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

The Observer view on deadly government incompetence

[Observer editorial](#)

Dominic Cummings' account confirmed what many knew – the government was unprepared for the pandemic and has remained that way for its duration



Boris Johnson announces the first lockdown on 12 March, 2020.
Photograph: Simon Dawson/Reuters

Boris Johnson announces the first lockdown on 12 March, 2020.
Photograph: Simon Dawson/Reuters

Sun 30 May 2021 01.00 EDT

That Boris Johnson lacks the leadership skills, capability and integrity to guide the country through a national emergency is not a new insight: it has been clear for months. But the significance of Dominic Cummings' [testimony](#) to the House of Commons last week was that the prime minister's

former adviser provided more evidence of Johnson's culpability for decisions that cost countless lives.

[Expert who helped change No 10 Covid policy in first wave warns over risk of easing](#)

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Cummings himself is a man lacking in integrity, who will for ever be associated with the electoral deceit and the implicit racism of the Vote Leave campaign during the [Brexit referendum](#). Although he expressed what appeared to be genuine contrition for his role in the policy disasters that caused people to die, he is unlikely to be a wholly reliable narrator. But that does not mean his account of what happened during his time advising Johnson can be dismissed out of hand. Much of what he said last week accords with what we already know in relation to Johnson's failures and rings true about his well-established character flaws.

Cummings' allegations about the conduct of Johnson and the health secretary, [Matt Hancock](#) – that the former ignored scientific advice in a way that cost lives and that the latter repeatedly lied – are extremely serious and underscore the urgent need for a public inquiry to establish the role the prime minister and other ministers, including those such as the chancellor, Rishi Sunak, who reportedly opposed the introduction of tougher social restrictions last autumn, played in causing avoidable loss of life over the last 14 months. This is not just about holding individuals accountable for negligence in office, but about learning how to avoid such serious mistakes being repeated in future national emergencies. As the vaccine rollout proceeds apace, and the mood of the nation remains one of positive relief, Cummings' select committee appearance was an important reminder that we brush aside the disasters of the last year at our peril.

Institutional failures

Cummings' account was further evidence that the state was woefully underprepared for a pandemic. He painted a picture of a governing establishment in utter chaos as civil servants and ministers realised that the appropriate level of contingency planning did not exist. The responsibility for this lies with ministers and officials. How could senior ministers and

officials not regularly review plans for a crisis that featured so prominently on the National Risk Register? How could the disastrous pandemic [simulation exercise](#) of 2016, which flagged concerns of a lack of cross-government coordination and the risks for care homes, not prompt an urgent review of the UK's preparedness for a pandemic?

This government has unquestionably faced the most difficult set of circumstances since the Second World War. Governments around the world have struggled to manage the impact of the pandemic on their citizens. But the lack of planning for an event, the risk of which was widely anticipated, affected the quality of the government's response. There are also questions to be asked about the quality and robustness of the scientific and public health advice ministers were receiving in the early days of the pandemic. Why did it take so long for it to dawn that not putting in place tighter social restrictions in the spring would lead to the collapse of NHS healthcare as we know it and tens of thousands of people dying in terrible circumstances, given what was happening in China and Italy, and the warnings from experts outside government before mid-March? Why were government experts defending decisions to drop testing, rather than urging ministers to increase capacity as quickly as possible in order to aid a test-and-trace strategy? Why did they tell the public that masks could put them at increased risk of infection in the absence of any [evidence](#)? The institutional failings provide a rude awakening as to the capacity of the state to respond to a broad range of national emergencies.

Political failings

But these serious institutional failings cannot be used as a cover for the gross political failings of Johnson and his ministers. Johnson is culpable for deaths that did not need to happen. The only conclusion to be drawn from the first wave of the pandemic was that the government took too long to introduce social restrictions and eased them too quickly in early summer. Neil Ferguson, one of the country's most eminent epidemiologists, said last summer that locking down a week earlier – at which point many advisers inside and outside government were urging the prime minister to do so – would have [halved the death toll](#) in the first wave. Yet Cummings said that Johnson regretted imposing a lockdown during the first wave and was

determined not to do it again: “I should have been the [mayor of Jaws](#) and kept the beaches open.” This allegation fits with what we know about the prime minister’s behaviour during the critical period last autumn, when scientists and others were again urging him to lock down to contain the spread of the virus, but he refused to act. Sunak also reportedly opposed the imposition of tougher social restrictions. There was no case for delaying the imposition of social restrictions. Those who argue that there is a tradeoff between such restrictions and broader costs to the economy and wellbeing display a dangerous lack of understanding about a virus that spreads exponentially; if the government is not willing to tolerate the collapse of the NHS and hundreds of thousands of deaths, the tradeoff is always between social restrictions now and longer and tougher social restrictions, with more deaths than necessary, later. That tradeoff was obvious last spring. Yet the prime minister chose to ignore the scientific consensus, relying on the advice of discredited outlier scientists who supported his views. He delayed introducing a circuit-breaker lockdown until November and decided to ease restrictions in early December, when infection rates were high and climbing. While the second wave was caused by a more infectious variant, its severity can be directly traced to Johnson’s unwillingness to take difficult political decisions. Nothing illustrates his gross unfitness for office more clearly.

A continuing threat to lives

That may prove to be the most serious political failing during this pandemic, but there have been countless others. Instead of quickly developing a plan to try to protect [care homes](#), Hancock issued false assurances that he had put a shield around them and that people being discharged from hospitals into care homes were being tested for Covid, even as care home managers and relatives were saying they were not; similar mistakes were made in Scotland and Wales. There were extraordinary failures in the procurement of PPE that resulted in the government spending huge sums on equipment [not fit for purpose](#), as NHS and care home staff coped with serious shortages. Children and young people have been failed at every turn: education secretary, Gavin Williamson, has done far too little to support them in accessing education while schools were closed and to help them catch up on [missed opportunities](#). He remains in post despite his huge errors in the [exam results](#)

[scandal](#), with similar issues also anticipated by experts this year due to government decisions.

The government also continues to make serious and repeated errors. Cummings drew attention to the failure of borders policy last year. In April, Johnson delayed putting India on the red list for three weeks because he reportedly did not want to cancel his trade trip; this helped seed the B.1.617.2 variant in the UK, which will probably require a delay to relaxing social restrictions. The failure to introduce tougher restrictions on international travel risks a third wave caused by vaccine-resistant variants from abroad. This could undermine what has been achieved by the highly successful vaccine rollout, for which the government deserves credit.

Despite that rollout, the pandemic remains a threat to health, wellbeing and the economy. Emerging data on the higher transmissibility of the B.1.617.2 variant dominant in the UK suggests that the government should delay the final relaxation of restrictions planned for 21 June for a few weeks, at least until the school summer holidays, when transmission risks will be lower. The government must also introduce more restrictions on international travel over the summer in line with the [scientific advice](#) and, assuming things are going well in the autumn, bring forwards the public inquiry as a matter of urgency.

But we do not need a public inquiry to tell us what is clear: Johnson is utterly unfit to be prime minister. He is responsible for tens of thousands of avoidable deaths. Those who supported Johnson's bid for the Conservative leadership – not just Cummings, but those MPs who backed him despite knowing that he lacks the leadership and integrity prerequisite for public office – are complicit. The pandemic has proved a tragic point: that the costs inflicted by incompetent leaders who treat politics more like a game than a matter of life and death can be very painful indeed.

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[Notebook V&A](#)

An exquisite new exhibition brings home my long obsession with Iran

[Rachel Cooke](#)



Not even the sight of Oliver Dowden could dim my excitement at the V&A's latest triumph



A projection of the Tribute to Ahuramazda at the V&A's Epic Iran exhibition. Photograph: Guy Bell/REX/Shutterstock

A projection of the Tribute to Ahuramazda at the V&A's Epic Iran exhibition. Photograph: Guy Bell/REX/Shutterstock

Sun 30 May 2021 02.00 EDT

I know exactly when [Iran](#) first took hold of me. In 1979, I was at school in Jaffa, Israel, my classmates mostly Arab children and the offspring of assorted diplomats. One morning, we arrived for our first lesson to find some desks empty; the Iranian girls and boys, it seemed, were all elsewhere (relations between Israel and [Iran](#) were then, bizarre as this sounds now, fully functional). It was explained to us that there had been a revolution. My friend Shirin, it seemed, had returned to Tehran with her family. Even as my teacher smilingly insisted that, yes, of course I would see her again one day, I already understood that I wouldn't.

Thereafter, I never stopped wondering about Iran. What was it like? What strange powers did it hold? I read books about it, I watched films about it and, eventually, I managed to get inside it. I visited Persepolis and the tomb of the poet Hafez in Shiraz. In Isfahan, a cleric whacked me on the back when my scarf slipped. In Yazd, home of Zoroastrianism, my guide broke into an exuberant rendition of Queen's I Want to Break Free at the top of the

city's Tower of Silence ([Freddie Mercury was a Zoroastrian](#) by birth; the tower is one of the structures on which Zoroastrians traditionally left their dead).

I like the way life works in circles, taking you back to where you began. Last Tuesday, I was invited to the opening of the V&A's exhibition, [Epic Iran](#), an event so thrilling for me that not even the sight of Oliver Dowden could dent my mood (distracted by a famous photograph of a girl making a bubble with her gum, I managed not to accost the culture secretary, keen though I am to know what he plans to do about the nation's beleaguered musicians, who now need visas to tour in Europe).

You will, perhaps, have read about the V&A's incredible recreation of the domes of Isfahan, of the exquisite carpets, tiles and manuscripts. But on the night my favourite object was a tiny, easy-to-miss painting of 1495. It depicts the construction of a palace. Scaffolding has been raised, mortar is being mixed. What makes it so charming, and so modern, is that the men working on the site seem so exaggeratedly busy. A well-earned tea break – fetch the samovar! – is surely only moments away.

Too cool to sit



Using a chair at work is old hat. Photograph: Old Visuals/Alamy

Because I would like my back to be less painful, and my bum to be smaller, I've finally invested in a standing desk. It comprises three bits of beechwood: slotted together, you perch the result on your existing desk. It's harder to concentrate standing up; so far, I only use it when writing emails. But this zen lectern also, I believe, gives me the aura of a Japanese architect. I am calm. I am omnipotent. I need some fancy new minimalist clothes.

See Jane rebel



The Museum of the Home will reopen on 12 June. Photograph: Richard Gardner/Rex Features

Next month, the [Museum of the Home](#) (formerly the Geffrye Museum) in east London reopens after an £18m refurbishment: good timing, given the enforced nesting of the last 12 months. Those thoroughly sick of cooking and cleaning will enjoy a new room dedicated to housework, starring mad-looking ancient vacuum cleaners and posters by the See Red Women's Workshop, a 1970s printing collective. In one, a skit on the Ladybird books many of us remember from childhood, docile Jane, Mummy's little helper, is transformed into a mini-radical. "Stuff this," she thinks, shoving aside her duster. "It's about time I started giving girls an example of all the other things we can do."

Rachel Cooke is an Observer columnist

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Boris Johnson and the emperor's new PPE – cartoon

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[Opinion](#)British Museum

As even Nero is now on the right side of history, perhaps there's hope for Boris Johnson

[Catherine Bennett](#)



In today's cancel culture, you're either in or out. But things can change; just look at the matricidal Roman emperor



Great hair: a marble bust of Nero in the British Museum exhibition.
Photograph: Facundo Arrizabalaga/EPA

Great hair: a marble bust of Nero in the British Museum exhibition.
Photograph: Facundo Arrizabalaga/EPA

Sun 30 May 2021 02.30 EDT

“Nero,” it says at the British Museum’s revisionist [exhibition](#) about the unlamented Roman emperor, “introduced new forms of entertainment where people of different classes could mingle.” He also had great hair. “It set a new fashion, as people across the empire imitated his look.”

But wait: “Appreciated by the masses, such inclusiveness antagonised some members of the senatorial elite.” At the age of 30, he was forced into suicide, after which enemies spoiled his statues and antique historians made a big thing of his murdering his mother. Even the current exhibition struggles to finesse that blip.

Still, what a thing for Nero if only he could somehow be made aware that, after almost 2,000 years of slander and meanness (he was literally miles away when Rome burned!), he is finally being uncanceled; reclaimed as an imaginative, stylish, often affectionate, possibly deserving recipient of popular adulation who behaved as maybe anyone might have done when you

factor in contemporaneous slavery and a more easygoing approach to both massacres and matricide. Maybe he was just ahead of his time.

In fact, visitors might conclude on this evidence that Nero was entitled to tell the senate, if only the expression had existed around AD68, that they were on the wrong side of history, that bad side featuring everyone from Churchill, slave traders and the architects of apartheid and genocide to people who resist their designation as “cis”. He, Nero, would meanwhile be on the virtuous, progressive side, one featuring Jesse Jackson, Tony Blair, Yvette Cooper, Bill Clinton, [Jeremy Corbyn](#), the late Fenner Brockway (see below) and, perhaps less promisingly, David Cameron and various pro-Brexit luminaries. High among the difficulties presented by the popular, right/wrong side of history style of argument is the absence of a reliable history-sorting hat or similar mechanism, followed by adequate policing of its decisions and an appeals system for the miscategorised.

What right-side border controls ensure that someone from, say, the [Spectator](#) or the Republican party can't, by identifying into the sacred group, undermine its reputation as progressive, as spiritually if not actually millennial? Any right-side impurity could, for its most energetic proponents, blight the whole exercise. Just last week, a Talk Radio host [characterised himself](#) as hailing from (in contrast to Dominic Cummings) the favoured, sunny side of history and therefore entitled to sit at the right hand of [Barack Obama](#), who must bear some responsibility for the evolution of the phrase from idealism shorthand to all-purpose conversation stopper. The *Atlantic* once calculated that Obama used “wrong side of history” 13 times and the “right side of history” 15.

But much of the vogue for TWSOH in online debate or, more accurately, in shutting down debate, probably lies in its being as a standalone accusation as completely meaningless as it is, at the same time, rich in biblical-sounding conviction. Both commanding and convenient, this time-saving tactic also offers users, when binary thinking runs short of current material, the chance to impose it on the future. Like children at the [British Museum](#), who are urged to judge Nero as either a “good emperor” or a bad one, the advertised judgment day will have no truck with compromise or equivocation. The non-compliant can only rejoice that we will by this time be as dead as Nero.

When, as usually happens, a “wrong side” taunt duly provokes a matching “no, that’s you, that is”, the initiating right-sider is conventionally spared, having bagged it first, not just further debate but also, to a remarkably forgiving degree, any explanation of what “history” means in this context, of why it is more relevant than what’s happening now, of what, most mysteriously of all, accounts for the delusion that history’s view should, so providentially – or myopically – resemble their own.

Because, leave aside countless historians and wrong-siders alerting us to the fragility of civilisations, shouldn’t the elevation of [Boris Johnson](#) alone, as Cummings has just mentioned, dispel any fatuous confidence in continuous progress? You don’t have to have read – though it might help manage expectations – Orwell, Margaret Atwood or Robert Harris’s *The Second Sleep* to wonder who Twitter’s prophets are relying on to ward off dystopian interference with the posthumous vilification of current dissenters. And even with a guarantee, it would hardly compete with the unquenchable fire.

Which could be one reason why OTWSOH was slow to take off, to judge by Hansard, among British political speakers. Not until 1953 did Brockway ask Anthony Eden if (in his not pressing for Tunisian independence) he wasn’t “placing this country on the wrong side of history”. It next appears in 2008, levelled by Gordon Brown at David Cameron’s party before Cameron adapted OTWSOH for personal use. Subsequently, this arguably complacent statement proliferated almost as if in step with publications dwelling on the precariousness of democracies and of liberal ideas of progress.

The mentions multiplied, often in a foreign policy context, until, with the pandemic intensifying insecurities about the future, OTWSOH achieved its current ubiquity, applied to everything from Brexit to data protection. Its close relation, “history will judge”, has enjoyed similar success. As in recently (from [Lord Bhatia](#)): “It remains to be seen as to how history will judge Boris Johnson in the coming two to three decades.”

Might it not be more practical to judge him now? In case a revisionist, cruelly non-progressive future depicts him, Nero-like, with his profligacy, debauchery and sociopathy balanced by festivals, showing off and haircuts, as the finest in an unbroken line of Etonians: “Appreciated by the masses, such inclusiveness antagonised some members of the senatorial elite.” After

the last few years, an appreciative future verdict seems fully as likely as one that damns him, like the wretches regularly excoriated on Twitter, for being on the wrong side of history.

Catherine Bennett is an Observer columnist

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[Names in the news](#) Simone Biles

You'll believe that wonder woman Simone Biles can fly

[Rebecca Nicholson](#)



The first female gymnast to execute the Yurchenko double pike wows everyone... except the judges



Simone Biles on the bars at the US Classic in Indianapolis on 22 May.
Photograph: Emilee Chinn/Getty Images

Simone Biles on the bars at the US Classic in Indianapolis on 22 May.
Photograph: Emilee Chinn/Getty Images

Sat 29 May 2021 10.00 EDT

Simone Biles became the central figure in a sporting parable last weekend, when she attempted, and landed, a move so dangerous that no other woman has ever even tried to do it in a gymnastics competition, not even the woman for whom it is named. Biles [executed the Yurchenko double pike](#) during the final night of the 2021 US Classic in Indianapolis; traditionally, it is only attempted by men. [It was incredible](#). It defied belief, even as it unfolded before the crowd's eyes.

If Ginger Rogers thought dancing backwards and in high heels was tough, then the sight of Biles approaching a vault blindly and then launching herself to astonishing heights, without so much as looking in the right direction, is something else entirely.

It may be obvious from the fact that I can only describe her moves as “very big”, “extremely high” and “that amazing jumpy-up spinny thing” that I don’t follow gymnastics religiously, nor do I fully understand its rules and

regulations. But I do know that Biles, one of the the most decorated gymnasts ever, is a rock star of sport and has superhuman abilities that have made her famous across the globe. I have played the video of the Yurchenko double pike again and again, the one in slow motion, and the sheer wonder of Biles making her body do something that the laws of physics suggest it should not be able to do is thrilling.

Biles seemed thrilled herself. “I’m sorry but I can’t believe I competed a double pike on vault,” she tweeted afterwards, of her history-making achievement. But the judges gave it comparatively low marks, because dangerous moves have a lower starting point. The *New York Times* suggested that this might be to discourage less able athletes from attempting it, but to this outsider, at least, it seems to penalise the most exceptional athletes for being able to do the most exceptional things. Biles said that her scores were “too low”. “But they don’t want the field to be too far apart. And that’s just something that’s on them. That’s not on me,” she said, wisely.

Even so, she said that despite being under-rewarded, she would continue to attempt these dangerous moves. When asked why, she replied: “[Because I can.](#)” It went viral, because it struck a chord. Few can relate to Biles’s world-class athleticism, of course, but plenty can relate to being told not to stand out, to fall back into line. “Because I can” is a statement of defiance dressed up in a shrug and, like the woman who said it, it is inspirational.

James Newman: Eurovision revision needed



James Newman: back to the drawing board. Photograph: Hollandse Hoogte/REX/Shutterstock

This year's Eurovision song contest was fabulously dramatic, even by Eurovision standards. A [drug-taking "scandal"](#) that turned out to have been conscientious cleaning-up! [Amanda Holden](#) going the full Brits abroad on languages other than English! The indignity of not one but two nul points lobbed squarely at the UK by both the professional juries and the audience vote!

It was a post-lockdown rush of giddiness. Yet it does sting that we keep getting it so wrong. Poor old [James Newman](#) even got a commiserating phone call from Chris Martin afterwards, though hasn't he suffered enough, etc, etc?

[Bill Bailey appeared on *Good Morning Britain*](#) to mop up the aftermath, telling Susanna Reid that he once submitted a song, but had it rejected by the BBC for being "too silly". One could argue that in a competition once won by a woman doing an impression of a chicken, this not a useful measure of potential success, but the Eurovision alchemy is delicate: it's not about daftness for the sake of it, but about taking it just seriously enough, no matter how outrageous the idea. To get past the nul lull, we need to find the right balance of sincerity and celebration.

Sharon Van Etten and Angel Olsen: singing along to a duet less ordinary



Sharon Van Etten and Angel Olsen: ‘a blessing to my ears’. Photograph: Courtesy of Chalk Press

Two of my favourite singer-songwriters, Sharon Van Etten and Angel Olsen, have teamed up to release a new single, [Like I Used To](#), a sweeping epic with all the swagger of an instant classic that I have attempted to sing along to in my car all week.

I love same-sex duets, not least because it means I can make an unholy mess of noise by belting out both parts, equally as terribly. Like I Used To has been a blessing to my ears and a curse to the ears of anyone I have driven past.

I love such duets, but outside of musical theatre, there are fewer of them than male-female ones. I think it makes them sound less familiar to our ears and they conjure up a different flavour of magic. But this is a minor genre stuffed with classics.

There is Brandy and Monica duking it out for the affections of a man who is surely not worthy of either their affections in [The Boy Is Mine](#), or Miranda

Lambert and Carrie Underwood partnering up to hit the town like a “real life Thelma and Louise” in [Somethin’ Bad](#), or the beautiful, consolatory tones of [I Used to Love Him](#), in which Mary J Blige seems to counsel a heartbroken Lauryn Hill on the perils of choosing “the road of passion and pain”, from the point of view of someone who has been there and done that many times before.

These songs stand out, because they offer a perspective away from the usual pop sentiments of “I’m in love” or “I’m at a party” or “I’m sad”. Like I Used To is a worthy addition to the canon.

Rebecca Nicholson is an Observer columnist

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[Observer letters](#)[Electoral reform](#)

Letters: our democracy cries out for electoral reform

Only by shaking up the voting system can we hope to be rid of Conservative dominance



We need to replace our ‘abysmal first-past-the-post system’. Photograph: Rui Vieira/PA

We need to replace our ‘abysmal first-past-the-post system’. Photograph: Rui Vieira/PA

Sat 29 May 2021 01.00 EDT

As a campaigner for electoral reform for many years, I was pleased to see the excellent article on the subject (“[Labour manifesto must back electoral reform, say activists](#)”, News). If this article were to become the stimulus leading ultimately to the replacement of our abysmal first-past-the-post system by an alternative that yields a better reflection of the electorate’s

views, then 23 May 2021 will surely qualify as a seminal day for democracy in the UK.

I would have preferred for this watershed moment to have been on 5 May 2011, when we had the chance to adopt the alternative voting system (AVS), and then we would surely now not be under the control of such a dominant Conservative government.

We can only hope that the [Labour](#) activists achieve their aim and create an unstoppable popular movement towards electoral reform, both for their party's benefit and for the greater aim of enhancing our democracy. The other "progressive" parties seeking fairer representation would also be beneficiaries of such a development and, for me, the icing on the cake would be if the consensus within this "affiliated" group were for the introduction of the AVS.

James Bingham

Broughton Astley, Leicestershire

Two sides of Diana

In your editorial about the Bashir interview ("[The betrayal of Diana is no excuse to wreck the BBC](#)"), you said: "To view Diana one-dimensionally as a helpless girlish victim – weak, mentally unstable and easily manipulated – is to betray the memory of a formidably intelligent woman" who was "no fool". It is, of course, possible to be both vulnerable and intelligent.

Susanna Gridley

London W4

Israel, land of shared culture

Neither a two- nor a one-state solution will emerge with the Arab or Israeli leadership ("[From the river to the sea, Jews and Arabs must forge a shared future](#)", Comment). One must look elsewhere for people of vision. Palestinian Marwan Barghouti (in prison) has shown a willingness to compromise. In Israel, Ayman Odeh has pointed out that Israel's desire to project a westernised image hides the fact that Mizrahi/north African Jews constitute the majority. Recognition of Israel as a Middle Eastern country

with a shared culture would help to catalyse peaceful coexistence and, one day, evolution to a single state.

CJ Hawkey

Nottingham

Outrageous attitude to aid

Andrew Rawnsley's excellent article omits two other significant points that demonstrate that the government's attitude to aid is negative ("[Boris Johnson, you can't claim to be a world leader while savagely cutting aid](#)", Comment"). First, in 10 years, there have been seven secretaries of state for international development: Andrew Mitchell (2011), Justine Greening (2012), Priti Patel (2016), Penny Mordaunt (2017), Rory Stewart (2019), Alok Sharma (2019) and Anne-Marie Trevelyan (2020). What does this say about the commitment to development assistance, the potential for developing strategies with countries requiring aid and the relationships with civil servants if there is this constant turnover of "bosses" at the top?

Second, the merger of the Department for International Development with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office simply means that money destined to support communities in the poorest nations can be used for so-called diplomacy. It's an outrage.

Dr Nick Maurice

Marlborough, Wiltshire

Help for abused wives

Dr Hannana Siddiqui advocates a "Banaz's law" to ensure that if a crime is committed for alleged cultural reasons, such as in an "honour" killing, that should be treated as an aggravating, not a mitigating factor ("['No one believed my sister was in danger.' Why race is leaving abuse victims at risk](#)", *Observer* campaign).

The 2006 Banaz Mahmood case did prompt legislation the following year to prevent such killings. Forced marriage civil protection orders allow those similarly threatened to take immediate action in the family courts to protect themselves. Hundreds obtain such orders each year. Given the reluctance of

domestic abuse victims to criminalise family members, it is disappointing your article made no reference to these civil orders, for which legal aid is available, as it is for non-molestation injunctions generally.

Jan Williams, the Campaign for Effective Domestic Abuse Laws
Knaresborough, North Yorkshire

Starmer and Primrose Hill

As part of a large but informal group of residents in the Primrose Hill area of London, we feel compelled to respond to your article ("[Anger as Starmer calls for gate to keep public out of London park](#)", News). Reporting solely from the standpoint of a small group opposed to permanent gates on the park, you failed to take into account any other point of view.

Sir Keir Starmer, our local MP, was responding to well-documented testimonials, videos and nightly logs of disturbances that include all-night raves, open drug dealing and abuse, underage drinking, physical assaults on residents, vandalism, defecation in gardens and doorways, knives and fighting.

In Meadowbank, we suffer some of the worst abuse. We have residents whose lives have been severely affected by the sustained disturbances. But those negatively affected include old folk in sheltered housing and an adjacent council estate. Many have been terrified by the disturbances and simply want some sense of safety. It's certainly not a class or race issue, as implied by your article, nor is it Tory v Labour. All our councillors are Labour and strongly support 10pm-till-dawn weekend closures as a "circuit breaker".

Primrose Hill park is the only central London royal park that isn't gated and closed at night. This has made it a vast, open-air and unregulated night-time destination, with partygoers travelling from all over London and beyond. The police have publicly stated they are unable to police the park effectively and have asked for gates to secure closure from 10pm-till-dawn weekends only. Starmer stepped in only after Royal Parks ignored these requests. Our MP, who acted on behalf of his constituents after months of frustration and a year of suffering, just happens to be leader of the opposition. We are grateful to him for his actions.

Virender Khanna and Lucy Kelsey
London NW3

Bermondsey's not all bad

Interesting to see an old map of the area round south Bermondsey station being revamped as the roadmap out of David Mitchell's imagined Covid-ridden hellhole ("[This roadmap is leading us in metaphorical circles](#)", the New Review). Bit unfair though; it's not that bad round there.

Graham Larkbey
London E17

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For the record

This week's corrections

Sun 30 May 2021 01.00 EDT

We erred in presenting data related to the spread in schools of the India Covid-19 variant: 164 cases of the new variant out of 2,111 is 7.8%, not 13%, as we said; and a rise from 2,111 cases to 3,424 since 12 May is an increase of 62%, not 160% ([No 10 blocked data on spread of India variant in UK schools, suggests report](#), 23 May, page 10, later editions).

Bob Dylan grew up in Hibbing, Minnesota, but he was not born there, as an article said. He was born in Duluth, about 70 miles away ([A little Minnesota town celebrates its famous son at 80](#), 23 May, page 26). Also, the place where he was reported to the police by a concerned resident in 2009 was Long Branch, New Jersey, not “Long Beach”.

The guitarist Mdou Moctar is from Niger and is therefore Nigerien, not Nigerian, as we said in a [review](#) of his latest album, *Afrique Victime* (23 May, New Review, page 33).

The Russell-Cotes gallery is in Bournemouth, not Eastbourne, as an article on the reopening of museums and galleries said ([Now's the best time to enjoy Britain's treasures \(there are no tourists\)](#), 16 May, page 4).

Other recently amended articles include:

[GPs stricken by long Covid 'shocked and betrayed' at being forced from jobs](#)

[Spy who got the cold shoulder: how the west abandoned its star defector](#)

[Thousands of work-related Covid deaths going unreported, says TUC](#)

[Yes but no but yes: flight bookings soar despite baffling travel rules](#)

[Dorfromantik review – the simple pleasures of world-building](#)

[Casa Madeira, London: ‘I love the Portuguese repertoire’ – restaurant review](#)

[Distraught choirs forced back to Zoom after late Covid rule change in England](#)

*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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Opinion Carrie Symonds

Of course Carrie Symonds loves Dilyn, so why mock her for that?

Barbara Ellen



The PM's fiancée was right to be upset at the suggestion she would abandon her rescue dog



Carrie Symonds with the controversial Dilyn. Photograph: Toby Melville/Reuters

Carrie Symonds with the controversial Dilyn. Photograph: Toby Melville/Reuters

Sat 29 May 2021 12.00 EDT

While obviously not the most important takeaway from *The Great Outpouring*, [Dominic Cummings](#) really hates Carrie Symonds, doesn't he? Understandable really. She took his best mate away. They were so close, but then she came along and Boris didn't have time for him any more... Oh sorry, I appear to have segued into a half-remembered *Byker Grove* storyline – a “teaching moment” for schoolboy viewers about feeling left out when your mate gets a girlfriend. Only in the Westminster version, a pandemic is brewing and Cummings depicts Symonds “going crackers about something completely trivial” – a story claiming that Dilyn, the jack russell cross she rescued with Boris Johnson, was being “reshuffled”. Thing is, though, I understand why Symonds was upset and I rather like her for it.

Cummings clearly wanted to present Symonds as a Violet Elizabeth Bott figure, a preposterous, demanding drag on the prime minister's focus at a critical moment. Admittedly, the [now-leaked letter of complaint](#) Symonds drafted to the *Times* is an overwrought belter, citing violations, demanding

corrections and ending with the classic: “We look forward to hearing from you as a matter of urgency.” Elsewhere, never mind the first fiancée’s taste for swanky decor, stories abound about her pushing animal welfare agendas and exerting undue influence over No 10 hiring and firing. Still, when it comes to being a pandemic liability, I have two words for Cummings: “Barnard” and “Castle”. As for the letter, it’s an absurd, messy, emotional overreaction... and I completely relate.

The story was about Dilyn potentially being rehoused because of bad health and unruliness (shagging legs and the like). Never mind that it’s supposed to be true that Johnson had wearied of Dilyn (maybe partly accounting for his waving away Symonds’s letter as “nonsense”). For an animal lover, and especially someone who’s rescued an animal, this would be upsetting. Adopting a rescue is a serious commitment – a lot of these animals have already been abused and [abandoned](#) (I read that Dilyn was rescued from being put down because of a wonky jaw). By rescuing, you make a sacred pledge to your vulnerable animal: “That’s the last time you’re scared” and you mean it. Or you should do.

While there’s been a [pandemic pet boom](#), charities are already worrying about animals [being abandoned post-lockdown](#). In that grim context, I’m all for Symonds raging, however disproportionately, over a story about them offloading Dilyn. I’m touched that she banged out that mad letter. She loves her dog, so sue her. Nor am I entirely averse to the unelected Symonds pushing animal welfare agendas (there has to be some upside to being Johnson’s fiancée). The bond between British people and their pets can get highly emotional and sometimes irrational, but it’s also the best part of us. Cummings was clearly trying to ridicule and diminish Symonds, but he probably won her some new fans.

**Many young people still think smoking is cool.
Isn’t it time for a ban?**



Time to stub it out? Photograph: Sigrid Olsson/Getty Images

So much for vaping seeing off smoking. [Shocking data](#) published in the *Lancet* shows that, while the prevalence of smoking has been decreasing globally, population growth means that numbers have risen by 10%, with 150 million more people lighting up in the nine years since 1990 and an all-time high of [1.1 billion smokers](#). While China accounts for one-third of the world's smokers (351 million), Britain made it into the top 10 of countries in terms of the number of female smokers (4.8 million).

I've got no moral axe to grind (I smoked like a steam engine for years and loved it), but the age element alone is striking. Almost 90% of smokers take up the habit before 25.

At this point in the debate, it's traditional to muse on the deadly glamour/"cool" of cigarettes, but isn't this attitude out of date? Cigarette adverts are banned and on-screen smoking has been curbed. Smoking can be about stress and weight control, but mainly it's about addiction. Specifically, vulnerable young people getting hooked.

When is enough enough? The glamorisation of tobacco is under control and vaping is popularised, so maybe it's time to consider an under-25 ban.

Ignoring rape victims' voices compounds the crime and pain



Rape victims routinely fail to get justice. Photograph: Rob Wilkinson/Alamy

Where rape is concerned, whose voice is more important than that of the survivor? A government review into the collapse of rape prosecutions in England and Wales could be missing a vital component – direct input from victims.

Last week, analysis of Home Office figures showed that only [1.6% of rape cases](#) resulted in a suspect being charged in 2020. The England and Wales review, two years in the making and overdue, could arrive in June. However, it appears that charities and groups wrote a letter expressing dismay at the reluctance of the review to directly [engage with rape survivors](#).

This review represents a crucial juncture in how rape is dealt with in England and Wales. How many prosecutions are made has an impact on public trust in the system – a rape victim's confidence that there's a point in coming forward about their attack. By anybody's reckoning, 1.6% of reported incidents resulting in a prosecution is an insult to sexual assault victims.

Those in charge of the review say that they didn't wish to re-traumatise people, so they used research conducted by victims' organisations rather than deal directly with survivors. Which doesn't make sense. No survivors would have been forced to take part and there could have been trauma specialists on hand for those who did. If victims are going to be re-traumatised by anything, it would be by not being heard about the vile crimes committed against them.

The review is supposed to be looking into how rape survivors routinely failed to get justice. Now, with this review, survivors have found themselves sidelined and muted, with no direct way of contributing. If corners were cut, it's disrespectful and absurd. In this context, whose voices, testimonies and thoughts could possibly be more important, more useful and illuminating than those of survivors?

Barbara Ellen is an Observer columnist

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/may/29/of-course-carrie-symonds-loves-dilyn-so-why-mock-her>

[OpinionUnite](#)

The UK's richest union is fighting in the courts, but not for the low paid

[Nick Cohen](#)



While Covid threatens the jobs of millions, Unite is focused on factional divisions



Anna Turley (right), then Labour MP for Redcar, leaving the Royal Courts of Justice in London in late 2019, when she was fighting a libel case against Unite and Skwawkbox. Photograph: Kirsty O'Connor/PA

Anna Turley (right), then Labour MP for Redcar, leaving the Royal Courts of Justice in London in late 2019, when she was fighting a libel case against Unite and Skwawkbox. Photograph: Kirsty O'Connor/PA

Sat 29 May 2021 13.00 EDT

Capital will stage a brutal demonstration of its power over labour when the furloughs and state protections of the Covid pandemic end. Across the west, but most particularly in the UK, employees' ability to defend themselves will depend on whether they are in a trade union.

The new working class of young, female and ethnic minority workers in hotels, gyms, security guard huts, supermarkets, call centres, restaurants, shops and bars needs unions. Whatever pain is coming, precarious private sector workers will feel it the most. The labour movement must surely be concentrating its energies on helping radically insecure workers as the crisis approaches.

How's it doing?

Last week, solicitors representing Anna Turley threatened to [send bailiffs](#) to the head office of Unite in Holborn, central London, with instructions to carry off everything that wasn't nailed down. Faced with the threat that Len McCluskey, Howard Beckett and the union's other post-Leninist apparatchiks would have nothing to sit on but overturned crates, Unite handed over its members' money. Turley received the final part of [legal costs of £1.3m and damages of £75,000](#), compensation for a libel claim that has cost the union between £2m and £2.5m in total.

It has been a busy time in the small but vicious world of militant trade unionism

Turley is not a traditional enemy of organised labour. Until 2019, she was the Labour MP for Redcar. Because she was a "centrist" or "Blairite" or whatever the far left was calling politicians like her at the time, the union falsely claimed, through the Skwawkbox website, that Turley was a cheat who had tried to join a section of the union reserved for the unemployed on "a fraudulent basis". If it had corrected the mistake and apologised, it would have likely cost union members a few hundred pounds, if that. As it was, Unite wasted several million hiring a ferocious QC, who said of Turley in open court and in the middle of the 2019 election campaign, "[she is not fit to be an MP](#)". She lost her seat. With Brexit and Jeremy Corbyn, it would have gone anyway. But the sight of the most influential union on the left attacking Labour MPs at the moment when Johnson was about to sweep to power says all there is to say about its priorities.

Also last week, for it has been a busy time in the small but vicious world of militant trade unionism, the Labour MP Neil Coyle [alleged](#) to the parliamentary commissioner for standards and the certification officer, who regulates trade unions, that Unite was using members' money to subsidise a string of legal cases. The media picked up his claim that Corbyn had not properly declared financial support from Unite for legal disputes involving antisemitism.

The high quantity and abysmal quality of the cases Coyle claims the union is fighting struck me. Coyle alleges Unite has become a bank, funding a dozen or more legal actions, nearly all involving accusations of antisemitism, with

potential costs running into the millions. A few are on the public record. Unite told the judge in the Turley case that it would cover all the costs of the Skwawkbox site's libels. Barristers said in open court that Unite was picking up the bills for five people accused of leaking a Corbyn-era report that purported to clear him and his supporters of antisemitism, while blaming Labour employees for [all that went wrong](#). The result is dozens of suits for libel and breach of privacy from ex-Labour staffers.

When I asked [Unite](#) if it was funding the remaining cases Coyle raised, its PR person said: "The information you have ranges from being false to widely inaccurate. It is, of course, a matter for you as to whether you print false or widely inaccurate information."

"OK," I replied, "which information is false and wildly inaccurate? All, some?" Answer came there none.

Once, a Marxist might have defended Unite's obsession with far-left factionalism. Unions were "schools of war", wrote Friedrich Engels in his [Condition of the Working Class in England](#) in 1845, where members learned to fight "the supremacy of the bourgeoisie". Andrew Murray, Unite's chief of staff, is descended from the [Earls of Perth](#) and the royal house of Navarre. He was born into a family that [sells a Picasso](#) when it is short of money. He is possibly the poshest man in England after Prince Charles. But he is also a [committed communist](#), who presumably sees Unite as a tool to overthrow the power of his fellow aristos, although how the union defaming a woman such as Anna Turley brings the revolution closer is beyond me.

The alternative conception of trade unionism holds that Labour party or Leninist revolutionary politics are as nothing when set against the overriding need to protect employees' interests. It recognises that trade union membership does not guarantee support for the left – at the last election almost as many Unite members [voted Tory as Labour](#) – and does not care. What matters is supporting millions of unprotected employees.

By this measure– the only measure that matters in my view – the trade union movement is failing. The Resolution Foundation said last week that trade union membership stood at just 12.9% of private sector workers in 2020. In

the hospitality industry, where long hours and low pay are standard, only [3% of workers](#) are in a union.

There are flickers of hope. The GMB union fights to defend the workers in [Amazon](#) warehouses, and has forced [Uber](#) to recognise its right to help and support its drivers. There are other examples I could cite, most notably in retail, but they cannot disguise that trade unionists are today far more likely to work in the public rather than the private sector, to be old rather than young and, for all Engels's talk about fighting bourgeois supremacy, to be [middle rather than working class](#).

Meanwhile, Unite uses its money and platform to pursue expensive and pointless courtroom dramas.

Nick Cohen is an Observer columnist

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/may/29/unite-union-funding-legal-battles-low-paid-workers>

[The weekly stats uncovered](#)Coronavirus

Why is the new Covid variant spreading?

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

The virus is now in a race with the vaccines and the victor is increasingly uncertain



Hounslow, west London, has become a hotspot for B.1.617.2 lineage, first identified in India. Photograph: MI News/NurPhoto/REX/Shutterstock

Hounslow, west London, has become a hotspot for B.1.617.2 lineage, first identified in India. Photograph: MI News/NurPhoto/REX/Shutterstock

Sun 30 May 2021 03.00 EDT

The UK's fine performance in sequencing Sars-CoV-2 genomes allows [Public Health England](#) to publish detailed analyses on the progress of variants and the [latest report](#) represents the changing of the guard. The B.1.1.7 lineage, first identified in Kent, had been dominant in the UK, but the B.1.617.2 lineage, first identified in India, comprised 58% of the most

recent sequences, up from 44% the week before. There are strong regional differences, with under 10% of cases in Yorkshire and the Humber being the Indian-identified variant, while in north-west England that share is over 60%.

The main concern is about increased risk of transmission and reports also include estimates of what is known as the “secondary attack rate” (SAR), which simply means the proportion of an infected person’s contacts who also get infected. Using NHS test-and-trace data for recent non-travel cases, the estimated SAR for the B.1.1.7 variant was 8.1% (+/- 0.2%), while for the variant identified in India it was substantially higher at 13.5% (+/- 1.0%) – although these are likely to understate the true values due to the limitations of contact tracing.

Between January and March 2021, [it was estimated](#) that, of contacts of a non-traveller infected with the B.1.1.7 variant, around one in 10 got infected. This is an average of a very widely dispersed distribution: [most cases](#) do not infect anyone else, while at the opposite end of the spectrum there can be [“super-spreader” events](#), often in prolonged indoor gatherings with poor ventilation. It is increasingly accepted that [viral spread](#) is mainly airborne rather than by droplets and [“fresh air”](#) has finally been added to the “hands, face, space” mantra.

Nearly [7 million contacts](#) in England have been legally obliged to [self-isolate](#) for at least 10 days. Even if the proportion of contacts infected were as high as 20%, it would still mean that over 5 million of these were not infected and yet were unable to shorten their isolation by testing.

Where are we now? Confirmed [cases are rising](#), with the virus in a race against the vaccines and the prospects are extremely uncertain.

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

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Headlines thursday 27 may 2021

- [Live UK Covid: Matt Hancock denies Dominic Cummings' claims he lied repeatedly](#)
- [Matt Hancock I was straight with people, says health secretary after Cummings claims](#)
- [Robert Jenrick Minister rejects Cummings' claims of 'unnecessary' Covid deaths](#)
- [Dominic Cummings Former aide lambasts PM in damning account of Covid crisis](#)

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

UK Covid: Hancock refuses to deny telling No 10 patients would be tested before discharge into care homes – as it happened

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[Coronavirus](#)

Johnson and Hancock dismiss Cummings' claims of chaos and lies

PM and health secretary defend their Covid response after accusations from former adviser

- [Covid UK live blog: reaction to Cummings testimony](#)
- [See all our coronavirus coverage](#)

01:34

'No relation to reality': Johnson dismisses Cummings allegations – video

[Aubrey Allegretti](#) *Political correspondent*

[@breeallegretti](#)

Thu 27 May 2021 09.20 EDT

The government has launched a fightback against [Dominic Cummings](#), after he accused ministers of a chaotic and incompetent response to the Covid pandemic that led to tens of thousands of unnecessary deaths.

Boris Johnson said, following the testimony from his former chief adviser on Wednesday, that some claims he had heard didn't "bear any relation to reality". The health secretary, Matt Hancock, dismissed allegations he lied in cabinet and to the public as "unsubstantiated" and "not true".

Westminster was still reeling after Cummings' seven-hour evidence session with two parliamentary committees, when he delivered excoriating analysis of the government's response to coronavirus, saying it was "lions led by donkeys over and over again".

Focusing his attacks on the health secretary and prime minister in particular, Cummings said Johnson was unfit for office, "constantly U-turned" and

ignored scientists' advice to order a second national lockdown. He accused Hancock of "lying to everybody on multiple occasions in meeting after meeting in the cabinet room and publicly" and of "criminal" behaviour for holding back Covid tests so he could meet his "stupid" target of reaching 100,000 tests a day by the end of April.

In response to questions from a journalist on a trip to a hospital in Essex, Johnson denied that his delay in ordering a second lockdown last autumn against the advice of scientific advisers led to unnecessary deaths.

The prime minister said he had grappled with the question of whether to enforce another lockdown, which he knew would be a "very, very painful, traumatic thing for people", and had to "set that against the horrors of the pandemic".

He insisted: "At every stage, we've been governed by a determination to protect life, to save life, to ensure that our NHS is not overwhelmed, and we've followed to the best we can the data and the guidance that we've had."

Johnson originally said he made "no comment" on Cummings' accusations, before saying some claims he had heard didn't bear any relation to reality.

He also admitted it was uncertain whether Covid restrictions would end as planned in England on 21 June, saying: "I don't see anything currently in the data to suggest that we have to deviate from the roadmap, but we may need to wait."

Meanwhile, Hancock faced questions from MPs in the House of Commons. Arriving in the chamber to boisterous cheers from Conservative backbenchers, he said he had been "straight with people" throughout the pandemic and that the "unsubstantiated allegations around honesty" were not true.

"There were unprecedented difficulties that come with preparations for an unprecedented event," Hancock said, urging his critics to "work together with a can-do spirit of positive collaboration".

Tory MPs rallied round the health secretary, accusing the opposition parties of “playing politics”, “opportunism and revisionism” and peddling “unsubstantiated Westminster gossip”.

[‘Domshell’: what the papers say about Dominic Cummings’ attack on Boris Johnson](#)

[Read more](#)

But the Labour leader, Sir Keir Starmer, said Cummings’ allegations should be taken seriously. “We’ve got one of the highest death tolls in Europe and the families who have lost someone are entitled to answers in relation to this,” he said.

“Bad decisions have consequences. In this case, I’m afraid, they’re unnecessary deaths ... They’re very, very serious allegations. They paint a picture that actually leads to the prime minister – the buck stops with him.”

Cummings has promised to provide evidence of his claims, which will be considered by the Commons’ science and health select committees conducting a “lessons learned” investigation into the government’s handling of the pandemic, well before the official inquiry, which is not due to start until spring 2022.

Hancock is due to address the same set of committees on 10 June, when he is likely to be asked about Cummings’ suggestions that there was no routine testing of hospital patients discharged into care homes, meaning Covid “spread like wildfire”.

Another allegation likely to be put to him is the claim that the government was preparing to pursue a “herd immunity” strategy of letting coronavirus seep through the population – and that up until mid-March, senior government figures including the cabinet secretary were suggesting people catch it “like the old chickenpox parties”.

Hancock will face further questions when he leads a Downing Street press conference at 5pm on Thursday, potentially alongside scientific advisers whom Cummings alleged he used as “shields for himself”.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/27/i-was-straight-with-people-says-matt-hancock-after-dominic-cummings-claims>

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[Coronavirus](#)

Minister rejects Dominic Cummings' claims of 'needless' Covid deaths

Robert Jenrick says PM acted with 'best information' he had at time when deciding how to tackle pandemic

- [Covid UK live blog: reaction to Cummings testimony](#)
- [See all our coronavirus coverage](#)



Robert Jenrick said 'nobody could doubt that the prime minister was doing anything other than acting with the best of motives with the information and advice that was available to him'. Photograph: Tayfun Salcı/Zuma Wire/Rex/Shutterstock

Robert Jenrick said 'nobody could doubt that the prime minister was doing anything other than acting with the best of motives with the information and advice that was available to him'. Photograph: Tayfun Salcı/Zuma Wire/Rex/Shutterstock

[Tobi Thomas](#)
[@tobithomas](#)

Thu 27 May 2021 05.18 EDT

A senior government minister has rejected Dominic Cummings' explosive claim that tens of thousands of people died unnecessarily during the Covid-19 pandemic, saying ministers were acting with the best information they had at the time when deciding on which measures to take.

Giving evidence to the Commons science and technology committee on Wednesday, the former senior aide to Boris Johnson said that ["tens of thousands of people died who didn't need to die"](#) due to decisions the government made in response to the pandemic.

When asked directly on Radio 4's Today programme whether Cummings' claim was false, the housing, communities and local government secretary, [Robert Jenrick](#), said: "Yes, I think it is."

['Domshell': what the papers say about Dominic Cummings' attack on Boris Johnson](#)
[Read more](#)

He added that the government "did not have all of the facts at the time the decision was being taken" and stressed that "nobody could doubt that the prime minister was doing anything other than acting with the best of motives with the information and advice that was available to him".

Jenrick also refused to say whether he viewed Cummings, with whom he worked in government, as a reliable source of information regarding the government's handling of the pandemic. When asked whether Cummings was unreliable, Jenrick said: "I'm not going to get into making personal allegations against individuals. I don't think that's helpful.

"As a government minister, I should be focused on what's next, how do we continue to respond to this pandemic. That's what the public want us to do. They do not want us to be obsessing about individual personalities."

Jenrick's comment came as the health secretary, Matt Hancock, [prepares to face MPs and the media to respond](#) to claims that he lied to colleagues and should have been fired for his handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

Hancock did not comment on Cummings' claims ahead of his Commons appearance and the evening Downing Street press conference, saying he was "just off to drive forward the vaccine programme" as he left his London home.

Jenrick also added that the [public inquiry being scheduled for 2022](#), rather than this year, was the right time for those who lost loved ones to seek answers and explanations.

He added that having a public inquiry into the government's handling of the pandemic next year was the "right moment" to "consider these things in a calm and reflective manner with all of the evidence".

Labour has called for a public inquiry to be held immediately due to fact that there may be some evidence to support Cummings' claims of government failures.

Angela Rayner, the deputy leader of the Labour party, said that Cummings' testimony was "very serious", and that her thoughts "are with the tens of thousands of families who are bereaved and feel that their loved ones died needlessly".

"This is why we need that public inquiry and we need it immediately," she said. "People need to know the answers to the questions, not just in terms of those that have lost loved ones, but also we need to learn the lessons."

She also added that following Cummings' claims, the main question Labour had for the health secretary was whether he had lied to the prime minister about plans to test people in hospital before they were discharged to care homes, as well as what he had to say to the public about why vulnerable people were put at risk in care homes.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/27/minister-rejects-dominic-cummings-claims-of-unnecessary-covid-deaths>

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[Dominic Cummings](#)

Cummings lambasts Johnson in damning account of Covid crisis

Ousted aide says failure to grasp situation meant ‘tens of thousands of people died who didn’t need to die’

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

03:20

Cummings calls Johnson ‘unfit for job’ and claims PM said ‘let the bodies pile high’ – video

[Heather Stewart](#) and [Peter Walker](#)

Wed 26 May 2021 16.00 EDT

Boris Johnson is unfit to be prime minister after presiding over a chaotic and incompetent pandemic response that caused many thousands of unnecessary deaths, his former chief aide [Dominic Cummings](#) claimed in an excoriating attack.

In a seven-hour hearing before MPs in Westminster, Cummings gave a damning account of the government’s approach, laying much of the blame on Johnson [and the health secretary, Matt Hancock](#).

The ousted aide said the prime minister had failed to grasp the gravity of the situation and held out against lockdowns meaning “tens of thousands of people died who didn’t need to die”. He portrayed Johnson as obsessed with the media and making constant U-turns “like a shopping trolley smashing from one side of the aisle to the other”.

Asked whether the prime minister was a fit and proper person to lead the country through the pandemic, Cummings replied simply: “No.” Apologising for what he said were his own failings, he added: “The truth is that senior ministers, senior officials, senior advisers like me fell disastrously short of the standards that the public has a right to expect of its government in a crisis like this.”

Other allegations in Cummings’ no-holds-barred testimony included:

- Hancock lied repeatedly to colleagues, causing the cabinet secretary – and Cummings – to urge Johnson to sack him, though the prime minister was told that “he’s the person you fire when an inquiry comes along”.
- Cummings heard Johnson say he would rather see “bodies pile high” than impose a third lockdown – something the prime minister has denied in the House of Commons.
- The government was woefully under-prepared for the pandemic, with no sense of urgency or plan for steps to protect vulnerable people, such as shielding.
- Ministers were assured patients leaving hospital for care homes would be tested first but belatedly discovered this was happening “partially and sporadically”.
- The prime minister’s fiancée, Carrie Symonds, meddled in hiring decisions to try to secure jobs for her friends in a way that was “unethical” and “illegal”.

While Cummings is widely viewed as bitter about his treatment at the hands of his former boss, he is also one of the first key figures from inside No 10 at the height of the pandemic to give public evidence.

In an appearance that spurred calls for a public inquiry to be expedited, the former aide described chaotic scenes in Downing Street in the early days of the pandemic, saying it was “surreal” and [comparing it to the alien invasion film Independence Day](#).

05:04

Cummings admits he did not 'tell the full story' about his lockdown trip to Durham – video

He said that in January and February 2020, as news of the pandemic emerged from China, ministers and senior officials fell victim to what he described as “literally a classic historical example of group-think in action”.

He claimed that only in mid-March was an initial plan to pursue “herd immunity”, by [allowing the virus](#) to spread but delaying the peak of the outbreak, belatedly abandoned. Herd immunity “was the whole logic of all the discussions in January and February and early March”, Cummings told the hearing.

He said the prime minister had repeatedly played down the seriousness of the disease, calling it a “scare story”. Cummings even claimed officials deliberately kept Johnson out of emergency Cobra meetings lest he hamper the response to the virus.

“Certainly, the view of various officials inside No 10 was if we have the PM chair Cobra meetings, and he just tells everyone ‘don’t worry about it, I’m going to get [England’s chief medical officer] Chris Whitty to inject me live on TV with coronavirus, so everyone realises it’s nothing to be frightened of,’ that would not help, actually, serious planning.”

No 10 rejected many of Cummings’ claims, including the idea the government had pursued a herd immunity strategy and that border policies were too lax.

The government had sought to undermine the reliability of Cummings’ account before it began. Grant Shapps, the transport secretary, told Sky News: “It’s easy to be the professor of hindsight. For certain, there are things we could have done differently ... but I’ll leave it to others to determine how reliable a witness he is.”

Cummings conceded that [his account of his lockdown-breaking trip to Durham](#) at a press conference in the Downing Street rose garden had been a “disaster”.

Explaining the decision not to order a lockdown in September, Cummings claimed, as had been previously reported, that Johnson argued at that time Covid was “only killing 80-year-olds”. The Labour leader, Keir Starmer, gave the prime minister the opportunity to deny making that remark at prime minister’s questions, but Johnson did not do so. Starmer accused the prime minister of “chaos, confusion and deadly misjudgment”.

03:46

Cummings: Hancock should have been sacked for 'criminal, disgraceful behaviour' – video

Starmer said the revelations in the hearing had underlined the need for the public inquiry into the pandemic to start work before the spring 2022 date set by the prime minister. “No more delays. A public inquiry needs to start this summer,” Starmer said.

Hancock is expected to be confronted with some of Cummings’ allegations when he answers an urgent question from the shadow health secretary, Jon Ashworth, in the House of Commons on Thursday and later presents a Downing Street press conference.

A spokesperson for Hancock said: “At all times throughout this pandemic the secretary of state ... and everyone in DHSC has worked incredibly hard in unprecedented circumstances to protect the NHS and save lives. We absolutely reject Mr Cummings’ claims about the health secretary.”

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2021.05.27 - Coronavirus

- [Live Covid: Olympics could cause new variant, doctor warns; India simplifies vaccine approvals to speed up rollout](#)
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[Dominic Cummings](#)

Dominic Cummings' evidence to MPs on Covid crisis: the key quotes

What the PM's former chief aide said during his explosive appearance before a Commons inquiry hearing

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03:20

Cummings calls Johnson 'unfit for job' and claims PM said 'let the bodies pile high' – video

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

Wed 26 May 2021 14.59 EDT

Dominic Cummings has shone a light on almost all aspects of the coronavirus pandemic: the key political figures, what dilemmas they faced and how they took decisions. In explosive testimony to two parliamentary committees lasting more than six hours, this is what he said on:

The early weeks – no sense of urgency

Cummings said it was difficult to get people in government to take Covid seriously at first: “The government itself and No 10 was not operating on a war footing in February [2020] on this, in any way, shape or form. Lots of key people were literally skiing in the middle of February.”

He said he had been bogged down with the “HS2 nightmare” and cabinet reshuffle, and then Johnson went on holiday for two weeks – so a “sense of urgency” only emerged at the end of that month.

Painting a picture of what it was like in No 10 as realisation dawned that tougher restrictions would be required, Cummings said 12 March was a “completely surreal day”.

In the morning, national security advisers revealed “Trump wants us to join a bombing campaign in the Middle East tonight,” while the prime minister’s fiancée, [Carrie Symonds](#), was enraged about a story in the Times concerning her dog, Dilyn, and “demanding that the press office deal with that”.

[Dominic Cummings says Covid chaos at No 10 was like ‘out-of-control movie’](#)

[Read more](#)

“So, we have this sort of completely insane situation in which part of the building was saying: ‘Are we going to bomb Iraq?’, part of the building was arguing about whether or not we’re going to do quarantine or not do quarantine and the prime minister has his girlfriend going crackers about something completely trivial.”

Herd immunity – ‘it *was* the plan’

Herd immunity [“was the whole logic of all the discussions](#) in January and February and early March [2020]”, Cummings said.

“The whole plan was based on the assumption that it was a certainty there would be no vaccines in 2020. So the logic was ... if it’s unconstrained it will come in and there will be a sharp peak like that and it will completely swamp everything and huge disaster. The logical approach therefore is to introduce measures which delay that peak arriving and which push it down below the capacity of the health system.”

He added: “I am completely baffled as to why No 10 is trying to deny herd immunity was the plan ... Hancock himself, the chief scientist [Sir Patrick Vallance] and CMO [Prof Chris Whitty] were all briefing senior journalists ... that this is what the plan is.”

Boris Johnson – Covid is a ‘scare story’

Cummings said Johnson [regarded Covid as “just a scare story”](#) and “the new swine flu” at the start of 2020 – adding he was “about a thousand times too obsessed with the media”.

Cummings described how officials had talked of getting the chief medical officer for England, [Chris Whitty](#), to inject Johnson live on TV with the coronavirus “so everyone realises it’s nothing to be frightened of”.

He said the prime minister “changes his mind 10 times a day, and then calls up the media and contradicts his own policy, day after day after day” and that Johnson “made some terrible decisions, got things wrong, and then constantly U-turned on everything”.

“I would say, if you took anybody at random from the top 1% of competent people in country, and presented them with the situation, they would have behaved differently to how the prime minister behaved.

“There’s this great misunderstanding people have that because it [Covid] nearly killed him, therefore he must have taken it seriously. But in fact, after the first lockdown, he was cross with me and others with what he regarded as basically pushing him into the first lockdown. His argument after that was: ‘I should have been the mayor of Jaws and kept the beaches open’ ... He essentially thought that he’d been gamed on the numbers of the first lockdown.”

The health secretary, Matt Hancock – ‘he should have been fired’

“There’s no doubt at all that many senior people performed far, far disastrously below the standards which the country has a right to expect. I think the secretary of state for health is certainly one of those people.”

Cummings said he “should’ve been fired for at least 15-20 things, including lying to everybody on multiple occasions in meeting after meeting in the Cabinet room and publicly”.

Johnson “came close to removing him in April but just fundamentally wouldn’t do it”, the ex-aide added.

He said Hancock had also blamed the NHS England chief, Sir Simon Stevens, and the chancellor, Rishi Sunak, for PPE (personal protective equipment) problems.

[Matt Hancock should have been sacked for lying, says Dominic Cummings](#)
[Read more](#)

Cummings said he asked the cabinet secretary to investigate, who came back and said: “It is completely untrue, I have lost confidence in the secretary of state’s honesty in these meetings”.

Hospital patients being discharged into care homes

Cummings said he was assured people would be tested before leaving hospital for a care home – and it was only after he and Johnson had been ill that they realised that “only happened very partially and sporadically”.

“Obviously, many, many people who should have been tested were not tested, and they went back to care homes and then infected people and it spread like wildfire inside the care homes. Also the care homes didn’t have the PPE to deal with it and they didn’t have the testing for the staff, so you had this cascading series of crises – like a domino effect, rippling out through the system.”

PPE procurement – ‘wading through treacle’

Cummings said he was told in meetings that vital masks and gloves were being sent by sea because it is “what we always do”. He said: “Hang on, we are going to have a peak in the NHS around about mid-April, and you are shipping things from China that are going to arrive in months’ time and all the aeroplanes are not flying? Leave this meeting, commandeer the planes, fly them to China, drop them at the nearest airfield, pick up our stuff, fly it back.

“At this point you had Trump sending the CIA round trying to gazump everybody on PPE.

“The whole system was just like wading through treacle.”

Vaccines and tests – promises were ‘incredibly stupid’

Cummings said the vaccine procurement worked better than would normally happen under the “dysfunctional system”, due to Kate Bingham being in obvious charge: “She picked the team, she did a good job of picking the team and everyone knew they were working for her,” he said.

On testing, Cummings said Hancock’s promise to deliver 100,000 tests a day by the end of April was “incredibly stupid”. He said: “In my opinion he should’ve been fired for that thing alone, and that itself meant the whole of April was hugely disrupted by different parts of Whitehall fundamentally trying to operate in different ways completely because Hancock wanted to be able to go on TV and say: ‘Look at me and my 100k target’. It was criminal, disgraceful behaviour that caused serious harm.”

Arguments about a second lockdown – ‘we are making same mistakes’

Cummings explained how he and health officials sought to persuade Johnson to go for a “circuit breaker” lockdown in September, but failed.

“I said, listen, we all lived through the March horror, and I’ve got a dreadful feeling that we’re making the same mistake ...

“The prime minister wasn’t persuaded about this. I said to him: ‘The whole lesson of what happened before is that by delaying the lockdown, it came later, it had to be more severe, it had to last longer. The economic disruption was even worse anyway, and we’ll have killed God knows how many thousands of people in the meantime’... [In the end] the prime minister decided no, and said, basically, we’re just going to hit and hope.

“Fundamentally the prime minister and I did not agree about Covid, after March. After March he thought the lesson to be learned is: ‘We shouldn’t have done a lockdown, we should have restored the economy, I should have been the mayor in Jaws’. I thought that perspective was completely mad.”

Cummings added that other government figures, including Sunak, also believed further lockdowns could be necessary – “but nobody could find a way around the problem of the prime minister, just like a shopping trolley, smashing from one side of the aisle to the other”.

Open borders – ‘it’s madness’

“Fundamentally, there was no proper border policy because the prime minister never wanted a proper border policy. Repeatedly, in meeting after meeting, I and others said: ‘All we have to do is download the Singapore or Taiwan documents in English and impose them here.’ We’re imposing all of these restrictions on people domestically but people can see that everyone is coming in from infected areas: it’s madness, it’s undermining the whole message that we should take it seriously.”

“At that point he was back to: ‘Lockdown was all a terrible mistake, I should’ve been the mayor of Jaws, we should never have done lockdown one, the travel industry will all be destroyed if we bring in a serious border policy’. To which, of course, some of us said there’s not going to be a tourism industry in the autumn if we have a second wave, the whole logic was completely wrong.”

Himself – ‘I failed’

Cummings did not spare himself from criticism.

“The truth is, senior ministers, senior officials, senior advisers like me fell disastrously short of the standards that the public has the right to expect in a crisis like this. When the public needed us most the government failed.”

Explaining how he tried to encourage a switch from pursuing herd immunity to full lockdown, he said: “It’s true that I hit the panic button and said we’ve got to ditch the official plan ... I think it’s a disaster that I acted too late. The fundamental reason was that I was really frightened of acting.”

“There’s no doubt that he [Boris Johnson] was extremely badly let down by the whole system. And it was a system failure, of which I include myself in that as well, I also failed.”

“I apologise for not acting earlier and if I had acted earlier then lots of people might still be alive.”

The Durham lockdown trip

Cummings said that [he had not told the whole story last year](#), saying he did not explain that he wanted to send his wife and son out of London due to security threats to their London home. In fact, he did detail some of this when he defended himself at a Downing Street press conference.

“The prime minister and I agreed that because of the security things, we would basically just stonewall the story and not say anything about it I ended up giving the whole rose garden thing [the press conference at No 10] where what I said was true, but we left out a kind of crucial part of it all. And it just ... the whole thing was a complete disaster and the truth is – and then it undermined public confidence in the whole thing.”

On his much-questioned explanation of driving to the local beauty spot of Barnard Castle to check his eyesight: “If I was going to make up a story I would have come up with a hell of a lot better one than that one, right? It’s such a weird story.”

Unnecessary deaths as a result of government decisions

Cummings was frank in his assessment: “Tens of thousands of people died who didn’t need to die.”

A public inquiry – it should happen now

“There is absolutely no excuse for delay,” he said. “The longer it’s delayed, the more people will rewrite memories, the more documents will go astray. The whole thing will become cancerous ... We’ve got to [learn lessons so we] have a system in place [for the next potential pandemic] where we go: ‘Holy Lord, new Ebola thing. Right MRNA companies, Pfizer – where’s the vaccine? Right, 10,000 people – what’s the price?’”

“There’s absolutely no excuse for delaying that. A lot of the reasons for why that happened are still in place.”

The chancellor, Rishi Sunak

Cummings denied that Sunak tried to block lockdowns: “There have been stories that he was a kind of block and tried to throw mud in the gears and him and the Treasury were trying to stop the first lockdown.

“What I would say was there were powerful voices in the Treasury saying the real danger is economic, but in meetings that I had, the chancellor never tried to stop that happening.”

Mark Sedwill, the former cabinet secretary

In mid-March, Cummings said Sedwill suggested the prime minister go on TV and explain the herd immunity plan by saying: “It’s like the old chickenpox parties, we need people to get this disease because that’s how we get herd immunity by September.”

Scientific advisers

Cummings called Vallance a “good scientist” and credited him with the idea of creating a vaccine taskforce, led outside the Department of Health and Social Care. He claimed Vallance and Whitty were used by Hancock as “shields for himself”, and said a lot of behavioural scientists were “charlatans”.

The media – ‘I did talk to people’

Cummings said the “main” journalist he spoke to in 2020 was the BBC political editor Laura Kuenssberg. “Because I was in the room for certain crucial things, I could give guidance to her on certain very big stories.” He gave the example of guiding her away from a rumour circulating in mid-March that a London-only lockdown was being considered, with tanks deployed to the M25, which was incorrect. “Yes – I did talk to people unauthorised,” he admitted.

The political system – ‘it’s crackers’

“It is completely crazy that I should have been in such a senior position, in my personal opinion. I’m not smart, I’ve not built great things in the world. It’s just completely crackers that someone like me should have been in there, just the same as it’s crackers that Boris Johnson was in there, and that the choice at the last election was Jeremy Corbyn. It’s also the case that there are wonderful people inside the civil service, there are brilliant, brilliant officials all over the place. But the system tends to weed them out from senior management jobs. And the problem in this crisis was very much lions led by donkeys over and over again.”

Carrie Symonds

Cummings said Boris Johnson’s partner was “desperate to get rid of me and all my team”.

“My resignation was definitely connected to the fact that the prime minister’s girlfriend was trying to change a whole bunch of different appointments in No 10 and appoint her friends to particular jobs. In particular, she was trying to overturn the outcome of an official process about hiring for a particular job, in a way that was not only completely unethical but was also clearly illegal. I thought the whole process about how the prime minister was behaving at that point was appalling.”

Marcus Rashford

The conversation drifted at times into other issues of media management.

Cummings said that despite Lee Cain, the former head of communications in No 10, telling Johnson twice not to pick a fight with Rashford: “The prime minister decided to pick a fight and then surrendered twice. After that everyone says: ‘Oh, your communications is stupid’. No, what’s stupid was picking a fight with Rashford over school meals, and what should have happened is just getting the school meals policy right. So it’s easy to blame communications for bad policy and bad decision-making.”

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[Dominic Cummings](#)

Cummings brought to life what many already knew about Johnson's failures

Analysis: PM's former adviser is self-interested and inconsistent, yet his attack had the ring of plausibility



Dominic Cummings (left) arriving at Portcullis House, central London, to give evidence to a parliamentary inquiry. Photograph: Kirsty O'Connor/PA

Dominic Cummings (left) arriving at Portcullis House, central London, to give evidence to a parliamentary inquiry. Photograph: Kirsty O'Connor/PA

[Heather Stewart](#) *Political editor*

Wed 26 May 2021 15.29 EDT

Late-night battles, expletive-ridden rants, Jaws references and Spiderman memes – the dramatic details of Dominic Cummings' seven-hour testimony captivated Westminster on Wednesday.

But strip away all the chaos and colour, and the bleak picture left behind was of a prime minister [utterly unsuited](#) to the historic and unprecedented task he was handed.

Of course, Cummings is a deeply unreliable witness: self-interested, embittered about his departure from Downing Street and inconsistent – to put it generously – about his [lockdown-busting trip to Durham](#).

At times he appeared to be pursuing something close to a vendetta against the health secretary, Matt Hancock, whom he claimed to have repeatedly [urged the prime minister to sack](#), and whom he accused of a litany of lies and other failures.

[Factchecked: Dominic Cummings' evidence to MPs on Covid crisis](#)
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Yet the broad thrust of his attack on [Boris Johnson](#) had the ring of plausibility, mainly because it chimed so squarely with much of what was already publicly known, from the botched early response to the pandemic to Johnson's refusal to order a September lockdown.

On Wednesday Cummings put that narrative on the record and brought it alive, with added layers of excruciating detail.

He described the prime minister's dogged refusal to listen to scientific advice or learn the lessons of the March lockdown. He told of Johnson's repeated references to "the mayor from Jaws" and his tendency to disappear off on holiday or become distracted at critical junctures.

03:20

Cummings calls Johnson 'unfit for job' and claims PM said 'let the bodies pile high' – video

The prime minister was "about a thousand times too obsessed with the media" and "changes his mind 10 times a day, and then calls up the media and contradicts his own policy, day after day after day", Cummings said.

Instead of a smooth-running machine, with the prime minister at the centre, Cummings claimed the cabinet was barely involved in key decisions, and went as far as saying that Johnson deliberately embraced political disorder.

Cummings said Johnson told him last summer, when the senior aide was threatening to resign, that “chaos isn’t that bad: it means people have to look to me to see who is in charge”.

Perhaps most damning, though, was Cummings’ account of the autumn, when many scientific experts were calling for a circuit-breaker to prevent the virus running out of control after schools reopened.

Unlike in March, when data was hard to come by and the pandemic was extremely novel, there was by now ample information as well as the hard-won experience gained from the spring lockdown.

Cummings claimed the prime minister continued to insist, in the face of all the evidence, not only that another lockdown was not necessary but that the first one had been the wrong move, which he was somehow gulled into.

[The Guardian view on Cummings’ testimony: a vivid portrait of failure | Editorial](#)
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“There’s this great misunderstanding people have that because it [Covid] nearly killed him, therefore he must have taken it seriously,” Cummings said in a reference to the prime minister’s brush with death in March 2020. “But in fact, after the first lockdown, he was cross with me and others with what he regarded as basically pushing him into the first lockdown. His argument after that was: ‘I should have been the mayor of Jaws and kept the beaches open.’”

Of course, Johnson did eventually order that second lockdown, at the end of October and several weeks later than advised. By this time, Cummings claimed, Johnson was so infuriated that he said he would rather see “bodies pile up” than implement a third lockdown – corroborating a report that the PM has denied.

And, Cummings argued, the bodies did pile up across a year of poor decision-making. The official UK Covid death toll now stands at more than 127,000.

Being prime minister doesn't just mean the Downing Street address and the cheering crowds: it carries the responsibility of life-and-death choices freighted with historical significance. That's the reason candidates for the job are often asked: "Would you press the nuclear button?"

Once they disappear inside the big black door of No 10, the nation has no choice but to rely on their judgment as they make those life-and-death decisions. On Wednesday it was hard to listen to the man Johnson chose as his closest adviser and conclude that he made them well.

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[Covid crisis watch](#)[Economic growth \(GDP\)](#)

Fresh support needed if UK lockdowns linger, warn business leaders

Country is on course for a short-term boom this summer, but concern mounts over India Covid variant

- [UK recovery overshadowed by inflation and new Covid variants](#)
- [‘Hospitality sector hasn’t reached the champagne moment yet’](#)



Retail sales have surged above pre-pandemic levels. Photograph: David Cliff/NurPhoto/Rex/Shutterstock

Retail sales have surged above pre-pandemic levels. Photograph: David Cliff/NurPhoto/Rex/Shutterstock

[Richard Partington](#)

[@RJPartington](#)

Thu 27 May 2021 00.00 EDT

Boris Johnson has been warned by business leaders that a fresh package of economic support would be required if rising Covid-19 infections prevent the further relaxation of pandemic restrictions next month.

After the reopening of hospitality venues indoors across all four nations of the UK, the Guardian's latest monthly assessment of economic developments suggests the country is on course for a short-term growth boom this summer.

Retail sales have surged above pre-pandemic levels, while customers returning to restaurants, pubs and cafes have driven a sharp rise in consumer spending to begin repairing the damage from the worst recession in 300 years.

However, concerns are mounting over the [Covid variant first detected in India](#) – B.1.617.2 – and the possibility that rising infections could delay the next phase of the government's roadmap for relaxing controls in England.



Kate Nicholls said the chancellor should consider extending the furlough scheme if lockdown easing is delayed. Photograph: David Cotsworth

Kate Nicholls, the chief executive of UK Hospitality, said that despite substantial progress being made, the last month had been “far from a

champagne moment for the industry” after the cumulative damage from repeated closures over the past year.

Writing in the Guardian, she said any delay to government’s roadmap would require the chancellor, Rishi Sunak, to bring forward a fresh package of financial support and to consider extending the furlough scheme.

“At this point, any delay to the removal of restrictions on 21 June will be nothing short of catastrophic for a sector that has already lost £80bn in sales – two-thirds of its pre-pandemic revenue – over the past year.

“Should there be one, it needs to be communicated well in advance and come with further support,” she said.

In the past year, the Guardian has [tracked the economic fallout](#) from the pandemic on a monthly basis, following infection rates, eight key growth indicators and the level of the FTSE 100. Faced with the deepest global recession [since the Great Depression](#), the [Covid crisis watch](#) also monitors Britain’s performance compared with other countries.

On the dashboard in the past month, the number of people eating out in restaurants has risen to 75% above the levels recorded on comparable days two years ago, before the pandemic struck, amid evidence of pent-up demand from consumers confined to staying at home for much of the year so far.

Public transport usage has climbed to the highest point since the health emergency first spread to Britain last year, with more people heading into town and city centres for leisure and work than at any time since the crisis began.

The reopening of non-essential shops in April helped drive retail sales to more than 10% above pre-pandemic levels, while closely watched business surveys reveal the fastest monthly growth in private sector activity since the late 1990s.

Against a backdrop of improving economic prospects and rapid progress with the Covid-19 vaccination programme, unemployment fell for a third

month running in March as companies ramped up their hiring plans in anticipation of reopening.

However, more than 4m jobs remained furloughed, reflecting continued pressure on the economy while social distancing measures remain in place and as global travel restrictions weigh on the travel industry.

Although there is evidence of a rapid economic recovery taking hold, the British economy is expected to take until the end of 2021 to return to its pre-crisis peak. According to the [National Institute of Economic and Social Research](#), the economy is on track to suffer more than £700bn of lost output as a result of the crisis, with the fallout made worse by the government's mishandling of the health emergency last year and the impact of Brexit.

Prolonged government restrictions beyond June could push back the point at which the economy returns to its pre-pandemic peak, while the prospect of a slower recovery could push up job losses when the government's furlough scheme is scaled back from the end of next month.

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From July, employers will need to contribute 10% of an employee's wage, rising to 20% in August, as taxpayer support is cut from the current level of 80%. Employees will continue to receive the same amount.

Nicholls said a package of economic support would be needed if there are delays on the roadmap, including deferring business rates repayments, extending commercial rent protections and cutting VAT.

“The government would also need to look again at the future of the furlough scheme, as operators will not be in a position to contribute further if they are still trading under restrictions. This would inevitably result in large numbers of jobs being lost,” she said.

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- ['The aliens are here' How movies shape Dominic Cummings' vision](#)
- ['Accidental meat' Should carnivores embrace eating roadkill?](#)
- [After Noel Clarke Can the UK film and TV industry bring an end to on-set bullying?](#)

Eve Pitts: the Church of England's first Black female vicar – and one of its fiercest critics

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Movies

‘The aliens are here’: how movies shape Dominic Cummings’ vision

By bigging up blockbusters and superheroes, the PM’s former chief adviser proved himself the pop culture motherlode in his explosive Commons performance



‘You need a new plan’ ... Jeff Goldblum in Independence Day. Photograph: Moviestore/Rex/Shutterstock

‘You need a new plan’ ... Jeff Goldblum in Independence Day. Photograph: Moviestore/Rex/Shutterstock



[Stuart Heritage](#)

[@st heritage](#)

Thu 27 May 2021 05.45 EDT

There are three ways to look at [Dominic Cummings](#)' explosive appearance at yesterday's joint session of the Commons health and science and technology committees. The first is that we witnessed a brave whistleblower speaking truth to power about a wave of horrifically preventable deaths. The second is that Cummings was spitefully acting out, rewriting history in order to further a handful of personal grievances. And the third is to notice that he referenced quite a lot of films, and to just concentrate on that instead. Today, we will be doing the third.

It should surprise nobody that Cummings is a fount of pop culture references. During the pandemic, the entire Conservative government has fallen back on cinema in an attempt to find a way through, from Matt Hancock's revelation that the film [Contagion](#) helped to inform his vaccination strategy, to Boris Johnson's admission that his movie idol is the crap mayor from [Jaws](#).

Even so, Cummings proved himself to be the pop culture motherlode. The cornerstones of his references were the 1996 film [Independence Day](#) and a

memes taken from episode 19b of the 1967 Spider-Man cartoon. The former was used as an example of the government's chaotic response to Covid last March, with Cummings saying it was "like a scene from Independence Day, with Jeff Goldblum saying, 'The aliens are here and your whole plan is broken and you need a new plan.'" The latter was used to illustrate the lack of accountability at the heart of government. "You know that Spider-Man meme, both the Spider-Mans pointing at each other?" he said. "It's like that but with everybody ... all the different Spider-Mans are pointing at each other saying, 'You're responsible.'"

But what does it mean? What does this tell us about Cummings? Essentially, it suggests that he's an unrepentant populist. This isn't exactly a surprise, given that he once attempted to deflect a difficult line of questioning by [reciting the lyrics to the PJ Masks theme tune](#). Nevertheless, he chose some huge targets yesterday. On its release, for instance, Independence Day became the second-highest-grossing film of all time, while Spider-Man is one of the most iconic characters of the last century.

It could have all gone so differently. Imagine if Cummings had attempted to explain governmental negligence by citing, say, [The Wind That Shakes the Barley](#) or Sokurov's [Russian Ark](#). It would have been a disaster. The references would have been lost on the majority of people, plus he would have outed himself as the type of aloof elitist that he railed against so bitterly during the Brexit vote. And, perhaps most importantly, it would have been much harder to write funny tweets about those films.

Hopefully, this is just the start. Now that he has entrenched himself in his war against the government, it is only reasonable to expect Cummings to appear before more committees, where he can unload a volley of even more blockbuster movie references. Yesterday he made reference to clicking his fingers, which brought him tantalisingly close to explaining how the final act of [Avengers: Infinity War](#) influenced the government's Covid response strategy. Perhaps he can be nudged further in that direction next time.

Or maybe he can describe himself as "the magic hair that the Na'vi plug into each other in [Avatar](#)", or Matt Hancock as [Voldemort](#), or a breakthrough moment as "that bit in [Batman v Superman](#) where they both shout the word Martha at each other". Now is the time for Cummings to watch as many big

films as he can, to better arm himself with references. After all, it isn't as if he doesn't have a lot of time on his hands.

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Foraging

‘Accidental meat’: should carnivores embrace eating roadkill?



A dead pheasant by the side of the road on Saddleworth Moor. Photograph: Danny Lavelle

A dead pheasant by the side of the road on Saddleworth Moor. Photograph: Danny Lavelle

My parents have been eating pheasants killed on the roads for years and encouraging me to try them. Is this the most ethical approach to meat-eating?

[Daniel Lavelle](#)

Thu 27 May 2021 05.00 EDT

Motorists shoot me funny looks as I sheepishly cross a scrubby verge, trying my best to conceal the dead pheasant under my arm. I am in a part of Saddleworth Moor called the [Isle of Skye](#) by locals, and have just collected a free meal from the middle of the road.

Nobody can agree on how this area of moorland, in the West Riding of [Yorkshire](#), earned its nickname. Some think it comes from a Victorian navvy, who exclaimed in a broad Irish brogue: “Look, there’s an ’ole in the sky,” as he considered a parting in the thick mist above him. Others think it was named after an inn of the same name. But either way, the area should be immediately renamed Pheasant Cemetery. Because, before I picked up my own bird, I counted 46 pheasant carcasses in various stages of decomposition, scattered and splattered on the road over several miles as I drove to Holmfirth for a day out.

This carnage on the Isle of Skye is not unique. According to a [recent study](#), 194m birds and 29m mammals die on European roads every year. In 2018, Dr Sarah Perkins, project coordinator at [Project Splatter](#), started to quantify and map roadkill across the UK. She says the most frequent victims on the roads are badgers, hedgehogs, rabbits, pigeons, pheasants and blackbirds. Perkins says that around 20,000 instances of roadkill are reported to her annually. “It’s probably a fair estimate to scale that up to millions of animals every single year,” she says.



Forager Fergus Drennan.

Scraping my tea off asphalt would never have occurred to me before; I prefer to buy meat that is faceless and feather-free. But, for the past few

months I have been living with my parents – and they are bargain-obsessed. At about 7pm every day we have been journeying across the moors to the nearest supermarket to raid the reduced shelves.

My parents do not care how a dead bird makes it to their plates: free meat is free meat. They have been eating roadkill for years and, ever since I came home, they have been trying to force it on to my plate. They insist it is perfectly safe. Still, I had my reservations as I watched my dad pluck the fiery red and gold feathers from the unfortunate bird on our chopping board one Sunday afternoon. How can we tell how long it has been dead? What if it has had a disease? Are we sure this is legal? Under the Road Traffic Act, you are expected to report any fatal accidents involving household pets, horses and farm animals, but it is not illegal to munch other roadkill so long as it was not run over on purpose. And, as far as safety is concerned, it is quite straightforward, according to the professional forager Fergus Drennan.

If it's warm on a cold day then obviously it's fresh. If it's got rigor mortis it means it's really fresh

Fergus Drennan

Drennan, 49, runs foraging [courses](#) for the public, and has been eating roadkill, or “accidental meat”, as he prefers to call it, for decades. He argues, over the phone from his home in East Sussex, that it's obvious whether roadkill is safe to eat: you just need to check if it is warm, stiff and intact. “If it's warm on a cold day then obviously it's fresh; if it's got rigor mortis, it means it's really fresh. You don't want it to be completely smashed to pieces,” he says.

I tell Drennan that I was debating if it would be possible to eat some of the more flattened carcasses. “Oh Jesus, don't use that old journalistic cliché!” he says. “Who in their right mind would scrape an animal off the road? It has got to look in immaculate condition.”

“What about if its head is missing?” I ask.

“You're not going to eat the head of a pheasant anyway, so it's perfectly all right, isn't it? If everything else is all right.”

Drennan mostly eats run-over deer, but has dined on foxes, squirrels and at least 30 badgers over the years. But he doesn't make just meals out of roadkill, he makes art pieces, too. "The reason I'm interested in the badger is because they have such fascinating skulls," he says. Drennan explains that, unlike most animals, which have sinew and tendons connecting their jaw bones together, the badger's mandibles come as a one-piece and open and close like Pac-Man.

It's not fair to call an animal thick. It is not designed to be aware of a ton of metal coming at 30 or 70 miles an hour

Jonathan McGowan

Badgers might make for fine artwork, but they aren't the tastiest creatures you can find on the roads. Drennan says they taste like lamb, with an aftertaste that resembles their diets – earthworms, with the occasional frog or hedgehog thrown in. I was going to ask Drennan how he knows what these animals taste like, but I'm not sure I want to know the answer.

It is not humans alone who take advantage of roadkill. Perkins was involved in an experiment that used fake roadkill to see how quickly it was scavenged: 90% of what they distributed was devoured by other animals over 12 hours. However, in rural Dorset, the animals might have slim pickings when the naturalist and taxidermist [Jonathan McGowan](#) is on the prowl.

McGowan says he started by feeding the roadkill he found on the roads to the buzzards, then realised it could supplement his own diet. "I've eaten roadkill for the whole of my adult life. I've hardly ever bought any commercial meat," he says. "All my meat comes from roadkill. Birds, rodents, badgers, foxes, owls, rats, deer. Anything, really."



Jonathan McGowan prepares a foraged meal of red legged partridge with herbs and fungi. Photograph: Courtesy of Jonathan McGowan

McGowan is disabled and he has been coping with Lyme disease for many years. Over the past year, it has caught up with him and he has been housebound, longing for the outdoors. Lyme disease is usually passed to humans from the bites of infected ticks, and although McGowan thinks he contracted it while wandering through the woods it could have come from the animals he finds. “That’s one of the hazards of picking up dead animals and doing taxidermy, because lots of mammals and birds have ticks on them.”

So, you risk getting ill when picking up roadkill? “Most [wild] animals don’t have disease – they’re really healthy. Especially young animals – they don’t have time to build up diseases,” McGowan says. He also claims that the dead animals he finds on the roads are cleaner than farm animals that are susceptible to maladies such as CJD and foot-and-mouth disease. He says that pheasants can be infected with leptospirosis and bacterial diseases, but that cooking the meat will eliminate these. The [Food](#) Standards Agency, however, is absolutely not in favour of people eating roadkill, pointing out “the animals may not have been healthy when killed and may have been suffering from disease or environmental contamination. There is also no way of determining how long the animal has been at the roadside.”

But McGowan insists that motorists in particular would do better to worry about other risks. After all, gamekeepers release millions of birds into the wild every year, many of which are involved in road-traffic accidents. A motorcyclist died in Wales in 2018 after a pheasant flew into his helmet. “They’re only bred so a few morons can point shotguns at them and blow them to pieces,” he says. “That’s what gamekeeping is all about. It’s a cruel, immoral, unjust practice.”

There are twin peaks to the pheasant-foraging calendar: at the beginning of the shooting season, when they are released from their pens, and at the end of it, when the birds are deprived of supplementary feeding and must fend for themselves. If they survive the guns, they can have a much better life than the average battery hen. Unless, of course, a car cuts it short. As Drennan points out, a wild animal “is not designed to be aware of a ton of metal coming at 30 or 70 miles an hour. At the end of the day, we live on a small island; there’s always gonna be a conflict between the human animal and other animals. And there are too many roads, and we are rushing around.”

It is not merely badgers, squirrels and overly bred game that are dying on UK roads. McGowan says he finds a variety of rare animals including snakes, lizards, bats and falcons. “Cars don’t discriminate,” he says. “Every animal that’s out in the countryside or even in the town succumbs to the roads.”

[A foraging trip for flavours and peace of mind in Epping Forest](#)
[Read more](#)

So, what can we do to mitigate roadkill? We can start by slowing down a little and “we can change animal behaviour”, says Perkins. “We can do that by putting in mitigations, so there are underpasses, river passes. There are specific mitigations for some species and a lot of new road builds have that.” Road-mitigation schemes consist of tunnels that allow amphibians, rodents and other small animals to cross safely, but much more needs to be done to make the roads safer for wildlife.

To return to our pheasant, my parents hung it up for three days to tenderise it. Then they plucked it, put it in a port marinade and whacked it in the oven.

After some reservations, I tucked in. It was a bit gamey and tough, but edible. I survived.

This article was amended on 29 May 2021 to correct Fergus Drennan's surname, which had been misspelled in several instances.

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Television industry.

After Noel Clarke: can the UK film and TV industry bring an end to on-set bullying?

For many years, the actor and director's behaviour was seemingly unchallenged. But there are hopes that the recent claims against him could help spur positive change



The overwhelming power of producers, directors and stars on sets creates a fear that speaking out about abuse will lead to blacklisting in an insular industry. Composite: Guardian Design; Siede Preis/Getty Images

The overwhelming power of producers, directors and stars on sets creates a fear that speaking out about abuse will lead to blacklisting in an insular industry. Composite: Guardian Design; Siede Preis/Getty Images

[Sirin Kale](#), [Amelia Gentleman](#) and [Lucy Osborne](#)

Thu 27 May 2021 01.00 EDT

After 20 women [came forward](#) to tell the Guardian they had been sexually harassed and bullied by the actor, director, screenwriter and producer Noel Clarke, the question on many people's lips was: did other people in the industry know about this? And if not, why not?

While some of the incidents of harassment or bullying took place without witnesses, others happened in front of colleagues and senior production staff. The assistant film director Anna Avramenko, who worked as an intern on the film Doghouse in 2008, told the Guardian that Clarke approached her on set and "started trying to kiss me on the lips, in front of everyone". She added: "He probably tried it like three to five times with me, maybe more."

Why was Clarke's behaviour go seemingly unchallenged for so long? And are the problems it highlights symptomatic of a wider lack of safeguarding within British film and television?

Clarke himself has categorically denied all allegations of wrongdoing, and continues to deny them. In a statement to the Guardian in April, he stated: "In a 20-year career, I have put inclusivity and diversity at the forefront of my work and never had a complaint made against me. If anyone who has worked with me has ever felt uncomfortable or disrespected, I sincerely apologise. I vehemently deny any sexual misconduct or wrongdoing and intend to defend myself against these false allegations."

Industry insiders talk about a culture on some sets where those in power could be bullying and demanding, but where people felt unable to complain. These actors, casting agents, union representatives and advocates describe the British film and television industry as an institutionally unsafe place, particularly for women. Job precarity, and the overwhelming power of producers, directors and stars on sets, all create a fear that speaking out about abuse will lead to blacklisting in an insular community.

"Having read all the stories [about Clarke's behaviour], I'm left with this overwhelming feeling of impotence and frustration," says Meriel Beale, the anti-bullying and harassment officer at Bectu (the Broadcasting, Entertainment, Communications and Theatre Union).

Beale founded the [Unseen On Screen anti-bullying campaign](#) in November 2020, after being a victim of workplace bullying herself. After the allegations against Clarke were reported by the Guardian, Beale wrote [an open letter](#), now signed by more than 2,000 members of the British entertainment industry, calling for “an end to this culture that turns a blind eye to predators and harassers operating in plain sight”.

Sexual harassment and bullying from actors on sets can go unchecked because “stars are more important than the minions, who are replaceable and disposable because everyone wants to be in film”, says Samantha Horley, who sits on the bullying and harassment committee set up by the BFI and Bafta. In her 30-year career in international film sales, she frequently encountered bullies. “It was always accepted that you put up with bad behaviour,” Horley says. “I’ve worked with screamers and phone-throwers.”

Paul Fleming, the general secretary of Equity, the union for actors, places the responsibility for protecting workers with producers. “Producers don’t like being called bosses,” he says. “They like to be seen as exclusively artistic and creative people. But they have a moral, legal responsibility to make their workplaces safe.”

But what if the alleged abuser *is* the person in charge? “There is huge vulnerability if you are someone who doesn’t have huge amounts of power in the industry and you’re talking about someone who is extremely powerful,” says Philippa Childs, the head of Bectu. “That power gap is definitely even more huge in TV than in other workplaces. The people with money and profile and kudos are almost untouchable.”

Whereas on a big project, such as a Netflix show, for example, victims might be able to contact the streaming giant to raise concerns about the behaviour of a producer or director, that option is not available on low-budget productions. “In the entertainment industry,” says the casting director Tamara-Lee Notcutt, who worked with Clarke on the film *Adulthood*, “we don’t have HR, you don’t have anyone to go to, especially if it’s the producers or directors doing it. They’re the head of the food chain. Who are you going to talk to?”

Many of the women the Guardian spoke with were reticent about making complaints about Clarke's conduct and behaviour, both at the time of the incidents and years later, seeing him as a man who wielded considerable power in their industry. They worried that if they reported the incidents, word could get around, and they might struggle to get work in the future. Others said there was a cultural reluctance to challenge the behaviour of senior actors and producers.

It's clear that many people did know what Clarke was like. Some people have admitted that he was known to be bullying and demanding on set. Others have pointed out that he often produced his own projects, such as Sky's now-cancelled police procedural drama *Bulletproof*. "There was absolutely no oversight on his projects," says a former insider on Clarke's productions, who does not wish to be named. "He was given complete autonomy. There was no one holding him to account and he surrounded himself with people who were 100% loyal to him. He mainly did his own productions and he was the power broker."

Clarke's lawyers say that he has never worked "on a single production where there has not been someone or a number of people above him", instead reporting to executive producers, distributors or financiers, and that he has "never had complete autonomy on a production".

Looking at the wider perspective, the UK film and TV industry is small, and reputation is everything. "People feel very anxious about speaking out," says Childs, "because they are concerned that word is going to go around that they are trouble-makers or that they can't cope, because they're not capable of dealing with the cut and thrust of the film set, or the pressures involved in getting a production finished within time and budget."



Noel Clarke in 2008. He categorically denies the accusations. Photograph: Everett Collection Inc/Alamy

People at the beginning of their careers can be vulnerable to superiors who may take advantage of their ambition and inexperience. Although the industry seems glamorous to outsiders, like many others it's full of bad bosses and bad pay. "These abuses of power are no different from what they might be within a chicken factory," says Fleming. "You have these short-term contracts, zero-hour agreements, peculiar freelance arrangements, very powerful, usually male bosses, and junior people who are very, very desperate to work – it's the same everywhere."

The industry's reliance on short-term, freelance contracts over the years has created a systemic problem, where a compliant workforce is fearful of speaking out. "If you're a freelancer or you're just starting out, then you do worry about how you're going to make a name for yourself or where your next job is coming from," says Childs.

Kristina Erdely, a casting director who worked with Clarke's production company Unstoppable on the Channel 5 drama *The Drowning*, says casting director jobs "are not advertised. There's no recruitment process. There's no equal opportunities. When a commission hits a producer's desk, they want to

crew up really quickly. It's so hard to open doors, and this instills fear in freelancers, because it's so hard to get work."

Individuals can fall between the cracks of a system that is not set up to safeguard them. In extreme examples, people can be driven out of the industry altogether.

Former runner Hollie Ibson alleges she was bullied by Clarke during the production of Bulletproof in 2018. "I never reported him," she says. She was worried that if she did report Clarke, it might get back to him, as the boss on the production.

She claims that Clarke would pretend not to hear her when she relayed messages to him, and then later blame her for not passing the messages on. She says that she would have panic attacks on set. "I would come home crying my eyes out most nights," Ibson says. "It was awful ... I felt insignificant and rubbish at my job, because I was ignored every day." Although there was a phone number on the bottom of the call sheet (the document that tells the cast and crew what they need to do each day) to allow anyone to report any workplace issues anonymously to an independent person, Ibson never called it.

After Bulletproof, Ibson quit the film industry and now works in TV scheduling. "Until I had that job," she says, "I knew I was good at my job, and progressing in the industry. When it all happened, it crushed me."

Clarke's lawyers state that he has "no recollection of Ms Ibson", and point out that no complaint was made about his alleged behaviour towards her on set. They say there were female executives and higher-ranking people than Clarke on the set every day, and that there is no record of the on-site medical team attending anyone having a panic attack on set.

Bulletproof was made by the production company Vertigo Films, which terminated its relationship with Clarke last month. Lawyers for Vertigo confirmed that Ibson had not made any complaints of misconduct against Clarke.

The Guardian understands that Vertigo was made aware of two incidents involving Clarke on the Bulletproof set, at least one of which resulted in a formal complaint. In the first incident, which took place on 22 May 2019, there was a physical altercation between Clarke and a supporting artist. An official complaint was made by the supporting artist against Clarke, who subsequently apologised. In the second incident, which took place during the filming of Bulletproof South Africa, Clarke allegedly told a crew member words to the effect that he would “fire” them for making a mistake on set.

Additionally, the Vertigo co-founder Allan Niblo told an alleged victim in a 1 May 2021 phone call: “Don’t get me wrong, I know Noel can be an asshole, I know he can be a bully. But no sexual, none of this behaviour got back to me at all. If it had, I would have done something about it.”

The call was one of a number Niblo made to people who worked with Clarke after the Guardian’s original story appeared. In it, Niblo made clear that he was not aware of any sexual misconduct allegations against Clarke prior to the story breaking, and was “devastated” by the reporting.

Bulletproof [was one](#) of Sky’s most popular shows: its debut episode got the biggest audience for Sky One all year. Vertigo and Sky accept that both incidents took place on Bulletproof; however, they state that they were handled expeditiously and resolved appropriately at the time, to the satisfaction of the individuals involved. Lawyers for Niblo state that he did not know that Clarke had allegedly bullied people prior to the Guardian’s reporting, and that when he said that Clarke could be an “asshole” and a “bully”, he was referring to conversations he’d had with current and former Vertigo employees after the story broke, which had changed his understanding of Clarke.

“We are devastated to learn of the allegations made against [Noel Clarke](#) and we have been working hard since then to speak with and support anyone who has been affected,” said a spokesperson for Vertigo Films. “The isolated issues that were raised during production were resolved immediately on set. It is clear the current industry standards for safeguarding procedures need to urgently be reviewed. Our primary goal now is that Vertigo Films will help to shape the best working practices in entertainment, and we have already begun investing in this.”

Clarke states that the May 2019 incident took place after the supporting artist joked about his family, and the incident on the set of Bulletproof South Africa took place after a crew member incorrectly loaded a prop gun. “It would be neither fair nor reasonable to criticise our client for being firm with the crew member in question in circumstances where their actions could have endangered cast and crew,” said Clarke’s lawyers of the second incident.

Nonetheless, these incidents illustrate some of the difficulties that the industry now finds itself having to grapple with. The responsibility for fixing the industry is a merry-go-round of finger-pointing and blame-shifting. “The industry is full of people organising seminars and producing documents explaining what’s gone wrong,” says Fleming. “There’s a tendency to point fingers at the casting process, at agents, at drama school, the nature of short-term contracts and the short-lived nature of the special production vehicles of companies that make shows.”

Childs wonders whether the array of anti-harassment initiatives launched after Harvey Weinstein’s abuses in the US came to light in 2017 have failed. “I think we became complacent,” Childs says. “People thought they had put in place checks and balances, but they weren’t working.”

In 2018, the BFI, in partnership with Equity, announced that everyone applying for BFI funding would have to pledge a zero-tolerance approach to sexual harassment and bullying. Their guidance recommended that every production should have two people on set who are anti-harassment leads, but this has not happened.

Furthermore, in late 2020, Equity stopped operating its bullying and harassment helpline. The union says that not enough people were contacting it to justify its continued operation, and that it increased its spend on one-to-one counselling services by £10,000 instead. The Film and TV Charity does have a 24-hour support hotline, which Beale says is helpful. But she says that people are reluctant to call whistleblowing hotlines. “People have said to me that they don’t want to call those lines, because they don’t know who would be hearing the messages, or answering the phones.”

The charity Time's Up UK has issued guides for nudity and sex scenes, while just last month, Equity negotiated with Pact, the trade association that represents the independent television and film production companies, to introduce new protections on performances involving nudity and simulated sex acts. But it's clear there's a long way to go. Beale wonders whether a neutral third-party organisation, capable of investigating abuse complaints, would be the best way to go. "We could do with some kind of independent body who is there to provide reassurance that, if you have a problem, you can go to them, and they're not going to be tied in with somebody who could affect your next job," says Beale.

Childs would like to see a dedicated anti-harassment representative on every set. "The big film companies, the broadcasters, Netflix," she says, "everyone would need to contribute, pay for their training and agree that there should be someone on every production." Vertigo said it has already taken action to secure the safeguarding of casts and crew on all its productions and in particular had hired an independent media HR consultant to be present on all sets to run compulsory training on harassment and bullying and to be available to all cast and crew to raise any issues confidentially that may arise. Sky has a dedicated, confidential web portal – SkyListens – to enable anonymous reporting of incidents either via phone or online and actively encourages reporting of incidents from employees and those working on Sky productions.

This cultural moment, although painful, may yet be a force for positive change. "I feel like we didn't have our [#MeToo movement](#) here in the UK in the same way that they did in America," Beale says. "People are really ready for it."

This article was amended on 28 May 2021. Due to a misunderstanding, an earlier version indicated that Meriel Beale's comments regarding people's reluctance to call hotlines related to support lines such as that run by the Film and TV Charity. In fact she was referring not to these, but to whistleblowing hotlines. This has been clarified.

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Opinion**Dominic Cummings**

The Dominic Cummings circus is an indictment of the entire governing class

[Aditya Chakraborty](#)



Today's punch-up obscured how many of the failures that left the UK so fatally exposed to the pandemic still remain



Illustration by Bill Bragg

Illustration by Bill Bragg

Wed 26 May 2021 11.36 EDT

Who better to judge the true significance of Dominic Cummings' Big Day Out at parliament than [Dominic Cummings](#) himself? Not the grave-faced, shaven-headed man we've been watching, ladling out his revenge cold, but an earlier incarnation. Before he became chief adviser to Boris Johnson, before he compromised his own government's lockdown rules by driving the family to Barnard Castle; before all of that, when he was just a guy holed up in a bunker with his blog, composing screeds about Bismarck, he anticipated the absurdity of today's carnival: "The political-media system," he wrote in a 2017 post, "actively suppresses thinking about, and *focus* on, what's important."

Westminster demands a diversion and, over the months leading up to this hearing, Cummings has made himself its distractor-in-chief. Ever happy to fatten the beast he only pretends to despise, he has drip-fed journalists poison about his former confidants. And a grateful press hyped up the coming "[Domageddon](#)", describing him as the "[terrifying](#)" kamikaze genius prepared to slay the prime minister or, at the very least, detonate Matt Hancock for "lying".

“It’s a full-on knife fight,” frothed one insider at the Evening Standard. Another source whispered hoarsely to the Sunday Times: “Dominic has copies of everything and knows where all the bodies are buried.”

And, my, aren’t there a lot of bodies. [More than 150,000](#) Britons have been killed by Covid: the equivalent in deaths of a twin towers terrorist attack happening on these shores every week for a year. Well over a million people report suffering long Covid, with [one in six](#) so ill they cannot carry out daily tasks. These are bodies, all right: sick and dead ones. No cache of top-secret documents is necessary to find out about them; they are our relatives, friends, neighbours. And the cause of their deaths is rather bigger than a punch-up between two middle-aged private school boys. It lies in a grotesque failure of the state.

In a country that as late as 2019 considered itself to be among the [best prepared on Earth](#) to handle a pandemic, hundreds of thousands of families are today struggling with premature death or the nursing of a chronically ill loved one, and the loss of vital income. Forget the blame game being played on Downing Street, this is an indictment of an entire governing class: lethal in its complacency, cocksure despite its manifest inadequacy, and forever blocking its eyes and ears to the lessons from history, or even the TV pictures from hospitals across northern Italy.

“When the public needed us most, the government failed,” [Cummings acknowledged](#) on Wednesday. And tens of thousands died as a result. That’s what counts, not who said what about herd immunity. The machinery of state buckled, the government all but collapsed – not just once, but again and again: from PPE to lockdowns to test and trace to care homes. The result is that Johnson’s UK stands alongside Donald Trump’s US as a cautionary tale of what happens when a ragtag bunch of cash-in merchants, state-haters and incompetent braggarts are allowed to run a country in grave danger. Plenty of examples of that were given to the parliamentary committee: Johnson pretending to be the mayor from Jaws, Cummings dreaming of replacing dull old civil servants with supercomputers, and Hancock blagging his way through.

The thread that pulls all this together is denialism. The denial you saw etched on the face of Hancock last spring is now writ large across what

Cummings calls the “political-media system”. Many of the pundits and politicians refuse to take on board how singularly badly the UK has handled the pandemic, even while relatively poor states [such as Vietnam](#) have done much better.

Even before the former chief adviser took his seat this morning in the Wilson Room at Portcullis House, he was being written off as yesterday’s man, spilling the beans on an episode that, however bad, will count more in history books than it ever does at the ballot box. For now, what counts for the front pages is jabs and freedom day just around the corner, the binning of social distancing rules, the return of big, fat weddings and heaving nightclubs. With all that waiting for us, the pandemic has been consigned to the rear view, its lasting effects chiefly a matter for careers in SW1.

Except, to [misquote an old Athenian](#), just because you do not take an interest in Covid doesn’t mean Covid won’t take an interest in you. As MPs questioned Cummings, the so-called Indian variant of the coronavirus continued its advance across the country. It is no longer confined to Bolton and Burnley and a few other pockets, but is increasingly widespread across west London. And what the Cummings circus has obscured is how many of the failures that left the UK so fatally exposed remain with us.

Consider: Whitehall freely allowed in planes from India long after it was in Covid meltdown. The £37bn test-and-trace programme keeps breaking down – in April and May, some English councils [could not see full data](#) on positive tests within their area. A full 15 months into this pandemic, the UK’s sick pay system – the [meanest anywhere](#) in the developed world – has still not been fixed. Even today, the care worker looking after your mum is effectively incentivised not to get tested for Covid for fear of going broke.

Most serious of all, Johnson and his ministers still refuse to level with voters for fear that they won’t love them any more. The result is utter confusion. We’d rather you didn’t fly to Greece this summer, but we won’t stop you – so enjoy that week sunbathing on the island of Petridish! Your area is in lockdown, except we wouldn’t dream of telling you. You can hug, but only if absolutely necessary.

The prime minister, who claims to be led by “data, not dates”, also promises we are on a “[one-way road to freedom](#)”. Both things cannot be true, as proved by the minutes of [the last Sage meeting](#) held two weeks ago. Discussing the new variant, scientists agreed that it was a “realistic possibility” that it is “as much as 50% more transmissible” than the previous Kent strain. In that case, the minutes record, for Johnson to press on with his road map “would lead to a substantial resurgence of hospitalisations”. The potential is lethal, as observed by Deepti Gurdasani, clinical epidemiologist at Queen Mary University of London: “Thousands may well die just because huge numbers will get infected, even if the risk of death for each person is low.”

Against that risk, the sensible thing to do would be to park “freedom day” and to make sure the UK is as well-protected as possible against this variant and all the others we are likely to face over the coming months. Money for smaller class sizes with better ventilation in schools; accommodation for low-income and badly housed families that need isolation; ditching the hyperbole about ancient British liberties such as downing a pint of Stella.

Doing those things would really be learning the lessons from Covid. But then who dies of this disease? Frontline workers, black and brown people, those with disabilities and people squashed into tiny housing. Rarely the sort who gets to address a select committee or text a friendly journalist.

- Aditya Chakraborty is a Guardian columnist

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[Opinion](#)Coronavirus

Public health experts warned of Covid disaster. Cummings confirms we were right

[Devi Sridhar](#)

The government's 'herd immunity' policy resulted in thousands of deaths. A public inquiry is now essential



12 March 2020: Boris Johnson announces the country would have to accept the spread of the virus. Photograph: WPA/Getty Images

12 March 2020: Boris Johnson announces the country would have to accept the spread of the virus. Photograph: WPA/Getty Images

Wed 26 May 2021 12.52 EDT

On 12 March last year, Boris Johnson [announced](#) that attempts to contain Covid-19 would be halted and the country would have to accept the spread

of the virus. As a global public health expert, this policy decision was baffling to me. The experience of China, Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore and Hong Kong had already shown us that Covid-19 could be contained through testing, tracing and isolation, border restrictions, social distancing and face coverings. By following this [east Asian playbook](#), England could save lives and avoid harsh, extended lockdowns.

[‘Upsetting and bleak’: Covid bereaved react to Dominic Cummings’ evidence](#)

[Read more](#)

I spent that evening reflecting on the decision. Although I wasn’t an expert in British public health policies (my work focuses on infectious diseases in low- and middle-income countries), it was [clear to me](#) that the government was getting this wrong. While other countries had demonstrated that speed was crucial, England’s plan revolved around herd immunity. According to this, the majority of the population would catch the virus. Pursuing herd immunity without a vaccine had never been used for any infectious disease in the past. The consequences of this strategy would be devastating.

Dominic Cummings’ [testimony](#) has confirmed how government decisions resulted in one of the highest death rates in the richer world and prolonged economic restrictions. In many ways, the testimony merely affirms what many public health experts suspected at the beginning of the pandemic. In those early days, many of us wanted to understand what the government’s assertion that it was “following the science” really meant. But there was no transparency. We couldn’t tell [who was a member](#) of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage), nor exactly what the government was planning to do. Instead, we had to piece together a picture of what was happening in No 10 and within Sage from conversations with colleagues and journalists.

Cummings’ testimony has exposed how a vacuum of political leadership shaped England’s pandemic response. Relatively less wealthy countries such as Senegal, Greece and South Korea did astonishingly well at managing infections because of their leadership. In contrast, Cummings noted: “It’s completely crackers that someone like me should have been in there, just as the same as it’s crackers that Boris Johnson was in there.” The careful,

considered leadership of the Scottish first minister, Nicola Sturgeon, who set up a Scottish [Covid-19 advisory group](#) in early April 2020, which operated transparently and published minutes, contrasts starkly with Johnson's aversion to detail and hard work.

The most frustrating – and darkly predictable – aspect of Cummings' testimony was his assertion that herd immunity was indeed England's strategy from February into March, a combination of what the prime minister saw as the simplest solution, as well as the early advice from Sage that this was the only option on the table. Johnson was more concerned with the effects of Covid-19 on the economy and not overreacting, while a [careful reading](#) of Sage minutes shows that the group saw the infection as uncontrollable. The reliance on complex theoretical modelling over the principles of basic infectious disease prevention was a problem; so was groupthink within Sage itself.

It was only when the NHS reached a similar situation to what we're now seeing in India and Brazil that the government quickly did a U-turn and enforced a harsh lockdown. But there was no plan for what should be done during this lockdown to get ahead of the virus. While other countries used [lockdowns to identify cases](#) and build testing capacity, the government instead used this to relieve pressure on the NHS. This was a major mistake: a waste of expensive time that could have been spent on suppressing and eliminating Covid-19 and preventing future lockdowns. In addition, absolutely [no border measures](#) were put in place during the first lockdown, which allowed a continual stream of infections to enter the country, even while people remained in their homes.

These early decisions revolved around a tradeoff between saving lives and protecting the economy. This was always a false dichotomy. There was never the option of putting largely vulnerable and elderly people into a plane and watching it crash as the rest of society went on living normally. Allowing Covid-19 to continue circulating among the population would have led the NHS to collapse. Fear of catching a deadly virus would have forced people to change their behaviours and remain at home – thus harming the economy, too. Ministers and their advisers should have instead focused on how they could suppress the virus and buy time to find scientific solutions such as a vaccine. Other countries did this through a combination

of firm border measures, a strong system of testing, tracing and isolating, and behavioural changes among populations that were properly informed about the risks of airborne and asymptomatic infections.

Yet the government and its advisers refused to look to other countries. There was a lack of humility and an unwillingness to observe or listen to other parts of the world. Some might say that hindsight is always beneficial. But there was no need for hindsight to see how this would play out. The government already had plenty of lessons it could have learned at the time from [other countries](#) that were battling with the virus. In fact, the lockdown restrictions in western countries have been much harsher and longer than those in much of east Asia. Meanwhile, a recent [Lancet study](#) showed that countries that eliminated Covid-19 not only saved lives, but enjoyed more personal freedoms, civil liberties and economic stability.

It is painful to relive the horrifying weeks of March 2020 but it's essential that we now have a proper public inquiry into England's handling of Covid-19. The families who lost loved ones deserve accountability from our public officials, who must be held to higher standards of performance and decision-making. And we need to learn from these missteps so we can do [better in the future](#). Make no mistake: there will be other pandemics. England must now learn, much like countries that were affected by Mers, Ebola and Sars, to ensure these mistakes are never repeated. And the public must ask itself: what do we expect from our leaders and ministers?

- Devi Sridhar is chair of global public health at the University of Edinburgh

Opinion**Dominic Cummings**

Lone wolf Dominic Cummings continues to howl at the system

Martin Kettle



Cummings's select committee diatribe blamed everyone in government as incompetents in the grip of groupthink



‘People like him are holy solitaires rather than team players.’ Dominic Cummings gives evidence to MPs on the government’s handling of Covid. Photograph: Uk Parliamentary Recording Unit Handout/EPA

‘People like him are holy solitaires rather than team players.’ Dominic Cummings gives evidence to MPs on the government’s handling of Covid. Photograph: Uk Parliamentary Recording Unit Handout/EPA

Wed 26 May 2021 12.01 EDT

Dominic Cummings’s [marathon appearance](#) in front of MPs on Britain’s coronavirus response was by some distance the most extraordinary Commons event of its kind in a decade. There has been nothing to match it since [Rupert Murdoch](#) was finally compelled to give evidence to a select committee on phone hacking, back in 2011. In some ways, though, the two events were important for the same reason.

In both cases, here were immensely powerful men – dethroned in Cummings’s case, throne tottering in Murdoch’s – going through the elaborate pretence of public contrition in front of a governmental body that, at heart, they despised. In both, the glimpses into their minds were compelling. But, in both, the apparent penitent submitted to the process for a similar reason – the hope of emerging to resume their respective crusades against the liberal order.

To understand what Cummings was doing it is important not just to be riveted by his hypocrisies and his U-turns. It is also necessary to grasp the larger significance of what he is up to. At times on Wednesday, as Cummings offered news story upon news story, that was difficult. The audacity of Cummings's attempt, in Fintan O'Toole's [succulent Shakespearean metaphor](#), to transform himself from the amoral manipulator Iago into the wronged innocent Desdemona is at times breathtaking. But there is method in it too.

[Dominic Cummings says Covid chaos at No 10 was like 'out-of-control movie'](#)

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There is a backbone of consistency in Cummings's political career. He has always engaged in a battle against a largely imaginary elite conspiracy to hold back iconoclastic innovators of the kind he sees in the shaving mirror each morning. It takes the form of Cummings's deep-rooted hostility to institutions – such as the civil service and the BBC – that seem to him to reproduce and strengthen the elite. It is suffused with a lone-wolf purism that enables Cummings to commit idiocies like the [Barnard Castle](#) incident and still present himself as a virtuous lone knight in an evil world.

This drove Cummings's politics, long before the Brexit campaign. The Commons hearing shows it still drives him today, long after the Brexit triumph. When he first stepped across the threshold of the education department as Michael Gove's adviser, Cummings is said to have promised to set the whole place on fire, such was his contempt towards what he famously dubbed "the blob". Incineration was a suitably Wagnerian image for Cummings's sense that it was, and still is, him against the system.

Cummings's Twitter marathon this month - it had reached 65 episodes before he sat down in front of MPs - is full of sweeping indictments of the collective failings of others. It targets Downing Street, [Boris Johnson](#), Matt Hancock, Jenny Harries, political pundits, behavioural scientists, social care planning, border control policy, Whitehall, senior managers, Westminster, official secrecy and many others. Many got a second dose of his anger in the committee hearings. To Cummings, all are to some degree or other

incompetents in the grip of various forms of groupthink in institutions that are being weakened by entropy.

People like him, by contrast, are holy solitaires rather than team players. Occasionally, his tweets will celebrate an ally who is deemed worthy - one is “a brilliant young neuroscientist I recruited to No 10”, another “a brilliant young woman” whose work averted some of the Covid social care crisis in 2020. Last week he approvingly retweeted that “It’s not only in actual politics that earnestness seems to be a handicap, but also in office politics and academic politics.” People like this, Cummings added, are “seen as mad/unreliable and are weeded out”.

If this makes Cummings in many ways the colleague from hell, it is important to also acknowledge that, in many respects, he was also right, more right than many of those around him, and that he had his supporters, notably the chief scientific adviser, Patrick Vallance. Cummings’s account to MPs of the [shambolic unpreparedness](#) and delay in February and March 2020 is doubtless not comprehensive and is bound to have been self-serving. But it sounds extremely compelling.

The crucial part of that account was not what it said about the failings of [Johnson](#) or [Hancock](#), damning though it is. It was what it said about Britain’s government and the UK state. These institutions, like others in the world, were desperately badly prepared for what Covid threw at them. To a degree, this may be understandable. Covid was not the type of pandemic the NHS had exercised for.

But the state, which Cummings is not alone in seeing as structurally dysfunctional, had also been run down, unable to respond on the scale and at the speed that was needed. Even the most able political leader would have struggled with the legacy of so many cuts and so much disorganisation. Johnson was out of his depth, as were others. As a result, thousands died [who need not have done so](#).

The immediate political question is whether Cummings has knocked the government seriously off course in any way. The answer is no. The vaccine programme has got the government and the state off the hook. Johnson has

kicked the official inquiry into the pandemic into the long grass. He has no interest in accelerating it, especially now.

That is a tragedy for reformers of all kinds. But Cummings will not be surprised. He [tweeted last week](#) that the “point of the inquiry is the opposite of learning, it is to delay scrutiny, preserve the broken system & distract public from real Qs”. The lone knight will be undeterred, because railing against the system is the way he likes it.

Martin Kettle is a Guardian columnist

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Global development

Kenya's high court overturns president's bid to amend constitution

Judges rule that Uhuru Kenyatta, who claimed BBI plan was to end country's cycle of post-election violence, overstepped his authority and can be sued



Kenya's President Uhuru Kenyatta, right, and his deputy, William Ruto, at the launch of the building bridges initiative. Ruto has since come out against the plan, straining relations between the two. Photograph: Njeri Mwangi/Reuters

Kenya's President Uhuru Kenyatta, right, and his deputy, William Ruto, at the launch of the building bridges initiative. Ruto has since come out against the plan, straining relations between the two. Photograph: Njeri Mwangi/Reuters

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[Peter Muiruri](#) in Nairobi

Thu 27 May 2021 02.00 EDT

The [high court](#) in Nairobi has overturned the president's three-year quest to amend Kenya's [11-year-old constitution](#).

In a ruling heavily critical of President Uhuru Kenyatta, five judges said he had no authority to bring forward plans to create more executive positions and parliamentary constituencies.

Kenyatta's quest to drive the process, the judges ruled, meant he had failed the leadership and integrity test, and could be sued while in office for contravening the constitution.

The amendments were among proposals agreed by Kenyatta and his erstwhile opponent Raila Odinga after the [so-called "handshake" in 2018](#) that cooled political temperatures after the disputed 2017 elections.

The 785-paragraph judgment said the constitutional amendment bill of November 2020, popularly known as the building bridges initiative (BBI), was illegal as it sought to alter the basic structure of the current constitution.

Proponents of the bill, including the attorney general and the country's electoral commission, are expected to appeal against the ruling.

The legislation sought to create 70 additional parliamentary constituencies but the high court ruling on 14 May said such a move would “establish a new form of government” other than that entrenched in the constitution. Parliament and regional governments had already voted in support of the amendments.



President Uhuru Kenyatta, left, with the opposition leader Raila Odinga after they agreed to work to end election violence, out of which came the BBI. Photograph: Brian Inganga/AP

The judges said any proceedings to amend the constitution ought to be started either by parliament or through a popular initiative. For the president to institute such amendments would be akin to granting him the roles of the promoter and referee, since, after beginning the process, he would “sprint to the finishing line to await and receive it and to determine its ultimate fate,” they said.

“A declaration is hereby made that the president does not have authority under the constitution to initiate changes to the constitution, and that a constitutional amendment can only be initiated by parliament through a

parliamentary initiative under article 256 or through a popular initiative,” said the judgment.

The ruling is the most scathing since the supreme court [nullified](#) Kenyatta’s election win in August 2017. [A repeat election](#), boycotted by the opposition led by Odinga and marred by violence, declared Kenyatta president in October of that year.

The proposed bill sought to bring back the post of prime minister (abolished in 2013), appointed by the president and approved by parliament. Previously that position was held by Odinga in a power-sharing move after the election of 2007 that sparked widespread violence, in which more than 1,000 people died.

Kenyatta and his deputy William Ruto [were later accused](#) at the international criminal court in The Hague of fanning the violence, charges later dropped amid allegations of “intolerable political meddling”.

The president said the BBI was meant to cure this “cyclic post-election violence”.

“The need to amend the constitution is evident in the never-ending threat of post-election violence and public concerns about its lack of inclusivity,” he said in a statement.

[Kenyan police to flood streets as country braces for election violence](#)
[Read more](#)

In a damning accusation of Kenyatta, the judges said: “In taking initiatives to amend the constitution other than through the prescribed means in the constitution, the president failed to respect, uphold and safeguard the constitution and, to that extent, he has fallen short of the leadership and integrity threshold.

“Court proceedings can be instituted against the president or a person performing the functions of the office of president during their tenure of office in respect of anything done or not done contrary to the constitution,” the ruling stated.

The constitutional amendments have been [opposed by politicians allied to Ruto](#) with reports claiming that they were left out of key consultative forums overseen by the president.

In a [tweet](#), Ruto said: “All patriotic citizens must defend these tenets just like [the] judiciary did.”

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Climate change

Rapid heating of Indian Ocean worsening cyclones, say scientists

Rising ocean temperatures caused by climate crisis increasing number of cyclones and intensity of storms, say experts



A petrol station flattened by Cyclone Tauktae in India's western state of Gujarat. Photograph: Amit Dave/Reuters

A petrol station flattened by Cyclone Tauktae in India's western state of Gujarat. Photograph: Amit Dave/Reuters

Neelima Vallangi

Thu 27 May 2021 04.41 EDT

India's cyclone season is being made more intense by the rapidly heating Indian Ocean, scientists have warned.

Last week India was battered by Cyclone Tauktae, an unusually strong cyclone in the Arabian Sea, resulting in widespread disruption. This week, another severe storm, Cyclone Yaas, formed in the Bay of Bengal, [leading to more than a million people being evacuated into safe shelters](#).

The Indian subcontinent has been facing the brunt of [costly and deadly tropical cyclones](#) for decades. But scientists say global heating is accelerating the rate of ocean warming, leading to an increased number of cyclones and rapid intensification of weak storms, with severe repercussions for the country.

Cyclones are much more likely to gather intensity over warmer waters. The Arabian Sea, part of the west Indian Ocean, generally has a sea surface temperature of below 28C (82F), and [recorded just 93 cyclones between 1891 and 2000](#). By comparison, the warmer Bay of Bengal in the east Indian Ocean, where temperatures are permanently above 28C, recorded 350 cyclones over the same period.

Between 2001 and 2021, 28 cyclones formed in the Arabian Sea, along with a marked increase in storm intensity, fuelled by rising sea surface temperatures which reached as high as 31C (88F). A [2016 Nature study](#) found anthropogenic global heating had contributed to the increased frequency of extremely severe cyclonic storms over the Arabian Sea.

Roxy Mathew Koll, a climate scientist at the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology, said: “The entire Indian Ocean is warming at a faster rate compared to the Atlantic or Pacific. And within the Indian Ocean, the western parts of the Indian Ocean are warming much more. We see that it [sea surface temperature rise] is connecting well with the changes in the intensity and frequency of cyclones especially in the Arabian Sea and also the rapid intensification.”

The rapid intensification of weak storms into severe cyclones has been observed in the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal over recent years. But the current forecasting models do not pick up rapid intensification in advance, posing a huge challenge to both disaster management authorities and the public in responding to the risk adequately, according to Koll.

“Climate projections show that the Arabian Sea will continue to warm at a faster rate than what we have seen before, and there will be more extremely severe cyclones in the Arabian Sea,” he added.

India is especially vulnerable as [14% of its 1.3 billion population live in coastal districts](#), and the number living in coastal areas below 10 metres elevation is [forecast to rise threefold](#) by 2060.

“The trail of destruction left behind by Cyclone Tauktae is a grim reminder of India’s vulnerability to extreme climate events,” said Abinash Mohanty, programme lead at the Indian thinktank Council on Energy, Environment and Water.

Mohanty said the government should invest in an improved emergency response framework that accounts for the compounded impacts of extreme events, a detailed climate risk assessment and climate-proofing of infrastructure.

Inland countries such as Nepal can also be affected when strong Indian Ocean cyclones do not dissipate after landfall, causing excessive snowfall in the Himalayan highlands, said Arun Shrestha, a climate scientist at the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development. “The blizzard in Everest of 1995, Cyclone Phailin in 2013 and Cyclone Hudhud in 2014 are some examples of cyclones impacting the Himalayas.”

Anomalous warming in the Indian Ocean [has also been linked to locust swarms, flooding in Africa, Australian bushfires, and changes in global rainfall patterns](#).

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Oman

Oman plans to build world's largest green hydrogen plant

Oil-producing nation aims plant powered by wind and solar energy to be at full capacity by 2038



A solar plant in Chile, Latin America. The Oman plant construction is scheduled to start in 2028 in al-Wusta governorate on the Arabian Sea. Photograph: Reuters

A solar plant in Chile, Latin America. The Oman plant construction is scheduled to start in 2028 in al-Wusta governorate on the Arabian Sea. Photograph: Reuters

[Laura Paddison](#)

Thu 27 May 2021 04.51 EDT

Oman is planning to build one of the largest green hydrogen plants in the world in a move to make the oil-producing nation a leader in renewable

energy technology.

Construction is scheduled to start in 2028 in Al Wusta governorate on the Arabian Sea. It will be built in stages, with the aim to be at full capacity by 2038, powered by 25 gigawatts of wind and solar energy.

The consortium of companies behind the \$30bn (£21bn) project includes the state-owned oil and gas company OQ, the Hong Kong-based renewable hydrogen developer InterContinental [Energy](#) and the Kuwait-based energy investor Enertech.

Once online, the plant will use renewable energy to split water in an electrolyser to produce green hydrogen, which is able to replace fossil fuels without producing carbon emissions. Most will be exported to Europe and Asia, said Alicia Eastman, the co-founder and president of InterContinental Energy, either as hydrogen or converted into green ammonia, which is easier to ship and store. The facility aims to produce 1.8m tonnes of green hydrogen and up to 10m tonnes of green ammonia a year.

[Australia's first fully renewable 'hydrogen valley' slated for NSW](#)
[Read more](#)

Oman currently relies heavily on fossil fuels, generating [up to 85%](#) of its GDP from oil and gas, but its fossil fuel reserves [are dwindling](#) and becoming increasingly costly to extract. In December 2020, the country published its [Oman Vision 2040](#) strategy, a plan to diversify the economy away from fossil fuels and increase investment in renewables.

Green hydrogen could play an important role, said Eastman, thanks to the Oman's combination of plentiful daytime sun and strong winds at night. "Oman is one of the places in the world that I've called the 'future renewable superpowers'," said Michael Liebreich, the founder of BloombergNEF, "because what you really want [to produce green hydrogen] is very cheap solar and very cheap wind."

While electrification is the most efficient way of decarbonising most sectors, it's limited when it comes to energy-intensive industries such as steel, chemicals, aviation and shipping. Green hydrogen will be vital to help fill

these gaps, said the International Energy Agency in its [report](#) published this week, which called for an end to fossil fuel investments if governments are serious about climate commitments.

A wave of net zero-emissions pledges has already led to a slew of hydrogen strategies, [including from the European Commission](#) in 2020, which predicted the share of hydrogen in the EU's energy mix would rise from 2% to 14% by 2050.

Yet green hydrogen currently makes up [less than 1%](#) of global hydrogen production. The majority is still produced using fossil fuels such as gas and coal, in a process that emits about [830m tonnes](#) of carbon annually, equivalent to the emissions of the UK and Indonesia combined. "Blue hydrogen" is a cleaner version, as emissions are captured and stored, but it is still produced using gas – and is seen by some oil companies as a [way to keep using fossil fuels](#).

One of the stumbling blocks for green hydrogen has been cost, partly because of the [huge amounts of energy](#) required. But as renewables and electrolyzers become cheaper, and fossil fuel prices rise, costs [could fall by up to 64%](#) by 2030, according to research from the consultancy Wood Mackenzie.

"Most green hydrogen products will not be competitive for at least another decade," said Falko Ueckerdt, a senior scientist at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, who sees the Oman project as "a sign that investors anticipate large future demands for hydrogen-based fuels after 2030".

Oman's proposed plant is just one in a slate of green hydrogen mega projects planned globally. Eastman said InterContinental Energy has a number of other plants in the works, including a [26GW wind and solar green hydrogen plant](#) in the Pilbara, Western Australia. If constructed, this \$36bn (£25.5bn) plant would be the world's biggest energy project. The first phase is expected to be online by 2028.

In March, the renewables company Enegix Energy [announced](#) the construction of a green hydrogen plan in Ceará state, north-eastern Brazil.

Once built, which the company estimates will take about four years, the plant would produce more than 600,000 tonnes of green hydrogen per year from 3.4GW of wind and solar power.

“People are upping the gigawatts, and they should,” said Eastman, “there’s so much room in the market.”

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Myanmar

Myanmar: fossil fuel giants cut payments to junta but gas still flows

Total and Chevron halt some payments to military in wake of coup but advocacy groups say more needs to be done



Total and Chevron have come under pressure to cut ties with Myanmar's junta in the wake of the coup in February. Photograph: Gonzalo Fuentes/Reuters

Total and Chevron have come under pressure to cut ties with Myanmar's junta in the wake of the coup in February. Photograph: Gonzalo Fuentes/Reuters

[*Ben Butler*](#) and [*Ben Doherty*](#)

Thu 27 May 2021 02.51 EDT

Advocacy groups have called on French fossil fuel giant Total and US company [Chevron](#) to further cut ties with Myanmar's military, after

announcing they would suspend dividend payments to the junta from a large gas project in the wake of February's coup.

“Total condemns the violence and human rights abuses occurring in [Myanmar](#) and reaffirms that it will comply with any decision that may be taken by the relevant international and national authorities, including applicable sanctions issued by the EU or the US authorities,” the company said in a statement.

But advocacy groups said 90% of the money the junta makes from the Yadana gasfield joint venture with Total and Chevron – as well as the gas itself – continues to flow.

[Burma's oil rush: 'Nothing else in this country gives you money like this'](#)
[Read more](#)

Since the military deposed Aung San Suu Kyi's government, more than 5,400 people have been arrested, according to monitoring group AAPP Burma, with the majority still in detention, often in unknown locations. At least 824 people have been killed by the junta, including dozens of children, sparking global outcry and calls for international companies to cut their business ties with the military.

Total told a shareholder meeting this month that Moattama Gas Transportation Company Limited (MGTC) – a joint venture that pipes gas from the Yadana field in the Andaman sea to Myanmar – had decided to stop making dividend payments to the junta.

The resolution was put forward by Total, which owns 31.24% of MGTC, and Chevron, which owns 28.26% of MGTC – shareholdings that give the two multinationals a controlling stake.

The rest of MGTC is owned by PTTEP, which is controlled by the Thai state (25.5%) and Myanmar government company Myanma Oil and Gas Enterprise (15%).

However, advocacy group Justice for Myanmar pointed out oil was still flowing through the pipeline and the vast majority of payments to the junta

have not been affected.

The junta, which seized power on 1 February, still earns the state's share of gas revenue, royalties and cost recovery from the Yadana gas field operation and corporate income tax from the MGTC.

MGTC's suspension of dividends accounts for a tiny proportion of the estimated US\$1.5bn Myanmar earns annual from offshore oil and gas projects.

Spokesperson for Justice For Myanmar Yadanar Maung said the decision to suspend dividend payments would curb one source of revenue for the illegitimate military government in Myanmar.

"Total and Chevron have made enormous profits in Myanmar in the past while simultaneously bolstering brutal military regimes ... [they] have made the right choice by finally acknowledging that MOGE [Myanma Oil and Gas Enterprise] is under the control of the military and finances the junta's crimes."

Anti-corruption group Publish What You Pay Australia said Total and Chevron's decision to stop dividends was "a positive first step in supporting the people of Myanmar and will begin to limit the murderous Myanmar military regime's access to vital foreign currency".

"We urge them to stop the other 90% of payments flowing to the military from the pipeline," the group's director, Clancy Moore, said.

He said that in the 2017-18 financial year, MGTC paid \$141m to MOGE in taxes and dividends, made up of \$41m in dividends and \$100m in taxes.

"Total and Chevron must stop financing the military generals who have blood on their hands and put payments into escrow accounts," he said.

Chevron said it was aware of calls to shut off the gas and put all payments due to MOGE into an escrow account instead of paying the regime.

"Any actions should be carefully considered to ensure the people of Myanmar are not further disadvantaged by unintended and unpredictable

consequences of well-intentioned decisions,” it said in a statement.

“Gas produced by the Yadana project is used to supply electricity for approximately half the population of Yangon, Myanmar’s largest city, and also for people in Thailand.

“Effectively turning off the power to half of Yangon’s homes, schools and hospitals – in the middle of a state of emergency and a pandemic – risks creating even more hardship.”

In its statement, Total did not address the other payments made to the junta. “Total continues to act as a responsible operator of the Yadana field, maintaining the production of gas in accordance with applicable laws, so as not to disrupt the electricity supply that is vital to the local populations of Myanmar and Thailand,” it said.

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International trade

US and China hold first ‘candid’ trade talks under Biden tenure

Both sides emphasised importance of bilateral trade relations and agreed to further negotiations



The US trade deficit hit a fresh record high in March. Its trade imbalance with China increased more than 22% to \$36.9bn. Photograph: Wang Zhao/AFP via Getty Images

The US trade deficit hit a fresh record high in March. Its trade imbalance with China increased more than 22% to \$36.9bn. Photograph: Wang Zhao/AFP via Getty Images

[Vincent Ni](#) *China affairs correspondent*

Thu 27 May 2021 05.39 EDT

Top US and Chinese trade negotiators have held “candid” talks, their first under the Biden presidency, as Washington continues to raise concerns over

Beijing's trade practices.

In the long-awaited first official engagement between the US trade representative Katherine Tai and the Chinese vice-premier, Liu He, held virtually on Thursday morning (Beijing time), the two sides emphasised the importance of the bilateral trade relations and agreed to further negotiations.

[A statement from China's commerce ministry](#) said the US and China held “candid, pragmatic and constructive exchanges with an attitude of equality and mutual respect”.

In Washington, [the office of the US trade representative said](#) that Tai “discussed the guiding principles of the Biden-Harris administration’s worker-centred trade policy and her ongoing review of the US-China trade relationship, while also raising issues of concern”.



The Chinese vice-premier, Liu He. Photograph: Erik S Lesser/EPA

The statement did not specify which concerns were raised during the call, but added that Tai looked forward to future discussions with her Chinese counterpart.

Trade relations between the world’s two largest economies have deteriorated since the presidency of Donald Trump. The [Biden administration](#) has vowed

to continue some of Trump's trade policies towards China, while seeking Beijing's cooperation on issues such as climate change.

The White House has also insisted that existing tariffs will be kept in place for now as the administration looks to secure a US economic recovery from the pandemic. [China](#) has also maintained duties on some imports from the US.

The two countries signed a "phase 1" trade deal in January last year, shortly before Covid-19 began to hit the global economy. In that pact, Beijing promised to increase its purchases of American products and services by at least \$200bn over 2020 and 2021.

But in an interview with Reuters before the discussions, Tai said the US still faces "very large challenges" in its trade and economic relationship with China, and requires attention "all across the board".

[China replaces Germany as UK's biggest import market](#)

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Some experts said Beijing is falling short on its agreement for 2020, and is still lagging in its imports in 2021. According to the Peterson Institute for International [Economics](#) in Washington, through 2020, China's total imports of covered products from the US were \$99.9bn.

Last year, China was the only major world economy that achieved growth despite the global pandemic. Roaring back from a rare contraction in the early months of 2020, China's economy grew by 2.3%.

The US trade deficit hit a record high in March. Its trade imbalance with China increased more than 22% to \$36.9bn, as demands for face masks and other foreign-made goods continued to grow.

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[Covid inquiry](#)[Boris Johnson](#)

Covid bereaved demand public inquiry and end to ‘political pantomime’

Dominic Cummings’ litany of claims against the government should be formally investigated, say families



Safiah Ngah lost her father, Zahari, to Covid during the second wave of infections. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

Safiah Ngah lost her father, Zahari, to Covid during the second wave of infections. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

[Robert Booth](#) *Social affairs correspondent*

Fri 28 May 2021 01.00 EDT

Boris Johnson is facing a growing clamour to bring forward the start of the coronavirus public inquiry after relatives of the pandemic’s victims said Dominic Cummings’ allegations had started a “political pantomime” that disrespected those who had died.

The Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice group, which represents thousands of grieving people, called for an urgent start to the inquiry, which is due to begin in spring 2022.

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) joined the call, alongside Lord Kerslake, the former head of the civil service under David Cameron, Angela Rayner, the deputy Labour leader, and Ed Davey, the leader of the Liberal Democrats.

On Wednesday, Cummings, Johnson's former chief adviser, accused the government of being [woefully underprepared](#) for the pandemic during seven hours of evidence to MPs, and said Hancock had told repeated lies, leading to tens of thousands of avoidable deaths.

Many of the bereaved found Cummings' litany of claims traumatic and argued that such detailed evidence should be handled in a properly structured [public inquiry](#).

"This political pantomime continues to show a level of disrespect to our lost loved ones and brings us no closer to the answers we need for lives to be saved," said Matt Fowler, co-founder of Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice.

Their view was fuelled by the response of Matt Hancock, the health secretary, who told the House of Commons on Thursday that "unsubstantiated allegations around honesty are not true". Boris Johnson said some claims he had heard did not "bear any relation to reality".

Kerslake told the Guardian: "We are either going to carry on with this tit-for-tat briefing or we get to grips with the job. We owe it to the families of the bereaved. It's down to the prime minister. He has to see the sense of doing it early."

Cummings had also told MPs: "The idea that any kind of serious inquiry and lessons learned doesn't start until next year is completely terrible. Tens of thousands of people died who didn't need to die."

The bereaved are coordinating with workers' and health experts' organisations to draw up a list of issues the inquiry needs to consider. The government has failed to respond to their lawyer's request for talks with officials tasked with setting up the inquiry.

Nurses also weighed in, saying that "justice delayed is justice denied". The RCN said Cummings' testimony confirmed the need for "a full public inquiry, without delay, into the preparation for and management of Covid-19".

"That is the only way the government, its agencies and advisers will reflect and learn," said Dave Dawes, chair of the RCN Council. "The inquiry must examine the decisions made at UK government level and by nations too."

Davey wrote to the prime minister on Thursday saying "we need [the inquiry] now". "The chaotic mess of claims, counter-claims, anonymous WhatsApp briefings and cryptic Twitter threads is not the way to establish the truth that the British people – and bereaved families in particular – deserve," he said.

04:49

Voices of the Covid bereaved: 'Our loved ones aren't just a number' – video

This month Johnson told parliament that an [inquiry](#) would start in spring 2022 but said it would be wrong to "weigh down" scientific advisers and take up "huge amounts of officials' time" during the pandemic.

A government spokesperson said on Wednesday that it would happen "as soon as is reasonably possible" and on Thursday, Robert Jenrick, the secretary of state for housing, communities and local government, said next year was "the right moment at which to consider these things in a calm and reflective manner".

Labour is pushing for a more rapid inquiry. Rayner said: "We need that public inquiry and we need it immediately and for it not to be delayed. We need to learn the lessons ... and people need to be confident we have learned those lessons."

Safiah Ngah, who lost her 68-year-old father, Zahari Ngah, to Covid in February, said: “We can prevent deaths happening next winter if we take the time now to launch the public inquiry.”

She believes the delay in locking down before Christmas caused the death of her father, an NHS psychotherapist for 40 years. He was shielding but contracted Covid in early January. Though he was in good health, her father ended up in intensive care at University College Hospital, London, which he found terrifying.

“It was the peak of the second wave and people were dying around him and he was listening to that every day,” said his daughter. “If there is any argument for a more urgent inquiry it is to prevent that happening to more people. It’s not just that he was only 68, it’s that his last three weeks must have been absolute hell.”

“If we can prevent this happening to more people, why wouldn’t we do that?” she added. “It doesn’t make any sense.”



Rebecca Jones and her sister, Jenny Davies, lost their father to Covid on 1 March. Photograph: Christopher Thomond/The Guardian

Rebecca Jones, the daughter of Gareth Jones, a retired head teacher who died with Covid on 1 March 2021, said Cummings’ testimony about the

government's "shambolic handling of the pandemic only confirms that the public inquiry must start now".

"We think the lockdown came too late and if it had been earlier my dad would still be here," she said. "There was a series of government decisions that led to this suffering. We don't want any other families to suffer this which is why we want a public inquiry sooner rather than later.

"It is a tragedy what happened to us and so many families and vital lessons must be learned so this isn't repeated. With the uncertainty with the Indian variant, I don't understand why as a government you wouldn't be doing everything in your power to protect people."

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[Kwasi Kwarteng](#)

Kwasi Kwarteng defends Hancock over Covid care home claims

Business secretary says residents ‘were protected as far as we could’ during early days of pandemic

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Kwasi Kwarteng: Hancock ‘always maintained he wanted to build up testing capacity. I think he was largely successful in that.’ Photograph: Tayfun Salci/Zuma Wire/Rex/Shutterstock

Kwasi Kwarteng: Hancock ‘always maintained he wanted to build up testing capacity. I think he was largely successful in that.’ Photograph: Tayfun Salci/Zuma Wire/Rex/Shutterstock

[Haroon Siddique](#)

Fri 28 May 2021 05.24 EDT

The UK business secretary, [Kwasi Kwarteng](#), has defended Matt Hancock against criticism that he failed to protect people in care homes at the outset of the Covid pandemic, saying residents “were protected as far as we could”.

The health secretary is under mounting pressure after [Dominic Cummings accused him](#) of promising ministers that all care residents in England were tested before being discharged back to their homes and then lying about this. On Thursday, [Hancock denied the allegation](#) but his explanation that it “wasn’t possible” to test all care home residents before they were discharged from hospital last March because the testing capacity was not yet available, has been called into question.

Kwarteng said it was “very easy with hindsight” to say where things could have been improved.

“I completely understand the anger and frustration about care homes, because a large number of people died, and it was a terrible situation,” he told BBC Radio 4’s Today programme. “I think what Mr Hancock said was very clear. He’s always maintained that he wanted to build up the testing capacity. I think he was largely successful in that.”

Asked why people were discharged if there was insufficient testing capacity, he replied: “They were protected as far as we could. We were absolutely focused at that time on saving as many lives as possible. Nobody worked harder in government than [Matt Hancock](#) to do that.”

Hancock’s claim that there was insufficient testing capacity was the first time he had diverged from his previous claim to have thrown a “protective ring” around care homes. Questioned about how long it took the government to say on the record that there had been no protective ring, Kwarteng merely referred to its existing commitment [to hold a public inquiry](#) at the beginning of next year.

The pressure on Hancock increased on Thursday night as [ITV News’s Robert Peston reported](#) that Cummings had documentary evidence showing Hancock was summoned to the prime minister’s office for a meeting on 4 May last year to explain whether he had misled Cummings, Boris Johnson

and the then cabinet secretary, Mark Sedwill, on testing patients before discharge into care homes and also about further testing of residents and staff in care homes. Peston said the term “negligence” was used in the documents.

Peston quoted a source close to the health secretary as saying: “We do not recognise this at all. The health secretary has had many meetings with the PM across a range of issues throughout the pandemic as you would expect.”

The UK has one of the world’s worst coronavirus death tolls: more than 127,000 people have died including [more than 40,000 care home residents](#).

At the Downing Street press conference on Thursday, Hancock did not directly deny Cummings’ claim that the health secretary had lied to the prime minister, falsely telling him care home residents would be tested before being discharged from hospital.

Hancock said his “recollection of events” was that “I committed to getting the policy in place but it took time to build the testing”.

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Hospitals

Surgeons in England call for £1bn a year to cut ‘colossal’ backlog

Royal College of Surgeons demands ‘new deal’ to help NHS weather future pandemics



The latest figures show that in March 4.95 million people were waiting for hospital treatment in England – the largest figure on record. Photograph: Peter Byrne/PA

The latest figures show that in March 4.95 million people were waiting for hospital treatment in England – the largest figure on record. Photograph: Peter Byrne/PA

[Haroon Siddique](#)

Fri 28 May 2021 03.29 EDT

Surgical hubs should be created across England and the government should spend £1bn annually for the next five years to reduce the “colossal” backlog

in non-urgent procedures, the Royal College of Surgeons has said.

The recommendations are two of [a dozen suggestions made by the RCS](#) designed to ensure planned surgery can continue safely if the country is hit again by another wave of coronavirus, a new variant or a severe winter/flu outbreak.

[All elective or planned surgery, such as for knee and hip replacements, was cancelled](#) in the first wave of the pandemic. The latest figures show that in March, [4.95 million people were waiting for hospital treatment in England](#) – the largest figure on record – including 436,127 people waiting more than a year a year.

The RCS pointed out that, even before the pandemic, there were mass cancellations as a result of winter pressures, [including in 2018](#).

Prof Neil Mortensen said: “We need government support for a ‘new deal for surgery’ to reduce the colossal backlog in elective surgery and to help the NHS weather future pandemics. Surgery must be available on the NHS all year-round, not stop and start. If a dangerous new variant of Covid-19 takes hold, or another bad flu arrives in the autumn, we cannot allow surgery to grind to a halt again or waiting lists will become insurmountable.”

The proposed hubs would be in every Integrated Care System, of which there are 42 in England. During the pandemic, NHS trusts put agreements in place to designate certain hospitals as surgical hubs. The RCS said they helped expand capacity by bringing skills and resources together under one roof in Covid-secure environments.

The “new deal” report also calls on the government to adopt longer-term aims of increasing the number of hospital beds and doctors to reach the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) average.

A Department of Health and Social Care spokesperson said it had backed the NHS throughout the pandemic to ensure it was not overwhelmed. The spokesperson added: “We are providing [an extra £7bn for health and care](#)

[services this year](#), as well as £1bn to tackle the backlogs that have built up, bringing our total additional Covid-19 investment to £92bn.

“We face an unprecedented challenge and will continue to work closely with the NHS to accelerate the recovery of services so everyone gets the care they need, [including £160m to support hospitals](#) to find innovative ways to carry out even more operations and cut waiting lists.”

Meanwhile, the University of Oxford has launched a centre of global research collaboration to ensure that the world is prepared for future pandemic threats.

The Pandemic Sciences Centre aims to provide science-driven solutions that respond to possible outbreaks at any time. It will build on collaborations developed rapidly across the globe between academia, industry and public health bodies during the pandemic.

The University of Oxford’s vice-chancellor, Louise Richardson, said: “The recent pandemic has demonstrated the unique contributions research universities like Oxford can make to pandemic preparedness.

“We are building on decades of medical research on infectious disease and data science, we have long-standing international partnerships and we have the ability to act and to adapt quickly.

“When aligned with industry and with public health bodies we can ensure that the world is never caught unprepared again.”

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2021.05.28 - Coronavirus

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- [US-China Move to investigate Covid origins opens new divide](#)
- [Care homes Hancock faces calls to explain Covid test failings](#)
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[US foreign policy](#)

Biden move to investigate Covid origins opens new rift in US-China relations

Beijing reacts angrily to calls for WHO to carry out second phase of investigation, while US intelligence split on virus's likely origin



On Thursday the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson, Zhao Lijian, said it was ‘extremely unlikely’ the virus had come from a laboratory in Wuhan. Photograph: Jason Lee/AFP/Getty Images

On Thursday the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson, Zhao Lijian, said it was ‘extremely unlikely’ the virus had come from a laboratory in Wuhan. Photograph: Jason Lee/AFP/Getty Images

[Vincent Ni](#), *China affairs correspondent*, and [Julian Borger](#) in Washington
Thu 27 May 2021 15.23 EDT

Joe Biden’s decision to expand the US investigation into the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic, with one intelligence agency leaning towards the theory

that it escaped from a Wuhan laboratory, has opened a new divide in his administration's already tense relationship with China.

Biden said on Thursday that he would publish the results of the 90-day inquiry, which has made a priority for the intelligence agencies. The move represents a dramatic turnaround from the administration's policy until now of leaving the investigation to the [World Health Organization](#).

The US on Thursday called on the WHO to carry out a second phase of its investigation into the origins of the coronavirus, with independent experts given full access to original data and samples in [China](#).

"It is critical that China provides independent experts full access to complete, original data and samples relevant to understanding the source of the virus and the early stages of the pandemic," said the US mission to the UN in Geneva.

Beijing has reacted angrily, portraying Biden's announcement as part of a broader geopolitical struggle. The Chinese government questioned Washington's motives and railed against the "notorious track record" of US intelligence in the lead-up to the 2003 war in Iraq.

However, as Biden acknowledged, the US intelligence community is split over the likely origins of the pandemic. The Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) issued a statement on Thursday, admitting the disagreement, and the continuing lack of certainty over the facts.

"The US intelligence community does not know exactly where, when, or how the Covid-19 virus was transmitted initially but has coalesced around two likely scenarios: either it emerged naturally from human contact with infected animals or it was a laboratory accident," the statement said.

"While two elements of the IC lean toward the former scenario and one leans more toward the latter – each with low or moderate confidence – the majority of elements within the IC do not believe there is sufficient information to assess one to be more likely than the other."

The statement concluded: “The IC continues to examine all available evidence, consider different perspectives, and aggressively collect and analyze new information to identify the virus’s origins.”

The virus was first detected in the Chinese city of Wuhan in late 2019 and has since spread around the world, killing almost 3.5 million people. The broad consensus among scientific experts remains that the most likely explanation is that Covid-19 jumped to humans from an animal host, in a natural event.

On Thursday, the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson, Zhao Lijian, said it was “extremely unlikely” the virus had come from a laboratory in Wuhan, pointing to the [findings of a March report](#) by a World Health Organization mission.

Zhao said: “[The US’s] one aim is to use the pandemic to pursue stigmatisation and political manipulation to shift the blame. They are being disrespectful to science, irresponsible to people’s lives, and counterproductive to concerted global efforts to fight the virus.”

Invoking memories of the 2003 Iraq war and the unfounded intelligence used to justify the US-led invasion, Zhao said “the notorious track record of the US intelligence community has long been known to the world”.

On Wednesday, Biden gave the US intelligence agencies 90 days to report to him in an effort to reach a “definitive conclusion” about the origins of the coronavirus.

He directed US national laboratories to assist with the investigation and called on [China](#) to cooperate with international inquiries into the origins of the pandemic. Biden said he had also asked the intelligence community to keep Congress informed of its work on the matter.

“The United States will also keep working with like-minded partners around the world to press China to participate in a full, transparent, evidence-based international investigation and to provide access to all relevant data and evidence,” he said.

Rumours that Sars-CoV-2 [may have emerged from a Chinese laboratory](#) began circulating shortly after China reported the first cases early last year. Although it was dismissed as a fringe theory at the time, Donald Trump, his secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, and a Republican senator, Tom Cotton of Arkansas, promoted it as the death toll began to rise in the last months of the Trump administration.

The theory was dismissed by most scientists, and in February an international expert mission to China on behalf of the WHO called the lab leak theory “extremely unlikely”.

Peter Ben Embarek, the head of the WHO mission, said at the time that work to identify the origins of Covid-19 pointed to a “natural reservoir” in bats, but that it was “unlikely” this occurred in Wuhan.

However, the organisation’s director general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, said in March that “all hypotheses remain on the table” after 14 countries, including the US and UK, made a joint statement to express concerns over the WHO team’s conclusions.

[Did Covid come from a Wuhan lab? What we know so far](#)
[Read more](#)

On Sunday, [the Wall Street Journal](#), citing “previously undisclosed” US intelligence, reported that three members of staff at a key virus laboratory in Wuhan had become sick with Covid-like symptoms and were taken to hospital before the first Covid patient was recorded in early December 2019.

Citing people briefed on the intelligence, CNN reported on Monday that the intelligence community “still does not know what the researchers were actually sick with”. “At the end of the day, there is still nothing definitive,” one of those who has seen the intelligence told CNN.

The Wall Street Journal report came on the eve of a key meeting of the WHO’s decision-making body, which was expected to discuss in detail the next phase of an investigation into the origins of Covid-19.

[Beijing vehemently denied the report](#), calling it “completely untrue”. On Thursday Zhao also proposed China’s own theory, without evidence, that the virus may have originated from a US army base in Maryland.

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[Coronavirus](#)

Hancock faces calls to explain Covid test failings at care homes

Health secretary claims it ‘wasn’t possible’ to test all patients sent to care homes at outset of pandemic

- [Dominic Cummings’ key accusations against Matt Hancock](#)
- [See all our coronavirus coverage](#)

01:45

Matt Hancock says not all patients sent to care homes were tested for Covid – video

[Heather Stewart](#) and [Aubrey Allegretti](#)

Thu 27 May 2021 15.08 EDT

Matt Hancock is under mounting pressure to explain why the government failed to protect care home residents at the outset of the Covid pandemic, as he sought to salvage his reputation after [Dominic Cummings](#) accused him of lying.

The health secretary claimed for the first time it “wasn’t possible” to test all care home residents for Covid before they were discharged from hospital last March, because the testing capacity was not yet available.

But the shadow social care minister, Liz Kendall, said that explanation “simply doesn’t stack up”.

“There were over 530,000 tests carried out in the UK by 20 April, yet they couldn’t test 25,000 people discharged from hospitals to care homes, after we saw it sweep through care homes in Italy, France and America?” she

said. “The reality is, they wanted to free up the beds and they didn’t prioritise older people.”

She accused Hancock, who previously claimed to have thrown a “protective ring” around care homes, of changing his story to “wriggle out” of responsibility.

On Wednesday, during seven hours of evidence to MPs, [Cummings accused Hancock](#) of promising ministers that all care residents in England were tested before being discharged back to their homes and then lying about this.

03:46

Cummings: Hancock should have been sacked for 'criminal, disgraceful behaviour' – video

Hancock denied the claim and a No 10 spokesperson said on Thursday night : “The prime minister has full confidence in the health secretary and will continue working with him to protect public health and save lives.”

The UK has one of the world’s worst coronavirus death tolls: more than 127,000 people have died including [more than 40,000 care home residents](#).

Data from Public Health [England](#) (PHE) released on Thursday found the transfer of patients with Covid from hospital to care homes resulted in 286 deaths. It said 96 outbreaks in care homes were related to this problem – about 1.6% of all care home outbreaks – and that the vast majority of these were identified during a matter of weeks in March and April 2020.

While PHE said the number of care home outbreaks seeded by hospital patients being discharged with the virus was “relatively small”, the “potential for their preventability ... must be fully acknowledged”.

Many at Westminster believe Hancock may have been saved from being reshuffled out of his post by Cummings’ attack because the prime minister will not want to appear to be following the prompting of his embittered former aide.

Hancock's defence at a Downing Street press conference came after Boris Johnson's former chief adviser repeatedly took aim at the health secretary. In particular, he claimed Hancock had lied to the prime minister, falsely telling him care home residents would be tested before being discharged from hospital.

Hancock did not directly refute that claim at the press conference. He said his "recollection of events" was that "I committed to getting the policy in place but it took time to build the testing".

He added: "I then went away and built the testing capacity ... and then delivered on the commitment that I made." He also defended his 100,000-a-day testing target, which Cummings claimed had distorted government priorities.

Cummings, who was ousted from No 10 in November, said that despite Hancock's promise in March, testing of hospital patients being moved to care homes "only happened very partially and sporadically" – meaning Covid "spread like wildfire inside" them.

The Conservative MP Dan Poulter said Hancock's remarks suggested there should be an immediate inquiry into Covid-related deaths in care homes.

Poulter, who is vice-chair of the all-party-parliamentary group on Covid, said: "It is one of the most troubling aspects of this pandemic that the elderly have borne the brunt despite being the most vulnerable in society. We must ensure these mistakes are not repeated and that care homes are never again treated as an afterthought in pandemic planning."

Allies of Hancock have reacted furiously to Cummings' testimony, saying he frequently briefed journalists against the health secretary and falsely took credit for his successes. One friend suggested Cummings may have had a grudge against Hancock since the pair were both Conservative advisers during the coalition government a decade ago.

Johnson himself dismissed Cummings' claims on Thursday, saying they didn't "bear any relation to reality".

Cummings claimed the prime minister [was unfit to lead the country](#) through the pandemic, still regretted ordering the first lockdown last spring and had stubbornly rejected scientific advice last September. Cummings told stunned MPs at his marathon hearing that “tens of thousands of people died, who didn’t need to die”.

In response to questions during a trip to a hospital in Essex, Johnson denied that his delay in ordering a second lockdown last autumn against the advice of scientific advisers led to unnecessary deaths.

The prime minister said he had grappled with the question of whether to enforce another lockdown, which he knew would be a “very, very painful, traumatic thing for people” and had to “set that against the horrors of the pandemic”.

He insisted: “At every stage, we’ve been governed by a determination to protect life, to save life, to ensure that our NHS is not overwhelmed, and we’ve followed to the best we can the data and the guidance that we’ve had.”

Hancock faces his own grilling before the health and technology committees in June, where he is likely to be quizzed about the situation in care homes and the availability of personal protective equipment.

The shadow health secretary, Jonathan Ashworth, also wrote to Hancock on Thursday, claiming he had been “disrespectful” towards the families of Covid victims by dodging critical questions at an earlier hearing before MPs.

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Coronavirus

Did Covid come from a Wuhan lab? What we know so far

To China's fury, Joe Biden has ordered a review of rival theories about lab leaks and animal hosts

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
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A World Health Organization team arrives at the Wuhan Institute of Virology in China, February 2021. Photograph: Héctor Retamal/AFP/Getty Images

A World Health Organization team arrives at the Wuhan Institute of Virology in China, February 2021. Photograph: Héctor Retamal/AFP/Getty Images

[Peter Beaumont](#)

Thu 27 May 2021 10.13 EDT

President Joe Biden has ordered US intelligence agencies to conduct a 90-day review of what is known about the origins of Covid-19 and [whether it could have escaped](#) from a laboratory in Wuhan. So what does this mean for the lab leak theory?

Has new evidence emerged?

Despite the Biden announcement and various stories in the US media claiming support is [growing for the Wuhan lab leak theory](#), the answer is that surprisingly little has changed in terms of good quality evidence – at least in the public domain.

The most striking new claim in recent days, ahead of Biden’s announcement, was in [the Wall Street Journal](#), which reported that US intelligence agencies were told that three unnamed staff at the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) were sick enough to go hospital in November 2019 with symptoms that *might* have been coronavirus.

How reliable is the evidence?

The intelligence relating to the three staff at the WIV has been described as uncorroborated evidence from a foreign source, ie it was not obtained – or so far verified – by a US intelligence agency, and was initially looked at under the Trump administration.

“It was very precise,” one source told the WSJ, but added the crucial caveat: “What it didn’t tell you was exactly why they got sick.”

According to the New York Times, not one but two [intelligence documents](#) were produced discussing the sick workers, one focused on the three individuals, the second about what was known about the origins of the coronavirus. There are multiple issues, however, with how to interpret this information.

Questions include whether the symptoms seen were of coronavirus or bad flu (or something else) and whether the sickness – if it was coronavirus – was related to work in their lab, or simply suggests that Covid-19 was

circulating in the general population in Wuhan a few weeks earlier than assumed.

Biden's comments, launching the review, are revealing – not least when he said that the US intelligence community does “not believe there is sufficient information” to fully understand the likelihood of different scenarios for explaining the origin of the virus that causes Covid-19.

Biden also revealed that two of the 18 US intelligence agencies lean towards the theory it jumped from an animal species to humans and “one leans more toward” the lab theory, suggesting a striking lack of clarity.

Meanwhile, outside of US intelligence circles, the broad consensus among scientific experts remains that the most likely explanation is that Covid-19 jumped to humans from an animal host in a natural event.

So where are we with the animal host theory?

Much has been made by some of the fact that no intermediate animal host – between humans and bats – has so far been identified, which has been cited in some places as somehow supporting the lab leak theory.

The reality is that identifying animal hosts in past coronavirus outbreaks has been a lengthy and uncertain process. While it is known that dromedaries were a major reservoir host for Mers, even now the role of the animals in transmitting the virus is poorly understood.

The same was true with the Sars outbreak. While [civet cats were suspected](#) as intermediate hosts, it took years to confirm. In neither case was there was a suggestion of a lab leak. Because of that, the model of transmission via an intermediate host has remained the predominant one under consideration.

Another issue is that a lot of focus of research into the origins of Covid-19 so far has relied on the very specialised field of the interpretation of gene sequences of the virus, an area that is less accessible to non-experts including journalists.

But wasn't there a World Health Organization mission to Wuhan to study the origins of Covid-19?

There was indeed. But the terms of reference of that mission, agreed with [China](#), were to study the potential animal origins of the coronavirus, a fact that was well known to the US and other countries.

It did not include provisions for an audit of the WIV laboratory or to look into so-called “gain of function” research at the lab into viruses, which the Chinese are unlikely to have agreed to. During that mission to Wuhan, researchers spent just three hours at the lab.

However, in public comments [team members were sceptical](#) of the lab leak theory after their visit, on the basis of what they were allowed to see – although that does not rule other material having been hidden.

And China, as the WHO's head, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, made clear, did not provide all the information that many had been hoping for, including full epidemiological data on some 174 early cases.

Why has the lab leak theory come back now?

That's complicated. The overt hostility of the Trump administration to China, and the way it pushed the lab leak claims, including a dodgy dossier that was doing the rounds last year, made it a pretty tainted source.

The advent of a Biden administration, which is less hostile to China, combined with the limitations in the WHO investigation, created an environment where some have felt able to ask questions about Covid-19's origins without appearing to buy into Trump-era conspiracies.

However, like the Benghazi attack in 2012, the Wuhan lab leak theory remains something of a cause celebre for the US right in the midst of what is essentially a cold war between the US and China.

In particular, it has been seen as a stick to beat the Biden administration's handling of it, not least following the decision to close down a state department group that had been looking into the lab leak theory.

That effort, [first reported by CNN](#), was quietly launched by the then secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, last autumn and reportedly became quickly mired in concern that it was part of a politicised effort by the Trump administration to blame China and cherry-pick facts to prove a theory.

Indeed, one source quoted by CNN was highly critical of the work being done. “They basically conducted it in secret, cutting out the state department's technical experts and the intelligence community, and then trying to brief certain senior officials in the interagency on their ‘tentative conclusions’ even before they'd let the department leaders they worked for know an investigation was under way at all.”

That sounds familiar ...

It does indeed. Many aspects of Wuhan lab leak story have echoes of the search for WMD in the run-up to the Iraq war in 2003 which included efforts to [“stove pipe” intelligence analysis](#) to fit the operating theory.

Then as now, experts (then weapons inspectors also under the aegis of a UN body) were sent into a highly obstructive environment amid a highly politicised debate. Leaks of dubious intelligence – some of it provided by third party countries like the infamous Curveball claims – [were reported without sufficient scepticism and expert warnings sidelined.](#)

So has the lab leak theory become more credible or not?

The bottom line is that it is still impossible to know with any certainty, as Biden has said.

Lab accidents do happen all the time, meaning that without further evidence a lab leak remains a possibility. The experience of Sars and Mers suggests

that coronaviruses do break out naturally and that understanding their origins is difficult.

Chinese obstruction of research into Covid-19's origins, combined with its own [promotion of conspiracy theories](#) over a foreign origin of the disease, make it look like it has something sinister to hide.

As the experience of the Iraq weapons inspectors demonstrated, obstruction can be profoundly misunderstood as suggesting a motive: ie Saddam Hussein was not hiding WMD but had substantially disarmed.

And where we are today, as [Adam Taylor put it cleverly in the Washington Post](#) on Thursday, is nowhere close to a resolution.

“Although the resurgent chatter may suggest new clues or proof, the inverse is in fact true. It is the persistent absence of any convincing evidence either for or against the theory that has prompted calls for more investigation.”

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Cillian Murphy: ‘I was in awe of how Helen McCrory lived her life’

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Rights and freedomChild rights

‘One name in a long list’: the pointless death of another West Bank teenager

Obaida Jawabra was weeks from turning 18 when he was shot by an Israeli soldier, after a life shaped by arrests and imprisonment



A still from the short film Obaida, about a young Palestinian from the West Bank who wanted to be a chef. Photograph: Courtesy of Defense for Children International – Palestine

A still from the short film Obaida, about a young Palestinian from the West Bank who wanted to be a chef. Photograph: Courtesy of Defense for Children International – Palestine

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[Jessie McDonald](#)

Fri 28 May 2021 01.01 EDT

Route 60, the north-south artery that carves its way through the West Bank, is both the lifeblood of the region and a source of daily fear.

Flanked in parts by 2.5-metre-high (8ft) separation barriers, military checkpoints and watchtowers crewed by Israeli snipers, the 146-mile highway that starts and finishes in [Israel](#) but passes Hebron and Bethlehem in the West Bank, has been the scene of many fatal attacks and violent clashes.

For a Palestinian teenager such as Obaida Akram Abdurahman Jawabra, the road was a route to opportunity and a source of restriction.

Growing up in al-Arroub refugee camp just north of Hebron, Obaida, 17, was training to become a chef and travelled daily from the camp through Route 60 to college in Beit Jala. When he was 15, he became the subject of an eponymous short film by the journalist Matthew Cassel in 2019, in which he spoke about running the gauntlet of Israeli military security on a daily basis. “The problem is Route 60 and how to cross it,” the teenager said.

[map of West Bank](#)

His fear was rooted in experience; at 14, Obaida was arrested while walking to a shop, and said he was blindfolded and beaten while detained. He was accused of throwing stones, but acquitted and released without charge. Six months later, in July 2018, he was arrested again, accused of throwing stones and a molotov cocktail. He agreed to a plea deal and was imprisoned for four months. He was arrested a third time, in 2019, and released without charge.

Obaida's story is typical of thousands of Palestinian children in the West Bank. Children can be imprisoned from the age of 12 under military law, and the detention of 15- to 17-year-olds is common, says Yael Stein, head of research at the Israeli human rights organisation B'Tselem and author of a 2018 report on [the arrest of minors](#). Most pursue a plea bargain, often under intimidating circumstances, says Stein.

After his release, Obaida focused on training to become a chef, which he saw as a way of escaping his circumstances. He was a few weeks from turning 18 and graduating from his course when he was shot and killed by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) on 17 May.



Obaida was described by college staff as ‘an active student ... always helping’. In December, he volunteered to make packed lunches for people sick with Covid. Photograph: Courtesy of Talitha Kumi Community College

Details of exactly what happened in the moments leading up to his death are unclear but witnesses have described him being shot from about 70 metres away, near the entrance to al-Aroub on Route 60. Witnesses say an ambulance was reportedly unable to reach him, as the route had been blocked by soldiers, which the IDF denies.

Obaida, a film by the journalist Matthew Cassel from 2019.

Obaida died during one of the many demonstrations across the West Bank during the recent 11-day [conflict that cost the lives](#) of more than 250 in Gaza, including 66 children, and 12 in Israel, including two children.

Four days after Obaida’s death, a ceasefire was declared on 21 May, but the unrest continues. On Monday Israeli [police shot dead](#) a 17-year-old attacker who stabbed an Israeli soldier and civilian in Jerusalem on the edge of the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood. In Hebron, the city nearest Obaida’s home in al-Aroub, there have been reports of further attacks by settlers on Palestinians and their property.

“Since the ceasefire there has been teargas, arrests of [Palestinians at al-Aqsa mosque](#), harassment and the [Israeli police at the] cement blocks in Sheikh Jarrah are [not allowing Palestinians to pass](#), while settlers can pass freely,” says Rania, from Jerusalem, whose son was a classmate of Obaida’s. “I was passing through Herod’s Gate [in Jerusalem’s Old City] today thinking we really do live in a war zone – it looks like something out of a Hollywood war movie.”

And a ceasefire means little change to the day-to-day life of boys such as Obaida in the West Bank.



Mourners carry the body of Obaida Jawabra at his funeral in al-Arroub refugee camp on 18 May. Photograph: Hazem Bader/AFP/Getty Images

The Palestinian prisoners' rights group Addameer estimates that about 700 Palestinian children are arrested by Israeli forces every year and that there are 160 inmates under-18 in Israeli prisons. [Children have also occasionally been arrested by the Palestinian Authority](#), which conducts its own crackdowns on opposition activists and has been accused of torturing prisoners, including minors. The authority did not respond to a request for comment.

At least 61 children were arrested as Israeli police stepped up raids in mid-April following confrontations in and around East Jerusalem – including a [13-year-old arrested](#) at Damascus Gate who was beaten by police, according to Addameer.

Most children imprisoned under the Israeli military legal system, like Obaida, are accused of throwing stones. Six children, including Obaida, have reportedly been [killed by the IDF this year](#), four in the past three weeks.

“Obaida, and I say this with complete sorrow, is just one name in a long list of many,” said the [Palestinian writer Mariam Barghouti](#) in an interview last

week.

Avner Gvaryahu, executive director of Breaking the Silence, an organisation of Israeli military veterans, describes a system of “inequality” in the treatment of Palestinian children by the IDF.

“What we’ve seen come up over and over again, especially when it comes to stone-throwing, or even in more extreme cases of violence, is the non-essential use of force. I’m not condoning stone-throwing, it has harmed Israeli citizens, but ... we’ve seen cases where there’s not sufficient reason to shoot – and definitely not kill.”



A Palestinian youth hurls stones at Israeli security forces during confrontations in the West Bank city of Hebron. Photograph: Hazem Bader/AFP/Getty Images

Gvaryahu says IDF soldiers who use excessive force operate with “high levels of impunity”, adding “[indictments are very rare](#), and the sentencing will be minimal”.

A report by [Human Rights Watch accusing Israel of imposing policies that amount to apartheid](#), found that: “Israeli forces regularly arrest children during night-time raids, interrogate them without a guardian present, and hold those as young as 12 in lengthy pretrial detention.” Israel’s foreign

ministry has previously accused Human Rights Watch of a “longstanding anti-Israeli agenda” and called the report a “propaganda pamphlet” that had “no connection to facts or reality on the ground”.

Ayed Abu Eqtaish, from [Defense for Children International – Palestine](#), the human rights organisation behind the film featuring Obaida, said: “If you go to Ofer military court [near Ramallah], you will see many Palestinian boys, just like Obaida Jawabra, standing trial before a military detention system that systematically ill treats and abuses them, denies them due-process rights, and hands nearly every child a guilty verdict. It is a reality that is made no more acceptable by its predictability and frequency.”



Israeli soldiers take aim at Palestinian demonstrators in Hebron during protests against the occupation and the latest attacks on Gaza. Photograph: Hazem Bader/AFP/Getty

A spokesperson for the IDF told the Guardian that the military had opened an investigation into Obaida’s death. They said: “In recent years, many Palestinian minors have been involved in carrying out terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians and IDF troops, as well as involved in violent riots including life-threatening acts, such as throwing molotov cocktails and explosive devices.

“IDF troops take various measures in the face of these actions, in order to prevent harm to human life while endeavouring to minimise the possibility of harm to minors.”

The spokesperson said the IDF acted in accordance with Israeli and international law when detaining minors, and that “there is an absolute prohibition on the use of violence or any other inappropriate treatment”.

- *Additional reporting by [Kaamil Ahmed](#)*

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China

An ultramarathon ends in tragedy: runners describe horror of Gansu race

Twenty-one competitors died in the freezing Chinese mountains, raising major questions about safety in the sport



Rescue workers work at the route of the ultramarathon. Photograph: Reuters

Rescue workers work at the route of the ultramarathon. Photograph: Reuters



[Helen Davidson](#) in Taipei

[@heldavidson](#)

Fri 28 May 2021 05.26 EDT

At the starting line of the Gansu ultramarathon, it was cold but the sun was shining. One competitor struggled to warm up, even after jogging a quick 2km, and noticed some of the elite competitors were wearing shorts and shivering. In nearby towns, the temperature was reportedly [already dropping](#) and winds increasing, but the 172 runners didn't know that.

In a widely shared account of [the horror that followed](#), published online, the anonymous runner described the conditions that led to the death of 21 competitors and the admission of eight others to hospital, and sparked major questions about the safety of the increasingly popular endurance sport in China.

Within hours, the temperature on the mountain in north-western [China](#) would drop far below zero. Runners were pelted with rain, hail and gale-force winds. Competitors have described being blindsided by the cold, losing feeling in their extremities, passing people who retired early and were descending the track, and coming across others who were foaming at the mouth or lying motionless.

Among those who died during the Huanghe Shilin Mountain Marathon in Gansu's Yellow River Stone Forest was record-holder Liang Jing, last photographed leading the pack, wearing shorts and a thin jacket. Nicknamed Liang God, the 31-year-old father of a two-year-old was well known in China as a champion racer. He was experienced, having won – among others – a 250-mile (400km) race through the Gobi desert in 2018.

According to China News Weekly, he was one of four competitors who sheltered in a cave, accompanied by two local villagers. By the time rescuers found them, three of the four, including Liang, had died.

Paralympian Huang Ganjun also died during the race. Hearing- and speech-impaired, Huang won the men's hearing-impaired marathon at the 2019 National Paralympic Games. A friend described him as a “sensitive” man whose greatest joy in life was running. Fellow competitor Zhang Xiaotao described seeing Huang between the two checkpoints, alive and continuing but “in bad shape”.

The Gansu ultramarathon had been run three times before, but this was a new route, through remote mountain territory. The weather deteriorated between the second and third checkpoints: a five-mile stretch of trail, 15 miles into the route. Competitors have variously described it as a treacherous and technical part of the route with 1,000 metres of elevation, requiring some climbing.

“There is nowhere to rest and you can't stop and the exposed mountains ... But on this day, the problems were magnified,” the anonymous competitor said.

Wang Jin-ming, 42, was among the runners who ended up in hospital. He told China News the weather turned at about 1pm, after he had run 17 miles. He struggled for 20 minutes to open his emergency blanket, only for it to be ripped out of his hands by the wind. He repeatedly pressed his GPS emergency button.

“I lost control of my hands and feet, I could only crawl, keep climbing, keep climbing ... I told myself that I can't stop, must keep up my body temperature, stay alive, and see my family.”



Rescuers searching for victims. Photograph: Xinhua/Rex/Shutterstock

Wang said he found six or seven others, also in dire straits, and he urged them to keep moving but they couldn't. At some point he lost consciousness and woke up in hospital. Rescuers hadn't reached him until about 7pm.

The inaccessibility of the section meant checkpoint 3 was not a supply drop for food, water or warm clothes, and those caught in the section could only rely on what they were carrying, which for many was very little.

Across running forums and articles and media reports, many have questioned the lack of cold weather gear on the mandatory equipment list. A windbreaker or thermal top were only recommended, and the mandatory emergency blankets were ripped to shreds by the winds.

But no one raised any objections to the list, wrote the anonymous competitor. "My jacket was packed in a transfer bag and stored at the [checkpoint 6] changing point 62km into the track. Normally, I can get here before dark."

Few made it past checkpoint 3.

Estimates say 40 to 50 people took shelter in small cabins or caves along the route, some helped by dozens of locals including a shepherd, Zhu Keming,

who has been [hailed as a national hero](#) for saving six people. Wang Qinlin, the party secretary of Hu Ma Shui village, said he coordinated with a neighbouring village secretary and marshalled residents to gather winter coats, quilts, steamed buns and hot water for survivors.



Shepherd Zhu Keming speaks to the media in a cave where he saved the lives of six runners. Photograph: China News Service/Getty Images

As the global ultramarathon community mourns its biggest ever tragedy, many are debating the role of personal responsibility. The sport is an ultimate endurance test, often in difficult or treacherous conditions. Races can, and often do, go sideways for competitors at any moment along the trails of 60 miles plus.

“Trail running is the same as mountain climbing,” said Chinese mountaineer Luo Jing, who survived the race. “You have to make plans for the worst case every time, and don’t pin your hopes on others.”

Luo put her survival partly down to preparation, bringing warm clothes and ensuring she had time to descend when the weather worsened.

Commentators have also suggested the explosion in the popularity of endurance running in China has led to thousands of race events, with too few experienced outfits to run them. Often tourism officials see a race as a high-

profile way to promote their region and to win favour with their superiors, potentially without enough regard for the danger.

00:48

Runner says she saw 'many with hypothermia' during deadly China ultramarathon – video

Accounts in the Chinese media have hinted at inadequate contingency plans, and poor communication to local rescue authorities, who struggled to access the terrain and locate stranded competitors. There is conflicting information about what weather was predicted, and what information was assessed and passed on by organisers. A [report published in Esquire](#), piecing together a timeline of events, revealed shambolic coordination of the rescue effort, with small teams and cars trying to reach checkpoints 2 and 4, while others including local villagers went on foot. There were several hours between the first messages for help and the full deployment of rescue teams.

[Route map](#)

The incident is under investigation, and China's sports governing body has already ordered improvements, saying there were "problems and deficiencies" in the management model for races, including contingency planning. Numerous scheduled races have been cancelled in the fallout, and families of some of the victims have demanded accountability for the deaths. Media reports of authorities preventing families from talking to each other, or of stopping families from taking the bodies back to their home towns, has only compounded worries.

The anonymous runner said it was unheard of that most of the runners had dropped out of the race before organisers finally suspended it, and urged future competitors to be prepared to look after themselves in an emergency.

"You can only say you've finished if you make it home. Safety always come first."

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Music

Interview

‘Black music is my superpower. It’s my way of showing love’: the art of Georgia Anne Muldrow

[Christine Ochefu](#)



‘I want to supply my people with some theme music ... something to keep their heads up high’ ... Georgia Anne Muldrow. Photograph: Priscilla Jimenez

‘I want to supply my people with some theme music ... something to keep their heads up high’ ... Georgia Anne Muldrow. Photograph: Priscilla Jimenez

The LA musician, who has unleashed another of her psychedelic funk and hip-hop beat tapes, talks about social justice, her time in Brixton and the battle over ‘woke’, a word she helped popularise

Fri 28 May 2021 04.00 EDT

Georgia Anne Muldrow may be more than 20 albums into her career and the woman who brought the word “woke” to wider consciousness, but she is not one for counting off milestones. “I’m the type of traditionalist that wants to give meaning to life,” she says. “My [concept of] success is directly linked to how Black folks see themselves; it’s not enough for me to be filthy rich or something, owning an island somewhere in the midst of what we live through.”

Since debuting with her EP *Worthnothings* in 2006, [she has become known](#) for her chameleonic ability to master different genres – soul, G-funk, jazz, electronic – under a number of [aliases \(for instance Jyoti\)](#) and collaborative projects. Last week, the [37-year-old vocalist, songwriter and producer released Vweto III](#), the latest in a series of beat tapes. These are self-produced and mostly instrumental albums full of psychedelic funk and prowling hip-hop (track titles such as *Boom Bap Is My Homegirl* show where her head is at). Besides solo releases, she has been featured on tracks by artists such as Erykah Badu, Flying Lotus and Yasiin Bey (formerly Mos Def), who described her as “like [Roberta] Flack, Nina Simone, Ella [Fitzgerald] – she’s something else”.

She video-calls from her kitchen in [Los Angeles](#), and is so charming that it feels as if I have been physically ushered into her home. She is making a huge batch of homemade muesli, and people come in and out: we are interrupted by her mother and friends, as well as her 12-year-old son, Nokware, who joins midway to dance for us and show his new hairstyle. Muldrow is as cool as you would imagine, her sentences interspersed with “You know what I’m saying?” in a relaxed, smoky cadence, and she drops phrases so winning they stick like lyrics (“I was already happy to be nappy by the age of two,” she quips, referring to natural Black hair).

An absence of vocals can sometimes turn off the average listener, but *Vweto III* is captivating. Unforgettable features west coast G-funk synths and 70s disco claps, conjuring up images of lowriders on highways in her native sunny LA, while eccentric outliers such as *Ghostride 21716* captivate with echoing synths and glitchy, skittering beats. Muldrow made the tape to alleviate the downcast mood brought about by the racial reckoning of the past year and the pandemic; to weather the “traumatic events experienced as a community online and offline”.



‘I felt seen by people without even expressing any musical talent, in a world where people don’t see little Black girls’ ... Georgia Anne Muldrow.
Photograph: Priscilla Jimenez

“It’s like a symbiosis kind of thing,” she says. “You know how Shaft had theme music, or [Black Dynamite](#)? I want to supply my people with some theme music so that they can feel self-confident, self-possessed; something to keep their heads up high. And posting the beats on Instagram and seeing the comments – people saying: ‘Please take my money!’ – helps me to know that somebody’s looking forward to what I share in a time where we can’t play any shows.”

If somebody uses ‘woke’ in a derogative way, I don’t really care for what’s on their mind. I don’t really care about somebody who don’t even like Black people

Muldrow grew up in LA. Her father was the jazz guitarist Ronald Muldrow, while her mother, Rickie, sang in the church where the daughter first honed her vocals. She recalls rubbing shoulders with musical greats: the late [Leon “Ndugu” Chancerl](#) once stopped by her Sunday school to teach her “traditional African drumming and West African rhythms” with a pair of claves and plastic water bottles. She also sat at the feet of civil rights activist

and drummer [Babatunde Olatunji](#) to hear him play the conga. “It’s been a magical life,” she admits. “I felt seen by people without even expressing any musical talent, in a world where people don’t see little Black girls. It just so happens that those people were world-class musicians.”

The desire to make music professionally hit around age 15, and she began picking up music production skills soon after. Her beatmaking is easily the match of her more famous leftfield male peers Flying Lotus and [Danger Mouse](#), although she doesn’t have their recognition factor. Muldrow agrees that misogyny in the industry tends to obstruct female producers from getting the appreciation they deserve. “Oh heavens – yes! And don’t let anybody tell you differently.” But it’s given her some resilience. “It’s made me fierce. And what better obstacles than those of chauvinism, misogyny and racism to be a catalyst for becoming fierce?”



Georgia Anne Muldrow arrives at last year’s Grammy awards in Los Angeles. Photograph: Mike Blake/Reuters

The theme of social justice runs through her work. By co-writing [Erykah Badu’s Master Teacher](#), with its lyrical hookline “I stay woke”, Muldrow brought the word to the modern lexicon. Muldrow previously said the word meant “being in touch with the struggle that [Black] people have gone through”, but its modern-day meaning has been mangled beyond belief.

There has been an [uptick in the sarcastic usage of “woke”](#) as a means of criticising “social justice warriors” and people perceived to be oversensitive. Even this week, culture secretary Oliver Dowden said: “I worry that elements of what has been [branded woke culture](#) runs contrary to the great liberal traditions of western democracies.”

Muldrow is largely unfazed: “If somebody uses ‘woke’ in a derogative way, I don’t really care for what’s on their mind,” she says. “I can’t worry about what some Republican is worried about; I don’t really care about somebody who don’t even like Black people. If people understand it, I feel blessed by that. But me having a sense of consciousness about my food, water, health and wellbeing is more important.”

Watch the video for Georgia Anne Muldrow: Overload

She is more concerned with the material welfare of Black people around the globe, and issues such as gentrification. Muldrow spent time in Brixton, south London, during the mid-2000s and is concerned with the rapidly changing social landscape and how Black communities bear the brunt of it all – the “flavour tax”, she calls it. “I’ll never forget Brixton, the quality of the people at that time was amazing. But everything’s changing all over the world. I can’t get my head around it; if everywhere is rising in price, where are Black people gonna go?

“That’s what’s deep about gentrification: people not being able to sustain living somewhere after they gave that place all its appeal. It’s like a penalisation for having flavour.”

[Georgia Anne Muldrow: Vweto II review – kaleidoscopic, sunshine timewarp jazz](#)

[Read more](#)

Muldrow instead wants to have a mutually giving relationship with her fans, and to invest in the wellbeing of her community.

“First and foremost I make my music for Black folk,” she says. “I definitely want to be more of a community worker and find ways where my music aids the community directly, and partner with organisations. I want it so that

when people support my work they're not just supporting me, they're supporting the lives of folks who are moving their bodies in aid of others. I want to be a benefactor for our human right to flourish.”

The best tool to use, in her opinion, is the thing that's aided her all her life – music. “Black music is my superpower. It's the music of my ancestors. It's my way of showing love, paying homage, keeping sounds alive that sometimes people think are dead. It's reviving dead forms of music, and honouring them. That's the functionality of art.”

Vweto III is out now.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2021/may/28/black-music-is-my-superpower-its-my-way-of-showing-love-the-art-of-georgia-anne-muldrow>

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Whatever Johnson's 'levelling up' means, it isn't about Britain's shocking poverty levels

[Polly Toynbee](#)



The government believes there are no votes in policies to make wages and benefits fairer nationally – so why would it act?



Boris Johnson on his way to prime minister's questions at the Commons on 26 May. Photograph: Justin Tallis/AFP/Getty Images

Boris Johnson on his way to prime minister's questions at the Commons on 26 May. Photograph: Justin Tallis/AFP/Getty Images

Fri 28 May 2021 02.00 EDT

Rattling through a lexicon of lies at prime minister's questions is so routine that few bother to call out Boris Johnson any more. Besides, on Wednesday all attention was on the vendetta [playing out elsewhere](#) in Westminster. But when the Labour MP Gareth Thomas challenged the prime minister on the [steep rise](#) in child poverty revealed in [official figures](#) this week – 4.3 million children and heading upwards on a steep curve – Johnson boasted shamelessly: “We are seeing fewer households now with children in poverty than 10 years ago.”

Thomas protested at “Boris Johnson's casual disregard for the truth”. But lies seem to work very well for him, and they're eagerly echoed as fact by those on the Tory benches.

Here's what the Office for National Statistics finds: in 2010 there were 3.6 million children living below the poverty line – and now there are 4.3 million, with [200,000 more](#) since last year. Nothing in the Treasury's meagre

spending plans at the budget suggests child poverty will stop rising. Raw numbers may bore people, so Johnson relies on voters hearing his upbeat promises without bothering with the small print. One loud assertion that there are fewer poor children travels faster than fact-checkers trying to sweep up behind him.

Since the government relies on confusion to obfuscate, the rest of us need to keep a grip on reality. The universally used measure of poverty, in Britain and internationally, is relative, counting anyone living below 60% of a country's median income. Important to note it's not below *average* income, because by definition, some are always below average. But the *median* is the mid-point, where half the population earns above and half below.

For obvious reasons, the government grasps on to a different measure called "absolute poverty". Here's the oddity of this number: it is anchored in 2010, so it measures how many children are still living on what was the 60% below-median level 11 years ago, when the median was of course far lower, as it rises with growth. Even using their absurd "absolute poverty" measure, when counting incomes before housing costs there are still 100,000 more poor children. Here's an even more alarming fact in the new official figures, [highlighted](#) by the Child Poverty Action Group: many more children are falling into far deeper poverty, so 2.9 million children live on less than 50% of the median. That is [600,000 more kids](#) plunged into those depths since 2010 – 1.7 million of them regularly hungry.

We live in a country where a third of children are poor – really poor – relative to the country's ordinary living standards, but the government doesn't think enough people truly care for it to matter politically. The dismal recent [Ipsos Mori poll](#) for King's College London revealed that many people blamed poor people for their misfortune. Even mid-pandemic, as unemployment rose, nearly half the population thought those losing their jobs were to blame because of their own poor performance at work – only 31% said it was bad luck.

Despite all the evidence, people are determined to believe we live in a meritocracy, where success comes from hard work and ambition. Pity for those on low incomes is waning – and this a severe problem for Labour, whose members and activists are so strongly motivated by concern for the

underdog. Reams of reports pour out of thinktanks, universities and campaign groups describing lives spent in poverty on the bottom rungs of society – but to no obvious avail. This week’s figures show, yet again, that poverty is primarily caused by pitiful wages: 75% of poor children are now in working families; poor despite striving and toiling, full of “merit”, “hard work” and “ambition”.

It takes hero footballer Marcus Rashford spelling out what it’s like to be a hungry child to shake off that public complacency. The chancellor, Rishi Sunak, will undoubtedly make permanent the [£20 added to universal credit](#) in the pandemic, with a fanfare of fake generosity, but it doesn’t begin to restore George Osborne’s savage £37bn [benefit cuts](#).

Johnson added this boast to his reply on poverty at prime minister’s questions: “We are levelling up across the country with the biggest investment for a generation.” That’s a vacant IOU, for which there is no day-to-day cash on the table. One growth industry in the north-east over the past five years has been in child poverty, [up by a third](#) in five years, and now the UK’s second highest. Fixing that takes national action on wages and benefits. Expect capital spending on a few eye-catching northern projects with salutes to some star industry openings. But remember, Treasury austerity is imposing yet [another 8% cut](#) on councils in the north, as everywhere, meaning fewer jobs and worse services with [cuts](#) to most government departments too.

What is so-called levelling up when London has the highest poverty per capita? The tyranny of averages makes London streets appear paved with gold, as City incomes disguise the country’s deepest deprivation, hiding in borough after borough. But as there are no Tory target seats in the capital (they may lose London suburbs), a Labour mayor can expect no favours from the Treasury.

Whatever “levelling up” does mean, there will be scant connection with actual need, poverty or inequality. The political question is when will inhabitants of those northern seats, in places like [Blackpool](#) – listed by the Living Wage Commission with seven of the most deprived neighbourhoods – discover the deceit that they are due more austerity, just lightly disguised with a few extra illuminations?

This article was amended on 28 May 2021 to remove a reference to Jeff Bezos's net worth from a sentence that was, strictly speaking, about income.

- Polly Toynbee is a Guardian columnist

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[Opinion](#)Education

Britain's racist 1970s education policies still resonate today

[Sally Tomlinson](#)

A recent documentary shines a light on how thousands of Black children were unjustly consigned to 'educationally subnormal' schools



A scene from the recent BBC documentary *Subnormal: A British Scandal*.
Photograph: BBC/BBC trailer

A scene from the recent BBC documentary *Subnormal: A British Scandal*.
Photograph: BBC/BBC trailer

Fri 28 May 2021 05.00 EDT

It only took well over 40 years for a TV programme to be made about a disgraceful period in the history of education in Britain that has had long-lasting effects on thousands of people in the Black community. Director [Steve McQueen](#), who dramatised the episode in [Small Axe](#), and Lyttanya

Shannon, who directed a recent documentary, [Subnormal: A British Scandal](#) (for which I was interviewed), have done a much-needed service in bringing this dismal period of “education” to general attention.

Following [Bernard Coard](#)’s publication [How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Sub-Normal in the British School System](#) (1971), I followed a group of children who had been referred from their local authority schools into ESN – educationally subnormal – schools. The justification for their removal was sometimes learning problems, but more often it was “behavioural”. The [overt racism of the 1970s](#) and ignorance on the part of many teachers and local authority administrators led to an overrepresentation of Black children in these institutions.

My conclusion at the time was that the ESN issue had taken on a profound symbolic importance for the West Indian community. “The ESN classification,” I wrote, “had come to symbolise the general underachievement of [Black] children in the school system and has raised anxieties that through educational failure West Indian children will be destined for inferior employment and status and fail to attain and keep equal citizenship rights with their white peers.” People in the community knew that their children were being failed by the system, not just through ESN placements but through mainstream schooling. As the Brent West Indian standing committee put it to a [House of Commons inquiry](#) in 1976: “We are concerned that the majority of youngsters who have been to so-called normal schools come out having achieved as little academically as those who went to ESN schools.”

The headteachers of mainstream schools whom I interviewed simply saw ESN institutions as inevitable places for those deemed slow, backwards, maladjusted and beyond remedial help. Psychologists and doctors – until 1973 a medical doctor signed the final referral form – also operated in a world steeped with prejudice, assuming that ESN children would always be from lower social classes and immigrant families. (The British Psychological Society has recently [issued an apology](#) for using inappropriate tests in the 1970s.) The headteachers of referring schools believed that West Indian children were slower, with poorer concentration, had language problems, were troublesome, and would make comments to me about “family problems” and working mothers. There was an assumption that

these were “natural” qualities, with a few even mentioning genetic inheritance, another disgraceful claim still being peddled by some academics in the 1970s and today.

While some heads were patronisingly sympathetic – “It’s such a transition for the kids. One minute they are sitting under a banyan tree waiting for breakfast to fall on their heads, the next minute they are in a cold wet place” – most were worried about disruption in class: “They are violent, with a lot of ‘you whites aren’t going to tell me what to do’ attitude.” There was some fear of the effects of the rising politics of Black power: “The black power people destroy kids, especially the less able.” One head of a girls’ school told me: “[Enoch Powell](#) is right, he has an avid love of his country. There are enough immigrants and there is going to be trouble.” Many of the professionals involved were more concerned with the administration – the complex assessment and form-filling – than with the morality of what they were doing by removing children from mainstream education.

When statistics from the Inner London Education Authority revealed a dramatic over-representation of West Indian children in the authority’s ESN schools, Black parents and community groups organised, many running their own [supplementary schools](#). Officials in the Department of Education displayed polite concern in response to their justified anger and complaints. I still have a copy of the letter sent on 1 November 1973 from the Department of Education and Science to all chief education officers detailing facts about “moderate” ESN schools. Nationally, children of a Caribbean or south Asian background constituted 2.4% of the total school population in 1972, but accounted for 5.4% of the population in special schools, with children of a Caribbean background being four times overrepresented. Apart from recording that some local authorities had made arrangements for teaching English to immigrants, and recommending short in-service teacher training courses, the department placed the responsibility on local authorities to come up with “constructive suggestions” but without extra funding – the only extra money having been provided through the Local Government Act in 1966 ([section 11](#)), not from the Education Department.

The ESN issue was a disgrace. While many in education have recognised the racism in the system and are working to improve the teaching and learning of all children, it is still a harder struggle for Black children to overcome the

stereotyping and obstacles in their way. In many schools there is still a “routine racism” of low expectations and heightened surveillance. Black children are [more likely to be sanctioned](#) by temporary suspensions or permanent exclusion than white children. Black parents and community groups are still attempting to correct failings in the system through supplementary teaching and other projects. There is still no general acceptance that all schools have a duty and a key role in clarifying and tackling all manifestations of inequality, racism and discrimination in education and in the wider society.

- Sally Tomlinson is emeritus professor at Goldsmiths London University and an honorary research fellow in the Department of Education at the University of Oxford

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Soccer

We must tackle the shocking poverty afflicting our young people

Trent Alexander-Arnold

The Liverpool and England player on why he helped launch an initiative to assist children who often feel they have no hope



Trent Alexander-Arnold, in action here for Liverpool this month, is part of the Football For Change initiative. Photograph: John Powell/Liverpool FC/Getty Images

Trent Alexander-Arnold, in action here for Liverpool this month, is part of the Football For Change initiative. Photograph: John Powell/Liverpool FC/Getty Images

Fri 28 May 2021 03.33 EDT

When you grow up without opportunities you can feel like the world is against you, other people are more fortunate than you and there is no hope

for a better future.

I grew up in an area of [Liverpool](#) called West Derby and right now there are a staggering number of young people trapped in poverty in that community alone. About 34% (6,487) of children there are living below the headline. To put it more bluntly, that's more than 10 in a school class of 30.

[Marcus Rashford: 'Whenever I hear "no", I ask myself: why not?'](#)

[Read more](#)

This, however, is not limited to my city. Between 2019 and 2020, an extra 200,000 kids were [pushed into poverty](#) in the UK and the impact of the coronavirus pandemic has been very stark.

More families – including those in work – are struggling to provide for their children and life chances for all these young people are severely limited. Across the UK, data shows there are 4.3 million children growing up trapped in poverty. To hammer home the point again, that's nine pupils in every class of 30.

These young people are our future and when they grow up devoid of any opportunities in education, employment and life in general it can be so easy to follow the wrong path.

This has to change. We must address this shocking situation to turn around the lives of these young people and improve our society for the future.

These are just some of the reasons why I have helped to launch an [initiative called Football For Change](#). I always thought growing up that if I ever got the chance to help others that would be amazing, and this scheme is initially aiming to raise funds which we will distribute to organisations supporting young people in the most deprived areas with a focus on education, employment and training.

You see so much deprivation in cities like Liverpool with food, shelter, education, even opportunities to play football

We will use people in football and business leaders who have succeeded in the face of adversity as role models to promote social mobility. We will show these Neet [not in education, employment or training] young people how to make a better life for themselves by following the right sort of pathways as others have done, whether that be in football or any other walk of life.

I'm incredibly proud about the support this initiative has already received from football legends and current players but we aren't going to stop there. It is so important for everyone to get behind this and bring about real positive change for the most deprived young people in our communities.

It truly is needed now more than ever due to the amount of disadvantaged young people who have seen any chance of a better life further torn from their grasp due to the effects of Covid-19.

You can genuinely see so much deprivation in cities like Liverpool, whether that be with food, shelter, education or even opportunities just to play football. Football For Change is all about giving Neet young people a platform to build towards a better future by providing training and education initiatives. As I say, that's more important than ever given the levels of underachievement in disadvantaged communities and the record number of unemployed young people across the country.

The pandemic has seen many opportunities in education being taken away from young people too. It is sad because a good education and learning new skills are key to building better lives, especially for those facing social and economic disadvantages.

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For me personally, to have the platform I've got now and be able to reach out to so many people is amazing but it's important to use that in the right way by getting involved with initiatives like this.

The benefits and impact Football For Change will have on young people is absolutely massive. We're aiming to help young people of secondary school age who often feel as if they have no hope.

Everyone who has given it their backing so far is huge for us and the initiative is only going to improve the future of our society.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2021/may/28/we-must-tackle-the-shocking-poverty-afflicting-our-young-people-trent-alexander-arnold>

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[Opinion](#)Home Office

Why everybody loses under the Home Office's 'Hostile Britain' policy

[Giles Tremlett](#)



Post-Brexit Britain is wrongly detaining EU citizens – a move that could easily backfire on Britons travelling abroad



‘We can expect many more stories of EU citizens bounced or locked up ... We can also expect EU countries to react by applying similar rules to British travellers.’ Photograph: Oli Scarff/Getty Images

‘We can expect many more stories of EU citizens bounced or locked up ... We can also expect EU countries to react by applying similar rules to British travellers.’ Photograph: Oli Scarff/Getty Images

Fri 28 May 2021 04.00 EDT

“Never again!” Of dozens of pained messages sent to the Guardian by EU citizens who have had run-ins with the UK Border Force since Brexit, this is the expression that stands out. These people insist they will never visit Britain again.

Recent stories in this newspaper show people are being [locked up](#), [handcuffed](#), humiliated, stopped from accessing their medication, prevented from communicating with family or lawyers and kept in fear or ignorance. This is the new reality for EU citizens at UK borders. Airport warning signs should read “Welcome to Hostile Britain”.

Hostile Britain is a place constructed on earlier foundations by mainly Conservative governments over the past decade, which is now being extended massively to afflict our closest neighbours and friends.

Some will rejoice that EU citizens are vowing never to visit again, but only if they do not work in a part of the economy that depends on the 26 million visitors who arrive from [Europe](#) each year.

Since two thirds of visitors to the UK come from the EU, according to [Visit Britain](#), that means the vast majority of foreign tourists, business people and shoppers who roam the streets of London, Edinburgh, York or Bath.

Before Brexit, these people had no contact with the hostile environment that Theresa May began building while she was home secretary, and which [Priti Patel](#) is determined to reinforce. Post-Brexit, the current home secretary will now apply it to three times as many people as before.

Even though we share a “visa-free” space with EU citizens that allows lengthy visits without paperwork, they are discovering that Britain works on the principle that foreigners are suspect. They must prove they will not do something banned – such as settle, find work, look after friends’ children or do unpaid internships.

Given that it is impossible to scientifically “prove” that you will not do something in the future, it is up to Border Force’s instincts to decide who must be kept out. Those instincts can be unreliable, subjective, arbitrary and occasionally in clear contradiction of the Home Office’s own rules.

The Guardian has reported cases of people being refused entry for job interviews and volunteer work, both of which are formally allowed.

Indeed, it seems to be only after Border Force is called out for these practices that officials look at the rulebook and declare that they will [no longer be used](#) to inflict the degrading experience of expulsion on people.

Some visitors are making honest mistakes, unaware of the exact nature of the new rules. Yet even when they realise this and offer to turn around and go straight home, they are being [locked up for days](#) at detention centres, despite Covid scares. The Home Office only announced a change to that policy – [offering them bail](#) until they fly home – after being quizzed on the reports in this newspaper.

Other practices, such as humiliating people by handcuffing them and walking them through the shopping areas at Luton airport, continue – despite the fact that HM Inspectorate of Prisons has [called it out](#) on this.

A browse through the latest inspections of detention facilities at Gatwick, Heathrow, Luton and City airports reveals, too, that fewer than half the recommendations for improvements have been carried out.

These reports show the problem is structural. Border officials are generally, though not always, deemed polite and considerate (though they are also sometimes accused of putting words into visitors' mouths). It is their bosses, and the confusing rules they insist on, that are the problem.

Nowhere was this more startlingly revealed than when inspectors made their first ever visits to the often shabby and inadequate short-term detention facilities (STDFs) at 13 smaller airports and seaports a year ago. Border Force managers did not even know how many of these they controlled. Worse still, children were being routinely handcuffed at some of them, or held for hours while different social services departments bickered over who would take responsibility for them. Inspectors deemed the facilities often “not fit for purpose”.

Even EU citizens with permission to live and work in the UK can find themselves detained for hours as Border Force officials struggle to understand or apply the new rules themselves. As one experienced traveller, himself an airline worker, put it: “I felt like I had landed in some [enemy state](#).”

Among those turned away at the border recently was Ramón, a Spaniard who had come to the UK for his nephew's baptism. Ramón, who asked for his name to be changed, had only just obtained Spanish nationality, having been born in Nigeria. It is, at the very least, odd that one of the small minority of Spaniards who are black should be refused entry.

Nigerians and others have long been used to the realities of hostile Britain. Indeed, the fact that EU citizens are being stopped at borders serves to highlight a long-running situation that we all should have been watching more closely for years.

The scandalous treatment of the Windrush generation shows that the pain and scars of this sort of treatment ruins lives and can persist for decades.

At the end of June, a transition period for EU citizens seeking to remain settled in Britain will end. More than 5 million people have applied for settled status.

They expect to be allowed through borders without the treatment already being meted out to some of them. Worse still, as some are [already finding](#), relatives and friends who want to visit may also find themselves treated as suspects at the border.

All this is happening with visitor numbers at an all-time low because of Covid. That, too, could change rapidly over the summer. We can expect many more stories of EU citizens bounced or locked up at the border. We can also expect EU countries to react by applying similar rules to British travellers arriving there.

A far higher of proportion of Britons travel to the EU each year than EU citizens who come to Britain. Tit-for-tat treatment would see Britain emerge as the loser. Hostile Britain, in other words, could easily backfire – hurting more Britons than Europeans.

- Giles Tremlett is an author and journalist based in SpainHis most recent book is The International Brigades: Fascism, Freedom and the Civil War
- Please write to lisa.ocarroll@theguardian.com, amelia.gentleman@theguardian.com or giles.tremlett@theguardian.com if you receive harsh or unfair treatment at UK or EU borders

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[Opinion](#)Conservatives

The shapeshifting Tories have grown their base – but this could be their downfall

[Andy Beckett](#)

Despite gathering new voters, Boris Johnson's promises to 'level up' the country could alienate his most faithful supporters



Illustration: Nate Kitch

Illustration: Nate Kitch

Fri 28 May 2021 01.00 EDT

Conservatism is stretching its boundaries in Britain. Electorally it is extending ever further into [previously hostile](#) parts of England. In Downing Street, it is prolonging its tenure into a second decade, far beyond what many expected during all its disasters in office since 2010. In the opinion

polls, it is widening its lead over Labour, in one recent survey to an impregnable feeling [18 points](#).

Above all, current Conservatism seems to be expanding what Tories are able to do in power. Increase corporation tax. Pay the wages of millions on furlough. Make “disruptive” protests illegal. Impose a border between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Remove the borders between party donors, the state and Conservative cronies. Nationalise an airport, as the [Tory mayor Ben Houchen](#) has on Teesside. Privatised parts of the NHS in the middle of a pandemic.

Simultaneously, the Conservatives seem to be moving both leftwards and rightwards, looking outwards towards new voters and turning inwards, ever more ruthlessly pursuing the party’s own interests. For their opponents, the sheer profusion of Tory manoeuvres has been almost paralysing. Keir Starmer has struggled to [find political territory](#), from patriotism to protecting jobs against Covid, that the Tories haven’t occupied already. Meanwhile, the Labour left has had to watch in frustration as its supposedly impractical 2019 manifesto has been repeatedly raided by the Conservatives for ideas and catchphrases such as the “[green industrial revolution](#)”.

British politics feels more dominated by one party than at any time since New Labour’s peak years almost a quarter of a century ago. Like Tony Blair, [Boris Johnson](#) seems to be leading a breakout from his party’s usual ideological and territorial zones, into a wider political space where a British prime minister can enjoy rare freedom of action and their party can shake off restrictive old associations.

Yet how New Labour achieved its breakthrough, and how it ended, contains warnings for the [Conservatives](#). Blair’s ascendancy was made possible by two deals: not just the famous one between him and Gordon Brown, but also a tacit one between their party and its traditional supporters. This promised that if they voted for a Labour government that was going to make what Blair called “hard choices” – favouring the free market over nationalisation, for example – then the party would be in power for much longer than usual, and the Tory enemy would be marginalised.

During the 1997 election campaign, I watched John Prescott, Blair's deliberately old-Labour deputy, deliver this message to halls of less than delighted leftists across the party's English heartlands. But the strategy worked, for a while. In 1997, and to a lesser extent at the 2001 election, Labour attracted enough support from both old and new sources to win huge majorities, twice as big as Johnson has today.

Traditional Tories in the party's southern English citadels are being offered a similar deal by his government now: accept a degree of "levelling up" in favour of the north and more state intervention in the economy than you're used to, and our time in office will continue, far beyond the norm. So far, many of these voters have accepted Johnson's ideological promiscuity, as they have his private life.

But there are signs of discontent. In this month's elections, the [Tories suffered](#) a net loss of council seats in south-east England. "Voters in plusher Conservative-held areas," wrote the watchful Tory commentator Paul Goodman, "[feel culturally alienated](#)" from Johnson's version of Conservatism, and are beginning to switch to other parties. Goodman described this phenomenon as "a potential Blue Wall effect" – a pattern of defections by previously loyal supporters that might echo Labour's electoral decline in the so-called red wall. In Worthing in West Sussex, where this month the Conservatives almost lost control of the council, the local Tory MP Tim Loughton was blunter: "[We have got a problem](#)," he told the Financial Times. "All the focus has been on the red wall, winning and cementing gains up there ... But levelling up can't just be about the north."

For much of its existence, British Conservatism has really been a form of southern English nationalism, ruling these islands principally for the benefit of the region's big landowners, the home counties and the richer parts of London. Are Tory voters – not always known for their altruism – really that keen for opportunities to be distributed more equally "across all parts of the United Kingdom", as the government promised in [this month's Queen's speech](#)? Better jobs and transport in the north might ultimately reduce the value of properties owned by southern Tories, for example, by making the north a better place to live.

And if the government's desire to level up is insincere – always a strong possibility with Johnson – the rhetoric alone is a political risk. If politics becomes a competition about which party can sound the most egalitarian, that's a contest that in the end the Conservatives probably won't win. As New Labour discovered, when its vote dropped sharply from 2001 onwards, politics is rarely conducted successfully for long on the enemy's terms. By accepting much of Thatcherism, and seeming not to value many of their party's most faithful supporters, Blair and Brown ultimately stretched Labour politics too far.

Johnson may have done something similar by allowing Dominic Cummings to become so important in his government. Cummings is not a Tory, and that surely sharpened his select committee testimony this week. His contempt for “Hancock”, and his comparison of the prime minister to an [out-of-control shopping trolley](#) echoed things he had said about other Conservative politicians. Only an overconfident party allows such an outsider to become an insider.

Many people believe that British Conservatism is uniquely flexible: that it can stretch to include almost any policy, strategy or interest group. But that's not true. From its split over free trade in the 1840s to its civil wars over Thatcherism and Europe in the 1990s, the party has sometimes fragmented disastrously – often when, as now, it feels most secure in power.

It's also striking how much of Britain Johnson's supposedly all-encompassing Conservatism doesn't represent, or care much about: not just most of Scotland and [Wales](#), but also England's cities and the vast majority of young Britons. Johnson's is not really a “one nation” government, but a government for the 40%. In our electoral system, and with our press, a Tory premier with that level of support can sometimes present themselves as a national unifier. But when the government's Covid bills come due, Johnson will have to do more choosing between interests and policies than he has so far. Then we'll discover whether his elastic Conservatism is going to snap.

- Andy Beckett is a Guardian columnist
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Smoking

Number of smokers has reached all-time high of 1.1 billion, study finds

Governments told to focus on stopping young from taking up habit that killed 8 million people in 2019



The study said efforts to curb smoking had been outstripped by population growth. Photograph: Khalil Mazraawi/AFP/Getty Images

The study said efforts to curb smoking had been outstripped by population growth. Photograph: Khalil Mazraawi/AFP/Getty Images

[Kaamil Ahmed](#)

Thu 27 May 2021 18.30 EDT

Smoking killed almost 8 million people in 2019 and the number of smokers rose as the habit was picked up by young people around the world, according to [new research](#).

A study published in the Lancet on Thursday said efforts to curb the habit had been outstripped by population growth with 150 million more people smoking in the nine years from 1990, reaching an all-time high of 1.1 billion.

The study's authors said governments need to focus on reducing the uptake of smoking among young people, as 89% of new smokers were addicted by the age of 25 but beyond that age were unlikely to start.

“Young people are particularly vulnerable to addiction, and with high rates of cessation remaining elusive worldwide, the tobacco epidemic will continue for years to come unless countries can dramatically reduce the number of new smokers starting each year,” said the study's lead author Marissa Reitsma, a researcher at the Institute for [Health](#) Metrics and Evaluation.

Though the prevalence of smoking has reduced globally over the past three decades, it increased for men in 20 countries and for women in 12. Just 10 countries made up two-thirds of the world's smoking population: China, India, Indonesia, the US, Russia, Bangladesh, Japan, Turkey, Vietnam and the Philippines. One in three tobacco smokers (341 million) live in China.

In 2019, smoking was associated with 1.7 million deaths from ischaemic heart disease, 1.6 million deaths from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, 1.3 million deaths from tracheal, bronchus and lung cancer, and nearly 1 million deaths from stroke. Previous studies have shown that at least half of long-term smokers will die from causes directly linked to smoking, and that smokers have an average life expectancy 10 years lower than those who have never smoked.

The research examined trends in 204 countries and was produced as part of the Global Burden of Disease consortium of researchers, which studies health issues that lead to death and disability.

According to the study, half of all the countries had made no progress in stopping uptake among 15- to 24-year-olds and the average age for someone to start was 19, when it is legal in most places.

Reitsma said the evidence suggested that if young people faced delays in picking up the habit they would be less likely to end up becoming smokers at all.

“Ensuring that young people remain smoke-free through their mid-20s will result in radical reductions in smoking rates for the next generation,” said Reitsma.

[South Africa tobacco ban greeted with cigarette smuggling boom](#)
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Despite 182 countries signing a 2005 convention on tobacco control, enforcing policies to reduce smoking had been varied. Researchers said taxation was the most effective policy but there was a significant discrepancy between the high cost of a packet of cigarettes in developed countries and a significantly lower costs in low- and middle-income countries.

The study’s co-author, Vin Gupta, said there needed to be stronger commitment to tackling smoking, as well as products such as flavoured cigarettes and e-cigarettes that could be enticing young people.

“Despite progress in some countries, tobacco industry interference and waning political commitment have resulted in a large and persistent gap between knowledge and action on global tobacco control,” said Gupta.

“Bans on advertising, promotion and sponsorship must extend to internet-based media, but only one in four countries have comprehensively banned all forms of direct and indirect advertising.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/may/27/number-of-smokers-has-reached-all-time-high-of-11-billion-study-finds>

Environment

‘Forever chemicals’ found in home fertilizer made from sewage sludge

Alarming toxic PFAS levels revealed in new report raise concerns that the chemicals are contaminating vegetables



The study's authors checked for 33 individual PFAS compounds and found each biosolid product contained between 14 and 20. Photograph: Creative Touch Imaging Ltd/NurPhoto/REX/Shutterstock

The study's authors checked for 33 individual PFAS compounds and found each biosolid product contained between 14 and 20. Photograph: Creative Touch Imaging Ltd/NurPhoto/REX/Shutterstock

[Tom Perkins](#)

Fri 28 May 2021 05.00 EDT

Sewage sludge that wastewater treatment districts across America package and sell as home fertilizer contain alarming levels of toxic PFAS, also

known as “forever chemicals”, a new [report](#) has revealed.

Sludge, which is [lightly treated](#) and marketed as “biosolids”, is used by consumers to fertilize home gardens, and the PFAS levels raise concerns that the chemicals are contaminating vegetables and harming those who eat them.

[I tested my tap water, household products and cat for toxic 'forever chemicals'](#)

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“Spreading biosolids or sewage sludge where we grow food means some PFAS will get in the soil, some will be taken up by plants, and if the plants are eaten, then that’s a direct route into the body,” said Gillian Miller, a co-author and senior scientist with the Michigan-based Ecology Center.

The testing, conducted with Sierra Club, found the chemicals in each of nine brands of biosolids it checked, and at levels that exceed standards set for two common types of PFAS. The biosolid brands are sold at stores like Home Depot, Lowes, Menards and Ace Hardware.

PFAS, or per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, are a class of about 9,000 compounds that are used across dozens of industries to make products water, stain and grease resistant. They’re also linked to a range of serious health problems like cancer, birth defects, endocrine disruption, and liver disease. They are known as forever chemicals due to their longevity in the environment once introduced.

Industries that use or produce PFAS often discharge the chemicals into public sewer systems where they travel to wastewater treatment plants, along with other industrial and human waste. Water is extracted from the waste, treated and released back into waterways. What remains in the treatment plants is a semi-solid mass of sludge that’s expensive for water treatment facilities to dispose of in landfills.

Sludge holds nitrogen, phosphorus and other nutrients that help crops grow, so with increasing frequency in recent years it’s treated and sold as home fertilizer, or given away to farmers. In 2019, about 60% of sewage sludge

produced by treatment facilities was spread on farmland and gardens, as well as schoolyards and lawns.

“It’s not widely known that sewage sludge is spread [on gardens and agricultural land] as fertilizer, but that’s where a lot of our waste from water treatment plants ends up,” Miller said. “There are lots of nutrients in it, but, unfortunately, it also recycles our industrial and synthetic waste.”

Human excrement from which sludge derives has mixed with any number of 80,000 manmade chemicals that are discharged from industry’s pipes or otherwise pumped into the sewer system. Though the treatment process kills most living organisms in biosolids, and treatment plants screen sludge for heavy metals, it can still teem with pharmaceuticals, PCBs, PFAS and other toxic chemicals that aren’t removed.

The EPA Office of Inspector General in 2018 identified more than 350 pollutants in a sludge sample, including 61 that it classifies “as acutely hazardous, hazardous or priority pollutants”. That’s prompted calls for a ban or much stricter regulation of sludge, and public health advocates say recent testing is further evidence that biosolids are unsafe.

The new study is not peer reviewed, but independent researchers who checked it for The Guardian said its methodology is sound. The study’s authors checked for 33 individual PFAS compounds and found each biosolid product contained between 14 and 20.

Among the few standards for PFAS in sludge are in Maine, where the state government set screening levels for PFOA and PFOS, two common types of PFAS. It developed the standards after milk from cows on a dairy farm that spread sludge were found to be contaminated with [high levels](#) of PFAS. The cows had to be killed, and the farmers found extremely high PFAS levels [in their blood](#).

Of the nine biosolid brands that the report’s authors studied, eight exceeded Maine’s standards. Though PFAS tests used by regulators check for up to 33 individual compounds, thousands exist. The authors also used a different test method to check for the total level of organic fluorine, which is an indicator of PFAS, and will provide a more accurate reading of levels. Those results

found up to 233 parts per billion of fluorine, which the authors wrote is “similar to concentrations found in fish collected in highly polluted areas and thousands of times higher than the amounts that are regulated in drinking water”.

Though multiple [studies](#) have [found](#) that plants and vegetables [uptake](#) PFAS, there are no standards for PFAS in food. Still, the chemicals can be harmful at low levels, and public health advocates recommend limiting exposure. Humans are also regularly exposed to PFAS in food packaging, water and [home products](#).

Many of the biosolid brands market the products as “eco”, “natural”, “reclaimed” or “organic”, which Miller characterized as “comforting” but misleading.

“These are words that can have some truth but there’s no legal definition for them,” she added. While some brands state that the product is made with biosolids, packaging doesn’t explicitly say that it’s a combination of human and industrial sewage waste.

The study’s authors call for stricter regulation of sludge, industry to address its PFAS waste, and for regulators to impose limits for the entire class of PFAS compounds instead of just a few. Though Michigan and Maine have taken some steps to regulate PFAS in sludge, they only screen for two out of thousands of compounds.

A spokesman from the Water Environment Federation, a trade group that represents wastewater districts, called for stricter regulation of PFAS, increased funding for plants to remove the chemicals, and for industry to address its PFAS waste.

“Water facilities are receivers of PFAS,” he said. “The best way to reduce PFAS is to stop the pollution at the source by prohibiting use in commerce, stopping industrial discharges and cleaning up contaminated sites.”

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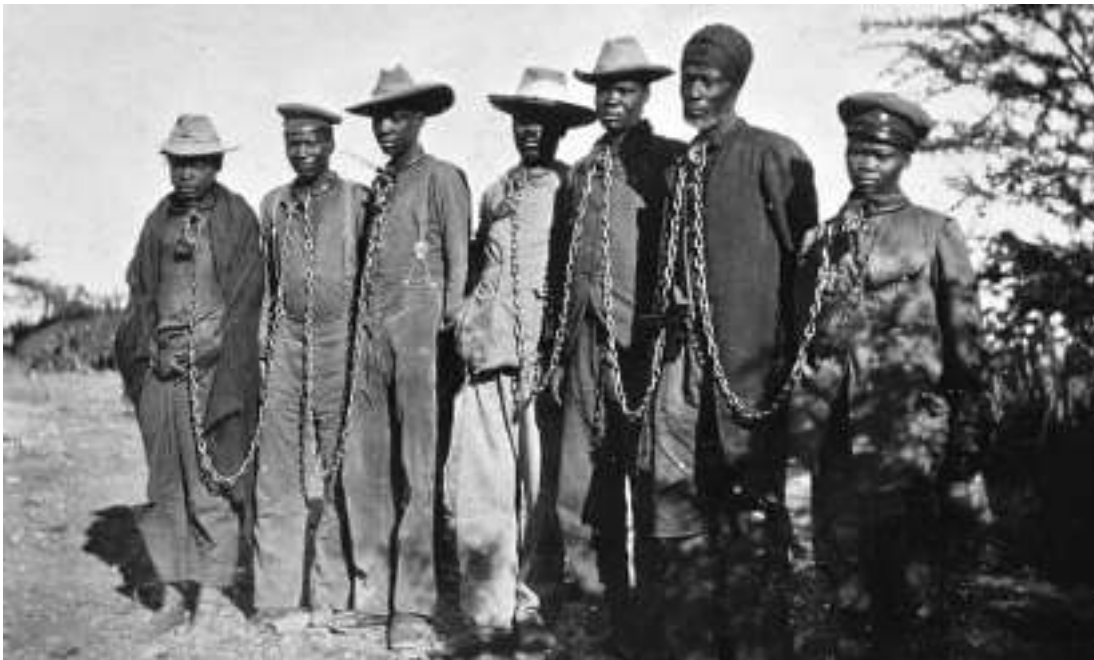
US inflation gauge highest since 1992; European markets hit record; France in recession – as it happened

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/business/live/2021/may/28/markets-rally-biden-6tn-budget-proposal-eurozone-confidence-core-inflation-markets-business-live>

Germany

Germany agrees to pay Namibia €1.1bn over historical Herero-Nama genocide

Germany calls atrocities ‘genocide’ but omits the words ‘reparations’ or ‘compensation’ from a joint statement



Seven Herero men in chains in what was then German South West Africa but is now Namibia. Germany has agreed to pay for atrocities committed between 1904 and 1908. Photograph: Chronicle/Alamy Stock Photo

Seven Herero men in chains in what was then German South West Africa but is now Namibia. Germany has agreed to pay for atrocities committed between 1904 and 1908. Photograph: Chronicle/Alamy Stock Photo

[Philip Oltermann](#) in Berlin

[@philipoltermann](#)

Fri 28 May 2021 06.53 EDT

Germany has to agreed to pay Namibia €1.1bn (£940m) as it officially recognised the Herero-Nama genocide at the start of the 20th century, in what Angela Merkel's government says amounts to a gesture of reconciliation but not legally binding reparations.

Tens of thousands of men, women and children were shot, tortured or driven into the Kalahari desert to starve by German troops between 1904 and 1908 after the Herero and Nama tribes rebelled against colonial rule in what was then named German South West Africa and is now [Namibia](#).

Since 2015, [Germany](#) has negotiated with the Namibian government over what it calls an attempt to "heal the wounds" of historic violence.

"Our aim was and is to find a joint path to genuine reconciliation in remembrance of the victims," the German foreign minister, Heiko Maas, said in a statement. "That includes our naming the events of the German colonial era in today's Namibia, and particularly the atrocities between 1904 and 1908, unsparingly and without euphemisms.

"We will now officially call these events what they were from today's perspective: a genocide."

[Germany rules out financial reparations for Namibia genocide](#)
[Read more](#)

On Thursday, official circles in Berlin confirmed reports in Namibian media that after nine rounds of negotiations the two sides had settled on the text of a joint declaration and a sum of €1.1bn, which will be paid separately to existing aid programmes over 30 years.

Of the overall sum, more than a billion euros will go towards projects relating to land reform, rural infrastructure, water supply and professional training. Communities of Herero and Nama descendants, which form ethnic minorities in all of the seven affected regions, are meant to be involved in the development of the specific projects.

Some €50m will go towards setting up a foundation for reconciliation between the two states, including cultural projects and youth exchange

programmes.

The text of the joint declaration calls the atrocities committed by German troops a “genocide” but omits the words “reparations” or “compensation” – a move borne out of [fear that such language could set a legal precedent](#) for similar claims from other nations.

A spokesman for the Namibian president, Hage Geingob, described German’s acknowledgment of genocide “as the first step” in the right direction. “It is the basis for the second step, which is an apology, to be followed by reparations,” the spokesman said.

Some of the numerous groups that make up the descendants of the genocide’s survivors have been critical of the framing of the negotiations from the outset and have declined to back the Namibian government’s stance.

Paramount chief Vekuii Rukoro, leader of the Ovaherero Traditional Authority, has criticised his government for not insisting on financial reparations: “When German president Frank-Walter Steinmeier comes to Namibia to render the apology we will embarrass him,” he told local media.

Namibian newspaper New Era [reported on Thursday](#) that at least three traditional leaders who had supported the government’s negotiations up to this point had refused to endorse the final wording of the declaration, which could make it difficult for President Hage Geingob to sign the deal.

The German side’s position is that it has negotiated the agreement with a Namibian government representing the country’s population as a whole, and that the deal does not stand or fall on the approval of Herero and Nama descendants groups.

US Capitol breach

Senate Republicans likely to sink Democrats' bid to set up Capitol attack commission

- Bill intended to establish 9/11-style commission into 6 January riot
- Senate Republicans block passage of bill by using filibuster



The attack on the Capitol on 6 January. Photograph: Samuel Corum/Getty Images

The attack on the Capitol on 6 January. Photograph: Samuel Corum/Getty Images

Guardian staff

Thu 27 May 2021 20.17 EDT

Senate [Republicans](#) were poised on Friday to kill an attempt by Democrats to establish a bipartisan commission to investigate the 6 January attack on

the Capitol in which a pro-Trump mob ransacked the building in an attempt to disrupt the formalization of Joe Biden's winning of the presidency.

The bill was intended to set up a 9/11-style commission that would examine its causes and impact and exactly who was involved.

Donald Trump is still powerful in the Republican party and has reacted angrily to the idea of such a commission. Observers believe that many top Republicans are fearful of antagonizing Trump and his loyal followers and also worried about what such a commission might uncover, including potential links between Republican lawmakers and some of those who invaded the building.

A vote on the procedural motion was bumped to Friday after delays on an unrelated bill to boost scientific research and development pushed back the schedule, AP reported.

The vote would mark the first successful use of a filibuster in the Biden presidency to halt Senate legislative action, and is likely to boost pressure on the president to get rid of the Senate tradition that requires a vote by 60 of the 100 senators to cut off debate and advance a bill.

[Senate Republicans scramble to derail creation of Capitol riot commission](#)
[Read more](#)

With the Senate evenly split 50-50, [Democrats](#) needed the support of 10 Republicans to move to the commission bill, sparking fresh debate over whether the time has come to change the rules and lower the threshold to 51 votes to take up legislation.

The House had already approved the measure with 35 Republican votes. Democrats have warned that if Republicans are willing to use the filibuster to stop an arguably popular measure, it shows the limits of trying to broker compromises, particularly on bills related to election reforms or other aspects of the Democrats' agenda.

"There is no excuse for any Republican to vote against this commission," said Senator Joe Manchin before the vote, though the centrist Democrat still

made it clear that he would not support efforts to do away with the filibuster. “I’m not ready to destroy our government,” Manchin said.

Before the vote, Gladys Sicknick, the mother of the late Capitol police officer Brian Sicknick, along with Sicknick’s girlfriend Sandra Garza and two officers who fought the protesters that day, met with several Republican senators to try to persuade them to act.

Sicknick was among many officers protecting the building, some seen in videos in hand-to-hand combat with the mob. He collapsed immediately after engaging with the rioters and died the next day.

In a statement on Wednesday, Gladys Sicknick was more blunt: “I suggest that all congressmen and senators who are against this bill visit my son’s grave in Arlington national cemetery and, while there, think about what their hurtful decisions will do to those officers who will be there for them going forward.”

Republican opposition to the commission, however, was carefully marshaled by the Senate Republican leader, Mitch McConnell, who has declared the bill a “purely political exercise”, since Senate committees are already looking into security shortfalls during the Capitol attack.

McConnell, who once said Trump was responsible for “provoking” the attack on the Capitol, now says of Democrats: “They’d like to continue to litigate the former president, into the future.”

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- [Sasha Johnson 18-year-old charged with conspiracy to murder](#)
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Pressure grows on Matt Hancock over Covid policy for care homes

Woman whose father died in care home demands health secretary release risk assessment as part of court case

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



Matt Hancock has been accused by Dominic Cummings of misleading the prime minister over measures to protect care homes. Photograph: James Veysey/Rex/Shutterstock

Matt Hancock has been accused by Dominic Cummings of misleading the prime minister over measures to protect care homes. Photograph: James Veysey/Rex/Shutterstock

[Robert Booth](#) *Social affairs correspondent*

Sat 29 May 2021 03.00 EDT

Matt Hancock is facing further pressure over the measures put in place to protect care homes early in the coronavirus pandemic following [allegations from Dominic Cummings that he misled the prime minister over the issue](#).

A woman whose father died of Covid in a care home that admitted an infected hospital patient is demanding that the health secretary release crucial internal documents about his risk assessment before thousands of people were discharged into care homes without tests.

The move is part of a potentially explosive high court [case](#) against Hancock, the NHS Commissioning Board and Public Health England scheduled for a three-day trial in October. It is likely to shed new light on this week's claim and counter-claim between the prime minister's former chief adviser and Hancock over care homes policy in the first weeks of the pandemic.

Cathy Gardner, who lost her father, Michael Gibson last April, said her lawyer was seeking the key documents before the autumn hearing to decide whether the discharge policy had broken the law. Government [research](#) this week concluded that hospital discharges had caused 286 Covid deaths, but the actual toll is likely to be significantly higher when fatalities who were not tested before death are counted.

Cummings told MPs about a discussion in government of the risks associated with the discharge policy, which he recalled as "Basically, 'Hang on, this sounds really dangerous, are we sure?'"

He said the view was that there was no alternative because of the need to free up NHS beds to deal with the coming wave of patients. Crucially, he said, Hancock assured him and the prime minister that people who were being discharged into care homes from hospital would be tested.

Hancock [responded on Thursday](#) by saying he had told Downing Street they would be tested when sufficient capacity was available. He said it hadn't been possible to test hospital discharges at the start of the pandemic, but he put that capacity in place.

Government guidance issued on 2 April 2020 said: “Negative tests are not required prior to transfers/admissions into the care home.”

The UK already had capacity for 10,000 daily tests at the start of April 2020, but Hancock said “we had to prioritise it by clinical need”. Between 17 March and 15 April, when tests were finally required before admission into care homes, around 25,000 people were discharged from hospitals into facilities, the National Audit Office has found.

The row has left people bereaved by Covid angry and frustrated at a lack of transparency. “People need the facts, instead of all this ‘He said, she said’,” said Gardner.

Gardner [alleges](#) that Hancock, the NHS Commissioning Board and Public Health England contravened the European convention on human rights, the Human Rights Act and the Equality Act when their policies allowed people to be discharged into care homes without being tested. The health bodies strongly dispute the claim.

Political allies [backed Hancock on Friday](#). The business secretary, Kwasi Kwarteng, said care home residents “were protected as far as we could. We were absolutely focused at that time on saving as many lives as possible”.

But Sam Monaghan, the chief executive of MHA, the UK’s largest provider of not-for-profit care homes, which [lost](#) 121 residents to Covid in the three weeks to 7 April 2020, described the discharge strategy as “like putting kind of a live explosive into a box of tinder”.

Sarah Knowles, whose father Graham died of Covid in a Manchester care home on 27 April 2020, said the policy was “just wrong” and highlighted other vulnerabilities. She said her father’s carers were improvising face masks from plastic document folders in April.

“They should have had PPE,” she said. “It makes me angry. If people were discharged into the care homes, they should have been tested.”

Amos Waldman, 41, whose grandmother Sheila Lamb died of Covid on 2 April 2021 in a care home in north London, said: “It feels as though they are

trying to cover their own backs with one eye on the future public inquiry.”

The Department for [Health](#) and Social Care has been approached for comment.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/29/pressure-grows-on-matt-hancock-over-covid-policy-for-care-homes>

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Matt Hancock

Matt Hancock: an ambitious operator who ‘knows which levers to pull’

Allegations by Dominic Cummings that minister lied to PM and public seem to have backfired

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



Hancock has clung on to frontbench roles during the tenures of Cameron, May and Johnson through a mixture of political skill and overriding ambition. Photograph: BBC/Getty Images

Hancock has clung on to frontbench roles during the tenures of Cameron, May and Johnson through a mixture of political skill and overriding ambition. Photograph: BBC/Getty Images



[Rajeef Syal](#)

Fri 28 May 2021 12.44 EDT

Tory MPs who wish to see Matt Hancock leave the cabinet are frustrated this weekend. They believe that the health secretary's career was already in the sights of Boris Johnson before Dominic Cummings' full-frontal attack on Wednesday.

But as a consequence of Cummings' explosive [claims that Hancock repeatedly lied](#) to Johnson, the cabinet and the public – resulting in tens of thousands of extra deaths from Covid-19 – senior Tories, including the PM, have been forced publicly to back the health secretary.

[Matt Hancock broke ministerial code over family firm given NHS contract](#)
[Read more](#)

“Dom, the supposed master tactician, did not think this through. If his target was Hancock, he missed because he was so critical of Boris's role too. If the PM admits that Cummings' allegations about Matt are true, then inevitably questions will be asked about Boris,” one MP said.

Hancock has managed to cling on to frontbench positions during the No 10 tenures of David Cameron, Theresa May and [Boris Johnson](#) through a

mixture of political skill and overriding ambition.

Born in 1978 in Cheshire to parents who ran a software firm, he moved swiftly from an independent school to read PPE at Oxford before becoming chief of staff to the then chancellor, George Osborne.

He was elected MP for West Suffolk in 2010, and wore his ambition and his closeness to the ever more powerful Osborne on his sleeve.

At a gathering of the parliamentary party in 2014, the Eurosceptic MP Philip Davies mocked the chancellor's ally, reportedly saying: "Anyone tempted to lick George Osborne's backside should be careful because if you go too far you will find the soles of Matt Hancock's shoes in the way."

But after becoming paymaster general in 2015 – his first cabinet role – his smooth path to the top was thwarted by the EU referendum. Cameron resigned, May was elected leader and Osborne was sacked, leaving Hancock with few advocates.

Reports have claimed that he pleaded with May and her aides to keep any government job – a claim denied by his friends. But he accepted a demotion to a junior role in the culture department before eventually being promoted to culture secretary and then health secretary.

His success in clawing his way back into the cabinet was a result of hard work, one former cabinet colleague said. "He is enthusiastic – Tiggerish is the right word – and is absolutely focused on doing the job."

Another said he understands the workings of Whitehall better than anyone in the cabinet other than Michael Gove. "It would be wrong to underestimate him, just because he comes across as irritating. He knows which levers to pull," he said.

[Hancock faces calls to explain Covid test failings at care homes](#)

[Read more](#)

Hancock stood to become party leader after May resigned, but after gathering a handful of supporters, he withdrew and supported Johnson as the

next prime minister.

During the pandemic, allegations of cronyism and a lack of openness have dogged Hancock. Questions were raised by the Guardian about why his former neighbour was supplying the government with tens of millions of vials for NHS Covid-19 tests despite no previous experience in the field. In February, a high court judge ruled that Hancock had acted unlawfully by handing out PPE contracts without publishing details in a timely way.

Despite numerous calls for his sacking – and increasingly hostile commentary about his abilities in right-leaning press, including the Daily Mail – Johnson has stuck by him.

Hancock's long-term future could depend on whether Cummings' most damaging claim – that the health secretary told Johnson “categorically in March that people would be tested before they went back to care homes” – is backed by witnesses.

Cummings told MPs last week that there were several others in the cabinet room when Hancock offered reassurances about care homes, including the then cabinet secretary, Sir Mark Sedwill and other No 10 staff and health officials.

Johnson's former aide said he pushed for Hancock to be replaced, but that Johnson was advised to keep him in post “because he's the person you fire when the [public] inquiry comes along”.

The prime minister initially declined to respond directly when asked if Hancock was the right person for the role, but Downing Street later issued a statement expressing full confidence in him.

A supporter of Hancock said he was open and candid with the prime minister about testing at all times and said his record in the department of health during the biggest health crisis in 100 years would speak for itself. The health secretary's team should be credited with successfully developing and expanding the number of Covid tests and had a major hand in the vaccine programme, he claimed.

“I do not think that the word of Dominic Cummings – someone with his track record in behaving with integrity in government – should be taken as gospel. Matt will be shown to have done his best and told the truth through this pandemic,” he said.

This article was amended on 29 May 2021. An earlier version incorrectly said that Matt Hancock was previously postmaster general; he is a former paymaster general.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/may/28/matt-hancock-an-ambitious-operator-who-knows-which-levers-to-pull>

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[UK news](#)

Sasha Johnson: 18-year-old charged with conspiracy to murder

Black Lives Matter activist, 27, remains in critical condition after shooting in early hours of Sunday



Sasha Johnson was a leading figure in last summer's anti-racism protests. Photograph: PA Video/PA

Sasha Johnson was a leading figure in last summer's anti-racism protests. Photograph: PA Video/PA

PA Media

Fri 28 May 2021 17.47 EDT

An 18-year-old has been charged with conspiracy to murder over the shooting of Black Lives Matter activist Sasha Johnson.

The 27-year-old remains in a critical condition in hospital after being injured at a party in Peckham, south-east London in the early hours of Sunday.

On Wednesday five males were arrested in connection with the incident, and on Friday four of them were released on bail until a date in late June.

The fifth, Cameron Deriggs, 18, of Bromley Hill, Lewisham, has been charged with conspiracy to murder, the Metropolitan police said.

He has been remanded in custody and will appear at Westminster magistrates court on Saturday.

Johnson was at a party in the back garden of a home in Consort Road when four men in dark clothing burst in and shots were fired.

Detectives continue to appeal for anyone with information to come forward by calling police on 101 or Crimestoppers, anonymously, on 0800 555 111 and providing the reference 1172/23MAY.

Johnson, a graduate of Ruskin College, in Oxford, who has two children, was a leading figure in last summer's anti-racism protests and is a prominent member of the Taking the Initiative party, which she helped found last year and which has been described as "Britain's first black-led political party".

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Fossil fuels

‘Black Wednesday’ for big oil as courtrooms and boardrooms turn on industry

Campaigners sense turning point as shareholders, boards and The Hague act to force Chevron, ExxonMobil and Shell to cut pollution



An oil rig in the Beaufort sea, in the Arctic. Photograph: Stockbyte/Getty Images

An oil rig in the Beaufort sea, in the Arctic. Photograph: Stockbyte/Getty Images

[Jillian Ambrose](#)

Sat 29 May 2021 02.00 EDT

The world’s patience with the fossil fuel industry is wearing thin. This was the stark message delivered to major international oil companies this week

in an unprecedented day of reckoning for their role in the climate crisis.

In a stunning series of defeats for the oil industry, over the course of less than 24 hours, courtrooms and boardrooms [turned on the executives at Shell, ExxonMobil and Chevron](#). Shell was [ordered by a court in The Hague](#) to go far further to reduce its climate emissions, while shareholder rebellions in the US imposed emissions targets at Chevron and a boardroom overhaul at Exxon.

“There is no doubt that this week’s news has been not so much a shot across the bows as a direct hit to the hull of Big [Oil](#),” says Mark Lewis, the chief sustainability strategist at BNP Paribas Asset Management. “They will have to recognise now that no amount of patching up the hole will do; shareholders and society want the vessel completely overhauled.”



Director of Dutch environment organisation ‘Milieudefensie’ Donald Pols reacts as he walks outside a court in The Hague. Photograph: Remko de Waal/ANP/AFP/Getty Images

For climate campaigners, the oil industry’s “Black Wednesday” marked a turning point in the financial and legal consequences awaiting oil companies that do not act fast to take accountability for their role in preventing a climate catastrophe.

“It was honestly a really emotional moment,” says Jasper Teulings, the former general counsel for Greenpeace International. The ruling by the Dutch court ordering [Shell](#) to cut its emissions by 45% within the next 10 years “shifts the debate” and could influence courtrooms across the globe, he told the Guardian.

“It makes clear that the onus is on the industry to act, and that it can be held accountable to take very specific steps. It’s very relevant in legal terms because the ruling was very pure in its demand: it’s not about money, it’s about conduct. It was astutely reasonable,” he says.

The basis of the case, brought by Dutch climate campaigners at Milieudefensie, was rooted in norms derived from elements of human rights law and the UN’s Guiding Principles, which have “near-universal application” and could be used in cases against other major polluters.

“We’re seeing a convergence of issues because, really, climate issues are human rights issues. I don’t see any reason why these [arguments] won’t be replicated elsewhere. Polluters can expect to see their day in court,” Teulings says.

Shell has said it will appeal against the “disappointing” ruling, which calls for the company to align with the emissions targets set out in the Paris Climate Agreement. The decision could lead to years of legal wrangling and prove profoundly damaging to Shell’s reputation.

“If they truly believe their strategy aligns with Paris, then there should be no problem complying with the court’s demands,” says Teulings. “Shell’s decision to appeal is therefore irreconcilable. Therein lies the lie.”

The court ruling will force Shell to slash at least a million barrels of oil and gas from its fossil fuel production every day, at a cost of several billion dollars a year, according to oil industry analysts.

Biraj Borkhataria, an analyst at RBC Capital, says: “To put this simply, this aggressive shift would have meaningful cashflow implications for Shell.” He estimates that the sharp cut in fossil fuel production could cost Shell \$6bn a year.

Increasingly, major institutional investors are also growing concerned over the cost of failing to act on the climate agenda. It marks the clearest sign yet that climate action is being treated as a major financial risk as well as an environmental one.

Exxon shareholders, including investment giants [BlackRock](#) and Vanguard, voted to oust at least two of the oil giant's board members in favour of candidates put forward by Engine No 1, an activist hedge fund founded less than six months ago, for failing to take the transition to low-carbon energy seriously.

At [Chevron](#), more than 60% of investors voted in favour of a climate resolution from Dutch campaign group Follow This to force the company to reduce its emissions.

Eli Kasargod-Staub, the executive director of Majority Action, a shareholder group, said, after the twin US rebellions, that “for the first time in history, responsible shareholders have breached the walls protecting recalcitrant boards of directors”.

“The [ExxonMobil](#) challenge is only the beginning of a reckoning for board directors who fail to make measurable progress towards decarbonisation and protecting long-term shareholder value,” Kasargod-Staub added.

Among the fossil fuel industry's largest institutional investors, concern is weighted far more heavily towards the potential destruction of long-term shareholder value than the destruction of the environment. But they do expect executives to take a defensive stance against the risks of a greener world – which means investing in the green technologies of the future.

Within days of the oil industry's ‘Black Wednesday’ reckoning, credit rating agency Moody's warned that the credit risk of major oil producers had increased. The convergence of financial risk with the long-held concerns of climate activists could prove to be a crucial tipping point against climate action cynics.

Oil industry pundits have warned that forcing Shell to cut its fossil fuel production would simply shift its barrels of oil to smaller, private oil

companies or larger state-owned oil giants, with little impact on global emissions.

This overlooks the endemic climate concerns taking hold in the financing of the fossil fuel sector, says Mike Coffin, a researcher at financial thinktank Carbon Tracker. Climate activist pressure “will be felt by the banks which finance these projects” and by the insurers that underwrite the risk. No matter which company is hoping to drill for oil, it will be viewed as a riskier prospect and capital will be restricted, he says.

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The flow of capital once destined for fossil fuels into sustainable investments may even help hasten the inevitable trajectory of lower oil demand and dwindling market prices, which could force oil-producing countries to rethink their state investments too, Coffin says.

For longtime campaigners including Teulings, the compounding implications of the climate victories of the last week offer a rare opportunity for optimism.

“Anyone who cares about the climate has felt times of panic, and despair, and helplessness. The ruling is a beacon of hope,” he says. “Perhaps that’s the biggest impact; beyond the legal impact, and the concrete impact on carbon emissions, the ruling offers hope. It’s what we’ve been waiting for.”

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2021.05.29 - Coronavirus

- [Live Expert warns over lifting restrictions in England too soon; Vietnam detects hybrid variants](#)
- [England What is the impact of lifting restrictions on 21 June?](#)
- [Schooling Longer hours won't plug Covid learning gaps, says academic](#)
- [Tim Gowers Expert who swayed first-wave policy warns over easing](#)

[Coronavirus live](#)

[Coronavirus](#)

Coronavirus: UK records another 3,398 cases and seven deaths – as it happened

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[Coronavirus](#)

Covid in England: what is the impact of lifting restrictions on 21 June?

From face masks to working from home, we examine what the government may risk ditching

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



A street in the London borough of Hounslow, where Covid cases have risen recently. Photograph: MI News/NurPhoto/Rex

A street in the London borough of Hounslow, where Covid cases have risen recently. Photograph: MI News/NurPhoto/Rex

[Linda Geddes](#) *Science correspondent*

Sat 29 May 2021 02.00 EDT

From face masks to the rule of six, we've got used to Covid restrictions over the past 14 months. But next week the government in [England](#) is expected to unveil its review of social distancing rules, ahead of the potential full unlocking of society on 21 June. Although it's unlikely that recommendations on handwashing and ventilation will be dropped, others, such as restrictions on household mixing or the 1-metre-plus rule, could be lifted.

Doing so would help the hospitality and travel industries, allowing pubs, restaurants and other indoor venues to increase their capacity, and more people to travel abroad for work or holidays. However, with coronavirus resurfacing in some areas of the UK, and the rise of new variants, some have questioned whether this is a good idea.

“Right now, I'm not sure we should be thinking of getting rid of any of them, because it doesn't meet with the government's fourth test [for moving to the next step of the roadmap], in that we have a variant of concern that's spreading exponentially in the country,” said Dr Stephen Griffin, a virologist at the University of Leeds. “It's not a matter of going back into lockdown, but certainly I think we should be pausing.”

As the government weighs up its possible choices, we examine the impact of these various restrictions, and what doing away with them could mean.

Face coverings

Scientists have long cautioned that masks alone will not prevent Covid-19 transmission, and should be combined with physical distancing and handwashing. Their main purpose is to protect other people from larger respiratory droplets produced when we speak, cough or sneeze – although medical-grade filtering facepiece (FFP) masks also protect the wearer because they filter the inflow and outflow of air, and give a degree of protection against smaller droplets or aerosols, depending on the mask's rating.

“From the perspective of airborne transmission, we have seen over the last year that well-fitted FFP2 masks are very effective in preventing transmission, even in highly contaminated and poorly ventilated

environments, or when in close contact with Covid patients,” said Dr Pedro de Oliveira from Cambridge University’s department of engineering. “I believe we should still be wearing face masks at all times in public spaces, most especially indoors.”

The evidence on cloth masks is more mixed, and they provide little individual protection against infectious aerosols. De Oliveira said: “In terms of collective protection and combined with physical distancing, cloth masks helped, to some extent, to mitigate the spread of the virus mostly by preventing the exhaled breath of sick individuals from reaching very long distances and by filtering large droplets that may carry most of the virus.”

Once most people are vaccinated, we can probably do away with masks, but at the moment there is a lack of scientific evidence about how and if vaccinated people can spread the virus – especially more transmissible variants. “Personally, I hope to see people wearing face masks for a little longer, just to be on the safe side,” De Oliveira said.

1-metre-plus

First it was 2 metres, then the recommended safe distance was reduced to “1-metre-plus”, to allow [hospitality businesses](#) to cater for more clientele. The risk of transmission increases by 2 to 10 times at 1 metre compared with 2 metres – although that starting risk is much lower in some settings, such as outdoors, than others.

For instance, De Oliveira and his colleagues found it takes just [seconds](#) for aerosols to spread over 2 metres when masks are not worn indoors, implying that physical distancing in the absence of ventilation would be inadequate over long exposure times. They have also created an [online tool](#) to help people assess the risk of transmission in various indoor settings.

Some scientists have argued against rigid safe distancing rules, claiming they’re oversimplified. They’d prefer [graded recommendations](#) to reflect the risks in different contexts.

Rule of six

“I think if you were to relax the rule of six, you should keep the 1-metre-plus rule, because you can very easily have six people from six different households who then go on and meet six other people from six different households,” said Griffin. “Six will, of course, limit the spread, but it is the number of interactions between different households that is the real concern.”

Already, up to 30 individuals are allowed to meet outdoors in England, or up to 50 in Wales. But allowing large groups from different households to gather indoors – without distancing and masks – would be a major change.

Working from home

According to [data](#) released by the government’s Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage) on Friday, between 20% and 25% of working age adults who became infected with the coronavirus believed they had caught it at work. Clearly, not everybody can choose to work from home, but if you can, it makes sense to continue doing so. “The major issue that we have with this virus is mixing, but particularly mixing indoors – so you absolutely don’t want to get rid of people working from home if possible whilst we still have this potential problem with the [India] variant,” Griffin said.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/29/covid-in-england-what-is-the-impact-of-lifting-restrictions-on-21-june>

Schools

Longer school hours won't plug Covid learning gaps, says Cambridge academic

As government in England considers extended day, study suggests only small gains can be expected

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A primary class in south Manchester. Radical plans to lengthen the school day in England have been considered. Photograph: Joel Goodman/The Guardian

A primary class in south Manchester. Radical plans to lengthen the school day in England have been considered. Photograph: Joel Goodman/The Guardian

[Richard Adams](#) *Education editor*

Fri 28 May 2021 10.45 EDT

Keeping pupils in school for longer lessons would not be enough to overcome the gaps in their learning caused by Covid disruption, according to research by a [University of Cambridge](#) academic.

With the government in England [considering extended school hours](#) as part of its catch-up plans, the research found that schools already timetabling longer teaching time in subjects such as English and maths see only modest improvements that may not justify the extra cost.

The British Psychological Society said that instead the additional time would be better spent allowing children to play, socialise and engage in activities such as music, crafts and sports that were also missed out on while schools were closed to most pupils during the lockdowns.

So far the government's catch-up efforts have been aimed at creating a national tutoring programme, offering small group and one-to-one tuition. But MPs report that more radical plans for a school day running from 8am to 5pm or even 6pm with voluntary attendance have been considered, as well as funding for at least 30 more minutes of compulsory lessons.

But the study by Vaughan Connolly, a researcher at Cambridge's education department, suggests that only small gains could be expected from longer time spent in lessons.

The study used timetable data gathered from 2,815 schools in [England](#) to look at the connection between changes to the amount of teaching time that pupils received in English, maths, science and humanities, and their academic progress measured by GCSE results.

The results showed small but noticeable progress for an additional hour of teaching each week, measured in terms of attainment over five years between the end of primary school and the end of key stage four when GCSEs are usually taken.

Connolly said: “The data suggests that, on average, an investment in more instruction time for all would lead to small improvements in academic progress, but the balance of international evidence suggests that it would be far more worthwhile for education recovery planners to look at other interventions first, which could be accommodated by rebalancing the school day.”

One more productive method, according to Connolly, would be to support and develop pupils’ metacognitive skills, sometimes known as “learning to learn”, by giving students strategies for planning, monitoring and evaluating their own learning.

The study also found that extended teaching was some help in closing the attainment gap between students on free school meals and others. Up to an hour extra each week in English reduced the gap between the groups by about 6%, while a similar amount of extra maths reduced the gap by about 8%.

Vivian Hill, the vice-chair of the British Psychological Society’s educational and child psychology division, said: “If the school day is to be extended, it’s important that we don’t just fill those extra hours with more and more formal teaching sessions.

“It is about developing a balanced offer and recognising that learning is a dynamic process. We urge the government to use this as an opportunity to re-set the approach we take to education and our children within schools.

“Children don’t have to be sat at desks in a classroom to learn. Giving them space to play sports, paint, try different crafts and socialise will all lead to learning and the development of important life skills.”

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[Coronavirus](#)

Expert who helped change No 10 Covid policy in first wave warns over risk of easing

Exclusive: Prof Sir Tim Gowers says ‘things will get bad very quickly’ after June if variant spread underestimated

- [Gowers’ herd immunity document sent to Dominic Cummings](#)
- [See all our coronavirus coverage](#)



Professor Tim Gowers of Cambridge University. Photograph: Patrick Imbert

Professor Tim Gowers of Cambridge University. Photograph: Patrick Imbert

[Ben Quinn](#)

[@BenQuinn75](#)

Fri 28 May 2021 12.00 EDT

The Cambridge professor whose argument against a herd immunity strategy helped trigger England's first lockdown has voiced concerns about the risks of easing restrictions next month.

Prof Sir Tim Gowers sent [Dominic Cummings](#) a five-page document warning of the need to “move urgently to extreme containment measures” in March last year. Boris Johnson's former chief aide told MPs this week it had influenced a critical change in the government's early thinking, with lockdown announced two days later.

In an interview with the Guardian, Gowers said “things will get bad very, very quickly” after 21 June – the fourth and final lockdown-lifting step – if the government had misjudged factors such as the spread of new Covid variants.

As UK Covid cases rose by 4,184 on Friday – the highest increase since 1 April – Gowers added: “The downside of being a bit more cautious is quite a lot smaller than the downside of getting it wrong.”

Gowers, a world-leading mathematician and winner of the Fields Medal – sometimes described as the Nobel prize of maths – was described by Cummings as “one of the smartest people on the planet” during evidence to two parliamentary committees.

Discussing the delayed decision to lock down in March 2020, which has been linked to [20,000 avoidable deaths](#), Cummings said Gowers' argument was among key interventions that meant he “finally had the confidence to say [to Boris Johnson] that I thought that the system had gone catastrophically wrong” last year.

His evidence to MPs, and Gowers' latest comments, come amid fears that the spread of the Covid variant first identified in India could trigger a rise in cases, hospitalisations and deaths. On Thursday, Public Health England revealed that the variant accounts for up to 75% of new reported cases across the UK, with numbers doubling in a week.

From 21 June, the government [hopes to “remove all legal limits on social contact”](#) in England, reopening nightclubs and easing restrictions on large

events including weddings, though [Johnson warned](#) on Thursday that “we may need to wait”.

Asked about the next step in lockdown-easing, Gowers said he did not necessarily believe the lockdown easing plans were at risk, but urged caution. “Because [Boris Johnson](#) has made a big thing about all the steps being irreversible, I think he’s put himself in a position where once he takes a step, he’ll be extremely reluctant to reverse because that would be a big U-turn, an embarrassing climbdown,” he said.

“So I think if that’s the way you’re going to play things, then you should be very, very cautious about every step you take ... And maybe everything [will] be OK, maybe the number of people who are vaccinated will be just enough, ... ‘R’ will broadly speaking stay below one even with Indian variants.

“But if it’s not OK, we know, because of mathematics, that things will get bad very, very quickly. Or at least, maybe it won’t look that quick to start with, but it’ll grow exponentially. So it’ll pick up speed and become a big problem.”

Gowers was speaking to the Guardian after Cummings told how he had shared documents from the government’s Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage) with a select group of people in March as he agonised over whether Downing Street should initiate its first lockdown.

Until this point, Cummings said, the government had been following a strategy of herd immunity – allowing people to catch Covid to boost the number with antibodies – though this is denied. By the evening of 13 March, Cummings said, he had realised he needed to tell Johnson that the plan had to be ditched to avert the biggest health disaster since the first world war.

Meanwhile, Gowers said he could precisely date the moment at which he realised that a herd immunity policy was “disastrously wrong”. After writing a Twitter thread on 13 March in which he backed the concept, a reply prompted him to re-evaluate.

“I did a very simple back-of-envelope calculation which made it clear that the stated aim of achieving herd immunity by the autumn would require far more people to be hospitalised than the NHS could conceivably cope with,” he recalled.

In a second thread, he “disowned” his sympathetic account of the strategy from a few hours earlier and explained why achieving herd immunity by the autumn without overwhelming the NHS was clearly impossible.

“It’s good that I came to that realisation when I did, because the day after that (or to be precise at 1.23am, but I saw it only when I got up the next morning), Dominic Cummings, who already knew me from discussions about mathematics teaching several years ago, got in touch. So I wrote and told him that I thought we needed to move urgently to extreme containment measures.”

He explained the mathematics in a document which he sent to Cummings and which is [being published by the Guardian](#). It warned that the NHS did not have resources to implement a herd immunity policy “in a non-disastrous way” and pointed out problems surrounding a scenario in which 60% of people (40 million) would need to catch the coronavirus – a figure cited by the chief scientific adviser, Sir Patrick Vallance – for the strategy to be effective.

“The most serious problem with the herd immunity policy, it seems to me, is that we can’t infect 60% of the population in a matter of months without overwhelming the hospitals and having to let a very large number of people die untreated,” Gowers’ document warned.

On the question of how many of the 60% would need hospital treatment, it said that even “a very optimistic figure of 2%” meant 800,000 would need intensive care for the policy to work.

Urging caution, Gowers said he hoped that the influence of Sage experts would outweigh pressure on the prime minister from Conservative MPs to lift all restrictions. While Sage had got things “a bit wrong” back in March 2020, they were “not making the same mistake twice” in September, he said.

“I don’t know what advice Johnson is getting from Sage at this point. If he departs from their advice, then I would be very worried.”

Gowers, 57, told how he and his family had started to implement their own form of social distancing and lockdown last year even before the official one was imposed. It was at this point that Cummings, who he had known from when the aide worked for Michael Gove at the Department for Education, reached out to him.

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[Opinion](#)Coronavirus

Why the ‘lab-leak’ theory of Covid’s origins has gained prominence again

[Stephen Buranyi](#)

Both sides in the ‘natural versus manmade’ debate remain deadlocked as the search for the source of Sars-CoV-2 goes on



‘The Wuhan Institute of Virology, nearby to the first recorded outbreaks, is the world’s premier collector of wild bat coronaviruses.’ Photograph: Thomas Peter/Reuters

‘The Wuhan Institute of Virology, nearby to the first recorded outbreaks, is the world’s premier collector of wild bat coronaviruses.’ Photograph: Thomas Peter/Reuters

Sat 29 May 2021 02.00 EDT

Joe Biden wants to know if the coronavirus pandemic originated in a laboratory. On Thursday, the president [ordered US intelligence agencies](#) to

“redouble” their efforts to find exactly when and how the virus jumped into humans, and the two scenarios he suggested were an infected animal, or a laboratory accident. Just last year, that second utterance would have got a person dismissed as a kook and a conspiracist; but an increasing number of mainstream figures, from those in [the press](#) to [influential scientists](#) and government officials such as [US chief medical adviser, Anthony Fauci](#), are at least open to the idea that the pandemic may have started with a containment failure in China, or a souped-up virus experiment gone wrong.

If you’re just tuning in, bleary-eyed and wondering how yet another thing you were told couldn’t possibly happen appears to be on the verge of becoming reality, you’re not alone. But there is a straightforward way to see what the possibilities are, what scientists currently think, and what information might resolve the dispute once and for all.

First, in the early days of the pandemic, [nearly every scientist](#) and [media figure](#) with any sort of platform assured the world that the pandemic had a natural origin. A coronavirus that naturally infected bats gained the ability to infect humans through normal evolution in the wild or farmed captivity. This had historical precedent: both the original Sars virus in 2003 and the Mers outbreak in 2012 arose in this way. And the viral genome, [shared by Chinese scientists](#) early in the pandemic, and since sequenced around the world thousands of times, didn’t show any obvious signs of manipulation: it didn’t use any well-known viruses as a basic framework, or have the the genetic equivalent of bore-holes and cut-marks.

All of these are decent arguments, but not overwhelming. A matter of low attention bandwidth at the height of the first wave, an overall deference to authority, and a general wariness about conspiratorial-sounding theories, led the animal-leap case to be presented and repeated with airtight surety. And this left it open to attack.

Something that should have been widely acknowledged back then is that scientists often do research with viruses that includes manipulating them to become more effective, or to infect other species – even humans. The justification for this is to learn about viral behaviour, and track how a pandemic threat might evolve. This is called “gain-of-function” research, and [lots of people think it’s a bad idea](#).

What is also known for sure, is that the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV), nearby to the first recorded outbreaks, is the world's premier collector of wild bat coronaviruses, has grown them [in their in-house laboratories before](#), and had the expertise to conduct gain-of-function experiments. If you wanted to create a pandemic coronavirus in a lab, the WIV would be a hell of a place to do it. And so there are now several theories about the pandemic strain coming out of the WIV, ranging from one of their on-file natural coronaviruses infecting a lab member; an ill-advised gain-of-function strain doing the same; or a purposely human-targeted bioweapon strain being accidentally or intentionally unleashed. Given the lab's capabilities, that's the full range of careless, reckless, or purely evil possibilities.

This means that some version of a lab-leak was always circumstantially and scientifically plausible. Each theory also neatly appeals to a certain sort of person, what you might call the fringes of both sides. If you're the radically credulous mainstream sort, the natural origin story fits the bill. A naturally emerging viral pandemic is a complex process that the experts say is likely to happen. It's the way things have happened before. People in positions of authority – say, running a biohazardous lab – are highly competent and probably trustworthy. Mystery solved by association.

If you thrive on contingency and conspiracy, however, the lab-leak theory is catnip. A single, discrete event, perpetrated by individuals, and then – if true – surely covered up. Whether you think it was an accident or a doomsday device, access to the lab offers the possibility of a smoking gun, if only you could investigate.

Given what we know, both sides are at a deadlock. The WIV had what armchair detectives would call motive, method and opportunity, but there's no proof that Sars-CoV-2 was ever in the lab. On the circumstantial side, the hole is as deep as you want to go – people have dug into irregularities in the institute's virus catalogue, there is an [“anonymous intelligence report”](#) about WIV members becoming sick with a pneumonia-like illness in November 2019. Do your own research, as they say. But parsing cold war-style intrigue from a desk chair a world away rarely makes anything clearer.

When it comes to the science, there isn't a knockout blow either way. Viruses have multiple evolutionary avenues in front of them, from simple

mutations to swapping entire genetic regions with closely related pathogens. Some of these can be worked around or reconstituted in a lab with little trace. Given that the major changes Sars-CoV-2 acquired to become pandemic-ready don't mirror those in any closely related coronavirus, its emergence was either a rare event – or we simply don't know very much about wild coronaviruses. The first is possible and the second is surely true.

At the same time, if it was created in a lab, the creators took a circuitous route, not using known strains or structures, and not always optimising the virus in obvious ways. Reflecting this, scientific arguments are [deep in the weeds](#) at the moment, arguing over the likelihood of one RNA sequence or another arising by natural or artificial means. So far they have served only to keep the window open on both sides.

So where did the virus that actually started the pandemic come from? For the natural-emergence side, finding a coronavirus in a bat or intermediate animal that is more genetically similar to Sars-Cov-2 than those currently on record would demonstrate a clear, plausible evolutionary path. The closer the better, and bonus points if it had a physical path to the outbreak as well. This would never amount to an airtight case – meaning some version of lab-leak will always be with us as a fringe theory – but it would placate the majority of scientists. Efforts are ongoing, but could take years.

For the lab-leak side, it's all about the source. Getting access to the WIV strain archive, the lab notebooks, regulatory filings, access to researchers. Again, if these turned out to be squeaky-clean there would always be a fringe alleging a cover-up. But if it is a case of research-gone-wrong, there would probably be evidence in the institute. The greater problem, though, is that access to the WIV isn't likely to happen any time soon. Scientists, the US government, and the WHO have asked for openness and cooperation from the Chinese state, and have been predictably stonewalled.

And so, like many other times over the past year, we're stuck without a clear answer. The point has been made that, epidemiologically, none of this really matters. Lab or not, the pandemic happened and is still going. But finding its origin would be hugely consequential. A natural origin would absolve any one person, but further confirm that our nature-encircling world is incubating pandemic disease at an unprecedented rate. A lab-leak would

tarnish the job of scientific research for a lifetime and prove some of the worst people in the culture war – partially – right. I think I'd prefer the first case, but even more than that, I'd like to know the truth.

- Stephen Buranyi is a writer specialising in science and the environment

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/may/29/lab-leak-theory-covid-natural-manmade-sars-cov-2>

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OpinionPolitics

To beat the Tories, we must first join forces to beat the electoral system

[Caroline Lucas](#), [Layla Moran](#) and [Clive Lewis](#)

There is a progressive majority in Britain, but under first-past-the-post you'd never know it. It's time to get smart



The Palace of Westminster. 'In the two coming byelections, it seems so illogical for us to fight one another for votes that just let the Tories through.'
Photograph: Victoria Jones/PA

The Palace of Westminster. 'In the two coming byelections, it seems so illogical for us to fight one another for votes that just let the Tories through.'
Photograph: Victoria Jones/PA

Sat 29 May 2021 04.00 EDT

Politics is changing rapidly, but too often our parties lag behind the people. The shifting tectonic plates of climate, Brexit, technology and the politics of

identity, both personal and national, change everything.

In the maelstrom we can only cling to our values and culture. And what we find remarkable and reassuring is that these are so similar for all of us. Each of us wants a society that is much more equal, sustainable and democratic, and we know we must work across old tribal boundaries to get there.

This is more than electoral necessity. While still recognising that each of our parties has their distinct identity, we enjoy working together. There is beauty in diversity, despite the political system actively seeking to pit us against one another.

But what we think hardly matters, compared with what people are doing. They know the two big dominant parties aren't working, and that no single party has a monopoly of wisdom. And they know the Tories are given huge advantages before any election campaign even begins.

Conservative votes are now so efficiently spread that [it takes just](#) 38,000 to elect a Tory MP but 51,000 votes for every Labour MP. But because of our first-past-the-post system it needs 336,000 for every Lib Dem MP and a ludicrous 866,000 to elect Caroline Lucas for Brighton Pavilion. It is why we need proportional representation, because this is sham democracy. The Tories even want to remove any kind of transfer-vote element from mayoral contests. To beat the Tories, we need to beat the system, and that means being smart about working together.

Meanwhile the rightwing parties have consolidated, after the Tories swallowed the Brexit party whole. But progressives remain split, competing for the same voters – [we divide; they conquer](#).

And yet poll after poll shows there is a progressive majority. We need to shape and win that majority.

This is why citizens are now using their votes wisely, to back the best-placed non-Tory; and why, under the radar, local parties are campaigning tactically to best direct their resources.

It's paying off. In counties that used to be true blue, such as Oxfordshire and Cambridgeshire, reds, greens and liberals are forming joint administrations, while in Surrey, Sussex and Kent, the Tories are being rocked back on their heels. Meanwhile, in towns and cities such as Sheffield, Bristol, Milton Keynes and Burnley, new cross-party arrangements are being forged to meet the challenge of Covid, inequality and the climate emergency.

None of this is easy. We all want our own parties to do well, but what is the point of the progressive vote going up and down between us when the Tories still rule?

Old politics holds us back. The [Labour](#) rulebook demands the party stands candidates in every seat, regardless of whether doing so guarantees another Tory win. Local parties should be allowed to decide. But tribalism runs deep everywhere, and trust takes times to grow, with the inevitable result of another likely general election loss. We cannot allow that to happen. This self-defeating tribalism must go. While well-intentioned, party bureaucracies could be the last bastions of the old politics to fall. If this needs to be a grassroots alliance, then so be it.

In the two coming byelections, it seems so illogical for us to fight one another for votes that just let the Tories through. In the absence of a deal between Labour and the [Liberal Democrats](#) though, the choice for progressive voters won't be easy.

Such negotiations are so much easier when more seats are in play. So ahead of the next election we owe it to progressive voters to offer easier choices by negotiating arrangements that increase the chances of progressive candidates winning, while also ensuring that all parties are more fairly represented at Westminster.

And as we move to a general election in the coming years, we all recognise that the Greens, worst hit by the electoral system, must be allowed the chance to win some seats if their rising votes are going to be used smartly. Underlying all this is the need for Labour to back proportional representation at its September conference.

Working with [Compass](#), and other organisations, we are committed to ending the Tory electoral monopoly in our country based on a minority share of votes. The only way we can see that happening is through electoral cooperation that could take a number of forms, from simply standing back to tactical campaigning and voting.

But what is essential is that any alliance is built on values, vision and the spirit of a new kind of politics. A politics of failed imagination, little hope and low effort has got us into this mess. We need a new politics that is in genuine and authentic service to the people, because of an abiding belief in the best of people and what they can achieve, given support. And we mean all the people, whether they voted for Brexit or against; from town, city or beyond.

We all come from one tribe or another – Labour, Green, liberal – for many different reasons. But only as open tribes, retaining our identities while working everywhere together for the common good, can we hope to create a new and good society. We are thinking, campaigning and building together. And where we disagree, it is done with respect in a spirit of learning.

We see the direction our society is heading, and we know there is a better way. We don't have the luxury of time to get there. So, if old-style leaders refuse to change, then we will respectfully work around them. Because this latent progressive majority in our society just needs to be unlocked.

- Caroline Lucas is the Green MP for Brighton Pavilion; Layla Moran is the Lib Dem MP for Oxford West and Abingdon; Clive Lewis is the Labour MP for Norwich South

[Hadley Freeman's Weekend column](#)Family.

Want to have a not-completely-terrible semi-locked-down celebration? Here's how

[Hadley Freeman](#)



I've always liked that my birthday is in May, but this year I was dreading it



‘May really is the perfect party month.’ Photograph: Getty Images

‘May really is the perfect party month.’ Photograph: Getty Images

Sat 29 May 2021 04.00 EDT

Bad news, Arieans and Taureans, or – as they are known by people who don’t believe in fairytales – people with birthdays between March and May. You have just had your second crap birthday in a row. No doubt the planets foretold it all. Now that I have declared myself the Guardian’s first astrologist, I must add that all Pisceans should avoid buying a dishwasher this week and Scorpios must stay away from anyone in a Moncler jacket. (That latter one is not in the stars, it’s just a good general rule for avoiding people with too much money and no taste.)

So it was my birthday the other week. I always liked that my birthday is in May, because it really is the perfect party month: late spring, so warm, but not – crucially – summer, so people generally aren’t on holiday. Also, I share my day with some genuinely interesting people: [L Frank Baum](#)! [Madeleine Albright](#)! [Andy Murray](#)! This might not say anything important about me, but it definitely doesn’t say anything bad, so I’ll take it. Clever me for being born on such a great day! At this point, you should be picturing Leonardo DiCaprio at the beginning of Titanic, [clutching his ticket and shouting](#): “We’re the luckiest sons of bitches in the world!” Except it’s me instead of

Leo, my birthday instead of a ticket, and the coronavirus instead of the Titanic.

OK, not being able to have a birthday party for the second year in a row might not be quite as bad as drowning in the freezing North Atlantic because Kate Winslet wouldn't share her [massive wooden board with you](#). But let's just acknowledge that having a double lockdown birthday is not great. And before anyone starts, yes, I know it wasn't *proper lockdown* two weeks ago, but it may as well have been, given I wasn't allowed to have dinner inside a restaurant and every outdoor table is booked until August, probably by people who arrange their books by colour.

I was really dreading my birthday this year, to the point that I tried to ignore it, which is extremely un-me. I love my birthday, and not just because I share it with Andy Murray. For a start, it's a better excuse than, say, Tuesday to throw a party, and I really don't understand people who don't like throwing parties, because why wouldn't you want all your favourite people in one room? Also, I have no problem with the ageing process, because I was such an idiot when I was young that I have to believe I can only get better. My birthday last year was fine, because there was a certain novelty about seeing neither my friends nor my parents on it. But twice in a row was not a prospect that filled me with joy. In the end, it was OK. More than OK: it was genuinely lovely, thanks entirely to my partner who stepped in and seized control of proceedings instead of letting me sit around in a self-pitying funk.

[I swore I'd never go camping. Now I'm toasting marshmallows – who even am I? | Hadley Freeman](#)
[Read more](#)

As I write, it is very much up in the air whether all restrictions will be lifted next month (or indeed, ever), so perhaps the rest of the astrology chart will also have a second lockdown birthday. Just in case, here is what I've learned about how to have a not-completely-terrible semi-locked-down celebration:

1 No Zoom parties Whatever initial appeal these once held ("It's like the [opening credits of The Brady Bunch](#) are talking to me!") has long since been overtaken by irritation about how no one actually gets to speak and

someone's wifi always freezes. It's like trying to have a party under water, and unless you're related to [The Little Mermaid](#), this is a stupid idea. Tell the people you see in person every day – your neighbours, the newsagent – that it's your birthday, and savour their good wishes, and if you must Zoom, keep it to one person, max two. You actually get to speak, and you'll see everyone else later. Someday. Maybe.

2 Plan nothing that's dependent on anything Picnics, meet-ups that require an outdoor table, gatherings that depend on restrictions being lifted when promised... these rely on, respectively, the weather, luck and Boris Johnson's integrity, all of which are as reliable as each other. Don't make your birthday stressful; instead stick with unshakable certainties. Like food. My birthday lunch, at my kitchen table, comprised all my favourite foods and, let me tell you, neither age nor Covid can wither spaghetti with tomato sauce and homemade chocolate cake.

3 Treat yo' self The best lesson of [Parks And Recreation](#) is the importance of a [Treat Yo' Self day](#) – a day when the only rule is to indulge yourself – and a lockdown birthday is that day. Stay in bed and watch Parks And Rec all day! Have the biggest bubble bath in the world! Or just watch a double bill of [High Society](#) and [Heathers](#), because it's your birthday and you can. Maybe the outside world is overrated after all.

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Opinion**Boris Johnson**

A dangerous cult now runs Britain – the worshippers at the Temple of Johnson

Marina Hyde



No matter what the prime minister does, no matter the consequences, his devotees line up to heatedly excuse it



‘Within seconds of Cummings’ detailed testimony about Johnson’s obvious unfitness for office, you couldn’t move for Tory MP’s explaining it all away.’ Photograph: Tayfun Salcı/Zuma Wire/Rex/Shutterstock

‘Within seconds of Cummings’ detailed testimony about Johnson’s obvious unfitness for office, you couldn’t move for Tory MP’s explaining it all away.’ Photograph: Tayfun Salcı/Zuma Wire/Rex/Shutterstock

Fri 28 May 2021 09.50 EDT

Last night’s Downing Street coronavirus briefing was given by Matt Hancock, now identifiable only by his dental records. According to [Dominic Cummings](#), Hancock was a serial liar at a deadly level who should have been sacked 15 or 20 times. According to himself, Matt Hancock “threw a ring around care homes”. It would have been a lot better if he’d thrown the ring into Mount Doom instead.

Elsewhere, it has emerged that a government that came to power promising to control our borders has allowed [1.59 million](#) – ONE POINT FIVE NINE MILLION – travellers to fly into the UK in the four lockdown months from January to April alone, two-thirds of whom were not UK nationals. If we don’t open up fully in three weeks, make sure to thank the Conservatives by popping a couple more points on their poll ratings.

So yes: you've heard a lot of denials over the past 24 hours. But the biggest UK repository of denial remains the polls, where no revelation of incompetence or failure impacts other than positively for the government. A [midweek poll](#) saw the Conservatives climb six points, to 44%, which feels about perfect for a country where at that moment Cummings was claiming industrial levels of lying, incompetence and contempt for elderly and vulnerable people, and spiking it all with such details as Boris Johnson wanting Chris Whitty to inject him with the virus live on TV. Remember, even Donald Trump at his maddest only wanted [other people](#) to inject the disinfectant.

Still, we are where we are. The great puzzle is that so many of the people who talked about "the Corbyn cult" are so reluctant to face up to the fact of the Johnson cult. In many ways, Johnson is the much more classic cult leader. His decisions have led to the deaths of large numbers of people, and he's got a lot of women pregnant.

If only people who rightly identified the unpleasant and weirdo tendency to excuse absolutely anything at all where Jezza was concerned could be man enough to see it on so much larger a scale where Bozza is concerned. He is, after all, the actual prime minister. And for well over a year, many – not just Cummings – have pointed in remorseless and verifiable detail to his abysmal decisions or indecisions, which have led to tens of thousands of unnecessary deaths, far deeper-than-necessary economic damage and longer loss of freedoms. To say nothing of his having an approach to funding holidays and interior decoration that would not seem out of place in a TV evangelist.

But let's return to first principles on this whole cult business. The thing about cult leaders, typically, is that they're charismatic, male and able to persuade people of the wisdom of things very much not in their best interests. There is simply no moral failing of theirs that could be placed in front of their followers that would not cause those same followers to passionately excuse it or love them more for it. Faulty prophecies, missing funds, being present but not involved at the laying of a wreath to Black September, notching up one of the world's worst death tolls and persistently dithering to the point of alleged manslaughter – all this is bad shit to outsiders, but simply makes the cultists cleave ever closer to their dear leaders.

This was something a lot of people noted in reactions to [Jeremy Corbyn](#). But you don't hear it about Johnson – and he's miles bigger than Corbyn. Just look at the scale of the damage. Compared with that, Corbyn was what? The equivalent of some suburban Utah sectist with a few devoted followers who never gets anywhere. Johnson's the David Koresh, the Jim Jones, the Charles Manson.

[Dominic Cummings, tosser of pretend hand grenades: you're no war hero | Marina Hyde](#)
[Read more](#)

Perhaps no wonder, then, that within seconds of Cummings' detailed testimony about Johnson's obvious unfitness for office, you couldn't move for Tory MPs moonily explaining it all away. Just as Corbyn was an #absoluteboy to some, so Johnson is a #massivelegend to rather more. Men want to be him; women want to be left to bring up a kid by him on their own.

Of course, part of the problem was the choice of cult deprogrammer. Cummings this week felt like the Conservative party's [Tony Blair](#) – a guy who knows how to win an election and who often makes a lot of sense, but who is a hopelessly compromised messenger because of this one thing he did. I'm simply not going to be drawn today on whether it was worse to drive to a north-east beauty spot to test your eyesight or to launch a regionally destabilising war in the Middle East on a false prospectus and without an exit strategy. In both cases it feels like the right thing to do is to defer to the judgment of the locals.

Even more unfortunately, Johnson is aided and abetted by a generation of Westminster-watchers so addled by polling that they have completely divorced morality from politics. I'm frightfully bored of being told things don't matter because they didn't "cut through", or that this or that horror show is "priced in" to the public's relationship with Johnson, or that something is irrelevant because "voters don't care about it". So what?! Voters don't care about a lot of things that are, nonetheless, properly important. Yet we're awash with pundits and politicians who can tell you the electoral price of everything but the value of nothing.

Ultimately, crowing that the public don't expect better than the substandard governance served up over the past 14 months isn't the win they think it is. Is that the mindset that's going to make a success of Global Britain? Do me a favour. It's the mindset of managed decline, and if they can't see that, they really are lost to the Kool-Aid.

- Marina Hyde is a Guardian columnist
- Join Marina Hyde and John Crace in conversation with Anushka Asthana as part of our [digital festival](#) on Tuesday 8 June. [Book tickets here](#)

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[Guardian Opinion cartoon](#)
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Martin Rowson on Boris Johnson hosting Viktor Orbán at No 10 – cartoon

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Belarus

Belarus: US draws up sanctions for ‘ongoing abuses’ after plane incident

White House says the US, the EU and other allies will target key members of President Lukashenko’s government



Russian president Vladimir Putin, right, and Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko pose standing on the boat during their meeting in the Black Sea resort of Sochi on Saturday 29 May 2021. Photograph: Sergei Ilyin/AP

Russian president Vladimir Putin, right, and Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko pose standing on the boat during their meeting in the Black Sea resort of Sochi on Saturday 29 May 2021. Photograph: Sergei Ilyin/AP

Agencies and staff

Sat 29 May 2021 14.31 EDT

The Biden administration has said it is drawing up a list of targeted sanctions against key members of the Belarusian government which forced

the landing of a passenger jet and had a journalist on board arrested.

The White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said on Friday the United States was also suspending a 2019 agreement between Washington and Minsk that allowed carriers from each country to use the other's airspace, and taking other actions against the government of President Alexander Lukashenko.

In a statement, she called on Lukashenko to allow a credible international investigation into the events of 23 May, when the Ryanair passenger jet flying from Greece to Lithuania was forced to land in Minsk.

[Belarus 'hijacking' is test for international community](#)

[Read more](#)

Belarusian authorities scrambled a fighter jet and flagged what turned out to be a false bomb alert to force the plane to land, then detained the opposition journalist who was on board, drawing condemnation from [Europe](#) and the United States.

Psaki said the United States, with the EU and other allies, was developing a list of targeted sanctions against key members of Lukashenko's government "associated with ongoing abuses of human rights and corruption, the falsification of the 2020 election, and the events of May 23".

The [EU has said it will provide Belarus with €3bn \(£2.6bn\)](#) through grants and loans if the country "changes course" in an attempt to ramp up internal pressure on [Lukashenko](#) as he met Vladimir Putin in Moscow on Friday.

Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission president, came close to an all-out call for regime change as she issued the pledge of funds in return for a "transition" to democracy.

The offer was made shortly before Lukashenko had arrived in the Black Sea resort of Sochi for a second day of talks with the Russian president, whose government has sought to distance itself from last Sunday's arrest of the [opposition journalist Raman Pratasevich](#) and his Russian girlfriend, Sofia Sapega.

For some years the EU had hoped to wrestle Belarus out of Russia's sphere of influence [but it appears that all hope has been lost](#) with the current regime.

On Saturday Putin took Lukashenko for a boat trip to take “advantage of the fine weather”, Kremlin spokesman Dimitri Peskov said.

President Joe Biden said on Tuesday that sanctions against Belarus were “in play”.

The US treasury department will develop an executive order for Biden to sign that will provide increased authorities to impose sanctions on elements of Lukashenko's government, and the United States will reimpose “full blocking sanctions” on nine Belarusian state-owned enterprises on 3 June, prohibiting US persons from dealing with those businesses.

The United States in 2020 imposed sanctions on eight Belarus officials over an election that the west said was rigged. In April 2021 the United States revoked an authorisation for certain transactions with the nine sanctioned state-owned enterprises over alleged human rights violations and abuses.

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Belarus

EU pledges €3bn funding for Belarus if it transitions to democracy

Ursula von der Leyen comes close to calling for regime change as she urges country to ‘change course’



The European Commission president told Belarus ‘no amount of repression, brutality or coercion will bring any legitimacy to your authoritarian regime’
Photograph: Kenzo Tribouillard/AP

The European Commission president told Belarus ‘no amount of repression, brutality or coercion will bring any legitimacy to your authoritarian regime’
Photograph: Kenzo Tribouillard/AP

[*Daniel Boffey*](#) in Brussels and [*Andrew Roth*](#) in Moscow

Fri 28 May 2021 09.15 EDT

The EU has said it will provide Belarus with €3bn (£2.6bn) through grants and loans if the country “changes course” in an attempt to ramp up internal

pressure on president [Alexander Lukashenko](#) as he met Vladimir Putin in Moscow.

Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission president, came close to an all-out call for regime change as she issued the pledge of funds in return for a “transition” to democracy.

“Our messages are twofold. To the people of Belarus: we see and hear your desire for change, for democracy, and for a bright future,” she said. “And to the Belarusian authorities: no amount of repression, brutality or coercion will bring any legitimacy to your authoritarian regime.

[‘Persecuted, jailed, destroyed’: Belarus seeks to stifle dissent](#)
[Read more](#)

“So far, you have blatantly ignored the democratic choice of the Belarusian people. It is time to change course. When – and we believe it is a case of when, not if – Belarus starts its peaceful democratic transition, the EU will be there to accompany it.”

The offer was made shortly before Lukashenko had arrived in the Black Sea resort of Sochi on Friday for a summit with the Russian president, whose government has sought to distance itself from Sunday’s arrest of [opposition journalist Raman Pratasevich](#) and his Russian girlfriend, Sofia Sapega.

Pratasevich and Sapega were taken into custody in Minsk after Ryanair flight FR4978, on which they were travelling from Athens to Vilnius, was [forced to land](#) in the Belarus capital due to false claims of a bomb being onboard. A MiG-29 fighter jet had also been sent to escort the civilian airliner, which had been minutes from leaving Belarusian airspace.

“Today, President Putin will have an opportunity to receive what is called first-hand information about the event,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov said ahead of the meeting of the two leaders.

For some years, the EU had hoped to wrestle Belarus out of Russia’s sphere of influence but it appears that all hope has been lost with the current

regime. The EU offer of cash has the hallmarks of a carrot and stick approach designed to force a change of leadership.

As well as targeting Belarus's national airline with a ban on EU airspace, and urging European carriers to avoid overflying the country, the bloc's leaders had agreed on Monday on a raft of new economic sanctions.

The sanctions, the details of which are yet to be announced, are in addition to asset freezes and visa bans imposed on more than 80 Belarus officials, including Lukashenko and his son Victor, relating to the crackdown on peaceful protests against last August's rigged presidential election result. Lukashenko has ruled Belarus since 1994.

A commission spokeswoman said Von der Leyen had also written to Belarus's opposition leader, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, and other opposition figures "expressing her respect and admiration for the courage and strength of the people of Belarus".

"The president conveyed the EU stands ready to engage in all possible ways to accompany a peaceful democratic transition in Belarus, and outlined in her letter the EU's comprehensive plan of economic support to a democratic Belarus of up to €3bn," the spokesperson said.

[A state-sponsored 'hijacking' – the arrest of Belarus blogger Raman Pratasevich](#)
[Read more](#)

The EU's high representative for foreign affairs, Josep Borrell, said the offer of funding from the EU "should be a genuine incentive for the regime to change its course".

Lithuania's foreign ministry on Friday said it was expelling two Belarusian diplomats for "activities incompatible with the status of a diplomat".

"Two [Belarus] intelligence officers working under the diplomatic cover were asked to leave Lithuania. No thank you and goodbye," the foreign minister, Gabrielius Landsbergis, said on Twitter.

Landsbergis said the move was in solidarity with Lithuania's Baltic neighbour Latvia, which had its entire embassy staff expelled from Belarus.

In Moscow, the Kremlin denied it had begun blocking European flights to Russia after it appeared that its aviation authorities had forced Austrian Airlines to cancel its flight from Vienna to the Russian capital. Air France also cancelled its Paris-Moscow flight for the second day in a row, after it was denied permission on Wednesday to land.

The Kremlin spokesman called the disruption of flights from France and Austria to Moscow the result of "technical issues".

"I have no doubt that the aviation authorities will give the necessary explanations, but these are technical issues," he said. "A plane cannot enter a country wherever it wants," Peskov said, adding that the situation was "extraordinary" and that "technical delays are unavoidable".

He did not give a timeline for when flights from France or Austria would be allowed to resume flights to Moscow, but he denied the cause of the problem was political.

"This is not a reason for additional problems," said Peskov. "We have enough of our own."

Peskov said Russia welcomed the International Civil Aviation Organisation's plans to launch an investigation into the grounding of the flight but indicated Russia would oppose other inquiries, saying that the "conclusions have already been drawn without holding any inquiry".

[France](#)

Outrage and delight as France ditches reliance on meat in climate bill

Environment minister Barbara Pompili says proposals will help country to meet net zero emissions



Barbara Pompili says the proposals will also improve health and boost the French economy. Photograph: Joel Saget/AFP/Getty

Barbara Pompili says the proposals will also improve health and boost the French economy. Photograph: Joel Saget/AFP/Getty

[Fiona Harvey](#) *Environment correspondent*

Sat 29 May 2021 03.00 EDT

The country that gave the world foie gras, coq au vin and le steak frites is being asked to ditch its meat-heavy diet in favour of vegetarian options, as [France](#) embarks on a historic “culture shift” that will bring sweeping changes to all aspects of society, the French environment minister has said.

Meat will be off the menu at least one day a week in schools, while vegetarian options will be standard in public catering, and chefs will be trained in how to prepare healthy and toothsome plant-based meals.

The proposals have sparked [uproar and howls of outrage](#) among the traditionalists of French cuisine, but have been welcomed by many young people.

Barbara Pompili, minister for ecological transition, said the country's wide-ranging plan to reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions would improve health and wellbeing, while providing a big boost to the economy.

"Developing a vegetarian menu offer is about freedom as much as ecology," she said. "Vegetarians must be able to find menus that cater to their needs in their canteens. This is especially true for young people, among whom the proportion of vegetarians is twice as high as the rest of the population."

The climate and resilience bill, now under examination by the higher chamber of the French parliament, includes: one compulsory vegetarian menu a week in all schools; one daily vegetarian choice in all state-run canteens, including government establishments and universities; training for canteen staff to guarantee high-quality vegetarian menus; and the stipulation that from 2024, 60% of the meat served in mass catering must meet minimum quality requirements, which are likely to favour meat produced in France over imports.

Pompili said the changes would boost French farming by emphasising local food, while reducing carbon.

"[About] 15% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions and 91% of deforestation in the Amazon rainforest are linked to livestock farming," she said. "So developing a vegetarian offer means acting for the climate, against deforestation, while giving canteens more room to purchase high-quality, locally produced meat that is better for the environment. Everyone wins."

That reassurance is key, in a country that just two years ago saw months of violent protests by the ["gilets jaunes"](#), sparked in late 2018 by a [row about](#)

[fuel price rises](#) that were brought in on environmental grounds but which many felt unfairly penalised [people living in the countryside](#).

Pompili acknowledged the mistakes of the past: “I do not want to leave anyone out from these policies. We will make sure that people who are affected are helped. This is true of every single measure we are taking.”

She told the Guardian: “We will only have a successful environmental transition if everyone is onboard. There is resistance and push back out there ... it’s quite difficult to travel in rural areas without cars. A lot of people in rural areas feel they have been sacrificed. We have to be very attentive to their needs, and make sure we listen to and support them.”

The government has set up a [citizens’ assembly to help to guide policy](#) and has found that once people have been informed about the science of the climate crisis, they tend to be “really enthusiastic and gung-ho” about taking action, she said.

Pompili said her aim was to make it easy for people to lead environmentally friendly lives, by providing greener options and removing some of the highest-carbon alternatives. There will be more room for [cycling in French cities](#), buildings will be renovated throughout the country, and buyers of appliances from smartphones to washing machines will have a [guarantee that they can be repaired](#) if they go wrong, instead of needing to throw them away.

She said: “We are trying to bring about a culture shift for French people – we want the environment to be a reflex for people. Every single person in France can play a role in environmental protection. This is about people’s daily lives.”

France’s economic stimulus package is one of the world’s greenest: of the €100bn the government is spending to revive the economy after the Covid-19 shock, at least €30bn will go on low-carbon projects.

The French are also working internationally, with the UK, to ensure that vital UN climate talks, called [COP26](#), to be held later this year in Glasgow,

result in the full implementation of the [2015 Paris agreement](#). “France has a special responsibility,” she said.

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The age of extinctionBarcelona

Flights v flamingos: can Barcelona wildlife reserve survive airport expansion?



A plane takes off from Barcelona airport near the Delta del Llobregat wetlands. Photograph: Paola de Grenet/The Guardian

A plane takes off from Barcelona airport near the Delta del Llobregat wetlands. Photograph: Paola de Grenet/The Guardian

Billion-dollar development threatens the future of one of the western Mediterranean's most important wetlands

The age of extinction is supported by



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[Stephen Burgen](#) in the *Delta del Llobregat, Spain*

Sat 29 May 2021 02.30 EDT

The silence is so complete it is easy to forget you are only a few minutes' drive from the centre of [Barcelona](#). Just the sigh of the willows in the sea breeze, the splash of a fish surfacing and a heron's cry – until the serenity is obliterated by a plane taking off.

The Delta del Llobregat, one of the most important wetlands in the western Mediterranean, is being eroded on one side by the sea and on the other by the city's land-hungry airport. As travel to [Spain](#) is still restricted, there are few flights and it is possible to revel in the delta's almost mesmeric tranquillity. But before the pandemic there were already close to 90 flights an hour and, if the airport authority has its way, this will increase still further.

The delta covers 920 hectares (2,280 acres) and has 14 distinct ecosystems, ranging from coastal, marshland and lagoons to pine forests and farmland. As well as being home to a colony of turtles, there are more than 1,000 plant species, including 22 varieties of orchids.

Until now, in the decades-long war of flamingos versus frequent flyers, the flamingos have lost every round. But the [European commission](#) has weighed in, accusing the Spanish and Catalan governments of failing to protect the wetlands and warning against a proposed expansion of the airport.



The delta is home to more than 1,000 plant species. Photograph: Paola de Grenet/The Guardian

In giving notice that it was sending the letter, [the commission noted](#): “Despite being one of the most densely populated regions on the Iberian Peninsula, the fragile lentic ecosystems of the Llobregat Delta hosts an outstanding biodiversity and plays a crucial role in the migratory routes of many European bird species.”

In the ensuing letter, it complained that “the adoption and implementation of a special plan for the protection of the natural areas and landscape of Llobregat delta, and an extension of the special protected area to protect the most suitable territories for the conservation of birds, have not been followed up sufficiently”.

The commission added that the Catalan and Spanish governments have not complied with their obligation to compensate for land lost to the airport, for

example by digging up and renaturalising a vast and abandoned parking area for taxis that was built on protected land.

The letter was sent in response to a formal complaint first filed in 2012 by [Depana](#), a Catalan conservation group, whose vice-president, José García, grew up in the delta and has witnessed the slow decimation of an area that is home to more than 350 species of birds and a key resting place on north-south migration routes.

[Bat boxes, 'greened' streets and bug hotels: Barcelona embraces its wild side](#)
[Read more](#)

For years Depana has been battling the national and regional governments as well as Aena, the airport authority, to save the delta.

“What’s new, is we’re at the start of a judicial process,” says García. “The areas where the airport wants to expand are part of the EU’s Nature 2000 bird protection network and to do that it needs permission from the European commission, and the commission has made it plain that permission won’t be forthcoming.”

Barcelona airport is Europe’s sixth busiest. It expanded rapidly for the 1992 Olympics and again in 2009, when a new terminal was built near the existing one, which is now practically abandoned. Now Aena is pushing a €1.7bn (£1.4bn) expansion that would rip through the heart of what’s left of the delta.



A horse stands in the Les Filipines lagoon in the Llobregat delta.
Photograph: Paola de Grenet/The Guardian

“The airport has to become an international hub and we can’t miss out on this new opportunity to put Barcelona on the map,” says Josep Sánchez Llibre, president of Foment de Treball, the Catalan business association.

Under the plan, which would extend the runway into the wetlands and involve building another terminal, passenger numbers would rise from 55 to 70 million a year.

Barcelona city council, which doesn’t have jurisdiction over the airport, has rejected the plan as “a bacchanalia of sectors stuck in the past”.

“We’re always in favour of investment but not of 20th-century proposals that have no future,” says Janet Sanz, the deputy mayor. The council wants journeys of less than 2.5 hours to be made by train.



White storks in Les Filipines lagoon, one of 350 bird species of birds in the area. Photograph: Paola de Grenet/The Guardian

Construction and grand projects are, however, a driving force in the Spanish economy. The key players – the Spanish and Catalan governments and Aena, a private entity in which the state has a 51% stake – have a shared worldview of the airport expansion project.

“The interests of Aena trump those of the Catalan or Spanish governments, who always give in to Aena’s demands,” says Cristina Sánchez, the Catalonia delegate of the Spanish Ornithological Society. “Aena has more negotiating power, it can offer to create jobs and other benefits for Barcelona, and these are financial benefits that are very interesting to the other players.

“This letter from the European commission may change everything, but up to now the Catalan government has never stood up for or managed this space against the airport’s interests.”

While the airport is the responsibility of Aena and the Spanish government, the regional government is responsible for the environment and complying with directives on wildlife protection.

Ferran Miralles, a Catalan government environment spokesman, says the administration will comply with the EU's demands to create a special protected area as designated by the [EU directive](#) on the conservation of wild birds and recover some of the land that has been lost to construction, but is unable to say where or when the work will be carried out.

“We’re working on it. It’s impossible to go any faster,” Miralles says.

Before the financial crash of 2008, Spain’s national and regional governments squandered millions on pharaonic projects designed less to fulfil a social need than to enhance the prestige of politicians. These included at least three airports that were either never used or abandoned, unfinished cultural centres, high-speed rail links with almost no passengers and a state-of-the-art film studio that hasn’t produced a movie since 2012.



Turtles in the Llobregat river. Photograph: Paola de Grenet/The Guardian

Money has been scarce, but with Brussels offering billions in post-pandemic aid, there are fears that Spain will revert to its bad old ways.

“We want to make sure that if there’s funding from Europe to protect the delta, it isn’t used for anything else,” says García.

“Aside from the commercial interests, this is all about the competition between Madrid and Barcelona. If Madrid has X, we have to have double X.”

Find more [age of extinction coverage here](#), and follow biodiversity reporters [Phoebe Weston](#) and [Patrick Greenfield](#) on Twitter for all the latest news and features

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