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Names in the newsPuzzle games

Richard Moore: even spies don't want to see our Wordle solutions

[Rebecca Nicholson](#)



The head of MI6 had a point when he threatened to unfollow social media users who insist on sharing their successes at the word game



‘Richard Moore caused a minor stink, which led to the double whammy of winning support from Anneka Rice and a jovial apology from GCHQ.’
Photograph: FCO/PA

Sat 5 Feb 2022 10.00 EST

Where do you stand on sharing your Wordle results? In recent weeks, that innocuous little grid of yellow, green and black squares has become as much a staple of social media as pedantry and passive aggression; it is a cute little flashback to when people’s annoyance at online content peaked with seeing too many pictures of what a stranger had for breakfast.

The word-guessing game continues to grow and grow and millions of people are now playing it. One newish [poll](#) by Morning Consult suggested that as many as 14% of Americans have joined in and that 59% of players share their results, either “often” or “sometimes”. Whether people post often or sometimes, a kind of grid rage is growing. Perhaps it is the sudden influx, or the sense that people are showing off, or talking about something of little interest to others, all of which are about as standard on the internet as someone choosing My Way on *Desert Island Discs*. MI6 chief Richard Moore caused [a minor stink](#) last week when he tweeted that he was “thinking of unfollowing those who post their Wordle results”, which led to

the double whammy of winning support from [Anneka Rice](#) and a [joyful apology](#) from GCHQ in the form of a mocked-up Wordle page.

I'll admit, I had a moment. I popped over to Facebook to check in on the conspiracy theorists – odd that Facebook has seen its first ever [drop in usage](#); I can't think what might be putting people off – and I saw a few grids and clicked away even more hastily than usual. But then I mentioned this to my partner, who promptly told me off for being a misery. "What's the harm?" she said, pointing out, with irritating reasonableness, that it was quite a nice thing to do.

Much of Wordle's appeal is its niceness. It's not too hard, not too demanding, and even when it dares to use American spellings or double-vowelled monstrosities, sharing the fact that nice old Wordle is being a pain in the arse is also a very unifying thing to do. Josh Wardle, its creator, [sold the game](#) to the *New York Times* last week and it's hard to blame him for cashing in.

After "[Black Thursday](#)", plenty of households will be looking down the back of the sofa for a Wordle. For now, it will remain free, which is nice. "At the time it moves to the *New York Times*, Wordle will be free to play for new and existing players," said the buyer, although I note that it was choosing its words carefully.

The Queen: I can't wait to celebrate her lovely Jubbly



A Jubbly plate: fit for a queen. Photograph: Wholesale Clearance UK/PA

Once seen, it cannot be unseen. At first, the commemorative plates, teacups and mugs made in China to be sold in the UK, created to commemorate the Queen's platinum jubilee, look like any other lot of royal memorabilia. Elegant-ish portrait, bit of heraldry, a few flowers, the special dates and a crown. But look closer and it's there. This batch of 10,800 items failed to commemorate the Queen's platinum jubilee. Instead, it pays tribute to Her Majesty the Queen on the occasion of her [Platinum Jubby](#). Lovely.

A Jubbly may not sound quite as regal, but something about this affair is fundamentally British, which should please the play-the-national-anthem-on-the-BBC types. Four days off for a Jubbly? I'll take it. It sounds like one of those old folk traditions, like cheese-rolling or shin-kicking. A competition to invent a special commemorative Jubbly pudding? I'll order mine today, because it sounds delicious. Plant some trees for the Jubbly? As if schoolchildren won't love it. Karl Baxter, the entrepreneurial boss of the clearance website that is selling them, told the BBC he is pitching the items as "limited edition" and "unique".

This is the kind of behaviour that wins people *The Apprentice*, if not the world.

Taylor Swift: in-depth study of a superstar? Bring it on



Taylor Swift: degrees of excellence.

Photograph: Evan Agostini/Invision/AP

It isn't quite a degree in Taylor Swift studies, but students at New York University's Clive Davis Institute can study a [three-month course](#) on the star, which "proposes to deconstruct both the appeal and aversions to Taylor Swift through close readings of her music and public discourse as it relates to her own growth as an artist and a celebrity".

It will be taught by *Rolling Stone* writer Brittany Spanos and, as someone who has read a collection of academic essays on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, I have some envy for those who made it on to the course. Apparently, there is a long waiting list. Look what she made you do.

I would definitely read, for example, a paper that deconstructed the rise and fall of the Squad, though I do wonder what can be taught in the field of Swiftology that thousands of internet theorists have not already painstakingly pieced together and analysed. After all, this is a woman who can write [a scarf](#) into a song and revive that scarf's status as an international obsession an entire decade later.

I have no time for snobbery about the study of pop culture, whether that's an [MA in the Beatles](#) at the University of Liverpool or a module in [Beyoncé](#), gender and race at Copenhagen University. But on hearing about Swift studies, my first thought was clearly conditioned by the shocking expense of higher education in this country. I didn't think, that sounds intriguing. I thought, that sounds like it would be an expensive frivolity and that seems like such a shame.

Rebecca Nicholson is an Observer columnist

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OpinionFrance

The Observer view on the forthcoming French elections

[Observer editorial](#)

With seven leftwing Élysée hopefults in the running, next time the left might win over voters by shunning factionalism



France's equivalent of England's 'red wall' voters have increasingly switched to far-right candidates. Photograph: Fred Tanneau/AFP/Getty

Sun 6 Feb 2022 01.30 EST

France's presidential election is still two months away and the most likely winner, according to opinion polls, the incumbent, Emmanuel Macron, has yet to declare his candidacy. Yet one result already appears certain: the vote will be another, perhaps terminal, disaster for the once-dominant Socialist party and, more broadly, the [French left](#).

Important lessons may be drawn from this impending failure by other European progressive, social democratic parties and also by Labour in

Britain. The re-election victory in [Portugal](#) last week of António Costa's Socialists, who improved on their 2019 performance, demonstrated it is still possible for the centre-left to win, govern and win again.

One basic lesson concerns the willingness to rally loyally round a single standard-bearer, eschewing the factionalism so typical of the left in Europe (and the US). In France, voters are confronted by no fewer than [seven leftwing Élysée hopefuls](#), including the Socialist, Anne Hidalgo, the Greens leader, Yannick Jadot, the hard-leftist Jean-Luc Mélenchon and the Communist, Fabien Roussel.

Social Democrats in Germany ended centre-right rule by forming a coalition with the Greens and neoliberal Free Democrats

Fears of an approaching train wreck intensified after an attempt to agree a “unity candidate” backfired spectacularly. A former minister, Christiane Taubira, won an informal vote, which was boycotted by the main contenders, rendering it meaningless. Of the magnificent seven, only Mélenchon is in double figures in the [polls](#) (10%). Hidalgo, heir to the former Socialist president François Hollande, who only left office in 2017, is on a risible 3%.

Another key lesson for the left is the need to adapt to changing political formations. In Germany, the Social Democrats ended decades of centre-right rule last year by forming an unlikely coalition with the Greens and the neoliberal Free Democrats. In [Norway](#), the Labour party regained power in September by allying with the agrarian Centre party.

In order to win, the left (loosely defined) must also adapt to [changing electorates](#). It is far from clear, in many countries, that a homogenous working-class vote still exists. The end of the communist era, the impact on communities and jobs of deindustrialisation, globalisation and post-2008 austerity, and fears stoked by far-right populists about immigration and identity have altered voting habits.

France has its own equivalents of England’s red wall seats – decaying urban areas where well-paid manufacturing jobs have vanished and investment dried up. But instead of switching to a Tory-like party, voters there increasingly back Marine Le Pen or Éric Zemmour, the siren voices of [far-right reaction and division](#). This is what can happen when the left fails in its responsibility to offer plausible, winning alternatives.

Spain provides perhaps the best European example of how socialism in the 21st century can thrive. Pedro Sánchez’s Socialist Workers party took office in 2018, [in coalition](#) with the populist Podemos and other factions. From the start, Sánchez rejected austerity and prioritised fighting poverty and inequality.

It hasn’t all gone swimmingly, by any means. But Sánchez’s supporters say that by increasing public funding for healthcare and education, boosting the minimum wage by 29%, helping small businesses and insisting that all government policies take account of environmental and climate crisis goals, he has succeeded in reconnecting with disaffected voters – the old “working class” – and in creating a [progressive majority for change](#).

It seems to be working. Recent [polling](#) by the newspaper *El País* suggests the Socialists would triumph afresh if an election were held today, albeit with some losses to the right and far-right. Spain offers no panaceas for the sickness of the left. But it does point to a way forward for those in Britain, France and elsewhere who wonder whether they will ever win again.

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OpinionCost of living crisis

The Observer view on Britain's growing cost of living crisis

[Observer editorial](#)

While the Tories feud over Boris Johnson, the country edges deeper into an economic mire that will cause hardship for thousands



Boris Johnson was accused of ‘scurrilous’ behaviour by former policy chief Munira Mirza after falsely claiming in parliament that Labour leader Keir Starmer failed to prosecute child abuser Jimmy Savile. Photograph: UK Parliament/Jessica Taylor/PA

Sun 6 Feb 2022 01.00 EST

The Bank of England last week published a set of grim economic forecasts that project inflation will peak at over 7% this year and real household incomes will fall by an average of £1,000 by the [end of 2022](#). Meanwhile, the energy price cap will have risen by hundreds of pounds over the same period. Without another Covid wave, it is the cost of living crisis and

particularly its impact on families already struggling to meet their rent, put food on the table and pay their heating bills that will dominate people's lives in the next two years.

Yet Boris Johnson remains mired in the depths of political crisis, debilitated in his role as prime minister, while his potential successors are more concerned with their campaigns to succeed him than addressing the challenges faced by the country. Westminster politics reached a new nadir when, in order to try to shift focus from his own woes, he falsely accused Keir Starmer of failing to prosecute the child abuser Jimmy Savile, a made-up allegation with no grounds in reality. Savile's victims have spoken out about their distress at seeing their abuse politicised by the prime minister in this way and the unfounded slur prompted the resignation of his long-serving policy chief, Munira Mirza, who accused him of "scurrilous" behaviour.

Johnson is no stranger to misinformation. He has made liberal use of it in the past – the Leave campaign he chaired made claims that the UK Statistics Authority later ruled "a clear misuse of official statistics", while as prime minister he has repeatedly spread false information, lying about the implications of his Brexit deal for Northern Ireland. The UK Statistics Authority said his claim made in the House of Commons last Monday that crime had fallen by 14% was wrong. But for the prime minister to try to mislead the country about why the victims of a paedophile never saw justice for his own political advantage is despicable and shames the whole nation.

Johnson's behaviour has been met with a renewed sense of anger among ministers and his parliamentary party. Several senior aides resigned, to be replaced last night by hastily assembled replacements. And his relationship with the truth is now so loose that it is unclear how voters are supposed to distinguish between government announcements that are true or false statements designed to distract from the disintegration of his premiership.

The government's measures to address the rising cost of energy bills go nowhere near far enough. Low-income families have been at the sharp end of tax credit cuts and benefit freezes over the last decade, with many low-paid parents losing thousands of pounds a year as a result. The savings paid for income tax cuts that disproportionately benefited better-off households;

they were a political choice made by successive Conservative chancellors, supported between 2010 and 2015 by the Liberal Democrats. The cuts have left less affluent households particularly vulnerable to this cost-of-living squeeze and are a large part of why [child poverty rates have risen](#) and growing numbers of people are using [food banks](#).

Government support to help with rising energy bills should be targeted at those who need it most, through the tax credit and benefit system. Instead, the chancellor, Rishi Sunak, has chosen to prioritise Conservative voters – and hence his own leadership prospects – by distributing it through a flat-rate, poorly targeted council tax rebate that 80% of households will benefit from; more than 40% of its value will go to households in the [top half](#) of the income distribution, while more than 600,000 low-income households will [miss out](#). The £200 rebate for all households will be taxed back through a £40-a-year surcharge for the next five years, which will push today's cost pressures into the future.

This assumes rosier economic times are just around the corner. Yet Brexit, the great unacknowledged economic dampener, will continue to depress economic growth in the coming years, whether or not voters associate these costs with leaving the EU. Worse still, Brexit is very likely to widen the gap in economic performance between London and the south-east and the rest of the country. This will only further accentuate the impact of cuts in government grants that fund local services, which have hit the least affluent areas of the country much harder than areas that enjoy higher council tax and business rates revenues. The incremental measures in the government's "levelling up" plan published last week will do very little to close the gap in investment and productivity; in 2021, the equivalent of just £32 per person was awarded from the Levelling Up Fund for the north of England, which pales in comparison with the £413 per person drop in council spending [since 2011](#).

This is the parlous situation in which the country now finds itself just over five years after a referendum that paved the way for [Boris Johnson](#) to become prime minister and irrevocably damage standards in public life. Whether he is forced out tomorrow or in a few months, a weakened Conservative party will remain consumed by its own internal politics while

many already hard-pressed families face the worst threat to their economic wellbeing for many years. It is not what Britain deserves.

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Observer comment cartoon

Boris Johnson

A week is a long time in politics for Boris Johnson – cartoon

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NotebookRishi Sunak

Rishi Sunak comes across as Mr Clean, but I've got his number

[Bidisha](#)



Ambitious, on-message and fundamentally well brought up, for the chancellor it is surely only about the maths



British chancellor Rishi Sunak – ‘starchily authoritative, like a pharmacist’.

Photograph: Reuters

Sat 5 Feb 2022 12.00 EST

Despite all the carnage, leaks and resignation letters currently oozing out of No 10, [Rishi Sunak](#) somehow remains clean. Not popular exactly – not even that nice, given the soaring energy bills to come in the spring. Yet he’s still starchily authoritative, like a pharmacist.

In the last two years, I’ve hoarded my Rishi rations (the pandemic self-employment grants the government gave qualifying freelancers) and pondered his lean, debt-assassin appeal. Every time I see him on TV I say out loud: “Rishi! You’re such a good boy! Yes – a GOOD BOY!” I convince myself he doesn’t want to be PM. I think he wants to be chancellor for ever. He literally just wants to do maths homework, all day, every day.

He married a billionaire because she’s into maths too – like, numbers with lots of zeros at the end – and maths is the glue that holds a relationship together. He will never cheat on you or, if he does, it’ll be with a very hi-tech calculator. No, what am I talking about? Rishi can do complex arithmetic in his head. At the risk of leaning into racial stereotypes, he is

literally every boy I was at school with: clever, clean-cut, ambitious, on-message, well brought up, serious and nice.

He also reminds me of every global one-percenter who ever messaged my rich, clever, petite, exotic, beautiful alpha friend Maya on Hinge: “Hi, I work in global cyber security, just spent three weeks talking corporate responsibility at a retreat in Mexico, really great conversations, looking good Maya, love the photos, let’s connect and find some synergy.”

Piling on the agony



The Observer's agony aunt, Philippa Perry. Photograph: Pål Hansen/Pal Hansen

There's been a huge rise in online agony aunts and advice columns during the pandemic, with the ace novelist [Marian Keyes](#) launching a new one this month with Tara Flynn called *Now You're Asking* via podcast with the BBC. You can never have too much advice and I'll add Marian's to my current big fave, Philippa Perry's column in the *Observer*.

The classics of course were the American columnists E Jean Carroll and Irma Kurtz, who will always be the best, while my saltier formative Gen X

voices of guidance were the brilliant Karen Krizanovich in *Sky* magazine in the 90s and the Mrs Mills etiquette column in the *Times*.

I was recently invited to audition as a potential agony aunt. I pitched the idea of Aunt Agony, the best kind of aunt being a spinster who has no nieces or nephews, serves her tea hot and her praise lukewarm, works a nice line in funky earrings and jazzy tops, delivers realltalk with a hint of menace and whose every answer, to every question, is: “He’s trash, they’re all trash, it’s nothing to do with you, drop it and run like hell.”

Fun is no human right



Taking deep breaths – an overrated pastime. Photograph: fizkes/Getty Images/iStockphoto

I’m appalled that there’s a new bestseller out called *The Power of Fun*, along with a whole movement based on the idea of a “funtervention”. Yes, like an intervention for an addict: an unpleasant and humiliating sudden ambush by your nearest and dearest, who confront you with your misery addiction.

Can we please drop the idea that happiness is a human right? Why do we have to enjoy ourselves all the time doing banal activities such as taking deep breaths and doing things for other people? We’re two-thirds of the way

into a pandemic and we're supposed to be trying to be happy? We should all just praise the gods that we're not dead. There's nothing wrong with feeling miserable if you are indeed living in miserable times.

Life is pain. Let's just all watch Netflix until the world ends.

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Warning – this article contains warnings about trigger warnings

[Catherine Bennett](#)



Hardened opera fans are merely the latest victims of this overly cautious approach



Julia Bullock and Jakub Józef Orlinski in *Theodora* at the Royal Opera House. Photograph: Camilla Greenwell

Sun 6 Feb 2022 02.00 EST

The Royal [Opera](#) House recently emailed some well-intentioned content advice to people who'd bought tickets for its production of Handel's oratorio, *Theodora*, first performed in 1750.

The new staging, "by the ever-radical Katie Mitchell", would feature, it said, "explicit presentation of scenes of sexual violence, harassment and exploitation and [the] evocation of themes of terrorism". This thrilling information was sent to hardened opera fans probably accustomed to watching, for instance, young women being stabbed to death in sacks, or abducted, betrayed or left behind in the underworld, or, taking the initiative, killing an unwanted bridegroom in a sea of blood. Maybe it was inevitable that when *Theodora* opened last week some studiously unruffled spectators couldn't help comparing the actual proceedings with its advertised potential to traumatisate. "This isn't the shocking staging we were promised," was the headline of [one review](#).

As writers of trigger warnings will know, there is a definite art to it, starting with the seemingly arbitrary business, as above, of what to warn about.

Then, since triggers within [a single text](#) might range from, say, “blood” to “classism” by way of “sexual assault”, “hateful language” and “death or dying”, the professional warner must decide how many warnings is too many. In the case of *Romeo and Juliet*, the Globe theatre was willing to overlook the statutory rape but mentioned “[references to drug use](#)”, along with stage blood, gun shots and suicide.

Supposing it’s a good idea, as academics at Royal Holloway have [reportedly decided](#), to warn MA students that *Oliver Twist* is replete with child abuse, domestic violence and racism, was it right to leave out the casual cruelty to animals, not only to Bill Sikes’s miserable dog, Bull’s-eye? “Mr Gamfield growled a fierce imprecation on the donkey, generally, but more particularly on his eyes; and, running after him, bestowed a blow on his head, which would inevitably have beaten in any skull but a donkey’s.”

Was it right to leave out the casual cruelty to animals, not only to Bill Sikes’s miserable dog, Bull’s-eye?

Challenged on the *Twist* warning, Royal Holloway told the *Mail on Sunday* that the use of content warnings is “standard and accepted practice within academia”, part of its “responsibility to support the mental health and wellbeing of our students” and exists “to educate and inform students in advance around potentially sensitive topics which could cause them anxiety or distress, perhaps as a consequence of past experience”. Or to put it another way, its *Twist* warning was no more absurd than those others that UK universities have recently applied to work including *Jane Eyre*, [Nineteen Eighty-Four](#) and a children’s book BA module featuring JK Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*. In which, as many 10-year-olds are aware, the child hero starts at wizard school. Older [students are advised](#) to tell tutors “if anything is particularly difficult because of its personal relevance”.

The presumption that students should be protected from literature-induced discomfiture has been criticised and ridiculed, to strikingly little effect, since trigger warnings began to proliferate in the US, around 2015. The wider application of a term previously used therapeutically in connection with trauma survivors was defended by academics such as the philosophy

professor [Kate Manne](#), writing in the *New York Times*: “It is to allow those who are sensitive to these subjects to prepare themselves for reading about them and better manage their reactions.” That such students might routinely view content ranging from Netflix’s blood, gun and drug-reference-rich offerings to news reports about real child murder, catastrophe and genocide is no reason, to such teachers, to downplay the discomfort brought on by a made-up story about a 19th-century governess.

From a teacher’s point of view, perhaps such warning-heightened engagement is easier to deal with than the kind of response that Bernardine Evaristo – and many others – have had to Virginia Woolf: “I didn’t connect with her at all.” That Jacob Rees-Mogg reflexively [denounces](#) trigger warnings – “universities should just grow up a bit” – is a further reminder that excessive feeling is generally preferable to none. Plus, sometimes you can see the point. Many students must be stunned, even as they expect it, by the racism with which much of the western literary canon is infected. It’s still a shock, going back to *Oliver Twist*, to see Dickens interspersing passages of deep fellow feeling with those in which Fagin is repeatedly “the Jew”. Nor is this generation the first to recoil. A Jewish mother [wrote to Dickens](#) in 1863, inviting him to “atone for a great wrong”.

Samuel Whiskers might benefit from a content warning... for gifting a lifetime’s flashbacks to a scuttling rat and a kitten shrouded in dough

More recently, it’s regrettable to some of us that the traumatising potential of some fiction never stopped *Lord of the Flies* and *Of Mice and Men* being considered ideal introductions, for 12-year-olds, to man’s inhumanity to man. *Samuel Whiskers*, too, might benefit from a content warning, not for triggering infant panic attacks, but for gifting them a lifetime’s flashbacks to a scuttling rat and a kitten shrouded in dough.

In fact, the commonest objection to trigger warnings, that they will cultivate generations of fragile, censorious victims, could be less effective in reversing them than growing evidence that, regardless of the benefits claimed, they are pointless. When theatres and universities defend them as standard practice they don’t merely lack proof of efficacy, or any coherent system of application, they ignore academic findings that trigger warnings

have no effect on anxiety and do not alleviate negative emotional reactions. Warnings may even, in the case of trauma survivors, make things worse. “We found,” [one study reports](#), “substantial evidence that trigger warnings countertherapeutically reinforce survivors’ view of their trauma as central to their identity.”

So long as intentionally disturbing literature is understood as a threat to student wellbeing, it looks as if academics need to find some other therapeutic approach. Of course it wouldn’t work for everyone, but after a few minutes with the snuff offerings at *MailOnline* they might turn to Bill Sikes with relief.

Catherine Bennett is an Observer columnist

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Observer lettersNorthern Ireland

Letters: there is no ‘they’ in Northern Ireland

Local people should not blame others for the Troubles that beset Ulster for so long



A scene from Kenneth Branagh's Belfast. Photograph: Rob Youngson/© 2021 Focus Features, LLC

Sun 6 Feb 2022 01.00 EST

The article based on an interview with Kenneth Branagh's cousin ended with a touching remembrance of his ethnically cleansed Catholic neighbours, his final comment being “Northern Ireland can be a great place if they'd just leave us alone” (“[I grew up with Branagh in Belfast: our childhoods haunt his new film](#)”, News). That is the kind of sentiment often heard from this country that sounds significant but is actually meaningless. Who is “they” and who is “us”? Was it all someone else’s fault? The “they” who put his Catholic neighbours out were his fellow Northern Irish Protestants. As the

article makes clear, some of those Protestants could have in their turn been put out by Catholics.

Notwithstanding the involvement of the British army, indigenous tit-for-tat violence was at the core of the Troubles and the reason it went on for so long. If “they” implies some outside influence, it was only the intervention of British, Irish and US politicians in support of home-grown peacemakers that eventually ended the Troubles in 1998. [Northern Ireland](#) can be a “great wee place” (as the saying goes) but only if we Northern Irish make it so. There is no “they”.

Stephen Butcher

Tullaghgarley, Ballymena, Co Antrim

Unions make work better

I've found that the worst workplaces for backstabbing and destructive forms of competitiveness are those where a trade union is weak or non-existent (“[Are you a jerk at work?](#)”, Magazine). A strong workplace union with a good union rep is still the best defence against malpractice, whether from colleagues or the boss. Working atmospheres improve dramatically where grievances are aired and taken forward collectively. People are then less likely to blame and undermine each other for things that are really the employer's or government's fault. If you're being bullied or discriminated against, there's someone who can provide advice and effective support.

So join a union and get involved in the fight for a better deal. It could improve your workplace relationships no end.

Lin Clark

Bristol

Don't ignore Wales, Labour

The interview with the shadow health secretary, Wes Streeting ([New Review](#)) was interesting, but his dismissal of “the left” as “a bunch of people who were relatively recent joiners to the Labour party who didn't understand its history or traditions or how you win elections” reveals his woeful (or wilful?) ignorance of politics outside England. He seems unaware that the

Labour party in Wales has proved very successful in winning elections while adopting leftwing policies and viewpoints. There has been a Labour government in Wales since devolution.

It is disappointing yet again for a senior English Labour politician to dismiss what has happened and is happening elsewhere in the UK, one reason why Welsh Labour party members increasingly feel the UK party is out of touch with them and their country. Such views are aiding the growing calls for independence, which, if achieved, would ensure perpetual Conservative governments in England. The Labour leadership in England would do well to think on this.

Melanie Lloyd

Three Crosses, Swansea

Call that a success?

In your critical survey of Boris Johnson’s claims of success on Covid and other issues (“[We got the big calls right](#)”, News), you rather downplayed the crucial point in relation to his purported Covid “success” – the number of Covid-related deaths, which are higher than any other country in Europe. Even today, although France has many more daily Covid cases, its daily death rate is still surpassed by the UK.

Yes, the UK got off the mark quickly with the vaccination programme, which should have been a way of keeping our Covid deaths low, but this lead was frittered away by all the other mistakes the government made, some of which are detailed in your article. Journalists should be hitting Johnson with this fact, and the related statistics, at every opportunity, not letting him get away with his spurious Covid “success” claims.

Carl Gardner

London EC1

Child-free by choice

My thanks and support to Holly Williams for her clear, sensible analysis of whether or not to have children (“[Why assume it’s a problem if a woman is child-free at thirty?](#)”, Comment).

I'm in my late 70s and among my friends are eight older women who, like me, have no children by choice. Only two have never been in a long partnership or marriage. We are happy with our choice, made for a range of reasons. We're not selfish, child-haters, lonely or weird. We just have chosen not to have children.

Paula Jones

London SW20

Punishment without care

Thank you, Nick Cohen, for your article on the disgrace that is the prison system in the UK ("[How many more Charlie Todds must there be before our prison system is reformed?](#)", Comment).

The way in which those in custody are treated, at whatever stage in their judicial process, is a stain on our society. Severe overcrowding and the self-defeating effect of short sentencing exacerbate the problem and vastly more could be done in the fields of education and training.

Having volunteered for 10 years as a teaching assistant in a London prison, a role that Covid has made impossible with the abandonment of class teaching and 23-hour confinement, I have seen how dedicated, compassionate and expert educators have struggled in the wake of the pitiful lack of resources and managerial imagination to offer the teaching and personal support that can make such a difference to an inmate's prison life and future after release.

It is highly regrettable that so much prison education is provided by private companies that are more concerned with getting paid for filling seats and ticking boxes than for providing opportunities for inmates. It is high time that the public recognised the stupidity and the human and financial cost of our self-perpetuating blunt regime of punishment without care or vision.

Steve St Clair

Potters Bar, Hertfordshire

The insightful article by Nick Cohen makes the point that the prison service is an unpopular posting for civil servants. It is, too, low in the estimation of politicians. Since the general election of 2010, there have been no fewer than eight ministers of justice.

The incumbent reportedly had to be bribed with the mantle of deputy prime minister before he would take the job. In that time, there have been even more prisons ministers, some of whom have shown signs of understanding the need for major reform, but have not stayed in post long enough to do anything about it. The prison service is conspicuously lacking in stability and political leadership, and the chronic state of our prisons reflects this.

Gordon Cropper

Barnet

Look east for the setting sun

While I agree with the selection of the 10 places in the UK to make the most of a spectacular sunset (“[The sky’s the limit](#)”, Magazine), readers may be tempted to visit Hunstanton on the north Norfolk coast whose beach surprisingly faces west and therefore offers many glorious sunsets.

Toby Wood

Peterborough

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/commentisfree/2022/feb/06/letters-there-is-no-they-in-northern-ireland>

[For the record](#)UK news

For the record

This week's corrections

Sun 6 Feb 2022 01.00 EST

An article referred to “the start of the millennium, when an SPD-led German government refused to join America’s war on terror”. We meant “America’s war in Iraq” ([Ghosts of Germany’s past rise again as Scholz seeks a way to solve Ukraine crisis](#), 30 January, p24).

A picture of Ukrainian soldiers training with British supplied weapons showed an anti-tank missile, not “anti-aircraft missiles” as the caption said ([UK prepared to commit extra forces to Nato allies as Russia tension mounts](#), 30 January, p5).

The Dunedin Country House hotel, recommended in a travel feature for those going to admire the sunset at East Yorkshire’s Spurn Point, is in Patrington, not “near Packington” as we said. The latter is about 120 miles away in Leicestershire. Meanwhile, a photograph taken from Ditchling Beacon in East Sussex showed sunrise, not sunset as implied ([The sky’s the limit](#), 30 January, Magazine, p35).

Other recently amended articles include:

[The big picture: Mary Ellen Mark captures teens on the streets of Seattle](#)

[A groundbreaking Strictly final in step with modern Britain](#)

[Juke & Loe, Sheffield: ‘Bold cooking designed to satisfy’ – restaurant review](#)

*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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OpinionCrime

Pulled by a current of Tory indolence, Britain flounders in a sea of dirty money

[Nick Cohen](#)



Fraud costs £190bn a year, but the UK is unlikely to clean up its act when its system is designed to protect the wealthy



Liz Truss's threat of sanctions on the Russian elite 'would carry more weight if the UK were not a country designed to protect oligarchical wealth'.
Photograph: Aaron Chown/PA

Sat 5 Feb 2022 14.00 EST

The paradox of the oligarchical money that washes around the British elite like a sea of dirty water is that it has yet to buy every aspect of British foreign policy. Opposition politicians and journalists can identify the Kremlin-linked billionaires funding the Tory party. We can look in a mixture of revulsion and astonishment at how the naturally conservative milieu of City financiers, libel lawyers, estate agents, the art market and private schools has become as dependent on the proceeds of crime as opioid addicts on OxyContin.

But we cannot say that Vladimir Putin owns this government. The UK supports Ukraine and shows no inclination to excuse Russian imperialism. If you want a truly cynical European power, look to Germany, which would rather see Putin's armies march into Kyiv than risk Volkswagen losing the sale of a single hatchback.

Domestic, not foreign, policy is corrupted. Your taxes are rising and your public services are failing because a governing elite that is at ease with easy

money will not pass laws to drain the money swamp. Because it does not police oligarchs, the government allows every type of fraudster to flourish.

The temptation is to focus on a London populated by caricatures out of socialist agitprop. Here we have Ben Elliot, [connected to royalty](#) via his Auntie Camilla. Elliot provides “[unique access and exclusive privileges](#)” to the super-rich on the one hand and charges Tory donors [£250,000](#) for meetings with Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak on the other.

To show you the damage, however, let me take you far from Mayfair to Manchester crown court by the River Irwell, where Judge Anthony Cross stared at Asif Hussain last month and confessed to being [staggered](#). Before him in the dock was the leader of an organised crime gang with 48 convictions on his record who had nevertheless received a £50,000 Covid bounceback loan without anyone in government undertaking “the most basic of checks”.

The fraud was not detected because the Treasury stirred itself out of its torpor but because Greater Manchester police uncovered the swindle while investigating a stolen car racket.

The pilfered £50,000 was a mere pittance. Thieves helped themselves to at least £5bn of bounceback business loans during the Covid pandemic and that is before you get to furlough and “eat out to help out” scams. More generally, if you are a victim of crime you will in all likelihood be a victim of online fraud. And as the humiliating realisation that you have been conned sinks in, you will also know the police will be unable to do a thing about it.

You can live a rich, comfortable and undisturbed life in the UK as a native fraudster or migrant oligarch

The best guess is that in total [the UK loses £190bn a year to fraud](#) while the government spends just £852m [fighting it](#). As with so much else this government does, the policing of fraud looks as if it is twisted for political gain. Students (who generally don’t vote Conservative) face a student loan company with a budget of £200m and 3,000 staff tasked with preventing

fake applications. By contrast, Sunak committed just £100m to a taxpayer protection taskforce and employed just 1,200 staff to capture older, white-collar criminals (who tend to be solid Tories and, indeed, the friends of cabinet ministers).

You can live a rich, comfortable and undisturbed life in the UK as a native fraudster or migrant oligarch. The secrecy of the financial system hides your assets. You do not have to declare which homes you own. Speaking before the Commons Treasury committee last week, senior staff of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs assured all watching criminals that they had taken a "deliberate decision" to reduce the prosecution of tax fraudsters.

Meanwhile, what the Conservative MP Bob Seely nicely described as a "corrupting cottage industry" of law firms and barristers ensures that anyone who raises questions about fraudulently acquired wealth faces libel actions with costs that run to millions. The judges who hear them are not corrupt, but they lack the intellectual capacity to admit that the inordinate costs of the system they serve suit the interests of the wealthy rather than the interests of justice.

The magnificently diffident Conservative peer Lord Agnew resigned as the minister responsible for countering fraud last month because "it feels somewhat dishonest to stay on in that role". Total fraud losses across Whitehall were running at an estimated £29bn a year, he said, while a combination of "arrogance, indolence and ignorance freezes the government machine".

Ask why this arrogant, indolent and ignorant tolerance of fraud has so afflicted the leadership of a Conservative party that preposterously pretends to be the party of law and order as well as the party of sound money. Bear all three in mind while you listen to a clearly panicking Liz Truss as she promises to deliver an economic crime bill that ministers have delayed bringing before parliament for four years. Truss has to look as if the government will act because she told Putin that the UK would impose sanctions on the Russian elite if he invaded Ukraine, a threat that would carry more weight were the UK not a country designed to protect oligarchical wealth.

A serious policy response would mean providing the funding to Companies House so it can weed out and prosecute the beneficial owners of the thousands of criminal enterprises it currently covers with a patina of respectability. It would include cleaning up the City, clamping down on corruption in UK-controlled tax havens and stopping the libel courts being used as weapons in asymmetrical warfare by hostile foreign powers.

I am happy to be proved wrong, and ministers would have the support of patriotic Conservative MPs if they acted, but I cannot see this government doing it. When (not if) Johnson is thrown out, the odds are that he will look to the oligarchs for easy money, like George Osborne and so many others before him.

In *Butler to the World*, a terrific book out next month, Oliver Bullough describes how the Treasury has always deferred to tax havens, hedge funds, private equity and venture capitalists and opposed any attempt to make fraud harder to perpetrate. It will do so again.

Those same financial interests that influence the Treasury supply the Conservative party with donations and personnel. The sea of dirty money is the sea the Conservative leadership swims in. It can no more live outside it than a fish can live on land.

Nick Cohen is an Observer columnist

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Headlines thursday 3 february 2022

- [Cost of living Treasury preparing 11th-hour package to soften national crisis](#)
- [Live UK politics: Sunak set to respond to huge rise in fuel bills amid cost of living crisis](#)
- [Live Business live: energy price cap to rise, and UK interest rates set](#)
- [Bank of England UK interest rate rise predicted as cost of living crisis deepens](#)

Cost of living crisis

Treasury preparing 11th hour package to soften national cost of living crisis

Measures include £200 rebate on energy bills as millions of households brace for record rise



Protesters in London hold signs calling for an end to fuel poverty and help with heating bills. Photograph: Vuk Valcic/SOPA Images/REX/Shutterstock

[Jillian Ambrose](#) and [Rowena Mason](#)

Wed 2 Feb 2022 18.25 EST

The Treasury is scrambling to complete 11th-hour plans capable of softening a national cost of living crisis, including a £200 rebate on energy bills and more help for the poorest households.

No 10 and the Treasury have been under pressure from Tory MPs to act as millions of households brace for a record hike in energy bills from April,

and the prospect of rising mortgage rates and tax increases.

With the Conservatives sliding in the polls and Boris Johnson under fire over parties in No 10 during lockdown, the prime minister and his chancellor, Rishi Sunak, met to stitch together a multi-billion pound package to address concerns about household bills.

Downing Street repeatedly refused to comment on Wednesday on the idea of a £200 discount on energy bills, backed by a £5.4bn plan to make loans available to energy suppliers which would be repayable over several years.

However, the measures are expected to be a major plank of the package due to be announced on Thursday.

Sunak will deliver a statement to the Commons laying out the details at 11.30, followed by a press conference at 5pm in Downing Street.

The Treasury is also understood to be considering a targeted approach to help the most vulnerable households by doubling the payouts from an existing winter fuel payments scheme and extending its reach to include more households.

There were also reports on Wednesday night that Sunak was poised to introduce a council tax cut for the poorest households in bands A to C.

Ofgem, the energy regulator, is to announce on Thursday morning a rise in the current cap on energy bills will bring the steepest hike for default energy tariffs on record. This threatens to catapult the average home energy bill to almost £2,000 a year from April, from £1,277 over the winter, plunging millions into fuel poverty.

In an unprecedented move, Ofgem agreed to bring forward its scheduled announcement for the new cap on default energy tariffs from Monday to align with the Treasury's plan to set out a series of measures to help ease the burden on people.

But fuel poverty campaigners fear the rescue package will fail to go far enough to help Britain's most vulnerable homes. The "heat now, pay later"

scheme would do nothing to help vulnerable people living in fuel poverty, according to a spokesperson for the End Fuel Poverty Coalition.

“[The] Ofgem price cap announcement, which will be somewhere between devastating and catastrophic for millions of people across the country, could very quickly wipe out any support these loans can provide,” the spokesperson said.

“The devil will be in the detail of what the government has cooked up, but unless there is sufficient support for the most vulnerable people, they won’t be able to disguise the reality of millions more people being forced into fuel poverty,” he added.

Households can also expect mortgages and other borrowing to get more expensive as the Bank of England tries to keep surging inflation under control.

The Bank is widely expected to signal a hike in interest rates on the same day as the energy announcement, dealing a double whammy to households paying off mortgages and other debts. Banks and building societies are expected to respond immediately by lifting variable rates.

Ministers and central bankers have been forced to act as households brace for the toughest squeeze on incomes in years. The official inflation rate reached 5.4% in December, [the highest level since March 1992](#), driven by soaring gas and electricity prices and the higher cost of food and clothes.

Threadneedle Street has warned that inflation could peak at close to 6% by April, three times the 2% target rate set by the government.

The Treasury is under pressure to cool the growing concerns over a nationwide cost crisis by setting out a multi-billion pound cushion for hard-pressed people and businesses, many of which are still reeling from the economic fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, Johnson and Sunak have resisted calls to scrap April’s controversial £12bn increase in [national insurance contributions](#).

Citizens Advice has warned the government that, without action to support those on the lowest incomes, hard-pressed householders would be pushed past breaking point.

In a “red alert warning” before the expected energy price hike, the consumer group revealed that the number of people seeking one-to-one crisis support from Citizens Advice, such as referral to food banks and advice on emergency one-off grants, reached its highest level on record last month.

More than 270,000 sought one-to-one advice from Citizens Advice, and the charity expects numbers to rise once the energy price hike takes effect from April.

“Cost-of-living pressures are at boiling point,” said dame Clare Moriarty, the chief executive of Citizens Advice. “Frontline advisers are hearing desperate stories of families living in just one room to keep warm, people turning off their fridges to save money and others relying on hot-water bottles instead of heating due to fears about mounting bills.”

The consumer group said its data had reached “red alert levels” as the number of people supported with energy debts climbed to more than 8,000 for the first time, while the average energy debt climbed to a record £1,450, up from £1,330 in 2020.

“If the government doesn’t act soon and bring forward a package of support for those on the lowest incomes, many more households will be pushed beyond breaking point,” she said.

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

[**Politics**](#)

Two more senior Boris Johnson aides resign amid Downing Street exodus – as it happened

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[**Business live**](#)

[**Business**](#)

Cost of living: families face biggest fall in disposable income for three decades, Bank of England warns – as it happened

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Interest rates

UK interest rate rise predicted as cost of living crisis deepens

Bank of England to vote on potential rate change while inflation soars to 30-year high



Grocery prices rose 3.8% over the four weeks to 23 January compared with the same period last year. Photograph: Daniel Leal/AFP/Getty Images

[Phillip Inman](#)

[@phillipinman](#)

Thu 3 Feb 2022 01.00 EST

Britons are braced for the Bank of England to increase interest rates on Thursday as the central bank seeks to tackle price pressures that have pushed annual inflation to a [30-year high of 5.4%](#).

Most City economists said the majority of members on the Bank's rate-setting committee would increase the base rate from 0.25% to 0.5%, with the likelihood that at least two more increases would follow during 2022.

On the eve of the Bank's decision, 29 economists from 45 respondents to a survey by Reuters predicted that the monetary policy committee (MPC) would go ahead with a rise, while 16 forecast that rates were likely to remain on hold.

High-street lenders are expected to increase the cost of variable-rate mortgages immediately after the vote, adding to the cost of living crisis facing many of those borrowing to buy a home. Rents are also likely to increase as landlords pass on the cost of borrowing to tenants, though savers will enjoy a long-awaited rise in the interest paid on deposit accounts.

A separate survey by the data compiler IHS Markit found that 49% of households – a record high – believe that Threadneedle Street policymakers will impose at least one rate rise in the next three months.

IHS Markit said it was clear that the MPC's [surprise vote in December](#) to increase the base rate from 0.1% to 0.25%, and to signal three rate rises to 1% this year, had filtered through to the public.

Chris Williamson, the chief business economist at IHS Markit, said: "UK households have grown increasingly certain of the [Bank of England](#) hiking interest rates for a second meeting in succession, with expectations of tighter policy having spiked higher since last October as inflation worries took hold."

He said recent surveys of business activity had shown the economy was "displaying encouraging resilience in the face of the Omicron [coronavirus] wave", while employment agencies had reported that wage growth rose sharply as employers competed to attract staff amid widespread labour shortages.

"With the Omicron wave already ebbing and virus containment measures eased, there's a good chance that the pace of economic growth will

accelerate in coming months, which will likely add to speculation that further rate hikes are on the table as we head into spring,” said Williamson.

Pressure on the Bank has grown after a surge in the price of energy, secondhand cars, food and household goods that pushed the consumer prices index (CPI) to 5.4% in December and the retail prices index (RPI), which is used for wage bargaining, to 7%.

The Bank aims to keep inflation at 2% over a two- to three-year period.

High demand for goods during a succession of lockdowns, combined with shortages caused by Covid-related delays made worse by hold-ups at UK ports due to Brexit, has pushed up prices.

Grocery prices rose 3.8% over the four weeks to 23 January compared with the same period last year, according to the market research company Kantar. It said prices were rising fastest for fresh beef and poultry, savoury snacks, crisps, skincare and cat food, offset by falls in the price of fresh bacon, vitamins and beer.

Industry figures showed that a broader measure of shop price inflation almost doubled in January to the highest level for nearly a decade, pushed up by the spiralling cost of furniture and flooring.

Annual inflation of goods bought from retailers rose to 1.5% last month from 0.8% in December, according to the latest data from the British Retail Consortium trade body and the market research company NielsenIQ, which is the highest level since December 2012.

The energy regulator is [expected to increase the price cap](#) on gas and electricity by more than 50% to reach almost £2,000 a year on Thursday, up from an [average of £1,277 this winter](#), to reflect record high gas prices caused by a global crisis in supply.

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2022.02.03 - Spotlight

- 'My life completely turned around' Is manifesting the key to happiness – or wishful thinking?
- James McAvoy Play Hamlet? Nah – he's always seemed a bit of a moaner to me
- 'It is soul-destroying' Lorry drivers face hours stuck in queues at Dover
- 'A deranged pyroscapes' How the quest to banish fire has unleashed new threats

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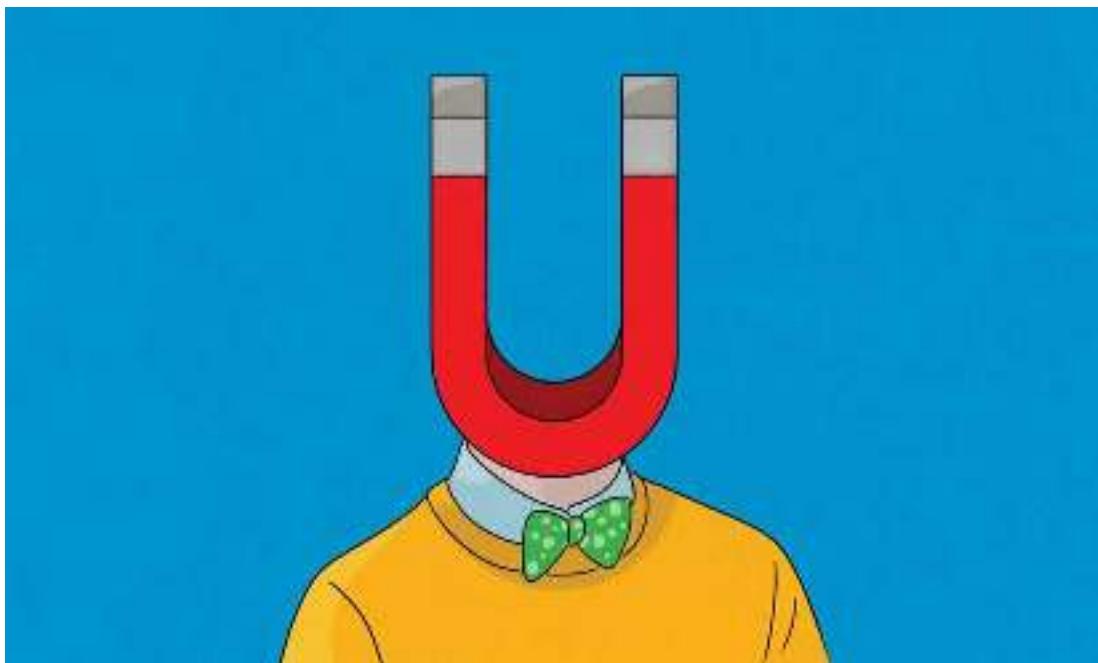
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‘My life completely turned around’: is manifesting the key to happiness – or wishful thinking?



‘Manifestation is attractive because it feels like something you can do to bring about happiness.’ Illustration: Steven Gregor/The Guardian

The controversial concept of willing your goals into existence has leapt in popularity since Covid began. But how do you do it – and can it help you realise your dreams?



[Ammar Kalia](#)

Thu 3 Feb 2022 01.00 EST

In the first months of the UK's spring 2020 lockdown, Jennifer Doyle, a teacher and single mother, was at a low point. "I was in a bit of a hole, struggling to cope on my own and focusing only on the negatives of my life," says the 39-year-old. "Then – during a Zoom quiz, of course – my friend said I should look into manifestation to help. I did – and my energy totally shifted. I started thinking about what I wanted from life, rather than what was wrong with it."

Doyle was not alone. In early July 2020, [Google Trends](#) reported a peak in searches for "manifestation", which is often described as a way of willing your goals into existence. In the past 22 months, the website [Life Coach Directory](#) has seen a 450% rise in potential clients searching for manifestation techniques. On TikTok, the hashtag #manifestation has [13.9bn views](#). It is part of the huge wellness market, [which is worth about £1.1bn](#).

I too spent the past two years raking up existential questions in response to the world's chaos (and my impending 30th birthday). What am I doing with my life? When will I next be able to afford a holiday? Faced with another year of broken resolutions, impending deadlines and chasing late invoices, I decided to investigate manifestation further, to see if I could find some answers – and perhaps attract some good stuff to myself.

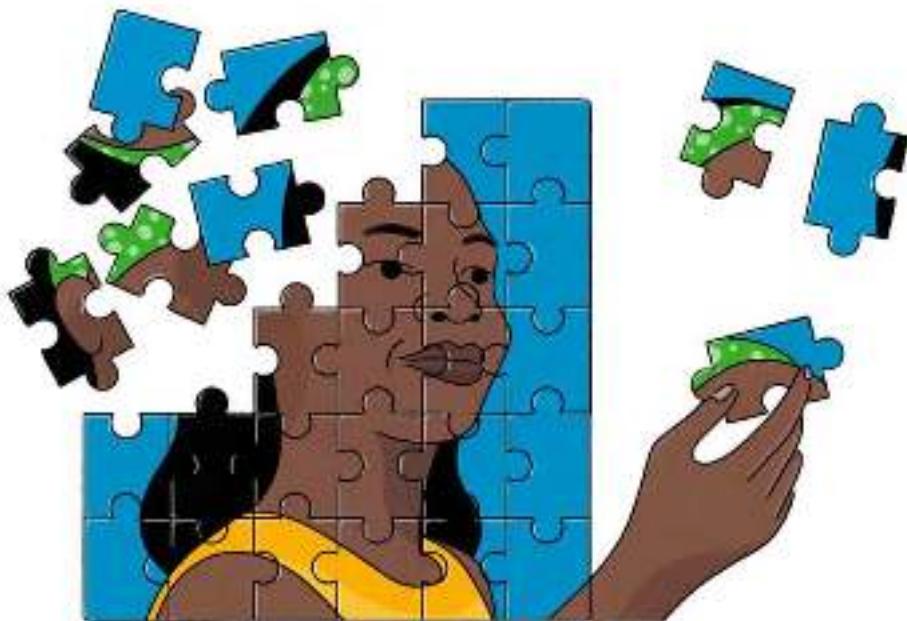


Illustration: Steven Gregor/The Guardian

A life of wealth and leisure is the first thing that springs to mind to manifest, but how manageable is that? “Manifestation can be a slippery fish to work with,” says the psychotherapist Dr Denise Fournier. “In pragmatic terms, it is the practice of translating something from thought and idea into a tangible reality. It is a nuanced way of using intention to create an image of a goal you want to achieve and then cultivating discipline and actions that keep you oriented towards that goal.”

This loose definition means manifestation can align with any number of life coaching and sports psychology principles, from visualisation and intention to self-control and self-belief. No wonder those of us stuck at home and faced with the uncertainty of the Covid world were attracted to its methods of self-improvement. “Life is always happening, but when you add intention the result is more likely to happen in your favour,” Fournier says.

“It’s positive thinking,” agrees Doyle. “I always had impostor syndrome, but manifestation has helped me believe more in my life and its possibility. I break my goals down and put action into them until I start to notice things popping up.” Each morning, she writes down 10 things for which she is grateful, before spending time visualising her goals, then writing her next steps in her journal.

I decide to narrow my goal of “wealth and leisure” into something more achievable, so that I can visualise it. One of my long-held dreams is to become an author. I finished writing a novel last year, but have been dithering about sending it to agents and publishers. Now, I decide to take a leaf out of Doyle’s book and make a daily visualisation practice to become a published author. I start setting myself “actionable steps”, or tasks: editing the text, selecting agents, sending out emails. I find myself beginning each morning picturing myself wearing tweed jackets and grandly declining an OBE for services to literature, while my days are surrounded by sheets of paper and scraps of notes for edits and pitches. This is starting to feel a lot like work and a lot less like magical thinking.

The popular idea of manifestation – a way of dreaming something into reality – stems largely from the 2006 book and film *The Secret* by the TV executive Rhonda Byrne. In it, Byrne outlines her “law of attraction” – that if you ask the universe for something and believe in its reality, you will receive it. Positive thinking attracts positive results, claims Byrne as she suggests historical figures such as Winston Churchill, Albert Einstein and even Jesus Christ used these principles in their lives. The book has sold more than 35m copies and attracted a legion of celebrity fans. Jim Carrey believes he manifested [a \\$10m payday](#), Oprah Winfrey [her role in *The Color Purple*](#).



‘My energy totally shifted’ ... Jennifer Doyle with her book *Billy the Blackbird*. Photograph: Courtesy of Jennifer Doyle

The Secret also has its share of detractors. In her 2009 book, Bright-Sided, Barbara Ehrenreich wrote that The Secret was part of a wellness trend that had led the US public to become self-interested and detached from political reality. The scientists Christopher F Chabris and Daniel J Simons argued in [a 2010 essay](#) that The Secret used jargon and selective history to produce an “illusion of knowledge”. The writer Mark Manson has called it [“a playbook for entitlement and self-absorption”](#).

Today’s manifesters, however, have moved away from spiritual energy. Doyle started manifesting with [The Manifestation Collective](#), a UK-based online community run by Victoria Jackson. “The Secret is what first got me interested in manifestation, when I was working as a magazine editor,” she says. “But it can lead you into thinking that if you are having a bad year, you will manifest only bad things into your life, which I don’t think is true.” Rather, she says, “manifesting is about changing your thoughts, which in turn will affect your actions and then become habits and behaviours. It’s about letting go of the limiting belief that we can’t achieve certain things.”

Raised in a working-class household in Leeds, Jackson believes manifestation helped her overcome messages that she had internalised

concerning what she could achieve in her work and life. “I manifested leaving my job to set up my own business and being able to work while travelling the world,” she says. “It’s about focusing on what feels good, rather than what looks good, then being incredibly specific about your goals. We’re trying to keep them at the forefront of your mind to always work towards.”

Amman Ahmed, a 34-year-old entrepreneur, also believes manifesting helped him transcend his limiting beliefs. “I grew up in an environment where working in a call centre was the norm,” he says. “In 2008, I got an internship at HP [Hewlett-Packard] and I thought I had made it, but when I discovered manifestation I realised I could do so much more than just be on the corporate ladder; I could build my life the way I wanted to.”

Ahmed has since founded a multimillion-pound company, [Relax My Dog](#), which produces music and videos for pets. “When I walked to work each morning, I was always visualising my goals,” he says. “I used to joke that I was a millionaire, but temporarily broke. You really have to live in the 3D reality of what you want to achieve and change how you think. It made me realise I wanted a certain lifestyle first and then I worked backwards on how to get there.”

Habits can change, but it takes effort and determination – there is no magic of the universe at play

Dr Kevin Mitchell

But doesn’t constantly focusing on your own gain breed a materialistic worldview or even narcissism? “Success can become an addiction and you have to question when it serves you and when it doesn’t,” Ahmed says. He is now reading up on meditation and ways to maintain his contentment. “Manifestation can be like therapy – consciously doing an inventory of yourself and always asking: ‘Why?’ when it comes to behavioural patterns,” he says. “Sometimes you might have searched enough.”

This constant self-assessment sounds difficult. Fournier says it can be. “It can get prickly drilling down into people’s learned behaviours, and often the things they wanted to manifest initially change,” she says. I ask her how I

might help along my own manifesting. “You need to look at how you are standing in the way of your fulfilment, then explore that.” She says my goals are likely to come to fruition if I connect with my vision and “show up in my own life” – in other words, put the work in.

Her response hits a nerve. Soon I am sweating and sifting through my subconscious. Am I too scared of rejection and failure to commit to trying for what I want? If my book doesn’t get published, does that mean manifesting doesn’t work – or that I am a bad writer?

“If you think whatever you do is miraculously manifested, it sets us up to be disappointed when we don’t get what we want,” Fournier says. “It can also mean that we judge others who aren’t manifesting and we can ignore systemic global and contextual problems. For instance, it’s really myopic and dangerous to think people who are in poverty aren’t manifesting themselves out of it. Manifesting is merely setting intentions for your life. It’s not about placing value judgments on yourself if you don’t succeed.”



‘I realised I could do so much more than just be on the corporate ladder’ ... Amman Ahmed, the founder of Relax My Dog. Photograph: Courtesy of Amman Ahmed

Is there any science to back up the idea? In her 2019 book *The Source*, the neuroscientist Tara Swart wrote about neuroplasticity – the brain’s capacity to be shaped by its environment. “If we don’t take responsibility for this, then our brains are moulded by outside experiences, which can be good or bad,” Swart says. “If we focus attention on what we want to change, deliberately practise new desired behaviours and are held accountable, we can change behaviour patterns.” Alongside the manifestation company [To Be Magnetic](#), Swart has created a method of “neural manifestation” that purports to reprogram subconscious limiting beliefs using “neuroscience, psychology, epigenetics and energetics”. If merely thinking about how I was standing in my own way made me sweat, the idea of reprogramming my subconscious sounds cultish.

But another neuroscientist offers a note of caution about the use of scientific terminology. “There is a danger to using terms like epigenetics – the science of cell development, turning genes on and off to create a cellular memory,” says Dr Kevin Mitchell, an associate professor of genetics and neuroscience at Trinity College Dublin. It lends an aura of respectability to something that he describes as “woo-woo”.

“The idea of a cellular memory can be conflated with psychological memory – and neuroplasticity can be broadened to encompass any changes in behaviour. Genes only influence our personality, rather than determine it,” he says. “The only positives of manifestation I see are in becoming more aware of our behaviours and paying attention to them, like in mindfulness. [Habits can change](#), but it takes effort and determination – there is no magic of the universe at play.”

Dr Caroline Hexdall, a psychologist who specialises in mindfulness, agrees. “Manifestation is attractive because it feels like something you can do to bring about happiness and success, but it’s when we accept the struggle that things change,” she says.

It seems manifestation can mean anything to anyone – a euphemistic term for the daunting process of self-awareness and accountability. “Some people prefer the language of spirituality and others positive psychology,” says Alana Leggett, a life coach at the Life Coach Directory. “Since it’s such a broad term, you can mould manifestation to fit the person and their belief

system so that it works with them. It mainly builds self-confidence and focus, since it's really hard to be accountable and consistent in making changes – just look at how many people make and break their new year resolutions.”



The Secret's out ... Rhonda Byrne, whose bestselling book helped establish the popular idea of manifestation. Photograph: David A Walega/WireImage

This makes sense: during the fortnight I have been manifesting, I have felt my confidence about my creativity grow. Just setting the intention to work on my book has led to a renewed sense of enthusiasm that has nudged away fear at its possible failure.

The boost in confidence and focus has also worked for Doyle. She spent the past 18 months writing and self-publishing a children's book and has met a new partner. “I wasn’t open to meeting a boyfriend, but manifesting helped me believe that there would be someone out there for me,” she says. “We soon met online and now we’re having a baby in August. It’s perfect.”

Whether her recent gains have been down to luck, manifestation or a combination of both, Doyle sees no downsides to continuing to envisage a better future for her new family. “If something makes you feel happier and you’re not harming others, why not continue?” she says. “Since I’ve been

manifesting, my life has completely turned around and I don't think I'll stop."

I have not been so successful; I have received no responses to my flurry of book emails. Visualising has been fun and helped me to realise that I can hope for more from my life (as well as realising that tweed is not my look), but I can't help feel uneasy at a practice that appears so insular and self-centred. I worry that if I continue with this laser-like focus, I will lose sight of the other, more fleeting, joys of life: laughing with loved ones, dancing drunkenly, reading for its own sake and simply living. Perhaps we can be happy with these things, rather than always chasing our own goals.

Only time will tell if my manifestation bears fruit – and I am not ready to give up completely. So, if any agents or publishers are reading this, well, my email address is in my [Twitter bio](#) ...

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Interview

James McAvoy: ‘Play Hamlet? Nah – he’s always seemed a bit of a moaner to me’

[Arifa Akbar](#)



‘Philadelphia is like a second home for me’ ... James McAvoy. Photograph: Sarah Lee/The Guardian

He came blazing out of Glasgow like a rocket, scoring hits and acclaim. As he returns to the stage in a hard-rapping, homoerotic Cyrano de Bergerac, the star talks about partygate, snout size – and tackling Lear when he hits 100



[@Arifa_Akbar](#)

Thu 3 Feb 2022 01.00 EST

James McAvoy is talking about Cyrano de Bergerac, the long-nosed, lovestruck poet [he first played on stage in 2019](#), and is now about to reprise. But every now and again he interrupts himself with off-piste observations that have nothing to do with 17th-century libertines and doomed love triangles. It slowly becomes clear that he is inside his car, which is parked at the stage door of the Harold Pinter theatre in London, ready to jump into rehearsals after our chat.

“What’s this guy doing?” he says, in his meta commentary of people-watching. “Oh my God. There’s a labourer walking down the road and he doesn’t have any trousers on. He’s just in long johns and he has got the

biggest penis I think I've ever seen." Wait, how can he tell? "Because he's wearing long johns! And he's packing a nine-inch –"

All right, back to Cyrano. How does it feel to return to the loquacious swaggerer? "Partly," he says, "it makes you feel like two years haven't happened. Most of the lines were still just there in my head, without me having to worry, which has never happened before. I once sat with Patrick Stewart and Ian McKellen and both of them had a 'Macbeth-off' where they started speaking Macbeth to each other. I had just finished doing Macbeth and I swear I could not remember a syllable, man. It was awful."



'It's radical but quite classical as well' ... at rehearsals for Cyrano.
Photograph: Marc Brenner

The show is directed by Jamie Lloyd, who dispensed with the idea of "characters" early on in the original run. Instead, he asked the cast to bring themselves to their parts. [This, says McAvoy](#), is what makes it a tricky endeavour: "The show relies on being authentic and you're two years older now. So you're slightly different people. Then Jamie went even further and said, 'I don't want you guys to wear costumes.' And we ended up wearing a slightly heightened average of what we all wore a lot of the time."

Lloyd's production is a daring reconceptualisation, using everything from rap and beat-boxing to poetry slam mics front of stage. Edmond Rostand's Alexandrine verse has been freely – audaciously – adapted by Martin Crimp, who adds modern parlance and street slang, all of it striking for its intensity and speed of delivery. What's more, Cyrano's relationship with Christian – the handsome young lover for whom he writes words, to help him woo the woman they both love – comes with homoerotic edges. What does McAvoy make of these reworkings?

"It's radical in lots of ways but it's quite classical as well. Martin really sticks to the couplets and rhyme of Rostand's original, more than a lot of versions. The fact that it sounds like rap at times or poetry slams is partly down to Martin, but also down to the fact that Jamie cast people who create those beats, and for whom spoken-word performance is part of their everyday."

Even the homoeroticism doesn't seem particularly radical to McAvoy, because it was always nestling in the subtext of the story. "I feel like it's daft not to explore it when you're talking about a love triangle. If I had to spend all my time loving a woman through a man who loved her and who loved him back, I would have to love him, too. The fact that it doesn't get explored in other versions, I think, is about what people want to see and what they are ready for."



Fancy a ‘Macbeth-off’? ... McAvoy with Patrick Stewart in X-Men: Days of Future Past. Photograph: Alan Markfield/20th Century Fox/Allstar

And what about the absence of Cyrano’s biggest comic feature? Why no big nose? McAvoy replies: “As soon as Jamie and I said, ‘Let’s do Cyrano,’ he said, ‘I don’t want to do any noses.’ I said, ‘Oh, but it’s about a nose.’ And he said, ‘No it’s not. The first act’s about a nose – but the rest is about objectification.’”

After London, the show is transferring to New York but before that it will go to Glasgow, where McAvoy spent his childhood. His parents split up when he was seven, after which his father dropped out of his life. When his mother became ill, McAvoy was sent to live with his grandparents, who partly brought him up. How does it feel to be taking this show home, if Glasgow is still home? “It’s where I was born, where I grew up. I’ve still got a place there and all my family there. I see myself as a Glaswegian and a Londoner – a Glaswegian Londoner.”

McAvoy, who is 42, separated from his former wife, [Anne-Marie Duff](#), in 2016, and met the Philadelphian Lisa Liberati on the set of M Night Shyamalan’s thriller Split (Liberati was Shyamalan’s PA). They began a relationship a couple of years later and, he confirms, recently got married. So he’s now an honorary Philadelphian, too, isn’t he? “Yeah, it’s like a

second home for me,” he says, but does not want to elaborate on this side of his life for fear of creating tabloid fodder.

Acting wasn’t McAvoy’s first or only vocation. He thought about becoming a missionary so he could go to “far flung places”, then almost joined the Royal Navy. He grew up on a council estate but the ambition was to have a big life and broaden his horizons. In the end, he chose to go to drama school, at what is now the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, graduating in 2000, and his career didn’t take long to sky-rocket. It hasn’t really come down, with such acclaimed films as [The Last King of Scotland](#) and Atonement under his belt, alongside the X-Men blockbusters and the [BBC/HBO series His Dark Materials](#). In 2015, he pledged a significant sum of money to a 10-year scholarship programme at his old drama school. Was that about greater access into the industry?



Words of love ... with Anita-Joy Uwajeh, who plays Roxane, during rehearsals. Photograph: Marc Brenner

Not really, he says. “I don’t really care if all the people who have been through the scholarship process end up becoming actors or not. It would be a symptom of things getting better if our stages and screens continued to be diverse for the next 40, 50 or 100 years. But being exposed to art at an early age is not about creating artists – it’s about creating better people who are

more able to communicate and feel worth something. Art, in all forms, allows you to see beyond your physical confines. If you do that then anything's possible.”

McAvoy has spent the entire pandemic in Britain, taking only UK-based film projects, and co-parenting his 11-year-old son, Brendan. He has done his part to help the NHS, too: in March 2020, he donated £275,000 to a crowdfunding campaign. Having been here throughout the lockdowns, how does he [feel about partygate](#)? “I’ve been disappointed in our political system for decades. So the fact that it’s letting us down isn’t a massive shocker.” So he feels disappointed by the system rather than by Boris Johnson? “I think the system relentlessly produces *people* that disappoint.” As for partygate, he adds: “We’re not even asking that they be held to a higher standard – and they can’t even fucking do that.”

If we wait until Covid is truly over to put on shows, then theatre and music might not exist

McAvoy has spoken about [Scottish independence](#). Does he think Scotland should reach for this now? “The fact that Boris and his company of people who enjoyed a drink while they were telling everybody not to isn’t necessarily something that will make me go, ‘Oh yes, Scottish independence’ – even though he is iconic of an educational and elitist class system that plays into Scottish independence massively. Independence could be a fantastic thing but it needs to be done for the right reasons. Don’t choose it because we don’t like Boris. Choose it because we want it. We can’t just define ourselves by our relationship with England. I’m sick of that.”

What about post-pandemic life? Does he feel safe under the new relaxed rules, in theatres particularly? He says he recently contracted the Omicron variant, even after being double-vaccinated and boosted. It put him out of rehearsals for a while. Although there is a risk, he says, there is also the importance of congregating as a society, in which theatre plays a vital part. “Every time you step outside you are taking a risk. But how long can we maintain a society that doesn’t move, that doesn’t connect? If you feel

comfortable coming, we'll see you. If you were a regular theatregoer and you're not coming, we'll see you in a couple of years. But if we wait to put on shows until this whole thing is truly over – if that's ever going to happen – then things like theatre and music might not exist.”

McAvoy has sometimes nodded off in the wings, a result of experiencing the same kind of tired tension a boxer might feel before a fight. [He did so with Macbeth in London in 2013](#), which demanded so much, physically and emotionally. But he loved the part and would like to take on more Shakespeare. Maybe Hamlet? “Nah, I’m not that bothered about doing Hamlet. He’s always seemed a bit of a moaner to me.”

King Lear? “Yeah, I’d love to, when I’m 100. You can do whatever you want in a production – but I want to feel I’m giving something of myself. So if I’m playing someone on their deathbed, I want to at least feel nearer to it.”

Cyrano de Bergerac is at the [Harold Pinter theatre, London, until 12 March](#), then at [Theatre Royal Glasgow, 18 to 26 March](#), and at Brooklyn Academy of Music from 5 April to 22 May 2022.

This article was amended on 3 February 2022 to correct a misnaming of director Jamie Lloyd as “James Lloyd”.

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Lorries being held on the approach to Dover on the A20 to avoid traffic overrun around the port and town centre.

‘It is soul-destroying’: lorry drivers face hours stuck in queues at Dover

Lorries being held on the approach to Dover on the A20 to avoid traffic overrun around the port and town centre.

Emergency traffic controls triggered 20 times this year as extra Brexit checks and freight volumes cause logjams

by [Joanna Partridge](#), photographs by [David Levene](#)

Thu 3 Feb 2022 12.09 EST

His lorry loaded with British Airways aircraft parts, Ivo Hradilik was expecting to drive on to a ferry heading to Calais, before delivering his cargo to the outskirts of Paris.

But there is a problem with the customs paperwork, and the 26-year-old HGV driver from the Czech Republic will have to park up near the Port of Dover while the haulage company sorts everything out.

“From the new year it has got worse with the paperwork,” Hradilik said, clutching a handful of documents. He usually visits Dover five times a month bringing goods between Britain and the EU.



Ivo Hradilik: ‘Since 1st January, I have queued every time in Dover.’

Hradilik expects to wait for hours before setting sail. On Wednesday, long queues of lorries built up once again on the approach roads to Dover, with as many as 100 vehicles waiting on the A20.

The sheer volume of HGVs meant the town’s temporary traffic management system was activated twice on Wednesday, once at 5am and again at midday. Known as TAP – Operation Travel Access Protocol – it can be triggered by a request from the port authority or the police to the National Highways agency.

Lorries heading for the port are required to stay in the left-hand lane of the A20 dual carriageway. Then small groups are called forward by a police officer stationed at the Aycliffe roundabout, once space becomes available at the port for them to enter the terminal.

01:00

Scores of lorries wait along A20 dual carriageway as Dover delays continue – video

According to National Highways, TAP has been activated 20 times so far this year, compared with 69 times for the whole of 2021.

The Port of Dover claims the main cause is a rise in freight traffic, rather than [Brexit](#). The drivers see things differently. Many blame the introduction on 1 January of the first controls on imports from the EU, and a new UK government IT system for goods entering and leaving the country.

“Since 1 January, I have queued every time in Dover,” Hradilik said. “From Calais it is better – there is only about two hours’ waiting.”

Time spent queueing in his cab is time that goes unpaid. Under Hradilik’s contract, he gets paid per kilometre driven, rather than time spent on the road.

When out of their vehicles, HGV drivers are easy to spot in Dover – they walk around holding sheaves of paperwork. Ciaran Donovan, a driver based in the UK who regularly travels back and forth to the continent, said the holdups were due to the extra time needed by staff to check the forms.

He is unable to charge his customers more for extended journey times – including the hours spent queueing to reach the port – as he fears they will find another firm to carry their goods.

“Having to sit there in the queues for free in order to earn money is soul-destroying,” Donovan said.

Donovan has also been caught out on the other side of the Channel when returning to the UK. Last Friday, he was stuck in Calais for 16 hours because he had not received the paperwork required to enter the UK.

“I think the customs agents can’t cope. They’ve got too much work,” he said.

Snaking up the A20 on Wednesday, the vehicles were from a host of countries including Ireland, Germany, Poland, Lithuania and Serbia.

Doug Bannister, the chief executive of the Port of Dover, said the new import controls were partly to blame, along with a 25% increase in freight traffic in January compared with a year earlier, combined with roadworks and two of the 12 ferries that serve the port currently being refitted.

“If folks were expecting the whole trading system to operate after we left the EU as it did before, that is clearly not possible. There is increased friction, that is what Brexit is partly about,” he said.

Freight traffic usually begins to climb in mid-January, after the Christmas break, but the long tailbacks seen so far this year have taken many drivers who regularly travel to Dover by surprise.

Some point to teething problems for users of a new IT platform – the goods vehicle movement system (GVMS), required when moving cargo into or out of Great Britain and Northern Ireland – which launched on 1 January.



Operation TAP in action approaching the Port of Dover. Lorries approaching Dover on the A20 are filtered into the left hand lane and held on the approach to Dover town, to avoid traffic overrun around the port and town centre.

“No doubt as people get more used to the paperwork which is required, and links to systems and codes used, it will get a lot smoother and slicker,” said Bannister.

The Guardian can reveal that the new GVMS portal, which is the responsibility of HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC), was not available to users for 15 minutes on 31 January, when there was a system outage.

An HMRC spokesperson said: “The goods vehicle movement system and other customs systems are online and working as planned. Traders and hauliers are adapting very well to the new processes.”

This will come as scant consolation for Fernando Naranjo Sanchez, a driver from Seville in Spain, who said he had regularly queued for several hours to reach the port in January. The 35-year-old visits Dover two or three times each month, bringing clothing manufactured in Morocco to the UK.



Fernando Naranjo Sanchez: ‘It is worse than it used to be.’

“Two Mondays ago I was waiting on the A20 for seven-and-a-half hours,” he said. “It is worse than it used to be. There is more paperwork.”

Meanwhile, Vitalii Shulha, a driver from Ukraine, said he had been stuck in an eight-hour queue to reach the port in the final week of January.

Haulage firms warn of [further hurdles on the horizon](#), when physical controls on the import of EU products of animal and plant origin, which have [been delayed several times](#) by the UK government, are implemented in July.

For many drivers, haulage firms and customs agents the queues and complications are a new reality, additional frictions that will be a continuing feature of post-Brexit trade.

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Illustration: Bruno Haward/Guardian Design

[The long read](#)

‘A deranged pyroscape’: how fires across the world have grown weirder

Illustration: Bruno Haward/Guardian Design

Despite the rise of headline-grabbing megafires, fewer fires are burning worldwide now than at any time since antiquity. But this isn’t good news – in banishing fire from sight, we have made its dangers stranger and less predictable

by [Daniel Immerwahr](#)

Thu 3 Feb 2022 01.00 EST

The hundreds of bush fires that hit southern Australia on 7 February 2009 felt, according to witnesses, apocalyptic. It was already hellishly hot that day: 46.4C in Melbourne. As the fires erupted, day turned to night, flaming

embers the size of pillows rained down, burning birds fell from the trees and the ash-filled air grew so hot that breathing it, one survivor said, was like “sucking on a hairdryer”. More than 2,000 homes burned down, and 173 people died. New South Wales’s fire chief, visiting Melbourne days later, encountered “shocked, demoralised” firefighters, racked by “feelings of powerlessness”.

Australians call the event [Black Saturday](#) – a scorched hole in the national diary. There, it contends with Red Tuesday, Ash Wednesday, Black Thursday, Black Friday and Black Sunday on Australia’s calendar of conflagration. But recently it has been surpassed – they all have – by the [Black Summer](#), the cataclysmic 2019-20 fire season that killed hundreds with its smoke and burned an area the size of Ireland. A study estimated that the bushfires destroyed or displaced [3 billion animals](#); its stunned lead author couldn’t think of any fire worldwide that had killed nearly so many.

This will keep happening. As the planet heats, combustible landscapes will dry and ignite. Less fire-prone lands, such as Greenland, will start catching fire, too. Environmentalists now [urge us to imagine](#) the whole world aflame. If our old picture of climate breakdown was a melting glacier, our new one is a wildfire. Its message is simple and urgent: the higher we crank up the heat, the more everything will burn – call this the “thermostat model”. With headlines reporting enormous fires from [Sacramento](#) to [Siberia](#), it’s easy to feel that we’re already on the brink of a devastating global conflagration.

The truth, though, is stranger. Satellites allow researchers to monitor wildfires around the world. And when they do, they don’t see a planet igniting. Rather, they see one where fires are going out, and quickly. Fire has a long and productive place in human history, but there’s [now less of it](#) around than at any point since antiquity. We’re driving fire from the land and from our daily lives, where it was once a constant presence. What used to be a harmonious relationship between humanity and fire has become a hostile one.



Volunteers working at the scene of a forest fire in Siberia in August 2021.
Photograph: Ivan Nikiforov/AP

Fewer fires burn today, but the ones left are formidable. Our pyroscape has become deranged, with fire taking on new shapes, visiting new places and consuming new fuels. The results are as confounding as they are unsettling, and our instincts are poor guides. Although we often hear about fires where rich people reside, such as in Australia's south and the US west, fires kill the most – by far – in places where poor people live, like south-east Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. The deadliest fires aren't the largest and most spectacular ones, but the smaller, regular ones that are rarely reported by global media. They kill by smoke rather than flame, and their main cause isn't global heating. Many are kindled by corporate-driven land clearance.

None of these conclusions should be particularly comforting. What they suggest, rather, is that fire is more complex than the thermostat model suggests. It's shaped by how we grow our food and place our settlements as much as it is by how we fuel our cars. Addressing our fire problem will thus require more than managing the rising temperatures of recent years – though that's still essential. It will also require us to confront a longer history that, since the Industrial Revolution, has thrown our relationship with fire out of whack.

Our rapid economic growth has taken fire from old places and carried it to new ones. The climate crisis has unbalanced things further. Today's unpredictable fires are a complex product of our economy and ecology. They're just not ones we've prepared ourselves for.

Humans didn't "start the fire", the noted pyrohistorian William Martin Joel [has argued](#). "It was always burning, since the world's been turning." The Joel Hypothesis, we now know, is only half right. People didn't invent fire – that part is true. But, surprisingly, it's a relatively recent phenomenon. For something like the first nine-tenths of Earth's history, a stretch of around 4bn years, the planet was an unburnable rock.

Fire requires fuel, oxygen and a spark. Lightning, volcanoes and even tumbling rocks can provide ignition, but without vegetation and oxygen, nothing will burn. It was only after cyanobacteria pumped the atmosphere full of oxygen and mosses and stemmed plants spread over land, which they did around 450m years ago, that the world's first fire broke out.

That wasn't just the first fire on Earth, but also the only fire within trillions of miles. The sun, despite appearances, isn't aflame; its heat and light come from nuclear fusion, not combustion. ("Don't think of the sun as a giant campfire," advises physicist Scott Baird, but as "a giant hydrogen bomb".) We know of no other planet, even outside the solar system, where fire exists.



Polar bears digging in a garbage dump in northern Canada. Photograph: Tom Nebia/Getty Images

Fire flourishes where life does, and the two depend on each other. There are pyrophilous (“fire-loving”) plants and animals that organise their lives around fire, such as the [beetles](#) that lay eggs in burned trees or [pine cones](#) that need flames to release their seeds. More than individual species, whole ecosystems depend on fire to clear space. In many habitats, fire is “as fundamental to sustaining plants and animals” as sun and rain are, a 2005 scientific [survey](#) found.

The most successful pyrophilous species is *Homo sapiens*. Early humans used fire for light, warmth, social gatherings and protection from predators. Fire lets us absorb nutrients quickly through cooking, rather than spending hours chewing every day as our primate cousins do. Chimpanzees, orangutans and gorillas all eat raw food, and they all have much smaller brains. The caloric boost of cooking underwrites our large, resource-heavy brains. Simply put: no fire, no us.

No us in an evolutionary sense, and no us in a historical one, too. Every known human society has used fire. Our ancestors didn’t just dispel darkness and prepare food with it, they shaped their environments: repelling pests,

flushing out game and making clearings. With spears, they could hunt individual animals; with firesticks, they could alter whole landscapes.

It's easy to think of our forebears, using their torches to set forest fires, as vandals, but it's more accurate to see them as gardeners. Fire let people domesticate spaces by opening pathways, creating meadows and beating back the wilderness. The ancient Romans referred to a clearing burned in the woods as a *lucus*, a sacred grove where the light came through – it shares a root with “lucid”. People also set their surroundings alight to protect themselves against wildfires; doing so let them regularly burn away fuels that, if left to accumulate, might feed a hard-to-control blaze. Thus did “fires of choice”, in the words of the anthropologist Henry Lewis, replace “fires of chance”.

What must it have been like to use fire this way? Victor Steffensen sheds some light in his [recent book](#) *Fire Country: How Indigenous Fire Management Could Help Save Australia*. In it, he tells of [two brothers](#), Poppy Musgrave and Tommy George, Aboriginal elders and the last speakers of the Awu Laya language. The pair grew up in the era of the [stolen generations](#), the long stretch from the early 20th century to the 70s when Australian authorities forced vast numbers of Aboriginal children to assimilate by removing them from their parents and communities. Musgrave and George dodged that fate by hiding from the police in mailbags. By evading capture, the brothers served, until their deaths, as key repositories for an imperilled culture. Not only did they carry their language into the 21st century, they also carried firesticks.

“The old people used to burn the country all the time,” Musgrave told Steffensen. For Musgrave and George, fire wasn't destructive, but purifying. Thick vegetation, the sort others might interpret as lush or abundant, elicited howls of frustration from them. The overgrown country, in their view, was “sick” and “suffering”. “We need to burn it,” they exclaimed, to make it healthy.



Controlled burning on a farm in Denmark in August 2021. Photograph: Ritzau Scanpix/Reuters

The name in English for someone who starts fires is arsonist. It's telling that there's no familiar word for someone who carefully tends a landscape with flame. But Steffensen's book shows this to be as venerable a calling as any other. It bulges with wisdom relayed by the brothers: when and how to light boxwood country afire so nearby ecosystems remain intact, which gum trees to burn and which to leave be.

Australia, where Aboriginal people once travelled with firebrands and kindled the brush as they walked, offers a prominent example of firestick farming. But there's every reason to suppose that the practice was global. From the 16th century onwards, Europeans encountering the peoples of Africa, Asia, the Americas and the Pacific reported seeing intentionally set fires in all those places. This shouldn't have been surprising; Europeans had nurtured their own lands by burning them, too.

The history of humanity is the history of fire, but you wouldn't know that from seeing how people live today. Fire – natural and human-made – has been banished from view, to the point where we regard its return with great apprehension.

Some of that fear makes sense. For centuries, cities had been built largely of organic materials – wood and thatch were common – and burned easily. London’s [1666 fire](#), which destroyed more than 13,000 structures, is famous, but it wasn’t anomalous. A fire perhaps 20 times that size had levelled Constantinople six years earlier.

Europeans extinguished those “astonishingly frequent” fires, the historian Eric Jones argues, by switching to flame-resistant material. The “brick frontier”, as Jones calls it, spread through Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries, and soon elsewhere. As brick, concrete and eventually steel structures replaced wooden ones, urban blazes grew rare.

But Europeans fireproofed more than just their cities. Their inventions also drove fire from daily life. Steam technologies moved burning from hearths to boilers. Electricity provided energy, light and heat cleanly and quietly, with no indication of its origins. Our lifestyles today depend on combustion, in that [more than five-sixths](#) of global energy comes from burning fossil fuels. But aside from the tightly controlled flame of a stovetop gas burner or the occasional candle or cigarette, many of us can go weeks without seeing fire.

Is that a problem? It might have been to the ancients, many of whom worshipped fire gods. And yet the dominant mindset of modernity has been one of intense pyrophobia. The Enlightenment, as its name suggests, prized illumination. But it did so as “light without heat”, the philosopher Michael Marder has observed. As western technologies banished flames, western thinkers came to see firestick farming as dangerously primitive.



A blastfurnace at a steel factory in Germany. Photograph: Wolfgang Rattay/Reuters

Or, perhaps, just dangerous. European scientific forestry, which emerged in the 18th century and spread around the world, took as its mission the extirpation of fire. “Only YOU can prevent forest fires” was the message the US Forest Service drilled into children starting in the 1940s through its famed mascot [Smokey Bear](#). But *should* forest fires – which occur naturally and have been profitably kindled by humans for millennia – be prevented? Forestry officials wouldn’t entertain that question seriously until the late 20th century. Until then, they sought to snuff out flames everywhere.

Today, forest managers have backed off their suppression strategy and are coming to appreciate [cultural burning](#). (An Australian university granted the Aboriginal elders Poppy Musgrave and Tommy George honorary doctorates before they died in 2006 and 2016.) But the widespread fear of fire remains. This is surely why environmentalists latch on to images of wildfires. There’s nothing unnatural, novel or even necessarily worrisome about a forest burning. But we are children of the Enlightenment, and fire terrifies us.

Infernos blaze hot on our screens. And yet overall, as scientists have repeatedly noted, the amount of land burning yearly is going down. By a lot. Between 1998 and 2015, it decreased by a quarter, according to [a 2017 study](#).

in the journal Science. Even flame-addled California, where fires have increased in the past two decades, is still markedly less fiery than it once was. Stephen Pyne, a brilliant chronicler of fire's history, estimates that before Europeans arrived in California, fires, natural and anthropogenic, burned twice the area that they now do.

This counterintuitive finding – the global decrease in fires – isn't good news. The main reason fires are dwindling is that humanity is expanding. Sprawling settlements and industrial farms act as firebreaks in the savannas of South America and Africa and the grasslands of the Asian steppe. Livestock consume vegetation that otherwise might feed big burns. “A shift toward more capital-intensive agriculture has led to fewer and smaller fires,” the authors of the 2017 Science study concluded. And that decrease – especially in flame-reliant landscapes in sub-Saharan Africa and northern Australia – outweighs the uptick in headline-grabbing megafires.

It might seem that extinguishing wildfires has made the world safer. But what it has really done is made the fires stranger. Where flame grows rare, biomass that would normally have regularly burned instead piles up as kindling. Decades of fire suppression is enough to build timebombs, and the supercharged blazes that do break out are more severe and harder to control. This is what the US now experiences every year: overall, the number of its fires is shrinking, while their size and the cost of fighting them are growing.

Purposeful burning can relieve the dangerous accumulation of fuel loads, but, without the intimate knowledge of a landscape that comes with centuries of tending it, it can also go badly awry. In 2000, a prescribed burn in a federally protected area of New Mexico got out of hand. More than 18,000 people had to flee, and the fire came perilously close to the tritium facility at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (had it burned, radioactive contaminants would have spread widely). “The calculations that went into this”, confessed the secretary of the interior, “were seriously flawed.”

Surely they were, but in place like New Mexico, where decades of settlement spread and fire suppression have starved the land of flame, the slightest contact between industrial life and dry vegetation – a downed power line, an exhaust pipe brushing grass – can mean conflagration. In 2018, a blaze in California known as the Ranch Fire burned 1,660 sq km. Its

start? Sparks from a rancher striking a metal stake with a hammer. The resulting fire lasted 160 days.

Such eruptive fires will only worsen with global heating, which dries fuels in fire-prone places. But global heating itself is a consequence of our modern relationship to fire. Because, despite appearances, we haven't actually stopped burning things. Instead, we've extinguished open and visible fires and relegated burning to boilers and vehicular combustion chambers. There, fire feasts not on living grasses, shrubs and trees, but on fossilised plants that died hundreds of millions of years ago.

The difference is vast. Societies using living vegetation for fuel are tightly limited by what the land can grow, and what people and animals can haul. With fossil fuels, however, we dig deep into concentrated stores of ancient organic matter, incinerating whole centuries' worth of buried plant life annually. The coal, oil and gas we burn each year required as much organic matter to make as the entire planet grows in roughly 600 years. And as we burn it, we release long-dormant stores of carbon into the atmosphere.

This has changed our relationship with time, the fire historian Pyne has observed. We used to burn what grew around us, with effects largely limited to our own day. Now we excavate plant matter from the deep past, burn it in the present, and send its byproducts wafting into an uncertain future.

One thing we already know about that future is that it will be hot. And that heat is lengthening fire seasons in the most flame-prone environments. After Black Saturday in 2009, Australians recalibrated their index of fire danger, adding a new category, "catastrophic", to describe the record-breaking weather conditions that they now regularly encounter.



A sign indicates the highest fire alert level in Sydney, Australia in December 2019. Photograph: David Gray/Getty Images

Thus far, the raised temperatures haven't resulted in more fire overall; the global trend is still downward. But like fire suppression, the increased heat is encouraging new kinds of unruly fires, such as those in the far north. Arctic lands contain huge reservoirs of peat – ancient vegetation that hasn't entirely broken down. Historically, much of that peat has been buried under frozen ground or protected from flames by cold and damp conditions. But as permafrost melts and summers lengthen, those rich peatlands encounter fire and burn furiously. Scientists are now wrapping their heads around "[zombie fires](#)" that can survive through winter by feeding on smouldering peat underground and emerge in the spring, releasing huge stores of sequestered carbon.

We're now well into a geologic epoch in which our behaviour is the main driver of the climate. The [Anthropocene](#) is what we usually call it – the age of humanity. Pyne [thinks](#) we might just as well call it the Pyrocene – the age of fire. It was burning that got us here, and now we're facing the consequences of Earth's "unhinged pyrogeography".

Seeing flames lick the suburbs of [Athens, Greece](#), or [Boulder, Colorado](#), it's hard to disagree. We're addicted to burning things, but we've kept fire like a

shameful secret, hiding it from sight and bottling it up in boilers. Now it's spilling out, uncontrolled: the return of the repressed.

The wildfires tormenting combustible landscapes such as California – which has experienced eight of its 10 [largest recorded fires](#) in just the past five years – highlight the threat of climate breakdown. And yet the California fires, for all the attention they've received, have been more dramatic than deadly. The 2018 Ranch Fire, which burned [for months](#), only directly killed one person. California's entire 2020 fire season, the largest in its modern history, was about as lethal as three days of traffic accidents on California roads.

That's something we rarely acknowledge about megafires: they burn plants and animals, but spare humans. The Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters at the Université Catholique de Louvain in Belgium maintains a [database](#) of more than 22,000 large global disasters since 1900. The earthquakes in its database killed on average more than 2,500 people, and the floods nearly 11,000. But the wildfires? They killed on average 23, rounding up.

It's not that fires are harmless. It's rather that the ways they harm people aren't the ways that come most readily to mind. Unless you're a firefighter, you're extremely unlikely to die in a big blaze. But you might shave years off your life by inhaling the particulates and chemicals that fires release.

The death toll from wildfire smoke is enormous: 339,000 die a year from such smoke-related maladies as strokes, heart failure and asthma, [according to](#) the Australian public health scientist Fay Johnston and her fellow researchers. A few die in the affluent places known for their telegenic fires, such as North America and southern Australia (more than 400 from Australia's 2019–20 Black Summer, Johnston and her colleagues [have estimated](#)). But the vast majority die in poorer places, where fires are smaller, yet chronic: sub-Saharan Africa and south-east Asia.



A peatland fire in Ogan Ilir, Indonesia last year. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

The south-east Asian fires are particularly worrisome. Rather than visiting land that has regularly burned for millennia, they're feeding on Indonesian forests and peatlands newly penetrated by economic development. These aren't thermostat fires, where global heating is the main culprit (though it's not helping). They're chainsaw fires, lit as timber, palm oil, rubber, petroleum and gas firms pry open the closed-canopy forest. Moisture floats out, wind blows in and a largely fireproof ecosystem becomes combustible. Plantation managers have sped things along by torching trees to clear the land. And it seems that the people those plantations evicted may be setting fires in retaliation.

In 1996, as industrial development pressed on Indonesia's rice lands in Java, the nation's president, Suharto, initiated the Mega Rice Project to convert the peatlands of Central Kalimantan into Indonesia's new rice bowl. Over the quiet grumbles of experts – Suharto, then nearly 30 years in power, was not known for his receptivity to dissent – he had tens of thousands of workers [dig 6,000km of canals](#) through Central Kalimantan's waterlogged peat forests. Developmentally, this accomplished little – even drained, the area was a poor place to grow rice. But environmentally, it exposed long-

submerged peatlands, with their vast stores of prehistoric carbon, to the flames.

No single one of Indonesia's many fires in recent decades has been especially noteworthy. But altogether they've been cataclysmic. In 1997, a dense haze of airborne particulates from Indonesia's fires was perceptible as far as the Philippines and Thailand. That year, on Sumatra – centre of Indonesia's fires – a commercial plane [crashed](#) due to poor visibility and killed all 234 aboard. The next day, two ships collided off the coast of Malaysia for the same reason, and 29 crew members died.

The economist Maria Lo Bue [found that](#) Indonesians who were toddlers during the 1997 haze grew less tall, entered school six months later and completed almost a year less of education than their peers. Another economist, Seema Jayachandran, [found](#) that the fires "led to over 15,600 child, infant and fetal deaths", hitting the poor especially hard.

Indonesia's fires keep coming back, as does its haze. School closures, business losses and flight cancellations due to air quality are now routine. In 2015, another bad year, the plume from Indonesia's fires [stretched from](#) east Africa to the middle of the Pacific. Those fires, feeding largely on dried peat, were also shooting ungodly amounts of previously sequestered carbon into the skies. At the height of the 2015 fire season Indonesia was [emitting more](#) greenhouse gas daily than the US.

This catastrophe, engulfing the world's fourth-most populous country in a choking haze and badly exacerbating global heating, would seem to be a story with legs. And yet international coverage of Indonesia's fires has been sporadic at best. You can find recently published books covering California's wildfires from virtually every angle: investigative journalism about incarcerated women [working as firefighters](#), an inspiring [chronicle](#) of a high-school football team from a burned town, a [children's book](#) about escaping wildfire and [an account](#) of Zen practitioners defending their monastery from a blaze. But a search on Amazon turns up only one book published in English about Indonesia's fires in the past 20 years: an 80-page economist's assessment of governmental mitigation programmes.



Smoke hovering over Kalimantan in Indonesian in September 2019.
Photograph: Nasa Earth Observatory Handout/EPA

The result of this unbalanced coverage is a warped understanding. When we think of how humanity is kindling fires, we think of global heating, which is the sum of our energy use in general. Our “burning planet” becomes an existential crisis, linked to modernity, rather than one tied to any specific company, activity or governmental scheme. And we think mainly of how fire affects the affluent people whose property is at stake, rather than the poor people whose lives are.

Picture a dangerous fire and you’re likely to imagine a thicket of tall trees blazing in a drought-stricken climate. But a more accurate image is smouldering peat or scrub burning by a tropical logging road. The real threat isn’t catching fire, but the slow violence of breathing bad air. You’ve got a hacking cough, your father suffers a stroke and you watch your daughter – short for her age – leave school a year early.

Fire is not in itself a bad thing. Many landscapes, built to burn, simply couldn’t exist without regular fires, either natural or intentional. Though foresters once sought to tamp blazes out everywhere, we now recognise that as a grave mistake. A fireproof planet isn’t something we can get, or should even want.

It helps to think of fire as like rain. Our world needs precipitation, and some ecosystems even depend on floods. But, as we know, it's possible to have too little rainfall in one area and too much elsewhere, to see some places parched and others dangerously inundated. Something similar has happened with fire – we're getting too much and too little at the same time.

We badly need a healthier relationship to combustion. Rather than erratic, runaway fires, we need regular, restorative ones, like we used to have. Our forebears didn't shun flame – they were relentless fire-setters. But they adhered to two important limits. First, they fed their fires with living vegetation, which reclaims lost carbon as it regrows. Second, they were guided by long-acquired experience with fire's complex paths and consequences.

We've blasted far past both of those limits. We're now burning fossilised vegetation, which sends carbon on a one-way trip to the warming atmosphere. And we're kindling fires that bear little resemblance to the ones we're used to. There's no generational wisdom telling us what to do when we drain the peatlands of Central Kalimantan or let dry fuel pile up precariously in the [California](#) countryside, all while raising the temperature to hitherto unrecorded heights.

[Books about fire](#) typically end with prescriptions: we must invest in science, reclaim lost cultural knowledge, burn intentionally, build resiliently and power our grids renewably. All that is true, surely. But given how complex fire is, and how unprecedented nearly everything we're doing with it is, the best advice would seem to be: slow down. We have scrambled our landscape, changed our energy diet, altered the climate and revised our relationship to flame, all in a very short time. It's not a surprise that fire, once a useful if obstinate companion to our species, has now slipped our grasp.

The world won't burn up, as we sometimes imagine. But the fires of tomorrow will be different from those of yesterday, and we're racing headlong into that unsettling future, burning tankfuls of gas as we go.

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Coronavirus

Exposure to one nasal droplet enough for Covid infection – study

Trial in which volunteers were given dose of virus is first to monitor people during entire course of infection

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The study suggests lateral flow tests are a reliable indicator of whether infectious virus is present. Photograph: Jon Santa Cruz/Rex/Shutterstock

Hannah Devlin Science correspondent
[@hannahdev](https://twitter.com/hannahdev)

Wed 2 Feb 2022 10.12 EST

Exposure to a single nasal droplet is sufficient to become infected with Covid-19, according to a landmark trial in which healthy volunteers were intentionally given a dose of the virus.

The trial, the first to have monitored people during the entire course of infection, also found that people typically develop symptoms very quickly – on average, within two days of encountering the virus – and are most infectious five days into the infection.

The study was carried out using a strain of the virus before the emergence of the Alpha, Delta and Omicron variants.

The trial's chief investigator, Prof Christopher Chiu, of Imperial College London, said: "Our study reveals some very interesting clinical insights, particularly around the short incubation period of the virus, extremely high viral shedding from the nose, as well as the utility of lateral flow tests, with potential implications for public health."

The findings, published on Springer Nature's pre-print server, and which have not yet been peer-reviewed, detail the outcomes in 36 healthy, young participants with no immunity to the virus. The volunteers were monitored at a specialist unit at the Royal Free hospital in London, and experienced no severe symptoms.

The study found that the infection first appears in the throat and that infectious virus peaks about five days into infection, by which point the nose has a much higher viral load than the throat. The study also suggested that lateral flow tests are a reassuringly reliable indicator of whether infectious virus is present. Swabbing the nose and throat makes it more likely to detect infections during the first few days, the work suggests.

"We found that overall, lateral flow tests correlate very well with the presence of infectious virus," said Chiu. "Even though in the first day or two they may be less sensitive, if you use them correctly and repeatedly, and act on them if they read positive, this will have a major impact on interrupting viral spread."

The study also revealed that of the 18 people who became infected, all had similar viral loads regardless of whether they developed symptoms, underlining the role of asymptomatic transmission.

Prof Wendy Barclay, the head of the department of infectious disease at Imperial College London, said: “A lot of people could be walking around shedding virus and not realising. It’s really marked with this virus.”

Intriguingly, some of those who did not meet the threshold for being infected also had very low levels of virus detectable in their noses and throats, suggesting that they may have experienced a very short-lived infection that was seen off by immune activity in the lining of the nose and throat.

The team are expected to publish further findings giving a unique window into the earliest phase of the immune response, during the first hours and days after encountering the virus.

The team say the trial paves the way for future challenge studies that could help accelerate the development of the next generation of vaccines and antiviral drugs. Phase 3 studies have become increasingly difficult to plan due to the erratic levels of transmission in the population. Challenge studies are far quicker and require far fewer participants to establish efficacy.

Prof Sir Jonathan Van-Tam, the deputy chief medical officer for England, said: “Scientifically, these studies offer real advantage because the timing of exposure to the virus is always known exactly, therefore things like the interval between exposure and the profile of virus shedding can be accurately described.

“This important study has provided further key data on Covid-19 and how it spreads, which is invaluable in learning more about this novel virus, so we can fine-tune our response.”

Canada

Ottawa police considering military intervention to end ‘unlawful’ blockade

Authorities also warned bringing in the military carried a ‘massive risk’ as they believe the protesters are armed



Dozens of tractor trailers are refusing to leave the highway near Coutts, Alberta, where drivers are protesting mask mandates, vaccines, and other Covid-19 restrictions. Photograph: Jeff McIntosh/AP

[Leyland Cecco in Toronto](#)

Wed 2 Feb 2022 16.54 EST

Police in Ottawa warned they may have to call in the military to disband “unlawful” protests in the nation’s capital and a town near the US border, amid mounting tensions between protesters opposing Covid restrictions and local residents.

The Ottawa police chief, Peter Sloly, warned on Wednesday that the officers did not have the resources to remove a fleet of trucks parked by the protesters in the national capital, adding the city was considering requesting help from Canadian armed forces.

But he warned bringing in the military carried a “massive risk”, adding that protesters are believed to have weapons.

“We do not want riots, but all options remain on the table,” he said.

The police chief said that a “significant element” in the United States was involved in organizing and funding the protests.

A GoFundMe campaign to support the demonstration has raised more than C\$10m (US\$7.9m) in recent days for what began as a protest against a vaccine mandate for truck drivers but has increasingly become an avenue for far-right groups.

Tamara Lich, the crowdfunding organizer, is part of the separatist Maverick party, and Patrick King has previously claimed the coronavirus vaccine is being used to “[depopulate the white race](#)”.

Officials expect more protesters to arrive in the city over the weekend, and described the situation “volatile”.

Residents have become [increasingly frustrated](#) with the blaring truck horns and a number of local businesses have shuttered. The Rideau Centre, a popular mall downtown, announced it would remain closed until 6 February.

“Residents have been abandoned during a national crisis – an occupation of our city,” said city councillor Catherine McKenney, calling on police to ask the RCMP for help.

Protesters [released a statement](#) on Wednesday, saying they sympathized with residents over the disruption to daily life, but added trucks would only leave once the federal government repealed its public health restrictions, many of which are under provincial and municipal jurisdiction.

Many senior conservative lawmakers have [embraced the movement](#), prompting accusations of hypocrisy, after those [same parliamentarians](#) called for police to [disband Indigenous-led blockades](#) in 2020.

The standoff near the Alberta border town of Coutts has entered its fifth day, with dozens of trucks blocking access to a key highway used to enter the United States. The town is an important border crossing for Alberta's meat exports and imports of livestock feed.

Police issued an ultimatum to protesters on Tuesday, threatening them with arrest if they remained on the road. A small group left, but many trucks remained. Others breached a police barricade to join the blockade.

The Alberta premier, Jason Kenney, condemned the “unlawful” blockades, calling on protesters to disband and return home. He told reporters people sympathetic with the protests had assaulted police and someone tried to ram RCMP members.

“Without hesitation, I condemn those actions and I call for calm amongst anybody who feels sympathetic to those engaged in this blockade,” said Kenney.

After a series of [Indigenous-led blockades](#) paralyzed rail traffic in 2020, Kenney’s government passed a law that allows for additional penalties against protesters blockading highways and other infrastructure.

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Coronavirus

Pfizer seeks US authorization of Covid vaccine for children under five

FDA decision could come within weeks but big obstacles remain to getting all children inoculated



Adeline Fahey, six, receives a child's dose of the Pfizer vaccination in Los Angeles. Photograph: Gary Coronado/Los Angeles Times/Rex/Shutterstock

[Melody Schreiber](#) in Washington

Wed 2 Feb 2022 08.08 EST

Children under five, the last group of Americans still ineligible for vaccines against Covid-19, may soon receive emergency authorization for the shots, but getting all children vaccinated remains a serious challenge in the US.

Pfizer and its German pharmaceutical partner BioNTech [announced](#) on Tuesday that they were requesting emergency-use authorization of their

vaccine for children aged six months to four years.

The application was submitted at the request of the US Food and Drug Administration, the companies said in a statement – an unusual move by the regulator.

The FDA's independent advisers will [meet](#) on 15 February to discuss the application and the shots, containing just one-tenth of the dose given to adults, [could be available](#) to this population of 19 million in the US by the end of the month.

The agency's decision could come within weeks, but that isn't the only hurdle. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) also has to sign off, and many parents then have to be persuaded to get their young children vaccinated.

The Biden administration has been trying to speed the authorization of Covid-19 shots for children, contending vaccinations are critical for opening schools and daycare centers and keeping them open, and for freeing parents from childcare duties so they can go back to work.

Many parents have been pushing for an expansion of shots to toddlers and preschoolers.

While children are much less likely to be hospitalized and die from Covid than adults, children's hospitals have seen record-high admissions during the surge of the Omicron variant, especially in children who are not yet vaccinated.

Infants under a year old are the most vulnerable of all children to severe illness.

Families, and even children themselves, say they have been eagerly awaiting this news. So do caregivers, teachers and others who work with young kids – as well as those who employ parents, who have struggled to find steady childcare.

“As a mom of two kids under five, I’m extremely excited. But as an epidemiologist and public health member, I have a ton of questions,” said Katelyn Jetelina, an infectious disease epidemiologist with UTHealth School of Public Health in Dallas.

Chief among them: “Did they move the goalposts?” She noted that researchers could change what they are examining in the trial — looking at T cell responses or cases and hospitalizations, for instance, instead of neutralizing antibodies.

If regulators are looking at real-world numbers on cases and hospitalizations among the vaccinated and unvaccinated children, she asked, “Do they have enough data?” The clinical trial wasn’t designed to examine these questions, she noted, and there might not be enough participants in the trial to understand the vaccines’ efficacy in those settings.

Parents and experts mostly remain cautiously optimistic, but many say they want to see the results of the trial first.

“Everybody is really excited about the news,” said Katherine Matthias, a pediatrician in South Carolina and the parent of two children under five. “We’re moving the needle on things, but we still need to see the data.”

The press release from the companies on Tuesday did not release any new data or updates to its study design.

In mid-December, Pfizer/BioNTech announced that two shots of a low dose created strong antibody responses in children between the ages of six months and two years.

But the doses produced disappointing results in children between the ages of two and four, prompting the addition of a third dose for all children under five in the trial. Data on the third shot is not expected until March at the earliest.

Regulators could now authorize the two-dose regimen for younger children, who saw effective responses to two shots. They might also allow slightly older children to receive the same doses in preparation for the third shot,

should the data show an additional shot helps create a protective immune response.

“If two doses are authorized, parents will have the opportunity to begin a Covid-19 vaccination series for their children while awaiting potential authorization of a third dose,” Albert Bourla, chairman and CEO of Pfizer, said in the statement.

“Getting that series started now, instead of three to four months down the road after so many children inevitably contract Omicron, is a huge win,” Matthias said.

Getting kids vaccinated has been a major challenge, even for those already eligible. Vaccinations among children have lagged even as cases soared.

Shots for children aged five to 11 were [authorized](#) in October 2021. But only 22% of US children in that age group are fully vaccinated, and only three in 10 children who are eligible have received their first shot, [according](#) to the CDC.

“What we’re seeing right now is still a lot of hospitalizations and unfortunately some deaths in this age group,” said Dr Sean O’Leary of the University of Colorado, who is on the American Academy of Pediatrics’ infectious disease committee.

If the FDA clears vaccinations for these youngsters, he added, “that’s going to be really important because all of those hospitalizations and deaths essentially are preventable”.

A new [report](#) from the Kaiser Family Foundation found that 31% of parents would vaccinate their children under five right away – similar to what parents of over-fives said.

Even parents who are fully vaccinated against Covid and who usually immunize their kids have been [slower to sign up](#) for pediatric Covid shots, doctors say.

Moving too quickly on the under-five vaccines, before the science is clear, could cause even greater delays in getting this age group vaccinated.

“We just need really great communication, and then a lot of transparency with this data and this decision-making,” Jetelina said. “If we aren’t transparent in this process, it’ll continue to drive hesitancy in the United States.”

Many parents worry most about long-term effects of the vaccines.

Two-thirds say they are concerned about the Covid vaccines affecting the future fertility of their children, according to an October 2021 [survey](#).

In response, a new [campaign](#) aims to talk about fertility fears, including a video in Spanish from pediatrician and parent Ilan Shapiro, the chief health correspondent and medical affairs officer at AltaMed Health Services.

There is “zero” evidence of the vaccines having any effect on fertility, Shapiro said. “In reality, we have not seen any decline of fertility in people that are vaccinated. There are still teenager pregnancies, there are still adult pregnancies.”

In fact, having Covid itself can temporarily affect men’s reproductive health; it’s unclear whether it has any short- or long-term effect on children.

“If you get Covid, the sperm count actually goes down. If you get Covid, you can actually have erectile dysfunction,” Shapiro said. “If you’re actually worried about fertility and protecting your kids, I would be more worried about the infection,” Shapiro said.

But he understands why some parents have been hesitant. For nearly two years, parents heard that Covid infections in children aren’t as severe as in adults.

“After the bombardment of almost 20 months of information that kids will be fine, a lot of parents were like, ‘Well, OK, you’re telling me this now?’” Shapiro said.

Kids were safer earlier in the pandemic in part because many schools were virtual or hybrid, and precautions like masks were in place, he said. Many of those precautions were subsequently lifted across the country at the same

time new variants arose – including Delta, which is particularly virulent, and Omicron, which is comparatively more transmissible.

“The probability of actually getting bad outcomes from the infection is higher than before, because we’re seeing more kids ending up in hospitals and more cases and more prolonged Covid,” Shapiro said.

Authorizing the vaccines for all ages will help protect more children. But many families still have unanswered questions about the vaccine, he said – and that doesn’t make them all anti-vax.

“For our kids, you think twice,” Shapiro said. Misinformation about the vaccines can compound those worries.

“We can start that conversation and talk about how many teenagers have already had this vaccine and how many kids have had this vaccine,” he said.

In children 12 and up, vaccines [reduced](#) the risk of developing multi-system inflammatory syndrome by 91%. Vaccines also cut the chances of getting Covid at all, which means children would be less likely to develop potential complications such as [type 1 diabetes](#), long Covid or “outcomes that we don’t know about yet from getting a Covid infection as a child”, Matthias said.

“These vaccines might not prevent all of our kids from getting infected, but they should prevent bad outcomes,” she said.

Matthias is among a group of physicians and scientists who are [advocating](#) for the FDA and the CDC to allow off-label use of the vaccine among younger children at high risk, before it’s authorized in this age group.

“This is not the answer for every kid under five, but it should at least be a conversation that we can have with parents,” she said. “This seems like an option that providers and parents should have on the table.”

Many parents are eager to see the results from this trial, and to hear the discussions with FDA and CDC independent advisers, Jetelina said.

“Once we get those answers, if the scientific committees all agree this is the right step – absolutely, I’ll be first in line.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/01/fda-urges-pfizer-to-apply-for-authorization-of-covid-vaccine-for-children-under-five>

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2022.02.03 - Opinion

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Johnson likes to dress up as a mini-dictator. But is he really up to that job?

[Zoe Williams](#)



The prime minister seems temperamentally unsuited the demands of his own increasingly authoritarian agenda



Boris Johnson at Tilbury docks, England, on 31 January. Photograph: Matt Dunham/AFP/Getty Images

Thu 3 Feb 2022 02.00 EST

“Creeping authoritarianism” is the wolf of the left, and we cry it all the time: I remember, almost nostalgically, thinking David Cameron was a creeping authoritarian for [outsourcing](#) punitive benefits initiatives to private companies; and that Theresa May was one when she earned the dubious accolade of politician [least likely to answer the question](#) in a broadcast interview. However, there is no ignoring or denying the vastly more anti-democratic manoeuvres of Boris Johnson’s government.

The [elections bill](#), currently in the Lords, features mandatory photo ID, which is well known to [disfranchise](#) younger and lower-income voters. It poses a direct threat to the reach and independence of the Electoral Commission, has serious implications for who can and cannot campaign at election time, and extends the perverse first-past-the-post voting system to the election of mayors and police commissioners. Beyond the explicit restriction of democracy, there is no plausible rationale for the bill; and unsettlingly, very little attempt has been made to produce one.

[Make Votes Matter](#) has organised a protest against it this Saturday, which feels slightly poignant, under the shadow of the police, crime, sentencing and courts bill, which would make the attendance of such a demonstration fraught with real personal risk.

This, too, has moved to the House of Lords, having passed its first stage last July. It contains many [chilling provisions](#): the extension of stop and search; a new crime of interfering with “key infrastructure”; and the introduction of the “[protest asbo](#)”, a serious disruption prevention order that (the clue is in the name) you can get before you’ve actually disrupted anything. It was plainly framed with [environmental protests](#) in its sights, and indeed its advocates use the techniques of Extinction Rebellion and Insulate Britain – the traffic-blocking and pavement-gluing – as their proof that the current law is too lax.

Yet you only need to look at the [Sarah Everard vigil](#) to see what happens when police powers over demonstrators are extended – in that case, by Covid legislation. This bill would affect the right to assemble in every particular and every instance.

More sickening still is the nationality and borders bill, which makes it easier to [strip the citizenship](#) of anyone with a second nationality to fall back on, thereby creating a [two-tier system of rights](#): white Britons at the top, minority-ethnic Britons at the bottom.

Many of these measures, if they did pass into law, would struggle to get past the Human Rights Act: but that, too, has been under constant attack from the right wing of the Conservative party, with a [consultation](#) announced yesterday that is nothing short of a provocation (Prof Francesca Klug and Dr Natalie Sedacca will lay out the implications more fully at an online event [next week](#)).

Then there are the atmospherics, [memorably listed](#) by Anthony Barnett: a prime minister who doesn’t bother with the truth and everybody knows he doesn’t; who “dresses up in the occupational costumes they wear in laboratories, hospitals and fish merchants (he has a particular liking for fish and crabs)”; who removes himself from scrutiny; who always smiles, and “everyone around him smiles”. These are the optics of a mini-dictator, while

those around him create the conditions for him to remain in power perpetually.

But there's a hitch: what happens when the people around him *stop* smiling? What happens when the lies suddenly *do* matter? What happens when his party unity is shot? What happens when the anger reaches beyond Extinction Rebellion? To perform as badly as Boris Johnson is currently doing, to openly lie and spread untruths in the House of Commons, to breach your own rules so flagrantly and be so openly unrepentant, you really need the power of an actual dictator. You need to be able to throw your critics in jail.

It's not enough that you might, soon, be able to imprison members of Insulate Britain. You need to be able to shut down the phonelines of LBC and restrict access to the internet on a whim. Authoritarianism, if it's to have any protective power for such inadequacy, has to go a lot faster than a creep.

It's peculiar that Johnson, with his expensive and so often flaunted education, didn't think this through. Temperamentally, he is unsuited to the full implications and demands of his own agenda. Unlike his home secretary Priti Patel, who has a natural flair for the language of constraint and cruelty, Johnson craves approval, and is at heart a libertarian. He has built a political persona whose one consistency is bumbling, tousle-haired frivolity. It's possible that he doesn't have the requisite ruthlessness in him. Though it is more likely, I think, that this is just a lack of competence and foresight.

By no means is this a call to complacency: this government isn't over until it's over, and the urgency of resisting these encroachments to democracy hasn't in any way abated. Yet the fight against them looks more winnable every day.

- Zoe Williams is a Guardian columnist
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OpinionCommunities

Unless Whitehall devolves its powers, ‘levelling up’ is doomed to fail

[Miatta Fahnbilleh](#)

So-called missions to improve people’s lot nationwide require local knowledge and local powers if they are to be fulfilled



Darlington town centre: ‘the challenges faced in Bradford or Manchester are different to those in Darlington and Barnsley.’ Photograph: Christopher Thomond/The Guardian

Thu 3 Feb 2022 04.00 EST

For two and a half years, it was like waiting for Godot. But the levelling up [white paper](#) is finally here. So was it worth the wait?

First, the good points: the plan’s ambitions are clear, and there are things to praise within it. For one, the notable shift of focus to improving living

standards rather than simply targeting growth. Legally binding “[missions](#)” to improve wellbeing across the country, close the gap in healthy life expectancy, narrow the attainment gap and boost wages and jobs are all a step forward. They show that the government has finally understood that its previous strategy of pursuing growth above all else failed to improve the lives and livelihoods of people in the country that most needed it.

Equally important are plans to create regional mayors across the country with new powers to deliver economic change. But full details on what powers will actually be devolved are glaringly absent. And that is the problem with the white paper: the ambition is clear, but how the government will deliver on its promise to close the divide is still unclear. Over 300 pages of policies cobbled together from across Whitehall that do more of the same simply won’t cut it. Recycled infrastructure spending, innovation hubs, and high street task forces are all well and good, but they simply repeat the old remedies that successive governments have tried and failed to close the divide.

The bottom line is that levelling up simply won’t happen without a major shift in policy. For us at the [New Economics Foundation](#), this must start with the devolution revolution that Michael Gove has promised. But rather than ad hoc devolution deals and centrally controlled funding pots for new schemes, we need a radical transfer of powers over transport, housing, skills, employment support, business support, climate change and local taxation from Whitehall to town halls. The challenges faced in Bradford or Manchester are different to those faced in Darlington or Barnsley. Pushing control over money and economic decisions to leaders that know their patch is the first step to levelling up.

Local power and control must be matched by a big injection of investment into our communities. The government simply cannot level up on the cheap, especially after a decade of cuts to council budgets. Why not create a £15bn social infrastructure fund to plough much-needed investment into public services and local facilities that people depend on? Or bring together the government’s goal of net zero and levelling up? We know that there is no path to net zero without public investment. So why not invest £28bn a year into our communities to create green jobs, boost green industries and remake

places? This would create a much-needed stimulus to local economies and enable places to revive their communities as they rapidly decarbonise.

There must also be a new focus on boosting incomes and creating good jobs in the parts of the economy that are often overlooked but form the backbone of local economies. Sectors such as retail, hospitality and care exist in every place, and make up 63% of all jobs. An uplift to the national living wage to reflect the true cost of living, for instance, would push up wages in these low-paid sectors and put money into the local economy. Equally important will be a new focus on small and medium-sized enterprises that account for over half of the jobs created across the country and almost two-thirds of private sector jobs in the north-east and north-west. Access to finance, targeted business support and affordable rents will be key.

There is no silver bullet to a problem that is as complex and difficult as closing the divide between people and places. But as real incomes in London have grown by £600 a year since 2019, compared to £90 in Yorkshire and Humber and £20 in the north-east, the country is being torn apart. The government must now shift from laudable pledges to action. Without a major shift in policy, levelling up will continue to elude it.

- Miatta Fahnbulleh is chief executive of the New Economics Foundation
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[Opinion](#)[Politics](#)

Johnson's hypocrisy and lies are emblematic of the British establishment

Owen Jones

Now the prime minister is a liability, we must resist attempts by his former allies to paint him as an aberration



Boris Johnson leaves No 10 for prime ministers' questions on 2 February.
Photograph: WIktor Szymanowicz/NurPhoto /Rex/ Shutterstock

Thu 3 Feb 2022 03.00 EST

For several weeks, millions of Britons have said or heard words to the effect of: "Surely Boris Johnson can't survive this." And yet he has, batting away Sue Gray's non-report after the Metropolitan police helped gut it, morphing daily into a plummy-mouthed Donald Trump, littering an already mucky political world with lies and entirely [bogus smears](#) about Keir Starmer and Jimmy Savile. Yet Johnson is now treated by his growing band of critics as a

freakish aberration who has disgraced the esteemed office of prime minister. His predecessor, Theresa May, who built her own career on bashing migrants – an approach that culminated in the Windrush scandal – has won plaudits for [castigating Johnson](#) in the House of Commons.

But Johnson is no grotesque interloper: his behaviour and attitudes are emblematic of the British establishment. If our ruling institutions have a shared culture, it's entitlement and shamelessness, a conviction that wrongdoing should meet consequences only if you are poor and powerless. When Johnson solemnly lectured the nation to abide by the rules while presiding over illicit parties in his Haçienda-on-Thames, his thought process is not hard to imagine. He must have believed that the rules had to accommodate his needs, rather than vice versa.

It's the same attitude that drove the expenses scandal: the MPs who railed against "benefit cheats" while milking hard-pressed taxpayers believed they were not sufficiently remunerated, certainly not compared with the party donors – the City hotshots and top lawyers they clinked champagne glasses with. Why shouldn't they just help themselves to extras they deserved? A handful of MPs went to prison, but for most, being personally winded by some adverse newspaper headlines did not prove a roadblock to their future political careers.

The revolving door between the fourth estate and politics has enjoyed a bit-part in this scandal. The career of the former journalist Allegra Stratton did not survive being demoted to being Johnson's human shield. But perhaps she felt invincible after her false portrayal of a single mother as a benefit "scrounger" on Newsnight in 2012 led to 27,000 complaints and a BBC apology, but did nothing to [impede her media career](#). Compare and contrast that with Newsnight colleagues who attempted to scrutinise the wealthy, well-connected Jimmy Savile just months before, and claimed they paid with their [BBC careers](#). But spreading myths and outright lies about benefit claimants, refugees or Muslims is largely consequence-free. It's quite a different story when media figures target the powerful.

When, in December, Boris Johnson sought to distract from "partygate" by escalating the war on "middle-class drug users", he merely emphasised the establishment's unofficial motto: *rules for thee and not for me*. It made his

[recent suggestion](#) in parliament that the Labour frontbench are drug takers all the more bizarre: he's admitted to [taking drugs](#); so has his deputy, Dominic Raab; and so has Michael Gove – to cocaine, indeed, on several occasions. Coke may coat parliamentary latrines, but our country remains one in which Black drugs offenders are 1.5 times [more likely](#) to be jailed than a white offender, not that the latter group will include politicians.

Our scandal-convulsed prime minister once boasted that nobody “stuck up for the bankers as much as I did” after the crash. Indeed, Johnson has been a longstanding and unapologetic champion of the wealthiest, who he once described as a [“put-upon minority”](#) who made a “heroic contribution”. They barely needed his defence. Following the financial crisis, 324 financiers were convicted of crimes after the financial system nearly collapsed in the US. In the UK, the [number of bankers](#) who went to prison was just five. Again: terrible behaviour, minimal consequences.

There are good reasons why members of the establishment may believe their power and connections are a bullet-proof vest. Consider the fact that in the UK, you are [23 times more likely](#) to be prosecuted for benefit fraud than tax fraud . Benefit fraud may inflict far less economic and social harm, but our society hysterically demands that it's the sins of the poor that must be punished. When Cressida Dick faced demands to resign after her officers attacked a vigil for Sarah Everard last March – a rather more heavy-handed approach than the officers stationed at No 10 offered when government officials boozily frolicked – she must have known she'd brazen it out. After all, the Met had already avoided full accountability for police spies [having relationships](#) with women under false pretences and stealing the identities of [dead children](#) , the unlawful killing in 2009 of [Ian Tomlinson](#), and the 2005 shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes – the latter in an [operation headed](#) by none other than Dick herself.

Johnson may understandably be bewildered that he is suddenly facing the level of scrutiny he always deserved after getting away with so much for so long. In fact, much of the fourth estate has conspired to help construct his jovial, amiable persona. From the Evening Standard editor who was a [personal friend](#) when he was London mayor to Theresa May appointing him foreign secretary, he has always been helped to power.

Now he is viewed as a liability. His support is melting away like a marshmallow over a flame. But self-serving attempts to paint him as an anomaly should be fiercely resisted. Johnson is the British establishment in its undiluted and unapologetic form. If he gets away with this, it will be another illustration of the truth that is as old as the establishment itself: that consequences are for the little guy, not for the powerful.

- Owen Jones is a Guardian columnist
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OpinionGlobal development

While the focus is on Ukraine, Russia's presence in the Sahel is steadily growing

Bruce Mutsvairo, Mirjam de Bruijn, Kristin Skare Orgeret

With Russian mercenaries invited to Mali as European forces withdraw, how worried should the west be about Russia's increasing influence across Africa?



French soldiers wrapping up a four-month tour of duty in the Sahel leave their base in Gao, Mali. Photograph: AP

Global development is supported by



[About this content](#)

Thu 3 Feb 2022 02.01 EST

Even in the turbulent, conflict-wracked Sahel region of Africa, the recent [military takeover in Burkina Faso](#) was intriguing. Amid the deteriorating security and humanitarian situation, the decision by neighbouring Mali's military-led government to invite fighters from the Wagner Group, widely seen as a paramilitary network of mercenaries with Russian connections, is causing growing concern in many western capitals.

Mali's transitional government faces a rough road to recognition after the Economic Community of West African States (Ecowas) announced a [strengthening of economic and diplomatic sanctions](#) in January in response to the proposal to postpone elections until at least 2026.

Burkina Faso's Lt Col Paul-Henri Sandogo Damiba is just the latest military leader to grab power in front of [Russian flag-waving supporters](#). It came less than a year after Mali went through its second coup in 12 months, and third in 10 years, while in September [a coup in neighbouring Guinea](#) saw special forces commander Col Mamady Doumbouya gain control.

France, the former colonial power in all three countries, faces a monumental task to reassert its authority in the vast Sahel, located south of the Sahara, in

the face of rising Russian influence in Africa. It is a region where anti-French sentiment is growing on social media and on the ground, at the same time as popular support rises for the Russians, scuttling France's efforts to bring peace. This week, the [French ambassador has been asked to leave Mali](#), bringing into question whether Air France, one of the last remaining international carriers operating in the country, will resume its flights to the capital, Bamako, in March as planned.

With tensions heightened over [the military buildup on the Ukrainian border](#), Russia's expanding presence in Africa should also give the west plenty to think about.

Gaining leverage by supporting isolated political leaders follows the script Russia has successfully used elsewhere

Central African Republic (CAR), another former French colony, is already working closely with the Wagner Group, which the US and the [UN accuse of committing human rights abuses in the region](#). It was while investigating the Wagner Group's activities in CAR in 2018 that Orkhan Dzhemal, a Russian war reporter known for his critical reports on Russia's policies, was [mysteriously killed alongside two fellow Russian journalists](#).

But Mali's leaders continue to downplay the presence of the mercenaries, saying they are simply cooperating with "Russian trainers". A European military taskforce coordinating the fight against the growing Islamist insurgency in the landlocked country, has [confirmed Russian proxy forces are active in Mali](#).

Mali's decision to turn to the Russians is already causing a rift between the gold-rich country and its European partners, including the UK and France.

Mali argues that France's decision to withdraw some of its 5,000-strong force from the west African country has left a huge void. Russia, seizing every opportunity to boost its influence in Africa, has moved in.

The Kremlin accuses the west of sour grapes, and while it has confirmed its support for [Mali](#), it denies links to the Wagner Group.

France, leading calls for EU sanctions in Mali, is changing its strategy, preferring a collective European effort through the European Takuba taskforce. Those plans suffered a setback last week when the military-dominated government asked the Danish troops to leave. Sweden has also confirmed its withdrawal from the taskforce.

The Sahel, home to some of the world's poorest nations, including Mauritania, Niger, [Burkina Faso](#) and Chad, is beset by problems ranging from recurring food crises and poorly policed borders to escalating armed conflict.

Human rights violations are reportedly on the rise. There are reports of repeated attacks on civilians in villages and towns near Mali's borders with Burkina Faso and Mauritania. Russian mercenaries frequently mistake civilians for the jihadist militants marauding across the region and Russians have also suffered casualties in combat with the groups.

To make matters worse, lingering security concerns in northern Nigeria and CAR are pushing thousands of people to seek refuge in other [Sahel](#) nations, further fuelling tensions in a region on its knees.

But Russia is going beyond the conflict-ridden countries, increasing its geopolitical influence across [Africa](#). St Petersburg will host the second Russia-Africa summit later this year.

Russian trade and investment in Africa is small but increasing. A deal to establish a naval base in Sudan has boosted Moscow's military foothold in the continent.

Gaining leverage by supporting isolated political leaders follows the script Russia has successfully used elsewhere, including in Syria, Libya and eastern Ukraine. In CAR, this was accompanied by Russian Valery Zakharov being appointed the country's national security adviser.

Covid-19 has also offered the Russians an opportunity. Last year, Russia donated more than 300m Sputnik V doses to the African Union. Several

African countries have reportedly approved the vaccine, helping spread Moscow's influence.

- Bruce Mutsvairo, Mirjam de Bruijn and Kristin Skare Orgeret are researchers involved in a Norwegian Research Council-funded project on disinformation and conflict in Mali and Ethiopia
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- [Middle East Trump risked disaster with Abbas praise in key Israel meeting, ambassador says](#)
- [Scam ads Why an Australian billionaire is launching legal action against Facebook](#)
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US news

Havana Syndrome could be caused by pulsed energy devices – US expert report

Concealable devices with ‘modest energy requirements’ which could emit pulsed electromagnetic energy and ultrasound exist



A group of cases could not be explained by health or environmental factors, or by psychosomatic illness, researchers found. Photograph: Yamil Lage/AFP/Getty Images

[Julian Borger](#) in Washington

Wed 2 Feb 2022 17.52 EST

A US intelligence report by a panel of expert scientists has named pulsed electromagnetic energy and ultrasound as plausible causes for the mystery

Havana Syndrome symptoms suffered by US diplomats and spies in recent years.

The report found that a group of cases could not be explained by health or environmental factors or by psychosomatic illness. It also said that devices exist with “modest energy requirements” which were concealable and could produce the observed symptoms and be effective over hundreds of meters or through walls.

The panel, established last year by the director of national security, Avril Haines, and the CIA director, William Burns, said the investigation was not tasked to identify a culprit, but in a statement accompanying the report, Haines and Burns said it would help sharpen the search for the origins of the mysterious ailments.

“We will stay at it, with continued rigor, for however long it takes,” they said.

In a redacted executive summary of its report published on Wednesday, the panel of experts said that the signs and symptoms of the syndrome were “diverse and may be caused by multiple mechanisms” but that a subset of them “cannot be easily explained by known environmental or medical conditions”.

The expert panel report clashed in tone to a briefing given by the CIA last month which said that in the majority of cases, there was no sign of a malignant campaign by a foreign power. That briefing, possibly aimed at limiting the further spread of psychosocial illness among US officials, did caution that in some two dozen cases the symptoms could not be easily explained.

The latest panel narrowed its review of the hundreds of reported cases by defining four “core characteristics”: the sudden onset of sound or pressure in one ear or one side of the head; near simultaneous symptoms like vertigo, loss of balance and ear pain; a “strong sense of locality or directionality” – the feeling of being assailed from a particular direction; and the absence of

known environmental or medical conditions that might otherwise explain the symptoms.

The summary did not go into details of cases, but the description of symptoms matched the earliest cases in 2016 reported among US and Canadian diplomats stationed in Havana, from which the syndrome got its name.

The expert panel found “the combination of the four core characteristics is distinctly unusual and unreported elsewhere in the medical literature, and so far have not been associated with a specific neurological abnormality.”

When looking at probable causes, the panel – which includes experts on medicine and engineering – pointed towards some form of external energy source.

The report found that: “Pulsed electromagnetic energy, particularly in the radio frequency range, plausibly explains the core characteristics, although information gaps exist.”

It added that “sources exist that could generate the required stimulus, are concealable, and have moderate power requirements.”

Using what the report described as “nonstandard antennas and techniques”, electromagnetic pulsed energy could be directed at a target “through air for tens to hundreds of meters, and with some loss, through most building materials”.

Pulsed electromagnetic energy had been “credibly demonstrated” to cause the observed symptoms, the panel found, and that “persons accidentally exposed to radio frequency signals described sensations similar to the core characteristics”.

However, the report said there was a “dearth of research” on the effects of such pulsed electromagnetic energy on humans.

Engineers who had been working on a [potential weapon for the US marines](#) two decades ago, known as Medusa, said that one of the reasons it was

discontinued was that it was ethically impossible to conduct human tests on the prototype.

A large part of the section on pulsed electromagnetic energy was redacted in the published expert panel report.

The executive summary said that ultrasound energy was also a plausible explanation for the symptoms but only in situations where the source was close to the target.

“The required energy can be generated by ultrasonic arrays that are portable, and produce a tight beam,” it found, but noted that “ultrasound propagates poorly through air and building materials”.

The report said that psychosocial factors could not explain the cases exhibiting the four core characteristics of Havana Syndrome but could have made them worse. Such factors could also explain other incidents which “could be due to hypervigilance and normal human reactions to stress and ambiguity, particularly among a workforce attuned to its surroundings and trained to think about security”.

A victims group issued a statement on Wednesday arguing the new report “reinforces the need for the intelligence community and the broader US government to redouble their efforts to fully understand the causes of ... Havana Syndrome”.

Mark Zaid, a Washington attorney representing victims from multiple federal agencies, said: “These piecemeal agency reviews at times reveal inconsistent and even contradictory results that undermine the effort to resolve this controversy.”

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Books

Trump risked disaster with Abbas praise in key Israel meeting, ambassador says

In new book, David Friedman recounts private meeting with Israeli president in which Trump also knocked Netanyahu – and how he says he turned his man around



In May 2017, Donald Trump met with Reuven Rivlin, then-Israeli president, and Benjamin Netanyahu, the former prime minister. Photograph: Jack Guez/AFP/Getty Images

[Martin Pengelly](#) in New York

[@MartinPengelly](#)

Thu 3 Feb 2022 01.00 EST

Meeting then-Israeli president Reuven Rivlin [in Jerusalem in May 2017](#), Donald Trump stunned advisers by criticising the then-prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, for being unwilling to seek peace while Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian leader, was “desperate” for a deal.

The comment “knocked everyone off their chairs”, David Friedman, Trump’s ambassador to [Israel](#), writes in a new book.

“Although the [meeting](#) was private and off the record, we all envisioned a headline tomorrow that Trump had praised Abbas and criticised Netanyahu – the worst possible dynamic for the president’s popularity or for the prospects of the peace process.

“Fortunately, and incredibly, the event wasn’t leaked.”

Friedman now describes the incident, and how he says he changed Trump’s mind, in [Sledgehammer](#): How Breaking with the Past Brought Peace to the Middle East, a memoir which will be published next week by Broadside Books, a conservative imprint of HarperCollins. The Guardian obtained a copy.

Trump’s bankruptcy lawyer was a hugely controversial choice for ambassador. As well as being a hardline pro-settler rightwinger, during the 2016 campaign he [called](#) Barack Obama an antisemite and J Street, a liberal US Jewish group, “worse than kapos”, Jewish prisoners who worked as guards in Nazi concentration camps.

He was [confirmed](#) as ambassador by a 52-46 Senate vote. US ambassadors to Israel are usually confirmed unanimously.

In his book, he says the “worse than kapos” remark was not a political or policy mistake but a tactical one, as it gave ammunition to critics in the Senate.

Describing four “murder boards”, sessions in which nominees are grilled over potential problems, he says he first said he used the controversial phrase “because I felt that J Street had betrayed the Jewish people”.

That, he writes, caused a “firestorm of reaction” and he was told he could not speak that way. His settled-on answer was: “In the heat of a political campaign I allowed my rhetoric to get the best of me. I regret these comments and assure you that if confirmed, my remarks will be measured and diplomatic.”

Describing his confirmation process, Friedman reproduces private conversations with Democratic senators including Kirsten Gillibrand of New York (a “bad joke”), Cory Booker of New Jersey (“delightful” in person, only, Friedman writes, to turn on him in hearings), and Chuck Schumer, the Democratic leader.

Friedman says he had donated to Schumer and the two New Yorkers spoke amicably before Friedman made a pitch for his vote, which he said would send “a strong message of bipartisanship on Israel, which you have advocated on numerous occasions”.

Schumer, he says, smiled and answered: “I’m not giving Trump the win. Sorry.”

Friedman also recounts an angry meeting with Bernie Sanders, the independent from Vermont, who he accuses of “siding with terrorists over one of America’s strongest allies”.

But his description of the meeting between Trump and Rivlin and how Friedman says he turned his president round makes for more surprising reading, not least in how it appears to show how eager Trump was for a deal.

Friedman describes how during Trump’s next meeting, with Netanyahu, he manoeuvred all present into viewing a “two-minute collection of Abbas’s speeches that I thought was worth watching”.

The tape contained “two minutes of Abbas honouring terrorists, extolling violence, and vowing never to accept anything less than Israel’s total defeat”.

“After the tape ended,” Friedman writes, “the president said, ‘Wow, is that the same guy I met in Washington last month? He seemed like such a sweet,

peaceful guy.'

"The tape had clearly made an impact."

Friedman writes that he was rebuked by Rex Tillerson, Trump's first secretary of state, and HR McMaster, Trump's second national security adviser.

"They thought it was a cheap propaganda trick," he writes. He told them, he writes, "I work for the president, and nobody else ... I am going to make sure that he is well informed so that he gets Israel policy right."

Friedman emphasises his role in such policy, prominently including closeness to Netanyahu; support for Israeli settlers on Palestinian land; cutting aid to Palestinians; recognising Jerusalem as the Israeli capital and moving the US embassy there; and diplomacy that led to the Abraham Accords, the normalisation of Israeli relations with four Arab countries.

Aides to Trump, Steve Bannon notably among them, have often suffered from being seen to claim too much credit for his successes. Friedman is sure to repeatedly praise Trump, while bragging of how close to "the boss" he became.

Nonetheless, his description of Trump's private meeting with Rivlin – behaviour Friedman says would have been embarrassing had it been leaked – could prove embarrassing itself.

Trump has been repeatedly burned by books on his time in power, even those written by loyalists like Friedman.

In December, the Guardian was first to report that Mark Meadows, Trump's last chief of staff, described how the president tested positive for Covid-19 before his first debate with Joe Biden – and how the result was covered up.

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Scams

Scam ads: why an Australian billionaire is launching legal action against Facebook

Advertisements using unauthorised images of celebrities are used to lure victims into fraudulent schemes

- [Get our free news app; get our morning email briefing](#)



One 77-year-old Queensland grandmother lost \$80,000 when she was invited to invest in a cryptocurrency exchange after clicking on an ad. Photograph: Getty Images/iStockphoto

*[Josh Taylor](#)
[@joshgnosis](#)*

Thu 3 Feb 2022 02.01 EST

The Australian billionaire Andrew Forrest has launched criminal proceedings against Facebook for failing to take action on scam ads featuring his image. A [Guardian investigation](#) into the scam ads sheds light on how the scam works and what the ads look like.

What are the scam ads?

The ads appear on [Facebook](#) or on news sites as “programmatic ads” supplied by Google. Programmatic ads target individual users.

These ads use images of celebrities or other well-known people in the regions they are targeting, such as Forrest or Dick Smith in Australia. They are presented as a news story claiming the celebrity has made a “big investment” and the banks are shocked by how well it is doing.

The image shows a screenshot of a fake news website. At the top, there is a logo for "news.com.au" with a colorful graphic of dots. Below the logo, there is a navigation bar with links to "National", "World", "Lifestyle", "Entertainment", and "Technology". The main headline is "SPECIAL REPORT: Dick Smith promises that every Australian will be super rich in a few months.". Below the headline, there is a subtext: "Australia citizens are already raking in millions of dollars from home using this "wealth loophole" - but is it legitimate?". To the right of the text, there is a small "NOVEMBER 13, 2020" timestamp. Below the headline, there is a large photograph of two men: an older man with glasses on the left and a younger man in a suit on the right. To the right of the photograph, there is a sidebar with the heading "READER RESULTS" and the text "PROFIT: AU\$5,552." followed by a smaller image of a man wearing a cap.

Fake news website used for the scam ads. Photograph: Screenshot

If you click on the ad, it takes you to a fake news story that includes a link claiming to be a cryptocurrency investment scheme. If you enter details to register for the scheme, you receive a phone call typically asking you to invest a small sum, such as US\$250. You are then asked to invest increasingly larger amounts.

In one case that Guardian Australia previously reported, a 77-year-old Queensland grandmother clicked through from a Facebook ad featuring Forrest. She initially transferred \$5,000 to a cryptocurrency exchange before being encouraged to put in more of her money. Scammers eventually emptied her accounts, stealing her entire life savings of \$80,000. She was unable to get her money back.

Some of the scams encourage people to invest in highly risky and often unregulated forex trading platforms where they are likely to lose most, if not all, of their money. The worst of the scams encourage people to hand over more and more money in an attempt to get their initial investment back, leading them to greater losses.

[An international investigation](#) by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project reported that contact details of people who signed up for such services were also passed on to brokers offering other risky or illegitimate investments.

These scams accelerated during the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Why have these ads been so hard to stop?

The normal approach to stopping these sorts of ads is to block the website hosting them, or by looking for specific “keywords” in the ad text and banning those from being used. Google said in 2019 it removed about 5,000 ads a minute, or about 2.7bn in a year.

But it is a game of cat and mouse. The scammers change ad text frequently to evade capture and to avoid domain blocking. Using a variety of domain registration companies, they buy hundreds of domain names every month to host the pages that users are directed to when they click on the ads.

If you are viewing the scam websites outside the targeted location, they can look like innocuous sites for cooking, or gardens or fruit.

Who is behind the ads?

The investigation by Guardian Australia found that hundreds of these sites were registered under just five names, all with addresses in the centre of Moscow.

None of those listed on the registration forms responded to attempts to contact them.

The scams may also be based in Ukraine, as the scam sites do not allow people to register a phone number from there. [A previous OCCRP investigation](#) found a call centre running similar celebrity-based investment scams operating from the nation's capital, Kyiv.

Have the regulators done anything about it?

In Australia, regulators have admitted it is difficult to trace and stop these scams. A spokesperson for the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission said the ads had been traced back to overseas. The ACCC had managed to get a handful of the sites removed by contacting the domain hosts.

In the UK there has been more success, in large part due to a dedicated site where the public can report suspected scam websites. The country's cybersecurity agency [removed over 731,000 celebrity scam sites](#) between April and December 2020.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2022/feb/03/scam-ads-why-an-australian-billionaire-is-launching-legal-action-against-facebook>

Facebook

Facebook's first ever drop in daily users prompts Meta shares to tumble

Mark Zuckerberg says company faces tough competition for attention from rivals such as TikTok

Analysis: why the shares are in freefall



The social media company revealed it had spent \$10bn on its vision of the future –the ‘metaverse’. Photograph: Chris Delmas/AFP/Getty Images

[Dominic Rushe](#) and [Dan Milmo](#)

Thu 3 Feb 2022 06.16 EST

Facebook shares fell 25% on Thursday – wiping over \$200bn (£147bn) off its value – after the company reported its first ever drop in daily user numbers.

The huge collapse – more than value of McDonald’s – came after Mark Zuckerberg’s newly rebranded social media empire, Meta, said daily active user numbers at its main app – a key growth target for investors – fell to 1.929 billion in the three months to December, from 1.93 billion in the previous quarter.

The symbolic loss of about 1 million users, the first in 18 years, contributed to a share price rout in after-hours trading on Wednesday that resumed on Thursday.

On a call with investors Zuckerberg he was “proud” of the work the company had done last year but acknowledged the company faced tough competition for attention from rivals including TikTok.

“Facebook’s big problem is competition for attention – there are only so many people and so many hours in a day and we’re already close to saturation point,” said Neil Wilson, chief markets analyst for trading platform markets.com

Reporting its first quarterly earnings under its new name, [Meta](#) revealed it had spent \$10bn on its vision of the future – the “metaverse” – and warned it faced “headwinds from both increased competition for people’s time and a shift of engagement”. As well as Facebook, Meta owns the photo and videosharing app Instagram, the WhatsApp messaging service and the Oculus virtual reality hardware business.

After a boom during the pandemic, markets have punished formerly hot tech companies including Netflix and PayPal for disappointing results. While Meta’s revenues were slightly higher than expected at \$33.7bn for the last three months, the drop in daily active users has grabbed investors’ attention.

Facebook’s growth has stalled in the US and Europe but the latest falls came from Africa and Latin America. Across all of Meta’s businesses including Facebook, the number of daily active users rose from 2.81 billion to 2.82 billion.

[Graphic](#)

Facebook announced it was [changing its corporate name to Meta](#) last October. Co-founder Mark Zuckerberg wants to refocus the company on ambitious plans to build a virtual reality “metaverse”.

Meta also revealed for the first time how much it had spent so far on its new strategy. The company’s Reality Labs division, which makes virtual reality goggles, smart glasses and other yet-to-be-released products spent more than \$10bn in 2021. The spending dragged down quarterly profits by 8% and Zuckerberg has indicated that there is much more spending to come.

The company set out a series of issues that could affect growth in the near term, including platform and regulatory changes, as well as tough comparisons to a year when online advertising was boosted by the pandemic.

The move also followed a series of crises at the company, which has been blamed for promoting fake news worldwide, stoking hostilities and invading privacy.

“Although the direction is clear our path ahead is not yet clearly defined,” said Zuckerberg. “Last year was about putting a stake in the ground about where we are heading. This year is about execution.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/feb/02/facebook-shares-slump-growth-fourth-quarter>

Headlines friday 4 february 2022

- [Boris Johnson Another adviser reportedly quits after ‘meltdown day’ at No 10](#)
- [Live Boris Johnson given fresh ultimatum to ‘shape up’ or go](#)
- [Politics Aides quit in fallout from Downing Street parties](#)
- [It's not me, it's you The political advisers who left PM](#)

Boris Johnson

Another adviser reportedly quits after ‘meltdown day’ at No 10

Elena Narozanski, Boris Johnson’s special adviser on women and equalities, is latest to resign

- [Today’s politics news – live updates](#)



A police officer outside Downing Street in London. Elena Narozanski's departure follows the resignation of four key No 10 officials on Thursday. Photograph: Andy Rain/EPA

[Heather Stewart](#) and [Jamie Grierson](#)

Fri 4 Feb 2022 04.03 EST

Another adviser to [Boris Johnson](#) has reportedly quit after a day of departures dubbed the “meltdown in Downing Street”.

Elena Narozanski, a special adviser to the prime minister on women and equalities, Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and extremism, has resigned, according to Paul Goodman, the editor of Conservative Home.

Number Ten Policy Unit member Elena Narozanski has quit.

— Paul Goodman (@PaulGoodmanCH) [February 4, 2022](#)

Narozanski's departure on Friday follows the resignation of four key No 10 officials on Thursday: policy chief, Munira Mirza; chief of staff, Dan Rosenfield; the PM's principal private secretary, Martin Reynolds; and director of communications, Jack Doyle.

Mirza abruptly resigned on Thursday afternoon after Johnson again declined to apologise for attempting to smear the Labour leader, Keir Starmer, over the case of the paedophile Jimmy Savile.

In a blistering letter, Mirza, who had worked with Johnson for 14 years since his days as London mayor, called the allegation "scurrilous".



Elena Narozanski.

The three other resignations were then announced in quick succession on Thursday night, in what was seen widely in Westminster as an attempt to regain control.

The chancellor, Rishi Sunak, made the clearest attempt yet to distance himself from Johnson on Thursday, saying of the Savile comments: “Being honest, I wouldn’t have said it and I’m glad that the prime minister clarified what he meant.”

Sunak also used a column [in the Sun](#) to further separate himself from the chaos in No 10. Setting out the measures he announced on Thursday to tackle the cost of living crisis, Sunak said: “We have always been the party of sound money – we will always continue to be on my watch – and that is the only kind of party I am interested in.” Sunak is widely seen as a frontrunner for the leadership if Johnson is dislodged.

Johnson has been fighting for his political life since the Met announced last week it was investigating gatherings in Downing Street and Whitehall during lockdown.

More than 10 MPs have called on him publicly to resign. Several of these have announced they have sent in letters calling for a vote of no confidence in his leadership, and more are believed to have done so privately.

Mirza was quickly replaced on Thursday: close Johnson ally Andrew Griffith, a wealthy former Sky executive, will now head up Johnson’s policy unit as a minister.

Supportive MPs sought to portray the mass clearout as Johnson fulfilling his promise to MPs to shake up his Downing Street operation in the wake of the partygate allegations.

Doyle and Reynolds had both been expected to depart: Reynolds sent a leaked email inviting staff to “bring their own booze” to a gathering on 20 May 2020 that is one of 12 being investigated by the Metropolitan police.

The spate of resignations means the prime minister is left without a principal private secretary, a communications director or a chief of staff. Issuing a

statement about Reynolds' and Rosenfield's departures on Thursday night, Downing Street said: "Recruitment for both posts is under way".

A former senior No 10 official, Nikki da Costa, who worked with Mirza, said: "For me this has all the signs of being rushed, in order to try and regain control."

She claimed there was a culture in Downing Street under Rosenfield in which some staff found themselves "marginalised".

"We had a change of chief of staff in December last year [2020]. What has happened in terms of the culture, that team hasn't been built and morale has been undermined, and certainly there has been a culture in which if you aren't somebody who says yes and falls into line, then you quickly find yourself marginalised, and if you deliver bad news then you feel marginalised," she told the BBC's Today programme.

She added that there were "longstanding issues" in No 10 that were "starting to come to a head".

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

[**Politics**](#)

Tory MP Aaron Bell calls PM's position untenable as he submits letter calling for no-confidence vote – as it happened

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Boris Johnson

Four Johnson aides quit in fallout from Downing Street parties

Policy chief Munira Mirza was first to go, followed shortly by Jack Doyle, Dan Rosenfield and Martin Reynolds



Munira Mirza, Dan Rosenfield, Martin Reynolds and Jack Doyle.
Composite: PA/Rex

[Heather Stewart](#) Political editor

Thu 3 Feb 2022 16.00 EST

Four of Boris Johnson's key staff have quit as the fallout from the Downing Street party scandal continued to shake his hold on government.

Johnson's longstanding policy chief Munira Mirza was the first to go, using a [stinging resignation letter](#) to accuse the prime minister of "scurrilous"

behaviour when he falsely linked Keir Starmer to the failure to bring paedophile Jimmy Savile to justice.

Within hours, three more of Johnson's staff had gone – Dan Rosenfield, his chief of staff, Martin Reynolds, his principal private secretary, and his director of communications, Jack Doyle.

All three have been implicated in Downing Street's response to the lockdown parties that are now being investigated by the Metropolitan police.

Reynolds sent a widely shared email urging staff to “bring your own booze” to one event on 20 May 2020.

While Johnson was expected to clear out many of his top team in the wake of Sue Gray's report into the lockdown-breaking gatherings published earlier this week, Mirza's resignation came out of the blue.

And in a sign of Johnson's waning authority, this also provoked the chancellor to issue a rare rebuke, as he also criticised the prime minister for his jibe against the Labour leader.

Asked about the comments at a press conference on Thursday, Sunak said: “Being honest, I wouldn't have said it.”

00:51

'I wouldn't have said it': Rishi Sunak on Johnson's Savile comments – video

Pressed repeatedly on whether Johnson should apologise, he said that was a matter for the prime minister.

Sunak has previously declined to criticise Johnson directly throughout the weeks of revelations about lockdown-busting parties in Downing Street, though he has acknowledged that mistakes were made.

The flurry of resignations came at the end of an important day for the government as the chancellor sought to explain how he hopes to avert a cost of living crisis for millions of people affected by rising fuel bills and mortgage payments.

But the focus once again turned to the turmoil in Downing Street when Mirza resigned.

Johnson has repeatedly refused to apologise, after saying in a rowdy House of Commons session on Monday that, as director of public prosecutions from 2008 to 2013, Starmer had “spent most of his time prosecuting journalists and failing to prosecute Jimmy Savile”.

In fact, Starmer took no personal role in decisions connected to Savile’s case.

In a strongly worded resignation letter, Mirza told Johnson: “There was no fair or reasonable basis for that assertion. This was not the usual cut and thrust of politics; it was an inappropriate and partisan reference to a horrendous case of child sexual abuse.”

Mirza’s departure was regarded at Westminster as a serious blow to Johnson, who was under pressure to overhaul his Downing Street operation after Gray identified failures of leadership and judgment.

It was swiftly followed later on Thursday by the resignation of Doyle – though he insisted his departure was unconnected with Mirza’s. A No 10 spokesperson said Doyle had “made a huge contribution and the prime minister is immensely grateful for the work he has done”.

Downing Street later confirmed the departures of Rosenfield and Reynolds in a brief statement.

“Dan Rosenfield offered his resignation to the prime minister earlier today, which has been accepted,” it said.

“Martin Reynolds also informed the prime minister of his intention to stand down from his role as principal private secretary and the prime minister has agreed to this.

“He has thanked them both for their significant contribution to government and No 10, including work on the pandemic response and economic recovery.

“They will continue in their roles while successors are appointed, and recruitment for both posts is under way.”

The prime minister had earlier sought to row back from the Savile claims on Thursday, saying “a lot of people have got very hot under the collar”.

“Let’s be absolutely clear, I’m talking not about the leader of the opposition’s personal record when he was director of public prosecutions and I totally understand that he had nothing to do personally with those decisions,” Johnson said on a visit to Blackpool.

01:10

Johnson concedes Starmer not personally involved in Jimmy Savile prosecution decisions – video

“I was making a point about his responsibility for the organisation as a whole. I really do want to clarify that because it is important.”

That was not enough to placate Mirza, however. In her resignation letter, she told him: “You tried to clarify your position today but, despite my urging, you did not apologise for the misleading impression you gave.”

She said Johnson was “a better man than many of your detractors will ever understand”, adding that it was “so desperately sad that you let yourself down by making a scurrilous accusation against the leader of the opposition”.

Dear Prime Minister

It is with great regret that I am writing to resign as your Head of Policy.

You will know of the reasons for my decision. I believe it was wrong for you to apply the task that Keir Starmer was personally nominated for attacking Jenny Saville in such a way. There was no fit or reasonable basis for that statement. This was not the normal cut and thrust of politics. It was an inappropriate and just plain perverse in a historical case of such seriousness. You tried to clarify your position today but, despite my urging, you did not apologise for the misleading impression you gave.

I have served you for nearly seven and it has been a privilege to do so. You have assisted many important things both at Downing Street and, before that, as Mayor of London. You have a real commanding ability with a wide range of people. In connecting with people.

You are a better man than many of your contemporaries and your conduct of public life is very creditable and there can be justified cause for taking a stand against the Leader of the Opposition.

However, I hope you find it justifiable to give me a period of judgement while under investigation. I appreciate that one political culture is not bringing about peace and security; but regardless, it is the right thing to do. It is not too late for you but, the longer we wait, the less time for me.

Yours sincerely,

Munira

Munira Mirza's resignation letter. Photograph: Twitter

A spokesperson said: “We are very sorry Munira has left No 10 and are grateful for her service and contribution to government.”

Johnson moved quickly to replace Mirza, promoting Andrew Griffith to head up the No 10 policy unit as a minister in the Cabinet Office.

A wealthy former Sky executive, Griffith [lent Johnson his £9.5m townhouse](#) as a campaign base during his 2019 leadership bid. Now the MP for Arundel and South Downs, he has been serving as Johnson’s parliamentary private secretary – liaising with MPs.

Mirza, often seen as a proponent of Downing Street’s “war on woke”, had worked with Johnson for more than a decade, including at City Hall when he was mayor of London. He previously identified her as one of the five most inspiring women in his life. Her partner, Dougie Smith, is also a senior Tory adviser.

Johnson’s former adviser Dominic Cummings claimed Mirza’s departure was “an unmistakeable signal the bunker is collapsing and this PM is finished”. He urged ministers to show a similar “flicker of moral courage” and resign.

In another sign of the pressures on Johnson from within his own party, West Midlands mayor Andy Street, one of the most prominent Tories outside Westminster, said he was unsure whether he could continue to support the prime minister.

“What he’s done, very clearly, is wrong. It’s bad by any measure,” Street told BirminghamLive. “He has apologised. He appears to me to be a man who is genuine in that apology. You can see that from his demeanour. But what we’ve now got to see is that this apology follows through in terms of actions, how he leads and what is done within Downing Street to make it very, very different.

“The honest answer is that we are waiting to see if he follows through on what he’s now said.”

Three Conservative MPs went public on Wednesday with their intention to submit letters of no confidence in the prime minister. One senior Tory MP said the departure of Mirza smacked of “the last days of Rome,” suggesting the number of no confidence letters may now be approaching the threshold of 54 that would trigger a no confidence vote.

If Johnson lost such a vote, which could be held within days, his premiership would be over.

The Savile/Starmer smear has circulated on far-right blogs, and at prime minister’s questions on Wednesday, Starmer accused Johnson of “parroting the conspiracy theories of violent fascists” for political gain.

Several cabinet ministers, including Nadine Dorries and Michael Gove, have since defended Johnson, however, with the justice secretary, Dominic Raab, calling it part of the “cut and thrust” of parliamentary debate.

Before prime minister’s questions on Wednesday, the Speaker, Lindsay Hoyle, reminded MPs of the importance of being truthful in the House of Commons.

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UK news

It's not me, it's you: the political advisers who left Boris Johnson

The prime minister has parted ways with key aides seven times since September 2020



Dominic Cummings leaving No 10 in November 2020. Photograph: Yui Mok/PA

[Peter Walker](#) and [Jessica Elgot](#)

Thu 3 Feb 2022 15.50 EST

All prime ministers lose advisers at various points, but those working for [Boris Johnson](#) seem to jump ship or otherwise exit at a faster rate than most. Here is a list of significant people who have left his No 10.

Munira Mirza

Johnson's longstanding policy chief and lead architect of his culture-war policies, who also worked with Johnson when he was London mayor, quit over the prime minister's attempt to associate Keir Starmer with the failure to prosecute the paedophile Jimmy Savile. In a strongly worded resignation letter, Mirza called the comments "inappropriate and partisan" and called for Johnson to apologise.

Jack Doyle

Quitting on the same afternoon as Mirza – though it was claimed not to be connected – was head of communications at Downing Street from April last year, having previously held the deputy's role. Formerly an experienced political journalist, Doyle had been somewhat in the glare of claims about lockdown-breaching parties, with reports that he made a speech and handed out awards at a Christmas event in December 2020.

Dan Rosenfield and Martin Reynolds

Doyle's departure was then quickly followed by that of Rosenfield, Johnson's chief of staff, and Reynolds, his principal private secretary. Both had also been implicated in Downing Street "partygate" claims, which are now being investigated by the Metropolitan police. Reynolds sent a widely shared email urging staff to "bring your own booze" to one event on 20 May 2020. However, in Sue Gray's redacted report, it was thought she was referring to his role when she wrote: "Too much responsibility and expectation is placed on the senior official whose principal function is the direct support of the prime minister. This should be addressed as a matter of priority."

Dominic Cummings

Not officially a resignation – Downing Street stressed at the time he was pushed out – the departure of Cummings in November 2020 was nonetheless dramatic. Johnson's former chief aide exited the No 10 front door carrying a box of possessions after a bitter internal power struggle. He has since spent much of his time taking potshots at "the shopping trolley", as he terms Johnson for his supposed wildly veering views.

Lee Cain

Departing at the same time as Cummings, Johnson's former communications chief quit his post at No 10 amid the same power struggle. A former journalist turned Johnson adviser, who loyally stuck with him in his backbench wilderness period, Cain was another veteran of the Vote Leave campaign.

Alex Allan

Johnson's [ethics adviser quit in November 2020](#) after the prime minister refused to sack the home secretary, Priti Patel, despite a formal investigation finding evidence that she had bullied civil servants. Allan said Patel's conduct "amounted to behaviour that can be described as bullying", noting instances of shouting and swearing and finding that she had breached the ministerial code, even if unintentionally.

Jonathan Jones

The head of the UK government's legal department [resigned](#) after a significant disagreement with the attorney general for England and Wales over plans to [override parts of the Brexit deal on Northern Ireland](#). Jones had repeatedly disagreed with Suella Braverman over points of law, but the final straw came over her interpretation of the EU agreement.

Samuel Kasumu

Johnson's adviser on civil society and communities [resigned after a row over a report on racial disparities](#), which concluded that the UK did not have a systemic problem with racism. Kasumu was the prime minister's most senior black adviser. He had previously said in a letter that he was considering his resignation over the conduct of the minister Kemi Badenoch, suggesting she may have broken the ministerial code when she publicly criticised a black journalist on social media, and that tensions over race policies within No 10 had become unbearable.

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Interview

Mitski, the US's best young songwriter: 'I'm a black hole where people dump their feelings'

[Ben Beaumont-Thomas](#)



‘I wanted to get out of the fog of the pandemic’ ... Mitski. Photograph: Daniel Topete

With songs about heartbreak and capitalism, the cult pop singer is on the brink of the mainstream – but the intensity of her fandom has her fearing for her safety



@ben_bt

Fri 4 Feb 2022 01.00 EST

There is a jokey meme that captions a picture of [Mitski](#) with “Therapists HATE her”. Her songs can make you doubt what love, happiness and stability are even for. Over the course of six albums, the 31-year-old has become the US’s best young singer-songwriter, stating her feelings with dry amusement or real pain. Her songs are vignettes heavy with painterly symbolism. She connects squalling indie-rock to ambient ballads with plenty in between; her chords never resolve in the way you think they will, rather like life. Perhaps therapists hate her because she is putting them out of a job – as well as being troubling, her music is often uplifting, cathartic and compassionate.

It turns out she is in therapy herself. “I love therapy! Having someone to talk to, who you don’t feel like you’re burdening, because it’s their job – it really

eases up all your friendships,” she says, laughing. “You’re saying it out loud, giving it words; it clears things up. In America, there’s still this notion that you’re not good until you’re happy. I hope we can get away from that.”

We meet in a very posh London hotel in November and sit in a sort of elite smoking area, for maximum ventilation: “I should have a cigar,” she says. Masked up, she occasionally widens her eyes for emphasis.

Mitski’s frankness has made her a cult figure among millennials and gen Z – generations that have rejected emotional repression with such enthusiasm – but her new album, *Laurel Hell*, should carry her into the mainstream. It is an immediate pop record, but with complex songs that continue to grow on you. Her touchstones while making it were “Scott Walker, Vangelis, Giorgio Moroder, Iggy Pop during his Berlin years, Arthur Russell and a secret reference that we perhaps shouldn’t reveal: [Hall & Oates](#)”.

Watch the video for her new single, *The Only Heartbreaker*.

She recalls her wilfully naive mindset while making it: “When was a time when everyone felt hopeful and everything is happening and everything is good? The 80s bubble! That feeling of possibility, having lots of money. I wanted to channel that feeling, just to get out of the fog of the pandemic.” A lot of the songs were written in or before 2018, so she and her producer-instrumentalist Patrick Hyland “had time to consider every detail, for better and for worse. It’s not good for mental health to have no limitations and just be focused for so long.”

In other ways, the pandemic has been a positive time for her. Mitski Miyawaki was born to a Japanese mother and an American father, whose work as a diplomat took them all over the world. She studied music in New York and her career took off soon after, sending her into another itinerant life of touring. The strictures of the pandemic, spent in a new base in Nashville, allowed her to “learn how to live like a regular person. I started baking; I learned how to garden. It turns out I don’t have a green thumb, because I’m so used to getting things done on the fly. But, with plants, you can’t force them to grow in a soil they don’t like; you can’t rush their growth. Each thing needs its own amount of water, its own environment.”

At the end of the day, I'm a woman in public, allowing myself to be consumed

It is a very Mitskian comment, employing the type of double meaning that crops up in her songs, whether it is alluding to panic via turbulence on a plane, or telling a potential lover on the Laurel Hell track Valentine, Texas: “Let’s step carefully into the dark / Once we’re in, I’ll remember my way around.”

To expand on her metaphor: did she lack roots? “I did. For sure. It’s just too difficult to go from one place to another and continue to lose things, or lose people; it’s been nice to teach myself it’s OK to become attached.” She gives the example of touring: “Every day, the audience is different. You love them that day, but then you can’t form attachments to anyone there, because you go to the next show. I’d found that I needed to guard my heart, so that I didn’t just feel loss every day. So it is nice to be in this position where I have a home to miss. It feels really dear to me, actually, that I am expected back.”

She played dozens of brilliantly theatrical gigs for her 2018 album [Be the Cowboy](#), her first masterpiece. Working with the choreographer Monica Mirabile, Mitski cycled through female archetypes – including coquette and housewife – on stage as she sang, posing across kitchen furniture. The kneepads she chose to wear let us know she was protecting herself, holding something back, even at her most cartoonishly sexy.



On stage in Gothenburg, Sweden, in 2019. Photograph: Rune Hellestad/Corbis/Getty Images

"I was dealing with being an object that's looked at," she says. "Being a woman, an Asian woman, there are all these different projections that people put on me, and I guess the choreography was me trying to figure out how to deal with that. And playing with it: I would signify to people that I'm being sexual, but I would have a stone face." She loved wearing the kneepads. "There's a sense of security, like you can go out and take risks." No doubt her therapist has noted them.

Mitski is open about her need for self-protection, which played out on *Be the Cowboy* as a series of personas that she hid behind and through which she sang the songs, "accentuating parts of myself". The title of that album was a mantra for self-confidence when she didn't always have it. "Putting on that guise of being a brash, confident person was a way to protect the vulnerable parts of myself that I didn't want the world to get at," she says. "The flipside was that it really hardened me, because I didn't allow myself to be soft, ever. I always had the masks on." Even in friendships? "I didn't even have time for friendships! But it affected my writing, because in writing you have to be vulnerable."

The cultish keenness of her fans, though, can make vulnerability difficult. “I am a musician, but the reason they really pay me the big bucks” – she smiles wryly – “is to be the place where anybody can put all of their feelings, their ugliness, that doesn’t have a place in their own lives. I’m like the black hole where people can dump all their shit, whether it’s a need for love, or it’s hatred and anger. So I’ve seen a lot of the ugliness of people … I’ve put myself in this position where anyone can really do anything they want to me. I’m always fearful of somebody who might not have good intentions finding me and doing something to me.”



‘I’m more than willing to share my feelings.’ Photograph: Ebru Yildiz

She recalls finishing a solo show in a small venue without security where she needed to make her way through the crowd to reach her dressing room. “People were unrelenting. Everyone needed a piece of me, whether it was a photo, or my autograph, and then I was so overwhelmed being surrounded by hands grabbing at me that I was crying, but they still didn’t seem to see my crying face. People started to grab at my shirt and, by the time I got out, my shirt was basically off. It was an emblematic moment – that has been happening to me in different ways.”

Another one of these ways, which she won’t discuss, is the virality of an unproved fan theory that her father was in the CIA. For extremely online

people, who are suspicious of policing and yet enforce absolute moral purity, this would be a failing on her part.

“It almost doesn’t matter what music I write and put out into the world. At the end of the day, I’m a woman in public, allowing myself to be consumed. I put out songs, but really what people are buying is the product that is me.” What product do people think they are buying? “I genuinely don’t know.” Being Asian complicates things further. “Even completely private citizens who are Asian women are more objectified, fetishised and expected to be submissive. There’s more a feeling of ownership towards people of my identity, in general. My being in public has made that assumption more extreme.”

Putting on the guise of a brash, confident person was a way to protect the vulnerable parts of myself

Nevertheless, she says, “I don’t want to continue to make music that is protective of myself. The music I love, that has saved me, is the kind that really gets to the heart of myself and the person performing it. And so I decided that even if more harm may come to me, I would be serving my purpose better if I actually wrote something that felt closer to my heart.”

Laurel Hell, then, is Mitski with the kneepads off: less filtered, more frank, more poppy. She will sing to tens of thousands as support for Harry Styles at Wembley stadium this summer; the big single, [The Only Heartbreaker](#), was co-written by Semisonic’s Dan Wilson, who wrote Someone Like You with Adele. Another single, Working for the Knife, addresses “how I have to navigate really exploitative capitalism in order to serve my purpose”.

Has she pondered what a better society might look like? “Every single day, I wish I were smart enough to figure it out. I just know that the way it is now is terrible and I feel my soul dying every day. [At least] I still have the privilege of being able to complain about my soul, you know? Because I’m middle class, I get to talk about my existence – a lot of people don’t have the room to do that. I only seem to be wired to write my little songs about my feelings. It really makes me sad how useless and unintelligent I am. It’s really terrible.”

Her biggest (and, indeed, best) song yet, [Love Me More](#) – think Flashdance’s Maniac given 21st-century oomph – is about getting validation from that one skill: “Please take this sole thing that I’m able to do and please love it. It is very desperate, and when you’re desperate you don’t have much time or space to think about how embarrassing it is to be desperate.” There are 81,000 people following a Spotify playlist called “[Mitski songs ranked in order of sadness](#)” and the artist is just as droll; she has that rare quality of making self-deprecation endearing.



Playing Coachella in Indio, California, in 2017. Photograph: Valérie Macon/AFP/Getty Images

I had assumed that much of the album was about a breakup. The absurdly buoyant That’s Our Lamp gets at a particular dissonant feeling I have never heard expressed in decades of pop heartbreak – the simultaneous horror and exhilaration that your relationship is ending – while a line on I Guess (“It’s been you and me since before I was me”) is a devastating truism of young love. But she says these songs aren’t lifted wholesale from a single breakup, rather crafted from “tiny moments”.

“I never want to say my songs are fictional, because they all come from my feelings and things I’ve seen – it’s just a matter of putting together different parts to make them tell a story and evoke a feeling.” She calls “the human

romantic relationship the best metaphor, the best narrative vehicle; this album is about a feeling of ending, a feeling of resignation, and often using the narrative of the ending relationship is the easiest way to convey that emotion.”

Given how specific and true the romantic strife she sings about feels, I find this a bit cool and evasive, especially when she adds that the new song Should've Been Me “is about your partner maybe cheating, but because you love this person and you know yourself, you understand their perspective. You understand your part in it. And, through somebody straying and betraying you, weirdly understanding that they loved you so much. You just weren’t there for them – they needed something and you couldn’t give it to them, so they tried to find it elsewhere. I wanted to portray a narrative of compassion, even after being lied to.” Has she been betrayed in this way? She makes an exaggerated shrug. “I’m not going to say.”

Perhaps I am behaving like that audience, too determined to get a piece of her pain. She is polite as she draws boundaries around her romantic history: “I’m more than willing to share my feelings, or things that happened to me. [But] I feel like I don’t have the right to tell someone else’s story.”

Whether betrayed or not, her willingness to share blame is radical in our flamboyantly punitive culture. “This album in general has been a process of me trying to figure out how to forgive myself and other people,” she says. “In my actual moments of tragedy or joy, I do tend to turn towards black-and-white thinking, and often that hasn’t served me.” Writing Laurel Hell, she says, “has been a process of learning how to be kinder to myself and, through that, be kinder to other people. I want to get out of being a hero of the story and being the villain.”

Laurel Hell is out now on Dead Oceans

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2022/feb/04/mitski-us-best-young-songwriter-im-a-black-hole-where-people-dump-feelings>

Media

‘Meltdown in Downing Street’: front pages batter Johnson after ‘Black Thursday’

Cost of living crisis, departure of top aides and Rishi Sunak’s rebuke dominate the newspapers on another bad day for the PM



The front pages of some of the UK papers on Friday. Composite: UK newspapers, Twitter

Martin Farrer

Thu 3 Feb 2022 22.24 EST

Three big stories dominate Friday’s front pages – and none of them are good news for [Boris Johnson](#). Editors were spoilt for choice with the “big squeeze” in living standards, the “bloodbath” of departing Downing Street aides and Rishi Sunak’s less-than-total backing for his leader.

Several papers combine the stories in what the **Mail** calls “Meltdown in Downing Street” above an image of a forlorn-looking prime minister and the subhead, “will the last one to leave please turn out the lights” evoking the [Sun’s infamous 1992 election front page](#).

Across the top of the page, the Mail runs through the litany of the latest disasters to strike Johnson’s ailing premiership: “Four aides go”, “Sunak puts knife into PM”, and “rates, energy bills and inflation soar”.

The **Sun**’s splash headline says “Ouch!” and then breaks out the strands of what it dubs on what others called “Black Thursday”. “Brits £2,417 poorer”, one subhead says, along with “Partygate bloodbath” and “Rishi knifes PM”.

Tomorrow's front page: Families will be an average of £2,417 worse off this year despite a £9billion bailout announced by Chancellor Rishi Sunak <https://t.co/1PWspF8E3b> pic.twitter.com/bNDnkJXQjk

— The Sun (@TheSun) [February 3, 2022](#)

The **Mirror** says “They’re all laughing” with a picture of the Tory frontbench sharing a joke in the Commons juxtaposed with some hard-hitting facts about the cost of living crisis.

Tomorrow's front page: They're all laughing <https://t.co/fDXVQy7v7c#TomorrowsPapersToday> pic.twitter.com/3rKuL8PJA2

— The Mirror (@DailyMirror) [February 3, 2022](#)

The **Guardian** focuses on the shenanigans in Downing Street as four of Boris Johnson’s senior aides left in the fallout from the parties scandal: [“PM hit by No 10 exodus as four aides quit in one day”](#). One of them, policy chief Munira Mirza, accused the prime minister of “scurrilous” behaviour when he falsely linked Keir Starmer to the failure to bring paedophile Jimmy Savile to justice. It also reports that households are “braced for further fuel bill rises”.

Guardian front page, Friday 4 February 2022: PM hit by No 10 exodus as four aides quit in one day pic.twitter.com/2hYg5ug9XA

— The Guardian (@guardian) [February 3, 2022](#)

The **i** has a similar theme with “Johnson’s top team quits No 10 en masse”, while the **Yorkshire Post** reports “Johnson aides quit amid slur against Starmer”.

YORKSHIRE POST: Johnson aides quit amid slur against Starmer
[#TomorrowsPapersToday pic.twitter.com/dxQuTa7V3o](#)

— Neil Henderson (@hendopolis) [February 3, 2022](#)

The headline in the **Times** is “Britons facing biggest drop in living standards” and a large picture of the chancellor. It also carries a story saying that “Johnson doubts grow after aides quit and Sunak takes swipe”.

TIMES: Britons facing biggest drop in living standards
[#TomorrowsPapersToday pic.twitter.com/ZAlp8WjYZD](#)

— Neil Henderson (@hendopolis) [February 3, 2022](#)

The **Telegraph** has a similar running order with a splash headlined “The big squeeze” and another smaller story down the page saying “More pressure on Johnson as four top aides quit in one day”.

The front page of tomorrow's Daily Telegraph:

'The big squeeze'[#TomorrowsPapersToday](#)

Sign up for the Front Page newsletter<https://t.co/x8AV4Oomry>
pic.twitter.com/TZRv2wzcKd

— The Telegraph (@Telegraph) [February 3, 2022](#)

Ditto the **FT** which has a main story saying “Household budgets suffer biggest blow in three decades”, and underneath it reports “Sunak distances himself from Johnson over Savile remarks as close aides quit”.

FT UK: Household budgets suffer biggest blow in three decades
[#TomorrowsPapersToday pic.twitter.com/EoSsHoB5IV](#)

— Neil Henderson (@hendopolis) [February 3, 2022](#)

In Scotland the **Daily Record** says “Half a million Scots to go hungry” because of the rising cost of household energy.

Friday's Daily Record front page: Rishi Sunak's energy bills rescue package will not stop half a million Scots from going hungry.
[#TomorrowsPapersToday @hendopolis pic.twitter.com/3ql3ayrnyB](#)

— The Daily Record (@Daily_Record) [February 3, 2022](#)

The **Express** says “Tighten your belts ... Britain in grip of biggest squeeze ever”.

Tomorrow's front page: "Tighten your belts... Britain in grip of biggest squeeze ever"
[#TomorrowsPapersToday pic.twitter.com/HF1cQHNVK6](#)

— Daily Express (@Daily_Express) [February 3, 2022](#)

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[You be the judge](#)[Life and style](#)

You be the judge: should my girlfriend stop hitting the snooze button?



Illustration: Joren Joshua/The Guardian

She likes waking up slowly; he gets out of bed immediately. We air both sides of a domestic disagreement – and ask you to deliver a verdict

[If you have a disagreement you'd like settled, or want to be part of our jury, click here](#)

Interviews by [Georgina Lawton](#)

[@georginalawton](#)

Fri 4 Feb 2022 03.00 EST

The prosecution: Harry

Regina sets between six and seven alarms each morning and ‘snoozes’ each one

I’m fundamentally opposed to the snooze button but my girlfriend, Regina, loves it. I don’t snooze because it’s not enjoyable. You’re left thinking about the alarm going off again; you’re neither fully asleep nor awake. Why not just set it and get up when it goes off?

Regina sets between six and seven alarms each morning and “snoozes” each one. She likes a gradual way of getting up whereas I prefer to do it immediately. I’m awake on the first alarm. I stay over at Regina’s four times a week and I have to adapt. I lie there in bed, waiting. Sometimes I reach over her to turn off an alarm, which is a lot of effort. I often feel as though I’m simply an extension of her alarm clock.

I like to make our coffees at the same time, but I can never tell when Regina will actually wake up

The snooze button impacts our morning routine. There have been a few times when alarms have been ringing hours later, while she’s showering or downstairs. It can be crazy. It also means I never know when to make my coffee. I like to make our coffees at the same time, but I can never tell when Regina will actually wake up. Sometimes I will have to wait anywhere between 15 and 45 minutes before I get my coffee.

On her phone, Regina has every alarm she’s ever set, as she never deletes them. I find that wild. The ringtone is also the default iPhone one, a loud

clanging noise which is really aggressive. Regina claims to be a morning person but she's not. A morning person is someone who doesn't need multiple alarms and gets up straight away, ready to embrace the day. That's me.

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There's also the issue of how she makes me feel if I'm getting up earlier than her: I'm accused of being functional, efficient and boring, when really I'm just organised.

If Regina was able to get up when the first alarm went off, we could use the spare time to have a coffee and chat instead of snoozing until the last second before she has to rush to join an online meeting. If we want an extra half an hour in bed, we should set the alarm for later and get up then. In my book, those are the only two options.

The defence: Regina

Harry needs to relax and embrace the snooze time. I enjoy it and it means I won't be late for things

I am a morning person. I like the start of the day. I like to get up and be productive. It's just that the period before 8am is really difficult for me.

When Harry suggests setting the alarm half an hour later and getting up then, he's missing the point. I don't want to maximise the amount of time I sleep. For me the period of snoozing is enjoyable in itself. I like to snooze for around half an hour. I like to wake up gently and process what I'm going to do that day. I'm semiconscious. It's a nice experience.

I set seven alarms every day and will snooze all of them, but it's a necessary process for me to get up. I've had a few close misses with things in the past – that's why I love setting multiple alarms.

Recently I woke up 15 minutes before a hospital appointment and it had been scheduled for months. Snoozing is great as it buys me extra time, but if you don't set enough alarms, then sleeping can be dangerous.

Harry says he doesn't recognise the nice things about snoozing but I have sometimes seen him fall back asleep at the weekends.

I like to wake up gently and process what I'm going to do that day. I'm semi-conscious. It's a nice experience

He is very strategic and organised, so he doesn't get my point that it's nice to ease yourself into the day. Sometimes when we wake up, Harry will say "I'm awake now" in a very instructive tone when I'm snoozing, implying that I have to wake up with him. But if it's not my time I won't get up. I set fewer alarms when Harry stays over, so he's probably right when he says he is my alarm clock; I do rely on him a bit more.

I'm organised, but probably not as much as Harry. He's never late for things whereas I usually always am.

I can try and set fewer alarms when Harry is with me, but I don't trust myself to rely on just one or two when he's not there. Harry needs to relax and embrace the snooze time and make good use of it.

He's not missing out on the day because the alarm goes off and we snooze through it before we need to get up – that's the whole point.

The jury of Guardian readers

Should Regina ditch her multiple alarms?

I'm on Team Regina, though I enjoy the image of Harry's rage growing with each clang of the alarm. Harry seems fixated on Regina's habits and implies that she is lacking in organisation skills. He could ask her to find a less intrusive alarm. Even simpler – just get out of bed, Harry.

Emily, 37

Regina is not guilty. Everyone's morning routine is unique. If Harry cares for Regina, he should respect her ritual and accommodate something his girlfriend values. If Harry wants a coffee he should make one!

Ewan, 55

I'm with Harry on this one – nothing induces a reaction like an alarm clock, so to hear it multiple times in one morning is enough to drive anyone up the wall. I recommend he try a judicious application of his cold feet, or a theatrical turn-over-and-steal-the-duvet manoeuvre. Harry could just get up and exit quietly to have a coffee in peace – but where's the fun in that?

Sophie, 29

Repeated alarms would annoy me too but Harry doesn't have to be a martyr. He can get up and enjoy a leisurely coffee while Regina snoozes. But Regina should accept that a truly organised morning person wouldn't behave like that.

Linda, 60

Harry needs to be more understanding as Regina's snoozes are part of her wake-up routine. Harry can always get out of bed on the first alarm and start the day without her. Regina could swap the clangy iPhone alarm though.

James, 29

You be the judge

So now you can be the judge, click on the poll below to tell us: should Regina stop relying on the snooze button?

We'll share the results on next week's You be the judge.

The poll closes Thursday 10 February, 9AM GMT

Last week's result

We asked if Alicia ate the chocolate biscuits too quickly, before her partner, Hans, could get to them.

50% of you said no – Alicia is innocent

50% of you said yes – Alicia is guilty

[Have a disagreement you'd like settled? Or want to be part of our jury?](#)

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Haitian skier Richardson Viano, (left), Great Britain curler Bruce Mouat (centre) Russia's figure skater Kamila Valieva. Composite: AFP/Getty Images; UPI/Shutterstock; TASS/Getty Images

Winter Olympics 2022: 10 things to look out for in Beijing

Haitian skier Richardson Viano, (left), Great Britain curler Bruce Mouat (centre) Russia's figure skater Kamila Valieva. Composite: AFP/Getty Images; UPI/Shutterstock; TASS/Getty Images

Jamaica return to the bobsleigh after 24 years, Haiti and Saudi Arabia make debuts, while GB aim for curling glory

by [Sean Ingle](#) and [Bryan Armen Graham](#) in Beijing

Thu 3 Feb 2022 19.00 EST

1) Jamaica, we have a bobsleigh team (again)

Jamaica will enter a four-man bobsleigh team in the Olympics for the first time in 24 years after nicking the final qualifying spot, offering a feelgood reboot for the island nation whose debut at the 1988 Calgary Games inspired the Disney film Cool Runnings. Just making it to Beijing might seem like accomplishment enough for Shanwayne Stephens, the team's 31-year-old pilot and Royal Air Force lance corporal who emigrated to Great Britain with his family in 2002: certainly after improvised training methods at the height of the pandemic that included pushing his girlfriend's Mini Cooper around the streets of Peterborough. But having touched down in China after undergoing their final preparations at the University of Bath, his goal is plain. "It's got to be medalling," Stephens says. "It's everybody's dream, it's what we're here to do. So why not aim high?" **BAG**

Sign up for our Beijing 2022 briefing with all the news, views and previews for the Games.

2) Bankes to lead Britain's charge on slopes?

There is no such thing as a banker in an event as chaotic or frenetic as snowboard cross, where four racers take each other on down a mountain, but Britain's Charlotte Bankes is certainly in pole position. The 26-year-old, who transferred from France to Team GB after the Pyeongchang Games four years ago, is not only the reigning world champion but has been in impressive form on the circuit this season. Bankes is at the vanguard of a strong GB snowsport team that also have reasonable medal chances in the form of Zoe Atkin, James Woods and 17-year-old Kirsty Muir, the youngest member of the Team GB squad. **SI**

3) Shiffrin and the drive for five

Mikaela Shiffrin, the 26-year-old American sensation of the piste whose three Olympic medals include gold in slalom in 2014 and in giant slalom in 2018, has said her plan is to race all five individual events in Yanqing and will go off as a hot medal contender in all but the downhill. That puts Janica Kostelic's women's record of four medals at a single Olympics on watch. The Vail native, whose 73 career World Cup wins are 13 short of Ingemar Stenmark's all-time record of 86, can further burnish her legacy by

becoming the first skier from the US, male or female, to win more than two Olympic gold medals. **BAG**



USA's Mikaela Shiffrin will be one to watch in Beijing. Photograph: Jure Makovec/AFP/Getty Images

4) Chen v Hanyu for all the marbles

It's the most compelling figure skating rivalry in a generation. In one corner: Nathan Chen of the US, the three-time world champion, who has won all but one competition he has entered since a [nightmarish short programme](#) doomed him to a fifth-place finish in 2018. In the other: Japan's Yuzuru Hanyu, the two-time defending Olympic gold medallist who became the [first men's repeat champion in 66 years](#) at those same Pyeongchang Games. Chen goes off as the favourite on merit after winning their three most recent head-to-head meetings, but Hanyu's knack for raising his level when the lights burn brightest makes their showdown at the Capital Indoor Stadium one of the must-watch fixtures of the coming weeks. **BAG**

5) A Brucey and Evey bonus in curling?

Remember how Britain briefly went curling crazy in 2002 when Rhona Martin and her stone of destiny [won gold in Salt Lake City](#)? Well, Beijing

2022 could be far bigger. The bookies rate the British mixed and men's teams, led by Bruce "Brucey" Moat, as favourites for gold, and the women's team, skipped by Eve "Evey" Muirhead, as the third favourites in their event. And while there might be some parochialism baked into those odds, the form of the British teams stacks up. The men are world champions. The mixed team are world champions. And the women recently won the European championship. Three medals? It's not out of the question. **SI**



Jennifer Dodds and Bruce Mouat of Team Great Britain compete in Beijing.
Photograph: Elsa/Getty Images

6) Warm-weather nations make Games debuts

Haiti and Saudi Arabia are poised to make their Winter Games debuts, with these Games matching the fewest number of debutant countries at an Olympics after Squaw Valley 1960, when South Africa was alone to join the fray. In a curious twist, both will take part in the same event. Richardson Viano, a 19-year-old originally from Port-au-Prince who was adopted by an Italian couple living in France, is scheduled to compete in the men's giant slalom alongside Fayik Abdi, a 24-year-old born in San Diego and raised in Beirut who will become the first athlete from any Gulf nation to compete in a [Winter Olympics](#). **BAG**

7) Eileen Gu becomes household name

The San Francisco-born freestyle skier and [IMG model](#) competed under the US flag before [switching affiliations to China](#), where she is known as Gu Ailing and has been positioned as the face of the Beijing Games. The 18-year-old is among the gold medal favourites in the halfpipe, slopestyle and big air events – having scored World Cup wins in all three disciplines this year – and well on her way to becoming a household name with more than 1.3 million followers on Weibo and a growing roster of sponsors including Cadillac, Tiffany's, Visa and Victoria's Secret. **BAG**



A poster of Ailing Gu is seen next a shopkeeper at an official merchandise shop for the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics in the Wangfujing shopping district in Beijing. Photograph: Kevin Frayer/Getty Images

8) Norway to reign supreme again?

It was a minor surprise when Norway, a country of only 5.4 million people, finished top of the podium at the 2018 Games, winning 39 medals. It won't be if they repeat the trick in 2022. Indeed the data company Gracenote projects them to win 44 medals – well clear of the Russian Olympic Committee and Germany – with cross-country skiing and biathlon providing the majority of medals. But what makes Norway's success so remarkable is

they spend only a 10th of what Team GB does on Olympic sports each year – and they also stress the importance of the umbilical link between grassroots and elite sport and of putting fun and happiness ahead of medals. SI

9) Return of the queen

Southern Californian prodigy Chloe Kim shot to global stardom in Pyeongchang when she became the youngest female athlete to [secure Winter Olympics gold on snow](#) with a transcendent performance that included back-to-back 1080s, the gravity-defying manoeuvre she remains the only woman to have landed in competition. But she quickly found the trappings of fame – gracing the fronts of cereal boxes and magazine covers, [getting name-checked](#) in Frances McDormand's Oscar speech – were dwarfed by her yearning for a normal life as a college student at Princeton. After nearly two years off the mountain Kim picked up right where she left off with a world title, crediting her decision to start therapy and turn focus to her mental health with helping rekindle her competitive fire. Now 21, she is the hot favourite to defend her Olympic snowboard halfpipe title. **BAG**



Chloe Kim competes in the women's snowboard halfpipe final at the U.S. Grand Prix World Cup in Aspen, Colorado. Photograph: Sean M Haffey/Getty Images

10) Russian figure skaters plot world domination

A trio of boundary-pushing Russian teenagers armed with point-gobbling quadruple jumps is poised to obliterate the competition in women's figure skating, reducing the entire podium of the Winter Olympics' glamour event to a fait accompli. Barring a colossal surprise, the more familiar pair of the 17-year-olds Alexandra Trusova and the reigning world champion, Anna Shcherbakova, will compete for the silver and bronze medals behind the 15-year-old prodigy Kamila Valieva, the [newly minted European champion](#) who has already broken the world records for the women's short programme, free skate and combined total in an extraordinary first season on the senior circuit. **BAG**

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[**Coronavirus**](#)

Turkey reports daily record of 111,157 new cases – as it happened

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Coronavirus

World faces ‘bumpy, difficult’ Covid transition, says senior scientist

‘I just don’t think you wake up on Tuesday and it’s finished,’ says former Sage adviser Sir Jeremy Farrar

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



The head of the Wellcome Trust, Sir Jeremy Farrar, said he is in favour of mask wearing on public transport in the UK. Photograph: Dinendra Haria/SOPA Images/REX/Shutterstock

Nicola Davis Science correspondent
[@NicolaKSDavis](#)

Thu 3 Feb 2022 12.18 EST

Tensions in societies around the world over the current Covid situation are going to be very difficult to handle, one of Britain's most senior scientific figures has warned.

Sir Jeremy Farrar, the director of the Wellcome Trust, who [stepped down as a government scientific adviser](#) in November last year, warned the idea of simply “exiting” a pandemic is not realistic.

“I just don’t think you wake up on Tuesday and it’s finished. It’s not going to happen like that,” he said in an online meeting of the Royal Society of Medicine.

“The transition from [the] acute phase of the pandemic to something new, not yet defined, it’s really difficult – bumpy, different around the world, different within a single country, with the degree of inequity that’s happened globally, but also nationally,” he said.

Farrar noted one problem is that while some people may argue the pandemic is now in the past, and the situation in the middle of the pandemic was exaggerated, others believe it’s far from over.

“And so the tensions, I think, within societies are going to be very difficult to handle,” he said.

Farrar added that while he has sympathy with the disruption of education and the health and economic impacts of Covid he is concerned about the speed at which some want to move on.

“My concern is that there will be too fast a shift to saying it’s all over and we will lose the humility of accepting that we’re only two years into a novel human pathogen, that is still a huge amount of uncertainty,” he said, adding it is also crucial to resolve [the problem of vaccine inequality](#).

While Farrar said the most likely scenario is that there will be a transition to Omicron becoming endemic, as the variant is less severe than others, it is not the only possibility.

“My worry in the push to try and move on from this [is that] we ignore those other scenarios, which are less rosy but we should be absolutely prepared for,” he said.

Farrar added that while he agreed it is time to begin easing Covid restrictions in the UK, he is in favour of keeping some measures.

“I would be in favour of continuing for instance, mask wearing on public transport, in enclosed spaces, etc,” he said. “And I would be pushing ever harder on trying to encourage people to be vaccinated, get their boosting doses, and make sure that everybody has access to the vaccines from a UK perspective.”

Farrar also warned that he has deep concerns about the global Covid situation, warning that the pandemic has been made worse “by a catastrophic failure of global diplomacy”.

“The ongoing geopolitics of east /west but increasingly, understandably, north/south, because of vaccine inequity is going to lead to really troubling years ahead and will have ramifications beyond pandemics to our ability to come together to solve issues of inequality, of issues of climate change, of issues of drug resistance, of issues of migration and conflict,” he said.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/03/world-faces-bumpy-difficult-covid-transition-says-senior-scientist>

World Health Organization

Covid: Europe set for ‘long period of tranquillity’ in pandemic, says WHO

Vaccinations, milder Omicron and arrival of spring should keep death rate low as cases rise to all time high

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



Shoppers walk down the Champs-Élysées in Paris. Hans Kluge, the WHO’s Europe director, said there will be a ‘ceasefire’ in the pandemic. Photograph: Kiran Ridley/Getty Images

*[Jon Henley](#) Europe correspondent
[@jonhenley](#)*

Thu 3 Feb 2022 07.46 EST

Europe could soon enter a “long period of tranquillity” that amounts to a “ceasefire” in the pandemic thanks to the less severe Omicron variant, high levels of immunity and the arrival of warmer spring weather, [the World Health Organization](#) has said.

In [an upbeat assessment](#), Hans Kluge, the WHO’s Europe director, said the region was in a position of “higher protection” that could “bring us enduring peace”, even if a new, more virulent variant than Omicron should emerge.

Kluge said the 53-country region – which includes the UK – had recorded 12 million new coronavirus cases last week, the highest single weekly total of the pandemic, with about 22% of all tests returning a positive result.

However, hospital admissions, although growing, were not rising at the same rate and the number of patients in intensive care was not increasing significantly, he said. The number of deaths across the region was also starting to plateau.

Kluge said “a large capital of vaccine-derived and natural immunity, a favourable seasonality pause and a lower severity of the Omicron variant” meant governments now had “a singular opportunity to take control of transmission”.

This opened up the prospect of “a long period of tranquillity and a much higher level of population defence” against any fresh resurgence in infection rates, he said.

The optimistic forecast comes days after [Kluge said](#) it was “plausible” the region was “moving towards a kind of pandemic endgame”.

But Kluge stressed on Thursday that authorities must use the respite constructively, by continuing vaccine and booster campaigns, protecting the most vulnerable, promoting individual responsibility and intensifying surveillance to detect new variants.

“I believe it is possible to respond to new variants that will inevitably emerge without reinstalling the kind of disruptive measures we needed

before,” he said. But he added it must now be a top priority to ensure all countries are equally well protected.

“This demands a drastic and uncompromising increase in vaccine-sharing across borders,” Kluge said. “We cannot accept vaccine inequity for one more day – vaccines must be for everyone, in the remotest corner of our vast region and beyond.”

On the eve of World Cancer Day, the WHO regional director also noted the “catastrophic impact” the pandemic had had on people with cancer as health systems struggled with screening, diagnosis and treatment during the past two years.

During the early stages of the pandemic, he said, diagnosis of invasive tumours fell by 44% in Belgium, colorectal screenings decreased by 46% in Italy, and in Spain the number of cancers diagnosed in 2020 was 34% lower than expected.

The situation in many countries had improved since then, he said, but “the knock-on effect of this disruption will be felt for years” and any respite from the pandemic must be used immediately to reduce backlogs for chronic care services.

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[Austria](#)

Austria passes Covid vaccine mandate, but question marks linger over enforcement

Despite an EU-first law that imposes fines of up to 3,600 euros for adults refusing a jab, government accused of mixed messaging

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Austria's upper house has voted 47-12 in favour of compulsory Covid-19 vaccination for adults. Photograph: Lukas Barth/Reuters

[Philip Oltermann](#) in Berlin

[@philipoltermann](#)

Fri 4 Feb 2022 08.15 EST

Austria has become the first country in the EU to make vaccinations against Covid-19 mandatory for all adults, but questions remain over whether it can sway those sceptical of taking the jab and how much the Alpine state's government is willing to press those who won't comply.

The upper house of the Austrian parliament, the Bundesrat, on Thursday evening voted 47-12 in favour of a [general vaccination mandate](#), formally approving a law that will see those over the age of 18 who decline to take a jab face penalties of up to 3,600 euros, unless they are pregnant or severely ill.

The legislation, which was signed by Austria's president Alexander Van der Bellen on Friday and will come into effect over the coming days, has been followed with great interest across [Europe](#), where other nations have considered taking a similar step.

Already approved by the lower house of Austria's parliament with a clear majority last month, Austria's vaccine mandate is due to come into effect in three stages.

Every household is to be informed of the new law via post by 15 March, after which police will start monitoring people's immunisation status via spot checks and issuing fines of 600 euros, rising to up to 3,600 euros in case of non-compliance.

In the third phase, those who cannot show proof of vaccination by a certain deadline are to be automatically fined, but it is unclear whether the government still keen to enforce its mandate to such a degree.

In an interview with public broadcaster ORF on Thursday morning, health minister Wolfgang Mückstein was unable to give a date for the crucial deadline.

As Austria has inched closer to a decision on mandatory vaccinations, the conservative-Greens coalition government of chancellor Karl Nehammer has simultaneously loosened restrictions for the unvaccinated.

A “[lockdown for the unvaccinated](#)” was lifted on Monday, and shops, restaurants and hotels across most of the country will soon be able to receive visitors who haven’t got a jab, as long as they can show a recent negative test result.

Political developments around the mandate have been followed closely in Germany, where [government calls for a similar law](#) have become more cautious in recent weeks.

“Since the government announced the compulsory measure in mid-January, it has done everything to undermine, soften and make its own project redundant,” wrote Munich-based German newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung in a comment piece. “The message is clear: we didn’t really mean it.”

Gerald Loacker, a health spokesperson for liberal NEOS opposition party, said waning political enthusiasm for mandatory vaccinations was impossible to ignore.

“What we are dealing with here is a vaccine mandate that comes into effect just as the government is making it possible for those who aren’t vaccinated to enter a bar with a subsidised free test result and raise a glass to their resistance,” Loacker told the Guardian.

“That’s not a coherent policy, and people in Austria are taking note of that.”

Karl Stöger, a professor of constitutional law at Vienna university, said that seeming incoherence was partly a deliberate choice. “The vaccination mandate has legal teeth, but it is also a law that is very aware of the limits of what a state can force people to do,” he said.

Stöger, who has advised the government in its handling of the pandemic, said it was possible that Austria’s constitutional court could still stymie the vaccine mandate, especially if an “endemic” situation of the virus with low hospitalisation rates no longer makes vaccinations appear vital.

Like many other European countries, Austria is experiencing record rates of Covid-19 infections, but the number of patients in intensive care beds with the virus is declining.

With 68.8 % of its population having received at least two shots of a vaccine, however, the government argues that only mandatory vaccinations will bring immunisation rates to a sufficiently high level to weather another wave of the virus later this year.

Last December's emphatic endorsement of the vaccine mandate idea on behalf of the government, then still fronted by interim chancellor Alexander Schallenberg, has also made it politically difficult for the conservative Austrian People's party (ÖVP) to change its mind without losing face.

"There's a sense the whole of Europe is watching us: a government U-turn at this stage would amount to a huge loss of face," said Clemens Schuhmann, a journalist for Oberösterreichische Nachrichten newspaper.

Yet enforcing the mandate could come with the risk of further stoking divisions in a society already polarised over the course of the pandemic.

Upper Austria, the northern state that Schuhmann reports on, has one of the lowest vaccination rates in the country, with fewer than 60% of residents fully vaccinated in some municipalities bordering on southern Germany.

"Those who will get vaccinated because of the mandate are the ones who can't afford to pay the fines", he said. "The risk is that others will get further radicalised and rather go to prison than take the jab."

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2022.02.04 - Opinion

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Opinion[Boris Johnson](#)

Reckless, Trumpian leadership is losing Johnson allies. It should lose him his job

[Martin Kettle](#)



The resignations of Munira Mirza and other aides should galvanise Tory MPs to do what they must now do



Illustration by Nate Kitch

Fri 4 Feb 2022 01.00 EST

In writing about politics you can either try to explain what you think is happening or you can say what you think should happen. Right now, there is a complete convergence between the two. Boris Johnson's premiership is [on the slide](#), irreversibly so. The question is not whether Johnson will go. It is when and how – and what will come after.

Simultaneously it is increasingly plain that Johnson *should* go. Some take this view for partisan reasons or because Johnson's personality appals them. Fair enough. But that's not my argument here. There is also an extremely powerful Conservative case against him remaining. In the end, this will be decisive, because he will only go only if it is in the Tory party's interest; no one else's.

However the main reason why Johnson should depart is now moral, systemic and governmental, rather than political. His increasingly reckless, and even Trumpian, response to it has now led to the resignation of Munira Mirza, No 10's policy chief, who described a recent attack on Keir Starmer as beyond "the normal cut and thrust of politics". It's about the way the current crisis shows how he sees his job, and about the way he does it. He

sees himself as above the system. He should not. His approach cannot coexist for much longer with being a prime minister of a stable and healthy parliamentary democracy. There is too much at stake.

Much has been said this week about how the dangers to Johnson's position may have lifted a little. That may be true in the short run, although every time anyone says this a new danger pops up. In the longer term, the danger is as great as ever. The simple but profound truth is that the law is above Johnson, not the other way around. As Keir Starmer hinted this week, the police investigation may yet end in the conviction of a prime minister, an event without modern precedent.

It is clear that Johnson would try to brush that aside. He appears ready to argue that a fixed-penalty notice for a breach of lockdown rules would no more call his position as prime minister into question than a parking fine. But the Tory party is almost certainly not so far gone that it would permit this. Tobias Ellwood's words this week – "We're better than this" – would become the rallying cry, and rightly so.

Johnson is blind to rules and dismissive of them. But he is also more devious about why they should not apply to him than is sometimes understood. This is fundamentally because he sees himself as an autonomous individual unburdened by the obligations or conventions that others uphold. It means he believes rules do not matter, and it means that in government he is not the first among equals, as the constitutional orthodoxy would have it, but very much the first above subordinates.

This is why he has constructed his government the way he has, with a cabinet composed mainly of sycophants and second-order ministers; with a centralised No 10 operation that overrides departments and undermines their ethos; and with senior civil servants, like ministers, too often chosen for their deference to the man at the centre rather than for their readiness to argue a case.

It is also why Johnson governs not through his control of Whitehall or the House of Commons but through the No 10 media operation. It is why he spends so much time making photo-opportunity visits to hospitals and construction sites accompanied by his seemingly bottomless dressing-up

box. It is why he built the press briefing suite in Downing Street. It is why he flew to Kyiv on Tuesday. It is why, in Jacob Rees-Mogg's highly revealing claim, government in the Johnson era is more presidential than parliamentary.

Johnson's attitude to the ministerial code offers an example of this approach. Starmer asked Johnson [last week](#) if the code applied to him. Johnson replied that it did. But there is a good case for suspecting Johnson really believes otherwise. In the code, ministers are subject to the rules, but the prime minister himself is the code's arbiter and guardian. It is he, and he alone, who decides if there has been a breach.

Johnson knows this. It is how he overrode his standards adviser in the Priti Patel bullying case. It is also the case he would make if Sue Gray were convinced in her final report that he had lied to parliament. The ethos of the code undoubtedly means that a prime minister should resign for lying. But the letter of the code gives a prime minister the wriggle room to claim to be the judge in their own case.

All of this is at one with the way Johnson conducts himself as the head of government. Constitutionally, he owes the prime ministership to the support of parliament (which is why MPs can and will in the end throw him out). But Johnson sees the 2019 election victory as a personal mandate that bypasses MPs. This is why Rees-Mogg and others have claimed that there would have to be a general election [if the Tories chose themselves a new leader](#). It is completely untrue, but it is how Johnson thinks of it.

Something similar surfaced again in Johnson's revealing response to Gray's interim report this week. In the face of Gray's finding of "failures of leadership and judgment", Johnson announced that "[I get it and I will fix it](#)." But he doesn't and he won't. Beefing up the No 10 operation and centralising government around himself even more firmly are the opposite of what he needs to do.

This week's "levelling up" white paper provided an example of another systemic failing in Johnson's solipsistic approach to government. Make no mistake, levelling up is and could be a big idea. Potentially it is as big an

idea as Brexit in its importance to sustaining the electoral realignment that Johnson achieved in 2019.

But the white paper shows that levelling up is still more of a phrase than a policy, rather as Brexit also was. The plans do not come close to addressing the scale and intricacy of the problems involved in the nation's inequalities and uneven opportunities. Without new money, amid large doses of Thatcherite Tory scepticism on the backbenches, and hampered by Johnson's preference for performative rather than effective presidentialism, it will not do the job either economically or politically.

Johnson owes his prime ministership to running against Britain's governing system. But at no time has he had an alternative system to put in place for changing Britain – beyond himself and his performance. He is now doubling down on that same approach, even though it will make all the problems worse. This is now an irreparably destructive prime ministership, not just to Johnson and his party, but to government more generally, to the public's needs, to the country's reputation and even to the survival of the state.

- Martin Kettle is a Guardian columnist

The subheading of this article was amended on 4 February 2022 to remove an incorrect statement that Tobias Ellwood had resigned.

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OpinionConservatives

The Tories are in trouble – but history tells us a scandal can strengthen them

[Andy Beckett](#)

The party's current crisis may be one of the sporadic upheavals that cements its longterm dominance of British politics



Boris Johnson on a visit to Blackpool transport depot, 3 February 2022.

Photograph: WPA/Getty Images

Fri 4 Feb 2022 04.00 EST

If you're not a Tory, the past few months may have brought some pleasure after years of torment. Bad news for the Conservatives has suddenly started coming almost daily: [misfiring smear campaigns](#), chaotic U-turns, [potentially lethal investigations](#), Tory MPs and rightwing papers turning on Boris Johnson, panicky ministers struggling through interviews, leadership rivalries ruining policy announcements, and a sustained [plunge in the](#)

[opinion polls](#). The multiplying consequences of the Downing Street party scandals have changed the political atmosphere.

The importance of all this should not be underestimated. A terrible government, the most lethally incompetent and probably the most corrupt in modern British history, may finally be beginning to be held to account. At the same time, Conservatism's image – as a rarely nice but often realistic ruling ideology – is being badly damaged. Seemingly unknown to themselves, Johnson and his remaining loyalists are becoming a laughing stock.

But are we laughing too much? Conservative governments in the past have regularly suffered humiliating meltdowns. In 1990 Margaret Thatcher's premiership [ended in tears](#) after months of plotting against her. In 1995 her successor, John Major, [resigned as leader](#) and sought re-election in a failed attempt to silence his critics. More recently, the crises have come faster and faster: [David Cameron's resignation](#) after losing his Brexit referendum in 2016; Theresa May's [disastrous attempt](#) to increase her parliamentary majority in 2017; the failed effort to remove her through a [no-confidence vote](#) in 2018; her repeated Brexit defeats and [resignation in 2019](#).

None of these episodes led to the [Conservatives](#) losing office. On each occasion, for days or weeks or months, the party's future appeared to hang in the balance. Journalists reported excitedly from Downing Street, or outside meetings of the Tories' much-mythologised 1922 Committee. Opposition parties seized on Conservative divisions and disarray. Labour politicians began to believe they might soon take office.

And then, every time, the sense of crisis gradually ebbed away. The Conservatives changed their leader, or some of their policies, or just played for time, exploiting the many opportunities in Britain's parliamentary calendar for evasion and delay. With its frequent recesses – the latest begins next Friday – the House of Commons is not as tough a place for wounded prime ministers as is traditionally claimed.

Something less tangible also helps Tory governments survive these disastrous phases: voters often lose interest. Not just because most people only follow politics closely for, at best, a few days at a time – an attention

span that digital media is probably shortening with its overload of political opinions and information. But also because these crises can be emotionally and politically satisfying in themselves.

By exposing the errors and shortcomings of our usual ruling class, and by forcing them into U-turns, changes of leadership and displays of sometimes embarrassing contrition, Conservative crises can feel like a rebalancing between politicians and citizens – and make more fundamental change seem unnecessary.

The 1992 and 2019 elections both came after particularly protracted periods of Tory upheaval. Yet they saw the biggest total Conservative votes of the past half-century. Many people seemed to feel that the Tories had listened and adapted sufficiently to their discontents. The government had been punished enough, so a new one was not needed.

In pre-democratic times, the status quo was protected by brief, pressure-releasing ruptures in the established order. In the annual Feast of Fools in medieval France, for example, low-ranking clergy temporarily swapped places with their superiors and mockery of church practices was permitted. There is also something similarly ritualised about today's Tory crises: from the theatrical [sending of letters to the 1922 Committee](#) by MPs seeking a leadership contest, to the inauthentic-feeling attacks on the government by the rightwing press, which flare up and then suddenly cease.

These protagonists may well be playing their roles on the understanding that uncomfortable periods for the Tories are the necessary price, paid every few years, for the party's longterm dominance. And during these crises British politics becomes, more than ever, mostly about the Conservatives. Currently that means the culture Johnson has created in Downing Street; what Sue Gray and Scotland Yard make of it; and who might replace Johnson as premier.

For non-Tories, trying to work out who would be the least awful new Tory leader is a familiar routine – in effect, a partial acceptance of continuing Conservative rule. Many voters and journalists probably know more about the rules of Tory leadership contests than they do about Keir Starmer's policies. And that's not just because he doesn't yet have enough compelling

ones. There is an English preoccupation with Tory politics that is a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy.

In one-party states, it's common to ridicule or feel contempt for your government without being able to envisage its removal. Our politics isn't that stuck, yet, despite the Tories' ongoing efforts to tilt the electoral system in their favour, such as [making it harder to vote](#) for social groups who tend not to support them. But the deepening cynicism about politicians means that a chaotic government no longer shocks and alienates voters as much as it did in previous eras with struggling prime ministers, such as the 1970s, when Edward Heath and Jim Callaghan were ejected from Downing Street for smaller errors than Johnson's. Nowadays it's widely expected that our leaders will be out of their depth, as well as entirely out for themselves. That's one reason why Starmer's offer of more competence and integrity has yet to properly resonate. Not enough voters can envisage such a government.

Yet it's too early to be sure that the Tories' current troubles will recede in the usual way. There is another, rarer kind of Conservative crisis. It is less exciting to follow, but longer-lasting and more lethal. It involves enough voters firmly deciding that the Tories have been in power for too long, and then fitting every government scandal and mistake into that template.

The last time this happened was in the 1990s, when Labour's return to office was preceded by almost five years of Tory calamities and failed relaunches. Tony Blair was [Labour](#) leader for the most decisive part of the period, and his ability to promise a better future helped make the Conservative government look obsolete.

Starmer doesn't have the same salesman's gifts. Nor, unlike Blair, does he get much of a hearing from wavering Tory voters and the rightwing press. We live in a more tribal age. It's also a more impatient one, when the political mood quickly changes. The next general election may not be for almost three more years. The Tories could be in the early stages of a terminal crisis. But if you're hoping that they really are doomed this time, it's going to be an anxious wait.

- Andy Beckett is a Guardian columnist

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[Opinion](#)[Parents and parenting](#)

Kindness is strength. But try telling that to children

[Emma Brockes](#)



The belief is rife in our culture that this great virtue is essentially a consolation prize indistinguishable from weakness



‘My child with the kind disposition is frequently baffled and let down by the hostility of others, at which point I have to bite my tongue.’ Photograph: Alamy

Fri 4 Feb 2022 03.00 EST

If you are a parent of young children who browses parenting websites, you will at some point have been pitched to about talent. You may be invited, via targeted advertising, to enrol your child in a Future School Global Maths Skill Assessment – “to see how they compare to peers globally”. You may be urged to consider the possibility – nay, probability – that they are “gifted” in some way, if not in maths, then in music or art. It’s window-dressing for lame subscription services, but the other day, assailed by this stuff, a line caught my eye that I haven’t been able to forget. “Talent isn’t everything,” read the copy. “The important thing is to teach your child to be kind.”

This positioning of “kindness” as oppositional to “talent” – and the impossibility, by implication, of a predisposition towards kindness itself being regarded as “talent” – is rife once you start looking for it. Kindness is, everywhere: the consolation prize, the donkey in the nativity play, the award for perfect attendance. The metric for gifted is limited in childhood to measurable and therefore narrow results; a child might learn to read early, but disciplines requiring maturity for their impact are sealed off as forms of

prodigiousness. There are no seven-year-old fiction writing prodigies. There are no prodigies in kindness, either.

A few years ago, none of this would have struck me as noteworthy. It is true that, along with a lot of other “soft” values, kindness is something one comes to appreciate more with age and exhaustion. The phrase “give me a break”, once muttered by rote and gutted of meaning, is now one I use extremely literally. Parenting changes one’s parameters, too. In line with common assumptions, I believed a predisposition towards kindness wasn’t innate, but instead something entirely reliant on cultivation. These days I wonder about that, and about our determination to see it that way. Of my two children, one can be urged, pressured, bribed or cajoled into sharing and being less grabby – behaviour, in other words, which falls squarely within the normal range. The other child, more often than not, considers and accommodates the feelings of others, naturally and without being asked. Like a tiny 40-year-old, she uses phrases like “I’m happy for her” and “No, you go ahead.” It’s weirdly mature and occasionally eerie.

Which brings us to the problem of kindness; not only the fact that, in plenty of settings, it can be a code for weakness or neediness, but the fact that the word itself has been emptied out through misuse. Online, “be kind” is an order commonly used by men towards women with whom they disagree. And, like similar entreaties – “smile!” – has a silent “bitch” at the end of the phrase. Kindness in this context means giving in to another’s demands, a form of female pliancy rooted in renouncing one’s needs.

Real kindness is not this. Kindness, I try to tell my children, is strength. My child with the kind disposition is frequently baffled and let down by the hostility of others, at which point I have to bite my tongue. “Jessica was a dick to you because she has vast inadequacies; and honestly, have you seen the state of her parents?” is not ammunition I’m going to give to my seven-year-old. On the other hand, it seems fair to provide her with a rudimentary knowledge of how projection and insecurity work. Frequently, these lessons go against the grain of how our culture measures success, and it’s a hard line to navigate; you can be competitive and resolute, and not a “pushover” or a “weakling”, but still factor in how other people feel.

Can you teach someone to be kind? Of course, but also only sort of, not entirely. You can condition them with reason and rewards in the same way you can send them to piano every week and eventually they'll learn to play Twinkle Twinkle. The fact remains that some people are kinder than others not as a result of external forces but from some preloaded ability we're resistant to valorising. There are branches of therapy that frame acts of kindness as a form of self-care – much more in line with our what's-in-it-for-me values – and the ancient Greek storyteller Aesop said, "No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted." Two thousand years later, it remains a hard sell.

- Emma Brockes is a Guardian columnist
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Opinion[**Global development**](#)

My dying grandmother's pain inspired me to challenge Zimbabwe's pharmacy system

Dudzai Mureyi

Finding the right medicine at the right price was once a lottery – now the crowdsourcing service I set up is bringing down the cost of illness



A woman waits by the pharmacy window to receive medication at Chimanimani hospital, in Zimbabwe's Eastern Highlands. Photograph: Zinyange Auntony/AFP/Getty

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[About this content](#)

Fri 4 Feb 2022 04.38 EST

In July 2015, as my 82-year-old grandmother, Sophie Mafuku, lay dying of a terminal illness in [Zimbabwe](#), I spent a day speaking to fellow pharmacists as I tried to fill her morphine prescription. If it takes 24 hours for the grandmother of a well-connected medical professional to access scarce drugs, I thought, how long is it taking people with no connections? It set me off on a journey.

In Zimbabwe, systemic [shortages are common](#). Sometimes, only a handful of pharmacies have particular drugs in stock. The shortages are caused by well-documented economic challenges, which affect Zimbabwe's capacity to manufacture or import medicines.

Moreover, prices vary across private-sector pharmacies because [medicine prices in Zimbabwe are not regulated](#). Comparing prices is essential for people who have to spend hard-earned US dollars on medicines (some businesses refuse payments [in the local currency](#) and from [some health insurance plans](#)).

Six and a half years after that frantic search for my grandmother's morphine, the service is up and running

The impact of shortages and cost variations are exacerbated in Zimbabwe by [advertising laws](#) which prohibit marketing medicines. This is not unusual – many governments have such restrictions as a public safety measure. In Zimbabwe, however, this well-intentioned regulation means that pharmacies cannot publicise that they have a drug that is unavailable or more expensive elsewhere. Consequently, people often have to trudge from pharmacy to pharmacy enquiring about availability and price in a process that is costly and distressing when a loved one is ill. It also undermines a person's right to access medication.



A pharmacy in Harare. Finding scarce drugs can involve walking from one to another in search of the product. Photograph: Tafadzwa Ufumeli/Getty

Motivated by my own family's experience, I set out to see if there was a way to crowdsource real-time inventory and price information from hundreds of pharmacies around Zimbabwe.

I came up with the [Medical Information Service \(MIS\)](#) – a platform that would allow Zimbabweans to send the name or picture of the medicines they want to a WhatsApp number. MIS would then crowdsource information from staff at licensed pharmacies in each region of the country, and in a matter of minutes relay the information about where the drugs were in stock and at what price.

In 2015, this proposal was resisted by state healthcare regulators, who viewed it as a covert way to illegally advertise. It took the [supreme court to rule](#) in November 2018 that MIS was legal. A further three years later, in 2021, the Zimbabwean government, through a fund for digital innovators, [awarded me a grant of Z\\$4m](#) (about £16,000 at the time the award was announced), to help implement the service.

The irony was not lost on me that the government, through state regulators, had gone from fighting the MIS to funding it.

Now, six and a half years after that frantic search for my grandmother's morphine, the service is up and running. It did take a long time to put a simple workaround to a critical problem into practice. However, that time was well spent, engaging with pharmacists and learning about crowdsourcing.

Preliminary observations from the service have emphasised the need for greater price transparency in Zimbabwe's pharmaceutical system as a first step towards reducing the costs of illness.

For instance, the price of [remdesivir](#), a medicine used to manage Covid-19, ranges from \$100 to \$135 across pharmacies in the capital, Harare, while the cost of praziquantel, [a deworming medication](#) used to treat bilharzia, can cost anywhere between \$3 and \$18.

Zimbabweans using MIS have been able to make important savings.

My grandmother died peacefully that July. She is survived by her children, her grandchildren – and by a frugal crowdsourcing intervention that her morphine prescription inspired.

Dudzai Mureyi is a global health researcher and pharmacist based in Zimbabwe

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Ukraine

Von der Leyen warns Russia of gas pipeline sanctions over Ukraine

European Commission president says Nord Stream 2 ‘cannot be excluded’ from possible measures



Ursula von der Leyen with Germany’s chancellor, Olaf Scholz, who has faced criticism over what some regard as his vague stance over Nord Stream 2. Photograph: John Thys/AFP/Getty Images

[Daniel Boffey](#) in Brussels

Fri 4 Feb 2022 04.36 EST

Nord Stream 2, the controversial Russian gas pipeline to Germany, will be part of the package of sanctions facing the Kremlin if Ukraine is invaded, [Ursula von der Leyen](#) has said.

In comments that appear to go further than any commitments made by Germany's chancellor, Olaf Scholz, the [European Commission](#) president sought to clear up any doubt about the pipeline's future.

"Nord Stream 2 cannot be excluded from the sanctions list, that is very clear", Von der Leyen said in an interview with the Handelsblatt and Les Echos newspapers.

The commission president said the future of the pipeline, which is yet to receive regulatory approval in Berlin or Brussels, would depend "on Russia's behaviour".

The latest estimate is that Russia has mobilised 145,000 troops on its border with Ukraine, with the US claiming on Thursday it had uncovered plans for a Russian "propaganda video" [it believed could have been used to justify an invasion](#).

The video, the US said, would depict a staged false explosion with dead bodies and actors as mourners following an "attack" by [Ukraine](#) or its Nato allies.

Von der Leyen's commitment offers clarity on an issue on which [Scholz has remained vague](#), stating only that "all options are on the table".

The chancellor has come under heavy criticism domestically for the stance. In recent days Ukraine's government had called for greater transparency on the potential range of EU sanctions facing the Kremlin.

"Make it available for the Russians, for everyone, so that the Russians can see what awaits for them," Ukraine's foreign minister, Dmytro Kuleba, said.

Von der Leyen responded to that call by shedding light on the package, saying it "ranges from closing access to foreign capital to export controls on critical goods, hi-tech components that Russia cannot simply replace, for example in the field of artificial intelligence and weaponry, quantum computers, lasers and space."

She described the sanctions list as "robust and comprehensive", adding: "People close to [Russian president Vladimir] Putin and oligarchs could of

course be hit sensitively.”

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Ukraine

Russia plans ‘very graphic’ fake video as pretext for Ukraine invasion, US claims

Officials say they have evidence of plot to mock up scenes of attack using corpses, Turkish-made drones and actors playing mourners



A member of the Ukrainian armed forces is seen near the line of separation from Russian-backed rebels near Horlivka in the Donetsk region.
Photograph: Oleksandr Klymenko/Reuters

[Julian Borger](#) in Washington [Shaun Walker](#) in Boryspil, Ukraine and [Dan Sabbagh](#)

Thu 3 Feb 2022 14.29 EST

US officials claim they have evidence of a Russian plan to make a “very graphic” fake video of a Ukrainian attack as a pretext for an invasion.

The alleged plot would involve using corpses, footage of blown-up buildings, fake Ukrainian military hardware, Turkish-made drones and actors playing the part of Russian-speaking mourners.

“We don’t know definitively that this is the route they are going to take, but we know that this is an option under consideration,” the deputy national security adviser, Jonathan Finer, told MSNBC, adding that the video “would involve actors playing mourners for people who are killed in an event that they would have created themselves”.

Finer added: “That would involve the deployment of corpses to represent bodies purportedly killed, of people purportedly killed in an incident like this.”

The Pentagon spokesman, John Kirby, said the video would have purported to show a Ukrainian attack on Russian territory or Russian-speaking people in eastern [Ukraine](#) and would be “very graphic”. He added that the US believed that the plan had the backing of the Kremlin.

“Our experience is that very little of this nature is not approved at the highest levels of the Russian government,” Kirby said.

US officials said the video would show Turkish-made Bayraktar drones taking part in the fabricated attack as a way of implicating Nato.

The claims are being made in the midst of a war of nerves between Russia and the US and its allies, in which diplomatic exchanges and intelligence briefings are playing out alongside a relentless Russian military buildup around Ukraine’s borders, and US and allied threats of devastating punitive economic measures if an attack goes ahead.

Administration officials said the plan was to use the video as evidence of Ukrainian “genocide” against Russian speakers to justify Russian military intervention. By going public, the US hoped to stall or slow down Moscow’s plans.

Finer said it would “make it much more difficult for them after the fact to claim that they had to do whatever they decided to do”.

The [New York Times](#) and [Washington Post](#) first published versions of the account given by administration officials, noting that the officials did not provide evidence for the US claims.

Britain said it agreed with the US assessment, having conducted its own analysis of the intelligence reports. The two countries routinely share intelligence as part of the wider Five Eyes network – and London has been as ready as Washington to highlight what both see as an acute Russian threat to Ukraine.

Liz Truss, the foreign secretary, said the disclosures were “clear and shocking evidence of Russia’s unprovoked aggression and underhand activity to destabilise Ukraine”. She added: “The UK and our allies will continue to expose Russian subterfuge and propaganda and call it out for what it is.”

The US and UK have [alleged that Russia has deployed operatives inside Ukraine](#) to stage false-flag attacks and has [recruited Ukrainians to take over a puppet government](#) that would collaborate with Russian occupation forces.

James Roscoe, a British diplomat at the United Nations said: “Russia says it will never invade Ukraine. Unless it is provoked. So ‘just in case’ it is provoked it has massed over 100,000 troops on Ukraine’s border.

“But how is it that they are able to anticipation that provocation?” Roscoe [asked on Twitter](#). “Perhaps because they are planning to stage that provocation?”

While massing troops around Ukraine, Russian officials have made repeated claims, without evidence, that Kyiv was planning to attack Russia or Russian speakers in eastern Ukraine rather than the other way round.

Last week, a Moscow-backed separatist leader in eastern Ukraine, Denis Pushilin, [repeated a frequent Russian claim](#) that Ukraine had plans to launch a chemical attack on the breakaway region.

Thursday’s claims were the latest in a series of US briefings on American intelligence assessments, [some of which have irritated Ukraine’s leadership](#)

and been rebuffed by officials in Kyiv

Last weekend, Reuters and CNN cited senior US officials claiming Russia had moved blood supplies close to the border, indicating a potential imminent military attack. Ukraine's deputy defence minister, Hanna Miliar, denounced the blood supply claim, calling it a provocation designed "to spread panic and fear in our society".

On Thursday, Miliar told the Guardian she had checked that claim with Ukrainian intelligence agencies, which had their own sources.

"It simply wasn't true. We found no information to back this up, we did not see any blood supplies moved to the front or even in the civilian hospitals around the front," she said, in an interview at a military airfield at Boryspil, outside Kyiv.

"It's really important to look at the sources. These sources were anonymous, and I don't think it's right to use anonymous sources that cannot be checked," she said.

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Belarus

US imposes visa restrictions on Belarusians amid Russia tensions

State department cites repression of athletes abroad and ‘counter-dissident activity’ but does not say who will be targeted



The case of Belarusian sprinter Krystsina Tsimanouskaya, who defected during the Tokyo Olympics, was cited by the US. Photograph: Andrzej Lange/EPA

Reuters

Thu 3 Feb 2022 21.22 EST

The United States has announced visa restrictions on several Belarusians, citing the repression of athletes abroad including the attempted forced repatriation of a sprinter at the Tokyo Olympic Games.

Krystsina Tsimanouskaya [refused to board a flight back home](#) in 2021 when she was removed from the Games against her will after publicly complaining about national team coaches.

She defected to Poland, saying she feared for her safety if she returned to Belarus. The country's president, Alexander Lukashenko, has said she was "manipulated".

"We stand in solidarity with Ms Tsimanouskaya and all others who have experienced the regime's attempts to silence criticism," said the US secretary of state, Antony Blinken.

The move relates to "involvement in serious, extraterritorial counter-dissident activity" but the US state department did not detail who was being targeted with the new visa limits.

Tensions are high between Russia and the US over a [possible invasion of Ukraine](#), as Nato said there had been a significant movement of Russian military forces into neighbouring Belarus in recent days.

Last May [a Ryanair plane was forced to land](#) in the Belarusian capital, Minsk, when controllers cited a bomb threat. Once it was on the ground, a Belarusian dissident journalist on board the plane was arrested along with his female companion.

Belarus accused the west of using the episode to try to undermine Lukashenko.

Blinken on Thursday called on Minsk "to immediately release all political prisoners (and) to engage in sincere facilitated dialogue with the democratic opposition and civil society".

The call comes as the US warned Chinese firms they would face consequences if they sought to evade any export controls imposed on Moscow in the event of Russia invading [Ukraine](#).

State department spokesperson Ned Price made the remark on Thursday after China's foreign ministry said China and [Russia](#) had coordinated their

positions on Ukraine during a meeting between their foreign ministers in Beijing on Thursday.

“We have an array of tools that we can deploy if we see foreign companies, including those in China, doing their best to backfill US export control actions, to evade them, to get around them,” Price told a regular news briefing.

Western countries say any invasion of Ukraine by Russia would bring sanctions on Moscow and Washington has said it is prepared to impose financial sanctions as well as export-control measures.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/04/us-imposes-visa-restrictions-on-belarusians-amid-russia-tensions>

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Russia

Moscow warns Ukraine may ‘destroy itself’ as Russia and US clash at UN

At a UNSC meeting, Russian diplomat Vasily Nebenzya claimed Ukraine’s violation of the Minsk pact could end in ‘worst way’



United Nations security council hold a meeting on the situation between Ukraine and Russia at UN headquarters in New York. Photograph: Jason Szenes/EPA

[Julian Borger](#) in Washington and [Lorenzo Tondo](#) in Rome

Tue 1 Feb 2022 03.07 EST

Ukraine will be responsible for its own destruction if it undermines existing peace agreements, a senior Russian diplomat has warned at a combative UN security council debate on the crisis.

The warning from Vasily Nebenzya, Russia's permanent representative to the UN, came on a day of continued high-level diplomacy aimed at defusing the Ukraine crisis.

The state department said it had received a response from Moscow to a document the US delivered in Moscow last week, formally outlining areas where the Biden administration believes the two countries could find common ground. US officials would not disclose the contents of the Russian letter, saying they would not “negotiate in public”.

Russia's state news agency RIA reported on Tuesday that Russia had sent follow-up questions rather than a response, and that Moscow was still working on an actual response.

The US secretary of state Tony Blinken and his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, are due to talk on Tuesday, in the wake of the Russian letter and the security council session. Meanwhile on Monday, [Vladimir Putin](#) talked to Emmanuel Macron in the second phone conversation between the Russian and French leaders since Friday.

“The two leaders agreed to continue contacts by telephone and to promptly consider the possibility of meeting in person,” the Kremlin said in a statement.

Monday's security council session did nothing to narrow the wide divide between Russia and the west, but did provide a test of diplomatic strength on the world stage. Nebenzya began the meeting by deriding western claims of a planned Russian attack as “hysterics” and blamed Ukraine for not abiding by the Minsk agreements of 2014 and 2015, which were supposed to end the conflict between the Kyiv government and the Russian-backed separatists in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions.

Nebenzya, Russia's permanent representative at the UN, also blamed western nations for “actively pumping Ukraine full of weapons” which he said would be used against civilians in the east of the country and were “in violation of the Minsk agreements”.

He ended his address to the security council with a warning.

“If our western partners push Kyiv to sabotage the Minsk agreements, something that Ukraine is ... willingly doing, then that might end in the absolute worst way for Ukraine,” Nebenzya said. “And not because somebody has destroyed it, but because it would have destroyed itself and Russia has absolutely nothing to do with this.”

The US had called for an emergency debate on Ukraine as part of a diplomatic campaign to fend off what Washington and its allies say is a planned Russian invasion of Ukraine. As part of that campaign, the [US and the UK both announced](#) that pro-Putin Russian oligarchs would be targeted if an attack goes ahead.

Russia had sought to stop a security council debate on Ukraine until after it took over the council presidency on Tuesday. But only China supported its opposition, with Gabon, India and Kenya abstaining, leaving the US with more than the nine votes required to proceed with an open session on the crisis.

In her remarks, the US envoy, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, said that even as the issue was being debated in New York, Russia continued to add to the more than 100,000 troops already massed around Ukraine’s borders, and within days would have 30,000 inside Belarus alone.

“Russia has already used more than 2,000 rail cars to move troops and weaponry from across Russia to the Ukrainian border,” Thomas-Greenfield said. “Russia has also moved nearly 5,000 troops into Belarus, with short-range ballistic missiles, special forces and anti-aircraft batteries. We’ve seen evidence that Russia intends to expand that presence to more than 30,000 troops near the Belarus-Ukraine border, less than two hours north of Kyiv, by early February.”

Speaking towards the end of the session, the Ukrainian envoy, Sergiy Kyslytsya, described the Russian build-up of troops and military hardware around his country’s borders and did not echo President Volodymyr Zelenskiy’s complaints that the West was exaggerating the threat.

Kyslytsya said there were now 112,000 Russian troops massed around Ukraine's borders and in Crimea, with another 18,000 deployed at sea off the country's coast.

He pointed to the sophistication of the weapons being gathered in Belarus, including Iskander missiles, Pantsir anti-aircraft systems and advanced Sukhoi-35 jet fighters.

Kyslytsya also said Russia was bolstering paramilitary separatist forces in eastern Ukraine, which he estimated as 35,000-strong, including 3,000 Russian troops "in command posts and in other critical combat positions".

In naval exercises in the Black Sea which started last week, the Ukrainian envoy said the Russians had deployed frigates, missile ships, assault landing ships and minesweepers.

Another six warships from Russia's northern fleet were reported to have entered the Mediterranean on Monday. According to the Italian newspaper *la Repubblica*, the vessels are carrying 60 tanks and more than 1,500 soldiers. The warships are currently navigating in the Sicilian Channel under aerial surveillance from Nato planes.

Ukraine's former defense minister, Andriy Zagorodnyuk, said that if the ships entered the Black Sea, the odds would tip on the likelihood of a Russian attack.

In his comments to the security council, Nebenzya insisted that the military exercises were nothing out of the ordinary.

Military analysts studying satellite imagery of the buildup in Belarus say the military units are coming from Russia's far east and their deployment in such large numbers so far from base is unprecedented since the cold war.

The Belarus envoy to the UN, Valentyn Rybakov, said the Russian troops were in his country for joint exercises from 10 to 20 February "to develop joint measures to eradicate the threat on the borders of our allied state, including caused by the migration crisis and the need to stabilize the humanitarian situation".

The two nations' combined forces, Rybakov said, would organize the defense of "strategically important facilities" and would "curb and ward off external active aggression".

This article was amended on 2 February 2022. An earlier version referred to "battleships" when warships was intended.

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Russia

Liz Truss vows ‘nowhere to hide’ for Putin allies if Ukraine invaded

Foreign secretary echoes US plans for sanctions on Russian elite but offers no new curbs on money laundering in UK



Truss told the Commons ‘nothing is off the table and there will be nowhere to hide’ for the Kremlin’s supporters and allies. Photograph: Wiktor Szymanowicz/NurPhoto/Rex/Shutterstock

[Patrick Wintour](#) Diplomatic editor

Mon 31 Jan 2022 13.35 EST

Liz Truss, the British foreign secretary, has said Russian oligarchs and key supporters of [Vladimir Putin](#) will be targeted by UK sanctions if Russia invades Ukraine, but left Britain’s existing much-criticised anti-corruption laws largely untouched.

Insisting that the Russian president's allies would have nowhere to hide their assets if an invasion went ahead, the Foreign Office, clearly working in lockstep with the US, threatened to seize the wealth of Putin's inner political circle and business backers.

Boris Johnson travels to [Ukraine](#) on Tuesday to meet President Volodymyr Zelensky as he pledged £88m of new funding to "support stable governance and energy independence". Ahead of the visit, Johnson said: "It is the right of every Ukrainian to determine how they are governed. As a friend and a democratic partner, the UK will continue to uphold Ukraine's sovereignty in the face of those who seek to destroy it."

"We urge Russia to step back and engage in dialogue to find a diplomatic resolution and avoid further bloodshed."

Johnson's efforts to take a leading role in the crisis were dealt a blow when he had to cancel his scheduled call with Putin so he could answer questions in the Commons about the Gray report into parties in Downing Street.

No 10 tried to reschedule the call, but Moscow said it was not possible, leaving Johnson to say he would speak to the Russian president as soon as a time could be agreed.

The Biden administration has drawn up a list of potential sanctions targets among Russian oligarchs and their families, who Washington deems to be in the Kremlin's orbit or "complicit in the Kremlin's destabilising behaviour," according to a US official quoted by Reuters news agency.

"Putin's cronies will no longer be able to use their spouses or other family members as proxies to evade sanctions", the official said. "Sanctions would cut them off from the international financial system and ensure that they and their family members will no longer be able to enjoy the perks of parking their money in the west and attending elite western universities."

US officials would not provide names, but said sanctions targets were vulnerable because of their investments and residencies in the west.

Truss, giving a statement to MPs on Monday, also refused to name any individual Russians at risk of being sanctioned, saying the aim was to create the maximum anxiety among Putin's allies.

Truss said the new legislation, which will be in place by 10 February, would be the "toughest sanction regime against Russia we have ever had", and would give the UK "the power to sanction a broader range of individuals and businesses".

She said the package meant the UK "can target anyone providing strategic support close to Vladimir Putin".

Labour criticised the package for failing to speed up the long-promised structural measures to tackle money laundering in the UK, including measures first announced by David Cameron in 2014 and 2015.

David Lammy, the shadow foreign secretary, said: "The proposals need to be part of a coherent policy.

"For years, Labour has raised the alarm about the role of dirty money in keeping Putin in power. Warning after warning, report after report, the government has been asleep at the wheel. London is the destination of choice for the world's kleptocrats. We are the home to the services and the enablers that help corrupt elites to hide their ill-gotten wealth."

Russia described the transatlantic measures as extremely alarming and likely to damage the business climate in the UK.

The net of those potentially subject to sanctions in the UK is being widened in the event of an invasion by making Russians and companies supportive of Putin liable to travel bans and asset freezes. Previously, only individuals regarded as guilty of destabilising the sovereignty of Ukraine could be sanctioned, although the UK can and has sanctioned Russians for human rights abuses and corruption.

Currently, 180 Russian individuals and 48 entities are subject to UK sanctions, more than half linked to the destabilisation of Ukraine.

Truss, who is due in Moscow for talks in the next fortnight but will not be travelling to Ukraine this week after testing positive for Covid on Monday, told MPs the proposals meant the UK would be able to act in lockstep with the US. “Whether you support Russia’s aggressive actions against Ukraine, or you’re of wider significance to the Kremlin, we will have the power to sanction you,” she said. “Nothing is off the table and there will be nowhere to hide.

“This will amount to the toughest sanctions regime against Russia we have had in place yet, and mark the biggest change in our approach since leaving the European Union.”

The reference to nothing being off the table was designed to show that the government has not abandoned other structural measures. These include reforms of Companies House, a register of properties held by overseas citizens and a public register of beneficial ownership in the British overseas territories – measures that have been repeatedly promised but held back as a result of opposition from the City of London. Some of the stiffest opposition is coming from Gulf states and not Russia.

An economic crime bill containing many of the measures looks likely to be delayed, a move that has infuriated the government’s own anti-corruption tsar, John Penrose. In the House of Lords on Monday, ministers were challenged about their personal links to firms operating in tax shelters.

John Heathershaw, co-author of a recent Chatham House report on “Britain’s kleptocracy problem”, said: “The use of sanctions here appears to be as an ad hoc and preventive measure – essentially as a form of deterrence. The reason such measures are necessary is that there is already a great deal of money in the UK from Russia which has been welcomed by UK banks, estate agents, football clubs and companies with minimal checks on the sources of wealth and beneficial ownership. The problems that led to the UK welcoming suspicious Russian wealth are structural British problems.”

Putin’s spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov, described Truss’s package as an “extremely alarming” statement that “undermines investment attractiveness and the United Kingdom’s attractiveness as such”. “It’s not often you see or hear such direct threats to attack a business,” he told reporters.

He added that Moscow would “proceed from its own interests when formulating retaliatory measures”. “An attack by one particular country on Russian business of course implies retaliatory measures,” he said.

The Russian ambassador to the UK, Andrei Kelin, stressed that the UK was now pursuing an “aggressive line” in Europe regarding Ukraine. He said the exaggeration of the “Russian threat” was being stoked by Britain’s domestic problems.

Russia last week expanded its blacklist of EU and member states’ personnel on a no-fly list who Russia said “were personally involved in promoting anti-Russian policy”.

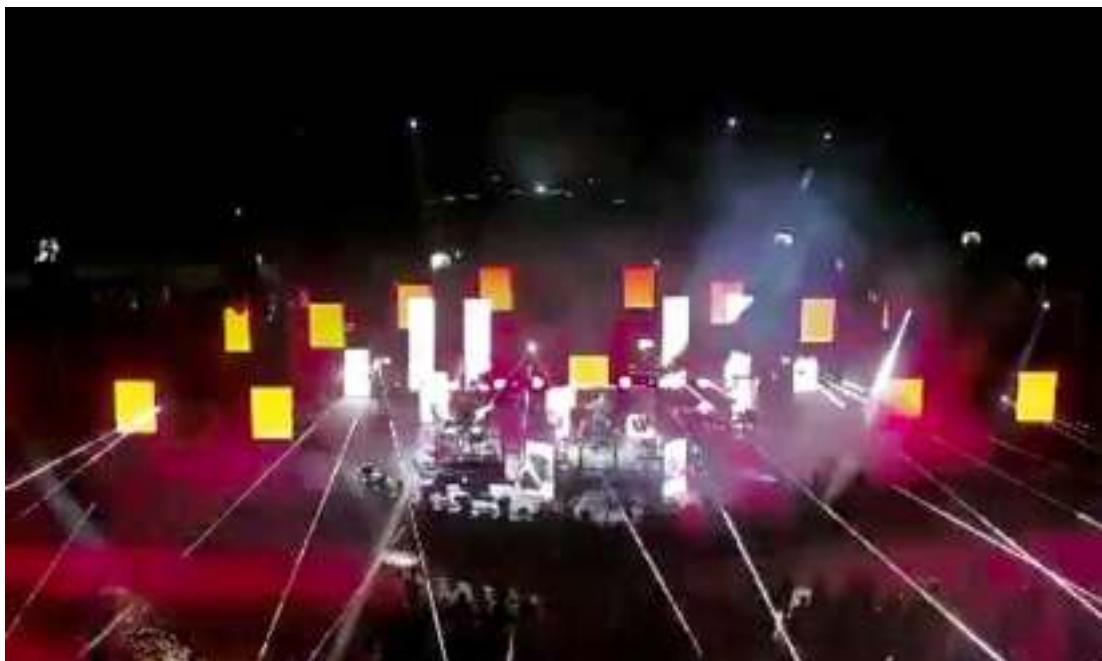
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Media

Vice Media secretly organised \$20m Saudi government festival

Youth media company organised March 2020 event despite pledge to stop all work in Saudi Arabia



The Azimuth music festival, held in the Saudi desert, pitched itself to bring the best of eastern and western cultures. Photograph: Azimuth Festival/Facebook

[Jim Waterson](#) Media editor

[@jimwaterson](#)

Tue 1 Feb 2022 04.00 EST

When social media influencers turned up at the Azimuth music festival in the middle of the Saudi Arabian desert they were promised a festival of musical and gastronomic excess, all subsidised by an arm of the Saudi government.

What attendees did not know was that the [pricey music festival](#) was secretly organised by youth media company Vice, as part of the media company's ongoing push to make money in the Middle Eastern state despite the country's poor human rights record.

Just three years after Vice publicly announced that it was [pausing](#) all work in Saudi Arabia due to the fallout from the state-ordered murder of dissident Jamal Khashoggi, insiders at Vice told the Guardian the company was once again aggressively pursuing business opportunities in Saudi Arabia.

"Vice employees have for years raised concerns over the company's involvement with Saudi Arabia – and we've been fobbed off with empty statements and pathetic excuses," said one Vice employee.

Although the Azimuth music festival received little publicity in the western media when it took place at the start of the Covid pandemic, it is believed to be have been highly lucrative for Vice. Staff at the company estimate the total budget was \$20m (£15m).

Azimuth Festival 2020, AlUla, KSA. Where History Meets Culture.
Until next year !#AzimuthFestival#WhereHistoryMeetsCulture
pic.twitter.com/fI7YjK9rqt

— AzimuthFestival (@AzimuthFestival) [March 19, 2020](#)

The event promised to bring together the best of eastern culture (it took place among ancient carvings at the [world heritage site of Al-'Ula](#) on a historic trade route) with the best of western culture (it featured a performance from the dance duo Chainsmokers).

The lineup was topped by French electronic musician Jean-Michel Jarre who appeared alongside rapper [Tinie Tempah](#). High-end chefs from restaurants such as New York's Michelin-starred Contra and London's Annabel's were flown in to cook for guests. British contemporary artists Lauren Baker joined the conceptual studio Shuster + Moseley to provide special art displays.

الآن The wait is over. Azimuth festival is here! #AzimuthFestival
[#WhereHistoryMeetsCulture](#) pic.twitter.com/qb7oKKM7H8

— AzimuthFestival (@AzimuthFestival) [March 6, 2020](#)

Despite this, efforts were taken to keep Vice's name off the event. Contractors who worked on the music festival – organised through Vice's creative marketing agency Virtue – were asked to sign non-disclosure agreements, while Vice's name did not appear on public marketing material.

Saudi Arabia is desperate to spend big money to rebrand itself in the eyes of western youth – and Vice, despite its counter-cultural roots, is now an ageing business that needs to improve its financial position fast. The company rode the new-media start-up wave of the early part of this century but has already burned through billions of dollars of investment – all while also dealing with allegations of sexual harassment and trying to deliver a financial return to investors.

As a result, the money on offer in the Middle East has been tempting and Vice last year opened a dedicated office in the Saudi capital Riyadh. It has also had a deal to make promotional films for the country in conjunction with the Saudi Research and Marketing Group, a business with close ties to the Saudi state which also has a partnership with the Independent and Evening Standard.

One employee claimed Vice executives were acutely aware of the potential reputational damage that could be caused if Vice's western audience became aware of the extent to which it was working with the Saudi state, saying: "It is astounding that – despite ongoing opposition from staff – Vice is still happy to take money from a country that was literally responsible for the state-sanctioned murder of a journalist."

Asked about concerns from staff about its return to doing business in Saudi Arabia, a spokesperson for Vice said: "Vice Arabia was set up over four years ago as part of our global expansion – alongside many other media and content businesses who have expanded into the region. Vice has always been

about creativity and culture for youth in every corner of the world – and in the Saudi Region, two-thirds of the population are under the age of 35.

“We opened a commercial and creative office in Riyadh earlier this year, which was reported and shared publicly. Our editorial voice has and always will report with complete autonomy and independence.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2022/feb/01/vice-media-secretly-organised-20m-saudi-government-festival>

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MMR

‘Very worrying’: MMR vaccine rates in England at 10-year low

Health officials say thousands of children at risk of getting measles after ‘significant drop’ in number getting jabs



More than one in 10 children aged five in England are not up to date with their two doses of MMR vaccine. Photograph: Owen Humphreys/PA

[Andrew Gregory](#) Health editor

Tue 1 Feb 2022 01.00 EST

Thousands of children face an increased risk of catching deadly measles in [England](#), senior health officials have warned, as “very worrying” figures reveal MMR vaccine rates have fallen to their lowest level in a decade.

The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) and the NHS will launch a joint appeal on Tuesday urging parents and guardians to ensure their children

have had their measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccines – as well as other routine jabs – before starting school.

Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, there has been “a significant drop” in the number of children getting MMR jabs and other childhood vaccines, UKHSA said.

Between July and September last year, the most recent figures available, just 88.6% of children had had their first MMR dose by the age of two while only 85.5% had had both doses at the age of five.

It means that more than one in 10 children aged five are not up to date with their two doses of MMR vaccine. The World Health Organization (WHO) says 95% of children need to be vaccinated to keep measles away.

Measles is highly contagious so even a small decline in MMR uptake could lead to a rise in cases, UKHSA said. With international travel resuming, it is also more likely that measles will be brought in from countries that have higher levels of the disease.

“Even a small drop in vaccine coverage can have a big impact on population immunity levels and lead to outbreaks,” said Dr Vanessa Saliba, a consultant epidemiologist at UKHSA.

Measles can lead to complications such as ear infections, pneumonia, and inflammation of the brain, which require hospitalisation and on rare occasions can lead to long-term disability or even death.

“It is very worrying that more than one in 10 children are not fully protected against measles by the time they start school,” said Prof Helen Bedford, professor of children’s health at the UCL Great Ormond Street Institute of Child Health. “There has been so much focus on Covid over the past two years, but we mustn’t forget about measles, which has not gone away.”

All children are invited for their first MMR vaccine on the NHS aged one, with the second dose given when they are three years and four months.

The NHS says it has continued to prioritise routine vaccinations throughout the pandemic. However, some parents whose children haven’t been

vaccinated against MMR have said they didn't realise the NHS was still offering appointments, or they didn't want to burden the NHS, according to UKHSA.

Separate research commissioned by the Department of Health and Social Care and UKHSA, conducted by Censuswide, shows many parents are unaware of the risks measles poses to their unvaccinated children.

Of 2,000 parents and guardians of children aged five or under surveyed, almost half (48%) were unaware measles can lead to serious complications such as pneumonia and brain inflammation. Just four in 10 (38%) were aware that measles can be fatal.

Dr Nikki Kanani, medical director for primary care at NHS England, said: "It is incredibly important that all parents and guardians ensure their child is up to date with their routine vaccinations, including MMR, as these vaccines give children crucial protection against serious and potentially deadly illnesses and stop outbreaks in the community."

"If your child has missed a vaccination, please contact your GP practice to book an appointment as soon as you can to make sure they have maximum protection against disease."

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/feb/01/very-worrying-mmr-vaccine-rates-in-england-at-10-year-low>

2022.02.01 - Spotlight

- Myanmar, one year on I photographed coup protesters one day – and their funerals the next
- The hidden life of a lorry driver Long hours, fear of robberies – and living for the weekend
- MØ ‘I was terrified to stop and crash – I had to make time to reflect’
- Flee Inside the film about a Kabul boy who finds happiness, cats and a husband in Denmark



A water cannon is fired at protesters in Mandalay

[Reporting Myanmar](#)

I photographed Myanmar's protesters one day – and their funerals the next

A water cannon is fired at protesters in Mandalay

Photojournalist Moe documented the military's terrifying and brutal attacks on protests in Mandalay, until even carrying his camera became too risky

- [Read more in our Reporting Myanmar series](#)

by Moe, as told to [Emily Fishbein](#)

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HUMANITY
UNITED

[About this content](#)

Tue 1 Feb 2022 01.45 EST

My first encounter with the military came on 4 February 2021, three days after the coup. From the back of my friend's motorcycle, I hid my camera under my clothes and attempted to photograph soldiers as they drove in trucks through my native city of Mandalay carrying their guns. I couldn't get a good picture, however, because one of the vehicles started following us and we had to retreat.

Within days, almost the whole country had erupted in protest. I couldn't stay still any more, and I joined the crowds on 7 February.



- ‘The whole country had erupted in protest. I couldn’t stay still any more, and I joined the crowds’

The first crackdown came a week later. Water cannon, smoke bombs and sound grenades sent us running in every direction. It was a totally new experience for me, and although I had tried to prepare myself, when it actually happened I felt shocked and scared.

Still, I returned to the streets the next day, as protesters gathered in front of a state-owned bank to urge its workers to join a growing civil disobedience movement and go on strike.

Map showing location of Mandalay

First, soldiers and police fired rubber bullets and air guns to disperse the crowd. Then, they went after us journalists. More than 20 people chased us with sticks and guns and tried to surround us.

I somehow managed to escape and, luckily, people from the neighbourhood pointed where to run and one man opened his door for me.

I climbed up to the rooftop of his building. Looking down on the street below, I saw soldiers and police fire catapults and air guns at fleeing crowds. I recognised four journalists among them, and watched with horror as one of them, my friend, was caught. I saw them beat him with their batons and rifle butts, and kick him; before he managed to get away, they also destroyed the video camera he had borrowed from me.

I tried to film this with my phone, but couldn't get a clear view, and almost got hit myself by a stray projectile that pierced the steel rail of the balcony in front of me.

The protests and suppression only intensified from there. On 20 February, crowds gathered at a dockyard to support striking ship workers as soldiers and police attempted to force them back to work. I saw regime forces aim their guns at protesters' heads and [open fire](#) with sniper rifles. I also saw the determination of the protesters, who ran for cover and fired back with catapults whenever they had the chance.

Many protesters were [shot](#), and there was blood everywhere. Two of them were killed that day, including a 16-year-old boy.

Q&A

What is the Reporting Myanmar series?

Show

In February 2021, Myanmar's progress towards democracy was brutally stalled when the military seized power and took control of the country.

In the year since, the country has been plunged into violence, poverty and mass displacement as the military attempts to crush widespread resistance to its rule.

Internet blackouts, arbitrary arrests, a ruthless curtailing of freedom of speech and escalating military attacks on civilian areas have silenced the voices of people from Myanmar.

For this special series, the Guardian's [Rights and freedom project](#) has partnered with a diverse group of journalists from Myanmar, many working in secret, to bring their reporting on life under military rule to a global audience.

Journalists in Myanmar are working in dangerous and difficult circumstances, as the military government attacks the free press and shuts down local media outlets. Many reporters still inside the country fear arrest, with others forced to leave their homes and go into hiding in areas increasingly under attack from military forces.

All the reporting in this series will be carried out by journalists from Myanmar, with support from the editors on the Rights and freedom project.

These are the stories that journalists from Myanmar want to tell about what is happening to their country at this critical moment.

Was this helpful?

Thank you for your feedback.

After that, [bloody crackdowns](#) happened daily. Initially after the coup, we journalists wore helmets and vests that said Press, thinking the gear would protect us, but by early March, we didn't dare to identify ourselves and instead focused on not standing out.



- ‘I saw the determination of the protesters’

On 3 March, I saw a young woman demonstrating on the frontline of the protests, wearing a black T-shirt that said: “Everything will be OK.” I tried to photograph her, but soldiers were everywhere and I had to run.

From a nearby rooftop, I saw soldiers and police hunt down protesters as they attempted to hide. I tried to keep photographing, but rubber and steel bullets hit the wall behind me and smoke grenades exploded too. But as soon as I had the chance, I ran back on to the street.



- A woman makes a three-fingered salute at soldiers. The gesture, which originated in The Hunger Games films, has been adopted by protesters as a symbol of resistance and support for democracy

I saw bloody wounds and scattered brains; I also saw the body of the young woman wearing the black T-shirt. Her name was Kyal Sin, and she had been shot in the head. The 19-year-old – one of three people killed during that protest and at least 28 unarmed protesters killed across the country that day – has since become an icon of the protest movement. I photographed her funeral the next day.

Throughout these traumatic experiences, I set my mind on my responsibility to document everything. With that motivation, I was able to continue.





- Clockwise from top left: young protestors try to protect themselves with handmade shields; a protester among the crowd flies the flag of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions, which has been active in the anti-coup movement; the shirt and sandals of Ye Swe Oo, [shot in the chest on 13 March](#); the body of [Saw Pyae Naing](#), a 21-year-old student

By early April, the brutal suppression of protests had convinced many people that street demonstrations were not enough to defeat the junta. Some left the city to join the rapidly growing armed revolution, while others held early-morning guerrilla protests on narrow streets. Although they had changed tactics to avoid being shot or run over by military vehicles, soldiers and police still found ways to violently put down opposition.

I tried to go out with my camera a few times by hiding it, and then tried to document the protests on my phone, but it was too dangerous – and I couldn't get a good shot. Finally, I stopped going out altogether.



- ‘Journalists often encourage me to flee the country. But I have never thought about leaving’

It has now been nearly 10 months that I have not been able to go out and photograph. But even staying inside, I don’t feel safe at all. I haven’t been home since the coup, and I am constantly moving from place to place.

Journalists often encourage me to flee the country and report from abroad. They might wonder why I stay here in this situation. But I have never

thought about leaving.

My purpose is to document what is happening here for the public and the world, and I believe that the time will come for me to go out again. I am waiting for that time. When it comes, I will resume my work no matter the risks.

- *Moe is a photojournalist based in Mandalay. He is using a pseudonym to protect his identity*
 - *Translated by Nu Nu Lusan*
-

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‘You’re driving a killing machine’ ... Rob Piper beside his DAF XF lorry on the Nursling industrial estate in Southampton. Photograph: Peter Flude/The Guardian

[A worker in winter](#)

The hidden life of a lorry driver: long hours, fear of robberies – and living for the weekend

‘You’re driving a killing machine’ ... Rob Piper beside his DAF XF lorry on the Nursling industrial estate in Southampton. Photograph: Peter Flude/The Guardian

The country would grind to a halt without hauliers such as Rob Piper. But do they get the respect they deserve? Our reporter joined him on the road to find out

by [Sirin Kale](#). Photographs by Peter Flude

Tue 1 Feb 2022 01.00 EST

Rob Piper's world is grey, blue and black.

The early morning sky is an inky blue-black as Piper drives his 44-tonne, 12-wheeled DAF XF lorry out of the Nursling industrial estate in Southampton. At this time of day – 6am – the endless grey roads consist mainly of lorries. Their metal bullbars flash a friendly smile in the halogen glare of each other's headlights.

After mind-numbing loops of concrete motorway, Piper finishes driving mid-afternoon. Lorry drivers used to do 16- or 18-hour shifts, but now they are monitored by a digital tachograph card; Piper inserts his into a slot above the dashboard. It records all the lorry's data: speed, distance travelled, breaks taken, total driving hours.

Piper may drive for a maximum of nine hours a day and he must take a 45-minute break after four and a half hours. He can work a maximum of 60 hours a week. (In normal circumstances, drivers can work for only 56 hours a week, but the government has [extended this temporarily](#) due to a shortage of drivers.) The data goes to his employer, the haulage firm [Youngs](#), which has to produce it on request to the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency, the government body that checks compliance.

The law is strict, with good reason. "You're driving a killing machine," says Piper. Long-distance lorry driving has a narcoleptic effect, especially after lunch. Lorry drivers swap photos of bad accidents like trading cards. Piper was sent a particularly graphic one recently. In it, a lorry half-hangs from a motorway bridge. He shuddered when he saw it.

The run-up to Christmas is always a wearying time for the UK's lorry drivers, but 2021 was exceptionally busy. All year, the haulage industry struggled with vacancies, mostly down to an exodus of European drivers after Brexit, but also because of Covid. It is estimated that there is a shortage of more than 85,000 drivers in the UK. [Those who remain](#) have been left to pick up the slack.

"We're seeing chronic staff shortages," says Rod McKenzie, the managing director for policy at the Road Haulage Association. "And we have an

ageing driver population. When you have an ageing population of workers and they're not being refreshed by younger people, you're in a bad place."

Youngs has lost many drivers; all the haulage companies have. About 20 of its 40 drivers across four depots returned to EU countries, including Romania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Bulgaria, post-Brexit. To retain staff, pay has risen by about 30% across the sector. "To be perfectly candid, drivers' wages needed to go up," says Rob Hollyman, a director at Youngs. "They were kept low by the consumer demanding cheap prices and so costs were cut everywhere."

Even with these pay increases, drivers have left to work for the supermarkets, which typically offer higher wages; some supermarket drivers are paid [more than £53,000](#) a year. But Piper isn't tempted. It is difficult work, with multiple drop-offs throughout the day, and you have to work weekends. Piper prefers to have some time at home with his wife and their three dogs, Tilly, Lulu and Bella. From Monday to Friday, Piper is alone, with only the ashes of his chihuahua, Toby, for company. Toby swings from the roof of the cab in a small felt bag, with a heart embroidered on it. "He's with me all the time, that little man," he says. The best bit of Piper's week is Friday afternoon, when he gets back and the dogs jump all over him, jealous for his attention.



- On the road again ... Piper sets off from Southampton for an 11am delivery in Swindon.

Piper is old enough to remember how things were before the tachograph cards (the 59-year-old has been a driver for 33 years). There was no heating in winter, nor air-conditioning in summer; no kettles or fridge-freezers or curtains to block out the sun. The engine was so loud that the seat shook. (Piper is partially deaf; his doctor says it is because of the job.) The lorries were manual and the rubber housing around the gear stick always had holes in it, which drivers would bind with jumpers to stop the cold coming in. (All newer models, including Piper's, are automatic.) There were no beds in the cab, so drivers slept across the seats at night. They never wore seatbelts. Many still don't.

When asked, Piper says that things are better now, safer, and he means it. But in his heart he prefers how things were before – before the tachograph cards, the medical he must pass every three years, the 35 hours of training every five years to renew his Driver Certificate of Professional Competence, all of which he has to pay for from his £700-a-week wages. “Before, you got in a truck and drove,” Piper says. “Now, you’re dictated on the hours you can do, and where you can go, and what you can do. There’s just no fun in it any more.”

Piper was robbed six years ago, in the middle of the night. They took £180,000 worth of clothes

But these restrictions demonstrably work: lorry driving is safer than it was a decade ago. There were [54 deaths of goods-vehicle occupants](#), a category that includes large- and heavy-goods vehicles, in 2020, down 13% from 2010.

Monday to Friday, when he is out on the road, Piper sleeps in his lorry. If he is unlucky, he has to park wherever he can. Industrial estates are usually OK: there are toilets and security gates, meaning Piper doesn't have to worry about thieves siphoning off his diesel or jacking open the back of the vehicle

and making off with his cargo. If he is very unlucky, he has to pull over in a layby. He sleeps badly on those nights, waking at the slightest noise.

But today, an unexceptional Monday in early October, Piper is lucky. He ends up at Eling Wharf in Southampton, where Youngs rents space for its drivers. There are toilets and showers, as well as a small office in a repurposed shipping container, painted blue, with a kettle, a fridge and a microwave. Piper drinks tea and looks out across the industrial estate.

He sees a dishwater sky reflected in brackish puddles around the site. He sees workmen preparing tomorrow's loads and carrying out maintenance on a vehicle. Without its trailer, the lorry seems exposed, like a great metal crab missing its carapace. By now, 4pm, what little light remains is mud-coloured.





- The waiting game ... with delays in Swindon holding up the unloading of his delivery, Piper takes the opportunity to check his calendar and rest his eyes.

After Piper has finished his dinner, he returns to his lorry. He climbs six feet into the cab, which is immaculately clean. He takes off his boots and leaves

them on the step, careful to shut them in when he closes the door, so they don't fall out. He closes the curtains across the windscreen and undresses. He puts the heating on. He calls his wife, to let her know that he is OK. He always speaks to her twice a day, at 12.30pm and 7.30pm. She worries otherwise.

Afterwards, he lies across the single bed behind the seats and turns on the flatscreen TV at the end of his bed. He likes having the TV on – it feels like company. He watches Emmerdale first, then Coronation Street and EastEnders. By Corrie, Piper is usually half-asleep. By EastEnders, he is definitely asleep.

As he sleeps, the tachograph uploads his data for the day. The computer floods the cab with a bright light that other drivers complain about, but Piper is used to it; he doesn't stir.

Staff shortages aren't confined to the drivers. More often than not, when Piper arrives at his destination, there are no workers available to unload his cargo. On another Monday later in October, Piper drives from Southampton to Birmingham with a full cargo of baby car seats. He gets to the warehouse at 11am, as requested; Piper takes pride in his job and is rarely late. There are no staff available to empty the lorry. Piper waits until 2pm, but there are still no staff free, so he returns to Southampton.



- Man's best friend ... the ashes of Piper's chihuahua, Toby, hang in his cab.

He drives back the next day and waits all afternoon. Still no staff. He spends the night in Birmingham, meaning that the firm has to pay demurrage, the fee set after the three-hour window for unloading has expired. There is a kebab van on the industrial estate where he is sleeping, which he considers, but, on account of his diabetes, Piper makes do with a microwaveable hot pot. Finally, on Wednesday, the car seats are unloaded and Piper goes back to Southampton.

This is the life of a lorry driver: endless waiting. Piper waits at Southampton docks to be assigned to a loading bay. He waits for his trailer – or box, as he calls it – to be lifted on to his lorry by a straddle carrier, a freight-carrying vehicle that looks like a giant stamp. He waits at his destination for his cargo to be unloaded. When he started, the waiting irritated him. “You get used to it,” he says.

While he waits, Piper flicks through his favourite truck magazines: Commercial Motor; Truck & Driver. Sometimes he naps, although he always wakes up when he feels the lorry is almost empty; he can tell from

how it shifts on the wheels. He speaks on his phone to his friends at work – Piper calls them the container boys. (Lorry driving is an overwhelmingly male profession: of the 315,000 registered HGV drivers in the UK, [just 2,200 are female](#).) There is Alan, on whom Piper likes to play practical jokes, and Lloyd, who is obsessed with unusual food innovations: jam-flavoured teabags, lemon drizzle digestive biscuits, roast potato crisps.

Lorry drivers tend to speak about one of five things: routes, traffic, schedules, other drivers and food. If Piper discovers a useful titbit – perhaps a bakery he likes to stop at has closed down, or a client told him something interesting as they were unloading his lorry – he passes it on to Alan and Lloyd carefully for inspection, like a piece of ancient pottery at a dig. “There is a lorry-driver grapevine,” Piper says.

This camaraderie – the inane, meandering chats – makes the job tolerable. Lorry driving is lonely work and the job has an emotional price. “I know I missed my kids growing up,” says Piper, who has three children and five grandchildren. “I only saw them weekends.”

October passes in a bleary circuit of motorway service stations and harried clients who complain about shipping costs and staff shortages. And then, at 6.07am on 11 November, a rent in the fabric of Piper’s everyday life. [A 54-year-old cyclist dies](#) after colliding with a lorry at the entrance to Southampton docks, causing tailbacks all day. Through conversations with the other boys in the yard, Piper gleans the particulars of the crash: the spot where the cyclist became affixed to the lorry; the stretch of road along which he was dragged; and the place where the driver made his grisly discovery.

Southampton docks are the beating heart of the south coast’s haulage operation. Here, gleaming cars, children’s toys and electrical appliances arrive from all over the world via inconceivably huge container ships. They are then carried by lorry on the M3, north-east to London, or the A31, westwards to Totnes, or the A34, north to Stoke-on-Trent.



- The container boys ... Piper has a cup of tea with his friend Alan (*top*) and catches up with another colleague.

But, in the past 18 months, Southampton docks have often been congested. When Piper drives into the docks, they are backed up. He might wait there for two, even three, hours. The delays are worst in the afternoon. As he waits

for his box to be loaded on to his lorry, Piper speaks to Alan and Lloyd on the phone. They gripe about the delays and wonder if it is down to Covid-induced staff shortages, as people are off sick and self-isolating.

To make matters worse, fuel prices have increased by nearly 20%. In June 2021, Youngs paid 99p a litre for fuel; by December, it was £1.17. “We have to pass it on to the consumer,” says Hollyman. “We have no other option.” (No one has managed to manufacture an electric HGV lorry, because of the fuel power needed to pull heavy loads, while the UK is not, in general, well set up for rail freight.)

Late in November, the lorry-driver grapevine yields more fruit. Three curtain-side lorries have their loads stolen during the night at Fleet services, on the M3 near Basingstoke, Hampshire. The trailers on curtain-side lorries are covered only by sheets of tarpaulin, affixed with ropes, which are easy to cut through. Piper hates driving curtain-side vehicles for this reason, especially around Christmas, when thieves surmise, correctly, that the lorries are full of valuable goods.

Piper was robbed six years ago, in the middle of the night. They took £180,000 worth of clothes. He felt the vehicle moving, but thought it was because of the soft ground on which he was parked, as well as the vibrations from passing traffic. Something felt off, though, so he pulled back the curtain on the passenger side of the cab. A man was standing there. He put one finger on his lips and slid another across his throat. Ten accomplices unloaded the van. Piper called the police, but they said there was nothing they could do. Afterwards, a doctor signed him off work for a week and prescribed him anti-anxiety medication. “It frightened me to bits,” he says.

The stress is constant. “It’s always in the back of your mind,” he says. “Where will I park? Will I be safe? When I wake up, I look out of my mirrors to see if there’s anyone around. I don’t want to go through that again. We’re targets all the time.” Many industrial estates are painted with double yellow lines, so lorry drivers are forced to park in laybys, where they sleep fitfully, fearful of being attacked and robbed. “People want their goods, but they don’t want you to park anywhere,” says Piper. “It’s horrible.”



- Home from home ... unlike in the old days, Piper's cab is fitted with a bed, a TV and heating.

It is for this reason that the sector struggles to recruit staff, says McKenzie. “Conditions are poor,” he says. “There’s very little safe and secure lorry parking. There are few gold-standard lorry parks. And drivers are fed up with it.” In October, the chancellor, Rishi Sunak, announced £32.5m in funding for roadside facilities. “It costs around £40m to build a brand new lorry park, so he’s talking about upgrades to existing parks,” says McKenzie. “But when you see some of the parks we’ve got, they need a lot more than a brush-up.”

This is the stuff that really grinds down Piper, that makes him wish there was something else he could do. This and the lack of respect. Most clients are polite, but some can be awful. They refuse to let Piper use the toilets, or berate him for being late, even if he has explained that it is not his fault the docks were backed up.

During the first lockdown, things were different. Families waved at him from motorway bridges. “We were loved by the public because we delivered everything,” he says. “Now that it’s over, we get treated dreadfully. But if it

wasn't for us, you wouldn't have the clothes on your back. The food in your house. Your car."

A man once came to Piper's house, in a village near Andover in Hampshire. He was campaigning against a distribution depot that a supermarket was planning to build nearby. He told Piper: "We don't want lorries coming through here." Piper was appalled. "I said: 'Hold on, I'm a lorry driver. I'm fed up with people saying they don't need lorries. How do you think you get your stuff?'"

By December, Piper is working punishingly long hours. At this time of year, he normally does a 13- or 14-hour shift, made up of his nine-hour drive time, but also mandatory breaks and waiting time. One Thursday morning, he has to wake up at 3.30am, in the Eling yard. Everything is dark and depressing. "It's cold out," he says. "You're in there nice and warm. You pull the curtain back and look outside and think: 'I don't want to get up this morning.'" It is a wrench to leave his plastic-moulded bedroom, where he sleeps more soundly than he does at home.

Piper brews a cup of tea, makes his bed, then walks to the shower block through the gloom. Some drivers don't bother, but Piper is fastidious about his personal hygiene. On his return, he checks the lorry, inspecting the wipers, tyres and brakes with a torch. He does the 10-minute drive to Nursling, listening to BBC Radio 2, before finding his load, strapping it down and collecting his paperwork from the office. Then it is on to Birmingham, where he has three drops. Collections in Newbury and Basingstoke will follow.



- ‘You’re snacking all the time’ ... Piper tucks into a sandwich and a packet of crisps. Often, his only options for lunch are fast food or ready meals.

Lunch is a bacon, egg and sausage sandwich from a van in a layby outside Birmingham. He had planned to buy only a cup of tea, until he smelled the

bacon. A pot belly is the lorry driver's inheritance, like the salaryman's gold watch or the Olympian's medal cabinet. Lorry drivers [are more likely](#) than average to be obese, have diabetes, hypertension, [heart disease](#), cancer, [problems sleeping](#) and [musculoskeletal disorders](#). The average [life expectancy](#) of a male lorry driver is 76.6; for male doctors and lawyers, it is 82.5.

It is the sedentary nature of the job, but also the fact that it is almost impossible to eat healthily on the road. Before, there would be truck stops, which served home-cooked meals, but most have closed down; Piper's only options come lunchtime are usually McDonald's, Burger King and KFC, or a salt-filled ready meal. His doctor tells him to go for a walk in the evening to get some exercise, but that is unrealistic: he can't leave his lorry unattended. Besides, he is always knackered. Piper's friends have had heart attacks while driving; he had a stroke in 2000 and didn't work for 18 months.

"It's the style of life," he says. "You sit here and you get bored. You think: I'm hungry, I'll have a sandwich. I'll have a bag of crisps. You're snacking all the time. You drink tea until it comes out of your ears."

Late in December, things go mad. "Everyone wants their containers and their deliveries urgently," says Piper. He does a job in London on a Friday. The traffic is unbelievable. It takes nearly an hour to travel 15 miles (24km) around the North Circular. By the time he gets home, it is nearly 8pm.

He is working right up until Christmas. On 20 December, he drives from Southampton to Wellington in Somerset. He leaves Nursling at 6am with a cargo of wicker baskets, crammed into the back with not an inch to spare. Passing other lorry drivers, he has the feeling of being part of a pod of friendly whales.

In Wellington, the client wants to talk about the supply chain crisis. His shipping container costs have gone up from \$2,000 (£1,490) to \$15,000 (£11,160) in just 18 months, partly due to increased labour costs since Brexit, but also due to the supply chain crisis. The client runs a garden furniture business that is foundering: just this year, he had to return a million

pounds' worth of orders, because it was impossible to import the stock. He had two containers on [the Ever Given](#), the container ship that got stuck in the Suez canal in March 2021, disrupting global trade for months.

We get treated dreadfully. But if it wasn't for us, you wouldn't have the clothes on your back. The food in your house. Your car

Rob Piper

“This is the picture across the world,” says Prof Edward Anderson, a supply chain expert at Imperial College London. Because globalised supply chains are run so efficiently, when something goes wrong – like the Ever Given – the impact can be catastrophic. The pandemic, too, has disrupted global trade. “Covid sits behind many of these disruptions,” says Anderson. “The pingdemic. People not being able to go to work.”

Covid has also created an international shortage of computer chips, which has had knock-on effects for the haulage sector, as these chips are used in automobiles. Youngs should have had 12 lorries delivered in November 2021, but it received only eight. All of the major lorry manufacturers have closed their books for 2022: you can't get a new lorry now unless you have already ordered it.

As Piper waits for the client to unload the lorry, he calls Alan and then Lloyd. They chat about the traffic and their routes. Piper relays some gossip he heard from the owner of the garden centre about how he came to buy the business. Later, in the twilight of the Eling yard, Piper wrings out the story a third time for his colleague Steve. “Is that right?” Steve says.

Today has been a good day. Friendly clients, no traffic. Back in Eling, Piper gets to sleep.

But, as he approaches the culmination of his more than 30-year career as a lorry driver, in all honesty, Piper has regrets. He wishes he had paid attention at school, instead of bunking off every Friday to work on a milk float, and got the grades to do something else, like become a truck mechanic. “I'm a fool,” he says. “But it's the only thing I know how to do.”



- ‘All I wanted to do was to drive a truck’ ... Piper in his cab.

Yet, when his stroke took him off the road, he was miserable. “I thought that was it,” says Piper. “My lorry-driving days were over. And my life was over, in a way.” Lorry driving is his life’s work – and his passion. “It’s sad, really,” he says. “Ever since I was at school, all I wanted to do was to drive a truck.”

When Piper says that sometimes he hates being a lorry driver, what he means is that he hates how the job has changed. Piper is nostalgic for the days when lorry drivers had the freedom to drive wherever they liked, for however long they wanted, rules and regulations be damned. He has always been like this: even when he was at school. “I don’t like change,” he says. “I like things to be the way they were.”

The best days, the days that really stick out, are the ones where people are kind. Ordinary human kindness takes on an outsized importance in Piper’s memory: he collects these encounters and turns them over in his mind. Take the time he was doing a house removal in Devon. It was a bucolic summer’s day. He drove through a tiny village, past cottages entwined with roses and an old man smoking a pipe. When he got to the house, it turned out he had

arrived a day early, by mistake. The client was a woman in her 30s. They sat out together on the patio, chatting and drinking tea. He could hear the church bells ringing. It was lovely.

But these days are rare. For the most part, lorry drivers are treated with disdain. Motorists cut them up. Nimbys campaign against proposed lorry parks, as if drivers should not be able to eat and sleep in comfort and safety. Environmentalists shudder at the emissions, while wearing clothes and eating food conveyed to them by lorry. “Lorry drivers are essential workers,” says McKenzie. “We told them that during Covid. But we have not done a lot as a nation to back that up.”

There are so many people like Piper, all over the country. They bring everything from our fuel to our medical supplies and, for the most part, they do it quietly, without recognition. “Lorry drivers are the forgotten side of the supply chain jigsaw,” says Anderson. “Consumers see the last mile and the people who deliver parcels to our front doors. But they don’t necessarily see the lorry drivers.”

After an exhausting week, Piper drives home on Christmas Eve, past houses where all the presents – and the turkey – arrived via lorry. He lets himself in. The dogs jump all over him, mad with excitement. A few days’ respite before Piper starts up the engine again. Who else would bring us the freight of Britain?

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Dance music

Interview

MØ: ‘I was terrified to stop and crash – I had to make time to reflect’

[Anna Cafolla](#)

The Danish synth star was nearly broken by years of gruelling tours and stepped back from the business. But now, she says, the planets are aligning for her again



‘I define success differently now’: MØ, AKA Karen Ørsted. Photograph: Fryd Frydendahl

Tue 1 Feb 2022 03.00 EST

NO!” cries MØ in mock defeat, clutching the purple beret she was crocheting before our conversation, hook and half-constructed hat held to heart. I have just told her that Mercury retrograde is set to fall this week: a celestial event believed to throw certain star signs into flux. MØ, a Leo and

Gemini rising sign, is among those potentially affected by this planetary shift. I assure her that it's actually *good* given her circumstances: it's supposed to facilitate new beginnings. Fitting, as she is on the cusp of releasing her make-or-break third album *Motordrome*.

MØ is in London to shoot a music video for the aptly titled *New Moon*. It's the central banger on the album, which articulates the past two years spent taking back control of her life and work. "I was super burnt-out at the beginning of 2019," the Danish singer says. "I was having panic attacks. My voice was broken. Everything was spinning."

Real name Karen Marie Ørsted, the musician had been a relentless pop presence since 2014. She first generated a buzz with her debut *No Mythologies to Follow*, building to a globe-shaking bang in 2015 with the Major Lazer and DJ Snake collaboration *Lean On*. It is one of Spotify's most-streamed songs of all time, with more than 1.5bn listens. She has collaborated with Diplo, Charli XCX, Iggy Azalea and Bleachers. She toured the world multiple times – both headlining and supporting the likes of Sia and Years & Years – all while working on her second album, 2018's *Forever Neverland*.

Yet she was left feeling empty. "I was riding on the success of those collaborations. I was chasing the stars," she says. "I don't regret the opportunity that a worldwide hit gave me, but I was so hard on myself. I loved a lot of the songs but it didn't feel unified or what I ultimately wanted to present." The shimmering dance-pop of *Forever Neverland* was a critical success, establishing her reputation as an individual rather than just a featured artist, but the protracted recording process didn't feel satisfying.

"On the cover, I look distant," the 33-year-old says. "I was frustrated by the lack of control. I was constantly moving, so I had no time to get deep into the songs or what I wanted to say."

She took a break and returned to Copenhagen after the gruelling *Forever Neverland* tour aligned with the pandemic. Her mother likened her feelings of burnout to *dødsdrom*: the Danish word for the motorcycle stunt known as the "wall of death", where drivers loop vertically and horizontally in a large

mesh sphere. “That was my brain! I was terrified to stop and crash. I had to make time to reflect.”

I feel more present in this record than anything before. I am excited for people to hear it

Ørsted underwent vocal surgery at the beginning of 2020 – a daunting operation, especially for a musician with her distinct rasp. She had reached a point where “more was always better, my body was aching, and I had no boundaries – I had to work on forgiving myself.” In the months of recovery when she couldn’t sing, she dyed her hair a dark wine red, crocheted, and read Neil Gaiman’s Sandman comics, an elaborate fantasy narrative steeped in dark mysticism, about a spiritual being who personifies dreams and traverses hell and faerie worlds.

She worked alone, writing and playing piano at home. [Goosebumps](#), a slow, vulnerable track about searching for an identity, was the album’s first song, written at a particularly low moment – “That was therapeutic. It brought me back to myself. I felt in the right gear again.” That precipitated a new outlook, with MØ shedding the squint-at-the-summer-sun bangers for a darker, more meditative sound. Not that the album is bereft of big tunes; far from it.

Slowly, she welcomed Scandinavian friends and collaborators for sessions: Sly, Noonie Bao, Caroline Ailin. “When it felt right, it was a joy to be surrounded by friends again and create together. I remembered why I love to collaborate. Especially with women, I felt that power of female unity,” she says. Later, producers Ariel Rechtshaid and SG Lewis brought dislocated disco, electro verve and effervescent pop sounds to the sparse demos. Building on the punk sensibilities of her mid-00s, and a high school-era love of Black Flag and Rammstein, scuzzy guitars punctuate the album. “Elements of it definitely recall my roots,” she says. So far, she has released four singles from the album: Live to Survive, Brad Pitt, Goosebumps, and Kindness, which hopscotch from 80s-inflected synth-pop to open-hearted lyricism and arena-ready grunge.

Ørsted has been an avatar of modern Scandipop, an elastic sound of sweeping choruses and miraculous melodies with deeply emotional lyrics, which has stretched over the years from the original purveyors, the Knife and Robyn, to include newcomers Sigrid and Aurora. “I’m a bit stuck in time with Scandipop,” she says. “It has a grandness but a deeper sadness. I think there’s more of a searching mentality than a sound. I want to get better at understanding genres, because I want to define my own.”

She reached out to Coco O of electro group Quadron during lockdown. “For the longest time, I thought I was the only one having a complete meltdown about putting a vision out into the world,” Ørsted admits. “It was good for me to talk to someone else who had struggled. I want to be better, too, in the future, for other female industry colleagues – to reach out and connect.”

Live to Survive and New Moon rail against the patriarchal attitudes of the music industry: “I work through frustrations with microaggressions I’ve experienced in studios, with producer guys who might not even know how suppressive they’re being.” Ørsted would sometimes feel too hesitant to speak up. “There was a constant feeling of self-doubt in those spaces. Live to Survive is a track that’s about saying: ‘Fuck that toxic energy.’”

In October, Ørsted played a home-town show at Copenhagen’s Den Grå Hal. A group of fans – “the MØ-squad” – flew from across Europe to see her. She will follow that up by heading out on the road again, something she’s both nervous and excited about. “I’m just fantasising about it now; I keep seeing myself on the tour bus watching movies. It feels so good that touring can be my sole focus, and I feel more present in this record than anything before. I am excited for people to hear it.

“I define success differently now,” she says. “Not to sound cheesy, but it’s making music that feels true to who I am and to communicate subjects that are important to me. I think it’s rare to make a song where anyone thinks: ‘This is 1,000% me.’ But these, I want to stand by. All this, while having a healthy life, a strong support system, good relationships – that’s my success.”

Motordrome is out now on RCA.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2022/feb/01/m-i-was-terrified-to-stop-and-crash-i-had-to-make-time-to-reflect>

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Animation in film

Flee: inside the film about a Kabul boy who finds happiness, cats and a husband in Denmark

He escaped death, fled across the Baltic, and eventually found love and a new life. Jonas Poher Rasmussen describes how he turned Amin's often harrowing story into an uplifting, award-winning animation



‘In Afghanistan, he couldn’t be openly gay’ ... Amin and his husband Kasper in Flee. Photograph: Final Cut for Real

[Ryan Gilbey](#)

Tue 1 Feb 2022 01.00 EST

When the Danish film-maker [Jonas Poher Rasmussen](#) was 15, an Afghan refugee moved to his small village. Rumours circulated about how the boy, Amin, had got there. Some said he had walked all the way from Kabul,

others that he had seen his whole family slaughtered. Rasmussen became the newcomer's friend and confidant – Amin even came out to him as gay when they were teenagers – and their closeness endured into adulthood. When they both suffered bad break-ups in their 20s, for instance, Rasmussen went to stay with Amin; they refer to that period now as “the heartbreak summer”. He still didn't know the truth about how his friend came to Denmark, though, so he did what any documentarist might do: he proposed making a film about him. Amin refused to reveal his identity on screen – but what if the film were animated?

The result is [Flee](#), which alternates between scenes of Rasmussen interviewing his friend, dramatisations of Amin's perilous journey to Copenhagen via Moscow, and present-day interludes showing him househunting with his boyfriend in which the concept of settling down presents unique challenges for someone who has spent his life running. Aside from the occasional excerpt of archive footage – the war-scarred streets of Kabul, the unruly waves seen from a boat smuggling people across the Baltic – every frame of the movie is animated, most of it in a simple, straightforwardly realistic fashion that matches Amin's narration.

“Fundamentally, everything came from his testimony,” says the 40-year-old director. We are speaking via video call just before Christmas, at the end of a year that began with *Flee* (which is executive-produced by [Riz Ahmed](#) and the Game of Thrones star [Nikolaj Coster-Waldau](#)) winning the Grand Jury prize in the documentary section at Sundance. “It had to be a style of animation that supported what Amin said. It also had to represent authentically the streets of Kabul and Moscow in the 1980s rather than being stylised or otherworldly.”



The joy of A-ha ... Amin as a boy.

When Amin frolics as a child in his sister's dresses or bops happily to the sound of A-ha, the mood is bright and buoyant. In moments of trauma, the animation grows nightmarish: faces appear without features, surroundings become scratchy and abstract. "Again, that came from the voice. When Amin started to talk about trauma, he spoke more slowly and incoherently. I knew we needed to see that reflected in the animation. It's not about the reality any more, it's about the emotion inside, the anger and fear."

Flee provides harrowing glimpses into the refugee experience but in places the movie is playful and funny. The young Amin, a devout fan of Jean-Claude Van Damme, imagines his idol winking at him in the middle of a fight scene from Bloodsport. Later, when Amin is squashed next to a dishy older man while being driven in a van by people smugglers, the soundtrack (Joyride by Roxette) seems to be expressing his taboo desires.

I want the film to show that being a refugee is not an identity – it's a circumstance that can happen to anyone

The partial disguise of animation gives Amin, who is hiding behind an assumed name as well as a cartoon face, a way to tell his story in full for the first time. "He didn't want people to pity him, or to see him only as a

refugee,” Rasmussen explains. It’s impossible not to notice, though, that Amin isn’t the only person whose appearance has been altered on screen. The film-maker talking to me today looks nothing like the one who is shown interviewing his friend in *Flee*. “Ah, my non-blondness,” he says sheepishly, gesturing to his dark hair and beard. “I wanted to create a contrast between Amin and me so that people weren’t confused.” It also reflects the story’s unreliable nature, where rumour and subterfuge are gradually peeled away to reveal the truth. “What we’re seeing on screen doesn’t always match up with the real world.”

He confesses to a more personal reason, too. “I didn’t want the audience to question where I’m from. In my own family, there is a refugee background. My maternal grandmother was born in Copenhagen but her parents, who were Jewish, had fled Russia in the pogroms. They applied for asylum here but were rejected, then moved on to Berlin. Being Jewish, my grandmother had to stand up every day in class with a yellow star on her chest. After that, they had to flee again – to England and then the US.”



Nightclub scenes ... Amin experiencing new freedoms in *Flee*. Photograph: Final Cut for Real

Rasmussen insists that he didn’t feel like an outsider himself during his childhood in [Denmark](#), though there was one detail that set him apart. “All

my friends were blond,” he says. “At 11 or 12, I wanted to be blond, too. And now I had the chance.” He looks bashful and boyish: a kid who made his wish come true.

Flee was an emotional film to piece together. “I’d heard the rumours about Amin’s past so I expected it to be harrowing,” he says. “I was more surprised by how much it all still affected him. He wasn’t able to connect his past and his present so he didn’t feel like a whole person.” The most traumatic part for Rasmussen was sifting through footage from 1980s Afghanistan to find just the right snapshots of horror. “That was a tough few weeks,” he says. “I needed a lot of breaks. But we had to show that staying in Kabul was not an option. The kid you see lying in a pool of blood represents Amin if he had stayed.”

In Rasmussen’s previous film, the live-action documentary [What He Did](#), he used a different sort of framework to address horrifying events. That film told the story of Jens Michael Schau, who brutally murdered his partner, the novelist Christian Kampmann. In that instance, the rehearsal and performance of a new play about the killing provided a lens through which to explore the story on two levels of reality, just as animation does in Flee.

Both films concern gay male outsiders – Schau admits he felt “inferior” in his partner’s literary circles, while Amin describes himself as being “ashamed and embarrassed” of being a refugee. The films also feature scenes set in gay bars. “I’m definitely drawn to outsider stories, to seeing how marginalised people cope in society,” says Rasmussen. Then a grin: “I’m not drawn to gay bar scenes. It’s just a coincidence I have two of those in a row.” Are the animation and the play-within-the-film ways of holding these subjects at an analytical distance? Quite the opposite, he argues. “When you deal with stories in the past, it’s always a struggle to make them feel current again. The setting up of the play in What He Did provides a natural structure. The same with the animation in Flee. It makes it all feel like it is happening now in front of our eyes.”



‘I’m drawn to outsider stories’ ... film-maker Jonas Poher Rasmussen.
Photograph: TT News Agency/Alamy

And it is. There will be millions more people who are [displaced](#) like Amin in the coming years and decades, not only through war but also the climate emergency. “I hope it gives a human face to these stories,” he says. “When Amin arrived in Denmark, the rhetoric around refugees wasn’t so bad. In the last 20 years, it has become increasingly toxic. I want the film to show that being a refugee is not an identity – it’s a circumstance that can happen to anyone. Yes, Amin is a refugee but he’s so much more. He is an academic, a house owner, a husband.”

How is he now? “He’s very well. He’s been travelling all his life and suddenly he had to stay at home like everybody else for the past few years. But he’s enjoyed it. He sends me photos of cats, and the flowers in the garden.”

Does Rasmussen feel as if he has finally understood Amin after making *Flee*? “I don’t think you can get to the bottom of a living person,” he says. “We’re all works in progress. I do understand him a lot better, and I understand what it does to someone to lose your home and not be fully who you are. In Afghanistan, he couldn’t be openly gay. In Denmark, he couldn’t be honest about his past. All his life, parts of himself had to be hidden away.”

Flee is really the story of a man trying to find a place where he can be who he is.”

- Flee is released on 11 February.
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This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2022/feb/01/flee-animation-documentary-refugee-amin-jonas-pohler-rasmussen>

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[Europe](#)

Austria lifts ‘lockdown of the unvaccinated’ as Europe slowly opens up

European countries begin to ease curbs with hospital admissions not rising in line with record Covid cases

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Shoppers in Vienna. From Saturday, shops and restaurants in Austria will be able to stay open until midnight and the maximum number of people able to participate in events will rise from 25 to 50. Photograph: Action Press/Georges Schneider/Rex/Shutterstock

*[Jon Henley](#), Europe correspondent
[@jonhenley](#)*

Mon 31 Jan 2022 10.34 EST

Austria has lifted its “lockdown of the unvaccinated”, **Switzerland** is gearing up for a “turbo” reopening and **Germany**’s finance minister has demanded an end date for Covid curbs as more countries prepare to ease pandemic controls.

It follows the **Netherlands**, **Denmark**, **Belgium** and **France**, who [last week began to](#) take steps to return to a semblance of normal life, with the Danish government declaring Covid-19 “should no longer be categorised as a socially critical disease” after 31 January.

Although infections, driven by the highly transmissible [Omicron variant](#), are still hitting record highs, data continues to show hospital and intensive care admissions are not surging in line with cases.

Austria’s chancellor, Karl Nehammer, said that from next Saturday, shops and restaurants would be able to stay open until midnight and the maximum number of people able to participate in events would rise from 25 to 50.

The country this week also became the first EU member state to make vaccination legally compulsory for adults under a law making those who refuse the jab liable for fines of up to €3,600 from mid-March, after an introductory phase.

Nehammer’s announcement came as Austria lifted a lockdown that – while proving difficult to enforce – has in principle barred those who have not been jabbed from leaving their home except for essential reasons since 15 November.

Restrictions on movement for the unvaccinated were lifted on Monday, although they remain barred from eating in restaurants or shopping for non-essential items as part of government efforts to boost what was western Europe’s lowest vaccination rate.

So-called “2G” rules banning those who have not been vaccinated or recovered from the virus from non-essential shops will end on 12 February,

with restaurants and tourist attraction also open to those with just a recent negative test a week later.

New daily coronavirus infections have been rising in Austria, but pressure on hospitals has eased and the wave is expected to reach a peak on around 7 February, the public health director, Katharina Reich, said.

In **Switzerland**, meanwhile, experts who studied both Swiss and German infection rates said Omicron was significantly more infectious, but seemingly less severe, than the Delta variant and was “unlikely to cause record numbers of admissions to ICUs”.

The finding followed a call last week by an alliance of Swiss businesses and rightwing parties to ease curbs – including working from home rules and a Covid pass needed to enter indoor public places such as restaurants, cinemas and gyms – that the group said were “disproportionate” and causing “enormous suffering” to companies.

Amid estimates that up to 40% of Swiss companies were experiencing staff shortages due to quarantine rules, the Swiss health minister, Alain Berset, has called for remaining restrictions to be lifted from 16 February, saying he wanted a “turbo” reopening of the economy.

Germany’s finance minister, Christian Lindner, also said the government should be laying the foundations for a smooth return to normal, arguing that even though the peak of the Omicron wave may still be several weeks away, business required a “planning horizon”.

Data from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control on Monday suggested that the country, which is recording record high infections numbers, had failed to hit its goal of vaccinating 80% of the population before the end of January.

As of Monday, 75.8% of Germans had received at least one vaccine dose of a Covid-19 vaccine, putting the country behind other large European countries including Italy, [France](#) and Spain. German MPS are expected to vote next month on making vaccinations mandatory.

The World Health Organization has said it is “plausible” that the Omicron variant, which seems to cause less severe symptoms in the fully vaccinated, may signal the pandemic’s transition towards a more “manageable” phase and eventual endgame, but warned the situation remains unpredictable.

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NHS

The demise of vaccine mandate plan for NHS staff was inevitable

Analysis: for good policy-making to work, it needs change being ushered in to have backing of all parties involved



Critical care consultant Dr Steve James challenges Sajid Javid about the edict during the health secretary's visit to King's College hospital in London. Photograph: Stefan Rousseau/PA

[Denis Campbell](#) Health policy editor

Mon 31 Jan 2022 15.32 EST

The decision to force NHS staff in England to get vaccinated against Covid-19 was always going to generate controversy, but it was also understandable. Sajid Javid's professed motivation – to protect patients from unjabbed frontline personnel – was sincere, especially given the many thousands of people who have died after becoming infected [while in hospital](#). The health

secretary argued his case publicly and passionately, seeking to convert the many sceptics.

But it was also a policy that was flawed from the start and which then encountered many obstacles along the way before meeting an increasingly inevitable demise. It will be little mourned.

For good policymaking to work, it needs the change being ushered in to have the backing of both those who will implement it and those affected by it, or at least a grudging willingness to go along with it. But while 58% of hospital bosses [supported compulsion](#), 32% did not. The same survey by NHS Providers of 172 chiefs in 114 health service trusts did find near-unanimity on one question, though: 94% agreed that it would exacerbate already-widespread understaffing.

More importantly, there was always going to be a hardcore of [NHS](#) staff who for whatever reason simply refused to set aside their own opposition to being vaccinated, even at the cost of losing their jobs. The 73,000 estimated to be in that position by the government's own impact assessment was a big number, even in a workforce of 1.4 million people, and especially given that the health service has been hobbled for several years by almost 100,000 vacancies. The 40,000 care home staff who have quit since vaccination was made compulsory in that sector was a reminder of real-world consequences.

Concerns about the policy took a while to emerge but then piled up quickly. Medical royal colleges representing nurses, midwives, GPs and obstetricians and gynaecologists voiced anxiety about the potential loss of staff in their areas of care; the Royal College of Nursing called the policy “self-sabotage”. An intensive care doctor challenged Javid about the edict with Sky News cameras rolling and other staff [began legal action](#) to try to overturn it.

And, crucially, as [the Guardian recently revealed](#), civil servants at his own department told Javid privately that fast-waning immunity from having two Covid jabs – NHS staff were not told they had to have a booster too – meant the policy was no longer “rational” or “proportional”.

Confirming the late, late U-turn to MPs on Monday evening, Javid insisted that mandatory vaccination was the “right policy at the right time”, given it was conceived last year, when Delta was the dominant variant of coronavirus. However, high take-up of Covid boosters and fact that the recent Omicron strain is much less severe meant “it is only right but responsible that we revisit the balance of risks and opportunities that guided our original decision last year.” As a result, he said, “I believe it is no longer proportionate to require vaccination as a condition of deployment in health and all social care settings.”

Javid’s backtracking will help hospitals maintain normal care. But it will also come at a price. A senior executive in a trust where 15% of staff were vaccine refuseniks said: “Undoubtedly it will help protect services by avoiding a significant loss of unjabbed staff. But there’s a balance between having staff in post to care for patients and having unjabbed staff in post treating vulnerable patients who are mostly frail, elderly and with compromised health.”

The vaccination drive for the population as a whole that Boris Johnson trumpets as one of his key successes could also become another unintended casualty. As another senior NHS executive said: “It potentially undermines the public messaging around the importance of people getting vaccinated. There are still lots of people who haven’t been jabbed at all or who haven’t had their booster. This change will only make our efforts to get the final few million vaccinated harder.”

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Coronavirus

Rise in Covid cases in England as reinfections included for first time

Previously people were only included in statistics once even if they had caught Covid multiple times

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
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Research assistants analyse the genetic material of Covid-19 cases at the Wellcome Sanger Institute, Genome Campus, Hinxton, Cambridgeshire, earlier this month. Photograph: Frank Augstein/AP

[Nicola Davis](#) Science correspondent

[@NicolaKSDavis](#)

Mon 31 Jan 2022 18.30 EST

Another 92,000 Covid cases were reported for [England](#) on Monday, a steep rise on the day before, after reinfections were included in the statistics for the first time.

Previously daily Covid case figures – which reflect the number of new infections picked up by testing – did not include reinfections for [England](#), [Scotland](#) or [Northern Ireland](#), although figures for Wales did, provided the positive tests were more than 42 days apart. In other words, most people were only counted once even if they had caught Covid multiple times.

However, as the pandemic has gone on, the [absence of reinfections in case data led to concerns](#), with experts noting that a previous infection provides little protection against Omicron, while – two years into the pandemic – there is a bigger pool of people who have had Covid at least once before.

Scientists noted that it was also important to include reinfections in order to understand the dynamics of the spread of immune-evasive variants that emerge, while it also sheds light on why some individuals may get infected over and over.

“This is likely to be a combination of risk – due to exposure – plus inherent likelihood of becoming infected, once exposed,” said Prof Rowland Kao, an epidemiologist at the University of Edinburgh. “We need to know these things in order to better target interventions of various sorts – how important, for example, particularly workplaces are likely to be, and how some individuals are therefore going to be exposed to more risk.”

The new approach means that reinfections will be now included in daily Covid case figures for England and Northern Ireland, with such episodes defined as a positive specimen at least 90 days after the last one – a gap that captures the majority of reinfections but ensures those who simply shed the virus for longer after an infection are excluded from the data.

[While data from the UK Health Security Agency](#) suggests some reinfections may occur in a shorter time period, this is a relatively small proportion of potential reinfections.

The Guardian understands data for cases in Scotland will also include reinfections in the coming weeks, while data for cases Wales will switch in the coming weeks to using the 90-day 90-day episode length.

Under the current, mixed definitions in use, 92,368 new Covid cases were reported for the UK on Monday, up from 69,007 the day before, with 81,720 reported for England alone compared with 59,559 on Sunday before reinfections were included.

The Guardian understands reinfections were not originally included in the daily case data across all the countries of the UK because at the beginning of the pandemic it was unclear whether they occurred and, if reinfections did happen, what the interval between infections was. While reinfection figures have since been tracked by public health bodies, [and released in reports](#), the daily case figures have not – until now – included such episodes.

While the inclusion of reinfections means the case-fatality risk – the proportion of people reported to be [diagnosed](#) with Covid who go on to die – will fall, Prof Sir David Spiegelhalter, a statistician at the University of Cambridge, cautioned the measure remains problematic.

“We have always known that the daily number of reported cases was a substantial undercount of the actual number of infections – the ONS Covid Infection Survey shows that we have to at least double the daily count,” he said.

“Including reinfections will be an improvement, and will reduce the apparent case-fatality rate, but nobody should have taken this very seriously anyway. The case-fatality ratio is inevitably an overestimate of what is the better measure – the infection fatality ratio, ie the proportion of those who are infected who die, whether or not they become confirmed cases.”

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Brexit: two years onEuropean Union

The EU is facing many difficulties, but Brexit isn't one of them

Lorenzo Codogno

EU countries have, on the whole, absorbed the shock of Brexit. But in Britain, trade is down – and prices are up



Frankfurt's financial district. 'Financial job openings have moved from London to continental Europe, and some firms have relocated.' Photograph: Kai Pfaffenbach/Reuters

Tue 1 Feb 2022 03.00 EST

Two years after Brexit formally took effect on [31 January 2020](#), and a year since the UK's exit from the single market and customs union, we can attempt a provisional economic stocktake for both sides.

Nearly 52% of UK voters supported Brexit in the 2016 referendum. Nearly 100% of citizens elsewhere in the bloc were shocked by the result, and the first concern was that Brexit could mark the unravelling of the whole European project. That did not happen: indeed, quite the opposite. Even in the most Eurosceptic countries there was an increase in support for the European Union, a sort of closing of the ranks. There was a clear risk that the EU would become disunited in the buildup to Brexit. But again, it did not happen. All countries gave a strong mandate to the European Commission, and stood united.

Today, British politics appears increasingly folded in on itself, and the British economy is arguably less outward-looking than before the referendum. Countless questions remain unresolved with the commission, and mutual trust between London and Brussels has long since collapsed.

From the EU, the drama of the Brexit negotiations was watched with mixed feelings. Initial regret shifted to a desire to limit the damage. Some economic opportunities to fill the gaps left by the UK opened up. Brexit was clearly going to be a loss for everyone, but far greater for the UK than for any continental European economy.

The negative impact on trade, so far, is substantial for the UK. The Centre for European Reform recently estimated that there has been an 11.2% negative impact on trade as a result of Brexit. The UK share of world trade has fallen by a further 15% compared to pre-referendum projections.

Assessing the impact of Brexit on the EU presents a challenge, as macroeconomic data is contaminated by the pandemic shock. However, digging into the details of trade flows, there has been a noticeable negative effect on some countries, sectors and firms. This has been especially sizeable for small producers who used to have unbounded single market access to the UK. Now, the extra paperwork puts off firms that lack the critical mass to absorb the extra fixed costs of handling non-EU trade procedures. Over time, the situation may well improve, but some companies have already given up. British consumers have paid the price, EU consumers far less.

A more precise picture of the geographical and sectoral composition will emerge once EU funds to compensate countries for the impact of Brexit are

distributed.

Since 2016, the [flow of EU workers](#) to the UK has been in decline. That process [accelerated last year](#), causing major imbalances in hospitality, agriculture, transport and healthcare, but also in some highly qualified jobs. The corresponding impact in the EU is a greater pool of labour in some countries and less of a brain drain, which increases unemployment but over time becomes a positive supply-side phenomenon. Again, while the impact is sizeable for the UK, it is very much diluted in continental Europe.

Although the impact of Brexit on the City of London is [not yet significant](#), the possibility of maintaining an undisputed dominant position in increasingly integrated European financial markets has been jeopardised. On the margins, London financial job openings have moved to continental Europe, and some firms have relocated.

The historically Eurosceptic wing of the Conservative party wanted Brexit to deliver more freedom from what was perceived as the unnecessary constraints and bureaucratic burdens imposed by Brussels. A minority ultra-liberal wing naively dreamt of an even more open, deregulated, low-tax environment to increase economic dynamism and transform the UK into a [Singapore-like haven](#). That raised fears in the EU of unfair competition through access to the single market, especially given the uncooperative approach to negotiations chosen by the UK government. Again though, these risks have by and large not materialised and concerns are dissipating.

The illusion of giving a boost to the UK economy with a reduction in taxation has clashed with the new needs for public spending for healthcare, the fight against the climate crisis, infrastructure investments, and the various electoral promises to the point of forcing the government to raise taxes. Instead of diverging, policies in the UK and the EU look increasingly alike.

Finally, there are non-tangible effects. In the past, the UK government has been obstructive on various initiatives aimed at strengthening the EU's architecture and achieving stronger economic and political integration. It opted out of schemes developed to alleviate the impact of the financial and economic crisis on Greece and other economies. Would the ambitious

€800bn (£665bn) [pandemic recovery plan](#) have even been possible with the UK government still around the table? Some in Brussels would say it would have been inconceivable.

The economic effects of the pandemic inevitably blur into those of Brexit, and therefore only once the dust settles can the damage be properly assessed. Of the many problems the EU is currently facing, Brexit has happily receded from the foreground.

- Lorenzo Codogno is visiting professor in practice at the London School of [Economics](#) and the former chief economist of the Italian treasury

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OpinionNew Zealand

Trivialising the Taliban is not the way to force New Zealand to change its Covid quarantine rules

Muzhgan Samarqandi

My heart goes out to Charlotte Bellis but the treatment of women in Afghanistan is not comparable to the situation in New Zealand



Under the Taliban, women in Afghanistan are not allowed to work or study.
Photograph: Héctor Retamal/AFP/Getty Images

Mon 31 Jan 2022 22.57 EST

My name is Muzhgan Samarqandi and I am from Baghlan, Afghanistan, but living in New Zealand with my Kiwi husband and our son. Like [Charlotte Bellis](#), I too was a broadcaster in Afghanistan, back when this was possible for a woman without being a foreigner.

[Bellis says](#) that she was forced to leave her previous home in Qatar, where she was a journalist with Al Jazeera, after becoming pregnant, since it's illegal for unmarried women to become pregnant there.

With New Zealand's borders closed, she returned to [Afghanistan](#), the only other country she had a visa to live in. Bellis says the Taliban granted her "safe-haven" and her multiple attempts to obtain emergency MIQ visas to allow her to return to give birth in New Zealand were – until Tuesday – unsuccessful.

As a mother, my heart goes out to Charlotte, and I sincerely hope she and her partner get to [New Zealand](#) so she can give birth at home surrounded by her family.

As someone who has travelled for study and work and love, and who does not share the same passport as their significant other, my heart goes out to everyone stranded overseas, and I sincerely hope they can all get home and be reunited with their loved ones.

But as an Afghanistani woman, who has only recently emigrated from Afghanistan to New Zealand, I have to speak up.

I almost did so when Charlotte [interviewed Abdul Qahar Balkhi](#), the Taliban spokesperson with the Kiwi accent in a story for Al Jazeera last year. Although her story raised allegations of Taliban killings and violence following their takeover, I felt she went easy on him. For example, at the end of the interview, she asked what he had to say to those who called the Taliban "terrorists". He said people didn't really believe they were terrorists, but this was just a word the US used for anyone who didn't fall in line with their agenda. There were no further questions.

This was a man who in 2012, as a member of the Taliban's "communications wing", [claimed responsibility](#) on behalf of the Taliban for an attack on innocent civilians. A man who has admitted the group committed crimes against humanity. It made me so upset to see him get away with answers like that. But then my energy was taken up just coping with the reality of what was happening to my friends and family in Afghanistan.

But now, when I read Charlotte's letter and see the media and social media responses, I see the situation in my country being trivialised, and it makes me angry.

Charlotte refers to herself asking the Taliban in a press conference what they would do for women and girls, and says she is now asking the same question of the New Zealand government.

I understand there are [problems with MIQ](#). And I understand the value in provoking change with controversy. But what I don't understand is how someone who has lived and worked in Afghanistan, and seen the impact of the [Taliban's regime on women and girls](#), can seriously compare that situation to New Zealand.

Afghanistani women who resist or protest the regime are being arrested, tortured, raped and killed. Young girls are being married off to Talibs. Education and employment are no longer available to them. A 19-year-old girl I know from my village, who was in her first year of law last year is now, instead, a housewife to a Talib. There are so many stories like this.

Charlotte says the Taliban have given her a safe haven when she is not welcome in her own country. This is obviously a good headline and good way to make a point. But it is an unhelpful representation of the situation. One commentary on Instagram, reposted by Charlotte , suggested her story represents the truly Muslim acts of the Taliban, which the Western media have not shown. This makes me angry.

If a person in power extends privileges to someone who doesn't threaten their power, it doesn't mean they are not oppressive or extremist or dangerous.

The Taliban distort Islam and manipulate Muslims for their political gain. They violate the rights of women and girls, and it is offensive to compare them to the New Zealand government in this regard.

New Zealand is no paradise, I have experienced my fair share of racism

here, and I am sure the MIQ situation can be improved. But relying on the protection of a regime that is violently oppressive, and then using that to try to shame the New Zealand government into action, is not the way to achieve that improvement. It exploits and trivialises the situation in Afghanistan, at a time when the rights of Afghanistani women and girls desperately need to be taken seriously.

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The panel**Gray report**

The Sue Gray report on No 10 parties: our writers on what should happen next

[Nesrine Malik](#), [Frances Ryan](#), [Devi Sridhar](#), [Katy Balls](#), [Rachel Clarke](#) and [Lola Okosie](#)

With some of Sue Gray's findings published, what will the implications be for Boris Johnson? Our experts give their view



Boris Johnson delivers a statement on the Sue Gray report to MPs in the House of Commons. Photograph: House of Commons/PA

Mon 31 Jan 2022 14.17 EST

[Nesrine Malik](#): Johnson expects this to be drowned out in the fullness of time



In any normal political climate, the [Sue Gray report](#) should be a final word. It is not short on statements that should condemn the prime minister, confirming the facts that have been out in the public domain for weeks now. Twelve parties – all but four of those that took place – are under criminal investigation. One of those, and this is not a passing detail, took place in the prime minister’s own flat. While the rest of the country was negotiating the fine technicalities of what constitutes a breach of the rules, in some instances pondering whether to sit on a bench in the park or not, these parties seem to suggest that No 10 and civil service staff, under the eye of the prime minister, believed they were exempt.

But this is not a normal political climate. It is one where Johnson and the Conservative party, even with their popularity severely diminished, have a large majority, no clear successor, and a grace period before the next election: if reports and conclusions can be spaced out far enough, and with fatigue and a heave-ho from the rightwing press, all this can be drowned by time.

There is potentially enough in the Gray report already to help the government along in this effort. There is enough bureaucrat speak, enough legally prompted restraint, for Johnson and his supporters to hang it all on the “infrastructure” of No 10, the proximity of the garden to the offices, the

“fragmented leadership structures” that “blur” lines of accountability. There might be enough here for Johnson to say, as he has done, picking up on the lifelines immediately: “I get it and I will fix it.” That pledge sounds more like a wink than an earnest promise.

- Nesrine Malik is a Guardian columnist

Frances Ryan: Every report of a party during lockdown is an insult to disabled people



In [her report](#), Sue Gray stated that, “At times it seems there was too little thought given to what was happening across the country.” As one of the 3.7 million clinically vulnerable people who were shielding 24/7 at home as Boris Johnson and his team let off steam, I can only agree. Every report of a party during lockdown is an insult to disabled people who even now are still afraid to have a drink with a friend.

How did we get to this point as a country? The attributes that could have led the prime minister and those around him to potentially break the law – entitlement, carelessness, deceitfulness – have long been visible to those who cared to see them.

As Johnson shamelessly tries to cling on to power, attention should also turn to those who helped get him there. The Tory MPs who are now moving against Johnson allowed party members to choose between him and Jeremy Hunt as leader when it suited them, just as the rightwing press now crying foul helped him get the keys to No 10 in the first place.

The consequences of this will be felt for years to come. The greatest loss from Johnson's time in office is the thousands of lives unnecessarily taken by coronavirus, but we should not underestimate the loss of public trust, too. Democracies are sustained by leaders with integrity, just as they are damaged by those without. The hangover from "partygate" will linger in Britain long after Gray's sparse report gathers dust. For a man famously fascinated by great leaders and power, Johnson will indeed go down in the history books – as the prime minister who partied as his citizens died.

- Frances Ryan is a Guardian columnist and author of *Crippled: Austerity and the Demonisation of Disabled People*

Devi Sridhar: From a public health perspective, we need modelling of appropriate behaviour from the top



It is simply a tragedy of history that when the Covid-19 crisis hit, Boris Johnson was prime minister of the UK. The scientific research from British academic institutions – and the NHS – is superb. We are envied by much of the world. Yet the UK response to Covid in 2020 was abysmal, as reflected by the [death toll](#) of 176,000.

In March 2020, there was no preparation, no plan and no leadership. Johnson missed [five consecutive emergency meetings](#) about Covid in the buildup to the crisis; boasted that he had [shaken hands](#) with Covid patients; went into hospitals without wearing a mask; and allegedly said (when pushed to introduce restrictions to slow the spread of the virus), “[let the bodies pile high](#)”.

The [Gray report](#) tells us little that we did not already know about Johnson’s poor leadership at this time. This is a report about the parties at No 10, but really it is not about parties at all. It is about the sacrifices – financial, social, familial – that normal people made to protect their communities and be law-abiding citizens, while the government carried on with seemingly little interest or care for the people of their country.

Covid will not be the last pandemic we face – and there is a real chance that another variant like Omicron could be just around the corner, and it could be

much more dangerous. From a public health perspective, we need people to look out for each other because it's the right thing to do. Because they care about the lives and livelihoods of others. This starts with modelling of appropriate behaviour and leadership from the top. Johnson has lost the trust of the people of this country. The consequence is that we are all more exposed and weaker in our pandemic response.

- Prof Devi Sridhar is chair of global public health at the University of Edinburgh

Katy Balls: Johnson's response to the report has put him back in the danger zone



Over the weekend, there had been a sense building among Boris Johnson's allies that the prime minister was over the worst of it when it came to "partygate". The rebels had lost momentum and the work of Johnson loyalists was beginning to result in more Tory MPs speaking up on behalf of the PM.

Even the police getting involved was seen by some as having an upside. The thinking was that it would drag things out, Johnson could remove anyone

who was fined by the police from No 10 – and then declare, when the Gray report finally came out, that he had dealt with matters.

But Gray's update, in which she was more than keen to stress this was not her report and just a summary, and Johnson's response to it, has put him back in the danger zone.

First, there's the sheer number of events the police are looking at. Second, there is the fact the PM was at some of them – and they include a gathering at his Downing Street flat.

Finally, there was the prime minister's appearance in the Commons. When he needed to be statesmanlike and contrite, he was angry and combative – even [refusing to commit](#) to publishing the full report once the police investigation was concluded (a position Downing Street has already had to U-turn on).

His attack on Keir Starmer for the failure to prosecute Jimmy Savile (a claim that has been [disproven](#)) dismayed even his own MPs – while his questioning of drug use by the Labour frontbench was viewed as simply bizarre. “It was terrible,” says one member of the payroll.

The scale of Tory anger at Johnson was on full display, as MPs – from Theresa May to the 2019 intake – lined up to criticise him. Given that many of the MPs who spoke up in the chamber aren't exactly known for being Johnson loyalists, there was no single intervention that signals a collapse in support for the PM.

However, behind the scenes, discomfort is building. Johnson's response to the report has only added to doubts about his future. For all the talk from Johnson of change in how No 10 operates, the part that most worries MPs is that he may not realise that he needs to change, too.

- Katy Balls is the Spectator's deputy political editor

[Rachel Clarke: While Downing Street partied, we confronted more death than anyone should ever](#)

endure in peacetime



How much did I need to hear this? Sue Gray just called time on some of the most nauseating codswallop of this entire saga. I'm referring to the Boris Johnson apologists who have tried to excuse the partying prime minister on the grounds that he was "stressed" at work. Dominic Raab, for instance – who incensed NHS staff such as me when he [referred to Downing Street](#) as "a cockpit for people working phenomenally hard under phenomenal strain". Oh really? Try 13-hour shifts in full PPE, we thought. Try holding an iPad to a dying man as his wife howls with grief, alone at home. Try knowing the ventilators are being [covertly rationed](#), yet being powerless to stop this. Try finding your most junior doctor trembling, traumatised, in a toilet. Try seeing your patients suffocate before your eyes – over and over and over again. And all the while, try knowing that the virus soaks your hair, your neck, your clothes, your shoes – and that you'll bring it straight back home to your family.

So thank you, Sue Gray. Thank you for choosing quite deliberately to acknowledge the "difficult conditions" and "long hours" worked by Downing Street staff, only to then observe – with damning curtness – that key and frontline workers were "working under equally, if not more, demanding conditions, often at risk to their own health".

Indeed we were. While Downing Street partied, we confronted more death and dying than anyone should ever endure in peacetime. In insinuating that Johnson has experienced something similar, Raab and his ilk sought to trivialise profound and lasting trauma. It was the cheapest of shots, a truly low blow to a broken NHS workforce. Gray just slapped it down – and for that I'm enormously grateful.

The more Johnson squirms, deflects, distracts and scapegoats others, the more he's really just writing his own dire legacy. The only way for this government to claw back credibility is for him, and his defenders, to embark on a process of radical candour. Admit the rule-breaking. Be absolutely candid. No more evasions. Just face up to how wrong they got it. Above all, Johnson needs to resign rather than be pushed. I don't believe anything less will defuse the nationwide anger.

- Rachel Clarke is a palliative care doctor and the author of [Breathtaking: Inside the NHS in a Time of Pandemic](#)

Lola Okolosie: My pupils, aged just 11 and 12, know that the rot begins at the top



Here we have it, in black and white, the simple outlining of 12 occasions in which the government defied its own laws. I think back to the third lockdown and can't believe the gall of a political establishment willing to stand in support of such blatant disrespect for its citizens.

At the time, my partner began cancer treatment. I could not accompany him to the operation that removed his tumour, nor the chemotherapy appointments that followed. All of it he attended alone. At the time I counted us "lucky". A chat with his cousin, a doctor working in a hospice, was evidence it could be much worse. That we were "all in this together" was taken at face value. It is difficult to not conclude we were taken as naive fools.

My partner's cancer treatment left him with a weakened immune system, meaning that despite our being key workers, my children remained at home to be taught by us. I would end online teaching lessons to my pupils by telling them to keep thinking positively and reminding them that they were doing great – although I was worried by the impact it was all having on so many who were increasingly becoming withdrawn or disengaged. I'd then rush down to begin teaching my own children. When thoughts centred on how long we would remain in the tunnel kept circling back, I'd reproach myself. We weren't the only ones going through hard times. To differing degrees, we were all shouldering a collective burden.

At the moment I am teaching my year 7 classes rhetoric. Today we covered a key element of the triad, ethos: a speaker's credibility. The audience, I tell them, needs to believe that the speaker is, among other things, "trustworthy and someone who genuinely cares". When I ask them who needs to be perceived as such, all write "politicians". More than a few name our prime minister, Boris Johnson. At 11 and 12, so many already know that the rot begins right at the top. What a terrible lesson to teach.

- Lola Okosie is an English teacher and writer focusing on race, politics, education and feminism

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[Opinion](#)[Winston Churchill](#)

Why did GB News interview a Churchill impersonator as if he were the real thing?

[Zoe Williams](#)



In a baffling segment on the TV channel, a stand-in for the wartime leader ponders whether he would be cancelled in the current climate. Too right he would



‘Don’t sweat the small stuff.’ Winston Churchill during an election campaign speech in 1945. Photograph: Stocktrek Images/Alamy

Tue 1 Feb 2022 02.00 EST

It was a low point even for GB News, a rolling-opinions TV channel with no documented highs: to celebrate the anniversary of Churchill’s funeral, it interviewed a Churchill impersonator *as if he were Churchill*. “Why do you think there is still so much admiration for you?”, the man – his name lost to the viewers, unfortunately, since the strapline underneath read simply “Winston Churchill, former prime minister” – was asked. “I think probably because I was the right man at the right moment,” he replied, having made the baffling decision to stick with the first person while consigning himself to the past. “I don’t think I could survive in the current climate,” he continued, presumably because the woke warriors would come for him. Too right we would. “You’re dead,” we would say, “and yet still talking. For this gross unnatural act, you are hereby no-platformed, nay, cancelled.”

Some time in the early 2000s, a survey found Churchill to be the Briton most admired by his compatriots, and that was interpreted – some would say overinterpreted – as a lesson on what kind of prime minister we all secretly wanted. Did we like him best for his lofty rhetoric or his [white supremacism](#)? For his salty remarks at parties, or his “I, too, am human”

physique? It was none of those things, of course. People liked him because he won things. Not all of them – he lost the odd election. But the important things, he won. Well, one important thing, but to give him credit, it was pretty damn important.

The salient thing now is not so much Churchill himself, who is – one more time for the GB viewers at the back – very much still dead, but what British politicians are trying to invoke when they wang on about him. The prime minister has [written a book](#) about his hero, but, even if you were prepared to read it, you would struggle to find the Churchillian value that Johnson most seeks to emulate. This is because it isn't anything intrinsic to the man himself but rather the nature of his legacy: to Winston-stans, nothing matters, nothing he said or did, no mistake or omission, besides that one thing that he won. Imagine how relaxing it would be for a chaos monkey or a seat-of-pants merchant to live that creed: don't sweat the small stuff, just choose one huge thing, and say you won it.

- Zoe Williams is a Guardian columnist
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2022.02.01 - Around the world

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Mexico

‘We only have a pen’: fury as fourth journalist killed in Mexico this year

Roberto Toledo was shot dead by three gunmen in a carpark in Zitácuaro, where he reported for a local news outlet



A woman posts photos of murdered journalists during a national protest in Mexico City on 25 January. Photograph: Eduardo Verdugo/AP

[David Agren](#) in Mexico City

[@el_reportero](#)

Mon 31 Jan 2022 18.07 EST

Journalists in [Mexico](#) have responded with fury and despair at the murder of a fourth reporter in the country this year, cementing its reputation as the world’s most murderous country for media workers.

Roberto Toledo was shot dead by three gunmen on Monday afternoon in a carpark in the city of Zitácuaro, where he reported for a local news outlet, Monitor Michoacán. Zitácuaro is best known for the nearby monarch butterfly reserves, but the region is rife with violence as drug cartels and criminal groups fight to control illegal logging.

“Exposing corruption led to the death of one of our colleagues,” said Armando Linares, the director of Monitor Michoacán, [in a video originally posted on Facebook](#). Linares broke down in tears before offering his apologies to Toledo’s family.

“[Toledo] lost his life at the hands of three people who shot him in a mean and cowardly manner,” he continued. “We don’t carry weapons. We only have a pen and a notebook to defend ourselves.”

The killing deepened the sense of desperation among journalists in Mexico, who accuse Andrés Manuel López Obrador of failing to take meaningful actions to protect them and their colleagues.

“In López Obrador’s discourse, he says, ‘the state no longer persecutes journalists’ and he’s correct,” said Javier Garza, a journalist in the city of Torreón. “But he doesn’t stop any of the other actors” from attacking members of the press.

In response to the recent spate of killings, the president, known as Amlo, has instead blamed the legacy of “neoliberalism” and claimed that political opponents were stirring outrage over the murder of reporters to discredit his government.

Adding to the sense of impotence among reporters is the fact that several journalists attacked or killed this month were enrolled in a scheme supposedly designed to provide for reporters under threat.

“Nobody in authority cares about journalism, unless it helps keep them in power. Let’s not fool ourselves,” tweeted Rafael Cabrera, an investigative reporter.

Press freedom organisation the Committee to Protect Journalists counts 32 media workers murdered in Mexico since December 2018 – not counting Toledo's case – when López Obrador took office. Those most at threat are local reporters investigating links between politics and organized crime.

Toledo was the fourth Mexican journalist murdered in 2022. Lourdes Maldonado López was shot dead 23 January as she arrived at her Tijuana home. One of the windows of her vehicle was covered in plastic as colleagues say it had been shattered previously by gunfire. Maldonado appeared at the president's morning press conference in 2019 and told López Obrador: "I fear for my life."

Tijuana photojournalist Margarito Martínez was killed by a lone attacker in his home 17 January, according to state authorities.

José Luis Gamboa was stabbed at least seven times 10 January in the port city of Veracruz. He had commented critically on crime and politics for Infóregio, a news site he co-founded.

Two journalists in the states of Yucatán and Oaxaca also survived attacks, according to Mexican media reporters.

Journalists staged protests in more than a dozen Mexican cities last week after Maldonado's slaying.

"What makes such a wave of journalist killings possible is that criminal interests – through government inertia, complicity or direct authorship – are almost never properly investigated or punished," said Falko Ernst, senior Mexico analyst at the International Crisis Group. "There's near-perfect impunity."

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[UK news](#)

Cypriot police urged to reinvestigate gang rape of British woman

Student found to not have had a fair trial two years after being wrongly convicted for making up allegation



Supporters of the woman gathered outside the court in the capital Nicosia.
Photograph: Petros Karadjias/AP

[Helena Smith](#)

Tue 1 Feb 2022 01.00 EST

Authorities in Cyprus are being urged to launch a fresh inquiry into a gang rape complaint by a British woman after the country's supreme court acquitted her of fabricating the claim that she had been sexually assaulted at a holiday resort.

The 21-year-old's legal team said it was incumbent on the island's police force to reopen the investigation in the wake of the landmark ruling. "It's our next big battle," said the human rights lawyer Nicoletta Charalambidou.

The three-member tribunal threw out the case on Monday, acknowledging that the Briton had not been given a fair trial. The verdict was announced two years after the then teenager was found guilty of making up the gang rape allegation and handed a suspended four-month sentence for fomenting public mischief.

Michael Polak, who had coordinated the appeal against the conviction as head of the legal aid group Justice Abroad, told the Guardian it was critical a new investigation be initiated if justice was to be properly rendered as the initial inquiry had breached standards. "Cypriot authorities now have a duty to properly investigate the rape complaint because it is clear that was never done," he said.

"We want the investigation to be transferred to a different police force so that all the evidence in this case can be considered fairly and dispassionately."

The verdict, he said, had been achieved "against the odds."

Persefoni Panayi, the British-born president of the supreme court, had upheld the appeal in favour of the conviction being dropped, although jurists were divided, with one voting against.

The Derbyshire student, who is attending university in the UK, had described in detail how she was gang-raped by up to 12 Israelis in a hotel room in Ayia Napa in July 2019. She had threatened to go to the European court of human rights if the bid to clear her name failed.

The guilty verdict, handed down by the district court judge Michalis Papathanasiou, had hinged on the Briton allegedly admitting that she had falsified her original complaint. Her defence team had argued that the handwritten confession, which formed the basis of the prosecution case, was

extracted under duress, in the absence of a lawyer, or translator, after more than seven hours of police questioning.

Papathanasiou had repeatedly refused to allow the defendant, as she stood in the dock, to speak about the assault, saying: “This is not a rape trial.”

The retraction allowed the alleged assailants, who were aged between 15 and 22 and included the sons of senior Israeli officials, to return home immediately.

The woman’s status changed overnight, from victim to suspect, and she spent four weeks in Nicosia general prison before being ordered to remain on the Mediterranean island for court proceedings that would drag on for six months.

The student, who has never been publicly named, was not in Nicosia to hear the news on Monday. Her lawyers described her as still being too traumatised to travel.

But in a statement, her mother responded to the outcome, saying: “It is a great relief we hear that the authorities in Cyprus have recognised the flaws in their legal process. Whilst this decision doesn’t excuse the way she was treated by the police, the judge or those in authority, it does bring with it the hope that my daughter’s suffering will at least bring positive changes in the way victims of crime are treated.”

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[Israel](#)

Israel military officers dismissed over death of Palestinian-American at checkpoint

Antony Blinken pressed to investigate West Bank death of 78-year-old who was handcuffed, gagged and left by soldiers last month



Men stand next to a poster of Palestinian Omar Abdalmajeed As'ad, in Jiljilya village in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. Photograph: Mohamad Torokman/Reuters

Staff and agencies

Mon 31 Jan 2022 21.52 EST

Israel's military has said it is dismissing two officers and would reprimand a battalion commander over the [death of a Palestinian-American](#) at a West Bank checkpoint after he was stopped by Israeli troops.

The death of Omar Abdalmajeed As'ad, who had lived in Milwaukee before retiring to his native village of Jiljilya, resulted from "a moral failure and poor decision-making", it added.

The 78-year-old had been handcuffed, gagged and blindfolded for between 20 minutes and an hour, before his body was [discovered by local residents](#) and others detained in the 12 January raid after the soldiers left.

"The soldiers did not identify signs of distress or other suspicious signs concerning As'ad's health. The soldiers assessed that As'ad was asleep and did not try to wake him," according the military statement. "The investigation concluded that the incident was a grave and unfortunate event, resulting from a moral failure and poor decision-making on the part of the soldiers."

After an autopsy found he died from "[stress-induced sudden cardiac arrest stemming from external violence](#)", a US embassy spokesperson in Jerusalem said it was "deeply saddened" by As'ad's death and it supported "a thorough investigation into the circumstances of the incident".

Palestinian leaders have called for the soldiers involved to be prosecuted in an international court.

Two members of Wisconsin's congressional delegation asked US secretary of state Antony Blinken on Monday to investigate whether the soldiers involved used equipment procured with American aid.

"We strongly support human rights and the rule of law as the foundation of United States foreign policy," US senator Tammy Baldwin and representative Gwen Moore wrote. "As a Palestinian American, Mr As'ad deserves the full protections afforded US citizens living abroad and his family deserves answers."

The 78-year-old's US citizenship means that his case has received more international attention than most civilian deaths related to Israel's military occupation of the [Palestinian territories](#). In 2021, security forces killed 41

Palestinians in the West Bank who were not involved in attacking or allegedly attacking Israelis, according to the human rights group B'Tselem.

As'ad was born in Jiljilya but spent about 40 years in the US. He became a US citizen before he returned to his home village in 2009 to retire with his wife, Nazmia, his nephew told the Associated Press.

US state department officials have said they're seeking clarification about the events leading up to As'ad's death.

State department spokesperson Ned Price said on Monday that he hadn't seen the request from Baldwin and Moore and the agency hasn't seen a final report from Israeli officials.

"We continue to support an investigation that is thorough and comprehensive into the circumstances of the incident and we welcome receiving additional information as soon as possible," Price said.

Omar As'ad's nephew and his son, Hane Assad, both described Omar as a philanthropist who was the life of the party. Hane Assad told the AP his father would often hand out money to the poor. "He just loved everybody, no matter what race you were, what culture you came from," he said. "He just saw you as a human being."

He was coming home from playing cards with a cousin when the soldiers stopped him, Assad said.

"He was very weak," Hane Assad said. "He walked with a cane. It takes him five minutes to get to the car, the way he walks. He doesn't have the power of 30 soldiers ... The military said 'we left and he was fine.' It doesn't make sense."

"Every time we got stopped Dad would say 'whatever they ask for give it to them. Just be calm.' Plenty of times we got pulled over and I never saw him fight," Hane Assad said. "I can't believe they did that to my Dad. Almost an 80-year-old man. All the soldiers there couldn't handle him? This is uncalled for. You don't treat no elderly person like that."

With Associated Press and Reuters

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[China](#)

Grindr disappears from app stores in China amid Olympics crackdown

Authorities are conducting a month-long campaign to root out illegal and sensitive content during the lunar new year holiday and Winter Games



Grindr has been removed from app stores in China as the LGBTQ community comes under pressure
Photograph: Avishek Das/SOPA Images/REX/Shutterstock

Agence France-Presse

Mon 31 Jan 2022 23.05 EST

Gay dating app Grindr has disappeared from multiple app stores in [China](#) as authorities tighten control of the country's already heavily policed internet and purge online behaviour the ruling Communist party dislikes.

The country's cyber authority is conducting a month-long campaign to root out illegal and sensitive content during the lunar new year holiday and February's Winter Olympics.

Although the world's most populous nation decriminalised homosexuality in 1997, same-sex marriage is illegal and LGBTQ issues remain taboo. The LGBTQ community is under pressure, with web content censored and depictions of gay romance in films banned.

Apple says Grindr's developers removed the app from Apple's China App store. Data from mobile research firm Qimai shows it was no longer available on Thursday.

Searches for the matchmaking app on Android and similar platforms operated by Chinese companies also returned no results. Google's Play Store is not available in China.

Grindr did not respond to an AFP request for comment. Local Grindr competitors such as Blued remain available for download.

The Chinese former owner of Grindr, Beijing Kunlun Tech, sold the app to investors in 2020 [under pressure from US authorities](#) concerned that the potential misuse of its data could present national security risks.

On Tuesday, the cyberspace administration announced a drive to crack down on rumours, pornography and other web content.

The campaign aims to "create a civilised, healthy, festive and auspicious online atmosphere for public opinion during the lunar new year", the administration said in a statement.

Last year, social media accounts belonging to major university LGBTQ rights groups were blocked from WeChat, China's dominant messaging and social media app.

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[China](#)

China more ‘brazen and damaging’ than ever, says FBI director

Bureau opening cases on Chinese intelligence operations every 12 hours, says Christopher Wray, as George Soros calls Xi Jinping the ‘greatest threat’ to open society



FBI director Christopher Wray said there was ‘no country that presents a broader threat to our ideas, innovation, and economic security’ than China.
Photograph: Xinhua/REX/Shutterstock

[Martin Farrer](#) and agencies

Tue 1 Feb 2022 00.39 EST

The threat to the west from the Chinese government is “more brazen, more damaging” than ever before, FBI director Christopher Wray has said, accusing Beijing of stealing American ideas and innovation and launching massive hacking operations.

The speech at the Reagan Presidential Library in California on Monday amounted to a stinging rebuke of the Chinese government just days before Beijing is set to occupy the global stage by hosting the Winter Olympics.

In another salvo from the US towards China on Monday, billionaire George Soros said Chinese president Xi Jinping was the “greatest threat” to open society throughout the world. However, he added in his speech that the crisis engulfing China’s “unsustainable” property market could be the downfall of Xi, along with other mounting problems such as [containing Omicron](#), the pursuit of total social control, and a plummeting birthrate.

Wray’s remarks made clear that even as American foreign policy remains consumed by Russia-Ukraine tensions, the US continues to regard [China](#) as its biggest threat to long-term economic security.

“When we tally up what we see in our investigations, over 2,000 of which are focused on the Chinese government trying to steal our information or technology, there’s just no country that presents a broader threat to our ideas, innovation, and economic security than China,” Wray said, according to a copy of the speech provided by the FBI.

The bureau is opening new cases to counter Chinese intelligence operations every 12 hours or so, Wray said, with Chinese government hackers pilfering more personal and corporate data than all other countries combined

“The harm from the Chinese government’s economic espionage isn’t just that its companies pull ahead based on illegally gotten technology. While they pull ahead, they push our companies and workers behind,” Wray said. “That harm – company failures, job losses – has been building for a decade to the crush we feel today. It’s harm felt across the country, by workers in a whole range of industries.”

Chinese government officials have repeatedly rejected accusations from the US government, with the spokesperson for the embassy in Washington saying in July last year that Americans have made “groundless attacks” and malicious smears about Chinese cyber-attacks. The statement described China as a “staunch defender of cybersecurity”.

The threat from China is hardly new, but it has also not abated over the past decade.

“I’ve spoken a lot about this threat since I became director” in 2017, Wray said. “But I want to focus on it here tonight because it’s reached a new level – more brazen, more damaging, than ever before, and it’s vital, vital that all of us focus on that threat together.”

‘The system is built on credit’

Speaking at a Hoover Institution panel on China, Soros said the victory of open societies “can’t be taken for granted” in a world teetering on the edge of military aggression in Ukraine and Taiwan.

However, Xi Jinping’s attempt to impose “total control” on China through a strategy of city-wide lockdowns, could jeopardise his chances of staying in power, Soros claimed, because they are “unlikely to work against a variant as infectious as Omicron”.

Despite Xi’s firm control over the military and his tools of repression and surveillance, Soros said that it should not be assumed, given strong internal opposition, that the president will stay in power. He rules by “intimidation” and “nobody dares to tell him what he doesn’t want to hear”, he said.

The Soros comments appeared timed to coincide with the run-up to the Winter Olympics, although several countries – including the US and UK – will not be sending any diplomats in protest at human rights abuses in Xinjiang and elsewhere.

Soros also argued that the world’s second-biggest economy has become too dependent on using “unsustainable” property development to power growth since Xi took power in 2013.

The sector that accounts for about 30% of Chinese economic output was faltering with high-profile failures such as Evergrande spreading throughout the industry, leaving “people’s confidence shaken” and the economy struggling, he said.

Add in the disruption caused by trying to stamp out every case of the Covid-19, and a falling population that will lead to labour shortages, and China's economic growth could not be taken for granted.

"The model on which the real estate boom is based is unsustainable. People buying apartments have to start paying for them even before they are built. So, the system is built on credit. Local governments derive most of their revenues from selling land at ever-rising prices.

The fall in prices already under way in many parts of China "will turn many of those who invested the bulk of their savings in real estate against Xi", Soros claimed.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/01/china-more-brazen-and-damaging-than-ever-says-fbi-director>

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- [Pandemic Young people who lost jobs 'return to less secure work'](#)

Boris Johnson

Boris Johnson to try to regain control with Brexit bill and policy blitz

PM hopes to move on from parties scandal with plans to make it easier to scrap EU laws and tackle cost of living crisis



Boris Johnson hopes a bill easing removal of EU laws from the statute book will also deal with criticism that Brexit's benefits have been sparse.
Photograph: Neil Hall/EPA

Jessica Elgot Chief political correspondent
[@jessicaelgot](https://twitter.com/jessicaelgot)

Sun 30 Jan 2022 19.01 EST

Boris Johnson will attempt to seize back control of the government agenda this week with a policy blitz, a Brexit bill and flying visit to Ukraine, as Westminster remains in the grip of paralysis over the Sue Gray and police inquiries into No 10 parties.

Amid frustration in No 10 at the uncertainty surrounding the report on rule-breaking parties in Downing Street, sources said Johnson was determined to deflect public outrage with a schedule of high-profile announcements and photo opportunities that he also hopes will show MPs he remains focused.

On Monday, Johnson is announcing plans for legislation to make it easier to rip up EU regulations and protections, after criticism from Conservative MPs that the government has not taken sufficient advantage of Brexit. He is also expected to visit [Ukraine](#) with the foreign secretary, Liz Truss, early this week, and the levelling-up white paper is scheduled for publication on Wednesday.

Whitehall sources said they also expected developments this week on [help for families struggling](#) with the cost of energy bills, after the prime minister and the chancellor definitively ruled out cancelling the national insurance rise and cutting VAT on energy bills.

Johnson could receive the long-awaited report on lockdown breaches in No 10 as soon as Monday, after which he is expected to give an immediate statement to MPs.

Scotland Yard's special inquiries team will this week scour evidence of lockdown-breaking by Johnson's aides sent to them by the Gray inquiry. Detectives received the information from the Cabinet Office on Friday and police chiefs have been stung by fierce and widespread criticism after pressing for Gray's report to give only "[minimal reference](#)" to the [gatherings under investigation](#).

Those are believed to be the most clear-cut breaches of the lockdown rules, and probably the most politically dangerous for Johnson. The police request caused widespread fury in Westminster and the report's contents are expected to be significantly weakened.

The Met was unable to say on Sunday when it will start to write to those identified by Gray as having potentially breached lockdown rules. They will be asked if they have a reasonable excuse and then police will decide whether they should face a fine. Cabinet Office sources said on Sunday night that they were still in discussion with the Met.

Opposition parties have been discussing what can be done to force the publication of a full version of the report, which is now only likely after a [police inquiry](#) has been completed.

Johnson, who spent the weekend at his Chequers residence, is said to have been struck by MPs' criticism that the government has been unable to communicate the benefits of [Brexit](#).

On Sunday night he unveiled plans for a new law – called the “Brexit freedoms” bill – intended to make it easier to amend or remove some of the bridging law kept on the statute book after Brexit. No 10 said that, as it stands, much of that regulation would require primary legislation to remove it, and the new bill could sidestep that process.

Critics said Johnson must make clear whether he intends to target employment protections, and pointed out that businesses and government have already faced billions of pounds of costs as a result of additional red tape due to Brexit itself.

Sarah Olney, the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for business, said: “This odd announcement raises questions about what kind of environmental rules, data protections and workers rights this government may look to water down. This bizarre press release leaves ministers with serious questions to answer.”

A Labour source said: “The key question for the government is which of the proposed changes in regulation depend on the passage of this bill, and if the answer is none, what other changes are they planning that do? Until they can explain all that, we have to ask what the point of this bill is.”

Downing Street said it would release a public catalogue of all retained EU laws to determine if they are beneficial to the UK.

In a statement announcing the new bill, two years after Britain's exit from the bloc, Johnson said: “Getting Brexit done two years ago today was a truly historic moment and the start of an exciting new chapter for our country. The plans we have set out today will further unleash the benefits of Brexit and

ensure that businesses can spend more of their money investing, innovating and creating jobs.

“Our new Brexit freedoms bill will end the special status of EU law in our legal framework and ensure that we can more easily amend or remove outdated EU law in future.”

The government will also publish a riposte to critics who claim little advantage of Brexit has been taken, with a document titled The Benefits of Brexit: How the UK is Taking Advantage of Leaving the EU.

It will claim that reforms have led to a more agile digital and AI sector and a less burdensome data rights regime compared with the EU’s GDPR. It will also claim that there have been benefits in changing clinical trials, strengthening environmental protections and establishing a domestic subsidy regime.

With hopes rising in No 10 that Johnson can swerve a no confidence vote, the prime minister is also understood to have told staff he hopes to save his chief of staff, [Dan Rosenfield](#), or move him to another role.

Gray’s report will criticise the culture in No 10 and make a series of recommendations on changes to the organisation, according to those who have given evidence, but Rosenfield has not been implicated publicly in any egregious breaches.

No 10 is braced for further damaging revelations in the press once [Gray’s slimmed-down report](#) is published. One of Johnson’s fiercest critics, Dominic Cummings, told NYMag on Sunday that it was [his “duty to get rid” of Johnson](#) as prime minister, describing it as “sort of like fixing the drains”.

Cummings, who was Johnson’s chief adviser, called his former boss a “complete fuckwit” whose only preoccupations were “Big Ben’s bongs” and “looking at maps” to “order the building of things” in his honour.

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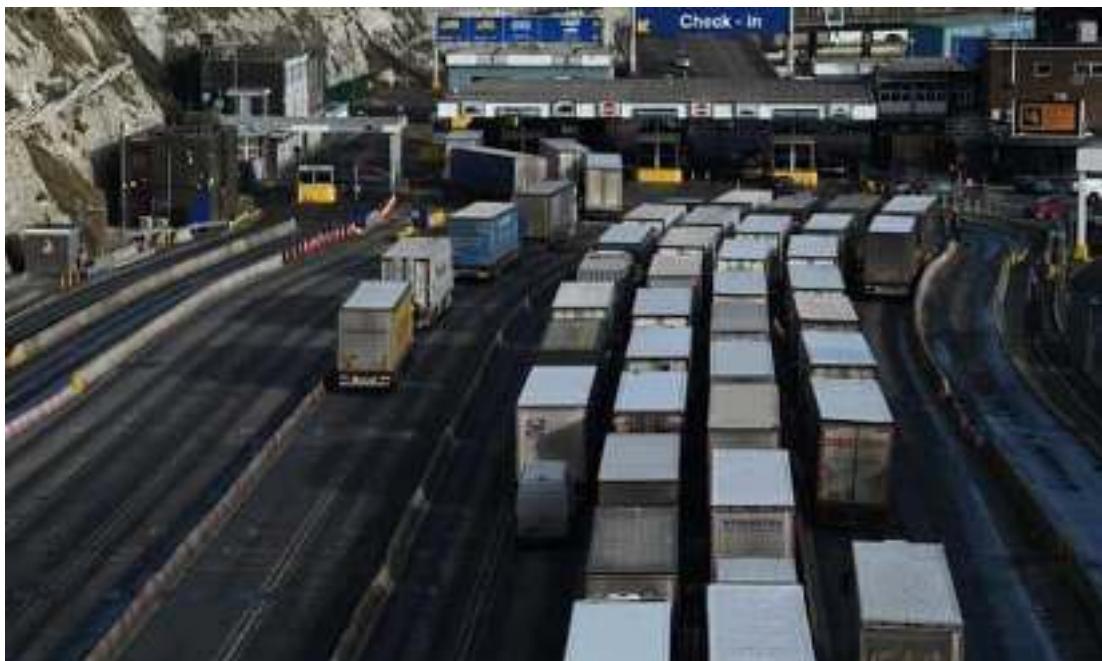
Boris Johnson apologises in wake of Sue Gray report as Met police given 300 photos linked to No 10 parties – as it happened

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Boris Johnson

Government plans to ‘cut £1bn in red tape’ with new post-Brexit legislation

No 10 announces bill to change status of EU law in legal framework but critics say leaving bloc has already led to billions in expenses



Lorries queue at the port of Dover before boarding a ferry to mainland Europe. Photograph: Glyn Kirk/AFP/Getty Images

[Jessica Elgot](#) Chief political correspondent

[@jessicaelgot](#)

Sun 30 Jan 2022 19.01 EST

Boris Johnson has announced plans for legislation to make it easier to rip up EU regulations and protections, amid criticism from Conservative MPs that the government has not taken sufficient advantage of Brexit.

The plans claim to cut £1bn in red tape expenses for businesses, but Johnson gave no firm details on which regulations are intended to be repealed or enhanced, instead stating five principles that would be applied, including the value of sovereignty and creating new markets.

Critics said Johnson must make clear whether he intends to target employment protections, and pointed out that businesses and government have already faced billions of pounds of costs as a result of additional red tape due to [Brexit](#) itself.

Sarah Olney, the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for business, said: “If this is the best Boris Johnson can muster up to save his job, then he is in big trouble. Try telling the thousands of lorry drivers stuck in queues at Dover that red tape is being cut.”

A Labour source said: “The key question for the government is which of the proposed changes in regulation depend on the passage of this bill, and if the answer is none, what other changes are they planning that do? Until they can explain all that, we have to ask what the point of this bill is.”

Johnson, who is battling to prevent a no confidence vote in the wake of multiple revelations of lockdown parties in Downing Street, has been criticised in private meetings with MPs that the government has not demonstrated how it is taking advantage of perceived post-Brexit freedoms.

The new law – called the “Brexit freedoms” bill – is intended to make it easier to amend or remove some of the bridging law kept on the statute book after Brexit. No 10 said that, as it stands, much of that regulation would require primary legislation to remove it, and the new bill could shortcut that process.

Downing Street said it would release a public catalogue of all retained EU laws to determine if they are beneficial to the UK.

In a statement announcing the new bill, two years after Britain’s exit from the bloc, Johnson said: “Getting Brexit done two years ago today was a truly historic moment and the start of an exciting new chapter for our country. The plans we have set out today will further unleash the benefits of Brexit and

ensure that businesses can spend more of their money investing, innovating and creating jobs.”

“Our new Brexit freedoms bill will end the special status of EU law in our legal framework and ensure that we can more easily amend or remove outdated EU law in future.”

The attorney general, Suella Braverman, said it was right that there was new scrutiny of the laws. “We can move away from outdated EU laws that were the result of unsatisfactory compromises within the EU, some of which the UK voted and lobbied against – but was required to adopt without question,” she said.

“These rules often had limited meaningful parliamentary scrutiny and no democratic legitimacy in the UK at all. It is vital that we take the steps necessary, in this parliament, to remove unnecessary rules altogether, and where regulation is needed, ensure that it meets the UK’s objectives.”

The government will also publish a new riposte to critics who claim little advantage of Brexit has been taken, with a new document titled The Benefits of Brexit: How the UK Is Taking Advantage of Leaving the EU.

It will claim that reforms have led to a more agile digital and AI sector and a less burdensome data rights regime compared with the EU’s GDPR. It will also claim that there have been benefits in changing clinical trials, strengthening environmental protections and establishing a domestic subsidy regime.

Emily Thornberry, the shadow attorney general, said the government was not taking advantage of one key aspect of leaving the EU – that it can cut VAT on energy bills, as Labour has been demanding.

“The British public overwhelmingly support Labour’s proposed change, and it is time the government started listening,” she said.

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Gig economy

Young people who lost jobs in pandemic in UK ‘returning to insecure work’

Resolution Foundation thinktank report says third of ‘returners’ on temporary or zero-hours contracts



The report says joblessness during the pandemic has blighted future employment and pay prospects for many young people. Photograph: Amer Ghazzal/Rex/Shutterstock

[Gwyn Topham](#)

[@GwynTopham](#)

Sun 30 Jan 2022 19.01 EST

Young people who lost their jobs during the pandemic in the UK have returned to less secure work, often in gig economy roles, according to research from a leading thinktank, which also found almost 50,000 more men under the age of 24 are now economically inactive.

A report by the Resolution Foundation published on Monday found young people had [returned to work](#) rapidly in late 2021, with unemployment now slightly lower than pre-pandemic levels, but a third of the 18- to 34-year-olds back in the workplace were now in atypical, insecure work.

The young “returners” – those who were employed pre-Covid but became [unemployed in the pandemic](#) – were now much more likely than those who stayed in work to be on a temporary or zero-hours contract, or doing agency work or unsteady hours. Thirty-three per cent of the returners, among 6,100 people surveyed by YouGov for the study, were now in such roles, compared with 12% of those who had stayed in work throughout the pandemic.

While the thinktank said the furlough scheme had been a success in limiting youth unemployment, joblessness during the pandemic nonetheless had blighted future employment and pay prospects, as well as the mental health, of many.

Although the youth unemployment rate decreased from 10.5% to 9.8% from spring 2020 to autumn 2021, the number of 18- to 24-year-olds who are economically inactive and not in full-time education, known as Neets, rose by 75,000 last year – with young men accounting for more than 60% of the increase, the report said.

Researchers found about two-thirds of those who lost work reported mental health problems. The thinktank said policymakers should not be led into complacency by the headline unemployment figures, and needed to focus on tackling insecure work.

Louise Murphy, an economist at the Resolution Foundation and author of the report, said: “One in three young people who experienced worklessness during the last lockdown have returned to atypical contracts, which often means insecure work. The fact that they are more likely to be looking for new or additional work suggests higher dissatisfaction with their current jobs.

“And while unemployment has fallen, the number of young people dropping out of education and the labour market altogether has risen – especially young men.

“A return to the workplace, on its own, is not enough. Ensuring that young people have the confidence and knowledge to find and apply for work, and access to good quality jobs and sufficient hours, must be a priority for employers and policymakers in the months and years to come.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/jan/31/young-people-lost-jobs-pandemic-uk-returning-insecure-work-resolution-foundation>

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[Cost of living crisis](#)

As UK households feel pressure, how are other European countries tackling energy crisis?



A fourfold increase in energy market prices across Europe means households will pay an average of 54% more for energy this year than in 2020, according to Bank of America. Illustration: Guardian Design

Many European countries are a step ahead of the British government, which has yet to announce plans to help homes facing annual bills of almost £2,000

- [Rachel Reeves: Tories have no answer to cost of living crisis](#)
- [From milk to crisps: why the price of basic food items is rising](#)

Jillian Ambrose Energy correspondent

Mon 31 Jan 2022 01.00 EST

In the next week Great Britain's energy regulator will announce the steepest rise ever in its energy price cap, effectively saddling millions of households with an annual energy bill of close to £2,000.

The blow to household finances follows almost six months of record high energy market prices because of the global gas crisis. Despite the deepening gloom facing bill payers, ministers are yet to agree a package of measures to prevent a national energy crisis.

After a fourfold surge in energy market prices across [Europe](#), households will pay an average of 54% more for energy this year than in 2020, according to Bank of America. The bank warned that the biggest increases would be felt by Italy and the UK.

While European governments have moved to protect households from the full brunt of the global energy crisis, the UK government has remained silent. The UK's failure to act comes despite desperate calls from groups representing vulnerable households, small businesses and economists, which fear that record high energy bills threaten to unlock economy-wide inflation and a cost of living crisis.

Great Britain

In Great Britain the next energy price increase is scheduled to be announced on 7 February, and households will be hoping that new support measures can be agreed before it takes effect from 1 April.

Potential measures include cutting the 5% rate of VAT on energy bills, or moving the policy costs levied on energy bills to general taxation. More radical ideas include setting up a “stabilisation mechanism” to give top-up payments to energy suppliers depending on the market price. The Labour party has thrown its weight behind a plan to subsidise bills by introducing a windfall tax on the profits made by North Sea oil and gas producers during the crisis.

The Treasury is expected to remain tight-lipped on whether households can expect a reprieve until its spring statement in late March. But elsewhere in Europe, multibillion-euro deals are already offering households the reassurance that bill payers in Great Britain are hoping for.



Will bill payers in Great Britain be given a reprieve? Photograph: Christian Bridgwater/Alamy

The Netherlands

The [Netherlands](#), like the UK, is highly reliant on gas for electricity generation and home heating. Unlike the UK, its government took action within weeks of energy markets reaching record highs to provide a multibillion-euro package of measures to protect households and small businesses.

The Dutch cabinet agreed in October to cut energy taxes in order to save households an average of €400 (£332.79) a year. In addition, some €150m is being set aside to boost home insulation. A further €500m will be used to compensate small firms in the form of lower energy taxes.

The measures, which will cost a total of €3.2bn, took effect from 1 January and will run for a year.



Wind turbines near Port-Saint-Louis-du-Rhône, near Marseille, France.
Photograph: Jean-Paul Pélissier/Reuters

France

The French government also wasted no time in agreeing a package of measures to soften the blow of rising energy bills, after an increase in fuel duty in 2018 triggered widespread outcry over the cost of living and led to protests by the *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests).

The French government has already cut some electricity taxes to help slow the rise in home energy bills at an estimated cost to the state of €8bn. It will also use its powers to squeeze the state-owned electricity company EDF to lower the cost of electricity by charging well below the market rate for the electricity it generates.

EDF warned its investors that it would take an estimated €8.4bn (£7bn) financial hit from the plan.

Germany

In [Germany](#), the government plans to lower energy bills by reducing the cost of supporting renewable energy projects.

From this year, the German government will cut a green surcharge that appears on home energy bills from 6.5 cents per kilowatt-hour to 3.7 cents. The government plans to cover the outstanding levies by using €3.3bn collected by the treasury via carbon taxes.

The state has also offered a €130m package of one-time grants to low-income households, which will be paid over the summer when households receive their bills from energy suppliers.

Spain

Spain's government was one of the first to take action to protect households against a sharp rise in energy bills.

The windfall tax is expected to raise about €2bn to soften the blow on households

It agreed last September to remove taxes from home energy bills until May, which would instead be paid by enforcing a windfall tax on utilities that were poised to profit from soaring energy market prices.

The windfall tax is expected to raise about €2bn to soften the blow on households, and prevent Spain's gas producers and electricity generators from raking in "unacceptable" profits during the crisis. The policy was seized upon by the UK Labour party as a model that could be applied to North Sea oil and gas producers.

Italy

Italian households pay some of the highest energy bills in Europe and can expect one of the steepest increases in energy bills because of the global gas crisis. In response, the Italian government has set out a plan to protect households against the rise in gas prices.

This includes cutting tax on gas for all consumers and reducing charges that finance subsidies for renewable energy, in addition to extra grants for low-income families. Overall, state support for struggling households is expected to reach €8.5bn through March this year.

Sweden

In [Sweden](#), the government has set aside 6 billion kronor (£473m) to soften the impact of soaring electricity markets on home energy bills. Earlier this month, it announced plans for winter-bill subsidies of up to 6,000 kronor from December to February to about 1.8 million households whose power consumption tops 2,000 kilowatt-hours a month.

Norway

Norway's government set out a series of measures to help bill payers totalling more than 8 billion kroner (£664m) in December, mainly consisting of direct subsidies for households.

Earlier this month, the Norwegian government promised to tackle the “socially unjust” effect of soaring energy bills by covering 80% of electricity costs when the market price for electricity is above 70 Norwegian øre (6p) per kilowatt-hour from January to March.



A gas processing plant in Norway. Photograph: Scanpix/Reuters

Denmark

The Danish government remains in talks to decide how much support it can offer towards household bills.

Approximately 800,000 households could receive a tax-free cheque from the government

So far it has set aside 100 million kroner (£11.1m) to top up an existing scheme that aims to help vulnerable households. But the government is preparing to take action to help households most exposed to the global gas crisis: those who rely on gas heating or gas-fuelled district heating networks.

Approximately 800,000 households could receive a tax-free cheque from the government to help pay their energy bills. The exact amount has not yet been agreed by Denmark's parliament.

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‘A vortex of thinking’ – inside the LSE’s brawny, brainy new building



‘Like a gleaming palazzo’ ... the Portland stone facade. Photograph: Nick Kane

A game of squash, a quick Rachmaninov concert, a brew with a view and then back to studying ... the £145m Marshall Building has got the lot, says

our writer, even its own Old Curiosity Shop



[Oliver Wainwright](#)

[@ollywainwright](#)

Mon 31 Jan 2022 01.00 EST

One minute, it's a shish kebab. The next, it's a washing machine. A second later, it's a casserole. Speaking to Yvonne Farrell and Shelley McNamara about their new building, the metaphors come tumbling out in a passionate torrent. The two Irish architects, whose practice Grafton won worldwide recognition in 2020 when it won the prestigious Pritzker prize, can't contain their excitement about their £145m facility for the London School of Economics, partly because they haven't had a chance to visit it yet. "The pandemic has really made us understand the meaning of longing," says Farrell. "Site visits on FaceTime just aren't the same."

The longing is over for students and academics, though, who return to face-to-face teaching this term, in a place that truly brings home the benefits of meeting in the real world. The new Marshall Building, which looks out over Lincoln's Inn Fields like a gleaming white palazzo, houses some of the finest spaces that any London university has to offer.

The project is the latest addition to the LSE's impressive stable of recent commissions, shoehorned into a five-acre tangle of alleyways behind Aldwych in central London. There is the twisted redbrick ziggurat of [the student centre](#), designed by fellow Dublin duo O'Donnell + Tuomey in 2014, which boasts a helter-skelter of alluring nooks and crannies. Then came the glacial slab of the [Centre Building](#) in 2018, by Richard Rogers' firm RSHP, a hi-tech silo of open-plan floors linked by meandering stairs. And, for a final prime site nearby, there is yet another [international competition under way](#), this time for £120m. But the Marshall Building is first time the LSE has had the chance to present a public face to Lincoln's Inn Fields, the largest public square in London and one of its oldest, having been laid out in the 1630s.



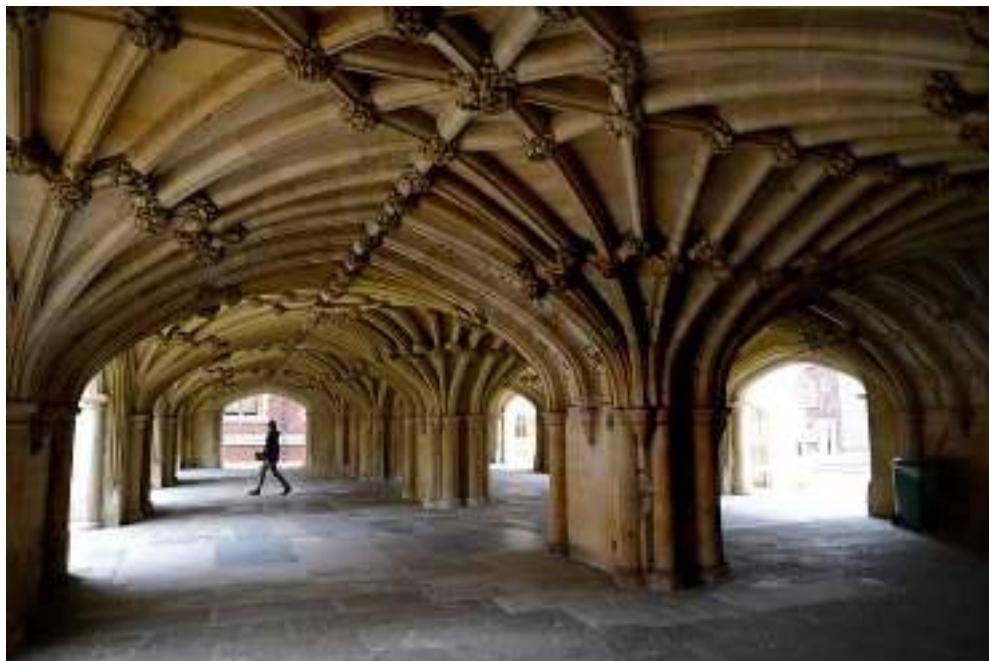
Branching out ... students at work by the concrete trees. Photograph: Nick Kane

And what an entrance it is. Channelled through a cleft in the Portland stone facade, you arrive inside an expansive hall, where gigantic concrete trees, the kind that might support a flyover, branch out in big brawny wedges. One punches through a hole in the ceiling, continuing its structural journey to the floors above, while a broad spiral staircase licks down in an elegant curl, enticing you up.

If you start to feel woozy from all this heroic concrete gymnastics, it might also be because the floor itself is sloping. This is a practical solution to the one-metre level difference across the site, avoiding the need for steps, but it also adds to the sense of being irresistibly drawn into the great hall, conceived as a covered public piazza. Anyone can wander in off the street and sip a coffee beneath the leaping beams. The terrazzo-paved square will be used for graduation ceremonies and can be transformed into an atmospheric banqueting hall.

There is a good reason for the infrastructural muscle – and it's not just the architects' love of Brazilian brutalism. Below the ground floor lies a vast sports hall, along with a gym, squash courts, dance studio and music rooms, repurposing a pre-existing triple-height basement, left over from the former 1960s Imperial Cancer Research Fund labs that occupied the site.

The sports hall required a column-free expanse, which would usually necessitate hefty beams or a massive truss to transfer the weight of the nine storeys above on to the existing basement retaining walls. Working with engineers, [AKT II](#), the team came up with a clever solution, conceiving the transfer structure as a space that could be inhabited. And so the concrete tree-studded great hall was born, with the great wedge-shaped beams tapering towards the centre where they support the column grid above.



Inspiration ... the 17th-century undercroft at Lincoln's Inn Chapel.
Photograph: PjrTravel/Alamy

Inspiration also came from an unlikely source nearby: [the 17th-century Lincoln's Inn Chapel](#). The building is raised up on great stone vaults that fan out, creating an open ground floor below massive masonry ribs. “We loved the idea of going upstairs to this other world,” says McNamara, “from a public space below.”

Researchers are like monks. They like to retreat into a cell, then have a contrast in public spaces

In their building, the spiral stair sweeps up to the two teaching floors, where Harvard-style horseshoe lecture theatres and classrooms are arranged around the edges in curved timber-clad pods, each enjoying daylight and a view out. The space in between is given over to informal seating – shaped, Farrell says, by “tidal lines of students and professors bumping into one another”. It is the kind of place you might want to actually sit and work, rather than just another anonymous corridor filing you from one seminar to the next. Little terraces, cut into the facade, allow a gulp of fresh air and a view of the square between classes.

The departments of accounting, finance and management are stacked above, connected by a light-well (the “shish kebab”) supported by another branching tree. Researchers’ offices are arranged along corridors that radiate from the centre like a sundial, with meeting rooms located at the “social fulcrum” of the stairs, in the hope of sparking encounters. “Architects always think that open studios are the best way to work,” says McNamara. “But researchers are like monks. They like to retreat into a cell where they are completely private, then come out and have the contrast in the more public spaces.”

Farrell rhapsodises a day in the life of this “vortex of thinking”, where an academic might pop downstairs from their office for a game of squash, or come down for a coffee, only to be lured into a music recital, the sounds of Rachmaninov inspiring a breakthrough in their [systemic risk modelling](#). “It’s about convening in a casserole of delight,” she says. “Not silent corridors

with ‘Shh!’ signs everywhere.” The noise of this lively casserole shouldn’t travel too far upstairs, thanks to carpeted floors and absorbent materials hidden in walls.



Global players ... Yvonne Farrell and Shelley McNamara. Photograph: Grafton

The sheer volume of concrete on show will raise environmental eyebrows, but Grafton insists it can be sustainable. “People say we are just brutalists from Dublin throwing concrete all over the place,” says McNamara, citing the reaction in some quarters when [their building for Kingston University won the Stirling prize last year](#). “It’s cement that’s the dirty word, not concrete, and we’ve worked hard to replace as much of the cement content as possible.”

Gerry O’Brien of AKT II says their embodied carbon assessment of the whole building came out at 650kg of CO₂ equivalent per square metre. This works out at almost 12,000 tonnes, which sounds enormous but comes in under RIBA’s new 2030 targets (despite the building having been designed in 2016, when targets were much looser).

While the inside revels in its sheer concrete muscle, with interiors worthy of the Brazilian architect [Paulo Mendes da Rocha](#), the exterior is more

deferential to the tastes of Westminster planners. To fit in with its decorous neighbours, the Lincoln's Inn Fields elevation takes a classical tripartite form, with a solid stone plinth at the lower storeys and two successive layers of white concrete fins, neatly angled in different directions.

“We were concerned that north-facing facades can be very hostile, cold and dreary,” says McNamara. “We wanted to capture as much light as possible from the sides, to animate this facade and draw reflected daylight inside.” It’s a worthy intention, but the result feels a bit stiff, as if the chiselled forms behind have been masked with a prissy veil.

Things get more interesting around the back, where the blocky mass of the building is cut and prised open in different directions, responding to the jumbled streetscape, with terraces and ledges. For Julian Robinson, the LSE’s director of estates, a major victory was convincing the council to pedestrianise one of these streets, on to which a long stone bench now fronts, and where large windows can be fully opened in summer. A curious little building remains clinging to the corner, like a pebble at the foot of a glacier. This is [The Old Curiosity Shop](#), a Victorian fake named to lure Dickens tourists. The LSE bought it during construction and might open it as a Dickensian tea shop.



Hidden depths ... the basement sports hall. Photograph: Ed Reeve

The thing that helped to summon this great concrete iceberg into being can be found at its very summit. Occupying the penthouse belvedere, with its own panoramic terrace, is [the Marshall Institute](#), a research centre for philanthropy and social entrepreneurship named after Sir Paul Marshall, boss of the £40bn hedge fund Marshall Wace. A prominent donor to the Brexit campaign, and backer of GB News, Marshall contributed £10m to found the institute in 2015, along with £20m towards the building, [providing a further £50m last year](#).

“It’s really our showcase floor,” says Robinson. “High net worth individuals will be brought up here to look out across the city where they’ve made their money – and hopefully be persuaded to part with some of it.”

The spell cast by Grafton’s architecture, as light bounces between the crisp concrete blades, casting a golden glow across this rooftop eyrie, might well make them cough up.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/jan/31/vortex-of-thinking-lses-brawny-brainy-new-building-curiosity-shop>

[Apple](#)

Beats Fit Pro review: Apple's workout-ready AirPods Pro rivals

Good sound, noise cancelling and spatial audio, with six-hour battery, Android support and cheaper price



The Beats Fit Pro offer Apple's earbud magic for Android, too, with a more compact and rock-solid fit that's as ready for workouts as a commute.
Photograph: Samuel Gibbs/The Guardian

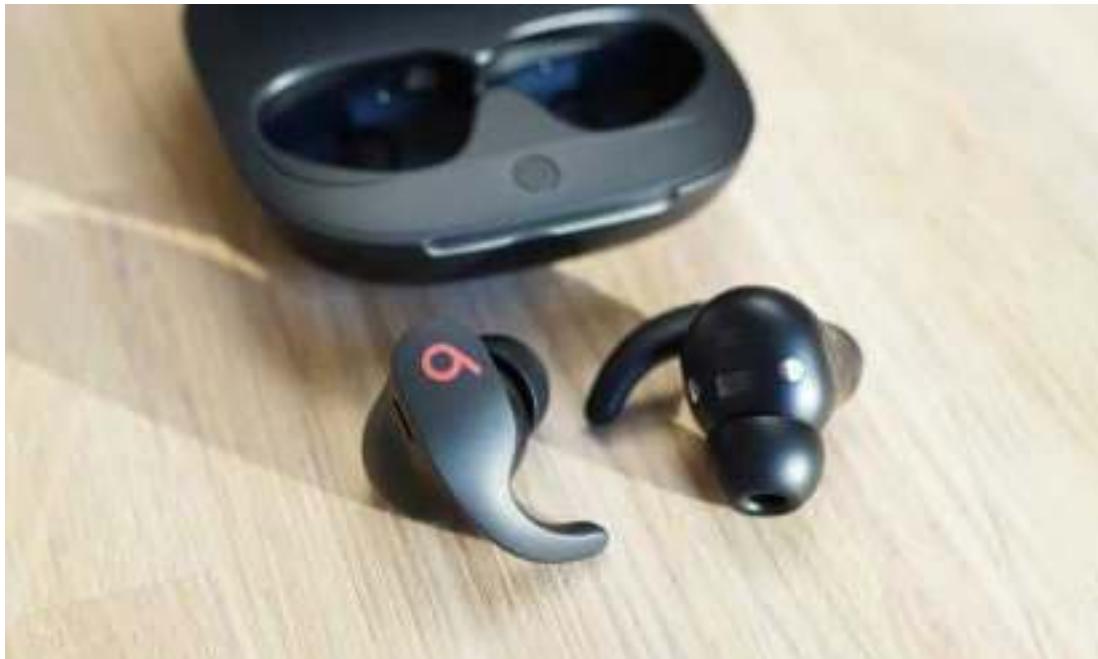
[Samuel Gibbs](#) Consumer technology editor

Mon 31 Jan 2022 02.00 EST

A new, cheaper alternative to the AirPods Pro is here – and it is also from [Apple](#). The Beats Fit Pro have many of the same features but cost £40 less, are more workout-friendly than their cousins and work with Android, too.

Priced at £199 (\$199.99/A\$299.95) they offer the same noise-cancelling as the AirPods Pro and features such as spatial audio virtual surround sound.

The Fit Pro essentially add a flexible silicone stabiliser “wing” to the top of last year’s [Studio Buds](#). Once you twist the wing into the top of your ear they stay put even with the most vigorous of exercise, or you can wear them without the wing tucked in for more sedate listening.



It took bit of trial and error to get the wing into a good position but once twisted far enough round the earbuds were comfortable for listening sessions of two hours or more. Photograph: Samuel Gibbs/The Guardian

The top of the earbud protrudes a little from your ear and has a single multi-purpose “b” button which you press once, twice, thrice or press and hold to skip tracks, change sound modes or adjust the volume. The music pauses when you remove an earbud too.

The earbuds clip magnetically into a flip-top case for charging and storage, which is like a mini version of the giant [Powerbeats Pro case](#). It is a bit bigger than the best on the market but still just about fits in the money pocket of a pair of jeans.

The earbuds last up to six hours of playback with noise-cancelling active between charges, which is two hours short of [the best rivals](#) but at least an

hour longer than the Studio Buds and AirPods Pro.



The case charges via USB-C in 90 minutes and can recharge the earbuds fully three times but does not support wireless charging. Photograph: Samuel Gibbs/The Guardian

Specifications

- **Connectivity:** [Bluetooth](#) 5.0, SBC, AAC, H1 chip
- **Battery life:** six hours ANC playback (24 hours with case)
- **Water resistance:** IPX4 (splash resistant)
- **Earbud dimensions:** 30x 24 x 19mm
- **Earbud weight:** 5.6g each
- **Charging case dimensions:** 62 x 62 x 28.5mm
- **Charging case weight:** 55.1g
- **Case charging:** USB-C

Great sound and noise cancelling



The earbuds have a conventional silicone tip that creates a good seal and offers some isolation, while the active noise-cancelling has no impact on the sound quality. Photograph: Samuel Gibbs/The Guardian

The Fit Pro sound really good, particularly for fitness-focused earbuds. They have a well-balanced and fully rounded sound that suits a variety of genres. They can produce deep notes with a thump when needed but the bass is kept from overriding the good treble and high notes. Vocals are excellent, instrument separation is good and they handle complex tracks well.

They sound similar to [Apple's AirPods Pro](#), and slightly better than [the Studio Buds](#), but can't quite match the very [best-sounding earbuds from Sony](#).

It is a similar story for the noise-cancelling. The Fit Pro match the efficacy of the AirPods Pro, successfully reducing low rumbles, cars and fans, while struggling with higher-pitched noise such as the tapping of fingers on a keyboard. The ambient awareness mode is one of the more natural-sounding of those available, good for listening out for announcements or a quick conversation.

Spatial audio



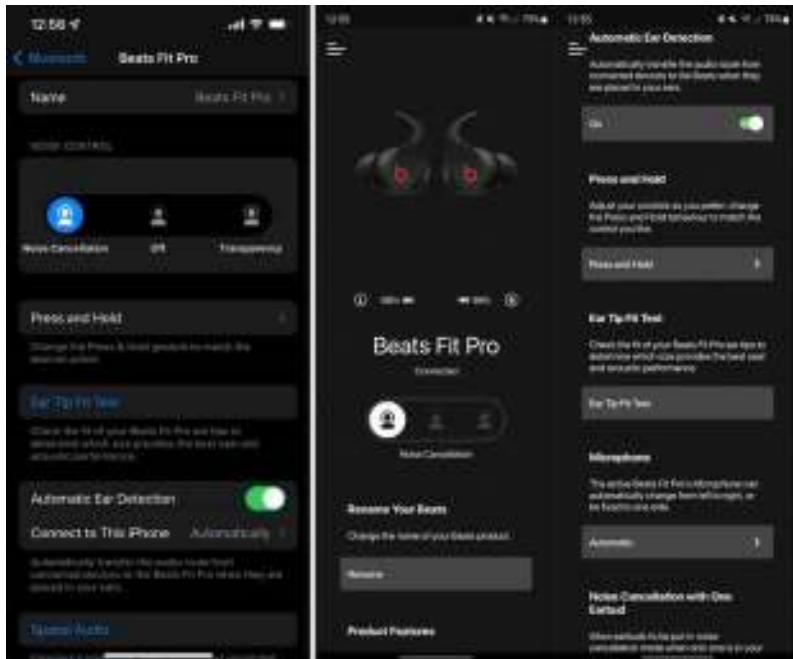
The sensors on the outside of the earbud detect when they are in your ear while accelerometers track the movement of your head. Photograph: Samuel Gibbs/The Guardian

In addition to standard stereo sound, the Fit Pro have Apple's [spatial audio virtual surround sound](#) technology, thanks to their H1 chip. It makes the audio sound as if it is coming from a collection of speakers around you rather than directed straight down your ear canal, giving it a greater atmosphere.

When used with Apple devices, the earbuds track the movement of your head and adjust the sound so that it is always centred on the screen in front of you. It works particularly well for movies and TV shows with a Dolby sound track but also works with music, too. It's all very clever.

Unlike Apple's AirPods, the Fit Pro support some elements of spatial audio on Android, but not the head tracking and other advanced features.

Apple and Android



The Beats app for Android (right) has most of the same features as that available on an iPhone (left). Photograph: Samuel Gibbs/The Guardian

The same story exists for other features on Apple versus Android. The Fit Pro support the same instant pairing, seamless switching between devices, instant “Hey Siri” access to the voice assistant, battery status notifications and audio sharing with Apple gear [as the AirPods](#).

They are standard Bluetooth 5.0 earbuds and will connect just fine to most devices, including Windows PCs. But unlike Apple’s other earbuds, the Beats support some of the more advanced features on Android including instant pairing, battery status, customisable controls, firmware updates and the ear tip fit test using [the Beats app](#).

Observations



The push-button controls are customisable in the settings or Beats app, while the handy battery status notifications are available on both platforms.
Photograph: Samuel Gibbs/The Guardian

- If you use a mix of Apple and Android gear, the Beats app on Android will not be able to “find” the earbuds unless you turn off Bluetooth on nearby iPhones or iPads.
- Call quality was really good for such compact earbuds: my voice sounded clear and natural with only a little background noise leaking through in loud environments.

Sustainability

Apple expects the batteries to last more than 500 full charge cycles while maintaining at least 80% of their original capacity but they are not replaceable.

While some minor bits of the earbuds are repairable, they scored a [zero out of 10 on iFixit's repairability scale](#). Apple [offers a “battery service” for £76.44 or replacements costing £96.44](#) each. The earbuds and case are made from recycled plastic and rare earth elements but Apple does not publish

environmental impact reports for accessories such as headphones. The company offers trade-in and free recycling schemes, including for non-Apple products.

Price

The Beats Fit Pro cost [£199 \(\\$199.99/A\\$299.95\)](#).

For comparison, the [AirPods Pro](#) cost [£239](#), the [AirPods 3](#) cost [£169](#), the [Beats Studio Buds](#) cost [£130](#), the Jabra Elite 7 Pro cost [£199](#) and the Samsung Galaxy Buds 2 cost [£99](#).

Verdict

The Beats Fit Pro offer a slice of the earbud magic found in Apple's AirPods Pro in a sportier, cheaper form.

They sound good, have effective noise-cancelling and solid battery life. The spatial audio virtual surround sound system is really great with Apple gear and some of the smart features are available on Android, too.

They are small and don't have stalks. The wing design keeps them locked in place but can take some fiddling to get comfortable. The charging case is a bit larger than I would like but still pocketable.

They are bettered on sound, noise-cancelling and battery life by the very best. And, unfortunately, the battery cannot be replaced, ultimately making them disposable and [losing a star](#).

But if you want a set of all-purpose earbuds for iPhone or Android that can silence the commute, do justice to movies on your phone and stay put when it's time to pound the pavement, there aren't many better than the Beats Fit Pro.

Pros: great sound and noise-cancelling, decent battery and case, great connectivity, good controls, advanced features with Apple devices including spatial audio, some special features with Android, rock-solid fit for exercise or commute, decent call quality

Cons: can be a fiddle to get comfortable, charging case larger than rivals, no wireless charging, only IPX4 sweat resistance, cannot be repaired, expensive.



A five-minute quick charge in the case is enough for up to an hour of playback. Photograph: Samuel Gibbs/The Guardian

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Interview

‘I had the perfect life – then both my husbands died’: singer Labi Siffre on love, loss – and happiness

[Tim Jonze](#)



‘I was remarkably naive about the music business. But you don’t blame a rattlesnake for biting you’ ... Siffre. Photograph: Eric Hands

The man behind Something Inside So Strong and It Must Be Love talks about his half-century in music, coming out in the 70s – and his menage a trois on a Welsh mountain



[@timjonze](#)

Mon 31 Jan 2022 01.00 EST

Before meeting Labi Siffre, I am intrigued by the varied reactions I get when mentioning his name. Many people I speak to have never heard of him. Some remember his 80s anthem Something Inside So Strong. Others are dimly aware of a solo career before that.

And then there are those whose eyes light up – those who, like me, regard him as one of the key figures in British pop history, and wonder why he’s not celebrated as such. “Labi Siffre’s fingerprints have been on popular music for many decades now,” [wrote the electronic musician Matthew Herbert in 2012](#). “But his actual voice is rarely heard.”

Why is that? During the first half of the 1970s, Siffre released six solo albums, operating effortlessly across folk, soul, reggae and funk, while

poetically addressing the political (his songs have tackled war veterans, homelessness and religion) and the personal (if there is a more perfect articulation of domestic bliss than his 75-second song Till Forever, I have yet to hear it). It's not like his career went under the radar – Siffre scored three Top 40 hits, with Crying Laughing Loving Lying reaching No 11. And it's not like he's had no cultural impact since: Madness did the definitive cover of his song It Must Be Love, while artists including Kanye West, Jay-Z and Primal Scream have sampled his music. The inordinately catchy riff used on Eminem's My Name Is was his. Rod Stewart and Kelis are among those who have recorded his music. Yet his name still registers lightly. Some of his songs don't even have their lyrics available to view online.

In the decade since I discovered Siffre's 70s catalogue, I've read stories about how being an openly gay, black folk singer held him back, and how he was dropped for refusing to stay in the closet. Being wary of the press, Siffre tends to avoid interviews. So I was thrilled to be granted an audience at his home and studio in north-east Spain, via Zoom, so I could get the full story.



Siffre performing in the early 70s. Photograph: David Redfern/Getty Images

Bespectacled and looking remarkably youthful for a 76-year-old – Siffre could easily be mistaken for an academic rather than a musician – his words

are chosen carefully, and his answers extend occasionally into emphatic monologues. But he has a poet's way with language.

"I was remarkably naive," says Siffre when I ask what the music industry was like in the late 60s. "I went in believing that the music business would be run by – who else? – musicians. But you don't blame a rattlesnake for biting you. A rattlesnake is a rattlesnake, and you're stupid to wander around in sandals and no socks in a rattlesnake-infested area."

Born in 1945 to a Nigerian father and mixed-race mother who refused to "pass" as white, Claudius Afolabi Siffre was raised in west London. He says he had already worked out his life plans at an early age. By 11 he knew he had to "find someone and make them love me for the rest of our lives"; by 13 he had resolved, thanks to one of his four brothers' impressive record collection, to become a musician. Both of these things were under way before he was 20. Siffre wrote his first song aged 18 and, a year later in 1964, met Peter John Carver Lloyd; they remained together for 48 years, entering a civil partnership in 2005, until Lloyd's death in 2013.

After playing jazz guitar for several years, Siffre brought his self-titled debut album out in 1970. By his third album – *Crying Laughing Loving Lying* – Siffre's lyrics were no longer written as if for the opposite sex. "It occurred to me that I couldn't do that any more," he says. His songs are not soapboxes. Yet often they express romantic contentment in such a simple and relatable way – shared jumpers, waiting for telephone calls – that just having a black, gay singer perform them must have felt like a political statement.

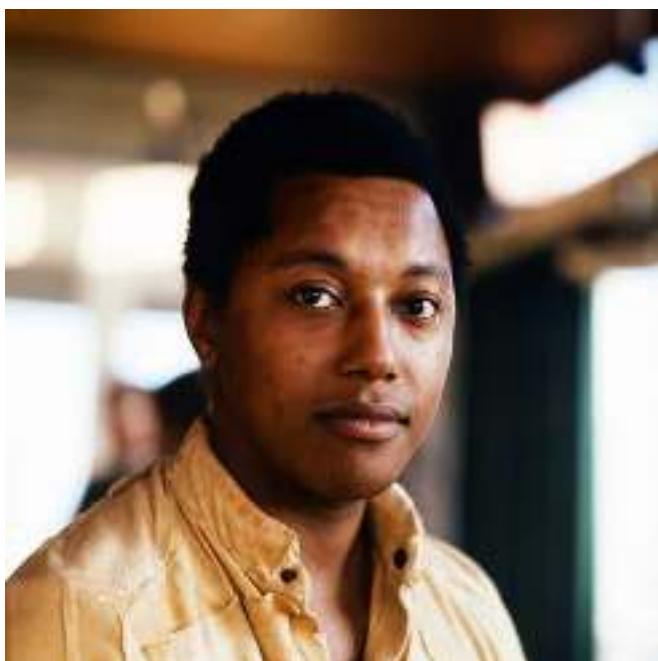
"The most important thing in your life is what happens at home," says Siffre. "Many people don't understand this. It is head and shoulders above everything else. And from the moment Peter and I met, I never took [that love] for granted."

Siffre found the music industry stifling. He trusted his management, but he says their attitude was often: "Can you bring me something that I've already heard, that has already been a hit?" Unsurprisingly, that meant a muted reaction to the album he's most proud of, *For the Children*, which tackled mankind's predilection for self-destruction. "My manager at the time said:

‘Every word on the album is true, but people don’t want to hear that.’ I thought to myself, I should leave these people – they don’t understand what I’m doing. But I knew I could trust them, so I stayed. And they did at least try and understand what I was doing, they did make an effort. Because I’m not easy … I’m not easy, even for myself!’

Songs on that album such as Prayer and Let’s Pretend had a strident atheist message. Was it brave to question religion at that time?

“I don’t think I was being brave at all,” he says. “I’m not a brave person. Pissed off? Yes! I’ve never taken kindly to being bullied.”



Siffre in 1979. Photograph: United Archives/Getty Images

Listening to For the Children again in recent years, Siffre says he cried, not just for himself but also for humanity. “It occurred to me: ‘I wish I hadn’t been right’,” he says. The album was not a commercial success, but Siffre says it’s nonsense that he was dropped because of his sexuality. “Nobody would have dared say that to me.”

It is perhaps surprising that Siffre was so comfortable being out. His father was “born in 1900, an upper-middle-class Nigerian man with patriarchal views. He’d warned me about homosexuals in graphic terms when I was 12 and I remember thinking: ‘You’re eight years too late!'”

But then Siffre introduced Lloyd to his family. “And it was my father who just accepted it without a blink. There’s this rubbish about homosexuality being un-African. Bullshit!”

Siffre’s prolific spell ended with 1975’s Happy. But there was to be a renaissance. Siffre remembers the night in 1984 he left a pub and headed to his music room. He had recently watched a documentary on apartheid in South Africa, where white soldiers fired at black civilians, but the song he was about to write had a more personal meaning too. “I sat down, played a C chord, threw my head back and sang the first two lines of Something Inside So Strong. I realised I was writing about my life as a gay man and I found myself crying.”

That song reached No 4 in the charts when it was finally released in 1987, and was subsequently covered by Kenny Rogers (and, let’s not forget, Barry from EastEnders during the 2014 World Indoor Bowls Championship). It became an anti-apartheid anthem. Siffre performed it in Trafalgar Square for Nelson Mandela’s birthday – after being told that he was not the kind of artist who would “fit in” at the bigger Wembley concert. “My manager was outraged. Incandescent with rage. And I was on the sofa finding it hysterically funny. That didn’t surprise me at all.”

There was also a 90s/00s revival for Siffre. He didn’t know much about sampling when Eminem’s people got in touch to request the riff from I Got The ... (Beck had been planning to use it for his post-Odelay comeback single before Eminem beat him to it). At first he turned them down. “I got pissed off with the ‘faggots’ and ‘hoes’ [in Eminem’s lyrics]. Because it’s just lazy, cowardly writing. It wasn’t the language that bothered me. I pointed out that my first poetry collection was called Nigger. What I cared about was attacking the oppressed rather than the culprits. Now, some will say, in the context of that song, that’s not exactly what was happening. However, that was my first reaction to it.”



At the South Africa Freedom Day concert in Trafalgar Square in 2001.
Photograph: Dave Benett/Getty Images

Siffre signed off on the sample when they sent him a censored “clean” version, not realising that he was also allowing its use on the alternative versions. But having grown up with modern jazz and the Great American Songbook, he is at least content with his songs being reinterpreted. “That’s what musicians are supposed to do,” he says. Besides, he was never in doubt of his music’s longevity.

“I was brought up to have low self-esteem,” he says. “I grew up being told by society that as a homosexual I was a bad, wicked, evil person. However, at the same time, I’m someone who is very much aware of my own genius.”

He bursts out laughing at this. “That’s a joke! It’s a *joke!* But by my first album I knew I was writing good-quality work. And when things have not been as popular as I thought they should have been, I always felt that, eventually, they would be recognised as a good song. Because a good song never dies.”

Given his music’s lifespan, does he not feel that his artistic reputation should be stronger?

We lived in a menage a trois for 16 years and it was the family I'd been looking for all my life

“I would say I’m not very good at selling myself,” he admits. “I grew up believing that real men, whatever real men are, don’t boast. Nowadays, everybody boasts. People will actually come up to you and tell you that they’re compassionate! But I don’t look at it like I was held back or that I should have been a superstar. Although it’s difficult for people to believe, being rich and famous never occurred to me in my plan. I realised by the time of my first album that I was not in the mainstream. So all I actually wanted was for my work to be *useful*. And *For the Children* made me realise that, well, the reason why you’re on the outside is because you’re actually trying to be useful.”

Perhaps one reason Siffre seems content with his standing is that music always came second to the great love of his life, which is love itself: not just Peter but also a “third husband”, Rudolf “Ruud” Cornelis Arnoldus van Baardwijk, who joined the pair in the mid-90s. The three of them shared an idyllic-sounding life – for some time – in a house halfway up a mountain in south Wales.

“I went looking for love,” he says. “But it was only when I met Ruud and we became three that I stopped looking entirely. For nearly 16 years the three of us lived together in a menage a trois. And I realised I’d made the family that I’d been trying to make for the whole of my life.”



‘I’ve always taken love very seriously’ ... Siffre with his partners Rudolf van Baardwijk and Peter Lloyd. Photograph: Courtesy of Labi Siffre

He continues: “I had the perfect life. And then, in the space of two years, six months and 28 days, they both died.”

The exactness of this number is striking. “I’ve always taken love very seriously,” he says softly. “Not just what it is, but how disastrous it would be to be without it.”

Siffre spent a long time as Peter’s carer before he died. A stroke in 1998 had left him paralysed down the left side of his body.

“I was a little annoyed to find that some people expected me to continue with my ‘brilliant’ career,” says Siffre. “I couldn’t understand how they could possibly think that that’s what I would do. Not out of any noble feelings. We *had* to be together. Simple as that. And that’s what it was for 14 years. Nothing noble about it at all.”

To have two partners die in such a short space of time must have been a horrendous amount of grief to deal with, I say.

He pauses. “That’s something I’m still ...” Then he trails off. “That’s something that I’m still ... I don’t know what the word is.”

Processing?

“No, it’s not a matter of processing. Suffering from? I can only say it quite inadequately. Yes, it is very difficult.”

I wonder if today’s world is better positioned to appreciate Labi Siffre, both as a masterly musician and a trailblazer for black and gay people. Last year, when Pride was cancelled due to the pandemic, he quietly released a reworked version of his song (Love Is Love Is Love) Why Isn’t Love Enough? An hour-long BBC documentary about his life is expected to air in early 2022 and there are even rumours of a new album too, although he’s a little coy about that. “I am working on … yes, a project … that’s true,” he smiles.

It would be a splendid thing indeed if, in the future, more eyes would start to light up at the mention of this magnificent songwriter’s name.

- *imagine ... Labi Siffre: This Is My Song will air on BBC One and BBC iPlayer on Monday 14 February, 10.35pm*
-

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2022.01.31 - Coronavirus

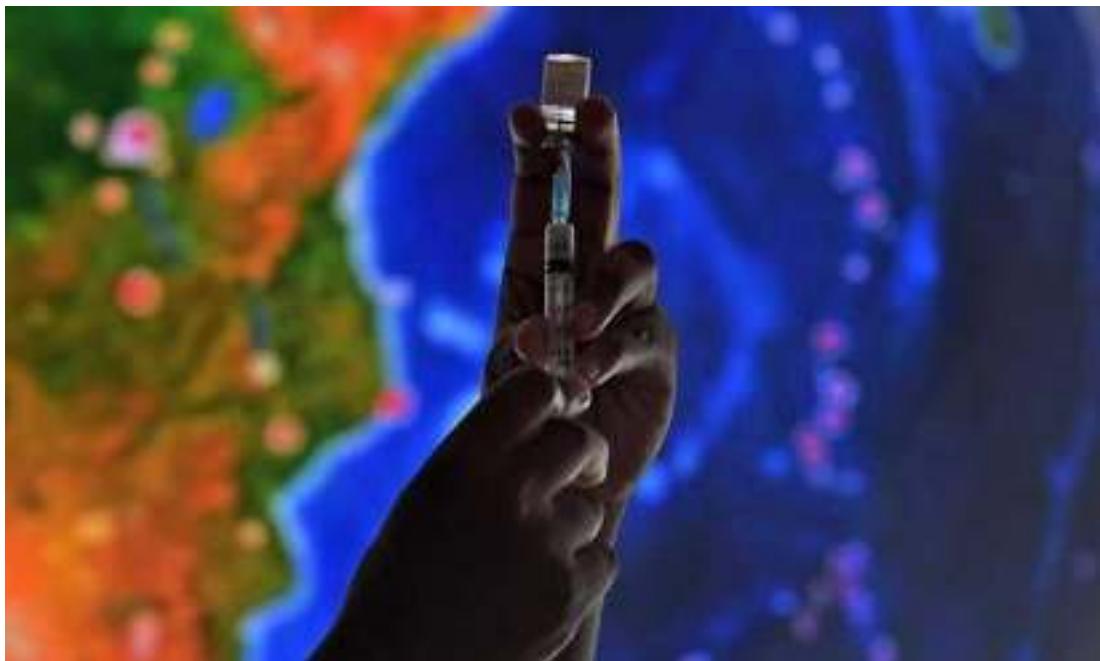
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Coronavirus

Omicron: what do we know about ‘stealth’ subvariant BA.2?

Omicron’s ‘close cousin’ has mutations that could alter how it behaves and has begun to surpass Covid’s most common variety in parts of Europe and Asia

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A health worker with a Covid vaccine syringe in Brazil. Some early reports suggest the Omicron variant BA.2 may be more infectious than the extremely contagious BA.1, but there is no evidence so far that it is more likely to evade vaccine protection. Photograph: Carl de Souza/AFP/Getty Images

Guardian staff and agencies
Mon 31 Jan 2022 01.18 EST

The highly transmissible [Omicron variant](#) of the Sars-CoV-2 virus – the most common form of which is known as BA.1 – now accounts for nearly all of the coronavirus infections globally.

Though Covid cases have already peaked in some countries, scientists are now tracking a rise in cases caused by a close cousin of Omicron known as BA.2, which is starting to outcompete BA.1 in parts of [Europe](#) and Asia. The following is what we know so far about the new subvariant.

‘Stealth’ subvariant

Globally, BA.1 accounted for 98.8% of sequenced cases submitted to the public virus tracking database GISAID as of 25 January. But several countries are reporting recent increases in BA.2, according to the World [Health Organization](#) (WHO).

In addition to BA.1 and BA.2, the WHO lists two other subvariants under the Omicron umbrella: BA.1.1.529 and BA.3. All are closely related genetically, but each features mutations that could alter how they behave.

Trevor Bedford, a computational virologist at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Centre in the US, has been tracking the evolution of Sars-CoV-2. On Friday he wrote on Twitter that BA.2 represents roughly 82% of cases in Denmark, 9% in the UK and 8% in the US. He based his analysis on sequencing data from the GISAID database and case counts from the Our World in Data project at the University of Oxford in the UK.

The BA.1 version of Omicron has been somewhat easier to track than prior variants. That is because BA.1 is missing one of three target genes used in a common PCR test. Cases showing this pattern were assumed by default to be caused by BA.1.

BA.2, sometimes known as a “stealth” subvariant, does not have the same missing target gene. Instead, scientists are monitoring it the same way they have prior variants, including Delta, by tracking the number of virus genomes submitted to public databases such as GISAID.

As with other variants, an infection with BA.2 can be detected by coronavirus home tests kits, though they cannot indicate which variant is responsible, experts say.

More transmissible?

Some early reports indicate that BA.2 may be even more infectious than the already extremely contagious BA.1, but there is no evidence so far that it is more likely to evade vaccine protection.

Danish health officials estimate that BA.2 may be 1.5 times more transmissible than BA.1, based on preliminary data, though it likely does not cause more severe disease.

In England, a preliminary analysis of contact tracing from 27 December through to 11 January by the UK Health Security Agency suggests that household transmission is higher among contacts of people infected with BA.2 (13.4%) compared with other Omicron cases (10.3%). The agency found no evidence of a difference in vaccine effectiveness.

A critical question was whether people who were infected in the BA.1 wave would be protected from BA.2, said Dr Egon Ozer, an infectious disease expert at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine in Chicago. That had been a concern in Denmark, where some places that saw high case counts of BA.1 infections were reporting rising cases of BA.2, he said.

If prior BA.1 infection did not protect against BA.2, “this could be sort of a two-humped camel kind of wave”, Ozer said. “It’s too early to know if that will happen.”

The good news, he said, was that vaccines and boosters still “keep people out of the hospital and keep people from dying”.

Where is BA.2 most prominent?

Prof Seshadri Vasan, a Covid-19 vaccine researcher from Australia’s Science Agency, the CSIRO, said analysis of GISAID showed that as of 27 January, 10,811 BA.2 sequences had been reported from around the world including

Australia (22 sequences), but 90% of the sequences were from three countries: Denmark (8,357), India (711) and the UK (607).

“So far, evidence from our colleagues in Denmark show that while it could spread faster, there is no evidence of increased severity,” he said. “Therefore it is important to keep calm and continue existing measures such as getting ourselves the vaccinated, including the booster dose, and following social distancing, masks and local guidelines.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/31/omicron-what-do-we-know-about-stealth-subvariant-ba2>

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[**China**](#)

Beijing seals off several communities over two cases of Covid-19

As the Winter Olympics nears, the Chinese capital has locked down some neighbourhoods and is setting up 19 testing points



Beijing is setting up 19 points in the area to test residents for Covid every day until the Winter Olympics begins. Photograph: Anne-Christine Poujoulat/AFP/Getty Images

Associated Press
Sun 30 Jan 2022 21.03 EST

Beijing officials have sealed off several residential communities north of the city centre after two cases of Covid-19 were found as the Chinese capital prepares to host the [Winter Olympics](#) opening ceremony on Friday.

Another 34 cases were confirmed among athletes and others who have come for the Games, the organising committee said. In all, 211 people have tested positive among more than 8,000 who had arrived by the end of Saturday. They include a Swedish cross-country skier and a snowboarder from Slovenia.

Everyone coming for the Olympics is being isolated from the general public for the duration of their stay in [China](#) to try to prevent cross-infection.

Residents in the Anzhenli neighbourhood in Beijing's Chaoyang district were locked down on Saturday and will not be allowed to leave their compound.

The city is also setting up 19 points in the area to test residents every day until Friday, officials said at a briefing on the pandemic, according to state-backed Beijing News.

While the number of cases is low compared to other countries in the region, China has doubled down on its “zero-tolerance” policy, which tries to break the chain of transmission as soon as it is found.

The Chinese capital reported a total of 12 cases of Covid between 4pm on Saturday and 4pm on Sunday, said Pang Xinghuo, the vice-head of the Beijing Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. All those cases came from people who were already under some kind of pandemic control measures.

The city conducted multiple rounds of testing for millions of residents this past week in Fengtai district, where some residential compounds were locked down.

The participants in the Games stay in hotels that have been surrounded by temporary walls. They can come and go only in special vehicles that take them directly to the venues or other Olympics facilities. The public is not allowed to enter the hotel properties or the venues, though a limited number of spectators will be let in for the events.

Anyone who tests positive inside the Olympics bubble is isolated in a hospital or quarantine hotel to try to prevent the virus from spreading to other participants.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/31/beijing-seals-off-several-communities-over-two-cases-of-covid-19>

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US Congress

Sweeping bill on inquiry into US Covid response sees bipartisan support

New Covid commission would inform the US response to future outbreaks as well as the current impact of the virus



Senator Patty Murray in Washington DC on 11 January. Murray and Senator Richard Burr will co-sponsor the bill. Photograph: Rex/Shutterstock

[Melody Schreiber](#)

Mon 31 Jan 2022 02.00 EST

A sweeping new bill with powerful bipartisan support in the US Senate would establish an inquiry into the country's Covid-19 response similar to the 9/11 Commission, among other provisions aimed at preventing the next pandemic.

The new Covid commission would inform the US response to future outbreaks as well as the current impact of the disease. The [bill](#) will be co-sponsored by Senator Patty Murray of Washington and Senator Richard Burr of North Carolina, who plan to mark it up in committee in coming weeks.

“The pain of this pandemic is unforgettable, and we have a responsibility to make sure its lessons are unforgettable, too,” Murray said.

The legislation, called the Prevent Pandemics Act, would lay the groundwork to enshrine new powers in federal health agencies.

It would also [require](#) Senate confirmation to appoint the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and it would better outline the duties of the assistant secretary for preparedness and response, a position Burr created in a 2006 law on pandemic preparedness.

Murray, chair of the Senate health committee, first [raised](#) the idea of a Covid commission in March 2020. “Because even back then it was clear: we have to learn from this pandemic to make sure we are never in this situation again,” she said on Thursday.

In November 2021, another bipartisan group of senators – Dianne Feinstein of California, Roger Marshall of Kansas, Kirsten Gillibrand of New York and Joni Ernst of Iowa – also [introduced](#) a bill to establish a Covid commission.

This wider bill represents months of work across the aisle between Murray and Burr, the committee’s Republican [ranking member](#).

An independent taskforce would “conduct a comprehensive review of the federal Covid-19 response, fully account for consequential gaps and breakdowns in our response, and issue recommendations to correct them”, Murray said.

In November 2019, the US was [ranked](#) first of 195 countries for pandemic preparedness in a report co-produced by the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security – but it has consistently had one of the worst responses to the actual Covid-19 pandemic, said John Farmer Jr, the senior counsel for

the 9/11 Commission and director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University.

“And there’s very little apparent effort to figure out exactly why it was so ineffective and what we can do in the future,” he said.

Farmer was among those [calling](#) for an inquiry early in the pandemic, he said, “because it was clear that the United States’ response was almost completely ineffective in containing the pandemic and preventing future variants from emerging”.



A testing site in Chicago. Photograph: Nam Y Huh/AP

The US response involved “basically 50 governors going 50 different ways, and no one effectively containing the virus”, Farmer said.

That happened in part because the president doesn’t have the authority under current law to establish temporary public health measures, even during a pandemic.

Legislation such as the proposed bill could lay the groundwork for changing these laws, though such changes would be likely to face sharp scrutiny in a highly divided Congress.

The 9/11 Commission was created by Congress soon after the September 11 terrorist attacks. It was independent and non-partisan, staffed with officials who had investigative power, funding and time to create an authoritative report.

“Good reports are important because they create the historical record, and they can also inform how we respond to the crisis to avoid it happening again,” said Alan Rozenshtein, associate professor at the University of Minnesota Law School.

Another reason to create a Covid commission would be to garner high-profile support from all branches of government, which could bolster public trust in institutions, Rozenshtein said.

“Those are the benefits – if you can pull it off,” he said.

Rozenshtein doesn’t believe it’s possible to create a report on Covid that accomplishes what the 9/11 Commission did, however.

“It will be very rigorous and professional and it will produce an excellent report – but because that will be attacked the whole way through by Trump and his enablers in the Republican party, that report will not then have anything like the impact of the 9/11 Commission.”

A Covid commission would surely face bipartisan scrutiny even if it finds bipartisan support, Rozenshtein and Farmer said.

“I think any sitting administration is going to feel vulnerable to the conclusions of such a commission,” Farmer said. “This is such a calamitous response that I’m not sure that either administration is really going to want a close look at what went wrong.”

At the same time, he added, “the public interest has to outweigh that kind of partisan consideration.

“We failed, as a society and as a world, to contain Covid, and we really need to look at more effective ways to handle future pandemics – or we could be in worse shape the next time,” Farmer said.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/30/us-covid-commission-bill-senate-bipartisan-support>

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Schools

Up to 10,000 pupils in England missed whole autumn term last year, analysis finds

Figures from education research group estimate 128,000 children withdrawn from state education in year to January 2021 lockdown



The UK government wants to introduce new measures to boost school attendance. Photograph: Ian West/PA

[Richard Adams](#) Education editor

Sun 30 Jan 2022 13.13 EST

Up to 10,000 pupils missed an entire term of school last autumn, according to new analysis that estimates 128,000 children were withdrawn from state education in [England](#) in the year up to the January 2021 lockdown.

The figures, based on data from schools collated by the education research group FFT Education Datalab, comes as the government wants new measures to boost attendance, while Rachel de Souza, the children's commissioner for England, has vowed to track down missing children.

But FFT found that the number of children being taken off school rolls was no different from years prior to the pandemic, with most being home-schooled, moving to private schools or to other parts of the UK or overseas, soothing fears that the pandemic had caused a surge in children being permanently taken out of school.

FFT looked at attendance data from the rolls of more than 5,200 primary schools and 2,600 secondary schools – a third of the total state schools in England – and found that about 0.2% of children enrolled at the same school throughout last term did not attend a single session between September and the end of 2021.

“These sorts of proportions would suggest something in the order of 10,000 pupils on the roll of schools who did not attend at all in the autumn term,” the analysis, by the FFT’s Dave Thompson, states.

In total, 86,000 children who were on school rolls for at least a month in the autumn term were classed as “severely absent” after missing at least half of their time in school, including those absent because of illness.

Those most likely to be counted as severely absent were pupils with special educational needs. [Children](#) with an educational health and care plan (EHCP) were many times more likely to have missed half of school in autumn compared with other pupils across all age groups.

While politicians and de Souza have expressed alarm at the numbers of pupils withdrawn from school rolls during the pandemic, the data suggests that the overall numbers are similar to previous years.

The FFT figures show that more than 128,000 children out of the nearly seven million of compulsory school age had been withdrawn from state school rolls in the year to January 2021 – slightly below the 129,000

withdrawn in the year to January 2020, before the start of the pandemic, and the same proportion as withdrew in the year to January 2019.

Of the 128,000, 57,000 are estimated to now be home-educated, [according to the Association of Directors of Children's Services](#), while a further 10,000 to 20,000 will have moved from the state sector to independent or private schools.

The remaining 50,000 children may have rejoined schools in other parts of the UK, most likely Scotland or Wales, or moved overseas with their families.

Nadhim Zahawi, the education secretary, said he wants to “end the postcode lottery of how attendance is managed in different schools and parts of the country”, with a new duty for schools to publish their plans to improve attendance.

Schools are also being asked to join a new data collection trial that will share daily attendance status for each pupil with the Department for Education.

The DfE also said it “remains committed to a registration system for children not in school” and plans to publish a formal response shortly.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/jan/30/up-to-10000-pupils-in-england-missed-whole-autumn-term-last-year-analysis-finds>

2022.01.31 - Opinion

- Tories don't have an answer to the cost of living crisis, because they are the crisis
- Covid has been an easy scapegoat for economic disruption, but Brexit is biting
- It's 50 years since Bloody Sunday, but sectarian tensions are running high
- There are good reasons why the Met may want a redacted version of the Gray report

Conservatives

Tories don't have an answer to the cost of living crisis, because they are the crisis

[Rachel Reeves](#)

There is much that could give relief – measures Labour has called for – but the government is more interested in distraction

- [How are European countries tackling the energy crisis](#)
- [From milk to crisps: why the price of basic food items is rising](#)



Rishi Sunak and Boris Johnson will soon come to a major crossroads in the cost of living crisis. Photograph: Tayfun Salcı/Zuma Press Wire/Rex/Shutterstock

Mon 31 Jan 2022 01.00 EST

The coming weeks are decisive for the Conservatives – not just because of the [frustrating wait for Sue Gray's report](#) on Downing Street parties.

As we head towards a spring of tax hikes and soaring prices, the prime minister and chancellor will come to a major crossroads in the cost of living crisis.

The truth is it couldn't be a worse time for a government to be paralysed by its own drama.

For months, inflation has spiralled out of control. The cost of a weekly food shop is up. Gas and electricity bills are skyrocketing. Everyone is noticing the difference.

The government's answer? Painfully whacking up national insurance contributions for working people and businesses.

To know how to fix this, you have to look at why we're here. It's partly down to disruption and extra red tape from the government's patchwork Brexit deal, one that's left businesses, workers and consumers facing shortages, delays and higher prices.

But it's not just over the last year that Tory failures have taken hold. It's over the last decade. Their incompetence and inability to plan over the last 11 years for shocks such as the global gas crisis have left us uniquely exposed, a reason many other countries are faring better than us.

It's why last week the International Monetary Fund (IMF) forecast that the UK will grow at half the rate as the advanced economy average over this parliament.

The Conservative failure to regulate the energy market, their decision to close gas storage, their achingly slow progress on renewables, nuclear and insulating homes has left bills mounting to unbelievable levels.

There is much that could give immediate relief from this – measures [Labour](#) has called for over many months.

By cutting VAT on home energy bills and spreading some of the costs from suppliers gone bust, you can save most households across the country £200 off their bills.

With the Resolution Foundation saying that the average household will feel a hit of £1,200 in April, many will benefit from that. But as fuel poverty rises, lower earners and pensioners will be hit especially hard.

That's why Labour would target extra support to those who need it most, giving those households an extra £400 – that's £600 off bills in total – enough to cancel out the total expected energy price rise in April.

We'd pay for all this with a one-off windfall tax on the profits of North Sea oil and gas producers, who have made a fortune this year, as well as using higher than expected VAT receipts and North Sea oil and gas receipts to keep bills low.

The government could provide that relief now. They could start insulating more homes and build more sustainable and secure energy supplies as Labour will do. But distraction and deceit seem worth far more of their time.

They don't have an answer to the cost of living crisis, because they are the cost of living crisis. If you don't grow the economy as they haven't, you get trapped in a cycle of high taxes to pay for public services weakened by 10 years of austerity.

Not only Labour, but now Tory MPs aplenty and cabinet ministers themselves are calling on Rishi Sunak and Boris Johnson to abandon the damaging national insurance rise.

But the Conservatives are now a high tax party, because they have become a low growth party.

To add insult to injury, at the very same moment the chancellor is knocking on working people's doors for more, he's casually writing off £4.3bn of taxpayer cash lost to fraudsters and organised criminals.

There's no map for economic recovery, no looking beyond the end of another Tory leadership race.

To get out of this crisis, and to create a stronger economy, we must plan for the future. We've got to grasp the possibility of industry and innovation simmering across the UK, meet our potential and seize hold of tomorrow.

Instead, we're faced with a government out of ideas and out of energy, too worn out by its own games to do the hard work when it matters.

Labour wants to tackle the cost of living crisis so people's everyday economies thrive. We want to stop waste because we respect taxpayers and we respect our public services.

That's why the next Labour government will grab hold of the opportunities and tackle our challenges, to grow our economy, make it stronger and spread prosperity across the UK.

Rachel Reeves is a Labour MP and shadow chancellor of the exchequer

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/jan/31/tories-cost-of-living-crisis-labour-rachel-reeves>

Brexit: two years on**Brexit**

Covid has been an easy scapegoat for economic disruption, but Brexit is biting

[Anand Menon](#)

As the pandemic recedes, the negative impacts of Brexit will become clearer and its political effects more unpredictable

- Anand Menon is director of the UK in a Changing Europe



‘More than half of people now think Brexit has had a negative impact on the supply of food and goods.’ Empty shelves in an Asda store in Cardiff, July 2021. Photograph: Matthew Horwood/Getty Images

Mon 31 Jan 2022 03.00 EST

It’s two years since the UK left the European Union, slightly more than one since it exited the single market and customs union. Yet, as one prominent

Brexit supporter has [pointed out](#), no one seems to have starved to death. A low bar, admittedly, but one takes what one can in these pandemic-ravaged times. However, while we may still have food on the shelves, Brexit has already begun to act as a drag on the UK economy. It seems clear this will persist, though it's less clear as to what implications this will have for the ongoing Brexit debate.

Think back to the febrile atmosphere of the referendum and its aftermath. There was plenty of loose talk on all sides. Claims such as the £350m on the bus or George Osborne's warning of the need for an emergency budget in the event of a vote to leave were generally overblown. And remaine rhetoric provided an opening for Brexeters. In response to 2017 warnings about a Brexit "cliff edge", a spokesperson for the Welsh Conservative leader Andrew RT Davies [remarked acidly](#) that "according to project fear we should be holed up in a post-apocalyptic wasteland in threadbare clothes eating tinned food by now".

Yet Brexit was already beginning to bite. Well before the date of departure, work by John Springford at the Centre for European Reform showed that [UK GDP was lagging behind](#) its expected level. By September 2021, he had concluded that UK goods [trade was 11.2%](#), or £8.5bn, lower than it would have been had the UK stayed in the EU's single market and customs union. Indeed, one reason the much-vaunted "cliff edge" failed to materialise is that we have been slithering down it for a while, and consequently have less far to fall.

And this is starting to hit home. Ian Mulheirn at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change has made the point that recent tax rises – £29bn of extra taxes are pencilled in to be introduced by the government by 2025 – would [not have been necessary](#) had the UK remained in the EU. Brexit is forecast to have a net cost to the public finances of around £30bn a year.

So why aren't we talking more about this? Well, for a number of reasons, but first and foremost the pandemic. Covid has drowned out everything else and has been an easy scapegoat for all [economic disruption](#). It has also meant that much economic activity that would have been – and will be – affected by Brexit (think of service providers travelling to the EU to sell their wares) has been paused.

So, what is still to come? Trade will become more difficult: it is only in July that the British government will finally institute the remainder of the checks necessitated under the terms of its trade deal with the EU. And over the longer term, the OBR has estimated the aggregate impact on UK GDP to be 4%. Our estimates at the UK in a Changing Europe are slightly higher, at between 5.8% (under a liberal migration policy scenario) and 7% (under a more restrictive regime).

What, then, of claims that Brexit provides us with opportunities to recoup these losses via trade deals and more effective domestic regulation? The former seems hopelessly optimistic, given not only the impact of geography on trade but also the limited nature of the deal so far signed with Australia. While there are indeed possibilities for the UK to regulate more effectively than the EU, particularly in emergent areas of economic activity such as robotics or AI, these gains have yet to be secured, and as things stand it is impossible to see how they could compensate for the scale of the negative impact generated by falling trade with the EU.

Brexit, of course, has shaped far more than our economy. It has also been central to a political realignment that eventually saw Boris Johnson elected at the head of an 80-seat majority, with his leave-voting coalition including large numbers of traditional Labour voters. Yet there have been recent signs that this coalition may not be as robust as it first appeared.

More than half of people now think Brexit has had a negative impact on the supply of food and goods, while 51% think it has adversely affected the cost of living, including more than a third of leave voters. Overall, 57% of Britons think the government is doing a bad job of handling Brexit. Just under half say the same on handling the economy – the worst rating for a government since 2013.

Indeed, for the first time, Johnson is thought to be doing a bad job among leave voters. After he won the “Brexit election” in December 2019, 74% of leave voters said Johnson was doing a good job. As the pandemic hit, in April 2020, that rose to 86%. Now, that number of leave voters who have a positive view of the prime minister has fallen to 36%.

Brexit, then, may not be the electoral catnip it once was. As its effects persist, and particularly as Covid recedes, it is at least conceivable that more and more people come to link the decision to leave the EU with the economic problems confronting them at home. And while, as the Financial Times' Peter Foster [put it](#), "It's angina, not a heart attack", living with angina long term can be an unpleasant experience.

This is far from implying an appetite to reopen the process, still less to think in terms of rejoining. But it does speak to the unpredictability of Brexit's political effects.

- Anand Menon is director of the UK in a Changing [Europe](#) and professor of European politics and foreign affairs at King's College London

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/jan/31/covid-easy-scapegoat-economic-disruption-brexit-biting>.

Opinion**Bloody Sunday**

It's 50 years since Bloody Sunday, but sectarian tensions are running high

[Susan McKay](#)

The old divides are closing, but the flags in Derry show that some unionists are in no mood to move on



Flags, including that of the Parachute Regiment, flying in Drumahoe, 24 January 2022. Photograph: Liam McBurney/PA

Sun 30 Jan 2022 08.17 EST

The road I grew up on in Drumahoe, on the outskirts of Derry, has been on the news lately, and not in a way that makes me proud. Journalists stand at its junction with the main road from Belfast, pointing up at the purple flag of the Parachute Regiment fluttering high on a lamp-post. They explain its significance at this time of year: it was paratroopers who killed 13 unarmed civil rights marchers in the city on Bloody Sunday in January 1972. Family

members of those killed have talked about the pain the flying of these flags causes them. Politicians, including some unionists, and even the Parachute Regiment itself [have called it](#) “unacceptable”.

The flag flies because there are some in the unionist community who want to show that not everybody is mourning the dead of [Bloody Sunday](#) as its 50th anniversary is marked in Derry this weekend. It is a show of disrespect. Drumahoe has been flying this flag for years, as has the village of Newbuildings on the main road into Derry from Dublin. I saw one that had a sign pinned underneath it featuring the crosshairs of a gun – a warning to anyone tempted to remove it. In Drumahoe there are always union flags and Ulster flags flying, and sometimes there are also Scottish, Israeli and paramilitary flags. They stand like a weird forest. After the Anglo-Irish agreement in 1985, “Drumahoe Says No” was daubed on a wall along the main road behind our house, the white ghosts of its letters lingering on the red brick for years after it was painted over.

Houses in Drumahoe are in demand. Lately a few developments have been built of the kind described as “exclusive”, which in estate agent language means expensive. Once the earth is cut for the foundations, however, flags appear and put a different slant on “exclusive”. Their message is: houses for Protestants. When we sold our old family home last year, someone plastered an Ulster Defence Association bulldog sticker on the for sale sign.

A woman who lives in one flag-festooned estate near Derry told me that her area is actually quite “mixed”, meaning people from both Protestant and Catholic backgrounds live there. She said most did not want the flags but they remain because everyone knew the men who put them up. They were aggressive and had paramilitary connections.

Some people simply cease to notice these territorial markings. My mother once took a photo of my daughter in her garden. She was up a tree with a large union flag on a lamp-post behind her, apparently sprouting from her head. When I said it was a pity about the flag, my mother said, “What flag?”

It used to be called triumphalism, this flaunting of Northern Ireland’s Britishness. Now it looks more like desperation. When the state was set up in 1921, unionists felt secure. But the Good Friday agreement is based on

power-sharing, and unionism has lost its majority at Stormont. A census to be published this year is [expected to show](#) that there are more Catholics than Protestants – this is already so [among young](#) people. The May election could see Sinn Féin take the first minister role.

Under the old unionist regime, the nationalist majority in Derry was disenfranchised – now it is reflected in local and UK political institutions. The old binary is breaking down anyway. Young musicians who play in loyalist bands by day go to gigs in republican areas at night – music is the shared passion, not division. While some unionists are still militant about calling the city Londonderry, and some nationalists insist on Derry, for the most part people are amiably willing to use either or both. Long, hard cross-community work on parading has taken much of the strife out of the annual burning of the effigy of “[Lundy the traitor](#)”. (He was a governor of Derry who wanted to surrender the city to Catholic King James in 1689 rather than endure a siege.)

The campaign for truth and justice for those who died on Bloody Sunday led to the [Saville inquiry](#). Its finding that those killed on Bloody Sunday were innocent, and the [prime minister's apology](#) in 2010, led to attempts to prosecute some of the paratroopers for murder. Soldier F, as he was known, was to be tried in Derry. In 2019 senior DUP figures, including Gregory Campbell, who lives in Drumahoe and is MP for East Londonderry, along with local Northern Ireland assembly member Gary Middleton, [posed under a banner](#) that had the Parachute Regiment’s insignia on it along with the claim that loyalist Derry is “still under siege” and the slogan “No surrender”. The Soldier F case [collapsed in 2021](#). This year, Middleton saw sense and [called for](#) the Parachute Regiment’s flags to be taken down.

The commemorations for Bloody Sunday this year included plays, exhibitions, debates and concerts. The Irish taoiseach attended. It has been gracious and dignified. People from all communities [were invited](#) to join a walk along the original route of the march on Sunday. Unionist leaders were also invited, but none came. It looks bad.

Last week Colum Eastwood, the SDLP leader and MP for the constituency, called at Westminster [for an apology](#) from the British army for coming to Derry to “murder” civilians. He was heckled by the DUP MP Sammy

Wilson. That looked bad, too. As a Stormont election looms, the DUP, humiliated by the Brexit debacle and by the prime minister, is poking at the deep old roots of sectarianism.

Those who put up the Parachute Regiment's flag are full of incoherent rage. They believe Protestant civilians killed by the IRA have not been given the same attention as those who died on Bloody Sunday. They want recognition for "the exodus" that saw many Protestants effectively driven out of the city side of Derry by the IRA during the conflict. They feel betrayed and neglected by unionist leaders who have taken their support for granted and done little to improve their lives. One man told me that those responsible are "giving two fingers" to everyone else. "They're saying – we can do this and you can't stop us," he said.

- Susan McKay is an Irish writer and journalist whose books include Northern Protestants: On Shifting Ground
 - This article was amended on 4 February 2022 to say that pending census results are expected to show more Catholics than Protestants (rather than to show an overall Catholic majority) in [Northern Ireland](#).
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This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/jan/30/50-years-bloody-sunday-sectarian-tensions-derry-unionists-northern-ireland>

Opinion**Gray report**

There are good reasons why the Met may want a redacted version of the Gray report

[Parm Sandhu](#)

If criminal offences are alleged to have taken place, police have to follow a rigorous investigation process

- Parm Sandhu is a former chief superintendent with the Metropolitan police



‘The Met is in the invidious position of playing catch-up when an internal inquiry by the civil service has already collected evidence.’ Photograph: Andy Rain/EPA

Sun 30 Jan 2022 12.45 EST

As a former senior police officer, when considering the Met's investigation of alleged parties at No 10 I imagine a scene at the start of the shift for the Downing Street beat. I hear the sergeant giving out the orders: "PC Angel, there's a job here for you from the deputy assistant commissioner, you lucky thing! Nip down to No 10 and issue this bunch of fixed penalty notices. You might want to take PC Butterman with you, and for heaven's sake make sure you look good for the cameras and turn your body-worn video on."

While this would clearly give the officers a story to dine on for many years, it is unlikely to be a job to savour. This is the position the Met finds itself in, after the latest twists and turns of the past week.

The Met had [resisted historical inquiries](#) into allegations of breaches of the coronavirus regulations; however, as the evidence being presented seems to suggest the claims are well founded, the police have a duty to act. "Policing without fear or favour" does need to be applied to all, and that's the demand of the British public. The question facing the police is whether government guidelines or laws were broken – in the latter case, they could proceed with a criminal investigation.

The problem now is that the Met is in the invidious position of playing catch-up when an internal inquiry by the civil service has already collected evidence. In a clumsy attempt to ensure best evidence, it has asked for a copy of the Sue Gray report and for a [redacted version](#) to be published.

This investigation is similar to others that have run in parallel with other processes. The most obvious example is [Hillsborough](#), which took two inquiries and 23 years to be referred for a [criminal investigation](#).

In regards to the Sue [Gray report](#), if the police are investigating criminal matters, the evidence produced would not have been gathered using the rules for investigations, which means it is inadmissible in a court. Instead, she would have followed civil service guidelines. There is also the issue that she would not have been able to compel individuals to be available for statements to be taken.

Every individual who is interviewed by police as a suspect would need to be told three things to make these statements admissible: they are not under

arrest; they can avail themselves of free legal advice; and they must all be cautioned.

Police access to emails, phone messages and CCTV images are subject to regulations that an employer may not have had to comply with. For example, employers can monitor use of work computers and phones. [Police](#) would need to redo this work adhering to legislation and making sure it can be used in criminal proceedings.

The Met may have [asked the report](#) to be redacted to reduce the opportunities for collusion among suspects or to prevent prejudice to other investigations. One theory is that other “new” criminal offences may be discovered that could end up in court with a jury. These “new” offences could be compromised if they had already been publicly reported, as this would influence judgment by 12 good people on that jury. This is being denied by the Met, which states it is only looking at Covid breaches, but will it be able to ignore “new” offences that could be discovered when trawling through emails, CCTV photographs and statements? The next step will be a review of the evidence, identifying further lines of inquiry and evidence disclosure to suspects.

If criminal proceedings go ahead, the matter must be proven beyond reasonable doubt for each named individual. Using the gathered evidence, the Crown Prosecution Service would consider using tests of sufficiency of evidence and public interest in determining whether to prosecute. The process on the whole is held to a much more robust standard than the publishing of a report, and could go some way to explaining the Met’s requests.

Back in my imagined scenario, a sergeant asks for an update. “Well, Sarge, we asked lots of people what happened (took months, what with diaries, getting legal advice, etc). The big chap with the blond hair used loads of baffling words (ancient Greek to me). A lady called Sue provided a report she had written. Seemed to clarify everything but I can’t use it at court. Shame they couldn’t all act sensibly and let us get on with dealing with real crime.” Would you want to be either one of the PCs ?

- Parm Sandhu is a former chief superintendent with the Met police and author of Black and Blue: One Woman's Story of Policing and Prejudice
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[Viktor Orbán](#)

Hungarian PM Orbán to visit ally Putin in Moscow

Seen as Putin's closest EU ally, his meeting with Russian president will be watched nervously in Europe's capitals



Viktor Orbán on Saturday at a meeting of far-right leaders in Madrid.
Photograph: Alain Robert/Sipa/Rex/Shutterstock

[Shaun Walker](#) in Budapest

Mon 31 Jan 2022 06.52 EST

Hungary's prime minister, [Viktor Orbán](#), will travel to Moscow on Tuesday in a visit that has drawn criticism from the country's political opposition and is being watched nervously in other European capitals.

Orbán, who has developed a reputation as Vladimir Putin's closest ally inside the European Union, is due to meet the Russian president just as other

EU leaders are trying to hash out a coordinated position on Russia's [menacing moves around Ukraine's borders](#).

"In this tense situation, it is simply treasonous to go to Moscow," said a statement released on Sunday and signed by representatives of the six opposition parties that have joined forces to face Orbán in April elections.

Orbán first came to public attention in 1989 when, as a young democracy activist, he called on Soviet troops to leave the country. But during his time as prime minister over the last 12 years he has cultivated warm relations with Putin, at the same time as his relations with Brussels have become [ever more fractious](#).

Nathalie Loiseau, the chair of the European parliament's subcommittee on security and defence, said it was clear Putin was trying to divide [Europe](#). "I sincerely hope that Viktor Orbán is aware of what is at stake, and that he sticks to the EU's message of unity," she said at a press conference late last week, according to Hungarian news outlets.

The UK's defence minister Ben Wallace struck a more positive note on a visit to Budapest on Monday, expressing support for Orbán's trip. "We need to de-escalate this and stand up for the right for sovereignty of [Ukraine](#)," Wallace said at a joint press conference with his Hungarian counterpart Tibor Benko.

Péter Szijjártó, Hungary's foreign minister, said last week the agenda for Orbán's visit would include Hungarian gas purchases from Russia, production of Russia's Sputnik Covid vaccine in [Hungary](#) and discussions on a long-delayed nuclear plant Russia is building in the country.

While France and Germany have been [notably less hawkish](#) on Russia than the US and Britain, they have loudly condemned the Kremlin's aggressive military manoeuvres. Orbán, on the other hand, has remained pointedly quiet about the military build-up on Ukraine's borders, except to say he is "in favour of peace and de-escalation", in a statement released after a gathering of European far-right leaders in Madrid over the weekend, hosted by Spain's Vox party.

Szijjártó has painted the current Ukraine stand-off as a dispute between [Russia](#) and the west in which Hungary wants to take no part, despite the fact that it is a Nato member. “Nobody can request such a thing from us,” Szijjártó told a pro-government newspaper, commenting on demands that Budapest should cool relations with Moscow.

Hungary was the first European country to purchase Sputnik, which has not yet been licensed for use by the European Medicines Agency. Budapest has also regularly pushed back against closer cooperation between Ukraine and Nato, ostensibly over concerns about the treatment of the Hungarian minority in the country.

In a sign of just how rosy the relationship is with the Kremlin, at a time when most European capitals describe relations as at a worrying low point, last November Putin awarded Szijjártó the Order of Friendship at a ceremony in Moscow.

András Simonyi, a former Hungarian ambassador to the US who is now a non-resident fellow at the Atlantic Council, said that previously there were many people in the Hungarian foreign ministry who were deeply suspicious of Orbán’s friendly behaviour towards Russia, but over the years this has changed, as critics were gradually replaced with loyalists.

“Hungary does not have a foreign policy, Viktor Orbán has a foreign policy. Everyone in Orbán’s government is just a staffer, and this is especially true for foreign policy,” he said.

Orbán’s recent support for the Bosnian Serb leader, Milorad Dodik, has also raised eyebrows across Europe, and has widely been seen as a favour to Russia. Dodik has in recent months [intensified secessionist rhetoric](#) around the Republika Srpska entity inside Bosnia, to the alarm of much of the international community.

Orbán flew to the Republika Srpska capital, Banja Luka, in November to meet Dodik, without stopping over in Sarajevo. He has promised to veto any EU sanctions against Dodik.

“There isn’t any EU member state doing anything even slightly similar: it’s a systemic abandonment of the EU foreign policy alliance,” said Péter Krekó, who runs the Political Capital thinktank in Budapest.

Alongside his clashes with Europe, Orbán also has poor relations with the Biden administration. Hungary was the only EU nation not invited to Biden’s recent democracy summit. Instead, Orbán has retained warm relations with Donald Trump. Earlier this month, Trump endorsed Orbán ahead of the April elections, and there are rumours he may come to Budapest to campaign for the far-right prime minister.

The 1956 uprising, which was crushed by Soviet tanks, remains a vivid part of the national consciousness, and is one factor that makes many in the country uneasy about Orbán’s support for Putin, at a time when a further Russian incursion into Ukraine may be possible.

“A prime minister who, in such a situation, remains silent and springs up to go to Moscow when he’s signalled to do so with a snap, only to stand on the edge of the carpet in the Kremlin, betrays the interests of both Hungary and Europe,” read the opposition statement.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/31/viktor-orban-hungarian-pm-vladimir-putin-moscow-russia-visit>

Ukraine

Kyiv urges Russia to pull troops back from Ukraine border

Call comes after Nato stresses need for EU countries to reduce dependence on Russian natural gas



Ukrainians sending a message to the country's western allies in Independence Square in Kyiv on Sunday. Photograph: Vladimir Sindheyev/NurPhoto/Rex/Shutterstock

Agencies

Sun 30 Jan 2022 14.44 EST

Kyiv has urged Moscow to pull back its troops from Ukraine's border and continue dialogue with the west if it is "serious" about de-escalating tensions that have soared amid fears of a Russian invasion.

“If Russian officials are serious when they say they don’t want a new war, Russia must continue diplomatic engagement and pull back military forces it amassed along Ukraine’s borders and in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine,” Kyiv’s foreign minister, Dmytro Kuleba, [tweeted](#) on Sunday.

Meanwhile, the head of Nato said Europe needed to diversify its energy supplies, as [Britain warned](#) it was “highly likely” that Russia, a major natural gas supplier, was looking to invade Ukraine.

Russia has massed 120,000 troops near its neighbour and demanded the western defence alliance pull back troops and weapons from eastern [Europe](#) and bar Ukraine, a former Soviet state, from joining Nato.

US officials said on Saturday Russia’s military buildup had been expanded to include supplies to treat casualties of any conflict. Across the border in Ukraine, locals trained as army reservists as the government scrambled to prepare.

Moscow denies it plans to invade but said on Sunday it would ask [Nato](#) to clarify whether it intended to implement key security commitments after earlier saying the alliance’s response to its demands did not go far enough.

“If they do not intend to do so, then they should explain why,” Russia’s foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, said on state television. “This will be a key question in determining our future proposals.”

The US has said it is waiting to hear back from Russia. It says Nato will not withdraw from eastern Europe or bar Ukraine from possible future entry but it is prepared to discuss topics such as arms control and confidence-building measures.

US senators are very close to agreeing on [sanctions legislation](#), the two leading senators working on the bill said on Sunday. Measures include targeting the most significant Russian banks and Russian sovereign debt as well as offering more lethal assistance to Ukraine.

Some of the sanctions in the bill could be imposed before any invasion because of what Russia had already done, said one of the senators, Bob Menendez, citing cyber-attacks on Ukraine, “false flag” operations and efforts to undermine the Ukrainian government internally.

Washington has spent weeks trying to build agreement with its European partners on having a strong sanctions package in place if Russia were to attack Ukraine. But the issue is divisive, with Germany urging “prudence”.

“We are concerned about the energy situation in Europe because it demonstrates the vulnerability of being too dependent on one supplier of natural gas and that’s the reason why Nato allies agree that we need to work and focus on diversification of supplies,” Jens Stoltenberg, the Nato secretary general, said.

Britain said on Sunday it would expand the scope of its own possible sanctions in legislation this week to deter the Russian president, Vladimir Putin.

01:17

'Nowhere to hide': Truss to pave way for tougher Russian sanctions amid Ukraine tensions – video

“We think it’s highly likely that he is looking to invade Ukraine. That is why we’re doing all we can through deterrence and diplomacy, to urge him to desist,” the foreign secretary, Liz Truss, told the BBC.

Truss, who is due to visit both Ukraine and Russia in the next two weeks, told Sky News the legislation would enable Britain to hit a much wider variety of targets “so there can be nobody who thinks that they will be immune to those sanctions”.

Asked if the new powers could include the ability to seize property in London, Truss said: “Nothing is off the table.”

The Center for American Progress, a US thinktank, has said Britain would face a challenge uprooting wealthy Russians with Kremlin links from London given close ties “between Russian money and the United Kingdom’s

ruling Conservative party, the press, and its real estate and financial industry”.

Asked about this, Truss said: “There’s a real threat here to freedom and democracy in Europe. And that is more important than short-term economic gains, both for the United Kingdom but also for our European allies.”

The Biden administration planned to spare everyday Russians from the brunt of US export controls if Russia invades Ukraine, and focus on targeting industrial sectors, a White House official said on Saturday. A top commerce official said earlier that “key people” would face “massive sanctions”.

The British prime minister, Boris Johnson, is expected to speak to Putin by phone next week. Stepping up diplomatic efforts after facing criticism for not doing enough, he said he had ordered the military to prepare to help strengthen Europe’s borders.

Stoltenberg said Nato had no plans to deploy combat troops to non-Nato member Ukraine in the event of a Russian invasion, adding: “We are focusing on providing support.”

Johnson said on Sunday the picture on Ukraine’s border with Russia was “increasingly concerning”.

“I continue to urge Russia to engage in negotiations and avoid a reckless and catastrophic invasion,” the prime minister said on Twitter.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/30/nato-calls-on-europe-to-diversify-energy-supply-amid-russia-standoff>

Foreign policy

UK to bring in measures to allow for tougher sanctions on Russia, says Truss

Foreign secretary announces legislation in bid to dissuade Putin from launching Ukraine invasion

01:17

'Nowhere to hide': Truss to pave way for tougher Russian sanctions amid Ukraine tensions – video

[Dan Sabbagh](#) Defence and security editor

Sun 30 Jan 2022 06.44 EST

Legislation to allow Britain to hit banks, energy companies and “oligarchs close to the Kremlin” with economic sanctions will be introduced by the government this week, the foreign secretary, [Liz Truss](#), has said.

The scheme is the latest attempt by the UK to dissuade the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, from launching an invasion of Ukraine, and was announced hours after [Britain said it was willing to deploy more forces](#) to Estonia and other Nato allies in eastern Europe.

“We’re going to be introducing new legislation so that we can hit targets including those who are key to the Kremlin’s continuation and the continuation of the Russian regime,” Truss told the BBC’s Sunday Morning programme.

“There will be severe costs on an invasion into [Ukraine](#). And we would target Russian financial institutions, we would target energy companies, we will target oligarchs close to the Kremlin,” she added.

Both the foreign secretary and the prime minister, Boris Johnson, are expected to visit Kyiv early this week, despite the pressure faced by

Downing Street over the “partygate” scandal. A redacted version of [Sue Gray’s report](#) is expected to emerge on Monday.

Foreign Office sources said Britain’s existing sanctions regime allowed the UK only to target those linked to the destabilisation of Ukraine; the new legislation will permit a wider targeting of the “strategic interests” of the Russian state.

Any legislation will probably have to be sped through parliament as about 100,000 troops are massing in Russia and neighbouring Belarus, creating what Truss described as “a real threat of invasion”.

The government has been accused of allowing Kremlin-linked money to flow easily through the City of London, and in some cases Russia-linked individuals donating to the ruling party.

Last week, the Center for American Progress, a US thinktank close to the president, Joe Biden, [warned that](#) “uprooting Kremlin-linked oligarchs will be a challenge given the [close ties](#) between Russian money and the United Kingdom’s ruling Conservative party, the press, and its real estate and financial industry”.

The thinktank proposed creating a joint US-UK working group to “prod stronger action from the UK government”. When asked about the thinktank report, Truss told the BBC: “We are doing more. We are introducing new legislation.”

Britain, in conjunction with the US, has stepped up its rhetoric about the Russian threat to Ukraine, with London warning of a possible coup plot a week ago. Ukraine’s president, [Volodymyr Zelenskiy](#), has talked down the risk, arguing that Kyiv has faced a constant military threat from Moscow since 2014.

Russia denies it will invade, although the Kremlin said it was unhappy with the US response last week to its security demands. Moscow wants Ukraine never to be allowed to join Nato and has demanded a broad range of troop withdrawals from former Warsaw pact countries in eastern [Europe](#).

On Sunday, it emerged that Britain had offered to double its troop numbers in eastern Europe, where 900 lead a multinational battlegroup in Estonia and 150 in Poland, while Biden said Washington would deploy “not too many” additional forces – a few thousand at most – “in the near term”.

Nato’s secretary general, Jens Stoltenberg, said on Sunday that combat troops would not move to Ukraine in the event of a Russian invasion.

“We have no plans to deploy Nato combat troops to Ukraine,” he said, adding later: “There is a difference between being a Nato member and being a strong and highly valued partner as Ukraine.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/jan/30/liz-truss-says-uk-will-introduce-tougher-sanctions-on-russia-this-week>

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Ukraine

US Senate panel close to approving ‘mother of all sanctions’ against Russia

Negotiations for package of sanctions against Putin ‘on the one-yard line’, says Bob Menendez of foreign relations committee

- [Opinion: Russia’s phony war is playing out as surreal theatre](#)



Ukrainian servicemen seen along the frontline outside of Svitlodarsk, Ukraine, on Sunday. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

[Richard Luscombe](#)

[@richlusc](#)

Sun 30 Jan 2022 13.36 EST

The leaders of the Senate foreign relations committee said on Sunday they were on the verge of approving “the mother of all sanctions” against

Vladimir Putin, warning there would be no appeasement as the Russian president [contemplates](#) an invasion of [Ukraine](#).

“We cannot have a Munich moment again,” the panel’s Democratic chair, Bob Menendez of New Jersey, told CNN’s State of the Union, referring to the 1938 agreement by which allies ceded parts of Czechoslovakia to Hitler, believing it would stave off war.

“Putin will not stop if he believes the west will not respond,” Menendez said. “We saw what he did in 2008 in Georgia, we saw what he did in 2014 in pursuit of Crimea. He will not stop.”

Menendez said he believed bipartisan negotiations for severe sanctions were “on the one-yard line”, despite disagreements with Republicans over whether measures should be imposed before or after any Russian invasion. The UK government promised to [ramp up sanctions](#) against Putin and his associates.

The negotiations come ahead of an expected UN security council meeting on Monday, at the request of the US, to give [Russia](#) the opportunity to explain its actions.

Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the US ambassador to the UN, said: “We’re going to go into the council prepared to listen to Russia’s security concerns, but we’re not going to be distracted by their propaganda.”

On Sunday, Kyiv urged Moscow to [pull back its troops from Ukraine’s border](#) and continue dialogue with the west if it was “serious” about de-escalating tensions that have soared amid fears of a Russian invasion. Canada moved its Ukraine-based military units westward on Sunday and announced the temporary withdrawal of all non-essential employees from its Kyiv embassy, citing ongoing Russian threats along the border.

“We will continue to take all precautions necessary to keep our Canadian Armed Forces safe and secure,” said Canada’s defense minister, Anita Anand, at a press conference in Kyiv. Canada has 900 military members supporting the Nato mission in [Ukraine](#) via “land, air and sea”, she said.

Meanwhile, Jens Stoltenberg, the head of Nato, said Europe needed to diversify its energy supplies, saying the situation “demonstrates the vulnerability of being too dependent on one supplier of natural gas”.

Tensions on the Ukraine border have continued to escalate, with Reuters reporting the Russian military buildup included [supplies of blood](#) in anticipation of casualties.

John Kirby, the Pentagon press secretary, told Fox News Sunday: “Putin has a lot of options available to him if he wants to further invade Ukraine, and he can execute some of those options imminently. It could happen really, honestly, at any time.”

Seeking to show bipartisan resolve, Menendez gave CNN a joint interview with his committee’s ranking Republican, James Risch of Idaho.

Menendez said: “There is an incredible bipartisan resolve for support of Ukraine, and an incredibly strong bipartisan resolve to have severe consequences for Russia if it invades, and in some cases for what it has already done.

“We are building on the legislation that both Senator Risch wrote independently, and I wrote, which I called the mother of all sanctions. It’s to include a variety of elements, massive sanctions against the most significant Russian banks, crippling to their economy, Russia sovereign debt. These are sanctions beyond any that we have ever levied before.”

Risch said talks had been a “24 hour-a-day effort for the last several days” in an attempt to reach agreement over sanctions timing and content, and that he was optimistic.

“That’s a work in progress,” Risch said, when pressed over discussions about pre-emptive sanctions or measures to be taken in the event of an invasion. “[But] I’m more than cautiously optimistic that when we get back to DC tomorrow that we’re going to be moving forward.”

Menendez said he believed western allies did not have to wait to start penalising Putin.

“There are some sanctions that could take place up front because of what Russia has already done, cyber-attacks on Ukraine, false flag operations, the efforts to undermine the Ukrainian government internally,” he said.

“But then the devastating sanctions that ultimately would crush Russia’s economy, and the continuing lethal aid that we are going to send, means Putin has to decide how many body bags of Russian sons are going to return to Russia.

“The sanctions we’re talking about would come later on if he invades, some sanctions would come up front for what has been done already, but the lethal aid will travel no matter what.”

Risch criticized the stance of several far-right figures, including the Fox News host Tucker Carlson and the Kentucky congressman [Thomas Massie](#), who have questioned why the US is backing Ukraine and opposing Russia. Carlson said “it makes sense” that Putin “just wants to keep his western border secure” by opposing moves by Ukraine to join Nato.

“We side always with countries that are democracies, and certainly there isn’t going to be a truce committed in that regard,” Risch said.



Bob Menendez speaks during a Senate foreign relations committee hearing, flanked by James Risch, in August 2021. Photograph: Rex/Shutterstock

“But the people who were saying that we shouldn’t be engaged in this at all are going to be singing a very different tune when they go to fill up their car with gas, if indeed there is an invasion. There are going to be sanctions that are going to be crippling to Russia, it is going to cripple their oil production. And as we all know, Russia is simply a gas station that is thinly disguised masquerading as a country. It is going to have a devastating effect on the economy around the world.”

On NBC’s Meet the Press, Dick Durbin, co-chair of the Senate Ukraine caucus, addressed [concerns aired by President Volodymyr Zelenskiy](#) on Friday that growing rhetoric over the crisis was causing panic and destabilising his country’s economy.

His comments followed a call with Joe Biden that Ukraine officials said “[did not go well](#)”.

“Any decision about the future of Ukraine will be made by Ukraine,” said Durbin, an Illinois Democrat. “It won’t be made in Moscow or in Washington, in the European Union or in Belarus. It’s their future and their fate and their decision as far as that is concerned.”

The caucus co-chair, Republican Rob Portman of Ohio, who is also on the foreign relations committee, told NBC he believed Putin had underestimated the unity of Nato and others.

“One thing [Vladimir Putin](#) has done successfully is he has strengthened the transatlantic alliance and countries around the world who are looking at this and saying, ‘We cannot let this stand, we cannot let this happen,’” Portman said.

“For the first time in nearly 80 years we could have a major and very bloody conflict in Europe unless we stand up together and push back, and so far so good.”

This article was amended on 1 February 2022. James Risch is a senator from Idaho, not Wisconsin as an earlier version said.

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- [No 10 parties Police have photo of Johnson with beer, reports say](#)
- [Boris Johnson PM struggles to rally team as pressure mounts](#)
- [Analysis PM hobbles into the weekend short of staff and allies](#)

Conservatives

Nick Gibb becomes latest Conservative MP to call for Boris Johnson to resign

MP for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton says his constituents were ‘furious about the double standards’ of the PM



Gibb said: ‘To restore trust, we need to change the prime minister.’

Photograph: Michael Mayhew/Sportsphoto/Allstar

[Nadeem Badshah](#)

Fri 4 Feb 2022 17.13 EST

Another Conservative MP has called for [Boris Johnson](#) to resign.

Nick Gibb, the MP for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton, said his constituents were “furious about the double standards” and said the prime minister had been “inaccurate” in his statements to the Commons.

Gibb, a former schools minister who served under three prime ministers, has also submitted a letter of no confidence to the chairman of the 1922 Committee, Sir Graham Brady, the Daily Telegraph reported.

He wrote: “My constituents are furious about the double standards – imposing harsh and, to my mind, necessary restrictions as we and the world sought to defend ourselves against this new and deadly virus, while at the same time flagrantly disregarding those rules within the fortress of Downing Street.”

Gibb also claimed that Johnson had been “inaccurate” in statements to the Commons.

The MP wrote in the Telegraph: “The prime minister accepted the resignation of Allegra Stratton for joking about a Christmas party that she hadn’t attended, but he won’t take responsibility for those that he did attend.

“I am sorry to say that it is hard to see how it can be the case that the prime minister told the truth.”

He said there was still support for Johnson in his constituency, but that voters were also questioning whether they could trust him. The MP said: “To restore trust, we need to change the prime minister.”

Gibb’s intervention brings the total number of [MPs who have publicly called for Johnson to go](#) to 15, but privately the number is likely to be higher.

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Boris Johnson

Police have photo of Boris Johnson with beer at lockdown party, say reports

Photograph understood to be among those submitted by Met to Sue Gray inquiry into breaches of Covid rules



Boris Johnson raising a pint during a visit to Fourpure Brewery in Bermondsey, London in 2021. Photograph: Dan Kitwood/AFP/Getty Images

Nadeem Badshah

Fri 4 Feb 2022 18.16 EST

Police have a photograph of [Boris Johnson](#) holding a can of beer at his [lockdown birthday party](#) in June 2020, according to reports.

It is understood to be among the 300 pictures submitted to the Metropolitan police by Sue Gray for their [investigation into social gatherings](#) which breached coronavirus regulations.

The prime minister is pictured with a can of Estrella beer standing next to the chancellor, Rishi Sunak, in No 10's Cabinet Room, the Mirror has been told.

It was reported that the picture was taken by the prime minister's official taxpayer-funded photographer, who was documenting the event in June 2020.

Labour's deputy leader, Angela Rayner, told the newspaper: "The Downing Street photographer is funded by the taxpayer, and the public have every right to see the photos they pay to have taken, including any of the prime minister's birthday party.

"Following the Met police investigation, the Sue Gray report must be published in its entirety with all accompanying evidence – photos, videos and testimony."

Last month Downing Street acknowledged that staff "gathered briefly" at a surprise birthday celebration organised by Carrie Johnson but said that the prime minister only stayed for 10 minutes.

The chancellor is understood to have attended the event as he turned up for a Covid meeting, but had not been invited.

Sources told the Mirror that Johnson and Sunak were surrounded by No 10 aides in the Cabinet Room but there was no birthday cake.

Barrister Adam Wagner, an expert in Covid laws, said: "The legal question for the prime minister is whether he participated in the gathering. The fact that he was photographed holding a beer strongly suggests he did and therefore committed a criminal offence of the regulations."

Downing Street said it could not comment due to the ongoing police investigation.

It comes after four of Johnson's senior aides resigned in the space of 24 hours on Thursday.

His policy chief Munira Mirza, the director of communications Jack Doyle, the principal private secretary Martin Reynolds and the chief of staff Dan Rosenfield all quit.

There was pressure on Doyle and Reynolds to resign after their involvement in two Downing Street gatherings during lockdown emerged.

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Boris Johnson

Johnson struggles to rally team as pressure on him builds up

Sajid Javid has joined Rishi Sunak in rejecting slur on Keir Starmer as two more MPs call for PM to go

01:12

Keir Starmer 'deserves absolute respect', says Sajid Javid – video

[Heather Stewart](#) and [Rowena Mason](#)

Fri 4 Feb 2022 17.45 EST

Boris Johnson's attempts to rally his dilapidated top team floundered on Friday after a second cabinet minister distanced himself from the prime minister and two more Conservative MPs called for him to go.

In a bid to shore up support, Johnson wrote to MPs promising them a "direct line to Downing Street", but his move came as [Sajid Javid](#) followed the chancellor, Rishi Sunak, in rejecting Johnson's remarks linking Starmer with the failure to prosecute paedophile Jimmy Savile.

The health secretary said Starmer had done "a good job" as director of public prosecutions and that "he should be respected for it". Javid said he was glad Johnson had "clarified" his remarks – though the prime minister has not apologised.

Sunak said of Johnson's comments on Thursday: "I wouldn't have said it." The attempt to smear Starmer led to [the departure of Johnson's longstanding policy chief, Munira Mirza](#), on Thursday.

In another sign of Johnson's waning authority, two more MPs confirmed they have submitted letters of no confidence in the prime minister.

The Newcastle-under-Lyme MP Aaron Bell called for Johnson to go first, saying in a statement on Friday afternoon that “The breach of trust that the events in Downing Street represent, and the manner in which they have been handled, makes [his] position untenable.”

The MP was widely believed to have submitted a letter after he challenged the prime minister in the House of Commons on Monday.

Bell told MPs he had followed the lockdown rules meticulously, driving three hours each way to his grandmother’s funeral without hugging his family or stopping for a cup of tea, and asked pointedly: “Does the prime minister think I’m a fool?”

On Friday evening he was [joined by former minister Nick Gibb](#), who wrote in the Telegraph that his constituents were “furious about the double standards” and that the prime minister had been “inaccurate” in his statements to the Commons.

Gibb said: “The prime minister accepted the resignation of Allegra Stratton for joking about a Christmas party that she hadn’t attended, but he won’t take responsibility for those that he did attend. I am sorry to say that it is hard to see how it can be the case that the prime minister told the truth.”

“To restore trust, we need to change the prime minister,” Gibb wrote.

If 54 letters are sent to the chair of the backbench 1922 Committee, Sir Graham Brady, a vote of no confidence will be called – and if Johnson loses it, his premiership will be over.

Some senior Tory MPs believe the total number of letters may be close to 40, though the total is never made public until the threshold is reached. More are likely to when details emerge of whether Downing Street staff have been fined for breaching lockdown rules.

01:13

‘Am I a fool?’ Aaron Bell asks Johnson after following Covid rules – video

The Met is investigating a dozen parties in Downing Street and Whitehall and has been handed a bundle of evidence including 300 photographs. One person who has seen some of them said, “It looked like a party to me”, adding that they would not be surprised if up to 20 No 10 staff ended up being given fixed penalty notices.

On Friday evening the Mirror reported that the police have a photograph of Boris Johnson holding a can of a beer at his lockdown birthday party in June 2020.

Johnson sought to placate Conservative MPs on Friday with a conciliatory letter detailing plans to include them in future policymaking.

He is also planning a policy blitz next week, according to government sources, with announcements expected “pretty much every day”, including on health and a potential overseas trip for discussions on the crisis in Ukraine.

Johnson flew to Ukraine earlier this week, and No 10 subsequently released a publicity video about the trip with a movie-style soundtrack.

This week also saw the publication of the long-awaited levelling-up white paper and Sunak’s cost of living measures, but Downing Street has struggled to wrench the headlines away from the ongoing chaos in No 10.

Johnson told MPs in his letter: “I understand the deep importance of engaging with colleagues in parliament and listening to your views, and that is why I want colleagues to have a direct line into 10 Downing Street,” he wrote. “I promised change and this is what we will now deliver together.”

One former cabinet minister said they believed the departures from the PM’s team on Thursday evening – which left him without a director of communications, a principal private secretary or a chief of staff – could hasten Johnson’s own exit. “The mass exodus is obviously bad for Boris and may bring forward decision day,” they said.

Another former minister said: “I think there are probably a lot of people who are going to be wrestling with their consciences over the weekend.” They

said the exodus from Downing Street “all looks a little bit like panic”.

Elena Narozanski, a special adviser to the prime minister on women and equalities, culture, media and sport and extremism, became the fifth aide to depart on Friday morning.

Johnson’s spokesman said new appointments would be made “in the coming days”. Some MPs say they are awaiting for these before judging whether Johnson has fulfilled the promise he made to overhaul his top team. One Tory insider said the situation was “very fluid” but that No 10 would want to make the appointments before the weekend was out.

Among those being tipped for a communications job are Simon McGee, a former Foreign Office press head, and the current press secretary, Rosie Bate-Williams.

For more strategic roles, insiders suggested David Canzini, an ally of Lynton Crosby, and Ross Kempsey, a senior political operator at Conservative campaign headquarters.

Lord Frost has already made clear that he will not come back into the fold while the national insurance rise is going ahead, and former aides Lord Lister and Will Walden are also thought to be resistant to returning.

Another senior figure in communications said he had turned down the job previously and would not go to a “sinking ship”.

The prime minister gathered No 10 staff in the cabinet room for a pep talk on Friday morning, [quoting the Lion King](#) to tell them “change is good”, after five members of his senior team, including Mirza, had quit in the space of less than 24 hours.

Johnson’s spokesperson said: “He reflected on the privilege of working in No 10 in order to deliver for the British people and reiterated his and No 10’s commitment to serving the public by keeping people safe, improving lives and spreading opportunity.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/feb/04/boris-johnson-struggles-to-rally-team-as-pressure-on-him-builds-up>.

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Boris Johnson

Boris Johnson's ministers watch and wonder as MPs sense the 'end of days'

Analysis: The PM needs to replace his lost team quickly as some in the cabinet start to pull away



The Tory party is unsure who is now running the Johnson project in No 10.
Photograph: Leon Neal/Getty Images

Rowena Mason Deputy political editor

Fri 4 Feb 2022 13.53 EST

Boris Johnson ends a bruising week with a vacuum at the heart of Downing Street and cabinet ministers beginning to distance themselves from his leadership.

The loss of his communications director, Jack Doyle, his chief of staff, Dan Rosenfield, his principal private secretary, Martin Reynolds, and his policy

chief, Munira Mirza, all in one day leaves the Tory party unsure who is now running the Johnson project in No 10, what its aims are and who will carry out their pursuit.

While the first three have notionally agreed to stay on until replacements are found, many MPs are beginning to doubt whether a team can be stitched together in time to stave off a confidence vote.



Boris Johnson started the week aiming to overshadow partygate.
Photograph: WPA/Getty Images

With every day that passes, Tory MPs agree among themselves that Johnson's premiership has an "end of days" feel to it – and yet the threshold of 54 letters signalling a loss of support in the prime minister has not been reached, leaving the party and government in a paralysed limbo.

Johnson started the week with a schedule of announcements designed to overshadow the damaging revelations of the Sue Gray report and the Met police investigation into the Downing Street parties.

A day trip to Ukraine was set up to make him look like an involved international leader, and there was the launch of his flagship policy on

levelling up. MPs appeared temporarily boosted by the news that [Sir Lynton Crosby, his elections guru](#), would be back giving him advice.

But on closer inspection, each of these events only served to make him look weaker, as he ran shy of the press by taking just a Sun journalist with him to Kyiv, and failed to take the lead on the white paper, sending out the cabinet minister Michael Gove instead to do a statement and media interviews. It also became increasingly clear that Crosby's involvement would be at arm's length only.

A bellicose performance at [prime minister's questions on Wednesday](#) also triggered at least one of the resignations – that of policy chief Munira Mirza as he failed to apologise for his slur two days earlier against Keir Starmer. Johnson had falsely claimed that Starmer had failed to prosecute the serial child abuser Jimmy Savile when director of public prosecutions..

For all the furore around the parties, it is the prime minister's flailing response and lack of contrition over the Savile slur that appears to have been the last straw for Mirza, along with some other MPs, such as Gary Streeter, who was one of at least five to put in letters of no confidence this week.

And all the while, his cabinet ministers are watching from the sidelines, wondering whether the moment will come soon for a leadership contest.



Rishi Sunak returning to Downing Street on Friday. Photograph: Tolga Akmen/AFP/Getty Images

Rishi Sunak, the chancellor and the frontrunner to succeed Johnson, was the first to draw a line between himself and the beleaguered prime minister, saying [he would not have made the Savile comment about Starmer](#).

And then Sajid Javid, the health secretary, another possible rival, also laid down a marker that he did not approve of the remarks, saying Starmer as director of public prosecutions did a “[good job and he should be respected for it](#)”.

01:12

Keir Starmer 'deserves absolute respect', says Sajid Javid – video

Several of the cabinet – Liz Truss, Nadhim Zahawi and Grant Shapps – are in isolation with Covid, but the collective role of Johnson’s top team will become increasingly important in the days to come.

Should Johnson manage to cobble together only a weak and insubstantial team over the weekend to replace his losses in No 10, then MPs may begin to lose the faith even before the conclusion of the Met police investigation and full publication of the Gray report.

In this situation, they will increasingly be looking to the cabinet heavyweights and potential leadership challengers to give them the nod that now is the time to start submitting letters in droves. That moment has not yet come – but MPs and Downing Street are on tenterhooks.

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- Stream big How Netflix changed the TV landscape in 10 years
- Lauren Laverne 'My biggest disappointment? Myself – that's my Catholic upbringing'
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‘There will have been students who got a £6,000 fine, yet people at the top are doing this.’ Photograph: Lol Keegan. Prop styling: [Propped Up](#)

‘We had two people over – then the police turned up’: how do Covid rule-breakers feel about partygate?

‘There will have been students who got a £6,000 fine, yet people at the top are doing this.’ Photograph: Lol Keegan. Prop styling: [Propped Up](#)

From the DJ fined £12,000 to the host of a small new year’s gathering – the people who *did* get busted for breaking lockdown restrictions tell their stories

by [Gaby Hinsliff](#)

Sat 5 Feb 2022 03.00 EST

The knock on the door came just before midnight on New Year's Eve. Chloé Gardiner and her boyfriend were at home, but not alone. After a hard year, they had invited two friends over to see in 2021 with them, breaking strict rules in force in her area as the UK entered its second wave of the pandemic.

"There were three carloads of police in the end," says Gardiner, a 23-year-old care assistant from the small town of Portstewart in Northern Ireland. "And there were only four of us." It was hardly a wild party, she says – they were just hanging out, listening to music and posting the odd picture to social media – and she doesn't know who reported them; they weren't being loud, and they have no close neighbours. They were fined £200 each for breaching Covid regulations, deducted automatically in her case from her wages. Gardiner, who works two jobs, says money went from both pay packets, and she is still trying to recoup £100 she thinks was wrongly deducted in the confusion.

Working in care, Gardiner had seen the consequences of Covid-19. Why did she take the risk? "At the beginning I adhered to all the rules, but the more things went on – it's bad for your mental health, it's tough trying to stay away from people you see in your everyday life anyway. And for something as simple as a hug ... it was just nice to have people over for New Year."

Gardiner had never been in trouble with the police before, and initially felt bad about it. But when the health secretary, Matt Hancock, [resigned](#) the following summer after being caught kissing an aide, guilt turned to something more like indignation, followed by fury when stories of boozy lockdown parties in Downing Street began to surface. "It's awful, what's now coming out. It's not just one or two. When their parties were going on, I was having to video-call families whose loved ones were on their deathbeds," she says. "How can we live by the government's rules if they can't live with them themselves?"

That question has reverberated through Westminster in recent weeks, as tales of a "[bring-your-own-booze](#)" party in the Downing Street garden and Friday night "[wine-time](#)" sessions dripped out. Individual liberties have been curtailed to a previously unimaginable degree during the pandemic – and sometimes huge sacrifices have been made. Mourners avoided hugging each other at funerals; mothers gave birth alone; and for months on end millions

of Britons left their homes only for essential errands such as exercising and buying food. Most complied, with a [YouGov poll in 2020](#) finding 68% of Britons claimed to have done everything asked of them. But one in four didn't – numbers likely to have risen as the pandemic wore on. Now the realisation that those who set the rules may have repeatedly broken them is casting the last two years in a different light, prompting difficult questions about freedom, trust in government, and the power of the state.

By last December, police in England and Wales had [issued 118,963 fines](#) for breaking Covid regulations – anything from meeting one friend when socialising was banned, through to staging illegal raves, with fines ranging from £100 for minor infractions to £10,000 for the most egregious, and sometimes more in cases of late payment. In Northern Ireland, police issued more than 8,000 fines over the year to March 2021, and Scottish police handed out [more than 12,843 in the year to August 2021](#). Over half of all Covid fines were issued during the lockdown between January and March 2021, when schools, pubs, offices and restaurants shut once again, and the initial novelty of clapping for the NHS gave way for some to frustration, deepening financial hardship and plummeting mental health.

Friends called, crying, saying, 'I'm in my room going crazy.' It's breaking the law to even say, 'Come over'

As so few cases reached trial, it's not always clear what drove the rule-breakers (fixed penalty notices, or FPNs, are processed like speeding fines, usually without a defendant going to court). A handful of sad cases have made headlines, from the Somerset care worker [fined for eating a sandwich in her car](#), post-shift, at a beauty spot (deemed a non-essential journey) to a lonely 66-year-old pensioner from London who [met friends at his allotment](#) as he picked greens for supper.

Not every case, however, elicits such sympathy. In London, 31 police officers responsible for enforcing Covid laws were [fined for breaking them to get haircuts](#). Three students in Norwich [were each fined £10,000](#) for throwing a house party for 100 people. And on the day the Queen buried her husband of 70 years, sitting alone in her funeral pew, a 27-year-old Londoner named Vianna McKenzie-Bramble [marked her birthday](#) with a

marquee, a bouncy castle and around 60 guests gathering outside her flat. What she couldn't have known was that hours earlier Downing Street staff had also hosted [two illicit leaving bashes](#), reportedly merging into one drunken gathering. Although Boris Johnson wasn't present, [No 10 would later apologise](#) to the Queen.

Police called out to break up McKenzie-Bramble's party in Victoria Park, London, found the grass littered with empty bottles and nitrous oxide canisters. Over at Downing Street, there was reportedly dancing in the basement and someone broke a swing used by Johnson's toddler son. While she was fined £12,000, the Downing Street party remained a secret for eight months, despite the presence of a 24-hour police guard outside No 10.

For many who suffered traumatic lockdowns and stuck to the rules, the thought of Downing Street aides swigging gin in the garden may be enraging. Yet some Britons caught partying during lockdown seem almost as infuriated by the idea of those in power getting away with what they were punished for doing. If the pandemic once divided Britons into rule-takers and rule-breakers, the partygate scandal may have briefly reunited them in anger.

There is a stretch of boggy marshland, on the fringes of the London suburb of Edmonton, that could have been made for illegal parties. Bordering an area where fly-tippers dump old sofas, it's close enough to a busy road to mask the sound from the DJ decks, but over three miles from nearby houses. When police were called to this wasteland on 30 May last year, they found around 500 people who had been raving all night and into the morning, in [defiance of Covid rules limiting outdoor gatherings to 30 people](#).

Party organiser Jayden Elworthy, a DJ, actor and aspiring model from London, claimed to be "saving lives on the dancefloor" and said of Covid that "we are past that now", according to the officers' testimony to court. In his absence, [Westminster magistrates fined him](#) the maximum allowable under coronavirus law – £10,000, rising to £12,000 for failing to pay a fixed penalty notice promptly.



‘No one blames me now. Everyone’s like, so why were we staying at home, then?’: Jayden Elworthy, given a £12,000 fine for running a rave. Photograph: Paola de Grenet/The Guardian

Over the phone from Barcelona, where he is currently working, Elworthy is initially defiant. When he organised the rave, he says, Ascot racecourse was preparing to welcome thousands of racegoers, and football crowds would soon be gathering to watch the Euros. “No one cared. Everyone was mixing,” he says. “I’m not going to have people govern me when firstly they don’t even abide by their own governance, and secondly that governance is flawed.” Elworthy, who has had Covid twice, agrees there was a “limited necessity” for restrictions to stop it spreading, but is suspicious of the science. He spends some time expounding on a complex conspiracy theory popular online, involving US public health officials supposedly paying a Chinese lab to make the virus, alongside various plots he believes were covered up by the mainstream media. His private rule of thumb, he says, was that partying was acceptable if the R rate of the virus was under one. But the bravado crumbles when it comes to the fine. He can’t pay, he says, and seems paralysed thinking about it. “I don’t know what to do. I haven’t even appealed it. I just prioritise everything else in my life instead.”

The clubbing and events sector in which Elworthy earns a living was the first to be shut down and the last to be reopened in successive lockdowns.

He runs a tech company on the side, but still had to claim universal credit at times, and has friends who lost everything; others, he says, were key workers risking infection every time they went to work, who felt they had little left to lose by mingling socially, too. “For some it was easy – you could stay at home and avoid it. But some were forced out into the wilderness of Covid, so then what’s the point of staying in when your mental health is at risk? There were a couple of DJs who killed themselves because overnight they had nothing – no career, no life.”

The parties, he insists, were about “saving people from loneliness, depression, drug abuse. I had friends calling me, crying, saying, ‘I don’t know what to do, I feel like a fish in a fishbowl; I go to work, I come back, I’ve already had Covid and I’m sat in my room going crazy.’ It’s breaking the law to even say, ‘Come over.’”

After his court case was reported in the press, Elworthy got some abuse online. But he thinks the mood changed when the tales from No 10 tumbled out. “No one blames me now,” he says. “Everyone’s like, ‘So why were we staying at home, then?’”

Jack started his biology degree in autumn 2020, just as the second Covid wave was gathering force. He had no face-to-face teaching for his first year at University College London and was largely confined to halls, sharing a flat with five strangers he didn’t get on with. After the country locked down again on 5 January 2021, he says, police patrolled the halls alongside university guards, making students stick to their rooms.

At 19, Jack wasn’t afraid of catching the virus, but he did fear the financial consequences of breaking lockdown. “A friend had a party and he got fined £1,800; his mum ended up taking a loan out to pay for it. It doesn’t seem right, the pressure that was put on us – sit in your room and be really depressed, or leave the room and financially cripple yourself. You don’t want to harm anyone by giving them Covid, but you don’t want to end up wasting your life away in a room, either.” So one February night, Jack sneaked upstairs to see friends.

There were seven of them in a room, he says, keeping quiet so as not to attract attention. But they were caught by security guards and each fined £100. “What we were doing was obviously wrong, but I could justify it to myself in the sense that we weren’t seeing anyone who was vulnerable – it was all in the same building, and I was with people I’d been seeing every day just before lockdown,” he says. “Even though breaking the rules is obviously not a good thing, it’s interesting that the students who didn’t break the rules noticeably struggled to fit in. A lot of them are currently living alone or have mental health issues.”

Will, now in his second year at university in Cardiff, also succumbed to temptation after a frustrating year of cancelled A-levels and staying in. “I had spent my whole life at school and then three months before my final exams it was like, ‘Nope, see you later.’ We never had a prom or a leavers’ ball. Then we got here and it was: ‘Stay put, don’t go to lectures,’” he recalls. Learning moved online, and all five of his student housemates dropped out of university; rattling round the house on his own, he threw one illicit lockdown party without getting caught, emboldening him to try again last March. This time, with around 100 guests and music blaring out, the party was broken up by campus security. His friends vanished quickly, leaving, as Will puts it, “just me, in my now really dirty house”. Given the size of the party and the fact that it was his house, Will was warned he could be fined up to £6,000.

The policeman said, ‘Are you part of the same household?’ The silence lasted a bit too long: do you tell the truth or lie?

What possessed him? “Being students, you feel a little bit – not invulnerable, but we were surrounded by each other. We weren’t going into lectures, we weren’t going to give it to our elderly professors,” he says. After a meeting convened between police and his university to settle several outstanding student cases, Will escaped with a £30 fine and a warning. He says of the Downing Street party allegations: “It’s so bizarre, I don’t even really know how to process it. I only got fined £30, and my mum was nice enough to pay it, but there will have been people who got a £6,000 fine who are students, who are in debt, yet the people at the top of the country are doing this.”

Harry, a 22-year-old final-year student in Newcastle who was also fined after being caught socialising at another student house, feels differently. Some of his friends racked up fines of up to £800, yet they felt it was worth the risk when nightclubs were closed: “The first time you got caught it was £100, and we were probably saving that on entrance fees and drinks.” Harry voted Conservative at the last election, and takes an equally relaxed view of Johnson’s conduct. “You’ve got a few young spuds and it’s their social life – I kind of think of these people as the weird kids at school [about whom] you thought, ‘I hope they never go into politics’ and they probably don’t have much of a life outside work. [Boris Johnson](#) wasn’t elected to be a cookie-cutter Hugh Grant-type prime minister, was he?”

Larissa Kennedy, president of the National Union of [Students](#), argues that only a “very small minority” of students broke the rules, and often only because they were struggling emotionally. “I’ve spoken to people who had months of not seeing anyone, who were only going out once a day for their exercise and not talking to a living soul. Some of them had moved countries to come to the UK and study, only to be locked into a room.”



‘A friend had a party and got fined £1,800; his mum ended up taking a loan out to pay for it.’ Photograph: Lol Keegan. Prop styling: [Propped Up](#)

But Jack, Will and Harry are typical lockdown-breakers in one sense, which is that they're all young men. A [study led by researchers at the University of Sheffield](#), part of a larger exercise examining everything from young people's compliance with advice to wash their hands to their mental health during the pandemic, found that over half of men aged 19 to 24 admitted breaking Covid guidelines during the first lockdown in spring 2020. One in five men aged 19 to 21 reported being arrested, fined, warned or escorted home by police, compared with only one in 10 women that age.

One explanation is that men were more likely to guess that their own friends wouldn't comply with lockdown, encouraging them to rebel without fear of being judged for it. Dr Jilly Gibson-Miller, lecturer in psychology at Sheffield, explains over Zoom that young people's willingness to take risks depends on how they perceive others who do it. "If they identify with that person, they're more willing to take that risk. It boils down to social comparison," she says. "They might see a person who followed the rules as more sensible or more grown up, but that's not necessarily a cool thing." Where older age groups saw rule-breakers as selfish or immature, the study found young men tended to see them as "cool" or "independent". They also tended to underplay the dangers of Covid, says the study's co-author, Dr Liat Levita. "I think they didn't see the point of complying. When we asked questions such as, 'How much risk are you to others?', the males tended to underestimate it."

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The study did, however, find links between compliance and mental health, with those feeling anxious more likely to obey the rules and those feeling depressed more likely to break them and seek out company. "Anxiety has a survival value," says Levita, who argues that while many young people described feeling anxious during the pandemic, that may have been a healthy reaction, so long as that anxiety was not crippling. "But depression is interesting, in terms of how low mood affects your behaviour. You're less likely to engage with anything, you have very low motivations – with that kind of diagnosis, we did find people struggled more in adhering to the guidelines."

Nonetheless, Levita and Gibson-Miller argue that young people shouldn't be seen as having behaved recklessly and that, if anything, it's surprising so many complied with unprecedented curbs on their freedom. "They didn't wash their hands so well. Sometimes, they broke the rules. But they did almost everything we asked of them, without going out into the streets and creating anarchy and throwing bottles around and rioting," Levita says. And while those aged between 18 and 29 received [over half of fines](#) issued up to March 2021, plenty of other recipients were arguably old enough to know better.

Harriet is a 54-year-old teacher from Hampshire, who followed the rules religiously through the first lockdown. But by December 2020, she was growing restless. A keen wild swimmer, she drove to the shingle beach at Hill Head near Portsmouth with two female friends for a bracing dip between Christmas and New Year, even though the restrictions in force allowed for meeting only one person outside her household to exercise. Heading into the chilly water, they bumped into two more swimmers they knew. The women were towelling off afterwards when a policeman, who she suspects was tipped off by another beachgoer, approached. "I was so embarrassed I just pulled my towel over my head," she admits. "He said, 'Are you part of the same household?' and there was this silence that lasted a bit too long – do you tell the truth or lie? But being the good citizens we are, we told the truth." The women apologised profusely and were relieved when, instead of fining them, the officer merely warned them not to do it again.

As a teacher, Harriet arguably risked jeopardising her professional reputation by breaking the law. What possessed her? "We were doing something that, in our view, we had risk-assessed, that was in a bit of a grey area – you were allowed to meet one other person outside; we were just a bit on the edge of that," she says. "We had the windows open and we were fully masked in the car." It felt odd, she adds, that she was allowed to work all day with hundreds of potentially infectious children, yet she was barred from meeting friends.

The rollout of the longed-for Covid vaccine that winter may have encouraged a surprising number of older Britons to drop their guard. The

Office for National Statistics found that [almost half of over-80s](#) met someone from outside their household or bubble indoors after their first jab, and given the timing of vaccinations, many must have breached the January to March lockdown to do so. After months in hiding, seeing their grandchildren only over FaceTime, perhaps loneliness got the better of some.



'I was there for something bigger than me': Bianca Ali, threatened with a £500 fine for being involved in a protest. Photograph: Francesca Jones/The Guardian

From the beginning, police have had some discretion to exercise compassion in such circumstances, via a strategy allowing them to explain and warn lockdown-breakers rather than leap to penalty notices. But even compassion can have its downsides, if exercised disproportionately in favour of some groups over others. Research published last year by the human rights pressure group Liberty found people of colour were [54% more likely to be fined](#) for breaching Covid laws than white people, reflecting concerns that "existing patterns about the policing of certain communities would be replicated and exacerbated" by an enforcement-led approach to lockdown, as its policy and campaigns officer Jun Pang puts it. Alternative measures such as improving sick pay and halting evictions could, she argues, have been used to help low earners comply.

Whether or not they were more likely to break the rules, the poor were arguably disproportionately likely to get caught. Hiding a party is easier in a remote country house – or a bomb-proofed building sealed off from the public road, like No 10 – than an inner-city flat with paper-thin walls. Flat-dwellers with no outside space, meeting in parks for illicit beers, were more visible to police patrols than homeowners smuggling guests into suburban gardens. Alba Kapoor, senior policy officer at the Runnymede Trust, meanwhile points out that ethnic minority Britons were disproportionately more likely to be living in overcrowded and pressured conditions when lockdown hit. “For us, the key takeaway is that the extension of police powers in this way will always have a disproportionate impact on BAME groups and on black men in particular,” she says. And, she points out, all this unfolded just as an emerging [Black Lives Matter](#) movement was providing a new focus for old frustrations with the criminal justice system.

In January 2021, Bianca Ali was getting ready for a protest marking the death in police custody of a black man, [Mohamud Hassan](#), when two police vans pulled up outside her Cardiff flat. “I live alone and I’m 5ft 2in – I’m not a threat,” says Ali, 30, a co-founder of Black Lives Matter Cardiff Community. “They were banging on my front door saying that they knew I was in there – I didn’t open the door, I didn’t know what could happen to me. It was a really intimidating situation.” Ali was warned to expect a fine for organising a protest gathering in lockdown, although she insists she wasn’t the organiser.



‘The police weren’t patrolling Downing Street, checking if those people were in groups of six.’ Photograph: Lol Keegan. Prop styling: [Propped Up](#)

It didn’t stop her joining the socially distanced protest outside Cardiff Bay police station, which lasted four days. “I was there for something bigger than me. If they want to give me a fine, it’s not going to stop me protesting about the death of a black person,” she says now. Ali was handed a £500 fine, but refused to pay, triggering a stressful eight-month legal battle that ended last autumn with police dropping the prosecution. Nonetheless, she was shaken by the process. “I suffer from anxiety, and my anxiety went through the roof,” she says. “Even now, if I walk from my house to my mum’s house, I have to pass the police station, and my stomach turns over. It’s a horrible feeling, especially on evenings like this when it’s dark. Who’s going to believe me, a young black woman from a rough area of Cardiff, against the police?”

Ali was represented by Patrick Ormerod, a solicitor with the London firm Bindmans, who argued that she was exercising her human rights in protesting, and thus had a reasonable excuse for breaching lockdown. Having also handled cases of students threatened with £10,000 fines for throwing parties in which the legislation turned out to have been misapplied, Ormerod argues a straightforward mechanism for appealing Covid fines is urgently needed. “I hope the Covid public inquiry will look at what could

have been done differently with the criminal justice response to the pandemic. Jacob Rees-Mogg [the leader of the Commons] has suggested we should look at whether the restrictions were proportionate, but I think the inquiry should also look at how so many people were criminalised when they probably weren't guilty of the offences," he says, pointing out that for those who can't afford lawyers, the prospect of challenging fines in court is daunting.

That was true for Ali Lawrence, a musician and music teacher from York who for decades has supplemented his living by busking. During the first summer of the pandemic, when the rules relaxed and restaurants were buzzing with "eat out to help out", he managed to get out and play. But by March 2021, having earned almost nothing in three months and exhausted a government support grant, he was poring over the regulations trying to establish whether busking was allowed.



'I caved in and paid, but I didn't think I'd done anything wrong': Ali Lawrence, fined £200 for busking. Photograph: Richard Saker/The Guardian

"During the 18 months of restrictions, nearly every musician was out of work. It was a tough time," he says. "There wasn't really any clear explanation in the rules – the only thing it said was that if you couldn't work from home, you could travel to your place of work. And cases like mine are

a business.” When he settled down at his piano in a busy York square, he took a copy of the regulations and a photocopy of his tax return to show music was his job, but was nonetheless told to stop by a police officer because he was “drawing an audience”. (He admits it may not have helped that when the officers approached his busking partner, Karl Mullen, the latter started playing the Laurel and Hardy theme tune on the piano.) [Footage uploaded to YouTube](#) from a bystander’s mobile phone shows a masked Lawrence at his piano and curious shoppers skirting round him, while a passerby observes that “there’s more people in Morrisons than there are here”. North Yorkshire police handed him a £200 fine.

Lawrence didn’t want to pay up for what he thought didn’t constitute an illegal gathering, but feared getting a criminal record if he went to court and lost. “So I caved in. But I felt awful, because I thought, ‘Well, I haven’t done anything wrong – I’m just trying to work.’” (North Yorkshire police subsequently said in a statement that [his fine](#) was for “contravening an officer’s instructions” to stop.)

While Lawrence views Johnson’s so-called “work events” in Downing Street as “just what you expect” of politicians, his experiences have changed the way he feels about the police. He remains anxious about getting into trouble, and recently when he was asked to move on while busking in a nearby market town, he gave in for fear of another fine. He is closely following the progress through parliament of [the police, crime, sentencing and courts bill](#), which contains controversial new restrictions on protest. “I’m worried that we’re losing all our freedoms. It’s in the back of my mind that we had almost a bit of a police state last year.”

Over the last two years the police have been visible in everyday lives as never before: patrolling parks, interrogating dog walkers at beauty spots, breaking up backyard barbecues. And for some who haven’t previously experienced the sharp end of the law, that may have been a wakeup call. The NUS’s Larissa Kennedy thinks the pandemic may have shaped young people’s feelings about the police, citing a resurgence of “cops off campus” campaigns fuelled by resentment at the heavy security presence during lockdown – including instances of black students being stopped and challenged when trying to get into their own halls. Liberty’s Jun Pang,

meanwhile, wonders whether living under this level of surveillance may prompt some Britons who hadn't previously been in trouble with the police to empathise more with minority communities. "It's really interesting, hearing people talk about their first interactions with the police. People might describe it as quite arbitrary or say they don't understand what's going on. Well, something we have been trying to say from the beginning is that lots of communities experience arbitrary policing because of things like racism and discrimination; lots of people have interactions with the police that don't seem to make any sense. I think this is a really interesting moment."

If all goes to plan, and the government lifts all pandemic restrictions in March, the era of Covid fines will be over. But long after memories of being banned from sitting on a park bench have faded, some will still be quietly paying off those fines. And for those like Jack, who broke the law when they were young and lonely, the corrosive feeling that it's one rule for the governed and another for the government lingers. "They were doing it because they think they're above the law, and they are above the law, really," he says of parties at No 10. "The police weren't patrolling Downing Street, they weren't checking if those people were in groups of six. They didn't do that for the MPs – they did it for students. But if anything, maybe it should have been the other way round."

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Stream big: how Netflix changed the TV landscape in 10 years



Remote possibilities ... from The Queen's Gambit to Bridgerton, Netflix has offered up a host of highly bingeable series. Composite: Getty

A decade ago this month, the streaming platform released its first original series, and never looked back since. But, with competition building, can it

stay on top?

Steve Rose
@steverose7

Sat 5 Feb 2022 04.00 EST

“I’m a brand new guy over here,” said “Little” Steven Van Zandt in the first episode of [Lilyhammer](#), back in January 2012. He wasn’t that new: Van Zandt was basically reprising the New Jersey mobster persona he’d successfully deployed for nearly a decade in *The Sopranos*. After ratting out his associates, his new character, Frank “the Fixer” Tagliano, had to begin a new life – in Lillehammer, Norway. The sleepy, snowy town didn’t know what was about to hit it. The same could be said for us: *Lilyhammer* was Netflix’s first original series.

Ten years on, our entertainment landscape is almost unrecognisable. [Netflix](#) has changed what we watch and the way we watch it. It has successfully reorganised traditional broadcast television and theatrical cinema models and put itself at the centre, growing from 24 million subscribers in 2012 to 214 million this year. It is available in more than 190 countries (Netflix UK launched the same month as *Lilyhammer*). It has created more than 1,500 original series, including planet-straddlingly massive shows such as *Stranger Things* and *Bridgerton*. In 2021 alone it released over 150 original movies – three per week. Its competitors have been playing catchup ever since. So how did it take over entertainment in just 10 years?

Lilyhammer was not exactly a smash hit, even if an estimated 20% of Norway’s population watched it. But the show marked the streamer’s first tentative step into making its own content, in partnership with the Norwegian broadcaster NRK1. By this stage Netflix had seen the writing on the wall. It had successfully transitioned from a mail-order DVD service to delivering content directly to consumers over the internet. This had always been the plan: the clue was in the name. But its biggest hits were existing shows such as *Family Guy*, *Grey’s Anatomy*, *Law & Order*, *the US Office* and *Parks and Recreation*. It was only a matter of time before the big media players noticed Netflix’s booming subscriber numbers and reclaimed their programmes for their own streaming platforms. So Netflix borrowed a

trunkload of cash (\$16bn over the past 10 years) and plotted its transition from distribution to production.

Netflix has not only transformed our entertainment landscape but our social one, too – and not just in terms of “Netflix and chill”. In 2010, two years before *Lilyhammer*, the company acquired the now-feted *Breaking Bad*, which had just finished its third season on AMC. The crime series already had a cult following by that stage, but Netflix supercharged its popularity by putting the first three seasons up on its platform ahead of the fourth. Not only could new viewers quickly get up to speed, they could consume *Breaking Bad* the same way Walter White’s customers consumed his top-grade meth.



Executive order ... Robin Wright in *House of Cards*, the first series to really put Netflix on the map. Photograph: David Giesbrecht/AP

To the under-35s, the idea of dutifully congregating round the living room television at the same time each week to catch your favourite show sounds laughably old-fashioned. We now expect the next episode to be available when we want it – which is often straight after the previous one has ended – and where we want it, be that the living room flat-screen, our laptop in bed or the phone on the commute to work.

In 2013, the term “binge-watch” was a runner-up to “selfie” for the Oxford Dictionary’s word of the year. By that time Netflix itself had published the results of a survey that found that 61% of streaming viewers binge-watched regularly and 73% had positive feelings towards it. Never mind that binge-watching has been blamed for everything from political apathy to insomnia, attention deficiency to declining birthrates; as Ted Sarandos, Netflix’s chief content officer put it, “binge-watching is the new normal”.

The year after *Lilyhammer*, Netflix released the show that really put it on the map as a producer: [House of Cards](#), whose mix of big-name talent (David Fincher, Kevin Spacey, Robin Wright), buzzy political themes and cinema-standard production values were impossible to ignore. Netflix bid over the odds for the rights to the series – some \$100m – and even took the unprecedented step of greenlighting a second season up front. It has continued to bring in the big names in the years since: Martin Scorsese, the Coen brothers, Noah Baumbach and Alfonso Cuarón (whose *Roma* [won Netflix its first Oscars in 2019](#)). It looks likely to figure again in this year’s race, with contenders such as Jane Campion’s [The Power of the Dog](#) and Maggie Gyllenhaal’s [The Lost Daughter](#). The channel has courted big names from outside cinema, too, signing high-profile production deals with the likes of the Obamas and the Duke and Duchess of Sussex.

In truth, though, these are the exceptions rather than the rule. The typical Netflix programme is not created by Oscar winners or royals. Indeed, by design, there is no “typical” Netflix programme. Where mainstream broadcasting has traditionally taken a “one size fits all” approach to programming – with that one size being determined by a small upper echelon of executives – mainly straight, white, American and male – Netflix has taken the exact opposite approach, casting the net far and wide in search of fresh talent and tailoring content to underserved audiences.

One thing that Netflix does well is content that others wouldn’t have done because there wasn’t seemingly an audience

Julia Alexander, analyst

This has been key to Netflix’s success, says Deborah Jaramillo, a professor of film and television at Boston University: “[Traditional TV] was putting

the idea out there that there was one sort of universal experience that we could all attach to and identify with, when the reality was that we are many different people with many different backgrounds, needs and struggles. Those things were not being spoken to by the whole model of broadcast television.” Jaramillo hates the term “binge-watching”, she adds, with its connotations of guilt and sin. “I think it casts a negative light on active, exuberant television-viewing. Watching movie marathons or reading a book aren’t understood in the same way, even though you’re still engaged for long periods of time.”

Netflix has attracted Black film-makers and showrunners such as Ava DuVernay (who has delivered documentary [13th](#) and series [When They See Us](#) and [Colin in Black and White](#)), Spike Lee ([She’s Gotta Have It](#)) and Shonda Rhimes ([Bridgerton](#)). It has championed LGBTQ+-friendly programming such as [Orange Is the New Black](#), [Sex Education](#) and RuPaul’s [Drag Race](#).

“One thing that Netflix does extremely well on the English-speaking side is content that others wouldn’t have done because there just wasn’t seemingly an audience for it,” says Julia Alexander, of Parrot Analytics. A great example for her is teen series and romcoms, shows such as [Never Have I Ever](#), [The Kissing Booth](#) and [To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before](#). “If you were a young girl or a woman between 14 and 34, there was no one really making television for you. And Netflix over the last 10 years really leaned into it and thought: ‘There’s an audience here. They’re hyper online and they will like it, it will become their identity.’”

It has done the same in many other areas: Japanese anime, adult-oriented animation, true-crime documentary, standup comedy, fantasy and sci-fi. It has also established footholds in territories including Spain, France, India and South Korea. As a result, non-English-language series that would otherwise never have travelled outside their country of origin have begun to find global audiences, such as Spain’s [Money Heist](#), France’s [Lupin](#) and, most recently, South Korea’s phenomenally popular [Squid Game](#).

Netflix matches this pluralistic approach with an unorthodox work culture, a senior Netflix UK producer explains: “Rather than a situation where you’ve got a massive hierarchy within a company, what you have is lots of people

who have real agency and can make their own decisions, but they do it whilst keeping everybody else in the company super-informed.” Netflix also encourages extreme candour: employees are encouraged to give and receive honest feedback rather than sniping behind people’s backs. For British people especially, all of this takes a lot of getting used to, they say.

The UK is Netflix’s third biggest production hub, after the US and Canada, and it has invested massively here. But it has also moved the dial of British TV in general. Unrestrained by traditional management structures, public scrutiny and limited broadcasting slots, Netflix has been free to go where public service broadcasters could not. At a parliamentary committee hearing in 2020, for example, the MP Kevin Brennan questioned whether the BBC could have made a series such as *The Crown*, given the outrage it would have generated from politicians and hostile media outlets. One independent producer suggested that as a result of Netflix’s edgier British fare, like *The Crown* and *Sex Education*, the BBC and Channel 4 had been emboldened to commission riskier material such as *Normal People*, *It’s a Sin* and *I May Destroy You*.



Dave Chappelle, who provoked a walkout of some staff at Netflix with comments in his standup special that were perceived to be transphobic.
Photograph: Alex Edelman/AFP/Getty Images

Rather than a competitor, Netflix sees itself as part of the thriving ecosystem of British film and television production, it says. It cites the first season of *The End of the F***ing World*, which aired on Channel 4 in the UK, then on Netflix for the rest of the world. When the show returned for its second season, it had gained a global audience, which resulted in increased viewing numbers for Channel 4 – so a win-win.

It doesn't always work out like that, though. Last year, Michaela Coel revealed she had been in discussions to make *I May Destroy You* with Netflix, but it refused to grant her any portion of the rights to her show, not even 0.5%. It told her “it's not how we do things here”, Coel said. She took the show to the BBC and HBO instead. Netflix has declined to comment on that specific case, but says it does different deals with different producers. A spokesperson also points out that “for many of our commissions Netflix finances 100% of the budget, and thus bears the full risk of whether the show is ultimately a commercial success or not, while producers and rights holders are guaranteed their payment.”

Netflix has not always lived up to its diversity commitments, either. In October 2021 it released *The Closer*, the last of six standup specials by African American comedian Dave Chappelle. In the show, Chappelle made a number of comments that were widely condemned as transphobic, not least by Netflix's own employees. Sarandos defended the show, emailing employees that Netflix's leadership “do not believe that *The Closer* is intended to incite hatred or violence against anyone” and that “content on screen doesn't directly translate to real-world harm”. Some Netflix workers staged a walkout in protest. The queer Australian comic Hannah Gadsby, who had filmed two standup specials for Netflix and was cited by Sarandos as a model of Netflix's commitment to “marginalised communities”, responded on Instagram: “Fuck you and your amoral algorithm cult.” Sarandos swiftly backed down and apologised that he had “screwed up”, but the incident pointed to possible faultlines in Netflix's model. Its desire to cater to all tastes had set two of its communities against each other.

Netflix is in all the countries Disney and Warners want to be in. They have access to the talent

Julia Alexander, analyst

A common criticism of Netflix is the extent to which it has atomised our viewing habits. Like Scheherazade in One Thousand and One Nights, its model depends on presenting viewers with a never-ending succession of new content, tailored to their personal viewing habits so that they never cancel their subscription. This is where Netflix's fabled algorithms really do come into play. Users' behaviour data is cross-referenced with its 2,000 different "taste groups" to produce a unique homepage for each user, presenting categories and "because you watched" suggestions that might appeal. Combine this fine-grained approach with the "anytime, anywhere" availability of streaming content, and we're heading for a landscape where we're all in our own discrete entertainment realities, watching different things at different times.

With all this fracturing, does there come a point when film and TV no longer function as "popular culture"? So far, Netflix has managed to square this circle, generating mainstream hits while diversifying our tastes. Look at [The Queen's Gambit](#), for example, whose success led to a boom in sales of chess sets. Or how Squid Game became the network's most watched series ever.

Can Netflix keep it up for another 10 years? Last month, for the first time, [it announced worse-than-expected results](#) that saw its share price drop an alarming 20%, wiping nearly \$50bn off its value. Its rivals are finally catching up. Big media companies such as Disney, Universal and Warner have taken back their content and used it to build their own streaming platforms. Earlier this year, for example, some of Netflix's popular titles, including Modern Family and How I Met Your Mother, migrated to Disney+, which could translate to a loss of 750,000 subscribers, according to analysts. Big tech players Apple and Amazon are also making inroads, fuelled by almost bottomless funds. Amazon Prime Video's forthcoming Lord of the Rings series alone has a budget of nearly half a billion dollars. Even binge-watching is not what it used to be. Some of the most talked about rival shows of the past year, such as Disney's The Mandalorian and WandaVision, and HBO's Succession, have lodged in the public consciousness partly as a result of dropping their episodes once a week, old-school.

For the time being, at least, Netflix is one step ahead, says Julia Alexander: "They're still dominant by, like, aeons," she says. Comparisons are often

difficult to draw, but Netflix's largest comparable rival, Disney+, has about 100 million fewer subscribers. "Yes, competition is affecting Netflix, but at the same time Netflix is hitting a saturation point in the US and Canada, they're making up for that in regions its competitors still aren't even in." Netflix is still growing globally, especially in Asia and Latin America. And it now has production centres across the world: Spain, France, Germany, Brazil, South Korea and more.

"They're in these regions, they have access to the talent, they have the partnerships," says Alexander. "And these are places where Disney and Warner and NBC and Viacom all are going to want to be in, but [those companies] are still building up their presence in the United States and Canada. So it feels like they're playing two different games at this point: everyone is going to wind up wanting to be a global player, but one of the only real global players right now is Netflix."

We've come a long way from *Lilyhammer*. One key difference between Netflix and its rivals is that it is not part of any larger media or retail or hardware business. Netflix is just Netflix. It lives and dies by the popularity of its content. In theory, therefore, it has a deeper interest in giving us what we really want to watch. Although given the past 10 years, it seems to have a better idea of what that is than we do ourselves.

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The Q&ALauren Laverne

Interview

Lauren Laverne: ‘My biggest disappointment? Myself – that’s my Catholic upbringing’

[Rosanna Greenstreet](#)

The presenter and musician on caravan holidays, mean people and sobbing over Strictly Come Dancing



Lauren Laverne: ‘I never feel guilty about pleasure.’ Photograph: Suki Dhanda/The Guardian

Sat 5 Feb 2022 04.30 EST

Born in Sunderland, [Lauren Laverne](#), 43, formed the band [Kenickie](#) when she was a teenager and released two albums before becoming an award-winning broadcaster. She presents BBC 6 Music’s breakfast show, and has

hosted Radio 4's Desert Island Discs since 2018. Her new TV series is The Big Design Challenge on Sky Arts. She is married with two sons and lives in London.

When were you happiest?

There are different flavours of happy, but I think my favourite is the quiet contentment when several generations of family are sitting together watching a crowd-pleaser like Harry Potter on the telly.

What is the trait you most deplore in yourself?

Deflection – what about you?

What is the trait you most deplore in others?

Unkindness, meanness. People who could make the world better and choose to make it worse.

Aside from a property, what's the most expensive thing you've ever bought?

A caravan. I was brought up going on caravan holidays – but we quickly realised that a double-axle caravan was too much of a commitment and sold it.

Describe yourself in three words

Hopeful, curious and thoughtful, in the sense that I am always thinking about things.

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If you could bring something extinct back to life, what would you choose?

The concept of polite disagreement.

What makes you unhappy?

I find it very difficult when the people I care about are unhappy.

Who would play you in the film of your life?

Evanna Lynch who plays Luna Lovegood in the Harry Potter films.

What was the last lie that you told?

Oh, what a lovely hat.

What is your most unappealing habit?

I have a tendency to take on a bit too much and then complain about it in my head afterwards.

What scares you about getting older?

Losing people.

Which book are you ashamed not to have read?

I always feel like I'm catching up because I didn't go to university, so War and Peace and Proust.

What did you want to be when you were growing up?

I wanted to be like my dad, who was an academic, because he had an office packed full of books, always had loud music on, and seemed to get to do what he wanted.

Would you choose fame or anonymity?

Anonymity. It's not good for human beings to be famous, even though it's the thing lots of people seem to want.

What is your guiltiest pleasure?

I never feel guilty about pleasure.

What was the best kiss of your life?

The first with my husband, 20 years ago. We worked together on a pop TV show in the early 00s. He invited me to a gig and we both thought other people would come, but nobody did. We realised that it was Valentine's Day and ended up getting together.

What has been your biggest disappointment?

My biggest disappointment is always myself. That's my Catholic upbringing.

If you could edit your past, what would you change?

It would have been lovely to have grown up in private like a lot of my

friends.

When did you last cry, and why?

The Strictly Come Dancing final almost destroyed me. I was howling all the way through – John and Johannes and then Rose and Giovanni. Oh my God.

What would you like to leave your children?

The knowledge that they were absolutely adored for exactly who they are.

What has been your closest brush with the law?

I did once see someone getting arrested while listening to Judas Priest's Breaking the Law. It was a moment of music synchronicity.

How would you like to be remembered?

I'd rather be enjoyed while I am still here.

What is the most important lesson life has taught you?

The difference between simple and easy.

What happens when we die?

Life goes on.

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Peloton's fortunes race downhill as fitness fans return to gyms



A major Peloton investor said it had ‘grave concerns’ about the company’s performance. Composite: Guardian Design

The exercise bike maker is worth less than a fifth of its \$50bn valuation during global lockdown

Dan Milmo and Alfie Packham

Sat 5 Feb 2022 03.30 EST

If Peloton wants to know why the lockdown boom in home exercise was unsustainable, then Ian Rodriguez has a good answer: working out is more fun with other people.

Rodriguez, a 52-year-old teacher from Preston, Lancashire, cancelled his gym membership when the pandemic hit but couldn't wait to get back. As many others did, he spent money on gym equipment, including a rowing machine and some weights. But then he started missing the gym classes.



Ian Rodriguez, 52, a teacher and writer from Preston, Lancashire

"I kept fit at home throughout the lockdown, but as restrictions eased, the lack of social interaction started to get to me. I was getting to the stage where I missed going to classes at the gym. Exercising on your own, even with someone shouting at you on a screen during an online course, just isn't the same," he says. Rodriguez is now back at the gym "four or five times a week".

Millions of others around the world have responded to the call of the gym instructor, leaving Peloton, the home fitness company, facing further

questions about what this means for demand for its exercise bikes, treadmills and online classes when it reports its latest quarterly results on Tuesday.

The last few years have been a wild ride for the company. Peloton was one of the symbolic commercial successes of the global pandemic lockdown, along with the likes of Zoom, Netflix and Amazon. It [floated in 2019](#) at \$29 per share and its valuation approached \$50bn in January 2021 as shares went over \$160 at the height of lockdown restrictions. But Peloton's fortunes have turned, and the valuation has sped downhill dramatically. Today, the company is worth as much as it was around flotation, at \$8bn. Late on Friday, however, shares in Peloton surged more than 30% in after-hours trading after a report in the Wall Street Journal that Amazon is considering making a bid for the company.

A takeover bid from one of the world's biggest businesses would be in keeping with a high-profile brand that is used to making headlines. In May last year, Peloton [recalled its two treadmills](#) following the death of a child and dozens of other injuries, and in late 2019 it was lambasted for a "sexist and dystopian" [Christmas advert](#), which featured a woman recording a video diary of her Peloton use after her partner gave her a bike.

In December, its shares tumbled following the onscreen death of the Sex and the City character Mr Big [while riding a Peloton](#) in the series reboot, And Just Like That. A rushed-out parody ad campaign by Peloton featuring the Mr Big actor, Chris Noth, was subsequently dropped when Noth was accused of sexual assault. Noth denies the accusations.



Chris Noth as Mr Big in *Sex and the City 2* Photograph: HBO/YouTube

Now, the chief executive, John Foley, is facing pressure from at least one shareholder to resign. [Blackwells Capital](#), an activist investor with a 5% stake in Peloton, says it has “grave concerns” about performance and is calling on its board to fire Foley and explore a sale.

Anjali Lai, a senior analyst at the research company Forrester, says Peloton is wrangling over a question that has affected all companies selling goods and services to consumers: how permanent are the changes brought about by the pandemic?

“Are the dramatic changes in consumer behaviour that we’ve observed over the last two years a pulling forward of consumer demand, or are they indicative of a long-term, persistent change in what consumers buy, and how? In Peloton’s case, supply and demand has been volatile, which indicates that the at-home fitness experience is an acceleration of consumer demand, not necessarily a persistent change.”

Peloton makes and sells exercise bikes (starting at £1,550) and treadmills (starting at £2,545), as well as a monthly subscription fee to its online classes at £12.99 a month. It also makes clothing and accessories, although this is a much smaller part of the business, and recently launched a camera

product. As a rough proxy of how many people use its equipment, the company has 2.5m connected fitness subscriptions, in which users pay £39 a month to access classes through their Peloton bike or treadmill. Peloton does not give a geographic breakdown of sales, but it currently ships equipment to the US – its biggest market – [plus Canada, the UK and Germany.](#)

In its last set of quarterly results in November, it said sales this year will be up to \$1bn lower than expected, at \$4.4bn-\$4.8bn, while the number of monthly workouts by each connected fitness subscriber had fallen to 16, versus 20 for the same period in 2020. It recorded a loss of \$376m in the three months to September last year, against net income – a US measure of profit – of \$69.3m the year before, as it cut the price of its bikes, ramped up ad spending and suffered problems with its supply chain. The company's chief financial officer, Jill Woodworth, said: "It is clear that we underestimated the reopening impact on our company and the overall industry."

The New York-based company said last month that it is [considering job and production cuts](#). A CNBC report, citing internal documents, suggested it was planning a temporary halt to bike and treadmill manufacturing. Responding to the claims in a message to his 3,200 staff, Foley started off strong, saying the report was "out of context" and the company was taking legal action against the leaker, before acknowledging that cost cuts were indeed on the way.

"In the past, we've said layoffs would be the absolute last lever we would ever hope to pull. However, we now need to evaluate our organisation structure and size of our team, with the utmost care and compassion," he said.

In a message that drew heavily on the American corporate lexicon, Foley added that the company would be "resetting". "We feel good about right-sizing our production, and, as we evolve to more seasonal demand curves, we are resetting our production levels for sustainable growth."

[Peloton's share price](#)

Dan Ives, the managing director of the US investment firm Wedbush Securities, says Peloton is a “revolutionary” product but management failed to foresee a shift in demand. “The clock has struck midnight for Peloton coming out of the WFH environment and there could be some darker days ahead as the company adjusts to a lower growth profile,” he says.

Meanwhile, gym owners on both sides of the Atlantic are welcoming back the likes of Ian Rodriguez, albeit against a backdrop of a dire two years for gyms. Pre-pandemic, the UK had 7,239 gyms and 10.4m memberships, according to the Leisure Database Company, a market intelligence firm. It expects both numbers to have fallen last year. In the US, Peloton’s biggest market, about a quarter of health clubs have closed, according to the IHRSA, a fitness industry association, with the number of memberships also expected to drop from the 2019 total of 64m.

Nonetheless, one UK gym industry veteran is optimistic about recovery. John Treharne, the founder and director of the Gym Group, which operates 190 low-cost venues around the UK, says that the entire UK market is now “pretty close” to pre-Covid levels and could be back to normal by Easter. And that, he adds, is partly due to people missing the “social aspect” of gathering for a collective workout.

“The sort of individuals who might have contemplated using an online or Peloton-type product have clearly returned to the more traditional offering,” he says.

Peloton, meanwhile, needs to change gear and adjust to a world where gyms are back in business.

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Coronavirus

‘It is an astronomically high number’: US Covid death toll surpasses 900,000

The two-year total compiled by Johns Hopkins University comes less than two months after eclipsing 800,000 deaths



Nurses prepare doses of Covid-19 vaccine at a pop-up vaccination clinic in Los Angeles, California. Photograph: Étienne Laurent/EPA

Associated Press
Fri 4 Feb 2022 18.54 EST

Propelled in part by the wildly contagious Omicron variant, the US death toll from Covid-19 hit 900,000 on Friday, less than two months after [eclipsing 800,000](#).

The two-year total, as compiled by Johns Hopkins University, is greater than the population of Indianapolis, San Francisco, or Charlotte, North Carolina.

The milestone comes more than 13 months into a vaccination drive that has been beset by misinformation and political and legal strife, though the shots have proved safe and highly effective at preventing serious illness and death.

Despite its wealth and world-class medical institutions, the US has the highest reported toll of any country and even then, the real number of lives lost directly or indirectly to the coronavirus is thought to be significantly higher.

“It is an astronomically high number. If you had told most Americans two years ago as this pandemic was getting going that 900,000 Americans would die over the next few years, I think most people would not have believed it,” said Dr Ashish K Jha, dean of the Brown University School of Public Health.

He lamented that most of the deaths had happened after the vaccine gained authorization.

“We got the medical science right. We failed on the social science. We failed on how to help people get vaccinated, to combat disinformation, to not politicize this,” Jha said.

“Those are the places where we have failed as America.”

Just 64% of the population is fully vaccinated, or about 212 million Americans, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Nor is Covid-19 finished with the United States: Jha said the US could reach 1 million deaths by April.

Among the dead is Susan Glister-Berg, 53, of Sterling Heights, Michigan, whose children had to take her off a ventilator just before Thanksgiving, after Covid-19 ravaged her lungs and kidneys.

“She’s always cared more about people than she did herself. She always took care of everyone,” said a daughter, Hali Fortuna. “That’s how we all describe her: she cared for everyone. Very selfless.”

Glister-Berg, a smoker, was in poor health, and was apparently unvaccinated, according to her daughter. Fortuna just got the booster herself.

“We all want it to go away. I personally don’t see it going away anytime soon,” she said. “I guess it’s about learning to live with it and hoping we all learn to take care of each other better.”

The toll came as Omicron is loosening its grip on the country.

New cases per day have plunged by almost half since mid-January, when they hit a record-shattering peak of more than 800,000. Cases have been declining in 49 out of 50 states in the last two weeks, by Johns Hopkins’ count, and the 50th state, Maine, reported that confirmed infections were falling there, too, dropping sharply over the past week.

The number of Americans in the hospital with Covid-19 has declined 15% since mid-January to about 124,000.

Deaths are still running high at more than 2,400 per day on average, the most since last winter. And they are on the rise in at least 35 states, reflecting the lag time between when victims become infected and when they succumb.

Still, public health officials have expressed hope that the worst of Omicron is coming to an end. While they caution that things could still go bad again and dangerous new variants could emerge, some places are already talking about easing precautions.

Los Angeles County may end outdoor mask requirements in a few weeks, Public Health Director Dr Barbara Ferrer said Thursday.

“Post-surge does not imply that the pandemic is over or that transmission is low or that there will not be unpredictable waves of surges in the future,” she warned.

Experts believe some Covid-19 deaths have been misattributed to other conditions. And some Americans are thought to have died of chronic illnesses such as heart disease and diabetes because they were unable or unwilling to obtain treatment during the crisis.

The Rev Gina Anderson-Cloud, senior pastor of Fredericksburg United Methodist Church in Virginia, lost her dementia-stricken father after he was hospitalized for cancer surgery and then isolated in a Covid-19 ward. He went into cardiac arrest, was revived, but died about a week later.

She had planned to be by his bedside, but the rules barred her from going to the hospital.

“I think it’s important for us not to be numbed. Each one of those numbers is someone,” she said of the death toll. “Those are mothers, fathers, children, our elders.”

The death toll reached 800,000 on 14 December. It took just 51 more days to get to 900,000, the fastest increase of 100,000 since last winter.

“We have underestimated our enemy here, and we have under-prepared to protect ourselves,” said Dr Joshua M Sharfstein, a public health professor at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. “We’ve learned a tremendous amount of humility in the face of a lethal and contagious respiratory virus.”

Jha said he and other medical professionals are frustrated that policymakers are seemingly running out of ideas for getting people to roll up their sleeves.

“There aren’t a whole lot of tools left. We need to double down and come up with new ones,” he said.

Covid-19 has become one of the top three causes of death in America, behind the big two – heart disease and cancer.

“We have been fighting among ourselves about tools that actually do save lives. Just the sheer amount of politics and misinformation around vaccines, which are remarkably effective and safe, is staggering,” Sharfstein said.

He added: “This is the consequence.”

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Coronavirus

One in eight primary pupils in England had Covid last week, figures show

Infections among younger children thought to have peaked, but secondary school disruption still rife

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
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Vaccine experts are discussing whether to offer Covid jabs to all children aged five or over. Photograph: Matthew Horwood/Getty Images

[Hannah Devlin](#) and [Richard Adams](#)

Fri 4 Feb 2022 10.29 EST

More than one in eight primary schoolchildren in [England](#) were infected with Covid during the last week of January, the highest prevalence for any

age group at any stage during the pandemic.

Figures [released on Friday](#) by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) suggest that infections have now peaked among primary schoolchildren, but the surge is continuing to cause significant disruption with large numbers of children [absent from school](#) due to positive tests.

The peak in infections comes as the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) is expected to make a recommendation as to whether Covid vaccination should be extended to all children aged five or over. This week, the NHS began to roll out vaccines to children aged between five and 11 in the clinically vulnerable category after the JCVI approved the move in December.

Paul Whiteman, the general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, which represents many primary school leaders, said: “The very high rates of infection amongst primary pupils means that the pandemic certainly isn’t over for schools – our members are telling us that disruption due to Covid is as bad as it’s ever been.

“There’s a strange disconnect between the lack of mitigations and restrictions, and the lived experiences of families and schools right now,” he added. “Covid is still having a significant impact on education.”

Prevalence remains high among secondary pupils, with an infection rate of 7.6% – one in 15 – for those in the school years 7 to 11, the ONS figures showed. This compares with one in 20 people infected in England overall with an estimated 2.6 million infections. Similar rates were seen in Wales, while Scotland recorded Covid-19 infections in one in 30 people and Northern Ireland said one in 15 people were infected.

The lowest rates of infections were seen among the over-70s with a rate of just under 2%, the ONS reported. Hospital admissions and the numbers of patients in ICUs with Covid are also falling, government figures show.

The ONS latest figures suggest that rates in primary schoolchildren in England have peaked and are beginning to fall. Prof Kevin McConway, an

emeritus professor of applied statistics at the Open University, said: “There’s a small bit of good news about that age group in the daily modelled figures, published today – they show the estimated rate beginning to fall between 26 January and the end of that week on the 29th, though it’s a small fall and that trend is too short-term to be much of a comfort yet.”

Speaking to the [pandemic response and recovery](#) all-party parliamentary group of MPs earlier this week, Prof Allyson Pollock, of Newcastle University, raised concerns about the continued testing and isolation of schoolchildren. “Healthy children are being tested and isolated unnecessarily,” she said. “Children are at extremely low risk of severe disease and many of them will be asymptomatic or only have mild symptoms.”

Others have emphasised arguments for extending vaccinations to younger age groups, as many other countries have already done, and for more focus to be placed on mitigation, including improving [ventilation in classrooms](#).

An analysis released on Friday as part of evidence used by the Sage advisory group suggested that Omicron was no more likely to lead to hospital admissions for infants than the Delta variant. Previously, there had been some concern about the apparent increase in the proportion of infants in hospital with Covid-19. However, [the latest analysis](#) by the Medical Research Council and the UK Health Security Agency found this could be explained by cases in general being skewed towards younger ages for the Omicron wave. Once this was taken into account, there was found to be no difference in risk of hospital admission between the two variants.

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Ukraine

Record Covid cases in Russia and Ukraine complicate military plans

Spread of Omicron variant cited as another factor that could determine whether Moscow launches offensive

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
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Ukrainian soldiers patrol outside Svitlodarsk. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

[Shaun Walker in Kyiv](#)

Fri 4 Feb 2022 10.06 EST

The Omicron variant is causing record numbers of new Covid infections in Russia and Ukraine, threatening to impact military calculations over

Russia's [continued troop buildup](#).

Analysts have cited various factors as possible contributors to whether and how Russia will launch an assault on [Ukraine](#), ranging from Vladimir Putin's psychological state to the strength of the western response and even the firmness of the ground during a mild winter in the region.

Covid is emerging as another element that may complicate plans for the Russian and Ukrainian armies, as record case numbers in both societies are replicated among the troops.

Gen Oleksandr Syrskyi, the commander of the Ukrainian land forces, told the Guardian that from about 150,000 soldiers in his ranks, 2,400 were infected by Covid.

Testing was taking place only before special events or in the case of symptoms, he said, suggesting the real number might be much higher. Ukrainian military bases have been [closed to visitors](#) to help prevent the spread.

"It's not dramatically affecting our plans, because few people are getting seriously ill, but of course we are having to ensure isolation of cases and also to be more careful with mask-wearing and other anti-Covid measures," he said, in an interview at the Boryspil military airfield on Thursday.

Ukrainian officials believe Covid has swept through the Russian soldiers placed close to the border and participating in exercises in neighbouring Belarus.

Ukraine's ministry of health said on Friday morning that 43,778 new infections had been registered in the past day, the highest total since the pandemic began. It was an increase of more than 4,000 on the previous day, which also set a record.

The Omicron variant has also hit hard in Russia, where an all-time high for new cases was also reported on Friday, with 168,201 new infections in the past 24 hours.

Both the Russian and Ukrainian armies have much higher rates of vaccination than among their respective general populations, where vaccine scepticism is widespread. In both countries, less than half of the population has been fully vaccinated. The Moscow Times [calculated](#) recently that Russia has had nearly a million excess fatalities since the beginning of the pandemic.

Syrskyi said 99.3% of the Ukrainian army had received two doses of a vaccine, and that booster shots were being rolled out. As of November, 95% of Russia's army personnel has been vaccinated and 25% received boosters, according to the defence minister, Sergei Shoigu.

"L lethality of Covid is 45 times lower among army personnel than in the population at large," Shoigu claimed in a meeting with Putin.

Still, the sheer number of current infections means large numbers of troops will be taken out of action for days at a time as Putin continues to keep the world guessing about his intentions.

British and US officials [have said](#) a major Russian military assault may be "imminent", and on Thursday, US intelligence [claimed to have information](#) that the Russians were preparing a staged video of an atrocity to act as a pretext to intervene.

Syrskyi said Ukrainian forces were ready for anything, but [echoed other Ukrainian officials](#) in dismissing the idea that a major military assault was imminent, instead saying the Kremlin goal seemed to be to exert psychological pressure and create panic in Ukrainian society.

"We see training, we see movement, but we don't see direct attack preparations or the preparation of strike forces," he said.

He added that basic military doctrine suggested the Russians would need three times as many attack forces as Ukraine had defensive troops in order to launch an attack, and said Russia currently did not have this on any section of the Ukrainian border.

“We would also expect to see logistics bases, field hospitals. This is all visible from space, we will know if and when it starts to happen,” he said.

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Opinion[Boris Johnson](#)

Johnson's Savile smear was the scorched-earth tactic of a desperate, dangerous man

[Jonathan Freedland](#)



The PM's behaviour this week was a reminder he will do and say anything to cling to power – no matter the cost to Britain



Boris Johnson at prime minister's questions in the House of Commons, London, 2 February 2022. Photograph: UK Parliament/Jessica Taylor/PA

Fri 4 Feb 2022 12.15 EST

That sound you can hear is the whirr of 650 adding machines. At Westminster, MPs are totting up the costs, tallying the benefits and working out the balance of their own interests. On the Tory benches, they know a moment of decision is coming but they can't be sure that moment is now. Does the [resignation in disgust](#) by one of Boris Johnson's most loyal lieutenants signal the end times, or was Munira Mirza a backroom aide no voter had ever heard of? What if both things are true?

They think, chiefly, about their own seats. Their inboxes are bulging with constituents' fury, but they hesitate before casting aside the winner of their [biggest election victory](#) for more than 30 years. Some long for the dilemma to be resolved for them, perhaps by a development so dramatic – police action or the emergence of a damning photograph, or if an unexpurgated Sue Gray report turns out to be full of what one ex-minister calls “tawdry detail” – that a consensus will rapidly form that the Johnson show is over. The bandwagon will start rolling and they'll be able to jump on it safely. But what if there is no such moment of clarity?

The minds of those at the top click and whirr with their own reckonings. The two current frontrunners have different views of time. It would suit Rishi Sunak for things to come to a head soon: he needs a leadership contest to happen before his brand is permanently tainted by the cost-of-living crisis, surging energy bills, painful tax rises and increased interest rates. Witness the [front pages](#) of the Telegraph and the Sun putting Sunak's face alongside the words "The big squeeze" and "OUCH!" Liz Truss is happy for things to drag on for the very same reason.

Labour is hardly a disinterested observer. It, too, is consulting its electoral calculator, looking at polls that show [Keir Starmer](#) ahead of Johnson, with the outlook less certain if the Tories pull off their old trick of picking a new boss and claiming to be a new government.

Talk to Westminster folk and you will pick up all these noises. But all too few MPs, certainly on the Conservative benches, realise that they're listening to the wrong part of their brains. For this stopped being a matter of calculation weeks ago. It should instead be a matter of conscience.

That was true as soon as it became obvious that Johnson broke the very lockdown rules he had imposed on everyone else. But one incident this week made it clearer still.

The clarity came from a single remark thrown across the dispatch box by Johnson as he sought to deflect attention from the Sue Gray "update" that, even in its gagged form, confirmed "[failures of leadership](#)" at No 10. In that remark, Johnson revealed that he is a man who will do or say anything to cling to power, no matter the cost. There is no depth to which he will not sink.

The words were directed at Starmer, whom Johnson accused of "failing to prosecute Jimmy Savile". As Mirza [wrote](#), this was a "scurrilous accusation", as well as "an inappropriate and partisan reference to a horrendous case of child sex abuse". It was also [demonstrably false](#). Nazir Afzal, a [former colleague at the Crown Prosecution Service](#), which Starmer led between 2008 and 2013, has said that the key decision on the Savile case was taken by others before Starmer ever got there.

Johnson knew that. That's why Mirza and others had begged him not to make such an accusation. But Johnson did it anyway.

No one can pretend to be surprised. This has been part of the Johnson modus operandi for years. He didn't need [Lynton Crosby](#) to teach him about dead cats. He himself [spoke openly about his technique](#): when besieged by scandal, the best defence is more scandal. Keep throwing out "chaff", make ever more outrageous statements, which the press will dutifully report and, before you know it, everyone will have forgotten your original misdemeanour.

Those Tory MPs deluding themselves that Johnson will change, that he now "gets it", need to face the reality that Johnson will keep doing this – not least because it works. For much of the last week, we were indeed talking not about parties and cake, but Starmer and Savile – those two words unwarrantedly and falsely linked in the same sentence, repeated on news bulletins and phone-in shows, sneaking past the unwary listener and settling in a part of the collective brain where the specifics and the truth soon become hazy. It was the same with £350m and the EU, the very falsity of the proposition ensuring its repetition and amplification.

The effect is poison. For the Savile-Starmer lie has long been a [meme on the wilder shores of the conspiracy-theorist far right](#), where it echoes the QAnon lunacy with its suggestion of a governing elite secretly protecting the abusers of children. Johnson was giving a validating wink to that hate-filled fringe, just as Donald Trump gave a [friendly nod to QAnon](#) or [the Proud Boys](#).

Johnson's Savile move was classic Trump. For once a lie is out of the mouth of a national leader, it will be repeated by those whose salaries depend on his favour. Note the [dispiriting interview](#) with the culture secretary, Nadine Dorries, in which she refused to acknowledge the truth on Savile and Starmer, telling her interviewer "I only have your word for it", as if provable facts were merely subjective opinions. Dorries was doing for Johnson what [Kellyanne Conway](#) did for Trump, creating a realm of "alternative facts".

This is the damage Johnson does. He did it a second time on Monday, randomly and without evidence suggesting that [drug-taking was rife](#) on the

Labour frontbench. On Thursday, the UK Statistics Authority had to rebuke Johnson for [falsely claiming crime was down](#) when it is in fact up.

The Savile smear was a demonstration of how low Johnson is prepared to go. He did not care that his remark would fuel ever greater distrust not merely in Starmer or Labour, but in the public sphere. Nor did he fear the corrosion that comes when a society cannot agree on a shared basis of evidence and truth, the slow death that is inflicted on democracy when each warring political tribe has its own “facts”.

He did not and does not care about any of that. If he is to be driven from the temple, he will bring down the temple. He will scorch the earth. Conservative MPs now owe it to the country they claim to love to put aside their electoral calculations and remove this man, before he brings yet more ruin.

- Jonathan Freedland is a Guardian columnist
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Letter from a curious parentSchools

Dear Nadhim Zahawi, your ‘levelling up’ in schools is jiggery-pokery

[Michael Rosen](#)



Those looking up the plans for education are struggling to find what hard cash is going to be given to schools



‘You’ve had Ofsted, league tables, academies, free schools, Ofqual and systematic synthetic phonics to ensure that everyone does better at Sats. What’s gone wrong with your initiatives?’ Photograph: Matthew Horwood/Getty Images

Sat 5 Feb 2022 03.15 EST

So you’re levelling up. As your government has spent the last 10 years levelling down, you’ll forgive me if I don’t cheer. To justify why the government has hit people so hard and for so long, I heard one of your predecessors Michael Gove on the Radio 4 [Today programme](#) this week repeating the theme song always played for this purpose: it was necessary to make cuts (translation: to make poor people poorer) because there was “no money left” when the government came to power. You’ll know, though, that billions somehow appeared from nowhere in the first phases of the pandemic. Perhaps you also spotted this week that there are great concerns now that some of that [money was wasted](#). Could that be true?

I mention this because the journalists looking at the levelling up plans for education are [struggling to find](#) what hard cash is going to be handed over to schools. There might be some “creative accounting” going on: announcing “new” funding that is actually old funding.

Leaving that aside, there are two core problems with your so-called levelling up. The first arises when it is cast – as you have – as if inequality were solely a north-south problem. I've lived in London all my life. There are some parts of London where a high percentage of people are on the bottom level of incomes. Treating such people as privileged is absurd and insulting.

But what kind of levelling up is possible when your government backs the arrangements by which the privileged remain privileged: inheritance of property, tax havens and private education? These create and freeze the "levels" in society. They are built into the system. If there are individuals who can hop up from one level to another, it follows from this set-up that for every person who hops up, someone has to hop down. Who's volunteering for that?

You're also part of a government that has behaved in the past as if the public sector – of which schools are such a big part – is a beastly drag on society. Yet the public sector is what helps us stay alive long enough to benefit from the crumbs that drop from the rich man's table. Did "[trickle down](#)" ever happen, or was that as empty a slogan as "levelling up"?

So these are the contexts for levelling up coming to education. You may already have heard some cynical snorts and guffaws coming from the chalkface. Since 1988, successive governments have treated education as an electoral asset: they've come up with endless slogans and projects to supposedly solve what is supposedly a crisis. Each time, they have peddled the narrative of decline, which claims that things are worse now than they were before. Each time, the initiative is heralded as the solution to the decline. Thus, the national curriculum, Sats, Ofsted, city technology colleges, the literacy hour, the numeracy hour, league tables, academies, free schools, the knowledge-rich curriculum, Ofqual, systematic synthetic phonics, eBacc, Education Action Zone, behaviour tsar, Progress 8 ... what have I missed out? Some are great but get abolished, some are rubbish but survive. The consistent point about them is that they were all imposed from on high. It seems as if the intellectual ceiling of those in government restricts people from imagining that education could be run in a vastly more [participatory and consensual way](#).

And here you are again, sitting in your offices in London cooking up stuff that you say will solve everything for some people out there. On this occasion, the people out there are in the north. You've even marshalled some nonsense about wanting [everyone to do better at Sats](#). You've had years to get everyone to do better at Sats. You've had Ofsted, league tables, academies, free schools, hubs, Ofqual, systematic synthetic phonics to ensure that everyone does better at Sats. What's gone wrong with your initiatives?

You are peddling jiggery-pokery here. I think if you pop down the corridor from your office, nip into another office, you'll be able to look carefully at how the [Sats marking](#) is done. You'll find that it's rigged anyway. The setters and markers of the tests decide how many succeed and how many fail before the students even sit down to write their papers. They can level up or down anytime they like. I hope I haven't shocked you by telling you that.

Yours, Michael Rosen

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OpinionParthenon marbles

The Parthenon marbles belong in Greece – so why is restitution so hard to swallow?

[Charlotte Higgins](#)



Repatriating the spoils of empire is stuck in all manner of legal and historical impasses that preserve the status quo



Some of the Parthenon's sculptures have recently been returned from a museum in Palermo. Photograph: Dmitry Rukhlenko - Travel Photos/Alamy

Sat 5 Feb 2022 04.00 EST

Those who would see the Parthenon marbles return to Greece sense change in the air. As the politics of identity resurge, as the legacies of colonialism are scrutinised, Benin bronzes held in [Aberdeen and Cambridge](#) have been sent back to Nigeria, those in Glasgow are the subject of a formal [request](#), and those in [Germany](#) are to return too. The Benin bronzes – looted by the British in a punitive raid on Benin City in 1897 – are a very different case from the sculptures that once adorned the great temple of Athens' patron goddess on the city's Acropolis, acquired (or so it is argued) legally by Lord Elgin in 1801. But still: Palermo's Archaeological Museum has just [sent](#) its share of the Parthenon sculptures to the Acropolis Museum – on loan, but with talk of a permanent arrangement.

The Palermo sculpture is a shoe-box-size fragment showing part of the goddess Artemis's foot, rather than the 75m of frieze plus magnificent pediment held in the British Museum, but still, it's a precedent of sorts. The Greek prime minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, made return of the Parthenon marbles a [talking point](#) on a recent visit to London. Even the Times has reversed its leader line to support repatriation. "Separating components of an

artistic whole is like tearing Hamlet out of the First Folio of Shakespeare’s works,” says its editorial – though bringing the Bloomsbury sculptures to Athens would not complete anything at all, since half of the stonework is destroyed, and they will never be intact again.

To many British people – among whom restitution, according to a recent YouGov [poll](#), is popular – restoring the sculptures to Greece seems simple. The Greeks want them, they were made in and for Athens, they should go back. Indeed, their presence in Bloomsbury has always been bitterly controversial, right back from the parliamentary debate in 1816 in which it was pondered, among many other things, whether Lord Elgin had taken advantage of his position as ambassador to acquire the [firman](#), or permit, from the Ottoman authorities to abstract “*qualche pezzi di pietra*” (“any bits of stone”) from Athens’ Acropolis (the document survives only in Italian translation).

That’s before you start to consider whether Elgin went beyond the terms of the firman – and whether, even if you think he was acting lawfully, that’s the point, given how many terrible things through history have been done within the rule of law. The case for return has seemed all the more compelling since the 2009 opening of the Acropolis Museum, whose airy galleries, in sight of the temple itself, do such a wonderful job of telling the story of the Parthenon. By comparison, the British Museum’s Duveen Gallery can seem bleak and depressing.

So why doesn’t philhellene Boris Johnson just give them back? After all, as a student he [wrote passionately](#) in favour of restitution. Well: what Johnson may or may not have thought once is, naturally, irrelevant (see also: Brexit and the BBC licence fee). Much more pertinently, he can’t: national museums in Britain are not an extension of government, they are at arm’s length and independent from it. In a rare outbreak of continence, Johnson has [said](#) that the Parthenon sculptures are a matter for the trustees of the British Museum.

These trustees, who include Mary Beard, Grayson Perry and chair George Osborne, are the “owners” of the BM’s collection – in the sense that they hold it in trust for the public. The 1753 act of parliament that set up the

museum defined “the public” as “all studious and curious Persons” – including “all learned Foreigners”.

It’s not impossible, then, that the trustees might wake up one morning and decide that the Parthenon sculptures would render most benefit to the public if they were displayed in the Acropolis Museum. In fact, I think they would be unlikely, at least in the short term, to do so. One reason is that trustees of institutions such as the British Museum are, collectively, constitutionally unsuited to taking radical decisions, however independent-minded they may be individually. Another is ideological: the museum asserts the centrality to its collection of the sculptures and argues there is huge benefit in their being displayed near Assyrian and Egyptian art, an arrangement that highlights the interconnectivity between cultures, as would not be the case in Athens.

A third reason is the law. The 1963 British Museum Act and its amendments state that the trustees cannot deaccession collection items except under very specific circumstances: if they are degraded or riddled with pests, if they are “duplicates”, or if they are deemed by the UK’s Spoliation Advisory Panel to have been looted or bought under duress during the Holocaust. And so the situation circles, perhaps conveniently. It’s not up to the government, it’s up to the trustees. And yet it’s not up to the trustees, because of the law. And it can’t *lend* to the Greeks, because the Greeks don’t recognise the British Museum’s ownership of the sculptures. Museums, on the whole, don’t lend things without certain conditions being met – most importantly, that they would be able to get them back. Hence the impasse, the convenient continuance of the status quo. The sculptures, though more ancient than either concept, are embroiled in the history of the nation state and of museums, and tangled in a knot of legal trusteeship and ownership.

In the early years of this century, Neil MacGregor, the former director of the British Museum, made a strong case for the British Museum as a “universal” museum based on Enlightenment principles. It was a place of the world, for the world, he said. The collection could be mobile, lending its treasures to Britain and around the globe (in 2014, with some chutzpah, the museum even lent one of the Parthenon sculptures to St Petersburg). In Nairobi in 2006, attending the first exhibition in Africa to which the BM had lent objects, MacGregor told me – and I still recall his testiness, unusual given

his normal charm – that “[repatriation is yesterday’s question](#)”. Not all Kenyans, it was clear to me, were so certain.

A decade and a half on, MacGregor, I think, would concede that restitution is, in fact, today’s question. The universal museum is not a neutral concept. The British Museum is the product of a combination of curiosity, scholarship and rampaging imperial acquisitiveness. But if museums are sites that represent some of the most troubling legacies of empire, they can and should also be places where these issues can be worked out – or to use a more recent formulation of MacGregor’s, “[sites of atonement and reconciliation](#)”. They have a duty to act ethically.

The sensible course is for the government to institute an expert panel to hammer out principles on which repatriation claims to national museums can be soberly assessed, as has now long been done for artefacts linked to the Holocaust. The Westminster government with its wilful nativism seems unlikely to be minded to do that. But repatriation is today’s question. And almost certainly tomorrow’s, too.

- Charlotte Higgins is the Guardian’s chief culture writer
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[The Stephen Collins cartoon Boris Johnson](#)

Stephen Collins on partying with Boris – cartoon

[Stephen Collins](#)

Sat 5 Feb 2022 02.00 EST

[Stephen Collins on partying with Boris – cartoon](#)

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North Korea

China urges US ‘flexibility’ with North Korea amid Washington anger at UN ‘silence’

After refusing to sign a statement condemning North Korea’s latest missile tests, China called for US to create ‘attractive and practical’ solutions



People in Seoul watch coverage of a North Korean missile launch in January. China has told the US to be more accommodating of North Korea if it wants to resolve tensions on the peninsula. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

Staff and agencies
Fri 4 Feb 2022 21.07 EST

China’s ambassador to the UN has called on the United States to be more flexible in its dealings with [North Korea](#), as Beijing joined others in refusing

to sign a US-drafted security council joint statement condemning Pyongyang's missile launches.

Kim Jong-un's regime conducted an [unprecedented seven weapons tests](#) in January, including launching its most powerful missile since 2017 as it hinted it could restart long-range and nuclear testing.

Washington had proposed a statement decrying those launches, but [China](#) and Russia, along with other nations, refused to sign on to it, prompting the US to say the council's "ongoing silence" would embolden North Korea to further defy the international community.

Before a closed-door meeting convened at Washington's request on Friday, China's ambassador to the UN, Zhang Jun, said the key to easing tensions with North Korea was in the hands of the US.

"If they do want to see some new breakthrough, they should show more sincerity and flexibility," Zhang said.

"They should come up with more attractive and more practical, more flexible approaches, policies and actions and accommodating the concerns of the DPRK," Zhang told reporters, using the initials of the North's official name.

The Chinese official noted that as a result of former US president Donald Trump's policy on North Korea, Pyongyang had suspended nuclear tests and international ballistic missile launches.

However, in recent months, Zhang lamented, "we have seen a vicious circle of confrontation, condemnation, sanctions".

China and Russia have been blocking council action on North Korea, and last year proposed a resolution that would ease sanctions on Pyongyang on humanitarian grounds, but the draft has not been put to a vote due to lack of support.

"At least we are doing something to facilitate further improvement and avoiding the escalation of the tension," Zhang said.

After the meeting, the US envoy to the world body, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, said the Chinese-Russian proposal to ease sanctions would effectively reward North Korea for what she called “bad behaviour”.

“There’s no reason for this council to reward them for nine tests in one month and almost as many in the previous years,” she told reporters.

“To spend millions of dollars on military tests when your people are starving indicates that this country does not care about its own people.”

Asked about Zhang’s call for increased US action and whether Joe Biden should get directly involved in diplomacy, Thomas-Greenfield reiterated that the US was willing to meet with North Korea without preconditions.

“But,” she added, “before we can commit our president to meeting, we need to have a better sense of what there is to achieve. I can’t comment on what the Trump administration achieved. We had ballistic missiles testing throughout the past four years. It never stopped him. So we have to keep up the pressure.”

She said that so far “we’ve not been able to bring them to the diplomatic table for any discussions whatsoever”.

Friday’s meeting on North Korea was the third in the space of a month.

In the last one on 20 January, eight council members – Albania, Brazil, Britain, France, Ireland, Norway, the United Arab Emirates and the United States – along with Japan released a joint statement condemning the North’s tests.

The other seven members – China, Gabon, Ghana, India, Kenya, Mexico and Russia – refused to sign.

On Friday, those same eight countries and Japan, again led by Washington, issued a new statement reiterating a call for North Korea to “cease its destabilising actions and return to dialogue.”

“We continue to urge the DPRK to respond positively to the offers from the United States and others to meet without preconditions,” it said.

The cost of the [@UN](#) Security Council's ongoing silence is too high. It emboldens North Korea to further defy the international community, normalize its violations of Council resolutions, and further destabilize the region. This is unacceptable. <https://t.co/iKBfd5eRCV>

— Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield (@USAmbUN) [February 4, 2022](#)

The statement also called out the other members of the security council, saying the “cost of the council’s ongoing silence is too high”.

“It will embolden the DPRK to further defy the international community; to normalise its violations of security council resolutions; to further destabilise the region; and to continue to threaten international peace and security,” it said.

North Korea on Friday sent “warm congratulations” to its Chinese ally for the Beijing Olympics, a message that experts consider a likely signal for a halt to missile firing during the sporting event.

US secretary of state Antony Blinken is scheduled to hold trilateral talks in Hawaii on 12 February with South Korea and Japan on North Korea.

Agence France-Presse and Associated Press contributed to this report

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[Louisiana](#)

Her son died at the hands of Louisiana police. She's still waiting for answers, 1,000 days on



Mona Hardin, whose son, Ronald Greene was killed after a police arrest. 'You just can't keep overlooking the murder of a man. You can't keep letting these killer cops get away with it.' Photograph: Phelan M Ebenhack/AP

Police are accused of a cover-up in Ronald Greene's death – and now the governor has had to deny political interference. Mona Hardin, Greene's mother, says enough is enough



[Oliver Laughland](#) in New Orleans
[@oliverlaughland](#)

Sat 5 Feb 2022 03.00 EST

Thursday marked 1,000 days since Ronald Greene died on a roadside in northern [Louisiana](#). And the 1,000th day, too, that Greene's mother, Mona Hardin, has awaited answers from state and federal authorities.

“It’s hard to sleep,” Hardin told the Guardian in an interview. “But it’s something I have to push myself through. It has destroyed my family, because of what we saw and what we know.”

It was 10 May 2019 when Greene was arrested by Louisiana state police for an unspecified traffic violation. The story [made public](#) by police back then was that the 49-year-old Black man had led troopers on a high-speed pursuit, crashed his car, and then engaged in “a struggle” before dying.

But gradually a clearer narrative emerged, laced with brutality and attempted cover-up. Greene, who was unarmed, had been stunned multiple times with tasers, punched in the face, placed in a chokehold and shackled, and had lain prone for almost 10 minutes before his death at the hands of six white troopers.

Body-camera footage of the incident was suppressed for two years until the Associated Press published excerpts last year, showing Greene, his face bloodied, pleading with officers to desist.

“I’m sorry!” Greene said. “I’m your brother! I’m scared!”

A US justice department civil rights and wrongful death investigation remains pending [after an internal review declined to bring charges](#), allegedly following pressure from senior members of the state police force.

But this week, new revelations have sent shockwaves around Louisiana, forcing the state’s Democratic governor, John Bel Edwards, to publicly deny he had delayed or interfered with investigations into Greene’s death.

The Associated Press reported Edwards received a text message from Louisiana state police superintendent Kevin Reeves just hours after Greene’s death, informing Edwards of a “violent, lengthy struggle” leading to the Black motorist’s death, at a time when public information on the incident was scant.

Superintendent Reeves resigned in October 2020 amid mounting scrutiny of the department in the wake of Greene’s death.



A blanket and painting bearing the likeness of Ronald Greene. Photograph: Phelan M Ebenhack/AP

The message was sent as Edwards was fighting a re-election campaign in a deep red state, which saw the governor make little comment on Greene's death until years later. The reporting also suggests that Edwards's handling of the incident is now part of the federal civil rights investigation.

During a heated press conference this week, the governor struck a defiant line after his office insisted the text alert had been standard operating procedure.

"There are implications that I knew more, or that one or more of my staff members tried to cover up what happened. I will say that that is simply and categorically false," he said, acknowledging for the first time in public that the killing was a racist act.

"It is sad. It is regrettable that I am here under these circumstances talking about these things. But unfortunately, it is unavoidable."

The governor is facing increasingly bipartisan criticism, both from state Republicans who control Louisiana's legislature, and members of the Democratic Black caucus who held a heated closed door meeting with Edwards earlier this week.

Hardin, who lives in Florida, and lost her job shortly after her son's death due to stress, remained unconvinced by the governor's denial and has called for his resignation.

"It's a cowardly way for him to approach the murder of a man by his state troopers," she said. "He said the text message was standard procedure, but there was no follow-up on his end after the murder of a man? They carelessly and lightly really insisted this was 'standard procedure'. But no one ever made any effort to be honest with me."

Edwards [won an incredibly tight 2019 re-election campaign](#) on the shoulders of Black voters. [According to election analysis](#), he won 99% support among the Black community, who turned out in high numbers to push him over the line.

"It's going to be very difficult for Black people to trust him again," said Eugene Collins, president of the NAACP Baton Rouge chapter. "He's going to have to really work hard to rebuild that trust. And at this point I don't know if he can."

Collins reiterated the NAACP's demand that Edwards meet with the Greene family to explain the message and his prior knowledge of the case. As of Wednesday, the Greene family had received no communication from the governor.



Louisiana governor John Bel Edwards in Baton Rouge on Tuesday.
Photograph: Matthew Hinton/AP

Edwards, a centrist, is the only statewide Democrat elected to office in Louisiana, and has recently made pronounced comments about the legacy of racism in the state. Last month the [governor signed a pardon for Homer Plessy](#), the civil rights pioneer whose act of civil disobedience in 1892 led to the infamous Plessy v Ferguson supreme court decision.

“The stroke of my pen on this pardon, while momentous, it doesn’t erase generations of pain and discrimination,” Edwards said at the time. “It doesn’t eradicate all the wrongs wrought by the Plessy court, or fix all of our present challenges.”

But the governor has also [signed into law a controversial “blue lives matter” bill in 2016](#). The act expanded the state’s existing list of groups protected against hate crimes on grounds of race, religion, sexual orientation and other minority groups to include law enforcement officers and other first responders. It faced significant criticism from civil liberties groups and Black Lives Matter activists at the time.

For some observers, Edwards’s “standard procedure” defense is perhaps in line with his character both as a no-frills straight-talker, but also as the son

and brother of law enforcement officers.

“Edwards is very careful. He’s a lawyer with a family background in law enforcement. He’s not given to wild pronouncements or getting ahead of a story,” said Dr Pearson Cross, associate professor of political science at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. “I also think he would be inclined to accept the story, as it was originally told, until he had proof that it was different.”

For Mona Hardin, the wait for answers continues.

“We still have to hope and pray that everyone digs down real deep, to bring this to its proper course and for everyone who had their hand in this to be held accountable,” she said.

“You just can’t keep overlooking the murder of a man. You can’t keep letting these killer cops get away with it,” she added. “It’s organized crime.”

- This article was amended on 5 February 2022. Eugene Collins is president of the NAACP Baton Rouge chapter, not Eugene Phillips.
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[Mike Pence](#)

'He is wrong': Pence rebuts Trump claim that he could have overturned election

At a conference in Florida, the former vice-president said that the idea of one person choosing the president was 'un-American'



Mike Pence speaks at the Florida chapter of the Federalist Society's annual meeting on Friday. Photograph: Stephen M Dowell/AP

[David Smith](#) in Washington

[@smithinamerica](#)

Fri 4 Feb 2022 18.39 EST

Mike Pence, the former US vice president, has issued [his strongest rebuke yet](#) of Donald Trump, insisting that his old boss is “wrong” to claim that Pence could have overturned the 2020 election.

The unusually blunt criticism suggests that Pence, unswervingly loyal during his four years serving under Trump at the White House, is running out of patience with the ex-president's [assault on democracy](#).

"I heard this week that president Trump said I had the right to overturn the election," Pence told a conference hosted by the conservative [Federalist Society](#) in Florida on Friday. "President Trump is wrong. I had no right to overturn the election."

The Republican former governor of Indiana added: "The presidency belongs to the American people and the American people alone. Frankly there is almost no idea more un-American than the notion that any one person could choose the American president."

"Under the constitution, I had no right to change the outcome of our election. And [current vice-president] [Kamala Harris](#) will have no right to overturn the election when we beat them in 2024."

The intervention came after Trump [issued a statement last Sunday](#) pushing the false narrative that Pence could have "overturned" the presidential election on 6 January 2021 in his role presiding over the counting of electoral college votes by Congress.

Constitutional scholars, politicians and Pence himself have determined that the vice-president has no such power and play only a ceremonial role. Members of Congress are currently working on [reforming the Electoral Count Act](#) to clear up any lingering ambiguities.

The issue appears to have caused an irrevocable rift between Trump and Pence, who has faced booing and heckling from followers of the Make America Great Again movement. [Pence recently revealed](#) that he has not spoken to his former boss since last summer.

[In a statement](#) on Tuesday, Trump, who has pushed bogus claims for voter fraud, said the House of Representatives committee investigating the deadly January 6 insurrection at the US Capitol should instead look at "why Mike Pence did not send back the votes for recertification or approval".

Pence was rushed from the Senate chamber that day and forced to [lie low for hours](#) in an underground car park. Trump did not call him to check on his safety even as a mob laid siege to Capitol chanting: “Hang Mike Pence!”

In his speech on Friday, Pence acknowledged the disappointment of the 2020 loss to Joe Biden but argued that “we did our duty”. He went on: “The truth is there’s more at stake than our party or political fortunes. If we lose faith in the constitution, we won’t just lose elections. We lose our country.”

He described January 6 as a “dark day” but, as in other recent public remarks, accused Democrats of blowing it out of proportion. Pence will not allow them to “use the actions of those who ransacked the Capitol to demean” the 74 million Americans who voted for him and Trump, he said.

While Pence has previously noted that he and Trump are never likely to see [“eye to eye”](#) over the events of January 6, his speech on Friday marked his most direct rebuttal to date.

The bad blood intensified on Friday night, when Trump issued a statement in response to Pence. “The vice president’s position is not an automatic conveyor if obvious signs of voter fraud or irregularities exist,” he said.

“That’s why the Democrats and RINOs [Republicans in name only] are working feverishly together to change the very law that Mike Pence and his unwitting advisors used on January 6 to say he had no choice.”

State election officials, judges and Trump’s own attorney general found no significant signs of voter fraud or irregularities in 2020.

The once unthinkable split is only likely to fuel speculation that the 62-year-old is laying the groundwork for a [potential run for president](#) in 2024, setting up a possible showdown with Trump, who has been hinting at a campaign of his own.

Pence would face an uphill struggle in the current political climate. On Friday the Republican National Committee (RNC) censured Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger, two Republicans sitting on the January 6 committee. Ronna McDaniel, the chairwoman of the RNC, [said the pair](#) were joining in

a persecution of ordinary citizens who engaged in “[legitimate political discourse](#)”.

Adonna Biel, a spokesperson for the Democratic National Committee, said: “Let’s be very clear — former vice president [Mike Pence](#) doesn’t deserve credit for ‘breaking’ with Trump after standing shoulder to shoulder with him for nearly six years.”

“Pence stood silent as Trump undermined our democracy, and he surely could have done more before Trump incited a mob to attack the Capitol, assault police officers, and try to overturn an election.

“On the same day the Republican party voted to declare the January 6 insurrection ‘legitimate political discourse,’ it could not be more clear that Pence’s comments today are a day late and a dollar short, to say the least.”

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[California](#)

Wealthy California town cites mountain lion habitat to deny affordable housing

Officials in Woodside – a mansion-filled, tech entrepreneur enclave – claim wildcat land keeps them from building multi-unit homes



Officials in Woodside claim ‘no parcel within Woodside is currently eligible for an SB 9 project’. Photograph: NPS Photo/Alamy

[Maanvi Singh](#)

[@maanvissingh](#)

Sat 5 Feb 2022 01.00 EST

At first glance, the town of Woodside may look more like a sprawl of mansions built on big-tech billions than crucial habitat for threatened [California](#) mountain lions.

But town officials might suggest looking again.

The wealthy San Francisco Bay area suburb has said it cannot approve the development of new duplexes or fourplexes to ease the statewide housing shortage because it encompasses the habitat of the elusive wildcats.

Residents in Woodside had long bristled at SB 9 – a new California measure that makes it easier to build multi-unit housing in neighborhoods previously reserved for single-family homes. But a clause in the measure exempts areas that are considered habitat for protected species. “Given that Woodside – in its entirety” is habitat for mountain lions that environmental groups are petitioning to list as threatened or endangered under the state’s Endangered Species Act, “no parcel within Woodside is currently eligible for an SB 9 project”, the town’s planning director wrote in a [memo](#) on 27 January.

Critics of the town council, including many housing advocates, have accused the town of cynically using environmental concerns to avoid compliance with state law. “This is nimbyism disguised as environmentalism,” said Scott Wiener, a California senator who co-authored SB 9. “The notion that building duplexes hurts mountain lions – it’s just ridiculous.”

Woodside is not only a habitat for mountain lions, but also for notable tech entrepreneurs including the Intuit co-founder Scott Cook and Oracle co-founder Larry Ellison. The latter modeled his 23-acre Woodside estate on a 16th-century Japanese imperial palace. The median home price in the town is \$5.5m, and the median household income is more than \$250,000. The landscape is scattered with sizable mansions and estates as well as sprawling ranches.

Mountain lions – also called pumas, cougars and panthers – have been [known to wander](#) into suburbs and cities across California, and may occasionally traverse the town. “You can see there’s a fair amount of habitat in the undeveloped areas around the city,” said Winston Vickers, director of the Mountain Lion Project at the UC Davis Wildlife Health Center.

“Any development should be done with careful consideration of whether it is going to impact a nearby travel corridor, green belt or large adjacent habitat area for mountain lions,” Vickers said. “But to say that any

expansion of housing, anywhere in a given city, would likely impact mountain lions is likely a bit of a stretch.”

Woodside’s mayor, Dick Brown, declined an interview request from the Guardian. “We love animals,” he told [AlmanacNews](#). “Every house that’s built is one more acre taken away from [mountain lions’] habitat. Where are they going to go? Pretty soon we’ll have nothing but asphalt and no animals or birds.”

As far as wildlife biologists know, mountain lions are not especially comfortable on land zoned for single family homes, nor are they particularly put off by two-story apartment buildings.

The biggest challenge that mountain lions are facing is “ex-urban development pushing into the wild areas that they need, and major roadways cutting through those habitats,” said Josh Rosenau, a conservation advocate with the Mountain Lion Foundation, one of the organizations seeking to have the mountain lions in the south and central coast listed as threatened or endangered under the California Endangered Species Act.

In most cases, “increasing [housing] density where possible, is going to be better for mountain lions ultimately”, he said, than expanding construction further into wildland areas.

As California pushes to expand housing amid a crisis of housing affordability and homelessness, communities across the state have resisted efforts to build more densely, often using the state’s strict environmental laws as a [shield](#). With SB 9 taking effect this year, cities across the state also sought to pass design restrictions, or designate historic districts and sites in a [scramble](#) to find loopholes in the law.

Earlier last month, Woodside had passed an [ordinance](#) prohibiting basements in SB 9 developments, capping their size to 800 square feet – the minimum required by the law – and prohibiting their construction in “very high fire severity zones, for health and safety reasons”.

“My hope is that Woodside thinks better of its position, and figures out how to comply with this new law,” Wiener said.

Or there's an option that some critics have offered: return all the land to the mountain lions that once prowled there freely.

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Sydney

Aboriginal flag to permanently fly above Sydney Harbour Bridge as premier blasts timeframe

NSW premier Dominic Perrottet says original advice move would take two years was ‘ridiculous’ since bridge built in nine years

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NSW premier Dominic Perrottet says the Aboriginal flag will soon have a permanent home atop the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Photograph: Bianca de Marchi/AAP

Australian Associated Press
Fri 4 Feb 2022 18.59 EST

The Aboriginal flag will have a permanent home atop the Sydney Harbour Bridge “as soon as possible”, the New South Wales premier, [Dominic Perrottet](#), has said.

“We’ve been working through this for some time,” he told reporters in [Sydney](#) on Saturday.

The premier said the first advice received was that it would take two years to do, something he felt was excessive considering the bridge itself was built in nine years.

“I’ll climb up there and put it up myself if I need to,” Perrottet said.

[He earlier told Nine Newspapers](#) he found it ridiculous “that we could build the Harbour Bridge in the 1920s, but apparently we can’t put a flagpole on the bridge in 2022”.

The bridge’s two flag poles currently show the Australian and NSW flag, with the state flag replaced by the Aboriginal flag on 19 days each year.

He said the move was part of a new government approach to acknowledging Indigenous Australians in NSW that would include the remediation of Sydney’s Goat Island and its return to Aboriginal ownership.

“Part of the change we are looking at today is empowering all ministers to have buy-in to that responsibility,” he said. “There are many issues that go right across the board, across different departments.

“If we all work together and have a key focus, I want all our ministers to be minister for Aboriginal affairs in their own right.

“We can’t truly be proud of our country unless we are working together to achieve true reconciliation,” Perrottet said.

“That’s a combination of both symbolic reconciliation and practical reconciliation.”

The premier said it was important to engender a deeper understanding of Indigenous culture, something he said had been lacking and was “a

travesty”.

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