hubs, via maritime links and land corridors. Following close behind comes the establishment of overseas military bases to secure and defend these new interests, with or without local consent.

Last, nascent empires establish an (often delusional) narrative, or "mission statement", to justify their activities. British imperialists claimed to be a civilising force, bringing law and Christianity to the great unwashed. The postwar American empire was, supposedly, all about championing democracy.

Almost as if it had made a study, the CCP is following this western imperialist handbook to the letter – with one important caveat. Beijing does not fight distant foreign wars to sustain its dominance, as the US did in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan and Britain did all over the world. Not yet, anyway.

The first phase of China's new imperial age is already in train. Xi's ambitious belt and road investment and infrastructure initiative (BRI) touches 60 countries. [China is the world's largest trading nation](#) and largest exporter, with \$2.6tn worth of exports in 2019.

Too often, the west appears unsure how to handle China's challenge – the partial Olympics boycott smacks of weakness

The CCP's focus is meanwhile shifting to empire phase two: military bases. US media reported last week that the port city of Bata in Equatorial Guinea could become [China's first Atlantic seaboard naval base](#) – potentially putting warships and submarines within striking distance of America's east coast.

In what could serve as a case study of Chinese neo-imperial strategy, Beijing offered billions in loans to Equatorial Guinea's corrupt dictator, whom the US in contrast accuses of serious human rights abuses. In such ways are alliances forged and empires built.

China already has a naval base in Djibouti, in the Horn of Africa. It is said to be considering an island airbase in Kiribati that could in theory threaten Hawaii. Meanwhile, it [continues to militarise atolls in the South China Sea](#).

A [Pentagon report last month](#) predicted China will build a string of military bases girdling the world, including in the Arctic. CCP "target" countries include Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, the United Arab Emirates, Kenya and Angola, it said.

[US concerns about Chinese inroads in Central America](#) centre on Cuba, Panama and Nicaragua. [Nor is Europe immune](#) to CCP power projection: witness the worries over Huawei, espionage, and the [Piraeus port "gateway to Europe"](#) scheme. Xi makes no bones about his aim to achieve global ascendancy, [remake the international order in China's image](#), and dominate emerging 21st-century technologies, such as artificial intelligence, advanced computing, information management and the weaponisation of space.

At the same time he spins a softer message, the sort of comforting narrative predatory imperial powers prefer. [China](#) is no threat, he says. Rather, we are

your benevolent friends, partners for global prosperity.

Last week, marking [Joe Biden's "summit for democracy"](#), to which it was not invited, Beijing even claimed, absurdly, to be the only truly functional democracy and an example to others.

In a speech in July marking the party's centenary, Xi offered a less reassuring insight into his combative ideas. Imperial might is right, he suggested. Where Britannia once bobbed about, now China rules the waves.

"We have never bullied, oppressed, or subjugated the people of any other country, and we never will. By the same token we will never allow anyone to bully, oppress or subjugate [China]," he said. "Anyone who tries will find themselves on a [collision course with a steel wall](#) forged by 1.4 billion people."

By key measures – the number of overseas bases, alliances, military strike-power – America still greatly outstrips China's regime; likewise in terms of respect for human values and rights. Xi's BRI ambitions are meeting increased pushback. But too often, the west appears unsure how to handle China's challenge. The partial Olympics boycott smacks of weakness.

After two centuries on imperialism's receiving end, the Chinese empire strikes back. Trouble is, Xi's vision of future global dominion is centrally controlled, collectively oppressive, individually crushing totalitarianism. He promises only misery for the masses.

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2021.12.13 - Around the world

- [Kentucky tornadoes Biden declares federal disaster amid hopes that death toll could be lower than feared](#)
- ['Not knowing is worse' Survivor awaits news of missing boyfriend](#)
- [India Man arrested for murder in alleged plot to fake own death](#)
- [Russia Putin says he resorted to taxi driving after fall of Soviet Union](#)

Kentucky

Kentucky tornadoes: Hopes rise that death toll could be lower than feared

Governor Andy Beshear had originally said more than 100 people were feared dead, but later said the estimate could be wrong



An aerial photo shows the destruction of the Mayfield Consumer Products candle factory after a tornado in Kentucky. Photograph: Tannen Maury/EPA

[Richard Luscombe](#), [Samira Sadeque](#) with agencies

Mon 13 Dec 2021 07.31 EST

US president Joe Biden declared a major federal disaster in [Kentucky](#) after a swarm of deadly tornadoes hit the state on Friday, as representatives of a candle factory destroyed by a twister said far fewer people may have died than previously feared.

Biden had previously declared the storms a federal emergency and the move to designate the storms a federal disaster paves the way for additional aid, as thousands face housing, food, water and power shortages.

It follows a formal request from Kentucky governor Andy Beshear, who said the tornadoes were the most destructive in the state's history.

00:59

Aerial footage shows extent of tornado damage in Kentucky – video

Beshear had said on Sunday morning that the death toll was expected to exceed 100 after twisters tore through the US midwest and south on Friday night but later that figure had been revised down, although amid power cuts and disrupted phone services across many communities, there was not yet certainty over numbers.

Dozens of people in several counties in the state are still believed to have died in the storms, but Beshear said later on Sunday that the death toll might be as low as 50, according to the Associated Press.

"We are praying that maybe original estimates of those we have lost were wrong. If so, it's going to be pretty wonderful," the governor said.



An aerial photo shows the destruction of the Mayfield Consumer Products candle factory
Photograph: Tannen Maury/EPA

Among the [110 people who were at the candle factory](#), eight have been confirmed dead and eight others remained missing, said Bob Ferguson, a spokesperson for Mayfield Consumer Products, which owns the factory. He said 90 people had been located, a figure that authorities were still trying to confirm on Monday morning.

“There were some early reports that as many as 70 could be dead in the factory. One is too many, but we thank God that the number is turning out to be far, far fewer,” Ferguson said, adding that rescue teams were still searching for the eight who remained unaccounted for.

It was unclear how many factory workers Beshear was counting in his latest death toll estimates.

By Monday morning, weather experts had estimated that more than 40 tornadoes hit parts of nine states.

Rescue workers continued to scour debris for survivors and many people without power, water or even a roof over their heads salvaged what they could two days after disaster struck.

While Kentucky was hardest hit, six workers were killed at an Amazonwarehouse in Illinois after the plant buckled under the force of the tornado, including one cargo driver who died in the bathroom, where many workers said they had been directed to shelter.

[Map](#)

A nursing home was struck in Arkansas, causing one of that state’s two deaths. Four were reported dead in Tennessee and two in Missouri.

Nowhere suffered as much as Mayfield, a community of about 10,000 in the south-western corner of Kentucky, where the large twisters also destroyed the fire and police stations. The governor said the tornadoes were the most destructive in the state’s history.

“The very first thing that we have to do is grieve together and we’re going to do that before we rebuild together,” Beshear said, noting that one tornado tore across 227 miles (365 km) of terrain, almost all of that in Kentucky.

A vast storm front moved across the Mississippi basin and parts of the US south-east and midwest on Friday night, spawning more than 30 tornadoes.

Spring is the main season for tornadoes and this latest event was very unusual coming in December, when colder weather normally limits tornadoes, said Victor Gensini, an extreme weather researcher at Northern [Illinois](#) University.



Debris are piled after a tornado tore through rural Kentucky. Photograph: Jeremy Hogan/SOPA Images/REX/Shutterstock

Asked if he thought the intensity of the storms was related to climate crisis, president Biden said: “All I know is that the intensity of the weather across the board has some impact as a consequence of the warming of the planet. The specific impact on these specific storms, I can’t say at this point.”

Illinois was hit, too, and six people were killed in the collapse of an Amazon warehouse in Edwardsville, with another injured worker airlifted to a hospital, fire chief James Whiteford said.

In addition, so far four people have been reported killed in Tennessee, two in Arkansas and two in [Missouri](#) as well as the high toll in Kentucky.

Kyanna Parsons-Perez, who was at the candle factory in Mayfield, said she felt the building was making her and her co-workers “rock from one side to the other” right before it collapsed.

Parsons-Perez was stuck for three hours in the rubble, and documented part of it in a livestream on Facebook in which her co-workers can be heard crying in fear.

Sitting in the hospital, [she told](#) the Guardian how a gust of wind suddenly changed everything. “My ears started popping and I felt my body swaying,” she said of the moments right before the building collapsed.



Houses and business are reduced to rubble in Mayfield, Kentucky.
Photograph: Scott Olson/Getty Images

She became very scared upon learning that she was buried under. “When I found out it was an air conditioner on me and five people on the debris on top of me is when I got scared,” she said.

The storm was so powerful that a photograph from a tornado-damaged home in Kentucky [was found](#) almost 130 miles away in Indiana.

The US uniquely experiences more than 1,200 tornadoes annually, more than four times the number in other countries around the world where they occur, combined, according to experts.

With Reuters and the Associated Press

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/13/kentucky-tornadoes-hopes-rise-that-candle-factory-death-toll-could-be-lower-than-feared>

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Kentucky

‘Not knowing is worse’: tornado survivor at candle factory awaits news of missing boyfriend

Autumn Kirks took shelter and glanced away from her boyfriend, who was 10ft away, and when she looked back he was gone



An aerial photo shows the destruction of the Mayfield Consumer Products candle factory after tornadoes moved through the area in Mayfield, Kentucky, on Friday night. Photograph: Tannen Maury/EPA

[Samira Sadeque](#) and agencies

Sun 12 Dec 2021 16.29 EST

Workers on the night shift at the candle factory in Mayfield, **Kentucky**, were part of the holiday rush that was keeping the place going around the clock

when a tornado whirled towards the small city and the word went out to “duck and cover”.

Autumn Kirks pulled down her safety googles and took shelter, tossing aside wax and fragrance buckets to make room for herself.

She glanced away from her boyfriend, Lannis Ward, and when she looked back, he was gone.

On Sunday, he was among scores of people missing and feared dead in the rubble of the factory leveled by the record tornado that howled in on Friday night, with the death toll [expected to exceed](#) 100 in Kentucky alone.

00:59

Aerial footage shows extent of tornado damage in Kentucky – video

Kirks and others are waiting in a heartbreak of emotional agony for news of their loved ones, even though by late Sunday afternoon no one had been found alive in the wreckage since 3am Saturday.

“Not knowing is worse than knowing right now. I’m trying to stay strong. It’s very hard,” she said.

The factory is now 15ft deep of mangled steel and there are cars on top of the ruins where the roof was, the state governor, Andy Beshear said on CNN.

Kirks said she and her boyfriend were about 10ft apart in a hallway. Suddenly, she saw sky and lightning where a wall had been, and Ward had vanished.

“I remember taking my eyes off of him for a second, and then he was gone,” she said.

Kirks was at a ministry center where people gathered to seek information about the missing.

The pastor, Joel Cauley, said of the disaster scene: “It was almost like you were in a twilight zone. You could smell the aroma of candles, and you

could hear the cries of people for help. Candle smells and all the sirens is not something I ever expected to experience at the same time.”

Kyanna Parsons-Perez, who was also on shift at the Kentucky candle factory, told the Guardian while sitting in the hospital, how a gust of wind suddenly changed everything.

“My ears started popping and I felt my body swaying,” she said of the moments right before “boom, everything fell on us”.

She was stuck for three hours in the rubble despite being in a storm shelter deep in the interior. She was trapped by a water fountain, an air conditioner and 5ft of debris.

In Arkansas, where a nursing home was destroyed and two people were killed, the governor, Asa Hutchinson, said workers shielded the residents with their own bodies.

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[India](#)

Indian man arrested for murder in alleged plot to fake own death

Police allege Sudesh Kumar tried to pass victim's body off as his own to avoid being tried for another alleged murder



Police last month found a body on the outskirts of the capital, New Delhi, wearing Kumar's clothes and carrying his ID card. Photograph: Nasir Kachroo/NurPhoto/Rex/Shutterstock

Agence France-Presse in Delhi

Mon 13 Dec 2021 04.05 EST

An Indian man who tried to fake his death by murdering a builder and passing the body off as his own has been arrested, police said.

He did it to avoid being tried for another alleged murder, they added – Sudesh Kumar was charged with but not convicted of the 2018 killing of his

daughter, who had eloped.

Kumar was released last year as authorities tried to prevent coronavirus outbreaks by reducing the number of inmates in overcrowded prisons.

Police last month found a body in Ghaziabad, on the outskirts of the capital, New Delhi, wearing Kumar's clothes and carrying his ID card.

"The body was partially burnt and its face was beyond recognition," police superintendent Iraj Raja told AFP. "We traced it back to [Kumar's] home and got his wife to identify the body. She promptly identified it as [her] husband's body. However, we were not convinced."

Police got a tip-off that Kumar was still alive and caught him outside his home on Friday.

"Upon being interrogated, he spilled the beans," Raja said.

Kumar had befriended a mason and invited him to his house on the pretext of doing some repair work, giving him a set of clothes to wear and plying him with alcohol before beating him to death, it is claimed.

Raja said both Kumar and his wife had been charged with murder.

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[Russia](#)

Vladimir Putin says he resorted to driving a taxi after fall of Soviet Union

Russian leader says it is ‘unpleasant to talk about’ his cab work in that period as he laments Soviet Union’s demise



The revelations from Russian president Vladimir Putin were made in an upcoming documentary. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

[Andrew Roth](#) in Moscow and agencies

Mon 13 Dec 2021 11.38 EST

Russian president [Vladimir Putin](#) has said the collapse of the Soviet Union spelled the end of “historical Russia”, claiming that he drove a taxi to make ends meet after the fall of the USSR.

Putin, a former agent of the Soviet Union’s KGB security services, was using the story to illustrate his own personal hardships as he declared the

USSR's fall a "tragedy" for "most citizens."

Putin has never before claimed to have moonlighted as a taxi driver in the early 1990s. "Honestly, it's not very pleasant to speak about," he said.

In a 2018 documentary, he shared a different story, saying he feared he would have to drive a taxi after his mentor and employer Anatoly Sobchak lost re-election as mayor of St Petersburg. Instead, Putin moved to Moscow and took a job in the national government.

The comments were excerpts from a film by broadcaster Channel One titled Russia: Recent History. Its release coincides with the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Soviet Union.

"After all, what is the collapse of the Soviet Union? This is the collapse of historical Russia under the name of the Soviet Union," the Russian leader was cited as saying.

A loyal servant of the union, Putin was dismayed when it fell apart, once calling the collapse "the greatest geopolitical disaster of the 20th century".



Putin behind the wheel of a cross-country vehicle while driving in Russia's Siberian federal district in March. Photograph: Alexei Druzhinin/TASS

Putin is sensitive to the perceived expansion of western military ambitions into ex-Soviet countries and Russia last week demanded that Nato formally scrap a 2008 decision to open its door to Georgia and Ukraine.

The end of the union brought with it a period of intense economic instability that plunged many into poverty, as newly independent Russia transitioned from communism to capitalism.

In the documentary, Putin said: “We lived like everyone, but sometimes I had to earn extra money … as a private driver. It’s not pleasant to speak about honestly, but unfortunately that is what happened.”

He said he gave rides in his private car, a Volga that he brought back from his KGB posting in Dresden.

By all accounts, Putin was struggling to make ends meet in the months directly after he returned to Russia from east Germany in early 1990. But by May of that year, he was employed by Anatoly Sobchak, his future mentor, as an aide in Leningrad city council. And Putin remained employed by the KGB until the failed coup attempt against Mikhail Gorbachev in August 1991.

By the following year, Putin’s office was under investigation for signing multimillion-dollar contracts to export raw materials like oil and timber in exchange for food. While the raw materials were shipped out, the food never arrived, and the companies granted export licences quickly disbanded. Putin has denied any wrongdoing in the affair, which opposition politicians said could have cost the city as much as \$100m.

Until the early 2010s, it was possible in many Russian cities to hail private cars and negotiate a fare to other places in the city. The practice has become less popular with the growth of taxi companies and the emergence of ride-sharing apps.

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