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OpinionPlymouth shooting

If extreme misogyny is an ideology, doesn't that make Plymouth killer a terrorist?

Joan Smith

To track the ‘incel’ diatribes uttered and read by Jake Davison, murdering women can seem like the logical conclusion to their seething hatred



The Keyham area of Plymouth where the shootings took place. Photograph: Ben Birchall/PA

The Keyham area of Plymouth where the shootings took place. Photograph: Ben Birchall/PA

Sun 15 Aug 2021 03.00 EDT

The hours after a fatal attack on members of the public are harrowing. Confusion reigns, rumours swirl and anxious people try to contact loved ones to make sure they are safe. Last Thursday evening, as reports of gunfire and possible fatalities on a housing estate in Plymouth began to circulate, the question of whether it was a terrorist incident was at the forefront of

everyone's minds. When Devon and Cornwall police announced it was not terrorism-related, I wondered how they could be so sure – and their judgment has been called into question by everything that has emerged since.

[Plymouth shooting: police urged to take misogyny more seriously](#)

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We now know that 22-year-old Jake Davison was a [misogynist](#) who shot dead his mother, who had recently been treated for [cancer](#), before taking the lives of four others. There are parallels between Plymouth and the [Sandy Hook massacre](#) in Connecticut in 2012, when [Adam Lanza](#) shot his mother five times before going to a primary school where he killed 20 children and six adults, all women. Not for the first time, the significance of extreme misogyny in the genesis of a fatal attack on members of the public seems to have been missed.

It is hard to see how Davison's actions fail to meet the government's [definition](#) of terrorism, which includes "the use of threat or action... to intimidate the public". Examples include serious violence against one or more people, endangering someone's life or creating a serious risk to the health and safety of the public: tick, tick and tick. But here is the get-out clause. The definition stipulates that terrorism must be "for the purpose of advancing a political, religious, racial or ideological cause" and it is often argued that even the most extreme misogyny does not meet that test.

It seems that its deadly interaction with other forms of extremism is poorly understood, something that struck me forcibly after the Manchester Arena bombing in 2017. Five years earlier, [Salman Abedi](#) was already showing signs of being radicalised, but the significance of his assault on a young Muslim woman at college was not recognised. Abedi [punched](#) her in the head for wearing a short skirt, almost knocking her out in front of witnesses. It was an act of staggering brutality, displaying a toxic combination of misogyny and allegiance to Islamist ideology, along with a low threshold for violence. Yet Abedi was not charged. Greater Manchester police dealt with the incident through restorative justice and Abedi owned up to anger management issues, avoiding a referral to the Prevent counter-terrorism programme. In what seems to be an example of history repeating itself, it

has been revealed that Devon and Cornwall police recently [restored](#) Davison's firearms licence, which he lost in December, after he agreed to take part in an anger management course.

Yet Davison made no secret of his seething resentment of women, posting hate-filled diatribes on YouTube. He compared himself to "incels" – involuntary celibates – angry young men who blame women for their inability to get sex and revealed an obsession with guns. In a video uploaded three weeks before the shootings, he came close to justifying sexual violence. "Why do you think sexual assaults and all these things keep rising?" he [demanded](#) in a 10-minute rant, claiming that "women don't need men no more". One of the questions Devon and Cornwall police need to answer is if they were aware of the content of Davison's social media posts when they returned his licence.

In North America, incels have been linked with white supremacy, as well as being held responsible for the [murders](#) of around 50 people. In Canada, their ideology has been designated a form of violent extremism following an attack on a Toronto massage parlour last year in which a woman was [stabbed](#) to death by a 17-year-old man. It was the second such attack in the city in two years, after a self-described incel drove a van into pedestrians in 2018, [killing](#) 10 people.

In the UK, however, misogyny is not even widely recognised as the driving force behind violence against women. Time and again, we hear about men who supposedly "just snapped" and killed their female partners in what the police describe as "domestic" and "isolated" incidents. Not so isolated, given that [1,425 women](#) were killed by men in the UK between 2009 and 2018, but we are expected to believe that such homicides could not be predicted or stopped. In fact, it is rare for a woman to be murdered by a current or former partner without a previous history of domestic abuse.

Hatred of women is normalised, dismissed as an obsession of feminists, even when its horrific consequences are staring us in the face. In June last year, [two sisters](#), Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman, were murdered in a north London park by a teenager. [Danyal Hussein](#), now 19, had been referred to Prevent after using school computers to access rightwing websites, but was discharged after a few months with no further concerns.

What seems to have been missed is his virulent misogyny, which led him to make a “pact” with a “demon” to kill six women in six months.

Five years ago, I began to notice how many men who committed fatal terrorist attacks had a history of misogyny and domestic abuse – practising at home, in other words. No one would listen so I wrote a book about it, listing around 50 perpetrators who had previously terrorised current and ex-partners. It was published in 2019 and inspired groundbreaking research by counter-terrorism policing, showing that almost 40% of referrals to the Prevent programme had a history of domestic abuse, as perpetrators, witnesses or victims. Project Starlight has produced a number of recommendations, arguing that counter-terrorism officers need to look for evidence of violence against women when they are assessing the risk posed by suspects.

That is a welcome development, but we need to go further. We are all in shock after hearing about the horrific events in Plymouth, while the grief of the victims’ families is awful to contemplate. But Davison’s murderous rampage demonstrates that our understanding of what constitutes terrorism is too restrictive. Extreme misogyny needs to be recognised as an ideology in its own right – and one that carries an unacceptable risk of radicalising bitter young men.

Joan Smith is the author of *Home Grown: How Domestic Violence Turns Men Into Terrorists*

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OpinionAfghanistan

The Observer view on the fall of Afghanistan

Observer editorial

The Taliban's rapid advance is chilling but a united response can still avert catastrophe



A Taliban fighter, armed with a rocket-propelled grenade, enters Herat, Afghanistan's third biggest city. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

A Taliban fighter, armed with a rocket-propelled grenade, enters Herat, Afghanistan's third biggest city. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

Sun 15 Aug 2021 01.00 EDT

The fall of Afghanistan to fundamentalist Taliban forces is a disaster foretold. Although the capital, Kabul, remains in government hands, the scale and speed of the insurgents' advance has left no doubt who now holds the upper hand. This swift implosion is likened to the final days of the Vietnam war, when the Viet Cong overran Saigon in April 1975. If what the

world is witnessing is the moral as well as the physical collapse of a nation, the fall of France in June 1940 may be the better analogy.

The success, though not the startling rapidity, of the Taliban's many-fronted offensive in seizing key provincial capitals and much of rural Afghanistan was predictable once it became clear, in June, that residual [US forces were rushing to leave](#). The foolish, unilateral American decision to quit at short notice effectively obliged Britain and other Nato allies to follow. It wrongfooted government forces. It gave Taliban leaders the opening they had awaited for 20 years.

The resulting shock waves are widely felt. Joe Biden bears immediate responsibility for a preventable reversal that will have lasting, deeply negative consequences for the longsuffering Afghan people and for western security. But this [failure is shared with previous US presidents](#) who took their eye off the ball in the years after al-Qaida's 9/11 attacks – and especially with Donald Trump, whose unbelievably inept, self-serving “peace deal” with Taliban leaders in Doha last year paved the way for capitulation.

Britain, America's steadfast but unconsulted ally, also faces searching questions about what was achieved and what happens next. [Boris Johnson](#) and Ben Wallace, the defence secretary, claim the occupation prevented more al-Qaida attacks and advanced women's education. But Wallace also admits there is a resurgence of al-Qaida in Afghanistan, as well as of Islamic State fanatics, which is a looming worry. It's obvious the job is incomplete – and that what good has been done may quickly be undone.

It's a pity that Wallace's sharp criticism of the US – he described Trump's Doha giveaway as a “rotten deal” and the [withdrawal as a “mistake”](#) – was not more clearly articulated when there was time to do something about it. His admission that he tried and failed to persuade France and Germany to help maintain a military presence starkly illustrates the limitations of “global Britain”. Without the US, and estranged from Europe, Britain was powerless.

Ordinary Afghans watch fearfully as Taliban fanatics begin to violently reorder their lives

An enormous humiliation has also been inflicted on Ashraf Ghani, the Afghan president. His uninspiring, ineffective political leadership has been cruelly exposed. Yet it's also true that he was seriously weakened when Trump excluded his government from the Doha talks. The inclusive democracy that many Afghans, western governments and NGOs strove so hard to establish is in mortal danger as a result. In fact, it's dying before our eyes.

Ordinary Afghans have more basic concerns. They watch fearfully as Taliban fanatics begin to violently reorder their lives, imposing regressive Islamic law, restricting access to education and persecuting women. Their priority is survival amid record civilian casualties. Their ordeal can only be imagined. Former minister Rory Stewart rightly speaks of "betrayal". In a country where the average age is 18, millions of people who reject Islamist bigotry face the prospect of [a nightmarish future](#) under the yoke of a medieval feudal state.

The full repercussions of this disaster are only beginning to be felt. Hundreds of thousands of people are already internally displaced. Many have fled to Kabul. If the capital falls, waves of frightened, dispossessed and hungry people could surge into Pakistan, Iran and the central Asian republics from a country the United Nations warns is "spinning out of control". It may only be a matter of time before huge, twin humanitarian and refugee emergencies impact Europe and destabilise the wider region.

Perhaps, at last gasp, catastrophe may be averted. It's possible Kabul will hold, that Ghani's demoralised army will make a stand and even repulse the insurgents. It's possible the [Taliban](#), split between opposing groups of fundamentalists and pragmatists, fighters and ideologues, will voluntarily halt their advance, accept a power-sharing deal, or fall out among themselves. It's even possible Biden, under pressure to make amends, will send back bombers and drones to help stem the tide.

But none of this is likely to make a lasting difference unless the international community urgently comes together. Why are so many countries passively looking on? Why is the [UN security council fiddling while Afghanistan burns](#)? All the main players share an interest in peace. China and Russia fear the jihadist contagion. Both India and Pakistan, in theory, desire stability.

Sanctioned, Covid-hit Iran can no more afford a refugee crisis on its eastern border than can Turkey or the EU.

An outcome that salvages Afghan democracy, secures basic human rights and provides guarantees against future jihadist threats is in everyone's interest. Even now, if the world truly wants it, Afghanistan can be pulled back from the totalitarian, terrorist abyss – and the Taliban brought to heel. [António Guterres](#), the UN secretary general, is demanding an immediate ceasefire, followed by “good faith” negotiations. For all our sakes, he must be vigorously supported.

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[OpinionCop26: Glasgow climate change conference 2021](#)

The Observer view on Britain's net-zero plan

[Observer editorial](#)

The UK must have a coherent strategy on emissions if it is to provide leadership at the Cop26 summit



November's Cop26 summit in Glasgow will put Boris Johnson centre-stage on global climate change. But does he have a plan? Photograph: Hollie Adams/EPA

November's Cop26 summit in Glasgow will put Boris Johnson centre-stage on global climate change. But does he have a plan? Photograph: Hollie Adams/EPA

Sun 15 Aug 2021 01.30 EDT

The language of the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#)'s report on global warming last week was unusual for its uncompromising candour. As its authors made vividly clear, the world can no longer seek solace in the

expectation that it can continue the unrestricted burning of gas, coal and oil without triggering devastation. Widespread flooding, severe droughts, rising sea levels, melting ice caps, coral reef destruction, heatwaves and forest fires will surely intensify unless we change our ways, the report's authors emphasised.

The message is clear. Humanity must break its fossil fuel dependence in short order and every nation will have to play a part in bringing a speedy halt to that addiction, though the burden facing the United Kingdom is a particularly severe one. For a start, we have been burning fossil fuel, mainly coal, on a large scale for longer than any other nation. The Industrial Revolution was born in Britain, after all. Thus, we have a special duty to be in the vanguard of nations doing the most to counter the unpleasant impacts that greenhouse gases are already having on our world.

More specifically, the UK is set to chair the [Cop26 UN climate summit](#) in Glasgow in November. This, effectively, is the world's last chance to agree measures that could limit global warming to a 1.5C rise above pre-industrial levels and so head off the worst consequences of our looming crisis. The UK therefore faces particularly intense pressure to ensure this summit is a success and needs to send out a clear message that it possesses the credentials to achieve that goal.

To do this, Britain must make it clear that it has plans to put its own house in order with a programme of measures that demonstrate it can curb its carbon emissions speedily and effectively. Many nations will be coming to Glasgow to look for inspiration and the UK's credibility as summit host rests on it having a clear strategy that shows that in the near future Britain will not be putting more carbon into the atmosphere than it removes, so achieving the goal of net-zero emissions.

Johnson's administration remains guilty of continuing to support measures that are irreconcilable with net zero

Unfortunately, there are few signs that such a master plan is anywhere near readiness. [Boris Johnson](#) may have become a recent convert to green causes, having derided the science of climate change many times in the past.

Nevertheless, his administration remains guilty of continuing to support measures that are irreconcilable with a strategy of [achieving net zero](#) in the near future. This list of incompatibilities includes the government's recent scrapping of the [green homes grant](#) insulation scheme; freezing fuel duty while doing little to help electric car owners; authorising billions to be spent on new road schemes; delaying the phasing out of gas boilers in homes; and encouraging airport expansion. All are likely to lead to increases in carbon dioxide emissions rather than helping us to reduce them.

Certainly, Cop26 delegates from developing nations will see little inspiration in such an inventory. For good measure, the recent deep cuts that have been made to our overseas aid have badly harmed the UK's reputation internationally. Our prospects of influencing the world at Cop26 at this moment look bleak, though there have been some encouraging moves, with Johnson revealing that he is set to announce a new [£400m scheme](#) to encourage homeowners to buy low-carbon alternatives to gas boilers. Nevertheless, the claim that Britain is nearing a [coherent climate policy](#) is unconvincing. It is estimated we need to invest about 1% of our GDP to build the infrastructure that will achieve net-zero emissions. At present, we are committing a tiny fraction of that. Britain clearly has a great deal to do before Cop26 but has a worryingly small window of opportunity to act. An injection of urgency into our climate preparations is now badly overdue.

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Observer comment cartoon

Afghanistan

A new dark age in Afghanistan – cartoon

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NotebookArchitecture

How to make London greener: stick up a tower block with a roof garden

Rowan Moore



The idea may not win the Garden Museum's competition but, as a parody, it deserves a prize



The Garden Museum in Lambeth, south London, is seeking design ideas for a new pavilion. Photograph: Johnny Jones/Alamy

The Garden Museum in Lambeth, south London, is seeking design ideas for a new pavilion. Photograph: Johnny Jones/Alamy

Sat 14 Aug 2021 10.00 EDT

The [Garden Museum](#) in London is running an architectural competition for the design of a pavilion for St Mary's Gardens, a leafy enclave next to its premises in a converted church in Lambeth, south London. I am a member of the interview panel. The winner has yet to be chosen, but I can reveal that it won't be a submission from one Minecraft builder that shows a blue-tinged skyscraper that occupies the entire footprint of the garden.

It comes with a justification based on the menace of "very bad" grey squirrels to Britain's ecology: "How do we stop grey squirrel[s]?" it asks. "Squirrels eat nuts. Nuts grow on trees... if we remove the trees we stop the grey squirrels," the submission explains. So "to remove trees we build a big tower. It will also sell for a lot of money because it's so big." It ends with a sop to whoever might be troubled by the loss of green space: "It can also have a garden on the roof." It's meant to be a joke and, as I say, it won't win. But it deserves some kind of a prize: as a parody of the bogus arguments whereby towers are allowed to trample over British cities, it's genius.

Question of balance



London's Central Hill estate, designed by Rosemary Stjernstedt. Photograph: Sam Mellish/In Pictures via Getty Images

At the other, southern end of the borough of Lambeth stands (at least for now) Central Hill, a council estate whose stepped terraces were skilfully and thoughtfully arranged over steep slopes that face back towards the centre of the capital, in a location close to where the Crystal Palace once stood. The design arranged blocks of homes so as to preserve mature trees and create quiet, informal enclaves. It was completed in 1975, three years before Alexandra Road and Branch Hill, council estates in the borough of Camden that also use stepped terraces to create a variety of spaces.

The latter two are listed buildings but [Historic England](#) has just refused, for the second time, to recommend listing for Central Hill, for reasons that don't seem to make a lot of sense. The design was "not particularly innovative", it said in its first refusal, even though it predates the Camden examples. The "level of threat", it says now, "cannot be determined", even though the borough of Lambeth has clearly stated its intention to demolish the estate.

One difference between the projects was that Central Hill was – unusually for the time – designed by a woman, Rosemary Stjernstedt. The other two

were designed by men. Campaigners for Central Hill's listing say that approximately 0.015% of listed buildings were designed by women, so Historic England has just passed up an opportunity, however modest, to redress the balance. One architectural construction its decision does preserve, it seems, is the glass ceiling.

Tucker takes aim



Fox News anchor Tucker Carlson has praised Hungary's 'pretty buildings'.
Photograph: Richard Drew/AP

The *Fox News* host Tucker Carlson, on a recent trip to Hungary to extol the regime of Viktor Orbán, took time to [praise the country's "pretty buildings"](#). In America, he said, there is "ugly architecture, brutalist architecture, glass and steel architecture, Mies van der Rohe architecture", which sets out to "dehumanise us". Dehumanisation, he said, is the "act of convincing people that they don't matter". Perhaps he should have a word with his hero, Donald Trump, who built quite a few structures in his career as a property developer that, objectively, are built of steel and glass and, subjectively, might be considered ugly. On second thoughts, maybe not: I'd hate to think what Trump's idea of "pretty" would be.

Rowan Moore is the Observer's architecture critic

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Will we reach herd immunity for the new coronavirus?

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

It appears unlikely, but we should try to get as close as possible



‘The neat formula does not describe real life: immunity is not uniformly spread and people do not mix evenly.’ Photograph: Cecilia Fabiano/AP

‘The neat formula does not describe real life: immunity is not uniformly spread and people do not mix evenly.’ Photograph: Cecilia Fabiano/AP

Sat 14 Aug 2021 12.30 EDT

The Office for National Statistics Covid infection [survey](#) estimates that, either through vaccination or infection, an extraordinary 94% of adults now have antibodies to Sars-CoV-2.

So why are [cases increasing](#) and why does vaccine star Prof Sir Andrew Pollard say herd immunity for Covid-19 is “[mythical](#)”?

The reproduction number “R” is the average number of people infected by someone infected with Sars-CoV-2. If everyone in the population were susceptible, as in the start of an epidemic, this is labelled R₀ (the basic reproduction number). For “vanilla” Sars-CoV-2, R₀ was [about three](#); with the [Delta variant](#), it is about seven.

Suppose that among these seven people who would – on average – be infected, six were immune, the virus would only get passed on to one new person and the epidemic would stop growing. In this scenario, R would be

effectively one. So, in theory, when $1 - 1/R_0$ of the population are immune, we reach herd immunity, which for Sars-CoV-2 is $6/7 = 86\%$ of the population.

So what's the problem? First, the neat formula does not describe real life: immunity is not uniformly spread and people do not mix evenly. Second, including children, the proportion of the population with antibodies is likely to be less than 94%. Third, the formula requires sterilising immunity: stopping infection in potential hosts. For this kind of virus, vaccinations reduce but do not eliminate the risk of infection, subsequent transmission and severe disease.

Sars-CoV-2 differs from measles, which has a very high R₀ of about 16, but for which full vaccination or survived infections probably bestow lifelong immunity. Of course, measles can still spread when those lacking immunity are close, such as when young people who had not been vaccinated following the MMR scare in the early 00s grew up and started gathering at music festivals.

Sars-CoV-2 is becoming endemic, meaning continued recurrent outbreaks, especially in communities with low levels of immunity. We shall all remain at some risk, which is a difficult message for those with extreme anxiety about Covid-19. But while herd immunity may be an unattainable goal, every step towards it helps.

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



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[Opinion](#)[Prince Andrew](#)

In a family so dedicated to children's charities, is Andrew now the reviled uncle?

[Catherine Bennett](#)



The prince consorted with a paedophile as his relatives defended victims of such people



‘We can easily picture him huddled by a two-bar fire, struggling with a jigsaw puzzle.’ Photograph: Lindsey Parnaby/AFP/Getty Images

‘We can easily picture him huddled by a two-bar fire, struggling with a jigsaw puzzle.’ Photograph: Lindsey Parnaby/AFP/Getty Images

Sat 14 Aug 2021 14.00 EDT

Balmoral: “Located in Royal Deeside,” we learn from the [royal family website](#), this gigantic granite folly is “one of two personal and private residences owned by The Royal Family, unlike the Royal Palaces, that belong to the Crown”. So, other than exceptionally cold, according to Cherie Blair – and described by one royal biographer as “[gruesome, ugly and dull](#)” – perfect for any member of that family in need of complete privacy.

As for a royal who might require a personal and private residence in which to avoid, for instance, [being served with papers](#) alleging the royal sexual abuse of a trafficked US minor, it’s hard to imagine anywhere better.

What is Prince Andrew up to inside Balmoral? Thanks to *The Crown* and various memorable accounts and photographs – one shows [David Cameron](#) almost succeeding in his bid to re-roof the place at a competitive rate – we can easily picture him huddled by a two-bar fire, struggling with a jigsaw puzzle or killing one of the symbolic wounded stags with which this vast

estate abounds. At one time, you might even, in the picturesquely swirling mists, bump into an as-yet unprosecuted child sex predator; the late Jeffrey Epstein, Prince Andrew's friend, was [reportedly a guest](#) there in 1999. Perhaps he felt at home with the dead animal heads and antlers, his own Manhattan home being, as Julie K Brown [writes](#) in *Perversion of Justice*, her impressive account of exposing Epstein's crimes, "dark and ominous". The interior featured individually framed glass eyeballs, with one room he called "the leather room" and another the "dungeon".

It remains obscure, however, why the prince enjoyed staying with this [charmless and sinister](#) – even if you never spotted a succession of young girls – financial adviser who, when not being massaged, liked to share his dream of seeding a master race with his DNA. Although Epstein's mysteriously acquired wealth was convenient when, in 2010 (after he had been [jailed](#) for soliciting sex with minors), [Fergie needed a loan](#).

As for Balmoral today, even with attractions including his ex-wife and thousands of doomed grouse, Andrew surely can't hide there for ever or not without addressing the civil lawsuit launched last week by Virginia Roberts Giuffre. The most recognisable alleged victim of Epstein's sexual assaults and trafficking, she says she was sexually abused by the prince in 2001. After escaping a miserable home, foster and institutional care and imprisonment by a trafficker, Giuffre appears to have been the sort of isolated "character", as Prince Charles calls struggling teenagers, that some of the best known royal charities were set up to support. Epstein liked to pose as a benefactor, varying threats and intimidation with promises to pay for college or to set up his victims with modelling careers.

Prince Charles makes it known that for Andrew, whose endurance of "slings and arrows" elicits his sympathy, there is now no return to public life. Since royal family life is routinely public, that could mean anything. Andrew is welcome, his name uncleared, at the semi-public retreat to Balmoral and presumably afterwards in his subsidised mansion on a crown estate. You wonder what he'd have to do to forfeit these signifiers of royal approval. Trade in horsemeat? Because a family brand so invested in children's charities and whose image relies deeply on this connection is unlikely to escape contamination, as more details emerge, from Andrew's closeness to a

prolific paedophile and to that paedophile's associate, Ghislaine Maxwell. Her trial, on charges of procuring girls for Epstein, is due this autumn.

Are they aware inside Balmoral of what Epstein, their former party guest, did to girls? Or just, as it increasingly appears, indifferent? In the United States, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology finally [apologised](#), with [resignations](#), for its shameful association with Epstein, and MIT had not, at least, formerly advertised itself as the saviour of the young and dispossessed: his prey.

From at least the time of Prince Philip, British royals have identified themselves as, especially, protectors of children and young people: an apolitical, attractive, largely amenable demographic that might grow up to feel loyal. If Diana is often portrayed, as with the new statue and the [Diana award](#), as having a special vocation, the Duke of Edinburgh awards preceded her, followed by Charles's Prince's Trust, Prince Harry's [Sentebale](#), the Cambridges' [Place2be](#), Kate's early childhood foundation and, according to her mythology, Sarah Ferguson's work as a "philanthropist for children". The Queen is patron of the Scouts and Princess Anne of Save the Children, which fights child trafficking. Charles last year appointed [Katy Perry](#) a British Asian Trust ambassador against the same crime. Were it not for the Giuffre lawsuit, there might last week have been more coverage of William's support for another child-focused royal scheme, [Future Forward](#), to "unlock the potential of young people".

His uncle has previously dismissed, despite [the photograph](#) of him holding her side, Giuffre's account of being trafficked to him when she was 17 – actually on the old side for Epstein. His preference, Brown reports, was for "waif-like prepubescent girls from troubled backgrounds who needed money and had little or no sexual experience". Giuffre looked old enough to get into, for instance, Tramp, where the prince, in his catastrophic [interview](#) with Emily Maitlis, denied accompanying her.

Absurd as they were, Andrew's assorted excuses and pizza alibi offered the royal family and its supporters an exculpatory narrative, to the point of allowing Harry to replace him – "[recollections may vary](#)" – as the official blood fabulist, bent on spoiling the Queen's forthcoming jubilee. Andrew, in contrast, was restored to us this year, [eulogising](#) his father: "We've lost

almost the grandfather of the nation.” Which makes him – what – the nation’s creepy uncle? Or worse?

The longer Andrew is silent on the Giuffre lawsuit, the more his immediate family may want to review, if only for consistency’s sake, its traditional concern for marginalised young people. Maybe old ones would be less trouble.

Catherine Bennett is an Observer columnist

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For rightwing culture warriors, to shed light on past conflict is to insult our history

David Olusoga

Nothing more to say on the statue wars? Events in Newcastle suggest otherwise...



The Boer war memorial in Newcastle: ‘This is not really about the young soldiers of 1900.’ Photograph: Wilf Doyle/Alamy

The Boer war memorial in Newcastle: ‘This is not really about the young soldiers of 1900.’ Photograph: Wilf Doyle/Alamy

Sun 15 Aug 2021 03.30 EDT

The problem with dishonesty is that you have to remember your most recent falsehoods to at least try to keep your story straight. In their pantomime “war against woke”, the UK’s statue defenders are incapable of remembering what they said just 12 months ago.

Last summer, [when the statue of Edward Colston was toppled](#), those who howled in protest claimed that they were not seeking to defend the reputation of a slave trader – a man complicit in the deaths of 19,000 Africans – but were merely opposed to the destructive way in which the statue had been removed. Toppling statues, or even removing them from public display peacefully, they lectured, entailed “erasing history”.

The answer, they and the government argued, was to leave statues and monuments in place but add contextual details that made visible aspects of the past about which statues had previously been mute. This strategy – “retain and explain” – could be best achieved by attaching plaques to the pedestals on which monuments stand.

Fast forward to 2021 and the same people seem to have forgotten that this was ever their position.

With no statue toppled since Colston’s pavement dive, the statue-philes have been forced to make the most of slim pickings. Hence the hysterical reaction to an [audit of statues and monuments conducted by Newcastle city council](#). The council’s report found that Newcastle has no monuments with direct links to slavery and with no Colston or Cecil Rhodes to worry about, it makes only modest suggestions. These include making changes to a city centre monument to 370 men from north-east regiments who died in the Anglo-Boer war of 1899-1902.

Topped with a statue of Nike, the winged Greek goddess of victory, the Boer war monument has plaques at its base that list the names of men from the region who died in South Africa 120 years ago. In a statement, the council explained that its aim is to “widen public interpretation of the South African war memorial” by installing “two information panels, one to interpret the statute and the other to shed light on its local connections in the city”.

To those whose abilities of recall stretch all the way back to 2020, the council’s proposals sound very much like “retain and explain” and there is not much here to get excited about. No statues are to be removed, never mind toppled. No one is taking the knee or trying to explain how structural racism works. Marcus Rashford is not involved and the Duchess of Sussex

has not chosen to fly to [Newcastle](#) and wastefully hurl avocados at the monument.

Yet in culture war Britain, even the non-story of Newcastle's statue audit is enough to pull the hair-trigger of the anger-industrial complex. Just a few years ago, before politicians and newspapers had mastered the art of using half-forgotten colonial conflicts to whip up anger and division, a report by a heritage committee, set up by the local council of a northern city, would have struggled to win space on the pages of even the local papers. Yet with wearying predictability, the council's proposal to provide additional historical information became national news and was caricatured as "cancelling history".

Meanwhile, the manifest and indisputable fact that the Anglo-Boer war was, as the council called it, a "colonialist enterprise" was deliberately presented as a libel rather than a statement of fact. With similarly tedious inevitability, the report was mischaracterised as "virtue signalling" and "erasing our history", an especially trite phrase – even in this strong field – given that all wars other than civil wars, by their nature, generate histories that are never solely "ours".

Many people at the time regarded the conflict as a grubby war of aggression

One military historian who must have missed the "retain and explain" memo concluded that the council's proposals had been arrived at because the monument "no longer suits the current cultural zeitgeist". It is this threadbare, non-argument that best reveals the deep dishonesty of the pro-statue lobby.

Their repeated claim in defence of statues to mass murderers and memorials to colonial wars is that, guided by the "standards of the time", our ancestors universally regarded empire as uncontroversial, naturally excused the violence that underwrote it and always celebrated its builders and defenders as heroes. None of that is true, particularly when it comes to the Anglo-Boer war.

Many people at the time regarded the conflict as a grubby war of aggression, motivated by British ambitions to seize the gold and diamond reserves of southern Africa. Others worried, with good reason, that the war was fuelling anti-British sentiment across the world. Indeed, volunteers from numerous nations travelled to the war zone and joined the Boers' ranks against the British.

The scorched earth policy adopted by the British in the final phase of the conflict, which entailed the imprisoning of Boer civilians in concentration camps, as they were named and described at the time, led to the deaths of around 30,000 Boer women and children. When made public, the horrors of the camps strengthened a significant anti-war movement in Britain and appalled even ardent supporters of the empire. The deaths in other British camps of around 20,000 black Africans were scarcely commented upon, by either side, in this "white man's war".

The statue obsessives claim to be defending the soldiers whom the Newcastle monument remembers, yet they cannot explain how pretending that the conflict in which they fell was glorious honours their memory.

But then this is not really about the young soldiers of 1900. It is about the ageing culture warriors of 2021, people so opposed to honestly examining our imperial past that they misrepresent even the most modest acts of reassessment. Like Dorian Gray, they are so fearful of uncomfortable truths that they seek to lock away history's mirror.

The irony here is that the history that Newcastle city council aims to empower the people of my home town to better understand contains exactly the sorts of harsh realities and ugly complexities that, if properly discussed, could help awaken us from our colonial dreamtimes.

David Olusoga is a historian and broadcaster

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For the record

This week's corrections

Sun 15 Aug 2021 01.00 EDT

Gareth Floyd, who is auctioning more than 1,200 of the storyboard illustrations that he created for the BBC TV show *Jackanory*, is 80, not 81.

And while he grew up in Suffolk, he was born in St Helens, then part of Lancashire ([‘I’ll paint you a story about Jackanory’: TV show’s art up for sale](#), 8 August, page 21).

It was Leeds United who won the FA Cup in 1972, while Derby County were league champions, not the other way around, as an article said ([Sparky Leicester take great memories from an entirely forgettable encounter](#), 8 August, Sport, page 16, later editions).

Homophone corner: “... constantly predicting catastrophe and then backpeddling when the worst numbers don’t materialise.” ([In defence of those Covid experts?](#), 8 August, page 43).

Other recently amended articles include:

[Macron tells critics: vaccine passport will protect all our freedoms](#)

[Sea, sand and subversive art: can Bournemouth be reborn as a culture hub?](#)

[US finds its own way to top the medal table at Tokyo Olympics](#)

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Observer lettersPrivate schools

Letters: boarding schools are no longer repressive

Whether or not you approve of private education, today's independent schools are a far cry from their predecessors



Eton College: "The school's primary concern is to preserve itself."

Photograph: Andrew Michael/Alamy

Eton College: "The school's primary concern is to preserve itself."

Photograph: Andrew Michael/Alamy

Sun 15 Aug 2021 01.00 EDT

Richard Beard's book extract and accompanying interview made for interesting insights into the current Tory government and his own experience of boarding as a boy was clearly traumatic ("The childhood of a leader", the New Review). However, newspapers focusing on the experiences of that generation of men who were made unhappy by their education helps perpetuate the myth that all boarding schools in 2021 continue to churn out repressed, inauthentic individuals with no interest in creating an equal world.

Whatever your views on private education as an idea, many modern boarding schools are deeply committed to educating children from all over the globe with strong values of service to others, teaching them that “with your privilege comes responsibility”. As a mum of three teenagers at a co-educational boarding school, I can also tell you that today’s boarders are home each weekend and FaceTiming for a catch-up every night; the days of not seeing your parents for weeks on end are long gone.

Finally, where are the voices of women? Boarding in the 1970s was not exclusively a male experience, yet I cannot remember reading in any newspaper about the female boarding experience, which I suspect was a more positive one.

Natasha Baker

Penn, Buckinghamshire

Richard Beard’s piece reminded me of the motto of Eton College – Floreat Etona (May Eton Flourish). The school’s primary concern is to preserve itself. Is it any wonder, with this message having been instilled in them at the age of 13, that our two most recent Etonian prime ministers have focused so much on their own financial interests and that of their friends – to the detriment of others?

Matthew Handy

Harrogate

Put PE centre stage

Rightly dissatisfied Labour councillors should support two proposals (“[Tories ‘squandering Olympic legacy’ as school PE declines](#)”, News). First, that physical education should be promoted from foundation to core status in the national curriculum so that no pupil misses out through the demands of examination preparation, the priority of other subjects or the temporary loss of facilities for other needs. Core subjects get more time and attention and receive more intensive monitoring and inspection. Funding for professional development is also greater, and time spent on core subjects in primary teacher training is far more than that for foundation subjects. Second, that the school day should be lengthened to provide more time for sport, music, drama, community service and the like.

Malcolm Tozer
Portscatho, Cornwall

In squirrels we trust

The password system I use (credit to Radio 4) makes every password different and yet easy to remember (“[Need a strong password? Put three random words together](#)”, News). Take a word, let’s say squirrel, add a number, 13 and a punctuation mark, !. Squirrel13!. That’s your formula word. Now insert the first three letters of the system/site for which you are creating a password (eg a *Guardian* account) after the first three letters of your formula and finish off with the rest: Squguairrel13! I defy any hacking system to guess that one.

Shira Rüb
Lower Ashton, Exeter

Walking back in time

Like Will Hutton, my wife and I went walking in the Yorkshire Dales and found evidence of an even earlier invasion than the Normans (“[The view from Wensleydale: old paths, dry-stone walls and Norman subjugation](#)”, Comment). Returning to our pub in Dentdale, the landlord asked where we had been and I described the long, wide, grassy path that overlooked the valley. “That’ll be the Occy,” he said. The occupation road.”

“The Normans?” I asked. “No. The Romans. It linked two of their forts.” Yorkshire folk have long memories.

Jon Lander
Devizes, Wiltshire

Unite to beat climate crisis

Your article about Alok Sharma declaring that Cop26 is our “last chance to save the planet” did nothing to reassure me that our future is in safe hands (“[We’re on brink of catastrophe, warns Tory climate chief](#)”, News). Even while global events are painting a clear and vivid picture of runaway climate collapse, Sharma and the majority of the public, including many working in

the area of sustainability, still remain unsure about this increasingly obvious fact.

To provide worthy global leadership at this crucial point in history, the UK government should create a cross-party emergency government and demonstrate to the world that we in the UK can work together effectively for a common purpose. Furthermore, it should commission all media to get involved in an adult re-education exercise to help people understand that we all need to embrace rapid “degrowth” and a minimalist lifestyle. Such action would be an appropriate response to the code-red IPCC report that was published on Monday.

Barbara Williams

Long Hanborough, Oxfordshire

A matter of perspective

Lovely account of London’s Camley Street Natural Park (“[Wild at heart](#)”, Magazine) except for the phrase: “As prostitutes plied their trade.” That should be: “As men abused prostituted women.” It’s all a matter of perspective.

Jane Lawson

London SE7

Plight of Pakistani exiles

Your report “[Dissident Pakistani exiles in UK ‘on hit list’](#)” (News), highlighting the plight of Baloch nationalists living in Europe under the Pakistani intelligence agencies’ death threat, will be much appreciated, not only by Balochi but by freedom-loving people everywhere.

The Balochi are fighting for independence from Pakistani rule. Before 1947, Balochistan’s political status was similar to that of Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal. It declared its independence from Britain in 1947, only to be occupied by Pakistan in April 1948 and has remained so ever since.

Under the Pakistani occupation, thousands of Baloch people have been massacred, hundreds of thousands made refugees and thousands more have

disappeared or been tortured and jailed, often without trial. The assassinations of Karima Baloch in Canada and Sajid Hussain in Sweden are merely the tip of the iceberg.

It is a pity that, while the international community leaves no stone unturned to publicise human rights violations in Kashmir, Gaza and the West Bank, it chooses to remain silent when it comes to denouncing such violations in Balochistan.

Om Prakash Shabbi

Jalandhar, Punjab, India

Goodness? Gracious me

Reading Catherine Bennett's piece ("[Allegra Stratton leads by example in saving the world... she doesn't fancy it just yet](#)" (Comment) reminded me of the words of St Augustine in his *Confessions*: "Please God, make me good, but not just yet."

David Hughes

Bath

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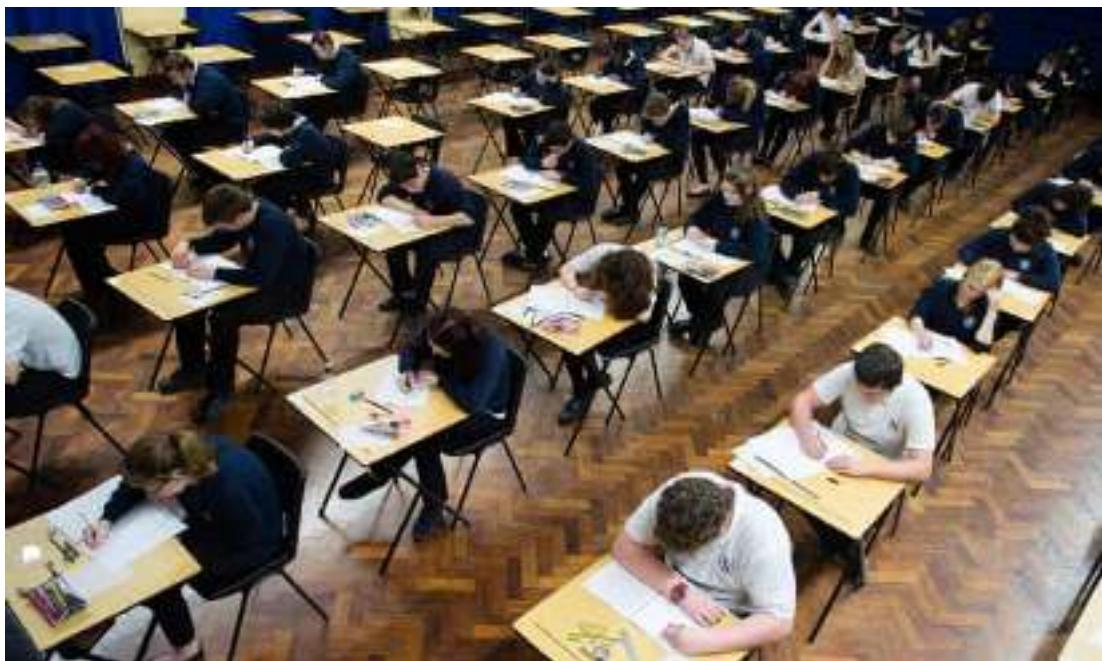
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OpinionExams

Let's not return to flawed exams. We have better ways to assess our children

Peter Hyman

The pandemic has given us a perfect opportunity to reset the education system



'Many people are not aware that in a normal exam year a third of students must fail their exams, however well they do.' Photograph: Keith Morris/Alamy

'Many people are not aware that in a normal exam year a third of students must fail their exams, however well they do.' Photograph: Keith Morris/Alamy

Sun 15 Aug 2021 02.00 EDT

After a week of [GCSE](#) and [A-level](#) results, we are in danger of missing the big point – our assessment system is not fit for purpose. It ruins the last four years of school on a narrow, stressful, unfair and badly designed exam merry-go-round. So, before we revert to flawed pre-Covid exams, now is the time for radical change.

The results of teacher assessments, we are told, is “[grade inflation](#)” but perhaps they actually reflect grade reality – the reality of what a child has learned in that subject over time, rather than merely what they can recall in that highly pressured moment in an exam hall.

[GCSE results reveal further gaps in educational attainment](#)

[Read more](#)

Simon Lebus, head of Ofqual, the exams watchdog, is right when [he says](#): “Exams are a bit like a snapshot, a photograph – you capture an instant, it’s a form of sampling – whereas teacher assessment allows teachers to observe student performance over a much longer period, in a rather more complex way, taking into account lots of different pieces of work and arriving at a holistic judgment. We can feel satisfied that it’s likely to give a much more accurate and substantial reflection of what their students are capable of achieving.”

This is particularly true for the most disadvantaged students. The received wisdom is that exams are fairer and more impartial. Leave aside that [Ofqual admits](#) that one in four grades is wrongly marked, the evidence from our schools suggests that students living in poverty are most [adversely affected](#) by having to perform in high-stakes moments in the exam hall. And many people are not aware that in a normal exam year a third of students, often branded “[the forgotten third](#)”, must fail their exams, however well they do, because of where grade boundaries are placed. In other countries, such as the US, if you meet the criteria, you pass.

Of course, without training and internal and external moderation to get rid of biases and inaccuracies, teacher-assessed grades can have problems, but this has been overcome for years in subjects such as drama, music and art and the [extended project qualification](#) (EPQ), which is much respected by universities.

I understand the impulse of some teachers, scarred by the huge amounts of extra work and pressure piled on them this year, to want to return to external exams. But that would be a huge missed opportunity. Many teachers have benefited from powerful professional development on curriculum and

assessment in the past two years and we should harness these skills to shape a new system.

To succeed, we need to win the argument about “rigour” in education. In the hands of former education secretary Michael Gove, rigour became the term for harder exams; harder exams were taken to mean more subject content. Yet this isn’t rigour. Rigour should mean that the assessment system is a true reflection of the varied strengths of every child – their knowledge, skills and dispositions. A rigorous assessment system would go beyond surface knowledge and exam technique and value the ability to think, to understand, to apply knowledge. It would identify the wider dispositions and strengths of every child. It would capture the development of each child throughout their schooling, not just on a few days, so that we get rid, once and for all, of the cliff-edge moment of the unveiling of 10 numbers or letters on GCSE day.

To do this, we need to change both what we assess and how we assess it (this needs to be varied – not just all the eggs in the exam basket). Ways to achieve this would include the following three:

First, students should be able to study interdisciplinary courses, not just single subject courses. So, a Steam (science, technology, engineering, arts and maths) GCSE, not just separate maths and sciences. Some independent and state schools are now devising their own courses on global perspectives, migration and climate change.

Second, we should recognise the strengths of every child in dispositions that are key to thriving in the modern world – creativity, collaboration, critical thinking and communication (or oracy). Employers spend a huge amount of time assessing these when they recruit, many believing they are now a better indicator of high performance than a degree.

Third, we could have many modes of assessment – not just exams and teacher assessment but other methods now widely used, for example, in universities. If you are studying medicine at a Russell Group university, you are assessed not just by exams but through observations, structured discussions, vivas, portfolios of evidence. And universities have experimented with open book exams and exams with extended periods of time, both of which have been successful. Assessments could be taken in

secondary schools over several years, when the student is ready, rather than in one big group at the same time.

Across the world, there are interesting assessment practices we can learn from. Many of these practices have a similar purpose – to broaden what is valued in school beyond a narrow set of exams. (This paper is a great curation from Bill Lucas of some of the key ones: rethinkingassessment.com/our-findings/). The [Mastery Transcript Consortium](#) in America gives a more holistic dashboard of a student's achievements. The [Australian Council for Educational Research](#) has worked successfully with schools on how to offer evidence of dispositions such as creativity and critical thinking.

This autumn, [Rethinking Assessment](#) (a coalition of schools, employers, universities, teachers and parents) will be conducting research projects in classrooms across the country in each of these three areas and we are seeking more schools to take part.

The aim is to capture the evidence and start to design a more “comprehensive learning record”, a digital transcript of the full strengths and achievements of every child. This passport could be tailored by the student to meet the needs of employers, universities and colleges and would mean that young people leave school with something that genuinely reflects what they can do and who they are.

This would be an assessment reform that would need to be implemented over time with proper training and support for teachers. It is one that we believe would command widespread support, be a lot fairer, would motivate young people and prepare them properly for the future.

Peter Hyman is co-director of Big Education and co-founder of [Rethinking Assessment](#)

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OpinionVaccines and immunisation

Vaccine passports are less a threat to liberty than a mark of solidarity

David Robert Grimes



Anti-vaxxers in France and elsewhere claim personal freedom. But what of brotherhood?



Illustration by Dominic McKenzie. Illustration: Dominic McKenzie/The Observer

Illustration by Dominic McKenzie. Illustration: Dominic McKenzie/The Observer

Sun 15 Aug 2021 02.30 EDT

In France over the past few weeks, the topic of vaccine passports has induced an [avalanche of outrage](#). Opposition to the measure has united both the hard left and right, with more than 200,000 people taking to the streets to express their contempt. In the kaleidoscope of disparate groups involved, the only unifying banner is the assertion that Emmanuel Macron's policy is an infringement of the French tenet of *liberté*.

Nor is France unique in facing such resistance. In the [United States](#), mask and vaccine mandates have generated passionate opprobrium and legal action.

Those resolutely opposed to anything styled as a [vaccination passport](#) tend to frame the issue as a solely personal choice. That can seem superficially reasonable but it highlights a crucial misunderstanding – a presumption that vaccination is solely an individual boon. On the contrary; immunisation is, at heart, a public health measure, implemented to reduce incidence and

burden of disease at a population level. That it has huge individual benefit is undeniable but viewing vaccination through this reductive, individualistic lens fundamentally distorts the reality that it is about much more than protecting oneself.

Immunisation collectively reduces reservoirs for disease, providing a firewall that protects vulnerable members of society. While a Covid infection might not do a young, healthy person lasting harm, their passing on that infection could inflict substantial, even fatal, damage to vulnerable people.

This is a consideration frequently missed in the arguments about proof of vaccination in public spaces. Those decrying it as an infringement of their liberties fail to realise that others have a reasonable expectation that they should not be needlessly exposed to a potentially deadly virus if it can be avoided.

The libertarian argument fails on another level too – unvaccinated populations still pose a threat even to the vaccinated. Apart from the fact that vaccines do not have perfect efficacy, viruses mutate with reproduction. The unimmunised, in effect, constitute a mass of human petri dishes, where mutations endowed with capacity to evade the protection afforded by vaccination swiftly arise. The reduced effectiveness of vaccination against the Delta variant is a telling reminder of this reality.

Individual rights are not absolute and must be balanced with the freedoms of others

How we proceed then is a challenging question. We can simultaneously acknowledge that individual rights exist, but also acknowledge that rights are not absolute and must be balanced with the freedoms of others. Very few of us would object to the imposition of speed limits on a shared public road or to restrictions on smoking in public places, given the recognition that these activities can harm others.

The concept of communal vaccination rests on the same principle. It is worth noting that these debates are certainly not new. In England and Wales,

the Vaccination Act of 1853 mandated universal vaccination against smallpox, with fines levied on those who opted not to comply. Such was the virulence of smallpox that vaccine mandates for schools were introduced in several US states as early as 1827.

It's also worth noting that, while these measures were extraordinarily effective at reducing infection, they too were lambasted by opponents as medical despotism. Such charges have modern echoes in the slew of recent legal challenges against vaccine mandates. In one US case last week, Judge Frank H Easterbrook upheld Indiana University's right to [mandate vaccination for returning students](#). Ruling that a university has the right to decide the measures necessary to keep other students safe in congregate settings, Easterbrook noted: "Vaccination protects not only the vaccinated persons but also those who come in contact with them and at a university close contact is inevitable."

Notably, this judgment relied on a [1905 supreme court decision](#), Jacobson v Massachusetts, which determined that states may require members of the public to be vaccinated against smallpox or risk being fined, a case motivated by the same "liberty" canard.



President Emmanuel Macron has told the French people that with freedom comes responsibility. Photograph: Hannah McKay/Reuters

Context is critical too. Even before the advent of Covid, anti-vaccine propaganda online had led to a deadly renaissance of diseases that were once virtually eradicated worldwide. Vaccine hesitancy is a spectrum and anti-vaccine activists had proved adept at weaponising social media to terrify parents. In 2019, endemic resurgence of measles forced the World Health Organization to declare [vaccine hesitancy](#) a top 10 threat to public health.

Anti-vaccine activists, galvanised by the pandemic, have made the invocation of liberty a central theme of their messaging. One especially ugly, historically illiterate stunt is their appropriation of the yellow star used to stigmatise Jews under Nazi Germany, claiming that they're being similarly segregated from society for their beliefs. Quite aside from being staggeringly tone deaf, this is a deplorable false equivalence.

Vaccine certification seems a reasonable requirement for communal activities and one with historical pedigree, especially when the only barrier is misguided ideological opposition. But perhaps the most pertinent issue is whether vaccine passports can help banish the spectre of the pandemic.

Despite the sound and fury, the data from France is extremely promising. The government announcement that full vaccination would be required to enter public spaces caused a [massive rise in vaccination uptake](#) in the formerly vaccine sceptical nation. This is a vital observation, as it suggests much of the apathy was owing to complacency and laissez-faire contrarianism rather than some deep-seated opposition. While those protesting might be vocal, they are very much a minority. Macron's move, for all the vitriol against it, was probably well judged.

Vaccines remain our best hope and there are still important conversations to be had on how we most effectively and fairly maximise uptake for everyone and what form mandates and incentives should take. However, one thing is sure – vaccination goes far beyond the individual and choices made have inescapable societal impact. Ultimately, those who would invoke the *liberté* of the French national motto as their mantra against vaccination betray themselves when they omit the equally vital *fraternité*.

Dr David Robert Grimes, a physicist and cancer researcher, is the author of *The Irrational Ape: Why We Fall for Disinformation, Conspiracy Theory*

and Propaganda

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- Plymouth shooting Police restored gunman's firearms licence last month
- The gunman A hate-filled misogynist and 'incel'
- 'Incels' culture Is it spreading?
- Explained The rules on firearms licences in the UK



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[Plymouth shooting](#)

Plymouth shooting: police reinstated gunman's firearms licence last month

Jake Davison had licence revoked in December but it was restored after he attended anger management course



A vigil for the victims of the worst mass shooting in the UK for more than 10 years. Photograph: Ben Birchall/PA

A vigil for the victims of the worst mass shooting in the UK for more than 10 years. Photograph: Ben Birchall/PA

[Vikram Dodd](#), [Jamie Grierson](#), [Steven Morris](#), [Matthew Weaver](#) and [Alexandra Topping](#)

Fri 13 Aug 2021 14.31 EDT

A gunman who killed his mother and four passersby, including a three-year-old girl, had his firearms licence revoked in December, but police reinstated it last month after he attended an anger management course.

Police will face an investigation over their dealings with Jake Davison, 22, who expressed sympathy for the “incel” movement and a keen interest in mass shootings. One resident from [Plymouth](#), where the killing spree took place, said Davison’s family had sought treatment for his mental health issues.

Detectives are also facing questions over the decision to treat the attack – which was Britain’s worst mass shooting in over a decade – as a domestic incident rather than a terror attack. On Friday evening sources said the main motives under investigation were a hatred of women and mental health issues.



Lee Martyn with his daughter Sophie, two of the victims of the attack.
Photograph: facebook

As well as his mother, Maxine, 51, Davison’s victims [were named on Friday](#) as Lee Martyn, 43, and his three-year-old daughter Sophie Martyn, and Stephen Washington, 59, and Kate Shepherd, 66.

Devon and Cornwall police suspended Davison's firearms licence in December last year over concerns about his suitability to hold a weapon, but deemed him suitable to have his gun back last month. He had held a licence since 2018.

The Guardian understands Davison had to attend an anger management course to get his licence back, and months ago was classed by police as being fit again to possess the three-shot shotgun, despite earlier concerns.

In 2020 he had a row with two youths and was reported to police, but he had no previous offences and agreed to attend the course, sources said. The police watchdog, the Independent Office for [Police](#) Conduct (IOPC), will formally investigate the handling of his gun licence by police.

Late on Friday night a large crowd gathered at a vigil following the fatal shootings. People laid flowers and held candles in North Down Crescent Park in Keyham to remember those who were killed by Davison.

[What are the rules on firearms licences in the UK?](#)

[Read more](#)

Davison had shared hate-filled views on Reddit forums used by incels – men who express hostility and resentment towards those who are sexually active, particularly women. Earlier this year, authorities in the US warned that attacks [linked to the incel movement were on the rise](#), and authorities around the world have begun to treat the ideology as a more serious terrorism threat.

Jonathan Hall QC, the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, told the Guardian: “Incel(dom) definitely can be an ideology for the purposes of terrorism. It always depends on the evidence, but if you kill people in a symbolic way because you hate what they represent within your ideology, it’s not a big stretch to conclude that killing them is in pursuance of an ideological cause.”

[Timeline](#)

Recent history of UK mass shootings

Show
June 2010
Cumbria

Derrick Bird, a taxi driver, killed 12 people and seriously injured 11 others in Cumbria before killing himself on 2 June 2010. Bird, 52, shot dead his twin brother and at least one colleague before driving through rural west Cumbria firing at people.

There were calls to strengthen firearm laws following the killings as it emerged that Bird, who got his first shotgun licence at the age of 16, had a criminal record of theft, drink-driving and allegations of threatening behaviour. An independent review recommended that offenders sentenced to a suspended prison sentence of three months or more should be banned from owning licensed weapons for five years.

March 1996
Dunblane

The 1996 Dunblane massacre remains the deadliest mass shooting in UK history and led the government to bolster firearm regulations. On 13 March 1996, Thomas Hamilton, 43, killed 16 pupils and one teacher and injured 15 others at Dunblane primary school before turning his gun on himself. The pupils killed were all aged between five and six.

Hamilton had legal ownership of the weapons used in the mass shooting. After an inquiry into the atrocity, parliament outlawed the private ownership of most guns in Britain.

August 1987
Hungerford

On 19 August 1987, Michael Ryan, 27, shot dead 16 people, including his mother, before shooting himself in Hungerford. Fifteen others were wounded as the gunman fired indiscriminately in the Berkshire town.

The Firearms (Amendment) Act 1988 was passed in the wake of the murder spree, banning the ownership of semi-automatic rifles and tightening

restrictions on shotgun usage.

Was this helpful?

Thank you for your feedback.

Counter-terrorism policing declined to comment and referred inquiries to Devon and Cornwall police, which said they were keeping an open mind and that there was “no [known] motive” at present.

Davison, an apprentice at a defence and security company, turned the gun on himself after killing five people in 12 minutes soon after 6pm on Thursday. He is thought to have used a pump-action shotgun that he reloaded at least twice during his rampage and for which he had had a firearms licence for three years for sports use.

He is understood to have been known to police in his youth, though not for anything serious enough to permanently ban him from owning a gun.

At a press conference in Plymouth, Shaun Sawyer, the chief constable of Devon and Cornwall police, said Davison murdered his mother at her home in Biddick Drive, which he is thought to have shared with her, before leaving the property and shooting dead the Martyns in the street.



Jake Davison's mother, Maxine, was killed in the attack. Photograph: unknown/other

Davison then shot two other people, a man and woman aged 33 and 53 respectively, in Biddick Drive. They are in hospital with significant but not life-threatening injuries.

He entered adjacent parkland where he shot dead Washington. Then, in Henderson Place, he shot Shepherd, who later died at Derriford hospital in Plymouth. He killed himself as police closed in.

Davison had written about guns online, including contributing to a Reddit chat called "GunPorn". In one post he said he craved owning a VZ58 assault pistol. In another he said his weapon of choice would be a Glock 17.

Davison used incel forums to express hatred for his mother and a view that mass shootings had no connection to gun control. In YouTube videos, Davison said he did not "clarify" himself as an incel – but went on to talk about how "people similar to me have had nothing but themselves".

The condition of Davison's mental health has been questioned, with one person familiar with his family claiming relatives had requested help from mental health authorities. Writing on Facebook, the neighbour said: "His family [pleaded] for help to the mental health team, the NHS basically said that they are short-staffed and that was it. The family even asked for the police to come out to see him as he was talking and acting strange but they didn't do a welfare check."

[Plymouth shootings may be a sign 'incel' culture is spreading](#)
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The Guardian approached community mental health services in Plymouth but they declined to comment.

A spokesperson for Babcock International, a defence and security company that has a significant presence at the city's dockyards in Devonport, confirmed that Davison had worked for the firm as an apprentice since August 2020. The company's CEO, David Lockwood, earlier said: "Our

thoughts and condolences are with the friends and families of those involved in this tragedy. We stand with the city at this difficult time.”



Jake Davison used incel forums online. Photograph: Jake Davison/PA

The IOPC said it had received a mandatory referral from Devon and Cornwall police relating to the incident. The IOPC regional director David Ford said: “After assessment of the referral we have determined we will carry out an independent investigation focusing on Jake Davison’s firearms licensing history and its impact on the tragic events of Thursday 12 August.

[‘Shocked to my core’: Plymouth reeling after 12 minutes of gun horror](#)
[Read more](#)

“We will examine what police actions were taken and when, the rationale behind police decision-making, and whether relevant law, policy and procedures were followed concerning Mr Davison’s possession of a shotgun. The investigation will also consider whether the force had any information concerning Mr Davison’s mental health and if so, if this information was appropriately considered.”

Tributes were paid to the friends and family of the deceased. Boris Johnson tweeted: “My thoughts are with the friends and family of those who lost

their lives and with all those affected by the tragic incident in Plymouth last night. I thank the emergency services for their response.”

Labour’s Keir Starmer tweeted: “My thoughts are with the families and neighbours of those caught up in this nightmare. I pay tribute to our emergency services who ran towards events we’d all run from.”

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Plymouth shooting

Plymouth gunman: a hate-filled misogynist and ‘incele’

Videos Jake Davison posted online portray him as a man in despair who raged against success of others

- [Plymouth ‘in mourning’ as gunman named – latest updates](#)



Police at Henderson Place in Keyham, Plymouth after the shootings on Thursday. Photograph: Jonny Weeks/The Guardian

Police at Henderson Place in Keyham, Plymouth after the shootings on Thursday. Photograph: Jonny Weeks/The Guardian

[Matthew Weaver](#) and [Steven Morris](#)

Fri 13 Aug 2021 11.53 EDT

Jake Davison, the [Plymouth](#) attacker, expressed misogynistic and homophobic views and portrayed himself as a man in despair who raged against his mother and his failure to find a girlfriend.

In what the 22-year-old described as an “unscripted rant” posted just over two weeks ago, he said “for the most part it’s just been me against the world”.

He also shared hate-filled views on Reddit forums used by “incels” – men who express online hostility and resentment towards those who are sexually active, particularly women. Earlier this year, authorities in the US warned that attacks [linked to the incel movement were on the increase](#) as authorities around the world have begun to treat the ideology as a more serious terrorism threat.

[Plymouth shootings may be a sign ‘incel’ culture is spreading](#)

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Davison used incel forums to express hatred for his mother and a view that mass shootings had no connection to gun control.

One of Davison’s first victim was confirmed to be his mother, Maxine, 51, after police said there was a “familial relationship” with one of the victims.

Davison’s Reddit posts are filled with hatred for his mother, whom he described as “my vile dysfunctional chaotic mother”. He also rants in general against single mothers.



Jake Davison in a video he posted on YouTube. Photograph: Jake Davison/PA

He also alludes to a financial dispute with his mother over benefit money that he felt he was owed because he claimed he had autism. A month ago, he wrote: "Luckily i got PIP money because i legit have autism which i should have taken from my mother at 18 years old really but like an idiot she manipulated and guilt tripped me in lettering her have it until at 22 i decided enough is enough and i took it from her."

Police said they were keeping an open mind on the motive but a neighbour and friend of the family said Davison had fallen out with his mother and they argued over his misogynist views. The neighbour said: "Maxine and Jake used to be close. You'd always see him helping her with the shopping at Lidl but they started to clash a lot. Jake was very quiet growing up. He was a troubled soul. He got into guns and he knew everything there was to know about them."

Two days ago, he liked a brief video on YouTube of men in the US loading and firing powerful rifles at a target. Social media posts from about 2018 also suggest he was a fan of the former US president Donald Trump and a supporter of the UK Libertarian party.

He shared a quote of Trump saying: “In America we do not seek to impose our way of life on anyone but rather to let it shine as an example for everyone to want.” In 2016, he posted an image of a statue of Capt John Parker holding a rifle, an iconic figure in the US of the right to bear arms.

Davison shot himself after [killing five others](#) including a three-year-old girl. Police have confirmed he held a [gun licence](#).

Last month on Reddit, he wrote: “Mass shootings are new phenomena that cannot be directly blamed on guns.” He mentioned the Hungerford mass shooting in 1987 in the UK when 18 people were killed.

Davison’s Facebook profile listed him as working for the defence and security company Babcock International, which is based in Plymouth. His profile also claimed he was from Phoenix, Arizona.

In two videos posted late last month he comes across as a man struggling with his mental health and full of loathing for himself and others.

In the most recent, he said: “It’s just been me fighting an uphill battle with a big fucking rock on my back, seeing motherfuckers that don’t deserve half of anything now. They’re getting a free ride to the top.”

He compared life to a Terminator movie where “everything is rigged against you – there’s no hope for humanity”.

Davison twice likened himself to an “incel” and complained that he lacked friends and a support network.

“Maybe the business owner might go bankrupt twice … but guess what – he had a wife and kids to support him. Does incel or virgin get that? No. Imagine failing at everything in life and having absolutely no support whatsoever.”

In a video filmed in a room with weightlifting equipment visible, Davison spoke of his lack of motivation to continue working out. He said: “You don’t have any willpower to do anything any more … how many years have I been working out? How many years have I been wanting and dealing with all these frustrations?”

He then pinched his stomach and asked: “Do I look any better?” He added: “Now I’m so beaten down, and defeated by fucking life. That drive that I once had has gone, mine has gone.”

He suggested he had been happy working in his late teens as a scaffolder, but had declined since then. “I worked there for a year and a half and then I injured my ankle when I took a couple weeks off and then after that I was just never the same,” he said.

He also compared himself to a retired boxer. “What happens to these pro-fighters when they lose? They lose all motivation, they’re fucked they’re never the same again.”

Speaking with a West Country accent, Davison added: “You get old, you’re ground down.” He added: “I’m still in the same house, same situation, same position … I’m still a virgin, fat, ugly, whatever you want to call it.”

At one point he expressed surprise that he had made it this far in life: “Most people would have been completely broken if they had lived my fucking life.”

In another video, he voiced regret at missing out on teenage love. “I have a feeling like I missed that boat and it’s never coming back.” He added: “There’s nothing really to look forward to as an adult, other than getting rich.”

At one point he described himself as “autistic or whatever” and complained that his workplace was a “male environment”.

He said: “I’m not very social and naturally quite asocial so I don’t have big social circles where I know I can meet girls.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/aug/13/plymouth-shooting-suspect-what-we-know-jake-davison>



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Plymouth shooting

Plymouth shootings may be a sign ‘incel’ culture is spreading

What do we know about the subculture of the involuntarily celibate and its beliefs and aims?



Police at work on Biddick Drive following the shootings in Keyham, Plymouth on Thursday evening. Photograph: Jonny Weeks/The Guardian

Police at work on Biddick Drive following the shootings in Keyham, Plymouth on Thursday evening. Photograph: Jonny Weeks/The Guardian

[Alexandra Topping](#)

Fri 13 Aug 2021 13.21 EDT

Experts are warning that a dangerous online subculture known as the “incel” movement is gaining traction after Jake Davison, the gunman behind the

shootings in Plymouth that left [six people dead](#), referenced the group and [expressed deeply misogynistic ideas](#).

Davison, who posted numerous videos on YouTube weeks before the massacre, appears to have been active on several online platforms linked to the sexist internet community, despite stating in a video that he “wouldn’t clarify [sic] myself as an incel”.

What is an incel?

A member of a sprawling online community. Incels are men who describe themselves as “involuntary celibates”.

“In other words, they’re not having sex and they want to be,” said Laura Bates, who researched incel culture while researching her book [Men Who Hate Women](#). “They see women as completely commodified and dehumanised sex objects [that] are there purely for male sexual pleasure. And they blame women for the fact that they’re not having sex.”

What is a ‘black pill’ mentality?

Within the incel movement, there are a variety of different attitudes, said Bates. “Gymmaxing” or “Looksmaxxing” incels believe they can improve their attractiveness to women by working out or otherwise improving their appearance.

Those who describe themselves as black pills have a bleak, defeatist and nihilistic worldview. Within that layer of the community, expressions of violent misogyny are common, she added.

“They actively incite what they describe as ‘incel uprising’ or a ‘day of rebellion’, where they will go offline and massacre women. This is not a generally nice, supportive community for lonely men with a few people inciting violence; it is a community specifically focused on and obsessed with inflicting violence on women.”

Is it a far-right movement?

Incel culture in the US [has links with the alt-right movement](#), and is considered by some to be a far-right, extremist ideology. But Bates argues that the belief system is sometimes subsumed into the bracket of the far right “by people who don’t know a great deal about it”.

“In this particular case, we’re not talking about the far right at all, we’re talking about extremist misogyny.” There is still, she says, a worrying lack of knowledge about the ideology in some major counter-terror organisations.

“The men who repeatedly carry out massacres in the name of this ideology are almost never described by the media or by police or seen by the justice system as terrorists,” she said. “Until [we see it as extremism](#) and radicalisation, we won’t be able to commit the resources that we need to tackling it.”

[The misogynist incel movement is spreading. Should it be classified as a terror threat?](#)

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Is it growing?

Tim Wilson, director of the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at the University of St Andrews, said the rise of social media and the internet had helped to create a movement.

“This isn’t sophisticated, but the problem is the volume of people who might be flirting with this kind of scene,” he told the Press Association.

Bates estimates that the incel community in the UK could be as large as 10,000, with hundreds of thousands more worldwide. “They’re very actively and deliberately grooming and recruiting and radicalising young men,” she said.

“Without even explicitly being a member of these communities, you can still very much be affected by that ideology, particularly as a teenage boy online.”

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[Plymouth shooting](#)

What are the rules on firearms licences in the UK?

Suspected Plymouth gunman was a licensed firearm holder, but UK has some of toughest rules in world



Police at a junction near the scene of the killings. Photograph: Jonny Weeks/The Guardian

Police at a junction near the scene of the killings. Photograph: Jonny Weeks/The Guardian

[Clea Skopeliti](#)

Fri 13 Aug 2021 09.39 EDT

A gunman has [killed five people](#), including a three-year-old child, in Plymouth, in Britain's worst mass shooting in more than a decade.

Police said the perpetrator, Jake Davison, 22, was a licensed firearm holder, but it is not yet known whether that gun was used. The UK has some of the toughest restrictions on firearms ownership in the world. Here is a look at how authorities determine who can get a licence.

Who can own a firearm?

The possession of firearms and ammunition in Great Britain is regulated mainly by the Firearms Act 1968. In order to be granted a firearms licence, individuals must be [assessed by their local police force](#) and judged not to pose a threat to public safety, and to have “good reason” to own the firearm.

The age at which a person can possess a firearm differs across the UK’s regions. In England, Wales and Scotland, anyone aged 14 and above may own and use a [section 1 firearm](#) if they hold a valid firearms certificate for it. In Northern Ireland, a person must be 18 and above to possess a firearm, though over-16s can use one in the company of an adult who holds a licence.

People who have been given a prison sentence of three years or more are banned from possessing a firearm or ammunition.

What types of firearms are legal?

Some firearms are completely prohibited, making it an offence to possess, buy or acquire them without the authority of the home secretary. Handguns were in effect outlawed after the 1996 Dunblane massacre, Britain’s deadliest mass shooting, which killed 16 schoolchildren and one teacher.

Some firearms, shotguns and rifles may be licensed and are held on a firearm or shotgun certificate.

Low-powered air weapons are not licensed in England and Wales unless they are a type banned by the Firearms (Dangerous Air Weapons) Rules 1969, but there are still some restrictions on their sale. It is an [offence to have an air weapon in a public place](#) without a “reasonable excuse”, though what constitutes a “reasonable excuse” is up to the courts to judge.

How do police grant firearms licences?

Police decide whether to grant an individual a firearm after judging whether the applicant is fit to own one. This follows a number of checks, which typically include interviews, visits to the person's property, criminal records checks and references from friends.

They should be able to demonstrate that “they require their firearm on a regular, legitimate basis for work, sport or leisure (including collections or research)”, although police are able to exercise discretion on a case-by-case basis of what merits a “good reason” to own a firearm.

In renewing a certificate, individuals are required by law to disclose their mental health history. Applicants' GPs may be contacted during the vetting process, and GPs are informed once a certificate has been granted. While people are not required to disclose a related mental health condition during the period their certificate remains valid, doctors have a duty to “disclose information where they believe the patient may present a risk of death or serious harm to themselves or others”.

Organisations including shooting clubs, museums and firearms sellers must apply for licences.

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Ministers launch review to weed out ‘cowboy’ Covid travel test firms

Sajid Javid cuts price of NHS test and trace package for international arrivals by a fifth

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A poster at a pharmacy offering a PCR Covid test for travel. The health secretary called some private providers ‘cowboys’. Photograph: Yau Ming Low/Alamy

A poster at a pharmacy offering a PCR Covid test for travel. The health secretary called some private providers ‘cowboys’. Photograph: Yau Ming Low/Alamy

[Rowena Mason](#) Deputy political editor

Fri 13 Aug 2021 17.30 EDT

Ministers have launched a review of the misleading costs of Covid travel tests from “cowboy” providers, as the government announced that the price of the NHS official test would fall by a fifth.

Sajid Javid, the health secretary, said UK holidaymakers would benefit from cheaper tests, as the NHS test and trace package for international arrivals will be reduced from £88 to £68 for green or fully vaccinated amber arrivals, and from £170 to £136 for two tests for amber arrivals who are not fully vaccinated.

There are more than 400 private providers of tests for people to use on day two and day eight after coming back from many foreign countries. One of those test providers, CTM, is the official provider sanctioned by the NHS, although it is not widely advertised as such. It is not the cheapest provider, with some advertising two tests for as little as £20, but the prices sometimes then appear to go up after the applicant fills in more details on the website.

Javid has made the move to review pricing and service standards of all providers of the tests [after many complaints from users](#) about the expense, and pressure to act from MPs. The Department of Health and Social Care said any misleading pricing would be clamped down on swiftly.

The review will start this weekend and last 10 days, and providers failing to meet necessary standards will be removed.

The announcement follows a request on 6 August from the health secretary for an urgent high-level review from the [Competition and Markets Authority](#) to address exploitative behaviour in the private testing market and crack down on excessive pricing or misleading claims.

[UK watchdog vows to help fight rip-off Covid test firms](#)

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Javid said: “I know how much people have looked forward to their summer holidays and that the cost of PCR testing can be a barrier to that. That is why I am determined to protect consumers and hard-working families from exploitative practices and ensure high-quality tests are available at a reasonable price.

“I am pleased to announce that with immediate effect we’re slashing the price of day two and eight tests from NHS test and trace by a fifth – this will benefit people right across the UK. And I look forward to reviewing initial advice from the Competition and Markets Authority over the coming days. I’ve also ordered my department to urgently review the list of private providers on to ensure pricing is clearer and transparent. Any provider found to be misleading the public will be kicked off.

“Too many providers are acting like cowboys and that needs to stop. The public should be allowed to enjoy their summer holidays without having to face excessive costs or anxiety.”

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Vaccines and immunisation

Booster jabs for rich countries will cause more deaths worldwide, say experts

Oxford Vaccine Group and Gavi say western leaders must not ‘reject their responsibility to the rest of humanity’

- [We shouldn't be giving Covid boosters while millions wait for first dose](#)
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The UK, Germany, France and Israel are planning or already administering booster shots and the US is likely to follow. Photograph: Nick Potts/PA

The UK, Germany, France and Israel are planning or already administering booster shots and the US is likely to follow. Photograph: Nick Potts/PA

[Haroon Siddique](#)

Fri 13 Aug 2021 11.29 EDT

Many more people around the world will die of Covid if western political leaders “reject their responsibility to the rest of humanity” by prioritising booster shots for their own populations instead of sharing doses, the head of the [Oxford vaccine group](#) has warned.

Writing for the Guardian, [Prof Sir Andrew Pollard](#), and Seth Berkley, the chief executive of [Gavi](#), the vaccine alliance, say that the scientific and public health case for large-scale boosting has not been made and could have far-reaching consequences in other countries.

“This is a key moment for decision-makers,” they write. “Large-scale boosting in one rich country would send a signal around the world that boosters are needed everywhere. This will suck many vaccine doses out of the system, and many more people will die because they never even had a chance to get a single dose. If millions are boosted in the absence of a strong scientific case, history will remember the moment at which political leaders decided to reject their responsibility to the rest of humanity in the greatest crisis of our lifetimes.”



Andrew Pollard., director of the Oxford Vaccine Group Photograph: Henry Nicholls/Reuters

On Tuesday, [Sajid Javid](#) said plans were in place to offer all over-50s a Covid booster at the same time as they receive the flu jab. But Prof Adam Finn, who sits on the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI), which advises the government, [said such a mass rollout may not be needed](#), with it more likely boosters would only be needed to protect a small number of the most vulnerable people.

Germany, France and Israel are all [planning, or already administering, boosters](#) for older citizens, although the eligibility details vary by country. This is despite the World Health Organization saying that halting booster shots until at least the end of September would help ease the drastic inequity in vaccine distribution between rich and poor nations. The US also [indicated it would not heed the WHO's call](#), describing it as a “false choice”.

But Pollard and Berkley write that while vaccines have brought hope and will likely save millions of lives globally, thousands are still dying of Covid every week and many countries are still in despair, with their hospitals overwhelmed.

“The vast majority of people who will die of Covid this year could have been saved if we had got this right,” they say. “Vaccinating those at risk everywhere is in our self-interest. It may reduce the risk of new variants arising and will relieve pressure on health systems, open travel, resuscitate the global economy and raise the international authority of politicians prepared to take such moral leadership.”

They also stress that the level of antibody or T-cells required to prevent people from getting seriously ill cannot yet be measured. While the yellow fever vaccine, which provides lifelong protection with one dose, the flu jab is given annually. Somewhere in-between is the tetanus vaccine, which requires five to six doses for lifelong protection. Pollard and Berkley say it is unclear where the Covid vaccine sits on the spectrum but – so far – it is clear it is offering protection against severe disease, including that caused by the main variants.

“The focus of vaccination policy cannot be on sustaining very high levels of antibodies to prevent mild infection,” they write. If we focus on antibody levels alone, we could end up vaccinating everyone repeatedly to cope with a virus that keeps mutating. The point of vaccination isn’t to prevent people from getting mild infections; it’s to prevent hospitalisation and death.”

They say that it is not an “all or nothing” argument, with careful analysis of the data required to ensure there are no groups for whom boosters are already warranted. But they add that for those who do not respond well to vaccines – a group which some have suggested should get a booster – “more doses won’t help”.

The pair conclude: “Since we have the two-dose luxury of having time on our side, we should not rush into boosting millions of people, while time is running out for those who have nothing. First doses first. It’s that simple.”

A government spokesperson said: “We are preparing for a booster programme and the independent JCVI has published its interim advice on who to prioritise for a third vaccine from September 2021.

“The UK is committed to supporting a global recovery to the Covid-19 pandemic and improving access to vaccines – and we have committed to

donate 100m doses by June 2022, with the first deliveries starting last week.”

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What are the UK's plans for Covid booster vaccines?

A look at Britain's booster vaccine programme and whether the science supports an autumn rollout

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A pharmacist administers a vaccine dose in Birmingham. Photograph: Oli Scarff/AFP/Getty Images

A pharmacist administers a vaccine dose in Birmingham. Photograph: Oli Scarff/AFP/Getty Images

[Nicola Davis](#)

[@NicolaKSDavis](#)

Fri 13 Aug 2021 09.41 EDT

Plans for a UK Covid vaccine booster programme this autumn have caused controversy: proponents say it will help save lives and [maintain freedoms](#), but [others argue](#) it is more important to send jabs abroad to countries where many have yet to receive even their first dose. We take a look at the current UK plans, and the evidence behind them.

What does the current UK Covid booster programme look like?

That depends on who you ask. The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI), which advises the government on vaccine policy, has not yet given its final advice on the booster programme. But on Tuesday, the health secretary, Sajid Javid, suggested over-50s were likely to be offered a booster at the same time as a flu jab, with the programme expected to begin in early September.

[That chimes with interim guidance from the JCVI](#) in June that said if a booster programme were to go ahead, jabs should be given to at-risk adults, over-50s and adults living with people who are immunosuppressed.

[But on Wednesday, Prof Adam Finn](#), a member of the JCVI, suggested the programme may be more targeted as “we clearly don’t want to be giving vaccines to people that don’t need them”.

Will the boosters be different from the jabs administered so far?

The Guardian understands the booster doses will not be specifically tweaked to tackle the Delta variant, which has become the UK’s dominant variant.

Officials pointed to data from Public [Health](#) England suggesting the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine is 96% effective and the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine is 92% effective against hospital admission after two doses.

Do we need boosters?

[This week, the World Health Organization \(WHO\) said](#) it was not clear if waning antibodies, noted in some studies, meant a decline in vaccine effectiveness. Indeed, the body's immune response involves more than antibodies, with components such as T-cells also important, while it remains unclear exactly what levels of these are needed for protection.

The WHO added that even if defence against infection declined, protection against severe disease was likely to remain – and booster shots should be prioritised against this.

Danny Altmann, professor of immunology at Imperial College London, said the question was tricky as the data was mixed. For most people, data from immune monitoring suggested both antibodies and T-cells were high after two doses, with it taking 200 or more days for levels to halve. “These datasets also suggest most are on a plateau and may not get a lot extra from a rapid boost,” he told the Guardian.

However, Altmann noted the Delta variant complicated matters. As data from Israel and the UK has shown, while the chance is reduced, fully vaccinated people can still get infected with the coronavirus and in some cases hospitalised. “You get Delta breakthrough cases, especially in over-60s, and [a third dose] mitigates this. The same will apply to other vulnerable or immune suppressed groups,” said Altmann. “The ideal would be to have targeted boosting rooted in data and immune monitoring.”

Dr Rupert Beale, the head of the cell biology of infection laboratory at the Francis Crick Institute in London, said “the argument for third doses in some clinically extremely vulnerable groups is overwhelming” but the case for boosters across a wider section of the population was less clear. “They will definitely be beneficial, but there is a point to be made about vaccine equity,” he said.

What are other countries doing?

While the [European Medicines Agency said last month](#) there was not enough evidence to recommend boosters, some countries have gone ahead anyway. [France](#) and [Germany](#) are looking at third doses for certain groups from September, although whether they will do so before the UK remains unclear.

[According to Reuters](#), Germany's health ministers have decided all booster shots should be mRNA vaccines, meaning either Pfizer/BioNTech or Moderna, regardless of which type of Covid vaccine individuals had received before. .

A mix and match approach is [being considered](#) by the JCVI, as a growing body of research suggests the approach could generate a stronger immune response as well as greater flexibility.

Israel [has begun giving boosters to over-60s](#), with the president, Isaac Herzog, already receiving his third dose.

Are there enough vaccines for richer countries to have booster programmes without poorer countries missing out?

The WHO seems to think not, [calling for a halt to booster programmes](#) until at least the end of September and saying: "In the context of ongoing global vaccine supply constraints, administration of booster doses will exacerbate inequities by driving up demand and consuming scarce supply while priority populations in some countries, or subnational settings, have not yet received a primary vaccination series." [According to Our World in Data](#), only 1.2% of people in low-income countries have received at least one dose of a Covid jab, compared with [69.5% in the UK](#).

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Opinion Vaccines and immunisation

We shouldn't be giving Covid boosters while millions wait for a first dose

Andrew Pollard and Seth Berkley

There's no evidence yet that top-up shots are needed, so let's help those around the world who urgently need the vaccine

- Andrew Pollard is director of the Oxford Vaccine Group at the University of Oxford; Seth Berkley is the chief executive of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance



‘Many countries are in despair, urgently pleading for vaccines because they have virtually none.’ A health worker prepares a Covid vaccine in Dakar, Senegal. Photograph: Léo Corrêa/AP

‘Many countries are in despair, urgently pleading for vaccines because they have virtually none.’ A health worker prepares a Covid vaccine in Dakar, Senegal. Photograph: Léo Corrêa/AP

Fri 13 Aug 2021 09.00 EDT

Since early 2020, the tragic reality of the pandemic has unfolded, killing millions, disrupting normal social interactions, destabilising economies and plunging the world into uncertainty. Between 4.3 and 11.6 million people have died. Amid this deepening gloom, vaccines have brought hope. Their development is a triumph of science; the manufacture and deployment of [4.4bn doses](#) by a handful of developers is astonishing, joyous. In the UK alone, [87m doses](#) have been administered, saving more than 84,000 lives. Globally, the number of lives saved by vaccines is expected to be in the millions.

So why is there still so much suffering around the world? Thousands of people are still dying of Covid every week. Hospitals are overwhelmed and many countries are in despair, urgently [pleading for vaccines](#) because they have virtually none. We are in this position simply because the doses we have are not being distributed first to those who are at highest risk of getting seriously ill or worse yet, dying. The vast majority of people who will die of Covid this year could have been saved if we had got this right. Vaccinating those at risk everywhere is in our self-interest. It may reduce the risk of new variants arising, and will relieve pressure on health systems, open travel, resuscitate the global economy, and raise the international authority of politicians prepared to take such moral leadership.

Despite the reality that a million more people are expected to die of Covid across the world by December, and many more live in fear with no chance of getting vaccinated, governments in the west are now considering giving a third [booster dose](#) of vaccine to those who have already received two. In a time of great global human need, we need to clearly outline a strong scientific case for giving booster shots. And we must get the timing right; if some need a boost, this must not deny a lifesaving vaccine to those who should be at the top of the list.

The scientific and public health case for large-scale boosting is incomplete and not clear. People experience a fall in antibody levels over time after vaccination, and we know from [several studies](#) that a booster will reverse this decline. If really high levels of antibodies are better at preventing minor infection, perhaps there is a case for boosters after all. But the focus of vaccination policy cannot be on sustaining very high levels of antibodies to prevent mild infection. If we focus on antibody levels alone, we could end

up vaccinating everyone repeatedly to cope with a virus that keeps mutating. The point of vaccination isn't to prevent people from getting mild infections; it's to prevent hospitalisation and death.

As we see in the daily case numbers, the virus that causes Covid can still infect vaccinated people. Cyclically infecting immune individuals is fundamental to the biology of human coronaviruses. This is not in itself a cause for alarm. The vaccines are still providing high levels of protection against severe disease. Our immune systems have been trained by vaccines to respond when exposed to the virus, even if antibody levels have fallen. So instead of being concerned about whether people will be infected, we should be concerned about whether that infection could lead to serious disease, hospital admission, or worse.

The information we need – which we don't yet have – is the level of antibody or T-cells required to prevent people from getting seriously ill. If this could be measured, and we saw protection dropping towards that level, there would be a clear case for administering booster shots. But we can't measure this yet. And at the same time, high-risk groups around the world are still awaiting their first shots. All we can do is analyse the clinical data to see when or *if* there is a point where boosting becomes necessary. This is being watched carefully and closely by public health authorities and the World [Health](#) Organization. It will become clear one way or the other, and policy will rightly evolve in response.

For now, we are in unknown territory. We might need to give people booster shots to increase and extend immunity, but we might not. There is precedent in both directions. Just one dose of yellow fever vaccine provides lifelong protection. Conversely, we use five to six doses of tetanus vaccine for lifelong protection, and the flu vaccine is given annually. Where will Covid vaccines sit?

It is highly unlikely that vaccine protection against severe disease will suddenly fall off a cliff and the ongoing pandemic will be catastrophically rebooted. Small mutations in the virus will occur to help it survive better in vaccinated populations. But those mutations don't render our vaccine immunity impotent. We are still protected from severe disease caused by the main variants that have emerged. So far.

This is not an all or nothing argument. We need ongoing careful analysis of the data to ensure there are no groups for whom boosters are already warranted. On the other hand, for those who don't respond well to vaccines, more doses won't help, and access to new treatments is urgently needed.

This is a key moment for decision-makers. Large-scale boosting in one rich country would send a signal around the world that boosters are needed everywhere. This will suck many vaccine doses out of the system, and many more people will die because they never even had a chance to get a single dose. If millions are boosted in the absence of a strong scientific case, history will remember the moment at which political leaders decided to reject their responsibility to the rest of humanity in the greatest crisis of our lifetimes.

Since we have the two-dose luxury of having time on our side, we should not rush into boosting millions of people, while time is running out for those who have nothing. First doses first. It's that simple.

- Andrew Pollard is director of the Oxford Vaccine Group at the University of Oxford; Seth Berkley is the chief executive of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance
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Are you in denial? Because it's not just anti-vaxxers and climate sceptics

[Jonathan Freedland](#)



To accept the facts about climate science without changing the way we live is also to deny reality



A demonstration against vaccine mandates, New York City, 9 August.
Photograph: John Lamparski/NurPhoto/REX/Shutterstock

A demonstration against vaccine mandates, New York City, 9 August.
Photograph: John Lamparski/NurPhoto/REX/Shutterstock

Fri 13 Aug 2021 11.55 EDT

It's easy to laugh at the anti-vaccine movement, and this week they made it easier still. Hundreds of protesters tried to [storm Television Centre](#) in west London, apparently unaware that they were not at the headquarters of the BBC or its news operation – which they blame for brainwashing the British public – but at a building vacated by the corporation eight years ago and which now consists of luxury flats and daytime TV studios. If only they'd [done their own research](#).

Anti-vax firebreather Piers Corbyn was there, of course, unabashed by the recent undercover sting that showed him happy to take £10,000 in cash from what he thought was an AstraZeneca shareholder, while agreeing that he would exempt their product from his rhetorical fire. (Corbyn has since said that the published video is misleading.) “We’ve got to take over these bastards,” he said during this week’s protest, while inside Loose Women were discussing the menopause.

In Britain, the temptation is to snigger at the anti-vaxxers, but in the US it's becoming ever clearer that the outright Covid deniers, vaccine opponents and anti-maskers – and the hold they have over the Republican party – are no joke. The Covid culture wars have escalated to such an extent that the Republican governors of two states, Florida and Texas, are now actively barring schools, colleges and local authorities from taking basic, common-sense measures against the disease.

They are no longer allowed to require vaccines, proof of vaccination, a Covid test or masks. Any Florida school administrator who demands the wearing of masks could lose their pay. Texas is dropping the requirement that schools even notify parents when there's a coronavirus case in class. Naturally, the Covid numbers in both states are through the roof. For all Joe Biden's early success with vaccination, this level of resistance is posing a grave threat to the US's ability to manage, let alone defeat, the pandemic.

What explains this level of Covid denialism? In the US, the roots of a "don't tread on me" libertarianism that regards any instruction from government as a step towards tyranny run deep. In the Trump era, it has become a matter of political identity: a refusal to believe Covid is real or that the measures against it are legitimate are increasingly conditions of membership of the right and of good standing as a true devotee of the former president. They are conditions of membership. Besides, Covid denialism offers the lure of all conspiracy theories: the promise of secret knowledge, the chance to see what the sheeple cannot see.

For everyone else, it's tempting to take pride in being untainted by such thinking. To dismiss the Covid deniers, whether in Florida or west London, as a group apart, irrational, if not downright stupid – refusing to take the steps that will provably protect them, their families and those around them. And yet, the distance between them and everyone else might not be as great as you think.

[Contempt for the unvaccinated is a temptation to be resisted | Dan Brooks](#)
[Read more](#)

On the same day that Piers and the placard wavers were out in force in White City, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change delivered its

report on the state of our planet. It was its starker warning yet. The UN secretary general, António Guterres, called it a “code red for humanity”, adding that the “alarm bells are deafening”. The IPCC found that sea level is rising, the polar ice is melting, there are floods, droughts and heatwaves and that human activity is “unequivocally” the cause.

Now, there are some who still deny this plain truth, the same way that some insist coronavirus is a “plandemic” hatched by Bill Gates or caused by 5G phone masts or aliens. Both those groups are guilty of cognitive denial, failing to update their beliefs in the light of the evidence.

But there is another form of denial, what the philosopher Quassim Cassam calls “behavioural or practical denialism”. This is the mindset that accepts the science marshalled by the IPCC – it hears the alarm bell ringing – but still does not change its behaviour. It can operate at the level of governments: note the White House official who on Wednesday [urged global oil producers](#) to open up the taps and increase production, so that hard-pressed US motorists can buy gasoline more cheaply. And it lives in individuals, too, in the fatalism that says one person can do nothing to halt a planetary emergency, so you might as well shrug and move on. Which is “to act in the same way as if you were a climate change denier,” says Cassam. “The practical upshot is the same.”

Whether it’s Covid or climate, there is a common defect at work here. It is wilful blindness, a deliberate closing of the eyes to a reality that is too hard to bear – and it afflicts far more than a hardcore of noisy sceptics and protesters. A [US poll this week](#) found that a summer of heatwaves, flooding and wildfires – evidence that the planet is both burning and drowning – has barely shifted attitudes to the climate issue. Many, even most, are looking the other way.

Perhaps all this is worth bearing in mind as policymakers grappling with the twin crises try to cajole the wary towards action for both their own and the collective good. In both cases, it pays to peel the committed deniers away from those who are merely hesitant or apathetic, and therefore more persuadable. And, again in both cases, it’s wise to remember that the recalcitrant are driven by an impulse that is all too human: namely, fear.

Jonathan Freedland is a Guardian columnist

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OpinionSurveillance

Action on sexual abuse images is overdue, but Apple's proposals bring other dangers

Ross Anderson

The tech giant's new system for scanning iPhones in the US could enable the massive expansion of state surveillance



‘Once it is built into phones, Macs and even watches, Apple’s new system could scan for whatever else – or whoever else – a government demands.’
Photograph: Loïc Venance/AFP/Getty Images

‘Once it is built into phones, Macs and even watches, Apple’s new system could scan for whatever else – or whoever else – a government demands.’
Photograph: Loïc Venance/AFP/Getty Images

Sat 14 Aug 2021 05.00 EDT

Last week, Apple [announced two backdoors](#) in the US into the encryption that protects its devices. One will monitor iMessages: if any photos sent by or to under-13s seem to contain nudity, the user may be challenged and their parents may be informed. The second will see Apple scan all the images on a phone's camera roll and if they're similar to known sex-abuse images flag them as suspect. If enough suspect images are backed up to an iCloud account, they'll be decrypted and inspected. If Apple thinks they're illegal, the user will be reported to the relevant authorities.

Action on the circulation of child sexual abuse imagery is long overdue. Effective mechanisms to prevent the sharing of images and the robust prosecution of perpetrators should both receive the political priority they deserve. But Apple's proposed measures fail to tackle the problem – and provide the architecture for massive expansion of state surveillance.

Historically, the idea of scanning customers' devices for evidence of crime comes from China. It was introduced in 2008 when a system called [Green Dam](#) was installed on all PCs sold in the country. It was described as a porn filter, but its main purpose was to search for phrases such as "Falun Gong" and "Dalai Lama". It also made its users' computers vulnerable to remote takeover. Thirteen years later, tech firms in China are completely subservient to the state – [including Apple](#), which keeps all the iCloud data of its Chinese customers in data centres run by a state-owned company.

Scanning photos is [tricky to do at scale](#). First, if a program blocks only exact copies of a known illegal image, people can just edit it slightly. Less skilled people might go out and make fresh images, which in the case of sexual abuse imagery, means fresh crimes. So a censor wants software that flags up images similar to those on the block list. But there are false alarms, and a small system of the kind that will run in a phone might have an error rate as high as 5%. Applying that error rate to the 10bn iPhone photos taken every day, a 5% false alarm rate could mean 500m images sent for secondary screening.

In order to prevent this, Apple will only act if the primary screening on a phone detects a certain threshold of suspect images, probably 10 of them. Each photo added to a camera roll will be inspected and, when it's backed up to iCloud, it will be accompanied by an encrypted "safety voucher"

saying whether it's suspect or not. The cryptography is designed so that once 10 or more vouchers are marked as unsafe, Apple can decrypt the images. If they look illegal, the user will be reported, and their account will be locked.

A well-known weakness of machine-learning systems such as the one Apple proposes is that it's easy to tweak a photo so it categorises it incorrectly. Pranksters may tweak photos of cats so phones mark them as abuse, for example, while the gangs who sell real abuse images work out how to sneak them past the censor. But images are only part of the problem. Curiously, Apple proposes to do nothing about live streaming, which has been the dominant medium for online abuse since at least 2018. And the company has said nothing about how it will track where illegal images come from.

But if the technical questions are difficult, the policy questions are far harder. Until now, democracies have allowed government surveillance in two sets of circumstances: first, if it is limited to a specific purpose; second, if it is targeted at specific people. Examples of special-purpose surveillance include speed cameras, and the software in photocopiers that stops you copying banknotes. Targeting specific people usually requires paperwork such as a warrant. Apple's system looks like the first type of these – but once it is built into phones, Macs and even watches, in a way that circumvents their security and privacy mechanisms, it could scan for whatever else – or whoever else – a government demands.

These concerns are not abstract. Nor are they limited only to [countries considered authoritarian](#). In Australia, the government threatened to [prosecute a journalist](#) over photos of Australian troops killing civilians in Afghanistan, arguing that the war-crime images were covered by national security laws. In addition, [Australian law](#) empowers ministers to compel firms to retrain an existing surveillance system on different images, vastly expanding the scope of Apple's proposed snooping.

Closer to home, the European Union just updated [the law](#) allowing tech firms to scan communications for illegal images and announced that a new child-protection initiative will extend to “grooming”, requiring firms to scan text, too. In Britain, the Investigatory Powers Act will also [enable ministers](#) to order a firm to adapt its systems where possible to assist in interception.

Your iPhone may be quietly looking for missing children, but it may also be searching for the police's "most wanted".

Legally, the first big fight is likely to be in the US, where the constitution forbids general warrants. But, in a case about drug sniffer dogs, a court found that a search that finds only contraband is legal. Expect the supreme court to hear privacy advocates claiming that your iPhone is now a bug in your pocket, while Apple and the FBI argue that it's just a sniffer dog.

Politically, the tech industry has often resisted pressure to increase surveillance. But now that Apple has broken ranks, it will be harder for other firms to resist demands by governments. Child protection online is an urgent problem, but this proposal will do little to prevent these appalling crimes, while opening the floodgates to a significant expansion of the surveillance state.

- Ross Anderson is professor of security engineering at Cambridge University and at Edinburgh University
-

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[Hadley Freeman's Weekend column](#)[Ben Affleck](#)

Thank God for Bennifer, a much-needed respite from literally everything else

[Hadley Freeman](#)



This is about more than just Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez getting back together. It's a way to kid yourself that the past 20 years haven't happened



Jennifer Lopez and Ben Affleck in Gigli, 2003. Photograph: Columbia/Allstar

Jennifer Lopez and Ben Affleck in Gigli, 2003. Photograph: Columbia/Allstar

Sat 14 Aug 2021 04.00 EDT

It's OK everyone, you can all stop crying into your toast, anxiously waiting to see if I'm back. Because I am! That's right, after a month away, I've returned, and what a month it's been. "Say, Hadley, how did you spend your incredible four weeks off work? Did you go sailing through the Balearics? Hire a villa in Tuscany? Go rock diving in Portofino?" asks no one. And the answer, no one, is no, I did not. I spent the entire month sitting right here, at my desk, writing a book about mental illness. Do I know how to carpe the hell outta my diem or what?

Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez, surprisingly, have different ideas about how best to spend the summer. By now you know, your mum knows, even Trappist monks know that Affleck and Lopez – better known as Bennifer, the original celebrity portmanteau – are back together. Over the past month, they have been offering the world glimpses into their passionate reunion on what is now routinely described as their "\$130m super vessel." (Factchecking has confirmed this is a yacht and not Lopez's nickname for

Affleck. Boom boom tish! Missed me much?) Not since Diana, Princess of Wales, lounged on the al-Fayed yacht has a mega-celebrity put on such a show for the world's press while on deck. Highlights included [Affleck stroking Lopez's backside](#) while sunbathing, which all scholars of early 2000s pop culture will instantly recognise as a reference to Affleck doing the same to Lopez in the Urtext of backside stroking, the music video for Lopez's seminal single, [Jenny From The Block](#). We've seen photos of them [making out on the boat](#); making out [in a restaurant](#); [making out on Instagram](#). For a couple who allegedly broke off their engagement in 2004 due to "excessive media attention", they have proven to be remarkably happy to [court said attention](#) again. Well, live and learn, or, in the case of Affleck and Lopez, live.

And thank God, because Bennifer (the sequel), has provided a much-needed respite in the press from literally everything else, from Covid to sad Gareth Southgate. I was especially struck by an [article in this newspaper](#) headlined "Bennifer is back, but don't rush to contact your ex, say experts." Wait, so I *shouldn't* take life guidance from Ben Affleck? Could someone perhaps have mentioned that before I got this [massive phoenix tattoo](#) on my back?!

But this does touch on one reason why the story has caused such excitement: the reunion of exes. From Casablanca to The Parent Trap, this has long been seen as one of the ultimate romantic storylines, the fantasy of getting a second chance with your true soulmate who you were too immature to appreciate the first time around. Maybe I'm a terrible cynic, or just have terrible taste, but when it comes to sex with exes, I subscribe more to Julie Burchill's take on the matter: only a dog returns to its vomit. (To any exes of mine who might be reading this: obviously I don't mean *you*. You were way better than dog vomit!)

[The dweeb and the hot girl: Matt Hancock's affair belongs to an 80s movie | Hadley Freeman](#)

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The reunion – reunification, even – of Bennifer doesn't just have ex appeal (oh, the puns just keep on flowing). Because this isn't just about Affleck and Lopez. In fact, it wasn't supposed to be about them at all. The famously broken up couple that was supposed to get back together was in fact – whirls

around, like Hercule Poirot exposing the truth – Jennifer Aniston and Brad Pitt! From the moment Pitt left Aniston for Angelina Jolie in 2005 (AKA world war three), the whole world has been on tenterhooks about their reunion, which seemed guaranteed when they were (gasp!) spotted [talking to one another](#) at an awards show last year. But in the end, it was this other 2000s couple, Bennifer, who obliged the public, and since then, [there have been rumours](#) that 90s couple Jonny Lee Miller and Angelina Jolie are (somewhat improbably) doing so, too.

Now *this* is the kind of nostalgia I can endorse. If you want to kid yourself that the past 20 years haven't happened – with all their Covid-, Brexit-, Johnson- and Trump-shaped hellholes – then seeing Affleck snog Lopez hits the spot in a way that, say, watching the [miserable Friends reunion](#) never could. And if Jolie and Miller get back together, well, we're back in the comparatively halcyon pre-9/11, pre-Iraq war, pre-George W Bush era. The couples might think they're getting a do-over in their relationship, but for the rest of us it's a do-over in time. So you stroke Lopez's backside, Affleck. Do it for humankind.

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Climate change

July was world's hottest month ever recorded, US scientists confirm

Global land and ocean surface temperature last month was 0.9C hotter than 20th-century average, beating July 2016 record



It is now ‘very likely’ that 2021 will rank among the 10 hottest years ever recorded, Noaa stated. Photograph: Frederic J Brown/AFP/Getty Images

It is now ‘very likely’ that 2021 will rank among the 10 hottest years ever recorded, Noaa stated. Photograph: Frederic J Brown/AFP/Getty Images

Oliver Milman in New York

@olliemilman

Fri 13 Aug 2021 14.25 EDT

July was the world’s hottest month ever recorded, US government scientists have confirmed, a further indication of the unfolding climate crisis that is now affecting almost every part of the planet.

[Greenhouse gas emissions must peak within 4 years, says leaked UN report](#)

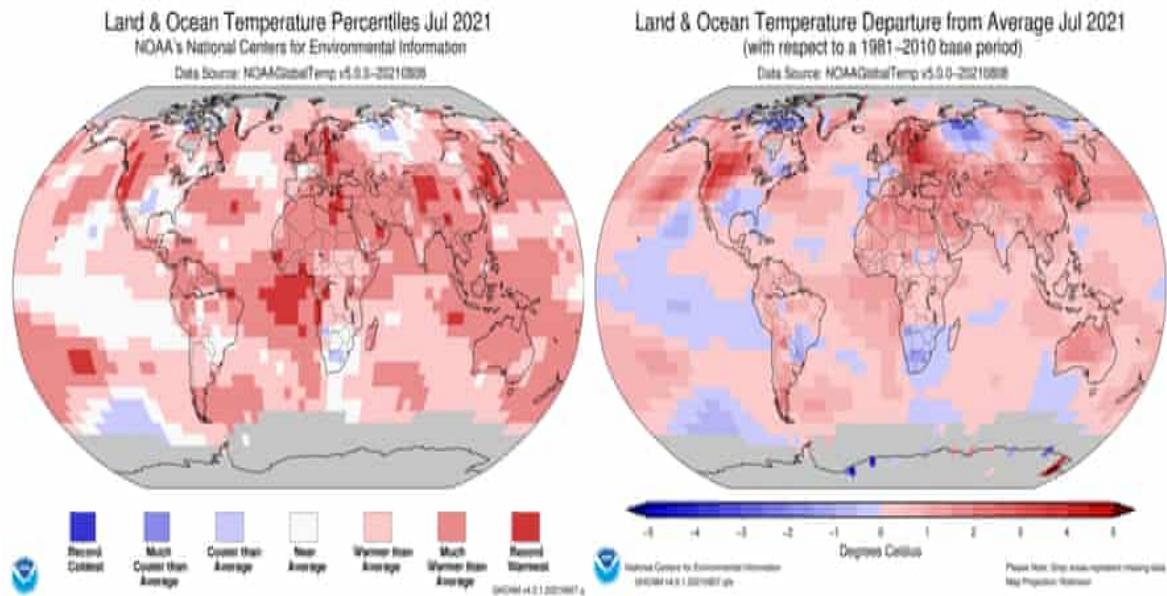
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The global land and ocean surface temperature last month was one degree Celsius, 0.9C (1.6F), hotter than the 20th-century average of 15.8C (60.4F), making it the hottest month since modern record keeping began 142 years ago.

It has beaten the previous record set in July 2016, [according to the National Ocean and Atmospheric Administration \(Noaa\)](#).

“In this case, first place is the worst place to be,” said Rick Spinrad, the administrator of Noaa. “July is typically the world’s warmest month of the year, but July 2021 outdid itself as the hottest July and month ever recorded. This new record adds to the disturbing and disruptive path that climate change has set for the globe.”

Last month’s record heat was driven by soaring temperatures across the world, with Asia experiencing its hottest July on record and Europe, which has been scorched by heatwaves and wildfires [in countries including Greece](#) and Italy, recording its second hottest July on record. Europe’s hottest ever recorded temperature was reportedly set [in Sicily on Wednesday](#), where it reached a roasting 48.8C (119.8F).



Photograph: Courtesy of Noaa

Australia had its fourth warmest July on record, while North America, which has been confronted with [extreme heat](#), [drought](#) and [wildfire](#) across much of its western half for much of the year, has its sixth-highest July temperature on record.

The Noaa climate report also found that Arctic sea ice extent was more than 18% below an average set between 1981 to 2010, the fourth smallest extent since satellite records began in 1979.

It is now “very likely” that 2021 will rank among the 10 hottest years ever recorded, Noaa stated.

Confirmation of the record July heat [follows the release of a landmark Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change \(IPCC\) report on Monday](#) which found that humans’ burning of fossil fuels has “unequivocally” heated up the planet to temperatures not seen on Earth in around 125,000 years.

This behavior is pushing the world towards dangerous climate breakdown that can only be averted by deep and rapid cuts to greenhouse gas emissions.

Spinrad said that IPCC report “confirms the impacts are widespread and rapidly intensifying.”

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Bollywood's Kareena Kapoor subject to online abuse over baby's name

Supporters say attacks over choice of name similar to 17th-century Muslim Mughal emperor rooted in prejudice against inter-faith marriage



Bollywood actors Kareena Kapoor and Saif Ali Khan with their first son, Taimur. Their choice of name for their second son has attracted unwelcome attention. Photograph: Sujit Jaiswal/AFP/Getty

Bollywood actors Kareena Kapoor and Saif Ali Khan with their first son, Taimur. Their choice of name for their second son has attracted unwelcome attention. Photograph: Sujit Jaiswal/AFP/Getty

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[Amrit Dhillon](#) in New Delhi

Sat 14 Aug 2021 02.01 EDT

Bollywood star Kareena Kapoor has received abuse online from extremists over her new baby's name.

Kapoor has been attacked on social media for calling her second son Jehangir, the imperial name of the 17th-century Mughal emperor, which means “conqueror of the world”. Kapoor, a Hindu, and her husband, Saif Ali Khan, a Muslim and also a Bollywood star, have faced abuse for their marriage.

Jehangir, the fourth Mughal emperor, ordered the torture and execution in 1606 of Sikh guru Arjan Dev, who opposed his rule. Many Hindus in [India](#) consider Sikhs to be part of a wider Hindu family.

The couple's first child, now four, was named Taimur, the name of a 14th-century Turkic conqueror who violently sacked Delhi in 1398.

When that name became public, the abuse began on social media. The couple were accused of naming their son after a “mass murderer”, a

“monster”, a “genocidal maniac”. Some commenters compared the choice to naming a baby Hitler.

Kapoor said she has been scarred by the online abuse and Khan has said he wondered for a while if he should change Taimur’s name.

When the couple announced the birth of their second son, Jeh, in February, a few commenters online wondered if this was short for Jehangir.

After the recent publication of Kapoor’s book, Pregnancy Bible, was found to have a photo of Jeh, with the caption “Jehangir Ali Khan”, the online abuse escalated.



Kareena Kapoor in a scene during filming of the Bollywood production Kambakht Ishq in Venice 2008. Photograph: Manuel Silvestri/Reuters

One commenter tweeted: “First kid – Taimur (who killed millions of Hindus) Second kid – Jehangir (who killed Guru Arjan Dev) What will be the name of next one?”

Another tweet read: “After Taimur, the guy who killed 5% of human population on earth, Jehangir, the Mughal who was an opium addict and debauch tyrant makes a good follow-up. Going for Aurangzeb would have made even more sense.”

The attacks have highlighted how, in India, for some, history is political and personal. Figures from the past and their actions are often seen in the context of current political and religious disputes.

Among supporters of the ruling Bharatiya Janata party (BJP) and Hindu extremist groups, there has been a desire to expunge the Mughals rule from history.

This attitude prompted BJP leader Yogi Adityanath, chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, to rename Muslim towns in the state and replace them with Hindu names.

Faizabad district has become Ayodhya. Mughalsarai junction railway station was changed to Pandit Deen Dayal Upadhyaya. Allahabad city was renamed Prayagraj.

Bollywood's secular culture has allowed both Hindus and Muslims to thrive. Inter-faith marriages have become common. The reigning star triumvirate – Salman Khan, Shah Rukh Khan and Aamir Khan – are Muslims, and two of them have married Hindu women.

[Indian domestic workers lose their jobs to Covid fears](#)

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These inter-faith marriages have angered Hindu extremists. Kapoor, for example, was attacked online for marrying Khan. The BJP's "[love jihad](#)" campaign was aimed at preventing inter-religious marriages on the unfounded grounds that Muslim men coerce innocent Hindu women into converting to Islam.



Kareena Kapoor at a Unicef launch of a move to make Indian schools more child-friendly, safe and secure for children in 2014. Photograph: Pacific Press Media Production Corp./Alamy

Some have come to Kapoor's defence online. One commenter questioned why people are still scared of a Mughal emperor who died 400 years ago.

Khan's sister, Saba, posted her support on Instagram: "What's in a name? Love ... live and let it be. Children are God's blessings."

Social commentator Parsa Venkateshwar Rao Jr said extremists with a hatred of Muslims seek out things to be offended by.

He said: "At the root of it all is one thing – anger and resentment at Kapoor, a Hindu woman, marrying a Muslim. If Saif Ali Khan had been married to a Muslim and he had chosen these names, they probably wouldn't have been bothered. But they get hot under the collar over a Hindu girl married to a Muslim who, moreover, chooses Muslim names for her children."

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Taliban

Kandahar's fall to the Taliban is a moment of huge significance

Afghanistan's second city was the capital of the jihadist group until 2001 and has vital strategic and symbolic importance



Taliban fighters in a vehicle belonging to the Afghan National Directorate of Security in Kandahar on Friday. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

Taliban fighters in a vehicle belonging to the Afghan National Directorate of Security in Kandahar on Friday. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images



Peter Beaumont

Sat 14 Aug 2021 00.00 EDT

In the sprawling compound of Mullah Omar, the Taliban's first emir, outside the southern city of Kandahar, curious onlookers were poking through his rooms.

There was the little mosque inside the walls, a camel stable damaged by a US rocket, and a series of bare rooms, some scattered with pages torn from a religious text, one a bedroom hung with a picture of an Alpine scene. Nearby, armed men sat on a strange sculpture of a mountain surrounded by spindly palm trees.

It was December 2001, a handful of days after the Taliban's defeat in the aftermath of 9/11, and the group had fled the city that once was its capital. Mullah Omar himself was gone. And while there was little to learn about the character of the Taliban's fled leader, Kandahar itself was giving up its secrets.

In houses behind walls in anonymous suburbs, the first reporters to reach the city discovered the training camps of the jihadis Mullah Omar hosted, places where foreign students were taught bomb-making skills and developed plans

for attacks abroad, as evidenced by scorched notebooks in multiple languages found on a hastily lit bonfire.



Militiamen on the sun terrace used by Mullah Omar in his compound outside Kandahar after the fall of the Taliban in December 2001. Photograph: Peter Beaumont/The Guardian

Passing a street in the city centre, a group of men stood watching from a rooftop, one wearing an old Soviet gas mask. Citizens of the city spoke of the Taliban's brutal rule; of executions by stoning and their own corruption, with many welcoming the group's fall.

Now Kandahar has turned full circle, [falling to the Taliban](#) on Thursday, with the group's officials once more in charge of the city and already taking meetings in the governor's office.

“Kandahar is completely conquered. The mujahideen reached Martyrs' Square,” a Taliban spokesman tweeted, referring to the city landmark.

The significance of the Taliban's retaking of Kandahar after 20 years should not be underestimated either in terms of history or strategically. Regarded as the capital of the Pashtun-speaking south, Kandahar has always exerted a special sense of gravity on the rest of the country, representing one of its main ethnic faultlines.

What it underlines most powerfully is how the Taliban survived during the long years of the US-led intervention to be able to return to the place where it began.

If the sight of US and British special forces outside Mullah Omar's house appeared to mark the emirate's fall in 2001, the appearance of its fighters in Martyrs Square has reified its resurgence.

It was first formed in the early 1990s by members of the CIA-backed Afghan mujahideen, who had resisted the Soviet occupation of [Afghanistan](#) between 1979 and 1989, and attracting younger Pashtun tribesmen who studied in Pakistani madrassas in exile.



Anti-Taliban militia and statue. Mullah Omar's compound near Kandahar, 1 December 2002. Photograph: Peter Beaumont/The Guardian

The first iteration of the Taliban attracted support by promising to end the internecine warlord violence that characterised the Soviet withdrawal.

In the mid-1990s – as now – the Taliban expanded their control of the country, employing Kandahar as their first stronghold, and benefiting from the divisions among the warlords opposing them.

If some things have changed in the intervening 20 years, including the Taliban's newfound engagement with the world and desire for international legitimacy, others have remained a constant.

As Gilles Dorronsoro noted in a prescient paper for the Carnegie Endowment for Peace in 2009 – The Taliban's Winning Strategy in Afghanistan – they remain “a revolutionary movement, deeply opposed to the Afghan tribal system and focused on the rebuilding of the Islamic Emirate.”

In some respects, the Taliban never quit Kandahar. In the long interregnum, Kandahar remained connected with exiled leadership of the Quetta shura across the border in Pakistan.

Even at the height of the US-led presence, when the sprawling airbase outside Kandahar, with its cinema, gyms and pizza restaurants, cast its shadow over the neighbouring city, those of us who visited the city independently were told of the districts where Taliban fighters' families were lodged while the men were fighting.

Beyond the city, in the mulberry groves down by the Arghandab river, as an Afghan colleague once told me pointing to the river, was where the Taliban began.



A man with his wife and a gas mask and stereo player in Kandahar four days after the Taliban fled the city, 1 December 2002. Photograph: Peter Beaumont/The Guardian

It was almost most visible in the countryside of the province around the city not least during the surge against the Taliban a decade ago when some fighters fled and others simply melted back into village life and waited.

[Whatever happens next in Afghanistan, a humanitarian catastrophe is already in train | Hameed Hakimi](#)

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For now the question of the residents of Kandahar is whether the return of the Taliban to the city will also mark a return to the Taliban's old ways after claims of the killing of opponents in the city in the past two weeks. Or whether the new era, for however long it lasts this time, represents some kind of departure.

On Friday one Kandahar resident, Abdul Nafi, told AFP the city was calm after the government forces pulled out early on Friday.

"I spent a distressing night as there was fighting, but in the morning it was quiet," he said. "I came out this morning, I saw Taliban white flags in most squares of the city. I thought it might be the first day of [the religious festival] Eid."

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Afghanistan

Seven days that shook Afghanistan: how city after city fell to the Taliban

Rout of government forces beginning in city of Zaranj has left country in chaos and western leaders looking on in dismay



Taliban fighters drive an Afghan national army vehicle through a street in Kandahar on Friday. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

Taliban fighters drive an Afghan national army vehicle through a street in Kandahar on Friday. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images



Peter Beaumont

Fri 13 Aug 2021 12.21 EDT

The end for Afghan forces in the south-western provincial capital of Zaranj, a trading hub close to the Iranian border, was announced by a [Taliban](#) commander. Except that he framed it as a start, and an ominous one.

“This is the beginning,” he declared in a statement. “See how other provinces fall in our hands very soon.”

The capital of Nimroz province, Zaranj was captured on 6 August, the first major city to fall to a Taliban assault in years.

Within the space of seven days of a lightning Taliban offensive, the Zaranj commander’s prediction would be proved correct as city after city fell in a comprehensive rout of government forces.

Zaranj’s fate would set the pattern for the days that have followed. After weeks taking districts in the countryside and cutting off Zaranj, its capture came suddenly, with insurgents overrunning defences in a sustained effort.

Within days, other cities would fall to similar tactics: the key city of Kunduz in the north, with its airbase, on Sunday; a few days later, Pul-e-Khumri and

Ghazni, sitting on the strategic approaches to the capital, Kabul.

Then, in the most devastating blow, the second and third largest cities in the country, Kandahar and Herat, would fall to the Taliban on Thursday, as Afghan and US air forces – including American B-52 bombers – failed to slow the Taliban’s advance.

By Friday, maps tracking the Taliban’s offensive showed a stark reckoning for the Afghan government forces and the western countries that have supported them, with more than 65% of the country under Taliban control, more than a dozen provincial capitals fallen, and Kabul isolated.

Taliban areas of control in Afghanistan

If Zaranj was the first to fall, it was the capture of Kunduz on Sunday that rang the biggest warning bells – the third of four provincial capitals to topple by that point, and the most significant – prompting a briefing for the US president, Joe Biden, who remained unmoved in his plans to withdraw the last American forces.

“Look, we spent over a trillion dollars over 20 years. We trained and equipped with modern equipment over 300,000 Afghan forces,” Biden told reporters at the White House on Tuesday. “Afghan leaders have to come together. They’ve got to fight for themselves. Fight for their nation.”

The Taliban’s advance has also brought stories of horror, including details of reprisals against former government workers, summary executions, beheadings, and kidnappings of girls for forced marriages.

“We saw bodies lying near the prison. There were dogs next to them,” said Friba, 36, a widow who on Sunday fled the northern city of Kunduz for Kabul with her six children as the Taliban took over.

As the Taliban have pressed their growing advantage in the past week – alarming international allies of the government of Afghanistan’s president, Ashraf Ghani, as they have scrambled to evacuate their embassies – the insurgents have cut the country into pieces, severing the main roads between

cities, overrunning airbases that can supply them, and cutting deals for capitulation.

With each city that fell in the past week, the same complaints were voiced by the despondent, often hungry and defeated former defenders, including how reinforcements promised by Kabul had failed to arrive.

By Thursday it was the turn of the sprawling southern city of Kandahar and the western city of Herat.

In Kandahar, a battle that had begun in earnest in mid-July, when Taliban fighters first infiltrated the city's seventh police district, began unravelling rapidly on Wednesday as the insurgents overran the city's central prison, releasing almost 1,000 prisoners.

By Thursday the Taliban had reached the broad, dusty expanse of Martyrs' Square as the country's symbolic second city, where the Taliban first emerged in the 1990s and which served as their de facto capital between 1996 and 2001, fell once again to the Islamist fighters.

By Friday morning the capture of the city was confirmed in a terse communique that stated what was already clear. "Following heavy clashes late last night," said an Afghan government official, "the Taliban took control of Kandahar city."



Internally displaced Afghans from the country's northern provinces take refuge in a public park in Kabul. Photograph: Rahmat Gul/AP

While many Afghans have fled in front of the Taliban's advance, crowding inside Kabul's gates to sleep in parks and other open spaces, others appear to have welcomed the fighters, with young men approaching their gun-toting Taliban occupiers in Pul-e-Khumri for selfies just hours after security forces were overpowered.

As the fighting swelled the numbers fleeing to Kabul, aid agencies warned of an impending catastrophe.

"We are bracing ourselves for a major humanitarian crisis," said Tracey Van Heerden, the Norwegian Refugee Council's acting country director in Afghanistan. "Families are fighting over food. We fear this situation is being replicated across the country at an unprecedented pace."

By the middle of the week, the shocking speed of the Taliban's advance was reverberating through the western capitals that have funded, armed and trained the Afghan forces, not least as they saw their own embassies in Kabul suddenly under threat.

How, politicians and analysts have asked, after 20 years and billions of dollars spent on Afghanistan's security forces, numbering about 300,000 and

whose abilities have long been touted by western generals, could they collapse so comprehensively and quickly?

For Ryan Crocker, who was the US ambassador to Afghanistan under Barack Obama, the answer was straightforward. Biden's plan to continue with the withdrawal of US forces was akin to "giving the country to [Taliban](#) fighters".

Other critical observers, such as the US special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction, which has tracked corruption and waste in the US-led effort, have long sounded a warning note over whether the money spent on military training and salaries was well spent, cautioning that the "question ... will ultimately be answered by the outcome of the fighting on the ground".

More critically, it is the combination of the withdrawal of western forces with fatal errors by the Afghan government and its military leaders that has led to disaster.

Most serious among those mistakes, arguably, was the decision by the Afghan military not to contest the countryside as the foreign forces withdrew, but to concentrate instead on defending the cities, allowing the Taliban to isolate and besiege provincial capitals and cut off lines of communication, ultimately squeezing Kabul.

Another factor has been the Taliban's relative willingness to fight compared with the Afghan government and forces. While far smaller, numbering a core of perhaps 60,000 fighters, and more lightly armed, the Taliban draw their fighters from a group invested in its religious outlook and cultural affinity. Afghan security forces are more disparate and have long had weaker motivating factors – not least the prospect of a salary.

Unless something dramatically changes, and I don't see how that's possible, these provinces [that have fallen] will remain under Taliban control

Bill Roggio

The last week has seen a number of key defections, retreats and rapid surrenders as leaders – both local politicians and military – have negotiated with the besieging Taliban.

At the end of the week, that process continued with Mohammad Omer Sherzad, the provincial governor of the southern Uruzgan province, saying he had been approached by tribal elders seeking a negotiated pullout.

Despite the inevitable expressions of dismay in western capitals at the speed of the catastrophe, this was in many respects a defeat that has been a long time coming.

Bill Roggio, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, who has chronicled the war, echoed that assessment. He said the Afghan army had been plagued by corruption and mismanagement, leaving troops in the field poorly equipped and with little motivation to fight.

[US deserves big share of blame for Afghanistan military disaster](#)

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“Whatever forces are left or remaining that are in the Kabul area and the provinces around them, they’re going to be used for the defence of Kabul,” Roggio said. “Unless something dramatically changes, and I don’t see how that’s possible, these provinces [that have fallen] will remain under Taliban control.”

The recriminations were beginning to reverberate through western capitals even as they deployed military reinforcements to evacuate diplomats and foreign staff.

For Afghans in cities that are not yet under Taliban control, the immediate concern is that those western reinforcements that are being sent are coming to rescue foreigners, not the Afghans who have most to fear from the Taliban’s return.

Among them was Zahra Omari, who had fled to Kabul from Kunduz province with her six children. “When people started fleeing, I took my children and fled. I didn’t even take milk for my 10-month-old daughter,”

she said. “We found a bus going to Kabul that had removed the seats to cram as many people as possible inside. It was full of frightened men, women and children.”

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GCSEs

GCSE results: pupils achieve record numbers of top grades in England

Thirty per cent of entries gain grades 7 and above – equivalent to A and A* – but rise is well below that in A-levels



Pupil Meher-Ali Khokhar is joined by his family as he receives his GCSE results at Manchester grammar school on Thursday. Photograph: Chris Bull/Rex/Shutterstock

Pupil Meher-Ali Khokhar is joined by his family as he receives his GCSE results at Manchester grammar school on Thursday. Photograph: Chris Bull/Rex/Shutterstock

[Richard Adams](#), [Niamh McIntyre](#) and [Andrew Sparrow](#)

Thu 12 Aug 2021 04.30 EDT

Record numbers of top GCSE grades were awarded to pupils in [England](#) but the rise was well below that recorded for the highest A-level grades earlier this week.

Thirty per cent of entries gained grades 7 and above – equivalent to A and A* – compared with 27.5% in 2020 and 22% in 2019, the last year formal exams were held before the Covid pandemic.

State grammar schools in England were by far the most successful with more than 68% of entries awarded grades 7 and above, a rise of nearly three percentage points compared with last year. The figure for secondary modern schools was 20%.

Independent schools, where 70% of A-level entries gained A or above, gave top marks to 61% of GCSE entries, up four percentage points on 2020 and 14 points since 2019.

The proportion of top grades at different types of school

Grammar schools usually outperform those in the independent sector, in part because many private schools choose to take so-called international or IGCSEs or similar qualifications, rather than the exams regulated by government agencies.

Nationally, the proportion of pupils in England gaining a 4 or higher, equivalent to C or above, was little changed from 78.8% last year to 79.1%, although it is still the highest pass rate since GCSE courses were reformed.

There was also a slight widening of the gap in attainment between pupils who received free school meals and those who did not, according to analysis by Ofqual, the exam regulator. Students with free school meals scored on average 0.1 of a grade lower compared with 2019. Gypsy or Roma students' outcomes were also down on 2019 by 0.2 of a grade.

A record 30% of GCSE grades were of 7 and above – graph

Although the 2.5 percentage point rise in top grades was smaller than the more than six percentage point jump in A-levels, it still meant a record 3,600 students gained 9s in every subject they entered. That included 338 pupils who gained the highest grade in 11 or more subjects – in 2019 just 133 pupils managed that feat.

State academies, including 2,000 secondary schools in England, gave grades 7 and above to 28% of entries, while comprehensives awarded top grades to 26%, both rising by more than two percentage points over the year.

Girls outperformed boys in maths in England for the first time since GCSEs were reformed by Michael Gove as education secretary, with 26.4% of girls receiving a 7 or higher compared with 25.5% of boys. In 2019, 20.9% of maths entries by boys gained 7 or above, one percentage point higher than girls.

[Maths grades - graph](#)

In English, the gender gap in results was much wider with almost a third of female entrants receiving a 7 or above, compared with just under a fifth of boys. The difference between them was 13.6 percentage points, the biggest gap since 2016.

Analysis published by Ofqual said it had not found discrepancies in patterns of awards by different types of schools. “The changes may therefore reflect the uneven impact of the pandemic which will have been lessened by the assessment arrangements. It is also worth noting that more able students might be more capable of independent study,” the report said.

The delivery of this year’s grades in England went smoothly, in marked contrast to the confusion seen in 2020 when [teacher-assessed grades](#) were awarded at the last minute in place of grades derived from an algorithm that provoked a public uproar.

[Close to 9% of girls' awards were a grade 9, the top mark under the new grading system, compared with 5.9% among boys](#)

This year exams in England were [scrapped in January](#) by the education secretary, Gavin Williamson, who chose to have teachers award grades by assessment, overseen by examination boards.

Geoff Barton, the general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, said this year’s GCSE grades were “a fair and accurate reflection”

of the ability of pupils receiving them, despite the controversy over grade inflation.

“These pupils deserve huge credit for having weathered the storm of the past 18 months,” Barton said.

“The question of next year’s grades is only one part of the wider issue of how to support pupils in the wake of the pandemic. This must also involve an education recovery plan from the government that is far more ambitious and better funded than ministers have managed so far.”

[The subject with the biggest gender gap at grade 4 and above was food preparation](#)

The schools minister, Nick Gibb, confirmed exams would return for GCSE pupils in England next summer. There would be adjustments to make them fairer, to compensate for the disruption to learning faced by pupils this year, and more detail of the grading standard for those exams would be announced in the autumn, he told the BBC Radio 4’s Today programme.

But he said in the longer term the government wanted to return to the situation in place before the pandemic, where grade inflation was not an issue and “where year on year you didn’t see great variation between the grades awarded”.

Gibb also ruled out keeping teacher assessment as an alternative to exams. He said: “Exams are the fairest system of assessing young people. We had to cancel exams this year because they wouldn’t be fair ... But we will be getting back to exams in 2022 because they are simply the fairest way of judging a young person’s attainment.”

While pupils in England, Wales and Northern Ireland all take GCSEs, the devolution of education to each country’s governments has seen the course content, grading and methods of assessment diverge substantially, making any UK-wide comparisons difficult.

[Results comparison for England, Wales and Northern Ireland – graph](#)

In Wales there was a slight dip in the proportion of pupils gaining C or above, to 73.6%, but the rate of entries gaining the top A* and A grades increased from 25.5% to 28.7%.

The Welsh education minister, Jeremy Miles, told students: “You’ve had everything thrown at you over the last 18 months – periods in lockdown, time away from your friends and families, and times where you’ve missed out on many of the social activities you should be enjoying. You’ve shown tremendous resilience to overcome all of these challenges.”

In Northern Ireland the proportion of entries awarded As increased to a fraction under 40%, while the 89.6% of entries achieving C or above was slightly lower than in 2020.

Additional reporting by Rachel Hall, Pamela Duncan and Steven Morris

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GCSEs

GCSE results 2021: record-breaking 30% of entrants get top grades – as it happened

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Exams

Use 2020 as baseline for future exam results, argues former DfE adviser

Policy expert says pegging results to last year is fairest and least disruptive way to rebalance grades



Students show off their A-level exam results at a school in London.
Photograph: Andy Rain/EPA

Students show off their A-level exam results at a school in London.
Photograph: Andy Rain/EPA

Richard Adams Education editor

Wed 11 Aug 2021 13.26 EDT

Future exam results in England should be permanently pegged to those awarded in 2020 to avoid pupils being hit by a fall in grades awarded, argues a former senior government adviser, as 16-year-olds across the country await their GCSE results.

Sam Freedman, a policy expert and former adviser in the Department for Education, said using the results awarded in 2020 as the new baseline for [A-levels](#) and GCSEs would be the fairest way to rebalance grades after two years of systematic acceleration.

This week's A-level results, awarded by teacher assessment [after formal exams were cancelled in January](#), revealed a spike in higher grades awarded across the board. At independent schools 70% of entries gained As and A*s, setting off calls for a new grading system to tackle perceptions of inflation.

[Private schools in England give pupils top grades in 70% of A-level entries](#)
[Read more](#)

The proposals being mooted include scrapping letter grades at A-levels and replacing them with the 1-9 numerical system that [has been used in GCSEs since 2017](#).

But Freedman, who advised ministers during the last major reforms, said it was too late to make changes for those taking exams next year, and cautioned against efforts to abruptly return to the level of grades last seen in 2019.

“You can’t change the grading system halfway through a course – you can change the balance of grades, but you can’t completely rip it up. For GCSE regrading we had a three or four-year run-in to the change of system,” Freedman said.

“But changing the system doesn’t actually solve the problem, because you still have to convert the numbers to the old grades so that people know what they mean.

“It would signal a break, but you would still end up in the position where you either have to give as many top grades as the previous year or give significantly fewer. It doesn’t help you with the problem of how many people get the best grades.”

Headteachers and school leaders agreed that a sudden shift back to the previous system was unviable. Paul Whiteman, the general secretary of the

National Association of Head Teachers, called for the government to undertake “meaningful consultation to ensure the fairest system for students”.

In a [report for the Institute for Government](#), Freedman looked at options including a switch back to 2019 grades, but decided that using the grades awarded by assessment in 2020 as a new baseline was the fairest and least disruptive option.

“Starting from 2020 would bake in a lot of the grade inflation, and that can cause other problems. The other option is that we do a gradual step-down over several years, which seems very messy but is something that the government is considering,” Freedman said.

An abrupt return to the 2019 system – when 25% of entries were awarded A or above, compared with 45% this summer – would be “politically impossible” for ministers, he argues.

“Whatever year you do it, it’s very unfair on that group. And you are going to have headlines saying A-level results drop 50% in a year. If I was writing a note to the minister, that is what I would call brave. If there was a 50% drop, you can imagine the children crying on television,” Freedman said.

“There’s no good answer. I decided rebasing outcome was best because you do it once, after that it’s consistent and you just have to accept that pre- and post-pandemic systems were different.”

[‘Students have worked very hard’: headteacher rejects grade inflation fears](#)
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Approximately 700,000 year 11 pupils in England, Wales and Northern Ireland will receive their results on Thursday, also awarded by teacher assessment, when [GCSEs](#) are published.

But the rise in this year’s GCSE grades is not expected to be as spectacular as that seen in A-levels.

The proportion of entries by 16-year-olds gaining the highest 7-9 grades rose from 21.9% to 27.6% in England last year, and those awarded grade 9 alone rose from 4.7% to 6.6%. In comparison, 19% of A-level entries were awarded A* this year.

Analysis by the FFT Datalab researchers, using teacher assessed grades submitted to its benchmarking service, suggests that results will be “broadly similar to 2020 in most subjects” at grade 4 and above, with a 2% increase in 7-9 grades.

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Exams

Gavin Williamson should be sacked over exam failures, says Keir Starmer

Exclusive: two years of chaotic policies and ‘yawning’ attainment gap make position untenable, says Labour leader



Gavin Williamson’s position in the cabinet is believed to be highly precarious. Photograph: Tayfun Salci/Zuma/Rex/Shutterstock

Gavin Williamson’s position in the cabinet is believed to be highly precarious. Photograph: Tayfun Salci/Zuma/Rex/Shutterstock

[Rowena Mason](#) and [Aubrey Allegretti](#)

Wed 11 Aug 2021 13.57 EDT

Keir Starmer has called on Boris Johnson to sack his education secretary, Gavin Williamson, for failing children during the pandemic and presiding over a “yawning gap” in attainment [between private and state school pupils](#).

Amid rumours that Williamson could be [replaced by either the equalities minister, Kemi Badenoch](#), or the vaccines minister, Nadhim Zahawi, at the

next reshuffle, the Labour leader questioned why the education secretary was still in his job after two years of chaotic exam policies.

Starmer has previously stopped short of demanding that Williamson should be removed from office, saying only that he had “failed over and over again”. In January the shadow education secretary, Kate Green, called on her counterpart to offer his resignation.

Asked by the Guardian whether he thought Johnson should take matters into his own hands and sack Williamson, Starmer said on Wednesday: “Yes, yes and a long time ago. And I don’t think I’m alone.”

Starmer also poured cold water on the idea floated among some in government that letter grades for [A-levels](#) should be scrapped in favour of numerical 1-9 grading to provide a reset after the pandemic and address the perceived issue of grade inflation when teachers have been in charge of setting marks.



Keir Starmer said Williamson should have been removed from his position ‘a long time ago’. Photograph: Ben Birchall/PA

Nearly 45% of A-level entries in England, Wales and Northern Ireland were awarded top grades this week. For private schools the figure was 70%

getting A or A*, compared with 39% at comprehensives and 42% at academies.

The [Labour](#) leader told the Guardian: “The problem is not whether we go to a 1-9 system; the problem is the baked-in unfairness. The gap between private schools and state schools has gone up. It was 20%, now it’s 30%. Instead of closing that gap it’s got worse. If you just brand it 1-9 it doesn’t solve that problem. The question the government has to answer is: why was the attainment gap so big before? Why is it even bigger now?”

Asked whether private school teachers had been too generous in their grading, Starmer said the attainment gap appeared to be to do with a “lack of a coherent framework to do the assessment” provided by the government.

“Some were testing very often and some not very often,” he said. “It led to the widening and now yawning gap between private and state schools. The hallmark of this government is wherever there is an inequality they can make it bigger and they are very busy doing that.”

Badenoch, the controversial equalities minister, has been mooted as a future education secretary to replace Williamson, a former chief whip who helped run Johnson’s leadership campaign.

Williamson’s position has always been one of the most precarious in the cabinet, with his stock low among Tory MPs. One said Williamson should have been “put out of his misery” a year ago over the [exam results algorithm saga](#), adding: “No one has properly taken to task shit teaching, shit schools and shit headmasters – it’s utterly boring to hear complaints from middle-class MPs who fail these kids time after fucking time.

“There is a moral urgency to sorting out our schools. If people in the Conservative party are not interested in that, they should get out of politics.”



Kemi Badenoch has been tipped to be Williamson's successor. Photograph: Rex/Shutterstock

The fallout from [this year's A-level results](#), when the gap between private and state school grades grew to the widest in the modern era, appeared to have been seen by Badenoch's allies as an ideal point to tout her own credentials as a potential successor. However, others believe Zahawi, who is perceived to have performed well as vaccines minister, had a better chance of getting the job given his wider experience.

Badenoch's "anti-woke" credentials were warmly welcomed by Tory MPs when [the Times reported](#) she was in line for a cabinet post on Wednesday. They praised her as "supremely talented" and "very well thought of" in the party. One Downing Street insider said Williamson was widely perceived as "terrible" in the education brief and Badenoch would be a "very good" replacement.

However, some Tory MPs believed her name may have been floated by her opponents to give them an opportunity to point out her weaknesses and controversies, and reduce her chance of getting a promotion.

Badenoch helped pioneer the government-commissioned race report, which was [criticised by a UN human rights experts](#) who said it tried to "normalise

white supremacy”.

Her appointment would also bring into cabinet someone who is not afraid to be openly hostile with the media. She made headlines this year for publicly branding a journalist “creepy and bizarre” for asking questions about Covid vaccines.

She holds a joint role as exchequer secretary in the Treasury, putting her close to the chancellor, Rishi Sunak – whose stock appears to be on the rise among Tory voters but declining in No 10 after a fallout with the prime minister.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/aug/11/keir-starmer-gavin-williamson-sacked-pandemic-failures>

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New Zealand

‘Light at the end of the tunnel’: New Zealand welcomes border reopening plans

Health experts warn that reopening hinges on Covid vaccine programme reaching vulnerable communities

- [New Zealand to pursue Covid elimination strategy indefinitely, says Ardern](#)

01:33

New Zealand borders to remain closed until new year – video

Eva Corlett in Wellington

Thu 12 Aug 2021 01.51 EDT

New Zealand’s much-awaited, albeit cautious, roadmap for reopening its borders has given businesses and families a taste of hope for the future, though health experts warn that it is dependent on improving the country’s vaccination strategy to reach vulnerable communities.

The [prime minister Jacinda Ardern laid out the reopening plans](#) at a forum in Wellington on Thursday, 17 months after borders closed in March 2020.

Ardern indicated that, all going well, vaccinated travellers from low-risk countries will be allowed to skip quarantine and enter the country early next year. Travellers from medium-risk countries would undertake some form of self-isolation or a shorter stay in a quarantine hotel, while MIQ would still

be required for those coming from high-risk countries, or those who are unvaccinated.

[No ‘return to normal’ expected in post-pandemic New Zealand – and locals say that’s fine](#)

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The proposals are contingent on an accelerated vaccine rollout in the next few months as the country seeks to avoid the lockdowns that are currently taking place in Australia.

Business leader and former chief executive of Air New Zealand Rob Fyfe said he felt encouraged that the strategy was “a clear signal of intent to open up”.

“I was hoping that it would happen pre-Christmas, but with Delta and what’s happened across the Tasman, if we opened too early and had to go into another lockdown, that would be a disaster from a business perspective,” he said.

To prepare for a phased reopening, Fyfe said businesses need to be doing everything they can to support people to get vaccinated, including allowing people time off to get vaccinated or if they are sick, educating employees on its importance and presenting Covid-19 tracer QR codes.

“There is so much we can be doing within business to encourage and support the pursuit of our freedoms to go back to living our lives as close to what we were prior to the Covid pandemic,” Fyfe said.

“It appears as though there is light at the end of the tunnel, but we don’t know how much longer we have to go,” Dr Julia Albrecht, a tourism expert at the University of Otago said. It would “be interesting to see whether our largely Covid-free status makes us more appealing,” she added.

But she also warned that there was still a lot of uncertainty. “We need to wait and see how arduous the border processes will be, and also what costs may be associated with them.”

Pasifika and [Māori](#) health experts warn the reopening plan hinges on reaching vulnerable communities, and that is going to require better techniques.

One Pasifika health leader, Dr Api Talemaitoga, said equity must continually drive the vaccination approach, starting with vaccine education.

“Vaccine hesitancy is thrown around a lot – but [the vaccine] is a new thing, it’s going to affect people. I think educating our communities is really important so they appreciate this virus and how harmful it can be,” he said.

It is crucial that the vaccination programme is community led, he added.

“We have the infrastructures there – schools, churches, general practices and Pacific health providers – who are not fly-by-nighters – they have been around for 20-30 years and they are trusted by our communities.”

Using a setting that attracts Pasifika people would be a better approach to boosting uptake, he said, and pointed to a Pacific vaccination festival day, which saw 830 people receive their first dose, as a good example.

“In Porirua there was music, Pacific kai and yes, you got a vaccine – there is a lot we can do and we need to be smarter.”

Māori immunologist Dr Maia Brewerton said that in te ao Māori (the Maori world), family and community were prioritised.

“We need to focus on those who aren’t accessing the vaccine … to reach those people.”

That approach should involve talking to those communities to find out what the barriers are, she said.

From October, vaccinated workers will be able to participate in a pilot where they can travel overseas and self-isolate at home, rather than going through the current mandatory two weeks of government-managed isolation (MIQ).

Epidemiologist, Sir David Skegg, who [led a reopening advisory group](#), said he feels very encouraged that the government has heeded the experts advice

to take a cautious approach to reopening.

But he said that self-isolation will look a lot different to how New Zealand has done self-isolation in the past due to the highly-infectious nature of the Delta variant.

“People sort of say ‘oh well so long as someone’s vaccinated, isolate at home’, and they sort of forget the vaccination is not 100% effective, and the sort of isolation we had before just won’t cut the mustard,” he said.

[Vaccine passports look inevitable, so what rights do New Zealanders have?](#) |

[Claire Breen](#)

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“For this pilot, it will just be people who can isolate alone. I mean, there’s two issues – one is making sure people really do stay at home … but also it’s going to be quite challenging I think for people to isolate in a family home.”

As of Wednesday, about 34% of New Zealand’s population aged 16 and over have had a first dose, and 20% are fully vaccinated.

Ardern said that opening now could have devastating consequences for the country.

She did not give a figure for what level of vaccination was required for the reopening, but said the country would need good coverage nationwide, including geographic spread and strong vaccination rates among high-risk and vulnerable groups.

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Coronavirus

Scrapped Covid rules bring fewer than 20% of UK city workers back to the office

Footfall in 30 big cities well below pre-pandemic levels despite end to guidance on non-essential workers staying at home



In London just 15% of workers had returned to their offices by the end of July this year, found the Centre for Cities thinktank. Photograph: Facundo Arrizabalaga/EPA

In London just 15% of workers had returned to their offices by the end of July this year, found the Centre for Cities thinktank. Photograph: Facundo Arrizabalaga/EPA

[Larry Elliott](#)

Thu 12 Aug 2021 01.01 EDT

Fewer than one in five people working in cities across the UK had returned to the office by the end of July, figures have revealed.

A report from the Centre for Cities thinktank said worker footfall in 30 big cities stood at an average of just 18% of pre-pandemic levels in the immediate aftermath [of most Covid laws being scrapped in England](#).

The biggest migration of workers back to the office has occurred in [Brighton](#), with 49% of people having returned to their desks, a rise of 6% on the previous week. This was followed by Gloucester (39%), Southend (38%) and York (37%).

Cities where only a fraction of workers have gone back to the office include Glasgow, with an 8% figure – the city has had coronavirus restrictions in force for longer, given Scotland's slower easing than England – followed by London and Oxford (15%) and Sheffield and Milton Keynes (16%).

Daytime worker footfall fell by 1% in the final week of July compared with the previous seven days, and on average was running at barely half the pre-Covid levels.

Paul Swinney, director of policy at Centre for Cities, said it showed there remained significant reluctance among some workers to head back to the office in the “largest and most economically important cities”.

He said that the “sandwich economy” that catered to city-centre office workers was facing “an uncertain future” as the end of the furlough scheme in September came closer.

Government guidance for offices was changed on 19 July to drop the requirement for non-essential workers to stay at home if possible, leaving it up to employer choice. This has bred uncertainty for some, and Whitehall departments have been grappling with how much civil servants should be ordered into the office.

footfall

The Guardian revealed over the weekend that Sajid Javid's health department had dropped plans to make it mandatory for staff to be in the

office four to eight days a month from September, and that senior mandarins from other departments had held talks on whether to scrap officials' London-weighted salaries if they resisted at least a partial return to Whitehall.

The Centre for Cities' report also found a mixed picture for the recovery of nightlife across the country.

Blackpool had a 50% increase in night-time footfall as clubbers in the north of England and the Midlands demonstrated the greatest desire to take advantage of the lifting of lockdown rules.

The strongest recoveries in overall footfall after Blackpool were in Sunderland (37%) and Leicester, Middlesbrough and Wakefield (all 32%). Bars, restaurants and clubs in the big metropolitan centres in the north and Midlands – Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham and Newcastle – also saw hefty increases in activity.

By contrast, night-time footfall in London, Luton and Slough, remained unchanged since clubs reopened and social distancing rules were removed.

Overall, the thinktank found an average 16% increase in footfall in 63 towns and cities across the UK in the period after 19 July. Only Blackpool and Bournemouth had seen footfall return to pre-pandemic levels, and the Centre for Cities said each was getting a temporary boost from people in the UK having holidays at home.

Swinney said it was a “mixed picture as the country takes its next steps back to normality, both for different types of businesses and for different places”.

He added: “People’s eagerness, particularly in cities in the north and Midlands, to go out and socialise has been a lifeline for many businesses in the night-time economy.”

The thinktank’s data showed the top five cities for footfall were all tourist destinations: Blackpool; Bournemouth; Southend; Brighton; and York. The five weakest performers were: London, affected by home working and a lack of overseas tourists; Oxford; Birmingham; Manchester; and Glasgow. Footfall in London is running at just 35% of its pre-pandemic level.

According to the latest statistics from the Treasury 1.9 million people were still on furlough schemes as of 30 June 2021, a decrease of 590,000 in the past month. London was the English region with the highest number of people on furlough, standing at 424,200.

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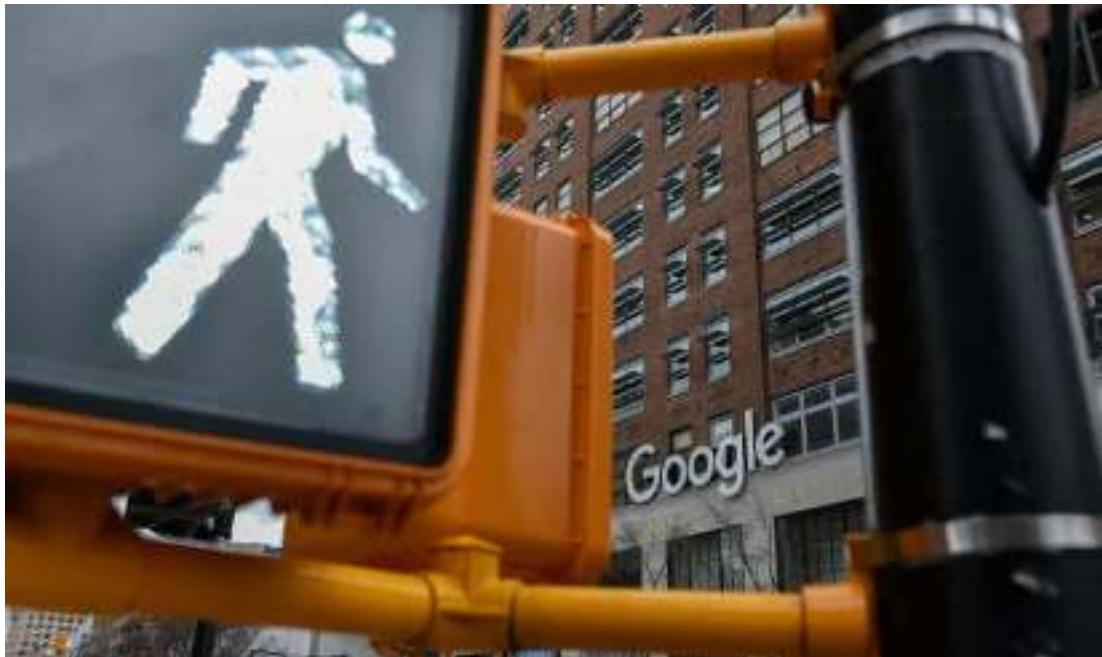
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[Google](#)

Google staff could see pay cut if they opt to work from home

Pay calculator suggests workers who commute long-distance could see salary drop if they shun the office in wake of pandemic

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Google says its salary packages have always been determined by location.
Photograph: Erik Pendzich/REX/Shutterstock

Google says its salary packages have always been determined by location.
Photograph: Erik Pendzich/REX/Shutterstock

Reuters

Wed 11 Aug 2021 21.49 EDT

Google employees could see their pay cut if they switched to working from home permanently in the wake of the pandemic, according to a company pay calculator seen by Reuters.

It is an experiment taking place across Silicon Valley, which often sets trends for other large employers. Facebook and Twitter cut pay for remote employees who moved to less expensive areas. However, Google's pay calculator tool – which allows staff to see the effects of a move – suggests remote employees, especially long-distance commuters, could experience pay cuts without moving.

A Google spokesperson said: “Our compensation packages have always been determined by location, and we always pay at the top of the local market based on where an employee works from,”, adding that pay will differ from city to city and state to state.

[Google co-founder Larry Page is a New Zealand resident, government says](#)
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Smaller companies including Reddit and Zillow have shifted to location-agnostic pay models, citing advantages when it comes to hiring, retention and diversity.

One Google employee, who asked not to be identified for fear of retaliation, typically commutes to the Seattle office from a nearby county and would likely see their pay cut by about 10% by working from home full-time, according to estimates by the company's Work Location Tool launched in June.

The employee was considering remote work but decided to keep going to the office – despite the two-hour commute. “It’s as high of a pay cut as I got for my most recent promotion. I didn’t do all that hard work to get promoted to then take a pay cut,” they said.

Jake Rosenfeld, a sociology professor at Washington University in St Louis who researches pay determination, said Google's pay structure raises alarms about who will feel the impacts most acutely, including families.

“What’s clear is that Google doesn’t have to do this,” Rosenfeld said. “Google has paid these workers at 100% of their prior wage, by definition. So it’s not like they can’t afford to pay their workers who choose to work remotely the same that they are used to receiving.”

Screenshots of Google’s internal salary calculator seen by Reuters show that an employee living in Stamford, Connecticut – an hour from New York City by train - would be paid 15% less if she worked from home, while a colleague from the same office living in New York City would see no cut from working from home. Screenshots showed 5% and 10% differences in the Seattle, Boston and San Francisco areas.

Interviews with Google employees indicate pay cuts as high as 25% for remote work if they left San Francisco for an almost as expensive area of the state such as Lake Tahoe.

The calculator states it uses US Census Bureau metropolitan statistical areas, or CBSAs. Stamford, Connecticut, for example, is not in New York City’s CBSA, even though many people who live there work in New York.

A Google spokesperson said the company would not change an employee’s salary based on them going from office work to being fully remote in the city where the office is located. Employees working in the New York City office will be paid the same as those working remotely from another New York City location, for example, according to the spokesperson.

Google did not specifically address the issue for commuters from areas such as Stamford, Connecticut.

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Cairngorms crofters: ‘We don’t follow a capitalist grow-grow-grow model’

Lynn Cassells and Sandra Baer say buying croft allowed them to farm based on regenerative principles

- [Rewilding 5% of England could create 20,000 rural jobs](#)



Lynn Cassells, left, and Sandra Baer, whose Lynbreck croft represents their dream of making a living from the land. Photograph: Julia Fayngruen

Lynn Cassells, left, and Sandra Baer, whose Lynbreck croft represents their dream of making a living from the land. Photograph: Julia Fayngruen



[Patrick Barkham](#)

[@patrick_barkham](#)

Thu 12 Aug 2021 02.00 EDT

“Farming with nature is really not idealism,” says Lynn Cassells. “It’s not a nice thing to do on the side. It’s the core of our business model. Nature is multi-faceted, interconnected and collaborative, and our business is too.”

[Rewilding 5% of England could create 20,000 rural jobs](#)

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For years she and her partner, Sandra Baer, dreamed of making a [living from the land](#). Working respectively as an archaeologist and librarian, they saved carefully, hoping that one day they would be able afford somewhere with five acres to grow their own food.

Then, to their surprise, in 2016 they found they were able to buy [Lynbreck](#), a 150-acre croft on the edge of the Cairngorms in north-east Scotland.

Inspired by reading [Joel Salatin](#)’s You Can Farm, their starting principle was that they produce food for local people by farming with nature and allowing some of the croft to rewild.

Their farm is run on regenerative principles, with a low-density of grazing animals roaming freely among the trees. They have planted 17,500 native broadleaf trees to create wood pasture and fenced off nine hectares (22 acres) for natural regeneration, allowing Caledonian pine forest to slowly re-establish.



The Cairngorms in Scotland. Photograph: Sandra Angers Blondin

They tend a herd of eight highland cattle for beef, and raise 12 rare-breed pigs each year. There are nine hives of bees for a crop of [heather honey](#), chickens for eggs and a polytunnel and kitchen garden for vegetables. They sold their first farm produce, eggs, in January 2018.

Their turnover is a modest £37,000. They prefer to run their business without subsidies, so do not take the basic farm payment for farmers, and have only received modest financial support for planting trees – but they live simply, cheaply and, crucially, mortgage free.

Their key to success is to sell the food directly to customers. They built a micro-butchery so can butcher their own pigs and they produce value-added foods such as cured meats and smoked foods such as beef jerky.

They have found there is strong demand for high-welfare meat from animals performing valuable ecological functions. They do not sell via mail-order

because they want to produce low-carbon food for local people. “That’s the best bit of what we do – to nourish your local community and try to give them health is a real honour,” says Cassells.

[Tell us: how is it to work in a green job or run a green business?](#)

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Their Egg Club is oversubscribed; so is their Mountain Meat Club (an annual subscription for a monthly “treat”) and their seasonal boxes of pork or beef sell out within 24 hours.

Food sales constitute 60% of their income and their remaining 40% is generated through education.

Covid scuppered their first year of [“how to farm” courses](#) but all three residentials (free on-site camping) this year are booked up. Cassells and Baer cover everything from starting a business to basic animal handling. They also run day-long “homesteading” courses and open up for farm tours each month, with additional private tours by appointment. They keep the numbers small (eight per residential) and do everything, including the catering, themselves.



Highland cattle are raised at Lynbreck. Photograph: Sandra Angers Blondin

“We’re really conscious that people want to make big changes in their lives and we feel a great burden of responsibility about that,” says Cassells. The biggest surprise about setting up a farm, she says, was the sheer relentlessness of the labour.

The biggest challenge has been resisting the constant temptation to scale up, to produce more food, run more courses. Next spring, when they publish a book about how to start a farm, there will be demand for Zoom meetings and talks all over the country.

Given their location and the domestic tourism boom they could probably make a fine living simply as a full-blown campsite.

Cassells says: “Holidays could be a major source of income but it is our home. We like the engagement side but we like the peace and quiet as well. It’s not about following a capitalist model of grow, grow, grow. It’s regenerative and ‘work within your means’.

“It’s so hard to find that balance. We could opt to do more to earn more, but then you blur that line between the wealth in your bank account and the wealth in your life, and we’ve always gone for the wealth in your life.”

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[Russell Tovey](#)

Interview

Russell Tovey: ‘Queer people in my generation have section 28 in our blood’

[David Shariatmadari](#)



‘Isn’t this a great time to be alive?’ ... Tovey. Photograph: Linda Nylind/The Guardian

‘Isn’t this a great time to be alive?’ ... Tovey. Photograph: Linda Nylind/The Guardian

As he hits the stage in *Constellations*, Tovey talks babies, what he’d say to the culture secretary and why he finally understands The History Boys



Thu 12 Aug 2021 01.00 EDT

Russell Tovey is trying to lick his elbow. It's a ritual every performer has to go through in the opening scene of [Nick Payne's play *Constellations*](#) – the response to a flirtily issued challenge from a stranger – but it seems particularly suited to someone whose physical presence combines goofiness and sex appeal in equal measure. The resulting ripple of laughter in a packed house feels mildly alarming after months of social distancing, but for Tovey it's a reassuring sign of a return to normal. "It hasn't felt as alien as I thought it was gonna be," he says, adding that gaps between seats could feel "like you're playing to a show that hasn't sold that well". Judging by the queues outside, there's little danger of that.

We meet the next day at the bottom of a lightwell in the middle of a rehearsal studio in Covent Garden. It's technically outside, which is better for Covid, the PR assures us – a reminder that normal is, in fact, some way away. Tovey is dressed in grey chinos and a darker sweater that chime with his now more-salt-than-pepper hair. The erstwhile History Boy is turning 40 in November (he played sixth-former Rudge in the Alan Bennett hit at the age of 23), though he still somehow manages to look younger than his years. The run-up to this milestone obviously hasn't panned out as expected. In 2020 he was supposed to be on Broadway, performing in Who's Afraid of

Virginia Woolf? alongside Rupert Everett, and, as he told one [interviewer](#), “putting the feelers out” on how to have a baby.

In the event, they managed only a handful of preview performances before theatres closed in March, and it was never officially reviewed (one blogger who saw it wrote that Tovey “[did a lovely job](#)” as Nick). “It was gutting,” he recalls, but there was no getting away from the reality. “It was a terrifying time. And the last two previews were when news was amping up and the world [was] getting scary. And then you’re playing director’s notes. So you’re thinking, OK, on this line, I’ll put the glass down. I’ll say that line louder, and then I’ll turn around. And the other part of your head’s going: we might all be dead in a month.”

Is there any chance of picking up where they left off? “Broadway literally just opened up the other day, so who knows? I’d love to, yeah. But you know, a lot’s happened.”

He means life, the world, the pandemic, of course. But despite the enforced hiatus, things haven’t been exactly quiet on the career front, either. Tovey is obsessed with contemporary art, and by the end of 2020 his podcast with gallerist Robert Diament, *Talk Art*, reached [2m](#) downloads. In May this year it [spawned a bestselling book](#), and these days [Tovey’s Instagram](#) is more arty than luvvie, with snaps of gallery visits, podcast guests and the occasional cameo by his beloved French bulldog, Rocky.



History boys ... Jamie Parker, Russell Tovey, Samuel Anderson, Andrew Knott, Alan Bennett, Dominic Cooper, Sacha Dhawan and James Corden.
Photograph: www.ronaldgrantarchive.com

What about plans for a baby? “It’s absolutely there in my life, in the future.” Tovey has been with his boyfriend, Steve Brockman, since 2016, although they split up for a year in 2018. In terms of how they’d do it, “surrogacy, adoption – all those things are up for grabs ... and you know, conversations with friends”. He says: “Everybody’s advice is don’t have a baby with a friend,” and when I point out I know parents for whom that’s worked out very well, he adds wistfully: “That’s the dream.” In any case, he’ll probably miss his self-imposed deadline: “I think I had this thing in my head, ‘I’ve got to be a dad by the time I’m 40.’ But ... probably because I’m about to be 40 I’m letting myself off the hook with that one,” he laughs.

Culture is always seen as fluff, and it's anything but. It's vitality

Children aren’t a factor for the couple at the heart of *Constellations*, a dizzying play that uses many-worlds theory to explore paths taken and not taken over the course of a relationship. Tovey performs opposite Omari Douglas, breakout star of the Aids-era TV drama [If’s a Sin](#), and an exuberant

presence in a play that demands huge emotional range from actors who have to flip not just between scenes, but universes.

This is the first time the script, a two-hander, has been adapted for gay characters, but it will run alongside a version featuring Anna Maxwell Martin and Chris O'Dowd. Earlier in the summer actors Sheila Atim and Ivanno Jeremiah alternated with Peter Capaldi and Zoë Wanamaker. This unusual setup is an example, Tovey says, of necessity being the mother of invention. The professional terror of getting pinged or coming down with Covid is eased by the knowledge that there are people who could easily take over if it came to it. "This production would not have happened if it hadn't been for the state of the world. The idea to turn it into this comes out of [an effort] to keep telling stories. Culture doesn't slow down, culture adapts."



Tovey and Omari Douglas in *Constellations*. Photograph: Marc Brenner

Sure, but it's hard to argue that the pandemic hasn't been a disaster for the arts. "When it comes to financing, when it comes to support for the arts, yeah." But at the same time, "all everybody's done in this time is turned to culture. They've streamed stuff, they've read books, they've gone to see public artworks." This is where Tovey, whose brand is nothing if not affable, starts to get a bit punchy. "So when the government starts doing cuts, when there isn't this support for the theatre industry, the entertainment industry,

it's offensive. Because it's taking away from what it is to be alive." What would he say to culture secretary Oliver Dowden if he was sitting here now? "I'd say like: what the fuck? It just doesn't make sense to me." Funding, he says, "is gonna be a constant battle because we're always seen as just fluff. And it's anything but fluff. It's vitality."

As I've discovered, Tovey's affability – it's hard to find any negative press about him – is a bit of a red herring. Given all the warm words, I ask if he's a people-pleaser, but he rejects the label. "I'm very confident to say to someone, 'That doesn't really work for me, sorry.' I think I'm polite. I think I work hard. I care about my job, and I think all of those qualities mean that people want to hang out with you, people want to work with you again." In a company, supporting your fellow actors isn't just about being popular, it's about making the work as good as possible. "Other people being brilliant means that you're going to be brilliant. If you're just thinking about yourself and your performance, and the other people literally just facilitate your performance, then I've no interest in that at all. And I've been in situations like that, and it just sucks the joy out of a room. It's shit."

Equally, he wants us not to *like* his characters necessarily, but to understand them. In the 2017 production of Angels in America at the National Theatre, he played Joe Pitt, a conservative lawyer who leaves his wife, Harper, for another man. "I would take it personally, the way that Joe Pitt was treated," he says. He'd heard that in other productions the crowd had applauded when Harper slaps Joe. "And I remember I went: 'If anybody claps when she slaps me, I've failed. They're not gonna fucking clap. And they never did. That, for me, was a victory. In that part, I want them to feel desperately sad for me, I want them to think my morals are very challenging, very problematic, but also to see how damaged he is and have empathy for him and care for him."

Tovey has been out since he was 18, but that doesn't mean he escaped the kind of shame that kept Pitt in the closet. He is, he says, part of a "whole generation of queer people who have [section 28](#) in our blood". The message of the Thatcher-era law against the "promotion of homosexuality" was: "You're a pervert, there's no place for you. Your only opportunities are to stay in the closet if you want success and happiness, but you won't be happy

anyway. And if you come out, you're going to get Aids and no one's going to love you.”

He says he was lucky to have found a more sympathetic environment in the arts, “but for a lot of people section 28 is still part of your psyche. And then they’re experiencing a world now where kids are coming up going like, well, ‘I’m pansexual, I’m fluid, I haven’t really decided yet.’ My feeling is that’s fucking wonderful. Isn’t this a great time to be alive? But I can understand when someone is chewed up by that, because that isn’t their experience. They’ve got self-hate that has been embedded in them by the government.”

Dealing with his own internalised homophobia has taken a lot of work over the years. And, of course, he’s changed and grown like anyone else, and looks back on some of his earlier material with a different eye. “In the beginning of lockdown, Steve said to me, ‘Let’s watch *The History Boys*,’” – the film of the play that Tovey hadn’t seen since attending the premiere in 2006. “And we put it on. I cried throughout, remembering being with those boys and that experience. But also [thinking] I fucking get that now, I understand what that line is, I know what heartbreak is. I know what longing is.”

[A brief encounter with Muriel, Alan Bennett’s latest talking head](#)
[Read more](#)

Is he still in touch with the others? “I speak to James [Corden] most; I was speaking to Sam Barnett the other day. Dom [Cooper] and me just send random messages to each other all the time. Me and Andy Knott are good, I saw Sacha Dhawan very briefly at a friend’s 50th.” And Alan Bennett? “I called Alan the other day, we had a big chat. He’s doing great.” Did he get through lockdown all right? “Well, I mean, he’s a writer, he’s solitary, you know, it’s him and his partner, and they go to Leeds and then they’re in London. And he sits in his little office and writes.”

And what about Tovey? Is he happy with how things are? He’s spoken in the past about frequently feeling too young for the task at hand. As 40 approaches, can he shake off a bit of the boy in him? “I’m always someone that, if something makes me feel uncomfortable, I push through it and then I

sort of catch up ... But when it comes to me now, I feel the most settled and the most calm I've been for a long, long time. Definitely."

- [Constellations](#) is at the Vaudeville theatre, London, until 12 September.
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Work & careers

Ready to quit your job? Here are the 17 questions to ask yourself first



‘People put up with so much for the sake of a salary.’ Illustration: Spencer Wilson at Synergy/The Guardian

‘People put up with so much for the sake of a salary.’ Illustration: Spencer Wilson at Synergy/The Guardian

In the UK, and globally, surveys suggest huge numbers of people are thinking about packing in their jobs, while in the US it’s been dubbed ‘the Great Resignation’. But is this a real desire for change or just a pandemic fug?



[Elle Hunt](#)

Thu 12 Aug 2021 01.00 EDT

It has been termed “[the Great Resignation](#)” and a “turnover tsunami”. But whether it is because of a shift in priorities during the pandemic or simply a desire for a change, many people have left their jobs, or are thinking of leaving. In the US, the department of labour [reported a record](#) 4m resignations in April.

[A Microsoft survey](#) of more than 30,000 workers worldwide revealed that 41% were considering quitting or changing professions this year, while in the UK and Ireland, [research by](#) the HR software company Personio found 38% of respondents were planning to quit in the next six to 12 months.

But how do you know if you are in desperate need of change or just in a pandemic fug. Here are 17 questions to ask yourself to help you clarify your thinking – and your future.

Should I even consider staying?

If work is causing you significant mental or physical distress, perhaps because of bullying or chronic overwork, it may be that you have to quit,

says the psychologist Lee Chambers.

If it feels like a question of self-preservation, “something that is effectively pivotal to you feeling like a human being, it’s almost as if that decision needs to be made for you,” he says. “Otherwise it’s going to have an increasingly negative impact on your health.”

But, he adds, you must be brutally honest with yourself. “What are your frustrations? What’s that primary sticking point, the one thing that’s really tipped the balance so this question has become prominent in your mind?”

The more precise you can be about the cause, the greater clarity you will have. Drill down not only into your role and responsibilities, but particular projects, pay, potential for progression, workplace culture, workload, colleagues, company values and any recent restructures or takeovers.

“The ‘why’ question is where everyone starts, but the first answer you give yourself is rarely what’s really going on,” says Eleanor Tweddell, the founder of the post-redundancy coaching consultancy Another Door. She suggests writing down every thought and feeling you have about your job for 10 days.

How did I get here?

As you consider your next steps, it can help to zoom out to see those that led you here: why did you take this job? What has been your career path so far?

Reflecting on your past can help put your present situation in perspective and lay a blueprint for your future – if only by underscoring your own agency. “Knowing that it’s not the first time you’ve taken a step in your career can make another one feel less daunting,” says Chambers.

How long have I been feeling this way?

It may help to think about when you were last consistently happy at work. If it’s been years, predating the pandemic, Chambers suggests it might be time to act. It is easy to keep giving it another six months, he says – “but there’s a reason why you’re feeling that way”.

If, however, your dissatisfaction is more recent – say, since February 2020 – “a lot of that is pandemic-related,” says Chambers. Now that restrictions have eased, it is easy to underestimate the impact of the disruption and stress of the past 18 months. But “most of us have not been through something as serious or significant as this, ever”, he says. With the future still uncertain, it could be that your desire to quit is rooted in wanting to exercise some control over your life, or feel as if you are making progress. “But a change of job is not actually going to change the [wider] situation,” says Navit Schechter, a cognitive behavioural therapist.

It’s also worth considering whether you may be burnt. If so, talk to your manager about taking some time off.



‘Try to visualise your perfect day.’ Illustration: Spencer Wilson at Synergy/The Guardian

What do I actually want to do?

This can be the hardest question to answer. It’s not enough to think about what’s wrong with your current role, your dream job or even your passions, says Tweddell. “The strongest question you can work on is how you want to live, and how you want to be. We don’t think of our values enough, yet this

is where our resistance and conflict often sit – making a career and life change has to be about more than career for it to be fulfilling.”

How would my perfect day be different?

Tweddell gets her clients to come up with a clear picture of their “ideal tomorrow”, with no detail too small or idea discounted. They repeat that exercise three times over a six-week period. “It’s great to see what changes, the clarity of what’s going on for people,” she says. “People will always have the answer of what to do next after this exercise.”

What do my friends and family say?

A trusted sounding board can help you to understand your own thinking and propel you towards a decision. “They often see things in us that we don’t see in ourselves, which really helps in the search for future positions,” says Chambers.

Conversely, it is hard to make a big life change without the support of those closest to you, especially if there are financial pressures. By involving them, he says, “you have allies on that journey and some accountability”.

What would I be giving up by quitting?

Change inevitably means compromise, says Tweddell. Being clear about what you would be saying goodbye to – friends, benefits, stability, a familiar routine – may clarify whether you are really prepared to give it up. “It helps people to create a solid foundation for change: they will make the move with eyes wide open,” she says.

What could I gain by quitting?

“We’re often so quick to say what we don’t like: this question probes people in a different direction,” says Chambers. “By thinking positively, they tend to light up a bit – because they realise they actually have a lot to give.”

Especially if you have been with your employer for a long time, you may have lost sight of your market value, says Amanda Reuben of Bijou Recruitment. “Often people come to me because they’re not feeling valued.”

If you have repeatedly been passed over for pay rises or promotion, a new job could be a reset, says Reuben. Moving to a new company has also been shown to bump up your salary far more than increases within a role.

Have I explored every option with my employer?

Some of what you want from a new job, you might be able to secure in your current one. With your perfect-day plan as a guide, see what you can negotiate – such as flexible working, a different reporting line, reduced hours or higher pay.

“Often the value to you as an individual is huge, when for the business there’s not a huge difference,” says Reuben. “When you’ve been somewhere for 10 years, you become so compliant – or complacent – you don’t actually think about what you could do differently.”

Should I wait until we’re back in the office to make a decision?

“If you know you want to change, waiting isn’t going to change that,” says Reuben – plus, she adds, it is easier to search for a new job while working remotely.

But if you’re undecided, it may be worth holding off to see how your employer navigates this transition towards hybrid working, says Chambers. “For many, it’s going to be make or break. Most employees have given an awful lot over this period and are waiting to see if they’re going to get the return.”

The key is to be clear with yourself about your own needs and desires, so that when the dust settles, you can act in line with them.

Should I quit over my toxic boss?

If your company is big enough, says Reuben, you might be able to change your reporting line or otherwise put some distance between you. “But in a small organisation, you can’t get away from them.”

Human resources may be able to help; only you know whether it’s time to cut your losses. “If there’s nothing you can do, and you decide your mental health is more important, the answer does become clearer,” says Schechter. “Ideally make those decisions before breaking point.”

Reuben says people often don’t understand the full toll of their toxic workplace until they start at a new one. “You see transformations … It’s like leaving a bad marriage. People put up with so much for the sake of a salary.”



Be clear about what you would be saying goodbye to. Illustration: SPENCER WILSON at Synergy/The Guardian

When should I quit over stress?

When it is consistently negatively affecting your overall quality of life, says Schechter. “Is it getting in the way of sleep, are you unable to be present with your family outside work time, are you cancelling social plans or working on weekends?”

Health impacts are also relevant: you may find yourself getting sick more often, or your blood pressure rising.

Before dismissing this as just a busy period, says Chambers, it's important to make sure that it will actually pass. "If there's an endpoint, that helps you to make an informed decision: 'Am I going to be able to tolerate it until then?'"

If you have a history of stress, it could be that work triggers something in you that a change would not necessarily address, says Schechter. "A lot of the pressures people feel come from their own beliefs – about making mistakes, for example, or not being seen as good enough."

In some companies, however, bullying or overwork is structural. Schechter asks clients to reflect "on a Sunday night, before the work week starts: what is it that they are most dreading?"

Another way to identify the source of your distress – your situation, or your response – is to ask yourself if a capable friend would struggle with what is being asked of you: "Would they experience the same feelings, or would they handle it differently?"

If you're putting yourself under pressure, therapy could help to unpick the underlying reasons and equip you with coping strategies.

Are my expectations realistic?

"There's a lot out there that says 'If you love what you do, you'll never work a day in your life,'" says Chambers – which can fuel the falsehood that there's a perfect job out there. Being your own boss in particular is glamorised – "but it's bloody hard work".

Ask yourself if you are really ready for a learning curve. "There is an energy cost for quitting your job and starting with a new employer – especially at the moment, when you might not meet your team in person," says Chambers.

Reuben says that many people who come to her to explore their alternatives end up deciding to stay put in their current role: "They realise 'it's not so

bad', or 'it suits me'."

Can I really afford to leave?

Appetites for risk vary, says Tamsin Caine, a chartered financial planner – but three to six months' worth of living expenses is a recommended safety net if you plan to quit then look for a similar job.

Changing career or moving to self-employment warrants more: at least enough to cover 12 months of living expenses and any startup costs. "You've got to think: 'What is the worst that can happen?'"

But in weighing up whether to quit, "it's not just about the salary," says Caine. Your current employer may have a generous pension or expenses policy that should factor into a cost-benefit scenario, especially if your plan is to cover it all yourself as a freelancer. It also pays to be very clear about your current finances.

Could caring less about work help?

It's been easy for work to take over our lives, especially while working from home. Common sense steps to protect wellbeing and boundaries can make a big difference to our ability to cope, says Schechter. "When we get enough sleep, eat well, do exercise, talk to our friends, take time out – all that makes it easier."

It could be that you find your career has come to stand in for your identity. If so, Schechter suggests spending some time defining your values and investing in relationships, hobbies and interests outside your job – if only to ease the transition later.

"It can help to build up that personal identity so that the work identity isn't so important: there's something else there that equals it, and betters it. Otherwise, how else do you know how to spend your time?"

Is now the right time?

The job market remains highly uncertain, Reuben says: it could take as long as six months to find a new job. “It’s a brave person who says ‘I just want a change – I’m going to find something’ at the moment.”

Unless your current work situation is abusive or intolerable, Chambers says, “you can take it step by step”. Indeed, spending time to reflect on the past, unpick the present and project into the future can make everything that comes later easier.

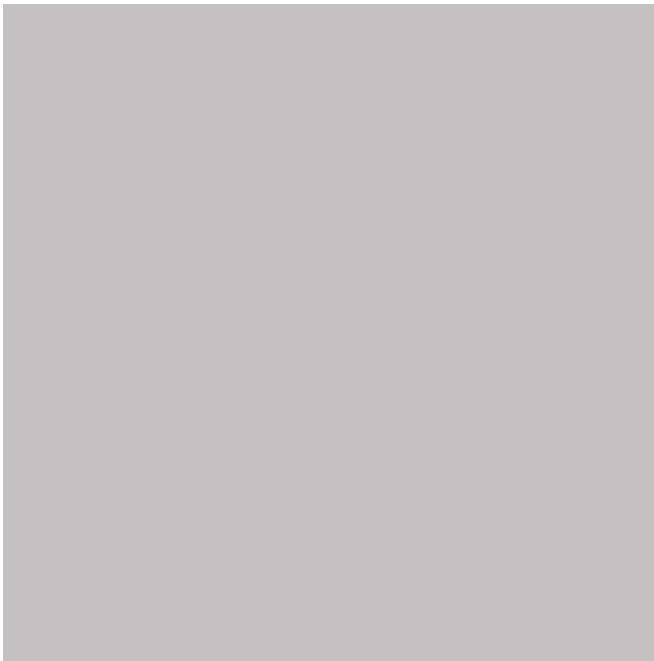
For example, if your ultimate goal is self-employment or to change careers, you might start to fill in gaps in your skillset, find a mentor or build your savings. “Asking yourself these questions can make quitting an empowered choice,” Chambers says.

Why can’t I make a decision?

“There will never be a moment when everything aligns and every box is ticked,” says Tweddell. “At some point you have to just decide and trust yourself to make it work.”

She suggests clients set a date and time to make the decision and put it in their diary. “You can play with ideas, ask questions, think, reflect all the way up to that date – and then you make the decision and do it,” she says. “Whatever you decide, you’ll feel very liberated because you are owning what happens next.”

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Mothers and children who fled fighting between the Taliban and Afghan army in the northern provinces find refuge in a Kabul park. Photograph: Rahmat Gul/AP

[Women report Afghanistan](#)

‘I worry my daughters will never know peace’: women flee the Taliban – again

Mothers and children who fled fighting between the Taliban and Afghan army in the northern provinces find refuge in a Kabul park. Photograph: Rahmat Gul/AP

Families fearful of what will happen to girls and young women as the Islamist militants gain ground are joining the tens of thousands of displaced Afghans

by [Zainab Pirzad](#), [Atefa Alizada](#) and [Rubaba Rezai](#) of Rukhshana Media

Women report Afghanistan is supported by



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Thu 12 Aug 2021 01.00 EDT

It was an exceptionally hot summer morning, on 13 July, when people in Malistan district, in the southern Afghan province of Ghazni, woke up to find that the conflict that had swirled around them for weeks had reached their small town and [Taliban](#) fighters were closing in.

By noon that day, 22-year-old Fatima, seven months pregnant, was seeking shelter from bullets raining down on her home in the village of Qol-e Adam, which was caught in the vicious crossfire between Taliban militants and government forces.

Surviving the battle was not the only thing on her mind – her family were terrified that if the Taliban gained control of their village, they would take Fatima as they had taken other young women in parts of the country falling under their control.

“We had heard of cases where the Taliban would kill young men and sexually abuse girls and young women of the family,” she says.

The fears of Fatima and her family were justified. “When [the Taliban] finally came to our village, they wanted to take a young girl with them, but she jumped from the roof of her house and ended her life.”

She says the Taliban fighters would also come into homes and demand that the women cook them food and wash their clothes.

Three days after the Taliban took over Malistan, Fatima escaped. “I walked with my family for one day and night in the mountains to reach Ghazni city. From there we paid a driver three times the [normal] cost to bring us to Kabul,” she says.

Fatima says that all the people from her village, about 50 to 60 families, fled except for the older people, who stayed in the hope of protecting their properties.

Q&A

What is the Women report Afghanistan series?

Show



As provinces and cities fall under Taliban control across Afghanistan, women's voices are already being silenced. For this special series, the Guardian's [Rights and freedom project](#) has partnered with [Rukhshana Media](#), a collective of female journalists across Afghanistan, to bring their stories of how the escalating crisis is affecting the lives of women and girls to a global audience.

Afghan journalists, especially women, face a dire situation. Dozens have been injured and killed. As the Taliban have advanced, many have lost their jobs or been forced into hiding. Female journalists face a double peril: attacked for their work and persecuted for their gender.

All of the reporting in this series will be carried out by Afghan women, with support from the editors on the Rights and freedom project.

These are the stories that Afghan women want to tell about what is happening to their country at this critical moment.

Was this helpful?

Thank you for your feedback.

Reports of Taliban advances into villages and towns across [Afghanistan](#) have spread fear among women across the country. Wave after wave of

displaced families are seeking sanctuary in cities such as Kabul and Herat.

Many have nowhere to go when they arrive. Fatima and her family have joined tens of thousands of displaced Afghans sleeping in parks and other public spaces in Kabul, with the numbers of new arrivals growing every day.

The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) recently estimated that nearly [a million Afghans have been displaced in the past few months](#). The Afghan Ministry of Refugees and Repatriations estimates that nearly 70% of the displaced are women and children.



Families wait for aid at shelters in Kandahar as the Taliban sweep across Afghanistan. Many villages have almost emptied as people flee. Photograph: M Sadiq/EPA

Shukria, from Kandahar, ended up in Herat, like Fatima, after fleeing Taliban forces. In Kandahar, she was the breadwinner for her family since her husband was diagnosed with severe asthma. “We didn’t have a lot but at least we had a roof over our heads. But now my entire life is packed in these few bags of clothes.”

[‘Please pray for me’: female reporter being hunted by the Taliban tells her story](#)

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Ghafoori single-handedly brought her ill husband and their two daughters to safety in Herat when the conflict reached their doors. Now, with Taliban forces surrounding the city, Ghafoori may be displaced again.

“For the last three weeks, we have been living in the house of a resident of Herat. But sooner or later, they will throw us out because the situation here is also critical. Then we will sleep in a mosque,” she says.

Since the beginning of May, foreign troops’ abrupt withdrawal from Afghanistan has allowed the Taliban to intensify their military offensive and the Islamist militants have since gained control of more than 200 districts.

The Ministry of [Refugees](#) and Repatriations confirmed that reports had been received of the Taliban killing civilian men and forcing women and girls into marriage. Neither the ministry nor the AIHRC have been able to verify or investigate these cases.



Men with Taliban flags cross the Pakistan-Afghanistan border at Chaman, Balochistan. Many believe the Taliban are more brutal now than in the 1990s. Photograph: Reuters

However, 38-year-old Ziagul from Bamiyan does not need a government agency to tell her that the Taliban are using women as “weapons of war”. She is old enough to remember what happened when they attacked her province in the 1990s.

“Even then when they attacked Bamiyan, they had raped women. This fear has always been in our minds. That’s why we ran away, to prevent this from happening again,” she says.

Ziagul and six other women from Bamiyan escaped to the capital in the middle of the night. Many families in their villages are sending just the women and girls away to safer areas, they say.

Many believe that the Taliban have become more violent and brutal than in the 1990s. “Much of the recent wave of displacement across Afghanistan has been caused by the fear the Taliban have created about how they will treat the survivors,” says Ali Amiri, an Afghan sociologist and university professor.

They were an unknown group with extremist ideologies in the 1990s, and the violence was much subtler then

Prof Ali Amiri, Afghan sociologist

“This fear and related displacement did not exist in the 1990s. Because the extent of the Taliban’s violence is something we did not witness back then, they were seen as an unknown group with extremist ideologies, and the violence was much subtler then.

“Now we know who they are and their position on education, working women, human rights, and religious and ethnic matters in Afghanistan is completely clear. That adds to the overall fear,” he says.



People displaced by conflict in Ghor province wait for government aid at a shelter in Qaderabad village in neighbouring Herat province. Photograph: Jalil Rezayee/EPA

While many of those displaced end up in camps or are living in mosques in the city, some of the girls have found refuge in the homes of strangers. Among those sheltering people fleeing the violence is 60-year-old Rahima, who has taken many young girls and women into her house in west Kabul. “It’s been two weeks that my house is packed full of guests. I have personally experienced displacement so I know what it is like to seek a safe place,” she says.

Rahima, who has seven girls of her own, is horrified at the changing situation in Afghanistan. “I worry about the fate of my own daughters. I haven’t experienced peace in my lifetime – and now I worry my daughters will never know peace,” she says.

For women such as Fatima and Ghafoori, the exhaustion of living away from homes and families is visible on their faces.

“I’m tired of war, running away, and not ever feeling safe,” says Ghafoori. “How long must we keep running?”

Editing and translation by Ruchi Kumar

Now more than ever, Afghan women need a platform to speak for themselves. As the Taliban's return haunts Afghanistan, the survival of [Rukhshana Media](#) depends on readers' help. To continue reporting over the next crucial year, it is trying to raise \$20,000. If you can help, go to [this crowdfunding page](#).

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OpinionA-levels

Record grade inflation isn't the only thing that's different about this year's exams

Gill Wyness

The unprecedented A-level and GCSE scores raise challenging questions about how to measure future student cohorts



'It is important to continue making allowances for the exceptional circumstances young people have faced.' Students in London after receiving their A-level results. Photograph: Peter Summers/Getty Images

'It is important to continue making allowances for the exceptional circumstances young people have faced.' Students in London after receiving their A-level results. Photograph: Peter Summers/Getty Images

Thu 12 Aug 2021 05.55 EDT

This week's [GCSE](#) and [A-level](#) results confirmed the expectations of many who study education policy: the proportion of students achieving top grades has increased substantially compared to 2019, especially at A-level. Students should be extremely proud of their results, which were achieved under very difficult circumstances. Likewise, teachers have worked hard to make the best assessment they can of their pupils' performance. But there is no getting around the fact that these results are different – and not directly comparable – with pre-Covid results.

It is right to allow for the fact that students taking GCSEs and [A-levels](#) this year and last are at a disadvantage compared with previous cohorts. In-person exams would have been next to impossible in 2020, and those assessed this year have missed significant amounts of schooling.

To deal with this, the government chose an entirely different means of measuring performance: teacher assessments. (I was among those who advocated a [different approach](#), based on more flexible exams, in 2021.) This year's approach has been rather more orderly than last year's chaos, but the wide range of measures that teachers could consider – such as mock exams, in-class tests and coursework – inevitably led to variations in how schools assessed their pupils.

This year's grades may also be capturing average or “best” performance across a range of pieces of work, rather than a snapshot from one or two exams. This seems to have been particularly true at A-level, where grades have immediate consequences for university entry decisions. In short, it is unsurprising that grades based on teacher assessment are higher than those based on exams alone: while some have called this grade inflation, it may be more accurate to say that they are capturing different information.

But given they have been presented on the same scale, the stark increase in grades compared with pre-Covid times presents significant challenges for current and future cohorts.

Even making comparisons between pupils within the 2021 cohort may be challenging. Using teacher assessment is likely to have disadvantaged some students relative to others. Previous research has shown that Black Caribbean pupils are [more likely](#) than white pupils to receive a grade from

their teacher that is below their score in an externally marked test taken at the same time. Similarly, girls have been found to perform better at coursework, while boys do better at exams on average. Differences between girls and boys have been particularly apparent this year, with girls seeing larger improvements than boys in performance compared with before the pandemic.

[England's school assessment system favours the sharp-elbowed and the wealthy | Gaby Hinsliff](#)

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This year's record high scores raise challenging questions. The much larger proportion of pupils getting As and A*s, at A-level, for example, may lead to universities relying more heavily on alternative methods of distinguishing between applicants – such as personal statements – which have been shown to entrench (dis)advantage.

There is also the all-important question of what to do next year: are this year's grade distributions the right starting point, or should we be looking to return to something closer to the 2019 distributions? Is it possible to go back? And would we want to?

Assuming in-person exams are feasible next year, one possibility would be to return to 2019's system as if nothing had happened. This would probably see substantial reductions in the proportion of students getting top grades. One can only imagine the political challenge of trying to do this.

Even more important is that the next cohorts of GCSE and A-level students (and indeed the ones that follow – we are tracking the experiences of those taking GCSEs this year as part of a new UK Research and Innovation-funded cohort study, Cosmo) have also been affected by the pandemic, arguably to a greater degree than this year's. They are therefore likely to underperform their potential and get lower grades than cohorts who took their exams before the pandemic struck. That is clearly not desirable.

It is important to continue making allowances for the exceptional circumstances young people have faced during this crucial stage of their education. During the period affected by pandemic learning loss, my

suggestion, along with that of colleagues, would be to design exams with more flexibility, allowing candidates to choose which questions to answer based on their strengths, as is common in university exams. This would enable a return to the fairest way to assess students – exams – while still taking account of lost learning.

Either way, any return to exam-based grades is likely to result in an immediate and pronounced drop in results compared with the last two years. Gavin Williamson, the education secretary, has suggested that the government will aim instead for a “glide path back to a more normal state of affairs”. This would smooth out the unfairness of sharp discontinuities between cohorts. But it would mean moving away from grades being based on the same standard over time, instead setting quotas of students allowed to achieve each grade each year, gradually reducing the higher grades and increasing the lower ones. Even if that seems a good plan now, it would be very hard to stick to: the fallout from the small reduction in pass rates seen in [Scotland](#) this week would be a taste of things to come for years.

A more radical possibility would be to reset the grading system entirely. This would get around the political issue of there being very large or deliberate, small reductions in grades for future cohorts, but you wonder whether this is the right time to undertake such a drastic overhaul. The pandemic will have repercussions on young people’s grades for years: is the best approach really a total reset right now?

The question of what to do next is one that policymakers will have to grapple with over the coming months and years. Of greater urgency, however, is that pupils have experienced widespread learning losses due to the pandemic – regardless of what their grades show – and are likely to be affected by these for years. Students require continuing support throughout the rest of their educational careers, including catch-up support throughout school, college and university.

We cannot simply award them grades and move on – the learning loss remains, and must be addressed.

- Dr Gill Wyness is deputy director of the UCL Centre for Education Policy & Equalising Opportunities (CEPEO). Dr Jake Anders, also deputy director, and Dr Claire Crawford, an associate professor at CEPEO, co-authored this article
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Overconfident and rebellious – Johnson will rue the day he made a Tory party in his own image

[Martin Kettle](#)



Clashes over the climate crisis and Covid are revealing deep divisions in government. A time of reckoning is approaching



‘Reports that an apoplectic Johnson then openly threatened to demote Sunak are not just accurate but clear evidence of serious fault-lines within both the government and the parliamentary Tory party.’ Photograph: Kirsty Wigglesworth/AP

‘Reports that an apoplectic Johnson then openly threatened to demote Sunak are not just accurate but clear evidence of serious fault-lines within both the government and the parliamentary Tory party.’ Photograph: Kirsty Wigglesworth/AP

Thu 12 Aug 2021 02.00 EDT

Compared with the fate of the globe, that of [Boris Johnson](#) is infinitesimally trivial. Yet the two things are interconnected. In November, Johnson hosts what is likely to be a knife-edge Cop26 climate summit in Glasgow. At the same time he faces an autumn of acute political dilemmas at home, in which his own future as Conservative leader will be on the line. Truly the coming months are a season of reckoning – for the planet and the prime minister alike.

This week’s report from the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) [posed existential questions](#) for the nations when they come to Glasgow. But it also highlighted issues that are becoming increasingly important to Johnson’s own survival. He is the leader of a Tory party that

bridles both [ideologically and financially](#) at the hard and expensive choices – on everything from aircraft and cars to home insulation and power generation – that are umbilically linked to his net-zero-by-2050 pledges and to the implications of the IPCC report.

Faced with a run of relatively poor recent opinion polls, many in the parliamentary party have little stomach for an ambitious climate agenda. They fear that the disruptions and costs could be politically toxic among poorer former Labour voters in so-called red wall seats who prioritise investment in their communities and the NHS. These MPs are authors of their own anxieties, since they are simultaneously unwilling to countenance the borrowing and taxes that might make such an agenda possible.

Throw into the mix the reality that climate scepticism remains only a dormant part of some Conservatives' political DNA, particularly on the libertarian right. Add the fact that Nigel Farage, whose influence still obsesses a section of the Tory party, now accuses the UN of alarmism and warns of waves of eco-refugees. In this volatile atmosphere, there is deep Tory unease about the financial costs of net zero, the reliability of the technological alternatives and the political price of any grand strategic approach. As a result there is real potential for an alarmed Tory horse to throw its overconfident rider out of the saddle.

Even without the climate crisis, this would be a difficult autumn for Johnson. Covid united the country in support of the NHS. But it has opened increasingly deep divisions in the Tory party about what to do when Covid recedes. These range from immediate dilemmas such as whether to maintain the pandemic-era uplift to universal credit – a demand now backed by some of Johnson's most prominent rebel backbenchers – to much larger strategic spending choices on health and [social care](#). Here, the head-on clash between Johnson's instinct for popular spending pledges and the Treasury's desire to keep tight control of the post-pandemic purse strings created a still unresolved [standoff with the chancellor](#), Rishi Sunak, as parliament broke up for the summer.

All these issues will return to the heart of the government with great force in the autumn and over the coming year. Every one of them has the potential to pit Johnson against Sunak and other rivals, with major political and policy

consequences. The relationship between Johnson and Sunak has morphed into rivalry as the pandemic has unfolded. The deterioration was clear when the chancellor's letter calling for a [relaxation of travel restrictions](#) was leaked at the end of last month. Reports that an apoplectic Johnson then openly threatened to [demote Sunak](#) are not just accurate but clear evidence of serious fault lines within both the government and the parliamentary Tory party.

There are two fundamental reasons why the internal Tory arguments about net zero, about building back after Covid and about the party's future direction should be taken very seriously. The first is ideological, because they tend to bring Johnson's personality and populism into stark conflict with the ascetic anti-governmental instincts that much of the party and its rich donors have internalised since the era of Margaret Thatcher. The second is more narrowly political. The modern Tory party has become rebellious and confident enough to bring its leader down – in no small way thanks to the example of Johnson's own behaviour over many years, of course.

The ideological impasse will have to be confronted in some way in Sunak's autumn spending review. Coming as this does in the wake of Brexit, Covid and the Conservatives' embrace of the state doing "what it takes" to keep the economy alive, the review will either be the event that puts a stamp on a new Conservative era, or one that marks the retreat towards the tighter norms of the recent past. Until now, Sunak has just about managed to straddle the two approaches. It is one of the reasons why he continues to be most Tories' choice as future leader. He may yet manage to postpone the moment of decision, as he has done at various stages through the pandemic. But he cannot do that for ever.

[There is no 'getting back to normal' with climate breakdown | Mark Blyth](#)
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The climate crisis means that the spending review has to come down on one side of the fence or the other. Johnson has simply promised too many things on too many issues – net zero, the NHS, social care, rebuilding the north and HS2 among them – for the Conservatives to be able to continue very much longer as simultaneous heavy spenders and tight fiscal rules enforcers. That's certainly how most Tory MPs see it, including those in former Labour

seats. Something will have to give. The choice will say more clearly than any speech or headline what sort of Tory party this now is.

Yet it is possible that Johnson will have to give too. The gratitude that victorious Tories felt towards him in 2019 has not vanished entirely. But it is now heavily counterbalanced with frustrations and impatience. Johnson remains an isolated leader. It is not clear what he believes in beyond his own success. He does not take his ministers and his MPs very seriously. There are few diehard believers. He is not the first prime minister of whom such things could be said; some of those were not brought down by it. But none has been so casual and sloppy about quite so many immense choices.

And few have been leaders of such an undisciplined party. They push back against Johnson almost as much as they did against Theresa May, and on an enormous range of issues. They seem to have forgotten what opposition is like. Instead they spend a lot of time speculating who should be the next leader. This is not good for the Tories and extremely perilous for Johnson. But it is full of opportunities for the opposition parties. If I was Keir Starmer or Ed Davey I would be looking forward to this autumn.

- Martin Kettle is a Guardian columnist
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The secret of happiness? Be more like Ted Lasso

[Adrian Chiles](#)



I love the comedy show about a goodhearted football manager so much I decided to emulate him. Then Private Eye, the satirical news magazine, took a swipe at me



Smiling, patient and kind ... Jason Sudeikis as Ted Lasso. Photograph: Colin Hutton/Apple TV + undefined

Smiling, patient and kind ... Jason Sudeikis as Ted Lasso. Photograph: Colin Hutton/Apple TV + undefined

Thu 12 Aug 2021 02.00 EDT

Ted Lasso has changed my life. It's a comedy series on Apple TV+ about a coach of an American football college team who, improbably, is taken on as manager of a Premier League football team in London. Ted, [played brilliantly by Jason Sudeikis](#), knows nothing about our kind of football. If you can get over [the absurdity of the premise](#), it soon [becomes funny and entertaining](#). But getting deeper into it, I sensed there might be something more profound about the show.

Ted, notwithstanding his cluelessness about the game, apparent naivety about everything and endless stream of corny jokes, somehow gets on. His players and the press start out savaging him, but he manages to win them over. He does so largely through sheer goodness of heart. He's always smiling, patient and kind, rising to none of the nastiness thrown his way. In its own quiet way, it's beautiful to watch.

Obviously, it's all a ridiculous fantasy. Anybody so relentlessly patient and kind would be destroyed in the real world. Or would they? Either way, I've resolved to try to be more Ted Lasso, and I'm a happier person for it. I instantly forgave the chap who nearly knocked me off my motorbike last week and I made friends with the woman in the park who was angry with me about my dog's behaviour. And when the satirical news magazine [Private Eye](#) devoted half a page in its last edition denigrating me as the crappiest writer ever, I dug deep into my Lasso-ness and came up smiling. Why, I thought, for years I've enjoyed reading Private Eye being rude about people; it would be hypocrisy to be upset when it's my turn. I remember well how much my mum loved reading AA Gill week in, week out, until one Sunday he put the boot into her boy. At that point she said she loathed him and would never read his words again.

No, I am serene. I am Ted Lasso. My mum, however, very much is not. So if you happen to know the name and address of whoever wrote the Private Eye piece, she would like to pay them a visit.

Adrian Chiles is a Guardian columnist

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Guardian Opinion cartoon

Prince Andrew

Ben Jennings on Prince Andrew being back in the news – cartoon

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Sex workers fighting for human rights among world's most 'at risk activists'

Exclusive: Front Line Defenders report says rights defenders working in sex industry face 'targeted attacks' around the world

- ['I'm scared of being killed': sex worker activists speak out](#)



Sex worker rights defenders from Yosoa in Zanzibar, Tanzania. Yosoa do health outreach work and provide support after police, client or family violence. Photograph: Erin Kilbride/Front Line Defenders

Sex worker rights defenders from Yosoa in Zanzibar, Tanzania. Yosoa do health outreach work and provide support after police, client or family violence. Photograph: Erin Kilbride/Front Line Defenders

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[About this content](#)

[Sarah Johnson](#)

Thu 12 Aug 2021 02.30 EDT

Sex worker activists are among the most at risk defenders of human rights in the world, facing multiple threats and violent attacks, an extensive investigation has found.

The [research, published today](#) by human rights organisation Front Line Defenders, found that their visibility as sex workers who are advocates for their communities' rights makes them more vulnerable to the violations routinely suffered by sex workers. In addition, they face unique, targeted abuse for their human rights work.

Drawing on the experience of 300 individuals in Tanzania, Kyrgyzstan, [El Salvador](#) and Myanmar, the report focuses on cases of sexual assault, threats from managers and clients, raids on homes and offices, physical attacks and police surveillance endured by sex workers undertaking human rights work.

The services the activists provide to fellow sex workers include: negotiating access to brothels, conducting gender rights training, offering legal and

health counselling, reporting experiences of violence, and campaigning for freedom of movement and free choice of employment for those seeking to leave sex work.

Erin Kilbride, research and visibility coordinator at Front Line Defenders and lead author of the report, said: “Sex worker rights defenders take extreme personal risks to protect their communities’ rights to access justice, healthcare, housing and food, while responding to the immediate threats of police and domestic violence, discrimination, criminalisation and structural poverty.”

Often these activists were the only people able and willing to provide health education in locations in which sex was sold, the report found. They ensured treatment for sex workers who would otherwise be left with crippling injuries and life-threatening illnesses.

Activists’ role in creating community networks and defending sex workers’ right to assemble were also highlighted in the report. “Coming together, even in private, is a radical, resistant, and dangerous act for defenders whose very identities are criminalised,” it said.

Defenders interviewed said they had been subjected to violations above and beyond what are typical for sex workers in their area. These included torture in prison, threats by name on the street, targeted abuse on social media and demands for sex in exchange for an advocacy meeting with a police commissioner. They also faced attacks from clients.

Ismail (not his real name), a sex worker activist in [Tanzania](#), had to have hospital treatment for two months after he was gang-raped in a hotel room by a long-term client and four other men.

Ismail’s client had never been violent towards him before. In the weeks before the attack, the client had found out about Ismail’s human rights work and had started asking about it.

“He repeatedly told me that being gay was fine, and being a sex worker was fine, but that I had to stop my activism. He knew about the human rights

workshops and trainings I do. He said this was promoting sex work to other people, especially kids,” he said.

During the assault, the client continually referenced Ismail’s activism, saying that it was his fault that people were becoming sex workers.

In Tanzania, sexual assaults in detention by the police have become a common occurrence for sex workers. They are often forced to perform sex acts in exchange for release. But human rights defenders have also been forced to perform sexual acts in order to secure other sex workers’ release. If they refuse, they are often tortured. One woman was given electric shocks after she refused to perform sex acts during a one-week detention related to her human rights work.

In El Salvador and other countries, physical attacks by clients and managers began after they learned about a sex worker’s activism, said the report.



Sex worker rights defenders from Colectiva Venus in San Salvador. Sex workers in El Salvador said they had been attacked by clients and managers for their activism. Photograph: Erin Kilbride/Front Line Defenders

In [Myanmar](#), police followed activists to brothels to conduct raids during human rights trainings. Some activists had been forced to change where they

sell sex because police surveillance increased after they became known for their human rights work.

Activists were often belittled at police stations in front of the sex workers they had tried to help. Htut, an outreach worker for Aye Myanmar Association, a network of sex workers, said: “[The police] let us in to the stations but then use rude words, take money from us, insult us, embarrass us, and made me feel bad about myself. It feels like they want to prove to the other sex workers that being an advocate is a humiliating thing.”

In [Kyrgyzstan](#), sex workers have been paid or threatened by the police to help entrap rights defenders when they go to an area to distribute health supplies.

[‘I’m sacrificing myself’: agony of Kabul’s secret sex workers](#)

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Despite the overwhelming evidence that sex worker activists have been under threat for their human rights work, much of it is dismissed by people ranging from the police to their own families, who assume such attacks are a result of being a sex worker.

Kilbride said: “Human rights defenders who are sex workers themselves are the best, and sometimes the only, activists and communities workers qualified and capable of accessing the most dangerous locations in which people sell sex.

“The targeted attacks they experience – ranging from sexual assault in detention to raids on their homes and offices – are indicators of how powerful their human rights work is.”

Some of the sex worker activists interviewed in the report will be taking part in an [online event at 3pm \(GMT\) on 12 August](#)

In the UK, [Rape Crisis](#) offers support for rape and sexual abuse on 0808 802 9999 in England and Wales, 0808 801 0302 in [Scotland](#), or 0800 0246 991 in [Northern Ireland](#). In the US, [Rainn](#) offers support on 800-656-4673.

In Australia, support is available at [1800Respect](https://1800respect.org.au/) (1800 737 732). Other international helplines can be found at ibiblio.org/rcip/internl.html

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Ex K-pop star Seungri ‘jailed over sex and gambling scandal’

Former Big Bang singer reportedly convicted of arranging sex services for potential business investors



Seungri, real name Lee Seung-hyun, retired from showbusiness as the scandal mounted and later enlisted in the military. Photograph: Jung Yeon-Je/AFP/Getty Images

Seungri, real name Lee Seung-hyun, retired from showbusiness as the scandal mounted and later enlisted in the military. Photograph: Jung Yeon-Je/AFP/Getty Images

Agence France-Presse

Thu 12 Aug 2021 05.05 EDT

A military court jailed the disgraced former [K-pop](#) star Seungri for three years on Thursday for arranging sex services and other charges stemming from a sex and gambling scandal, according to reports.

The 30-year-old singer from the popular boyband Big Bang, who retired from showbusiness as the scandal mounted and later enlisted in the military, was found guilty on all nine counts against him, according to various media reports.

Big Bang enjoyed widespread fame after their 2006 debut, and Seungri – real name Lee Seung-hyun – went on to become a successful businessman.

He was convicted of arranging sex services for potential investors in his business, as well as overseas gambling at luxurious casinos in Las Vegas involving illicit foreign exchange transactions.

“It is hard to see the defendant was not aware of financial payments paid to the women for sex,” the judge, Hwang Min-je, was cited as saying. “It appears that he carried out systematic sexual prostitution.”

Seungri had changed his testimony under police questioning and in court, he added, and “lacked credibility”.

The singer was also ordered to pay 1.15bn won (\$1m) in restitution.

The investigation into the scandal surrounding him uncovered a spate of allegations against other musicians and personnel at YG Entertainment, Seungri’s former agency and one of K-pop’s biggest management firms.

It prompted the agency’s chief executive, Yang Hyun-suk, to step down, facing inquiries of his own into illicit gambling.

Reaction to the verdict was swift on Thursday, with many users online saying Seungri’s punishment was too light for the offences.

“While it is fortunate he is finally being jailed, the term is too short,” a user on Naver, South Korea’s largest portal, posted.

Another said: “It should’ve been 30 years, not three.”

The verdict came a month before he was due to be discharged from his mandatory military service.

All able-bodied South Korean men are obliged to fulfil about two years of military service to defend the country from nuclear-armed North Korea, with which it remains technically at war.

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Lesotho's PM isolating with Covid as cases 'go unrecorded'

Medics fear government is failing to gather data as 'social media conspiracies' slow vaccination take-up

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'Being vaccinated should not bring about reckless behaviour,' warned Lesotho's prime minister, Moeketsi Majoro. Photograph: Molise Molise/AFP/Getty

'Being vaccinated should not bring about reckless behaviour,' warned Lesotho's prime minister, Moeketsi Majoro. Photograph: Molise Molise

Molise/AFP/Getty

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[Silence Charumbira](#)in Maseru

Thu 12 Aug 2021 04.00 EDT

Lesotho's prime minister, Moeketsi Majoro, has said he is isolating after testing positive for Covid-19, as doctors warned that the true tally of cases in the country was going unrecorded.

Majoro tweeted that he had taken a travel-related test that came back positive.

He said: "May I advise anyone who has been in close contact with me recently to rush for PCR testing to ensure your safety."

Majoro's spokesman, Buta Moseme, said the prime minister would remain in quarantine at home, although he was not showing any symptoms.

He said Majoro's oxygen saturation and other tests were satisfactory and that the public should remain calm.

In the statement, Majoro said: “The important message is that even when you are vaccinated, you should still follow WHO and Ministry of [Health](#) Covid-19 protocols at all times.

“Being vaccinated should not bring about reckless behaviour as an infected person can infect other people who are not vaccinated,” he said.

Lesotho, with a population of 2.1 million, has recorded [more than 3,000 new Covid-19 cases](#) from the start of May to 10 August. The virus has killed 391 people.

A doctor at a private clinic in Maseru, the capital of Lesotho, is among those concerned that the [National Covid-19 Secretariat](#) is failing to gather data.

“In the last month alone, we have seen over 100 patients who are Covid-19 positive but the secretariat has never collected our data,” he told the Guardian.

Lesotho had only received 36,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine until July, when the US delivered 302,400 Johnson & Johnson vaccines.

The government has started to administer the doses, and a further 108,000 have since been delivered. The last batch was procured using \$1m (£700,000) [donated by the Vodacom Foundation](#) to Lesotho in April.

While the vaccines are welcome, medical staff have said the government is not doing enough to persuade an indifferent public to get vaccinated.

The lack of information has also been blamed for the slow progress in testing and vaccine rollout. Just over 140,000 [tests have been conducted](#), as of 10 August, and [more than 13,000 have been positive so far](#).

[‘Our morgues are full’: Zimbabwe struggles with surge in Covid burials](#)
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“People have no information and they are relying on social media. This means they are not getting accurate and reliable information and this is why there is so much apathy,” said a nurse who did not want to be identified.

“The public is hesitant because of social media conspiracies.”

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South Korean politicians seek to criminalise ‘semen terrorism’

Recent court rulings have punished men on charges of property damage rather than sexually criminal behaviour



Women call for a government crackdown on widespread spycam porn crimes at a 2018 rally in Seoul. Photograph: STR/AFP via Getty Images

Women call for a government crackdown on widespread spycam porn crimes at a 2018 rally in Seoul. Photograph: STR/AFP via Getty Images

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Raphael Rashid in Seoul

Wed 11 Aug 2021 22.17 EDT

Politicians in [South Korea](#) are seeking to make amendments to existing laws in order to make “semen terrorism” a punishable sex crime.

The move comes after a string of controversial court verdicts that have punished men who secretly ejaculated onto women’s belongings for “property damage”, and not for sexually criminal behaviour.

Lenient court rulings and societal attitudes towards sex crimes in South Korea have come under [increased criticism](#) over the past few years and in light of the global [#MeToo movement](#).

[Samsung boss to be freed from jail after bribery sentence](#)

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The act of secretly delivering or smearing semen onto someone else, also known locally as “semen terrorism”, has now become a case in point, with local activists highlighting the lack of an adequate legal framework to punish what they consider to be clearly a sex crime.

In 2019, a man who soaked a woman's shoes with semen was given a 500,000 won fine (\$435). Police said at the time the investigation was carried out on charges of "property damage" because there were no legal provisions to apply sex crime charges.

That same year, a man was sentenced to three years in prison for "attempted injury" among other charges after spiking a woman's coffees with laxatives and aphrodisiacs as revenge for rejecting his love advances. Despite also adding his semen and phlegm to the mix and to other items 54 times, the crime was not recognised as a sex crime because no forced sexual assault was established.

And in May 2021, a male civil servant was sentenced to a fine of 3m won on charges of "property damage" for ejaculating inside his female colleague's coffee tumbler six times over the course of half a year. The court judged that his actions "ruined" the utility of the container. Local media continue to report on many more instances of "semen terrorism".

[Once a Covid success story, South Korea sweats through summer of Delta surge](#)

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According to [South Korean law](#), a perpetrator must exercise violence or intimidation in order for the offence to be recognised as a sex crime, such as molestation or rape. Also punishable are [digital or online](#) sex crimes.

"The victim [in the coffee tumbler case] was sexually humiliated, but it was not considered a sex crime because it was not seen as involving direct physical contact," Baek Hye-ryun, a lawmaker of the ruling Democratic party who is trying to change the law, told the Guardian. "By charging the perpetrator with 'damage of property', his act was judged to have infringed on the utility of the tumbler."

Baek submitted an amendment bill to the national assembly last month that seeks to expand the scope of punishable sex crimes to include non-physical contact through the delivery of objects or substances that cause sexual shame. "Sex crimes need to be interpreted from the victim's point of view," she said.

A similar bill was submitted by Baek's fellow party parliamentarian Lee Su-jin in December last year which also proposes to expand the definition of "indecent acts" by amending the country's criminal code. Both bills have yet to be discussed at the national assembly.

There have been several instances where judges have acknowledged "semen terrorism" to be acts of molestation in the absence of physical contact, but around 53% of recent related court cases have handed perpetrators suspended sentences, according to an analysis by Women's News.

[North Korea wants sanctions eased on metal, fuel and 'liquor and suits' to restart US talks](#)

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Out of 44 recent police cases, 26 were charged with molestation, and 17 with property damage, suggesting differing interpretations of existing laws that the proposed amendment would clear up.

"Every sex crime is a crime," said Choi Won-jin, secretary general of the civic group Korean Womenlink, who believes such acts are also hate crimes against women. "This isn't a random act of violence in the street, it's targeting a specific gender."

South Korea has seen some progress in recent years when it comes to improving the legal system. Possession of illegal sexual videos is now punishable by up to [three years in prison](#), and stalkers will soon face [heavier punishments](#).

Choi said: "Just like other incidents that brought about legal revisions, it's a matter of expanding our understanding of the pain that can be caused to a person and making the necessary changes."

- In the US, Rainn offers support on 800-656-4673. In the UK, [Rape Crisis](#) offers support for rape and sexual abuse 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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German police arrest Briton on suspicion of spying for Russia

Employee at British embassy in Berlin suspected of passing on documents in exchange for cash

- ['Old-style espionage': Briton's arrest feels like cold war throwback](#)



The British embassy in Berlin. Photograph: Fritz Reiss/AP

The British embassy in Berlin. Photograph: Fritz Reiss/AP

[Philip Oltermann](#) in Berlin, [Vikram Dodd](#) and [Andrew Sparrow](#)

Wed 11 Aug 2021 10.17 EDT

German police have arrested a British man who worked at the British embassy in Berlin on suspicion of spying for Russian intelligence in exchange for cash bribes, according to prosecutors.

Germany's highest public prosecutor said the man, identified only as David S, was arrested at his Potsdam apartment at 2.20pm on Tuesday, and his home and embassy workplace were searched.

The 57-year-old Briton is understood not to be a diplomat but a private contractor working as a security guard at the Berlin embassy and therefore does not hold diplomatic immunity.

He is suspected of having worked for a Russian intelligence agency at least since November 2020, at least once passing on documents he had acquired through his work to a handler.

He is alleged to have been paid a cash bribe to pass information to Russian intelligence.

He is a British national and was under surveillance by British and German investigators, believed to have included MI5, but officials reluctant to discuss when that started.

The operation that led to David S being suspected was "intelligence-led".

He is alleged to have received cash payments of an as yet unspecified sum in exchange for information. Citing prosecutors' circles, the German news magazine Focus reported on Wednesday that the information passed on related to counter-terrorism issues.

Germany's public prosecutor said the arrest was the result of a joint investigation by German and British authorities. The Metropolitan police said the investigation into David S had involved Scotland Yard's counter-terrorism officers.

"The man was arrested in the Berlin area on suspicion of committing offences relating to being engaged in 'intelligence agent activity' (under German law)," the Metropolitan police said.

“Primacy for the investigation remains with German authorities. Officers from the counter-terrorism command continue to liaise with German counterparts as the investigation continues.”

The Met’s counter-terrorism command is responsible for investigating alleged breaches of the Official Secrets Act.

A spokesperson for the British Home Office said: “An individual who was contracted to work for the government was arrested yesterday by the German authorities. It would not be appropriate to comment further as there is an ongoing police investigation.”

Nick Thomas-Symonds, the shadow home secretary, said the allegations potentially amounted to a “serious breach of UK national security”.

“All measures must now be taken – urgently – to establish exactly what information has been passed to Russian intelligence and the impact this has on the UK, as well as that of our allies,” he said.

“This is yet another example of the real threat posed by Russia, so it is unacceptable that Conservative ministers have been so slow to enact the measures necessary to protect the UK, including implementing the recommendations of [the Russia report](#).”

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Plymouth shooting

Gunman suspected of killing five in Plymouth shooting is named

Local sources identify Jake Davison, who also killed himself in atrocity being classed as domestic incident

- [Plymouth ‘in mourning’ as gunman named – latest updates](#)

01:35

Plymouth shooting leaves six dead including a child – video report

[Jamie Grierson](#), [Steven Morris](#) and [Matthew Weaver](#)

Fri 13 Aug 2021 05.17 EDT

A man suspected of killing five people, including a child, before turning a gun on himself in [Plymouth](#) has been named as Jake Davison.

[Two females and two males died](#) at the scene in the Keyham area of the city, along with another male who was believed to have been the offender, Devon and Cornwall police said.

Another female was treated at the scene for gunshot wounds and later died in hospital. One of the victims was a child under 10, according to an MP.

The force said next of kin had been informed and it was not looking for anyone else in connection with the attack, which it confirmed was not terror-related.

Multiple local sources named Davison, 22, as the shooter. Social media profiles suggest he worked at Babcock International, which has a significant

presence near the city at the dockyards in Devonport.



Jake Davison. Photograph: Rex/Shutterstock

Social media posts from about 2018 also suggest he was a fan of the former US president Donald Trump and a supporter of the UK Libertarian party. He also recently shared his struggles in keeping fit and his difficulties using weights to stay in shape.

The prime minister, Boris Johnson, tweeted: “My thoughts are with the friends and family of those who lost their lives and with all those affected by the tragic incident in Plymouth last night. I thank the emergency services for their response.”

Babcock’s CEO, David Lockwood, said: “I am shocked and deeply saddened by the events that have unfolded overnight in Plymouth and the deaths of six people.

“Our thoughts and condolences are with the friends and families of those involved in this tragedy. We stand with the city at this difficult time.

“As one of the largest employers in Plymouth, we are providing support and help for any of our colleagues who feel affected by this incident.”

The Labour MP for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport, Luke Pollard, said more people were being treated for their injuries in hospital, and tweeted: “I’m utterly devastated that one of the people killed in the #keyham shooting was a child under ten years old.”

Emergency services were called to Biddick Drive in the Keyham area of the city, where the offender is understood to have lived, shortly after 6pm on Thursday. Witnesses described hearing gunshots with one saying she saw a man “randomly” start shooting at people.

In a statement early on Friday, Devon and Cornwall police said two females and two males had died at the scene.

“A further male, believed to be the offender, was also deceased at the scene. All are believed to have died from gunshot wounds. Another female treated at the scene for gunshot wounds died a short time later in hospital.

“All of the next of kin of the deceased have been located and informed by Devon and Cornwall police officers.” The force said the shootings were not terrorism related.

They added: “The area has been cordoned off and police are not looking for anyone else.”

Biddick Drive location map

It urged the public with mobile phone footage of the “immediate aftermath” not to post it on social media and to “respect those families who have lost loved ones this evening”.

One witness, who lives near Biddick Drive and gave her name as Sharron, told the BBC: “Firstly, there was shouting, followed by gunshots – three, possibly four to begin with.

“This was when the shooter kicked in the door of a house and randomly started shooting ... he ran from the house shooting as he ran and proceeded to shoot at a few people in the Linear Park up from the drive.”

Robert Pinkerton told the BBC he had walked around the corner and “bumped into a bloke with a shotgun”.

Pollard tweeted that police confirmed six people had died, adding “more people are being treated for their injuries in hospital”. He said: “Just so unspeakably awful. My condolences and thoughts are with the families.”

In a video posted on Twitter, Pollard said Ford primary school and St Mark’s church on Cambridge Road in Keyham would be open from 9am on Friday and he, along with police and local councillors, would be attending to support the community.

He said time and space would be needed to process what has happened, but “this will be a safe space for the community to come together”.

South Western ambulance service said it was called just after 6pm on Thursday and responded with a significant number of resources, including hazardous area response teams, multiple ambulances, air ambulances, multiple doctors and senior paramedics.

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Plymouth shooting

Five killed in Plymouth shooting named by police, including gunman's mother Maxine Davison – as it happened

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UK security and counter-terrorism

Priti Patel to take over security minister brief on permanent basis

Home secretary has been covering portfolio since resignation of James Brokenshire in July following return of cancer



Priti Patel will add the extensive portfolio to her Home Office responsibilities. Photograph: Aaron Chown/PA

Priti Patel will add the extensive portfolio to her Home Office responsibilities. Photograph: Aaron Chown/PA

[Jamie Grierson](#) Home affairs correspondent

[@JamieGrierson](#)

Fri 13 Aug 2021 07.43 EDT

The home secretary, Priti Patel, is to take on the security minister's responsibilities permanently after [James Brokenshire](#) left the portfolio last month, according to reports.

Brokenshire announced his resignation on 7 July, telling Boris Johnson that his recovery from lung cancer treatment was "taking longer than anticipated" after a resurgence of the illness he was diagnosed with two years ago.

Patel will take over his brief on a permanent basis after covering the role for more than a month, the Times reported.

The move came shortly after Labour claimed that the [arrest on Tuesday of a British man in Berlin](#) on suspicion of spying for Russia raised questions about the prime minister's failure to fill the security post. The shadow security minister, Conor McGinn, said it "beggared belief" that the role had not been filled five weeks on.

The Metropolitan police commissioner, Dame Cressida Dick, said on Thursday that her force had been involved in the Berlin case for "a number of months".

A Home Office spokesperson said on Wednesday: "The home secretary is responsible for all areas of Home Office business, including those related to national security."

The [security minister brief](#) outlined on the government's website is extensive. Responsibilities include counter-terrorism, serious and organised crime, cybercrime, economic crime, hostile state activity, extradition, and royal and VIP protection.

It also covers online harms; the common travel area between the UK, Ireland, the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands; aviation and maritime security; Grenfell; and flooding, hurricane, and natural disaster relief.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the minister also oversaw the functioning of the domestic national security system, including MI5, counter-terrorism

policing, as well as the functioning of the serious and organised crime system, including the National Crime Agency, and cybersecurity.

McGinn said: “This is a clear sign that the [Conservatives](#) don’t take the safety of our citizens seriously enough. Rather than No 10 and the home secretary briefing against each other, Britain’s security should be the government’s number one concern.

“Getting rid of a specific, day-to-day, senior government minister responsible for security and counter-terrorism when Britain’s national security is under threat 24 hours a day, seven days a week is an abdication of responsibility.

“From the chaos in the Channel to the Police Federation declaring no confidence in her, the home secretary is clearly struggling to deliver on her current responsibilities. It is unwise that she takes on an additional role.”

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US withdrawal from Afghanistan a mistake, says UK defence secretary

Ben Wallace says troop pullout had given Taliban momentum and ‘international community will probably pay the consequences’



Taliban fighters stand on a vehicle along the roadside in Herat after Afghan government forces pulled out of the city. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

Taliban fighters stand on a vehicle along the roadside in Herat after Afghan government forces pulled out of the city. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

[Matthew Weaver](#)

Fri 13 Aug 2021 03.47 EDT

The UK defence secretary has criticised the US decision to leave [Afghanistan](#) as a “mistake” that has handed the Taliban “momentum”.

Speaking to Sky News, [Ben Wallace](#) warned that “the international community will probably pay the consequences” and said he was worried al-Qaida would regain a base in Afghanistan.

He confirmed UK plans to deploy 600 troops to Afghanistan to help 3,000 people including interpreters and British passport holders to leave, as officials said on Friday the Taliban had [captured Afghanistan's second biggest city, Kandahar](#), as well as Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand province in the south.

Wallace said the withdrawal agreement [negotiated in Doha, Qatar](#), by the Trump administration was a “rotten deal” which the UK tried to resist.

[US deserves big share of blame for Afghanistan military disaster](#)
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He said the UK had no choice but to pull troops out, because the international community had to act together. “When the United States as the framework nation took that decision, the way we were all configured meant that we had to leave,” Wallace said.

Asked how big a mistake it was to withdraw troops, Wallace said: “At the time of the Trump deal with, obviously the [Taliban](#), I felt that was a mistake to have done it that way. We will all, in the international community probably pay the consequences of that.”

He added: “I’ve been pretty blunt about it publicly and that’s quite a rare thing when it comes to United States decisions, but strategically it causes a lot of problems and as an international community, it’s very difficult for what we’re seeing today.”

Asked about the threat of Afghanistan becoming a base for terrorism, Wallace said: “I’m absolutely worried that failed states are breeding grounds for those types of people. It’s why I felt this was not the right time or decision to make because al-Qaida will probably come back.”

Wallace added: “I think the deal that was done in Doha was a rotten deal. It effectively told a Taliban that wasn’t winning that they were winning, and it undermined the government of Afghanistan and now we’re in this position where the Taliban have clearly the momentum across the country.

“The United States are leaving, we are leaving alongside them, and that leaves a very, very big problem on the ground developing with the Taliban, obviously with the momentum and it’s not what we probably would have liked. I did try after the announcement, to see if we can bring together the international community. And I’m afraid most in that community weren’t particularly interested.”

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Afghanistan likened to fall of Saigon as officials confirm Taliban take Kandahar

As Lashkar Gah is also captured, US senator Mitch McConnell says exit could be ‘sequel’ to Vietnam humiliation



A Taliban fighter holds a rocket-propelled grenade on the roadside in Herat, Afghanistan's third biggest city. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

A Taliban fighter holds a rocket-propelled grenade on the roadside in Herat, Afghanistan's third biggest city. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

Guardian staff

Fri 13 Aug 2021 01.25 EDT

Mitch McConnell has warned that America's retreat from [Afghanistan](#) risks a replay of the nation's humiliating withdrawal from Saigon at the end of the Vietnam conflict in 1975.

As thousands of American soldiers were ordered back to Kabul to evacuate embassy staff amid a rapid advance by the Taliban, US Senate minority leader McConnell said the US was "careening toward a massive, predictable, and preventable disaster".

It came as officials confirmed on Friday that the Taliban had captured Afghanistan's second biggest city, Kandahar, as well as Lashkar Gah in the south.

The Taliban also claimed they had captured the western city of Herat, the country's third-largest, and Qala-e-Naw in the north-west.

A photo that immortalised America's defeat in Vietnam, showing evacuees boarding a helicopter on the roof of a building, spread fast on social networks after the United States [announced the emergency deployment on Thursday](#).

[US deserves big share of blame for Afghanistan military disaster](#)
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McConnell, the most senior Republican in Congress, criticised the Biden administration on Thursday for its [decision to announce the withdrawal of troops by 11 September](#) – the 20th anniversary of the terror attack on New York and Washington that precipitated the US invasion of Afghanistan.

Although Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump, had signalled the withdrawal, McConnell gave a searing assessment of the White House plan.

"The latest news of a further drawdown at our embassy and a hasty deployment of military forces seem like preparations for the fall of Kabul," McConnell said.

"President [Joe] Biden's decisions have us hurtling toward an even worse sequel to the humiliating fall of Saigon in 1975."

“President Biden is finding that the quickest way to end a war is to lose it,” McConnell said, urging the president instead to commit to providing more support to Afghan forces.

“Without it, al-Qaida and the Taliban may celebrate the 20th anniversary of the September 11 attacks by burning down our embassy in Kabul.”

A former US state department spokesperson, Morgan Ortagus, added her weight to the chorus of criticism, saying that it was “a huge foreign policy failure with generational ramifications just shy of seven months into this administration. Everything points to a complete collapse.”



Evacuees mounting a staircase to board an American helicopter on the top of an apartment building near the US embassy in Saigon in 1975. Photograph: Bettmann/Bettmann Archive

Biden said on Tuesday that he does not regret his decision, noting that Washington has spent more than a trillion dollars in America’s longest war and lost thousands of troops. He added the United States continued to provide significant air support, food, equipment and salaries to Afghan forces.

Back in June, as the Taliban advance built momentum, Biden addressed the Saigon parallels and dismissed them out of hand. “There’s going to be no

circumstance where you'll see people being lifted off the roof of an embassy of the United States from Afghanistan," he said.

The same month – since which the Taliban's lightning offensive has surprised many US military officials – the chairman of the US joint chiefs of staff, Gen Mark Milley, also rejected comparisons to the desperate exit from Saigon.

"I do not see that unfolding," Milley said. "I may be wrong, who knows, you can't predict the future, but I don't see Saigon 1975 in Afghanistan. The Taliban just aren't the North Vietnamese army. It's not that kind of situation."

To carry out the evacuation of American staff from its embassy in Kabul, 3,000 US troops will secure the airport, 1,000 will be sent to Qatar for technical and logistical support, while 3,500 to 4,000 will be positioned in Kuwait to deploy if needed.

Senior US officials spoke to Afghanistan's president, Ashraf Ghani, on Thursday and told him the US "remains invested in the security and stability of Afghanistan" in the face of Taliban violence, the state department said.

Antony Blinken, the US secretary of state, and Lloyd Austin, the defence secretary, told Ghani that Washington was reducing its civilian footprint in Kabul given the "evolving security situation" and would increase the tempo of special immigration visa flights for Afghans who helped the US effort in the country.

The UK said it would send 600 troops, and the defence secretary, Ben Wallace, said Britain was relocating its embassy from the outskirts of the secure Green Zone to a potentially safer location closer to the centre of the capital.

On Thursday, US officials scrambled to answer questions about the mission, with the Pentagon spokesman John Kirby declining to describe it as a so-called "noncombatant evacuation operation", or NOE. He indicated it had no name, and avoided talking about evacuations.

The most famous “NOE” mission was Operation Frequent Wind, during which more than 7,000 Vietnamese civilians were evacuated from Saigon on 29-30 April 1975 by helicopter.

The image of American diplomats departing under military protection from the top of an apartment building used by the CIA – not the US embassy as often believed – has come to represent American failure in Indochina.

Asked about the image and the inevitable comparisons between the situation in Afghanistan and the fall of Saigon, Kirby tried to underline the differences.

mappy

“We are not completely eliminating our diplomatic presence on the ground,” he said.

“Nobody is abandoning Afghanistan, it’s not walking away from it. It’s doing the right thing at the right time to protect our people.”

The Taliban’s capture of Kandahar capped an eight-day blitz that has left only the capital and pockets of other territory in government hands. The group has established a bridgehead within 95 miles (150km) of Kabul and its rapid advances leave the capital isolated from the rest of the country.

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Coronavirus

Firms selling UK travellers Covid tests not charging VAT - investigation

Exclusive: Guardian finds companies are not adding on tax on kits for holidaymakers

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HMRC guidance suggests only Covid tests administered by a health professional are exempt from VAT. Photograph: Guy Bell/Rex/Shutterstock

HMRC guidance suggests only Covid tests administered by a health professional are exempt from VAT. Photograph: Guy Bell/Rex/Shutterstock

[Sarah Butler](#)

@whatbutlersaw

Fri 13 Aug 2021 01.00 EDT

Companies offering Covid tests to travellers may be skewing the market by not charging VAT sales tax, a Guardian investigation has found, adding to pressure on the government to intervene and regulate pricing.

Guidance from the UK's tax authority, [HMRC](#), states Covid tests are only exempt from VAT, which amounts to 20% on the sale price, if administered by a registered health professional or if the company selling them has sales of less than £85,000 a year.

The Guardian has seen communications from a number of companies telling customers they have not been charged tax on home testing kits sent out by post.

One invoice for a Covid-19 self-testing kit from Eurofins, charged at £44.90, states that zero VAT has been charged.

Another invoice for a Covid-19 home testing kit from Expert Medicals provided to a UK resident says £0 taxes have been charged while Nationwide Pathology charged £40 for a day 2 PCR test with an invoice making clear no “sales tax” had been added.



Screenshot of Nationwide Pathology test receipt

Eurofins, Expert Medicals and Nationwide Pathology did not respond to requests for comment.

An executive at a testing company, who asked not to be identified, contacted the Guardian to raise concerns, saying they feared the decision by some providers not to add VAT might be distorting competition by allowing cheaper prices or bigger profits.

He said: “The legal and tax advice we were given was that we should be charging VAT, which we do and always have. When we see competitors potentially not charging VAT and undercutting us by so much it is very frustrating.”

HMRC guidance suggests that only tests administered in person by a health professional, for example, when attending a clinic or via a home visit, are exempt from VAT.

But there are questions over whether having self-administered tests analysed by a health professional would qualify the product for exemption from VAT, and the industry executive said some providers may be using this as a loophole to avoid the sales tax.

In a statement, the tax office said: “VAT is a broad-based tax on consumption and the standard rate of 20% normally applies to most goods and services, including PCR tests. However, medical testing administered by registered health professionals is exempt from VAT.”

“We have recently received queries about the application to Covid testing – as with all guidance, if clarification is required we will make the necessary amendments.”

Providers are calling on HMRC to either scrap VAT on the tests, or give more clarification to businesses and ensure everybody was charging tax correctly.

Avi Lasarow, European chief executive of Project Screen by Prenetics, a testing provider at Heathrow, Stansted, Southend and Luton Airports, said the company would welcome clarification from HMRC.

“We are charging VAT under accounting advice, but know other providers are not taking the same view, which makes for a potentially uneven playing field.

“Of course, our view is that government should, as policy, not be charging VAT on what is effectively an essential medical service in the national interest. Spain, France, Greece, Portugal, Cyprus and Ireland don’t tax holiday Covid tests and we should do the same.”

Ben Bradshaw, a Labour MP who sits on parliament’s transport select committee said: “The UK’s testing regime for travel is a total mess. The Guardian revelation shows there is no consistency in the charging of VAT, a significant part of the price. No VAT is levied in the rest of Europe and some countries provide tests completely free of charge.

“The UK government should scrap VAT on all Covid tests immediately. They are pricing families out of travelling to see loved ones they have been separated from for two years or more and needlessly destroying jobs in our transport and travel industries while the rest of Europe and America are well on the road to recovery.”

Bradshaw's comment comes after a group of senior Conservative party MPs called on the government to cap Covid test prices at £40. Henry Smith, the Tory chairman of the all-party future of aviation group said the government should also scrap them for holidaymakers returning from "low-risk" countries.

"The rationale for the testing regime looks increasingly dubious. Why not, instead, sample a random group of arrivals rather than require everyone to pay for tests frequently run by shoddy companies failing to deliver tests on time and guilty of making hugely misleading price claims?" he wrote in The Telegraph.

A Guardian analysis suggested that air passengers to the UK had spent more than £500m on PCR Covid-19 tests from private companies since mid-May, only for the NHS to be saddled with extra costs when firms fail to deliver them.

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Warning of Covid ‘disaster’ in Japan as cases explode

Local media report Paralympics will be held without spectators as infections rise to more than 18,000 a day in wake of Olympics

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Japan is in the midst of an explosion of infections caused by the highly transmissible Covid variant Delta. Photograph: Fabrizio Bensch/Reuters

Japan is in the midst of an explosion of infections caused by the highly transmissible Covid variant Delta. Photograph: Fabrizio Bensch/Reuters

[Justin McCurry](#) in Tokyo

Fri 13 Aug 2021 00.13 EDT

Health experts in [Japan](#) have said the country is confronting a [coronavirus](#) “disaster” and urged the government to take immediate action to stem a surge in infections.

The warning came as local media reported that spectators will be banned from almost all events at the Paralympics, which are due to open on 24 August.

The government and organisers of the Games will make an official decision next week, Kyodo cited unnamed officials as saying. Media reports said sports fans would be denied admission to venues in Tokyo and Saitama prefectures, although a limited number could attend events in Shizuoka prefecture, which does not border Tokyo. Organisers are reportedly considering inviting schoolchildren to venues.

[Support for Japan’s PM reaches all-time low over Covid-19, despite Olympics success](#)

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Japan is in the midst of an explosion of infections caused by the highly transmissible Delta variant. It reported more than 18,000 cases on Thursday, exceeding the previous record of 15,812 logged a day earlier, according to the Kyodo news agency.

Tokyo, which is under a state of emergency [targeting the capital’s night-time economy](#), recorded 4,989 cases on Thursday, the second-highest figure since the start of the pandemic. The western prefecture of Osaka reported a record 1,654 infections the same day.

Health officials are also concerned about the number of people in Tokyo with serious symptoms, which has risen above 200 for the first time, amid warnings that the city’s hospitals are coming under renewed pressure, with those aged in their 40s and 50s occupying many of the available beds.

In addition, more 20,000 people with milder symptoms are being asked to stay at home, a policy that in the past has resulted in deaths in isolation.

“If infections continue to surge at the current pace, we won’t be able to save lives that could otherwise be saved,” said Shigeru Omi, the government’s most senior adviser on the virus. “This is already happening. The situation is like a disaster.”

[Rice, rice baby: Japanese parents send relatives rice to hug in lieu of newborns](#)

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The prime minister, Yoshihide Suga, continues to rule out any connection between the spike in cases and the [Tokyo Olympics](#), which ended last weekend.

While it does not appear that athletes and other visitors spread infections outside the Olympic “bubble”, experts including Omi have said the festival atmosphere surrounding the Games caused people to drop their guard.

A month-long state of emergency, under which restaurants and bars in Tokyo have been asked not to serve alcohol and to close early, has failed to prevent the upsurge as more establishments choose to ignore the request despite the threat of fines.

Experts said the emergency measures should be expanded nationwide, adding that footfall in Tokyo needed to be brought down to half the level of early July to rein-in the latest surge in cases.

Omi, who weeks ago described holding the Olympics during the pandemic as “abnormal”, called for widespread testing and urged more medical institutions to support Covid-19 patients who have been told to self-isolate. “Otherwise, we are going to see more tragic cases at home,” he said.

Japan is now vaccinating about a million people a day, but its rollout began several months after Britain and other countries, and has not progressed enough to check the spread of the Delta variant. About 36% of the population of 126m is fully vaccinated.

Japan’s seven-day rolling average of new cases stands at 11.2 per 100,000 people, compared to 2.8 in India, 37 in the US and 41 in Britain, according

to Johns Hopkins University.

Experts advising the Tokyo metropolitan government repeated Omi's alarming description of the latest Covid-19 wave.

"Infections are raging and becoming uncontrollable," said Norio Ohmagari, director of the Disease Control and Prevention Centre. "It's almost a disaster, a situation where people have no choice but to protect their lives on their own."

Wires contributed reporting

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- A new start after 60 I became a busker at 79 $\frac{3}{4}$
- Dan Stevens ‘The bodice ripper never quite goes away, I don’t think it ever will’
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The 15 greatest video games of the 00s – ranked!



A dreamy meditation on grief and game design ... *Shadow of the Colossus* (2005). Photograph: Sony Computer Entertainment

A dreamy meditation on grief and game design ... *Shadow of the Colossus* (2005). Photograph: Sony Computer Entertainment

The decade that began with the GameCube, PlayStation 2 and Xbox, and ended with the Wii, PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360, saw huge technical advances and remarkable innovations in storytelling and gameplay – these are the standout games of the noughties

[Keza MacDonald](#) and [Keith Stuart](#)

Fri 13 Aug 2021 04.30 EDT

15. Left 4 Dead

(Valve, 2008)

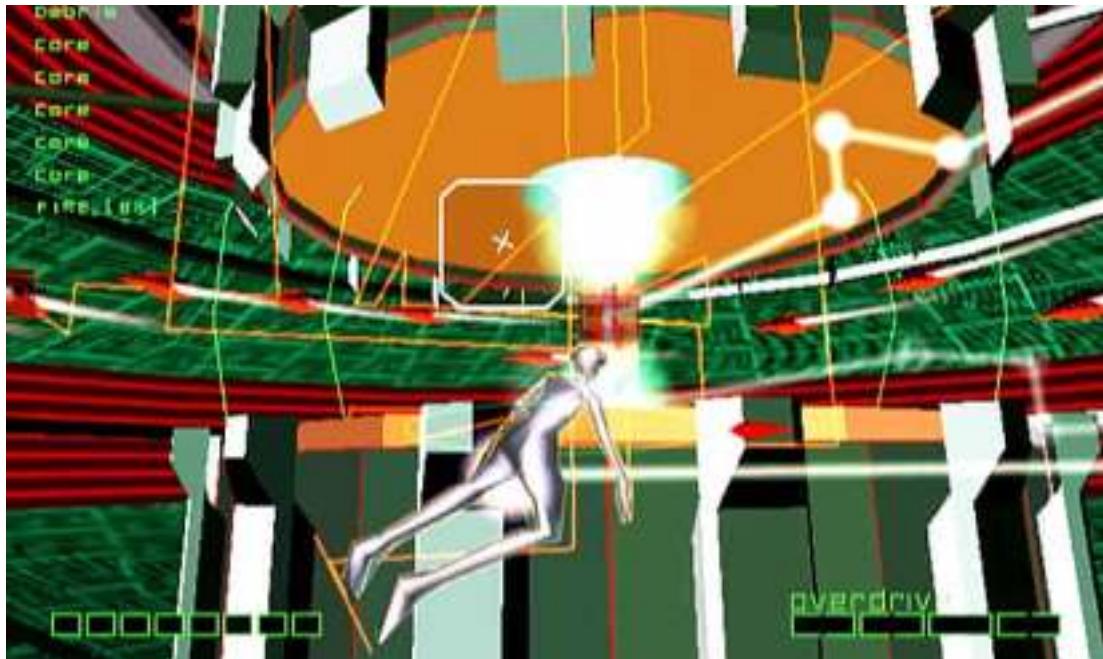


Photograph: Akella

Four players take on waves of zombies in a post-apocalyptic landscape: it doesn't sound like the most innovative proposition, but Valve infused this enthralling co-op blaster with brilliant technical flourishes. The game's clever artificial intelligence system, named "Director", varied the numbers and ferocity of enemies as well as the lighting and music, depending on the skill and strategies of the players, making for a superbly choreographed experience that felt both spontaneous and cinematic. And veteran fans still have nightmares about the Witch ...

14. Rez

(Q Entertainment, 2001)



Photograph: Sega

Inspired by his love of dance music, [Tetsuya Mizuguchi](#), produced a euphoric combination of rhythm action and rail shooter in which the player navigates a deteriorating AI system that resembles a nightclub lighting display. Successfully shooting enemies locks you in with the beat of the music, adding extra layers to the instrumentation, so that you're not just completing a level but also composing the soundtrack. Alongside other titles such as Jet Set Radio and Samba de Amigo, the game symbolised the creativity and youthful exuberance of the Dreamcast era.

13. Wii Sports

(Nintendo, 2006)



Photograph: Nintendo

The industry laughed at the idea of the Wii, with its weird motion controller and comparatively dated hardware ... until they saw people playing Wii Sports. Its collection of five perfectly tuned events made competitive multiplayer gaming accessible to everyone in the house, from toddlers to octogenarians, helping the machine shift more than 100m units and contributing to the idea that games can be a highly social bonding experience. There were arguably better games on Wii – Super Mario Galaxy, [Super Smash Bros Brawl](#), for example – but Sports was the title that defined the machine and its ethos.

12. Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare

(Infinity Ward, 2007)



Photograph: Activision

Some people will argue Battlefield 1942 was the more accomplished military shooter of the era, but we're going with Modern Warfare for the way it brilliantly added RPG-style progression mechanics to the multiplayer component, and killstreak rewards that brought new levels of structure and compulsion to the online experience. The campaign was excellent too, drawing on Andy McNab-style heroics and pacy 1990s thriller movies and, with Captain John Price, providing one of the only truly memorable characters of this whole genre.

11. Shadow of the Colossus

(Team Ico, 2005)



Photograph: Sony Computer Entertainment

Fumito Ueda had already introduced the world to his dreamy, impressionistic design philosophy with the beautiful Ico, but Shadow of the Colossus cemented his reputation as a genuine visionary. A young warrior sets out to revive a dead girl by slaying 16 giant monsters; but are these hulking, mournful creatures – which exist both as enemies and living architectural models – really the baddies in this scenario? A wondrous meditation on grief and game design.

10. **Guitar Hero 2**

(Harmonix, 2006)



Photograph: RedOctane

Who knew, when a little known music game developer first released a pint-sized plastic guitar into the world in 2005, that music games would briefly become the most beloved and popular thing around? For a brief period in the late 00s, living rooms everywhere were inundated with pretend guitars, mics, drums and even DJ decks, to go with the torrent of rhythm-action games that had suddenly flooded the market. The popularity of rhythm games didn't endure, but that changes nothing about how transcendentally brilliant they were. For many gamers, Rock Band, with its full complement of plastic instruments, was the best, but Guitar Hero was the original, and it was Guitar Hero 2 and its superb soundtrack of nailed-on rock classics that launched this genre to true worldwide fame. There is no experience in gaming like falling to your knees, tilting the guitar to unleash Star Power, and absolutely nailing the solo in Sweet Child o' Mine.

9. Silent Hill 2

(Konami, 2001)



Photograph: Konami

The original game introduced Konami's surreal, psychological take on the survival-horror genre; the sequel took it in bizarre, daring new directions. Troubled protagonist James Sunderland turns up in the eponymous town looking for his dead wife, but what he finds amid the mist and radio static is a Freudian menagerie of fetishistic monsters, including the unforgettable BDSM overlord Pyramid Head. As with all great horror fiction, once you've experienced it, it haunts you for ever.

8. The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

(Bethesda, 2006)



Photograph: Bethesda

From the moment you emerge from the sewers in the first hour of Oblivion and see how far its lush fantasy world extends into the distance, and are suddenly overwhelmed by the amount of freedom that you are given to explore it, it is apparent that this is a gigantic leap for role-playing games. This is the game that set the template for open-world adventures, a genre that would become dominant in years to come. 2002's The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind had the thornier, more interesting setting and story, but it was also an absolute drag to play; Oblivion let you fight and talk and connive your way through its world with ease, using magic or swords or a silver tongue to shape the adventure however you wanted.

7. The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask

(Nintendo, 2000)



Photograph: Nintendo

The weirdest, saddest, most memorable Zelda game was released right at the dawn of the decade. Whisking hero Link away from the realm he'd just saved in 1999's Ocarina of Time, it transplanted him to a doomed and twisted place, where he became caught in a three-day time loop. As a grimacing moon draws ever closer to the planet, the residents of Termina go ever more urgently and anxiously about their business, and we try to figure out how to avert disaster. Link dons masks that transform him from child to grotesque living shrub to mountain troll or mermaid. Majora's Mask's time travel is so clever and artful that few games dared imitate it in later years, and its tone captures the powerful melancholy of a half-remembered myth.

6. Bioshock

(2K Games, 2007)



Photograph: 2K Games

Beginning with a jawdropping descent into the submerged libertarian paradise of Rapture, a failed city state that took Randian objectivist principles to their logical extremes under the leadership of Very Problematic visionary Andrew Ryan, Bioshock was, at the time, a rare shooting game that had something interesting to say. The superpower-bestowing tonics that sent most of Rapture's residents mad also provided for some very fun and flavourful combat, but it is the grandiose setting and big ideas that earn Bioshock its place among the greatest games in this genre.

5. Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty

(Konami, 2001)



Photograph: Konami

The first stealth-action [Metal Gear Solid](#) game had been a huge hit on the original PlayStation. Its grizzled hero, Solid Snake, was on the way to becoming a gaming icon. So for the sequel, [Hideo Kojima](#) and Konami got rid of him and made us all play as effete stranger Raiden on a boat. Few games have ever messed with players as much as Sons of Liberty, with its wide-ranging political themes and a prescient preoccupation with misdirection and fake news. It is an anarchic postmodern masterpiece.

4. **Halo: Combat Evolved**

(Bungie, 2001)



Photograph: Microsoft

There was a time when people scoffed at the idea of a great first-person shooter on a console, rather than a PC. Halo was what changed that, setting the scene for shooters to become the dominant genre of the 00s. After exhausting the space-opera single player story, with its beautiful vistas and vicious, intelligent alien zealots, the teens and students of the 00s would lug TVs and Xboxes around and fiddle with LAN cables to enable 16-player multiplayer battles before online gaming was a thing. From learning to wrestle a warthog to absorbing the all-time great score, playing Halo was a defining experience of the decade.

3. Deus Ex

(Ion Storm, 2000)



Photograph: Eidos/Square Enix

Drawing on the legacy of formative role-playing classics Ultima Underworld, System Shock and Thief: The Dark Project, Warren Spector and his team at Ion Storm created a sprawling, ridiculously ambitious sci-fi thriller about nano-augmented super agent JC Denton and his globe-spanning battle against dystopian corporations. The game drew together real-life conspiracies and cyberpunk lore, then let players take part how they wanted, sneaking through the world or blasting it wide open. It redefined the whole concept of an immersive video game adventure.

2. The Sims

(Maxis, 2000)



Photograph: EA/Maxis

It was famously dismissed as “the toilet game” during development, because it required players to clean up their bathrooms as a key gameplay component, and Will Wright had to fight to get his life simulator taken seriously. But its combination of interior design kit and interactive soap opera enraptured a new audience of players who had PCs at home but didn’t necessarily want to play Doom. The rise of reality TV has since shown us that people are fascinated by the grubby minutiae of normal lives manipulated into voyeuristic entertainment – but The Sims got there first.

1. Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas

(Rockstar Games, 2004)



Photograph: Rockstar

Grand Theft Auto III provided the 3D blueprint, GTA: Vice City brought the tone of super-stylised movie-referencing anarchy, but it was San Andreas that gave us the ultimate expression of Rockstar's open-world gangster adventure series for the noughties. Channelling hip-hop music, the films of [John Singleton](#) and the Hughes brothers, and the Los Angeles riots into one narrative of revenge and rehabilitation, it was a staggering achievement, redefining the whole concept of open-world video games and providing unparalleled freedom of expression and experience to players.

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A new start after 60: I became a busker at 79 $\frac{3}{4}$



‘I wonder where the music came from’ ... Horam. Photograph: Mark Waugh/The Guardian

‘I wonder where the music came from’ ... Horam. Photograph: Mark Waugh/The Guardian

Laurie Horam always considered himself unmusical. But when his son gave him a harmonica, the retired civil servant discovered a natural talent – and a new way to express his emotions

*[Paula Cocozza](#)
[@CocozzaPaula](#)*

Fri 13 Aug 2021 01.00 EDT

Laurie Horam never thought of himself as musical. At home, his dad never listened to music, while one of his boarding school teachers labelled him tone deaf. But last month he started to busk. And while he accompanies on harmonica his guitar-playing friend Alan Eaton – and people clap, dance and throw coins into Alan’s guitar case for the local food bank – Horam catches himself thinking: “How, at the age of 79¾, do I come to be playing music to people on the streets of Bradford?”

The question preoccupies him, because, some years ago at a family gathering, one of his children said: ““You know what, Dad? It can’t be coincidental. We must have got our musical abilities from you.”” He has three sons, two daughters and a stepson from two marriages; between them, they cover a range of instruments and genres from techno to rock. Horam was floored. “I said: ‘There can’t be music in me, because I can’t play!’”

But now Horam has begun to wonder: where did the music come from? “Did they get it from me, or did I get it from them?” He has come to understand that “this is all related to how we help our children to make the most of who they are”, and in a way, that’s a service he performs for himself now, almost as a parent helps a child. In lockdown, he says appreciatively, his playing has “come on tremendously”.

Laurie and Alan doing their thing.

Eight years ago, Horam, a retired civil servant, was driving back from a trip to the Yorkshire coast with his eldest son, Gavin, who was visiting from Canada. “Gavin wanted to stop at a music shop. He walked out and said: ‘Here you are. I bought this for you, Dad. It’s a harmonica. I’ll try to show you how to play a bit.’”

They went to a jam session at their local pub. Gavin played guitar and Laurie sat in the corner with his harmonica, trying to make a sound that no one would hear. After six months, he was invited into the group. Unable to read music, he discovered a talent for improvisation, “responding to a note within a millisecond without batting an eyelid … I don’t play by ear. I play by heart.”

Actually, Horam says: “My harmonica plays me – how I feel, what I am, what I’ve been. I can express myself through music, and do it in a very non-thinking way.” The harmonica has the same range as a saxophone, two and a half octaves; as he learns to “create a broader range of sounds”, he can express “a broader range of emotional response”.

I wonder if he has always been attuned to his feelings. He had long, painful periods of estrangement from his children – and “a very sad start to my life. My mother died when I was four,” he says; he was seven when he understood she had died. “I probably did a lot of crying, though I don’t remember.”

Until a few years ago, he had put all this “into a cupboard and locked the door”. Then his partner suggested counselling. He took a photograph of his mother to a session; it was the start of a relationship with her. “Her picture is on the wall of my living room and most nights when I go to bed I say: ‘Goodnight, Mum.’”



‘My harmonica plays me – how I feel, what I am, what I’ve been’ ...
Horam. Photograph: Mark Waugh/The Guardian

In one precious memory, Horam pictures his mother standing over his cot. At this he starts to sing her words, soft and tuneful: “Wheezy-anna, down

where the watermelons grow ...” (She sang Wheezy-anna in tribute to his asthma, he thinks.)

So, there was music in his life before he knew it? “Maybe,” he says. He doesn’t know “what moves [him] around the harmonica”, but when he plays something “that’s come from a really strong feeling”, he sees Alan “smile and shake his head a bit, as if to say: ‘That’s so lovely.’”

Music has enriched life with friendship and made Horam feel “part of something much bigger” than himself. “At a time when the scope of life might be shrinking, mine is expanding,” he says. “Maybe we never know completely who we are or what we can do.”

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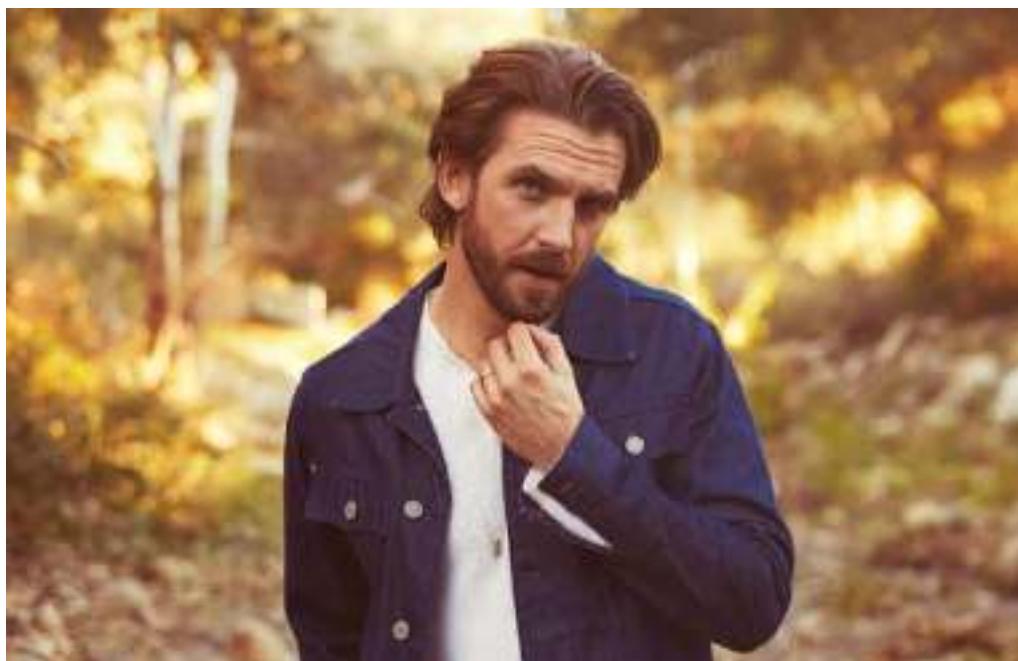
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Interview

Dan Stevens: ‘The bodice ripper never quite goes away, I don’t think it ever will’

[Zoe Williams](#)



Dan Stevens: ‘Very often, romantic leads are not very well written.’

Photograph: John Russo/Contour RA

Dan Stevens: ‘Very often, romantic leads are not very well written.’

Photograph: John Russo/Contour RA

Ever since his days on Downton Abbey, the actor has segued seamlessly between British period drama and high-rolling US sci-fi. He talks about playing a robot – and why he has moved on from romance



@zoesqwilliams

Fri 13 Aug 2021 01.00 EDT

When I speak to Dan Stevens, he's in Los Angeles, shooting [Gaslit](#), a forthcoming TV show that sounds like the definitive deep dive into the Watergate scandal. It's full of big hitters – Stevens and Betty Gilpin playing John and Mo Dean, Sean Penn and Julia Roberts as John and Martha Mitchell – and is based on the podcast [Slow Burn](#), which is marvellous, if you get a minute and want a refresh on who these people are.

Ever since his years on [Downton Abbey](#), Stevens, 38, has been very much in that glossy league, moving seamlessly between British period drama and high-rolling US sci-fi – he is the lead in [Legion](#), Noah Hawley's [epic addition to the Marvel universe](#) – with hybrid projects in between. Blithe Spirit, for example, a British reinvention of Noël Coward's classic, with a sort of American reverence for the past, and a partly US cast. [It wasn't very well-reviewed](#), but that's beside the point; this is an actor who makes sense in many contexts, for whom there is very high demand. That – although like everyone he says he has had “chunks of months here and there” without work – has been the story of his career since his first professional job, cast as Orlando by [Peter Hall](#) in As You Like It. Hall had spotted him in a university production of Macbeth.

[I'm Your Man review – Dan Stevens is the perfect date in android romance](#) [Read more](#)

We're actually here to discuss I'm Your Man (Ich bin dein Mensch), a German romcom so subtle, deceptive and textured that it was days before I realised it was actually a romtraj. He plays robot boyfriend to Maren Eggert's lonely human, balanced like an acrobat throughout between computer-impersonating-person and person wondering "what-does-person-mean-anyway?". So obviously my first, incredibly parochial question is how on earth does he speak German? He learned it at school, had friends in Germany, visited regularly, loves Berlin. It's not a classic polyglot's trajectory, it sounds more like the way someone learns languages in an EM Forster novel. And he concedes: "I think the list is relatively small, you know, English actors who actually speak German."



With Maren Eggert in I'm Your Man.

It sounds like a challenge, playing a robot – your proposition is to have no feelings, after all, and feelings are usually your one job. "Always," he says, "when you're doing an android story, it's not really about the android, it's not really about the technology, it's about the human, and what the human desires; what we do with that technology or what that technology teaches us about ourselves." And it is true that all the emotional focus is on Eggert,

who won the Berlin film festival's first ever gender-neutral acting prize (which is *so* Berlin) for the role. From Stevens's point of view, it was quite a modest role to take on, since he is essentially a reflective space for Eggert.

Anyway, what was ultimately so tragic about the film – I don't think it's a spoiler if I give away the underlying philosophy – is its conclusion, that all romantic love is a projection, whether it's with a robot or not. "Maybe ..." he says, cautiously not agreeing. "Definitely, at the start of every romantic relationship, part of it evolves in very simple programming terms: 'This is working, I'll do more of this. Right, right, not working, I'll try not to do that.'"

Certainly, taken together with [Legion](#), *I'm Your Man* suggests a preference not necessarily for sci-fi but for romantic scenarios much more complicated than classic love stories. "I don't know that I ever actively lost interest in romance, it's just that, very often, romantic leads are not very well written. They're not that interesting, the will-they, won't-they stories."

At university, before his performance opposite Hall's daughter Rebecca put him on the professional stage, Stevens was much more interested in comedy. He was at Cambridge, in the Footlights, but he hasn't got a very standup personality (as in, "built for standup comedy", not "decent"). It was more about "character creations. I really admire Peter Sellers. You learn such a lot about stagecraft doing comedy."



With Hugh Bonneville in Downton Abbey. Photograph: Carnival Films

While it was in *The Line of Beauty*, in 2006, that Stevens got his small-screen break, naturally [Downton Abbey](#), in which he was cast as Matthew Crawley in 2010, was more defining, if only because – in case you've forgotten, it was a decade ago and a lot has happened in between – we all used to talk about it so much. The show split the crowd. If you surrendered to its superb performances and sheer sumptuousness, it was Sunday-night TV at its finest. If you asked too many questions about its, and TV's general, craven fascination with posh people, it might have made you feel a bit mournful.

Stevens gnomically bats away any suggestion that it made him a household name, even though it did – “Obviously in your own household, people know your name. I guess it’s up to other people to take that name into their household” – but he does remember that “it was one of the early shows that was popularly live-tweeted, and that was interesting and exciting, but also a bit distressing. Instead of the odd critic, writing about you in the Sunday papers, you had everyone coming out with really strong opinions about specific scenes or what she was wearing or what he was looking like.”

[Julian Fellowes](#), the creator and writer, said at the time that Stevens had “a kind of niceness, sympathetic in a way that harks back to an earlier tradition:

Jack Hawkins or Kenneth More or Gary Cooper or Cary Grant". There is a self-effacing quality, to both that performance and his general manner as he elaborates on it. "I look at other performances and absorb them, whether it's imitative or trying to absorb the modes of acting in my memory bank, I don't know." And he's always keen to resituate Downton Abbey as part of period drama tradition – he tries to divert me on to the more recent [Bridgerton](#) (which isn't completely successful, given that he wasn't in it), concluding: "You know the bodice ripper never quite goes away, I don't think it ever will." You wouldn't necessarily conclude that he wasn't proud of Downton, rather that he finds it burdensome to dance in his own spotlight and thinks he deserves a statute of limitations. Which is probably fair.

Unusually, after some slightly bruising experiences on social media, Stevens is still pretty active on Twitter himself, and comes over much more like a commentator than a performer – [very often signal-boosting causes and amplifying articles](#), particularly, recently, Black Lives Matter. "It is definitely worth putting a stake in the ground on things are important." (Strong start.) "But that's not to say that, if I don't say anything on a particular issue, it doesn't mean anything to me." (Good point, this is a minefield.) "It could be just that I don't know quite how to express it, maybe feel it's not my place to. And, you know, it's a personal choice at the end of the day, some people choose to say nothing and I think that's OK too." I realise, as this unfolds, why actors so often don't say anything remotely political – that space between being an ally and being performative about it, between saying anything at all and not saying enough, between making your own choices and being seen implicitly to judge other people's, is just vanishingly narrow.



As Charles in *Blithe Spirit*. Photograph: StudioCanal Limited/Sky Cinema Original and StudioCanal

There's a bit more freedom to have an opinion on culture. In 2012, Stevens was asked to be a Booker prize judge, after a spirited response to the 2011 shortlist on *Late Review*. It's actually quite a chunky time commitment, reading 145 books, especially since his character hadn't even been brutally and slightly improbably killed off in *Downton* at this point (was the lorry driving too fast? Or was the [Christmas special moving too slow?](#)). "I was very much the guy off the telly in that room of heavyweight academics and people who've written massive books that would wedge open many, many heavy doors. I took on a bit too much, to be honest."

At around the same time, he started contributing to the now-defunct online quarterly the *Junket*, collections of essays, memoir and poetry, writing short stories and [that kind of luxurious observation-in-miniature that young people like](#) (OK, he's not that young now, but this was 10 years ago). He was raised in Wales and later Kent by his parents, two teachers, before going to Tonbridge boarding school. What you pick up in his writing is much less public-school show-offy-ness and much more teacherly introspection. He rattles off the traits that his parents encouraged, a bit absent-mindedly: "Reading and studying, independent thought, an interest in the arts."

He describes his approach to acting in quite academic terms, piecing together how things work, genre by genre. “I’ll do some Shakespeare, then a Noël Coward, some sort of zany comedy, a grisly horror, bolt on these bits and pieces, absorbing and learning and growing. Early on, I wasn’t good at screen auditions, it took a while to click into place. There are certain kinds of TV shows, which are made a lot in the UK, that suit the British classical theatrical style, but that doesn’t necessarily translate into other kinds of screen performance. Storytelling with a flick of the eye is something you can learn but it can’t necessarily be taught.”



As David Haller in Legion. Photograph: FX Networks

In that sense, he says, filming Legion was “a conservatory in itself, every single day on set was vastly different in that show. From one scene to the next, you could be in almost a totally different genre. There were some very sentimental, romantic scenes; horror, thriller elements, action. I’ve never seen a camera team so excited by what they were trying to achieve.” It wasn’t the realisation of a lifelong dream. “I wasn’t that interested in the Marvel universe,” he says. I didn’t know people were allowed to say that any more.

Covid locked down Broadway in 2020 just before Stevens was due to open in *Hangmen*, the Martin McDonagh play that [premiered in the Royal Court](#),

London, in 2015. He steps rather carefully over that disappointment, mindful that there are worse things that can happen in a pandemic than your play getting cancelled after 13 previews. “We still had a fantastic time rehearsing it and getting into the theatre.”

Shortly afterwards, with I’m Your Man in between, he started filming Gaslit, “finding America and American politics endlessly fascinating”. He has lived away from the UK, mostly in the US, with his wife, the jazz singer Susie Stevens, and three children, Willow, Aubrey and Eden, for the best part of a decade. It makes perfect sense professionally, but at the level of the citizen, he describes – without too much angst, you understand – a kind of exile. “If I try and say anything about American politics, people tell me to go home; if I say anything about British politics, they’re like: ‘You don’t even live here.’”

He found that particularly trying over Brexit, when “there were things I couldn’t hold back on, some of those parliamentary debates, and some of the behaviour of our parliamentarians during that time was utterly despicable. And there was very little I could do. There’s only so much you can do from afar.” I consider saying something emollient, along the lines of: “Cheer up, we didn’t manage to do anything from a-near, either”, but he’s quite a serious-minded person. One gets the impression he wouldn’t parse the difference between “light” and “silly”.

Still, we carry on about Brexit for a bit, and the perspective of geographical distance, but also the feeling of being an outsider, and he says: “You’re asking questions as if I somehow have this transcendent overall view of myself. I don’t.” It was very courteous, not at all impatient, but the unspoken question underneath it was: “Me? What are we still talking about me for?”

I’m Your Man is out now in cinemas and on Curzon Home Cinema.

This article was amended on 13 August 2021 to correct Stevens’ age, and to correct the surname of his wife Susie Stevens.

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Hong Kong

‘Can we ever return?’ Tears and heartbreak as Hongkongers leave for a new life in the UK



Friends embrace at the departure gates before one of the twice-daily flights to London from Hong Kong airport. Photograph: Isaac Lawrence/AFP/Getty Images

Friends embrace at the departure gates before one of the twice-daily flights to London from Hong Kong airport. Photograph: Isaac Lawrence/AFP/Getty Images

Residents fearing China’s tightening grip are departing in droves, not knowing if they will be back

Guardian reporter

Fri 13 Aug 2021 00.00 EDT

It was a heartbreak scene. A family get-together on a Sunday morning, not for a leisurely lunch at a traditional Chinese restaurant, but for a tearful farewell at the airport.

Amid the Covid pandemic, [Hong Kong](#) airport is quiet except for twice a day, when long queues form at airlines desks for London-bound flights. Friends and families turn out in droves to see them off – grandparents hand out “lucky money” in red envelopes to grandchildren, aunts and uncles joke with children to lighten the otherwise melancholic mood. With tearful eyes, many stop for a final hug and pose for one last photo with their loved ones before passing through the departure gates. The waving continues long after they have disappeared from view.

Wearing a yellow face mask – the colour symbolising resistance in the city’s 2019 pro-democracy movement – one young woman, who gave her name as Charlie, was among those waving goodbye to her friends. She said she was going to the UK to study to be a psychologist, and was unlikely to return.

[Hong Kong jails man, 24, for nine years under national security law](#)
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“With speech freedom under threat, I would have limited opportunities in Hong Kong. I might be implicated under the [national security] law,” she said.

Victor, a 28-year-old IT professional, likewise blamed the worsening political environment for his departure. “I have no faith in Hong Kong – it is going downhill. I want to be somewhere where there is democracy,” he said.

They are among the tens of thousands of people taking up the British government’s [offer of a route to citizenship](#), after China imposed the draconian national security law on its former colony a year ago. The Home Office expects up to 153,000 people with British national (overseas) status and their dependents to arrive in the UK in the first year, and up to 322,000 over five years. According to [Home Office statistics](#), 34,300 people applied

in the first two months after applications for BNO visas opened at the end of January, with 20,600 from outside the country.

The exodus intensified in the run-up to 1 August, when an immigration law allowing the government to bar people entering or leaving the city came into effect. Net outflows of residents in July regularly exceeded 1,000 a day, according to [government figures](#) recorded by the former investment banker David Webb.

Hong Kong's population declined by 1.2% in the past year, including nearly 90,000 more residents departing than moving to the city, government figures released on Thursday showed. The population decrease to 7,394,700 continues the largest fall since the city began keeping comparable records in 1961.

A surge in withdrawals from the city's mandatory pension fund due to permanent departure also suggested many were leaving for good. According to [official figures](#), in the first quarter of this year, Hong Kong residents planning to leave permanently applied to withdraw HK\$1.93bn (£180m) from their MPF accounts – a surge of 49% year-on-year.



A woman takes photos of her friends before entering the departures hall for her flight to Britain in July. Photograph: Bertha Wang/AFP/Getty Images

China's intensifying control over Hong Kong in recent years had already prompted many people to contemplate leaving, but the crackdown on the 2019 pro-democracy protests, in which more than 10,200 people had been arrested, and the national security law aimed at halting the movement were the final straw. Nowadays, casual conversations between friends and families often lead to a discussion of not whether they plan to leave, but when.

A changed city

Beneath the usual hustle and bustle, Hong Kong has changed dramatically since the introduction of the law. It enabled the authorities to crack down on almost any form of opposition to China's rule and undermined a wide range of civil freedoms previously taken for granted. Expressions of dissent can be punished with up to life in jail, with the possibility of being sent to mainland China.

Since its introduction, police have arrested at least 128 people for related alleged offences and targeted opposing politicians and activists, media outlets and employees, churches, schools, and unions.

The knock-on effect is obvious. Street protests have been categorically banned by the authorities, citing the pandemic. A man who allegedly booed the Chinese national anthem while watching an Olympic event at a shopping centre [was arrested](#).

Dozens of civil society groups have closed while many political commentators have quietly left. Official censors have been authorised to ban movies that breach the national security law.

Patricia Chiu, a businesswoman who recently fled Hong Kong for the UK, said it was the loss of the city's former way of life that broke her heart. Chiu, who had supported young protesters and campaigned for pro-democracy politicians – some of whom are now in custody – feared she too would be arrested if she stayed.

"No one wants to leave, but the situation is worsening all the time," she said. "Since the passing of the national security law, I've been suffering from

anxiety. Every day, I worried about [the police] knocking on our doors – the fear was constant.

“I miss the old Hong Kong, the good old days when we were free. We had no democracy but had the rule of law, the freedom of speech and assembly. But now, I don’t think I will ever be able to go back.

[I covered Hong Kong for decades. Now I am forced to flee China’s ‘white terror’ | Steve Vines](#)

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“Before I left, I looked at everything and thought that might be the last time I saw them. The Hong Kong that we knew is fast disappearing – the good life we had, the spirit, the culture of Hong Kong. It’s the city where I grew up.”

Chiu said since she might not be able to return, one of her biggest worries was that she might never see her son again.

“I dread not being able to see him again,” she said.

Carol Poon, an accountant who recently left Hong Kong with her young family, also does not anticipate being able to go back. She and her husband decided to move after the introduction of the national security law. “It’s a catch-all law that has no limits ... how can we accept it?

“It’s not the same Hong Kong any more. How can we expect our kids to grow up in this environment, where you have to lie or be two-faced to survive?

“When we said goodbye to our parents the night before our departure, we thought it might be the last time we saw one another. We shed a lot of tears. Would we see them again? Can we return? If we go back, can we leave again?”

She said although she wanted her children to integrate into UK culture, it was also important for them to maintain their Hong Kong identity.

“We want to them to remember where they’re from,” she said. “The authorities will call the pro-democracy movement a riot, but we have a responsibility to preserve our memories and our Hong Kong identity. We must live to tell why we had to flee.”

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OpinionSummer holidays

Imagination is key to the revival of Britain's seaside towns

Gaby Hinsliff



Whether or not the new artworks appearing in Norfolk are by Banksy, they show the enduring appeal of our resorts



An artwork believed to be created by Banksy in Great Yarmouth, Norfolk.
Photograph: Peter Nicholls/Reuters

An artwork believed to be created by Banksy in Great Yarmouth, Norfolk.
Photograph: Peter Nicholls/Reuters

Fri 13 Aug 2021 02.00 EDT

A couple dance on top of a bus shelter to the music of a nearby accordion player. Children play in a boat, on a wall in a Lowestoft park. And by the beach huts in Cromer, a hermit crab with a placard reading, “Luxury rentals only” guards a pile of empty whelk shells from a huddle of homeless crabs.

A string of artworks that may or may not be by the pseudonymous graffiti artist Banksy [have been discovered](#) scattered along the East Anglian coast, raising the tantalising prospect that like everyone else who couldn’t get abroad this summer, he just went to Norfolk and hung around in bus shelters instead. “Is Banksy in Great Yarmouth?” ran the dream August headline, after a miniature cottage with his name sprayed on one side and “Go big or go home” on another was mysteriously added overnight to the resort’s [Merrivale model village](#). Maybe it’s real, and maybe it isn’t, but it’s absolutely the sort of thing the British seaside is for.

[Possible Banksy street art appears in English coastal towns](#)

[Read more](#)

Coastal towns get a miserable rap. Regardless of all that bracing sea air, they're notorious hotbeds of poor health and low life expectancy (England's chief medical officer, Prof Chris Whitty, is making tackling health inequalities in [impoverished seaside towns](#) a priority, post-Covid) and lagging educational performance. I last went to Yarmouth on the eve of lockdown, to see a school serving a deeply deprived neighbourhood that had been transformed from chaotic to thriving; but the kids still needed more decent local jobs to move into. And while some coastal towns are struggling with the loss of both a once booming industry – fishing in Lowestoft or Grimsby, bucket-and-spade tourism in Skegness or Scarborough – for others, it's prosperity itself that is the problem.

“Don’t feed the locals; they bite,” read the handwritten sign by a pretty Cornish cove this summer, where holidaymakers were spreading towels around fishing boats drawn up on the shingle. A joke, though only just; second homers and wealthy retirees have long monopolised the prettier bits of Devon and Cornwall, and this year’s holiday feeding frenzy saw reports of landlords [evicting long-term local tenants](#) in order to cash in on renting to tourists via Airbnb. A post-Covid exodus of Londoners realising that remote working allows them to earn a city wage from the seaside, meanwhile, risks breeding resentment among priced-out locals along the Kent and Sussex coasts. But these tales of loss aren’t the only ones to be told, as a staycation summer gives fading seaside glories one last chance to reintroduce themselves.

Recently I had some time to kill in Bangor, Gwynedd, although that’s a story for another day. Someone kindly showed me around its botanic gardens, a hidden delight known only to local dog walkers, where luscious fresh passion fruits grow under glass. The town’s high street has arguably seen better days, but it has a lovely pier reaching out towards Anglesey, and for 50p you can spend as long as you like watching the tide come in through the gaps in the boards beneath your feet. There’s a cafe serving rhubarb crumble ice cream, but I was drawn to a line of plaques along the railing, mostly marking departed loved ones, including one for “Florence Magdalen Feasey, who swam the Menai Strait in 1929 aged 15 years.”

There is no mention of a spouse or children; either Florence never married, or rather thrillingly, that one great adventure was the way she chose to be defined. (The crossing from the Welsh mainland to Anglesey is less than a mile but notoriously dangerous, with fast running tides and swirling whirlpools.) Whoever she was, Florence must have been fearless.

And that's what British seaside towns excel at: surprises. They're all about the unexpected, the quirky, even the subversive; places for mooching around and stumbling across things, boasting a certain indomitable spirit born of constantly having to think of stuff to do in the rain. And that makes them natural wellsprings of creativity. (It's probably no coincidence that the maybe-Banksys have appeared just as Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft are [jointly bidding](#) to become the 2025 UK City of Culture; art's role in economic regeneration is not to be underestimated, given the [Tracey Emin effect](#) in Margate further down the east coast.)

British seaside towns may never realistically trump the Med as places to spend a sun-soaked fortnight. But they could make perfect short breaks for Britons in a climate-conscious era in which jetting off to Rome or Paris for the weekend feels too wanton, and their residents deserve better than a future oscillating wildly between unsustainable property booms and crumbling neglect.

Two years ago, a [select committee report](#) on regenerating seaside towns highlighted the success of Seaminster, a once-shabby resort that learned to make a virtue of its “romance and its grit”, after recognising that behind the tatty amusement arcades and stink of seaweed lay a place of “creativity, unconventionality and misrule”. A journalist who had grown up there was enlisted to promote it. A music festival, film-making co-operative, fast broadband and sustainable energy projects did their bit. Someone even built a sauna on a beach. The only snag, the committee admitted, was that Seaminster was fictional; it had completely made it up. But like the maybe-Banksys, if it was fake it was strangely convincing; a glimpse of what could happen given enough imagination. And who doesn't long for them both to be real?

- Gaby Hinsliff is a Guardian columnist

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OpinionPolice

If we really value our freedom, repealing Covid police powers won't be enough

Owen Jones



From voter ID rules to restrictions on protest, repressive measures are on the UK government's post-pandemic agenda



‘Even as crime levels fell during the first lockdown, stop and search more than doubled, with Black people in London up to 11 times more likely to be targeted.’ Black Lives Matter protest, London, June 2020. Photograph: Isabel Infantes/EMPICS Entertainment

‘Even as crime levels fell during the first lockdown, stop and search more than doubled, with Black people in London up to 11 times more likely to be targeted.’ Black Lives Matter protest, London, June 2020. Photograph: Isabel Infantes/EMPICS Entertainment

Thu 12 Aug 2021 12.15 EDT

As a bewildered country blinks in the tentative daylight of freedom, after nearly a year and a half of unprecedented restrictions, a wider struggle to restore our sacred freedoms is surely overdue. Despite cynical attempts by some commentators to brand Boris Johnson a “libertarian” – in practice, he is a man who cherishes freedoms only for his own class – his is a nakedly authoritarian government.

It would be unwise to concede this fact to Covid conspiracists, who are as noisy as they are peripheral in public opinion. It is possible to believe, for instance, that an extraordinary national emergency required lockdown, but that implementing it sooner in early 2020 would have suppressed the public health crisis more quickly, meaning restrictions on freedoms would have

been shorter lived. The government's focus on law-breaking during the pandemic – rather than greater financial support for self-isolation or the hiking of a statutory sick pay that remains [among the lowest](#) of the rich countries – is further evidence of its authoritarian credentials.

And while the liberal conception of the state is that it is blind to the characteristics of its citizens, in reality it is riddled with prejudice. In “normal” times, Black people are [nine times more likely](#) to be stopped and searched by the police, for example over suspicion of possessing drugs, and [far more likely](#) to be sent to prison for drug offences than white offenders. So it is no surprise that the government’s sweeping powers during the pandemic were applied through a racist prism. As one [recent study found](#), even as crime levels fell during the first lockdown, stop and search more than doubled, with Black people in London up to 11 times more likely to be targeted.

Police forces high on their own power tried [banning Easter eggs](#) as “non-essential” goods and threatened to start [inspecting shopping trolleys](#). Under the Coronavirus Act, they were granted the power to remove or detain any “suspected infectious person” – in other words, anyone. Yet during the first lockdown, [every single person](#) that this measure was used against in England and Wales was wrongfully charged. By the third lockdown, nearly a third of those prosecuted under general emergency legislation [had their cases dropped](#).

Those who value civil liberties should do two things. First, ensure that repressive measures deployed for the pandemic are entirely repealed, and that they are not used to set precedents. Second, make a broader argument for a truly free society, loosening a corset that has become increasingly confining under New Labour and Tory administrations alike. “Freedom day” may have been declared in England, but the [Coronavirus](#) Act – dispersing gatherings, closing borders, postponing elections – remains on the statute books.

More disturbingly, the government’s [policing bill](#) puts lockdown-era authoritarianism on a permanent footing, enabling the police to suppress protests in England and Wales that are deemed noisy or a nuisance – which is built into the very function of the democratic right to protest. “You can’t

legislate away people's right to protest," as Gracie Bradley, interim director at Liberty, puts it, "and it actually risks creating way more confrontation between protesters and police, as the [Clapham Common vigil](#) after the murder of Sarah Everard shows." Repressive legislation tends to single out the most marginalised people in society, and this bill – [further criminalising Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities](#) – is no exception. Meanwhile, a new elections bill infringes on the right to vote by introducing the [requirement to show voter ID](#), in a bid to tackle the near non-existent problem of voter fraud. The result is that disproportionately minority and working-class Britons without photo identification will be deprived of the most basic of democratic rights.

The worry in tackling this government on civil liberties is that the strategy becomes defensive: an attempt to restore the illiberal status quo of the recent past, rather than demand a truly free society. Acknowledging the racism riddled in the practice of arbitrary police power should lead us to demand the scrapping of section 60 of the 1994 Public Order Act altogether, since it allows stop and searches [without any actual suspicion of a crime](#). Rather than the mass communications surveillance regime that is currently in place, we should support Liberty's proposals for a warrant-based system. Rather than criminalising homelessness through the 19th century Vagrancy Act – which is used to fine and prosecute rough sleepers – we should treat housing as a fundamental social right and act accordingly.

Furthermore, rather than allow free speech to be degraded as "the right to platform bigoted views", we should tackle the real threats to it – like the [Prevent strategy](#). Workers' rights are about basic liberties, too: we should support removing anti-union laws that prevent workers exercising their hard-won freedoms to improve their working conditions.

We were promised "freedom day" in England, but ours is a society wrapped in chains. Rather than loosening them, we should demand their removal altogether.

- Owen Jones is a Guardian columnist
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Opinion Tax and spending

British voters across all parties seem to be calling Johnson's bluff on 'levelling up'

Polly Toynbee



Polls show a majority would pay more tax to improve services and regional inequality, but that's far too ambitious for our PM



‘A woman from York has a decade longer of healthy life expectancy than a woman from Doncaster [pictured],’ said Boris Johnson. Photograph: Christopher Thomond

‘A woman from York has a decade longer of healthy life expectancy than a woman from Doncaster [pictured],’ said Boris Johnson. Photograph: Christopher Thomond

Fri 13 Aug 2021 04.00 EDT

A Tory chancellor eager for austerity will struggle to get away with echoing George Osborne’s mendacious old trope that the country has “maxed out its credit card”. Whatever the Treasury’s debts, there is no public appetite for retrenchment, according to the latest [Ipsos Mori poll](#). Two-thirds want to pay higher taxes to go towards social care and easing NHS waiting lists. What’s more, there is virtually no difference between Labour and Tory voters on this. A mere 9% want spending cuts to pay off the deficit.

Voters’ apparent willingness to pay more tax to spend on vital things is encouraging. The NHS always touches a political nerve – as anyone might fall under a bus. But it’s heartening to find that 60% of respondents are prepared to pay higher taxes to reach the net zero target for carbon emissions – and that includes 52% of Tory voters. Not long ago, using the R-word – redistribution – was, pollsters warned, a vote-killer, yet now 51% are ready

to pay more tax for “levelling up” regional inequalities. This goodwill fluctuates slightly, but, says Ipsos Mori’s Gideon Skinner, the rejection of austerity that began in 2015 has grown and “the Covid response has encouraged big state action”. Chancellor Rishi Sunak is battling for cuts, so why is he so popular? “Voters still associate him with furloughing largesse,” says Skinner, helped by his “eat out to help out” scheme. But that can’t survive his autumn spending review permafrost plans for three years ahead.

Small-state Thatcherism is being blown back by US intellectual headwinds, as Joe Biden’s \$1 trillion infrastructure bill passed through the Senate this week [with bipartisan support](#) – with another lavish new deal-style bill on social support to come. All the UK’s political divides are there in the polling, but on spending they are less deep than you might expect. Young people are considerably keener to pay to reach net zero, as their future chances of survival burn up before their eyes. Older people are keener to raise tax for their social care than for the planet. But across the board, a majority want more tax and spend on three essentials: NHS and social care, climate catastrophe and greater equality.

But they are pessimistic that the government will actually do what they want: only a quarter expect an increase in spending. On this, sadly, they are right: the Institute for Fiscal Studies shows spending plans at the last budget cut another [8%](#) from all but three departments.

Here’s the Boris Johnson conundrum: as he raises airy expectations in verbose speeches on climate action or levelling up, he may indeed be influencing voters, Tory as well as Labour. He never mentions any price to pay: voters seem to be ahead of him here. But, swayed by his party’s right wing more than by the polling, he retreats from every hard choice. The FT on Thursday reports that he is [Backing off his pledge](#) to ban gas boilers by 2035, though domestic buildings cause 21% of UK greenhouse gas emissions and the CBI’s own heat commission says new gas boilers must go by [2025](#). This week’s analysis by the conservation charity WWF of the UK budget finds Johnson [spending many times more](#) on measures that increase emissions than on policies to tackle the climate crisis. Hardly a day passes without data revealing the yawning gaps between his windy “targets” and his actions.

No one was any the wiser on what his “levelling up” meant after his airily policy-free [speech](#) last month. But he was good at evoking the shocking depths of deprivation: “A woman from York has on average a decade longer of healthy life expectancy than a woman from Doncaster.” “Why should income per head in Monmouthshire be 50% higher than in Blaenau Gwent?” Why do “two-thirds of graduates from our top 30 universities end up in London”? And a majority agree that these are problems that need solving. But no, no, of course he won’t “decapitate the tall poppies” of southern seats such as Chesham and Amersham in his “mission to unite and level up across the whole UK”.

[Johnson’s levelling up plan lacks definition and planning, say MPs](#)

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He may hope emotive rhetoric disguises inaction, as he re-announced small sums and offered tiny gifts, such as £50m for football pitches, nowhere near replacing the 710 cut in the last round of austerity. Preposterous metaphors – “the ketchup of catch-up” – may obscure [FT data](#) revealing his £4.8bn “levelling-up” fund [funnels cash to Tory seats](#) by ignoring measures of deprivation, so richer Richmond (MP: Sunak) and Newark (MP: Robert Jenrick) rank above Barnsley and Salford for pork barrelling. But opening a [new coal mine](#) just as Cop26 approaches, or [cutting £20 a week](#) from the lowest earners’ universal credit, would blow against those prevailing winds of public opinion stirred by himself.

In that speech Johnson unwisely referred to how the former East Germany now has a higher GDP per capita than north-east England, Yorkshire, the East Midlands, Wales or Northern Ireland. But he said nothing of what that epic act of levelling up cost the Germans. Over 31 years, charging an annual 5.5% “solidarity surtax” on every citizen, they have transferred \$2tn from west to east. The [results](#) are phenomenal: the economic power of the east, where only 10% had telephones in 1989, rose from 43% to 75% of the west’s. Even so, young easterners still [feel left behind](#), earning 17% less and filling only 1.7% of Germany’s top jobs. Even if not yet fully levelled up, the east overtaking our poor regions is a fine example of what a country can do to unify and equalise. But absolutely nothing about Johnson or his ministers suggests they intend a fraction of that heavy lifting, just a little window dressing with some Boris-branded show projects. They plan none of

the devolution of money and powers that [research](#) by the IPPR thinktank shows could achieve better results.

Polling suggests a majority of voters are out ahead of this government, more willing to take these gigantic challenges seriously. How much are they willing to pay? That's unknowable. But Johnson and his soundbites may be encouraging people to want a far more ambitious country than he and his small-statist cabinet would ever tolerate.

- Polly Toynbee is a Guardian columnist
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‘It’s outrageous’: Trinidadian fishers film ‘half-hearted’ oil spill clean-up

Hundreds of spills off Gulf of Paria having ‘dire’ impact on local fishing in one of the most biodiverse areas of Trinidad and Tobago

02:01

Outraged fishers show oil spill ‘like porridge’ in Trinidad sea – video

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[Sarah Johnson](#)

Fri 13 Aug 2021 03.39 EDT

Hands masked in thick black oil, the fisher drips toxic globules back into the sea as he pleads with the camera, urging viewers to “share this video”.

In the footage, filmed onboard a small boat, Gary Aboud documents an oil spill this week in the Gulf of Paria, off the Caribbean coast of Trinidad. It is just the latest of many spills that threaten to wreak havoc on the area’s vulnerable marine life and fishing industry.

Aboud, who heads a local environmental watchdog, showed the extent of the spill, which he said stretched for miles, and criticised what he said was a half-hearted clean-up attempt by oil company, Paria Fuel Trading Company Limited.

Fishermen and Friends of the Sea (FFOS) went out to document the spill and filmed a vessel at full throttle apparently attempting to break up the oil layer. It called for the company to use booms to contain the oil and collect it. “What we saw [in terms of the spill] was not as outrageous as what they were doing,” said Aboud.

“Breaking up the large globs into smaller globs might be less offensive to the eye but it’s equally offensive to us. When you break the oil up, it sinks and goes to the ocean bed, where it will continue to degrade and get into the food chain.”

Paria said it discovered the spill about 7.30pm on Saturday and that a leak along a 12-inch crude pipeline was the cause. In a statement released on Monday, it said: “The spill is contained, and a residual clean-up is ongoing.”

The company said that absorbent booms had been strategically placed to prevent further migration of oil into the sea, and that vacuum trucks were removing oil collected on land while oil streaks at sea were being “mechanically broken up”.

But Lisa Premchand, programme director of FFOS, said that there was no evidence over the last three days to show the company was using booms to contain the spill. “Through our drone imagery, there were no booms in the Gulf of Paria around this spill to contain the oil from spreading even further.”

Premchand said FFOS received eyewitness accounts from fishers claiming that an oil dispersant is being used in the clean-up attempt although there has been no confirmation of that from the company. Trinidad and Tobago's [oil spill contingency plan](#) states that dispersant chemicals should not be used near the shoreline.

"It takes years and years for oil to degrade," said Premchard. "There is a buildup of chemicals in our water. Our gulf is becoming more polluted over time with the increase in intensity of oil spills."

The region's oil industry has come under increasing fire as the Gulf of Paria has been plagued by spills over the past few years. A freedom of information request carried out in April by FFOS revealed there have been 498 reported oil spills on land and at sea since the beginning of 2018.

There have been no resulting prosecutions or fines by Trinidad and Tobago authorities. Last year, there was international concern over [efforts to remove a vessel filled with 1.3m barrels of crude oil](#) floating in the gulf. The FSO Nabarima, a stationary storage facility, was pictured rusting, and taking on water, sparking fears that it would spill its contents.

[Sri Lanka's worst ever maritime disaster reveals the true cost of our identity crisis | Sandali Handagama](#)

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The impact of oil spills on the fishing industry in the area is dire, say locals. The Gulf of Paria is one of the most biodiverse regions in Trinidad and Tobago, accounting for more than 60% of all fishing activity. A Ministry of Agriculture report in 1992 found [an estimated 40,000 people](#) depend on the fishing industry directly or indirectly as their main source of income.

If crude oil gets on to fishing nets, which cost about £4,000 each, it renders them useless. Oil that sinks to the seabed forces fish to migrate, and can reach the food chain. A [2019 study](#) showed unsafe levels of carcinogens in fish caught in the area.

Every time there is news of an oil spill, Aboud says, people stop buying fish. "This has installed fear in consumers. Every time we have an oil spill of this

magnitude and it's publicised, there's a decrease in the sale of fish."

Paria Fuel Trading Company Limited did not respond to requests for comment.

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North Korea

North Korea military threats ‘intended to deflect from economic crisis’

Regime looking to shift focus from domestic problems with rhetoric around US-South Korea military drills, say analysts



Military helicopters at US army base Camp Humphreys in Pyeongtaek, South Korea. North Korea has warned against the staging of summertime military exercises. Photograph: Yonhap/EPA

Military helicopters at US army base Camp Humphreys in Pyeongtaek, South Korea. North Korea has warned against the staging of summertime military exercises. Photograph: Yonhap/EPA

[Justin McCurry in Tokyo](#)

Fri 13 Aug 2021 05.36 EDT

North Korea's threat to boost its military capacity to counter hostility from Washington before joint US-[South Korea](#) military drills is intended to divert attention from its economic crisis but could lead to a resumption of missile tests, according to analysts.

While there is nothing unusual about North Korean opposition to the summer exercises involving American and South Korean forces, its warning this week that Seoul and Washington faced "greater security threats" comes from a position of weakness not seen since [Kim Jong-un](#) came to power a decade ago.

Battered by extreme weather, coronavirus restrictions and international sanctions imposed in response to its ballistic and nuclear missile programmes, [North Korea](#) is facing one of the worst [economic crises](#) in its 73-year history.

Kim has taken the unusual steps of [apologising](#) for the parlous state of the economy and imploring his 25 million people to prepare for challenges he likened to the "[arduous march](#)" of the 1990s, when as many as three million people are thought to have died during a famine.

The US and [South Korea](#) insist the drills are intended only to test their defence capabilities against a belligerent and nuclear-armed North Korea, but Pyongyang claims they are rehearsals for a US-led invasion.

That the latest condemnation of the drills came from [Kim Yo-jong](#), Kim's influential sister, suggests the stakes are being raised as the regime attempts to shift the focus away from its myriad domestic challenges, including food shortages and disruption to trade with China caused by [anti-coronavirus](#) restrictions.

"North Korea's amped up rhetoric against scaled down US-South Korea defence exercises appears to be more about domestic politics than signalling to Washington," said Leif-Eric Easley, a professor at Ewha University in Seoul.

"The Kim regime is shifting blame for its struggles to restart the economy after a long, self-imposed pandemic lockdown. Pyongyang is also trying to

pressure South Korean presidential candidates to express differences with US policy on sanctions and denuclearisation.”

Kim Yo-jong, who is widely considered the de facto second-in-command in North Korea, this week condemned South Korea for pushing ahead with “dangerous” joint exercises with the US in comments carried by the official KCNA news agency.

North Korea would boost its “deterrent of absolute capacity”, including for “powerful preemptive strike”, to counter the ever-increasing [US military](#) threat, she said in a statement that observers assumed had been approved by her brother.

“The reality has proven that only practical deterrence, not words, can guarantee peace and security on the Korean peninsula, and that it is an imperative for us to build up power to strongly contain external threats.”

The statement was more explicit than those issued in previous years, calling on Washington to remove its 28,500 troops from South Korea, as South Korean forces and their American counterparts began preliminary training ahead of 10 days of computer-simulated drills from Monday.

Analysts said Kim’s tone, and the specific demand for a troop withdrawal, was designed to cause friction between Washington and Seoul as South Koreans prepare to elect a new president next spring to replace the liberal [Moon Jae-in](#), who has invested considerable political capital in reaching out to his neighbour.

The regime is hoping that some of the candidates looking to succeed Moon, who can govern only for a single five-year term, will take issue with the US’s uncompromising stance on denuclearisation and sanctions relief – major obstacles to progress since talks broke down after Donald Trump’s disastrous summit with [Kim Jong-un](#) in Hanoi in February 2019.

Pyongyang’s warning over the joint drills came after it agreed last month to [resume cross-border hotlines](#) after more than a year – another attempt, analysts say, to pressure South Korea into convincing Washington to make concessions on denuclearisation. On Friday, South Korea’s Yonhap news

agency said officials north of the countries' heavily armed border had not answered calls for a third straight day.

While the allies have scaled down their joint exercises in an attempt to encourage North Korea to join negotiations, US officials said this year's drills would proceed as planned.

"Let me reiterate that the joint military exercises are purely defensive in nature," US state department spokesman Ned Price said, when asked about Kim Yo-jong's threat.

"As we have long maintained, the United States harbours no hostile intent towards the DPRK," he added, using the North Korea's official name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

"We support inter-Korean dialogue, we support inter-Korean engagement and we'll continue to work with our South Korean partners towards that end."

After 18 months in which North Korea's focus on containing the pandemic appeared to rule out any dramatic rise in tensions on the Korean peninsula, this week's warning could signal it is ready to return to more provocative measures, including missile tests, to demonstrate its frustration at the lack of progress with Washington.

But Cheong Seong-chang, director of the Centre for North Korean Studies at the Sejong Institute in Seoul, pointed out that little had come of previous threats by North Korea timed to coincide with US-South Korean wargames.

"They would suddenly switch to a policy of appeasement whenever it was deemed necessary, when the drills were over," he said.

With Agence France-Presse

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[China](#)

Torrential rain lashes central China, leaving 21 dead

Hundreds of homes destroyed and almost 6,000 people evacuated amid power cuts and landslides in Hubei province



Rescuers evacuate a child from a flooded area after heavy rains in Suizhou, in China's central Hubei province. Photograph: CNS/AFP/Getty Images

Rescuers evacuate a child from a flooded area after heavy rains in Suizhou, in China's central Hubei province. Photograph: CNS/AFP/Getty Images

Agence France-Presse in Beijing
Fri 13 Aug 2021 01.55 EDT

At least 21 people died as heavy downpours struck central China's Hubei province, authorities said today, weeks after record floods wreaked havoc and killed hundreds in a neighbouring province.

China has been battered by unprecedented rains in recent months, extreme weather that experts say is increasingly common due to global warming.

In Hubei, torrential rains caused power cuts and landslides, destroying hundreds of homes and forcing the evacuation of nearly 6,000 people, the province's Emergency Management Bureau said on Friday, as reservoirs reach dangerous levels.



An overhead view of flooded streets in Hubei province. Photograph: CNS/AFP/Getty Images

“Twenty-one people were killed and four others are missing as heavy rain lashed townships from Wednesday,” state broadcaster Xinhua reported on Friday.

[Prison term raises pressure on Canada and US in high-stakes China standoff](#)
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Footage showed families wading in water that had risen to almost hip level and carrying essentials in plastic bags in Yicheng, which saw a record 480

mm (around 19 inches) of rain on Thursday. Rescuers carried people to safety on bulldozers.

“Yesterday the water levels rose to about two to three metres – my neighbour’s house was completely destroyed,” a resident from one of the worst affected areas in the city of Suizhou told local media.

“We haven’t seen so much rain in 20 or 30 years.”

Hundreds of firefighters and thousands of police and military have been dispatched to the worst-affected areas, China’s ministry of emergency management said.



Rescuers evacuating a child from the floodwaters in Suizhou in Hubei.
Photograph: CNS/AFP/Getty Images

Around 100,000 people were evacuated in the south-western province of Sichuan last weekend as heavy rains caused several landslides.

More than 300 people were killed in central China’s Henan province last month after record downpours dumped a year’s worth of rain on a city in three days.

China's Meteorological Administration warned that heavy rainfall was likely to continue until next week, with regions along the Yangtze River, including Shanghai, vulnerable to flooding.

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Belarus

New wave of arrests in Belarus as more than 20 detained in two days

Opposition figure, lawyers and former envoy among latest detained in six cities a year after disputed presidential poll



Demonstrators march with Belarusian opposition flags at a solidarity rally with Belarus in Wroclaw, Poland, this week on the one-year anniversary of Belarus's disputed presidential election. Photograph: Lidia Mukhamadeeva/SOPA Images/Rex/Shutterstock

Demonstrators march with Belarusian opposition flags at a solidarity rally with Belarus in Wroclaw, Poland, this week on the one-year anniversary of Belarus's disputed presidential election. Photograph: Lidia Mukhamadeeva/SOPA Images/Rex/Shutterstock

Associated Press in Kyiv

Thu 12 Aug 2021 22.06 EDT

Belarusian authorities have detained more than 20 people in the latest wave of arrests, continuing their sweeping crackdown on dissent a year after a disputed presidential election, human rights activists say.

Belarus [was rocked by protests](#) which were fuelled by the 9 August 2020 re-election of the authoritarian president, Alexander Lukashenko, to a sixth term in a vote that the opposition and the west rejected as a sham. Lukashenko responded to the demonstrations, the largest of which drew up to 200,000 people, with huge repressions in which more than 35,000 people were arrested and thousands beaten by police.

Belarusian authorities have ramped up the clampdown in recent months, arresting scores of independent journalists, activists and all those deemed not loyal. The Viasna human rights centre said on Thursday that more than 20 people have been detained over the past two days in six cities across the country.

[Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: ‘Belarusians weren’t ready for this level of cruelty’](#)

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Andrey Dmitriyeu, who was among the challengers to Lukashenko in the presidential vote, was detained for interrogation after a search in his Minsk apartment on Thursday. Dmitriyeu was released later in the day, and it was unclear if he faced any charges.

Ihar Lyashchenya, the former Belarusian ambassador to Slovenia, was arrested on Thursday on charges of “organising mass disturbances”, accusations that carry a prison sentence of up to eight years.

When the post-election protests erupted, Lyashchenya publicly criticised the crackdown on demonstrators and was stripped of his rank by Lukashenko.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) said on Thursday it was closely monitoring the situation in Belarus, amid calls for the global lender to limit

the disbursement of new emergency reserves to Lukashenko's government.

But IMF spokesman Gerry Rice also said the lender was guided in its actions by the international community, which "continues to deal with the current government in the country".

Some US lawmakers have urged the IMF to set strict limits for Lukashenko's ability to use nearly \$1bn in new special drawing rights, the IMF's own reserve currency, that Belarus is slated to receive as part of a \$650bn allocation to all IMF members later this month.

But experts say that as long as the IMF's members continue to recognise the government of Lukashenko, the fund cannot take more forceful action.

In a coordinated move with Britain and Canada, the US on Monday hit several Belarusian individuals and entities with new sanctions, aiming to punish Lukashenko.

In Belarus, those arrested in the latest wave also include lawyers, political and environmental activists who were part of the Skhod (Assembly) civic initiative intended to encourage a national dialogue.

Stsiapan Latypau, an activist who stabbed himself in the neck with a pen in the courtroom in June in protest against political repressions, faced a hearing on Thursday during which prosecutors asked the court to sentence him to eight-and-a-half years on charges of violation of public order, resistance to the police and fraud.

Latypau, who has been in jail since September, described to the court how police beat him in custody and used a plastic bag to suffocate him.

[Belarus regime steps up 'purge' of activists and media](#)

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"I was crying, struggling to breathe in the plastic bag and they just laughed," he said.

"The masked men beat me with their hands, their feet and using truncheons

– they beat me simultaneously and then one by one. They beat me with their fists and palms over my ears, and it felt like a hand grenade exploding inside my head.”

Protests have withered as authorities have moved relentlessly to stamp out any sign of dissent, and opposition leaders have been either jailed or forced to leave the country.

Amid the continuing crackdown, several dozen of women dressed in white and carrying red flowers to represent the colours of the opposition’s red-and-white flag, marched across the Belarusian capital in a silent protest on Thursday.

With Reuters

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Germany

Briton suspected of spying for Russia ‘kept himself to himself’

Neighbours know little of David Smith though Russian flags are visible inside his Potsdam flat



The complex where David Smith's apartment is located in Potsdam.
Photograph: Kate Connolly/The Guardian

The complex where David Smith's apartment is located in Potsdam.
Photograph: Kate Connolly/The Guardian

[Philip Oltermann](#) in Berlin, [Kate Connolly](#) in Potsdam and [Andrew Roth](#) in Moscow

Thu 12 Aug 2021 15.36 EDT

A security guard at the British embassy in Berlin who has been arrested on suspicion of passing state secrets to [Russia](#) lived in a two-room flat on a tidy estate in the city of Potsdam.

David Smith was [arrested at his home](#) on Tuesday and the contents of his apartment are likely to become a focus of the ongoing inquiry into whether he sold documents to “a representative of a Russian intelligence service” in exchange for cash.

On Thursday, Smith’s neighbours had little to say about the 57-year-old British national – a woman sitting in her garden terrace reading, a couple of doors away from his flat, only said he had “kept himself to himself”.

[UK police involved in Berlin embassy spy case for ‘number of months’](#)

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German police left his apartment unprotected, meaning members of the public could easily peer inside through half-drawn shutters.

Whether anything inside has any bearing on the investigation will be assessed by detectives, who will also want to look at the extent of the vetting process that led to him getting a job in the embassy, where he started work late last year.

Photographs published by numerous media organisations on Thursday showed Russian flags inside his flat and military memorabilia from east Ukraine. Other items included a mug bearing the flag of Novorossiya, a name adopted by the separatist republics of [Donetsk and Luhansk](#).

Clearly visible was a framed insignia of Ukraine’s Berkut special police unit, which fought back protesters during the 2014 [EuroMaidan protests](#) and were lionised by opponents of the new Kyiv government.

A bookshelf held a partially obscured insignia of the so-called Somalia Battalion, a Russian-backed separatist military unit that fought against the Kyiv government and participated in the battle for Donetsk airport in 2014.

Several of its fighters, who used the battle names Givi and Motorola, were regularly featured on Russian state media.

A sailor's cap seen on a shelf is part of the uniform of the Black Sea Fleet, which is based in Sevastopol. The city, along with the rest of the Crimean peninsula, was annexed by Russia from Ukraine in 2014.

The items appear to show an interest in a particular period of history – and whether any of it has any relevance to the investigation will doubtless form part of the inquiry led by the German authorities.

There was certainly little about Smith's flat – for which the current market value is about €700-€800 (£595-£680) rent a month – that made it stand out from the others on the estate; from the rubber plants in the window to the neat coloured knives hanging next to a kettle in the kitchenette, which was separated from the living room by a partition wall.

A PlayStation, cuddly toys including a bear in a sombrero and a stuffed doberman, and some artificial floral arrangements were also visible through the window.

Contrary to some earlier reports, Smith worked in Berlin not as a private contractor but as a “local hire” who was directly employed by the British embassy.

While the embassy outsources some security work to Securitas and building management to CBRE, both companies have categorically denied that Smith is or was on their payroll. “The arrested person is not known to Securitas,” a spokesperson for the company told the Guardian.

Local embassy hires usually undergo a shorter vetting process than UK-based civil servants or top-level diplomats representing the country abroad.

Smith was arrested “on suspicion of acting on behalf of a foreign intelligence agency”. The relevant part of the German criminal code, section 99 paragraph 1, applies mainly to espionage against [Germany](#) but can be expanded to cover allied states in conjunction with the country's Nato Troop

Protection Act, meaning the suspect could end up being tried in a German court.

German law criminalises “communicating or supplying facts, objects or knowledge” to an intelligence service of a foreign power and is thus more broadly phrased than the British Official Secrets Act, which specifically makes it illegal to pass on a sketch, plan, model, note or secret official password or code word.

Under German law, Smith can be held in pre-trial detention while investigations into his actions are ongoing, and before he has been fully charged.

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