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[Names in the news](#)[Spotify](#)

Olivia Rodrigo: Spotify's tracking is all about smoke and mirrors

[Rebecca Nicholson](#)



Olivia Rodrigo: chart-topper. Photograph: Mario Anzuoni/Reuters

Sat 4 Dec 2021 10.00 EST

Olivia Rodrigo claimed the top two positions on Spotify's most-streamed songs list in the UK this year, with just one surprise, given her ubiquity – that the Paramore-esque Good 4 U edged out Drivers License, which is an affront to advocates for the correct use of apostrophes. While other streaming services are available, it is [Spotify](#) that has the end-of-year list sewn up; as one internet wag wisely noted, it is the only service to show off about how much it is tracking you *and* make it seem like fun.

A few years ago, Netflix posted a tweet that read: “To the 53 people who’ve watched *A Christmas Prince* every day for the past 18 days: who hurt you?” [At the time, it was controversial](#) for being creepy and judgmental. Now, most of us not only shrug off big tech companies knowing what we’ve been doing and when, but help them to promote it.

Spotify’s annual Unwrapped, a personalised animation that shows what subscribers have been listening to, arrives with the advent calendars. That’s about three weeks after everyone has put up their Christmas trees.

I’ve always found the performative aspect of these lists a bit unsettling, like a teenager listening to music on phone speakers so that everyone knows about their love for rap music with lots of swearing in it.

What I listen to is basically mortifying: There Are Worse Things I Could Do from the *Grease* soundtrack, on repeat, so I can sing along at top volume and daydream about an amateur production that would take a 39-year-old Rizzo (to be fair, Stockard Channing was 33 when she played her in the film). I know, in theory, that there is no such thing as a guilty pleasure, but is it dignified to shout about repeat-listening to Monster by Kanye in order to perfect the Nicki Minaj rap?

This year, I have seen more memes about Spotify Unwrapped than actual lists; either everyone’s pandemic streaming was too exposing to be made public or people don’t see themselves reflected in it.

Shared accounts, hacked accounts, the radio, the record player – all mean Spotify Unwrapped is a funhouse mirror, not quite what it says it is.

And I am convinced, *convinced*, that it invents genres in order to encourage people to post “wtf is chamber psych lol random”. Or maybe the only thing that needs unwrapping is my tinfoil hat.

Bryan Adams: snapping pit stops for Pirelli



Bryan Adams: calendar king. Photograph: Mark Blinch/Reuters

Rock star/photographer Bryan Adams has shot this year's Pirelli calendar. Since 1964, the tyre company has been recruiting star photographers and famous people, usually women, to [what has become a prestigious project](#). The theme of this year's instalment is On the Road and it features a number of musicians, from Cher to St Vincent to Rita Ora, posed as if to “capture the life of an artist on tour”.

The calendar used to be notoriously nudity-heavy, but the only topless shot I could see this year was Iggy Pop's.

In my days as a music journalist, I spent plenty of time “on the road” and was excited to see it reflected in Adams's pictures.

Perhaps Cher would be captured turning up at a remote services at midnight, only to find that everything except a lone WHSmith was closed and that it would be Monster Munch for dinner, again.

Perhaps Rita Ora might be seen wondering if that sticky feeling on her skin, a mix of cheap, warm beer and drummer's sweat, would ever go away?

It's not a spoiler to say that if this calendar were a road, it would be the M6 toll: clean, elite and full of rich people.

Ellen White: joy all round, but the score's not the goal



Ellen White: goal heroine. Photograph: Tom Flathers/Manchester City FC/Getty Images

As a relative newcomer to being a football fan, I was shocked to discover that winning 20-0 did not feel as good as I might have anticipated it would a few years ago. The statistics involved in [England's drubbing of Latvia in Tuesday's World Cup qualifying match](#) are, to use the technical term, a bit silly: four hat tricks, 85.6% possession for England, 31 shots on target and seven more goals than England's previous best score of 13-0. Even the manager, Sarina Wiegman, suggested this might be an indication of the need

for pre-qualifiers. “In every country you want to develop the women’s game but I don’t think it’s good that the scores now are so high,” she said.

Amid all that, though, it was deservedly Ellen White’s evening. The Manchester City forward equalled Kelly Smith’s record of 46 goals for England in the sixth minute and had bettered it in the ninth. (Smith sent her a congratulatory message on Twitter: “So many nations now across the world fear playing against you,” she said.)

White ended the match with a new record of 48 goals, putting her on a level with Gary Lineker and Harry Kane[Correct according to <https://www.englandstats.com/player.php?pid=1207>], behind only Bobby Charlton and Wayne Rooney. Cause for celebration, obviously, and on the pitch the joy was there for all to see, though off the pitch White’s humility was profound. “We move on and don’t mention it again,” she said.

It’s clear now that smashing Rooney’s record is a possibility: at 32, you sense there are many more goals left in her yet, though don’t expect her to be shouting about it.

This article was amended on 4 December 2021. A picture captioned “Ellen White” was actually of Lauren Hemp. This has been replaced with a picture of White.

Rebecca Nicholson is an Observer columnist

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OpinionChild protection

Sometimes the most caring thing to do is to remove a child from their family

[Sonia Sodha](#)



Arthur Labinjo-Hughes. The anxieties of relatives for his safety went unheard. Photograph: Olivia Labinjo-Halcrow/PA

Sun 5 Dec 2021 01.58 EST

Sometimes, a news report is so horrific you know it will haunt you forever. So it is with the story of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes, the six-year-old tortured to death by his stepmother and father. Starved, poisoned with salt, forced to stand for 14 hours at a time and subjected to punishment beatings: Arthur went from a happy, [healthy young boy](#) to a child broken by abuse within months of moving in with his stepmother.

Experts have worried about the impact of the pandemic on child abuse: more children at home with abusive parents and without the safety valve of school and fewer interactions with extended family. But a shocking thing about this case is that several loving relatives raised the alarm with social services, the police and his school. Arthur was old enough to talk about what was happening to him and he did. But his voice and the anxieties of the adults around him went unheeded; a social worker concluded after a brief visit that there were no concerns. The review of what went wrong is yet to be published but there is no doubt Arthur was catastrophically failed. It may seem jarring to move straight from the distressing details of his case to the lessons for the system in which it happened. But we must.

Every time a horrific case of child abuse surfaces – Victoria Climbié, Peter Connolly, Daniel Pelka, Keanu Williams – the immediate reaction is “never again”, only for the public gaze to slip away. Sentiment swings wildly between “more must be done” and emotive newspaper campaigns against over-interventionist services.

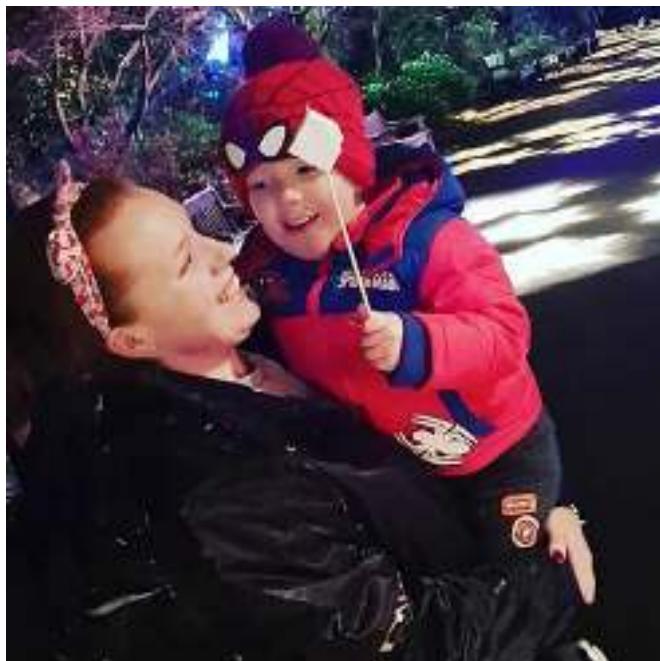
Sentiment swings wildly between ‘more must be done’ and campaigns against over-interventionist services

This oversimplified narrative fails children, but it takes place even among those who should know better. There is no decision more intrusive that the state can make than to remove a child from his or her parents. These high stakes impede the sophisticated conversation about child protection that is

needed. Arthur's case involved unusual levels of cruelty, but last year alone there were 482 [serious incidents](#) reported where a child died or experienced serious harm and abuse or neglect was known or suspected. Thirteen children died as a result of filicide, 22 from physical abuse and 20 related to maltreatment. Serious harm and abuse are not one-off incidents – they are the product of escalating patterns of behaviour. More of these deaths should be preventable.

If there is no state decision more intrusive than removing children, then there are few public service jobs that are as difficult or highly skilled as social work. Social workers have to make finely balanced risk assessments about what is in a child's best interests with unthinkably huge consequences. Reducing this to box-ticking or simple rules is a recipe for bad decision-making.

Social work involves supporting families to provide the best possible home for their child, but also investigating parents suspected of harming or neglecting their child. Sometimes, it will be obvious, sometimes not. As Lord Laming pointed out in his 2009 review of child protection after the death of Peter Connolly, abusive parents can be incredibly deceptive in appealing to social workers' natural sympathies.



Arthur Labinjo-Hughes with his mother, Olivia Labinjo-Halcrow. Photograph: Olivia Labinjo-Halcrow/PA

It is wrongheaded to look at raw numbers of children in care – as many do – to argue that the state is too interventionist. There are big variations in numbers between different councils with similar deprivation profiles. Low rates of children in care can be a sign that children’s services are performing excellently, as in Leeds, where a decade-long [early-intervention plan](#) means there is less need to take children into care. But they can also be a sign of councils with no such plans are missing children seriously at risk.

It takes outstanding leadership to move from the latter to the former. Yet a simple system-wide narrative that suggests there is too much intervention – the head of the government’s review of social care, Josh MacAlister, recently spoke of the “[runaway train](#)” of child protection investigations – risks signalling that councils should show restraint. That jars with the many professionals who say, in their experience, too many children are left in abusive situations for too long. [Martin Barrow](#), an experienced foster carer told me that carers in his network are seeing children coming to them with increasing levels of need in the last five to 10 years.

Cuts to mental health, domestic abuse and substance abuse services have put children at risk. That is a political choice

Two other factors shape local decision-making. The first is the strain on the system as a result of shrinking resources. How can social workers do their jobs well when some have caseloads of [30 or more](#)? Cuts to other support services over the last decade – mental health services, domestic abuse services, substance abuse services – have put more children at risk. That is a political choice.

Second, there are some well-meaning but misplaced beliefs in some parts of the profession that can undermine timely intervention. There is the idea that care is to be avoided at all costs because it is detrimental to a child’s interests. There is so much about the care system that needs to be improved: the shortage of foster carers, the lack of stability for children and young people, the cliff edges as support drops off as they get older. But the very

poor outcomes experienced by children in care highlighted by the care review's [interim report](#) must be put in the context of the very poor outcomes suffered by children experiencing neglect and abuse in their family home. In fact, [evidence suggests](#) that a timely move into care is associated with better educational outcomes.

What's more, there can be a very human sense of overoptimism in social workers that abusive and neglectful parents can do better if only given a bit more time and support. Of course as much should be done as possible to enable parents to provide a safe home for their children. But this is often expensive, intensive work, not the light-touch support group you might think from reading some reports and it is not always appropriate.

[Research](#) on returning children to the care of their parents suggests that, in too many cases, it is to the detriment of the child. There is a danger that a laudable emphasis on early intervention moves into emphasising a parent's support needs over a child's safety. The sad truth that underpins child protection is that the wish to support parents and to protect the child are not always in harmony.

Sonia Sodha is an Observer columnist

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OpinionRussia

The Observer view on Russia's threat to Ukraine

[Observer editorial](#)



A Ukrainian serviceman takes a rest in a trench on the Ukraine-Russian border near Horlivka, a city controlled by pro-Russian insurgents.
Photograph: Anatolii Stepanov/EPA

Sun 5 Dec 2021 01.30 EST

Vladimir Putin is an old-fashioned sort of guy. He yearns for the days when the Soviet Union was a great power. He still views western democracies as adversaries, to be confounded whenever possible. And he has never reconciled to the post-Soviet loss of cold war-era satellite republics in eastern Europe. This is especially true of Ukraine.

The Russian view that [Ukraine](#) is stolen territory to which it has a natural right has roots in tsarist times and before. Ukrainians (and Belarusians) were habitually called “little Russians”. Indigenous narratives stress a common

history and common faith indissolubly linking two brotherly eastern Slavic races. Putin has repeatedly stated that “Russians and Ukrainians are one people”.

Conveniently forgotten is 19th-century imperial oppression that included a ban on Ukraine’s language. In 1918, after the Russian Revolution, Ukraine declared its independence, only to have it swiftly snuffed out. In the 1930s, a man-made “terror famine”, known as the [Holodomor](#), killed more than 7 million mostly ethnic Ukrainians and is now officially viewed as a Soviet genocide.

Despite all this, Putin views modern Ukraine’s bid for closer ties to the EU and Nato as a betrayal. This attitude recalls that of 1950s France towards Algeria and of 19th-century England towards Ireland. Yet he also appears to be genuinely fearful that Kyiv’s westwards lurch, encouraged and exploited by the US and allies, [poses a threat](#) to Russia.

The US debacle in Afghanistan may have convinced Putin that another adventure in Ukraine could yield positive dividends

Understanding a little of this shared history is essential to understanding why current tensions on Ukraine’s borders have the [potential to explode](#) into a European war. In 2014, in response to the revolution that toppled Ukraine’s pro-Moscow president, [Putin invaded](#) and annexed Crimea and began a proxy separatist conflict in the Donbas region.

The failure of peace efforts, championed by Germany’s Angela Merkel, led directly to today’s crisis. By stationing more than 90,000 troops and heavy weapons around Ukraine’s borders, Putin may be trying to push Kyiv and the west into a permanent settlement, the lifting of sanctions and formal recognition of Crimea’s new status.

But he has other motives, too. Moscow has always objected to Nato’s post-1990 eastwards expansion, especially into Poland and the Baltic republics. He would like to reverse the alliance’s recent deployments there of troops and missiles. He’d like US and UK arms sales to Kyiv, and talk of Ukraine’s bright “Euro-Atlantic future”, to stop.

Adept at leveraging Russia's relatively weak geo-strategic position to his advantage, Putin also senses an opportunity. The US debacle in Afghanistan, after similar American failures of will over Syria, Crimea and Georgia, may have convinced him that another adventure in Ukraine could ultimately yield positive dividends while avoiding serious military consequences.

In this, unfortunately, he may not be far wrong. The US president, Joe Biden, has issued a series of tough-sounding warnings. He says he will talk directly to the Russian leader soon. Meanwhile, he boasted last week, he has prepared "the most comprehensive and meaningful set of initiatives to make it very, very difficult for Mr Putin to go ahead and do what people are worried he's going to do".

What this piece of Biden-speak means, in practical terms, is that the US plans to punish Russia economically and in other ways if it attacks Ukraine – but there will be no overt military response. Nato will not ride to the rescue; there will be no wider conflict. As Putin knows, Biden is in the business of ending wars, not starting them. It's his promise to American voters. And anyway, he's focused on China and Covid.

Seen this way, the crisis marks a very dangerous moment for Ukraine – and the credibility of the western alliance. The foreign secretary Liz Truss's jingoistic blather about defending the "frontier of freedom" is actually a confession of impotence. Putin may be about to commit another act of daylight robbery. And, truly, who's to stop him?

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Opinion[Child protection](#)

The Observer view on the state of children's social care

[Observer editorial](#)



Tributes left outside the home of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes in Solihull, West Midlands. Photograph: Bradley Collyer/PA

Sun 5 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

Perhaps the most important job that the state has is to protect children at risk of harm and abuse. Yet children's social care is facing a mounting crisis that gets far less exposure than that confronting the NHS or even adult social care. Local councils, which are responsible for child protection, are having to provide for vulnerable youngsters against a backdrop of rising need, reduced funding from central government and a shortage of long-term foster and residential care places, many of which are overpriced by the private sector. All this affects the quality of support that is available for children who need it the most.

Children in need of help and protection from local councils because they are at risk – and the smaller group of children in care, for whom the council has parental responsibility – deserve the very best that the state has to offer. The awful fate of six-year-old Arthur Labinjo-Hughes shows the tragic costs when the state fails. In England, more than six in 10 children are in care because they have experienced [parental abuse or neglect](#). A further 14% are in care because parenting capacity in their family is chronically inadequate and 8% because of acute family stress, where a temporary crisis has diminished parenting capacity and their needs are not being met. While taking a child into care is never the preferred option if a child's family can be successfully supported to provide a safe home, research shows a move into care can be associated with [better outcomes](#) for children at serious risk.

However, there are mounting pressures on the system as a result of growing numbers of children in care. The overall child population has grown over the past decade but, even allowing for this, there has been a 6% increase in the rate of children entering care in the past five years. This is partly due to an increase in the numbers of unaccompanied child refugees in recent years, some of whom are, disgracefully, [housed in hotels](#) with minimal adult supervision, but also by a sharp rise in the number of [teenagers](#) being taken into care, who often have more complex needs than younger children.

Despite this rising demand, local authorities have seen their central government [funding drastically cut](#) by almost 60% in the past decade. Councils have been expected to make up for this reduction by relying more heavily on receipts from council tax and business rates. This means councils in less affluent areas, with higher levels of need for children and adult social services and from people who are homeless have seen their overall budgets fall by more than wealthier areas. This has forced them to cut their spending on the early intervention services such as children's centres, parenting support and domestic abuse services that, if run well, can help reduce pressure on the care system by preventing escalations to crisis point. At the same time, spending on acute services such as child protection and care placements has been forced up. Councils in England have increased budgeted spending on children's social care by £1.1bn in the past two years yet last year [eight in 10](#) ended up overspending their budgets by £800m collectively. The [National Audit Office](#) warned earlier this year that 25 councils are on the cusp of bankruptcy.

Three-quarters of children's homes are now privately run, compared to 40% 20 years ago

What makes this situation even worse is that the costs of providing children's social care have soared in recent years, driven by the privatisation of children's care. Three-quarters of children's homes are now privately run, compared to 40% 20 years ago and about a third of children are placed in foster care using private agencies. The Competition and Markets Authority published an interim report on the availability and price of children's care a few weeks ago. It found that private care homes and foster agencies are making significant profit out of the system: for children's homes, the average weekly price was £3,800, with an average profit margin of 23%; for fostering agencies, the average weekly price of a placement was about £820 a week, with an average operating profit margin of 19%. It is obscene that one pound in every five that English councils are spending on private care is banked as profit, particularly given the growing role of private equity in buying up children's homes and foster care agencies.

These profits are partly driven by a shortage of appropriate places and the weak negotiating position of councils. And, as we report today, new research by the Fostering Network has highlighted that out of 99 fostering services that responded to its survey all but six reported having a shortage of foster carers. These shortages generate an unacceptable level of instability in the care system: the charity Become highlights that more than one in 10 children in care have experienced three or more placements in the past year. More than 12,000 children in care are split up from their siblings and too many children and young people have been put up in unregulated accommodation with minimal adult support, which remains legal for those aged 16 and 17 despite efforts by campaigners to get it banned for all children. One in six children in care lives more than 20 miles from home.

All this is compounded by the poor quality of children's services. Half of council children's services have been rated inadequate or require improvement by Ofsted; this is an improvement from a few years ago but it falls far short of the standards that vulnerable children deserve. This has consequences. Ofsted found significant problems with Solihull council's

child protection services just months before the death of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes last year.

It seems nothing short of wicked that some of the most vulnerable children in the country are being forced to bear the brunt of the past decade of spending cuts, while private companies pocket inflated profits from running children's homes and foster agencies. Children's services urgently need better resourcing, but the whole system needs a rethink.

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NotebookArchitecture

This was a bridge too far, even for Boris Johnson

[Rowan Moore](#)



The view from Torr Head in Antrim to Scotland's Mull of Kintyre is no longer to be interrupted by a £335bn Boris Bridge. Photograph: Liam McBurney/PA

Sat 4 Dec 2021 12.00 EST

An architect who was invited to design a kitchen extension for a married couple spent an evening with them to discuss their (conflicting) needs and aspirations for the work. At the end, he gave them this valuable advice. "You don't need a kitchen," he said, "you need a divorce."

This story brings us to the announcement that [Boris Johnson's idea of building a bridge between Northern Ireland and Scotland](#) would be, at £335bn, absurdly expensive. Such was widely suspected as soon as the plan became public given, among other things, that it would have to cross the 300m-deep Beaufort's Dyke, which is filled with up to a million tonnes of dumped munitions. But it has required a government [feasibility study](#) by a team of "[world-renowned technical advisers](#)" to conclude that bears do, after all, shit in the woods.

It might save the taxpayer a 12-figure sum if a therapist could help the prime minister explore his compulsion to inflict heavy engineering on large expanses of water. (See also: the Thames garden bridge, the Emirates Airline cable car, the "Boris Island" airport). More obviously, [Northern Ireland](#) would benefit more from a resolution of its border issues than from a structure completed decades in the future but, as with the couple and their kitchen, it's easier to fantasise about construction than sort out a fractious relationship.

Gift that keeps taking



The Sagrada Familia star: ‘truly repulsive’. Photograph: Thiago Prudencio/DAX/ZUMA Press Wire/REX/Shutterstock

Imagine that you were given a truly repulsive Christmas decoration, a sculpture of coagulated ectoplasm, its finish gritty, like something from a seaside gift shop. On its summit is a big pointy [glow-in-the-dark star](#) that goes jarringly with the rest. Imagine then that you had to live with it, 365 days a year, forever. And that it was more than 140m high. This is the fate of the citizens of Barcelona, who have to watch the endless rising of the Sagrada Família church, 139 years after construction started. It is, of course, a famous project of the celebrated architect Antonio Gaudí, but it resembles his spirit only in the realm of parody. It is paid for, to add insult to injury, with the help of a tax exemption on the enormous income the church makes out of tourists. So you have to pay for the gift, too.

Supreme spat with neighbours



Tate Modern viewing platform: access all areas. Photograph: Victoria Jones/PA

This week, the case of *Fearn v Tate Gallery* reaches the supreme court. Here, some residents of a glass-walled block of luxury flats called Neo Bankside are complaining about the fact that a viewing gallery on top of Tate Modern's Blavatnik Building allows the public to see into their living rooms. Their case seems to be weakened by the fact that it was never a secret, through the time that Neo Bankside was designed, built and marketed, that Tate wanted to erect a large public building next to the Neo Bankside development. In which case, you might think something other than all-glass walls might have been a good idea. Regular windows, perhaps? But then the developers and home owners would have been denied value-enhancing panoramic views out.

The high court and [court of appeal](#) having rejected the residents' claim, it has gone to the highest court in the land. So what is going on is this: a small group of property owners, with the resources to hire expensive lawyers, are trying to work the full majesty of the British legal system against a hugely popular public institution, the proximity of which, by the way, also increases the value of their properties. It would be easier to put up curtains, you would have thought, except that apparently a clause in their lease forbids this. Maybe they could use their legal muscle to sort that out, then.

Rowan Moore is the Observer's architecture correspondent

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The Grim Reaper knocks on Number 10 – cartoon

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[The shifting patterns of EnglishCoronavirus](#)

May I have a word about Omicron and the Disneyfication of Notre Dame

[Jonathan Bouquet](#)



‘Oh-my-crone’: Jon Snow on Channel 4 News. Photograph: REX/Shutterstock for BAFTA

Sun 5 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

So, what was your most controversial event of the past week? The [Christmas knees-up](#) last year in Downing Street? Protocols are for little people. The continuing and increasingly tiresome rumbles within the house of Windsor? A period of silence from all interested parties would be welcome.

Sorry, but it was none of those. The most bitterly contested issue was how to pronounce Omicron. Classicists favour emphasis on the second syllable. The BBC and the World Health Organization plump for stressing the first syllable, on the other hand. One thing I think we can all agree on is that it is

not as *Channel 4 News*' Jon Snow had it last week - "Oh-my-crone". I am, as always, happy to stand corrected.

Now, what does the phrase "visitor-friendly experience" mean to you? I ask because the refurbishment of the fire-ravaged Notre Dame cathedral includes plans to welcome visitors, upon its completion, with modern art and dignified lighting to achieve just such an effect.

Critics have condemned this as the Disneyfication of a most noble and thrilling building, and I couldn't agree more. Cathedrals are not theme parks or bouncy play areas. They were conceived as places of wonderment and awe, to uplift the soul and make us feel small at the same time, to remind us of our place on Earth.

Don't you find the world of academe is getting sillier and sillier? Last week, the University of Aberdeen added to the litany of trigger warnings for nervous Nelly undergraduates. My favourite was: "Includes depictions of murder, death, betrayal and kidnapping." I would've thought the title of the book under discussion - *Kidnapped* - gave the game away.

Jonathan Bouquet is an Observer columnist

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Observer letters

Letters: the real reasons why migrants want to come to Britain



Migrants at a refugee camp in Grand-Synthe, Dunkirk. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

Sun 5 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

Damian Green sneers at “more delicately minded *Observer* readers” who refuse to see the light of “post-Brexit, Tory-voting Britain, Boris’s Britain” ([“France and Britain must not allow the diplomatic disaster to continue”](#), News). He obviously thinks we should be more tough-minded in our response to refugees drowning in the Channel.

The assertion that refugees find Britain more attractive because of Brexit is both delusional and insulting. This country’s historical reputation for fair dealing and kindness, our rejection of tyranny and corruption, which is surely the reason people seek asylum here, is currently being trashed by the very government Green supports.

His article offered no fresh insights and merely parroted the Priti Patel line of blaming “criminal gangs” preying on “vulnerable people”. He ignores the fact that it is the government’s refusal to provide viable, legal routes for refugees that lets such criminality thrive. The article by Mark Townsend on the same page (“[Patel blames the ‘evil’ gangs. On the front line, they know different](#)”, Analysis) shows what a simplistic and self-serving view this is of a complex situation.

Graham Tyrrell

Edinburgh

Damian Green’s description of those attempting to enter the UK in search of asylum omits to mention that the number involved is in fact truly minuscule compared with applications for asylum throughout the rest of Europe or that most of the tiny number who do wish to come here have a special reason for doing so, be it language or family connection.

Anthony Menzies

London W4

A coalition could succeed

If Keir Starmer is the pragmatic realist that he claims to be, he needs to follow the advice of Best for Britain and form an electoral alliance with the Lib Dems and Greens to stand a chance of beating the Tories (“[Cooperate in key seats to beat Tories, parties told](#)”, News). Even with Boris Johnson’s tenure rapidly unravelling, the loss of dozens of Scottish seats over several years and a hostile rightwing press means that Labour will still be defeated.

An alliance does not have to be a negative, cynical, electoral calculation. He could take inspiration from the new German “traffic light” coalition government and the brilliant way that Clive Lewis and Caroline Lucas work together on climate justice.

There is more that unites the centre-left parties than divides them in terms of constitutional change (proportional representation, federalism and a senate to replace the House of Lords), a radical green revolution, tackling inequality and pro-Europeanism.

William Keegan (“[Even Macron hopes Brexit Britain will come to its senses](#)”, Business) is surely right when he says it is no good Labour trying to make Brexit work because it never can work and the majority can now see what a dreadful rightwing con-trick it has turned out to be.

Philip Wood

Kidlington, Oxfordshire

Johnson's innate inequality

Nick Cohen argues a strong case (“[Why do we Britons still genuflect before age-old class caricatures?](#)”, Comment), but

he is wrong about Boris Johnson in one respect. He is not an empty vessel. He is committed to a view of society in which privilege and inequality are good; it reflects natural intelligence or so he believes.

Shake the cornflake box and the clever ones – like him – rise to the top. The poor are there because that is their place. He also believes in the “great man” theory of history and for some reason, he thinks he’s one of them.

Dr Lorna Chessum

Brighton

Nazi Germany and the Crash

Torsten Bell notes that the banking crisis in Weimar Germany in 1931 triggered a bank run and contributed to rising Nazi support (“[A banking crisis isn't just bad for business, it can poison politics](#)”, Comment).

Discussions of the 1929 Wall Street Crash seldom give sufficient attention to the grievous knock-on consequences for Germany and subsequent world history. From about the mid-1920s, Germany began to build its economy towards a state of stability and had attained growing prosperity for its citizens.

This was largely owing to great investment from US banks that, as a consequence of the Crash, rushed to pull the plug overnight. The country was tipped into crisis and, yes, the poisonous politics that resulted in panicked support for that arch chancer, Adolf Hitler.

Michael Trevallion
Birmingham

Exeter College's woes

The article by [Rowan Moore celebrating the completion of Exeter College's Cohen Quad hides a much sadder story](#), New Review. The site in Walton Street was once the proud home of Ruskin College, "whose only-fairly-good 1913 facade and part of its flanking wall have been retained". The 19th-century institution that brought thousands of adult trade unionists to study cheek by jowl with privileged Oxford undergraduates thrived until the Thatcher government, as part of its war on the unions, ruthlessly cut funding.

Since that time, the college has suffered from a lack of Department for Education comprehension of its unique offer and mission and with adult education funding frozen by the Cameron government for the decade after 2010, Ruskin was forced to sell the Walton Street building to Exeter College.

The decline does not stop there. Costly and mismanaged "merger schemes" have wasted time and money and the college has floundered into administration with its whole future in doubt. So much for levelling up.

Michael Burns
New Malden, London

Greeks had a gift for it

How opportune to have Natalie Haynes responding to the significance of the Roman mosaic at Rutland with scenes from Homer ("[The Iliad's epic power endures... even in Rutland](#)", Focus).

She quotes Aeschylus, saying that his tragedies are slices from the banquet of Homer. At their best, the Greeks are indeed always timely as well as timeless. With his radical compassion and feminism, Euripides always blazes a trail.

Geoff Coombe
Cambridge

Moved to tears

Chris Riddell frequently makes me laugh (often bitterly). “[The tragedy in the Channel](#)” (Comment cartoon) is the first time he has made me weep.

Geoff Brace
Norwich

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/commentisfree/2021/dec/05/the-real-reasons-why-migrants-want-to-come-to-britain-observer-letters>

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For the record

For the record

Sun 5 Dec 2021 01.30 EST

We said that “Cambridge University became the first UK institution to officially repatriate a Benin bronze”. To clarify: it was Jesus College, Cambridge, which is a college of the university but a legally separate institution (“Victorians buried truth of atrocities in the plundering of Benin bronzes”, 21 November, page 19).

A book review referred to a poem about a statue of Clio in the US Capitol and said it was written in 1851 by President John Adams. In fact it was written in 1840 by former President John Quincy Adams (“[Witness to the last days of a would-be dictator](#)”, 28 November, New Review, page 38).

Edward Powys Mathers, the *Observer*’s cryptic crossword setter in the 1920s and 1930s, wrote poems that were accompanied by illustrations of lesbian figures, but he did not draw these illustrations himself, as an article said (“[I took on Torquemada’s fiendish literary puzzle. And yes, it was torture](#)”, 28 November, page 50).

Other recently amended articles include:

With Covid studies, the quality of the evidence matters

Love at first sip breathes new life into an ancient Piedmont home

The week in TV: Crime; Dopesick; Tiger King 2; Bridget Riley: Painting the Line

*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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OpinionConservatives

Fraudsters of the world, come to London. And bring your dirty money

[Nick Cohen](#)



‘No one can say how many in the UK are living off immoral earnings.’
Illustration: Dominic McKenzie/The Observer

Sat 4 Dec 2021 14.00 EST

There is no better representation of the decline of the English upper class into the global rich’s servant class than Ben Elliot. On the one hand, the co-chairman of the Tory party is now a rent collector, [hauling in money](#) for the Johnson administration from the [Russian rich and native hedge fund bosses](#).

On the other, he is an actual servant: an upmarket flunkey, to be sure, praised by society magazines for his “puppyish schoolboy charm”, but a flunkey nonetheless. Elliot is a [founder of the Quintessentially “concierge” service](#) that gives the super-rich anything they want: luncheon on an iceberg; the Sydney Harbour bridge closed for a wedding proposal. There’s nothing Elliot won’t do for paying customers up to and including arranging a meeting with our future sovereign. Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, is Elliot’s aunt and it appears that no considerations of good form or good manners have prevented him [monetising the connection](#). Not that the prince appears to mind. A Quintessentially advert interrupts a montage of shots of yachts and celebrities to [quote his royal highness](#) as saying he is “particularly grateful” to Quintessentially for organising a party he attended. Members of Elliot’s Quintessentially club donate to the Conservatives. The Conservatives gave Elliot [£1.4m of taxpayers’ money](#) in 2016 to “attract the right high-value individual investors to the UK through bespoke programmes”. If on arrival, those high-value individuals went on to show how valuable they were by hiring Quintessentially and donating to the Tories, the circle would be complete.

Upstairs has moved downstairs in the remains of the Tory day and a large segment of British capitalism is now employed as the best servants money can buy. The law, PR, City, estate agency and banking know that easy riches come from serving the large part of the world where it pays to forget Balzac’s warning that the secret of a great fortune no one can explain is invariably an undetected crime. For want of an agreed name I propose “Corruptistan” to cover [Russia](#) and the ex-Soviet states, the kleptocracies of Africa and the Middle East and probably soon China as the communist elite learns how to expatriate its wealth.

Britain has benefited so greatly from the corrupt we may soon be at a stage where we can't afford to clean ourselves up

Given the secrecy of the financial system, the defunding of the police and regulatory authorities and the English libel law, no one can say how many in the UK are living off immoral earnings. But two statistics and one quotation give us a measure of the UK's dependency culture. Graeme Biggar, of the National Economic Crime Centre, said a "[disturbing proportion](#)" of [criminal money](#) from the old Soviet Union is "laundered through UK corporate structures". Companies House, meanwhile, has become a front organisation for organised crime. So welcoming is it to criminals that 335,000 of its listed companies do not reveal the name of their beneficial owners. And 4,000 of the names it appears to reveal turn out on close inspection to belong to children aged two or under.

Last month, Professor Sadiq Isah Radda, a Nigerian anti-corruption official, encapsulated the consequences of the UK's tolerance of theft. An opponent of corruption in Nigeria, home to countless online scams? A joke figure, you might think. But Radda spoke with a seriousness no government minister can muster when he said the UK was "the most notorious safe haven for looted funds in the world today". The corruption we facilitate destabilised Nigeria and, he might have added, many other countries besides.

Last week, a handful of MPs asked why the Conservatives were so peculiarly soft on this particular crime. [In 2017, they promised a law](#) that would compel the foreign owners of UK property to reveal their identities. (The willingness to allow private and state criminals to launder their wealth anonymously through the prime London property market was Radda's main charge against Boris Johnson.) Nothing has been heard of this bold "anti-corruption strategy" since.

Likewise, the government has said it wants to stop Companies House being a crime scene where anyone can set up a firm without proof of identity or the most cursory checks. Even the Conservative party appeared to agree that it should not be harder to apply for a passport than to set up a shell company. But once again nothing happened. As for the recommendations in the Russia report on money laundering, they vanished as soon as they were made.

The SNP's [Alison Thewliss asked](#): "I wonder who benefits from this delay. Is it the oligarchs and those to whom they donate?" Pat McFadden, Labour's shadow chief secretary to the Treasury, asked Conservative MPs why they thought "their party has been such an attractive destination" for £2m in gifts from Russian donors." Change must come soon or not at all. Britain has benefited so greatly from the wealth of the corrupt we may soon be at the stage where we cannot afford to clean ourselves up. So many people are making so much money, what was once outrageous has become normal. This to my mind is why the security services and the judges just shrug when oligarchs with links to hostile foreign powers use the intimidatory costs of England's unreformed legal system to menace critics. No one likes hard questions about a nation's guilty secrets, not even the men and women who are professionally obliged to ask them. Labour certainly believes that tolerance of fraud is now part of the government's economic strategy and the Treasury wants to loosen what few protections exist to compensate the financial services industry for the Brexit debacle.

Cynical readers may not care as long as the UK can wallow in streams of hot money. They should recall how many times con artists have tried to fleece them. Online fraud is the crime you are most likely to suffer from, yet nowhere in the government's online safety bill is there a word about fighting the fraudsters who flourish on social media platforms. Once the Tories started turning a blind eye, they found it impossible to stop.

You cannot profit from economic crimes committed abroad while enjoying the rule of law at home. The presence of the global plutocracy's valets at the top of government and society shows the UK no longer even bothers to pretend that it can.

Nick Cohen is an Observer columnist

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Headlines friday 3 december 2021

- Vaccination Booster shots significantly strengthen immunity, trial finds
- Live UK Covid: ‘keep calm and carry on’ with Christmas plans, says minister despite high case numbers
- PTSD NHS England forecasts 230,000 extra cases due to Covid
- Covid Black and south Asian people urged to get jabs to cut higher death rates

[Coronavirus](#)

Covid booster shots significantly strengthen immunity, trial finds



The findings show that both Pfizer and Moderna mRNA vaccines are highly effective boosters. Photograph: Leon Neal/Getty Images

[Ian Sample](#) Science editor

[@iansample](#)

Thu 2 Dec 2021 18.30 EST

Covid booster shots can dramatically strengthen the body's immune defences, according to a study that raises hopes of preventing another wave of severe disease driven by the Omicron variant.

In a study published in the [Lancet](#), researchers on the UK-based [Cov-Boost trial](#) measured immune responses in nearly 3,000 people who received one of seven Covid-19 boosters or a control jab two to three months after their second dose of either AstraZeneca or Pfizer vaccine.

Those boosted with Pfizer after two doses of AstraZeneca had antibody levels a month later nearly 25 times higher than controls. When the Pfizer booster was given following two Pfizer shots, antibody levels rose more than eightfold.

The most potent booster in the study was a full dose of the Moderna vaccine, which raised antibody levels 32-fold in the AstraZeneca group and 11-fold in the Pfizer group. When Moderna is used in the UK booster programme, it is given at a half-dose.

While the findings show that both Pfizer and Moderna mRNA vaccines are highly effective boosters, scientists cautioned about comparing their performance as people started with different antibody levels. For example, antibody levels tend to remain high a few months after a Pfizer vaccination, so a booster would not be able to drive them much higher.

“These are remarkably effective immunological boosters, way above what is needed to prevent hospitalisation and death,” said Prof Saul Faust, the trial lead and director of the NIHR clinical research facility at University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust. While side-effects varied, most people who reported them had fatigue, headache or arm pain and the study found no safety concerns.

Beyond antibodies, the scientists looked at the impact of boosters on T-cells – another crucial component of the immune system linked with the prevention of severe disease. Most of the boosters, including Pfizer, Moderna and AstraZeneca, increased T-cell levels regardless of the vaccine people had for their first two doses.

One result that has caught scientists’ attention is that the T-cell response was as good against the Beta and Delta variants of concern as against the original virus that emerged from Wuhan. Asked if the finding might be relevant to the Omicron variant, Faust said: “Our hope as scientists is that protection against hospitalisation and death will remain intact.”

Jonathan Ball, professor of molecular virology at the University of Nottingham, who was not involved in the study, shared Faust’s optimism.

“Whilst variants, such as the Delta variant, reduced the overall virus-killing effect of antibodies, the T-cell responses were pretty much unaffected,” he said. “The fact that the mRNA vaccine boosts gave a marked increase in both antibodies and T-cells is great news, especially now, when our attention has been grabbed by the emergence of the Omicron variant.

“We still don’t know how this increase in immunity translates into protection, especially against serious disease, but I am still convinced that our vaccines will continue to provide the protection that we need.”

Early results from the Cov-Boost study underpinned the decision by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation to shorten the time people had to wait for a booster from six to three months. The study found AstraZeneca to be an effective booster too, raising antibody levels three and five times after primary vaccination with AstraZeneca and Pfizer respectively.

Further results from the study suggest that booster programmes could switch to half-doses of the Pfizer vaccine without losing much protection. The data shows that half-doses of Pfizer boosted antibody levels in the AstraZeneca group nearly 17 times and more than six times in those who had Pfizer for their first two shots.

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Coronavirus

UK Covid: 50,584 new cases and 143 deaths reported, as weekly infections rise – as it happened

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Post-traumatic stress disorder

NHS forecasts 230,000 extra cases of PTSD in England due to Covid



A survey of intensive care staff across six NHS hospitals in England during the first wave of the pandemic found 20% reported symptoms of PTSD.
Photograph: Graeme Robertson/The Guardian

[Andrew Gregory](#) Health editor

Fri 3 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

The NHS is forecasting there will be 230,000 new cases of post-traumatic stress disorder in [England](#) as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, official figures show.

Covid-19 has increased exposure to events that could cause PTSD, an anxiety disorder triggered by very stressful, frightening or distressing events, according to the Royal College of Psychiatrists. It says the [NHS](#) is already facing the biggest backlog of those waiting for mental health help in its history.

Forecasts cited by the college from the NHS strategy unit, which carries out NHS analysis, show there could be as many as 230,000 new PTSD referrals between 2020/21 and 2022/23 in England, which suggests a rise of about 77,000 cases a year on average.

The NHS strategy unit said it was not possible to directly compare the modelling of new cases to current figures since the NHS does not publish a total figure for all PTSD referrals in England. However, analysis suggests the number of new cases predicted would represent a significant increase.

The strategy unit said its forecast of the rise in cases was based on the effects of the pandemic on domestic abuse victims, children and young people, relatives of Covid survivors, health and care workers, and those who have lost friends and family to the disease.

People affected can experience intense negative emotions, thoughts and memories, experts said.

Prof Neil Greenberg, expert editor of the Royal College of Psychiatrists' new resource tool for patients with PTSD, said: "It's a common misunderstanding that only people in the armed forces can develop PTSD – anyone exposed to a traumatic event is at risk.

"It's vital that anyone exposed to traumatic events is [properly supported at work](#) and home. Early and effective support can reduce the likelihood of PTSD and those affected should be able to access evidence-based treatment in a timely manner. Especially our NHS staff who are at increased risk as a result of this unprecedented crisis."

The college highlighted a poll of 709 intensive care staff across six NHS hospitals in England during the first wave of the pandemic that found two in five reported symptoms of PTSD – more than twice the rate found in [military veterans](#) with recent combat experience.

It also pointed to research published in the journal BJPsych Open earlier this year, which found that 35% of Covid-19 patients who were put on a ventilator [go on to experience extensive symptoms of PTSD](#).

One patient, Dee, a 52-year-old from Bristol, who became severely ill with Covid-19 last year, said: “I experienced severe anxiety about my breathing problems. This included intrusive visions of not being able to breathe and of NHS staff in PPE suits taking me to hospital.

“My sleep was badly affected and I started using alcohol as a coping mechanism. I have since tested positive for Covid-19 a second time, which has been extremely traumatising. I’m struggling but I’m not confident that I can get the help I need.”

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Coronavirus

Black and south Asian people in UK urged to get jabs to cut higher Covid death rates



Government data found higher death rates seen in some ethnic minorities earlier in the pandemic were mainly due to a higher risk of infection.
Photograph: Amer Ghazzal/Rex/Shutterstock

[Ian Sample](#) Science editor

[@iansample](#)

Fri 3 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

Doctors have urged unvaccinated Black and south Asian people to get their Covid jabs after new data revealed hospitalisations and deaths are higher in those groups, despite infection rates being lower than in white people.

Infections were higher in many Black and Asian groups during Britain's first two waves of Covid but recently the pattern has shifted, with infections now

more common among white people, even though their death rates remain relatively low.

The new data, published on Friday in the final government report on understanding and tackling Covid-19 disparities, suggest that poor vaccine coverage is now a major reason for severe Covid in some Black and Asian groups, despite programmes to improve underwhelming vaccine uptake.

Dr Raghib Ali, the government's independent adviser on Covid-19 and ethnicity, and the author of the report, said evidence gathered over the past year showed that higher death rates seen in ethnic minorities in the first two waves of the pandemic were primarily due to a higher risk of infection, particularly among older people.

UK Covid death rate

Many factors contributed to the higher risk of infection but a greater likelihood of living in a densely populated area, working in public-facing roles such as health and social care, and living in larger and multigenerational households all played a part.

“In the third wave to date, a different pattern is emerging with infection rates in ethnic minorities now lower than in whites, but rates of hospital admissions and deaths are still higher, with the pattern now matching levels of vaccine uptake in older and other higher risk groups,” Ali said. “I’m confident this is being driven by vaccination rates.”

Data gathered by Oxford University shows that vaccine coverage has reached more than 90% among white people, but is 20 percentage points lower among Black groups, with coverage among south Asian people halfway between the two.

“Although vaccine uptake in all ethnic minorities has increased very significantly over the last year, the proportion unvaccinated is roughly twice as high in south Asian people and four times as high in Black people,” Ali said.

The report finds that differences in infection rates in the first wave were largely driven by occupational risk, with Black Africans and Black Caribbeans in health and social care particularly exposed to the virus. In the second wave, when many schools were open, Bangladeshi and Pakistani groups were at greater risk because they were more likely than others to live in multigenerational houses, where children brought the virus home to more vulnerable older relatives.

The report goes on to highlight obesity, diabetes and hypertension as risk factors for severe disease and death, and a gene that is nearly four times more common in south Asian people than Europeans, which doubles the risk of respiratory failure and death from Covid.

“This recent data is another reminder that the vaccines are the best way to protect yourselves and your elderly relatives, especially if you live in a multi-generational household, and it is never too late to come and take your first dose,” Ali said.

Neena Modi, professor of neonatal medicine at Imperial College London, said it was disappointing the report did not highlight the toll Covid has taken on pregnant women who make up a disproportionate number of the women in intensive care. Last month, Chris Whitty, England’s chief medical officer, urged pregnant women to get vaccinated, adding that almost all pregnant women admitted to hospital and intensive care were unvaccinated.

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2021.12.03 - Spotlight

- ['I was offered \\$35m for one day's work' George Clooney on paydays, politics and parenting](#)
- [Recycled regatta World heritage site highlights plastic pollution crisis](#)
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[George Clooney](#)

Interview

‘I was offered \$35m for one day’s work’: George Clooney on paydays, politics and parenting

[Hadley Freeman](#)



‘The whole country has been engaged in hate and anger, and I’ve been part of it’ ... George Clooney. Photograph: Magdalena Wosinska/New York Times/Redux/eyevine



[@HadleyFreeman](#)

Fri 3 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

George Clooney is smoother than a cup of one of those Nespresso coffees he has advertised for two decades and for which has [earned a highly caffeinated £30m-plus](#). With that, on top of the tequila company Casamigos, which he co-founded then [sold four years ago for a potential \\$1bn](#) (£780m), the ER juggernaut and – oh yeah! – the hugely successful film career as an actor, director and producer, it seems safe to assume that Clooney could, if he were a bit less cool, start every morning by diving into a pile of gold coins like Scrooge McDuck. So, George, I ask, do you ever think: “You know what? I think I have enough money now.”

Sign up to Film Weekly for our newsletter recapping the week in cinema.

Unruffled as the silver hair on his head, Clooney leans forward, as if he is about to confide in me. “Well, yeah. I was offered \$35m for one day’s work for an airline commercial, but I talked to Amal [Clooney, the human rights lawyer he married in 2014] about it and we decided it’s not worth it. It was

[associated with] a country that, although it's an ally, is questionable at times, and so I thought: 'Well, if it takes a minute's sleep away from me, it's not worth it.'"

Personally, I would lose a minute's sleep for a tenner, but Clooney operates on a different scale from the rest of us.

We meet on the terrace of a hotel in London, to talk about his new film, [The Tender Bar](#), which he directed and which stars Ben Affleck, but it feels more like we are in Beverly Hills in the 50s, with Frank Sinatra and Clark Gable at the next table. Clooney, 60, is a very old-fashioned kind of movie star. He doesn't really bother with relatability, because he knows there is no point in pretending he is just one of the guys when the reason he didn't go to Barack Obama's 60th birthday party this summer was because "we were in Italy" – ie at his villa on Lake Como.

'Such a kind story' ... watch the trailer for The Tender Bar.

But despite being extremely famous for almost 30 years, he has suffered none of the usual pitfalls of modern celebrity. There are no photos of him falling around drunk, no appearances on reality TV, no misguided tattoos and no affairs with the nanny. Even his wedding in Venice in 2014 had the smack of retro glamour; photos show Clooney in a dinner jacket [speeding down the Rialto](#) in a mahogany limousine.

If Clooney has a brand, it is carefully cultivated classiness. He has been – by and large – clever with his film choices, opting for thoughtful and stylish fare. His best-known movies are probably those in the Oceans franchise, a very deliberate hark back to the Hollywood of the 60s. Clooney's aunt was [Rosemary Clooney](#), who starred alongside Bing Crosby in White Christmas. I ask if growing up around her gave him a template for how to handle fame.

"I didn't really grow up with her, because I lived in Kentucky and she was in Los Angeles. But we all worshipped her and I loved the idea of Hollywood – I'd dream about it!" he grins.

Yet even the star of your film, Ben Affleck, has had his less-than-ideal moments in the spotlight, I say. "Sure, sure," he says. So how have you

avoided any real public embarrassments? “I was 33, 34 when ER took off, so I was older, right? Also, Rosemary was a huge singer – huge! And then rock’n’roll came and she lost her career. And she didn’t get it, because at 21 she thought she was the real deal and by 26 it was gone. So, I’m lucky enough to understand how little the fame side has to do with me.”



Heart-throb ... Clooney as Dr Doug Ross in ER. Photograph: NBCU Photobank/Rex Features

Most celebrities operate within a forcefield that repels any information that doesn't pertain to them. But when I mention to Clooney that, like him, I have young twins, he drinks it in, making repeated references to our twin-parent connection throughout the interview. It is the conversational equivalent of Bill Clinton's trick of gripping someone's upper arms when he meets them, immediately creating a sense of intimacy. And it works, damn it, the old charmer.

“How old are your twins? I have to ask you, are they very different kids? Ours are so different; it’s like night and day. Alexander loves to laugh and Ella’s very serious, always making sure everybody plays by the rules. They really are born with their personalities!” he grins.

Given that their father is an extremely successful movie star and their mother is an extremely successful barrister, I assume the twins have an army of nannies, but he insists not.

“We don’t, because it’s so important to Amal [to be involved]. We have a nanny four days a week and the rest of the time it’s just us. And during lockdown it was just us – for a full year! I felt like my mother in 1964, doing dishes and six loads of laundry a day,” he says. He has the relaxed demeanour of a man recalling a beach holiday as opposed to pandemic parenting.

I would be so ashamed if I hadn’t been on the record of being against some of the horrible things Trump had done

Unlike so many celebrities, Clooney keeps his children, now four, firmly out of the spotlight. I tell him that I like that he gave them old-fashioned names instead of the usual Hollywood coinages. “We talked about it from the beginning and said: ‘Their lives are going to be unusual, right? There’s no denying that. So let’s give them a head start by giving them normal names,’” he says.

I suspect that parenthood and the soft emotions it inspires is partly what drew him to direct *The Tender Bar*. Unlike so many of his other movies – such as [The Ides of March](#) and, my favourite of all his films, [Good Night, and Good Luck](#), both of which he produced, directed and starred in – there are no prickly political overtones here. It is a straight-down-the-line coming-of-age story about a young boy, JR (Daniel Ranieri and then Tye Sheridan), whose single mother (Lily Rabe) and irascible uncle (Affleck) help him to get ahead in life. It is well acted, especially by Affleck, even if, at times, it veers close to soft-focus *Wonder Years* territory.

That was the point, says Clooney: “The whole country, for the last five years, has been engaged in hate and anger, and I’ve been part of it at times. I’ve been angry, and this was such a kind story. It’s such a gentle film, and I wanted to be part of that, and I thought maybe an audience would want to be part of a gentle experience,” he says.

After [Suburbicon](#), this is the second film Clooney has directed not acted in. It is striking how much he has slowed down on the acting since he got married. Is that because of age or wanting to spend time with his family?

“In general, there just aren’t that many great parts – and, look, I don’t *have* to act. My wife and I had this conversation when I turned 60 this summer. I said: ‘I can still bounce around pretty good, and we both love what we do. But we gotta make sure we don’t book ourselves silly.’ So, part of it is just us making sure we live our lives.”



‘I don’t *have* to act’ ... with Daniel Ranieri on the set of *The Tender Bar*.
Photograph: Claire Folger/Amazon Content Services

As an aside, he then mentions that he is about to go to Australia to make a film with his frequent co-star Julia Roberts, while next summer he will be in the UK to make a film with another regular co-star, Brad Pitt. So, Clooney’s idea of slowing down is, again, not on the usual scale.

Clooney grew up in Kentucky and Ohio, the son of a city councillor and a news anchor. His father, Nick, is revered for his journalistic integrity: “My dad says: ‘I spent the first half of my life being Rosemary Clooney’s brother and the second half being George Clooney’s father.’” It has always been obvious how much Clooney has been influenced by his father, not least in

Good Night, and Good Luck, which is about the news anchor Edward R Murrow, who stood up against Joe McCarthy.

“Both my parents are really respected where we’re from and I wouldn’t want to do anything to embarrass them. Also, my dad made one rule for me and that was: ‘I don’t care what you do in life, but challenge people with greater power than you and defend those with less power,’” he says.

It would be interesting to know what Nick made of his son’s early acting career in classics such as Return of the Killer Tomatoes, but since he hit the big time as the heart-throb Dr Doug Ross in ER, Clooney has tried to live up to his father’s dictum. For 20 years, he has campaigned indefatigably for causes such as pursuing a resolution to the Darfur conflict and helping Syrian refugees, as well as taking on enemies from Donald Trump to the Daily Mail, after the latter published an untrue story about Amal’s mother.



Political performer ... in Syriana, for which he won an Oscar. Photograph: Reuters

He has always “liked a good fight”, he says with relish, although he is very aware of the eye-rolling sparked by actors getting involved in politics; he can quote how TV hosts such as Bill O’Reilly and Bill Maher have mocked him. “But I would be *so* ashamed if, for instance, in this last Trump regime, I

hadn't been on the record of being against some of the horrible things he'd done. My kids would be like: 'So, they were putting kids in cages and you didn't say anything?' The blowback is nowhere near as bad as the shame I'd feel."

Given the political edge to so many of his films – including Michael Clayton and Syriana, for which he won an Oscar – I start to ask if Gregory Peck's performance as Atticus Finch in To Kill a Mockingbird was an influence on him. He answers before I finish the question.

"Huge. Huge! The two actors who were personally friends and also had the most influence on me were Paul Newman and Gregory Peck, both of whom were men I greatly admired for who they were and how they were on screen. They were proper old-fashioned movie stars and they mixed it up in [politics]. So it was really fun to be friends with them and copy some of the things they did."

Does it worry him that Peck and Newman each lost a son to, respectively, suicide and an overdose?

"That has not gone unnoticed by me. The pressures on a son of a famous man are a lot. But I have an advantage, which is that I'm considerably older, so the competitive juices will be different. I'll be 75 when my son will be in any way compared to me, so it won't be the same vibe. Also, it is very important to Amal and me that they grow up knowing that their own path is the only way, and they have nothing to live up to but their own expectations."

My dad made one rule for me: 'Challenge people with greater power than you and defend those with less power'

For someone who is fairly private, Clooney mentions his wife a surprising amount. Did I know that her last two clients, Maria Ressa and Nadia Murad, each won the Nobel peace prize? Do I know how many journalists she has got out of jail? Wait, I watched ER when I was on maternity leave? So did Amal, because she had never seen it before! That's crazy!

Yet not very long ago, Clooney was at least as famous for his – shall we say – bachelor lifestyle as he was for his politics. What was it about Amal that persuaded him, at 53, to cash in the single life?

“It’s true, I’d been dating for quite a while. But she’s a very impressive person! She’s beautiful, smart, funny and we fell in love right away and got married after six months. And now we’re having such a great time,” he says, which is not something you hear often from a parent of young twins.

Rich, handsome, successful, smart: I don’t know if Clooney is the perfect man, but he is certainly the perfect interviewee. He is excellent at selling himself, which isn’t to say he is inauthentic – on the contrary. But a man can be genuine *and* hyperaware of what people want from him. His answers to my questions – neither too rambling nor too terse – reveal just enough to gratify me, but not too much to embarrass him. He is deft at getting ahead of criticisms before they are brought up. When I bring up his advertising deals, he neatly segues into talking about how proud he is to work with Nespresso, adding that whenever people have pointed out problems with the company, they fix them, thereby heading off questions about last year’s [report of child labour](#) in the company’s supply chain before I can ask them. “It’s fun to be able to [change] things like that,” he smiles.

By this point, I am convinced that we are best buddies, so I tell him I have a very important question. “Bring it on,” he says, straightening up.

How can I get an invite to his house in Como?

“It’s not hard; it’s usually just someone driving by. I remember Ernest Borgnine – one day, he and his wife were riding by in a boat and I hear: ‘George!’ and I stick my head over the fence and he goes: ‘It’s Ernie Borgnine! What are you doing?’ And I go: ‘I don’t know, come on up!’ So we sat there and drank prosecco and had a hysterical time,” he chuckles.

Great, I’ll bring the twins, I say. “Oh yes, because there’s nothing more fun than more twins. Now, tell me, are yours identical?”

Alas, we have run out of time. We leave the terrace and walk into the hotel room, where his crew of PRs and assistants are waiting. I turn around to

wave goodbye, but he is otherwise engaged. “So, what’s next?” he asks his gang. Clooney is already on to the next project.

The Tender Bar is released in the UK on 17 December

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Seascape: the state of our oceansPlastics

Recycled regatta: world heritage site highlights plastic pollution crisis



Edward Constance and Brian Souyana race on Rasta Rocket, made from plastic drain pipes and fishing buoys that washed up on Aldabra. About 68 tonnes of marine litter a year is washed ashore

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[About this content](#)

[Anne Pinto-Rodrigues](#)

Fri 3 Dec 2021 02.00 EST

Red Lion is the kind of boat you would not see in most regattas. Its frame is made of bamboo, sourced from washed-up fishing equipment, and it uses two old oil drums for buoyancy.

Equally strange is Rasta Rocket – made from old plastic drain pipes, washed-up floats and fishing buoys.

These were two of the boats in the inaugural Aldabra Regatta: an ironic attempt to draw attention to marine plastic pollution by racing boats made from marine debris.



Martin van Rooyen, a researcher, and Luke A'Bear, a science coordinator, prepare to set sail on Red Lion, buoyed by discarded oil drums

Organised by the [Seychelles Islands Foundation](#) (SIF), a non-profit organisation that manages the Aldabra atoll, the event was a fun but nevertheless last-ditch effort to fight back against the waves of plastic washing up on this Unesco world heritage site.

“A significant portion of three boats was made from marine litter associated with the fishing industry,” says Luke A'Bear, the science coordinator for Aldabra and part of a team that lives at the isolated research station all year.

The bamboo for Red Lion comes from fish-aggregating devices (FAD) – floating objects used to attract certain species of fish. They are often abandoned by the fishing boat to save fuel on the journey back to shore. Huge chunks of bamboo, which can take years to degrade, wash up on the beaches of Aldabra, blocking turtles from coming ashore to nest.

“Sadly, there is no consequence and very little incentive for FAD recovery,” says A'Bear, explaining how the decision to hold the regatta felt like a desperate move. “It is going to take years for any meaningful policy or legislation to come into force.”

Another boat, Wakanda, built by Rickpert Woodcock, an electrician, and Alex Rose, who works in logistics, with wood recovered from the beach, also used washed-up floats for stability. A fourth, Floppy, was built by the manager of Aldabra island, Jude Brice, using part of a wooden canoe that had washed ashore.



Alex Rose and Rickpert Woodcock manoeuvre Wakanda, made from washed-up wood and floats

Island nations such as [Seychelles](#) bear the brunt of marine plastic pollution due to the convergence of ocean currents. On Aldabra, researchers have observed the endemic giant tortoises eating plastic, seabirds entangled in fishing lines and other examples of the havoc wreaked by marine litter on both terrestrial and marine ecosystems.

“Just last week, we pulled out a 200-metre longline with hooks and buoys that had got stuck on the coral. We had to attach it to the boat to be able to pull it off. It just kept coming and coming,” says A’Bear. “And that’s just one long line.”

“At our most conservative estimate, around 68 tonnes of marine litter gets washed ashore annually,” says April Burt, an SIF research associate based at

Oxford University, who co-led the five-week [Aldabra Clean-up Project](#) (ACUP) in 2019.

The collective effort removed 25 tonnes of accumulated plastic litter from the atoll, at a cost of \$225,000 (£170,000), but that is merely a fraction of the 513 tonnes that ACUP researchers estimate still remains. “This number [also] did not account for the new litter arriving each year,” Burt adds.

An overwhelming 83% (by weight) of the marine debris remaining on Aldabra is fishing-related gear, including buoys, nets, ropes and FADs.

The regatta was not a close race: Floppy led throughout the 1.5km course, eventually winning by more than 300 metres, with Rasta Rocket edging Wakanda for second place. The participants enjoyed themselves, but they are serious about the challenges ahead.

“If you went to the beaches cleaned during the ACUP, you wouldn’t know that they have been cleaned,” says A’Bear. “Sometimes there’s 55kg of litter washed-up along a 50-metre stretch – in one month. We’ve cleaned a beach a month before, and it’s like you’ve done nothing. It’s depressing.”

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From utopian dreams to Soho sleaze: the naked history of British nudism



Still from Nudist Paradise, uncredited, 1958, the first British feature film to include naturism. Photograph: Courtesy of RGA



[Claire Armitstead](#)

[@carmitstead](#)

Fri 3 Dec 2021 02.00 EST

When Annebella Pollen was 17, she left behind her strict Catholic upbringing for the life of a new-age hippy, living in a caravan and frolicking naked among the standing stones of Devon, while earning a living by modelling for life-drawing classes. That early experience, followed by a relationship with a bric-a-brac dealer, shaped her later life as an art historian. “I’m very interested in things that are culturally illegitimate,” says Pollen, who now teaches at the University of Brighton. “A lot of my research has been looking at objects that are despised.”

Foraging trips with her partner to car-boot sales alerted her to a rich seam of 20th-century nudist literature that is still emerging from the attics of middle England: magazines whose wholesome titles – Sun Bathing Review or Health & Efficiency – concealed a complex negotiation with both public morality and the British weather. This is the subject Pollen has picked for her latest book *Nudism in a Cold Climate*, which tracks the movement from the spartan 1920s through the titillating 50s, when the new mass media whipped up a frenzy of moral anxiety, to the countercultural 60s and 70s,

when the founding members were dying off and it all began to look a bit frowsty.

Though nudism had its roots in 19th-century Germany, the first British camp was set up in 1924 in an Essex back garden – for climatic reasons most of its centres were in the relatively balmy south of England. By 1931 the word had entered the Oxford English Dictionary where, for decades, it became interchangeable with naturism. Early pictures show members digging and sawing to lay the foundations of a utopian political movement, or drinking tea together in the sheds they had built. “In the very early days, many were intellectuals: campaigners, psychiatrists, artists, writers and pioneering feminists who argued that nudism would bring an equality of the sexes,” says Pollen. By 1933 the practice had assumed such a moral high ground that one Anglican vicar condemned the bathing costume as a “satanic invention” that promoted titillation through part-concealment.

Often the same model would be used for a naturist photo next to a wheelbarrow, and for a sleazy photo, produced in Soho

Annebella Pollen

But the intrusion of the camera began to challenge naturism’s claim to be a wholesome family movement, by privileging pictures of beautiful bodies and playing fast and loose with the market in erotica. At a time in the 30s when the movement had fewer than 10,000 members, the second issue of Sun Bathing Review sold 50,000 copies; the slender, young, white women who dominated the pictures were mostly photographed by men, for men. By the late 50s, nude images were regularly seized by police under obscenity laws. “Often the same model would be used for a naturist photograph next to a wheelbarrow, and for a sleazy photograph, produced in a Soho studio, bending over with a choker and fishnet stockings,” says Pollen.

Nude photographs are not something that can be stabilised, Pollen says; we all bring our own perspectives and intentions to them. But they “are worth taking seriously for what they reveal about bodily ideals and realities in a period of rapid social and cultural change”.

Nudism in a Cold Climate: The Visual Culture of Naturists in Mid-20th Century Britain by Annebella Pollen (Atelier Editions) is out now in the UK and globally on 11 January.

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

Back to nature: four images from Nudism in a Cold Climate



East Midland Sunfolk. Photograph: Colin R Clark Estate

East Midland Sunfolk, Colin R Clark, 1951

Annebella Pollen: "Although pictures of nudist clubs purported to show normal people enjoying themselves, often models would be shipped in so a photographer could sell images both to naturist and pin-up magazines. I like the fact that this is of a group of women of different ages having a wonderful time, because older women were so rarely depicted. And everyone here was actually a naturist."

Still from Nudist Paradise, uncredited, 1958 (pictured, top)

"This is a still from the first British feature film to include naturism. It was

shot at Spielplatz, a 12-acre Hertfordshire camp that took its name from the German word for playground, in honour of the movement's Germanic roots. Although real naturists appeared in the background, the film's stars were professional actors.”



This modern Sunbathing Venus of to-day ... Photograph: Courtesy of Hawk Editorial Ltd

This Modern Sunbathing Venus of Today ..., uncredited, 1936

“Sunlight was being used to treat TB, rickets and other disorders, so there was a central story about the good that sunbathing might do for physical and mental health if you fully exposed your body. The problem was that there aren’t many sunny days in Britain, so in the 1930s indoor nudism emerged as a practical solution.”



Jean Straker at the Visual Arts Club. Photograph: David Hurn/David Hurn/Magnum Photos

Jean Straker, Soho, David Hurn, c1960

“Straker (pictured, middle) opened his Soho studio in the early 50s. He clashed with police for selling nude images with visible genitalia, under the guise of artistry and of providing detailed views of women’s bodies for scientific research. He became an unlikely figurehead in late-60s campaigns against censorship.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/dec/03/from-utopian-dreams-to-soho-sleaze-the-naked-history-of-british-nudism>

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[You be the judge](#)[Relationships](#)

You be the judge: should my girlfriend spend less money on her cats?



Illustration: Joren Joshua/The Guardian

Interviews by [Georgina Lawton](#)

@georginalawton

Fri 3 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

The prosecution: Rob

Lakshmi spends her entire salary on the cats, then says she can't afford to go on holiday with me

I think of cats as pets, while my girlfriend, Lakshmi, refers to them as her “children”. We have Bella, Kiera and Fiona, who are a year old. Lakshmi and I usually live apart, but moved in together for the duration of lockdown. I had to move out of my home office, as it was turned into the cat’s bedroom. Lakshmi and I are very different in our attitudes towards the cats, but her stance affects us both.

Lakshmi will spend her entire month’s wages on the cats. She has cancelled dinner dates, using the money to pay for cat food and vet bills. She recently spent £400 on a wifi-controlled catflap. When Fiona wasn’t eating normally, Lakshmi once spent £1,700 on scans, blood observations and checkups. It turned out Fiona was constipated. We had to cancel our holiday after that, as Lakshmi didn’t have enough money left to go.

She spends loads on expensive cat food but gets annoyed if I don’t get the cheapest supermarket-brand food for us

We’ve been together five years and keep our finances separate. Lakshmi will pay for a lot of the cat stuff, and I’ll take care of the human food. She spends loads on expensive cat food but gets annoyed if I don’t get the cheapest supermarket-brand food for us. I eat cheap ham, but the cats have the finest. She also gets mad if I point out that five daily dishes of dry cat food for three cats – as well as extra treats – is too much. I once said the cats were getting heavy and she didn’t talk to me for two days.

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We split the cost of our holidays and going out. Normally this works, but recently Lakshmi has complained about having no money. We want to have a long holiday to celebrate our five-year anniversary and I’m worried that

she'll cancel if some unexpected cat expense comes up. She once nearly missed a dentist appointment she'd waited a year for because Keira had a runny eye.

Lakshmi should stop spending so much on the cats and prioritise her finances. It's her choice how she spends her money, of course, but I'd like to know she can pay for her half of things if we are making plans together.

The defence: Lakshmi

I feel that I have to prioritise my cats' health, wellbeing and diet over my own

Rob's exaggerating about me spending all my money on the cats. But I can choose to live it up or to help my cats – and I choose the cats. You have to prioritise their health, wellbeing and food before your own. Rob complains about eating cheap food, but he's usually happy to shop at Lidl so I don't get why he cares. I buy the finest for the cats and the cheapest for us. There's no way I'd give the cats low-cost supermarket food. They have lovely, glossy bodies because they eat the best.

The time Fiona wasn't right, Rob agreed with me. The vet confirmed she wasn't well, so I was right

The time Fiona wasn't right, Rob agreed with me. The vet confirmed she wasn't well, so I was right. Rob was just concerned about the money. I'm particular about the cats because I once missed Bella's bad tooth. I had taken her for a checkup and the vet told me she had a rotten molar, and that she might have been in pain for eight months. I felt so guilty.

Now, whatever I have to pay at the vets, I just pay it. Yes, you have the consultation fees, plus the medicine and an extra £100 if it's out of hours, but I don't mind. I save up. Once, Rob didn't realise the cat had been bitten in the tail, and it got infected. Waiting can make things worse.

Another time, Keira was blinking loads and Rob said: "Whatever it is, she's not going to die from it." It's his favourite line. I wanted to take her to the

vet out of hours, but Rob said to wait. The next day, it turned out Keira had a scratched cornea and needed eye drops. Again, I felt guilty as we could have gone earlier.

Rob has less of a right to say anything about my cats – they are my responsibility. We live apart, but spend alternate weekends at each other's houses. Rob is the cat's "uncle". He thinks it's ridiculous that I spent money on electronic catflaps but why not?

Rob and I are always going to disagree. I don't earn as much as him, so I have to weigh things up. I do need to go to the dentist's for a new crown, but Keira has watery eyes and Fiona might have dermatitis, so I've delayed it. I can live with a bad tooth but my girls can't live with that.

The jury of Guardian readers

Should Lakshmi stop spending so much money on her cats?

Lakshmi's cat pampering is completely bonkers. Their rich diet may give them glossy bodies, but also dermatitis, constipation and runny eyes! Were Lakshmi to have to choose between Rob and the cats, I'd hazard the cats would win paws down.

Emma, 44

Lakshmi can spend her money however she wants. Rob, on the other hand, may want to consider whether he wishes to be with a partner who struggles to afford romantic activities because of her pet obsession.

Lewis, 38

Lakshmi and Rob don't normally live together so it is Lakshmi's decision as to how much she spends on her cats. However, a sense of balance, both in terms of care for herself and her relationship, seems lacking. Lakshmi could get ill from not taking care of herself and thereby let the cats down.

Cher, 51

Lakshmi's choices are affecting their relationship. It's not healthy to put pets above everything, you have to look after yourself first. Rob isn't being

unreasonable to ask for balance, and for his feelings to be considered fairly.
Nick, 41

Lakshmi is an adult and has every right to make decisions relating to her cats even if some of them are extreme. Rob needs to decide whether he can live as (at best) fourth choice, and as a consequence Lakshmi may have to live with being a single cat lady.

Arya, 37

You be the judge

So now you can be the judge, click on the poll below to tell us: should Lakshmi spend less money on her cats?

We'll share the results on next week's You be the judge.

The poll closes Thursday December 9, 9am GMT

Last week's result

We asked if Tom should listen to his partner Jenny and spend [more time](#) with his baby.

2% of you said no – Tom is innocent
98% of you said yes – Tom is guilty

[Have a disagreement you'd like settled? Or want to be part of our jury?](#)
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2021.12.03 - Coronavirus

- [Live Covid: Slovakia sets new daily case record; India says expects severity of Omicron to be 'low'](#)
- [Analysis How probable is it Omicron will take hold in UK?](#)
- [Expert view Omicron may cause more reinfections](#)
- [Germany Mandatory jabs a step closer as unvaccinated face lockdown](#)

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Covid news: 75 more cases of Omicron variant found in England; Ireland announces new restrictions – as it happened

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Coronavirus

How probable is it Omicron Covid variant will take hold in UK?



Scientists are waiting to find out what proportion of Omicron cases in the UK are linked to imported infections compared with transmission within the community. Photograph: Vladimir Sindreyev/NurPhoto/Rex/Shutterstock

[Nicola Davis](#)

[@NicolaKSDavis](#)

Thu 2 Dec 2021 12.31 EST

Omicron is causing consternation around the world, with the variant found to be behind an [exponential rise](#) in Covid cases in South Africa. Yet with just 42 cases confirmed in the UK so far, and most European countries seeing numbers in the double rather than triple figures, could this be a tentative sign the variant may fail to take hold outside southern Africa? The bottom line is, it is too soon to say.

One issue is that there are important differences that make it difficult to compare the situations in [South Africa](#) and beyond.

Prof Rowland Kao, an epidemiologist at the University of Edinburgh and member of the modelling group Spi-M, noted that different Covid variants are circulating in South [Africa](#) and the country uses different vaccines from those used in Britain.

As well as the Pfizer/BioNTech jab, it has used the Janssen vaccine – not yet in use in the UK – and suspended the use of the Oxford/AstraZeneca jab. Kao said some differences may aid Britain, for example the longer interval between vaccine doses.

“The fact that we had an early vaccine deployment then lots of people infected [with Covid] also can be helpful in broadening the spectrum of immune response, and this may again mean we have greater protection than [South Africa],” he said.

With Covid already “running hot” in the UK and some European countries, picking up early signs of Omicron’s impact is challenging. Before the new variant was detected, Covid cases in South Africa were very low, meaning its impact became clear at an early juncture.

Dr Michelle Groome, of South Africa’s National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD), said that new Covid cases had risen from a weekly average of about 300 a day to 1,000 last week, and most recently 3,500.

UK cases

By contrast, the UK has been experiencing a huge number of cases a day – 53,945 on Thursday alone – with figures fluctuating by several thousand from day to day. Should Omicron lead to a rise in cases, they could take longer to become apparent from such data alone.

Case numbers are not the only source scientists have to hand, however. One approach experts are using to investigate Omicron’s presence in the UK is to look at results of tests for the coronavirus S-gene in Covid-positive samples.

Omicron has a mutation that means it comes up negative on such tests, as was the case for the Alpha variant, but not Delta, meaning the test can give a quick – although not conclusive – indication of whether Omicron is present.

[In a thread on Twitter](#), Prof Nick Davies of the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine noted that in the five days to 28 November, there had been an increase in S-gene target failure in community testing data in England from about 0.1% to about 0.3%.

Davies said around half of PCR tests in the community are processed by labs that use such a test, although the Guardian understands there may be some prioritisation of cases in areas where Omicron has already been found.

While Davies found the results only equate to about 60 more samples testing negative for the S-gene than would otherwise have been expected, he said the excess is most likely down to Omicron cases and suggested the numbers will probably climb.

Whether or not those cases are down to imported infections or linked to transmission within the community, however, remains unclear. “So scientists in England will be watching this data stream carefully over the next several days and weeks to work out what is happening,” Davies wrote.

Others have also stressed that the situation in the UK is in its early days, but there are reasons for concern. “There was at least [a single large-scale event](#) in Scotland – which indicates the potential for rapid spread,” said Kao, adding that the S-gene test results are among the evidence suggesting the UK is also starting to see signs of an exponential rise.

Kao said: “There is good reason to think it’s spreading already at a good rate. But what we don’t know yet is whether or not that will be sustained, and also whether it will result in more sustained increased hospitalisations and deaths.”

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Global development

Omicron seems to carry higher Covid reinfection risk, says South Africa



A woman receives a Covid vaccine dose at a centre in Soweto, South Africa.
Photograph: Denis Farrell/AP

Global development is supported by



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[Peter Beaumont](#) and [Nick Dall](#) in Cape Town

Thu 2 Dec 2021 13.23 EST

The Omicron variant of Covid-19 appears to be reinfecting people at three times the rate of previous strains, experts in [South Africa](#) have said, as public health officials and scientists from around the world closely monitor developments in the country where it was first identified.

As the EU's public health agency warned that Omicron could cause more than half of all new Covid infections in Europe within the next few months, evidence was emerging, however, that vaccines still appear to offer protection against serious illness.

According to new evidence collected in South [Africa](#) by its National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) the latest epidemiological evidence suggests that Omicron can evade immunity from infection with earlier variants and is causing reinfections at three times previous rates.

The South African Centre for Epidemiological Modelling and Analysis along with the NICD said the latest findings "provide epidemiological evidence for Omicron's ability to evade immunity from prior infection".

“We believe that previous infection does not provide protection from Omicron,” said Anne von Gottberg, an expert at the NICD.

In mid-November South Africa was reporting about 300 Covid cases a day. On Wednesday, it reported 8,561 new cases, up from 4,373 the day before and 2,273 on Monday.

Outlining early research into the newly emerged variant, Von Gottberg said doctors were seeing “an increase for Omicron reinfections [of Covid-19]”.

She said: “We believe the number of cases will increase exponentially in all provinces of the country. We believe that vaccines will still, however, protect against severe disease. Vaccines have always held out to protect against serious disease, hospitalisations and death.”

Scientists from the same institute have said initial data suggests that Omicron may provoke less severe illness than previous variants although that may be skewed by the fact that many of the first Omicron cases have been identified in younger individuals or detected in very recently screened travellers.

But even as South Africans have rushed to get vaccinated – nudged by President Cyril Ramaphosa’s warning on Sunday that stricter lockdowns may have to be imposed if vaccination rates don’t improve – Aslam Dasoo, of the Progressive [Health](#) Forum, warned that the recent increase in vaccinations may be insufficient.

“It’s not enough to make a dent in the fourth wave,” he told the country’s News 24 news channel. “The test positivity rate was 1% last Monday. And it is now in the double digits. We are in the teeth of the fourth wave. Everyone you know is a potential risk to you,” he said.

Doctors in Gauteng province said Covid patients were presenting with flu-like symptoms including a dry cough that could be treated at home.

On Tuesday, the epidemiologist Prof Salim Abdool Karim said current vaccines still provided high levels of protection against hospitalisation and death.

The emergence of Omicron has led to a steep rise in the number of people seeking vaccination.

As well as an exponential jump in case numbers, South Africa has seen a sharp increase in its case positivity rate – the number of those tested who test positive – in the same period, from 10.7% to 16.5%, with the positivity rate in Gauteng reaching 19%.

Even more worrying has been the hospitalisation rate in Gauteng, which jumped by 144% last week, doubling approximately every six days.

South Africa has reported close to 3m Covid infections during the pandemic and more than 89,000 deaths, the most on the African continent.

Graphic

While most of the focus on Omicron has so far been on Gauteng province, there were indications that the Omicron variant was taking hold elsewhere in South Africa.

In Cape Town on Thursday morning, Dr Keith Cloete, the head of the Western Cape health department, announced that the country's southernmost province had entered a new wave of Covid-19.

“The week-on-week percentage change in the seven-day moving average of new cases has been more than 20% for more than a week, indicating that we have officially entered a resurgence,” he said, adding: “A very large increase in absolute numbers is expected for the coming weeks.”

Although only 16 cases of Omicron have been positively identified in the province, Cloete said that based on a proxy marker in PCR tests, the Omicron variant could be prevalent in as much as 80% of the new cases in the last week.

And while [much has been written](#) about the issue of a lack of vaccines in the developing world, this has not been the main issue in South Africa.

For several months, supply there has outstripped demand and in late November the government asked Johnson and Johnson and Pfizer to delay

the delivery of vaccines as they had too much stock.

The latest figures suggest about 36.3% of adults are fully vaccinated (although 64% of over-60s have had at least one dose). Vaccination, however, is lowest among younger age groups. Only 26% of South Africans between 18 and 34 – the cohort currently showing the highest rate of Omicron infections – have had one vaccine dose.

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[Germany](#)

Germany: mandatory Covid jabs a step closer as unvaccinated face lockdown



Angela Merkel and Olaf Scholz in Berlin on Thursday. Photograph: Reuters

*[Jon Henley](#) Europe correspondent
[@jonhenley](#)*

Thu 2 Dec 2021 12.01 EST

Vaccination could become mandatory in Germany from February, [Angela Merkel](#) has said, as she announced what her successor as chancellor, Olaf Scholz, described as “a lockdown of the unvaccinated”.

As more EU countries confirmed cases of the Omicron variant, which the bloc’s health agency said could make up more than half of all infections on the continent within months, Merkel described the situation as “very serious”.

Meeting with Scholz and Germany's 16 state leaders for emergency talks on Thursday on tougher measures to stem rocketing Covid cases, the outgoing chancellor said an "act of national solidarity" was required.

"We have understood that the situation is very serious and that we want to take further measures in addition to those already taken," she said. "To do this, the fourth wave must be broken, and this has not yet been achieved."

[Germany cases](#)

Daily new infections in Germany have broken records in recent weeks, with many hospitals operating at or over capacity. Authorities said 73,209 new cases were recorded in the past 24 hours. Deaths have surged from a rolling seven-day average of just over 10 a day in August to nearly 300 this week.

Merkel said Germany's ethics council would issue formal guidance on a vaccine mandate, and the Bundestag would vote on the legislation by the end of the year. If passed, the rule would come into force from February.

"Given the situation, I think it is appropriate to adopt compulsory vaccination," said Merkel, who is due hand over to Scholz next week.

The move would follow the [example of neighbouring Austria](#), which is planning mandatory vaccinations from February. Greece also announced mandatory jabs for the over-60s, with [unvaccinated people facing fines](#) if they fail to comply.

Merkel also announced a blanket ban on people who have not been vaccinated or recovered from Covid entering bars, restaurants, theatres, cinemas and other leisure venues, as well as non-essential shops and Christmas markets. In areas where the incidence rate exceeds 350 per 100,000 people, discos and nightclubs will close.

Private gatherings will be limited to 50 people indoors and 200 outdoors, providing everyone involved has been vaccinated or recovered. But if there are unvaccinated people in the mix, households may invite a maximum of two outside guests, not including children, Merkel said. Masks are to become compulsory in schools.

The lockdown measures are expected to be approved by MPs in the coming days and will take effect immediately afterwards.

Experts have blamed the fourth wave on Germany's relatively low vaccination rate of about 68%. For comparison, Spain has fully vaccinated 79% of its population and Portugal 86%.

"From the point of view of intensive and emergency medicine, the pandemic situation has never been as threatening and serious as it is today," Germany's intensive care association said.

Merkel's outgoing government had previously ruled out mandatory vaccination, but the measure has since won broad political backing. "We don't have enough vaccinated people," Scholz said after the meeting. "We now know that this has consequences."

Authorities in Norway said the new variant had been detected in one person out of more than 50 who tested positive for Covid after an office Christmas dinner party in an Oslo restaurant on Friday, and they expected more cases to follow.

The Norwegian government reintroduced some restrictions to cope with the emergence of the Omicron variant, including testing all travellers arriving in Norway within 24 hours of arrival, whether vaccinated or not.

France announced its first Omicron case on the mainland, in an unvaccinated man from the greater Paris region recently returned from a trip to Nigeria, and said it was awaiting the results of sequencing tests on his wife, who had also tested positive, to see if she was also infected with the variant.

Regional authorities in Madrid said they had detected Spain's first domestic Omicron case, in a vaccinated person who had not travelled to any countries considered at risk or met anyone who had, and were investigating two other similar suspected cases.

Dutch health authorities called for pre-flight tests for all travel from outside the EU after it emerged that almost all of the 62 passengers who tested

positive after arriving on two flights from South Africa on 26 November, including those with the variant, were fully vaccinated.

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OpinionConservatives

Boris Johnson's rule is a throwback to the 18th-century golden age of sleaze

[Andy Beckett](#)



Boris Johnson speaks during Prime Minister's Questions, 3 November 2021.

Photograph: Jessica Taylor/UK Parliament/AFP/Getty Images

Fri 3 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

Corruption is a word used nervously in the UK. We're quite happy applying it to other countries; but in Britain even critics of the status quo can be surprisingly reluctant to describe as corrupt our society's tight, often concealed circulation of power and rewards.

Partly, this is because corruption is a slippery concept. "There has never been a single, fixed, universal definition," wrote Mark Knights of Warwick University in 2016. "Notions about what is unfair, unjust or immoral change over time."

As a small, centralised country with a huge capital city, Britain has for centuries been run by elites with overlapping memberships and interests, and offered a wide range of services to foreigners with dubious fortunes. To attack this system as corrupt is to risk being called unworldly – and experience feelings of deep frustration and futility. From the House of Lords to the City of London, the capital is lined with ancient institutions that anti-corruption campaigners have failed to cleanse.

Yet there are periods when the charge of corruption suddenly acquires potency. Having struggled for two years to find an effective way of criticising Boris Johnson's government, Labour seems finally to have discovered one. "Corruption," said the party's deputy leader, Angela Rayner, on Monday, "[is rife right through this Conservative government](#)." Keir Starmer, often too measured, has become just as blunt about the issue.

Johnson's response – "[I genuinely believe that the UK is not remotely a corrupt country](#)" – has been floridly unconvincing even by his standards. Most voters disagree with him. According to YouGov, 80% think there is "a lot" or "a fair amount" of corruption in British politics, and [only 1% think there is none](#). Since the corruption controversy took off, the Tories have dropped in the polls.

The word corruption sometimes suggests something past its peak and beginning to decay. And despite their efforts to pretend otherwise, the [Conservatives](#) have been in office for a long time. But more often corruption suggests something spreading, swelling, mutating, becoming monstrous. The constant acquisition of power and resources by Johnson's Tories and their corporate allies has those qualities: from the appointment of cronies to public office to the funnelling of state funds to Tory constituencies to the awarding of government contracts to friends, relations and supporters – a practice for which the Omicron variant may open up more opportunities.

Previous governments have done sleazy things, but few have done them so systematically and blatantly. When Tony Blair was prime minister, the anti-corruption group Transparency International gave the UK scores in the 80s (out of 100) in its annual index: good, but not outstanding by the group's standards. Under Johnson, the UK scores in the 70s.

Appropriately for an administration that shows contempt for parliamentary democracy, the British ruling culture that Johnson's increasingly resembles is a pre-democratic one: the once-infamous [Old Corruption](#) of the 18th and 19th centuries. Government jobs were routinely sold and public money was distributed to people with political leverage. As the state grew, expanded by wars rather than a pandemic, new functions were carried out by private companies whose ability to win contracts and extract profits far exceeded their operational effectiveness. The prime minister sat contentedly at the centre of this system. A satirical cartoon from 1740 shows Robert Walpole – an Old Etonian like Johnson, who governed for more than 20 years – as a giant figure “stretched over ye Doors of all ye Publick Offices”, waiting for supplicants to kiss his exposed buttocks.

Johnson is like an 18th-century politician, with his shamelessness, elaborate but untrustworthy rhetoric, and enrichment of favourites. And, like his style of government, at first Old Corruption seemed immune to criticism. It took a century of campaigning by radicals such as the journalist and MP William Cobbett for the system to start being dismantled.

We live in faster times now. Johnson's ascendancy has lasted little more than a 10th as long as Walpole's, and already there are signs it could be ending. The exposure of corruption may be particularly damaging for this government because Johnson has so emphatically promised to spread resources and opportunities more widely – not to hand them to an even narrower circle. Setting up “[VIP lanes](#)” for companies with Conservative links is hardly levelling up.

Such inside-dealing is part of a bigger Tory project that predates the Johnson government. During George Osborne's period as chancellor, his “grand strategy”, according to his biographer Janan Ganesh, was “the calculated use of [government] policy” to change Britain in his party's favour. Austerity was intended to shrink one of Labour's main bases of support: public sector employees. Under Johnson, patronage of certain firms is intended to create an even more Tory-friendly private sector.

The coherence and cleverness of all this should not be overstated. The Tory governments since 2010 have often been haphazard, with last-minute policies and limited capacity for longterm thinking, as the frustrated

departures of more ambitious strategists such as Dominic Cummings and Steve Hilton have indicated.

Yet one of the lessons of the past 11 years is that even mediocre Tory governments can be transformative. They act as conduits for powerful forces, such as corporations wanting to run state services. The Johnson government's corruption stems as much from modern Conservatism's emptiness as its over-confidence.

Labour's response to all this works as a political message. With the rectitude of a former prosecutor, Starmer promises "a truly independent anti-corruption and anti-cronyism commission". A Starmer government would almost certainly be much less sleazy.

But after a reshuffle that left the shadow cabinet with few fundamental critics of our economy's incestuous workings – and one of them, Ed Miliband, effectively demoted – any Labour anti-corruption drive feels likely to be limited. The Johnson government may end in disgrace, but Britain's insiders will keep prospering.

- Andy Beckett is a Guardian columnist

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[Opinion](#)[Energy industry](#)

The energy crisis shows precisely why this industry should be in public hands

[Christine Berry](#)



Margaret Thatcher opens the Torness power station in East Lothian in May 1989. Photograph: Murdo Macleod/The Guardian

Fri 3 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

Last week, the energy company Bulb became the latest and largest victim of a bloodbath that has seen [25 firms](#) go to the wall. Emergency procedures for “special administration” have been used for the first time, with Bulb effectively being [bailed out](#) by the taxpayer to avoid leaving its 1.7 million customers without power. As a result of the UK’s energy crisis, we face a situation where just a few large firms dominate the market, with millions of households expected to face hardship this winter as fuel bills soar. Sound familiar?

Not so long ago, the outsized power of big energy companies was a major political issue. People in the UK [paid more for their energy](#) and were less satisfied with their suppliers than almost anywhere else in Europe. Thousands of people were dying every winter because they could not afford to heat their homes. We were told that more competition was the answer: the fresh air of the free market would ventilate the UK's broken energy system and solve these problems at a stroke. When Ed Miliband first proposed an [energy price cap](#) in 2013, he was decried as a mad Marxist – only to see the Conservatives [adopt his policy](#) four years later.

But recent events have brought us full circle. The competition experiment has well and truly failed. Once lauded as the solution to overcharging and fuel poverty, small challenger firms are now being castigated as irresponsible, reckless and "[badly run](#)". Meanwhile, the Big Six are revelling in their new status as heroes, piously declaring that customers need "a sustainable and responsible [supplier market](#)" – in other words, them. Firms are also taking aim at the energy price cap, complaining that it has left them shouldering unsustainable losses as wholesale gas prices spike.

So how can we make sense of all this? We need to start with a crucial but underappreciated fact: energy supply companies – the firms that we buy our electricity and gas from – do not own our energy system. They are essentially middlemen: buying energy on the wholesale markets, selling it on to you and pocketing the difference. They aren't responsible for generating the power that keeps your lights on, or for running the networks that supply it to your home. In practice, some of the Big Six firms do some of these things – but the law requires them to run these activities through separate entities from the ones you pay your bills to.

The obvious next question is why on earth you would design an energy system this way. The answer is ideological. In the 1980s, the Thatcher government had a problem. It was committed to privatising the power stations and grids that produced and supplied our energy. But its doctrine of efficient markets didn't work for a system that, like the railways, was a natural monopoly. Its solution was to create a completely new, separate function of "energy supply", whose sole purpose was to turn this natural monopoly into an artificial market.

The theory was that this would force companies to compete for customers – driving prices down and boosting investment. The reality was rather different. Customers rarely bothered to switch and, as long as wholesale energy prices stayed low, the new system was a licence to print money. Even when competition did start to emerge, the odds were still stacked against new entrants. This is a business with high fixed costs and huge economies of scale. Companies need a “hedging strategy” to manage the risk of yo-yoing wholesale prices. This favours large firms that can afford to employ whole trading floors of people to bet on the future price of energy on financial markets. When Big Six firms brand failing rivals “less well run”, what they really mean is “less enormous”. It’s their sheer size and access to capital, not superior talent, that has left the old titans of our energy system as the last men standing.

This has also demolished a different vision for how competition could fix the market, a view most clearly expressed by Lisa Nandy [when she declared](#) in the 2020 Labour leadership contest: “If I’m honest, I think nationalising the energy companies is a waste of money. Disrupting them by setting up municipal energy companies and energy co-ops around the country is a much better route.” She was not alone in finding hope in this prospect. Many were inspired by the progress made in Germany and Denmark towards local, democratic renewable energy, and thought the UK could emulate this through municipal firms such as Nottingham’s [Robin Hood Energy](#).

But these plucky young Davids were, in the end, no match for our energy Goliaths. All went under after a previous bout of market turbulence in 2018. Even had they succeeded, they could never have lived up to the burden that was placed on them. The phrase “municipal energy” painted a picture of cities producing their own energy and distributing it to local people. But without control of the grid, which is owned by a patchwork of private monopoly companies, it was not within local authorities’ power to do this. They were simply playing the wholesale markets in a game that was rigged against them.

It’s not that progressives were wrong to aspire to a green energy system that is [decentralised and democratic](#). While the grid itself is a natural monopoly, the energy that powers it can – and should – be generated by a range of democratically owned renewable sources, from community solar co-ops to

large-scale public offshore wind. But trying to out-compete the Big Six while leaving the rest of the system untouched was never a plausible route to this future. What's more, liberalised energy markets – a model now exported from the UK across Europe – have actually undermined such efforts: community energy co-ops have struggled to compete with corporate giants when bidding to supply the grid.

The attempt to create competitive energy markets has caused more problems than it has solved. Opponents of public ownership need to explain how they plan to solve the problems that competition was supposed to fix. And big firms that declare that only they can manage the risks of fluctuating prices need to explain why this is preferable to having a single public utility. After all, as last week's bailout shows, when push comes to shove these risks will be socialised anyway. The reason why the government cannot allow a firm such as Bulb to fail is simple: access to energy is an essential public good. So why don't we treat it like one?

- Christine Berry is a freelance writer and researcher based in Manchester
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[SportblogPeng Shuai](#)

Peng Shuai needs more than ‘quiet diplomacy’. If she can be silenced, no Chinese athletes are safe

Jessica Shuran Yu



Peng Shuai competing in 2017 in Beijing – the venue for the 2022 Winter Olympic Games. Photograph: Andy Wong/AP

Thu 2 Dec 2021 15.00 EST

When I first experienced abuse as an athlete, I made a vow to myself to never tell anyone. Ever. I was worried that I wouldn’t be believed, but also the thought that anyone would know me as a “victim” mortified me. On top of that, I knew that even if I told anyone, nothing would change. I was both right and wrong. Years later, after I stopped competing in figure skating, [I broke my own silence](#) on the physical abuse inflicted on me in China, and it freed me. I talked about it to my close friends, to reporters, and to my

therapist – extensively. It never got easier to talk about but each time I did, I began to heal a little more.

The most powerful perpetrator of abuse is silence. It allows for abusers to continue to harm athletes, for athletes to continue believing that such treatment is OK, and for authority figures to continue to turn a blind eye without guilt. Every allegation of abuse that is aired needs to be investigated properly for there to be any hope of justice.

Recently, Peng Shuai added her voice to the #MeToo movement, only for it to be taken away. Her statement accusing a Chinese government official of sexual assault was live on social media [for 34 minutes](#) before it was taken down and she has not been heard from directly since. Weeks of silence followed her initial statement, leading to expressions of concern from many tennis players [including Naomi Osaka and Serena Williams](#).

Hu Xijin, editor-in-chief of the Chinese state-affiliated Global Times, started trying really hard to convince worried fans that Peng is safe by first [posting a clip](#) of Peng having dinner in a restaurant. The next day, he tweeted a video of Peng signing autographs and posing for pictures with kids at a tennis tournament. “Can any girl fake such [a] sunny smile under pressure?” poses Hu in his caption. The question reeks with defensiveness and, although rhetorical, I have an answer: yes, a girl can fake such a sunny smile. It’s not that hard.

Hu’s caption also said: “Those who suspect Peng Shuai is under duress, how dark they must be inside. There must be many, many forced political performances in their countries.” I’ve been in therapy for long enough that I can recognise gaslighting and emotional manipulation when I see it. Political performance occurs in all politics, all governments, but that is not why people are worried. China’s history of censorship does not give fans much reason to trust that Peng’s allegations are being treated with respect. We may never truly know what is fake and what is real but it is clear that she is being silenced on some level, with [fans pointing out](#) that her name still cannot be searched on Chinese platforms. Her true voice is filtered, censored, unheard.



Jessica Shuran Yu competing for Singapore at the Southeast Asian Games in Shah Alam, Malaysia, in 2017. Photograph: Kim Kyung Hoon/Reuters

I know from my experience that Chinese officials are quick to protect what is said about them in the media. After I came forward with my story of abuse with an unnamed Chinese coach, my parents received many angry phone calls from the ministry of sport. My situation was not exactly the same but if I, an athlete who was nowhere near as successful as Peng and did not even represent [China](#) in my sport, found my family receiving threatening messages from officials, it is safe to assume that Peng has it much worse.

If Peng, the first Chinese tennis player to be ranked world No 1 in doubles, can be silenced, then no other Chinese athletes are safe. Her disappearance has been noticed because she is big enough to be visible in the public eye. There are thousands of vulnerable athletes who are not. They could have similar complaints of sexual assault or other types of abuse, but never feel safe enough to speak up.

This is not exclusive to Chinese athletes, either. In the past few years, we have seen abuse stories from athletes in the US, South Korea, Australia, Britain, China and more, across a variety of sports, including gymnastics, swimming, and speed skating. It's clear that allegations of the physical abuse, emotional abuse and sexual assault of athletes is universal – but most

often, their experiences are not addressed unless they receive enough media attention.



Simone Biles is sworn in during a US Senate judiciary committee hearing about the inspector general's report on the FBI's handling of the Larry Nassar investigation. Photograph: Getty Images

Simone Biles, a victim of the US gymnastics coach [Larry Nassar](#), is aware of this cruel reality. "I feel like if there weren't a remaining survivor in the sport, they would've just brushed it to the side," she told NBC's Today show. "Since I'm still here and I have quite a social media presence and platform, they have to do something." The physical, mental and emotional health of all athletes should not fall on shoulders of one Olympian with millions of fans. Biles is a survivor. She was never asked to shoulder the burden of all other survivors in their sport or country. At the end of the day, an athlete's job is to perform, and their safety is the responsibility of their coaches, national federations and governing bodies.

The Women's Tennis Association which governs the global women's game has responded well. After threatening to pull the WTA out of China for weeks unless a "full and transparent investigation" into Peng's allegations are opened up, it [suspended all tournaments in China](#). "Women need to be respected and not censored," said the WTA's chief executive, Steve Simon.

This decision is sure to cost the federation millions of dollars but is a noble one that centres athletes over profit.

The suspicion is the IOC hopes to convince the public that all is well enough for them to tune into the Winter Olympics

The same could not be said about the International Olympic Committee. Thomas Bach – the IOC president – and two other members, one of whom is from China, held a video conference with Peng on 21 November. They reported her as being in good health and said she would like to have her privacy respected. On Thursday they announced they had held a second video call with Peng which betrayed some doubts about her safety. “She explained her situation and appeared to be safe and well, given the difficult situation she is in,” the IOC statement said. “We are using ‘quiet diplomacy’ which, given the circumstances and based on the experience of governments and other organisations, is indicated to be the most promising way to proceed effectively in such humanitarian matters.”

Finding the courage to tell your story is not easy. We want to hear about what is being done about the accusations, not just how well – or otherwise – Peng is coping. A so-called “quiet diplomacy” is lacklustre in a time when athlete and activist voices are anything but quiet. We are loudly asking, begging even, for something to change because we are fed up of reading the same stories, feeling frustrated, and seeing no fruits from our efforts. Bach delivered none of the things that were demanded from activists: an explanation on Peng’s seeming disappearance, a demand for the end of Peng’s censorship, and most importantly, an investigation on Peng’s accusations against Zhang Gaoli. The suspicion is that the IOC is attempting to convince the public that all is well enough for them to still tune into the Winter Olympics set to begin in Beijing in February 2022.

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As the organisation that decides which country hosts the Olympics, the IOC has the most power here. With more and more people speaking up, it is clear that allegations of athlete abuse have become rampant across the sporting

world. The IOC needs to acknowledge there is no ethical neutrality here. They could start by following the WTA's example.

Jessica Shuran Yu was born, raised and trained in China and competed in the 2017 figure skating world championships for Singapore. She is now a student in the US studying to become a journalist

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[Opinion](#)[Mail on Sunday](#)

We all have a stake in Meghan's court win over the Mail on Sunday

[Jane Martinson](#)



Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex and Meghan, Duchess of Sussex at a gala in New York in November 2021. Photograph: Dia Dipasupil/Getty Images

Thu 2 Dec 2021 12.49 EST

After years of being accused of not playing the media game – cheating royal correspondents by not telling them when she went into labour, for example, and then having the temerity to avoid photographers when she came out – it was unsurprising, perhaps, that Meghan, the Duchess of Sussex, [victorious in the latest battle of her fight](#) with the Mail on Sunday, denounced it as a game played with “no rules”.

Today, three court of appeal judges applied some when they ruled that letters written to family members counted as “personal, private and not matters of legitimate public interest”. What’s more, and in a point that few media lawyers have argued with, the copyright of such letters always belongs to the author.

It’s a big win for the Duchess of Sussex, and it raises the question: why on earth did the Mail continue to appeal against the judgment made against it [earlier this year?](#)

Mail executives argued in court that Meghan was playing her own game with the press, knowing that her letter would be leaked, daring to disintermediate the Mail and other papers by putting statements out on social media. They refused to settle and the response to the judgment suggests the appeal could go all the way up to the supreme court.

Not only did the group pursue its appeal and continue to publish stories about Meghan and Prince Harry in the intervening months but, just a few weeks ago, the Mail on Sunday editor who published the letters, Ted Verity, was [elevated to run all print titles](#). As one sign of just how newsworthy he considered Meghan and Harry, his last front page as Sunday editor splashed on the recent royal documentary, *The Princes and the Press*, while his first in charge of the Daily Mail mentioned it too.

For Meghan herself it was all part of the “deception, intimidation and calculated attacks” by what she called a “daily fail” that “profits from the

lies and pain that they create”.

There is no getting away from the fact that Meghan excites strong opinion from supporters and detractors. This is a blessing and a curse. The fact that everyone seems to have a view encourages people to click on the stories about her – the more negative or scurrilous, the better.

In his first interview since leaving GB News, [published in the Daily Mail](#), Andrew Neil said the channel pushed “constant themes” to make a splash and win viewers: “We hate migrants, we hate the NHS, we hate lockdown and we hate Meghan Markle.” A history of tabloid headlines and their online iterations appears to have even taught newcomers that hate sells.

Meghan refused to perform as the happy wife and new member of the royal “firm”, putting out her own statements and managing her own team. But she was quickly treated differently to her sister in law, the Duchess of Cambridge. Despite initial euphoria over Meghan as a “breath of fresh air” it was as long ago as 2016 that Harry first condemned “[the racial undertones of comment pieces](#)” about his then girlfriend.

Last week, in Amol Rajan’s much watched, much debated BBC documentary on the royal princes and their relationship with the press, Rachel Johnson, the prime minister’s sister and a former [Mail on Sunday](#) columnist, gave an insight into Meghan’s treatment when she admitted that when she wrote “positively” about Meghan she “got no reaction”. Asked to explain what she meant by writing that this mixed-race woman was injecting some “exotic DNA” into the House of Windsor, she admitted that such a statement was “culturally acceptable” four years ago.

But was it, even 10 or 20 years ago? Of course not. At the very least this suggests that Meghan has raised awareness about the sort of language that educated, successful people use without thinking.

She apparently wants to do more. In her triumphant letter, which will no doubt annoy many journalists, Meghan wrote: “What matters most is that we are now collectively brave enough to reshape a tabloid industry that conditions people to be cruel, and profits from the lies and pain that they create.”

The statement itself sends a signal: a sign of how Harry and Meghan want to change the relationship between the press and the monarchy. Consider that when Prince Charles [successfully sued the Mail on Sunday](#) for publishing his diaries in 2006, he said very little afterwards.

There are broad themes here. It is no surprise that Prince Harry continues his legal complaint against those who hacked his phone, while more than 1,000 victims have already settled. This is no longer just about money for them, and it has a broader significance for all of us. It's about what sort of society we want to see reflected in our media. We all have a stake in that.

- Jane Martinson is a Guardian columnist
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2021.12.03 - Around the world

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[Guantánamo Bay](#)

‘Enemy combatant’ held at Guantánamo petitions for release because war is over



The ‘Camp Six’ detention facility at the US Naval Station in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, in 2012. Abu Zubaydah remains at the camp without charge. Photograph: Jim Watson/AFP/Getty Images

[Ed Pilkington in New York](#)

[@edpilkington](#)

Fri 3 Dec 2021 02.00 EST

Abu Zubaydah, the Guantánamo detainee who was [tortured close to death by the CIA](#) and who has been held without charge by the US for nearly 20 years, has petitioned a federal court for his release on grounds that America’s wars in Afghanistan and with al-Qaida are over.

In a [filing with the US district court](#) in Washington DC, Zubaydah's lawyers argue that recent White House declarations that the [armed conflict in Afghanistan is over](#) – combined with the complete destruction of the original al-Qaida group that carried out 9/11 – have removed any remaining legal justification for keeping him captive. The motion calls for his immediate release, describing Zubaydah's treatment over the past two decades as a “parade of horribles”.

At the heart of the new habeas corpus push for the detainee's freedom is Zubaydah's status as a so-called “enemy combatant”. Under the 2001 Authorisation for Use of Military Force (AUMF), passed by Congress days after 9/11, the then president, George W Bush, was given the power to pursue those behind the terrorist attacks as part of the war on terror.

But as the new filing points out, Zubaydah has never been charged with involvement in 9/11 and he was not even a member of al-Qaida, as the US government has conceded. Rather, he was accused of offenses that took place in [Afghanistan](#) as part of a war that has now officially been concluded.

A day after the chaotic evacuation of Afghanistan was completed in August, the current president, [Joe Biden, said](#): “My fellow Americans, the war in Afghanistan is now over.”

The defense secretary, Lloyd Austin, has countered that while the war in Afghanistan may be over, military operations against al-Qaida are ongoing. In court statements, Austin says that troops and weapons are still being deployed in “military operations against al-Qaida and associated forces … throughout the Middle East and Africa”.

Zubaydah's lawyers insist that the new emphasis on al-Qaida as the justification for keeping him in Guantánamo is also based on legal chicanery. Al-Qaida, they point out, was never specifically mentioned in the AUMF under which Zubaydah is being detained.

They also highlight the fact that all the top al-Qaida leaders involved in 9/11, including Osama bin Laden himself, have either been killed or captured with

the sole exception of Bin Laden's successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who some suggest has died of illness.



Abu Zubaydah. Photograph: AP

"They are saying that if there's conflict with al-Qaida anywhere in the world, in Africa or elsewhere, then the war continues and Guantánamo detainees will be locked up forever," the lead lawyer in Zubaydah's habeas petition, Mark Denbeaux, told the Guardian. "That means that detention without trial, without hearings or justification, with detainees held in isolation and no access to the public or their families – all that will never end."

Denbeaux added: "The war is over. How can you detain enemy combatants when there's no combat going on?"

Denbeaux described the Zubaydah case as "the perfect storm that exposed the evil behavior driving the global war on terror and the torture program in particular". Zubaydah, a Palestinian aged 50 whose name at birth was Zayn al-Abidin Muhammad Husayn, was the first terror suspect to be captured by the CIA months after 9/11.

For more than four years he was held in CIA black sites in Thailand and Poland and subjected to some of the most brutal torture ever carried out by

[the US state](#). Zubaydah became the guinea pig for a program devised by [two psychologists](#) under contract to the CIA euphemistically known as “enhanced interrogation” but widely denounced as torture.

He was [waterboarded](#) 83 times in one month, [held for hours](#) in the nude with his hands shackled above his head, deprived of sleep for days at a time, and stuffed into a closed box resembling a coffin.



Joe Biden announces the end of the US war in Afghanistan on 31 August.
Photograph: Stefani Reynolds/EPA

The devastating details of Zubaydah’s treatment are back under the public spotlight because the US supreme court is considering a [state secrets case](#) that was prompted by his time within a CIA black site in Poland. Though the case has no bearing on Zubaydah’s habeas petition, observers were struck by the fact that for the first time supreme court justices directly referred to what he endured as “torture”.

Several of the justices also expressed astonishment that Zubaydah was still in Guantánamo without charge despite clear supreme court rulings that prohibit such indefinite detention. In a [series](#) of [critical rulings](#), the nation’s highest court has barred detainees from being held perpetually without checks and balances, granted them the right to petition a judge in federal

court, and stated that their “detention may last no longer than active hostilities” continue in the particular armed conflict in which they were deemed to be enemy combatants.

Zubaydah first challenged his imprisonment in the Washington DC federal district court in August 2008, just weeks after the supreme court had granted enemy combatants that right under habeas corpus in its ruling [Boumediene v Bush](#). Habeas corpus requires the state to go before a judge and either press charges against an individual or set them free, yet 13 years later the case is still unsettled and Zubaydah remains locked up without charge.

In October, during oral arguments in the state secrets case, Justice Stephen Breyer said that the supreme court had ruled that the government could hold Guantánamo detainees while “active combat operations against Taliban fighters … are going on in Afghanistan. Well, they’re not any more. So why is [Zubaydah] there?”

Breyer later added: “I don’t understand why he is still there after 14 years.”

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[Philippines](#)

Philippines court allows Nobel laureate Maria Ressa to go to Norway



The Nobel peace prize laureate Maria Ressa will receive the award on 10 December. Photograph: Mark R Cristino/EPA

Reuters in Manila
Fri 3 Dec 2021 03.20 EST

The Philippine journalist Maria Ressa will be allowed to travel overseas so she can accept her [Nobel peace prize](#) in person after a court gave her permission to leave the country to visit Norway this month.

Ressa, who is subject to travel restrictions because of the legal cases she faces in the Philippines, shared the prize with the [Russian investigative journalist Dmitry Muratov](#), amid growing concerns over curbs on free speech worldwide.

The award is the first [Nobel peace prize](#) for journalists since the German Carl von Ossietzky won it in 1935 for revealing his country's secret postwar rearmament programme.

In its ruling on Friday, the Philippine court of appeals granted Ressa's request to travel to receive the award on 10 December, noting that she was not a flight risk.

The Norwegian Nobel committee has decided this year's award ceremony will be an in-person event taking place in Oslo city hall.

Ressa's news site, Rappler, has had its licence suspended and she is embroiled in various legal cases. Supporters say she is being targeted because of her scrutiny of government policies, including a deadly war on drugs launched by the president, Rodrigo Duterte.

The journalist, who is free on bail as she appeals against a six-year prison sentence handed down last year for a libel conviction, faces five tax evasion charges and a corporate case with the regulator.

The Philippines' ranking in the 2021 World Press Freedom Index dropped two notches to 138 of 180 countries, and the Committee to Protect Journalists ranks the [Philippines](#) seventh in its global impunity index, which tracks deaths of media members whose killers go free.

The government denies hounding media and says any problems organisations face are legal, not political. It says it believes in free speech.

On Monday, the UN urged the Philippines to allow Ressa to travel to [Norway](#) to accept the award.

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Technology sector

China's ride-hailing firm Didi to switch listing from New York to Hong Kong



The move by Didi comes less than six months after it made its \$4.4bn flotation in New York. Photograph: Jakub Porzycki/NurPhoto/Rex/Shutterstock

[Mark Sweeney](#)

[@marksweney](#)

Fri 3 Dec 2021 04.11 EST

The Chinese ride-hailing firm Didi is to move its listing from the New York stock exchange to [Hong Kong](#), as Beijing cracks down on the country's biggest technology companies.

The company said it would start “immediate” preparations to delist in New York and prepare to go public in Hong Kong.

“After a careful study, the company will start delisting on the New York stock exchange immediately, and start preparations for listing in Hong Kong,” the company posted on its Weibo account on Friday, a Twitter-like service in [China](#).

It comes less than six months after Didi made its \$4.4bn (£3.3bn) flotation in New York, making it the biggest listing by a Chinese company in the US since Alibaba in 2014, only to see investors sharply sell off shares days later as China’s internet regulator ordered its ride-hailing app to [be taken off domestic app stores](#).

It was also banned from signing up new users, and [subjected to a “cybersecurity review”](#), as Beijing flexed its muscle to curtail Didi’s international expansion plans. In August, Didi [suspended plans to launch in Europe and the UK](#), where it had secured licences to operate in Manchester, Salford and Sheffield.

Didi, which is so dominant in its home market that Uber pulled out of China in 2016 in exchange for a stake, said its board had authorised the company to ensure its shares “will be convertible into freely tradeable shares of the company on another internationally recognised stock exchange”.

Didi’s delisting is the latest development in a long-running crackdown on the rising power of China’s tech companies by Beijing.

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Last year, regulators stepped in at the last minute to block the \$34bn flotation of Jack Ma’s Ant Group, which would have been the [biggest ever corporate fundraising](#).

In April, Ma’s Alibaba paid a [record \\$2.8bn fine](#) to settle an investigation by Chinese regulators into anticompetitive practices at the e-commerce company.

Authorities began to [focus on businesses owned by Ma](#), one of China’s most popular, outspoken and wealthiest entrepreneurs, after he gave a blunt

speech last year criticising national regulators, which reportedly infuriated the president, Xi Jinping.

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Global development

‘She didn’t deserve to die’: Kenya fights tuberculosis in Covid’s shadow



Patients wait outside a TB Clinic in Kibera, where cramped housing allows the disease to thrive. Photograph: Brian Otieno/The Global Fund

Global development is supported by



[About this content](#)



[Sarah Johnson in Nairobi](#)

Fri 3 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

One day in May last year, Violet Chemesunte, a community health volunteer in Kibera, the largest slum in Nairobi, got a call from a colleague worried about a woman she had visited who kept coughing.

She asked if Chemesunte could go round and convince the 37-year-old woman, a single mother to three young children, to seek medical help. She suspected tuberculosis (TB), and feared it might already be too late.

“I went there and she was very sick,” remembers Chemesunte. “She didn’t want to go to hospital because she was scared she might have Covid and would be taken into quarantine. The government had enforced very strict measures at that time and there was a lot of fear around.”

Chemesunte spoke to the woman about TB, which has some similar symptoms to Covid, and persuaded her to get tested at a nearby site. It came back positive.

Two weeks later, before she could start treatment, she was dead. Her children, aged between nine and 13, tested negative and have since left Nairobi to live with their elderly grandmother.

“It was very sad,” says Chemesunte. “She didn’t need to die. TB is curable. The only thing you need is to be diagnosed early enough.”



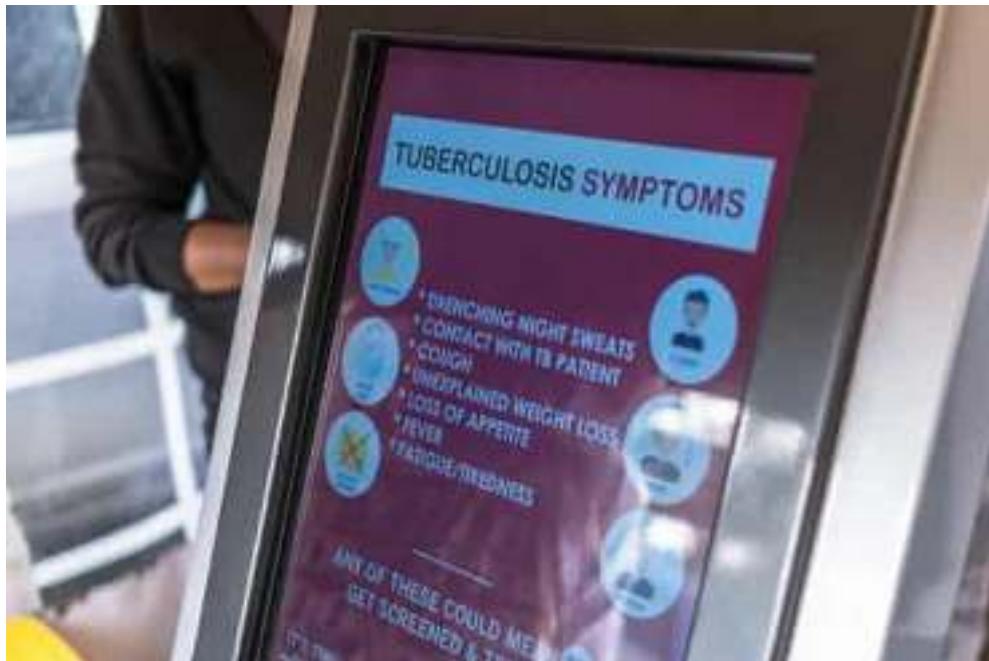
Community health volunteer Violet Chemesunte stands to the right of a queue for TB screening in Kibera. Photograph: Brian Otieno/The Global Fund

TB is one the world's deadliest infectious diseases. It kills more people than HIV and malaria combined. Last year in Kenya 21,000 people died of TB, four times the number of those who have died from Covid-19 since the pandemic began.

The disease is airborne and can lie dormant in someone infected with the bacteria. When a person develops active TB, symptoms may include a cough, fever, night sweats and weight loss. Left untreated, TB kills about half of those affected. Someone with active TB can infect five to 15 others through close contact over the course of a year.

The World Health Organization revealed in October that Covid-19 had reversed years of global progress in tackling TB, and for the first time in over a decade, deaths had increased.

Kenya is one of the 30 countries with the majority (at least 83%) of cases. Last year, around 140,000 people in Kenya were estimated to have TB, according to the country's Ministry of Health.



An automated TB screening machine at Kibera Health centre. Photograph: Brian Otieno/The Global Fund

Covid also meant that the number of “missing people” with TB – those who go undetected, untreated and unreported – increased. Nearly half of people

with TB in Kenya last year were likely to have missed out on diagnosis and treatment. An estimated 15% reduction in case finding was “largely attributable to the pandemic”, according to the Ministry of Health’s national tuberculosis, leprosy and lung disease programme [annual report](#).

Restrictions on movement, patients avoiding health facilities, the repurposing of health services and workers to cater for the pandemic, and stigma related to similar presentations of Covid-19 and TB all contributed.

For TB, that urgency is not there. Resources are not aligned to the magnitude of the disease

Dr Enos Okumu Masini

“Covid has made everything worse,” says Dr Enos Okumu Masini, who served as head of the national TB and lung disease programme and now works for the [StopTB partnership](#). “It had a knock-on effect, and the programme [to tackle TB in Kenya] has a lot of work to do.”

Against this backdrop is a lack of funding to tackle the disease. Masini says [less than half of Kenya’s plan to tackle TB has adequate funding](#). One concern is lack of diagnosis in children; two-thirds of cases in those under 15 are missed, he says.

Masini is aghast at what he sees as an imbalance of attention and political will between Covid and TB. While Kenya’s president is fully in charge of the Covid response, with regular ministerial briefings and readily available data, this is not the case with TB, he says.



Community health workers visit a patient being treated for TB. Photograph: Brian Otieno/The Global Fund

The number of deaths from TB is “the equivalent of two bus crashes in Kenya every day,” he adds. “[If that happened, it] would cause uproar. There would be high-level intervention. For TB, that urgency is not there – it’s not taken as an imminent danger. Resources are not aligned to the magnitude of the disease.”

Back in Kibera, where poor and cramped housing allows the disease to thrive, Anne Munene, project officer for Amref Health [Africa](#), sits at a table outside a TB clinic. “Covid was an eye-opener,” she says. “What have we done wrong that we never got this attention for TB?”

She and her team at Amref Health Africa, which has received funding from [the Global Fund](#), ran a campaign aimed at raising TB awareness at a community level, where so many cases are missed. Information on the dangers of TB were distributed to *matatus*, the minibuses used for public transport, and schools. The school curriculum is being updated to include TB, Munene says. The disease was also discussed on TV and radio chatshows.

Munene and her colleagues ran a competition asking businesses to suggest ways to find people with TB in the community. One innovation that has been adopted is an automated TB screening machine, or “ATM”. A community health volunteer helps people go through five automated questions, asking if they have experienced any TB symptoms. If they answer yes to any, they are encouraged to submit a sputum sample for testing.



Kibera is Africa's largest informal settlement, home to approximately 250,000 people. Photograph: Brian Otieno/The Global Fund

The ATMs have been placed in frequently visited sites across Nairobi, including the train station and a compound in Kibera with various government and health services. From November 2019 to May 2021, about 80,000 people were screened for TB, Munene says. Of those, 262 tested positive and were put on treatment.

“These are things that have never been done,” she says. “To get 262 cases in the first 12 months that we would not have found otherwise shows we are filling a gap.”

The pandemic still threatens to curtail efforts and derail progress, but Munene also sees it as an opportunity. “Now we need to ride the wave of Covid to raise awareness of TB. We are still grappling with this.”

The Global Fund provided transport while the Guardian was in Kenya

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Business live

Business

Ofgem to review response to Storm Arwen, removes compensation cap for power-cut homes – as it happened

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Headlines monday 29 november 2021

- [Live UK Covid: health minister says more cases of Omicron expected to be confirmed in England](#)
- [Scotland Six Omicron cases found as ministers resist calls for tougher rules](#)
- [Omicron Covid variant poses ‘very high’ global risk, says WHO](#)
- [Netherlands Police arrest couple trying to flee quarantine for Spain](#)

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

[**Politics**](#)

Sajid Javid implies new restrictions will be abandoned if Omicron no more dangerous than Delta – as it happened

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[Coronavirus](#)

Six Omicron cases found in Scotland as ministers resist calls for tougher rules



Humza Yousaf said Public Health Scotland would undertake enhanced contact tracing in all cases to establish the origin of the virus. Photograph: Andrew Milligan/PA

Peter Walker Political correspondent

@peterwalker99

Mon 29 Nov 2021 03.54 EST

Six cases of the Omicron variant of coronavirus have been confirmed in [Scotland](#), Scottish health officials have said. It trebles the number of cases found around the UK, as ministers face calls for tougher rules on mask use and travel tests.

Four cases were in the Lanarkshire area, with two found in the Greater Glasgow and Clyde area, Scotland's health department said [in a statement](#).

The three cases identified previously had all been in England.

Scotland's health secretary, Humza Yousaf, said officials would undertake enhanced contact tracing to try to track down the origin of the outbreak, and identify people the six had been in contact with.

The junior UK health minister Edward Argar told BBC Radio 4's Today programme that the news was not unexpected.

He said: "We've been clear since we first knew about this new variant that we would expect to see the number of cases rise, and I think what we're seeing in Scotland reflects that. That's in the nature of the virus."

New restrictions are being imposed this week in an attempt to limit the spread of the variant, first identified in South Africa, which scientists fear could be highly transmissible and might [evoke some vaccine protections](#).

Ten southern African countries have been placed on the travel red list, while England has [reimposed](#) mandatory mask use for public transport, shops, and for secondary school pupils in communal areas, to begin from Tuesday.

Angela Rayner, Labour's deputy leader, said masks should be used more generally when people were mixing indoors, arguing that [Boris Johnson's repeated avoidance of](#) wearing a mask had made encouragement and enforcement more difficult.

"We know the prime minister has undermined his own message in the past, but we need clarity so that people can do the right thing," she told Sky News.

Rayner also repeated Labour's calls for a resumption of the previous system of people needing a negative Covid test before, rather than two days after, being allowed to travel to the UK. "What we're saying is that people should have a test before they come into the country – wherever they are they should be tested before they come into the United Kingdom."

Speaking earlier, Argar confirmed that the government's vaccines watchdog was expected to set out plans later on Monday for the [booster vaccines](#)

programme to be rapidly expanded, in an attempt to offer more protection.

The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) which held an emergency meeting over the weekend, is expected to advise the use of boosters for younger people, and could also recommend a cut in the current six-month wait between second and booster doses, it is understood.

Argar reiterated comments on Sunday by Sajid Javid, the health secretary, that ministers were hopeful that what he called “swift, precautionary steps” would mean no extra measures would be needed to combat the new variant.

Asked if the government might tighten up the rules even further in the next three weeks, the current period in which the new restrictions are in force, Argar told Sky News: “It’s not something I’m anticipating.” Argar said he was “looking forward to a Christmas spent with family and friends”.

Javid has said the restrictions are intended to “buy time” to restrict the spread of Omicron while scientists try to better understand it, and to give an opportunity to expand booster jabs.

Asked on Sky whether the JCVI would expand boosters to all adults over 18, Argar said: “I think that’s what they’re looking at, but I don’t know what they’re going to recommend. I haven’t seen the advice. But we’d expect that within the coming hours.”

Nicola Sturgeon was to hold an emergency briefing on Monday morning after the identification of the six cases. The Scottish first minister was already due to warn people to redouble their efforts to follow physical distancing and mask-wearing guidelines in Scotland, and to make sure they are fully vaccinated, in her speech to a Scottish National party conference later.

Coronavirus

Omicron Covid variant poses very high global risk, says WHO



A health worker in Quezon city, Philippines. Photograph: Aaron Favila/AP

[Andrew Gregory](#), health editor

Mon 29 Nov 2021 12.27 EST

The threat posed by the “highly mutated” Omicron variant shows what a “perilous and precarious” situation the world is in, the head of the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) has said, as he warned that the pandemic would not end until every country has access to vaccines.

In his first substantial comments since the emergence of the new variant last week, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said it illustrated how “hard-won gains could vanish in an instant”.

Addressing a special session of the World Health Assembly, he said the emergence of Omicron served as a reminder that “Covid-19 is not done with

us”.

Earlier on Monday the WHO said the Omicron variant was likely to spread internationally, posing a very high global risk of infection surges that could have severe consequences in some areas.

The UN agency urged its 194 member states to accelerate vaccination of high-priority groups and, in anticipation of increased case numbers, to “ensure mitigation plans are in place” to maintain essential health services.

Tedros said the pandemic would not be over until what he called the “vaccine crisis” had ended, highlighting that low-income countries had received just 0.6% of the world’s Covid vaccines. G20 countries had received 80%, he said, adding that “no country can vaccinate its way out of the pandemic alone”.

“Instead of meeting in the aftermath of the pandemic, we are meeting as a fresh wave of cases and deaths crashes into Europe, with untold and uncounted deaths around the world,” he said. “And although other regions are seeing declining or stable trends, if there’s one thing we have learned, it’s that no region, no country, no community and no individual is safe until we are all safe. The emergence of the highly mutated Omicron variant underlines just how perilous and precarious our situation is.”

The WHO said earlier: “Omicron has an unprecedented number of spike mutations, some of which are concerning for their potential impact on the trajectory of the pandemic. The overall global risk related to the new variant ... is assessed as very high.”

To date, no deaths linked to Omicron have been reported, though the WHO said further research was needed to assess Omicron’s potential to escape protection against immunity induced by vaccines and previous infections.

“Increasing cases, regardless of a change in severity, may pose overwhelming demands on healthcare systems and may lead to increased morbidity and mortality. The impact on vulnerable populations would be substantial, particularly in countries with low vaccination coverage,” it said.

The variant was first reported to the WHO on 24 November from South Africa, where infections have risen steeply. It has since spread around the world, with new cases found in the Netherlands, Denmark and Australia, even as more countries imposed travel restrictions to try to seal themselves off.

Global cases

Japan said on Monday it would [close its borders](#) to foreigners, [joining Israel](#) in taking the toughest measures.

“The presence of multiple mutations of the spike protein in the receptor-binding domain suggests that Omicron may have a high likelihood of immune escape from antibody-mediated protection,” the WHO said. “However, immune escape potential from cell-mediated immunity is more difficult to predict. Overall, there are considerable uncertainties in the magnitude of immune escape potential of Omicron.”

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Netherlands

Dutch police arrest couple trying to flee quarantine for Spain



Schipol airport, Amsterdam. Dozens of passengers who tested positive after arriving from South Africa on Friday are in quarantine at a nearby hotel. Photograph: Robin Utrecht/REX/Shutterstock

[Daniel Boffey](#) in Brussels

Mon 29 Nov 2021 06.14 EST

Dutch police have arrested a married couple who fled a quarantine hotel to get a flight out of the country, despite at least one of them testing positive for Covid on arrival in the Netherlands from South Africa, where the new [Omicron variant](#) was first identified.

The Portuguese woman and Spanish man were apprehended in their seats moments before their plane was scheduled to leave for Spain from Amsterdam's Schiphol airport on Sunday evening.

A spokesperson for the Royal [Netherlands](#) Marechaussee, a national police force, said the couple had been taken off the plane “almost silently and without resistance”.

They were being kept in isolation in hospital and could be prosecuted for violating Dutch quarantine rules. It is unclear whether one or both had tested positive for the Omicron variant or one of the earlier strains.

A total of 624 passengers arrived at Schiphol on flights from Johannesburg and Cape Town on Friday morning on the Dutch national carrier KLM.

People were held for four hours on their planes while they were tested for the virus. Those who tested negative were asked to isolate at home for five days and take further tests and those transiting were allowed to carry on with their journey.

Sixty-one passengers tested positive and were put into quarantine at a Ramada hotel near the airport along with their partners. Thirteen of them were identified as having contracted the Omicron variant.

The couple, who have not been named, are understood to have left their hotel at about 6pm on Sunday evening, at which point the security guards supervising the quarantine called the police. The Marechaussee did not release further details of the couple’s medical status.

The Dutch health minister, Hugo de Jonge, made an urgent request for all those who had arrived from southern Africa in recent days to be tested for Covid as soon as possible.

“It is not unthinkable that there are more cases in the Netherlands,” he said.

Under a change of rules, those flying to the Netherlands from South Africa must now show a negative PCR test to board planes. The Omicron variant has also been found in Australia, Belgium, Botswana, Canada, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Hong Kong, Israel, Italy and the UK.

A tightening of Covid restrictions has come into force in the Netherlands. For the next three weeks, hospitality and cultural venues, including bars, cafes, museums, and cinemas, must close by 5pm local time.

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2021.11.29 - Spotlight

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- [Nelson, BLM and new voices Why Barbados will ditch the Queen tonight](#)
- ['Someone needs a kick up the butt' Bexley byelection voters consider Tories' record](#)
- [A new start after 60 'I lost weight, then lost myself - until I became a burlesque dancer'](#)

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Interview

‘I owe an enormous debt to therapy!’ Rita Moreno on West Side Story, dating Brando and joy at 90

[Simon Hattenstone](#)



‘I think I’m funny as hell and I think I’m cute and I think I’m mischievous’
... Rita Moreno. Photograph: Chris Pizzello/Invision/AP



Mon 29 Nov 2021 01.00 EST

Rita Moreno pops up on my computer screen in a bright red hat, huge pendant necklace and tortoiseshell glasses. “Well, here I am in my full glory,” she says from her home in Berkeley, California. And glorious she sure is. Moreno is a couple of weeks short of her 90th birthday, but look at her and you would knock off 20 years. Listen to her and you would knock off another 50.

Can I wish you an advance happy birthday, I ask. “Yes, you can. Isn’t it *exciting?*” Moreno is one of the acting greats. But she could have been so much greater. She is one of only six women to have bagged the Egot (Emmy, Grammy, Oscar and Tony awards), alongside Helen Hayes, Audrey Hepburn, Barbra Streisand, Whoopi Goldberg and Liza Minnelli. Yet she has spent much of her career battling typecasting or simply not being cast at all.

Still, her 80s have been golden years. She has been working regularly in TV – notably as the fabulously flirtatious grandmother in the Netflix sitcom [One Day at a Time](#). Meanwhile, December marks two huge events (apart from

the big day). Rita Moreno: Just a Girl Who Decided to Go for It, a brilliant warts-and-all documentary about her, is released in the UK on 6 December. It is a testament to her remarkable life and arresting honesty – and the inglorious history of sexual abuse and racism in the film industry.

A few days later, she features in one of the cinema events of the year – Steven Spielberg's remake of the Bernstein/Sondheim classic West Side Story, released 60 years after Moreno mesmerised audiences as Anita, the girlfriend of the gang leader Bernardo. This time, she plays a character specially created for her by the film's scriptwriter, Tony Kushner – Valentina is the widow of Doc, who ran the sweet shop in the original.

Moreno was born in Puerto Rico to a seamstress and a farmer. When she was four, her mother took her to New York in search of a better life, leaving behind Rita's father (whom she saw again only once) and brother. They settled in Manhattan. From her earliest days, she remembers being called a "spic". Dancing was her salvation. At six, she made her professional debut at Greenwich theatre. She dropped out of school at 15 and by 16 was the family's breadwinner. In 1950, at 18, she signed to MGM; a year later, she moved to 20th Century Fox.

Moreno had a brutal introduction to showbusiness. As a teenager, she was raped by her agent. The shameful thing, she says, is that she kept him on because she thought he was the only person in the industry looking out for her. Moreno met him recently for the first time in 70 years. "When I saw who it was, I went white. I froze. He said: 'My wife would like to meet you; would you have lunch with us?'" For some reason, she said yes. "I was examining every inch of his face and his soul and, when his wife went to the bathroom, he came back to the day he raped me and said: 'You know, I always wished I had made you pregnant.' She repeats his words, still shocked. "I was so horrified that all I was able to say was: 'You're a piece of work,' and I got up and left."

Soon after being raped, she was introduced to the notorious sexual predator Harry Cohn, the co-founder of Columbia Pictures, at a party. "I had just met the man and he said, with his wife in the room, by the way: 'You better watch out – I'd like to fuck you.' That may have been the third time I'd

heard that word in my life, and I stood there and giggled. I didn't know what to say. But I was horrified." If Cohn was alive today, does she think he would be in jail for sex offences? "Yes, I think Harvey Weinstein would have had company. He had a dreadful reputation."

Then there was Buddy Adler, who ran 20th Century Fox. "He found my phone number and started to call me all the time. It turned into a stalking situation." Did she realise beforehand what went on in Hollywood? "I had no idea."



'She's what I've always wanted to be!' Moreno as Anita in West Side Story.
Photograph: Moviestore/Shutterstock

Nor did she have any idea about the roles she would end up playing. "Illiterate, immoral characters – men's little island girls," Moreno says. Her skin would be darkened; she would be told to speak lines such as: "Why you no love me no more? Why you like white girl?" in an "exotic" accent. She found it humiliating. In 1952, she got a cameo in Singin' in the Rain as the silent movie star Zelda Zanders. Moreno hoped this would be her escape, but she was soon back playing dusky maidens.

In 1953, at 21, Moreno began a tumultuous on-off eight-year relationship with [Marlon Brando](#), regarded by many at the time as the most desirable

man in the world. She was obsessed with him and has compared him to cocaine. “He had a gorgeous intelligence. He was the funniest person I’ve ever met in my life. He was not only famous, he was the *king* of sexy actors.” Was he a good lover? “*Oh yes!* That part of it was incredible. That’s all I’ll say. No other details.” Her best lover ever? “*Ever!*”

But he was also monstrous. Moreno thought he couldn’t love anybody else because he loved himself so much. When she became pregnant, he made her have an abortion. During the course of their relationship, he had numerous affairs and married twice. He seduced everyone he met, she says – even his psychiatrist.

She tried to get her revenge by dating 25-year-old Elvis Presley. “I was still seeing Marlon. I was trying to make him jealous after I found some lingerie in his house.” Was Elvis as sexy as Brando? “Not in a million years. He was very sweet, but no.” She says he was shy and bumbling. Their evenings would inevitably conclude with a clumsy fumble on the floor, as a fully trousered Presley gyrated against her while Moreno waited for more. She gave up on him. Meanwhile, Brando was unchanged.

Was Elvis as sexy as Brando? Not in a million years. He was very sweet, but no

Her self-belief, already low, reached a nadir. Shortly after filming West Side Story in 1961, Moreno tried to kill herself at Brando’s home. She would have succeeded if Brando’s assistant hadn’t found her and rushed her to hospital. “I was told I was crying all the time I was unconscious,” she says. Did she really want to die? “It wasn’t done for drama, that’s for sure. What I really wanted to do was kill the bad Rita who was always getting me in trouble, but it turned out if you’re going to kill the bad Rita, you’re also going to kill the good one.” She chose life and dumped Brando.

West Side Story was huge and Moreno was phenomenal as Anita. Here was a woman ahead of her time in the macho ganglands of New York – sexy and sexual, proud and principled, complex and compromised. It is impossible not to fall in love with her.

Moreno says she fell in love with Anita, too. “I thought: ‘Wow – she’s what I’ve always wanted to be!’” I assumed you were like her, I say. She laughs and insists she was weak and subservient and couldn’t have been more different. But I have seen chatshows from then in which you seem so sure of yourself. “You are perceiving that Rita Moreno I presented to the world. What was I gonna do, say: ‘Really, I’m a weak person’? No, that was the persona. I am now that person, but it took me a very, very long time to become her.”

She won an Oscar for West Side Story and was convinced she had finally cracked the film industry – then she didn’t make another movie for seven years. That is unbelievable, I say; was it your choice? “It was my choice, because I was being offered such crappy stuff. I was only offered gang movies on a way lesser scale and it was like the same fucking battle again. I couldn’t believe it. And it broke my heart. It. Absolutely. Broke. My. Heart. I thought: ‘I’ll wait for something better,’ and something better kept not coming. It was horrific.”



‘He was the funniest person I’ve ever met in my life’ ... with Marlon Brando on the set of his 1954 film *Désirée*. Photograph: Archive Photos/Getty Images

Have things improved for Latino actors? “Latino people are still horribly under-represented. It has changed, but nowhere near as much as for the black community. The black community in films has done an incredible job of getting themselves in the picture and we have a long way to go.”

Why have Latinos struggled so much? “I think part of the reason is because, unlike the black community, we don’t mainly come from America. We come from all kinds of countries and we’ve siloed ourselves rather than supporting each other, as we should have. We still think of ourselves as Argentinian or Puerto Rican or Mexican rather than Hispanic. Until we get over that and become one big wonderful community, we’re still going to have problems.”

Moreno was targeted recently by Latino activists after defending her friend Lin-Manuel Miranda from criticism that he had not cast enough dark-skinned Afro-Latinos in the film of his musical In the Heights. “I said: boy did they pick on the wrong person, ’cause this is the guy who wrote a play called Hamilton where most of the cast was black and tan.” Equally, it felt as though they had picked on the wrong woman – after all, Moreno has campaigned for minorities throughout her adult life, marched on Washington in 1963 and stood only a few metres from Martin Luther King when he made his “I have a dream” speech.

But she took on board what her critics said. “I thought their timing sucked and they were strident, but they did have a point.” As a thoroughly modern woman, she apologised on Twitter with grace and humour for failing to acknowledge the need to be “more inclusive of the Afro-Latino community”, concluding: “See, you CAN teach this old dog new tricks.”

Perhaps those who attacked Moreno weren’t fully aware of how closely the issue resonates with her. After West Side Story, and despite the Oscar, she more or less gave up on the movies because her opportunities were so limited. Instead, she focused on theatre, TV, one-woman shows and activism. The breadth and piecemeal nature of her career are reflected in the other awards that make up her Egot – a Tony for playing the talentless singer Googie Gomez in The Ritz, two Emmys for The Muppet Show and The Rockford Files and a Grammy for the children’s TV show The Electric Company.

In 1965, she married Leonard Gordon, a cardiologist. They had one daughter, the actor Fernanda Gordon, and stayed together until he died in 2010. The most moving, and shocking, part of the documentary is when Moreno talks about what a wonderful man Gordon was – then says she should have left him long before he died, because he was so controlling. “I was with him to the very last, including a month in hospital where I slept on a cot and was with him 24/7,” she says now. “It’s what you do when you love and respect somebody.” But she admits that, as soon as he died, she felt liberated.



National treasure ... receiving the 2009 National Medal of Arts from Barack Obama. Photograph: Shawn Thew/UPI/Shutterstock

“I got up, cut a lock of his hair, which I still have – beautiful silver hair – and as I left I stopped at the door and I looked at him. He was so small and slender and white, and I thought: ‘How is it that little wizened person made me so unhappy? Where did he get that power?’ It was a mystery to me.”

When she got home, she asked her assistant, Judy, to pour her a big glass of wine. “I sat on the patio, took in the sun and there was this enormous sense of relief. When I woke up the next morning in bed and turned on the news on the TV, I said to myself: ‘Oh my God, I can do this for the rest of the day if I want to. I can just get up and go to the bathroom and pour myself a cup

of tea and get back into bed and stay here.’ I was astonished and I loved every second of it. I revelled in it.”

What had been stopping her doing this beforehand? “It was in my husband’s head and in my head. I’ve always been a newshound, so I had the news on constantly and it drove him crazy. I think it was also a way of having company.

“He didn’t like the raucous side of me and I love that side of me. I think I’m funny as hell and I think I’m cute and I think I’m mischievous. I *know* I’m mischievous. And that’s the kind of thing he discouraged, and that makes me very sad, because he was missing out on something pretty wonderful about me.” It’s great to hear you talk about yourself, like this, I say. “You know, I think I owe an enormous debt to psychotherapy. Without that, I wouldn’t be the Rita you know and love.” She giggles.



Back where it all began ... starring in Steven Spielberg’s remake of West Side Story. Photograph: 20th Century Fox/Niko Tavernise/Allstar

It took her years of therapy to start liking herself, she says. “If you have been traumatised from the time you were a child to believe you were a ‘spic’, that you were a garlic-mouth, that you are not worthy, it takes a long time to get rid of that. That’s why therapy so often takes so long, because

you're trying to get rid of that trash before you can deal with the you that wants to get better. I went into therapy wanting to get better, knowing that in some way I had a sickness. And the sickness was Rita hates Rita.”

Those days are long gone. Nowadays, she can accept how special she is and how much she has meant to so many people. After her relationship with Brando ended, they rebuilt their friendship and remained in touch throughout his life (much to her husband's chagrin). “There was always this attachment between us till he died. Every now and then, he'd call me and he would say to me: ‘You were the only woman in my life who was able to make that right turn.’” What did he mean? “That I didn't need him any more. That I found a sense of dignity about myself.”

She stops talking, looks a little distant for a moment, then smiles contentedly. “Oh boy!” she says. “I know now that he did actually love me. And when I realised that, I was so happy. It meant so much to me.” When did she realise? “Oh, way after it was over. Then, if I needed proof, it was in the newspapers that there was only one picture of a woman in his bedroom and that was me.” She is almost right. The New York Post reported that the only piece of movie memorabilia found in Brando's home after his death was a picture of him in the 1969 film *The Night of the Following Day*, locked in a passionate embrace with a naked Moreno.

Since her husband's death, she has done just as she fancies and is getting to be more herself by the day. In the documentary, her daughter mentions the time they were at a fundraiser and no money had been raised, so Moreno offered to cook for four people and flash her breasts for \$10,000. She got the \$10,000. When asked in 2017 to play the grandmother in *One Day at a Time*, she agreed on the proviso that they made the character sexual. Why was that so important to her? “Being sexy? Because nobody my age is ever thought of as somebody who has ovaries. You can't have a baby, but you can still play for sexy.”

She has lived by herself for a decade. It amazes her how many people assume she is lonely. “*I love* being by myself,” she says. “It's not hard to be alone. In fact, it's great, if you like the person you live with.”

This article was amended on 2 December 2021 to refer to Moreno as having moved to New York, rather than to “the US” as a child.

Rita Moreno: Just a Girl Who Decided to Go for It is available on digital download from 6 December. West Side Story is in UK cinemas from 10 December

In the UK and Ireland, Samaritans can be contacted on 116 123 or by emailing jo@samaritans.org or jo@samaritans.ie. In the US, the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) is on 1-800-273-8255. In Australia, the crisis support service [Lifeline](#) is on 13 11 14. Other international helplines can be found at [befrienders.org](#)

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Barbados

Nelson, BLM and new voices: why Barbados is ditching the Queen



Downtown Bridgetown in Barbados last week. Photograph: Joe Raedle/Getty Images



[Michael Safi](#) in Bridgetown

[@safimichael](#)

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The first time, he stumbled on it by accident, after following a dirt track through fields of sugar cane that came to a clearing. There was a sign, Hakeem Ward remembers, beneath which someone had left an offering.

“The sign said it was a slave burial ground,” he says. “We went and Googled it, and then I realised it was actually one of the biggest slave burial grounds in the western hemisphere.”

Ward, 24, lives nearby, within sight of the turquoise waters that lap at Barbados’ south coast, but had never learned until then of the Newton Slave Burial Ground, where the remains of an estimated 570 enslaved people were found interred in unmarked graves. At school he says they brushed lightly over the history of the slave trade on the island. “We learned a lot of stuff about Christopher Columbus and how he discovered and colonised the world.”



Hakeem Ward. Photograph: Michael Cadogan

But the past still agitates, making itself known. Dogs occasionally vanish into the bushland, returning with skulls and other remains, Ward says. He and his friends try to avoid hanging out near the site. “With the spiritual energy, we don’t want to see anything,” he says. “Because we see things, and we want to avoid that as much as possible.”

Late on Monday night, local time, Barbados will declare itself a republic, becoming the first nation to remove Queen Elizabeth II as its head of state in nearly three decades. The transition, flagged last year in the thick of activism inspired by the [Black Lives Matter movement](#), is being executed amicably, in the presence of Prince Charles, and circumspectly, more than 20 years since it was recommended by a government commission.

[new map](#)

But, unmistakably, it is a repudiation of the British monarchy, part of a wider campaign that includes strengthening ties with the African nations from which most Barbadians claim heritage and renewing demands for the UK government to make reparations for its historical crimes. Aimed at authoring a liberated future, many hope it will also soothe the restless ghosts of the past.

‘Barbados was a hellhole’

As its peak tourism season approaches, Barbados is bearing the brunt of its worst Covid-19 wave. Masks are ubiquitous and many supermarkets and government buildings have installed imposing machines to check temperatures. Still, visitors are coming, drawn by the island’s famously pristine beaches, lush hinterland and gentle weather.

It was these same natural blessings that made the easternmost island in the Caribbean an exquisite laboratory for the development of a new form of capitalism in the 17th century. Sugar, backbreaking to produce and for centuries reserved for Europe’s ultra-wealthy, flourished in Barbados’ rich soil. The island’s even topography offered vast space for plantations.

But it was a third innovation, the perfection of a model using enslaved Africans to work the fields, which set off a “sugar revolution” that made England extraordinarily wealthy and created a template that soon spread across the Americas. “It was in Barbados that the slavery plantation production model was invented – right here,” says David Comissiong, the country’s ambassador to Caricom, a Caribbean regional integration body.

Reclassified under British law as property, the men, women and children who worked the cane fields of Barbados were subject to unimaginable brutality. The first systematic study of the health of those buried at the Newton Slave Burial Ground found the average life expectancy of those examined was 18 years old, with the lives of women thought to be especially appalling: until then, no lower mean age of death had been documented among enslaved females anywhere in the world. “Barbados was a hellhole,” Comissiong says. “For black people, Barbados was a brutal, hellish society.”



Newton Slave Burial Ground. Photograph: Michael Cadogan

It is easy to be among the more than 1 million people who visited Barbados each year before the pandemic and never encounter this history. There is a single statue commemorating emancipation, at the centre of a busy roundabout, depicting a man who has come to be identified with Bussa, the leader of a failed 19th-century revolt, whose broken chains dangle from arms raised skyward.

For centuries after slavery ceased, over the island's shameful history, "there was almost a kind of indifference, a kind of silence", recalls Esther Phillips, Barbados' poet laureate, that she believes stems in part from guilt and shame among those who were freed. "Who wants to revisit the pain of trauma, once you get out of it, or appear to get out?"

That muffling was passed down through generations, and reinforced in the colonial education of her youth, which some argue has not sufficiently been reformed to this day. "I never knew there was anything called West Indian history or Caribbean history," Phillips says. "I knew all about the English queens and kings."

The decades since Barbados became independent 55 years ago have seen gradual efforts to face the past, and confront its implications for the future,

but always cautiously. A government commission in the 1970s examined the question of becoming a republic and advised against it, conscious that similar experiments in Caribbean states such as Suriname and Guyana had led to authoritarianism and instability.



Horse trainers in the sea with horses from the Garrison Savannah horse racing track in Bridgetown. Photograph: Joe Raedle/Getty Images

Even the Barbadian leaders who wanted to break away from the monarchy recognised they still lived in the world colonialism made, and had an economy critically dependent on attracting a pipeline of sun-starved British tourists.

“The fear, I think reasonably, was that it would not be received well, and that there would be a narrative, for example, of telling tourists in the UK: ‘Maybe you should wait about going to Barbados, because you should make sure the political situation is stable,’” says Melanie Newton, a professor of history at the University of Toronto.

Part of this conservatism, too, was pragmatic: Barbados was building a society that was, by any measure, a tremendous success, with some of the best human-development indicators in the formerly colonised world, an enormous leap from the desperate conditions that prevailed in the last

decades of British rule. “Barbados has a very strong public service system, amazing education, good healthcare,” Newton says. “And a lot of that is paid for by tourism and international business and investment banking.”

‘In Barbados, what are we doing?’

Over the past week, workers have been busy erecting and painting a dais in central Bridgetown’s national heroes’ square, formerly called Trafalgar, where the handover ceremony will take place at 11pm on Monday, and the surrounding colonial buildings – including the country’s Gothic parliament, the third oldest in the world – are decked in the national colours, ultramarine and gold.

At the head of the square stands a grand pedestal – with nothing on it.

The year 2020 produced seismic changes everywhere. In Barbados, too, it was a watershed, opening the way for government to finally propose a republic that had been promised for decades but always postponed.



The Union Jack flies next to the British High Commission building on 18 November in Bridgetown. Photograph: Joe Raedle/Getty Images

Alexander Downes was supposed to be studying in Australia, but was trapped at home in Barbados early in the year when borders suddenly closed. He would pass national heroes' square, glancing at the statue of the English admiral Horatio Nelson that had stood there since 1813, three years earlier than its twin in London.

At 32, Downes was part of the first generation without memory of Barbados' colonial-era nor its hangover in the early years of independence. He and his friends were more inclined to question the things their parents took for granted, he says. "Sometimes I would talk to my father, as we drove through certain areas, and he would be like, 'Oh, when I was a kid, I couldn't come to this area.' And I'd be, like, why not?"

Those things included the pride of place given to the defender of British slavery Nelson, whose bronze statue had first stirred small protests decades earlier, to which the government had responded in 1990 by rotating it to face away from town. "The compromise wasn't, let's get rid of it," says Downes. "It was, literally, just turn it."



The statue of Horatio Nelson in heroes' square in Barbados. Photograph: Nigel R Browne/Reuters

In the middle of the year, Black Lives Matter protests were spreading across the world, including to Barbados, and Downes sensed that in his careful society, something was shifting. After consulting with friends, he posted a petition calling for Nelson to come down.

“I said to myself, in Barbados, what are we doing?” he says. “We have a colonial past, we have a past steeped in racism … [The statue] is just brick and mortar. If we can start with this, then we can get the ball rolling to start addressing some bigger issues.”

It caught fire, attracting more than 10,000 signatures and culminated in meetings with government officials and, months after, confirmation that Nelson would be removed in November 2020 and relocated to a museum.



The Nelson statue on the back of a vehicle after it was taken down.
Photograph: Senator Crystal Haynes/Reuters

Some objected, including among the more than 90% of the population with African heritage, urging him to not to meddle with the past, Downes says. “They were saying, ‘Why do you want to move this thing that has been there from before you were even born? Have some respect for your history.’ I’m, like, 10 years from now, what I do today is going to be our history as well,” he says.

At the ceremony to mark the removal of the statue, Barbados' prime minister, Mia Mottley, called the tribute to the hero of Trafalgar, "an assertion of power, of dominance". She held her phone to the crowd, telling them her screensaver was the reggae artist Bob Marley, "to remind me always that the mission of our generation is the mental emancipation of our people".

In the ruptures of the year, Mottley appeared to sense an opportunity. The same day the statue was dislodged, her government announced that, in a year's time, Barbados would remove the queen as head of state and elect its own president.



People relax outside restaurants in Bridgetown on 17 November.
Photograph: Joe Raedle/Getty Images

Monarchists have worried for years that the end of the reign of Elizabeth Windsor may trigger a new wave of former colonies to seek native heads of state. Barbados suggests that threat, at least in the Caribbean, may have arrived in her diamond jubilee years instead, as a conviction stirring in the minds of some of her youngest generation of subjects.

Asked what the crown means to him, Downes is clear. "It signifies a time when people who looked like me ... were almost considered just a part in

the process of generating wealth,” he says. “Humanity was not considered. Civil rights were not considered.”

At sundown, before the cars on the nearby highway switch on their lights, the view from the top of the slope of the Newton Slave Burial Ground appears much as it may have three hundred years ago. The stone chimney of the plantation’s boiling house still stands. There is still the sea on the horizon and bristling pastures of sugar cane in every direction.

The burial site, too, is still an open field, but for the park benches recently installed at its edges, and rows of bougainvillea and crotons lining the perimeter. They are freshly planted, some still seedlings, and dwarfed by the surrounding cane fields, but growing.

The map in this article was amended on 30 November 2021 to add detail about the dispute over the British Indian Ocean Territory/Chagos Islands.

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Byelections

‘Someone needs a kick up the butt’: Bexley voters consider Tories’ record



Labour’s campaign in Sidcup. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

[Aubrey Allegretti](#)

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Mon 29 Nov 2021 01.00 EST

Boris Johnson’s popularity dip may be such that Tory voters in Old Bexley and Sidcup brand the prime minister a “blithering idiot” and question his qualities as a leader, but [Labour](#) still faces an uphill battle to win the seat in Thursday’s by-election.

The message Labour’s challenger, Daniel Francis, was selling to waverers who backed the [Conservatives](#) in 2019 was that the result was “not going to change the government, but it is a chance to send a message”.

He admitted it would be an “enormous challenge” to overturn the 19,000 majority earned by James Brokenshire, who [died from cancer at the age of 53 last month](#).

“That takes a lot of different dynamics to happen – of Tories staying at home, Tories switching, movement between lots of other parties,” Francis said. “We’re in it to try and do that.”

He stressed that some people who deserted Labour under Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership were “looking at the party again”, but confessed there was “still work to do” to persuade them to vote for it.



Daniel Francis talks to residents in Sidcup. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

The contest comes at a tricky time for Johnson, following criticism of his handling of sleaze scandals, a fall for the Conservatives in the national polls and pressure from Tory MPs who are desperately urging him to tighten up his act.

With less than a week until the first in a series of three – possibly four – byelections, voters in the south London suburban seat are considering what kind of message they should send.

Sue Buckley, a retired Sidcup resident, said she would “love Boris to sort himself out” and “might vote Labour”. However her criticisms extended to wider frustrations with the government. “Someone needs a kick up the butt,” she said. “I don’t believe them any more. They backtrack a lot.”

A few roads over, a man who did not want to give his name said he normally voted Conservative. However he had been struck by the prime minister’s rambling speech to the Confederation of British Industry earlier in the week, and called him a “blithering idiot”.

Francis claimed the issue of sleaze and Johnson’s handling of it had grown recently.

“The campaign’s changed as we’ve gone on,” he said, recounting a conversation with a Tory-voting nurse who complained to him about MPs with second jobs not having enough time to resolve NHS staffing shortages. He also recalled a pensioner who said she had never voted for Labour, but who was “so concerned about the prime minister’s behaviour that she’s already voted for me – with her postal vote”.

Francis even said fellow parents at the school gates who usually voted Conservative had a part in persuading him to stand.

Labour supporters who spoke to the Guardian after being canvassed by Francis spoke highly of their former MP. Two, Alison and Ben Page, called Brokenshire “well-liked”, but voiced hopes Labour would perform better against a different Tory candidate. “He might have a chance this time, because people were voting for [Brokenshire],” they said.

But to get over the line, Francis also needs to sweep up support from other leftwing parties. Several people who said they voted Green suggested they would not switch their vote.

Francis was buoyant in his belief that the animosity some voters had against Labour at the last election was dissipating under Keir Starmer’s leadership, even if this did not mean a win for him. “I hope that the result shows that Labour is moving back in the right direction,” he added.

Francis has been supported with visits from around half a dozen of the shadow cabinet, while Louie French, the Conservatives' candidate, has been joined for flyering and door-knocking sessions by senior cabinet ministers including Johnson, the chancellor, Rishi Sunak, and the deputy prime minister, Dominic Raab.

French's team did not respond to requests for an interview. There are 11 candidates in total standing in the byelection on 2 December.

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A new start after 60: ‘I lost weight, then lost myself – until I became a burlesque dancer’



Burlesque performer Marilyn Bersey, 74, whose stage name is Foxy La Mer, at her home in Ventnor, Isle of Wight. Photograph: Peter Flude/The Guardian

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When Marilyn Bersey, 74, stands on stage and removes her last piece of clothing to reveal her nipple tassels, she triggers the pyrotechnics. From the audience there is “the admiration, the affirmation, the claps, the whoops, the cheers”. Well, she explains: “When I retired, I promised myself I wouldn’t be one of those pensioners who sit and knit.”

Becoming a burlesque performer may seem an extreme form of resistance to this stereotype, but Bersey, who lives in warden-assisted accommodation in Ventnor on the Isle of Wight, had finally stabilised a huge weight loss. At the same time, she was adjusting to life without her second husband, whom she had cared for through Parkinson’s disease. She was searching for a form of exercise and self-expression that would fit the new shape of her life.

Bersey was 70 when she saw the advert for a local [burlesque group](#). “I thought: ‘That sounds a bit risqué. I wonder if I could do it?’” She phoned the instructor, who said: “It’s for any age, any body size.” Bersey “just loved it from the word go. Routines, getting your leg over the back of chairs. I thought: ‘What’s this feeling I’ve got?’ I felt really glamorous and I felt really sexy.”

Bersey has always loved to perform, but burlesque felt different. In her amateur dramatic group and then in four years at a Manchester drama school, she had never auditioned for a leading role. “It was common knowledge that Marilyn would be the comedy part. That’s what I did. I was always the fool. I think the accolade I got from an audience was the love that I never got at home ... But I always wanted to be the leading lady. I’ve always felt inside there was a glamorous person.”

Even if others didn’t see her that way. “Picture a fat kid with glasses,” she says of herself as a child. Her weight rose with her age – 15st at 15, 18st at 18. One day at school in Radcliffe, Lancashire, she was bullied by a girl who poured salt from her crisps into Bersey’s hair.

Bersey's mother took her to the doctor, who prescribed slimming tablets. Her weight crashed by 5st. But after a withdrawal period, it rose again, and she yo-yoed all the way through her first marriage, two children, into her early 40s.

"My childhood was not a good time. I'd hide behind comedy. I'd make a fool of myself so it didn't hurt as much when people bullied me," she realises now.

Bersey's late mother had yearned for a son. But after Bersey was born, she needed a hysterectomy. The sense of loss heavily tinged Bersey's childhood. "She always said: 'Oh, you'll never amount to much. If you'd have been a boy you'd have done this. If you'd have been a boy, you'd have loved me more ...' Chip, chip, chip."

Having previously worked as a cook and swimming instructor, Bersey later trained in therapeutic arts and psychodrama, perhaps hoping to understand her mother. "Now I can see where it's come from."

In her mid-40s, shortly before she met her second husband, something changed for Bersey. She lost weight gradually through Slimming World until, in 2013, at the age of 66, her loss reached 6st 7lb and she "called target". But when her second husband died the following year after a long illness, Bersey realised: "I had lost myself. I was no longer anyone's mother – I was, but not needed. I was nobody's wife. I was nobody's daughter. Who's Marilyn?"

Burlesque has given her an answer. "I know exactly who Marilyn is now," she says. "She's Foxy La Mer."

Bersey's bedroom "looks like a boudoir": wigs, feather boa, Hollywood mirror. She doesn't stop to wonder what her mother would think. But her son, an electrician, does her pyrotechnics; her daughter has seen her perform.

Her "burlesque granny" and Ghostbuster-themed routines rely on comedy. Is she still hiding behind those tassels? "Probably," she says, before deciding: "I don't think I feel I am hiding."

Regardless, she feels sexier than she has ever felt. “And I’ve got the confidence to accept that’s how I’m feeling ... Who’s there to tell me that I can’t feel like that in old age?”

- [Tell us: has your life taken a new direction after the age of 60?](#)
-

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Covid live news: UK battles new virus variant as Omicron is detected around the world – as it happened

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Coronavirus

Nursing unions around world call for UN action on Covid vaccine patents



A healthcare worker in Houghton, Johannesburg receives syringes filled with Covid vaccine. Photograph: Sumaya Hisham/Reuters

*[Peter Walker](#) Political correspondent
[@peterwalker99](#)*

Mon 29 Nov 2021 01.00 EST

Nursing unions in 28 countries have filed a formal appeal with the [United Nations](#) over the refusal of the UK, EU and others to temporarily waive patents for Covid vaccines, saying this has cost huge numbers of lives in developing nations.

The letter, sent on Monday on behalf of unions representing more than 2.5 million healthcare workers, said staff have witnessed at first hand the

“staggering numbers of deaths and the immense suffering caused by political inaction”.

The refusal of some countries to budge on rules about intellectual property rights for vaccines had contributed to a “vaccine apartheid” in which richer nations had secured at least 7bn doses, while lower-income nations had about 300m, it argued.

Such a distribution was not only “grossly unjust”, the letter said, but the rampant transmission of Covid in developing nations also increased the risk of new variants emerging, such as Omicron, first identified this week in South Africa and which has prompted the UK and other nations to [tighten travel restrictions and other rules](#).

South Africa, along with India, has been pressing the World Trade Organization (WTO) to help improve access to vaccines by waiving the multinational [Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights](#) (Trips) agreement.

A temporary waiver on Trips provisions for Covid vaccines would, supporters say, allow them to be manufactured more widely, improving global distribution. On Friday, the US president, Joe Biden, [called for](#) WTO members to take this step following the emergence of the Omicron variant.

However, other countries have resisted. The letter to the UN – coordinated by the healthcare umbrella organisation Global Nurses United, and Progressive International, a collection of leftwing parties, movements and unions – cited what it called an “immediate threat to people’s right to health” from the EU, UK, Norway, Switzerland and Singapore.

It said that at least 115,000 medical and healthcare staff around the world have died as a result of Covid, and that while 40% on average have been fully vaccinated, in Africa and the western Pacific the figure is lower than one in 10.

“As frontline workers, we are well placed to testify against the violation of the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of

physical and mental health because of the impact of a delayed Covid-19 Trips waiver,” the letter warned.

It was sent to Tlaleng Mofokeng, a South African doctor and health campaigner who is the UN’s special rapporteur on physical and mental health, and has the power to launch an investigation under the UN’s human rights council.

Mofokeng said the demand for a patent waiver “is one I share”. The role that health workers have played during the pandemic “provides them with moral authority” over the issue, she added.

In addition to South Africa and India, the call comes from unions representing nurses and healthcare staff in the US, Ireland, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Costa Rica, Curacao, the Dominican Republic, Greece, Guatemala, Honduras, Israel, Italy, Kenya, Malawi, New Zealand, Paraguay, the Philippines, Portugal, Rwanda, South Korea, Spain, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Uganda and Uruguay.

Deborah Burger, co-president of the National Nurses United union in the US, said the unequal distribution of vaccines and the resultant likelihood of new Covid variants “poses a dire risk to all people around the world”.

Shirley Marshal Diaz Morales, the vice-president of Brazil’s Federação Nacional dos Enfermeiros union, said: “It is way past time for the governments of the world to prioritise the health of the people over the profits of multinational corporations by approving the vaccine waiver.”

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Coronavirus

Where has Omicron spread, and why are scientists so concerned?



The UK has added six countries to its 'red list', and from 1 December, only fully vaccinated Brits will be allowed into Spain. Photograph: Hollie Adams/Getty Images

[Linda Geddes](#)

Sun 28 Nov 2021 11.16 EST

Where has Omicron been detected so far?

Since the announcement of the first cases in [South Africa](#), Botswana and Hong Kong earlier this week, additional cases have been reported in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Czech Republic, Australia and the UK. All of these cases were in individuals who had recently arrived from South Africa, Mozambique or Egypt.

Dutch authorities have also been sequencing samples from 61 passengers who arrived in Amsterdam from South Africa on Friday and tested positive for Covid-19. Of these, 13 have been identified as Omicron cases.

How many UK cases have been identified, and where are they?

So far, the UK has identified three cases, two in Nottingham and Brentwood, Essex, which involved travel connections with South Africa, and a further case of an individual who was visiting the UK. Contact tracing and targeted testing at locations where these individuals were likely to have been infectious is currently under way, in order to establish further likely contacts and cases. All positive cases will undergo further genome sequencing to identify whether or not they are infected with the Omicron variant.

According to new temporary and precautionary [measures](#) set out by Boris Johnson on Saturday, all contacts of suspected Omicron cases must self-isolate, regardless of their vaccination status.

Why are we so concerned about this variant?

The Omicron variant has a large number of mutations compared with previous variants, more than 30 of which are in the spike protein – the key used by the virus to enter our body's cells. Such a dramatic change has raised concerns that the antibodies from previous infections or vaccination may no longer be well matched, although it's likely that some residual immunity, for example from T-cells, will remain.

Some of the same mutations have been seen in other partially vaccine-resistant variants, such as Beta and Gamma, although Omicron contains many additional mutations. Purely based on this list of mutations, [scientists anticipate](#) that the virus will be more likely to infect – or reinfect – people who have immunity to earlier variants. These are theoretical predictions, though, and studies are rapidly being conducted to test how effectively antibodies neutralise Omicron.

Also of concern is how rapidly Omicron appears to have spread within South Africa, where there has been a [surge of cases](#) in the past two weeks. More than 80% of these were from Gauteng province, and preliminary analysis suggests Omicron has rapidly become the dominant strain. There is a chance this is a statistical blip linked to a super-spreader event, but the data has triggered enough concern for precautionary measures.

Which countries have been added to the UK's travel "red list"?

From 4pm on Sunday, passengers arriving in England from South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho, Eswatini, Zimbabwe and Namibia will be required to book and pay for a government-approved hotel quarantine facility for 10 days. Those who have arrived since midday on Friday but before this deadline must quarantine at home for 10 days and take NHS PCR tests on days two and eight, even if they already have a booking for a lateral flow test.

The government has also added to the requirements for travellers from other countries, so all international arrivals must take a PCR test by the end of the second day after their arrival, and self-isolate until they have a negative result.

Which countries have introduced travel bans on UK passengers?

Israel has responded to the emergence of Omicron by banning all foreigners from entering the country for 14 days. Switzerland has imposed a 10-day quarantine on anyone arriving from the UK, regardless of their vaccination status. The same applies to travellers from the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Egypt and Malawi.

Spain has also imposed restrictions on UK passengers: only those who have been fully vaccinated will be allowed in from 1 December. Previously, anyone could enter if they could show a negative PCR test taken within 72 hours before arrival.

What other rules have been brought in to contain Omicron's spread?

Besides the new travel measures and the requirement for contacts of suspected Omicron cases to self-isolate, regardless of their vaccination status, face coverings will be made compulsory in shops and on public transport in England from Tuesday, bringing it closer in line with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Hospitality settings such as pubs and restaurants will be exempt from the change. The new measures will be reviewed in three weeks' time, the prime minister has said.

Is there any difference in the symptoms people are reporting?

According to Dr Angelique Coetzee, who runs a private practice in Pretoria, South Africa, the Omicron patients she has seen have presented with relatively mild symptoms, and none of the loss of taste or smell typically associated with Covid-19. Instead, they have had reported unusual symptoms, such as intense fatigue and a high pulse rate. However, it is too soon to know whether these anecdotal reports will be true of everyone who is infected with Omicron.

How could it play out in the coming weeks?

Within the next month, we should have a far better idea of how contagious Omicron is, and whether or not it is associated with more severe disease. We should also know the extent to which it has been contained, or if it has spread more widely, as is expected by many scientists. Perhaps most important will be the results of those ongoing experiments to test how effectively antibodies neutralise the new variant. Real-world data on reinfection rates will also give a clearer indication of the extent of any change in immunity resistance. Until all this data is available, it makes sense to remain cautious and reimpose some restrictions to limit Omicron's spread.

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[Australian Open](#)

Novak Djokovic likely to skip Australian Open over vaccine mandate, says father



Serbia's Novak Djokovic has not disclosed his vaccination status, putting his appearances at the Australian Open in doubt. Photograph: Leonhard Föger/Reuters

Reuters

Sun 28 Nov 2021 23.23 EST

Novak Djokovic is unlikely to play at the [Australian Open](#) if rules on Covid-19 vaccinations are not relaxed, the world No 1's father, Srdjan Djokovic, said.

Organisers of the year's first grand slam have said that all players will have to be vaccinated to take part.

Djokovic has so far declined to disclose whether he is vaccinated and his father told Serbia's TV Prva that governing body [Tennis](#) Australia's stance on players being vaccinated was tantamount to "blackmail".

"As far as vaccines and non-vaccines are concerned, it is the personal right of each of us whether we will be vaccinated or not. No one has the right to enter into our intimacy," news website B92 quoted Srdjan as saying.

"Under these blackmails and conditions, [Djokovic] probably won't [play]. I wouldn't do that. And he's my son, so you decide for yourself."

Djokovic has won nine grand slam titles at Melbourne Park, including this year's tournament, and shares the record of 20 men's grand slam titles with Roger Federer and Rafa Nadal.

Nadal has confirmed he will play at Melbourne Park in January but Federer will miss the tournament as he recovers from another knee surgery.

The Australian Open begins on 17 January.

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2021.11.29 - Opinion

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Opinion**Immigration and asylum**

Migrants are told they must earn a place in Britain. But no one should have to

[Nesrine Malik](#)



Refugees on the outskirts of Calais, France in an area where around 1,800 people are living outside in hopes of crossing the Channel, November 2021.
Photograph: Kiran Ridley/Getty Images

Mon 29 Nov 2021 01.00 EST

How much are you worth? I don't mean what is the sum of your financial assets. I mean, as a human, if you had to come up with some formula to determine what your value is, how would you go about it? If that is too difficult, let me rephrase the question to make it more specific. Who values you? Who knows, loves and cares for you? Who seeks your company, who would miss it, whose lives would be poorer for your absence?

The answer is probably everyone whose relationship to you is not transactional, whose affection for you is unconditional, for whom you are unique and irreplaceable. All other roles we have, as employees, consumers, taxpayers, are impersonal. We don't think of ourselves as units whose value is derived from making a measurable contribution to the economy. We do not wake up in the morning and congratulate ourselves for contributing to our country's GDP.

Similarly, if we fall on hard times, we do not personally berate ourselves for being a net drag on the economy. Our sense of self is shaped not by calculations of what we put in and what we take out from some common pot of goods and services, but by other people, and the rich and enriching relationships we form with them.

Our entire immigration system and approach towards outsiders is based on reversing this definition of worth. People who are trying to enter the UK are not valued for this sort of humanity, like us, but instead regarded as dud units of economic drag. Their entry to this country becomes a matter of what they will take out and consume, what resources they will take away from the rest of us and even how their cultural influences will dilute and compromise our own. When they drown trying to make it to our shores, we don't blame their deaths on the fact that we have not set up safe routes, forcing them to carry their children in toy inflatables across the Channel. We instead enforce the cruel logic of borders and entitlement.

There has to be a system, you see. Those who are coming here merely to exercise needs, no matter how urgent those needs are, rather than contribute something, should be kept out. A place in the UK and the high value of life apportioned within this country has to be earned, rather than given away like alms to whoever asks.

Here I ask you another question. Have you earned that place? Did you, at any point, have to go through a series of obstacles, near-death experiences, homelessness and loyalty tests to win your place at the top of the human food chain? Did you, when you conducted that exercise to figure out your worth in the market of lives, believe that you have worked hard to win the affection and dedication of those to whom you are important, or that you are

simply owed it because that's what people do – love and take care of each other?

The truth is nobody wins their place in the UK; for most people it is the result of luck and circumstance, and they have no more right to ownership of it than the people risking their lives to get here. If anything, those people are working hard for that place, rather than simply being born into it. Borders aren't accidents – but being born within them is an accident. Your entire life is an accident, a random luck of the draw. You do not deserve to be here, any more than anyone else deserves not to be here.

These are obvious, almost banal observations. But many will resist them. Even if they acknowledge their truth, many will feel an urge to argue against them. That is because two large political constructions have dominated our way of thinking for so long, presented as facts and not choices – these accidental borders must be enforced as strictly as possible, and we, as individuals in free-market societies, are the sole architects of our own prosperity. These two lies allow wealth to accrue in private hands and ensure that as little of it is shared as possible, whether through higher taxes, more open borders or increased public spending.

If you become convinced that you have won your place on this earth through hard graft, then you are more likely to support policies and economic ideologies that facilitate the hoarding of resources. It is harder to part with what you have when you believe that those who are in need of it had the same shot as you but simply didn't pull their weight. In the UK, we have perfected a framing whereby the helpless are portrayed as feckless. Britain has made a national sport of condemning immigrants, single mothers, people on benefits – an entire cast of characters who dared to be born in need. They support a national delusion of perfect meritocracy, of deserves and deserve-nots, which in turn sustains our closed borders, purses and hearts.

This is why people shrug and move on when others die in the cold waters of the Channel. This is why nothing changes. This is why we fail to understand how our entire history as a species has been shaped by the inevitability and necessity of the movement of people. The only thing that is not an accident is that if you go far back enough, everyone is born where they are because

someone in their lineage, at some point, deliberately moved to find a safer place for their progeny. They gave their descendants better odds. The only decent thing to do is spread those winnings around.

- Nesrine Malik is a Guardian columnist
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OpinionPolitics

Sleaze is just a symptom – democratic politics in the UK is dying

[Alan Finlayson](#)



‘Today’s sleaze bears the stamp of a leader whose temperament is at odds with public service.’ Boris Johnson arrives at the Lord Mayor’s banquet, Guildhall, London, 15 November. Photograph: Leon Neal/Getty Images

Mon 29 Nov 2021 03.00 EST

Though fears of Covid-19 are spiking once again, this seems to be a comforting moment for the Labour party. After a disastrous few weeks for the ruling party, it seems as though politics is returning to “normal”: sleazy Tories [are being sleazy](#), reneging on commitments to the “red wall”, and the opposition is [sneaking ahead](#) in the polls. But flashbacks to the mid-90s are, in reality, delusions. What most hurt the Tories then was that sleaze came to symbolise a decaying, patrician regime that, Labour argued, must give way to a new political generation. Johnson is a big, tempting and sometimes easy

target. But our problems are not reducible to the moral failings of one individual. The current state of British politics – with an “incompetent” and “corrupt” administration at its centre – is symptomatic of a British state in which democratic politics is failing.

To understand the depths of the problem, we can start by recognising that democracy isn’t just about voting. It names a much wider political and social system. People will be interested in politics – and more likely to see it as legitimate – if they think it cares about their interests. Large and active political parties circulate ideas, arguments and experiences between the centre and the periphery of power. So too do membership organisations: trade unions, business associations, consumer groups, campaign organisations, charities, churches. Through these, citizens identify the causes and interests they have in common and see them represented in their politics.

This is not how British politics works any more. Parties do not closely engage with a mass membership, and are not attached to stable social interests. The Conservatives’ coalition is a protean ragbag of Thatcherite revenants, self-caricaturing traditionalists and anti-political culture warriors; Labour’s electoral strategy is to divest itself of obligations to members and of connections with clearly defined interests. Advocacy, charitable and campaign groups have become highly professionalised, their personnel sometimes taking on government positions. Public political engagement is intense but unstructured. Triggered by terrible events, and catalysed by social media, we swarm around issues – posting, petitioning and protesting. But, disconnected from civic institutions and with nowhere to go, energy dissipates rapidly, leaving only a bitter residue of resentment.

In this “post-democracy”, governments give up the complex business of brokering between differing wants. Instead, a few people at the centre – advisers, lobbying consultants and public affairs professionals – make policy, leaving a void between people and politics, which governments try to bridge using tools of public opinion management and behavioural change. But this is not enough. And so, political loyalties – within parties, between voters and parties, and between citizens and government – come to rest on personalised promises of reward or punishment: the main reason to vote Conservative isn’t ideological, but because your constituency might win a prize.

The political scientist [Chris Hanretty](#) found that being in a Conservative ultra-marginal made places more likely to receive money from the Towns Fund by 45 percentage points. We learned from the budget that if you want your town [swimming pool refurbished](#), you shouldn't campaign for your local council to get it done, but have the chancellor deliver it personally. Deeper down, people have learned that if you keep on good terms with the government you'll drive in the [VIP lane](#) to government contracts (but be critical and you may get "[cold shouldered](#)"). Such a political culture changes what an MP is, from a representative of constituents to a professional conduit between private interests (blocks of voters, personal acquaintances, the highest bidder) and the state. This is the context in which we need to understand the recent corruption scandals.

You may object: haven't governments always acted like this in some way? What's wrong if people really do get the swimming pool they need? But there is a world of difference between people organising to make demands (becoming part of a process through which interests are brokered, agreement reached) and a government dispensing courtly favours according to its immediate interests. "Clientelism" (receiving benefits in return for political support) is not citizenship. It widens the gap between people and their politics. Rather than meaningfully involve us in the democratic process, the government has only to know – from polling, market research and social media sentiment analysis – what to offer to enough social segments, in the right places, to remain in power. This means it becomes incapable of addressing long-term problems. It has no obligation to work with populations to address fundamental challenges (the climate crisis, inequality, infrastructural decay) and no incentive to overcome resistance from clients demanding that their self-interest be satisfied. Under such a regime, things don't rapidly fall apart. Uncared for, they slowly become more threadbare. The public realm is reduced to an endless queue of ambulances for which no doctor waits.

Furthermore, as is clear with the Johnson regime, this creates a fateful political dynamic. To remain in favour with its supporters (voters, donors, second employers) the government needs continuously to reward them. Whatever gets in the way of making ad hoc decisions – constitutional rules or independent overseers – is an obstacle to be overcome. Lots of regimes are clientelist because they are authoritarian and have no other support; ours

is becoming more authoritarian because it is clientelist. As the constitutional expert [Meg Russell observes](#), ignoring independent oversight is a hallmark of this government: marginalising the Commons; trying to overturn the parliamentary commissioner for standards; ignoring breaches of the ministerial code; weakening the [electoral commission](#). These are not deviations but steps in a process of making it easier for centralised administration to direct resources to where political calculation deems it necessary.

Today's sleaze bears the stamp of a leader whose temperament is at odds with public service. But it is not out of tune with how our politics works now. Johnson is a creature of this degraded democracy: he is an exemplar of social-media celebrity politics supported by a fandom, and sellotaped into a network of personal favours and obligations. Labour's leadership has promised a constitutional commission to be led by Gordon Brown and made positive noises about devolving power, yet ignored members' overwhelming [support for electoral reform](#) (which would break the closed cartel of clientelist parliamentarism) and expressed hostility to sharing power. Doubtless these issues don't poll well and the party thinks it wiser to demonstrate greater competence at giving out favours. But in so doing it misses a chance that its predecessors would have seized, to put itself at the centre of demands for a better democratic politics, fit for the 21st century.

- Alan Finlayson is professor of political and social theory at the University of East Anglia

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OpinionCoronavirus

Scientists sharing Omicron data were heroic. Let's ensure they don't regret it

[Jeffrey Barrett](#)



Illustration by Dom McKenzie.

Sun 28 Nov 2021 04.00 EST

One of the positive experiences during two years of pandemic gloom has been the speed of scientific progress in understanding and treating Covid. Many effective vaccines were launched in less than a year and rapid large-scale trials found a cheap and effective drug, dexamethasone, that [saved thousands of lives](#).

The global scientific community has also carried out “genomic surveillance” – sequencing the genome of the virus to track how it evolves and spreads at an unprecedented level: the public genome database has more than 5.5m genomes. The great value of that genomic surveillance, underpinned by a commitment to rapid and open sharing of the data by all countries in near-

real time, has been seen in the last few days as we've learned of the Covid variant called [Omicron](#).

The surveillance requires a remarkable amount of cooperation between scientists to build compatible laboratory protocols, software systems and databases. Many of these scientists are not directly paid for this work and do it in addition to their existing jobs. They are motivated by a belief that sharing data relevant to public health, especially in a pandemic, can help speed up scientific understanding, aid in decision-making and contribute to the next generation of medicines.

This commitment to rapid data sharing has deep roots in genomics. At a 1996 summit in Bermuda, the leaders of the Human Genome Project established a set of principles to release a new DNA sequence to public databases within 24 hours. This approach departed from the established convention that experimental data only needed to be released when a study was published, months or years later. Sir John Sulston, founding director of the Wellcome Sanger Institute, said: “All of this [genome data] should be in the public domain... I think we need a public social welfare attitude to the use of this information.”

That attitude now prevails around the world, as evidenced by the rapid sharing of more than 1m Sars-CoV-2 sequences by the Sanger Institute since March 2020.

On 23 November, scientists in Botswana uploaded 99 Sars-CoV-2 genome sequences to this database. Like most submissions that day, nearly all the sequences were the dominant Delta variant. But three of them looked different from anything seen before.

Later the same day, an independent team in South [Africa](#) uploaded seven nearly identical genomes. These teams noticed that the new variant contained an eye-watering number of mutations in the part of the virus's genome that encodes the spike protein, which it uses to infect human cells. Most concerningly, nearly half of these mutations had previously been seen in the earlier variants of concern (Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta) or predicted in laboratory experiments to increase the virus's ability to latch on to human

cells. They notified health authorities of their concerns and began an immediate investigation into how widespread this new variant might be.

While these scientists worked around the clock, the fact that they had shared the sequences with the world as part of their routine process, before they even knew what they were, meant that other scientists, thousands of miles away, could study them as well. Within just a few hours of the sequences being shared, a post was made on the pango designation forum, a corner of the internet where virus genome experts discuss new sequences and assign name that makes it easier to refer to specific parts of the Sars-CoV-2 family trees.

The mutations in the new variant also alarmed the international scientists. It was quickly dubbed B.1.1.529 and prioritised for further study. Once additional evidence gathered by the local teams in South Africa had been presented, the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) made it the fifth variant of concern, Omicron. Just 72 hours had passed since the original discovery.

The pandemic has emphasised that we are a single global community, and our policy responses must reflect that reality

The scientists who sounded the alarm because they are committed to the moral imperative of rapid data sharing knew that in the midst of the pandemic it would have consequences. Tullio de Oliveira, one of the leaders of the South African genomics team, announcing the variant, tweeted: “The world should provide support to South Africa and Africa and not discriminate or isolate it! By protecting and supporting it, we will protect the world!”

By the next day, dozens of countries, [including the UK](#), had announced [new travel restrictions](#) on countries in southern Africa. Some restrictions may have been unavoidable to buy time to understand this new threat, but travel bans come with serious consequences for people and economies in affected countries. Previously, they have delayed, but not prevented, the spread of new variants. There is some chance in this situation that they may be more effective, precisely because of the excellent work done to share information so rapidly.

Genomic surveillance in India when Delta appeared was less comprehensive and the seriousness of that new variant did not become apparent until weeks after it had been circulating widely, and exported around the world.

While scientists around the world are scrambling to understand Omicron, and national governments are making response plans, we must also find ways to reward the critical early warning provided by South Africa. Less than 25% of South Africans are fully vaccinated, and while that may be due to complicated reasons involving both supply and demand, it is not for us in the rest of the world to determine what would be most helpful. Countries with an abundance of vaccine doses and other resources should offer whatever is asked for by countries now at the front edge of the confrontation with Omicron.

The pandemic has emphasised that we are a single global community and our policy responses must reflect that reality. It would be a disaster if the global response to this heroically open science sent the message that the reward for such bravery is isolation.

Jeffrey Barrett is leading the Covid-19 genomics initiative at the Wellcome Sanger Institute

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OpinionHealth

Could the Omicron variant have been avoided? It could set back vaccine successes around the world

Meru Sheel



A newspaper poster in Pretoria, South Africa, with the news of the Omicron coronavirus variant. Photograph: Denis Farrell/AP

Sun 28 Nov 2021 21.06 EST

I am an epidemiologist working in global health, and have worked in the field of vaccines for nearly 15 years. While the scientific successes of Sars-CoV-2 vaccine development have been surreal, the inequity of the pandemic and access to vaccines has left me despondent.

As Australia reaches almost 90% coverage for two doses of Covid-19 vaccination, it's a success story worth celebrating. Covid-19 vaccination has already proved to be highly effective at dampening wide-scale community

transmission in settings such as [New South Wales](#), where a rapid rollout with high levels of first-dose coverage along with other public health measures helped with the bending of the curve.

But the vast majority of low- and middle-income countries have only vaccinated a small proportion of their population. An [analysis](#) suggests that while 66% of people in high-income countries are fully vaccinated, only 2.5% of the population in low-income countries are fully protected.

In many settings, even healthcare workers have not yet been vaccinated, making countries' frontline defence very weak. With more than 3.5 billion people in the world waiting for their first dose of the vaccine, many high-income countries are now introducing boosters or third doses for the entire population, along with paediatric vaccines.

The barriers to vaccinating people in low-income countries are largely due to supply issues, with only a small number of doses available to them. While there are other ongoing challenges such as cold chain low-temperature storage, distribution logistics, vaccine hesitancy and shortages of health workers to administer the vaccines in some settings, the largest barrier relates to dose shortage.

The world is hearing of the emergence of a new variant of concern, Omicron. While first detected in Gauteng, South Africa, the variant did not necessarily begin there. While it is still early days, [the WHO Technical Advisory Group on Sars-CoV-2 Virus Evolution](#) has raised alarms for several reasons. Early epidemiological data from cases in Gauteng – one of the most populated regions of South Africa, where the strain appears to spreading faster than other parts of the country – suggests that Omicron has a new combination of multiple mutations, including on the “S gene”, which produces the spike protein, and an apparent ability to outgrow the Delta variant.

Science tells us we could have avoided the emergence of this new variant of concern. Viral mutations are a part of natural selection and are common. When the virus enters a cell, it can make copies of itself that go off and infect other cells and then pass to another person.

Sometimes during this process of copying in non-immune persons, it may introduce an “error” or mutation, and at times these mutations can offer competitive advantage to the viruses to spread from one non-immune person to another.

But if a person is already immune (say from vaccination), then the virus cannot spread between people, preventing the emergence of new variants.

The emergence of each new variant of concern can have implications for our public health response measures, how we test for the strain and whether the current vaccines will work. The emergence of new variants that escape existing vaccines can set back Covid-19 vaccination successes significantly around the world.

Although it is too early to say if any of this holds true for Omicron, or if there are any “real” differences in characteristics in terms of its transmission, its ability to cause severe disease and if it will replace the Delta variant of Sars-CoV-2, it is a timely reminder that we need larger populations of the world to be vaccinated against Covid-19.

Vaccination is one of the best ways to avoid emergence of new variants.

For several months, experts in the field have advocated for greater vaccine equity across the world, ensuring that low-income countries have greater access to vaccines through increased supply through Covax, waivers of intellectual properties that hold the recipe for how vaccines are made, and greater manufacturing capacity in low- and middle-income countries.

Vaccinating the world’s population, especially those living in conditions of poverty who experience the worst impact of Covid-19 at the same pace as those in rich countries, is important for several reasons.

Firstly, it is more equitable and the ethical thing to do; secondly, economic estimates from the United Nations estimates suggest that low- and middle-income countries [will suffer losses of \\$12tn through to 2025](#); and thirdly, the scientific case for vaccinating the world is robust.

As we prepare to enter the third year of the pandemic, there is also significant impact on other health programs around the world, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, relating to measles, TB, HIV and several other routine health services, which can further cause greater severe impact on people living in poverty.

As countries embark on booster, adolescent and paediatric vaccination programs we need faster policy-level solutions that increase vaccine supplies in low- and middle-income countries.

The current approaches are not optimal.

- Dr Meru Sheel is a senior research fellow at the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population [Health](#) at the Australian National University
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This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/nov/29/could-the-omicron-variant-have-been-avoided-it-could-set-back-vaccine-successes-around-the-world>

[**Opinion**](#)[**Coronavirus**](#)

How bad will the Omicron Covid variant be in Britain? Three things will tell us

[Devi Sridhar](#)



A sign announces coronavirus checks ahead of the football match at the Etihad stadium in Manchester, November 2021. Photograph: Robbie Stephenson/JMP/Rex/Shutterstock

Sun 28 Nov 2021 10.40 EST

Omicron, the name of the [new Covid-19 variant](#) that is sending worrying signals from southern Africa, sounds like something from Transformers. It has caused panic across the world, among governments, the public and the stock markets. After adding a number of southern African countries to the red list, the UK government has reimposed mandatory masks in England [from Tuesday](#), and will require anyone travelling to the country from abroad to [take a PCR test](#). Omicron is probably the first variant to [have scientists](#)

worried since Delta became the predominant strain in every country last summer. But how bad is it? What does it mean for future lockdowns – and future deaths?

Scientists are waiting on three pieces of data before they will be able to tell what effect this new variant will have over the next six to 12 months. The first is how infectious Omicron is. Can it outcompete Delta? Earlier this year we saw another worrying variant, Beta, that luckily faded away as a result of a selective advantage in Delta that allowed it to transmit faster between people. Limited data from South Africa shows that Omicron is very infectious, but whether it will become the predominant strain remains to be seen.

The second thing scientists are waiting for is data showing the impact of this new variant on health outcomes – both in terms of hospitalisations and deaths. The reason governments impose lockdown measures is because hospitals fill up; limiting social mixing helps to slow the spread of the virus and reduce the impact on health services. In an optimistic scenario, Omicron may cause less severe disease and become more like the common cold. In a more realistic scenario, it could cause the same disease levels that we've seen with Alpha, Beta and Delta.

The third and most concerning piece of data is the potential for Omicron to erode the immunity afforded by vaccines. Crucially, this wouldn't necessarily mean that our current vaccines would stop working against Omicron. It would mean they would be less effective at stopping transmission – and, most worryingly, at stopping people from going into hospital and dying. This is based on a virological analysis of the [sequencing of Omicron's genome](#), and we don't yet know the implications it will have in the real world. Companies such as [BioNTech](#), which developed the Pfizer vaccine, are already trying to gauge the impact their vaccine will have on this variant.

So what does this mean for each of us? Right now, we need to continue to do all the things we should already be doing to get through the harsh winter months: getting vaccinated, and boosted, to protect ourselves; using the free home-testing kits to ensure we're not infecting others, whether in friends'

homes or in pubs and restaurants; wearing masks in crowded places such as public transport and shops; and being attentive to how many close contacts we have.

For governments, it means having to plan for several scenarios. The first (and best) would be that Omicron can't outcompete Delta, or results in milder forms of the disease, or vaccine effectiveness remains high. The worst would be that an updated vaccine is urgently required (scientists could theoretically deliver one in a matter of weeks), followed by a massive vaccination campaign to get this variant-specific booster out to populations as quickly as possible. Governments have learned that it's better to move earlier with precautionary measures rather than waiting and watching a crisis unfold.

Scientists are increasingly cast in the role of “bad guys”; we’re the ones who convey difficult messages and uncertainty to the public, and are transparent on what we know and don’t know. Right now, everyone just wants Covid to be over and normal life to resume. Yet “when will this end?” is the wrong question to be asking – a more appropriate one is: “How do we manage this infectious disease in a more effective way so we get back more of our normal life?”

Last winter was particularly bad. This winter will be bad, but not to the same degree. The hope is that by the spring, and definitely by next winter, we will be in a strong position to manage this disease through testing, vaccines and antiviral therapies. But, if nothing else, Omicron has shown that all humans on this planet are in the same boat (albeit in different cabins with differential access to vaccines), and the pandemic will only be over when it’s over in all parts of the world. Not just in Britain.

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

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Immigration and asylum

UK's 'double talk' on Channel crisis must stop, says French interior minister



France's interior minister Gérald Darmanin speaks at a press conference in Calais after a meeting with EU ministers responsible for immigration.
Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

[Kim Willsher](#) in Paris

Sun 28 Nov 2021 15.48 EST

The French interior minister, Gérald Darmanin, has said British ministers including his counterpart, [Priti Patel](#), should stop saying one thing in private while insulting his country in public if there is to be a solution to the crisis in the Channel.

In an interview with the Guardian, Darmanin strongly criticised what he called "double talk" coming out of London and said [France](#) was not a "vassal" of the UK.

“Relations are good when we speak in private. Every week I have my British counterpart on the telephone and when we have personal meetings and exchange messages we see the UK has a serious approach and we have things in common,” Darmanin said.

“Then as soon as it’s something said in public, in the House of Commons or on social media and the press, there’s a difference of tone that becomes strongly unfriendly … and is often different, even diametrically the opposite of what has been said in private.

“The more France is used as a punching bag for British domestic politics, and we hear provocative statements like ‘France has to take back all the immigrants’, the harder it becomes to find a solution. It’s not only insulting it’s totally unrealistic.”

Darmanin was speaking after France [convened a meeting of ministers](#) responsible for immigration from Germany, Holland, Belgium as well as the European commissioner for internal affairs. Representatives from the EU’s agency for law enforcement cooperation, Europol, and Frontex, the EU’s border management agency, were also invited to the hastily arranged summit in Calais on Sunday.

The meeting was called after [27 people died in the Channel on Wednesday](#), a tragedy that shocked both sides of the Channel and has sparked a blame game between London and Paris.

Patel’s [invitation](#) to the meeting was rescinded on Friday after Boris Johnson published a letter to Emmanuel Macron calling on France to do more to stop Channel crossings including allowing British forces to patrol French coastal areas – which France has refused citing concerns about sovereignty – and to accept refugees being returned.

Darmanin said he had “a cordial relationship based on trust” with Patel, but expressed growing French frustration at the mixed and contradictory messages heard from Boris Johnson’s government.

This frustration was voiced by Macron on Friday when he accused the UK of a lack of seriousness over the Channel crisis. The president was furious that Johnson had published a letter to him on [Twitter](#), calling on France to take back migrants and questioning the country's refusal to allow British forces to join patrols on France's northern coast.

Darmanin reiterated that frustration. "When it comes to the British government in general, it's very difficult to work in a calm manner. Relations are fine with ministers ... but unfortunately as soon as there's a camera or they're in parliament we seem to hear them say something very different," he said.

"I say again: France is not a subsidiary of the UK, we are a free and equal country with Great Britain and we want to be treated as such, treated as allies not vassals and not be hostages to British domestic politics."

He was incredulous at Patel's suggestions that Britain could send naval ships or forces to [turn back](#) refugee boats mid-Channel.

"We do not imagine for a single instant that Britain could just ignore all the international conventions and maritime law to put warships in the 30km between Britain and France to turn back boats when it will mean dozens of people, pregnant women, children, the elderly, who will die. We cannot imagine for one second that this could enter a British head," he said.

The question of people crossing from France to the UK has poisoned relations between London and Paris for decades. Tightened security around ferry ports and the Channel tunnel have driven refugees camped out along France's northern coast to increasingly desperate measures. French police tear up makeshift refugee camps, destroying tents and bussing people elsewhere in France where they are encouraged to apply for asylum in France. Within weeks, the majority return to the Calais area.

Darmanin repeated that France would not accept British forces in France.

"What would the British say if we suggested having French troops on the English coast? They would say, quite understandably, that they are a free

country and they want their sovereignty respected and we say the same thing. There's nothing extraordinary in that," he said.

"It's better that the British ask themselves why so many migrants want to go to the UK. This is first because the labour market of your country works in part with clandestine immigrants because in your country you can work and even pay taxes without having any identity papers or be in any kind of regular situation.

"If there was a change in the labour law in Britain tomorrow there would be a lot fewer migrants who would want to cross over. Second, unfortunately, the British government today no longer allows any legal way for people to access their territory as immigrants."

The UK government disputes Darmanin's characterisation of the UK labour market, saying people have to prove their immigration status to work or rent a property. A Whitehall source said: "We will this week have more talks with counterparts on how we can work together to resolve this Europe-wide crisis. Priti's nationality and borders bill is the first step in addressing the broken asylum system and the pull factors it creates."

Darmanin confirmed the [UK had paid France](#) €17m of the €67m (£57m) agreed in July to police its northern coast, but added: "Sometimes I read in the British press that you pay us to intervene, but this costs us €250m a year. Of course €67m helps, but it cost us a lot more."

The minister said he would be reporting to Macron on Monday and had a series of meetings scheduled for next week on the crisis and specifically how to clamp down on smuggling networks.

On the question of returning refugees in return for Britain accepting unaccompanied minors – a proposal Patel outlined in parliament last week – Darmanin said this would have to be agreed at European level.

"If we could send minors to the UK you think we would refuse? No, we would accompany them all the way. We are ready to consider minors going to the UK in return for migrants being returned to Belgium, France or

Germany or the Netherlands ... as long as it is one for one. ... The British say they want to return a number of migrants for one,” he said.

Darmanin said screaming headlines in the British press attacking French police and gendarmes were “insulting”.

“It’s an insult to France and the French police who risk their lives every day. It’s terrible to hear things like that from the English side because not only are we guarding the border for the English, we are suffering the political consequences of this decision.

“That’s enough. It has become extremely insulting. We have to stop the slogans, work seriously.”

Asked if he was planning to speak to Patel in the next few days, he replied: “There’s no meeting foreseen but she has my mobile number and I have hers. I tell you again, I respect her and know her well. All I ask is for the same respect from the UK so we can talk on the basis of equality and France is not the considered subservient to the UK.

“From the moment we are treated normally we can discuss things seriously and everyone will make an effort to try to understand and try to advance the discussion. At the moment we have the impression that only France is making an effort.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/nov/28/uk-s-double-talk-on-channel-crisis-must-stop-says-french-interior-minister>

[Lisa Nandy](#)

UK and France playing ‘blame game’ after Channel deaths, say Labour



Lisa Nandy said France and the UK needed to set aside differences and work together to solve the Channel crisis. Photograph: Anthony Harvey/REX/Shutterstock

*Peter Walker Political correspondent
@peterwalker99*

Sun 28 Nov 2021 10.48 EST

The UK and [France](#) are “engaging in a blame game” over people making perilous Channel crossings in small boats, Labour has said, rather than sitting down together to try to work out a way to prevent more deaths.

The diplomatic spat between the countries, which saw France disinvite [Priti Patel](#) from a [meeting of EU ministers in Calais](#) on Sunday, after Boris Johnson tweeted a letter on the issue to Emmanuel Macron before the

French president had received it, was “simply unconscionable”, Lisa Nandy said.

“France blames Britain, Britain blames France – the truth is that both governments are engaging in a blame game while children drown off their coastline,” the shadow foreign secretary told Sky’s Trevor Phillips on Sunday programme.

“It’s just simply unconscionable and any responsible government on either side of the Channel would set aside those differences and work together to deal with what is a collective shared problem that will only be solved together.”

France invited representatives from Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands and the European Commission to the meeting in Calais after [27 people hoping to claim asylum in the UK died last week](#).

While UK officials have held talks in France, Patel, the home secretary, was removed from plans after intense French anger at what they felt was provocative UK action in tweeting the letter.

Patel had separately spoken on Sunday to Kajsa Ollongren, the Dutch interior minister, UK officials say.

Speaking to Sky, Nandy castigated Patel and Johnson’s approach to liaising with France, and also called for policies to tackle the wider issues connected to illicit Channel crossings, such as a lack of safe routes to claim asylum in the UK.

“The government is writing open letters to the French that they are releasing via social media, calling on the French to do things that any responsible government would have already done – to get in place a mechanism across [Europe](#) to be able to return people to safe third countries they travel through, to agree safe and legal routes for people who have no obligations to come here,” she said.

“The asylum system across Europe and across the world has completely broken down. If you look at the countries that people are freeing from, it’s

Syria, it's Afghanistan, there are reasons why people are on the move and the world has been completely unable to come together to deal with that.

“One of the people on the boat that sank just a week ago was an Afghan soldier who said he had given up hope of being able to get to Britain through a legal route, because although the home secretary announced an expansion of their Afghan refugee settlement scheme, that scheme hasn’t even opened yet and that was three months ago.

“These routes simply don’t exist and they won’t exist for as long as the government continues to engage in a blame game with others and doesn’t do the hard yards of sitting down around a table and agreeing how we are going to tackle this together.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/nov/28/uk-and-france-playing-blame-game-after-channel-deaths-say-labour>

[Hong Kong](#)

Disney+ channel launches in Hong Kong, without the Simpsons Tiananmen Square episode



A photograph of the Disney+ television schedule in Hong Kong shows the Simpsons episode 12 missing from the listings. The episode shows a reference to the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. Photograph: Peter Parks/AFP/Getty Images

Agence France-Presse

Mon 29 Nov 2021 01.51 EST

An episode of the Simpsons in which the cartoon American family visit Tiananmen Square is absent from Disney's streaming channel in [Hong Kong](#), at a time when authorities are clamping down on dissent.

The missing episode adds to concerns that mainland-style censorship is becoming the norm in the international business hub, ensnaring global

streaming giants and other major tech companies.

The Hong Kong version of Disney+ started streaming this month and customers soon noticed that an episode of the Simpsons featuring China was absent.

Episode 12 of season 16, which first aired in 2005, features the family going to China to try to adopt a baby. They also visit Beijing's Tiananmen Square, the [site of a deadly 1989 crackdown against democracy protesters](#).

In the cartoon there is a sign in the square that reads “On this site, in 1989, nothing happened”, a satirical nod to China’s campaign to purge memories of what happened.

It is not clear whether Disney+ removed the episode or was ordered to by authorities.

The entertainment giant has not responded to requests for comment, nor has Hong Kong’s government.

When Disney+’s Hong Kong channel was checked on Monday, episodes 11 and 13 of season 16 were available but not 12.

Until recently Hong Kong boasted significant artistic and political freedoms compared to the mainland. But authorities are currently transforming the city in the wake of huge and often violent democracy protests two years ago.

Among the slew of measures are new censorship laws introduced this summer that forbid any broadcasts that might breach a broad national security law China imposed on the city last year.

Censors have since ordered directors to make cuts and refused permission for some films to be shown to the public.

Last week Hong Kong’s Beijing-appointed leader, Carrie Lam, vowed to “proactively plug loopholes” in the city’s internet and introduce “fake news” regulations.

Her comments have added to concerns that China's "Great Firewall" – a sprawling internet and news censorship regime – could be extended to Hong Kong.

Content that satirises China is still available on other streaming platforms in Hong Kong.

Netflix's Hong Kong channel is currently still showing Band in China, an episode of the cartoon series South Park.

In that episode, one of the characters ends up in a Chinese labour camp and much of the show lampoons the willingness of American brands to adhere to Chinese censorship rules in order to make money.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/29/disney-channel-launches-in-hong-kong-without-the-simpsons-tiananmen-square-episode>

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Ghislaine Maxwell

Ghislaine Maxwell ‘preyed on vulnerable young girls’, prosecutors say



Ghislaine Maxwell in 2013. She has pleaded not guilty on six counts related to her alleged involvement in the late financier’s sexual abuse of teen girls.
Photograph: Rick Bajornas/AP

[Victoria Bekiempis](#) in New York

Mon 29 Nov 2021 16.26 EST

In [Ghislaine Maxwell](#)’s child sex-trafficking trial, Manhattan federal prosecutors shared a simple, chilling message with jurors in their opening statement: “She knew what was going to happen to those girls.”

Maxwell “preyed on vulnerable young girls, manipulated them and served them up to be sexually abused” by Jeffrey [Epstein](#), said prosecutor Lara Pomerantz. “The defendant was trafficking kids for sex.

“Maxwell was Epstein’s best friend and right hand,” Pomerantz said of the late financier, who was arrested in July 2019 in relation to sexually abusing teen girls. “She was involved in every detail of Epstein’s life. The defendant and Epstein were partners in crime.

“She used the same excuse over and over to get the girls to touch Epstein – massage,” Pomerantz argued. “You’ll learn the cover of massage was the primary way the defendant and Epstein lured girls into sexual abuse.

“The defendant massaged Epstein in front of the girls, then encouraged the girls to massage Epstein,” she said. “But what was happening inside those massage rooms was not a massage – it was sexual abuse.

“Sometimes she was even in the room for the massages herself and sometimes, she touched the girls’ bodies,” Pomerantz continued. “And even when she was not in the room, make no mistake: she knew exactly what Epstein was going to do to those children when she sent them to him inside the massage rooms.”

Maxwell, 59 and the daughter of the late British press baron Robert Maxwell, has pleaded not guilty on six counts related to her alleged involvement in Epstein’s abuse of minors, some as young as 14 years old.

“When the defendant sent a 14-year-old girl [to] an adult man, she knew exactly what was going to happen,” Pomerantz said.

“She knew exactly what she was doing. She was dangerous,” Pomerantz also remarked. “She was setting young girls up to be molested by a predator.”

Bobbi Sternheim, Maxwell’s lead attorney, used an Old Testament flourish in arguing that Maxwell was getting punished for Epstein’s misdeeds.

“Ever since Eve was accused of tempting Adam for the apple, women have been blamed for the bad behavior of men, and women are often villainized and punished more than the men ever are,” Sternheim said in her opening statement. “The charges against [Ghislaine Maxwell](#) are for things that Jeffrey Epstein did.

“But she is not [Jeffrey Epstein](#). She is not like Jeffrey Epstein – and she is not like any of the other men, powerful men, moguls, media giants, who abuse women.”

The indictment cites four accusers – referred to as Minor Victim-1, Minor Victim-2, Minor Victim-3 and Minor Victim-4. Epstein killed himself in a Manhattan federal jail in August 2019, while [awaiting trial](#). Maxwell’s alleged crimes took place from 1994 to 2004, prosecutors have said.

In court on Monday, Maxwell wore a cream-colored sweater and black pants. When she first walked into the courtroom at about 8.30am local time, Maxwell lifted her eyebrows and acknowledged her sister, who was seated in the first row.

An Epstein accuser, [Sarah Ransome](#), arrived at the [courthouse](#) shortly before proceedings began, [telling reporters](#): “I never thought this day would come.”

During the lunch break, which came before opening statements, a group gathered outside the courthouse for a purported rally against sex trafficking, though the comments were largely conspiratorial.

A speaker, using a megaphone, said Epstein “didn’t kill himself”. One attendee sported a red-and-white cap, similar to those worn by supporters of Donald Trump, that said the same thing.

Some protesters set up a tent to facilitate the distribution of stickers, some of which expressed skepticism about Covid-19. One woman held a sign that read: “COVID IS NOT A PANDEMIC BUT A HUMAN TRAFFICKING” [issue], along with the words “Illegal Organ Harvesting”.

Authorities arrested Maxwell on 2 July 2020 at a secretive, expensive estate in the small New Hampshire town of Bradford.

Audrey Strauss, acting Manhattan US attorney at the time, contended that Maxwell “played a critical role in helping Epstein to identify, befriend and groom minor victims” and that “in some cases, Maxwell participated in the abuse”.

The Manhattan US attorney's office has also accused Maxwell of trying to cover up her involvement in Epstein's crimes by providing untrue information "under oath" during civil litigation.

That lawsuit was the defamation case which Virginia Giuffre, a longtime Epstein accuser, brought against Maxwell. Giuffre has claimed Maxwell and Epstein coerced her into sexual activity with Prince Andrew when she was 17.

Giuffre sued Maxwell, who called her a liar. Both Maxwell and the Duke of York maintain their innocence. Maxwell is charged with two counts related to the alleged lying. Those will be tried in a separate proceeding.

Prosecutors also called their first witness before trial ended for the day: Epstein's longtime pilot, Lawrence Paul Visoski Jr, who worked for him from 1991 to 2019. Visoski said Maxwell was about 30 years old when he met her in 1991, and that "we interacted quite often. She was on a lot of the flights."

Visoski said that Maxwell managed Epstein's households. Asked about the relationship between Epstein and Maxwell, he remarked: "I thought it was more personal than business."

Maxwell and Epstein's close contact went into the 2000s, Visoski said. It wasn't romantic per se, Visoski explained, but "couple-ish". Visoski didn't see the pair hold hands or kiss, he said.

Visoski's testimony resumes Tuesday morning.

- *Information and support for anyone affected by rape or sexual abuse issues is available from the following organisations. In the US, [Rainn](#) offers support on 800-656-4673. In the UK, [Rape Crisis](#) offers support on 0808 802 9999. In Australia, support is available at [1800Respect](#) (1800 737 732). Other international helplines can be found at [ibiblio.org/rcip/internl.html](#)*
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- [Live UK Covid: people ‘should avoid unnecessary socialising while Omicron threat remains unclear’](#)
- [Business live Markets fall as Moderna chief predicts existing vaccines will struggle with Omicron](#)
- [England As rules on mask wearing return, what exactly is the law?](#)

Coronavirus

Boris Johnson rejects health official's advice to reduce festive socialising



The prime minister made his comments after a visit to a London vaccination centre. Photograph: Paul Grover/AP

[Kevin Rawlinson](#), [Rowena Mason](#) and [Aubrey Allegretti](#)

Tue 30 Nov 2021 09.00 EST

Boris Johnson has rejected the idea that people should cancel Christmas parties and other festive events, after one of the UK's most senior health officials said people should cut down on socialising.

The prime minister said there was no need to strengthen the guidance on social contact, despite the cautionary message from the head of the UK Health Security Agency, Jenny Harries.

After visiting a vaccination centre, Johnson said there needed to be a "surge" in people getting booster shots and that the army would be brought in to

provide logistical support, but there would be no further change in advice “about how people should be living their lives”.

Harries had earlier urged people to reduce their social contact, even if only by a little, as fears grow that existing vaccines will prove less effective against the Omicron variant.

“Of course our behaviours in winter – and particularly around Christmas – we tend to socialise more, so I think all of those will need to be taken into account,” the former deputy chief medical officer for England told BBC Radio 4’s Today programme.

“So I think being careful, not socialising when we don’t particularly need to and particularly going and getting those booster jabs.”

Tory MPs were outraged by Harries’s suggestion, and the lockdown-sceptic backbenchers Desmond Swayne, Mark Harper and Steve Baker challenged it in the House of Commons. Baker said it “appears now that employed civil servants are no longer bound to policy” and that it was a “recipe for chaos”.

Pressed about whether people should cancel their Christmas parties, No 10 said Harries “gives advice to the government, she is not the government”.

Senior politicians are pressing ahead with Christmas drinks parties, and Johnson will continue to attend and hold receptions.

His official spokesman also made it clear that the government had no intention of moving to its “plan B” of working from home and introducing vaccine passports unless hospitals show signs of becoming overwhelmed.

Harries, however, appeared to suggest a lower bar for plan B measures based on a rising number of cases rather than hospital admissions.

She said advice from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage) had “shown that, if we have significant surges in Covid cases, then actually working from home is one of the key ones to implement”.

She said the number of Omicron cases identified in England remained low. “So it’s a very early stage for this, I think, but certainly, if we see surges, then working from home will be a good thing to do.”

Three more cases of the Omicron variant were identified in Scotland on Tuesday, taking the UK’s total to 14.

Harries spoke after the chief executive of the drugmaker Moderna said existing vaccines were unlikely to be as effective against Omicron as they had been against the Delta variant.

Stéphane Bancel told the [Financial Times](#): “I think it’s going to be a material drop. I just don’t know how much because we need to wait for the data. But all the scientists I’ve talked to … are like ‘this is not going to be good’.”

Bancel had earlier said on CNBC that there should be greater clarity on the efficacy of vaccines against Omicron in about two weeks’ time, and that it could take months to begin shipping a vaccine that would work against it.

Asked about the prospect of Christmas being cancelled, the Sage member Prof Paul Moss told Sky News: “I don’t think we need to worry too much about that at this stage … the measures that we got in place have a good chance of gaining some control here.”

The Labour MP Lisa Nandy said it was up to the government to save Christmas. She told Sky News: “The vast majority of people are doing what is asked of them – wearing masks, getting the booster jab, social distancing … People are trying their best, but there are some big holes in the government’s plans, particularly around travel.”

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Coronavirus

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Coronavirus

Covid: as rules on mask wearing in England return, what exactly is the law?



The new rule applies to shops, enclosed shopping centres, banks, short-term loan providers, post offices, and on public transport. All hospitality venues are currently exempt. Photograph: Leon Neal/Getty Images

[Jedidajah Otte](#)

Mon 29 Nov 2021 16.44 EST

As part of targeted measures to prevent the spread of the new Covid-19 variant [Omicron](#), from 4am on 30 November, people in England will be required by law to wear a face covering in certain places.

The measure will be introduced as a precaution while more information is gathered and assessed on the variant's transmissibility and any possible effect on Covid-19 vaccines, Downing Street said.

Face coverings are compulsory in shops and settings such as banks, post offices and hairdressers, as well as on public transport, unless individuals are exempt. Hospitality settings are excluded from the rules, except takeaways that do not offer consumption of food or drinks on the premises.

Boris Johnson said: “The measures taking effect today are proportionate and responsible, and will buy us time in the face of this new variant. Based on everything we know, our vaccines and boosters remain our best line of defence, so it is more important than ever that people come forward when eligible to get boosted.

“Not only will today’s steps help us slow down the variant’s spread, but they will help us protect each other and the gains we have all worked so hard for.”

The measures will be reviewed in three weeks.

Where you will have to wear a face covering

The new rule applies to:

- All public transport, including taxis and private hire vehicles, and transport hubs (airports, rail and tram stations and terminals, maritime ports and terminals, bus and coach stations and terminals)
- Shops and supermarkets and generally places that offer goods or services for retail sale or hire, enclosed shopping centres and indoor markets.
- Takeaways without space for consumption of food or drink on the premises.
- Premises providing personal care and beauty treatments such as hair salons, barbers, nail salons, massage centres, tattoo and piercing studios.
- Auction houses and retail galleries.

- Post offices.
- Banks, building societies, high-street solicitors and accountants, credit unions, short-term loan providers, savings clubs and money service businesses.
- Estate and lettings agents and retail travel agents.
- Pharmacies.
- Vets.

Masks must also be worn during driving lessons and driving tests.

Where you don't have to wear a face covering

All hospitality venues are exempt, including pubs, restaurants, cafes and canteens, bars, restaurants and bars in hotels or members' clubs, and shisha bars.

Also exempt are photography studios, as well as premises – other than registered pharmacies – providing medical or dental services, audiology services, chiropody, chiropractic, osteopathic, optometry or other medical services including services relating to mental health.

What are the punishments for non-compliance?

People who are not wearing a face covering where they have to can be fined in form of a fixed penalty notice and ordered to pay £200, rising to £400 for the second such offence, and to £800 for the third, up to a maximum of £6,400 in the case of a sixth and subsequent fixed penalty notices.

Who will police this new law?

The new requirement to wear a face covering in certain places can be enforced by a constable, a police community support officer, a TfL officer, staff of public transport operators, or any person designated by the secretary of state for the purposes of this regulation.

These people can direct a person to wear a face covering or direct that person to leave the relevant place and, where a person does not comply with a direction given to them by a constable, the constable may remove them from the relevant place.

Proceedings for an offence under these new regulations may be brought by the Crown Prosecution Service, Transport for London or any other person designated by the secretary of state for the purposes of this regulation.

All contacts of suspected Omicron cases must self-isolate, regardless of their age or vaccination status. They will be contacted by NHS test and trace, Downing Street said.

The face mask mandate will expire at the end of 20 December 2021.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/29/covid-as-rules-on-mask-wearing-in-england-return-what-exactly-is-the-law>

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- [Lost to the virus Life and tragic death of fitness fanatic who refused vaccine](#)
- ['Break the junk food cycle' How to fix Britain's failing food system](#)
- [Who is Parag Agrawal? Jack Dorsey's replacement as Twitter CEO](#)
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‘He was an old romantic’ ... John Eyers. Illustration: Paul Ryding/The Guardian

[Lost to the virus](#)

The life and tragic death of John Eyers – a fitness fanatic who refused the vaccine

‘He was an old romantic’ ... John Eyers. Illustration: Paul Ryding/The Guardian

by [Sirin Kale](#)

Tue 30 Nov 2021 01.00 EST

It was one of those rare, almost magical, summer evenings. Warm enough to sit outside in a T-shirt, listening to birdsong; warm enough to stay out late, savouring a meal; warm enough not to notice night settling in, the visitor that slipped into the party unannounced.

It was 11 June 2021. Jenny McCann sat in the garden of her home in north London with her twin brother, John Eyers, their parents, Lyn and Derek, and Jenny's husband and children. It was her son's 10th birthday party. John and their parents had come down from Southport in Merseyside for the weekend to celebrate. Jenny made Lebanese lamb and parathas. The adults were buzzed on wine, the kids on birthday cake. "Life felt really good," says Jenny.

She can't remember how the argument about the Covid vaccine started. "John started saying really crazy things that didn't make sense," she says. "About how people were only getting the vaccine for free McDonald's, and there was formaldehyde in it." The rest of the family remonstrated with him, pulling out their phones to factcheck what he was saying. But John was unmoving. "He kept saying: 'I won't be a guinea pig.'"



The last family photo taken with John, in June: (*left to right*) Jenny's husband, Amit; Jenny; the twins' father, Derek; John; their mother, Lyn; and Jenny and Amit's children, Maya and Seb. Photograph: Courtesy of Jenny McCann

Eventually, he made a joke and changed the subject – that was his way of defusing tension. "He would make a joke about everything," says Jenny, who is 43 and works as an operations manager.

Argument aside, it was a great get-together. “John was on really good, funny form,” says Jenny. They went for dinner at a Turkish restaurant and played darts in the garden. John scored a bullseye with his eyes closed and bragged about it all weekend. There was only one other difficult moment, when the family went to a local health club. John refused to wear a mask. The twins had a fight in reception.

“I said: ‘John, put your face mask on,’” Jenny remembers. “‘He said: ‘You aren’t my mother – don’t tell me what to do.’” John eventually acquiesced, then made another easy joke. They went swimming and played tennis and forgot about it.

A perfect weekend, then. Twins enjoying each other’s company after the enforced separation of the pandemic. Neither had any idea it would be their last time together.

John and Jenny were born in Southport in 1978. As children, they were diametrically opposed. Jenny was a bookish goody two-shoes; John was mischievous, good at sport and uninterested in school.

Despite their differences, they shared a formidable bond. “When we were very young, we were shadows of each other,” says Jenny. Into adulthood, she always knew when her brother was lying – like the time he told their mother he hurt his shoulder tripping over a witch on Halloween. (He had been knocked off his bike by a lorry.) “He didn’t want Mum to worry,” she says.

Jenny left home at 18 to go to university, leaving her brother behind. He worked in their parents’ carpet business for a while, but didn’t enjoy it, then joined the erotic dance troupe the Chippendales, performing all over Europe. “He had piercings in places you don’t want to know about your brother having piercings in,” Jenny shudders.



‘When we were very young, we were shadows of each other’ ... John’s sister, Jenny. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

Around this time, he had a child, Macey, who is now 19. The relationship with her mother didn’t work out, but John was a committed and loving father. His stripping days over, he returned to Southport and began working as a product specialist in the flooring industry. He worked to keep the lights on, but sport was his big thing. John had always been a gifted athlete.

“He would do something and get obsessed with it,” Jenny says. In his teens, he was a champion pole-vaulter and hockey player. In adulthood, he went through phases. He got into triathlons for a while, then bodybuilding competitions, then mountain climbing. He was a fixture at his local gym, which is where he met his best friend, Jonathan Cohen, 37, a chartered surveyor. “He’d spot me in the gym with a set of weights and it was a natural progression from there,” says Jonathan. “Suddenly, we were going out every weekend together.”

John’s dedication to fitness was something to behold. “He really pushed his body to the limit,” says Jonathan. John would be in the gym most mornings at 6am. On a holiday to Marbella in May 2016, John kept getting stopped by other men on the beach – they wanted to know his training regimen.

Jonathan cropped John out of their holiday photos. “I wasn’t having a photo stood next to him with his six-pack,” he laughs. “No! Not having that.”

He made a bad decision. And he paid the ultimate price for it. Which is so unfair

Jenny McCann

John was gregarious and fun-loving. “He was a social butterfly,” Jenny says. “He liked being out, working a room, being charismatic and laughing and joking. He was a big piss-taker – he’d insult you, but in a funny way, so you ended up laughing.” From his first girlfriend, at 10, John was a serial monogamist, prone to the odd grand gesture; he once proposed to a girlfriend at a festive grotto while dressed as Santa. “He was an old romantic,” says Jenny. “He really wanted the happily-ever-after.” (That relationship didn’t work out and John never married.)

From January onwards, John struggled with his mental health. Covid restrictions weighed heavily on him. He hated not being able to go to the gym, hated not being able to go climbing, hated not seeing his friends. He lived alone, having broken up with a girlfriend at Christmas, and was lonely. He confided in his sister. “I was really worried about him,” Jenny says. “He was in a bad place. I had to call him every day to make sure he was OK.” Their grandmother died in March. When Jenny saw him at the funeral, she was horrified. “He’d lost so much weight,” she says.

Jonathan thinks this is, in part, what drove his friend’s Covid scepticism. “He was frustrated at the way he couldn’t go and do normal things,” he says. “He didn’t want another lockdown, or to be in a situation where he wasn’t able to go and see people.” John felt that Covid was real, but that it had been dramatically overstated by the authorities. Nobody he knew in Southport had contracted Covid. If he got the virus, he would be fine. “It got to the point where he refused to wear a mask at all,” says Jenny.



John and Jonathan Cohen, his best friend, in Marbella. Photograph: Courtesy of Jenny McCann

Many of the people in his life tried to argue with him. “I would tell him: ‘Why won’t you get the jab? You’ll need it if you want to go away on holiday,’” says Jonathan. “He kept saying that he wanted to wait. It wasn’t that he would never get it. But it was more the misinformation, really. For whatever reason, he would not listen to whatever message was coming out of the government. I’d say to him: ‘John, why are you listening to that rubbish?’”

John was a fan of the pearlescent-toothed [Tony Robbins](#), whose brand of adrenalised motivational speaking has earned him an estimated fortune of \$500m (£375m), plus a private island in Fiji and [celebrity fans](#) including Serena Williams and Hugh Jackman. Robbins, while steering clear of outright anti-vaccine statements, has made comments throughout the pandemic that play down the severity of Covid, or imply that lockdown restrictions are overblown. (Confusingly, he has also [touted a Covid vaccine](#) that is being developed by Covaxx, a company that has received funding from a venture capital firm in which Robbins is a partner. [He has made no secret](#) of that financial interest.)

In September 2020, Robbins posted [a link](#) to an article by the Kremlin-funded news site RT that said lockdowns “achieved almost precisely nothing with regard to Covid. No deaths were prevented”. In September 2021, he appeared at a conference in Florida where he [mocked Australia’s Covid restrictions](#), cast doubt on the efficacy of vaccines and told a cheering audience not to let “fear be the thing that controls you”.

“John mentioned to me once that one of his beliefs was that we shouldn’t live in a climate of fear around Covid,” says Jenny. “If you were young and fit and well, you’d be fine.”

In this assumption, John wasn’t entirely wrong. He *was* extremely unlikely to die from Covid, as a physically fit 42-year-old with no underlying conditions. The Covid mortality rate for a 40-year-old with no underlying health conditions is [about one in every 1,490](#) people infected.

But his calculus when it came to understanding the risk-to-benefit ratio of Covid vaccination was off. If infected, someone who is unvaccinated is [32 times more likely to die](#) of Covid than someone who has been vaccinated. While vaccination carries a risk of side-effects, this risk is far smaller than the risk of being unvaccinated during a pandemic. Out of 46.3 million [fully vaccinated people](#) in the UK, [77 have died of blood clots](#) thought to be related to a Covid vaccine.

“There is a huge asymmetry with risk,” says Dr Tom Stafford, a psychology lecturer at the University of Sheffield. “If you can get away with things that are low probability, you don’t know how dangerous they are until it’s too late.” Stafford uses the example of driving without a seatbelt: most of the time, you will be absolutely fine. But the one time you *are* in an accident, things might get very bad very quickly.



John went through a bodybuilding phase, among other fitness obsessions.
Photograph: Courtesy of Jenny McCann

“It’s the same with the vaccine,” says Stafford. “It’s a low-probability event that you will get the virus and need hospitalisation. But if you do, then the vaccine shows its benefit.”

Stafford says that decisions about vaccination, particularly for Covid, are some of the hardest that people have to make. “Risk calculus can be particularly hard in certain circumstances,” he says. “Risks where we don’t always see the outcome, so we have to trust people. And new risks. Coronavirus is both of those things.”

But why would someone such as John be inclined to take his information about the pandemic from social media influencers rather than scientific experts?

In 2009, Stafford [co-authored a paper](#) that surveyed people who lived on brownfield sites that might have been contaminated with pollutants. The survey asked the residents whom they trusted to tell them about the risks associated with living on the land. While most of the people trusted scientists to tell them the truth, they were almost as likely to take their information from family and friends, despite their total lack of expertise. “It

wasn't that they didn't trust the expertise of the scientists," Stafford says. "They knew that scientists knew about pollution. They just thought that the scientists didn't have their interests at heart, whereas they knew that family and friends did."

The internet replicates this fundamental human impulse – to trust family and friends almost as much as we trust experts – at scale. "We feel a connection to the people who are telling us things in a way that we don't feel a connection to the Centers for Disease Control or the Joint Council on Vaccination and Immunisation," Stafford says.

In the age of social media, we don't even need to have met the people we trust as much as established experts. "That's why social media is so dangerous," says Stafford. "Because people share that emotional connection with influencers they might never have met. But it's an asymmetrical intimacy. I may think I know that vlogger and they are talking to me. But really they're talking to millions of people – and the advertisers generating them their revenue."

If you can get away with things that are low probability, you don't know how dangerous they are until it's too late

Dr Tom Stafford

The falsehoods that John repeated to his family and friends in the months leading up to his death are common tropes in online anti-vaccine spaces and easy to find: the vaccine has dangerous levels of formaldehyde in it; the vaccine is experimental; people are only getting the vaccine [for free McDonald's](#).

"The best thing that people can do is realise that social media platforms are fundamentally unsafe environments to gain facts about a pandemic that might kill you," says Imran Ahmed, the CEO of the [Center for Countering Digital Hate](#). "Social media contains vast amounts of misinformation that mingles seamlessly with good information. The misinformation might kill you."

John was a heavy user of social media. “He was what I’d call a Facebook ranter,” says Jenny. Occasionally, she would challenge him on the content of his posts about Covid. When he was at her house, Jenny told him off for spending too much time on his phone. “He wouldn’t put his phone down,” she says.

Ahmed is scathing about the social media companies that profit from misinformation. “They don’t want you to find the truth,” he says. “They want you to keep scrolling. If you find the truth, you don’t need to scroll any more. They want you to keep scrolling and arguing and looking for more bullshit.”

John tested positive for Covid on 29 June. By 3 July, he was seriously unwell. Amy, the woman who had recently become his girlfriend, had to force him to call 111 for help. Later that day, he was taken to Southport & Ormskirk hospital by ambulance.

Jonathan texted his friend as soon as he heard the news. “He said that he couldn’t type, but that he was in hospital with pneumonia,” he remembers. “He wouldn’t admit at that point that it was Covid.”

John had a raging temperature and difficulty breathing. Doctors put him on a Cpap machine, to assist his breathing, and swathed him in cooling blankets. On 4 July, John was up all night vomiting blood. He sent Jonathan a voice note the next morning.

“It is the worst voice note I have ever heard in my life,” says Jonathan. “I burst out crying halfway through it.” The voice note is a minute and a half long. In that time, John speaks about 12 words. “I will never send it to anyone, but if anyone questioned whether Covid is real, I would play it to them,” says Jonathan. “It is the worst thing in the world. I can hear the fear in him. He is literally gasping for air. This is someone I knew who could run 10k or climb a mountain without struggling.”



John in intensive care. Photograph: Courtesy of Jenny McCann

On 6 July, Jenny was in the supermarket when a feeling of great panic settled upon her. “I just had this feeling that something wasn’t right with John,” she says. She left without doing her shopping. That afternoon, she got the phone call. John was in the ICU. She immediately got a train to Southport, sobbing the whole way.

By 11 July, John needed to go on a ventilator. Jenny spoke to him on the phone before he was sedated. She told him she loved him. He couldn’t respond, but he texted her: “Don’t let them give up on me.” It was the last message she received from her twin.

On the morning of 27 July, John’s family got the call they had been dreading. He was dying; they should come in right away. They raced to the hospital, but John had stabilised by the time they arrived. Staff told them to go home and said they would call back if there was any change.

About an hour later, the hospital called back. The family piled into the car and started driving to the hospital at top speed. Nurses kept calling, telling them to hurry. They raced to the ICU, where staff were waiting with PPE. Jenny could hear the alarms going off in her brother’s room. “I couldn’t stop

shaking,” she says. “It felt like a monster was about to come out of my mouth and I couldn’t control it.”

When they had finally tugged on the PPE, they ran into his room. It was full of ICU staff, all in tears. John had just died. Jenny’s stepdad collapsed to the floor. Her mum was wailing. “The matron grabbed my mum and was holding her,” says Jenny. “Everyone was crying. The consultant was crying. All the staff were crying. Because he was so young. And they couldn’t save him.”

How do you explain how a supremely fit 42-year-old man died of a disease typically thought to afflict older people or those with underlying conditions?

“Genetics makes the most sense,” says Dr Guillaume Butler-Laporte, a genetic epidemiologist at McGill University. Butler-Laporte is part of a global research programme to analyse the genomes of more than 100,000 people with Covid, in an effort to understand why some people are more severely affected than others.

When he began his research in March 2020, Butler-Laporte “did not expect to find much”, he says. “We thought Covid would affect everyone, but be worse for old people and not as bad for young people. But as we included more patients, we saw a clear story develop. It was surprising.”

Butler-Laporte and his colleagues found that people with variants in up to a dozen locations on the human genome were at higher risk of developing severe Covid, should they be unfortunate enough to be infected with the virus. People with variants on the chromosome 3 region alone were up to twice as likely to develop severe Covid as someone without that genetic mutation. Chromosome 3 mutations are carried in about 10% of people of European ancestry, meaning that such people have a 10% chance of being twice as susceptible to severe Covid infection.



John was a keen mountaineer. Photograph: Courtesy of Jenny McCann

“There is no question there is a genetic underpinning to this,” says Butler-Laporte. “As to whether genetics is more important than other factors, like age, I wouldn’t want to comment. But it is clear that there are other determinants of severe disease and genetics is one of them.” He is almost certain that John fits the profile of someone with a genetic variation that made him more vulnerable to severe Covid. “It’s impossible to know specifically what genes he carried, but it’s very likely he carried this genetic predisposition,” says Butler-Laporte.

Unbeknown to John, his body was primed to react with maximum violence to the Covid virus. When he was unfortunate enough to breathe in infected air carrying infinitesimally small virus particles, his body gradually failed.

“Had he been vaccinated, the best case would have been that he developed sterilising immunity, meaning that, when the virus landed in his nostrils, it got picked up by antibodies and never set up an infection,” says Dr Tom Lawton, an intensive care doctor. “If he’d had a lower level of immunity from the vaccine, he would have had non-sterilising immunity, meaning that the virus did start to infect cells, but his body fought it and was able to clear out the virus before it ramped up rapidly.” But John was not vaccinated.

The Covid virus infected his cells, replicating in his body. He eventually managed to expunge the virus – but then his immune system went into overdrive. “The virus seems to set something up in the body and the damage comes from there,” says Lawton. “It wouldn’t have happened had the virus not been there.”

First, his lungs were affected. “There will have been blood clots forming, as well as a thickening of the membrane that separates the air and the blood in his lungs,” says Lawton. As a result, the blood couldn’t carry sufficient oxygen to John’s organs.

Doctors treated him with steroids, to damp down his immune response. But these immune suppressants made John vulnerable to bacterial and fungal infections. He developed infections in his lungs. His liver and kidneys began to malfunction, causing waste products to build up in his blood.

Doctors put John on dialysis to clear out the toxins, but by this point many of his organs were failing and he had unsurvivably low oxygen levels. He expended an inconceivably huge metabolic effort to stay alive. “Although it looks like someone is just lying there asleep, the amount of work they’re doing is really impressive,” says Lawton. He compares it to walking a marathon for every day the patient is hospitalised.

Eventually, John exhausted his physiological reserve. His body was oxygen-deprived and wrung out. His heart stopped beating and he died.

Before he died, John told the doctor treating him how much he regretted not getting the vaccine. “The doctor said that he was beating himself up so much before they put him on the ventilator,” Jenny says. “He was saying: ‘Why didn’t I get vaccinated? Why didn’t I do it? Why didn’t I listen?’”

It is for this reason that his family has agreed to share his story. “He probably wouldn’t be dead if he’d had the vaccine,” says Jenny. “It’s really quite simple. He made a bad decision. We all make bad decisions all the time. And he paid the ultimate price for it. Which is so unfair.”

Jenny says she “just wants people to be vaccinated and, if they have doubts, to get medical advice – not advice from the internet. And to realise that

Covid is brutal. It's just brutal."

She is struggling to adapt to life without her brother. "I don't know that it will ever feel real," she says. "How can my healthy, outgoing, silly brother be dead? It doesn't make sense in my brain. How can I be a twin without a twin?"

At John's funeral, on 16 August, Jonathan delivered a eulogy. He spoke about that holiday in Marbella in 2016. They spent a day drinking champagne at a beach club, laughing, messing around. As the sun set, a rainbow formed over the sea.

This is how Jonathan likes to remember John. They are sunburned, drunk, a little unsteady on their feet. Suffused with love for each other. The night is drawing in and Jonathan turns to his best friend and says: shall we carry on? And John says: of course.

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Illustration: Klawe Rzeczy/The Guardian

[The long read](#)

'We need to break the junk food cycle': how to fix Britain's failing food system

Illustration: Klawe Rzeczy/The Guardian

by [Bee Wilson](#)

Tue 30 Nov 2021 01.00 EST

When I was younger, and at war with my own body, I was a sucker for diets. I tried The Rotation Diet (Lose Up to a Pound a Day and Never Gain it Back), The Beverly Hills Diet (a 35-day programme, but I never made it past the first three days) and numerous punitive low-fat regimes involving raw carrots and dry crispbread. None of them lasted long, but each time I broke a diet, I would soon be looking around for another, equally unrealistic, weight-loss plan. No matter how similar the new diet was to the last, it gave

me a sense that I was doing something productive about what I saw as the problem of my body.

Personal weight-loss diets have a lot in common with obesity policies in England and beyond. For a start, the sheer quantity of these policies is astonishing. Earlier this year, two researchers based at the University of Cambridge – Dolly Theis and Martin White – published a [paper](#) showing that from 1992 to 2020, there were no fewer than 689 separate obesity policies put forward in England. Like failed diets, almost none of these initiatives have been realised in any meaningful way. Instead, their main effect has been to remind people with obesity that the government views the mere existence of their bodies as a “crisis”.

While England is not alone in failing to reduce the prevalence of obesity – the World Health Organization [reports](#) that it has more than tripled worldwide since 1975 – “obesity policy” in England has been strikingly ineffective. (I say England because since devolution, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland [have their own](#) separate health policies.) Between 1993 and 2015, obesity among England’s adult population rose from 14.9% to 26.9%. Twice as many adults in the UK are living with obesity as in Italy, Sweden or Switzerland. At the same time, levels of hunger in the UK are some of the highest in Europe. Nearly one in five 15-year-olds live in a household where the adults are “food insecure”, which is a fancy way of saying that they can’t reliably afford enough food.

Covid has brought to the surface some hard truths about the British food system, and what a poor job it does of feeding the population as a whole. As the first lockdown hit in March 2020, plenty of better-off British households were able to carry on eating much as before, while millions more were plunged into food poverty. According to data from [the Food Foundation](#), during the first two weeks of lockdown in the spring of 2020, the proportion of households facing food insecurity doubled to more than 15%. Black and Asian people have been twice as likely to suffer hunger during the pandemic as their white counterparts. As Marcus Rashford [said in a letter](#) to parliament about food poverty in June 2020, “This is a system failure”. But it is a system failure that existed for decades before the pandemic at long last pushed it on to the national agenda.

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British politicians, as a rule, have shown little interest in tackling the problem of poor-quality food and its relationship to health. These policy failures go back to the 19th century. Our early Industrial Revolution meant that a larger percentage of the population lost its connection with agriculture at an earlier stage than in any other country. When it comes to food policy, there has long been an attitude of “leave it to the market” (the shining exception being the two world wars, when the constraints of rationing forced governments to join the dots on food and health). Campaigners against the grossly adulterated food supply in Victorian times sometimes complained that the selling of food in London operated on “buyer beware” principles, which meant that grocers were free to sell poisonous pickles and fake coffee to an unsuspecting public without fear of retribution. Not much has changed, except that instead of poisonous pickles, we are sold a surfeit of [ultra-processed food](#).

Recent English obesity policies have spoken endlessly of “action” to help people eat healthier diets, but what they deliver, often as not, is another raft of patronising diet information leaflets, such as the bright yellow Change4Life diet pamphlets handed out in schools and GP surgeries. (One uninspiring gem: “If you’re shopping for packaged snacks for your children, try sticking to 100 calorie snacks.”)

For three decades, Theis and White found, successive governments have repeatedly proposed “similar or identical policies” and then not done anything to see them through. What counts as an obesity policy could be anything from a plan of action to a statement of intent. Whichever party has been in charge, the most popular policies have been ones placing high demands on individuals to make personal changes (such as the 5 a day campaign) rather than meaningful reforms such as restricting the sale of unhealthy foods, or subsidising fruits and vegetables to make them more affordable. Most of the ideas for structural interventions – for example, that the food industry should reformulate its unhealthiest products – were voluntary. Unsurprisingly, compliance was not high. One of the few exceptions has been the Soft Drinks Industry Levy (AKA [Sugar Tax](#)) of 2018, which resulted in a 30g a week drop in household sugar consumption,

but I suspect that this will turn out to be a pyrrhic victory given new evidence that consuming aspartame, the artificial sweetener used in many diet drinks, also causes weight gain as well as possibly altering the gut microbiome.

The almost 700 obesity policies fell under the banner of 14 separate obesity strategies. It is poignant to read the titles of these largely failed and forgotten strategies, which share an air of wishful purpose. Under John Major in 1992, there was Health of the Nation. Next, under Tony Blair in 1999, came Saving Lives. Also under Labour came Choosing Health (2004), Choosing a Better Diet (2005), and Choosing Activity (2004, 2005 and 2005) and Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives (2008). The Coalition government produced Healthy Lives, Healthy People and A call to action on obesity in England (2011). Most recently, under the Conservatives there have been three instalments of Childhood Obesity: A Plan for Action and then, in 2020, Tackling Obesity.

Notice how the words “choosing” and “action” keep reappearing in these strategies. Given that poorer UK households would have to spend nearly 40% of their income to buy food for a healthy diet, according to recent data from the Food Foundation, to frame healthy eating as simply a matter of “choosing” is dishonest. It’s not choice if you can’t afford it.



A volunteer at work in a food bank in north London, October 2020.
Photograph: Tolga Akmen/AFP/Getty Images

Decades of research show that obesity is determined to a large extent by environmental factors such as socioeconomic inequality, the rise of ultra-processed food and the way that cities are built to facilitate car use. But policymakers of England have stayed wedded to the idea that weight is all about personal responsibility: just eat less and move more.

The failures of obesity policy in England and the UK are part of a larger problem with food policy in general. As well as being a source of joy and nourishment, food is Britain's biggest employer, accounting for 4.1m jobs (most of them low-paid). At the same time, poor diet is the country's biggest cause of preventable disease and the food supply is also one of its biggest drivers of climate breakdown (10% of our greenhouse gas emissions come from agriculture).

And yet for decades, a food policy to address any of this has seemed to be missing in action. Fewer than a quarter of the policies analysed by Theis and White (24%) included any plan for monitoring their progress. Nearly a third (29%) of the policies did not include any timeframe, any evidence or any position on who or what is responsible for driving the rise in obesity. It isn't just that food policies in England have long been ill-suited to improving our diets. It is that very few people, inside or outside government, seems to have the slightest idea what these policies actually are.

Earlier this year, the need for a radical rethink of food policy in the UK was set out in Henry Dimbleby's [National Food Strategy: The Plan](#), an independent review commissioned by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). Dimbleby, one of the founders of the Leon chain of cafes, wrote the report after consultations with more than 300 organisations, as well as town hall meetings with members of the public. It took three years to produce.

Unlike all the earlier failed obesity policies, Dimbleby's plan recognised that how a person eats is not just a question of personal choice, and that healthy food is a basic need for all of us, no matter how much we weigh. It called for

a range of ambitious strategies themed around reducing diet inequalities, improving food education, making better use of land and, crucially, setting as a clear goal that the food system of the future must “make us well instead of sick”. It suggested that school inspections should pay as much attention to cookery and nutrition lessons as they do to English and maths, and that meat consumption should be cut by 30% over 10 years, with more investment going to growing vegetables and fruits.

Almost everyone I have spoken to in food policy and nutrition circles has showered Dimbleby’s report with praise, relieved that someone close to government was finally recognising the scale of the problem and proposing real solutions. Some public health experts, such as Rob Percival at the Soil Association, have been disappointed that the report still talks about foods high in sugar, fat and salt as the problem, rather than addressing the harm done by ultra-processed products as a whole. But Percival has still praised the report as “important and progressive” in making the connections between farming and health.

No sooner had the National Food Strategy (NFS) plan appeared, however, than the government backed away from taking action. The first of the strategy’s recommendations was a “reformulation” tax of £3 a kilogramme on sugar and £6 on salt for use in food processing, catering and restaurants and food processing. But on 15 July, Boris Johnson announced that he would not support the plan’s call for higher taxes on foods high in salt and sugar. “I’m not attracted to the idea of extra taxes on hard working people,” said Johnson, before repeating his belief that weight loss could best be achieved through exercise. His language could have come from any one of the 14 failed obesity strategies.

This was a characteristic piece of political theatre from Johnson, who knows he will win points with some voters by positioning himself as a brave warrior against the nanny state. More significant than the fact that the prime minister ridiculed the first recommendation in the NFS plan is the fact that he remained silent on the other 13 proposals. Did this silence imply approval or disapproval (or simply that Johnson couldn’t be bothered to read the whole thing)? The real test will be the government white paper, which is due to be published in January 2022, setting out plans for legislation based on

Dimbleby's report. Will the libertarians in the Tory party ever lose their conviction that it is not government's place to meddle in how people eat? If they don't, it is unclear how Dimbleby's radical policy suggestions can be put into action.

The ambitions of the NFS report raise a question: can this new holistic vision of food policy actually be delivered? The final recommendation is the introduction of a Good [Food](#) bill, which would commit the government to five-year action plans, and to coming up with a "healthy and sustainable reference diet": an agreed vision of what healthy eating actually means, to create a consistent approach to food across the whole system, from schools to farms. So far, so good. The problem is that the report handed responsibility for monitoring progress to the Food Standards Agency, a non-ministerial department whose remit is mainly food safety and things such as use-by dates.

"Delivery ain't gonna come from the FSA, no way!" said Tim Lang, emeritus professor of food policy at City, University of London, when I spoke to him on the phone recently. Lang, who is most famous for coining the term "food miles", has long been recognised as one of the leading experts on food policy in Britain. The week after the NFS plan was published, he wrote an opinion piece in the Spectator praising much of the content of the report but suggesting that the FSA was unfit to deliver it. The FSA is, [he wrote](#), a "long-weakened body ... a kind of genial facilitator" whose role is purely advisory. Since it is not a government ministry, Lang argued, the FSA lacked the power to get anything meaningful done.

"Nothing happens unless you get laws and regulations that get translated into daily cultural values," Lang told me. Since the war, he argues that the closest that the UK has come to having a systematic food policy was in 2008, under Gordon Brown, when the [Food Matters](#) review of food policy was set up (under which the Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives strategy fell). "They integrated environment and nutrition and hospitality all in one document," Lang said. But when the coalition government came to power in 2010, the review was "shut down by the Tories overnight". Now, he wonders whether the government really wants a unified food policy, or whether they would prefer "no policy at all", to keep their friends in industry happy.

For years, Lang has decried what he calls the lack of “food democracy”. In the UK, 94.4% of food [is supplied by](#) one of the nine leading retailers. Along with his colleagues Erik Millstone and Terry Marsden, earlier this year Lang [wrote a paper](#) setting out nine “tests” for food policy in the UK. “How will people be fed and to what standards, from where, produced how, and with which consequences?” the paper asked.



Children queuing for food in a school canteen. Photograph: Nick Sinclair/Alamy

Lang feels that Whitehall brushes these questions aside because there is a “naive optimism” that other countries will always come along to feed us. After Brexit, this post-imperial complacency looks dangerously misplaced. As recently as October there were tonnes of broccoli and cauliflower rotting in the fields without workers to pick them, tens of thousands of pigs faced being culled because of a post-Brexit shortage of butchers and [empty shelves](#) in the supermarkets because of the shortfall of lorry drivers.

In the midst of this chaos, who will actually step in to protect the food supply? Successive governments have been largely happy to leave it to the market – which in practice means leaving it to the supermarkets and the ultra-processed food industry. Dimbleby says that one of the core aims of his report is to break what he calls “the junk food cycle”, in which retailers

oversupply us with low-nutrient sugary foods and we in turn demand more of them. At the same time, the report was informed by conversations with many of the biggest food companies including Coca-Cola, Greggs, Tesco and Asda (as well as smaller organic companies such as Yeo Valley).

To regulate industry, Dimbleby proposes forcing all food companies with more than 250 employees to publish an annual report. As well as admitting how much food they waste, they would be forced to declare how many healthy foods such as vegetables they sell each year – for some companies, the answer would presumably be “none” – as well as how many unhealthy sugary foods. The hope is that this process of public accounting would enable government to track whether businesses are moving in the right direction. The problem is that it’s currently unclear who would oversee this, or what the sanctions would be for companies that continue to sell us the same old junk.

It is hardly surprising that English food policy to date has seemed muddled, given that responsibility for it is spread across no fewer than 16 separate government departments. As well as the obvious candidates such as the Department of Health, the Department of Education and Defra, there are more surprising departments such as the Department of Justice (prison food) and Digital Culture, Media and Sport (food sponsorship and advertising).

In 2020, Kelly Parsons, a food policy researcher at the University of Hertfordshire, produced a [report](#) identifying which government departments are responsible for which aspects of food policy in England. The meticulous research process confirmed Parsons’s hunch that “there is no single place to go to find out about food-related policy, either for those inside or outside government”. Parsons told me that after she published her map of the different groups and departments a number of people in Whitehall told her how useful it was, because they had been just as much in the dark about food policy as the rest of us.

Given the poor state of the average British diet – the Food Foundation [found in 2021](#) that almost a third of British children aged between five and 10 eat fewer than one portion of vegetables a day – it would be easy to assume that Britain must have a poor nutrition policy. But the problem is actually deeper

and more nebulous than this. Britain doesn't actually have a single nutrition policy at all, just a series of different policies on food, often contradictory ones, emerging from different departments at different times. Not only do these departments fail to coordinate their actions on food, but they may have directly opposing agendas. Current agricultural policy in the UK subsidises sugar and red meat, even though dietary advice from the Department of Health recommends eating less of them.

Earlier this year, Parsons set out to identify some of the key disconnects in food policy in England, based on interviews with senior officials in key departments in Westminster. One of the biggest contradictions was that different departments have different “client groups” to please. Health officials may wish to restrict junk food being marketed to children, but their counterparts in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport are more interested in protecting the profits of the advertising industry. “When you have [an agriculture] minister who says, ‘I’m going to be judged on whether I keep the farmers happy’, and a minister of health who has a completely different set of interests, it’s difficult to see how they would work together,” said one of Parsons’s interviewees.

The client who tends to get forgotten in all this is the ordinary person simply trying to feed themselves and their family as well as they can on a stretched budget. Another of the disconnects Parsons identified was between nutrition, obesity and income. Through the Department of Health, the government hands out advice on what to eat (through the much-criticised [Eatwell guide](#)), but there is no attempt to cross-reference this with policy on welfare and on food access – “specifically, people’s ability to afford the food being recommended for healthy weight”.



A food campaigner supporting Marcus Rashford's fight to end child food poverty in October 2020. Photograph: Mark Case/Getty Images

This clash of departments partly explains why so many obesity policies focus on physical activity as the solution, rather than reforming the food supply. As Tim Spector outlined in his recent book *Spoon-Fed*, evidence suggests that exercise – while beneficial, especially for [mental health](#) – does not reliably cause weight loss. But obesity policies that propose more sport, rather than changes to diet, have always been popular in government because they pose no threat to the junk food industry.

We shouldn't be talking about obesity policy (let alone an "obesity crisis") at all, but about food quality laws or junk food control. After all, the government does not produce tobacco strategies with titles such as "childhood smokers: a plan for action" or "tackling smokers' lungs". Chris van Tulleken, an infectious diseases doctor at University College London hospital, told me that, as with tobacco, the focus should be "on regulating the marketing, not blaming the consumer". He argues that ultra-processed foods should come with a warning label and that these products should not be marketed to children. But there is still a reluctance within the UK government even to identify ultra-processed food as a problem. As Gyorgy Scrinis, an Australian professor of food policy, has shown, the big food companies have successfully lobbied governments around the world to

ensure that official nutrition advice stays focused on individual nutrients in packaged foods rather than on ultra-processed food in general.

What would it take for England to have a food policy fit for the task? One obvious solution would be to create a designated minister of food to coordinate food policy, as there was during the war and up until 1955, when the Ministry of Food became subsumed by Agriculture and Fisheries.

Another solution would be to say that food is so relevant to every aspect of life that there should be food in every policy. This is the approach favoured by the NFS report, which ruled out the idea of a single food minister, noting that food is not unique in being split across multiple departments. Since the second world war, Dimbleby argued, the purpose of the food system in England has been to maximise the production of cheap food, regardless of quality. This urgently needs to change, but to pivot to a new system that produces nourishing, sustainable food would require radical adjustments all the way through the food chain. There is a need, as Dimbleby notes, for every cog in the wheel of the food system to be designed to “make us well instead of sick”, to be “resilient” and to help “halt climate change”.

But where will this shared sense of purpose come from? Having interviewed 23 of the most senior civil servants and politicians in Westminster, Kelly Parsons told me that she realised that at the highest levels of government in England, food was endlessly pushed down the agenda. It simply wasn’t seen as important.

The absence of adequate food policy in England reflects a wider culture in which most of the population has been disconnected from food production for a very long time. There is a maddeningly persistent view in the UK that caring about healthy food is snobbish or “middle-class”. (Witness the rage that greeted Jamie Oliver when he dared to try to improve the quality of school meals in 2005.)

England is far from the only country where responsibility for food policy is spread across multiple departments. In South Africa, for example, food policy is splintered across 15 different departments. But one of the big differences is that South Africa also has a Department of Cooperative

Governance, whose role is to coordinate food policies across all the departments at a local and national level. In 2019, South Africa was ranked as the most effective government in the world for its commitment to tackling hunger and undernutrition by the [Hunger and Nutrition Commitment Index](#). Under South African policy, ensuring adequate food for the population is seen as such an urgent priority that nutrition has its own separate budget line.

Compare and contrast this with the UK, where hunger is still not generally recognised as an issue. In England, there is not a single department assigned lead responsibility for hunger, despite the fact that, in 2018, the Food and Agriculture Organisation [found that](#) there were more than 2.2 million people in the UK in a state of food insecurity. (The 2021 figures are undoubtedly higher). Last winter, for the first time in 70 years, [Unicef stepped in to feed hungry children in the UK](#). Yet Parsons reported that the government continues to see hunger as an “overseas issue”.

If England has fragmented food policies, it is partly because this is a country that does not recognise how much food matters. In modern western societies with an apparently abundant food supply, treating food as trivial is a common mindset, as historian Paul Freedman shows in his short new polemic [Why Food Matters](#). Effective food policies have a better chance of taking root in countries with long-established cultures of cooking, where it is normal for families to gather around a table every day. One example is Brazil, where school canteens are obliged to source 30% of their ingredients from local family farms. In 2014, Brazil totally rewrote the script on nutrition policy when the department of health issued new food-based nutrition guidelines urging Brazilians to avoid ultra-processed food and to eat more freshly produced food. At the time, these guidelines were unlike any other nutrition policy in the world, although similar policies have since been adopted by other countries including Ecuador, Peru and Canada.



Shoppers in Belfast faced with empty supermarket shelves earlier this year.
Photograph: Charles McQuillan/Getty Images

When I asked Geoffrey Cannon, a British researcher who helped design the Brazilian nutrition guidelines, why Brazilian food policy is so much more ambitious than that in England, he pointed to the prevailing food culture. “In the Catholic tradition, Brazil is still largely family-based and therefore family meals are normal.” Even when people move away from home to the cities, they can still buy cheap home-style food at “per quilo” restaurants selling unpretentious food priced by weight. Cannon felt that people in Brazil still had a sense that homemade food was something normal and delicious – much more so than in the UK with its highly processed diet and long working hours.

But it’s also worth remembering that food cultures are not static, and just sometimes food policy can succeed in changing cultural attitudes for the better. In the 1970s, the region of North Karelia in Finland had some of the worst rates of fatal heart disease in the world. A visionary young public health official called [Pekka Puska](#) implemented a whole range of measures to address cardiovascular health, all at once. Puska worked with women’s groups to encourage people to cook new versions of traditional dishes, with more vegetables and less meat. He supported dairy farmers in diverting some of their land from butter to berries. He persuaded local sausage

producers to take out some of the fat and replace it with mushrooms. And he recruited an army of local people to act as advocates for the new diet to their friends and neighbours. Puska also instigated smoke-free workplaces. By 2012, cardiovascular mortality among men in the region had dropped by 80%. Policy experts still debate which of Puska's various measures made the greatest difference, but in a sense it doesn't matter. This was food policy as doing, not talking, and it worked.

A good food policy is one that actually makes it beyond the announcement and gets carried out, with adjustments along the way for anything that doesn't work. The example Dolly Theis likes to give is of the city of Amsterdam, which from 2012 to 2015 brought down rates of child obesity thanks to a series of measures that included increased support for parents, a ban on junk food marketing at sporting events, and a rule that the only drink in schools should be water. "Can you imagine that here?" Theis asks.

The hope held out by Dimbleby's NFS report is that if enough measures can be put in place at once, as in Amsterdam, something fundamental will shift and we will collectively reach a point where we no longer tolerate a system so stacked against healthy eating. Our forgiving attitude to an ultra-processed food supply today might be a bit like attitudes to tobacco 50 years ago, when smoking on trains was normal.

There are signs that the pandemic has finally jolted us into new ways of thinking about food. Marcus Rashford's passionate advocacy has made far more people recognise how unacceptable it is to live in a country where mothers like his struggle to buy "a good evening meal" on minimum-wage jobs. Our great-grandchildren may laugh when we tell them that English schools routinely used to sell sugary drinks for profit, that hospital food courts provided burgers and chips to people who had just undergone heart surgery, and that farmers were paid to produce the very foods that caused the most damage to health and the environment. "That was what it was like," we will say, "living in a country where the politicians didn't know that food mattered."

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[Twitter](#)

Who is Parag Agrawal? The new Twitter CEO replacing Jack Dorsey



Parag Agrawal has worked for Twitter for 10 years. Photograph: Ellian Raffoul/AP

[*Kari Paul*](#) in San Francisco

Mon 29 Nov 2021 20.51 EST

Jack Dorsey has [stepped down as CEO of Twitter](#) and passed the baton to the relatively unknown executive Parag Agrawal.

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Agrawal, who has been with the company for 10 years – most recently as chief technology officer – has emerged from behind the scenes to take over one of Silicon Valley's highest-profile and politically volatile jobs. But who is he, and what can we expect for [Twitter](#) under his leadership?

A 37-year-old immigrant from India, Agrawal comes from outside the ranks of celebrity CEOs, which include the man he's replacing as well as Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg and Tesla's Elon Musk. But his lack of name recognition, coupled with a solid technical background, appears to be what some of Twitter's biggest backers were looking for in the company's next chapter.

Agrawal is a “‘safe’ pick who should be looked upon as favorably by investors”, wrote the CFRA Research analyst Angelo Zino, who noted that [the Twitter shareholder Elliott Management](#) had pressured Dorsey to step down.

That means we can expect more of the same under him in terms of policy and company direction, experts say – including plans to continue Twitter’s [recent strategy](#) to double its annual revenue by 2023 and focus on its [long-term ambition](#) to rebuild how social media companies operate.

“We recently updated our strategy to hit ambitious goals, and I believe that strategy to be bold and right,” Agrawal said in an email to employees. “But our critical challenge is how we work to execute against it and deliver results.”

The company currently faces a host of challenges, including slow growth in its user base as competitors like TikTok and Instagram lure away younger demographics, as well as continuing struggles with misinformation and hate speech.

Agrawal is expected largely to pick up where Dorsey left off, continuing to fight for users being lured away by competitors like TikTok and Instagram, said Jill Wilson, the chief marketing officer for [Esquire Digital](#).

“Agrawal has his work cut out for him in terms of keeping Twitter relevant and getting the everyday user on board, and monetizing the platform in general,” she said.

Dorsey, who [co-founded Twitter](#) in 2006, steered the company through a high-profile hack and the controversial banning of Donald Trump, who

tested the boundaries of the platform's enforcement against hate speech and misinformation.

Those problems have continued beyond the Trump presidency, and Agrawal is stepping into a role in the eye of the storm over moderation policies on hate speech and misinformation, for which Dorsey has faced criticism in recent years.

"The new CEO will need to work out how to stop his platform being a machine that is routinely and perpetually hijacked to distort the news agenda, produce fake popularity and influence, and provide a warped lens on the world," said Imran Ahmed, the CEO of the Center for Countering Digital Hate.

Dorsey had simultaneously been serving as CEO of the social media platform and as CEO of his payments processing company Square but will now focus primarily on Square as well as other pursuits such as philanthropy, Reuters reports.

In an email to employees on Monday, Dorsey said he chose to step down due to the strength of Agrawal's leadership, the naming of the Salesforce chief operating officer, Bret Taylor, as the new chairman of the board and his confidence in the "ambition and potential" of Twitter's employees.

"I'm really sad ... yet really happy," he wrote. "There aren't many companies that get to this level," adding that his move to step down "was my decision and I own it".

Over the past year, Twitter has fought to end years-long criticism that it has been slow to introduce new features for its 211 million daily users and was losing ground to social media rivals.

Under Dorsey's leadership, Twitter acquired the email newsletter service Revue and launched Spaces, a feature that lets users host or listen to live audio conversations.

However, shares in the company have slumped in recent months, adding pressure on Dorsey to end his unusual arrangement of being CEO of two companies.

Agrawal has already had a fast introduction to life as CEO of a central platform for political speech.

Following the announcement on Monday, conservatives quickly unearthed a tweet he sent in 2010 that read: “If they are not gonna make a distinction between Muslims and extremists, then why should I distinguish between white people and racists.”

As some Twitter users pointed out, the 11-year-old tweet was quoting a segment on The Daily Show, which was referencing the firing of Juan Williams, who made a comment about being nervous about Muslims on an airplane.

Agencies contributed to this report

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[Jack Dorsey](#)

Jack Dorsey: the outgoing Twitter CEO with an artist's vision



Jack Dorsey formed the idea behind Twitter while co-founding an online courier and taxi dispatch firm. Photograph: Anushree Fadnavis/Reuters

[Dan Milmo](#) Global technology editor

Mon 29 Nov 2021 14.37 EST

Jack Dorsey likes to keep things simple, at least for a 45-year-old multibillionaire. He [eats one meal a day](#), fasts at weekends, and tries to meditate for two hours daily. The post that launched Twitter, and ultimately a million pile-ons, was equally austere: “just setting up my twttr”.

just setting up my twttr

— jack⚡ (@jack) [March 21, 2006](#)

Dorsey was born in St Louis, Missouri, in 1976 and was a self-taught computer programmer, using a Macintosh computer that his father bought for him. In 1999 he dropped out of New York University and moved to California, where he dreamed up the idea of a [Twitter](#) prototype while co-founding an online courier and taxi dispatch firm. The company later failed.

The Twitter story began to take shape when Dorsey was hired as a coder at Odeo, a podcasting startup run by a future Twitter co-founder, Evan Williams. This is where Dorsey appears in Sarah Frier's award-winning history of Instagram as one of the peripheral figures in the story, trying to make his way in Silicon Valley like so many others.

“Dorsey, a 29-year-old New York University dropout with an anarchist tattoo and a nose ring, considered himself to be more of an artist. He would sometimes dream, for instance, about becoming a dressmaker. He was an engineer, but only as a means to an end – to create something out of nothing, with code. Also, so he could pay rent.”

There was enough hard-edged business sense within Dorsey, however, for him to co-found Twttr – soon renamed Twitter – with Williams, Biz Stone and Noah Glass in 2006. Dorsey became chief executive for the first time in 2007.

Indeed, Dorsey’s artistic mindset was cited, pointedly, when he was removed as chief executive for the first time in 2008. According to Nick Bilton’s book Hatching Twitter, Williams said to him: “You can either be a dressmaker or the CEO of Twitter. But you can’t be both.” Dorsey would apparently intersperse his chief executive duties with breaks for hot yoga and sewing classes.

Dorsey leaves the company with 210 million daily active users and annual revenues of \$3.7bn

Dorsey came back as executive chairman in 2011, having set up payment company Square – today worth \$100bn – in the meantime. Twitter struggled in the wake of its 2013 flotation, which made Dorsey a billionaire, and he

replaced Dick Costolo as chief executive in 2015 while relinquishing the executive chairman role.

Dorsey [leaves the company](#) with 210 million daily active users and annual revenues of \$3.7bn. According to the Bloomberg Billionaires Index, he is worth \$12.3bn, ranked 174th among the ranks of the world's super-wealthy. He still owns 2.3% of Twitter.

But unrest had been building about Dorsey's priorities. In 2019 [Dorsey surprised staff and investors](#) by announcing plans to move to Africa for up to six months a year. Announcing the move during a month-long trip to the continent, he tweeted, from Addis Ababa: "Sad to be leaving the continent ... for now. Africa will define the future (especially the bitcoin one!). Not sure where yet, but I'll be living here for 3-6 months mid 2020. Grateful I was able to experience a small part."

Dorsey, who remains a cryptocurrency enthusiast, dropped the plan after coronavirus arrived. But it wouldn't have dissuaded the activist investor firm Elliott Management from its view that Twitter was a business in need of more focus at the top. Elliott took a stake in Twitter last year and is still the 13th largest shareholder in the business, according to the financial data company Refinitiv, with a stake of just over 1%. At the time of the stake-building move, Elliott's billionaire owner, Paul Singer, was reported to have been concerned by the fact that Dorsey had two chief executive jobs, at Twitter and Square.

By the end of last year it appeared that Dorsey had survived the pressure. In November a committee of Twitter directors said it had "confidence in management and recommended that the current structure remain in place".

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Much of the innovation shown by Twitter under Dorsey's leadership in recent months has been more to do with safety than making money, however. It has launched trials warning users that they are about to enter a heated conversation and is testing a "[safety mode](#)" that blocks accounts for seven days if the tech firm's systems spot them using harmful language or

sending repetitive, uninvited replies and mentions. In the context of Frances Haugen's Facebook revelations and the upcoming Online Safety Act in the UK, social media companies know they have to focus on protecting users.

On the money-making side, in the US the company launched Twitter Blue, a product that for \$2.99 a month offers a range of services including a 60-second grace period to amend a tweet before it is fully posted. Expect more money-making initiatives under the new boss, the chief technology officer Parag Agrawal, who has to hit ambitious targets: to increase the company's daily average users by more than 50% to 315 million, and more than double revenue to \$7.5bn by 2023.

According to one California-based analyst, now is a good time for Dorsey to leave, with the social media industry becoming ever more competitive.

"Dorsey is a pillar of the social media world," said Dan Ives, the managing director of the investment firm Wedbush Securities. "These are big shoes to fill."

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Composite: Guardian/Charlotte Patmore/Adedayo Kosoko

[Best music of 2021](#)

The 50 best albums of 2021: 50-11

Composite: Guardian/Charlotte Patmore/Adedayo Kosoko

Fri 3 Dec 2021 01.02 EST

This list is drawn from votes by Guardian music critics – each critic votes for their Top 20 albums, with points allocated for each placing. Check in every weekday to see our next picks, and please share your own favourite albums of 2021 in the comments below.

50

Agnes – Magic Still Exists

The Swedish pop star's long-delayed fifth album embodies the platonic ideal of pop disco, steeped in Gaga (invigoratingly stern vocals about freeing

one's mind and body), Abba (piano stomps and trills), Donna Summer (the thumping 24 Hours) and Queen (melodramatic balladry). It transcends pastiche on the strength of her songwriting (you could swap almost anything here on to Dua Lipa's [Future Nostalgia](#)) and the going-for-broke intensity of it all. *LS*

49

MØL – Diorama



Faith no more ... cult survivor-singer Kim Song Sternkopf (centre) with band MØL. Photograph: Sebastian Apel

Blending the blast beats and acid-gargling glottal mayhem of black metal with the uplifting, even sentimental guitar dynamics of shoegaze, "blackgaze" has become a vibrant corner of heavy music – and Danish quintet MØL became one of its best exponents with their second album. The moody breakdowns allow the explosive choruses to land all the more righteously, with vocalist Kim Song Sternkopf – a survivor of faith cults as a child – venting majestically into the mic. Tracks such as Serf bring in a groove metal sensibility to help it all swing. *BBT*

48

Lucy Dacus – Home Video

Some of the year's best musical storytelling lived in the Virginia songwriter's third record, her writing newly amplified by subtle hints of pop propulsion and grit that evoked how Elliott Smith expanded his sound. Dacus reflects on her teenage years – of church and bible camp, of budding queer desire amid a culture of shame and damnation, of the fantasies that let her escape these limitations – with such tender curiosity that these vignettes feel less like fixed memories than forensic crime scene reconstructions.

[Read the full review](#). LS

47

Chai – WINK

The truly self-assured rarely make a noise about it, and so it is with the third album by Japanese girl group [Chai](#). To blissed-out, dreamy synth-pop that buoys you along like a lazy river – occasionally spiked by classic rap throwbacks and arcade-game electro – the four-piece dreamily hymn the joys of food, self-acceptance and protest, nurturing their own laid-back take on [pleasure activism](#). LS

46

Stephen Fretwell – Busy Guy



Melody maker ... Scunthorpe singer-songwriter Stephen Fretwell.
Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

A songwriters' songwriter beloved of Elbow and Arctic Monkeys, [Stephen Fretwell](#) was washing pots in a Wetherspoon's pub, his music career having flatlined amid fatherhood. He hauled himself up and gave music another shot, apparently at the cost of his marriage. So these songs are the work of a truly inveterate musician, and it shows – Fretwell has such a natural facility for an affecting turn of melody, his simple fingerpicked guitar made eerie by the subtle ambient tones that sit behind it. *BBT*

45

For Those I Love – For Those I Love

Poignant memories seem to lengthen and soften as we age, but this album is a reminder of how much jagged heft they have when you're looking back after just a few years or months. [David Balfe](#), 30, reflects on a dead best friend, poverty, trauma and the intense vibrancy of young friendships and creativity, in long recitations set to music that reaches towards techno and house. "You're told you need to grow cold to grow old," Balfe says, but he remains charged up with human warmth on these songs. [Read the full review](#). *BBT*

Black Country, New Road – For the First Time



‘Timeless tenderness’ ... Black Country, New Road. Photograph: Max Grainger

You don’t tend to get many Top 5 charting albums from bands who blend klezmer, post-punk, jazz and prog with lyrics about failed romance at a science fair, but [Black Country, New Road](#) managed it. That success is testament to how particular and fresh their sound is amid the ordinary boys of British indie, further helped by a really arresting frontman, Isaac Wood. Whether it’s really him or a persona, he is haughty, easily hurt, lustful, clumsy and incurably romantic – a wonderful, flawed character. [Read the full review](#). BBT

Chris Corsano and Bill Orcutt – Made Out of Sound

For this album, made remotely last year, guitarist Orcutt improvised to Corsano's drum tracks, observing the waveforms as he recorded "so I could see when a crescendo was coming or when to bring it down", he said. It's reminiscent of a surfer's mentality, and *Made Out of Sound* feels thrillingly like the trusty unpredictability of broaching the sea: absurdist guitar begets quieter contemplation; burnished riffs harden and soften, then collapse. Throughout, the open-ended sense of beauty is undimmed. *LS*

42

Gojira – Fortitude

Metal's potential for thunderous anger makes it the most naturally expressive music to vent the fear, confusion and even shame of the climate crisis. "The greatest miracle is burning to the ground," laments Joe Duplantier with bafflement and urgency, singing about the Amazon but perhaps also the entire planet. Other songs are direct rallying cries to save Earth (*Into the Storm*, *Sphinx*); *Another World* turns jaded and escapist, but is offset by *The Chant*, whose hearty chorus is the kind of thing a post-apocalyptic band of survivors would sing while rowing across a flooded city. *Fortitude* is an album that surveys humanity's idiocy, but also its tenacity.
BBT

41

Eris Drew – *Quivering in Time*

The joyous ecclesiastical energy of house enriches your soul on listening to this full-length from the US producer, which also chimes with the desire for optimism and gregariousness amid the waning pandemic. Like a lot of the best underground dance artists in recent years (Skee Mask, [Anz](#) etc), she firmly embraces the breakbeat-driven sound of the early 90s – *Ride Free* even has the same Peter Fonda sample as Primal Scream's *Loaded* – and further enriches those busy, cymbal-heavy rhythms with zesty detailing: rave melodies, declarative vocal samples, penetrating bass notes. [Read the full review.](#) *BBT*

40

Lana Del Rey – Chemtrails Over the Country Club

Who is [Lana Del Rey](#) really? The question that has animated her decade-long career has sometimes riled her, but the first of two albums she released this year turns introspective to consider the matter. Was she happiest as a 19-year-old waitress listening to [Kings of Leon](#), as she sings in stunning falsetto on White Dress? Is she most herself as a sister, a lover, a star, an adopted Californian – or embracing her wanderlust and escaping all that? The myth and melodrama, at least, remain unchanged on a Lana album made with an unusually light touch. [Read the full review](#). LS

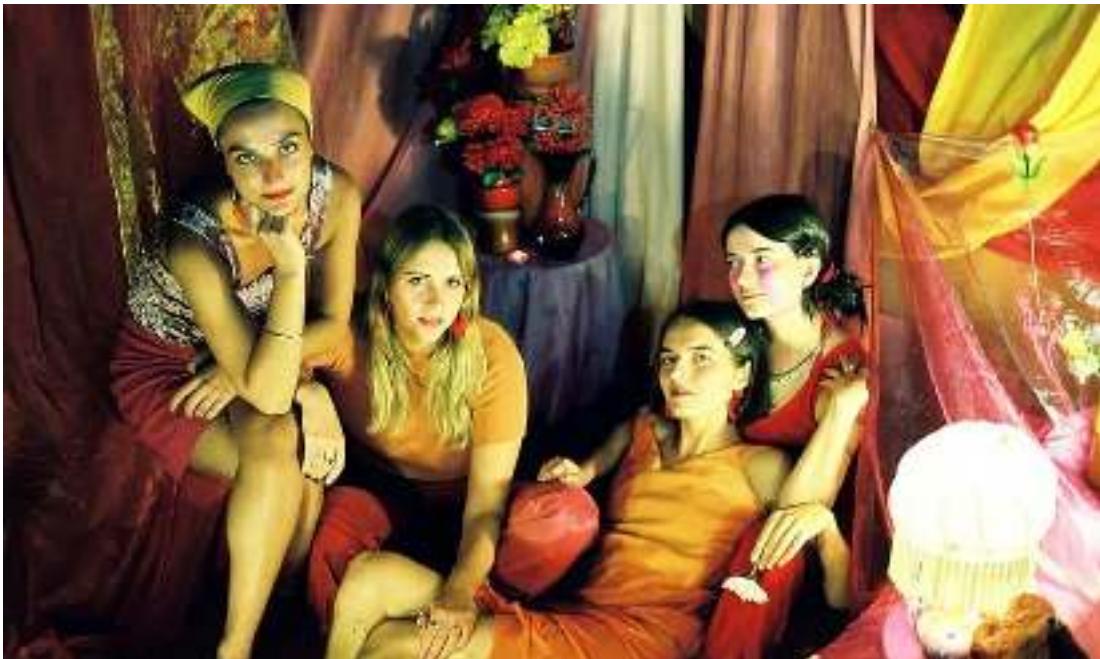
39

[Hayley Williams](#) – Flowers for Vases/Descansos

With pop-punk surging this year, Paramore's influence may never have been stronger – but the band's flag bearer continued to burrow away from incandescent rock into stranger, subtler sounds. Williams' second solo album in two years observed the dying days of her marriage, and how the reliability of sadness became its own sort of safe harbour. That strange sense of comforting desolation hums through in acoustic guitar and ghostly piano, although Williams' innate way with a vocal hook provides the defiant life force. LS

38

Goat Girl – [On All Fours](#)



Using synths to crack open a portal out of the drab ... Goat Girl. Photograph: Holly Whitaker

The [south London quartet](#)'s debut was garage rock with a touch of psych; this sophomore album grandly scaled that second element up, using synths to crack open a portal out of the drab, repressive everyday. The bigger ambition was partly predicated by one member surviving cancer, and the band don't shy from big questions about life and death: the climate crisis, capitalism and the struggle to be allowed one's truth and identity are among the topics broached. *BBT*

37

Erika de Casier – **Sensational**

Any crush has a delicate alchemy, and liable to lurch towards obsession or revulsion as the fantasy of someone duels with the reality. On the second album by the Portuguese-born Danish songwriter, her would-be lover may be a braggart who is rude to waiters, but that smile is irresistible: what are you gonna do? Her minimalist take on turn-of-the-millennium R&B shivers with sensitivity, essaying every heart flutter and gut punch in plush bass, glassy percussion and elegant strings, while De Casier's coy delivery brims with a beguiling sense of mystery. [Read the full review](#). *LS*

36

Aya – Im Hole

This is the kind of slippery, funny, explosively creative record that perhaps could only be made in the UK. Yorkshirewoman Aya Sinclair mulches various bits of club culture in to a fetid, sweating mass – grime, breakbeat, drill, the off-kilter electronics of Autechre, the hyper-contemporary bass shudder of the late [Sophie](#) – and threads vocals through it, her surreal non sequiturs and body horror hovering on the edge of rap. *BBT*

35

Aly & AJ – A Touch of the Beat Gets You Up on Your Feet Gets You Out and Then Into the Sun

It's one of pop's sweetest narratives: former child stars escape the machine to make a great, offbeat record. Fourteen years after their last album, one-time Disney performers Aly and AJ softened their synth-pop pedigree in this dreamy collection of west coast pop-rock, a vision of Robyn-gone-Laurel Canyon that also might sate anyone left hoping for a bit more brooding from this year's [Kacey Musgraves](#) album. *LS*

34

The War on Drugs – I Don't Live Here Anymore

The psychedelic, shoegaze-y haze has gradually lifted from Adam Granduciel's band, burned off under a rising sun as their success has grown. He now stands in the midday of his career, with this fifth album fully embracing bright, mainstream classic rock. Powered by those distinctive WoD backbeats, which match the tirelessness of Granduciel's search for love, perspective and contentment, these songs are huge in scale: both the arrangements and the strength of feeling. [Read the full review](#). *BBT*

PinkPantheress – To Hell With It



An after-hours rite of passage ... PinkPantheress. Photograph: Brent McKeever

In the TikTok phenomenon PinkPantheress's micro-pop gems (only two songs on her debut project exceeded two minutes), classic drum'n'bass samples double as nagging memories and overwhelming rushes of adrenaline, swirling around lyrics about obsession and disappointment made more sinister by her innocent, breathless voice. Fourteen years ago, [Burial](#)'s transient, lonely, sodium-lit sound became associated with the experience of sitting on the night bus. [PinkPantheress](#) makes music befitting another after-hours rite of passage: that bleary-eyed, rueful stumble through bright lights and swarming crowds as you try to hold it together. LS

Cassandra Jenkins – An Overview on Phenomenal Nature

The New Yorker's second album is almost confrontationally still: brass like wisps of smoke, guitar a gentle thrum, softly puddling cymbals. Once the aftershocks of a loss have settled, Jenkins takes stock of what's gone for good – Ambiguous Norway orbits her memories of [David Berman](#), whose band Purple Mountains she was set to tour with prior to his death – and how learning how to trust again might yet retrieve her stolen sense of peace. *LS*

31

Low – Hey What

[Low](#)'s last album, [2018's Double Negative](#), was a total reinvention 25 years into a virtually undented career – a staggering achievement for any band. Yet somehow Alan and Mimi Sparhawk transcended it with this follow-up, bridling its predecessor's swashbuckling noise until it splintered, and contrasting it with electronic reimaginings of the forlorn atmospherics that made their name. The sheer invention contrasted devastating lyrics about hitting a wall – drawn from the couple's experiences dealing with Alan's depression – imbuing these static hymns to limits and perseverance with a superhuman sense of determination. [Read the full review](#). *LS*

30

[Greentea Peng – Man Made](#)

There's a wonderful sense of liveness to this record, evoking a dive bar with a fug of weed smoke sitting at shoulder height. On stage is London-born Aria Wells, whose delivery is natural and improvisatory: vowels that bend drowsily downwards, or rap flow that sits on top of the beat without being too fussily precise. Behind her a band shuffle through a selection of grooves – reggae, neo-soul, hip-hop – that add up to a sensual, instinctive album that you could imagine [Amy Winehouse](#) making on a different timeline. [Read the full review](#). *BBT*

29

Clairo – Sling

A strong self-preservationist streak ran through several highly anticipated albums by pop's young women this year, with the likes of [Billie Eilish](#), [Lorde](#) and [Kacey Musgraves](#) opting for lower-key sounds that poured cool water on heightened expectations. Among them was [Clairo](#), whose second album left behind bedroom electro-pop for perfectly turned miniatures of Carole King's warm classicism. Irrepressibly, sweetly funky, it sounded like music for pushing the furniture back and dancing on the living room rug – and Clairo's lyrics, about breaking with relationships that no longer served her, underscored that joyful intimacy. [Read the full review](#). LS

28

[Kacey Musgraves](#) – Star-Crossed

Every stage of a breakup is sung in chronological order here: marital worries, hope for the relationship being good enough, worsening arguments, split, poignant staring at old photos, perspective gained, exciting/depressing ventures on to dating apps, eventual feeling of true freedom. Swerve a couple of tepid chillout-compilation moments and along the journey you alight at some of Musgraves' prettiest songwriting, nicely leavened with her straight-talking, wearily dismayed tone of voice. [Read the full review](#). BBT

27

St Vincent – Daddy's Home



Rich lyricism ... St Vincent at the 2021 Pitchfork music festival, September, 2021. Photograph: Daniel Boczarski/Getty Images

It was perhaps slightly overshadowed by its backstory: [Annie Clark's](#) father's release from prison, which, for some listeners, cast the entire record in an unsympathetic light. But its lyricism was much richer than one man, and its 70s-inspired music richer still: psychedelic soul, cabaret songcraft, prog ballads, cosmic funk. Clark remains a highly literate and shapeshifting songwriter, where half the fun is working out how much is ironised and how much is real. [Read the full review](#). BBT

26

Mogwai – As the Love Continues

In a feat of lockdown recording, Dave Fridmann produced Mogwai's 10th studio album over Zoom and Atticus Ross directed an orchestra in Budapest via remote connection from Los Angeles. The classic Mogwai physicality remained undimmed by these virtual limitations, however, swerving between twinkling beauty (*Dry Fantasy*) and pleasingly barbed dirges (*Ceiling Granny*), and chucking in a new bag of glitter (*Supposedly, We Were Nightmares*) for good measure. Happily for all involved, it became their first UK No 1 album. [Read the full review](#). LS

25

Madlib – Sound Ancestors



Communing with sound ... Madlib. Photograph: Roberto Flores

A relatively austere and serious release from the collagist hip-hop beatmaker, letting his fabled samples really stretch out and inhabit the songs instead of chopping between them – a result of Kieren “Four Tet” Hebden arranging the album. There’s still room for [Madlib](#)’s trickster energy though, as found in a chaotic blurt of mayhem-inducing rap duo MOP. The title track is spiritual jazz, but that genre’s mood pervades the entire album, as Madlib communes with more than half a century of sound. [Read the full review.](#)

BBT

24

[Billie Eilish](#) – Happier Than Ever

On her second album, Billie Eilish not only defied the tacit assumption that there’s nothing less appealing than complaining about the ravages wrought by fame but reinvigorated the cliche by toying deliciously with concealment

and exposure. She sings about sexual fantasies and clandestine assignations and the power she can wield to keep her partners quiet, flexing her ability to carry on in secret – despite manifold violations of her privacy – as if it were a coveted jewel. She and her collaborator brother Finneas brought the same thrill to intimacy as they did to adolescent fears on her debut, tracing the scope of Eilish’s newfound commitment to her own pleasure in dreamy golden-age classicism and hormone-spiking techno. She let her listeners share in sensation even if the details were off-limits. [Read the full review](#). LS

23

Floating Points, London Symphony Orchestra and Pharoah Sanders – Promises

Promises is an album that rewards patience. Not only was it Pharoah Sanders’ first major recording in a decade – and a record five years in the making itself – but its nine movements unfolded with a rare subtlety. A chiming refrain written by Sam Shepherd (AKA Floating Points) and played by the [LSO](#) sparkled like dawn’s first light, its sense of potential undimmed over 45 minutes of repetition. Sanders’ saxophone playing, lightyears softer than the blazing attack that made his name, activated that magic. The harmony between them generated its own sense of orbit, with cello and violin solos and the moving spectacle of Sanders’ singing voice balanced in a kind of celestial harmony. [Read the full review](#). LS

22

Laura Mvula – Pink Noise

After enduring the humiliation of her old label dropping her with a seven-line email, Mvula donned the musical equivalent of shoulder pads – namely the 1980s’ gated drums, pugilistic bass and immaculately buffed synths – for this supreme display of confidence against the odds. The stylisation never comes at the expense of heart, either: Mvula delves deep as she searches for freedom in desire, art and within her own body, stretching her voice into majestic, wild anthems of liberation. [Read the full review](#). LS

21

The Coral – Coral Island



Ballads for lonely fishermen ... the Coral.

Few of their peers from the 00s indie boom are so hale and hearty; 20 years into their career, the Merseyside band made their most ambitious album, and one of their best. It's a double concept album about a seaside resort, and captures those towns' blend of buckets-and-spades buoyancy and out-of-season malaise; gorgeous harmonies flow through jangling psych-pop and touches of northern soul, though there's also creepy rockabilly emanating from the ghost train and ballads for lonely fishermen at the end of the pier.
[Read the full review. BBT](#)

20

Arooj Aftab – Vulture Prince



The year's biggest musical revelation ... Arooj Aftab. Photograph: Vishesh Sharma

The year's biggest musical revelation came from Pakistani composer Arooj Aftab, who set traditional Urdu ghazals (and an adaptation of a poem by Rumi) amid harp and strings that rippled and ran as clear as a fresh stream. In her rich, meditative vocals, Aftab weighed the beauty of a single phrase and tenaciously addressed existential disappointments; her small ensemble shapeshifted between intricate filigrees and paring back to make a virtue of space. Made in response to the death of her younger brother, and released into an unprecedented global experience of grief, *Vulture Prince* was a refuge for solace and contemplation. *LS*

19

Dave – We're All Alone in This Together

“It’s like flying first class on a crashing plane,” Dave says of his fame and wealth at the outset of his second album. Few rappers have sounded so ill at ease with critical and commercial success as him – even when firing off bars about gorgeous women, there’s a wary, jaded tone to his voice. And in many ways, nothing has changed: he remains angry at the government over immigration and social mobility, and relationships certainly haven’t got

easier. “Love’s a film and I’m just flicking through the parts I’m in.” That sense of a man looking down at his own life is Dave’s tragedy, and what makes his tracks such, well, psychodramas. [Read the full review](#). *BBT*

18

Turnstile – Glow On

The compressed, febrile sound of 80s punk rock is resurrected for this terrifically entertaining record, where the jams are not just kicked out but also sent off the nearest cliff. The monstrous chug of cock-rock rhythm guitar underpins lead lines made for whipping a mane of hair around to, and Brendan Yates’s vocals have something of Perry Farrell’s yelled pronouncements to them. But there’s a dream-pop softness, too – not least in two songs with Blood Orange guesting – that adds emotional range. *BBT*

17

Tirzah – Colourgrade



South Londoner finds a new singular language ... Tirzah.

The intimacy of new parenthood, where the world shrinks to a few rooms, is expressed in a new singular language by the south London musician (she also evokes the strangeness of those circumscribed Covid lockdowns). Breath, touch, kisses and sleep fill her songs, which conjure dub, hip-hop, post-punk and folk as if trying to remember them from a previous life. This album has the kind of utterly natural beauty that other artists strive towards, but will never reach because of that very striving. [Read the full review](#). *BBT*

16

Deafheaven – Infinite Granite

For their most mainstream album yet, the band's screams abated, the drums slowed their gallop, and the guitars took on a prettiness that recalled [Coldplay](#) at times. For certain metalheads, these are unforgivable sins and Deafheaven remain a divisive band – but for the rest of us, this is a stirring blend of arena rock and shoegaze that seems to fill the sky. [Read the full review](#). *BBT*

15

Nick Cave and Warren Ellis – Carnage

The spirit of [Scott Walker](#) fills this idiosyncratic and brilliant album, which pumps with blood as bright and oxygenated as its red cover text. Freed from the occasionally sentimental and over-sumptuous backings of recent Bad Seeds albums, Cave and Ellis stalk off into a wilderness fringed with cyberpunk detritus: strange bits of production prowl at the edges of these violent songs. In its second half, the sky turns gentler as Cave ponders ageing across four ambient ballads: “I’m 200 pounds of packed ice / Sitting on a chair and in the morning sun” is as good an image for the inevitability of death as you’ll find. [Read the full review](#). *BBT*

14

Lil Nas X – Montero



Witty and frank ... Lil Nas X in LA, November 2021. Photograph: Mario Anzuoni/Reuters

One of the most proudly queer pop records ever released, where sex isn't veiled in metaphor but detailed right down to where the ejaculate lands. Lil Nas X writes wittily about lust and witheringly about his rivals, but there are also frank admissions of loneliness and doubt as he navigates his way into the lasting fame that is assured by his stunningly good top line melodies. [Read the full review. BBT](#)

13

Japanese Breakfast – Jubilee

Michelle Zauner weaves beguilingly strange fantasies of how fulfilment might look throughout her third album as [Japanese Breakfast](#). The rapturous Paprika considers how it would feel to “stand at the height of your powers” as an artist, but other songs about desire – for other people, and for life – explore agency and submission in striking shades of grey. The musical roles on Jubilee are just as mutable, shapeshifting convincingly from New Order-era pop to the brassy filigrees of early 2010s indie, and the arrangements give Zauner space to wonder. LS

12

Jazmine Sullivan – Heaux Tales

The power struggle between reason and desire fuels the Philadelphia songwriter's fourth release, which intersperses soulful swagger and forlorn blues with interludes by women describing what they mean by owning their sexuality. Sullivan's compassion resonates in how freely her interviewees express what some might see as contradictions (threatened with a sex tape leak, the subject of Ari's Tale shrugs, "That dick spoke life into me"). And her own songs could be righteous – Pick Up Your Feelings snaps impatiently, and she makes no bones about her own pleasure on the languid On It – but they're also transparent about the ways that freedom and dignity don't always look how you might expect. "I just want to be taken care of / 'Cause I've worked enough," she sings on The Other Side. *LS*

11

Sam Fender – Seventeen Going Under

The North Shields songwriter's second album starts with a grim image of teenage desensitisation: a chronically ill parent, snuff videos, fist fights and arrests; rinse and repeat. The forecast hardly improves across Seventeen Going Under, on which hope is elusive amid Fender's bitter depictions of feeling trapped by political alienation and inherited bad habits. And yet the sheer force of feeling in this record – tenaciously euphoric sax a la Springsteen, tempos that bob like a featherweight boxer hungry for their shot, a reckless taste for the epic – indicates a life force that won't be stamped out so easily, one that, going by the rabid response to the album, has mass revivifying potential. [Read the full review](#). *LS*

2021.11.30 - Coronavirus

- [Live Covid: France confirms Omicron case on Réunion; German incidence rate falls slightly](#)
- [Omicron Entry bans spread as China pledges 1bn jabs for Africa](#)
- [Q+A What changes have been announced for Covid booster jabs?](#)
- ['Having to close would be a disaster' Omicron is ominous for hospitality](#)

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Boosters may protect against new virus variant as US checks vaccine effectiveness – as it happened

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Coronavirus

Omicron: entry bans spread as China pledges 1bn jabs for Africa



A Cathay Pacific aircraft lands at Hong Kong airport. The territory has banned visitors from Australia, Canada and parts of Europe. Photograph: Isaac Lawrence/AFP/Getty Images

[Martin Farrer](#) and [Samantha Lock](#)

Tue 30 Nov 2021 00.27 EST

More countries have imposed travel restrictions on visitors from other parts of the world in order to try to contain the spread of the Omicron variant of Covid-19, as China pledged to send 600m vaccine doses to Africa.

As cases of Omicron continued to grow around the world from Japan to Reunion Island, **Hong Kong** widened its ban on non-residents entering the city on Tuesday to include visitors who have been to Australia, Canada, Israel or six European countries in the past 21 days. Non-resident arrivals from four southern African nations have already been barred.

Ecuador joined the move to tighten border by imposing entry restrictions on travellers flying from or via a number of African countries. It would also request vaccine certificates from those arriving from other countries due to the new Omicron strain of coronavirus, president Guillermo Lasso said late on Monday.

With the announcement Ecuador joins other countries across the globe in restricting travel in response to the Omicron strain, which carries a very high risk of increased infection, [according to the World Health Organization \(WHO\).](#)

The head of WHO, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, said the emergence of the new strain in South Africa last week showed how “hard-won gains could vanish in an instant”. He told a special session of the World Health Assembly in Geneva that “Covid-19 is not done with us”.

Media in **Japan** reported that the first case of Omicron was recorded on Tuesday, while a person has tested positive for Omicron on the French Indian Ocean island of **Réunion**, it was reported on Tuesday, citing an official researcher on the island. The 35-year-old person had recently travelled to Mozambique.

Amid concern about the gulf between vaccine rates in developed countries and less wealthy ones, **China** has pledged to donate 600m doses of its Covid-19 vaccines to Africa.

0

Why Omicron is the most worrying Covid variant yet – video explainer

China’s president, Xi Jinping, made the promise in a video speech to the opening ceremony of a China-Africa forum on economic cooperation in Senegal on Monday. He said China would supply 1bn doses in all. The other 400m are to come through other routes such as production by Chinese companies in Africa.

“We need to put people and their lives first, be guided by science, support waiving intellectual property rights on Covid-19 vaccines, and truly ensure

the accessibility and affordability of vaccines in Africa to bridge the immunisation gap,” Xi said.

Stock markets in Asia made a good recovery on Tuesday after steep falls in values in recent days brought on by concerns about Omicron. The Nikkei in Tokyo led the way by lifting 0.5% while the ASX200 was up more than 1% in Sydney.

“We’ll get a new variant, we’ll get new waves, but the market – and we all as investors – will see how that might play out,” Jason Brady, president at Thornburg Investment Management in Hong Kong, told Bloomberg.

In the **United States**, president Joe Biden said Omicron was a “cause for concern, not a cause for panic”, as the US implemented restrictions on travel from South Africa and [several other countries](#).

Biden [urged all Americans to get vaccinated](#), including booster shots, saying it was the best protection against the new variant. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention weighed in by saying on Monday that everyone aged 18 years and older should get a booster shot.

Canada saw another two cases on Monday, taking its total to five, and the prime minister, Justin Trudeau, also appealed to the public to make sure they were vaccinated.

“Let’s be clear: getting vaccinated is the best thing you can do right now,” Trudeau said in a tweet on Monday night local time.

“So, if you don’t have your shots yet, get them. And now that we have enough vaccine doses for every kid between the ages of 5 and 11 to get their first shot, make sure you get your kids vaccinated, too.”

The **UK** government is planning to [reboot its vaccination programme](#) back to levels seen earlier in the pandemic when around 500,000 jabs a day were being administered. In addition, ministers cut the waiting time for boosters [to three months](#) in a bid to outpace the Omicron variant that scientists believe is already spreading in the community.

There were 11 confirmed cases of Omicron in England and Scotland on Monday, with hundreds more expected in the coming days. From Tuesday, masks will be mandatory on public transport including airports and stations, and in shops.

Two arrivals into **Australia** have tested positive to Omicron, becoming the first cases in the country. The pair are in quarantine in Sydney after arriving from Johannesburg via Qatar on Saturday.

Authorities in Singapore said on Tuesday that two travellers who tested positive for Omicron in Sydney transited through Changi airport. And a fifth person is self-isolating with the Omicron strain after returning to Australia from southern Africa before the variant emerged last week.

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Coronavirus

What changes have been announced for Covid booster jabs in UK?



A mobile NHS Health on the Move vaccination service in Chesham.
Photograph: Maureen McLean/Rex/Shutterstock

[Peter Walker](#) and [Andrew Gregory](#)

Mon 29 Nov 2021 14.01 EST

The UK government [has accepted](#) advice from its vaccines watchdog, the Joint Committee on Vaccines and Immunisation (JCVI), for one of the biggest immediate changes in the Covid jabs programme. Here is what has been decided and why.

What changes have been announced for booster jabs?

There are two: the age range and the time gap. When boosters – a third dose to top up people's immunity – were first introduced in September, they were restricted to those over 50 or with clinical vulnerabilities. Earlier this month the age limit [was extended](#) to 40. In time, all adults over 18 will be eligible.

Under the original plans, boosters were not supposed to be given until at least six months after the second jab, though people were recently allowed to start booking them after five months. Now the minimum interval has been cut to three months.

So when can I get my booster?

That depends in part on your age and how quickly they can be given. [Sajid Javid](#), the health secretary, confirmed in the Commons that they would be carried out in age order, with 30-39-year-olds expected to be up next. This should be confirmed within days. Even if there is a successful speed-up of the rollout, if you are say, 19, it is likely to be months rather than weeks before you can get your third dose.

What about children aged 12 to 15?

The JCVI has confirmed the widely expected plan for this age group to get a second jab at least 12 weeks after their first. So far, the vaccination rate for this age group is 39.1%, against 67.4% of adults who have had at least one dose. A similar second jab approach for teenagers aged 16 and 17 was agreed earlier this month.

And younger children?

A number of countries have approved Covid vaccinations for children aged five to 11, and this is something the UK could follow. However, the JCVI faces a potentially tricky decision given the limited health risks of Covid to the bulk of younger children. First of all, the medicines watchdog, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, would need to approve vaccines for use by the age group.

And people with suppressed immune systems?

People whose immunity is compromised by conditions such as blood cancer are already eligible for three vaccine doses, although some charities say the rollout has at times been chaotic. They will now be eligible for a booster jab, which will be their fourth dose.

A third dose and booster are not necessarily the same – for example, if someone is given the Moderna vaccine, they will get a full dose for a third injection, but usually a half dose for a booster.

Does the UK have enough vaccine doses for this ramp-up?

Officials involved in the vaccination programme said they expect there will be sufficient doses. A bigger challenge has been trying to encourage uptake among those already eligible.

One official who runs a Covid vaccination site in London said they had experienced a “significant rise” in walk-ins in the last 72 hours, however, with people coming forward for first, second and booster doses. The NHS will still need to carefully stagger when it invites certain age groups to come forward for a booster, the official said, warning that if everyone came forward at once, “that’s when you could run into supply problems”.

Will we need to change the pace of the rollout?

Almost certainly. Javid told the Commons that while he had previously planned for 6m booster jabs to be administered in England over the next few weeks, with the emergence of Omicron he wants “to go further and faster”.

The NHS is currently administering about 350,000 booster vaccines or third jabs a day, or about 2.4m a week across the UK, official figures show. It will have to increase the daily number of jabs to 500,000 a day in order to hit 30m boosters by Christmas Day, according to Guardian analysis.

Has the Omicron variant prompted these changes?

Yes and no. Ministers have long viewed an extended booster programme as a way to reduce winter pressure on the NHS. Second jabs for 12-15-year-olds and boosters for people with compromised immune systems were both expected.

But Omicron greatly increased the pace of decision-making at the JCVI, a regulator that is used to a longer deliberation process. JCVI members were called to an emergency meeting on Saturday and the decision was fast-tracked amid intense government pressure to find ways to limit the impact of the variant. The JCVI is a UK-wide body and it is up to each devolved nation to accept advice, but they almost always do.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/29/what-changes-have-been-announced-for-covid-booster-jabs-in-uk>

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Hospitality industry

‘Having to close would be a disaster’: Omicron is ominous for hospitality



Stosie Madi at the Parkers Arms. She worries that fresh Covid-19 pessimism risks dampening trade. Photograph: Joel Goodman/The Guardian

[Rob Davies](#)

[@ByRobDavies](#)

Tue 30 Nov 2021 01.00 EST

The Parkers Arms in rural [Lancashire](#) is freezing cold and cannot take bookings over the phone, at least for now. Four days ago, Storm Arwen took out the power lines and telephone wires linking this rural Lancashire gastropub to the outside world.

Its ever-optimistic proprietor, Stosie Madi, expects normal service to resume by the weekend at the pub in Newton-in-Bowland. But now – like the rest of

the hospitality sector – she has a new worry on her mind: the [Omicron variant of Covid-19](#).

“We’re fully booked for the Christmas season and we’re quite pleased with that but we’ve had some cancellations come through,” she says, adding that the bulk came on Sunday after Boris Johnson [announced tighter rules in response to the variant](#).

She worries fresh Covid-19 pessimism risks dampening trade, which had been booming since restrictions were lifted in the summer.

“People have been making up for lost time but the worst thing that could happen is if we’re stopped from trading,” Madi says. “This year they’ve said they won’t lock us down again but you know what he [Johnson] is like. You never know how quickly he changes his mood. If we had to close down completely, that would be a disaster. I don’t know if I could pull the strength out for that.”

Madi is one of thousands of publicans, nightclub owners and restaurateurs dreading a rerun of last winter, when soaring cases and newly identified variant led to a lost Christmas.

While hospitality has escaped any new restrictions in Sunday’s announcement, which reintroduced compulsory mask-wearing in shops and on public transport, the uncertainty over whether they will eventually be brought in may already be taking its toll.

“There will undoubtedly be an impact as consumers digest the news and take steps to protect themselves,” says Kate Nicholls, chief executive of trade body UKHospitality. “There’s no doubt there will be a chilling effect on confidence, while travel restrictions may mean some bookings are being cancelled.”

A second Christmas lockdown would be “catastrophic” for a sector still rebuilding from last year and heavily reliant on the festive period, she says.

Peter Marks, chief executive of 46-venue nightclub group Rekom UK, has already had to revive the company from the ashes of Deltic, the firm's former name before it was rescued from administration by a Scandinavian firm.

The nightclub industry has been closed for longer than any other hospitality segment and received less support.

"It makes me want to scream at the fact that I'm sat here waiting for the next piece of virtue-signalling from government where they start picking on us, on nightclubs in particular," says Marks.

"If you lose Christmas and new year it would cost millions and mean you would not have the cash to see you through the sparse trade of January and February."

Even restrictions such as having to ask for vaccine status on the door could have a major effect now, he adds. "Slow queues in freezing conditions are not conducive to great trade."

Nicholls argues that any reimposition of curbs on hospitality must come with renewed economic aid. "Last year we had grants, reduced VAT and full furlough but none of those are in place now. Businesses wouldn't be able to cope. Substantial restrictions should mean substantial support."

At the Old Millwrights Arms in Aylesbury, landlady Liz Hind has been fielding questions from punters about whether masks are coming back to pubs. "People are very confused about what they are supposed to be doing, the story of the pandemic really," she says, warning the longer-term effect on pubs will be hard to reverse.

"The pub industry Facebook chatter is that the people who are more concerned about Omicron were already staying away. We've got that long-term change in customer behaviour."

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2021.11.30 - Opinion

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Why is Britain pushing it?
- Polly Toynbee There is no 'solution' to Channel crossings – there is only a humane response
- As an obstetrician, here's my advice to pregnant women: get your vaccine and stay safe
- Wine glasses are getting smaller. But will anything actually make us drink less?

OpinionMigration

Draconian border security doesn't work and costs lives. Why is Britain pushing it?

[Daniel Trilling](#)



A camp in Calais, where migrants were waiting on 27 November for the chance to cross the Channel despite the death of 27 people in the same week.
Photograph: Rafael Yaghobzadeh/AP

Tue 30 Nov 2021 01.00 EST

In the Calais museum to the second world war, housed in a former Nazi bunker in one of the town's parks, there is a room dedicated to people smugglers. A giant map shows the routes by which members of the French resistance spirited Jews, stranded British soldiers and others out of German-controlled territory. The paths stretch from France into southern Europe and out over the Mediterranean – an echo of the dangerous journeys taken by many who seek to reach the UK without permission today.

Smuggling people across borders is neither inherently good nor inherently evil. Those who do it can show a callous disregard for human life. Or they can be motivated by a desire to protect and nurture, like when Rob Lawrie, an army veteran who volunteered in the Calais refugee camp in 2015, hid a four-year-old Afghan girl in his van and tried to board a ferry to the UK. (Lawrie [narrowly escaped](#) a prison sentence but was found guilty in France of the lesser offence of endangering a child.) Very often, the “smugglers” are the people on the move themselves, helping one another out as they travel.

What such efforts have in common – from wartime heroics, to profit-making gangs, to acts of charity – is that they are responses to needs. When people feel compelled to move, they will look for ways to do so. If obstacles are placed in their way, the chances that they will turn to the services of smugglers, or attempt dangerous journeys under their own volition, will increase.

After last week’s disaster – the deadliest at the UK’s border with mainland Europe since 39 people were found dead in a lorry in Essex in [October 2019](#) – the British government is under pressure to put an end to the Channel crossings. Its instinct is to reach for yet more border security: on 26 November, [Boris Johnson proposed](#) more patrols at sea, more electronic surveillance, more spying and harsher treatment of migrants who reach the UK. But the situation in the Channel is the clearest evidence we have of where an unrelenting focus on security leads us.

For more than two decades, successive governments have sought to discourage unwanted migrants, mostly people seeking asylum, from crossing the Channel. During the 1990s and early 2000s, Britain and France set up “juxtaposed” border controls, placing officials at transport hubs in each other’s countries, to stop people taking ferries and trains. When people stowed away on vehicles instead, Britain prevailed on France and its neighbours to increase security at ports and entry points. In 2014, for instance, the UK pledged £12m to help France build fences around the port of Calais to [stop people breaking in](#). As these journeys became more difficult, the use of small boats became increasingly common from 2018, accelerating in 2020 as the pandemic shut down other travel options.

We have known for years that border security has deadly consequences. Between 1999 and 2020, according to [a report](#) published by the Institute for Race Relations, just under 300 people lost their lives trying to cross to the UK. People have been hit by cars on the motorways of northern France, they have suffocated inside lorries or been electrocuted in the Channel tunnel, and they have drowned. But the shift to small boats is potentially far more dangerous: while market dynamics create an incentive for smugglers to cram people into unsafe boats, many more migrants are simply clubbing together to buy their own, as the UK's [National Crime Agency admits](#).

From the British government, you couldn't find a response more likely to make the situation worse. Not only does it follow the security-focused trajectory of its predecessors, but this now comes wrapped up in Johnson's toxic post-Brexit mode of engagement. Its diplomatic posturing has soured relations with France, which makes international cooperation more difficult. Some have noted the irony that Brexit actually seems to have given the UK *less* control of its borders – by leaving the EU's common agreement on asylum at the end of 2020, for instance, the UK has lost the ability to return asylum seekers to other European countries they may have passed through. But by far the greater problem is the nationality and borders bill currently making its way through parliament.

The bill is an attempt to reshape policy around the Faragist lie that the country is at “breaking point” from unwanted immigration, by introducing a system that punishes asylum seekers who arrive in the UK of their own accord. This, Priti Patel [has said](#), will encourage refugees to use official routes, ensuring that asylum is “based on need, not the ability to pay people smugglers”. Yet the [government's own assessment](#) of the legislation accepts there is “a risk that increased security and deterrence could encourage [asylum seekers] to attempt riskier means of entering the UK” and that “evidence supporting the effectiveness of this approach is limited”.

Opponents of the bill argue – correctly – that the UK should instead expand safe routes to asylum, through official refugee resettlement schemes. Even where the government claims to want this, its efforts are sorely lacking: the much-vaunted [Afghan citizens resettlement scheme](#) has still not opened, more than three months after the Taliban seized Kabul. (On Thursday, just a day after the disaster in the Channel, a former Afghan soldier was [among the](#)

passengers of a boat that arrived at Dungeness beach in Kent.) A concerted effort to encourage people to claim asylum by other means could undermine demand for smuggling routes. Safe facilities in northern France where people could stay and claim asylum in either country – or humanitarian visas that allow people to travel to the UK to make their claims – would reduce the need for people to attempt crossings.

Yet whether the response is authoritarian or liberal, a common mistake would be to think that there will be a “solution” to Channel crossings in the sense that one or other approach will make this issue disappear entirely. For as long as the UK wishes to maintain border controls there will be people who want to evade them. We can choose to mitigate the damage these controls cause or to ignore it. To go further than that, however, would require a more profound rethinking of our attitudes towards migration, and the way that the UK relates to the rest of the world.

Precious little is known so far about the 27 people who died on Wednesday. Yet what we do know already suggests they were not complete strangers to Britain. Maryam Nuri Mohamed Amin, a 24-year-old Kurdish student from northern Iraq, was trying to join her fiance here. Harem Pirot, 25 and from the same part of the world as Maryam, was trying to join his brother in Cambridge. Why did both see a deadly boat journey as their only option to follow these everyday family relationships? And what would it take for our society to see such international connections as these as a strength, rather than a threat?

After tragedies like the one last week, our political leaders say they want to stop smuggling. What they really mean is that they want to stop migrants. Those two things are not the same – and the gap between them is a matter of life and death.

- Daniel Trilling is the author of *Lights in the Distance: Exile and Refuge at the Borders of Europe* and *Bloody Nasty People: the Rise of Britain’s Far Right*

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OpinionImmigration and asylum

There is no ‘solution’ to Channel crossings – there is only a humane response

[Polly Toynbee](#)





Migrants are brought ashore from a lifeboat in Dungeness, Kent, 24 November 2021. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

Mon 29 Nov 2021 13.49 EST

Politicians need an answer to every problem, even when there isn't one. Pretending to be omniscient and omnipotent is in the job description – though the result is that public trust leaches away, since some problems don't have politically acceptable solutions. There is no politically satisfactory answer to [asylum seekers](#) arriving in Britain when many voters feel "controlling borders" is the definition of nationhood. So impossibilism rules.

Politicians could point to net migration plummeting last year to 34,000, far below David Cameron's original 100,000 promise; the net number of EU nationals coming to the UK [even went negative](#), caused by a combination of the pandemic and Brexit. Or they could show that [less than half](#) the number of asylum seekers arrived in the UK compared with the early 2000s peak. Numbers of asylum [applications are very low](#) compared to France and Germany, while around 85% of refugees worldwide are camped in the poorest countries. We make a disproportionate fuss over taking just 1% of the world's [26 million refugees](#). But pollsters will tell you none of that cuts any ice with voters.

Blame Shakespeare's John of Gaunt, with his preposterous eulogy to English exceptionalism: "This other Eden, demi-paradise / This fortress built by Nature for herself / Against infection and the hand of war..." As infection and refugees from war arrive here, John Donne's better truth, "No man is an island entire of itself", is a more reliable guide for our times: it illustrates the failure to enable poor countries [to access vaccines](#) rebounding on the rich world like an avenging angel, through the Omicron variant. Or take our failure to help to staunch the flow of refugees at source, made harder by the fact that Britain is cutting foreign aid and has shuttered its development department. Berate this country's age-old inability to compare ourselves rationally with any other country, but as one pollster warns me, for politicians, being seen to be complacent about immigration is "not a hill to die on".

The Tories, alarmed at "losing their grip" on borders, as on so much else, take fright at Nigel Farage's threatened return to politics. He may never win a seat, but he has demonstrated his power to deny them a host of seats in the past. He has them in such a lather that the cabinet is engaged in a circular firing squad, blaming each other for the dinghies in the Channel. Priti Patel's allies berate the cabinet for doing "sweet f*** all", [reports](#) the Sunday Times. She blames a do-nothing Foreign Office for failing to negotiate a return of refused asylum seekers. "The one thing they're supposed to do is to speak to foreigners and foreign countries," says a friend of Patel. They rail against Ben Wallace for offering no military barracks as asylum detention centres. A cabinet minister retaliates, saying that "she has over-promised and underdelivered": her plan for processing asylum seeker applicants in Albania disintegrated when that country found out about it, crying, "[fake news!](#)"

"Stick with Prit," the prime minister said of his home secretary over her breaking of the ministerial code – and why not, when Cruella draws all the flak for the brutality and ineffectiveness of this government's migration policy? She rails against Border Force for refusing to [turn around fragile boats](#), but captains don't want to break international maritime law. Her nationality and borders bill's penalty of up to four years in prison for "inadmissibles", asylum seekers who arrive unlawfully, is another fantasy. Boris Johnson met the Common Sense Tory MPs group, reports the Express,

promising some new wheeze: “He has a plan but didn’t want to reveal the details yet,” as his cabinet “wets” would wreck it.

What seems to be brewing is an attempt to derogate or abrogate the 1951 refugee conventions obliging signatories to harbour those fleeing persecution. The UN refugee agency says the bill already [breaks the convention](#) by penalising asylum seekers for arriving through safe countries.

That’s how the wind blows when even someone seen as a liberal Tory like Matthew Parris [advocates abandoning](#) the Geneva convention. You could say the convention belongs to a cold war era, suitable for encouraging the escape of communism’s dissidents, not a mass exodus from poverty-stricken and often gangsterised perpetual war zones, where the lines blur between overlapping terrors. But I’ve never been clear on the human rights difference between a family fleeing so their children don’t starve, and a family escaping their children’s murder for ethnic or political reasons.

Government figures show that 55% of applicants [are granted asylum](#) but Peter Walsh of Oxford University’s Migration Observatory says “of 10,000 refused, at least a half never leave. The backlog of assessments is 88,000, some waiting three years or more.” January’s “tough” new law labelling arrivals “inadmissibles” if they came through safe countries does nothing to solve this. How they arrived is unprovable since Brexit Britain lost access to Eurodac, EU fingerprint data. Of 4,500 “inadmissibles”, says Walsh, “only seven have been returned, with so few agreements with countries to take people back”.

What happens to those who are refused? Most stay, living lives of limbo, vanishing into an underground economy. That’s why all this “tough” stuff is bogus. It would be better by far to admit the truth and let asylum seekers live, work and integrate legally. On this issue, hardline Tories such as Steve Baker and [the public](#) agree they should be allowed to earn their living. With a million vacancies, we need workers – and they are not going anywhere anyway. Nor is there any evidence that the ability to work is a “pull” factor, [with not one study](#) finding that asylum seekers shop around according to best work and benefits regimes.

Easing asylum numbers takes international cooperation, not treaty breaking or gesturing rudely at the French with [undiplomatic tweets](#). The public may not accept that stopping all arrivals is impossible, because no one dares tell them that truth. Instead we may see rhetoric ratchet up and further policy cruelty.

The only actual penalty for reneging on the refugee convention is international opprobrium: no other country has done this. But that might cause enough public shame to stir a patriotic sense of harm done to national pride and honour. Voters also harbour a contradictory idea of Britain as a country that keeps its word, plays by the rules and sees justice done. Besides, in practical terms, reneging on a treaty we helped draw up would make it even harder to strike deals with other countries to return their citizens. If this didn't work, what next? No one really knows. This squalid government could do anything.

- Polly Toynbee is a Guardian columnist
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OpinionPregnancy

As an obstetrician, here's my advice to pregnant women: get your vaccine and stay safe

[Lucy Chappell](#)



'It's incredibly reassuring to see the proportion of women giving birth who had received the vaccine increasing steadily over time.' Photograph: NoSystem images/Getty Images

Tue 30 Nov 2021 03.00 EST

As an obstetrician, I know first-hand the highs and lows that women experience when having a baby. It can be hugely rewarding for many and a daunting experience for some. Over the past months, the pandemic has added a great deal of uncertainty to the experience of pregnant women and those considering becoming parents.

We know how dangerous the virus can be for pregnant women. The data published over recent months has been heartbreaking. Between July and October in England, [one in five Covid patients](#) receiving NHS treatment through a special lung-bypass machine were pregnant women who had not had their first jab. Around one in five women who are hospitalised with the virus [need to be delivered preterm](#) to help them recover – and one in five of their babies need care in the neonatal unit. New data from England shows that of those pregnant women in hospital with Covid, [98% are unvaccinated](#).

Senior doctors and healthcare professionals from across the health system, including the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and the Royal College of Midwives, have been clear that the Covid vaccines are the best possible way pregnant women can protect themselves from the virus. Real-world data from the United States, where the vaccines have been given to more than 177,000 pregnant women, has also been reassuring that they're safe for this group.

Now, we have even more evidence to back the safety of the vaccines – with new data from the UK Health Security Agency showing [there is no impact](#) on newborns. The rate of stillbirths, low baby-birth weights and premature births is very similar for vaccinated women as it is for all women.

It's also incredibly reassuring to see the proportion of women giving birth who had received the vaccine [increasing steadily over time](#) – from 3% in May to 22% in August. Given that most pregnant women would have become eligible for the vaccine around June, in line with advice from our independent experts, this shows that more and more pregnant women are taking up the offer. Vaccine coverage at birth is expected to increase even further over the coming months. Boosters are also available six months after a second dose to pregnant women who are aged 40 and over, are health or social care workers or are in an at-risk group.

We know there is more to be done, though – particularly to make sure that we reach pregnant women from all ethnic groups and from all backgrounds, as vaccine uptake varies by ethnicity and deprivation area. The government and the NHS are continuing to work closely with experts from medical organisations and community and faith leaders to provide information and advice at every possible opportunity to those in these groups, as well as

pregnant women more widely. Every contact counts between a pregnant women and a healthcare professional. This new data on pregnancy outcomes provides important information to help pregnant women feel more confident about having the vaccine.

The message I want to give is this: if you're thinking about pregnancy, already pregnant, a new mother, or know someone who is pregnant or concerned about fertility, get your vaccine and stay safe.

- Professor Lucy Chappell is a chief scientific adviser for the Department of [Health](#) and Social Care and honorary consultant obstetrician at Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust
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This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/nov/30/obstetrician-pregnant-vaccinated-covid>

OpinionWine

Wine glasses are getting smaller. But will anything actually make us drink less?

Zoe Williams





Tipping point: we are losing our taste for large wine glasses. Photograph: Klaus Vedfelt/Getty Images

Tue 30 Nov 2021 02.00 EST

For years, wine glasses got larger and larger; the hospitality protocol was to fill them to the widest point of the glass, which was about a third of the way up, typically 250ml. The home drinker might fill them halfway, which was more like half a bottle. Everybody knew they weren't very practical, but there was a double jeopardy in that, if you'd just necked half a bottle of wine in a single glass, you would forget they didn't fit in the dishwasher and break them trying. Then you'd have to buy more, and the next generation of glasses would be even larger.

Post-lockdown, according to [John Lewis, there has been a surge in demand for smaller glasses](#). Instinctively, I wouldn't call the John Lewis glassware shopper the barometer of the national mood; like the Marks & Spencer underwear-shopper, these are people who have looked ahead to a time when they might need a glass, or some pants, and carefully balanced quality against value for money. Regular people wait until they have run out of these things, then buy them on an emergency footing, in a garage. And yet, John Lewis was the first retailer to report a run on ironing boards in 2020, and it

was only much later that it was discovered that young people were using them as a desk.

It won't, on its own, make you drink any less; the deterrent of more trips to the fridge is no match for a powerful thirst. But if it signals an intention to drink less, that foundation alone might change habits.

The only person on record who has successfully fooled their brain with a trick like this is Liz Hurley, who said she kept her weight down by eating with children's cutlery. It was never clear to a fascinated public whether that was because the small cutlery made the food look bigger, or the infantile mood sapped the adult pleasure of overeating. If you're trying any of this at home – you've bought your bistro mini-glasses and are still powering through gallons of wine a night – maybe swap to a sippy cup.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/nov/30/wine-glasses-are-getting-smaller-but-will-anything-actually-make-us-drink-less>

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[Xinjiang](#)

Leaked papers link Xinjiang crackdown with China leadership



Chinese president Xi Jinping argued in a speech that ‘population proportion’ was a foundation for peace in Xinjiang, new documents have revealed.
Photograph: Ng Han Guan/AP

[Patrick Wintour](#) Diplomatic Editor

Mon 29 Nov 2021 13.33 EST

Excerpts from previously unpublished documents directly linking China’s crackdown on Uyghur Muslims and other minorities in [Xinjiang](#) province to speeches by the Chinese leadership in 2014 have been put online.

[The documents](#) – including three speeches by Chinese president Xi Jinping in April 2014 – cover security, population control and the need to punish the Uyghur population. Some are marked top secret. They were leaked to the Uyghur Tribunal – an independent people’s tribunal based in the UK.

In the documents, the highest levels of the Chinese Communist party (CCP) leadership call for Uyghur re-education and relocation to rectify an imbalance in the Uyghur and Han population in Xinjiang.

Dr Adrian Zenz, the German academic who was asked by the tribunal to authenticate the documents, said the top secret and confidential papers are significant because they show multiple links between the demands of the Chinese leadership of 2014 and what subsequently happened in Xinjiang, including mass internment in re-education camps, coercive labour transfers and optimising the ethnic population by increasing Han population shares.

Zenz alleges that the documents show the leadership's long-term intent to commit cultural genocide with the specific purpose of safeguarding the rule of the CCP.

The documents were handed in full in digital form to the tribunal in September, but have not been published in full in order to protect the source of the leak.

Instead transcripts from some of the documents, lengthy quotations, summary and analysis have been published. The original documents were peer reviewed by Dr James Millward, professor of inter-societal history at Georgetown University Washington, and Dr David Tobin, lecturer in east Asian studies at the University of Sheffield. Some have been redacted to remove reception stamps. The leak covers 11 documents and 300 unique pages. They range from April 2014 to May 2018.

Zenz said some of the documents were drawn upon by the New York Times [in a report in 2019](#), but that the leak also comprises previously unseen information.

In late 2016, just before the implementation of a set of unprecedented measures in Xinjiang, the leaders' statements were handed to Xinjiang's cadres as crucial study material, preparing them to implement the measures.

In one 2014 speech covered by the leak, Xi argues that the belt and road initiative, [his signature foreign policy project](#), requires a stable domestic

security environment. He asserts that the entire country's national security and the achievement of China's major goals in the 21st century will be in jeopardy if the situation in southern Xinjiang is not brought under control.

The speech was delivered weeks after Xi called for "["all-out efforts"](#)" to bring to justice assailants who murdered 31 people and wounded more than 140 with knives and machetes in a bloody killing in the south-western city of Kunming on 1 March. Beijing blamed Xinjiang separatists for the attack.

In the speech Xi demands that the region engage in an all-out battle to "prevent Xinjiang's violent terrorist activities from spreading to the rest of China", argues that "stability across Xinjiang and even across the whole country depends on southern Xinjiang", and calls for "a crushing blow to buy us time".

He notes that since violent acts had already spread to other regions of China, "therefore we propose that Xinjiang is currently in ... a painful period of interventionary treatment". Religious extremists, he says, are "devils who will kill without blinking an eye".

He also warns religious extremism is "a powerful psychedelic drug", and calls for reform through education, as opposed to a practice of arrest and release – a reference to re-education and detention camps.

In another document, Xinjiang's party secretary, Chen Quanguo, personally commands officials to "round up all who should be rounded up" and says the region's vocational re-education facilities should be "unswervingly operated for a long time".

In one of Xi's speeches, he argues that "population proportion and population security are important foundations for long-term peace and stability". This statement was later quoted verbatim by a senior Xinjiang official in July 2020, who then argued that southern Xinjiang's Han population share was "too low".

Other classified documents lament "severe imbalances in the distribution of the ethnic population" and a "severely mono-ethnic" population structure

(an over-concentration of Uyghurs) in southern Xinjiang. They mandate that by 2022, 300,000 settlers (mostly Han from eastern China) are to be moved to regions in southern Xinjiang administered by the Xinjiang Construction and Production Corps, also known as “bingtuan”, a paramilitary entity, with the explicitly stated aim of increasing Han population shares in the region.

Xi himself ordered the abolition of preferential birth control policies for ethnic groups in southern Xinjiang that had previously allowed them to have more children than the Han. He demanded that birth control policies in the Uyghur heartland were to be made “equal for all ethnic groups”.

The fresh leak was first mentioned at a special session of the UK-based tribunal on Saturday.

Government reports indicate that in February 2017, just weeks prior to the start of an internment campaign, leading cadres in prefectures and counties were subjected to an intensified study schedule of two of Xi’s speeches for at least two hours every week.

Zenz has been denounced by defenders of Beijing as a Christian fundamentalist determined to destroy Chinese communism. The Chinese government has imposed sanctions against him. It has always maintained that political, economic and religious freedoms in the Xinjiang region are “fully guaranteed”.

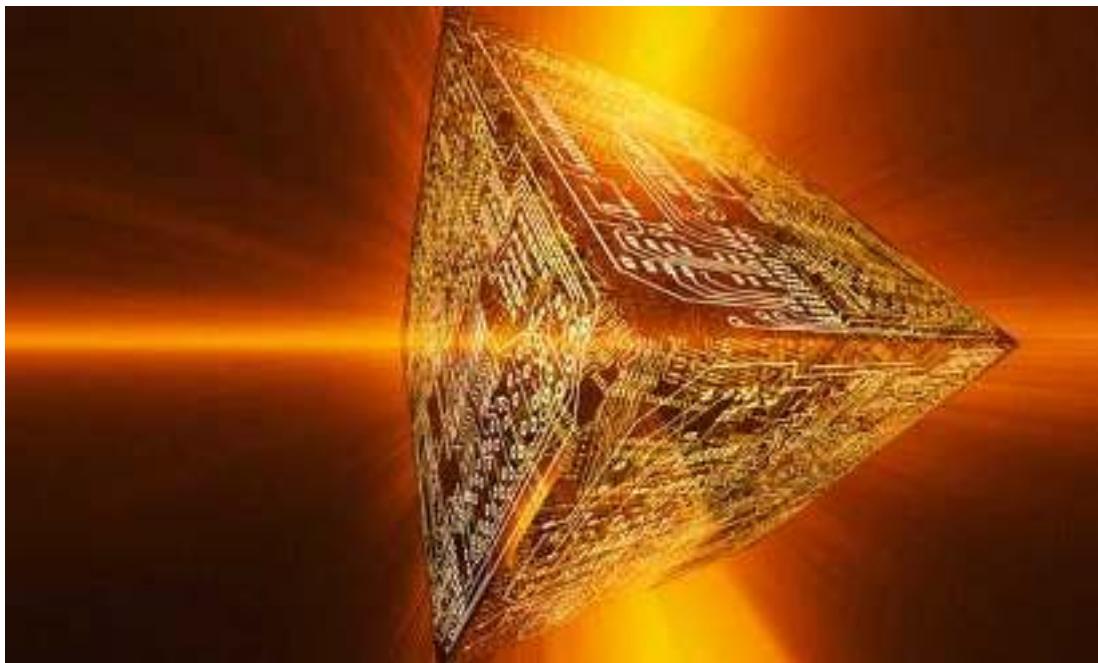
Zenz claims the new material shows that top Chinese leaders viewed the achievement of “stability maintenance” and related goals such as religious “de-extremification” in Xinjiang to be a matter of China’s national security, crucial to achieving primary long-term political goals.

This article was amended on 30 November 2021 to clarify that the documents were leaked to the Uyghur Tribunal, which asked Dr Adrian Zenz to authenticate them; also Dr James Millward and Dr David Tobin peer reviewed the original documents, not the transcripts as an earlier version said. A reference to sanctions against Zenz was clarified.

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Hacking

Chinese could hack data for future quantum decryption, report warns



Analysts expect China to surpass Europe and the US in quantum-related research and development. Photograph: Mehau Kulyk/Getty Images/Science Photo Library RM

[Dan Milmo](#) Global technology editor

Mon 29 Nov 2021 11.36 EST

Chinese hackers could target heavily encrypted datasets such as weapon designs or details of undercover intelligence officers with a view to unlocking them at a later date when [quantum computing](#) makes decryption possible, a report warns.

Analysts at Booz Allen Hamilton, a consulting firm, say Chinese hackers could also steal pharmaceutical, chemical and material science research that can be processed by quantum computers – machines capable of crunching through numbers at unprecedented speed.

In a report titled “Chinese threats in the quantum era”, the consultancy says encrypted data could be stolen by “Chinese threat groups”. It says quantum-assisted decryption will arrive faster than quantum-assisted encryption, giving hackers an edge.

“Encrypted data with intelligence longevity, like biometric markers, covert intelligence officer and source identities, social security numbers, and weapons’ designs, may be increasingly stolen under the expectation that they can eventually be decrypted,” the report says. It says “state-aligned cyber threat actors” will start to steal or intercept previously unusable encrypted data.

However, it adds there is a “very small” likelihood that quantum computing could break the latest encryption methods before 2030. The analysts say quantum computing’s advantages over classical computing – the computing used in everything from laptops to mobile phones – are at least a decade away.

“Although quantum computers’ current abilities are more demonstrative than immediately useful, their trajectory suggests that in the coming decades quantum computers will likely revolutionize numerous industries – from pharmaceuticals to materials science – and eventually undermine all popular current public-key encryption methods,” the report says.

Quantum computing is viewed as an exciting development. For example, experts say it could predict accurately what a complex molecule might do and thus pave the way for new drugs and materials.

China is already a strong player in the field, and Booz Allen Hamilton says it expected the country to surpass Europe and the US – where IBM recently made the most powerful quantum processor – in quantum-related research and development.

“Chinese threat groups will likely soon collect encrypted data with long-term utility, expecting to eventually decrypt it with quantum computers,” the report says. “By the end of the 2020s, Chinese threat groups will likely collect data that enables quantum simulators to discover new economically valuable materials, pharmaceuticals and chemicals.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/nov/29/chinese-could-hack-data-for-future-quantum-decryption-report-warns>

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[China](#)

Chinese province targets journalists and students in planned surveillance system



Surveillance cameras are seen in front of Chinese flags at a shopping area in Shanghai in May. Photograph: Aly Song/Reuters

Reuters in Beijing

Mon 29 Nov 2021 11.24 EST

Security officials in one of China's largest provinces have commissioned a surveillance system they say they want to use to track journalists and international students among other "suspicious people", documents reviewed by Reuters showed.

A 29 July tender document published on the Henan provincial government's procurement website details plans for a system that can compile individual files on such persons of interest coming to Henan using 3,000 facial recognition cameras that connect to various national and regional databases.

A 5m yuan (\$782,000) contract was awarded on 17 September to the Chinese tech company Neusoft, which was required to finish building the system within two months of signing the contract, separate documents published on the Henan government procurement website showed. Reuters was unable to establish if the system is currently operating.

Shenyang-based Neusoft did not respond to requests for comment.

China is trying to build what some security experts describe as [one of the world's most sophisticated surveillance technology networks](#), with millions of cameras in public places and increasing use of techniques such as smartphone monitoring and facial recognition.

US-based surveillance research firm IPVM, which has closely tracked the network's expansion and first identified the Henan document, said the tender was unique in specifying journalists as surveillance targets and providing a blueprint for public security authorities to quickly locate them and obstruct their work.

The Henan provincial government and police did not respond to requests for comment. The ministry of public security and China's foreign ministry also did not comment.

The near-200 page tender document from the Henan public security department does not give reasons why it wants to track journalists or international students. Another category of people it said it wants to track were "women from neighbouring countries that are illegal residents".

Public access to the tender document was disabled on Monday.

The tender document specified cameras must be able to build a relatively accurate file for individuals whose faces are partially covered by a mask or glasses, and those targeted must be searchable on the database by simply uploading a picture or searching their facial attributes.

The system will be operated by at least 2,000 officials and policemen, and specifies that journalists will be divided into three categories: red, yellow, green, in decreasing order of risk, according to the tender.

Different police forces covering all of Henan, whose 99 million inhabitants makes it China's third-largest province by population, will be connected to the platform in order to spring into action in the event that a warning is set off, the tender explains.

Warnings will be set off if a journalist while in Henan registers at a hotel, buys a ticket or crosses the provincial border, according to the tender.

"Suspicious persons must be tailed and controlled, dynamic research analyses and risk assessments made, and the journalists dealt with according to their category," the tender reads.

The tender also detailed different early warning systems for the other groups.

Press freedom groups say the ruling Chinese Communist party has tightened control over media since the Chinese president, Xi Jinping, took office in 2012.

In February, the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China (FCCC) said China used coronavirus prevention measures, intimidation and visa curbs to limit foreign reporting in 2020, citing responses to an annual survey of correspondents and interviews with bureau chiefs.

While most of the Henan document refers to journalists, several segments specify "foreign journalists".

In October last year, the Henan government published on its procurement platform for prospective suppliers a short summary of the intended project in which it said the system would be "centred on foreigners" and would help "protect national sovereignty, security and interests".

The contract was put out for tender on 29 July, days after foreign journalists from the BBC, LA Times, Agence France-Presse and others reporting on devastating floods in Henan were targeted by a nationalist campaign on China's heavily censored social media platform Weibo.

The FCCC said at the time it was “[very concerned](#) to witness the online and offline harassment of journalists” covering the floods. It described how, for instance, one Weibo account asked its 1.6 million followers to report the whereabouts of a foreign journalist who was reporting about the floods.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/29/china-province-surveillance-system-journalists-students-henan>

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- [**Live UK Covid: minister casts doubt on wisdom of holding big Christmas parties**](#)
- [**Christmas Covid: avoid ‘snogging under mistletoe’ this Christmas, says UK minister**](#)
- [**Pregnancy Women fear losing jobs over Covid safety worries, survey finds**](#)

Coronavirus

Omicron variant fuelling ‘exponential’ rise in Covid cases, say South Africa officials



Cases of the new Covid variant Omicron have been detected in the US, United Arab Emirates and South Korea, while in South Africa it is becoming the dominant strain. Photograph: Jeon Heon-Kyun/EPA

[Virginia Harrison](#) and agencies

Wed 1 Dec 2021 22.54 EST

The Omicron variant has fuelled a “worrying” surge in coronavirus cases in [South Africa](#) and is rapidly becoming the dominant strain, local health officials have said, as more countries including the US detected their first cases.

The United Arab Emirates and [South Korea](#) – which is already battling a worsening outbreak and record daily infections – also confirmed cases of the

Omicron variant.

Dr Michelle Groome of South Africa's National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) said there had been an “exponential increase” in infections over the past two weeks, from a weekly average of around 300 new cases per day to 1,000 last week, and most recently 3,500. On Wednesday, South Africa recorded 8,561 cases. A week earlier, the daily tally was 1,275.

“The degree of increase is worrying,” Groome said.

The NICD said 74% of all the virus genomes it had sequenced last month had been of the new variant, which was first found in a sample taken on 8 November in Gauteng, South Africa’s most populous province.

While key questions remain about how transmissible the Omicron variant is, which has been detected in at least [two dozen countries around the world](#), experts are rushing to determine the level of protection afforded by vaccines. World Health Organization (WHO) epidemiologist Maria van Kerkhove told a briefing that data on how contagious Omicron was should be available “within days”.

0

Why Omicron is the most worrying Covid variant yet – video explainer

The NICD said early epidemiological data showed Omicron was able to evade some immunity, but existing vaccines should still protect against severe disease and death. BioNTech’s chief executive, Uğur Şahin, said the vaccine it makes in a partnership with Pfizer was likely to offer strong protection against severe disease from Omicron.

As governments wait for a fuller picture to emerge, many continued to [tighten border restrictions](#) in the hope of stopping the virus spread.

South Korea imposed more travel curbs as it detected its first five Omicron cases and fears grew about how the new variant could affect its ongoing Covid surge.

Authorities halted quarantine exemptions for fully vaccinated inbound travellers for two weeks, who now require a 10-day quarantine.

Daily infections in South Korea hit a record on Thursday of more than 5,200, with concern growing over the sharp rise in patients with severe symptoms.

Graphic

Earlier this month restrictions were eased in the country – which has fully vaccinated nearly 92% of adults – however infections have surged since and the presence of Omicron has fuelled fresh worries about pressure on the already strained hospital system.

In Europe, the president of the European Union's executive body said there was a “race against time” to stave off the new variant while scientists established how dangerous it is. The EU brought forward the start of its vaccine rollout for five-to-11-year-olds by a week, to 13 December.

“Prepare for the worst, hope for the best,” Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, told a news conference.

Britain and the United States have both expanded their booster programs in response to the new variant, while Australia is reviewing its schedule.

Top American infectious diseases specialist Anthony Fauci stressed that fully vaccinated adults should seek a booster when eligible to give themselves the best possible protection.

Still, the WHO has noted many times that the coronavirus will keep producing new variants for as long as it is allowed to circulate freely in large unvaccinated populations.

“Globally, we have a toxic mix of low vaccine coverage, and very low testing – a recipe for breeding and amplifying variants,” said WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, reminding the world that the Delta variant “accounts for almost all cases”.

“We need to use the tools we already have to prevent transmission and save lives from Delta. And if we do that, we will also prevent transmission and save lives from Omicron,” he said.

With Reuters and Agence-France Presse

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/02/omicron-variant-fuelling-exponential-rise-in-covid-cases-say-south-africa-officials>

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

[**Politics**](#)

UK Covid: PM says people should not cancel Christmas events after highest cases since 17 July recorded – as it happened

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/live/2021/dec/02/uk-covid-live-minister-christmas-parties-omicron-variant-boris-johnson-vaccination-latest-updates>

Coronavirus

Covid: Javid says snog who you like under mistletoe, contradicting Coffey



Johnson switching on the Christmas lights in Downing Street. Photograph: James Veysey/Rex/Shutterstock

[Jessica Elgot](#), [Alexandra Topping](#) and [Aubrey Allegretti](#)

Thu 2 Dec 2021 14.52 EST

Ministers have clashed repeatedly over advice on festivities and mistletoe, with Home Office staff being urged to limit numbers attending [Christmas](#) parties in the office and the health secretary contradicting a cabinet colleague to insist “people can snog who they wish”.

Amid concerns over [the new Covid variant, Omicron](#), the government was accused of sending mixed messages about whether people should change their behaviour in the festive period despite no laws prohibiting social contact between healthy people.

Sajid Javid became the latest to weigh in, contradicting the work and pensions secretary Thérèse Coffey's [warning against kissing strangers under mistletoe](#).

"People can snog who they wish," Javid told ITV News. "I'll certainly be kissing my wife under the mistletoe – it's a Javid family tradition. It's got nothing to do with the government who you kiss or anything like that. But the only thing is just – there's guidance already out there - just be cautious and enjoy yourselves."

[Map](#)

Coffey had said on Wednesday night that "we should all be trying to enjoy the Christmas ahead of us", but "for what it's worth, I don't think there should be much snogging under the mistletoe".

Meanwhile, guidance issued to civil servants in the Home Office on Wednesday, seen by the Guardian, said they could celebrate with colleagues, but urged people to "take sensible precautions".

The advice said that for festive gatherings in the workplace, "numbers should be kept to a minimum". It also stated: "Colleagues should refrain from undertaking irregular travel solely to attend a Christmas gathering." It advised staff to "take steps to minimise contact, including the avoidance of sharing food and drink".

An influential scientist also warned that he would not feel safe going to a Christmas party this year. Prof Peter Openshaw, a member of the Government's New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group (Nervtag), said the "chances of getting infected were too high" to have a party.

Earlier, George Freeman, the science minister, admitted that "given the new variant" his team had decided to "get together on Zoom and toast each other" virtually.

Freeman had told the BBC: "Individual businesses, in the end, have to make judgments on what is appropriate internally ... For many small businesses,

four or five staff, who are working together every day anyway, gathering to have a drink isn't a big step up in risk.

“But some companies might normally bring hundreds of people in from around the world to a big party, and they may decide, this year, is that sensible, given the pandemic and given where we are?” Freeman was reprimanded by Boris Johnson, who insisted that “people shouldn’t be cancelling things; there’s no need for that”.

Pressed on whether Christmas parties and children’s nativity plays should be scrapped given Omicron’s spread in the UK, Johnson said: “That’s not what we’re saying.”

He stressed that the government was trying to respond in a “balanced and proportionate way” to the variant, and said Downing Street was holding events “the whole time”, citing the recent turning-on of the Christmas lights outside No 10. His spokesperson confirmed that several more gatherings would go ahead in Downing Street this Christmas.

It comes after Jenny Harries, who heads the UK [Health](#) Security Agency, suggested people should avoid unnecessary socialising in the run-up to Christmas. but was contradicted by No 10.

The issue of such advice for people to alter their behaviour running contrary to official guidance and new Covid rules has infuriated some, who believe it will hit businesses hoping for high levels of trade as Christmas approaches.

Johnson is also on tricky ground, after it emerged that he attended a leaving party in Downing Street last November, during the second lockdown. Angela Rayner, Labour’s deputy leader, wrote to the cabinet secretary, Simon Case, asking him to investigate that and another alleged gathering in No 10 last winter.

She said in her letter: “This government is undermining public health messaging with their actions and we cannot let this go on unchecked. It cannot be that the prime minister believes there to be a set of rules for the public and a totally different set of rules for himself.”

Layla Moran, a Liberal Democrat MP and chair of the parliamentary group on Covid, said: “Mixed messages and obfuscation is this government’s bread and butter when faced with hard decisions, and we can see this again in their completely confused statements on Christmas parties.

“The evidence is unequivocal: clear government messaging is extremely important in preventing infections and so the prime minister must overcome his aversion to delivering bad news, as his abdication of responsibility has cost us dearly throughout this pandemic.”

Johnson’s spokesperson on Thursday insisted all rules were followed at gatherings in Downing Street throughout the pandemic. Asked if Freeman was wrong to imply that firms should consider not having a Christmas party or replace it with a smaller gathering, he replied: “That is not in the guidance, it is not in the regulations.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/02/covid-avoid-snogging-under-mistletoe-this-christmas-says-uk-minister>

Coronavirus

Pregnant women in UK fear losing jobs over Covid safety worries, survey finds



In the survey of more than 400 pregnant women, 69% said they were fairly or very worried about catching Covid at work. Photograph: Simon Kadula/Alamy

[Andrew Gregory](#) Health editor

Thu 2 Dec 2021 04.18 EST

More than a third of pregnant women fear losing their jobs due to safety concerns about Covid in the workplace, according to a survey. Research from Maternity Action shows 36% are concerned about their work if they take time off or ask their employer to do more to protect them from Covid.

The charity is urging ministers to immediately overhaul health and safety rules for pregnant women in the workplace, which it says are “not fit for purpose”.

Ros Bragg, director of Maternity Action, said: “The situation for pregnant women is dire and is only getting worse as the pandemic progresses.

“They are frankly right to be worried – because the system that is supposed to protect them is not fit for purpose. There is a vast gap between what the law says and actual employer practice, leaving women under huge pressure to work in unsafe conditions.”

Bragg said officials and organisations given the responsibility of enforcing workplace health and safety had “shown themselves wholly inadequate to the task”. Women are being left with an “unenviable choice” of either taking their employer to a tribunal to get basic health and safety protections or “carrying on working in an unsafe environment”.

[graph deaths UK](#)

Current evidence suggests pregnant women are no more likely to get Covid-19 than other healthy adults, but they are at slightly increased risk of becoming severely unwell if they do get the disease, and are more likely to have pregnancy complications such as preterm birth or stillbirth.

In the survey of more than 400 pregnant women, over two-thirds (69%) said they were fairly or very worried about catching Covid because of their work. A fifth of respondents (20%) said they took time off or even left their job because they were so concerned about becoming infected.

More than half (59%) raised concerns about their health and safety with their employer but, of these, almost one in five (17%) said their employer took no action to address their concerns.

One pregnant woman told how she was forced to quit her job during the late stages of pregnancy over concerns about Covid safety in the workplace.

“I asked about risk assessment and [was] told it wasn’t necessary,” the woman, who asked to remain anonymous, said. “I just kept saying: ‘Can I work from home today?’ Every day I would go to the office and our office remained a busy environment and not at all Covid-secure. It wasn’t possible

to socially distance. We didn't do anything like wearing masks or take those other ordinary steps.

"I was genuinely afraid. I had a lot of conversations about what I needed from them. It became clear very quickly that none of that was on the table. They weren't prepared for a moment to accept any changes to my working patterns. I had previously felt valued but suddenly every conversation was a difficult one.

"I was asked to come into a formal meeting and at that meeting it was made clear that my career with my employer was over. I effectively had to leave at short notice, not knowing what I would be going to.

"What you can't do is look in the paper and find another job, because you are visibly massively pregnant. It was frightening because you're thinking about your mortgage, and your kids and wondering if you'll be able to pay the car loan at the end of the month. I had asked for so little, and what I expected was so reasonable but at some point they decided that investing in me wasn't worthwhile."

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/02/pregnant-women-fear-losing-jobs-over-covid-safety-worries-survey-finds>

2021.12.02 - Spotlight

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Richard Amoah. Photograph: Jill Mead/The Guardian

[The long read](#)

A 975-day nightmare: how the Home Office forced a British citizen into destitution abroad

Richard Amoah. Photograph: Jill Mead/The Guardian

by [Amelia Gentleman](#)

Thu 2 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

Eight months ago, the events that shattered the life of Richard Amoah, a 58-year-old upholsterer from south London, were condensed into a series of succinct, emotionless paragraphs, typed into boxes on an 18-page form, scanned and emailed to a government office in Sheffield. Everyone knows you can't put a price on happiness, but it is now the Home Office's job to assess the cost of Amoah's unhappiness, after a series of disastrous

government mistakes left him destitute on the streets of Ghana's capital, Accra, for two and a half years.

As they process Amoah's claim for compensation, staff in Vulcan House, the Home Office's riverside headquarters in Sheffield, will need to address a number of difficult questions. How should the government compensate someone for carelessly wrecking their life? What is the correct payment for rupturing family bonds? Can the loss of a stable, happy existence be remedied with a methodically quantified pay out?

Amoah is one of at least 13,000 victims of the [Windrush scandal](#), in which retirement-age UK residents who had been born in the Commonwealth and travelled, legally, to Britain as small children, were misclassified as immigration offenders. Hundreds of victims of the scandal were wrongly deported or held in detention centres, and thousands more lost homes, were sacked from their jobs or were denied benefits, pensions and NHS treatment because of the error. As it became clear how much damage had been caused to this cohort, a major compensation scheme was promised. The scheme, which was launched in March 2019, was meant to offer swift payments to anyone affected. Initial estimates by civil servants suggested that anywhere between [£200m and £570m would be paid out](#).

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But in the nearly three years since it launched, the compensation programme has been ridden with controversy and delays. Many claimants object to the fact that the programme is run by the same department that caused their problems in the first place. The Home Office has, effectively, been allowed to mark its own homework. Claimants have expressed dismay at meagre compensation offers, which they feel do not reflect the harm they suffered. At least 23 people have died waiting for a decision. Last year, the most senior black employee in the Home Office's Windrush team resigned, telling the Guardian that the scheme was "[racist and unfit for purpose](#)".

Three separate inquiries have investigated what is going wrong with the scheme. How the compensation team responds to Amoah's claim, and to the more than 3,000 other applicants, should be seen as evidence of how

committed the Home Office really is to its mantra that it wants to right the wrongs done to the Windrush generation.

“It’s been a car crash,” said Anthony Browne, a lawyer, who as co-founder of Windrush Defenders has advised dozens of people trying to make claims. For the past year he has been on a committee appointed by Priti Patel, advising the Home Office on what has been going wrong, but he has now stopped attending. “I’ve become disenchanted with the Home Office. They listen but they don’t hear; they don’t seem to want to do the right thing. It’s really critical now that the whole ethos changes.”

In late September 2020, when the Windrush compensation scheme was developing into a scandal in its own right, I met Amoah in an otherwise deserted pub in south London, to hear about his attempts to claim compensation.

Like most people affected, Amoah arrived in the UK, entirely legally, as a child. His parents met in the early 1960s, when his Ghanaian father was studying architecture in London and his Irish mother was working as a seamstress. They married and settled in Ghana, where Amoah was born, but in 1964, after the marriage collapsed, his mother returned to London with Amoah, who was still a baby. He travelled to Britain on his mother’s passport. (At the time she returned to Britain, Amoah’s mother was pregnant with her second child, who was born in the UK a few months later.)

Amoah grew up in Britain and never saw his father again. But in April 2016, when his brother told him of their father’s death, Amoah felt moved to attend the funeral in Ghana and finally meet his family there. “I wanted to have a look around and see where I came from,” he said. He had not travelled abroad since arriving in the UK 52 years earlier, and he had no passport. He flew using temporary Ghanaian travel documents because they were simpler to get than an emergency British passport.

From the airport in Accra, Amoah got on a coach, arriving at his father’s town just as the funeral was beginning. Relatives Amoah had never met made him change out of his black suit into a black-and-red cloth robe and sandals. “I’d never worn clothes like that before,” he recalled. “Absolutely

everything was strange. I didn't speak the language, nothing was familiar to my life – the heat, the mosquitoes, the food.”

Before he left London, Amoah had thought he might spend time getting to know his Ghanaian family, but in the days after the funeral he struggled to connect. He found being in rural Ghana – surrounded by siblings he had only just met, most of them speaking a language he didn't understand – an unhappy, unsettling experience. After two weeks, he was more than ready to return home to London.

He travelled to the British high commission in Accra to get the documents that would allow him to fly back. During his rushed travel preparations, he had been assured by an official that this would be a simple matter. “My thinking at the time was that I'd get a Ghanaian document to go there, and an English one to go back home,” Amoah told me. “I'd never travelled before. I was a bit naive about the whole situation.”



Accra, Ghana, in December 2020. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty

At the high commission, Amoah took a ticket from a machine on the wall, and waited more than an hour for his number to come up. Eventually he was called to a desk, but the conversation was brief. He was told that unless he could prove to staff that he was a British citizen, he had no right to board a

plane to the UK. Amoah had attended primary and secondary school in Battersea, south London. He had worked and paid taxes in the UK throughout his adult life. He had helped bring up his five children and grandchildren in the same part of the city where he had grown up. When he tried to explain all this, the official behind the counter cut him off. “There’s nothing we can do for you,” he was told.

Amoah demanded to see someone more senior. Eventually the vice-consul was brought out. “She told me these decisions came from Home Office rules in the UK,” he said. “She was upset talking to me, but she said the rules had been changed in the 1980s. She told me: ‘You’ve overstayed in Britain for 50 years.’ I tried to explain: everything I have ever done in life, I did it in England. I learned to walk here, I learned to talk here. In Accra, I was like an alien, just landed on Earth. She was very sympathetic, but pfft … that was about it.”

Amoah’s younger brother, Christopher, who had travelled alongside him to the funeral, returned home to London without him. “We were trying to sort it out until the day of the flight,” Christopher told me. “I had to get on the flight. I thought he would be able to sort it out, but he couldn’t. It was a nightmare.” Because Christopher had been born in the UK, he had never had problems with his documentation. He’d made a number of previous trips to Ghana, and never encountered any difficulties.

At first, Amoah was merely frustrated by what he assumed was just a stupid bureaucratic hiccup. But after a few days, it became increasingly clear that officials at the British high commission would not budge. Within a few weeks his money had run out and he found himself homeless for the first time in his life, sleeping rough in slums on the outskirts of an unfamiliar city. His siblings in Ghana helped for a bit, but they had their own lives, and Amoah felt they were suspicious of this unknown person who had turned up at their father’s funeral.

“Everything was upside down,” said Amoah. It was hard to get people to understand the problems he was having with British officials when he was struggling to understand them himself. He felt embarrassed having to ask his siblings for help, and there were some difficult misunderstandings. “I was offending people left, right and centre, and getting offended left, right and

centre. I grew up in south London; I have a south London attitude, I'm a bit loose with my tongue and language. They had a real problem with that. I was totally marooned," he told me. "I was in a country I didn't know, among people that didn't like me, in a culture I didn't understand, with no sense of being able to return back home on the horizon."

In south London, Amoah had lived a comfortable, secure life, usually facing nothing more taxing than heavy traffic during his commute to work at an upholsterers in Battersea. The fifth-floor flat he shared with his frail mother, who he cared for, overlooked a park where he enjoyed watching swans on the lake. He had a girlfriend who he saw every day. He had a good relationship with his children, who were aged between seven and 25 when went to Ghana.

In Accra, Amoah was quickly reduced to scavenging and begging. He was violently attacked on several occasions, and often afraid for his life. After two months, he returned in desperation to the high commission, hoping they might relent. He spoke to a senior diplomat, who was a distant friend of one of Amoah's Ghanaian sisters. (I asked to speak to this diplomat but was refused.) She was aware of the unfairness of the situation, but felt unable to assist. He remembers she told him: "There's no chance that you're going to be allowed back into the UK."

By the time I met Amoah, I had interviewed more than 50 people [affected by](#) the Windrush scandal. People had lost their jobs, their homes, their pensions and access to NHS care. But there was something particularly disturbing about Amoah's conversations with a British diplomat who seemed to recognise that he was British, and that he was in an appalling situation through no fault of his own, yet did not feel inclined to help.

In Ghana, Amoah's life unravelled. Rather than getting accustomed to the horror, he found himself less and less able to cope. Sometimes, a friend or relative would let him stay for a night or two, but then he would have to move on. "It's hard to stay longer if you have nothing to contribute," Amoah told me. Often he would sit in all-night bars, waiting for morning; sometimes he would huddle by a street fire in between corrugated-iron

shanty houses, horrified by the open sewers running through the dirt streets. Sometimes, he slept wrapped in a cloth on the beach.

A year passed, and then a second. He became seriously ill with malaria, but had no money for medicine. He thought he might die. He picked up odd jobs here and there; a friend in England sent some money; a church offered moral support. But after a while, he lost all hope of returning home and decided to kill himself. He walked out in front of a truck on a fast highway. The truck driver swerved to avoid him and drove into a ditch. He was so furious at the damage to his truck that he attacked Amoah, beating him.

“I felt like a prisoner, being held against my will away from my family,” Amoah told me, still incredulous at the treatment so carelessly meted out to him by British bureaucrats. “It was like being incarcerated for two and a half years.” After about an hour of talking, Amoah began to cry quietly.

Amoah was particularly distressed by the damage done to his relationship with his children, who thought he had deserted them. (“They didn’t understand,” Christopher later told me. “He just disappeared from their lives. They started to resent him.”) He had no money to call them and could only occasionally afford to visit an internet cafe to try to make contact by email. “Richard is a caring, sensitive man, devoted to his children. He was his mother’s carer. It would have troubled him greatly to be stuck there away from them all,” Donovan Barnett, an old friend, told me later. “He must have been so tormented by the thought that he might never get back here.”

Christopher tried to help from London, but was overwhelmed by the bureaucracy. “I was going round in circles, calling the embassy, trying to get information,” he told me. “I was very worried. He got ill and I couldn’t get hold of him. I was thinking I would have to go to bloody bury him.”

In April 2018, while Amoah was still stuck in Accra, the Windrush scandal became major news in the UK – leading to the [resignation](#) of the home secretary, and an official [apology](#) from the prime minister. The following month, Martin Forde, a QC who specialises in medical negligence, was appointed by prime minister Theresa May to devise a compensation scheme for victims of the scandal. Forde’s own parents had come to the UK from

Barbados and St Lucia as part of the Windrush generation, and he was eager to help deliver justice.

To the layperson, trying to put a monetary value on human suffering seems an impossible exercise. But compensation lawyers have a methodical approach, breaking down loss and distress into component parts that can be totted up into a neat sum.

Forde based his scheme on the tariffs set out in Judicial College Guidelines for the Assessment of General Damages in Personal Injury Cases, the bible for all compensation lawyers, now in its 15th edition. The guidelines make the process seem simple, assigning a value to every conceivable unhappy scenario. Lost a middle finger? You're eligible for £12,460. Received a scar to the face? Take £6,240.



Martin Forde. Photograph: Martin Godwin/The Guardian

Particularly useful to Forde was the chapter on psychiatric and psychological damage, which breaks down levels of suffering, taking into consideration factors such as “the injured person’s ability to cope with life, education, and work” and “the effect on the injured person’s relationships with family [and] friends”. The guidelines advise that claims should be classified as moderate,

moderately severe or severe, with payouts ranging between £5,000 and £108,620.

Forde drew up a booklet for Home Office staff, showing how to assess claimants' overall experiences according to their level of distress – rising from “inconvenience, annoyance, frustration and worry” (which would bring a payout of £250) to “profound impacts on a claimant’s life which are likely to be irreversible”, which would deliver a minimum £10,000 payment. There were also separate claimable categories for different problems: homelessness (payable at £250 a month), or detention (about £100 a day, depending on the length of wrongful imprisonment). The maximum payment for someone who was wrongly deported was set at £10,000.

Applications began to be accepted in 2019. But campaigners who had seen up close the life-altering consequences of the [Windrush scandal](#) worried that these sums were rather low. David Lammy raised concerns in parliament, warning: “Victims have correctly described these payments as peanuts and insultingly low.”

In July 2018, more than 800 days after he had first landed in Ghana, Amoah’s situation was suddenly resolved. An email arrived from the same high commission official who, two years earlier, had expressed mild regret that she could not help. She had seen news reports about the Windrush scandal and realised Amoah was one of thousands of undocumented people whose Britishness had been contested. She arranged for him to have a call with the newly created Windrush taskforce to sort out documentation so he could return home.

Amoah went to an internet cafe to call the UK to explain to British officials what had happened. “They said: ‘This is a totally horrendous situation; let’s get you back here as quickly as possible.’ I could hear they were shocked, which was strange to me, because how could they be shocked when they’d been refusing me the right to come back? I was just totally bewildered.”

The official arranged the visa, and Amoah borrowed money from a relative for a plane ticket. He was amazed at the speed with which everything was

resolved. “They had me out there for two and a half years for something they could have resolved in a matter of minutes,” he said.



Amber Rudd in 2018, after she resigned as home secretary. Photograph: Niklas Halle'n/AFP/Getty Images

It was cold and wet when Amoah finally landed back in Britain in December 2018, after a total of 975 days away, but he didn’t mind. “I’d been missing the cold,” he said. “I could finally exhale and inhale. I felt like I was being put back together again.” He hadn’t told his relatives he was coming back, so he took a train and then a bus from the airport, using the last bit of money he had been lent. (“I’d forgotten they didn’t take cash on buses. The driver let me on for free.”)

Quickly he realised that this wouldn’t be the return he had hoped for. During his time abroad, his mother had developed Alzheimer’s. She barely recognised him. “I’d only been able to speak to her once or twice when I was away. She was confused,” he said.

His long absence had damaged his relationship with his children. “I had become quite alienated from my family. The consensus was that I chose to stay out there. I told them I’d been stopped from coming back into the

country, but I didn't go into much detail. I wouldn't want to upset them. They haven't had much to do with me since I came back."

Amoah struggled to return to normal life. He had lost his job and was unable to find new work, and he had been profoundly altered by his experience. "He was skinny, like a bag of bones," Christopher said. "He used to be very bubbly and outgoing. Now he is the total opposite, more like a recluse."

In the summer of 2020, a year and a half after his return, Amoah saw a TV news report about the compensation scheme and decided to apply. He searched online for a lawyer, who sent him the 18-page form, then he set about trying to shoehorn his experiences into the white spaces allocated, under headings that included:

- "When did you first have difficulties proving your lawful status in the UK?"
- "Include the dates you were homeless and where you stayed when you were homeless."
- "Impact on life: provide details of the non-financial impact you experienced on your daily life for which you are claiming."

There is no space on the form for people who got stranded abroad and denied the right to return home, so he scattered his description of what had happened across other boxes.

The compensation scheme was designed to be so simple that there would be no need for lawyers, but Amoah said he didn't feel confident enough to do this alone. He instructed Malcolm Johnson of Lime Solicitors on a no-win, no-fee basis. In November, I joined a Zoom meeting between Amoah and Johnson as they made final tweaks to his application.

"Is it about putting a value on what I lost or what I went through?" Amoah asked, pacing about his flat. "I wouldn't say that compensation is my major object."

Johnson, who specialises in compensation claims, explained later that he frequently encounters this peculiar British queasiness about financial compensation. Claimants are anxious not to appear money-grubbing, but lawyers have a single-minded focus on trying to achieve the maximum payout for their client. “For us, it’s all about the money,” he said.



Richard Amoah in London. Photograph: Jill Mead/The Guardian

The scheme, Johnson told me, was a “ghastly, snarled-up bureaucratic mess” – much worse than his experience with other government compensation schemes, such as those set up to compensate people who were abused in children’s homes, which allocated funding for lawyers, and often for medical reports setting out the victims’ mental trauma.

Amoah’s agreement with Johnson’s legal firm was that he would pay them 30% of whatever compensation he is awarded. In return they would help Amoah with the application and gather evidence to satisfy assessors that he was telling the truth. The priority was tracking down old payslips and tax records to prove loss of earnings, and establishing medical proof that the experience had an impact.

Both have been hard to do. Amoah’s own records were thrown away by relatives during his absence, and former employers have not been helpful.

As for proving “impact”, Amoah, like many Windrush victims, was raised to be stoical, and he is disinclined to offload his feelings on to a GP, which makes it hard to prove how badly he has been affected. (“I don’t want to because I don’t want anyone thinking that I am mad,” Amoah told his lawyer.)

Johnson had spent a lot of time trying to get Amoah to articulate his pain. He told me: “At each point we ask: were you distressed? How distressed? How debilitating was it?” But Amoah’s application was largely written in short, factual sentences. “I could barely afford to eat when I was there as I was not working and had no income,” he wrote in the “Impact on life” section. “My adult children took the view that I had abandoned them and that I had decided to stay in Ghana of my own free will. My partner left me when I told her I was stuck in Ghana.” On the page, his anguish had largely been bleached out.

The compensation scheme was troubled from the start. For the first 18 months, the sums offered to successful applicants tended to be low, and many found the process itself frustrating. In some cases, requests for supporting documents seemed absurdly demanding. One person was asked to find a post office receipt for £19.60 that had been paid years earlier.

In November 2020, Alexandra Ankrah, the head of policy for the Windrush compensation team who had resigned from her post earlier that year, [told the Guardian](#) that her colleagues had “showed an unwillingness to look with any genuine concern at the situation of victims, many of whom were elderly and unwell”. She described one meeting at which officials argued over whether a terminally ill claimant should be paid “a trifling sum or a very trifling sum”.

Towards the end of 2020, even Forde, who had designed the scheme, was becoming frustrated by the slow progress and unreasonable Home Office demands for documentary proof, which echoed the original scandal. “They come at this with a high index of suspicion. I understand it’s taxpayers’ money, but I’ve told them I don’t think you get many dishonest people in that cohort,” Forde told me. “The civil servants are doing a difficult job well, but the institution is tainted.”

In December 2020, two weeks after Ankrah's criticism of the scheme was published on the Guardian front page, home secretary Priti Patel announced a set of radical improvements. Any claimants who could show that they had been affected by the scandal would receive a swift interim payment of £10,000. The standard of proof was reduced from "beyond reasonable doubt" to "on the balance of probabilities". The payouts for the "impact on life" categories were increased tenfold, so that someone whose life was affected in "profound" and "irreversible" ways might now in theory receive more than £100,000. "While nothing can undo the suffering they endured I hope that the additional money and support now available will go some way to rebuild trust," said Patel.

But, almost a year later, that trust has not been rebuilt. When the scheme was initially devised, civil servants estimated that the government could pay up to £570m to 15,000 people, but those figures have been revised downwards. The latest available figures, from October 2021, show that after two and a half years, only £32.9m had been paid out to just 885 people, and they now think they are only likely to receive around 3,000 applicants.

Last month, I visited the Home Office's headquarters in Sheffield, where civil servants conduct the initial assessments for Windrush compensation claims. On the walls, staff had pinned up thank you messages from people who have received payments, along with small, homemade cut-out figures – presumably meant to represent satisfied claimants – with words like "integrity", "grateful", and "phenomenal" written across them in felt tip. "Staff are happy to receive the thank yous, because there has been a lot of bad press," the acting head of the scheme told me.

The staff I spoke to felt proud of the work they were doing, and were very defensive about the criticism they were receiving over the slow progress of payouts. By the time of my visit, the home affairs select committee, then the National Audit Office, then the Public Accounts Committee, and finally a human rights and legal organisation, Justice, had all launched investigations into what was taking so long.



Protesters outside the Home Office in May 2018. Photograph: NurPhoto/Getty Images

The [various reports](#) have highlighted numerous problems with the scheme. They note that staffing levels have been consistently lower than planned. The Home Office initially stated it needed 200 caseworkers, but the scheme was launched with just six who were working full-time. Later, the proposed headcount was reduced to 125 full-time employees, but by October 2021, only about 80 of these positions had been filled. When I put this to the Home Office, I was told that they were aiming to recruit another 34 over the next three months. It is now advertising for “compassionate and eager individuals”.

Another stumbling block has been the failure to allocate money for claimants to get legal advice when filling in the forms. In the crucial “impact on life” section, claimants often downplay just how badly they have suffered. “They are very embarrassed about the condition that they find themselves in now,” Jacqueline Mackenzie, a partner at the law firm Leigh Day, who has provided pro bono help to more than 100 applicants. “They need to be helped to explain how that has affected them,” she said, echoing what Amoah’s lawyer told me. What puzzles Mackenzie is why the Home Office has failed to recognise this persistent problem. “You would have

thought that Windrush is the one group that they would want to get to things right for, but they seem to be failing abysmally,” she said.

The Home Office is also regarded with understandable suspicion by many of those eligible for compensation. Some continue to believe, erroneously, that the scheme is a way to round up illegal immigrants; a Home Office survey revealed that 12% of respondents believed that the scheme was set up to send people who are in the UK illegally back to their country of origin.

The team in currently charge of the scheme acknowledge these criticisms, and say that changes have been made. About 200 outreach events have been organised, trying to persuade people to apply. “I’m not going to be daft enough to say that it’s all great, when it isn’t. But we are making progress,” another senior manager said. Staff point out that the cases they’re dealing with are inherently complicated. “It would be easier if everyone applied with a neat pile of documents, but very few people keep records and most people have had a disrupted life because of what they’ve experienced. They may have been homeless, they don’t always have many documents. It does take some time to build up that picture.” Originally the Home Office estimated that it would take staff on average 30 hours to process a case; now they say it takes more than five times that. “We can’t pretend that it is fast or simple, but we’re not dragging our feet because we can’t be bothered,” the senior manager said.

When I asked about Amoah’s claim, staff could say nothing except that in cases of people being wrongly exiled, it would be up to the applicant to demonstrate how deeply their life was affected. To qualify for an impact on life payment at level 1 (£10,000), Amoah would need to show family events had been missed. To qualify for level 2 (£20,000) he would need to prove “some family separation”. For level 3 (£40,000), Amoah would have to demonstrate that his ability to live a relatively normal life was “substantially affected”, or for level 4 (£70,000) “seriously compromised”. For level 5, the maximum (£100,000), he would need to prove major physical or mental health impacts, from which a return to a relatively normal life is likely to take several years. The sticking point may be the question of proof. Without a psychiatric report or notes from a doctor that provide enough detail of his suffering, Amoah’s claim may be found to lack sufficient evidence, and result in a low payout.

While staff wish more people were aware of the cases in which large payouts have been awarded, they recognise that publicising these cases is extremely difficult. “It’s never an outcome that you can be pleased about. We can’t say this is a good result, because then we would have to say, we did this terrible thing to someone, but look, now it has worked out well! It’s just not a good news story,” said a senior Home Office civil servant, helping supervise the scheme operation from London. Every day, they are reminded of the ways in which their department has devastated people’s lives, which can be particularly confronting for people who have spent their whole career with the Home Office. “What I do now is the polar opposite of what I used to do,” said one caseworker, who transferred over from an immigration enforcement role. “We’re recognising how much damage we have done,” another caseworker said. “It’s hard, the realisation that the organisation we work for did something so bad to them and we can’t take that back.” Taking helpline calls can be distressing. “Sometimes people will be really aggressive, telling us how they’ve suffered, then the next person on the phone will be crying, absolutely in bits,” the senior manager said.

The staff who I spoke to seemed genuinely committed to their work, and hopeful that, in the end, people will receive fair payments. “The home secretary and the department remain steadfast in our commitment to ensure that members of the Windrush generation receive every penny of compensation that they are entitled to,” said the Home Office in a statement. One case worker told me: “It’s drummed into us that it is our job to try to get them as high an award as possible.”

They are aware of their department’s poor reputation, but they argue that transferring responsibility for the scheme away from the Home Office – as the home affairs select committee report recommended last week – would simply cause further delays. “It’s not a popularity contest. People don’t have to like us. I don’t even mind if they don’t trust us, as long as they apply,” the senior civil servant said.

In the summer, Amoah received a £10,000 interim payment – an acknowledgment that staff accept he has a valid claim. Most of the money went towards paying off debts, and on organising a funeral for his mother, who died in August. Eight months after applying, Amoah has begun

checking his email daily, waiting for news of a payment that could allow him to start rebuilding his life. He hasn't been able to get his old job back, but he would like to start his own upholstery firm, and perhaps give something to his children.

Periodically, he calls the Windrush helpline to see if the full amount might be paid soon; they tell him that the claim is being processed. "They say they have a limited amount of staff dealing with a heavy workload. They're very polite, but the wheels of bureaucracy seem to turn very slowly," he said.

Amoah isn't sure if a financial settlement could restore his life to anything like how it was before, but he hopes his application conveyed to Home Office staff what it was like to feel trapped abroad with no way of returning home. "I want them to try to understand what they did to me. It was pretty extreme," he said. "I only went out there for a couple of weeks."

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Interview

‘I’ve healed. I don’t want to be the badass’ – Noomi Rapace on beating her Dragon Tattoo trauma

[Ryan Gilbey](#)



‘I don’t take myself as seriously as people think’ ... Rapace Photograph: Pedro Alvarez/The Guardian

Thu 2 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

Noomi Rapace – the original Lisbeth Salander, AKA The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo – is sitting in the hotel bar with her sunglasses on top of her head. They disappear at some point during our conversation, though I don’t see them go. I do notice, however, when her black jacket, which has been draped around her shoulders, falls to the floor while she is flapping her arms pretending to be an eagle. This happens shortly after she has told me how she once wore a strap-on dildo in public. She really is a lot of fun and quite naughty.

We were due to meet in a windowless room upstairs but she wanted a window. “They’d put us in a little prison cell,” she huffs, now looking out on to the back streets of London’s Mayfair. “I was like, ‘I can’t be stuck in there!’ It’s all about flows and energies.” The double espresso she asked for when she first got here has yet to arrive, so she orders another from a passing staff member, who brings it in a flash. Rapace, who is 41, does a quick inventory: “Window. Coffee. Ryan. Perfect.” Then her original order arrives. She looks up at her server in astonishment. “Is this ours? I love your lipstick, by the way, it’s really pretty.” She turns to me. “Do you want this? Let’s have it.” The next time I look down, both cups are empty.

This is all worlds away from the forceful minimalism she brings to the unsettling new indie thriller *Lamb*. She plays Maria, who lives with her husband on a farm in the Icelandic countryside. It’s just the two of them, their sensible knitwear, their animals, and the unspoken pain of the past. “It’s like a family drama,” she says. “But with one obstacle that is a bit strange.” That’s putting it mildly. When a sheep on the farm gives birth to a half-human, half-lamb hybrid, the couple name her Ada, rock her like a baby, and adopt her as their own. Meanwhile, Ada’s birth mother stands outside, bleating sinisterly, refusing to budge.

“I had nightmares about her,” gasps Rapace. “We had this strange energy between us. She was always looking me straight in the eye, ‘Baaaa, baaaa.’

Enough! The noise got in my dreams. I went outside to try to connect with her and she was stomping on the ground. It felt like she was a direct threat to my happiness. I hated her.” The director, Valdimar Jóhannsson, worried sometimes that Rapace had gone a bit too deep. “He said I was more Maria than Noomi.” No kidding.



‘It gave me nightmares’ ... Rapace in Lamb, about a sheep that gives birth to a half-human. Photograph: A24/Allstar

This film, an elemental human-against-nature struggle, means more to her than most. “I feel like I’ve been waiting for it for as long as I can remember,” she says. “My body was telling me, ‘This is what you need. To dig down into the soil and lava of Iceland.’” Although born in Sweden, Rapace spent three years on a farm in Iceland from the age of five: her mother and stepfather worked there in a community for young adults with Down’s syndrome. When the family moved to another farm back in her home country, she pined for Iceland. “I had a very strong love story with it from the first time I set foot there. I was always an outsider in Sweden: I was too much, too emotional, too passionate.”

She started acting while still in Iceland, getting her first film job there at the age of seven, in the medieval saga *In the Shadow of the Raven*. “I felt like I’d been invited to paradise. There was freedom on set. I didn’t have to be

cute. I've always revolted against cuteness and the need to be likable, because I'm not." A few minutes later, she corrects herself: "Actually, I'm desperate to be liked. That's the problem. My need to be accepted into the nice sophisticated rooms was so strong that I had to make a conscious decision, 'OK, I don't want to be liked.' Otherwise I would be a slave to that. I've even written a manifesto to myself as a reminder that I can't do things just to be liked." She emails it to me later: this punchy, 500-word pep talk is the sort of thing one might read to get psyched up before stepping on stage or into the ring.

I put on a big strap-on dildo and walked round the club like a man all night. I loved it!

If ever there was a role designed to prove that she was nobody's poppet, it was Lisbeth Salander, the snarling, punky, motorbike-riding, golf-club-wielding avenger from [Stieg Larsson](#)'s Millennium novels. Arthouse audiences already knew that Rapace meant business from films such as [Daisy Diamond](#), where she plays a young mother who drifts into sex work. But it was Swedish-language adaptation of [The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo](#) (2009) and its two sequels that introduced her to the world. Mention this and she grimaces at how people still confuse her with Salander.

"I don't want to be the badass," she groans. "I even hate the word. People are always pitching things to me, 'She's so badass, she's so you.' I'm like ..." She puts her head in her hands. Making those films, she says, was "like drowning in trauma. It meant that the first connective tissue between me and the world was pain for many years. Pain and sadness was like my identity card. Now I've healed a lot. Maybe I'm not lighter but I would say I allow more colours in me. I feel looser. The veneer, the shield I'd built up since childhood, is slowly peeling off. I'm alive now rather than surviving."

She accepts that the word "badass" can still be applied to some of her actions: aborting her own alien baby in [Ridley Scott's Prometheus](#), before leaping off the operating table as if she had just enjoyed a quick disco nap, was about as badass as it gets. "*That I like,*" she laughs. "Look, I really don't take myself as seriously as people think. My friends all know I'm stupid and nerdy." Like how? "Well, I'm always doing *this.*" She folds her top lip under

itself and sticks out her front teeth. “My friends are like, ‘Can you please stop?’”

Anything else? “A director and producer came over to work with me and I took them to a club where the theme was cross-dressing. I put them in wigs and long dresses, and I was a full-blown man. I was wearing this dildo, this big strap-on, and I was walking round like a man the whole night. I loved it!”



‘I’ve always revolted against cuteness’ ... Rapace with Michael Nyqvist in *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*. Photograph: Nordisk Film/Sportsphoto/Allstar

Since she associates Salander with suffering and trauma, it’s no wonder she wants to move on. Each of her movies, she explains, represents a clear chapter in her life, whether it’s 2014’s [The Drop](#), an impressively tender crime drama with [Tom Hardy](#), or the [Will Smith](#)’s 2017 fantasy thriller [Bright](#), in which she played an evil elf whose minions eat babies. She need only watch a few seconds of one of her old films to remember her state of mind: “What my fears were, what I was struggling with.”

In 2011, she starred with Robert Downey Jr and Jude Law in Guy Ritchie’s [Sherlock Holmes](#) reboot. “If I watch that now I can see I was in the middle

of my divorce. I can see it in my face, hear it in my voice. I can see my chest is locked. I can see that was a day where we had a big argument that morning, or I hadn't slept the entire night. Making both Sherlock Holmes and Prometheus, I was coming out of my divorce, and life was really chaotic."

Her ex-husband, and the father of her 18-year-old son, is the Swedish actor Ola Rapace, formerly Pär Ola Norell. They both changed their surnames when they married; hers was Norén. Is this a Swedish custom? "No. I just didn't feel connected to my name and I wanted to start something new and beautiful." Rapace, she says, means "bird of prey"; the choice can be traced back to an experience she had in Iceland when she was seven. "I was playing with ice rocks and I felt this presence. I look up and this huge eagle is sitting close by, staring at me with golden eyes. I thought either he was going to take me or attack me or bless me for life. And then – ba-boom, ba-boom – he took off and flew away." She flaps her arms. Her jacket hits the floor.

"I felt like it was a god. Later, I did some research and found out that eagles are incredibly loyal. That's like me – and that's something I tapped into on Lamb. I have this primal animal side. If I go to battle for you, I promise I'll fight until I die!" I believe her. I have no doubt she would make a formidable ally. But for now: no more coffee.

Lamb is released in the UK on 10 December.

This article was amended on 2 December 2021 to clarify that Noomi Rapace starred in the 2009 version of *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* rather than the 2011 remake.

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The pandemic body: how the Covid era changed us – from hair loss to weight gain



Has staying at home, not wearing shoes caused us foot pain? Illustration: Jango Jim/The Guardian



Amy Fleming

Thu 2 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

This year, out of nowhere, my left heel has started hurting. Is it the onset of some degenerative condition, a normal byproduct of ageing, or simply pandemic life, I wonder. After all, living through this period has had surprising health consequences – even for people who have not caught coronavirus. It has recently emerged, for instance, that [the Covid era has been a global hair-loss event](#) – a clear manifestation of the stress everyone has been under. What else have these unprecedented times written on our bodies?

Hair

When the UK's Institute of Trichologists (IoT) – a professional association for those who treat hair and scalp disorders – surveyed its members this summer, 79% said they had seen cases of “post-Covid hair loss” in their clinics. Eva Proudman, consultant trichologist and chair of the IoT, puts it down to the high temperatures and loss of appetite that are common with having the virus. “Both of these factors reflect in the hair, usually between four to six weeks after the virus has started to resolve, and the hair will start to shed excessively.”

But mental stress alone can also lead to hair shedding. Richard Spencer, a trichologist working in central London, says other reasons for hair falling out can be “the anxiety of having the virus and not knowing how badly one might suffer from it, as well as the stress of lockdowns”. While Proudman has seen cases in men and women, it can be more obvious in women, “as they tend to wear their hair longer than men, and you see a higher volume of hair coming out in the shower, brush and generally shedding”.

Pandemic-induced hair loss is most likely a condition known as telogen effluvium, “a disruption to the hair’s normal growing and shedding cycle,” says Proudman, “causing there to be less hair in the growing phase, and more in the resting and shedding phases”. The good news, says Spencer, is that whether the loss is due to physical or emotional stress, “most or all of the hair is recoverable”. In some cases, adds Proudman, “the body will recover from this disruption on its own. In other cases, we may need to help with dietary changes, specific hair supplements or treatments.”

Eyes

Pandemic eyes are dry and, frankly, shattered from so much screen time. This makes them scratchy, sore and blurry, and it’s hard not to blame this on some perceived [malignant force in the screens, such as blue light](#). Ditto for the boom in childhood myopia that was shown in a Chinese [study](#) to coincide massively with increased screen use (and time indoors, without distant vistas) during lockdowns. This study is now held up around the world as a warning, triggering universal parental guilt and worry, while in practical terms being extremely hard to heed.

But blue-light-blocking glasses are unlikely to be the solution. There is no evidence that screens themselves are damaging eyes. Myopia is caused by focusing continuously on something close to the face (it’s just that children tend to do this more with screens than books). And it is not screen glare that is drying out our eyes. It is our natural tendency to [blink around five times less](#) frequently when doing screen work (or, again, when reading books), and to blink incompletely during screen work (less so with books, so books win).



Pandemic eyes are sore – but are screens to blame? Illustration: Jango Jim/The Guardian

Teeth

Having had all routine dental checkups cancelled during the Covid crisis, my family didn't see a dentist for almost two years. According to the British Dental Association (BDA), safety measures have meant that more than 35m appointments have been lost across England since Covid struck. Tooth decay was already the most common cause of hospitalisation in children (because many are too young to cooperate with treatment without a general anaesthetic).

Mick Armstrong is chair of the BDA's health and science committee, and has come out of retirement to help with the backlog in West Yorkshire. "I treated a tooth the other day," he says, "that required root canal therapy." If he had seen it six months earlier, it would have been salvageable, he says, but: "When I did see it, it was too far gone." He says there was already a crisis in access to NHS dental care, and this is one of the many areas in which existing health inequalities have been exacerbated by Covid.

But those whose teeth haven't quietly rotted beyond repair may have inadvertently ground them to smithereens instead. When the American

Dental Association [surveyed](#) its members in February, it found that 71% of almost 2,300 dentists around the country reported seeing an increase of bruxism – teeth grinding and clenching – among their patients during the pandemic. This can also lead to temporomandibular disorder, which more than 60% of the dentists also saw rise, with symptoms including jaw clicking and pain, and headaches around the temples. There was a similar rise in cracked and chipped teeth, which can result from tooth grinding.

Heart

Cardiologists have seen a rise in chronic heart conditions during the pandemic, says Sonya Babu-Narayan, associate medical director at the British Heart Foundation. For some, diet and exercise have suffered (more on which later), while it has become harder to access medical help. “Each delay adds to a snowball effect,” she says, “which ultimately puts lives at risk. Cancelled procedures, missed appointments and growing waiting lists have likely already contributed to thousands more deaths from heart attacks and strokes during the pandemic than we would expect to see otherwise.”

Stomach

Philip Smith, consultant gastroenterologist at Royal Liverpool hospital and trustee of the charity [Guts UK](#), has noticed that irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) flareups have grown more common. “We have seen an increase in disorders which can be linked to stress and anxiety, such as IBS,” he says. “The brain and the gut interact very closely.”

“My entire job is ‘embarrassing bodies’,” he says. “People don’t want to talk about breaking wind and diarrhoea and there’s a lot of stigma with the conditions that I look after.” Lockdowns have made seeking help more off-putting, for conditions such as Crohn’s disease, ulcerative colitis and inflammatory bowel disease, “and by the time that people are actually diagnosed, and have their treatment, their disease is flaring a lot more severely than it would have done in ordinary circumstances. We might have caught it when it was moderate rather than severe.”

Liver

Alcohol-related hospital admissions dropped in the years preceding the pandemic, says Smith, but, since Covid, cases “have massively skyrocketed. They may present with alcoholic hepatitis and jaundice. They can present with weight loss, or withdrawal symptoms such as shakes, tremors, sweating and agitation. They can present with gastrointestinal bleeding, because when you’ve got cirrhosis of the liver, your blood vessels swell up in your gut.” It’s not that everyone is drinking more – in fact, one-third of [those surveyed by the charity Alcohol Change UK](#) in 2020 said they had stopped or reduced their drinking. However, one in five – an estimated 8.6 million adults – have been drinking more.



If your teeth haven’t rotted, maybe you’ve ground them into smithereens.
Illustration: Jango Jim/The Guardian

Skin

As you would expect, says Emma Craythorne, consultant dermatologist at Guy’s and St Thomas’ hospital in London, inflammatory skin conditions such as rosacea, eczema and psoriasis have been worsening over this stressful time, because stress equals flareups. And frequent handwashing can take its toll on anyone’s skin. In fact, Craythorne’s department had to set up a clinic for staff at the hospital because, as she says, doctors have to wash their hands about 100 times a day. “When you cleanse your hands,

immediately, the outer layer starts to lose water because you've disrupted its bricks-and-mortar protection." If you don't moisturise afterwards, or use a hand sanitiser with added moisturiser such as glycerin, the constant drying, "starts to cause cracks in the skin. And then the pathogenic bacteria can get in and cause inflammation."

The term "maskne" has been jovially mooted during the pandemic – referring to skin problems due to mask-wearing – but Craythorne doesn't see this as a big problem. Some people might develop perioral dermatitis, she says, "a condition where the barrier of the skin isn't working quite so well, and you develop these tiny bumps around the mouth that can be itchy – and people often confuse it with acne, but it's not". While wearing masks does change the environment in that area, which could trigger the condition, Craythorne suspects that blame might more lie with the specialist skincare acids.

Feet

According to Emma McConnachie, spokeswoman for the Royal College of Podiatry, who practises in Stirling, my dodgy heel may well be pandemic-related. "We have been seeing more tendon strains and types of heel pain such as plantar fasciitis," she says. One hypothetical cause could be that while we are working from home, feet are deprived of their usual supportive footwear. "Not all foot types cope well with walking barefoot or in flimsy footwear," she says. "Some are also reporting that their feet have 'spread' and that their shoes no longer fit. Although, it could be argued that their shoes may not have fit properly before and that they are more aware after the time out of them. Like when you first put on your jeans after spending lockdown in jogging bottoms."

She says podiatrists are also seeing increases in painful arch areas, ankles and the achilles area at the back of the ankle. The assumption, she says, is that many of these injuries have resulted from "changes in activity type, or taking up new activities, such as running". If you have had pain in your feet for longer than two weeks without improvement, she advises, "you are best to seek professional assessment, diagnosis and treatment".

Diet and fitness

Tim Spector at King's College London, whose Zoe Covid Symptom Study app has been a mine of epidemiological data throughout the pandemic, says that the app's survey on diet and exercise showed, overall, little change in the nation's weight and fitness. But, behind these averages, he says, "quite a lot of people shifted their behaviour. They either got healthier, or they got much less healthy, but on average, they sort of balanced out." This data was published this year in the journal Nature Food.

While the survey found that overall, weight gain averaged at just 0.8kg (1lb 12oz), an NHS [study](#) this year showed that people seeking help with weight loss were on average 2.3kg heavier than those in the previous three years.

Meanwhile, the Zoe survey showed that, while just over a quarter of people did less exercise over the pandemic, a slightly larger proportion became more active. And, when it came to diet, Spector says, about one-third rediscovered cooking and ate more healthily, while another third did the opposite, and the final third made no changes. "What will they revert back to?" asks Spector. "Will they miss the KFC – or the quinoa salad?"

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The Power of the Dog

‘A cold-souled Brokeback’: queerness and desire in The Power of the Dog



Benedict Cumberbatch and Kodi Smit-McPhee in The Power of the Dog
Photograph: Courtesy Of Netflix/COURTESY OF NETFLIX



Guy Lodge

Thu 2 Dec 2021 02.28 EST

Jane Campion's [The Power of the Dog](#) is a film of reveals: some gradual and ruthlessly calculated, others abrupt and careless and hastily re-concealed. Bodies and desires are unwittingly exposed to others. Motivations are guarded until it's too late to change them. When they slip, they show us the secret lives and minds of men who want to seem more straight and simple than they are.

Benedict Cumberbatch's performance is the film is a reveal in itself. It's aggressive and dissonant and off-kilter in ways the refined British actor rarely permits himself to be on screen, and I spent a good portion of the film's running time figuring out if I liked it or not. Whenever he plays American, Cumberbatch gives the appearance of *acting* more than usual, and such is the case here: cast very much against type as crude, caustic Montana rancher Phil Burbank, his growling drawl and wide-gaited cowboy swagger feel like put-ons, almost distractingly unnatural to him — even as his presence fixes your gaze with eerie insistence.

At a certain point, the penny dropped. The tensely macho affectations aren't so much Cumberbatch's as Phil's: the actor is channeling the character's

own uneasy but compelling performance of alpha masculinity, straining to keep a different sense of self under his shapeless leather cattleman hat. And it was with this realisation that the not-so-secret agenda of Campion's terse, hard-bitten and surprisingly, substantially queer film began to bloom, like a cactus flower in a very hostile desert.

Or a paper flower on an otherwise dingy barroom table setting — out-of-place decorations fashioned by out-of-place teenager Peter (Kodi Smit-McPhee), a quiet, anxious boy who looks like he was once scared entirely out of his skin and never quite got it to fit again. The ornate fake blossoms are brusquely destroyed by Phil, set on fire to light his cigarette, and for much of *The Power of the Dog*, it looks like Peter will likewise fall prey to the older man's wilfully destructive impulses. There, too, the film defies our expectations, as Phil and Peter enter a fierce psychological standoff that highlights their very different senses of duty toward masculine identity — and ultimately reveals what they have in common.

Phil has always had a beta counterpart to torment: usually, his mild-mannered brother George (Jesse Plemons) has taken the brunt of that need. For 40 years, the men have shared a bedroom in the dark, unloved wooden house at the centre of the family ranch, maintaining a physical closeness in spite of personalities roaming ever farther apart. Stuffily suited George is the ranch's gentle pragmatist; Phil, never not seen in oily, sweat-stained workwear, is its brawny labourer, despite a superior, well-read intelligence that he works hard to override — as if his intellect might give the lie to his brutishness.

It's an unhappy arrangement that has nonetheless worked well enough for years. Phil is more rattled than he cares to admit when George rather suddenly marries fragile widow Rose (Kirsten Dunst), moving her into the house and himself out of the brothers' bedroom. Perhaps he's merely taking that frustration out on Rose's son Peter when he starts relentless bullying the boy, taunting him for his spindly physique, his effeminate hobbies and his mother's weaknesses. But perhaps he recognises a strange kind of threat in Peter's wispy demeanour, fearing that a kid who cares so little for performative masculinity will see right through his own.

And so *The Power of the Dog* proceeds as a morbid, cold-souled negative of *Brokeback Mountain*: a film where two lonesome cowboys recognised a mutual queerness in each other, letting it pull them close until the world pulled them apart. Here, the world needn't intervene: the men can weaponise that shared secret against each other all by themselves. Though Campion's adaptation of Thomas Savage's novel makes blunt nods to gay desire in some respects — even revealing a character's hidden stash of muscle magazines, what passed in the 1920s for gay porn — its most charged queer relationship is an unseen one.



Photograph: Kirsty Griffin/NETFLIX

Taciturn Phil speaks little of anything personal, but frequently shares memories of a late cowboy, Bronco Henry, his perma-scowl lifting by a full inch whenever the name crosses his lips and mind. Henry, we gather, showed young Phil the literal ropes as a rancher, and more besides. But nothing Phil says of the man is as revealing as the fetishistic reverence with which he treats his one keepsake of Henry, a riding saddle that he displays in the barn, regularly oiling and polishing it with an out-of-character tenderness that borders on the erotic.

Poor George and ailing Rose can only dream of this tactile chemistry between Phil and his idol's leather seat. Campion, a great sensualist film-

maker, is rarely given due credit for her sense of humour, but there's sly, leering wit in the way she draws on rustic BDSM iconography — saddles and chaps and ropes and whips, oh my — to articulate the queer longings her characters would rather not. Elsewhere, she revels in male-for-male vanity and peacocking: in one marvellous tableau, she gazes across Phil's retinue of young ranch hands on a work break, in repose in various states of undress, one even sprawled like a beefcake model astride his horse. It's a luxuriant display of male beauty for the benefit of no one but each other. Claire Denis' *Beau Travail* comes to mind in its body-beautiful symbology of masculine power and servility — though so, perhaps accidentally but not inappropriately, does the rodeo-chic queerness of Madonna's *Don't Tell Me* video.

Yet the most hard-to-read queerness in the film lies in the character most easily targeted and bullied for not being like the other boys. Peter's desires are opaque throughout; when he begins mirroring Phil's behaviour later in the film, to the consternation of his protective mother, it's not clear whether he's motivated by empathy and identification or canny, vengeful trap-laying. Phil softens to the lad, making peace, as you do, by weaving him a snazzy, handmade cowboy's lasso. It's a gesture of kinship: they're family, of course, but perhaps he means another kind of community. Masculine bonding is a fixture of the American western, of course, though Campion's thrilling, perverse film subverts that tradition, bringing the long-seated subtext of the genre perilously close to the surface — only to get violently evasive just as her cowboys are about to come clean, or come out, to each other.

- The Power of the Dog is now available on Netflix
-

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2021.12.02 - Coronavirus

- [Live Covid: Germany set to impose restrictions on the unvaccinated; Sweden warns of new restrictions next week](#)
- [Matt Hancock Pressure on former health secretary over pub landlord's Covid deal](#)
- [Vaccines UK ministers secure 114m more vaccines for next two years](#)
- [Hospitality Ad boss Martin Sorrell criticises lack of masks guidance as events cancelled](#)

[Coronavirus live](#)

[Coronavirus](#)

Covid news: more Omicron cases in UK amid 53,945 new infections; German ‘lockdown’ for unvaccinated – as it happened

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Matt Hancock

Pressure on Hancock over pub landlord's Covid deal



Alex Bourne, who used to run a pub close to Hancock's former constituency home, said he initially offered his services to the UK health secretary by sending him a personal WhatsApp message. Photograph: UK Parliament/Jessica Taylor/PA

[Felicity Lawrence](#)

Wed 1 Dec 2021 17.40 EST

Former health secretary [Matt Hancock](#) was under pressure on Wednesday to set the record straight over £40m of government Covid-related work won by his former pub landlord after he accused Labour of “fabrication” about the deal.

The Guardian first [revealed](#) in November 2020 that a former neighbour in Hancock's constituency had been awarded work supplying the government

with tens of millions of vials for NHS Covid-19 tests despite having had no previous experience of producing medical supplies.

Alex Bourne, who used to run a pub close to Hancock's former constituency home in Suffolk, said he initially offered his services to the health secretary by sending him a personal WhatsApp message.

On Tuesday, Hancock had told Labour party chair [Anneliese Dodds](#) that Labour's efforts to suggest Bourne had been favoured because of his acquaintance with the health secretary were a slur: "I have heard this point about this pub landlord and I just want to tell her and the House, and put it formally on the record, and after this I hope the Labour party will also stop this slur, that the man in question never got nor applied for a contract from the government or the NHS at all. It is a fabrication pushed by the Labour party. It's a load of rubbish."

Hancock was speaking after the deputy speaker, Eleanor Laing, responded to a point of order from Dodds by encouraging him to correct the record if he had misled the House of Commons. Hancock instead defended his record.

Bourne's company Hinpack did not have a direct contract with the Department of Health and Social Care or the [NHS](#) but was subcontracted for the Covid work to a supplier already approved by the NHS, Alpha Laboratories.

Hancock told MPs: "Of course, the Department of Health and the NHS does not have a say in sub-contracting arrangements."

However, the contract which is between Alpha and the secretary of state for health, and signed by a civil servant on his behalf in December 2020, stipulated that all the work would be [subcontracted](#) to Hinpack, the Guardian revealed earlier this year.

Exchanges between the two men later [emerged](#), after multiple contested freedom of information requests, showing the former health secretary had personally referred his old neighbour on to an official.

The Good Law Project, which has been challenging the government in court

over its awarding of Covid contracts, [published](#) details of the contract involving Bourne on Twitter, which it said undermined Hancock's account in the house. This prompted Dodds to call for Hancock to return to parliament and correct the record, reigniting the controversy.

Bourne and Hancock insist no favours were asked for or given in the award of the work. Hancock replied to Dodds: "This point of order and the point made in it demonstrates very clearly that there was no contract between the firm being discussed and the department or the NHS.

"So what this has done is demonstrated finally and for the record that there was no such contract between my constituent and the department or NHS. No matter how hard they look or how deep they dig, all that will be discovered is a lot of people working hard to save lives. That's what was going on."

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Coronavirus

UK ministers secure 114m more Covid vaccines for next two years



Some experts have warned that Covid-19 will have to be kept at bay by repeated vaccine campaigns, while others have said it is too early to tell whether annual vaccine boosters will be needed. Photograph: Mike Segar/Reuters

[Andrew Gregory](#) Health editor

Wed 1 Dec 2021 17.30 EST

Ministers in the UK have secured new contracts to buy 114m more Covid-19 vaccines for the next two years.

The deals, for 2022 and 2023, were accelerated after the emergence of the Omicron coronavirus variant, officials said. Under the agreements, the UK will buy 54m more doses from Pfizer/BioNTech and 60m more doses from Moderna.

These purchases are in addition to the 35m extra Pfizer/BioNTech doses ordered in August for delivery in the second half of 2022, officials said. The UK is also still expecting 60m Novavax and 7.5m GSK/Sanofi doses in 2022.

Sajid Javid, the health secretary, said the new deals would “future proof” the UK’s vaccine programme and ensure protection for “even more people in the years ahead”.

There remains uncertainty about further health programmes. Some experts have warned that Covid-19 will have to be kept at bay by repeated vaccine campaigns, while others have said it is too early to tell whether annual vaccine boosters will be needed.

Officials at the Department of [Health](#) and Social Care said the new contracts included access to modified vaccines if needed to combat Omicron and future variants of concern.

The government said it had enough supplies of both Moderna and Pfizer/BioNTech doses for the current expansion of the booster programme.

Ministers said this week that all adults in the UK would be offered a booster shot before the end of January, amid growing concerns about the Omicron variant. Vaccination experts advising the government have expressed preference for the mRNA vaccines from Pfizer and Moderna.

Trial data suggest booster doses are generally well tolerated and provide a substantial increase in vaccine-induced immune responses, in particular, and that mRNA vaccines provide a strong booster effect.

Javid said: “These new deals will future proof the Great British vaccination effort, which has so far delivered more than 115 million first, second and booster jabs across the UK, and will ensure we can protect even more people in the years ahead.

“This is a national mission, and our best weapon to deal with this virus and its variants is to get jabs in arms. So when you are called forward, get the jab and get boosted.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/01/uk-ministers-secure-114m-more-covid-vaccines-for-next-two-years>

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Hospitality industry

Martin Sorrell: ad clients are cancelling Christmas parties over Omicron



Sir Martin Sorrell said clients were calling off Christmas events: 'There has been a sharp series of cancellations.' Photograph: Kiyoshi Takahase Segundo/Alamy

[Mark Sweeney](#)

[@marksweney](#)

Thu 2 Dec 2021 06.40 EST

The advertising boss Sir [Martin Sorrell](#) has said clients are cancelling Christmas events in response to Omicron, and criticised the UK government for failing to give sufficient guidance on masks.

Sorrell, the executive chairman of S4 Capital and the founder and former chief executive of WPP, said event cancellations had gathered pace since the new Covid variant was identified.

“What we are seeing our clients doing and other people [doing], the answer is they are … cancelling,” Sorrell told BBC Radio 4’s Today programme. “There has been quite a sharp series of cancellations since this happened just three, four, five days ago.”

Boris Johnson, who is embroiled in a controversy over [Christmas parties at Downing Street](#) during lockdown last year, has urged people [not to cancel](#) festive parties or nativity plays.

The prime minister’s view contradicted the [advice of leading scientists](#) and one of his most senior health officials, who advised people to cut back on unnecessary socialising in response to Omicron.

Sorrell said: “The guidance we are getting both from the government and the medical community is contradictory. The uncertainty is extreme. To be a little bit sympathetic to the government, it is an extremely difficult situation. But we have been through this before with [the] Delta and the previous variants, so you would have thought the government would have been a little bit more prepared for what may or may not happen in terms of scenario planning.”

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Sorrell said the government should extend its guidance on where masks should be worn while the UK is in a period of “extreme uncertainty” over the seriousness of Omicron.

“The government suggesting we should wear masks in shops or on public transport is one thing but what about restaurants, what about hotels, what about events? I think we are not being given enough guidance by the government as to the simple things we can do,” he said. “We don’t know at the moment how far this will spread. It could become extremely difficult in some scenarios.”

He said the public were not taking the current advice to wear masks seriously. “Mask-wearing, I think, to some extent helps, and we are just not implementing it and people are not taking the measures. Going out last

night, for example, and seeing what people were doing in restaurants and shops and theatres, really not taking it seriously enough to heart. We should be very cautious at this particular point in time, I think.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/dec/02/ad-boss-martin-sorrell-criticises-lack-of-masks-guidance-as-events-cancelled>

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2021.12.02 - Opinion

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[Opinion](#)[Social care](#)

This isn't a plan for social care in England – it's a recipe for disaster

[Polly Toynbee](#)



‘A vanishing social care workforce in England is already 100,000 short.’
Workers strike over pay and conditions at a care home in London.
Photograph: Guy Smallman/Getty Images

Thu 2 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

After all this time, is that it? The white paper on social care in England, published on Wednesday, doesn’t begin “to fix social care once and for all”, as Boris Johnson promised on Downing Street’s steps. Ignoring the scale of this crisis, nothing was announced that will actually slow the galloping rate of the sector’s collapse, with [half of councils](#) having dealt with a care home closure or bankruptcy in the past six months.

Only a [fifth of funds, £1.7bn](#), raised from the new national insurance levy goes where it’s most needed, including retaining a vanishing social care workforce, which is already 100,000 short. Instead, the bulk of the £5.4bn will go on preserving the inheritances of well-off homeowners. Wednesday’s announcement, which does not come with extra money, reallocates some to new technology for collecting data, assessing risks to help prevent patient falls and for adapted housing for the frail. But in this hurricane, good ideas risk sinking under water.

What an odd political blunder, not to “level up” in class and geography but instead perversely tip the scales towards the richer south. The design of the [£86,000 cap on care costs](#) means Boris Johnson’s promise that no one will lose their home to pay for care is kept only for southerners with expensive properties, not for northerners whose house prices are lower, contrary to his electoral strategy.

Here are the bleak financial facts: social care funding will only return to the level it was at 15 years ago by 2025, Ben Zaranko, senior research economist at the Institute for Fiscal Studies, tells me. In fact it’s worse than that: the population has grown since then and so has the number of elderly people who need help, so per capita funding will still fall far below the standards of 2010, which were never brilliant.

Here's the scale of the crisis: Age UK's charity director, Caroline Abrahams, says the number of people now receiving no care who would have qualified a decade ago has risen to 1.6 million in England, leaving many vulnerable people home alone with neither family nor care. Social service directors this week reported that a further 400,000 people are stuck in a queue waiting to be assigned the care they qualify for. No one yet knows the significance of a [30% rise](#) in numbers of people dying at home over the past two years, but some of these will be the lonely, unattended deaths of those denied care. The number of district nurses has been [cut by half in eight years](#).

Care staff are leaving the sector to work in warehouses, supermarkets or the [NHS](#), where the pay is better. If they were to be paid the same as the lowest band for NHS healthcare assistants, the cost would be an extra £1.2bn a year, says the IFS – but that's much more than what is in this care plan. Why are care workers paid so much less than NHS staff with the same skills? Because they are virtually un-unionised, they have no pay review body, no national pay scale and they are scattered among a host of small employers. Without muscle, there's no leverage for a pay and career regime to attract and retain this disappearing workforce.

Besides, care is not just for the old. Half that puny £1.7bn must cover care for people of working age, with the number of those with disabilities surviving birth and childhood who might not have generations ago growing.

One of the most perverse policies will actually accelerate care home collapse. At the moment, many providers keep going by cross-subsidising their underfunded council residents through charging the self-payers about 40% extra. The government says that's unfair, so self-payers will be allowed to ask their council to fix their care at the lower rate. That's a recipe for instant bankruptcy.

As council fees are so low, if everyone were to pay that rate, a lot of homes would go under at a stroke, says Mike Padgham, head of the Independent Care Group, an umbrella lobby for small northern care home owners. No wonder Stephen Chandler, president of the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services, warned this week: "Red lights are flashing right across our dashboard." His organisation calls for a £1,000 winter retention bonus to

keep hold of care staff. Jeremy Hunt's health and social care select committee estimates that £7bn is needed to keep social care afloat.

The Treasury may reckon most voters will never see these private care tragedies hidden behind lace curtains, with only a few families using care at any one time. The hot politics are all with the NHS, and especially its ballooning waiting lists. But any attempt to clear that backlog of operations will fail with too many hospital beds filling up with those denied social care. This derelict plan leaves health and social care even less prepared for a future pandemic wave.

- Polly Toynbee is a Guardian columnist
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[Opinion](#)[Scottish independence](#)

Sturgeon is being forced to play the long game on a second referendum

[Martin Kettle](#)



Illustration: Eleanor Shakespeare/The Guardian

Thu 2 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

Here are four truths about Scottish politics. The nationalist SNP commands the stage, reinforced by its latest [Holyrood election mandate in May](#). Its leader, Nicola Sturgeon, is Scotland's most admired political figure by far. Boris Johnson is a big turnoff for Scots. And more Scots want a second independence referendum by 2026 than do not.

Sound familiar? They should. All four things have been true in some form or other for a long time now. The SNP has been dominant for 14 years now. Sturgeon has reigned supreme for seven. No Conservative prime minister has been popular with Scots. Demands for a second referendum have revved up since the [2014 No vote](#), especially after Brexit.

So does that mean there will in fact be another independence vote soon? Many say yes. They depict the demand as politically unstoppable. Yet it all depends on which side holds the stronger card. Some polls give the nationalists a boost – yesterday's Ipsos Mori poll has [55% support for independence](#). Most others counsel caution: a week ago [YouGov had independence trailing](#) on 47%. [Scots tell the pollsters](#) they want support to be consistently at 60% before Sturgeon calls a second vote. She remains well short of achieving that.

While individual polls remain volatile, the overall picture has paradoxically become more settled. The immediate independence drive appears stalled. The return of Covid-19 boosts Sturgeon as a leader but that boost pushes independence down the agenda again. All this could continue for at least another year. That doesn't mean there will never be a second referendum, let alone that there ought not to be one. But it does mean, as Galileo might have said to the Inquisition, that it still isn't moving.

To write this will provoke the usual abuse from supporters of independence. Looked at dispassionately, however, it is the case, and one good poll for the independence cause does not change it. More significantly, leaders on both sides in the argument know this too. Their actions can only be properly

understood in that light. This is a time for political calculation. It may be less exciting than some want, but it is in some ways more fascinating.

The underlying reality is that Scottish opinion still [divides down the middle](#) about independence. Smart strategists have long recognised that the resultant standoff requires delicate judgments. Nationalists don't like the standoff, of course, while unionists do. Each must nevertheless be highly aware of the danger of overplaying their hands. Canny nationalists know they risk alienating middle-ground opinion by obsessing about independence over everything else, especially during Covid. Unionists know that Johnson charging around Scotland trying to stick a union flag on everything is a guaranteed vote-loser. If they didn't know it before, they certainly do after [Johnson's 80% dissatisfaction rating](#) in the Ipsos Mori poll yesterday, a record low.

Gordon Brown [argued earlier this year](#) that Scottish opinion divides not into two but three. On many issues, diehard nationalists and unionists frame a group in the middle that is larger than either of them. These middle-ground voters, people whose politics are not wholly defined by the constitutional question but by other values too (many of them shared with people across Britain), will shape any outcome. They remain very much up for grabs. In 2014 they tipped the balance against independence. The nationalists have to change that – but they have not yet succeeded. Until they do, a second referendum remains an uncertain enterprise in which a second defeat would shake Scottish politics to its foundations.

Never underestimate the ability of the SNP and the wider independence movement to shift opinion during a campaign, especially while Sturgeon remains at its head. Even so, more thoughtful nationalists acknowledge the difficult reality – and have done so even in the week of the [SNP's recent virtual party conference](#), in which all its leaders have been compelled to talk up the referendum as urgent business. In reality, there is more light and shade in all this than many would like. Inevitably, Sturgeon's judgment, and that of the small circle around her, is crucial.

Not many nationalists would go as far as one seasoned Scottish political observer did the other day, claiming to me that “Nicola’s commitment is Augustinian; give me a referendum, but not now.” But it is undeniable that

Sturgeon – caught between the fervour of her followers and the caution of the voters whose support she needs – is being forced to play the long game on the second referendum. True, there have been moments when events were moving the nationalists' way – especially in the early aftermath of the Brexit vote. But this has ebbed now, and Brexit, with all its uncertainties, is no longer the nationalist recruiting sergeant that it was.

Nor has Sturgeon's handling of Covid translated into an enduring boost of support for independence. At the height of the pandemic, especially when compared with Johnson, Sturgeon soared in the polls. In August 2020 her [approval ratings reached +50](#). Today they are down, at +12. That's still far better than anyone else, but it is a reminder that when Sturgeon is judged on other things, including the SNP government's often poor domestic record, the aura can sharply diminish.

The result, perhaps surprisingly, is that UK ministers currently think they have acquired more of a handle on the Scottish question than one might assume in the light of Johnson's unpopularity and the SNP's ascendancy. They have done it by a policy of what Victorian imperialists might have called masterly inactivity. Taking care not to inflame the situation needlessly, and trying to avoid outrageous ineptitude may not set the bar high for the UK government, but recent months have been marked by what ministers are more likely to call strategic patience. As long as there is no fervour for independence outside the core vote, UK ministers believe they can play it long.

In practice, that means [Scotland](#) faces a constitutional poker game, not a battle for freedom. Both sides have to think several moves ahead. The central fact is that there will be no UK government agreement to any request from Sturgeon for a second referendum this side of the next UK general election. That election may not be until spring 2024. What will follow is a tough two years of mounting pressure on Sturgeon from SNP activists to go it alone in a referendum that opponents will dismiss as unlawful and which voters may regard as a misjudged priority. Much rests on the decision she must take. In the fight for the future of the United Kingdom, it is less a question of which side has right on its side, and increasingly a question of which side will blink first.

- Martin Kettle is a Guardian columnist
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OpinionThe Guardian Foundation

#MeToo changed Hollywood – but what about our schools, workplaces and homes?

[Rosamund Cloke](#)



A protest in Trafalgar Square, central London, over violence against women in April 2021. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

Thu 2 Dec 2021 04.45 EST

Women's rights have been the focus of many protests in Britain this year. After the rape and murder of [Sarah Everard](#) and the killing of the teacher [Sabina Nessa](#), women demonstrated over the lack of safety on the country's streets.

Beyond British shores, when news broke that the [Taliban](#) had once again begun restricting Afghan women's lives and the debate about the [legitimacy](#)

[of abortion](#) restarted in the US, it became clear that the threat to women's rights was increasing around the world.

Among all this discourse over women and their bodies, the fourth anniversary of the [#MeToo movement](#) took place this October. This all raises the question: what impact has #MeToo had on the world, if any?

The movement has certainly made a difference in Hollywood, leading to the arrest and conviction of powerful men such as Harvey Weinstein. However, sexism and sexual harassment are not only found in Hollywood but also closer to home, in our schools, [our workplaces](#) and our everyday lives.

A YouGov poll carried out in March 2021 for UN Women UK found that [seven out of 10 women](#) surveyed had experienced some form of sexual harassment in public; for younger women the proportion was nearly nine out of 10. [A report](#) by a group of British MPs and peers set up to support UN Women UK's work concludes that "sexual harassment in public places continues to be highly prevalent and concerning".

Laura Bates, the founder of the Everyday Sexism Project in the UK, [has said](#): "Many people would like to think that workplace sexual harassment is a thing of the past. In reality, it is alive and well, and having a huge impact on tens of thousands of women's lives."

Even more concerning is the number of sexual assault cases in schools. A BBC investigation revealed that at least 13,000 sex offences involving under-18s [were reported](#) to police in England and Wales every year between 2018 and 2020, and the education inspectorate Ofsted says sexual harassment [has become "normalised"](#) among school-age children.

This level of cases creates a dangerous environment and culture among students and a mindset that regards sexual abuse or harassment of any kind as a normal and acceptable part of society; a mindset that can then be carried into adulthood and the workplace.

I can attest from personal experience that sexual harassment in schools is scarily common, to the extent that it is considered ordinary classroom banter among boys. What is even more rife within the school environment is the

presentation and exchange of nude images. Many of my female friends, and even occasionally I, receive unwanted explicit images that we try to ignore or delete.



A stitched message tied to a tree outside Highgate School in north London, where pupils staged a walkout in March following alleged abuse and harassment at the school. Photograph: James Veysey/REX/Shutterstock

Making the situation worse is the lack of reports made by students to teachers about the behaviour because, as Ofsted's chief inspector, Amanda Spielman, [said](#) in an interview: "Whether it's happening at school or in their social life, they simply don't feel it's worth reporting."

It has been suggested that this could be the result of a lack of education about what is considered assault, or from a history of schools failing to take cases brought to them seriously. From my experience, I would say that both are sadly true.

However, an anonymous system, whereby pupils can submit their cases to a trusted teacher or member of staff without having to go to them in person, has been shown to be effective at allowing students who might otherwise feel uncomfortable sharing their experiences the opportunity to report their

cases. However, this has not yet been widely implemented in British schools.

I hadn't even realised how detrimental the culture we have created is until I began researching for this article: I can now see more clearly that the behaviour I would have previously dismissed is dangerous. It shows how far we still must go even after the upheaval the #MeToo movement created.

To me, it seems that sexual harassment is still happening, the only difference is that now we're much more aware of it. But awareness is perhaps the first step in eradicating the threat of sexual assault that many of us feel daily, and in slowly dismantling the dangerous culture created by decades of silence.

- Rosamund Cloke, from Bishop Challoner school in the London borough of Bromley, has won the Guardian Foundation's Young Hugo Award 2021 for political opinion writing with this article
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[Opinion](#)[Coronavirus](#)

Introvert, extrovert or other? Welcome to the age of the ambivert

[Emma Beddington](#)



Ambiverts, who combine extrovert and introvert traits, are very ‘now’, which is handy in the face of conflicting advice about socialising. Photograph: Betsie Van der Meer/Getty Images

Thu 2 Dec 2021 02.00 EST

In the spirit of getting your kicks where you can, I was tickled by former deputy chief medical officer for England Dr Jenny Harries’ recent Omicron-related [advice](#) to “be careful, not socialising when we don’t particularly need to”. What would necessary socialising look like? Can I cancel the stressful bits of Christmas and replace them with some quietly necessary drinking with a dear friend, or possibly just a cat? Could I pretend that I have responsibly chosen not to attend parties, when I haven’t actually been invited to any? I’m ready for these upsides.

Harries’ advice actually feels like something of an ambivert’s charter. Ambiversion – combining introvert and extrovert traits – is very “now”. There is a theory that Covid and its attendant stresses and circumstance changes recalibrated our preconceptions about how we relate to others. Extroverts have been forced to explore a quieter life that some found they appreciated to an unexpected degree, and introverts are flourishing in a less hectically connected world, or alternatively, realising how much they need and miss human connection. We are becoming, or realising we already were, ambiverts with contradictory and complex needs in our relationships with others, not just tick boxes on a personality test.

That is probably a good thing. In the corporate arena, research in 2013 described an “[ambivert advantage](#)”: ambiverts in sales outperform other groups, because they relate better to a range of people. Dr Karl Moore, author of the upcoming [We Are All Ambiverts Now](#), argues that responding successfully to Covid challenges requires business leaders to listen, observe and reflect (introvert traits) but also to enthuse, energise and inspire (extrovert). In our personal lives, having a more nuanced understanding of ourselves and others as social animals feels like a forgiving way to approach these tediously still-unprecedented times.

With eye-rolling inevitability, the PM rejected Harries’ recommendations, urging us to press ahead with all possible mulled Dickensian jollity, but I

will be taking the ambivert's approach. "All I want for Christmas is a measured amount of necessary socialising" might not seem very celebratory, but I quite like the sound of it.

- Emma Beddington is a freelance writer
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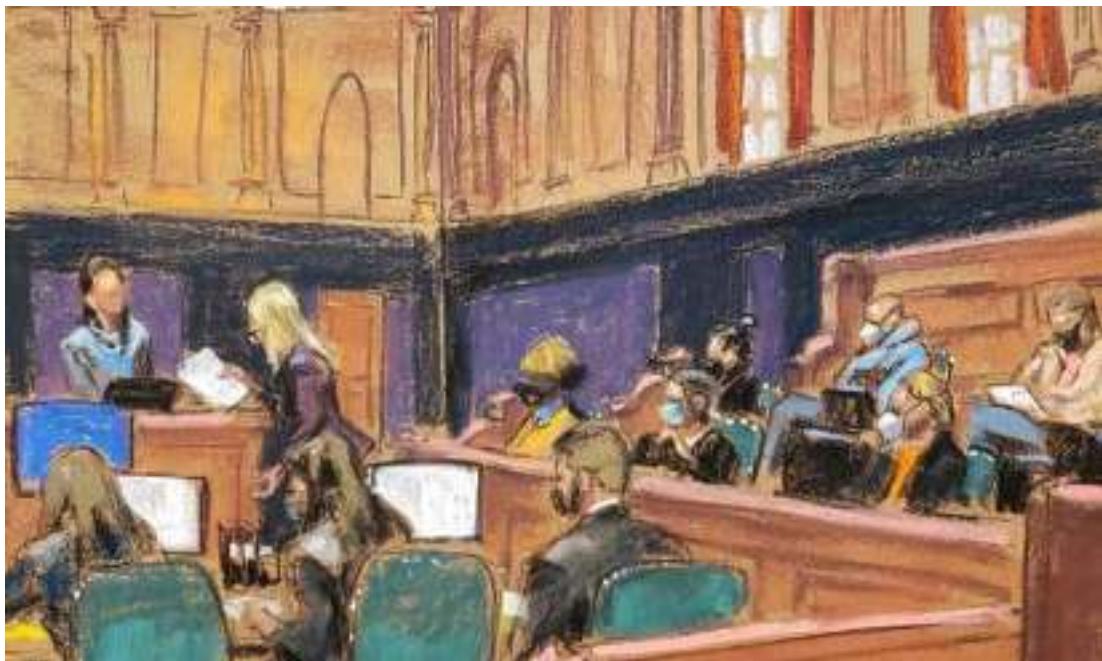
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Ghislaine Maxwell

Ghislaine Maxwell accuser says she met Trump at 14 and flew with Prince Andrew



The witness identified as 'Jane' underwent cross-examination in court in Manhattan on Wednesday. Photograph: Jane Rosenberg/Reuters

[Victoria Bekiempis](#) in New York

Wed 1 Dec 2021 18.09 EST

The first accuser in [Ghislaine Maxwell](#)'s child sex trafficking trial testified on Wednesday that Jeffrey Epstein introduced her to Donald Trump when she was 14. This accuser also claimed that she was on a flight with Prince Andrew.

She did not accuse Trump or the Duke of York of any misconduct. The accuser, who used the pseudonym "Jane" in court, said this as she was undergoing cross-examination from one of Maxwell's attorneys.

“Mr Epstein introduced you to Donald Trump, correct?” defense lawyer Laura Menninger asked.

“He took you to Mar-a-Lago when you were 14, you claim?” Menninger said, in reference to the former president’s home in Palm Beach, Florida.

“Yes,” Jane said.

“He took you in a dark green car and you met Donald Trump there, correct?”

“Correct.”

Menninger also asked: “You remember Prince Andrew being on a flight with you?”

“Yes,” Jane said.

Jane had alleged on Tuesday that Maxwell drew her into Epstein’s predatory orbit when she was 14 years old. At times, Jane alleged, Maxwell was present when Epstein sexually abused her, and claimed that she sometimes participated in the encounters.

Epstein, a financier and convicted sex offender who counted Prince Andrew among his associates, [killed himself](#) at a New York City jail in August 2019 while awaiting his own sex-trafficking trial.

Maxwell, 59, daughter of the late British press baron Robert Maxwell, was arrested at a luxurious New Hampshire estate in July last year. She is on trial for six counts related to her alleged involvement in Epstein’s sexual abuse of teenage girls. She has pleaded not guilty to all counts.



The prosecutor Alison Moe questions a witness, 'Matt', on Wednesday.
Photograph: Jane Rosenberg/Reuters

Menninger challenged Jane about statements she made to law enforcement in the months following Epstein's death. Menninger did so by pointing Jane to statements she had previously given to authorities.

"It is true that you do not recall Ghislaine ever touching you?" Menninger asked.

"That's not true," Jane said.

Menninger said: "When you spoke to the government in December of 2019, with your lawyers there, and you told the government at that time, you are not sure whether Maxwell ever touched you during these encounters, correct?"

"I don't recall," Jane said, referring to what she had told authorities.

"You told the government you had no memory of Ghislaine being present when you claim that Epstein engaged in any sexual contact with you?"

"I don't recall."

“You recall telling the government that Maxwell never touched you?”

“I don’t recall that,” Jane replied.

Menninger also asked: “Has your story changed about how many times you remember abuse over the course of your discussions with the government?”

Menninger’s questioning speaks to one aspect of Maxwell’s defense – attempting to undermine accusers’ recollection of events. The defense is expected to call psychologist Elizabeth Loftus as a witness, to discuss how people can form “false memories”.

Maxwell’s demeanor on day three of testimony was in keeping with the way she has carried herself throughout the trial. Maxwell entered the courtroom and hugged her lawyers as usual. Her brother, Kevin Maxwell, approached her at the divider and spoke with her. This was the first time he has attended Maxwell’s trial. Her sister, Isabel, also went to speak with her prior to the proceedings starting.

When cross-examination ended, the prosecution had a chance to question Jane again. She blotted her eyes with tissue after being asked to describe Maxwell’s interaction with her during alleged abuse.

Prosecutors also asked Jane about her lawsuit against Epstein’s estate, which resulted in a settlement. That line of questioning addressed one of the defense’s strategies, which is to portray Maxwell’s accusers as being motivated by money.

“Would you give that money back if it meant that you weren’t abused as a kid?” the prosecution asked.

Jane started crying moments later. She said “sorry” as her voice cracked.

The prosecution asked Jane what the money meant to her. “I wish I would have never received that money in the first place, because of what happened,” she said.

When Jane’s testimony concluded, prosecutors called one of her former boyfriends to the stand. The man, who testified under the pseudonym “Matt”

to keep Jane's identity confidential, said she had discussed a "godfather"-like figure who helped cover her expenses as a child.



Kevin Maxwell and Isabel Maxwell, brother and sister of Ghislaine Maxwell, speak outside the courthouse on Wednesday. Photograph: Jefferson Siegel/Reuters

In about 2008, he said, Jane told Matt that the FBI had contacted her, asking if she wanted to tell her story. That year, Epstein would start his sentence for soliciting a minor for prostitution.

Matt told the court: "She said: you know the godfather that I told you about? She said: I need you to know this is who it is."

"I said: that guy is your godfather?" Matt continued. "She said yes."

"Did you ask her the details about what happened with her and Jeffrey Epstein?" the prosecution asked.

"Yes, I did."

Matt said Jane did not provide details about their interactions.

Asked how Jane reacted to questions about Epstein, Matt said: “She would say to me: ‘Matt, the money wasn’t fucking free.’”

Prosecutors have alleged that Maxwell was Epstein’s “best friend and right hand”.

“Who was most frequently in the room when you had sexual contact with Jeffrey Epstein when you were 14 years old?” prosecutor Alison Moe asked.

“Ghislaine Maxwell,” Jane responded.

After proceedings ended for the day, Kevin Maxwell stood with Isabel Maxwell outside of court and gave a brief statement to reporters. Kevin Maxwell said he was “very pleased to have attended today in court, in person together with Isabel, in support of our sister Ghislaine”.

“We respect the criminal justice system and process in this country and, as a result, we are not going to make any further comments whilst attending court,” Kevin Maxwell added.

The trial continues.

- *Information and support for anyone affected by rape or sexual abuse issues is available from the following organisations. In the US, [Rainn](#) offers support on 800-656-4673. In the UK, [Rape Crisis](#) offers support on 0808 802 9999. In Australia, support is available at [1800Respect](#) (1800 737 732). Other international helplines can be found at [ibiblio.org/rcip/internl.html](#)*
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[Science](#)

Californian firm touts ‘mushroom leather’ as sustainability gamechanger



Grown in trays, mycelium is engineered to look and feel like calfskin or sheepskin
Photograph: carla tramullas

[Jess Cartner-Morley](#)

[@JessC_M](#)

Thu 2 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

Vegan alternatives to leather could save more than just animals. The scientists behind fashion’s new latest must-have – the “mushroom leather” handbag – believe that mycelium, a material grown from fungi which can be engineered to look and feel like calfskin or sheepskin, could help save the planet.

Speaking to the Guardian before a talk at the Business of Fashion Voices conference in Oxfordshire, Dr Matt Scullin, CEO of biomaterials company

Mycoworks, forecast that mushroom leather could be a sustainability gamechanger, “unlocking a future of design which begins with the material, not with the object”.

Fine Mycelium, a patented material which can be grown from fungi in trays in a matter of weeks, replicates the appearance and feel of leather while outperforming it in strength and durability. The material recently made its high fashion debut as an exclusive Hermès handbag.

“It can give the same emotional response as an animal leather. It has that hand-feel of rarity,” says Scullin. On a planet of finite natural resources, Scullin believes both the technology and the mindset of carbon-neutral, grown-to-order mushroom leather could be “revolutionary” – and have implications for innovation in manufacture beyond fashion.

Alongside Scullin at the conference will be Merlin Sheldrake, author of Entangled Lives: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds, and Shape Our Futures. Sheldrake, a biologist, is joining a lineup which also includes designers Vivienne Westwood and Tommy Hilfiger, “because I’m interested to talk to people in creative industries about how the possibilities of fungi can help open the mind to new ideas”. “I am excited to support the fashion world in its efforts to become more sustainable. There is so much potential in fungi to overcome some of the problems we face,” he said.

Sheldrake sees fashion’s engagement with mushroom leather as a platform for “fungi as an analogy for thinking creatively, and sustainably”. Mushroom leather can be grown in pieces to the specific shape and size required by a designer, eliminating the need for cutting room waste. A report by the Higg Materials Sustainability Index found bovine leather to wreak more environmental damage than any other fabric, including plastic-based synthetic leather, due to the deforestation and gas emissions associated with animal rearing.

With leather goods accounting for 15% of the luxury market in 2019, according to the [Statista Consumer Market Outlook Luxury Leather Goods Report](#), sustainable alternatives could have a significant impact on fashion’s footprint.

Bolt Threads – another California-based biomaterials company working with mushroom leather, which collaborated with Stella McCartney on a handbag shown at Paris fashion week and is developing products with Adidas – is another leading player in the mushroom leather market, alongside MycoWorks.

Mushrooms may not have a glamorous image, but fungi-based leather has become an exclusive material, favoured by the kind of high-fashion design studios which work with double face cashmere, and silk organza. But in order to have a substantial impact on sustainability, the material would need to be accessible at a lower price point. “We are working with luxury fashion first because they are ahead of the curve when it comes to sustainability,” says Scullin. “These are brands which are in a position to think big and to think long term.”

But partnership with mass market brands is “on the radar” of MycoWorks, which is about to open a second factory in the US. Scalability that ensured the material could be used in high street fashion or in car upholstery is a definite possibility – the material can be grown in trays in a few weeks – but bioscientists caution that insensitive design could undermine some of the environmentally friendly properties of mycelium. If a handbag or jacket is produced using hardware, trims, adhesives and fastenings which are not biodegradeable, this would undo much of the good the material was developed to achieve. “We can bring biodegradeability to brands, but there is a big problem in the industry with thinking sustainably about a finished product,” says Scullin.

Sheldrake believes that one of the overarching lessons learned from studying fungi is “reforming the way we think about waste. If fungi didn’t do what they do, our planet would be piled metres high in the bodies of animals and plants”. He believes that the impact on mushroom leather on our culture could go way beyond a new It bag. “We have been trained as consumers to think in terms of a straight line whereby we buy something, use it and throw it away. Fungi can inform thinking about fashion on lots of levels. This is about material innovation, but it’s also about the culture of making endless new things, and what we can learn from thinking in terms of nature and of cycles instead.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2021/dec/02/californian-firm-touts-mushroom-leather-as-sustainability-gamechanger>

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Pope Francis

Pope arrives in Cyprus after pledge to relocate 50 refugees to Italy



Referencing the refugee crisis, Pope Francis said in a video message that those ‘fleeing from war and poverty’ were ‘encountering not hospitality but hostility and even exploitation’. Photograph: Grzegorz Gałazka/Sipa/Rex/Shutterstock

[Helena Smith](#) in Athens

Thu 2 Dec 2021 11.09 EST

Pope Francis has arrived in Cyprus armed with a message of compassion for the thousands of people who have sought sanctuary on the east Mediterranean island, and a promise that by the end of the year 50 refugees will have been relocated to Italy.

The pontiff embarked on the politically sensitive tour on Thursday as the EU country closest to the Middle East struggles with an unprecedented influx of asylum seekers.

“They are our brothers and sisters,” he said in a video message before the visit.

Francis has made the defence of refugees a cornerstone of his papacy. In 2016 the Roman Catholic leader [stunned](#) Europe’s political elite when he elected to share his plane back to Rome with 12 refugees at the end of a historic trip to Lesbos, the island then at the centre of the migration crisis.

Five years later, the pope made clear that during his pilgrimage to war-partitioned [Cyprus](#), his mind would again be focused on those who had reached Europe often in the face of great adversity.

“I am also thinking of those who, in recent years and still today, have been fleeing from war and poverty, landing on the shores of the continent and elsewhere and encountering not hospitality but hostility and even exploitation,” he said at the weekend. “How many have lost their lives at sea! Today our sea, the Mediterranean, is a great cemetery.”

The five-day tour, which also takes in [Greece](#) and a second lightning visit to Lesbos, comes amid a hardening of migration policy globally.

Both Nicosia and Athens have been accused of resorting to violent methods, including pushbacks of boats carrying asylum seekers, to keep migrants and refugees at bay.

In a letter released on Thursday highlighting the alleged violations, 36 NGOs appealed to meet the religious leader when he flies into Greece on Saturday.

In Cyprus, aid workers and Greek Cypriot officials said they have been overwhelmed by the numbers of people arriving, which by early November were up 38% compared with all of 2020.

In May the government called a state of emergency, claiming asylum seekers exceeded 4% of the local population.

Most of the newcomers cross from the Turkish-occupied north through the buffer zone that bisects the island, a legacy of the frozen conflict that has

haunted the country since 1974 when a coup aimed at unity with Greece prompted Ankara to invade.

The Vatican has signalled that the pope, who will be hosted in a Franciscan monastery in no man's land, will mention the need to "strengthen bilateral talks" so as to resolve the island's division.

Speaking to Catholic leaders in Nicosia Francis underlined the need for a "fraternal" church. "We should not experience diversity as a threat to identity; we should not be jealous or defensive," he said. "We need to work together to build a future worthy of humanity, to overcome divisions, to break down walls."

In a trip expected to be heavy on symbolism, a ecumenical mass with migrants is planned at the church of the Holy Cross in Nicosia after a service at the capital's outdoor stadium on Friday. Francis has described Cyprus as the outpost of the Holy Land on the continent of Europe.

"He comes with a message of acceptance and tolerance," Father Jerzy Kraj, patriarchal vicar of the island's Latin community, told the Guardian. "We see his visit to the peripheries of Europe as a sign that he wants to encourage us all to help them and accept them."

The cleric confirmed that 50 vulnerable refugees would be transferred to Rome at the pope's request.

The tour, the last the octogenarian pope will make in 2021, has surprised Catholic clergy given the size of congregations in both countries.

There are barely 25,000 Catholics in Cyprus and just twice that number in Greece.

But Fr Kraj said while only seven years had elapsed since the previous pope visited Cyprus, the trip was in keeping with a man who had chosen to be named after one of the most venerated figures in Christianity.

"Pope Francis has a Franciscan heart," he said. "We never dreamed that he would come to Cyprus so soon but it is at the peripheries where people are in need. He comes as a brother and to show them his love."

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/02/pope-pledges-to-relocate-50-asylum-seekers-to-italy>

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US Capitol attack

‘Handful of fanatics’ to blame for Capitol riot, Trump ally Meadows says in book



The Capitol attack of 6 January. Meadows writes extensively about Trump’s attempts to overturn his election defeat by Joe Biden. Photograph: Jim Urquhart/Reuters

[Martin Pengelly](#) in New York

[@MartinPengelly](#)

Thu 2 Dec 2021 02.00 EST

In his new memoir, former White House chief of staff Mark Meadows blames just “a handful of fanatics” for the 6 January attack on the Capitol – over which nearly 700 people have now been [charged](#).

“No one would [focus] on the actions of … those supporters of President Trump who came [to Washington on 6 January] without hate in their hearts or any bad intentions,” he writes. “Instead, they would laser in on the actions of a handful of fanatics across town.”

Throughout his book, Meadows seeks to play down Donald Trump’s role in an insurrection regarding which Meadows himself will now co-operate with the investigating House committee.

The former chief of staff writes extensively, supportively and selectively about Trump’s attempts to overturn his election defeat by Joe Biden, of which the Capitol attack was the deadly culmination.

But while enthusiastically repeating Trump’s lie that his defeat was the result of electoral fraud, Meadows skates over attempts to stop the certification of electoral college results, the cause in which the mob attacked the Capitol.

For example, Meadows does not mention Jeffrey Clark, a former Department of Justice official whose attempt to persuade Trump he could legally overturn his defeat landed him in legal jeopardy.

Reporting by Jon Karl of ABC News has placed Meadows in the Oval Office on 3 January, when Clark tried to persuade Trump to fire the acting attorney general, Jeffery Rosen, who rejected the scheme.

In his book, Betrayal: The Final Act of the Trump Show, Karl details how Trump was deterred by the threat of mass resignations at the DoJ.

On Wednesday, the 6 January committee recommended a contempt charge for Clark. The issue now moves to the House.

Karl also reports that aides to the then vice-president, Mike Pence, who would oversee certification of results at the Capitol on 6 January, “began to suspect” Meadows himself was pushing schemes to overturn the process.

Meadows, Karl says, sent the vice-president’s staff a memo written by the campaign lawyer Jenna Ellis which argued that Pence could declare results in six key states to be under dispute.

Reporting another memo written by Johnny McEntee, [Trump's director of the presidential personnel office](#), Karl writes: "This was all madness. There was no other way to put it."

Karl concurs with other reporters in saying Meadows was not in the Oval Office when on 4 January a constitutional scholar, John Eastman, [presented his own memo](#) on how Pence could supposedly stop certification.

Two days later, in a few chaotic hours at the Capitol, offices were ransacked, rioters paraded Trump and Confederate flags through the halls of Congress and lawmakers were hustled to safety. Some rioters chanted that Pence should be captured and hanged. Five people died, including a Trump supporter shot by law enforcement and a Capitol police officer who collapsed the next day.

Meadows, however, insists the mob had "absolutely no urging from President Trump".

The Guardian obtained a copy of the book, *The Chief's Chief*, as Meadows reversed course under threat of a contempt charge and [agreed to testify](#) before the House select committee investigating 6 January.

Also this week, lawyers for Trump argued in court that executive privilege means records from his White House should not be released to the panel. The former president contends the same doctrine should apply to former aides.

Last weekend, the California Democrat Adam Schiff [said](#) the 6 January panel wanted to establish "the complete role of the former president" in the Capitol riot.

"That is, what did he know in advance about propensity for violence that day? Was this essentially the back-up plan for the failed [election] litigation around the country? Was this something that was anticipated? How was it funded, whether the funders knew about what was likely to happen that day? And what was the president's response as the attack was going on, as his own vice-president was being threatened?" Schiff stated.

On Tuesday, citing sources close to Trump, the Guardian [reported](#) that hours before the Capitol attack, Trump made several calls from the White House to allies at a Washington hotel and talked about ways to stop certification.

Meadows' book, however, will provide few further answers.



Donald Trump, his daughter Ivanka Trump and chief of staff Mark Meadows depart the White House on 4 January 2021. Photograph: Erin Scott/REX/Shutterstock

As he rode with Trump to a rally near the White House on 6 January, Meadows writes, Trump "was in mourning for the second term he had been unfairly denied".

Trump took the stage following an exhortation to "trial by combat" from his attorney, Rudy Giuliani. Trump's own words featured his instruction to supporters to "fight like hell".

But Meadows claims the speech was "more subdued than usual".

He also claims that when Trump told the crowd "We're going to walk down to the Capitol and we're going to cheer on" Republicans objecting to electoral college results, it was all an "ad lib".

Meadows said Trump told him immediately after the speech that when he said he would march on the Capitol himself, he had been “speaking metaphorically” – but only because he “knew as well as anyone that we couldn’t organise a trip like that on such short notice”.

In their own Trump book, *Peril*, Bob Woodward and Robert Costa of the Washington Post describe what happened next.

“Following Trump’s hour-long speech, thousands of attendees took his advice. They marched down Pennsylvania Avenue toward the Capitol, and when they arrived, they … surged closer and closer to the Capitol despite pleas from [law enforcement].

“By 1.30pm, parts of the crowd had become a mob, pounding on the doors and demanding entry. At 1.50pm [police] declared a riot. Possible pipe bombs had been found nearby.

“Shortly after 2pm, windows at the Capitol began to shatter. They were in. Many were looking for Mike Pence … outside, a makeshift gallows had been erected.”

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Business live

Business

Opec+ agrees to increase oil output; UK household wealth soars; Omicron worries hit markets – as it happened

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Health policy

Sage scientists seek balanced UK response to Omicron concerns



Boris Johnson waiting for the Sultan of Brunei at No 10 Downing Street on Friday. Photograph: James Veysey/REX/Shutterstock

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

Sat 4 Dec 2021 02.00 EST

Government officials and scientific advisers believe that the danger posed by the Omicron variant may not be clear until January, potentially allowing weeks of intense mixing while the variant spreads.

Across Westminster, invitations to Christmas drinks are landing in embossed envelopes or on WhatsApp groups. Departmental staff parties are set to take place, as well as a reception for journalists with Rishi Sunak at No 11. Even Keir Starmer and Rachel Reeves are hosting a joint bash.

However, minutes for the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage) suggest there is deep concern about the threat from the new variant, particularly its transmissibility. Though there is a wariness about overreacting, one government scientific adviser said Downing Street was “putting all its eggs in one basket” by focusing its efforts on the booster vaccine drive.

“It should be a balance between social mixing and immunity. That will affect how quickly it spreads,” the adviser said. “At the moment we are not really doing anything to reduce mixing. It’s disruptive and it’s damaging to the economy, but at the very least we could encourage people to think about their contacts.”

Some senior Sage scientists have made the case privately that the additional precaution of home working should be taken in the run-up to Christmas and that the government should start to suggest that people take sensible steps to minimise social contact in the days before seeing loved ones.

“Working from home is substantially less intrusive as an intervention. If you can easily do your job from home until Christmas, to me that seems a very proportionate thing to do right now,” one Sage adviser said.

“We may wait till next year to see an exponential increase and then introduce plan B. And then that doesn’t work and we end up having to do more intense things. It’s undoubtedly a very difficult judgment.”

That advice has so far not been taken, and ministers who have suggested that people exercise their personal judgment over Christmas party participation have been slapped down by No 10.

After the work and pensions secretary, Therese Coffey, counselled caution over “snogging” under the mistletoe, the health secretary, Sajid Javid, intervened on Thursday to insist that “it’s got nothing to do with the government who you kiss”.

Government sources have also firmly denied that there has been any consideration of a short “circuit break” lockdown in order to allow more

mixing over Christmas. “It’s totally wrong to suggest that has been considered,” a spokesperson said.

However, one senior health source said that although intensive mixing often occurs in the run-up to Christmas, people would be expected to decrease that over Christmas itself. “The Christmas holidays may act as a form of circuit breaker – people stay at home in smaller groups, kids are off school after a period of lots of mixing. That will help,” the source said.

Another Sage scientist said it would be hard to make the case in the early weeks for a crackdown on social contact because the figures would look absurdly low in relation to the daily infection rates that Britons have come to expect.

“The first part of the curve looks flat and then it suddenly takes off and the exponential nature becomes more obvious. I don’t think we will reach that point before Christmas. We will reach it in the first quarter of next year.”

Ministers acknowledge that the current figures for Omicron in the UK may be more than two weeks old and vastly underestimate the true picture.

“We are talking about big underestimates. The sequencing is always a week or more behind. We are looking at the numbers we had a week or two ago and it’s an underestimate of that,” one official said.

The rapid-response restrictions, which include additional measures for self-isolation of contacts as well as mask wearing, will be reviewed in three weeks. Some scientists said the data from South Africa would be clearer by then, but the implications for the UK would still be very uncertain.

“If we see the exponential increase in cases and hospitalisations are staying flat, that would be positive, but the population [in South Africa] is much younger; much of the early circulation is the young adult population. It’s not necessarily completely reassuring if you didn’t see that increase,” one government scientist said.

“Ultimately, the only thing that really tells us this, is the real-world data. It would take us a month, even with our extremely good data, to have a good

understanding of what is really happening. Unfortunately we get that detail once it's widespread.”

No 10 believes the actions over the past week showed a recognition of where ministers needed to move quickly, without an overreaction when evidence of the threat is still unknown.

“Because of the uncertainty, we have acted swiftly and decisively but also in a proportionate way,” one senior adviser said. “There was broad recognition on the importance of working at speed. That has been borne out by the fact we identified our first confirmed case very shortly after announcing initial border measures.

“Our whole approach has been to act swiftly to buy time and then make good use of that time to get a better understanding of this variant whilst building up our defences against the potential threat. That’s why we are putting the booster programme on steroids.”

Despite widespread support for extra precautions at the border and additional mask wearing, there is no big push from the public for Johnson to go further.

Most adults in England are unwilling to return to full lockdown rules, according to the latest polling from YouGov, which found 68% were against closing pubs and 56% were against the return of limited numbers at gatherings.

However, the polling has not moved significantly since the end of the roadmap in July, suggesting the public are sanguine or jaded about the new threat.

Emerging information from South Africa could start to shift public opinion. One Sage adviser called the latest findings from South Africa “extraordinary”, with new cases appearing to have doubled within 24 hours, and the variant reinfecting people at three times the rate of previous strains.

“If you have a much more transmissible strain then it’s highly likely you will get a big wave of infections, and even if the fatality rate is the same, then

you will see a big increase in hospitalisations and deaths,” a government scientific adviser said.

“Even reductions of 10-20% in vaccine effectiveness against severe disease could lead to very substantial problems.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/dec/04/sage-scientists-warning-behind-scenes-no-10-omicron-covid-policy>.

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[Coronavirus](#)

Act now against Omicron to stop new Covid wave, UK ministers warned



A DHSC source made clear the government sees the accelerated vaccination campaign and border measures as its main weapons against Omicron.
Photograph: Neil Hall/EPA

[Ian Sample](#), [Nicola Davis](#), [Heather Stewart](#) and [Jessica Elgot](#)

Fri 3 Dec 2021 17.59 EST

UK ministers have been warned they cannot wait for new research on the Omicron variant and must act now to prevent a potentially “very significant wave of infections” that risks overwhelming the [NHS](#).

A 75 further cases of the variant have been identified in England, the UK [Health](#) Security Agency (UKHSA) said on Friday night, bringing the total number of UK confirmed cases to 134. The head of the agency, Dr Jenny Harries, said: “We have started to see cases where there are no links to travel, suggesting that we have a small amount of community transmission.”

The Guardian understands the government has been privately urged by some of its own scientific advisers to tell people to work from home until Christmas if they can, when more will be known about the dangers posed by the new variant.

Growing concern about the spread of the variant was reflected at the latest [meeting of the Sage committee](#), details of which were released on Friday. The minutes show experts saying there is no time to wait for more data on the Omicron variant. “Even if measures are introduced immediately, there may not be time to fully ascertain whether they are sufficient before decisions are needed on further action,” the documents say.

“The situation could develop quickly over the coming weeks and decision-makers may need to act while there is still a high level of uncertainty including considering the potential need for stringent response measures.”

However, on Friday, during a visit to Oswestry in Shropshire before an upcoming byelection, Boris Johnson said that Christmas this year should go ahead as “normally as possible” and reiterated that people did not need to cancel plans for parties and nativity plays.

Sage’s warning came as ministers gave GPs in England the green light to [provide less care](#) to millions of patients for the next four months so they can join the “national mission” to urgently deliver Covid booster jabs.

Family doctors will spend less time monitoring people with conditions such as diabetes and heart problems, do fewer health checks on the over-75s and stop performing minor surgery until April.

A Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) source made clear the government sees the accelerated vaccination campaign, combined with border measures, as its main weapons against Omicron. “Stepping up the boosters is the key thing: buy as much time as we can with the measures at the border to slow the incursion, and then make good use of that time to understand the variant.”

Ministers are keeping Covid measures under constant review, but it is understood fresh restrictions at the border – such as adding more countries to the red list – are considered more likely than domestic changes such as the reimposition of working from home guidance.

The Sage experts praised scientists in South Africa for swiftly identifying and sharing details of the highly mutated Omicron variant in November, a move that prompted a string of travel bans and a global research effort to understand how dangerous the variant may be.

According to the minutes, it is “highly likely” Omicron will escape immunity to some extent, given the large number of reinfections already seen in South Africa, and a raft of mutations that affect every known site that neutralising antibodies bind to.

The scientists expect protection against infection to be hit harder than protection against severe disease. But even if vaccines hold up well against severe illness, any significant drop in the prevention of infection could drive a “very large wave” of disease that requires “very stringent response measures to avoid unsustainable pressure on the NHS”, the experts say.

“It is important to be prepared for a potentially very significant wave of infections with associated hospitalisations now, ahead of data being available,” the minutes add.

The warning comes as the latest figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) reveal that infection levels have risen in the UK, echoing trends seen in recent daily case numbers. The ONS survey, which is based on swabs collected from randomly selected households, found in the week ending 27 November an estimated 1.65% of the population in England had a Covid infection, equating to about one in 60 people. In Northern Ireland and Wales, the rate stands at one in 45, and at one in 65 in Scotland. The figures represent a rise in all nations except Wales, where the trend was uncertain. None of the cases were confirmed as Omicron, which was first reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) on 24 November.

On Friday, the UK reported a further 50,584 cases, up 1% on the week, with 787 hospitalisations and 143 deaths, down 3.8% and 5.2% on the week respectively.

Adam Finn, a professor of paediatrics at the University of Bristol and a member of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI), urged people to work from home where possible until more was known about the risk Omicron posed. The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control believes the variant could become dominant on the continent within months.

“The honest truth is that the booster programme, which I think will work, is not going to work soon enough if there is a big wave here soon,” said Finn. “It takes time to get them into people and it takes time for them to make an immune response.”

“We need to buy time. If in three weeks it’s died out, then fine, we can all relax, but right now is the time when you could prevent there being a big wave,” he added. “The more people can work from home now the better, until we are more definite about what’s going to happen.” Sage scientists estimate that more than a third of people’s contacts occur in the workplace and that home working can have a significant impact on transmission.

Prof Anthony Harnden, the deputy chair of the JCVI, said while boosters would give the majority of people their best chance of fighting Omicron, there remained a small proportion, but large numbers, of unvaccinated adults who would be “at very high risk” if Omicron proved to be highly transmissible. “We should explore every measure to reach out to these unvaccinated adults,” he said.

No 10 on Friday ruled out making vaccines compulsory, as has happened in Austria and is being considered in Germany. A spokesperson for the prime minister told reporters: “We’ve set out our policy on this and we’ve said it’s not something that we would look to introduce. You’re aware of the changes we made in terms of social care settings and for NHS workers, given the importance of protecting the most vulnerable in our society. But there’s no plans above and beyond that in that regard.”

Finn believes mandatory vaccination of the general public could cause more harm than good in the UK, but favours an approach used in South Africa, where trusted individuals go door-to-door to talk through people's concerns about having a Covid jab. "They are literally going to people's houses and talking to them, one by one, and I think that's what you've got to do, and it has to be the right person doing it," he said. "We know who's not had the shots and you can have a real impact if you get the communication right."

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/03/omicron-act-now-stop-nhs-being-overwhelmed-covid-variant-uk-ministers-warned>

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Coronavirus

More than half Omicron cases in England are in the double jabbed



A further 16 cases of the Omicron variant have been found in Scotland in the last 24 hours Photograph: Neil Hall/EPA

[Andrew Gregory](#) Health editor

Fri 3 Dec 2021 17.17 EST

More than half of those infected with the [Omicron](#) coronavirus variant in England were double jabbed, health officials have said, as the number of cases detected in the UK continues to rise sharply.

There were 75 further cases of the Covid-19 Omicron variant identified in [England](#), the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) said on Friday night. It brings the total number of confirmed cases in England to 104 with 134 in the UK as a whole. There were warnings of a “small amount” of community transmission as not all the new cases were linked to travel.

Cases have now been identified in the east Midlands, east of England, London, north-east, north-west, south-east, south-west and West Midlands.

On Friday, 16 cases were found in [Scotland](#) in the previous 24 hours, five times the increase recorded the previous day, with some linked to a Steps concert in Glasgow 11 days ago. Wales also announced its first case on Friday.

The sharp rise in cases came as a new risk assessment from the UKHSA said the new variant is “transmitting rapidly and successfully”. A separate analysis by the agency of the first 22 Omicron cases in England also found that more than half of those infected had been double jabbed.

Twelve of the 22 cases occurred more than 14 days after the individual had received at least two doses of vaccine. Two cases were more than 28 days after a first dose of vaccine. Six were unvaccinated, while two had no available data.

None of the cases is known to have been hospitalised or died, but the UKHSA said that “most of the cases have a specimen date that is very recent and that there is a lag between onset of infection and hospitalisation and death.”

The UKHSA has also issued its highest “red” alert against the virus for its theoretical ability, based on its mutations, to evade both vaccine and naturally acquired immunity. It also warns it could reduce the effectiveness of monoclonal antibody treatments. However, the UKHSA’s confidence level for the warnings is “low” as officials still lack key definitive data on the new variant.

Dr Jenny Harries, chief executive of the UKHSA, said: “Thanks to very high levels of vaccine coverage we already have a robust wall of defence against Covid-19 as new variants emerge.

“We are working as fast as possible to gather more evidence about any impact the new variant may have on severity of disease or vaccine effectiveness. Until we have this evidence, we must exercise the highest

level of caution in drawing conclusions about any significant risks to people's health."

She added: "We have started to see cases where there are no links to travel, suggesting that we have a small amount of community transmission."

Earlier the University of Oxford said two people were suspected to have the Omicron variant. It said: "The individuals are now isolating in line with government guidance and their close contacts have been notified and are also isolating. The university has already implemented a number of changes to its health guidance in response to the Omicron variant, based on advice from its clinical academics."

The first case in Wales of the Omicron variant was in the Cardiff and Vale University [Health](#) Board area and linked to international travel, the Welsh government said.

Public Health [Wales](#) said there was no evidence of wider community transmission. The organisation's national director for health protection and screening services, Dr Meng Khaw, said: "The number of mutations in the Omicron variant is concerning, but new variants are anticipated. We keep variants under constant review, and we work with UK partners to identify, detect and monitor new and known variants.

"The single best thing you can do to protect yourself, your community and the NHS against new variants of coronavirus is to take up the offer of a vaccine."

In Scotland, Omicron cases jumped by 16 in the past 24 hours to 29, a significant rise on the three cases identified the previous day.

The first minister, [Nicola Sturgeon](#), warned cases may rise "significantly" in the coming days as the variant is circulating in the community.

Previously, nine Omicron cases were linked to a single private event, but Sturgeon said there were now several different sources of infections of the new variant, including a Steps concert at the Hydro in Glasgow on Monday

22 November. Six cases are linked to this event, but the risk to attenders is said to be low.

Sturgeon said: “The number of Omicron cases now being reported in Scotland is rising, and cases are no longer all linked to a single event, but to several different sources including a Steps concert at the Hydro on 22 November.

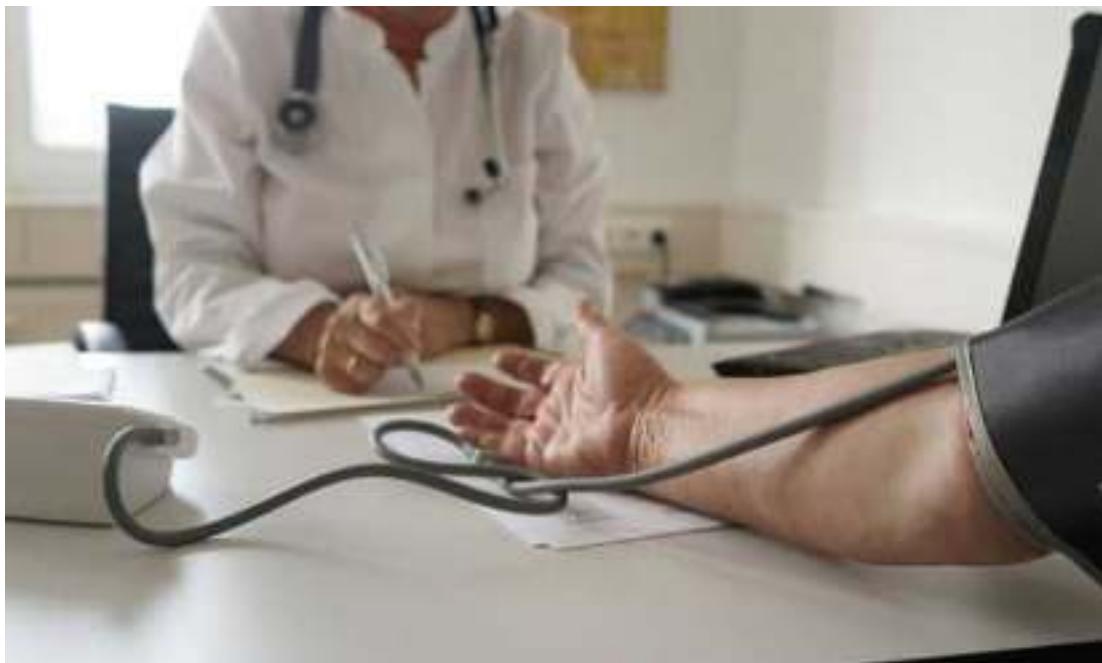
“This confirms our view that there is now community transmission of this variant within Scotland. Given the nature of transmission, we would expect to see cases rise, perhaps significantly, in the days ahead.

“However, health protection teams are continuing work through contact tracing, isolation and testing to slow the spread as far as possible while we learn more about the new variant’s impact. Ministers are also keeping the situation under daily review.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/03/more-than-half-omicron-cases-in-england-are-in-the-double-jabbed>

Health policy

GPs in England get green light to provide less care and join Covid jab drive



GPs will spend less time monitoring patients and do fewer health checks on over-75s. Photograph: RayArt Graphics/Alamy

[Denis Campbell](#) and agencies

Fri 3 Dec 2021 12.23 EST

Ministers have given GPs in [England](#) the green light to provide less care to millions of patients for the next four months so they can join the “national mission” to urgently deliver Covid booster jabs.

Family doctors will spend less time monitoring people with conditions such as diabetes and heart problems, do fewer health checks on the over-75s and stop performing minor surgery until April.

Sajid Javid, the health secretary, and NHS bosses have approved the controversial changes so that GPs and practice nurses can join the drive to administer top-up shots as quickly as possible.

Doctors' leaders sought to reassure the public that anyone falling ill or worried about their health would still be seen and assessed.

However, the Patients Association immediately warned that the reduction in routine checks will lead to signs of illness being missed and disrupt the relationship between patients and [GPs](#).

Family doctors will experience a substantial lifting of the requirements set out in the [Quality Outcomes Framework](#) (QOF) to monitor patients and help tackle public health problems such as smoking and obesity – lifting their workloads so they can help administer booster shots.

Javid and [NHS](#) England have given them permission to undertake far fewer checks on people with a wide range of serious ailments, including high blood pressure, asthma, chronic kidney disease and obesity. GPs will also undertake fewer medication reviews with people who are taking drugs on a long-term basis to help manage their condition and reduce the danger of their health deteriorating, for example blood pressure tablets to reduce the risk of a heart attack or stroke.

For the next four months family doctors will continue to carry out only a limited amount of these checks. Javid and NHS England have agreed to leave it to GPs' clinical judgment which patients still need to be monitored.

"This is a necessary temporary emergency measure because the booster rollout is now the NHS's top priority," a source said. "National GP bodies have assured the government and NHS leadership that most of the services should still go ahead, but based on clinical need."

However, GPs will still have to comply as usual with a few QOF duties, including administering non-Covid vaccinations, especially in children, and undertaking cervical cancer screening.

The NHS has to ramp up the daily total of boosters delivered from 350,000 to 500,000 as soon as it can to help deliver Boris Johnson's pledge on Tuesday that every adult in England will have been offered one by the end of January.

The deal was hammered out during several days of complicated and protracted talks this week involving GP leaders, NHS England and the Department of Health and Social Care. [The Guardian revealed on Wednesday](#) that moves to set aside QOF obligations on GPs were under way after the emergence of the new Omicron variant of coronavirus left ministers, NHS leaders and scientists worried about a potential new surge in infections.

Rachel Power, chief executive of the Patients Association, welcomed the fact that "the NHS is undoubtedly mobilising resources on an impressive scale for the booster programme."

But, in a sign that NHS England will have difficulty explaining the rationale behind the move, Power added: "Withdrawing some regular GP services will further disrupt the relationship between patients and the NHS. The decision also risks building up future ill-health that would have been picked up in routine health checks, which will have to be dealt with at some point."

The changes were [outlined in a letter](#) which NHS England chief executive Amanda Pritchard and three senior colleagues sent on Friday to local leaders across England outlining how the health service will push forward with the booster programme.

The suspension of so many of the QOF duties is a major victory for the British Medical Association (BMA). Javid has ignored the doctors' union's pleas in recent months to relax or scrap QOF altogether as a way of reducing their "unsustainable and impossible" workloads and angered them when he did not include it in his "GP support package" in October. That plan caused fury and consternation in the profession by insisting that GPs see any patient who wants it face to face, despite the threat posed by persistently high levels of Covid infection.

The BMA GP committee chair, Dr Farah Jameel, said the nationwide shortage of family doctors meant that, while GPs intend to aid the boosters push as much as they can, “there must be a recognition that they cannot do everything for everyone all of the time.

“Today’s changes begin to recognise this, and we hope that, by removing some of the more bureaucratic and target-based requirements within practices’ contracts, that staff’s time can be freed up to get more jabs into arms, while allowing practices to focus on patients who need their attention the most.”

She added: “Patients need to know that if they are unwell or have concerning symptoms and need to receive care from their practice they will continue to be prioritised and GP teams will continue doing their very best to keep their sickest patients safe in every way they can and know how.”

Ruth Rankine, director of primary care at the NHS Confederation, said: “Hopefully this guidance will free up much-needed time for primary care teams to vaccinate at speed and to prioritise patients with the greatest clinical need.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/03/gps-in-england-get-green-light-to-provide-less-care-and-join-covid-jab-drive>

2021.12.04 - Spotlight

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- [James Dyson ‘The worst thing anyone has said to me? That my father had died. I was nine’](#)
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[Mel Brooks](#)

Mel Brooks on losing the loves of his life: ‘People know how good Carl Reiner was, but not how great’



‘We didn’t become comics out of misery. We became comics because there are a lot of laughs in Jewish households.’ Photograph: Andy Gotts/Camera Press



[Hadley Freeman](#)

[@HadleyFreeman](#)

Sat 4 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

In February 2020, I joined Mel Brooks at the Beverly Hills home of his best friend, the director and writer Carl Reiner, for their nightly tradition of eating dinner together and watching the gameshow Jeopardy!. [It was one of the most emotional nights](#) of my life. Brooks, more than anyone, shaped my idea of Jewish-American humour, emphasising its joyfulness, cleverness and in-jokiness. Compared with his stellar 60s and 70s, when he was one of the most successful movie directors in the world, with *The Producers* and *Blazing Saddles*, and later his glittering 2000s, when his [musical adaptation of The Producers](#) dominated Broadway and the West End, his 80s and 90s are considered relatively fallow years. But his 1987 Star Wars spoof, [Spaceballs](#), was the first Brooks movie I saw, and nothing was funnier to this then nine-year-old than that nonstop gag-a-thon (forget Yoda and the Force; in *Spaceballs*, [Mel Brooks is Yoghurt](#) and he wields the greatest power of all, the Schwartz).

I loved listening to Brooks and Reiner – whose films included [The Jerk](#) and [The Man With Two Brains](#) – reminisce about their eight decades of friendship in which, together and separately, they created some of the

greatest American comedy of the 20th century. The deep love between them was palpable, with Brooks, then 93, gently prompting 97-year-old Reiner on some of his anecdotes. It was impossible not to be moved by their friendship, and hard not to feel anxiety about the prospect of one of them someday having to dine on his own.

Only a month later, the US went into a lockdown. Then in June [Reiner died](#), followed a few months later by Jeopardy!'s long-term host, [Alex Trebek](#). I worried about Brooks. What was he doing with his evenings without even Jeopardy! for company? When his memoir, [All About Me!](#), arrived in the post last month, my concerns were not assuaged. It is as sparkling and delightful as you'd expect from Brooks, full of great advice, such as how to get a studio head to give you more money for your film (catch them off-guard in the bathroom), and memories from the making of his gold-plated classic movies. But it's also full of ghosts. Almost everyone he writes about is now dead: Reiner, Brooks's wife [Anne Bancroft](#), [Richard Pryor](#), [Gene Wilder](#), TV star [Sid Caesar](#), comedian [Dom DeLuise](#), film-maker [Buck Henry](#) – all gone. Living to 95, as Brooks now is, is not for the faint-hearted.

I miss him so much. He'd call and say, 'Come over! I got a big stuffed cabbage for us!' Even at the end, he was always Carl

I became even more concerned in the run-up to this, our second interview. Brooks has never needed much encouragement to get in front of a camera, but I was told that he wanted to talk by phone, not video chat, because he doesn't want to be on a screen. As I dial his number, I am braced, unsure what to expect.

"Hi! How are you? Thank you so much for your time, I appreciate it," says Brooks, when he answers, sounding reassuringly chipper.

I ask how he's been during the pandemic. "Good and bad," he says. "But my son Max – he's a very good writer, he wrote [The Zombie Survival Guide](#), World War Z, that's Max – he said to me, 'You're stuck in the house during this pandemic, and sooner or later you want to write your memoir, so this is a good time to do it. Just write down all the stories you told me growing up.' So I did that."

Did he find it painful or comforting to write about his past? He hesitates before replying: “A little of both. Yeah, a little of both. When I look back at people like Gene, who I loved so much and miss so much, and my adventures with Carl – you met him, you saw what a sweetheart of a guy he was, my best friend – and, of course, my wife who was my great love and support, it was hard to keep going sometimes.”



Brooks, aged 16, with his mother, Kitty, in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn; his father died when he was two. Photograph: Courtesy of Mel Brooks

Brooks is one of just 16 people in history to win an EGOT, short for an Emmy, a Grammy, an Oscar and a Tony (he has 11 of those in total, many for the 1967 film *The Producers*, or his 2001 Broadway adaptation). In 2009, President Obama gave him a Kennedy Center Honor, in recognition of his contribution to American culture, after he turned one down from President George W Bush in protest against the war in Iraq. (Brooks asked Obama if he could have two honors, to make up for the one he turned down. “Only one per customer,” Obama replied.)

He has [a star on the Walk of Fame](#) on Hollywood Boulevard (although instead of leaving his own handprints on the pavement, he used a prosthetic hand with six fingers) and an American Film Institute (AFI) lifetime achievement award. As part of the AFI presentation, Clint Eastwood talked

about how the western movie was a central part of the American identity. “And this is what Mel Brooks did to it,” he faux-snarled, and cut to the famous fart scene in *Blazing Saddles*. Brooks relates all this and more with relish in *All About Me!*. As he writes, “I’m not bragging. It’s just a fact.”

Brooks’s story begins – as it did for so many American comedians of his generation, including Reiner – in a working-class Jewish family. “People say, ‘Out of the suffering of Jews, the need to laugh is critical for the survival of the race.’ But we didn’t become comics out of misery. We became comics because there are a lot of laughs in Jewish households. There’s always some wiseguy making cracks about how fat Aunt Sadie is, and it’s a need for that joy to continue that was the engine for all of us to become comics. It was fun being a little Jewish boy in a household with three older brothers and my mother; my aunt and my grandmother living next door,” he says.

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He was born Melvin Kaminsky and grew up in the Brooklyn tenements. His father died of kidney disease when he was only two, and even as an adult, when Brooks would get a big laugh doing standup at Radio City Music Hall, he would think: “I wish my father could have heard that laugh.” His mother compensated by lavishing love on him, singing the Bing Crosby song You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby as she dressed him on cold winter mornings. He knew it so well he sang it to his teacher, and she made him sing it to the whole school. Is that when he caught the performing bug?

“I think so. I loved it – their applause and their whistles. I was only five, but I knew what I had to be, to do that strange thing of getting up in front of a bunch of people and make them applaud and laugh,” he says.

He got plenty of inspiration for laughter from his mother. “She made me keep lookout for when my grandmother would come into the apartment. When she did, I’d whisper, ‘It’s Grandma!’ and my mother would run around the kitchen and hide anything *treif* [non-kosher] like ham, because my brothers liked ham-and-cheese sandwiches. And then she’d sit at the

table with a calm smile on her face,” he laughs. This scene, with its caperishness verging on slapstick, all wrapped up with a gleefully Jewish twist, could have come straight out of a Brooks movie.

“I remember always being funny,” he writes in his book, and this was partly to fend off the bullies at school, who were all much taller than him. [Comedy](#), Brooks writes, was his weapon. As a teenager, he got a job as a busboy working at a resort in the Catskills, a holiday destination so popular with Jews that it was known as “the Borscht Belt”. He was quickly spotted by the hotel’s owner as someone who could entertain the guests round the pool. It was about this time that he became “Melvin Brooks”, because he also dreamed of being a drummer, and it was easier to fit Brooks – a homage to his mother’s maiden name Brookman – on a drum kit than Kaminsky.

But his budding drumming and comedy career was interrupted when he was 18 and he followed his three older brothers into the army to fight in the second world war. (Miraculously, all four boys survived.) Brooks was shipped out to Normandy, where he swept for landmines, and he fought in the Battle of the Bulge. Over the years, Brooks has been criticised by some for making fun of Hitler in his movies and treating him as a joke. But not many of his critics literally fought against Hitler in the war. Who would know better than Brooks that comedy is a weapon?



Mel (far left) with his brothers (from left) Bernie, Lenny and Irving; all four fought in the second world war. Photograph: Courtesy of Mel Brooks

After the war, Brooks met Sid Caesar, who had also worked in the Borscht Belt and was now a comedian in need of a writer. Brooks wrote for Caesar's popular TV variety shows Your Show of Shows and Caesar's Hour, and he worked alongside a bunch of fellow young unknowns: Reiner, [Neil Simon](#) and, later, Woody Allen. Brooks scoffs at my suggestion that, between them, they coined modern Jewish-American humour – “We were just part of the swim” – but they certainly popularised it, and in turn, it helped to popularise all of them. What was Allen like to work with?

“Woody was so young then. I was about 24 when I started, but Woody must have been 19. But so wise, so smart. He had this tricky little mind and he'd surprise you, which is the trick of being a good comedy writer. That was Woody – always making a left turn. Then I moved to California and he was in New York, but every once in a while, we'd send each other letters. I'd say how great his movie was, he'd say how great mine was – that kinda thing,” Brooks says.

But the writer Brooks was closest to was Reiner. Pretty much from the moment they met, the two men became best friends, and Brooks loved to make him laugh. Just to amuse one another, they came up with their routine of [The 2000 Year Old Man](#), in which Reiner would ask Brooks, the man who had lived through two millennia, about his life, and Brooks would riff answers:

Reiner: Did you know Jesus?

Brooks: Thin lad, right? Wore sandals? Hung around with 12 other guys? They always came into my store. Never bought anything, just asked for water.

It progressed from being their private joke to their party trick to, in 1960, a successful series of comedy albums that won them a Grammy. Whether The 2000 Year Old Man was recalling the Crucifixion or the French Revolution, he always spoke in the same accent, which sounded a lot like a Yiddish-inflected Brooklyn accent from the early 20th century.

“I wanted to preserve that dialect. When I was a little kid, it was all over the place, but then suddenly, it was kind of gone. Nobody spoke Yiddish any more, that wonderful crazy language. Like, English has ‘chide’, but it can’t compare to [the Yiddish translation] ‘kibbitz’,” Brooks says.



With Reiner: ‘He was just the most wonderful friend a person could ever have.’ Photograph: Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images

For Brooks, the real joy of The 2000 Year Old Man was spending time with Reiner. “Any time I could surprise him and really break him up, I knew it was funny. He was the greatest audience. Ahhh, I miss him so much, Hadley. He would call me in the evenings and say ,‘Come over, come over! I got a big stuffed cabbage for us!’ Even at the end he was always Carl: funny, sweet-natured, warm and just the most wonderful friend a person could ever have. People know how good he was, but not how great,” Brooks says.

Can he watch Jeopardy! – which currently has a series of guest hosts – without Reiner sitting next to him? “It’s over for me. All the stuff I used to do with Carl is still around, but I don’t enjoy it if I don’t share it with Carl. It’s as simple as that.”

I tell Brooks that I recently interviewed [Steve Martin](#), with whom Reiner frequently collaborated, and he said Reiner’s memorial happened over Zoom

due to the pandemic. I can almost hear Brooks wince down the line. “Oh. Yeah. So bad. Anyway, I love Steve – so wise and witty,” he says, changing the subject.

Soon after Brooks and Reiner released The 2000 Year Old Man album, Brooks divorced his first wife, with whom he had three children. On a whim, he tagged along with a friend to go to hear the actor Anne Bancroft rehearse for a performance. Brooks walked into the dark theatre, and saw Bancroft in the spotlight.

“Anne Bancroft, I love you!” he shouted.

“Who the hell are you?” she shouted back.



With his late wife, Anne Bancroft: ‘I’d still be a TV comedy writer if it weren’t for Annie, because she always thought there was nothing I couldn’t do.’ Photograph: Courtesy of Mel Brooks

“I’m Mel Brooks! Nobody you’ve ever heard of!”

“Wrong!” she replied. “I’ve got your 2000 Year Old Man record with Carl Reiner and it’s great.”

Annie was smart. I could never bamboozle her. Also, she was downright, flat-out beautiful

What was it about her that made him fall so fast? “She was smart. She was a short stop: she would get the ground ball, toss it to second and make a double play,” he says, making the most romantic baseball metaphor I’ve ever heard. “I could never bamboozle her – she always knew what was going on. Also, she was downright, flat-out beautiful!”

For the next week, he made sure to turn up wherever she was. “It’s kismet!” he’d say, as they bumped into one another at yet another restaurant. “No, you’re stalking me! If you want to see me, why don’t you just ask me on a date?” she replied. So he did, she said yes, and that, for the Italian Roman Catholic girl and Brooklyn Jewish boy, was that.

It was only after he met Bancroft that Brooks’s movie career took off. “I’d still be a TV comedy writer if it weren’t for Annie, because she always thought there was nothing I couldn’t do, no rhyme I couldn’t make, no joke I couldn’t pull off. She was my biggest fan,” he says with feeling.

The studio said, ‘Get rid of the curly-haired guy’ meaning Gene [Wilder]. Here’s a film-making tip: stick to your vision

With Bancroft’s encouragement, Brooks wrote *The Producers*, his classic story about two men who try to put on a theatrical flop and inadvertently make a hit, and he talked the studio into letting him direct, despite never having directed a movie. He cast [Zero Mostel](#) as Max Bialystock and Gene Wilder as Leo Bloom. “The studio said, ‘Get rid of the curly-haired guy, he’s not handsome enough and he looks a little nuts,’ meaning Gene, of course. And I said, ‘It’s done, you’ll never see him again.’ That’s another movie-making tip: just say yes to whatever the executives say, and then stick to your vision. When it’s a hit, they’ll be happy,” Brooks says.



Cleavon Little and Gene Wilder in *Blazing Saddles*, 1974. Photograph: Warner Bros./Allstar

It was and they were, and then there was no stopping Brooks. Over the next decade he wrote and directed five more movies, each one a hit, including [Blazing Saddles](#) (1974), [Young Frankenstein](#) (also 1974) and [High Anxiety](#) (1977, a riff on Hitchcock movies, which Hitchcock loved). Suddenly Brooks, who hadn't been able to afford pay for Bancroft's meals when they were dating, was one of the most successful directors of the 1970s. He then founded his production company, Brooksfilms, so he could produce movies that weren't the kind of comedies audiences expected from him. These included [The Elephant Man](#), for which he hired the near unknown David Lynch as director, and [The Fly](#), in which he insisted on casting the then unknown Jeff Goldblum. People know how good Brooks is, but not how great.

The support did not flow in one direction in Brooks and Bancroft's relationship: it was only after they got married that Bancroft won a Tony and then an Oscar for her performance in [The Miracle Worker](#). During the course of their marriage, she accumulated four further Oscar nominations including for Mrs Robinson in [The Graduate](#). So he must have encouraged her, too, I say.

“Yes, but she didn’t need it. Like I said, she was a short stop, always playing on the infield,” he says, meaning she knew how to look after herself. “I was so lucky to have her, and I was very lucky that together we made Max.”

Bancroft was 40 when Max was born, by which point she’d given up hope that she could have a child. He was their miracle baby, and with his father’s features and mother’s colouring he still looks strikingly like both his parents. These days, it’s 49-year-old Max – and his wife and son – whom Brooks often goes to for dinner. During lockdown, [he and Max made funny videos](#), which Max tweeted, about the importance of social distancing and voting for Biden, and it’s not hard to imagine that Brooks might have once done those with Reiner.

When I saw Hamilton I wrote, ‘It’s the best musical ever on Broadway (except for The Producers),’ he cackles

Brooks’s book is mainly about his work as opposed to his personal life: “Personal means personal, and I don’t want to spill the beans,” he says. But he couldn’t resist sticking in a few anecdotes about happy holidays he took with Bancroft, dinners they hosted, their weekends away with the Reiners, and laughing, always laughing. Did they ever fight? “We fought a lot. One time, I left the house after a terrible fight and I checked into a hotel at midnight and at about three in the morning I called her and said, ‘You still up?’ She said yes. I said, ‘I’m coming home.’ The people at the desk said, ‘That was a short stay.’ But I couldn’t spend the whole night without being with her,” he says.

Bancroft died from uterine cancer in 2005, at the age of 73, yet Brooks makes no mention of this in the book. “No, that still hurts too much,” he says. Does he ever watch her movies? “I don’t decide to turn on one of her movies, but if one is on when I turn on the TV, then I’m caught, and I’ll stay until the end and cry. I’ll see her energy, her joie de vivre. She was just amazing. I don’t think there was anybody better,” he says quietly.



Winning the Oscar for best original screenplay for *The Producers*, 1969.
Photograph: PictureLux / The Hollywood Archive / Alamy Stock Photo

It was Bancroft who convinced Brooks he could write the songs when he decided to turn *The Producers* into a Broadway musical, even though he had never scored a show before. “She said, ‘Just write the songs, they’re in you! You’re the Jewish George M Cohan,’” Brooks says. (Cohan was the early 20th-century songwriter behind *Give My Regards to Broadway* and *Yankee Doodle Dandy*.) Bancroft was right, and the original Broadway production, starring Nathan Lane and Matthew Broderick, won 12 Tonys in 2001, more than any other show ever. When *Hamilton* won 11 in 2016, Brooks quietly cheered that *The Producers* still held the record. Does his competitive spirit still burn bright at 95?

“It’s always there. When I saw *Hamilton* I wrote, ‘It’s the best musical ever on Broadway (except for *The Producers*),’” he cackles. “That’s how it is in show-business. It’s always, ‘You’re good – but you’re not me!’” But that’s not how it was with you, Reiner and Bancroft, I say. The three of you were each other’s biggest fans. “That’s true, that’s true,” he says, quiet again.

Brooks used to love meeting his fans and didn’t even mind when they would interrupt his meal in a restaurant, where he was invariably dining with several dozen of his closest friends. But now he does mind: “They crowd

around me and breathe on me and give me their pens. It's just too dangerous. So I don't go out for meals until [the pandemic] is gone," he says, and for the first time he sounds not just alone but vulnerable.

I ask why he didn't want to talk by video chat. "Ach! Because I don't want to have to worry about two things – how I look and how I sound. I just want to be free to sit and talk. And we did that, didn't we?" We did. "Right! Good!" he says, back to his puckish self. "So look, next time I make it to beautiful London, that city that I love, we'll go out for dinner together, OK? It's a deal!"

The shadows grow long in the twilight, but the sun hasn't set yet.

All About Me! by Mel Brooks is published by Cornerstone. To support The Guardian and Observer, order your copy from guardianbookshop.com.

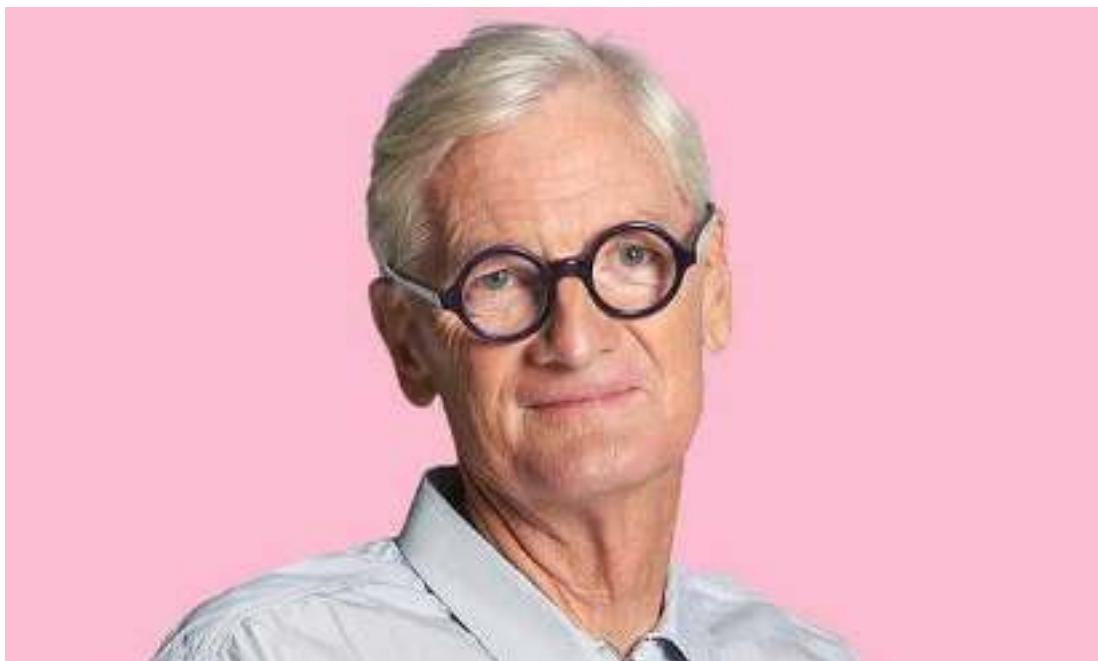
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The Q&A James Dyson

Interview

James Dyson: ‘The worst thing anyone has said to me? That my father had died. I was nine’

[Rosanna Greenstreet](#)



James Dyson: ‘I’m driven, impatient and thorough.’ Photograph: Johnny Ring

Sat 4 Dec 2021 04.30 EST

Born in Norfolk, Sir James Dyson, 74, studied at the Royal College of Art. He spent four years developing the cyclonic vacuum cleaner and went on to set up his company in 1992. Dyson products, now available in 82 countries, span household vacuums, purifier fans and heaters, lighting, hand dryers and haircare. This year he published his autobiography, [Invention: a Life](#). He is married with three children and lives in Wiltshire.

What is your earliest memory?

Being lowered into a swimming pool by my father who had me in a rope noose attached to a stick. That's how I learned to swim.

What is your greatest fear?

Losing a child.

Which living person do you most admire, and why?

David Hockney, because he's so experimental and creative. He continually reinvents himself in a really delightful way.

Describe yourself in three words

Driven, impatient and thorough.

What would your superpower be?

To have more energy. Compared with 30 years ago, I get tired much more quickly.

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What scares you about getting older?

Forgetting things.

Which book are you ashamed not to have read?

Ulysses by James Joyce, because everybody says it's the greatest book ever written.

What is the worst thing anyone's said to you?

That my father had died. I was nine; he was 40.

What did you want to be when you were growing up?

I had no idea whatsoever, and nor did anyone else. I thought I'd go to art school and see whether I liked it – and of course I did, and stayed.

What is your most treasured possession?

A copy of a children's book my father wrote, [The Prince and the Magic Carpet](#), with "author's copy" written inside by him.

What or who is the greatest love of your life?

Deirdre, my wife. She allowed me the indulgence of spending ages developing the vacuum technology and signed those awful things from the bank putting the house and everything you have up to guarantee the loan.

What does love feel like?

An overwhelming sensation of caring and passion.

When did you last cry, and why?

Very recently, when a graduate at the [Dyson Institute of Engineering and Technology](#) gave the most brilliant speech on behalf of the students at our first graduation.

What would you like to leave your children?

That a creative life, whether successful or not, is rewarding.

What do you consider your greatest achievement?

Creating jobs and opportunities for thousands of people.

Would you rather have more sex, money or fame?

I can't complain.

How would you like to be remembered?

Changing the way young engineers are educated through the Dyson Institute, and fostering creativity and innovation through our foundation.

What is the most important lesson life has taught you?

Perseverance in the face of failure. It took me five years to crack the vacuum technology, from 1979 to 1984, but it was another nine years before I had a product on the market, mostly because I wasted time trying to licence people who are now my competitors. Finally, in 1992, I decided to make it myself.

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Blind date: ‘It would have been better if he hadn’t had to stop for a takeaway on the way home’



Photograph: Alicia Canter/The Guardian

Sat 4 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

Adriana on Streisand



What were you hoping for?

A good night, some delish food and to meet someone fun and exciting.

First impressions?

Polite, smart and good-looking, if a little flustered.

What did you talk about?

Work, family, life ambitions, French music and his food preferences.

Any awkward moments?

He didn't like the tasting menu, so that was kind of awkward. The waiter noticed and apologised and offered him some cauliflower tempura instead. He didn't seem much of a fan of that either, and said he might have to get a takeaway on the way home.

Good table manners?

I'm sure they are great but I didn't really get to see them because he didn't eat much, but he was very polite to the waiter – even if he did mutter under his breath about the cauliflower.

Q&A

Want to be in Blind date?

Show

Blind date is Saturday's dating column: every week, two strangers are paired up for dinner and drinks, and then spill the beans to us, answering a set of questions. This runs, with a photograph we take of each dater before the date, in Saturday magazine (in the UK) and online at theguardian.com every Saturday. It's been running since 2009 – you can [read all about how we put it together here.](#)

What questions will I be asked?

We ask about age, location, occupation, hobbies, interests and the type of person you are looking to meet. If you do not think these questions cover everything you would like to know, tell us what's on your mind.

Can I choose who I match with?

No, it's a blind date! But we do ask you a bit about your interests, preferences, etc – the more you tell us, the better the match is likely to be.

Can I pick the photograph?

No, but don't worry: we'll choose the nicest ones.

What personal details will appear?

Your first name, job and age.

How should I answer?

Honestly but respectfully. Be mindful of how it will read to your date, and that Blind date reaches a large audience, in print and online.

Will I see the other person's answers?

No. We may edit yours and theirs for a range of reasons, including length, and we may ask you for more details.

Will you find me The One?

We'll try! Marriage! Babies!

Can I do it in my home town?

Only if it's in the UK. Many of our applicants live in London, but we would

love to hear from people living elsewhere.

How to apply

Email blind.date@theguardian.com

Was this helpful?

Thank you for your feedback.

Best thing about Streisand?

His musical tastes: he likes reggaeton. He also seemed very kind, hardworking and family-orientated.

Would you introduce him to your friends?

I think he might find us all a bit much.

Describe Streisand in three words?

Opinionated, driven, serious.

What do you think he made of you?

I have no idea, he was hard to read.

Did you go on somewhere?

We walked to the tube.

If it weren't for physical distancing, would you have kissed?

It wasn't the vibe.

If you could change one thing about the evening what would it be?

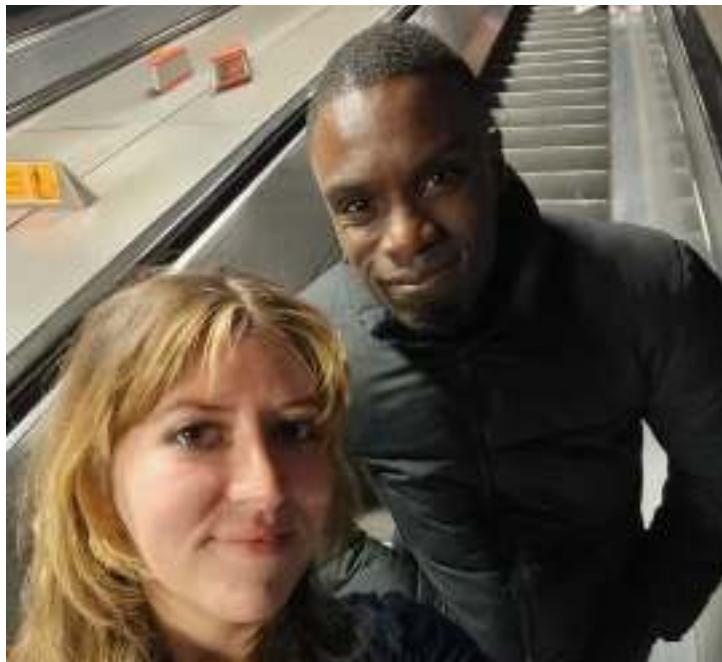
It might have been a more enjoyable night for him if he could have left without needing to stop for a takeaway on the way home!

Marks out of 10?

7

Would you meet again?

Maybe as friends.



Adriana and Streisand on their date

Streisand on Adriana



What were you hoping for?

To meet a new friend, and that it might lead to romance further down the line.

First impressions?

Nice eyes, easy going, good energy.

What did you talk about?

Politics, family, our upbringings, work, how intense bachata dancing is.

Any awkward moments?

She is a reporter for a red-top ...

Good table manners?

Very good.

Best thing about Adriana?

Her keenness to listen and debate with people who have different opinions.

Would you introduce her to your friends?

My friends would embrace her with open arms.

Describe Adriana in three words?

Thoughtful, adventurous, and a good listener.

What do you think she made of you?

Someone who struggles to eat food that he has never tried before.

Did you go on somewhere?

Nah. It was getting late and we both had to get up early in the morning.

If it weren't for physical distancing, would you have kissed?

Well, I did give her two kisses on the cheek as we said goodbye.

If you could change one thing about the evening what would it be?

The food. I wasn't full.

Marks out of 10?

7

Would you meet again?

I gave her my number but haven't heard back.

Adriana and Streisand ate at [Turnips](#) Borough Market, London SE1. Fancy a blind date? Email blind.date@theguardian.com

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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

[Yotam Ottolenghi recipes](#)[Food](#)

Potted duck, cracked roasties and croissant cookies: Yotam Ottolenghi's party recipes



Yotam Ottolenghi's potted duck with baharat butter. Photograph: Louise Hagger/The Guardian. Food styling: Emily Kydd, Prop styling: Jennifer Kay. Food assistant: Valeria Russo.

[Yotam Ottolenghi](#)

[@ottolenghi](#)

Sat 4 Dec 2021 04.30 EST

And so begins the party season. When I'm throwing a party, I want most of my food prepped and ready: no one comes to watch the host be a slave to the kitchen all night, after all. At the same time, I also like to have one or two things that need a bit of last-minute attention – I enjoy the theatre and energy of it – so today's party food suggestions reflect that balance: something savoury that can be made days in advance, something sweet that can be

made weeks in advance and something to be cooked there and then and eaten in the moment. Cheers!

Potted duck with baharat butter

This is a take on rillettes, the French classic of confit meat preserved in its own fat. In this lighter version (though you could hardly go much heavier), the duck is braised in white wine before being sealed with spiced butter. This can be made up to three days in advance, but make sure you bring it back to room temperature before serving.

Prep 15 min

Cook 2 hr 40min

Chill 1 hr+

Serves 6

2 duck legs (about 440g)

½ tsp whole black peppercorns

1½ tsp coriander seeds, toasted

2 fresh bay leaves

200ml dry white wine

2 shallots, peeled and halved lengthways (100g)

Flaked sea salt

10g chives, finely chopped

60g unsalted butter

2½ tsp baharat

50g gherkins

Heat the oven to 150C (130C fan)/300F/gas 2. Pierce the duck skin a few times with a fork then lay the legs skin side up in a 20cm x 15cm baking dish. Scatter over the peppercorns, a teaspoon of the coriander seeds, the bay leaves, white wine, shallots and a teaspoon of flaked salt, cover the tray tightly with foil and roast for two and a half hours, until the meat is very tender and almost falling off the bone. Remove, take off the foil and set aside until the duck is cool enough to handle.

Lift out the duck legs and transfer them to a large bowl. Put a sieve over a small bowl and pour through the roasting juices. Pick out the shallots and set

these aside, then discard all the other solids.

Using your hands or a couple of forks, pull the duck meat away from the bones; discard the skin and bones. Pour 100ml of the strained roasting juices into the duck meat bowl. Finely chop the reserved roast shallots, add these to the duck bowl, then mix everything until everything breaks up and is finely shredded. Stir in the chives, then divide between two 10cm-wide by 4½cm-high ramekins (or two small bowls), using the back of the spoon to compact the mixture as much as possible.

Melt the butter in a small frying pan on a medium heat and, once it's bubbling, add the baharat and a quarter-teaspoon of flaked salt. Take off the heat, skim off any foam on the top, then divide the butter mixture equally between the two ramekins, so it completely covers the duck mix. Crush the remaining half-teaspoon of coriander seeds in a mortar and sprinkle this and a tiny pinch of flaked salt on top of the butter. Refrigerate for at least an hour, until the butter is set and the duck sealed (or overnight, if you want to get ahead).

About half an hour before you want to serve, take the ramekins out of the fridge, so the butter softens and is spreadable. Serve with toasted bread or crackers and cornichons.

- UK readers: [click to buy these ingredients](#) from Ocado

Crisp smashed new potatoes with spiced salt and spring onion creme fraiche



Yotam Ottolenghi's crispy smashed new potatoes with spiced salt and spring onion creme fraiche.

The potatoes can be boiled ahead of time and the spiced salt can be made the day before, but when it comes to serving and eating these, as fresh out of the pan as possible is best.

Prep 15 min

Cook 40 min

Serves 6

750g baby new potatoes

2 tbsp table salt

1 litre sunflower oil

5 spring onions, thinly sliced (40g)

150g creme fraiche

1 tsp lemon juice

For the spiced salt

2 tsp coriander seeds, toasted

1 tsp kelp or nori flakes

1½ tsp aleppo chilli

1½ tsp paprika
1 tsp flaked sea salt

In a medium pan, bring a litre and a half of water to a boil. Add the potatoes and table salt, and boil for 20 minutes, until a knife goes through the potatoes easily. Drain, then set aside until the potatoes are cool enough to handle.

While the potatoes are cooking, make the spiced salt. Roughly grind the coriander seeds in a mortar, then add the kelp flakes, aleppo chilli, paprika and flaked sea salt, and grind two or three more times, until everything's well mixed.

Put the spring onions in a small bowl with the creme fraiche, a teaspoon of lemon juice and an eighth of a teaspoon of salt, mix to combine, then set aside.

Once the potatoes are cool enough, press them between your hands (or on a flat work surface) until the skin breaks and the white flesh pokes out. Be as brutal as you like: all those rough edges crisp up very nicely when fried.

Put the sunflower oil in a medium saute pan set over a medium-high heat. Once it's hot, fry a third of the potatoes for five to six minutes, turning occasionally, until deeply golden and crisp all over. Remove with a slotted spoon, drain on kitchen towel and sprinkle with some of the spiced salt while they're still hot. Repeat with the remaining potatoes.

Put the potatoes on a platter and serve hot with the spring onion creme fraiche for dipping.

- UK readers: [click to buy these ingredients](#) from Ocado

Hazelnut vanilla kipferl with cocoa nibs



Yotam Ottolenghi's festive hazelnut vanilla kipferl with cocoa nibs.

The coconut and cocoa nibs are by no means traditional, but they do bring a lot to the party taste- and texture-wise. Once shaped into logs, these can be frozen for up to a month (defrost fully before slicing, shaping and baking). Once baked, the kipferl will keep for up to two weeks in an airtight container, which makes them great for gifting as well as for partying.

Prep 10 min

Chill 30 min

Cook 50 min

Makes About 48

200g plain flour

100g roasted blanched hazelnuts, finely ground

30g desiccated coconut

20g cocoa nibs, roughly crushed in a mortar

150g room-temperature unsalted butter

50g caster sugar

30g icing sugar

½ tsp salt

1½ tsp vanilla bean paste

1 egg yolk

100g icing sugar, for dusting

Put everything bar the icing sugar in a free-standing mixer with the paddle attachment in place, and mix just until it all starts forming a dough, but is not quite fully coming together. Tip out onto a clean work surface and gently knead only once or twice, to bring the dough together. Divide into four pieces, roll each piece into a roughly 22cm-long x 2½cm-wide log, then wrap in greaseproof paper and chill for half an hour.

Heat the oven to 170C (150C fan)/325F/gas 3 and line two baking sheets with greaseproof paper. Cut each log into 12 equal slices, then shape each one into a small sausage that is slightly fatter in the middle and has tapered ends. Carefully bend the two ends towards each other, to make a crescent shape (if they crack, just gently squeeze them together again), then arrange on the trays (you should be able to fit 20-24 on each tray). Bake for 20-25 minutes, rotating the trays once halfway through, until golden.

Remove, leave to cool for five minutes, then dredge in the icing sugar, to coat – it's important that the cookies are still warm when you do this, or they won't get a thick enough covering of sugar (that said, if you prefer a thinner coating of sugar, wait until the kipferls are completely cool before dredging them). Leave to cool, then repeat the dredging.

- UK readers: [click to buy these ingredients](#) from Ocado
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Coronavirus

WHO says no deaths reported from Omicron yet as Covid variant spreads



A passenger administers a self-collected Covid test at Los Angeles airport amid the continuing spread of the new Omicron variant around the world.
Photograph: Mario Tama/Getty Images

Staff and agencies
Sat 4 Dec 2021 00.22 EST

The Omicron variant has been detected in at least 38 countries but no deaths have yet been reported, the [World Health Organization](#) has said, amid warnings that it could damage the global economic recovery.

The United States and Australia became the latest countries to confirm locally transmitted cases of the variant, as Omicron infections pushed South Africa's total cases past 3 million.

The WHO has warned it could take weeks to determine how infectious the variant is, whether it causes more severe illness and how effective treatments and vaccines are against it.

“We’re going to get the answers that everybody out there needs,” the WHO emergencies director, Michael Ryan, said.

The WHO said on Friday it had still not seen any reports of deaths related to Omicron, but the new variant’s spread has led to warnings that it could cause more than half of Europe’s Covid cases in the next few months.

The new variant could also slow global economic recovery, just as the Delta strain did, the International Monetary Fund chief, Kristalina Georgieva, said on Friday.

“Even before the arrival of this new variant, we were concerned that the recovery, while it continues, is losing somewhat momentum,” she said. “A new variant that may spread very rapidly can dent confidence.”

A preliminary study by researchers in **South Africa**, where the variant was first reported on 24 November, suggests it is three times more likely to cause reinfections compared with the Delta or Beta strains.

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Omicron Covid variant: too soon to say illness severity – video

The emergence of Omicron was the “ultimate evidence” of the danger of unequal global vaccination rates, the Red Cross head, Francesco Rocca, said.

“The scientific community has warned … on several occasions about the risks of very new variants in places where there is a very low rate of vaccinations,” he said.

“It’s unbelievable that we are still not realising how much we are interconnected. This is why I call the Omicron variant the ultimate evidence.”



People receive Covid vaccines in Lawley, South Africa. Photograph: Jérôme Delay/AP

Uğur Şahin, the CEO of BioNTech, which makes the Covid vaccine with Pfizer, said the company should be able to adapt the shots relatively quickly. He said current vaccines should continue to provide protection against severe disease, despite mutations.

“I believe in principle at a certain timepoint we will need a new vaccine against this new variant. The question is how urgent it needs to be available,” Şahin said.

In the US, six more states confirmed infections of the Omicron variant on Friday.

New Jersey, Maryland, Missouri, Nebraska, Pennsylvania and Utah each reported their first cases of Omicron. It has also been found in California, Colorado, Hawaii, Minnesota, and New York. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said it was investigating possible cases of the Omicron variant in other states.

Two cases involved residents with no recent international travel history – showing Omicron is already circulating inside the country.

Australia on Friday reported three students in Sydney had tested positive for the variant, despite a ban on non-citizens entering the country and restrictions on flights from southern Africa.

Canada has discovered a total of 15 cases of the new Omicron variant. On Friday the chief public health officer, Theresa Tam, announced 11 Omicron cases, all involving people who had recently travelled abroad.

Hours after she spoke, the city of York said a child under 12 had been diagnosed with Omicron. The child had recently traveled to southern Africa. Toronto then reported its first three cases of Omicron late on Friday, with two of those individuals having recently returned from Nigeria, while another individual had returned from Switzerland.

In **Norway**, officials said at least 13 people who contracted Covid-19 after an office Christmas party in Oslo last week had the Omicron variant – though so far they have only had mild symptoms.

But the government ushered in restrictions in greater Oslo after fears of the cluster surfaced.



A pedestrian in Seoul walks past an exhibition billboard reading, 'Our Lives Beyond Epidemics'. Photograph: Seokyong Lee/Penta Press/REX/Shutterstock

South Korea again broke its daily records for coronavirus infections and deaths and confirmed three more cases of the new Omicron variant.

The 5,352 new cases marked the third time this week the daily tally exceeded 5,000. The country's death toll was at 3,809 after a record 70 virus patients died in the past 24 hours, while the 752 patients in serious or critical conditions were also an all-time high.

The country's Omicron caseload is now at nine after three more cases were confirmed, connected to a couple who had arrived from Nigeria on 24 November. Officials say the number of Omicron cases could rise as some of the patients had attended a church gathering involving hundreds of people on 28 November.

On Friday, **Malaysia** also reported a first Omicron infection in a foreign student arriving from South Africa on 19 November. **Sri Lanka** also announced its first case, a citizen returning from South Africa.

Rising Delta cases had already forced European governments to reintroduce mandatory mask-wearing, social distancing, curfews or lockdowns, leaving businesses fearing another grim Christmas.

Belgian authorities said on Friday that primary schools would close a week early for the Christmas holidays.

Germany's regional leaders agreed new measures including a ban on fireworks at new year parties to discourage large gatherings.

Ireland said it will close nightclubs and reintroduce social distancing in some settings over Christmas and the New Year.

Meanwhile in **Brazil**, a supreme court justice has ordered that the president, Jair Bolsonaro, be investigated for comments linking Covid-19 vaccines to Aids – an assertion rejected by doctors and scientists.

Alexandre de Moraes instructed the country's top prosecutor, Augusto Aras, to look into the accusation raised by a pandemic inquiry conducted by Brazil's Senate.

Bolsonaro said in a video in October that “official reports from the UK government suggest that fully vaccinated people … are developing acquired immunodeficiency syndrome much faster than anticipated”. Facebook and Instagram took down that video days later.

The Brazilian president, who remains unvaccinated and has frequently pushed against vaccine mandates, argued he was merely quoting an article in the magazine Exame and not making assertions.

Moraes said in his ruling that Bolsonaro “used the modus operandi of mass dissemination schemes in social networks”, which requires further investigation.

Aras, however, rarely goes against the president and has not opened an investigation into Bolsonaro’s handling of the pandemic despite calls to do so by the Senate committee.

With Agence France-Presse, Reuters and Associated Press

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Coronavirus

Does the Omicron variant mean Covid is going to become more transmissible?



A woman receives a Covid vaccine. Scientists are not expecting new strains to completely evade immunity and put us back to square one. Photograph: Maureen McLean/Rex/Shutterstock

Hannah Devlin Science correspondent

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Fri 3 Dec 2021 11.42 EST

[When scientists predicted](#), months ago, that Covid-19 could be entering an endemic phase, many felt ready for the crisis period of the pandemic to be over. The tantalising suggestion that coronavirus might, at some foreseeable point, be just another seasonal cold felt welcome. But the emergence of the Omicron variant, just weeks before Christmas, shows this is not guaranteed to be a smooth or quick transition.

Will the virus become milder?

A recurring suggestion is that pathogens evolve, over some undefined period, to be more transmissible and less virulent, bringing virus and host towards a state of benign coexistence. If Omicron is spreading so quickly, some wondered, perhaps it will at least be milder. But experts say this expectation has no scientific basis. “Put simply, this has been one of the most baffling misinformation myths peddled during the pandemic,” said Prof Alan McNally, director of the [Institute of Microbiology and Infection](#) at the University of Birmingham. “There is almost no evidence of any human pathogenic virus evolving towards reduced virulence.”

The simplistic argument behind the idea is that if a pathogen kills its host, or makes them too sick to leave the house, then it gives itself a worse chance of propagating. So by the logic of survival of the fittest, there would be a selective pressure for milder strains. Sadly, the dynamic is more complex in the real world.

Covid cases

“It’s really unpredictable what will happen to the evolution of the host or the virus,” said Brian Ferguson, an immunologist at the University of Cambridge. “You can pick out examples of things going one way or the other depending on what point you want to make.”

In the case of coronavirus, there is also an obvious hole in the argument: transmission normally occurs before symptoms start or during the earliest stage of symptoms, meaning that severity of illness has little influence on the spread of the virus.

The impact of Covid may become less each year as immunity builds up through infection, vaccination and – possibly – annual boosters.

Will it keep getting more transmissible?

Yes, probably. “Strains that transmit more easily and that evade existing immunity will have an advantage over those strains which are less transmissible and more susceptible to immunity,” said Prof Kit Yates, a

senior lecturer in mathematics at the University of Bath. We have already seen this occurring with the shift from the original variant, which had a basic R number of about 3, followed by Alpha, estimated to have an R₀ of 4-5 and Delta, with an R₀ of 6-8.

“There’s no reason to believe this won’t go any higher,” said Yates. “Measles, which is one of the most infectious human-to-human diseases, has an R₀ which has been estimated to be as high as 18. There’s certainly still room for the R₀ of Covid to increase.”

Scientists say predicting where the ceiling might be is extremely difficult. “It’s probably not very sensible to try and second-guess that,” said McNally. “Numerous human pathogenic viruses have been co-evolving with us for hundreds of thousands of years. So I don’t think there could ever be a confident prediction of a ceiling being reached.”

On the plus side, R₀ is a less pressing concern in a vaccinated population, where there is more protection from serious disease.

Will it keep escaping our vaccines?

To some extent, although scientists are not expecting new strains to completely evade immunity and put us back to square one. “The broad scientific consensus is that this is not what will happen with Omicron,” said Yates. “It is believed that existing immunity will still provide some defence against the new variant, especially against severe disease.”

There is also a limit to how much the virus’s spike protein can evolve, because the spike is the key that allows it to infect our cells.

Nevertheless, there is still a scenario where protection is weakened enough to require an update to existing vaccines – and companies are already playing out whether Omicron meets these criteria. This poses vaccine makers with a dilemma. One option is to make a new variant vaccine that is closely matched to Omicron, for example. This creates a vulnerability, however, because new variants could emerge from Delta or earlier strains, for which the updated vaccine would be an even worse match. And if

different strains are dominant in different regions, the question of which vaccines to deploy where becomes complicated.

“We’re questioning whether chasing the globe to hunt down the next variant to tweak the vaccine again and again is necessarily the best way of going,” said Prof Danny Altmann, an immunologist at Imperial College London.

He and others are investigating vaccine strategies that would give broader protection, which they hope will be less sensitive to future mutations of the spike protein. “We’d love to slow down and do the homework properly and find out which version of this is going to give you a future-proofed answer,” he said.

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Coronavirus

Do Covid vaccine mandates work?



Indonesia is among the countries that have already made Covid jabs mandatory. Photograph: Hotli Simanjuntak/EPA

*[Nicola Davis](#) Science Correspondent
[@NicolaKSDavis](#)*

Fri 3 Dec 2021 08.14 EST

A growing number of countries are exploring making Covid jabs compulsory for the general population, but is it the right approach?

Which countries are opting for mandatory Covid vaccinations?

[Austria has announced plans](#) to make Covid jabs mandatory from February, with [Germany indicating it may follow suit](#). Greece, meanwhile, has already announced mandatory jabs for the over-60s, [while Indonesia](#) and

Turkmenistan are among those that have already made Covid jabs mandatory.

Why are they taking this approach?

Many of the countries exploring mandatory vaccination of the general population are doing so in the face of rising levels of Covid that have led to the reintroduction of severe measures including lockdowns.

In Germany, for example, many hospitals are under severe strain while the number of new Covid cases has hit unprecedented highs in recent weeks striking a record of 79,051 new cases on 24 November, [according to data collated by Johns Hopkins University](#).

According to Hans Kluge, the WHO's [Europe](#) director, the situation faced by Europe and central Asia is down to a number of factors, including insufficient vaccination coverage [and the relaxation of public health and social measures](#).

"Most people hospitalised and dying from Covid-19 today are not fully vaccinated," he [said last month](#).

The emergence of the variant [Omicron has added to concerns](#) given early signs it may be more transmissible than Delta and have some ability to dodge the body's immune responses, leading many countries – [including the UK](#) – to ramp up efforts to ensure the population is as well protected as possible through vaccination, including booster jabs. Some countries believe the best way to do this is through mandatory Covid jabs.

Does mandatory vaccination work?

Vaccines against Covid have been shown to be safe and effective, particularly at preventing severe disease and death, and may reduce the need for severe social measures such as lockdowns. Mandatory vaccination programmes offer the potential to not only increase the level of uptake but the speed at which people head for the jabs. But [how well such programmes work](#) depends on a number of factors, including the level of opposition.

“Vaccine mandates work – as Italy, the US and Australia have shown for other vaccines. Will they work for Covid? There is more uncertainty in the public about the long-term safety profile so more resistance,” said Prof Julian Savulescu, director of the Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics at the University of Oxford, adding in the UK there was the added factor of high levels of natural immunity.

Italy already had 10 mandatory vaccines for children, with some [evidence suggesting](#) the laws have had a positive impact on vaccine uptake. However, the [EU-funded Asset project](#), which looks at the impact of mandatory vaccination in a number of countries, found no clear link between the approach and vaccine uptake.

In April, the World [Health](#) Organization (WHO) said it “does not presently support the direction of mandates for Covid-19 vaccination, having argued that it is better to work on information campaigns and making vaccines accessible”.

But speaking last month, Robb Butler, executive director for WHO Europe, said conversations on the compulsory jabs needed to be had. “Mandatory vaccination can but doesn’t always increase uptake,” he said.

Are there downsides to mandatory vaccination?

There are a number of concerns, including that it may risk undermining public confidence in public health measures.

“I think the main problem is public backlash, increase in polarisation and the possibility of political parties gaining ground on the anti-vaxx ticket,” said Dr Samantha Vanderslott of the Oxford Vaccine Group. “Also it might ignore improvement of vaccine services and access to vaccines,” she said.

Savulescu also pointed out concerns. “The risks are public confidence in government but more importantly, liberty should only be restricted to the least extent necessary. Unless the public health system is on the verge of collapse, it is hard to justify treating the decision to treat the unvaccinated differently to the decision to smoke, drink alcohol, eat unhealthily, not

exercise etc,” he said, adding if mandatory policies were brought in, they should be as selective as possible.

“The Greek approach of making [Covid] vaccination mandatory for over-60s is more ethically defensible than the Austrian or German proposals to make it mandatory for all adults,” he said.

Will the UK introduce mandatory jabs?

The health secretary, Sajid Javid, has said the UK “won’t ever look at” mandatory vaccinations for the general public.

While the UK decided to make Covid jabs a condition of work for frontline health and social care workers, mandatory vaccination of the general population would be a very different matter.

Besides the ethical concerns, the situation faced by the UK is different to many countries in Europe.

“The UK has a high level of immunity now – natural or from vaccination. Importantly, it has good protection of the elderly, who are the main group putting pressure on hospitals,” said Savulescu, noting data from the Office for National Statistics suggests in early November 92.8% of adults in England would have had antibodies to Covid either from vaccination or natural infection. “There is not a lot of point to a mandatory policy in the UK – Austria, for example, has much lower coverage.”

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2021.12.04 - Opinion

- Dear Nadhim Zahawi, please sort out Ofsted's lack of humanity. There's no excuse
- A decade of marketisation has left lecturers with no choice but to strike
- For France it is impossible to work seriously with Boris Johnson's government
- The princes and the press have a true 'special relationship' – only one side thinks it's real

[Letter from a curious parent](#)[Ofsted](#)

Dear Nadhim Zahawi, please sort out Ofsted's lack of humanity. There's no excuse

[Michael Rosen](#)





‘One theme I hear over and over again in schools is that inspectors were not sympathetic to the specific conditions of the school.’ Photograph: Russell Hart/Alamy

Sat 4 Dec 2021 03.30 EST

As you preside over the bewildering and nonsensical inconsistency of mask-wearing in schools, I thought I might distract you with another matter of great importance: the behaviour of [Ofsted](#) inspectors.

As all of us involved in schools in England know, we work in a territory policed by a triumvirate: Ofsted, the league tables and the Sats results. There are no Covid-like press conferences where representatives of these three stand at lecterns being quizzed by journalists. Why not? After all, at key moments in the year (like GCSE Handwringing Day or International Performance Comparison and Sneering Day) education in schools is presented as if it were a pandemic of decline.

Perhaps we are supposed to believe that the three parts of the triumvirate work independently of each other, doing good, in the manner of Oxfam, Christian Aid and Children in Need, though with you at the helm. But if you had wanted to invent a set-up that was as undemocratic as possible and as unrepresentative of the people working in it, you’d be hard pushed to beat it.

Right now Ofsted is causing particular concern. Did you see last week's Guardian article, '[I can't go through it again](#): headteachers quit over brutal [Ofsted inspections](#)', and the readers' [letters](#) that followed? If you missed them, please take a look. They paint a picture of a profession in distress. Headteachers say Ofsted inspectors are refusing to take into account the effects of Covid on schools. The head of Lancaster Royal grammar school, [Dr Chris Pyle](#), says that some recent Ofsted reports "exclude all specific references to the pandemic".

As I'd hope you would acknowledge, the impact of the illness itself, the absences, the casualties, the lockdown and the online teaching has been a trauma felt acutely by school communities. Of what benefit can it be for Ofsted to turn up at a school and trample over people who have experienced such high stress and, in some cases, loss and bereavement?

The fact is this high-handed approach is bred by the structure and terms of reference of Ofsted. The idea that a judge, prosecution and jury arrive one day at a school, at short notice, conduct a trial and then leave is a poor way to run education. In my school visits these days, I also rush in and out – though usually I give them a bit more notice of my arrival! But I'm not inspecting teachers, I'm doing that very non-Ofsteddy thing of coming in to support teachers and pupils. While I'm there, I often hear from teachers about Ofsted visits. The one theme I hear over and over again is that they feel the inspectors were not sympathetic to the specific conditions of the school. It's as if inspectors come briefed with a notion that teachers are bad people making excuses for their own incompetence. So the report that some inspectors don't want to hear about the experience of Covid came as no surprise to me.

One headteacher told me an Ofsted inspector complained that the Year 6 results were showing a significant decline. The headteacher pointed out that the dip in scores coincided with the sudden arrival of a cohort of refugee children, none of whom spoke English. In other words, the composition of the class had changed between one set of scores and the next. Though the refugee children had made huge advances in the few months they had been here, the effect on the data was that the scores were "low" in an absolute sense. What did the inspector say to the headteacher? That it was "no

excuse". In Ofsted's world, data can exist independently of the people being measured. Please, Mr Zahawi, listen to the teachers and headteachers in the Guardian article and the letters. The system is not benefiting teachers, pupils or families, and it's all predicated on the idea that the only way to improve education is through top-down hectoring.

How interesting to see that your government is trying to cope with Covid by encouraging people to choose the right path, whether that be the wearing of masks, getting vaccinated or holding parties. This approach is much preferred, I've heard ministers saying on the radio, to making such measures compulsory. And yet when it comes to education, you and your colleagues drop this libertarian approach and opt for the big stick. Tell us: why should education be excluded from your libertarian methods?

We really do have to make our minds up whether we think education should be about consent or coercion. Here we are, in the midst of two crises threatening humanity: disease and climate change, and the best we can come up with for schools is the authoritarian triumvirate. Does it ever give you pause for thought that a coercive system might not be the best way to foster creative and questioning minds, the kind of minds we desperately need to solve humanity's problems?

Yours, Michael Rosen

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OpinionLecturers

A decade of marketisation has left lecturers with no choice but to strike

[Jacob Mukherjee](#)



'Higher education is one of the most heavily casualised industries in the UK.' A picket at University College London. Photograph: Guy Smallman/Getty Images

Sat 4 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

Along with tens of thousands of university workers at 58 institutions across the UK, I have been on strike for three days this week over pensions, pay and conditions. For workers at Goldsmiths this national strike has fallen in the middle of an epic, local three-week strike of our own – over management proposals to [sack 52 staff](#), as part of a cost-cutting plan [financed by big banks](#).

The national action and our local strike are connected: the factors that led to a vote for strike action by more than 70% of [University and College Union](#)

[\(UCU\) members](#) nationally are the same ones that have produced a dramatic confrontation at Goldsmiths. Indeed, the situation at Goldsmiths, a small University of London college specialising in arts, humanities and social sciences, could be a window on to the future of higher education nationally: a future of casualisation, swingeing cuts and the possibility of troubling interventions from financial institutions.

The national dispute encompasses a wide range of elements, the most high-profile of which is pensions: like [public sector workers](#) before them, university staff face an attack on our defined-benefit retirement schemes. The employer, Universities UK, is attempting to cut our pensions by [more than 30%](#), using a [reportedly flawed valuation](#) taken at a low point in the economic and social crisis caused by the pandemic. The dispute amounts to a cluster of grievances over working conditions known as the “[four fights](#)”: pay, equalities, workload and casualisation. Higher education is one of the most [heavily casualised sectors](#) in the UK, with two-thirds of researchers and half of teaching staff employed on fixed-term (ie temporary) contracts.

For many younger academics it is casualisation that has spurred us to take action in the national dispute. I spent seven years on seven different casual contracts across three institutions before I got my first permanent position at Goldsmiths this summer. Many of these contacts are desperately low paid; at times I was taking home just £2,000 a year from teaching, and having to work three jobs to survive. But it is also the insecurity that is crippling: it is impossible to plan your career trajectory and life in general without knowing if you’ll be in work next year. Casualised staff are also the first to be laid off in a crisis: Goldsmiths attempted to release nearly 500 of us at the start of the pandemic last spring, [though we fought back](#).

The national dispute is the result of what has been called “[a decade of marketisation](#)” in higher education. And it is marketisation – the move to turn education from a public service into a commodity – that laid the conditions for our local dispute at Goldsmiths. The overhaul of higher education funding in 2010 by the coalition government, particularly the removal of most direct government funding for courses, meant universities became heavily reliant on the volatile and unpredictable stream of income from student tuition fees. Humanities departments outside of the elite

universities have been under pressure ever since, with several (such as [politics and history at Kingston](#)) being shut down altogether. Universities have sought to cut staff costs through redundancies and increased use of casualised contracts.

The 2010 reforms also empowered a new generation of university senior managers who see their role as combining “streamlining” and cost-cutting measures with management speak about social justice and inclusion. Goldsmiths’ senior management is archetypal in this respect, with the warden, Frances Corner, dressing up a [2019 plan](#) to axe staff as part of a mission to “secur[e] our legacy as a beacon of progressive, critical thought and in the vanguard of social justice”.

Goldsmiths’ latest move in this direction involves a plan to cut 52 jobs across professional services, English and creative writing, and history courses, centralising administration and likely cutting courses in the process. An alarming aspect of the plan is the mooted role of the banks: Lloyds and NatWest are thought to have insisted on reductions in staff costs as a condition of [loans given to the university](#). If this is the case, it raises the worrying prospect of private banks dictating terms to a public university: an eerie echo of Gary Shteyngart’s 2010 novel Super Sad True Love Story, which imagined a character “studying art & finance at HSBC-Goldsmiths”.

The possibility of an alliance of cost-cutting senior management and finance capital has provoked a heartening response from a militant union branch and a politicised student body: 86% of Goldsmiths’ UCU members, on a 70% turnout, voted to strike. The three-week period of industrial action has featured a varied programme of [teach-outs](#) run jointly by students and staff, a [march](#) on local branches of Lloyds and NatWest, and a [huge solidarity rally](#) addressed by former shadow chancellor John McDonnell.

Unless marketisation can be resisted at a national level, the situation at Goldsmiths – in which funding volatility linked to the 2010 reforms has allowed banks to exert influence – will become much more common. These are two struggles we have to win.

- Jacob Mukherjee is a lecturer in media, communications and cultural studies, and co-secretary of Goldsmiths UCU
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OpinionFrance

It is impossible to work seriously with Boris Johnson's government

[Sylvie Bermann](#)



Macron said of Johnson's letter tweet: "I am surprised when methods are not serious. One does not communicate on those issues, from one leader to another, via tweets or by a letter made public." Photograph: Alastair Grant/PA

Sat 4 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

Britain and [France](#) have a long and intertwined history, encompassing great friendship and solidarity as well as war and rivalry. This was evident most recently following terrorist attacks in our respective countries. It's a relationship that can still be characterised as "sweet enemies", as Philip Sidney put it in a sonnet in 1591.

We are twin countries, with more or less the same population, similar economies, and the same status on the world stage, as permanent members

of the United Nations security council, and nuclear countries with military projection capability. As members of the same international organisations, we have often held the same positions, and coordinated closely. This respect and cooperative spirit have been particularly strong among diplomats from our two nations.

Any prejudices and mockery have remained mostly friendly, or been delivered with a touch of humour – as in 2012, when both [Boris Johnson](#) and David Cameron riled François Hollande’s government by saying they would “roll out the red carpet” for French businessmen who were being highly taxed in France. The then French Minister of Labour, Michel Sapin, [rejoindered](#): “Frankly, I don’t understand how you can unfurl a red carpet across the Channel. It could get quite wet.”

Sadly, I feel Brexit has changed all this – and rivalries that were once largely convivial have turned sour and unfriendly.

France has been repeatedly accused of wanting to punish the UK for Brexit. The French position is simply that the decision to leave the European Union has made the UK a “[“third country](#)” – not a punishment but a term defined in EU treaties, with many legal and regulatory consequences. The French government and public opinion alike are irritated by what seems like Johnson’s determination to have his cake and eat it.

The implementation of the Northern Ireland protocol is at the heart of the tension. Becoming a third country requires land or sea borders: the aim is to protect the European internal market. The French may be more vocal on this subject, but their position is one shared by EU institutions and all its members – and even by the Americans. We can’t understand how an agreement negotiated, signed and proclaimed as fantastic is not then respected by the very people at the heart of it. It has created a real loss of trust in the British government.

The fishing dispute is also seen in Paris as emerging from a British violation of an agreement with the EU – this allowed European fishermen to continue operating in British waters, provided they were already doing so before 2016. It is seen as an act of hostility towards France, as other countries have

successfully obtained licenses, whereas dozens of French boats [have had their applications rejected](#). They tend to be small vessels without GPS systems who have spent all their lives fishing in these waters, and their livelihoods are at stake. This explains their despair and anger – and some harsh actions.

The question of refugees is the most difficult one. Mary Tudor once said that “you shall find Calais lying in my heart”, and it remains a place of dispute between France and Britain. Some Brits say that France should take back “its migrants” and accuse the French police of incompetence, suggesting Britain withdraw its financial contributions. This has provoked outrage in France: these payments have not been made out of generosity, but because French police are effectively guarding the border for the British.

The hostility has become so bad that some candidates for next year’s presidential elections have suggested the [Le Touquet treaty](#) on border controls should be scrapped, saying that if the UK really wants to “take back control” of its borders, it can do so on its own soil. France has [more than twice as many asylum seekers](#) than the UK. Those who arrive in Calais are often desperate to go on to Britain for several reasons: because they speak English and can find work more easily, because they have relatives there, and because of the lack of safe legal routes to get across. Whatever new enhanced security measures are introduced in the future, asylum seekers will continue to come, and it is impossible to control 150 km of coast once the tunnel and the port have been sealed.

Paris is finding that it is impossible to work seriously with Johnson’s government. Even the manner in which the issue of refugees has been addressed has annoyed them: Johnson’s [letter](#) to Emmanuel Macron was tweeted to the world in a very Trumpian fashion, drawing the [comment](#): “I am surprised when methods are not serious. One does not communicate on those issues, from one leader to another, via tweets or by a letter made public. We are not whistleblowers. Come on now.” Meanwhile, France’s interior minister, Gérald Darmanin, has [criticised](#) the “double talk” of the British: constructive in bilateral talks behind closed doors, then, a day later, the opposite publicly, for domestic political reasons.

Our nations' two leaders have very different visions and personalities. In other times they might have got along, and the very serious and very European French president might even have been amused by a man who once said he would not sacrifice a good joke to the truth. But right now the stakes are too high. The British government seems obsessed by its largest and closest neighbour: France is an easy scapegoat in a difficult period. It will unfortunately take time before a new *entente cordiale* is formed.

- Sylvie Bermann was French ambassador to the UK from 2014 to 2017
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[Opinion](#)[Monarchy](#)

The princes and the press have a true ‘special relationship’ – only one side thinks it’s real

[Marina Hyde](#)





The Duke and Duchess of Sussex in Rabat, Morocco, February 2019
Photograph: Getty Images

Fri 3 Dec 2021 09.01 EST

A truly vintage week for hypocrisy in an industry I simply cannot take seriously: the newspaper industry. My industry. As longtime observers of so-called Fleet Street will be aware, living down to expectations is a constant burden. But it is a tribute to the business that said burden is shouldered daily by any number of lavishly shameless individuals, across all titles, without exception.

This past week's standout has been the full-spectrum warfare unleashed by the tabloids on the BBC's Amol Rajan for having the temerity to make a [documentary about Princes William and Harry](#) – who you will, of course, barely ever read about in the tabloids. On the very, very rare occasions that sacred [D-notice](#) is broken, you will only hear about the royal family in the most deferential, scrupulously fair and quintuply sourced terms. You know [the sort of thing](#) – “EXCLUSIVE: Diana thinks Kate is perfect but doesn't believe Meghan's ‘the one’: confidante reveals the princess still speaks to her from beyond the grave (and even told her to vote for Brexit).” Huge thanks to the tireless standards-upholders at MailOnline. And we'll come back to the Mail very shortly.

To recap: the BBC's media editor, Rajan, has now been the subject of days of unfavourable press – and reported outrage from the royal family – for saying that William and Harry's households briefed against each other. Before we go on, I should say I have never so much as met Rajan, in case anyone imagines we're friends from some cursed London media party circuit (I do not attend cursed parties). I did very much enjoy his [book on spin bowlers](#), though – a much better way of spending an evening than having champagne misted halitotically over you by a parade of dickheads who imagine that their work is hugely significant.

What is it about Rajan that has so enraged some sections of the press? The Mail in particular has run a number of articles and [columns](#) by the likes of Janet Street-Porter, in which he is energetically trashed. “Next year he’s presenting two documentaries on social mobility,” [remarks](#) Janet tartly, “a subject he seems to know very well.” Righto. And that’s bad now, is it? Forgive me – I’m just trying to understand the specific level it would be acceptable for a person such as Amol Rajan to reach. And why.

In the meantime, the Sun and Mail have called loudly for the smelling salts over this look at the princes’ relations with the media, citing such outrages as the documentary having [annoyed members of the royal family](#), and Rajan’s previously expressed republican views. On both counts: so what? Everyone has views, and it’s pathetic of so-called free speech nuts to pretend that they haven’t; he certainly didn’t push them in the programme. Even accounting for their long-term interest in attacking the BBC, we have to wonder why the enemies of cancel culture are trying to cancel him for it. Given that the only human right they care about is free speech, this seems an awkward spot to be occupying.

Their other bugbear, apparently, is the BBC’s “incendiary” timing, after the recent exposé of the lies behind Martin Bashir’s Panorama interview with Diana. OK, but these are distant past events. If you want a more contemporary instance of “timing”, the Mail on Sunday only this week lost its appeal against a privacy action brought by Meghan – yet no one is suggesting they suspend all coverage of her.

The spectacle of tabloid journalists – ANY journalists – demanding the royal family get shown an entire documentary before it airs, so they can approve

it, is hardcore through-the-looking-glass stuff. Do the papers show the royal households the entire proof copy front page before they run with this or that anonymous briefing? Of course they don't. "Hello – we've got some chiselling medium who says Meghan's a cow and Di would have voted Brexit – can we just run the headline past William and Harry to make sure they're absolutely thrilled with it?"

I guess the chance to rubbish the BBC for not doing something they'd never dream of doing themselves is simply too tempting to resist – but really it's just the most extreme hypocrisy, when they have profited handsomely for decades from the very system of covert gossip it touched on.

Anonymous briefing is the royal beat's lifeblood, helped by the fact royal households are famously Earth's most bitchy workplaces (not even newspaper offices or the BBC come close). The idea that the royal family could claim with any certainty that one or several of their ludicrous retinues HADN'T briefed a journalist is absurd. They never STOP briefing. The whole point of working for these people for half the money you could get elsewhere is so that you can convince yourself you're Deep Throat because you've divulged a spat about a tiara. That, and the constant possibility of a knee-trembler in the silver cupboard with some likeminded house elf (listen, I'm not knocking it).

The self-delusion frequently spreads to those who cover the royals. One of the most hilarious genres is the first-person article by either the "legendary" royal correspondent or the "legendary" royal photographer, along the lines of: "What's happened to my former cheeky-chappie friend [Prince Harry](#)?" To which the answer is: he's not your friend, he never liked you and there was never any "mutual respect" for each other's work. You were barely tolerated: the end. The relationship between press and royals is like the relationship between stalker and stalkee, or Britain and the US. Which is to say, only one side thinks there is one.

Think of the [Swiss photocall](#) at which a boom mic picked up Prince Charles observing the dutiful ranks of royal press. "Bloody people," he remarked to William and Harry, before catching sight of the BBC's Nicholas Witchell. "I can't bear that man anyway. He's so awful, he really is." Decades of absolute obsequiousness from Witchell, and this is what he gets for it.

But my absolute favourite part of this story is that the BBC was widely reported to have been punished by Charles for it – having its reporters not called at press conferences, a documentary about Camilla given to ITV, and so on. Clarence House denied it, unconvincingly. But to summarise: if THEY are overheard calling you awful, YOU get punished. I can't help feeling something rather similar is happening with the continuing saga of the Rajan documentary, in which the behaviour of the royal households and some newspapers will ultimately be found to be the fault of the BBC.

- Marina Hyde is a Guardian columnist
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Dog noises, name calling, claims of abuse: a week of shame in Australian politics



Former staffer to Australian education minister Alan Tudge, Rachelle Miller, speaks to the media about allegations of abuse. Photograph: Lukas Coch/AAP



Amy Remeikis in Canberra

@amyremeikis

Fri 3 Dec 2021 20.32 EST

Allegations of abuse and accusations of widespread sexism. Bullying and harassment particularly of women. A cabinet minister stood aside pending an investigation into claims by a former staffer that their relationship was at times “abusive”. Even by the low standards of the Australian parliament, it was a week of horror in [Canberra](#).

The final sitting week of parliament for the year began [with a long-awaited report](#) on sexual harassment and cultural issues within the parliament, which found one in three parliamentary staffers “have experienced some form of sexual harassment while working there”.

The report itself had been ordered after a former staffer alleged she had been raped by a colleague inside a minister’s office – [now the subject of a criminal trial](#).

It included anonymous testimony from staffers, mostly women, about the abuse they had been subjected to while doing their jobs.

“The MP sitting beside me leaned over. Also thinking he wanted to tell me something, I leaned in. He grabbed me and stuck his tongue down my throat. The others all laughed. It was revolting and humiliating,” one staffer reported.

“I have female colleagues who take fake binders … to committee meetings so a male MP won’t try to kiss them.”

The prime minister, [Scott Morrison](#), in accepting the report, said he wasn’t overly surprised by the findings.

“Like anyone who works in this building, I find the statistics that are presented, they’re of course, appalling and disturbing,” he said. “I wish I found them more surprising. But I find them just as appalling.”



The prime minister Scott Morrison. Photograph: Mick Tsikas/EPA

The review put together by the sex discrimination commissioner, Kate Jenkins, painted the parliament as a boys’ club with no consequences.

But just hours after the prime minister pledged to make the parliament a more respectful and safe working environment, politicians were caught making sexualised and gendered slurs.

A male government senator was accused of making dog noises while a female senator spoke in the chamber. He apologised for the interjections, but denied he had made animal sounds, claiming his face mask may have muffled his words.

The tone did not improve. The following day, senator Lidia Thorpe apologised for yelling “at least I keep my legs shut” at another senator in the chamber. Over in the lower house, opposition MPs heckled government MPs to “get a room” in response to a friendly question between a female backbencher and male minister.

While parliamentarians slugged it out over who was worse on issues of respect, Rachelle Miller, a former press secretary to cabinet minister Alan Tudge, came forward on Thursday with allegations of emotional, and in one case physical, abuse she said she experienced while in a 2017 relationship with the then-married minister. Tudge categorically rejected the allegations in a statement later that day.

Miller had gone public with the relationship in late 2020, as she called for cultural change, alleging her career ended when the relationship soured, while she watched Tudge be promoted.

It was the release of the review into parliamentary culture, along with the public activism of former and current staffers and female MPs, that prompted her to talk, saying her previous attempts at “reaching out” to the prime minister and others had been ignored.

“I’m fully aware that a year ago I said that my relationship with minister Alan Tudge was a consensual relationship but it’s much more complicated than that,” she said.

“I was so ashamed, so humiliated, so scared. I was exhausted. I told a small part of the story I was able to manage. It took a long time to face the truth about what happened but the memories are clearly etched in my brain. This relationship was defined by significant power imbalance. It was emotionally, and on one occasion, physically abusive relationship.”

To make it very clear, I DID NOT CONSENT to emotional & physical abuse by someone who also told me “he couldn’t live without me.”
[#auspol #JenkinsReport](#)

— Rachelle Miller (@rachellejmiller) [December 2, 2021](#)

Miller accused the minister of physically kicking her after her phone woke him early one morning.

“He continued to kick me until I fell off the side of the bed and ended up on the floor. I searched around in the dark for my clothes,” she said. “He was yelling at me that my phone had woken him up. He needed to get some more sleep. He told me to get the fuck out of his room and make sure that no one saw me.”

Tudge has “completely and utterly” rejected Miller’s claims. He had previously admitted to the relationship but this week strongly refuted any allegation of abuse, or that Miller’s career suffered as a result.

“I have accepted responsibility for a consensual affair that should not have happened many years ago. But Ms Miller’s allegations are wrong, did not happen and are contradicted by her own written words to me,” he said in a statement, referring to text messages Miller had pre-emptively suggested in her own statement may be used against her.

“I regret having to say these things. I do not wish Ms Miller ill but I have to defend myself in light of these allegations, which I reject.”

After almost a year of criticism over his lacklustre response to the allegations rocking the parliament, an under-siege prime minister announced Tudge would stand aside from his ministerial duties while an independent investigation into Miller’s claims was carried out.

The happenings in federal parliament were almost seen as depressingly normal, [in a year when women marching for justice](#) were told by the prime minister it was a “triumph of democracy” they weren’t greeted with bullets.



Protesters outside parliament during the Women's March 4 Justice.
Photograph: Mick Tsikas/AP

Morrison is still to announce his government's response to the review of parliamentary culture, which recommended more focus on gender parity, independent complaints processes and entire systemic change from the top down, ensuring the issue will follow him into what is shaping up as a difficult election year.

Greens senator Larissa Waters said there needed to be clarity the sex discrimination's recommendations would be fully implemented "and the culture of our toxic parliament will change".

"This has been the year that the veil was drawn back on the extent of predatory sexism and abuse of power in our nation's parliament," she said. "Because of the bravery of survivors, there is now no hiding from it."

For those fleeing the nation's capital on Friday after parliament rose, the only concern was putting as much space as they could between themselves and the scenes inside Parliament House.

"It was a fucked week to be a woman in that building," one MP said. "And given this year, that's saying something."

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/dec/04/dog-noises-name-calling-claims-of-abuse-a-week-of-shame-in-australian-politics>

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Emmanuel Macron

Emmanuel Macron accused of trying to ‘rehabilitate’ Mohammed bin Salman



The meeting on Saturday will mark the first one-on-one between the crown prince and a major western leader since the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi. Photograph: Sarah Meyssonnier/Reuters

[Angelique Chrisafis](#) in Paris and [Stephanie Kirchgaessner](#) in Washington

Fri 3 Dec 2021 15.26 EST

Human rights groups have criticised Emmanuel Macron’s planned meeting with Mohammed bin Salman in Saudi Arabia on Saturday, which will mark the first one-on-one public meeting of a major western leader with the crown prince since the state-sponsored assassination of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

For three years since the 2018 murder, western heads of state have avoided direct one-on-one meetings with the crown prince in the kingdom. The US

president, Joe Biden, has even [avoided speaking to the future king](#) in what has widely been seen as an attempt to avoid conferring legitimacy on the de facto ruler.

But Macron's move suggests at least one major western leader is ready to formally re-establish ties to the crown prince directly, less than a year after US intelligence agencies released a report stating they believed that Prince Mohammed had approved the murder of Khashoggi.

“Whatever strategic interest France has in [Saudi Arabia](#), nothing can justify their legitimisation of a ruler who kills journalists, threatens activists, imprisons women human rights defenders, slaughters Yemeni civilians, and deceives the international community. Macron diminishes himself and his own country as he stoops to partnership with MBS,” said Agnès Callamard, a French national who serves as Amnesty International’s secretary general.

After Macron was accused of attempting to “rehabilitate” Prince Mohammed, his office defended the meeting, telling journalists that Saudi Arabia was “a major actor in the region”, and stressed that [France](#) would have a “demanding dialogue” with the kingdom.

The Élysée Palace said the meeting in Jeddah was not in any way intended to get the crown prince “back in the saddle”. Instead, it was part of Macron’s long-term strategy since his election for France to contribute to “stability” in the region and that the country was presenting itself “as a balancing power in reinforcing dialogue” between countries from the Mediterranean to the Gulf.

Bruce Riedel, a senior fellow at Brookings Intelligence Project who formally served as an analyst at the CIA with a focus on Saudi Arabia, called the meeting a “French seal of approval for MBS and his war in Yemen.”

“Any semblance of western disapproval of Saudi behaviour in Yemen has now been removed. It is a remarkable statement of French betrayal of the Yemeni people,” he said.

He pointed to a recent UN report that showed nearly 400,000 children were at risk of starving to death amid the conflict in Yemen, which Riedel said was a catastrophe that had largely been put in place by Prince Mohammed himself.

News of Macron's meeting coincided with a new attempt by the Biden administration to reach out to Saudi Arabia as it has sought to persuade the kingdom to increase oil production.

In a statement, the national security council revealed that three senior US officials had travelled to the UAE, Saudi and Qatar to discuss economic issues and areas where the US could "partner to invest in the clean energy future and find ways to further collaborate to build a 21st-century clean energy architecture".

The Saudi oil giant, Saudi Aramco, has been considered one of the world's largest contributors to CO2.

US officials said Biden was not expected to have a conversation with Prince Mohammed despite the outreach.

The Biden administration's relationship with the kingdom is under close scrutiny in the US Congress, where Democrats and Republicans alike have expressed deep disapproval of the kingdom and have called for the US to end all arms sales to Saudis.

Human Rights Watch criticised French arms sales to the region and said Macron must speak out against human rights abuses on his visit to the Gulf, which begins on Friday and will take in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

In a statement, Human Rights Watch said: "Macron should address the atrocious 2018 murder of Jamal Khashoggi. Remaining silent on these matters would be tantamount to turning a blind eye to serious human rights violations."

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US politics

The ‘stench’ of politicization: Sonia Sotomayor’s supreme court warning



‘The perception of nonchalance towards the integrity of the court among the six conservative justices now in the majority is striking.’ Photograph: Dana Verkouteren/AP



[Ed Pilkington](#)

[@edpilkington](#)

Sat 4 Dec 2021 02.00 EST

About 11 minutes into this week's hearing on abortion rights at the US supreme court, the floor was taken by Sonia Sotomayor, one of the three beleaguered liberal-leaning justices left on the court after its sharp rightward shift under [Donald Trump](#).

Sotomayor [began](#) by noting that in the past 30 years no fewer than 15 justices of all political backgrounds had supported the right to an abortion up to the point of fetal viability. Only four had objected.

Now after so many years of relative consensus, the legality of abortion enshrined in the landmark 1973 ruling Roe v Wade and reaffirmed in 1992 in Planned Parenthood v Casey was suddenly on the line.

Politicians in Mississippi, Sotomayor remarked (while leaving it unsaid that they were rightwing Republicans), had devised new legislation to ban abortions after just 15 weeks of pregnancy. By these politicians' own admission, their bills were targeted specifically at the three new justices on

the supreme court (all appointed by Trump, though she left that unspoken too).

Then she went in for the kill.

She addressed the danger posed by the court's sudden and apparently politically motivated change of heart not just to abortion rights but to the rule of law itself.

If the nation's highest court, with its newly constituted Trumpian majority, were to go along with the ploy set for it by Mississippi and throw out half a century of settled law affirming a woman's right to choose, then what would happen to the court's legitimacy as a place in American democracy that rises above the cut and thrust of grubby partisanship?

"Will this institution survive the stench that this creates in the public perception that the constitution and its reading are just political acts?" she said. "I don't see how it is possible."

Stench. The word ricocheted off the august walls of the courtroom like a bullet.

"It was a shocking moment," [said](#) Sherrilyn Ifill, director-counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. "An unadorned recognition of the legitimacy issues that are clearly preoccupying a number of the justices."

For Stephen Vladeck, a professor of constitutional law at the University of Texas at Austin, the takeaway of this week's hearing was not how many justices were preoccupied with the reputational damage facing an increasingly politicised court, but how few. "To me, the single most distressing feature of Justice Sotomayor's arguments was how little anyone else seemed to care," he told the Guardian.

Vladeck said he was dismayed by the "casualness with which so many of the justices seemed to be taking an issue that is so central to so many women. A ruling that gets rid of Roe would be enormously damaging in the eyes of millions of Americans, yet some of the conservative justices don't seem to think that's important."

The perception of nonchalance towards the integrity of the court among the six conservative justices now in the majority is striking. In advance of last week's supercharged hearing, several of those same justices bent over backwards to try to convince the American people that they are neutral servants of the constitution.

The three justices appointed by Trump have been especially keen to portray themselves as having not a partisan bone in their body. Neil Gorsuch, Trump's first of the three appointments, insisted in [September 2019](#) that it was "rubbish" to imply that the justices were "like politicians with robes".

More recently Amy Coney Barrett, another of Trump's triumvirate of appointees, [told an audience](#) in Kentucky that the supreme court was not "comprised of a bunch of partisan hacks".

But she was speaking at the McConnell Center at the University of Louisville and was introduced at the event by the politician after whom the venue is named – Mitch McConnell, the top Republican in the US Senate. It was his shenanigans, [blocking](#) Merrick Garland's confirmation to the court in 2016 on grounds that it was in an election year then [rushing through](#) Barrett's confirmation much closer to election day in 2020, that gave Trump his three picks.

But it is the third of Trump's supreme court proteges, Brett Kavanaugh, whose position is perhaps most glaring. During his confirmation process in 2018 Kavanaugh went to great lengths to underline his respect for the decisions made by his predecessors on the court, and for the legal doctrine known as stare decisis, which requires justices to honor past rulings in all but exceptional cases.

Kavanaugh [assured senators](#) worried about his stance on abortion that he saw Roe v Wade as "settled law".

He went even further in his conversations with Susan Collins, the relatively moderate Republican senator from Maine on whose vote Kavanaugh depended. When she [announced](#) her decision to back him for the supreme court, she revealed what he had said to her during private conversations.

“There has been considerable … concern that Judge Kavanaugh would seek to overturn Roe v Wade,” she said. “Protecting this right is important to me. As Judge Kavanaugh asserted to me, a long-established precedent is not something to be trimmed, narrowed, discarded or overlooked.”

But when it came round to Kavanaugh’s turn to speak in this week’s debate he read out a long list of supreme court cases in which prior precedents had been overturned. He left observers with the clear impression that he was preparing to do precisely what he promised Collins and her fellow senators that he would not do – run roughshod over a pillar of constitutional law.

The pointed interventions of the Trump justices and their conservative peers in this week’s hearing have led most observers convinced that abortion rights in the US are likely to be [grossly restricted or abolished outright](#) when the court rules next June. That would be uncannily as Trump himself had predicted.

In a televised debate during the 2016 presidential race, Trump was asked by the Fox News host Chris Wallace whether he wanted the court, including any justices he might appoint as president, to overturn the right to an abortion. He replied: “I am pro-life, and I will be appointing pro-life judges. I would think that that will go back to the individual states.”

Trump did go on to appoint anti-abortion judges, and they are now poised to send control back to individual states, [21 of which currently have laws in place](#) that would effectively ban abortions overnight were Roe v Wade overturned.

Vladeck fears that the vast and growing disconnect between what the conservative justices say they are doing – impartially and faithfully upholding the law of the land, and what they are actually doing – playing along with the machinations of politicians in states like Mississippi, bodes very ill for the legitimacy of the court.

In the long run it could also harm America’s future as a country of laws.

“Public perception matters,” he said. “The more the court appears to be guided by contemporary partisan preferences as opposed to permanent legal

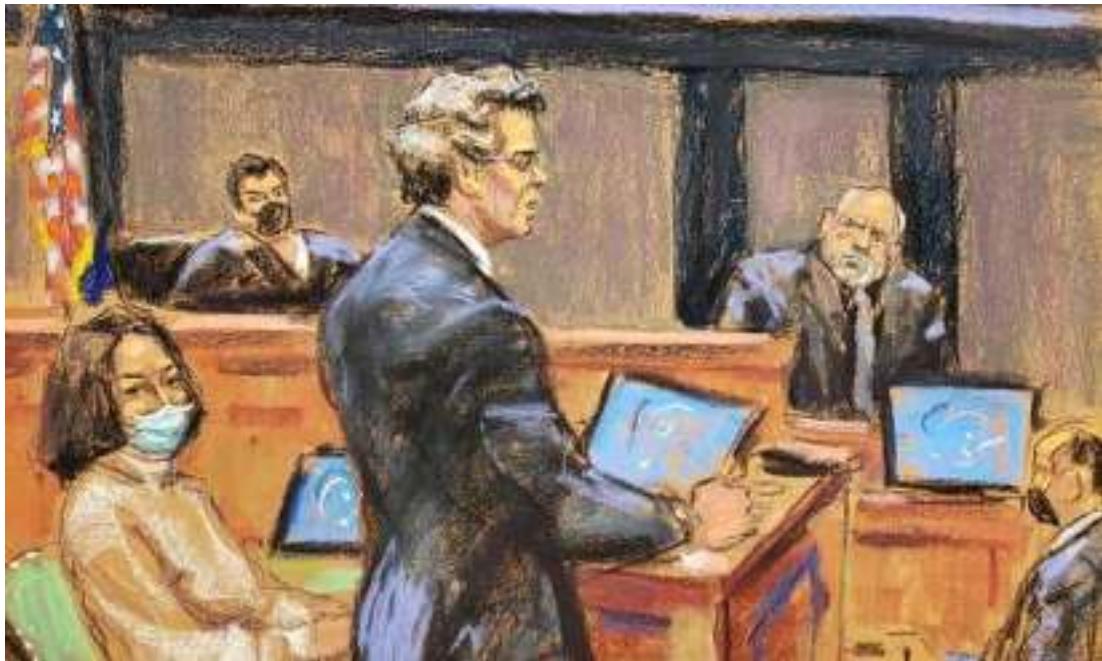
principles, the harder it will be for millions of Americans on the wrong side of these cases to understand why they should be bound by them.”

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Ghislaine Maxwell

Maxwell prosecutors: ‘sexualized’ photo of young girl displayed outside Epstein bedroom



Ghislaine Maxwell in court on Friday. She denies the charges against her.
Photograph: Jane Rosenberg/Reuters

[Victoria Bekiempis](#) in New York

Fri 3 Dec 2021 17.53 EST

Ghislaine Maxwell’s child-sex trafficking trial took a shocking turn on Friday when prosecutors brought one of Jeffrey Epstein’s infamous massage tables into the courtroom.

By bringing this green, folding table into the courtroom, and then expanding it, prosecutors are working to bolster allegations that Epstein and Maxwell sexually abused teen girls under the pretext of giving him a massage.

The prosecution also revealed that “sexually suggestive photograph of a very young girl” was displayed outside [Epstein](#)’s bedroom at his Palm Beach mansion. “Schoolgirl” costumes were also recovered during a search of Epstein’s Manhattan home.

Epstein, the wealthy financier whose acquaintances included Prince Andrew and Bill Clinton, [killed himself](#) at a New York City jail in August 2019, while awaiting his own sex-trafficking trial.

Maxwell, 59, his former girlfriend and the daughter of the late British publishing baron Robert Maxwell, was arrested in July 2020 at a luxurious New Hampshire estate. She denies all the charges against her.

Gregory Parkinson, a former police officer who helmed the search of Epstein’s Palm Beach estate in October 2005, was questioned about what was within the home. He walked jurors through a video of this search, and answered questions about still images presented on-screen.

“Mr Parkinson, what is the green object?” the prosecution asked in reference to one photo.

“That is a portable, collapsible massage table,” Parkinson replied.

The prosecution asked Judge Alison Nathan for permission to bring in government exhibit 51. Into the courtroom walked a detective, carrying a folded massage table.

Parkinson descended the witness stand, put on a pair of gloves, and briefly examined the table while it remain in its folded position. He then went back to the witness stand. The detective who brought in the massage table opened it shortly thereafter. Parkinson was asked to describe what he saw.



A green foldable massage table is displayed in court during the Ghislaine Maxwell trial. Photograph: Jane Rosenberg/Reuters

“The table itself in an open position,” he said.

The detective who ferried this table into the courtroom folded it back up. It remained in the courtroom for the remainder of this trial day. The images discussed on Friday were recovered during searches of Epstein’s various residences. One depicted a young girl pulling down her underwear, exposing her buttocks. An image depicted a young girl on Epstein’s lap.

The prosecution said that one of the photos “is the primary decoration outside the master bedroom that the defendant [Maxwell] shared with Mr Epstein”.

“In order to get into that room, you have to get by a sexually suggestive photograph of a very young girl,” the prosecution said. “The fact that there is a sexualized photograph, of a clearly underaged female, is highly probative.”

The prosecution also revealed that “schoolgirl costumes” were found when law enforcement searched Epstein’s New York City property in 2019. The outfits were “small ones found in the same room where an underage girl says she was sexually abused”, said prosecutors. “It’s certainly relevant.”

This debate came before Juan Alessi, the house manager of Epstein's south Florida manse from 1990 to 2002, resumed his testimony. As this discussion took place before trial proceedings began in earnest, jurors were not present.

Alessi's [testimony on Thursday](#) described Maxwell as a domineering "lady of the house" who warned him to "never look" Epstein in the eyes as she increasingly saddled the employee with degrading demands.

Alessi also appeared to support some accusers' allegations against his former boss and Maxwell. He claimed to have seen two minor-looking teenagers at Epstein's house. One of these females was Jane – as the first accuser to testify against Maxwell at this trial is referred to in court.

Epstein introduced her to Donald Trump when she was 14, she [told the court](#) earlier in the week. This accuser also claimed that she was on a flight with Prince Andrew, although she did not accuse the now former president or the duke of any misconduct.

The other female Alessi alleges to have seen was Virginia Giuffre. She is a longtime Epstein and Maxwell accuser. Giuffre has claimed that Maxwell and Epstein coerced her into sexual activity with Prince Andrew at 17, an allegation that the Duke of York denies.

Alessi said that Epstein, who had hired him full-time after coaxing him to leave his other clients, began acting differently toward him after Maxwell's hiring.

"It changed gradually from being cordial to more just, uh, professional," he said. "Our conversations with him were less and less."

Some of Epstein and Maxwell's accusers have claimed that they were sexually abused under the pretext of giving him a massage. Some have alleged that they were abused with sex toys.

Maxwell's legal team tried to undermine Alessi's credibility during cross-examination on Friday. Alessi admitted that he didn't see any signs that people were hurt during these massages.

They then asked whether anyone had told him about abuse during Epstein's massages. "I wish they would have," Alessi said, "Because I would have done something to stop it."

The trial continues.

- *Information and support for anyone affected by rape or sexual abuse issues is available from the following organisations. In the US, [Rainn](#) offers support on 800-656-4673. In the UK, [Rape Crisis](#) offers support on 0808 802 9999. In Australia, support is available at [1800Respect](#) (1800 737 732). Other international helplines can be found at [ibiblio.org/rcip/internl.html](#)*
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[**Pakistan**](#)

Man tortured and killed in Pakistan over alleged blasphemy



Security officials gather beside a damaged vehicle near the premises of a factory in Sialkot after police confirmed a Sri Lankan man was beaten to death. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

[Shah Meer Baloch](#) in Islamabad and [Hannah Ellis-Petersen](#) in Delhi

Fri 3 Dec 2021 12.51 EST

A mob in Pakistan tortured, killed and then set on fire a Sri Lankan man who was accused of blasphemy over some posters he had allegedly taken down.

Priyantha Diyawadana, a Sri Lankan national who worked as general manager of a factory of the industrial engineering company Rajco Industries in Sialkot, Punjab, was set upon by a violent crowd on Friday.

In horrific videos shared across social media, Diyawadana can be seen being thrown on to the floor, where hundreds began tearing his clothes, violently

beating him. He was tortured to death and then his body was burned. Dozens in the crowd can also be seen taking selfies with his dead body.

The incident began when rumours emerged that Diyawadana, who had been manager of the factory for seven years, had taken down a poster bearing words from the Qur'an. By the morning, a crowd began to gather at the factory gates and by early afternoon they had charged into the factory and seized Diyawadana.

The police assistant commissioner Mohammed Murtaza said: “Due to the renovation of the factory building, some posters were taken off from the wall. They may have desecrated posters bearing the name of Prophet Muhammad. Maybe the manager was lynched because of that.”

He added: “Unfortunately, I can’t affirm or deny anything at the moment. The alibi used for murder is blasphemy but the cause of murder appears personal and targeted. The issue is being investigated.”

Murtaza said at least 50 people had been arrested and more arrests were likely as police went through footage from the scene. Amnesty International said it was “deeply alarmed by the disturbing lynching and killing of a Sri Lankan factory manager in Sialkot, allegedly due to a blasphemy accusation”.

Pakistan, an Islamic state, has notoriously draconian laws against blasphemy, which carry the death sentence. The laws are often used against religious minorities and those accused are sometimes lynched before they are proven guilty in a court. The culture of fear around blasphemy cases means judges are often too afraid to find the accused anything other than guilty.

One of Pakistan’s most infamous blasphemy cases is that of the Christian woman Asia Bibi, who was [sentenced to death](#) in 2010 after being accused of blasphemy by her co-workers. Almost a decade later [she was acquitted](#) after heavy international pressure.

Pakistan's prime minister, Imran Khan, condemned the violence in Sialkot. "The horrific vigilante attack on factory in Sialkot and the [killing] of [a] Sri Lankan manager is a day of shame for Pakistan. I am overseeing the investigations and let there be no mistake all those responsible will be punished with full severity of the law. Arrests are in progress," he [tweeted](#).

But some critics linked the incident and a recent U-turn by the Khan government in its policy towards Pakistan's hardline Islamic group, Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP).

TLP was banned by the Khan government and declared a militant organisation. However, after TLP followers started a wave of deadly protests in Lahore in October, killing at least six police officers, the [government agreed to lift the ban on the organisation](#). In one of the videos from the scene in Sialkot, two of the instigators of the violence refer to TLP's slogans to justify their actions against Diyawadana.

Many fear that incidents of violence over alleged blasphemy cases and mob lynching are escalating as a result. Last week, a police station in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province was [set on fire](#) and police vehicles burned after officers refused to hand over a person accused of blasphemy to the mob.

Hussain Haqqani, a scholar at Hudson Institute and former ambassador to the US, said Pakistan had indulged and empowered extremist Islamists for years. "The state machinery supports those who are perpetrating violence in the name of religion instead of protecting the victims. Only recently, the government cut a deal with TLP, which was responsible for killing policemen during violent protests," he said.

He added: "The rise of the TLP has normalised murder over blasphemy allegations. What were once random incidents are now becoming an epidemic."

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