The Guardian

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OpinionUkraine

The Observer view on Britain's cruel and unfit refugee policy

Observer editorial

Ukrainian refugees are becoming the latest victims of a hostile bureaucracy that was two decades in the making

'Priti Patel's nationality and borders bill will create a two-tier asylum system that lawyers believe would break international and domestic law.' Photograph: Ian Forsyth/Getty Images

Sun 3 Apr 2022 01.00 EDT

More than four million refugees have fled Ukraine since Russia began its barbaric military campaign against the Ukrainian people just over a month ago. It has been described by the UN's refugee agency as the fastest-growing refugee crisis since the Second World War. Poland is host to almost 2.5 million refugees, Romania just over 600,000, Moldova almost 400,000 and the whole of the EU has opened its borders to Ukrainian refugees, with no

visa required. In contrast, the UK has issued fewer than 5,000 visas under the "Homes for Ukraine" scheme, not even a sixth of the number of applications.

There are aspects of the government's response to the crisis that are to be commended, but on the worsening refugee situation it has been astonishingly mean-spirited. In the early weeks, the only refugee resettlement route was for Ukrainians with family settled in the UK; at first, this only applied to immediate dependents, but now includes extended family. People using this process have reported significant delays, with family members having to finance extended hotel stays in countries bordering Ukraine while they wait for the Home Office bureaucracy to process visa applications.

Eventually, the government bowed to public pressure to do more. Three weeks ago, it launched Homes for Ukraine, a scheme that allows Ukrainians to come to the UK if they are matched with a host to act as an individual sponsor for their visa and who can provide them with accommodation for at least six months (the host will be paid £350 a month by the government to do so). Under this scheme, refugees will get a three-year visa and be entitled to work and use public services in the UK.

The requirement to be matched with a host falls far short of what the government should have done, which is to match the EU's visa-free offer and provide independent housing for refugees so that their numbers are not limited by the amount of willing hosts or the time it takes to run checks, a prerequisite to processing a sponsor visa. The requirement for refugees to match with sponsors adds layers of bureaucratic delay and exploitative potential. Charities that work with refugees have warned that the lack of proper safeguards will create opportunities for those who seek to exploit Ukrainian women and children. They report UK-based human traffickers and slum landlords have already tried to target them. The government has been slow to establish any efforts to actually match refugees to hosts; it has only just announced funding for a pilot scheme.

> The lack of proper safeguards in this scheme will create opportunities for those who seek to exploit Ukrainian women and children

The government's response to the crisis is a reflection of 20 years of hardening policy towards refugees and asylum seekers. It started under the last Labour government, whose ministers were all too happy to make political scapegoats out of refugees as a way of trying to boost its poll ratings, replacing cash support for asylum seekers with vouchers – later rolled back – and stoking public fears about "illegitimate" asylum seekers. But it has got much worse over the last decade under successive Conservative home secretaries, culminating in Priti Patel's nationality and borders bill, which will create a two-tier asylum system that lawyers believe would break international and domestic law. It seeks to criminalise anyone arriving in the UK to claim asylum without a pre-approved claim, despite the fact that the 1951 Refugee Convention, to which Britain was a founding signatory, establishes the right of anyone with a legitimate claim to asylum to be heard fairly, regardless of how they arrive in a country. Meanwhile, the government has imposed far stricter than necessary limitations on resettlement schemes for Syrian and Afghan refugees over the last decade. Last year, 13,000 refugees in total were granted protection, the equivalent of just 20 people per parliamentary constituency.

The Home Office has always been one of the poorer-performing departments, but Theresa May, as home secretary, made further sharpening of its cruel and inhuman bureaucracy a matter of government policy. In her efforts to make the UK as hostile an environment as possible for undocumented migrants, members of the Windrush generation who had lived, worked and paid taxes in the UK for decades found themselves cut off from the NHS, robbed of their right to work and even deported. At the same time, the government has made it ruinously expensive and bureaucratic for young people who have grown up in Britain to regularise their status when they turn 18, consigning those who cannot afford it to becoming undocumented. An independent report published last week by Wendy Williams, who conducted the independent review of Windrush, found the Home Office had resoundingly failed to improve its culture and was consequently at risk of another major crisis.

Making cruel, inhumane and inflexible bureaucracy an integral aspect of government policy in order to try to drive down immigration and asylum numbers has had dreadful consequences. It has led to people who are British by any meaningful measure being denied basic rights and young people who

have spent the majority of their childhood in Britain finding on turning 18 that they are not eligible for the same educational support as their peers. It has rendered the state incapable of fulfilling its ethical obligations to people fleeing conflict and torture in countries such as Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine. Incremental reform will not do: the UK's immigration and asylum system needs to be dismantled and rebuilt from scratch.

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OpinionFrance

The Observer view on the French election and rightwing populism

Observer editorial

Emmanuel Macron is expected to win but voter support for Marine Le Pen shows the threat of the far right must be tackled

Marine Le Pen has dropped plans to restore the death penalty and leave the euro, making her candidacy more acceptable to centre-right voters. Photograph: Chesnot/Getty

Sun 3 Apr 2022 01.30 EDT

Despite his unpopularity – 54% of French voters disapprove of his performance in office – Emmanuel Macron is widely expected to win a second five-year term in France's presidential election, whose first round will be held next Sunday. Yet it is already clear who has won the campaign as opposed to the vote: the populist forces of far-right nationalism grouped around the candidacies of Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour.

As leader of the National Rally, formerly the Front National, Le Pen has strengthened her grip on second place after a shaky few months. Her support is at about 20%, against Macron's 28%, and she is closing the gap. As matters stand, Macron would beat her in the two-candidate second-round runoff on 24 April by 56-44%, although one poll last week suggested the margin has shrunk to only six points. Predicted low voter turnout is increasing uncertainty.

The appeal exerted by Zemmour has faded but remains significant. The Islamophobic pundit-polemicist has about 10% support. If the first-round far-right vote, including the 2% who support the fringe party, Debout la France, united around one candidate, Macron would be pushed into second place.

Luckily for Macron and France, this is unlikely to happen – on this occasion, at least. And in the second round, enough socialists, communists, Greens, centre-right conservatives and followers of the hard-left candidate, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, can be expected to hold their noses and back Macron, if only to keep Le Pen out of the Élysée.

If so, that would be a repeat of the 2017 runoff result. But while Macron won easily then, by more than 30 points, his margin this time may be in single figures. So how has Le Pen made up so much ground? Observers point to hard work and an ability to learn from past mistakes. Eschewing large rallies, she has tirelessly courted the working-class "*vote populaire*" through personalised, town-hall-type gatherings up and down the country while Macron strode the international stage.

> If and when Le Pen loses again, far-right supporters may conclude moderation of any kind does not pay

Zemmour's repulsive, headline-catching anti-immigrant rants may have helped highlight Le Pen's relatively less extreme stance. Unlike him, for example, she says Ukrainian refugees are welcome. She has dropped plans to restore the death penalty and leave the euro. This shift reflects her strategy

of detoxifying a party long seen as irredeemably racist, thereby rendering her candidacy more acceptable to centre-right voters.

It's working, up to a point. A study published by *Le Monde* found fewer voters now see Le Pen as a threat. While 50% would still not vote for her under any circumstances, the figures were higher for Zemmour (64%) and Mélenchon (53%). The downside is that if and when Le Pen loses again, far-right supporters may conclude moderation of any kind does not pay.

This is the huge challenge facing a Macron second term. Like Britain, France is struggling with the destructive impacts of deindustrialisation, globalisation and austerity. Extremism of the right (and left) has flourished among working-class voters who feel betrayed and forgotten. As with Brexit and in Trumpist America, a divisive discourse demonises migrants, Muslims and minorities of all kinds. It is fatally corrosive of society.

The Ukraine crisis has understandably distracted Macron from campaigning. But pernicious forces are advancing at home, too, and he needs to do better at thwarting them and pulling the country back together. The trend is clear. The root causes of national distress must be addressed – or France could face a far-right nightmare in 2027.

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NotebookArt and design

The talented women who had their eyes, if not their hands, on the prize

Susannah Clapp

Valentine Prax's fluid, vital paintings are an adjunct in a show of works by sculptor husband Ossip Zadkine. As in art, so in life

A portrait of artist Gwen John (1876-1939), sister of the more famous Augustus. Photograph: Heritage Images/Getty Images

Sat 2 Apr 2022 10.00 EDTLast modified on Sat 2 Apr 2022 14.40 EDT

Barbara Trapido's marvellous novel *Brother of the More Famous Jack* has just been reissued to celebrate the 40th anniversary of its first publication. The title alone deserves a party. It puts its finger on a big category – the person who gets used to being an adjunct. It's a category traditionally inhabited by women and was nailed in an excellent poem, also from the 1980s, by Selima Hill: "I am the wife of the man who won first prize."

The prize Hill mentions was for a painting and I often remember her poem when looking at 20th-century artists and their male sibs or hubbies: Tirzah Garwood and Eric Ravilious, Gwen and Augustus John, Winifred and Ben Nicholson. It came to mind again recently when I visited the village of Les Arques in the Lot region of France, where a museum is dedicated to the sculpture of Ossip Zadkine. It is an intense experience. In the parish church, Zadkine's huge crucifixion twists opposite a pietà; one room is filled with his wooden mythological works, another with bristling bronzes – a group under bombardment, arms outstretched, struck home hard.

In one corner is some utterly different work: vital, citrus, fluid paintings. They are by Valentine Prax, the sculptor's wife, who guarded her chap's work during the Second World War when he was in America, and burnt much to save it from the Nazis. Ah. Wife of the more famous Zad.

Masterclass in insight

Joyce DiDonato and conductor Pedro Pardo on stage in Barcelona at a Concert for Peace in Ukraine. Photograph: Enric Fontcuberta/EPA

A few weeks ago, I was given the best ever lesson in how to be a critic. By a performer. At London's Linbury theatre, the mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato gave a masterclass to three young singers. Dressed like a principal boy – violet frock coat over jeans – she was a compelling presence; as if caught in headlights, the performers began to mirror her movements.

DiDonato was rapt but not reverent. She had a go at Covent Garden seat prices and put it to a tremendous bass that he need not be polite to Handel; he might suggest in his aria that the composer could go on a bit. She lit up Shakespeare, suggesting that Iago should have the dreadful sincerity of a false friend, delivering fake news to his Othello as if it hurt him to utter every word. She advised a soprano that she would break more hearts if she sang one phrase less perfectly. She managed to suggest they were all in this

together; that she was totally on their side – and totally against their being less than superb.

I would be preening if I could get into a column a smidgen of her insight.

Scandi soft soap

David Archer (Tim Bentinck) – familiarity and even boredom make soaps compulsive viewing. Photograph: Gary Moyes/PA

I complained to a Swedish friend the other day that I needed something non-compulsive to watch. I still haven't dared to begin the last series of *Succession*, knowing I'll be transfixed for hours. She suggested *Bonus Family*, a Netflix series about divorces and stepchildren, not wildly dramatic and completely true to Swedish life. Together with Danny Robins's nifty radio sitcom *The Cold Swedish Winter*, it has proved the perfect Scandi antidote to noir. It gets the soap balance between drama and daily routine just right; it also has superb child actors. Counselling sessions frame each episode: the therapists, a heterosexual couple, appear in dun-coloured homespun tunics and identical wire specs.

Having anticipated smoked glass and clear surfaces, I was sceptical about the clutter and porcelain ducks in the home of the matriarch. Very Swedish,

my friend assured me. Other aspects were more stereotypical. Running through the agenda for an office meeting, a boss turns to his colleague and briskly addresses the last item: “Sex tonight?” The series has not, though, worked as methadone. It is not excitement that addicts you to a soap: familiarity – in the case of *The Archers*, even boredom – is the thing. After one episode I was hooked.

Susannah Clapp is the theatre critic of the Observer

This article was amended on 2 April 2022 to correct the caption for the main picture. Gwen John was the sister of Augustus John, not his wife as an early version said.

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Observer comment cartoon
Boris Johnson

Boris Johnson contemplates resigning – cartoon

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OpinionThe Queen

If you can’t see the problem with Andrew, ma’am, perhaps it’s time to hang up the crown

Catherine Bennett

Giving the prince centre stage at Philip’s memorial service was a foolish misstep

The Queen escorted by Prince Andrew at the memorial service for Prince Philip in Westminster Abbey on 29 March, 2022. Photograph: Richard Pohle/AFP/Getty Images

Sat 2 Apr 2022 14.00 EDT

It's six weeks since Prince Andrew settled out of court with his accuser, Virginia Giuffre, for a sum estimated at £12m. Cheap at the price, it was suggested, if the money (source unexplained) prevented sexual assault charges and a public trial ruining his mother's platinum jubilee. Whatever's left to be ruined, that is, after mixed results from the Cambridges' vintage-inspired Caribbean visit in which only Kate's elaborate wardrobe signalled that anything had changed since 1953.

Since Andrew testified in the settlement to a hitherto unsuspected concern for victims of sex trafficking, along with a newfound regret for knowing Jeffrey Epstein, the deal was also welcomed as a victory for Giuffre's fellow survivors. A lawyer for Sarah Ransome, one of those abused by Epstein, called the settlement a "banner day"; survivors had "been heard and were no longer silenced".

These women, probably unfamiliar with correct form concerning the titled associates of known sex offenders, could not have anticipated that Andrew's discomfiture would be strictly temporary. A prince who is no longer HRH owing to some serious sexual allegations should still, as newly demonstrated by the UK's foremost role models, be seen at formal events and addressed ducally as "your Grace". Should one bow? A nod is usually acceptable where a prince has been unable to account, as with Andrew, for a photograph of him pawing a teenage girl, with Ghislaine Maxwell in the background. Following a period of reflection – a month is ample – current protocol requires a monarch's son previously accused of sexual assault to take precedence in royal ceremonial over siblings who have never associated with a known sex offender (Charles's favourites, Jimmy Savile and Laurens van der Post, were only posthumously unmasked).

As the Queen's escort at Prince Philip's memorial service, Andrew duly enjoyed a central role: received by reverential clerics and a trumpet fanfare, then serenaded to a front seat by less valued siblings and relations. If only a prior engagement in New York's Metropolitan Detention Center had not obliged Ghislaine to send regrets it could have been just like old times.

> As a massive public affront to Giuffre and the other women raped by Epstein, the event could hardly have been surpassed

As a massive public affront to Giuffre and the other women raped by Andrew's friend Epstein, the event could hardly, however, have been surpassed. After being silenced for years by their abusers' allies, the women last week saw the memorial to Prince Philip double, as dictated by Andrew's leading role, as a further denial of their existence. Juliette Bryant, a survivor of Epstein's abuse, said: "It's not just an insult to the victims – it's a complete insult towards humanity."

The deep public respect and affection for the Queen, with an added tenderness that comes of seeing her look, often, tired, small and alone, meant that this perverse choreography was received, where she was concerned, less with disapproval than with incredulity. How could this dutiful woman, one of the UK's dwindling emblems of national probity, have allowed her greedy, notoriously brutish son to reinvent her husband's memorial service

as a rehabilitation opportunity? She should have been one of the country's last protections against epidemic Matt Hancock Syndrome: the pathological inability to feel shame.

It's possible that the Queen never saw the seedy photo, is the one person who still believes Andrew's *Newsnight* codswallop: that he can't sweat, always wears ties, stayed at Epstein's to "show leadership". Maybe he was addressing Mummy all along? "My judgment was probably coloured by my tendency to be too honourable, but that's just the way it is."

As much as her admirers would welcome any relief from the cognitive dissonance, this explanation, since it requires a credulity alarming in a head of state, obviously requires the Queen to step down. If she believes Andrew, what would she not believe from Boris Johnson?

More likely though, given her involvement in Andrew's earlier demotion, the Queen was acquainted with the accusations and with Andrew's reasons for not repeating in a courtroom his *Newsnight* line: "I have no recollection of ever meeting this lady." His accelerated redemption came after she witnessed, like everyone else, Andrew dodging court papers, Andrew's lawyers', after they'd failed on technicalities, resorting to insinuations about his accuser's greed, morals, false memory. Giuffre was even accused of being the harmful one, for somehow diverting attention from "those who have actually perpetrated sexual offences against minors".

Only on reaching a settlement did Andrew say she'd "suffered as an established victim of abuse" and regret, as he'd previously refused to do, his association with Epstein.

The Queen presumably knew all this and, with a wide choice of children and grandchildren for memorial plus-ones, picked the son who once facilitated a loan for his ex-wife from a sex offender. The son who once sold a house for £3m above the asking price. Days after the memorial, the names of Andrew and his ex-wife would again come up, in a bewildering fraud case involving a £750,000 "wedding gift" and a Turkish woman's passport.

To judge by last week, the family might have saved the £12m it spent rescuing the jubilee from Andrew. If he could be irreplaceable at Philip's

memorial, despite advice, then every jubilee event must still be at risk. Actually, if he'd defended himself in court then returned to non-royal obscurity it might have done less damage than his Westminster Abbey performance, acting as if open invitations to the massage-addicted Epstein households were the kind of things that could happen to any pious Anglican.

Whether the Queen is too blinded by her affections to recognise the impact of Andrew's unbanishing or she knows and doesn't care, they're both reasons to retire before he causes her further trouble. It might seem a poor reward for the years of service, even a cruel and unusual punishment, but she has certainly earned the right, at 95, to spend more time with her favourite son, enjoying the conversation that made him such a treasured guest in any home owned by Jeffrey Epstein.

Catherine Bennett is an Observer columnist

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OpinionTransgender

From pool to track: disputes over trans athletes mustn’t make everyone a loser

Kenan Malik

Arguing for sex-based categories in sports such as swimming and cycling is not bigotry. It’s fairness

Lia Thomas at the NCAA swimming and diving championships in Georgia, Atlanta on 19 March. Photograph: Brett Davis/USA Today Sports

Sun 3 Apr 2022 03.00 EDT

If you want a case study of how not to handle the question of transgender athletes in sport, look to the treatment of British cyclist Emily Bridges. As a talented male junior, Bridges won three silver medals at national championships and seemed destined for the Olympics.

Bridges came out as trans in 2020 but had continued to participate in men's events while transitioning. Having sufficiently reduced her testosterone levels, she became eligible to compete in women's races. Her first such race would have been yesterday at the National Omnium Championships alongside the likes of five-time Olympic champion Laura Kenny.

Bridges's inclusion raised considerable controversy. Then, on Thursday, cycling's global governing body, the UCI, ruled that she was ineligible as she is still registered as a male cyclist and cannot compete as a woman until that registration expires.

It's a situation unfair both to Bridges and other women riders. Having raised Bridges's expectations and led many women riders to fear unfair competition, she was barred at the last minute – but only on a technicality. Currently, once Bridges is no longer registered as a male, she will be eligible to race in women's events. And the whole debate will begin again.

Bridges's case closely follows another controversy, when last month Lia Thomas became the first transgender woman to win the US college swimming championship. At the heart of these debates – and not just in sports – is the distinction between sex and gender. Sex refers to an individual's biological traits, such as their chromosomes, hormones and reproductive organs; gender to social ideas about "masculinity" and "femininity" and of male and female roles. Transgender people have a sense of their gender identity being at odds with their biological sex and resolve it by changing gender.

How should society respond to the distinction between sex and gender and to differences of identity rooted in each? There is no single, simple answer.

> How should society respond to the distinction between sex and gender, and to differences of identity rooted in each?

When it comes to political and civil rights, we should defend those rights for all individuals whether they define themselves by sex or gender. For trans people, we should, just as we would for women, oppose discrimination in employment, demand equal treatment in services, support equality in marriage and adoption procedures and stand up against bigotry.

There are, though, areas in which the distinction between sex and gender is significant. Sport is one. In many sports, there are separate men's and women's competitions because having a male physique provides physical advantages. Men have, on average, larger hearts, bigger lungs, longer limbs and greater muscle mass. To give a sense of the advantage this provides, Bridges's junior male 25-mile record (as Zach Bridges) is two minutes faster than that of Hayley Simmonds, the fastest-ever British woman at the distance.

All sporting champions have physical advantages – that's why they are champions. But the advantages Usain Bolt or Michael Phelps had over male competitors is of a different kind to their advantage over female competitors.

This does not mean that men are "better" at sports than women, any more than the fact that world heavyweight boxing champion Oleksandr Usyk would probably knock out flyweight champion Julio Cesar Martinez means that he is a better boxer. Nevertheless, without sex-based categories we would see few women in the Olympics or at Wimbledon.

To mitigate such advantages, many sports, including cycling, require trans women to reduce their testosterone levels. This is both unfair on athletes who may not wish to be subject to such treatment for non-medical reasons and a misplaced obsession with testosterone. Trans women who have transitioned after puberty retain many advantages of a male physique despite testosterone reduction. A study led by Joanna Harper, herself a transgender athlete and a strong advocate of trans inclusion in sport, concluded that hormone therapy reduces haemoglobin levels to normal female levels but strength and muscle mass, while reduced, nevertheless "remain above that observed in cisgender women, even after 36 months".

Another study showed that after a year of testosterone reduction, "the muscular advantage enjoyed by transgender women is only minimally reduced".

> Without sex-based categories we would see few women in the Olympics or at Wimbledon

One suggested solution is to have an "open category" for all athletes, irrespective of sex or gender, together with a protected sex-based women's category.

It's not a perfect answer. It would disadvantage trans women who lose some of their male advantage in transition. And women's sport may end up seeming like a kind of ghetto. Nevertheless, it's an attempt to think through the conundrum of sex and gender in sport rather than ignore it or pretend it does not matter.

Some dismiss the worries as overblown hysteria, pointing out that there are only a few trans athletes and that, far from taking over sport, they are underrepresented. That's true, though the numbers may not be so low in 20 years' time. In any case, it's a question not of numbers but of formulating principles and practices that welcome trans athletes without undermining sex-based categories in sport.

Some argue, too, that any restrictions on trans athletes taking part in women's sports are "transphobic" because they suggest that trans women are not women. It's an objection that fails to distinguish between sex and gender.

Cyd Zeigler is co-founder of Outsports, a website about LGBTQ athletes. He supports "inclusion for [trans] athletes in their gender category". Disagreeing with that, though, he points out, is not necessarily transphobic. Many "who think that trans women should be treated as women in employment, in housing, in education, on their driver's license" nevertheless also question their place "in women's sports".

To discriminate against trans people in the workplace, to refuse to serve them in a shop, to object to trans adoptions, to deliberately misgender as a means of humiliating someone – that is bigotry. To argue for sex-based categories in sport – that is not. To deem both "transphobic" is to diminish the meaning of the word.

We can only work our way through these conundrums with open discussion rather than dismissing disagreement as "hatred". Such rhetoric only stokes fear and resentment and makes it more difficult to come to an equitable solution.

Trans people face considerable prejudice and discrimination. We cannot challenge that, though, by undermining women's rights. The problem does not lie with Lia Thomas or Emily Bridges. It lies with sports authorities who have ducked the issue and those who would shut down the debate rather than work through the difficulties. Sooner or later, we're going to have to debate this as grownups.

Kenan Malik is an Observer columnist

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Names in the newsLocal government

Jackie Weaver had no authority in the end, but she's still the queen of Zoom

Rebecca Nicholson

Even in defeat the parish clerk has managed to maintain the moral high ground against the bullies

Jackie Weaver: ‘Deeply saddened that it took so long and cost so much to get there.’ Photograph: Ken McKay/ITV/REX/Shutterstock

Sat 2 Apr 2022 13.00 EDTLast modified on Sat 2 Apr 2022 19.40 EDT

Like the post-credits sequence at the end of a superhero film, the saga of the acrimonious Handforth council meeting that went viral in 2021 has finally released its postscript.

It has been over a year since the heroic Jackie Weaver wrangled the meeting into some kind of order, by muting and booting out the furious men who tried to shout her down and told her she had “no authority here”. She became a symbol of no-nonsense stoicism, a steady hand in the wild west of lockdown Zooms. In a world of online rage, so the story went, we could all try being a bit more her.

Weaver became a star of sorts, giving interviews and writing a self-help book called *You Do Have the Authority Here*, subtitled *#What Would Jackie Weaver Do?*). But as much as this looked primed for a happy ending – the rise of Weaver, the fall of fury – Handforth council, rebranded now as town and not parish, has opted to close the whole affair with a bang.

Six investigations into councillor misconduct were made public last week, after initially being published in May last year. Three of them focused on the chaos of that Zoom meeting and came to a dramatic conclusion. This was a classic plot twist. It's the finale of season one of *The Good Place*, it's the Red Wedding episode of *Game of Thrones*.

The report decided that Weaver had no authority to do what she did, after all. Presumably her book is being reissued with a new cover and titled: *Technically You Don't Have the Authority Here, #What Would Jackie Weaver Do Anyway?*

The report was sympathetic towards Weaver's actions, citing the "unusual and difficult circumstances" she faced, but described her actions as being "without any formal footing in terms of appropriate process and procedure". I couldn't help but feel as if I'd just watched my favourite team lose. Really, did it matter who had the procedural authority when Weaver had the moral authority? As funny as it was, the atmosphere on that Zoom meeting was poisonous. Her triumph was about more than just the rules.

But I imagine that this attitude is probably what got that meeting into such a pickle in the first place and it is definitely not very #What-Would-Jackie-Weaver-Do? of me. Weaver herself was much more proper about it all, telling the BBC that she welcomed the findings, "but am deeply saddened that it took so long and cost so much to get there". Classy. Because *that* is what Jackie Weaver would do.

Adjoa Andoh: Bridgerton star could read anything to me

Adjoa Andoh: now listen up. Photograph: Ken McKay/ITV/REX/Shutterstock

Bridgerton has returned to Netflix for a second series, which has been criticised for its lack of raunch, although this has done nothing to stem the tide of *Bridgerton* fever. My inbox has never had so many "get the *Bridgerton* look/house/attitude!" emails (though I notice none for "get the *Bridgerton* early 19th-century life expectancy!").

This season features more of Lady Danbury, which means more Adjoa Andoh, the woman who plays her. I'm going off on a tangent here, but one lasting legacy of the lockdown months was that I got into audiobooks for the first time since I was a child. I found them very comforting, and still do. I hadn't given their narrators much thought before, but it turns out that it's an immense skill and a good narrator can elevate a story, just as a bad one can ruin it.

Andoh is pretty much the best there is. She does the voices without "doing the voices" and at this stage, her name attached to the reading of any story would sell it to me. She has read *Americanah* and *Pride and Prejudice*, but best of all, she read Lauren Groff's magnificent *Matrix* and she brought it to life beautifully.

Slash: I love rock'n'roll but where are the women?

Slash: rock god. Photograph: Daniel DeSlover/ZUMA Press Wire/REX/Shutterstock

The opening lick (just what is it about describing elements of rock music that brings on an instant Alan Partridge voice?) to Guns N' Roses' Sweet Child O' Mine has been named the best guitar riff of all time, in a poll of 1,500 people, carried out by software company Muse Group.

The 1988 hit, built around that enduring melody by guitarist Slash, the soundtrack to many a wedding and school disco, beat Eye of the Tiger, Another One Bites the Dust and, oddly, Sex on Fire by Kings of Leon, which isn't even Kings of Leon's best riff; that is surely Molly's Chamber and I'm as surprised as anyone that I have a strong opinion on Kings of Leon's guitar legacy.

It may come as no surprise that there are few women in the top 20, though it did find space for a bass line (Fleetwood Mac's The Chain). Joan Jett gets a look-in for I Love Rock'n'Roll and the White Stripes and Fleetwood Mac had female members, which counts, but this list reads as if it's from the era of those guitar magazines that featured a bikini-wearing woman on the cover, holding a guitar as if she were helplessly sexually attracted to it. It is

the sort of list that Nirvana (number seven, Smells Like Teen Spirit), a band with famous disdain for rock'n'roll machismo, would have hated.

It's not that there is a vast trove of female guitarists in the long history of rock music who have been unfairly passed over. It was a male old world. But I do hope that in 20 years' time, a list like this might have more women than Joan Jett on it.

Rebecca Nicholson is an Observer columnist

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For the recordUK news

For the record

This week's corrections

Sun 3 Apr 2022 01.00 EDT

The former chief executive of Volvo, Håkan Samuelsson, was paid £5m in 2020, not £19m as a profile said (27 March, p52).

Seaham Hall hotel and spa is in County Durham, not Northumberland, as a guide to spa retreats said (And relax..., 27 March, Magazine, p38).

Other recently amended articles include:

'If I am appointed,' says the QC in line for charity commissioner. He will be

Knit for victory: the lost songs that gave women a role on the home front

Yes, there is much more the democracies can do to ensure Vladimir Putin's defeat

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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Observer lettersP&O Ferries

Letters: a lesson to P&O in ethical leadership

While the ferry company dispensed with human values, a hovercraft service shows how staff and customers should be treated

P&O ferries in Dover. Photograph: Dan Kitwood/Getty Images

Sun 3 Apr 2022 01.00 EDT

The P&O human resources strategy shows how detrimental it is to treat experienced employees as expendable and to abandon human values even in a financial crisis ("No sea experience needed, says agency ad for P&O crews", News). As an Isle of Wight resident, during lockdown when our cross-Solent transport services were under extreme financial pressure, I saw the value of collaborative ethical leadership to keep us connected to the mainland and ensure all passengers, especially key workers, had access to their workplaces.

As a member of the Hover Travel User Group, I heard how the company reached out to assist ambulance services to transport patients quickly to the mainland. The crew underwent rigorous training and many seriously ill patients have benefited. The group, drawn from commuters, health charities and support groups, schools and island traders, is consulted about changes to practice. Its advice and suggestions are taken seriously and often implemented. The company knows it doesn't get it right all the time, but works with customers to alleviate difficulties. Such openness and service to the community ensure that we and the company survived turbulent times. Perhaps there's a lesson there for P&O.
Yvonne Williams
Ryde, Isle of Wight

Crime doesn't pay

Rana Mitter observes that Russia's elites consider China *nekulturny*, or uncultured, having never produced a Dostoevsky ("China-Russian relations carry deep memories of mutual respect… and scorn", Comment). China might do well, in the spirit of "friendship without limits", to remind its new friends that the author of *The Gambler* and *The Idiot* also wrote *Crime and Punishment*.
Austen Lynch
Garstang, Lancashire

Put people before plants

Your article about cycling and walking infrastructure plans ("Get on your bike? Not if some Tory councils have their way…", News) makes no mention of ill thought-out schemes, introduced without any equality impact assessment. Where I live, planters (glorified packing cases) and benches (who wants to sit in the road?) have been used to obstruct parking places, preventing people with impaired mobility from accessing shops and facilities.
Janet Mearns
London W3

In praise of tides

The sun doesn't always shine, the wind doesn't always blow, but the tide reliably goes in and out every day. Why was tidal power not mentioned in your piece on the choices we have as sources of energy? It now seems very shortsighted to have abandoned the Severn Estuary scheme. Whatever the cost then, it would be good value now.
Sue Humphries
York

Who are the real hypocrites?

Nick Cohen's scathing article deriding those he regards as Russian defenders/apologists/propagandists is most notable for its condemnation of the moral hypocrisy afflicting people who "excoriate the double standards of democracies while excusing or ignoring the crimes of dictatorships" ("Collaboration thrives on everyday vanity and ambition. Just look at RT's wannabes", Comment). This presents only one part of a circular debate. To many, those who unflinchingly condemn the actions of the Russian state while ignoring the death, destruction and displacement wreaked by unlawful, western-led invasions or sustained illegal occupations perpetrated by their allies epitomise everything that Cohen decries.
Nick Cusack
Paisley, Renfrewshire

The privatisation problem

I have worked in or alongside children's social care for many years and remember when privatisation was first promoted ("Revealed: top 10 children's care providers made £300m profits", News). Rather like academies and free schools, the rhetoric was handing over control, whether to experienced childcare workers, parents or teachers; rescuing services from bureaucratic control. Gradually, private equity has taken over and cost-cutting started to maximise profit. One such move was to sell the properties in the urban areas where the children had grown up and replace them with cheaper alternatives, often disused farmhouses and remote cottages,

frequently detached from communities. Local authorities placing vulnerable children have to take what is on offer.

When a child needs a placement is when there should be a suitable vacancy but, to maximise profit, facilities need to be full most of the time. This is where the problem arises, which only financial investment can resolve; profit means limiting vacancies, while choice and availability require carrying vacancies in the system. Add the fact that the millions of pounds of profit going to shareholders is all taxpayers' money, provided to care for vulnerable children, and we have a clear example of why we should not be privatising public services.
Roy Grimwood
Market Drayton, Shropshire

Chagossian courage

While agreeing with the general argument in Kenan Malik's insightful article ("As the imperial ties are being cast aside, a royal tour was always going to be a farce", Comment), his reference to the Chagos Islanders was misleading. In fact, the extension of citizenship to descendants of those shamefully evicted from the Chagos Islands is the result of effective campaigning by Chagossians themselves.

Their campaign resulted in a Lords amendment to the appalling nationality and borders bill that was passed by more than 80 votes, with strong support from all benches including the Conservatives. This, together with the support in the Commons of Henry Smith MP, led to the government concession. The campaigns for the Chagossians' right to return to their homeland and for citizenship are not and should not be mutually exclusive.
Baroness (Ruth) Lister of Burtersett
House of Lords
London SW1

The cost of Brexit

Thanks to Will Hutton for drawing attention to the catastrophic economic impact of Brexit with the words "the reign of silence on Brexit – and that

includes you, Labour party – means the damage goes unnoticed and uncriticised" ("For brazen cynicism, I have seen nothing like Sunak's plan in 40 years", Comment). Elsewhere in the paper, reports such as 400 people a week leaving the NHS and the substantial erosion of teachers' salaries highlight the pressure on public finances and the need to explore every possible option for raising the necessary tax revenues. In this context, any rational government or prospective government should surely re-examine the self-imposed Brexit, an issue that is forecast to have a net cost to public finances of £30bn a year, or, to put it another way, around £570m a week less to spend on the NHS.

The need for a re-examination is reinforced by the polls indicating that people are increasingly starting to realise the cost of Brexit, with three to one now considering it bad for the economy.
David Newens
Great Linford, Milton Keynes
Buckinghamshire

Role models with strings

As a huge fan of *Thunderbirds* and *Captain Scarlet*, I was sad to read of Gerry Anderson's difficult childhood ("Why Mother's Day was no cause to celebrate for creator of Thunderbirds", News). However, as I had a rather overprotective mum and a father who legged it shortly after I was conceived, the Tracy family, along with Colonel White, Lieutenant Green and the indestructible Captain himself gave me a clear idea of what it is to be a man, albeit a small, plastic one with strings attached.
Ian Grieve
Gordon Bennett, Llangollen canal

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OpinionCoronavirus

I have long Covid and despair that the UK government ignores its blight

Ravi Veriah Jacques

I'm 23 and have been seriously ill for a year. Why don't we spend more on treating this debilitating disease?

Covid vaccines were developed in record time; long Covid treatment needs similar urgency Photograph: Artur Widak/NurPhoto/REX/Shutterstock

Sun 3 Apr 2022 02.30 EDTLast modified on Sun 3 Apr 2022 03.13 EDT

Britain's next public health crisis is already looming: long Covid. The numbers are stark. According to the Office for National Statistics, 1.5 million people in the UK have long Covid, 281,000 of whom are so ill that their ability to undertake day-to-day activities has been limited "a lot". That's roughly the population of Bradford.

I know first hand how debilitating long Covid can be. I'm only 23. Before Covid struck, I had just graduated from Stanford University and was

halfway through a master's degree at Tsinghua University, Beijing, as a Schwarzman scholar. However, I've been seriously ill for a full year. My main symptom has been an intense fatigue that has forced me to spend up to 16 hours a day in bed and, when I do get up, I can't do any strenuous activity without my symptoms worsening. Long Covid has put my life almost completely on hold.

Yet I've received no effective medical treatment. I'm being seen in London at University College hospital's long Covid clinic, where I've been prescribed antihistamines and given advice on how to manage my symptoms. Alas, neither measure has made a dent on my fatigue.

My experience is far from unique. None of the more than 80 specialist NHS long Covid clinics can offer longhaulers effective treatments. But the clinics aren't the primary issue. The fundamental problem is that we lack treatments because research isn't progressing fast enough.

Long Covid is no longer a mystery. There is a growing body of biomedical research on its underlying pathophysiology. The leading theories as to what causes it include the presence of micro-clots in the blood and the continuous persistence of the virus in the body. But even if we know far more about the illness than two years ago, widely available biomedical treatments remain a distant prospect. The research is moving far too slowly for the hundreds of thousands of longhaulers, such as myself, who are desperate to get their lives back.

Much of the fault for this lies with our political leaders. The government has put just £50m into long Covid research. This is nowhere near what is required. Indeed, the all-party parliamentary group on coronavirus last week released a report that criticised the government for "not adequately funding" long Covid research and called for £100m a year to be spent on researching treatments.

> The research is moving far too slowly for the hundreds of thousands of longhaulers desperate to get their lives back

The underinvestment follows decades of underfunding for research into post-viral illnesses. Myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME), also known as "chronic fatigue syndrome", affects 250,000 people in the UK. It has a similar array of symptoms to long Covid, including brain fog and fatigue. A study found that 46% of long Covid patients meet the diagnostic criteria for ME. Had we found effective treatments for ME, it is likely that we'd also now have treatments for long Covid. But ME too has been starved of research funding. Worse still, in the UK most of that funding has gone towards studies that understand post-viral illnesses as primarily psychological – rather than physical – and therefore requiring psychological treatments.

The climax of this deeply misguided approach was the 2011 Pace trial, a £5m study that initially claimed that cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), a form of psychological rehabilitation often used for depression, and graded exercise therapy (GET) were effective treatments for ME. But when the trial data was finally made public after an extended campaign by ME patients, researchers quickly realised that the data did not support the conclusions. In November 2020, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence published damning analysis of the Pace trial that found the quality of science had been "low" or "very low" and advised doctors not to offer ME patients GET or CBT.

Following this debacle, alongside the growing biomedical research into long Covid, we finally seem to be past the dark days of psychologising post-viral illnesses. But much damage has been done; research is decades behind where it should be. Long Covid is an opportunity to put this right – to finally find treatments for post-viral illnesses. However, this will require investment on a far grander scale than £50m. Furthermore, that £50m pales in comparison to the economic impacts of long Covid, particularly on employment. Crucially, the risk profile for long Covid is very different to that of Covid. Whereas the elderly are at greatest risk of dying because of Covid, people aged 35-49 are most likely to develop long Covid. In other words, long Covid cuts down people in their economic prime; studies estimate that nearly half of longhaulers require reduced working hours and roughly one in four cannot work at all. Long Covid is therefore probably one of the driving factors behind the current labour shortage. Companies are

already feeling the crunch. A quarter of UK employers say long Covid is now one of the main causes of long-term, sickness-related absence.

Similarly, long Covid promises to be a further strain on the already overburdened NHS. Not least, providing care for hundreds of longhaulers will be very expensive. Most worryingly, more than 3% of healthcare workers have long Covid – above the national average of 2.4% – presumably due to their increased exposure to Covid. Even before Omicron, NHS staffers had lost more than 2m days due to long-Covid-related absences. Social care and education are also being significantly affected as teachers and social workers disproportionately have long Covid.

In short, it threatens to affect almost all sectors of society and the economy, making that £50m figure seem ever more irrational and miserly. It is also important to think of all the talent and potential that is being squandered while longhaulers wait for treatments to emerge.

Over the past two years, we've seen how quickly things can move when governments, scientists and the pharmaceutical industry apply themselves to a problem. It is a triumph of human endeavour that an array of effective vaccines was developed in record-breaking time. That urgency now needs to be applied to the battle against long Covid. If we dally, hundreds of thousands of people will needlessly lose years of their lives to this brutal and relentless illness.

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OpinionBosnia-Herzegovina

Ukraine matters, but so did Bosnia 30 years ago. Where was the outcry then?

Ed Vulliamy

Echoes of conflict are loud in Sarajevo on this poignant anniversary, yet there is one key difference

A Bosnian Muslim woman reads from a book of prayers among grave stones of her relatives who fell as victims of the Srebrenica massacre in 1995. Photograph: Elvis Barukcic/AFP/Getty Images

Sun 3 Apr 2022 02.00 EDT

This week, we shall be subjected to further appalling reports from Ukraine: murderous brutality and human suffering and resilience at its receiving end. President Vladimir Putin's invasion has been condemned as the worst violence in Europe since the Second World War.

But 30 years ago this week, a similar atrocity was detonated in Bosnia-Herzegovina. On 6-7 April three decades ago, as the US and EU recognised the fledgling Bosnian republic, Russian-backed Serbian and Bosnian Serb snipers and artillery gunners opened fire on the capital, Sarajevo, unleashing the worst carnage to blight Europe since the Third Reich – so far; one prays Ukraine will not usurp that awful title, if it hasn't already.

Commemorations in Sarajevo this week could not be more cogently timed: focused on Ukraine, not least because the echoes are very loud, viscerally clear and traumatically resonant. It's like: "We're with you not just because we're with you, but because we've been there."

However, there are baffling differences. While most in the west rightly rally around Ukraine, the hurricane of violence against Bosnia's Muslims and Croat Catholics met with bewilderment, apathy and – among the so-called international community – appeasement of, and even support for, the Serbian and Bosnian Serb aggressors. In Britain, leading the appeasement were men now described as "grandees" of the Conservative party: John Major, Douglas Hurd, Malcolm Rifkind – with keen allies on the organised and intellectual left.

While the west has armed Ukraine's resistance, an arms embargo on all sides, as leaders put it, strapped a ball and chain around the embryonic Bosnian partisan army and afforded the aggressor a calculated, overwhelming military advantage. While the nightmare in Ukraine drives the "international community" to seek a solution within three weeks, that in Bosnia was dragged on for three years.

This week in 1992, Sarajevo came under prolonged siege, eight years after hosting the Winter Olympics. Almost every Muslim inhabitant of eastern Bosnia was either killed or displaced and many women held captive in rape camps. Villages and mosques were incinerated or else under relentless siege in isolated UN-declared "safe areas". At the other end of the country, a crew from ITN and I revealed a gulag of concentration camps for Muslim and Catholic inmates in August 1992, which had operated since May, where thousands were killed, tortured and raped.

In July 1995, three bloody years later, 8,000 men and boys were summarily executed within five days after the fall of the "safe area" of Srebrenica, the victims of this genocide delivered to their killers by the very powers and UN soldiers pledged to protect them.

Bosnia is not only about the past: a survivor of the Omarska concentration camp, Satko Mujagić, is among those presenting an open letter from various Balkan and peace groups about current, heightened tensions generated by Russia's Serbian and Bosnian Serb allies, who aspire to a Bosnian Serb "Donbas" secession from Bosnia.

So why did not and does not Bosnia matter, as Ukraine rightly does? Marching through a sea of blue and yellow in London last Saturday, it was

poignant to recall, by contrast, the trickle of protesters 30 years ago for Bosnia (whose colours are the same).

> The notion of 'ancient ethnic hatreds' was peddled by appeasers. But what is morally confusing about 'ethnic cleansing'?

"If we'd had a tenth of the public support for Ukraine, and a twentieth of the military support, the war would have been stopped, a hundred thousand lives saved; also three lost years and the homes of millions," says Damir Sagolj, a Bosnian army guide during the war, now Pulitzer prize-winning photographer and director of the Warm (war, art, resistance, memory) Foundation, central to this week's commemorations.

Most of the 100,000 dead and two million displaced in Bosnia were Slavic Muslims and some survivors think the west's connivance was because they are just that – Muslims. But many victims were Bosnian Croat Catholics and the same attitude pertained towards the destruction of Vukovar, the Danube city levelled into the dust of its own stone during Croatia's earlier war of independence in 1991.

I thought the slaughter in Bosnia may have been just too close, "so near Venice", as the grateful Bosnian Serb vice-president Nikola Koljević once taunted me, satanically, with regard to western inaction. But that is disproved; part of the outcry for Ukraine is that, like Bosnia, it is part of Europe.

Perhaps Ukraine musters righteous support in part because Putin has nuclear weapons, which threaten us all. Conversely, Serbian president Slobodan Milošević did not possess such an arsenal; almost every reporter on the ground in Bosnia, and most military analysts, knew that 48 hours of carefully targeted Nato air strikes could have ended the atrocity, as they did in 1995, three years late, when the Bosnian Serbs capitulated immediately after a brief round of pinprick attacks. So, even more reason to have struck at any time between 1992 and 1995, without risk of the war spreading.

Perhaps people were shocked by Bosnia, and it was complicated, while Ukraine is manifestly Manichean. The notion of "ancient ethnic hatreds"

was lucratively peddled by appeasers. But what is complicated or morally and politically confusing about “ethnic cleansing”, as Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadžić himself called it, concentration, rape and death camps and the modern-day siege of a European capital city? For Kyiv, read Sarajevo and vice-versa; for Mariupol, Goražde or Srebrenica.

Columns are supposed to conclude with answers, not questions, but I have none.

Why was it OK to collaborate in Bosnia with violence echoed by Putin now? In the aftermath and public sphere, why is it OK for the German writer Peter Handke to be awarded a Nobel prize, as he was in 2019, having written eulogies to the “Greater Serbia” project and given the oration at the funeral of President Milošević, architect of the genocide; and for supposedly liberal feminist Olga Tokarczuk to fawningly clasp Handke’s hand, accepting her own prize, while the mothers of Srebrenica tearfully demonstrated outside? For the former Trotskyite Claire Fox, Brexit star of GB News and RT, as well as BBC radio, who insists that the concentration camps were a fabrication, to be made a baroness?

Why did not and does not Bosnia matter, as Ukraine absolutely does? The question has baffled – and the answer evaded – me ever since April 1992. But, beholding history repeat itself, never more than now.

Ed Vulliamy reported on the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s

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Headlines

- **Live Twenty fines issued for breach of Covid rules over Partygate, Met says**
- **Partygate Met says 20 fixed penalty notices issued**
- **Downing Street Boris Johnson must resign if fined, says Labour**
- **Interactive How No 10 parties took place as Covid death toll rose**

Politics live with Andrew Sparrow
Politics

Lebedev criticises Labour as MPs debate releasing security advice behind peerage – as it happened

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Metropolitan police

PM yet to formally accept law broken despite Met fines over parties, No 10 says

Boris Johnson's spokesperson says it is for police to make judgment after Scotland Yard announces 20 fixed-penalty notices

- Today's politics news – live updates

A police officer outside No 10. Police are investigating 12 events in 2020 and 2021 at Downing Street, six of which Boris Johnson is said to have attended. Photograph: Mark Thomas/REX/Shutterstock

Jessica Elgot, Peter Walker and Vikram Dodd
Tue 29 Mar 2022 09.52 EDTFirst published on Tue 29 Mar 2022 04.22 EDT

Boris Johnson has not formally accepted that the law was broken, No 10 has said, despite police saying 20 fixed-penalty notices would be issued for breaches of Covid rules after allegations of lockdown-breaking parties in Downing Street.

Any No 10 civil servants or other staff fined for breaching lockdown rules will not be obliged to tell their managers, and the names of those fined will not be released, Johnson's spokesperson said.

The only exceptions to this will be Johnson himself, and Simon Case, the cabinet secretary. No 10 initially said Case would not be named if fined, but Johnson's spokesman said later this would happen "given his unique position".

The Metropolitan police said those who received the fines would not be named publicly, according to the professional practice guidance for fixed-penalty notices (FPNs).

The force said on Tuesday there was a "significant amount of investigative material that remains to be assessed" and that further fines would be issued if the evidence threshold was met.

The Guardian reported on Monday night that 20 fines were expected for the most straightforward cases, with Boris Johnson unlikely to be among them as he has denied breaking the law.

The officials and staff who have been issued with FPNs have not yet been informed. Downing Street has said it does not know the identity of any of the 20.

Johnson's spokesperson said there was no obligation for any civil servants or special advisers who were fined to tell their managers, and that they would not be asked. Some might need to disclose it for vetting processes, depending on their security level, he said.

Any action against staff connected to the parties would come as part of the parallel report into the claims, led by the senior civil servant Sue Gray, the

spokesperson said, adding: “There are existing HR processes for anyone who breaks rules in the civil service, and those are well established.”

He declined to say whether Johnson, who has repeatedly denied any breach of the rules, now accepted the law was broken on his watch: “It’s for the Met to make that judgment rather than the prime minister. You will hear more from the prime minister once the report has concluded.”

Johnson was not expected to comment on the matter until the end of the police investigation, and the subsequent publication of the second part of the report by Sue Gray, the spokesperson said.

The Downing Street position prompted immediate criticism, with the former chief whip Mark Harper tweeting that officials and special advisers “are bound by the Civil Service Code … which says you must *comply with the law*.”

Police are investigating 12 events in 2020 and 2021, six of which Johnson is said to have attended. The force said it had obtained more than 300 photographs and 500 pages of documents, stemming from a Whitehall inquiry by Gray.

The Downing Street gatherings included a summer drinks party where attenders were invited to “bring your own booze”, leaving dos for civil servants and an alleged gathering in Johnson’s flat.

The Met said it would not confirm the number of referrals from each individual event, saying that may inadvertently lead to people being identified.

Those fined will receive a letter from the criminal records office, Acro, giving 28 days to pay the penalty. It is thought at this stage that the Met is probably referring people for fines of £100 or £200.

One police source said: “The Met would not put that application [for a fine] into Acro if they were not certain of their case. This is the low-hanging fruit.”

If the fines are disputed, the Met will review them. Those identified as facing fines could in theory produce evidence that shows they did not breach the regulations.

Labour's deputy leader, Angela Rayner, renewed calls for Johnson to resign and said that should apply as well to the chancellor, Rishi Sunak, who has also been issued with a police questionnaire about lockdown gatherings.

"The culture is set from the very top. The buck stops with the prime minister, who spent months lying to the British public, which is why he has got to go," she said. "It is disgraceful that while the rest of the country followed their rules, Boris Johnson's government acted like they did not apply to them."

The Liberal Democrats said the breaches within Downing Street were enough to compel Johnson to resign even if he was not personally fined.

The Lib Dem leader, Ed Davey, said: "If Boris Johnson thinks he can get away with Partygate by paying expensive lawyers and throwing junior staff to the wolves, he is wrong. We all know who is responsible. The prime minister must resign, or Conservative MPs must sack him."

A number of Tory MPs have privately said they would move to trigger a vote of no confidence if Johnson is fined by the Met, although some have withdrawn letters of no confidence because of the Ukraine crisis.

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Boris Johnson

Boris Johnson must resign if fined for breaching lockdown, says Labour

Angela Rayner increases pressure on PM with Met expected to issue first fines imminently

- Today's politics news – live updates

A protester holding a 'Partygate' placard in Westminster in December. Photograph: Matt Dunham/AP

Jessica Elgot Chief political correspondent
@jessicaelgot
Tue 29 Mar 2022 04.11 EDTLast modified on Tue 29 Mar 2022 04.35 EDT

Boris Johnson should resign if he is fined by the Metropolitan police for lockdown breaches, despite the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Labour has

said, after the Guardian revealed the first tranche of fines are expected to be issued imminently.

It is understood the Met is expected to issue about 20 fines on Tuesday related to the most straightforward cases, though more are expected to follow. A source said the fines would probably be imposed on "low-hanging fruit" – an indication that Boris Johnson is unlikely to be among them, as he has denied breaking the law.

Labour's deputy leader, Angela Rayner, said Johnson should resign if he were fined and so should his chancellor, Rishi Sunak, who has also been issued with a police questionnaire about lockdown gatherings.

Asked if it was the right moment to trigger a leadership contest, Rayner said: "I think it's important the support that we've given to the Ukrainian people, and we've been very clear in supporting the government in that and I think that's a very serious situation and that it's right that we've been united on that.

"But that doesn't negate the prime minister from lying to the British public and if he thinks it does then he's sadly mistaken."

She said Johnson had compounded the seriousness by potentially misleading the House of Commons. "There's breaking the rules, and then there's trying to lie about it, because that makes it even worse, because the British public have to have faith," she said.

"I think, to be honest, if the prime minister said at the time, OK, there was a gathering, I was at this party, I probably shouldn't have been there, hold my hands up. But he said there was no parties.

"Then he says, 'I didn't realise it was party,' when it was found out that he was actually there. So it shows a pattern of behaviour where the prime minister is not telling the truth to the British public. That's very serious."

Two months ago the force began examining material from the Whitehall inquiry carried out by the senior civil servant Sue Gray into multiple alleged breaches of Covid rules.

The Met sent questionnaires to more than 100 members of staff and aides, including Boris Johnson and his wife, Carrie; the head of the civil service, Simon Case; and the prime minister's former principal private secretary Martin Reynolds.

Police are investigating 12 separate events in 2020 and 2021, six of which Johnson is said to have attended. Scotland Yard said it had obtained more than 300 photographs and 500 pages of documents showing what Gray's inquiry believes to be potential rule-breaking.

Images include photos taken at parties and those taken from security cameras showing when people entered and exited buildings.

The education minister Will Quince said gatherings that took place across Downing Street and Whitehall during Covid restrictions "shouldn't have happened" but declined to say Johnson should go if he broke the law.

"I entirely understand why you asked that question. I understand the huge public interest," he told Sky. "I completely understand the considerable upset caused – the events that took place shouldn't have happened.

"But I hope you'll understand that both as an education minister, but more importantly, as there's ongoing live Metropolitan police investigation, it's just not appropriate that I comment."

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Coronavirus

How No 10's alleged parties took place as UK Covid death toll rose – interactive

A timeline of alleged lockdown parties and UK deaths, what Covid rules were in place at the time and what Boris Johnson said

- Coronavirus – latest updates
- See all our coronavirus coverage

Pamela Duncan, Pablo Gutiérrez, Ashley Kirk, Miles Probyn and Tobi Thomas
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The long awaited Sue Gray report has been published and, although she has been restricted in what she can say, she has shed light on yet more events. Only time will tell what political implications her report, on a series of claims about staff parties held in Downing Street and elsewhere in Whitehall, will have. Some have argued the "partygate" scandal could ultimately topple the prime minister, who has apologised for the things he did not get right. However Boris Johnson loyalists within the UK government and the wider Conservative party will be hoping that it will allow the prime minister to draw a line under the controversy.

With more than 178,000 Covid deaths to date, the Guardian plots the UK death toll against dates on which the staff parties are alleged to have occurred, as well as other alleged breaches of lockdown rules and Johnson's recent comments on the 2020 gatherings.

UK cumulative Covid deaths

Restrictions level:

1 Mar 2020

dummy

dummy

15 May 2020

421 deaths that day

"Cheese and wine" in the No 10 garden

Boris Johnson, his then fiancee and up to 17 staff were pictured in the Downing Street garden during lockdown with wine and cheese. The event took place while people were only allowed to meet one other person from outside their household, and only as long as it was an outdoor public place and with two-metre social distancing. Asked about Johnson's presence at the alleged party, his official spokesperson said: "On 15 May 2020 the prime minister held a series of meetings throughout the afternoon ... a small number of staff required to be in work remained in the Downing Street garden for part of the afternoon and evening."

20 May 2020

353 deaths that day

"BYOB" party in No 10 garden

Boris Johnson was accused on 10 January 2022 of an "utterly outrageous" lockdown breach as a leaked email showed one of his top officials invited

more than 100 Downing Street staff to a “bring your own booze” party during the first lockdown. After initially refusing to address the issue, on 12 January 2022 at PMQs, he accepted that he did attend but that he thought it was a work event. This event is now under police investigation.

23 May 2020

284 deaths that day

Cummings Barnard Castle story published

The Daily Mirror and the Guardian broke the story that Cummings breached lockdown rules by driving to Barnard Castle with his family on 12 April. Cummings later claimed that the family drove to Barnard Castle to test whether he was well enough to drive after having some problems with his eyesight.

18 Jun 2020

90 deaths that day

Private secretary leaving event

The Sue Gray report refers to a gathering in the Cabinet Office in 70 Whitehall "on the departure of a No 10 private secretary". It was later reported that the event was in honour of Hannah Young, a No 10 official and Johnson’s lead official on home affairs policy, who moved to become a senior diplomat in the US. This event is under police investigation.

19 Jun 2020

88 deaths that day

Johnson birthday event at No 10

ITV reported that Johnson had a birthday party, including a cake, singing and up to 30 people, at No 10 during the first lockdown, when rules forbade indoor social gatherings. A No 10 spokesperson said: “A group of staff working in No 10 that day gathered briefly in the cabinet room, after a meeting, to wish the prime minister a happy birthday. He was there for less than 10 minutes". The spokesman denied that family friends were hosted upstairs in the prime minister’s residence that evening and that he instead hosted a small number of family members outside. This event is now under police investigation.

13 Nov 2020

450 deaths that day

Alleged Downing Street flat party

This is the date that Johnson’s chief adviser, Cummings, and communications director, Lee Cain, left their roles. Sources have reported loud music and sounds of a party coming from the flat occupied by Johnson and his wife on this date. Cummings has alleged there had been “other flat parties” and suggested the pair’s “bubble” policy should be investigated. Asked if a party went ahead in his flat on 13 November, Johnson said: “No.” The Sue Gray report refers to a second event held the same day in Downing Street, on the departure of special adviser, known to be Dominic Cummings. No 10 did not deny later reports in the DailyTelegraph that the prime minister was seen going up to the flat on the night in question, where Abba songs including The Winner Takes It All were apparently played. Both events are under police investigation.

25 Nov 2020

499 deaths that day

Treasury officials' "impromptu drinks"

The Treasury was forced to defend officials holding an “impromptu” drinks party to celebrate Rishi Sunak’s autumn spending review during lockdown. The chancellor is not thought to have attended or have been aware of it taking place at the time. A spokesperson said a “small number” of staff had celebrated around their desks, despite reports putting the number closer to two dozen civil servants.

27 Nov 2020

460 deaths that day

Boris Johnson gives leaving speech for Cleo Watson

Boris Johnson is known to have attended the 27 November event, which sources claimed was an impromptu leaving do for aide Cleo Watson. The prime minister remarked on how crowded the room was, and then made a short speech paying tribute to her before leaving to continue working. The event took place during England's pre-Christmas lockdown.

Pre-Christmas

Defence minister leaving event

The Mirror alleges that the prime minister gave a speech at a leaving event for his then defence minister, Captain Steve Higham, in the run-up to Christmas 2020. According to the report, the PM was “there for a few minutes to thank him for his service” as a “small number of No 10 staff briefly said goodbye”. The Ministry of Defence declined to comment on the story to the Mirror.

10 Dec 2020

496 deaths that day

Department for Education staff party thrown by Gavin Williamson

Former education secretary Gavin Williamson held a Christmas party for up to two dozen staff at the Department for Education cafe. A spokesperson confirmed a report that Williamson gave a short speech and ministers enjoyed “drinks and canapes”, adding: “Looking back we accept it would have been better not to have gathered in this way at that particular time.” London was under tier 2 restrictions, including no mixing of households indoors.

11 Dec 2020

491 deaths that day

Wine fridge allegedly delivered to No 10 for "wine-time Fridays"

Pictures of a £142 drinks fridge, allegedly delivered to No 10 on 11 December 2020 formed part of a further Mirror story which also alleged that Downing Street staff continued to hold 'wine-time Fridays' throughout the pandemic, with the prime minister regularly in attendance and that Johnson encouraged staff to "let off steam", despite indoor socialising having been banned under lockdown rules.

14 Dec 2020

506 deaths that day

CCHQ Christmas party for Shaun Bailey

A picture – first revealed by the Daily Mirror – showed that an event hosted by the campaign for Shaun Bailey had been held at the Conservative campaign headquarters while indoor socialising was still banned by the continuing Covid restrictions.

15 Dec 2020

507 deaths that day

Virtual Christmas quiz attended by Boris Johnson

A day later, Boris Johnson hosted a Christmas quiz in Downing Street. The prime minister was pictured on a screen reading out questions while staff joined virtually from their desks and conferred on the answers, as revealed in yet another Mirror report with accompanying picture in late 2021. London was still under restrictions banning any social mixing between households.

16 Dec 2020

484 deaths that day

Department for Transport "low-key", "distanced" gathering by fewer than 12 staff

The Mirror revealed that Tory minister Grant Shapps' staff threw a Christmas party, where almost a dozen staff were "boozing and dancing" in a Whitehall office the day London was plunged into tier 3 restrictions. A spokesperson for Shapps said the minister had "absolutely no idea" about the gathering.

17 Dec 2020

567 deaths that day

Cabinet Office Christmas party

A social event is alleged to have taken place in the cabinet secretary, Simon Case's office on 17 December 2020. Case, who was tasked in late 2021 with investigating other parties alleged to have taken place in the same period, stepped down from the role following allegations that the event had taken place among his staff while all indoor social mixing was barred in late 2020. It was later reported that another event occured at the Cabinet Office that day after Kate Josephs, the former Covid taskforce head, apologised for attending a drinks gathering to mark her leaving the civil service. The Sue Gray report mentions a third event, "a gathering in No 10 on the departure of a No 10 official. These events are under police investigation.

18 Dec 2020

586 deaths that day

Downing Street Christmas party

The claim that a staff party was held in No 10 after London had been bumped up to tier 3 restrictions was broken by the Daily Mirror and subsequently denied by Johnson's spokesperson. However, a video filmed four days after the event showed Allegra Stratton, the prime minister's then aide, rehearsing for televised press conferences and joking with aides about a party on 18 December. Stratton laughed it off as a "business meeting" but added: "It was not socially distanced." Stratton resigned in early December 2021 following the publication of the video. The event is under police investigation.

14 Jan 2021

1,338 deaths that day

Leaving event for two private secretaries

Boris Johnson attended a prosecco-fuelled leaving do for a No 10 aide during the strict post-Christmas lockdown, which is now under police investigation. The event was first brought to light in the Sue Gray report which said the No 10 event marked the departure of two private secretaries. Johnson is understood to have given a speech thanking the official for their work and staying for around five minutes.

16 Apr 2021

31 deaths that day

"Boozy" leaving do held the day before Queen mourned Duke of Edinburgh alone

The Telegraph reported that No 10 held two "boozy" leaving events the night before the Queen mourned Prince Philip while socially distanced and masked. The report claimed staff drank until the early hours and at points danced. The prime minister's former director of communications James Slack, for whom one of the events was organised, apologised for the "anger and hurt" caused. This was later followed by an apology from Downing Street to the palace. These events are under police investigation.

26 Jun 2021

17 deaths that day

Matt Hancock resigns after breach of his own lockdown rules

Hancock resigned as health secretary after footage was released showing him kissing his closest aide, Gina Coladangelo, in his ministerial office – in breach of his own Covid-19 rules. After an apology failed to quell public outrage, and Tory MPs observed a deliberate silence despite the prime minister's initial support, the minister fell on his sword, saying: "I've got to resign."

1 Dec 2021

136 deaths that day

Prime minister's first appearance in House of Commons after party allegations

Boris Johnson in the House of Commons after the Mirror's first story broke about Christmas parties in Downing Street: "What I can tell the right honourable and learned gentleman is that all guidance was followed completely in No 10."

7 Dec 2021

125 deaths that day

"All the guidelines were observed"

When asked about Downing Street parties in December, the prime minister told BBC News: "All the guidelines were observed."

8 Dec 2021

124 deaths that day

"I have been repeatedly assured that the rules were not broken"

After the Allegra Stratton video was released by ITV News, Johnson told the House of Commons: "I apologise for the impression that has been given that staff in Downing Street take this less than seriously. I am sickened myself and furious about that, but I repeat what I have said to him: I have been repeatedly assured that the rules were not broken. I repeat that I have been repeatedly assured since these allegations emerged that there was no party and that no Covid rules were broken."

13 Dec 2021

105 deaths that day

"I certainly broke no rules"

Asked again about Downing Street parties on Sky News, Johnson said: “I can tell you once again that I certainly broke no rules … all that is being looked into.”

20 Dec 2021

128 deaths that day

"Those were people at work"

After the Guardian published pictures of people, including the prime minister, at drinks in the garden of No 10 on 15 May 2020, Johnson told BBC News: “Those were people at work, talking about work. I have said what I have to say about that.”

10 Jan 2022

225 deaths that day

"All that, as you know, is the subject of a proper investigation"

Asked if he had attended the 20 May 2020 event, Johnson replied: "All that, as you know, is the subject of a proper investigation by Sue Gray." Asked if he had been interviewed by Gray, Johnson replied: “All that is a subject for investigation by Sue Gray.”

12 Jan 2022

214 deaths that day

Johnson: "I believed implicitly" that garden party "was a work event"

Boris Johnson admitted to parliament that he did attend a gathering in the Downing Street garden on 20 May and apologised to the nation while arguing it was a work event and “technically” broke no rules.

31 Jan 2022

Sue Gray report published

Sue Gray delivered her findings into allegations of lockdown-breaching parties inside Downing Street and Whitehall. However, due to the Metropolitan Police's own investigation into the events, the report was not published in full. Shortly after the publication of the report Boris Johnson told parliament he was "sorry" for "the things we simply didn't get right".

The prime minister will have hoped to have drawn a line under the controversy. Only time will tell how this sequence of events will play out for Boris Johnson.

Data notes and methodology

UK daily deaths are as recorded by the Office for National Statistics – which includes all deaths where Covid was mentioned on the death certificate deaths to 14 January 2022, as in the most recent publication – and stood at 178,978 people. This time lag means that the graphic remains static for the final 12 days of the interactive which does not reflect the actual situation on those days.

This differs to the government's primary metric sourced from the Covid-19 data dashboard, which only includes those deaths occurring within 28 days of a positive Covid test, which, at the time of writing, had recently exceeded 151,000 deaths.

The restrictions level is sourced from the University of Oxford's coronavirus government response tracker. A stringency index score of above 75 is classed as "very high" restrictions level, above 50 "high", above 25 "medium" and then anything below is classed as "very low".

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2022.03.29 - Spotlight

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Victoria Derbyshire

Interview

‘I went into fighting mode’: Victoria Derbyshire on escaping violence, surviving cancer – and taking on her bosses

Simon Hattenstone

‘I’ve had some amazing bosses and I’ve had some non-human bosses’ … Victoria Derbyshire at Broadcasting House. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

The veteran BBC journalist discusses her axed TV show, her father’s domestic abuse, reporting on Ukraine and reaching a new audience on TikTok

Tue 29 Mar 2022 05.00 EDTLast modified on Tue 29 Mar 2022 05.19 EDT

I call Victoria Derbyshire’s team to say I’m at Broadcasting House in central London. Before the sentence is out, she is standing in front of me. The BBC journalist has always been one step ahead of the game.

The expression “Don’t mourn, organise!” could have been invented for her. Every time the journalist has had a crisis – and there have been plenty – she has done something about it. Whether it was surviving her father’s domestic violence, getting cancer in her 40s, or finding out from the newspapers that her TV show was to be axed, she has always been quick to act when faced with adversity.

When Russia invaded Ukraine, she acted again. A couple of days earlier, Jonathan Aspinwall, BBC news’s podcast supremo, had asked if she fancied

co-hosting a podcast on Ukraine with Newsnight's Gabriel Gatehouse. On 24 February, she woke up at 4am, an hour after Vladimir Putin announced the launch of a "special military operation". "I WhatsApped Jonathan and said: 'We need to do the first podcast today.'"

Ukrainecast has become a must-listen for those keen to contextualise the latest horrors of the war. The daily podcast takes a deep dive into a topical theme, calling on the BBC's bank of experts and talking to those struggling to survive in Ukraine or trying to escape. It does what 53-year-old Derbyshire has done so well throughout her career – establish relationships with people and return to them time and again, so we have an investment in their lives. Here, this makes the terrible numbers game of war intimate and personal.

It's a jungle out there … Derbyshire on I'm a Celebrity in November. Photograph: ITV/Rex/Shutterstock

I tell her how much I like Ukrainecast. "Why?" she asks. It's typical Derbyshire. Most people would settle for the compliment and move on, but she puts me to the test. She wants to know if I really like it and why – partly to learn (she is incredibly inquisitive) and partly because she can't stop herself asking questions. Derbyshire, who joined the BBC 28 years ago after graduating from Liverpool University with a degree in English and Preston

Polytechnic (now the University of Central Lancashire) with a postgraduate diploma in journalism, is an exceptionally good interviewer. With vulnerable people, she is empathic without being saccharine. With politicians, she is tough without being strident.

Derbyshire gets the coffees in at a cafe next to the BBC. When she returns, she checks the latest headlines on her phone. As well as the podcast, she co-presents the BBC's lunchtime news. She has also just learned a new skill of which she is particularly proud. For the past four months, she has been making short films on TikTok, highlighting the stories of the day. "They've had over 50m views," she says, proudly. She loves TikTok, because it's targeted at young people who will quickly tell you when you are getting it wrong. "I've learned such a lot. I get amazing feedback. I put up a story about police officers not being vetted properly and someone asked what vetted means. Journalists throw these terms in and, if we don't explain them, it excludes people."

> I ran to the police station to get help for my mum when my father was beating her up. They took two hours to get there

She is a dab hand at marketing herself. TikTok has provided her with a new audience, just as I'm a Celebrity … Get Me Out of Here! did when she appeared on the 2020 series. "Young kids stop me on the train. They don't know me from doing the news or doing my programme. But they know me from TikTok and I'm a Celeb."

Derbyshire grew up in Rochdale, Lancashire, the oldest of three children. Her mother, Pauline, was – and remains – her inspiration. "My mum was a brilliant primary school teacher. She taught all three of us." Did you have to call her Mrs Derbyshire? "*Course*. What else would you call her?" Mum? "No, she had to be completely impartial, though when we used to go up and have our books marked she would put her hand up my skirt and rub the back of my leg as a secret sign that actually I was her daughter and she was my mum." She laughs. "In a comforting way, not an inappropriate way!"

As for her father, the family lived in fear of him and his violent outbursts. On one occasion, he poured a cup of boiling soup over Derbyshire. "When I

was a young teenager, I ran to the police station to get help for my mum when my father was beating her up. They took two hours to get there." When the police arrived, her father invited them in for a cup of tea and they left happy. "I wonder if that was a point in my head when I thought: 'OK, don't rely on other people; if you need something doing, do it yourself.'"

Her father, who ran a building company, went bankrupt. Bills went unpaid and the phone and electricity were cut off. Did she ever think her father would kill her mother? "Yes," she says, baldly.

'I was devastated, but I immediately went into practical mode, fighting mode' … Derbyshire on the surprise closure of her daytime show. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

She tells her two teenage boys that, if they are faced with a bully, they should fight back with humour. Is that what she did? "God no, there was no humour there. The older I got, the more confident I became with language. He would get words wrong and I wouldn't dare laugh, but I would say: 'Don't you mean such-and-such a word?' and that would really piss him off." You knew it would? "Yes. It was my only way of trying to get one over him. I couldn't physically match him." In 2020, Derbyshire made a Panorama programme about domestic violence and spoke about her experience.

When Derbyshire was 16, her mother took Derbyshire and her siblings and walked away. She never saw her father again. In 2020, he died of a stroke. The family didn't attend his funeral. Was she glad when he died? "I was completely emotionless, because I don't want to spend any of my energy thinking about him. Life is short. I think this feeling's really intensified since cancer. I love my family, I love my friends, we have the best time – and I'm not wasting time on people that …" She trails off.

She has two glitzy rings on her wedding finger. Wow, that's a lot of diamonds, I say. She grins. "*Loads* of diamonds, man! Aren't they gorgeous? These are the engagement and wedding rings my stepdad bought for my mum. How fab is that?" She adored her stepfather, Des, who was married to her mother for 20 years before dying at 56. "Des was a proper dad to us. I never regarded my biological father as a proper father. When Mark and I got married, Mum gave them to us. So my stepdad is with me all the time."

In 2018, Derbyshire married her long-term partner, Mark Sandell, the father of her sons, who runs a radio and podcast production company. After she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2015, she told him that, if they got through it, she would like to get married. She never expected to make it. But after six rounds of chemotherapy and 30 sessions of radiotherapy, she was told in 2017 that there was no evidence of active cancer. There is an 11% chance of the cancer recurring.

She went into practical mode after her diagnosis. She made plans in case she didn't survive, telling Mark that he would have to sell the house, because he wouldn't be able to afford the mortgage on a single salary. As she has done so often, she turned her experience into journalism. She made a series of powerful video diaries, documenting the gruelling treatment, the loss of her hair, her changing moods and how she was coping.

> Millions of viewers and listeners are turning to the BBC right now because they trust it, because it's accurate

Derbyshire was determined to make people more aware of breast cancer. So, two years after her mastectomy, she stripped off in front of a live audience for ITV's The Real Full Monty. Then, last year, she launched the podcast

And Then Came Breast Cancer. If ever there were a cancer programme that could be uplifting, this is it. Her latest guest was the Labour MP Dawn Butler, who spoke to Derbyshire for the podcast and BBC Breakfast about Butler's recent breast cancer diagnosis, which she revealed yesterday, and the lower uptake of screening tests among women of colour. Derbyshire says she is unwilling to waste her energy on negativity and anger, particularly since her diagnosis.

This was put to the test in January 2020 when she read in the Times that her BBC Two programme was going to be axed, as part of a wider set of cuts. Called Victoria Derbyshire, it ran every weekday for two hours. It did something no other morning magazine show was doing, covering heavy-duty subjects (such as the contaminated blood inquiry) and regularly breaking news stories (exclusives included the story of a woman who proved her father was a rapist using her own DNA as evidence; a harrowing 45-minute interview with four footballers who had been sexually abused by the football coach Barry Bennell; and 800 women suing over vaginal mesh implants).

The management team claimed the show was too costly and that it hadn't grown its audience. As usual, Derbyshire tackled it head on. She called out her bosses, stating that the show had met the targets it had been set: to get millions of digital views and reach people who don't think the BBC is for them.

How did she react when she read that the show was being pulled? Her first mission, she says, was to find out if it was true. "I texted my immediate boss just before I went on air. No reply. I texted his boss. No reply. And then, after the programme, I received a really shit, cold message, which told me nothing, so I went to find them. They were in a meeting, so I basically doorstepped them."

Raising awareness … Derbyshire in 2015. Photograph: Victoria Derbyshire/Facebook/PA

The people in the meeting were Gavin Allen, who was head of news programmes, and Fran Unsworth, the director of news and current affairs – both of whom have since left the BBC. "They said: 'Oh, this was meant to come out next week,' and I said: 'W*hat* was meant to come out next week?' I was so fucking steely it was untrue. I was determined not to cry. Fran Unsworth said: 'W-w-w-w-we-we weren't meant to announce this till ...' She was shaking. And I said: 'What is it that you weren't going to announce till next week?' because I wanted to make her say it.

"And she said: 'We are – we are – we are – we've taken the decision to close the programme.' I was like: 'You're *fucking* kidding me?' She said she was sorry it leaked out. I said: 'What about being sorry about closing the programme and the impact on the team's jobs? It's a disgrace.'"

The meeting went on for almost an hour, Derbyshire says. "In the end, Gavin Allen said: 'We'd be really grateful if you could keep this to yourself till next Wednesday.' I just laughed and said: 'You're *fucking* joking, aren't you?'" Her voice rises in pitch. "And then I just left."

> Young kids stop me on the train. They don't know me from the news, but they know me from TikTok and I'm a Celeb

You must have been angry then, I say. "You're desperate for me to say I'm angry. I wasn't angry. I was gutted, I was devastated, but I immediately went into practical mode, fighting mode. What can we do? How can we change this? We had some amazing people on our team. Young, diverse people, who left the BBC because they had no job."

When I approach Allen for a response, he says: "It was an appalling way to have learned the news, which I said, apologising on the BBC's behalf, to the entire Derbyshire team." But, he adds: "It wasn't about 'keeping the news to herself until the following week'; it was about giving the wider team the remaining courtesy to explain the decision and discuss it with them face to face [first]." Unsworth did not respond to a request for comment.

A campaign began to save the show. Derbyshire even ended up reporting on the decision, live-tweeting from the BBC staff presentation about the cuts. "Head of Internal Comms jst said to us all, 'enjoy and relax'," she told her followers on Twitter. But the campaign ended with a whimper when it was overtaken by the pandemic.

I ask how she has managed to rebuild her trust with the BBC. "I haven't got a trust issue with the BBC," she says. "It's not the BBC, is it? It's individuals. The management have all changed now. It really depends who's in charge. I've had some amazing bosses and I've had some non-human bosses." Like who? "I'm never going to tell you that in a million years."

She says she loves the two jobs she is doing and is as hungry to tell stories as she has ever been. I ask if she feels there is an existential threat to the BBC, with the government treating it as a political football. "I'm going to choose my words carefully," she says. The idea of Derbyshire being discreet is funny, as much of her appeal lies in the fact that she isn't. "I was grateful when the culture secretary stood up in the House of Commons and appreciated all the journalists that are out in Ukraine right now bringing the truth to audiences across the world."

Baring all … Derbyshire *(far right)* on The Real Full Monty. Photograph: James Gourley/ITV/Shutterstock

Anyway, she says, the BBC's coverage of the war has been brilliant and it has proved once again why the country needs a public service broadcaster. "Millions of viewers and listeners are turning to the BBC right now because they trust it, because it's accurate, because they like the correspondents who are out there, because they're human beings. This is what we do and we shouldn't forget that."

Isn't it about time she looked for her next big job? I remind her that there is a vacancy at Newsnight, now that Emily Maitlis is leaving to launch a podcast and host a radio show with Jon Sopel for Global. Would she fancy that gig? "Errrrr, I think everyone will go for that. Look, I've got two jobs at the moment," she protests. Has the BBC advertised the job yet? "I have no idea. That is a very good question."

As we wind up, a producer friend runs into the cafe with the news that Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe has been released after being imprisoned for six years in Iran.

"Oh. My. Fucking. God," Derbyshire says. "Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God." She takes a deep breath. "I messaged them all last night to say I've

got my fingers crossed for you. Oh my God, that's amazing. Can I just check that?" She picks up her phone. "Oh my God, she's on her way home to the UK." Now I see first-hand how much journalism means to her. She is almost hyperventilating with joy. "Oh. My. God. I feel like I want to cry." She is welling up. "Wow!"

She tells me that, when Zaghari-Ratcliffe's husband, Richard, was on hunger strike recently, she spent 90 minutes with him, just chatting to him and his mum. "Wow! He's amazing. But she's amazing, too. *Jeeeeeesus*. Wow! See! I'm just so happy. Some positivity in the gloom. Wow! Right, I've got to go to work and do this. I'm going to do a TikTok straight away saying: 'Oh my God, you will not believe what's happened.' Then I've got to do the 1pm news. And all the headlines have changed, which is good. Then I'm doing Ukrainecast. Oh my God!"

Ukrainecast is available on BBC Sounds and other podcast platforms

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Ireland

‘Nobody knows what happened’: the row over the non-vanishing Irish lake

Lough Funshinagh flooded in 2016, and hasn’t receded since, causing an environmental legal tussle

Tom Carney on the makeshift road that maintains access to his home. Photograph: Lisa O'Carroll

Lisa O'Carroll in Lough Funshinagh
@lisaocarroll
Tue 29 Mar 2022 00.00 EDTLast modified on Tue 29 Mar 2022 11.53 EDT

It is the disappearing lake that has stopped disappearing.

Lough Funshinagh in the west of Ireland used to drain through a “swallow hole”, as if someone had pulled the plug in a bath, but for an unknown reason nature’s plumbing has broken down, flooding an area thought to be twice the lake’s usual size and threatening homes and livelihoods.

Last week, Roscommon county council halted work to drain the lake artificially with a 2.5-mile (4km) pipeline to the nearby River Shannon after the campaign group Friends of the Irish Environment took the local authority to the high court on the grounds that no environmental impact assessment had been carried out, breaching EU rules.

A high court order halting the flood relief has set off a bitter row, with some local residents arguing that Ireland's scientists and political leaders would be pulling out all the stops to find a solution if it were homes in coastal Dublin that were under threat.

Mary Beattie's home has been surrounded by industrial-sized sandbags for more than a year and her garden has partially flooded. "There are even life belts here," the 69-year-old said, pointing to her submerged farmland. "Did you ever see anything like it?"

Beattie said she would move on to the top of floor of her house if it became inundated.

Mary Beattie's house in 2018, and in 2022, with her son Padraig. The house has been barricaded, the road has been raised as nearby fields remain submerged.

Mary Beattie's house in 2018, and in 2022, with her son Padraig. The house has been barricaded, the road has been raised as nearby fields remain submerged.

Mary Beattie's neighbours' house before flooding in 2016. Photograph: Google Maps

Land around the house has been flooded for six years. Photograph: Padraig Beattie

With flood relief now at a standstill, local residents say they have been abandoned and that far from being protected, the environment has been

damaged by inaction. Rare Bewick's and whooper swans, curlews and the unusual fauna supported by the seasonal waters have all disappeared.

"The law is the winner here, nobody else," said Geraldine Murray, who lives locally.. She remembered scores of swans nesting on the shores when she was a child. Now they are gone, as are the geese, and other wildlife.

Standing on what looks like a mangrove thicket in the waters inundating his farm, Tom Carney said the flooding was "an awful affliction" for the community.

"The sad thing is nobody knows what happened," the 70-year-old said. "Whether it is because of climate change or a collapse in the underground caverns or some obstruction that has got in the way, nobody knows."

Tom Carney remembers the swallow hole and the whirlpool draining the lake

Funshinagh is one of the largest turloughs in Ireland and is officially considered "of major ecological importance" and a Priority 1 habitat under EU law. It is served by both surface water during heavy rainfall and groundwater through springs bubbling up from the karst limestone bedrock.

While it hasn't vanished fully to bone dry land since 1996, a crisis set in after heavy rain in 2016 caused flooding that has failed to recede.

Carney said he remembered when the lake used to slowly drain dry, disappearing down the swallow hole and making a whirlpool-like noise as the last water disappeared underground.

According to the International Association of Hydrogeologists (pdf), the water level rose by 2 metres above normal levels in 2016, causing extensive and prolonged flooding. "Based on the slow outflow, it was calculated that it would take 600 days or two years for the floodwaters to drain and that would assume no further flood events," the IAH said in a 2018 report.

Farmers in the area do not want the lake to drain completely, but fear the situation for the habitat and their homes will worsen if after a relatively dry winter they are faced with another deluge next winter. Septic tanks will be

flooded, sending effluent into what has been recognised as some of the cleanest lake water in the country, they said.

Bernadette Mee, a farmer, tells how the floods have killed decades-old ash and native larch. Photograph: Lisa O'Carroll

"Us farmers, we just want it to regulate itself, we just want to protect the environment like we did before with respect and dignity to all the natural wildlife," said Bernadette Mee, pointing to acres of decades-old ash and native larch killed by the flooding on her farm.

She like Murray and Carney say the irony is the habitat the EU law is designed to protect has been destroyed.

This time of the year, the air above the shoreline should be filled with feathers and the chitter-chatter of birds, Mee said. "The birds you hear are behind you, they are not on the lough, there are no swans, no geese on the lough, there's nothing. The reed beds are gone, they have no cover."

Mee said that before 2016, the water was difficult to see such was the expanse of rushes and reed beds. The vegetation supported swans by giving them cover and because they could feed off the tadpoles and nutrients on the lake floor.

Roscommon county council said it had “left no stone unturned trying to find a mechanism to deliver urgent emergency relief that would ensure families could stay in their homes”, but added that it had been questioned every step of the way by Friends of the Irish Environment.

Eoin Brady, a lawyer for campaign group, said the council had twice “sought to approve a project to abstract a very significant volume of water” from a protected habitat without conducting environmental assessments, as legally required to do.

“If Roscommon County Council had proceeded as they had originally intended by undertaking a lawful scheme, it is entirely possible that flood relief measures would be in place by now at Lough Funshinagh. There is an important lesson for public authorities from the outcome of these legal proceedings that, in dealing with the impacts of climate change, the longest way around is usually the shortest way home,” he said.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/29/row-non-vanishing-irish-lake-lough-funshinagh-drain-flooding-environment-legal

Energy bills

Is it cheaper to have a bath or a shower? Your energy questions answered

From boiling pasta to vampire devices, experts explain how you can reduce your bills

- **How smart thermostats can save you fuel and money**
- **How to beat the biggest price rise in living memory**
- **Read your meter on 31 March before prices rise**

A short(ish) shower will be cheaper than this. Photograph: Youngoldman/Getty

Hilary Osborne and *Miles Brignall*
Tue 29 Mar 2022 02.00 EDTLast modified on Wed 30 Mar 2022 04.25 EDT

With energy bills on everyone's mind, those little questions about how to cut your use have come to the fore. We asked experts to answer some FAQs.

Is it cheaper to boil water for pasta in an electric kettle or a pan on a gas hob?

The million-dollar question. Brian Horne, a senior insight and analytics consultant at the Energy Saving Trust, says a kettle is more efficient than a hob for heating water as it is heated from the inside, whereas the pan is heated from the outside and needs to get warm first. Kettles will boil water faster and use fewer units of energy. But while gas hobs take much longer and use up to three times more energy in unit terms, the consumer group Which? says that because gas is cheaper than electricity (less than a third per unit), it works out slightly cheaper to boil water on a gas hob than using an electric kettle. This assumes you are boiling only the quantity you need, are using a lid and switch off the hob as soon as it has boiled.

Have you considered how much it costs when you boil pasta? Photograph: Delihayat/Getty

Am I wasting energy by leaving my phone charger plugged in?

Yes. British Gas estimates that as much as 23% of our electrical usage, or £200 a year currently, could be put down to what are being termed vampire devices – chargers left plugged in and switched on or items on standby. Hi-fis, televisions, set-top boxes and games consoles that sit on standby are all using power – and the older the device, the greater the standby load. However, it is also the unseen chargers, such as those for electric toothbrushes, razors, etc. “As soon as your device is fully charged, try to get into the habit of unplugging it,” says Marc Robson, a British Gas smart energy expert. “As well as saving energy, this will prolong your battery life. And it could also save you about £60 a year on your electricity bills.”

Do you charge your phone for longer than is necessary? Photograph: Daniel Jedzura/Alamy

Are electric or gas hobs cheaper to cook on?

Gas, because the unit price is far less than the unit price of electricity. This is partly offset if you have an induction hob. “If you’re looking to reduce your carbon emissions, consider using an electric or induction hob rather than gas,” Horne says. “Induction hobs are typically the most energy-efficient as no energy is wasted heating space around the pan.”

Whichever you use, Robson says you can cut energy use by some careful choices: “Use the right size of saucepan for what you’re cooking and fill it with just enough water. Putting a lid on will save energy and reduce condensation in the kitchen, too.”

Should I microwave soup rather than using a hob?

If you are reheating food, microwaves are more efficient than electric and gas ovens, Horne says. “Comparing a microwave with a hob is trickier, though – the microwave is likely to use the least energy but a gas hob may still be cheaper.”

Can I wash my clothes properly at less than 40C?

Yes. “Modern washing powders and detergents work effectively at lower temperatures,” Horne says. Brands such as Ariel and Persil advertise that their products work at 30C. None seem to make claims about washes below that. However, Which? says its tests found “cleaning power was slightly worse at 20C compared with 40C” but “switching to a liquid detergent helped, and should still be enough for everyday cleaning”.

Laundry detergent brands such as Ariel and Persil advertise that their products work at 30C. Photograph: Lynne Sutherland/Alamy

Just moving the dial down to 30C will make a big difference to the cost of running a washing machine – Horne says it will cut the energy needed by 40%. Robson adds: “Spin your clothes before hanging them out to dry, instead of relying on your tumble dryer.”

Should I keep my house at a constant heat or let it cool down and warm up?

You will always save money by turning the heating off when you don’t need it, Horne says. It will take extra energy to heat up when you turn it back on but this will always be less than the energy wasted by running the heating when you don’t need to. He says the only exception is if you have a heat pump, as these are more efficient if you leave them running for longer at a lower output.

Martyn Bridges, the director of technical support at the boiler maker Worcester Bosch, agrees: “It is generally more economical to turn off your heating system when you are not so much in need of it. For example, through the night or parts of the day when the house is empty.”

Does it always make sense to turn lights off when you leave a room?

Traditional lightbulbs and modern LED lights don’t take any extra energy to turn on, so you should always turn them off when you are not using them or when you leave a room, Horne says. He says this could save you about £20 a year.

Robson says LEDs are so energy-efficient that it won’t make much difference to your bills if you leave them on for five minutes when you pop out of the room “but we always advise turning them off anyway, so that you get into good habits”.

If you do still have any traditional lightbulbs, switching them for LEDs will result in a 69% energy saving.

Is it cheaper to have a bath or a shower?

Is a long, hot bath the most economical option? Photograph: Michele Adamson/Getty

A short(ish) shower. Worcester Bosch's Bridges says: "A typical bath requires about 90 litres of water, split between 60 litres or so of hot water and 20 to 30 of cold. A normal thermostatic mixer shower head discharges about nine litres a minute, requiring about six litres of hot and three litres of cold. So, providing you shower in less than 10 minutes, it will be more economical to shower."

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from https://www.theguardian.com/money/2022/mar/29/cheaper-bath-shower-energy-questions-answered-reduce-bills

Energy bills

Energy bills: read your meter today before prices rise

Ensure you get the current, cheaper rates for all the energy you use right up to the end of Thursday 31 March

- **Is it cheaper to have a bath? Your questions answered**
- **How smart thermostats can save you fuel and money**
- **How to beat the biggest price rise in living memory**

‘We recommend anyone who can to submit a meter reading online,’ says one energy supplier. Photograph: Simon Dack/Alamy

Rupert Jones
Thu 31 Mar 2022 03.28 EDTFirst published on Fri 25 Mar 2022 03.00 EDT

Phones and pens at the ready: Thursday 31 March will be “national meter reading day”.

With energy bills due to rise by an average of 54% on Friday 1 April, millions of households are being urged to take gas and electricity meter readings the day before.

The aim is to ensure you get the current, cheaper rates for all the energy you use right up until close of play on Thursday. Otherwise your supplier might charge some of it at the new higher unit prices.

Gareth Kloet, the energy spokesperson at the comparison site GoCompare, says: “We would urge all bill payers to take both gas and electricity meter readings on 31 March and make sure you submit these to your supplier.”

Money-saving guru Martin Lewis is encouraging people to do the same, to “draw a line” in terms of their usage.

If everyone does that, on Thursday there are likely to be a lot more people than usual phoning the energy companies and logging on to their websites.

EDF, one of the big energy suppliers, told Guardian Money: “We expect a lot of customers might try to contact us with meter readings on 31 March and would recommend anyone who can to submit a meter reading online – via our website, in MyAccount or our app, which are all available 24/7.

“This will help keep our phone lines free for those who might need additional or urgent support, and mean customers can avoid waiting on the phone.” This advice is likely to apply to customers of other suppliers too.

You can submit your meter reading using an app on a smartphone. Photograph: Paul Melling/Alamy

There are often lots of ways you can submit a reading: online or via the supplier’s app, and maybe also via online chat or by sending a text.

If you have a smart meter, you will probably know that these send automated readings to your energy supplier. However, depending on how it is set up, your meter may not automatically send a reading on 31 March. That’s because in many cases the system will be set up to send a reading on a set date once a month. But you should be able to change the settings – some meters can take readings every half hour – or, failing that, log into your account and submit your reading that way.

British Gas told us that its smart meters take readings at set times determined by the customer, but there is nothing to stop them logging in and submitting an additional one on 31 March.

There are about 4.5m households with a prepayment meter, and many will be old-style “non-smart” ones. If you have one, MoneySavingExpert points out that you may be able effectively to delay the coming price rises and keep the cheaper rates for a little longer. It says that’s because, according to Ofgem, the price customers pay is fixed at the point they top up. This means any built-up credit is spent based on the price of energy when that credit was added.

So you should seriously consider adding as much credit as you can afford before 1 April. Though there will be limits on how much you can add. For example, SSE Energy Services says its meters will only hold up to £250 credit in total.

If, for whatever reason, you have a problem trying to submit your readings, take photos on the day that clearly show them and the meter serial numbers.

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Sport

The extreme cavers: don’t watch these videos if you’re claustrophobic

Being somewhere that no one else has been is what drives these explorers to keep pushing – even if it means some frightening squeezes

Extreme caving in Washington state: not for the fainthearted. Photograph: Ahrlin Bauman

Kate Robertson
Tue 29 Mar 2022 04.00 EDTLast modified on Tue 29 Mar 2022 11.05 EDT

Last month, 15-year-old Jacob Sanders found himself stuck deep in the belly of a dark cave. He had stripped down to his underwear, his naked torso bleeding from scratches. And he was shivering from the cold.

But he wasn’t afraid. His uncle, Calvin Sanders, and his dad were nearby, and they were confident they could get him out. In fact, they’d helped him into the tight spot, hoisting him through a small crack in the ceiling to push

deeper into the Pacific north-west cave, further in than any human had ever been before.

But now, without a boost or anything to push off of with his legs, he was struggling to squeeze back through the space, similar in size to the opening of a dog door, but lined with sharp, rough, lava-made basalt rock.

"I first took off my hoodie to fit through," Jacob explained on a recent video call from Washington state, where he lives. "I was covered in blood and scratches from the cave walls. And my belt loop got stuck. And I couldn't really breathe. So I had to take my belt off. And then my pants got stuck, so I literally started to take off my pants and everything."

(Warning: do not watch the video below if you are claustrophobic.)

Eventually, scratched up but smiling, Jacob made it back through to his family. The scene didn't make it into a video on Caveman Hikes, their YouTube channel chronicling Jacob and Calvin's often claustrophobia-inducing caving excursions, but it's similar to the scenarios that have helped their videos go viral.

In the video called "The worst claustrophobic caving you will ever see", for example, Calvin, a 46-year-old military veteran and experienced outdoorsman, and a small team of expert cavers use a drill to chip away at a long passageway before wedging themselves in to access a larger cavern below.

While the chipping makes it possible for Calvin to just barely squeeze through the passageway, it's excruciating to watch. Gripping a GoPro camera on a selfie stick in a lightly bleeding hand, he can hardly move his head from left to right. At one point, his slightly larger colleague becomes stuck ahead of him and has to be pulled by his feet to get free, chipping away at the rock to give himself slightly more room and make another attempt.

Since Jacob is still growing, he's able to wedge himself into even smaller spaces than most of the others. In another video, "The tightest cave squeeze

ever recorded", his uncle helps him into a 6in-by-10in hole headfirst; he calmly and expertly wriggles through to a large cavern on the other side. With a flashlight in hand, he joyfully runs up the sides of the cave walls, slapping the ceiling with the other hand and taking it in. Then he slithers back up through the hole, this time "Superman style", with his hands and arms out front so his uncle can pull him back out.

"That was awesome in there!" he exclaims, laughing. "That was so much fun!"

Jacob and Calvin agreed that even if no one watched their YouTube videos, they'd still be exploring. Photograph: Calvin Sanders

Jacob and Calvin agreed that even if no one watched their YouTube videos, they'd still be exploring the hundreds of local underground lava tubes and tree casts of southern Washington and Oregon, created by past eruptions from nearby volcanoes such as Mount Saint Helens. They both grew up hiking, and sometimes their family chose caves over waterfalls to visit along the way.

But after the Covid-19 pandemic hit, the infrequent hobby transformed into an obsession.

“When I first went in caves, I was terrified,” Jacob admits, adding that initially, he would always let his uncle go first, just in case someone or something unpleasant was around the corner. But now, that uncertainty about what’s ahead delivers a rush of excitement and wonder.

“Caves will always surprise me,” he said. They always offer something new, dropping off or bending in unexpected ways, or containing fascinating geological formations or conditions. “Is it going to be wet? Is it going to be dry? Is it going to be cold, dirty, muddy, clean? Is it going to be, like, pretty or is it going to be super ugly, you know, like a crawly cave that’s all spiky?”

For Calvin, it’s also a creative outlet, with the lighting, shooting and editing element thrown into the mix, as well as the opportunity to recite philosophical and often funny monologues about human nature. And he loves the psychological impact the videos have on the audience, who largely seem to be people who have claustrophobia and are engaging in a kind of exposure therapy.

“This video made me press pause and go outside. TWICE,” writes one commenter. “I’ve been getting better though … I used to never be able to watch a whole video.”

But after running into a few challenges on their own adventures, the pair decided to join their local “grotto”, a more formally organized chapter of the National Speleological Society, which started in the 1960s, long before technology like GPS.

The librarian of the Oregon Grotto, which is a bit of a misnomer because it’s focused on southern Washington, is the official keeper of approximately 600 tightly protected cave maps that reveal the secret locations of every documented cave in the region. Because the maps can present a danger to inexperienced hikers and can seem inviting to vandals and litterers when they are made public, members of the grotto commit to keeping locations private.

But it’s hardly a popular sport, said the grotto chairman, Ahrlin Bauman, who has appeared in a few of the videos on the channel. The group only has

about 20 active members, he said, although there are more on the official mailing list. That's because most excursions involve a lengthy hike of up to three miles through thick forest to site locations. Some caves require rope work, rappelling down into a cavern before hiking through a tunnel or wedging oneself through sharp, rugged passageways. The lava-made surfaces are so rough, a caver's clothes and shoes last for just one or two excursions.

This year, the grotto plans to survey an additional 58,000ft of caves. Photograph: Arhlin Bauman

But with members like Jacob and Calvin, there has been fresh energy to continue surveying caves and "pushing" them – looking more closely than the previous generation's grotto did to see if caves are longer than originally thought, sometimes extending them by more than 1,000ft.

Five years ago, Bauman said, he was exploring one of his favorite caves, Scott's Cave, when he discovered a tree well that expanded into an erosional cave linked to a lava tube – a complete visual history of what lay below a lava eruption that happened 4,000 years ago.

"You find something like that and that will reinvigorate you for a whole year," he said. "You don't have to find anything else."

The exhilaration of discovery, being somewhere that no one else has ever been, drives the cavers to keep pushing. This year, Bauman and the grotto plan to survey an additional 58,000ft, or about 10 miles, of caves.

But the grotto isn't the official administrator of the regional caves. They sometimes butt heads with the local forestry service, which doesn't always want them to clean up vandalized caves and may not share their goal of keeping caves open, but private, with only those in the community aware of the locations.

Caves are sometimes closed up. One of Bauman's favorite spots, Dynamited Cave, was given the name after a group of kids became stuck in it decades ago. They had used a stretchy rope to rappel themselves down into the scenic cave, known for its orange walls that glow under LED lights. But when they let go of the rope, it bounced up 10ft out of their reach. Their parents found them and they were rescued, and the entrance to the cave was blown shut using explosives. But it was later reopened and remains so, partly because the local townspeople have developed a fondness for the cave.

Calvin said the types of dangers audience members ask about – such as poor air quality – weren't real risks. And you'd never meet dangerous animals – the only wildlife are insects and bats. But there is no cellphone service, and it can be cold. The temperature is nearly always hovering around 48F. After sweating heavily through an arduous passageway, it can feel frigid. Hypothermia is a real risk, and so is pure exhaustion from over-exertion.

In 2009, John Edward Jones, a 26-year-old medical student, became stuck upside down while going head first into a passageway in Utah's Nutty Putty Cave. Despite valiant efforts to rescue him over the course of 28 agonizing hours, Jones died there, leaving behind his pregnant wife and young child. His body was never retrieved, and the cave was sealed to prevent anyone from meeting the same fate.

"Sometimes if I'm in a real tight spot, I'll just lay there and relax," Bauman said, adding that having a sense of calm and patience is one of the most important skills a caver can have. "A lot of times people panic and start wiggling and getting stuck even more. So I've learned that the more you try

and fight it, the worse off you are.” He’s taken that calmness to the extreme, falling asleep in tight spots to rest his weary muscles and mind.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2022/mar/29/caving-youtube-videos-jacob-sanders-calvin-sanders

2022.03.29 - Opinion

- **From ‘herd immunity’ to today, Covid minimisers are sabotaging pandemic progress**
- **Chris Rock once defined a generation – but his shtick has aged poorly**
- **I have breast cancer but had no symptoms. A routine mammogram saved my life**
- **Sorrow and regret are not enough. Britain must finally pay reparations for slavery**

Rewriting Covid-19Coronavirus

From ‘herd immunity’ to today, Covid minimisers are still sabotaging our pandemic progress

William Hanage

Every time you hear someone say it’s time to ‘live with the virus’, remember that doesn’t mean doing nothing about it

‘The minimum response is to avoid healthcare being overwhelmed.’ NHS slogan at Waterloo station. Photograph: WIktor Szymanowicz/NurPhoto/Rex/Shutterstock

Tue 29 Mar 2022 01.00 EDTLast modified on Fri 1 Apr 2022 12.05 EDT

So, is that it? After wave upon wave of infections, the combination of vaccination and Omicron’s comparatively mild (though still serious) properties has led the UK to declare the pandemic, essentially, over.

After two lockdowns, a huge burden on healthcare and at last an extremely prompt and effective vaccination campaign, the UK has still registered more than 160,000 lives lost to the pandemic, roughly half of them in the Alpha wave.

And in case you hadn't noticed, "herd immunity", much like Godot, has stubbornly failed to arrive and expel the virus from the population. Nobody should be under any illusion: it could have been much worse. Poor Peru was hit by dreadful waves of infection before vaccines could be deployed; it has lost roughly three times as many people as the UK, accounting for population.

It should be astonishing given these facts, but some stubborn voices have continued to argue that in the autumn of 2020 we should have rushed to remove restrictions on all except those most at risk – who would be somehow saved by untested, implausible means gathered together under the heading of "targeted protection". At that point no vaccines were widely available, and the effective therapies we now have against Covid were pie in the sky. Shockingly, there are now attempts to rehabilitate these ideas in parts of the media.

Reaching back to relitigate such already-discredited approaches is nonsense. And worse, it makes reasonable discussions about pandemic management that much harder. Distraction has always been the goal of such revisionism. We saw this around targeted protection, we saw it in early arguments that Covid was "just the flu", we saw it when many people were still arguing that PCR tests were overcounting cases in the UK in the fall of 2020, even as hospital beds and ventilator wards filled up and the death toll steadily mounted.

The point of all those fights was to play down the seriousness of the disease and ultimately to blunt our response to it. It started with saying the pandemic wasn't a real threat, and, when that became undeniable, it became about declaring it over or past, again and again. As I wrote in April 2020, instead of a single peak, we got a mountain range. Ultimately, these arguments –

despite being lost individually – seriously hampered the possibility of a real, sustainable strategy emerging to help us handle the grim pandemic terrain.

To want a sustainable strategy is not about being a "Covid hawk". March 2022 is very different from October 2020. To suggest that restrictions might be relaxed once vaccination has been deployed is a reasonable discussion. Before that point it was guaranteed to lead to more preventable transmission, more serious illness, more hospitalisations and more deaths.

How our pandemic response should change is a question I get asked all the time. And my answer is always the same: what do we want to achieve? The minimum is to avoid healthcare being overwhelmed. But healthcare gets compromised when things like elective surgeries and screening are delayed – which will happen if huge numbers of staff and patients are sick. And this has indeed happened, over and again, as a result of uncontrolled transmission of the virus in the community.

Here's a basic pandemic strategy fit for 2022: maintain awareness of the situation with cross-sectional testing of the population to determine how much virus is around, and combine it with wastewater surveillance to spot any rapid changes. Aggressively investigate any new variants because we can expect them, and they could still make a lot of people sick, fast. Make sure people who are in a vulnerable category get treatment early in infection, when it is most likely to help. Above all, emphasise being "up to date" with your vaccination status rather than "fully vaccinated" or "boosted" because we don't know what might be needed in future.

And we should not forget other effective measures that we have known about for ages. More than a century and a half ago, we started to think seriously about cleaning the water we drank, after repeated cholera epidemics, and infections like typhoid whose victims included Queen Victoria's Prince Albert in 1861. We could do the same for the air we breathe now with better ventilation. What about improved sick pay? It enables people who are infectious with Covid or anything else to not infect people in the workplace, by staying at home.

These interventions would blunt future pandemics of respiratory infections. And they would help in the autumn and winter of this year, when Covid and influenza will be tussling for pole position. Hell, you don't need to talk about future pandemics to advocate for the benefits of such structural change, it's clear right now.

After almost all interventions were removed, the UK has been predictably buffeted by a wave of BA.2 infections. For now, it appears that the disease is comfortingly similar to BA.1, by which I mean readily handled by the great majority of vaccinated folks. But to insist that future variants will be similar is a gamble, not a policy. Rather than maintaining its world-beating scientific effort to understand the properties of the variants as they emerge, the UK is scaling back funding. It doesn't end because you want it to. Every time you've heard a voice state it's time to "live with the virus" remember that doesn't mean doing nothing about it.

This article was amended on 31 March 2022 to give typhoid, not cholera, as the cause of Prince Albert's death.

- Dr William Hanage is a professor of the evolution and epidemiology of infectious disease at Harvard and co-director of the Center for Communicable Disease Dynamics

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Chris Rock

Chris Rock once defined a generation – but his shtick has aged poorly

Andrew Lawrence

The comedy legend's cultural and commercial power have waned as he struggles to resist going lowbrow

Back when GI Jane was water-cooler conversation, Chris Rock was making a credible case as an all-time great comedian. Photograph: Ampas/Reuters

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At this point in his gilded career, Chris Rock doesn't take an Oscars gig for the clout. He takes it for the check. And the 57-year-old funnyman made clear from the moment he took LA's Dolby Theatre stage to present the prize for best feature documentary that he wouldn't be sweating for it.

Rather than launch into a meticulous bit that might remind the world why he was once so big that he hosted this program all by himself *twice*, he made

fun of the crowd – hack moves. He singled out Jada Pinkett Smith, who has alopecia, maligning her with a near 30-year-old movie reference, and everyone in the room laughed on reflex – because he's Chris Rock. For his brief guest spot to end with Will Smith slapping him on live television and then heckling him from a front-row seat in some ways speaks to how much the comedy legend has slipped. (Smith apologized to Rock in an Instagram post on Monday.)

Back when GI Jane was water-cooler conversation, Rock was making a credible case as an all-time great comedian – the skinny, indignant kid from Crown Heights, Brooklyn, who clicked up with Eddie Murphy as a teen and followed him on to Saturday Night Live by his mid-20s before his star became a supernova. But over the past decades, that star has greatly faded, as Kevin Hart has seized the box office mantle and Dave Chappelle has entrenched himself as America's most talked-about comedian.

The fact that Rock will be touring jointly with Hart this summer seems to suggest that he can't draw a crowd on his own any more – an idea that would have seemed unimaginable when he was roasting the Academy for its lack of diversity while hosting the Oscars in 2005.

While Rock is still a legit A-lister, one who stars in his own season of Fargo when he isn't lending his voice to albums by Ye or Little Nas X, he isn't exactly a cultural force these days.

Rock is one to joke about Will Smith getting $20m to do Wild Wild West. Netflix gave Rock twice that in 2016 to deliver a pair of comedy specials. And while the first, 2018's Tambourine, earned Rock a Grammy nomination, he nonetheless came off relatively muted – tonally and sartorially – and somewhat diminished while whinging about women and stewing about the breakup of his marriage. (This was after Rock ranted about the millions he lost in his divorce in a 2017 interview on Scandinavian TV.)

At his peak, few could follow Rock when he was actually trying

Rock's whole shtick – the pained but personable indignation, the pop culture references, the pentecostal delivery – has aged poorly. Worse, it doesn't seem as if he can stop himself from punching down or pulling back the blows at his own people. And as he got rich, he was goading his audiences. Alas, Will Smith took the bait.

But at his peak? Few could follow Rock when he was actually trying. A trio of standalone comedy specials for HBO marked him as a piercing cultural critic with a skill for parsing the world from an unapologetically Black perspective, prowling the stage in head-to-toe leather in homage to Murphy's Delirious.

Rock's 12-minute monologue in his 1996 special Bring the Pain might be one of the best known comedy bits in history. In the second episode of the American version of The Office, Michael Scott's performance of the routine leads to a day-long racial sensitivity seminar. The purposefully awkward spoof, besides being brilliant in its own right, speaks to Rock's hip-hop swagger. He wasn't just letting rap lyrics inspire the names of his specials or making fun of artist beefs from the standup stage; he was also making the kind of edgy content that was so catchy that white fans couldn't help repeating it in public, no matter how ill-advised.

Chris Rock performs on David Letterman's show in 1994. Photograph: CBS Photo Archive/CBS/Getty Images

Bring the Pain, which won two Emmys and a Grammy (as a spoken-word album, Roll with the New) established Rock as a critical darling and a commercial powerhouse. He went from playing basketball-arena crowds to headlining major motion pictures opposite the likes of Morgan Freeman and Alan Rickman to producing and narrating the biographical Fox sitcom Everybody Hates Chris – which launched Abbott Elementary's Tyler James Williams, propelled The Neighborhood's Tichina Arnold and established the series co-creator Ali LeRoi. Rock advocated for collaborators like Wanda Sykes, who got her start as an actor-writer on The Chris Rock Show.

During its two-season run through the late 90s, there was nothing on TV that matched The Chris Rock Show's mix of politically incorrect sketches (offensively named cereal, Halle Berry 911), straight-faced man-on-the-street reports (on the Tiger Woods effect in Harlem, on his own campaign to bust Bobby Brown out of jail), popular music showcases (Missy Elliott, Prince) and celebrity interviews.

In the season 2 finale, Rock sat down with Jada Pinkett Smith, then fresh off an appearance in Scream 2. After needling Pinkett about her big-brimmed hat, he returned to an earlier joke about her attending the Million Woman March – a concept he couldn't get his head around. "Did you catch any sales?" he cracked.

At the end a gameshow buzzer sounded and a stage hand brought out a bottle of champagne. "You just did an interview without mentioning the name Will Smith!" he enthused. ("That's terrible!" she said.) Among other things, it spared Rock having to talk about the time he appeared in drag as Will's love interest in the Fresh Prince of Bel-Air as he was still finding himself post-SNL.

After the HBO show ran its course, Rock dived into film producing, developing Head of State, Pootie Tang and other crude comedies before acquiring a taste for richer fare and the urge to direct. But despite highbrow ambitions and an encouraging stage acting run in the 2011 Broadway

production of The Motherfucker with the Hat, Rock never could quite resist the temptation to go lowbrow.

Death at a Funeral not only put a Black American spin on the dark British comedy, it kept Peter Dinklage on to make sure the joke at the heart of the film paid off. In I Think I Love My Wife, a reboot of a classic French film, Rock casted women as the root of all evil. And then of course he went on and made Good Hair, which does far more to put down Black women than uplift them.

Interestingly, Rock co-wrote I Think I Love My Wife with Louis CK – who worked with Rock on the HBO show and directed him in Pootie Tang. In a 2011 HBO special called Talking Funny, they appear on a roundtable discussion that also includes Ricky Gervais and Jerry Seinfeld. In one exchange Rock calls Louis CK "the blackest white guy I fucking know". Louis CK asks if Rock is calling him the N-word, to peals of laughter from Gervais – who *repeats* the word. Meanwhile, Seinfeld squirms and pushes for a subject change.

Ten years ago, an awards show producer would have killed to get one of those comics to host. Now they belong to a class of comedians that would sooner turn off viewers than compel them to tune in. Success has made Rock too out of touch, too rich. And now he's in a weird space – still a distinctive voice, but not all that thought provoking. For the comic whose material once defined a generation, that's the real slap in the face.

This article was amended on 30 March 2022. The title of the 2011 HBO show was Talking Funny, rather than Funny People.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2022/mar/28/chris-rock-comedy-career-will-smith

OpinionCancer

I have breast cancer but had no symptoms. A routine mammogram saved my life

Dawn Butler

About a million women have missed screenings due to Covid. I'm appealing to other women to book one now

- Dawn Butler is the Labour MP for Brent Central

'The coronavirus pandemic and cancer are a nasty combination.' Dawn Butler MP Photograph: Graeme Robertson/The Guardian

Tue 29 Mar 2022 03.00 EDTLast modified on Tue 29 Mar 2022 03.01 EDT

Being told you have cancer is one of the biggest shocks you can go through. The coronavirus pandemic and cancer are a nasty combination. All the

normal support, even if it's just a big hug, is something you need but are deprived of.

But the main thing is catching breast cancer early and I was lucky enough to do that. We have had it drummed into us that we should "CoppaFeel", so that whatever your age or gender you are aware of the symptoms of breast cancer, feel for lumps and look for changes in your breasts.

But what happens if none of that applies and you still have cancer? That's what happened to me. The truth is a routine mammogram saved my life. I had no symptoms whatsoever but because of a mammogram in November last year, doctors discovered my cancer early. This early diagnosis means that I'll make a full recovery.

Sadly there are many women whose cancer will go undetected, or only be detected too late. The charity Breast Cancer Now estimates that about one million women in the UK missed appointments for mammogram screenings due to Covid-19. And about 8,600 women could be living with undiagnosed breast cancer after missing out on the screening.

The NHS Breast Screening Programme invites all women from the age of 50 to 70 for screening every three years. But all screening was effectively paused in March 2020 because of the pandemic, and now women have sadly fallen through the cracks. Although it's since resumed, there are big delays as the NHS works through a backlog of people who weren't able to get an appointment. When breast cancer is only detected at a later stage, it can be harder to treat. I'm deeply concerned about this, and I urge anyone who has symptoms to contact their GP straight away. But also, those of you who do not have symptoms: please don't leave it too late. Book a routine appointment and get checked now.

I would also like to make a specific appeal to other women of colour to please take it up, as we know that uptake of cancer screening is lower among this group. Research by Cancer Research UK and Public Health England found that black women are almost twice as likely to be diagnosed with advanced breast cancer as white women, in part because of lower screening

uptake. The incredible NHS doctors, nurses and staff will be there to help, as they were with me.

I am telling my story to raise awareness and so that other women can be alert and take up their mammogram whether they have symptoms or not. Hopefully the more we talk about it, the less of a struggle it will be for some people to cope. I'm hoping that by talking about this publicly, I can make a dent in the million women who have missed appointments and help save lives.

- Dawn Butler is the Labour MP for Brent Central

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OpinionSlavery

Sorrow and regret are not enough. Britain must finally pay reparations for slavery

Kenneth Mohammed

In Jamaica last week, Prince William trotted out the same tired platitudes the UK has parroted for years. Now it's time to pay

Protesters call for slavery reparations at the British High Commission in Kingston, Jamaica, last week during the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge's royal tour. Photograph: Ricardo Makyn/AFP/Getty Images

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About this content

Tue 29 Mar 2022 02.45 EDTLast modified on Tue 29 Mar 2022 02.46 EDT

When Jamaica's prime minister, Andrew Holness, announced to Prince William last week that Jamaica was "moving on", the irony of his statement was lost on most. Visiting the country in 2015, Britain's then PM, David Cameron, told Jamaican politicians making the case for reparations to "move on".

Republican ideology has been given renewed energy since 2021 when Barbados, led by Mia Mottley, became the latest Caribbean island to remove the Queen as head of state, replacing her with a female president.

Mottley had strongly opined that the Caribbean had won political independence but was denied any developmental compact. Outlining the strides the Caribbean had made in reversing legal inequalities, she made the case that only reparations could help tackle the psychological, sociological and economic inequalities that still exist within Caribbean countries and between them and their former colonisers.

Reparation seems a dirty word whenever Caribbean leaders utter it, and talks have taken on a farcical narrative. In 1834, reparations of over £20m were

paid, not to the slaves but to the plantation owners, in compensation for their loss of free labour after emancipation.

Talks over the last 60 years or so, since independence began, have offered no cause for celebration. Britain has been remorseful in words but not emphatic in action. In August 2020, the UK government's response was: "The UK deplores the human suffering caused by slavery and the slave trade. They are among the most abhorrent chapters in the history of humanity."

Sound familiar? Prince William reiterated this in Jamaica. The statement went on: "While reparations are not part of the government's approach, we feel deep sorrow for the transatlantic slave trade, and fully recognise the strong sense of injustice and the legacy of slavery in the most affected parts of the world. We also believe that we have much to do today and in the future to address the reality of slavery in the UK and around the world."

But hey, let's move on! Reparations are not part of our approach and neither is a formal apology or, worse yet, making things economically right.

> One has only to look at how the Windrush generation has been treated to understanding the Caribbean's plight, how much it has given and how little it has had in return

I wonder if William knew he was making his statement on the eve of the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, which passed almost unnoticed on 25 March. The day honours the more than 12 million men, women and children brutalised under a slavery system that endured for more than 400 years. The large population of people of African descent in the Caribbean remains the legacy of the inhuman enforced migration which broke the ladder of generational wealth of these displaced people.

In June 2020, the UK prime minister pledged to establish a new commission on ethnic disparities to "examine all aspects of continuing racial and ethnic inequalities in Britain". This will have no meaningful impact for the ordinary person on the streets of Kingston, Port of Spain or Bridgetown.

Voicing "sorrow and regret" is indeed a start but money talks far more than platitudes. One has only to look at how the Windrush generation has been treated to understanding the Caribbean's plight, how much it has given and how little it has had in return. Today, black and minority ethnic (BME) politics seems to be only about scholarships for black students to British universities and, in the workplace, painting the diversity picture and checking that box. Admittedly, this is important and a step in the right direction, but not enough.

Former British colonies should not be treated like the French have treated Haiti. In 1791, after the world's largest slave revolt, Haiti became the first nation to dismantle slavery. However, it was held to political ransom, forced to succumb to France's reparation demands in order to secure independence in 1804. The terms were cruel, as the infant nation entered into debt with exorbitant interest rates imposed by the French. Haiti paid French slaveholders and their descendants the equivalent today of $30bn, taking 122 years to pay it off, and severely damaging the newly independent country's ability to prosper.

Citizens of Belize and Jamaica protested during the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge's visit. A petition proclaimed that there was absolutely nothing to rejoice over for the last 70 years of the Queen's role in Jamaica.

As part of the Queen's platinum jubilee, other tours are planned. In April, Edward and Sophie, the Earl and Countess of Wessex, will travel to Antigua and Barbuda, Grenada, St Lucia, and St Vincent and the Grenadines. Some of the last significant bastions of the British empire lie in Caribbean waters. These tiny island paradises, thousands of miles away yet still tied to the British empire, have been plagued by natural disasters which have impacted infrastructure and economies.

Two years of the pandemic have severed any hope of a quick recovery. In addition, there is political corruption by captured states, and the inertia of successive governments that seem hellbent on destroying their economies and enriching themselves, moving their ill-gotten gains through British tax-haven territories, with the final destination being London, to be hidden in real estate and other investments.

Caribbean politicians and officials continue to be naive towards what reparations would mean to Britain. They fool themselves that they possess leverage if they remain in the Commonwealth. Maybe a clue lies in recent articles and interviews on reparation issues between Namibia and its German ex-colonisers, which reveal exactly how the west views reparations.

> Reparations become masked as 'developmental aid', suggesting a handout, and a means for the west to appear as saviours

Namibia was known as "German South West Africa" from 1884 to 1915. Between 1904 and 1908, German colonial forces brutally suppressed anti-colonial uprisings by the Herero and Nama people, forcing many into the desert to starve. They killed tens of thousands, confiscating land and livestock.

In 1988, the South African government finally agreed to give up control of Namibia and it was granted independence in 1990. The German government has acknowledged responsibility for genocide in Namibia but "reparation" is feared as a legal term by German negotiators concerned at setting any expensive precedent. Reparations therefore become masked as "developmental aid", suggesting a handout, and a means by which the west can appear as saviours. It is not restorative justice.

Reparations to bring real, impactful development initiatives in infrastructure, education, health and transportation could change the destiny of the descendants of slavery in the Caribbean. The fight for reparations must continue and must unite the ethnic majority of the Americas, the Caribbean and Africa.

In addition, the Caribbean countries, having taken their destiny into their own hands, must break the chains of political corruption and corporate capture which continue to smother and retard their economic and social development.

- Kenneth Mohammed is a Caribbean analyst and senior adviser at Intelligent Sanctuary

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2022.03.29 - Around the world

- Singapore Appeal court upholds death sentence for intellectually disabled man
- Monarchy Royal tour ‘in sharp opposition’ to needs of Caribbean people, says human rights group
- Ezra Miller Justice League star arrested after allegedly ‘yelling obscenities’ in Hawaii bar
- Artificial intelligence French system beats eight world champions at bridge
- Nigeria Several injured after gunmen attack passenger train

Singapore

Singapore court upholds death sentence of man with learning disabilities

Outcry over drug smuggling case of Nagaenthran K Dharmalingam, who has IQ of 69 and could be executed in days

Nagaenthran K Dharmalingam was arrested in 2009 for attempting to smuggle 43g of heroin – about three tablespoons – into Singapore. Photograph: Fazry Ismail/EPA

Rebecca Ratcliffe in Bangkok
Tue 29 Mar 2022 06.20 EDTFirst published on Tue 29 Mar 2022 00.15 EDT

A man with learning disabilities who has spent more than a decade on death row could face execution within days after Singapore's top court dismissed his last-ditch appeal, in a case that has drawn global condemnation.

Nagaenthran K Dharmalingam, a Malaysian national, was arrested in 2009 for attempting to smuggle 43g of heroin – about three tablespoons – into

Singapore.

Nagaenthran, who was 21 at the time of his arrest, has said he was coerced into carrying the package, which was strapped to his thigh, and did not know its contents at the time.

His case has provoked an outcry globally. UN experts have said the sentence is not only disproportionate for drug trafficking, and therefore illegal under international law, but also that there are concerns that accommodations were not made for his disabilities.

Campaigners say that Nagaenthran has an IQ of 69, a level recognised as indicating a learning disability, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

His family have described him as vulnerable, timid and easily led, and warn that his mental condition has deteriorated further after he has spent about a third of his life in prison.

In a letter to Singapore's president, Halimah Yacob, in December, Nagaenthran's mother, Panchalai Supermaniam, said he could not sustain eye contact, was not speaking in full sentences and was at times incoherent, appearing not to fully understand his situation. He would talk about going home and eating her home-cooked food, she said, adding that she feared he did not realise that "execution" meant he would die.

Sarmila Dharmalingam, elder sister of Nagaenthran K. Dharmalingam, says he does not understand what is happening. Photograph: Mohd Rasfan/AFP/Getty Images

Nagaenthran was originally scheduled to be hanged in November, but the execution was stayed due to his right to appeal. His appeal was then adjourned after he tested positive for Covid.

His sister Sarmila Dharmalingam told the Guardian she was angry and fearful for her brother. “We are very disappointed, we are really, very disappointed,” she said.

“Just give a second chance to my brother to live a life. Everybody [makes] mistakes. We must give them a chance to realise their mistakes,” she said, adding her brother had already spent 13 years in prison away from his family.

In court on Tuesday, Nagaenthran called out “pray for me”, her brother, who attended the hearing, told her.

Several international rights groups, as well as the EU’s delegation to Singapore, and the British billionaire Richard Branson, a critic of the death penalty, have called for the sentence to be halted. The Malaysian prime minister, Ismail Sabri Yaakob, last year wrote to Singapore’s prime minister,

Lee Hsien Loong, to ask for leniency in his case. An online petition in support of Nagaenthran has attracted more than 100,000 signatures.

Transformative Justice Collective, a Singaporean campaign group seeking reform of the criminal justice system and which has supported Nagaenthran, said it was "profoundly disappointed" with the decision of the court of appeal on Tuesday.

Nagaenthran's lawyers had argued that executing someone with mental disabilities was a violation against international law. However, their case was rejected as baseless and an abuse of the court that sought to delay the sentence.

Nagaenthran had been "afforded due process" Singapore's chief justice, Sundaresh Menon, said.

M Ravi, a human rights lawyer who has represented Nagaenthran, said the execution could take place in days.

Singapore, which has some of the world's most severe drugs laws, has not carried out any executions since 2019, as continuing court applications have forced the authorities to pause proceedings. However, death penalty sentences have continued to be handed down throughout the pandemic, even over Zoom hearings. Families of those on death row fear the authorities are pushing to clear a backlog of cases.

Maya Foa, the director of the anti-death penalty campaign organisation Reprieve, said she was "extremely concerned about rushed hearings and decisions in this case".

"Nagaenthran should be protected from the death penalty because of his intellectual disability. The heart-wrenching fact that he believes he is going home to his family and talks about sharing home-cooked meals with them shows that he does not fully understand he faces execution and lacks the mental competency to be executed."

His family has said that, under international guidelines, accommodations should be granted to people with disabilities, such as allowing them to be

accompanied by family at all stages of the process, but that this has not been the case. The family was not informed of Nagaenthran's arrest until about a week later.

Singapore's government claims its severe drugs laws, including the death penalty, are the most effective deterrent against crime.

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Monarchy

Royal tour ‘in sharp opposition’ to needs of Caribbean people, says human rights group

Legacy of ‘colonial-era ideologies’ is condemned as community leaders demand reparations for imperialism

The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge in the Bahamas during their eight-day tour of the Caribbean – a ‘charm offensive’, as Jamaica’s Advocates Network called it.
Photograph: Chris Jackson/Getty Images

Tom Ambrose
Mon 28 Mar 2022 17.23 EDTLast modified on Mon 28 Mar 2022 17.24 EDT

The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge’s recent tour was in “sharp opposition to the needs and aspirations of the Caribbean people”, a human rights

alliance from the region has said.

The British monarchy's historic role in the slave trade continues to damage the Caribbean's society and economy, Jamaica's Advocates Network said in an open letter published jointly with representatives from Belize and the Bahamas.

Repeating the call for reparations to be paid by the UK government, the alliance said: "We stand united in rejecting this so-called charm offensive tour of the Caribbean undertaken by William and Catherine, the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, which is in sharp opposition to the needs and aspirations of indigenous peoples and people of African descent in the Caribbean.

"We stand united in condemning Britain's savagery in enslaving our ancestors, the coarse indecency of colonial exploitation, the brutality of its enforcers and the enduring legacies of impoverishment and colonial-era ideologies that have damaged and continue to damage our people, our society and our economy."

It was a trip intended to repair relations between the monarchy and the Caribbean people, but Prince William and his wife faced fierce protests in Belize over a land dispute involving a charity of which the Duke is a patron.

The opposition came as the Jamaican prime minister said his country would be "moving on" to become a republic, while a government committee in the Bahamas called on the royals to issue "a full and formal apology for their crimes against humanity".

William issued a statement after the trip – understood to have not been discussed with the Queen and Prince Charles first – in which he said the visit "had brought into even sharper focus questions about the past and the future".

But Cristina Coc, leader of the Maya community in southern Belize, criticised the duke and duchess for not going beyond saying sorry.

“Before they ask us to heal, they must right the wrongs they have caused indigenous people and people of African heritage,” she said. “The powers and systems that continue to foster imperialism must acknowledge the harm done, not merely by an apology but by a true recognition of our inalienable human rights, land rights and true reparative justice.

“We will not continue to remain silent in the face of continued threats to our identity, dignity and agency while privileged royals travel around in desperation to maintain the legacy of colonies.”

Niambi Hall-Campbell, of the University of the Bahamas, lambasted the cost to taxpayers in the country to fund the royal tour.

She said: “Why are we being made to pay again? Why are we footing the bills for the benefit of a regime whose rise to greatness was fuelled by the enslavement, colonisation and degradation of the people of this land, when we should be the ones receiving payments?

“Several hundred thousand dollars in public resources and manpower were dedicated to accommodating the royal visit at a time when thousands of Bahamians are struggling to make ends meet amid high inflation.”

The duke is understood to have also raised questions about whether it would be appropriate for him to be head of the Commonwealth, since the role is not hereditary. In 2018, Commonwealth leaders formally announced that Charles would become the next head after the Queen.

Meanwhile, Sir Hilary Beckles, vice-chancellor of the University of the West Indies and chair of the Caricom Reparation Committee, said it was an “embarrassment” that the Queen continues as head of state to a number of Caribbean countries.

He said: “It is now today, at this time to us, an embarrassment, that we should have a head of state who does not live among us, who does not understand the lives and the pain and suffering of the people who are her subjects, who cannot perform any role or functions among the people over who she presides and has to hire someone to do her work … because either

she is too busy or unwilling, unable, cannot perform her duty as head of state and delegates that duty to someone else.

“These are part of the embarrassments of colonialism that we can no longer take.”

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Movies

Ezra Miller: Justice League star arrested after allegedly ‘yelling obscenities’ in Hawaii bar

The actor, best known for playing the Flash and their role in Fantastic Beasts, was charged with disorderly conduct and harassment, police say

Ezra Miller, pictured in Paris in October 2021. Miller has been arrested and charged over an alleged incident at a Hawaii bar. Photograph: Laurent Vu/SIPA/REX/Shutterstock

Sian Cain
@siancain
Tue 29 Mar 2022 02.12 EDTLast modified on Tue 29 Mar 2022 02.22 EDT

Ezra Miller has been arrested and charged with disorderly conduct and harassment after an alleged incident at a Hawaii bar on Sunday evening.

Police say the 29-year-old actor, best known for playing DC superhero the Flash and their recurring role in the Harry Potter spin off franchise Fantastic Beasts, was arrested in Hilo on Monday morning.

In a public statement, Hawaii police said South Hilo officers had responded to reports of a disorderly bar patron on Sunday just before midnight. Police allege that Miller had become "agitated" while other patrons sang karaoke and began "yelling obscenities".

Police allege the actor then "grabbed the microphone from a 23-year-old woman singing karaoke and later lunged at a 32-year-old man playing darts. The bar owner asked Miller to calm down several times to no avail".

Miller featured briefly in the Academy Awards on Sunday, with a pivotal scene of the Flash in Zack Snyder's Justice League winning the "most cheer-worthy moment" category, a new award introduced by the Academy that is voted for by audiences at home.

Miller was released on bail on Monday police said. Miller's representatives have not yet responded to requests for comment.

Miller is set to appear in the next Fantastic Beasts film, The Secrets of Dumbledore, in April. The Flash, which will see their super fast superhero take the leading role and recently finished production, has been delayed by Warner Brothers until 2023.

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Artificial intelligence (AI)

Artificial intelligence beats eight world champions at bridge

Victory marks milestone for AI as bridge requires more human skills than other strategy games

The AI, NooK, was able to read its opponents and explain its decision-making. Photograph: switas/Getty Images/iStockphoto

Laura Spinney
Tue 29 Mar 2022 01.00 EDT

An artificial intelligence has beaten eight world champions at bridge, a game in which human supremacy has resisted the march of the machines until now.

The victory represents a new milestone for AI because in bridge players work with incomplete information and must react to the behaviour of several

other players – a scenario far closer to human decision-making.

In contrast, chess and Go – in both of which AIs have already beaten human champions – a player has a single opponent at a time and both are in possession of all the information.

“What we’ve seen represents a fundamentally important advance in the state of artificial intelligence systems,” said Stephen Muggleton, a professor of machine learning at Imperial College London.

French startup NukkAI announced the news of its AI’s victory on Friday, at the end of a two-day tournament in Paris.

The NukkAI challenge required the human champions to play 800 consecutive deals divided into 80 sets of 10. It did not involve the initial bidding component of the game during which players arrive at a contract that they must then meet by playing their cards.

Each champion played their own and their “dummy” partner’s cards against a pair of opponents. These opponents were the best robot champions in the world to date – robots that have won many robot competitions but that are universally acknowledged to be nowhere near as good as expert human players.

The AI – called NooK – played the same role as the human champion, with the same cards and the same opponents. The score was the difference between those of the human and the AI, averaged over each set. NooK won 67, or 83%, of the 80 sets.

Jean-Baptiste Fantun, co-founder of NukkAI, said he had been confident the machine – which the company has been developing for five years – would triumph in thousands of deals, but with only 800 it was touch-and-go.

Announcing the results, the mathematician Cédric Villani, winner of the Fields medal in 2010, called NukkAI “a superb French success story”.

AI researcher Véronique Ventos, NukkAI’s other co-founder, calls NooK a “new generation AI” because it explains its decisions as it goes along. “In

bridge, you can't play if you don't explain," she says.

The game relies on communication between partners.

Explainability is a hot topic in AI. "Most of what the general public have heard in recent years about machine learning is based on black box systems such as AlphaGo, which is unable to explain to human beings how decisions are being made," said Muggleton.

Instead, NooK represents a "white box" or "neurosymbolic" approach. Rather than learning by playing billions of rounds of a game, it first learns the game's rules and then improves its play through practice. It is a hybrid of rules-based and deep learning systems. "The NooK approach learns in a way that is much closer to human beings," Muggleton said.

"The pendulum is swinging towards these kinds of methods," says Michael Littman, a professor of computer science at Brown University in Rhode Island. "Not being able to tell people what's going on just doesn't work in our societies."

Even if a person or an AI can't explain in words what they are doing, Littman says, their behaviour needs to be "legible" to others – enacting rules they understand.

This will be critical in domains such as health and engineering. Self-driving cars negotiating a junction will need to be able to read each other's behaviour, for example.

Littman was disappointed the challenge didn't include bidding, which is where much of the most interesting communication – and deception – happens in bridge.

But Nevena Senior, a many-times world bridge champion for England and one of NooK's challengers, said the contracts the humans and NooK were given to play were sufficiently variable that the card game became as important as the bidding.

She said NooK's creators had done a "magnificent" job. She found that it read its opponents better than the humans did, and was better able to exploit their mistakes.

"This is something that humans do after enough experience and I was pleasantly surprised that a robot mimics typical human skills," she said.

Other AI triumphs

- 1996: IBM's Deep Blue chess machine wins a game against world chess champion Garry Kasparov but loses the match 2-4. A year later, Kasparov loses the rematch.
- 2007: Checkers is solved by researchers at the University of Alberta in Canada. After sifting through 500bn positions, they build a checkers-playing computer programme that can't be beaten.
- 2011: IBM's Watson computer defeats TV gameshow Jeopardy! champions Brad Rutter and Ken Jennings, claiming the $1m first prize.
- 2016: Google DeepMind's AlphaGo defeats Korean Go champion Lee Sedol 4-1. The Korea Baduk Association awards AlphaGo the highest Go grandmaster rank, an honorary 9 dan.
- 2022: NukkAI's bridge-playing computer NooK defeats eight world bridge champions in Paris.

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Nigeria

Rail staff killed in ‘unprecedented’ attack on train in Nigeria

Suspected bandits blow up track and open fire on train travelling from Abuja to Kaduna

A train leaving Lagos. Many Nigerians use the railway as a safer alternative to the road route between the two cities. Photograph: Olukayode Jaiyeola/NurPhoto/Rex/Shutterstock

Emmanuel Akinwotu in Lagos
Tue 29 Mar 2022 06.42 EDTFirst published on Tue 29 Mar 2022 05.37 EDT

Gunmen have attacked a train travelling from the Nigerian capital, Abuja, to the city of Kaduna, in an “unprecedented” act of violence that will heighten concerns about a breakdown of security in the country’s troubled northern region.

The death toll is unclear but a local security official told Reuters two train staff and five security personnel had been killed. A senator in Kaduna state separately said three cleaning staff on the train had died. Many others were injured and there were fears that an unknown number had been abducted.

Authorities could not immediately confirm the number of passengers on the train but local media reported that nearly 1,000 people were onboard.

locator

The attackers used explosives to blow up the rail track before opening fire, according to Fidet Okhiria, the chief executive of the state-owned Nigerian Railway Corporation. “There were casualties but we have not been able to confirm the number,” Okhiria told Associated Press, describing the nature of the attack as unprecedented.

The attack occurred in Katari in Kaduna state, 55 miles from Abuja, on Monday evening. Many Nigerians use the railway as a safer alternative to the road route between Abuja and Kaduna, which for years has been one of the most dangerous in Nigeria because of kidnappings and armed bandits.

No group has claimed responsibility for Monday night’s attack but suspicion will fall on bandit groups.A Kaduna government official said passengers trapped on the train and others who had escaped to nearby forests were evacuated on Tuesday morning.

The attack is the most significant on the railway line from the capital since it began operating in 2016. It came two days after gunmen attacked Kaduna airport, killing a security guard before soldiers intervened.

Details of the latest incident emerged on Monday night, when passengers posted on social media that they were being shot at. One passenger who posted on Twitter during the attack that she had been shot later died, her colleagues said.

Some passengers complained that the attack continued for at least an hour before soldiers arrived to rescue them.

Video footage broadcast by local media showed passengers with bullet wounds and damaged carriages.

It has not been possible to establish a precise death toll. A senator in Kaduna, Shehu Sani, said passengers and police reported multiple deaths.

“Police officers confirmed that three train cleaners were killed. My friend’s wife, who was on the train, also said many people in her carriage were killed and injured and many kidnapped and taken away into the bush,” he said. “I got distress calls from some of the passengers. Even from the call you can hear the gunshots.”

The security situation in Kaduna had been gradually deteriorating, Sani said. “We used to travel by road, and the bandits blocked the road. Then we resorted to using the trains. Now this incident.”

Samuel Aruwan, a commissioner for defence at the Kaduna state government, said injured passengers had been taken to hospitals and that the government would cover the cost of their treatment. Relatives of the injured have made public appeals for people in Kaduna to donate blood.

Federal authorities have yet to release a statement.

Much of north-west and central Nigeria has been in the grip of attacks by so-called bandit groups, proscribed terrorists in Nigeria, who have carried out mass killings mainly in villages, rural towns and motorways. The groups – mostly ethnic Fulanis – have kidnapped thousands of people for ransom as well as killing, stealing and committing acts of sexual violence.

They emerged from a historical conflict that has worsened dramatically, between largely Fulani pastoralists and farmers of varying ethnic groups, over access to water and land and the boundaries between private farmland and grazing areas.

In recent years, the groups have overwhelmed communities and been more heavily armed than local police forces and vigilante groups. Kidnaps for ransom, targeting schoolchildren, ordinary civilians, prominent figures and their relatives have boomed in recent years.

The groups have in effect occupied many communities in north-west and central Nigeria, punishing communities that cooperate with authorities and demanding levies.

Jihadist groups have also become increasingly active in north-west Nigeria, exploiting the lack of security and in some cases working with bandits to carry out kidnaps.

Airstrikes have been launched on the hideouts of armed groups in a forested expanse stretching from northern Nigeria into Niger but the attacks have continued.

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Headlines

- **‘Bleak Friday’ Energy provider websites struggle to cope with traffic as prices rise**
- **Live Biggest rise ever in British energy bills to push 2.5m more into fuel stress**
- **Inflation More UK firms expect to raise prices than at any time since 1980s**
- **‘Worse than under Thatcher’ Energy price rises pile pressure on UK**

Energy industry

Energy price rise: Rishi Sunak needs to do more, say experts

Cost of living crisis intensifies with average annual gas and electricity bill poised to double to £2,600

- From energy costs to TV bills: what has gone up in price today?

The increase in energy prices has happened on the same day as a string of scheduled rises to taxes and household services. Photograph: Andy Rain/EPA

Rob Davies and Mark Sweney
Fri 1 Apr 2022 10.50 EDTFirst published on Fri 1 Apr 2022 05.46 EDT

The chancellor, Rishi Sunak, will have to do more to help struggling households with soaring energy bills, experts said on Friday, with the

average annual gas and electricity bill poised to double inside a year to £2,600.

The average household dual fuel tariff jumped from £1,278 to £1,971 at midnight, as energy regulator raised the price cap by 54% on bills to reflect sky-high wholesale gas prices.

Analysts at Cornwall Insight, who predicted the £1,971 price cap within a 3% margin of error, said they now expect the next price cap increase, due in October, to result in the average tariff jumping to £2,599.92.

This would mean bills having doubled inside a year, it said, piling pressure on the chancellor to help the poorest households, who experts have warned face a choice between heating and eating.

"While the government's £350 worth of support will provide some respite to consumers this time around – albeit not far enough – with the cap almost guaranteed to rise again, the government will need to look at expanding the scale and scope of this support after October at the very least," said a Cornwall Insight principal consultant, Dr Craig Lowrey.

The 54% increase in the price cap on Friday prompted chaos, as energy providers' websites failed to cope with a deluge of traffic on what has been called "bleak Friday", as the largest increase in gas and electricity prices in living memory took effect on the same day as scheduled rises to taxes and household services.

Customers in Great Britain seeking cheaper energy bills had been advised to submit meter readings online before Friday's increase, putting unprecedented pressure on the websites of suppliers.

The meter reading page of British Gas, one of the UK's biggest suppliers, was displaying an error message on Friday morning, while E.ON and EDF were also battling outages.

Standing charges, a fixed amount paid to connect a home to the grid, have been criticised for disproportionately penalising low-income people.

“In the new price cap the fixed charge is about £300 [a year],” said DavidOsmon of Ideal Economics, a former senior economist at Ofgem.

“For the poorest 10% of households this amounts to a third of their total energy spending. Ofgem’s policy of raising the standing charge instead of the price per unit of energy is perverse.”

Households were hit with multiple price increases from 1 April, from council tax and VAT on hospitality to broadband and phone bills, all adding to the cost of living crisis, with inflation forecast to hit a 40-year high this year.

As snow and hail fell across the UK this week, families and pensioners spoke of having to turn off the heating and disconnect broadband to afford the rising cost of food.

However, those with prepayment meters who stop using them will still find they are running up gas and electricity bills because of rising weekly standing charges of up to £6.15, despite having no power for heating, light or cooking.

> From today people on prepayment meters who run out of money and disconnect themselves from electricity or gas will find their electric meter will still be ticking up at £3.53 a week standing charge and the gas meter at £2.62 – £6.15 a week to be without heat, light, or cooking.
>
> — Paul Lewis (@paullewismoney) April 1, 2022

A screengrab of a message on the British Gas website. Photograph: PA

The Resolution Foundation thinktank said the number of households in England in "fuel stress" had doubled overnight, from 2.5m to 5m.

The Trades Union Congress (TUC) called for an emergency budget to help working families who were at "breaking point", as Citizens Advice estimated that about 5 million people would be unable to pay their energy bills from this month.

The TUC said the measures announced by Sunak in last week's spring statement were "woefully inadequate", as UK households faced the biggest fall in living standards since the 1950s.

"People shouldn't be struggling to cover the basics but millions of families have been pushed to the breaking point by spiralling bills and soaring inflation," said Frances O'Grady, the general secretary of the TUC.

"This is a living standards emergency. Rishi Sunak must come to parliament and present an emergency budget. We need a proper package of economic support for families. Britain faces the worst living standards crisis in generations. We need an emergency budget to bring down energy bills and to boost pay, universal credit and pensions."

Energy bills would rise 10 times faster than wages this year, said the TUC, as it joined the Labour party in calling for a windfall tax on the billions in profits made by oil and gas companies to pay for its proposed package of support measures.

“People don’t want a revolution, they do want to know how to pay their energy bills,” said the Labour leader, Keir Starmer, during an interview on Friday morning.

> "People don't want a revolution, they do want to know how to pay their energy bills."@Keir_Starmer says Labour "understands" concerns shared by millions as the energy price cap rises.
>
> Read more: https://t.co/MEd3NXPqKS
>
> Sky 501, Virgin 602, Freeview 233 and YouTube pic.twitter.com/NkVUArRKi0
>
> — Sky News (@SkyNews) April 1, 2022

Citizens Advice warned that the number of people unable to pay their energy bills would rise to one in four across the UK, more than 14 million, if the energy cap rises by the amount forecast in October.

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Experts have said the war in Ukraine could drive annual bills to £3,000 at the next price cap decision.

“We understand that people are struggling with the rising cost of living – we can’t shield everyone from the global challenges we face but we’re putting billions of pounds back into the pockets of hard-working families across the UK,” a government spokesperson said.

“We are taking action worth over £22bn in the next financial year to help people with the cost of their energy bills and to ensure people keep more of their money.”

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Business live
Business

Energy price cap rise hits British bills as unions call for ‘emergency budget’ – as it happened

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Inflation

More UK firms expect to raise prices than at any time since 1980s

British Chambers of Commerce survey suggests inflation surge will escalate further in coming months

The survey also revealed domestic sales had stagnated across most sectors and business investment remained at historically low levels. Photograph: Rui Vieira/PA

Phillip Inman
@phillipinman
Thu 31 Mar 2022 19.01 EDTLast modified on Fri 1 Apr 2022 00.29 EDT

More UK businesses are preparing to raise prices than at any time since the 1980s, heaping further pressure on hard-pressed consumers amid recent increases in gas, electricity and petrol prices.

The British Chambers of Commerce said its latest quarterly survey found almost two-thirds of firms expected to raise prices over the next three months, the highest since the survey began in 1989.

Amid warnings from opposition MPs and business groups that ministers should offer more support to struggling businesses, a record number of manufacturers and services firms said they would be increasing prices.

The survey of more than 5,600 firms also revealed domestic sales had stagnated across most sectors and business investment remained at historically low levels.

Investment in plant, machinery and equipment continued to stagnate, the BCC said, with 27% of firms reporting an increase in investment spending, while 58% reported no change, and 15% a decline.

"This metric remains largely unchanged since the second quarter of 2021," it added. This is despite a tax break since April 2021 that offers firms a deduction from their profits of 130% for each £1 of investment spending.

Labour said the BCC survey showed inflationary pressures were gaining momentum, as the costs of imported raw materials and energy surged on international markets.

Jonathan Reynolds, the shadow business secretary, said: "Instead of supporting business with spiralling inflation, the Conservatives are ramping up taxes and turning their back on energy intensive industries."

Last month, data showed consumer confidence fell back to levels last seen in November 2020, just before the second national Covid-19 lockdown. The widely used GfK index tumbled to -31 in March as consumers were hit by inflation reaching a 30-year high of 6.2%, record-high fuel and food prices, predictions of several interest rate hikes and higher personal taxes.

After the chancellor's spring statement last month, the Treasury's independent forecaster, the Office for Budget Responsibility, cut its estimate of GDP growth for this year to 3.8%, down from a previous estimate of 6%.

When firms were asked by the BCC what pressures they were facing to raise prices, 92% of manufacturers cited raw materials, while 56% pointed to energy and transport costs among other overheads.

A third of firms said the cost of labour was also influencing their decision to raise prices after increases in wages and a hike in the employers' rate of national insurance from this month.

The percentage citing recent increases in interest rates as a concern also rose in the quarter. Nearly one in 3 (32%) firms were worried about interest rates, up from 27% in the last three months of 2021.

Overall, 62% of firms expected their prices to rise in the next three months, up from 58% in the fourth quarter of 2021. Only 1% expected a decrease in their prices.

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Suren Thiru, the BCC's head of economics, said that while businesses had bounced back during the first three months of 2022 after the end of plan B Covid restrictions, rising inflation and the uncertainty caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine were likely to slow growth during the rest of the year.

Thiru said: "High price pressures suggests that the current inflationary surge will escalate significantly in the coming months. The reversal of the hospitality VAT cut, the higher energy price cap and soaring energy and commodity prices amid Russia's invasion of Ukraine, should lift inflation well above 8% in the near term."

He added that many firms still lacked the cash reserves to withstand further shocks, making them vulnerable to a long war in Ukraine and more persistent price increases.

"The first quarter may be the high point for the UK economy with activity likely to stall in subsequent quarters as surging inflation, rising energy bills and higher taxes increasingly drags on activity."

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Energy bills

‘It’s worse than under Thatcher’: energy price rises pile pressure on UK

Readers describe how soaring gas and electricity costs are adding to the cost of living crisis

Readers have described how they dread receiving energy bills as gas and electricity prices rise, Photograph: Xinhua/Rex/Shutterstock

Clea Skopeliti and *Rachel Obordo*
Thu 31 Mar 2022 11.23 EDTLast modified on Fri 1 Apr 2022 00.28 EDT

Households in the UK will see their energy bills rise by 54% from 1 April, with prices expected to rise again in six months. Despite the chancellor’s spring statement offering a fuel duty cut and changes to the national insurance threshold, people are still struggling with the cost of living.

We spoke to six people about their experiences and what spiralling heating costs will mean for them.

‘If it weren’t for my mum, I’d have to go to the food banks’

Lee Craven.

In Hull, Lee Craven, a 48-year-old support worker at a mental health charity, is running out of money at least a week before his salary is paid each month. “I often work [overtime] just to make ends meet,” he said. His electricity bill has doubled since this time last year, and that’s before the price hike comes into effect on Friday. “I think it’s going to be pretty bad,” he says. “You get to the point where you dread the post coming through the door.”

By the last week of each month, Craven has run out of cash and has to get help from his parents. “I’ve got nothing – literally no money whatsoever,” he said. “I know where my money goes, it’s just going on bills. I’m not entitled to universal credit so I’m having to cut back on things like food. It’s really hard going. If it weren’t for my mum, I’d have to go to the food banks.”

Last month, he disconnected his broadband, and now uses his mobile phone as a hotspot. “It’s a luxury that I just can’t afford,” he said, adding that subscriptions to music streaming platforms have also had to go.

Craven used to shop at Sainsbury's, before switching to cheaper supermarkets like Lidl and Aldi a couple of months ago because of the rising cost of food and essentials. "I used to like Sainsbury's for the quality," he said. "I was always budgeting my food quite well and would spend about £25 a week – now it's about £35."

'I've been able to reduce my expenditure by eating less'

In Northampton, Will, who is retired, has seen around a 50% increase in his electricity usage since his landlord moved supplier recently after the previous one went bankruptcy. "It used to cost approximately £5 a week but it's now gone up to about £10 depending on how cold it is," said the 72-year-old.

Will, who has been living in shared accommodation for three years, uses a prepayment meter, which he "pops coins into" when he needs to. "I probably use the electricity the most in the household. I had major heart surgery last June and the cold really affects me, and because I've not been well I'm virtually at home all day."

His monthly income is about £1,300, which includes his state pension and financial assistance he receives for housing and council tax. He believes he would be eligible for a warm home discount but because his landlord receives the electricity bill he doesn't think he can apply for it.

"It's been tough. I'm having difficulty walking so at least I've been able to reduce my expenditure by not going out, but I've also been eating less. If the electricity price goes up again it will become quite a concern. We'll just have to wait and see."

'I've told them if they try to take the payment I'll cancel my direct debit'

John Ellis has faced a series of rises in his monthly payments to E.ON for gas and electricity. Photograph: True Images/Alamy

John Ellis, 31, from Suffolk, is “livid” that his monthly payment for gas and electricity will jump to £255.76 from the start of April. He said he received correspondence from E.ON in December to say it would increase to £186 from January, and it agreed he would pay £95 instead. However, in February he was told it would increase again.

“I’m in a bit of a rubbish situation,” said Ellis, who works as an account manager and lives with a housemate in a two-bedroom house. “I have about £600 outstanding on my energy account that I didn’t know about, and because E.ON never increased my direct debit I’ve been accumulating debt over time.

“I’m in a somewhat fortunate position in that my energy bills cost slightly less than 20% of my monthly income at the moment but if it goes up in April that would be unacceptable.”

He had been with E.ON on a variable rate for a few years and was recently moved in February to its sister brand E.ON Next, which claims to supply 100% renewable energy. “It’s a bit bonkers,” he added. “We’re still discussing the April payment but I’ve told them if they try to take it I’ll

cancel my direct debit. There's no way I'm paying that much money – it's just wrong."

'I haven't been able to pay for prescriptions'

Until she got a new job in further education a few weeks ago, Marie*, a 54-year-old from Liverpool, was living extremely frugally. The rising cost of living has meant she has at times been unable to afford prescriptions. "I get the lower rate of PIP [personal independence payment benefit], which I have to use for taxis to work as arthritis stops me walking the distance to the bus stop without pain. I need inhalers and co-codamol for pain and some months I haven't been able to immediately pay for prescriptions," she said.

Marie says she needs inhalers and prescriptions have sometimes been unaffordable. Photograph: Andrew Milligan/PA

Although she has always worked "low-wage jobs" and is good at food budgeting, Marie began to worry when she noticed the prices creeping up, even in supermarkets "like Lidl and Aldi". "Panic sets in and it's scary. You go round the supermarket and you're totting up the cost in your head," she said, explaining that she often has to put back items at the checkout. "You'd just make sure you have toilet paper, milk and bread." The only clothes she buys are socks and tights. "I wear shoes until they fall apart."

She said the spiralling cost of living has pushed people in her area to the brink. “I live in a poor area, and people just look like the fight’s gone out of them. It was bad enough before, but people just look so much more miserable now. I grew up under Thatcher – we thought it was bad then but things are so much worse now. We didn’t have food banks during the 1980s – now they are essential.”

‘There is no wriggle room right now’

From next month, Christine Nebbett, a 46-year-old from Norfolk, will see her electricity bill shoot up from about £95 to £195 a month. The amount she pays for broadband will increase too. “I got an email saying my contract has ended and it’s going to go from something like £23 to £40,” she said, explaining she chose the provider “because it was really quite low for broadband – my son needs it as well because he’s at university”.

“I don’t know what to do on the internet,” she said, wondering if it is “feasible” to cut it off. “That means having to apply for jobs just on a phone, and my son, when he comes back from university, still needs to study. There is no wriggle room now.”

Rising costs of living have left Nebbett, who works in retail but is on statutory sick pay and universal credit, with few areas to make cuts to. “I’ve already got rid of anything extraneous,” she said. “I’ve got no Netflix, Amazon, or Spotify.”

Nebbett said she is considering taking her car, which cost her about £500 four years ago, off the road. “It’s more expensive for road tax, fuel and oil because it’s an old car,” she said, but this would be difficult as she lives in a rural location with poor transport links. Although she avoids driving as far as possible, she said: “There is always something extra and unanticipated.” She recently had to use fuel to drive to get a PCR test. The unexpected trip meant she later could not afford to drive to the supermarket.

‘I can’t get the council tax rebate even though I live in a house worth less than £300,000’

Mary Strode.

“I’m going to get very cold,” said 70-year-old Mary Strode from Powys, Wales.

The retired overseas development worker said she was not eligible for any government help because her house was in council tax band E. She uses oil central heating and does not pay for her electricity via direct debit.

“I can’t get the council tax rebate even though I live in a house worth less than £300,000 with two bedrooms and a box room,” she said. “Apart from the holiday lets, most of the people in our village are of modest means. Council tax might work well in cities but not outside the south-east of England.”

Strode, who lives on her own, said her income was less than £20,000 per annum and with no fuel price cap on heating oil, she’s going to struggle. “Heating oil is the big expense for me,” she said. “I pay about £80 a month but I’ve cut down a lot. When I last filled up in January it was 72.5p a litre but now it’s around 99p plus VAT. I still have half a tank left so I hope it lasts as I can’t afford to fill it up again.”

She pays for her electricity as and when she uses it because she likes “the feeling of having things under control” rather than paying by direct debit. “It

helps me try to economise," she added. "Another thing I think I'm going to do is let a room out for the Hay-on-Wye festival – anything to help pay for the bills."

**Some names have been changed.*

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2022.04.01 - Spotlight

- **Red Hot Chili Peppers People misbehave and make mistakes. They don't know better**
- **From energy costs to TV bills What has gone up in price today?**
- **'I'm living for the ones who didn't make it' Bonnie Raitt on her unquenchable thirst for music**
- **Just Stop Oil Inside the youth climate group blocking UK refineries**

Advertisement

Interview

Red Hot Chili Peppers: ‘People misbehave and make mistakes. They don’t know better’

Kate Hutchinson

Red Hot Chili Peppers … (from left) Anthony Kiedis, John Frusciante, Flea and Chad Smith. Photograph: Clara Balzary

As they reunite for their 12th album, the punk-funk rockers are trying to age gracefully after a youth full of sex and drugs. So why does Anthony Kiedis hang up after a difficult question?

@katehutchinson
Fri 1 Apr 2022 01.00 EDT

If there was any doubt to how massive the Red Hot Chili Peppers still are, last month they got a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, on the very streets they used to stalk as teenage punks. Here in Los Angeles, they are everywhere. In a bodega on Melrose Avenue, amid the lingerie shops and trash-filled lots, the city's unofficial theme tune wafts out of the speakers: "First born unicorn / Hardcore soft porn / Dream of Californ-i-cay-tioooon". I half expect Flea and Anthony Kiedis to wander in, long-haired and bare-chested; those teenagers who ended up in one of the world's most enduring bands.

It's not quite the meet-cute I had imagined, then, when I finally see them in the pixellated flesh on separate Zooms and one phone call: drummer Chad Smith in his home office, bassist Flea in his home cinema and frontman

Kiedis dialling in from the warehouse where the band is rehearsing for a stadium tour. There is a new album, Unlimited Love, their 12th – significant because it's the first in nearly two decades with guitarist John Frusciante back in the fold, but also because the band has survived for 39 years without resorting to a breakup and reunion. "I thought we'd implode at some point, like most bands do," says Smith.

They have had a fair go, what with the drug hell and lineup changes. The last time this lineup was together was in the mid-00s. Californication – their 1999 ground zero, my most-worn cassette – had sold 15m, follow-up By the Way included huge singles, and their 2006 double album, Stadium Arcadium, was a US No 1. Critics said it was either the best thing they had ever done or that it failed to harmonise their two sides: edgy funk-rap mavericks and radio-friendly pop-rockers. Frusciante quietly left soon after. Although it was for less dramatic reasons than the first time, in 1992, when he was shooting so much heroin that his teeth fell out.

The Red Hot Chili Peppers in 1988 … (from left) Anthony Kiedis, John Frusciante, Flea and DH Peligro. Photograph: Jim Steinfeldt/Getty Images

The guitarist had joined the band at 18, "and by the time he was 21, we went from this little club band to Under the Bridge," says Smith. "It was a lot."

Frusciante's second exit was different. "There was no animosity. My take is that he wanted to do his own thing, where you didn't have to compromise and [deal with] photoshoots and interviews." Indeed, he seems to have rejoined on the proviso that he doesn't have to do much of the latter, and isn't available for this piece. Smith never considered that he would come back: "I thought that ship had sailed."

But in late 2019, Flea and Frusciante started jamming together. "I can't think of another musical connection I've seen that's as strong as theirs," Rick Rubin, their long-serving producer, who is back again on Unlimited Love, once said. There was only one problem: the Chilis already had a guitarist, Josh Klinghoffer, who had replaced Frusciante in 2009. Klinghoffer got a text from Flea, calling him over to his house. When he arrived, the band was waiting in the back yard, ready to deliver the bad news: he was out. He would later tell Rolling Stone that "it truly felt like a death".

"Flea was like: 'We're gonna have John back. We love you, but we feel like there's unfinished business,'" says Smith of that meeting. "It was fucking hard. Josh sat there, the rug pulled out from under him. There was a pause of about 15 seconds. And then he turns to us and goes: 'I'm really happy for you guys.' What a class act." There was a silver lining for the sacked guitarist: eight days later, Eddie Vedder rang Klinghoffer and asked him to join Pearl Jam's touring band.

Frusciante back in the fold was, in some ways, a risk. The last solo release he did was rooted in rave and he said was unsure if he could still write rock. But the rest of the band were looking to start afresh. "We were getting ready to make another record and we weren't feeling confident," says Smith. For 2016's The Getaway, they had swapped Rubin, who had overseen their previous six albums, for Danger Mouse and loosely experimented with disco. But in the six years following, it sounds like the Chilis were a little lost. "It was hard to get us all on the same page and having faith in one another," Flea says.

> Anthony and I have a bond that is so deep, from having nothing and hustling together

Flea

As soon as they were jamming once again, however, ideas flowed freely. “Every possible fear of the muse disappearing has proven so far to be irrational,” says Kiedis. “We had a momentous shift in chemistry by getting John back in.” No sooner had they regrouped than the pandemic happened – but for the newly fired-up Chilis, it was a blessing in disguise. They jammed for months, on a diet of old blues, rock’n’roll and New York Dolls, and came to Rubin’s studio with more than 100 songs. “We have a reputation for being a bunch of lunatics, but we take the music very seriously,” adds Flea.

Ah yes, that reputation. A 2004 NME profile once wagered: “If you need any decent reasons to dismiss the band for ever” it’s down to early “moronic” songs such as Mommy Where’s Daddy – about incest – and Special Secret Song Inside (Party On Your Pussy) – go figure. To some disdainful critics, the band has never shaken off that image: puerile, sleazy, silly. Or, as Smith puts it: “Young Chad, early on in Chili Peppers, would have drank all your booze, done all your drugs. I would have fucked your girlfriend and not given a shit about any of it.”

So it’s interesting that their first three albums – their 1984 eponymous debut, the 1985 George Clinton-produced Freaky Styley and 1987’s The Uplift Mofo Party Plan – were among the material that Frusciante asked the band to play through when they were finding their feet again. “Songs we really hadn’t played in a long time,” says Smith. “My thought was: John wanted to reconnect with the band that he fell in love with.”

For Kiedis, it was about getting “back to basics – let’s just play music together with no expectations”. But he admits that revisiting that era was “a bit awkward. It feels a little like going backwards and I’ve grown into a new place. But I did see the value in the exercise, because it was a time where there was really nothing other than having fun and being obnoxious, brazen, crass – all of these characteristics that we had as young 20-year-olds.”

Unlimited Love has a few songs that speak to this unbridled attitude; these songs tend to be heavier, whereas the album is also airier and wistful elsewhere. One track is called, bluntly, The Great Apes. On One Way Traffic, meanwhile, Kiedis laments: “When did life get so damn cautious?” – though he’s not up for expanding on it now. “I don’t really get into this self-analysis,” he sighs. “Maybe I was referencing the world around me,

maybe a part of myself." It's a shame he won't dig deeper because there are themes of ageing and alienation, the US, their eternal muse, California, and – despite the softer innuendoes these days – love and sex, which are compelling against the long shadow of three musicians who have seen it all, now entering their 60s. (Frusciante, a whipper-snapper, is 52.)

Other songs are less oblique: Poster Child and the skronky-jazz of Aquatic Mouth Dance hark back to the 80s LA punk scene that Flea and Kiedis rolled with, from their old haunt the Starwood to John Doe from influential LA punks X. For Flea, it was a reminder that he's still Jenny from the block. "We're very privileged people – we have refrigerators full of food, nice houses and we jet off to wherever the fuck we want," he says. "But when I hear [Kiedis] singing: 'Please tell me can you spare / A pillow for my head and hair?', we lived that for a long time. Where are we gonna get food today? Where am I going to sleep? Being fucked up on drugs. Anthony and I have a bond in that way that is so deep, from having nothing and hustling together. And I love how it relates to who we are today."

Who and where they are today is complicated, perhaps, by the paradigm shift in culture since they have been away. The last Chilis album came out a year before #MeToo asked us to look differently at how we've lionised famous men, their privilege and behaviour. It's a time that looks back less favourably, you might say, at a group of dudes who once billed themselves as "utter perpetrators of hardcore, bone-crunching mayhem sex things from heaven" and paraded around with socks on their cocks.

"I always wanted to stir the pot," says Flea, who also said in his excellent 2019 memoir, Acid for the Children, that he was, at times, a bit of a jerk. "I wanted to be offensive, and it didn't matter whether it was women, other men, rightwing people, leftwing people, I'd want to say something that would piss them off, just to be contrarian, to get things going. And I always saw so much hypocrisy on every side of every fence."

He recalls writing one of his "stream-of-consciousness" blogs, Fleamail, in 2000, and signing off with the words "the feminist movement I mock". "I love feminism, I just wrote that," he says, though it prompted Kathi Wilcox, bassist in riot grrrl band Bikini Kill, to email him, saying: "That's offensive

to me." He says now: "And I remember in that moment, being like: 'Oh shit, I can't just say anything, even though I have a good heart inside.'"

On stage in 2004 … (from left) Flea, Kiedis and Frusciante. Photograph: Amanda Edwards/Getty Images

Flea came to terms with that chaos-baiting part of himself "a long time ago, nearly 30 years, when I stopped drinking and doing drugs. People misbehave and make mistakes, they don't know better." Being spiritually attuned these days, he has had "many reckonings with myself in regards to everything, not just women". But regarding the content of their songs, he deflects to Kiedis. "I didn't write those lyrics and I feel like I can't speak for them, or speak for Anthony, in terms of sexuality and the objectification of women," he says, although he suggests he sees a difference in being "in awe of a woman and taking delight in that sensuality and eroticism, and being disrespectful".

Personally, I love the songs about sex, trying to have sex and period sex – they are hotwired to my early teens, before I had awakenings of my own, and I surmise that it's a similar story for every generation of kids that discovers the Chilis' balls-out nonsense scatting and psychedelic doo-wop laments about Hollywood's seedy side. Though some of their songs might sit less easily now. One on Stadium Arcadium, called She's Only 18, Kiedis wrote about dating Heather Christie, the mother of his son Everly, when he

was 41. That's not to say that men over twice the age of someone can't write about them as an object of sexual desire, or flash back to their younger selves. But it doesn't stop others from getting the ick.

The stickier subject is Kiedis's 2004 memoir, Scar Tissue. Among the well-publicised revelations about his lost childhood is a passage where he admits to having sex with a minor when he was 23 or 24, knowing that she was 14, which he also said inspired his 1985 song Catholic School Girls Rule. This is all out there on bookshelves, though reviewers at the time tended to focus on the shocking experiences Kiedis had as a child himself (drugs, sex, partying), under the guidance of his father, who died last year. The book was of its time in the sense that no one batted an eye – or even dared question it.

He has thought twice about some of Scar Tissue now, surely? "I had low-level regret the minute the very first person ever read that book," says Kiedis. "But as time went by, my regrets disappeared into realising that the book did something much better than I ever intended for it to do. In the end, the stories were not the important thing, as much as this thematic notion that one could be at death's door, and somehow survive." He would receive messages from people in rehab and prison saying: "'Your book kept me company and it made me realise that it could change my life.' That's a much better reason to have written the book."

I say I was thinking more specifically about the Catholic School Girls Rule passage, but before I've got a chance to ask whether he has reflected on what he wrote, Kiedis shoots back: "I don't know what you're searching for with that one. But it doesn't seem like any good can come out of discussing that." Then the line goes dead.

Conveniently, Flea and Kiedis claim not to have thumbed each other's autobiographies. "I'm scared to read his book," says the bassist. Outside the studio, the Red Hot Chili Peppers appear to operate as four separate entities, with Flea's and Kiedis's knotty double helix at the centre. Says Flea: "If Anthony and I sat in a room and spoke for an hour like we're doing right now, he and I would walk away with completely different impressions of what happened. I'm not saying one truth is more important than another truth. We just are different people."

In 1990 … (from left) Flea, Smith, Kiedis and Frusciante. Photograph: Jeff Kravitz/FilmMagic, Inc

Perhaps that's the key to the band lasting like it has: ignoring each other. "A long time ago, we established a sort of unspoken musical language, where we don't need to speak a lot," says Flea. "We don't, like, hang out on a Friday night," says Smith. "But we have this thing that's special."

In that respect, Unlimited Love is both a necessary sentiment and a bit of a cop out. It speaks to the current moment of a divided world – left versus right, masked or unmasked, says Flea, who also talks a lot about building bridges – and it surveys the Chilis' past while making them relevant in the present, as rock titans who have lasted against the odds. Although I do wonder if the earnest bridge-building sidesteps accountability.

Each period of the band, says Flea, is "a growing experience. Every record is a time capsule, and to tie anybody, especially an artist that always continues to evolve and change, to something they did 30 years ago, 10 years ago, even five years ago … People might do something idiotic and have awakenings."

But what if that something is illegal, or unforgivable? Flea, in his tie-dye Miles Davis hoodie, remains philosophical. "If you go back through

history," he says, "through all the greatest, timeless art [that] changed culture for ever, and then you have to go through every single person and investigate the quality of their character, to see if the words [or] music is worth paying attention to because of the quality of the character of the person that made it … At what point … ?

"I know this one thing for sure," he continues. "The art remains the same. You could look at a painting 20 years ago you didn't understand and you didn't like it. Twenty years later, you look at [it and think]: 'This is touching my heart in a way that I can't believe', because the art stayed the same, *you* changed. Wagner's operas sound the same, the way that we look at them changes. Picasso's art stays the same. A hundred years from now, people will look at it, and they'll think about it completely differently than we [do] now."

(From left) Flea, Frusciante, Smith and Kiedis. Photograph: Sandy Kim

Is it possible, then, to be fun-loving, sleazy rock'n'rollers now? Or has culture moved to a point where it no longer accommodates that? "It's absolutely possible," says Flea, with fizzy vim. "Let your freak flag fly. Say what you need to say, don't worry about what people think. And build bridges of love out into the universe."

But Smith is not so sure if you can be that band in 2022. “Probably not. You have to be a little more careful. Things have changed. And good, as it should. Change is good. Nobody wants to see 60-year-old guys with socks on their dicks.”

Unlimited Love is out now on Warner Records. Red Hot Chili Peppers tour the UK and Ireland in June

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Advertisement

From energy costs to TV bills: what has gone up in price from 1 April?

Energy bills, car tax and TV streaming are just some of the costs that are rising from 1 April. Composite: Guardian

Britons face a shock as household costs soar – and some unexpected items such as beer also go up

Hilary Osborne
Fri 1 Apr 2022 05.06 EDTFirst published on Fri 1 Apr 2022 02.00 EDT

It's been dubbed "bleak Friday" by some: pre-announced price rises for many household bills are to take effect on 1 April, adding to the misery for consumers who are already paying more for goods and food than this time last year.

Energy bills graphic

Energy bills – up 54%, £693 a year, on average

The price cap on energy bills for households in Great Britain has increased by 54%, meaning providers can charge up to £1,971 a year for customers with average use who have a direct debit set up. Average use is 3,100kWh of electricity and 12,000kWh of gas, so any household using more power will pay more. The cap varies around the country and according to how you pay. Those who settle their bills when they receive them will typically pay £130 a year more, while pre-payment customers with average use pay £47 more.

Council tax graphic

Council tax – up 3.5%, £67 a year, on average

The average annual council tax bill on a band D property in England goes up to £1,966. London boroughs are increasing band D bills by an average of 2.4%, while households in shire counties will see the largest rise, at an average of 3.7%. They will also see the highest bills, at an average of £2,041.

Water bills graphic

Water bills – up 1.7%, £7, a year

Water bills in England and Wales will rise by an average of 1.7% to £419. Customers of South West Water face a rise of £12 to £515, while households with Wessex will see a £21 rise to £476. Other water companies including Hafren Dyfrdwy and Thames are reducing annual bills by similar sums.

Broadband bills graphic

Broadband, phones and TV – about £42 a year

Telecoms and streaming companies have announced price hikes across their services. Some, including Virgin, have already applied increases this month. Customers of Sky, BT and Vodafone could all face higher bills from today. Sky's Essential broadband package has gone up by 10% to £27.50 a month, while the Superfast service is up 9% to £30.50 a month. On average it says customers will pay less than 5%, or £3.60, more.

BT's prices went up on Thursday by 9.3%, which it said meant customers paying an average of £3.50 a month more. Some customers, including those with BT Basic or Home Essentials, will not see prices rise.

Vodafone is hiking monthly mobile phone bills by up to 9.3%. If your plan started before 9 December 2020, it will go up by 8.2% to reflect the retail prices index (RPI) rate published in March 2022. A £40 plan will go up by £3.28. If your contract was taken out more recently, your monthly cost will go up by 9.3%. For a £40 plan, that means shelling out an extra £3.72.

Car tax graphic

Vehicle excise duty – about £10 a year

The annual cost of taxing your car is rising in line with RPI – typically the highest measure of inflation. VED is based on a range of factors including how old your car is, as well as its emissions and fuel type. Tax on a band E car is increasing from £155 a year to £165. The most polluting cars are subject to a £30 increase.

Pint of beer – up 5%, 20p, each

A temporary VAT cut on hospitality has come to an end, and pubs and restaurants are among business that will pay 60% more in tax as a result. Some of the rise, from 12.5% to 20% VAT, is expected to filter through to prices charged. The night-time economy adviser for Greater Manchester has forecast that over the next three months this and other price pressures will add 16-20p to the price of a pint, taking the UK average to £4.25.

Covid test graphic

Lateral flow tests – from £1 each

The government in England will no longer provide free LFTs to most households. Most of those asked to do one before visiting relatives in care homes, or attending a venue or service, will need to pay. Retailers including Tesco and Boots are charging £2 for individual tests, although cheaper options are advertised online.

Social housing rents – up 4.1%, £202 on average, a year

Housing associations have been allowed to raise rents and service charges in line with September's consumer prices index (CPI) figure plus one percentage point, which comes to 4.1%. The Resolution Foundation thinktank says this works out at an average of £202 a year for the 4.5m households affected.

The rents charged on shared ownership properties are often linked with the higher RPI, and many tenants are facing increases of more than 5%.

Council tax rebate – £150 to households

Households in band A-D properties will get a council tax rebate this month – if you pay by direct debit, it could land in your account soon. This is part of the government's plan to help towards rising costs, and is now tipped to be followed with a second rebate. If you qualify but do not pay by direct debit, you will need to apply – your council should contact you to tell you how.

Minimum wage graphic

Minimum wage – up 6.6%, about £1,000 a year

In more welcome news, pay is also rising. The government's "national living wage" has gone up by 59p an hour to £9.50 for workers aged 23 and over. For those aged 21 to 22, the minimum will increase by 9.8% from £8.36 to £9.18.

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Advertisement

Interview

‘I’m living for the ones who didn’t make it’: Bonnie Raitt on her unquenchable thirst for music

Kat Lister

‘Stay true to your art and when you’re 70 years old people will still want to come and see you’ … Bonnie Raitt. Photograph: Shervin Lainez

As she wins a lifetime achievement Grammy at 72, the US singer who crossed blues with pop is still determined to support artists who never got their dues

Fri 1 Apr 2022 05.00 EDT

Bonnie Raitt’s story begins in a childhood bedroom in Burbank, California. By 16, she had already taught herself the guitar by listening to Joan Baez and Bob Dylan. Now, the Newport folk scene was turning her on to Muddy Waters, John Hammond Jr and Robert Johnson – and to the bewitching sound of the slide guitar. She soaked the label off a medicine bottle, placed her middle finger inside the glass and started to play.

“I’m just one more kid who learned how to play the blues from being a fan,” the 72-year-old tells me on a video call from her home in northern California. It is a modest statement for the first woman to have a Fender guitar launched in her honour. On Sunday, Raitt will receive a lifetime achievement award at the Grammys – a far cry from her DIY beginnings in the mid-60s, and a long overdue accolade. “My gameplan was just to follow my blues and jazz exemplars. Stay true to your art, do the best shows you can, keep going, don’t worry about commercial success, and when you’re 70 years old people will still want to come and see you,” she says.

This self-determination has come to define Raitt’s life and work. She first dazzled the critics in 1971, when she was just 21. Her self-assured debut album, Bonnie Raitt, was followed by six more before the decade was through. The 80s, however, would challenge the singer, who was tussling not only with her label’s commercial expectations, but also with alcohol and drugs, too. In 1983, she was dropped, her ninth album shelved. In spite of the odds, she toured anyway, scaling the band down to just her and a bass guitarist. A few more years passed. Warner Brothers forced her to release the album they had scrapped in 1986. She called it Nine Lives; it is a deeply painful record that she describes as “a sputter of a bad relationship”.

The ‘best damn slide player working today’: BB King on Bonnie Raitt. Photograph: Gary Miller/Getty Images for Shock Ink

Raitt joined a recovery programme in 1987: “I recognised that I had been in the grips of an increasing addiction, reliant on drugs and alcohol to numb my feelings.” Her 10th album, Nick of Time, was her first made sober – and her first No 1. Luck of the Draw swiftly followed, featuring the pensive ballad I Can’t Make You Love Me, written by Mike Read and Allen Shamblin and later covered by George Michael and Adele.

The album sold 7m copies in the US alone. It was a turning point that Raitt calls her “Cinderella moment” – not because she courted fame and fortune, but because its success enabled her to invest in social activism causes such as the Rhythm & Blues Foundation (dedicated to assisting artists) and Musicians United for Safe Energy, founded by Raitt, Jackson Browne, Graham Nash and John Hall. “When I became a hit artist for a minute, I could really raise money and attention in a way that I couldn’t before,” she says. “It gave me clout and freedom and security – and at 40 that was something, along with sobriety, that were four of the greatest gifts I could’ve gotten.”

> Someone like me ... can get some health insurance for these legends who populate your record shelves

Granted, Raitt hasn't always been a Grammy-winning artist, but that doesn't negate the years that preceded Nick of Time. "I was never unsuccessful in the 70s and 80s," she says, reframing the narrative. "When I started out, I didn't want to come off the road, I didn't want to marry and have kids, I loved the Gypsy life and I loved playing."

Listen to any one of her 17 studio albums and you will hear this devotion in action, from the country croons of Under the Falling Sky, written by Browne, to the storytelling prowess of Angel from Montgomery, a song of longing by John Prine that Raitt transformed adroitly into a soaring anthem. Whether it is songs by Allen Toussaint or Richard Thompson, Calypso Rose or Eddy Grant – no stone is left unturned.

"Thank goodness I come from the generation of Elvis, Frank Sinatra, Ray Charles and Aretha Franklin, where they performed other people's songs and did it in their own way," Raitt says. Her unquestionable gift is the way she can interpret and reimagine music intuitively, motivated by a desire to find stories. Searching for the right song is what motivates Raitt, she says. It can make her sleep less, too. "One moment, you're listening to some obscure Charles Brown recording from the 1949 sessions that you've never heard before; the next thing you know, it's four hours later and you haven't brushed your teeth," she says, laughing.

As a girl growing up in the 80s, I say, I used her early records as a conduit to artists I hadn't yet discovered. Blues musicians such as Mississippi Fred McDowell (a master of the slide guitar, whose playing captivated Raitt as a college student in Cambridge, Massachusetts) and Sippie Wallace, a star of the 20s jazz scene in Chicago. "She wasn't just a fantastic piano player: most people don't know she wrote many of her own songs," Raitt says.

She loved her attitude, especially as a young feminist. Raitt draws my attention to a particular Wallace line, putting on her best drawl. "You can make me do what you wanna do, but you got to know *howwwww*," she teases. "That's such a good way of wagging your finger and talking about what you want sexually."

When she discovered Wallace in 1968 at Dobells record store on Charing Cross Road in London, she had no idea that by recording three songs – Mighty Tight Woman, Women Be Wise and You Got to Know How – she would reintroduce Wallace to a new audience. She also had no idea that Wallace was still alive and singing gospel in Detroit. “I begged her to come out to the Ann Arbor blues festival in 1972 and we sang Women Be Wise in the backstage trailer.” They toured together for 15 years until Wallace died in 1986.

Raitt’s great mission is to showcase underappreciated artists, she says – and that includes the R&B musicians who never got paid for their original recordings. “Someone like me can bring attention to the fact that recording contracts weren’t fair back then, and ask for contributions to the Rhythm and Blues Foundation, so we can get some health insurance for these legends who populate your record shelves,” she says.

‘When I became a hit artist, I could raise money and attention in a way that I couldn’t before’ … Raitt in 1986. Photograph: Aaron Rapoport/Getty Images

Her mastery of the guitar once prompted BB King to call Raitt the “best damn slide player working today”. “There were more people around doing great blues guitar,” Raitt says, with typical humility. Shine a light on her

accomplishments and she will be quick to turn to those of others. From the folk greats ("Joan Baez and Odetta were like goddesses to me – they were my Beyoncé") to her blueswomen contemporaries ("Jo Ann Kelly was a master of the acoustic blues. And Sister Rosetta Tharpe nailed the electric guitar. Memphis Minnie was a great role model for me, too").

As for slide? "I'm glad I got good at it, but it really isn't that difficult," she shrugs. "I know I got my foot in the door for being adept at that instrument, but I beg to say I'm not *that* great at it." I reply by telling her that I have watched her 1976 Old Grey Whistle Test rendition of McDowell's Kokomo Blues and I beg to differ.

Next month, Raitt will release Just Like That, her first studio album in six years. As well as continuing to showcase her interpretive skills (Love So Strong is a tribute to Toots and the Maytals' Toots Hibbert, who died in 2020), it is also a reminder of her songwriting talent, a muscle she flexed from the very beginning, with soulful compositions such as 1971's Thank You and Finest Lovin' Man.

There seems to be a lot of love and loss on this record. Living for the Ones is perhaps the most potent example of this, a cruising rock number that belies her grief. "I lost my brother in 2009," she says. "Every day, when I want to complain about something that didn't quite work out, I open my eyes and say: I'm living for the ones who didn't get to make it." Another "huge loss" for Raitt was the death of Prine from Covid complications in 2020. She had him in mind when she wrote Down the Hall, an introspective acoustic ballad inspired by a New York Times piece she read about a prison hospice programme. It prompts tears as she talks about it. "I just put myself there and created a character, like John Prine did with Angel of Montgomery," she says.

Her enthusiasm is as boundless as it has ever been, urged onwards by these losses. Next month, she hits the road in the US with the gospel legend Mavis Staples. Suffice to say, she is raring to go after nearly two years of the pandemic. "When I play my first live show, where I hear the audience clap and actually look out there and see *real* people? I've never appreciated doing this more than I do right now."

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Down to EarthClimate crisis

Inside Just Stop Oil, the youth climate group blocking UK refineries

A band of 20-year-olds have made headlines disrupting football games, the Baftas and now oil facilities across the UK. But what do they want?

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Just Stop Oil and XR protesters block UK refineries – video

Damien Gayle
@damiengayle
Fri 1 Apr 2022 04.39 EDTLast modified on Fri 1 Apr 2022 08.44 EDT

Louis McKechnie is the face that launched a thousand British football memes. In March, the 21-year-old caused a stop to play when he ran onto the pitch at Goodison Park during a match between Everton and Newcastle and zip-tied himself to a goalpost by his neck.

If anything could have enraged the 40,000 jeering football fans more, it was the solemnity with which he did it. But while for many the episode will have merely been jotted down as another entry in the annals of absurdity, his cause was deadly serious.

Sign up to Down to Earth, our exclusive weekly newsletter from our top climate crisis correspondents.

A day earlier, Maddie, 21, and Kai, 20 – who did not give their surnames – attempted to stage a similar action at Arsenal's Emirates Stadium in north London. Kai took a long pause and looked around him at the slowly filling stands before describing how he felt about what they had planned.
"Every single second I spend here, I want to do what I'm going to do less,

because I can see everyone just trying to have a nice time," he said. "But I know it's what is right; I know that it has to happen."

Louis McKechnie ties himself to the net in protest during the Premier League match between Everton and Newcastle United at Goodison Park on 17 March, 2022 in Liverpool, England Photograph: Michael Regan/Getty Images

Fuel to the fire

Louis, Maddie and Kai are all young activists with a climate group called Just Stop Oil. They have called on the UK government to halt all new fossil fuel projects in order to avoid the worst effects of climate change. If their efforts fail, they intend to paralyse the supply chain themselves, using non-violent direct action to disrupt the strategic oil and gas infrastructure that keeps the UK moving.

The ambition is big. "We are mobilising upwards of 1,000 people," one JSO activist told the Guardian. "This is going to be a fusion of other large-scale blockade-style actions you have seen in the past."

Just Stop Oil say they are taking inspiration from UK lorry drivers' protests in 2000, when, furious at a rise in fuel duty, hauliers and farmers staged

blockades that paralysed petrol distribution. Hundreds of petrol stations ran dry, leading to empty shelves in supermarkets, delays to mail deliveries and schools being closed. Protests ended after the government said it would order soldiers to secure deliveries, but they won: then-chancellor Gordon Brown announced in that year's budget that fuel duty would be frozen.

But where 20 years ago those protesters enjoyed public support in their campaign against rising prices, Just Stop Oil's target is the fossil fuel system itself. While polling shows large majorities regard the climate as one of the most important issues of the moment, it's unclear whether that understanding would continue if the pumps were empty.

At a recruitment meeting last Thursday in Camden, north London, Larch Maxey, a veteran eco-campaigner, said the aim was "to build a community of civil resistance in response to the climate change science".

"In 2022 you have got tens of thousands of peer-reviewed papers spelling out the climate science," he said. Authorities such as David Attenborough and David King, the former government chief science officer, were in agreement, he said: there is a narrow window of two to three years in which to act. "We are facing the end of civilisation if we do not act on the climate emergency. We are heading towards societal collapse.

"When your house is on fire, you stop pouring petrol on the flames," he said. "That's basically the demand – no new licences. We are in a crisis. Let's stop digging out new oil and gas."

Activists from the Just Stop Oil campaign group, with hands glued to the road, protest against the use of oil after the arrivals for the Baftas Photograph: Tolga Akmen/AFP/Getty Images

New kids on the blockade

Just Stop Oil doesn't just share rhetoric with Extinction Rebellion, it sits within an arc of escalation that began with that group's blockades of five Thames bridges in 2018. Since then, the environmental movement has continued to explore new non-violent tactical provocations to draw attention to its demands.

Many of those involved are, like Maxey, veterans of XR and the HS2 protests; McKechnie is one of a number who took action with Insulate Britain. As with those groups, the silhouette of Roger Hallam also looms behind Just Stop Oil. Although the Guardian has been told it is wrong to describe Hallam as the mastermind of this latest campaign, he featured prominently in early coverage of its activities.

The key shift in Just Stop Oil is what its supporters say is a move from civil disobedience and into civil resistance. What that means, as Jess Causby, 25, a supporter of the campaign, told the Guardian last month, "is stopping pointing out what the government should or shouldn't be doing [and instead]

actively stopping government doing what they shouldn't be."

The question is whether they can pull it off. The record of actions attended by Guardian reporters has not immediately seemed propitious. Young activists who tried to storm the red carpet at the Baftas two weeks ago misjudged how difficult it would be to reach, and ended up blocking its road-entrance instead. Kai and Maddie were intercepted before they could prove a nuisance at Arsenal. A small group who tried to disrupt play at Tottenham were also swiftly handled.

Their next plan is to tackle a much bigger target, and they can expect to be anticipated. Oil companies have already begun to make preparations. What will happen next remains to be seen.

This piece first appeared in Down to Earth, the Guardian's climate crisis newsletter, on Thursday 31 March before Friday's protests at oil terminals across the UK. Sign up here to read more exclusive pieces like this and for a digest of the week's biggest environment stories every Thursday

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2022.04.01 - Opinion

- Putting calories on menus won’t solve obesity, but it will harm those of us with eating disorders
- Why does it make me uneasy when straight women write TV shows about lesbians?
- The horrific birth stories from Shrewsbury NHS trust are haunting. Sadly, they’re not unique
- Homeless deaths in the UK have increased by 80% since 2019. But we had a solution

OpinionFood

Putting calories on menus won’t solve obesity, but it will harm those of us with eating disorders

Clare Finney

For many, restaurants are a place of refuge where calories are off the table. This new labelling policy will induce anxiety and stress

‘In New York, where labels have been in place since 2008, it seems people go for broke when presented with calorie counts.’ Photograph: Chris Hondros/Getty Images

Fri 1 Apr 2022 02.00 EDTLast modified on Fri 1 Apr 2022 12.21 EDT

There was a time when counting my calorie intake was as easy as breathing. Though practically innumerate in maths classes, I could quickly tot up the calories I’d resisted, succumbed to and burned in a day. If restaurants and cafes had revealed the calories in their dishes, it would have played straight into my 16-year-old determination to whittle away my already whippet-like body. For the 1.25 million men and women with eating disorders in the UK, eating out is about to become even more stressful than it already is. From today, cafes, restaurants and takeaways in England with more than 250 employees will have to display the calorie information of all food and drink they prepare for customers.

This is part of the government’s wider strategy to help people who are overweight or obese, a category that includes almost two-thirds of adults in England and one in three children leaving primary school. In theory, this sounds like a simple solution: if customers who are watching their weight know a chicken katsu curry and a side of fried gyoza at Wagamama’s adds up to 1,224 calories, they might order differently. In practice, like most simple solutions, calorie labelling doesn’t really work.

For proof of this, we need only look to the US, where calorie labels have been mandated on the menus of large chains since 2018. Despite this, Americans are still getting fatter. At best, studies suggest people quickly stopped noticing the small, joy-sapping number next to their favourite order. At worst – as it transpired in New York City, where such labels have been in place since 2008 – it seems they go for broke when presented with calorie counts, choosing dishes with more calories, not fewer.

The failure of such policies can be accounted for in many ways, from the role a person's genetics plays in weight gain to the addictive quality of high-calorie foods and the economic and social factors that make obesity a systemic rather than an individual problem. As Stuart Flint, an associate professor of the psychology of obesity at Leeds University and a director of Obesity UK, recently told the Observer: "Obesity is very complex. If it was as simple as eating less or more, people wouldn't gain weight to the extent we have at the moment, and people would be able to lose weight more easily." You would hope this policy would be founded on reliable evidence and the support of people like Flint.

Yet rather than tackling obesity, the main effect of calorie labelling may simply be to induce anxiety and stress in already vulnerable people. It's been years since I struggled with eating disorders, but only because, like any recovering addict, I'm meticulous about putting preventive measures in place. I have a therapist. I'm open about my experiences. I have friends and family I can look to if I'm struggling. I never weigh myself, or take waist measurements – and I never, ever count calories, focusing instead on flavour and nutrition.

And I'm *recovering* – recovered, even, though the threat of regression continues to worry me, as it does all former sufferers. I can all too easily imagine how those coping with anorexia, bulimia or binge eating might feel when confronted with a calorie label at a restaurant with family or friends. When I was unwell, restaurants were a rare and special refuge; a place where, because I couldn't easily count them, calories were off the table. The regret would kick in soon after, but for those few precious hours in Pizza Express Pinner or ASK Northwood, my weight worries were outweighed by the company, atmosphere and sense of occasion.

It pains me to think that this brief, light relief will be taken away from people like me. The number of people with eating disorders in the UK is rising sharply as a result of the isolation and anxiety wrought by Covid-19. During long lockdowns, many former sufferers saw the disease they thought they had put to bed return. Mental illness can be easily triggered by changes in your environment: big changes, like a global pandemic, and seemingly small ones, like calorie labels on menus. While the new regulations permit restaurants to provide menus without calories "where the consumer expressly requests it", the assumptions behind this concession are deeply flawed.

It assumes the businesses will have such a menu; that staff will know to offer it; that a customer will know to ask for it; and that a pathologically compulsive counter of calories will ask for this special menu, in front of their family, colleagues or friends. It is a cruel irony that those who would ideally take note of calorie labels will eventually ignore them, while those who should ignore them will have to fight every instinct in order to do so. With this new policy, those of us who are at risk of being affected by calorie labelling on menus stand to lose an awful lot more than weight.

- Clare Finney is a food writer
- BEAT's advice on eating out with calorie labelling is here

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OpinionTelevision

Why does it make me uneasy when straight women write TV shows about lesbians?

Emma Brockes

I know, I know: I sound bitter and chippy. But lesbianism is a very specific thing, not a proxy for feelings of outsiderdom

Suranne Jones (right) as Anne Lister and Sophie Rundle as Ann Walker in Gentleman Jack. Photograph: BBC/Lookout Point/HBO/Aimee Spinks/PA

Fri 1 Apr 2022 03.00 EDTLast modified on Fri 1 Apr 2022 08.46 EDT

To quote Nora Ephron in her take-down of Dorothy Schiff, I feel bad about what I'm going to do here. It's not a take-down, but still, I feel bad. I am probably in the wrong. I'm being all the things one is accused of in these instances, in good faith and bad: chippy, oversensitive, territorial, ungenerous and, as my mother would have said, looking for nonsense. I have tried to frame the following less as opinion than reporting. I am, merely, passing on a conversation presently taking place among lesbians who watch a lot of prestige TV and tend to notice who wrote it. But I can only maintain the delusion so far. At some point, neutrality gives way to something else.

It's about Sally Wainwright – sort of – who of course, we all love. We love Wainwright because we love Sarah Lancashire and Suranne Jones, her two leading ladies. There isn't a lesbian in Britain who isn't in love with Suranne Jones. I have no opinion about this, I am simply reporting the facts. The same goes for Sarah Lancashire. Wainwright is justifiably one of the most beloved creators of TV in Britain. Last week, she was to be found in this paper promoting season two of Gentleman Jack, her BBC/HBO show about Anne Lister, the landowner who rocked around Yorkshire in the mid-19th

century, enthusiastically seducing women. Lister has been styled, by HBO and others, as the "first modern lesbian".

Most of us agree that, as a broad principle, anyone can write about anything they like, and Wainwright has written a lot about lesbians; in Last Tango in Halifax, in At Home With the Braithwaites, and now in Gentleman Jack. Lesbianism is a useful plot point, like murder, or infidelity and historically has tended to be treated in one of three ways on screen: with lurid disdain, with lascivious voyeurism – think Sharon Stone in Basic Instinct – or with dreary, agonised despair. Lesbians are, generally, so grateful not to be depicted as weirdos, murderers, or sexless creatures in bonnets picking up stones off a beach, that when a halfway decent writer comes along and gives them attention, they – we – are quite forgiving if the details are off. Better a sympathetic straight woman than Jed Mercurio.

I'm making a wild assumption here. Wainwright, who until they separated was married for 29 years to a man with whom she has two adult children, could conceivably identify as queer. But anyway, her lived experience, shall we say, is not that of a woman married to a woman in a starkly homophobic society. In the Guardian last week she said of Gentleman Jack that it was a story, "so life-affirming, uplifting and clever. She didn't die at the end – she got her big romantic reconciliation. That's what gay women responded to". She put this in contrast to Last Tango in Halifax, a great show with a central storyline about lesbians in which Kate, one half of a gay couple, goes under a car. "I got slated for that," said Wainwright. "Apparently, *all* lesbians die in telly, which I just didn't know." Ha; yeah; it's almost as if you don't know much about the experiences of the people you're writing about.

See? We're chippy. It comes from decades of shitty representation, or no representation at all. And by the standards of what came before, Wainwright's treatment of lesbians is of course nuanced and sympathetic. And so here I am, wringing my hands. Why am I being mean about this nice straight lady writing gentle plot lines that, OK, in some places bear absolutely no relation whatsoever to experiences an actual gay person has had – in Last Tango, Kate shags her ex-boyfriend to conceive a baby she wants to raise with her girlfriend, while the girlfriend sits uncomplainingly downstairs. Have you ever sat next to a lesbian? We complain. A lot. About

everything. That woman is not sitting there in a hotel bar while her girlfriend has sex in the room with a guy. If she's not storming upstairs to create a scene, at the very least she has a drink problem.

Some of the irritation here is just market economics. Women's stories take up less space than men's; lesbian stories a tiny portion within that. Production companies will routinely say they have their "one gay" story of the season and it will inevitably be about gay men. It is easier to be a gay man than a lesbian because it is easier to be a man than a woman. Just look at Ryan Murphy, swaggering around Hollywood promoting great stories about gay men. Where is his female counterpart? (I'll tell you where she is, she's in the closet.)

I'm aware that none of this leads anywhere good. The appropriation debate only ends in gridlock. If a writer is vetoed on the basis of who they are, what about an actor? Sarah Silverman raised this issue last year when she called out non-Jewish actors for effectively donning "Jewface", pointing in particular to the non-Jewish actor who plays Mrs Maisel, and the propriety of Felicity Jones being cast as Ruth Bader Ginsberg. Nuances might be missed, but in my view this isn't about performance. With a good enough writer or actor the differences can be largely surmounted. It's not even about employment opportunity, although there is that. It's a largely emotional response, a request for basic acknowledgment. If you belong to a minority that has, historically, been blocked from proportionate access to the market, it sits really badly to watch someone from a category of greater privilege use your stories for their own advancement.

Bitter! Did I mention we're also quite bitter? And here's the worst part. The defence often used by straight people writing about gay people is that they, too, have felt estrangement in their lives and so understand the terrain. This extends beyond writing to less tangible areas. Here's Tilda Swinton, identifying as queer "not in terms of my sexual life," as she told the Guardian this year, but because as a young person she was "just odd". I've seen similar comments by other artists, referring to a disconnect they represent in their fiction as gayness. Guess what? We don't entirely love that! Gayness is not a catch-all category for people struggling with feelings of rejection. No one wants to be used metaphorically. No one wants to be a

proxy for someone else's social unease. People tend to be wedded to the specificities of their own experience, particularly when it comes to representation. Common cause is wonderful and with any luck, in 20 years, none of this will matter. But it matters now.

And so here we are. I loved Happy Valley. I loved huge chunks of Last Tango. I feel abject and unhappy raising all this. But as a friend – a massive dyke, let's be clear, not someone with a nebulous sense of generalised anxiety looking for a convenient peg to hang it on – said to me the other day on the subject of Swinton, Wainwright, and some of the others gently congratulating themselves for claiming affinity with an experience to which they bring good intentions but no particular insight: "What the fuck does any of this have to do with us?"

- Emma Brockes is a Guardian columnist

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OpinionNHS

The horrific birth stories from Shrewsbury NHS trust are haunting. Sadly, they're not unique

Gaby Hinsliff

More than 200 babies died through lack of care. Why are women in childbirth repeatedly treated so badly?

‘It’s thanks to Kate’s and Pippa’s parents, who persuaded Jeremy Hunt to open an inquiry, that we now know these stories.’ Donna Ockenden, centre, with Rhiannon Davies, far left, and Kayleigh Griffiths, left. Photograph: Jacob King/PA

Thu 31 Mar 2022 12.48 EDTLast modified on Thu 31 Mar 2022 14.29 EDT

Had she lived, Kate Stanton-Davies would have just turned 13. She should have been a teenager with her whole life before her, yet as it was she survived for only six short hours. The legacy of that brief time is a harrowing report published this week into the failure of maternity services at the Shrewsbury and Telford hospital trust, where her mother, Rhiannon, gave birth to her.

The senior midwife leading the inquiry, Donna Ockenden, said that after talking to some of the hundreds of bereaved families who gave evidence she would sometimes go home and cry. I did too on reading the report, which concludes that no fewer than 201 babies and nine new mothers who died over a period stretching back to the millennium could or would have lived with better care.

The stories are haunting. Take the unnamed mother worried about delivering vaginally after a previous caesarean birth, a process that can risk ripping

open the old scar, who was pressed into doing so and died on the operating table. Or Kayleigh Griffiths, who had a home birth, and phoned the midwifery service repeatedly overnight with worries about her daughter Pippa's feeding, breathing and other symptoms; her baby died the next morning of neonatal meningitis, and an inquest later ruled she could have survived with better care.

And then there is Rhiannon Davies, whose baby Kate stopped moving in the last weeks of pregnancy – a clear indication of problems – but who was still deemed low risk and sent to a midwife-led unit not equipped to deal with what turned out to be a very sick baby.

It's thanks to Kate's and Pippa's parents, who persuaded the then health secretary Jeremy Hunt to open an inquiry, that we now know not only these stories but countless more: babies born brain-damaged who needn't have been; the survivor of sexual abuse whose baby lived but was so traumatised by her experience on the labour ward that she barely left the house for four years; the woman who suffered a fourth degree tear – and if you don't know what that is, then trust me you don't want to – after a junior doctor made a basic error during a forceps delivery, which did not appear even to have been raised with that doctor as a training issue to ensure it didn't happen again. Since the trust "failed to investigate, failed to learn and failed to improve", in Ockenden's words, the same mistakes happened over and over again.

And sadly, that's not unique. Similar stories emerged from a 2015 inquiry into maternity services at Furness general hospital in Morecambe Bay, while new inquiries into maternity services in Nottingham and East Kent are currently under way. Why, in an era of miraculous medical advances, are we still so bad at ensuring women can give birth safely, easily and without going home traumatised?

For nowhere else in hospitals are people expected to be proud of their "natural" ability to endure pain without relief. Only childbirth still involves endless guilt for mothers about doing it "right", combined with techniques of almost medieval barbarism; dragging stuck babies out by their heads with forceps, and patching up their mothers' ripped flesh afterwards with a shrug. (I'm sorry if this is gory to read, but it's much more gory to go through.) It's

estimated up to 28,000 women a year in the UK emerge from childbirth suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, a condition more often associated with soldiers at war or survivors of violent crime.

If patients were emerging in this state from any other routine procedure we'd be demanding to know what had gone wrong, and surely many of these traumatising experiences must involve near-misses from which life-saving lessons could be learned. Yet women are expected to accept that staggering out of the labour ward feeling as if you've been in a car crash is somehow normal; after all, doesn't half your National Childbirth Trust group feel the same? There is intense pressure not to complain publicly for all sorts of reasons, ranging from embarrassment about discussing the grisly state of your innards or reluctance to frighten pregnant friends to the fear of seeming ungrateful merely to have survived. If you got to take home a healthy baby, it can feel selfish to complain. The idea that motherhood means sacrifice, or burying your own feelings, runs deep and on some labour wards seems actively encouraged.

One woman whose baby had been whisked off to the neonatal unit for treatment told the Ockenden review she had been scolded for complaining of postpartum pain; midwives apparently told her that "women who have babies next to them have more important things to think about. People like you, who do not, are only concerned with themselves." Another was called "a princess" for asking for formula feed for the baby. Wanting a caesarean, a perfectly rational response to a previous traumatic delivery or even to fear of what may happen on understaffed and overstretched wards, is still widely mocked as being "too posh to push", a misogynistic moral judgment that would sound ridiculous applied in any other field of medicine.

Ideological resistance to C-sections was clearly part of the story in Shrewsbury and Telford, where the trust prided itself on a startlingly low caesarean rate while seemingly sweeping the consequences under the carpet. Ockenden concluded this approach was harmful for some and welcomed new NHS England advice not to judge hospitals on their caesarean rates, reversing years of pressure for more "natural" births (which also just happen to be cheap). But the report is clear that isn't the whole story. Similarly, while it backed recent calls for a £350m annual increase in England's cash-

starved maternity budget now, lack of money doesn't explain avoidable deaths in Shropshire dating back to the 2000s, relative boom years for NHS funding.

What stands out from her report is something much harder to change: a culture of overconfidence and resistance to scrutiny inside a service one interviewee dubbed the "Republic of Maternity", alongside a bullying culture among midwives which left staff afraid of ridicule if they asked for help. Mistakes were inevitably made, and grieving families fobbed off or ignored.

What Ockenden is describing is a familiar mixture of arrogance, fear and denial which won't end until professionals are properly supported in admitting near misses – the lesson of virtually every patient safety report ever commissioned – and women who have endured horrific labours feel encouraged to talk about them. There is no "right" way to give birth, no perfect model that mothers should beat themselves up for not attaining. But there are some tragically very wrong ones, and many of them start with refusing to listen to women.

- Gaby Hinsliff is a Guardian columnist

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OpinionHomelessness

Homeless deaths in the UK have increased by 80% since 2019. But we had a solution

Simon Hattenstone and Daniel Lavelle

Two years ago a government scheme solved Britain's street homelessness crisis. What went wrong?

'Perhaps the most alarming thing about the record number of people dying homeless is that the figures are likely to get far worse over the next few years.' Photograph: Maureen McLean/Rex/Shutterstock

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Two years ago this week, the government launched a scheme called Everyone In, which did just what it said on the tin. It provided funding to ensure rough sleepers were housed in hotels or hostels during the first

lockdown. In a single stroke, it essentially eradicated Britain's street homelessness crisis.

It remains among the only positives to emerge from the pandemic, even if it was introduced to remedy an emergency the Conservatives had ignored during their previous decade in power.

We hoped at the time it would be the start of a concerted, long-term plan to deal with homelessness in general and street homelessness in particular. How naive we were. A few months later the government quietly pulled the plug on the programme. Look around you now, and it's hard to imagine that rough sleepers were living in hotels only a couple of years ago.

Today, the Museum of Homelessness, which records the annual number of homeless deaths, published its latest findings – and they are horrific. In 2021, 1,286 people experiencing homelessness died in the UK. We are not talking about sofa surfers or those who have secured long-term accommodation in hostels such as the YMCA, the group that forms the vast majority of the estimated 274,000 homeless people in England alone. Instead, we are talking about the most vulnerable people – rough sleepers or people placed in emergency accommodation and other insecure settings.

This is a 32% increase from the 2020 study, and a shocking 80% increase from the number registered in 2019. A freedom of information request, coroners' report, charity or family member verified each death.

The easy assumption is that many of the deaths are due to Covid. Wrong. Astonishingly, the Museum of Homelessness recorded only seven homeless people dying of Covid, showing how effective Everybody In was. (Figures from the Office for National Statistics are higher but still impressive). So what went wrong?

For starters, according to Shelter, by June 2020, 77% of the 37,430 people helped under the Everyone In banner were not living in settled accommodation (somewhere they could stay for at least six months); and almost one in four were no longer being accommodated at all. Of those

being accommodated, few received wraparound support to help with mental health and addictions.

When we wrote The empty doorway, a Guardian series telling the stories of people who had lived and died on the streets, we found that every person we profiled experienced poor mental health and dependency. They needed access to mental health and addiction services as much as secure housing, but the Tories have stripped them to the bone. Meanwhile, 41% of the homeless deaths reported by the Museum of Homelessness were related to drug and alcohol use, while 12% were suicides.

Street homelessness itself vastly increases the chance of dying young. According to the ONS, the mean age of death in England and Wales in 2019 was 45.9 for homeless men and 43.4 for homeless women, as opposed to a mean 76.1 and 80.9 for men and women, respectively, in the general population.

In several cases we examined, vulnerable people were placed in independent or semi-independent accommodation when it seemed apparent to us they needed to be supported. Twenty-two-year-old Jake Humm's body lay undiscovered for two days at a Brighton YMCA in August 2018, even though he was documenting that he was drinking himself to death on his Facebook account. Former outreach worker Sharron Maasz, 44, died in women-only supported accommodation in Oxford after staff had allowed her "boyfriend" into the building. She died shortly after he shared drugs with her. And on it went. We felt all the deaths we investigated could have been avoided.

Perhaps the most alarming thing about the record number of people dying homeless is that the figures are likely to get far worse over the next few years. Those on benefits will suffer a considerable fall in living standards as benefits rise by just 3.1%, with inflation currently at 6.2%. According to the Resolution Foundation thinktank, about 1.3 million Britons will be pushed into absolute poverty by the cost of living crisis.

The more people living in poverty, the more will become homeless. In February, Crisis and Heriot-Watt University forecast that more than 66,000 more people will be homeless by 2024, with the bulk of the increase being

among people forced to “sofa surf”. They estimate that 8,000 more people will sleep rough and 9,000 people will be forced into unsuitable temporary accommodation.

Avoiding this catastrophe is not rocket science. We made this argument two years ago and the answer hasn’t changed: restore addiction treatment budgets, take rough sleepers off the streets and introduce Housing First, where homeless people are provided with secure homes – not hostels, not shelters, but real homes of their own – and then wraparound care tailored to their needs. The government also needs to extend the remit of the Care Quality Commission, so it can investigate the homes provided by private landlords for vulnerable people.

For those not convinced by the moral imperative here, know this: it costs far more to do nothing. Research conducted by Crisis found that “if 40,000 people were prevented from becoming homeless for one year in England, it would save the public purse £370m”.

Boris Johnson was determined to house rough sleepers at the start of the pandemic because he was terrified of dead homeless people’s bodies lining British streets. That never happened – partly because the government acted rapidly to house rough sleepers temporarily. But if he doesn’t take dramatic action this time round, on both the cost of living and homelessness, his worst nightmare may well become a reality.

Simon Hattenstone is a Guardian journalist. Daniel Lavelle writes on mental health, homelessness and social care. His book on homelessness Down and Out is published in May

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2022.04.01 - Around the world

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Gaza

Palestinian baby dies after treatment delayed by Israeli blockade of Gaza

Fatima al-Masri, a 19-month-old with a hole in her heart, waited five months for Israel to issue a permit allowing her to travel for treatment

Fatima al-Masri died in Gaza on Friday. ‘I wish I had died as well,’ said her father.

Kaamil Ahmed
Fri 1 Apr 2022 01.30 EDTLast modified on Fri 1 Apr 2022 13.11 EDT

A 19-month-old child has died in Gaza after waiting for five months for Israel to grant her permission to leave the blockaded enclave for treatment.

Human right groups said Israel’s blockade of Gaza was responsible for the death of Fatima al-Masri, who was diagnosed last year with a hole in the heart and who died on Friday.

“I loved her from deep inside my heart. I wish I had died as well as her,” said Jalal al-Masri, Fatima’s father. “They kept saying the application was ‘under review, under review’ and then she died.

“It felt like I had died as well without Fatima in my life. Nothing breaks a person more than losing their child.”

Masri said that Fatima missed two appointments for treatment at Jerusalem’s al-Makassed hospital in December and February while her family were told her case was “under review” by the Coordination and Liaison Administration (CLA), the Israeli authority which handles Palestinian travel permits.

“We are under blockade. I don’t understand how Israel can send me this message about her case being under review. If Israel wanted to send her by herself for treatment, then send her,” said Masri.

The Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, a Palestinian NGO, took on Fatima’s case when Masri complained in February, urging Israel to issue the permit in time for her to be taken to al-Makassed in the week after the appointment, before the hospital takes a patient off its list.

“Al Mezan deeply regrets Fatima’s death and strongly condemns Israel’s ongoing closure on the Gaza Strip and its associated restrictions on the movement of Palestinians, that includes denying patients access to the hospitals in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Israel and abroad,” the NGO said in a statement.

Al Mezan said the Israeli authority, which makes decisions on permits, referred them instead to the Palestinian Civil Affairs Committee (PCAC), which co-ordinates with Israel.

Israel approved 69% of permit applications from patients in Gaza in February but 56% of applications for companions to patients were not responded to in time for the appointment, according to the World Health Organization’s monthly report.

Palestinian children protest against the Gaza blockade last August. Photograph: Majdi Fathi/NurPhoto/REX/Shutterstock

Miriam Marmur, a director for Israeli group Gisha, which campaigns for Palestinian freedom of movement, said Israel appears to have changed how it deals with permits, no longer handling applications from human rights groups or lawyers but directing them through the PCAC.

“Unfortunately, non-response to permit applications is a practice of bureaucratic violence used by Israel on a regular basis,” said Marmur. “In a growing number of cases, even patently humanitarian and highly urgent ones such as Fatima al-Masri’s, people receive no response from the CLA, effectively blocking them from accessing medical treatment, as well as other needs. We know of multiple cases where people are not receiving answers to their applications for urgent treatment outside of Gaza.”

Palestinians have to travel for serious conditions that the overburdened health system in Gaza cannot treat, but face long waits for permits to both Israel and Egypt, where they also endure a difficult journey through the Sinai desert.

The UN’s special rapporteur for Palestine, Michael Lynk, in a report last week that described Israel’s control over Palestinian territories as

“apartheid”, said Gaza’s health system “is flat on its back, with serious shortages of healthcare professionals, inadequate treatment equipment and low supplies of drugs and medicines.”

Mahmoud Shalabi, programme manager in Gaza for the charity Medical Aid Palestine, said the blockade had “suffocated” the health system, leaving hospitals short of medicine and equipment, and that conditions had worsened during the pandemic.

“My cousin, who was suffering from cancer, tried to seek specialist care in East Jerusalem, but died while waiting for a permit. She left behind five young children,” said Shalabi.

“Accessing care feels like a lottery. The case of 19-month-old Fatima is another devastating story. But these stories will keep appearing while Israel’s blockade and restrictions are in place.”

The Israeli military authority over the Palestinian authorities, the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, did not respond to the Guardian’s requests for comment.

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Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka: 50 injured as protesters try to storm president's house amid economic crisis

Curfew lifted a day after 45 people were arrested when an angry crowd demanded the resignation of Gotabaya Rajapaksa

A protestor demonstrates outside Sri Lanka president's home as the country's unprecedented economic crisis worsens Photograph: Ishara S Kodikara/AFP/Getty Images

Amrit Dhillon in Delhi and agencies
Fri 1 Apr 2022 01.27 EDTFirst published on Thu 31 Mar 2022 19.42 EDT

Nearly 50 people were injured after authorities used teargas and water cannon to drive back a crowd that stormed the home of Sri Lankan president Gotabaya Rajapaksa, amid anger over the government's handling of the nation's deepening economic crisis.

The crisis, the worst in living memory, has caused massive discontent, with people unable to find gas for cooking, medicines, fuel and basic items of food such as milk powder because the country has run out of foreign currency to pay for imported goods.

A crowd of hundreds of people chanted for Rajapaksa and the entire cabinet to resign over his handling of the crisis. Videos circulating on social media showed the protesters shouting “lunatic go home”.

The Rajapaksa family rule the island. The finance minister, prime minister and agriculture minister are the president’s brothers. His nephew is sports minister.

The security forces fired teargas and water cannon to disperse the crowd. Near the presidents’ home in Mirihana, the demonstrators set fire to an army bus and police vehicle.

The violence prompted an overnight curfew, which was lifted on Friday, and the arrests of 45 people. Nearly 50 people, including some journalists, were injured and taken to hospital.

Official sources told AFP that Rajapaksa was not at home during the protest, which was the first to target the president after diesel shortages had sparked demonstrations elsewhere on the island.

The economic meltdown has left the city’s roads eerily empty as fuel pumps run dry. If residents can find petrol, the price has risen from 128 rupees a litre to 300 rupees.

People shout slogans during a protest against the current economic crisis, outside the President's private residence in Colombo. Photograph: Chamila Karunarathne/EPA

With no air conditioners or fans, people are sweltering during the 10-12 hour power cuts. The government does not have the money to pay for the fuel needed by the power plants.

People with serious medical conditions are struggling to find medicines and hospitals have cancelled operations as they have no diesel to operate the generators that act as back-up during blackouts.

To save electricity, the government has switched off street lighting. Mobile phones have been affected because the standby generators used at the phone base stations have run out of diesel.

"We make sure we charge our phones during the hours we have electricity but the internet is very patchy because the towers aren't working properly. Supermarkets are shut as they have no electricity for lighting or the freezer compartments and we are paying two to three times the normal price for basic food items," tourism official Zainoor Adnan told the Guardian before the WhatsApp connection failed.

The government's decision to plunge into organic farming last year turned out to be disastrous. The ban on all chemical fertilisers, without preparing farmers, led to a surge in prices and food shortages. Although the policy was partially reversed later, the damage had been done.

"Agriculture is seriously distressed. Now they want to import fertilisers but with the war in Ukraine, fertiliser isn't available because other countries have long-term contracts that have tied up supplies," said retired Indian diplomat Neelam Deo.

This year, Sri Lanka has to repay $7bn in foreign debt even though it does not have the foreign exchange to import milk powder. Of this debt, about 10% is owed to China.

India has recently extended a $912m loan along with another US$1bn line of credit for Sri Lanka to purchase food and fuel. Sri Lanka is also seeking more loans from China. The government has said it is seeking a bailout from the International Monetary Fund.

Civil society groups have called for another demonstration on Sunday morning and members of the opposition parties are expected to participate.

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New Zealand

Cannabis sprouts in New Zealand parliament garden in protesters' parting pot-shot

Seedlings, apparently planted by anti-Covid mandate protesters, have been removed after speaker asked for 'weed to be weeded'

Cannabis plants have been found growing in the grounds of New Zealand's parliament after an anti-Covid mandate protest. Photograph: Michael Neilson/NZME/Michael Neilson

Eva Corlett in Wellington
@evacorlett
Thu 31 Mar 2022 20.36 EDTLast modified on Thu 31 Mar 2022 21.23 EDT

After a weeks-long illegal occupation that ended in a riot, New Zealand's parliament has a new unwelcome visitor to contend with: cannabis seedlings popping up among its rose gardens.

An eagle-eyed Wellingtonian spotted the tiny green leaves emerging from the soil this week and posted his find to social media. The man wished to remain anonymous, but a parliament groundskeeper confirmed to the national broadcaster, RNZ, that the plants were indeed "a few cannabis seedlings" thought to be left by the protesters.

"A lot of seeds had been scattered around, among other things left from the protesters," the groundskeeper said.

A security guard added that it was "probably the first cannabis that has ever been planted on parliament grounds".

The New Zealand Speaker asked for the 'weed to be weeded' after cannabis plants were found growing on parliamentary grounds. Photograph: Michael Neilson/NZME/Michael Neilson

A protester who had returned to the site told RNZ that the protesters were responsible for scattering the seeds and "many more will likely germinate for years to come".

The plants, which are illegal in New Zealand, have since been pulled out and destroyed after the speaker of the house, Trevor Mallard, asked "for the

weed to be weeded".

The 23-day protest on Wellington's parliament grounds was nominally about opposition to vaccine mandates, but was blighted by conspiracy theories, death threats, abusive behaviour and a riot that ended in violence and fires. The grounds were left muddied and charred by campers, who also tore up parts of the established gardens to plant herbs, vegetables and, it turns out, cannabis.

Following weeks of peace, high fences were erected around the grounds and the police presence upped again on Friday morning, after a new group said they would begin another 14 days of action to demand an end to all Covid-19 restrictions.

Two weeks ago, the government announced it would end some vaccine-mandates and the requirement for vaccine passes from 4 April. However, one protester, Tessa Jefferis, told RNZ: "There'll be protest action until we, first, get an acknowledgment. Second, we get an apology. Third, we get justice. And fourth … personally, I'm not stopping until the Covid-19 Health Response Act legislation is obliterated."

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/01/cannabis-sprouts-in-new-zealand-parliament-garden-in-protesters-parting-pot-shot

Donald Trump

Trump may face day in court thanks to lawsuit from reggae singer Eddy Grant

The musician sued the former president and his administration over the use of his song Electric Avenue in an ad in 2020

The Guyanese-British reggae musician Eddy Grant claims copyright infringement and seeks $300,000 in damages. Photograph: Jean-Christophe Bott/AP

Martin Pengelly in New York
@MartinPengelly
Fri 1 Apr 2022 02.00 EDTLast modified on Fri 1 Apr 2022 02.02 EDT

Reggae singer Eddy Grant may succeed where the attorney general of New York state and other powerful figures have struggled – by forcing Donald Trump to answer questions under oath in a legal proceeding.

Grant sued the former president and his campaign over the use of the song Electric Avenue in an ad in 2020.

In the ad, Grant's song plays over an animation of Joe Biden traveling slowly in a handcar, after a Trump campaign train passes at high speed. Remarks from Biden are also heard.

According to Grant's lawsuit: "As of 1 September 2020, the video had been viewed more than 13.7m times; the tweet containing the video had been 'liked' more than 350,000 times, re-tweeted more than 139,000 times, and had received nearly 50,000 comments."

Grant claims copyright infringement and seeks $300,000 in damages. Trump has failed to have the suit dismissed.

Lawyers for the former president have claimed fair use, saying the ad was satire, exempt from copyright law, and used footage reposted without knowing its origin. They have also said Trump cannot be sued because of "presidential absolute immunity".

Last September, Judge John Koeltl wrote: "Defendants have offered no justification for their extensive borrowing."

This week, in a letter to the judge reported by Business Insider, a lawyer for Grant said he wrote "with consent from defendants Donald J Trump and Donald J Trump for President, Inc … to request a 60-day extension for the parties to complete discovery".

Exchange of documents had been completed, the letter said, but "additional time is needed to schedule and take the depositions of both parties".

If the case is not settled and the new schedule is agreed, Trump and Grant will be deposed by 21 June.

Elsewhere in New York, Letitia James, the state attorney general, is trying to compel Trump to sit for deposition in her civil investigation of his business practices.

This week, James asked an appeals court to uphold a ruling requiring the former president to answer questions under oath.

James, who also wants to force Donald Trump Jr and Ivanka Trump to be deposed, has said she has uncovered evidence the Trump Organization may have misstated the value of assets on financial statements for more than a decade.

Trump rose to prominence in the 1980s. So did Grant.

Electric Avenue was a hit in 1983, reaching No2 in the UK and US. Discussing how he wrote it, Grant told the Guardian in 2018: “My big songs, like Electric Avenue, tend to come quickly. It’s like visiting the bathroom – you’ve really got to go.”

As it happens, Electric Avenue is a political song.

“I’d watched the Brixton riots unfold on television,” Grant said. “I’d seen the Notting Hill riots starting a few years previously.

“I wrote down: ‘Now in the street there is violence,’ and the song just flowed from there. I had been talking to politicians and people at a high level about the lack of opportunity for black people.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/apr/01/trump-lawsuit-eddy-grant-electric-avenue

Oscars 2022

Police offered to arrest Will Smith, Oscars producer says

Will Packer reveals that police were ‘prepared to get him right now’ but Chris Rock declined to press charges

Chris Rock stands backstage at the 94th Academy Awards in Hollywood, Los Angeles, California. Photograph: AM PA S/Reuters

Reuters
Thu 31 Mar 2022 20.42 EDTLast modified on Fri 1 Apr 2022 07.29 EDT

Los Angeles police were on site and ready to arrest actor Will Smith at the Academy Awards on Sunday for slapping presenter Chris Rock, the producer of the Hollywood ceremony said on Thursday.

The authorities did not take any action because Rock declined to press charges, said producer Will Packer, echoing what a police spokesperson said on Sunday.

“They were saying, you know, this is battery, was a word they used in that moment,” Packer said in excerpts from an interview that will air Friday on ABC’s Good Morning America.

“They said, we will go get him. We are prepared. We’re prepared to get him right now,” Packer added.

During the live Oscars telecast, Smith strode up to the stage after Rock made a joke about the appearance of Smith’s wife, then smacked the comedian’s face.

Less than an hour later, Smith gave a tearful speech on stage as he accepted the best actor trophy for his role in King Richard.

Behind the scenes, police were discussing options with Rock, Packer said.

Rock “was being very dismissive of those options. He was like, ‘No, no, no, I’m fine.’ And even to the point where I said, ‘Rock, let them finish,’” Packer added.

Representatives for Rock did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Smith apologized to Rock, producers and viewers in a statement on Monday, saying he had “reacted emotionally”.

Rock’s joke about Smith’s wife, Jada Pinkett Smith, made a reference to the 1997 film G.I. Jane in which actor Demi Moore shaved her head. It was unclear whether Rock was aware that Jada Pinkett Smith has a condition that causes hair loss.

A police spokesperson said Sunday night that the individual involved in the incident had declined to press charges, but did not provide details about the interactions at the awards show.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from https://www.theguardian.com/film/2022/mar/31/police-offered-to-arrest-will-smith-oscars-producer-says

Headlines

- **Partygate Sue Gray kept in dark as first fines issued to No 10 officials**
- **Timeline The lockdown parties and events we know about**
- **'I betrayed your trust' Will Smith resigns from Academy**
- **Falklands war Argentina criticises UK refusal to talk about future of islands**

Conservatives

Partygate: Sue Gray kept in dark as first fines issued to No 10 officials

Lockdown parties investigator not expected to be told which civil servants or politicians have received penalty notices

Pedestrians pass a protest poster by the urban artist Bod on the seafront in Weymouth, Dorset. Photograph: Finnbarr Webster/Getty Images

Rowena Mason Deputy political editor
Sat 2 Apr 2022 02.00 EDTLast modified on Sat 2 Apr 2022 12.02 EDT

Sue Gray is being kept in the dark about which Downing Street parties have attracted fines, as officials began to receive £50 penalties for attending illegal lockdown gatherings, following the Metropolitan police investigation.

Emails were received by some partygoers this week, after the police said they were issuing 20 penalty notices to those they had a “reasonable belief” attended gatherings during lockdown.

However, the Met is refusing to reveal which parties have attracted fines. It is understood that Gray, the senior civil servant carrying out the inquiry into suspected Downing Street parties during lockdown, is also not being informed which events have reached the bar of criminality.

She is due to update and publish her report when the police investigation is complete, but is not expecting to receive full information on which of 12 parties under investigation and which officials, aides and potentially politicians have been fined.

The Cabinet Office and No 10 are also unaware which, if any, of its current employees have been issued with penalties.

No 10 has committed to disclosing whether Boris Johnson and Simon Case, the cabinet secretary, have received fines, but otherwise officials are not being encouraged to go public or even tell their line managers if they are handed penalties.

Contact the team securely: create a Protonmail account and email us at guardian.politics.desk@protonmail.com; or use Signal Messenger or WhatsApp to message +44 7824 537227.

Their names are only likely to become public if any of them own up to having been present, or they decide to challenge the fine, which could see their name listed by the relevant magistrates court.

Labour has criticised the lack of transparency, with Keir Starmer saying on Thursday that the public must be told if the prime minister's wife, Carrie Johnson, received a fixed-penalty notice for breaking lockdown rules.

Government sources said the Met appeared to have tackled the "low-hanging fruit first" by concentrating on parties where those involved had acknowledged their participation.

The Met suggested the fines were issued as part of a "first tranche", indicating that more could be handed out in relation to more complicated events where those involved were denying having attended illegal gatherings.

One of the events where some of the people in attendance are believed to have got fines is a leaving party on 18 June, which was held for a departing No 10 aide.

The prime minister is believed to have been present at several of the gatherings under investigation, including a birthday party and a gathering in the garden of No 10 organised by his principal private secretary, Martin Reynolds.

However, he has refused to accept that a fine would mean he has broken the law, and his allies suggested he would not resign if he were issued with a penalty. He repeatedly dodged questions on the issue when he appeared at the Commons liaison committee on Wednesday.

In contrast, Kit Malthouse, the policing minister, appeared to back the view of two cabinet colleagues – Dominic Raab and Anne-Marie Trevelyan – that the issuing of Partygate fines evidence that police believe the law had been broken.

Malthouse, a Home Office minister, said it was fair to say a fixed-penalty notice (FPN) signalled police felt an unlawful act had been committed. Speaking to BBC Breakfast, Malthouse said: "A fixed-penalty notice means police have a reasonable belief that you've broken the law – you still have a right to challenge it if you want.

"Having said that, the police practice is not routinely to release the names of those who receive fixed penalties, and I don't see why that rule should be waived for those people who may or may not be in receipt of it in Downing Street."

Malthouse, who attends cabinet, said he had not personally received a fine in relation to the Scotland Yard investigation, but he would declare it if he did.

The threat by some Tory MPs to depose Johnson as leader has lessened in recent weeks amid the crisis in Ukraine, but confirmation of the first penalties on Tuesday reignited talk of a possible challenge and speculation over his future if he were issued with a fine and criticised in the Gray report.

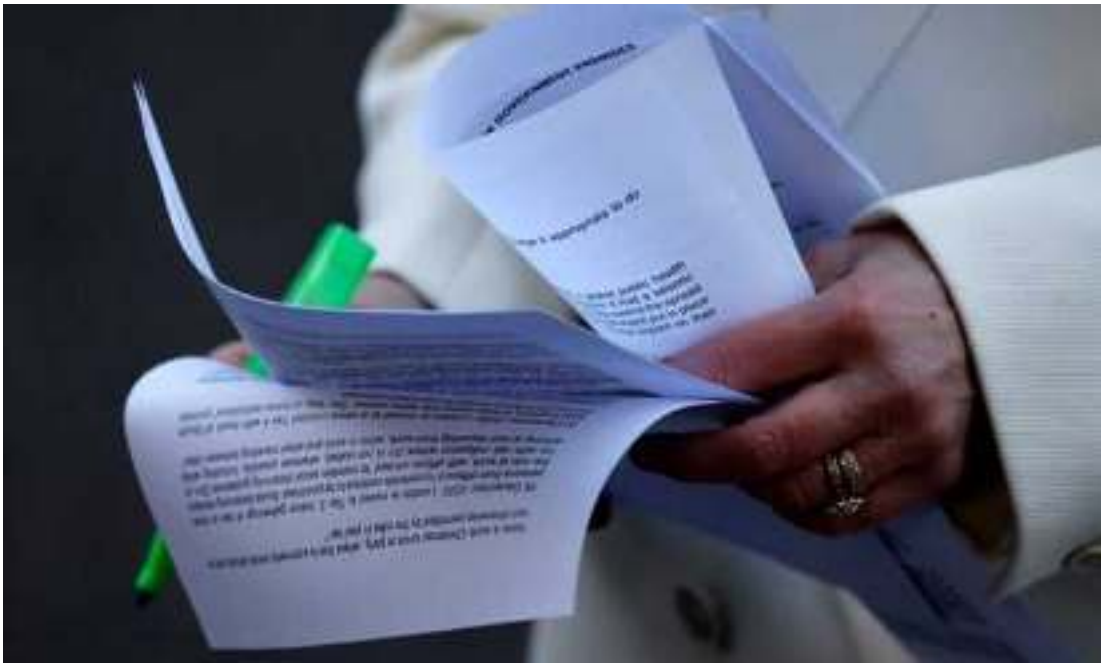
This article was downloaded by **calibre** from https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/apr/02/partygate-sue-gray-fines-downing-street-boris-johnson-no-10

Gray report

Lockdown parties and events: 20 gatherings we know about so far

Sixteen are in the Gray report, a dozen of which are being investigated by the Met; four others are not mentioned

- Read Sue Gray's report
- See all our coronavirus coverage



A journalist highlights sections of Sue Gray's report. Photograph: Tolga Akmen/AFP/Getty

Peter Walker Political correspondent
@peterwalker99
Fri 1 Apr 2022 11.16 EDTFirst published on Mon 31 Jan 2022 12.34 EST

Police have begun to issue a "first tranche" of 20 fines to people they believe took part in lockdown parties in Downing Street. There were 12 parties,

leaving dos, “wine Fridays” and work meetings referred by Sue Gray, the civil service investigator, to the Metropolitan police. However, the police are not revealing which parties have resulted in fines. Here is a full rundown of the parties under investigation, and the broad details of all the claims we know about.

Events being investigated by police

1) 20 May 2020: ‘BYOB’ in No 10 garden

One of the more explosive revelations, after the publication of a leaked email to No 10 staff inviting them, during the first lockdown, to “make the most of the lovely weather” and attend drinks in the garden, adding “bring your own booze”. The email was sent by Johnson’s principal private secretary, the senior civil servant Martin Reynolds. The PM and Carrie Symonds, then his fiancee, attended for a time. Johnson apologised but insisted he only realised in retrospect it might have been a social gathering.

2) 18 June 2020: Cabinet Office gathering for departure of official

This is a claim that had not previously seen the light of day before Gray’s report, which describes it only as “a gathering in the Cabinet Office, 70 Whitehall, on the departure of a No 10 private secretary”. No indication whether Johnson was present.

3) 19 June 2020: PM’s surprise birthday

Downing Street has accepted that about 30 people, among them the interior designer Lulu Lytle, who was not a member of staff but was renovating Johnson’s flat, gathered to mark Johnson’s birthday in the cabinet room. No 10 say Johnson was there for less than 10 minutes. There was, reportedly, a birthday cake, singing, and picnic food from Marks & Spencer. The Northern Ireland minister, Conor Burns, later memorably defended Johnson, saying the PM had been “ambushed with a cake”.

4) 13 November 2020: No 10 leaving event

On the day that Johnson's former chief aide Dominic Cummings was removed, there is a mention in Gray's report of "a gathering in No 10 Downing Street on the departure of a special adviser". As Cummings left abruptly, this seems likely to refer to the departure on the same day of Lee Cain, Johnson's then head of communications. It is not clear whether Johnson attended.

5) 13 November 2020: gathering in Johnson's flat

Sources have reported that on the day Cummings departed, loud music and other party noises came from the No 11 flat occupied by Johnson and his future wife, Symonds, a known foe of Cummings. Downing Street has denied any rule-breaking, and it is not clear who was there.

6) 17 December 2020: the Christmas quiz

An alleged social event took place in the office of the cabinet secretary, Simon Case – who was initially meant to have led the Gray report but stepped down after the claim about his own office. The invitation billed it as a "Christmas party", but government insiders said it was a virtual quiz and Case only passed through the event on the way to his office. Johnson did not attend.

7) 17 December 2020: Cabinet Office leaving event for senior official

Kate Josephs, the former Covid taskforce head, has apologised for attending a drinks gathering to mark her leaving the civil service on the same day. She is now chief executive of Sheffield city council, where her future is uncertain.

8) 17 December 2020: No 10 leaving event

Another previously unknown gathering mentioned in the report. It says only: "A gathering in No 10 Downing Street on the departure of a No 10 official." It is not clear who that was, or who attended.

9) 18 December 2020: No 10 Christmas party

According to witnesses, dozens of staff gathered for a Christmas party, with cheese and wine passed around, a mock awards ceremony and secret Santa gifts exchanged. This event propelled coverage of the parties after a video emerged of Allegra Stratton, the prime minister's then press secretary, joking about it a few days later.

10) 14 January 2021: No 10 leaving event for officials

Another claim that emerged for the first time in Gray's report. It is described thus: "A gathering in No 10 Downing Street on the departure of two No 10 private secretaries." It is not confirmed who they were, or who attended.

11) 16 April 2021: Downing Street garden/first leaving party

One of the most damaging claims – that on the eve of Prince Philip's funeral, where the Queen sat alone, two leaving events were held in No 10. The first, and seemingly less rowdy, was for James Slack, who was the prime minister's official spokesperson under both Theresa May and Johnson, before becoming Johnson's director of communications. Johnson was at Chequers that evening.

12) 16 April 2021: Downing Street garden/second leaving party

The second of the events, for a government photographer, reportedly began in the basement, with music played by an official. It is believed this is the event for which an official bought a suitcase full of wine from a nearby supermarket. The two events later combined in the garden, where one reveller sat on and broke the swing of Johnson's infant son, Wilfred.

Events in the Gray report but not part of the police inquiries

13) 15 May 2020: gathering in No 10 garden

This was the event captured in a now famous photo shown to the Guardian, portraying a series of groups on the No 10 terrace and lawn, among them Johnsons, Cummings and Reynolds, sitting at a table with wine and a cheese board. The Gray report refers only to "a photograph showing a number of groups in the garden of No 10 Downing Street", perhaps indicating that she did not hear from witnesses about it. Johnson insisted he believed it was a work event.

14) 27 November 2020: No 10 leaving do

For No 10 aide Cleo Watson. Johnson is known to have attended the event, remarking on how crowded the room was, before making a short speech and leaving.

15) 10 December 2020: Department for Education Christmas event

Gavin Williamson, the then education secretary, held drinks in his department for staff. The department's most senior civil servant, Susan Acland-Hood, said she attended the "work-related" gathering in which people congregated in the canteen for Williamson to "say a few words".

16) 15 December 2020: No 10 Christmas quiz

Johnson hosted the Christmas quiz in Downing Street, and was pictured on a screen reading out questions flanked by staff who wore tinsel and a Santa hat. Some staff joined virtually, but sources said others crowded around desks.

Events not in the report

17) 25 November 2020: Treasury 'impromptu drinks'

The Treasury defended officials holding an “impromptu” drinks party to celebrate Rishi Sunak’s autumn spending review during lockdown. A spokesperson said a “small number” of staff had celebrated around their desks.

18) Before Christmas 2020: leaving event for defence adviser

The Mirror alleged that the PM gave a speech at a leaving event for his then defence adviser, Capt Steve Higham, in the run-up to Christmas.

19) 14 December 2020: CCHQ Christmas party for Shaun Bailey

A picture showed that an event hosted by the campaign for the Conservatives’ London mayoral candidate, Shaun Bailey, was held in Tory campaign headquarters, with buffet food. Police have looked into the gathering.

20) 16 December 2020: Department for Transport gathering

The Mirror said staff of the transport secretary, Grant Shapps, threw a Christmas party at which almost a dozen staff were “boozing and dancing” in a Whitehall office.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/jan/31/lockdown-parties-and-events-20-gatherings-we-know-about-so-far

Will Smith

Will Smith resigns from Academy, saying he betrayed its trust

Actor will accept ‘any further consequences’ the body’s board considers appropriate after Oscars slap

Will Smith won best actor for his role in King Richard. Photograph: Patrick T Fallon/AFP/Getty Images

Maya Yang and agencies
Fri 1 Apr 2022 22.23 EDTFirst published on Fri 1 Apr 2022 19.21 EDT

Will Smith has resigned from Hollywood’s Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences after he slapped Chris Rock at the Oscars ceremony, saying that he “betrayed the trust of the Academy” and will accept “any further consequences”.

In a statement released on Friday afternoon, the actor described his actions at the 94th Academy Awards as “shocking, painful, and inexcusable”.

He added: “I betrayed the trust of the Academy. I deprived other nominees and winners of their opportunity to celebrate and be celebrated for their extraordinary work.”

“So, I am resigning from membership in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and will accept any further consequences the Board deems appropriate.”

Smith’s resignation pre-empts official disciplinary action from the Academy board of governors, which met on Wednesday and initiated proceedings against Smith. Smith loses voting privileges with his resignation. But there are other, less tangible benefits to being part of the Academy, Hollywood’s most prestigious organization: it bestows industry credibility on its members. It’s invitation-only, with a once-a-year membership review.

The Academy president, David Rubin, said Smith’s resignation was accepted. “We will continue to move forward with our disciplinary proceedings against Mr Smith for violations of the Academy’s Standards of Conduct, in advance of our next scheduled board meeting on April 18,” he said.

It was not immediately clear what additional punishment Smith could face. Had he been expelled, Smith would have joined a small group of men removed from the academy: Harvey Weinstein, Roman Polanski, Bill Cosby and the actor Carmine Caridi, who was kicked out for sharing awards screeners.

On Sunday, Smith shocked Hollywood and viewers at home when he strode on stage and smacked Rock, moments after the comedian had made a joke at the expense of Smith’s wife, Jada Pinkett Smith.

The fallout has shaken the industry. While some have rallied around Smith for coming to his wife’s defense, he has been widely condemned for responding with violence and casting a cloud over both his long-sought Oscar victory and the night’s other winners.

Many have questioned why Smith – who later received a standing ovation after winning the award for best actor – was allowed to remain seated front row at the Academy Awards after the incident. On Wednesday, the Academy claimed that it had attempted to remove the actor from the audience.

“Things unfolded in a way we could not have anticipated,” the Academy said. “While we would like to clarify that Mr Smith was asked to leave the ceremony and refused, we also recognize we could have handled the situation differently.”

However, outlets including Variety and the Hollywood Reporter have complicated the account of what exactly took place backstage, with sources saying that Academy leadership did not formally ask Smith leave the ceremony, and that the show’s producer, Will Packer, encouraged him to stay.

“I think what many of us were hoping was that he would go on that stage and make it better,” Packer said in an interview with Good Morning America. “We were hoping that he would make it better, that he would stand on that stage and say what just happened minutes ago was absolutely and completely wrong [and say], ‘Chris Rock, I’m so sorry, please forgive me.’ That’s what I was hoping for. I felt like he was going to win and I was hoping that if he stayed, he said that.”

Smith, who won for his role in King Richard, did not apologize to Rock until the day after the show, when he wrote on Instagram: “I was out of line and I was wrong ... I deeply regret that my behavior has stained what has been an otherwise gorgeous journey for all of us. I am a work in progress.”

Rock declined to file charges when asked by police and has remained tight-lipped since. Speaking at a comedy show in Boston this week, the comedian briefly alluded to the incident.

“I’m still processing what happened, so at some point I’ll talk about that shit,” Rock told the crowd. “It’ll be serious. It’ll be funny, but right now I’m going to tell some jokes.”

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Argentina

Argentina criticises UK refusal to talk about future of Falklands

Argentine foreign minister calls for improvement in bilateral relations with Britain 40 years after conflict

- Santiago Cafiero: Britain still acts as if Malvinas dispute has been settled

Santiago Cafiero: ‘The 1982 conflict did not alter the nature of the dispute between both countries, which is still pending negotiation and resolution.’ Photograph: Juan Ignacio Roncoroni/EPA

Patrick Wintour Diplomatic editor
Sat 2 Apr 2022 01.00 EDTLast modified on Sat 2 Apr 2022 09.44 EDT

British-Argentine relations will be stifled so long as the UK refuses to engage in discussions about the future sovereignty of the Falkland Islands,

or if both sides continue to act as if the war happened only yesterday, the Argentine foreign minister has said.

Writing in the Guardian on the 40th anniversary of the Argentine invasion of the islands in April 1982, Santiago Cafiero called for an improvement in bilateral relations.

In an important statement of the Argentine coalition government's thinking on the islands, he said the UK's treatment of Argentina at times resembled that handed out to a country in breach of basic human rights norms rather than a nation that has been a democracy for 40 years.

He writes: "We believe that no outcome of any war can resolve a dispute recognised by the international community. This would set a dangerous precedent. The 1982 conflict did not alter the nature of the dispute between both countries, which is still pending negotiation and resolution."

The foreign secretary also points out that before the Argentine dictatorship's surprise invasion, there had for 16 years been negotiations over the substance of the sovereignty of the islands that took into account the interests of the islands' inhabitants.

Pretending that the dispute does not exist or that it does not create obstacles in our bilateral relationship is "naive", he says.

He insists "the two governments share fundamental values and a vision of a rules-based world order. And yet, in the South Atlantic agenda, we behave as if the conflict had taken place just yesterday."

The Argentine invasion caught Whitehall and British intelligence wholly by surprise, leading to a panicked and finely balanced debate within the cabinet about the feasibility of sending a taskforce to free the islands, which the Argentine junta thought Margaret Thatcher did not have the resources, resolve and diplomatic support to do.

Contemporary Argentina is a threat to no one, the foreign minister writes, and points out that the pursuit of the historical sovereignty claim in the national constitution is conditional on it being pursued peacefully.

“Despite this, the UK maintains a major military base in the South Atlantic, carries out periodic military exercises in the disputed area and maintains restrictions on the sale of dual-use military materials to Argentina,” he writes. He says that these kind of restrictions are reserved usually for countries responsible for serious human rights violations, and finds it “incomprehensible” that such treatment is given to Argentina.

He says his government has presented proposals that would be beneficial, such as the re-establishment of regular flights between the Falklands and Argentina. “More flights mean more trade, more tourism and more dialogue, as we have had in the past,” he says, but so far there has been no clear response from the UK to a request to reopen flights.

He also points to the great progress by veterans, islanders and the International Committee of the Red Cross to help painstakingly identify the bodies of most of the unknown Argentine soldiers who fell during the UK forces’ retaking of the islands.

“We have also made great progress over the last 40 years in humanitarian matters. We were able to identify the remains of more than 120 Argentine ex-combatants and provide an answer to their families, after so many years of uncertainty.”

A third excavation is planned with the help of the Commission of Relatives of the Fallen in the Malvinas and South Atlantic Islands.

The Argentine invasion, greeted initially with patriotic fervour and politically beneficial to the dictatorship, led ultimately to the collapse of Gen Galtieri’s regime as the death toll mounted and the lack of training of a working-class conscript army became apparent.

In total, 649 Argentinian soldiers, 255 British servicemen and three Falkland Islanders died in the conflict. The Malvinas veterans, initially ignored, now have more status, with 2 April a day of memorial.

Ever since the defeat, Argentina has pursued various diplomatic initiatives, including the combative one led by the then president, Néstor Kirchner, from

2003 and then from 2007 by his wife, Cristina. Those 13 years included non co-operation over hydrocarbons and a ban on ships entering Argentine ports flying the Falklands Islands flag.

A plebiscite on the islands conducted in 2013 revealed a 99.8% desire to remain British, and has been the cornerstone of the UK's diplomatic stance ever since.

In 2016, Argentina reverted to a more conciliatory approach led by the government of Mauricio Macri, but the centre-right former mayor of Buenos Aires fell from power in 2019 after he failed to deliver economic prosperity.

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2022.04.02 - Spotlight

- **Douglas Stuart on Shuggie Bain ‘Living with an alcoholic, there wasn’t much I didn’t see’**
- **Tory defector Christian Wakeford on crossing the floor ‘All I was thinking was, please don’t throw up’**
- **Josette Simon ‘If I wasn’t me, I’d like to be prime minister’**
- **Amy Bloom After my husband died, my life felt broken – so I planted a new tree**

Advertisement

Interview

Douglas Stuart on Shuggie Bain and his tough start: ‘Living with an alcoholic, there wasn’t much I didn’t see’

Simon Hattenstone

Douglas Stuart: ‘Every day somebody would call me a poofy wee bastard.’ Photograph: Benedict Evans/The Guardian

After his debut about a gay boy in 80s Glasgow, comes another tale drawing on his childhood. Could his glittering fashion career ever have kept the Booker-winner from his roots?

Sat 2 Apr 2022 01.00 EDT

After Shuggie Bain was published, Douglas Stuart prepared to pack in writing and go back to the day job. He’d spent 10 years on his debut novel, then it came out during a pandemic. “It was the first week of lockdown. I thought, ‘God, this is the end of my publishing career.’” Stuart couldn’t complain. It had received fabulous reviews, even if nobody was buying it, and he knew he could walk straight back into a top job in fashion.

Then Shuggie got nominated for the Booker prize and America’s National Book Award for Fiction. In fact, between 2020 and 2021, it was shortlisted for well over 20 major awards. Not bad for a book that had been rejected by more than 40 publishers. It went on to win the Booker, which inevitably boosted sales. But here was something different. A novel that had been considered inaccessible and unmarketable was selling by the shelfload in

supermarkets. To date, it has sold more than 1.3m copies in the English language alone. This brutal love story about a young gay boy trying to protect his alcoholic mother from herself and the ravages of the world, partially written in the Scottish vernacular, had huge popular appeal. Perhaps even more remarkable, Stuart had not read a book for pleasure until he was 16.

We meet at a basement bar in the East Village in Lower Manhattan, where Stuart, 45, has lived for the past 21 years. Life couldn't be more different from the high-rise blocks and tenements where he grew up in Glasgow. It's here that he made a success of himself as a fashion designer for Calvin Klein and Banana Republic, here that he earned more money than he ever thought possible, and here that he married the man who has been his partner since he was 20. And yet it is Glasgow that continues to define him, not least in his second novel, Young Mungo, published later this month.

Stuart's accent is still distinctly Scottish, but more refined than I'd expected – certainly more so than his characters, most of whom speak in a raw Glaswegian slang. Has America softened the accent? Possibly a little, he says, but the way he speaks is largely down to his mother. She was a proud woman who insisted that he spoke the Queen's English. "She thought regional accents would hold back your kids; that if you wanted to do well you had to talk like a BBC newscaster. So as a kid I just sounded a bit weirder than the kids around me."

Did they bully him for the way he spoke? He laughs. They hardly needed that as an excuse, he says. From the age of six, they taunted him. "They thought I was queer because I liked dolls, My Little Pony and singing and dancing, and if you gave me a bit of space I'd twirl. But actually the reason they thought I was gay is because I didn't play football. Every day somebody would call me a poofy wee bastard. I didn't quite know what they meant, but I knew I should feel ashamed about it."

By this time, he was already the adult in the house – his sister and brother were 15 and 13 years older, and had left home. He would undress his mother when she was too drunk to do it herself, brush out the knots from her hair, make sure she was eating enough, get in bed to warm her up, try to protect

her from abuse and gossip, and give her the love she was so desperately missing in her life. “The parent and child relationship from when I was about six was inverted totally. I had to miss school all the time. I had a really disrupted education.”

His father had left when Stuart was four; he saw him only twice after that. He was a serial philanderer, and his mother remained hopelessly in love with him. “One of my formative memories is of him leaving. That’s what escalated her drinking. In a way my father killed my mother. It just took 12 more years for her to die from her alcoholism.”

> Shuggie is about loss and grief. I wouldn’t have needed to have written it if my mum had still been alive

Stuart’s mother did any number of jobs to keep the family going – in a chip shop, petrol station, cleaning houses. Ultimately, it was the combination of addiction and searing unemployment under Margaret Thatcher that left the family dependent on benefits. In the early days, he says, she was such fun. “She wanted nothing more than to have a house full of friends and kids. She was really popular, which makes her disintegration harder to bear.” What did she drink? “Anything. If she had enough money, she drank vodka; if she didn’t, she’d drink fortified lager – Special Brew or Tennent’s. Nasty.”

His mother was beautiful, and however low she sank, she always looked immaculate – just like Shuggie’s mother, Agnes Bain. She so wanted the family to be cultured that she created an illusion of bookishness in their home. “We had shelves of books that looked like Henry James or Thomas Hardy. But they were just facades – like a Blockbuster video cover, except they were all burgundy leatherette or embossed plastic.”

Would he have been able to write Shuggie Bain if his mother had still been alive? “I don’t think I could have, because Shuggie is about loss and grief, so I wouldn’t have had the impetus. I didn’t just want to conjure up hardship and the pain of loving someone with addiction, but also the wonderful small things: her pride, her resilience, her dignity, her glamour. I wouldn’t have needed to have written it if my mother had still been alive.”

It was only after winning the Booker that Stuart started to think of himself as an author. “When I woke up the next day I thought, ‘That’s it.’ Until that point I’d been thinking, ‘I’ve got to go and get a job.’” Writing full-time has certainly paid off – Young Mungo has taken him only two years, and is every bit as good as Shuggie Bain. The novel follows schoolboys Mungo (named after the patron saint of Glasgow) and James as they fall in love in a macho environment where any hint of homosexuality is stamped out. Literally. (Mungo’s older brother Hamish outdoes Trainspotting’s Begbie on brutality.) A parallel story describes Mungo’s traumatic fishing trip with two older men. The astonishing thing is that, as with Shuggie Bain, despite the book being soaked in horror, it’s the tenderness that wins out in the end.

Stuart’s language is fantastically cinematic. We don’t read Shuggie Bain and Young Mungo so much as see them. He’ll sicken us with cruelty in one paragraph, move us to tears the next, have us belly-laughing by the end of the page. The books are emotional rollercoasters, just as his childhood was. “Sometimes I’d come home and my mum would be having a party, sometimes her head would be in the oven. Twelve years of living with an alcoholic, there were very few scenarios I didn’t see.” What did you do when her head was in the oven? “I just took it out and hoped she was all right. Suicide was always a huge worry. I often found she could be four different types of drunk in a night: fun, then really dangerous, then sad, then suddenly come to life like a revenant. It’s terrifying for a kid dealing with all those personalities. And sometimes she was fine.”

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We finish our beers and head off to a nearby restaurant. Even on a cold, wet night, New York seems exotic. As a child, did he ever imagine living here? He smiles. “I was a kid who hadn’t even been to Edinburgh, so that would have been a strange concept for me.” He pauses. “It sounds like a piety, but I think of Glasgow as my home and New York is where I am and where I work.”

We get to the restaurant and it’s shut. Stuart looks peeved and slightly embarrassed. He says there’s another good place we can go to. As he talks, I

make a note in my recorder that he's stylishly dressed in an understated way – all black. "Navy blue," he tells the recorder. "Douglas pays attention to these things."

The second restaurant is also shut. "Fucking hell," he says. "Now you've really stumped me. Let's just have a bit of a walk." So we wander around looking for food, trying to convince ourselves we're not freezing.

By the time Stuart was 16, his mother was dead. Soon after, his aunt took him aside. "She asked how I was and I said, 'I feel sad and lost.' She said, 'What you have to understand is, everybody's got a sad story.' What she was telling me was you have to pick yourself up and get on, because people are visited by tragedy all the time."

'I think of Glasgow as my home and this is where I am and where I work': Douglas Stuart in New York. Photograph: Benedict Evans/The Guardian

After his mother's death, Stuart got a job, moved into a bedsit, started reading prodigiously and put himself through college. "I was going there all day and working every night in Texas Homecare, straightening the aisles of paint." Since his early teens he'd been aware he was gay ("Marti Pellow was my sexual awakening – I had a huge crush on him"). He told his brother and sister, and was shocked to find they were shocked. He'd assumed they knew.

After all, the whole community had been telling him he was gay since he was six.

I ask if his brother is as hard as Young Mungo's Hamish. "No, he was nothing like that. I was super-close to my brother. He died in a motorcycle accident when I was 21."

Stuart was the first person in his family to complete school. He had wanted to do a degree in English, but his supportive head teacher suggested he would struggle because he had discovered his love of literature so recently. So he found himself the only boy to complete the degree course at the Scottish College of Textiles in Galashiels, a town in the borders. Money – or lack of it – meant he was still an outsider. He was the only student who couldn't afford to live in the halls of residence. But for the first time in his life, he says, he felt relaxed in the company of others. "Going to an all-female textile college did huge things for my self-confidence. I felt safe, I wasn't compared with other men, my sexuality was never questioned. I was just in this place where we were all laughing, creating textiles. It was a pretty sleepy, snoozy place. We're knitting, weaving, embroidering, it's not sexy, it's not disco lights." He loved it.

The college organised an exchange trip for him to Philadelphia, on which he met his future husband, Michael Cary, now an art curator for the Gagosian in New York. "The minute I met him, I fell in love." Stuart describes the young Michael as "Kurt Cobain meets Morrissey". He sounds so proud when he talks about him – almost boastful. "My husband is incredibly handsome, incredibly kind, polite, and has no hidden agenda. I felt very safe around him, very loved." For four years they conducted a long-distance romance. Stuart returned to Galashiels, completed his degree, then did a master's at the Royal College of Art in London.

> I'm writing about me, about what it means to be young and queer and working class, not belonging in the only place you know

We find an open restaurant and take a seat under a Covid canvas with heaters blazing overhead. "It's like a tanning salon. I can have them turn it down," he says.

At the age of 24, Stuart headed back to America, Michael and the fashion industry – starting as an assistant at Calvin Klein and ending up as vice-president of design at Kate Spade, establishing himself as a knitwear expert in the process. “When you’re younger and you start to climb the ranks, it feels really exciting. You have more money and nice holidays, but I got to a point where it was not scratching my creative itch. In fashion, so much is ephemeral. With these international brands you create stuff after stuff after stuff, but people don’t remember it. None of it felt as if it mattered.”

There was still something nagging away at him. He began to realise he had not dealt with his mother’s death. He had simply buried his grief – and his childhood along with it. “That’s what made me sit down at 32 and write a book, because I’ve never spoken about it.” He had not even told his husband what his childhood was really like. “He read the first draft and had no idea most of this stuff happened. Shuggie was a way for him to understand poverty, Thatcherism, addiction, because I had no other way to explain it to him.”

The wine waiter arrives. “I’ll take something red but not too jammy or sweet or sickly,” he says. “And is it possible to turn the heaters down a bit?” He points to his head. “I don’t want to upset other people, but this bald guy feels like he’s a crispy ham.” Our neighbours thank him – they’re boiling, too. Stuart is a mix of confident and assertive, apologetic and self-conscious.

When we speak it’s a month until Young Mungo is published and he is anxious. “I think there’s an enormous amount of pressure once you win the Booker with your debut: people are going to come to your work with a different critical lens, or begin to rebalance accounts, or see if you’ve really got the stuff. So you worry about that.”

But the diffidence soon disappears, eclipsed by his passion for his novel. “It’s about performative masculinity; young boys who are being asked to be violent, to be sexualised, to lower their expectations.” Young Mungo is set in a post-Thatcher wasteland of 1992, where older men are unemployed and emasculated, younger men see no point in trying to get a job so they sell drugs, and Catholic and Protestant kids throw bricks at each other as they vie for sectarian supremacy.

At the heart of the book is the relationship between Mungo and James. Stuart captures brilliantly the intensity, fumbling clumsiness and innocence of first love. Is this the relationship Stuart wanted as a teenager? “I would have *loved* it,” he says. But when he was growing up in 80s and 90s Glasgow, he says, there was no sense that this was a possibility.

‘These characters are very close to my heart.’ Photograph: Benedict Evans/The Guardian

The threat of physical and sexual abuse is omnipresent in the novel. I ask if he was sexually abused. “No, nothing like that ever happened to me.” As for physical violence, he wasn’t so lucky. When he was 16, he was assaulted by a group of teenagers. “There were about 12 of them. They started calling me ‘You fat poof’ and all this, and beat the shit out of me.” They only stopped when a car pulled up. “It was an old woman, a pensioner who stopped in a wee red car with her husband, and she stopped because they thought I was a dog because I was on the ground. My nose was bust, my eyes black. I was cut and bruised all over.”

He had never seen the boys before. They were just bored. Does he think they would have killed him if the car hadn’t stopped? “I don’t think they had the ability to stop. You just keep going cos you’re having fun and before you know it you’ve killed somebody or given them brain damage. I remember so

vividly the guys taking turns running and jumping on my head and … bang. They were having a great time. After that I just stayed at home and did my homework. It ended my socialisation as a teenage kid because I was so terrified."

Stuart has always suffered with anxiety and says the money raised from events to publicise Young Mungo is going to a mental health charity. How is his mental health these days? "Nice journalistic segue! I'm naturally anxious, and it's an anxious time before pubishing a book, but generally I'm the happiest I have been. I feel I'm doing the work I was meant to be doing all my life."

Stuart was initially reluctant to acknowledge the autobiographical nature of his work. He thought it might both undermine the fictional element and diminish his past. But now he embraces it. This is his territory, and he could happily mine it for the rest of his writing life. "These characters are very close to my heart. I'm writing about me. I think my entire life's work will be about searching these wounds. I am fascinated by belonging and families when they disintegrate, about what it means to be young and queer and working class, what it means when you don't belong in the only place you know. What I'm always writing about is gentleness in the face of oppression. Really, I'm only writing love stories."

Actually, he says, his next novel is going to be totally different. "There is no brother or sister." He pauses. "But there is an alcoholic mum." He splutter-laughs.

‘Glasgow has a mural of Billy Connolly and St Mungo – and now Shuggie Bain. What could be better?’ Photograph: Jane Barlow/PA

We head off into the night. He walks me part-way to my hotel. I ask if he felt the need to escape Glasgow when he came here. “No. I loved Glasgow, but I’m not sure Glasgow loved me. New York gave me a sense of distance and clarity, but also made me incredibly homesick. I don’t know how you could leave your Glaswegian upbringing at the door. It’s not a mild place. It is a place with a real stamped definition, so wherever I go I am Glaswegian.”

As for New York, he says, it has changed. “When I first came it felt like a place where creatives from all over the world were coming to meet and express themselves and have fun. Now it feels like a rich person’s playground. I’m trying to find somewhere to live in Glasgow so I can spend time between both, because it’s a source of inspiration for me and I want to see my family more.”

How did they react when he won the Booker? “I think my sister is proud of the book, though the Booker doesn’t mean anything to her. I called her to say I’d won and she was like, ‘Oh, that’s good. You know I tried to return a top to Primark earlier on, and they wouldn’t take it because I forgot the receipt.’ It keeps you grounded.”

But two years on, busy writing the TV adaptation of Shuggie Bain, he knows just how big winning the Booker was. “It’s changed my life. It’s changed what I do for a living. Now I feel invited to be part of a literary conversation.” But what means more is the way it has changed his relationship with his home city.

He tells me about the mural on the side of the Barrowland Ballroom of Shuggie dancing, accompanied by a quote from his mother, Agnes: “You’ll not remember the city, you were too wee, but there’s dancing. All kinds of dancing.”

Stuart can’t contain his delight. “Considering Glasgow inspired every word in that book, that got me. That was tears, and nobody told me it was happening till the day it happened.” He takes out his phone and shows me a photograph of first minister Nicola Sturgeon putting the finishing touches to it. “When you think Glasgow has got a mural of Billy Connolly and St Mungo, and now they’ve also got one of Shuggie Bain. What could be fucking better?” He looks me in the eye fiercely. Proudly. “*What* could be better?”

Young Mungo by Douglas Stuart is published on 14 April by Picador at £16.99. To support the Guardian and Observer, order your copy at guardianbookshop.com. Delivery charges may apply. Douglas Stuart is on tour throughout April.

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Advertisement

Interview

Tory defector Christian Wakeford on crossing the floor: ‘All I was thinking was, please don’t throw up’

Helen Pidd

Christian Wakeford: ‘The only thing I would change would be the effect it has had on friends.’ Photograph: Olivia Harris/The Guardian

He was a leave-voting, lockdown sceptic who dramatically switched to Labour in January – shoring up support for Boris Johnson in the process. Does he regret his split?

Sat 2 Apr 2022 05.00 EDT

On the whiteboard in Christian Wakeford’s Westminster office there is a to-do list detailing everything he needs to achieve in the week ahead. Alongside the domestic (laundry) and the aspirational (secure a Westminster Hall debate on pure maths), one entry stands out: “Learn words to Red Flag.”

On 19 January, Wakeford delivered a dramatic shock to Boris Johnson’s government. By walking into prime minister’s questions in a union jack face mask and taking a seat behind Keir Starmer, he became the first Tory MP for 15 years to switch to Labour. It was a moment that blindsided even his closest friends in the Conservative party. To leave the governing party for the opposition was a particularly bold move: the last two Tory defectors, Quentin Davies in 2007 and Shaun Woodward in 1999, both joined Labour when it was in power.

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Today, Wakeford insists he is not really swotting up on the Labour party anthem and blames Ben Everitt, the prank-loving Conservative MP for Milton Keynes North, for sneaking into his office. Earlier that morning, Everitt bowled up to Wakeford and gave him a hug bordering on a rugby tackle. It is seven weeks after Wakeford's defection, and at least some former colleagues are starting to forgive his treachery.

Everitt is also accused of leaving the can of C Bomb pale ale on the desk, a nod to Wakeford's reputation as one of parliament's foulest mouths. On the bookshelf, next to a Lego model of Boba Fett from Star Wars, are two bottles of sauvignon blanc scrawled with Boris Johnson's signature, intended as raffle prizes for constituency party events at which he is now almost certainly unwelcome. By his computer is an unused red Labour mug. It sits on a David Shrigley coaster that reads: "I'm so hungover I wish I was dead."

Wakeford in his Westminster office. Photograph: Olivia Harris/The Guardian

It was no secret that Wakeford was unhappy in the Conservative party. Elected as MP for Bury South in 2019, with a majority of just 402, Wakeford was openly critical of Boris Johnson over the "partygate" scandal, and earlier this year revealed he had submitted a letter of no confidence in the prime minister. "How do you defend the indefensible? You can't!" he tweeted on 12 January.

The 37-year-old already had a reputation for bluntness; last November, he marched up to Owen Paterson and called him a "fucking selfish cunt" after the government instructed its MPs to vote to overhaul the parliamentary standards system in an attempt to save Paterson's skin (ultimately the government was forced into a U-turn). If he'd resigned the Conservative whip and sat as an independent, few would have been surprised. But for this leave-voting, lockdown-sceptic Tory lifer to join Labour? No one saw that coming. He didn't seek counsel from anyone in the party he had joined aged 18. His staffers, who included two Tory councillors, were kept in the dark. He didn't even tell his wife, Alex, until the morning of his defection (her reaction: "Oh shit").

Many Labour MPs hardly noticed Wakeford during his first two years in parliament and had to Google their new comrade. He had been on the education select committee, but didn't turn up for meetings half the time, and did not have a reputation for cross-party collegiality. Indeed, after his defection it emerged that he had sent a message to a Tory WhatsApp group calling Labour a "bunch of cunts". You can see how he earned that can of C Bomb.

Even as the Guardian's North of England editor, I had only the vaguest sense of Wakeford. After the 2019 general election, he was among a minority of new Tory MPs who would at least occasionally take my calls, but Covid meant we had never actually met. I interviewed him on the phone in December 2020, and he was open about how hard he was finding the job. He complained that he hardly ever got to see his two-year-old daughter, and there had been protests outside his office after he abstained on the Marcus Rashford-inspired vote on free school meals. "Is there anything good about being an MP?" he mused. "I'll let you know when Covid finishes."

A month after his defection, we met for an off-the-record drink in Manchester that turned into five pints and an encounter with two of my friends, musicians who were also his constituents; they were appalled to discover that he didn't seem to have heard of the Fall, whose belligerent singer, Mark E Smith, lived for much of his life in Bury South. By the end of the evening, I had persuaded him to let me shadow him in parliament. After much to-ing and fro-ing, he eventually sent me screengrabs of his diary and told me to pick a day.

We arrange to meet in Portcullis House, where MPs have their offices, at 9.30am one Tuesday, and he arrives 20 minutes late wearing a decidedly unparliamentary outfit of skinny jeans, bobbly blue jumper and a navy peacoat. He has shaved off the beard he sported on defection day and lost weight. He softly mutters an apology.

> The only thing I would try to change would be the effect it has had on friends I've had for 15, 16 years. I know I've hurt them deeply

We go down the escalator into the tunnel that connects Portcullis House with parliament, and a grey-haired man going up in the other direction clocks him. "Are you OK? Are you surviving?" asks Matthew Offord, the Conservative MP for Hendon. Just about, says Wakeford. "I'm glad about that," says Offord, with a kind smile.

Not everyone is so warm. Later, in Westminster Hall, Wakeford congratulates Jonathan Gullis, the Tory MP for Stoke-on-Trent North, on the birth of his second child. Gullis – who is one of Johnson's most loyal defenders, having gone viral during the Omicron wave for jeering, maskless in the Commons – gives him a death stare.

For other former colleagues, Wakeford is now a figure of fun. One whacks him on the back with her order paper as she sweeps past in central lobby, tutting: "For fuck's sake, Wakeford. Always causing trouble." It is Alicia Kearns, Conservative MP for Rutland and Melton, who has recently earned the sobriquet of Pork Pie Plotter as the alleged leader of a plan to oust the prime minister. The plot was ultimately aborted, partly because Wakeford's defection was viewed as so traitorous that some dissenters withdrew their

calls for Johnson's resignation. Wakeford seems disappointed that no one followed him across the floor. "Is it the effect I had hoped for – to galvanise support behind Boris?" he says. "No. But at the same time I still think he would have survived a vote of no confidence."

Once the north-west coordinator for Johnson's leadership campaign, Wakeford has come to see the prime minister as a danger to democracy. "He's never going to leave of his own volition. He's literally going to be dragged out, screaming," says Wakeford. He denies owing his election to Johnson: "People didn't just vote Conservative for Boris. There was also the anti-Corbyn vote, especially in a seat like mine."

Wakeford answers questions from children from King David Orthodox primary school on a school trip to Westminster. Photograph: Olivia Harris/The Guardian

Bury South has the biggest Jewish population of any constituency outside London and the south-east, and many Jews felt the Corbyn administration turned a blind eye to antisemitism. In his maiden speech, Wakeford said a local woman approached him after his victory "with tears running down her face and the simple message: 'Thanks to you and the Conservatives, we no longer have to leave the country.'" Local politics were complicated further by Labour's suspension of Ivan Lewis, who had represented the seat since

1997, in a sexual harassment scandal. He ran in 2019 as an independent, winning 1,366 votes despite withdrawing his candidacy at the last minute and urging his former constituents to vote for Wakeford, again because of the antisemitism issue.

Much of Wakeford's time is spent advocating for the Jewish community. Although he is not Jewish himself, his maternal grandfather was Ukrainian. One of his first engagements, post-defection, was to travel to Kyiv to speak at a symposium ahead of Holocaust Memorial Day about the atrocities committed at Babyn Yar, where 100,000 people were murdered, many of them Jews. He has a Hebrew lesson every Monday – preparation for trips to Israel: "I also thought it would be a nice thing to do, to show I am committed to the community locally."

His first event of the day is with a group of year 6s on a visit to parliament from King David Orthodox primary school near his constituency. Do you think you'll regret switching party, asks one child. Wakeford insists he'd do the same again: "The only thing I would try to change would be the effect it has had on friends. These are friends I've had for 15, 16 years. They came to my wedding, I went to their weddings, they came to the christening of my daughter. I know I've hurt them deeply."

The friend he is saddest to have lost is Andrew Stephenson, MP for Pendle and minister for HS2. Wakeford, while a county councillor and chair of the Lancashire Conservatives, worked in Stephenson's constituency office, and Stephenson encouraged him to become an MP. The night before his defection, Wakeford went for dinner at Stephenson's home along with other MPs from the 2019 intake, including Chris Clarkson, who won the Greater Manchester seat of Heywood and Middleton. Wakeford says Clarkson was appalled at the subsequent betrayal; he called him "Judas" to his face and referred to him as "Christian Wokeford".

Wakeford stayed until midnight and made no mention of the bomb he was about to drop on them all. Wasn't there a moment when you thought: I probably should swerve this invitation, I ask. The day before, he had secretly met Keir Starmer, and he had been having clandestine meetings with Chris Elmore, a Labour whip, for months. "It was never meant to be taking place the next day," he insists. "I explained to colleagues that I was seriously

considering leaving the party, but I don't think they understood that it was leaving to join Labour. I couldn't tell them that."

> My approach has always been to try to find consensus. Compromise isn't a dirty word, even though in Westminster it's treated like one

At first, Wakeford says, he was looking for friends across the aisle. But then he and Elmore began meeting weekly in coffee shops around Victoria, bonding over the trials of having small children and their shared love of wrestling. The latter interest came in useful when one of the Tory whips walked into the cafe where they were plotting, and they switched the conversation to WWE.

The final decision was made over Christmas. By the time of Stephenson's dinner party, "it was a case of when, not if. But I was still thinking there would be weeks, slowly building up to it." Wakeford says he now regrets attending because it "adds to the sense of betrayal". Dehenna Davison, MP for Bishop Auckland and a close friend from the 2019 intake, tells me she is willing to forgive Wakeford. "It wasn't so much the defection that hurt, though I still think he made a huge mistake, which I've told him," she says. "It was the secrecy, and the fact some of us who were close to him were blindsided by it. I still consider him a friend – though our relationship has inevitably changed."

Wakeford says he was forced to jump sooner than planned when a journalist from the Times called the Labour press office saying they knew a defection was looming, and that they had four names they were about to run. Wakeford found out about the threat at 9.15am on 19 January, and met Elmore to discuss whether to call the paper's bluff or go for it and "control the narrative". He chose the latter: "It was a case of very quick pros and cons and, excuse my French but: 'Holy shit, this is actually real now.'"

Until that day, like many on the Tory benches he had regularly appeared in the chamber without a face covering, but he knew that would not wash on the Labour side, so he reached for the union jack mask. "Quite a lot of people have tried to talk about the symbolism and the patriotism, but it was literally the first one I grabbed from my coat." It served a dual purpose: "It

allowed me to hide my face and the emotion behind it. All I was thinking, sitting there, was: 'Please don't throw up, please don't throw up.' I was sitting opposite 300 former colleagues trying not to look at most of them, while trying to catch the eye of friends."

Wakeford crossed the house to sit on the opposition benches behind Labour leader Keir Starmer. Photograph: House of Commons/PA

A few weeks before he crossed the floor, Wakeford had called Alan Howarth, a former MP now in the Lords, who defected from the Conservatives to Labour in 1995. Wakeford seemed "very steady, very sensible", says Howarth, who offered advice on "what he would have to face, so that he could be well prepared, organisationally as well as morally and emotionally". When Howarth joined Labour, the Tory whips mounted what he calls "a filthy operation to vilify me, and launched rumours about my mental health, my sexuality".

Within hours of Wakeford's defection, the Tory whips began spreading rumours about his drinking, as well as other personal matters. The drinking is an interesting one: despite enjoying a pint (or five), he is chair of the all-party parliamentary group (APPG) on alcohol harm. He took on the job after talking in parliament about how his older brother died in a drink-driving accident when three times over the limit. Mark Jones, 44, had been living

with Wakeford since his marriage collapsed, and it was Wakeford who got the knock on the door from the police. At the time, Wakeford thought Mark had his drinking under control. “We’d tried to normalise it – to say, ‘If you want to have a drink, drink with us, you don’t have to hide it.’ What we didn’t realise was that there were three, four, five, six other drinks he was having in secret, in his room, in his car, all straight vodka.”

Mark was one of four children Wakeford’s mother had before meeting Barry “Tony” Wakeford, a lecturer in catering at Blackburn College. The pair married and had Christian and his identical twin brother, Julian, a nurse. When the marriage broke down, the twins went to live with Barry, who died of bowel cancer when they were just 11. Wakeford became estranged from his mother shortly after Mark’s death. “It wasn’t the best relationship before, but it got quite toxic,” he says.

> Do I drink? Yeah. Do I think I’m a problem drinker? No. To try to use that to discredit me was quite a nasty trick to play

He is vague about why he joined the Tories in 2003, saying he liked the idea of meritocracy; that “if you worked hard, you got rewarded”. Most of his views now, if not then, seem solidly New Labour, but there were certain Blair-era policies that put him off, such as the pledge to get 50% of children into university (despite having two degrees, he is a big fan of vocational education).

He got into politics at Nelson & Colne college in Lancashire, where he enjoyed arguing with lefty classmates. “My approach has always been to try to find consensus where you can. Compromise isn’t a dirty word, even though down here in Westminster it has been treated like one. It’s almost like we’ve lost the art of disagreeing,” he says. His main teenage sparring partner, Richard Wyatt, says: “He was a relatively socially liberal Thatcherite at college. I’m from Burnley, and if you think back to that era there was quite a lot of disillusionment with Labour locally.” Cat Smith, the Labour MP for Lancaster and Fleetwood, knew Wakeford at Lancaster University, where he came away with a third in politics, before doing a BSc in chemistry at the Open University and then working in insurance. They would go on nights out together “but we never talked about our respective

politics. Like ‘normal’ students, I doubt either of us ever expected to be MPs,” she says.

Even within his new party, Wakeford’s defection was not universally welcomed. Young Labour, the party’s youth wing, tweeted: “Christian Wakeford MP should not be admitted to the Labour Party. He has consistently voted against the interests of working-class people; for the £20 universal credit cut, for the nationality and borders bill and for the police and crime bill.”

Now, Wakeford suggests the Tory whips helped drive him away. After his defection he accused former chief whip Gavin Williamson of threatening to withdraw funding from a new school in Radcliffe, a town in the Bury South constituency where Wakeford lives with his daughter and his wife, when he was education secretary. “It was very much along the lines of: ‘If you’re wanting a favour from the department, and it’s quite a big favour, it’s wise not to vote against the government,’” he says.

Wakeford wearing a union jack mask on the day he defected to Labour. Photograph: PRU/AFP

He says he raised concerns after he was told to vote against the Dubs amendment of the Brexit bill, which would have allowed unaccompanied

child refugees to be reunited with their families in the UK. The whips assured him that the government was against it simply because it belonged in forthcoming immigration legislation. “I guess it is naive to be trusting, but when you’re new you don’t know. But there’s only so many times you can be told, ‘This bill isn’t the right place for that amendment, it will come forward in future legislation.’ And the future legislation comes forward and there’s no amendment.”

He says he feels particularly bad about the Dubs amendment now. Whereas many of his former colleagues are obsessed with controlling immigration, Wakeford is relatively relaxed, and was against the cut to the international aid budget. “For those who think the biggest issue facing us right now is tackling all those small boats, well, surely that’s an argument for more international aid, to improve everyone else’s countries,” he says. “I do think we need a fairer immigration system, based on not where you are from, but what you can contribute to society. But it needs to be fair – that is the main thing.”

His first rebellion came when he voted against Covid regulations in November 2020. When asked which vote with the government he most regrets, he cites the building safety bill on cladding, post-Grenfell. He helped the government defeat an amendment that would have stopped building owners passing on the crippling costs of fixing defects. His abstentions often came on opposition day debates tabled by Labour, which generally have no chance of passing but are designed to embarrass the government – such as the free school meals vote that prompted the protests outside his office, and another opposing a cut to universal credit. It was the latter that prompted the “Labour: bunch of cunts” message. After he defected, he apologised to Angela Rayner, Starmer’s plain-speaking deputy, who told him: “Don’t worry, I’m sure I’ve called you lot worse.”

Wakeford must now win over the Bury South Labour party, which will vote in a few months on whether to allow him to stand for them in the next general election. Starmer has made it clear he thinks he is an electoral asset because of his Tory past, and has not offered to find him a safer seat, as Tony Blair did for Alan Howarth and Shaun Woodward. Wakeford insists most local members have been kind, particularly former Bury North MP James Frith, who welcomed him with a “massive hug”.

Nathan Boroda, a young Labour councillor for Unsworth in Bury South, says constituents are split about Wakeford's defection, but thinks he will win the so-called trigger ballot. According to Boroda, Wakeford still "has questions to answer, particularly over his voting record". Do you trust him, I ask. There is a long pause. "I don't know the answer to be honest," says Boroda. "I'm still not sure about him."

Later on the day I meet Wakeford, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskiy appears live by video link in the Commons to make an emotive appeal to MPs, but Wakeford is not there. He chooses to keep a prearranged appointment with two contacts from a Greater Manchester university, and takes them to the Strangers' Bar. After two pints, we go off to give a group of young Jewish European leaders a tour of parliament, and then return to the bar, before attending not just a parliamentary tasting of beers made with British hops, but also a reception from the British cider industry. When I rush off to get my train I confess I feel a bit drunk. "Lightweight," he says, before heading to a friend's birthday party.

Earlier I asked him outright if he thought he had a problem with alcohol. "Do I drink? Yeah. Do I think I'm a problem drinker? No," he says, and the Tory whips' smear campaign comes to his mind once again. "But to try to use that as a way to discredit me when some of the work I am most proud of is my work on alcohol harm was quite a nasty trick to play."

‘Do I think anyone else will cross? Possibly,’ says Wakeford. ‘They are probably looking at what is going on with me and the warm reception I’ve received.’ Photograph: Olivia Harris/The Guardian

Seeing Wakeford hold forth at the bar made me think of something he told the King David schoolchildren earlier in the day as he urged them to consider careers in politics. “It’s an incredibly serious job,” he said. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t have fun.”

In the immediate aftermath of his defection, Wakeford seemed lonely and miserable. Watching him today, I can see he is also an MP who loves the boys’ club atmosphere in parliament, the banter, the drinking, the lobbyists competing for his ear. At one point in the afternoon, we attended a reception for Mondelez International, which owns the Cadbury brand. I assumed he had some special interest in regulating the sugar industry, but all we do is sample a chocolate fountain and have a laugh with some of his lobbyist friends.

I like Wakeford, but there’s a certain naivety to him, which makes me think no one in his new party is giving him advice: was it wise to go drinking with a journalist when your enemies want to suggest you are a problem drinker? Shouldn’t he have been in the debating chamber for Zelenskiy’s historic

address instead of the Strangers' Bar? And what 37-year-old needs to remind himself each week to do his washing?

Will he be the last of Johnson's MPs to join the Labour benches? Maybe not, he says. "Do I think anyone else will cross? Possibly, and if they are thinking about it, they are probably looking at what is going on with me quite closely, and the warm reception I've received. My advice to them would be: give me a shout."

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Advertisement

Interview

Josette Simon: ‘If I wasn’t me, I’d like to be prime minister’

Rosanna Greenstreet

Josette Simon: ‘I live in the now.’ Photograph: Pip

The actor on her classic VW camper, her celebrity crush, and the time she pretended she could ride a horse

Sat 2 Apr 2022 04.30 EDT

Born in Leicestershire, Josette Simon studied at the Central School of Speech and Drama, joining the Royal Shakespeare Company in the early 1980s. In the early 90s she was Olivier-nominated – and won the Evening Standard best actress award – for her role in Arthur Miller's After the Fall at the National Theatre. Her films span Cry Freedom (1987) and Wonder Woman (2017), and her recent television work includes The Split, The Witcher, Riviera and Small Axe. She stars in the new Netflix series Anatomy of a Scandal, which begins on 15 April. She lives in London and has a daughter.

When were you happiest?
I don't have a happiest; I live in the now.

Aside from a property, what's the most expensive thing you've bought?
Mabel, my wonderful classic VW campervan.

Describe yourself in three words
Brave, silly, loving.

What would your superpower be?
Making every person in the world compassionate and empathic.

What do you most dislike about your appearance?
Nothing. I've learned to accept myself warts and all.

Who would play you in the film of your life?
Adrian Lester. Adrian and I are always being asked if we are brother and sister, which we're not. He's a gorgeous person and a fantastic actor, and seems able to play anything.

What is the worst thing anyone's said to you?
"Your mother has dementia." She was diagnosed with Alzheimer's in 2003

and died in 2010.

What scares you about getting older?
Nothing. I've lost people and I feel immensely grateful to have the privilege of getting older.

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Which book are you ashamed not to have read?
I try not to be ashamed of anything.

Who is your celebrity crush?
Adam Lambert.

What was the last lie that you told?
"Yes, I can ride a horse." It was for a project that didn't happen in the end.

What is your guiltiest pleasure?
Far too much pinot grigio.

To whom would you most like to say sorry, and why?
My dear friend Katy. I'm sorry that I couldn't stop you from making the most devastating decision. She committed suicide.

Which words or phrases do you most overuse?
I'll think about it.

What has been your biggest disappointment?
That my parents and my siblings were so shocked and appalled by my changing my path, from university to deciding to be an actor, that they have never seen anything I've done.

If not yourself, who would you most like to be?
Prime minister.

When's the last time you changed your mind about something significant?
I'd thought of driving my campervan full of urgent supplies to the Polish border. Yesterday I decided not to, but I might still do it.

What single thing would improve the quality of your life?
A housekeeper.

Would you rather have more sex, money or fame?
Money, and then I could start my own production company.

What is the most important lesson life has taught you?
If you get tired, learn to rest, not quit.

Tell us a joke
The first time I met my husband I knew he was a keeper – he was wearing massive gloves.

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Advertisement

After my husband died, my life felt broken – so I planted a new tree

Illustration: Nathalie Lees/The Guardian

When she lost her ‘best beloved’, author Amy Bloom was overwhelmed by grief. But then nature, a tarot card reader and even Covid all helped her heal

Amy Bloom

Sat 2 Apr 2022 04.00 EDT

“I cannot take all of these losses,” I said to my therapist, The Great Wayne, as I lay down, sniffling on his absurdly proto-Freudian Peruvian rug-covered couch.

I had a list of large and small losses: my parents (whom I miss every day, but orphaned at 55 does not feel like someone has done me wrong); my old house (which I miss only at the holidays when my new house is an exploding clown car of children and grandkids); my perfect, helpful and unintrusive nextdoor neighbour who moved away suddenly, replaced by someone who is none of the above; my older sister, hospitalised twice; and, more than all of these, my husband, Brian, my constant companion and best beloved, who had been gone from me and from this world for a month. Brian was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease at 65, and, having seen its ravages in his own family and witnessed his own decline, he was determined not to make what he called “the long goodbye”. I supported and helped and wept, every day, while he arranged for his own peaceful and painless assisted suicide at Dignitas, in Switzerland.

I flip over on the couch, to look at Wayne, hopefully. He is very old, quietly kind and nobody’s fool. He wears monstrous orthopedic shoes, has the eyebrows of Robert Morley and gets in and out of his armchair with hydraulic assistance. Wayne glances at me.

“You cannot take all of these losses,” he says. He laughs out loud. “Buckle up, kid. It only gets worse.” He says it with such good cheer, and such frank surprise that a sensible person like myself would think that moping and moaning was the best approach, that I laugh, too. And the two of us are cackling away, him nearly ossified in his hi-tech armchair, me, curled into a wet ball. I will get about four in-person sessions with Wayne, from early February to early March, talking and sometimes napping on the slightly grotty, very reassuring rug-covered couch and then Covid will come down like the snow in Joyce’s The Dead, just a few flakes at first fluttering into a wide, relentless storm, transforming the world.

After Brian's death, what I thought would be months, years, of private grief and me tottering my small, dark, detached way through the world as a widow, turns out to be Life all over me; grief, like the turtles of Hindu cosmography, is grief all the way down, small on top of big. There were regular tsunamis of rage and loss that left me wiped out, soaking wet but still lodged firmly in the turtle pile.

> I gave away most of his clothes, except the shirts that smelled like him and his father's grand bathrobe

Brian had come into my life quietly, although he wasn't a quiet man. We liked each other for years as neighbours, then tumbled into love, then caused a little scandal in our little town, then settled, as even the most scandalous do, into everyday life, and then, just as we were hitting our stride as very settled people and devoted grandparents, he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's.

I gave away most of his clothes, except the undershirts that smelled like him and his father's grand, louche silk bathrobe, which I wore, while mourning, while watching TV nonstop. I couldn't finish reading a single page of prose. (Derry Girls and Jane Kenyon. Shetland and Auden.)

I discovered that, having occasionally watched American football with Brian for 15 years and having made a small effort to understand it (having grown up in a family in which even the men were amused and disdainful about sports-fandom), I now hated it and was fiercely glad to talk about what a disgusting, cruel and dangerous game it was. (Brian and his neurologist both thought that football was the cause of his dementia as it has been for so many football players. I knew that Brian would not have given it up; if he'd been offered a time-travelling chance, he would have stayed with football, but as far as I was concerned, football had killed him.) I knew that I was only a few steps short of harassing people in stadiums and even those not in stadiums. And even those not supporting the NFL, even those whose only crimes were living, unconcerned. I began writing an account of our life together and Brian's death, crying, drinking more tea and watching the cold sea from my office window. I found it impossible to talk about much of

anything (except the Scandinavian murder mysteries/international dating shows I'd watched between 3 and 5am).

Brian's memorial service was on 8 February, in the library across the street from our house. It was the poem he wanted (Szymborska's Allegro Ma Non Troppo), the minister he wanted (an old friend, who had advised me not to marry Brian and then relented), the music he wanted (Bill Evans). His mother and siblings came and they held a second memorial service on 22 February, near his family home, in Pennsylvania, a few hours from me. It was lovingly centred on the young Brian, the big, long-haired, pot-smoking footballer, before he left home for university. The music was not what he would have chosen and he had largely stopped watching sports, but he would have loved all the remembrances by men in their mid-60s who appreciated him as a tough defensive lineman and a warm-hearted (hot-headed) pal. It was a little bit out-of-body for me. I hardly knew any faces in the crowd and most of them didn't know me. I was very aware, very suddenly, that I was a blip (albeit a 15-year blip) in his life and I found it rawly painful – all that I missed, all that we wouldn't get.

> I call my excellent tarot card reader to ask if Brian is OK, if he has maybe turned into a salmon (he liked to fish)

Back from the second funeral, hoping that I'd behaved well, I shed my mourning clothes, brushed out my beehive (those funerals pushed me, strongly, into later-Sophia-Loren territory and I wanted very much to be done with the black coats and black jumpsuits and massive black sunglasses, which I should have bought by the gross, and be returned to my own mild denim frowsiness) and – to my surprise – I went shopping. I replaced the dining-room table and chairs Brian and I spent 10 years planning to get rid of. I began to peruse The World of Interiors the way another, better person might be rereading Proust or The Iliad. I ordered two little couches for my living room (in the magazine, this clever idea of back-to-back couches is located in a living room the size of a swimming pool. Mine is not.) and it felt cosy, and I found that I was completely uninterested in anyone else's opinion of this arrangement. I sit in one couch and read and then saunter into my tiny kitchen and sashay over to the other couch, scone in hand.

All of my appliances break down and I call Susie Chang, my excellent tarot card reader to find out if this is Brian, from the other side, signalling wistfully or perhaps angrily to me. Not at all. Although very popular in certain kinds of movies and TV shows, this signalling is not exciting to Susie. She does not suggest exorcism or sage. I tell her I have called the plumber, the electrician and the dishwasher guy, and she says that sounds like a good idea. I follow up by asking her if Brian is all right; if he has, maybe, turned into a salmon (he liked to fish). She says, in a flat, sensible voice: that's not a thing that happens.

I tell Wayne about my conversation with Susie Chang, expecting a little well-modulated mockery. He nods and thinks.

"Not a salmon, eh?"

'I planned to have a tree for Brian in my back yard.' Illustration: Nathalie Lees/The Guardian

I cry every night and every morning but I am up by sunrise, feeling less sodden. I am not optimistic but I am not particularly worried. I am not in a hurry. I am not urgently moved by my obligations but I want not to worry my children and I want to continue to be a good grandmother. I find the grief, kindness and harshness of others completely unbearable. I talk to

Brian's photographs. I call Brian's mother every 10 days. I'm not looking forward to anything at all, but I see a few early snowdrops in my yard and I'm so glad I go out into the snow in my slippers to admire them. I drink a lot of tea and I eat toast. I make dinner (more toast and sometimes noodles). I am wading in the grief, still sifting through the last few difficult years, moving slow but not uncomfortable. I am in no hurry to get back to anything that looks like real life. Or even a shoddy simulacrum of life. You can just keep it all, is my view.

By early March, my grown children and I are all exchanging texts about Covid. Do we need to get masks? Is it nonsense? Is it just another name for the flu? Will schools stay open? I buy a box of 50 masks online, get dressed, and go to the bank and withdraw a lot of cash. I put it in my nightstand and feel like my own grandmother. My younger daughter calls me on a Friday night, beside herself with worry and work, to say that she and her wife have just been informed that they are no longer allowed to go to their offices and will both be working full-time, and from home and that their three-year-old's preschool programme is closed for the indefinite future. (The indefinite future will turn out to be nine months.)

By the end of the weekend, my daughter, Sarah, her wife, Jasmine, and little Zora arrive with their small car piled high, escaping from Brooklyn. I am glad to see them, they are glad to see me.

In the mornings, I watch Zora so her mothers can get in at least four-to-five hours of work. We play hide and seek, mostly in my bedroom closet. Zora discovers she can hide in the laundry basket. Zora discovers that Nana can hide in the shower stall. We find these things hilarious. We watch Plim Plim, a Latin American animated series about a child who is a clown, a hero and a magician. His friends are animals, each with one personality trait. We watch bits and pieces of 140 Minutos de Capítulos Nuevos y Completos every morning, and Zora decides that we should always watch it in the armchair in my bedroom, squishing in next to each other. Every morning, she instructs me: Squish! Plim Plim! I find myself humming Los Canciones Infantiles and La Vaca Lola. My shred of Spanish is improved and Zora's is certainly better than mine. My daughter-in-law offers to cook dinner, every night. I'm gobsmacked and slow to respond because I think I must have misunderstood

her. I made dinner for four or five people most nights for 30 years. The idea that Jasmine, not yet 40 and parent of one, would volunteer to cook dinner every night for the four of us astonished me.

“I hope I’m not overstepping,” she said.

I hugged her. “Step away,” I said. “Please.”

Jasmine cooked interesting and healthful meals that were consistently delicious, more than I could have done on all three counts, and dinner was on the table by 6pm. My daughter washed the dishes. I had the pleasure of being a guest at my own table, and it was a pleasure. I also had the pleasure of seeing my daughter’s happy marriage up close. I sat, every day, in their happiness, in their parental fatigue, in Zora’s flow of new words and blossoming of self, in their family-building, in which I was included. The broken pieces of my life turned out to be hospitable to new life, flowers and grass growing in the dead log.

I planned to have a tree for Brian in my back yard. I planned to bury the urn of his ashes next to the roots of the tree, and I planned to have a small brass plaque attached to the boulder near where I wanted the tree. First, I Googled pictures of all kinds of trees, as if I were on were an aborist dating app. Too big, too small, too narrow, too mangy. The linden tree is handsome, bushy and green but its superpower is the scent of its small yellow flowers: pure honey. (Also, makes a nice tea.) I talked to Wayne about the kind of tree that would best represent Brian. I talked about trees passionately and hypothetically all winter, and then, after offering Wayne a number of choices and his refusing to do anything but listen, I bought Brian’s linden tree. The tree I wanted cost twice as much as I’d wanted to spend and would be delivered several seasons later, and I decided that there would be no stopping me. All spring and summer, I sat on the little hill where the tree would be. I found the Rumi poem that would go on the plaque. I ordered the plaque, which was also twice as expensive as I’d hoped and would also be slow in coming, by a few months. I found all the white perennials that could surround the linden tree and on the day the gardeners suddenly arrived, almost a year after his death, to put this huge tree into the yard, the plaque was there, the urn was there and I was happy to be there and the weeping didn’t change that.

Also with me, at a polite distance from me and from the tree, was a man who had come to see me for lunch, having read a novel of mine and recognised my name from when we had been friends 30 years ago, when our children played together. We did have lunch and I cried some more and when he went home, I called Wayne.

“I have all these feelings,” I said. “It’s like Grand Central Terminal in here; loss coming in and going out, happiness coming in and going out. Grief, platform five, all aboard. Changing trains, next stop, for … Change. Mind the gap. I cannot take it,” I said.

Wayne laughed.

In Love by Amy Bloom is published by Granta Books (£16.99). To support the Guardian and Observer, order your copy at guardianbookshop.com. Delivery charges may apply.

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2022.04.02 - Opinion

- **Dear Nadhim Zahawi, your Great Big Bag of Big Ideas feels uncannily empty**
- **To Katya, aged seven, in a bomb shelter in Kyiv**
- **Forty years after the Falklands war, Britain still acts as if the dispute is settled. It isn't**
- **Betraying old friends, making new enemies: the Tories have lost the plot**

Letter from a curious parentSchools

Dear Nadhim Zahawi, your Great Big Bag of Big Ideas feels uncannily empty

Michael Rosen

What was it that your predecessors got wrong that you're now having to put right?

‘Nadhim Zahawi, what did Michael Gove do that didn’t do the trick?’ Photograph: Tayfun Salcı/Zuma/Rex/Shutterstock

Sat 2 Apr 2022 03.23 EDTLast modified on Sat 2 Apr 2022 13.02 EDT

Do you remember that speech in Shakespeare’s The Tempest when Prospero’s slave, Ariel, reports back to his master with an account of all the work he’s done to capsize the king’s ship? He says he boarded the ship and “flamed amazement”. One moment he was on the deck, the next in every cabin, then up on the topmast and then on the bowsprit, creating “sulphurous roaring” and causing people to jump into the sea.

It made me think of you. There I was last week, hearing you presenting all your big new ideas on the radio and on TV. You were firing off in all directions. I hope you’ll excuse me if I express some scepticism about your schools white paper. You see, people like me who’ve been parents and education-watchers for nearly 50 years don’t whoop with joy when a new secretary of state for education comes on the scene with yet another Great Big Bag of Big Ideas that will – of course – drive standards up, narrow the attainment gap, give parents what they want, deal with bad behaviour, give everyone a job, level up, simplify the types of schools, and give help to those pupils falling behind.

For most of those 50 years it's your party that's been in power. If you think education needs shaking up that's because you're dealing with the last time you guys shook it up. Or the time before that. Or the time before that. What did Kenneth Baker or Michael Gove do that didn't do the trick? Or what knack or streak of genius have you got that those two giants of education theory and practice didn't have?

I wonder, for example, if you remember Gove-worship? It worked like this: Gove would announce another great education reform – the "knowledge-rich curriculum" or "world-class GCSEs" or, of course "academies and free schools". Your side of the Commons drooled with delight. Sympathetic newspapers wrote about the great revolution that Gove was bringing about. Then, when the great man suddenly left office, his admiring colleagues explained how Gove had turned schools round, driven up standards, and broken the stranglehold the local authority mafia had over education.

Job done, surely? But no. It seems even after 11 years of Tory-led education we still apparently need Ariel Zahawi to hurl yet more of Jove's lightning around. So I have to confess bewilderment. How about you do another speech next week in which you explain to us parents what it was that your predecessors got wrong that you're now having to put right?

Yet your Great Big Bag of Big Ideas feels uncannily empty. Apart from the mind-numbingly ordinary stuff about the hours in a school week, one of your Big Ideas caught my eye. Announcing that all schools are to join multi-academy trusts, you said: "All the evidence suggests that schools that work together in a family of schools … deliver better outcomes for the children."

I don't expect you to be a scholar of education history – though it would be nice – but have you heard of someone called Sir Tim Brighouse? He led something called the London Challenge (2002-07, when I had several children in London schools). Do you know what Brighouse put in place? Schools working together. It was a huge success and teachers are still talking about it. Brighouse would have been just the man to advise on a national rollout of the scheme.

It wasn't to be. Instead, the preferred Tory model for schools, as enacted by Gove, was for them to compete with each other for pupils, teachers and

facilities through the vicious instrument of league tables. The huge apparatus of assessment, which could and should have been designed to help students, is instead tied into proving that one school is better than another. And yet, it is precisely this model that you are sticking with: demanding yet more academies, praising grammar schools – thereby depriving neighbouring schools of academically high-achieving students. And yet you roar out praise for families of schools.

One thing that can be said for certainty is that within a few years, someone sitting in your seat will give the same speech as you, using the same cliches. “Narrow the attainment gap … good standards … bad behaviour … blah blah blah … passionate about education … I went to school, you know … I want every school to be a grammar school … levelling up … blah blah blah …” When is an education secretary going to find out what really needs to be done?

Yours, Michael Rosen

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Illustration by Masha Foyart, who is based in Kyiv.

To Katya, aged seven, in a bomb shelter in Kyiv

Illustration by Masha Foyart, who is based in Kyiv.

In a new poem, the novelist and poet Ben Okri writes about what hope can grow out of the destruction in Ukraine

by Ben Okri

Sat 2 Apr 2022 03.00 EDTLast modified on Sat 2 Apr 2022 09.13 EDT

All around you missiles
Are falling. Churches
You once knew won’t
Be there any more.
The streets you walked
Will be changed by
Blood and shelling

And bombs. It seems
The world's gone mad.
As the Earth shakes,
Not because of the rage
Of the gods, but that
One man wants to
Win back a lost empire,
You will think that
Your world is being
Shattered for ever. It is.
But out of the destruction,
Out of all this thunder,
Something new will
Come. Whatever happens
Your land will know
The courage of its soul,
Its people; and history
Will be rewritten not
With the force of an autocrat
But by the steadfast hope
And desire to be true
To the beauty of your earth
And all you have
Suffered. Katya in your
Bomb shelter, we're with you.
We're there in the shadows
We're there in the silence
Between the explosions …

*

Those who destroy your land
Destroy themselves.
Always remember what
Your land fights for,
The right to its future,
Without any force from

Outside. Katya, we are
Done with people forcing
Us into their own dream.
We are done with being
Told who we can or can’t
Be. A time comes when
You stand and say
My future’s mine to dream
My land is mine to till
My life is mine to imagine
You will not break my truth
You will not distort my
Dream. You will not
Destroy my future, who
Ever you are. You may
Pulverise our churches,
Our roads, theatres, and our
Hospitals, with hundreds
Hiding in them, but you’ll
Never touch the
Fountain of our dreams,
Or the deep world
From which we will create
Every day a radiant
Land. From this bomb
Shelter we’ll dream anew.
Your shelling is our resurrection
Your missiles are missives
Of our regeneration.
All that you ruin
Are all those things
Which must go so
That we will for ever
Be free to be what we
Truly are. For even
If you win, the victory
Is ours. For you’ve

Tempered our souls
And revealed to us our
True selves which we
Might never have
Found without your
Wish to crush us.

*

Katya, in your
bomb shelter, it's
A fearful thing
When people act
From the great emptiness
Of a loss of empire.
An empire is a vast ego,
A gigantic delusion, and
It makes people think
That they own the
Souls of others, that they
Control the destiny
Of nations, and that they
Are somehow the masters
Of the Earth. The loss
Of such a delusion
Can make people insane.
Sometimes when a leader
Is unhinged by this loss
They are prepared
To destroy the world so
They can return
To their lost dream
Of vast terrains in which
Once they were gods.

*

It’s not good for humans
To entertain the delusion
Of being gods. So Katya
It is not your fault that
Someone wants back
What they should not
Have taken. It’s not our
Fault that we dream
Of freedom, that we want
To be ourselves,
Live our lives, make
Our own mistakes,
And determine our own
Destiny. No one can
Rip that away from us.
The age of empire is over.
The age of freedom is
Here. They may dominate
Us still with their might and
Their nuclear bombs,
But they will not
Determine who we shall
Be, or where our
Fire and our dreams
Will take us. I am with
You there in the bomb shelter.
I am a bomb shelter child too.
This will end. It will pass.
So drink the sweet
Waters of the Earth.
Sing songs to one
Another in this time
Of darkness. The
Monster’s worst roar
Is often just before
It falls. There are no real
Monsters in life,

Just people who're
Deluded, or mad, or
Lost in ideas that stray
Too far from the
Wise road of the human.

*

Fires are howling
In the streets that the
Centuries built.
There are tenements,
Bomb-sliced in half,
In which you can
See the innards
Of apartments.
Your roots are entangled
With the souls of those
Who seek to murder you.
I hear that their soldiers
Weep as they drop
Bombs on their distant relations.
See, they're driving
Their knives into their own
Hearts. Such a great
Civilisation, home to
Such madnesses.
They learned nothing
From Lev Tolstoy, Katya.
They learned nothing.
Napoleon tried to do
The same thing. He
Won too. But what
A loss that was.
They burned their famed
City so that what he
Won was ashes.
He sat there in the throne

Of ash, and eternal winter
Descended on his head.
That was the commencement
Of his end. They learned
Nothing from War and Peace.
Nor from Hitler.
A people determined
To be free can
Not be compelled
To be unfree again.
Even if you kill them.
Do you know why,
Katya? Well it's because
We are made of a stuff
Not of this Earth
And when we find
Our truth a new beauty
And force is added to
The universe.

*

The missiles are falling.
Children perish in bombed
Out churches. An evil
Is being planted in our
Times and the whole
World can see it.
But missiles create lions
From lambs, and bombs
Awaken tigers. They
Never learn, the deluded ones.
They'll kill hundreds
Of thousands, but
From those defeats
An army of dragons
Will be born. They
Have changed the world,

But not in the way they
Thought. Katya, you
Who live in the slip
Stream of empires,
Wake up fast. Grow
Deep, strong and brave.
Join the greater river
Of human destiny.
You can't fight injustice
And then be unjust to others.
Every day you survive
Brings your liberation
Closer. Spirits
Of the dead will you on.

*

The church will be rebuilt
The streets will be made new
There will be festivals in the square.
You will taste grapes from Greece,
Apples from the Hesperides
And sweet oranges from Africa.
And one day your laughter
Will defeat the vacuum missiles
And the bombs will fade
Into the depths of your freedom.
A soft wind from the Bosphorus
Will weave your hair
And the sun-kissed snow
Will temper the grim memories
Of this bomb shelter where you grow.

- Ben Okri is a novelist and poet. He is the author of Every Leaf a Hallelujah and The Famished Road

- Voices of Ukraine: writers including Ian McEwan and Karl Ove Knausgaard will read work by Ukrainian authors at a Guardian Live event in London 0n Monday 11 April. The event will also be livestreamed and all profits will be donated to the DEC Ukraine appeal. Book here

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OpinionFalkland Islands

Forty years after the Malvinas war, Britain still acts as if the dispute is settled. It isn't

Santiago Cafiero

My country's pursuit of sovereignty didn't end in 1982. I urge the UK, in line with UN resolutions, to resume negotiations

- Santiago Cafiero is the Argentine foreign minister
- Argentina criticises UK's refusal to talk about the future of the Malvinas

Argentine war cemetery near Darwin. Photograph: Daniel García/AFP/Getty Images

Sat 2 Apr 2022 01.00 EDTLast modified on Sat 2 Apr 2022 11.50 EDT

The 40th anniversary of the Malvinas war compels us to pay homage to and honour the memory of the fallen Argentine and British soldiers who lost their lives there. It should also lead us to reflect on why, four decades on from the cessation of hostilities, Argentina and the United Kingdom have not been able to resume a substantive dialogue to resolve the sovereignty dispute over the Malvinas, South Georgias and South Sandwich Islands and the surrounding maritime areas, despite the call made by the international community through UN resolutions.

The immediate events that triggered the war and the details of the conflict itself are well known to the British public. But it is often forgotten that, for a period of 16 years beginning in 1965, there was a bilateral negotiation process between Argentina and the UK that was in line with the mandate of the UN resolutions. These were true negotiations on the substance of the issue, sovereignty. Over that period of time, several concrete alternatives were explored to help resolve the dispute between our countries, taking into account the interests of the inhabitants of the islands.

The United Kingdom alleges that there is no sovereignty dispute over these territories. Why then did the British government negotiate with Argentina during that period?

We believe that no outcome of any war can resolve a dispute recognised by the international community. This would set a dangerous precedent. The 1982 conflict did not alter the nature of the dispute between both countries, which is still pending negotiation and resolution. That is why, in November 1982, the UN general assembly adopted resolution 37/9, which requests both countries to resume negotiations in order to find as soon as possible a peaceful solution to the sovereignty dispute.

The UK and my country are both vibrant democracies, with relevant economies (in fact, we are both members of the G20). We collaborate on key issues of the international agenda such as the pandemic and the protection of human rights – and, above all, we share fundamental values and a vision of a rules-based world order. And yet, in the South Atlantic agenda, we behave as if the conflict took place just yesterday.

The Argentine government has recently presented concrete proposals to advance connectivity between the islands and mainland Argentina through the re-establishment of regular flights. More flights mean more trade, more tourism and more dialogue, as we have had in the past.

Argentina is not a threat to anyone. We have a clear mandate at the constitutional level. The Argentine constitution underlines two important aspects of that mandate: it states that the recovery of sovereignty is an inalienable objective of the Argentine people, and it also affirms that we must seek it through peaceful means only, in accordance with international law and respecting the way of life of the islands' inhabitants.

Despite this, the UK maintains a major military base in the South Atlantic, carries out periodic military exercises in the disputed area and maintains restrictions on the sale of dual-use military items to Argentina. I would stress that the UK reserves restrictions of this nature for countries responsible for serious human rights violations. These restrictions have been extended to include sensitive technologies, raising doubts about Britain's reliability as a provider of this type of equipment. Beyond the fact of the sovereignty dispute, it is incomprehensible that such treatment is meted out to our country, which has enjoyed 40 years of uninterrupted democracy.

We have a positive agenda in which cooperation is possible and desirable. We can and must continue to work together on both global and bilateral issues. In particular, we should seek to build a more flourishing bilateral trade relationship, which is currently operating well below its potential.

We have also made great progress over the last 40 years in humanitarian matters, identifying the remains of Argentine soldiers who fell on the islands during the conflict and are buried there: thanks to the neutral intermediation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), we were able to identify the remains of more than 120 Argentine ex-combatants and provide an answer to their families, after so many years of uncertainty.

The UN calls for solving the sovereignty dispute by peaceful means, as a way to put an end to this special and particular colonial situation. There have been declarations from the Organization of American States, the Community

of Latin American and Caribbean States, the Ibero-American Summit, Mercosur and others.

However, the sovereignty dispute over the Malvinas, South Georgias and South Sandwich Islands and the surrounding maritime areas remains unresolved. Pretending that it does not exist or that it does not create obstacles in our bilateral relationship is naive. No Argentine government will cease in its pursuit of our sovereign claim. This does not prevent us from advancing in areas of common interest, but we must be aware that without a frank and constructive dialogue regarding the South Atlantic, our relationship will not be able to reach its full potential.

- Santiago Cafiero is the Argentine foreign minister
- This article was amended on 2 April 2022 to reflect the author's use in his text of the term Malvinas

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OpinionConservatives

Betraying old friends, making new enemies: the Tories have lost the plot

Andy Beckett

Treating group after group of voters as expendable is a luxury the Conservatives may not be able to afford

Illustration: Nate Kitch/The Guardian

Fri 1 Apr 2022 09.27 EDTLast modified on Fri 1 Apr 2022 13.40 EDT

Boris Johnson's government loves to boast. Often it seems to do little else. Talking up its achievements, real or not, gives the impression of momentum where there is more often chaos and indecision – as there was this week, with the government twice changing its position on LGBT conversion practices. With a prime minister not known for his administrative abilities, and yet many voters and newspapers still invested in the idea that the Tories are the natural party of government, for today's Conservatives, constant bragging plays a crucial distracting role.

One of the government's more potent claims is that it represents a wider range of Britons than its predecessors. In some ways, this is actually true. Johnson has a bigger majority, drawn from more parts of England and Wales – if not Scotland – than any Tory government since the early 90s. Most strikingly, he has a more multiracial cabinet than any previous prime minister.

In other ways, his government is much less representative, with a huge reliance on support from pensioners and twice the proportion of privately educated cabinet ministers as served under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Yet there is just enough substance in Johnson's claim to speak for "the people of this country" to unsettle Labour, with its mainly urban MPs and succession of leaders from north London. A relatively inclusive Conservative government can be presented as a change from the discredited Tory regimes that ran Britain from 2010 to 2019. If enough voters believe in this change, the Conservatives may get re-elected yet again.

So it has been strange in recent weeks to watch the government seemingly happy to alienate so many groups of voters. From public sector workers to people who followed the lockdown rules; from university students to people who export to the EU; from Covid shielders to benefits claimants, including pensioners: the government's combination of cuts, tax rises and insouciance about the pandemic threatens to enrage them all. Meanwhile, promises made to millions of new Tory supporters during Johnson's first year in office have been allowed to wither. In his spring statement the chancellor, Rishi Sunak, only mentioned levelling up once, in passing.

All governments eventually disappoint people. But Johnson has been in power less than three years. The speed with which his government has let voters down, the unapologetic way it has done so – "we can't do everything", as Sunak sulkily put it – and the scale of the disconnect between rhetoric and reality have all been pretty startling. These brazen shortcomings also tell us important things about Johnson's rule.

Most obviously, as all his careers have shown, he always lets people down. Second, his party is feeling almost invincible. After surviving – or thinking they have survived – Brexit, the pandemic and countless other policy

disasters and scandals, many Conservatives find it hard to imagine any crisis that would be fatal, not least because they see Labour and Keir Starmer as such toothless rivals.

A similar overconfidence is shaping how the Tories govern. They seem more interested in trying to control the country's political conversations – about patriotism, for example – than in more tangible goals such as making the public safer or protecting standards of living. Meanwhile, the material beneficiaries of Johnson's rule seem ever fewer: rich party donors, crony companies winning government contracts, crooks fraudulently claiming barely supervised Covid support payments, and a minority of homeowners able to exploit a price bubble.

Conservative governments used to think it was in their interests to spread the incentives and rewards for voting Tory much more widely. As housing minister during the 1950s, Harold Macmillan was so keen to get more homes built, to demonstrate that the Tories were creating a "property-owning democracy", that the construction totals were displayed in his department like the scores at a cricket match. In 1992, the Conservative election manifesto promised "to encourage the wider distribution of wealth throughout society". It claimed that under them, Britain had already become "a capital-owning democracy": "10 million people own shares, 6 million of them in newly privatised industries."

This more expansive Toryism should not be romanticised. Many of the homes built during Macmillan's housing ministry were small and shoddy. Over four-fifths of Britons still did not own shares in 1992. But these Tory governments at least made serious attempts to soften the tension between conservatism and democracy – namely that a belief system based on hierarchies is always potentially threatened by every adult having one vote. As the US political theorist Corey Robin wrote in his book The Reactionary Mind, serious conservatives are always looking for ways "to make privilege popular".

Johnson is not serious about anything except himself. For all his populist talk, and his government's initially broad support, the Tories' electoral strategy now looks increasingly narrow. Their party co-chairman Oliver Dowden recently said that their next general election campaign would be

“building on the experience of [our] campaign in 2015”. The Conservatives won that election with a skimpy 37% of the vote – almost exactly their poll rating now – by focusing on small numbers of voters in a few dozen swing seats, adding them to the party’s core support and essentially ignoring everyone else. The architect and overseer of this strategy was the Australian consultant Lynton Crosby. He has been hired to advise the Conservatives again.

There is a chance that this methodical, minimal, often cynical approach, which uses scare stories about other parties in order to push voters towards the Tories, will work less well at the next election. Politics has become less predictable since 2015, and after all the chaos under Johnson it is harder to present the Conservatives as the safe option.

Eventually, the Tory support from older voters may also weaken. Last year, the sociologist Phil Burton-Cartledge published Falling Down, a counterintuitive but quite convincing book about “the decline of Tory Britain”. It argues that there is “a crisis of Conservative political reproduction”: today’s pensioners, many of them beneficiaries of past Tory policies such as right to buy, will gradually be replaced by more liberal Britons who owe the Conservatives little.

Anticipating a better future is often a coping mechanism for the left. But already under Johnson the Conservatives are in a reckless, possibly self-destructive phase: treating most voters as expendable, offering the country not coherent government but the spectacle of their own manoeuvring and shamelessness. Explaining Johnson’s U-turns on conversion practices, a Downing Street spokesperson said: “On reflection, it was something he cared passionately about.” Such slipperiness still impresses some commentators and other political professionals. Voters may want more.

- Andy Beckett is a Guardian columnist

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2022.04.02 - Around the world

- Sri Lanka President declares public emergency after protests against economic crisis
- Amazon Teamsters president vows to pressure company after New York votes for union
- Analysis How the Islamic State trial could change the future of US terrorism cases
- Hungary Where editors tell reporters to disregard facts before their eyes
- Australia More refugees released from detention ahead of election

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka president declares public emergency after protests against economic crisis

Declaration comes after hundreds of protesters clashed with police and the military

A man shouts anti-government slogans during a protest outside the president's private residence on the outskirts of Colombo. Photograph: Eranga Jayawardena/AP

Reuters
Sat 2 Apr 2022 01.56 EDT

Sri Lankan president Gotabaya Rajapaksa has declared a nationwide public emergency, following violent protests over the country's worst economic crisis in decades.

Rajapaksa said in a government gazette notification late on Friday that he took the decision in the interests of public security, the protection of public order and the maintenance of supplies and essential services.

Hundreds of protesters clashed with police and military on Thursday outside Rajapaksa's residence in a suburb of the capital, Colombo.

Police arrested 53 people and imposed a curfew in and around Colombo on Friday to contain sporadic protests that have broken out over shortages of essential items, including fuel and other goods.

The Indian Ocean island nation of 22 million people faces rolling blackouts for up to 13 hours a day as the government scrambles to secure foreign exchange to pay for fuel imports.

The country's lucrative tourism industry and foreign workers' remittances have been sapped by the pandemic, and public finances were hit further by deep tax cuts promised by Rajapaksa during his 2019 election campaign.

Ordinary Sri Lankans are also dealing with shortages and soaring inflation, after the country steeply devalued its currency last month ahead of talks with the International Monetary Fund for a loan programme.

An alliance of 11 political parties has urged Rajapaksa to dissolve the cabinet and form a government with all parties to deal with the crisis, local media said, in a nation where both India and China are competing to build influence.

Police used teargas and water cannon to disperse crowds near Rajapaksa's residence on Thursday, after they torched several police and army vehicles.

At least two dozen police personnel were injured in the clashes, an official said, declining to comment on the number of protesters hurt.

Tourism minister Prasanna Ranatunge warned such protests would harm economic prospects. "The main issue Sri Lanka is facing is a forex shortage,

and protests of this nature will hurt tourism and have economic consequences," Ranatunge said.

The United Nations representative in the country, Hanaa Singer-Hamdy, called for restraint from all groups involved in the clashes. "We are monitoring developments and are concerned by reports of violence," she said on Twitter.

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Amazon

Union chief vows to pressure Amazon after historic New York vote

Teamsters' Sean O'Brien says the e-commerce company has 'total disrespect' for its workers

Amazon workers protest in New York on 1 April. Photograph: Andrea Renault/AFP/Getty Images

Steven Greenhouse
Sat 2 Apr 2022 05.00 EDTLast modified on Sat 2 Apr 2022 08.42 EDT

The Teamsters' new president has pledged his powerful union will step up the pressure on Amazon and mount its own efforts to unionize the company after workers in New York voted to form the company's first US union.

In an interview with the Guardian Sean O'Brien said it was vital to organize Amazon, asserting that the e-commerce company has "total disrespect" for

its workers and was putting downward pressure on standards for unionized warehouse workers and truck drivers across the US.

"You have an employer like Jeff Bezos taking a joyride into space, and he bangs on his workers to be able to fund his trip," said O'Brien, who was inaugurated as Teamsters president on 22 March. He asserted that Amazon workers would benefit greatly from joining the Teamsters, saying that Amazon's drivers and warehouse workers are treated and paid considerably worse than their unionized counterparts at other companies.

"They're awful, they're disrespectful the way they treat their employees," O'Brien said of Amazon.

On Friday, a final vote count showed that Amazon workers in Staten Island voted to unionize, 2,654 for a union, 2,131 against. Another vote to organize workers in Alabama hangs in the balance. Amazon beat off the union drive by 118 votes but the final tally is awaiting a review of 416 challenged ballots.

O'Brien said he applauds any organization that seeks to take on Amazon: "I commend anybody who tries to take on a schoolyard bully like Amazon."

The Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union is seeking to unionize an Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama, while a new, independent union, the Amazon Labor Union, was behind the organizing at two Amazon facilities on Staten Island.

> You have an employer like Jeff Bezos taking a joyride into space, and he bangs on his workers to be able to fund his trip

Sean O'Brien

O'Brien said that no union is better positioned than the Teamsters to organize Amazon because his 1.3-million-member union has decades of experience in unionizing and winning good contracts for warehouse workers and truck drivers. "This is the only union that has the proven track record of organizing workers in these industries," O'Brien said.

He said the Teamsters needed to organize Amazon as an obligation to "our members" and "our largest employers", most notably United Parcel Service and DHL. Concerned that Amazon's lower pay is undercutting Teamster employers and Teamster contracts, O'Brien said he didn't want Amazon to threaten the livelihood of Teamsters or "diminish the standards established by collective bargaining agreements".

"We have to organize Amazon," he said. "We have to have a plan in place. We have to execute that plan and not be scared to change that plan if it doesn't work at times. Even a world champion team doesn't win all the time. Hopefully we will have a favorable win-to-loss ratio."

Before winning a five-year term as Teamsters' president, O'Brien headed a large Teamsters local in the Boston area for 15 years. He succeeded James P Hoffa, who stepped down after 23 years as Teamsters president.

"We the Teamsters have the best resources out there, not just financially" to unionize Amazon, O'Brien said. "We have the ability to utilize our members who work in the industry, who know the benefits of working under a collective bargaining agreement and having dignity and respect in the workplace.

"We have a lot of work to do," he continued. "We have a plan to focus on the big metro cities," where he said the likelihood of winning unionization elections would be greatest. He said that the Teamsters would mount "non-traditional campaigns" that include up lining politicians' support and extensive community support behind unionization. He stressed the importance of worker-to-worker organizing: "We need to utilize our best organizers: our worker members who work in these industries."

Amazon officials say their company's pay levels are competitive – $18 for a full-time entry-level worker in Staten Island and nearly $16 in Alabama. The company notes that its benefits, including health coverage, begin for full-time workers the day they join the company.

Amazon officials have repeatedly said they are committed to maintaining an environment where its employees can thrive and feel appreciated and respected.

News of the Staten Island victory comes as union activity is experiencing a resurgence in the US. Joe Biden has positioned himself as the most pro-union president in generations.

"The Biden administration has done a great job for unions right out of the gate," O'Brien said. "An administration that's not afraid to endorse unions is great." He praised, in particular, a 2021 law that Biden backed that helped secure the pensions of millions of union members and retirees, including many Teamsters whose pension plans were seriously underfunded.

O'Brien said the Teamsters and other unions need to do a far better job explaining to Americans how unions lift workers and the nation as a whole. He said many Americans view the Teamsters favorably despite the movie The Irishman about scandals inside the Teamsters a half-century ago. "During the worst pandemic we'll ever face people saw that we delivered packages, did trash pick-ups, did food and grocery deliveries," O'Brien said. "We've proven our worth providing goods and services to keep this country moving."

He talked at length about the importance of holding politicians accountable, especially when they fail to back workers and unions. "I can't remember people's birthdays. But I can remember the last person that screwed me. That's how we're going to deal with those politicians who vote against us. We'll run people against you. We'll campaign against you."

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Islamic State

How the Islamic State trial could change the future of US terrorism cases

As a Virginia jury hears horrific allegations, experts say the trial of El Shafee Elsheikh sets an important precedent

Family members of IS hostages outside the the US district court in Alexandria, Virginia, in September. Photograph: Saul Loeb/AFP/Getty Images

Victoria Bekiempis
Sat 2 Apr 2022 05.00 EDTLast modified on Sat 2 Apr 2022 10.38 EDT

As the trial against the accused Islamic State fighter El Shafee Elsheikh began this week on American soil, jurors in a northern Virginia courtroom were quickly exposed to accounts of unimaginable brutality.

Elsheikh, prosecutors alleged, carried out terrorist acts that involved the grisly deaths of four Americans – the journalists James Foley and Steven

Sotloff, as well as the aid workers Kayla Mueller and Peter Kassig.

Elsheikh, a former British national, allegedly did so as part of a three-man cell dubbed "the Beatles" by the group's hostages, due to their English accents. Officials have said that this cell was responsible for the kidnappings of more than 20 westerners between 2012 and 2015.

IS members decapitated Foley, Kassig, and Sotloff. The leader of IS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, repeatedly raped Mueller before she was killed.

Legal experts told the Guardian that Elsheikh's trial would help provide a sense of justice to victims' families and show that international terrorism cases can, and should, be held in US civilian courts – an important precedent.

David Viola, a professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice's Center on Terrorism, said Elsheikh's trial demonstrated that the US could get justice through the legal process, not solely by relying on military force.

"The trial proves to the world, hostage-takers, terrorists and others that the US has a virtually unlimited reach and a very long memory," Viola said.

The prosecutor John Gibbs described Elsheikh as an IS leader who relished cruelty. Elsheikh and his accomplices had beaten hostages more frequently than did low-level guards, Gibbs said on Wednesday in his opening statement.

"If a hostage looked at any of the three men, they would be beaten," said Gibbs. "In fact, they did not have to do anything to be beaten."

Hostages who were poised to be released after paying ransoms even endured "going-away beatings", Gibbs said, noting that Elsheikh and his accomplices once struck a hostage 25 times when they learned it was his 25th birthday, the Associated Press reported.

The IS fighters "were utterly terrifying" to hostages, Gibbs said. Hostages had to kneel, face the wall and avoid eye contact with their captors.

Federico Motka, an aid worker, said that he and his fellow aid worker David Haines were forced to fight captured journalists, including Foley and John Cantlie. “They were super excited about it,” Motka, who was held captive for 14 months and released in May 2014, testified. “We were so weak and shattered we could barely lift our arms.”

The cell described these forced fights as a “royal rumble”, Motka said. They further humiliated the hostages by giving mock commentary on these forced fights. They were forced to fight until passing out.

“They played lots of games with us,” Motka told jurors. “They gave us dog names. We needed to come and immediately respond.”

Motka claimed that in late 2013 and early 2014, hostages had to wear orange jumpsuits, with their captors saying they wanted to re-create “conditions to the detainees at Guantánamo Bay”. Motka said that he endured waterboarding and electrocution through an opening in his cell “until my hands went rigid”.

Elsheikh and another Briton, Alexanda Amon Kotey, were caught in January 2018 by Kurdish fighters while trying to escape from Syria to Turkey. They were brought to US authorities in Iraq and eventually transported to Virginia in 2020, for criminal proceedings.

British officials stripped Elsheikh and Kotey of their UK citizenship but delayed their transfer to the US until authorities agreed not to pursue the death penalty against them.

El Shafee Elsheikh at the trial in a Friday 1 April image. Photograph: Bill Hennessy/Reuters

Kotey pleaded guilty in September 2021 and is awaiting sentencing. His plea deal stipulates life imprisonment; after 15 years, however, he could serve the rest of his sentence in the UK if authorities there are willing to accept him.

The cell ringleader, Mohammed Emwazi, known as “Jihadi John”, died during a US drone strike in Syria about seven years ago.

Elsheikh’s attorney, Edward MacMahon, has contended that there is no evidence proving he was in the terror cell. MacMahon conceded that Elsheikh had traveled to Syria to fight in IS but said cell members always wore masks, making it difficult to identify them.

But amid the awful to and fro in the courtroom and the details of cruelty, violence and death, experts believe the trial’s legacy will concern far bigger issues than individual violence.

“We’re a nation of laws. Our power and our legitimacy can never solely be derived from our military might,” said Viola, who has served as an intelligence officer in the US navy reserve. “We have to hold the likes of Elsheikh accountable … in front of a judge and jury.”

Viola continued: “This is the kind of proof we need for the world, and for ourselves, that laws can have a more profound and lasting impact, and importantly, bring closure to the families of the men and women who died.”

Jason M Blazakis, director of the Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies, said Elsheikh’s trial showed that the US would prosecute more of this type of case.

“I think the trial, in and of itself, demonstrates that the United States is serious about ensuring that the law is applied against individuals engaged in hostage taking – no matter how long it’s been between the actual hostage taking and the actual trial itself,” Blazakis said. “There is no statute essentially of limitations in terms of trying to bring people to justice for the horrible crimes they allegedly committed.”

In Blazakis’s view, these proceedings might send a message to people who are considering similar actions and prevent some from doing so.

“There are always going to be individuals who sacrifice themselves for some ideological objective – those types of individuals are not going to spend a lot of time thinking about this court case,” Blazakis said. “But there are other kinds of bad actors who are less steeped in the religious ideological milieu of Isis who could be deterred.”

Trial testimony resumes next week.

The Associated Press contributed to this report

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Hungary

Hungary: where editors tell reporters to disregard facts before their eyes

With elections imminent, some say independent media is in a weaker state than in communist 1980s

An election poster of the Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán, (right) next to one for opposition leader Péter Márki-Zay. Photograph: Attila Kisbenedek/AFP/Getty Images

Jennifer Rankin in Brussels and Flora Garamvolgyi in Budapest
Sat 2 Apr 2022 03.00 EDTLast modified on Sat 2 Apr 2022 03.02 EDT

On Hungary's national day last month Viktor Orbán accused the opposition of seeking to drag the country into Russia's war on Ukraine.

The Hungarian prime minister's highly questionable claim was the centrepiece of a 30-minute speech to supporters that was broadcast on the state TV channel M1 nine times in 24 hours. For Orbán, it was perfect

coverage, as he seeks a fourth straight term in the country's most closely fought election in years, on 3 April. The main opposition leader, Péter Márki-Zay, has also been on state TV: he got five minutes.

Orbán's patriotic message was amplified by gushing tributes on government-friendly media. "Anyone who saw or heard Orbán's annual assessment speech, saw a successful head of government at the height of his power … in which lightness and humour were as just present as the deep and highly complex web of a statesmen's thoughts," said the pro-government website PestiSrácok. Over on TV2, one of the main commercial channels, an evening news anchor declared: "I am going to support Viktor Orbán on 3 April."

By contrast, it was hard to find coverage of this week's press conference by Márki-Zay at a Habsburg estate reportedly owned by the prime minister's father, Győző Orbán. Márki-Záy hammered away at one of his main themes: corruption. Pro-government news sites, such as Origo and Magyar Nemzet, did not mention the speech, nor did Hungary's main news agency, MTI. The last-discovered reference the agency made to the Hatvanpuszta estate, alleged to have been subject to a lavish renovation, was more than 20 years ago.

Welcome to the media in Hungary, where NGOs are blacklisted, critical stories are binned and senior editors instruct journalists to disregard the facts before their eyes. "We have reached a situation where our position is now much much worse than it was back in the 1980s when Hungary was a communist country," said one person with decades of experience of Hungarian state media, recalling the days when the central European country was described as "the happiest barracks" in the eastern bloc, for its relative freedom.

"The situation back then in terms of censorship and state interference in public service journalism is nowhere near, nowhere near, the situation right now," the person told the Guardian.

People familiar with MTI, a source of news for other media, say there is a blacklist of organisations that cannot be reported on, including Amnesty

International and Human Rights Watch. Any attempt to write about their reports "is work done for the dustbin", said a second source. And while there is no ban on reporting the opposition, "the coverage is profoundly lopsided in the sense that the coverage given to pro-government parties and politicians is disproportionately wider in range and scope", one person said. "I would go as far as saying that the distribution is nine to one in the government's favour."

While these comments refer to the news agency, the rules are said to be identical across Hungary's public service broadcasting organisation, MTVA, which houses state TV, radio and the news agency.

One senior MTI editor was said to have instructed journalists that international news agencies, such as Reuters and Associated Press, could not be trusted and should only be used for basic facts, not the wider context of their articles. Another senior MTVA editor, Balázs Bende, told staff after Joe Biden's victory not to refer to him as US president-elect. "I've marked it with asterisks AGAIN that he is not president-elect, and he has not won until there is an official result," Bende wrote in an internal mail, a copy of which has been seen by the Guardian. "And I don't care if everyone is OK with this or not." In another email sent more than a week after Biden's victory was confirmed, Bende quoted Donald Trump to his staff: "He only won in the eyes of the FAKE NEWS MEDIA."

Instructions are not always needed. Senior editors are on message with the government line, an approach that worked, until Russia invaded Ukraine, forcing the traditionally pro-Kremlin Orbán government to condemn the war and side with the EU on sanctions. The script had changed, but nobody seemed to had told the state news agency, which described the invasion as a "Russian military operation" – echoing the Kremlin's phrasing – for the first five days of the war.

M1's Russia-friendly attitude reflected the editors' personal agenda and confusion over how to frame the war, rather than any government order, according to three sources close to state TV. Another person familiar with MTVA said they did not believe the pro-Russia stance was intentional, but reflected the exodus of professional journalists at the top. "It's not political,

it's unprofessional. The whole thing has been so messed up that there are no clear professional criteria."

Pro-government media and numerous acolytes on Facebook have attacked the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, especially after he told Orbán to choose a side in Russia's war on his country. Hungarian journalists joke bleakly that Zelenskiy is the new Soros, a reference to the Hungarian-born investor and philanthropist George Soros, who has been the main target of an antisemitic smear campaign by the Hungarian government and its supporters.

Magyar Nemzet published an article stating that Márki-Zay's staff had contacted Zelenskiy. Ukraine's embassy in Budapest accused the paper of "anti-Ukrainian scaremongering".

Earlier this week, a complaint was filed to the European Commission alleging that Russian war propaganda has been "continuously disseminated" by Hungarian public media. The complaint from the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union and the Political Capital institute accuses Hungarian authorities of failing to place sanctions on public service media "when it presents disinformation as truth".

The war may be recent, but the erosion of Hungary's independent media has been unfolding since Orbán was elected again in 2010. His victory was soon followed by a media law that asserted government control over the main media regulator. In later years, independent newspapers and websites went bankrupt or were taken over by government-friendly buyers, squeezed, in part, by state advertising heavily tilted towards pro-government outlets.

Meanwhile, Hungary's small cadre of independent media outlets have had their journalists targeted by Pegasus spyware. By 2021 the Council of Europe's commissioner for human rights concluded: "The combined effects of a politically controlled media regulatory authority and distortionary state intervention in the media market have eroded media pluralism and freedom of expression in Hungary."

While Hungary tumbled down international press freedom rankings, EU authorities were accused of standing by. More than a decade after the

country dismantled its independent media regulator, the European Commission promised a media freedom act to protect independence and pluralism across the EU.

For Hungary's opposition, slightly behind in the polls, it is too late to level the playing field. People familiar with Hungarian media do not expect any change if the current government remains in power: "The light we saw at the end of the tunnel in the late 80s is now behind us."

Responding to the main points in this report, a government spokesperson said Hungary recognised and protected the freedom and diversity of the press. Media legislation, the statement said, prevented the emergence of information monopolies and ensured pluralism.

"“The government isn't an authority directing the public service media. If you look at the Hungarian press, if you look at Hungarian radio and television, if you look at social media, you'll see that there are very many different opinions, a wide-ranging palette. This is very different from the media in western societies. On the whole around 50% of the Hungarian media is Christian democrat, traditionalist and conservative, while the other 50% is progressive, liberal, left-wing and so on. This is what we call pluralistic media," said the spokesperson.

MTVA did not respond to requests for comment about the allegations, including those concerning staff members named in this report.

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Australian immigration and asylum

More refugees released from detention ahead of Australian election

Coalition releases detainees as it prepares to face independents calling for more humane treatment of refugees, advocates suggest

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At least 18 refugees were released late Friday from Melbourne's Park hotel and detention centres in Melbourne (pictured), Brisbane and Sydney. Photograph: Daniel Pockett/AAP

Calla Wahlquist
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Sat 2 Apr 2022 03.22 EDTLast modified on Sat 2 Apr 2022 03.28 EDT

Refugee advocates have celebrated the release of at least 18 people from onshore detention centres in Australia, but say the secrecy and lack of notice

around their release is a final piece of cruelty from the Australian government.

They have also called for the release of the 33 people who remain in detention.

Ten refugees from the Park hotel in Melbourne received less than an hour's notice to pack their bags before their release late on Friday. Other refugees were released from the Melbourne Immigration Transit Accommodation, Brisbane Immigration Transit Authority and Villawood Immigration Transit Accommodation in Sydney.

The Department of Home Affairs made no announcement about their release and would not confirm numbers when asked by Guardian Australia on Saturday.

It was the second time in three weeks that the department had released refugees from detention late on a Friday, after 13 people were released last month.

The department said some refugees would be issued with bridging visas to allow them to reside in the community while awaiting departure to another country.

They would not be allowed to settle in Australia, the department said.

Some of those released are on track to leave for the US or Canada. Others are expected to go to New Zealand, but have not received confirmation. They are from four different countries – Iran, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sudan – and represented by seven different lawyers.

There was no common thread between the cases, said Jana Favero from the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, which made it even more difficult for the 30-odd people left behind.

"The only consistency is inconsistency," she said. "There's no common thread, which just adds to the cruelty and impacts the mental health of those

left behind. There's no rhyme or reason and believe me we have tried to find it."

All of those released had been in detention for eight to nine years, in both offshore and onshore detention.

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Thanush Selvarasa, a human rights activist and refugee who was detained on Manus Island and in Melbourne before being released last January, said while their long-awaited release was welcome, after nine years the refugees were "destroyed mentally and physically".

"We need time to recover our lives and without a permanent protection visa we cannot recover our lives," he said.

"Thanks for all those people who are continually working for freedom. The people in detention should be released and detention should be ended. You cannot imagine being held for no reason."

Favero said the decision to release people late on a Friday night made it difficult for refugee services to provide immediate support to those now in the community, and mental health support to those who remained behind.

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Photograph: Tim Robberts/Stone RF

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Favero said those who remained in detention were expected to be released to await transfer to another country over the coming months – but there had been no confirmation of that.

She suggested the government was keen to release people before the federal election, when it would be facing challenges in a number of seats from independents who were calling for a more humane treatment of refugees.

“It really appears that they are happy to use people seeking asylum and refugees as political pawns,” she said. “They will detain them if they think that is politically advantageous, and they will release them if they are trying to gain ground in small-L Liberal seats.”

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Headlines

- **Exclusive 500 ghost flights from UK a month**
- **Air pollution Home wood burning in UK causes £1bn of health costs a year, report says**
- **Housing market UK house prices grow at fastest rate for 17 years**
- **GDP Covid spending fuelled faster growth in UK economy in late 2021, ONS says**

Airline emissions

Ghost flights from UK running at 500 a month, data reveals

Exclusive: MPs criticise ‘climate-degrading’ and ‘nefarious’ practice of flying near-empty planes

Ghost flights are defined as those with no passengers, or less than 10% of passenger capacity. Photograph: urbanbuzz/Alamy

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Thu 31 Mar 2022 01.00 EDTLast modified on Fri 1 Apr 2022 11.08 EDT

Almost 500 “ghost flights” a month departed from the UK between October and December 2021, data has revealed.

The information, obtained through a freedom of information request by the Guardian, shows Heathrow, Aberdeen, Manchester, Stansted and Norwich were the top five airports for such flights during the period.

Ghost flights are defined as those with no passengers, or less than 10% of passenger capacity. The data from the Civil Aviation Authority includes only international flights leaving the UK and not arrivals, or any domestic flights.

Flying is one of the most carbon-polluting activities people can undertake, and ghost flights have angered those campaigning for action on the climate crisis. Almost 15,000 ghost flights left the UK between the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 and September 2021, the Guardian revealed in February. The German airline Lufthansa said in January it would have to fly 18,000 "unnecessary" flights by March.

Such flights have been blamed on the system at busy airports whereby airlines must normally run 80% of their flights, empty or not, to retain their landing slots. The rule was suspended during the pandemic and reintroduced at 50% in October 2021, but that did not appear to have significantly changed the number of monthly ghost flights.

Tim Johnson, of the Aviation Environment Federation, said: "UK airline average occupancy grew significantly in the last six months of 2021, although November's peak at around 70% is still significantly below the 86% achieved before the pandemic. But this hasn't altered the number of ultra-low occupancy flights in our skies each month.

"If changing market fortunes can't solve this problem then the government must act to do so," he said. "Its recent claim earlier that aviation can be net zero by 2050 while accommodating a 70% increase in passenger numbers (from 2018 levels) stretches belief when there are such obvious examples of inefficiency in the current system. Fixing these should be a priority."

The government regulates aviation but no data is made public on the number of ghost flights. Only the airlines know the true number, but have not provided this data when asked by the Guardian.

"The public deserves transparency," said Sarah Olney the Lib Dem MP and transport spokesperson. "They are not getting it from an industry keeping this nefarious practice hush-hush, and ministers have to share the blame for

this serious vacuum of accountability. A government review into ghost flights is long overdue."

Alex Sobel, a Labour MP and chair of the net zero all-party parliamentary group, said: "Although international travel has recovered somewhat, and there's no need to fly empty planes to hubs or for maintenance, airlines don't seem to have given up their climate-degrading practice of ghost flights."

A parliamentary petition calling for an end to such flights has been signed by 14,000 people.

The Department for Transport said: "We acted swiftly [during the pandemic] to prevent empty aircraft needing to fly to retain their slots, however some flights may operate with low passenger numbers for a whole range of reasons, including carrying key workers or vital cargo."

Airlines UK, the trade body for UK-registered airlines, said: "The [CAA] figures reflect two things – refreshed travel restrictions to combat the Omicron variant, leading to flights from destinations like Morocco and the far east bringing UK travellers home. Passenger aircraft have also been widely used as freighters during the pandemic, and even though these flights are carrying essential freight and supplies, including PPE, they would be inaccurately classed as 'ghost flights' in this analysis."

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Air pollution

Home wood burning in UK causes £1bn of health costs a year, report says

Pollution from wood burning causes half of all harm from home heating, but provides only 11% of heat, says public health group

In the UK, the health-related social costs of wood stoves is about 40 times higher than a gas boiler over a year. Photograph: Phil Holden/Alamy

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Wed 30 Mar 2022 18.01 EDT

The air pollution from wood burning in homes is responsible for more than £1bn a year in health-related damages in the UK and €10bn (£8.5bn) across the EU, according to a report.

The analysis from the European Public Health Alliance found the total costs of early deaths, illness and lost work resulting from outdoor air pollution produced by all home heating was €29bn a year.

Wood burning was the biggest single cause of these costs, accounting for 54% of the total in the UK and 40% in the EU. This is despite wood stoves producing only 11% of heat in UK homes and 14% in the EU. The report combines burning wood in stoves and on open fires: in the UK two-thirds of people use stoves.

Wood burners account for the largest share of UK health costs caused by pollution from home heating

The researchers said their cost estimates were conservative because lack of data prevented them from including the impact of indoor air pollution from heating.

Compared with transport, regulators have largely neglected heating and cooking as sources of air pollution, the EPHA said. The report found that heat pumps and solar water heaters produced no air pollution at homes using them.

“It is clearer than ever that burning biomass and fossil fuels at home is not only an environmental problem, but also a major health problem,” said Milka Sokolović, the EPHA director general. “The solution, obviously, lies in ensuring that homes are powered by clean renewables. As people are grappling with high energy prices, we must avoid quick and dirty solutions.”

Air pollution is the single biggest environmental risk to health, causing millions of early deaths a year globally. In the EU, just one of pollutants, small particles under 2.5 microns in size (PM2.5), is blamed for 300,000 deaths a year. A comprehensive global review in 2019 found that air pollution may be damaging every organ in the human body.

Recent reports have highlighted the high levels of pollution produced by wood burners. The stoves emit more particles than traffic in the UK, where only 8% of homes have them and 95% of stove owners have other sources of

heating. Wood burning stoves in urban areas are also responsible for almost half of people's exposure to the cancer-causing chemicals found in dirty air, another study concluded.

The new report was produced for EPHA by the Dutch consultancy CE Delft. The health-related social costs were derived using data from Eurostat and other sources on fuel emissions, energy use and links to disease for seven pollutants. These costs included premature death, illness, greater healthcare spending and lower productivity. The data was from 2018, the latest available.

Wood burner pollution results in annual health costs of €12bn in the EU and UK

The analysis found that for most countries – 18 out of 28 – the health-related social costs due to people heating their homes were higher than the costs due to their use of cars and other transport.

The most damaging type of heating were coal boilers, which resulted in €1,200 of damages a year and these accounted for 64% of the total costs in Poland. Wood stoves were the second most damaging, with average costs of €750 a year, causing 84% of costs in Italy. "For comparison, we roughly estimated that driving a diesel car for one year causes health-related social costs of €210," the researchers wrote.

In the UK, the health-related social costs of wood stoves is about 40 times higher than a gas boiler over a year. "Obviously, when some [fuels and appliances] are very polluting, they have a high share of the social cost estimates, but only a relatively minor share of the final energy consumption," said environmental economist Marisa Korteland at CE Delft.

The EU is set to tighten air pollution limits in 2022 and may tighten Ecodesign pollution limits for heaters. The latest Ecodesign wood stoves, which become mandatory in January for new sales in the EU and UK, emit 750 times more tiny particle pollution than a modern HGV truck, an October report showed.

Earlier in March, the UK government proposed new air quality limits for 2040 that would allow twice as much PM2.5 pollution in England as the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends as an upper limit today.

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Housing market

UK house prices grow at fastest rate for 17 years

Prices boom across all of UK, with average price up by £33,000 in 12 months to March

Thr average UK house price now stands at £265,312 Photograph: Dinendra Haria/SOPA Images/REX/Shutterstock

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Thu 31 Mar 2022 02.46 EDTLast modified on Fri 1 Apr 2022 00.26 EDT

UK house prices grew in March at the fastest rate since 2004, continuing the ascent to new record levels – with the price of an average home now a fifth higher than at the start of the coronavirus pandemic.

Prices rose by 14.3% in the year to March, the strongest pace of increase since November 2004, when the UK experienced a housing boom that

preceded the financial crisis, according to Nationwide, the UK's largest building society.

The price of an average UK home hit £265,312, more than £33,000 higher than March 2021. Price rises were evident across the country, with prices in Wales increasing by 15% over the year. House price growth accelerated in every region of England and Scotland.

Detached homes have gone up nearly £68,000 in price since the start of pandemic, a 22% rise, as people working from home sought out bigger properties, while average flat prices have increased by £24,000, or 14%.

The near-relentless rise in house prices has come despite the economic damage from the pandemic, which caused a deep slump in activity. However, government wage support schemes and savings during lockdowns have supported the housing market. Nationwide estimated that reduced spending has meant that households were on average able to save £190bn more than would have been expected before the pandemic – £6,500 a household, albeit unevenly spread.

The government also intervened with stamp duty cuts, which subsidised the housing industry and helped to keep prices rising as soon as the market unfroze.

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Economists are now trying to ascertain whether rising inflation (including unprecedented increases in energy bills from Friday, when the price cap increases) and rising interest rates to combat it will finally dent house prices.

"The housing market has retained a surprising amount of momentum given the mounting pressure on household budgets and the steady rise in borrowing costs," said Robert Gardner, Nationwide's chief economist. "A combination of robust demand and limited stock of homes on the market has kept upward pressure on prices."

However, he said he expected the market to slow in the coming months.

“The squeeze on household incomes is set to intensify, with inflation expected to rise further, perhaps reaching double digits in the quarters ahead if global energy prices remain high,” Gardner said.

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Economic growth (GDP)

Covid spending fuelled faster growth in UK economy in late 2021, ONS says

Upward revision in annual GDP growth, despite Omicron denting output over Christmas

Covid-19 regulations ended in late February 2022 in England. Photograph: WIktor Szymanowicz/NurPhoto/REX/Shutterstock

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Thu 31 Mar 2022 06.50 EDTFirst published on Thu 31 Mar 2022 04.12 EDT

The UK economy was only 0.1% below pre-pandemic levels after growing faster than previously thought at the end of 2021 because of a rush of coronavirus test-and-trace activities, the latest official data has shown.

UK economic output grew by 1.3% from October to December, compared with an initial estimate of 1%, despite the Omicron variant denting output over Christmas, the Office for National Statistics said on Thursday.

Revisions to estimated growth in 2021 and 2020 mean the economy is now thought to have ended 2021 0.1% shy of its pre-Covid-19 level, compared with a previous estimate of 0.4%. However, increased government spending has made up much of the shortfall, and growth remains well off the trend that would have been expected before the pandemic began.

The government ordered a surge of coronavirus testing and a huge programme of booster vaccine shots at the end of November as Omicron spread, in turn fuelling a large rise in state spending, which sustained economic output.

The pandemic lockdowns caused the biggest economic recession since comparable records began, followed by the fastest annual economic growth since the second world war in 2021.

The huge volatility in output has caused the UK's statisticians difficulties in measuring the economy, and the ONS has warned of larger than usual revisions. On Thursday it said the 2020 recession was slightly less severe than expected, with a decline of 9.3%, meaning the recovery through 2021 was slightly smaller, at 7.4%.

The data showed household consumption was now 1.1% below its pre-coronavirus level, after a downward revision that comes as consumers face rising prices of energy and basic goods that have prompted a cost of living crisis.

Paul Dales, chief UK economist at Capital Economics, a consultancy, said the spending revision suggested the squeeze on real incomes was starting to bite, although the decrease in the saving rate was providing a cushion.

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“The 0.1% quarter-on-quarter fall in real household disposable incomes was smaller than we had expected. But it was the third decline in as many quarters and the big increases in prices that lie ahead means further falls are on their way,” he said.

Samuel Tombs, chief UK economist at Pantheon Macroeconomics, another consultancy, highlighted that output excluding government spending remained 2.9% short of the pre-pandemic high.

“Exports were a hefty 15.7% below their 2019 fourth quarter level – the worst performance in the G7, by some distance – greatly exceeding the 6.4% shortfall in imports,” he said. “Exports have consistently underperformed relative to other advanced economies since the first quarter of 2021, suggesting that Brexit is largely to blame.”

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2022.03.31 - Spotlight

- **‘Some people are freaked out’ How Laetitia Ky tackles abortion, sexism and race with her extraordinary hair**
- **The long read How south London became a talent factory for Black British footballers**
- **‘A lot of stars are freaks or introverts’ Jim Kerr on Live Aid, ex-wives and four decades of Simple Minds**
- **‘Our traditions have been criminalised’ The Arctic artists bringing protest to the Venice Biennale**

Advertisement

Interview

‘Some people are freaked out’: how Laetitia Ky tackles abortion, sexism and race with her extraordinary hair

Nesrine Malik

‘Appreciating my hair let me appreciate other things that made me black’ … Ky. Photograph: Laetitia Ky

From vacuum cleaners to menstruation, the Ivory Coast artist and activist creates incredible sculptures with her hair to tackle taboos. She talks about how learning to love her natural hair taught her to love being a black woman – and western criticism of her work

Thu 31 Mar 2022 01.00 EDTLast modified on Thu 31 Mar 2022 04.53 EDT

Laetitia Ky makes sculptures out of hair, although I’m not sure the word “sculpture” accurately conveys just how dynamic her art is. Her pieces are moments, scenes, statements, emotions, rendered in black afro textured hair. Ky is central to the art. Her sculptures can’t be displayed on a wall or a table. They can’t be bought or taken on tour. Every piece is on her head, extending high up into the space above and around her, a growth of coils and curls that she twists into shapes that seem unfathomable.

There are no gimmicks, technological cheats or shortcuts. Ivory Coast-born Ky, 25, doesn’t even create the sculpture on a flat surface or stand and then attach them to her head. She links hair extensions directly to her own natural fro and then, using a mirror, proceeds to mould both into shapes. If what she wants to build is particularly complicated, she uses wires and glue. This is even more remarkable considering the fact that her pieces range from the bucolic, to the domestic and the political. There are sculptures of household chores, where Ky’s hair extends into a vacuum cleaner she then grips to clean with; others where Ky is the body of an alligator, crawling out of a swamp, her hair the alligator’s head. There are more shocking ones, where Ky’s hair is a womb – on each side, instead of ovaries, there are two middle fingers – or a vagina with period blood pouring from it.

On a video call from her home town of Abidjn, Ky speaks slowly and deliberately, trying to pick the right word in English. Her hair falls long around her shoulders in twists. She describes in her book Love and Justice: A Journey of Empowerment, Activism and Embracing Black Beauty the long path she took to embrace her natural look. Finally accepting her hair

was the start of her accepting many other things she had grown up to believe she had to change – her skin colour, her weight, her politics.

“Appreciating my hair let me appreciate other things that made me black,” she says. “Like my skin. I’m very dark-skinned and the beautiful Ivorian woman is supposed to be light-skinned. When I started to love my hair, I started to love my skin, and I started to love the fact that I was black. And when I started to love the fact that I was black, it helped me to love the fact that I was a woman. Loving one thing led me to love another thing.”

Through her art and activism – she studied business administration at university – Ky has found international acclaim, with almost half a million followers on Instagram and a social media contract with Elite Models under her partnership with TikTok. She has also moved into acting, appearing in Philippe Lacôte’s Night of the Kings, with another film role in the works.

‘When you start to believe you’re valuable, you don’t accept injustice any more’ … Ky. Photograph: Laetitia Ky

But Ky didn’t always have the body confidence that has empowered her work. She started school much earlier than her peers. “I was three years younger than the [next] youngest person. When you’re young, you try to adapt to be at the level of others. It was hard when your school friends

already had their periods and you were just a child." They had "all the curves", she says, while she was "just a slender child". She was also a lot darker than her peers. "A lot of them were bleached. So not only am I dark-skinned and the standard is to be light-skinned. But also I am skinny, so I have nothing. I think maybe I was nine when my body image really started to go down."

She began to binge eat and gained weight, too much as far as a certain boy she had a crush on was concerned. One day in class, he told her that she had a fat stomach. The class laughed. She was humiliated. It was "like a scene from a movie", she says, and it sent her spiralling in the other direction. "I'm very extreme in everything I feel, everything I want. This was a shock. It shifted my mind in a couple of seconds." Anorexia came at 13, then bulimia.

"I was just stuck," she says, unable to find a way out of her illness. It was easy for her to hide it, even though her mother noticed she was losing weight. "I would always wear baggy clothes so she would not see the real deal. All my life revolved around food. I was scared of it. If there was a social thing, I was thinking: 'Oh my God, I will have to eat something so that people don't find me weird.'" Then she would start to plan: "Will I be able to go to the bathroom? Will I be able to throw up without people knowing? It was crazy." Her mother caught her changing one day, and saw Ky's emaciated body. Her distress was what Ky needed to find a way out, to spare her mother more pain.

This description is such a far cry from the Ky in her sculptures, and the one sitting in front of me, easy in her own skin. I ask her how she changed from the teen who hated her body.

"It definitely didn't happen overnight," she says. But where it really started, was with her hair. "I always had relaxed hair. I think I first used hair relaxer when I was five." Then she saw a picture of Beyoncé with box braids and immediately went to get the same. "It was tight, I had never felt so much pain in my head. But I was loving it. It was pretty. And the rule here is if it's not painful, then the hairstyle is not OK." The tension, combined with the fragility of her hair, already damaged by relaxers, meant that she began to lose hair at her hairline. "It was terrifying, all the front of my hair was gone.

I needed to hide it, so I did a weave, with some bangs; when I took the wig out, it was even worse."

'Can you imagine living in a country full of black women and never seeing one with natural hair?' … Ky. Photograph: Laetitia Ky

She started searching online for a solution and discovered the natural hair community in America. "I was just shocked. I was 16 and it was the first time I was seeing black women with their natural hair. Can you imagine living in a country full of black women, and I've never seen this before? I was amazed." She cut off all her hair and told herself: "I will try to come to natural and see what will happen." That decision unlocked something else. "This is where everything started."

While her hair grew she started following social media accounts promoting the black aesthetic, including one on Facebook that posted about African culture before colonisation. "One day," she says, the account featured a photo album of "African women prior to colonisation. Their hair was just [she gestures upwards from her head] ooop! It was also sculpture, decorated with beads. The shape they were able to give to their hair … I was very curious. How did they do this? I felt like I needed to experience myself how to create some shape too." She teased her hair with extensions into a high column and posted it online. It got more attention than she expected, so she

made some more shapes and posted again. “I was trying to push a little bit further every time I was posting, and the attention got bigger and bigger all the time.”

When Ky first started posting on social media, she tells me she began receiving messages from women thanking her for her work and saying it was the first time they had seen a black woman so proud that she had turned herself into art. “I started to realise that maybe what I was doing was more powerful than I thought it was,” Ky says. “If I really try to use it to share what is important for me, it can make a difference.” Initially her pieces were about gender equality rather than race, “because growing up in Ivory Coast, this did not seem as much of an issue.” She began to explore racial issues after there was international interest in this element of her art.

‘My parents never tried to make sex a taboo for me and my sister’ … Ky. Photograph: Laetitia Ky

Her ability to question sexual taboos was seeded by her family, thanks to her unusually liberal parents. They separated when Ky was young but both tried to ensure that Ky felt comfortable with her body and sexuality, despite Ky’s mother being from a very strict family. “On my first day of college,” she says, “my dad took a box of condoms and gave it to me, saying: ‘It will

happen there. Make sure you protect yourself.' It was so awkward. I wanted to hide. My parents never tried to make sex a taboo for me and my sister."

The response to her work has been unexpected, both at home and abroad. In Ivory Coast, she was surprised to discover that "some women share the same beliefs but weren't bold enough to tell it out loud". Others, she says, predictably "freaked out" when she talked or made art about abortion, for example, telling her: "I love what you create but I don't like what you say." But what really took Ky by surprise was how her work got caught up in the slipstream of a western discourse about gender identification. Her focus on the punishment of biological womanhood has attracted comments that she is excluding trans women from her feminism. Ky is upfront about how the context is unfamiliar to her. "I'm not gonna lie, I don't fully understand it. But in Ivory Coast we have things like excision, we have things like breast flattening. So when I come out there trying to express all this and someone tells me sex doesn't exist, only gender exists, I'm like: 'What are you saying? Sorry, but no.'"

She explains that her anger on this issue is about her work being critiqued by what she believes is a self-centred western issue. She also hears from western women who thank her for saying women have wombs. "Every time I talk about sex as a reason of oppression of African women, some western people get mad. And I'm always like: 'I'm sorry, maybe your experience is different but I'm not going to shut myself up to make you feel better about your convictions. Because those things are really happening where I come from. I also understand they have an experience I don't have, so maybe what they think is OK concerning their experience. I'm talking about me. If it was different for you, that's cool. I think inclusivity is a very good thing. I'm a black woman."

Ky seems broadly unshaken by any criticism, either at home or abroad. "I have learned to be very strong. I surround myself with people who agree with me." She bats away social censure constantly about her life choices, from not shaving her armpits to not wanting children or marriage, in a society where these things are non-negotiable milestones for women. "I've never felt the need to have children or to be married," she says, breezily. "Maybe it's because I've never been around a successful marriage in my

life. Of course I am interested in finding love. I want to find someone I will grow and build things with. I don't think we necessarily need to be married."

At such a young age, Ky speaks as if her work is done. Her focus now is on others. "I want to inspire other women to speak," she says. "When you start to believe you're valuable, that you're worth something, you don't accept injustice any more. You want respect. You want to be free."

Love and Justice: A Journey of Empowerment, Activism, and Embracing Black Beauty by Laetitia Ky (Princeton Architectural Press, £19.99) is published 5 April

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Ruskin Park, south London. Photograph: Richard Baker/In Pictures/Getty Images

The long read

How south London became a talent factory for Black British footballers

Ruskin Park, south London. Photograph: Richard Baker/In Pictures/Getty Images

From the playing fields of Lewisham and Bromley to the Premier League, south London's football clubs have nurtured wave after wave of stars. And these players have become proud symbols of a place reshaped by each new generation of migrants

by Aniefiok Ekpoudom

Thu 31 Mar 2022 01.00 EDT

In the beginning I remember Saturday training sessions on the rec, sprawling green fields and the rolling hill we climbed like a mountain. I remember Golas moulded around size-four feet and metal studs screwed into Umbro soles. Mesh bibs and Mitre footballs. Part-time coaches and passing drills.

More than two decades have passed. But I still remember how things were back then. How we gathered on crisp Saturday mornings, seven-year-olds cut loose on Lewisham playing greens. We were young kids pulled into a sport handed down through the local family network, a Lewisham tradition slowly becoming our own, the crossfade of football and Saturday mornings shifting into ritual. Every generation just following the last. I still remember those weekends, still see the grass, the pitches where we were baptised. I still remember Hilly Fields. I still remember south London.

Hillyfielders FC was my childhood football club. Hilly Fields was where I played my first game. Thirty acres of open grass, thick tree lining and tennis courts, a sprawling grass junction in the blue borough, with Brockley and Ladywell and Lewisham Central quietly lapping at its sea-green shores. It is wide parkland carved into residential sprawl, besieged by rows of Victorian and terraced housing. It is the jewel of a concrete town, raised 175 feet above sea level. From our Everest you can stare down towards the skyscrapers of the city skyline and see steel mountains rising from the earth, glistening along a glass-panelled shorefront.

Sometime in the late 1990s, Ron Bell, a local coach and the uncle of a boy from our estate, began running training sessions, gathering flocks of south London infants in the park. Young boys dragged into the ritual by fathers who dreamed of one day seeing the family name printed on Premier League jerseys. We found our feet on that turf, swung skinny legs at size 3 footballs, scampered across the short grass, broke in our new arena.

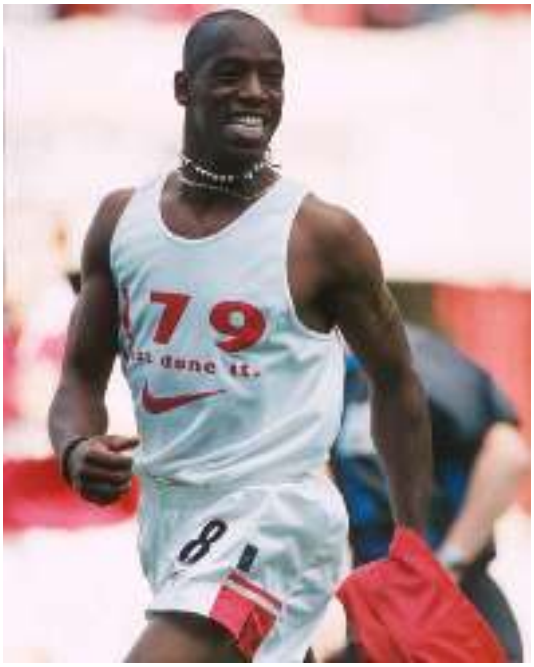
But we were not the first. There were other Black boys in other decades who came before us, kids who stumbled to their feet on the same turf. A Hilly Fields FC played these grounds through the 60s and 70s, with a few solitary Black faces speckled among the traditional team photos on club archive websites. A boy named Don Fields and another named Delroy Richards, a Vic Banton and an Albert St Clair: Black kids with tight afros, south London

footballers frozen in time. Ian Wright played these fields in the late 60s too, before Palace, before Arsenal and England, before he became Arsenal's top goal scorer, pulling his shirt over his face at Highbury and revealing "179 Just Done It" underneath. "I never lost a game playing in Hilly Fields," he once said. "Never lost a game."

Footballers are symbols, an illustration of changing social and economic dynamics, of immigration and new communities that have taken root. I was born in 1992, during a time when Lewisham and south London had been imposing their will on British football. The early 90s, a time when Arsenal's David Rocastle had come out of the Honor Oak estate in Brockley, and Wright had come with him. The Wallace brothers: Danny, Rod and Ray out of Deptford in the north of the borough, who went on to play for Southampton together, Rod winning the old first division with Leeds in the year before it became the Premier League. Chris Powell, Kevin Campbell, Michael Thomas, Paul Davis. Their collective presence was an indicator of how things were in south London, how things are, how they will be.

How a community comes to congregate in a road, a borough, a city often remains unwritten. These stories lie in family folklore, in oral histories that never reach official records. And so, while there is no definitive reason as to why Black communities wandered south into Lewisham, in the Characterisation Study published by Lewisham council in 2019, the suggestion is that Black immigrants arrived in the borough from the Caribbean throughout the 60s, searching for work in hospitals and on the railways.

James Leighton's book Rocky: The Tears and Triumphs of David Rocastle alludes to the same, adding factory work and jobs at the docks to the motivations that pulled Black immigrants south. Rocastle's mother, Linda, worked in Greenwich hospital; his father, Leslie, worked in local factories. Both were among a steady wave of Black settlers carving their presence into south London. In Leighton's book, the Honor Oak estate of the 70s is portrayed as a Caribbean enclave, reminiscent of lost home countries in sight, sound and smell. Players like Rocastle, with Grenada and Trinidad in his heritage, are a sign of that early migration.



Ian Wright celebrates his record-breaking 179th Arsenal goal in 1997. Photograph: Mark Leech/Offside/Getty Images

African immigrants began to settle en masse in south London from the 80s. My parents drifted in from Nigeria and Cameroon, as did my godparents. When I arrived at Lewisham hospital in the summer of ’92, and when I became aware of football a few years later, Ian Wright was centre stage. Fathers like mine, strangers in a new country who were fluent in football’s universal tongue but wary of a hostile time on British terraces, were drawn to Wright and Arsenal and the club’s rolling Black contingent out of south London.

And so, in those early years, I remember a borough and a home bristling with pride for its golden son. Nobody told you that he was from around here. You knew by instinct. I watched him play in my highchair. His name was painted on the walls, his essence infused into the water. This was his ground zero, and every young kid from that time has an Ian Wright story they are ready to repeat, encounters told and retold by parents like mine until the details have become concrete.

There was the school competition I won in year 1, a few weeks after Wright broke Arsenal’s goalscoring record. The reward was to take part in a presentation at a school assembly that we were told he would attend. The

assembly never happened, but he sent a fax through, and I was invited into the staff room to take a phone call with his agent.

Another time he turned up at a community day event in Catford, him standing and making smalltalk with my parents, my brother and I tangled at their knees, watching the boy from the neighbourhood speak with the west African immigrants who had made the place their new home.

The bond between south London's kids and its professional football clubs begins early. Saturday morning training sessions on Hilly Fields became rumours of a football team. We cast ballots to pick the name. I wrote "Hilly Rangers" on some paper. My brother wrote something similar. Neither of our suggestions were picked. The club was officially registered, and in 1999 Hillyfielders FC was born. We played our home games in deep green kits.

Some weekends Crystal Palace would gift the club tickets, and so I attended my first football match proper in that period, a league game at Selhurst Park. A band of Hillyfielders FC families convoyed out of Lewisham and down through Sydenham and Forest Hill in a borough-to-borough road trip. We sat in the family stand, waved claret-and-blue scarfs and felt ancient Palace chants swell in our thin throats, then went home and tried to spot ourselves on the telly.

For as long as I can recollect, south London's three major footballing institutions – Crystal Palace, Charlton and Millwall – have retained strong relations with the communities that sustain them, have spread long arms into local areas and pulled new talent from the earth, mining the ground for Black gold. The Crystal Palace youth system has become a staple in south London, an academy famed for turning out a staggering line of "touchline" Black footballers – wingers and full-backs who have come to excel in the tight spaces of football league flanks. Wilfried Zaha, Nathaniel Clyne, Wayne Routledge, Victor Moses.

At my second primary school in Bromley, where we moved in 2001, a community coach from Crystal Palace held after-school sessions for kids interested in football. My brother was invited to trial at the club, and so one evening a week we would travel with my father to the Palace training

ground in Beckenham, see the chairman walking through the car park, professional footballers disappearing into the darkness, a sharp enthusiasm rising among us, the belief that maybe this here was the real deal.

Nothing ever came of those trials, but my brother and I still speak about the sessions, tease about how we were young kids who could've gone pro *if not but.* We reshape our memories to include encounters with the players who eventually made the grade, those who would gain professional contracts and those we still see something of ourselves in.

At the turn of every generation, south London presents an icon, a player who comes to mean more, whose brilliance on the pitch and whose identity away from it shapes his relationship with those who stand and support from the sidelines. Ian Wright gave way to Rio Ferdinand, with his deep ties to Peckham and his crowning as one of the finest central defenders in British history. When Ferdinand left the game in 2015, the mantle was thrust on to Wilfried Zaha and his generation.

Among the first of this new generation to surface was the midfield prodigy John Bostock. His name floated through secondary schools, whispers on the wind from friends who still played at Palace on weekday evenings, arriving at school the next day with tales about the grace they had seen. He was an anomaly, a marvel of his time of whom greatness was expected, signed by Palace at five years old and playing for the first team at 15.

Crystal Palace v Burnley at Selhurst Park, London in June 2020. Photograph: Catherine Ivill/NMC Pool/PA Wire/PA

After Bostock's premature emergence, the remainder of our generation's finest players followed. In 2010, when Crystal Palace had been bought by a group of fans known as CPFC 2010, the club tabled a new strategy to place itself at the core of the local community. It erected billboards with the slogan "South London and Proud", the mantra flying alongside images of the club's local stars of tomorrow. Zaha was among the academy squad members selected to appear in the campaign.

Zaha was born in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, and raised in Thornton Heath, in a house so close to Selhurst Park that he remembers seeing the floodlights shimmering from the stands as a young boy. He played his first football for a local Croydon team, Whitehorse Wanderers, and his story has been intertwined with Crystal Palace since he was scouted at the age of eight. His presence in the Premier League, and his relationship with England, have begun to throw light on the nuances of identity and home for Black British people, for the generations of African and Caribbean families raised in the old traditions of a new country. In that passing of time, they have slowly been carving out an identity of their own.

Zaha was an England international until the age of 20. He played for the under-19s and the under-21s and for the full team at Wembley. Many of the friends he met through football's youth systems still turn out for the national team today. But in 2016, three years after his last performance, Zaha pledged international allegiance to his birth country, Côte d'Ivoire. In response, England manager Gareth Southgate said: "If you don't feel that internal 100% passion for England, then I'm not sure it's for me to sell that to you. It should be your desire to do it. Although I'm always willing to sit down with players, it should be them coming to us … the inherent desire of wanting to play for your country is the most important thing."

Southgate's comments hinted at a subtle misunderstanding of kids with dual heritage, an inability to recognise the shifting sense of home that can exist for those like Zaha, for those like me. For many first- and second-generation immigrants whose parents or grandparents found new homes in Britain, whose recent family lines are staggered across the continents, "the inherent desire of wanting to play for your country" can manifest uneasily amid these tensions. Our passions are divided, our identities frayed. Our upbringings were British. Our families come from countries far from here. We carry their stories in our surnames. The matter of nationality is a complex one.

In that uneasy straddling of home countries and birthplaces, for some south London has become an identity in itself, a holding space to balance the fragments of themselves that never quite fit. "I just came here from the age of four and south London is all I know really," Zaha once told an interviewer, years deep in the Premier League but still deeply local in his presence, still turning out at five-a-side pitches with friends in the summer, still driving his car over the same streets he rode his bike on to the stadium. In 2013, when still playing for England, Zaha was asked about his Ivorian roots and his subsequent life in Britain. "I think of myself as a Londoner than anything else," he said.

Wilfried Zaha at the Crystal Palace training ground in 2012. Photograph: Tom Jenkins/The Guardian

Among Zaha's generation of players who emerged from the Crystal Palace youth system, there is a scattering of Black boys bred in south London who wear varying international crests on their jerseys. Victor Moses played in the England youth system, like Zaha, and then turned out for Nigeria. Sean Scannell, of Jamaican heritage, who also featured on the billboard, pledged for Ireland, Nathaniel Clyne for England. John Bostock declared for Trinidad and Tobago. Dual heritage is encoded in south London's DNA. These footballers are emblems of settled communities, the rising total of African countries they represent are an indication of how the Black presence in south London has broadened between the first generation and mine.

The starry-eyed gaze we set upon footballers in our infancy begins to fade as we get older. We never realised back then that, among many things, the kind of success you dream of in football is not a consequence of skill alone, but of mentality and divine timing, of proper guidance and luck randomly allotted. After offers from Barcelona and a move to Tottenham at 16, Bostock drifted quietly through the leagues across Europe – a season in Turkey, three more in Belgium – his story a footnote in south London folklore, another boy who, for a brief moment, flew close to the sun. Today Bostock is 30 and plays his football for Doncaster Rovers in League One.

The lower leagues are fuelled by these players: Black footballers who never quite made the grade at the elite level and now play their football in the national and regional leagues, boys I schooled with or had heard of who now turn out for Bromley and Cray Wanderers and Welling United.

Footballers are no longer our superheroes, just men and women feeling their way through life the best way they know how. But that sense of boyish wonder is inherited by the next generation, young cousins and family friends of mine being dragged gradually into the ritual. As I moved through my 20s, I began to hear stories of chance encounters and rumours bonding them to local heroes: Rio Ferdinand saw a family friend of ours running late for school on a cold morning, stopped his car and drove him to the school gates; Ferdinand, again, spotted in a pie and mash shop on a local high street; the Wright-Phillips brothers, Shaun and Bradley, driving past my godbrother's old house in Crofton Park. Tradition reaffirming itself for the young.

I tore my hamstring when I was 24. In the second half of a national cup game, I was chasing a winger when I felt the muscle shred behind the knee. I collapsed on the bobbled pitch. It was a grade-two tear, and I walked with crutches for weeks. My season was abruptly ended. I broke with my Saturday routine for the first time since I was 11.

Weekends that for so long had meant crumbling dressing rooms and faded kits at sports grounds across south London and north Kent were now open. I filled the void with a friend's spare Charlton tickets and sat in the East Stand at The Valley for four, five, six games. Travelled away to Watford and to Millwall. Caught the team when they were quietly excited about a new generation of local players making their way into the first team: Ademola Lookman, raised in Peckham by Nigerian immigrants, and Joe Gomez from Catford, son of a Gambian father and an English mother.

South Londoners Joe Gomez (left), playing for Liverpool, and Ademola Lookman, playing for Everton. Photograph: Everton FC/Getty Images

Lookman is now at Everton and Gomez at Liverpool. They are part of a golden south London generation that in the years following my brief stay on the East Stand has gathered mass adulation across the British media, a generation that has drawn comparisons with the French boys from the banlieues who won the World Cup in 2018. With Jadon Sancho and Reiss Nelson, who grew up together on the Aylesbury estate, not far from where Ryan Bertrand followed Rio Ferdinand out of the Friary estate in Peckham, with Aaron Wan-Bissaka following a long line of Crystal Palace touchline players, with Callum Hudson-Odoi and Jonathan Panzo, with the Sessegnon siblings and the Chalobah brothers, the rest of the country has become wise to a footballing legacy that has been at work for five decades. And with a European Championship and World Cup on the horizon, they wait in hope.

Hillyfielders FC still stands. The club is 22 years old. They moved grounds a few years back, down Brockley Road to Honor Oak Park, and now field 17 teams across local leagues. Arsenal striker Eddie Nketiah had his start with the club, some 40 years after Ian Wright charged up and down on the old home ground. Like many boys from across south London, Nketiah idolised Wright as a child. The two are friends now. “Growing up in similar areas, we can relate to each other,” Nketiah explained in an interview a few years ago.

In another he said of Wright: “Whenever I need to speak to somebody, he’s always there and available.”

That sense of subtle affiliation to them both has led me to keep track of his career, and now whenever the name “Nketiah” flashes across the screen I’m drawn to memories of the gaping greens and Saturday sessions on Hilly Fields. I dig out my laminated Hillyfielders membership card, which still hangs in my mum’s kitchen and reads “Member 008”, and wrestle with the thought that Nketiah and the club share the same birth year: 1999.

I think about how Nketiah, like so many others, is the sum of community parts: coaches and part-time staff, immigrant parents and professional footballers, pulling and turning in south London for generations, paving the road Eddie would walk from Lewisham to the Premier League.

I do not watch Nketiah in the same way I watched Bostock or Scannell or Zaha – I don’t demand or expect a Premier League legend from his playing career. I know that his time in the game will be determined by the same forces that met those who came before him, conditions of luck and divine timing and good guidance. But he has started well. He is the England under-21s all-time record goalscorer (edging out Alan Shearer and Francis Jeffers), with 14 goals to his name.

A few weeks before Nketiah claimed the record, the Ghanaian national team manager, CK Akonnor, told a local radio station that the Ghanaian football association had reached out to Eddie’s parents in an attempt to tease his national team loyalties back towards home. When asked about his Ghanaian heritage, Nketiah said: “I’m very proud, it’s in me, it’s who I am and it’s helped me to be the person I am today.” But he has reportedly turned down an invitation to play for the side. The matter of nationality remains complex.

Nketiah is still in touch with his old club, and sends back videos at the start of every season wishing the kids good luck for the games ahead. For many, it will likely be their first encounters with a professional footballer, like mine with Ian Wright. And so, for a new generation, the cycle begins anew.

I can trace the lines now, joining the dots between what happens out there on the giant stadium stages of the Premier League and the plastic posts fastened into grass playing fields in south London, and I realise that those early Saturday mornings on the rec were always about more than ourselves, more than we could see, that the greater was somehow at work. By many hands, a man is forged. The lone hero is a myth. We are all threads of something or someone else.

This is an edited essay taken from A New Formation: How Black Footballers Shaped the Modern Game, edited by Calum Jacobs and published by Merky books on 21 April. Order it from guardianbookshop.co.uk

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Advertisement

Interview

‘A lot of stars are freaks or introverts’: Jim Kerr on Live Aid, ex-wives and four decades of Simple Minds

Dave Simpson

Jim Kerr … ‘We’re not like punch-drunk boxers, just doing this because we don’t know what else to do.’ Photograph: Dean Chalkley

Two years after Covid cancelled his world tour, the singer is back on the road. He talks about his journey from a Glasgow tower block, life with Chrissie Hynde and Patsy Kensit, and the tough times of the early 2000s

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Two years ago, Jim Kerr experienced the mother of celebrity comedowns. His band Simple Minds were in Copenhagen, 10 dates into a world tour, when all the remaining shows were cancelled because of Covid. Kerr returned to Glasgow and supermarkets lined with empty shelves. “It was like the first time I’d gone to East Germany in 1978,” he chuckles. “All that was left were cabbages and broccoli. I reached for the last cabbage and a woman burst in front of me and grabbed it. Two nights before, I’d been a rock star. I thought: ‘What happened to my life?’”

In fairness, that’s a question he could have asked many times since 1977, when he began his journey to stardom from a tower block in Glasgow’s Toryglen. Kerr and his old pal Bono virtually wrote the job description for “stadium rock god”, but Kerr was the last person you’d have expected to become one. In his teens, no one knew people in bands and he felt “you had more chance of becoming an astronaut”. He was painfully introverted and spoke with a stammer.

Simple Minds' first gig in Glasgow, 1978. Photograph: Laurie Evans

"Having met Peter Gabriel and all of these people that are 10 times more successful than I've been," Kerr reflects, "quite a lot of them are freaks or introverts. I was never bullied, because my dad got me a set of boxing gloves, but outside of my circle I would never speak. When you're quiet, you notice things that other people maybe aren't noticing. I had my own dialogue going on in my head."

In January, Simple Minds released the single Act of Love, written in 1978 but never recorded because it was drowned out by so much other music. "It was the first song where I thought Simple Minds had a chance," Kerr remembers, describing how the then 18-year old guitarist Charlie Burchill came up with the riff and he thought: "Fucking hell! We've got a shot!"

Kerr in Berlin in 1980. Photograph: Ronnie Gurr

Today, the 62-year old Kerr is video-calling from a holiday home in France, grabbing a short break prior to the rescheduled 40 Years of Hits tour. His eyes sparkle with the enthusiasm that took him from Toryglen to the world. As he puts it: “That sense of wonder is still in what we do.”

> Punk had left remnants. People were starting their own magazines or conjuring up the money to make a movie

The son of an Irish builder’s labourer and a factory machinist, Kerr first had his horizons broadened when the family moved from the tenements of the Gorbals to that 11th-floor flat in Toryglen, and he rejects the popular view of high-rise living as a living hell. “It had central heating and elevators,” he says. “Heroin hadn’t turned up yet. There were jobs. It was the modern world.” The building’s older teens would return suntanned from places such as Jaipur or Morocco, clutching Van Der Graaf Generator albums or The Tibetan Book of the Dead. “I am being poetic here, but it seemed the whole world was out there.”

He was working as a butcher’s boy when David Bowie played a Ziggy Stardust-era gig in Glasgow. Kerr missed that after injuring himself standing on a rusty nail, but he did see Foxtrot-era Genesis, Roxy Music and Lou

Reed. The pivotal incident came with the onset of punk. He and Burchill hitchhiked to London to try to see the Sex Pistols, but a truck driver said he was going to Paris, and would they like to go there instead? "We knew Patti Smith was playing in Paris, and in those days you could get a temporary passport," says Kerr. "We'd read Jack Kerouac and we were On the Road." They missed the gig, but ended up spending a month hitching through France, Belgium and Holland. As he puts it: "It felt like you could stick out your thumb and find emancipation."

> Five minutes before we're on at Live Aid and where's my father? 'Oh, I was with Bob Dylan and he's steaming!'

After four albums of starkly entrancing dancefloor-friendly post-punk, 1982's Promised You a Miracle gave Simple Minds their first hit. Kerr sang "Everything is possible", and the rest of their sublime fifth album New Gold Dream radiated youthful possibility against a background of mass unemployment and the Falklands war.

Was there so little optimism that he had to conjure up his own? "I'm not entirely sure where it came from," Kerr says, "but I know from meeting contemporaries in other cities like [Echo and the Bunnymen's] Ian McCulloch or [Associates singer] Billy Mackenzie, we all felt the same. Punk had left remnants. People were starting their own magazines or somehow conjuring up the money to make a movie or a documentary. Suddenly, things were regional, whether it was Tony Wilson's Factory Records in Manchester or the Sheffield bands once they got their hands on synthesisers. In journalism, [NME's] Paul Morley would review the new Dollar single and mention a Yukio Mishima novel. You could see the ingredients of Simple Minds – Magazine and Ultravox – but people like Boy George or Morrissey were truly unique. There was this idea of self-invention, the potency of imagination."

Kerr hadn't left the tower block long when Don't You (Forget About Me) rocketed to the top of the US charts, after featuring in John Hughes's 1985 film The Breakfast Club. Famously, the band didn't want to record it for the film, only relenting because songwriter Keith Forsey came up to see them.

They took him to the pub and really liked him. But suddenly Simple Minds were what he calls “definitely one of the bands of our generation”. They had three consecutive UK No 1 albums between 1984 and 1989. Kerr is modest – but not falsely modest. “Who would have thought that MTV would come along and put us in every living room in the world?”

Kerr on stage at Live Aid. Photograph: Paul Natkin/Getty

Live Aid, Bob Geldof and Midge Ure’s 1985 concert for Ethiopian famine relief, broadcast from stadiums in the UK and US, showcased what he calls “the side of me that I haven’t mentioned, that thinks: ‘The biggest event since the moon landing. We’re just gonna fucking blow people away.’ We were young and No 1 in America and fancied our chances.”

He can’t describe what it actually feels like to sing for 1.9 billion people (90,000 of them in Philadelphia’s JFK stadium, where Simple Minds were on the bill for the US event) because the day passed in a blur. His vivid memory is of his father, who had flown in from Glasgow. “He’d stopped drinking by then – when I was young, he drank enough! – but was still the sort of guy that would meet a taxi driver and become best mates. Anyway, five minutes before we’re on – no mobile phones back then – where’s my fucking father? He turned up and said: ‘Oh, I was with Dylan.’ I’m thinking: ‘Is that one of the roadies?’ He goes: ‘Fucking *Dylan*!’ It turned out he’d

wandered off and got talking to Bob Dylan about folk music but he went: ‘Great fella, but I’m a bit worried because he’s going onstage with Keith Richards later and the pair of them are steaming.’” He beams at the memory of his “best pal”. Before his father died aged 83 in 2019, Kerr returned to Glasgow to share every day of his final 10 months .

Kerr with second wife Patsy Kensit in 1995. Photograph: Richard Young/Shutterstock

However, Kerr was unprepared for the tabloid scrutiny that accompanied his two marriages, to the Pretenders’ Chrissie Hynde and the actor Patsy Kensit. Legend has it he met both of them in hotel lifts, but he points out that with Hynde (to whom he was married between 1984 and 1990) he was *waiting* for the lift. “I was surrounded by fans, trying not to make eye contact. I kept hearing this voice and it was Chrissie, taking the piss. Her dad has Scottish roots, we got chatting and – what can I say? – Cupid intervened.”

Kerr and Kensit – married from 1992 to 1996 – met in Spain, where she was filming. “I met her in the elevator and she said: ‘I’m utterly bored here.’ I said: ‘Why not come out with us?’” But he loathed the accompanying lifestyle of being in Hello! magazine or being invited to one of Michael Winner’s dinners with guests such as Arnold Schwarzenegger. “She said:

‘Don’t you understand? This is my job!’ I’m not being disparaging to her, but none of that appealed to me whatsoever.”

In the late 80s and 90s, with pop fired up by Live Aid, Kerr opted for activism as Simple Minds toured for Amnesty International and performed at the two giant concerts for Nelson Mandela, one marking his 70th birthday, the other celebrating the ANC leader’s release from prison. It wasn’t a big stretch: Kerr’s family were socialists (“Everyone in Scotland voted Labour”), and he had been “profoundly affected” by seeing ancient slavery ports on holiday in Senegal.

“The [Thatcher] government was dragging its feet over apartheid and calling Mandela a terrorist,” he says. “I wanted to use my platform for more than selling records or merchandise.” He admits to “conflicted” feelings over whether rock stars should try to heal the world until Mandela gathered all the artists and told them: “This is a brilliant thing. When there was no voice allowed, the voice of the artist gave us the oxygen we needed.” Kerr accepts that “singers, writers, journalists and film-makers” helped end apartheid, but isn’t self-congratulatory, saying: “Others died or went to prison. We just turned up for 15 minutes.”

Pop subsequently turned away from huge-scale activism, and Kerr notes: “People get wary of rock stars lecturing them.” Nevertheless, he mentions being “in conversations” about a benefit concert – announced after we speak – for Ukraine.

On tour, Simple Minds will perform 1980’s I Travel, an uncannily current-sounding song about strife in central Europe. “We were cold war kids,” he says. “Everywhere we toured, it seemed like Europe was on fire, whether it was bombs in Bologna train station or a synagogue in Paris the day after we left, or the Baader-Meinhof gang, or the IRA. I sang ‘Tragedies, luxuries, statues, parks and galleries’ because all that stuff was going on in these otherwise cultural centres. So I suppose that song has found its time again.”

The same could be said for Simple Minds. After a rocky period in the early 2000s when Kerr remembers “driving in a minibus past stadiums we used to

sell out en route to a club that's not sold out", they decided not to "go around like punch-drunk boxers, just doing it because we don't know what else to do", and instead revitalised the band with a postmodern reboot. Their last album, 2018's Walk Between Worlds, reached No 4 in the UK. Kerr spent the pandemic working on a memoir and enough songs for a double album. The gigs are getting bigger, too: Simple Minds are back in arenas, which Kerr finds "intimate – not too cavernous".

Today's seven-piece touring lineup includes three women. "And no mullets," Kerr says, laughing, although he points out that Simple Minds had a female vocalist, Robin Clark, in the 80s. "But if you look around most organisations now there are women, and you don't get more macho than rock bands. We never thought: 'Which boxes do we tick?', but everyone needs to strap on new engines."

When not on global jaunts, Kerr divides his time between Glasgow and Taormina, Sicily, where he built a hotel, after deciding that one day he would live in Italy during a school trip to Rimini when he was 13. Only Kerr and Burchill remain from the five-piece that played to hails of bottles in Dunfermline, or recorded their debut single Life in a Day in 1978, but Kerr feels like their great teenage adventure never stopped. "This is who we are and what we do," he says. "It's the prism through which we try to make sense of the world."

The 40 Years of Hits tour starts at Wembley Arena, London on 31 March. Simple Minds perform their album New Gold Dream in its entirety at Princes Street Gardens, Edinburgh on 13 August for Unicef and the children of Ukraine.

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Advertisement

‘Our traditions have been criminalised’ – the Arctic artists bringing protest to the Venice Biennale

‘What’s happening to the reindeer is our story as well’ … the Sámi Pavilion artist Máret Ánne Sara and her brother, Jovsset Ante Sara. Photograph: Michael Miller / OCA

They're threatened by loggers, miners, global heating and culling laws – but the Sámi are fighting back with art. Our writer meets them in the frozen tundra as they prepare for the art world's biggest global gathering

Charlotte Higgins
Thu 31 Mar 2022 01.00 EDTLast modified on Thu 31 Mar 2022 04.00 EDT

The tundra of northern Norway is a long way from the Venice Biennale. Indeed, it is a long way from anywhere, at least viewed through western eyes. To reach the gentle herd of reindeer who are now feeding under the long pale glow of an Arctic sunset, I have ridden for three and a half hours across the snowy wastes, partly in a sled and partly on the back of a snowmobile, pausing halfway at a herders' hut (no electricity, no water, but nevertheless a cosy refuge). We are somewhere off the road that links the villages of Karasjok and Kautokeino. To the north of us is Hammerfest. North of that, the Barents Sea.

Artist Máret Ánne Sara is with her husband, brother and 18-month-old, the child cheerfully bundled up and goggled against the chill and the snow's bright glare. She is telling me about the yearly passage of these, her brother's reindeer, from the tundra up to the northern coastal summer lands, 250km away: how the biggest cow will start to move when she's heavily pregnant, and the whole herd will inexorably, mysteriously make its way

north. “It’s the animals who control everything,” she says. “We just follow them and try to keep them safe.”

Her brother Jovsset Ante Sara is scattering feed as the soft-haired animals prance and jitter across the snow. That’s not a good sign: reindeer have always been able to eat lichen and moss through the Arctic winters, but the unstable climate is increasingly bringing snow that’s too deep for them to find it, as it has this year. Or, as in 2019, periods of warmth that melt the snow, so that when temperatures drop again, impenetrable layers of ice form, keeping the animals from reaching food.

The tundra is changing in other ways, too: as winters get warmer, birchwoods are spreading north by as much as 50 metres a year. “When we have birch forests, the ground changes and the lichen gets pushed out,” says Sara. “If the landscape keeps changing, they won’t have any winter food.” She looks around at the short but sturdy birches. “If you look up historical photos, there are no trees here.”

Courthouse protest … a sculpture made of 200 bloodied reindeer heads by Máret Ánne Sara. Photograph: Iris Egilsdatter

Reindeer herding is one of the traditional livelihoods for Sámi families such as the Saras. The Sámi are an Indigenous people scattered thinly through a

vast tract of northern Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia's Kola peninsula. Their presence long predates the Nordic settlers of these boreal lands, who now outnumber them. Their homeland is called Sápmi in the Sámi languages, nine of which survive, some clinging on to life with just a few hundred speakers.

For this year's Venice Biennale, the Nordic Pavilion will be renamed the Sámi Pavilion, and a long colonised people, divided by borders and living at the sharp end of climate crisis, will take their place as a nation for the first time at the art world's most prominent global gathering – a gathering that, because of its exhibitions presented in national pavilions, can feel like a kind of art Olympics, always entangled in the geopolitics of the moment.

What do reindeer on the tundra have to do with Máret Anne Sara's art for the Venice Biennale? Everything. For her, reindeer are both the subject and the material of her work; indeed, they are central to life itself. For reindeer-herding families, the animals are not mere livestock. "There's a different way of thinking and being between an Indigenous perspective and a typical western orientation," she says. "For us, the reindeer is actually a very close relative. Humans, nature and animals are interdependent and equal. So destroying any part of this is like suicide from our perspective. What's happening to the reindeer is our story as well." The director of the Sámi Museum at Karasjok, Jelena Porsanger, had earlier told me how this proximity is even embedded in the northern Sámi language. "To live" – *eallit* – has the same derivation as the noun "herd" – *eallu*.

It is not a sentimental relationship, though. While I'm on the tundra, a couple of reindeer are quietly and efficiently slaughtered, "for domestic use", says Sara; and at the herders' hut, her brother Jovsset slices chunks of dried reindeer meat as a snack. Ande Somby, a Sámi activist, lawyer and artist whom I meet in the city of Alta a few days later, tells me that between the herder and the reindeer there is a kind of contract, "that the reindeer will be given a death of dignity and everything shall be used" – bones, hide, meat, antlers.

Somby is in his 60s, of the generation of Norwegian Sámi sent away to boarding school and chastised for speaking his mother tongue. Things are different now, with Sámi parliaments in the Nordic nations giving people a

say in cultural, linguistic and educational matters. Somby is a *yoiker*: practitioner of a haunting, uncanny vocal technique in which the singer embodies, almost becomes, the subject of the *yoik*, which could be a person, a landscape, a wolf, or indeed a reindeer.

Some of Sara's most powerful art has been made as a means of protest. For years, Jovsset Ante Sara was locked in a legal battle over the government's policy of culling herds because – it was argued – of overgrazing. Sara denies that overgrazing is an issue, and anyway, she says, "it is very difficult for us to accept that argument, because the government is at the same time inviting big industries into the same area".

A long history of mineral exploitation in Sápmi now also extends to building windfarms on traditional reindeer-herding lands, which spooks the reindeer and affects their traditional migratory patterns. It is complicated: clearly, now more than ever, wind energy is needed to help replace fossil fuels. But the Sámi, as so often, find themselves paying a high price for the high-carbon lifestyles of others.

Ironic twist … Sara and the curtain of 400 skulls that has now been acquired by the National Museum of Oslo. Photograph: Máret Ánne Sara

As Jovsset's case against the forcible slaughter of reindeer rose through the courts, Sara's confrontational art accompanied it. She erected a pile of 200 bloodied, frozen reindeer heads with the Norwegian flag atop it near the courthouse in Tana. In front of the Norwegian parliament building in Oslo, she made a huge sculpture, a kind of "curtain" of 400 reindeer skulls, each with a bullet hole – a work that formed part of a greater project of documents, talks and debates she called Pile O'Sapmi.

Jovsset won every case until, at the last, he was defeated in the Supreme Court in 2017. "It showed how fragile we are, and how our rights are owned, totally, by the state," says Sara. It was what happens, she says, "when an outside worldview criminalises your traditions and capitalises nature". It is an irony, perhaps, that the new National Museum of Oslo has acquired that "curtain" of skulls and, when it opens its doors in June, this howl of protest against internal colonialism will be the first thing visitors see.

Sara tells me how, some time after the legal defeat when she was at a loss to find a way forward, she was talking to another herder, describing her disappointment and exhaustion. "All of a sudden he said, 'But now the red calf is coming. And at the first sight of the red calf, everything is forgotten.'" It was a transformational moment. What he meant was that when the new reindeer are born – "the red calves" – they bring joy and a fresh beginning. Sara's new work takes its cue from this sense of renewal but, like everything in her art, it is shot through with darkness. The losses of calves to legally protected predators such as wolverines and eagles are huge, and her work, which often teeters on the edge of the macabre, will use their mutilated bodies as material.

Pauliina Feodoroff is another artist representing Sápmi at the Venice Biennale who has a strong need to find hope in the dark. She is one of the 1,000 or so-strong Skolt Sámi community from close to the Finnish-Russian border, of whom around 300 speak the Skolt Sámi language. Feodoroff learned it in adulthood, "taking back" the tongue, like a number of her generation in their 30s and 40s. Many Skolt Sámi ancestral lands were long ago lost to the hellish, polluting nickel mines of Murmansk. But, says Feodoroff – whose background is in performance and choreography as well as politics and land guardianship – "for myself I want to focus on what is healthy and our need to be kind and gentle to ourselves and others".

‘The trees are our cathedrals, our libraries, our museums’ … artist Pauliina Feodoroff. Photograph: Michael Miller / OCA

Feodoroff is speaking on the edge of the river Näätämö – or Njâuddam in Skolt Sami – north of Finland’s Lake Inari. She offers a greeting to the “grandmother” river and suggests that I introduce myself to the landscape by lying near the riverbank in the snow for a moment – which I do, staring into the heavy white sky and listening to the intense silence, broken only by the caw of a crow and the fussing of a couple of willow tits in the birches. The animistic, nature-based spirituality of the Sámi did not entirely die with the aggressive Christianising process of the 17th century, when Sámi *noaidis*, or shamans, were tried for witchcraft.

Later that day we cross the frozen lake Inari on sleds and enter the pristine, ancient pine forests that circle it – deep woods where the trees stand at a dignified, discreet distance from each other to take in as much of the precious Arctic light as possible. “This is our cultural monument,” says Feodoroff of the forest. “It is our cathedrals, our libraries, our museums.”

She has been fighting to preserve these forests, which are threatened by logging for the pulp industry, despite their antiquity, their biodiversity and their dark green, spreading beauty. Part of her work for Venice will be a conceptual project in which she will auction the right to see views of

wilderness like this, and use the proceeds to buy and protect the land in a case of art and practical activism combining. When institutional or legal processes have ground to a halt, she says, "art is a space that can cause some kind of freedom of movement".

In the forest we sit round a campfire and listen to Feodoroff's friend, Anna Morottaja, one of the Inari Sámi, talking about her people's traditional singing style the *livđe*, an art that had virtually disappeared from her community's culture until she researched ethnomusicological collections in Berlin and elsewhere to find recordings of long-lost family members performing for the benefit of curious anthropologists. Like the *yoik*, the *livđe* can involve creating a kind of portrait of a person. Hearing an archive recording of her great-aunt's *livđe* for the first time was, then, like a personal encounter. She sings it now, in the dusk and the snow, before the campfire, and it's an unearthly thing with a rocking rhythm like a spell, but tinged with wit, telling of an energetic woman with "fire in her hemline".

A song sung in the forest seems an enchanting and simple thing, but none of this really is simple. The Sámi were long victims of racism and prejudice. Northern Sámi activist and film-maker Siljá Somby later tells me that it's still very much there. You can see plenty of hate speech directed at the Sámi on social media. The situation varies from country to country. Sweden has not signed the UN convention on Indigenous peoples, meaning the Swedish Sámi have fewer rights than those in Norway and Finland. For Venice, the Swedish side of Sápmi will be represented by painter Anders Sunna, another member of a reindeer-herding family that has been locked in legal battles for years with the state.

> We never resist, we always bend. When it comes to nature, that's the right thing to do

Even in Norway and Finland, points out Siljá Somby, the parliaments stop short of giving them what she calls "hard rights" over land or water, only "soft rights" over culture and education. And there are plenty of divisions within the Sámi community itself. Some have little time for the sharpening, over the last 50 years or so, of Sámi political consciousness, and those elected to the Norwegian Sámi parliament have included members of the

Progress party, who would see the institution itself abolished. Nor has resistance come naturally to the Sámi, who for centuries adapted themselves to circumstances.

Inari Sámi reindeer herder Osmo Seurujärvi, has, like Morottaja, immersed himself in a language and way of life that his own parents were becoming estranged from, realising that if he did not, the chain would end and his children would lose the culture for ever. “We never resist, we always bend,” he says. “When it comes to nature, that’s the right thing to do. But when it comes to social structures, it’s not always the right thing. It’s always expected that Sámi will give up and not resist. We are not a warrior nation. But we do need to have a say.”

Everything is connected: this is what the Sámi tell us. The landscape, nature, the climate, politics, culture, society, the law, art – they are all entangled. Like Indigenous peoples from other parts of the world, the Sámi are at the front line of climate crisis but also the holders of knowledge; of alternative perspectives that could usefully challenge the consumerist, capitalist structures that have proved so destructive. And, as Feodoroff points out, we all rely on the Sámi and their breathtaking, expansive landscapes in more ways than we might at first think. “The forests here are storing carbon for you guys, too,” she says. “If they cease to exist, the consequences will come to your back door.”

The Sámi Pavilion at the Venice Biennale opens on 23 April.

This article was amended to correct the spelling of Morottaja.

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OpinionCoronavirus

Charging for Covid tests in England just as infections surge? This is an act of national self-sabotage

Frances Ryan

The government is abandoning a public health tool that has undoubtedly saved many lives in the pandemic

Illustration by Bill Bragg

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They call it April Fools' Day for a reason. From tomorrow, 1 April, Boris Johnson's government will end the provision of free lateral flow and PCR tests for the majority of people in England.

Ministers have announced that only a limited number of groups will now have access without having to pay. That includes symptomatic hospital patients when it is required for their care, and people living or working in "high-risk settings" such as care homes and prisons. Free asymptomatic testing will remain available for care home and patient-facing staff in the NHS, but only when there is a high prevalence of the virus and it is determined that infections may spread quickly.

By ending free testing just as coronavirus infection rates soar – and a cost of living crisis leaves people without spare cash – the government is creating a perfect storm for illness. People will now be in the dark as to whether they have the virus, unless they can afford a test or choose to buy one, and could go into public spaces while infected, spreading the virus to people they would previously have protected by self-isolating.

The public health messaging is clear enough: don't worry about Covid any more, but if you insist on bothering, you can pay for a test yourself. Or as Sajid Javid, the health secretary, put it: now that free testing has ended, people with Covid symptoms should "socialise a bit less".

With the partygate scandal back on the political agenda, it may be in Johnson's best interests to pretend that coronavirus is old news, but it is in no one else's. Scientists have been all too clear on the likely consequences of ending free testing: increased infection rates, extra pressure on an already struggling NHS, more people getting long Covid, delays in detecting new variants. Also bear in mind that ministers have just axed funding for our world-leading infection tracker system.

The government claims that its testing plan will at least still protect the most vulnerable to coronavirus – but it appears that the majority of clinically vulnerable people, and the people they come into contact with, will not be eligible. Some high-risk people who need to have Covid treatments, such as antivirals, will be granted free tests, but government guidelines say they are only to be used once they are ill and already showing symptoms. It's the public health equivalent of closing the stable door after the horse has bolted. This fundamentally misses what has been so valuable about large-scale testing over the past two years: it's not that high-risk people can see if they have Covid, but that those they're due to come into contact with can.

It is good news that ministers have relented and will not just test NHS and care home staff when they have symptoms, but it's concerning that asymptomatic frontline workers will be left untested outside times of vaguely defined "high prevalence". Public sector workers enduring real-term pay cuts can hardly be expected to pay for regular tests themselves, and it is negligent to tell patients they should be treated by an untested medic. Roughly a third of people who have coronavirus don't show any symptoms, and hospitals – which are by their nature frequented by sick and vulnerable people – will always be areas of high risk of infection. It is not enough for an asthmatic mum to worry about catching Covid in the shops, bus and classroom – now she has to risk it from her respiratory nurse.

The government's plan commits to testing care home staff, but there is little word on carers and personal assistants who work in the community, many of whom go into multiple disabled and older people's homes each day. Nor is there any help for unpaid carers, despite them largely living in poverty and already worried about going out and bringing back germs to their vulnerable family member. Putting the financial burden of testing on to disabled people and their families during an energy crisis, which will itself hit people with disabilities hard, is outright cruelty. In the coming weeks, vulnerable care users will be forced to choose between buying an LFT to keep well and paying energy bills to keep warm.

There is also little help in the plan for people visiting elderly or disabled relatives in care homes, except a pledge that asymptomatic testing will remain available to "a small number of care home visitors who provide personal care". Care home visitors may end up having to pay about £73 a month just to see loved ones, according to the Alzheimer's Society, or else risk walking in being potentially contagious. Ministers' infamous "protective ring" around care homes seems to have cracked once again.

From the very beginning of the pandemic, there have been voices seeking to downplay the threat of the virus to falsely suggest that protective measures are both restrictive and unnecessary. In many ways, the end of free testing is the ultimate example of this narrative. Not content with low sick pay, no mandated masks or ending the legal duty to isolate with Covid, England is about to abandon a public health tool that has undoubtedly saved many lives in the pandemic. That this is being done just as hospital admissions from Covid rise again is a national act of self-sabotage.

Some will say "we can't afford testing", but common sense says we cannot afford not to. The cost of increased hospitalisations as well as the fallout of long Covid will probably dwarf any testing costs; lateral flow tests make up a tiny fraction of the £2bn testing budget. Others will praise ditching LFTs as a sign of liberty restored, although it's unlikely that this cohort will include the clinically vulnerable. Those who want their "freedom" will need to explain what it is exactly about access to universal healthcare that is so restrictive.

Ultimately, there is a choice: embrace the low-restriction, preventive measures that enable us all to get back to normal life as safely as possible, or accept uncontrolled transmission of the virus. The path taken reflects the extent to which the government really believes that every life matters. When it comes to that particular test, they have certainly failed.

- Frances Ryan is a Guardian columnist

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OpinionArchitecture

We trash our modernist heritage on a whim: why is Britain so in thrall to the wrecking ball?

Owen Hatherley

Between destruction and conservation there must be a middle ground – perhaps a new life – for these eminent buildings

The police station in Wrexham, demolished on 1 November 2020. Photograph: Peter Halliday

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Change is what happens to cities if they are not to become lifeless monuments to themselves. A living city has to strike some sort of balance between avoiding the strangulation and depopulation that happens when you conserve everything, and the visual slurry that occurs if you let developers do what they like. That's why Britain has listing systems, ensuring that the

best of each era is saved from destruction. But this can cause some ironies – since the 1990s, scores of modernist buildings have been listed. These are often the very same buildings that the Victorian nostalgists who dominate local newspaper comment sections blame for ruining their towns.

The result has been a new tension between different notions of conservation. This is a tension that serves mainly to benefit property developers, who can make money both from new buildings, and as "saviours" of great modern buildings at the cost of destroying their original purely social purpose, as has happened in the privatisation of London's Keeling House or Sheffield's Park Hill.

Hardline modern architecture is now something of a cult. There is a mini-industry of modern architecture tat – go into the shops of the Barbican or Southbank Centre in London, the Baltic in Gateshead, the Herbert Art Gallery in Coventry or the Modernist Society's specialist corner shop in Manchester, and you can buy an armful of tea towels, badges and mugs with British modernist buildings on them, as you could with Victorian buildings at their moment of rediscovery in the 1970s and 80s. No doubt brutalism will eventually have its own Beamish-style "living museum", too – the 1974 Camden town hall annexe opposite St Pancras was recently restored as a hotel that looks far more "70s" than the original building ever did. But there's more here than just fashion: this rediscovery is also the result of a melancholic sense of lost civic purpose. In Birmingham, you can buy all kinds of merch featuring John Madin's monumental brutalist library, but the building itself has been replaced with bland, private glass office blocks.

‘John Madin’s brutalist library in Birmingham has been replaced with bland, private glass office blocks.’ Photograph: Images of Birmingham Premium/Alamy

Over the years I have spent compiling a gazetteer of modern buildings in Britain, I often found myself trying to catch up with the pace of demolition. Even between going to print and publication, some buildings were hit by the wrecking ball – Coventry Point, an aggressively sculptural tower by the unfortunate Madin; Freedom House, a bright and optimistic Festival of Britain-style design at the heart of the new town of Basildon; Wrexham police station, a dramatically cantilevered brutalist tower; and the Dorman Long tower, a unique, monumental industrial landmark in Middlesbrough. Each of these was refused listing, except for the latter, which was listed then almost immediately demolished after the personal intervention of Tees Valley mayor Ben Houchen, who convinced Nadine Dorries to de-list the building in order to make the site cheaper to develop. Ominously, this was one of the first things Dorries did as culture secretary. The government has the power to de-list, but uses it very rarely.

So what is going on here? Obviously, the answer is profit – tax incentives make it much more lucrative to demolish rather than renovate. But a lot of the time, these demolitions are justified by a peculiar know-nothing local self-hatred, alongside a perverse desire to punish modern buildings for the

demolitions that took place during the 1960s. Yet the replacements for controversial modern buildings seldom mean a restoration of the old, but much more often new modern buildings of much poorer quality and cheaper construction – witness Gateshead's pitiful Trinity Square development, on the site of the late Owen Luder's spectacular, if derelict shopping centre and Get Carter car park.

'Owen Luder's spectacular, if derelict shopping centre and Get Carter car park in Gateshead.' Photograph: Heritage Image Partnership Ltd/Alamy

There is also, as with almost everything in Britain, a mobilisation of class language to bolster vested interests. Coventry's civic fathers, trying their best to flog their now extensively protected city centre to developers, lament poshos coming up there and trying to list their horrible buildings. The opposition from many quarters to the proposed demolition of the megastructural town centre in Cumbernauld new town in North Lanarkshire is seen by some as the glamorisation of an architectural failure by people who don't have to live with the buildings in question.

This is a red herring. Opinion in most towns is starkly divided on modern architecture, but practically everywhere has a band of fiercely local, enthusiastic campaigners for the concrete bus station, the modernist mosaic or the high-rise housing estate. Sometimes, though, it's really true that the

building that enthusiasts are praising can look like it's beyond help. Cumbernauld has some well-looked-after and superb modernist housing, churches and schools, but the town centre, once celebrated and emulated from Toronto to Tokyo, is undoubtedly sad and stricken. That doesn't mean the solution is to replace it with a miserable "hub" that would be unworthy of an out-of-town retail park, let alone as the central building for an entire town.

What we need is a more serious conversation about ownership and preservation. The precincts of central Coventry, Freedom House in Basildon, or Cumbernauld town centre were built as multifunctional civic spaces and were owned by the local authority – sell-offs in the 1980s meant that they were run solely as malls, a function for which they were ill-suited. Ironically, North Lanarkshire is buying Cumbernauld town centre – but, as things stand, solely so they can demolish it. However, the purchase offers a chance to restore the building to something like its original civic purpose. Here, the problem is not just one of architectural fashion, but also a lack of social imagination.

The listing system is a blunt instrument, and Cumbernauld town centre is far too altered to be listable. But it could benefit immensely from the sort of socially imaginative reinvention happening to the very similar Sewoon Sangga megastructure in Seoul, where, as in Cumbernauld, the local authority took control of a controversial and dilapidated multifunctional shopping centre, housing block and factory complex, and had the city architect's department add new spaces to it, from an urban farm on the roof to "maker" workshops on the walkways. They also gently restored the little that was left of the original 1960s building.

Much of the best work in contemporary architecture comes from working critically with the civic architecture of the mid-20th century, rather than demolishing it or fetishising it. So, for instance, rather than demolishing towers like College Bank flats in Rochdale, we could be both renovating and extending badly needed public housing, as at the Grand Parc in Bordeaux. We could have both change and conservation, if only we'd move on from the childish game where one side shouts "icon!" and the other "eyesore!"

- Owen Hatherley is an author and the culture editor of Tribune. His latest book, Modern Buildings in Britain, is published on 7 April

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OpinionCoronavirus

Why is the UK seeing near-record Covid cases? We still believe the three big myths about Omicron

Christina Pagel

People are desperate to return to life as normal, but the rising number of infections is a reminder that this pandemic isn't over

'The NHS is under severe pressure again due to new patients and sick staff.' Photograph: PA Images/Alamy

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We're living in two realities: one in which people have returned to living life as if Covid is over, and the other in which we are approaching record levels of infections, with an estimated 4.26m cases last week. Most of us know people who have Covid, work and education are being disrupted, and the NHS is under severe pressure again due to new patients and sick staff.

Admissions with Covid are only 2% below the first Omicron peak two months ago and still rising. While about half are currently admitted primarily for other reasons, numbers are rising in primary Covid admissions too and admissions in over-65s are now 15% higher than their January 2022 peak.

The pandemic has changed, but the idea that it is over is false. Omicron represents a major variant, taking over in the UK in a similar way to Delta last summer and Alpha last winter. The ubiquitous narrative that the pandemic is over exists because most people (including the government) now believe at least one of the three big myths of the Omicron age. We need to move past these myths to firstly anticipate the future, and secondly do something to prepare for it.

The first myth is that coronavirus is now endemic, and just another disease we have to live with. We do, unfortunately, have to live with Covid. But the word "endemic" is commonly used in epidemiology to describe a disease that does not spread out of control in the absence of public health measures – in some sense, it means a predictable disease.

This clearly does not (yet) describe Covid. Globally, we have just experienced by far the highest surge of cases of the pandemic so far with Omicron's BA.1 variant. Many countries in Europe, including the UK, are experiencing a significant second Omicron (BA.2) wave mere months after the first. Neither were predicted and they are rapidly changing our assessment of the evolution of coronavirus and the implications for protection from vaccination or previous infection. The chief medical officer, Chris Whitty, recently warned that new variant waves will come, but we don't know when or what they will be like. People have declared Covid endemic after every previous wave and there is nothing special about this latest wave – they are still wrong.

Covid will probably become endemic – over some unknown timescale - but even then, endemicity certainly does not necessarily mean mild. There is a significant global burden of ill health and death, for instance, from endemic diseases such as TB and Malaria. As it stands, trying to ignore a disease that

is still so unpredictable feels a bit like turning your back on a hungry tiger in the undergrowth.

Next, we have to debunk the myth that coronavirus is evolving to be milder, and each new variant will be milder than the last until it becomes a common cold. New variants of Covid have arisen rapidly over past two years. Each variant of concern has spawned several offshoots – like our current BA.2 wave – but most gamechanging new waves we've seen have come from variants that have evolved completely independently from each other. Omicron did not evolve from Delta and Delta did not evolve from Alpha, Beta or Gamma. There has been no progression through successive variants, and no building towards "mildness".

It is also simply not true that viruses always evolve to become milder. What drives evolution is transmission: variants that infect more people will thrive. Because most Covid transmission happens while people have no or few symptoms, severity is not a driver of evolution but instead a byproduct of whichever mutations improve transmission and how they interact with existing levels of immunity. For Alpha and Delta, this led to greater severity and for Omicron (somewhat) less severity, but this was an evolutionary accident. The next variant could easily be more severe again.

While many assume that the four other coronaviruses that cause common colds started as epidemics and then eventually became the mild colds of today, we have no idea whether this takes years, decades or centuries, or even if it is inevitable. We simply do not know much about the long-term evolution of new coronaviruses in humans.

Finally, there is the pernicious myth that we've somehow "finished" our vaccination programme, and there is no point in waiting to return to normal. The UK does have a high level of vaccination, particularly in older, more vulnerable populations, and the initial two dose rollout in adults is largely complete. Unfortunately, immunity from vaccines wanes over a matter of months – mostly against infection, but also against severe disease and death.

Boosters help, but also mean it's more a question of whether you are up to date with vaccination rather than just vaccinated. Around a third of over-12s are yet to receive their booster in the UK, and we've only just started

another booster round for people who are over 75 or clinically extremely vulnerable. Most children, meanwhile, remain entirely unvaccinated.

As the world is increasingly either vaccinated, infected or both, the way the virus will evolve to improve transmission is by becoming better at evading our immune system, like Omicron did. This means that existing vaccines (targeted to old strains) and previous infection will become less able to protect us from new infection, as tens of thousands of people are finding out with their second (or more) Covid infection. As Prof Danny Altmann argues, instead of relying on frequent boosters of the same vaccines, we must develop better and longer lasting ones.

We are currently pushing existing vaccines to their limits with high infection levels, but we should instead be supporting them by reducing transmission. Returning to normal behaviour does not return us to normal life. It returns us to a life with more disruption, more sickness and more strain on the NHS. But we can certainly learn to live with Covid better.

We need to rediscover our ambition to improve public health as we did in the 18th and 19th centuries. We can introduce serious upgrades to infrastructure: better ventilation, less crowding, increased air purification and sterilisation, more green spaces, changed work practices. We can also tackle inequalities with improved sick pay and housing and population health. All of this is beneficial over and above Covid. We can do it, but we first need to stop believing in these persistent myths.

- Christina Pagel is director of UCL's Clinical Operational Research Unit, which applies advanced analytical methods to problems in healthcare

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OpinionHospitals

Mothers were shamed and traumatised at Shrewsbury hospital. I was one of them

Anonymous

I had two babies there and my experience was so terrible that the memory haunts me 20 years later. Even now I feel a deep, scorching rage

‘She was taken to the special care baby unit – I didn’t get to touch or hold her and was given a Polaroid of her to look at instead.’ Photograph: Handout

Wed 30 Mar 2022 09.31 EDTLast modified on Wed 30 Mar 2022 12.40 EDT

I have been having so many baby dreams recently. Nonsensical images of babies sliding down chutes and falling into deep water below. Dreams where I dive in and swoop the babies to safety, pushing the water from their lungs and wrapping them in soft blankets, lined up as I watch over them. I know

why. There is no deep Freudian meaning to find – the publication of the Ockenden report into failings in maternity services in England has meant that the events of nearly 20 years ago, yet again, have begun to stalk both my conscious and unconscious mind.

I gave birth twice at Royal Shrewsbury hospital. "Gave birth" sounds so everyday, so ordinary, so gentle, but in reality both of my experiences were visceral, violent and have stayed with me for two decades. For the birth of my first child, a son, I arrived at the ward, contracting regularly and close to needing to push. The baby was back to back so I was in lots of pain. I was given pethidine, a drug that rendered me drunk and forgetful, my agency gone. Perhaps it is a blessing that I can only remember snapshots of the next four hours; the abject terror on my partner's face, the hastily inserted drip to restart my contractions and the fretful scribbling of the CTG machine showing them rising off the scale. After interminable hours, a doctor was called and then another. They attempted a ventouse delivery and I can remember the cup popping off the baby's head and the doctor reeling backwards. Next the forceps were used and finally after hours of pain my son was delivered. He was big for a first baby and bore the scars of the forceps blades down both sides of his face.

I was so dizzy with love for him that I just accepted what had happened, assuming that my body was somehow at fault for not being able to birth him "naturally", without the aid of the instruments used. After all, I had read all the books and swallowed the dogma that natural birth was a desirable and attainable goal for all women. That the C-section that I probably should have had was in some way a failure, an indictment of my shortcomings as a childbearing woman. This was the prevailing ethos at Shrewsbury, an attitude that shamed women into blaming themselves when something went wrong. At the time, Shrewsbury was an outlier and in 2002 just 11% of births there were by C-section – a fact that was actually applauded by the Commons health select committee – while the UK average was 20%. It has not been recognised until recently that these figures represented a blinkered and dangerous approach.

I foolishly thought, some years later, that my second birth would somehow exorcise the ghosts of the first. As full term approached, I would tell anyone

who would listen that I could feel this baby's shoulders grinding on my pelvis. At a checkup at 37 weeks, I was dismissed by my consultant when I enquired whether I might need a C-section this time. Due to the "natural birth" dogma I had ingested, it was something that I did not ask for loudly enough, too intimidated by this senior doctor who dismissed my fears and worries; telling me that a 4kg baby was not considered to be large. In what I assume as a compromise, I was informed that I would be induced on my due date.

> I began a cycle of self-blame and hatred that, yet again, I had been unable to give birth 'properly'

It was snowing that night. Everything seemed to be proceeding normally – my waters broke at 9pm and by midnight I was taken to a labour room. I was monitored again as I was considered a high-risk pregnancy. I could see marked decelerations in my baby's heartbeat during each contraction and waited for the midwife to return so I could tell her. In what seemed a matter of moments, the baby was coming out and rapidly the head was born. Then nothing. The midwife told my birth companion that this was a sign of shoulder dystocia – where the baby's shoulder gets stuck in the pelvis – and hastily banged the alarm bell on the wall. The midwife, eyes darting to and from the clock, shouted out various manoeuvres as she tried to free my baby; each failed. It was brutal and horrific. No additional staff arrived. My poor baby was being crushed by my body, starved of oxygen, primed to expand their lungs but unable to do so. Eventually the midwife managed to free the shoulder and there was my daughter, wrenched out on to the bed, navy blue and seemingly lifeless, an image I will never forget. Silence roared around my ears. No crying, no breaths even.

At some point someone else must have entered the room. Resuscitation began and I waited, flattened by fear and panic, to hear her cry. She began to grunt, a sign, I later learned, of respiratory distress. The medical staff feared she had a chest infection, and she was taken to the special care baby unit (SCBU) – I didn't get to touch or hold her and was given a Polaroid to look at instead. The paediatrician attempted to explain that her arm might be damaged. I was confused, I couldn't understand what he was telling me, couldn't understand the words. I felt as if I was at the end of a long tunnel

where no one could reach me. I was in shock and the stitching had to be delayed as a result. I awoke hours later, still covered in blood, not sure, in her absence, if I had had the baby or not. I was wheeled to see her and found her dressed in borrowed clothes, in a plastic cot, pink now and sleeping.

I began a cycle of self-blame and hatred that, yet again, I had been unable to give birth “properly”. For years I believed that a shoulder dystocia could not be predicted and that again my body had failed me. I have since learned that there are predictors – and that I ticked many boxes. It didn’t have to happen, it could have been prevented. If only I had insisted on a C-section, perhaps things would have been different. But I now know that I probably would not have been granted one anyway. It was Shrewsbury’s failure, not mine.

I had a third baby. That baby was born in a different county after an initial meeting with the consultant at Shrewsbury where I was yet again belittled and my fears dismissed. I was once more refused a C-section. This time everything was different. My views and thoughts were listened to and I gave birth in a controlled and managed environment.

My daughter carries a lifelong anxiety that I have been told by one of the many psychologists, psychiatrists and other health professionals I have employed to help her over the years, could be related to the trauma and massive bolt of stress chemicals she was subjected to at birth. The legacy I carry myself, apart from the scars, is in a box inside my head. Mostly it remains untouched, but sometimes I revisit it. My box has a baby, a child and now an adult in it. Many families were left with an empty box, left with no baby to take home. I weep for those families and for myself but there is also rage, a deep, scorching rage, that so many baby deaths and injuries were preventable. We must all weep and rage to ensure that what happened at Shrewsbury is never allowed to happen again.

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2022.03.31 - Around the world

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Zimbabwe

Zanu-PF faces threat from Zimbabwe's new opposition party

Citizens Coalition for Change's byelection success raises concerns of instability

Zimbabwe main opposition party leader Nelson Chamisa of the Citizens Coalition for Change. Photograph: Jekesai Njikizana/AFP/Getty Images

Jason Burke in Johannesburg and Nyasha Chingono in Harare
Thu 31 Mar 2022 00.00 EDTLast modified on Thu 31 Mar 2022 08.27 EDT

Zimbabwe's ruling Zanu-PF party may be facing an uphill struggle to secure a clear victory in elections due next year after a new opposition party made significant gains in byelections last weekend, raising concerns of new political instability and possible violence.

The Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), which was only founded in January, won 19 out of 28 parliamentary seats in polls widely regarded as a

test run for the 2023 presidential election.

In 2018, a fractured opposition came within 1% of forcing President Emmerson Mnangagwa, who took power following the fall of President Robert Mugabe, into a runoff. The vote was marred by allegations of rigging.

The CCC is led by Nelson Chamisa, who described the weekend's results as a "landslide".

"There is nothing that will stop us from forming the next government … Yes challenges are there. Electoral reforms must be implemented, and we have said those reforms have to be put in place," Chamisa told reporters in Harare earlier this week.

Analysts say the opposition in Zimbabwe has largely unified around Chamisa, putting an end to the worst of the internecine bickering that undermined its previous efforts to win power. The gains made by the CCC at the weekend suggest a tight battle next year, with Mnangagwa likely to be forced into a runoff that he could lose.

Though the CCC won most of the urban vote, taking 75 of the contested 122 municipal seats, it failed to make inroads outside towns. Overall turnout was low.

Chamisa accused the ruling Zanu-PF of using underhand tactics. Party officials said traditional leaders in rural constituencies intimidated voters by forcing them to register names in a local database before voting. Electoral officials denied the accusations.

"Had it not been for rigging and other shenanigans particularly in the countryside we would be talking about [winning] almost 26 out of 28 [constituencies] but … the citizens are clear and have made a bold statement," Chamisa said.

Electoral and ruling party officials denied the allegations.

Though campaigning in 2018 was relatively peaceful, the polls were followed by a wave of repression with soldiers shooting civilians in central Harare and hundreds of arbitrary detentions.

In campaigning for last weekend's byelections, CCC supporters were teargassed or assaulted by police, several were arrested and one killed. The party was forced to obtain court orders to allow rallies to go ahead after authorities claimed there were insufficient police officers to provide security.

Independent observer groups such as the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (Zesn) said some candidates' conduct amounted to vote buying, including giving out food to voters.

"The election day was peaceful but with concerns of community coercion," Zesn said in a statement.

In the southern city of Bulawayo, ruling party officials distributed sacks of maize flour before the vote, residents told the Guardian.

Human rights organisations have accused the ruling party of encouraging violence. On 26 February, Zimbabwe's vice-president, Constantino Chiwenga, said the ruling Zanu-PF party would "crush the [opposition] like lice under a stone".

A day later, a gang of unidentified men entered the centre of Kwekwe, a town 200km from Harare and a key constituency, where they attacked CCC supporters on their way to a rally. Around 20 people were injured with bottles, iron bars, spears and bricks. Mboneni Ncube, a 30-year-old man and opposition supporter died after being stabbed. Five suspects have been arrested and charged with murder.

Amnesty said the attack appeared to be pre-meditated to intimidate political opposition.

After the Covid restrictions were lifted in September, Chamisa began a "meet-the-people" tour. In Masvingo province and other places, Zanu-PF supporters damaged vehicles and beat villagers who came out to support him. On at least one occasion, supporters were forced to publicly denounce

him and on 20 October, Chamisa was shot at in Manicaland province, Amnesty said.

Another opposition supporter died in November after being beaten in Gutu by suspected Zanu-PF supporters. His wife and other relatives were charged with defamation after they accused ruling party members of being responsible.

Before the polls, Zanu-PF officials said they were targeting the urban vote.

Party spokesperson accused the opposition of "neglect, feckless maladministration, screaming corruption, and putrid decay".

"The electoral jury is out. Come the 2023 … elections, Zanu-PF envisages an electoral tsunami that will drown the foreign spawned opposition", Mutsvangwa said in a statement broadcast by state-controlled media.

In the run-up to the vote, Mnangagwa threatened to suspend the work of all NGOs – even those working to protect millions from malnutrition.

Mugabe banned NGOs when he feared defeat in polls, and frequently accused aid agencies of conspiring with the opposition and usually unidentified foreigners.

After Mugabe secured victory in the contested and violent election of 2008, he lifted the ban on the aid groups.

The current government aim to bring in new laws that will make NGOs disclose their source of funding and ban them from activities deemed "political".

The government say that the measure aims to target "money-laundering and terrorist funding".

"We can do without NGOs. I will remove them from this country, I will chase them away," Mnangagwa said before the byelections.

Some fear a ban on aid agencies would lead to drastic cuts in humanitarian assistance, estimated at $800m a year.

Blessing Vava, head of a local democracy and governance group, Crisis Coalition, said Mnangagwa was seeking “to entrench a one-party state and a dictatorship where the government does not want to be accountable”.

No opposition has won an election and formed the government in the former British colony since independence in 1980.

Chamisa has complained of a flawed voters’ roll and has accused the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (Zec) of transferring voters from one constituency to the other without their knowledge.

“Yes, we had a landslide, but those issues are still there … Zanu-PF do not believe in a free vote,” Chamisa said.

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Israel

Two Palestinians die in gun battle as Israel raids Jenin refugee camp

West bank raid comes two days after a Palestinian shot and killed five people in central Israel

Women mourn the death of the two Palestinians killed during the Israeli raid in Jenin on Thursday. Photograph: Jaafar Ashtiyeh/AFP/Getty Images

Associated Press
Thu 31 Mar 2022 04.43 EDTLast modified on Fri 1 Apr 2022 00.27 EDT

Israeli forces have raided a refugee camp in the occupied West Bank, setting off a gun battle in which two Palestinians were killed and more than a dozen were wounded, the Palestinian health ministry said.

In a separate incident, a Palestinian stabbed a 28-year-old Israeli man on a bus in the West Bank before being killed by a bystander, the Israeli military

said. The Magen David Adom emergency service said the stabbing victim was treated and taken to hospital.

Videos circulating online showed smoke rising from the centre of the Jenin refugee camp as gunfire echoed in the background. Others appeared to show Israeli soldiers and Palestinian gunmen moving through the narrow streets.

The raid came two days after a Palestinian from a village near Jenin shot and killed five people in central Israel, part of a wave of attacks in recent days in which 11 people have died. The Palestinian Health Ministry said a 17-year-old and a 23-year-old were killed and another 15 people were wounded.

The Israeli military said troops came under fire after entering Jenin to arrest suspects. It said one soldier was wounded and taken to hospital for treatment.

The Jenin refugee camp was the scene of one of the deadliest battles of the second Palestinian intifada, or uprising. In April 2002, Israeli forces battled Palestinian militants in the camp, leading to the deaths of 23 Israeli soldiers and more than 50 Palestinians.

In recent years the Palestinian Authority, which administers parts of the occupied West Bank, has appeared to have little control over Jenin. Israeli forces operating in and around the city and refugee camp often come under fire.

In Tuesday's attack, a 27-year-old Palestinian from the West Bank village of Yabad, near Jenin, methodically gunned down victims, killing five. On Sunday night, two police officers were shot dead by two Islamic State sympathisers in the city of Hadera. Last week, a combined car-ramming and stabbing attack in the southern city of Beersheba, also by an attacker inspired by IS, killed four. The two attacks claimed by IS were carried out by Arab citizens of Israel.

The US president, Joe Biden, spoke to the Israeli prime minister, Naftali Bennett, on Wednesday. Biden expressed his condolences after the recent

attacks and said the US “stands firmly and resolutely with Israel in the face of this terrorist threat and all threats to the state of Israel”.

The recent wave of violence has brought the Palestinian issue back to the fore at a time when Israel is focusing on building alliances with Arab states against Iran. There have been no serious Israeli-Palestinian peace talks in more than a decade, and Bennett is opposed to Palestinian statehood.

Israeli, Jordanian and Palestinian leaders have held a flurry of meetings in recent weeks, and Israel has announced a series of goodwill gestures, in an effort to maintain calm before the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which begins this weekend.

They hope to avoid a repeat of last year, when clashes in Jerusalem set off an 11-day Gaza war, but the recent attacks have sent tensions soaring. After a security cabinet meeting late on Wednesday, Israel decided to carry on with plans to ease restrictions on Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza.

Israel captured East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza in the 1967 war, territories the Palestinians want for a future state. Israel annexed East Jerusalem in a move not recognised internationally. In the West Bank, it is steadily building and expanding Jewish settlements, which most of the international community views as illegal.

Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005, and the Palestinian militant group Hamas seized power there two years later. Since then, Israel and Hamas have fought four wars and Israel and Egypt have maintained a blockade on the territory, which is home to more than 2 million Palestinians.

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Donald Trump

White House rebukes Trump after he calls on Putin to smear Hunter Biden

The former president spoke in a television interview that raised unsubstantiated questions about Hunter Biden's dealings in Russia

Donald Trump suggested in an interview that Vladimir Putin should release potentially damaging information about Hunter Biden. Photograph: Evan Vucci/AP

Reuters
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The White House sharply criticized Donald Trump on Wednesday over an interview in which the former president said that Vladimir Putin should release potentially damaging information about Hunter Biden.

"What kind of American, let alone an ex-president, thinks that this is the right time to enter into a scheme with Vladimir Putin and brag about his

connections to Vladimir Putin?" said Kate Bedingfield, a White House spokesperson, when asked by reporters. "There is only one, and it's Donald Trump."

Trump's comments come amid a deadly Russian invasion of Ukraine that has displaced millions of people. Speaking in an interview on Just the News, a TV program that raised unsubstantiated questions about Hunter Biden's former business dealings in Russia, Trump said, "I think Putin would know the answer to that. I think he should release it."

Trump's remarks also came in a week where a federal judge ruled he "more likely than not" committed a felony by trying to overturn his election defeat on 6 January, and as his business remains under investigation.

During the military buildup preceding the invasion of Ukraine, Trump praised Putin as a "genius". Once the attack had commenced, he condemned it as "appalling".

Trump's long-running search for information on Hunter Biden that could be politically damaging to Joe Biden led to the first of his two impeachments, over claims that he withheld millions in aid to pressure Ukrainian officials into announcing investigations into Biden's son.

It's also not the first time Trump has called for help from Russia to attack his political opponents. During his 2016 presidential campaign against Democrat Hillary Clinton, the Republican publicly suggested Russian hackers could help find Clinton emails, saying, "Russia, if you're listening, I hope you're able to find the 30,000 emails."

Reuters contributed reporting

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Asia Pacific

Security agreement with China ‘initialled’ by both countries, Solomon Islands says

Pacific nation has batted away concerns from Australia, New Zealand and the US, saying its policy is ‘friends to all and enemies to none’

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China police liaison team officers train local Solomon Islands police officers in drill. A senior Australian defence force officer says a deal between the two nations may force Canberra to change the way it conducts operations in the Pacific. Photograph: RSIPF/AFP/Getty Images

Daniel Hurst Foreign affairs and defence correspondent
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Thu 31 Mar 2022 04.04 EDTLast modified on Thu 31 Mar 2022 04.05 EDT

Solomon Islands has announced it is pushing ahead with a security agreement with China hours after a senior Australian defence force officer said the deal may force Canberra to change the way it conducts air and sea operations in the Pacific.

The Solomon Islands government said officials from both countries had on Thursday "initialled" elements of the proposed security agreement with China which would be signed at a later date.

"The draft framework agreement will be cleaned up and await signatures of the two countries' foreign ministers," said the statement issued by the Solomon Islands government's communication unit.

Australia, New Zealand and the US have all raised concerns about the deal but Solomon Islands said it would continue to uphold its foreign policy of "friends to all and enemies to none".

The government said it would "work with all partners in providing a safe and secure nation where all people are able to co-exist peacefully".

The statement was issued after Lt Gen Greg Bilton, Australia's chief of joint operations, said it "does change the calculus if Chinese navy vessels are operating from Solomon Islands".

Bilton was asked about the implications for Australian defence planners if the deal paved the way for temporary stationing of Chinese naval vessels in Solomon Islands.

"They're in much closer proximity to the Australian mainland, obviously, and that would change the way that we would undertake day-to-day operations particularly in the air and at sea," Bilton told reporters in Canberra.

"We would change our patrolling patterns and our maritime awareness activities."

Bilton said “a very important aspect” of Australia’s relationship with Solomon Islands had been to provide training to the country’s police force.

“Our training will continue,” he said. “So I guess we find ourselves in a circumstance where we will be present in the Solomon Islands and so too will the Chinese, seeking to provide training and support to the same organisations.”

The prime minister of Solomon Islands, Manasseh Sogavare, earlier this week dismissed foreign criticism of the country’s security negotiations with Beijing as “insulting” and blamed the leak of the draft document on “some lunatics and agents of foreign regimes in the government system”.

The draft, which emerged online last week, said Solomon Islands may request China to send police, armed police, military personnel and other law enforcement and armed forces to the country for a range of tasks such as maintaining social order and protecting lives and property.

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According to the draft text, the agreement would also pave the way for China to “make ship visits to, carry out logistical replenishment in, and have stopover and transition in Solomon Islands” while Chinese forces “can be used to protect the safety of Chinese personnel and major projects in Solomon Islands”.

However, it is unclear whether there will be any minor or substantial changes when the agreement is ultimately signed.

Solomon Islands sought to thank its traditional partners in Thursday’s statement.

“Solomon Islands seeks greater security partnership with other partners and neighbours and once again express its deep gratitude and sincere appreciation to Australia, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand and Fiji for the presence of their Security Personnel in Solomon Islands,” it said.

“We thank their respective governments and peoples for the service of their professionals whom we welcome and acknowledge with a thankful heart.”

The president of the Federated States of Micronesia, David Panuelo, had also urged Solomon Islands to reconsider the “unprecedented” security pact with China.

“My fear is that we – the Pacific islands – would be at the epicentre of a future confrontation between these major powers,” Panuelo wrote in a letter released on Thursday.

In Senate estimates hearings in Canberra on Thursday, Australian officials said they were aware of discussions “for some time” but would not be more specific about when they first learned of the draft deal.

Officials confirmed that the Australian prime minister, Scott Morrison, had had “direct contact” with Sogavare, but this was not in the form of a telephone conversation.

The finance minister, Simon Birmingham, rejected claims the deal was a failure of Australian diplomacy.

“I do not accept that,” Birmingham told senators. “Are you suggesting that a better form of diplomacy would be to hector and lecture” Solomon Islands not to take the deal?

A former senior Australian intelligence official had warned that the proposed treaty was an “adverse development for Australia’s security” and would also have wider implications for Pacific stability, but predicted it may be too late to stop the deal.

Richard Maude, head of the Office of National Assessments from 2013 to 2016 and an experienced former diplomat, said the agreement “could spark responses from other countries, including Australia, leading to a more crowded Pacific in a military sense”.

China’s foreign ministry said on Tuesday that countries should “earnestly respect Solomon Islands’ sovereignty and its independent decisions instead

of deciding what others should and should not do in a condescending manner”.

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Will Smith

Will Smith was asked to leave Oscars after slap but refused, Academy says

Board of governors says it has initiated disciplinary proceedings against actor after he hit Chris Rock

Will Smith slaps and swears at Chris Rock on stage at the Oscars – watch the full video

Kari Paul and agencies
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The Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences said that Will Smith was asked to leave to Sunday's Oscars after hitting Chris Rock but refused.

The Academy's board of governors, which met on Wednesday, said it had also initiated disciplinary proceedings against Smith for violations against the group's standards of conduct.

The actor slapped Rock after a joke about his wife, Jada Pinkett Smith, that mocked her short hairstyle. Pinkett Smith has been open about her alopecia-related hair loss.

Many have questioned why Smith – who just an hour later received a standing ovation after winning the award for best actor – was allowed to remain seated front row at the Academy Awards after the incident. On Wednesday, the Academy suggested that it attempted to remove the actor from the audience.

"Things unfolded in a way we could not have anticipated," the Academy said. "While we would like to clarify that Mr Smith was asked to leave the

ceremony and refused, we also recognize we could have handled the situation differently."

The Academy said Smith would have the opportunity to defend himself in a written response before the board meets again on 18 April. The Academy said disciplinary action for Smith could include suspension, expulsion or other sanctions.

The film academy earlier condemned Smith's onstage assault of Rock. But it used stronger language on Wednesday.

"Mr Smith's actions at the 94th Oscars were a deeply shocking, traumatic event to witness in-person and on television," the academy said. "Mr Rock, we apologize to you for what you experienced on our stage and thank you for your resilience in that moment. We also apologize to our nominees, guests and viewers for what transpired during what should have been a celebratory event."

The fallout in Hollywood continues, with many stars condemning the onstage violence. Wanda Sykes, who co-hosted the Oscars with Amy Schumer and Regina Hall, said she had felt physically ill after the slap. In an interview with Ellen DeGeneres scheduled to air on Thursday, Sykes also said Smith should not have been allowed to stay and accept his award. Jim Carrey said he was "sickened" by the response and called Hollywood "spineless" for giving Smith a standing ovation that night.

During a five-minute, emotional acceptance speech for best actor, Smith talked about defending his family and apologized to the Academy, but he did not mention Rock. On Monday, he issued an apology to Rock, the Academy and viewers, saying: "I was out of line and I was wrong."

Will Smith apologises after hitting Chris Rock during Oscars ceremony – video

"I deeply regret that my behavior has stained what has been an otherwise gorgeous journey for all of us. I am a work in progress," Smith said in an Instagram post. Jada Pinkett Smith, meanwhile, has called for "healing".

Rock addressed the controversy for the first time at a show in Boston on Wednesday night. According to an audio clip posted by Variety, the comedian said he was “still kinda processing what happened” and would have more to say “at some point”.

Only a very small number of Academy members have ever been expelled, including several accused and convicted of assault, including Harvey Weinstein, Roman Polanski, and Bill Cosby; and the actor Carmine Caridi, who was kicked out for sharing awards screeners.

Questions have been raised about whether Smith could see his award withdrawn. Whoopi Goldberg, a member of the Academy’s board of governors, said Monday on The View: “We’re not going to take that Oscar from him.” (Even Oscars won by expelled members haven’t previously been ordered to be returned.) Goldberg added that “nobody is OK with what happened”.

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Oscars 2022

Oscars 2022: Will Smith not facing charges for slapping Chris Rock, says LAPD, as Academy releases statement – as it happened

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Oscars 2022

Oscars 2022: Coda triumphs while Will Smith attacks Chris Rock onstage

The drama picked up three major awards, including best picture, while best actor winner Will Smith had a viral confrontation

- **The Oscars red carpet – in pictures**
- **Follow all the action with our liveblog**
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Oscars key moments: emotions run high at 2022 Academy Awards – video

Benjamin Lee in New York
Sun 27 Mar 2022 23.42 EDTLast modified on Mon 28 Mar 2022 08.24 EDT

Coda has been named this year's best picture at an Oscars ceremony that featured an unusual confrontation between Will Smith and Chris Rock.

The Apple TV+ drama, bought from 2021's Sundance film festival for a record-breaking $25m, became the first film from a streamer to win the award. It's a remake of French film La Famille Bélier, focusing on the only hearing member of a deaf family.

"Thank you to the Academy for letting us make history," said producer Philippe Rousselet. Producer Patrick Wachsberger thanked the Academy for "recognising a movie of love and family in this difficult time".

Troy Kotsur also won best supporting actor for his role in the film, making him the second deaf actor to bring home an Oscar, joining his co-star Marlee Matlin who won for Children of a Lesser God in 1987. "I really want to thank all of the wonderful deaf theatre stages where I was allowed and given

the opportunity to develop my craft as an actor," he said in an emotive speech. "This is dedicated to the deaf community, the Coda community and the disabled community. This is our moment."

Sian Heder, Coda's writer-director, also won best adapted screenplay becoming the first woman to bring home the award by herself since Emma Thompson in 1995. Coda has become the first best picture winner with fewer than four nominations since 1932's Grand Hotel.

Will Smith had the night's most viral moment with Chris Rock after the comedian made a joke about his wife Jada Pinkett Smith's shaved head, saying he was looking forward to GI Jane 2. Pinkett Smith, who revealed last year that she has alopecia, was unamused and an angered Smith then came on to the stage and appeared to slap Rock before the sound muted and footage later showed that Rock said "Will Smith just smacked the shit out of me" before Smith shouted: "Get my wife's name out of your fucking mouth."

Rock tried to defuse the situation by saying it "was a GI Jane joke" before Smith repeated his warning. Scott Feinberg of the Hollywood Reporter tweeted that Smith was then calmed by Denzel Washington and Tyler Perry during the commercial break as he appeared to wipe tears from his eyes.

Smith later secured his first Oscar, winning best actor for playing the father of Venus and Serena Williams in King Richard. "Richard Williams was a fierce defender of his family," he said tearfully. "I know to do what we do, you gotta be able to take abuse, you gotta be able to take people talk crazy about you, in this business, you gotta have people disrespecting you and you gotta smile and pretend that it's OK."

He then recalled advice just given to him by fellow nominee Washington: "At your highest moment, be careful that's when the devil comes for you."

He continued: "I wanna apologise to the Academy, I wanna apologise to all my fellow nominees … art imitates life. I look like the crazy father, just like they said about Richard Williams, but love will make you do crazy things."

Will Smith apologises after hitting Chris Rock during Oscars ceremony – video

“Will Smith said it all, let’s have peace and love and quiet,” Anthony Hopkins said later onstage.

The award for best director went to Jane Campion for the queer psychodrama The Power of the Dog, the only win for a film that had led the pack with the most nominations. Campion is only the third female director to ever win the Oscar for best director, following in the footsteps of Kathryn Bigelow for The Hurt Locker and Chloé Zhao last year for Nomadland. She thanked the film’s “actors I’m moved to call my friends” and called the win “a lifetime honour”.

Jessica Chastain was named best actress for the televangelist biopic The Eyes of Tammy Faye, her third nomination and first win. The actor spoke of recent times of “trauma and isolation” and how suicide has affected many, including herself. She paid tribute to LGBTQ+ youth who “feel out of place with their peers” and face “discriminatory and bigoted legislation that is sweeping our country”.

“At times like this I’m reminded of Tammy,” she said and her “radical acts of love”. She said to all those feeling alone: “I just want you to know that you are unconditionally loved for the uniqueness that is you.”

The film also won the only other award it was nominated for, best hair and makeup.

Ariana DeBose. Photograph: Frederic J Brown/AFP/Getty Images

Ariana DeBose was named best supporting actress for her performance in Steven Spielberg's remake of West Side Story. She became the first openly queer woman of colour and only the second Latina to ever win an Oscar. She joins her West Side Story co-star Rita Moreno, who also won for playing the character of Anita in 1962. "For anyone who has ever questioned your identity … there is indeed a place for us," DeBose said while paying tribute to Moreno as a "divine inspiration who paved the way for tons of Anitas".

Kenneth Branagh picked up best original screenplay for his semi-autobiographical drama Belfast. "It's a great tribute to an amazing city," he said of the award, his first win from eight nominations.

There was outcry last month when it was announced that eight craft awards would be announced before the ceremony and then edited into the broadcast later. These were dominated by Dune, which won for Hans Zimmer's original score as well as for editing, sound and production design. The film later won cinematography and visual effects too, making it the night's most awarded with six wins.

Drive My Car, which was the first Japanese film nominated for best picture, was named best international feature film. Encanto beat out competition

from Flee and The Mitchells vs the Machines to win best animated film. Questlove's Summer of Soul was named best documentary.

This year also saw the introduction of two Twitter-voted special awards for fans. The fan favourite film was won by Zack Snyder's Netflix zombie thriller Army of the Dead while the all-time most cheer-worthy moment was won by Zack Snyder's Justice League for the scene where Ezra Miller's The Flash enters speed force.

Last year's best actor nominee Riz Ahmed also became the first Muslim and first person of Asian descent to win live action short for The Long Goodbye. "This is for everyone who feels like they don't belong," he said in his speech. "Anyone who feels like they're stuck in no man's land. You're not alone." The British two-time Oscar-winner Jenny Beavan also won for her costume work on Cruella.

Amy Schumer, Wanda Sykes and Regina Hall. Photograph: ABC/Getty Images

The ceremony was hosted by Regina Hall, Amy Schumer and Wanda Sykes. "We're gonna have a great night tonight and for you people in Florida, we're gonna have a gay night tonight," said Sykes to applause, in reference to the state's controversial "don't say gay" bill which seeks to ban teaching of

sexual identity and gender orientation in early-grade education as well as in "a manner that is not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students". Sykes also made a jab at voter suppression by presenting a shredded Texas voter registration form.

The night was kicked off with an extravagant performance by Beyoncé, singing her Oscar-nominated song from King Richard in the tennis courts of Compton. But the award for best original song went to Billie Eilish and her brother, Finneas, for their Bond song No Time to Die.

The ceremony was also overshadowed by the war in Ukraine with stars including Jason Momoa, Jamie Lee Curtis, Benedict Cumberbatch and Samuel L Jackson all wearing ribbons or badges. "To see children buried under the rubble of theaters, to see pregnant women being injured in maternity wards, I just, you know, it beggars belief that it is happening," Cumberbatch said on the red carpet.

"One cannot help but be in awe of those who find strength to keep fighting in unimaginable darkness," the Ukrainian-born Mila Kunis said in her introduction to a performance by Reba McEntire. It was then followed by messaging that asked for a moment of silence and a plea for help. "We ask you to support Ukraine in any way that you are able," the screen read.

Schumer had previously expressed a desire for the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, to appear while Sean Penn said he would smelt his Oscars if this didn't happen. Sykes was asked about this idea on the red carpet. "You know, in Hollywood, we can get a little full of ourselves and we think that what we're doing is all so important," she said to Variety. "I understand that, yeah, what we do reaches a lot people and we can persuade a lot of people, but it's also [respectful] to just know your lane. You know what I'm saying? Know your lane."

Schumer did use a moment near the end of the night to improvise a reminder that there is "a genocide going on in Ukraine and women are losing all their rights ... and trans people".

Last year's Academy awards were led by wins for Nomadland and its director, Zhao, and star, Frances McDormand. It was watched by the smallest television audience for an Oscars ceremony ever.

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Oscars 2022

‘Violence isn’t OK’: Hollywood reacts to Will Smith slapping Chris Rock

Reactions to the most talked-about moment of the Oscars ranged from delight in the mess to concern

Will Smith apologises after hitting Chris Rock during Oscars ceremony – video

Adrian Horton
@adrian_horton
Mon 28 Mar 2022 01.38 EDTLast modified on Mon 28 Mar 2022 07.31 EDT

It was the bombshell moment of the Oscars. Not feelgood best picture winner Coda, or historic wins for the Afro-Latina actor Ariana DeBose or deaf actor Troy Kotsur, or the Academy hiring not one but three hosts – Amy Schumer, Wanda Sykes and Regina Hall – for the first time since 2018. No, by far the most talked-about moment of the 94th annual Academy Awards was when the best actor winner, Will Smith, took offense to a joke by presenter Chris Rock and slapped him onstage.

Rock had joked about Smith’s wife, Jada Pinkett-Smith, as being ready for “GI Jane 2” – seemingly a reference to her shaved head. (Pinkett-Smith has been open about having alopecia, which causes hair loss.) Smith then walked to the stage, slapped Rock, and sat back down, before shouting “keep my wife’s name out of your fucking mouth” twice.

Reactions online, of course, ranged from delighted memes to concern. Some supported Smith, including the actor’s 23-year-old son Jaden Smith, who wrote on Twitter minutes after the ceremony: “And That’s How We Do It.”

> And That’s How We Do It

— Jaden (@jaden) March 28, 2022

Representative Ayanna Pressley, who has also been open about stigma faced with alopecia, tweeted and deleted a defense of Smith. "#Alopecia nation stand up! Thank you #WillSmith Shout out to all the husbands who defend their wives living with alopecia in the face of daily ignorance & insults," the deleted tweet read.

B!tch don't you ever play with me. LOL • https://t.co/jnbpt4Vpb3 pic.twitter.com/Klb3GEIL3d

— 50cent (@50cent) March 28, 2022

Some, including Conan O'Brien and the Abbott Elementary star Quinta Brunson, revelled in the messiness:

Just saw the Will Smith slap. Anyone have a late night show I can borrow just for tomorrow?

— Conan O'Brien (@ConanOBrien) March 28, 2022

Will Smith slapping Chris Rock is straight people's Adele Dazeem.

— Joel Kim Booster (@ihatejoelkim) March 28, 2022

What a very west Philly Oscars.

— quinta brunson (@quintabrunson) March 28, 2022

It was just a joke. Jokes are what Chris Rock does. Always has been edgy. This was a mild joke for him. And i love GI Jane

— Mia Farrow (@MiaFarrow) March 28, 2022

While others in Hollywood simply gaped:

> Dying at this photo from the Vanity Fair #Oscars viewing party…. pic.twitter.com/YAvcr2KN6O
>
> — Jarett Wieselman (@JarettSays) March 28, 2022

Or, as actor LaKeith Stanfield put it in an interview on the red carpet for the Vanity Fair Oscar party: "I don't know, it was crazy. I don't know, it was surreal."

Some were appalled by Smith's behaviour, seeing it as an example of the normalization of violence.

"Violence isn't ok. Assault is never the answer," tweeted actor Sophia Bush. "Also? This is the 2nd time that Chris has made fun of Jada on the #Oscars stage, & tonight he went after her alopecia. Punching down at someone's auto-immune disease is wrong. Doing so on purpose is cruel. They both need a breather."

> Violence isn't ok. Assault is never the answer. Also? This is the 2nd time that Chris has made fun of Jada on the #Oscars stage, & tonight he went after her alopecia. Punching down at someone's auto-immune disease is wrong. Doing so on purpose is cruel. They both need a breather.
>
> — Sophia Bush (@SophiaBush) March 28, 2022

"Let me tell you something, it's a very bad practice to walk up on stage and physically assault a Comedian," tweeted comedian Kathy Griffin. "Now we all have to worry about who wants to be the next Will Smith in comedy clubs and theaters."

"Someone in the audience charged the stage Friday night during my opener's set and attempted to throw the speaker, started taking swings at the people trying to stop her and pushed down a security guard. It's scary times.

So, no, I don't find someone getting hit on stage amusing," tweeted comedian Fortune Feimster.

> Someone in the audience charged the stage Friday night during my opener's set and attempted to throw the speaker, started taking swings at the people trying to stop her and pushed down a security guard. It's scary times. So, no, I don't find someone getting hit on stage amusing.
>
> — Fortune Feimster (@fortunefunny) March 28, 2022

"The 'vessels of love' I have known or admired never acted violently against another human being …" tweeted the actor Cary Elwes, referring to Smith's acceptance speech for best actor, in which he said he felt called to be a "vessel of love".

> The "vessels of love" I have known or admired never acted violently against another human being…
>
> — Cary Elwes (@Cary_Elwes) March 28, 2022

One official body to weigh in was the Los Angeles police department (LAPD), which released the following statement: "LAPD investigative entities are aware of an incident between two individuals during the Academy Awards program. The incident involved one individual slapping another. The individual involved has declined to file a police report.

"If the involved party desires a police report at a later date, LAPD will be available to complete an investigative report."

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Oscars 2022

‘To hide the coward’: how Will Smith’s personal history may explain his Oscars violence

The actor, who hit Chris Rock at the Oscars for joking about his wife, has written publicly about his need to compensate for a childhood marred by domestic violence

Will Smith apologises after hitting Chris Rock during Oscars ceremony – video

Catherine Shoard
@catherineshoard
Mon 28 Mar 2022 02.11 EDTLast modified on Mon 28 Mar 2022 05.45 EDT

When Will Smith slapped the award-presenter Chris Rock on the stage at the Dolby theatre on Sunday night, the comic and the audience were all stunned. “Will Smith just smacked the shit out of me,” exclaimed Rock.

“Take my wife’s name out of your fucking mouth,” Smith explained loudly, after the joke Rock made about Jada Pinkett-Smith’s shaven head – despite the actor having recently gone public about having alopecia.

Later, when Smith tearfully accepted his best actor speech, he went on to defend his actions by saying he felt compelled to defend his family.

“I know to do what we do you’ve got to be able to take abuse, and have people talk crazy about you and have people disrespecting you, and you’ve got to smile and pretend it’s OK.

“But love will make you do crazy things.”

Will Smith slaps and swears at Chris Rock on stage at the Oscars – watch the full video

Such a dramatic defence was felt by many people to be disproportionate to the slight – however public – that Rock delivered. Yet Smith's personal history suggests why the actor would have felt the insult was too hard to shake off.

In his autobiography, published in November 2021, the actor describes at length the appalling domestic violence he and his three siblings witnessed his father, William, inflict on his mother, Caroline.

"When I was nine years old, I watched my father punch my mother in the side of the head so hard that she collapsed," he wrote. "I saw her spit blood. That moment in that bedroom, probably more than any other moment in my life, has defined who I am."

Smith wrote that it wasn't only the violence that traumatised him, but his own inaction in the face of it.

"Within everything that I have done since then — the awards and accolades, the spotlights and attention, the characters and the laughs — there has been a subtle string of apologies to my mother for my inaction that day. For failing her in the moment. For failing to stand up to my father. For being a coward.

"What you have come to understand as 'Will Smith', the alien-annihilating MC, the bigger-than-life movie star, is largely a construction – a carefully crafted and honed character designed to protect myself. To hide myself from the world. To hide the coward."

Smith's parents separated when he was a teenager and divorced in 2000. The actor maintained a close relationship with his father but says his hatred resurfaced when his father had cancer and was using a wheelchair. When Smith was caring for him, he said he considered killing his father.

"As a child, I'd always told myself that I would one day avenge my mother," he wrote. "I paused at the top of the stairs. I could shove him down and

easily get away with it. Thank God we're judged by our actions and not our trauma-driven, inner outbursts."

Smith's best actor acceptance speech contained frequent reference to a higher power, who he said was calling on him "to love people and to protect people and to be a river to my people".

He also said that fellow best actor nominee Denzel Washington had cautioned him after the incident that: "At your highest moment, be careful, that's when the devil comes for you."

Smith, 53, found fame early as a rapper and musician alongside childhood friend Jazzy Jeff. Aged 22, he won the lead role in sitcom The Fresh Prince of Bel Air, about a high schooler prone to fights, whose mother sends him to live with his wealthy uncle and aunt in California.

Shortly before he was cast, Smith was arrested in relation to an alleged assault on his record promoter, William Hendricks. He was charged with aggravated assault, criminal conspiracy, simple assault and recklessly endangering another person, but all charges were later dismissed.

Smith's 30 years on the A-list have generally been characterised by good humour and much warmth towards the actor from the public and industry alike. His marriage to Pinkett-Smith is one of considerable longevity, although both have been open about their relationships with other people within the marriage.

Yet the arrangement has made them easy punchlines. At the Bafta awards two weeks ago, the host Rebel Wilson joked that she felt Smith's "best performance over the past year was being OK with all his wife's boyfriends".

Speaking afterwards, Smith said there had "never been infidelity in our marriage. Jada and I talk about everything, and we have never surprised one another with anything ever". The actor has said that he hoped the couple's openness will encourage others to have meaningful conversations about monogamy.

Two years ago, Rock appeared to mock the Smiths' domestic arrangements, by commenting beneath a fulsome happy birthday tweet Will Smith sent to his ex-wife and the mother of his first child. Rock wrote: "Wow. You have a very understanding wife."

In 2016, when he was hosting the Oscars, Rock took aim at Pinkett-Smith for "boycotting" the event, in the year Smith failed to receive a nomination for the film Concussion. "Jada got mad, said she's not coming," said Rock. "Jada boycotting the Oscars is like me boycotting Rihanna's panties. I wasn't invited.

"You get mad," Rock continued. "It's not fair that Will was this good and didn't get nominated. It's also not fair that Will was paid $20m for Wild Wild West."

In the UK, Samaritans can be contacted on 116 123 and the domestic abuse helpline is 0808 2000 247. In Australia, the crisis support service Lifeline is on 13 11 14 and the national family violence counselling service is on 1800 737 732. In the US, the suicide prevention lifeline is 1-800-273-8255 and the domestic violence hotline is 1-800-799-SAFE (7233). Other international helplines can be found via www.befrienders.org

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2022.03.28 - Spotlight

- **‘I played a virgin running behind a man with a gun’ Jane Seymour on Bond, marriage and finding happiness**
- **‘Meet us, don’t eat us’ How Iceland is turning tourists from whale eaters to whale watchers**
- **‘She broke boundaries’ How textile artist Althea McNish made Britain bloom**
- **‘My skin tone is not really accepted’ Model Nyakim Gatwech on colorism and Instagram**

Advertisement

Interview

‘I played a virgin running behind a man with a gun’: Jane Seymour on Bond, marriage and finding happiness

Emine Saner

Jane Seymour at home in Malibu, California. Photograph: Philip Cheung/The Guardian

The actor discusses her breakthrough part in Live and Let Die, staying friends with her four ex-husbands and her new role as an action hero

@eminesaner
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For a cheering example of progress, you need look no further than at the roles currently bookending Jane Seymour's career. In the 1973 Bond film Live and Let Die, she played a character so useless that she makes most of the other Bond girls look like accomplished world leaders. And now here she is, at the age of 71, reinventing herself as "an action hero", she says with a laugh. "Chasing bad guys with a stun gun and a sense of humour."

Seymour plays Harry Wild, the title character of a crime drama – "it's soft crime", she says, by way of explaining its cosy tone – that was written for her. It's not exactly Line of Duty, but it is charming and Seymour is great as an English literature professor who retires and becomes an accidental sleuth. If, as I am, you are tired of cliched detectives with disastrous personal lives

and a drink problem, Harry – it's short for Harriet – is the antidote: fun, spirited and accompanied by a teenage sidekick.

"She lives life according to what suits her," says Seymour. "I think she's the kind of woman a lot of women would secretly like to be." We speak over Zoom – Seymour is at home in Malibu, in what looks like her office, a businesslike bookcase behind her. At this time of her life, she says, "I've been offered more work than I've ever been." As well as Harry Wild, she plays a grandmother living with dementia in the Australian film Ruby's Choice. She has signed up to do two other films, and – with her partner, David Green, a producer – hopes to produce and star in another. In recent years, she appeared in the acclaimed Netflix comedy-drama The Kominsky Method, and the second season of the US sitcom B Positive. "So yes, I'm busy," she says.

What is going on? Is the old story that roles for women dry up once they hit a certain age no longer true? "It's 40, actually," says Seymour. "Clearly, they open up again when you're 70. I think what's really happened is there's a huge generation of baby boomers saying, 'My life is way more interesting and complicated than the life of an 18-year-old.' I think it occurred to people that there is a major audience out there for material that includes people who are older."

Seymour as Dr Mike in Dr Quinn, Medicine Woman. Photograph: Cinetext Bildarchiv/ITV/Allstar

Seymour was in her 40s when she played Michaela Quinn, AKA Dr Mike, in the hugely successful TV series Dr Quinn, Medicine Woman, though it wasn't exactly billed as the role of a lifetime. "It'll never be a series," she remembers being told after signing on for the pilot. "It's a woman in the lead – that doesn't work. It's a western, a period piece, and it's women and children and animals, and morality." Nobody would be interested, apparently, but it was a massive hit, and the show, says Seymour "saved my life". On the brink of bankruptcy, she had taken the job out of desperation – her agent had rung around, saying Seymour would do pretty much anything. Her third husband, the father of her first two children, was also her business manager – and not only had he had an affair, he'd lost all her money.

As a child, with the less glamorous name Joyce Frankenberg, she wanted to be a ballerina. She grew up in south London, where her father was a doctor and her mother had been a nurse. Both had been through extraordinary, traumatic experiences – her father, whose Jewish father had escaped the pogroms in eastern Europe as a teenager, was in the RAF during the second world war. Seymour says he was among those who liberated Bergen-Belsen, the concentration camp where some of his own relatives had been murdered. Her mother, who was Dutch, had been in Indonesia when the war broke out,

and was interned in a Japanese camp. In London after the war, they had three daughters – Seymour is the eldest – and managed to create a happy family life.

If Seymour's home life was stable and loving, her school life was less so. She was a shy and diligent pupil who was bullied. During one production, a pantomime where Seymour was in the chorus but also understudy to the lead, she had a memory book, which the other cast members wrote messages in. "Some of them are so mean, like: 'You think one day you're going to be a big star but you're never going to get another job.' And: 'I hope everything nasty happens to you in life.'" She laughs again. "It's not just me saying I was bullied – I actually have visible evidence of it. You know what I think? You have two ways to go. One is you quit, and the other is you just decide to get on with it, and do it because you love it. It was a little bit lonely. I had a couple of best friends, one in particular who's still my best friend – you only need one really good friend. And I had my sisters and my parents who were lovely."

Around the same time, an injury ended Seymour's dreams of being a dancer, but she moved into drama. She got a part in the chorus on Richard Attenborough's film Oh! What a Lovely War, and an agent spotted her. It didn't matter that she had been turned down by all the big drama schools – her career had started. She had done some small roles and was 20 when she got the part in Live and Let Die. She was married by then, to Attenborough's son, Michael; Richard sent a letter to Roger Moore, playing Bond, asking him to look after his daughter-in-law (it sounds like it contained more than a hint of a warning). "He kept waving this letter at me," Seymour remembers. Moore and his then wife did look after her, she says. "They knew I was completely out of my comfort zone. I don't think I'd ever stayed in a hotel in my life, and certainly not been to restaurants. I was there on my own and it was hard to figure it all out."

What was it like to be suddenly part of the Bond machine? "It was quite frightening," she says. "Before I even started, they had Terry O'Neill taking these crazy beautiful photographs of me with very little on and doing an interview about how I liked to run naked through long grass." It was all made up. Did she mind being called a Bond girl? "At the time, coming from

obscurity, it was a very nice thing. It meant I had a job," she says. But for all the doors it opened, it also slammed some shut. The acclaimed director John Schlesinger wanted to offer her a role, until someone told him, says Seymour, that she was "a Bond girl. And that was it. Never heard from them again. That happened a few times." (She had wanted to do Ibsen, but instead she embraced a commercial career, from TV movies to Playboy shoots, and designing products including jewellery, scarves and home decor.)

Live and Let Die has not aged well – it's sexist, obviously, but the racism is shocking. "You'd never make that movie now," says Seymour. "You wouldn't want to make that movie. I was a woman, a virgin, who ran three paces behind a man with a gun, wearing very … well, actually for a Bond girl, a lot. I was deflowered and then deposited. I'd lost all my power, so I was useless. It was awful!"

'You'd never make that movie now …' Seymour with Roger Moore in Live and Let Die. Photograph: United Artists/Allstar

Years before the #MeToo movement geared up, Seymour wrote about her experience of sexual harassment in the entertainment industry. In her early 20s, shortly after she had arrived in the US, a producer asked her to go to his house to watch a screen test she had done; she was told there would be other people there, but he was alone. "He told me I was going to star in this

movie, and he'd told everyone how great I was, and now it was my turn. He said: 'You know what you've got to do, don't you?'" She asked him to call her a cab. "He threatened me and said that he would make sure that I never worked again as an actress if I ever told anyone." The next day, she told her agents she hadn't gone to his house. "They went: 'Thank God for that.'"

Did it feel normal in the industry? "I didn't know. I'd never spoken to anyone about it." She was so shaken by it that she came back to the UK, where she married for a second time, and stopped acting for a while. Later, back in the US and starting her career again, "I looked around at a lot of my friends and my fellow actresses – choices were made," she says of the position many women were put in. "It was never my choice. Who knows, I might have had a better career." Is she shocked it was allowed to happen, that it took so long for it to be exposed? "It happens in every business. It's not just Hollywood – it's every career where there is a woman, and a man has seniority."

She has seen the business change in other ways for women – in the early 80s, Seymour says she was fired from the Broadway production of Amadeus because she announced she was pregnant. Later, when she was pregnant with twins and working on Dr Quinn, her pregnancy was written into the storyline.

Seymour has four children (and now grandchildren), from her third and fourth marriages, and is close to her two stepchildren. She has managed to remain friends with her ex-husbands (there are four) and their wives and ex-wives. Exes come to her premieres, or to stay; just recently, the ex-wife of her current partner came to visit. She tells of how she and her first two husbands regularly get together. She has said that all four of her exes left her for other women. How did she move past that? "I just think that when you love someone, especially when you've also had children and experiences, if you can remember the good stuff, then with the pain, the bitterness, the betrayal and all the other stuff, you somehow have to process it and move forward."

What has she learned about marriage? "That I don't feel the need to be married any more," she says with a laugh. "Marriage, like James Bond films, was different back in the day. When my parents got married, people married

for life and they lived with whatever it was. Nobody that I knew, usually, had sex before they were married. So you married pretty much the first boyfriend you had. And so I did – I married my first boyfriend."

She says she was so young that she doesn't "really count" her first two marriages. "I count David Flynn as marriage – I was with him for 10 years, we had two children. What did I learn from that? I learned that absence makes the heart wander." She laughs. "Not mine, but his. It wandered a lot." Her fourth marriage, to the actor James Keach, lasted "for twentysomething years, and I thought that was it for ever, and I was devastated …" Keach had an affair. "I think what I'm really proud of is that I've always managed to be my own person, I've always made my own money, I've always taken care of myself. And my kids came out great."

Seymour, with Rohan Nedd as Fergus Reid, in Harry Wild. Photograph: Bernard Walsh/Zoe Productions DAC/AcornTV

Seymour has written self-help books, partly of her own experiences. "I'm not trying to preach anything to anyone, but people ask me how I've managed to move on. You have to learn to accept and forgive yourself and others, and then move forward and don't live in the past or the blame game. I feel very good that my children's family – past, present and future – we can all be together."

She thinks the example came from her mother, Mieke, who experienced extreme hardship. Mieke never talked to Seymour and her sisters about what she had gone through during the war. It was only as an adult, when Seymour and one of her sisters accompanied her to Indonesia, and tracked down the camp where she was imprisoned, that Seymour had any understanding of what she had experienced – the ants and snakes they would catch and cook to supplement their tiny rations, the people she nursed through illness, many of them dying from dysentery.

As a child, Seymour knew her mother had been in a camp but nothing more. Mieke "just cut off the war. The end, a new life." But theirs was also an open house, says Seymour, and her parents were generous to anyone who needed help. She learned from her mother that if you can accept the past "however unacceptable it is, open your heart and reach out to help someone else, you don't have to look far to find someone worse off than you. And when you do that, you have purpose. She reckoned that if you have purpose in your life, you can survive. That became my philosophy and very much how I've weathered the storms of life, and I've been battered a few times. But we all have."

It's about being able to let go of one idea of something and being "open-minded and open-hearted to receive something different", she says, sounding pretty California, but also very right.

Harry Wild streams on Acorn TV from 4 April

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from https://www.theguardian.com/film/2022/mar/28/i-played-a-virgin-running-behind-a-man-with-a-gun-jane-seymour-on-bond-marriage-and-finding-happiness

Advertisement

‘Meet us, don’t eat us’: Iceland turns from whale eaters to whale watchers

An orca pod feeding. Iceland, one of the few countries that still hunts whales commercially plans to end the practice from 2024. Photograph: Nature Picture Library/Alamy

The country's plan to end commercial whaling is driven by falling demand but also a 15-year-long campaign aimed at their biggest consumers of whale meat – tourists

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About this content

Abby Young-Powell in Faxaflói Bay, Iceland

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Onboard a small whale-watching boat making its way across the choppy waters of Faxaflói Bay, off the south-west coast of Iceland, a guide urges tourists not to eat whale meat. “We have a campaign here against whaling,” says Estelle, who has been pointing out whales and dolphins from the boat. “It’s better to meet them in person than to eat them.”

Iceland, one of the few countries in the world to hunt whales commercially, announced in February its plan to end the practice from 2024, though it has not officially banned it yet.

Falling demand for whale meat, especially since Japan resumed commercial whaling in 2019, has influenced the decision. “There is little proof that there is any economic advantage to this activity,” Svandís Svavarsdóttir, the country’s fisheries minister, wrote in the newspaper Morgunblaðið. But experts also credit a 15-year-long campaign carried out largely by Icelanders and local whale-watching companies.

Reykjavik harbour. The small red boat on the right is an Elding whale-watching vessel. The blue one with a tall mast is a whaling boat. Photograph: Abby Young-Powell

Whaling has been practised around Iceland since the early 1600s, but it wasn't until the 19th century that steamships and explosive harpoons allowed US and European companies to hunt the animals on a large commercial scale.

Iceland stopped commercial whaling in 1985 and scientific whaling four years later under the international moratorium on commercial hunts. But commercial whaling resumed in 2006. Current annual quotas allow for 209 fin whales to be killed in Iceland, to be sent to Japan, along with 217 minke whales, which are eaten domestically.

> We had tourists who would see whales and then ask where they could go and eat them

Megan Whittaker, Elding

Since the practice restarted, an association of local whale-watching companies, led by the non-profits International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) and IceWhale, have fought to end it. Their campaign has aimed to turn the tide on whale hunting in Iceland using the slogan "meet us, don't eat us".

Contrary to what many visitors believe, whale is not considered a delicacy among Icelanders, says Arni Finnsson, chair of the Iceland Nature Conservation Association, who worked on the campaign. Only 2% of Icelanders say they regularly eat it, according to IFAW.

Instead, the biggest eaters of minke whale have been the country's roughly 2 million annual visitors, many of whom believe it is an Icelandic speciality. "We had tourists who would see whales and then ask where they could go and eat them," says Megan Whittaker, head naturalist at Elding, a whale-watching organisation.

A plan was hatched by IFAW and IceWhale to end the practice. In 2009, IWAF launched one of the country's most successful petitions, which now has almost 175,000 signatories, asking people to sign a declaration that they would not eat whale meat.

From 2011, the campaign sent volunteers into restaurants, asking them to stop serving the animal, and more than 60 restaurants are now labelled as "whale friendly". The campaign cut whale meat consumption by tourists in Iceland by three-quarters, according to IFAW, which says it does regular tourist surveys.

A fisher sorts through meat from a minke whale in Olafsvik harbour, Iceland. Photograph: Adam Butler/AP

"Meet us, don't eat us" has had a big influence on the government's approach to whaling, says Belén García Ovide, founder of Ocean Missions, an Icelandic non-profit not involved in the campaign. "[Politicians] have realised that a whale that's alive brings more economic benefits than a dead whale," she says.

Whale watching has become a booming business. One in five tourists in Iceland take a whale-watching trip, generating approximately $12m (£9m) annually, according to the Animal Fund.

Tour companies have played a large role in the campaign to end whaling. "All of us whale-watching companies have been like propaganda," says Gísli Ólafsson, owner of Lakitours, which operates in Iceland's Westfjords.

His tour guides have spoken about whaling on every trip for decades, he says.

The companies also fought to eject whale hunters from Faxaflói Bay, which was one of the main hunting areas. “We always saw the whaling boats,” Whittaker says. “We saw the [dead] whales being tied to the side of the boat and being dragged. And we told the tourists about it.”

In 2017, the fisheries minister announced an expanded “no whaling zone”, forcing hunters further out to sea, where there are fewer whales, making the practice economically unviable.

When Japan resumed commercial whaling in 2019, demand for Iceland’s whales declined. Whale meat processing plants were also unable to operate as normal during the pandemic.

Conservationists are now exploring ways to make whale tourism sustainable. Whale-watching companies have created a code of conduct, including agreeing not to make sudden noises, as well as to approach animals gradually and to take turns with other boats.

But there is no legal requirement to follow this voluntary code, as there is in other whale-watching destinations, such as New Zealand or Canada. Ovide wants politicians to change this.

Scientists are exploring whether whales get stressed by tourist boats, by measuring their cortisol levels and monitoring behaviour. The research, by charity Whale Wise in partnership with Edinburgh University and the University of Iceland, could lead to updates to the current code of conduct, says Tom Grove, the co-founder of Whale Wise.

“I see whale watching as a fundamentally good thing,” Grove says. “But it’s about making it the best it can be and as sustainable as possible.”

There are still some who are against the plan to end whaling. Kristján Loftsson, owner of Hvalur, a family business that has led the hunt of fin whales over the past few decades, told the Guardian he wants to continue as long as it is legal. He has said he will restart whaling for four months this

summer for the first time in four years, with up to 150 people expected to be hired to work on whaling ships.

Public support for whaling has declined in recent years. But for now, in Reykjavik harbour, boats used to kill whales continue to float alongside boats used for whale-watching trips. “You can see the whaling boats in front of ours,” Estelle says as our small boat pulls into land. Tourists disembark and walk past their tall sails as they head off in search of “whale friendly” restaurants.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/mar/28/meet-us-dont-eat-us-how-iceland-is-turning-tourists-from-whale-eaters-to-whale-watchers

Advertisement

‘She broke boundaries’: how textile artist Althea McNish made Britain bloom

Althea McNish’s Orina Danasco, 1960. Photograph: Nicola Tree/William Morris Gallery

An inspiration for Balenciaga and Dior, the flamboyant fabrics of the Trinidad-born artist brought Caribbean colour into 50s British households

Skye Sherwin
Mon 28 Mar 2022 04.00 EDT

The Trinidad-born British designer and artist Althea McNish's bold textile prints rescued 1950s Britain from postwar gloom, ushering in the upbeat 60s with outsize flowers in a humid palette. Her early work with forward-thinking fabric producers such as Liberty, Ascher Ltd and Hull Traders brought Caribbean heat into British living rooms, while Christian Dior and Balenciaga used her pop-bright prints on floaty silk dresses.

"She layered two unique identities," says Rose Sinclair, the co-curator of Colour Is Mine, a long-overdue, posthumous survey of McNish's 70-year career. "In terms of the Black influence on British culture, her textiles say it loud and clear."

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A photo of McNish from 1966 suggests her reach. She's in her studio, behind a desk laden with pots and brushes, while hectic mood boards cover the walls. Shot from below with her head turned, mid-conversation, it is an empowering image that casts her as a busy career woman and an aspirational figure for readers of the publication that commissioned it: the Daily Mail. The portrait ran with a story on McNish's contribution to that year's Ideal Home Show, a "bachelor girl's room" for the metropolitan twentysomethings busily dismantling traditional female roles.

At the other end of the scale, McNish clothed the Queen for her official visit to Trinidad and Tobago that February. As Sinclair puts it: "She's a rare Black woman within international textile history. She broke boundaries." McNish had a far steeper hill to climb than her peers. "She was decorating the domestic space, up and down the country, at a time when the frame for a lot

of Black people was: ‘You should go back home,’” the curator says. “She changed the spaces that people inhabited.”

The forthcoming retrospective is set to reveal a life full of luminous firsts. McNish originally came to Britain in her late 20s to undertake an architecture degree, which she gave up in favour of printmaking. She completed her studies at the Royal College, although Sinclair credits evening classes with the pioneering pop artist Eduardo Paolozzi for first introducing McNish to textiles’ potential. Her technical prowess was unusual, creating multilayered prints whose complexity is nigh-on impossible to imitate. “When you’ve got a piece that has 17 screens and colours in it, who’s going to copy it?” asks Sinclair.

It was what McNish described as her “tropical eye” that caught the attention of her early champion, Arthur Stewart-Liberty. When a designer’s expected career path meant learning the ropes in someone else’s studio, Liberty took the rare step of commissioning exclusive designs from her as soon as she graduated in 1957. Transforming, as McNish once said, “the flowers of the English countryside [with] tropical flamboyance”, her iconic prints explode with brushy depictions of giant blooms and free-floating foliage. The colours sizzle and ping: rose red against violet, tangerine over deep pink, lime with the perfect turquoise of a still, warm sea. The designer summed up her approach with a simple, uncompromising affirmation: “I’m a citizen of the world and I am multicultural. […] My textiles are the statement of my being.”

Colour field: works by Althea McNish

Althea McNish's Golden Harvest, c1960s.

Golden Harvest, designed for Hull Traders, c1960s
This marks an important moment in the development of McNish's "tropical eye". The colourway recalls the lush blue Caribbean ocean, but the print's harvest grew in England. She was a student picnicking in an Essex wheat field when she had the idea for it.

Orina Danasco, 1960 (main picture)
This design shows McNish pushing her organic forms into abstraction, and is unusual in its direct use of black. The designer once said: "Grey is a colour I would never use […] Black … has the power in it to do what I want."

Althea McNish in her studio in 1966. Photograph: Hodder/ANL/Shutterstock

Ideal Home Exhibition, 1966

This portrait shows McNish in her studio preparing for the exhibition, where she exhibited her "bachelor girl's room". Sinclair says: "It was to be designed for the 26-year-old girl about town, [someone] not too flash with money. It is the textiles that make the statement."

Student sketchbook, 1954. Photograph: Nicola Tree/N15 Archive/The Althea McNish Collection

Student sketchbook, 1954

McNish's sketchbooks show the breadth of her influences. Kew Gardens was a favourite haunt, but so too was the British Museum, where she studied ancient cultures. As Sinclair says: "Her attitude echoed Trinidad itself and its diversity of cultures. She recognised her own mixed cultural heritage."

Althea McNish: Colour Is Mine is at the William Morris Gallery, London, from 2 April until 11 September.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/mar/28/she-broke-boundaries-how-textile-artist-althea-mcnish-made-britain-bloom

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‘My skin tone is not really accepted’: model Nyakim Gatwech on colorism and Instagram

Nyakim Gatwech in 2019. The model collaborated with friends to produce her own photoshoots. Photograph: Rich Fury/Getty Images

Gatwech, who was targeted in a prominent psychiatrist's racist tweet, has built a career in the face of industry prejudice

Andrew Lawrence
@by_drew
Mon 28 Mar 2022 01.00 EDTLast modified on Mon 28 Mar 2022 10.13 EDT

"Would he call his wife or his daughter a freak of nature?" wonders Nyakim Gatwech, the 29-year-old model targeted in a racism scandal that shook an Ivy League university. "His words are not just affecting me, but dark-skinned girls in general, dark-skinned girls who go to Columbia too or even a dark-skinned girl who is wishing to go there. It can affect her in a way that none of us can imagine – especially coming from a *psychiatrist*."

Jeffrey Lieberman has ranked among the US's foremost clinicians for more than two decades. As the longtime chair of Columbia University's psychiatry department, he was especially respected for his research and published discoveries about schizophrenia. But last month, the former president of the American Psychiatric Association became known for something else.

Seemingly out of nowhere, Lieberman retweeted a photo of Gatwech and described her as a "freak of nature"; this was after the original post used the pronoun *it* in reference to the woman while making the false claim that she was listed in the Guinness book for having the world's darkest skin.

Gatwech's mother fled war-torn South Sudan while she was pregnant. Photograph: Emma McIntyre/Getty Images for L'Oreal Paris

The fallout for Lieberman was swift. Within days he was suspended from his post at Columbia, stripped of his psychiatrist-in-chief position at Columbia University Irving Medical Center/NewYork-Presbyterian hospital and asked to resign as director of the New York state psychiatric institute – a post that paid him almost $250,000. In addition to widespread condemnation online, Lieberman faced scorn from his many collaborators in New York's elite medical community. "He's a destructive personality who has done a great deal of damage, who is only now being held accountable after decades of impunity," one former colleague told the City.

In an email to university cohorts, Lieberman wrote: "An apology from me to the Black community, to women and to all of you is not enough." Before his tweet and his Twitter account vanished, the model, Nyakim Gatwech, made sure to take a screenshot for posterity.

All her life, Gatwech has observed white people ogling her as if she were some kind of modern-day Hottentot Venus, an African female curiosity. But she hasn't let the derisive comments deter her from pursuing a career as a fashion model, even as she risks being exposed to even more cutting prejudice in an industry famous for it. And while many industry stakeholders

were quick to align themselves with the George Floyd-born antiracism movement while promising greater inclusion, Black fashion models still struggle to break through, much less earn their fair share. All the while, the same issues of cultural appropriation and racist gaffes remain.

In her determination to join the ranks of Alek Wek, Duckie Thot and other world-renowned dark-skinned models, Gatwech makes her own breaks. For the better part of a decade, in between jobs as a Minneapolis daycare teacher and at a Buffalo, New York, Panera Bread, and while pursuing a degree in education, Gatwech collaborated with photographer friends to produce her own photoshoots, posting her favorite snaps to Instagram.

It was through the following cultivated there that she came to be known as "queen of the dark" – a nickname that probably led to the Guinness book claim taking on a life of its own.

The photo Lieberman retweeted, of Gatwech perched on a hotel bed mock-reading a newspaper, came from a shoot she hustled together two years ago. "Years back," she says, "this thing would have really affected me."

Gatwech has lived a lifetime in her 29 years. Her mother fled war-torn South Sudan while pregnant; she was born at a refugee camp in Ethiopia and lived at another camp in Kenya for nine years before immigrating to Buffalo at age 16.

On top of the ridicule she faced for not speaking English, the racist comments about her skin tone were relentless. "I would sit down in the classroom, and the students in front and behind me would get up and go, like I had some kind of disease or I smelled or my clothing wasn't clean," she recalls. "And some of these were other Black kids, to be quite frank with you. They were literally social distancing from me."

Some of the most uncomfortable moments, Gatwech recalls, came when the classroom lights went down for the projector; when she raised her hand, a classmate would think nothing of asking the teacher: "Can you even see her?"

The bullying pushed Gatwech to consider suicide and weigh whether to bleach her skin – something her older sister was already doing. “She was like, ‘Here are the products, but it’s not going to solve anything,’” Gatwech recalls. “As you get older and into your career, there’s still gonna be people who say something about your skin color. You’ve got to work on loving yourself and not letting these people’s words affect you.”

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So they initiated a routine of daily affirmations and remembering the risks their mother took to bring them this far. And when the racist and colorist taunts finally became insufferable, the family pulled up stakes for the Minneapolis area, where they found instant community among the area’s east African expats. Once her self-confidence had recovered, Gatwech started to reconsider a career in modeling while binge-watching America’s Next Top Model after school. “When I saw Tyra Banks, I was like, ‘Wow, if she can do it, I can do it,’” she says. “But that was before I realized that my skin tone is not really accepted like that in this industry.”

Her independent research into colorism sparked the idea for a shoot made up of Black women across the skin tone spectrum. But it was an outtake of her sitting next to a fair-skinned model during a set re-staging that properly launched her career and led to her booking work – not that it stopped her hustle. “For my first three big campaigns, I was the one pretending to be my manager,” says Gatwech. Unsure of what to charge for the work, she Googled possible rates.

Still, the fact that model agencies hold fast to their blinkered views when it comes to rostering Black models is a continuing source of frustration. “When an agency already has that Sudanese dark-skinned model, they will just continue to work with her,” says Gatwech, who attended Black Lives Matter rallies in the Twin Cities after Floyd’s killing. “But that’s not diversity. Why can there only be one?”

Gatwech's social media ascent has continued, but she has yet to land a deal with a major modeling agency. "There hasn't been an opportunity where a brand was like, 'We want to put you on the cover of a magazine,'" says Gatwech, who splits time between New York and LA. "At least not yet. I'm just believing in God's plan."

- In the US, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is at 800-273-8255 and online chat is also available. You can also text HOME to 741741 to connect with a crisis text line counselor. In the UK and Ireland, Samaritans can be contacted on 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.org or jo@samaritans.ie. 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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2022.03.28 - Opinion

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- **Why the UK can't rely on boosters to get through each new wave of Covid**
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OpinionRussia

Neither Nato nor Ukraine can de-Putinise Russia. We Russians must do it ourselves

Mikhail Shishkin

A new, democratic Russia is impossible without a change of national mindset – and an acknowledgment of national guilt

‘Many of my fellow citizens support the war against Ukraine: they put the Z on their windows at home.’ A poster bearing the letter Z in Kronstadt, Russia, showing support for military action. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

Mon 28 Mar 2022 02.00 EDTLast modified on Mon 28 Mar 2022 08.17 EDT

Bombed-out Ukrainian cities and the corpses of children are not shown on Russian TV. Brave young people in Russia who protest against the war are being beaten up and arrested, while most people remain silent – there are no

mass protests, no strikes. It hurts to see that many of my fellow citizens support the war against Ukraine: they put the Z on their windows at home and on their cars.

Russian television now repeatedly shows an interview with the famous actor Sergei Bodrov, a cult figure in Russia. “During a war one cannot speak poorly of one’s own,” he says. “Even if they’re wrong. Even if your country is wrong during the war, you shouldn’t talk poorly about it.” And that’s what people do, willing to support “their own” even if they are shooting at Ukrainians.

The modern world is separated from most Russians by a revolution, humankind’s most important: the transition from the supremacy of the collective consciousness to the priority of the individual. People identified with the tribe for thousands of years and were completely dependent on the pack leader – the chief, khan or tsar. Only in the last several centuries did a fundamentally different human social order begin to emerge, one in which the individual is free. Before the famous text that begins with the words “We the people” could be written, a new humanity had to emerge and it had to be aware of its human dignity.

This huge gap in civilisation has not yet been bridged. This is the drama of my homeland: a small number of my compatriots are ready for life in a democratic society, but the overwhelming majority still bow before power and accept this patrimonial way of life.

If, over the course of generations, everyone who thinks for themselves is wiped out, the only qualities that will prevail will be silence and satisfaction with the authorities. But can you blame these people if that was their only survival strategy? Where do those who don’t remain silent end up today? They go to jail. Or they need to emigrate before it’s too late.

Two attempts to introduce a democratic social order in Russia have already failed. The first Russian democracy, of 1917, lasted only a few months. The second, in the 1990s, lasted a few years with great difficulty. Every time my country tries to build a democratic society by establishing elections, a parliament and a republic, it finds itself in a totalitarian empire.

Do a dictatorship and a dictator give birth to a slave population or does a slave population give birth to a dictatorship and a dictator? The chicken and the egg. How can this vicious circle be broken? How can a new Russia begin?

Hitler's Germany found its way out of the vicious circle of dictatorship. Germans learned a lot about dealing with the past and coming to terms with guilt, and were able to build a democratically oriented society. However, the rebirth of their nation was predicated on total, crushing military defeat. Russia needs this zero hour, too. A new democratic start in Russia is impossible without paying a price and acknowledging national guilt.

There was no de-Stalinisation in Russia and there were no Nuremberg trials for the Communist party. Now Russia's fate depends on de-Putinisation. Just as the "ignorant" German population was shown concentration camps in 1945, so "ignorant" Russians must be shown destroyed Ukrainian cities and the corpses of children. We Russians must openly and courageously acknowledge our guilt and ask for forgiveness.

The German writer Georg Büchner wrote this in a letter to his bride in 1834: "What is it that lies, murders, steals in us?" Only that question can accelerate this most important revolution of humankind in Russians: the realisation that the responsibility lies not with your superiors, but with you.

Neither Nato nor the Ukrainians can de-Putinise Russia. We Russians must clean up our country ourselves. Are my people up to the task? After the war, the world will help Ukraine to rebuild. But Russia will be in economic ruins. The collapse of the empire will continue in full force. Other peoples and regions will follow the Chechens towards independence. The Russian Federation will disintegrate. But the centrifugal force of the peoples and regions in the world's last empire can be purifying and rehabilitating as well as destructive. The Russian consciousness must learn to accept that there can be several states with Russian as the state language. The empire must be removed from minds and souls like a malignant tumour. Only then can new states push through reforms.

But can a democracy establish itself without a critical mass of citizens, without a mature civil society? "The beautiful Russia of the future" (this is

Alexei Navalny's motto) should begin with free elections. But who will carry them out, and according to what rules? The same tens of thousands of terrified teachers who carried out the rigging in the country's Putinian elections? And can one be sure that in truly free Russian elections, the "national traitor" from the democratic opposition will win, and not the "patriot" who fought against the "Ukrainian fascists"? A population hoping for a benevolent tsar cannot be turned into responsible voters in an hour. And who will implement democratic reforms? Officials who have become tainted with corruption and crime under the Putin regime must not be allowed to build a new state. And they are all tainted.

The world is calling for a "Russian Nuremberg". But who in Russia will organise and carry out these legal proceedings? Who will make this great reappraisal of the past? Who will uncover the crimes and punish the guilty? The criminals themselves? One can remove and replace Putin, but how can one suddenly replace millions of corrupt officials, mercenary police officers and compliant judges?

A long, painful rebirth is the only way forward for Russia. And all these sanctions, the poverty, and the international outcasting will not be the worst thing we encounter along the way. It will be more terrible when there is no inner rebirth for the Russian people. Putin is a symptom, not the disease.

- Mikhail Shishkin is a novelist, and the only author to have won the Russian Booker, Russian National Bestseller and Big Book prizes

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Rewriting Covid-19Immunology

Why the UK can’t rely on boosters to get through each new wave of Covid

Danny Altmann

The evidence suggests performance could be less predictable and effective in the future – though there are promising developments

- Danny Altmann is a professor of immunology at Imperial College London

‘We now inhabit a world where no two people share precisely the same exposure history.’ Photograph: Dinendra Haria/SOPA Images/Rex/Shutterstock

Mon 28 Mar 2022 03.00 EDTLast modified on Mon 28 Mar 2022 12.50 EDT

This time in 2020, we watched with horror as the realities of the pandemic and its death toll unfurled. Most hardly dared imagine that effective vaccines might appear in a fraction of the time taken for previous efforts, effectively stemming the pandemic tide.

But despite the success of the vaccines in greatly reducing the odds of hospitalisation or death, viral evolution had plenty more to throw at us. The onslaught of highly immune-evasive variants was, for most of us in immunology and virology, unforeseen. We'd come to think of the coronavirus family as being rather more stable – less error-prone in terms of mutations – than many viruses. And we had never before had to roll out relatively new ways of developing vaccines, involving mRNA or recombinant adenoviruses, at this scale and in the heat of battle.

Having started out brilliantly, the real-life state of play today is self-evidently suboptimal. The vaccines rapidly induce hugely high levels of protective, neutralising antibodies in most people, but these levels wane within months of each sequential dose. Meanwhile, Omicron and the subvariant BA.2 have managed to mutate almost every amino acid residue targeted by protective antibodies, escaping protection. And so you have the unhappy equilibrium currently endured by the UK: more than 300,000 new cases a day, as of late last week, and a continuing caseload of more than 3 million, with hospital admissions and excess deaths holding steady at a new – high – setpoint. All this despite one of the highest vaccination rates in the world.

We are living in a precarious truce imposed through frequent mRNA boosters to keep the viral caseload "manageable". But there are signs this isn't sustainable, and that a strategy simply consisting of boosters in perpetuity may not be fit for purpose. Recent case surges in Hong Kong, Denmark and Scotland emphasise the fragility of that balance. And new evidence from the past two years suggests that encounters with different variants of Covid or different vaccine types can alter the effectiveness of later jabs in surprising ways – an effect called immune imprinting. This raises the possibility that booster performance could be even less predictable and effective in the future.

Sars-CoV-2 began as a single variant, which we term the Wuhan strain. But we now inhabit a world where no two people share precisely the same exposure history: we have never been infected, or were asymptomatically, mildly or severely infected during any or a combination of the Wuhan to Alpha, Delta, Omicron or BA.2 waves, and we've all had somewhere from zero to four doses of diverse vaccines. The combination of these exposures gives each of us a unique immune memory repertoire.

Imagine a huge jar of pills of different colours, each especially good for responding to a given present or future variant. Someone whose experience has been an Alpha infection plus three doses of Pfizer may have brilliantly built up lots of green pills at the expense of others. But this is less good for you if the next variant mainly needs yellow pills. It turns out the order and type of exposure can affect how our immune system responds later on.

In a recent paper reported in the journal Science, we compared protective immunity between people infected in the first wave with the original strain and in the second wave with the Alpha variant. In second wave-infected people, encounters with an Alpha infection plus two vaccine doses gave lower protective (known as neutralising) antibody responses against the Wuhan and Beta variant, yet higher responses against Delta. Given the number of vaccines and strains, these interactions are unpredictable, but will shape how our immunity holds for future waves. It needs more investigation.

These are complex problems demanding careful research, long-term planning, trials and even some intelligent crystal ball-gazing. We must evaluate many approaches. Some places have announced a fourth dose rollout for first generation Pfizer vaccines (which cross-neutralises recent variants, but very suboptimally); some vaccine makers have pivoted to targeting the Omicron spike; others are working on polyvalent vaccines to include several different versions of spike, or clever structural approaches to target those parts of spike that would be the same across all past and future variants, and maybe even across those coronaviruses still awaiting crossover from bats and pangolins.

This latter approach is exciting and the subject of recent efforts across many teams, including research trials through the US National Institutes of Health

and at Cambridge University. There are also advanced programmes considering intranasal – nose – vaccination to achieve local mucosal immunity, increasing the chances of blocking transmission at that site altogether, and vaccine platforms that could be much more durable.

The take-home message is that the pandemic is very much with us and evolving dynamically, with a long, bumpy road ahead. The option to sleepwalk through this, taking automatic-pilot choices based on what was "good enough" in the first wave is one we adopt at our peril. We must look at options besides simply boosting through every successive wave. At a time when the US has cut future vaccine research funding, and the UK also needs to maintain its momentum, this should be an urgent priority.

- Danny Altmann is a professor of immunology at Imperial College London, who has contributed advice to the Cabinet Office, APPG on long Covid, and the EU

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Republic of ParenthoodParents and parenting

I've just become a mum – where is the writing about parenting for my generation?

Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett

In this new series, I promise not to write as though I am the first ever to have given birth to a child, but I do have different questions to ask

Illustration: Eva Bee for the Guardian.

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If you are reading this, it means that I have just become a mother. For reasons of practicality, and superstition, I am writing this column in advance. I am currently 29 weeks pregnant, just into my third trimester, but this will not run until, all being well, my baby is born.

Born, too – hopefully less painfully – is this series, The Republic of Parenthood, which will hopefully speak to other parents, and examine some of the philosophical, political and cultural issues around modern parenthood. I chose the name to honour The Republic of Motherhood, a beautiful poem by Liz Berry that evokes the feeling of which many new mothers speak; of joining a new society, almost, which feels like a closed-off state separate from the rest of the world, one that necessitates the learning of new rules and customs:

> "I stood with my sisters in the queues of Motherhood –
> the weighing clinic, the supermarket – waiting
> for Motherhood's bureaucracies to open their doors.

> As required, I stood beneath the flag of Motherhood
> and opened my mouth although I did not know the anthem."

For Berry, the Republic of Motherhood is "a wild queendom", and, though I feel her words deeply, I wanted this series to include fathers, and families of all shapes and sizes. Hence: parenthood. I also chose the name semi-ironically, for though parenthood may feel like a separate state to some, we are all, ultimately, part of a collective, a community. It seems to be that problems arise when we fail to acknowledge the role parents play in that and – vice versa – the part played by those who are childless and child-free (two slightly different things, as I will come to explore). So I hope this series speaks, too, to non-parents, and helps to foster solidarity between us all, whatever our choices.

It is easy to say that everything about pregnancy and motherhood has been written already, and certainly I am joining a crowded field. Accordingly, I promise not to write as though I am the first woman to ever have given birth to a child, nor can I really profess to know anything. I can be honest, but I cannot be didactic, because I am a complete novice.

This is all also sounding rather earnest, so I also promise not to take myself too seriously. So much writing about parenthood feels to me to be po-faced, moralistic in tone, painfully middle-class and passé. Very little of it seems to speak to parents of my generation and younger, who face unique struggles in addition to all the usual challenges, during an unprecedented societal moment and with a moral panic about the birthrate humming in the background.

For example, last night I read a couple of newspaper articles that talked about home decoration for parents. Both assumed that everyone lives in a giant Victorian terrace, recommending lethally expensive furniture and accessories – cot canopies costing more than £100, a smart cot that "sleep-trains" your baby, retailing at more than a grand – and featuring quotes from influencers and mummy bloggers. As someone who lives in a rented flat and, with the best will in the world, has zero interest in following these women, I thought there might be some writing out there that spoke to me during my pregnancy. But there was very little. And there must be others like me, who are spending their days in a state of near constant bemusement

and frustration. Instead, I have turned to older female writers, to Rachel Cusk, Anne Enright, Maggie O'Farrell, Rebecca Walker, Adrienne Rich, Elena Ferrante and Audre Lorde, for inspiration.

It's been a strange time to be pregnant: in the middle of a pandemic, though at a stage, thankfully, when vaccines have been available. It has meant that, while others have returned to an approximation of normal life, those who are pregnant and their partners are still living in varying degrees of lockdown. Even when we've had the jab, the advice is to be extra careful, and no one wants to risk their baby's health or, should their partner catch Covid, being unable to be present at the birth.

I have been lucky to have a pregnancy that has mostly been happy and healthy, but at times it has also felt curiously lonely. Reading and writing about it has helped, and I hope will continue to do so.

When I showed my mother the poem The Republic of Motherhood, she praised it, but she also said: "It isn't like this, you know, for everyone." It was my first glimpse of a gulf between those who have struggled in parenthood, and those who have thrived. I have friends in both camps, and at this stage have no idea where I will fall: perhaps, like many people, somewhere in between.

This is why it is important to stress that I do not believe my experience to be that of anyone else, and the purpose of this column is not to alienate, but to include. Our experiences may all be different, but we have much in common, whether we are parents or are contemplating parenthood, or have decided against it, or crave it desperately only to be thwarted. Wherever you fall, I hope this column speaks to you. And I hereby promise that I will never subject you to a single anecdote about changing my baby's nappy. Well, not unless it's really, really funny.

What's working: As I write this, I have not slept through the night for seven weeks (so much for "sleep while you can"), mostly because I simply cannot get comfortable. I have tried shoring myself up with piles and piles of feather pillows, but the only thing that seems to truly give my aching hips and back some relief is a pregnancy pillow (mine is from BellaMoon, and is

like a giant, squishy croissant that you straddle, supporting you to sleep on your side). It isn't cheap and takes up roughly the same space in the bed as a person, but, if it saves my aching back, I'm a convert.

What isn't: My friend recommended I tried hypnobirthing, but many of the "positive birth stories" are along the following lines: "During my home birth, I was bleeding out all over the living room floor. The midwife recommended that I go to hospital, but, using what I learned in hypnobirthing, I resisted all attempts at medical intervention." Some may find these stories comforting: I really, really don't.

- Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett is a Guardian columnist and author

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OpinionMental health

If we all talked about suicide, wouldn't that be better for everyone?

Xavier Mulenga

The more comfortable we feel talking about suicide and self-harm, the easier it will be to detect when someone is in distress

Suicide awareness has increased over the years, but it hasn't translated into people feeling comfortable talking about it with a distressed person. Photograph: Dumitru Ochievschi/Alamy Stock Vector

Sun 27 Mar 2022 12.30 EDTLast modified on Mon 28 Mar 2022 03.16 EDT

Suicide is a topic that gets a lot of media airtime; however, not many people are able to talk about it in their personal lives with friends or family.

This is not surprising, considering the nature of the topic and the stigma and helplessness that many people experience when talking about suicide. At

this point in my career as a psychiatrist, I believe that almost everyone has been affected by a suicide or suicide attempt.

You just have to ask.

According to the World Health Organization, about 700,000 people die from suicide every year. In Australia, that equates to around nine deaths a day, with 65,000 people attempting suicide each year.

As part of a psychiatric assessment, we ask our patients whether they are feeling suicidal or have made plans to end their lives.

In the earlier years of my training, I was often surprised when people were relieved to be asked these questions and stated that no one had asked them this before.

During the first year of my psychiatry training, I was working an evening shift when I received a call from the doctors in the emergency department to review Anna, a 19-year-old girl who had overdosed on pills.

When asked if she had been suicidal previously, she told me about bullying and bulimia in high school three years prior. She had been at her lowest point at that time, and often thought about ending her life. Some people may be surprised by how long someone can think about ending their life without making any attempts.

Somewhat reluctantly, Anna provided her parents' contact number and they came to the hospital shortly after. Eventually, Anna was cleared to go home with her parents with a referral to see the community mental health team in the coming week.

Patrick, her father, came to me separately and asked: "How can I stop this from ever happening again? What do we do now?" I knew what he wanted to hear, but couldn't provide any answer that offered that certainty – the certainty that a parent would never receive a phone call from the hospital telling them that their child had attempted suicide.

He had been aware that Anna had been struggling but had never expected that she would attempt to end her life. I gave Patrick some information sheets and emergency numbers he could use, but paper provides very little solace to worried parents.

Even years into my training, there are few harrowing scenes that compare to parents leaving the hospital with a child who has had their first suicide attempt.

Suicide awareness has increased over the years and has permeated our pop culture (13 Reasons Why) and social media (TikTok and Instagram). People are more comfortable with the idea that suicide is a major health concern. But this has not translated to people feeling more comfortable with bringing up the topic of suicide with a distressed person.

If you have had a sibling, parent, or partner attempt to end their life then you might be able to bring up this difficult topic, but we need more people empowered to ask *anyone* who is struggling.

Not everyone gets a second chance and the people most hurt by suicide are those who are left behind.

My first psychiatrist supervisor once told me: "If you're a psychiatrist long enough you will have your fair share of patients take their lives and there's nothing you can do to change that." My initial reaction was that of defiance, and I thought the mental health service could be doing more.

> If we reach a point where people can make mainstream jokes about suicide, then we would be close to the mark

Many doctors, for better or worse, have a saviour complex and feel helpless when they can't help their patients, or lose a life under their care. With time, mental health services have continued to provide more education and support for people and families on mental health issues. Knowledge, destigmatisation and empowerment are fundamental tools for mental health services when engaging the public.

Mr Ansari was a 64-year-old man who presented to our community mental health service with significant depression following the suicide of his only son, Omar, two years earlier.

Omar had taken his life at the age of 30. Mr Ansari and his wife had divorced shortly after, partly due to his depression and mostly due to parental grief. Not all relationships can survive the death of a child. Burying your child is a specific type of traumatic grief with no easy roadmaps to acceptance.

Mr Ansari had been admitted to a mental health ward due to increasing suicidal thoughts. He started on antidepressants and was referred to see a psychologist on discharge. The medications and therapy were effective and while he was no longer suicidal, I couldn't help but think of him as a lonely, sad man.

During a regular review, he brought up his son and we spoke about the final weeks of Omar life. Mr Ansari knew that his son had been struggling mentally and had one previous overdose in his early twenties. I asked Mr Ansari if he had ever spoken to his son about suicide.

He became angry and said: "Isn't that your job? How's a parent meant to ask their child if they want to kill themselves?" A valid question and very commonly asked – mostly by fathers, I should add.

I apologised and let him vent his frustration at mental health services. He eventually was able to be followed up by his GP and psychologist. I like to think we ended on good terms in later reviews, but I've never been able to ask him about that. A few years later, I asked a colleague what had happened to him and was told he had returned to Pakistan to be with his siblings as there was little left for him in Australia.

The public often raise the question of who is the most qualified to ask questions around suicide. Anecdotally, many people would prefer if the "professionals" (GPs, psychologist, psychiatrists, nurses, etc) did this, which we are more than happy to.

The question I ask is: If we all asked about suicide, wouldn't that be better for everyone?

I truly believe that more campaigns should centre around the destigmatisation of suicide and self-harm. This would involve the average person being able to begin discussions around suicide or self-harm in an open and non-judgmental manner. The goal would be for suicide to be talked about in the same way people talk about diabetes, heart attacks or strokes.

If we reach a point where people can make mainstream jokes about suicide, then we would be close to the mark. We make jokes about several medical conditions (which kill people), but we find it uncomfortable to do the same with suicide.

My point is not to be flippant – but the less taboo discussions around suicide are, the more likely people will feel comfortable talking about it. This might lead to earlier detection of significant mental distress or illness which could be a deciding factor in getting people into treatment earlier, with the idea of potentially reducing the chance of people ending their lives.

When you open your web browser or turn on your TV screen, you will often come across a story of a person who has ended their life. We often feel helpless and empathise and then move on. Suppression is a coping strategy, after all. Instead, I want you to feel empowered to lean in and get educated and be able to ask the difficult questions or share your own experiences where appropriate.

We need to talk about suicide.

- Dr Xavier Mulenga is an addiction psychiatrist based in Sydney
- To read more on how to approach conversations about suicide you can access: "Understanding Suicide"; "When someone is thinking about suicide"; "Having a conversation with someone you're worried about"; and "How to talk about suicide with young people".
- Patient examples are not real people and are amalgamations of situations often seen by psychiatrists

In the UK, Samaritans can be contacted on 116 123 and the domestic abuse helpline is 0808 2000 247. In Australia, the crisis support service Lifeline is on 13 11 14 and the national family violence counselling service is on 1800 737 732. In the US, the suicide prevention lifeline is 1-800-273-8255 and the domestic violence hotline is 1-800-799-SAFE (7233). Other international helplines can be found via www.befrienders.org.

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2022.03.28 - Around the world

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Myanmar

Myanmar's military ruler vows to 'annihilate' resistance groups

Min Aung Hlaing also urges ethnic minorities not to support militias opposed to army rule

Myanmar's ruler Gen Min Aung Hlaing during a parade for the country's Armed Forces Day. During an address, he said Myanmar's armed forces would 'annihilate' militia groups fighting the military. Photograph: Aung Shine Oo/AP

Associated Press
Sun 27 Mar 2022 22.18 EDTLast modified on Mon 28 Mar 2022 12.50 EDT

Myanmar's top general has vowed to intensify action against homegrown militia groups fighting the military-run government, saying the armed forces would "annihilate" them.

Gen Min Aung Hlaing, speaking at a military parade marking Armed Forces Day on Sunday, also urged ethnic minorities not to support groups opposed to army rule and ruled out negotiations with them.

The military seized power last year from the democratically elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi. Security forces have since used lethal force to suppress mass nationwide protests, resulting in the deaths of more than 1,700 civilians, according to a detailed tally compiled by the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners.

Forced to turn away from peaceful protests, many of those opposed to military rule took up arms, forming hundreds of militia groups called People's Defence Forces – better known as PDFs. In some parts of the country, they've joined forces with well-organised, battle-hardened ethnic armed groups, which have been fighting for greater autonomy for decades.

Min Aung Hlaing, addressing thousands of military personnel during the parade in the capital Naypyidaw, said he would not negotiate with "terrorist groups and their supporters for killing innocent people" and threatening peace and security.

He said the military, known as the Tatmadaw, "will annihilate them to (the) end", according to an official translation of his speech.

His government has declared major resistance organisations – regardless of whether they are directly engaged in armed struggle – as terrorist groups. Membership or even contact with them carries harsh punishment under law.

"I would like to highlight that there are no governments or armies worldwide that negotiate with any terrorist groups," he said.

Despite a huge advantage in equipment and numbers, Myanmar's military has struggled to crush the new militia units. Outgunned and outmanned, the PDFs have relied on support from local communities and knowledge of the terrain to carry out often surprisingly effective attacks on convoys, patrols, guard posts, police stations and isolated bases in remote areas.

The military is currently conducting operations in Sagaing, in central Myanmar, and in Kayah State, in the country's east, using airstrikes, artillery barrages and the burning of villages. The army recently seems to have expanded its offensive into Chin State in the west and Kayin State in the south-east as well.

Protesters in Yangon burn a picture of Min Aung Hlaing during a demonstration against the military rule in November 2021. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

Last year's Armed Forces Day was the single bloodiest since the military's seizure of power on 1 February 2021. Security forces across the country opened fire on demonstrators, killing as many as 160 people.

Anti-military protests were held on Sunday despite the risks in Yangon, the country's biggest city, and elsewhere. To avoid arrest or injury, urban street protests usually involve flashmobs, which quickly disperse before security forces crack down.

The main opposition group, the self-styled National Unity Government, urged people to join a "power strike" on Sunday night by switching off the lights and their televisions for 30 minutes while the military parade was broadcast on state-run TV channels.

The group said the strike was also intended to protest daily power outages. The blackouts started several months ago, and the government blames them on high gas prices and damage to power lines caused by sabotage.

The US, European Union and 20 other countries issued a statement marking Armed Forces Day by recalling “those killed and displaced by violence over the last year, including at least 100 people killed on this day alone one year ago”.

It called on the military to cease its violence and return to democratic rule, and urged countries not to supply arms to Myanmar.

The US, UK and Canada on Saturday imposed the latest in a series of coordinated sanctions on senior military officials and business leaders who allegedly act as arms dealers for Myanmar’s army.

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NatWest Group

HSBC cuts references to Ukraine ‘war’ from its analyst reports

Bank has softened language in research documents, according to report, amid pressure to exit Russia

- **Russia-Ukraine war: latest updates**
- **What we know on day 33 of Russia’s invasion**

HSBC is under pressure to follow the lead of some of its largest rivals and close its Russian operations over the war in Ukraine. Photograph: General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine/AFP/Getty Images

Jasper Jolly
@jjpjolly
Mon 28 Mar 2022 05.29 EDTLast modified on Mon 28 Mar 2022 16.40 EDT

HSBC has reportedly removed references to a "war" in Ukraine from research reports, amid calls for the British bank to close its operations in Russia.

Russia's government refers only to a "special military operation" in Ukraine, and Vladimir Putin's regime has criminalised reporting on its invasion that contains any information from non-official sources, with prison sentences of up to 15 years.

The bank's committees that review all research sent to clients have amended multiple reports to soften the language used on the subject, including changing the word "war" to "conflict", according to the Financial Times, which cited two people with direct knowledge of the matter.

HSBC is under pressure to follow the lead of some of its largest international rivals and close its Russian operations, which employ about 200 people serving multinational clients based outside the country. Goldman Sachs, Citigroup, JP Morgan and Deutsche Bank have announced plans to wind down their Russian businesses. Several of the largest Russian banks have been placed under sanctions by the US, EU and UK, making it difficult for foreign banks to carry out transactions in Russia.

HSBC has declined some new Russian clients and refused to extend credit to existing customers, according to Reuters, after saying on 14 March that it was "not accepting any new business in Russia". However, it has not announced plans to withdraw or wind down its operations.

MPs from the Conservative party, Labour and the Liberal Democrats have said HSBC should leave Russia. The Labour MP Dame Margaret Hodge said HSBC was "further tarnishing its reputation in its bungled attempts to rewrite the present".

"There is a violent war being waged in Ukraine," she said. "The tragic loss of life and the millions of refugees seeking safety elsewhere attest to that. The failure of the banking giant to confront that truth and instead continue

doing business in Russia is a terrible dereliction of moral duty that will not be forgotten."

Kevin Hollinrake, a Conservative MP, said HSBC's continued presence in Russia "cannot be justified" and added there were "clear commercial and moral reasons" to shut down the operation.

Hollinrake said on Monday he would be closing his HSBC account.

"Have they seen the horrific, appalling footage the rest of us are watching on our TV screens every night? Ukrainians are sacrificing everything to keep what we and the directors of HSBC take for granted: freedom," Hollinrake said.

"We all have a responsibility to support them whatever the personal or business cost. I will be closing my HSBC account today and hope many others do the same."

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The move to edit analyst reports had prompted strong complaints from some staff, the Financial Times reported.

A person briefed on the situation said the research team had issued some reports making explicit reference to the war but acknowledged that there were often sensitivities around research reports. The content of analyst reports, which are provided as a service to clients, is not usually controlled at a group level.

HSBC declined to comment. It has previously said: "Our thoughts are with all those impacted by the continuing conflict in Ukraine." The statement also said the bank "will continue to operate in line with local regulatory requirements".

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Coronavirus

Shanghai begins locking down millions as China's Covid cases surge

China will shut down city in two stages as it sticks to a 'zero-Covid' strategy amid growing outbreaks

China is launching a staged lockdown of Shanghai in an effort to curb the spread of the country's worst Covid outbreak since 2020. Photograph: Héctor Retamal/AFP/Getty Images

Vincent Ni

Mon 28 Mar 2022 10.50 EDTFirst published on Sun 27 Mar 2022 19.44 EDT

Shanghai has begun its phased lockdown as an Omicron-fuelled Covid-19 wave spreads through mainland China's most significant financial hub, resulting in the highest caseloads in the country since the early days of the pandemic.

The eastern side of the Huangpu River, which divides Shanghai, would be under lockdown between Monday and Friday, officials said, followed by similar restrictions across its western side from 1 April. Massing Covid testing across the city is also under way.

The metropolis of 25 million people has in recent days become the leading hotspot in a nationwide outbreak that began to gain pace in early March.

Earlier this month, President Xi Jinping urged his officials to "minimise the impact" of the virus on the country's economy as the authorities reflected on the zero-Covid policy. On Monday, China's stock market resumed lower, with its benchmark CSI 300 index falling by 2% in morning trading.

In Shanghai the government ruled out a lockdown on Saturday, barely 24 hours before the final decision was announced, citing the potential damage it could cause to the economy.

However, a record 3,450 asymptomatic cases were reported in Shanghai on Sunday, accounting for nearly 70% of the nationwide total, along with 50 symptomatic cases, the city government said on Monday.

China's National Health Commission on Monday reported 5,134 new asymptomatic cases for the previous day, and 1,219 local confirmed infections.

Although the case numbers remain relatively insignificant in a global context, they are China's highest since the first weeks of the pandemic, which was first reported in the city of Wuhan in late 2019.

Millions of residents in affected areas across the country have been subjected to citywide lockdowns. Now, in the eastern part of Shanghai, residents are confined to their homes, too. Some said healthcare workers arrived to conduct tests at 7am on Monday.

The city government said in a public notice on Sunday that the two-part lockdown was being implemented "to curb the spread of the epidemic,

ensure the safety and health of the people" and root out cases of infection as soon as possible.

The city's sprawling eastern half, known as Pudong, which includes the main international airport and financial district, would be locked down for testing beginning on Monday morning and ending on 1 April.

After that, the city's western half, known as Puxi and featuring the historic Bund riverfront, would be locked down until 5 April, the government added.

Residents were told to stay indoors during the lockdowns, and all business employees and government personnel not involved in the supply of essential services were advised to work from home. Those involved with providing vital services such as gas, electricity, transport, sanitation and the supply of food would be exempt from the stay-at-home order.

Shanghai's public security bureau said it was closing cross-river bridges and tunnels, and highway tollbooths concentrated in the city's eastern districts until 1 April. Areas to the west of the Huangpu River will have similar restrictions imposed.

A member of the city's pandemic taskforce had over the weekend vowed Shanghai would not shut down. The official said a lockdown in Shanghai, the country's major financial and trading hub, would "impact the entire national economy and the global economy".

"If Shanghai, this city of ours, came to a complete halt, there would be many international cargo ships floating in the East China Sea," said Wu Fan, a medical expert on the taskforce, during a daily virus press briefing held by the city government.

Barriers have been erected in Shanghai as the city is split into two for a snap lockdown. Photograph: Aly Song/Reuters

"It seems clear that the authorities have been trying to rely on targeted measures to the maximum extent possible, but clearly they now feel they cannot afford to wait any longer in Shanghai," said Thomas Hale of Oxford University's Blavatnik School of Government, who leads the Oxford Covid-19 Government Response Tracker.

"Overall, we're now seeing more [Chinese cities] using restrictive measures than any other time since 2020."

China's government had previously kept the virus under control nationally through strict zero-tolerance measures including mass lockdowns of entire cities and provinces for even small numbers of cases.

But in recent weeks, authorities have watched nervously as a deadly Omicron surge in Hong Kkong prompted panic-buying and claimed a high toll of unvaccinated elderly people.

The variant's subsequent spread in mainland China has posed a dilemma for authorities wrestling with how forcefully to respond, with the zero-tolerance approach increasingly being questioned amid concerns over the economic

impact and public “pandemic fatigue”, especially considering Omicron’s less severe symptoms.

Shanghai had sought to ease disruption with a targeted approach to the current outbreak marked by rolling 48-hour lockdowns of individual neighbourhoods combined with large-scale testing, but otherwise keeping the city running.

But the softer strategy has so far failed to dampen city case counts, and the localised lockdowns have provoked grumbling online and a run on groceries in some districts.

Agence-France Presse and Reuters contributed to this report

This article was updated on 28 March 2022 to reflect news developments. An earlier version incorrectly referred to Shanghai recording 3,450 “symptomatic” cases of Covid, when “asymptomatic” was meant.

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Capitol attack panel expects to hear how militia groups coordinated plans before insurrection

Donald Trump speaks at ‘Save America March’ rally in Washington DC on 6 January 2021. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

Testimony could play a major role in establishing whether Trump oversaw a criminal conspiracy in efforts to overturn 2020 election

Hugo Lowell in Washington
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Behind closed doors in a nondescript conference room at the foot of Capitol Hill, the House select committee investigating 6 January next week expects to hear testimony about the connections between the Oath Keepers and the Proud Boys militia groups and the Capitol attack.

The panel expects to hear how the Oath Keepers and the Proud Boys coordinated their plans and movements in the days before the insurrection to the same level of detail secured by the justice department and referenced in recent prosecutions for seditious conspiracy.

And the select committee hopes to also hear in the 5 April deposition – arranged by a senior counsel for the panel – private conversations between the leaders of the two militia groups and whether they might have communicated with any Trump advisers.

The panel should get the evidence both on the record and under oath, according to two sources familiar with the arrangement, to add to raw video footage of a meeting between the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys leaders in a garage across from the Capitol on the eve of 6 January.

The expected testimony and materials represent another significant breakthrough for the investigation and could play a major role in establishing for the select committee whether Donald Trump oversaw a criminal conspiracy as part of his efforts to overturn the 2020 election.

Most crucially for the panel, it could form part of the evidence to connect the militia groups that stormed the Capitol on 6 January to the organizers of the Save America rally that immediately preceded the attack – who in turn are slowly being linked to the Trump White House.

As the select committee moves closer to Trump – who House investigators alleged in a recent court filing that the former president violated federal laws including obstructing Congress and conspiring to defraud the United States as he sought to return himself to power – it is redoubling its efforts.

The information that Sean Tonolli, the senior investigative counsel who set up the deposition, should obtain about the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys in the first week of April means the panel has managed to get all the major evidence for all the big moments.

Members of the Oath Keepers on the Capitol on 6 January 2021 in Washington. Photograph: Manuel Balce Ceneta/AP

In December, the select committee revealed that it had in its possession 2,320 text messages from Trump's former White House chief of staff Mark Meadows, emails such as one with a PowerPoint presentation on staging a coup, and other documents he had turned over to the inquiry.

That alone has been seen as a treasure trove of materials, including messages to and from House Republicans who apologized for not being able to stop the certification of Joe Biden's election win, and more recently, messages with Ginni Thomas, the wife of the supreme court justice Clarence Thomas.

In January, the panel got from the National Archives thousands of pages of Trump White House documents that the former president unsuccessfully sought to shield over claims of executive privilege in a case that Justice Thomas reviewed and emerged as the sole dissenter.

Those included documents in the files of Meadows and the former deputy White House counsel Pat Philbin, among others, and Trump's private schedule for 6 January that showed he gave the crowd a false pretense to go to the Capitol perhaps in the hope that they might stop Biden's certification.

Then the select committee learned of the fake electors ploy – a scheme to send "alternate" slates of Trump electors to Congress in states won by Biden – that ensnared the White House and showed the involvement of some of Trump's most senior aides.

Earlier this month, the panel also revealed in separate litigation that the Trump lawyer John Eastman knew that his plan to have the then-vice president, Mike Pence, reject Biden's wins in select battleground states and return Trump to office was an unlawful violation of the Electoral Count Act.

The panel has so far conducted the vast majority of its investigation in private, conducting nearly 750 depositions behind closed doors, amassing more than 84,000 documents and pursuing more than 430 tips that have come through on its website tip line.

But notwithstanding the secrecy, the select committee has uncovered extraordinary information that has put them several steps closer to potentially forcing them to make criminal referrals to the justice department once the inquiry is complete, the sources said.

What the panel has found and made public so far, the sources said, could also lay the groundwork to sketch out a criminal conspiracy that connects Trump's political plan to return himself to office with the attack itself – its ultimate suspicion, the Guardian first reported.

From its nondescript offices boarded up with beige boards and wood-paneled conference rooms with blinds always drawn, the select committee

has spent the last eight months working in color-coded teams in an attempt to untangle Trump's efforts to subvert the 2020 election results.

The gold team is examining Trump's plans to stop the certification of Biden's election win with the help of Republican members of Congress, and his pressure campaign on state, local and justice department officials to return himself to office.

The red team is looking at the Save America rally organizers and the Stop the Steal Movement, while the purple team is scrutinizing the Oath Keepers, the Proud Boys, the 1st Amendment Praetorian and how militia groups helped lead the Trump mob into the Capitol building.

As the panel moves into the second phase of its investigation, its members have said they want to release in narrative form the evidence of wrongdoing in a series of public hearings that are likely to be delayed from April to May but still focus on how Trump broke the law.

The select committee's purpose remains to recommend legislative reforms to prevent a repeat of 6 January, but the evidence collected by the panel is fast hurtling it towards a conclusion of criminal behavior that could implicate Trump – and necessitate a referral – the sources said.

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