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Come back award shows – I'm missing the stars like Kristen Stewart

[Rebecca Nicholson](#)



Declining viewers and Omicron-induced apathy could see gong ceremonies going the way of the untelevised Golden Globes



Kristen Stewart was widely tipped for the Screen Actors Guild best actress award for her role as Diana, Princess of Wales in the film *Spencer*, but failed to be nominated. Photograph: Cindy Ord/Getty Images for SiriusXM

Sat 15 Jan 2022 10.00 EST

The first mass use of the word “snub” in any given year ushers in award season for me. This year, [Kristen Stewart](#) has been snubbed, apparently, after the Screen Actors Guild failed to nominate her for a best actress award for her role as Princess Diana in Pablo Larraín’s *Spencer*. She had been widely tipped to pick up an Oscar nomination, perhaps for the brazen bizarreness of the casting, which actually sort of worked. If she has been snubbed here, commentators are asking, will she be shut out of the Oscars?

As controversies go, it is a tame one, which speaks volumes about the unsettled state that award ceremonies seem to have found themselves in. I say this as someone with a disproportionate love of these ridiculous events, but even I am finding it difficult to care. Usually, I love the clothes and the speeches and being put out when something I adored is passed over in favour of something objectively worse, and feeling thrilled when Olivia Colman inevitably wins everything, and I love looking out for that precise moment when an actor adjusts their face from “absolutely fuming” to “gracious in defeat”.

But television audiences are declining rapidly, year on year, and award show chatter has become more of a quiet background murmur. Omicron has forced the indefinite [postponement](#) of the Grammys. The [Golden Globes](#) took place last weekend, untelevised and with no celebrity involvement, after a series of scandals meant any statues it gave out would probably end up in the weird cupboard at the back of the kitchen rather than on the mantelpiece. (I felt for the winners who made history in a year when it was harder to celebrate that, such as *Pose*'s MJ Rodriguez, who became the first trans woman to win a Golden Globe, for best actress in a TV drama.) The Oscars [will have a host](#) after three years without one, though whether that will be [Tom Holland](#) or [Pete Davidson](#) is the internet's guess. Anyone to try to stem the tide of fleeing viewers.

It is unsurprising that seeing famous people messing around in ballgowns and designer suits and jewellery that requires its own bodyguards has lost some appeal during two years of a pandemic, but whether world events simply hastened a decline that was already in progress is unclear.

It could be that these ceremonies go the way of the Golden Globes – if a gong is handed out in an empty forest, does anyone hear the tearful acceptance speeches? – and pare back to basics, or this could be a chance to try an over-the-top, full showbiz spectacle once again. I'd prefer the latter. I'd better follow them all closely, just to see.

Elvis Costello: his aim is true in taking that song off his playlist



Elvis Costello: end of the road for Oliver's Army. Photograph: Terry Wyatt/Getty Images for Americana Music Association

Elvis Costello has been discussing the lyrical content of his 1979 hit Oliver's Army for years, and now, he says, [he won't be playing it](#) live any more. It famously uses a derogatory phrase for Irish Catholics, which contains a racial slur. "That's what my grandfather was called in the British army – it's historically a fact – but people hear that word go off like a bell and accuse me of something that I didn't intend," he told the *Telegraph*.

This is not the first time the song's lyrics have led to a discussion about its meaning and intent. In 2013, [BBC's 6 Music radio station censored it](#), explaining that a number of factors had been taken into consideration, including the time of day and the context of the programme on which it was broadcast. Costello argued that the BBC was making it worse by drawing attention to the lyrics. "Just don't play the record," he said.

The song is anti-colonialism and anti-war, so context matters. But Costello has explained it, again and again, and now he has made the decision to retire it. Not to delete it from record collections, just not to sing it live after 43 years.

Some may take that in bad faith and see it as another sign of cancel culture marching on unchecked, but it seems to me like a decision taken in good faith, in consideration of attitudes that have shifted and developed over time. Although often it feels like the opposite, I do think we have become better, collectively, at discussing complex ideas. Applying that to a lyrical choice made so many years ago seems perfectly reasonable.

Licorice Pizza: California heat, in a cinema. What's not to like?



Alana Haim, star of Licorice Pizza. Photograph: Everett Collection Inc/Alamy

Finally, after 18 months or so of almost buying tickets and then deciding it probably wasn't worth it, I went back to the cinema. Even though my only local option is the fancy chain with sofas for seats, which brings food to you at any time – eating burgers while midway through watching a film is an affront to cinemagoing and that is a hill I will die on – I was childishly delighted to be back.

Everything about it, from the ads to the trailers to sitting still for more than two hours without any desire to look at my phone, made me determined to go again regularly.

It was *Licorice Pizza* that lured me in. As a fan of both Paul Thomas Anderson and sunshine, I thought it would be perfect to head out into the chill of a winter's evening and then sit in a dark room soaking up the Californian heat. There were plenty of things to take away from the film, but one that seemed particularly lovely was the fact that its leads, Cooper Hoffman and Alana Haim, had beautifully normal teeth. Is this the beginning of the end for those hyper-real, super-straight white veneers?

Rebecca Nicholson is an Observer columnist

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Opinion**Boris Johnson**

The Observer view on Boris Johnson hurting the country and shaming his party

[Observer editorial](#)

With his lies and hypocrisy, the prime minister has corrupted and degraded the Tory party from the highest office



‘We were supposed to believe that a culture of impunity and disregard for rules at the heart of government had absolutely nothing to do with Boris Johnson.’ Photograph: Paul Childs/Reuters

Sat 15 Jan 2022 14.00 EST

A little over a month ago, the prime minister told the House of Commons that he shared the anger of a nation at [seeing a video](#) of his Number 10 staff making light of lockdown measures and joking about [Christmas parties](#). We were supposed to believe that a culture of impunity and disregard for rules at the heart of government had absolutely nothing to do with Boris Johnson;

that he was as shocked by the hypocrisy as the rest of us. It was always a ludicrous contention that the prime minister had no idea what was going on in his own office, part of the same complex as his own residence. And in the last week the full extent of the sheer gall of a leader prepared to throw his staff under a bus to evade accountability for the worst sort of political hypocrisy has been exposed.

Revelation [after revelation](#) has emerged since the start of the year – as Johnson must have known they inevitably would – that rubbishes that statement he made to MPs last month. We now know that in May 2020, Johnson was giving a speech at a social gathering, with drink and food, in the Downing Street garden the very same evening ministers were warning the public at a press conference that they could only meet one other person outside. That his staff were throwing not one, but two, raucous parties that reportedly left items in the garden damaged the night before Prince Philip's funeral. And that Downing Street staff regularly held drinks parties on Fridays that Johnson would often drop into, giving them the prime ministerial seal of approval.

Contempt for parliament and public

The *Observer* has long believed Johnson to be a man of little integrity, but even so, it is hard not to be shocked at the level of contempt in which he so clearly holds parliament and the public. Imagine the consequences if he had misled a court under oath in this way. But to him, it is just the Commons, just the way he approaches politics and every other aspect of his professional life.

It is clear that the view of the Covid rules as optional rather than mandatory, as they were for everyone else in the country, did not stop at the doors of No 10. There were parties and leaving drinks at other government departments. But there is no doubt where this culture emanated from: it started from the very top, with the prime minister. It is extraordinary that those who wrote the law and the guidance flouted it, as almost everyone else, including the Queen, observed it for the sake of public health, even while mourning. For those who did not, there were hefty fines, even for people with far more sympathetic stories than those working in No 10. One teenager was [fined](#)

hundreds of pounds for organising an outdoor balloon release for his friend who had died and had to go to court to contest a further £10,000 fine issued in error by [Durham constabulary](#).

It is extraordinary that those who wrote the law and the guidance flouted it

Two weeks into the new year, Johnson's authority has been comprehensively shredded. He cannot stay in post. But the Conservative party cannot wipe the slate clean by electing a new leader. Everything about Johnson's dreadful premiership has been entirely predictable, a reflection of the man he so clearly was long before he became prime minister. He was sacked from a job in journalism in the 1980s for [fabricating quotes](#) for a newspaper story and from the Conservative shadow frontbench in the early 2000s for [lying about an affair](#). As chair of the Leave campaign, he was complicit in its false claims that leaving the EU would free up £350m a week for the NHS – later ruled a [misuse of official statistics](#) by the UK Statistics Authority – and that a vote to remain in the EU was a vote to share a border with Iraq and Syria. As mayor of London, he failed to declare his personal interests, including his relationship with Jennifer Arcuri, whose company received thousands of pounds of [public money](#).

It was patently obvious what sort of prime minister he would be; no one could credibly argue that there was a senior Tory less well suited to govern Britain. Yet Conservative MPs still crowned him leader in 2019. Enough of them thought he cared too little about the union, allowing him to ruthlessly pursue a hard Brexit and that his loose-with-the-truth style of campaigning could win them a general election in the same way it did the EU referendum. An incompetent, corrupt and rotten prime minister was the bargain they were prepared to make, the cost they were all too willing to impose on the whole country.

Thousands of avoidable deaths

What a heavy price Britain has paid. On Covid, the government is trying to use the success of the vaccine programme to detract from the growing political crisis in which it finds itself. It is true that the UK has had a more

successful vaccine rollout than many other countries, and that the government, particularly Kate Bingham, who chaired the taskforce, deserves credit for the early investment in vaccine technology. But the government's overall record on Covid is grim: time and again, during the first 15 months of the pandemic, Johnson failed to learn from previous mistakes and acted to introduce restrictions too slowly, undoubtedly resulting in thousands of avoidable deaths and more economic pain.

First, the government's hapless approach to education during a pandemic means that far too little has been done to mitigate its impact on children. The effects of this will be felt long into the future. Second, on Brexit, Johnson achieved the hard Brexit the ideological crusaders from his party's right flank wanted. But it has come at a huge cost: a long-term economic cost, which will depress Britain's growth prospects for many years to come, but also a perilous risk to the integrity of the union that cannot be measured in pounds and pence and which may mean that within a couple of decades the United Kingdom may no longer even exist. Who cares if the hardest of Brexits offers succour to the cause of Scottish independence?

And faced with the irresolvable conundrum of Brexit – that there can be no clean break from the EU while avoiding the need for a customs border either on the island of Ireland or down the Irish Sea – Johnson has chosen simply to pretend this problem does not exist, rather than confront the fact that he or his successor will have to choose between rejecting regulatory alignment between the EU and parts of the UK or stability in Northern Ireland. The disregard for the union permeates everything this government does, extending to ministers such as Jacob Rees-Mogg insulting Scottish Conservatives in a way that only plays into the [independence campaign's hands](#).

Who cares if the hardest of Brexits offers succour to the cause of Scottish independence?

Third, all over Britain, families are suffering as a result of this government's policies. Johnson won his majority by promising not only to get Brexit done, but to "level up" the country. That was just empty rhetoric: his chancellor, Rishi Sunak, has continued the approach of his predecessors since 2010,

introducing the biggest ever one-off benefit cut, on top of the last decade's tax credit cuts that have seen some low-income parents lose thousands of pounds a year even as more affluent families have had their tax bills reduced. Refugees fleeing war zones and human rights abuses have found themselves at the sharp end of a culture war with Priti Patel's Home Office.

Finally, the last few weeks of revelations about Johnson's hypocrisy on Covid do not just damage the Conservative party. Like the expenses scandal more than a decade ago, it undermines public trust in all politicians and the legitimacy of our democratic institutions. It makes a mockery of the rule of law when ordinary citizens are punished for breaking the law, but senior politicians, political aides and civil servants appear to neatly sidestep the consequences.

From electoral asset to liability

Every day Johnson continues as prime minister, the damage he does grows. As his evolution from electoral asset to electoral liability dawns on his party, it is looking increasingly likely that they will not allow him to continue in office for much longer. But Britain's political crisis will not be over. The choice of the next prime minister would fall to Conservative MPs and party members. Johnson's likely successors are all complicit in the government's dreadful track record.

The only hope lies in a renewed Labour party winning the next general election. [Keir Starmer](#) has emerged from recent weeks as a man of competence, integrity and values. Labour still has a long way to go in addressing the reasons why it lost voters in 2019 and communicating what a Starmer premiership would achieve for Britain, but they are advancing from the terrible defeat Jeremy Corbyn led them to then.

Prime minister [Boris Johnson](#) is a creation of the modern Conservative party. Tory MPs propelled this charlatan to No 10 entirely because it suited their narrow interests, with no regard for the consequences for the country. It is extraordinary how little contrition many of those who backed him have shown. Johnson's resignation is not enough: the Conservative party itself must be held accountable for his disastrous premiership.

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[**Coronavirus**](#)

What were you doing while No 10 held parties? – cartoon

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NotebookUK news

**Book readers have realised that you
can't replace the feel of turning a real
page**

[Tim Adams](#)



Record sales show that even the ability to carry thousands of books in one portable electronic device is not enough



‘The unexpected triumph of printed books proves the fact that not all upgrades represent progress.’ Photograph: Neil Hall/EPA

Sat 15 Jan 2022 12.00 EST

In 2009, when Amazon’s Kindle [ebook was launched](#) in the UK, it seemed impossible to imagine that a dozen years later booksellers would be reporting [a record year](#) of sales of paperbacks and hardbacks. Despite the fact that [bookshops were closed](#) for three months early in 2021, figures show that the rejuvenation of the printed word has gathered pace.

That trend undermines the tech companies’ seductive promises that apps and platforms will always and inevitably eclipse physical objects. The unexpected triumph of printed books – partly a result of their enhanced design values – proves that not all upgrades represent progress.

As the great after-hours polymath Tom Waits once [observed to me](#): “If I want to walk out in the desert and heat up a tin of beans on a fire, I still can. In movies such as *Gattaca*, the space-age stuff is always all there is. But in the world there is never just one way of living. It’s more like a big junkyard. Put it this way: I’m not afraid I’m going to end up on a space station in aluminium-foil underwear.”

Beguiled by slime



Merlin Sheldrake: ‘Nature is an event that never stops.’ Photograph: Samir Hussein/Getty Images for BoF VOICES

Among the more surprising books that currently feature on bestseller lists are those devoted to the biography of the ground beneath our feet. Merlin Sheldrake’s mesmerising [Entangled Life](#), his quest into the subterranean kingdom of fungi, began that trend. I’ve subsequently been hooked on Susanne Wedlich’s uncovering of 3bn years of *Slime* and Robin Wall Kimmerer’s cultural history, *Gathering Mosses*. If these books share a thread it is that life is fundamentally cooperation; its principle “we”, not “I”. As the magically named Sheldrake puts it: “A mycelial network is a helpful reminder that all life-forms are processes not things. The ‘you’ of five years ago was made from different stuff than the ‘you’ of today. Nature is an event that never stops.”

Legal aid



Jolyon Maugham's latest victory in the high court, proved the illegality of the government's 'VIP lane'. Photograph: Jean-Francois Pelletier/Alamy

British people find it hard to take lawyers to their hearts. An exception might have to be made, however, for [Jolyon Maugham](#) and his Good Law Project.

On a busy news day last Wednesday, with the competing shame of the prime minister and Prince Andrew dominating the headlines, Maugham's [latest victory](#) in the high court, proving the illegality of the government's "VIP lane" for PPE procurement, was relegated downpage. As the full detail of the billions squandered in the chaotic early response to the pandemic emerges, however, it may well prove the story that most defines the unravelling core belief of Johnsonism – that laws are for other people.

Old haunts



Jan Morris at home in Wales: ‘It HAS been fun!’ Photograph: Antonio Olmos/The Observer

My journalistic highlight of the past couple of years was visiting 93-year-old [Jan Morris](#) at her home in north Wales. Morris, the most mercurial of spirits, was full of a powerful presentiment both of her mortality and what might come next. She gaily imagined an afterlife that involved both a great love affair with [Lord Jacky Fisher](#), former admiral of the fleet, and the haunting of her two spiritual homes: the River Dwyfor beside her house and the cliffs of Trieste, where she would again “watch the nightingales swarm”.

Her life exemplified a belief that there’s no need to settle as a single being. That shape-shifting spirit is alive and well in the new posthumous collection of Morris’s essays, [Allegorizing](#).

In one, she dreams of an alternative Britain in which Princess Diana, our “patron sinner”, still bewitches the world in a “summer dress of blazing crimson and an amazing hat”, eternally uttering the fond farewell Morris always aspired to: “It HAS been fun!”

Tim Adams in an Observer columnist

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OpinionBBC

Sometimes a statue is indefensible – the BBC should get rid of Eric Gill

[Catherine Bennett](#)



Its response to the paedophile artist's vandalised work is highly misguided



Eric Gill with his *Prospero and Ariel* sculpture in 1932. Photograph: Hulton Deutsch/Corbis/Getty Images

Sun 16 Jan 2022 02.00 EST

Perhaps bravely, the BBC is making a [drama series about Jimmy Savile](#), exploring how its former favourite managed a double life as a star and paedophile, dying before being unmasked in an ITV documentary.

Savile's victims have, it's reported, been involved in a production likely to show how his extraordinary status, giving him opportunities for years of attacks, derived from a doting state broadcaster. The series will inevitably remind audiences how BBC executives subsequently [suppressed](#) their journalists' attempts to expose his crimes.

Given this historical but probably indelible association with one of the UK's most infamous paedophiles, it's unfortunate the corporation's flagship building should still double as a monument to another notorious British pervert, [Eric Gill](#). Last week, Gill's most famous public sculpture, *Prospero and Ariel*, was badly vandalised in front of an audience including various police officers and spectators from the BBC.

In hindsight, the BBC may be wondering if it could have done more to protect a sculpture that is so public, so accessible and so controversial. Maybe by using protective wire, like Cecil Rhodes at Oriel College, with a similarly contextualising, Oliver Dowden-mollifying [plaque](#). “[Retain and explain](#)”, according to the former culture secretary, is the correct way to reconcile a statue’s critics with the object of their understandable revulsion. Although it’s hard to see, as with the Edward Colston statue, what inscription would answer here. Gill’s work ornaments a key national building. What, in his case, justifies continued public display of a piece whose revised but still monumental message is “made by a famous child abuser”?

As for the “leftwing snowflakes” who, according to Dowden’s successor, Nadine Dorries, enjoy “tearing down statues”, does that define everyone who recoils from Gill’s behaviour and, along with it, his work? Like the nude studies of the daughters he was raping? To complicate matters, the way Gill harmed these children belongs, thankfully, to no tradition sacred to earlier generations, not in 1933, not in 1633 or 1033.

As for the ‘leftwing snowflakes’, does that define everyone who recoils from Gill’s behaviour and, along with it, his work

After last week’s distressing but not wholly surprising attack, the [BBC](#) informed the public that Shakespeare’s Ariel “as the spirit of the air, was seen as an appropriate symbol for the new dawn of broadcasting”. Supposing this notion ever really worked – the novelist Penelope Fitzgerald pointed out that Ariel was a liar, “pretending that someone’s father had died full fathom five, when in point of fact he was safe and well” – metaphorical difficulties seem unlikely to have provoked the vandalism. Though it’s a reminder that Two Little Boys was once a sweet song loved by Margaret Thatcher.

“The BBC,” the statement continued, “doesn’t condone the views or actions of Eric Gill. Clearly there are debates about whether you can separate the work of an artist from the art itself. We think the right thing to do is for people to have those discussions. We don’t think the right approach is to damage the artwork itself.”

But who thinks the BBC does condone Gill's offences or that damaging his artwork is a great idea? There's no response, however, to a reasonable proposal that it be moved, given that survivors have called its current prominence an insult, mocking, "[intolerable](#)". With the further difficulty, in this specific case, of separating the artist from the art being elevated. At least one art critic has reported feeling "[aesthetic revulsion](#)" from Gill's sculptures, including *Prospero and Ariel*.

It was carved in 1932, with Gill adding to a *Tempest* theme he seems never to have grasped some godly content of his own. For Gill, religion and sex were indivisible ("we are fucked by Christ, and bear children to him"). Both the sculptor and the statues created a stir, in relation to Ariel's penis size, but nothing approaching the reaction when, in 1989, his biographer, the late Fiona MacCarthy, [disclosed](#) that the pious Gill was a child abuser. There were diary entries, previously ignored, in which Gill recorded furtive sexual encounters with two of his daughters, as well as with his dog. Though women of all ages were targeted the married Gill, a superficially droll figure in his monk's habit and "girdle of chastity".

And some criticisms of his Ariel were probably not, it emerged, vexatious. Gill liked causing trouble. He was also, MacCarthy found, phallically obsessed. His own dimensions were scrupulously recorded, sometimes with female assistance. In one tract, [Trousers & the Most Precious Ornament](#), the saintly penis liberator rails against modern containment: "All sidewise, dishonoured, neglected, ridiculed and ridiculous – no longer the virile member." Gill was certainly blessed in both his biographer, since MacCarthy did not allow his "strange urge for the sordid" to qualify her appreciation of his work, and in the timing of these revelations, not long before Savile was knighted.

Being inflicted long before survivors began to be heard on what had been done to them by priests, by teachers and inside children's homes, and before the evidence of Savile, Gary Glitter and Rolf Harris, Gill's initial reputational damage was strikingly limited. Even 10 years later, a *Guardian* obituary of one of Gill's daughters could depict the incestuous rapes, since these could hardly be ignored, as paternal encouragement: "He introduced Betty and Petra to the mysteries of sex and recorded the occasions in his diaries." Gill apologists liked to stress that neither girl had publicly

complained of abuse. But their father, keeping it secret, was in no doubt. “This must stop,” he wrote.

Outside the BBC, Gill’s abuse is finally catching up with his artistic legacy. Save the Children is going to stop using his typeface Gill sans. The [Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft](#), in which Gill’s work is central, is committed to showing his work without separating it from his abuse.

A still greater sensitivity, given the feelings of survivors about its far more prominent collection, might have been expected from the BBC. Instead, in an uncanny echo of Savile, it seems again to be struggling with plain sight.

Catherine Bennett is an Observer columnist

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Observer lettersCensus

Letters: my ancestors, the key workers

Delving into a family history in Birmingham reveals the value of working-class jobs, then and now



A lace factory in Birmingham in the 1850s. Photograph: INTERFOTO/Alamy

Sun 16 Jan 2022 01.00 EST

David Olusoga described his emotions on seeing his grandparents' lives recorded in the 1921 census ("[Time collapsed as I saw how my grandad lived a century ago. History turned intimate](#)", Comment). I too have wept while researching my family history through the censuses of 1841 onwards. My forebears lived in industrial Birmingham and experienced the hardships of those times, including overcrowding, infant mortality and low life expectancy. I have found my ancestors in orphanages and asylums and discovered the range of work they carried out in the "city of a thousand trades". Their work was hard and often did not provide an income to cover decent housing, even if it had been available, though the goods they made

were sold all over the world. This is history I never learned at school and rarely see dramatised on screen.

During the pandemic, we have begun waking up to issues of historical and contemporary injustice but we are still a divided society and prepared to turn a blind eye to the fact that we benefit from the labour of people who cannot afford decent housing and healthy food, whether in this country or beyond. They are the key workers who have been so essential over the past two years.

Susanne Wood
Warwick

Johnson's time is up

“Only levelling up can save Johnsonism from being little but a hollow creed” ([Comment](#)): the headline on Anne McElvoy’s thoughtful column was wrong on only one crucial point. There is no such thing as “Johnsonism” and never has been, only an unprincipled political shape-shifter driven by hubris, personal ambition and a delusional image of himself as a kind of Churchill reincarnate. From Brexit to Covid crisis blunders and an addiction to snappy slogans over coherent policy strategies, Boris Johnson epitomised a passing public appetite for the “celebrity politician” with hollow comedic flair substituted for serious, substantive ideas.

The polls suggest the public is now ahead of much of the media in seeing through Johnson on several fronts, including Brexit where Buyers Remorse continues to gain momentum as reality replaces mis-sold fantasy. Combine that with the looming cost-of-living crisis and a sleaze and hypocrisy legacy that will refuse to go away and 2022 is the year when the Tory party’s ruthless self-survival instincts will seal Johnson’s fate. The May local election results could well prove breaking point when the men in blue suits conclude the prime minister’s time is up. As per the two words with which Ms McElvoy concluded: tick tock.

Paul Connew
St Albans, Hertfordshire

Smart shopping? Hardly

Supermarkets occupy a particular place in retailing, because everyone needs food (“[Do smart supermarkets herald the end of shopping as we know it?](#)”, Magazine). Large corporations (whether existing supermarkets or newcomers such as Amazon) tell us that “smart” shops are for our benefit, but really they’re cost-saving for the companies. And do those savings get returned to the customer in lower prices? No, they increase company profits and hence dividends to shareholders. And what happens to the checkout and other low-paid staff who lose their jobs? They’re likely to need state benefits. So automation of our shopping becomes yet another indirect route (alongside privatising or outsourcing public sector functions) for funnelling taxpayers’ money into shareholders’ pockets. But if too many people lose their jobs to “smart” automation, who will pay tax to fund the benefits to those left un- or under-employed?

Pam Lunn

Kenilworth, Warwickshire

Stop striving. Start thinking

“[Can you think yourself young?](#)” (the New Review) looks at the issue from the wrong side. Evolution and resource constraints dictate that the growth and numbers of all living things must be limited. For the vast number of species, this means death. Thus, it could be that thinking fatalistically about death makes the inevitable easier to face and faster to come. And to ensure future generations have a habitable planet, all of us of all ages must “rethink our perceptions” that we must forever be achieving something in order to be fulfilled. Constant striving can be exhausting to the individual and ruinous to the planet. A better question might be: “Can you think yourself at peace?”

Jon Burden

London W14

So much for going green

A subheading to the article “[What I’ve learned from my year with an electric car](#)” (Focus) equates driving an electric car with going green. The huge carbon costs of manufacturing and transporting cars, the environmental and human costs of lithium mining, the enormous amount of electricity needed to enable mass electric car use, the damage to human health of particulate

pollution caused by the friction between tyres and Tarmac: these do not add up to going green.

We need to stop presenting electric cars as good for the environment. They are simply less damaging than petrol or diesel cars. Going green means walking, cycling and using public transport.

Hazel Pennington

Bath

Science, but not as we know it

In “[Is this the dawn of post-theory science?](#)” (the New Review), Laura Spinney paints a picture that should be familiar, but depressing, to many working in the human and life sciences. She asks whether the “classic methodology of hypothesise, predict and test” has been superseded by big data and machine learning. As she rightly notes, this is to replace the traditional scientific project of understanding the world with one of merely predicting it. But this is not to propose a new way of doing science, but to propose not doing science at all. One can understand why Facebook and Google might want to “stop looking for the causes of things and be satisfied with correlations”. But why should humanity?

Gabe Dupre

Macclesfield, Cheshire

It's simple, Simon

Simon Reeve’s reflections on his travels (“[I worry I’m a climate hypocrite](#)”, News) should serve as a prompt for programme makers to consider their impact on the environment. There may be a case (as Reeve explains) for engaging the audience by capturing “honest stories about what’s happening to our planet” and thus shocking the viewer. However, such tactics have been claimed before and they may do more to induce inertia and feelings of helplessness than to spur people into positive action.

Much harder to make a case for entertainment by “celebrities” clocking up air, land and sea miles in motorised vehicles. Do they do this on our behalf, so we don’t have to, thereby helping us all to minimise our own carbon

footprint? Or are they about presenting themselves as having a jolly outing and inviting us to do likewise? The latter possibility is all the more worrying when it involves quests for ever new places to “discover” – places that have so far escaped the onslaught of tourism.

The plethora of media messages asserting what we must do in order to combat climate change needs to translate into personal commitments of, I will do today, tomorrow and thereafter. Any programme and presenter of the world around us should be able to justify the associated environmental cost by bringing about this shift in attitude. In the absence of such justification, they really should face the charge of climate hypocrisy.

Sibille Herdeis

Frimley Green, Surrey

I'm a (non-)believer

As a Catholic, I disagree with Harlan Coben's opinion that, unlike Jews, “you don't see too many Catholics... saying, ‘Oh, I'm a Catholic, but I don't buy a word of it’” (“[This much I know](#)”, Magazine). This prompted a two-minute rant to my long-suffering wife, also a Catholic who doesn't buy a word of it. So I was delighted to read, again in the Magazine (“[Sunday with...](#)”), the musician Maverick Sabre's comment that “I went to a Catholic school like most kids in Ireland, but we weren't religious”.

Peter Connolly

Newcastle upon Tyne

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/commentisfree/2022/jan/16/observer-letters-my-ancestors-key-workers>

For the record

For the record

This week's corrections

Sun 16 Jan 2022 01.00 EST

An article about sexual assault claims against Prince Andrew said: “[Carolyn] Andriano told the *Mail* that [Virginia] Giuffre sent a picture of her with the prince by text.” Andriano actually said Giuffre had shown her the picture in person ([Friend of Giuffre: ‘she told me she slept with prince’](#), 9 January, p4).

The Covid-19 self-isolation period in Wales was seven days when an article was published, not 10 days ([Ten days, seven or five... how long does the science say we should stay home?](#), 2 January, p13). It was reduced from 10 days to seven on 31 December.

Harlan Coben was misquoted as saying: “When I started my Harlan Coben series a lot of it was wish fulfilment.” The author was referring to his Myron Bolitar series ([This much I know](#), 9 January, Magazine, p7).

The referendum on having a regional assembly for north-east England was held in 2004, not “more than 25 years ago” as a column said due to an error introduced during editing ([It’s hard to ‘level up’ when No 10 is bearing down on us](#), 2 January, p53).

Other recently amended articles include:

[I lost more than £12,000 in a scam and the Co-operative Bank won’t resolve it](#)

[Restoring hope: ‘Why can’t we recreate the old energy of Sarajevo?’](#)

[As A-listers shun Golden Globes, have awards shows had their day?](#)

Lack of English speakers embarrasses Czech coalition

Oxford Street buildings through time – photo essay

Why the climate-wrecking craze for crypto art really is beyond satire

It's simple and takes 20 minutes... But learning to meditate could unlock your inner calm

*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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OpinionChina

No friendly politician is too obscure for insecure China, not even Barry Gardiner

[Nick Cohen](#)



The Communist party is obsessive in its demand for respect, at home and abroad



Labour MP Barry Gardiner took £420,000 from Christine Ching Kui Lee, who MI5 says has established links to Beijing. Photograph: UK Parliament/PA

Sat 15 Jan 2022 14.00 EST

The Chinese Communist party appears utterly deluded. Hasn't it learned in its 100-year history that some politicians aren't worth buying? Wasting its money, or rather the money of the subjugated Chinese people, on Barry Gardiner, of all MPs, seems more silly than sinister. Why bother?

If you've never heard of him, Gardiner is an unremarkable Corbynista, who has continued the far left's tradition of excusing anti-western dictatorships. The Labour MP took £420,000, a large whack even by the lax standards of Westminster, from Christine Ching Kui Lee, an influence-peddler MI5 said had "[established links](#)" for Beijing with British politicians.

Suddenly, Gardiner had to find excuses for himself rather than a regime that is [terrorising the Uyghur people](#), occupying Tibet and crushing democracy in Hong Kong. He said he [didn't know Lee had links](#) to a hostile foreign power – presumably, he thought she was rewarding his stand on renationalising the railways. And in any case he had been "critical of the Chinese government

on many occasions”. This was news to the journalists who recorded the revolting moment when Gardiner was in Corbyn’s shadow cabinet and [deplored on the BBC](#), “the escalation of violence between protesters in Hong Kong and ordinary people in Hong Kong”, as if the threat to “ordinary people” is not a dictatorial superpower that stamps their rights into the dust. But when Gardiner said he was a “very poor investment” from a Chinese point of view, he was right, and he brought back my original question: why bother?

The answer is that, as [Xi Jinping](#) turns China from a one-party state into a one-man imperium, everything matters. No detail is too small to sweat. No sympathetic politician too obscure to ignore. With opponents, Xi demands a gangster’s respect by unleashing retaliation out of all proportion to the original offence. China explodes at trivial examples of opposition a stable superpower would have the self-confidence to ignore.

If you want to know why Muslim countries [stay silent](#) about the persecution of fellow Muslims in Xinjiang or why scientists were so quick to dismiss the theory that the Covid pandemic began with a leak from a Wuhan lab, look at China’s willingness to use overweening force to secure conformity with the party line. Filippa Lentzos, of the Centre for Science and Security Studies at King’s College, London, was describing Covid scientists when she said they did not talk about lab leaks “[because they feared for their careers \[and\] their grants](#)”. But she might have been describing businesses and governments, too.

Last year, I heard the Czech politician Zdeněk Hřib explain to the leaders of European cities how he had learned the hard way why they should not allow Chinese technology in their infrastructure or have any dealings with the organs of the Chinese state. He discovered when he became mayor of Prague in 2018 that the city had committed itself to supporting Xi’s one-China policy, as part of an apparently harmless twinning agreement with Beijing. Hřib abandoned the policy because he was a liberal who did not agree with forcing Taiwanese people into a communist state against their wishes. In any event, he thought it ridiculous for a central European city to take a position on conflicts in the far east. China reacted as if he had declared war. It banned cultural contacts. Czech oligarchs with Chinese interests hired hack journalists and PR shills to attack him. Miloš Zeman, who was then the

Czech republic's Trumpian president, warned him and Prague of "unpleasant consequences".

Today it is Lithuania's turn. [China](#) is blocking imports and threatening multinationals with punishments if they do business with the tiny Baltic country, solely because it trades with Taiwan.

There is no greater intimidatory threat to Chinese people in the UK than the Chinese Communist party

We should bother, not out of admiration for this government's apparent policy of committing British forces to fight alongside the US in a war over Taiwan, but because of what China is doing to Britain. The Chinese embassy showed why when it responded to the spying claims by accusing the security service of "[smearing and intimidation against the Chinese community in the UK](#)".

Muslims, Jews, Chinese people and others undoubtedly worry about blowback when global politics turns national attention towards minorities. But in this instance there is no greater intimidatory threat to Chinese people in the UK than the Chinese Communist party. Or, for that matter, to Chinese people in China. Within hours of the Gardiner story breaking, a contact who works for the pro-democracy movement told me that, even after they have found asylum in the UK, Hong Kong activists communicate through encrypted apps because they worry about what could happen to them here and to their families in China. Just before Christmas, two activists who dared to speak publicly described their "never-ending fear" to the [New Statesman](#). You could see why they were frightened. Anonymous spies had offered £10,000 on the Chinese social media platform WeChat for their work or home addresses.

Meanwhile, universities, so quick to atone for the slavery of the past, show little concern for [modern-day slavery in Xinjiang](#) as they hoover up Chinese money. They say they want safe spaces to protect students from the tiniest of micro-aggressions, and yet allow the Chinese state, via its on-campus [Confucius Institutes](#), to keep tabs on Chinese students and their teachers. The government should close them, as the [Swedish government has](#), and act

to build the UK's resilience against dictatorial enemies. But there's the rub. It's not just that the collapsing Johnson administration is incapable of taking serious measures. Even when the Tories were in their pomp, they showed no inclination to damn the sources of corruption.

Honourable MPs and whistleblowers have warned for years that the openness of the City, the libel law, estate agency and indeed the Conservative party to dubious Russian money undermined national security. Last summer, I wrote that all the professional services a dictatorship could want was on open sale in the capital, and warned that if Putin's allies did not worry ministers, they "should reflect on what will happen when the Chinese Communist party realises what London has to offer".

No worthwhile reforms followed, for a reason I should have grasped at the time. Worthwhile reform is impossible for as long as the Conservatives remain in power.

Nick Cohen is an Observer columnist

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/jan/15/no-friendly-politician-is-too-obscure-for-insecure-china-not-even-barry-gardiner>

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- [Downing Street No 10 apologises to Queen over parties on eve of Prince Philip funeral](#)
- [Analysis Which of Johnson's colleagues will be first to publicly withdraw support?](#)
- [Timeline How alleged parties took place as death toll rose](#)
- [Analysis Apology to the Queen marks a new low for a PM](#)

Boris Johnson

No 10 apologises to Queen over parties on eve of Prince Philip funeral

Boris Johnson's spokesperson says 'it's deeply regrettable that this took place at a time of national mourning'

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



Two leaving parties, for the former director of communications James Slack and a government photographer, were reportedly held on 16 April.
Photograph: Andy Rain/EPA

[Heather Stewart](#), [Rowena Mason](#), [Jessica Murray](#) and [Steven Morris](#)

Fri 14 Jan 2022 08.19 EST

Downing Street was forced to issue an unprecedented public apology to the Queen on Friday over parties held in No 10 on the eve of her husband's funeral, amid mounting fury from grassroots Tories.

Conservative MPs will hold crisis talks over the weekend about how to respond to allegations of a party culture in Westminster while the rest of the country was in lockdown.

The civil servant Sue Gray, who is investigating the allegations, is now understood to be looking at three more events, two held on the night before Prince Philip's funeral on 16 April 2021 and one held on 17 December 2020.

In total 13 parties held on government premises while coronavirus restrictions were in place – most of them in Downing Street – have been disclosed. However allegations in the Mirror have said that events in No 10 became so regular they were dubbed “wine-time Fridays” and staff bought a drinks fridge to store their alcohol. The paper claims that Boris Johnson attended a “handful” of the events at a time when indoor socialising was banned.

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'I apologise for the impression': how Boris Johnson has responded to lockdown party claims – video

Senior figures in a string of Conservative constituency associations told the Guardian that support for the prime minister was draining away. Mark Rowley, chairman of the Kettering Conservative Association, said: "At a local level, we're losing members. People are just not renewing their membership, or they're actively cancelling their membership. So people are starting to talk with their feet."

"Personally, I think he should resign," he said, adding that he had written to the Conservative chair, Oliver Dowden, to express his members' "dismay".

Martin Trollope-Bellew, chair of the Grantham and Stamford Conservatives and once a staunch supporter of Johnson, said "it appears the wheels are coming off".

“Some of the members, the longstanding members, are being very vocal about saying he ought to go,” he said, although added he would be waiting until the result of Gray’s investigation before taking a stance.

Richard Clewer, the Tory leader of Wiltshire council, said: “It’s critical we follow the guidance that public health put out as leaders and politicians – no questions asked, we should.

“There has clearly been a significant failure of management inside No 10. I don’t know who that sits with, but I guess leadership comes from the top.”

On Friday night a poll released by Savanta Comres gave Labour a 10-point lead, on 42 points against 32 for the Conservatives.

Johnson chose to make no public statement on Friday, after news emerged of two leaving parties held in No 10 on 16 April 2021.

Instead, his deputy spokesperson told journalists: “It’s deeply regrettable that this took place at a time of national mourning, and No 10 has apologised to the palace for that.”

He declined to say whether Johnson would apologise in person to the Queen at his next private audience with her, but said the prime minister recognised the public’s “significant anger”.

The Labour leader, Keir Starmer, said: “An apology isn’t the only thing the prime minister should be offering the palace today. [Boris Johnson](#) should do the decent thing and resign.”

The monarch [mourned alone at her husband’s funeral](#) because Covid rules at the time prohibited indoor mixing.

Two leaving parties in No 10, details of which emerged in the Daily Telegraph, involved a case of wine bottles, and continued into the early hours of the morning in the Downing Street garden.

The prime minister did not attend the parties, and his spokesperson said he was not aware they were taking place.

Johnson has not appeared in public since prime minister's questions on Wednesday, when he apologised for attending a "bring your own booze" gathering on 20 May 2020, but insisted he believed it was a "work event".

The prime minister's spokesperson has suggested Johnson is exercising caution after a close family member tested positive for Covid – though government guidance no longer obliges double-vaccinated people to isolate.

It also emerged on Friday that Johnson "commuted" back and forth between Downing Street and Chequers in the first few days of lockdown in March 2020, when the public were being told to "stay at home".

Tortoise reported that the prime minister travelled between his two residences until 27 March, despite ordering a full lockdown on 23 March. A Downing Street spokesperson said: "At that time Mrs Johnson was heavily pregnant and had been placed in a vulnerable category and advised to minimise social contact.

"In line with clinical guidance and to minimise the risk to her they were based at Chequers during this period, with the prime minister commuting to Downing Street to work."

Several MPs including the Scottish Conservative leader, Douglas Ross, and the backbencher Andrew Bridgen have [called for Johnson to resign](#).

Johnson's cabinet colleagues have agreed to wait until Gray's report is published before deciding what action should be taken.

One minister said it could still go either way. "If Sue Gray doesn't come up with anything more than we already know, and it concludes the events were not illegal, then maybe he could still find a way of recovering his mojo." But the minister said equally Johnson was at a point of "very great danger".

Backbench Conservative MPs said on Friday that his departure had most likely been hastened by the latest revelations. "I suspect it will bring forward the 'when'," said one former minister.

MPs said they would be having calls and Zoom meetings over the weekend to discuss strategy.

News of yet another party emerged on Friday, with the Daily Telegraph reporting that leaving drinks were held for the head of the Covid taskforce, Kate Josephs, on 17 December 2020. Josephs, who is chief executive of Sheffield city council, issued a statement saying she was “truly sorry”.

Dave Penman, general secretary of the FDA trade union, which represents senior civil servants, expressed concern that what he called the “selective leaking” of incidents was “increasingly designed to push the blame on to civil servants.”

“Everyone has to take responsibility for their own actions, but clearly those in leadership positions set the tone and expectation,” he said. “I would hope – and expect – that the investigation will ensure responsibility and accountability are reflected fairly and proportionately, regardless of position.”

James Slack, Johnson’s former head of communications, issued his [own apology on Friday](#) after it was reported that one of the 16 April events was a leaving party to mark his exit as he left to take up a post as deputy editor of the Sun. He said: “I wish to apologise unreservedly for the anger and hurt caused. This event should not have happened at the time that it did. I am deeply sorry, and take full responsibility.”

* Additional reporting by Mark Brown

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/jan/14/no-10-apologises-palace-parties-eve-prince-philip-funeral-queen-covid>

Boris Johnson

Which of Johnson's colleagues will be first to publicly withdraw support?

With the PM on the ropes, senior Tories' lukewarm endorsements may be withdrawn as their ambitions rise



Rishi Sunak and Liz Truss are seen as frontrunners to replace Boris Johnson.
Photograph: Jessica Taylor/UK Parliament /AFP/Getty Images

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

Sat 15 Jan 2022 03.00 EST

If it is a political truism that a cabinet is all smiles when the ruling party is well ahead in the polls, it is equally the case that nothing highlights ministerial ambitions more than a vulnerable PM.

With [Boris Johnson](#) on the ropes over lockdown party allegations, all eyes are now on his cabinet colleagues and other senior Tories.

Most have offered him support – so far. But will any break cover over the weekend, particularly if there are any new revelations?

The Guardian looks at the ones to watch.

Rishi Sunak

The chancellor's endorsement of Johnson was one of the latest, and perhaps the most equivocal. Having spent Wednesday 200 miles from the Commons on a visit to Devon, Sunak waited until eight hours after Johnson's apology [to tweet](#) that this had been the correct thing to do and "I support his request for patience while Sue Gray carries out her inquiry."

Since then there has been silence, met by irritation among some fellow Tory MPs about the lukewarm extent of Sunak's public support for his boss, and how it hints at his apparent eagerness to take over.

Liz Truss

As another perceived frontrunner to replace Johnson, the foreign secretary's long delay in [tweeting support](#) for the PM – it took until 9.15pm on Wednesday, an hour after even Sunak – was viewed as significant.

Unlike the chancellor, Truss has been spotted since, defending Johnson in a BBC interview. Even here, however, the message was not entirely straightforward. While talking up the PM's wider record, arguing "I think we now need to move on", a grave-faced Truss said of the lockdown parties: "We are very clear that there were real mistakes made."

Michael Gove

The levelling up secretary was given the unenviable task of defending Johnson publicly at the 1922 meeting of Tory backbenchers on Wednesday.

He did so robustly, saying Johnson had made the right calls on Covid and laying into Scottish Conservative leader Douglas Ross, who has [called for the prime minister to resign](#).

But Gove is likely to have been frustrated that a crucial announcement on dangerous cladding remediation was overshadowed by the continuing rows over parties.

And Gove has form for changing his mind.

Johnson allies have never quite trusted him since he scuppered the prime minister's first leadership bid in 2016.

Jeremy Hunt

The former foreign secretary has been rebuilding his reputation from the backbenches as chair of the health and social care select committee. He has tried and failed in a pitch for the leadership once before, and would be a rank outsider this time too. But some commentators have suggested he might still have a chance – and his quiet manner would certainly be an antidote to the mayhem of Johnson's chaotic time in Downing Street. Hunt has admitted his ambitions have “waned a bit”, but that might not stop him from sticking the boot in to the man who beat him in 2019.

Theresa May

Few critics of Johnson have been as forensic as the former prime minister, who was tortured during her own time in No 10 by Johnson. She has described him as “ill-judged and wrong” over his handling of the Owen Paterson sleaze allegations and decried him for threatening to break international law during Brexit trade negotiations. Johnson, she said, had abandoned “global moral leadership.”

Is this the moment to exact a final revenge?

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/jan/15/which-of-johnsons-colleagues-will-be-first-to-break-cover-and-withdraw-support>

Coronavirus

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

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

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

Pamela Duncan, Pablo Gutiérrez, Ashley Kirk, Miles Probyn and Tobi Thomas

Fri 14 Jan 2022 07.26 EST

The UK government and the Conservative party have been rocked by a series of claims about staff parties held in Downing Street and elsewhere in Whitehall. Some have argued the “partygate” scandal could ultimately topple the prime minister.

With more than [175,000](#) Covid deaths to date, the Guardian plots the UK death toll against dates on which the staff parties are alleged to have occurred, as well as previous controversies involving alleged breaches of lockdown rules and Johnson’s recent comments on the 2020 gatherings.

UK cumulative Covid deaths

Restrictions level:

1 Mar 2020

dummy

dummy

15 May 2020

421 deaths that day

"Cheese and wine" in the No 10 garden

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

20 May 2020

353 deaths that day

"BYOB" party in No 10 garden

Boris Johnson was accused on 10 January 2022 of an "utterly outrageous" lockdown breach as a leaked email showed one of his top officials invited more than 100 Downing Street staff to a "bring your own booze" party during the first lockdown. After initially refusing to address the issue, on 12 January 2022 at PMQs, he accepted that he did attend but that he thought it was a work event.

23 May 2020

284 deaths that day

Cummings Barnard Castle story published

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

13 Nov 2020

450 deaths that day

Alleged Downing Street flat party

This is the date that Johnson's chief adviser, Cummings, and communications director, Lee Cain, left their roles. Sources have reported loud music and sounds of a party coming from the flat occupied by Johnson and his wife on this date. Cummings has alleged there had been "other flat parties" and suggested the pair's "bubble" policy should be investigated. Asked if a party went ahead in his flat on 13 November, Johnson said: "No."

25 Nov 2020

499 deaths that day

Treasury officials' "impromptu drinks"

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

27 Nov 2020

460 deaths that day

Boris Johnson gives leaving speech for Cleo Watson

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

10 Dec 2020

496 deaths that day

Department for Education staff party thrown by Gavin Williamson

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

14 Dec 2020

506 deaths that day

CCHQ Christmas party for Shaun Bailey

A picture – first revealed by the Daily Mirror – showed that an event hosted by the campaign for Shaun Bailey had been held at the Conservative

campaign headquarters while indoor socialising was still banned by the continuing Covid restrictions.

15 Dec 2020

507 deaths that day

Virtual Christmas quiz attended by Boris Johnson

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

16 Dec 2020

484 deaths that day

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

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

17 Dec 2020

567 deaths that day

Cabinet Office Christmas party

A social event is alleged to have taken place in the cabinet secretary, Simon Case's office on 17 December 2020. Case, who was tasked in late 2021 with

investigating other parties alleged to have taken place in the same period, stepped down from the role following allegations that the event had taken place among his staff while all indoor social mixing was barred in late 2020. It was later reported that another event occurred at the Cabinet Office that day after Kate Josephs, the former Covid taskforce head, apologised for attending a drinks gathering to mark her leaving the civil service.

18 Dec 2020

586 deaths that day

Downing Street Christmas party

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

16 Apr 2021

31 deaths that day

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

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

26 Jun 2021

17 deaths that day

Matt Hancock resigns after breach of his own lockdown rules

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

1 Dec 2021

136 deaths that day

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

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

7 Dec 2021

122 deaths that day

"All the guidelines were observed"

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

8 Dec 2021

119 deaths that day

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

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

13 Dec 2021

101 deaths that day

"I certainly broke no rules"

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

20 Dec 2021

123 deaths that day

"Those were people at work"

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

10 Jan 2022

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

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

12 Jan 2022

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

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

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

Data notes and methodology

UK daily deaths are as recorded by the [Office for National Statistics](#) – which includes all deaths where Covid was mentioned on the death certificate deaths to 31 December, as in the most recent publication – and stood at 176,035 people. This time lag means that the graphic remains static for the final 12 days of the interactive which does not reflect the actual situation on those days.

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

The restrictions level is sourced from the University of Oxford's [coronavirus government response tracker](#). A stringency index score of above 75 is

classed as “very high” restrictions level, above 50 “high”, above 25 “medium” and then anything below is classed as “very low”.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2022/jan/14/how-no-10s-alleged-parties-took-place-as-uk-covid-death-toll-rose-interactive>

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Boris Johnson

Johnson's apology to the Queen marks a new low for a prime minister

Analysis: from Winston Churchill to Theresa May, it would be hard to think of a more humbling and cringeworthy moment



Boris Johnson with the Queen. There has never been a more humiliating prime ministerial grovel than the one he made this week. Photograph: Jack Hill/The Times/PA

[Martin Kettle](#)

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Fri 14 Jan 2022 12.12 EST

After 70 years on the throne, every aspect of the relationship between the monarch and her prime ministers must surely have become deeply, even sometimes wearily, familiar to Elizabeth II. Fourteen very different men and women have held the country's highest political office since 1952 – 10

Conservatives and four Labour. Ideologically, they cover a wide spectrum of views.

Yet they have all been united by one thing: the intense care they have taken never to embarrass the Queen in the slightest way.

Until [Boris Johnson](#).

The thought of having to make a public apology to the monarch [like the one that Johnson made on Friday](#) would likely have sent shivers of shame down the spines of every one of his Downing Street predecessors.

From Winston Churchill to Theresa May, it would be hard to think of a more humbling and cringeworthy moment than having to apologise for their staff partying on the eve of the monarch's husband's funeral in the midst of a plague.

But Johnson is a precedent buster as well as a rule breaker.

He is said to have also apologised to the Queen in 2019 when the [unlawful prorogation of parliament](#) was overturned by the supreme court.

But there has never been a more humiliating prime ministerial grovel than the one he made this week.

That is not to say that all previous prime ministers have behaved with equal tact and deference in every aspect of the relationship with the palace. During the short reign of the Queen's uncle, Edward VIII, in 1936 there was a full-on political battle between the government and the king over whether he would marry Wallis Simpson, an American divorcee.

The then prime minister Stanley Baldwin told the king to his face that the government would resign if he did not abdicate.

When the king asked for time to consult his friends, Baldwin replied tartly: "Who are they?" Edward gave in.

During her own reign, the Queen has sometimes had periods of brittle relations with certain prime ministers. Edward Heath's and Margaret

Thatcher's hostility to the prospect of Commonwealth sanctions against South Africa caused tensions with a monarch whose devotion to the grouping is second to none.

Yet according to Thatcher's biographer Charles Moore, both she and the Queen remained very sensitive to the other's role and views, in spite of the lurking disagreement.

Tony Blair offended some traditionalist courtiers when he pressed the Queen to respond with more public sensitivity to the displays of distress after the death of Diana, Princess of Wales in 1997.

Palace traditionalists attempted to get their own back on Blair by claiming he was getting above himself during the Queen Mother's lying in state in 2002. But there has never been any suggestion that the Queen herself took this view. Blair's memoirs, like those of other prime ministers, are respectful and deferential towards her.

Long ago, the Victorian constitutional expert Walter Bagehot said the British monarch had three rights when meeting a prime minister: to be consulted, to encourage and to warn.

Johnson has added another one to the list: the right to an apology.

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‘Just go for it. Have a shot. I did – I started with nothing’: at home with Vicky McClure



Vicky McClure: ‘I’m always up for anything that’s emotionally challenging.’ Photograph: Paul Farrell/The Guardian. Top and trousers: [nanushka.com](#)

Line of Duty has made her primetime royalty and one of the UK's most watched actors. Now Vicky McClure is paying it forward to a new generation of working-class talent



[Terri White](#)

Sat 15 Jan 2022 03.00 EST

Vicky McClure has just made me a cup of tea and now we're on to the important business of weighing up just how famous she has become. The Line of Duty and This Is England star reckons she's a long way from being an A-lister, insisting her fame is "a bit more like a household-ey name? Maybe in the same vein as a soap?" It's the kind of take you might expect from the grounded Midlander who, despite starring in the [most-watched BBC drama since records began](#), keeps things very real. And she also makes a great cup of tea.

We're talking in the unflashy front room of her cosy house in Nottingham. An ordinary house on an ordinary suburban street; no thick electronic gate, no hovering publicist or personal assistant. Our only (unseen) company is McClure's fiance, fellow actor Jonny Owen, who's pottering around upstairs. Oh, and the builder who knocks on the front door – they're having work done.

But while McClure might not be quite sure about her level of fame, I am (and not just because she has the bone structure of a woman whose face belongs on billboards). We meet in December, after a year in which her career has entered the stratosphere, thanks to Line of Duty and its record-breaking sixth series. The one that the BBC says was streamed [137m times](#), and in which she stars as Kate Fleming, the unemotional, straight-as-a-die undercover specialist. “I mean, we didn’t *quite* expect it to do that,” she says of the show, as we sit, brews on our knees. “I don’t know how you describe it – those kinds of figures just don’t happen any more; we don’t watch telly in that way.” McClure shakes her head. But last year, we did.

The show about corrupt coppers, created by [Jed Mercurio](#), actually began life on BBC Two in 2012, with a respectable few million viewers, before being bumped up to BBC One for its fourth series in 2017, gaining a bigger audience as each series aired, thanks to a growing army of fans who had caught up on streaming. By last year, it was a rare type of cultural phenomenon: a weekly police procedural show on a linear TV channel that stood out in a landscape dominated by on-demand viewing. True event television that people made time to watch, without fail.

It got to the point where I was not enjoying myself as much as I would have done had nobody known me

Soon, its dialogue and character catchphrases – well, superintendent Ted Hastings’ catchphrases (“Mother of God!”, “Jesus, Mary and Joseph and the wee donkey!”) – became memes and merchandise. The anti-corruption unit was even referenced in the Houses of Commons (Keir Starmer said that “Ted Hastings and AC-12 are needed to get to the bottom of this one” over the [David Cameron Greensill lobbying scandal](#)).

As the show’s profile grew, its lead actors’ profiles rocketed. For them it was a decidedly surreal experience that only the three of them – McClure, [Martin Compston](#) (DI Steve Arnott), [Adrian Dunbar](#) (Hastings) – as well as Mercurio, could truly understand. Every Friday night, during the weeks when the show was airing, they’d meet on Zoom, McClure says, “just to discuss how our weeks had been, because it was a lot”. Especially for an actor who prides herself on a normal existence, on keeping a tight hold on

her privacy. “Yeah, it is getting weird,” she admits, concluding that “as long as I can live in this way” – in Nottingham – “I’m happy. I don’t know what’s coming next. You know, me and Jonny are just normal people with extraordinary jobs.”

I’s been a life-changing time for McClure, who at an early stage in her career gave up on acting and got a job in retail. “I’ve never been so solid until last year,” she says. “It was the craziest year of my career.” It’s had an impact off-screen, of course. McClure lists on two fingers the times she went on a night out last year, most recently in Nottingham with her sister, something she hadn’t done in years. “We just said sod it,” she says, then takes a beat as she looks disappointed. “And it was hard work. We were home by 10 o’clock, and that was because people were approaching, taking pictures. And I don’t mind, I will give the selfie, I will chat. But I’m cautious at the moment: we’re in the middle of a shoot [for the ITV thriller Without Sin] and I don’t want to get Covid. So I don’t want to be hugging anyone. It got to the point where I was not enjoying myself as much as I would have done had nobody known me.”

McClure’s authenticity has always been her superpower. She made her name in almost exclusively homegrown films and TV shows, and in her work with the visionary, working-class film-maker [Shane Meadows](#), who first cast her when [she was just 15](#). She’s never even been to Los Angeles (and it doesn’t sound as if she wants to: “I’m all right!”). And, apart from a brief stint in London a decade ago, she has always lived near where she grew up. She fiercely loves her home town and her life there.



Photograph: Paul Farrell/The Guardian. Jumper: christopherkane.com. Trousers: Clements Ribeiro, from koibird.com. Clogs: rejinapyo.com

Of London, she says: “You’re all kind of living on top of each other and you don’t really get to know the community in the same way that you would in suburbia. I know everyone around here. I love my neighbours and everybody’s very normal to me, because I’m normal to them.” It’s a quality her collaborators love in her. [Dominic Savage](#), who co-created [I Am Nicola](#) with McClure – an astonishing, largely improvised drama for Channel 4 about coercive control – tells me he loves her “remarkable instinct for truth, deep understanding and empathy for ordinary life and human nature. She just can’t fake it. She has to feel it, has to believe in it. She is immersed in honesty and saying things as they really are. Everything she does comes from being utterly grounded.” Essentially, he adds: “Working with Vicky was therefore a real joy because there’s no bullshit.”

This year has the potential to make Vicky McClure’s life even weirder. For I’m actually here, on her settee, to talk about her new show, [Trigger Point](#) (which I accidentally keep calling Tipping Point, just like the makeup artist on Line of Duty who exclaimed to McClure of the quizshow, “I didn’t know you presented!”). McClure is starring in ITV’s big new primetime thriller as ex-military bomb disposal operative (otherwise known as an “expo”) Lana Washington. This time, she’s not sharing top billing three ways; while

there's a sterling cast (including [Adrian Lester](#)), this is McClure's show – and has been all along. The part was written with her in mind, by first-time screenwriter Daniel Brierley who offered it to her without an audition. Mercurio is executive producer. It will provoke inevitable but wide of the mark comparisons with Line of Duty. And from the one episode I've seen, it's clear that although they're both women who work in law enforcement, they have very different backstories and lives. "Oh my God, Lana and Kate are worlds apart. But I'd imagine they'd have a great time in the pub," McClure says. "In Line of Duty, I kind of dip my toe into my personal life, but we don't tend to go down that road too much with Kate. So it was lovely: we really get to see Lana outside the expo world. And I'm always up for anything that's emotionally challenging."

Mercurio's involvement runs deep. He mentored Brierley as part of a TV bursary scheme when the show was simply an idea, and has been with him every step of the way since. The mentoring Mercurio isn't perhaps the Mercurio the public are most familiar with, I suggest to McClure. He's more commonly known as, well, a tough cookie (Mercurio has had public [run-ins with journalists](#) and Twitter users).

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"Jed's my friend now, I've worked with him for over 10 years," McClure says, with warmth but firmness. "I see Jed as a tough cookie in so much as he's got real moral standards, and he's not afraid to be heard. He's an extremely intelligent man, so you can learn a lot from him. And I think he speaks on behalf of people in a really direct way, in a world in which people are a bit afraid to do that. So I've got the utmost respect for him. He's willing to put himself out there and very generous with his time. He wants to share what he's learned, and his passion for what he does. So fair play to him."

Steadfast loyalty is actually the least surprising thing about McClure, but one of the most revealing. She will defend those she cares about (politely). Her relationships are everything: whether with family, friends, her fiance or her colleagues, who seem to inevitably become mates.

Mercurio tells me that McClure “was the absolute top of our wishlist to play the leading role in Trigger Point because she’s got an amazing gift for bringing authenticity and naturalism to any part. It’s been a privilege to witness Vicky grow as an actor over the past decade to the point where she was a real leader on set.”

McClure has been a performer pretty much all her life. She joined a dance school on her third birthday and then the renowned Nottingham drama school, the [Television](#) Workshop, at the age of 11 (“I was very focused,” she says of her childhood). But, unlike many of her fellow actors, she’s from a working-class family – her dad was a joiner and butcher, her mother a hairdresser and stay-at-home mum – and had to rely on free drama training. She auditioned for the prestigious Italia Conti School in London aged 14, but the fees were beyond their reach, and pleas to local council and arts organisations (and even family and friends) were unsuccessful.

“My mum and dad worked very hard to see me through lots of things,” McClure says. “It also meant that, financially, we couldn’t do certain things like Italia Conti and schools that require a large amount of money for people to be given a shot.” McClure got her shot anyway: she was able to stay at the TV Workshop, where “whether you were rich or poor or different, it was fully funded and you were all on a level playing field”.

I loved office parties. I loved my mates. I loved not having to bring my work home. I loved sick pay, holiday pay!

Within a year of the Conti disappointment, Meadows, then a young director, turned up at the workshop to audition students for his third feature, a coming-of-age story, set in a Nottingham village, called [A Room for Romeo Brass](#). McClure, after improvising with [Paddy Considine](#), who’d already been cast, landed the role of Romeo’s sister, Ladine. She was just 15. McClure thought she’d made it, and waited for Hollywood to come calling – until she discovered the film had played in just six cinemas across the UK. And then: nothing.

So, instead, she went to college and studied drama, leaving after just four months, skint and despondent. She worked in retail – H Samuel, Dorothy

Perkins and a tanning shop – before taking office jobs. “I didn’t have this little pot of money that had been saved for me for years and all of a sudden you hit 18 and it’s like, you’ve hit the jackpot,” she says matter-of-factly. “So that didn’t happen and that’s fine. I just worked instead. I don’t remember having a bad time. I loved the Christmas parties. I loved my mates. I loved not having to bring my work home. I loved sick pay, holiday pay!” It taught her a valuable lesson. “I love my job, but I don’t put it on a pedestal like it’s the most important thing in my life.”



Photograph: Paul Farrell/The Guardian. Roll neck: loewe.com. Trousers: joseph-fashion.com

In the early 2000s, McClure gave up her agent and did hardly any acting for six years – something she’s now grateful for. “It kept me grounded,” she says, “though if you’d asked me that when I was in that [situation], I’d have been, like, ‘Just give me the work!'” – until, once again, Meadows appeared, this time with the role of a lifetime on offer: Lol in [This Is England](#).

Those who now know [Vicky McClure](#) as Kate Fleming – by-the-book, middle-class, career-driven – may not recognise her as Lol, the young, big-hearted skinhead who, pre-Line of Duty, was McClure’s most famous role, one that won her a TV Bafta in 2010. She first played her in the 2006 award-winning film, then the three acclaimed series for Channel 4 that followed.

McClure says Lol is “probably the only character I’ve played that I felt like was a real person. Because I immersed my head and heart into her.” McClure and Meadows summoned her together (he works largely with improvisation) as a three-dimensional, working-class woman who was also a child sexual abuse survivor. McClure’s acclaimed performance – taking in events of supreme darkness and hard-fought-for joy – was full of naturalism, believability and heart, and Lol arguably one of the greatest female characters in British film and TV history.

Meadows changed McClure’s life – and is still a big part of it. “Shane lives down the road, his wife is my best friend and he’s my mate. We’ve known each other for so long, and the majority of time we spend together is as friends, rather than as director and actor. But [with *This Is England*] he trusted me with something. I didn’t know where that was gonna lead, none of us did, really.”

Meadows knows how lucky he was to find McClure. “Working with Vicky is akin to working with Julie Walters, Alison Steadman and Twiggy at the same time,” he tells me over email. “She’s not only one of the greatest actors this country has produced, she works harder than most, hasn’t changed one iota and is annoyingly handsome to boot. From the first time I met her at an audition for *Romeo Brass* in 1998, up until the present day, I’ve never once seen her lay anything unauthentic down. Truth just seems to ooze out of every pore.”

Meadows’ *This Is England* saga told the story of a group of working-class kids growing up together on a Midlands estate – and their messy, painful, joyful lives over almost a decade. It’s on the subject of class and opportunity that McClure lights up, though she’s insistent that she doesn’t “want to wave a flag that makes people think I’ve come from poverty. That’s disrespectful to people that have had a much harder start. Nobody needs to feel sorry for me. I don’t, I had a great upbringing.”

Given the decimation of [arts funding in this country over the last decade](#) – public funding per person has dropped by 35% since 2008 – does she think the next Vicky McClure could actually make it today, when it’s harder than ever to be a working-class creative? She seems at a loss. “Yeah,” she sighs,

running her hands through her hair. “Whenever anybody asks me for advice or says, ‘What tips can you give me because I don’t have much money and I need to get into the industry?’, I don’t know what the answers are. And I feel awful.”

Just go for it. Nothing’s guaranteed, is it? You’ve just got to have a shot. I had a shot, I started with nothing

Many people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have to be exceptional, I say: willing to work harder, be more ambitious, push harder, just to get a toe inside the same worlds that money provides an open door to. “I’m just always going to be one of those who feels like, why should anybody have to do any more than someone else just because of what they’ve got in their account?” she says. “There’s certain people that get to see the world or buy into an opportunity that can propel them somewhere, and that’s good for them. But if you don’t have that financial gain, you’re locked into what you’ve got. In the same breath, [those people] get a completely different experience of life, rooted in a different understanding of the world, and there’s a different authenticity there. I don’t want to bash people because of their beginnings. It’s not anybody’s fault. I’d rather people just own it.”

These beliefs, this passion, inspired McClure’s next big move: one that she’s sharing with Owen (who she’s been engaged to since 2017), a fellow working-class kid from Merthyr Tydfil, an ex-mining community in Wales. In October last year, the couple launched BYO (Build Your Own) Films, a production company that will tell working-class stories and give jobs to those not traditionally offered opportunities in TV and film. They are already shooting their first project, Without Sin, in which McClure stars and executive produces (she was adamant that it was to film in Nottingham), and using plenty of talent from the TV Workshop.



Photograph: Paul Farrell/The Guardian. Styling: Melanie Wilkinson, assisted by Peter Bevan. Hair: Louis Byrne at Premier. Makeup: Cher Webb. Faux leather jumpsuit: nanushka.com

“I feel like it put me in very good stead,” McClure says of her decade at the Workshop. “It makes you ambitious, it gives you that kind of feeling of, just go for it. You know, nothing’s guaranteed, is it? You’ve just got to have a shot. I had a shot, I started with nothing. It’s not like anything’s been handed to me on a plate … I’m in a position now where I can share a bit of what I’ve learned – and giving people work is an amazing feeling.”

That’s not to say that she’s no longer going to be in front of the camera. We’re discussing whether there’s a connecting thread in her career and her characters, and McClure lands on “relatability”: women she can share ground with. That’s why, she says, she will never play the Doctor in Doctor Who, despite the semi-regular Twitter campaigns calling for it (and, for the record, she would make an excellent Doctor).

“It’s lovely,” she says of the social media love, while emphasising that she hasn’t been offered the role. “It’s a real compliment. It’s an iconic piece of telly that’s been going for ever and ever, and I’m sure will continue to, and I wish it well, but it’s not for me.” Well, yes, if relatability’s your kick, then playing an alien with two hearts will understandably be a stretch. “It’s not

even something I watch,” she continues. “You know, the TV I make is usually the TV I will enjoy myself. So what I tend to do is go for parts I feel can stretch my imagination – like, even bomb disposal is so far from my world, but the understanding of fear, we all have. Once we start moving to sci-fi, that’s where I start to lose interest.”

So if not Doctor Who, what’s ahead? There is, tantalisingly, the promise of a future Meadows collaboration, though exactly what still seems to be undecided. “We speak about working together a lot,” she smiles. “And we’ve had a few little things that have come our way where we’ve thought, oooh, there we go, maybe that’s it? And it will happen, that’s very much a dream of mine. Shane shares the same interests and likes, and [we] have a similar vision. So I think when we do get to do something again, it will be a major moment.”

And, of course, there’s the other big thing the world wants to know ... will there be a seventh series of [Line of Duty](#)? “I don’t know!” McClure insists. “I don’t know, there’s no word of it. I think we’ve all been really honest and said should that happen, we’re all game.”

McClure says that she’ll be there with Mercurio, Compston and Dunbar, as long as they want in, too. “I’ll just stick with the guys. I think when it comes to a close, it will be a natural close for us all. And we’re very close with Jed, so it’s not a business transaction, do you know what I mean? This isn’t business, this is our lives and we’ve all created careers from it, and we’ve all got a lot out of it. Not only that, I can’t imagine my life without Adey [Adrian Dunbar] and Martin in that acting capacity where it’s like, well, at least I get to be with my mates for four months of the year.” But end it will, eventually, I say, as I hand over my drained mug and begin to head to the door. “And that will be a big blow,” she says. “But, you know, everything comes to an end, and everything’s got a shelf life. So when that natural end is, is when it is. I’m just loyal to that. I can’t see me going” – and she puts on a posh voice – “‘I’m done, I’ve got a better job, I’m off’, because what’s better than Line of Duty?”

Trigger Point airs this month on ITV.

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Movies

Interview

Guillermo Del Toro: ‘I saw real corpses when I was growing up in Mexico’

[Ryan Gilbey](#)

In his new film *Nightmare Alley*, the Oscar-winning director abandons fantasy for gritty noir – but, as he knows from his childhood, humanity has its own share of monsters



‘We are the very best that has happened to this planet – and the very worst’
... Guillermo Del Toro Photograph: Jay L Clendenin/Contour by Getty Images

Sat 15 Jan 2022 04.00 EST

Guillermo Del Toro used to describe Hollywood as “the Land of the Slow No”. Here was a place where a director could die waiting for a project to be greenlit. “The natural state of a movie is to be unmade,” he says over Zoom

from his home in Los Angeles. “I have about 20 scripts that I lug around that no one wants to make and that’s fine: it’s the nature of the business. It’s a miracle when anything at all gets made.”

Nevertheless, Del Toro has established himself as this century’s leading fantasy film-maker, more inventive than latter-day Tim Burton and less bombastic than Peter Jackson (with whom he co-wrote the Hobbit trilogy). From the haunting adult fairytale Pan’s Labyrinth and the voluptuously garish Hellboy romps to his beauty-and-the-fish love story [The Shape of Water](#), which won four [Oscars](#), he is the master of the glutinous phantasmagoria.

Waking up the morning after the Academy Awards ceremony in March 2018, Del Toro found himself in an industry newly receptive to his ideas, even if it wasn’t quite the Land of the Fast Yes. “There are still parameters,” says the 57-year-old. “But I’m able to get things made that would be going through a more tortuous process otherwise.” These include his stop-motion animated Pinocchio, set in Mussolini’s Italy, which will premiere on Netflix later this year. Before that, there is Nightmare Alley, a ghoulish noir thriller that is the first of his films not to feature fantasy elements. “Every time I make a movie, I always say that the worst monster is a human,” he smiles. “I decided to continue that, but without the safety net of whimsy or flights of fancy.”

Adapted from the 1946 novel by William Lindsay Gresham – though not a remake of the 1947 film version starring Tyrone Power – Nightmare Alley follows the shifty Stanton Carlisle (Bradley Cooper), who flees the scene of a murder and hides out at a carnival. There he falls in with its shady personnel: clairvoyant Zeena the Seer (Toni Collette), sideshow performer Molly Cahill (Rooney Mara), who “conducts” lethal levels of electricity, and grizzled barker Clem Hoatley (Willem Dafoe), responsible for “the Geek” (Paul Anderson), who lives in a cage and bites the heads off live chickens.

A self-professed carnival obsessive, Del Toro drew much of the film’s rich detail – including a woman posing as an arachnid-human hybrid – from memories of his childhood in Mexico. “The spider-woman act is one I saw

when I was four or five," he says. "I have a photograph of my brother and me on a little horse cart on the day we saw her. I was tiny, and the impression it made on me was so strong. I can remember exactly what she said: 'Oh woe be me, I was turned into this for disobeying my parents!' I knew it was not a real spider, but the image was so disturbing. And the lady seemed so bored. The carnival in the film is not magical but at least it's honest about being dishonest. That is the advantage I see over the city. People in the city are pretending to be honourable."

It is in the city – Buffalo, New York, to be precise, but as symbolic a nucleus of corruption as any noir metropolis – that Stanton's grifting skills make him a superstar on the mentalism circuit. It is here also that he meets figures murkier than anything the carnival can throw up, including Cate Blanchett's femme fatale psychoanalyst Dr Lilith Ritter.



Fatale attraction ... Cate Blanchett as Dr Lilith Ritter in *Nightmare Alley*.
Photograph: AP

Del Toro has had more than his share of bruises and setbacks in the film industry, from an early run-in with the Weinstein brothers, who butchered his 1997 giant-bug horror *Mimic*, to the time Universal pulled the plug suddenly on his epic adaptation of HP Lovecraft's monster-fest *At the*

Mountains of Madness. Is the city depicted in Nightmare Alley analogous to his experiences in Hollywood?

“It’s analogous to most human endeavours,” he says. “Our capacity to be brutal with each other is infinite, unwarranted and gratuitous. And it seems to come naturally. I think we are paradoxical beings: we are the very best that has happened to this planet and the very worst. There is no reason to deny one side. We are capable of absolutely beautiful loving acts and absolutely brutal ones. We don’t exist in a single space.”

This gets him thinking about childhood again. “I saw real corpses when I was young,” he recalls. “People who had been shot, or had accidents. You get a sense of how fraught things are. It’s certainly not a rosy life when you grow up in Mexico. There is that famous, touristic but very real dichotomy for me as a Mexican, where the notion of living and of death as an impending destiny is fused into a single concept.”



Mexican wave ... Del Toro celebrates his double win for *The Shape of Water* at the 2018 Oscars. Photograph: Paul Buck/EPA

As a Mexican he has also had to contend with a US administration that made no secret of its hostility towards people like him. Just over a year after Donald Trump’s inauguration, Del Toro began [his Oscar acceptance speech](#)

with four vital words – “I am an immigrant” – then proceeded to argue that “the greatest thing our art does, and our industry does, is to erase the lines in the sand. We should continue doing that when the world tells us to make them deeper”.

It was an inspiring speech to suit an uplifting film: in *The Shape of Water*, four outsiders (a mute domestic, her African American colleague, her gay neighbour and the amphibious creature she falls in love with) triumph over a fascistic US colonel in cold war-era Baltimore, just as the Francoist general is vanquished in [Pan's Labyrinth](#), and the ghosts of the Spanish civil war confronted at the end of Del Toro’s allegorical horror *The Devil’s Backbone*.

But *Nightmare Alley* is not a movie born out of hope or healing. Despite being set in the 1940s, it is unmistakably a product of our times. “One hundred per cent,” agrees Del Toro, who describes it as the story of “the rise and rise of a liar” who “aims for what he thinks is success, and is therefore perpetually famished”. How Trumpian.



Handsome devil ... Doug Jones as the Pale Man in *Pan's Labyrinth*.
Photograph: Everett/REX/Shutterstock

“We are in a very divided moment,” he says. “As a storyteller, I am reactive, so I didn’t feel I needed to make an engaging love story at this moment.”

That said, a love story did emerge from the production. The director's 20-year marriage to Lorenza Newton, mother of his two daughters, had already broken up by the time he began collaborating on the script with Kim Morgan, film critic and former wife of the Canadian director Guy Maddin. The co-writers got hitched last spring.

No trace of romance survives in the film. "These are very bleak times," Del Toro says. "For an audience, my movies form a filmography. But for me, it's biography. In exchange for two hours, I give you three years of my life." Make that two and a half hours in the case of *Nightmare Alley* – an awfully long time to spend in the company of a greedy, deceitful protagonist who fails to reach any understanding about himself until the final minutes.

"It's not a surprise where Stanton ends up," Del Toro explains. "But it's *how* he ends up there. You don't watch the history of Jesus and root for him not to get crucified. You don't watch Oedipus and bet that he's not going to bed his mother. The inexorable fate will happen because character is immutable. That's the power and the difficulty of a movie like this."



Beauty and the beast ... Elisa (Sally Hawkins) meets the mysterious Amphibian Man in *The Shape of Water*. Photograph: Fox Searchlight/Allstar

Industry lore decrees that you can generally knock a zero off the gross if your hero isn't changed or redeemed. Add to this the reluctance of pandemic-era audiences to fully embrace cinema-going and it is perhaps no surprise that *Nightmare Alley* struggled at the US box office. The film, budgeted at \$60m, took less than \$3m in its opening weekend, which according to Forbes magazine is "below even the over/under \$5m 'Covid normal' for the likes of *King Richard*, *The Last Duel* and *Last Night in Soho*." A Searchlight spokesperson admitted that "the numbers were a bit more modest than we had predicted".

Noir was born at a time in America of disillusionment

Guillermo Del Toro

Whatever the picture's commercial fate, Del Toro's determination to warp or withhold familiar noir pleasures is to be admired. "Noir was born at a time in America of disillusionment," he says. "I wanted to go into that existential quality and to stay the fuck away from venetian blinds and rotating fans and a detective in a gabardine mac walking along a wet street." It is also a film that places emphasis squarely on behaviour. "Destiny is the sum of your choices. There is no punishment or tarot or bad luck in what happens to Stanton. We made a very clear happy ending in the middle of the story where he gets the girl and he's leaving the carnival for a better life. I even do a beautiful crane shot, like the ending of a movie. And then two years later, he has a great act in a luxury cabaret, lives in a fancy hotel with room service, and it's not enough. He's still unhappy."

Anyone reluctant to face the bitter pill of the second half, then, is advised to dash for the exit after that crane shot. "Yeah," he says, warming to the idea. "Audiences not interested in a gut-punch are very much invited not to stay."

Nightmare Alley is in UK cinemas from 21 January.

Guardian and Observer charity appeal 2021Climate crisis

Thank you for giving generously to the Guardian and Observer charity appeal

[Katharine Viner](#)



This weekend is the last chance to donate to our 2021 appeal supporting those on the frontline of the climate emergency

- [Guardian and Observer charity appeal 2021: the fight for climate justice](#)
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Thanks to your donations, Royal Botanic Gardens Kew will pursue its work to preserve biodiversity in Madagascar. Photograph: Matthew Williams-Ellis/Universal Images Group/Getty Images

Sat 15 Jan 2022 02.00 EST

In this year's [Guardian and Observer charity appeal](#) we have supported communities and individuals hit hardest by the climate emergency, people who have seen their lives upended and livelihoods lost by extreme weather. It's a topical issue, and not going away – and there is still time to donate: so far we have raised over £800,000.

Our appeal is shaped by [vivid stories of climate emergency](#): floods, drought and wildfires; from [reindeer killed by unnatural arctic heat](#) to chronic [crop failure by the shores of Lake Victoria](#). At its heart, however, lies inequality and poverty: the stark truth is the countries least responsible for global emissions have by far suffered worst from climate-induced disasters.

Thousands of readers have so far given generously to the appeal – and hundreds of you have emailed us to tell us why. You told us the climate crisis is the most urgent issue facing the planet, and that world's wealthiest economies – as many delegates at the recent Cop26 climate conference in

Glasgow made clear – have a moral responsibility to help the poorest cope with increasingly grave climate challenges.

Giving to the appeal felt for many readers like a way of registering support for wider change. As one said: “My donation is a tiny contribution to the efforts of all those working to preserve this precious world we live in.” It was also, many of you said, an acknowledgment that even a relatively small charitable investment in local expertise, resilience and innovation can deliver social dividends.

Other donors said they were inspired by reading about our partner charities. Some described the alarming impact of extreme weather on family and friends who lived on the front lines of climate change. Giving was for some donors a small but important protest against government climate policy, or aid budget cuts, or the excesses of western consumption and material exploitation.

Whatever your reasons, the money we raise together will be shared among our four fantastic charities: [Practical Action](#), [Global Greengrants Fund UK](#), [Royal Botanic Gardens Kew](#), and [Environmental Justice Foundation](#). All do brilliant work to help tackle the climate emergency, and offer important hope and optimism for the future.

Thanks to your generous donations, Practical Action will continue to invest in local communities with innovative [tools and adaptations](#), from agricultural technology to flood warning systems. Environmental Justice Foundation will continue to provide powerful testimony of the human impact of climate change and fight for the rights of climate refugees.

Global Greengrants Fund UK will distribute its share of donations to grassroots climate projects in the global south, reminding us that “[small farmers cool the planet](#)”. Royal Botanic Gardens Kew will pursue its vital work to [preserve biodiversity](#) and revitalise denuded land on the island of Madagascar.

As ever, I’d like to appeal to those of who have not yet given to consider doing so – and to thank the more than 7,000 of you who have already done

so. We appreciate your generosity, spirit, and your commitment to a fairer, greener and more just world. Your donations are inspiring – and they will make a difference.

The appeal is scheduled to close at midnight on Sunday. You can donate online [here](#).

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Panting, moaning and ‘pussy-gazing’: the couple who have sex on their podcast



Lacey Haynes, 37, and Flynn Talbot, 40, met in Berlin 10 years ago and had an instant connection. Photograph: Muir Vidler/The Guardian

Lacey Haynes and Flynn Talbot want to improve the world's love life – starting by doing it live on air in every episode



[Coco Khan](#)
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Sat 15 Jan 2022 02.00 EST

Lacey Haynes is a women's "intuitive healer", and guides couples in yoga-informed "elevated sex". When she opens her front door, the first thing I notice about the Canadian podcaster is her fashionable faux fur slippers and chic blunt fringe. Where is the western wellness guru uniform of linen tunic, elephant-print trousers and culturally inappropriate head jewellery, I wonder?

Inside the living room, I spot the hot-pink sofa that Haynes' Australian husband, Flynn Talbot, a men's life coach and fellow elevated sex practitioner, calls "love island". Fans of their podcast – [Lacey and Flynn Have Sex](#) – will know it as one of many locations around their house where they take the title literally, recording themselves having sex in the bedroom, on the kitchen barstool, and beyond.

Sign up to our Inside Saturday newsletter for an exclusive behind the scenes look at the making of the magazine's biggest features, as well as a curated list of our weekly highlights.

But it's not the sex that's the main event – it's the talk. In each episode Haynes, 37, and Talbot, 40, discuss techniques and topics around sex and relationships, covering everything from overcoming rejection to the joys of cunnilingus; from rethinking orgasm as the ultimate goal to navigating intimacy with common conditions such as UTIs and premature ejaculation.

Their mission is to help coupled-up listeners have more fulfilling sex – and to transform nonexistent or perfunctory sexual experiences into something physically pleasurable, emotionally empowering and spiritually uplifting. From there, they believe, the sky is the limit: “elevated” sex can lead to better mental and physical health, and even a better career.

After all, it's what happened to them. As they tell their listeners, their relationship started out “hot and heavy”, before “the sex died”, says Haynes. But rather than “living out the rest of our days like that”, they decided to invest in their sex life. It became a project that they worked on together, drawing influences from yoga and books on everything from diet and anatomy to politics and memoir.

It isn't a podcast to listen to in public. You hear them pant, moan and direct each other to orgasm

The project eventually transformed their relationship and led them to start their own business, which offers private coaching, online courses and even retreats. Haynes focuses on women – and extends their relationship work to include pregnancy – while Talbot takes care of the men. They do it all from their idyllic home in Sussex, while juggling the parenting of their two homeschooled children.

Their work couldn't have come at a better time. Despite living in an age of hypersexualisation, with [more Britons tuning in to Pornhub than BBC News](#), people across all demographics are having less sex than 10 years earlier, according to a 2019 survey published in the [British Medical Journal](#), which

also found that couples and over-25s are seeing the biggest decline. [According to Relate](#), 29% of couples regard their relationships as “sexless” – and half of women and nearly two-thirds of men in the BMJ survey said they wanted to have more. Throw into that a pandemic in which [78% of cohabiting couples](#) saw a change in their sexual activity (and not for the better), and it’s perhaps no wonder that Haynes and Talbot have found a listenership. But with devotees come detractors, and, as I’ll find out, some of the pair’s more controversial views have attracted criticism.

Over tea in the kitchen, I listen to them lovingly bicker over how to heat pastries and I enjoy Haynes’ impressions of her kids pleading to stay up late. There is nothing about this conversation that suggests sex, but I don’t doubt it could go that way. That is, after all, one of their key messages: that too many couples wait for the vague and mysterious “mood” to show up, when it is always within their power to have sex, be it before work, once the kids are in bed, or just after a mid-morning croissant on an unseasonably warm autumn Thursday.

Haynes and Talbot didn’t mean to record themselves having sex; it just sort of happened. “We intended to have sex off the podcast, and then come and talk about it,” says Talbot. But that first recording in April 2021 – dreamed up just a few months earlier – “developed its own momentum”, says Haynes, as the talk about sex turned easily to foreplay and then the act itself. Their approach to the podcast’s sex segments is to talk through what they’re doing and how it feels in unflinching detail. Their choice of words ranges from the ethereal (“I see your light shining,” one of them might say as they revel in each other’s “energy” and “aura”), to terms ordinarily censored: “Lacey is tugging on my cock,” Talbot might say; or from Haynes: “He’s licking my side pussy.” It is not a podcast to be listened to in public. The listener hears them pant, moan and direct each other to orgasm.

In many ways we are living in the age of the overshare, where giving too much information turns ordinary people into viral stars. Indeed, a quick look at the podcast charts makes clear that subjects that were once highly personal (psychotherapy, pregnancy and sex) are driving serious engagement. But even by today’s standard, Lacey and Flynn Have [Sex](#) shocks.

Not every episode ends in ecstasy, however. The listener also hears Haynes in distress when sex triggers difficult memories; flashes of annoyance if one does something the other doesn't like; and the sound of shuffling around when there's physical discomfort. All of it is discussed in detail: a real-life, authentic example of how to talk about (and throughout) sex.



Styling: Peter Bevan. Hair & makeup: Sadaf Ahmad. Main image: Lacey wears underwear, lesgirlslesboys.com; Flynn wears: underwear, cdlp.com. Above and below: Lacey wears bodysuit, weekday.com; Flynn wears underwear, lesgirlslesboys.com. Photograph: Muir Vidler/The Guardian

The couple met in Berlin more than 10 years ago, when Talbot, then working as a light artist, kept failing to show up for classes at Haynes' yoga studio. "Then she had a Christmas party and I went to that," recalls Talbot. Was it love at first sight? "No. My first thought was, 'Wow, she is super Canadian. And loud. Imagine living with her,'" he laughs.

Nonetheless, there was an instant connection. "I was actually in a relationship," says Haynes. "And I could have kept going in it and just ignored the 15% of the relationship I wasn't happy in, like so many people do. But then I met Flynn. I was just so fascinated by him. He recognised my entrepreneurial spirit and I his. And he was tall. As Melissa McCarthy says in *Bridesmaids*, I wanted to climb him like a tree."

For the next few years, they were sexually insatiable and madly in love, maintaining the passion through moves from Berlin to Australia via South Africa, before marrying in Nova Scotia and settling in the UK in 2014. It was around this time that their sex life slowed down, worsening after they had their first child in 2017. The issue? Talbot wanted more sex than Haynes.

One person wanting more sex than the other is a common problem for couples in long-term relationships. “I was just like, everything I want is with Lacey,” says Talbot, recalling his frustration. “So why can’t we cultivate that?”

“I felt resentment,” says Haynes. “I’d satisfy him and be like, ‘Phew, I’m off the hook for two weeks.’ It put Flynn in something we call the rejection loop, where he’d come near me and get rejected.”

The transformation was not an easy process. “Lacey was full-on crying, having emotional meltdowns,” recalls Talbot. But every Sunday they made an appointment for sex and pancakes. This was the first step. “Credit to Lacey, she showed up,” he says.

The pair say they have learned that sex is not just a pleasurable experience, but a place to work through emotions and traumas. In an episode on “rage fucking”, they talk about the opportunity to release feelings of anger through sex and masturbation. They even talk about sex as a place where they have some of their brightest business ideas. (Haynes even used to offer “pussy-powered” business coaching, which used their practice to help women unlock career goals.)

I wanted to make Lacey feel safe to explore. I’m married and I want to have amazing sex with her. I was willing to do whatever it took

Listeners will note their vernacular: an amalgam of new-age language, pop culture references and most of all the sort of “therapy speak” that dominates online self-care content. Did they try therapy? Would they have considered marriage counselling? “Honestly, no,” says Haynes. “I didn’t think someone would have had the depth of understanding that I wanted, to take me on an

intuitive journey that would fulfil my healing. That was something I needed to do myself, and with Flynn.”

Talbot says that a key job for men in sexual relationships is providing emotional safety. “I didn’t have an emotional barrier that was stopping me from performing and enjoying sex, though I have learned I have other areas I can work on,” he says. “But I wanted to make Lacey feel safe to explore, because I’m a leader – I’m an all-or-nothing guy. I’m married and I want to have amazing sex with Lacey. I was willing to do whatever it took.”

Did they ever worry that the other one would leave if it got too much? No, they reply confidently. “We know some couples don’t have that level of security,” says Haynes. “And we never advise people to do what we did if they’re not in a safe situation.”

In the end, it paid off. While they were trying to get back to that great sex, they discovered something even better. Haynes says that when she looks back on their early sex life, she sees that pain during intercourse was normalised. But now, she says, having learned to fully de-stress and release any tension in the mind, body and spirit, penetrative sex is pain-free.

In her “pussy-gazing” class, which is currently offered as an online workshop, Haynes teaches women to put a mirror between their legs and work through any feelings of shame over their vulva. The class originally took her to festivals around the UK, as the pair became tuned into the unmet demand for coaching in intimate subjects. “We were like: if we were brave, what would really help people?” says Talbot. The podcast was born. Since then, their listenership has been steadily growing, finding listeners in 50 countries to the tune of 40,000 downloads.

While they haven’t told their pensioner neighbour what they’re up to at home (“I think he’d have a heart attack,” says Talbot), their friends and family have been resoundingly supportive, even in their small, close-knit village. And both Haynes and Talbot say working on their business has strengthened their relationship. “We have conversations that we might not ordinarily have space for through this podcast,” says Haynes.

“Love island” is just one of several locations in which Haynes and Talbot record themselves. In the recording studio that occupies their spare room, I wonder if the single mattress on the floor with the cheeky boob print duvet cover is another. It turns out that’s where Talbot sleeps when he works late or if Haynes is in the main bed with their children. For the recording today, the kids are with their nanny, and the plan is to make a talk-only episode.

Haynes and Talbot take their seats opposite each other, almost knee to knee. I can tell that my presence, typing notes while they talk, is slightly disruptive (they say so on their podcast, kindly referring to me by my chosen fake name, Esmeralda), but they shake it off, and within minutes their eyes are only for each other. Watching them give each other edits, it’s clear not only how seriously they take their work but also how energised they are by one another. Is there something sexy about recording? “No, we don’t have a weird fetish where we want to expose ourselves, but only via sound,” laughs Talbot.

They seem at ease, much more so than the nervous yet excited presenters I heard in episode one. But even back then they were wary of performing for the audience. (“It felt authentic and true, and now it feels performative,” says Talbot in the middle of the first episode’s sex, before getting the session back on track.)

Haynes says that the performance of sex is something she’s been “unpicking” for a while. “There is playing into voyeurism – wanting to be seen and wearing a mask, often to satisfy another’s gaze. And that’s different from just being witnessed in your vulnerability and truth. I never want to be masked in my relationship, in my life or in this podcast,” says Haynes.

This is my biggest takeaway from listening to their podcast: how much work and self-awareness is required to push performance away from sexual encounters, even between partners, even in private. It gives rise to the questions: what roles are we performing and where did we learn them?

I’m reminded of a conversation I had with feminist scholar Gail Dines some years ago. She argued that sex is like eating, in that we have a biological urge for it. But how we eat – whether it’s with chopsticks or cutlery, sitting on the floor or at a table – is down to cultural influences. So what has culture

shown us about how to have sex? Have we learned from Hollywood movies? The unrealistic and often degrading world of online porn? Clinical sex education classes focused on avoiding pregnancy? Tall tales from high school boys or the mumbled bumps heard through a university bedroom wall? Lacey and Flynn Have Sex may not be for everyone, but at the very least its offer of a different source is helpful.



Haynes and Talbot believe ‘elevated’ sex can lead to better mental and physical health, and even a better career. Photograph: Muir Vidler/The Guardian

Undoubtedly, some will be put off by their grandiose terms – they refer to themselves as visionaries – or uncensored language. Their response on the podcast has been to ask listeners not to overlook their whole message because of a few disagreeable words. Personally, I’d say the same logic applies to other parts of their work, where it gets too new age, or simply too much. For example, I can appreciate the anatomical similarities between the vocal cords and the vagina. But when they mention this on the podcast in relation to women being vocally expressive during sex, my alarm bells ring.

I ask Haynes and Talbot why they talk about the masculine and the feminine as archetypes. “I’m really talking about energies,” says Haynes, moving her index and middle finger against each other, to convey connected yet

different halves. “So like day and night, sun and moon. If you relate more to the feminine or masculine, you have different styles of communication, and problem-solving.” But, she explains, that doesn’t mean you need to look a certain way to relate to that energy, or even be biologically ascribed to it.

As for inclusivity, the pair say they have resigned themselves to not being able to fully deliver on that, and are coming to terms with their work being limited to – or at least most suitable for – heterosexual couples. They recall a non-binary person attending one of their in-person workshops, and as the group separated into masculine and feminine spaces to work with Haynes and Talbot separately, this person wasn’t sure where to go. “I spoke to the person after they said they didn’t always feel safe at the course,” says Haynes. “It really helped us understand that there’s a limit to how inclusive we can be,” Talbot says.

“I get messages from people who tell me I’m a Terf [trans-exclusionary radical feminist] because I talk about ‘power’ and ‘feminine’, and then I’ll get a message from a trans woman saying my pussy-gazing workshop completely helped her connect after getting her new vagina,” says Haynes, sounding exasperated. “I want to live in a world where I can say, ‘This class will help these sorts of people, and if that’s not you, we love you, but this class won’t help.’ It doesn’t mean I’m trying to take away from other people and that I love them any less. I don’t think that their experience and who they are is any less valid.”

Of the two, it’s clear that Haynes has borne the brunt of criticism. She certainly has unconventional views: after she gave [an interview to the Guardian about free birthing](#), commenters argued that it was dangerous, irresponsible and smacked of middle-class privilege to refuse the help that women around the world are desperate for.

More recently, Haynes announced on social media that she hasn’t had a Covid vaccination. I didn’t know this when we met, but when I follow up with the pair to discuss it over video chat, they’re uneasy, concerned that all their work will be reduced to this one position. Later they send me an email: “The same characteristic that makes us able to have sex on a podcast and freebirth both our children is the one that has us challenging the status quo in other realms. This might make our decisions unpopular or challenging for

others to understand, but ultimately, we're most concerned with being true to ourselves and what we feel is right. Our podcast is about governing your own body and living your own life. And we take that stance across every facet of life."

The majority of men are lost in the bedroom. They know how to penetrate but they don't know how to connect

I want to ask the pair about money. I have, for many years, been concerned about the self-help and wellness space, and whether it is morally right to suggest individuals can transform their lives if they just do this, eat that, or think such and such. Isn't it charging people for a false promise? And doesn't it imply that the problems and traumas people experience – which are so frequently related to societal unfairness and injustice – are somehow the individual's fault for not making the right choices, leaning in enough or harnessing their "power"? Wouldn't it be more honest to say: self-help is a sticking plaster that may help you cope with a messed-up world, but it cannot cure the sickness?

I expect defensiveness, but instead they listen thoughtfully before Talbot muses aloud: "In that regard maybe our work is a sticking plaster ... "

"No," Haynes interjects. "We're a chisel. We're giving you a little hammer and a nail to start picking it all apart. I don't want people to cover it up. I want them to dig deeper."

I'm curious about the troubles straight men face with sex. "The majority of men are lost in the bedroom. They know how to penetrate but they don't know how to connect," says Talbot. "Men have, for generations, been conditioned to suppress their emotions. And yet truly expressed emotions and vulnerability are the route to a deep connection with women.

"Not knowing how to harness the power of expression puts men at a great disadvantage, in and out of the bedroom. It's why many men live with deep frustration and anger that's close to the surface every day."

What about pornography? Surely that is a factor? In a recent episode, Talbot describes having been free of his semi-regular cam girl habit for six months. Is giving up porn something he'd recommend to others? "Yes, because it's just perpetuating the cycle of needing visual stimulation when you should be creating a deeper understanding of your own pleasure. And then when you come to have pleasure with someone else, it's going to be much greater."

As we wrap up, Talbot tells me a story about one of his clients. "I often give people homework to explore themselves – not just masturbating, but feeling yourself, rubbing your body, learning your own pleasure." As part of this work, the client learned techniques on how not to climax, but hover near. He was enjoying having his control and the sensation. "And two weeks ago he told me he had an orgasm, and it was the greatest one of his life. Ever since, he'd cut off porn."

Without thinking, I let out a high-pitched "Yay!" "Good for him!" I cry, clapping. It is odd to feel so genuinely happy for the sex life of a man I have never met.

"Isn't it nice to change the narrative about men enjoying themselves?" asks Haynes.

On the drive home, I feel strangely light. I don't agree with everything Haynes and Talbot have to say, but it is hard to deny their bravery in putting themselves out there week after week, and the value of offering up a different model of fulfilling sex. And it's a model that is, at its heart, fighting for something quite traditional: committed monogamy, happy families, love. "How very normie," I think, surprised by just how sexy being a normie can be.

Tips for great sex

1. Communication is key

Before achieving soulful and carefree sex that involves communicating with nonverbal cues, you need to get comfortable with saying if something is a turn-on, a turn-off, triggering or painful.

2. Don't take it personally ...

... if you're playing with your partner and they don't enjoy it, say, "Sorry, someone else found that enjoyable. What do you find enjoyable?" Haynes says. Talbot says men need to know that "talking about sex doesn't make you a bad lover".

3. Discuss your sexual past

Often, current sexual issues are a result of past experiences, traumas or narratives.

4. Use more of your body

Rather than just jackhammering away, with all movement coming from the hips, Talbot suggests connecting torsos and hearts. "Be like two serpents writhing together." Use controlled breathing to slow the rushes of feeling and prolong the experience, moving focus to other parts of your body.

5. Rewrite your power script

Haynes says that the narrative where the man holds all the power may contribute to women's dissatisfaction with penetrative sex. But there is power in letting go and allowing someone in, emotionally and physically. That's what soulful sex is all about.

Listen to [Lacey and Flynn's podcast here](#)

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China has further tightened measures in Beijing and across the country as scattered outbreaks continue ahead of the opening of the Winter Olympics in a little over two weeks. Photograph: AP

Staff and agencies
Sat 15 Jan 2022 01.15 EST

The southern Chinese city of Zhuhai has suspended public bus routes after announcing it had detected at least seven cases of the highly transmissible

Omicron coronavirus variant there and warning residents not to leave the city.

The coastal city, which borders the gambling hub Macau, said late on Friday that Omicron had been detected in one mildly ill and six asymptomatic patients, after mass testing due to a case in a neighbouring city.

China is battling a [spate of coronavirus outbreaks](#), including several from the Omicron variant, as it steps up vigilance against the virus ahead of the Beijing Winter Olympics in February.

Millions of people across the country have been ordered to stay home in recent weeks, with scores of domestic flights cancelled and factories shut down.

Zhuhai officials have asked that residents avoid leaving the city “unless necessary”, with those who do required to show negative Covid test results within the past 24 hours. The city had launched mass testing for its population of 2.4 million people on Friday after a Covid case was detected in neighbouring Zhongshan earlier in the week.

China reported 165 new cases on Saturday, down from 201 a day earlier.

Meanwhile, in the **United States**, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has revised its guidance for Americans on masks, recommending wearing “the most protective mask you can” while stopping short of advocating nationwide usage of the N95 type.

The CDC clarified on its website “that people can choose respirators such as N95s and KN95s, including removing concerns related to supply shortages for N95s”. Americans should “wear the most protective mask you can that fits well and that you will wear consistently”, the CDC added.

It said it wanted to encourage Americans to wear masks – “it is important to remember that any mask is better than no mask” – rather than push them only to wear the highest-grade face protection, but also explicitly said that respirators are best while “loosely woven cloth products provide the least protection”. It said the revised recommendations “reflect the science on

masking, including what we have learned in the past two years” since the start of the pandemic.

The US is tallying about 1,800 Covid-19 deaths and 780,000 new infections daily – the most in the world – as well as record levels of hospitalised patients. The Omicron-related surge appears to be slowing in areas that were hit first, including states in the north-east and south, according to a Reuters analysis. In western states, the number of new cases climbed 89% in the past week compared with the previous week.

Australia has likely neared the peak of its Omicron wave, authorities said on Saturday, while warning daily infections would linger near record levels for the next few weeks after more than 100,000 cases were reported for a fourth straight day.

Having limited the spread of the coronavirus through tough restrictions earlier in the pandemic, Australia is suffering record caseloads from Omicron. Most parts of the country have shifted to a strategy of living with the virus after they reached high vaccination rates. Modelling from some states “leads me to believe that we are close to the peak of this wave in terms of cases”, said Paul Kelly, the chief health officer.

Infections have dipped over the last three days while the rise in hospitalisations in worst-hit New South Wales, Australia’s most populous state, has slowed slightly, official data showed.

Most states are dealing with record hospitalisations from the Omicron wave, with authorities saying unvaccinated younger people form a “significant number” of admissions in Australia.

Brazil’s health ministry reported 112,286 new cases in the past 24 hours and 251 Covid-19 deaths. [Brazil](#) has had 22,927,203 cases since the pandemic began, while the official death toll has risen to 620,796 according to ministry data.

With Reuters, AP and AFP

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/15/covid-global-report-omicron-alert-in-southern-chinese-city-bordering-macau>

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Secondary schools

‘It’s been awful’: teachers at English secondary schools on the first week back

Pupils not wearing masks is a major worry, as is a very heavy workload due to staff off with Omicron, they say

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Mask wearing is ‘unenforceable’ in English secondary schools, leading to staff concerns about catching Covid, possibly for the second or third time.
Photograph: Kevin Coombs/Reuters

[Rachel Obordo](#) and [Alfie Packham](#)

Fri 14 Jan 2022 12.47 EST

In [England](#), following a Christmas break full of uncertainty about further restrictions, a rise in the number of Omicron Covid cases and disrupted Christmas plans due to self-isolating family members, pupils returned to school at the start of January for a new term.

[Only a few days before teachers returned to school](#), new advice emerged from the Department for Education (DfE) saying all secondary school pupils should wear masks in classrooms in an attempt to stem a rise in cases of the Omicron variant.

Three teachers in England speak about their first week of term and their concerns for the coming weeks.

‘I don’t think I’ve known it this bad since I started teaching nearly 20 years ago’

“It’s been awful,” said Julia*, who teaches at a secondary school in London. “We had less than half of our students show up for a lateral flow test before the start of term and quite a few of our parents didn’t grant permission for their children to be tested.”

Julia said she feels concerned as students are hesitant to wear masks and a significant portion of their staff are off sick. “We are already talking about having to send students home as we don’t have enough cover,” said the 50-year-old, who has been in the profession for nearly 20 years. “I’m fully jabbed and have had Covid twice – catching it again is an inevitability at this point.”

She said her school has a high number of disadvantaged children and the situation with Covid has become more difficult following years of little to no funding. “We don’t have enough toilets so we use portaloos and sometimes when it rains too much in my classroom it floods. At the end of the day it’s the children who lose out.

“I think this government is the absolute pits and schools are being hung out to dry. Announcements are left to the last minute when bigger-picture thinking would be a great help. At the end of the day, good teaching happens

when you can plan effectively. I don't think I've known it this bad in schools since I started teaching."

'We feel hamstrung'

Tom, 40, a deputy headteacher in Essex who leads his secondary school's Covid response, said staff and student absences have been at their highest this term since the start of the pandemic.

"We've been letting a different year group back into the school each day and doing on-site testing. But as we wait for year groups to come in, we're finding that pupils are testing positive," he said. "So I've been spending much of my time informing staff of students who are positive, making sure online learning is set up, and letting families know when their child will return. We've got so many that we've had to put them on a centralised spreadsheet."

The school is well prepared for remote teaching, said Tom, but staff shortages concern him. "In mid-December, we started to get hit quite badly. At the beginning of the holiday, myself and 20% of my colleagues tested positive. It was my second positive result during the pandemic. It was obviously disarming for those of us who couldn't see our families over the Christmas period."

This term, the school has [introduced the compulsory wearing of masks](#) in communal spaces, according to government guidance. However, Tom is frustrated that the rule is unenforceable. "The DfE said no child should be denied an education if they refuse to wear a mask. The vast majority of our students are really good about it, but we feel a bit hamstrung. The DfE doesn't seem to be able to make a decision."

'I'm not sure how much longer I can continue'

For Amanda* in Birmingham, the Covid situation at her school is better than they expected it to be. "We haven't had many absences compared to other times during the pandemic," said the secondary school teacher. "Staff

absence is very low and our children have been incredibly compliant about masks.”

Her main concern is the lack of ventilation and the threat of an inspection from Ofsted. “I have a CO₂ monitor in my classroom but no real guidance on how to use it. The readings appear to be normal but if it gets high, what am I supposed to do? I already have the windows open.

“Workload is a huge problem at the moment. We are trying to help students catch up, and prepare them for exams and teacher-assessed grades, all the while with the threat of Ofsted hanging over us. It’s a fear for many of us and feels like the DfE have forgotten teachers are not immune to the pressures of Covid, let alone preparing for an inspection.”

With the added [pay freeze from 2021](#), Amanda and her colleagues are feeling the pinch of the continuing pressure. “Teaching used to be a well-paid job with a good pension but with inflation at an all-time high, and energy bills going up now I’m not sure how much longer I can continue.”

**Some names have been changed.*

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/jan/14/its-been-awful-teachers-at-english-secondary-schools-on-the-first-week-back>

Vaccines and immunisation

Covid booster jabs in England to be thrown away as demand falls

Hundreds of thousands of Pfizer and Moderna doses estimated to be about to expire after sharp fall in take-up

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
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On Thursday only 111,849 booster jabs were given out, compared with nearly a million on 21 December. Photograph: Neil Hall/EPA

[Denis Campbell](#) and [Nicola Davis](#)

Fri 14 Jan 2022 13.09 EST

Booster jabs distributed in England for the pre-Christmas vaccination push are to be thrown away because of a [lack of demand](#), a leaked NHS memo

reveals.

It is not known exactly how many vaccines will be discarded but it is likely to be “hundreds of thousands”, sources told the [Health](#) Service Journal (HSJ), which obtained the memo.

The memo, sent on Thursday from NHS England’s vaccination team to officials managing the 3,000 vaccination sites around the country, said some stocks would reach their expiry dates without being used. It urges them to try to use them up until the last minute before they have to be thrown away.

It said: “There is a quantity of vaccine in the system, which was released in December to support the booster campaign, that will potentially reach its expiry date within the next couple of weeks before it can be fully used. All sites must ensure they make every effort to use this … and prioritise it for all vaccination events coming up until expiry, as per our previous communications.”

Unused supplies that are no longer in date should be “quarantined in appropriate medical fridges” at the correct temperature, it adds. Vaccinators have been using a combination of the Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna jabs in the booster campaign, which began in England last September.

Primary care bosses blamed the wastage on as many as 30% of people [not turning up](#) for their booster appointment.

“Primary care teams have given over 30m boosters, so the last thing they want is for any vaccine stock to be at risk of going to waste,” said Ruth Rankine, the director of primary care at the [NHS](#) Confederation. “They have arrangements in place with other local sites and commissioners to reduce this risk but with NHS leaders telling us that about 20% to 30% of vaccination appointments are resulting in no-shows this is a real worry.

“There will be reasons why people are unable to go to their vaccine appointments including if they are self-isolating, have recently had the virus or have decided to get vaccinated or boosted elsewhere.” People should

amend their booking if they realised they could not make it to “help manage supply and demand”, Rankine said.

Prof Martin Marshall, the chair of the Royal College of GPs, said: “Whilst everything will be done to keep vaccine wastage to a minimum, vaccines do have an expiry date, and if they are unused after this date or can no longer be stored in the correct conditions, they need to be destroyed.”

The HSJ quoted a vaccination programme source who said that: “The prime minister’s mission last month was to get everyone boosted by the end of the year, so the national team pushed out the vaccine before Christmas … irrespective of whether regions wanted it.

“The relative lack of delivery slots over the holiday period meant it was sent in advance, so hundreds of thousands of doses nationally are now coming to the end of their refrigerated shelf life.”

Government [figures on the booster rollout](#) show that the number of people across the UK receiving one has fallen recently from a record 968,665 on 21 December to 111,849 on Thursday.

An NHS England spokesperson said: “The fastest and most successful vaccination programme in NHS history delivered more than 14m jabs during December 2021 alone, following the prime minister’s call for all adults to be offered a booster vaccine by 31 December.

“Despite the deadline having passed, the NHS is continuing to do everything it can to vaccinate as many people as possible against Covid-19 … so please do come forward and book your jab.”

Meanwhile, a new report from the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) has provided updated figures on the effectiveness of booster jabs against Omicron.

The [report](#) suggests the jabs may offer slightly better protection against severe outcomes than suggested by early data, revealing a third dose reduces the risk of hospitalisation by 92% two to four weeks later, although after 10 weeks or more the figure is lower at 83%. Previous [figures from UKHSA](#)

put vaccine effectiveness against hospitalisation at about 88% for Omicron two or more weeks after three doses of vaccine.

“There is further data showing that effectiveness against symptomatic disease is significantly lower compared to the Delta variant, and wanes more quickly,” the report adds.

However, the level of protection against Omicron for this outcome remains similar to the earlier report, at about 65-75% two to four weeks after the jab, falling to about 40-50% protection from 10 or more weeks after the booster.

The latest report also reveals that a loss of taste and smell is less common with Omicron than with the Delta variant.

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Opinion[Boris Johnson](#)

A suitcase of booze, breaking the kid's swing ... is this No 10's worst hangover yet?

[Marina Hyde](#)



Reports of a wild party on the eve of Prince Philip's funeral haven't yet done for Johnson – but there could be more to come



Protesters dressed as Boris Johnson outside Downing Street, London, 14 January 2022. Photograph: Amer Ghazzal/REX/Shutterstock

Fri 14 Jan 2022 10.26 EST

Incredible, when you think about it, that the ceremonial funeral of His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh had fewer attendees than “Slacky”’s leaving do the night before. That’s showbiz, I guess. Anyway: another day, another [Downing Street party dispatch](#) from the nation with the [highest Covid death toll in Europe](#). If only Boris Johnson’s administration could have organised a piss-up in a brewery, instead of just in No 10.

I’m sure Dominic Cummings has some complex 5D game-theory analysis as to why decision-making in Whitehall was systematically loaded toward bad outcomes, but a lot of us will be developing an alternative hypothesis. Namely, do you reckon one of the reasons we did so badly was because you lot were trashed half the time? Forgive me: I forgot to use the approved euphemism. Do you reckon one of the reasons you made impaired decisions and now seem to be suffering repeated memory loss was because of “the drinking culture at No 10”? I mean, honestly. Imagine being such a mess that even JOURNALISTS reckon you drink too much.

And so to a recap of the latest. These two most recently exposed parties were both held at Downing Street on the eve of Prince Philip's funeral, during lockdown last April. Probably the most eye-catching detail reported – beyond the impromptu DJ set, the basement dancing, the suitcase of wine wheeled in, the spills and stains on the carpets – was that one of the revellers apparently broke Wilfred Johnson's garden swing. (Incidentally, if you take a tour of Graceland, you're told that Elvis and his chums loved to shoot in the backyard, and are shown the bullet hole in Lisa Marie Presley's kiddie slide. Fun times.) "What happened to my swing, Daddy?" "Buck up, little chap. Some press officer whose job is issuing denials but who currently thinks he deserves a Victoria Cross for coming into the office sat on it when he was drunk. Is it wet? Probably don't touch it if it is."

As for the rest of the-day-after-the-night-before ... I was recently re-reading a bit in Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* about a shame-haunted hangover, where the character has drowned his memory of the previous evening like a monstrous beast in an icy lake. And yet, the events begin returning to him. Perhaps it felt a bit like this for the Downing Street staff who attended those parties. "A ripple ... The monster was heading up from the bottom of the lake! In a moment ... Its filthy snout! Can't face it –"

Well quite. Oh, God, the suitcase of booze. The attempt at body popping in the basement. Breaking the kid's swing ... Can't face it. Switch on the telly, to take the old mind off it. Oh dear. Live footage of the 94-year-old Queen sitting utterly alone at her husband's funeral. Christ, the snout on this hangover. The filthy snout ...

Then again, the one thing the Downing Street staff don't seem to have been overburdened by after these many, many parties is a sense of shame. I guess you tell yourself that while the Queen is vaguely significant, she is not in any way as significant a personage as you, a Downing Street desk johnny. It all gives new meaning to one of the slogans of Vote Leave, who famously wanted to be rule-makers, not rule-takers. After all this, I don't think anyone could accuse them of taking their own rules.

Speaking of Vote Leave, many of you will be rather bored of Cummings's ongoing attempts to present himself as Downing Street's Jiminy Cricket, a tireless conscience who was forever trying to do the good and noble thing

while surrounded by liars and idiots. Take his announcement this week that he told the BYOB party organiser, Martin Reynolds, “in writing” that it should not happen. Yeah, not all heroes wear capes. Some send a single, arse-covering email to insulate themselves against any future trouble and then do jack shit else to stop the event, even though as the prime minister’s most senior adviser they could have taken a proper stand.

Reynolds has long been expected to be moved after Sue Gray’s investigation, [apparently](#) to a Middle Eastern ambassadorship. Amazing. Is this the same Martin Reynolds who was this week [reported](#) to have regretted his BYOB email as soon as he sent it, become “panicky”, but thought he couldn’t go back on it or it would somehow be worse? Because he sounds EXACTLY the sort of guy who should be an ambassador in the Middle East. Great to hear that the British establishment will keep protecting and advancing him. Come on, what’s the worst that can happen?

Meanwhile, today’s [Sue Gray leak](#) indicated that the civil servant investigating the multiple parties would find insufficient evidence of criminality. Maybe there are legal exemptions because all this took place on the Crown estate – which won’t do a whole lot for the whole stink of elitism, but it will certainly allow the Met to carry on doing absolutely nothing about any of it.

As for the damage being done not merely to the Johnson administration but to the entire concept of government by consent, are these latest revelations finally going to be an end to it? Or are they not even the half of it? My guess is that there is plenty more to come out. One rumour doing the rounds of the upper echelons in Whitehall centres on a lockdown drinks event allegedly attended by several secretaries of state.

Last night, even loyalist MP Andrew Bridgen [called for Johnson’s resignation](#), apparently as disillusioned with the government as fellow Brexiteer Lord Frost. (As with communism, the problem with Brexit will always be that it has yet to be done *properly*.) Johnson’s staunchest defenders seem to be Priti Patel, now detested by Tory voters and beyond because of her perceived failure to get a grip on migrant boats, and Jacob Rees-Mogg, whose intellect remains very much single-breasted. Perhaps you caught him this week declaring that “[HR does not apply to ministers](#)”, and

calling the leader of the Scottish Tories a “[lightweight figure](#)”. Oh dear. How did Jacob bite through his restraints? If he hadn’t been kept out of circulation for months, he might have heard that hanging on to the union was quite an important policy of his government, and perhaps not best assisted by mugging off the most senior Conservative in Scotland.

Not the greatest surprise, then, to see a voter in a TV vox pop judging that “Boris has lost his moral compass”. (I love the idea that he ever had one. What would this contraption have looked like? A custom-built device where the needle pointed magnetically to the words World King Get Big Drunken Shag?) If things carry on at this rate, it won’t be long before the Conservative party decides to Build Back Borisless. For now, the most positive reading of Johnson’s situation is that he’s in the last chance saloon – but hey, at least that means there’s booze.

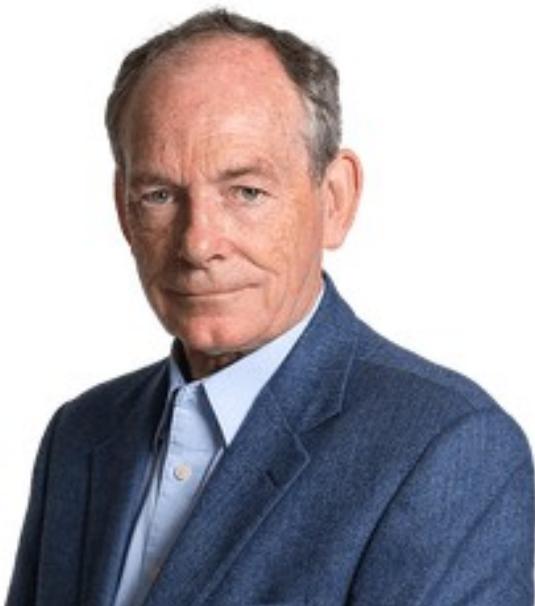
- Marina Hyde is a Guardian columnist
- Join our journalists for a Guardian Live online event on the No 10 lockdown party and Boris Johnson’s future at 8pm GMT on Wednesday 19 January. [Book here](#)

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OpinionMonarchy

After the Prince Andrew scandal, it's time to slim down the monarchy

[Simon Jenkins](#)



Royal offspring are accidents waiting to happen. Far better to cut down the throne to an heir and a spare



'The Duke of York's court case, which could turn out to be a high-octane festival of royal humiliation, risks contaminating the platinum jubilee celebrations.' Photograph: EyePress News/Rex/Shutterstock

Fri 14 Jan 2022 12.03 EST

The royal family is engaged in frantic damage limitation ahead of the Queen's platinum jubilee this summer. The [Duke of York's court case](#), which could turn out to be a high-octane festival of royal humiliation, risks contaminating the celebrations. This should have nothing to do with Britain's monarchy, except that it has everything to do with it. The essence of monarchy is its image; right now, the royal family's public appearance looks messy.

The lifestyles of the Queen's son and grandson, the dukes of York and Sussex, have acquired the aura of a Shakespearean tragedy appropriate to their titles. The Duke of Sussex has done nothing wrong; as yet, neither has the Duke of York. Prince Harry was merely seeking to profit from his only marketable asset – royalty. [Prince Andrew](#) used the same asset to win unsavoury friendships, one of which laid him open to what he regards as outrageous blackmail, as yet untested in a court of law. His desperate hope was that a New York judge would disallow Virginia Giuffre's suit. But American lawyers do not volunteer to starve.

The Queen may not have power, but she can wield tools of emphasis. Just as the Duke of Sussex was shorn of even the slightest royal status, so his uncle has been stripped of titles, badges, regiments, charities and patronages. Like a disgraced medieval saint, he is cast out of heaven into the jaws of hell. His fault is not a matter of right or wrong – he may yet prove a victim of a gross unfairness – but of embarrassment, shame and misery, caused to his mother and family and the institution they represent.

Monarchy depends for public support not on votes but on a fragile, intangible underpinning of public opinion. It needs to be loved for its dignities, its ceremonies and its anniversaries. It must be beyond criticism, pure as the driven snow. It can be tedious and boring. The one thing it cannot be is scandalous – least of all sexually scandalous. Sex was always a royal taboo; for royalty was about heredity, as [James II](#) and [Edward VIII](#) learned to their cost.

As for Prince Charles, he has spent a quarter of a century purifying his image after his own purgatory years. He has carefully fashioned himself as a genial and blameless middle-aged monarch in waiting. As his moment approaches, the last thing he needs is his brother's alleged antics flashed in headlines round the world. As he found with his second son, he must preserve royalty on its eerie, untainted pedestal.

How a nation embodies its statehood is bequeathed to it by history. A virtue of inherited monarchy – perhaps its sole virtue – is that it takes succession beyond argument. It also puts beyond argument any suggestion that the monarch should exercise political power. If monarchy strays into politics or controversy – or shame – it ceases to embody its nation.

That was the fundamental risk taken by the Queen – reportedly against her better judgment – when she decided in the 1960s to depart from the custom of other postwar European monarchs and present Britain's monarchy as a “royal family”. While monarchs in Sweden, Norway, Belgium and the Netherlands were retreating into bourgeois semi-obscurity – where they have wisely stayed – the Queen turned monarchy into a family firm under a blaze of televised publicity.

Royal offspring – who were then still children – became instant celebrities. A cast list of entitled princes, princesses, dukes and duchesses prowled the gossip columns and monarchy magazines. Inevitably they became accidents waiting to happen. It was hard to see these junior royals as anything but victims as they stumbled through life's perils, but the chief risk was to monarchy itself. So it has proved.

The single best decision Prince Charles could make on assuming the throne is, quite simply, to abolish the royal family. He should go Scandinavian. Monarchs do not die young. The throne needs only an heir and a spare. The rest of the family should become commoners and lead normal lives. Perhaps inadvertently, that process started this week.

- Simon Jenkins is a Guardian columnist
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OpinionNHS

A Tory party mired in scandal can't fix the NHS – but a Labour government can

[Keir Starmer](#)

We will fix the damage the Conservatives have done to our health system, and deliver a renewed NHS



‘Labour would get waiting lists down by getting staff numbers up.’ Keir Starmer, left, and Rachel Reeves, right, meet staff at the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, London, in March 2021. Photograph: Stefan Rousseau/PA

Fri 14 Jan 2022 14.00 EST

The next [Labour](#) government will build a new Britain based on security, prosperity and respect. To do that, we must renew the very foundations of

our country. That will begin with renewal of the health service.

The [NHS](#) must be resilient, able to meet the challenges of the future, and focused on prevention as well as cure. It must be there to protect us in the future, rather than requiring us to protect it in the present.

It is to the country's great misfortune that at this crucial time we have a Conservative government yet again mired in scandal, led by a prime minister who is [out of control](#), out of touch and out of ideas. Senior cabinet ministers are spending their days plotting how and when to dispose of him. Precious time is being wasted on the latest internal psychodrama of the Tory party instead of sorting out the mess they have made.

Nowhere is that mess more profound than in the health service. Twelve years ago, the Tories inherited a strong NHS from Labour. Waiting times were the shortest on record. Today they are the [highest since records began](#). Across the country, people are struggling to see a doctor, get the care they require or have a much needed operation.

The claim from the government benches that all the NHS's ills are down to Covid is simply not true. Waiting times were on the rise long before the virus showed up. [Life expectancy](#) had stalled. We went into the pandemic [short of 100,000 staff](#) in England and with patients unable to be discharged from beds. Lockdowns were necessary to stop the NHS falling over – but the reason it was in such a perilous state was because the Tories had made it so.

Without a great renewal, the NHS will continue to be vulnerable to new variants and new viruses. That, in turn, will leave the country vulnerable. This is unsustainable. Lockdowns come at enormous cost to people's lives and health, and the country's economy. Being forced into a hokey-cokey of restrictions will only do more harm in the long term.

Instead we must fix the damage the Tories have done, to make the NHS more resilient again. That means investing properly. Labour would get waiting lists down by getting staff numbers up: recruiting, training and – crucially – retaining the staff we need. We would treat care workers with respect by giving them real job security and rewarding them properly. And

we would transform social care to give older and disabled people the support they need to live the life they choose.

Our focus will be on the sort of renewal that has only ever been possible under Labour governments. Just as the Blair government refocused the health service on outcomes, we would switch the focus from simply treating illnesses to preventing them. When I was director of public prosecutions, hardly a case came across my desk where early intervention couldn't have turned lives around before they unravelled. The same is true in health.

Achieving this sort of change means rethinking how the healthcare system works. It will require us to focus on the patient rather than just the system, the community as much as the community hospital. If we are to keep people well and at home we must strengthen those services that in turn strengthen entire communities, such as [adequate mental health provision](#).

The NHS needs to be properly funded but, simply throwing money at the problem [isn't the answer](#). Instead, we need to think radically about how the NHS can deal with the challenges of the future. We would be forensic with investment. Technology has the potential to transform how we live and manage our lives, while also reducing pressures. It will be possible to get early warnings about diseases we may be vulnerable to. "Hospital at home" systems will allow patients to track and report their conditions, with remote supervision.

Tackling the immediate crisis, future-proofing the NHS and shifting our focus to prevention is all part of Labour's new contract with the British people. It will provide the security that comes with knowing the health service will be there for you and your loved ones when you need it. It will increase our nation's health and wellbeing, giving us all the chance to prosper. And it will provide people with the dignity and self-respect that come with being able to have control over your own life. The Tories don't get any of this. They think it's enough for the NHS to merely survive. Under Labour, the NHS – and Britain – will once again thrive.

- Keir Starmer is leader of the Labour party and MP for Holborn and St Pancras
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Opinion**Boris Johnson**

It's a scandal that Boris Johnson ever got to No 10 – and shaming that he's still there

[Jonathan Freedland](#)



If Johnson's lies go unpunished, the public's ability to feel a basic level of trust in their government will have been shattered



Boris Johnson at the Commons in March. Photograph: Jessica Taylor/UK PARLIAMENT/AFP/Getty Images

Fri 14 Jan 2022 12.32 EST

It's come to something when there's more accountability in a hereditary monarchy than in our elected government. Even in Buckingham Palace there are consequences for one's actions, as Prince Andrew learned on Thursday, when he was [stripped of his sort-of jobs](#). In the Palace of Westminster, not so much.

The contrast could hardly be sharper. On one side, a Queen so determined to show that she was not above the rules that she [grieved alone](#) as she buried the man she had loved for 73 years. On the other, a prime minister running Downing Street like a frat house, where bottles were reportedly brought in by the suitcase and they [danced in the basement](#) even on the eve of that austere royal funeral, even in the midst of a lockdown.

And yet, Johnson remains in his post, his titles still his to use. There's confident chatter, [briefed to the papers](#), that he'll get away with it. His team is already spinning in advance the report of the civil service inquisitor, Sue Gray, suggesting that she will find no criminal wrongdoing – deliberately

misunderstanding the role of her inquiry – thereby setting the bar sufficiently low for Johnson to say he has cleared it and we should all move on.

Meanwhile his supporters, and even some of his opponents, are working out what serves them best: to push him out or let him stay. There are Tories looking at the calendar, asking if the local elections in May might be the moment. There are Labour folk wondering if it might help to have a weakened Johnson to punch at from now until the next general election.

I understand all those calculations. But what does it mean for our system if he is allowed to hold on? What does it say about us?

What, for example, would it say about our perennial brag that we are a society subject to the rule of law that the man who sets the rules is allowed to break them and break them so egregiously? I know it's hard to keep track, but the party we were all focused on before the revelation of the basement disco was the one on 20 May 2020, when lockdown was still a relative novelty and most Britons were policing themselves with extraordinary self-discipline and self-sacrifice. Johnson says he went to that garden party, attended by his wife and some of her friends, where the gin and rosé flowed, and thought he was at a “work event”. No one in their right mind believes that is true. But if he stays in his job, we are saying that we accept it.

What will it say about the supposedly unbreakable convention that a minister who lies to or misleads the House of Commons has to resign? Johnson was guilty of that on Wednesday with that “work event” nonsense, but it was hardly the first time. On 1 December last year, when grilled about whichever of the seemingly daily Downing Street parties had just been revealed, Johnson [told MPs](#) “all guidance was followed completely in No 10”. That was obviously untrue, and he must have known it was untrue because he had attended just such a rule-breaking party himself, back on 20 May 2020. Whatever elaborate get-out he tries to construct, we can all see the truth. If Johnson’s lie goes unpunished, a convention that evolved in order to allow the public to feel a basic level of trust in their government will have been shattered.

[contact us](#)

That will damage our democratic health, but what will it mean for our literal health if Johnson is allowed to stay? Should there be a grave new variant of this disease, one that demands a return to full lockdown, it's clear that he could not impose it. The country would simply refuse to take instruction from a man who so flagrantly laughed in their face last time. Indeed, it's not clear any government could ever again impose such restrictions: the electorate might well conclude from this episode that all politicians and their officials are as hypocritical as the current gang inside No 10 and refuse to comply. That is a grim possibility. But with Johnson himself, it is certain. The country cannot navigate a public health crisis with this man at the helm. If that was true of Matt Hancock snogging his lover – a point Johnson conceded when he accepted Hancock's resignation – then it is a hundred times truer of him.

Of course, there were multiple reasons for Johnson to be removed, even before we knew he had turned Downing Street into the Studio 54 of Whitehall. On Wednesday, the high court found that the government's use of a "VIP lane" for the allocation of lucrative PPE contracts during the first wave of the pandemic was unlawful, exposing to the light once more a pattern of behaviour that, were it spotted in any other country but ours, we would call corruption. What does it say about us that no one thinks for a minute that Johnson will be pushed out over any of that?

There will be many now hoping that Sue Gray will ride to the rescue, that in calm, mandarin prose she will pronounce the prime minister unambiguously guilty. But it's a fantasy, just as it was a fantasy to expect Robert Mueller to topple Donald Trump over collusion with Russia, or Robin Butler to remove Tony Blair over Iraq. I spoke to Lord Butler on Friday, and he reminded me that inquiries of this kind are not about declaring guilt or innocence, but solely about establishing the facts. He believes Gray will set out "what happened. It's then for other people to reach judgments." Those others will include the police, who will determine whether there is evidence of criminal activity. That's their job, not Gray's. Which is why it's so dishonest of Downing Street to be briefing that the civil servant will rule on a question she has not been asked.

Johnson's fate will be decided not by her, but by politics: initially by MPs and, if necessary, by the people. Johnson's former editor at the Telegraph,

Max Hastings, once wrote that if Johnson, a man he believed “would not recognise truth if confronted by it in an identity parade” became prime minister, it would demonstrate that Britain was no longer “[a serious country](#)”. If we allow Johnson to stay as prime minister, given all that he’s done and all that we’ve seen, it would say something far, far worse.

- Jonathan Freedland is a Guardian columnist
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US claims Russia planning ‘false-flag’ operation to justify Ukraine invasion

- Officials: Moscow has already positioned saboteurs in Ukraine
- Allegation arrives on day Ukraine hit by ‘massive’ cyber-attack



Vladimir Putin at the Kremlin on Friday. Moscow has persistently portrayed the crisis as a military threat from Ukraine against Russia. Photograph: Mikhail Metzel/AP

[Julian Borger](#) in Washington and [Luke Harding](#) in Kyiv

Fri 14 Jan 2022 13.25 EST

The US has alleged Russia has already positioned saboteurs in [Ukraine](#) to carry out a “false flag” operation to use as a pretext for a Russian attack, which Washington says could begin in the coming month.

The allegations came on the same day as [a large-scale cyber-attack on Ukrainian government websites](#), and amid new reports of Russian military hardware on the move from the far east heading westwards.

They follow [a week of failed diplomacy](#) with abortive talks in Geneva, Brussels and Vienna, which did nothing to defuse the crisis provoked by Russia's massing of more than 100,000 troops near Ukraine's borders. Moscow has persistently portrayed the crisis as a military threat from Ukraine against Russia, without providing any evidence.

"We have information that indicates Russia has already pre-positioned a group of operatives to conduct a false flag operation in eastern [Ukraine](#)," Jen Psaki, the White House spokeswoman, said. "The operatives are trained in urban warfare and using explosives to carry out acts of sabotage against Russia's own proxy forces."

The allegation was echoed by the Pentagon spokesman, John Kirby, who said that [Russia](#) was preparing "an operation designed to look like an attack on ... Russian-speaking people in Ukraine, again as an excuse to go in."

A US official claimed that social media disinformation had been stepped up well in advance, saying: "The Russian military plans to begin these activities several weeks before a military invasion, which could begin between mid-January and mid-February."

Russian-language posts on social media accusing Ukraine and its western backers of planning attacks appeared at the rate of 3,500 a day in December, a 200% increase from the daily average in November, the official said.

Ukrainian officials had claimed that the provocation could take the form of a violent incident at the Russian embassy or consulate, which Moscow could then blame on far-right Ukrainian extremists.

The presidential spokesman in Moscow, Dmitry Peskov, rejected the claims as "unfounded and completely unconfirmed".

On the same day as the allegations, [Ukraine was hit by a "massive" cyber-attack](#), with the websites of several government departments including the

ministry of foreign affairs and the education ministry knocked out.

The hackers left a message on the foreign ministry website, according to reports. It said: “Ukrainians! ... All information about you has become public. Be afraid and expect worse. It’s your past, present and future.”

Andriy Yermak, the head of the presidential office in Kyiv said, “practically 90%” of the affected websites were back online by mid-afternoon.

“The most strategic infrastructure in Ukraine was not be destroyed by this attack. This is a very [well] protected,” Yermak told a meeting of the Atlantic Council thinktank from Kyiv. He said Ukraine was working with the US and the UK to confirm who was behind the assault.

Foreign ministry spokesperson Oleg Nikolenko said that initial investigations suggested that “hacker groups associated with the Russian secret services” were responsible. The White House, however, could not immediately confirm that.

“We don’t have an attribution at this time,” a US official told reporters. “While we continue to assess the impact with the Ukrainians, it seems limited so far, with websites coming back online. We will consult with allies and partners including Ukraine.”

In a message to the Guardian, the foreign ministry’s spokesperson, Oleg Nikolenko, said: “As a result of a massive cyber-attack, the website of the ministry of foreign affairs and other government agencies are temporarily down.”

He added: “Our specialists have already started restoring the work of IT systems and the cyber-police has opened an investigation.”

Nato’s secretary general, Jens Stoltenberg, and Josep Borrell, the EU’s top diplomat, condemned the attacks. Borrell said the EU’s political and security committee and cyber units would meet to decide how to respond and to support Kyiv.

“We are going to mobilise all our resources to help Ukraine to tackle this. Sadly, we knew it could happen,” he said. He added: “It’s difficult to say

[who is behind it]. I can't blame anybody as I have no proof. But we can imagine.”

Stoltenberg said Nato and Ukraine would in the coming days sign an agreement on enhanced cyber cooperation. Kyiv would get access to Nato's malware information sharing platform, he said.

Sweden's foreign minister, Ann Linde, said the west must stand up to any Russian aggression. “We have to be very firm in our messages to Russia, that if there are attacks against Ukraine, we will be very harsh and very strong and robust in our response,” she said. Sweden stood in solidarity with Kyiv, she added.

On Friday, there was more confirmation of Russian forces being moved towards Ukraine from across the country. The Atlantic Council's [Digital Forensic Research Lab](#) analysed pictures posted on TikTok and other social media this month, which it said showed Iskander mobile short-range missiles and T-72 tanks being transported westwards from the far east.

The Kremlin has demanded an assurance Ukraine and Georgia will never join Nato. It wants Nato to remove troops and equipment from its member states in eastern [Europe](#), and to return deployment to 1997 levels, before Nato expanded.

On Friday Russia's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, said Moscow would not wait indefinitely for a response. “We have run out of patience,” he said at a news conference. “The west has been driven by hubris and has exacerbated tensions in violation of its obligations and common sense.”

Meanwhile, Moscow said it had carried out a special operation against the [ransomware group REvil](#) following a request from the US. The FSB spy agency which Vladimir Putin used to run said it had detained and charged the group's members.

In Washington, a US official praised the arrests, saying that one suspect was behind the disruptive [hack of the Colonial Pipeline](#), but separated the issue from tensions on Ukraine, according to Agence France-Presse. “I want to be very clear – in our mind, this is not related to what's happening with Russia

and Ukraine. I don't speak for the Kremlin's motives, but we're pleased with these initial actions." AFP did not name the official.

The US embassy in Moscow had no immediate comment. But the move appears to be part of carrot and stick operation following the latest cyber-attack on Ukraine, designed to wrong-foot the Americans. Thus far, the Kremlin has made little effort to curb hacks on western targets by Russia-based cyber-criminals.

Yermak said that the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, had proposed a three-way summit with Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin in an effort to end the crisis.

"We're still waiting for the reaction to this from the Russian side, but our American partners take our proposal with some interest," Yermak said, warning of the potential cost of failure to prevent a war.

"If it's happened, it will be a big tragedy and you understand it will be big war because ... most citizens of the Ukraine will fight against aggressors," Yermak said.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/14/us-russia-false-flag-ukraine-attack-claim>

Ukraine

Ukraine hit by ‘massive’ cyber-attack on government websites

Suspected Russian hackers leave message warning: ‘Ukrainians ... be afraid and expect worse’



Ukraine has been repeatedly targeted by cyber-attackers since 2014.
Composite: Screengrabs

Luke Harding in Kyiv
Fri 14 Jan 2022 03.45 EST

Ukraine has been hit by a “massive” cyber-attack, with the websites of several government departments including the [ministry of foreign affairs](#) and the education ministry knocked out.

Officials said it was too early to draw any conclusions but they pointed to a “long record” of Russian cyber assaults against Ukraine, with the attack

coming after [security talks between Moscow and the US and its allies this week ended in stalemate.](#)

Suspected Russian hackers left a message on the foreign ministry website, according to reports. It said: "Ukrainians! ... All information about you has become public. Be afraid and expect worse. It's your past, present and future."

The message reproduced the Ukrainian flag and map crossed out. It mentioned the Ukrainian insurgent army, or UPA, which fought against the Soviet Union during the second world war. There was also a reference to "historical land".

NEWS IN KYIV: Several Ukrainian government websites down due to a major a cyberattack. Below is the [@MFA_Ukraine](#) website now. It reads in part: "Ukrainians!...All information about you has become public, be afraid and expect worse." Sites of MOD and Education ministry also down. pic.twitter.com/3lbA06Q3F1

— Christopher Miller (@ChristopherJM) [January 14, 2022](#)

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"We are going to mobilise all our resources to help [Ukraine](#) to tackle this. Sadly, we knew it could happen," he said. He added: "It's difficult to say [who is behind it]. I can't blame anybody as I have no proof. But we can imagine."

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Sweden's foreign minister, Ann Linde, said the west must stand up to any Russian aggression. "We have to be very firm in our messages to Russia, that if there are attacks against Ukraine, we will be very harsh and very strong and robust in our response," she said. Sweden stood in solidarity with Kyiv, she added.

On Thursday, Russian envoys sounded a bleak note after discussions this week with the OSCE in Vienna, as well as [Nato](#) and the US. Sergei Ryabkov, who led Russia's delegation, said [talks had hit a dead end](#).

The Kremlin has demanded an assurance Ukraine and Georgia will never join Nato. It wants Nato to remove troops and equipment from its member states in eastern [Europe](#), and to return deployment to 1997 levels, before Nato expanded.

On Friday Russia's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov said Moscow would not wait indefinitely for a response. "We have run out of patience," he said at a news conference. "The west has been driven by hubris and has exacerbated tensions in violation of its obligations and common sense."

Russia has mobilised 100,000 troops on the border with Ukraine and sent in military hardware. Its defence ministry [announced](#) that further equipment would be relocated from the east of the country as part of what it said was an "exercise".

Meanwhile, Moscow said it had carried out a special operation against the [ransomware group REvil](#) following a request from the US. The FSB spy agency which Vladimir Putin used to run said it had detained and charged the group's members.

The US embassy in Moscow had no immediate comment. But the move appears to be part of carrot and stick operation following the latest cyber-attack on Ukraine, designed to wrong-foot the Americans. Thus far, the

Kremlin has made little effort to curb hacks on western targets by Russia-based cyber-criminals.

Ukraine has been repeatedly targeted since 2014, when Moscow annexed Crimea and kickstarted a war in the eastern Donbas region. About 288,000 cyber-attacks took place in the first 10 months of 2021, according to official figures, with 397,000 in 2020.

The attacks have also been directed at critical infrastructure. In winter 2015 suspected Russian hackers took out parts of the country's power grid, which led to almost a quarter of a million Ukrainians losing power and heat. A repeat attack happened in 2016.

In 2017, suspected Russian hackers unleashed the NotPetya virus, causing mayhem. Banks, newspapers and leading companies were targeted.

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Ukraine

What have Ukraine talks achieved, and is war now more likely?

Russia calls talks a ‘dead end’ and it becomes clear that troop build-up is not a bluff to achieve other ends



US deputy secretary of state, Wendy Sherman, and Russian deputy foreign minister, Sergei Ryabkov, on Monday. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

[Julian Borger](#)

Thu 13 Jan 2022 13.40 EST

The Guardian’s world affairs editor assesses the outcome of three rounds of talks this week about the fate of [Ukraine](#), involving Russia, the US, Nato and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

Did the talks achieve anything?

Not much. The Russians have described them as a “dead end”. The gap between what the US and its allies were prepared to talk about – reciprocal limits on missiles and military exercises and other confidence-building measures – and what Moscow was demanding – guarantees that Ukraine and other former Soviet bloc states would never join Nato – is as wide at the end of the week as it was at the beginning. But at least the possibility of finding common ground has been tested, and diplomacy is being given a chance.

Is there any more clarity about what [Russia](#) wants?

Yes. It is clear now that Russia was not using its troop build-up and its demands about Nato as a bluff to achieve gains on other matters. The three meetings this week have provided opportunities for Russia to take an off-ramp and find a face-saving solution, but Moscow has not taken them. There is little doubt any more that [Vladimir Putin](#) is seeking nothing less than a transformation in European security, with a much-reduced Nato presence along its borders.

Are there likely to be more talks?

Russian officials on Thursday did not make it sound like there was much appetite in Moscow for further discussions. The Poles suggested having an intensified dialogue on security issues within the framework of the OSCE, but the Russians have said all along they want a quick resolution, rather than an ongoing process of airing grievances. Ukraine has suggested a summit to address the crisis, this time with Kyiv at the table, but there has been no response from Moscow.

What happens next?

The diplomats go back to their capitals to discuss the next steps. All eyes will be on Moscow and the movements of Russian troops and armour in the region around Ukraine. The Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, is due to give a press conference on Friday. That should give a clearer idea of Putin’s state of mind. The Russians have demanded the US give written comments on the draft agreements that Moscow published in December, which include the proposed limits on [Nato](#). It is not clear yet whether Washington will submit those written responses summing up its objections.

Has the chance of war increased or decreased after the talks?

Increased. The probability that Putin was using the pressure on Ukraine as leverage to get something else was always small. Now it has all but disappeared. It is also clearer that the US and its allies are not ready to offer a fudge on Ukraine's Nato membership, acknowledging that it is unlikely for the foreseeable future. After this week, we know that Putin is ready to go to the very brink of war. The question now is: will he go over it?

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/13/what-has-been-achieved-after-three-rounds-of-talks-on-ukraine>

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North Korea

North Korea fires railway-borne missiles in third weapons test this month

Two tactical guided missiles hit their target, state media said, hours after Pyongyang accused US of ‘provocation’



Images of the firing drill were released by North Korea’s official news agency. Photograph: AFP Photo/KCNA via KNS/Getty Images

Reuters in Seoul

Fri 14 Jan 2022 18.10 EST

North Korea’s third weapons test this month involved the firing drill of a railway-borne missile, state media KCNA has said.

South Korea’s joint chiefs of staff said it had detected what it presumed were two short-range ballistic missiles launched eastward on Friday from North Pyongan province on the north-west coast of North Korea.

The official KCNA news agency said on Saturday that a firing drill was held to “check and judge the proficiency in the action procedures of the railway-borne regiment”, which North Korea tested for the first time last September, designed as a potential counter-strike to any threatening forces.

It was the third time North Korea has launched ballistic missiles since New Year’s Day, an unusually rapid pace of weapons tests. The previous two launches involved what state media called “hypersonic missiles”, capable of high speeds and manoeuvring after launch.

The drill came just hours after Pyongyang criticised a US pursuit of new UN sanctions over a series of recent launches as a “provocation” and warned of a strong reaction.

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un did not attend the drill. KCNA said it was held “at short notice” from the military’s general staff but the regiment precisely struck the target set in the east coast with “two tactical guided missiles”.

The regiment “demonstrated high maneuverability and rate of hits”, and discussed ways to “set up [a] proper railway-borne missile operating system across the country”, KCNA said.

North Korea has defended the missile tests as its sovereign right to self-defence and accused the US of intentionally escalating the situation with new sanctions.

Washington condemned the latest launch, saying it posed a threat to Pyongyang’s neighbours and the international community, while reiterating calls for a restart of stalled denuclearisation talks.

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Headlines thursday 13 january 2022

- [Live Boris Johnson cancels trip after family member's positive Covid test while Tory leadership crisis grows](#)
- [Coronavirus Boris Johnson cancels clinic visit after family member tests positive for Covid](#)
- [Boris Johnson No 10 parties inquiry should have more independence, say former civil servants](#)
- ['Disgrace' What the papers say as PM faces calls to resign](#)

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

[**Politics**](#)

Scottish Tories set to deliver snub to Johnson by not inviting him to spring conference – as it happened

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/live/2022/jan/13/boris-johnson-coronavirus-covid-uk-news-live-pm-tory-leadership-crisis-sue-gray>.

Boris Johnson

Boris Johnson does not believe he broke Covid rules at party, says minister

Northern Ireland secretary Brandon Lewis defends PM as he pulls out of public engagement in Lancashire

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



Johnson would have faced questions from the media in Lancashire but has pulled out of visit after family member's positive Covid test. Photograph: MI News/NurPhoto/Rex/Shutterstock

[Caroline Davies](#) and [Heather Stewart](#)

Thu 13 Jan 2022 06.22 EST

The Northern Ireland secretary, Brandon Lewis, has insisted the prime minister was “very, very sincere” when he apologised for attending an alcohol-fuelled gathering in the Downing Street garden, but did not believe he had broken the rules.

Boris Johnson told MPs on Wednesday he [thought he was at a “work event”](#) when he dropped into what his own principal private secretary had called “socially distanced drinks”.

Lewis told Sky News: “The prime minister has outlined that he doesn’t believe that he has done anything outside the rules. If you look at what the investigation finds, people will be able to take their own view of that at the time.”

Johnson’s apology failed to assuage the concerns of many [Conservatives](#), with the Scottish Tory leader, Douglas Ross, and the senior backbencher William Wragg calling for him to resign.

Several cabinet ministers, including the chancellor, Rishi Sunak, were slow to declare their backing for Johnson, with Sunak eventually tweeting that the prime minister deserved “patience” until the civil servant Sue Gray officially reported on the lockdown events.

Lewis played down reports that Sunak, who was in Devon at the time of Johnson’s public apology, had been lukewarm in his response. “I have seen Rishi working with the prime minister. They work absolutely hand-in-hand. I know that Rishi has got support for the prime minister,” he said.

Some MPs had suggested Johnson was unrepentant when talking to colleagues after he apologised to the House of Commons. But Lewis insisted he was “very, very sincere”.

He told BBC Radio 4’s Today programme that the PM had “made it very clear that, with hindsight, he regrets doing what he did in going out and not just straight away telling the staff to go back in but thanking the team for the work they were doing.

“He does recognise the anger and upset and frustration that people feel at what they perceive happened at No 10. He recognises that and takes responsibility. Anybody who looks at what he said at the dispatch box yesterday will clearly be able to see that was very, very sincere.”

It came as the prime minister [pulled out of an engagement](#) on Thursday after a family member tested positive for Covid.

Johnson would have faced questions from the media about his attendance at the Downing Street event on the planned visit to a [Lancashire](#) vaccination clinic on Thursday. He pulled out despite official guidance no longer requiring vaccinated contacts of coronavirus cases to self-isolate.

A Downing Street spokesperson said: “The prime minister will no longer be visiting Lancashire today due to a family member testing positive for coronavirus. He will follow the guidance for vaccinated close contacts, including daily testing and limiting contact with others.”

Lewis played down reports that Johnson had told Conservative MPs in the Commons tea room that he did not believe he did anything wrong and the government was undeservedly taking a hit.

“I haven’t heard him say that at all. I wasn’t in the tea room. So commenting on tittle-tattle that may have come out of the tea room I can’t do,” he told the Today programme.

Johnson is facing calls from some Conservative MPs to resign. But cabinet ministers have defended him, saying MPs should wait for the outcome of Gray’s inquiry.

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'I apologise for the impression': how Boris Johnson has responded to lockdown party claims – video

Asked what facts the prime minister still needed to know, Lewis said: “We can’t know the facts we don’t know until the investigation tells us what they are.”

Meanwhile, the deputy Labour leader, Angela Rayner, had written to Johnson and his government asking for “full details of parties” that cabinet ministers may have attended during lockdown, the shadow housing secretary, Lisa Nandy, said.

She said Johnson “should not be confident that he will survive” the controversy over the Downing Street party.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/jan/13/boris-johnson-cancels-lancashire-visit-family-member-tests-positive-covid>

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Boris Johnson

No 10 parties inquiry should have more independence, say former civil servants

Senior figures concerned that Boris Johnson could veto Sue Gray's findings if she recommends investigation under ministerial code



The disclosure of a 'bring your own booze' party at No 10 in May 2020 has only added to the import of Gray's inquiry. Photograph: Henry Nicholls/Reuters

Rajeev Syal

Thu 13 Jan 2022 01.00 EST

An inquiry into Downing Street parties that could determine the fate of Boris Johnson's premiership should be given greater independence from No 10, former civil servants and a union leader have warned.

It comes amid concerns that the prime minister could veto the conclusions of an inquiry by Sue Gray if she recommends that he should be investigated under the ministerial code.

Gray, a senior civil servant, was appointed last month to examine claims that Downing Street officials broke Covid rules by holding a series of parties and events during the pandemic. She replaced her line manager – the cabinet secretary, Simon Case – after it [emerged that a Christmas quiz](#) was alleged to have been held in his office.

However, her inquiry has grown in gravity and potential impact amid calls for Johnson to step down following a public outcry over further party revelations. On Wednesday, [Johnson gave a partial apology](#) for attending a “bring your own booze” party in No 10’s garden on 20 May 2020.

Keir Starmer, the Labour leader, accused Johnson of breaking the ministerial code by making misleading statements in a series of denials about parties at No 10. “That code says ministers who knowingly mislead parliament will be expected to offer their resignation,” Starmer told MPs.

Afterwards, several Tory MPs privately said they would await the Gray findings and, if damning, call for their prime minister to quit.

Gray, whose inquiry could conclude as early as next week, can recommend that Johnson has broken the ministerial code. The terms of reference for her inquiry state that “the conduct of ministers should follow the process set out in the ministerial code in the normal way”.

However, Dave Penman, the head of the FDA union, which represents senior civil servants, said if Gray makes a recommendation for further inquiries under the ministerial code, Johnson still has the power to block it.

“The prime minister himself gets to decide if he needs to be investigated under the ministerial code. No one else can make that decision and he has so far refused to give up this veto despite the [recommendations from the committee for standards in public life](#) to do so,” he said.

Gray is running the inquiry from the Cabinet Office along with staff members from the propriety and ethics team. She previously headed the same team for six years, during which she ended the careers of three cabinet ministers and vetted the memoirs of ministers.

Senior civil servants have expressed concern that the inquiry's conclusions will be scrutinised by both Johnson and Case.

Bob Kerslake, the former head of the civil service, said he had previously been happy for the inquiry to be run by Case but believed the latest revelations meant a retired judge should be asked to receive Gray's findings.

"Sue Gray is an immensely capable investigator but one has to recognise that two of the principal actors here – the PM and the cabinet secretary, effectively her bosses – are now deeply implicated in the inquiry. That is completely unprecedented. The findings could decide whether they stay in their jobs or not.

"The latest revelations over the events of 20 May 2020 have raised real questions as to whether there should be another independent person involved – a retired judge, for example – who could then receive this report, rather than it being passed directly on to the prime minister and the cabinet secretary," he said.

Sir David Normington, who worked at the Home Office and oversaw public appointments, said Gray had been placed in a "very odd" position as the public waited for her verdict.

"She's in the middle of a political maelstrom at the moment, trying to establish the facts, and there'll be a lot of pressure on her to conclude this investigation as quickly as possible," he said.

"She will be very aware that she has the reputations and possibly the careers of senior civil servants and possibly of the prime minister in her hands. That is a very difficult position to be in, however fair and fearless and rigorous you are."

A Cabinet Office spokesperson said they would not speculate on the inquiry.

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Newspapers

‘Disgrace’: what the papers said as Boris Johnson faces calls to resign

Amid the derision, supportive papers try to rally around the PM but report that ‘ambitious’ Rishi Sunak is waiting in the wings



How some of the papers covered Boris Johnson’s dramatic apology in the Commons. Composite: twitter, various

Martin Farrer

Wed 12 Jan 2022 21.27 EST

The newspaper front pages have piled the pressure on [Boris Johnson](#) as the prime minister fights for his political life over the scandal of the “bring your own booze” lockdown-era party at Downing Street.

The **Mirror**’s banner headline on Thursday is “Disgrace”, set below a picture of Johnson giving his humiliating apology to the Commons for “not

realising” the event in the back garden of 10 Downing Street on 20 May 2020 was a party.

Tomorrow's front page: Disgrace <https://t.co/IMUC6TcXQi>
[#TomorrowsPapersToday](#) pic.twitter.com/aFkWxnod9Z

— The Mirror (@DailyMirror) [January 12, 2022](#)

In a lengthy subhead, the Mirror says: “First, Johnson said no rules were broken ... then he said he didn’t know about any parties ... now he admits he was at one of them ... but didn’t realise it was a party.”

The **Guardian’s** main headline is “[PM’s future on knife-edge after No 10 party apology](#)”, and reports that there is widespread “derision” over his claim that he did not realise he was attending a party.

Guardian front page, Thursday 13 January 2022: PM's future on knife-edge after No 10 party apology pic.twitter.com/RTOPdWJLAE

— The Guardian (@guardian) [January 12, 2022](#)

Times also has a picture of a grim-faced Johnson in the Commons and the headline “Defiant PM refuses to quit as polls slip further”, while the **FT** has “Johnson faces Tory calls to quit after attending lockdown party” and the **i** says “Tories call on Boris Johnson to resign”.

THE TIMES: Defiant PM refuses to quit as polls slip further
[#TomorrowsPapersToday](#) pic.twitter.com/XqyXw56uP3

— Neil Henderson (@hendopolis) [January 12, 2022](#)

Just published: front page of the Financial Times UK edition Thursday January 13 <https://t.co/Z1zl6vEJBA> pic.twitter.com/nLbdTPT7Nk

— Financial Times (@FinancialTimes) [January 12, 2022](#)

Thursday's front page: Tories call on Boris Johnson to resign [#TomorrowsPapersToday](#)

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— i newspaper (@theipaper) [January 12, 2022](#)

The **Scotsman** naturally takes the strong Scottish angle on the drama given the role played by Tory leader Douglas Ross in leading calls for the prime minister to quit: “Scots Tories lead rebellion despite Johnson’s apology”.

THE SCOTSMAN: Scots Tories lead rebellion despite [@BorisJohnson](#) ‘s apology [#TomorrowsPapersToday](#) <pic.twitter.com/D5yJIIdoGX>

— Neil Henderson (@hendopolis) [January 12, 2022](#)

The **Daily Record**’s splash is a bit more direct – “Cock and Bull Tory” – and nor does the **National** hold back, screaming “Liar”.

Tomrrow's front page leads on Boris Johnson fighting for his political career after Tories turned on the Prime Minister. [#scotpapers](#) [#TomorrowsPapersToday](#) [@hendopolis](#) <pic.twitter.com/AHGbVaINAa>

— The Daily Record (@Daily_Record) [January 12, 2022](#)

The **Telegraph** takes a slightly different tack with its story headlined “Sunak leaves Johnson in limbo”, focusing on the chancellor’s half-hearted backing for the embattled PM. A comment piece by columnist Juliet Samuel on the front page has the headline “PM buys time at cost of public mockery by admitting he’s an idiot”.

In a possible sign of the seriousness of the situation, the **Mail** and **Express** have both decided it is time to circle the wagons around the PM – a sharp contrast with [their treatment of the story earlier this week](#). “Operation Save

Boris” says the Mail, reporting that “cabinet rallies round” but that “ambitious Rishi’s lukewarm support” spells trouble ahead.

Thursday's [@DailyMailUK](#) [#MailFrontPages](#)
pic.twitter.com/3rFG2BzLvc

— Daily Mail U.K. (@DailyMailUK) [January 12, 2022](#)

Express headline is “I'm Sorry ... but now prove you can deliver for Britain”.

Tomorrow's front page: I'm sorry..... but now prove you can deliver for Britain [#tomorrowsfrontpagetoday](#)

Read more: <https://t.co/VhYzrOil03> <pic.twitter.com/9sajf9Zpj6>

— Daily Express (@Daily_Express) [January 12, 2022](#)

The **Star** joins in the fun with a splash headline saying “Rules are only for little people!” and the **Metro** has “Sorry... not sorry”.

Tomorrow's paper tonight

SORRY... NOT SORRY

□ PM apologises for Downing Street B.Y.O.B party [#TomorrowsPapersToday](#) <pic.twitter.com/RbKk92vjCp>

— Metro (@MetroUK) [January 12, 2022](#)

On any other day, the news that the [civil case can proceed against Prince Andrew](#) over sexual abuse allegations would lead most papers. Only the **Sun** rates it as the best today though with the splash head: “Damned old Duke of York”.

Further afield, the **Washington Post** says there is one question that Britons are asking: What were you doing on 20 May 2020?”. It says “heartbreaking” interviews with people about their lockdown sacrifices reveal a “growing sense of betrayal” and increase pressure on Johnson. Also in the US, the furore has prompted the New York Times to round up [all those other grovelling apologies](#).

In Spain, [El País says Johnson](#) “does what no one would expect, and acts as if he is exempt from the rules that apply to the rest of the mortals”.

The French newspaper **Libération** says that after “arrogant victories and pungent slogans”, [the party is over for Johnson](#).

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Tented love: how Senegal created a spectacular new African architecture



All that's missing is triangular honey from triangular bees ... strongly geometrical buildings at the international fair. Photograph: Oliver Wainwright

After independence in 1960, the country cast off western influences and forged a new African style full of triangular forms, rocket-shaped obelisks and rammed earth. Is this spirit now being suffocated? Our writer takes a tour of the capital



[Oliver Wainwright](#)

[@ollywainwright](#)

Thu 13 Jan 2022 01.00 EST

Visiting the [International Fair of Dakar](#) is like taking a stroll through the ruins of some ancient Toblerone-worshipping civilisation. A cluster of triangular pavilions rises from a podium, each clad in a rich pattern of seashells and pebbles. These are reached by triangular steps that lead past triangular plant pots to momentous triangular entranceways. All around, great hangar-like sheds extend into the distance, ventilated by triangular windows and topped with serrated triangular roofs. All that's missing is triangular honey from triangular bees.

Built on the outskirts of the Senegalese capital as a showcase for global trade in 1974, this astonishing city-sized hymn to the three-sided shape was designed by young French architects Jean Francois Lamoureux, Jean-Louis Marin and Fernand Bonamy. Their obsessive geometrical composition was

an attempt to answer the call of Senegal's first president, the poet [Léopold Sédar Senghor](#), for a national style that he curiously termed “asymmetrical parallelism”.

After the country gained independence from France in 1960, Senghor was determined to use the arts to forge a new national identity, [liberated from western tradition](#) and drawing from African civilisation, particularly Sudano-Sahelian traditions, “without wavering from the requirements of modernity”. Senghor never quite defined what this brave new style should look like, but he spoke vaguely of “a diversified repetition of rhythm in time and space”. Forceful, faceted forms and strong, rhythmic geometries became the vogue.



Forceful geometry ... the library at Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar.
Photograph: Michael Ford

[Dakar is home to numerous structures](#) that attempt to meet Senghor's ambitions. The international fair complex is the most spectacular, its composition loosely nodding towards a nomadic desert settlement of tent-like forms, dotted with everything from animal horns and shells to clay pipes and gnarled volcanic rocks. It is in a sorry state, although [a Getty-funded conservation project](#) is currently under way, and it is still possible to see how it attempted to forge a bold new path, combining modern techniques with

indigenous traditions, creating an expressive, sculptural language rooted in its context.

Many such projects feature in the Atlantic coast volume of [Sub-Saharan Africa](#), an immense new architectural guide that brings together a staggering collection of more than 850 buildings from 49 countries within 3,400 pages. Seven years in the making, the publication provides an illuminating cross-section of the continent, from the glittering skyscrapers of oil-rich Luanda in Angola to the mud mosques of Mali and the art deco buildings of Burundi. It boasts more than 350 authors, half with African roots (it's also available in individual volumes, allowing you to spread out the load of the full 8kg set).

Philipp Meuser and Adil Dalbai, co-editors of the guide, write of how, on the one hand, “glossy magazines featuring [Africa](#) normally show safari lodges with pseudo-ethnic architecture, or fancy resorts located on expanses of long sandy beaches” or, on the other, “reports on over-population and lack of education and healthcare”. But there is hardly any reporting on everyday architecture, offering a “real” picture of African cities. While by no means comprehensive, the guide aims to fill part of that void, combining descriptions of historic, vernacular and contemporary buildings, considering them against the background of race, gender and power, be it colonial, neocolonial or local.



A shift towards localism ... the Institute of Social Hygiene in Dakar.
Photograph: Anaïs Dresse

[On a recent visit to Dakar](#), the book was an invaluable companion to help understand the jumbled urban fabric of the chaotic coastal capital. One curious confection looked like a fantastical postmodern interpretation of Sahelian mud architecture, with curved rocket-like obelisks projecting from its corners, painted a rich rusty red, and rain spouts echoing the overhanging wooden beams of vernacular mud construction. This is the Institute of Social Hygiene, which was actually [designed by the architect Henry Adenot in the 1930s](#), when the French colonial authorities ditched their usual beaux arts style and attempted to adapt buildings to local contexts in the name of cultural integration.

Any local inspiration was usually surface-deep: in this case, the ochre-coloured walls are made of reinforced concrete, but painted to look like sun-dried earth. In [Senegal](#), French architects mainly drew inspiration from Sudanese and Moroccan styles – made popular by international expositions in Europe – ignoring the local architecture of the Wolof, Serer, or Fulani peoples.

It is the postcolonial architecture of the 1970s and 80s that really stands out for its originality, much of it by Senegalese architects Cheikh Ngom and Pierre Goudiaby Atepa, as well as France's Henri Chomette. They all developed a distinctive form of modernism in tune with President Senghor's ideas of asymmetrical parallelism. Monolithic tapering pillars, often in rough-textured concrete, support powerful chiselled volumes, with an inventive use of pebbles, rocks and shells to add a tactile, rugged texture to the almost primitivist forms.



Village spirit ... 1970s lecture theatres at Cheikh Anta Diop University.
Photograph: Adil Dalbai

Dakar's Cheikh Anta Diop University is one of the best places to see this kind of work. One cluster of lecture theatres, designed by Chomette and Roland Depret in 1976, comprises five white, curved, windowless structures raised on textured brick plinths, arranged around a kind of village courtyard. As you get closer, you realise that the bobbly white surfaces are made from painted seashells, while the streaked brickwork is designed to evoke tree bark. You step up from the courtyard into the enigmatic white cocoons, which house steeply raked lecture halls sunk into the ground.



Magnificently kitsch ... the African Renaissance Monument, Dakar
Photograph: Oliver Wainwright

The faculty of law and political science, by Cheikh Ngom, has an equally striking presence. Its knobbly red lava rock walls – covered with a sort of supersized volcanic pebbledash – are flanked by tapering buttress-like fins, rendered in textured sandy concrete, opening up to reveal a shady open-air lobby full of spaces to sit and chat out of the sun.

The buildings of this era show a much more sensitive approach to the local climate than recent developments, with brise-soleil screens, deep-set windows and large overhangs to allow as much passive cooling as possible. It is notable that Dakar's two recent trophy projects – [the Chinese-built grand theatre](#) and the [Museum of Black Civilisations](#) – share a could-be-anywhere aesthetic and have to be entirely air conditioned.

Both are the doing of Abdoulaye Wade, Senegal's president from 2000 to 2012, who had a penchant for oversized cultural baubles he could put his name on. The most gargantuan looms above the city on a hill to the west, in the form of [the magnificently kitsch African Renaissance Monument](#). Featuring a ripped topless man and his copiously bosomed, scantily clad wife, complete with pointing baby held aloft, the 49-metre-tall bronze statue was made by North Korean sculptors at a cost of \$30m (£22m).

Taller than the Statue of Liberty, it has been widely ridiculed as a symbol of the vain profligacy of the former president, who claims intellectual property over the monument and still receives 35% of the income from ticket sales. Many Dakarois appear to share the view of the late Senegalese master sculptor Ousmane Sow, who lambasted the statue as “aesthetically childish and banal in the extreme”. Still, once you’ve climbed the 200 steps up to its base, it provides a great vantage point to admire the teeming city below.



Lost wonder ... how Henri Chomette’s Hotel Independence used to look and the building today. Composite: Alamy/Oliver Wainwright

It’s easy to think Dakar’s architectural golden age is long gone, given the quality of what is now being built – and the fact that the only official architecture school closed in 1991. Many structures from the post-independence era have been demolished or mutilated beyond recognition. [Chomette’s striking Hotel Independence](#), which once stood as a great vertical beehive facing on to the city’s central square, was recently stripped to the bone, its sculptural hooded window shades amputated and the remaining shell smothered in cheap grey cladding.

But the guide offers a glimmer of hope from a new generation of young architects and engineers rediscovering vernacular techniques. I hadn’t given

my hotel, the Djoloff, a moment's thought until I found its extension listed in the guide as an example of the revival of compressed earth bricks. The seven-storey structure was built by Doudou Dème, who studied earth engineering in Grenoble before returning to Senegal to establish his company, [Elementerre](#), in 2010.

In a nation addicted to concrete, where cement bricks are cast on site for practically every kind of building, Dème and his peers face an uphill struggle. But the benefits of his earth bricks – which are low-carbon and highly insulating – are clear, especially as he combines them with organic typha insulation panels. Providing thermal comfort and regulating humidity, they make air conditioning obsolete. We may yet see a future of planet-friendly asymmetrical earthen parallelism.

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Boris Johnson

No end in sight for Dominic Cummings' briefing war against Johnson

Analysis: the ex-adviser's revelation about the 20 May party is unlikely to be his last attempt to wound the PM



Dominic Cummings has used his insider knowledge of No 10 to devastating effect. Photograph: Toby Melville/Reuters

[Dan Sabbagh](#) and [Heather Stewart](#)

Thu 13 Jan 2022 01.00 EST

When Dominic Cummings left Downing Street in November 2020, it was meant to be an amicable departure from Boris Johnson. But it soured within days, amid a briefing war. The prime minister's former chief aide and his allies were described [as presiding over a “macho culture” at No 10](#).

Cummings is said to have reacted to the negative stories by warning Johnson: “I have never briefed against you: believe me, when I do, you’ll fucking know about it.”

In that sense, Cummings has certainly been true to his word.

Key advisers, bound usually by a residual loyalty, normally remain relatively quiet after they depart a prime minister’s side. But Cummings has always been different, and armed with his knowledge of a year and a half at the very top of government, he has been willing to fight back ever since.

It was Cummings who prompted Johnson’s most serious crisis yet.

Last week [he revealed in a blog](#) that, on 20 May 2020, “a senior No 10 official invited people to ‘socially distanced drinks’ in the garden”.

That posting was, in part a response, to the Guardian [publishing a picture](#) of Johnson, Cummings and others chatting over cheese and wine in Downing Street on 15 May 2020.

The photo in the Guardian had appeared a week before Christmas, following weeks of revelations across the media about lockdown-breaching parties at Downing Street. Cummings insisted this gathering was a work meeting and that somebody, possibly the prime minister himself, “brought a bottle of wine out to the table”. This rebuttal was published on 7 January, just as the political year had begun to restart.

Three days later came another revelation. On Monday, ITV published the now infamous invitation from Johnson’s principal private secretary, Martin Reynolds, who [emailed more than 100 staff inviting them to drinks](#) in the Downing Street garden on 20 May 2020.

Within about half an hour of ITV’s report [Cummings tweeted to say Johnson himself was present](#), using the shopping trolley emoji he uses to describe his former boss. In evidence to MPs last May, he accused Johnson [of being so indecisive he ends up “smashing from one side of the aisle to the other”](#).

With other sources confirming Johnson’s presence at the gathering 18 months ago, the prime minister [had little choice but to apologise](#) in the

Commons on Wednesday, although he insisted the event “could be said, technically, to fall within the guidance” of the time as it had taken place at work, even if it was the Downing Street garden.

Not so said Cummings, tweeting his reply a few minutes after Johnson delivered his statement.

In a potent mixture of upper and lower case, Cummings wrote: “The invite = obv totally SOCIAL NOT WORK. (UNlike all the mtngs in garden). No way ‘technically within rules’.”

It was he added “bullshit cos altern[ative] is admit he broke rules + resign”.

The timing of the 20 May party may also explain why Cummings was not immediately fired by Johnson when two days later it emerged that his then chief aide had travelled to Durham in March that year, despite having symptoms of coronavirus. Instead the prime minister forced him to explain himself in person – in the Downing Street garden.

Few believe that the public briefing will stop here.

“Cummings is the kind of person who, once he focuses on something keeps going and going until he feels he has won,” said one former political associate who worked with him on the Vote Leave campaign in 2016. “It’s what makes him difficult and what makes him brilliant.”

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Israeli troops run as clashes erupt outside the al-Aqsa mosque compound in Jerusalem, September 2000. Photograph: Awad Awad/AFP/Getty Images

[The long read](#)

‘In our teens, we dreamed of making peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Then my friend was shot’

Israeli troops run as clashes erupt outside the al-Aqsa mosque compound in Jerusalem, September 2000. Photograph: Awad Awad/AFP/Getty Images

At a summer camp for kids from conflict zones, I met my brave, funny friend Aseel. He was Palestinian. I was Israeli. When he was killed by police, my hope for our future died with him

by [Roy Cohen](#)

Thu 13 Jan 2022 01.00 EST

On 11 May 2021, I was sitting with a small group in a cafe in southern Tel Aviv, studying Arabic. Our teacher, a Palestinian citizen of Israel, had been telling us that he and his pregnant Jewish wife kept getting turned down by landlords who would not rent their property to a “mixed” couple. We were almost at the end of the three-hour class when air raid sirens sounded. A few days earlier, missiles had been launched from Gaza into Israel, but [this was the first time they had hit Tel Aviv](#). Beyond the fear of an airstrike, I had a sad, heavy feeling. I had recently returned to live in Israel after 15 years studying and working abroad. I remembered a time, in the mid-1990s, when I had believed that Israel was going to be different, more just and less violent. That belief now felt like a distant memory.

My faith in Israel’s future had been inspired by an experience I shared as a teenager with a group of extraordinary people. As we waited for the rocket fire to stop, I recalled one of those people in vivid detail, a person I have barely been able to talk about in my home country for more than 20 years. His name was Aseel Aslih.

When I first met Aseel, in 1997, he was 14, a Palestinian citizen of Israel from Arraba in the Galilee and I was 13, a Jew from the Mediterranean city of Ashdod (formerly the Palestinian village Isdud). We had been chosen as Israeli delegates to a summer camp in the US for teenagers from conflict areas. A few months before camp we both attended a preparatory seminar for the Israeli delegation. We didn’t become friends straight away. I was skinny, wore denim overalls and mostly hung out with girls. Aseel was slightly taller than me, physically bigger and already had facial hair. I felt uncomfortable around boys, not sure if they were going to comment on the way I spoke, which at the time I thought was too feminine. But I warmed to Aseel. His presence was engaging. He had a habit of tilting his head slightly to the side, his cheeks rising as he smiled. In conversation, he lowered his voice and narrowed his eyes, demanding attention.

Our delegation to the summer camp, which was called Seeds of Peace, had been selected by the Israeli ministry of education, which was looking for people with leadership skills and good English. While knowledge of a foreign language is often a product of privilege, neither Aseel nor I came from wealthy families. My father was a taxi driver and my mother worked for the Port Authority; Aseel’s father owned a small business and his mother

was an educational counsellor. Our knack for languages and the gift of curiosity made us good candidates.

Seeds of Peace was founded by two Americans, [John Wallach](#) and Bobbie Gottschalk, in 1993, the year that the Oslo peace accords were signed between the Israeli government and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). The purpose of Seeds of Peace was to create bonds between young members of communities in conflict, and lay the groundwork for future understanding. Located in a rural part of Maine, the summer camp offered traditional activities like sports, art projects and talent shows; it also facilitated group dialogue sessions, in which campers from the different delegations talked about their hopes, fears and traumas with kids from enemy countries.

The year Aseel and I attended camp for the first time, 1997, there were 120 campers from Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and Qatar, as well as the US. The camp was funded through a mix of corporate partnerships, individual donations and federal grants. It was the 90s: the cold war was officially over and the United States was the global leader, presenting itself to the Middle East as a hopeful messenger. We were young and we ate it up. To be put on a plane to go to summer camp – what could be more exciting?

When we arrived, the counsellors hugged us as we got off the bus. Camp felt safe, warm and welcoming. The closely packed bunk beds put us within arms' reach of each other, and meeting rooms nested in the pines invited us to engage in conversation. Even the lake was called Pleasant. But conflict emerged on day two, when each of the delegations stood in front of their flag and sang their national anthem. Aseel and a fellow Palestinian citizen of Israel refused to sing the Israeli anthem. As Aseel told a friend, he could not relate to an anthem that started with the sentence, "As long as in the heart within, the Jewish soul yearns ... our hope is not yet lost." I was astonished by Aseel's boldness. Being queer, I was always trying not to call attention to the ways in which I was different. And here was this kid from my delegation, only a year older than me, who acted the way he felt, who set himself aside from the pack. Not without jealousy, I began to admire him.

Not everything Aseel did was iconoclastic; he also had a fun-loving, silly side. In our first summer together, he co-wrote a song whose chorus was, “No food no food no food no food no food no food I hate waiting at the dining hall”. Aseel sang these lyrics with his co-writers at the camp’s talent show, exuding confidence. There was something about camp that made our young group shine. Being at Seeds of Peace felt like being part of history. Wallach told us every day that we were the future leaders of our peoples. I think Aseel and I shared the intoxicating excitement of seeing ourselves as agents of change.

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In fact, Aseel was already effecting change. His unwillingness to sing the Israeli anthem was only the first in a series of actions that defied the Israeli delegation leaders’ expectations. Every group included three to five government officials who accompanied the kids. The officials made sure the students were well schooled in the official version of historic events. Israeli delegation leaders had party-line answers about the 1948 war, Palestinian refugees, settlements. But Aseel knew Palestinian history and insisted on telling it.

After our first summer at camp, a ministry of education official told Seeds of Peace that Aseel would not be permitted to return to camp with the Israeli delegation. So Seeds of Peace invited him in 1998 to participate as his own delegation. Aseel Aslih, a delegation of one. As a Jew whose family came from Algeria and Morocco, I had some idea of how hard it was to have an Arab identity in Israeli society. My grandmother Hajila went by her French name, Alice, while my father, Anjel Makhluf, went by the Jewish name Mordechai. It was easier that way. Aseel showed me, and the entire Israeli delegation, that it was possible to stand up for your identity.

That year, I got a glimpse of the connections that were possible between Palestinians and Israelis. Our relationships would always be complicated, but we had discovered we had a lot in common, and we had a lot to say. When tragedy hit those friendships, there was no way to talk about it. For long years of my life, the animated and hopeful interactions of those teenage years were overtaken by silence.

In the next few years, Aseel and I returned to camp every summer. We became members of a group of young leaders in the organisation. There was Tareq from the Jordanian delegation, whose family were Palestinian refugees. Aseel and I both looked up to Tareq, who was a couple of years older than us and already very worldly. There was Alia from the Palestinian delegation, an instant friend who I could joke around with for hours.

When the summer of 1997 ended, we returned to the Middle East. A triple suicide bombing in Jerusalem's Ben Yehuda promenade had just killed four people. Israel was tense. Under the Oslo peace accords, Israel had withdrawn from Jericho, Gaza and most of Hebron. To some Israelis, these withdrawals were a betrayal of the country's security interests; to others, they were a betrayal of a biblical pact with God. Religious and rightwing ideologues held mass protests against the Oslo accords. Labor prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, who had signed the Oslo accords, responded to the civil unrest and violence by severely limiting Palestinian movement from the West Bank and Gaza into Israel. This policy of restricting movement, which unfolded during the 90s, introduced new layers of permits and physical barriers. As children of the 80s, my generation of Israelis and Palestinians had been born into mostly segregated towns; the 90s made interaction between our communities even harder. To live in a Jewish town and have newly acquired Palestinian friends was highly unusual.



Aseel Aslih at a Seeds of Peace camp in the 1990s. Photograph: Bobbie Gottschalk

Returning home was especially challenging for one 15-year-old Palestinian girl from our 1997 Israeli delegation, who sent the Seeds of Peace magazine a letter entitled Caught Between Worlds, in which she wrote, “as a Palestinian living in Israel ... I find it interesting but also difficult to have [these] two different sides to myself. Can these two worlds live together? Am I strange?” Aseel, also a Palestinian citizen of Israel, responded with an open letter of his own: “I don’t agree that you are caught ... We don’t have to be caught; we can lead these two worlds.” Even in the confusing home environments we returned to, Aseel was ready to show us the way.

Even though I admired his courage, I was sometimes taken aback by what Aseel dared to say or do in public. In 1999, Seeds of Peace opened a centre in Jerusalem, and Aseel was asked to act as MC. In front of hundreds of people, Aseel performed a skit in which he “realised” that he wasn’t wearing Seeds of Peace’s signature green shirt and removed his clothes, only to reveal the green shirt and a pair of shorts underneath. Aseel was 6ft tall and athletic, his hairline already receding; he looked more like a man than a kid. But he was unafraid to make a fool of himself. I was cringing in the audience, embarrassed by what was, in retrospect, a hilarious performance. Seeds of Peace now had a place in Jerusalem, the Center for Coexistence,

where Palestinians and Israelis could freely meet, and Aseel was the star of its opening night.

Seeds of Peace's regional staff organised activities outside Jerusalem. In order for the teenagers to get around, the American staff hired a driver – Sami Al Jundi, a Jerusalem native who was fluent in the city's languages, culture, people and roads. A few weeks after my group returned from camp in 1997, Sami picked us up in a Ford Transit and took us across checkpoints and borders. Every month after that, the young camp alumni would come up with a plan or an activity and Sami took us there – whether it was in Nahariya by the Lebanese border, or in the West Bank's Beit Sahour. The American organisation had connections that navigated government and military bureaucracies, and Sami knew how to safely get us to our new friends. Driving in Sami's Transit, boundaries between Jewish and Arab spaces shrank. Back then, I assumed that these boundaries would further diminish over time, and eventually disappear.

One weekend, when it was still possible for us to cross these borders, Sami and other staff brought friends to my house in Ashdod, including Tareq and others from Jordan. Aseel came down from the Galilee. The Jordanian guests and Aseel stayed the night. Aseel and I were the hosts in this country, so we gave the Jordanians the bedrooms. We shared my mother's white couch. It was a long, deep couch; we could both fit if we lay head to toe. We fell asleep in front of the TV. At one point in the middle of the night, I woke up to the smell of Aseel's feet. I got annoyed, and told myself that I would mention it in the morning. When morning came, Aseel donned the signature smile he had when he was about to say something controversial, and told me that the smell of my feet had woken him up. We laughed – and then we talked about South Park.

The decade that had started with peace treaties was spinning out of control. In 1995, prime minister [Yitzhak Rabin](#) had been murdered by a rightwing activist who wanted to disrupt the peace process. Seven years after the Oslo agreements, Labor's new prime minister, [Ehud Barak](#), decided that if he could not get a peace agreement signed within a year in office, no one could. His statement in July 2000 that there was "no partner" on the Palestinian side reaffirmed what anti-compromise activists in Israel had been saying all

along: Jews must not trust Palestinians. A few months later, the right's political veteran [Ariel Sharon](#) visited the al-Aqsa mosque compound in Jerusalem, which is also the holy grounds of the Jewish Temple Mount. Sharon knew that his presence there would stir Muslim leaders to calls to protect Jerusalem; his advisers later said in a documentary that they wanted to antagonise Palestinians and get media coverage in the run-up to the election. [On 28 September 2000](#), the day of Sharon's hour-long visit, scores of Palestinian protesters took to the streets and several threw stones at the politician's entourage.

Within 48 hours, Palestinian protests escalated into road blockades, arson and sporadic attacks on Jews. They were met with force by police. High-ranking officers called for the use of rubber bullets, live ammunition and snipers. This was an unprecedented escalation in use of force against citizens. One Palestinian protester was filmed by a news crew telling a military sniper, "Why are you shooting us? These are not the occupied territories. We are citizens!" His words reflected the shock of a people who saw their country's security forces use live weapons against them.



Israeli soldiers and Palestinian youths clash in Ramallah after Ariel Sharon's visit to al-Aqsa compound, 28 September 2000. Photograph: Jamal Aruri/AFP/Getty Images

On 1 October 2000, three Palestinian citizens between the ages of 18 and 23 were shot dead. The following day, there was a rally outside Aseel's home town, Arraba, in the Galilee. Aseel, who was 17 at the time, walked towards the protesters in his green Seeds of Peace shirt. His father, who was already there, said that Aseel stood at a distance from the crowd. He wasn't carrying any kind of weapon. Suddenly, a police Jeep sped on to the scene. Four policemen jumped out. It was a common tactic at the time for police to make an example out of one protester in order to scare away the rest. Some of the policemen later testified that the fact Aseel was standing by himself made him look suspicious. I would guess that it also made him an easy target.

The policemen ran towards Aseel. When he tried to run, they chased him and one of them hit him in the back with his gun. Then they shot Aseel in the neck. He fell, face down. As he lay bleeding, the police walked away. When his cousin rushed to his side, he heard Aseel say: "They killed me."

I was at home, standing next to the couch that Aseel and I had slept on, when Ned Lazarus, Seeds of Peace's regional director, called. "Aseel is dead," he said.

"What?" I said. "No. You're wrong."

I heard only muffled echoes of Ned's words. The 17-year-old who defied authority, who wanted to lead both sides, who took his clothes off in front of hundreds of people to get a laugh, who was my friend. Gone.

Thirteen Palestinian men were killed by police in October 2000. Twelve of them were Israeli citizens and one was a man from Gaza who came to Israel to work. There was one Jewish-Israeli victim, who was killed as he was driving under a bridge and Palestinian protesters threw a rock on to his car. These events marked the beginning of the second intifada, a violent period that lasted four and a half years and took the lives of roughly 3,000 Palestinians and 1,000 Israelis.

To many in Israeli society, the events of October 2000 revealed that peace accords were an illusion: Palestinians had never wanted Jews around. The security offered by the state seemed fragile. Gun stores reported a spike in sales. On 7 October, an Israeli soldier from Tiberias was one of three

[kidnapped by the Lebanese organisation Hezbollah](#); Jewish people in his home town took to the streets, vandalised Arab-owned businesses and set fire to a mosque.

In my Jewish high school, I felt like no one wanted to hear about the death of my Palestinian friend. Even people who loved me found it hard to talk about Aseel. I wanted so desperately to bring Aseel into the conversation that one time, when I was 17, I brought a newspaper with his photo in it to a pub and waited for someone to ask about it. One friend did. We had a short conversation that faded away quickly. The fact that Aseel was a Palestinian killed by a police officer made the act of talking openly about his death political. During those times, a conversation about Aseel's loss and my grief felt taboo.

At dinner with my family I brought up what happened to Aseel. My brother-in-law, who I love, asked: "What makes you think he was shot for no reason?" My brother-in-law's family, like my mother's, came from Algeria, which Jews fled during the Algerian war of independence in the middle of the 20th century. Our parents came to Israel because of its promise to be a safe haven for Jews. To acknowledge that a Palestinian had been illegally killed by a cop meant that the state was an unjust aggressor. It meant that we – my brother-in-law and I, our Jewish community in Israel – might not have right on our side. But Aseel was my friend, and my confusion quickly turned to anger. I banged my fist on the table and yelled at my brother-in-law for making assumptions about someone he had never met. I didn't back down in the moment, but after that evening, I would talk about Aseel only around people with whom it felt safe to do so. I became more reserved, more careful.

While I was struggling to talk about the events of October 2000 in Jewish spaces, the victims' families were protesting their sons' deaths. Aseel's father re-enacted for the TV news cameras how his son had been chased and shot, in a scene that I have rewatched on YouTube dozens of times. When I first watched this video, I imagined what it was like for Aseel in his final moments, how afraid he must have been. The older I got, the more I thought about what it was like for Aseel's father to witness his son's death, to go through the motions for the cameras. Israeli media got the message: here

was an innocent victim. But it was a distorted one: it made out that Aseel the peace activist was the only innocent victim. Eventually, prime minister Barak appointed an official inquiry, the Or commission, to investigate the events surrounding the violent events of October 2000.

During the hearings, discrepancies emerged between the police testifying in Aseel's case. When commission members challenged one of the policemen who chased Aseel, he said: "The fact that [our] testimonies don't match only proves that we didn't coordinate our stories." This cynical argument, as if contradictory testimonies were a sign of credibility, didn't surprise me. I heard this cynicism every time I tried to bring up Aseel. "It's a shame he died, but you don't know what really happened." More and more, when the topic of October 2000 came up, I planned what I was going to say and how I was going to say it. I imagined people saying to me: "Did you really know him as well as you think?" I thought about who would hear me and who would find out what I had said. I surrendered to the fear of what other people might say, and shut myself behind a wall of silence.

In 2001, while the Or commission was in progress, I graduated from high school and was drafted into the military. After Aseel's death, I could no longer believe in the wisdom and leadership of our generals, but still I could not imagine evading military service. It has been a deep part of Israeli culture my entire life, and the second intifada did not seem like a time to withdraw from service. In March 2002 alone, 135 Israelis were killed by suicide bombers. I joined the navy and, like most Jewish men, I served for three years, while my female friends served two. Many Palestinians found it offensive that their Israeli friends joined the military at all; soldiers can be tasked with carrying out state violence against Palestinians at checkpoints and in their own homes. Many friendships and connections disintegrated.



Aseel Aslih (seated far right) and Roy Cohen (seated third from right) at a Seeds of Peace camp in the 1990s. Photograph: Bobbie Gottschalk

The years of crossing borders in Sami Al Jundi's van were long gone. Most of the American staff who had run the Jerusalem Seeds of Peace office, young professionals in their 20s and early 30s, left in the following years. The organisation talked about cancelling the activities that brought Palestinians and Israelis together. Sami, who had started as a driver and was now a staff member, was heartbroken. Before joining Seeds of Peace, he had been a prisoner in an Israel jail 30 minutes away from my home. In the 2011 memoir he co-wrote with Jen Marlowe, *The Hour of Sunlight*, Sami mentioned that at the age of 18, he and two of his friends assembled a bomb they intended to use against Israelis. The bomb blew up in Sami's house and killed one of his friends. Sami was sent to prison for 10 years and got out in his late 20s. He dreamed of a different life for us. When Seeds of Peace considered closing the Jerusalem centre, Sami asked himself, "How would separating our community of peacemakers lead to achieving peace?" It was a rhetorical question to which he knew the answer. Eventually, Seeds of Peace shut down the centre whose opening Aseel hosted months before he was shot. The Center for Coexistence was no more. That same day, Seeds of Peace let Sami go.

Even as Seeds of Peace changed, the relationships formed there continued to offer me insight into how people outside Israel experienced the events of October 2000. Tareq, our friend from camp who grew up in Jordan, was at boarding school in Europe when he found out Aseel had been killed. I saw him at a Seeds of Peace alumni event in 2005, but I could not get myself to bring up Aseel. This was a different type of silence. We were Aseel's friends, but I was Israeli and Tareq was Palestinian-Jordanian. I did not know if he wanted to talk about Aseel with me. I did not dare ask.

One of my other friends from camp, Alia, lived in the occupied West Bank. Israel's changing policies made travel nearly impossible for her. After the second intifada, she had asked me to meet her in Jerusalem, wearing my soldier's uniform. I knew it would make us both sad, but Alia was thoughtful about everything she did. I showed up in my khaki naval uniform, like she asked.

It was early winter. The streets of the French Hill neighbourhood were filled with stark mountain light. Alia and I were talking about relatively normal stuff – what she was planning to do after university, what I was planning to do after the military. We approached the building that used to be the Seeds of Peace centre. The site was now a painful reminder of the past: before the intifada, before they shut down the centre, before Aseel was killed.

The Or commission released its conclusions in 2003. The commission recommended disciplinary action against several high-ranking politicians and police officers for using live ammunition. However, the policemen who shot the victims fell under the jurisdiction of the department of internal police investigations. The police's own investigation into October 2000 killings was less than rigorous. Eventually, in 2006, the head of the police's internal investigations unit and the attorney general announced that none of the policemen involved in the October 2000 killings would be tried.

For years, I knew that people around me didn't want to know what happened to Aseel. Now I knew that the justice system didn't, either.

I left Israel in my 20s. Aseel's death and the intifada were devastating. I had experienced through Seeds of Peace how big the world was, and I wanted to

be part of it. But even as a neuroscience undergraduate in the US, I could not leave behind my roots: my topic of study was the effects of dialogue on Palestinians and Israelis. I dedicated my final thesis to Aseel. After school, I became a documentary film-maker and began making films about technology in London, Hong Kong and New York. I made a feature film about an American technologist who was fed up with humans and tried to build the first truly intelligent AI. When *Machine of Human Dreams* came out in 2016, I thought about Aseel, who – like me – spent hours of his youth in front of computers, exploring the internet. Had Aseel been alive, I wondered, would he have watched my film? Would he have liked it? Would we have still been friends?



Palestinian youths flee shots by Israeli troops near Gaza City, 1 October 2000. Photograph: Fayed Nureldine/AFP/Getty Images

In 2019, I moved back to Israel. Now, I am 37 and living in Tel Aviv. A few months ago, I attended a protest rally against evictions of Palestinian families from Jerusalem's Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood. We were standing in a drum circle with children dancing in the middle – not exactly a violent mob. Suddenly policemen in riot gear with guns appeared, and walked through our group, staring with hostile expressions as they passed close to us. I was afraid. I thought they might do to one of us what they did to Aseel. I wondered, does my face look more Jewish or more Arab to them? And if I

am thinking about that, then how many others have avoided protesting alongside Palestinians for fear of getting caught up in violence?

In the two decades since October 2000, the cycle of land grabs, protest, violence and trauma has only worsened. I realised that in order to live in Israeli society again, I needed to talk about Aseel, our friendship and the painful silence surrounding his death. I contacted old friends with the idea of making a documentary. Almost none of my Palestinian friends had any interest in speaking on camera. One friend told me that, even if he trusted me with his story, his reputation could be damaged by being in an Israeli director's film. Someone would inevitably call him out on social media as a normaliser of the occupation, of state violence, of the expansion of settlements. I realised that Palestinians had their own silences. In my film-making, and by picking up Arabic again, I am trying to find a voice to speak to Palestinians.

Silence has fallen in my relationship with Tareq. We haven't spoken since the Seeds of Peace alumni event more than 15 years ago. He is now a businessperson in the United Arab Emirates. Although I've imagined talking to Tareq about Aseel many times, I have yet to come up with a way to start that conversation.

There is one person who breaks her silence in this story. Several years after we met for a walk in Jerusalem, Alia told me that she had asked me to wear my uniform that day so that she could see me as a soldier and finally let go of our friendship. Her plan did not have the intended effect: after that day in Jerusalem we had years of off-again, on-again communication, but we are now closer than ever. We talk every week. She married a man. I married one, too. In 2021, she managed to get a travel permit from Israeli authorities and we went to Jerusalem with her children. Looking at them, I was overwhelmed with the joy of seeing a loved one's offspring; the ways in which they are similar to her, the ways in which they are new. But none of us has any idea when they'll be able to travel again. This is not the dream that Aseel and I had shared. It is a violent reality in an unjust place, with brief moments of grace.

Some names have been changed

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Life and style

'A banana, concrete – those are good gifts': the recycling group turning strangers into friends

There are 7,000 Buy Nothing groups with more than 5 million members worldwide. But their appeal goes beyond the chance to swap everything from nettles to power tools



Composite: Guardian Design; Rani Sr Prasithi/EyeEm; ivanastar; Prostock-Studio/iStockphoto; vejaa/Getty Images; Carolyn Jenkins/Alamy



[Emma Beddington](#)

Thu 13 Jan 2022 01.00 EST

Who on earth wants fish tank wastewater, chicken poo, tumble-dryer lint, loo roll tubes, “a plaster mould of a Komodo dragon’s foot” or half a broken toilet? No one, you might think, but the [Buy Nothing](#) community begs to differ: these are all real “gifts” snapped up by more than 5 million members worldwide, who give away their unwanted items in the local community. It’s living proof that “one person’s trash is another’s treasure”, as Alisa Miller, the administrator of the [Blackheath/Charlton/Lewisham group](#) puts it.

Miller offered her daughter’s broken toy birdcage with little hope anyone would want it; it was snapped up by a local flower-arranging enthusiast, and filled with succulents and trailing plants. Her co-administrator’s son is the current custodian of a toy helicopter that has been played with by five Buy Nothing families to date. Members ask for what they want and usually get it: anything from household appliances, furniture and gardening tools to clothes and baby gear.

There is nothing unique or original about giving and getting stuff for free. It’s a practice as old as humanity. The juggernaut giveaway network [Freecycle](#) was [founded in 2003](#) – but what distinguishes the Buy Nothing

project from Freecycle, [Freegle](#), [Olio](#) and their ilk is that the emphasis is less on stuff, per se, and more on community. In what Buy Nothing describes as its “[hyperlocal gift economies](#)”, users are encouraged to let items “simmer” rather than giving them away to the first person who asks, perhaps suggesting they share a joke or provide a story explaining why they would like the item. In addition to “gifts” and “asks”, users are encouraged to post “gratitude”, with a message or a picture showing what a gifted item has meant to them.

That could all sound insufferably twee, but the thinking behind it is fairly radical. It’s a “social experiment”, explain the project’s founders, Rebecca Rockefeller and Liesl Clark, from their respective living rooms in Washington state, effecting a fundamental shift in our attitude to material goods by building a sense of community, and treating items as community-owned and shared. “If you come at it from an angle of joy and human connection,” says Rockefeller, “you’re more likely to inspire lasting change than when you come at it from telling people: ‘You have to do without this.’”

Clark, 55, and Rockefeller, 52, bonded as “Freecycle renegades”, Rockefeller says. She was trying to give away things (twigs, nettles) that her local Freecycle moderator did not consider suitable gifts; both were looking for a deeper connection beyond an anonymous back-door drop or pickup.



There's a re-use for everything ... sweet pea seedlings growing in toilet roll tubes. Photograph: Mike Jarman/Alamy

"We wanted more of that dialogue," says Clark. Her attitude was shaped by her experiences as a film-maker, exploring mortuary caves on the Nepal-Tibet border with her husband and children. The objects they found there had been used, exchanged, appreciated and transformed over centuries. "It helped me understand a little more the practical side of reuse and how an entire culture could thrive without any stores."

Users are encouraged to let items 'simmer' rather than giving them to the first person who asks

"The stuff is one thing, but the stories that go along with it – the humour, the poignancy, the memories – those are the things we really want from each other," agrees Rockefeller. Both, too, were shocked at the tides of plastic detritus that washed up on the beaches of their home on Bainbridge Island. "It led us naturally to ask what role do we play in this and how can we lessen our impact?" The pair started out with an in-person gift exchange in a local park at weekends; they launched the first Facebook-hosted group in 2013.

I'm speaking to them surrounded by the debris of a minimal, but not particularly mindful Christmas: cardboard packaging, return labels and scraps of wrapping paper. It's a time of year characterised for many of us by a sugar rush and guilt slump of conspicuous consumption. Buy Nothing offers members tools and approaches to counter that sickly consumption hangover, but "Buy Nothing" is the name, not the aim.

There's no expectation or even aspiration that users will somehow forge a fully cashless economy. Indeed, during the pandemic, Buy Nothing changed its rules to allow members to give gifts of cash. "Quite literally, that's a lifesaving gift you can give another person in a lot of cases," says Rockefeller. "This was never meant to be an exercise in purity: that doesn't serve us well. What serves us well is flexibility. A banana, a chunk of concrete or \$10 – those are all good gifts."



Any takers? A bunch of nettles. Photograph: vejaa/Getty Images/iStockphoto

She speaks from personal experience: when the first Buy Nothing group was established, Rockefeller was an unemployed single mother. "I was having to go through the US social services system – it's horrible and it's intentionally meant to make you feel horrible about yourself." Getting food and clothes for her children through Buy Nothing gave her financial breathing space. "I

had money to go and buy a cup of coffee or a book, which would have been 100% unreachable for me.”

Of equal importance, she says, was being able to gift bread she had made or foods she had foraged, which allowed her to “get some dignity back”. “The services we can provide are gifts in themselves,” adds Clark. “Gifts of time” (babysitting, gardening, lifts) and “gifts of self” (social meet-ups, offers to become a workout buddy) are a key element of the Buy Nothing experience.

We quickly came to realise how lonely we actually are as a result of not sharing

Liesl Clark

From that first Facebook group, the community has expanded to 7,000 Buy Nothing groups with, at the most recent count, 5.3 million users in 44 countries as diverse as Guatemala, Iceland, Oman, Vietnam and Zimbabwe. On a slow day, Clark tells me, it gains 1,500 members. The greatest concentrations of communities are in Seattle and New York. There is also a huge, dynamic [Australian Buy Nothing network](#). According to Buy Nothing figures, the UK has 50 active groups and approximately 40,000 members. Although Buy Nothing is described by Clark as “an open-source model”, most local groups operate on Facebook, for which Buy Nothing provides guidance, training and ground rules.

A healthy pattern of organic growth, with occasional viral spurts, accelerated during the pandemic. For Clark, physical isolation made people more aware of a deeper kind of isolation. “There’s this ethic of self-reliance, that you fill your house with all the things you need as a family – there you are against the world. But then the pandemic came along. We quickly came to realise how lonely we actually are as a result of not sharing. What we’ve observed is that if people couldn’t physically get together, they’ve been able to virtually connect through sharing items and services.”

Inevitably, this kind of growth creates challenges. As groups “sprout” – the Buy Nothing term for when they reach the maximum recommended capacity of 1,000 members and split geographically – redrawn boundaries have at times perpetuated or reinforced historic [racial and socio-economic barriers](#).

These issues have on occasion been compounded by the Facebook group structure where considerable power lies in the hands of local administrators, deciding who can join and what they can post.

Clark and Rockefeller have addressed Buy Nothing's failings, including the "flaws and racism we as co-founders built into the original structure of this movement", as [they said](#) in a June 2020 statement. An Equity Team now provides guidance to groups on how to develop an "actively anti-racist and anti-oppression policy", including trying to use geographical group boundaries to create diverse sharing communities.



The gift of giving. Photograph: SolStock/Getty Images (Posed by a model)

Miller worked hard to avoid creating a silo of privilege in south-east London when creating the community in 2019. "This area has got huge wealth inequality. It couldn't be more diverse, and we intentionally wanted to make sure that we straddled those areas; that was a critical goal."

The newly launched Buy Nothing app is designed to swerve the structural potential for inequity of the Facebook group model. Here, users choose their own geographical limits and create their own communities: "hyperlocal", "neighbourhood+" or "surrounding areas". "I'm really hoping our app makes this more accessible [to people] who have been unable for a variety

of reasons to connect with it on other platforms, so we get a more diverse set of voices,” says Rockefeller.

There are personal costs to growth, too. A network of nearly 13,000 volunteer administrators keeps Buy Nothing functioning, assisted by a core staff of a dozen, all working from their kitchen tables and living rooms. Clark and Rockefeller have always been unpaid volunteers. “I work weekends, in the holidays, in the hours when you’re supposed to be sleeping,” says Clark, who was able to make money from film-making initially. “There’s certainly some joy in it, but it’s become unsustainable.”

I really believe this will help us, as individuals, to participate in our collective survival

Rebecca Rockefeller

Rockefeller has taken on part-time jobs over the years to support her full-time commitment to Buy Nothing. “My kids look at it as their sibling,” she says. “It’s not just me and Rebecca,” adds Clark. “The key volunteers are an incredible group of, basically, women, who are doing this unpaid labour and it’s not the model we want to promote for the world. We need to get a little more creative with this.”

They hope that the app will also allow them to capture data on what Buy Nothing does to reduce waste and waste management costs, thereby potentially enabling it to raise funds from municipalities. “We’ve never been able to study how much waste is being diverted from landfill,” says Clark. “Imagine if any given community could access that information?”

Moving from the germ of an idea to a global structure is challenging, but for Clark and Rockefeller, the impetus and the motivation is as strong as ever. I ask about their most memorable experiences with Buy Nothing. Clark describes how musical instruments were collected and delivered to victims of the [2018 fire in Paradise, California](#). As a community, they had enjoyed making music together. Their basic material needs were met by big charities, but they missed having this creative outlet.



Books have been loaned out to children in one UK group. Photograph: Bongkarn Thanyakij/Getty Images/EyeEm

For Rockefeller, it's a source of great pride that her brother-in-law's community group suggested Buy Nothing as a first port of call when helping refugees from Afghanistan settle in their town. "We're building this tool that I really believe will have the power to help us, as individuals, to participate in our collective survival," she says.

Over in south-east London, members of the Blackheath/Charlton/Lewisham group appreciate the new friendships and the sense of local connection. "It's culturally so different from any kind of other free stuff group out there," says Miller. "I love giving back to the community and turning to it when I'm in need of something" adds Elif Koç. "I can spend what I've saved for charity and other meaningful causes." Their group has shared camping equipment and loaned books to children; it has supported a victim of domestic violence and a refugee in setting up home and providing clothing for their families. It does feel like a gentle revolution – one houseplant cutting or power tool at a time. As one member, Sarah Wilde, puts it: "I really like the opportunity to quietly rage against the machine."

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- Care homes Staffing at 30% less than needed, survey finds
- England Pandemic brought ‘dramatic’ fall in hospital admissions for childhood infections
- ‘Not the cruise I signed up for’ 30-fold increase in Covid cases upends industry

[France](#)

France to lift ban on UK tourists from Friday, says tourism minister

Requirement to isolate on arrival will also be scrapped but travellers will need evidence of negative Covid test

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
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British tourists can travel to France from Friday. Photograph: Chris J Ratcliffe/Getty

[Jon Henley](#) in Paris and [Jamie Grierson](#)

Thu 13 Jan 2022 10.07 EST

France will lift its ban on UK holidaymakers from Friday morning, the tourism minister has announced, dropping a requirement for all travellers

from the UK to show evidence of a “compelling reason” for their journey.

Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne said on Thursday that people arriving from Britain would also no longer need to self-isolate on arrival in France, but proof of a negative Covid-19 test taken no more than 24 hours before departure would still be demanded.

“People will once again be able to travel for leisure between France and the UK, and to go skiing,” he said.

The decision to allow non-essential travel again will be welcomed by travel operators including ferry companies and the cross-Channel Eurostar train service, and in particular by British skiers, thousands of whom have booked holidays in Alpine [ski resorts](#).

The move has been applauded across the travel industry. Eurostar said it would ramp up its services.

A spokesperson for the firm said: “We welcome the safe reduction of travel restrictions which will allow our customers to travel more freely between the UK and France.

“We are ready to welcome more passengers onboard and will continue to increase the frequency of our services in the coming weeks to offer passengers more flexibility and choice.”

Chris Logan, the managing director of Britain’s biggest winter sports operator Crystal Ski, said: “Like the rest of the ski community, I’m delighted we’ll be able to hit the slopes in France once again.

“It’s been a challenging start to the season, with Switzerland and France both imposing short-term bans, and complex and ever-changing testing requirements.

“But with the relaxation of UK testing and the Alps open to the UK again, I’m feeling really optimistic. We’ve seen a steady increase in searches and bookings in the last two weeks.

“Bookings to France doubled yesterday even before the announcement and we would expect to see another very positive uptick now it’s official. The outlook is good, there are great deals available, so now is the time to book.”

A spokesperson for the travel trade organisation Abta also welcomed France’s decision.

He said: “France is one of the most popular destinations for UK holidaymakers. Thousands of people head there for ski breaks at this time of year, so this will be a huge relief for customers with holidays booked there for the next few weeks, who have been waiting anxiously for news.

“We are still waiting for more details from the French government on entry requirements such as the rules that will apply for children. Travellers should continue to monitor the Foreign Office travel advice.”

France [tightened restrictions](#) on travel to and from Britain on 18 December in an effort to curb the rapid spread of the Omicron Covid variant, requiring vaccinated and unvaccinated people to show a “compelling reason” for travel such as a family or health emergency.

The rule, which in effect limited entry from the UK to French and EU nationals and British citizens resident in France, was later eased to allow people in “for the pursuit of an economic activity requiring an on-site presence that cannot be postponed”.

The rules also required all arrivals from the UK to present a negative PCR or antigen test taken within the previous 24 hours and to quarantine in France for seven days, reduced to 48 hours if they could produce a new negative test.

Thursday’s decision should also mean an end to a controversial rule barring British nationals resident in other EU countries from travelling through France to reach their homes. The transit ban was temporarily [suspended](#) on 30 December after UK citizens living in Belgium and Germany were refused entry to France.

The French government spokesperson, Gabriel Attal, [said on Wednesday](#) the ban on non-essential travel should be lifted within days because the highly transmissible Omicron variant was now dominant in France.

New daily coronavirus infections in France have set successive records in recent weeks, with the country on Tuesday reporting a new high of nearly 370,000 infections and a seven-day average high of more than 283,000, with Omicron accounting for 87% of all cases nationwide.

The strict travel measures were also imposed during what analysts see as a post-Brexit breakdown of trust between the British and French governments over a host of issues from immigration to [fishing](#).

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Social care

Staffing at UK care homes 30% less than needed, survey finds

National Care Forum also finds one in four homes have closed their doors to new admissions



The NCF described the situation in social care as ‘grim, difficult and relentless’. Photograph: Paula Solloway/Alamy

[Robert Booth](#) Social affairs correspondent

Thu 13 Jan 2022 01.00 EST

Care homes are missing a third of the staff they need and more than one in four have closed their doors to new admissions in a deepening labour crisis that is “putting safety and dignity at risk”.

With thousands of care workers off sick with Covid on top of a rising number of vacancies, the situation in social care has become “grim, difficult

and relentless”, according to the National Care Forum (NCF), which ran a survey of its not-for-profit care-home members.

Omicron absences are running at 14% on top of an 18% vacancy rate – a sharp increase on estimates before the pandemic – as beleaguered care workers quit jobs, often for better paying roles in retail or warehouses. The picture is even worse for domiciliary care, with two-thirds of providers forced to decline families’ new requests for help because they are short of carers.

The executive director of the NCF, Vic Rayner, said the worsening situation showed the government’s approach to tackling the problem of staff shortages by giving social care “crumbs from the table” was negligent.

We “have been highlighting the growing shortages in the workforce and the knock-on impact on those who remain working in the sector and those who use care and support services for many months”, she said. “How many times does this message need to be repeated for it to be heard?”

The Department of [Health](#) and Social Care (DHSC) has provided councils with additional funds to pay bonuses to retain staff, and late last month it extended the visa programme for foreign workers to care workers, care assistants and home-care workers. Such measures, however, are yet to fill widening gaps in the workforce.

The figures came as MPs and peers were told that staff shortages in social care had worsened the lives of people who live in care homes and increased the risk of undernourishment and dehydration.

The director of the Relatives and Residents Association, Helen Wildbore, also told a hearing into restriction on care home visiting by parliament’s joint committee on human rights that “untold harm is being done to lives and to wellbeing”.

She said care residents “are being left behind while the rest of the country gets back to normal … if this is what the government meant by that protective ring then it is suffocating”.

She said staff shortages were “putting safety and dignity at risk”.

The director of Age UK, Caroline Abrahams, said short-staffing meant it was harder for residents to get fed and watered.

“It can make a huge difference to help people eat and drink and it can be very pleasurable, but you can’t do it if you’re a care provider and you haven’t got the staff,” she said.

The NCF’s snapshot of staff shortages was taken from care providers who together look after 130,000 people. It suggests official figures on staff absences may be underestimates. Live figures on Monday from internal health system capacity data seen by the Guardian showed 122 operators had declared a red alert on staffing, with 13,500 care workers off with Covid in England.

A DHSC spokesperson said: “Care staff are working incredibly hard, and to strengthen the workforce we have provided £462.5m for recruitment and retention, expanded the health and care visa scheme, and are running our Made with Care recruitment campaign.”

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Infectious diseases

Pandemic brought ‘dramatic’ fall in English hospital admissions for childhood infections

Study confirms anecdotal evidence that lockdowns protected children against non-Covid illnesses



Social distancing measures contributed to a reduction in hospital admissions.
Photograph: Andy Rain/EPA

[Andrew Gregory](#) Health editor

Wed 12 Jan 2022 18.30 EST

Hospital admissions for common childhood infections in England dropped by as much as 94% during the first year of the [Covid-19](#) pandemic, according to the first major study of its kind.

Doctors have previously reported anecdotally how Covid measures such as lockdowns inadvertently led to children being better protected against other illnesses.

Now a large study by the University of Oxford has revealed the sheer scale of the “dramatic” fall in hospital admissions for a whole range of non-Covid infections in the 12 months after March 2020.

Researchers found there were “substantial and sustained” reductions in admissions for common and severe childhood infections, most likely due to social distancing measures, school and workplace closures, and travel restrictions. Other measures such as enhanced cleaning, better hand hygiene, and the use of face masks may have also contributed to the reduction.

Altogether, tens of thousands fewer children were admitted for bronchiolitis, meningitis, flu, tonsillitis and pneumonia and other conditions as England went into lockdown, schools closed and children’s social contacts significantly reduced. The findings were published in [The BMJ](#).

Some children with pre-existing conditions such as asthma were also “protected from severe and potentially life-threatening infection”, the study found. Before the pandemic, exacerbation of asthma caused by acute respiratory infections was one of the most common reasons for hospital admission in children.

Many of the measures seen in the first year of Covid in England are unsustainable outside the pandemic, the researchers acknowledged. Such measures have also significantly had an effect on other areas of health, such as mental health. However, the researchers said the huge fall in admissions meant there should be a further evaluation of interventions that could be continued, especially during winter months, to minimise the burden on health systems and protect vulnerable children.

It was previously known that child immunisation programmes globally have been disrupted since the onset of the pandemic owing to barriers in accessing or administering vaccines. Data from lab surveillance studies indicated worldwide reductions in some childhood infections.

In the new study, researchers found that 12 months after the onset of the pandemic, large and sustained reductions were found in rates of hospital admissions for “a wide range of severe, respiratory, and vaccine preventable childhood infections” in England. Absolute numbers of deaths within 60 days of hospital admission for sepsis, meningitis, bronchiolitis, pneumonia, viral wheeze and upper respiratory tract infections also decreased.

The researchers examined hospital admissions for children up to the age of 14 for common and severe childhood infections in England between March 2017 and the end of June 2021.

They examined information on admissions for common respiratory infections including tonsillitis, influenza and bronchiolitis, severe invasive infections including sepsis, meningitis and a bone infection called osteomyelitis. The team also looked at admissions data for vaccine preventable diseases included measles, mumps and several bacterial causes of serious illnesses.

Researchers found “substantial and sustained” reductions in hospital admissions were found for all but one – kidney infections – of the 19 conditions studied.

The largest fall in admissions was for flu, with a 94% reduction in admissions from an average of 5,379 each year before the pandemic to 304 in 2020/21. For bronchiolitis, admissions decreased by more than 80% from an average of 51,655 to 9,423 in 2020/21. Tonsillitis admissions fell by 66% from more than 54,000 each year before the pandemic to just over 18,000. Meningitis admissions dropped by almost 50% from an average of 3,917 before the pandemic to 1,964 in 2020/21.

“This study has shown dramatic overall reductions in hospital admissions for respiratory, severe invasive, and vaccine preventable infections in children during the Covid-19 pandemic in England,” the researchers wrote in The BMJ. “Children with potentially life threatening co-morbidities were also substantially protected.

“Further evaluation of non-pharmacological interventions that could be sustained beyond the pandemic is required to inform policymakers about

potential strategies, especially during winter months, to minimise the burden on health systems and protect vulnerable children. Continued monitoring of hospital admissions for these infections is required as social restrictions evolve.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2022/jan/12/pandemic-brought-dramatic-fall-in-english-hospital-admissions-for-childhood-infections>

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Coronavirus

‘Not the cruise I signed up for’: 30-fold increase in Covid cases upends industry

The surge has led to passengers stranded on ships, staff shortages and tour cancelations in addition to ports turning ships away



The problems have come just six months after the cruise industry opened in June. Photograph: Chandan Khanna/AFP/Getty Images

Erin McCormick

Thu 13 Jan 2022 01.00 EST

A surge in Covid infections on cruise ships is causing mayhem across the industry, leaving passengers stranded aboard ships, exacerbating staff shortages and prompting the CDC to warn US passengers against all cruise travel.

The CDC director said this week that Covid cases have increased 30-fold in just two weeks. Every one of the nearly 100 cruise ships currently carrying passengers in US waters has reported enough Covid-19 cases to merit investigation by the CDC, according to the [agency's website](#).

Over the holidays, passengers found themselves floating around on ships that couldn't dock because foreign ports were turning them away or facing long, onboard quarantines before being allowed to come home, after testing positive for Covid. Dozens of cruises have been cancelled and some ports in the Caribbean and South America are turning ships away from making daily visits.

"It wasn't the cruise we signed up for," said Janet Silver Ghent, a Palo Alto retiree and editor who was stuck onboard a South America cruise for eight days, when ports in Chile and Argentina refused to let passengers disembark because of Covid cases.

On December 30, the CDC issued its highest [travel warning](#), advising the public to avoid cruise ship travel even if vaccinated. The agency said, at the time, that the number of infections reported on cruise ships had jumped to 5,013 between 15-29 December – up from only 162 in the first two weeks of December.

CDC director Dr Rochelle Walensky, speaking at a senate health hearing on Tuesday, said that the numbers have continued to skyrocket, though the agency did not respond to requests for updated case counts.

"Just over the last two weeks with Omicron, we've seen a 30 fold increase in cases on ships," Walensky said.



Janet Silver Ghent and Allen Podell were stuck aboard their South American cruise. Photograph: courtesy of Janet Silver Ghent

The problems come just six months after the cruise industry's big comeback, when companies resumed full operations after having voyages shut down for more than a year by the pandemic. Fortunately, unlike the outbreaks that rattled the global cruise industry early in the pandemic, there have been no initial reports of serious illness or death in the latest surge. Most cruise companies are requiring passengers to be fully vaccinated and tested before setting sail, likely helping to limit the severity of outbreaks.

"Our case count has spiked, but the level of severity is significantly milder," said Royal Caribbean Group's chief medical officer Dr Calvin Johnson, in a statement last month.

The company reported that, since cruising restarted in the US in June 2021, only 1,745 of its 1.1 million guests have tested positive – a positivity rate of 0.162%. Of those, it said, only 41 people needed hospitalization.

But the case surge is nonetheless causing headaches for cruise operators and passengers. Florida maritime attorney James Walker said that thousands of cruise ship crew members have tested positive and that many are quarantining on a handful of out-of-service ships.

“Given the number of crew members who are ill, there are significant staffing problems,” said Walker, who believes cruise lines should suspend their operations until after the Omicron surge. “For the people who pay to go on a cruise, the service isn’t there.”

‘We were willing to embrace the risks’

By the time the CDC issued its warning against cruise ship travel on 30 December, many holiday passengers were already aboard and seeing their dream cruises disrupted by Omicron. Some have opted to try and make the best of it.

Five days after Utah resident Brett Williams and his wife set sail on what was supposed be an 11-day Caribbean cruise, he said 48 crew members and 51 passengers of the small 342-passenger sailing ship, the MSY Wind Surf, tested positive and had to be taken off the ship for quarantine in Barbados. Within a few days, he and his wife and many other passengers also tested positive and were told they couldn’t fly home until they each received a negative test result.

Despite experiencing no symptoms, Brett Williams’ tests remained stubbornly positive. The psychologist and author made the best of what turned out to be 12 extra days stuck on the ship, eating complimentary deluxe room service meals, taking pictures of beautiful sunsets and working on his new book, a self help guide, ironically titled *Unstuck*.

At one point, when all the other passengers had been sent home, he and his wife even got to enjoy the ship’s spa pool by themselves, where he joked he wanted to order up “a quarantini”.



Brett Williams and his wife were stuck aboard their cruise for an extra 12 days after testing positive for Covid. Photograph: Courtesy of Brett Williams

“Life has risks,” said Williams, who described the trip as “awesome” despite the disruptions. “We were willing to embrace the risks.”

Ghent and her husband, Allen Podell, also managed to enjoy their South America trip even though their ship, the Viking Jupiter, spent so much time at sea, since they couldn’t dock, that the entertainers aboard used up all their routines in the first few days and had to resort to improvising entirely new material.

Ghent said Viking’s testing routines were extremely strict, requiring all passengers to take a spit PCR test every day. “I spit so much, I never want to spit again,” she said.

Passengers who were deemed to be exposed were taken off the ship for quarantine. These included actor Liev Schreiber, who proceeded to post [viral videos](#) from his quarantine hotel in Chile, [tapping out beats](#) on a Casio synthesiser and calling himself DJ Covid.

Ghent’s husband, Podell, 83, ate voluminous amounts of sushi and spent his time singing along with the guitarist in the Viking ship’s Explorer Lounge. While the boat was never able to dock in its final destination port, Buenos

Aires, Argentina, Podell enjoyed belting out renditions of John Denver's Take Me Home Country Roads and made up his own version of an Evita song: Don't Make Me Cry, Argentina.

Ghent and Podell eventually got off the ship in Uruguay, where they were supposed to spend one day but ended up spending five. The cruise line chartered a plane to get passengers back to Miami. From there, the couple missed their connecting flight to San Francisco and temporarily lost their baggage, but managed to keep their sense of humor all the same.

"Nobody's going to feel sorry for us for cruising the Atlantic," said Podell.

Officials in the cruise industry, which has lost a lot of money since the start of the pandemic, were also trying to take the setbacks in stride.

"Omicron is having a big short-term impact on everyone," said Richard Fain, CEO of Royal Caribbean in a statement, but argued that cruises are one of the safer places for people to vacation because everyone aboard is vaccinated. "Many observers see this as a major step towards Covid-19 becoming endemic rather than an epidemic."

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/12/cruise-covid-cases-ship-industry>.

2022.01.13 - Opinion

- As things fall apart, the super-rich spend \$2m on whisky. We need a wealth tax
- If Omicron is on the retreat, that's bad news for the Conservatives
- Now Prince Andrew is facing trial, the palace must find a way to 'de-royal' him
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Opinion[**The super-rich**](#)

As things fall apart, the super-rich spend \$2m on whisky. We need a wealth tax

[Owen Jones](#)



All that frittered wealth could be used to help with the economic recovery from the pandemic instead



'It's not just expensive bottles of whisky attracting the wallets of the thriving mega-rich.' A selection of vintage Macallan whiskeys. Photograph: Rex Features/REX FEATURES

Thu 13 Jan 2022 03.00 EST

You may need a stiff drink to believe this. Last October, a new record was set: a cask of Macallan 1991 whisky sold for a cool [\\$2.33m](#). At least this was an entire cask of premium liquor: earlier last year, a luxury case of 30-year-old Irish malt featuring a gold Fabergé egg was auctioned off for [\\$2m](#), only slightly more than a [single bottle of scotch](#) at the end of 2019.

Is whisky really worth 2m big ones? As any economist will tell you, the value of something is determined by how much someone is prepared to pay for it, and all that money sloshing around at the top has to go somewhere. The crises of our time have been kind to the uber-rich: while British workers have suffered a near unprecedented squeeze in their wages, the richest 1,000 people saw their [fortunes double](#) in the first seven years after the financial crash. Covid has proved little different: Britain produced a [record number](#) of new billionaires in the pandemic, while their US counterparts enjoyed almost a two-thirds jump in their wealth during the first 18 months of the crisis. At \$4.8tn, the combined fortunes of US billionaires are almost equivalent to the size of the entire Japanese economy.

RING THE BELL.

You're looking at the new world record for a [#whisky](#) cask sold at auction.

\$2,327,563 cask. Divided by the 608 bottles, that's \$5,705 per bottle.

Smashing the previous record of \$574k/\$2,845, achieved [@Bonhams1793](#).

An amazing [#NFT](#) collab w/ [@TrevorJonesArt](#). □
pic.twitter.com/Q7KuzihE7r

— Metacask (@metacask) [October 22, 2021](#)

It's not just expensive bottles of whisky attracting the wallets of the thriving mega-rich. When the Chinese billionaire Cheung Chung-kiu snapped up a 62,000 sq ft mansion in Hyde Park for a cool \$275m back in 2020, he understandably wanted to make sure it was just right, so last year he commenced a [renovation](#) estimated to cost nearly as much as the original asking price. Last year, [11 Picassos](#) were auctioned off in Las Vegas for \$100m, while a [1958 Ferrari](#) found a new home in exchange for \$6m.

Perhaps such ludicrously expensive items will provoke baffled shrugs. Wealthy people splash their seemingly limitless fortunes on frivolous items with extortionate price tags – so what? Sure, it's a symptom of the growth in wealth inequality since the 1980s, encouraged by the decline in progressive taxation, the deregulation of finance, the shattered power of trade unions, diluted antitrust legislation, and the rise of large quasi-monopolistic businesses such as Facebook and Amazon. No, a hyperactive work ethic and dazzling entrepreneurial acumen does not explain the explosion in billionaires' wealth during the pandemic: no-strings government help for businesses and quantitative easing policies that drove up asset prices are more plausible explanations. And, yes, watching the wealth collectively produced by the hard graft of billions of people hoovered up by a select few is undoubtedly a moral affront. But does it matter?

The simple answer is yes. Buying whisky for \$2m doesn't simply underline an inverse correlation between money and sense on the part of the super-rich: it represents the red lights flashing on the dashboard of an entire economic model. Gary Stevenson should know: formerly Citibank's most profitable trader, he [made millions](#) betting against economic recovery after Lehman Brothers detonated in the heart of the financial sector. Among the bigwigs of big finance, the consensus was that near-zero interest rates were an extraordinary measure that would be soon reversed as the economy recovered.

But Stevenson was a dissenter: he believed the continued parlous state of the economy would halt any interest rate hikes. The reason? Because when ordinary people receive money, they spend it, stimulating the economy, while the wealthy tend to save it. But our economic model promotes the concentration of wealth among a select few at the expense of everybody else's living standards. If working-class people don't have the money to spend, they won't; and as they're plunged into debt simply to cover their families' cost of living, consumer demand is sucked out of an economy based upon it. In an amusing paradox, Stevenson's belief that inequality was crippling the economy literally made him millions.

As Stevenson emphasised, the super-rich tend not to invest all that hoovered up wealth into productive parts of the economy: they instead throw it at property or, yes, \$2m bottles of whisky, driving up asset prices. "What you have to understand is that saving is not the same as investing," the chartered accountant Richard Murphy says. "Investment is the creation of new capacity to undertake economic activity, which is almost universally funded by new bank loans. It's very rarely funded by share capital, except generally with very small microbusinesses." The entire economy has been designed to funnel wealth generated by the team effort of millions into the bank accounts of a tiny few, whose whims and hobby horses have no social value whatsoever.

While many people have experienced bereavement, loneliness and insecurity during the pandemic, Covid-19 has proved just the latest lucrative boon for billionaires' wealth portfolios. And that's why an economic case – rather than simply a moral case – for a wealth tax desperately needs to be made.

All that wealth could play a pivotal role in the post-Covid recovery. It could be put towards drastically expanding the capacity of the NHS, ventilating all schools and businesses, and funding the transition to a green economy. Instead, a tiny elite are clocking up many more billions just by sitting on their assets, frittering wealth away on \$2m bottles of whisky featuring gold Fabergé eggs. It's not simply immoral: it's utterly irrational.

- Owen Jones is a Guardian columnist
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[**Opinion**](#)[**Coronavirus**](#)

If Omicron is on the retreat, that's bad news for the Conservatives

[Larry Elliott](#)



When fear of Covid fades, people will notice taxes, bills and inflation are all up. And that there's no plan for that



‘A 50% increase in energy bills in April means even Tory-supporting publications are warning about a cost of living crisis.’ Photograph: Leon Neal/Getty Images

Thu 13 Jan 2022 01.00 EST

After two years, there is light at the end of the Covid-19 tunnel. Daily recorded cases of the Omicron variant [are falling](#) and it seems likely plan B restrictions will be eased in England at the end of the month. Nicola Sturgeon [has relaxed](#) the 500-person limit on mass gatherings in Scotland.

The return of life to something approaching normal ought to be unalloyed good news for the government. After all, the pandemic has resulted in the economy shrinking by almost a tenth in 2020, sending public borrowing to a [peacetime record](#).

In fact, the waning of Covid-19 as an issue may make life more rather than less difficult for Boris Johnson, because it will allow people to focus on everything else that is going on. They will be free to contemplate [a 50% increase](#) in their energy bills in April, an increase in taxes, and prices rising faster than wages. Chuck in higher interest rates from the Bank of England and it is not hard to see why even [Tory-supporting publications](#) have been warning about a cost-of-living crisis.

Warren Buffett, the veteran US investor, [once said](#) that it's only when the tide goes out that you see who's been swimming naked, and rarely has that maxim seemed more apt. Even though the economy will continue to grow this year, for many voters 2022 is going to feel more like a recession year than 2020 did.

It is taking the government a long time to realise the political peril this represents, particularly at a time when public anger over the parties at Downing Street is palpable. Labour has been running hard with its “them and us” attack on the prime minister over adherence to lockdown rules, but it now has the opportunity to mount the same argument on the economy: the rich are benefiting from soaring house and share prices, while those struggling to get by will be clobbered by an increase in national insurance contributions and £600 a year on the average household’s fuel bills.

At the height of the pandemic, it was hard for Labour to get a hearing on the economy. Nobody was really interested in what the main opposition party had to say during a health emergency; and, in any case, Labour was broadly supportive of the measures taken to prevent lockdowns leading to mass unemployment.

That’s now changing. In part, that’s because money is no longer gushing out of the Treasury at the rate it was. Rishi Sunak announced [£1bn extra for hospitality firms](#) in December, but previously decided not to continue with the £20 a week uplift to universal credit announced at the start of the pandemic and insisted on a national insurance (NI) increase to pay for extra spending on the NHS and social care. Both those decisions – controversial at the time – look even more questionable in the light of the subsequent jump in global energy costs, a price shock reminiscent of the 1970s.

But in part, too, the government’s delay in responding to demands for consumers to be shielded from looming price rises has allowed Labour to fill the vacuum. Its plan includes a temporary cut in VAT, consumers not being expected to pick up the tab for the costs of the more than 20 energy companies that have recently gone bust, and a windfall tax on North Sea oil and gas to help pay for an expanded and more generous warm home discount – the help with bills provided to those on low incomes. Under Labour’s proposals around one-third of UK households would see virtually

no increase in their bills next year. There would be something off bills for everyone, with extra help for those who need it most.

It is quite hard for the government to push back against Labour's ideas. [The prime minister himself said](#) during the EU referendum campaign that one of the benefits of Brexit would be the freedom to set our own VAT rates, and the first Thatcher government imposed a North Sea windfall tax [in 1980](#). Accusing Labour of being the party of tax and spend has its difficulties for the Conservatives, given that taxes are on course to be their highest since Clement Attlee was prime minister.

Whether the energy crisis represents Keir Starmer's breakthrough moment remains to be seen. The good news for the government is that unemployment is low and inflation is expected to fall back later in the year after peaking in the spring. The bad news is that the time-honoured Conservative way of ramping up the economy – a house-price boom – is not an option because the property market is already red hot. While the main focus of Labour's attacks has been the prime minister, the shadow chancellor, Rachel Reeves, has also been accusing Sunak of going missing in action. Reeves clearly thinks the chancellor is looking vulnerable, which indeed he is.

Two years of Covid have not fundamentally changed the basic rules of politics. Governments thrive when wages are rising faster than prices and living standards are going up. They struggle when the opposite is the case. Opinion polls suggest “red wall” voters are angered not just by Johnson’s flouting of lockdown rules but also by his failure to deliver on his levelling-up agenda. Given the squeeze on family budgets, there has rarely been a more opportune moment for Labour to propose an alternative to NI increases: wealth taxes on the rich.

- Larry Elliott is the Guardian's [economics](#) editor

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Opinion[Prince Andrew](#)

Now Prince Andrew is facing trial, the palace must find a way to ‘de-royal’ him

[David McClure](#)

Whatever the outcome, there is no way back for the prince – and the family will be keen to limit the damage



Prince Andrew in Bruges, Belgium, September 2019. Photograph: John Thys/AFP/Getty Images

Wed 12 Jan 2022 12.31 EST

Well, he’s surely sweating now. One by one, the options are running out for Prince Andrew. He has just lost his latest legal battle after Manhattan federal court judge Lewis Kaplan’s [ruling today](#) that the sexual abuse lawsuit against him should proceed to trial, despite his lawyers advancing a variety of technical arguments, including that Virginia Giuffre no longer lives in the US, that she agreed in a 2009 deal not to pursue claims against certain other

people, and that the court summons had not been properly served. He now faces a long trial that is likely to cause considerable reputational damage to the royal family in a year when everyone was supposed to be celebrating the Queen's platinum jubilee.

One possibility left to him is settling with Giuffre out of court. After all, this is what happens in the vast majority of civil litigations in the US, particularly after the attrition of a drawn-out court case begins to bite. But such an option could hit the cash-strapped prince hard in the pocket, given reports that he is trying to [sell his £17m Swiss chalet](#) to raise funds just to pay for his legal bills; this is after reports from the palace that the Queen would not bail him out financially. Since Giuffre had already received [\\$500,000 in a legal settlement with Epstein](#), any settlement could run into the millions of dollars (some reports have put it as [high as \\$5m](#)). If that happened, despite palace denials, the Queen would probably have to intercede with help, just as she did when Charles was faced with a multimillion-pound divorce bill from Diana in 1995.

Whichever way you look at it, Andrew is now a major liability for the royal family and the palace must wish he would just retire to his Royal Lodge home and lead a life of quiet anonymity. Part of the problem, as we discovered with the sudden departure of Prince Harry from the royal hearth, is that there is no clear process of “de-royalling” a royal. Despite his escape to California, Harry was allowed to keep a few of his royal connections in case he ever had a change of heart. The situation of his Uncle Andrew is obviously much more serious and more difficult to decouple.

Today’s ruling represents a victory for Giuffre’s team and, from her point of view, a positive step. But even in the best-case scenario for Andrew, if the legal process went to a full trial and he successfully defended himself, the reputational damage to him and the royal family would still be done. The fact that he had numbered among his friends two people who were convicted sex criminals would tarnish his name for ever. There is no way back for Andrew. Whatever the difficulties, the palace may have to find some way to “de-royal” him – he is for all intents and purposes an ex-royal and faces a lot of sweating in the year to come.

- David McClure is the author of The Queen's True Worth
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[Opinion](#)[Local government](#)

I believe in local democracy – I just don't understand it

[Adrian Chiles](#)



I don't have any complaints, but if I did, who would I moan to? Parish or county council? MP or mayor? I'm baffled



What should I talk about to Bev Craig, the leader of Manchester city council? Photograph: Christopher Thomond/The Guardian

Thu 13 Jan 2022 02.00 EST

I was chatting to some locals in a village somewhere over Christmas. They were bemoaning various decisions that had been made – to the detriment, in their view, of the community. There was planning stuff, blocked sewers, restrictions demanded by a preservation society, highways and so on. These people weren't professional moaners, or even keen amateur moaners. They were just exasperated.

I opened my mouth to impart some sage advice, but nothing came out, as it dawned me that I knew nothing of any use to them. I have no clear idea where the power lies. Is it the parish council, the county council, the regional government or central government? And where does the local member of parliament fit in to all this? As a voter in a democratic society, it is surely critical for me to know who is responsible for what, so I know who to blame or praise, who to vote in or out and who to try to influence. I really don't. Perhaps it's just me.

I thought I understood the point of local democracy, but if no one can fathom its byzantine ins and outs there surely is no point. Take Manchester. I

know that Andy Burnham is the mayor. But, in that case, I wondered, what is Bev Craig, the leader of Manchester city council, for? Oh, I see: Craig is the leader of just one of the 10 city councils that make up the [Greater Manchester](#) combined authority, a body that has an 11th member and chair, the mayor Andy Burnham. OK, got it, I think. But to whom would I speak if I lived in the middle of Manchester and was displeased about, say, the state of Piccadilly Gardens? Is it Lucy Powell, the MP for the area? Or could it be one of the three councillors for that ward, their council leader, Craig, or her sort-of leader, Burnham? This is nothing against these people, or Manchester generally; I'd have the same questions about anywhere. Please, someone, explain.

- Adrian Chiles is a broadcaster, writer and Guardian columnist
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2022.01.13 - Around the world

- [Aras Amiri Iran frees British Council employee accused of spying](#)
- [Iran French-Iranian academic sent back to jail at key point in nuclear talks](#)
- [Online child sex abuse 2021 was worst year on record, says IWF](#)
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[Iran](#)

Aras Amiri: Iran frees British Council employee accused of spying

Amiri, 34, back in UK after Iran's supreme court overturned 2019 conviction and 10-year prison sentence



Aras Amiri is now at an undisclosed address in the UK. Photograph: Family Photo

[Patrick Wintour](#) Diplomatic editor

Wed 12 Jan 2022 09.09 EST

An Iranian woman who worked for the British Council has been freed from detention in Evin prison and returned to the UK after being acquitted of spying charges.

Aras Amiri's lawyers had mounted an appeal to the Iranian supreme court that led to her release. She is now at an undisclosed address in the UK.

The 34-year-old, who worked as an artistic affairs officer for the British Council, [was visiting relatives in Tehran in 2018 when she was detained](#). In May 2019 she was sentenced to 10 years in prison on spying charges after she said she refused to become an informant for Iran's intelligence service. Three months later she lost an appeal.

"We have always refuted [sic] the original charges made against Aras," the British Council said on Wednesday. "We are very proud of her work in our London office as an arts programme officer supporting a greater understanding and appreciation of Iranian culture in the UK. This was important work, which reflects the value of cross-border cultural collaboration. Aras's wellbeing remains our priority. We ask that her privacy is respected as she rebuilds her life in the UK following a long and difficult period."

In 2019 Amiri wrote to the then-chief justice and now president-elect, Ebrahim Raisi, asking him to conduct an investigation into the false charges against her.

She said the reason she had been imprisoned was her refusal to spy for the Iranian intelligence services. "Following my release on bail ... the case investigators kept contacting me," she wrote. "During our third meeting, I turned down their explicit invitation for cooperation and told them I could only work in my specific field, not any other kind of work.

"In light of the unlawful actions in the processing of my case and the insults against myself and my family, I am writing to request Your Excellency to carry out an investigation," Amiri wrote. The letter was translated by the Centre for Human Rights in Iran.

A number of British-Iranian nationals have been jailed in Iran on similar charges, including [Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe](#), who was sentenced to an additional year in prison in April 2021, shortly before finishing her five-year sentence. During Amiri's imprisonment she shared a cell with many dual nationals.

Talks about the future of the Iran nuclear deal, seen as critical to wider European-Iranian relations, are continuing in Vienna, and some relatives of

those still detained are hoping that Amiri's release is a sign of a slow thaw over the issue of detainees.

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[Iran](#)

Iran sends French-Iranian academic back to jail at key point in nuclear talks

France says Fariba Adelkhah's unexplained return to prison will damage efforts to revive 2015 curbs on nuclear programme



Fariba Adelkhah was sentenced to five years in 2020 for conspiring against national security, a charge her supporters call absurd. Photograph: Thomas Arrive/Sciences Po/AFP/Getty Images

AFP in Paris

Wed 12 Jan 2022 16.31 EST

Iran has sent back to prison from house arrest [French-Iranian academic Fariba Adelkhah](#), a shock development in the midst of delicate talks on the Iranian nuclear drive.

Adelkhah was [sentenced in May 2020 to five years in prison](#) for conspiring against national security, accusations her supporters have always denounced as absurd. She was allowed home in Tehran in October 2020 with an electronic bracelet.

The French foreign ministry expressed “astonishment” at Adelkhah’s reimprisonment on Wednesday, calling for her immediate release and adding the move had come with “no explanation or preliminary warning”.

“The decision can only have negative consequences on the relationship between [France](#) and Iran and reduce confidence between our two countries,” the foreign ministry said.

She is one of at least a dozen western nationals believed to be held in [Iran](#) who activists say are being held as hostages at the behest of the elite Revolutionary Guards to extract concessions from the west.

With talks under way in Vienna aimed at salvaging the 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and world powers, the French foreign ministry warned the move would damage bilateral relations and trust.

“It is with great shock and indignation that we have been informed that Fariba Adelkhah ... has been re-imprisoned in the prison of Evin” in Tehran, the committee set up to support her said in a statement.

“The Iranian government is cynically using our colleague for external or internal purposes that remain opaque, and that have nothing to do with her activities,” it added.

The committee accused the authorities of “deliberately endangering Fariba Adelkhah’s health and even her life”, pointing to the death this month in Iranian custody of poet Baktash Abtin after he contracted Covid.

The surprise move by the Iranian authorities to move Adelkhah back to prison comes at a hugely sensitive juncture in talks involving France and other world powers aimed at reviving the deal on the Iranian nuclear programme.

France's foreign minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, complained on Tuesday that the pace of the talks in Vienna is "too slow", in marked contrast to the more upbeat tone from officials in Tehran.

Also being held in Iran is Frenchman Benjamin Briere, who his family describe as an innocent tourist but was detained while travelling in May.

Briere's family announced last month he had begun a hunger strike to protest at his detention conditions and the lack of evolution in his case.

A specialist in Shia Islam and a research director at Sciences Po university in Paris, Adelkhah was arrested in June 2019 along with her French colleague and partner Roland Marchal.

[Marchal was released in March 2020 in an apparent prisoner swap](#) after France released Iranian engineer Jalal Rohollahnejad, who faced extradition to the United States over accusations he violated US sanctions against Iran.

Adelkah's support group said she had been imprisoned "on trumped-up charges and without any proper trial".

Nationals of all three European powers involved in the talks on the Iranian nuclear programme – Britain, France and Germany – are among those foreigners being held.

In a separate development on Wednesday, the British Council said its staffer, Iranian citizen Aras Amiri, had [returned to the United Kingdom after being cleared on appeal](#) of a 10-year jail sentence for "cultural infiltration" in Iran.

The 2015 deal – agreed by Iran, the United States, China, Russia, Britain, France and Germany – offered Tehran sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on its nuclear programme.

But then US president Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew the United States in 2018 and reimposed biting sanctions, prompting Tehran to begin rolling back on its commitments.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/12/iran-sends-french-iranian-academic-back-to-jail-at-key-point-in-nuclear-talks>

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Online abuse

2021 was worst year on record for online child sexual abuse, says IWF

Watchdog says younger children were targeted by online predators on an industrial scale during lockdowns



Younger and younger children are being targeted by internet groomers, the research found. Photograph: Peter Byrne/PA

[Dan Milmo](#) Global technology editor

Thu 13 Jan 2022 01.00 EST

Internet grooming of children has surged during lockdown, according to new research that found a threefold increase in online sexual abuse imagery featuring seven to 10-year-olds.

The Internet Watch Foundation [reported its worst year on record for child sexual abuse online in 2021](#) as it confirmed 252,000 URLs containing

images or videos of children being sexually abused, compared with 153,000 in the [previous year](#). The UK-based charity said it had seen a large increase in self-generated material – where children are manipulated into recording their own abuse before it is shared online – with the fastest growing increase in such material occurring among seven to 10-year-olds.

The IWF said the rise in cases could be linked to [Covid lockdowns](#) which required people to stay indoors and led to millions spending more time [online](#). It said lockdowns led to younger and younger children being targeted on an “industrial scale” by internet groomers.

“Child safety experts say younger children have been relying more and more on the internet during the pandemic, and that spending longer online may be leaving them more vulnerable to communities of criminals who are looking to find and manipulate children into recording their own sexual abuse on camera. The footage is then shared among other criminals on the open internet,” said the IWF report.

In 2021, the IWF reported 182,000 instances of self-generated material. Of these confirmed cases 27,000 were seven to 10-year-olds, which is more than treble the number for 2020. Once the IWF confirms that reports of abuse – largely from members of the public, the police, tech firms or IWF analysts themselves – are genuine, they are reported to authorities in countries where the servers hosting the content are based. The IWF said the biggest age group for self-generated sexual abuse material remained 11- to 13-year-olds, with 148,000 reports made to the organisation last year.

“Children are being targeted, approached, groomed and abused by criminals on an industrial scale,” said Susie Hargreaves, IWF chief executive. “So often, this sexual abuse is happening in children’s bedrooms in family homes, with parents being wholly unaware of what is being done to their children by strangers with an internet connection.”

On Thursday the House of Commons will debate a [report by a joint committee](#) of MPs and peers into the draft online safety bill, which imposes a duty of care on tech firms to protect children from harmful content, as well as preventing the proliferation of illegal content and activity such as child

pornography. Responding to the IWF figures, the head of child safety online policy at the NSPCC, Andy Burrows, said it was “crucial” that the bill is strengthened to prevent online grooming of children.

The figures were released as the UK government launched a new online safety campaign, [Stop Abuse Together](#), to help parents and carers spot signs of abuse. The safeguarding minister, Rachel Maclean, said: “Keeping children safe is one of this government’s highest priorities and we are committed to doing all we can to combat the increased identification of child sexual abuse online.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/jan/13/2021-was-worst-year-on-record-for-online-child-sex-abuse-says-iwf>

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Global development

Brazilian turtle breeders shot dead along with teenage daughter

Activists mourn deaths in Amazon state of Pará as bodies of José Gomes, Márcia Nunes Lisboa and their daughter found by son



Márcia Nunes Lisboa and her husband José Gomes with their two children. The family bred baby turtles to repopulate the river. Photograph: Handout

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Thu 13 Jan 2022 02.30 EST

Police in the Brazilian Amazon state of Pará are investigating the killing of three members of the same family who were shot dead at the riverside home where they bred turtles.

The deaths happened on the island of Cachoeira da Mucura, on the banks of the Xingu River, in São Félix do Xingu and regional media named the victims as José Gomes, his wife Márcia Nunes Lisboa and her teenage daughter, Joane Nunes Lisboa.

Police confirmed to the Guardian that they do not yet know the motive for the killings.

José Carlos Rodrigues, the civil police chief leading the investigation, told the Diário do Pará newspaper that the crimes had shocked the city.

On social media, environmentalists and human rights activists mourned the loss of the family.

“They worked for life in the river, for life on land and for life in general. And they were killed, their lives taken with gunshots,” wrote Marina Silva, a former environment minister, in a [Twitter post](#).

The bodies were found on Sunday outside the family home in the early stages of decomposition.

“Those responsible for the crimes must be identified and held accountable quickly and effectively,” said [Amnesty International Brazil in a public statement](#).

“The Brazilian state has the obligation to act to contain the wave of violence and the cycle of impunity that are perpetuated in the Amazon region and throughout the national territory.”

In videos shared on social media of the crime scene, one of the bodies floats in the river, another lies fallen by its banks and another lies collapsed and barefoot in a puddle.

Gomes’ son discovered the bodies.

Gomes and his family bred thousands of baby turtles, which they released into the river once a year, sometimes with help from neighbours or local people.

In isolated indigenous and riverine communities of Brazil’s Amazon, eating turtles is common and replenishment projects like Gomes’ have been vital to maintaining the population.

In a video from December, published on the Diário do Pará website, Gomes releases buckets of baby turtles into the river, explaining how the family has done this work for 20 years.

“Today, we’re trying to repopulate these baby turtles in the river so that in the future our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren can still catch these turtles,” he said.

Brazil was ranked the fourth-deadliest country for land and environmental defenders in 2020, according to [a report released by the NGO Global Witness last year](#). Nearly three quarters of 20 killings recorded happened in Brazil's nine Amazon states.

Such murders mostly go unpunished, perpetuating a cycle of violence and impunity.

Pará, which has an area five times that of the UK, has been one of Brazil's deadliest states for land defenders, with less than 5% of land-conflict killings going to court, according to Brazil's Pastoral Land Commission, a land violence watchdog.

While murders of land and environmental defenders in Brazil have fallen since a peak in 2017, when Global Witness recorded 57 killings, the country's far-right president, Jair Bolsonaro, has overseen a dramatic increase in [deforestation in the Amazon, according to government data](#).

São Félix do Xingu consistently tops Brazil's most deforested municipalities, according to government data.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jan/13/brazilian-turtle-breeders-shot-dead-along-with-teenage-daughter>

Headlines monday 10 january 2022

- [Novak Djokovic Tennis star wins appeal against decision to cancel his Australian visa](#)
- [Live Minister could still use discretion to cancel visa, lawyer warns](#)
- [Live UK Covid: Gove claims he was wrong about need for tougher restrictions](#)
- [Cladding Leaseholders will not have to pay to fix any fire risks, vows Gove](#)

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Novak Djokovic wins appeal against decision to cancel his Australian visa

World No 1 immediately released from detention, but immigration minister considering cancelling visa again

01:13

Novak Djokovic practises in Melbourne with Australian Open place in doubt – video

[Paul Karp](#)

[@Paul_Karp](#)

Mon 10 Jan 2022 01.44 EST

Novak Djokovic will be immediately released from immigration detention in Australia, after the federal circuit court ordered a decision to cancel his visa be quashed.

But the Australian government's counsel, Christopher Tran, has revealed the immigration minister will consider exercising a personal power to cancel Djokovic's visa meaning he is not guaranteed to stay and compete in the Australian Open.

The decision now under consideration to cancel Djokovic's visa anew would result in him being excluded from Australia for three years – significantly upping the stakes in a bizarre border row that threatens Djokovic's quest to win the most grand slam singles titles of all time.

After a lengthy adjournment on Monday the judge Anthony Kelly read a consent minute agreed between the world No 1 male tennis player and the home affairs minister, Karen Andrews.

Djokovic, after being temporarily released from immigration detention earlier on Monday to attend the remote hearing, was present off-screen as Kelly ordered the visa cancellation decision be quashed and costs awarded in his favour.

After the decision is quashed, Djokovic must be released from detention within 30 minutes with his passport and personal effects be returned to him.

Kelly said it was “unreasonable” for Australian Border Force officials to interview Djokovic on Thursday morning and cancel his visa in circumstances where they had agreed to give him until 8.30am to speak to officials and respond to the proposed visa cancellation.

Court documents show Djokovic’s reason for seeking a medical exemption from Australia’s vaccination requirements was that he contracted Covid in mid-December.

This was accepted by [Tennis](#) Australia and the Victorian state governments medical panels which granted him the exemption on 30 December, but border force decided Djokovic had not satisfied entry requirements.

Tran informed the court that the immigration minister, Alex Hawke, would consider exercising a personal power to cancel Djokovic’s visa.

Kelly questioned if such a power was exercised whether Djokovic would be removed from Australia and unable to return for three years, which Tran confirmed.

00:53

'Free Nole': fans surround car leaving Novak Djokovic's lawyer's office – video

“The stakes have now risen rather than receded,” the judge said.

“I cannot purport to encroach on the valid exercise of a minister of executive power.”

The power states that the minister would have to be satisfied “a ground exists to cancel the visa”, in this case a threat to public health because Djokovic is unvaccinated; that Djokovic can’t dissuade him of this; and that it is “in the public interest to cancel the visa”.

Immigration law professor, Mary Crock, told Guardian Australia the Migration Act gives the minister “god-like powers” to cancel visas and if “they really decide to … the power is there”.

“Everything that has gone before can be disregarded – it is set up precisely for this situation, to come in and cancel a visa anyway.

“The politics behind this is enormous … If the visa is cancelled under this provision – you’re excluded for three years … Australia would be at risk of losing the Australian Open.”

Crock said such a cancellation is “not common” and would “definitely end up in court again” – this time to answer the substantive question of whether an unvaccinated person poses a risk, and not just procedural questions.

Kelly noted the personal cancellation could be appealed and warned he expected to be “fully informed in advance” if such a decision was taken.

Earlier, [Kelly queried “what more” Djokovic could have done](#) to prove his medical exemption and criticised the Australian government for renegeing on a deal to give him more time to defend his visa from cancellation.

In a [transcript](#) of Djokovic’s interview with border officials, released after the hearing, the tennis star complained he had been put in a “very awkward position” by demands to substantiate the exemption.

“So you’re giving me legally 20 minutes to try to provide additional information that I don’t have? At 4 o clock in the morning?”

01:55

'If it was me ...': tennis players respond to Novak Djokovic visa saga – video

A spokesman for Hawke told Guardian Australia following the federal circuit court ruling on a procedural ground, “it remains within [his] discretion to consider cancelling Mr Djokovic’s visa under his [personal power of cancellation](#)”.

“The minister is currently considering the matter and the process remains ongoing.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/jan/10/novak-djokovic-wins-appeal-against-decision-to-cancel-his-australian-visa>

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Novak Djokovic

Novak Djokovic's mother claims tennis star subjected to 'torture' after he wins visa court battle – as it happened

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Cladding: ‘We are coming for you,’ Michael Gove warns builders of flats in fire-risk dispute – as it happened

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Grenfell Tower fire

Leaseholders will not have to pay to fix any fire risks, government pledges

Michael Gove says new statutory protection will cover all works required to make buildings safe – not just cladding



Cladding is replaced on flats in Reading, Berkshire. ‘Those who knowingly put lives at risk should be held to account for their crimes,’ said Gove.
Photograph: Geoffrey Swaine/Rex/Shutterstock

[Robert Booth](#), [Rupert Neate](#) and [Peter Walker](#)

Mon 10 Jan 2022 13.16 EST

New legislation will protect leaseholders from the costs of all post-Grenfell building safety defects, not just combustible cladding, the government has said.

The secretary of state for levelling up, housing and communities, [Michael Gove](#), told parliament the government would give leaseholders statutory protection that extends to all works required to make buildings safe. The move followed anger at reports that officials were only planning to force developers and materials manufacturers to pay to replace combustible cladding on buildings taller than 11 metres.

As about £1.3bn was wiped off the stock market valuations of the UK's major housebuilders, Gove insisted he had the backing of the chancellor, Rishi Sunak, to threaten developers with tax rises if they don't pay £4bn to fix the defective buildings that are blighting tens of thousands of households in the wake of the Grenfell Tower disaster.

Lisa Nandy, the shadow housing secretary, questioned whether this would be sufficient. "What makes him think he can force developers, who for four years have refused to do the right thing, to pay up?" she asked in the Commons. "Has the chancellor agreed to back a new tax measure if negotiations fail, or is he prepared to see his own already allocated budget, levelling-up funding or monies for affordable or social housing raided?"

Gove replied: "We do have absolute assurance that we can use the prospect of taxation in order to bring people to the table."

However, a leaked letter from the Treasury to Gove insisted that new or increased taxes were "not a given at this point". Nandy suggested that would weaken the government's hand against developers.

The End Our Cladding Scandal campaign group, which represents affected leaseholders, said: "Rishi Sunak still does not appear to understand the gravity of our situation and is seemingly doing all he can to evade ensuring homeowners are protected."

Gove also said he was unable to give any guarantees that people who have already paid to fix their homes would receive retrospective compensation.

Nevertheless, Gove's statement represented a marked shift of tone by the government in tackling the building safety crisis. It announced it would scrap a plan to loan money to leaseholders in medium-rise buildings

between 11 and 18 metres in height with fire safety defects. It will also scrap advice that all wall systems need to be checked for fire safety.

“Medium-rise buildings are safe, unless there is clear evidence to the contrary,” Gove said. “Those who knowingly put lives at risk should be held to account for their crimes.”

“We will make industry pay to fix all the remaining problems and help to cover the range of costs facing leaseholders,” he said. “Those who manufactured combustible cladding and insulation, many of whom made vast profits even at the height of the pandemic: they must pay now instead of leaseholders.”

He singled out two firms that made cladding and insulation used on Grenfell. “If you look at the behaviour of people who work for Kingspan and Arconic and the evidence that has been presented to the Grenfell inquiry, [it] is truly dreadful.”

However, developers said they should not be held wholly accountable.

Stewart Baseley, the executive chair of the Home Builders Federation, said: “Any further solutions must be proportionate, and involve those who actually built affected buildings and specified, certificated and provided the defective materials on them.”

Taylor Wimpey, which made a pre-tax profit of £287.5m in the first six months of 2021 but saw its share price slide 3.3% by 3pm on Monday, said the government’s plans to fix the cladding crisis must hit others in the supply chain. “There are many organisations involved in the issue of fire safety, including large business in our supply chain, and indeed government themselves,” a spokesperson said.

Reece Lipman, 32, who owns 25% of his flat in Romford, east London, but is liable for 100% of the building safety costs he faces, said Gove “has got the rhetoric right and is now talking with a much firmer tone”. However, he insisted that what has been seen as “just a cladding crisis” is in fact “a full-blown building safety crisis”. He likened government action so far to bailing “water off the Titanic with pots and pans”.

Officials said they were aware that persuading developers to accept responsibility when so many professionals and manufacturers are typically involved in construction projects was “without a doubt difficult”. They said it was possible that government budgets would need to be used in the first place to get urgent remediation works under way while persuading developers to pay up in parallel.

One threat could be to increase the 4% tax on developers’ profits that is already planned to try to raise £2bn over the next 10 years to help cover remediation costs.

Gove said the timescale for getting buildings fixed would be “rapid” but not “immediate”. He has assigned a team of forensic accountants to trace the ownership and developers of affected buildings. From its analysis of 1,000 blocks with fire risks, it believes 43% are owned by 14 corporate groups and a further 10% are owned by five developers, which between them made £1.2bn in profits last year.

They figure that with the top seven developers making £16bn in the last three years, “there is plenty of cash in the system”.

Some observers said they believed the threats might be persuasive. “Gove may find that the developers will pay up immediately to avoid damage to reputation and to avoid being banned from the government scheme,” said a senior lawyer working on the Grenfell Tower public inquiry.

That could trigger “a cascade of threats of legal action”, with the case against some of the main materials manufacturers potentially strengthened when the Grenfell Tower inquiry produces its final report towards the end of this year.

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2022.01.10 - Spotlight

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- [‘We’re just little country bumpkins!’ 2022’s hottest band Wet Leg on songs, silliness and their surprise success](#)
- [‘The extremist media has tried to destroy me’ Oscar-winning Iranian director Asghar Farhadi](#)
- [Technology Best baby monitor cameras for travel or home](#)

A new start after 60Life and style

A new start after 60: ‘I almost died of cancer. Then I became an actor – at 63!’

Julian Bird was a psychiatrist when he was diagnosed with bladder cancer – and began daydreaming about being an actor. Seventeen years later, he is playing the lead at a London theatre



‘I can’t understand the notion of retirement’ ... Julian Bird at the King’s Head theatre, north London. Photograph: Anna Gordon/The Guardian

[Paula Cocozza](#)

[@CocozzaPaula](#)

Mon 10 Jan 2022 01.00 EST

When Julian Bird was 60, he was diagnosed with cancer of the bladder. He had a series of operations, “all very unpleasant”, and learned that he “was likely to die pretty soon”. After 34 years as a psychiatrist, in that intense state of mind, he began to daydream about becoming a professional actor.

The bleak prognosis held for only a few months, and as he recovered Bird reevaluated his life “and what to do with what was left of it”. At the age of 63, he enrolled at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. This month, at 80, he is the lead in the play Freud’s Last Session, at the King’s Head theatre, in north London.

“I was brought up in a theatre family,” Bird says. His father, Henry Bird, was an artist who designed sets. His mother, Freda Jackson, was an actor, “a name in the 40s, 50s and 60s”. She was the lead in the play No Room at the Inn, about the abuse of evacuees during the second world war, which was so scandalous that she needed police protection when it transferred to the West End in 1946. “There were always women at the stage door wanting to kill her.”

Despite this, Bird “always loved theatre”. Indeed, the Drury Lane stage where his mother performed No Room at the Inn was the venue for his fifth birthday party. He was then a newly returned evacuee himself and recalls “being the centre of attention”. There were “all the kids in the cast”, though many were teenagers playing younger children, which must have felt a little strange.

An only child, at 13 he went to boarding school. “There were lonely times,” he says. “Every time I returned, there would be somebody else looking after me, a housekeeper/secretary.”

He gave little thought to following his mother into acting. When he was seven or eight, he fell ill; the illness was mysterious, with aches and pains. His mother found a doctor in Harley Street and the consultation proved decisive.

The elderly physician “was very empathic and wise. He was interested in me as a person,” Bird says. “He got books down off his shelf and invited me to join him in understanding the problem. And that’s very seductive ...” Curiously, Bird has no memory of the diagnosis. “But I left that consultation feeling: ‘I want to be like him. I’m going to be a doctor.’”

His parents were delighted. Bird studied natural sciences at Cambridge, before going on to medical school in London. He had scarcely dabbled in

Cambridge's drama scene for fear of profiting from his mother's renown, but in London he directed and starred in a production of The Doctor's Dilemma. (His mother, in the audience, was complimentary.)

By now Bird had become interested in neurology and psychiatry. The neurologist who supervised him was distinguished but dull, while the consultant psychiatrist was charismatic. So Bird became a psychiatrist. I wonder why he was so susceptible to the charisma of the Harley Street medic and the psychiatry teacher. "I suspect it has something to do with my relationship with my father. He was not an emotionally expressive man. He painted. In his studio. Every day. Seven days a week," Bird says. "Perhaps I wanted, needed, to have a close relationship with a father figure."

As a psychiatrist, in academia and in practice, Bird studied the patient-doctor relationship and his research included roleplay. He enjoyed this "emotionally expressive" dimension, but it was not until he arrived at drama school in 2004 that he saw the connection between psychiatry and acting.

Almost immediately, "there was joy, and a realisation that this was the right place ... I was hooked." At drama school, Bird understood, "I am an actor. I can't understand the notion of retirement. It doesn't exist. I'm an actor. That's what I do."

It is tempting to wonder what his mother, who died in 1990, would have made of his career change. He has worked in TV and theatre for the past 15 years. "I would have loved her involvement and appreciation," he says. There's a pause. Recently, he has had "a passing thought. Maybe that freedom was partly possible because they both had gone. I was free of their influence."

On stage, Bird says, "I can *feel* the audience. This focus of attention is very important, and it is a powerful feeling and it gives me power ... I feel most real on stage, and connected."

[Tell us: has your life taken a new direction after the age of 60?](#)

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Interview

‘We’re just little country bumpkins!’: 2022’s hottest band Wet Leg on songs, silliness and their surprise success

[Zoe Williams](#)



Wet Leg ... Rhian Teasdale and, lying down, Hester Chambers. Photograph: Hollie Fernando

Rhian Teasdale and Hester Chambers' feelgood anthems have beguiled fans. But after playing for fun and turning down record labels to rollerskate – do they finally feel they are a 'real band'?



[@zoesqwilliams](#)

Mon 10 Jan 2022 01.00 EST

How does a song by an unknown band get to be listened to 6.5m times? It was hard enough to determine in the olden days, before streaming existed, when we still said "popular" instead of "viral"; it is absolutely baffling now. If anyone knew, Facebook would have written an algorithm for it. That hasn't stopped critics twisting and turning to account for the success of [Chaise Longue](#), by the Isle of Wight duo Wet Leg, which was hotly followed by their astronomically successful follow-up singles, [Wet Dream](#) and [Too Late Now](#). They haven't even released an album yet.

Is it because they are, [as one reviewer put it](#), witty and sexy, and indie rock normally isn't? Everyone loves them, from Florence Welch to Hayley Williams to Iggy Pop. Is it because they have been compared to the likes of Violent Femmes and Björk? They have certainly unleashed an (often

contradictory) avalanche of they-remind-me-ofs, not because they are derivative; but because they put everyone in a good mood. We all reach wildly for the first or last band that put us in a good mood.

Rhian Teasdale and Hester Chambers, 28 and 27 respectively, talk to me over a video call, which I am not keen on anyway, but on this occasion is about as hilarious, frustrating, charming and elusive an experience as Wet Leg themselves. They are sitting against a glass-bricked wall; there is a dog around, but it never comes into view: it is all pretty indie. Chambers has an incredibly high, quiet voice and she wraps her blond hair around her face like the French Lieutenant's Woman. Teasdale has the most exquisite, whimsical manners. At one point, a passerby comes up to them to ask whether they are doing a TikTok. "No," she says, with endless patience. "We're doing a ... conversation." It is frustrating, because it transpires that they are in Streatham, south London, about two miles from my house. I could have cycled to meet them in less time than it would have taken to ask Chambers to get her hair out of her mouth.

They describe their musical influences, from the time they first met, doing a music BTec on the Isle of Wight: Patrick Watson, Arts the Beatdoctor, "a lot of Nordic stuff," as Chambers puts it, Laura Marling, And So I Watch You from Afar. "I was able to answer this one really well, because I was talking to my friend about what music we used to listen to when we were 17 and I thought: 'Wow, I was so zany,'" says Teasdale. Chambers couldn't disagree more. "Oh my gosh, no! Not that zany's a bad thing. It's not really my lexicon. It's a good word, though." "Lexicon is also a good word," says Teasdale.

The lyrics of Chaise Longue are intensely likable ("Is your mother worried? / Would you like us to assign someone / to worry your mother?"), even if all the kids I have met have the wrong end of the stick and think it is a song about academic failure, mixed with some not-so-subtle innuendo: "I went to school and I got the big D." In fact, the full line runs: "Mummy, Daddy, look at me / I went to school and I got a degree / All my friends call it the big D." But maybe the kids are perceptive because the pair couldn't stand academic life. Teasdale only got to the BTec via dropping out of her A-levels. "Just teenage angst, probably. 'What's the point?' I just really didn't get on with

it. I didn't really have any friends. My mum tried to get me to join the merchant navy."



'Sorry, we don't have time – we're just rolling around in the grass.'

Photograph: Hollie Fernando

Of course, the move was fortuitous, since it was at Isle of Wight College that Teasdale met Chambers, but it wasn't the start of an academic late-flowering. They both went on to start a music degree, drop out and describe it as a disaster. They can smile about it now, but at the time it was terrible (to quote a band they really don't sound anything like). "I found it really hard to reject it," Teasdale says. "I tried to go back again and again, because that's what you're fed as the only option, otherwise you're working a dead-end job. I couldn't see anything beyond that."

Chambers, who has a shy, winning fatalism, says: "I dropped out in the first year, which was sad. I was really bummed out. It's just not what I wanted to put my brain into. I'm not a very academic person."

The visual narrative they create in two of their videos, Chaise Longue and Wet Dream, seems true to type; Teasdale's gaze is direct and challenging, Chambers hides under a hat. It reminds me of something, this anti-going-getting, dropping out, failing again, failing better: the 90s, when not

everyone was on the same conveyor belt, when no one had heard of self-actualisation. Keeping a knowing distance to preserve an essential self used to be a fundamental currency in pop culture, then it fell away. But I really love it.

Both women grew up on the Isle of Wight. Teasdale's parents were "boat people", she says, which makes them sound like yacht owners. In fact, they met in the merchant navy, her father an engineer, her mother ... "I don't actually know what she was doing there." Chambers's parents run a jewellers, where Chambers occasionally still works. "It's such a fantastic job; I really fell into the family business."

They didn't start making music together until after they had given up their degrees, when they were 22 and 23. Chambers says to Teasdale: "For me, it was being in the room with you, another woman, and no boys around. That was the moment when I went: 'Woah, look at us, look at us making music together.'" Teasdale was puzzled that they hadn't started doing it earlier.

The origin story they have settled on is that they made a decision to start a band at the top of a ferris wheel. But I refuse to ask them about that because it's just too [manic pixie dream girl](#) and I don't want to encourage that. They are called Wet Leg because they wanted a name they could spell with emojis. Like a lot of their lyrics, it simultaneously makes sense and doesn't, because those emojis could mean "wet leg" or "tsunami robot" or "rain chicken". Anyway, that brought them to the summer of 2018, when they got a gig on the local stage at the Isle of Wight festival, playing to "one man and his welly boots", Chambers recalls.

"We didn't have enough songs to play a full set," Teasdale says. "A lot of the performance was songs that we wrote in such a short time to fill up the set. Some of them were just silly songs we wrote so we could get a wristband to go in. Some of them didn't survive."

On the attitude this low-stakes period inspired, Chambers adds: "It was fun. We were like: 'Cool. First, pancakes for the dog – let's make some more pancakes.'"

What it wasn't was a clear career path. "I just wanted to do it for the fun of it," says Teasdale. Chambers carried on working in the jeweller's; Teasdale did a season selling ice-cream, then went to London – worked at an ice-rink, did a stint as a wardrobe assistant for adverts.

It wasn't until the pandemic, when they were both back on the island, living with their parents, that they became ambitious in any recognisable sense. Even then, you would only just recognise it.

"It was really sheltered," Chambers says. "It was dreamy, especially if you remember the weather," Teasdale continues. "It was like the school holidays when you're a kid, just thinking: 'Wow, all this time to play around.' We took up longboard dancing and roller skating. I'd say we shut out the outside world." Longboard dancing is as it sounds, dancing on a long skateboard: you have to watch a video to understand how hyper-fey it is, whimsy on stilts.

They were, nevertheless, "productive by accident", Chambers says, working on demos, making the Chaise Longue and Angelica videos, finding a manager via Teasdale's then boyfriend, who sent their demo to people at Domino Records, who wanted to meet them. But "we were just absolutely silly", Chambers says, not without satisfaction. "We were like: 'Sorry, we don't have time – we're just rolling around in the grass doing teddy bear rolls with the guitars.'"

A couple of other labels did manage to persuade them to meet; the pair took them to the Spyglass pub in Ventnor, on the south coast of the island. No offence to the town, which is the indie centre of the island, but this is a brutal way of saying: "We're not really fussed whether we meet you or not" – it doesn't even have a train station. Lovely boozer, though.

They ended up meeting Domino in the end, and signed with them in November 2020, but it wasn't until they played Latitude, one of only a few major festivals to go ahead in 2021, that they realised they were now a legit band. "We turned up, saw Dream Wife about to go on stage, Lucia and the Best Boys, all these really cool people milling about," says Teasdale. "And

we thought: ‘What the hell are we doing here? We’re just little country bumpkins from the Isle of Wight.’



Wet Leg performing in Liverpool in October 2021. Photograph: Zuma Press/Alamy

“It was so unexpected that the tent was so rammed. And, even more unexpectedly, we had people actually dancing. And singing – singing the words to *Chaise Longue* back at us. It was our first time seeing that people had actually listened to it and we’d been in the tiniest little bubble world. It didn’t really compute, initially. It still doesn’t, really.”

Teasdale adjusts the set slightly: “I think we come across as a real band now.” Chambers looks at her, as if to say: “If you like, buddy.”

“We’ve certainly bonded really well as a band,” Teasdale says.

“Yeah,” Chambers finally concedes.

There remain a few known-unknowns. How will their first album, due for release in April, be received? What toll will gigging take once it is fully up and running again, not fits and starts of cancellation and rebooking? Teasdale says: “Playing more shows, we’re meeting a lot of people who are in a similar position to us, and we’ve had some really nice conversations.” I

thought she meant about mediating life's beautiful futility through synth-rock, but it is more concerning: "What to eat when you're on the road that's not a cold Greggs sausage roll. How to pack your suitcase. Stage fright. Mental health."

Chambers is still based in the Isle of Wight, although only technically, as she is not there very much. Teasdale doesn't really know where she lives. They give off the strong sense that, ideally, they would go on a world tour just so they don't have to decide.

But there are also some known-knowns: since they first began, people have really, strongly liked their vibe. That self-effacing but stubborn surrealism, the melodic idiosyncrasy: they have taken their friendship and set it to music.

Wet Leg's UK tour begins on 16 January. For more information, go to wetlegband.com

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2022/jan/10/were-just-little-country-bumpkins-2022s-hottest-band-wet-leg-on-songs-silliness-and-their-surprise-success>

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Interview

Oscar-winning Iranian director Asghar Farhadi: ‘Global recognition is double-edged’

[Steve Rose](#)



Global operator ... Farhadi in Rome. Photograph: Marco Provvisionato/IPA/Rex/Shutterstock

He has been detained at airports and told never to return to Iran. But the director, who could be about to win his third Oscar, refuses to be silenced about outrages in his own country – and in the west

@steverose7

Mon 10 Jan 2022 01.00 EST

Withdrawing your film from the Oscars would be career suicide for most directors, but in November Asghar Farhadi appeared to do precisely that. Shortly after Iran's state-controlled film board put his movie, [A Hero](#), up for the best international feature Oscar, Farhadi released [a statement on Instagram](#) saying he was “fed up” with suggestions in Iranian media that he was sympathetic to the country’s hardline government. “If your introduction of my film for the Oscars has led you to the conclusion that I am in your debt,” he wrote, “I am explicitly declaring now that I have no problem with you reversing this decision.”

Farhadi, it could be argued, can afford to make such a gesture. He has already won two international feature Oscars – for [A Separation in 2012](#) and [The Salesman in 2017](#) – and many more awards besides ([A Hero won the Grand Prix at Cannes last year](#)). Such achievements inevitably convey national hero status. At the same time, he seems to have trodden a careful line when it comes to his country’s oppressive regime. Other Iranian filmmakers, such as Jafar Panahi and Mohammad Rasoulof, have paid a heavy price for criticising aspects of Iranian society, from prison sentences and house arrests to travel bans. Farhadi seems to have been spared similar treatment. Hence the accusations that he was “pro- government”.

In his statement, Farhadi strongly disagreed: “How can anyone associate me with a government whose extremist media has spared no effort to destroy, marginalise, and stigmatise me?” He wrote of how he has had his passport confiscated and been interrogated at airports, been told not to return to [Iran](#), and had remained silent in the face of the government’s “accusations and name-calling”. Until now.



Up for an Academy award ... A Hero, about a father built up, then attacked, by the media. Photograph: New Zealand Film Festival

Speaking from Paris through an interpreter, Farhadi is not minded to go into further details. "It's been a very complicated case," he says. "I'm not sure which translation you've read. For people who are not familiar with my country, it might cause misunderstanding, but Iranian people understood it clearly. It was for domestic purposes only."

There is a certain impatience to Farhadi's tone. He seems resigned to the fact he must always discuss his status as an Iranian film-maker as much as his actual work. But also, perhaps, there is the knowledge that anything he says could be used against him back home. International recognition is "double-edged", he says. "It protects you in a way, but it makes [the Iranian authorities] more sensitive. Whatever you say, whatever you do, it's more under the spotlight."

He has also taken a stand against western extremism, refusing to attend the 2017 Oscars because of Trump's travel ban

Ironically, A Hero is a film about the media's role in building up and tearing down heroes. Its subject is Rahim, a divorced father with a winning smile. On a two-day release from prison, Rahim and his fiancee find a handbag

containing gold coins. At first they try to sell them, but then Rahim, played by Amir Jadidi, opts to find the owner of the bag and return it. The story gets out and Rahim is hailed as a hero. A TV crew comes to make a story about him in prison and a local charity holds a fundraiser to help pay off his debt.

But then a series of half-truths about the incident becomes a tangled web of deceit in which everyone involved finds themselves trapped. “Really,” says Farhadi, “what was at the heart of the film was the sudden rise and fall of a person. And this is something we observe often in our society these days: people who are put under the spotlight very quickly, and they get out of it just as quickly.”

Farhadi’s films have a knack of making ordinary life feel like a suspense thriller. They are so realist, they could be docudramas, yet they are full of tension, surprise and mystery. His breakthrough, *About Elly*, concerns the unexplained disappearance of a woman from a group holiday. The *Salesman* hinges on a woman’s sexual assault by an unidentified perpetrator. Likewise, in *A Hero*, Rahim must seek out the mystery woman who has claimed the missing handbag in order to validate his story (he finds a workaround that lands him in even more trouble).



‘I don’t judge my characters’ ... *A Separation*. Photograph: Artificial Eye/Sportsphoto/Allstar

“What I’m really interested in, and what I want to deal with, is ordinary, everyday life,” explains Farhadi. “This, for me, is precious. But I also know the danger of it being boring and full of repetitive detail nobody wants to focus on. So it has to be lifelike, but with an element of suspense that intrigues the audience.”

As usual in Farhadi’s work, nothing is black and white in *A Hero*. There are no unambiguously “good” or “bad” characters. Behind his easy nature, Rahim turns out to be a slippery proposition. “As a film-maker, I don’t judge the characters,” Farhadi says. “It’s not that I think they should not be judged: quite the opposite – it’s an invitation to judge. But I leave it open to the audience. I don’t want to impose my view.”

Farhadi acknowledges that his films are less overtly political than some of his counterparts’ work. Rasoulof’s recent *There Is No Evil* was an indictment of the death penalty and conscription. Rasoulof, who was banned from film-making and sentenced to a year in prison in 2020 (but has so far avoided jail time), had to use guerrilla tactics, using false names and scripts, while shooting in remote rural locations. Farhadi, by contrast, is now a global operator. He has also made films in France ([The Past](#)) and Spain ([Everybody Knows](#)), starring the likes of Penélope Cruz and Tahar Rahim. In Iran, he explains, it depends what kind of film you are making. “If your subject or your way of telling stories is less directly social or political, then it can be less of a problem. You work with the restrictions as you can. But it also depends on whether you want your films to be screened in Iran or not. That has always been my priority.”

Still, he does not have it easy. As well as being criticised for being “pro-government”, he is constantly criticised for being the opposite. “It’s always from the hardliners and their media – I’ve been criticised for giving an ‘unrealistic image’ of the country. And I really don’t agree. In spite of the complex situations I describe in my films, there’s always a very noble image of the people, of the characters, of the relationships. I don’t see what ‘unrealistic image’ they’re talking about.”

In public life, Farhadi has been outspoken against Iran’s hardline elements. He was one of several film-makers who accompanied Rasoulof to court to appeal against his prison sentence. And, via Instagram, he has made his

views clear to the government about everything from the accidental shooting down of a Ukrainian passenger jet in January 2020 to “the cruel discrimination against women and girls” and “the way the country has allowed coronavirus to slaughter its people”.



‘I’m interested in ordinary, everyday life’ ... *The Salesman*. Photograph: Arte France Cinema/Kobal/Rex/Shutterstock

By the same token, Farhadi has taken a stand against western extremism. [He refused to attend the 2017 Academy Awards](#) in protest at the Trump government’s contentious travel ban against seven Muslim-majority countries, including Iran. His acceptance speech was instead read out by Iranian-American engineer Anousheh Ansari. “Dividing the world into the ‘us’ and ‘our enemies’ categories creates fear, a deceitful justification for aggression and war,” he [wrote](#). He could have been speaking about either the US or Iran.

“There is a strong resemblance in all kinds of extremism,” he says. “They’re more or less all the same.” Farhadi believes culture can be a weapon against that. Regardless of where his films are set, they address universal human qualities and frailties: they create, he says, empathy between the “us” and “them”. That has always been his mission. Does he feel culture is winning

that battle? “I don’t know, but I think there’s an element of time. I think the impact of arts and literature and cinema is a long-term one.”

He seems to have survived this particular battle: A Hero remains Iran’s international feature Oscar submission. Unlike Rahim, the film’s protagonist, Farhadi’s story is neither morally ambiguous nor a rapid rise-and-fall. Does he consider himself a hero? “Not at all,” he says. “I’ve always said that I’m nothing but a film-maker. I don’t want to be anything else.”

A Hero is in UK cinemas.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2022/jan/10/extremist-media-tried-destroy-me-oscar-winning-iranian-director-asghar-farhadi>

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Gadgets

Best baby monitor cameras for travel or home

From low-cost to do-it-all systems, here are the best wireless, wifi and smartphone-connected options



Baby monitors with cameras come in various shapes, sizes, prices and capabilities, so we put nine of the best to the test to find out which ones deliver. Composite: Guardian Design/Owlet/Kodak/Motorola/Nanit

[Grace Holliday](#)

Mon 10 Jan 2022 02.00 EST

Whether you have a newborn or know someone who does, a good baby monitor can be both freeing and reassuring, helping keep an eye on the little ones as they rest.

But with so many to choose from with varying brands, capabilities and prices, it can be hard to know which work best in practice. So we put nine of the best baby cameras to the test across three different categories for travel or home. Here are the ones that delivered.

Best wifi-free camera for travel

Babysense V43 split-screen monitor



The Babysense V43 split-screen monitor baby camera. Photograph: Babysense

Price: [£139.99](#)

With a sturdy parent unit and two cameras for split-screen capabilities, the Babysense V43 performs impressively pretty much across the board. The parent unit is user-friendly with responsive buttons and a logical, well-labelled menu. The built-in lullabies are a little old-fashioned and tinny, and while it displays room temperature it does not show the time. The Babysense is wifi-free, making it safe from remote hackers. Its 300-metre wireless range means the parent unit, which can be used on battery or mains, can be taken outside ready for warmer months. Notably, none of these features waned or stalled when two cameras were connected during testing.

Settings for each camera can be tailored individually, and switching between camera feeds is almost instantaneous. Up to four cameras can be used with one parent unit with additional purchases. The battery lasts about 10 hours in eco-mode, which pauses sound and video on the parent unit if the camera detects no sound for 30 seconds. A spare or replacement battery costs £5.99.

The base of each camera has a pleasant orange night light, while the lens pans, swivels 360 degrees and zooms quickly and smoothly. The motor, while not silent, did not disturb a sleeping baby. Panning is controlled via the parent unit, meaning there is no need to fiddle with camera angles once initial setup is complete. The cameras can be wall-mounted using the screws and wall plugs included, but easily lifted away for travel purposes.

Many monitors designed with travel and flexibility in mind sacrifice screen size, but that is not the case here. The 5in screen has good picture quality, which is extra clear when close up to faces or objects. There is no delay in movement or audio on the unit, although two-way talk mode sounds somewhat walkie-talkie-esque. There's no need to worry about software updates as there is no app, which also makes the Babysense a smart option for those looking to avoid checking their phones during the night too.

Verdict: A comprehensive package that offers genuine flexibility, with smooth panning, speedy connection and an impressive range without the need for wifi.

Runner-up: VTECH VM3254



The Vtech VM3254 baby monitor camera. Photograph: Vtech

Price: £50

The VTECH VM3254 offers a compact, wifi-free package, making it suitable for travel, and the picture quality is good, particularly close up. The talk function, however, is far too quiet and the button layout on the parent unit isn't particularly easy to navigate. Our runner-up, the VTech VM3254 is still an excellent option for the price, but note the battery cannot be replaced and it is not repairable.

Best wifi camera for home

Kodak Cherish C525



The Kodak Cherish C525 baby monitor camera. Photograph: Kodak

Price: [£159.99](#)

This baby monitor [may not be made by the Kodak of old](#), but at least it lives up to picture quality of the brand name. Via either phone app or parent unit with 5in screen, the Cherish C525 displays not just the baby's features or silhouette, but even subtle facial expressions during the day with lifelike colour, which cannot be said for competitors. Night mode is also excellent, while movement and audio come through with minimal delay and the two-way-talk sound is crisp.

Not only does the camera zoom and swivel 360 degrees at an almost imperceptible volume, the parent unit can handle split-screen viewing with up to five paired cameras with additional purchases. There is a fair selection of pleasant-enough lullabies, white noise and heartbeat sounds, plus room temperature monitoring.

Special milestones and events can be captured and stored either on an SD card or in the cloud. The [Kodak smart home app for Android or iPhone](#) is easy to navigate and intuitive but the parent unit is less so. While the keyboard can be backlit, which is handy for night-time check-ins, its icons are not labelled and the buttons are fiddly, so you need to learn how to

navigate it efficiently. Despite this drawback, the parent unit, antennae and handy flip-stand are sturdy, and the device is neither fragile nor too heavy.

It has two factor authentication for extra security when accessing the app and requests authentication if you attempt to log in from a different location than usual. Alternatively, the camera and parent unit – though not the app – can be used without an internet connection. Out of the house, both the camera and parent unit can run on battery power for a few hours. The units are generally repairable and replacement batteries are widely available too. [Kodak](#) will support apps for the Cherish for a minimum of three years after the model is discontinued.

Verdict: Outstanding picture quality sets this monitor above the rest, while most additional features are well executed.

Runner-up: [Motorola](#) VM65X Connect video baby monitor



The Motorola VM65X Connect baby monitor camera. Photograph: Motorola

Price: [£249.99](#)

With stylish rose gold detailing on the parent unit, a sleek camera and a sturdy over-cot stand, the Motorola is an attractive package. However, it is more expensive, the picture quality is less sharp, the colours are not as true

and there is a slight crackle to the voice when speaking to the baby. The battery can't be replaced either.

The best premium system

Nanit Pro



The Nanit Pro smart baby monitor camera. Photograph: Nanit

Price: [£299](#)

The Nanit Pro's 1080p HD camera, app and breathing band is a comprehensive and well-executed baby monitoring system for parents who wish to cover every possible base. There is no parent unit, but the app is efficient and streamlined making checking in on the baby easy.

The camera's stream goes live in the app within 3 seconds with little in the way of delay, and switches between day and night mode automatically. The camera has a good zoom and field of view over the cot but does not swivel. That means there is no disruptive motor to worry about, and as it will be either attached to a wall or floor stand (£80 additional purchase) it won't get knocked over by rambunctious pets or other children. As for security, Nanit encrypts your data, protects accounts with two-step verification and has

various settings for controlling when and who can see the feed from the camera.

The app shows room temperature and humidity, while five buttons allow users to quickly snap a photo, play music, white noise, birds or wave sounds, listen to or talk to the baby and switch on a nightlight.

The nightlight is particularly good. It shines upwards with adjustable brightness so you can see the cot and immediate surroundings without disturbing the baby or others in the room. The Nanit comes with a year of basic “Insights” including special milestones and memory videos, sleep tracking and quality analysis, and breathing monitoring using a soft, electronic-free band wrapped around the baby’s torso, which sounds an alarm if an issue arises. Insights are only stored for two days, which costs [£5 a month after the first year](#) or £10 a month for 30-day storage. One breathing band for babies up to 15kgs is included, and swaddles or pyjamas for older children are available. The camera is repairable and the app is available on a wide range of Android, iOS and iPadOS devices.

Verdict: A comprehensive, efficient system that fulfils its myriad promises to reassure even the most anxious of parents.

Runner-up: Owlet Baby Monitor Duo



The Owlet Baby Monitor Duo camera. Photograph: Owlet

Price: [£389](#)

The Owlet is as sophisticated as the Nanit in many ways, with a sleek camera, excellent picture quality and user-friendly app. But it uses a “smart sock” to monitor breathing and oxygen levels, which children could disturb or kick off, sounding the alarm and terrifying parents in the process. There is also a noticeable delay in both the video and sound in comparison with the Nanit too, and while replacement parts are available the batteries cannot be replaced and the devices are not repairable.

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Health policy

UK government urges all pregnant women to get immediate Covid jab

Campaign comes as figures show almost all expectant mothers hospitalised with coronavirus symptoms were unvaccinated

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The government is highlighting that Covid vaccines are safe for pregnant women and have no impact on fertility. Photograph: NoSystem images/Getty Images

PA Media

Sun 9 Jan 2022 19.01 EST

The UK government is warning that almost all pregnant women admitted to hospital with Covid symptoms were unvaccinated in one analysis over several months last year, as it kicks off an advertising campaign encouraging expectant mothers to get boosted.

The campaign is calling on pregnant women not to wait to get either their first, second or booster jab. It will highlight the risks of Covid-19 to mothers and babies, with testimonies of pregnant women who have had the vaccine to be broadcast on radio and social media.

The government says it has been clear, along with medical experts and institutions, that Covid-19 vaccines are safe for pregnant women and have no impact on fertility.

The Department of Health and Social Care cited statistics from the UK Obstetric Surveillance System which showed 96.3% of pregnant women admitted to hospital with Covid-19 symptoms between May and October were unvaccinated, a third of whom required respiratory support.

About 20% of women admitted to hospital with the virus need to be delivered pre-term to help them recover, and 20% of their babies need care in the neonatal unit, the Department of Health and Social Care said.

Since April 2021, about 84,000 pregnant women have received one dose and more than 80,000 have received two doses of the Covid-19 vaccine, the department said.

Dr Jen Jardine, from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, who is seven months pregnant and has had her Covid-19 booster jab, said: “Both as a doctor and pregnant mother myself, we can now be very confident that the Covid-19 vaccinations provide the best possible protection for you and your unborn child against this virus.

“I would strongly call on all pregnant women like me, if you haven’t had the vaccine yet, to either speak to your GP or midwife if you still have questions and then book right away today.”

Prof Lucy Chappell, the chief scientific adviser to the DHSC, said: “Getting a Covid-19 vaccine is one of the most important things a pregnant woman can do this year to keep herself and her baby as safe from this virus as possible.

“We have extensive evidence now to show that the vaccines are safe and that the risks posed by Covid-19 are far greater.

“If you haven’t had your Covid-19 vaccine, I would urge you to speak to your clinician or midwife if you have any questions or concerns, and book in your vaccine as soon as you can.”

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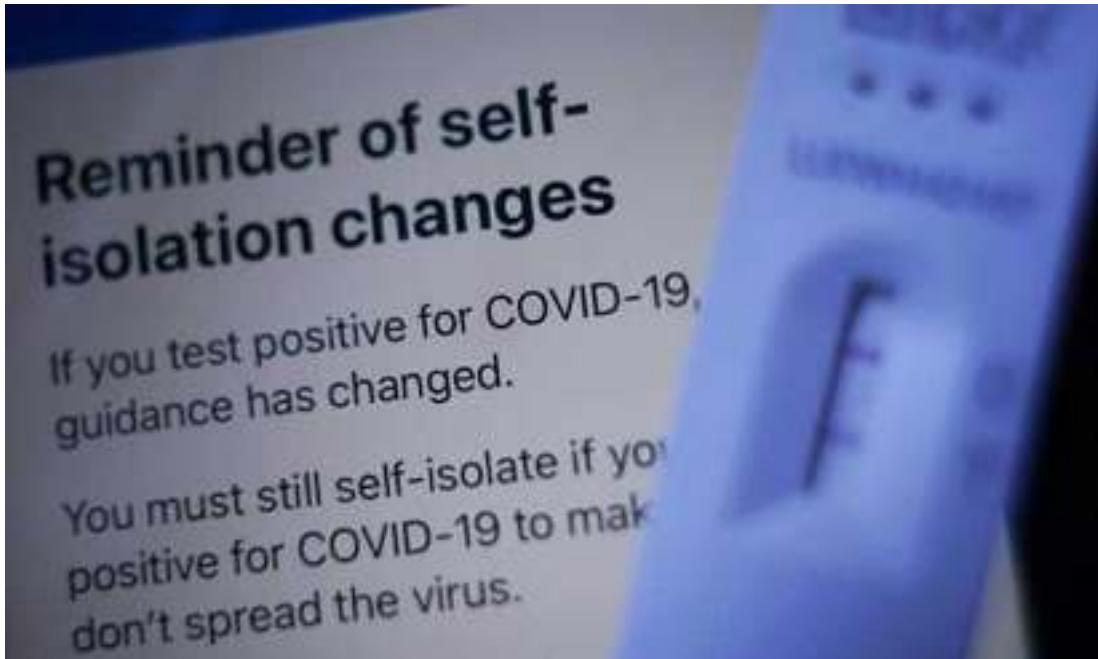
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Coronavirus

‘Living with Covid’ does not have to mean ditching all protective measures

Analysis: reports and denials that free LFTs will be axed highlight gulf in opinions on how to move forward

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Wherever your instincts lie, it is not surprising – or even undesirable – that the mass testing of asymptomatic people is being reviewed. Photograph: Yui Mok/PA

Hannah Devlin Science correspondent
@hannahdev

Sun 9 Jan 2022 13.39 EST

Reports on Sunday that [free lateral flow tests could be axed](#) under a strategy of living with Covid within weeks were met with a swift backlash. The government promptly [denied the suggestion](#) that free tests could soon be scrapped.

The story highlights a gulf in opinions on what “living with Covid” might look like, with some saying we will achieve this only through continued caution and others equating the phrase to ditching all Covid measures and partying like it’s 2019.

Wherever your instincts lie, it is not surprising – or even undesirable – that the mass testing of asymptomatic people is being reviewed.

The policy was rapidly brought in at a time when, faced with a new, highly infectious variant of unknown virulence, it made sense to throw everything we had at Omicron to slow down transmission and to minimise disruption caused by essential workers having to self-isolate. With case numbers wildly outstripping the UK’s laboratory testing capacity, lateral flow tests continue to be vital for tracking case numbers.

However, these tests are not ultimately “free”. More than £6bn in public funding has been spent on lateral flow test kits. As the Omicron wave recedes, the use of lateral flow tests needs to be justified as part of a wider public health policy. Undoubtedly, the tests pick up some cases that would have gone under the radar. They also provide reassurance to people.

However, we need much better real-world evidence on the most effective way to target testing. It is likely that this would continue to include screening healthcare workers and carers of vulnerable people. It is not clear, in the future, that it would extend to people routinely monitoring themselves before attending social events.

Some question why the government is even thinking about how we can “live with Covid” in the same week that [case numbers have hit record highs](#). But mapping out the path to normality does not have to equate to misguided optimism that we have already arrived at this destination.

In advice given in November, before the emergence of Omicron, Sage scientists predicted it would take “at least five years” for Covid-19 to settle into an endemic state and that this path would be critically dependent on factors such as the rate of waning of immunity and chosen policies on vaccination and surveillance. Active management would be required for at least the next five years, during which time there would remain a realistic risk of “epidemics of sufficient size to overwhelm health and care services”, they said.

While five years may sound disappointingly distant, the advice also reminds us that we are not powerless in steering our course and that, as time goes on, the uncertainties will decrease. We know now, for instance, that immunity against severe illness appears to be holding up well and that second boosters will not be immediately necessary. Within the next few months, it will become clear whether we can hold off until the autumn, which would bring Covid boosters roughly in line with annual flu jabs.

“Living with Covid” does not have to mean reversing every protective measure. If better ventilation and face masks reduce the impact of winter respiratory illnesses, that is a positive, even if the NHS is no longer under imminent threat of being overwhelmed. We will also need to remain vigilant about the threat from new variants, which could still cause big setbacks. There is no guarantee that another variant, more infectious and more virulent than Omicron, could emerge in the future. Scientists say that supporting global vaccination efforts will be crucial to securing the path to normality.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/09/living-with-covid-does-not-have-to-mean-ditching-all-protective-measures>

[Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#)

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez announces positive Covid test

- Progressive congresswoman ‘experiencing symptoms’
- Office says political star had booster vaccine shot last year



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez speaks in Washington. Photograph: Will Oliver/EPA

[Martin Pengelly](#) in New York

[@MartinPengelly](#)

Sun 9 Jan 2022 18.34 EST

The Democratic congresswoman [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#) has tested positive for Covid-19.

In a [statement](#) on Sunday evening, the office of the New York progressive said she was “experiencing symptoms and recovering at home.

“The congresswoman received her booster shot this fall and encourages everyone to get their booster and follow all Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance”.

New York is experiencing a huge surge of Covid cases linked to the Omicron variant, placing strain on hospitals and public health resources.

The city has posted high rates of vaccination.

Earlier, in [an interview on Fox News Sunday](#), the director of the CDC, Rochelle Walensky, was asked about the severity of the Omicron variant compared to the Delta variant.

Walensky said: “We are starting to see data [from other countries](#) that indicate on a person-by-person basis it may not be. However, given the volume of cases that we’re seeing with Omicron we very well may see death rates rise dramatically.”

According to Johns Hopkins University, [more than 837,000 people](#) have died of Covid-19 in the US. About two-thirds of the eligible population is considered fully vaccinated but resistance to public health measures stoked by conservative politicians and media has dogged the federal response.

Walensky also emphasised the importance of vaccination and booster shots, saying: “We have seen with the [Omicron variant](#) that prior infection protects you less well than it had … with prior variants.

“Right now, I think the most important thing to do is to protect Americans. We do that by getting them vaccinated and getting them boosted.”

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The Colston Four's critics are deluded to think Britain owes no apology for its past

[Nesrine Malik](#)

The idea that figures such as Colston are remote characters from our history ignores their impact on our present



‘The Colston statue topplers are the ones trying to drag Britain’s view of itself closer to reality.’ Protesters throw a statue of Edward Colston into Bristol harbour in June 2020. Photograph: Ben Birchall/PA

Mon 10 Jan 2022 01.00 EST

It was inevitable, but the speed with which it happened was still surprising. After the four protesters who toppled the statue of Edward Colston then helped to heave it into the harbour were [acquitted](#), Conservative MPs, the

rightwing press and the prime minister himself unleashed their volley of rage at the verdict. “[Vandals can’t change our history](#),” postured Boris Johnson on the front page of the Daily Mail. A “[green light to ransack the past](#)” said the Sun. “[A monumental mistake](#)” punned the Telegraph, weakly.

If one were a cynic, one would think that the newspaper stories, the statements and the tweets were all sitting in draft form, waiting to be posted, emailed and published. The responses were so rehearsed, so obtuse and so optimised for a polarising landing, that the issue seemed less about Colston’s statue and more about their rigid vision of Britain, a country that – in their eyes – has done no wrong, that owes no apology and should show no humility.

Certainly that seemed to be the motivation of Suella Braverman, the attorney general. For as soon as the media screams died down, she made clear her distaste at the trial’s outcome – predicated, lest we forget, on the decision of a properly convened jury of her fellow citizens – by [threatening](#) to refer the matter to the appeal court. There was “confusion”, she said. We needed “to clarify the law for future cases”. Clarity, one might suggest, that would better protect that never-to-be-questioned version of Britain.

But that version of Britain, in which figures such as Colston are remote characters from the past who have no bearing on our lives today, is a fiction. The Colston statue topplers, and the Black Lives Matter protesters in general, are the ones trying to drag Britain’s view of itself closer to reality, one in which community relations are still strained as a result of deep inequalities that run, like cracks, from the past to the present.

Maintaining fictions is hard work, so an army of propagandists must mobilise to spin, yarn and stitch together the lies that make up this permitted view of British history. One that displays the iconography of slavery and of empire in our public spaces and consciousness.

The narrative that frames the Colston statue incident – and indeed all arguments about British history – is spun broadly around the clash of two schools of thought. One, an innocent, stoic, impartial one, not invested in any particular ideological narrative, and another that is aggressive and politically motivated. According to this construct, Colston stood peacefully,

undisturbed by campaigns to remove or maintain him for years until some protesters, in a rush of blood, tore him down. In this world of neutral arbiters and wild vandals, we are led to believe that Colston was toppled by people who do not trade in logic, and have no respect for dialogue, or interest in peaceful resolution.

The truth is that the protesters were motivated by frustration. All the peaceful avenues were exhausted, because those who kept Colston up were pugnaciously committed to the elevation of a statue of a slave trader, rather than considering what he represents in a modern Britain that is as delusional about the moral integrity of its colonial heroes as it is about the health of its race and ethnic relations.

It is a trick that is constantly played by those who view British history as an objective and inoffensive series of facts that must be preserved for the record, rather than a living legacy of supremacy, both racial and national, that many are still invested in, and that still resides not just in our streets and squares but in our politics, our education and our economy. Most crucially when it comes to Colston's statue, it resides in our government.

There is no better example of how quickly history is rewritten to suit the establishment than the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020. What seemed like a moment of profound change was quickly miscast as the opposite, a marker in the sand for what happens when demands for racial equality are taken too far, when they become violent, militant and vandalistic. In that framing, there can be no place for the reality that Colston's name was already being expunged from Bristol's public spaces, a process that was citizen-campaign-led, consensual and consultative. There had been frequent rows dragging in historians, schoolchildren, councillors, the mayor and Bristol's Society of Merchant Venturers – the guild and body that is accused of creating Bristol's “cult of Colston”. And yet the council says it never considered removing the statue despite “significant community concerns”.

This is what we continually fail to understand about the importance of reappraising our history: friction arises not from “woke vandals” but from a state that clings, despite all entreaty and evidence, to a glorification of a past that reinforces and legitimises all the injustices of the present.

If those in the government and the media who are so critical of the toppling of Colston were really interested in forging a state of community cohesion, they would acknowledge the moral sins that built Britain's wealth and empire – past cruelties that still reverberate across social mobility, life expectancy and job prospects. Instead, they fan the flames of a hysterical moral panic that claims the toppling of Colston was about destroying historical fact, rather than being a victory for that truth they work so hard to deny.

We will only move forward when the organs of government, from Downing Street to local councils to education boards, resolve to take people's demands seriously. Otherwise the state, which has now been unmasked as a partisan mediator through its intransigence in Bristol, loses all legitimacy and therefore control. That really would be, as Conservative MPs describe it, [a licence to vandalise](#).

- Nesrine Malik is a Guardian columnist. She has won an inaugural [2021 Silvers-Dudley prize](#) for literary criticism, arts writing and journalism
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[**Guardian Opinion cartoon**](#)

[Bristol](#)

Ben Jennings on the Tories' statue sorrow – cartoon

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OpinionWorking from home

Working from home has entrenched inequality – how can we use it to improve lives instead?

[John Harris](#)



Many people face longer hours and constant surveillance. But more flexibility could bring long-term benefits



‘Big companies too often try to offload responsibility and risk on to fragile individuals.’ Illustration: Matt Kenyon/The Guardian

Sun 9 Jan 2022 09.00 EST

It was Omicron that did it. Up until early December, office workers in England seemed to be steadily returning to their desks. But once the new variant had arrived, a change that had been taking shape since the Covid crisis started suddenly felt irresistible. Back-to-the-office schedules [were binned](#), more companies announced long-term plans for so-called hybrid employment split between homes and workplaces, and there it was: a quiet revolution, whose consequences will unfold over the next year and beyond.

Home and hybrid working has been embraced by a [long list](#) of tech companies that includes Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Spotify and dozens more. Something similar seems to be happening in the financial sector. In the UK, [18m sq ft](#) of office space has been vacated since the start of the pandemic. In the past year, in such places as Derby, Southampton and the London borough of Brent around 20% of offices have been taken out of use, and there are projections that between now and 2027, one in 10 British offices will no longer be needed.

For all the government's wishful thinking about a [looming return](#) to pre-Covid normality, this looks like deep, era-defining change. Talk to people in trade unions, and you get a sense of a new frontier that demands urgent and careful attention. At the union Unite, for example, they are working on a [detailed template](#) for home working agreements, designed to minimise the risk of isolation, "stress and depression" and "health and safety risks from working in an unsuitable environment". So far, though, any political debate about what is happening has reduced everything to yet another instalment of the culture wars. The [right seems to see](#) any move away from the traditional workplace as a [mortal threat](#) to both the economy and our moral wellbeing, while more [liberal voices](#) glimpse something almost utopian: liberation from the daily commute, increased productivity, more family time. What both sides tend to ignore are massive issues about inequality, what work actually involves, and the way that big companies too often try to offload responsibility and risk on to fragile individuals.

For a start, only a minority of us are actually able to work from home (WFH). In April 2020, the Office for National Statistics put the figure [at 46%](#), although the number varied wildly across the UK: 57% of Londoners said they were able to do at least some work at home, whereas the figure in the West Midlands was 35%. In that context, even if home working ushers some of those who do it into an idyll of autonomy and holistic living, it threatens to make the class divisions that the pandemic widened both permanent and huge.

Other questions centre on the people who now do at least some of their work not far from where they sleep. If you live alone, WFH may well represent both a degree of freedom and a snatching-away of human interaction. For young people at the start of their working lives, not being in an office will probably entail two kinds of disadvantage: being cut adrift from the collective workplace experiences that allow people to find their professional feet, and not having the domestic space to do your job effectively. There is, needless to say, clear evidence of how traditional gender roles affect home working: in American research done by the [management consultants McKinsey](#), 79% of men said they experienced "positive work effectiveness" at home, compared with only 37% of women. Whoever you are, moreover, there is a good chance that WFH will have [increased your hours](#): research during the first global lockdown found that for 3 million remote workers

around the world, the average working day had increased by 8.2%, or nearly 50 minutes.

The American writers Charlie Warzel and Anne Helen Petersen recently published [Out of Office](#), an exhaustive but very readable book about the upsides and drawbacks of working from home. Its central contention, partly based on their experience of leaving behind office jobs in New York and attempting a new life in Montana, is that working remotely can “remove you from the wheel of constant productivity”, as well as turning you into “a better friend and partner”. The big problem, as they see it, is that far too many employers have quickly built a model of home working on workplace cultures that emphasise long hours, the kind of camaraderie that quickly turns painful, and close monitoring of what people do. They cite the comedian [Kevin Farzad’s observation](#) that “if an employer ever says, ‘we’re like family here’ what they mean is they’re going to ruin you psychologically”. Allow those attitudes into people’s domestic environment, and you risk “the total collapse of work-life balance”.

To understand that point, forget any visions of high-powered people flitting between the city and country and hosting Zoom meetings in their summerhouses. Instead, think about call-centre work, which was being [pushed into people’s homes](#) long before the pandemic. Here, you see not just the connections to be drawn between home working and bogus self-employment, but a new world of remote worker surveillance. In March last year, [the Guardian reported](#) on the multinational call centre company Teleperformance, and software built around webcams in home-workers’ laptops. “If the system detects no keyboard stroke and mouse click, it will show you as idle for that particular duration, and it will be reported to your supervisor,” said one set of instructions.

“If you don’t talk about power in the workplace, you’re not going to get this right,” says Andrew Pakes, a deputy general secretary of the white-collar union Prospect. From this basic point, everything follows. We fixate on home working, when we really should begin with flexibility: irrespective of where they work, the chance for people to start and finish at times of their choosing, carve out free time and ensure holidays complement the other aspects of their lives. Companies ought to pay much more attention to the needs of new recruits – pairing them with dedicated mentors, ensuring they

have the option of spending all or most of their working hours in a workplace, allowing them to join a trade union. For all employees, there ought to be both an entitlement to collective representation, and the kind of right to disconnect – to not have to deal with emails, calls and messages outside working hours – that has been adopted in France, Italy and Spain, and is now tentatively supported – for public sector staff at least – by the SNP-led government in Edinburgh.

Somewhere in all that might be the beginnings of home and hybrid working that could actually improve people's lives. The danger of the weary, punch-drunk mood of early 2022 is that indifference and fatalism will set in, and we will end up sleepwalking into a post-pandemic reality that no one wants. Amid grief, disruption and huge changes to our everyday experiences, the future has arrived: not just of work, but all the other aspects of life that it touches. When do we start doing something about it?

- John Harris is a Guardian columnist
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OpinionPsychology

Why can't we stop scrolling or eating Haribo? Blame the lizard brain

[Eli Goldstone](#)

My life is a constant struggle against the primitive part of my brain – and the forces designed to exploit it



‘I visualise my reptilian brain quite literally as the lizard-like baby from *Eraserhead*.’ Photograph: Photo 12/Alamy

Sun 9 Jan 2022 07.00 EST

I experience frequent, urgent cravings for very specific things and act on them immediately. As soon as I open my eyes I often know exactly what I want: to wear a particular little outfit, buy a sandwich of a certain heft and filling from *this* shop in *this* postcode, eat it (for instance) on a bench under a tree. It’s a shame that the place in me capable of conjuring these whims also regularly churns out other, much more boring urges, and occasionally

dangerous ones too. My brain is a constant game of Hungry Hungry Hippos, my dopamine receptors snapping noisily at an alarming rate, urging me to do things that actually bring me very little pleasure at all. Why do I want things that don't make me feel good? I'm at the mercy of my lizard brain and the mechanisms of society designed to exploit it.

The concept of the three-tiered brain – a primitive reptilian brain nestled like a living fossil in the clay of our most recently evolved, superior brains, [was proposed in the 1960s](#) by the neuroscientist Paul MacLean. Its scientific credulity holds about as much significance to me as that of the astrology app that sends me notifications each morning – it just provides a structure for me to think about my habits and how to change them. In short, the reptilian brain is the most primitive part of the brain. I visualise it quite literally as the [lizard-like baby from *Eraserhead*](#), mewling and requiring constant attention from the other parts of the brain, the parts that have evolved over 10m years to quieten its cries.

The less regulated this part of the brain is, the more regrettable the desires. We are generally more capable of regulating these desires as we grow out of childhood, although for some people – myself included – it is harder than others. Desires can run away with themselves, and become all-consuming, without us really noticing. The caterpillar that simply wants a lovely apple on Monday is the same caterpillar that wants two pears on Tuesday, three plums on Wednesday, four strawberries on Thursday, five oranges on Friday and then, inevitably, a piece of chocolate cake, ice-cream, a pickle, Swiss cheese, salami, a lollipop, cherry pie, a sausage, a cupcake and a slice of watermelon on Saturday.

Giving in to our reptilian desires has been encouraged, rebranded as a sort of self-care both by a society that wants us to consume and those of us who enjoy consuming with impunity. But often we are simply experiencing anxiety dressed up as hedonism. If you have experience of any kind of addiction, this is obvious. Saying yes to every desire that occurs to us seems quirky and fun if it involves dyeing your hair orange and eating too many Haribo, but a little less so if instead what you're doing is climbing into a stranger's car to buy cocaine. The truth is though, cravings and their related behaviours don't have to involve life-destroying habits to rob us of joy. I may no longer lose days of my life to bingeing booze and drugs, but the

same lack of impulse control insidiously robs me of my time. I, like the majority of people, pick up my phone over and over again and open apps that I've just closed, scrolling and refreshing without agency. How did my phone even get into my hand? I watch reality TV instead of the films that I've been meaning to watch for years because my lizard brain tells me that it will feel good: instead what it often feels like is closer to nothing. It urges me to do things that require little energy and, in return, provide little in the way of reward.

Dopamine controls our desire for things, but it isn't cognitive. It isn't that it doesn't know what's good for us – it doesn't even know what we actually enjoy. To submit to these desires and consider that submission as an act of self-care is extremely misguided. Our lizard brain doesn't know what we like doing, and it doesn't care. It has very little purpose and succeeds, ultimately, only to make a noise annoying enough to distract us from what we originally set out to do.

So how can I want what actually brings me joy? How can I quiet the Eraserhead baby – which nobody is convinced is actually a baby at all but instead simply various unhappinesses, swaddled – and reach for the things that provide lasting joy and satisfaction? If only I knew. We are taught to want, but not too much. We are rewarded for consuming, but judged for taking more than our fair share. It is a strange thing to navigate a world that encourages and shames us for the same behaviours, and difficult not to assign moral value to our urges – to categorise each desire as either good or bad. Instead I focus on remembering times when I have felt calm and fulfilled – not the sweet little drip, drip, drip of dopamine throughout the day but the deep, quiet satisfaction at the end of a difficult task, or a long journey with something beautiful at the end of it. Of course, it's not about one or the other. Thankfully for me. I will try to live life mindfully, to create long-term goals, etc – but ultimately I will always serve my lizard-brain king.

- Eli Goldstone is the author of *Strange Heart Beating*
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New York

Fire in Bronx building leaves 19 people dead, including nine children

- More than five dozen people injured and 13 in critical condition
- City fire commissioner says space heater caused the blaze

01:28

'The numbers are horrific': New York City apartment building fire kills 19 – video

[Ed Pilkington](#) and agencies in New York

[@edpilkington](#)

Sun 9 Jan 2022 18.04 EST

Nineteen people including nine children were killed in an apartment fire in the Bronx in [New York](#) on Sunday, one of the worst fire disasters in the city in 30 years.

Thirteen people remained hospitalised in critical condition, authorities said late on Sunday afternoon. In all, more than five dozen were hurt.

Authorities said the fire was caused by a space heater in a duplex apartment.

01:05

Bronx fire: baby rescued from burning New York building – video

Eric Adams, the mayor who is [in his first days in the job](#), said: "The numbers are horrific. This is a horrific, painful moment for the city of New York. The impact of this fire is going to really bring a level of pain and despair in our city."

“This is going to be one of the worst fires that we have witnessed during modern times.”

More than 200 firefighters fought the blaze, at a 120-unit, 19-storey building on East 181st Street known as Twin Parks.

The fire commissioner, Dan Nigro, said the fire started shortly before 11am in a duplex on the second and third floors and spewed smoke through the building because a door was left open.



Emergency personnel from the New York fire department provide medical aid. Photograph: Lloyd Mitchell/Reuters

Nigro said firefighters “found victims on every floor in stairwells and were taking them out in respiratory and cardiac arrest. That is unprecedented in our city.”

Almost all victims suffered smoke inhalation, not burns.

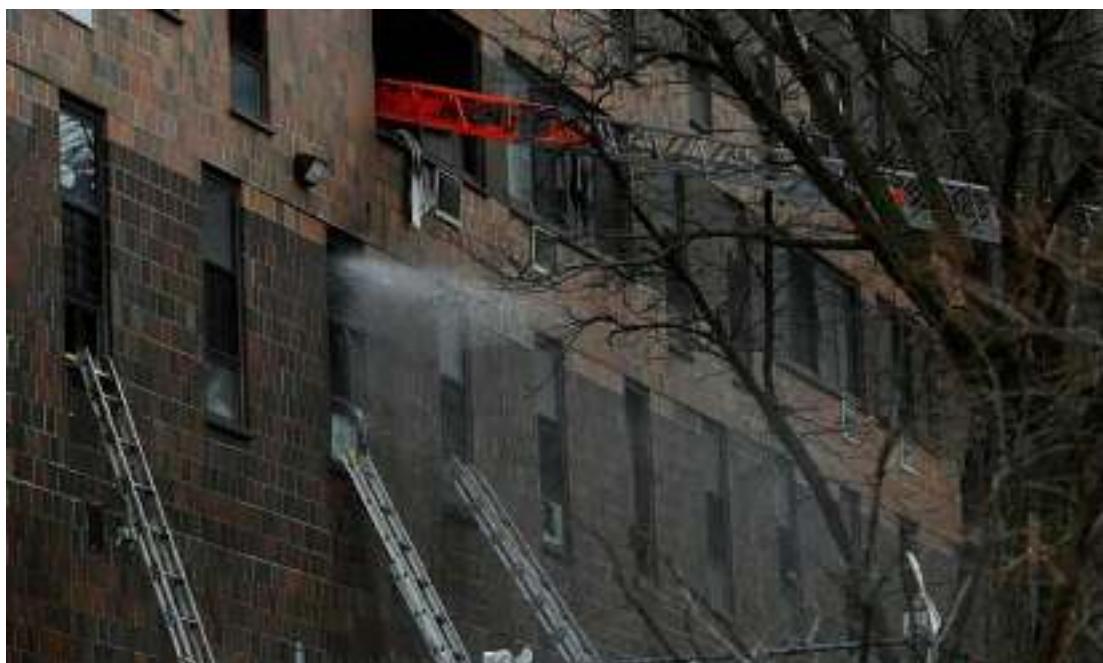
“This fire took its toll on our city,” Nigro said, comparing the blaze to the Happy Land social club fire, [which killed 87 in 1990](#).

News photographs showed firefighters entering the upper floors of the burning building on ladders, children being given oxygen after being carried out and evacuees with faces covered in soot.

At an early evening press conference, Nigro said evidence and witness testimony confirmed that the fire “started in a malfunctioning electric space heater … the fire consumed that apartment that is on two floors and part of the hallway. The door to that apartment unfortunately when the residents left was left open, it did not close by itself.”

Central heating was on in the building, Nigro said, and smoke alarms functioned. Some residents could not escape simply because of the volume of smoke, he said.

Nigro also said “there was at least one door open from the stairwell to a floor, one of the upper floors. Smoke and heat travels upwards.”



Firefighters' ladders are seen at the apartment building. Photograph: Lloyd Mitchell/Reuters

Adams said a number of immigrants, many from Gambia, were caught up in the fire.

“This is a heavy immigrant community,” Adams said. “And we want to make sure the residents know that if you need assistance your names will not be turned over to ICE [Immigration Customs Enforcement], any other institution. We want people to be comfortable coming forward.”

Some residents said they initially ignored wailing smoke alarms because false alarms were so common in the building.

“It seems like today they went off but the people didn’t pay attention,” said Jose Henriquez, an immigrant from the Dominican Republic who lives on the 10th floor. He said he and his family stayed, wedging a wet towel beneath the door once they realised the smoke in the halls would overpower them if they tried to flee.

Another resident, Cristal Diaz, 27, told the New York Post she was drinking coffee when she smelled smoke.

“We started putting water on towels and the bottom of the door,” she said. “Everything was crazy. We didn’t know what to do. We looked out the windows and saw all the dead bodies they were taking with the blankets.”

Sandra Clayton said she grabbed her dog Mocha and ran for her life when she saw the hallway fill with smoke and heard people screaming “Get out! Get out!”.



A fire department ambulance at the scene.

Photograph: Xinhua/REX/Shutterstock

Clayton, 61, said she groped her way down a darkened stairway, clutching Mocha. The smoke was so black she couldn't see, but she could hear neighbours wailing and crying nearby.

"I just ran down the steps as much as I could but people was falling all over me, screaming," she said from a hospital where she was treated for smoke inhalation.

In the commotion, her dog slipped from her grasp and was later found dead in the stairwell.

Another resident, Luis Rosa, said he was woken by a fire alarm but thought it was false. But when a notification popped up on his phone, he and his mother began to worry. By then, smoke began wafting into his 13th-floor apartment. He heard sirens in the distance. He said he opened the front door but the smoke had gotten too thick for an escape.

"Once I opened the door, I couldn't even see that far down the hallway," Rosa told the Associated Press. "So I said, OK, we can't run down the stairs

because if we run down the stairs, we're going to end up suffocating. All we could do was wait."

Another resident, Vernessa Cunningham, 60, said she raced home from church.

"I couldn't believe what I was seeing," Cunningham said from a nearby school where residents gathered. "I was in shock. I could see my apartment. The windows were all busted out. And I could see flames coming from the back of the building."



New York fire department chief Daniel Nigro beside mayor Eric Adams (second from left) at a media briefing in front of the building after the blaze. Photograph: Lev Radin/Pacific Press/REX/Shutterstock

The building dated from 1972, Nigro said, and was part of a project to provide modern, affordable housing.

Ritchie Torres, who represents the area in Congress, told the AP: "There's no guarantee that there's a working fire alarm in every apartment or in every common area. Most of these buildings have no sprinkler system. And so the housing stock of the Bronx is much more susceptible to devastating fires than most of the housing stock in the city."

The fire comes just days after [a house fire in Philadelphia left 12 dead](#), including eight children. That was the deadliest fire at a US apartment building since 2017, when 13 people died [in the Bronx](#). That fire started when a three-year-old boy played with stove burners.

Adams praised the “men and women who went in this building, these firefighters. Their oxygen tanks were empty, and they still pushed through the smoke. You can’t do this if you don’t feel attached to the city, this community, and I really want to thank them for putting their lives on the line to save lives.”

Kathy Hochul, the governor of New York, visited the school where residents gathered.

“We are indeed a city in shock,” she said. “We’re in such grief, we see such pain. I see it in a mother’s eyes as I held her, who lost her entire family.”

A victims’ compensation fund would be established, Hochul said.

“It’s hard to fathom what they’re going through,” she said. “I went table to table, helping children make the ramen noodles and eat their pizza and I let them know one thing. And the mayor and I are united in this. We will not forget you, we will not abandon you. We are here for you.”

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Ukraine

Ukraine crisis: tense talks between US and Russia open in Geneva

Secretary of state Antony Blinken says week of talks is moment of truth for Vladimir Putin



The US deputy secretary of state, Wendy Sherman, Russia's deputy foreign minister, Sergei Ryabkov, attend the security talks in Geneva. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

[Julian Borger](#) in Washington

Mon 10 Jan 2022 10.49 EST

Formal talks are under way between US and Russian officials in Geneva over the fate of [Ukraine](#), amid low expectations and high tensions driven by fears that the Kremlin will order an invasion.

The Russian deputy foreign minister, Sergei Ryabkov, and his delegation arrived under Swiss police escort at the US diplomatic mission in Geneva for face-to-face talks with Wendy Sherman, the US deputy secretary of state, and her team. The talks adjourned for lunch and then began an afternoon session.

The two senior diplomats made only brief eye contact when they posed for photographs beforehand. “The talks promise to be long and substantial,” the Russian diplomatic mission in Geneva tweeted, with a picture of the two lead negotiators standing in front of their national flags. Sherman said “the US will listen to Russia’s concerns and share our own” in an earlier tweet from Geneva.

□Protocol is always a must!

Meanwhile, □□/□□ negotiations on security guarantees in [#Geneva](#) are in full swing. The talks promise to be long and substantial
pic.twitter.com/RQILoRMUVW

— Russian Mission in Geneva (@mission_russian) [January 10, 2022](#)

Sherman and Ryabkov held a working dinner in Geneva on Sunday evening with the top military officials in their delegations before Monday’s formal negotiations to discuss Moscow’s demands. Those demands were set out last month [in two draft treaties](#), one with the US and one with Nato. Much of their content is unacceptable to Washington and the alliance, most importantly a pledge that Ukraine will never be a Nato member.

Ryabkov described the conversation at dinner as “difficult but businesslike”. Sherman “stressed the United States’ commitment to the international principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the freedom of sovereign nations to choose their own alliances”, according to a state department account of the dinner. It said she told the Russians that the US would however “welcome genuine progress through diplomacy”.

Russia has 100,000 troops positioned near Ukraine and a similar number are primed to be mobilised at short notice, according to the US secretary of

state, Antony Blinken, who said on Sunday that the week's diplomacy was a moment of truth for the Russian president.

"There are two paths before us," he told CNN. "There's a path of dialogue and diplomacy to try to resolve some of these differences and avoid a confrontation. The other path is confrontation and massive consequences for Russia if it renews its aggression on Ukraine. We're about to test the proposition about which path President Putin's prepared to take."

The Biden administration insists that sovereign states' right to apply for Nato membership is not negotiable. Nor are US troop deployments in [Europe](#), administration officials have stressed. They said, however, that Washington would discuss other security guarantees, such as mutual limits on missile deployments and military exercises on the continent. That would fall far short of the comprehensive changes Moscow is demanding.

Few if any diplomatic observers expect a quick deal to resolve the crisis this week, and the opposite – a complete breakdown – is possible. It should quickly become apparent whether Russia is interested in negotiating over its proposals or whether they were designed to be rejected, creating a pretext for a war that Putin has already decided on.

"We're about to test the proposition of which path President Putin wants to take this week," Blinken, told the ABC News programme This Week. "And the question really now is whether President Putin will take the path of diplomacy and dialogue or seek confrontation."

"Lower your expectations and then lower them some more," said Melinda Haring, the deputy director of the Eurasia Center at the Atlantic Council. "Watch Moscow's demands in the meetings. If Russia insists that [Nato](#) cannot expand ever again, we will know that Moscow is preparing for war in Ukraine, since this is a red line for the west."

Sherman and Ryabkov lead teams of senior diplomats and defence officials. Sherman was accompanied to the Sunday night dinner in Geneva by Lt Gen James Mingus, the joint staff director of operations, Ryabkov by Russia's deputy defence, Col Gen Aleksandr Fomin.

France's European affairs minister, Clément Beaune, complained on Sunday that the EU was being excluded from the talks, an omission that he said played into Putin's hands by dividing the west. "Europeans shouldn't be absent from the negotiation table," he told the CNEWS TV network.

The state department account of the Sunday night dinner said the US would talk about certain bilateral issues with Russia in Geneva, "but will not discuss European security without our European allies and partners". France and other European states will be represented at the two other rounds of talks over the course of the week.

01:22

What it's like to walk on the Ukraine frontline – video

The negotiating teams will move to Brussels on Wednesday for a session of the Nato-Russia Council, in which all 30 alliance members will take part. It will be the first such meeting since 2019 of the council, which was established in 2002 to defuse tensions and build consensus.

The next day there will be a meeting in Vienna of the permanent council of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), chaired by Poland. Representatives will be on a more junior, ambassadorial level than the Nato session the previous day. It will, however, be imbued with particular significance because it will include non-Nato European states such as Finland and Sweden, who are contemplating their future in light of Russia's pressure on Ukraine. Finnish leaders in particular have hinted heavily in the past few days that they might look anew at Nato membership.

"We believe that after bilateral talks with the United States and then the Nato format, in this wider forum, some developments are possible," said Nikodem Rachoń, the spokesperson for the Polish embassy in Washington.

The OSCE talks are the only negotiations in which Ukraine will take part, though its president, Volodymyr Zelensky, announced a parallel bilateral diplomatic initiative directly with Moscow last month.

Washington says the US-Russia meeting in Geneva would primarily be an opportunity to present positions rather than resolve them.

“I don’t think we’re going to see any breakthroughs next week. We’re going to listen to their concerns; they’ll listen to our concerns, and we’ll see if there are grounds for progress,” Blinken said. “But to make actual progress, it’s very hard to see that happening when there’s an ongoing escalation, when Russia has a gun to the head of Ukraine, with 100,000 troops near its borders, [and] the possibility of doubling that in very short order. So, if we’re seeing de-escalation, if we’re seeing a reduction in tensions, that is the kind of environment in which we could make real progress.”



The US president, Joe Biden, and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin.
Photograph: Mandel Ngan/Sputnik/AFP/Getty

In Geneva, Sherman will also list the costs to Russia if it goes ahead with military action in Ukraine, including sweeping financial sanctions, possibly cutting it off from the international electronic payments system Swift, and limits on its citizens’ ability to buy western technology.

According to the [New York Times](#), the chairman of the US joint chiefs of staff, Gen Mark Milley, has also warned his Russian counterpart, Gen Valery Gerasimov, that an invasion would face a long insurgency, backed by advanced US weaponry. US officials have refused to comment on reports that Stinger anti-aircraft missiles were being sent to Ukraine in anticipation of such a guerrilla war.

“This week’s diplomacy is critical. From a certain moment it was clear that the west would not say an outright no to Moscow’s proposal because too much was at stake. The question was, how far Washington and Europeans are ready to go with the talks,” said Andrey Baklitskiy, a senior research fellow at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations.

Russia’s rushed military intervention in Kazakhstan has thrown another wildcard on to the table, but Baklitskiy does not expect it to have any impact on the Ukraine crisis. “There is no direct link between Ukraine and Kazakhstan. Even the people handling the issue in Russia are different, except for the very top,” he said.

Others say it is too early to tell whether the uprising and the response will unnerve or embolden the Kremlin. “To what extent are the Russians worried about Kazakhstan or believe they can manage it? I don’t think we have a feel for that yet,” one European diplomat said.

If there is wriggle room at all in this week’s negotiations, it could come in one of a handful of categories. The Biden administration and Nato’s secretary general, [Jens Stoltenberg](#), have ruled out bowing to Russian demands to preclude Ukraine’s membership of the alliance, but some analysts say that leaves open the possibility of a compromise, in which the theoretical possibility of membership is asserted at the same time as a clear statement that there would be many obstacles to overcome and so it would not happen in the near future.



The Nato secretary general, Jens Stoltenberg. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

That may be palatable in Washington and Nato capitals, but it may well not be enough for Putin. “Frankly, I’d be surprised if it was,” the European diplomat said. “Given their demands, I think they prefer to have the issue not addressed at all. Otherwise it shows they haven’t got their demand about Ukraine not joining Nato written down.”

US officials have repeatedly denied reports that Washington would negotiate on troop deployments in Europe but said they were willing to discuss reciprocal limits on missile deployments and military exercises.

“Russia has said it feels threatened by the prospect of offensive missile systems being placed in Ukraine. As President Biden told President Putin, the United States has no intention of doing that. So, this is one area where we may be able to reach an understanding if Russia is willing to make a reciprocal commitment,” the senior US administration official said.

Blinken said the US was also open to talking about limits on missiles previously banned by the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces treaty, from which the Trump administration withdrew in 2019 following longstanding US complaints of Russian violations.

“There may be grounds for renewing that,” Blinken said, adding that there could also be limits on war games.

“There are agreements on the deployment of conventional forces in Europe, things like the scope and scale of exercises that if adhered to reciprocally – that is, Russia makes good on its commitments, which it’s repeatedly violated – then there are grounds for reducing tensions, creating greater transparency, creating greater confidence,” he said. “All of which would address concerns that Russia purports to have.”

Missiles and war games are both areas where Russia has called for limits, albeit only on the US and Nato’s activities. It is an open question whether Putin would be satisfied with deals in these areas without some radical change in Ukraine’s status.

“Putin could go back and say we’ve been assured that there’s no imminent admission of Ukraine to Nato and we have assurances there will be no strike weapons – combat aircraft, missiles – or US bases in Ukraine,” said Rajan Menon, a political scientist at the City University of New York. “But will Russians insist that this be put in writing? That’s the sticky part.”

The most severe limiting factor in the negotiations could turn out to be the political constraints on the main parties.

“If you look at the polarisation here, it suggests that we have no bandwidth on the US side to actually do anything, sue for peace, let alone come up with a treaty or series of treaties,” said Fiona Hill, a former senior director for European and Russian affairs on the US national security council. “Putin has his own time frame of elections in 2024, and he wants to have something to show because his own popularity is lagging somewhat.”

The deployment of so many troops and the Kremlin’s rhetoric have set high Russian expectations of what would constitute a satisfactory outcome from the week’s diplomacy. Officials in Moscow have insisted that nothing short of “legally formulated guarantees of security” would be enough to pull back the troops from the Ukrainian border.

“Putin has put himself in a position where he has to come back with something, without looking really weak,” Menon said. “Given the political realities now, am I confident that a deal is going to happen? No, not at all. I think it’s going to be very, very dicey.”

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Business live

Business

Markets hit by US interest rate rise worries as IMF sees turbulence ahead – as it happened

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Guantánamo Bay

Lithuania pays Guantánamo ‘forever prisoner’ Abu Zubaydah €100,000 over CIA torture

Compensation for allowing torture at Vilnius black site indicates changing attitudes in Washington, lawyers say

- [Resettled Guantánamo detainees in legal limbo, analysis shows](#)



A protester wearing a black hood holds a portrait of detainee Abu Zubaydah during a demonstration in London on Saturday. Photograph: Thomas Krych/Sopa Images/Rex/Shutterstock

Ed Pilkington in New York

@edpilkington

Mon 10 Jan 2022 01.00 EST

Lithuania has paid more than \$110,000 to Abu Zubaydah, the Guantánamo detainee [known as the “forever prisoner”](#), in compensation for having allowed the CIA to hold him at a secret site outside Vilnius where he was subjected to forms of torture.

The €100,000 (\$113,500) payment comes more than three years after the European court of human rights [ordered](#) the Lithuanian government to pay compensation for violating European laws banning the use of torture.

It marks a significant shift in the treatment of Zubaydah, who has been detained by the US without charge for more than 20 years.

Zubaydah was captured in Pakistan six months after 9/11. The [CIA](#) and lawyers for the Bush administration attempted to justify his torture by claiming he was a very senior figure in al-Qaida. It emerged that he was not a member of the organisation and he has never been charged with involvement in 9/11.

For much of the time since his arrest, Zubaydah has been held incommunicado, at the insistence of the CIA as part of its efforts to prevent details of his torture from becoming public.

Lawyers for Zubaydah believe it is highly unlikely that [Lithuania](#) would have made the compensation payment without approval from Washington.

“The situation is a lot less incommunicado when you pay €100,000 to someone and the whole world knows about it,” Mark Denbeaux, one of Zubaydah’s legal team based in the US, told the Guardian.



A photo provided by US Central Command shows Abu Zubaydah.
Photograph: AP

“This move is consistent with the idea that the US is softening its position on the detention of the forever prisoners. The US could clearly have kept Lithuania from handing over this money and the question is, why didn’t they?”

News of the Lithuanian payment comes just days before the 20th anniversary of the military prison at Guantánamo, which received its first detainees on 11 January 2002. In recent months there have been other signs of a shifting attitude towards Zubaydah and the torture that was inflicted upon him by CIA agents and contractors.

In October, the US supreme court heard arguments in a case in which the US government is seeking to block two CIA contractors from testifying in Poland about torture Zubaydah suffered in 2002 and 2003 at a secret or “black” site in that country. In the course of the hearing, several of the justices, including conservatives, broke a legal taboo by openly using the word “torture”.

In Zubaydah’s case against Lithuania, which was led on the European side by his lawyer Helen Duffy, the European court of human rights heard that

Zubaydah was held at a CIA black site in that country from February 2005 to March 2006. The site, codenamed Violet, was on the outskirts of Vilnius.

The most brutal forms of torture endured by Zubaydah occurred in 2002 when he was held at a CIA black site in Thailand. An entire program of torture, euphemistically referred to by the CIA as “enhanced interrogation techniques”, was devised for the prisoner by two psychologists under contract to the agency.

Zubaydah was waterboarded – a type of controlled drowning – at least 83 times in August 2002, as well as being placed in a coffin-sized box for days on end.

European judges heard that Zubaydah was unlikely to have suffered from the harshest forms of torture while in Lithuania. But he was subjected to techniques that still amounted to torture, lawyers argued, including sensory and sleep deprivation, solitary confinement, loud noise and harsh light.

The money transferred by Lithuania is now in a bank account. Zubaydah is unable to receive the sum given his detention in Guantánamo and because his assets have been frozen by the US treasury.

A similar freezing of his assets by the United Nations security council was reversed two years ago, after a petition by his lawyers.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/10/lithuania-pays-guantanamo-forever-prisoner-abu-zubaydah-100000-cia-torture>

[Afghanistan](#)

Joy as baby given to US soldier during Afghan withdrawal is reunited with relatives

Sohail Ahmadi, who was being raised by a local Kabul taxi driver, will hopefully now travel to the US to live with his parents



Sohail Ahmadi, who was separated from his parents at the airport in the chaos of the US evacuation of Afghanistan. Photograph: Mohd Rasfan/AFP/Getty Images

Reuters

Sun 9 Jan 2022 20.46 EST

An infant boy handed in desperation to a US soldier across an airport wall in the chaos of the American evacuation of [Afghanistan](#) has been found and reunited with his relatives.

The baby, Sohail Ahmadi, was just two months old when he went missing on 19 August as [thousands of people rushed to leave Afghanistan](#) as it fell to the Taliban.

Following a Reuters story published in November with his pictures, the baby was located in Kabul, where a 29-year-old taxi driver named Hamid Safi had found him in the airport and taken him home to raise as his own. After more than seven weeks of negotiations, Safi handed the child back to his jubilant grandfather and other relatives still in Kabul on Saturday.

They said they would now seek to have him reunited with his parents and siblings who were evacuated months ago to the US.



Sohail Ahmadi, centre, at his grandfather's house in Kabul after being found. Photograph: Mohd Rasfan/AFP/Getty Images

During the tumultuous Afghan evacuation, Mirza Ali Ahmadi – the boy's father, who had worked as a security guard at the US embassy – and his wife, Suraya, feared their son would be crushed in the crowd as they neared the airport gates.

Mirza Ali Ahmadi said in early November that in his desperation that day, he handed Sohail over the airport wall to a uniformed soldier who he

believed to be an American, fully expecting he would soon make it the remaining five metres (15 feet) to the entrance to reclaim him. At that moment, [Taliban](#) forces pushed the crowd back and it would be another half an hour before Ahmadi, his wife and their four other children were able to get inside. But by then the baby was nowhere to be found.

Ahmadi said he searched desperately for his son inside the airport and was told by officials that he had likely been taken out of the country separately and could be reunited with them later. The rest of the family was evacuated – eventually ending up at a military base in Texas. For months they had no idea where their son was.

With no US embassy in Afghanistan and international organisations overstretched, Afghan refugees have had trouble getting answers on the timing, or possibility, of complex reunifications like this one.

“We are working to reunify the family,” a State Department official said.



Hamid Safi, right, the taxi driver who found Sohail Ahmadi at Kabul airport, pats the infant alongside grandfather Mirza Mohammad Qasemi and others after the boy's return to relatives. Photograph: Mohd Rasfan/AFP/Getty Images

On the same day Ahmadi and his family were separated from their baby, Safi had slipped through the Kabul airport gates after giving a ride to his brother's family, who were also set to evacuate. Safi said he found Sohail alone and crying on the ground. After he said he unsuccessfully tried to locate the baby's parents inside, he decided to take the infant home to his wife and children.

Safi has three daughters of his own and said his mother's greatest wish before she died was for him to have a son. In that moment he said he decided: "If his family is found, I will give him to them. If not, I will raise him myself." They called the baby Mohammad Abed and posted pictures of all the children together on his Facebook page.

After the story about the missing child came out, some of Safi's neighbours – who had noticed his return from the airport months earlier with a baby – recognised the photos.

00:54

Children passed over the walls of Kabul airport amid evacuation chaos – video

Ahmadi asked his relatives still in Afghanistan, including his father-in-law Mohammad Qasem Razawi, 67, who lives in the north-eastern province of Badakhshan, to seek out Safi and ask him to return Sohail to the family.



Sohail Ahmadi is carried by his grandmother as they leave the then-house of Hamid Safi, who had found the baby on the ground crying at Kabul airport.
Photograph: Ali Khara/Reuters

In the presence of the police, and amid lots of tears, the baby was finally returned to his relatives.

Razawi said Safi and his family were devastated to lose Sohail. “Hamid and his wife were crying. I cried too, but assured them that you both are young, Allah will give you male child. Not one, but several,” he said. “I thanked both of them for saving the child from the airport.”

The baby’s parents said they were overjoyed as they were able to see with their own eyes the reunion over video chat. “There are celebrations, dance, singing,” Razawi said. “It is just like a wedding.”

Now Ahmadi and his wife and other children, who in early December were able to move off a military base and resettle in an apartment in Michigan, hope Sohail will soon be brought to the US. “We need to get the baby back to his mother and father. This is my only responsibility,” his grandfather said. “My wish is that he should return to them.”

This article's main image was changed on 11 January 2022 to one showing Sohail Ahmadi.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/10/there-are-celebrations-baby-lost-in-afghan-withdrawal-chaos-found-and-reunited-with-relativesfamily>.

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Headlines tuesday 11 january 2022

- [No 10 Health minister admits public will be ‘angry’ over lockdown party](#)
- [Live UK Covid: party revelations show PM has done ‘incalculable damage’ to trust in health measures, Labour says](#)
- [‘Bring your own booze’ Newspapers lash PM over latest Downing Street party claim](#)
- [New leak Email drinks invitation explodes Johnson’s defences](#)

Conservatives

Lockdown parties: Boris Johnson ‘can run but he can’t hide’, says Labour

Angela Rayner lambasts PM as junior minister sent out to answer urgent question over May 2020 garden party

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



Angela Rayner asking an urgent question over the lockdown-busting Downing Street drinks party. Photograph: Reuters

[Heather Stewart](#) and [Jessica Elgot](#)

Tue 11 Jan 2022 08.28 EST

Labour’s deputy leader, Angela Rayner, has warned [Boris Johnson](#) “he can run but he can’t hide”, as the prime minister declined to answer questions

over a “bring your own booze” gathering in the Downing Street garden during the first lockdown.

The paymaster general, Michael Ellis, was sent to the House of Commons to answer Rayner’s urgent question about the drinks event on 20 May 2020.

Labour has been pressing the prime minister to “come clean” since a [leaked email from his principal private secretary, Martin Reynolds, obtained by ITV News](#), invited colleagues to “make the most of the lovely weather” and have some “socially distanced drinks”.

Rayner said: “There’s no need for an investigation into the simple central question today: did the prime minister attend the event in the Downing Street garden on 20 May 2020?”

Ellis apologised to MPs “for the upset that these allegations have caused”. He confirmed that the investigation being carried out by the senior civil servant Sue Gray will consider Downing Street gatherings on 15 and 20 May 2020 – but sidestepped further questions.

02:48

MPs share personal stories of loved ones lost to Covid in May 2020 – video

Ellis said Gray’s report would “establish the facts, and if wrongdoing is established there will be requisite disciplinary action taken”.

But Rayner insisted: “The public have drawn their own conclusions. He can run, but he can’t hide.”

Johnson has declined to say whether he and his wife, Carrie, attended the event – five days after they were pictured at a separate outdoor gathering, which ministers have insisted was work-related.

Asked whether Johnson would resign if he was found to have broken the law, Ellis said the prime minister was “going nowhere,” and “retains the confidence of the people in this country”.

Ellis also raised the prospect that Gray's work might be "paused" if the Metropolitan police launched an investigation into the events.

"As with all internal investigations, if evidence emerges of what was potentially a criminal offence, the matter would be referred to the Metropolitan police and the Cabinet Office's work may be paused," he said.

The Met confirmed on Monday night that it was in contact with the Cabinet Office over the allegations.

01:31

'He can run but he can't hide': Angela Rayner blasts Boris Johnson over lockdown parties – video

Johnson's official spokesperson told journalists on Tuesday the prime minister had "full confidence" in Reynolds, who would be "continuing in his role". He insisted repeatedly that further questions would have to wait for Gray's report.

At one point in the Commons, the Speaker, Lindsay Hoyle, rebuked Labour MPs for heckling Ellis, saying: "He's got a tough enough job as it is: don't make it harder for him!"

Veteran Conservative backbencher Peter Bone said he had confidence in the prime minister; but called for Gray's report to be completed quickly.

The Tory MP Christopher Chope asked: "Why can't all the dirty linen be washed at once? Why are we getting this dripfeed of parties? Surely the civil service must have known that there was a party on 2 May?"

Earlier, the health minister Edward Argar admitted the public would be "upset and angry" at the revelations in the leaked email from Reynolds.

In a tacit acknowledgement of the strength of feeling, he said he had not attended any parties and had been aware of the regulations, "not least because I was a health minister who'd helped draw them up".

Contact the team securely: create a Protonmail account and email us at guardian.politics.desk@protonmail.com; or use Signal Messenger or WhatsApp to message +44 7824 537227.

It came as the former Scottish Conservative leader Ruth Davidson called for an immediate explanation from Johnson, rather than questions being deferred to Gray's inquiry.

“This line won’t survive 48 hrs. Nobody needs an official to tell them if they were at a boozy shindig in their own garden. People are (rightly) furious. They sacrificed so much – visiting sick or grieving relatives, funerals. What tf were any of these people thinking?” Davidson tweeted.

About 30 to 40 people are said to have attended the 20 May gathering, with food and wine set out on tables, but it is understood some staff expressed reservations at the time.

On the same day, Oliver Dowden, the culture secretary, had reminded the public at a press conference: “You can meet one person outside of your household in an outdoor, public place provided that you stay 2 metres apart.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/jan/11/health-minister-admits-public-will-be-angry-over-no-10-lockdown-party>

Politics live with Andrew Sparrow

Politics

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Media

‘Bring your own booze’: newspapers lash PM over latest Downing Street party claim

Even pro-Tory titles voice anger at Boris Johnson in a reflection of growing upset on backbenches about alleged lockdown breaches



Newspaper front pages on Tuesday after the latest claims about alleged Downing Street parties during the UK lockdown in 2020. Composite: Various

[Martin Farrer](#)

Mon 10 Jan 2022 21.06 EST

The latest allegations about [lockdown-era gatherings at Downing Street](#) have provoked a furious backlash on the front pages of Tuesday’s papers.

The normally pro-Boris Johnson **Express** blasts a full-throated warning in its splash headline: “Enough Boris! You MUST end ‘partygate’ farce now”, it says, reflecting backbench Tory exasperation at the drip-drip of damaging reports about partying No 10 staffers.

Tomorrow's front page: Enough Boris! You must end 'partygate' farce now
[#TomorrowsPapersToday](#) pic.twitter.com/PMteBo6k6f

— Daily Express (@Daily_Express) [January 10, 2022](#)

The **Mail** takes a similar line and says “Boris rocked by new party revelations”, ramming home the iniquity being felt by people throughout Britain with a subhead that reads: “Email proves key aide invited 100 Downing Street staff to party with PM – while public could only meet one person outdoors”.

Tuesday's [@DailyMailUK](#) [#MailFrontPages](#)
pic.twitter.com/NsD2dPPhLp

— Daily Mail U.K. (@DailyMailUK) [January 11, 2022](#)

Others are more scathing with the **i** picking up on a particularly galling line from the leaked email invitation to the gathering on 20 May. ““Bring your own booze””.

Tuesday's front page: 'Bring your own booze!' [#TomorrowsPapersToday](#)

Leaked email to Downing Street staff appears to confirm Number 10 party during lockdown: <https://t.co/4g5HCDqqpS>
pic.twitter.com/jJmVopthsL

— i newspaper (@theipaper) [January 10, 2022](#)

The same line is used by the **Guardian** as well with its lead story “Fury as email reveals No 10 ‘bring your own booze’ lockdown party”.

Guardian front page, Tuesday 11 January 2022: Fury as email reveals No 10 'bring your own booze' lockdown party
pic.twitter.com/cBLjByf0w5

— The Guardian (@guardian) [January 10, 2022](#)

The **Mirror** describes the email as “Invite to do what you like”, while the Metro goes with a play on words – “Downing it Street” – alongside a picture of Johnson quaffing a pint of beer.

Tomorrow's front page: Invite to do what you like
[#TomorrowsPapersToday](#) https://t.co/reeSxKG45t
pic.twitter.com/QHLGkxHuFK

— The Mirror (@DailyMirror) [January 10, 2022](#)

The coverage contrasts with that of the Times and Telegraph, neither of which choose to lead with the party revelations.

The **Times** does have the story on its front page – “No10 celebrated ‘lovely weather’ with lockdown drinks party” – but leads on limits to sporting fixtures being eased.

TIMES: Pressure mounts for five days of isolation
[#TomorrowsPapersToday](#) pic.twitter.com/c6izcr2pcP

— Neil Henderson (@hendopolis) [January 10, 2022](#)

Ditto the **Telegraph**, which says “Johnson received invite to lockdown party” but leads on cabinet anger over misleading isolation guidance.

□The front page of tomorrow's Daily Telegraph:

'Cabinet anger over misleading isolation guidance'[#TomorrowsPapersToday](#)

Sign up for the Front Page newsletter <https://t.co/x8AV4Oomry>
pic.twitter.com/2Tbnbm4M4x

— The Telegraph (@Telegraph) [January 10, 2022](#)

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Conservatives

Leaked email about drinks event at No 10 explodes Johnson's defences

Analysis: cheery invitation to Downing Street garden at odds with coronavirus mixing rules at the time



Martin Reynolds, a senior aide to Boris Johnson, wrote: ‘it would be nice to make the most of the lovely weather and have some socially distanced drinks in the No 10 garden’. Photograph: James Veysey/Rex/Shutterstock

Jessica Elgot Chief political correspondent
[@jessicaelgot](https://twitter.com/jessicaelgot)

Mon 10 Jan 2022 15.06 EST

On the day that one of the prime minister’s most senior aides cheerily [emailed more than 100 staff](#) to suggest drinks in the Downing Street garden, a cabinet minister was telling the public they could meet only one person outside their household in an outdoor public place, 2 metres apart.

The starkly different advice from Oliver Dowden at the No 10 press conference was less than an hour before the email from Martin Reynolds was sent on 20 May 2020. And that disparity would seem to encapsulate better than perhaps any other alleged No 10 party – and there were [many](#) – the “one rule for them” approach that has been so damaging for Boris Johnson.

It puts paid to the different explanations No 10 has offered for each new scandal, and it leaves the prime minister most personally exposed.

After the [news of the 2020 Christmas party story broke](#) six weeks ago, Johnson himself said he had not attended and that he had been assured by aides the party did not take place.

Many No 10 insiders believed that was to give himself scope to sack the senior aides who briefed him before his PMQs appearance before Christmas, should the heat become too great for him.

When he was revealed to have attended a winter leaving do and a festive Zoom quiz, he argued the approaches were within the rules.

That was the response also taken to the [Guardian's picture](#) of Johnson in the Downing Street garden on 15 May 2020, relaxing with cheese and wine in the company of his wife, Carrie, and their newborn son, as well as Dominic Cummings and Reynolds, his principal private secretary. Despite the aides standing around with glasses, No 10 insisted it was work-related, backed up by Cummings this week – not one to normally cut the PM any slack.

And however unbelievable that explanation seemed when compared with the atmosphere in the Guardian picture, the newly revealed Reynolds invitation makes it ever clearer: that explanation will not wash this time.

[Contact the team securely: create a Protonmail account and email us at guardian.politics.desk@protonmail.com; or use Signal Messenger or WhatsApp to message +44 7824 537227.](#)

Two defences no longer apply. Firstly, Johnson is said by multiple sources to have been in attendance at the 20 May drinks, meaning there is no distance

between him and the lockdown-breaking, and no aides can be blamed for misinformation.

Secondly, this gathering cannot be justified as an important work meeting. Reynolds' jaunty tone makes that clear: "After what has been an incredibly busy period it would be nice to make the most of the lovely weather and have some socially distanced drinks in the No 10 garden this evening."

Socially distanced they may have been, but the sheer number involved is a clear breach of pandemic rules in place at the time. The tone will be particularly galling as Matt Hancock, the then health secretary, had warned in one of his addresses: "This weekend, with the good weather and the new rules ... don't take risks."

No 10 has a holding position it can take to avoid commenting before the inquiry by senior civil servant Sue Gray concludes. Reynolds has been widely rumoured to be on the way out, heading back to the diplomatic service having previously been ambassador to Libya for six months before Johnson asked him to return as his principal private secretary. One Whitehall source said he was hoping to return to the Middle East.

Tory MPs had hoped after new year that the heat would die down on the parties scandal, with the public having been allowed to enjoy a more normal Christmas with loved ones. But the new revelations could prove even more damaging, leaving the prime minister with no shield for his own rule-breaking.

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‘Don’t plan it, just go!’: how to be spontaneous – and grab some unexpected fun



‘Fun comes so much from spontaneity – doing things and not thinking too much about it.’ Illustration: Leon Edler/The Guardian

The pandemic has left our best-laid plans in disarray, but we can still have spur-of-the-moment adventures



[Amy Fleming](#)

Tue 11 Jan 2022 01.00 EST

Back in the wild old days, my best buddy and I used to call going out “looking for trouble”. We weren’t hoping for a punch-up or a little light robbery, but a spontaneous adventure involving music, strangers or just the city at night. All that spur-of-the-moment fun has taken quite a beating since the pandemic began, for many millions of us. First came the lockdowns, social distancing and closed venues, then the cautious reopening when even a trip to the pub or an art gallery had to be booked weeks in advance. And now, just when it seemed the world was finally getting back to normal, Omicron has come wielding its everything’s-off-again sledgehammer, crushing all those dreams of nights out, holidays and raucous parties. Not only does it seem foolish to plan anything, but after two years of frustration and self-restraint, it’s hard to summon up the enthusiasm to do anything off the cuff.

And that’s quite a loss. While we often think anticipation is half the fun, in 2016 researchers from two US universities [found](#) that people enjoyed

activities more when they were impromptu. Scheduling a coffee break or a movie, for instance, made them feel “less free-flowing and more work-like”, wrote the authors. As Jane Austen put it 200 years ago in Emma: “Why not seize the pleasure at once? – How often is happiness destroyed by preparation, foolish preparation!”

Masks don’t help, says Edward Slingerland, a philosophy professor at the University of British Columbia and the author of *Trying Not to Try*. “It’s difficult to get into any kind of relaxed, spontaneous rhythm when you can’t see the other person’s facial expressions. Our in-person interactions have been drained of the subtle facial cues that we normally use to tell if the other person is enjoying themselves or if a comment is landing the right way.” This renders even those precious interactions with strangers when out in the world so much harder. Video calls are equally unconducive. “You’re not in the same room. There’s often a subtle time delay that may not seem like very much, but it’s hard for people to know when you’re done talking, when it’s OK for me to start. It’s impossible to relax into natural, really positive social interactions that have spontaneity to them.”

The good news is that, as counterintuitive as it sounds, you can work at being more spontaneous. For his book, Slingerland looked at how ancient Chinese thinkers tackled the problem. “It involved things like ritual activities, meditation, breathing practices or just trying to trick your mind into forgetting that you’re trying to be spontaneous.” Because, he explains, if you put your mind to the problem directly, you’re activating the part of the brain you need to shut down – the cognitive control areas. The key is relaxation, not striving.

Slingerland isn’t suggesting we moderns start doing Confucian rituals, but, he says, “there’s a very similar function served by doing things like weeding the garden, or going for a walk – using your body in a way where you’re interacting with the natural world”. The early Chinese word for the state these activities bring on is *wuwei*. “I translate it as ‘effortless actions’,” he says. “A state where you lose a sense of yourself as an agent, and you get absorbed in what you’re doing.” Some modern thinkers might equate this sort of state with “flow”, while there are obvious comparisons, too, with mindfulness. “Look at the sunlight on trees and hear birds and you get

absorbed in something bigger than yourself,” says Slingerland. “That takes you out of your head and allows you to relax.”



Disrupting routines can help free the mind. Illustration: Leon Edler/The Guardian

This isn’t just about enjoying a good night out. We also need spontaneity to embrace change, says the clinical psychologist and writer Linda Blair. “And change is necessary for progress of any sort. Spontaneity makes us happier, too.” In 2016, a team of Austrian and Italian researchers found that people with less spontaneity in their lives experienced greater “psychological suffering”.

The best way forward at the moment, says Blair, “is to turn things on their head and instead of talking about *trying* to be spontaneous, you say: ‘There is no other way to be right now.’” Now is the time for seizing the day and moving with your heart, or your gut. “You want to go to your favourite restaurant?” asks Blair. “Don’t plan it – go there today, while it’s still open.”

She points out that disrupting routines can help to free the mind. This could mean switching off your mental autopilot and thinking about what you really feel like for breakfast today. Another spontaneity starter, she says, is having a backwards day. “That’s a lot of fun, especially with kids. Start your day

with dinner, say – anything that shakes up the triggers that keep us doing the same things.”

Triggers are things that keep us acting automatically. The cookie jar that makes us think we’re hungry. The phone ping that takes us into a rabbit hole and delays making lunch by 45 minutes. Triggers are not spontaneity’s friends. So Blair’s top tip for starting the day free of our inner naysayers and triggers is to write down all your thoughts first thing in the morning, before you do anything else. [This process is called the Morning Pages](#) and was devised by the writer Julia Cameron, originally as part of what she called the Artist’s Way – a method for unblocking creativity. “The best way to be spontaneous,” says Blair, “is to clear out the rubbish that mentally clogs you up every day. You get up in the morning and you write anything, whatever is going through your head, even if it’s: ‘Why am I doing this?’” Cameron prescribes three A4 pages, but if that puts you off, Blair says you’ll still benefit from just writing until you run out, “or for five minutes”.

Don’t let time pressures stop you. “One person I know gets up at four o’clock to do it, so that the kids can’t possibly bother her,” says Blair. “It is important to have your own time, and to look at what comes out as potential to do things in a new way.” Not only does this boost your propensity for spontaneity for the rest of the day, says Blair, but it often generates spontaneous ideas. “It suddenly awakens you, so for example, you have a dream that you write down about having seen somebody you realise you haven’t been in touch with for ages. So you now call them or email them.”

Joe Oliver is a clinical psychologist who specialises in acceptance and commitment therapy – a mindfulness-based behavioural therapy – and has some good solutions if you’ve lost your spontaneity. So many of his clients have a sense of malaise just now, partly from general pandemic pressures, but also, he says, from “the lack of fun that’s available to them. And fun comes so much from spontaneity – doing things and not thinking too much about it, connecting with people, doing an activity and being allowed to take it in unexpected directions.”

One of the barriers, he says, “is people wanting to stay in their comfort zones, where it’s safe, predictable, ordered and people know how things are

going to go”. The comfort zone can be useful – especially at the moment, when we need to keep safe, but there’s a danger of talking ourselves out of adventuring. “Overthinking is an absolute classic one,” says Oliver. “Getting entangled with worry about the future: it’s going to be terrible, it’s not going to work out, it won’t be fun, it’s going to have bad consequences, you won’t be safe. And when people get caught up with those thoughts, of course, they do that natural thing of retreating into their comfort zone. Or they ruminate a lot.”

Part of the problem is living not in the present, but in the past or the future, thinking: “What about the times it hasn’t worked?” says Oliver. But understanding that this is going on is the first step to recovering spontaneity. He reminds clients: “There’s good evidence that unplanned-for opportunities support wellbeing and mental health.”

Next time you catch yourself chickening out of doing something on the spur of the moment, he suggests overruling your critical brain and telling yourself: “I’m doing this because it’s good for me. And I like it. It’s fun. Let’s persist through this initial anxiety and see what comes afterwards.” Mindfulness will help you enjoy the moment you’re in, Oliver says, but “it doesn’t have to be a full-on meditative practice”. Just “anchor into your feet, notice your breath for 10 seconds, roll your shoulders back, drop your arms and spend some time coming down into your body”.

Catch those limiting thoughts that tell you we can’t draw/skateboard/jog in the rain, he says, but don’t try to argue with them. If you challenge the thoughts, it creates “a bit of a tussle and can inadvertently give those thoughts a bit more power”. Instead, try thinking: “There are those thoughts again,” or even thank them for their feedback – after all, they’re only trying to keep us safe.

Oliver’s other tricks include taking turns with a friend or partner to suggest new things to do, “to build in randomness. I’ve got a favourite pub but my partner often wants to go somewhere else, not in my comfort zone. Sometimes, in the interest of spontaneity, we say to the other: ‘OK, you decide.’ Or sometimes we come up with a couple of pubs and flip a coin.” Because, while your instincts might tell you to stay in your comfort zone,

there's actually no way of foretelling which option will result in the most fun on any given day.

"As Daniel Gilbert at Harvard has [shown us so well](#)," says Blair, "we don't accurately estimate what the future is going to be like. We usually think it's going to be better than it is. And we don't accurately estimate what the past was like, either. We are hard on ourselves and overly critical about what happened – or we romanticise it. But *now* ... you can be happy right now." She says her patients often tell her about a recurring pain that keeps them up at night because it's so bad. But when she asks them how it is right now, they say: "What, the pain? Oh, it's not too bad." Again with the living in the future and the past. "Coming to the now," says Blair, "things are usually OK." And here, Austen bears repeating: "Seize the pleasure at once."

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THG

Matthew Moulding: the curious case of THG founder's property deals

Online shopping tycoon with £2bn fortune in spotlight after slump in value of company's shares



Boris Johnson is shown around by Matthew Moulding during a visit to a fulfilment centre for THG in Warrington in December 2019. Photograph: Ben Stansall/AFP/Getty Images

[Simon Goodley](#)

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He is the online shopping tycoon billed as the UK's answer to the Silicon Valley tech titans – with a personal [fortune put at more than £2bn last spring](#) and whose penchant for displaying his toned torso at pre-pandemic yacht parties has anchored many a tabloid newspaper rags-to-riches story.

Yet for Matthew Moulding – the founder, chief executive and chair of the e-commerce company The Hut Group (THG) – 2021 proved a humbling year.

The acclaim that greeted his [company's £4.5bn London stock market flotation](#) in the autumn of 2020 evaporated in 2021, as parts of the City of London turned on the company that owns online beauty and nutrition brands including Espa and Myprotein, as well as [providing e-commerce technology to firms such as Unilever](#).

THG's shares – which had soared after the group floated – slumped by 71% between January and December. That fall cost its investors, among which Moulding is its biggest shareholder, about £6.9bn in paper losses.

The reversal has heaped yet more scrutiny on a business that has not been shy of giving critics targets to snipe at: group companies have made [significant donations to the Conservative party](#); while THG cocked a snook at City convention prior to its stock market debut by retaining Moulding in both the chair and chief executive roles.

The board also signed off a pre-flotation deal that saw Moulding acquire THG's offices, warehouses and leisure facilities – before immediately becoming the company's landlord by leasing those buildings back to the company for [an annual rent of £19m](#).

That property deal was [frowned on by City figures](#) at the time, but justified by the company on the grounds it cut THG's debts.

[Interactive](#)

Yet some investor questions have lingered, including should the company have sold the buildings to its founder before floating? What was the exact value of that deal and the price paid? And why wasn't THG more transparent about all the relevant numbers?

The company does not seem to have explicitly disclosed how much the property portfolio cost Moulding.

But a Guardian analysis of THG's accounts, which pieces together figures in THG's annual report, suggests the deal was worth £297m – [but Moulding](#)

might not have parted with any cash at all.

Instead, the entrepreneur could have waived £76m of THG shares he was due to receive, as well as taking on £221m of the property portfolio's debts and other liabilities.

The company did not dispute the figures.

Interactive

And if they are accurate, this could raise new questions for THG – because a £297m price does not appear to reflect the company's own historical filings about the value of individual properties in the portfolio.

THG published specific individual values for 14 of the 18 properties in the portfolio, in a collection of its own annual reports and Companies House accounts between 2015 and 2020.

The historical filings suggest that, at those points in time, the 14 properties had values that add up to £295m – just £2m less than the figure Moulding appeared to pay for all 18 buildings.

Of course, property values rise and fall. The value of each of the 14 may have changed.

But what about the four outstanding properties in the portfolio? According to the Guardian's calculations, their current value could be as much as £55m.

They include a new 56,873 sq metre (612,180 sq ft) warehouse near Wrocław in south-west Poland, for which THG has disclosed it pays Moulding a rent of €3.7m (£3.1m) a year.

Such a rent – the third highest in the portfolio – would imply a property value of about £50m, according to research on typical yields collated by the statistical website Statista and property firm Cushman Wakefield. THG says the building is worth £43.3m.



Matthew Moulding has remained in both the chairman and chief executive roles at THG. Photograph: Thg Holdings Plc/Reuters

Three further offices in Northwich, Cheshire, charge rents that suggest the buildings are collectively worth as much as £5m, according to financial and property experts.

Richard Kleiner, a managing partner of the City accounting firm Gerald Edelman, said: "I agree with the Guardian's analysis ... presumably, THG can more fully explain the accounting so that the analysis can be interpreted in a different way."

Moulding has had a mixed relationship with followers of his company, and has criticised the City and financial journalists for their coverage and analysis, even going as far to suggest that he regrets ever having taken the firm public.

At the weekend it emerged he has handed a dossier to regulators over what THG described as a coordinated attack on its share price.

However, the entrepreneur has never fully explained why he became THG's landlord just as the company joined the stock market, although last January the company said: "The transaction removed in excess of £200m of debt from THG's balance sheet immediately which increases to in excess of

£400m over the near term as THG completes its infrastructure rollout programme globally.”

The online retailer also previously said that a chief executive acting as a public company’s landlord was “not unique”, while adding that the property sale “was agreed on arm’s length terms with the independent non-execs’ and professional shareholders’ oversight. Mr Moulding paid the market value as independently valued by a global top tier accountancy practice appointed by THG on behalf of all shareholders.”

Even so, THG declined invitations to provide an on-the-record comment to the Guardian’s most recent questions in December about the value of the property deal.

It said the transaction was completely lawful, had been concluded only after taking extensive advice from a range of property and financial experts and that the company disputed it had valued the 14 properties at £295m.

It said the Guardian’s calculations were wrong, but did not respond to repeated requests to provide a breakdown of the individual property values.

THG added that the portfolio’s valuation was assessed by “[Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors] accredited experts, following the recognised ‘Red Book’ global standard”.

Its 2020 annual report also disclosed that the board’s related party committee – created after the property deal had concluded – found “no significant matters … as part of this subsequent review [of the property sale]”.

Still, THG would not respond to further questions about the identities of the firms it hired to conduct the “Red Book” valuations, or the dates when the research was concluded. Nor would it make clear its position on specific buildings, where seemingly legitimate questions about valuations remain unanswered.



THG constructed Icon, a new logistic and global content creation studio at Manchester airport. Photograph: Christopher Thomond/The Guardian

For example, the portfolio's most valuable piece of real estate – at least from a rental point of view – is a new four-building development called Icon, which the company constructed at Manchester airport to “house 2,000 people and … focus on video production and photography to be used across THG’s and clients’ digital offerings”.

THG pays Moulding an annual rent of £7.78m for use of those buildings, according to the company’s listing prospectus, which also calls the site a “state-of-the-art facility”. Meanwhile, THG’s 2019 annual report informed shareholders that the Icon buildings were “a £135m THG investment”.



Icon houses THG Studios, which handles video production and photography for THG's and clients' digital offerings. Photograph: Christopher Thomond/The Guardian

Those figures would imply a yield – or rate of return – of about 5.8% for Moulding, which sits in line with the market rate for properties predominantly rented on 25-year leases by a public company tenant, according to property and financial experts.

However, THG told the Guardian that Icon was actually valued at £62.25m when it was sold to the company's founder. It did not explain why the company would pay the tycoon the 12.5% annual return on his investment such a valuation would imply.

Moulding has also pledged all annual profits from his THG property arm to charity, although the company has said that, because of the debt on the portfolio, it would be “barely income generating” in the first year.

THG has said that it does not endorse any political party and has also donated to the Manchester mayor's office and Labour-controlled Manchester city council.

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Music

Interview

Nilüfer Yanya: ‘I wasn’t thinking: how am I going to make this a TikTok hit’

[Rachel Aroesti](#)

The Londoner reflects on her old-school ascent to jazzy indie greatness, her Turkish heritage and reaching out to refugee kids



Nilüfer Yanya: ‘Can’t I just be an adult now?’ Photograph: Molly Daniel



Tue 11 Jan 2022 03.00 EST

Nilüfer Yanya may have grown up in Chelsea, but hers is not the world of the Sloane Ranger 2.0: pristine Georgian townhouses and endless champagne brunches. Instead, it is the manic, deadening, claustrophobic side of the city that radiates through her work: on recent single *Stabilise*, the 26-year-old sings of never-ending high rises, filled with small flats “rotten to the core”. “Grey concrete,” she says. “I see that immediately when the song starts. A literal grey but also an emotional grey.”

Today we are in the first kind of London – a posh, gleaming, pink-accented coffee shop in Bayswater – discussing Yanya’s upcoming second album, *Painless*, a collection of prickly, occasionally jazzy, and always catchy post-punk that lands somewhere between [Joy Division](#), [King Krule](#) and [PJ Harvey](#). It is the sequel to 2019’s rave-reviewed *Miss Universe*, a record that heralded this unassuming, smiley woman as one of Britain’s most exciting new rock stars.

And yet, in spite of her uniformly excellent output, Yanya’s rise seems highly unusual. Not because it was sparked by a flukey moment of internet-fuelled hype – but because it wasn’t. Instead, it involved nothing more newfangled than gigging around [London](#) throughout her teens and early 20s,

signing to an independent label and, then, more of the same. Granted, she was offered some (questionable) shortcuts along the way, such as the time she dodged involvement in a doomed manufactured girl band with links to One Direction's Louis Tomlinson, an industry approach Yanya sums up as: “‘Let’s go and pinch some young people, tell them we’re going to make a really successful group but we’re obviously going to make a lot more money than them.’ It’s a very selfish thing to do.” Even more so considering she heard the entire project was unceremoniously ditched a year later.

In any case, being a pop star was never on Yanya’s radar. You don’t make sour, spiky, impressionistic rock songs if you want to be top of the charts, or, indeed, if you want to surf the zeitgeist: Painless doesn’t exactly correspond with the current sound of young London. Do her friends listen to guitar music? “Not massively,” she admits. It’s also not the music some people expected her to make, going by her name (her father is Turkish) and her appearance (she is mixed race). “Some people have [described it as] R&B and it’s like: where are you getting that from? There’s a very small element of that in any music I’ve released.”

It was boys with guitars that shaped her musical ambitions from the start. A talented pianist as a child, she was turned on to “pop-rock, skater-punk, and the Strokes” by her elder sister. “It was weird because I didn’t really listen to any female singers; the only music that was ‘credible’ was by guys. Obviously I never realised that, I just thought this is cool. I didn’t think ‘I feel excluded.’”

Without seeing any women doing it, how did she know she could? “I just wanted to try. I guess I wasn’t worrying about it being commercially successful; I wasn’t thinking: how am I going to make this a TikTok hit.” Not that she’s totally off the hook in that regard: she is now being encouraged by her team to promote her wares on the platform: “It’s a young person’s thing; I feel like I’m past that. Can’t I just be an adult now?!”

When your parents are from other countries, you want to disassociate.
You’re like: I just want to be from London

Niliüfer Yanya

For Yanya, adulthood hasn't only involved a creeping ambivalence towards social media; it has also turned her attention towards her Turkish heritage. Painless features a *saz*, the stringed instrument her father used to play around the house, and she has recently started taking Turkish lessons. Her younger self shared none of this enthusiasm. "When you grow up here and your parents are from other countries, you want to disassociate in some way," she says. "You're like: 'No, I just want to be from London, I don't want to have to deal with all this other stuff.'" She still feels like she's only just starting to understand Turkish culture: "I don't really know anything. My mum's Irish and Bajan so there's so much going on, I don't really know myself most of the time."

It doesn't help that the music industry tends to treat her background in a reductive, flattening way. "'You're Turkish, great, we've got that covered' or 'You're mixed race, cool, got that ticked.' They're like: 'Well we need people who aren't just white now, but you still look white so that's even better.'"

One weapon against industry cynicism is to surround yourself with people who genuinely have your best interests at heart – and Yanya has managed to keep her career a family affair. At 16, she recorded her first song in her uncle's Cornwall studio, a tradition she has continued with Painless. Her younger sister, Elif, sometimes joins her on tour as a backing singer, while her elder sister Molly directs her music videos.

With Molly, she has also set up an initiative called [Artists in Transit](#) that brings creative workshops to refugee children, initially in Greece and now in London. "You're just talking to people, making nice things," explains Yanya. "Their parents just want them to have a nice time no matter where they are, so we're playing to that. I don't know how to help people get out of that situation, [but] I think the first step is getting to know people and bridging some sort of gap."

As the child of two visual artists, creativity has been a constant in Yanya's life. But the arts, she notes, seem increasingly undervalued in the UK. A case in point: she attended Pimlico School, known for fostering music talent (alumni include [La Roux](#)'s Elly Jackson, [Roots Manuva](#) and Dave Okumu of

[the Invisible](#), who also taught Yanya music there). Halfway through her education, the school was converted into an academy and music teaching cut by half.

She despairs of the way creativity has become “a luxury. It shouldn’t be something for people that have extra money or extra time. Why can’t everyone take part?”. School music lessons, giving young refugees a creative outlet: the arts are not just a nice-to-have, says Yanya, they are an essential. “It’s a way of communicating, it crosses cultures. When you cut people off from being able to do that, it’s like cutting off an arm.” It’s not difficult to agree – and if anyone remains sceptical about the benefits of encouraging creativity in childhood, an encounter with Yanya’s exhilarating music is sure to change their minds.

Painless is released on 4 March.

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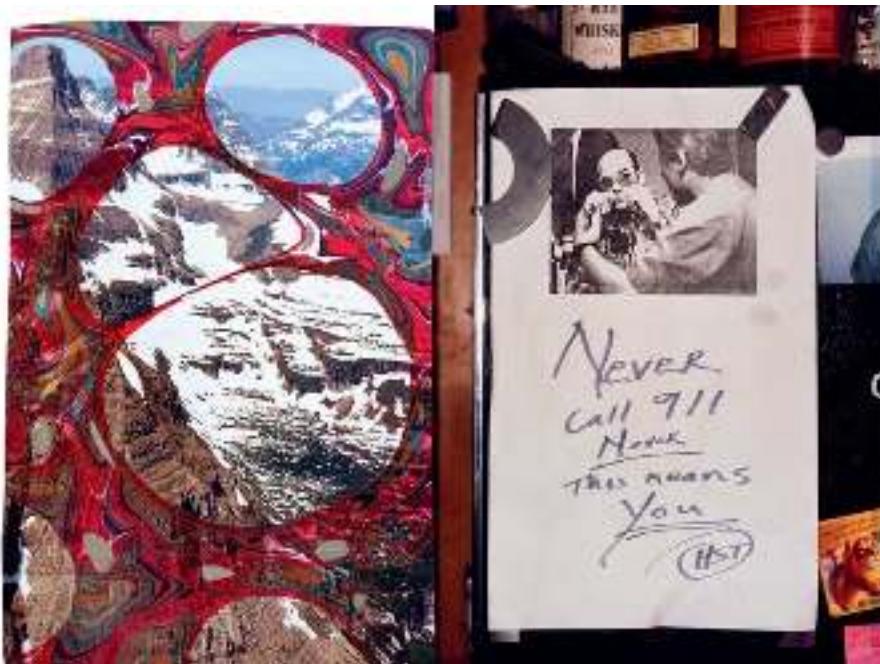
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Interview

‘He was a handful’ – Hunter S Thompson’s PA and photographer relives her wild job

[Sean O’Hagan](#)



‘Underneath it all, he was an old school gentleman’ ... a shot from the book Hot Damn! showing Thompson with Bill Clinton. Photograph: Chloe Sells

She cooked his weird dinners, dealt with his volcanic rants, and read his prose back to him from dark till dawn. As Chloe Sells’ photographs of the gonzo writer’s chaotic Colorado cabin are published, she remembers an invigorating, inspirational figure



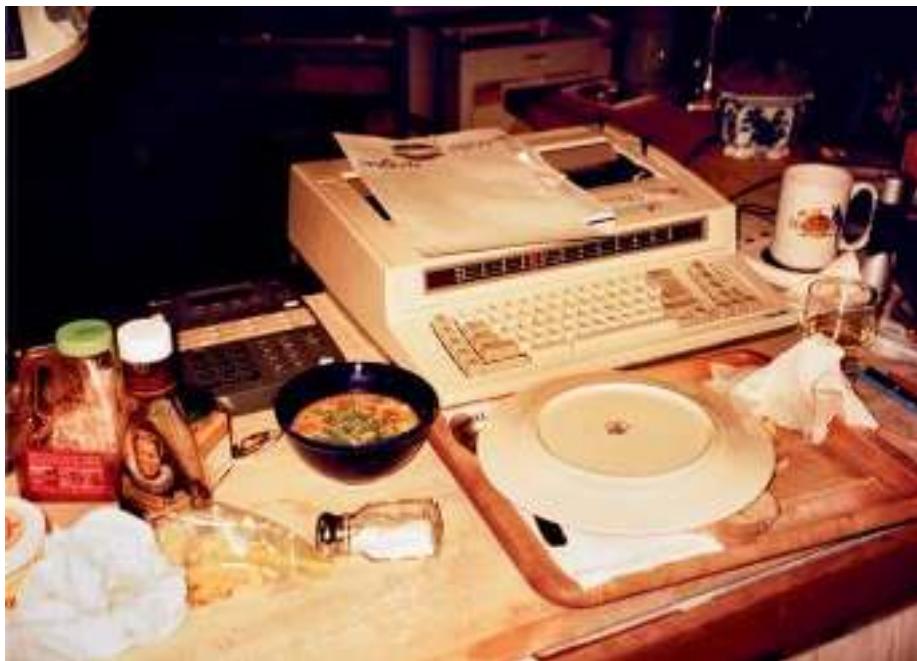
Tue 11 Jan 2022 01.00 EST

One evening towards the end of 2003, Chloe Sells was entering the J-Bar in Aspen, [Colorado](#), in search of a late night drink, when an older woman approached her. As Sells recalls in her new photobook, Hot Damn!: “She looked me up and down and said, ‘We’re looking for some help for Hunter. Are you a night owl? Would you be interested?’”

Hunter, as every local knew, was [Hunter S. Thompson](#), the celebrated creator of “gonzo” journalism, and the town’s most infamous resident. The woman was his wife, Anita. “It took me only a moment,” Sells says, “to answer ‘Yes’ to everything.”

Sells ended up working as Thompson’s personal assistant for just over a year, doing “anything and everything that needed doing”. Her typical

working hours were 11pm until dawn, and her tasks included preparing his often elaborate dinners to order (microwave turkey dinner with soup, chutney, peanut butter and salsa), reading his prose back to him while he shouted instructions (“Louder, louder, slower, slower”) and dealing with his increasingly frequent bouts of explosive anger at his publishers, editors, acolytes and the world in general.



Tap, tap, gulp, gulp ... Thompson's cluttered writing desk. A typical meal might include soup, chutney, peanut butter, salsa, mustard, endive, celery, garlic salt, microwave turkey dinner, Paul Newman's salad dressing, whiskey, coffee, beer and a cigarette. Photograph: Chloe Sells

“I was in my late 20s in full rock’n’roll mode, young and bulletproof,” she says. “I’d grown up in Aspen in a pretty wild, bohemian family and I knew nothing that Hunter did could bother me. In fact, the only thing that got to me was the cigarette smoke. There was so much of it.”

Sells’ father had been a hippy in his youth, opening one of Colorado’s earliest “head shops” in nearby Boulder, selling drug paraphernalia. Just like Thompson, he had relocated to the mountains in Aspen in the late 60s to escape the pressures of the straight life. In the decades that followed, though, the town became a hangout for the privileged and the famous, drawn by its breathtaking Rocky Mountains, winter sports, libertarian politics and

abundant availability of cocaine. “You could trek and ski by day and do shitloads of coke at night,” says Sells, laughing. “There were dealers and busts – and mountains’ worth of cocaine that was regularly flown in on Cessnas.”

I decided never to get wasted with him. I’d seen the scorn he reserved for those who turned up to pay homage and did

By the 1990s, Aspen had become a realtor’s dream, drawing A-list celebrities including Goldie Hawn and Sylvester Stallone, as well as younger acolytes of Thompson’s including Johnny Depp, who played his alter ego – Raoul Duke – in the film version of the writer’s most famous book, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. “You’d suddenly see famous people everywhere,” says Sells, “but the prevailing attitude in Aspen is not to stare or make a big deal out of it.”

At [Owl Farm](#), Thompson’s compound in Woody Creek, she realised early on that her irascible employer demanded not just her unyielding attention, but also constant intellectual stimulation into the early hours. “I decided early on never to get wasted with him,” she says proudly. “I stayed straight throughout my time there. I’d seen the scorn he reserved for those who turned up to pay homage to him, got completely stoned and started acting stupid. They were never welcomed back.”



Stuffed ... Thompson was friendly with a local taxidermist. Photograph: Chloe Sells

For all his volatile unpredictability, Sells describes Thompson as “essentially an old-fashioned southern gentleman”, whose fits of anger were often immediately followed by heartfelt contrition. Once, having taunted her with the news that Taschen was publishing a book of his photographs, he immediately felt guilty and granted her free rein to photograph the interiors and contents of Owl Farm, the one part of his life that had not been extensively documented. She immediately took him up on his offer.

The negatives from that time languished in storage for 10 years, while Sells’ work moved from straight documentary towards a vividly experimental approach close to pure abstraction – swirls and patterns of colour deftly applied to her landscapes in the darkroom.

Something of a bohemian herself, Sells has lived for over 20 years between London and Botswana, where her late husband Peter Sandenbergh ran a safari camp business. Her previous book, *Flamingo*, was shot on the Makgadikgadi Salt Pans in the desolate heart of the Kalahari Desert. In 2016, Peter died of cancer and, soon after, she found out that she was pregnant from the IVF treatment they had undergone while he was ill. “Suddenly, my partner was gone and I was pregnant and trying to figure out

what to do and how to be an artist,” she says. “That’s when I thought, ‘Let’s just dust off those old negatives from Aspen.’”

Unsurprisingly, *Hot Damn!* – which took five years to complete to her satisfaction – is a more hybrid work than her previous series. Sells originally shot Thompson’s living quarters and possessions in a fly-on-the-wall documentary style that captures all the hovering chaos of a life lived on the edge: his cluttered writing desk, piles of unfinished manuscripts, various stuffed and mounted birds and animals, guns, ephemera from his writing career, his collections of hats and his electric typewriter, plus endless Post-it notes with often extravagant titles – *Sodomized at the Airport*, *Olympic Disaster in Utah*, *The Wisdom of Nashville* and the *Violence of Jack Nicholson*. Pure gonzo, in fact.



Porcupine by Chloe Sells from the book *Hot Damn!* Photograph: Chloe Sells

More intriguing are the dreamily psychedelic images that punctuate the book, creating a narrative that shifts constantly from the visceral to the woozily disorienting – not unlike, one imagines, day-to-day life in Woody Creek. “I don’t make documentary work any more,” Sells says, “and to be honest, I looked at some of the pictures and thought they were a bit boring. I started using the Japanese and Italian marbling techniques I had studied to push the boundaries a bit. It took a few years before it really started to sing,

but I think it offers this emotive quality that gets closer to what the ride was like – the speed, the intensity, the pressure of working with Hunter, but also the strange intimacy. It points to his legacy, but also to the spirit of my own creativity.”

Much to Thompson’s annoyance, Sells departed Woody Creek for the last time in January 2005, having decided to travel to Thailand to document the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami. A few weeks later, on 20 February, her father called her to break the news that Thompson had died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. “My legs buckled and I fell to my knees,” she says, lapsing into silence for a few moments. “It’s not that I didn’t see it coming, because he spoke about it a lot. His health was giving out and he was in constant chronic pain. His body was degenerating and his mind was not as sharp. Basically, he was not having fun. Plus, he had this Hemingway crush.” Hemingway had taken his life with a double-barrelled shotgun in 1961.

Sells remembers one early-hours conversation, when Thompson told her mysteriously that he had his death taken care of. “In my head, I was thinking, ‘How is that even possible?’ Then a few days later, I was like, ‘OK, that’s what was going to happen.’ But it never occurred to me it would happen on my watch. That I was so close to it is what was really shocking.”

How does Sells think back on her time at Woody Creek? “With gratitude,” she says. “Hunter was a handful: he lived to break the rules. That was his thing. But he was also inspiring and invigorating to be around, because he was just so sharp and smart. He would have had serious fun taking down Trump, that’s for sure. But underneath it all, he was an old school gentleman. He couldn’t help it, even amid all the rants and the bad behaviour. He was someone who would stand up when a lady entered the room.” She pauses for a second. “That’s if he was capable of standing up.”

- [Hot Damn!](#) by Chloe Sells is published by Gost Books. In the UK and Ireland, Samaritans can be contacted on 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.org or jo@samaritans.ie. In the US, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is [1-800-273-8255](tel:1-800-273-8255). In Australia, the crisis support

service Lifeline is 13 11 14. Other international helplines can be found at www.befrienders.org.

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Coronavirus

Will Covid-19 become less dangerous as it evolves?

Analysis: experts warn that viral evolution is not a one-way street and a continuing fall in virulence cannot be taken for granted

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‘The idea that we will achieve endemicity anytime soon also seems a little bit counter to the fact that we’ve just had several weeks of massively explosive exponential growth’. Photograph: Dominic Lipinski/PA

[Linda Geddes](#) Science correspondent

Tue 11 Jan 2022 01.00 EST

The pandemic has been awash with slogans, but in recent weeks, two have been repeated with increasing frequency: “Variants will evolve to be milder” and “Covid will become endemic”. Yet experts warn that neither of these things can be taken for granted.

Those stating that viruses become less deadly over time often cite influenza. Both of the flu viruses responsible for the 1918 Spanish flu and 2009 swine flu pandemics eventually evolved to become less dangerous. However, the 1918 virus is thought to have become more deadly before it became milder. And other viruses, such as [Ebola](#), have become more dangerous over time.

“It’s a fallacy that viruses or pathogens become milder. If a virus can continue to be transmitted and cause lots of disease, it will,” said Prof David Robertson, head of viral genomics and bioinformatics at the University of Glasgow’s Centre for Virus Research.

Viruses aim to create as many copies of themselves and spread as widely as possible. Although it is not always in their best interests to kill their hosts, so long as they are transmitted before this happens, it doesn’t matter. Sars-CoV-2 doesn’t kill people during the period when it is most infectious; people tend to die two to three weeks after becoming ill. Provided it does not evolve to make people so ill that they do not, or cannot, mix with other people while they are infectious, the virus doesn’t care if there are some casualties along the way.

Neither is it clear that Sars-CoV-2 is becoming progressively milder. [Omicron appears to be less severe](#) than the Alpha or Delta variants – but both of these variants caused more severe illness than the original Wuhan strain. Importantly, viral evolution is not a one-way street: Omicron did not evolve from Delta, and Delta didn’t evolve from Alpha – it is more random and unpredictable than that.

“These [variants of concern] are not going one from the other, and so if that pattern continues, and another variant pops out in six months, it could be worse,” said Robertson. “It’s important not to assume that there’s some inevitability for Omicron to be the end of Sars-CoV-2’s evolution.”

There is a possibility that [Omicron is so transmissible](#) that it has hit a ceiling whereby future variants will struggle to outcompete it. But just a few months ago, people were saying the same thing about Delta. Also, Omicron is likely to keep evolving. “What might play out is that as Omicron infects so many people, it’s harder for that first Omicron [variant] to continue to be as successful, and so that creates a space for a virus that’s better at evading the immune response,” Robertson said.

What about the idea that Sars-CoV-2 [could become endemic](#)? Politicians tend to use this as a proxy for getting on with our lives and forgetting that Covid-19 exists. What endemic actually means is a disease that’s consistently present, but where rates of infection are predictable and not spiralling out of control

“Smallpox was endemic, polio is endemic, Lassa fever is endemic, and malaria is endemic,” said Stephen Griffin, associate professor of virology at the University of Leeds. “Measles and mumps are endemic, but dependent on vaccination. Endemic does not mean that something loses its teeth at all.”

As more and more people develop immunity to Sars-CoV-2, or recover from infection, the virus may become less likely to trigger severe disease. But it could then evolve again. The good news is that this becomes less likely the more of the world’s population is vaccinated – because the fewer people who are infected, the fewer chances the virus has to evolve – but we’re not close to that yet. Even in the UK, there are large numbers of unvaccinated individuals, and it’s unclear how long the protection from boosters will last.

“The idea that we will achieve endemicity anytime soon also seems a little bit counter to the fact that we’ve just had several weeks of massively explosive exponential growth, and prior to that, we were still seeing exponential growth of Delta,” Griffin said.

Transforming Covid into a disease that we can truly live with requires more than a national vaccination campaign and wishful thinking; it requires a global effort to improve surveillance for new variants, and supporting countries to tackle outbreaks at source when they emerge. It also requires

greater investment in air purification and ventilation to reduce transmission within our own borders, if we're mixing indoors.

Everyone hopes that the coronavirus will evolve to become milder, and that Covid becomes endemic – or rather, manageable enough not to blight our daily lives. But these are hopes, not facts, and repeating these mantras won't make them happen any faster.

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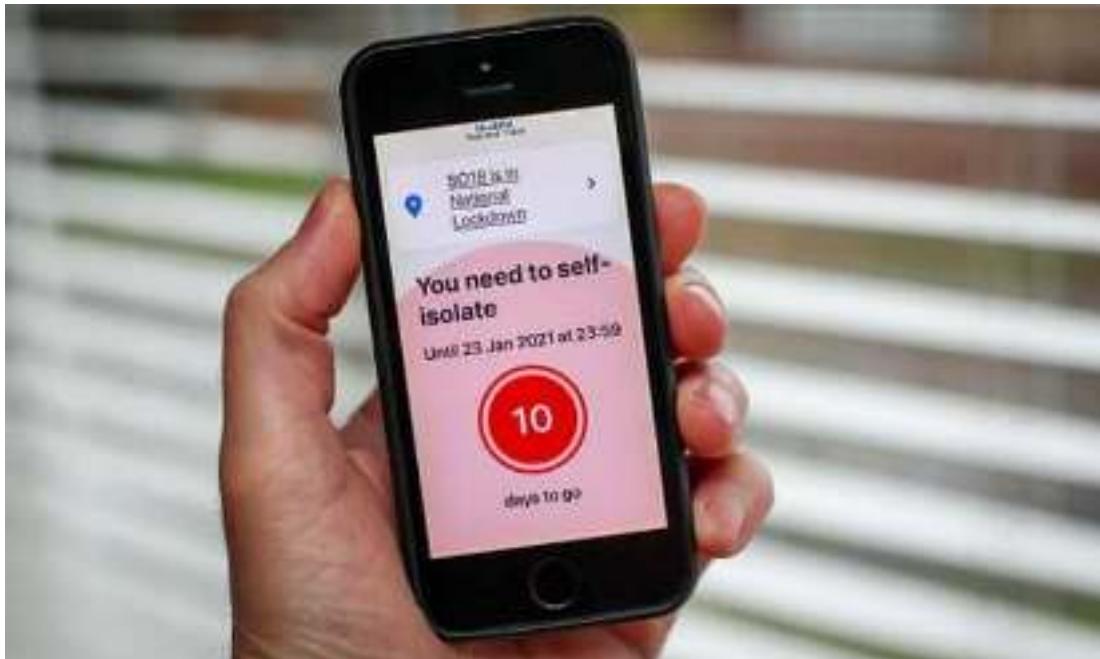
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Coronavirus

PM orders officials to look at cutting Covid isolation period to five days

Scientists urge caution as Boris Johnson launches review led by Cabinet Office

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
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Boris Johnson came out on Monday in favour of easing quarantine rules if the move was backed by scientific advice. Photograph: True Images/Alamy

[Rowena Mason](#) and [Ian Sample](#)

Mon 10 Jan 2022 14.43 EST

Boris Johnson has ordered officials to examine plans to cut Covid isolation to five days in England as scientists urged caution over the lack of evidence

to support a change.

The prime minister came out on Monday in favour of easing quarantine rules if backed by scientific advice. It is understood that the health secretary, Sajid Javid, is also open to the move if clinicians recommend it.

The Cabinet Office has been charged with leading the isolation review with input from public health officials at the UK [Health](#) Security Agency (UKHSA) and Department of Health and Social Care. Two sources told the Guardian there may be a Covid-O meeting as soon as Thursday to examine any proposed changes.

One of the options under consideration is for health and social care workers to have stricter conditions on release from isolation than the general population, it is understood.

This would be designed to avoid Covid spreading to vulnerable people in hospitals or care homes and could involve keeping isolation periods at seven to 10 days for that group, requiring more testing or extra PPE.

Political pressure has been building for a reduction in isolation after the US [cut its quarantine period](#) to five days, although the UK's system is different in that it requires isolation from the point of symptoms if they occur before a positive test.

Nadhim Zahawi, the education secretary, and Rishi Sunak, the chancellor, emerged as the first cabinet ministers to back a change if recommended by scientists, with others including Johnson and Javid following suit on Monday. Keir Starmer also said he would back a reduction in the time period if the evidence supported it.

It is less than three weeks since isolation was cut from 10 days to seven in England if a person tests negative by lateral flow on days six and seven. It is likely that any move to shorten isolation periods again to five days would have caveats about testing negative and applying to those without symptoms.

However, scientists still urged caution over the proposed move. Prof Peter Openshaw, a member of the government's New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group (Nervtag), said that while it was "reasonable" to look at reducing the isolation period to five days he had not seen evidence to back such a change.

Convincing data could come from experiments that looked at how well LFTs distinguished between people who were still shedding infectious virus and those who were not, even if they still tested positive on PCR tests, he said.

Martin McKee, a professor of European public health at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) and a member of the Independent Sage group, said he was willing to be convinced that it was safe to shorten the isolation period but evidence to support the move seemed "elusive".

"The limited available evidence, for example [a] [small Japanese study](#), provides little reassurance, suggesting that a substantial proportion of people infected with Omicron are still infectious at five days," he said. Openshaw said the study was too small to say that asymptomatic people were not infectious beyond five days.

If the isolation time were reduced, McKee said the government was right to consider extra precautions for health and social care workers.

The UKHSA estimates that 10-30% of people who self-isolate after a positive Covid test are still infectious on day six, dropping to about 5% after day 10. Their modelling suggests a similar risk of being infectious – about 5% – if people end isolation after two negative tests on days six and seven. The work underpins the existing guidance on Covid isolation, but the thinking may change as more data comes in on the Omicron variant.

Recent LSHTM modelling showed that requiring two days of negative LFTs to leave isolation reduced the risk of transmission to almost nil as the likelihood of being infectious after a series of negative lateral flow tests was very low.

Contact

“But if we find that most individuals test positive for a longer period, this may not address the staffing crisis as desired,” said Billy Quilty, an infectious disease epidemiologist who worked on the modelling. “We urgently need to know how long people are testing positive by lateral flow for on average, and how well this corresponds to the infectious period for Omicron.”

Preliminary findings from Japan’s National Institute of Infectious Diseases hint that people who have asymptomatic Omicron infections may stop shedding the virus sooner than those who have symptoms. That asymptomatic infections are typically cleared faster is not unexpected, but the study includes only 21 cases, so the results are considered tentative.

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Coronavirus

US CDC warns against travel to Canada amid rising Covid numbers

Agency elevates recommendation to ‘level four: very high’ and says Americans should avoid travel to northern neighbour



A shopping mall in Vaughan, Ontario, at the weekend. Photograph: Xinhua/Rex/Shutterstock

[Leyland Cecco in Toronto and agencies](#)

Mon 10 Jan 2022 16.45 EST

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has warned against travel to [Canada](#) as Covid-19 cases surge across the country and rampant infections threaten to once again overwhelm fragile healthcare systems.

The CDC on Monday elevated its travel recommendation to “level four: very high” for [Canada](#), telling Americans they should avoid travel to its northern neighbour. The CDC currently lists about 80 destinations worldwide at level four.

Canada has long been a popular destination for Americans but for most of the pandemic, the border between the two countries was closed to all non-essential travel. In November, fully vaccinated travellers were once again permitted to move freely to Canada and Mexico, ending the unprecedented closure.

The Canadian government did not immediately comment Monday on the CDC’s warning.

Last month, Canada’s government implored residents not to leave the country for non-essential travel.

Despite a high vaccination rate in Canada and masking requirements in major cities, the recently discovered Omicron variant has nonetheless strained provincial healthcare systems across the country. Hospital and ICU admissions have surged over the last week in Ontario, the most populous province.

Testing positivity rates have hovered around 30%, suggesting the virus is far more widespread than the daily tally of cases suggests. In neighbouring Quebec, hospitals are struggling with a shortage of beds and more than 20,000 healthcare workers are off the job due to infection.

“We are not only seeing an increase in the number of patients in our hospitals, but we are also seeing that we are losing even more staff every day,” said Christian Dubé, the Quebec health minister, last week, warning the province had not yet reached the peak of infections.

Canada, which has [422,017 active cases](#), also set a record for hospitalizations after the weekly average jumped to 5,259 – the highest of the pandemic.

Covid hospitalizations in the US reached a fresh high of 132,646, according to a Reuters tally on Monday, surpassing the record of 132,051 set in January last year.

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Heathrow airport

Heathrow demands end to Covid testing for vaccinated as 600,000 cancel flights

Airport says passengers abandoned plans because of Omicron variant and uncertainty on restrictions



Only 19.4 million passengers passed through Heathrow airport in 2021, less than a quarter of 2019 levels. Photograph: Neil Hall/EPA

[Julia Kollewe](#)

Tue 11 Jan 2022 03.25 EST

Heathrow airport has said at least 600,000 passengers cancelled their travel plans from the airport in December because of Omicron, warning aviation would take years to recover from the pandemic.

Only 19.4 million passengers passed through the airport in 2021 – less than a quarter of 2019 levels and below even 2020, the year when the Covid-19

pandemic started in March.

Heathrow said passengers cancelled their travel plans last month because of the Omicron variant and the uncertainty caused by swiftly imposed government travel restrictions. The UK's busiest airport again urged the government to remove all testing requirements for fully vaccinated passengers and to adopt a playbook for any future variants of concern that is more predictable.

The Heathrow chief executive, John Holland-Kaye, said: "There are currently travel restrictions, such as testing, on all Heathrow routes – the aviation industry will only fully recover when these are all lifted and there is no risk that they will be reimposed at short notice, a situation which is likely to be years away."

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He said there was significant doubt over the speed at which demand would recover. The International Air [Transport](#) Association, the industry body, forecasts that passenger numbers will not reach pre-pandemic levels until 2025, on the assumption travel restrictions are removed at both ends of a route and travellers have confidence the curbs will not return rapidly.

[Travel firms reported a surge in bookings](#) last week after the government relaxed travel restrictions, ditching the requirement for a pre-departure test for UK arrivals who will not have to self-isolate until they receive the result from the day two test, which has been changed from a PCR test to a cheaper lateral flow test. EasyJet and Tui said the biggest jump was in bookings to the Canary Islands.

Heathrow also called for help from the regulator, the Civil Aviation Authority, which has [approved an interim rise in landing charges](#) from £22 to £30.19 a passenger. The airport had called for higher charges of up to £43 to help recoup losses caused by the pandemic. The levy is likely to be passed directly on to travellers.

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[Opinion](#)[Conservatives](#)

Johnson promised to ‘level up’ – instead the UK’s wealth divide is worsening

[Polly Toynbee](#)



Sensible policies that would effect the necessary changes exist. But they are anathema to most Conservatives



St George's Hill in Weybridge, Surrey, the site of a protest by the Diggers in 1649. Photograph: Garry Weaser/The Guardian

Tue 11 Jan 2022 01.00 EST

“Levelling up” was always a slippery slogan. If the civil war was Boris Johnson’s period of history, he might have shunned its potential association with the Levellers and the Diggers, who dug up the fences of enclosures for the landless to plough and sow.

Their most famous digging, in the year of Charles I’s execution, was St George’s Hill in Weybridge, Surrey, now in a gated and guarded enclosure including a grand golf club where nearby house prices reach £5m. Stand there and ponder what levelling up can possibly mean to [Surrey Tories and their MPs](#).

It was a bold slogan to announce, in the context of a skyrocketing stock market and soaring UK house prices, which rose by [9.8% last year](#), the fastest rate since 2007. Meanwhile, workers were furloughed and food banks hard-pressed. This is the first postwar recession with rising property values, says the [Resolution Foundation](#). This year, on 7 January, FTSE 100 chief executives had already earned more than the median pay for all full-time workers in the UK, according to [The High Pay Centre](#).

The [latest ONS income inequality figures](#) show that the gap between rich and poor in the UK has now grown to its widest in a decade. It has “steadily increased to 36.3%” according to the ONS, which measures inequality by the Gini coefficient, whereby 0% represents total equality and 100% represents total inequality. This is awkward for Johnson the Leveller: until now Tories could claim inequality had become no worse under their government. But here is the history: the much-maligned 1970s were the most equal time on record; in the 1980s, there was a meteoric rise in top pay and wealth soared, while the lowest salaries fell behind. That great gap never narrowed again. The richest 10% of the population now own 43% of wealth, leaving the entire bottom half just 9%.

What was Leveller Johnson’s reaction to official figures revealing wealth gaps widening between north and south, old and young, white and other ethnicities? At PMQs last week [he wrongly claimed](#) that “inequality is down in this country”.

He wants “levelling up” to be purely geographic to seduce red wallers, but he should be warned: the south-east’s median household wealth rose by 43% in 16 years, while it fell in the north-east. Whatever trinkets Michael Gove crafts to decorate his levelling up white paper this month, he and Johnson are unlikely to admit the mammoth endeavour it would take to shift the dial even slightly. Sunak has [set aside](#) just £4.8bn for the levelling-up agenda, which is a teaspoon to shift a slag heap. About [£2tn was spent](#) to level up East and West Germany – and they are still only 85% of the way there.

Johnson’s cabinet is in undisciplined revolt. Jacob Rees-Mogg let it be known he led a protest against the national insurance rise and called for a cut in the civil service pay bill instead: “cut the bureaucrats” is the last refuge of dishonest politicians. Senior Tories call for the pensions triple lock to be restored. Behind them thundering hooves gallop after axing VAT and green taxes on energy bills. Insurrectionist Mark Harper, a former chief whip, says he will [declare a leadership challenge](#) if May’s local election results are bad. David Frost, the Brexit bruiser, [brays for](#) “free markets and low taxes”.

The government is reportedly panicking at a “[chicken run](#)” of red wall Tory MPs defecting to Labour, for fear of losing their seats where Labour polls

16% ahead, a [comically unlikely](#) route to securing tax or green policy cuts those MPs want.

The Tories are right to quake as the May elections near, when April really will be the cruellest month as households face the crunch of [£1,200 in extra bills](#) as council tax rises and [5 million social housing tenants](#) face the highest rent rises in a decade. Meanwhile, wages and benefits fall behind.

The hard truth is that there never was and never could be a Tory “levelling up”. There are good ways to ease the cost of living crisis, but none are Conservative ways. Any levelling must start with restoring the £20 a week removed from universal credit, but that’s unTory.

Johnson’s government could impose a windfall tax on the [six companies](#) that made [£16bn excess profits](#) out of the pandemic, says Tax Justice UK. It could tax the excessive gains made by the bizarre increase in property values, says the [Resolution Foundation](#). This weekend, the shadow chancellor, Rachel Reeves, advocate of wealth taxes, laid out Labour’s plan to cut £200 from all energy bills and £600 from those of the neediest households, paid for with [a windfall on North Sea oil and gas profits](#). The BP CEO, Bernard Looney, [unwisely said](#) energy price rises had turned his company into a “cash machine”, while the North Sea company Serica [promises its shareholders bumper returns](#). A revaluation of council tax to create a “proportional property tax” would help 75% of households, reports [Fairer Share](#). Sunak could revive his dropped plan to lift capital gains tax from 20% to 25%, which would have [brought in a handsome £14bn](#). These would be popular ways that could pay for stricken public services, but they aren’t Tory ways.

The public never voted for this hard Brexit, this graveyard of trade deals with its colossal [loss of 4% in GDP](#), depriving the Treasury of precious receipts. But the nature of this Tory cult decreed it.

“There’s no point in saying you’re Conservative,” [protests](#) a senior Tory to PoliticsHome, “unless you cut taxes.” The axe is the emblem of this [cultish](#) Tory generation. When it comes to levelling up, the dishonest contradiction of Johnson’s cakeism has finally landed, jam side down.

This article was amended on 12 January 2022. The ONS figures are for income inequality, not wealth.

- Polly Toynbee is a Guardian columnist
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How to win at Wordle using linguistic theory

[David Shariatmadari](#)



The key to success in the viral word game is understanding the rules that govern how sounds fit together



‘Wordle probes your instinct for how letters can be combined.’ Photograph: Wordle

Tue 11 Jan 2022 03.00 EST

It’s a point in 2022’s favour that, rather than violent insurrection or the misery of lockdown, most English-speaking people on the internet are currently preoccupied with a harmless word game. Harmless at the time of writing, I should say – it’s popular enough that some kind of backlash is inevitable. I’m sure any day now [Wordle](#) will be revealed as a Bad Thing and I don’t want to speculate how; I am merely here to observe that it is a) a lot of fun b) linguistically interesting, and I’d like to explain why. I may even be able to make you a bit better at it.

If you don’t already know, Wordle is a browser-based puzzle that gives you six goes at guessing a five-letter word. If your guess includes a letter that’s correct but in the wrong place, it turns yellow (more like ochre – now there’s a good starting word for you). If it includes a letter that’s correct *and* in the right place, it turns green, allowing you to build on your guesses until you hit the jackpot. The solution to the Wordle in the screenshot above is “craze”.

It's helpful to understand what Wordle is mainly testing, and I think there are a couple of things: first, your knowledge of the frequency of individual letters in the English language – that is, how common they are (think of the value of letters in scrabble – “q” is 10 because it's harder to find words that use it, whereas “e” is 1). So it would be unwise, for example, to use “hyrax” as your first guess.

More interestingly, though, it probes your instinct for how letters can be combined. Very often you find yourself thinking: I've got an “o” an “r” and a “t”. Do many English words end in “o”? Is “t” a good bet to start the word with? Should it be followed by “r”, or should there be a vowel in between them?

OK, so most of us will have a sense of how to answer these questions already, because we use words every day and have a gut feeling for which sequences are possible where, and which aren't allowed at all (“ng”, for example, is pretty common in English, but never at the beginning of a word, and “lng” never appears anywhere).

But linguistics can help a bit. There is actually a whole branch of it that looks at the way sounds enter into sequences, and it's called [phonotactics](#). Each language has its own phonotactic constraints – such as the rule that says “ng” can't start a word in English (it can, and does, in Māori and Swahili). Then there are rules that determine the possible order of consonants in a syllable: “tr” is fine at the beginning of a syllable but not the end, and the reverse is true for “rt”. “Bl” and “lb” follow the same pattern.

That's not actually a coincidence. There's a mechanism behind it called the “[sonority sequencing principle](#)” or SSP. Certain sounds, often “hard” ones like “t”, “b” or “g”, are not very sonorous, or resonant. Softer sounds like “r”, “l” and “w” are a bit more sonorous, and vowels are very sonorous. In a syllable that contains consonant clusters, the less sonorant sounds will tend to appear at the beginning, there will be a sonority peak in the form of a vowel, and then a gradual downward slope back to something less sonorous. “Blurb” is a lovely example of this, as is “twerk” or “plump”. “Rbubl”, an impossible word, violates SSP because “r” is more sonorous than “b”, and “b” is less sonorous than “l”. Within this framework, some combinations of sounds are seen way more often than others: “tr” and “pr” are everywhere,

but “dw” is pretty unusual, appearing in “dwell” and “dweeb”, with “dz” rarer still – “[adzes](#)” may be the only Wordle-able example.

Why do we see this rise and fall pattern with sonority? Basically, it makes things easier for both the speaker (the transition between sounds requires less effort if there’s a gradient rather than a sudden leap) and the hearer (syllables are more distinct when there are less sonorant, more abrupt sounds at the edges). As a bizarre [aside](#), some researchers believe that climate has an effect on the ratio of sonorant to not-so-sonorant sounds in a language. In places with higher temperatures, which can distort high frequency sounds, languages may have fewer consonants and simpler syllables as a result.

Anyway, the reason it’s useful to think about SSP when you’re Wordle-ing is because it can guide you towards more likely sequences and away from unlikely or impossible ones. There is something to beware of here, however, and it’s the fact that in English there often isn’t a one-to-one correspondence between sounds and letters. “Sh” is actually one sound, not a combination of “s” and “h” – but it’s still represented by two letters, whereas “e” can indicate no sound at all, as in “craze”, which ends phonetically with a “z”. SSP was described with sounds in mind, and doesn’t always work perfectly with letters. I await a version of Wordle for linguistic purists that uses the [international phonetic alphabet](#), but until then, a little bit of phonotactics might still be enough to give you an edge. Good luck!

- David Shariatmadari is the author of [Don’t Believe a Word: From Myths to Misunderstandings – How Language Really Works](#)
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OpinionTechnology

Want to seem younger? It's not the bags under your eyes, but way you use your phone that's the giveaway

[Zoe Williams](#)



There's no surer way to date yourself than the way you use your mobile. From leaving voicemails to leaving voice notes, each generation has a different etiquette



Are you a boomer who leaves voicemails or a millennial that sends voice notes? Photograph: Marko Geber/Getty Images

Tue 11 Jan 2022 02.00 EST

A lot of people, particularly at this self-improvement stage of the year, spend a great deal of time worrying about what makes them look old. Is it the bags under the eyes or the invisible triceps? This is daft, since, if you have a ring light or – better yet – are willing to pretend that your camera isn't working, no one needs to know what you really look like unless they live with you (and those people have a fair idea already). The giveaway now is how you use your phone. You can absolutely carbon-date yourself in a single exchange.

If you leave voicemail, that makes you a boomer, according to assorted experts. If you send a voice note, you are (spiritually, at least) a millennial, or even generation Z. This makes no sense, since, to your interlocutor, these are two identical experiences: an annoying taped message that they are burdened with listening to. However, if you query the rules, that puts you back in boomer territory.

If you trail off a text with “...”, this situates you right in the middle of generation X, but if you ask a younger acquaintance what is so wrong with

ellipsis, you doubly age yourself, first by using ellipsis and second by knowing what it is called.

Between two people over 40, switching from a text to a phone call in the middle of an exchange is a little infra dig, but not drastic. You might just be at a loose end. In the 30 to 40 bracket, to call anyone at all without scheduling it first is considered incredibly impertinent. To the under-30s, this counts as de-escalation – don’t intensify the tone, change the platform.

Boomers answer their phone the minute it rings, like it is a smoke alarm. They could be in the middle of getting knighted, or being diagnosed with a terminal illness, and they would still go: “Ooh, unknown caller ID – could be important.” There is a generation above, sometimes called the “[silent generation](#)”, where they keep their phone in a drawer, forget it is there and might call you back a month later. This used to really bug me, but now I find it ineffably charming and nostalgic, like vinyl.

- Zoe Williams is a Guardian columnist
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This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/jan/11/want-to-seem-younger-its-not-the-bags-under-your-eyes-but-way-you-use-your-phone-thats-the-giveaway>.

OpinionRace

Being Black and British means something else now I'm at an Ivy League university

[Amandla Thomas-Johnson](#)

The responses to my London accent show how UK Black culture is changing perceptions in the US – but only for some



‘The British accent remains for some the epitome of white privilege.’
Cornell University in Ithaca. Photograph: Jupiterimages/Getty Images

Mon 10 Jan 2022 11.00 EST

I hadn’t even reached Ithaca, the tiny university town in upstate New York – my home for the next six years, as I studied for a PhD – when the confusion over my Blackness and British accent began. I was ill-prepared for Matt, the skinny white American in a cap sitting beside me on the plane. “But you

don't seem like you're from London," he said (I'm from Hackney, and very proud). Matt had never been to the UK, let alone London.

This response emerges from the US's own unique history of race and class. The British accent remains for some the epitome of white privilege, reviving memories of high-born English settlers and exuding an air of aristocracy. Blackness signifies the opposite. The property of those settlers. The lowest of the low. Slaves. And so I was violating the US's time-worn prejudices. Matt was trying to put me back in my place.

As for Ithaca, its charming Queen Anne homes bear Black Lives Matter signs on their manicured lawns; and, come election night, it is a rare patch of Democrat blue in a sea of red. But, with [reports of Confederate flags](#) and Donald and Melania posters [in bedroom windows](#), I think twice when crossing the road at night and hurry when I see a police car: a reflex that is as much response to the state violence that killed George Floyd as the realities of growing up Black in London.

My mistaken identity, however, is more than simply a matter of Black and white. Late one evening, I found myself in the company of west African students and, as we ate jollof rice, one stood up to announce they had found me out: that my accent was fake. The group crowded round as my doubter sat me down and put me through a painstaking interrogation. Humoured, I went along with it. I carefully repeated several words, first in my supposedly "fake" British accent and then in my apparently "real" American one. She asked me to sing, listening out for a revealing twang in a croaky rendition of Stevie Wonder's Lately.

On another occasion, a student said she heard in my accent the British imperial soldier in his khaki uniform and pith helmet that colonised her corner of Africa. I found this especially curious because it appeared as though I was being held partly culpable for Britain's imperial atrocities. Rather, the British accent as voiced by a Black person reveals empire's underbelly. My own betrays the kidnapping of my African forebears, their trafficking to the Caribbean, a brave resistance against colonialism and my parents' eventual migration (as British citizens) to the UK as part of the Windrush generation. The cadence of the Black Londoner contains the

sounds, forged over centuries, of the colonial consequence the Sri Lankan scholar-activist Ambalavaner Sivanandan spoke of when he said: [“We are here because you were there.”](#)

However, the days when my Caribbean and American cousins could dismiss me as “English man”, an oddity with no identifiable culture, are thankfully coming to an end. Just as my generation grew up on Black American music – Biggie Smalls, 2Pac and Lauryn Hill – so a younger one has been raised on Black British artists like Skepta, KSI, Giggs, Ella Mai and Khaled Siddiq. Drake has done a lot to introduce UK artists to US audiences, while the TV series Top Boy, featuring Asher D (Ashley Walters), played its part. The direction of cultural exchange has not always been one-way traffic: Paul Gilroy notes a Black Atlantic of diasporic cultural flows that has existed for time immemorial. It’s still remarkable to me though that UK drill music – reformulated from the Chicago-born genre on a Brixton council estate – has found a cult following at my US Ivy League university.

There’s also no shortage of Americans willing to embarrass themselves with stabs at “yes bruv” and “wagwan”. It’s music to my ears when I meet up with other Londoners (I’ve counted four so far) and we lay on an accent so thick some poor kid from Nebraska doesn’t know what language we speak.

As UK Black culture continues to alter perceptions of race and class, for some Americans, it seems, Britain is starting to look and sound a lot more like [Daniel Kaluuya](#) than it does the Queen.

- Amandla Thomas-Johnson is a freelance journalist, PhD student and author of *Becoming Kwame Ture*

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2022.01.11 - Around the world

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- [‘It’s our house’ Mood in Kyiv calm despite threat of Russian attack](#)
- [Analysis Russia’s military options in Ukraine](#)

US foreign policy

US-Russia talks over Ukraine ‘useful’ but no progress made

Diplomats stress they have not made progress towards resolving fundamental disagreements



US deputy secretary of state Wendy Sherman and Russian deputy foreign minister Sergei Ryabkov attend security talks between the US and Russia, in Geneva, on Monday. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

[Julian Borger](#) in Washington and [Andrew Roth](#) in New York

Mon 10 Jan 2022 14.22 EST

US and Russian diplomats have emerged from a day of [negotiations in Geneva over the fate of Ukraine](#), describing the talks as “useful” and “very professional” – but also stressing they had not made progress towards resolving fundamental disagreements.

The two sides largely spent the eight hours of talks presenting their points of view on the situation in [Ukraine](#), currently hemmed in by some 100,000 Russian troops, and on European security in general, and deferred further debate on them to a meeting in Brussels on Wednesday between Russia and all Nato members.

“We had useful discussions and exchanges today that will help inform our way forward,” Wendy Sherman, the deputy US secretary of state and leader of the delegation in Geneva, told reporters after the day of talks.

Her Russian counterpart, Sergei Ryabkov, said: “The conversation was difficult, long, very professional, deep, concrete, without attempts to embellish or smooth over sharp corners.

“We have been left with the impression that the American side approached the Russian proposals very seriously, studied them in depth,” Ryabkov said.

[interactive](#)

Sherman also remarked on the Russians’ readiness to negotiate, saying they discussed “things that are not Russian priorities”.

She said that the issues of reciprocal limits on military exercises and missile deployments were discussed, but the US ruled out as a matter of principle, the idea of a guarantee that Ukraine would never join Nato, restating that it was the country’s sovereign right to decide.

“We were firm in pushing back on security proposals that are simply non-starters for the United States,” Sherman said. “We will not allow anyone to slam close Nato’s open door policy.”

While conceding that the talks were “not hopeless” Ryabkov confirmed Russia had made no progress in achieving its key goals, which the Kremlin laid out in December in two proposed treaties with the US and Nato, which included a pledge by the US that Nato would no longer accept new members such as Ukraine or Georgia.

In his remarks on Monday, Ryabkov said that a pledge from Nato not to expand further, to limit the deployment of weapons in countries bordering

Russia, and to roll back military activity in new Nato countries were “requirements we cannot step back from”.

Ryabkov said the two sides had continued to clash over what the agenda of future talks should be. While the US has sought to focus on technical arms control issues, Ryabkov described those as a secondary concern compared with the far thornier demand to limit Nato’s presence in central and eastern [Europe](#).

He also noted that elements of Russia’s demands, such as an effective veto on future Nato enlargement, appear to be non-starters for the US and its allies. Analysts have said that the aggressive demands made by Russia mean that the negotiations are headed for a dead-end.

“Regrettably, there are also other aspects of the same sort where we disagree: something that is absolutely necessary to us is categorically unacceptable to the Americans,” Ryabkov told the press.

He warned that Russia did not want negotiations to take months or years and insisted that Moscow would also stick to its demands for Nato to roll back its troops and infrastructure in eastern Europe to pre-1997 levels. The US presence on the alliance’s eastern flank was significantly reinforced after the Russian annexation of Crimea and covert military intervention in eastern Ukraine in 2014.

“There needs to be a breakthrough, there needs to be a real step toward Russia – a step made by Nato,” Ryabkov said. “If this doesn’t happen ... we very much don’t want to have a situation where Nato countries led by the US make that kind of mistake and once again act to undermine their own security and the security of the whole European continent.”

He said both sides were looking to the upcoming Nato-Russia Council on Wednesday as a testing ground for whether Russia can come to a new arrangement with the security alliance.

Ryabkov repeated Russian assurances that Moscow was not planning to attack Ukraine. All Russian troop movements were taking place inside the

country's borders, he said, and "there is no basis to worry about an escalation in connection to this".

On being informed of his remarks, Sherman responded: "They can prove that, in fact, they have no intention [to invade] by de-escalating and returning troops to barracks."

Over the weekend, open source investigators had identified new signs that Russia's military buildup on the border with Ukraine was probably continuing.

Videos posted on social networks such as TikTok showed Russian armor and artillery being transported by rail through cities along the Trans-Siberian Railway, suggesting that reinforcements may be traveling toward Russia's border with Ukraine from nearly 4,000 miles away.

Those forces included main battle tanks, armored personnel carriers, and rocket artillery, all elements of what could form new battalion tactical groups (BTGs) that could launch an attack across the border. Russia has stationed more than 50 BTGs near Ukraine, a considerable portion of the Russian armed forces' total.

Sherman said Russia had a stark choice to make.

"If Russia walks away from the diplomatic path, it may well be quite apparent that they were never serious about pursuing diplomacy," she said.

The Nato-Russia meeting in Brussels on Wednesday will be followed by a session of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, in Vienna, which will be the only one of the three diplomatic venues at which Ukraine will be directly represented in talks with Russia. European states who are not Nato members will also be represented, including Finland and Sweden who could reassess membership if Russia launches a new attack on Ukraine.

Sherman said that Washington would assess the whole week's diplomacy before deciding on the future direction of talks.

“We will have discussions with our allies and partners in the days ahead and at the end of this week, informed by those discussions, the US and Russian governments will discuss the way forward,” she said.

At the Geneva talks, Sherman repeated the US threat to impose unprecedented sanctions in the event of an invasion of Ukraine.

“Certain threats, or at the very least warnings, were made to us,” Ryabkov confirmed, but suggested they were unnecessary because Russia had no intention of launching an invasion.

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Ukraine

‘It’s our house’: mood in Kyiv calm despite threat of Russian attack

Residents in Ukraine’s capital defiant, with many ready to fight – but they also have other concerns



Demonstrators at an anti-Putin rally on Sunday in Kyiv, Ukraine.

Photograph: Sergey Dolzhenko/EPA



Luke Harding in Kyiv

Mon 10 Jan 2022 11.53 EST

At weekends Yevgeny Tereshchenko goes to the woods outside Kyiv and practises his shooting. “We need to be ready, morally and physically,” Tereshchenko explained, showing off a video in which he springs athletically into action and fires a rifle several times.

A Ukrainian army officer until two years ago, Tereshchenko is preparing for a possible Russian attack. If Moscow does launch a further military operation against [Ukraine, assuming diplomatic talks fail this week](#), he and his friends are ready to fight, he said. “There are a lot of us. It’s our house, our country,” he pointed out.

Tereshchenko conceded that Russia has a formidable army, with 100,000 troops massed on the border. It could swiftly overrun much of [Ukraine](#) “in a Blitzkrieg”, he said. But he predicted that should the Kremlin seize new territory it would quickly find itself embroiled in a bloody and costly partisan war.

“There will be many Russian casualties,” he anticipated. “The Kremlin can seize runways, demand concessions. But they will find it hard to hold cities.

During the day they will see a civilian population. At night we will attack them with weapons and grenades.”

As Russia and the US [sat down on Monday for talks in Geneva](#), with Nato-Russia negotiations due to take place on Wednesday, the mood in the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, was calm. Snow had settled for the first time this winter on the city’s cobbled boulevards and fairytale art nouveau mansions.



A Ukrainian soldier at the line of separation from pro-Russian rebels in the Donetsk region on Sunday. Photograph: Andriy Dubchak/AP

Some people, like Tereshchenko, were following political events keenly. Others were doing their best to avoid them. One local journalist said she had gone on vacation, reasoning that it made sense to take a break now before a possible Russian attack later this month.

“Actually I had an exam today. I’m focused on normal life,” said Nikita, a 20-year-old IT student sitting in a downtown coffee bar.

“This situation has been going on since 2014. You can’t live under constant pressure. You adapt.”

His friend Diana admitted: “I’m trying not to think about it. It’s too much negative.

“Yes, the situation with Vladimir Putin is a bit scary. But we have so many other problems in Ukraine, including Covid. To think about one more is hard,” she said, before jumping in an Uber.

Others were fatalistic in the face of Kremlin threats. Last summer Putin [published an essay in which he asserted Ukraine and Russia were “one people”](#). He wants Nato to rule out membership for Ukraine and effectively to return eastern Europe to a Russian zone of influence.



Russian troops take part in drills at a firing range in the Rostov region of southern Russia last month. Photograph: AP

Would there be more war? “What Putin thinks he generally does,” Tatiana, a middle-aged pharmacist, said. “I wouldn’t describe myself at this moment as an optimist.” She added: “Some of the things he has written about history are ridiculous. He twists things for his own purposes. He lies.”

Tereshchenko said he had fought in Ukraine’s eastern Donbas region, [where Moscow-backed separatists run their own mini-fiefdoms from the cities of Donetsk and Luhansk](#). He said there were some “traitors” active in Ukrainian politics, who would be willing to work with Russia in the event of a takeover.

Ukraine and Russia are different countries with different traditions – one democratic, the other strongly autocratic and repressive, he said. He reeled off a series of dates, starting with 1648 when Ukrainian Cossacks allied with Crimean Tatars to throw out their Polish overlords.

The rebellion led to the creation of a hetmanate, a “democratic system” in which Ukrainians voted for a military chief or hetman. At the same time, eastern Ukraine became part of the Russian empire. Over the next two centuries Ukrainian traditions, culture and language were eroded, he said.

Ukrainian statehood was too precious and too hard won to be sacrificed once again to Russian ambitions, he suggested. “There are groups of us in every town. Resistance won’t stop.”

Tereshchenko was scathing about the US-Russia discussions taking place in Switzerland. Ukraine’s president Volodymyr Zelensky was not at the table. “It’s true our leadership is weak. But how can you decide the future of a state without the state present?” he said.

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Ukraine

What would be Russia's military options in Ukraine?

Analysis: Military advantage is overwhelming but full invasion and occupation are different matter



A Russian multiple rocket launcher is fired during military drills near Orenburg, Russia, in December 2021. Photograph: Russian Defence Ministry Press Service/EPA

[Dan Sabbagh](#) Defence and security editor

Mon 10 Jan 2022 11.44 EST

A full invasion of [Ukraine](#), with the aim of pacifying the capital, Kyiv, would result in Vladimir Putin starting a war on a scale not seen since Iraq in 2003 – prompting western experts to question whether a lasting Russian victory could be achieved.

Estimates suggest about 100,000 Russian troops are massing near Ukraine's borders. Yet, experts following the crisis closely say that for an invasion of the whole country that number would need to nearly double again, and would almost certainly involve forces passing through Belarus.

Dr Fred Kagan, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, said: "This will likely require an invasion on a scale not dissimilar to 2003, somewhere between 150,000 and 200,000 troops."

He predicted that a force that size could be in position by the end of January. About 175,000 US and other allied troops were involved in the invasion of Iraq.

Is occupation possible?

Kagan, who co-authored a series of reports that led to the 2007 US troop surge in Iraq, said the real challenge for Putin was how an almost certainly hostile Ukraine may be held by the Russians if there was an insurgency after the capture of Kyiv.

A determined operation would require one counter-insurgent per 20 inhabitants, said Kagan in a paper he co-wrote with other experts from the [Institute for the Study of War](#). That "would suggest a counter-insurgency force requirement on the order of 325,000 personnel" would be needed to hold Kyiv and Ukraine's major cities in the south and east, they added.

Ukraine has an army of 145,000, according to the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS),, but there are also [an estimated 300,000 veterans](#) of the low-intensity conflict in the Donbas region of the country that started in 2014. Polling says a [third of Ukraine's citizens would be willing to take up "armed resistance"](#).

Burnt by the Soviet experience in Afghanistan, Russia generally viewed US attempts to hold countries against insurgents as a mistake. "Putin will have studied what happened to the US in Iraq after 2003. The difficulties of dealing with partisan activity keeps my mind open to the possibility that the Russian president does not intend to invade and conquer Ukraine," Kagan told the Guardian.

[military options](#)

Russia's advantages

Nevertheless, Moscow has overwhelming advantages in terms of an initial invasion, most notably in terms of rocketry and airpower. Ukraine faces potentially terrifying consequences, in an all-out assault, which could shatter a country's morale and prompt millions to flee west, rather than fight.

Rob Lee, a former US marine and fellow with the Foreign Policy Research Institute, said: "Russia has the capacity to devastate Ukraine's military units from afar with weapons such as Iskander ballistic missiles. We almost never see modern weaponry like this unleashed; it gives Russia the capability to inflict thousands of casualties a day."

A military assault will also have a transformational effect on international opinion. Civilian casualties in considerable numbers are almost certain, amounting to an operation unlike almost any Putin has conducted before, including the war with Ukraine in 2014, where responsibility for military action was denied.

Dr Samir Puri, a senior fellow at the IISS, who has previously spent a year as a conflict monitor in Ukraine, said: "It is hard to imagine a full invasion without the use of airpower, but that is such a huge threshold for Russia to cross."

Much has been made about Ukraine's recent purchase of weapons from the west, but the Javelin antitank missiles have a range of about 1.5 miles (2.5km) and can only delay an mechanised advance.

The country has a relatively modest number of Turkish TB2 drones for now, half a dozen or a dozen, tiny compared with Russia's thousands of tanks, the core of any ground force.

Capturing Kyiv

Russia also has to decide how to deal with Ukraine's cities, principally Kyiv, with a population of 3 million, but also Kharkiv in the north-east, with a

population of almost 1.5 million. “Urban warfare is hard, it does fearful damage and Russia struggled with it in Aleppo,” Kagan said, citing Putin’s intervention in Syria’s civil war.

Speculation about Russia’s plans – based in part on [apparent leaks published in the German newspaper Bild](#) – suggests the Kremlin would surround Kharkiv and ultimately Kyiv, cutting off supplies, hoping in a medieval fashion they will surrender. That may be less violent but would still undercut the idea of Russia acting as a unifying force.

Nor is encircling Kyiv easy, western analysts say. The key points of the city, including the presidential palace, are to the west of the readily defensible Dneiper River. The first bridges south of the city are 60 miles away; a dam four miles north has turned the stretch of the river that runs to the border with Belarus into a lake.

Exploiting Belarus

The simplest way across the river is to cross in a safe territory – Belarus to the north. That would require Minsk’s support, which would be highly probable given its recent rapprochement with Moscow. In a speech to mark Orthodox Christmas on 7 January, the Belarusian president, Alexander Lukashenko, said his country would [“do everything” to take back Ukraine](#).

Russian mechanised forces would aim to encircle Kyiv from the west. One route is to cross the Pripet marshes, which freeze in winter, and the Chernobyl area (not deemed a great complication for a modern military able to operate in a radiation zone).

An alternative would be to strike from further west in Belarus, such as the Baranovichy training area. A key sign that Russia is ready to act, Kagan said, will be if “Russian mechanised forces deploy to Belarus”.

Even if Putin does not invade, a permanent Russian military garrison in Belarus would have advantages to the Kremlin, as an potential threat not just to Ukraine but to the Baltic states to the north. It would “create a large military base that would give Russia air dominance over Nato’s eastern

flank”, said Orysia Lutsevych, a research fellow at foreign policy thinktank Chatham House.

Putin’s military alternatives

The risks inherent in invasion and occupation leave experts such as Dr Taras Kuzio, an associate fellow with the Henry Jackson Society, arguing in a newly released paper that an all-out attack “the least likely” of the military scenarios available to Putin. Instead, the Ukraine expert sees three other options.

In the first, Russia simply occupies and annexes the part of the Donbas controlled by separatists, a partial invasion mirroring the 2008 Georgia crisis. That began, Kuzio wrote, after “repeated military provocations” by proxies “led to intervention by Georgian troops”, giving Putin a pretext to respond.

A second is to enlarge the occupied territory with a land corridor to previously annexed Crimea, capturing the coastal city of Mariupol. Russia could also seize other key industrial sites and try to degrade Ukraine’s nearby military. “They could take out Turkish TB2 drones and artillery in the Donbas” in an overt, limited campaign designed to weaken Ukraine, said Lee.

A final option, said Kuzio, is the “revival of the 2014 ‘New Russia’ project” that would try “to cut Ukraine off from the Black Sea”. This would amount to seizing the south, capturing the port of Odessa and perhaps the industrial city of Dnipro.

Taking Odessa, population 1 million, would probably require a dramatic air and naval operation, using paratroopers from Crimea followed by marines landing on nearby beaches.

Of those options, annexing occupied Donbas would almost certainly be popular in Russia. However, it would be an extremely limited response given the Kremlin’s insistence that its chief goal, [as most recently repeated by Sergei Ryabkov](#), Russia’s deputy foreign minister, is “the non-expansion

of Nato, the non-accession of Ukraine, Georgia and other countries to the alliance” – raising concerns that a military campaign is probable.

“You have to take a step back and ask what Russia’s political goals are,” said Lee. “If Russia wants to force a change in Ukraine’s political orientation, you can see why the Kremlin might look at military options.”

Profile

Armed forces of Russia and Ukraine, compared

Show

Russia

Army: 280,000, including 2,840 tanks and 6,920 fighting vehicles; 150 Iskander ballistic missiles; 4,684+ artillery; 1,520 surface-to-air batteries.

Navy (just the Black Sea fleet): 6 submarines; 6 warships; 35 patrol ships.

Air force: 1,160 combat planes, 394 attack helicopters, 714 air defence systems.

Ukraine

Army: 145,000, including 858 tanks and 1,184 fighting vehicles; 90 Tochka ballistic missiles; 1,818 artillery; 75+ surface-to-air batteries.

Navy: 1 warship, 12 patrol and coastal ships.

Air force: 125 combat planes, 35 attack helicopters; 6 medium TB2 drones; 322 air defence systems.

Source: International Institute of Strategic Studies

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- [James Slack PM's former aide apologises for Downing Street party held in his honour](#)
- [No 10 Inquiry will reveal 'farcical' culture, say Whitehall sources](#)

Boris Johnson

Renewed calls for PM to resign over parties on eve of Philip funeral

Queen followed Covid rules at husband's funeral, sitting alone in face mask away from rest of family

- [**Coronavirus – latest updates**](#)
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The Queen sits alone at the funeral of her husband, the Duke of Edinburgh, in St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle, in Berkshire. Photograph: Yui Mok/PA

[Lucy Campbell](#)

Fri 14 Jan 2022 03.48 EST

Further allegations [of Downing Street parties](#) taking place on the eve of the Duke of Edinburgh's socially distanced funeral have been met with widespread anger across the political spectrum, bookending a turbulent week for Boris Johnson, who is facing renewed calls to resign.

Prince Philip's funeral took place in the private chapel at Windsor Castle on Saturday 17 April, the day after two leaving dos were reportedly held at No 10 at a time when such mixing was banned. The Queen, in mourning black, wearing a face mask and [sitting alone to maintain social distancing](#), became one of the defining images of the national lockdown.

The Liberal Democrat leader, Sir Ed Davey, and Labour's deputy leader, Angela Rayner, were among those to condemn the allegations after the wealth of sacrifices made for the funeral to go ahead.

In April last year, the country was under coronavirus restrictions and in a period of national mourning after Philip's death. Carefully laid plans for his funeral, which had been revised over many years, were abandoned owing to the pandemic, with public elements unable to take place.

Though some lockdown restrictions were [relaxed in England on 12 April](#), there were [no changes to the rules on social contact](#) and people were still instructed to maintain a distance from each other of 2 metres. Outdoor gatherings, including in gardens, were limited to six people or two households, and people were told they must not socialise indoors with anyone with whom they did not live or with whom they had not formed a support bubble.

How did Covid restrictions impact Philip's funeral?

- Covid restrictions had a substantial impact on the proceedings, with the guest list trimmed from 800 to 30.
- The Queen attended the funeral wearing a face mask and socially distanced from the rest of her family, who were seated in their respective household bubbles, at the service in St George's Chapel at Windsor Castle.

- Those in the funeral procession were required to put on face masks before entering the chapel.
 - Bottles of hand sanitiser featured alongside the traditional dressing of floral arrangements and family wreaths.
 - Original plans for military processions through London or Windsor were scrapped, with the royal family asking the public not to gather at the castle or other royal residences.
 - The choir was also limited to four singers, while the few guests were banned from singing in line with Covid regulations.
-

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Former Covid taskforce head ‘sorry’ for holding Cabinet Office leaving party ‘with drinks’ in December 2020 – as it happened

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Boris Johnson

PM's former aide apologises for Downing Street party held in his honour

James Slack says sorry for hurt caused by party during Covid lockdown, on the evening before Prince Philip's funeral

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
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James Slack said the events surrounding the party had been referred to Sue Gray's investigation. Photograph: James Veysey/Rex/Shutterstock

*[Peter Walker](#) Political correspondent
[@peterwalker99](#)*

Fri 14 Jan 2022 03.00 EST

Boris Johnson's former head of communications has apologised for the "anger and hurt" created after it emerged that a leaving party was held for him in Downing Street during Covid restrictions last year.

According [to the Daily Telegraph](#), the event in honour of James Slack, now deputy editor of the Sun, was one of two social events in No 10 on the evening of 16 April, the day before Prince Philip's funeral, while indoor social mixing was still barred.

"I wish to apologise unreservedly for the anger and hurt caused," Slack said in a statement. "This event should not have happened at the time that it did. I am deeply sorry, and take full responsibility."

Slack added that he could not comment further as the matter had been referred to an investigation into a string of alleged parties held at Downing Street and elsewhere in government amid lockdown, led by the senior official Sue Gray.

Slack was the prime minister's official spokesperson under Theresa May and Johnson, before becoming Johnson's director of communications, holding both jobs as a civil servant rather than as a political appointee.

According to the Telegraph, another leaving event was held the same evening for one of Johnson's personal photographers. About 30 people attended the events in total, witnesses told the paper, which later combined in the No 10 garden.

The latter event, initially held in the Downing Street basement, appeared the more raucous of the two, with loud music reportedly played.

According to one attender, a staff member was sent with a suitcase to the Co-op store on the Strand, a short walk away, returning with the case filled with bottles of wine.

Both groups reportedly moved outside at about midnight, with drinking carrying on into the early hours of the morning. While in the garden one person broke a swing belonging to Johnson's infant son, Wilfred, a witness told the paper.

Philip's funeral took place in the private chapel at Windsor Castle the next day, Saturday 17 April, with [the Queen sitting alone to maintain social distancing](#).

Boris Johnson was not at Downing Street that evening, having gone to the prime ministerial country retreat, Chequers, on the Thursday evening and remaining into the weekend.

Asked about the events, the security minister, Damian Hinds, said he was "shocked", and that Gray should look into what happened.

He told BBC Breakfast: "This was a particularly solemn time for our whole nation, as Her Majesty the Queen was mourning Prince Philip, and I was shocked by these allegations."

At the time, England was [in stage two](#) of the government's gradual relaxation from lockdown. Up to six people or two families could meet outside, while indoors, people could socialise only with their household or support bubble.

The claims are likely to heap yet more pressure on the prime minister, who [is facing calls to resign](#), including from some of his own MPs, after [admitting he took part in an event](#) in the No 10 garden in May 2020, during the first Covid lockdown.

The reports were met with fury across the political spectrum as more Conservative MPs called for Johnson to be deposed as leader.

Labour's deputy leader, Angela Rayner, tweeted: "I have no words for the culture and behaviours at No 10 and the buck stops with the PM."

A Downing Street spokesperson said, in relation to Slack's departure: "On this individual's last day he gave a farewell speech to thank each team for the work they had done to support him, both those who had to be in the office for work and on a screen for those working from home."

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/jan/14/pms-ex-press-official-james-slack-apologises-for-downing-street-party-held-in-his-honour>

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Boris Johnson

No 10 party inquiry will reveal ‘farcical’ culture, say Whitehall sources

Investigation by Sue Gray expected to unearth more lockdown drinks events in government buildings

- [Met police won’t investigate alleged No 10 lockdown party](#)



Boris Johnson clapping for the NHS and social care workers outside No 10 on 21 May 2020, the day after the ‘bring your own booze’ event.
Photograph: Mark Thomas/REX/Shutterstock

[Rajeev Syal](#), [Heather Stewart](#) and [Peter Walker](#)

Thu 13 Jan 2022 15.16 EST

An inquiry into lockdown parties in Downing Street, which could determine the fate of [Boris Johnson](#), is expected to lay bare a “farcical” culture of

drinking and impromptu socialising, with little oversight from senior officials, the Guardian understands.

Whitehall sources said the investigation, overseen by the senior civil servant Sue Gray, was also likely to unearth other drinks events across government buildings as special advisers and officials were encouraged to “come clean” about breaches of lockdown rules.

Gray’s report is being anxiously awaited by Conservative MPs, some of whom have already called for Johnson to resign after he was forced to apologise for attending a “bring your own booze” gathering in the No 10 garden on 20 May 2020 – claiming he [believed it was a “work event”](#).

The prime minister’s fate may now lie in the hands of Gray, who is understood to still be gathering evidence amid claims from Labour that Johnson’s explanation and half-apology was unbelievable.

Johnson ducked out of a public engagement in Lancashire on Thursday after a close family member tested positive for Covid.

While self-isolation for contacts of coronavirus cases is no longer mandatory, Johnson’s spokesperson said the prime minister [would heed guidance to limit outside contacts](#) as much as possible for seven days after the test.

“In line with the guidance, he’s reducing contact. He’ll be working from No 10, doing daily tests and limiting contact with others both outside No 10 and indeed inside No 10 as well,” they said.

Several Tory MPs, including the party’s leader in Scotland, Douglas Ross, said Johnson should resign immediately after he gave his account of the lockdown-busting drinks event.

It emerged on Thursday that Johnson will not be involved [in this spring’s Scottish Conservative conference](#). A Scottish Tory source said: “I don’t see a way he could be involved really.”

Few other MPs have so far publicly joined Ross's call for Johnson to go; but many are now awaiting the findings of Gray's investigation before deciding whether they can continue to back the prime minister.

Sources said that Gray's team – based in the Cabinet Office – was still gathering evidence about the drinks parties in Whitehall. These include an alleged Christmas party and a Zoom quiz in December 2020, as well as gatherings in the garden on 15 and 20 May.

01:59

Downing Street party claims: what May 2020 looked like for the rest of England – video

It is understood that the team are examining the culture and the management structures within No 10. Sources said the inquiry's staff believe that No 10's structures are "farcical".

The disclosures, which will call into question the management of No 10 by Johnson and the cabinet secretary Simon Case, come as Johnson's cabinet allies took to the airwaves to defend him.

The culture secretary, Nadine Dorries, endorsed the idea that the prime minister might not have actually done anything wrong, saying his apology had been over what the public "perceived had happened".

She also argued that it was a good public health decision to have used the Downing Street garden for gatherings.

"I don't accept that he's in the wrong," Dorries told Sky News. "What I support the prime minister is in his apology. He said very clearly that he understood the upset and the anger that people felt at what they perceived had happened, and what had been reported. But what we all want is the inquiry to conclude.

Priti Patel, another staunch Johnson loyalist, appeared to argue the event in the No 10 garden had been part of a "24/7 government working night and day at the height of a pandemic".

“He was thanking staff,” the home secretary told Sky. “Let’s not forget that was in May 2020, at the time when there was a lot of work.”

Gray’s inquiry will assess why no one saw fit to stop the 20 May gathering, after the prime minister’s principal private secretary, Martin Reynolds, sent out an invitation to staff to “socially distanced drinks”.

Among the questions that will be asked is why no one felt able to “blow the whistle” on Reynold’s party invitations, even though several people believed that they broke Covid regulations.

The report is expected to lay out a series of factual statements about the drinks parties, when and where they took place, how many people attended them, and, crucially, their purpose. This will then be compared with the guidelines at the time.

In theory, Gray could recommend that Johnson is investigated under the ministerial code. But if she does so, Johnson would have to decide whether to launch an inquiry into his own alleged rule breaches.

The Metropolitan police confirmed in a statement that they would not launch their own investigation into events in Downing Street in May 2020 unless Gray found evidence of rule-breaking.

“The Met has ongoing contact with the Cabinet Office in relation to this inquiry. If the inquiry identifies evidence of behaviour that is potentially a criminal offence it will be passed to the Met for further consideration.”

One former cabinet minister suggested that even if the prime minister is not explicitly condemned in Gray’s report, Tory MPs could move against him, with key council elections looming. “We’re heading for an absolute hammering in May. I think colleagues will want to act before then,” they said.

Gray’s appointment to head the inquiry came amid a panicky atmosphere in Downing Street, insiders claim. Case stood down in mid-December after allegations emerged of a drinks event taking place within his own office.

[contact us](#)

A Tory adviser who attended meetings in Downing Street during the pandemic contrasted the lax Covid safety regime in the building with the much tougher rules in place elsewhere across government that saw many people working from home.

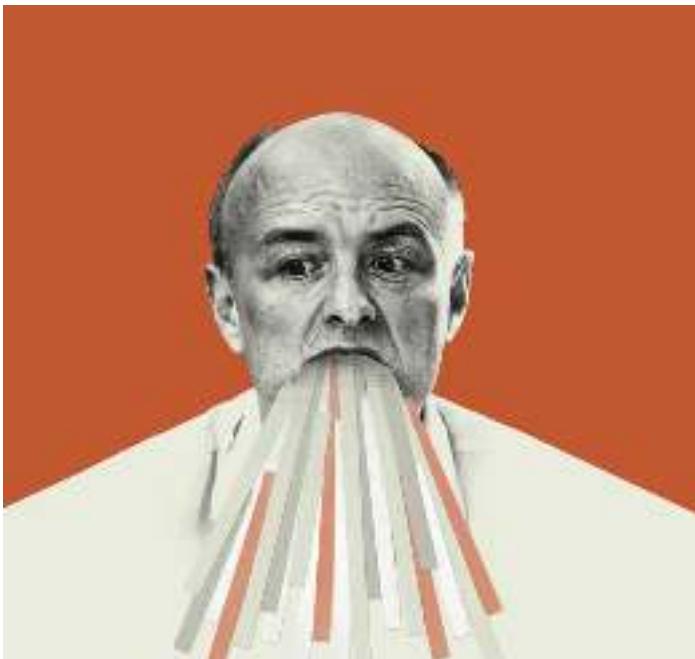
“In No 10 they were told they had to be in: it was a totally different attitude. That was why Covid ripped through that building. There was no testing, there were no bubbles. You can understand why the party happened when you understand that broader culture.”

Another senior Tory who previously worked in Downing Street said opening a bottle of wine at the desk was not unusual if people were working into the evening, particularly on a Friday.

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2022.01.14 - Spotlight

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- 'I don't think we should talk about me' A visit to David Strathairn's own Nightmare Alley
- 'I need to not be violent to myself' Big Thief on pain, healing and their intense musical bond
- You be the judge Should my daughter stop hogging the television?



Illustrations: Joan Wong/The Guardian

Intoxicating, insidery and infuriating: everything I learned about Dominic Cummings from his £10-a-month blog

Illustrations: Joan Wong/The Guardian

Since he left Downing Street, Boris Johnson's former adviser has been setting out his worldview – and settling scores – on his Substack. Could it help us understand the most notorious man in British politics?

by [David Runciman](#)

Fri 14 Jan 2022 03.00 EST

Who is the most interesting writer about politics in Britain today? No question, it's [Dominic Cummings](#). [The Substack blog](#) he started in June last year is not cheap – £10 a month for an erratic and irregular output via email

– but it's worth it. Whenever and whatever he does post, you can be sure it will contain plenty of extraordinary ideas, unexpected insights and eye-popping indiscretions. Cummings appears to have little or no filter on his thoughts, with the result that his writing offers as clear a view into the dark heart of contemporary politics as is available anywhere. He has no time for any of the usual pieties. What you get is a voracious intellect – Cummings is interested in everything from 19th-century German history to quantum physics – coupled with a tireless curiosity about anything that lies outside the conventional wisdom. It's a revelation.

As Boris Johnson's former right-hand man – and the architect of Brexit and the Tories' 2019 election landslide – Cummings is nothing if not divisive. Since [Johnson fired him in late 2020](#), Cummings has turned on the prime minister and made it his mission to force him out of office. If your enemy's enemy is your friend, this makes it hard for many of Cummings' former critics to know what to think of him now.

And who is the most boring writer about politics in Britain today? That too is Dominic Cummings. His blog is exhausting to read – too long, too aggressive, too inward-looking. He rarely bothers to explain who's who in his cast list of spads (government special advisers), physicists and tech gurus. Anyone in the know will already know, and everyone else should be grateful simply to be allowed inside the loop. His hobbyhorses are ridden to death. Nearly a quarter of all his posts have been fanboy notes on [Lee Kuan Yew](#)'s book about how he made modern Singapore: an interesting story, but by the time Cummings has finished you'll never want to hear about it again.

Sign up to our Inside Saturday newsletter for an exclusive behind the scenes look at the making of the magazine's biggest features, as well as a curated list of our weekly highlights.

His score-settling is equally relentless. Even if you find it hard to feel sorry for Boris Johnson's wife, Carrie, you'll wish Cummings would leave her alone, if only to vary the message a bit (she's crackers, Johnson is frightened of her, it'll all come crashing down in the end). He likes to recommend further reading on his favourite subjects, but too often that means links to things he has written himself, as though we needed more of his views on Brexit, or Whitehall dysfunction, or the merits of startup culture. He has a

habit of wanting to remind us of what he got right, and what other people got wrong. Which turns out to be almost everything.

I study politics for a living, and as a professor at Cambridge I'm a member of the chattering classes Cummings despises – so I signed up for direct access to his thoughts with mixed feelings. On the one hand, I was excited by what he had to say once freed from the shackles of government responsibility. On the other, I felt slightly queasy at the thought of all the bile heading my way. More than six months on, neither feeling has gone away. Cummings' blog is intoxicating. And slightly puke-making.

When it began, most early subscribers – including me – probably expected that the cheap thrill of an insider spilling the beans would be its selling point. But the first post established that Cummings was after something else, too: a way of reimagining how the world of politics might work. As he describes it: “This is about the intersection of: selection, education & training for high performance; prediction; science & technology; communication; high-stakes decision-making in politics/government.” Cummings offered to help readers who were confused and in need of assistance. For instance: “You are a government minister/CEO-type figure in an organisation and want to shift from the old world of PowerPoint + Excel to: code + prediction/keeping score + dashboards (and dashboard of dashboards!)”. If so, Dom's your man! Still, there's keeping the score, then there's settling scores – and Cummings does plenty of both.

The two Cummingses on display in his writing – fascinating Dom and infuriating Dom – are like a mirror image of the picture he paints of his former boss in No 10. Cummings says there are two Boris Johnsons: what he calls Boris-Normal (Boris-N) and Boris-Self-Aware (Boris-SA). Boris-N is a lazy, self-indulgent chancer. He has no interest in policy, doesn't bother to read his papers, has no idea how to chair a meeting, and cannot enter a room without looking for the exit routes. This Boris only cares about his own prospects and will do whatever it takes to bolster them. But that means that occasionally, when things get really sticky, a different Boris emerges. Boris-SA knows he's hopelessly out of his depth and will do whatever he is told to survive.

This happened at the end of the 2016 Brexit campaign, when the previously shambolic Johnson was willing to follow the Cummings playbook to the letter once he realised his career was on the line. It also happened in the summer of 2019, when Johnson, terrified he would be the shortest-lived PM in modern British history, asked Cummings to bail him out, regardless of the cost. Boris-N cares obsessively about what people think of him. Boris-SA couldn't care less how much he is mocked, so long as he ends up on the winning side. Cummings believes Boris-SA disappeared, possibly for good, in December 2019, once he had a thumping majority in the Commons and Carrie whispering in his ear about what the press was saying about them (that he was Dom's puppet, and she was his Lady Macbeth). Cummings thinks that once anyone starts caring about what the idiot newspapers are saying, the game is up.

Dom-Normal (Dom-N) is the opposite of Boris-N. He is intensely hard-working, obsessive about detail, always focused on the goal to be achieved. He has extraordinary gifts, not least his ability to think his way into the mindset of his opponents. Dom-N is self-aware about his limitations, including the gaps in his knowledge, and will do whatever it takes to compensate for them. He doesn't care how he comes across so long as he gets results. But when he feels himself under attack or misunderstood, a different Cummings emerges. Dom-Can't-Be-Wrong (Dom-CBW) is unable to resist overstating his case, rubbishing the alternatives and ranting about the stupidity of others. Most of the time Dom-N is in charge, which is what makes his blog so rewarding to read. But Dom-CBW is never far away and tends to emerge when the chips are down.

Whenever Johnson – or ‘the Trolley’ – veers catastrophically off track, Cummings can’t resist an analysis of what a cock-up it’s been

The whole world saw this after his [bonkers and lockdown-breaking trip to Barnard Castle](#) in April 2020, when a man whose career is built on his ability to think outside the box was unable to think beyond his own foolish self-justifications. It happened again after his pompous [post-resignation interview](#) with the BBC’s political editor, Laura Kuenssberg, in July 2021, which led to criticism that he had ideas above his station, and was followed by his most whiny and least interesting blogpost. Having come across as

both paranoid and absurdly self-important – apparently it was up to him and his little coterie to decide whether Johnson could be allowed to continue as prime minister after he had just won an election, when they twigged he was now going to listen to Carrie more than to them – Cummings needed to explain to his subscribers why giving the interview was still exactly the right thing to do. Apparently, he sees it as his job to “explain the craziness”, without being willing to explain his deep complicity in it. Johnson is lazy and self-serving except when he has no choice. Laziness is his default. Not Cummings. He only becomes lazy and self-serving when he can’t help himself.

The supreme importance of hard work is a recurring theme on his Substack. He believes that a willingness to put in insane hours, sacrifice a home life, and keep coming back for more is a hallmark of any successful campaign. It’s one of the reasons he is so contemptuous of the operation around Keir Starmer: they just don’t want it badly enough. When he was in Downing Street, Cummings made it clear to his staff that work/life balance was for people who were better off out of politics altogether. To win you must outlast your opponents. He thinks you can tell a winning campaign by whether the office is still humming at two in the morning and at the weekends. Clinton had it. Blair had it. Vote Leave had it. Successful startups have it. But it’s almost nowhere to be found in Whitehall or in the modern Labour party, where downtime is celebrated as a sign of a healthy approach to problem-solving. Cummings thinks downtime is for political losers. It’s what made the chillaxing David Cameron easy meat for him in the Brexit campaign.



That said, his blog does not feel like the work of a man who is fully committed to the enterprise, despite the large sums of money it must be bringing in (Substack doesn't release the figures, only that there are "thousands" of subscribers, which means Cummings must be making hundreds of thousands a year). Posts are promised but never appear, deadlines are missed, and in his ask-me-anything sessions with subscribers he only bothers to answer the odd question that grabs his attention. (One way to get his attention is to tell him he was right about something, despite his claim [in his launch post](#) that he is "interested in the best arguments against what I say".) What he really seems to like is suggestions for further reading. Meanwhile, great wafts of subscribers commenting on other subscribers' comments pass him by. It is hard to know whether he's reading these or just ignoring them. The result is that there is an odd, vicarious thrill when he does step in; even as a bystander you feel, *ooh, Dom has noticed.*

He often hints that the reason he can't give the blog his full attention is that he is caught up in private meetings with unspecified people planning a new future for British politics. These are people, by implication, with serious money, serious influence and ready to make a serious time-commitment. Unlike his regular subscribers. We are just hangers-on, but that is also part of the thrill. I have to admit I get excited when a new post pings into my inbox,

because you never know – is this the one where he finally explains what his plan is, how he is going to upend the establishment?

Cummings is not immune to the news cycle. Whenever Johnson – or “the Trolley” as Cummings has nicknamed him, often using the emoji for a supermarket trolley – “smashes from one side of the aisle to the other” and veers catastrophically off track, he can’t resist another analysis of what a cock-up it’s been. For the most part, though, he marches to the beat of his own drum. Cummings doesn’t follow the news. He doesn’t even want to make it now he no longer has an election campaign to run. He wants to undercut the news altogether by imagining an alternative political universe.

Trying to reshape how the British state works is at the heart of the Cummings project. It means putting the right people in charge: relentless, take-no-prisoners problem-solvers like himself. What makes Cummings’ view of politics so distinctive – and so powerful, or dangerous, depending on your point of view – is that he reverses the usual balance of personal and political prejudices. Most people, including most politicians, have contempt for the ideas of the other side, but quite a lot of time for many of the individuals who hold them. Remainers tend to think Brexit was a stupid, cynical, corrupt cause, but are willing to admit that not all Brexiters are monsters, including some family and friends. Cummings is the opposite. He goes out of his way to say he doesn’t think remain was a stupid idea – it may turn out in the long run that Brexit was a mistake, after all. The possibility that the future will surprise us all should be baked into everyone’s political calculations. But Cummings thinks remainers are invariably fools, above all the better-educated ones, because they are incapable of accepting that they might be wrong. His shorthand for these people is Jolyons (after the remainder lawyer Jolyon Maugham) or, as he says of Keir Starmer, the ones who can’t resist giving “the London idiot answer” to any difficult question because they daren’t think for themselves. When Starmer got himself tangled up over the question of whether “only women have a cervix”, it was, Cummings says, because “he’s a dead player working off a script” – and the voters can smell that a mile off.

Cummings cut his teeth campaigning against a new regional assembly for north-east England in the 2004 referendum. He was strategic adviser for the

North East Says No (Nesno) campaign, now seen as a dry run for the leave campaign. He defeated the New Labour establishment – represented by then deputy prime minister [John Prescott](#), a man never afraid of expressing a view on any subject – with a few simple slogans. “Politicians talk, we pay.” “More doctors, not politicians.” Cummings’ side won that vote by a margin of almost 80:20, despite polling indicating a victory for the government’s “yes” campaign. His opponents had no answer to his accusation that they wanted more of their kind of politics just for the sake of it.

This is his political superpower: he takes the other side’s ideas seriously, but not the people who hold those ideas. It means he can think dispassionately about what his opponents are doing – even get inside their heads and explore how they will react to what he is doing – while retaining his unshakeable contempt for them. He likes to conduct thought experiments in which he imagines how the idiots might do their version of politics better if they weren’t such idiots. It’s what won him Brexit. When remainers wailed about his tactics, traduced his character and told him he was playing with fire, he just shrugged. He ignored the commentariat and relished the howls of outrage from the chatterati. But he also thought hard about how his campaign messages would affect theirs. By wrapping the case for Brexit in the mantle of the NHS, he not only made Brexit more appealing to many voters, he infuriated remainers who knew it was nonsense. Which meant they ended up talking about his message, Brexit = NHS, and not theirs. In politics, victory doesn’t always go to the people who work hardest. It also goes to the ones for whom outrage is a weapon, not simply an indulgence.

The same applied in the tumultuous autumn of 2019, when parliament appeared paralysed by what to do about Brexit and the country was running out of patience. Cummings makes it clear that he had to persuade Johnson the only way through was to provoke an election, and that meant doing whatever it took to ensure his opponents ran out of patience first. It was a deliberate strategy. Prorogue parliament – not because you want to shut down democratic debate, but because you want to ensure the other side can’t talk about anything else. Send them mad and you will get what you want in the end, because they will be unable to think straight.

When it comes to people Cummings thinks we should read – mostly from the tech/science/futurism blogosphere – they are almost

exclusively men

Still, it took Boris-SA to get it done, though he had to put up with torrents of outrage and criticism, including from his own family. Then, in the election campaign that followed, Johnson allowed Cummings to frogmarch him from [one hospital ward photo-op](#) to the next, despite the fact the nurses in the background looked as if they might be physically sick. This campaign is a joke, the remainers cried. Can't they see how much people hate them? But what they meant was: can't they see how much we hate them? Cummings could of course see that, and he was delighted with it.

In the end, Johnson won the biggest parliamentary majority for a generation. And as Dom-CBW repeatedly reminds us, all this was predicted with unerring accuracy by his state-of-the art polling algorithms. “We built a model that in December 2019 predicted we would win 364 seats – the result was 365 (we did better than the exit poll). We were lucky to be so close but ... not very lucky.”

But Cummings' superpower is also his great weakness. It means that personal animus is his stock in trade, and anger and frustration are never far from the surface. The Cummings roll call of modern-day morons, repeatedly called out on [his Twitter feed](#) and itemised in his blog, includes almost the entire parliamentary Conservative party, all journalists with a handful of exceptions (Guardian journalists are the worst), any social science academic (he only really has time for physicists and mathematicians), most of the senior British civil service, and anyone stupid enough to think Keir Starmer might be up to the job. At the same time, the few individuals who garner his respect get praised to the skies. When he comes across a rare talented civil servant, he'll insist they would make a better prime minister than any of the current crop of politicians. He believes his small but brilliant team inside Downing Street – ferociously hard-working, fearlessly loyal to the Cummings way – could have saved the country from the current fiasco of Johnson's premiership, along with many of the lives needlessly lost to Covid. So how to explain the fact that he and they are now outside Downing Street, and Johnson is still there? Morons will moron.

Cummings is not interested in half measures. He doesn't want to reform the British state. He wants to blow it up and replace a bloated and inefficient machine with something brutally streamlined. Government departments that employ tens of thousands would do better if they were reduced to 50 people, so long as these were the right people. He thinks one of the biggest mistakes we make is to believe that intelligence and talent operate on a gradual gradient: that most very smart people are more or less as smart as each other. Wrong: the very smartest people can be tens or hundreds of times better at what they do than the next rung down.

This means that searching for outstanding talent and then doing whatever it takes to hold on to it is far more important than treating people fairly. Given the risks we face – from China, from the next pandemic, from AI – anything else would be grossly irresponsible. But that, for Cummings, is the problem: unlike in Silicon Valley, where stupidity gets ruthlessly weeded out, Whitehall and Westminster don't take responsibility seriously. What matters is keeping up appearances. British politics is all about trying not to look stupid in the eyes of others. Which, Cummings insists, is the stupidest thing of all.

All this is oddly old-fashioned. At times, reading Cummings is like reading [Colin Wilson's *The Outsider*](#), published to wild acclaim in 1956, shortly after its author had discovered [Nietzsche](#). Wilson was the original angry young man, an autodidact who believed that everything of lasting value was the work of the tiny minority with the courage to think for themselves. Cummings' vision of small, secretive groups of brilliant people working to save the rest of us from disaster also recalls the world of John Buchan, though without the globe-trotting. Even within the British civil service, he believes there are tiny cabals of free-thinking renegades, determined to do the right thing, whatever it takes. These brave men and women don't need to travel further than their computer screens. But they do need some protection from the higher-ups. And with Dom out of the picture, that's what they are no longer getting.



I say men and women, but something else that is Buchan-like about Cummings' worldview is its intense maleness. He is aware of this and, in Dom-N mode, he does what he can to correct for it. The handful of brilliant civil servants and special advisers he singles out are often women, if only to contrast with the general uselessness of the men. It was women who tended to do a better job during the darkest days of the Covid crisis in 2020. He thinks Labour's fortunes could be transformed if Starmer were replaced by Lisa Nandy, but really any northern woman would do, given how hopeless the current leadership is. He says that his toughest opponent over Brexit was Sabine Weyand, the EU's deputy chief negotiator, who was "100 times" better at her job than the posturing [Michel Barnier](#).

But when it comes to the people Cummings thinks we should read and follow – mostly culled from the tech/science/futurism blogosphere – they are almost exclusively men. This is men talking to men, about cryptocurrency, autonomous weapons, supply chains, space travel, nuclear fusion, existential risk. Cummings knows his way around these topics and his intolerance for blather makes him an excellent guide. A lot of it is fascinating and it's easy to get drawn in. Still, spending an afternoon in the virtual company of these people can feel like being trapped in a world where the little people don't count. No one has time for small talk or the usual niceties. Given what is at

stake – systems collapse, tech breakthroughs, seriously big bucks – it's all about being ahead of the curve. Sensitivity to anyone's feelings is anathema.

In a blogpost from July, Cummings offered a guide to the most interesting nonfiction he could find (his taste in fiction is more conventional, though also very male: he likes quoting Tolstoy and classic sci-fi). The list includes [Michael Nielsen](#) on quantum computing, [Steve Hsu](#) on the future of war, [Peter Scholze](#) on mathematics, [Scott Aaronson](#) on quantum supremacy, [Scott Alexander](#) on polygenic scores, [Balaji Srinivasan](#) on cryptocurrency, [Alvaro De Menard](#) on pension systems, [Tyler Cowen](#) on university education, [Andrew Sullivan](#) on the “liberal left” (Sullivan is almost the only political commentator Cummings has any time for), [Matt Yglesias](#) on history curriculums, Alex Tabarrok on Covid, and Dominic Cummings on the birth of computing and mathematical paradoxes. The sole woman to make the list happens to be his wife, [Mary Wakefield](#), writing in the Spectator about how women should toughen up.

If you click through, [Wakefield's article](#) turns out to be pretty vapid. She is discussing a recent book that caused an attack of the vapours in Silicon Valley by describing most women in the Bay Area as “soft and weak ... and full of shit”. Its author was cancelled, and Wakefield wants to know why, given the offending sentence was taken out of context and meant good-humouredly. Fair enough, I suppose. But then she says women should respond to insults like this more like men, giving the example of an article published nearly 20 years ago in the Spectator that characterised west London men on the dating scene as emotionally stunted, misogynistic, borderline alcoholic, coke-addled man-children. Since this described many of those who worked at the Spectator, you might expect the journalists to mind. Not a bit of it – they loved the article and put it on the cover. The then editor of the magazine, Boris Johnson, even invited its author, a young Canadian woman, to lunch. Of course he did.

Cummings has little sympathy for people – from women to minorities to workers – who can't control the oppressive systems they are stuck in

To think these cases are comparable is utterly tone-deaf. West London men didn't mind being described like that because they knew it didn't matter:

they – Johnson included – could get away with this behaviour because they had the power and the impunity. It was all a big laugh. Cummings should know this about Johnson by now. By contrast, women in the tech world are routinely mistreated and discriminated against. The joke simply isn't as funny, if it's funny at all.

One name for this kind of imbalance is systemic injustice, a phrase Cummings would doubtless hate. He is interested in systems, but not in what they do to people's sense of self-worth. He cares about what they do to their ability to think for themselves. He thinks the danger of being stuck inside a system you can't control, from the EU to 10 Downing Street, is that it forces you to take your eye off the ball. That said, he appears to have little sympathy for all those people – from women to minorities to workers – who can't control the oppressive systems they are stuck in because they have been systematically deprived of their power to escape them. His rule of thumb for finding interesting people is to search out those who are comfortable being right on the edge of things, including the edge of polite society. That's where the intellectual action is.

He also believes it is crazy that in a world of failing and obsolescent systems, so little time and attention is devoted to studying the organisations that do work. This list is shorter. It includes the government of Singapore, the Mossad, Amazon, Y Combinator (a Silicon Valley company that funds and advises tech startups), and Berkshire Hathaway, Warren Buffett's conglomerate. What these organisations have in common is their ruthless focus on what really delivers results. They also recognise and reward exceptional talent. Cummings doesn't just think that the best mathematicians and physicists are so much more brilliant than their nearest rivals. It's true of organisational genius, too. Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk have built their empires because they are orders of magnitude better than their competitors at taking and managing large-scale risk while drilling down into the details of a complex business operation. Their unparalleled wealth is a function of their unique abilities. "Musk and Bezos are similar," he writes. "Smart enough to understand a lot of technical details but *really* far out on the tail when it comes to executing."

Ping! Another update. The blog jumps back and forth relentlessly from an intergalactic Silicon Valley perspective to digging up the bodies back home. It's a dizzying ride. Last time we were rattling around in number theory and now here we are lamenting the moron count in SW1.

Cummings believes that Whitehall needs a startup mentality, and what it has got instead is team-building exercises and job-satisfaction reviews. One of Cummings' punchbags is Jeremy Heywood, routinely described as the greatest civil servant of his generation before his untimely [death at age 56](#) during the height of the Brexit crisis in 2018. Four prime ministers spoke at his funeral and described his exceptional talent. Cummings thinks [Heywood was vastly overrated](#): “a genius fixer, not a genius manager”. Heywood made unlikely connections – including between Cameron and Lex Greensill – and he kept the wheels of Whitehall spinning. He patched up ministers’ hare-brained schemes and refused to rock the boat. He treated everyone with courtesy. But he had no eye for system change, Cummings says. He *was* the system. He wouldn’t have got very far at Amazon.

Cummings is a brilliant provocateur with an extraordinary ability to see through to what many of us would rather not face

How exactly the British democratic state could be modelled on organisations which are anything but democratic is not something that much troubles Cummings. The fact that Singapore, [hardly a bastion of freedom](#), is probably the most democratic of the ones on his list tells you all you need to know. Many of the alternative thinkers Cummings likes to cite are explicit in their contempt for democracy, which they consider close to obsolete. The world has moved on; asking whether something would be “undemocratic” is just sentimental attachment to a passing phase in human history. As elite technical expertise, both machine and human, becomes paramount, the idea of having to wait on public opinion to work out what to do starts to look absurd.

What’s so interesting about Cummings is that although he seems to share some of this deep scepticism about democratic politics and politicians – too slow, too trivial, too easily spooked – he cannot fully embrace it. After all, tracking public opinion in a clear-eyed, unsentimental way is what he does,

perhaps better than anyone. He is a genius at it. In the end, his blog reminds me of the old Woody Allen joke: “The food here is terrible!” “Yes, and such small portions!” Cummings thinks that British politics is broken, that the two main parties are ready for the knacker’s yard, and that most of the political class couldn’t strategise their way out of a paper bag. And yet he can’t resist trying to play their game. He wants to abolish the Labour party. He also wants to teach it how to win the next election. He’d like to put quantum physicists in charge of the government. He’d also like to see Rishi Sunak boot Boris (and Carrie) out of Downing Street. He wants to burn it down. He also wants to make it better.

As we settle in to 2022, nothing is resolved. Johnson is in deep trouble and Cummings can claim that many of his warnings about the government’s incompetence and idiocy have been horribly borne out. Yet Johnson is – at the time of writing – still there. Like many, I wondered if Cummings was behind the drip-drip of deeply damaging photos and videos relating to office parties that pulled the rug out from under his former boss in the run-up to Christmas. But then a photo appeared of that [wine and cheese gathering on the Downing Street lawn](#) from May 2020, in which Cummings himself is on prominent display, the insolent slouch sitting opposite Boris, Carrie and the baby. Now in an attempted coup de grace he has pointed them away from the 15 May gathering he attended and towards the far more damaging 20 May shindig instead. Two Johnsons but – always – two Doms.

I hesitate to recommend to Guardian readers a blog in which they will find nothing but contempt for many of the things they hold dear. I realised during the months I spent reading Cummings’ thoughts that I represent pretty much everything he loathes: a social scientist, a political commentator, no experience inside government, just another posturing talking head, pretending to have knowledge that I am too ignorant even to know I lack. That didn’t make me enjoy what he had to say any less. Cummings is a brilliant provocateur with an extraordinary ability to see through to what many of us would rather not face. His disdain for so much of British politics goes along with a genuine desire to prevent the idiots from dragging the rest of us down with them.

It's worth reading Cummings because however much you may wish he would go away, he isn't going to. His Brexit moment might have passed. But the future probably still belongs to people like him. And it remains as important as ever to try to understand what the other side thinks. Outrage is an indulgence.

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Movies

Interview

‘I don’t think we should talk about me’: a visit to David Strathairn’s own Nightmare Alley

Ryan Gilbey

One of the stars of Guillermo del Toro’s new noir, he has been a captivating character actor for 40 years, but is rarely put up before the press. We find out why ...



David Strathairn ... ‘I don’t think it’s a propos of doing PR for a film to talk about what I was like as a kid.’ Photograph: Eduardo Muñoz/Reuters

Fri 14 Jan 2022 04.37 EST

Fugitives facing the firing squad have looked more relaxed than David Strathairn does right now. One of the most perspicacious character actors of

the past 40 years, he has been exceptional so often on screen that any attempt to list the highlights runs the risk of simply transcribing his [IMDb page](#): [Nomadland](#), [LA Confidential](#), [The River Wild](#), [Sneakers](#), a batch of rigorous dramas by his longtime friend John Sayles (including [Matewan](#) and [Limbo](#)), a [fling with Carmela on The Sopranos](#), a career-best performance as a predatory teacher in the indie gem [Blue Car](#), and an Oscar nomination for [Good Night, and Good Luck](#). Today the 72-year-old, who resembles a lean, lined Cary Grant, is sitting bolt upright and strangely far from the camera as he talks via video call from New York. Or rather, doesn't talk. I have just asked him a question that he considers irrelevant, even impertinent, and he has clammed up.

To think, it all started so well. Discussing his new movie, Guillermo del Toro's 1940s-set noir thriller [Nightmare Alley](#), Strathairn is in his element. In this adaptation of William Lindsay Gresham's novel, filmed once before, in 1947, he plays Pete, a soused, weather-beaten mentalist who performs a mind-reading act with his wife, Zeena (Toni Collette), at an insalubrious travelling carnival. The doggedly cheerful couple have seen better days. "Pete was at the top of his game many years earlier when they were in Paris," he reflects. "He has this idea that he was once a great mentalist on the most renowned stages. It's an interesting contrast to where we find him in the film."

Into the couple's life stumbles Stanton (Bradley Cooper), a handsome but shady sort to whom Zeena takes an immediate shine. Is Pete alert to his wife's infidelity? "I don't know," he says thoughtfully. "Did you get any sense of that? It was talked about but we didn't want to indulge in it too much. The idea was to make Zeena and Pete one entity. There's an emotional bond, and they've spent so much time together. Was he aware that she has this side? Would she have had other Stantons? I'm not sure."

Even now, the actor sounds grateful to have found himself on the lavish set of a [Guillermo del Toro](#) movie. "The production design was extraordinary," he says. "Then you had the rain, the mud, the boardwalks, the texture of the tents. It was so gritty. That world informs who the people are."



Strathairn with Frances McDormand in *Nomadland*. Photograph: AP

Strathairn trained to be a clown straight out of college. Did making the film take him back to those days? “Uh, it had trappings of that, yeah,” he says. “The sense of community. A bunch of wildly eccentric individuals.” How deep did he get into clowning? “Deep enough to learn how to fall down and get up again.” How does it compare with acting? “Uhhh ... I dunno.” He is beginning to wriggle in his seat. “They’re probably similar in essence. Catch the people’s attention and try to transport them into another reality.”

Did he see any overlap between Pete and himself? After all, an actor – like a mentalist – needs to be a good reader of people. “Well, you hope you are. Actors are sort of conduits for human behaviour.” Pete maintains that anyone who reads people will have learned the skill as a child. Is that true of Strathairn, too? “I think it’s true of all of us.” All actors or all people? “Anybody. There are so many clues out there.” What sort of child was he? Quiet and reserved or kicking with the fray? He lets out a protracted, agonised sigh. “Ahhh, I dunno,” he shrugs. Then nothing for five or six seconds. “I don’t think I was anything other than a normal kid.”

Actors believing their hype can be a slippery slope. There are a lot of banana peels out there

Why the enormous sigh? “I sort of don’t think we should be talking about me,” he says. “We should be talking about the film, really.” Seven seconds pass in silence. Is he uncomfortable speaking about life off screen? “No, I just don’t think it’s a propos of doing PR for a film to talk about ‘what I was like as a kid.’” He treats that last phrase like a stinky sock which must be held away from his face. “That’s not … I don’t think that’s applicable to the film. To the project. It’s not, uh … No.” He reaches for a reference to the psychoanalyst played in *Nightmare Alley* by Cate Blanchett. “I mean, I’m not in Dr Lilith Ritter’s office!”

I protest gently that I wasn’t intending to analyse him; I was trying to get an idea of how someone without an acting background (his parents were both medical professionals) might have been drawn to the business. “I know, I know,” he says softly. I conduct a quick mental inventory of the topics I had hoped we might touch on. Strathairn was superb as Meryl Streep’s milquetoast husband in the action thriller *The River Wild* but the chances now of him reflecting on his brief, real-life connection to his co-star – Streep’s daughter Grace Gummer married his son, Tay, in July 2019 before separating 42 days later due to “irreconcilable differences” – have become vanishingly remote. It would not be a propos, as he might put it. I cross the subject off my list.



Strathairn as Edward R Murrow Good Night, and Good Luck. Photograph: Warner Bros/Allstar

We drift back to Nightmare Alley, and to the scene in which Pete warns Stanton of the risks for any mentalist who becomes seduced by his own confidence tricks. Isn't that a danger for an actor: that one might believe the hype? Strathairn pulls a face as if to say: *again* with the personal stuff? Another long silence passes, during which he shakes his head and glances away. I joke with him that, for the purposes of the tape, I will at this point need to describe aloud what he is doing: He shakes his head, I say. ““He shakes his head,”” he repeats dolefully.

A few seconds later, however, a switch seems to flick inside him, and he decides that he *will* answer the question after all. “Actors believing their hype can be a slippery slope,” he agrees. “There are a lot of banana peels out there in that respect.” Was his own head turned when he received that Oscar nomination (his only one so far) for playing the journalist Edward R Murrow in George Clooney’s McCarthy-era drama Good Night, and Good Luck? “Yeah it was kinda like: ‘What’s this all about?’ When I’m working, it’s about the work, not what comes afterwards. It was like an out of body experience. My eyes were wide open all the time taking it in, because it may never happen again. It was like being at a circus.” Only this time he wasn’t a clown.



Strathairn with Joseph Mazzello and Meryl Streep in *The River Wild*.
Photograph: Universal/Allstar

Even when he has been part of a hit (such as his two Bourne thrillers) or an Oscar-magnet (such as *Nomadland* or Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln*), he hasn't usually been sent out on to the publicity circuit; his more famous co-stars tend to shoulder that burden. Perhaps this explains his discomfort with personal questions. Some character actors may crave the fame and attention that comes the way of their superstar colleagues but Strathairn seems not to be among them.

Get him on the finer points of his craft, though, and he unclenches. To rescue the mood before we finish, I ask whether he has read [Mark Harris's recent book about the director Mike Nichols](#). He has not. Then he won't know that he is singled out as a valuable influence on Nichols's 1983 film *Silkwood*, where he played one of the workers at a plutonium plant alongside – that woman again – Meryl Streep. I read him the relevant passage, which describes how his decision to chew gum and blow bubbles helped to “loosen up the blocking of a static scene”.

He seems captivated. “Wow. I do remember that. Probably I was just trying to keep myself busy. And I felt also that there was this lack of awareness

about working in the radioactive environment: you were touching food in your mouth, but you didn't know what was in the shit you were dealing with. It was a disconnect between the toxic surroundings, and this person thinking: 'I'm just working in a factory.' Hmm. That's really a great film. Wow."

All at once, he has been spirited back to the more creative space of the film set or rehearsal room. He looks happy at last. We say our goodbyes. His nightmare is over.

Nightmare Alley is released in the UK on 21 January

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Interview

‘I need to not be violent to myself’: Big Thief on pain, healing and their intense musical bond

[Marissa R Moss](#)



‘We don’t let ourselves be the cliche of the rock star – you’re on stage, people are screaming – but that’s where you can get lost in yourself’ ... clockwise from top left: Buck Meek, James Krivchenia, Adrianne Lenker and Max Oleartchik. Photograph: Josh Goleman

The folk-rockers have weathered divorce and trauma to become one of the US’s best bands. Loved up with one another on tour, they explain their need for imperfection – and why recording is like sex

Fri 14 Jan 2022 01.00 EST

It is early afternoon in downtown Nashville, and the party is already going strong. Bachelorettes in pink cowboy hats are flowing, mask-free, in and out of the honky-tonks. The members of [Big Thief](#), though – Adrianne Lenker, Buck Meek, Max Oleartchik and James Krivchenia – are sitting outside the Ryman Auditorium like dots of oil floating atop the water. No one seems to notice that one of the US’s best bands is scattered around a patio table a few hours before their show tonight, just yards above the 24/7 bacchanal.

“There’s a pigeon-keeper up there,” says the band’s frontperson Lenker, leaning forward in her chair in a horse-print shirt, jeans and a bandanna, her gaze fixed on a small skyscraper. She points, and the rest of the band follows her finger to a group of birds on top of a building, furiously in motion. “They’re flying in circles, so there has to be a cage up there. They only do that when there is someone conducting them.”

There is no conductor in Big Thief, nor do they move in circles – but they do stay in formation. Since the release of their debut album *Masterpiece* in 2016, they have been one of the most prolific working bands as a collective and individually, flying free of music industry best practices (two competing and equally brilliant albums, [UFOF](#) and [Two Hands](#), were released in 2019), Instagrammable perfection, or any sort of pomp and circumstance, with Lenker’s intricate and vulnerable lyrics leading the way in songs that traverse indie rock and folk. When they take to the Ryman stage later, they will do so without big displays or sets, raw and unfiltered in front of a closed stage curtain. They have two Grammy nominations and have graduated to big venues, but would rather talk about the marvel of human consciousness

than accolades, discussing the process of creating art as if they're astronomers not just content to find the next star, but eager to unveil a whole unseen universe.

Everything that makes Big Thief work could be the undoing of any other band. For one, Lenker and Meek are divorced – they met and started the group together in New York in 2015, and were married young. Bassist Oleartchik lives a world away in Israel, and each band member has a vibrant set of solo interests that overlaps rather than competes with Big Thief itself. During the pandemic alone, Lenker released two solo albums, Songs and Instrumentals, guitarist Meek had one, Two Saviors, Oleartchik worked on his jazz material and Krivchenia released an ambient album and sat in on drums for numerous projects, including [Taylor Swift's Red \(Taylor's Version\)](#). “The alchemy of all those things is what makes Big Thief Big Thief in the first place,” says Meek, who wears all black and smiles as if he’s known you for ever. “So we’ve all honoured that, and each other, I think.”

Their new 20-song album Dragon New Warm Mountain I Believe in You comes, in title, from that interconnecting continuum: it’s taken from a line in Anything, from Lenker’s album Songs, further narrowing the distance between what is hers and theirs, as if that even matters. They got here by engaging in a non-stop battle against the ego. “We don’t let ourselves be the cliche of the rock star,” Oleartchik says. “It can feel like that – you’re on stage, people are screaming – but that’s where you can get lost in yourself.”

Dragon New Warm Mountain I Believe in You doesn’t try to fit neatly into a box that further defines the Big Thief sound, whatever that may be, or grasp at bigger rock stardom. Sometimes, its songs beautifully meander without a chorus (Certainty), or the music melds perfectly with the feel of the lyrics, though not specifically the meaning. There are mentions of potato knishes and elbows (Spud Infinity) and microwaves (Dried Roses) that would have made [John Prine](#) chuckle, and lines that kick you in the gut with their brilliant simplicity: “I wanna live for ever till I die,” Lenker sings to a country romp.



‘I don’t think we’ve ever made anything because someone else expected us to. If anything, it’s the opposite’ ... Big Thief. Photograph: Alexa Viscius

“Maybe I’m delusional, but I don’t think we’ve ever made anything because someone else expected us to. If anything, it’s the opposite,” Meek says, turning to Lenker, who is rubbing a bottle of water against her forehead to help cure a headache. “You write the songs because it’s a form of survival. You’re my favourite songwriter on Earth, and we’re definitely my favourite band on Earth. We are the vessel for music that doesn’t exist that I want to hear.” This comes across as enthusiastic joy, not ego, and the music sounds like he feels it, too.

“You are *my* favourite songwriter!” Lenker responds – this love-in is more heartfelt and less corny than it might read. But Lenker had a lot of excavating to do to find this happiness, and when the pandemic hit, everything rushed to the surface once the crowds grew quiet.

“I had gone through marriage and divorce,” Lenker says in a separate Zoom call later, alone in a hotel room with her dog. “We had to try to transform our relationship, to let it die and be reborn, all while being on the road in proximity to each other. And holding space for other people through our art, writing about it and singing about it together on stage. He’s like family now, which I think is a testament to the love that we do [still] share.”



‘My heart was broken into smithereens’ ... Adrianne Lenker. Photograph: Alexa Viscius

Big Thief were in the middle of a European tour when the pandemic hit in March 2020; they had been on the road incessantly for three years, and Lenker had started a new relationship, with the musician Indigo Sparke, which came to an end early in quarantine. “My heart,” she says, “was broken into smithereens.” All of a sudden, it seemed like her body started to “purge everything out”. Her sister and solo album co-producer Phil Weinrobe both had to remind her to eat on a daily basis, and she came down with shingles and multiday migraines, ending up in hospital in Brooklyn before retreating to her sister’s cabin in western Massachusetts.

She worried something might really be wrong medically, until it became clear that it was the grind she had been engaging in since she was a little girl, and the trauma that came with it. “I realised it wasn’t about this thing with this person,” Lenker says, “it was about old trauma manifesting in current life.” She doesn’t say specifically what that trauma was (though she has spoken elsewhere about how difficult her childhood was), but the breakdown of the two romantic relationships “triggered this whole thing inside of myself, and I was living in a state of self-abandonment. I’m not going to perpetuate that cycle but in order to do that I really need to not be violent to myself. And that’s not something that just happens overnight.”

Lenker was born in Indianapolis, raised in a cultlike Christian sect that her parents eventually distanced themselves from, and she started writing music before she was 10; her first album, *Stages of the Sun*, came in 2006 and shows the origins of her penchant to incorporate country or folk textures into her work, even though others around her seemed to think she was more destined for pop stardom. Lenker, clearly, was uninterested in that.

After attending Berklee College of Music in Boston on a scholarship and moving to New York, Lenker met Meek in 2015, who was playing in, as he puts it, “a crazy ragtime swing band”. Meek, from Texas and appropriately well-schooled on singer-songwriters such as [Townes Van Zandt](#) and [Guy Clark](#), made a perfect busking partner for Lenker in the early days. Oleartchik was a jazz player and son of Alon Oleartchik, a popular Israeli musician and member of 70s breakthrough rock band Kaveret, while Krivchenia, born in Minnesota, was established on the punk scene. Once the foursome formed Big Thief, everyone committed fully to the collective.



‘We had to try to transform our relationship, to let it die and be reborn’ ...
Big Thief performing in Dorset, England, in 2018. Photograph: Roger Garfield/Alamy

Krivchenia, who produced Dragon New Warm Mountain I Believe in You, presented the concept to the band one morning over a continental breakfast

at a hotel in Copenhagen before the pandemic, typed up and printed in the hotel business centre. The idea was that they would go as a group to four locations – upstate New York, Topanga Canyon in California, the Arizona desert and Colorado mountains – with four different studios and four different engineers, each with a sonic goal in mind.

“Before he finished we were all like: oh my God, yes,” Oleartchik says. Krivchenia really believed in the concept, but he also didn’t want to upset the power balance in the band – or the lack of one, really. “There’s a communal thing with this band where all opinions are very important,” he says. “I just wanted to check my ego to make sure I wasn’t positioning myself in any sort of role.” Mostly, he wanted the band to help create some time, some freedom from a ticking clock.

“It’s like sex,” Lenker says of recording, laughing lightly. “If you feel pressure to make love well and you only have an hour to prove yourself, forget about it!”

Lenker’s songs are a grounding force of Big Thief, never meant to lead definitively one way or the other, though extremely revealing at the same time. “Her writing is more complex than, ‘it’s her nature album or it’s her breakup album’,” Krivchenia says. “She wants to leave space for people to add their own meaning,” Oleartchik adds. Her bandmates talk about her songwriting so she doesn’t have to; she doesn’t enjoy deconstructing her own work in that way. She’d rather stay vulnerable with the songs, so she can stay vulnerable on stage.

Sometimes Lenker will be chatty during a set. Other times, she will say nothing at all. “Sometimes,” Krivchenia says, “Adrianne rambles for five minutes and we are like: let’s do a song, we’re getting cold back here!” She is so resistant to cultivating a performance or persona over an authentic shared experience that she gets emotionally worn down and can “feel like a flat piece of cardboard” after a night or two of touring. “A huge part of our craft is trying to come into this radical acceptance of what is happening, and our imperfections and idiosyncrasies,” Lenker says – Big Thief’s music voices a constant yearning to heal, and her own process is ever-evolving. Recently, she shaved her head to confront her insecurities about her face and

beauty. “I’m still on that journey, and it may be a lifelong one … We have quirks, and we ride with them. Hopefully people in the room can feel a wave of inspiration to embrace exactly how they are in the present moment, happy or odd or chaotic. I think we need more of that in the world.”

Meek remembers something that Krivchenia told him at a show in New Orleans a few nights earlier as they gathered in a huddle. “You said: ‘Remember to keep saying yes,’” he says. “So that whole night I kept reminding myself that: just keep saying yes because it’s so easy to say no. Even if you play the wrong note. Just go: ‘Yes! I played the wrong note! Yes!’”

“It’s like an improv skit,” Krivchenia says, “Saying no fucking kills the skit.”

“And, suddenly,” Lenker cuts in, “you’re creating something.”

Dragon New Warm Mountain I Believe in You is released on 11 February on 4AD.

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You be the judgeFamily

You be the judge: should my daughter stop hogging the television?

He likes drama series; she loves reality TV. We air both sides of their domestic disagreement – and ask you to deliver a verdict

[Fall out over housework? Don't like your partner's pet? If you have a disagreement you'd like settled, or want to be part of our jury, click here](#)



Illustration: Joren Joshua/the Guardian

Interviews by [Georgina Lawton](#)

@georginalawton

Fri 14 Jan 2022 03.00 EST

The prosecution: Mick

Annabelle commandeers the front room for her trashy TV when I want to relax with a good drama

When I get home from a long day at work, I just want dinner, TV, shower and bed – in that order. But my daughter, Annabelle, hogs the front room to watch crap telly at least four nights a week.

I like to watch a good series, like Boardwalk Empire or Peaky Blinders, to help me switch off. But if Annabelle is back first, she binges on reality TV. Sometimes she says, “Dad, I was here first and I’ve been working too.” I tell her she’s not been working as hard as me – she’s still at uni. I’m a manager, and when I’m in the office I don’t get back until 7pm.

Even though I’ll say, “my house, my rules”, Annabelle will try to persuade me to watch her shows – but I can’t stand them. She loves dull dating shows, celebrities completing banal tasks, and influencers on islands. It’s so boring. Annabelle studies psychology and tells me her TV choices are educational, but I don’t buy that.

Annabelle doesn’t mind my drama choices as much as I detest her reality shows, so really, she should compromise more

I have lost my temper a couple of times over this: I called Annabelle selfish and told her to consider moving out. I don’t like shouting, but raising my voice is the only way to be heard. I have also started hiding the remote control before I go to work so if Annabelle gets home before me, she has to go to her room instead of settling on the sofa. She will text me asking where I’ve put it, but I’ve got my secrets.

My wife doesn’t watch a lot of TV in the front room – she prefers her iPad. But when she does, it’s all soaps and reality TV. She tries to stay out of the arguments but I know she prefers my daughter’s TV tastes to mine.

I never last long when I do watch Annabelle’s reality TV. I think it’s terrible how society makes untalented people rich and famous. Annabelle doesn’t mind my choices as much as I detest hers, so she should compromise more. She can catch up on her favourite shows on her laptop in her room.

Besides, it's my house. As long as I'm paying the bills and the mortgage, I should be able to watch what I want, when I want.

The defence: Annabelle

Reality television helps us empathise with others. Dad could learn a lot from it – and try to relax

Dad is exaggerating. Obviously if I'm home before him, I will chill on the sofa and put my favourite shows on. But if he comes back and asks me to move nicely, I will.

The problem is that Dad doesn't always ask nicely. If he's in a bad mood, he will storm in after he's had dinner with mum and say, "Right then, move", even if I'm in the middle of something. It's really annoying and combative. How does he expect me to respond? I'm not argumentative but I do get snarky when he speaks to me like that. I'll dig my heels in and tell him he has to wait.

I know Dad pays the bills and I'm very grateful to live at home for free, but it's just manners to ask me politely to go to my room.

When we do watch a show together, he just moans and tutts and ruins it with irritating comments or calling people stupid

I don't think my taste in TV is bad. Yes, I like dating shows. I watch the really dramatic American ones, like [Are You The One?](#) and Temptation Island, which Dad particularly hates, as well as the British ones like [Dinner Date](#), [First Dates](#) and [Love Island](#). I find watching human behaviour play out on these shows fascinating, and they sometimes reflect my studies at university.

Reality TV actually helps us empathise with others – and dad could definitely do with working on his empathy. When we do watch a dating show together, he just moans and tutts, which ruins it. He will make irritating comments or call people stupid. It makes me cringe. When I watch his dramas I'm don't comment every five seconds on people's acting or their

accents, I just watch it quietly like you're supposed to. Dad can't do the same for me.

This new habit of hiding the remote control is really immature. I don't even bother to ask him where he puts it any more; I just go straight to my room to watch something, but obviously watching television on a huge screen while spread out on the sofa is better than watching it on a laptop on your bed.

I have definitely had to compromise and watch Dad's TV choices more recently. What more can I do?

The jury of Guardian readers

Should Annabelle give her father first dibs on the television?

Mick needs to press reset. Why not "Our home, our rules"? Annabelle is not a child, she's a fellow adult with her own pressures. Making it about who works hardest will never end well. Try a family film night, taking it in turns to choose what to watch.

Michael, 52

Mick has let his adult daughter live with him rent free – if that's the agreement, it isn't fair to hold that over her. He has to accept that it's her home too, and stop being so judgmental and inflexible.

Alice, 34

Annabelle is not guilty – there needs to be more tolerance and compromise. They should create a schedule so each can watch what they like at a certain time every evening.

Claire, 58

It's understandable that Mick wants to unwind, but hiding the remote is just antagonistic. His wife also seems to avoid watching the television to appease him; surely it is her house too. Mick needs to reconsider how he expresses his frustration - it's just TV after all! **Nitya, 21**

Annabelle is a borderline slacker. Treating reality TV as homework is a pathetic excuse for a psychology major. Dad has superior taste in TV shows,

but if he really needs to “switch off”, I’d suggest meditation rather than a series about violent low-lifers.

Mick, 67

You be the judge

So now you can be the judge, click on the poll below to tell us: should Annabelle stop hogging the television?

We’ll share the results on next week’s You be the judge.

The poll will close on Thursday 20th January, 9AM GMT

Last week’s result

We asked if Mariana should stop bringing [strangers back to her shared flat](#), as it worries her sister and flatmate, Mafalda.

24% of you said no – Mariana is innocent

76% of you said yes – Mariana is guilty

[Have a disagreement you’d like settled? Or want to be part of our jury?](#)

[Click here](#)

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2022.01.14 - Coronavirus

- 'Red levels of staffing are the norm' NHS workers on coping with Covid
- Wales Covid restrictions to be eased by end of January
- Philippines Public transport ban on unvaccinated is 'anti-poor'
- Education Deprived state schools hit hardest by staff absences

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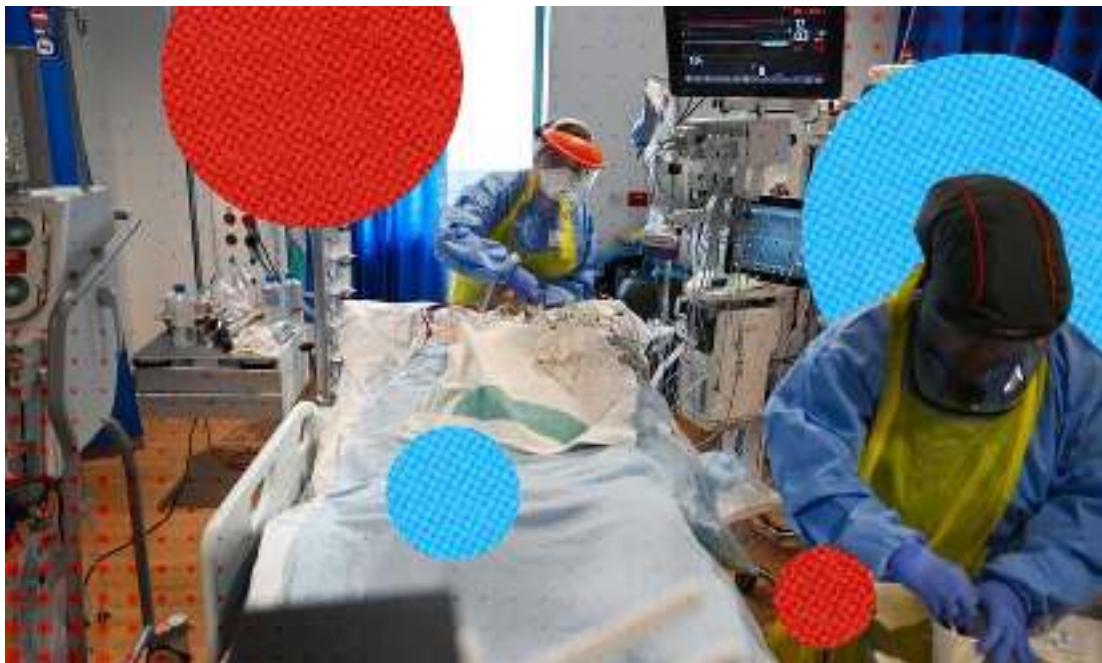
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[Health](#)

‘Red levels of staffing are the norm’: NHS workers on coping with Covid



The number of Covid patients in England and Scotland has continued to rise this week. Composite: Guardian Design/Getty Images

With Omicron cases leading to more hospital admissions and staff sickness, five workers explain the pressures they face

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
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Clea Skopeliti

Thu 13 Jan 2022 07.54 EST

The number of Covid [patients in hospitals in England and Scotland](#) has continued to rise this week, as NHS England reached a [deal with private hospitals](#) to free up beds amid the outbreak of Omicron cases.

Meanwhile, Covid staff absences in England rose to their highest level [since the introduction of the vaccine](#). The number of NHS workers in England off sick because of Covid was up by 41% in the week to 2 January, according to the latest figures.

Five health workers describe some of the challenges they are facing, including understaffing, waiting times and bed-blocking.

Paramedic, the Midlands

Ambulances are becoming a service for everything

With this new variant, we're still seeing Covid patients, but they've stayed at the same rate as before. The Covid patients that we see are those that haven't had vaccines. In the last month I've seen four or five Covid patients – none of them were vaccinated.

One hospital in the area has a really bad problem with ambulance queues – up to six and a half hours, and the standard wait time is over an hour. At other hospitals, you queue for one or two hours max. There's no movement. They aren't able to get people out of A&E on to wards, I guess because they're not getting people out of wards. That's due to a lack of care homes and care in the community. If you've got somebody who lives alone and

can't walk – we see a lot of that – how can they be sent home until they can walk? And that can take months.

The main jobs we're going out to haven't changed – it's still old people that have fallen, people that can't walk, people that need antibiotics. Those are the main bread and butter jobs. If GPs, district nurses and care homes were able to cover these jobs, things would function much better. I think the ambulance service is becoming everything, including social services.

Graphic

A&E consultant, south-east England

No one even raises an eyebrow at a 10-and-a-half-hour wait in emergency

The pressure is increasing on workload and capacity. There's just so much Covid – staff are catching it and having to self-isolate. So, from mid-December we've been running with major gaps across all kinds of disciplines: nursing, medical, radiographers, cleaners. People aren't terribly ill but obviously they've got to stay home.

Our in-patient Covid numbers have doubled in the last few weeks, but the numbers are not rising to the levels of last January. We can manage, we know how to manage Covid, we've got the skill set. But the biggest problem is capacity in the hospital because we don't have enough beds. We've got about 40 to 50 Covid patients taking up two wards. We've had to close some wards because of having to staff them, so that further reduces our capacity.

This morning we had a 10-and-a-half hour wait – no one even raises an eyebrow at that anymore. Five years ago we'd have all been running around with our hair on fire if the wait was more than four hours.

Critical care nurse, the Midlands

A lot of nurses are going to agencies

We probably have about 10 critical care beds free at the moment but we just don't have the staff. A lot of people are off with Covid, and lately a lot of senior nurses, who are normally in charge of eight patients, have moved to new jobs. They've gone to different places, like specialist jobs in the community, that are just easier for them or their families, if they can do a nine to five kind of job rather than doing night shifts.

They're still doubling up patients in ITU [intensive therapy units] – one nurse to two patients, as they were in October. We haven't really seen many flu patients, which is odd for this time of year, it does just seem to be Covid patients. There's a lot of patients that are classed as "wardable", but the wards are so busy that they can't really facilitate it. We say that we're struggling, but then when we hear how the ward is, they actually do sound worse than us. They barely have a bed free.

The trauma patients who are coming in now, because of a head injury or a cardiac arrest or whatever it is, are often Covid positive as well. So even if they're admitted for something else, we have to put them in the Covid pod.

A few people are slowly giving up because [the pressure] is still quite heavy, and I think we were hoping it would be easier by now. A lot of people are going to agencies. At an agency, they'll pay me about £60 an hour for being a critical care nurse, whereas on average, I'll get paid £18 an hour at my hospital. So a lot of nurses are reducing their hours at my hospital, so they can work more hours elsewhere. That's probably what I'm going to do. We're trying not to leave our hospital because we feel bad about it, but we can add more money on the side.

[Graphic](#)

Paediatrician, east of England

You come to accept these levels of staffing

Red levels of staffing have become the norm – we've become used to running on minimum staffing now, the issue has moved on to 'can you run safely at all'. You come to accept these levels of staffing. We're seeing

people who are getting Covid for a second time, including among staff who had it in the first wave. They're mostly less unwell this time, whether due to the variant, vaccine, and prior immunity. Everyone is grateful they're less unwell this time, but they're still off – it doesn't make any difference to your staffing numbers.

Fortunately, the number of presentations of children with respiratory illness wasn't as bad as expected – it tailed off a bit before Christmas in terms of numbers. Schools have just gone back so we're waiting to see what happens next. Respiratory illnesses continued but didn't spike – we've seen numbers of respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) fall in recent weeks, which is reassuring, but we don't know yet if there'll be another peak.

We test all admissions, and last week, for the first time, the most commonly isolated virus in the children's emergency department was Covid. Usually it would be normal winter viruses, like rhinovirus [one of the viruses that causes the common cold]. It's not the case that more children are unwell with Covid – they're mostly incidental findings. This just represents the fact that community rates of Covid are so high at the moment.

GP practice manager, Scotland

I'm preparing to hand my notice in

I wake up every morning with the dread of further staff shortages. Last week we had a number of colleagues with Covid or waiting for results. There's always a big backlog at the start of the year, after we've been closed for a few days, and we had to reschedule the whole diary for the practice.

Staff who are well are having to pick up extra shifts to make sure we're covered. People are doing a lot of overtime – some are doing something like 40 more hours a month. That's effectively an extra week's work. Everyone is emotionally and physically drained.

We're expected to kind of get through the same workload without making any mistakes. When you're rushing, or when people are tired and trying to get through a huge amount of work, mistakes can happen. Things are being

missed – thankfully nothing serious, but it feels like it's only a matter of time.

GP practices have been getting really bad press. People seem to have this idea that nothing is happening in the practice, when everybody is running themselves ragged. You can't help but take it home with you. And the thing is that when I leave work, I just become another person living in a pandemic. Right now, I can't see why I'm staying. When the pandemic started, I think it felt like I was doing my bit. I've done my bit and now I'm tired. I'm preparing to hand my notice in and debating whether I can face going back at all or whether to admit defeat and take sick leave.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/jan/13/nhs-workers-covid-omicron-coronavirus-red-levels-staffing>

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Coronavirus

Wales moves to ease Covid restrictions by end of January

Mark Drakeford to set out plan to move back to alert level 0, with outdoor activities opened up first

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



The Christmas Day parkrun in Cardiff, shortly before new restrictions took effect. Photograph: Gareth Everett/Huw Evans/REX/Shutterstock

[Steven Morris](#)

[@stevenmorris20](#)

Thu 13 Jan 2022 17.00 EST

Covid restrictions in [Wales](#) such as a limit on the number of people who can attend a sporting match and curbs on hospitality businesses may be lifted by the end of the month.

The first minister, Mark Drakeford, will set out a two-week plan on Friday to ease restrictions that have been in place since Boxing Day.

The move will be phased, with restrictions on outdoor activities lifted first, and could be halted if the public health situation worsens. But as long as cases do not rise dramatically again, it seems likely that crowds will be allowed back for the Six Nations rugby tournament, which begins in February.

Wales is in [“alert level 2”](#), meaning nightclubs are closed, a maximum of six people can meet in a pub and only up to 50 people can watch outside sporting events or take part in an activity such as parkrun.

The Tories in Wales have claimed the stricter conditions have made the country an “outlier” while the night-time industry has been highly critical of the restrictions it is operating under.

Drakeford will set out how Wales plans to move back to [alert level 0](#) at his weekly press conference in Cardiff.

In a statement the administration said: “The Welsh government is able to start removing the protections put in place in response to the Omicron wave, thanks to the support of people across Wales and the successful booster campaign – more than 1.75 million people have had the extra booster dose. The move to alert level 0 will be phased, with restrictions on outdoor activities being removed first.”

Earlier on Thursday the Welsh health minister, Eluned Morgan, said she hoped Wales was reaching the Omicron peak.

Giving evidence to the Welsh parliament’s health and social care committee, she said: “There are some very positive signs, I’m pleased to say, in terms of us possibly turning the corner, which would be a huge, huge relief.”

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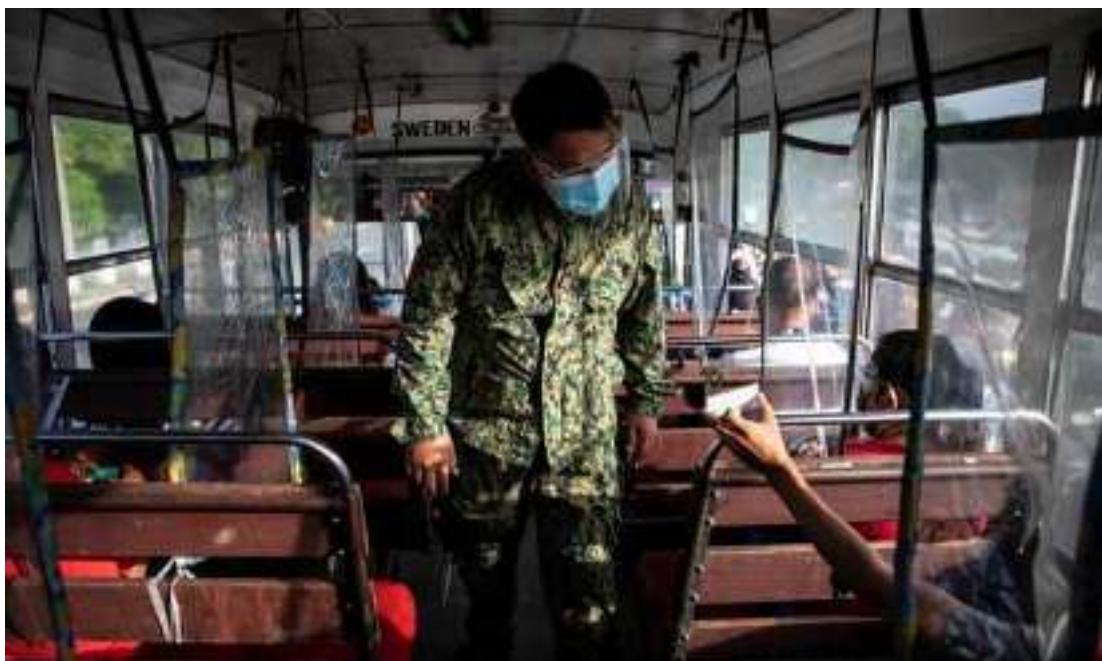
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[Philippines](#)

Philippines accused of being ‘anti-poor’ with public transport ban on Covid unvaccinated

Rights groups say the ban penalises those who cannot travel in a private vehicle or work from home

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



The Philippines has taken measures restricting the lives of those who have not been vaccinated against coronavirus, including banning them from public transport. Photograph: Eloisa Lopez/Reuters

[Rebecca Ratcliffe](#) in Bangkok

Fri 14 Jan 2022 00.17 EST

The Philippine government has defended a controversial ban that prevents unvaccinated people from using public transport in the capital of Manila, denying that the policy is “anti-poor”.

The “no vaccination, no ride” policy is designed to curb a recent wave of Covid infections and applies to all modes of transport to and from Metro Manila, including public buses, jeepneys, rail, boats and planes. The policy will be fully implemented from Monday, according to local media, when passengers will be required to show proof of vaccination.

Less than half of Filipinos are fully vaccinated, though vaccination rates are higher in the capital, at more than 90% of the eligible population.

Rights groups, including the Philippine Commission on Human Rights and Amnesty International, have criticised the transport ban for unvaccinated people, warning that it penalises the poorest, who are less likely to have the option of working from home or of travelling in a private vehicle.

“The reality is that ordinary Filipinos continue to rely on public transportation in attaining basic needs, such as for food, work and accessing health services,” the Philippine Commission on Human Rights said in a statement. It fears that even those who should be exempt from the rules could still struggle to access essential goods or services because they do not have a private vehicle.

The Philippine Commission on Human Rights said the government should find less punitive ways to promote vaccination. “We continue to urge the government to address vaccine hesitancy and the low vaccination rate in the country with education that addresses common misconceptions and positive encouragement,” it said.

The Department of Transportation, however, said the policy was not “anti-poor, draconian or punitive”, adding: “We believe that it is more anti-poor and anti-life if we do not impose interventions that will prevent loss of life due to non-vaccinations.”

It said exemptions would be made for people who were unable to receive a vaccination for medical reasons, as well as those who needed to buy essential goods or travel to a vaccination site.

The [Philippines](#) has experienced a recent surge in infections, which health experts have blamed on the more transmissible Omicron variant. The country reported a record 34,021 cases on Thursday, the highest since the start of the pandemic, half of which were reported in the national capital region. A further 82 deaths were confirmed.

The rise in cases has placed a strain on public services, including hospitals and schools, as well as private businesses. Schools in the capital have announced they will close for a week, with no online or in-person classes, while the government has placed limits on the amount of paracetamol and other over-the-counter medicines that can be bought by one individual or household, due to shortages in shops.

Last week, unvaccinated people in Manila and several other provinces and cities were [told to stay home](#), with president Rodrigo Duterte ordering the arrest of those who violate the orders. Under the rules, unvaccinated residents may leave home only for essential reasons such as work or to buy essentials or access medical care.

Businesses such as restaurants and beauty salons are also operating at a lower capacity, as are churches and parks.

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Schools

Deprived state schools in England hit hardest by Covid staff absences, survey finds

Schools with pupils from poorer backgrounds reported higher teacher absences and less capacity for cover



The survey found 29% of those working in schools with high numbers of pupils from deprived backgrounds said at least one in 10 of their colleagues were off or isolating with Covid. Photograph: Jw Ltd/Getty Images

[Richard Adams](#) Education editor

Thu 13 Jan 2022 19.01 EST

The most deprived state schools in England have been hit much harder by staff absence with Covid, compared with those in better-off areas or private schools, according to a new survey of classroom teachers.

The [TeacherTapp daily online survey](#) of teachers found that 29% of those working in schools with high numbers of pupils from deprived backgrounds said at least one in 10 of their colleagues were off or isolating with Covid.

The survey done on 7 January revealed that nearly a third of all teachers said between 5% and 10% of their colleagues were off, across both primary and secondary schools.

But at schools with more than 10% of staff off, there was a dramatic divergence. While 30% of teachers at secondary schools with the highest proportion of pupils on free school meals said that 10% or more of their colleagues were off, just 9% of teachers at schools with the fewest pupils on free school meals said the same.

Similarly, while one in four teachers at state schools said they didn't have enough staff to cover absences, just 9% of teachers at private schools reported the same.

On the upside, 95% of teachers at state schools reported that they had sufficient supplies of lateral flow tests for their pupils.

Sir Peter Lampl, chair and founder of the Sutton Trust, which published the findings, said poorer pupils should not be further disadvantaged as a result of the pandemic, adding: “The most important thing for the government to do is to strengthen existing education recovery and make sure sufficient funding is being provided to cover absent staff.”

A Department for Education spokesperson said school staff were working “tirelessly” to ensure classrooms were safe.

“We are supporting schools through encouraging former teachers to come back to classrooms and extending the Covid workforce fund for schools that are facing the greatest staffing and funding pressures,” the spokesperson said.

“We’ve also asked schools to have contingency plans to maximise attendance and minimise disruption to learning, should they have high rates

of staff absence, and are working with the sector to share case studies of flexible learning models to support the development of those plans.”

The survey of nearly 6,500 teachers found that in some schools more than a third of pupils did not have access to laptops or tablets if required for remote learning.

Geoff Barton, the general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, said it “beggars belief” that pupils were still without digital devices nearly two years into the pandemic.

“The government made great play of its efforts to provide laptops to schools last year but it seems it did not see the job through. The use of technology in education has been one of the few positives to come from the pandemic but it is of little use if young people cannot access lessons when they are self-isolating,” Barton said.

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2022.01.14 - Opinion

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Opinion**Conservatives**

The sickness ailing the Conservatives runs deeper than Boris Johnson

[Gaby Hinsliff](#)



The party will be unable to force its next choice of leader on to a country in dire need of a general election



Boris Johnson at prime minister's questions in the House of Commons, London, 12 January 2022. Photograph: Jessica Taylor/AP

Fri 14 Jan 2022 03.00 EST

Like a dog that could not be sorrier for chewing the sofa, it was a contrite prime minister who prostrated himself before parliament this week. Dogs are never truly sorry, of course. They have learned that if they whimper, hang their heads and look pathetic when caught, they can defuse their owners' anger. But they don't actually *feel* sorry, because dogs don't think like that. They just want the shouting to stop.

In Boris Johnson's case, the ever-so-humble act certainly doesn't seem to have lasted long. When he toured the tearooms afterwards, taking the temperature of his party, he reportedly [horrified some MPs by insisting](#) that he hadn't actually done anything wrong and was merely taking the rap for someone else: some other prime minister, presumably, who had stood in the middle of a crowd chugging wine on his lawn and now claimed not to have realised that was a party.

Douglas Ross, the Scottish Tory leader, who has [publicly called for Johnson's resignation](#), confirms the prime minister said something similar to him. What Scottish Tories have seemingly grasped faster than English ones

is that an unrepentant prime minister may cost them not just an election, but potentially the union too.

Boris Johnson isn't going to change now, because if he did he wouldn't be Boris Johnson. He's going to keep running his government much as he once ran the Spectator magazine office – which famously boasted half-empty bottles of wine on all the desks and a ping-pong table in the garden, plus the [general air](#) of what one visitor memorably called a “knocking shop” – for as long as anyone lets him, although that may not now be very long. He's not sorry, or not in the meaningful sense of resolving to change. He just wants the shouting to stop. But that's not going to happen now.

Shortly after new year, I was surprised to hear a former No 10 staff member who is well aware of the prime minister's flaws privately predicting that Johnson would nonetheless see out 2022. But on reflection, it started to become clear how that might happen. Had it not been for the party revelations, this week's two big stories would have been [Michael Gove unveiling](#) a resolution of sorts to the cladding crisis – a debacle that has hurt the Tories not just among young first-time buyers trapped in flats they can't sell, but among the furious parents providing their deposits – and London hospitals [reporting a fall](#) in Covid cases. Had he not been pseudo-apologising for the party, Johnson would have spent this week boasting that he had called it right on Covid, riding out the Omicron wave without a lockdown. [Sue Gray's investigation](#) into all the other Downing Street parties would still have loomed large on the horizon, of course, but until this week there were hints that Labour's poll lead might be narrowing. Enough, maybe, to convince restless backbenchers that things weren't irreparable.

How interesting, then, that his old nemesis, Dominic Cummings, chose this moment to [reveal the existence](#) of yet another secret party. Now every Tory MP understands they are staking their majority on a prime minister who seemingly can't help himself, and whose former closest aide seems determined to finish him off. Where Gray leaves off, the [official Covid inquiry](#) will in time pick up, reawakening the same painful memories all over again. But if Tory MPs think that merely replacing their current bespattered leader with someone less obviously compromised solves the problem, they don't understand the depths of the hole they're in.

We are so conditioned to the idea of Labour having a mountain to climb in order to win again – still true, since the voters it lost last time aren’t simply going to fall back into its lap – that it’s easy to forget the audacity of what the Tories are attempting. At the next election, they will be asking for an unprecedented fifth consecutive term in power. Of their three most recent leaders, one had to resign after leaving the EU by accident, one was defeated by the task of clearing up the resulting mess, and the last has dragged his party into the gutter. “Give us a chance to finish the job” – the universal slogan of incumbents seeking re-election – starts to sound more like a threat than a promise.

What gets governments re-elected is delivery: the sense that everyday life is getting better – if not for everyone, then at least for those most likely to vote Conservative. Tory MPs got cold feet about their last leader once she became better known for trying and failing to deliver a Brexit deal than for any concrete achievement.

Their current leader was elected primarily on a promise to “get Brexit done”, but has so far rewarded his base with a deal so flawed he immediately started trying to renegotiate it, plus two years of grinding Covid misery and the promise of higher taxes. Even his vague post-Brexit mission to “level up” Britain has been hamstrung by a pandemic pushing things in the opposite direction: in parts of the north-west and north-east hit hardest by the virus, businesses have suffered longer under restrictions than in the south, and children are likely to have [missed more school](#). The next looming crisis, meanwhile, will be NHS waiting lists, which [were at a record high](#) even before hospitals started cancelling operations to deal with the Omicron wave, and may well cost more votes at the next election than memories of a garden party.

What the Conservative party really needs now is a workhorse of a leader, with an eye for detail and a record for delivery, who can knuckle down to the boring grind of actually running a country. But party members still drunk on ideology don’t want a Jeremy Hunt figure, some throwback to a forgotten era where competence vaguely mattered, and they’re suspicious of Michael Gove, the last Brexiter standing with the skills to drive a complex agenda through Whitehall. Nor do they want to face the truth about Brexit, which is

that voters were promised something that doesn't really exist, and that lies have a horrible habit of leading to more lies.

The sickness lies not just with the leader but with the party that chose him, and which, having belatedly realised its mistake, seems to think it can just merrily spin the wheel again and force its next choice on the country. If there's to be another Tory leadership contest, fine. But it must be followed immediately by another general election. The past few years have shown the people of this country to be astonishingly long-suffering. But they will no longer be taken for fools.

- Gaby Hinsliff is a Guardian columnist
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[Yorkshire](#)

DCMS report on racism in cricket is welcome but government must take lead

[Mark Ramprakash](#)



Attempt to make sport more inclusive must be embraced but it is hard not to question what role divisive politics has played



This problem is not confined to Yorkshire, and while I am sure every county is thinking about their structure, perhaps they could all be expected to give regular updates. Photograph: Carl Recine/Action Images/Reuters

Thu 13 Jan 2022 19.01 EST

I welcome the conclusions and recommendations of the digital, culture, media and sport committee as well as the clear and succinct language used in its report. It is not a long document, but it suggests the committee means business. I think everyone within cricket, hopefully of whatever race or background, will embrace it as an attempt to make the sport more equal and inclusive.

The England and Wales [Cricket](#) Board is instructed to create a “set of key indicators by which they might measure their progress”. These are yet to be defined – last November the ECB published a 12-point action plan to address diversity in the sport, but the wording of the report suggests the committee expects a new list. What these indicators will be, and how the sport’s administrators choose to measure and recognise progress in this area, will determine whether the committee’s work has been successful.

The ECB published a South Asian Action Plan in 2018, and nearly four years on a lot of people would ask whether that was a genuine attempt to improve inclusivity or just an attempt to tap into a new commercial market. When he gave evidence to the DCMS committee [Azeem Rafiq](#) described some previous attempts to improve diversity in cricket as “box-ticking” and “tokenism”, and when we look back in a few years’ time what emerges from this process must have been genuinely productive.

The threat to withhold funding will certainly focus minds, and I particularly welcome the expectation that [Yorkshire](#) and the ECB will give quarterly reports on their progress – that’s enough time to make a positive impact, but not so much that they will feel able to waste any. Of course this problem is not confined to Yorkshire, and while I am sure that every county is thinking about their structure and their representation, perhaps they could all be expected to give regular progress updates.

Ashley Giles, the managing director of England men’s cricket at the [ECB](#), has spoken in the past about its reliance on the counties in sporting terms, and it is reliant again now. The ECB must work with and try to get the best out of the counties, but in the end if it is to be seen as successful it needs the counties to get their houses in order.

For me there is a cloud that hangs over this report. The DCMS committee is chaired by Julian Knight, the Conservative MP for Solihull, and the majority of its members sit on the government benches. It is their party that created the hostile environment and was responsible for the Windrush scandal – an episode that resonates personally with me as my father came over in 1960. As of the end of last year only 5% of Windrush victims had received compensation.

The Spin: sign up and get our weekly cricket email.

Knight stands behind a prime minister who writes about black people with “watermelon smiles” and Muslim women as “letterboxes”. His government is led by the same people who organised a deliberately divisive Brexit campaign, has presided over a period when race hate has gone through the roof, and continues to demonise and criminalise refugees who attempt the perilous journey across the Channel in inflatable dinghies. Knight comes

across as sincere in his criticism of what has gone on in cricket, but what are his qualifications for sitting in judgment over the commitment of others to the reduction of racial injustice in this country? I feel there is an irony to him leading this committee at this time, and perhaps his party should also demonstrate their own commitment to the fight against racism, and the success or failure of any efforts they have made.

I remember watching Rafiq giving evidence to the committee last year. It was uncomfortable to see, and there was great disappointment in how little progress we have made as a sport. I started in 1987 and here we were in 2021 watching a young man go through that experience. Hopefully it will result in substantive change, and this report will be part of that process. But I also recognise that cricket is part of society, that this is an issue across society, and that most of us, even the members of the DCMS committee, still have a lot of work to do.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2022/jan/14/dcms-report-racism-cricket-welcome-government-must-take-lead>

OpinionNovak Djokovic

What more could Novak Djokovic have done? Get vaccinated, isolate and get the facts right

Australia has again cancelled the world No 1's visa. His fate was sealed when he conceded an error in his paperwork and acknowledged attending an interview after a positive Covid test

- [Follow live reaction to the cancellation of Djokovic's visa](#)
- [Full report: immigration minister cancels visa](#)



'The politics of Australia's decision to re-cancel Novak Djokovic's visa will be mixed.' Photograph: Diego Fedele/AAP

[Paul Karp](#)

[@Paul_Karp](#)

Fri 14 Jan 2022 02.13 EST

Novak Djokovic has fallen victim to the latest harsh application of border policies by an Australian government, but he still only has himself to blame.

On Friday the Morrison government's immigration minister, Alex Hawke, [took the momentous decision to again cancel the world No 1's visa](#), which is very likely to trigger deportation despite Djokovic's win in court on Monday.

Now Djokovic's only hope would be a second Hail Mary court case, made all the harder by the godlike powers given to the minister in Australian law and a slower, steadier process of decision that has consumed the whole week.

When Djokovic landed in Melbourne late on the evening of 5 January, he thought a visa and a medical exemption approved by [Tennis](#) Australia's chief medical officer and an independent Victorian government board would guarantee him a shot at his 10th Australian Open and record 21st grand slam.

But his fate was sealed by a hardening view in the Australian government and its border force that a recent Covid diagnosis was itself not enough to enter the country quarantine-free – and an error on his immigration paperwork that took days to come to light.

Djokovic challenged his visa cancellation in the federal circuit court, winning because the judge agreed it had been unreasonable of the border force to renege on a deal to give him more time to address the exemption issue.

First set Djokovic. He took to Melbourne Park, ensuring familiar images of him on Rod Laver Arena's Avatar-blue court that seemed to promise another shot at grand slam greatness.

Even public opinion – so long set against Djokovic for his refusal to be vaccinated to play a tournament in one of the world's most locked down cities during the pandemic – seemed to swing back his way.

Transcripts of his interview with border force, released in court documents, painted the picture of a weary traveller who stayed cool and calm despite being genuinely bewildered as he thought he'd done everything right.

Scott Morrison's 'rules are rules' refrain showed this is where the Coalition thinks the balance of public opinion lies

Or as judge Anthony Kelly put it: what more could this man have done?

Accepting the loss on procedural grounds, the government's lawyer warned the minister was still considering the nuclear option of re-cancelling his visa.

Technically, the old ground of possible risk to public health was enough to do so, although it could be construed as a churlish response demonstrating the government was always out to get Djokovic.

But momentum swung against Djokovic when it was noted that his presence in Belgrade for Christmas suggested a declaration he hadn't travelled in the fortnight before his flight to Australia from Spain was wrong, to say nothing of his public appearances in the days after his positive test on 16 December.

Djokovic's Wednesday statement conceded error in his paperwork, blamed an agent who had filled it out, and acknowledged an "error of judgment" attending an interview and photo shoot after he received his result.

That statement gave new impetus to cancel his visa and further harming his public image for exposing others to Covid back in Serbia. At a late-night Friday hearing, Djokovic's lawyers revealed the government's new reason to cancel his visa was a fear his presence in Australia might "excite anti-vax sentiment".

The politics of this decision will be mixed. Some will think it an overreaction for a government trying to normalise the inevitability of endemic Covid cases and Serbian-Australians will be furious.

But time and time again Australian governments have been rewarded for keeping people out and the prime minister's "rules are rules" refrain last

week showed this is where the Coalition thinks the balance of public opinion lies.

Yes, the decision is harsh, as most travellers' declarations and exemptions are not subjected to this level of scrutiny. Yes, it will have an enormous impact on Djokovic and his quest to be recognised as the greatest male singles player of all time.

But still, the judge's question can now be answered easily enough. What more could Djokovic have done?

Get vaccinated; isolate while awaiting the result of a PCR test instead of doing an event with children (even if, as Djokovic claims, he felt fine and rapid antigen tests came back negative); stay in isolation after being notified of a positive result instead of doing an interview and photoshoot; and answer the form correctly.

While it seems bizarre that the minuscule risk of one unvaccinated man entering a country overrun by Omicron could justify deportation, harshness – and even cruelty – are the hallmarks and organising principles of Australia's border policies.

The decision was Hawke's to make, but it's worth noting Morrison proudly displays an “I Stopped These” trophy of a boat in his office, and once complained the relatives of deceased asylum seekers received taxpayer-funded flights to attend their funerals.

Donald Trump remarked to another Liberal prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, “you are worse than I am”, intending it as a compliment on Australia's refugee policies.

A system that crushes the hopes and dreams of refugees and asylum seekers who did nothing except seek safety in Australia was always going to be able to find a way to crush those of a man who has hit plenty of unforced errors.

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The politics sketch**Boris Johnson**

The PM's predicament seemed hopeless. But Brandon Lewis had a cunning plan

[John Crace](#)



The cabinet's Baldrick made the media round for Operation Save Our Boris.
It did not go well



Brandon 'Baldrick' Lewis, the secretary of state for Northern Ireland.
Photograph: Brian Lawless/PA

Thu 13 Jan 2022 13.20 EST

There was never any chance of getting Rishi Sunak to do it. The chancellor had made it clear he wasn't going to offer anything but the most half-hearted support. Ideally, he wouldn't be spending any time in the same postcode, let alone the same room, as the prime minister from now on.

But [Boris Johnson](#) had been more disappointed in other members of his cabinet. Liz Truss's phone had gone straight to voicemail. Dominic Raab had called in to say he was exhausted after committing random acts of psychopathic violence to try to offset humiliating himself with a supportive tweet.

Michael Gove had ruled himself out by making himself available to do anything that was required. The last time the Govester had made that kind of offer was when he had been Johnson's campaign manager for his 2016 leadership bid. And he knew how that had ended. The man couldn't be trusted not to betray his own shadow.

In the end, there had been only one man left standing. “I need someone with a cunning plan,” Johnson had told Brandon “Baldrick” Lewis, the secretary of state for Northern Ireland. “I am that man,” Lewis had replied. “I have a plan so cunning it will defeat even our most cunning enemies.” Good, then you’ve got the job, Boris had said. So it was that Baldrick came to be sent out to defend the prime minister’s lies on the following morning’s media round.

Baldrick first came unstuck when Sky’s Kay Burley made it clear from the off that she thought she was dealing with a halfwit. Though that might have been to overestimate Lewis’s intellectual faculties, as he couldn’t really explain anything very much. He reckoned that Johnson’s boyfriend apology had covered all the bases and been both heartfelt and insincere.

Why should he say sorry and mean it when he didn’t think he had done anything wrong? Besides it had been commonplace at the time to use Boris Johnson impersonators – it’s amazing what you can do with a clown in a blond toddler wig – for roleplays in No 10 work meetings, so it was possible the real Boris hadn’t even attended the party.

Not that it had been a party, of course. And even if it had been, then the prime minister definitely [hadn’t read the email from his principal private secretary about it](#). We had Johnson’s word for that and what more could you want from a man who has repeatedly lied to wives, friends, parliament and the entire country. That’s what made him such a great leader. Because he wasn’t afraid to take the big decisions on when to lie and when to merely conceal the truth. Bring on the next election and another five years of the Great Dissembler.

Err … hang on, said Burley. Back to the party that Boris was unable to tell was a party even though there were trestle tables with food and drink and various staffers were lying face down in the flower beds by the time he turned up. Still that wasn’t a party, said Baldrick. It was just a cunning plan to make it look like a party. Besides, the trestle tables had really been there for spreadsheets.

Baldrick’s head was still spinning by the time he had moved studios to Radio 4’s Today programme, where Nick Robinson concluded the

dismantling that Burley had started. No one was sorrier than Boris, Baldrick said, and instead of being the only person who was in the garden to not recognise that a party was a party, he wished he hadn't stayed for 25 minutes wondering what work event had been taking place, before conveniently forgetting about the whole thing until details of the party that wasn't a party had been leaked to the media at the end of last week.

It was the insincerity of the apology that made it so sincere. After all, no one would have believed a sincere apology from The Liar. And he had heroically gone to prime minister's questions, which he was obliged to do, to explain why he hadn't really done anything wrong. Something he was sure the inquiry would establish as it was being undertaken by Sue Gray, who just happened to be employed by the prime minister and was therefore far from independent. It was all just a huge misunderstanding that could soon be cleared up. Then everyone would be free to have a massive work event to celebrate.

With that, Baldrick shrivelled up in a ball and went to hide until the next time he had a cunning plan – he was fortunate not to have any self-respect to lose – and the mantle of Operation Save Our Boris, codename Sob Story, was passed to [Jacob Rees-Mogg](#), who was making the weekly business statement in the Commons. On reflection, Johnson might have wished Jakey had said a little less. In his own mind, the leader of the house is a model of good manners and easy charm: in reality he is a 12-year-old entitled brat in an oversized suit whose default setting is to be patronising and offensive. The very model of passive aggression.

After making a point of doubling down on [his dismissal of Douglas Ross](#), the leader of the Scottish Tories in Holyrood, as a lightweight – the reality is that it's Mogg who is the lightweight – Jakey went on to insult the Welsh. He had done more for the independence movement in five minutes than the Nats had achieved in years. Then Rees-Mogg went still further. It was incumbent on all Tories to support their leader even if he was proved to be a liar and a fraud and Johnson couldn't be expected to obey the rules as they were far too harsh in the first place. In fact, an intelligent person would have been obliged to break them. That's what the rest of the country – we little people – who managed to do so were told.

There was just one more thing to do for Boris. Draw a second red line on a family member's lateral flow test. Now he could hide up in Downing Street [where no one could get to him for the next five days](#). And maybe everyone would have forgotten about his lies by the time he got out. Some hope.

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Energy industry

Global surge in electricity use could bring three more years of price rises

International Energy Agency says pollution from power generation will worsen until alternatives are found



Shanghai at night. About half of the growth in electricity demand took place in China alone. Photograph: Paul Reiffer/Rex/Shutterstock

Jillian Ambrose

Fri 14 Jan 2022 01.00 EST

The global surge in demand for energy could spark another three years of market volatility and record power plant pollution unless countries make major changes to how they generate electricity, the world's energy watchdog has warned.

The International [Energy](#) Agency recorded the steepest ever increase in electricity demand last year, which triggered blackouts in major economies and led to historic energy price highs and record emissions.

The IEA's annual electricity report said this could continue for another three years, with [serious consequences for consumers](#) and economies unless there is a faster structural change to the way electricity is produced.

“Sharp spikes in electricity prices in recent times have been causing hardship for many households and businesses around the world and risk becoming a driver of social and political tensions,” said the IEA’s executive director, Fatih Birol.

The IEA found that the world’s demand for electricity surged by 6% last year, following the global economic rebound from the 2020 pandemic recession, the steepest increase since 2010 when economies began to bounce back from the global financial crisis. The total increase in electricity demand was over 1,500 terawatt-hours, the largest on record.

About half of the growth in electricity demand took place in China alone, where it rose by an estimated 10% compared with 2020. China and India [both suffered from power cuts in the second half of the year](#) because coal supplies failed to keep pace with the demand on their power plants, [leading to an economic slowdown in Asia](#).

In the UK, electricity market prices have reached record highs in recent months, in large part because the power grid continues to rely on gas-burning power plants for almost half of its electricity. The cost of running of these sites has rocketed following a global gas supply crunch which has [triggered record high market prices across Europe](#).

The rising cost of keeping the lights on has left the UK [facing a national energy crisis](#) as household bills have rocketed, energy suppliers have collapsed and factories have been forced to shut.

The global strain on electricity systems has also led to record emissions from power generation as economies turn to cheaper coal power plants to keep a lid on soaring costs.

“Policymakers should be taking action now to soften the impacts on the most vulnerable and to address the underlying causes,” Birol said. “Higher investment in low-carbon energy technologies including renewables, energy efficiency and nuclear power – alongside an expansion of robust and smart electricity grids – can help us get out of today’s difficulties.”

The IEA’s report found that renewable energy sources grew by 6% in 2021, but that increase was unable to keep pace with the surge in demand as economies reopened following the sudden Covid-19 lockdowns that had choked economic growth.

In order to meet the rebound in demand for power, coal-fired plants generated 9% more electricity last year, or more than half of the global increase in power demand, to reach an all-time peak as gas became more expensive. Electricity generated by gas power plants grew by 2% last year, according to the IEA, while nuclear generation increased by 3.5%.

The return to dirtier sources of electricity caused the world’s total carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions from power generation to climb by 7% to a new all-time high after having declined the two previous years, the IEA said.

Birol warned that emissions from electricity would need to decline by 55% by 2030 if the world hopes to limit the rise in global heating by becoming “net zero carbon” by 2050.

“But in the absence of major policy action from governments, those emissions are set to remain around the same level for the next three years,” he said. “Not only does this highlight how far off track we currently are from a pathway to net zero emissions by 2050, but it also underscores the massive changes needed for the electricity sector to fulfil its critical role in decarbonising the broader energy system.”

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The Pacific projectVanuatu

EU could suspend Vanuatu visa-free travel over ‘golden passports’ scheme

EU states set to vote on proposal after commission found deficiencies including ‘the granting of citizenship to applicants listed in Interpol’s databases’



The European Commission has proposed suspending visa-free travel to Vanuatu passport holders amid concerns about the country’s citizenship-by-investment programs. Photograph: Mario Tama/Getty Images

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Thu 13 Jan 2022 21.17 EST

The [European Commission](#) has proposed suspending a visa-free travel arrangement with Vanuatu due to concerns about the Pacific nation's controversial "golden passports" scheme.

The proposed suspension, which still needs to be voted on by EU states, would prevent all holders of passports issued as of 25 May 2015 – when [Vanuatu](#) started issuing a substantial number of passports in exchange for investment – from travelling to the EU without a visa.

The citizenship-by-investment (CBI) programs allow foreign nationals to purchase Vanuatu citizenship for US\$130,000 in a process that typically takes just over a month, without ever setting foot in the country.

One of the most appealing elements of the passport scheme is that it grants unfettered, visa-free access to 130 countries including the UK and EU nations, allowing passport holders to travel there for 90 days without a visa.

Vanuatu also operates as a tax haven, with no income, corporate or wealth tax.

The commission – the executive branch of the EU – believed Vanuatu’s investor citizenship schemes “present serious deficiencies and security failures”, including “the granting of citizenship to applicants listed in Interpol’s databases”, “an average application processing time too short to allow for thorough screening”, “a very low rejection rate” and some applicants coming from countries that are typically excluded from citizenship schemes.

Last year, the Guardian revealed that [among the more than 2,000 people Vanuatu had sold citizenship to in 2020](#) were disgraced businesspeople and individuals sought by police in countries all over the world.

[The list included](#) a Syrian businessman with US sanctions against his businesses – [whose application for citizenship was revoked](#) after the Guardian’s reporting – a suspected North Korean politician, an Italian businessman accused of extorting the Vatican, [a former member of a notorious Australian motorcycle gang](#), and South African brothers accused of a \$3.6bn cryptocurrency heist.

Vanuatu’s opposition leader, Ralph Regenvanu, said the commission proposal was “inevitable”. “We have been warning the government to implement the recommended reforms to the program for almost two years now, but nothing has been done.”

Glen Craig, a Vanuatu-New Zealand citizen who developed Vanuatu’s CBI program in 2012, said the impact of the announcement would have “massive negative” effects on the economy.

Vanuatu is one of the poorest countries in the world, with the World Bank putting GDP per capita at US\$2,780. The sale of passports is the largest source of revenue for the Vanuatu government, with [analysis by Investment Migration Insider](#) finding it accounted for 42% of all government revenue in 2020.

“The economy is pretty much sustained by the program,” Craig said. “I’m sad, to be honest. There’s going to be a lot of people that probably won’t have teachers, there won’t be money to pay them, the hospital system is already pretty stretched and there’ll be no money for that. It’s tough to watch.”

Craig acknowledged the CBI program had room for improvement but questioned the fairness of the visa decision, when wealthier nations that run CBI programs and have raised serious questions have not had the same visa-waiver suspension imposed on them.

“Vanuatu’s been the shot across the bow,” he said. “I think we’ve been seen as an easy target … We are no better and no worse than any program we’ve seen recently, but you have to ask, for the EU to effectively economically cripple a country overnight, is that a fair punishment?”

The Vanuatu Citizenship Office and Commission has been contacted for comment.

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The age of extinctionRivers

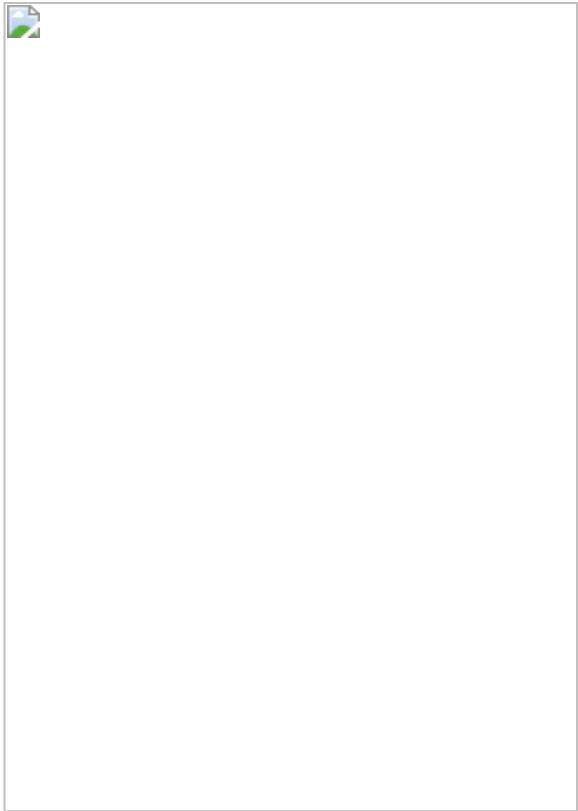
Norway blows up hydro dam to restore river health and fish stocks

Campaign by local angling club to free fishes' migratory routes is part of move across Europe to create free-flowing rivers



Campaigners say removing the seven-metre dam, in Fåvang, Norway, which has not been used in 50 years, will help fish thrive. Photograph: Rob Kleinjans

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[Graeme Green](#)

Fri 14 Jan 2022 02.45 EST

A dam that has blocked the Tromsa River in [Norway](#) for more than 100 years was blown up with dynamite this week, freeing migratory routes for fish.

“It’s a big step,” said Tore Solbakken of Norwegian angling club Gudbrandsdal Sportsfiskeforening, who has campaigned for five years to

have the old hydropower plant dam removed. “I’m very happy. It’s all about restoring healthy rivers and fish populations.”

Built in 1916, the seven-metre high dam in the small town of Fåvang, in Innlandet, east Norway, has not been in use for more than 50 years. The Tromsa is a tributary of the Lågen River, which feeds into Lake Mjøsa, Norway’s biggest lake. Campaigners say removing the dam will help fish in the area thrive again, including grayling, burbot, Alpine bullhead and common minnows. It is hoped the main beneficiary will be the lake-dwelling trout, which can weigh more than 10kg and feeds in downstream lakes and the Lågen. Until now, the fish have only been able to live and spawn in the lower 950 metres before the dam, whereas they will soon be able to swim 10km upriver.



Tore Solbakken and his local angling club campaigned five years for the dam to be removed. Photograph: Rob Kleinjans

“A few years ago, I watched the [DamNation](#) documentary and that inspired me to try to remove dams that aren’t in use any more,” said Solbakken. “Fish barriers, hydropower dams, roadbuilding and the way we secure rivers against flooding are all big problems for big brown trout and other fish. It is important to take care of all the small rivers. If we do that, we can have a positive future for our area.”

The dam's destruction is part of a trend to remove the obsolete barriers that litter Europe's waterways. In October, the [Open Rivers Programme](#), a €42.5m project to provide grants to support the removal of small dams and the restoration of river flow across Europe, was launched with the backing of the charitable fund Arcadia. Last month, the European Commission released [a guide](#) for member states to identify barriers that could be removed to help achieve the goal of restoring [25,000km of rivers](#) to free-flowing by 2030.

"Dams in rivers block migration routes – the swimways – of fish," said Herman Wanningen, founder of the World Fish Migration Foundation and [Dam Removal Europe](#). "Some fish species, such as Atlantic salmon, eels and sturgeon, travel thousands of kilometres to complete their lifecycle. Dams also impede important sediment and nutrient transport, and drastically change the natural flow of rivers. Breeding places are lost."

It is estimated that there are at least [1.2 million instream barriers](#) in Europe and that they are a factor in the massive drop in the number of migratory freshwater fish across the continent, with numbers declining by [more than 90% between 1970 and 2016](#).

"Free-flowing rivers underpin a wealth of biodiversity," Wanningen said. "They also provide food for hundreds of millions of people, as these rivers are full of life and fish. Free-flowing rivers deliver rich sediments, which are crucial to agriculture and also mitigate the impact of floods and droughts. There's so much potential for free-flowing rivers in Europe."

"Norway is a major hydropower country. Removing dams here isn't normal," said Solbakken. "But it's not controversial if you're removing old dams that are not in use, in rivers protected by regulations against new hydropower."



The dam was blown up with dynamite packed into holes along the structure. After the rubble is removed a team will start work restoring the river.
Photograph: Rob Kleinjans

The campaign by Solbakken and the 120 members of the fishing club resulted in the government agreeing to foot the bill of 3.4m kroner (£290,000) to remove the dam.

On Wednesday, the small team drilled five holes deep into the dam then packed 20kg of dynamite into each one. Blowing up dams is unusual in Europe but was judged to be the safest method in this case. “As planned, the dam cracked in the middle and top,” said Solbakken. “The next step is to use the excavator. It’s a massive dam and it will take days to remove it all. There’s still plenty of work to do.”

The team will then set about restoring the river directly ahead of the dam site. “The Tromsa dam is in a steep canyon, so our challenge is to build up a nature-like step-pool cascade to enable the fish to swim upstream in the strong current,” said Ulrich Pulg, a fish biologist and river restorations expert. “This project will have several one-metre steps. It will look like white-water rapids during floods but big lake-dwelling trout will make it.”

Other dams are earmarked for removal across Europe in 2022, including in Spain, France and the UK. “More and more river managers and NGOs are picking up their tools for excavations,” said Wanningen. “Just a couple of months ago, three dams in Montenegro and one in Slovakia went down for the first time in the history of these countries. The European research project, [Amber](#), which we participated in, has shown there are about 150,000 dams and weirs in Europe that have no function any more and can be taken out without any problem.

“Rivers are the veins of the Earth. We need to treat them with care.”

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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Amitav Ghosh

Amitav Ghosh: European colonialism helped create a planet in crisis

Indian author says pillaging of lands and killing of indigenous people laid foundation for climate emergency



Amitav Ghosh's latest book, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, is non-fiction.
Photograph: Nicolo Campo/Alamy

[Hannah Ellis-Petersen](#) South Asia correspondent

Fri 14 Jan 2022 02.00 EST

Amitav Ghosh can clearly remember his first interaction with the climate crisis. It was the early 2000s, and Ghosh, now one of India's most celebrated authors and winner of its highest literary prize, was researching a novel set in the Sundarbans, a network of islands around the mouth of the Ganges Delta in the Bay of Bengal, which is home to the world's largest mangrove forest.

Climate change had barely entered into public consciousness back then, but Ghosh clearly remembers “visible signs that something wasn’t right”.

“People spoke of their homes disappearing, of sea water levels rising and salt water erosion, but no one knew what was happening,” he said. “So I began researching. And as the years went on the signs became clearer and clearer.”

Twenty years on, the Sundarbans are widely acknowledged to be one of the world’s most vulnerable areas to the climate crisis. Rising sea levels are eating away at the islands while extreme weather events have decimated the ecology and made the land salty and arid. Drilling for groundwater has only exacerbated the problem as it causes the islands to sink faster. Some predict that in less than a century, the unique biosphere will disappear entirely.



Women in the Sundarbans carry mangrove saplings to be planted after floods from Cyclone Yaas damaged nearly 100km of embankments. Photograph: Avijit Ghosh/SOPA Images/REX/Shutterstock

Ghosh, who was born in Kolkata in West Bengal, less than 100 miles from the Sundarbans, never forgot the rapidly changing landscape he witnessed and has become one of the most vocal literary voices calling for the world to pay attention to the climate emergency.

While he is still known best for his novels, most notably the Booker-prize nominated *Ibis* trilogy about the opium trade in the 1800s, it was to a “planet in crisis” that Ghosh turned his attention in his latest work of nonfiction, *The Nutmeg’s Curse*.

Spanning horrific incidents of European settler colonial violence carried out across Asia, America, Australia, New Zealand and Africa, Ghosh maps out how the pillaging of those lands hundreds of years ago – and the systematic extermination of their indigenous people – laid the foundation for the climate crisis that threatens the world today.

“Why has this crisis come about?” said Ghosh. “Because for two centuries, European colonists tore across the world, viewing nature and land as something inert to be conquered and consumed without limits and the indigenous people as savages whose knowledge of nature was worthless and who needed to be erased. It was this settler colonial worldview – of just accumulate, accumulate, accumulate, consume, consume, consume – that has got us where we are now.”

Yet as Ghosh sat down to write the book in March 2020, he had no idea that the ideas that had begun to take shape in his head would begin to manifest so dramatically off the page. Suddenly the pandemic hit and New York, where he lives, was one of its hardest-hit cities. “That experience really shaped the book, because the pandemic is the most visible aspect of the planetary crisis that’s unfolding us around us,” said Ghosh. “I think the pandemic more than anything else made it perfectly clear that this is a crisis you can’t hide from. Money will not protect you, power will not protect you, we’re in the midst of it already. It gave it a terrific sense of urgency.”

For Ghosh, the survival of our planet hinges on returning to interacting with Earth as a living being to be listened to, understood and respected. “The indigenous peoples of the Americas have been saying for decades that our past is your future and now that’s exactly what’s proving to be the case,” he said.

There are signs this perception of nature is becoming more formally recognised and non-human voices are starting to be heard. Courts in countries such as New Zealand, once home to atrocious acts of violence by

European colonialists, have begun to recognise the [personhood and rights of rivers](#), mountains, glaciers and other geological phenomena. “This is one of the things that makes me hopeful because if it happens in legal language then at some point it’s bound to seep also into political language,” said Ghosh.

But he also sees some developing countries, including [India](#), reverting to the very same approaches of greed, consumption and extraction, and alienation of indigenous communities, that were inflicted by colonial invaders 200 years ago.

“In India especially, governing elites have completely accepted the settler colonial models, and are now trying to impose them upon indigenous forest dwellers, *adivasis*,” said Ghosh.



Adivasi people dance during the 2020 International Day of the World’s Indigenous People. Photograph: Francis Mascarenhas/Reuters

He pointed out that the Indian government was auctioning off sites for private coalmines, many in rich biodiverse forests with tribal communities. “They talk about environmentalism, development and progress but it only serves a middle-class, urban vision of the world,” he said. “Meanwhile,

those who live off the land are made to suffer. It can only have disastrous consequences for the future of our planet.”

Ghosh said this disconnect was worsened by India’s caste system, where *adivasis* are seen to be at the very lowest rung of society. “Indian environmentalism has tended to be very upper-caste oriented,” he said. “They have these visions of nature as pure and pristine and these *adivasis* are somehow contaminants of the forests.”

According to Ghosh, there is still hope left in the fight against the climate crisis, but it is not a hope represented by large multinational bodies and institutions. Cop26 only proved his worst fears. “Cop26 really underlined that all those political mechanisms and institutions of liberal world governance that we rely on have failed us, and they’re going to fail more and more in the future,” said Ghosh.

His hope for the planet lies instead in movements such as Black Lives Matter, the Standing Rock protests and Occupy, where the colonialist viewpoints that have infused society for hundreds of years finally began to be challenged and the power and potential of global connectivity was felt.

As Ghosh writes in the final lines of the book, it is not of billionaires or technology that will save us, but instead a “vitalist mass movement”, driven by human spirit, that “may actually be magical enough to change hearts and minds across the world”.

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Meta

Meta sued for £2.3bn over claim Facebook users in UK were exploited

Lawsuit claims company set ‘unfair price’ by taking users’ personal data without proper compensation



Mark Zuckerberg speaking in Utah in January 2020. The lawsuit covers the period from 1 October 2015 to 31 December 2019. Photograph: Bloomberg/Getty Images

[Dan Milmo](#)

Thu 13 Jan 2022 19.01 EST

Mark Zuckerberg’s Meta is being sued for £2.3bn in a class action lawsuit that claims 44 million [Facebook](#) users in the UK had their data exploited after signing up to the social network.

The case argues that Meta has broken the 1998 Competition Act by setting an “unfair price” for Facebook’s UK users when they are given access to the service. The lawsuit brought by the legal expert Dr Liza Lovdahl Gormsen argues that the price for getting on Facebook, which does not charge its

users, is [handing over personal data](#) that generates most of the company's income.

Worldwide, Meta makes 98% of its income from advertisers, who are able to [target specific demographics and consumers](#) because the company has built up profiles of its users through their online activity.

"They are exploiting users by taking their personal data without properly compensating them for taking that data," said Lovdahl Gormsen, who added that Facebook had a "completely disproportionate" relationship with its users. "I don't think the users are entirely clear when they click on the terms and conditions how unfair that deal is."

Lovdahl Gormsen, a competition law specialist at the British Institute of International and Comparative Law, is bringing the class action at the Competition Appeal Tribunal in London as an opt-out case. This means Facebook users covered by it do not need to actively join the case to receive damages and will be part of the claim unless they decide to opt out from it. The lawsuit covers the period from 1 October 2015 to 31 December 2019. If the case is successful, the amount of compensation per user will be settled by the judge. The £2.3bn compensation number cited by the case's backers represents an estimate of the damage caused to users.

The lawsuit is being funded by Innsworth, a firm that pays for litigation in exchange for a share of any damages, and Lovdahl Gormsen is being represented by Quinn Emanuel Urquhart & Sullivan, a law firm that describes itself as a specialist in "high-stakes commercial litigation".

Lovdahl Gormsen's lawyers have written to [Meta](#), which also owns the photo-sharing app Instagram and the WhatsApp messaging service, to notify it of the claim. The claim will then be heard by a judge at the tribunal, who will decide whether the case should go ahead. If it does go ahead, the case could take between 6 and 12 months.

A Meta spokesperson said: "People access our service for free. They choose our services because we deliver value for them and they have meaningful control of what information they share on Meta's platforms and who with. We have invested heavily to create tools that allow them to do so."

On Tuesday, a US federal judge ruled that the US competition watchdog could proceed with a breakup lawsuit against Meta. The Federal Trade Commission wants to force Meta to sell Instagram and WhatsApp, in one of the biggest challenges the government has brought against a tech company in decades. Its lawsuit accuses Meta of pursuing a “course of anti-competitive conduct” by buying or crushing rivals.

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