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Names in the newsMichael Sheen

Michael Sheen: knowing when you have enough is a rare trait in the age of avarice

[Rebecca Nicholson](#)





Michael Sheen: ‘A not-for-profit actor.’ Photograph: Ian West/PA

Sat 11 Dec 2021 10.00 EST

It is hard to find something to dislike about Michael Sheen. You have to really try: I managed to squeeze out the fact that he didn’t much enjoy his bow tie in *Good Omens*, but it took some effort. In an [interview](#) with the *Big Issue* last week, Sheen raised the Decent Bloke stakes again by explaining that he had “essentially turned myself into a social enterprise, a not-for-profit actor”.

This is not some Jeremy Strong-style method approach, in which Sheen, playing the role of Social Enterprise, goes all-in to benefit the community. Or maybe it is, in a way; he revealed that he is putting the majority of his future earnings into good causes. “I don’t want to just be someone who enjoys the fruits of what other people have done and then pull the drawbridge up and go, ‘Well I’m all right, Jack, I’ve had a nice time’,” he said.

I thought about Sheen’s decision, to have enough for himself and to do something good with the rest of it, when I read another piece, by [Courtney Love](#) in the *Financial Times*, in support of the paper’s campaign to advocate for wider financial literacy. One idea stood out and, although it is not radical,

I was surprised to find that it sounded as if it was. “I don’t think artists should be expected to be billionaires,” she said, arguing that a poet, for example, doesn’t need a second home. “I think artists should get what we call ‘right-sized’ about what to expect from their careers.”

In their individual ways, both are raising the question of what it means to have enough. It’s old-fashioned as an idea. We live in an era, and a culture, that not only prioritises growth for the sake of it, but fetishes it. Everything is about having bigger, better, more, from desserts piled high with other desserts until they’re photogenic enough for Instagram, to the absurd expansion in car size that means parents drive their kids down the road to school in vehicles more suited to country tracks or Ben Nevis.

The wealth gap in Britain has widened to a sickening degree during the pandemic. Obviously, I am talking about one end of it and that is not the people struggling to put food on the table with any regularity. In the world of work, we are largely expected to strive for more: promotions, a pay rise, more status, more money, infinite growth. Philosophers and economists have long grappled with the idea that this is unsustainable. On an individual level, though, we are rarely asked to consider what is enough. To consider what is “right-sized” for us.

Bernie Sanders’s mittens broke the internet



Bernie Sanders: glove love. Photograph: Brendan Smialowski/AFP/Getty Images

Google's annual end-of-year round-up of [search trends](#) showed that in 2021, the world searched for a lot of cricket, a lot of superhero movies and a lot of *Squid Game*. In the UK, we still preferred football and made space for *Line of Duty*, wanted to know when *Love Island* finished more than we wanted to know when lockdown started, were less interested in Pete Davidson than we were in Matt Hancock and persisted with making the ubiquitous banana bread.

But most shocking was the news that searches for “mittens” reached an all-time high in January, thanks to Bernie Sanders keeping his hands warm, cottagecore-style, at the presidential inauguration. It was shocking because how, by any measure, apart from calendars and clocks, was that *this year?* I don’t wish to deny mittens their moment in the spotlight, because it’s taken them forever to hit that record for most searches. But I could have sworn that Sanders wore those mittens at least 15 years ago, that those memes about him sitting grumpily loaded up slowly on a BlackBerry screen. As if that happened less than 12 months ago. I simply refuse to believe it.

And Just Like That: no sex in the city for these baffled gal pals



Nicole Ari Parker, Kristin Davis and Cynthia Nixon at the And Just Like That premiere. Photograph: Marion Curtis/StarPix for HBOmax/REX/Shutterstock

It had to be done. The *Sex and the City* reboot [And Just Like That...](#) was a rare moment of must-see TV, at least among my friends. On Thursday, there was a synchronised press-play, a flurry of texts, though “are you watching?” quickly became “what... are we watching?”

The cast ploughed on gamely, but it was a strange experience; there was little sense that these characters had actually aged while they were off screen, more a sensation that they had been picked up in 2004, when *Sex and the City* ended (I am ignoring the films, which is a kindness), and plopped back down in the present day, where they stared, baffled, at a world in which people said “woke” and confused them with their newfangled podcasts.

One of the oddest things was the feeling that the *characters* were too famous to be believable on screen. This is fairly normal with actors; there are some who only play tweaked versions of the same thing and look like Bambi on ice when they try to do something different.

But I didn't get the impression that these famous women were struggling to lose themselves in the characters, more that the characters were struggling to lose themselves in the story. Also, there was hardly any sex, not helped by the most fond-of-sex character Samantha being famously indisposed, although I did enjoy the loose explanation as to why she'd chosen London over this.

Until *that* twist at the end of episode one, I don't think anyone could blame her. Obviously, I will be watching every week, just to make sure.

Rebecca Nicholson is an Observer columnist

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Do we really want to live in a culture of endless blame when we're all fallible?

[Emma John](#)

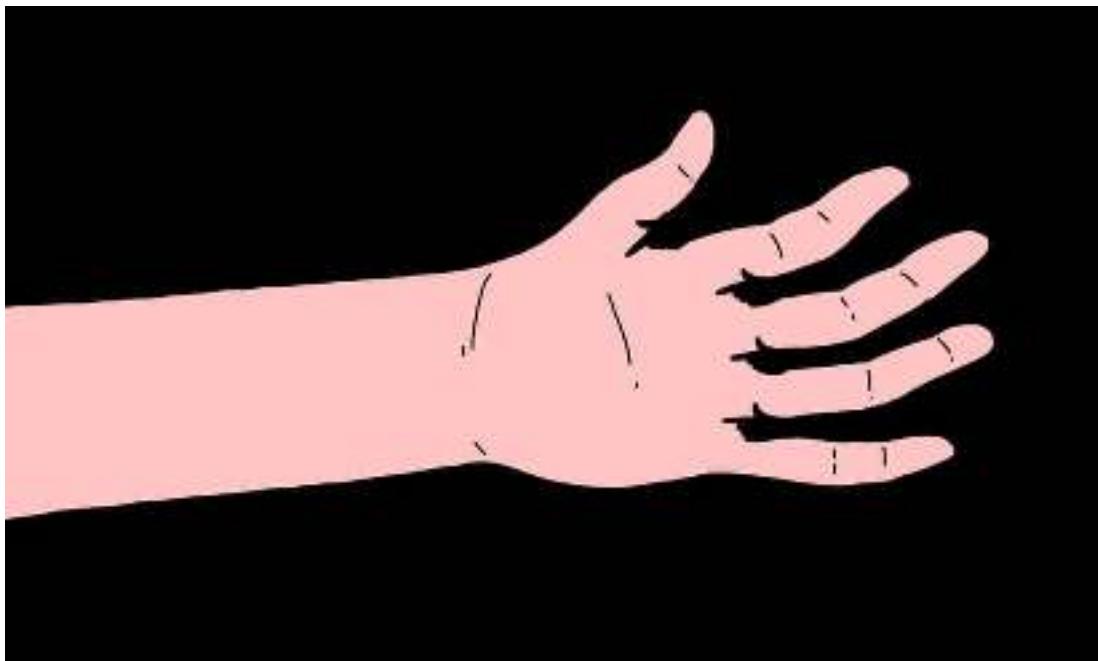


Illustration: Dominic McKenzie/The Observer

Sun 12 Dec 2021 02.00 EST

There's a communal prayer of penitence that is often used in Church of England services. In it, worshippers confess that they have sinned against their fellow humans "in thought, and word, and deed; through negligence, through weakness, through our own deliberate fault". Concise yet powerful, it recognises the different ways we can harm each other. Sins of omission and of carelessness are no less damaging, or requiring of forgiveness, than those born of malice.

We live in a period when our personal contributions to systemic injustice, many of them unintentional, are becoming increasingly obvious. Our new age of enlightenment has illuminated any number of dark corners that society has long failed (or refused) to notice. Cricket, the sport I love, has just endured a particularly punishing month of reckoning. First, Azeem Rafiq's public testimony against his former county, Yorkshire, forced the [English game to admit](#) that its anti-racism stance wasn't worth the T-shirts it was printed on. Then, right before the Ashes, Australia's [then-captain admitted sending sexually explicit messages to a colleague](#). In both cases, players, coaches and commentators found themselves suddenly jobless, while the sport's administrators have scrambled, with little dignity, to contain the fallout.

Rafiq said he had no interest in shaming individuals, but in exposing the culture of which their actions were a part. The fact that he was undermined with the [revelation of antisemitic tweets](#) from his past is symptomatic of our default position, to respond to calls for societal change with charges of hypocrisy.

Each new sally in the culture wars requires its own forensic dig through social media. Each corresponding "Gotcha" moment detracts and distracts from the widespread need for justice, education and understanding that has inspired such powerful movements as Black Lives Matter and the #MeToo movement.

Attitudinal and behavioural changes in our society are as rapid as they are overdue. Generations Z and Alpha will grow up with a far greater understanding than their predecessors of how insidious and widespread is the human instinct to “other” one another and how enshrined it is in our political systems and social networks. For anyone older, this is a time of reassessment.

How many of us can honestly say we haven’t laughed at comedy based on stereotypes we’d blench at now, whether it’s our parents laughing at funny foreigners in 70s sitcoms or Rachel [sniggering at the word “homo” in Friends?](#) Given the insults that liberally littered schooldays past – girls calling each other “retards” or boys calling each other “gay” – who hasn’t used language they’d cringe to repeat or stayed silent at something they would quickly denounce today?

We’re living in an era when we’re being asked to listen and learn in ways that many of us haven’t done before

No wonder many feel defensive, threatened, overwhelmed: having good intentions, and being decent in our individual encounters, is no longer enough. We’re living in an era when we’re being asked to listen and learn in ways that many of us haven’t done before. If it were easy to admit and apologise for our complicity in social “norms” that hurt others, we might have solved some of these problems. But even saying sorry for the smallest things can feel beyond us, especially under the scrutiny of social media that is quick to point the finger.

While our first thoughts in these situations must be with the victims of injustice, it’s possible to feel horror for the discrimination they’ve endured (and we’ve ignored) yet retain an instinctive sympathy for those caught in the crude spotlight of their own errors. Perhaps that’s not an unselfish feeling. It’s born of the utter surety that some of our own past thoughts, beliefs and utterances might not withstand such scrutiny, whether or not our timelines are devoid of casually racist memes.

Occasionally, it feels as though we’re living in a world of mutually assured destruction. There are few enough of us with clean hands, yet still, in our

moral panic, we sacrifice our scapegoats and revel in other people's downfalls. The more loudly we exercise our judgment on "historical messages" or thoughtless speech or crass attempts at humour, the harder it becomes for everyone else to own their mistakes. We can't escape, and we can't progress, if we're trapped in a circle holding guns to each other's heads. We have to find a new model for taking responsibility that tempers justice with mercy. We need to adopt a readiness to forgive that stops us getting so self-righteous and stoking divides. We must make space for grace.

We also have to admit – to ourselves, to others – that we're all susceptible to human nature and human flaws. Understanding how or why someone said or did something wrong, whether through deep-rooted and unchallenged prejudice or wilful ignorance, or worse, isn't the same as condoning it. Acknowledging our mistakes and changing our behaviour is the most vital thing we can do. We're more likely and able to make amends if we're not terrified of lifelong judgment and if we don't feel singled out for blame.

In our secular society, we've let go of many of the rituals that allow us to acknowledge communal wrongdoing and encourage us to seek corporate forgiveness. Many would, understandably, choke on the hypocrisy of the absolution that religious establishments offer, when so many of them have been implicated in oppressive systems of their own. But maybe we've struggled to replace them with anything else that can recognise and relieve the heavy tonnage of our collective guilt.

Instead, we point out the mote in our brother's eye. Or we outsource atonement to actual corporations and other organisations we can hold accountable for actions and behaviour that exist at a safe distance. There's surely a reason why the mea culpas doled out by PR departments these days have started to sound less like careful legalese and more like liturgy. "Our sport did not welcome you, our game did not accept you as it should have done," intoned the ECB's press release. It could almost have come with an amen at the end.

Emma John is a freelance writer and author

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OpinionBoris Johnson

The Observer view on Boris Johnson

Observer editorial



Prime Minister Boris Johnson at a press conference in Downing Street to announce new restrictions in response to the Omicron variant. Photograph: Adrian Dennis/PA

Sun 12 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

Every month of Boris Johnson's premiership brings a new reminder of his rank unfitness for office. As the country is on the verge of an [Omicron wave](#) that could pose a profound challenge to the NHS, the government is mired in a deep political crisis entirely of its own making, after a week in which yet more of Johnson's hypocrisy and corruption have been exposed.

A year ago, citizens made huge sacrifices in obeying Covid restrictions to limit the number of individuals who lost their lives in the second wave. As in the first wave of the pandemic, Johnson left it far too late to introduce social restrictions last autumn, with the result that thousands died needlessly

and more damage than necessary was inflicted on the economy. But public compliance with restrictions when they were eventually brought in was high, as people did their bit to ease pressure on the NHS and save lives. Relatives missed saying final goodbyes to loved ones with Covid; grandparents missed first Christmases; more people than usual spent Christmas alone. Yet we have discovered that individuals working for the [government held Christmas parties](#) across Whitehall, including in No 10, in flagrant breach of the government's own regulations that so many people abided by, at great personal cost.

Johnson's claims that he did not know about the reported parties in No 10 or the cultures of entitlement that fuelled them are not credible. No one in government has taken adequate responsibility for what happened. It reveals an abject disregard for the public and has further undermined trust in the government at a critical phase of the pandemic, just when ministers are asking the public to comply with extra Covid measures.

The revelations that Johnson's team had so little respect for the public have prompted a political crisis just at the moment when the government should be focused on what action is needed to combat the Omicron variant. Emerging data has suggested the new variant is far more transmissible than Delta and that a double vaccine provides much less protection against symptomatic infection, although a booster dose is [very effective](#). It is too early to tell the extent to which Omicron is associated with serious illness, hospital admissions and death in a population with the UK's levels of immunity and age profile, but even if the risk of hospital admissions is half that of Delta, its significant transmissibility advantage means there is a very substantial risk that, without further action, the NHS could be [overwhelmed](#) this winter. This is why Professor John Edmunds, one of the government's scientific advisers, has said Omicron represents a "very severe setback" to hopes of bringing the virus under control.

His political authority has ebbed as a result of his terrible handling of the Owen Paterson corruption scandal

On Wednesday, the government announced it would be introducing its plan B measures: compulsory masks in more settings, Covid passports for

nightclubs and large-capacity venues and asking people to work from home if they can. But many experts have raised doubts about whether these will make enough of a difference to the spread of Omicron. While levels of immunity are better than they were last winter, Omicron's transmission advantage means Johnson now faces a similar decision to last Christmas: should he take precautionary action now in order to avoid tougher social restrictions to prevent the NHS from being overwhelmed later? Ministers should be considering further measures, such as extending vaccine passports to all forms of hospitality, and re-extending self-isolation to all contacts of Covid cases, while, as we have long argued, ensuring everyone has access to decent sick pay so they can afford to test if they have symptoms and to self-isolate if positive. Moreover, while boosters have rightly been heralded as the first line of defence against Omicron, many who are officially eligible for the booster dose have been unable to access it due to limited capacity across the UK. The booster programme has proceeded in a more lethargic fashion than the original rollout of vaccines, despite the risk of a more vaccine-resistant strain such as Omicron emerging. There should have been an unrelenting drive within government last week to rapidly expand vaccine capacity across the four nations.

But just as Johnson's sole focus should be on the booster rollout and any further measures needed to combat Omicron, his premiership is being consumed by a self-inflicted political crisis. His political authority in the Conservative party has ebbed away as a result of his terrible handling of the Owen Paterson corruption scandal, the revelations that he misled the government's adviser on ministerial interests on the funding of the refurbishment of his [Downing Street flat](#) and the political fallout of his senior staff holding parties while the country was in lockdown. He faces a significant backbench rebellion over a parliamentary vote on the introduction of plan B, let alone on any further measures. We know Johnson is a man who has elected to put personal interests before country time and again: there is a risk that he is again being too slow to take the action required because he is swayed by retaining the support of newly emboldened rebellious backbenchers.

It is a national misfortune that we have a man who is by far and away the worst postwar prime minister in office at the time of the worst postwar crisis. [Johnson lacks any shred of integrity](#), is driven by ego and self-interest

and has been prepared to mislead voters over and over again. He is incompetent and embodies the entitled politician who sees politics as a game rather than a duty. He is utterly unfit to govern Britain.

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OpinionAfghanistan

The Observer view on the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan

[Observer editorial](#)



Afghan girls selling water at Lake Shuhada in Kabul on 1 December.
Photograph: Ahmad Sahel Arman/AFP/Getty Images

Sun 12 Dec 2021 01.30 EST

During 20 years of war in Afghanistan, according to the US-based Watson Institute's [Costs of War Project](#), about 176,000 people were killed, of whom 46,000 were civilians. Dreadful though they are, these figures are dwarfed by [predictions](#) by the World Health Organization that 1 million Afghan children under five will die of starvation this winter. Another 2.2 million will suffer acute malnutrition – unless urgent action is taken.

Relief organisations have warned for months of an impending humanitarian catastrophe. Now the catastrophe has arrived. "Hunger in the country has reached truly unprecedented levels," the [UN refugee agency](#) said on 3

December. “Nearly 23 million people – that is 55% of the population – are facing extreme levels of hunger and nearly 9 million of them are at risk of famine.”

If the international community, and especially the US and Britain, which abandoned the country in August, is to prevent, or even mitigate, this coming disaster, it must act now. Some emergency aid has been supplied since the Taliban took power in Kabul, but nowhere near enough. A Marshall Plan for [Afghanistan](#) is required.

Many crises are converging. The war and its aftermath have left 3.5 million people displaced. They are particularly vulnerable. Foreign assistance, amounting to 75% of all public spending, has halted. Teachers, health professionals and civil servants have not been paid for months. As Covid rages, a drought has caused [harvests to fail](#).

While Taliban commanders direct scant resources towards feeding and paying their fighters, the economy has seized up. The banking system is breaking down, cash and savings are hard to access, prices are rising. Per capita annual income is forecast to drop next year from \$509 (£380) to \$350 (£260). These are starvation wages. Meanwhile, the US Treasury and IMF have frozen [\\$9.5bn of Afghan assets](#).

According to the [Costs of War Project](#), the US has spent \$2.3tn in Afghanistan since 2001. Yet direct and indirect gains, such as healthcare provision, schooling for girls and integration of women into the workforce, are being squandered, mainly due to the [Taliban's feudal attitudes](#) but also for lack of continued western support. This self-defeating regression threatens to rebound on the west. Analysts suggest Europe could face a huge new refugee crisis next spring. Last week, 15 EU states agreed to take in [40,000 Afghans](#). This is welcome, but it's a drop in the ocean. Wealthy countries, and [Priti Patel's flailing Home Office](#), must do more, better, quickly.

The main reasons for western governments' reluctance to step back in – fear of validating Taliban rule and misuse of donor funds – remain valid. Yet given the urgency of the crisis, ways around this political roadblock must be found. Proposed measures to ease UN sanctions, waivers for relief agencies,

cash transfers via private banks and the unfreezing of individuals' assets should be pursued. A longer-term international assistance strategy must be formulated.

In Britain, much attention remains focused on August's evacuation debacle. Concerns about the Foreign Office's failure to adequately respond to Afghans' emailed pleas for help, first reported in the *Observer*, and the negligent performance of then foreign secretary, Dominic Raab, have been compounded by a whistleblower's revelations painting a picture of endemic incompetence. Raphael Marshall, who has since resigned his Foreign Office job, confirmed the impression that Raab was out of his depth. It's surprising and disappointing that he is still in government and it's dismaying that his successor, Liz Truss, appears to be as much interested in advancing her Tory leadership ambitions as she is in helping Afghans.

By invading Afghanistan, Britain and the US began a fight they could not finish. By leaving in a panic, they precipitated another disaster. If they are to prevent a third catastrophe, as they should, they must hurry to the aid of the starving Afghan people – immediately, generously and without further prevarication.

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Observer comment cartoon

Boris Johnson

Boris Johnson: liargate – cartoon

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NotebookStage

The green-eyed monster syndrome doth mock Othello

[Susannah Clapp](#)



Paul Robeson as Othello, right, and Peggy Ashcroft as Desdemona at the Savoy theatre in London in 1930. Photograph: Hulton Deutsch/Corbis/Getty Images

Sat 11 Dec 2021 12.00 EST

I have been puzzling over a dramatic question from a psychiatrist friend. He had been consulted about a patient who was behaving erratically, obsessed by the notion that his wife was having an affair. A colleague diagnosed “Othello syndrome”, which is apparently the recognised term for pathological erotic jealousy. My friend thinks this won’t do. Othello was not delusional: he was tricked, persuaded by Iago that a hanky was evidence of Desdemona’s infidelity. He wonders if Leontes from *The Winter’s Tale*, who, on a whim, accuses his wife and best friend of carrying on, might not more accurately lend his name to the condition? Or could I think of another candidate, in Shakespeare or elsewhere, to represent all-consuming but not suicidal jealousy?

I consulted a trio of English graduates: they were stumped – and I am still looking. So far the best suggestion has come from a friend’s 13-year-old son. He thought Adrian Mole would fit the case nicely.

Joke of thanks



Penelope Fitzgerald. Photograph: Jane Bown/The Observer

The *London Review of Books* has recently published a small volume of pieces by [Penelope Fitzgerald](#), a terrific reminder of how far-reaching book reviews can be. The novelist's unblinking brilliance spurred me to look for a small cache of postcards she sent when I was helping to edit her at the *LRB* (actually, she required no editing): one of them explained she was about to take part in a writing course in Yorkshire – “madness, as it’s only encouraging more writers and there are too many already”.

The cache has temporarily disappeared and the only card I could lay my hands on was a thank-you message written after a party in 1981. She had arrived spectacularly early – the *LRB* staff were still slicing up strawberries and arranging pots of flowers at the back of the lawn, in imitation of a garden. The novelist sat for half an hour in an easy chair looking out of the window, chatting. Her card (a Maclise painting of *The Eve of St Agnes*) was characteristic: clearly written but mysterious – tactful? Feline? A joke? “It was a lovely party and obviously getting better and better... ” She had left before anyone else arrived.

Shared square



The Royal Court theatre: centre of festive fun. Photograph: Jansos/Alamy

A small comfort for the Royal Court, from which last week two corporate sponsors withdrew their support following [the row](#) about antisemitic stereotyping in Al Smith's play *Rare Earth Mettle*. At least Sloane Square itself is for the moment a jollier place. Usually the bleakest of traffic islands, surrounded by cabs and wealth, it will, until 23 December, feature a restaurant and bar run by the theatre, offering cocktails, currywurst – and hot-water bottles.

This is the revival of an old dream. Just over 20 years ago, the architects Haworth Tompkins, commissioned to redesign the theatre, wanted to link the newly placed basement bar to the square via an underground connection next to a former ladies' lavatory. The Cadogan Estate refused permission.

Covid and the need for outside congregation have caused it to think again and now we can see what we have been denied these two decades. A vivid area rather than a desolate one, with audiences and passersby sharing a space, the theatre part of the flow of life. The Court is working on a new offer in the square for January. I hope it gets it.

Boring a bore



The Duchess Of Cornwall meets the cast of The Archers. Photograph: Kate Green/Getty Images

The Archers deserves congratulations on one of its meta-moments, I think scripted by the great Nick Warburton. The son of the recently deceased Bert Fry has turned up, talking animatedly about his obsessions – travel arrangements and stones. He is, Tony Archer complains, “the most boring man” ever. “Boring” is a startling new addition to the Ambridge lexicon. Is Tony, hardly the most vibrant villager, really the best first user?

Susannah Clapp is the theatre critic of the Observer

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Observer letters**Local government**

Letters: local councils have been undermined



Cllr Jayne Kirkham in Falmouth, Cornwall. Photograph: Karen Robinson/The Observer

Sun 12 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

Phillip Inman's article on the dire state of local government finances sheds a light on what has been going on for decades, something I witnessed as a councillor on various authorities between 1987 and 2017 ("[Councils have been short-changed. We need more government money](#)", Business). Cllr Jayne Kirkham is pulling her punches when she opines that Cornwall has been "short-changed by the government". In my opinion, local councils have been systematically emasculated by successive governments, at least since the end of the Second World War.

It is time to reform local government finance and structure in England before repatriating some of the powers it used to enjoy. The surviving remnants of

the three-tier system in England (county, district, town/parish) need urgently to be replaced by unitary authorities, while retaining and strengthening the town/neighbourhood councils, which would bring English local government broadly in line with its counterparts in the other three UK nations. Council tax needs to be replaced by a local income tax and/or a land value tax. Just don't give us any more local supremos, aka mayors or governors. Democracy is not safe if it rests in the hands of a single person, regardless of their mandate, as Boris Johnson proves to us every day.

John Marriott

North Hykeham, Lincoln

I have great sympathy with Jayne Kirkham, Labour councillor in Cornwall. Cornwall is indeed one of the poorest regions in Europe and before Brexit was a beneficiary of millions of pounds from the EU social funds. However, Cornish people voted by a majority for Brexit, the Conservatives swept to power in the council elections in May and all six of Cornwall's Westminster constituencies are blue. I would leave it up to them to sort out. That is local democracy and public accountability. You get what you vote for.

Paul Goodman

Loughborough, Leicestershire

Vaccinate the world

Sir Jeremy Farrar suggests that, unless there is global vaccination coverage, a new variant is likely to overcome our armoury of vaccines ("[Progress on Covid now 'squandered', warns expert](#)", News). Professor Sir Andrew Pollard and Gordon Brown have been saying something very similar for some time.

According to the OECD last week, it would cost \$50bn (£38bn) to vaccinate the world. If the world's highest income countries (81, according to the World Bank) had the political will, these countries would only have to contribute £470m each. When we remember that the UK's track and trace system cost £37bn, £470m is a drop in the ocean. These costs would be greatly reduced if governments approved a waiver of intellectual property rights related to Covid-19 technologies. This is supported by more than 100 governments, but not ours.

Global vaccine equality demands that the UK does the right thing and contributes to an urgent vaccination programme. Putting the strong moral argument aside, it is in our own best interests to do so.

Phil Powell

Oxford

Tomato yoghurt does exist

Come on, Séamas O'Reilly, use your amazing imagination – tomato yoghurt is easily contrived with a spoonful of ketchup added to plain yoghurt (“[My son's Heston Blumenthal potential comes into its own – and means we're late for nursery](#)”, the New Review).

One of my children would not eat yoghurt with bits in, at a time when smooth ones were unavailable, so in typical earth mother mode I would sieve out the bits and he was happy with the result.

Catherine Roome

Staplehurst, Kent

Care system not the solution

I agree wholeheartedly that social workers need to engage all their critical skills when assessing parenting behaviour (“[Don't be fooled by deceitful parents, top child expert warns social workers](#)”, News). However, I am less sure that proposing more children should be taken into care is necessarily the solution, given the shortcomings of our current system.

We know that children in care are more likely to do poorly in education, to experience problems with physical and mental health and to enter the criminal justice system. As adults, these experiences have a long-term effect and consequently affect their own parenting abilities. Unless we are prepared to invest substantially in a system that does much better for these children, expanding the numbers in care is not the answer.

Pam Hibbert

Llangammarch Wells, Powys

A rood awakening

While I agree with Jonathan Bouquet that “cathedrals are not theme parks” (“[May I have a word?](#)”, Comment), I can’t agree that they were created to instil wonderment, awe and lift the soul. It depended who you were.

A secular view is that the awe was engendered by segregation of the masses from the hallowed and secure area of the sanctuary by a screen that gave limited view of the ceremonials undertaken by the hierarchy. The masses had to stand, there were no pews until relatively recently, but the old and infirm could “go to the wall” to sit on stone shelves.

Many cathedrals had wall paintings and often sculpture that depicted or promised damnation, torture or the sufferings of saints. It was fear that engendered the “awe” for them. For me, modern, freer access creates the awe. I see cathedrals as art that is made fluid by the additions and changes over the centuries. Perhaps the next wave of fluidity for Notre Dame will again demonstrate that the building is the star and the contents another aspect of change and self-awareness.

Jonathan Hauxwell

Crosshills, North Yorkshire

Who’s the tyrant?

“[A cruel tyrant is crushing a democracy. People are dying. So what is the west going to do about it?](#)” (Foreign affairs commentary): on reading this headline, I initially thought this report was talking about the UK, not Myanmar.

Pete Lavender

Woodthorpe, Nottingham

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[For the record](#)UK news

For the record

Sun 12 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

Kingspan predominantly manufactures insulation, not cladding, as an article suggested ([Principles v money: from tennis to F1, this is the real contest taking over global sport](#), 5 December, page 48). The piece also referred to yen when yuan was meant.

An article misspelled Usman Khawaja's surname as Kawaja ([England can step up and enjoy freedom of the no-context Ashes](#), 5 December, Sport, page 12).

People would need to be 78 or older to have voted in the 1964 election, not 75 or older, as stated in an opinion piece, because the voting age at the time was 21 ([Keir Starmer should learn from how Wilson and Blair led Labour to success](#), 5 December, page 45).

A [review](#) of *Unalome* by Graeme Cheevers said news of the restaurant's launch had prompted speculation that this might be "the place that brings a Michelin star back to Glasgow". In fact, Cail Bruich gained a Michelin star in January to become the city's first place to receive the accolade in 18 years (5 December, Magazine, page 51).

Syngas is short for synthesis gas, not synthetic gas ([Making stuff from thin air](#), 5 December, New Review, page 25).

Homophone corner: "As with all the finest Lieder singers, [Padmore] can yolk his own experience – four decades, performing all kinds of repertoire – to the demands of the music, from simple longing to anguish" ([Classical](#), 5 December, New Review, page 34).

[Easy rider? We'll miss the roar, but electric motorbikes can't kill our road romance](#)

[Olivia Rodrigo: Spotify's tracking is all about smoke and mirrors](#)

[Buy your dog a canine Christmas pudding if you want to get its tail wagging](#)

[Poll reveals huge public cynicism, with just 5% of respondents believing politicians work for public good](#)

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[**Opinion**](#)[**Politics**](#)

So which of these politicians is a neoliberal? Not one of them

[Nick Cohen](#)



Tony Blair, 1998; Margaret Thatcher, 1990; David Cameron, 2016.
Composite: Sportsphoto Ltd/Allstar; Richard Baker/Getty; Justin Tallis/AFP/Getty

Sat 11 Dec 2021 14.00 EST

No one admits to being a “neoliberal”. You cannot vote for the Neoliberal party or join a neoliberal club. Like 21st-century fascism and religious fundamentalism, neoliberalism is a movement without declared adherents.

If you call opponents “fascist” or a “fundamentalist”, however, at least your audience knows you are condemning them. A “neoliberal” though? Most people won’t know what you are talking about, but will guess that it doesn’t sound such a bad thing to be. The exceptions will be the minority immersed in leftwing thought. They alone are primed to shudder at the sound of the word.

Insults that only the initiated comprehend are closer to a secret code than an open argument. Like the changes in [approved terms for disadvantage](#) – don’t say “able-bodied”, say “non-disabled” – the effect, if not the intention, is to belittle ordinary people and make them feel they are gauche or worse for not keeping up with the latest linguistic fashions. Given that losing is the standard experience of the centre-left, throwing out language that excludes the majority of the population strikes me as an overdue necessity. The more so when a new collection of essays by modern historians suggests that supposed insiders may not understand what neoliberalism means either. [The Neoliberal Age? Britain since the 1970s](#) is well worth reading and not only because the generous publishers allow you to download it free.

Although most of the contributors agree that the rise to power of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher represented a break with the past, they contest everything else. Were they really preceded by a social democratic golden age? (The movements to empower women, ethnic minorities and gays and lesbians did not think so.) Were changes we explain by looking at political decisions the result of shifts in ideology or the shift from manufacturing to service economies that affected every developed nation, regardless of who was in power?

The doctrines of Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek are meant to be distinct from traditional apologetics for unrestrained capitalism. Nineteenth-century economic liberals wanted a minimal state. But the neoliberals of the 20th century wanted to empower the state to create and uphold markets and competition. As history, this is tediously sentimental. The British state presided over the world's first capitalist economy. It used its empire as a captive market and went to war with China to allow the [free trade in drugs](#) to flourish. You can call it many things but it was not a minimal state. In the 1960s, during the supposed [Trente Glorieuses](#) of the social democratic age, the Bank of England and the Foreign Office enabled the creation of [tax havens](#) that allowed plutocrats, corporations and criminals to hoard their money with disastrous and enduring consequences for humanity.

Russians would never use such a mild term of the men Vladimir Putin has let loose. They capture the banditry of crony capitalism by talking of robbers, looters and frauds

I could go on, but the cliquey language remains my main concern: not just for what it conceals, but for what it unwittingly reveals. Like so much insider jargon, neoliberal is a pathetically weak term. To take an everyday example: since Thatcher's government privatised the water industry in 1989, managers and shareholders have exploited their monopoly power to take almost [£60bn in profit](#). In 2020, the companies spent 3.1m hours [dumping sewage into rivers](#). So great has been their failure to reinvest even a small portion of the money they take, south-east England may soon face [water shortages](#).

I accept that no mid-20th-century government would have contemplated handing over water companies to negligent profiteers. But to call today's politicians and regulatory authorities, who sit back while monopolists cover the countryside in excrement, "neoliberals" is to let them off lightly. Russians would never use such a mild term of the men Vladimir Putin has let loose. They capture the banditry of crony capitalism by talking of robbers, looters and frauds.

I can't speak for academia, but in politics I know that the cry "neoliberal" is a certain sign that I am in the presence of the far left. It must maintain there

is no difference between Tony Blair's Labour government and any government Keir Starmer may lead, and the Tories. I once believed that, but the brutality of David Cameron's actual Conservative government made me think again. So, too, did the arguments for apathy or despair behind apparently radical sloganising.

Only moderate centre-left parties have won elections in western countries and their victories are rare enough. If you insist that they are as much a part of a neoliberal conspiracy as the right, then there is no point in fighting to remove the right from power.

As seriously, a belief in neoliberal hegemony ducks the question whether it makes sense to think of today's right as neoliberal. I can see the idea's appeal. [Boris Johnson](#) and his wife are openly for sale. Whether they want new wallpaper or home-delivered dinners, their first instinct is to sponge off rich donors, who may well entertain the hope that their favours will be returned.

Boris Johnson and his wife are openly for sale. Whether they want new wallpaper or home-delivered dinners, their first instinct is to sponge off rich donors

None of his personal corruptions, however, can hide the truth that Johnson is a nationalist, who appeals to deep chauvinist sentiments rather than class interests. No economic liberal, neo or otherwise, would pull the UK out of the world's richest single market. Conservatives fooled themselves that Brexit would bring a deregulated society. But we should pay more attention to the world as it is than to the fantasies of the delusional and see that, instead of a Singapore-on-Thames, they have undermined exporters and brought tax to its highest level since the 1960s, an era the Thatcher revolution supposedly finished off.

Far from being a spur to entrepreneurial dynamism, the Conservative party is the party of the people who have stopped working, rather than the party of businesses and their workers. Johnson and ministers stroke the prejudices of his core pensioner vote and put their economic interests first. I cannot

imagine the ghost of Friedman applauding a government that raises taxes on employers and employees to protect the property of wealthy retirees.

You won't beat them with obscurantist labels voters don't understand and you may well not understand either. You won't beat them until you understand them and when you do you will realise that whatever else they are they are not neoliberals.

Nick Cohen is an Observer columnist

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/dec/11/so-which-of-these-politicians-is-a-neoliberal-not-one-of-them>

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- [Covid Johnson rushes in plan B amid 'moral authority' crisis](#)
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[Coronavirus](#)

Debacle over No 10 Christmas party ‘threatens efforts to control pandemic’



Boris Johnson speaking at a press conference where he was repeatedly asked about Christmas parties at No 10 last year. Photograph: Adrian Dennis/PA

[Ian Sample](#) Science editor

[@iansample](#)

Thu 9 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

The debacle over the No 10 Christmas party threatens to undermine efforts to control the Covid pandemic at a time when the Omicron variant is fuelling fears of an imminent and major wave of disease, say scientists.

A so-called Cummings effect last year led to “negative and lasting consequences” on public trust following the lockdown-busting trips made by Boris Johnson’s aide, Dominic Cummings, researchers found.

Another apparent breach of Covid guidelines at Downing Street last December, and footage of Johnson's aides joking about a party, risk deepening mistrust in ministers and exacerbating a sense of "us and them" just as the country faces further [plan B restrictions](#) to combat the virus, experts warned.

"There is a real concern over Omicron. It could be completely out of control fairly quickly," said Stephen Reicher, a professor of psychology at the University of St Andrews and a member of the Sage subgroup on behavioural science. "We need a communal response to keep ourselves safe, and for that we really need trust in government."

"In the middle of a national crisis where we need to react quickly and need to know how to react, we need a government that can guide us; a government that we think of as 'them', and as dishonest, and as liars, is not the government we need right now."

The impact of any loss of trust may go far beyond the conflicting advice about Christmas parties, Reicher warned, potentially extending to areas such as the vaccination and booster programmes, which are already hampered by low trust in some communities.

In a paper [published in the Lancet](#) called the Cummings Effect: politics, trust, and behaviours during the Covid-19 pandemic, Dr Daisy Fancourt described the breach of Covid rules by Cummings last May as having "negative and lasting consequences ... for public trust and the risks to behaviours".

"While public adherence to Covid guidelines was falling before news emerged of Cummings' drive to Barnard Castle, the decline worsened in England in the three weeks after, but not in Scotland or Wales," said Fancourt, associate professor of psychobiology and epidemiology at UCL.

"One thing I'm nervous about with reporting on the No 10 breaches is that it could damage public compliance behaviours when they are more important than ever ... so the important thing for the public to remember is that the vast majority of people are playing their part, following the rules to protect themselves and others."

There is no simple equation between trust and adherence to Covid guidelines, Reicher points out. Some of those most angry with Cummings adhered more strictly to Covid rules in the aftermath because they wanted to demonstrate how different they were from government officials.

But others – those who already wanted to break the rules – felt emboldened. “It gave them a warrant, an excuse to break the rules. It doesn’t necessarily change people’s minds, but it empowers people to act on what they believe,” he said.

Prof Heidi Larson, director of the [Vaccine Confidence Project](#) at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, said the Christmas party reports were “a betrayal of trust”. “It’s not good for a public that is really tired, that’s exhausted and ready to see the end of this pandemic. A lot of people have really hung in there in a deep desire to get through it,” Larson said.

“When you’ve been doing what’s felt like the right thing for getting on for two years, and it’s been a long haul, and then you see this, it’s a betrayal of trust … We need to distinguish between what’s happening at No 10 and what Chris Whitty and the scientific advice says.

“That is really important. The chief medical officer’s guidance should not be implicated in this at all.”

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Politics live with Andrew Sparrow

Boris Johnson

No 10 denies claim Boris Johnson lied to standards adviser over flat refurbishment – as it happened

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/live/2021/dec/09/uk-covid-live-boris-johnson-tory-revolt-coronavirus-plan-b-no-10-parties-latest-updates>

Coronavirus

Boris Johnson rushes in Covid plan B amid Christmas party scandal

01:47

Work from home, masks and Covid passes: Boris Johnson outlines plan B – video

[Rowena Mason](#) and [Hannah Devlin](#)

Wed 8 Dec 2021 16.00 EST

Boris Johnson rushed forward new Covid restrictions amid fears of an exponential rise in the Omicron variant, as his government was engulfed in a crisis of credibility sparked by the Christmas party scandal.

With government experts warning of an estimated 10,000 UK Omicron infections currently, rising to 1m by the end of the month and up to 2,000 hospital admissions a day, Johnson insisted now was the time to act.

But Wednesday night's announcement about the implementation of plan B measures came amid allegations Johnson's own staff broke lockdown rules last year. Labour claimed he had lost his "moral authority" and some of his own MPs questioned why the public should now follow official advice.

At a Downing Street press conference, Johnson said people must work from home where possible from Monday and that face masks would be a legal requirement in most public indoor areas such as theatres and cinemas from Friday, with exemptions for eating and drinking in hospitality venues.

Vaccine passports available to the double-vaccinated on the NHS app will be necessary for those wanting to attend large, potentially crowded venues such as nightclubs from next week. But Johnson insisted there was no need to cancel Christmas parties or nativity plays, and nightclubs will remain open.

There will be a vote in parliament on the restrictions next week, with the government expected to face a substantial rebellion. The health secretary, Sajid Javid, was heckled in the Commons as he announced plan B.

Johnson came under pressure immediately over the decision to bring in new restrictions at a time when No 10 was under fire over a Christmas party when socialising was banned last year.

William Wragg, a Tory MP, accused the prime minister of a “diversionary tactic”, while Mark Harper, a former chief whip, questioned why anyone should “do things that people working in No 10 Downing Street are not prepared to do”.

Johnson came under further fire from Douglas Ross, the leader of the Scottish Tories, who said the prime minister should resign if he had misled the Commons, and Ruth Davidson, a former Scottish Tory leader, who said: “None of this is remotely defensible. Not having busy, boozy not-parties while others were sticking to the rules, unable to visit ill or dying loved ones. Nor flat out denying things that are easily provable. Not taking the public for fools.”

In a bid to defuse the furore, Johnson apologised in the Commons over a leaked video showing his aide Allegra Stratton laughing and joking about the party held on 18 December last year. Claiming to be “sickened” by the video, he asked Simon Case, the cabinet secretary, to investigate whether the event had complied with Covid rules.

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Johnson promises sanctions if No 10 party broke rules and pays tribute to Allegra Stratton – video

However, it later emerged that Case’s inquiry would not cover a second party on 27 November, at which Johnson is said to have given a speech, or claims of a party at Johnson’s Downing Street flat on 13 November, which has also been denied. The Met police announced [they would not investigate](#) despite complaints from two Labour MPs.

Stratton, the Cop26 spokesperson, later [resigned in a tearful statement](#) outside her front door, saying she should would “regret those remarks for the rest of my days”.

Keir Starmer, the Labour leader, said it was not credible for Johnson to pretend he had known nothing. “They knew there was a party, they knew it was against the rules, they knew they couldn’t admit it, and they thought it was funny.”

The [Labour](#) leader cited the example of the Queen, who sat alone during the funeral of Prince Philip: “Leadership, sacrifice – that’s what gives leaders the moral authority to lead. Does the prime minister think he has the moral authority to lead and to ask the British people to stick to the rules?”

Johnson denied the accusation that the new rules had been hastened to distract from the crisis engulfing him. “The British public … can see the vital importance of the medical information that we are giving and can see the need to take it to heart and to act upon it,” he said.

“Imagine the counterfactual. People say we are somehow making this announcement to coincide with events in politics, well, imagine that this step were to have been delayed because of political events. What would people say then? You have got to act to protect public health when you have clear evidence.”

Chris Whitty, England’s chief medical officer, said people do “get very angry when they feel the rules are unfair”, but this needed to be separated from evidence that showed restrictions were necessary.

Sir Patrick Vallance, the UK government’s chief scientific adviser, said: “We are now facing a viral variant that is rapidly progressing and measures need to be taken to slow that.”

Johnson and his two key advisers also stressed the necessity of boosters to guard against Omicron, despite the vaccine passport scheme only applying to those who have had two jabs for now. New data has [shown that three](#)

doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine are likely to protect against infection with the Omicron variant – but two doses may not.

With anger rising on the Tory backbenches about the move to new restrictions, Johnson appeared to hint during the press conference that he was prepared to bring in harsher limits for the unvaccinated to prevent a rolling cycle of strict measures.

Asked why there was no mandatory vaccination, Johnson said there was no case for forcing people to get jabs, but argued that the UK would need a national “conversation about the way we deal with this pandemic”.

This article was amended on 9 December 2021. There are an estimated 10,000 cases of Omicron in the UK, not 10 as stated in an earlier version due to an editing error.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/08/boris-johnson-plan-b-covid-measures-england-omicron-vaccine-passports-mask-wearing>.

Politics

No 10 party: more Downing Street gatherings now under the spotlight



Allegra Stratton, in a recorded rehearsal for a proposed new programme of press briefings that was later leaked. Photograph: ITV

[Aubrey Allegretti](#) and [Richard Adams](#)

Wed 8 Dec 2021 14.21 EST

As an investigation is launched into [a party held in No 10](#), other alleged gatherings are under the spotlight amid allegations that some in Downing Street may have contravened Covid rules.

An inquiry announced by the prime minister, however, is focused on facts surrounding what happened on 18 December 2020.

18 December 2020 – Downing Street Christmas party

[A party was held in No 10](#) when London was in tier 3 restrictions, which banned social events, according to multiple sources after the Daily Mirror first broke the [story](#) last week. Several dozen people – a mix of civil service and political staff – reportedly attended and were told to bring “secret Santa” presents, with cheese and wine laid on.

While Boris Johnson’s spokesperson insisted no rules had been broken and then denied any party took place, a video filmed four days after the event was published by ITV.

The leaked footage showed Allegra Stratton, the prime minister’s then aide, rehearsing for televised press conferences and laughing and joking with aides about a party on 18 December. Stratton all but confirmed the event took place by laughing it off as a “business meeting” but added: “It was not socially distanced.” Cabinet secretary Simon Case will investigate what rules may have been broken.

10 December – Gavin Williamson’s staff party

Earlier in the month, when London was in tier 2, which only allowed socialising in groups of six outside, then-education secretary Gavin Williamson threw a party in his Whitehall department.

The most senior civil servant in the department, Susan Acland-Hood, attended and admitted that there was a “work-related” gathering hosted in the canteen. She did not dispute people were drinking wine, and blamed Williamson for instigating the event.

She recalled he wanted to “say a few words” to thank staff after a difficult year. Acland-Hood confirmed Case would also consider the Department for Education event as part of his investigation into Westminster parties.

Unspecified date in December – a festive No 10 quiz

On an unspecified date also in December, a Christmas quiz was organised for No 10 staff, the BBC said, with invites emailed to everyone who worked

in the building.

Some guests were said to have dialled in by Zoom but others apparently attended in-person and sat in groups of six, some wearing Christmas jumpers. Downing Street was contacted for comment.

27 November – Downing Street leaving do

While England was still in the grip of its second national lockdown, a leaving do was organised in No 10 – said to have been for Cleo Watson, a former aide to Johnson's chief adviser Dominic Cummings.

A source told the Guardian that Johnson personally attended and gave a speech, remarking on how full with people the room was, before leaving to continue working.

At the time, socialising in groups from different households was completely banned and people were ordered to work from home, though key workers could continue going into the office.



Dominic Cummings leaving 10 Downing Street on 13 November
Photograph: Henry Nicholls/Reuters

13 November – Boris and Carrie Johnson flat party

The latest alleged party to emerge dates to around midway through England's second lockdown and relates to the Downing Street flat where Johnson and his wife live.

The accusation came from Cummings and the event was said to have taken place on the same evening he left Downing Street for good. After Case's review into the 18 December party was announced, Cummings urged the cabinet secretary to also investigate a party in the Johnsons' flat.

He alleged there had been "other flat parties" and suggested the pair's "bubble" policy should be investigated. Asked this week if a party went ahead in his flat on 13 November, Johnson said "no".

The prime minister's "bubble" has come under scrutiny before, after his spokesperson did not deny that a close friend of Carrie Johnson – Nimco Ali – stayed with them last Christmas. One of the explanations offered was that Ali was considered part of the Johnsons' childcare support bubble.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/dec/08/no-10-party-more-downing-street-gatherings-now-under-the-spotlight>

2021.12.09 - Spotlight

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Nina Gladitz in Berlin in 2015. Photograph: Julia Zimmermann/laif / Camera Press

[The long read](#)

Burying Leni Riefenstahl: one woman's lifelong crusade against Hitler's favourite film-maker

Nina Gladitz in Berlin in 2015. Photograph: Julia Zimmermann/laif / Camera Press

by [Kate Connolly](#)

Thu 9 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

On 20 November 1984, in the southern German city of Freiburg, two filmmakers faced each other in court for the first day of a trial that was to last nearly two and a half years. The plaintiff, Leni Riefenstahl, had been Hitler's favourite film-maker. Now 82, she showed up to court in a sheepskin coat over a beige suit, her blond hair set in a large neat perm framing a tanned

face. The defendant was a striking, dark-haired 32-year-old documentary maker. Her name was Nina Gladitz, and the outcome of the trial would shape the rest of her life.

During the Nazi era, Riefenstahl had been the regime's most skilled propagandist, directing films that continue to be both reviled for their glorification of the Third Reich and considered landmarks of early cinema for their innovations and technical mastery. Once the second world war was over, Riefenstahl sought to distance herself from the regime she had served, portraying herself as an apolitical naif whose only motivation was making the most beautiful art possible. "I don't know what I should apologise for," she [once said](#). "All my films won the top prize."

Riefenstahl was taking Gladitz to court over claims made in Gladitz's television documentary *Time of Darkness and Silence*, which had aired in 1982. In the film, members of a family of Sinti – a Romani people living mainly in Germany and Austria – had accused Riefenstahl of taking them out of Maxglan, a Nazi concentration camp near Salzburg, in September 1940, and forcing them to work as extras in her feature film *Tiefland* (Lowlands). Riefenstahl would later claim that all of the Romani extras – 53 Roma and Sinti from Maxglan, and a further 78 from a camp in eastern Berlin – had survived the war. In fact, almost 100 of them are known or believed to have been gassed in Auschwitz, just a small fraction of the 220,000 to 500,000 Romani people murdered in the Holocaust. Some of the survivors insisted that Riefenstahl had promised to save them. One, Josef Reinhardt, was 13 when he was drafted as an extra. He was the trial's key witness, and sat beside Gladitz in the courtroom every day.

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Riefenstahl denied that she had visited the camp to handpick the extras, denied failing to pay them and denied having promised and subsequently failed to save them from Auschwitz. She claimed that, while making the film, she had not known of the existence of the gas chambers, nor of the fate of the Roma and Sinti. When Gladitz's documentary was played in court on the opening day of the trial, Riefenstahl repeatedly interrupted the screening with cries of "Lies! Lies!" and "Nothing but a lie!" As her shouts echoed

round the darkened courtroom, the judge, Günther Oswald, told her: “Madam, I have no other choice than to watch the film.”

While there is no doubt that Riefenstahl’s account of her own life is far from reliable, it has been hard to establish precisely what she knew about the horrors perpetrated during the Third Reich. She was the regime’s leading film propagandist for almost its entire duration, and her films included *Triumph of the Will*, about the Nuremberg rally, and *Olympia*, a record of the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. But, though she was a close friend of Adolf Hitler and other high-ranking Nazis, such as the fanatical antisemite Julius Streicher, Riefenstahl fiercely denied any awareness of the slaughter that took place in concentration camps. Jürgen Trimborn, author of a highly critical biography published in 2002, declared that there was “no evidence that, due to her proximity to the regime, Riefenstahl knew more than others did about the mass annihilation of the Jews. But it is obvious that, like most Germans, she knew enough to be sure that it was better not to know even more.” (Gladitz would later judge this analysis as far too generous.)

During the trial, Riefenstahl produced correspondence from one of the extras that appeared to support her account of her good relationship with them while filming *Tiefland*. It was accepted that they had habitually referred to her as “*Tante Leni*”, or Auntie Leni. “Even if you don’t want to believe it, the Gypsies – the adults as well as the children – were our darlings,” Riefenstahl said. But the court also heard that during the day the extras were watched by two policemen, and at night they were locked up in sheds and cellars. A contract discovered by Gladitz in archives in Salzburg showed an agreement between Riefenstahl and the SS camp guard that measures would be taken against any attempts at escape.

When the trial finally reached its conclusion, in March 1987, Gladitz won on three out of four points. The judge ruled that Riefenstahl had indeed visited the Maxglan camp to choose the extras, and that they had not been paid for their work. He also overturned Riefenstahl’s description of Maxglan as a “relief and welfare camp”, stating that by definition it was a concentration camp.

But Josef Reinhardt’s assertion that Riefenstahl had promised to save him and his family from deportation to Auschwitz, or that she knew what would

happen to the Roma and Sinti once there, could not be proven, Judge Oswald said. And so he ordered the removal of the scene in Gladitz's documentary in which Reinhardt recalled Riefenstahl's promise.



Nina Gladitz (centre) during her 1984 trial after being sued by Leni Riefenstahl, flanked by Josef Reinhardt (left) and her lawyer, Albrecht Götz von Olenhusen (right). Photograph: Landesarchiv Baden-Württemberg

For Gladitz, this was a disaster. "There are certain edits I am not prepared to tolerate," she told the court. Her refusal to remove the scene meant that WDR, the broadcaster of the documentary, consigned the film to the archives, where it has remained under lock and key ever since. In the years that followed, commissions for new films dried up, and Gladitz's financial situation, already strained from being unable to work during the trial, worsened. "In the TV world I had become persona non grata, because I had dared to out Riefenstahl as a perpetrator," Gladitz told me many years later.

Though some journalists framed the verdict of the trial as an ending, for Gladitz it was only a beginning. She would spend the next four decades consumed by Riefenstahl, devoting most of her waking hours to pursuing the truth about her as no one else, in her view, had adequately done. Her career, her friendships, her finances and her health would all be sacrificed in the attempt to find evidence that would finally, conclusively, condemn

Riefenstahl. The result would be the publication, last year, of her magnum opus, the product of a life's obsession, *Leni Riefenstahl: Karriere einer Täterin* ("Career of a Perpetrator"). "Some people are certainly going to accuse her – and I don't think it can really be denied – that this is something of a personal vendetta," her publisher told me.

For Gladitz, though, this was irrelevant. "The most important thing is that Riefenstahl's myth is dead," she told me on the day the book was published. "In my mind's eye, I see her grave glowing from within because she's turning in it so fast."

I first met Nina Gladitz in 2002, when she contacted me ahead of Riefenstahl's 100th birthday. Gladitz was supporting a Roma and Sinti rights group in a new legal challenge against Riefenstahl, and she wanted me to cover her efforts for a British newspaper. She was insistent – then and in the years to come – that if I wrote about her work, it must be in what she deemed to be the right way. "This is not about me. I will not let you focus on me and ignore my research," she would tell me, although our conversations invariably led back to her own life. The more time I spent with Gladitz, the more apparent it became that her fixation was as much to do with her own biography, and with laying some of her own ghosts to rest, as it was about Riefenstahl.

The shadow of the Nazi era had hung over Gladitz's childhood. Born in 1946, she grew up in Schwäbisch Gmünd in the south-western state of Baden-Württemberg, about 30 miles east of the state capital, Stuttgart. Her beautiful, uncaring mother was, Gladitz believed, mourning the loss of Hitler. "She fed me. But affection and love or the feeling of emotional security was totally lacking," Gladitz recalled. "Her standard insult to me was: 'You're not my daughter, you must have fallen out of a Gypsy's pram.'"

When she was about five, Gladitz overheard her mother and an aunt talking about how many people, including children, had been murdered in the gas chambers. "I suddenly became convinced my mother must have been involved," Gladitz once told me. "Even though I later realised this could not have been the case, it was logical for a five-year-old, on the basis of my own

experiences, to easily imagine my unloving mother had been one of the perpetrators.”

In Gladitz’s telling, her childhood was sheltered and isolated. Playmates were not allowed to visit the family’s house, which stood on the side of a hill. Her imagination was her escape, fuelled in part by the magical films her father would show to Gladitz and her siblings. In her early 20s, Gladitz moved to Munich to study at the University of Television and Film. It was there that she first came across Riefenstahl’s work, but she was more interested in the growing movement against nuclear power, and other leftwing causes, than she was in looking back to the Nazi era. Soon after graduation, she made an agitprop documentary about attempts to block a nuclear power plant located not far from where she grew up, which was named the Chicago film festival’s documentary of the year in 1974.

Gladitz’s interest in Riefenstahl began in 1977, when an acquaintance sent her a letter that he thought might interest her. It had been written by Josef Reinhardt more than 20 years earlier, and Gladitz’s acquaintance had found it in the archive of the Association of Persecutees of the Nazi regime. Reinhardt had asked the association for financial help, explaining that he and members of his family had been picked from a prison camp by Riefenstahl and forced to work as extras on Tiefland in 1940 and 1941. He had included two small black-and-white photographs of poorly clad, barefoot children.



Josef Reinhardt (right), aged around 12 or 13, and another unidentified Romani child, photographed during the filming of Leni Riefenstahl's film *Tiefland*. Photograph: Mullock Madeley/PA

In Riefenstahl's oeuvre, *Tiefland* remains a largely forgotten work. Based on an opera by Eugen d'Albert, the bucolic romantic drama was filmed between 1940 and 1944, and cost 6m Reichsmarks to make – a staggering sum for the time. The funding was secured thanks to an intervention by Hitler, with the project classed as vital to the war effort, though the film was not released until well after the war. When *Tiefland* finally reached cinemas in 1954, it received a lukewarm response from filmgoers and critics, who dismissed it as wooden and schmaltzy. Almost all the closeups of the Sinti and Roma extras had been edited out.

When Gladitz visited the national film archives in Koblenz a few weeks after reading Reinhardt's letter, she was amazed to find that it had no documentation on *Tiefland* whatsoever. "I had been sure that one drawer after another would open itself to me with documents on how *Tiefland* was made," she recalled. "I knew immediately that I would have to start this lonely search on my own." Her life's work had begun.

With remarkable speed, Gladitz managed to track down Reinhardt, who was living in the town of Offenburg in western Germany. A violin maker by

profession, he was the nephew of the jazz great [Django Reinhardt](#), and also of Schnuckenack Reinhardt, known as the violin virtuoso of Sinti music.

At their first meeting, Reinhardt told his story over several hours. He and his family had fled Nazi Germany to Austria in the 30s. Following Germany's annexation of Austria in 1938, he had hidden with his relatives in the mountain forest south of Salzburg. They were captured by local authorities in October 1939 and held in horse boxes before being taken to a holding point near Salzburg, which prisoners had themselves been forced to transform into a "concentration-style" camp, later known as Maxglan, with barbed-wire fencing and a watchtower. He had first seen Riefenstahl there in September 1940, accompanied by several SS officers. Riefenstahl had, he said, inspected an array of pre-selected prisoners, including his teenage self, and several family members.

The group Riefenstahl selected was soon transported to the film set, which was in Krün, near the Bavarian town of Mittenwald, about 125 miles to the west. As soon as Reinhardt and the other extras arrived, they were put to work. Their food and accommodation were, Reinhardt recalled, "worse than in the camp". They slept on bare boards in sheds, barns, animal stalls and cellars, which were locked up at night. They were under constant watch. The women and children had been separated from the men, the majority of whom were left in the camp in Salzburg.

Filming continued for about 13 months, until November 1941, after which the extras were ordered to march to the nearest railway station. Reinhardt told Gladitz they had not been allowed to take any of the costumes they had worn on set, instead having to wear the rags they had arrived in the previous year. The children no longer fitted their clothes. "We had to go barefoot because we had all grown out of the shoes we'd had. It was bitterly cold," Reinhardt remembered. For the rest of his life he could only wear soft shoes as a result of the frostbite he suffered.



Leni Riefenstahl shooting Tiefland in 1940. Photograph: STF/AFP/Getty

Gladitz knew almost immediately that she would make a documentary about Reinhardt's story. In time she also began to grasp, as she said, "why no one had known about Riefenstahl's abuse of her defenceless prisoners". In 1949, Riefenstahl had successfully sued Helmut Kindler, a magazine publisher who had been involved in wartime resistance, for revealing her exploitation of the Sinti and Roma extras. From then on, Riefenstahl had pursued dozens of further legal battles against those who had written or said anything about her that she disliked.

Gladitz was determined to speak to Riefenstahl for the documentary, and in 1981, she managed to track her down in Frankfurt. Their first encounter took place in a bookshop, where Gladitz posed as a film-maker called Anna Madou, hoping to make a film about great 20th-century artists. Using the same false identity, she wrote to Riefenstahl a few months later to remind her of their earlier meeting and to ask whether – given great interest in the project from, among others, the BBC and NBC – they could schedule an interview soon. She signed off: "Please forgive me once again for the tenacity with which I have already pursued you and be assured of my admiration and veneration for your great art!"

For what she imagined would be the central scene in the documentary, Gladitz hoped to stage a meeting between Reinhardt and Riefenstahl. She envisaged Reinhardt greeting the film-maker warmly and starting a conversation, before eventually confronting her with the truth about her “extras”. “The idea came from Josef,” Gladitz told me. “He said he would go to her, as his favourite Gypsy, and say: ‘Tante Leni, it’s so great to see you again.’ I knew she would not have been able to resist him.” But the plan collapsed after Gladitz asked Riefenstahl, prior to the meeting with Reinhardt, what she calls a “throwaway question” – about how Riefenstahl had related to other women during the Third Reich, given her proximity to the overwhelmingly male inner circle of the Nazi regime.

“It was as if I had put poison in her tea,” said Gladitz. “She turned away from me coldly, and I knew then that it was never going to work. It was such a stupid question. If I had known then that she had had several clandestine lesbian affairs, I would have known better than to ask that.” (“Frau Gladitz,” Riefenstahl would later write in her memoir, “clearly had the specific intention from the very start of producing a slanderous concoction about me.”)

Today, the only way to see *Time of Darkness and Silence* is to get hold of a bootleg. Not long ago, via a French film director, I managed to obtain a grainy DVD copy of a VHS recording of the original broadcast. Despite the poor quality of the bootleg, the film retains its power. Watching it almost 40 years after it first aired, one is struck by the intimacy of the encounter with Reinhardt and his relatives, as they sit on their sofa, smoking and drinking coffee and relating their awful experiences. There is no musical accompaniment, no frills, no *schnick-schnack*, as the Germans say. Instead, what we get are the plain facts of the hunger they felt during the filming, the nights spent locked together in a stall with a single bucket for a toilet. At one point, Gladitz returns with Reinhardt to the place where Tiefland was filmed, and to the site of the former Maxglan camp. There is no trace of the horrors that unfolded there, just empty fields. It is only through Reinhardt’s testimony that we rediscover the significance of these sites, as he recalls where the watchtower once stood, the location of the kitchen, the entrance, the places where he was told to put up the barbed wire.

Time of Darkness and Silence aired in Germany on 6 September 1982. Reviews were sparse, but those that did appear recognised the film's significance. Few Germans had ever heard Sinti and Roma talk about their experiences in the Holocaust, and the fact that Gladitz had persuaded them to talk so openly on camera was remarkable, wrote a reviewer in *Die Zeit*. It wasn't until the following year that Riefenstahl watched the documentary. In June 1983, she wrote an angry letter to her lawyer, claiming that she was "stunned" by the film's "monstrous aspersions". She immediately set about suing Gladitz for defamation.

Going into the trial, Gladitz knew that not everyone would take her side. Riefenstahl's work had experienced a renaissance in the previous decade, with several feminists celebrating her for succeeding in such a patriarchal environment, and some film critics arguing that the beauty and ambition of her films should be appreciated separately from the context of their production. (Others disagreed: [Susan Sontag saw Riefenstahl's aesthetics](#) as entirely inseparable from Nazi ideology, calling *The Triumph of the Will* "the most purely propagandistic film ever made".)

Even Gladitz's mother, who attended court every day, seemed to side with the plaintiff. "That poor Leni Riefenstahl," she said to her daughter one day, "what you're putting her through." Over the years, Gladitz's childhood suspicions of her mother's Nazi sympathies had not diminished. During the trial, these confrontations took on a new intensity. "I was so incredibly angry," Gladitz told me. "I took her by her blouse and pushed her against the wall and said: 'I'll let you go when you tell me what you knew about the Nazis.'" The most her mother admitted was thinking "nothing good" would come of the Nazis' deportation of the last Jews from Schwäbisch Gmünd, which she had witnessed. (Gladitz believed that her mother sensed this "quarrel with Riefenstahl also had something to do with her". Others sensed it, too. "You are aware who the Riefenstahl in your life is, aren't you?" a doctor friend asked, and urged her to find a psychoanalyst.)



Leni Riefenstahl arriving at court during her action against Gladitz in November 1984. Photograph: Rolf Haid/DPA/PA Images

With her documentary banished to the archives, Gladitz decided to continue gathering more stories of those whom Riefenstahl had betrayed and exploited. She met Rosa Winter, who had been 17 when Riefenstahl chose her as an extra for *Tiefland*. Winter's mother had to stay behind in Maxglan concentration camp. When Winter began to fear that her mother would be killed there, she escaped from the set and began walking back to the camp on foot. She was caught and taken to a police cell in Salzburg. According to Winter, Riefenstahl visited her and ordered her to get down on her knees and beg for forgiveness. When she refused, Riefenstahl ordered the girl to be imprisoned, and Winter endured five years of incarceration in Ravensbrück concentration camp.

Gladitz was also haunted by the story of Willy Zielke, a talented film-maker who had filmed and edited the famous prologue of Riefenstahl's film *Olympia*. Zielke was absent from the film's premiere in 1938, which had been part of the celebrations for Hitler's 49th birthday, and Riefenstahl had Zielke's name removed from the credits. Gladitz discovered that at the time of the premiere, Zielke was in a psychiatric institution, having had a nervous breakdown. As she pored over Zielke's unpublished memoirs and his medical records, Gladitz grew convinced that Riefenstahl was responsible

for Zielke's admission to the clinic. In 1942, Riefenstahl removed him from the institution by appointing herself his legal guardian. She insisted that he help her with the filming of Tiefland, and later, during the edit, forced him to sleep in an unheated room guarded by one of her assistants so that he wouldn't escape, and gave him such paltry portions of food that he was close to starvation.

Bringing these stories to light became Gladitz's mission. She gathered more and more interviews and documents, each piece of research opening a door to the next. Finally, she started compiling it all into a work that she hoped would finally prove the extent of Riefenstahl's crimes. *Time of Darkness and Silence* may languish indefinitely in the archives, but Gladitz hoped that her book would vindicate the documentary's creation.

In late 2015, Gladitz contacted me again with some news: her book was finished. She had uncovered many new details about Riefenstahl's life and crimes, she said, including previously untold stories of those whose lives she had destroyed. The manuscript was more than 1,000 pages long.

A few days later, we met in a crowded cafe in Berlin. Dressed imposingly in a voluminous black velveteen dress coat, bulky necklace and black hat, Gladitz was what I would soon come to recognise as characteristically blunt. "I don't see why I have to justify my motive," she said, when I asked what had made her pursue the story of Riefenstahl for what was now more than three decades. "In retrospect it feels like the topic found me, rather than the other way round." Gladitz explained her disgust at what she called "Riefenstahl's renaissance in public life", which she saw as tacit acceptance of the director's lies and self-mythology. In 1998, for instance, Riefenstahl had been a guest of honour at Time magazine's 75th anniversary banquet, where she had been given a standing ovation. In 2002, the year of her 100th birthday, in an interview with the leftwing Frankfurter Rundschau newspaper, Riefenstahl had declared that she had seen all of the Tiefland extras after the war and "none of them came to any harm". The newspaper did not attempt to contradict her.

Our meeting lasted several hours. Afterwards, I realised that in more than 25 years as a journalist, I had never met anyone so consumed by a single

subject, or so indignant about the fact that hers was such a lonely pursuit. Since the trial with Riefenstahl, Gladitz had made other films, most of which championed underdog heroes. But in all the conversations I would go on to have with her, Gladitz barely mentioned these projects. She only wanted to talk about Riefenstahl, and how others had failed to pursue various lines of inquiry because of their ignorance and negligence.

After that second meeting, Gladitz became a constant presence in my life. We usually met in the same Berlin cafe in Charlottenburg, and as she smoked roll-ups and nibbled on pastries, often the only food she would eat that day, she would keep me abreast of the latest developments and share with me her theories – details of Riefenstahl’s secret lesbian affairs, or her lie that a knee injury, rather than simple lack of talent, had ended her dancing career. Our phone calls usually lasted an hour or more, as she itemised the new letters, documents, court records and diaries she had uncovered, here in a French archive, there in a Polish one. I filled notebook after notebook during these meetings, struggling to keep up as she swept through her years of research, each new find reinforcing with greater intensity what she had known all along.



Nina Gladitz at her 70th birthday celebration in Berlin in 2016. Photograph: Kate Connolly

Sometimes it felt as if Gladitz saw me as a journalist, a useful contact who could bring her research to a wider audience; sometimes, I was closer to a friend, or at least a confidante to a lonely woman who could not tolerate most people, and whom most people found intolerable. (I did too, at times.) The discussions sometimes spilled over into evening email exchanges. Once she sent me Riefenstahl's description of her ecstatic feelings on first encountering Hitler: "It seemed as if the Earth's surface were spreading out in front of me, like a hemisphere that suddenly splits apart in the middle, spewing out an enormous jet of water, so powerful that it touched the sky and shook the Earth."

"It is – well what is it?" Gladitz asked me.

"Either childbirth or an orgasm," I emailed back.

"Bingo," she replied. "She is quite obviously describing an orgasm." Every new fact further underlined the depths of Riefenstahl's deviousness, her devotion to the *führer*.

After Gladitz had a heart attack in 2016, I visited her in hospital in Charlottenburg, where I found Riefenstahl documents lining the windowsill. A few weeks later, I attended her 70th birthday party at a tavern in Berlin, where all the guests – historians, archivists, editors – seemed connected to her work on Riefenstahl. There she held court, tapping her ringed fingers on the table, entertaining the guests with Riefenstahl anecdotes until well after midnight.

In the five years after she completed it, Gladitz's book was rejected by about 30 publishers. To her, this was further proof that they were all "too afraid to release a critical book about the sacred Leni Riefenstahl". Recent critical biographies of Riefenstahl, such as Trimborn's, had not, in Gladitz's opinion, gone far enough.

When the literary agent Lianne Kolf received Gladitz's manuscript in 2019, she recognised it as one of the best finds of her long career. "I thought: 'Finally someone who is telling the truth about Riefenstahl, who she really was and what she really did,'" Kolf told me. She decided to represent Gladitz, but was also frank that the reason the book had struggled to find a

publisher was “not so much because of the topic, but simply because the text was so unwieldy”. In the end, as Gladitz admitted to me, she had been forced to pay for an editor to pull the text into a manageable shape.

Eventually, in early 2020, the Zurich-based publishing house Orell Füssli took on the manuscript. Stephan Meyer, its nonfiction publishing director, told me that communication with Gladitz had not always been easy. “Her attempts to steer the reception of the book are not likely to help its success,” he said, shortly before it came out. One of Gladitz’s demands was that she would only be interviewed by people who could prove they had read the entire book.

When we spoke on the day of the book’s publication, 23 October 2020, Gladitz was elated. “I have finally managed to shatter the Riefenstahl monument, with all 675g of my book, a paper hammer,” she told me over the phone. No one, she insisted, will be able to write another word on Riefenstahl without referring to her book. “Even my mother would be forced to take me seriously.”

By then, Gladitz had gone back to live in Schwäbisch Gmünd. Her movements were restricted by the pandemic and her own failing health. There was no publication party. “I don’t need a red carpet, and no one needs to tickle my tummy,” she said. Instead, she had celebrated with a latte macchiato, which an old friend, a former admirer from her teenage years, had delivered to her one-bedroom apartment. She was sleeping on a sofa bed, surrounded by mountains of Riefenstahl material packed into large plastic boxes.

In the weeks after Gladitz’s book came out, it received considerable coverage. The French-German cultural TV channel Arte produced a documentary, which stated that Gladitz proves “the extent to which, unknown until now, the cultural ambassador of the Third Reich was entangled in the crimes of the Nazis”. The German magazine *Der Spiegel* ran a long article about the book’s gestation. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine* was more sceptical, saying that the book sometimes “borders on obsession” and will be “more a point of departure” for future Riefenstahl scholars than “representing a conclusive position”. (Among the points it queried was Gladitz’s claim that Riefenstahl had an affair with the Black American

athlete Jesse Owens, hero of the 1936 Olympics. “But everyone knows that’s true!” Gladitz protested, when I asked her about it.)

Gladitz was furious at much of the coverage, even those articles that were largely positive. Indeed, before the book was published, Gladitz had complained to me about a leading historian of the Nazi era, who had written a laudatory postscript for the book, which included the gentle concession that “historians may perhaps find some of her interpretations hard to follow, or not give them the importance the author does”. Gladitz judged this analysis a “declaration of intellectual bankruptcy” and the postscript was scrapped shortly before publication. It was replaced by an eloquent 12-page appreciation from Albrecht Götz von Olenhusen, professor of law at the University of Düsseldorf, who represented Gladitz in the 80s trial, and whom she had long regarded as her most constant and loyal supporter.

One of the moments in the discarded postscript that had most infuriated Gladitz was the historian’s reference to a popular nickname for Riefenstahl during the Third Reich: *Reichsgletscherspalte* or “glacial crevasse of the Reich” – a nod to her mountaineering prowess and her sexual promiscuity. “That is just not on,” Gladitz told me. “It’s totally lacking in respect.”

She sounded almost sympathetic towards Riefenstahl. It was an odd moment, her words perhaps indicating less respect than recognition. Over the years, Gladitz had spoken to me about the repeated abuse she had suffered from men, including from a violent ex-husband, and about being sexually harassed as a girl while walking home from school. Gladitz wanted Riefenstahl to be known for her crimes and condemned for her complicity, her lies and her cruelty. Sceptical though she was about those who viewed the director “through feminist eyes”, she bridled at seeing Riefenstahl belittled because of her sex, an experience she knew only too well.

Sometimes Gladitz’s short temper, and frustration that her work was not getting the respect it deserved, were directed at me. She felt annoyed, betrayed even, when I asked, after publication, if I could still draw on two previous manuscripts I had read, both much longer than the published version. She replied that if there were elements of those manuscripts I found interesting, why had I not intervened to stop her editor cutting them?

It had not, of course, been in my power to do so, but I felt guilty nonetheless. I often felt guilty around Gladitz – at not doing enough to help her, and at my inability to find her research as riveting as she did, even as I filled page after page with details of her work. By the time the book appeared, I had been in constant contact with her for five years. Occasionally, I felt my obsession with Gladitz had started to mirror her obsession with Riefenstahl, as the piece I had been planning to write grew and grew, year after year, and my office was taken over by mounds of related books, documents and newspaper articles.

A few days after the publication of her book, I went to visit Gladitz in Schwäbisch Gmünd for the weekend. On the Saturday, we returned to her childhood home. Despite the house's calm elegance, despite the brilliant sunshine and the peaceful woodland setting, Gladitz shuddered as we approached. When we reached the house, she would not get out of the car, sitting firmly in the passenger seat, enveloped in her trademark black gauzy dress and a knitted headband. In her deep husky voice, she dismissed my suggestion that we take a photograph of her in front of the house. A very silly idea, she said.

Gladitz was notably more decrepit than when I had seen her last, and dependent on a walking frame. She was sick and exhausted, and her eyesight had deteriorated. In an email she had sent to friends and supporters when her book came out, she had invited them to “celebrate with me, the birth of my ‘baby’ after nearly 50 years of pregnancy”. Attached was a picture of the thirtysomething she had been at the time of the trial in 1984, captioned “BEFORE”, next to one of a large brown bear slumped on its stomach, captioned “AFTER”. Below she had written: “Book writing is not helpful for beauty contests.”

For all her frailty, it was clear that Gladitz felt the years of struggle had been worth it. She was buoyed up by the recent sale of the film rights to her book, to a company that hoped to make a series for Netflix. Gladitz said she was planning to act as the project’s adviser and that she wanted Judi Dench to play the older Riefenstahl.

On the last evening of my visit, we sat down on the sofa to watch *Tiefland*. Gladitz wanted to explain her reading of the film, which sees in it a deeply

antisemitic message. “This is a real privilege that I’m letting you watch it with me,” she said, pulling tobacco from a battered tin and rolling the cigarettes that she would chain smoke as the film played.

We had not been watching long before she flared up with impatience at my questions, at my inability to recognise as clearly as she did the film’s symbolism. She explained to me how the final scene, in which the main characters walk off together into paradise, is the perfect representation of the Germany Hitler had dreamed of. “The last words Hitler spoke to Riefenstahl when she visited him in March 1944 were ‘Germany will rise again far more beautiful than it was before’,” Gladitz told me.



Riefenstahl with Hitler at the Nuremberg rally in 1934. Photograph: Everett/Shutterstock

At one point, I asked her how she felt at being viewed as someone whose life has been taken hostage by Leni Riefenstahl. “I’ve never seen myself as a victim,” she said. She had numerous ongoing conflicts with historians and editors, and there were still legal battles she intended to fight, including with the broadcaster of *Time of Darkness and Silence*, to recover lost earnings and to have the film brought out of the archive. Now that her book was published, and given her struggles with her health, I asked whether it might

be time to allow herself a more peaceful life. “Only weak people give in,” she told me.

The next morning she refused to meet me for breakfast. “You think I’ve just been dawdling for the past 40 years? That is just the verdict of a *trampeltier* [a clumsy oaf],” she yelled at me down the phone. “Well I say thank God I had the guts to fight her.”

On my seven-hour train journey back to Berlin, my head rang with her stories, recollections, jokes and insults. From then on our communication was scant – I knew she was still angry with me – and consisted mostly of businesslike emails via her agent. Gladitz’s health continued to worsen, and in early April 2021, she had heart surgery. From her hospital bed, she discussed the TV adaptation of her book with its producer, Ulrich Limmer. The series, which has the working title *Leni*, will be the first major biopic of Riefenstahl.

On 22 April, I received the news I had been expecting for some time. When it arrived, in an email from her niece, it was still a shock. Gladitz had died a few days earlier. Her body had been discovered by a health visitor calling at her flat. She had apparently died peacefully in her sleep.

Her ashes were buried under a tree on 12 May at a cemetery in Schwäbisch Gmünd. It was a cloudy day and the group of mourners was small, partly owing to Covid restrictions. Most were family members or old schoolfriends, many of whom Gladitz had not seen for 60 years or more. Gladitz’s niece said her aunt had “sought the closeness” of her relatives in her final days. “That gives us some solace, even if her loss pains us,” she wrote.

In the weeks after her death, a smattering of articles about Gladitz appeared in the German press. In an obituary in *Die Welt*, the film critic Hanns-Georg Rodek praised her determination and the depth of her research. “She did not tolerate ignorance,” he wrote. “She demanded loyalty.” Rodek is one of a group of journalists urging the broadcaster WDR to rescue *Time of Darkness and Silence* from the vaults.

When I met Rodek for coffee recently, it turned out that his relationship with Gladitz had not been dissimilar to mine. He had known her in the final few years of her life, after she contacted him with a request that he publish her work. We shared our experiences of Gladitz – how easily she had taken offence at a stray remark, or when she felt her work wasn't being given the dignity it deserved. “I'm glad to hear it wasn't just me,” he said with a faint smirk.

There was a strange kind of camaraderie that came from having known this singular woman. Her fury, often hard to bear, was her fuel. For most people, “pursuing the truth” or “confronting the past” are just platitudes or abstractions. For Gladitz, nothing was more important. Every lie or error that Riefenstahl had introduced into the public record, no matter how tiny, was an abomination to her. Attempts to rehabilitate Riefenstahl, by ignoring or failing to properly investigate her crimes, were the sign of a moral rot that needed to be cut out. “Take it to its logical conclusion and one day people might think Hitler was a second-rate landscape painter,” she once told me, her voice filled with anger. During the years she spent consumed by her book, fearing that it would never find a publisher, this is what kept her going. “I have achieved my life's purpose,” she told me the last time I saw her. “I am my book.”

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Trees and forests

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The inner lives of dogs: what our canine friends really think about love, lust and laughter



Happy face? Hard to tell ... Photograph: Catherine Ledner/Getty Images



Zoe Williams

@zoesqwilliams

Thu 9 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

It is humanity's great frustration, to gaze into the eyes of a dog, feel so very close to the creature, and yet have no clue what it's thinking. It's like the first question you ask of a recently born baby, with all that aching, loving urgency: is that a first smile? Or yet more wind? Except that it's like that for ever.

I can never know what my staffie is thinking. Does Romeo realise that what he just did was funny, and did he do it on purpose? Is he laughing on the inside? Can he smile? Can he feel anxious about the future? Can he remember life as a puppy? Does he still get the horn, even though I had his knackers off some years ago? And, greater than all these things: does he love me? I mean, really love me, the way I love him?

To get some answers, I enlisted a group of experts, ranging from a zoologist to an evolutionary anthropologist, and channelled the spirit of Jaak Panksepp, who is commonly acknowledged as the grandfather of dog neuroscience. He died in 2017, leaving behind a body of experimental research and insight, including the theory that all mammal brains share

seven primary emotional systems: fear, rage, lust, “seeking”, panic/grief, care and play. Most of my questions fall into these categories, apart from the age-old conundrum: why does my dog get so aroused by hi-vis lanyards? To which the answer is: it could be any reason at all.

Play

Do dogs understand human laughter? Do they make you laugh on purpose?

“Dogs do seem to respond positively to our positive emotions, like laughter and smiling,” says Dr Brian Hare, an evolutionary anthropologist and author of *The Genius of Dogs*. But he is cautious about interpretation. “Whether they understand the reason behind the joke, that’s harder to say.”



Wherefore are thou? Zoe Williams and her staffie Romeo. Photograph: Courtesy of Zoe Williams

“Dogs have learned to like us laughing,” says Rob Alleyne, a behaviourist who appeared in the TV series *Dog Borstal*. “They’ll do something, then look at you to see if you’re amused, then repeat that.” I once asked the comedian Rob Beckett how he could remember his routine – he keeps almost no notes – and he said: “If 500 people laugh at something you said, you’re not going to forget that.” The same circuit of approbation, creating

feelings of gratification, laying down a memory of how to elicit that response in the future, is occurring in a dog. It's just not going to be wordplay – it'll be something more slapstick.



Whaddya mean, can a dog smile? Photograph: Catherine Ledner/Getty Images

Can dogs laugh – and do they make each other laugh?

One of the most famous strands of Panksepp's research looks at laughter in non-human mammals (including a paper with the delicious title: 50-kHz Chirping (Laughter?) in Response to Conditioned and Unconditioned Tickle-induced Reward in Rats). Dogs, he found, can sound as if they're laughing when they're panting, but that's because they are: when you analyse the pant with a sonograph, then map its burst of frequencies, then play those frequencies to other dogs, it reduces stress and increases tail wagging, play-bows (head down, butt in the air stance) play-face (you know your dog's play-face) and pro-social behaviour in general.

Can a dog smile?

All dogs have an expression of pleasure or contentment, which you'll recognise as you get to know a particular animal. However, owners of some breeds believe their dogs are more smiley than average and therefore happier. This is mistaken, Alleyne says. "Generally, dogs with broad faces –

staffies, rottweilers – look like they’re grinning. The same expression on a German shepherd will look like it’s curling its lips back.”

Care

Does my dog love me?

Many years ago there was a segment on Kilroy, the daytime TV show, called “I love my animal but does my animal love me?” Alleyne appeared on it and remembers: “The audience were ready with a gallows for me by the end. Because I don’t think any animal loves us. They do things that we interpret as love, but they don’t have the capacity, not the way we mean it. That’s why we can rehome them. I couldn’t remove you from your partner and say: ‘I’ve got a friend who’s a much better fit for you.’ Whereas, if I took Romeo and gave him to someone else, three months on, that’ll be his owner.” A sound point, but if Romeo died, three months on, I’d probably have a new dog. So what if we love each other the exact same amount? What if irreplaceability isn’t the measure, in interspecies relationships?

Attuning ourselves to the desires of another species has a profound impact on our own cognition, according to philosopher Donna Haraway

If it’s not love, why does it feel so good?

“You are definitely more than a food dispenser,” Hare says. “Parents and their babies have an oxytocin loop, where they can make each other feel good just by staring into each others’ eyes. Somehow, dogs have inserted themselves into this loop, so that when dogs and owners stare at each other, it [increases the oxytocin in both the dog and the owner.](#)”

What on earth is a dog doing in my oxytocin loop?

The modern understanding of canine domestication – scoped out to its full in Hare’s *The Genius of Dogs*, and the book he co-authored with Vanessa Woods, *Survival of the Friendliest* – is that selection for friendliness led to the evolution of a new cognition in dogs. They gained a social understanding of what humans meant and wanted, in their gestures and commands, and the benefit to dogs is plain: shelter, nutrition and whatnot. But the philosopher Donna Haraway argues, in *Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People and Significant Otherness*, that attuning ourselves to the desires of another

species has a profound impact on our own cognition. This isn't really about what's going on in your dog's head. It's just interesting.



How much empathy do dogs have for us? Photograph: LWA/Getty Images

Can my dog empathise?

No expert alive can tell you that [your dog doesn't know when you're sad](#). Alleyne, who, as you can see, is pretty hard-boiled, recalls: "I had a dog many years ago who would recognise when I was down. He would keep his head on my knee for an hour, saying: 'I understand.'" They can also tell, sometimes, when you have cancer or, more recently, Covid, but that's more about bio-detection than intimacy.

One simple measure of empathy is yawning. "Contagious yawning is related to empathy scores in adults," Hare explains. "And in one study, over 70% of dogs yawned when they saw someone yawning."

Fear, panic and grief

Why do dogs get separation anxiety?

Strictly speaking, most of them don't, according to Petrina Firth, director of the company The Pet Coach and a specialist in the condition. She says she has only met one dog in her career with clinical separation anxiety – an

over-attachment to one person. What people generally mean by the term in dogs – destructive behaviour, howling for hours, sometimes nipping ankles when the owner’s shoes are put on, lying down in front of the doorway – is “isolation distress”, generally laid down in puppyhood. Your dog doesn’t feel safe alone, and will do anything to avoid that amorphous feeling of peril. “They don’t come pre-programmed,” Firth explains. “When you go out to Marks & Spencer, they don’t know you’ll be back in an hour. It takes quite a lot of training from when they’re a young puppy to teach them that being on their own is OK, nothing bad happens. Nothing amazing is going to happen, but nothing bad.”

How do they know how long you’ve been gone? Do dogs have a sense of time?

If you feed your dog at the same time every day, their digestive systems will become tailored to expect food at that time and, remarkably, it can be to-the-minute accurate. [The same goes for cats.](#)

But a dog that can be left for 40 minutes, yet freak out after 45 – what’s that about? The current best theory is that your scent in the air recedes minutely over time. Whenever you’re trying to understand a smell-related behaviour, remember that humans can smell a spoon of sugar in a cup of tea, while a dog can smell a spoon of sugar in a swimming pool.

What’s the difference between distress and anxiety?

This is mainly developmental – a young dog will experience distress in the moment: “I’m on my own and I don’t like it.” As it gets older, Firth says, “it will start to worry that it’s going to have that horrible feeling – worry about worrying, which is essentially what anxiety is. And there are lots of cues in the environment, like humans finding keys, to set them off.”



Adverse early experiences can affect a dog's later behaviour. Photograph: Patricia Doyle/Getty Images

Can a dog remember negative events? Can it get PTSD?

Adverse early experiences can certainly affect a dog's later behaviour, though long-term memory is insufficiently understood for us to know whether they can remember them. Service dogs returning from war zones present symptoms very similar to trauma response in soldiers.

Lust

Does a neutered dog still crave sex?

This feels like one of those things humans ought to understand before they do the snip. Yet apparently we don't. "It's a complex question, with no easy answer," says zoologist Dr Naomi Harvey. "It may depend on the timing of neutering. Expression of reproductive behaviour requires gonadal hormones, and absence of these hormones during pubertal brain development can impair reproductive behaviour long-term." You'd expect both sexes to have diminished drive if neutered before puberty, then – however, [a study of free-roaming male dogs](#) in Chile found that castrated dogs showed no reduction in sexual activity.

Does humping always mean sexual arousal?

No, says Harvey. “Humping is a fairly common displacement behaviour for dogs feeling conflicted, stressed or experiencing anticipation. It can’t be assumed to indicate lust.”

Rage

What's the root cause of aggression?

Dogs have the same limbic system as us, manifesting what used to be the two Fs and is now understood as four: under threat, they’ll go into fight, flight, fawn or freeze mode. (Humans have another pathway to violence, which is humiliation, but a dog cannot be humiliated. “They have the emotional complexity of a two- to three-year-old child,” Firth explains, “so they don’t feel guilt and they don’t feel shame.”)

Attacks are rooted in fear, and “one of the reasons people are often bitten”, Alleyne says, is that they misinterpret signs of fear. “A dog that’s panting may just be hot or he may be stressed. A dog with ‘whale eye’ [where the whites are clearly showing] might be stressed or he might be looking at something in his periphery. You’ve got to be able to look at the overall picture. If he’s got whale eye, *and* he’s panting, *and* his tail is down, *and* his ears are back, then he goes from panting to lip-licking, you have to be able to put all those things together.” And keep your distance.

Why do some dogs attack others for no apparent reason?

Hare counsels, as Alleyne does, that you just have to read it right. “Some dogs are xenophobic, which means they don’t like strangers. So just meeting a strange dog could create enough fear to make it feel like it needs to protect itself. A lot of dog aggression is explainable if you have a good understanding of dogs’ natural history, body language and behaviour.”

Alleyne’s explanation is more controversial: “Aggression is by a mile the most common problem I see, which it wasn’t 20 years ago. We’ve been bullied and badgered into socialising our dogs. They’ve become aggressive towards each other when we’ve never tried harder to socialise them. We haven’t thought about what socialising is: what we’re really doing is allowing them to be beaten up by other dogs when they’re too small to

protect themselves. We call it one-trial learning: it only takes a single incident for a puppy to learn that other dogs are a threat.”



What are dogs after? Photograph: Brighton Dog Photography/Getty Images

Seeking

Why do they quest? What are they looking for?

Essentially, dogs want no more than the average New Zealander, as politicians put it: somewhere to live, something to do, someone to love, something to hope for – except without the hope, having no real concept of the future. But centuries of interaction with humans have given them intense, breed-specific desires. Take the dog of the moment, the cockapoo: “People don’t realise that the mixture is two working dogs,” says Firth. “So even if you’ve got the prettiest show cocker, and the prettiest show poodle, in their genes they’re meant to be out retrieving.”

I’m not trying to shame cockapoo owners, by the way: I’ve always had staffies, and I’m constantly astonished and appalled to find that a dog bred to bring down a bull will, in the absence of one, make do with a labrador. We have taught them, over generations, these unshiftable urges. Now they’re here to teach us cause and effect, if only we would listen.



Having the last bark ... Photograph: RF Pictures/Getty Images

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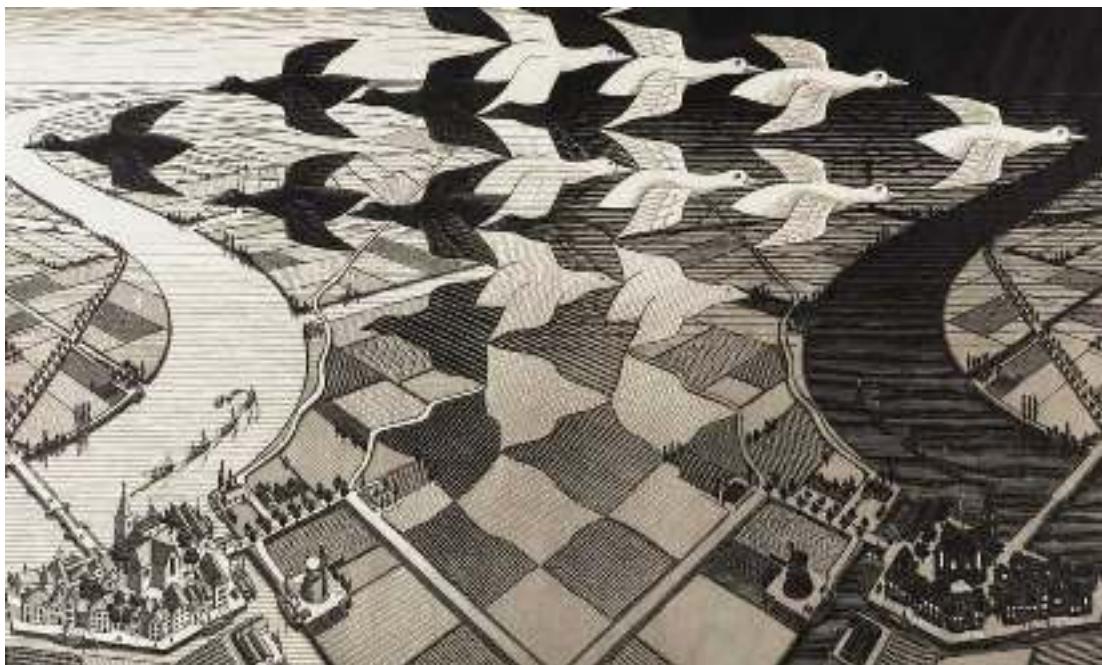
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[Art](#)

From snubbing Mick Jagger to explaining the cosmos: the secret life of MC Escher and his impossible worlds



Gaps in reality ... Day and Night, created as Europe was sliding into war.
Photograph: © The M.C. Escher Company B.V. -Baarn-Holland.



[Jonathan Jones](#)

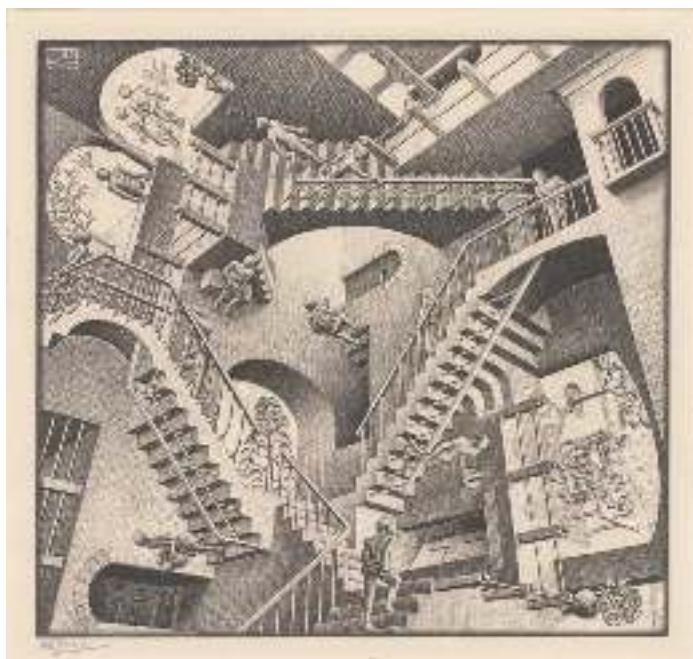
Thu 9 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

You are walking up a staircase that winds up to the top of a tall square tower. It ascends one side, then the next, then the next – and then suddenly you are right back where you started. This is the kind of problem people who are trapped in the geometrically impossible, yet still strangely plausible, worlds of MC Escher have to deal with all the time. In [his mind-boggling creations](#), dimensions collide and normality dissolves. Looking into his pictures is like standing on the very edge of a cliff – and being right down at the bottom at the same time.

The Dutchman's illusions have been famous and beloved since the 1950s, when spaced-out fans first started claiming to see hemp plants hidden in his art. And now we have *Kaleidocycles*, a Taschen book about the artist featuring paper puzzle kits that allow you to actually build his paradoxical structures at home, unlikely as that may seem. The tome has just been reissued in time for Christmas and the 50th anniversary of his death next year. His work does seem perfect for the festive season, given it's all fun and games. Or at least that's how it seems, initially.

A Nobel laureate used his work to explain the non-Euclidean 'hyperbolic' geometry behind a new theory of the cosmos

Escher's visionary flair did not just confine itself to art: he also intruded into the world of science. His profound yet impossible perspectives seem to prophesy the greatest tricks of virtual reality. Yet Maurits Cornelis Escher – born in Leeuwarden, a city north of Amsterdam, in 1898 – showed absolutely no aptitude for any academic subject at school. His father was a hydraulic engineer – an important job in a country with so much land reclaimed from the sea. Although he despaired of his son, he supported young Maurits in his studies at art college in Haarlem, and in his travels around southern Europe, where he spent years developing his style.



Which way up? ... Relativity, created in 1953. Photograph: © 2021 The M.C. Escher Company-The Netherlands. All rights reserved. www.mcescher.com

In the 1920s, Piet Mondrian and the De Stijl movement were taking Dutch art into pure abstraction. Escher, meanwhile, was in Italy – using traditional printmaking skills to depict timeless cities on picturesque hilltops. These designs would become the building blocks of his deceiving universe. A thickly inked [engraving of St Peter's](#) that he made in 1935 takes a

spectacular, god's-eye view of the Vatican basilica's vast interior from up inside the dome. We see tiny people on the floor far below, as columns plummet down towards them in rushing, scary perspective.

In this powerful engraving, you can clearly see the roots of Escher's art. The work reveals his love of perspective, the method of depicting deep space and distance invented in Renaissance Italy. To the likes of Leonardo da Vinci, perspective was not just art but science. He filled his notebooks with sketches of buildings and landscapes, fascinated by this mathematical technique.

Earlier this year, a film called *Escher: Journey into Infinity* looked afresh at this artist, examining how he gained cult status in the US counterculture, with bootleg versions of his work appearing on T-shirts. As well as exploring his influences, which range from densely packed Italian hilltop towns to the music of Bach, we found out that Mick Jagger once wrote to Escher, asking him to create an album cover. Not only did the artist decline, he told the Rolling Stone off for addressing him by his first name.

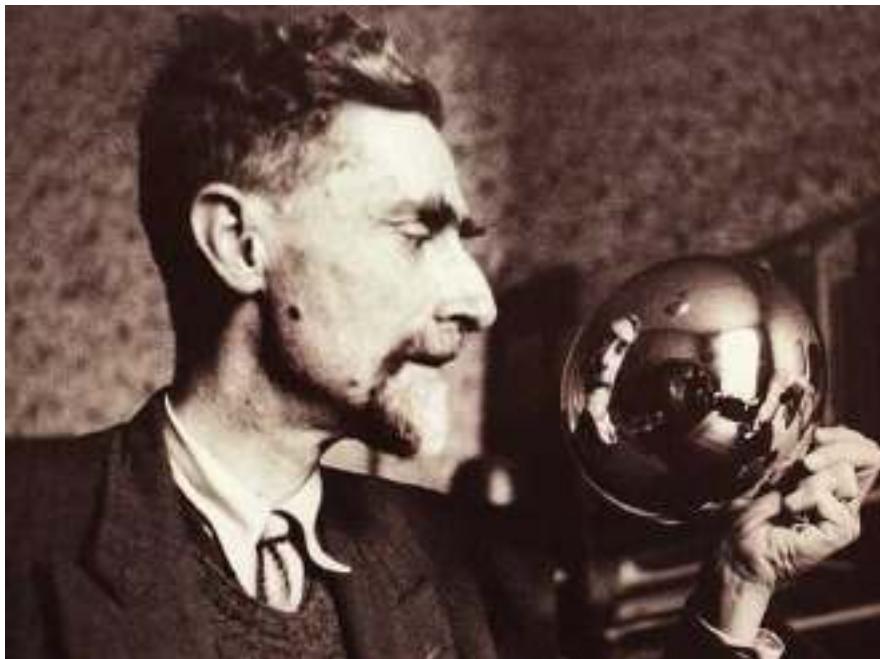


Trouble at mill ... Waterfall. Photograph: Gemeentemuseum Den Haag/www.gemeentemuseum.nl

A flat surface is just a flat surface. As soon as you depict something on it that seems to have depth and solidity, you are constructing an illusion. In Escher's most mature and unsettling works, he takes that to extremes to orchestrate multi-dimensional crashes of alternate realities. In his 1953 picture *Relativity*, everything is drawn in strict perspective. The only trouble is there are three points of view looking towards three vanishing points (the point where lines that would be parallel in reality meet on the page). The artist called these "different worlds" and in one of them, a waiter walks down an upside-down staircase to serve al fresco diners, whose table is vertical. In another, lovers stroll in a garden in defiance of gravity. Only a flight of stairs that rises from the bottom of the picture is "the right way up". Yet rotate the square image on its side and everything changes. A different world now becomes the real one.

Escher's dive into the beauty of maths and science started when his eyes were opened by an art even older than that of the Renaissance. When he visited the Alhambra, the medieval Islamic palace that sprawls along a clifftop overlooking Granada in southern Spain, he was carried away on a magic carpet of inspiration. Its rooms were lined with brightly coloured tiles arranged in complex patterns, fitted together in lattices of mind-boggling symmetry, all inspired by Arab science. Mathematics calls this tessellation: the complete covering of a surface by interlocking shapes without any gaps. It is the glory of Andalusian Islamic art.

Escher was transfixed. He also felt challenged – as if he was looking on the work of rivals. He started drawing his own tessellated surfaces, but with a difference. While the Alhambra is full of abstract shapes, Escher set out to tessellate figurative images. Birds, fish, lizards, angels, devils – he fits together these repeated forms in hallucinatory flows that transform from one thing into another. Fish swim with wide open mouths under the sea while birds glide above: then you see the gaps between the birds are fish shaped, and vice versa. They meet at the sea's surface in a dazzling metamorphosis.



Flair ... MC Escher.

Europe was heading into shadow as Escher saw the artistic light. Horrified at the thought of his sons being brought up under fascist ideology, he moved his family from Italy to Switzerland. They then moved to Belgium but, after his mother died and the country was seized by the Nazis, they returned to the Netherlands to be closer to family and to settle her inheritance. Escher despised the Nazis and refused to ever visit Germany.

So it is surely not a coincidence that he started revealing gaps in reality the very moment the world was being sucked into a black hole. In his 1938 print Day and Night, two flights of swans, black and white, tessellate as they fly in opposite directions across the border between day and night. Look longer and you realise the nocturnal and daylit landscapes are mirror images of the same European vista. Escher depicts an eerie symmetry between light and dark in the year of the Munich agreement, with the continent on a knife edge between war and peace.

The Mesquita family, he wrote of his art teacher, had been hauled out of bed by the Nazis and taken away

In 1944, now back home in the Nazi-occupied Netherlands, it would fall to Escher to get into the home of his beloved Jewish art teacher Samuel

Jessurun de Mesquita – to save as much art as he could. “The Mesquita family,” he would later write, “had been hauled out of bed and taken away. It must now be regarded as practically certain that S Jessurun de Mesquita, his wife and their son Jaap all perished in a German camp.”

Escher’s fantastic tessellations brought the maths of the Alhambra head to head with modern physics. Roger Penrose, who won the 2020 Nobel Prize for his pioneering work on black holes, encountered Escher’s art in the 1950s while at a conference in Amsterdam. He went home and tried drawing Escher-like conundrums, publishing a paper that unveiled two “impossible” objects: a staircase that loops on itself without going up, and a solid triangular structure that looks real yet is connected in a totally absurd way, with its three corners all seeming to push outward while actually being on the same plane.

When Escher saw these Escheresque objects, he responded with his own fantastic interpretations of the infinite staircase and the Penrose triangle. His 1960 print *Ascending and Descending* depicts cowled figures marching up and down a staircase atop a palace that just takes them back to where they started. In 1961’s *Waterfall*, he gives the same seductive depth and detail to a vision of a waterfall working a mill. After hitting the mill wheel, water flows along a flat, zig-zagging channel until – impossibly – it falls again. Escher explained it was based on the Penrose triangle. So, in the 1960s, this Dutch graphic artist who had failed at school was in dialogue with the most advanced mathematics around.

Another print shows angels and devils interlocking on a sphere-like surface, getting smaller as they approach the edges of the globe. While striking, it looks almost straightforwardly Escheresque – yet in his book *Cycles of Time*, Penrose uses this work to explain the non-Euclidean “hyperbolic” geometry behind a new theory of the cosmos. In the pantheon of art-and-science crossovers, this is an extraordinary achievement.

Art is another way of thinking about the universe. It can illustrate mathematical phenomena that few could follow any other way. Escher took two artistic traditions, Islamic abstraction and Renaissance perspective, and

fused them. The result is a multiverse of delights with no correct way up or down. Escher proved that looking can be a magical kind of thinking.

[MC Escher Kaleidocycles](#) is out now from Taschen, £50.

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[Coronavirus](#)

Businesses and unions call for state help after England adopts Covid plan B



Nightclub owners are especially worried about the effect of plan B on business because of the requirement for clubbers to present proof of their Covid status. Photograph: Gareth Phillips/The Guardian

[Richard Partington](#), [Sarah Butler](#) and [Gwyn Topham](#)

Wed 8 Dec 2021 15.14 EST

The government is facing growing pressure to relaunch furlough and other emergency financial support schemes after imposing working from home orders in [England](#) because of the rapid spread of the Omicron variant of coronavirus.

Business leaders and unions warned that failure to provide assistance to companies and their workers in the hardest-hit sectors of the economy risked squandering progress made since the easing of pandemic restrictions earlier this autumn.

Some reacted with anger, accusing the prime minister of trying to “save his own skin” by [announcing the curbs](#) as a diversion from the week’s political scandals.

Ruby McGregor-Smith, president of the British Chambers of Commerce, said: “The government must once again stand shoulder to shoulder with business and provide a package of support to ensure that we get through a challenging winter without serious damage to our economic recovery.”

Warning that Treasury support and steps to fix the sick pay system were glaring omissions from the government announcement on tighter restrictions, union leaders said furlough would be needed for the hardest-hit sectors of the economy.

01:47

Work from home, masks and Covid passes: Boris Johnson outlines plan B – video

Frances O’Grady, general secretary of the TUC, said: “Requiring people to work from home over the busy Christmas period will hit jobs – unless ministers bring back furlough. Cleaners, receptionists, conference and banqueting staff and hospitality and retail workers will be short of work if people don’t come into offices,” she said.

“Ministers must reassure workers in hard-hit sectors like hospitality, leisure and travel that their livelihoods are secure.”

Manuel Cortes, general secretary of transport union TSSA, said: “Many more workers are going to feel the pinch as plan B kicks in. The government must bring back the furlough job retention scheme to ensure no one loses their jobs as a result of the new restrictions.”

Boris Johnson has told employers in England their staff should work from home where possible from Monday and announced mandatory vaccine passports for nightclubs and [venues hosting large crowds](#).

Matthew Fell, chief policy director at the CBI, said the fresh restrictions were a “big setback for businesses”, especially in hospitality, retail and transport, at a key time of year for sales. “It will be vital that the impact of these restrictions is closely monitored, and that the government is ready with targeted support as required,” he said.

Even before Johnson’s Wednesday announcement, concern about Omicron had already dented consumer confidence, hitting sectors of the economy where face-to-face interaction is most prominent, such as in hospitality, travel and leisure.

Pubs, hotels and restaurants had already reported a wave of Christmas party cancellations, while tighter controls on foreign trips have led to travel and tourism firms suffering a drop in winter holiday bookings.

Michael Kill, chief executive of the Night Time Industries Association, said the new rules would have a “devastating impact” on venues and questioned the timing of the announcement. “Is this sound evidence-based public policymaking, or is this an attempt to move the news agenda on from a damaging story about the Downing Street Christmas party? It feels that nightclubs and bars have been thrown under the bus by the prime minister for him to save his own skin.”

The trade body, which represents nightclubs, theatres and other venues, said its members’ businesses in Scotland and Wales – where similar steps to those being planned for England have already been announced – had seen a drop in trade of up to 30%.

Hospitality industry leaders said there had already been a downturn in business due to mixed messages from the government, while warning that orders for office staff to work from home would hit footfall in city centre establishments over the crucial Christmas period.

Alex Proud, owner of the three Proud Cabaret venues in London and Brighton, said bookings were down by more than a quarter already, while the passport scheme would trigger further cancellations. “This is armageddon for us. It’s a disaster that doesn’t need to happen.”

Martin Williams, the boss of M Restaurants and the Gaucho steak chain, said jobs in the hospitality sector would be put at risk. “Any government measures need to be offset with further support to our sector in terms of an extension on business rates and a permanent VAT reduction,” he said.

Despite fears over the fallout from the latest measures, economists said the new controls were relatively light touch compared with earlier phases of the pandemic, meaning a muted impact for the economy as a whole.

Paul Dales, chief UK economist at the consultancy Capital Economics, said plan B would probably shave between 0.2% to 0.5% from GDP. “It feels fairly small, if people don’t buy train tickets, go to work or the pub near the office. It’s very different to shutting all retailers and hospitality,” he said.

However, the launch of tougher controls such as the closure of non-essential retail, hospitality and schools would cause more damage. This could trigger a 3% fall in GDP in January, Dales said. Analysts at Barclays said the economy could be dragged down by between 4% and 5% in the first three months of 2022 in such a “worst-case scenario”.

Economists are increasingly expecting the Bank of England to hold back from raising interest rates when its monetary policy committee meets on Thursday next week.

However, the impact could be mitigated because businesses have adapted and found ways to continue trading through periods of restrictions and lockdowns, for example by using online channels. In a sign of the progress made since the start of the crisis almost two years ago, the US investment bank Goldman Sachs said it expected that under a “downside scenario” with “nationwide restrictions” imposed for three months, the economy could sink by just 1.7% in the first quarter of 2022.

It stands in stark contrast to a collapse of almost 20% in the second quarter of 2020 during the first wave of Covid-19, which was part of the worst economic slump ever recorded.

However, any move to further tighten controls would trigger an immediate contraction in the economy and turbo-charge demands for emergency

economic support measures such as business grants, loans, tax cuts and furlough.

Dales said: “If the chancellor didn’t revive the furlough scheme, the fall in the economy would be bigger or last longer.”

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Coronavirus

Omicron cases could exceed 1 million by month-end – Sajid Javid



Sajid Javid said there was still a lot to learn about the new variant.
Photograph: Tayfun Salci/ZUMA Press Wire/Rex/Shutterstock

[Hannah Devlin](#)

[@hannahdev](#)

Wed 8 Dec 2021 15.30 EST

Omicron cases could exceed 1 million by the end of this month on the current trajectory, Sajid Javid has told MPs, describing the new variant as “an even more formidable foe”.

In a statement delivered to the House of Commons, the health secretary said that there were 568 confirmed cases of the Omicron variant but that the estimated current number is “probably closer to 10,000”.

In a statement on Wednesday evening, he said: “The UK health security agency (UKHSA) estimates that the number of infections is approximately 20 times higher than the number of confirmed cases, and so the current number of infections is probably closer to 10,000.

“UKHSA also estimate that at the current observed doubling rate of between two and a half and three days, by the end of this month, infections could exceed 1 million.”

Javid said there was now confidence that Omicron is “far more transmissible” than Delta, but he said there was still a lot to learn about the new variant. He said Delta cases had doubled in around seven days, and that Omicron was spreading at an even faster rate.

“Based on the latest data from here and around the world, our latest analysis is that it’s been around, it’s between 2.5 and three days.”

The statement followed scientific advice to ministers on Tuesday that provided a stark outline of the potential consequences of failing to take action to suppress the spread of the virus.

In a [consensus statement on Tuesday](#), the Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Modelling advisory committee predicted: “If initial estimates of transmission advantage and immune escape from South Africa are applicable to the UK population, there is the potential for a very substantial peak of infections much larger than occurred during the winter wave of January 2021.”

Even if the severity were half that of Delta, this could be outweighed by the sheer number of infections, the scientists said.

Assuming Omicron has some transmission advantage and some degree of immune escape – the scenario judged to be most probable – the scientists said it was highly likely that “very stringent measures” would be required to control growth and keep R below 1.

The government’s Sage advisory committee said Omicron was on a steep upward trajectory in the UK, with probably thousands of daily infections

already occurring. At this rate, Omicron is projected to become the dominant variant within a few weeks.

Without any changes to existing measures, the number of hospitalisations from Omicron could reach 1,000 per day or higher in England by the end of the year, with a peak likely to be higher than 1,000 to 2,000 Omicron hospital admissions per day.

“For it to be below this level, there would need to be only a small degree of immune escape and very high protection from boosters against Omicron,” the minutes said.

The [Sage advice](#), released on Wednesday, also suggested additional infection control measures should be considered in hospitals, care homes and prisons to help prevent the spread of the highly transmissible variant.

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[Wales](#)

Wales: 14 schools to add hour a day to help pupils catch up after lockdowns



Pupil Hall Storm draws and eats breakfast, while other pupils behind play games, at Cadoxton Primary School in Barry, South Wales. Photograph: Gareth Phillips/The Guardian

[Steven Morris](#)

[@stevenmorris20](#)

Wed 8 Dec 2021 19.01 EST

A number of schools in Wales are extending their day by an hour to try to help youngsters [catch up after Covid lockdowns](#).

The Welsh government will invest up to £2m on the trial, allowing 14 primaries and secondaries across south [Wales](#) to open for groups of children for an extra five hours a week.

Schools can choose what they do with the time and may put on sessions such as art, music and sport or academic lessons.

If successful, the trial could lead to a longer school day being introduced permanently and school leaders, children and parents are also to be asked to think about whether the shape of the academic year should also be reformed with, for example, the summer holiday being made shorter.

Earlier this week the head of the Ofsted schools inspectorate in England, Amanda Spielman, said [almost all children had felt the impact of lockdowns](#) and struggled with a “hokey-cokey education”.

The Welsh scheme is designed to try to find ways to address issues such as children falling behind with lessons and experiencing mental health issues. The government said the trials will be focused on supporting disadvantaged pupils and schools particularly affected during the pandemic.

Headteachers will decide on how and what is delivered in each school during the trial period, which is due to start in the new year and run for up to 10 weeks.

Jeremy Miles, the Welsh education minister, said: “We are funding trial schools so that they can provide exciting activities around the school day, which can develop personal skills and resilience which will also impact on academic attainment.

“We will be working closely with schools and local authorities to evaluate the impact on learners and on staff.

“Over the coming months, I’ll also be talking to young people, education staff, families and people working beyond the sector – in areas such as tourism and public services – to seek their views on reforming the school year.

“Reforming the year could help to narrow the disruption caused by the long summer holiday on learners.”



Headteacher Rhian Milton is overseeing the extra support at Cadoxton primary school in Barry, South Wales. Photograph: Gareth Phillips/The Guardian

Staff and children at one of the schools involved in the trial, Cadoxton primary in Barry, expressed enthusiasm.

The head of school, Rhian Milton, said it planned to offer year six pupils four after school sessions and, on a Friday, a breakfast time activity.

It will put on cooking, gardening and DJ clubs, weaving in literacy, numeracy and digital skills. Milton said children felt they had missed out during lockdown and social skills as well as learning had been affected.

Ten-year-old Seren said she was excited at the prospect of a longer day. “Lockdown was really rough for me,” she said. “I didn’t know what to do, sitting in my bedroom wondering why I wasn’t at school.” Another pupil said her head “went weird” during lockdown.

There was a mixed response from teachers’ unions. Neil Butler, the NASUWT national official for Wales, said the trial was “sprung on us without consultation”.

He warned: “There are implications for teacher workload and, indeed, health and safety as schools still struggle with Covid mitigations.”

Dilwyn Roberts-Young, general secretary of UCAC, a Welsh teaching union, said it was open to discussion about changes to the school day and the school year.

He added: “Our education system needs to be in tune not only with the current needs of the education workforce, but also of learners and families.

“Naturally, as a union, we will want to ensure that there is no detriment to teachers’ terms and conditions.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/dec/09/wales-14-schools-to-add-hour-a-day-to-help-pupils-catch-up-after-lockdowns>

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OpinionInequality

The truth is now plain: in Johnson's Britain, some lives are more equal than others

[Aditya Chakrabortty](#)





Illustration: Thomas Pullin/The Guardian

Thu 9 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

The already infamous footage of aides to Boris Johnson caught on camera in Downing Street laughing about how to handle news of an illicit Christmas party at No 10 is not at heart a Westminster story. It is much, much bigger than that. Yes, it will be recounted by lobby journalists and illustrated with clips from prime minister's questions, but this episode dwarfs the usual tittle-tattle and tales of Peppa Pig. This one goes to the heart of how this country is run, because it is a story about fairness. About them and us. About who can't see their mum on her deathbed on a Covid ward and who enjoys an evening of cheese and wine, fun games and a secret Santa. The society that kids itself about its sense of fair play is also the most unequal country in western Europe, and the depth charge of this story lies in its revelation of just how unequal our lives are.

It's not a word you hear much from Westminster these days, inequality. For Keir Starmer's team it possibly smacks too much of the Corbyn years, while Johnson prefers to trumpet about "levelling up". Yet euphemisms and silences can't cancel out its poisonous influence, and the pandemic that began with the government assuring us "[we are all in this together](#)" has been defined by inequality. Of long drives to Barnard Castle, while others are

allowed only an hour's walk. Of well-off managers on Zoom ordering their shopping to be delivered, even while carers are paid nothing when seriously ill. Some of these are tales of life or death, others of wealth or ruin, and each shows how inequality is inscribed into this country and our daily lives.

The day before that briefing-room video was broadcast, I visited the most unequal city in the country. Not the capital, nor Manchester or Aberdeen but, according to research from the Centre for Cities thinktank, Cambridge, a tiny city with a population only half the size of a single London borough. Long before this coronavirus arrived, locals experienced a rather different kind of social distancing – one where your postcode and just a few miles meant the difference between [living till you're 87 or more](#), or dying at 78. And where, in Christmas 2019, a homeless woman gave [premature birth to twins](#) while sleeping outside Cambridge's wealthiest college, Trinity.

Since the Brexit vote, journalists have spent a lot of time touring the UK's failures: those towns and cities that have struggled to get off the floor since their coalmines were closed or factories shut. But to visit [Cambridge](#) is to see something else entirely: how limited and partial post-industrial Britain's successes are. There's plenty of money washing about here, from the ancient colleges to the new WeWork complex just outside the train station and the Amazons and Apples setting up in the science parks springing up all around the city's perimeter.

This is the stuff that gets government ministers donning their hi-vis jackets, speechifying about dynamic startups and dreaming up an arc that loops west and joins it on to Milton Keynes and Oxford. Johnson inherited that scheme from David Cameron, and his department for levelling up has got further with it than any white paper for the "red wall". But if Cambridge is the future of the UK, as Westminster would have it, then it is one in which inequality is even more deeply marked into society. The Centre for Cities points out that the least well-off 20% of local people receive only 2% of the city's income.

Drive 10 minutes out of Cambridge's centre, past the tiny Victorian terrace houses that now sell for London prices, and you reach perhaps the most deprived ward in this city of riches: Abbey. The food hub operates on a Monday lunchtime, inside an old pre-school building that still has the pastel-

coloured classroom walls. A queue starts forming an hour beforehand and the early rush is formidable.

Working his way through the oranges and bananas and bread was Granville Grahame, a skinny 55-year-old who used to run a barber's right by the Grafton shopping centre until a messy divorce knocked him off course. He lost his business, then his home, and had spent the months before lockdown bedding down in a car park right by his old shop. "Without this place, I'd have nothing to eat," he said, swaddled in an old parka. "I'd be lucky to get one meal a day."

Next up was Kevin, a manual worker whose body was now breaking down. Both his shoulders had had to be operated on and he was leaning on a walking stick. Helping him with his bags while getting some stuff for herself was his daughter, Natalie. She works as a nursery nurse, until Christmas. Then she's made redundant, and so far no one has called her in for an interview. Watching her was Nicky Shepard, head of the [Abbey People](#) charity that runs this hub, who said quietly that she noticed how many of the women coming for food worked in nurseries or as teaching assistants.

At desks next to her were a couple of staffers from the local office of Citizens Advice and Cambridge Water, fielding a steady stream of people worried about their heating bills or their benefits. In one small room you had an ad hoc welfare state, providing food and support where both public and private sector had retreated. The county and city council have seen their core funding from central government cut to nothing. Outside, staff pointed out, the last local post office had shut, most of the pubs had gone, and if you wanted to sit down and have a coffee your best bet was the giant McDonald's on the other side of the roundabout.

It was just a couple of days after Rishi Sunak had leaked his plans to lower inheritance and income tax, but here they were dealing with the fallout from another of his cuts: the one in October that took £20 a week off universal credit. In the month since, the number of households reliant on the hub has jumped by more than 25%, while the number of fuel and supermarket vouchers given out has tripled.

There's a new kind of anxiety, too, noted Rachel Karniely, manager of the food hub. "More visitors ask for further support ... or even just for someone to talk to." People she supports now ring her "crying down the phone, expressing suicidal thoughts, because they're scared they're going to become homeless because they can't pay the bills". Just down the road was the city centre, with its swanky shops and cultural festivals, but no one I spoke to at the hub went there. "I don't have any business with them, and they don't have any business with me," shrugged Natalie. "I might take the kids at Christmas."

It used to be said that the age-old divide was between town and gown, but over the past couple of years it has been overlaid by a newer form of inequality. A new, globalised Cambridge has been created, open to multinational firms that use their rootlessness to reduce their tax bills, and to investors from China and the Gulf states successfully lured in by executives at the university. That society has as much to do with Cambridge, Massachusetts, as the one in the Fens.

Businesses and senior university managers and ministers have traded Cambridge's fame for a form of money and success enjoyed by only a select few, even while this has forced up property prices, jammed roads and put extra pressure on schools and Addenbrooke's hospital. Even academics at the university, who last week joined the national strike action, have not seen much of its rewards.

One, a university lecturer called Edwin, told me how he had traded his Cambridge flat in the pandemic for a much cheaper place lent by a friend. But that meant that on the three or four nights a week he worked at the university, he spent the night in a sleeping bag in his office. No one else in his faculty knew his secret. Yet every week, he spent 60 hours on university business, supervising teenagers who had spent thousands of pounds for his teaching.

And this is deemed a success story, in contrast to all the UK's economic debris. I left Cambridge with an uneasy feeling I couldn't pin down until I saw the prime minister's then spokeswoman (now casualty) laughing about a "business meeting", and then it struck me: these are the same socioeconomic injuries and sadnesses I heard before the Brexit vote under yet another

government that laughs at those who are suffering. And this is before inflation peaks. I would not bet against politics getting even more combustible.

Still, I hope they had a good party.

- Aditya Chakrabortty is a Guardian columnist
- Some names have been changed to protect the identities of people interviewed.

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OpinionBoris Johnson

Will the furore over the No 10 party be enough to burst Boris Johnson's bubble?

[Martin Kettle](#)





‘The joke may not be funny any more, with the polls suggesting that voters have begun to tire of Boris Johnson’s act.’ Photograph: Tom Nicholson/Reuters

Thu 9 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

Boris Johnson’s entire life and career are littered with personal, professional and political deceptions. He breaks rules and tells lies with shameless confidence and without compunction. This is part of his act, but it sometimes feels as if it is almost a matter of self-regarding principle too. That is partly because, most of the time, he gets away with and is even rewarded for it. So why should it be any different now?

The question facing British politics today is whether the image of a Downing Street Christmas party, and the excruciating insensitivity there would be in holding it on a day when nearly 500 people were dying of Covid, may be the event to burst Johnson’s bubble. Last week an online video spoof showed Johnson apparently receiving a Covid booster jab, then shrivelling up like an empty balloon. That video was someone’s fantasy. Now nature is imitating art. It was a deflated Johnson, a rare sight in any season, who turned up to answer prime minister’s questions on Wednesday.

ITV's [toe-curling video](#) of staffers smirking and joking about the party is the real thing, not a spoof. The reality it portrayed is likely to lodge in the collective mind. In less than a minute, the video captures all the shallow amateurism of modern politics: its absence of moral awareness, its capacity for awful judgment and its corrosive sense of entitlement, acted out against the backdrop of a wholly unnecessary, flag-draped [new briefing room](#) that is an expensive monument to a man-child prime minister's ego and his absurd great-man view of himself. Does anyone wonder that public trust in politics is plumbing new depths, [according to a report](#) this week?

The video certainly scared ministers [off the airwaves](#) for a while, leaving the government undefended against some genuinely cutting attacks from Labour and the Tory backbenchers. It left Johnson with no immediate alternative but to grit his teeth, try to look contrite and apologise, up to a point and uncharacteristically. He managed to take the political punches in the Commons without losing his rag and making things worse, but the damage was plain to see on the Tory benches.

In the short term, Johnson now has three main options in this crisis. The first is to attempt to kick the Christmas party controversy into the long grass. He did this by the time-honoured expedient of referring the whole thing to an inquiry by the cabinet secretary, Simon Case. Johnson will feel he can pick and choose his response to any embarrassing findings here, as he did with the Priti Patel bullying case. He certainly does not want a police probe, which would be far more threatening, and Keir Starmer was smart to entrap Johnson into keeping that possibility alive.

The second weapon is to create a headline-grabbing distraction of some kind. In an ideal Johnsonian world he would have done this by picking another fight with liberals over an issue like the Human Rights Act. But he is on the back foot now. It is a mark of the hand-to-mouth urgency of his present battle for survival that Johnson was forced to choose [Covid restrictions](#) as his diversionary tactic, an issue that divides his MPs, which he has consistently mishandled in the past, and on which his authority is now even further diminished because of the ITV revelations.

The problem for Johnson is that this will blunt his third key weapon, the need to demand the support and loyalty of Tory MPs in helping the party and

government through the furore. The response in Tory ranks matters most and will hold the key. The backbench response was bad enough for Johnson – there was talk of serious upset, tipping points, Barnard Castle moments and even apocalypse. There were gaps on the Tory benches during PMQs too, another sign of disaffection. But that is as nothing to the mood that would follow the loss of the [North Shropshire byelection](#) next week.

It isn't just that North Shropshire is a rock-solid Conservative bastion that in its current and earlier incarnations has [returned a Tory](#) at every election in the last 115 years (even unopposed in 1935). It isn't just that this byelection was triggered by Johnson's stupid attempt to bully the Commons into changing its standards regime to suit Owen Paterson, who promptly resigned the seat. It is that local rivalry between the opposition parties means a win for either the Liberal Democrats or Labour would be genuinely astonishing. It would be the loss of a seat. But it would also feel like evidence of a tactical-voting dagger pointed at the hearts of dozens and dozens of other Tory MPs. If North Shropshire falls, this week's sullen impatience with Johnson could escalate quickly – even over the Christmas break.

That is why this time things may indeed be different for Johnson. Partly because it is serious – perhaps even involving lawbreaking. Partly because the joke may not be funny any more, with the polls suggesting that voters have begun to tire of Johnson's act. Partly because the whole episode reveals a prime minister, not to mention a [former Downing Street press secretary](#), who is simply out of his depth. And finally, because the country may be on its quiet, midterm way to concluding not just that it needs a new government but that there may be a plausible alternative.

None of this is remotely set in stone. The damage that politics has done to itself over many years, especially under Johnson, is very disabling, and not just to the Tory cause. Labour is only recovering slowly, and bright new dawns are not currently on offer. But the sense that the country can do better than this, can be better governed than this, that it needs to come together and not grow more divided, that it can find fairer and steadier ways of dealing with serious problems, not least in its wounded democracy, runs very deep. Johnson's way is emphatically now part of the problem, not part of any solution. On that, I think, the wheel has begun to turn.

- Martin Kettle is a Guardian columnist
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[Opinion](#)[Coronavirus](#)

Plan B shows Britain is still chasing Covid. Here's how we can get ahead of it

[Devi Sridhar](#)



Boris Johnson announces new measures against coronavirus in Downing Street, London, 8 December 2021. Photograph: Reuters

Thu 9 Dec 2021 04.53 EST

The [Omicron variant](#) is now in 57 countries. And that's countries that have sequencing ability to find it. Even in Britain, estimates are that the hundreds of confirmed Omicron cases are just the tip of the iceberg. Given how fast it has spread globally, its probable increased transmissibility even compared with Delta, and the many mutations in this variant, this is another step change in the pandemic. And one in which governments again have to manage how a wave of infections would affect their health services, where staff are already hitting the emergency button and saying they can't take on more patients. The good news is that vaccines (especially boosters) seem to

be holding up well against Omicron so far. The bad news is that a more transmissible variant will find unvaccinated people faster, and infect more people. While the link between cases and hospitalisations is weakened, it is not broken.

I recently joined a call with NHS clinical colleagues who have been running Covid-19 wards and managing wave after wave in hospital since March 2020. Their words were stark. Staff are exhausted. Burned out. Medical professionals not only have to cope with difficult shifts, large patient loads and public sector pay, but also risking their own health and that of their families. One nurse recounted caring for a fit and healthy woman in her 30s who hadn't been vaccinated and was now on a ventilator. She sees little compliance with masks in shops, or any kind of infection control measures in society. One world in hospitals where the pandemic is still raging. One world outside where the UK government prematurely announced victory over Covid-19 on "[freedom day](#)" last summer.

With this in mind, the UK government's move towards [plan B](#) is a welcome step, but should have been introduced weeks ago, if not months. Again, waiting longer to take action means that stronger action might be necessary in the future. [Scotland](#) maintained face coverings in shops and public transport with high compliance and understanding that it is a necessary measure to maintain economic and social activity while a dangerous virus is circulating. Asking people to work from home is also wise as we head into the Christmas break, and a [welcome move](#) from the Scottish government. Testing regularly to catch infectious individuals is an important step so that chains of transmission are interrupted. The [Cop26 conference](#) in Glasgow showed that mitigations, such as vaccine certification and regular testing and masks, can make large events safer. There is a way to mix, socialise and maintain economic and social activity in a more secure way.

However, recent reports of government [Christmas parties](#) have resulted in a loss of trust in leadership, which is a major blow during a pandemic. And continual lies means a fuzzier line between what is true and what is false, which again is a huge blow to public health messaging and response. We follow public health measures, such as masks, getting vaccinated and testing often, not because of politicians or top-down directives, but to help protect

our communities and each other. And to help keep pressure off health services so that when our loved ones need healthcare, it's there for them.

I'd like to focus on two remaining issues that we haven't heard enough about so far. The first is schools: [school closures](#) – like those we had last January and February – should be off the table completely. More than [100,000 children](#) have been "lost in the system" and have not fully returned to school since the start of the pandemic, while in-person schooling is important not only for education, but child nutrition, wellbeing and safety. The UK is wasting time by not offering parents the option of vaccinating their five- to 11-year-olds and protecting them from illness. Around [5 million children under 12](#) have been vaccinated in the United States, with Denmark also rolling out jabs to younger people and the World Health Organization advising European countries to focus on this over the holidays. Again the UK is an outlier – and again, as with teenage vaccination, will probably go the way of other countries, just months later.

The second issue is around travel: international travel is likely to be disrupted for the foreseeable future. The red-list "kneejerk" approach isn't effective at stopping the introduction of variants, because people can just avoid direct flights from certain countries, and it punishes those countries that can sequence and detect variants and then share this data. It also creates hesitancy to book overseas travel with the worry of what it may cost to return home. Instead, aviation ministers from the G20 countries should agree standard travel procedures that would offer certainty and stability to the aviation sector for the next six to nine months, and strike a balance between international mobility and infection disease control. This could include agreed pre-departure testing, vaccine certification and day two testing on arrival.

With all we have witnessed and the 146,000 lives lost in Britain, it should be clear by now that Covid-19 is a serious virus. Even to those in their 20s or 30s. And to those who think of themselves as fit and healthy and with a robust immune system. Fortunately we have vaccines now: their main role as new variants have emerged has been to blunt the full impact of Covid-19 on the body, and reduce it to a mild disease that can be managed at home for most. While people might think they're getting vaccinated to save their grandparents, they're actually getting vaccinated to save themselves.

The sobering message is that Covid-19 is here to stay, and the increased number of animal reservoirs being found, including deer, hippos and mink, mean that it can continue to mutate and jump back into humans. Sars-CoV-2 spilled over into one human in Wuhan and spread across the world. All it takes is one person to be infected with a new variant with a major selective advantage, and again it will spread across the world as Delta has. And while we focus on Omicron now, we have to be thinking ahead to what the next version of Covid-19 could look like this spring, and how we get ahead of this virus, instead of always trying to catch up. This involves managing Covid-19 using vaccines, testing, masks and clear messages to the public on where we are and why. And having someone in charge whom we can trust to be honest and public-oriented.

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

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OpinionThe Beatles

Get Back isn't just about the Beatles. Here's what it taught me about life today

[Adrian Chiles](#)





No logo ... Ringo drinks tea from a china mug in Get Back. Photograph: TCD/Prod.DB/Alamy

Thu 9 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

A lot of great stuff has been written about what [the film Get Back](#) has taught us about the Beatles. I wonder if I might chip in with what the film taught us about other stuff.

First, how much less plastic and packaging there was back then. Sandwiches were brought in on actual plates and tea was drunk from actual cups. Today, within a short walk of that building at 3 Savile Row in the West End of London, I make it 19 branches of Pret a Manger, 14 Starbucks, four Sainsbury's, three Marks & Spencers and two Tescos. The making of that film about those rehearsals and that performance would today have generated skipfuls of bad stuff.

Then there's the clothes. The Beatles and a handful of techies are dressed like [Austin Powers](#) at his most laid-back; all the others are sober in suits. Now, most of us are lounging around in the sartorial centre ground.

The absence of mobile phones. An obvious one this but, without small screens to stare at, how present they all have to be. Now they'd surely be

engrossed in other stuff, playing each other bits and bobs to listen to, instead of just playing. And much of the sniping would be done by text, to each other and confidants elsewhere. Creative angst and energy would have leaked out of the room.

The boring bits. In these stretches are to be found the true beauty of the film, a triumph for slow television. I presume it always takes long stretches of enervating struggle, with all its tedium and tetchiness, to make great art. But ordinary film and television rarely give time to this process, for, to be fair, obvious reasons. We never get to see it. In a lesser, shorter film, no time would have been wasted getting to that brilliant moment McCartney conjured up Get Back. It would still have been jaw-dropping, but without all the context we'd have missed out on the real magic.

- Adrian Chiles is a Guardian columnist
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Biden administration

Biden signs order for government to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050



President Joe Biden arrives at Kansas City international airport on Wednesday. Photograph: Nicholas Kamm/AFP/Getty Images

[Oliver Milman](#)

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Wed 8 Dec 2021 16.18 EST

The US government will be a net zero contributor to the climate crisis by 2050 by slashing the planet-heating emissions from its operations and transitioning to an all-electric fleet of cars and trucks, according to a new executive order signed by [Joe Biden](#).

The federal government is the largest land owner, energy consumer and employer in the US and it will “lead by example in tackling the climate

crisis”, the White House [said](#), by eliminating greenhouse gases from its activities.

Under the order signed by Biden on Wednesday, the government will cut its emissions by 65% by the end of this decade, before reaching carbon neutrality by 2050.

The government’s fleet of 600,000 cars and trucks will be transformed, with all acquisitions of vehicles from 2035 being zero emission versions. For light duty vehicles, this deadline will come earlier, starting in six years’ time.

The order also demands that the 300,000 federally owned buildings produce no net emissions by 2045, with a 50% cut in emissions by 2032. All electricity procured by the government will be from clean sources such as solar and wind by 2030, while all procurement decisions made by the hefty government bureaucracy will be net zero emissions by 2050.

“Through a whole-of-government approach, we will demonstrate how innovation and environmental stewardship can protect our planet, safeguard federal investments against the effects of climate change, respond to the needs of all of America’s communities, and expand American technologies, industries, and jobs,” the president’s order reads.

The executive order will tackle about 15% of all carbon emissions in the US, according to RMI, a non-profit clean energy organization.

“Decarbonizing buildings, ensuring federal investments for infrastructure are targeted for clean, sustainable projects, and driving and informing private investment for clean technology to slash greenhouse gas emissions showcase this administration’s climate priorities,” said Sarah Ladislaw, managing director of RMI’s US program.

“This series of investments takes much-needed steps to capitalize on what we already know: the clean energy transition is critical in tackling climate change and stimulating our economy.”

The commitment is the biggest yet by Biden towards his goal of cutting the US's overall emissions to net zero by 2050. The president has set other related goals, such as making America's electricity grid entirely run on renewable energy by 2035 and for half of all car sales in the country to be electric by 2030.

Biden has set out the most ambitious climate agenda of any US president to date, although he has come under criticism from environmental groups recently for calling for an increase in oil production to lower gasoline prices and for offering up vast tracts of land and ocean to oil and gas producers.

Much of the president's climate agenda rests upon an enormous spending bill that faces a tricky path through the Senate.

The Build Back Better Act has about half a trillion dollars in climate change measures, such as incentives for electric cars, tax credits for renewable energy production and funding to make vulnerable communities more resilient to climate change impacts such as flooding. Analysts have said it will become much harder to avoid disastrous global heating without the sweeping legislation.

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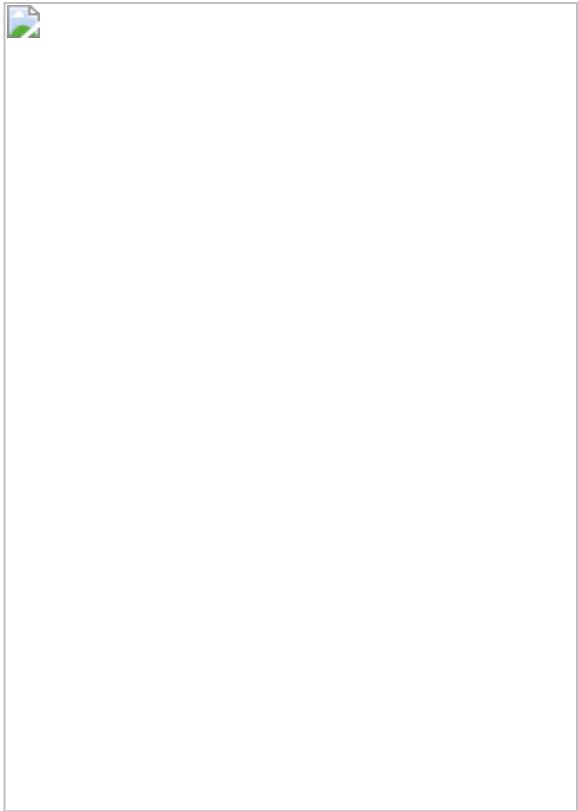
The age of extinctionFish

Batman loach returns: fish feared extinct found in Turkey



The tiny yellow-and-brown striped fish was thought to be extinct until its recent sighting by Dr Cüneyt Kaya and Dr Münevver Oral. Photograph: Courtesy of Re:wild

The age of extinction is supported by



About this content

Graeme Green

Thu 9 Dec 2021 04.00 EST

A freshwater fish that scientists thought was extinct has been found in south-east [Turkey](#), after an absence of nearly 50 years.

“I’ve been researching this area for 12 years and this fish was always on my wishlist,” said Dr Cüneyt Kaya, associate professor at Recep Tayyip Erdoğan University. “It’s taken a long time. When I saw the distinctive bands on the fish, I felt so happy. It was a perfect moment.”

The critically endangered Batman River loach (*Paraschistura chrysicristinae*), a tiny yellow-and-brown striped fish which grows to a maximum length of 3.6cm (1.4 inches), was previously found in streams and tributaries of the Batman and Ambar rivers, where it was last seen in 1974.

Kaya, a fish taxonomist, and Dr Münevver Oral, a geneticist and research fellow at the same university, focused their search for the loach upstream of the Batman Dam, which was built between 1986 and 1999. “Because the species was lost, we couldn’t know the original natural habitat, so we weren’t sure where to search,” said Kaya. “The species is also very small and cylindrical, so the nets’ mesh needed to be smaller. Earlier, we used larger nets and I think the fish went through the nets, so we didn’t find it.”

Using tight-weave nets, Kaya and Oral found 14 loaches in shallow, rocky, fast-flowing areas of the Sarim stream and another nine in the Han stream. The fish’s size may have counted in its favour. “We’re lucky, because this species has no economic value whatsoever,” said Oral. “If we were talking about big trout, people like to go fishing. People usually think about fish they can consume. But the Batman River loach is so tiny. Local people say to us: ‘Is this why you came all this way, just to find this?’”

More work is now needed to help secure the loach’s future, including examining possible threats, such as populations fragmented by the dam, drought ([which has been particularly bad in Turkey in 2021](#)) and pollution. “Man-made pollution is an issue, so we need to increase the awareness of local people,” said Oral. “The dam construction is another threat. There could also be invasive species. We don’t know the ecology of the species, so we need to do more research.”

Kaya and Oral’s expedition was supported by conservation organisations Shoal and Re:wild, as part of their global [Search For The Lost Fishes](#) project. The Batman River loach is the first fish to be found on their list of 10 “most wanted” lost species, which also includes the fat catfish (*Rhyzosomichthys totae*) in Colombia’s high-altitude Lake Tota and the duckbilled buntingi (*Adrianichthys kruyti*) in Lake Poso, Indonesia.

“Freshwater fish matter to millions of people around the world who rely on them for daily survival,” said Mike Baltzer, executive director of Shoal. “There are over 18,000 species of fish. They’re important for biodiversity and for climate change, and a perfect indicator of the health of rivers and lakes we depend on for survival. Once these fish are found, work needs to be done to save the species.”

According to the [World’s Forgotten Fishes](#) report, which WWF, Shoal and other partners published this year, freshwater fish face severe threats.

“Freshwater fishes are considered the most threatened group of fauna on the planet,” said Baltzer. “More than a third of [freshwater fish species are threatened with extinction](#). Freshwater fish need more attention – we need to conserve rivers and lakes.

“It’s very exciting to find a species like the Batman River loach that was thought to be extinct. [It shows] that if we focus our minds and efforts, we can find other species and stop the extinctions of fish.”

Find more [age of extinction coverage here](#), and follow biodiversity reporters [Phoebe Weston](#) and [Patrick Greenfield](#) on Twitter for all the latest news and features

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/dec/09/batman-loach-returns-fish-feared-extinct-for-decades-spotted-in-turkey-aoe>

Journalist safety

Number of journalists in jail around the world at new high, says survey



A protest over the murder of journalist Jacinto Romero Flores in August. Mexico is the western hemisphere's most dangerous place for journalists.
Photograph: Victoria Razo/AFP/Getty Images

Reuters

Thu 9 Dec 2021 01.32 EST

The number of journalists who are behind bars worldwide reached a new high point in 2021, according to a study which says that 293 reporters were imprisoned as of 1 December 2021.

At least 24 journalists were killed because of their coverage, and 18 others died in circumstances that make it too difficult to determine whether they were targeted because of their work, the nonprofit Committee to Protect Journalists said on Thursday in its annual survey on press freedom and attacks on the media.

The number in jail [rose by 15 compared with 2020](#).

While the reasons for jailing reporters varies between countries, the record number reflects political upheaval around the world and a growing intolerance of independent reporting, according to the US-based nonprofit.

“This is the sixth year in a row that CPJ has documented record numbers of journalists imprisoned around the world,” said CPJ executive director Joel Simon in a statement. “The number reflects two inextricable challenges – governments are determined to control and manage information, and they are increasingly brazen in their efforts to do so.”

The dangers faced by reporters were underlined when police in the [Philippines](#) said a journalist was killed in an execution-style attack while watching television at a store in the central city of Calbayog on Wednesday.

Jesus Malabanan, a 58-year-old provincial correspondent for the Manila Standard newspaper, died while being transported to a hospital after being shot once in the head by one of two men on motorcycles.

Other journalists who were killed in 2021 include [Danish Siddiqui](#), a Reuters photographer who died in a Taliban attack in Afghanistan in July, and Mexican radio journalist Jacinto Romero Flores, who was shot dead in Veracruz in August.

China imprisoned 50 journalists, the most of any country, followed by Myanmar (26), which arrested reporters as part of a crackdown after its military coup, then Egypt (25), Vietnam (23) and Belarus (19), the CPJ said.

For the first time, the CPJ’s list includes journalists incarcerated in Hong Kong – a byproduct of the 2020 national security law which makes anything Beijing regards as subversion, secession, terrorism or colluding with foreign forces punishable by up to life in prison.

Mexico, where journalists are often targeted when their work upsets criminal gangs or corrupt officials, [remains the western hemisphere's deadliest country for reporters](#), according to the CPJ.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2021/dec/09/number-of-journalists-in-jail-around-the-world-at-new-high-says-survey>.

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New Zealand

New Zealand to ban smoking for next generation in bid to outlaw habit by 2025

01:09

New Zealand aiming for 'smoke-free generation', says associate health minister – video

Tess McClure in Christchurch

@tessairini

Wed 8 Dec 2021 18.29 EST

New Zealand has announced it will outlaw smoking for the next generation, so that those who are aged 14 and under today will never be legally able to buy tobacco.

New legislation means the legal smoking age will increase every year, to create a smoke-free generation of New Zealanders, associate health minister Dr Ayesha Verrall said on Thursday.

"This is a historic day for the health of our people," she said.

The government announced the rising age alongside other measures to make smoking unaffordable and inaccessible, to try to reach its goal of making the country entirely smoke-free within the next four years. Other measures include reducing the legal amount of nicotine in tobacco products to very low levels, cutting down the shops where cigarettes could legally be sold, and increasing funding to addiction services. The new laws will not restrict vape sales.

"We want to make sure young people never start smoking so we will make it an offence to sell or supply smoked tobacco products to new cohorts of

youth. People aged 14 when the law comes into effect will never be able to legally purchase tobacco,” Verrall said.

New Zealand’s daily smoking rates have been dropping over time – down to 11.6% in 2018, from 18% a decade earlier. But smoking rates for Māori and Pacifica were far higher – 29% for Māori and 18% for Pasifika. “If nothing changes, it would be decades till Māori smoking rates fall below 5%,” Verrall said. She said eradicating smoking in the next four years was within reach: “I believe it is. In fact, we’re on track for the New Zealand European population [to become smoke-free]. The issue is, though, if we don’t change what we’re doing, we won’t make it for Māori – and that’s [what] the plan is really focused on.”

The policies were welcomed by public health experts on Thursday. “New Zealand once again leads the world – this time with a cutting-edge smoke-free 2025 implementation plan – it’s truly a game changer,” said Dr Natalie Walker, director of the Centre for Addiction Research at University of Auckland.

The reduction of nicotine in cigarettes was a world first, said Chris Bullen, a public health professor. From a health perspective, “all my wishes have come true”, he said.

Smoking has already been widely replaced by vaping among teenage New Zealanders, and is also attracting many young people who would never have taken up smoking – according to surveying of 19,000 high school students this year, nearly 20% were vaping daily or several times a day, the majority with high nicotine doses. That’s compared to 3% of those aged 15-17 who smoked daily in 2018, or 13% who smoked a decade earlier.

The plan has come under criticism from some parties – the Act party has argued that reducing the nicotine in products will hit lower-income people hardest, who will have to buy more cigarettes and smoke more to access the same dose. Verrall said the very low levels required by the laws had been researched and proven to help people quit.

Concerns have also been raised about a growing black market for tobacco. [The government acknowledged this risk](#) in initial proposals: “Evidence

indicates that the amount of tobacco products being smuggled into New Zealand has increased substantially in recent years and organised criminal groups are involved in large-scale smuggling,” it said.

Initial plans for a smoke free generation of New Zealanders have now been finalised after public consultation. [They were first floated in April](#). They will still need to pass through the legislative process, but should not face any obstacles – Smokefree 2025 is a headline Labour policy, and the party holds a majority in New Zealand parliament. Verrall said the legislation would be introduced in 2022, with the age limits coming in 2023.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/09/new-zealand-to-ban-smoking-for-next-generation-in-bid-to-outlaw-habit-by-2025>

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New York

Woman's body pulled from submerged car in dramatic recovery at Niagara Falls' edge

01:03

Helicopter lowers rescuer to car at top of Niagara Falls – video

Guardian staff and agencies

Thu 9 Dec 2021 09.04 EST

In a dramatic rescue attempt on Wednesday, a US coast guard diver braved the frigid rapids where a car had become submerged in water near the brink of Niagara Falls, only to find it was too late to rescue the person trapped inside.

The diver was lowered from a hovering helicopter, climbed into the car and pulled out the body of its lone occupant, a woman in her 60s, officials from New York's state park police said.

Video and images [on social media](#) shows the coast guard diver, petty officer second class Derrian Duryea, in an orange suit and a helmet, fighting against strong wind and water to enter through the passenger side of the black car, which appeared stuck near the edge of the falls.

Duryea said he was entirely focused on the vehicle as he was being lowered for the rescue attempt.

“As I was coming down I was just really focused on how am I going to get in this car when there's, you know, pretty much rapids coming over the car right next to Niagara Falls,” Duryea [told KTLA](#). “My sole focus was which window or door am I going in.

“Luckily, the car was unlocked and I didn’t have to break out any windows and I was able to open up the passenger side door and push it up against the current,” Duryea said.



A US coast guard helicopter hovers over a vehicle submerged in the frigid water near the edge of Niagara Falls. Photograph: New York State Office of Parks,/AFP/Getty Images

Kathy Hochul, the governor of New York, [tweeted](#) that she was “saddened by the tragic loss of life” and praised the “swift and heroic actions” of emergency crews.

Park police Capt Christopher Rola later called the coast guard’s work “incredible”.

The rescue was also made perilous by the icy wind coming off the falls. Helicopter pilot Lt Chris Monicelli told KTLA: “A lot of bigger planes have deicing capabilities, but we don’t”. As a result, crews train for exactly such rescue attempts, “because if you do accumulate enough ice on the helicopter, it will fall out of the sky”.

It was unclear how the car got into the Niagara River. Witnesses reported seeing it floating near a pedestrian bridge, where it was believed to have gone in. Roads in the area were slippery as a light snow fell.

The car appeared to be almost completely submerged with only part of the roof and open trunk hatch visible through the rapidly flowing water.

Police used a drone to determine it was occupied.

Authorities said the woman lived in the area. Her name was not released pending notification of her relatives.



A coast guard diver is lowered from a helicopter to pull a body from the vehicle stuck near the brink of American Falls. Photograph: Jeffrey T Barnes/AP

After the recovery, the vehicle remained about 50 yards (45 metres) from the brink of the American Falls, one of three waterfalls that make up Niagara Falls. Onlookers watched as emergency crews prepared to try to pull the vehicle from the water.

Rola said the state park department's swift-water rescue teams had been unable to get to the car because of its location.

Niagara Falls, located at the border between upstate New York and Canada, has a history of attracting both daredevils who try to cheat death by plunging over in homemade contraptions, and those driven by suicide.

Emergency crews, however, had never been called for a vehicle so close to the edge, Rola said. He said investigators would try to determine whether the vehicle wound up in the water by accident or intentionally.

This article was amended on 9 December 2021. An earlier version said that Niagara Falls was located entirely within the US.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/08/niagara-falls-woman-car-coast-guard>

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Headlines saturday 11 december 2021

- [Exclusive Javid advised to take ‘stringent’ Covid measures within a week, leak reveals](#)
- [England Care home residents to get only three visitors at Christmas](#)
- [Schools Labour demands ‘Christmas vaccine guarantee’ in England](#)
- [Ant and Dec Party jokes should be a warning to Johnson, say experts](#)

Coronavirus

Javid advised to take ‘stringent’ Covid measures within a week, leak reveals



Covid patients at the ICU at Milton Keynes hospital. The UKHSA warning says that unless action is taken by 18 December Covid hospitalisations could surpass last winter's peak. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

[Rowena Mason](#) Deputy political editor

Fri 10 Dec 2021 14.19 EST

Britain's top public health officials have advised ministers that “stringent national measures” need to be imposed by 18 December to avoid Covid hospitalisations surpassing last winter's peak, according to documents leaked to the Guardian.

Sajid Javid, the health secretary, received a presentation from the UK Health and Security Agency (UKHSA) on Tuesday warning that even if the new Omicron variant leads to less serious disease than Delta, it risks overwhelming the NHS with 5,000 people admitted to hospital a day.

In an interview with the Guardian, the epidemiologist Prof Neil Ferguson [said](#) the total could be double that number.

No 10 insisted there were no imminent plans to bring in more measures after plan B measures were announced for England this week but cabinet minister Michael Gove, who chaired a Cobra meeting on Friday, said the government had been presented with some “very challenging information” about the speed of the spread.

The Guardian has seen leaked advice from UKHSA for Javid marked “official, sensitive” saying: “The key point is that under a range of plausible scenarios, stringent action is needed on or before 18 December 2021 if doubling times stay at 2.5 days. Even if doubling times rise to around 5 days, stringent action is likely still needed in December.”

It adds: “The rapid spread of Omicron means that action to limit pressures on the health system might have to come earlier than intuition suggests.” Its calculations suggest that even if Omicron causes a less severe hospitalisation rate of 1% or 0.5% compared with Delta’s 1.5%, then “stringent national measures” would be needed by 18 December at the latest.

[possible Omicron restrictions](#)

On the current trajectory of 2.5 days doubling time, and without any further restrictions, the document warns that Omicron cases could be at 248,000 cases a day by 19 December. It also stresses that the figures are not a projection but an estimate of Omicron prevalence and doubling times seen in the UK so far.

The document does not detail what the necessary curbs would be but defines “stringent national measures” as those that bring the R (reproduction) number below 1.

Boris Johnson [triggered plan B this week](#) including more wide-ranging mask mandates, asking people to work from home and Covid passports for big venues but a senior Whitehall source said few inside UKHSA believe this will have much effect on slowing the spread of the variant.

Further measures, now being referred to as plan C, could include stricter isolation requirements for contacts of Covid cases, masks in pubs, shutting hospitality entirely, more restrictions on visitors to care homes and hospitals or even the return of curbs on social contact.

As the ministers convened a Cobra meeting to discuss Omicron, the level of concern about the variant is rising among its scientific and public health advisers. There were more than 58,000 new confirmed UK daily cases of Covid on Friday – the highest level since January – with 120 deaths within 28 days of a positive test.

Cobra, which involved the four nations of the UK, was chaired by Gove, the levelling up secretary, as Johnson spent time with his family after the birth of his second child with his wife, Carrie Johnson.

He warned that evidence suggests Omicron is “more likely” than past Covid-19 variants to “potentially” lead to hospital admissions among the fully vaccinated.

Sturgeon warned of a “potential tsunami” of Omicron infections as the new variant brings “the fastest exponential growth we have seen in this pandemic so far”. At an unscheduled televised Covid update on Friday, the first minister said that “frankness” with the public was necessary, as the Scottish government published an evidence paper suggesting Omicron is “rising exponentially”.

It came as the Welsh government hinted at new restrictions on visiting people in care homes and hospitals to counter the impact of Omicron. The first minister, Mark Drakeford, also suggested it would be wise for businesses and public sector leaders to plan for the possibility of further clampdowns and even a new lockdown.

He said: “We will be issuing new guidance for visiting in care homes and hospitals. We want to do all we can to support visiting where it is safe to do so but, if we see a new wave of cases, some strengthened measures to protect patients and residents may be needed.”

A government spokesperson said: “There are no plans for further restrictions. Plan B is the proportionate approach given what we know at this stage about the Omicron variant.

“The government will continue to look closely at all the emerging data and we’ll keep our measures under review as we learn more about this variant.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/10/stringent-uk-covid-measures-needed-within-a-week-leak-reveals>

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Social care

Care home residents in England to be allowed only three visitors at Christmas



Care home residents in London opening gifts sent by their families on Christmas Day 2020. Photograph: Hannah McKay/Reuters

PA Media

Sat 11 Dec 2021 04.22 EST

Care home residents will be allowed only three visitors and one essential care worker under updated government guidance announced as part of new measures to protect the sector from the spread of the Omicron variant.

The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) said the move was “in order to balance the current Covid-19 risk and the need to keep people safe in line with clinical advice”.

It is understood the guidance will come into force from Wednesday.

Fully vaccinated residents visiting family and friends outside the care home will be asked to take a lateral flow test on alternate days for two weeks after each outing, while those not vaccinated will have to isolate after an outside visit.

Staff testing will be increased from two lateral flow tests a week to three, alongside a weekly PCR test.

The chair of the National Care Association has said new rules on care homes have “almost” taken people back to the restrictions that were in place a year ago.

Nadra Ahmed said she was hoping to get clarity on several details of the new guidance, including whether people could change the nominated three people to visit someone in a care home.

She told BBC Breakfast: “Families are much bigger than [three people], if you’ve got four siblings, five siblings, you’ve got grandchildren, great-grandchildren.

“It was something that we’ve been having to plan for and, of course, now we’re looking at three nominated people. That kind of disempowers anybody else and for the residents, they may have been looking forward to it.

“We raise expectations on this quite substantially and, of course, we’re almost back to where we were, just slightly better, but almost back to where we were last year.”

The government said specialist vaccination teams were also being expanded and deployed to guarantee that all care home residents and staff, and housebound people and their care-givers, were offered a booster jab.

More than 70% of older adult care home residents have already received a booster jab, according to the DHSC.

Care homes will be able to request follow-up booster visits from vaccination teams, and GPs will receive higher home visit payments.

The government said care homes would also benefit from a £300m fund that could be used to pay for bonuses, bring forward pay rises, and fund overtime and staff recruitment until the end of March.

James White, the head of public affairs and campaigns at the Alzheimer's Society, described the new guidance as "deeply concerning".

He said: "More than 70% of care home residents are living with dementia and we know that restricting their contact with loved ones can lead to significant and irreversible deterioration in their symptoms.

"As we've seen from NHS [England](#) data released this week, a quarter of care home residents are still waiting for their booster vaccination despite promises that all residents would receive theirs by 1 November. We're concerned that these suggested plans are being used as a crude sticking plaster due to the failure to meet this vital target."

The health and social care secretary, Sajid Javid, said: "Throughout the pandemic we have done everything we can to protect the adult social care sector, and the emergence of the Omicron variant means this is more important than ever.

"This new funding will support our incredible workforce by recruiting new staff and rewarding those who have done so much during this pandemic.

"Boosting the booster rollout in social care and updating the visiting guidance will help keep the most vulnerable people in our society safe from the virus this winter."

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/dec/11/care-home-residents-in-england-to-be-allowed-only-three-visitors-at-christmas>

Schools

Labour demands ‘Christmas vaccine guarantee’ for pupils in England



The government has missed its target to vaccinate all 12- to 15-year-olds by the October half-term break. Photograph: Rui Vieira/AP

[Richard Adams, Education editor](#)

Sat 11 Dec 2021 04.32 EST

Labour has called on the government to give a “Christmas vaccine guarantee” to the hundreds of thousands of eligible children in England who have been unable to receive a Covid vaccination.

With recent figures showing that just 44% of children in the 12-15 age group had been vaccinated on 8 December, Bridget Phillipson, the shadow education secretary, said the government needed to make a bigger push to vaccinate the remainder before they returned to school in the new year.

“As Omicron cases in the UK are rising, it’s essential that ministers use the Christmas holidays to get the vaccine out to children, preventing continued chaos next term,” Phillipson said.

“Labour has been calling on ministers to use pop-up and walk-in clinics, and bring back volunteers and retired clinicians to increase vaccine rollout, but 13 weeks after the jab was approved [by the chief medical officers] the Conservatives have failed to deliver.

“With hundreds of thousands of children out of school each week this term, the government must urgently get a grip and stop neglecting children’s education.”

The government had initially [aimed to offer vaccinations](#) to all 12- to 15-year-olds by the October half-term break. But the most recent figures suggest it will struggle to vaccinate half by the end of term next week.

The Department of Health and Social Care has described the vaccination programme in England as “a phenomenal success”, with children able to be vaccinated at school or using the national booking system.

Phillipson’s call came as two primary schools in England reported cases of the Omicron variant, including among staff and pupils at Solent infant school in Portsmouth. An entire year group at Manor community primary school near Dartford in Kent was sent home after a case emerged there.

Phillipson has written to Nadhim Zahawi, the education secretary, asking him to urge the Department for Health to drive up vaccination rates among children, including a campaign to promote vaccinations and access to walk-in clinics.

Earlier this week, Susan Acland-Hood, the permanent secretary at the Department for Education (DfE), suggested to MPs that most schools would have to pay for any new air conditioning or ventilation from their existing budgets.

“In Germany and New York, ventilation systems have been in place in schools for months. Once again, England is lagging behind our international

counterparts and children are being let down as a result,” Phillipson wrote.

But even before the Omicron variant began spreading in England, attendance data from the DfE showed that more than 200,000 pupils were absent for Covid-related reasons at the end of November, a rise of 60% in two weeks.

Results collated by Education Datalab suggest that the absence rate in state secondary schools is close to 10%, compared with nearly 6% before the pandemic. The biggest contributor to the rise has been in number of pupils off school because of illness.

The DfE counts pupils absent for “Covid-related” reasons if they have suspected symptoms or a positive lateral flow test result. But if they return a positive PCR test they are counted as absent because of illness. As a result, the figures underestimate the full impact of Covid on school attendance.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/dec/11/labour-demands-christmas-vaccine-guarantee-for-pupils-in-england>

[Ant and Dec](#)

Ant and Dec party jokes should be a warning to Johnson, say experts



The pair's foray into political comedy has prompted an outpouring of support on social media. Photograph: Kieron McCarron/ITV/Rex/Shutterstock

*[Rachel Hall](#)
[@rachela_hall](#)*

Fri 10 Dec 2021 10.22 EST

Political satire may not usually be considered in their wheelhouse, but this week Ant and Dec were given a shoutout during prime minister's questions after the presenters referenced the [alleged Downing Street Christmas party](#) on I'm a Celebrity ... Get Me Out of Here!

The Labour leader, Keir Starmer, cited the joke as he pressured [Boris Johnson](#) into admitting he had been aware of the Christmas party hosted at

No 10 while London was under tier 3 restrictions last year. Starmer said the duo were “ahead of the prime minister on this.”

He was referencing a gag on Tuesday night’s episode, in which Ant remarked of the celebrity contestants: “They categorically deny that they had a party. And this fictional party definitely didn’t involve cheese and wine or a secret Santa.”

Dec added: “Evening, prime minister … for now.”

Political and media experts who spoke to the Guardian said the joke transcended political differences of opinion because it spoke to the prevailing view that Johnson is untrustworthy, and reflected the fact the pandemic restrictions are seen as a human issue – not just a political one.

They also warned the prime minister that, if [Ant and Dec](#) have trained their own brand of cheeky irreverence on to him, it was a good indicator that his recent controversies were resonating with the public.

“If Ant and Dec pick it up like that it’s because they feel the pulse of the country better than the politicians, and it’s what everyone’s talking about,” said Lis Howell, a professor emeritus of journalism at City, University of London and a former broadcasting executive.

She added: “Ant and Dec are universally popular and therefore very influential. They’re more damaging than any pundits. It’s the court jester who has the power to mock the king, but it’s no good mocking the king unless there’s some truth in it.”

The “evening, prime minister” refrain has punctuated a series of jibes about Johnson on the show, including describing contestants’ role as to “look increasingly dishevelled, give cushy jobs to their mates and pretty much make it up as they go along”. On Wednesday night, Ant reprised the double entendre between the celebrity contestants and the prime minister, remarking: “you can’t get away with covering things up”.

The pair’s foray into political comedy has prompted an outpouring of support on social media from viewers, who praised their candid remarks and

commented on how they were an unlikely force to [bring down the government](#).

It also represents a considerable departure from Ant and Dec's usual comedic style and the type of jokes considered appropriate for mass entertainment shows, which are notoriously wary of offending viewers.

Matthew Flinders, a politics professor at Sheffield University, said Johnson's role as the UK's first "celebrity prime minister" had blurred the boundaries between politics and entertainment by "building his reputation on joking around, not taking things seriously and breaking conventions".

The inclusion of political humour may have been a deliberate decision by I'm a Celebrity's producers to revive slumping ratings for what is increasingly seen as an ailing format.

"Prime time entertainment shows like this tend to avoid politics because it polarises the audience and is generally dull and serious, but Boris embraces slapstick. The producers of I'm A Celebrity will have inserted the gag into Ant and Dec's script as a tester, and it resonated immediately. The PR machine needs constant topicality and cut-through so it remains in people's minds," said Julian Henry, an entertainment PR expert.

Last year, I'm a Celebrity was still pulling in an average of 11 million viewers nightly, but this week ratings averaged just 5.2 million nightly, according to BARB figures. This season has been beset by problems, including cancelled episodes due to storm Arwen and the [early exit of contestant Richard Madeley](#) for a medical emergency.

While the political jokes haven't translated into higher ratings yet, they have generated headlines in a way not seen since the show's heyday.

Their popularity may reflect a gap in television programming for a satirical show which can keep up with social media. I'm a Celebrity is one of the few shows that films live nightly, unlike the UK's main political satire, Have I Got News For You, which records weekly.

“News and politics travels so fast now so a lot of the jokes we were sharing yesterday aren’t the same ones we’re sharing today,” said Scott Bryan, a culture writer.

Bryan added that the fact ITV had a clip of the joke on social media “within minutes” helped it go viral. “It’s a strategy at a time when television is incredibly competitive,” he said. “As well as attracting people who’d always watch the show, they’re getting other people writing and talking about them.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2021/dec/10/ant-and-dec-party-jokes-should-be-a-warning-to-johnson-say-experts>

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2021.12.11 - Spotlight

- [Carrie-Anne Moss 'There was a scene in the first Matrix with me in stilettos. I could barely stand straight'](#)
- [Karen Elson 'I survived body shaming, harassment and bullying – and I'm one of the lucky ones'](#)
- [The secret history of Sesame Street 'It was utopian, it's part of who we all are'](#)
- [Help us support those on the frontline of the climate emergency](#)
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Movies

Interview

Carrie-Anne Moss: ‘There was a scene in the first Matrix with me in stilettos. I could barely stand straight’

[Rebecca Nicholson](#)



Holy Trinity ... Carrie-Anne Moss, star of The Matrix: Resurrections.
Photograph: Brian Bowen Smith



Sat 11 Dec 2021 04.00 EST

When The Matrix asks us all to take the red pill again on 22 December, Carrie-Anne Moss, 54, will return to the role that made her famous. Moss first played Trinity, a motorbike-riding, badass, PVC-clad hacker, in 1999, and despite the character not surviving the original trilogy, she is back, along with her co-star Keanu Reeves, for the fourth instalment, *The Matrix Resurrections*, directed by Lana Wachowski, this time without her sister Lilly. Moss, who was born in Canada, started her career as a model and had several small parts on television and in films before *The Matrix* struck gold. She played Marvel's first on-screen lesbian character, Jeri Hogarth, in the Netflix series [Jessica Jones](#), and away from the acting world, she runs a "labour of love" lifestyle site called [Annapurna Living](#). She lives with her husband and three children in the countryside in California, which means she does not see the current trend for Matrix-inspired fashion such as big stompy boots and tiny sunglasses out on the streets.

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Was returning to the world of The Matrix a tough decision?

Oh, no. I was absolutely over-the-moon excited about the prospect. It was something that I never imagined happening. People had mentioned it to me in passing, and I was always thinking: ‘No way. Never gonna happen.’

There are obvious reasons for that, the main one being that Trinity dies in the third film.

When myself, Lana, Keanu and a few others sat together to read it for the first time, I was thinking: ‘What is this going to be like? How is she going to do this?’ It’s something that I never imagined, and I was really blown away.

The Matrix came out in 1999, but it has been a near-constant part of the cultural conversation ever since. How does it feel to have been such a big part of that?

It’s interesting. I’m definitely honoured to be in a film that made such an impact, and I’m deeply respectful of the part that I play in that story. I also have my own personal life that doesn’t include any of that, and so I don’t really feel the cultural impact. At the same time, when I do feel the weight of it, I’m moved that I got chosen to be that part of this film, and what it means to people, and I don’t take that lightly. It’s not just some job I did. When I did the first Matrix, it seemed to really impact women a lot. Women would come up to me, women directors, and stuntwomen, and they would thank me for opening this door or that. So I hold it with a lot of reverence, and a lot of deep respect. I respect this character more than any character that I’ve ever played. I chose not to play similar characters. I didn’t want to give Lana and Lilly’s hard work and beautiful artistry to any other film-maker.

Were you offered roles like Trinity a lot?

It did happen, and then it was just really clear. I think it didn’t even get past anybody to get to me because I was just like: I’m not going to do that. I think a lot of people interpreted it as that I didn’t want to stereotype myself, and it had nothing to do with stereotypes. It only had to do with my respect for the film-makers, and the film, and I didn’t want to sell that out. It was a no-brainer. I’m grateful now, coming around full circle to it, and getting to be in it again. There’s a real purity about it for me.

What do you think those women were thanking you for?

I don't know. When I did the first film, I was super-young; I didn't really understand all the different things that were happening, it was just such a whirlwind. When I saw the movie I was overwhelmed by it. I'd never seen myself in that way on a big screen. One of the things that I love about Trinity has to do with the gaze of the film-makers. It's Lana, and how she shoots. She loves Trinity so much. I can really appreciate it, in hindsight. I didn't feel that she was overly sexualised, and I don't think they would have picked me anyway if they were looking for that. I am grateful, in Hollywood terms, that it wasn't taken in that direction.



Hack attack ... Carrie-Anne Moss in 1999's The Matrix. Photograph: Cinetext/Warner Bros/Allstar

I watched an interview you did around the release of the first Matrix, and you talked about trying to shoot a scene in heels, which was a problem for you. I checked the trailer for Resurrections, and Trinity appears to be wearing flat-soled boots. Is that progress?

In the first one, there was one scene where they had me in a kind of a stiletto, and I couldn't do the scene. I had auditioned with that scene, and then suddenly there we are on the day shooting it, and I was unsteady. It was the whole thing in the nightclub, where I'm whispering in the guy's ear, and I'm supposed to be really grounded and strong, and yet I could barely stand

straight. And so they took those off and gave me a boot with a nice solid heel.

Well, footwear matters.

Yeah. I'm a clog girl, personally.

What did you have to do to get back into Trinity mode?

A lot of the preparation was physical training. I had weight to lose, I had strength to gain, I had fights to learn, I had big scenes to mentally prepare for. For months leading up to it, it was a lot of physical work, to get into Trinity in a way that wasn't me trying to be someone I used to be, and not trying to be 30, or trying to have the body I had when I was 30, and at the same time, being gentle with myself about that, too. When I had babies, I gained weight, and it took me years to come back into my body that I felt strong and comfortable in.

It's lovely to be around a man who listens in the way Keanu does ... He deserves all that good press about his compassion

Carrie-Anne Moss

I wonder if it's less of a big deal than it was to have female action heroes in their 40s, 50s and 60s? It's been normal for male actors for a long time, but I think fewer people would bat an eyelid about women doing those sorts of parts now.

I haven't really thought too deeply about it. Except that for my own personal journey, I didn't want to add any desperation on to myself, because in a way, I would feel like I was doing all the women my age, who were 30 [once], a disservice. This feeling that I have about Trinity is that it's not just about me, and I take that to heart. If suddenly I show up and I'm like ... I don't even know what that would look like, but let's be real, seeing yourself on screen is not easy. It wasn't easy when I was 30, either. But what I do feel happy about in seeing the movie is that I didn't really even think about it.

How much truth is there to the rumour that Keanu Reeves is the nicest man in the movie business?

Ha ha! He's a very kind person, and he's so good at what he does. He is very committed and disciplined. And he works harder than anyone I've ever met.

It was a pure pleasure to get to partner with him again, in this way. It was as if no time had passed. We all have those friends where you can just pick up right where you left off. He's a great listener. It's really lovely to be around a man who listens in the way that he does. He's very thoughtful in his listening. He deserves all of that good press about his compassion and kindness.



Brief encounter ... Moss as lawyer Jeri Hogarth in Marvel's *Jessica Jones* with Krysten Ritter. Photograph: Everett Collection Inc/Alamy

You said you made a decision not to play characters like Trinity, but there has been a thread of authority running through your characters recently. You were a doctor in Humans, a lawyer in [Jessica Jones](#) ...
Well, I think the common denominator is who's playing them.

They do all look like you.

It was interesting to me that [Jeri Hogarth in *Jessica Jones*] was originally a guy. The character was written as a man, and when I talked to them about it, I didn't want them to change it too much. I liked this idea that she had this stereotypical male kind of energy. That was quite fun to play. Actually, I really enjoyed doing that. It was my first [big] job after I had children. When I got that job, and I went to New York, it was as if I had walked into an entirely new world, with technology, and all of this stuff. I couldn't even

order a coffee! It was really a culture shock. Krysten Ritter, my co-star, I was always asking her things, she was helping me put Uber on my phone, little things, but New York was a real learning curve for me. It was quite jarring. I was quite comfortable at home, so I was stepping out of my comfort zone.

You don't seem like a very Hollywood person to me.

I've never really been interested in any of that. I never went to any Hollywood stuff, premieres or events or whatever, unless it was something that I was part of, or I was supporting a friend. Sometimes in the beginning, my team would say: 'Maybe she'd go to that thing.' And I'd be like: 'I don't want to have to get dressed and figure out what to wear, and I don't know how to do my makeup, and I don't know how to do my hair.' And I'm OK that I don't know how to do that stuff. I would rather be at home with my family any day. I've worked really hard to have this connected family life, and that means a lot to me. It's not because it's perfect or easy, but it's where I belong, in my heart. When I leave to go to work, I ultimately always love it, because you're forced to get out of your comfort zone. It's so healthy. But when I come home, I love my simple life.

The Matrix: Resurrections is in UK cinemas from 22 December.

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Karen Elson: 'Power is so elusive.' Photograph: Silvana Trevale/The Guardian. Blazer: [Rejinapyo.com](#). Top: [Joosticot, from koibird.com](#). Trousers: [Gabriela Hearst](#)

Supermodel Karen Elson on fashion's toxic truth: 'I survived harassment, body shaming and bullying – and I'm one of the lucky ones'

Karen Elson: 'Power is so elusive.' Photograph: Silvana Trevale/The Guardian. Blazer: [Rejinapyo.com](#). Top: [Joosticot, from koibird.com](#). Trousers: [Gabriela Hearst](#)

by [Jess Cartner-Morley](#)

Sat 11 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

When [Karen Elson](#) was a young hopeful trying to make it in Paris, a model scout took her to a nightclub. After long days on the Métro trekking to

castings that came to nothing, and evenings alone in a run-down apartment, she was excited to be out having fun. The music was good and the scout, to whom her agent had introduced her, kept the drinks coming. She started to feel tipsy. A friend of the scout's arrived, and the pair started massaging her shoulders, making sexual suggestions. "I was 16 and I'd never kissed a boy," she recalls. "It was my first experience of sexual – well, sexual anything, and this was sexual harassment. They both had their hands on me."

She told them she wanted to go home, and left to find a taxi, but they followed her into it, kissing her neck on the back seat. When they reached her street, she jumped out, slammed the taxi door and ran inside. The next day she told another model what had happened, and the scout found out. "His reaction was to corner me in the model agency and say: 'I'll fucking get you kicked out of Paris if you ever fucking say anything ever again.'"

Twenty-six years later, [Elson is telling me](#) this story from her sixth-floor suite in the Ritz hotel in London. The scout did not get her kicked out of Paris. She got booked for a shoot in Tokyo by an up-and-coming young American designer called Marc Jacobs, then [Donatella Versace](#) hired her as a fitting model to help her fine-tune her clothing. On Elson's 18th birthday, [Steven Meisel](#) photographed her for the [cover of Italian Vogue](#), her strawberry blond hair chopped into a [Louise Brooks bob](#) and tinted crimson, her pale skin exaggerated to alabaster, and a career as a supermodel began. [Karl Lagerfeld](#) called her "the beauty of the new millennium" and she is still going strong. At Paris fashion week this autumn, she walked in the [Balmain show](#) between Milla Jovovich and Carla Bruni-Sarkozy; in Milan, she was on stage alongside Kate Moss and [Gigi Hadid](#) for a collaboration between Italian powerhouses Fendi and Versace.

Today, the trappings of success are all around. A vast bouquet sits in its cellophane, a plate of fanned sliced fruit is untouched on the desk. But Elson takes a sip from a bone china teacup and tells me that the legacy of her 25 years at the top of the modelling game is "a shit ton of PTSD". Her distinctive Elizabethan colouring is still radiant against black cashmere, her complexion still peachy and wrinkle-free (more of which later), but her verdict on fashion lands with a punch. "Modelling looks like it's all glamour, and it really is not," she says. "I survived sexual harassment, body shaming and bullying. And I am supposedly one of the lucky ones."



‘I could smell the misogyny’: corset adjustment before the Victoria’s Secret 2001 lingerie show. Photograph: Evan Agostini/Getty Images

Not long after that night in Paris, Elson was living in Milan, signed to “an agency run by women who gave it to me straight: ‘Do not go to clubs, because the men who take models to clubs are sleazy and you will be in danger.’” Some of the girls in Elson’s apartment were not so lucky. “I remember one waking up with bruises on her neck. We were all horrified. They were young models, full of hopes and dreams, and the people who were supposed to be their guardians were preying on them. The agents had prestige names on their books, girls who were in Vogue and getting big campaigns, but they also had young models they went to nightclubs with.” Models who are earning little money are given free drinks in clubs, sometimes taken to fancy restaurants, in return for being arm candy. “Sometimes there is a fine line between modelling and escort work, and the girls don’t realise it. I’m not shaming them for that.”

Last year, [a Guardian investigation by Lucy Osborne](#) revealed decades of alleged abuse by former Elite Models boss Gérald Marie. This summer, the model [Carré Otis filed a suit against Marie](#) – who denies all allegations against him – for rape and sex trafficking, abuse she claims began when she was 17. Elson, who has led calls to reform the model agency system, booking most of her own shoots for the past four years, immediately offered

her support. “We need to figure out why the fashion industry enables so much toxicity and [we need to] finally make positive changes,” she wrote on Instagram.

For a time, Elson was also represented by Marie. “My impression was he was a sleazy man,” she says, speaking publicly about him for the first time. “But I never had anything happen with him. To be blunt, I don’t think I was ... well, that I was a bit odd-looking and ginger granted me some protection. Not always, but sometimes.”



‘I just wanted so badly to fit in.’ Photograph: Silvana Trevale/The Guardian.
Dress, trousers and sandals: [Jil Sander](#). Earrings: [Bar Jewellery](#).

Elson has seen how a toxic blend of international travel, lack of transparency and an unequal power structure can shade modelling into trafficking. In March, she began running “model mentor” workshops online, giving advice to young people in the industry. A young eastern European woman at one session told Elson her passport had been confiscated when she tried to leave an agency. “I was like: withholding your passport, that’s human trafficking. And her agency was also telling her she’d get kicked out of the country if she left.”

In 2001, the [Victoria's Secret televised lingerie show](#) was in its pomp, with 12 million viewers tuning in. Rupert Everett was the host; Mary J Blige performed that year's inescapable hit, Family Affair. It was a high-profile, lucrative job, but Elson recalls "walking out and seeing a bunch of lecherous men in the audience. I could smell the misogyny. I didn't feel beautiful, I felt ridiculous. I felt like someone else's fantasy of a redhead, in a red G-string and devil horns, or whatever the fuck I was wearing." Later, I look up the pictures. Elson is in a red G-string and corset, though no devil horns. Most of the other models toss their ringlets and flash toothy grins; Elson, half hidden under long straight hair, looks stone-faced. "I felt sad the whole time I was doing it," she says.



Elson with a crocodile, shot for Vogue in 2008. Photograph: © Tim Walker Studio

Elson has never been a cookie-cutter beauty queen. Growing up in Oldham, "with frizzy red hair and ghost-white skin and no boobs" at a time when every teenage boy she knew had a poster of Cindy Crawford on his wall, she kept her early modelling ambitions quiet. After signing to Boss Models in [Manchester](#), she left school early every Thursday to go there, claiming she was off to see the orthodontist. The day after she finished her GCSEs in June 1995, she caught the train to London, dragging her suitcase straight to the office of Models 1.

[Photographer Tim Walker](#)'s Vogue portraits of Elson have featured her in bed with a giant crocodile, or in white tuxedo trousers with braces and no blouse. He met Elson and fellow [model Erin O'Connor](#) for the first time in 1997 and thought they didn't look like models: "They looked like people I knew, art college friends." With her marble skin, flaming hair and fine bone structure, Elson can look "androgynous and ethereal, so I wasn't so much the sexualised object," she says.

But being pigeonholed as otherworldly came with its own issues. "I was put in this box where I was a freak, and as a result it was as if I wasn't real. I wasn't supposed to have feelings." Having reached the supermodel ranks, she experienced a kind of [impostor syndrome](#). "I just wanted so badly to fit in. I wanted to be [Claudia Schiffer](#) and instead I felt like the red-headed stepchild."

Now, if someone wants to take a nude, they have to explain why.
Funnily enough, no one ever asks me any more

Despite Elson's slender frame, through much of her career she has been bullied over her weight by people in the industry. A well-known Italian designer once described her, to her face, as "a beast" and "disgusting". A US model agent offered to pay her money for every pound she could lose. Once, in desperation to get work, she booked into a "health spa" in California where she fasted for seven days. She flew straight to Milan for fashion week ("looking skeletal") and the compliments – and bookings – flooded in.

Just before our interview, Elson texts to say she is about to order room service, asking if I want anything. When her lunch arrives, she ignores the food, saying she feels [too self-conscious to eat during the interview](#). (It is under a silver dome, but I think it's a salad.) Clumsily, I comment on her "self-control", to which she replies with a wry smile that "self-control is my achilles heel".

Eating disorders have plagued her since she was seven when, unsettled by her parents' increasingly unhappy marriage, she stopped eating and was admitted to hospital. "Food has always been attached to trauma for me," she

says. “And then I went into an industry that played into my biggest insecurities.”

With the help of “a great therapist, who used to be a ballerina and understands body dysmorphia”, Elson has reached a “safety zone”. “I sincerely do eat these days. I will never do another diet as long as I live because they make me feel like I’m losing my mind, but if I’m on set and a dress doesn’t fit, it’s really hard not to go to that place where you start thinking, if I was 12lb skinnier … I’m not going to do anything drastic any more, but the thoughts still appear. I run really fast four times a week and, yes, I love it mentally, but I also love how it makes me look, and it’s important to be candid about that. It’s a rollercoaster for me still.” Her therapist would like her to give up modelling, she says.

Behind the lip service to diversity, fashion’s obsession with thinness persists. “I looked at photos from a catwalk show recently and the models were so, so thin. Not the kind of thin you get by going for a healthy jog in the morning – the kind you get when you stop eating. I find it heartbreakingly to see that still.” Recently, someone in the industry greeted her with: “You’ve lost so much weight in your face, you look great!” she recalls. “I said to him, ‘You know, “Hello, how are you?” would be nicer.’”



‘I will never do another diet as long as I live.’ Photograph: Silvana Trevale/The Guardian. Dress, earrings and heels: [Fendi](#). Belt: [Missoma](#)

But there have been good times, too. She danced for Alexander McQueen’s landmark Deliverance show in 2004 and this year starred in a mini-musical for Moschino. When she feels a connection with a photographer on set, being a model is like being “lightning in a bottle”, she says. In her memoir The Red Flame: a Journey of a Woman, she writes about her breakthrough shoot with Meisel. “We shot for two glorious hours. I had never felt more excited. I left the studio to go back into the snow with only a single subway token, but I had never felt so joyful.” But while her unique looks caught the eye of the most creative photographers, being stereotyped as edgy often meant being expected to take her clothes off.

“I would suddenly be given a see-through dress, or a pair of knickers and no top, and told: ‘That’s the image.’ My opinion didn’t come into it,” Elson says. Sometimes the results were poetic, beautiful images of which she is proud – her memoir includes nude portraits by Walker, [Peter Lindbergh](#), Mert and Marcus – but there are other images she dislikes because she felt uncomfortable on set. These days, she has learned to set out boundaries. “If someone wants to take a nude, they have to explain the context, why it’s necessary and how they intend to ensure I feel safe and comfortable.” She laughs. “Funnily enough, no one ever asks me to be nude any more.”

Because our society struggles to distinguish what a woman looks like from who a woman is, models have become ciphers for femininity. Debate about them is charged because it is never just about models, but about the [institutionalised misogyny](#) of a world where the female experience can feel like a never-ending beauty contest in which even the winners are shortchanged. “Power is so elusive as a model. Even as a supermodel, it doesn’t feel like you really own your power,” Elson says.

You know what’s really messed up about fashion? When I was totally exhausted and fragile was when people loved me most

Her words remind me of a point made by Emily Ratajkowski in [her essay collection My Body](#) – that exploitation is inevitable in “a value system that

revolves around men and their desire”. Elson is encouraged “by Emily taking control of her own voice, the way other people have taken control of her image”. Yet when she describes Ratajkowski in person, Elson’s articulate, crisp sentences dissolve into breathlessness. She was “blown by how beautiful, how ridiculously beautiful, she is. It’s like … how is your stomach so flat? How is that even possible? Everything about her is just … And God Created Woman, you know?” Everyone, it seems, is conditioned to objectify Ratajkowski-level beauty, even supermodels campaigning against objectification.

There is a fractiousness in the conversation around models that model and labour activist [Sara Ziff, founder of the Model Alliance](#), has termed the “empathy gap”. Ziff argues that the job’s ultra-glamorous image does a disservice to most models by giving the impression that anyone with their picture in a magazine is flying first class with suitcases stuffed with cash. “The biggest misconception about modelling is the money,” Elson says. “Most working models are barely getting by.”

Elson’s father was a joiner in construction; her mother stayed at home, occasionally taking odd jobs to make ends meet. Elson and her twin sister, Kate, shared a bed held up by tin cans. She has rarely known the luxury of not worrying about money. Because her off-kilter looks tended to appeal more to editorial clients than to commercial ones, her income has been erratic. “I’d get home from a shoot and once all the expenses were added up, I’d be in debt.” For a prestigious magazine, a 20-hour shoot might pay a flat fee of only £150, “and if you’re flying yourself somewhere, the debts can rack up”.



‘I felt like someone else’s fantasy of a redhead.’ Photograph: Silvana Trevale/The Guardian. Styling: Melanie Wilkinson, assisted by Peter Bevan. Hair: Shukeel Murtaza at the Only Agency. Makeup: Beau Nelson at the Wall Group. Dress: [Khaite, from Selfridges](#). Earrings: [Alighieri](#)

A lack of financial transparency is symptomatic of the way models “are made into powerless, passive entities in their own industry, rather than treated as professionals”, she says. “The agents’ attitude was always – you’re just a pretty face, get out there and milk it until the wrinkles arrive, then you’ll be carted back to your home town.” Elson says she would ask an agent how much she’d be paid for a job and “practically hear the eye roll over the phone – here she goes again, being difficult”. Now she is represented by a talent agent and a publicist: “I’m never signing with another model agency as long as I live.”

In 2005, Elson, ghostly in white tulle and teetering on her heels, starred in a music video for [Blue Orchid by the White Stripes](#). Within a few weeks, she and frontman Jack White had eloped to the Amazon rainforest where they were married by a shaman. They divorced in 2013. Her memoir makes no mention of the [restraining order she took out against him that year](#), saying only that “eventually the dust settled” and the two are now “loving co-parents” to their children Scarlett, 15, and Henry, 14.

Having long harboured musical ambitions, Elson released her first album as a singer-songwriter, *The Ghost Who Walks*, in 2010, followed by *Double Roses* seven years later. Her music – a gothic kind of blues, part folksy Americana, part Left Bank chanteuse – has won over sceptics of the “[model marries rock star, makes record](#)” narrative. (“[Ethereal pop majesty with a mesmerising talent,](#)” wrote this paper in 2017.) An EP of covers recorded during lockdown, *Radio Redhead*, will be followed next year by a third album, *Green*. Yet music, Elson has discovered, can be as misogynistic as fashion. “In fashion, the misogyny is more superficial – the men don’t necessarily want to sleep with me, they want to objectify me in a picture. In music there are still powerful straight white men who operate under the myth of the tortured genius. There have been men who said they believed in my talent and then it turned out they wanted to sleep with me. It was humiliating.”

We are living in the era of supermodel reparations. Paulina Porizkova and Carla Bruni-Sarkozy have joined Elson in offering support to Carré Otis. Linda Evangelista, who has posted about being “[permanently deformed](#)” by [complications after a cosmetic procedure](#) on her face, is “a good friend. It is so difficult to be a supermodel getting older and have what you looked like 20 years ago held up as a comparison the whole time. I’ve had two kids, and to walk on set and be given an outfit that would work on a 17-year-old is hard.” Evangelista speaking out “is really brave because it goes against decades of conditioning to be the beautiful face and stay silent”.

At 42, Elson’s own face is wrinkle-free. “I have had [Botox](#), and I like it,” she says. “I haven’t done filler yet, but I probably will.” She kneads her sculpted cheekbones with manicured nails, miming an imaginary lift. She’d love to champion natural beauty, she says, but she isn’t going to pretend she’s not “feeling the pressure. Let’s just talk about it, you know? The cloak-and-dagger around Botox isn’t helpful, because not admitting to it perpetuates images that aren’t realistic.”

Elson’s next appointment has arrived – a film crew, pacing the corridor outside – and she still hasn’t had a chance to eat her salad. She promises she will call to say goodbye properly, and a few days later is on the phone from Nashville, Tennessee. The city is home, she says, because, years ago, “my

husband Jack and I fell in love with Nashville and bought a house here, kind of impulsively. Two kids later, I looked around and I was like – huh, I guess I live in this town now,” she laughs.

“Having kids taught me boundaries, and Nashville gave me an escape from fashion. The realness to life here is such a blessing.” To her kids and her neighbours, she isn’t a supermodel; she is “a dorky British woman, sitting here on my bed with a cup of tea, my big tom cat Fergus on my lap.” She has come a long way from Paris, in every sense. “You know what’s really messed up about fashion? The moments when I was totally exhausted and fragile were when people loved me most. It was like, she’s major! But at the expense of my health and my sanity. And I got to a point where I thought, I’m a grown fucking woman, you know? I’ve got two kids. I’m a good mother. I don’t want to be a broken doll any more.”

In March, Elson will appear in a Sky Documentaries series, telling the story of sexual exploitation in the modelling industry. Building on an investigation by journalist Lucy Osborne, first published in the Guardian’s Weekend magazine, it will be produced by Wonderhood Studios and the Guardian.

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Main photo: Jim Henson (left) and Frank Oz (right) introduce some lucky visitors to Bert and Ernie. All photographs: David Attie

The secret history of Sesame Street: ‘It was utopian – it’s part of who we all are’

Main photo: Jim Henson (left) and Frank Oz (right) introduce some lucky visitors to Bert and Ernie. All photographs: David Attie

by [Steve Rose](#)

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“I’m still pinching myself that my dad, my own flesh and blood, had Ernie on one hand and Bert on the other,” Eli Attie says. “It is like he got to sit at Abbey Road studios and watch the Beatles record I Want to Hold Your Hand.” Attie’s father was the photographer David Attie who, in 1970, visited the set of Sesame Street in New York City during its first season. His images lay forgotten in a wardrobe for the next 50 years, until Eli recently discovered them. They are a glimpse behind the curtain of a cultural phenomenon waiting to happen. Here are not only Bert and Ernie but Kermit, Big Bird, Oscar the Grouch with his original orange fur (he was green by season two). And here are the people who brought these characters to life, chiefly [Jim Henson](#) and [Frank Oz](#), the Lennon and McCartney of Muppetdom. What also stands out in Attie’s images are the children visiting the set. As in the show itself, they are clearly so beguiled by the puppets, they completely ignore the humans controlling them.

Eli himself was one of those visitors, although he has no memory of it. “I was in diapers, and as the story goes, I was loud and not to be quieted down, and was yanked off the set,” he says. His parents and older brother Oliver at least made it into the photos. Oliver was even in an episode of the show, in the background in Hooper’s Store, Eli explains, with just a hint of jealousy.



- Above: Bert and Ernie with puppeteers Daniel Seagren, Jim Henson and Frank Oz
- Left: Cast member Bob McGrath, an actor and musician, in a segment called The People in Your Neighborhood.
- Right: Henson (left) and Oz – the Lennon and McCartney of Muppetdom – operate puppets for a sketch titled Hunt for Happiness



Fifty-two years and more than 4,500 episodes later, Sesame Street remains the premier address in children's entertainment. It is still watched by hundreds of millions around the world, and broadcast in more than 140 countries. One attempt to statistically measure the show's impact on American society failed because nobody could find a large enough sample group who *hadn't* watched it. Sesame Street's place in US culture was bizarrely underlined last month when Big Bird [announced on Twitter](#): "I got the Covid-19 vaccine today! My wing is feeling a little sore, but it'll give

my body an extra protective boost that keeps me and others healthy.” He was promoting the rollout of vaccinations to five- to 11-year-olds, but Big Bird’s tweet, combined with Sesame Street’s recent introduction of a new [Korean American muppet](#), has prompted a conservative backlash. [Texas senator Ted Cruz responded](#): “Government propaganda … for your 5 year old!” Cruz later doubled down, [tweeting a cartoon](#) of the Sesame Street characters sitting around the Thanksgiving dinner table, with a dead, cooked Big Bird in place of a turkey.

Sesame Street was used as government propaganda – just not in the way Ted Cruz might imagine

Others piled in. The influential Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) [expressly banned Big Bird](#) and other Sesame Street characters from its next conference, and CPAC organiser Matt Schlapp called for [PBS](#), which broadcasts the show (although new episodes now air on HBO Max), [to be defunded](#). “They just won’t stop in their push for woke politics,” he complained. Arizona state senator Wendy Rogers went even further, declaring: [“Big Bird is a communist.”](#)

Beyond the optics of beating up on universally beloved children’s characters, in the context of David Attie’s images, these takes could hardly be more wrong. Attie had been commissioned to photograph [Sesame Street](#) by Amerika, a Russian-language magazine funded by the US state department and distributed in the Soviet Union. Essentially, it was a cold war propaganda project. Soviet officials would regularly return copies of Amerika to the US embassy unsold, saying their citizens were not interested. In truth, the magazine was so sought after, it became a black-market commodity, explains Eli Attie. “One embassy official said to me they had traded two copies of Amerika for these impossible-to-find ballet tickets in Moscow at the time,” he says. So Sesame Street *was* used as government propaganda, just not in the way Cruz and Rogers might imagine.



- The choice of a New York street scene was a radical move in children's TV in the 60s.

You could say that Sesame Street had a political mission from the outset, as the new documentary, [Street Gang: How We Got to Sesame Street](#) (to which Attie's book is a companion piece), lays out. One of the show's co-founders, the broadcaster [Joan Ganz Cooney](#), was involved "intellectually and spiritually" with the civil rights movement. The other, psychologist Lloyd Morrisett, was concerned about a widening education gap in the 1960s US, which was leaving behind socioeconomically deprived children, particularly African Americans. These children were often spending long hours at home watching television while their parents were busy working. Instead of jingles for beer commercials, Cooney and Morrisett reasoned, why not use television to teach them literacy and numeracy?



- Above: Big Bird with actors Loretta Long and Matt Robinson, AKA husband and wife duo Susan and Gordon.
- Below: According to Big Bird's operator Caroll Spinney, his 'sometimes sad, very complex character' gave the show its depth.



With an \$8m federal grant, the newly formed Children's Television Workshop spent two years researching how to make content that would not only be educational but entertaining. That's where The Muppet Workshop came in (even if the hippy-ish Henson was initially distrusted by his more academic colleagues). Not to mention the [songs](#), the anarchic comedy sketches, the [surreal animations](#), and the improvised [child-with-muppet segments](#). The whole thing was an experiment. Nothing like it had been done before and there was no guarantee it would be a success, but everyone seemed to be on the same page.

We were learning to count, we were learning to spell and we were learning a kind of comedy

Eli Attie

As Cooney puts it in the documentary: “We weren’t so worried about reaching middle-class children but we really, really wanted to reach inner-city kids badly. It was hardly worth doing if it didn’t reach them.” This explains why the show was set on an ordinary New York street – a radical move for children’s TV, a familiar place for the target audience. Equally radically, the show was multicultural and inclusive from the start, with white, Black and Latino actors alongside non-human characters of all colours. Even the title sequence and the guests reflected the US’s diversity (the first season featured [James Earl Jones](#), BB King, [Mahalia Jackson](#) and [Jackie Robinson](#)). As the long-running writer and director Jon Stone said of the show’s inclusive approach: “We’ve never beaten that horse to death by talking about it; we simply show it.”



- Muppet designer and performer Caroly Wilcox goes to work with Henson.

Sesame Street has taught kids about all manner of life topics. Not only racism (most recently with the introduction of [two new African American characters](#), post-Black Lives Matter) but also poverty, addiction, autism, HIV and Aids, public health (Covid was not Big Bird's first jab, [he also got a measles vaccination in 1972](#)), and gentrification (in 1994, the street was under threat of demolition from a loud-mouthed property tycoon named "Ronald Grump", played by Joe Pesci). Sesame Street has even tackled the concept of death: when Will Lee, who played storekeeper Mr Hooper, died in 1982, the show featured a wrenching segment in which neighbours, clearly tearfully, [explain to Big Bird that Mr Hooper is dead](#) and is never coming back.



- Spinney, who played Big Bird for almost 50 years until his death in 2019, jokes with children on set.

It wasn't just "inner-city kids" Sesame Street was popular with. While his father was working, Eli Attie's artist mother would also put him and his brother in front of the TV to watch it so she could paint. "There was a block of hours that it was on public broadcasting stations in the New York region. So she just thought: 'Hallelujah. I can place them here, they're entertained,'" he says. "We were learning to count, we were learning to spell and we were learning a kind of comedy: we both became fans of Monty Python and standup comedy and I'm sure this was the gateway." Attie went on to become a TV writer and producer, working on shows such as *The West Wing*, *House* and *Billions*.



- Above: Filming on set of Sesame Street.
- Below: Henson with the Dentist and the Bus Driver from the song The People in Your Neighborhood, which was about different occupations.



Sesame Street's inclusive, humane, progressive agenda has always had its enemies. Mississippi broadcasters [refused to air the first season](#) back in 1969 on account of the show's desegregated setting (they backed down after a few weeks). In the past decade, the conservative chorus of disapproval has been getting louder. Before Cruz and co, the show and PBS have been targeted by the likes of [Mitt Romney](#), [Fox News](#), and, inevitably, [Donald Trump](#).

“Sesame has never been a political show; it has been a very socially relevant show,” says Trevor Crafts, producer of the Street Gang documentary. Although the political climate today has echoes of the 1960s, when Sesame Street was created, he feels. “It was a very similar time. There was a lot of social unrest, and here we are again. It just shows that you need something like Sesame Street to sort of increase the volume of good in the world. And also to know that through creativity, you can make change. Positive change can occur if you’re willing to see a problem and try to fix it and do it creatively.”





- Spinney with Oscar the Grouch. Henson had wanted Oscar to be magenta, but television cameras couldn't process the shade. In season two, Oscar became green.
- Long gets a peek into Oscar's trashcan. Now in her 80s, she went on to be one of the longest-serving members of the original cast.

Where some might see a political agenda, many more would simply see a model for the kind of society the US would like to be. “I think it showed everybody: ‘This is who we should be in our hearts,’” Eli Attie says. “It was utopian. It was optimistic, it was challenging and smart. And it didn’t talk down to children.” As well as a family album, his father’s photos capture that spirit of playful idealism. “I see now that’s part of who I am,” he says. “And it’s part of who we all are.”

The Unseen Photos of Street Gang: How We Got to Sesame Street by Trevor Crafts, with photographs by David Attie, is published by Abrams on 23 December at £28.99. To support The Guardian and Observer, order your copy for £25.22 at guardianbookshop.com. Delivery charges may apply. The documentary Street Gang is on HBO in the US on 13 December and in the UK next year.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2021/dec/11/found-photographs-sesame-street-season-one-utopian>

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Guardian and Observer charity appeal 2021Climate crisis

Help us support those on the frontline of the climate emergency

[Katharine Viner](#)



A man draws water from a well in Burkina Faso, west Africa. Photograph: DeAgostini/Alamy

Fri 10 Dec 2021 07.31 EST

“I remember thinking: if we make it out alive, how and where are we going to start all over again?” said Vanessa Nieuwenhuizen, who [dragged her children to safety](#) through rapidly rising flood waters in Samoa. Others in the Guardian’s [interviews with people](#) with personal experience of the climate emergency also talked vividly of the bewilderment and grief caused by wildfires, flooding and drought, of livelihoods lost and lives turned upside down.

“Every tree, every bush, every flower was burned and the whole ecosystem was wiped out,” [recalled](#) Antonis Vakos, a beekeeper from the island of Evia in Greece. For some the impact of extreme weather was sudden and catastrophic. For others it meant slow environmental degradation: entire ways of life gradually disappearing amid climate volatility, [rising seas](#), and [melting snow and ice](#). As Daharu Isah, a Nigerian farmer, [expressed it](#): “The weather keeps playing tricks on me.”

In a year in which the real, human and ecological [impact of global heating](#) has been brought home to ever more of us – and when the choices facing a world teetering on the edge of irreparable climate disaster were [starkly framed at the Cop26 conference](#) in Glasgow – it seemed timely and right that we put the environment at the heart of the 2021 Guardian and Observer charity appeal.

The thread running through our appeal is climate injustice. The stark truth is that the world’s developing countries have seen the vast majority of the death and destruction caused by climate-induced disasters, and yet they are responsible for a tiny fraction of global emissions. The [richest countries pollute most](#) but it is [in the poorest](#) where climate change is most harshly felt, through extreme poverty, food and [water insecurity](#) and [the displacement of millions of people](#) from their homes.

Tackling such monumental injustice is an existential issue for the entire world, and a pressing moral obligation for the wealthiest countries. Set

beside the vast and bold systemic and behavioural changes we urgently require, a charity appeal might seem relatively insignificant. As ever, however, we see the appeal as a statement of intent, a sign of our commitment to a fairer society; a show of solidarity with the victims of climate injustice; and an ovation for those who fight that injustice.

This year we are supporting [four fantastic charities](#), which in their different ways show how we can start to make a difference:

[Practical Action](#) delivers locally run and sustainable plans to help communities adapt to climate change, from flood early warning systems to the introduction of climate-smart regenerative agricultural practices.

The [Environmental Justice Foundation](#) puts human rights at the centre of its work securing [protection for climate refugees](#) – people displaced from their homes by extreme weather – and highlighting injustices such as illegal fishing and deforestation.

The [Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew](#) is best known for its gardens in west London. Your donations will help fund its work [protecting biodiversity](#) and restoring denuded land on the island of Madagascar, which the [World Food Programme reported](#) is suffering from a famine [linked to climate change](#).

[Global Greengrants Fund UK](#) will work with international partners such as [CLIMA Fund](#) to regrant its share of your donations to grassroots projects at the sharp end of climate change in the global south.

Since 2015, Guardian and Observer readers have raised just under £10m through our annual appeals. We've [supported refugees](#), funded [youth homelessness projects](#), and helped charities fighting [Windrush immigration injustices](#). Last year we raised an incredible £1.4m for charities working with [disadvantaged young people](#) in the UK.

In the coming weeks our journalism will highlight the inspiring work of our 2021 charity partners. We hope we can in turn inspire you to give generously.

Donations can be made online by credit card, debit card or PayPal, or by phone on 0151 284 1126. We are unable to accept cheques.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/dec/10/help-us-support-those-on-the-frontline-of-the-climate-emergency>

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Guardian and Observer charity appeal 2021Climate crisis

Guardian and Observer charity appeal 2021: support the fight for climate justice



People near Khartoum carry their belongings through floodwater after strong rains lashed the area in August. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty

[Patrick Butler](#)

Fri 10 Dec 2021 08.02 EST

Climate justice is the theme of the Guardian and Observer's 2021 charity appeal. We are supporting four charities that fight to protect the rights and livelihoods of communities hit by extreme weather events caused by the climate emergency.

Practical Action

Big change starts small is [Practical Action](#)'s approach to tackling the impact of the climate emergency and environmental degradation. As its name suggests, this UK-based charity specialises in hands-on, pragmatic ways of helping communities adapt to the challenge of extreme weather.

It works with people in Africa, Asia, and Latin America to develop ingenious, lasting and locally owned solutions for those whose lives and livelihoods have been devastated by the climate crisis, helping to increase resilience through climate-smart, regenerative agriculture, waste management and access to clean energy.

These solutions include introducing technology and mobilising communities to help local volunteers provide early warning of imminent flooding; providing irrigation and tree-planting to repair damage to forest and pastureland, and helping farmers adapt to the changing climate by supplying climate-resilient seeds and developing new practices.



A farmer, who is being helped by Practical Action, outside her home in Bangladesh. Photograph: Kaamil Ahmed/The Observer

Practical Action was established in 1966, after an article was published in the Observer by the radical green economist EF Schumacher (of [Small Is](#)

Beautiful fame). He argued that economic development should be based around the holistic needs, skills and resources of local communities.

“Our work remains grounded in the realities of people living in poverty, who face even more challenges from the devastating impacts of climate change, even though they have been the lowest contributors to the problem. We support communities so that they can thrive, rather than just survive. And we work with governments and businesses to ensure these changes are sustained and scaled,” said Sarah Roberts, chief executive of Practical Action.

Environmental Justice Foundation

At the core of Environmental Justice Foundation’s mission is the belief that the climate crisis is a human rights concern, and that protecting the natural world is not just a question of “quality of life” but, for too many people, a matter of life and death.

The UK-based charity has pioneered campaigning for climate refugees, giving voice to some of the planet’s most vulnerable people, and working to secure legal protection for communities for whom the climate crisis has destroyed their homes and livelihoods.

Its investigative films and reports have highlighted a range of climate injustices and prompted local policy changes in areas from defending marine environments and tackling illegal fishing, to uncovering the ruinous impact of rising global demand for soy, palm oil and beef.



Indigenous people of Peru protesting in Lima in September over rainforest being razed to cultivate palm oil. Photograph: Paolo Aguilar/EPA

“Whether working with local peoples to raise the alarm over destructive wildfires and illegal logging in Brazil; empowering coastal communities to rid their waters of illegal fishing in Liberia; or telling the stories of those who have lost their homes to the climate crisis in Bangladesh, our goal is the same: we take local fights for environmental justice and make them global; reaching the centre of governments and business, to drive action for people and planet,” said Steve Trent, its chief executive.

Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

The Indian Ocean island of Madagascar is one of the world’s biodiversity hotspots, famed for its natural wonders and yet facing acute challenges. Its unique plants, animals and fungi, and the 28 million people who live there, are increasingly threatened by drought and wildfires, famine and deforestation, driven by the climate crisis.

Madagascar’s plight was [highlighted](#) at the recent Cop26 climate conference in Glasgow, which heard how climate-induced famine in the south of the island had forced people to move west and north, putting natural resources there under strain.

The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (RBG Kew), a UK-based science and conservation charity known for its famous gardens in south-west London, is helping tackle this. It has had a [large research](#) presence on the island for nearly 40 years, and is at the forefront of initiatives there and globally to catalogue, understand and protect biodiversity.



Kew staff help with identifying grasses at a training workshop in Madagascar. Photograph: Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

With many Malagasy people dependent on natural resources such as rosewood, yams, rice and vanilla for their livelihoods, the Kew Madagascar Conservation Centre has been working with local communities to develop resilient agricultural systems, restore denuded land, and protect the island's abundant biodiversity.

“Using our unique expertise in halting biodiversity loss and protecting precious habitats in Madagascar, we will use funding from the Guardian and Observer appeal to support and enhance the benefits of biodiversity to rural people, through projects planned and delivered in partnership with local communities,” said Paul Wilkin, head of ecosystem stewardship at RBG Kew. “We believe these projects have the potential to transform lives whilst protecting the country’s precious diversity.”

Global Greengrants Fund UK

The approach successfully championed by [Global Greengrants Fund UK](#) is to help people and communities at the sharp end of the climate crisis to find their own solutions to the challenges of extreme weather and environmental degradation.

Using its share of donations to this year's Guardian and Observer appeal, Global Greengrants Fund UK will work in collaboration with the US-based non-profit [CLIMA Fund](#) to identify and award financial micro-grants to grassroots climate projects across Africa, Asia and South America.

These will include projects that develop community-led resilience to climate impacts, protect the human rights of indigenous groups, address climate injustice and promote environmental initiatives, including water capture, tree-planting and the sustainable methods of agriculture.

Global Greengrants Fund UK was a partner in the Guardian and Observer 2019 charitable appeal, when it regranted its £250,000 share of donations to support local rainforest protection groups in the Amazon basin.

“Answers to the climate crisis exist. They are led by those who are most impacted by but least responsible for climate change: Indigenous peoples, women, youth, and rural communities. Together with our partners in the CLIMA Fund and our donors we are supporting these forces for change to protect our shared planet and call for climate justice,” said Eva Rehse, the UK executive director of Global Greengrants Fund.

[Donations can be made online by credit card, debit card or PayPal](#), or by phone on 0151 284 1126. We are unable to accept cheques.

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2021.12.11 - Coronavirus

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[Coronavirus](#)

From hippos to hamsters: how Covid is affecting creatures great and small



These two hippos at Antwerp zoo recently tested positive for Covid-19.
Photograph: Reuters

[Linda Geddes](#) Science correspondent

Sat 11 Dec 2021 04.00 EST

A year ago humanity embarked on a project to vaccinate every person against Covid-19. But in recent months a shadow vaccination campaign has also been taking place. From giraffes to snow leopards, [gorillas](#) to sea lions, zoos around the world have been inoculating their animals with an experimental Covid vaccine as an insurance policy against what they fear could be a similarly fatal illness for certain mammals.

Meanwhile, veterinary scientists have been scrambling to understand the scale of Covid-19 infection in our furry household companions, and what the consequences could be for their health – and our own.

Last week [two hippos](#) at Antwerp zoo in Belgium became the latest in a coterie of creatures to contract Covid from humans. Fortunately, Imani and Hermien had no symptoms apart from runny noses, but other animals haven't been so fortunate. In November [three snow leopards](#) died from Covid-related complications at a children's zoo in Nebraska. Other zoos have reported infections in gorillas, lions, tigers and cougars.

Although Sars-CoV-2 is thought to have originated in an animal, most likely a bat, until recently most of the scientific focus has, understandably, been on human cases of disease. Yet ever since the early days of the pandemic, scientists have worried about the possibility of other animal infections.

“We've always recognised that coronaviruses have this tremendous capacity to jump species. So it was always predicted that there would be a variety of domestic animals, livestock and potentially wildlife that could be infected,” said Margaret Hosie, a professor of comparative virology at the University of Glasgow's Centre for Virus Research.

If other animals can become infected and transmit the virus, this could put pressure on it to adapt and acquire new mutations, raising the prospect of new variants that could be transmitted back to people. “You could be concentrating on eradicating the virus in humans, but meanwhile the virus could be mutating away quietly in an animal species, and getting hotter and hotter,” Hosie said.

The first report of an animal infection came in February 2020 when a dog in Hong Kong tested positive, probably having contracted it from its infected owner. Since then there have been numerous reports of dogs and cats with Covid. Other pets generally appear less susceptible – no one has yet identified a Covid-positive goldfish – although ferrets and golden hamsters can catch Covid-19, and [dwarf Roborovski hamsters](#) can die from it.

[Further research](#) has suggested that cat and dog infections are relatively common. Scientists in the Netherlands found that in 20% of households they visited where pet owners had tested positive for Covid, the cats and dogs had antibodies for the virus.

Some infected animals develop symptoms – generally a runny nose, coughing, sneezing or conjunctivitis – and most make uneventful recoveries. However, some may experience more severe illness.

“The first cat that we identified as being infected from its owner was a young kitten that died of pneumonia,” said Hosie. “We didn’t test exhaustively for other potential pathogens, so we couldn’t say for sure, but the pathology was very similar to the viral pneumonia seen in Covid-19 patients.”

But are these infected pets contagious? Evidence from dogs suggests the risk of onward transmission is low because it is difficult to isolate replicating virus from them.

On cats, the jury is still out. Experimental studies have suggested they can infect other cats, but the degree to which this happens in the real world is uncertain. Cats are relatively solitary creatures – they don’t spend much time in close contact with other cats or humans (besides their owners). So if they catch Covid-19, their owner is probably the source, and any onward transmission is likely to be extremely limited.

Farmed mink, on the other hand, are forced to live in close proximity to one another, and are highly susceptible to infection with Sars-CoV-2. They can also develop pneumonia and die from it.

In November 2020, news that the virus had crossed from [humans into mink](#), mutated and then jumped back again sounded alarm bells around the world. “That was a real wake-up call, and I think is why there’s now more emphasis on studying viruses at the human animal interface,” said Hosie.

Fortunately, although there have been other mink outbreaks, “so far [mink-related variant viruses] have not shown to be more transmissible or causing more severe impact compared to other circulating Sars-CoV-2,” a [report](#) by the European Food Safety Authority and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control concluded.

Of course, infected farm animals can be quarantined or culled, as millions of mink were. Farm surveillance can also be stepped up and farmworkers kitted

out with protective equipment.

Vaccination is another option. In March, Russia's state veterinary service announced that it had approved a Covid-19 vaccine called Karnivak-Kov for use on fur farms or for cats and dogs, after clinical trials on arctic foxes, cats, dogs and mink.

The US Department of Agriculture has authorised a vaccine developed by the American animal health company Zoetis for experimental use on a case-by-case basis. Early this year Zoetis agreed to supply San Diego zoo with enough doses to inoculate its great apes after the zoo's western lowland gorilla troop became ill with Covid.

"Since then we've had multiple requests from different zoos and conservatories," said Mahesh Kumar, a senior vice-president of biologics research and development at Zoetis. "I think 100 species of mammals have been vaccinated."

More concerning than farm outbreaks would be evidence of significant transmission among wild animals. Vaccinating them would be impractical, assuming a vaccine even worked in that species.

In May the [Journal of Virology](#) reported that white-tailed deer, which are native to North, Central and South America, were capable of transmitting the virus to each other. And in August researchers at the US National Wildlife Center in Fort Collins reported that up to a third of [white-tailed deer](#) in the US north-east had antibodies to Sars-CoV-2. It is unclear how they became infected.

If white-tailed deer really are transmitting the virus to each other in a continued and significant way, that could be problematic – although if a potentially dangerous new variant arose in them, it would still need to be transmitted back to us, and humans don't tend to spend a lot of time breathing the same air as deer.

"What we're really concerned about is the passing back and forth between humans and animals, and to other animals, in a setting where the human

population ultimately could be affected,” said Rebecca Fisher, an assistant professor of epidemiology at Texas A&M University.

Her greater fear is the virus adapting to wild animals that live in close proximity to humans, such as rodents. Fortunately, rats and mice don’t appear particularly susceptible to Sars-CoV-2 infection at the current time.

However, because of the risks involved, it could pay to be vigilant. “The current pandemic is maintained by human [to] human transmission, but we need to keep a watching brief on animals,” said Alan Radford, a professor in veterinary health informatics at the University of Liverpool.

For now, the most likely source of new variants is continued circulation of the virus in humans. With ongoing high infection rates, we still present a far greater risk to our pets than they do to us.

This is unfortunate. “When we’re sick or convalescing, what is better than a snuggle with our pets?” said Fisher. “Tough as it is, if we are sick we must try to not interact with them, and not pass anything on to them. We need to try our hardest to protect them, just as we would our human children.”

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[**Coronavirus live**](#)

[**Coronavirus**](#)

Covid live: 633 new Omicron cases detected in UK – as it happened

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2021/dec/11/covid-live-booster-significantly-reduces-risk-of-omicron-symptoms-taiwan-detects-first-case-of-variant>

Coronavirus

Two jabs offer little protection against Omicron infection, UK data shows



A nurse prepares Pfizer jabs at an NHS mobile vaccination centre.
Photograph: Maureen McLean/Rex/Shutterstock

[Nicola Davis](#), [Hannah Devlin](#) and [Ian Sample](#)

Fri 10 Dec 2021 12.06 EST

Having two doses of a Covid vaccine offers less defence against symptomatic infection from the Omicron variant than with Delta, experts have said, although a booster jab raises protection considerably.

The UK [Health](#) Security Agency (UKHSA) said Omicron was projected to become the dominant variant of coronavirus in the UK by mid-December, based on current trends.

It added that there could be more than a million coronavirus infections by the end of the month.

Dr Susan Hopkins, the UKHSA's chief medical adviser, said: "I think what we're seeing is that if you've had two doses more than three months ago, then it's not going to prevent you from getting symptomatic disease."

However, a Pfizer/BioNTech booster jab, given after an initial round of either Oxford/AstraZeneca or Pfizer, raised the level of protection, offering 70-75% protection against symptomatic infection.

The findings came as the UK reported 58,194 new cases of Covid-19 on Friday – the highest number of positive cases in a 24-hour period since 9 January – and 120 deaths. A total of 448 Omicron cases were also reported, compared with 249 on Thursday, with the total across the UK to date now standing at 1,265.

The UKHSA report offers early insights into the degree of protection the initial two vaccinations may offer against Omicron. The data suggests that people who have had two doses of the Oxford/AstraZeneca jab 25 or more weeks ago have far lower protection against symptomatic infection with Omicron than with Delta.

While the data suggests such individuals have about 40% protection against Delta at this time point, protection against symptomatic infection with Omicron could be less than 10%. However, there is a great deal of uncertainty around that figure given the small number of people studied and the fact that the Oxford/AstraZeneca jab was largely given to older or more vulnerable people.

A similar trend was seen for those who have had two doses of the Pfizer jab, with about 60% protection against Delta at 25 or more weeks since the second dose, and just under 40% protection against Omicron at the same time point – although, again, there are uncertainties around the figures.

About 44 million people received their second jab at least three months ago, but about 22 million have received a booster since then.

Experts have said Omicron infections are doubling every two to three days in the UK, leading to concerns that the variant could overwhelm the NHS if it is as virulent as Delta. In the UK, about 39% of those over 12 years old

have had a booster dose, compared with 81% of people having had two doses.

“The booster is really adding to protection,” said Dr Mary Ramsay, the head of immunisation at the UKHSA.

While the effectiveness of the jabs against severe disease is still unknown, the team says it is expected to be higher, drawing parallels to the drop in vaccine effectiveness for Delta when compared with earlier variants.

“We did see this reduction in protection against milder disease with Delta way back in June. And what we didn’t see was any reduction in protection against hospitalisation,” said Ramsay.

This is important because experts have previously warned that a drop in effectiveness against severe infections from, for example, 96% to 92% could lead to double the number of people who are not protected against hospitalisation.

While some data from South Africa has suggested that infections with Omicron may be mild, Hopkins said it was too early to know whether the variant causes less severe disease than Delta.

The findings chime with a report by scientists on Friday of the first cluster of Omicron cases in a group of people who had all received booster doses, suggesting that even three doses does not always protect against symptomatic illness.

The group of seven German tourists in their 20s and 30s had recently visited South Africa and were subsequently found to have been infected with Omicron. All had mild to moderate symptoms and were not admitted to hospital, but the findings contrast slightly with more encouraging early laboratory results released by BioNTech and Pfizer this week.

Prof Wolfgang Preiser, of Stellenbosch University in South Africa and senior author of the report on the cluster of Omicron cases, said: “We regard any claim that three doses would protect against symptomatic infection as not supported by available evidence.

“But importantly the message is not that vaccination does not work – it just does not work as well as it used to against pre-Omicron viruses and an updated vaccine is desirable.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/10/two-jabs-give-less-protection-against-catching-omicron-than-delta-uk-data-shows>

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Coronavirus

Omicron could overwhelm NHS if it is as virulent as Delta, Neil Ferguson says



Prof Neil Ferguson helped shape Britain's coronavirus lockdown strategy.
Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

*[Nicola Davis](#) Science correspondent
[@NicolaKSDavis](#)*

Fri 10 Dec 2021 09.38 EST

The Omicron variant has the potential to “very substantially overwhelm the NHS” and cause up to 10,000 hospitalisations a day if it is as virulent as Delta, according to a leading scientist who helped shape Britain’s coronavirus lockdown strategy.

Prof Neil Ferguson, a mathematical epidemiologist from Imperial College London, said the UK was already experiencing a “very explosive wave of infection” from the new variant. This could lead to “quite an explosive wave

of hospitalisations,” depending on the severity of disease caused by Omicron.

“Unfortunately, most of the projections we have right now are that the Omicron wave could very substantially overwhelm the NHS, getting up to peak levels of admissions of 10,000 people per day,” he told the Guardian.

Ferguson added that the figure could be reached “sometime in January” but noted the impact on deaths was less clear. He also added the caveat that the projection was based on assumptions around the variant’s ability to evade existing protection, and the premise that Omicron was similar to Delta in terms of the severity of disease it causes.

But Ferguson said: “Even the best-case scenarios involve several-fold more admissions per day than we’re getting at the moment – we are at about 700 right now.”

The stark figure of 10,000 hospitalisations a day is more than double the current highest level, with 4,582 admissions on 12 January this year.

Some have been quick to point to early signs that Omicron may cause more mild disease, including former prime minister Theresa May.

Ferguson said, at present, however, there was very little data on the severity of disease caused by the new variant, and that it was not necessarily the case that viruses evolved to cause less severe illness – such a situation only occurs if it favours their transmission. With Covid, as “99% of transmission occurs before anybody even gets to hospital,” the severity of disease is “a very minor selection pressure”.

While there was a “little bit of a hint” in UK data of a slightly higher rate of asymptomatic infection with Omicron, Ferguson said it was too soon to say if it was good news. “It could be confounded with many other things like vaccine status [or] reinfection,” he said. “So we’ll just have to wait and see.”

He cast doubt on the plan B measures announced by the prime minister on Wednesday being enough if his worst-case scenarios came true.

“In the context of Delta, I think the government had a clear policy that hospitalisations were manageable, deaths were relatively low, and they did not want to restrict people’s freedoms any more than they had to. I think that calculus has now changed with Omicron,” said Ferguson.

Nevertheless, the measures could prove to be enough if Omicron turns out to cause much less severe disease than the Delta variant.

“If it turns out, actually, it looks like hospital admissions may only peak at 2,000 to 3,000 a day, then it’s possible that something like plan B – maybe a little bit plan B-plus – might be sufficient, given the government’s overall motivation to do the minimum possible to avoid the NHS being completely overwhelmed,” he said.

But if Omicron ends up even close to the severity of Delta, models suggest things could be different. “In most of those scenarios, all I would say is plan B will not be enough to stop an overwhelming wave of hospitalisations.”

The hope, he added, was that the new measures would slow the spread of Omicron, potentially dropping its doubling time to four or five days. That may not sound like much, but Ferguson noted it could buy crucial time to get more booster vaccines into arms – and allow scientists to get a better understanding of the risk of people ending up in hospital.

Ferguson’s team produced modelling early in the pandemic that suggested the UK would suffer 500,000 Covid deaths – before the onset of vaccines or a lockdown. But the disaster scenarios often proffered in these models are averted due to changes in government policy.

Sometimes, however, the modelling just comes a cropper: in July, Ferguson said the final phase of unlocking in England would bring on 100,000 cases a day – a level that was never reached – while the peaks and troughs over the past few months have left experts sometimes scratching their heads.

“I think people have been overinterpreting the ups and downs, which have been going on really since mid-July,” Ferguson said. “I made the unfortunate, overconfident prediction that we’d hit 100,000 cases, which I

then later apologised for, but that was a very clear multi-week exponential growth.”

He added: “Since then what we’ve seen is occasional rises, occasional falls, partly coincident with relaxing measures, a lot with school holidays, and a lot with vaccine rollout. So we’ve had this gradual pattern of increasing contacts – it’s not like on ‘Freedom Day’ in July, everybody went back to normal.”

Ferguson said the booster programme was already making a difference, with significant drops seen in hospitalisations and deaths, while there is evidence it may even have had an impact on infection rates in some groups.

“But now, in a certain sense, that progress is slightly moot given we now have a variant which has evolved specifically to not wipe out, but substantially evade that immunity we’ve built up in population,” he said.

“It really is essential in the next few weeks that we get as many boosters out as possible, particularly getting high coverage in the most vulnerable groups, but frankly, across the population.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/10/omicron-could-overwhelm-nhs-if-virulent-as-delta-neil-ferguson-says>

2021.12.11 - Opinion

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OpinionViolence against women and girls

It was right to expose Andrew Griffiths as an abuser; powerful men must be accountable

[Charlotte Proudman](#)



MP Kate Griffiths outside the Royal Courts of Justice. Photograph: Aaron Chown/PA

Sat 11 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

I'm known as the feminist barrister. I represent women with no immigration status on the breadline and I represent politicians in positions of power. They all have one thing in common. They are survivors of male violence. Kate Griffiths MP is no exception.

I had the great privilege of being her barrister. I remember meeting her in the Houses of Parliament for the first time. She had such stature. She was poised and had an air of confidence.

We walked into a small room and it was there that I learned what her ex-husband Andrew Griffiths, a disgraced former MP, [had done to his wife](#) behind closed doors.

When he was a minister under Theresa May MP, he was also raping his wife whilst she was asleep. Sex whilst asleep is rape. But the abuse didn't stop there. He put his hands around her neck, hit her and was physically abusive to her when she was nine months pregnant. He even shouted "shut the fuck up" to their new born baby. He continued his insidious coercive control of her even after they separated.

We already knew he had a reputation for sexual depravity towards women. In 2013, Andrew Griffiths was reported to the police for harassment by his former partner whom he cheated on. In 2018, just weeks after Kate had just given birth, he sent over 2,000 sexual and violent messages in just a matter of days to two female constituents.

His darker texts included "She's so cute. So sweet. I can't wait to beat her". Whilst he supported making upskirting a criminal offence in parliament, he was sexting women, "I want to be able to lift your skirts over dinner and show my friends".

The Tory government suspended him – [only to bring him back](#) for Theresa May MP's "confidence vote". Then he was [cleared of any wrongdoing](#) by the parliamentary standards watchdog. The big red neon warning signs were ablaze for everyone to see. But those in the most senior positions of power turned a blind eye.

In 2019, Kate bravely [stood to succeed Andrew Griffiths as an MP](#) in Burton upon Trent and she won. Little did anyone know that Derby family court was making decisions about one of the biggest cases of our time. Kate wanted to protect her child from further harm at the hands of Andrew. She could only do this by proving that he abused her and the child. She went through a traumatising trial.

Watching her being cross-examined was painful . "You're lying", "why didn't you leave?", "why didn't you tell anyone?", was the line of

questioning. Because, Kate responded, he told me that no one would believe me because he's an MP. He used his position of power as a minister and MP to rape and abuse his wife with absolute impunity. He tried to silence her.

Thousands of victims of domestic abuse will know from first-hand experience that almost everything that happens in the family courts is secret. I have long campaigned that we need to expose the truth. We need transparency.

In this case, two journalists, Louise Tickle and Brian Farmer, applied to publish the judgments. Unlike all the other women that I represent, Kate had a platform to expose the truth. But Andrew, who denied allegations made by Kate and "adamantly denied" rape, fought bitterly against publishing the judgments. He was trying to further control her. But it didn't work. Mrs Justice Lieven said, "the court should be slow in all cases to be used as a means by which one parent seeks further control over the other. Particularly where there have already been findings of coercive control". We were vindicated.

This case is not over. Andrew Griffiths is still allowed to have supervised contact with their child. And if that isn't awful enough, she has to pay half of the costs of supervised contact. This is financial control – both sickening and perverse. I appealed against the decision on behalf of Kate. We are waiting for the judgment.

Imagine, you are teenager and you discover that your father raped your mother and then the family court required your mother to make you available for contact with him. Surely that is state-sanctioned abuse.

The Ministry of Justice found last year that the family courts take a "pro-contact" at all costs approach even in cases of domestic abuse. This case shows that the government needs to urgently change the law. We need a presumption of no contact for abusive parents.

But what this case shows most powerfully is how men in positions of power can still use their status to silence and control victims. Haven't we learnt anything from the MeToo movement? It shows that even an MP, a public figure, a lawmaker, can be coercively controlling of their spouse and of

other women. We have seen so many of these cases. It can happen to anyone.

Powerful men who abuse need to be held accountable because victims will only have faith in the family justice system if they see that perpetrators are being held accountable and children are being protected.

Victims in the family courts must not be silenced, for they have a right to self-identification and self-determination. If we want to change the system together, we must be able to speak the unspeakable.

This article was amended on 11 December 2021. Andrew Griffiths did not stand for election against Kate Griffiths in Burton in 2019, as an earlier version suggested.

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[**Opinion**](#)[**Politics**](#)

What's the truth about lockdown-busting parties at No 10? Don't ask Shagatha Christie

[Marina Hyde](#)





Boris Johnson at 10 Downing Street, London, 7 December 2021.
Photograph: Chris J Ratcliffe/Getty Images

Fri 10 Dec 2021 10.15 EST

Great to hear that a 57-year-old Downing Street man is keen to help the police with their inquiries into a growing number of potential misdemeanours at his address. [Boris Johnson says](#) that “of course” he will tell the Met the truth, which pretty much guarantees they’ll never get to the bottom of it. When you want Sherlock Holmes but have to settle for [Elizabeth Holmes](#).

Still, here he comes – Shagatha Christie, trying to deduce what the hell has happened this week. Happy to help: the sphincter of his prime ministership has failed. Tory MPs whose inboxes now resemble something [designed by Lulu Lytle](#) are reminded that character is fate. There was simply no other place a Johnson government would ever end up but mired in rampant lies, chaos, negligence, financial sponging and the live evisceration of public service. To the Conservatives and media outriders somehow only now discovering this about their guy, I think we have to say: you ordered this. Now eat it.

To self-styled classics expert Johnson, meanwhile, we should extend our sympathies. Dude ... worst last-days-of-Rome EVER?! Instead of bacchanalian orgies and high-end decadence, you're back on the nappies while taking blitzkrieg for some naff Secret Santa "do" at which a press officer was reportedly [handing out prizes](#) to other press officers. Still, I hope the prizes were free girlfriends. Give them something they need.

We'll get to the parties and the gold wallpaper and the institutionalised mendacity in a minute, but while we're vaguely on the police, many have noticed a certain investigative sluggishness on their part over the number of Covid rule-breaching events that may or may not have taken place last Christmas in the very house where the government makes the rules for the rest of us idiots. Do you detect the same? If so, at least someone's doing some detecting. I know most crimes have now effectively been legalised by lack of investigation, but it would be nice to think the Met might at least be able to chase down potential law breaches in buildings that have multiple serving police officers in and around them at all times. Mind you, when you think of all the people who [restrain themselves to death](#) in police stations without any coppers seeing anything, you can quite see how officers might miss a big cheese-and-wine party just yards from their various sentry points. It all depends on the sightlines, no doubt.

Anyway: standards. Apparently Johnson's current independent standards adviser, Lord Geidt, is [considering quitting](#) after it turns out the prime minister misled him in his investigation into how the welfare king and queen of No 10 treated themselves to a load of hugely expensive stuff for their flat on other people's dime. Picture Boris and Carrie looking in their rattan mirror (Soane, [price on application](#)) and going: "[We DESERVE this.](#)" If Geidt does walk, Johnson will have disgusted [two standards advisers](#) in just over 12 months. Two! I'm not going to twee this up with the [Lady Bracknell quote](#) – it doesn't remotely cover it. Try and imagine Lady Bracknell going back to Armie Hammer's place; now you're in the ballpark. In the meantime, Boris Johnson's standards adviser is starting to look like the [old al-Qaida number three position](#). Dead men's shoes.

Speaking of shoes, other lockdown-breaking gatherings are being alleged, including one reportedly held by Carrie Johnson in the No 10 flat last November, in the immediate wake of a Kansas farmhouse [landing on](#)

[Dominic Cummings](#). After this, milady seems to have thought the ruby slippers would pass automatically to her, but this week they are beginning to look more like footwear for [Liz Truss](#). (Rishi Sunak's slippers are made of actual rubies.)

Were journalists at any of these parties? That is a line of inquiry/rumour, reminding you just how incestuous the political-media complex is in this backwater country. I keep reading that a journalist is godfather to the Johnsons' son, Wilfred. Then again, maybe the prime minister has had so many kids it's like jury service. Every UK adult should expect to be called as godparent at some point. Either way, getting too close to politicians on either side of politics is always a mistake for journalists: you might think the access makes them a great contact, but the compromises and self-editing required to retain them means that ends up being just a lie you tell yourself. And, by extension, your readers. Telling me the REAL story of the election only after it's been won or lost is for courtiers. Professional pride or your terrible social life. Pick a lane.

Staying with the subject of rigorous independence, though, what a hoot to learn that the entire investigation into Downing Street parties will be carried out by the cabinet secretary, Simon Case, a certified wet blanket whose earlier appointment procedure was once [characterised by Dominic Cummings](#) as: “I brought in Simon Case ... because I thought the prime minister is not listening to me.” Sorry, but why is the person deciding who should be subject to disciplinary consequences on a team he works closely with ALSO the person who decides what those consequences are? I guess it’s Johnson’s world. We just live in it.

And what a world. The sheer clusterfuckery of it this week means we’ve barely time to even discuss Johnson or Johnsons’ intervention in that [ex-Marine’s Kabul pet evacuation](#) – a saga on which we’ll slap the title The Animals Give Farthing Wood. I’m kidding, of course. A lot of people anthropomorphise their animals. You know the sort of thing. “My dog loves Homes Under the Hammer.” “My guinea pig is sulking.” “My cats are high-value Taliban targets.”

As for Dominic Raab, in any other week we’d have been boggling at the [Foreign Office whistleblower’s claims](#) that as capacity for removals from

Afghanistan tragically dwindled, the foreign secretary was asked to personally approve individual cases, but “took several hours … to engage”, then asked for the relevant files to be resubmitted in a different kind of spreadsheet. [According to Raab](#), that’s “not quite right”. Not *quite*? Wonder how he did put it. Maybe: “I’m not interested in appeals for desperate people and their children not to be murdered unless they’re correctly formatted.” Previous flights of fancy in this column might have cast Dominic Raab as kind of guy who owns a lock-up with a chest freezer. This underestimated him. I now realise he combines the calm psychopathy of a medieval steppe warlord with the fist-gnawingly obdurate “desk hygiene” of a regional manager. Regional manager of either a photocopier firm or a forced resettlement programme.

Regrettably, though, space constraints must end our recap of the week here. But on it all goes, as Omicron closes in. We’ll play out with a reminder that in a pandemic that has so far killed 146,000 of the Britons who these people are supposed to be in politics to serve, the absolutely vital public health message has now TWICE been most fatally undermined by people who worked at the very heart of No 10 with [Boris Johnson](#). That is absolutely a disgrace, and absolutely not a coincidence.

- Marina Hyde is a Guardian columnist
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[Television](#)

And Just Like That: bad jokes are the least of its problems

[Hadley Freeman](#)



‘The show, once so brave, limits its discussions of women and ageing to whether Miranda should dye her grey hair.’ Photograph: YouTube/HBO Max

Fri 10 Dec 2021 12.21 EST

Good sex, like good comedy, relies on timing, and maybe, 17 years after the original show ended, 11 years after the second film departed cinemas, Sex and the City no longer has its finger on the clitoris when it comes to timing. “[And Just Like That, It All Went Wrong](#)” was the New York Times’s verdict on the wildly publicised, moderately anticipated SATC follow-up series, And Just Like That, which debuted its first two episodes this week. The Guardian’s Lucy Mangan described it as at times “excruciating”.

Certainly the jokes are bad. Not “Lawrence of my labia” bad, as Samantha (Kim Cattrall) [notoriously said](#) in Sex and the City 2. But a far cry from the spit-out-your-wine-with-laughter-and-shock level of the original show, which ran from 1998 to 2004. And that’s the least of its problems.

The show, once so brave, limits its discussions of women and ageing to whether Miranda should dye her grey hair, rather than confronting the more obvious issue of whether to have Botox and filler injections. The fashion, once integrated so beautifully into the show by stylist Patricia Field, now sits on the characters like costumes, the clothes wearing the women rather than the other way around.

The characters always lived fantasy lives, but now they live ostentatiously, even repulsively wealthy ones, with Charlotte buying her children’s clothes at Oscar de la Renta and Carrie boasting that the fishmonger gave her the expensive kind of salmon, taking proceedings close to Dynasty territory. And Just Like That tries to be au courant, with Miranda worrying that she might be a “white saviour” and Carrie being castigated by her non-binary friend Che (Sara Ramirez) that she comes across like an “uptight cisgender female married lady … I know you got more”. Are “female” and “lady” now terms of abuse on SATC? Apparently so, and Carrie meekly agrees to try harder.

It's now fashionable to denigrate SATC as too white and too naff, but it was a genuine cultural phenomenon that changed how women saw their lives, and how an entire city – New York – saw itself. "I feel a little guilty that our show became the look for what New York is," Sex and the City star Chris Noth, who plays Mr Big, [told the Guardian this week](#). The once pretty barren Meatpacking District gentrified itself beyond recognisability during the show's run, allowing women to brunch and shop down there, just like the characters. Women, too, took their cues from the show, which reassured them that going for cocktails with friends was far more fun than being married.

Ever since the release of the increasingly appalling films in 2008 and 2010, and now the disappointment of And Just Like That, a common theory is that the show was too much of its time to endure. But like Friends, [which has faced similar criticism](#), SATC has actually endured very well. The reruns still totally work, and that is because of a simple if often forgotten truth: the scripts were brilliant. Yes, the show was wrapped in a gauze of fantasy, and its depiction of women's sex lives was revolutionary. But the reason it spoke to women so deeply was for neither of those reasons: it's because it was soaked in emotional truth, and it was extremely funny.

Never mind the discussions about cunnilingus and masturbation, although they were great, actually. It was the plotlines about Samantha's breast cancer, Miranda caring for her mother-in-law with dementia, Charlotte's infertility and Carrie's affair with Big while he was married that stuck to the sides. The reason the movies and the new show don't work isn't because they've come out at the wrong time – it's because their scripts are terrible. If the original show had been like And Just Like That, let alone Sex and the City 2, there would be no Sex and the City tour buses going around New York City today.

It's a mystery why the SATC spin-offs are so bad, given that they're written by Michael Patrick King and executive produced by Parker, as the original show was. In truth, the original show lost its way in the last series, with its insistence that all the women end up shacked up with someone, betraying the courage of its original convictions, although at least the scripts were still good. Most likely, the huge success of the franchise cowed everyone

involved into conventionality. It's a shame. Some franchises cannot endure, it turns out. But, happily, old box sets live for ever.

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Television

The great subtitles fiasco: Channel 4 must be punished for failing deaf viewers

Liam O' Dell



Noel, Noel ... a scene from the recent series of Channel 4's The Great British Bake Off. Photograph: Mark Bourdillon/Love Productions

Fri 10 Dec 2021 10.38 EST

Let's abandon the misconception that only deaf and disabled people benefit from subtitled television. If you were [one of the 5.7 million viewers](#) in the UK who watched the Korean drama Squid Game last month and opted for subtitles, you'll know what I mean.

Everyone who watches content with subtitles does so to engage with a show and process information in a way they otherwise couldn't. In every situation, subtitles are an accessibility feature.

[Channel 4's subtitles outage in September](#) affected huge numbers of viewers. Damage to hard drives caused by the triggering of the fire suppression system at the London base of Red Bee Media – which provides access services to large broadcasters – left Channel 4 viewers without subtitles for weeks, with casualties including the latest series of The Great British Bake Off.

Accidents happen, and sometimes there's no one to blame. But Channel 4's response to the incident was lacklustre. It was not the only broadcaster affected – Channel 5 and the BBC also experienced loss of subtitles. Yet months later, it is the only channel yet to resume normal service across both its live programming and catch-up service. It has only sorted the former. The broadcaster took nearly a month [to fix the subtitles](#) on their broadcast output, although this was quicker than [the mid-November date they'd initially predicted](#), due to having "[to build a completely new system](#)".

As well as that, Red Bee and Channel 4 failed to provide detailed and consistent updates on the situation. Over a fortnight after the initial outage, the Royal National Institute for Deaf People [published a statement on their website](#) in which they singled out Channel 4 for criticism. It stated: "We do not believe that they have communicated effectively with the deaf community." They had to resort to writing to the broadcaster to ask them to provide the deaf community with updates on – among other things – how long the situation would continue. Granted, Channel 4 did [issue a series of press releases with updates on the situation](#), but they came far too late – making deaf and disabled viewers like me feel completely disrespected.

Also, returning subtitles to live programming does not mean the issue is over and done with – and we cannot give Channel 4 an easy ride on the matter. There is still a huge problem with catchup services. I approached Channel 4 for a comment as part of my reporting on the issue, and a spokesperson told me the subtitling backlog for this won't be resolved until [the second week of December](#). That's two and a half months after the initial incident – which is shameful.

Deaf and disabled people should not be waiting for access, and yet they are. In some instances, we miss out on programmes completely, with them disappearing from our screens and streaming services before they have a

chance to be subtitled. This is especially the case for US programmes licensed by [Channel 4](#), which have a limited shelf life on All 4 due to rights reasons. It has already caused issues for those looking to watch series five, episode one of the US legal drama *The Good Fight*, which was taken off All 4 at the end of November before it could be captioned. Deaf and disabled users have now been cut out of a conversation they were entitled to enjoy at the same time as everyone else.



Legal eagles ... Christine Baranski and Audra McDonald in *The Good Fight*, which was shown unsubtitled. Photograph: Elizabeth Fisher/CBS

It's outrageous, though unsurprising. Deaf people often find themselves left behind the zeitgeist. The state of UK cinemas is so dire in terms of accessibility that I have to wait weeks for a subtitled screening. Provided the captions file doesn't encounter any technical difficulties – as happened when I finally got to see *No Time to Die* last month and a big cinema chain ended up running a version without subtitles instead – I can join the conversation around the latest blockbuster release several weeks late. In that time, friends and family members may well have moved on to the next big thing.

Another prominent example of failure to serve deaf viewers is the UK government's coronavirus briefings. Having [rejected a petition signed by over 26,000 people](#), the government's refusal to provide a British Sign

Language (BSL) interpreter is forcing deaf people to receive public health information from unofficial channels or via word of mouth.

As for All 4, what does it say when a service that could help us deaf and disabled viewers “catch up” on content we missed the first time (because it wasn’t subtitled) isn’t accessible, either? It’s a damning stain on the reputation of a broadcaster that has long put diversity and inclusion at the forefront of its branding.

Eventually, captions will come back to All 4, but the trust Channel 4 has built up with deaf and disabled subtitles users will take much longer to rebuild. The National Deaf Children’s Society has estimated that the broadcaster will fail to meet the annual 90% target for subtitled content it is legally obligated to provide by the Communications Act 2003. This is unacceptable. Ofcom has suggested that [they intend to take enforcement action if this happens](#), and they must not take this infringement lightly, if so. Ofcom needs to make sure that any action taken is to the greatest extent possible. Channel 4 must take its responsibilities to deaf and disabled viewers far more seriously – and the regulator needs to send a strong message to the broadcaster to ensure this happens.

Even if this were to be the case, it would not necessarily solve the situation with All 4, which could still justifiably fail to provide access under current regulation. Unlike TV channels, streaming services have [no legal obligation to provide access services](#). The Digital Economy Act 2017 allows the culture secretary to impose requirements on providers, but we’ve yet to see this done.

This has to change. A failure to start regulating catch-up services on their access provision would mean broadcasters can fail to give sufficient priority to subtitling on these platforms, without consequences. When TV channels fall foul of accessibility requirements, they risk Ofcom breathing down their neck, ready to take regulatory action. It’s time the government recognises the contribution catch-up services make to the world of entertainment, and legislates to ensure that every viewer’s experience is accessible.

It’s a move that is long overdue. Only when this happens, together with strong action against Channel 4 from Ofcom, will the public be able to have

any confidence that we can prevent such a dire case of inaccessibility from happening again.

- Liam O'Dell is an award-winning deaf and disabled journalist and campaigner.
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US supreme court

Supreme court rules Texas abortion providers can sue over ban but won't stop law



The Texas law is unusual in that it relies on the public, rather than the authorities, to sue those suspected of performing an abortion or aiding in the service, although not the patient undergoing the termination. Photograph: Kena Betancur/AFP/Getty Images

[Jessica Glenza](#), [Ed Pilkington](#), [Gloria Oladipo](#) and agencies

Fri 10 Dec 2021 11.57 EST

The supreme court ruled on Friday that Texas abortion providers can sue over the [state's ban](#) on most abortions, but the justices are allowing the law, the strictest such regulation in America to date, to remain in effect.

The decision is a mixed result for reproductive health advocates at a time when social conservatives seem on the march in America and the supreme court is [leaning towards](#) restricting or outlawing abortion nationally in the future with its [conservative supermajority](#), engineered by Donald Trump.

The [Texas](#) law is unusual in that it relies on the public, rather than the authorities, to sue those suspected of performing an abortion or aiding in the service, although not the patient undergoing the termination. The framing of the law was widely seen as a device to make it harder for the abortion ban to be challenged in federal court given the lack of state involvement in enforcing the prohibition.

[Friday's supreme court opinion](#), written by Justice Neil Gorsuch, gives a complicated legal response that abortion providers in Texas and beyond are likely to receive as a partial but by no means overwhelming victory. In his opinion, Gorsuch makes clear that the court in this case was not addressing the issue of abortion rights per se, or whether the Texas ban was consistent with existing federal law.

Those [larger questions](#) will fall to a separate case currently before the supreme court, [Dobbs v Jackson Women's Health Organization](#), out of Mississippi, which specifically seeks the overturning of [Roe v Wade](#), the 1973 landmark supreme court ruling that [paved the way](#) for legal abortion nationwide.

That case, which could determine the future of abortion rights in the US for decades to come, was heard in [oral arguments](#) last week but is unlikely to be concluded until a ruling is issued next June.

The overall result of Friday's opinion is that abortion providers in Texas will be allowed to press ahead with their legal challenge to the [near-total ban on abortion](#). But their legal path forward has been narrowed and from now on they will be forced to direct their efforts at a small number of state employees.

As part of their challenge to SB 8, abortion clinics had attempted to sue a Texas state judge. That was dismissed unanimously by the nine justices as

being inconsistent with a 1908 supreme court ruling that prohibits federal courts imposing injunctions on state courts.

The court ruled by a lesser margin that the providers will be able to continue challenging SB 8 by focusing on four licensing officials who would be involved in taking action against abortion clinics under the terms of the new ban. But state court clerks and the attorney general of Texas, Ken Paxton, who had been named as defendants, could not be sued.

Sonia Sotomayor, one of the three remaining liberal-leaning justices on the nine-judge supreme court bench, expressed strong views in dissent.

She said that by casting their opinion so narrowly, the conservative majority was “shrinking” from its duty to defend the supremacy of the US constitution over the whims of individual states.

“The court should have put an end to this madness months ago, before SB 8 went into effect,” she wrote in a dissenting opinion. “It failed to do so then, and it fails again today … Federal courts can and should issue relief when a state enacts a law that chills the exercise of a constitutional right.”

The legal battle to try and stop SB 8 and reopen access to abortion to millions of Texan women will now return to a lower federal court in the state capital, Austin. While it does so, however, the prohibition against almost all abortions in the state will continue to stand.

Massachusetts Democratic senator and former presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren said the Friday decision in the Texas case was outrageous.

“While Scutus has allowed challenges to SB 8 to proceed, it’s outrageous that the Court has again decided not to block Texas’ unconstitutional abortion ban,” [tweeted Warren](#). “More Texans are harmed every day this law is allowed to stand. The Senate must pass the Women’s Health Protection Act.”

The law would codify the right to abortion access in the US into national legislation. The bill passed the House in September and is in limbo in the US Senate.

Also on Friday, the court dismissed an overall challenge to the Texas law from the Biden administration that would have blocked the ban entirely.

The law in Texas has been in effect since September, aside from a district court-ordered pause that lasted 48 hours. It bans abortions once cardiac activity is detected, usually around six weeks and before many women know they are pregnant.

While courts have blocked other state laws effectively banning abortion before a fetus can survive outside the womb, the Texas law has so far avoided a similar fate because it leaves enforcement up to private citizens, a move that many critics have said effectively creates anti-abortion bounty hunters.

The law allows anyone, anywhere to bring a suit against anyone who helps a woman obtain an abortion, and provides a \$10,000 penalty against defendants found to violate the law.

Meanwhile, a judge in Texas had ruled on Thursday that the law violated the state's constitution because it allows private citizens to sue abortion providers.

State district court judge David Peeples was ruling on the law but abortion providers had already signaled that despite the ruling, they were unlikely to resume the procedure until the supreme court announced its decision.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2021/dec/10/supreme-court-texas-abortion-ban-law>

[US politics live](#)

[Joe Biden](#)

Biden ‘concerned’ over supreme court’s Texas abortion ruling, says White House – as it happened

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US news

Sotomayor decries abortion ruling but court's conservatives show their muscle



The supreme court's ruling allowed the law, the most restrictive currently in force in the US, to remain in effect. Photograph: Evelyn Hockstein/Reuters

[Ed Pilkington](#) in New York

[@edpilkington](#)

Fri 10 Dec 2021 15.41 EST

Sonia Sotomayor, the liberal-leaning justice on the [US supreme court](#), put it plainly. For almost three months, lawmakers in the Republican-controlled legislature of Texas had “substantially suspended a constitutional guarantee: a pregnant woman’s right to control her own body”.

“The court should have put an end to this madness months ago,” Sotomayor said.

But when the supreme court issued on Friday its majority [opinion](#) on SB8, the extreme Texas law that bans abortions effectively at six weeks, in blatant violation of the court's own constitutional rulings, it still didn't put an end to the madness.

It allowed the law, the most restrictive [currently in force](#) in the US, to remain in effect.

And by varying margins, the new [conservative supermajority](#) of the court, consolidated by Donald Trump's appointment of three new rightwing justices, restricted the legal route by which abortion providers could challenge the law.

From now on the legal battle would have to be focused narrowly on just four state employees responsible for medical licensing in the state. Other [Texas](#) officials involved, notably the state's attorney general Ken Paxton and clerks in state courts, would be let off the hook.

Even more provocatively, while the court sent the abortion fight back to a federal district court in Austin, it let the ban itself stand. That adds insult to injury given the supreme court's much-criticised refusal to stay the ban at the start, not to mention the many weeks it has taken to hand down its decision.

Over those weeks, Texas women have paid a heavy price. "The court's delay in allowing this case to proceed has had catastrophic consequences for women seeking to exercise their constitutional right to an abortion in Texas," Sotomayor said in a powerful dissenting opinion.

In September alone, the first month of the ban, the number of legal abortions performed in Texas [plummeted](#) to about half the level a year ago. That was the largest recorded decline in the state's recent history, with untold numbers of women forced to seek abortions out of state or carry unwanted pregnancies to term.

Sotomayor, who is emerging as a pivotal voice of resistance within the post-Trump court, was forthright in her choice of words. Her disagreement with

the conservative justices went far beyond a “quibble” over which state officials abortion providers can sue, she said.

The question was: is the supreme court prepared to stand up in the name of constitutional rights to the cynical antics of ideologically driven Republicans in states such as Texas?

“The choice to shrink from Texas’s challenge to federal supremacy will have far-reaching repercussions,” Sotomayor warned. “I doubt the court, let alone the country, is prepared for them.”

Nobody can doubt that SB 8 is a flagrant violation of the constitutional right to an abortion enshrined in the 1973 landmark ruling Roe v Wade. While Roe sets the bar of fetal viability at about 24 weeks, Texas now puts it at the point of earliest cardiac activity, around six weeks – before many women even know they are pregnant.

Neil Gorsuch, one of the three Trump appointees, who wrote Friday’s majority opinion, said that the issue of the constitutional right to an abortion was not under consideration in this case. The matter at hand in the Texas law was whether abortion providers could press on with their challenge to the ban by suing specific state officials.

That will do little to assuage the jitters of [80% of Americans](#) who think that abortions should be legal in all or certain circumstances. In a separate case before the supreme court based on a new Mississippi ban at 15 weeks, which is now blocked by a lower court, Roe v Wade is very much up for grabs, and the signs are ominous.

In oral arguments in the Mississippi case less than two weeks ago, several of the conservative justices [indicated](#) they were willing to sharply restrict or even overturn the right to an abortion despite its rock-steady standing as a pillar of constitutional law for almost 50 years.

Nor does Gorsuch’s protestation that Friday’s case was merely focused on procedural matters offer much comfort. SB 8 was devised by Texas Republicans as a juridical trick to skirt around constitutional protections by

making it more difficult for abortion providers to challenge the law in federal court.

At the heart of the legislation is a ruse designed to make a mockery of federal oversight. Enforcement of the abortion ban is transferred from state officials who are vulnerable to federal challenge to private individuals, armed with financial inducements of up to \$10,000 to cover legal fees.

“SB 8 is structured to thwart review and result in ‘a denial of any hearing’,” Sotomayor decried. “The events of the last three months have shown that the law has succeeded in its endeavor.”

That is why the vote of the court’s new post-Trump majority to issue such a narrow opinion over SB 8 is more than a “quibble”. The highest court in the nation has been defied by a group of extremist Republicans openly flouting the court’s own rulings.

In response, the conservative majority emboldened by Trump has opted not to insist on respect for the constitutional law of the land, but instead to blithely play along.

As Sotomayor put it: “By so doing, the court leaves all manner of constitutional rights more vulnerable than ever before, to the great detriment of our constitution and our republic.”

Perhaps most tellingly, the idea of appeasing Texas Republicans in their attempt to undermine the supreme court’s own precedents proved too much even for John Roberts, the chief justice.

In important aspects of Friday’s decision, he broke with his five fellow conservative justices and sided pointedly with Sotomayor and the liberal minority.

“The clear purpose and actual effect of SB 8 has been to nullify this court’s rulings,” Roberts said, in words which may reverberate down the years.

“The role of the supreme court in our constitutional system is at stake.”

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US supreme court

‘The court should have put an end to this madness’: reproductive health advocates criticize abortion ruling



People take photos of the US supreme court on Capitol Hill in Washington DC Friday. Photograph: Sarah Silbiger/Reuters

[Maya Yang](#)

Fri 10 Dec 2021 14.13 EST

The US supreme court [has ruled](#) that Texas abortion providers can sue over the state’s ban on most abortions, but the justices are allowing the law to remain in effect, much to the dismay of pro-choice advocates and abortion providers.

The so-called [“Heartbeat Act”](#), which was signed into law by Greg Abbott, the state’s Republican governor, and went into effect in September, bans abortions at six weeks and does not make exceptions for incest and rape.

Furthermore, it empowers private citizens to enforce the law, rather than the authorities, giving them the right to sue any abortion provider whom they believe has violated the law or anyone aiding the provision of the service, although not the patient receiving the abortion service.

The law provides for a \$10,000 penalty against defendants found to have violated the law.

Reproductive health advocates and Democrats have sharply criticized the supreme court's ruling, arguing that the court did not do enough to abolish a law that many say nullifies a constitutionally protected right.

Justice Sonia Sotomayor, alongside the court's other two liberal-leaning members, Stephen Breyer and Elena Kagan, wrote that they disagreed with the conservative majority's refusal to stop the law, known as SB8, completely.

"The court should have put an end to this madness months ago, before SB8 first went into effect. It failed to do so then, and it fails again today ... I dissent ... from the court's dangerous departure from its precedents ... The court thus betrays not only the citizens of Texas, but also our constitutional system of government," [wrote](#) Sotomayor.

She added: "The dispute is over whether states may nullify federal constitutional rights by employing schemes like the one at hand."

Democratic senator Cory Booker of New Jersey called the ruling wrong, [saying](#): "This half measure from the supreme court is wrong. It continues to deny Texans their constitutional right to an abortion and is causing harm at this very moment."

Massachusetts Democratic senator and former presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren said the Friday decision in the Texas case was outrageous.

"While SCOTUS has allowed challenges to SB8 to proceed, it's outrageous that the Court has again decided not to block Texas' unconstitutional abortion ban," [tweeted Warren](#). "More Texans are harmed every day this law

is allowed to stand. The Senate must pass the Women's Health Protection Act.”

That law would codify the right to abortion access in the US into national legislation. The bill passed the House in September and is in limbo in the US Senate.

Laurence Tribe, co-founder of the American Constitution Society and constitutional law scholar at Harvard University, also condemned the ruling.

“Letting abortion clinics sue to challenge SB8 but leaving that outrageous six-week abortion ban remain in place – just as it was clear this radically rightwing court would do – reaffirms my view that this court needs major reform and needs it now,” he [wrote](#), and called the court with its new conservative supermajority “broken”.

Others criticized what they saw as the conservatives’ religious motive, influenced by Republicans, AKA the GOP. Dean Obeidallah, an American lawyer and host of a SiriusXM show, [wrote](#): “The GOP Supreme Court allows religious supremacy to continue by not halting the Texas GOP abortion law. That law is about imposing the GOP’s extreme religious beliefs upon the rest of us. The Taliban should sue the GOP for trademark infringement.”

Some praised the ruling, including Dan Patrick, the Republican lieutenant governor of Texas.

“Texas is a solidly pro-life state, and I will never stop fighting to protect innocent life from the radical abortionist left. A great victory for the unborn!” he [tweeted](#).

Similarly, the Susan B Anthony List, a nonprofit anti-abortion organization, welcomed the ruling, [writing](#), “This is good news because the law will remain in effect, already saving thousands of lives, and we hope more to come.”

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Boris Johnson

Boris Johnson's senior aide 'gave awards at No 10 Christmas party'



Jack Doyle was deputy communications director at the time of the alleged event. Photograph: Stefan Rousseau/PA

[Jamie Grierson](#)

[@JamieGrierson](#)

Fri 10 Dec 2021 08.17 EST

The prime minister's now director of communications addressed staff and handed out awards at a party in Downing Street last Christmas that is currently under investigation, it has been reported.

Jack Doyle, who was then deputy director of communications at No 10, addressed up to 50 people at the gathering on 18 December 2020, [ITV News reported](#).

Doyle spoke to the press office to thank them for their work, as he did every week, and presented some awards to mark the team's efforts, it has been claimed.

A Downing Street spokesperson said: "There is an ongoing review, and we won't be commenting further while that is the case."

Political commentators have said Doyle's presence at the party would be significant because as director of communications he would have been behind the government's confused messaging since the revelations of the party surfaced in the Daily Mirror.

Ministers have repeatedly told reporters they did not know what happened or if a party took place – but were sure no rules were broken.

Boris Johnson announced on Wednesday that an internal investigation led by the cabinet secretary, Simon Case, would look into reports of a staff gathering held in Downing Street just days before Christmas, when London was under tier 3 Covid restrictions.

The investigation was subsequently widened to include another festive celebration and a reported staff leaving do.

After it emerged that Doyle had reportedly spoken at the event, the Labour deputy leader, Angela Rayner, said: "The government's internal investigation has been exposed as the sham it is. The investigation has only just published its terms of reference, and we are already seeing more details from the media than the Cabinet Office about the parties."

Wes Streeting, the shadow health secretary, told BBC Radio 4's Today programme that those who had allegedly broken the rules by holding gatherings all had one thing in common – the prime minister.

"In the end, I'm sure Boris Johnson is busy planning who he is going to throw under the bus next. We've had the resignation of Allegra Stratton; there are questions now about the prime minister's communications director," he said.

Alongside the alleged party on 18 December, Case will include in his review a confirmed gathering at the Department for Education's Whitehall headquarters on 10 December last year, and a reported leaving event for a No 10 aide – allegedly attended by Johnson – on 27 November.

The terms of reference for the investigation, published on Thursday, said “where there are credible allegations relating to other gatherings, these may be investigated”.

The two alleged events in December coincide with when mixing between households in London was restricted, with England in a month-long lockdown in November.

Case's inquiry was ordered by the prime minister after a leaked video emerged showing Downing Street aides laughing about a “fictional” party at No 10 in December 2020.

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

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UK politics: Starmer challenges Tory MPs to oust PM, saying he's 'not fit for office' – as it happened

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Conservatives

Government faces Tory backbench revolt over plan B Covid measures



Boris Johnson could be left relying on Labour support to win the vote on Tuesday. Photograph: Chris J Ratcliffe/Getty Images

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

Thu 9 Dec 2021 15.00 EST

Downing Street is facing a damaging revolt over planned Covid restrictions after dozens of Tory backbenchers threatened to rebel or abstain in fury over the proposed new rules and Boris Johnson's handling of the Christmas party scandal.

With at least 30 Conservative MPs already expected to vote against [regulations on](#) masks, home working and vaccine passports, and many more now vowing to stay away from Tuesday's vote, the prime minister could be left relying on Labour support to win.

“The whips will be doing a lot of work this weekend,” one Tory MP. “It’s all about saving the PM’s blushes.”

Johnson is battling the fallout from days of successive revelations about a festive gathering inside No 10 amid tough Covid rules last December. An inquiry into the reports has been expanded to examine other alleged events, including one that Johnson is believed to have attended.

In further blow for the prime minister, a Survation survey for the Daily Mirror put Labour six percentage points ahead of the [Conservatives](#), at 40% to 34%. A YouGov poll for the Times had Labour four points ahead on 37% to 33%.

Announcing the hastily set up review on Wednesday following public outrage [over a video](#) showing Downing Street staff joking about the supposed party on 18 December last year, Johnson initially said it would look into only that event. Recent reports have said that Jack Doyle, the then deputy director of communications, gave out awards to staff during the evening and there was food, drinks and games. Doyle, now head of press for Downing Street, has been contacted for comment.

However, the Cabinet Office minister Michael Ellis, addressing MPs on Thursday, [said the investigation](#) led by the cabinet secretary, Simon Case, would also examine another Downing Street party on 27 November last year – reportedly a leaving event at which Johnson spoke – and one at the Department for Education on 10 December.

The [terms of reference](#) for the process, published later in the day, added: “Where there are credible allegations relating to other gatherings, these may be investigated.”

Ministers and officials would be “expected to cooperate” with the inquiry, it said. Case and his team will establish the need for any disciplinary action, or whether potential breaches of the law should be referred to the police.

Shortly after unveiling the review, [Johnson announced](#) he was introducing tougher “plan B” Covid restrictions for England because of the rapid spread of the Omicron variant – a move that some speculated was timed in part to

distract attention from the parties, but which Tory MPs say has instead magnified their annoyance and frustration.

The likely collision point will be next Tuesday, when MPs will vote on the restrictions, covering an extension to mandatory mask-wearing, advice to work from home and, most controversially, the introduction of Covid status certificates as a condition of entry to venues such as nightclubs and football grounds.

A [BBC tally](#) said at least 22 Tory MPs had already said they would vote against the rules, with a dozen more expressing wariness. One backbencher said they also expected “a high number” of others deciding not to vote. “What that looks like exactly is unclear, but it is unlikely to be a good day for the government,” they warned.

Up to a quarter of parliamentary private secretaries, the junior rank of ministerial aides, are believed to be seeking official permission to miss the vote, allowing them to avoid backing the plan without having to resign, but whips are refusing.

“A lot of MPs seem to want to campaign in the North Shropshire byelection that day,” one backbencher said. A senior MP said they believed they had “already lost [their] seat” and thus felt “ungovernable”.

“The mood on the backbenches is really angry,” yet another backbencher said. “It’s going to be quite a sizeable rebellion. I think the government will only get this through with Labour votes. It’s a bit like the Theresa May Brexit days – which is somewhere I never really wanted to go back to.”

The sense of resentment combined both the shift in Covid rules and the furore over illicit Christmas parties, they said. “It’s us who get the angry emails saying about the Downing Street parties. We’re the ones who get it in the neck. So you’re much less willing to bail out the boss, particularly with unforced errors.

“People are much more forgiving if it’s a single issue. When us backbenchers have been marched up and down the hill one too many times,

it's not conducive for morale.”

The new Covid rules are being introduced over the next few days, with the extension of mandatory mask use to include such venues as theatres and cinemas starting from Friday. While that is before the Commons vote, the regulations can be changed immediately and approved by MPs retrospectively.

In an apparent attempt to help get Tory MPs onside, Downing Street insisted Johnson was not advocating possible mandatory vaccinations when he told a press conference on Wednesday that there might come a time to “have a conversation” about more ways to combat Covid.

Johnson was simply “making a broader point on the intention to keep developing further mitigations against coronavirus”, his spokesperson said.

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Coronavirus

How will plan B Covid restrictions affect the UK economy and jobs?



A reduction in social activities is likely to increase demand for goods at home at a time when restrictions are making imports more expensive.
Photograph: Oli Scarff/AFP/Getty Images

[Phillip Inman](#)

[@phillipinman](#)

Fri 10 Dec 2021 03.32 EST

The introduction of Covid-19 countermeasures across the UK and the rest of Europe, not to mention the US and Asia, to try to combat the spread of the Omicron variant has raised the spectre of the global economy stumbling into 2022 in a distinctly weakened state. But how big is their impact likely to be?

Will there be redundancies?

Employers are unlikely to panic in the run-up to Christmas, no matter how disappointed they are that customers have begun questioning spending decisions. Many firms, especially in the hospitality, retail and tourism industries, were already short of staff.

A longer spell of working from home could change how firms respond, while [even tighter restrictions](#) are expected to be met with an increase in the number of firms going bust, possibly before they get a chance to make staff redundant.

A recent Bank of England report found that more than [30% of UK's small businesses were classified as highly indebted](#), with borrowing levels of more than 10 times their cash balances – up from 14% before Covid-19 hit.

Rishi Sunak has rebuffed calls from industry bosses to bring back the furlough scheme, and rejected Labour's demand for an increase in sick pay to support workers who test positive to the virus. However, the chancellor has hinted that steps to protect the worst-hit industries will be considered should Omicron force ministers to adopt further measures.

Will prices rise even higher?

There is a strong prospect of shops raising prices in response to the stricter restrictions. As rising cases and rule changes make going to bars, restaurants and shows less attractive, millions of households are expected to channel the money they would have spent there on purchases, at a time when restrictions mean it is more difficult to import items into the UK.

Future lockdowns in some of the world most important manufacturing hubs, including China, could further restrict the number of goods coming to the UK, adding extra pressure on prices.

Paul Dales, chief UK economist at Capital [Economics](#), said the emergence of the Omicron variant would slow the recovery and increase the risk of higher inflation. “It has arguably increased the upside risks to our consumer prices index inflation forecasts,” he said.

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Will there be another recession?

Most economists believe mask-wearing in shops and working from home will do little to alter their forecasts for growth over the next couple of years. Most businesses have adapted to home working and its reintroduction will cause only minimal disruption. That means they expect the recovery to continue and the economy to climb back above its pre-pandemic level.

However, plenty of businesses will be harmed by a lack of shoppers, and the January sales could prove to be a massive flop.

Samuel Tombs, chief UK economist at the consultancy Pantheon Macroeconomics, said the impact of Omicron could be measured in lost GDP, with a cut in his estimate for growth to just 0.3% in the first quarter of 2022 compared with a previous forecast of 0.8%.

It would not mark the beginning of a recession – which needs two consecutive quarters of negative growth – but would be a painful reminder of the enormous cost of the pandemic.

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2021.12.10 - Spotlight

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Madness in their method: have we fallen out of love with actorly excess?



'It's not an imitation, it's a becoming' ... Leonardo DiCaprio in The Revenant, Lady Gaga in House of Gucci and Jeremy Strong in Succession. Illustration: Guardian Design



[Hadley Freeman](#)

[@HadleyFreeman](#)

Fri 10 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

Robert De Niro is the greatest actor of his generation. So claimed the [headline](#) in a popular magazine last year, and it's not a controversial claim. The evidence offered for this opinion was the same that's always wheeled out when discussing De Niro's acting: "[He] took method acting to previously uncharted levels. He got a New York cab licence for *Taxi Driver*, learned Italian and lived in Sicily to prepare for *The Godfather Part II*, put on 60lbs to play Jake LaMotta in *Raging Bull*, learned Latin for *True Confessions* and the sax for *New York, New York*. He was the hardest-working man in Hollywood," wrote the journalist.

For decades, this has been the general feeling about actors: the more method, the better. After all, if they don't eat raw bison and sleep in an animal carcass ([Leonardo DiCaprio in *The Revenant*](#)), stay in a wheelchair and be spoonfed by the crew ([Daniel Day-Lewis in *My Left Foot*](#)) or lose so much weight that they start to go blind (Matthew McConaughey in *Dallas Buyers Club*), they're just playing make-believe. And why should they get all that fame, adoration and money just for *that*? All of the above actors were rewarded for their efforts with an Oscar, and actors talking about their

method efforts has become as much a part of the run-up to the Oscars as shops playing Do They Know It's Christmas in the run-up to the holidays.

That's the thing about going method: if you don't talk about, no one off the film set knows you've done it, and what would be the point of that? Last month, Lady Gaga told [Vogue](#) that she stayed in character for a year and a half, and spoke with an Italian accent for nine months, all in service of playing her character, Patrizia Gucci, in the camp-fest House of Gucci. "It's not an imitation, it's a becoming," she solemnly told the magazine. Unfortunately, all that "becoming" didn't seem to leave her time to coordinate with the other actors about what an Italian accent is, as in the film they sound as if they come from entirely different countries. Yet talking about method acting has become a great exercise in marketing on the film circuit and Gaga is seen as a possible shoo-in for an Oscar nominations.



'It's not an imitation, it's a becoming' ... Lady Gaga as Patrizia Gucci in House of Gucci. Photograph: Fabio Lovino/Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures Inc

So Jeremy Strong, who plays Kendall in HBO's Succession, must be wondering where he went wrong. Fans of the show, which is now in its third season, have known for a while that Strong is an intense actor, one who goes "all-in" on his performances, as he has said in interviews; and the other cast

members have hinted as much. Brian Cox references it in [his new memoir, Putting the Rabbit in the Hat](#), with audibly gritted teeth. And until this week, that has worked in his favour: he won an Emmy last year and, given that his character on the show is such an intense outcast, the fact that Strong himself is so intense and so different from his co-stars made sense to the public. Until this week, when the worm turned.

The New Yorker is no slouch when it comes to taking creativity seriously, so Strong must have assumed he was in safe hands when its staff writer Michael Schulman, whom he has known since 2003, turned up to profile him for the magazine. By [the eighth paragraph of the article](#), he would have been firmly disabused of that notion. “Preening intensity” and “self-indulgent” are two descriptions that appear early on, followed by less than positive comments from his former and current co-stars: Cox describes Strong’s intensity as “a particularly American disease”, while Robert Downey Jr, not known for underplaying performances himself, says Strong “crosses the Rubicon”. The strongest comments come from his co-star Kieran Culkin, who told the journalist about Strong’s methods: “That might be something that helps him. I can tell you that it doesn’t help me.”

The profile quickly went viral. Some people have defended Strong, including Jessica Chastain, who worked with him on Zero Dark Thirty and Molly’s Game, who [described](#) him as “lovely … Very inspiring and passionate about his work. The profile that came out was incredibly one-sided. Don’t believe everything you read, folks. Snark sells, but maybe it’s time we moved beyond it.” But in the main, there has been much cackling glee over the profile, a sense that the emperor’s method nudity has finally been exposed for what it is: pretentious, performative, narcissistic nonsense.

“Going method” is now the catch-all term for an actor going to absurd lengths to embody a role, from Pacino pretending to be blind while making Scent of a Woman (at the end of the shoot, he allegedly [wrote](#) a note to his co-star, Chris O’Donnell: “Although I didn’t see you, I know you were great”), to Johnny Depp sleeping in Hunter S Thompson’s basement next to several barrels of gunpowder as preparation for playing Thompson in Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas. The original techniques [were coined at the beginning of the 20th century](#) by the Russian director and actor Konstantin

Stanislavski, and refined in the US by the acting coaches Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner at the Actors Studio, which stressed that actors should emotionally identify with their characters. It is the rare celebrated mid-century American actor who didn't emerge from the Actors Studio, and so Cox is right to describe it as "a particularly American disease". This led to what is probably the most famous anecdote about method acting. When making Marathon Man, Dustin Hoffman allegedly went without sleep in order to look and feel as exhausted as his character. "My dear boy," his exasperated co-star, Laurence Olivier, said to him, "[why don't you just try acting?](#)"



Robert De Niro got a cabbie's licence for his starring role in *Taxi Driver*.
Photograph: Everett Collection/Rex Feature

Yet despite Olivier's scorn, method-ish acting has held an especial fascination for actors, journalists and the public for decades and has become the, if not easiest, then at least the surest way for an actor to accrue respect. Forest Whitaker learned Swahili for *Last King of Scotland*; Nicolas Cage had four of his teeth pulled out for *Birdy*. (It is, by and very large, men who have been lauded for going method, partly, I suspect, because going method often involves weight gain and loss, which is a more complicated prospect for a female actor. But mainly, I suspect more strongly, because such

extreme behaviours are much less tolerated from women in Hollywood than they are from men.)

So where did Strong go wrong? He has never described himself as a method actor, and he doesn't stay in character during a shoot. But he has said that he has "to believe in what he's doing", in other words, believe in the reality of his character. The anecdotes in the profile about depths of his commitment to a role are funny: asking Aaron Sorkin to spray him with teargas during the making of *The Trial of the Chicago 7* (Sorkin declined); refusing to be in the makeup trailer with his [Succession](#) co-stars so as to better embody his character's alienation from his family. But they're no more silly than De Niro shaving down his teeth for *Cape Fear*, or Adrien Brody selling his apartment and car in order to get closer to his character, the Holocaust survivor Władysław Szpilman, in *The Pianist*.

The profile implies that Strong is a "networker" who likes to "attach himself like a remora to famous actors", although another way of looking at that is he's an actor who works with other actors who sometimes like him, as in the case of Chastain. Extreme efforts at acting are only really funny when the results are bad, which is why the idea of Gaga shouting "bravo!" for nine months is so hilarious. But even Strong's critics admit that he is very good at his job. So what's the problem?

I'm going to defend Strong here. I have even less time for pretentious actor bullshit than most, because a big part of my job is interviewing actors and, after more than 20 years of this, I have a zero-tolerance approach to actors talking about their job as though it's a mystical artform demanding athletic levels of endurance. And seriously, what is the deal with "method acting"? Why not "method writing", or "method interior designing"? If a novelist lived like his characters while writing a book, people would think he was insane – why laud it in actors?

So [when I interviewed Strong in September](#), my bullshit-o-meter was braced. But here's the thing about Strong: he's the real deal. I don't mean he's such a great actor, although I do think he is incredibly good, I mean he really believes this stuff. I had always assumed that method-y acting was either a performative show in an attempt to prove an actor's depth or commitment, or frantic compensation for the actor's inability to actually act.

There is an implication in the New Yorker piece, I think, that Strong is overegging his process in order to be seen in the same lineage as his heroes, Pacino, Hoffman and, most of all, Day-Lewis.



Leonardo DiCaprio in *The Revenant*. Photograph: Kimberley French/20th Century Fox/Regency Enterprises/Kobal/REX/Shutterstock

I'm not sure how you would prove someone is faking method-ish acting, any more than you could prove someone is thinking bad thoughts, but it's impossible to spend time with Strong and not think he's genuine. His intensity isn't, it seemed to me, about ego; it's about trying to be a better actor, and proof of that is that is – unlike every other method-y actor – he rarely talks about the lengths he goes to; all of those anecdotes come from those he worked with. His biggest mistake was probably being so intense on what is an ensemble show, and therefore impinging on the other actors. But De Niro surely wasn't much fun to work with on *The Godfather Part II*, never mind Marlon Brando on *The Godfather*, and no one laughed at them. I'm not an actor, and I've never worked with Strong. But I can tell you, as someone who has interviewed a lot of actors, I've met much sillier and self-absorbed ones than him, all of whom were far worse at their job than him.

Another mistake, perhaps, was agreeing to be profiled during the time of what can be roughly described as All This. It's hard not to laugh at an actor

who says, during a global pandemic, when it comes to acting, “the stakes are life and death. I take [Kendall] as seriously as I take my own life.” Actors who take themselves too seriously have never looked more absurd, especially since the start of the first lockdown, when a dozen or so of them earnestly sang Imagine to cheer up the little people. But only last month, Nicole Kidman said, as part of her publicity campaign, that she stayed in character for the whole shoot of the TV series Nine Perfect Strangers, which Strong has never said he does. So I’m not sure why what’s impressive in Kidman is laughable in Strong.

Maybe there’s a feeling that Strong – unlike De Niro and Kidman – isn’t famous enough to get away with this nonsense. Maybe it’s the suggestion that – unlike Day-Lewis and Depp – he’s not handsome enough (“The hangdog face of someone who wasn’t destined for stardom,” as the New Yorker put it). Maybe it just seems too self-conscious from him, as though Day-Lewis training for three years as a professional fighter for *The Boxer* didn’t involve some forethought.

It may just be that we still don’t know how to talk about actors. Are they great artistes or meat puppets who merely say sentences someone else has written? Do we want them to be acting or reflecting their own reality? The mockery of Strong and simultaneous veneration of other method-y actors suggests it’s an uneasy combination of the two. Fans thrilled to the suggestion – heavily played up by Bradley Cooper and Gaga – that the two of them had feelings for one another during the shoot for *A Star Is Born*, but were more weirded out by Oscar Isaac kissing Chastain’s arm on the Venice red carpet while promoting *Scenes from a Marriage*.

The media and public are fascinated by famous actors’ personal lives, and that also includes how they do their incredibly well-paid jobs. So it feels a little unfair to then knock someone who answers that question in such an intense – yes – but also heartfelt way. The late critic AA Gill once wrote that to review a TV show you have to judge it by whether it succeeded in its intention, so even if you hate reality TV, if a programme is good reality TV, you give it a good review. Pretentious actors are truly unbearable. But for those of us who just have to watch them as opposed to work with them, the end result should matter more than the method.

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You be the judge: should my boyfriend get over his phobia of seafood?



Seafood phobia for you be the judge 11 dec Illustration: Joren Joshua/The Guardian

Interviews by [Georgina Lawton](#)
[@georginalawton](#)

Fri 10 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

The prosecution: Ines

Jay hates fish because of a distressing childhood experience, but it means I can't have it either

I can't cook fish for me and my boyfriend, Jay, in our shared flat, and it's getting annoying. I do most of the cooking and I really love seafood. When we were in lockdown I was bored with the usual meat dishes and craved a bit of salmon, but Jay insisted that we didn't buy any. It's a big compromise as I'm Portuguese and have grown up on wholesome, healthy fish all my life. Lockdown brought home how much I've missed the cooking of my childhood. Jay needs to come round because it's affecting our mealtimes together.

All our joint meals are fish-free so if I want seafood, I cook it when he's away. One time Jay was out for a work meal and I thought, great, I've got free rein, and fried up some mackerel in a pan. Jay came back early and completely overreacted, saying "whoa, that stinks." He kept washing the pan over and over and wouldn't use it for a week as he thought the fish smell lingered.

I say the crabmeat was long ago and he could try a prawn. He says I'm making him eat something that makes him feel sick

We can't go out to seafood restaurants either. And when we do eat out, Jay goes crazy if I order fish. In fact, he hates it so much that if I've got fish on my plate I'm not allowed to use my fork to try some of his food. He's so fearful of the flavour, even though I ensure there's never any fish on the fork. It's irrational and ridiculous. We usually split dishes and bills 50/50, but if I've ordered a fish dish, he will tell me I have to pay more because he didn't get to try my order.

Jay says he hates fish because when he was six, his dad gave him pasta mixed with a can of crabmeat that was three years past the sell-by date. It

was disgusting. Since then he's not been able to stomach seafood of any kind.

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I would like him to try fish again: he's an adult now and surely our tastebuds change over time. I tell him the crabmeat episode was a long time ago and that he could try a prawn, but he tells me I am forcing him to eat something that makes him feel sick. It's time for Jay to try and update his palate.

The defence: Jay

I was traumatised by seafood as a child, and my tastebuds do not need 'updating'

I reject the idea that Ines isn't allowed to cook fish in our flat. She's strong-minded and if she wants to cook seafood, she will. I think she's just learned that, because I hate it so much, it's simply easier if she waits until I'm away. What's wrong with that? I compromise, she compromises. I'll admit, I'm not over the moon when she cooks fish at home, but I just ask her to exercise caution if I'm there.

The only times I have overreacted are when we had one non-stick frying pan to share between us, and I had to use it directly after her. Fish can leave a strong aftertaste and smell. For that reason, when we eat out at restaurants, I'd rather she didn't stick her fishy fork in my food. I won't stop her ordering a mound of molluscs, but I don't want to taste them, thanks very much.

Recently, Ines forgot to turn on the fan and turned our home into a marine smokehouse. There was a putrid stench for days

I've been traumatised by seafood. At six, my dad gave me bad crabmeat and I was violently ill. I also used to work on a fish counter at Sainsbury's and had to fillet mackerel. Fish guts got stuck to the bottom of my shoes. Once, I

went on holiday and left my work shoes in my car and when I returned the stench was awful.

Recently, Ines forgot to turn on the extractor fan when she was cooking, which turned our home into a marine smokehouse. There was a putrid stench in the flat for days, just like the one from my fish-gutting days. It brought all those horrible memories back. I told her that this couldn't happen again. I'm a reasonable man, but boundaries had to be set after incidents like that. Now if fish is cooked, appropriate ventilation and extraction are required and I need prior warning. I need to sign off Ines's fish-cooking plans, so I'm prepared.

Ines is the primary cook in the house because she's better at it than me. I'll eat whatever she wants most of the time, but if she tells me prawns are on the menu then a little part of me dies inside. We're never going to agree on that. My tastebuds don't need "updating", as she puts it. I'm quite happy never tasting fish again, and Ines shouldn't try to force it down my neck if the mere smell triggers me.

The jury of Guardian readers

Should Jay try to overcome his aversion to fish?

Is it a food phobia or just a dislike? Jay uses words like traumatised – if so, he should get professional help. Jay's idea of compromise is not mine; he could agree to her cooking some fish at home, and cook other things himself.
Maureen, 69

Ines has compromised enough. Going crazy when ordering fish; paying less because he couldn't try her order; "signing off" on cooking plans? Jay, I sympathise with you hating fish, but if you really don't want it, you could cook your own meals. And then try some sustainable halibut.

Tristan, 45

Stuck on a desert island, would Ines crave her prawns or her partner? If the former, there's something fishy going on here! So long as Jay isn't using his phobia to control Ines, I'd shell out for a second pan, agree to some "fish

days", and buy Jay a takeaway.

Iona, 49

It's a battle between Ines's longing for Portugal and Jay's unresolved childhood trauma. Those are more important things than the smell of fish. They should share a session with a friend or counsellor and talk about the underlying issues. The words fish or seafood are not to be mentioned.

Bas, 52

Jay claims to be reasonable but seems to underestimate the strength of his reactions and the effect they have on Ines. It's ridiculous that Ines should be held hostage by his pickiness. Maybe it's not the tastebuds but the boyfriend that needs updating. Katherine, 28

You be the judge

So now you can be the judge, click on the poll below to tell us: should Jay try and get over his phobia of seafood?

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

The poll will close on Thursday December 16, at 9 AM GMT

Last week's result

We asked if Lakshmi should spend less money on her cats, something that annoys her boyfriend, Rob.

25% of you said no – Lakshmi is innocent

75% of you said yes – Lakshmi is guilty

[Have a disagreement you'd like settled? Or want to be part of our jury?
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People wait on top of a plane at Kabul airport after a stunningly swift end to Afghanistan's 20-year war, as thousands of people mobbed the airport trying to flee the Taliban's feared hardline brand of Islamist rule. Photograph: Wakil Kohsar/AFP/Getty Images

[From the agencies](#)

Agency photographer of the year – 2021 shortlist

People wait on top of a plane at Kabul airport after a stunningly swift end to Afghanistan's 20-year war, as thousands of people mobbed the airport trying to flee the Taliban's feared hardline brand of Islamist rule. Photograph: Wakil Kohsar/AFP/Getty Images

by [Matt Fidler](#)

Fri 10 Dec 2021 02.00 EST

It's that time again, when the photo editors on the picture desk at the Guardian sift through the edits of the best of the millions of images that they

see over the course of a year, supplied by the various press agencies from around the world, from staff and freelancers alike.

It is not possible to mention as many of the talented photographers who have supported our journalism visually, creating outstanding work and stories of their own, as we would like to but we have picked out a few.



Felipe Dana

- Drug users detained during a Taliban raid walk in line on their way to the detoxification ward of the Avicenna Medical hospital for drug treatment in Kabul, Afghanistan, 2 October 2021.

Felipe Dana is a photojournalist covering news and stories for Associated Press. Felipe's work this year has taken him from Brazil via Israel and the Occupied Territories, to Tokyo for the Olympics. In Afghanistan, where he has largely been since September, he has gained close access to the Taliban regime, spent time with fighters and covered their drug treatment programme.



- A family sits inside a makeshift tent built amid the rubble of their home, destroyed by an airstrike in Beit Lahiya, northern Gaza Strip, 14 June 2021.



- Portraits of Taliban fighters taken at various police stations in Kabul, Afghanistan.



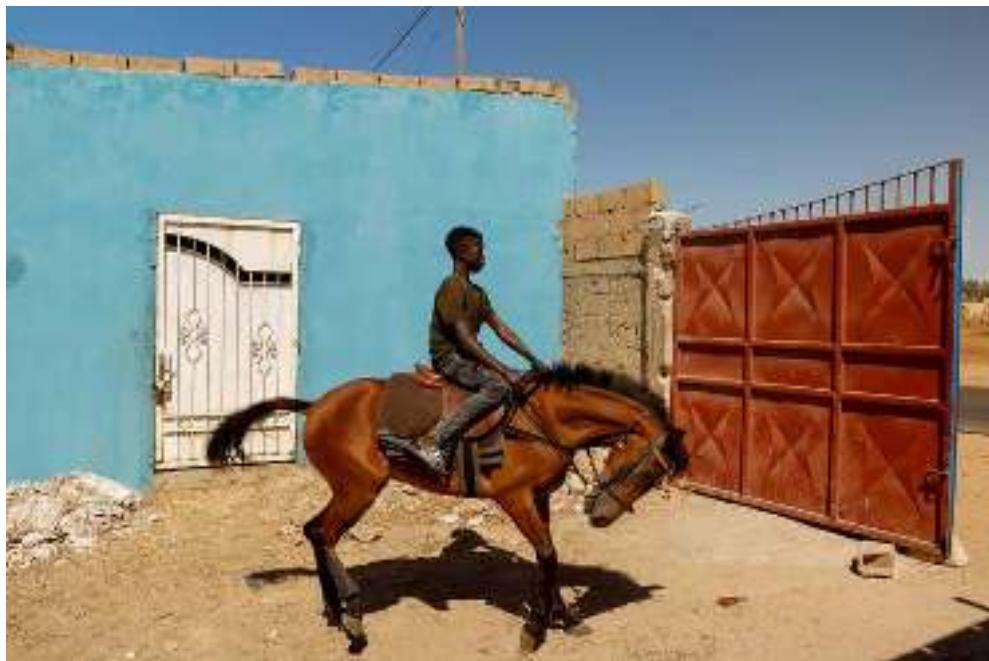
- Migrants arrive aboard a Spanish coast guard rescue ship at Arguineguín port, in Gran Canaria island, Spain, 21 November 2021.



Zohra Bensemra

- Female primary school students leave school after a class in Kabul, Afghanistan, 25 October 2021. [See more on this story here.](#)

Based in Dakar, Senegal, Zohra Bensemra has covered drought and Covid, and has been in Kabul since October, one of the few female members of the international press working in the country, where she has covered the evolving situation for women and girls under the new hardline Islamist Taliban regime.

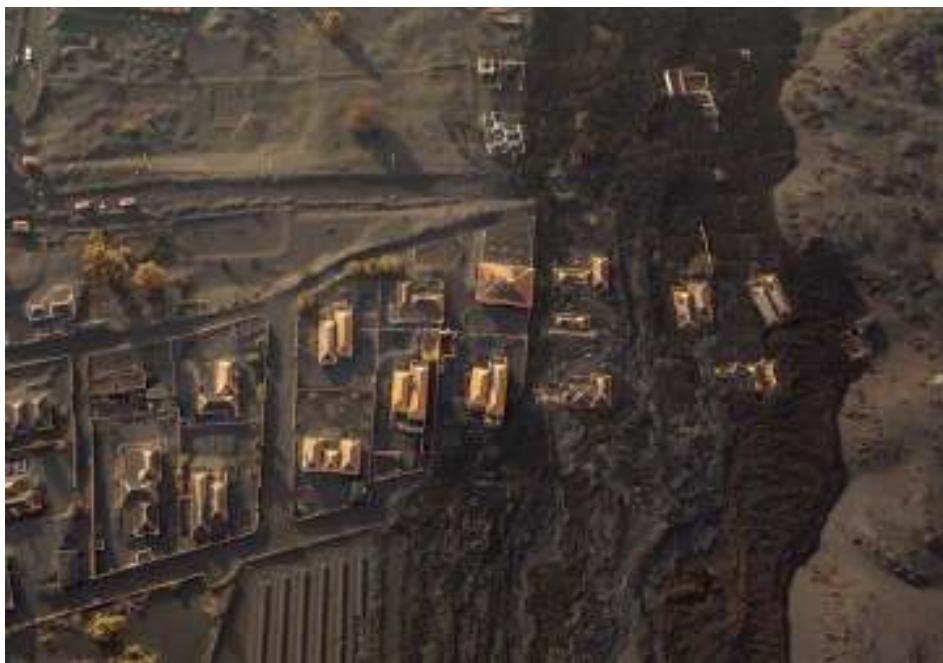


- Fallou Diop, 19, a jockey, rides a young mare called Raissa Betty, whom he trains to compete with in the future, out of the Lambafar stable, in Niaga, Rufisque. [See more on this photo story here.](#)





- Supporters of Gambia's president and presidential candidate Adama Barrow celebrate after partial results of the presidential elections showed Barrow leading in Banjul, 5 December 2021.



Emilio Morenatti

- Volcano's lava flows destroying houses in Las Manchas village, on the Canary island of La Palma, Spain, 6 December.

Emilio Morenatti is chief photographer for the Associated Press in Spain and Portugal. His ethereal photographs of the ash-covered La Palma, Canary Islands have really stood out and engaged our readers, in addition to his coverage of Tokyo's Olympics and domestic news in Spain.

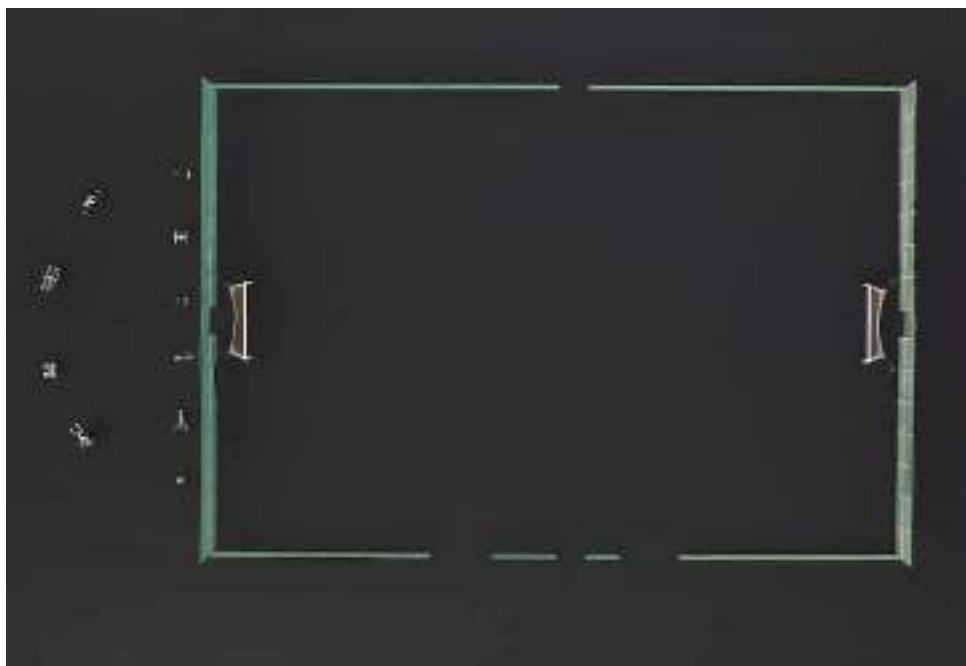


- A couple kiss in front of a barricade set on fire by demonstrators during clashes with police following a protest condemning the imprisonment of rap singer Pablo Hasél in Barcelona, Spain on 18 February 2021.



- Melissa Stockwell plays with her children, Dallas and Millie, in their home in Colorado Springs, ahead of the Olympics.





- Abandoned cats wander in search of food at a road covered by ash, and a soccer field is covered with ash on La Palma, Canary Islands, 1 December 2021.



- People dance on a promenade facing the Mediterranean Sea, as sun sets at a beach in Barcelona in October 2021.



Yasuyoshi Chiba

- Wounded captive Ethiopian soldiers arrive on a truck at a rehabilitation centre in Mekelle, the capital of Tigray region, Ethiopia, 2 July 2021.

After being stationed in São Paulo, and then Rio in Brazil, Yasuyoshi Chiba has been posted in Nairobi since 2016. This year his work has taken him from Kenya to Ethiopia for the unfurling Tigray crisis, Sudan and Uganda, as well as to Tokyo for the Olympics.



- A local farmer walking in a swarm of desert locusts in Meru, Kenya, February 2021.





- Supporters of the incumbent Ugandan president, Yoweri Museveni, celebrate in the streets of Kampala on 16 January 2021. Right: Members of Dance Centre Kenya perform in a dress rehearsal of the Nutcracker in November 2021.



Ariana Cubillos

- Children jump a rope as they play at a court close to the Pavia garbage dump in Barquisimeto, Venezuela, 3 March 2021.

Colombian photographer Ariana Cubillos is based in Caracas, Venezuela. The desk has noticed her joyful stories filed among the difficult times that the country is facing, such as the Musical Vaccine orchestra tour.

Musicians join pianist, composer and conductor Jose Agustin Sanchez on the bed of an 18-wheeler truck for a musical tour coined a musical disinfection in Barquisimeto, Venezuela, 4 March 2021.





- A woman holds a sign that reads in Spanish: “Sex education to decide, contraceptives to avoid abortion” as she jumps with another woman as part of the Global Day of Action for access to legal, safe and free abortion, outside the parliament in Caracas, Venezuela , 28 September 2021.



Danish Siddiqui

- People wait to cremate victims who died due to coronavirus at a crematorium in New Delhi, India, 23 April.

Indian photojournalist Danish Siddiqui, based in Delhi, who led the national Reuters multimedia team, was killed on 15 July while covering clashes between Afghan security forces and the Taliban forces near a border crossing with Pakistan. His work during the year covering the tragedy of the wave of Covid infections across India was very powerful.



- A member of the Afghan special forces keeps watch as others search a house during a combat mission against the Taliban, in Kandahar province, Afghanistan, 12 July 2021.





- Demonstrators are stopped by police during a protest against the arrest of 22-year-old climate activist Disha Ravi, outside police headquarters in New Delhi, 16 February. A Naga Sadhu wears a mask before the procession for taking a dip in the Ganges river during Shahi Snan at Kumbh Mela festival, in Haridwar, 12 April.



Lillian Suwanrumpha

- Pro-democracy protesters confront riot police whilst marching to Government House to call for the resignation of Thailand's prime minister, Prayut Chan-ocha, in Bangkok on 18 July.

[Lilian Suwanrumpha](#) is a Thai photographer who has been based in Bangkok for Agence France-Presse since 2016. In 2021 they covered ongoing anti-government demonstrations, environmental issues and daily life alongside the coronavirus pandemic. They have covered a tumultuous year for the the country.



- Pro-democracy protesters make the three-finger salute during an anti-government demonstration in Bangkok on 24 March 2021.



- Medics haul an oxygen tank onto the back of a police car for an elderly Covid-19 coronavirus patient in Bangkok, 30 July. Right; A research team from Chulalongkorn University collect sweat samples from vendors in a fresh market as they develop a novel device that detects the Covid-19 coronavirus through specific odours.



Brandon Bell

- People walk through the French District during Hurricane Ida on 29 August 2021 in New Orleans, Louisiana.

[Brandon Bell](#) is a staff Photographer for Getty Images, based in Houston, Texas. He has covered the border story extensively, as well as some remarkable work during Hurricane Ida.



- Migrants are accounted for and processed by border patrol after crossing the Rio Grande into the United States, 1 July, in Roma, Texas.





- Medical assistants Crystal Leyva and Keitia Perez administer Covid-19 sampling tests, to laboratory technicians, at Foxconn Assembly in Houston, 13 August. Right Bailey Salinas, 10, meets Democratic gubernatorial candidate Beto O'Rourke after a campaign rally at Republic Square, Austin, on 4 December.



- People exit a border patrol bus and prepare to be received by the Val Verde Humanitarian Coalition after crossing the Rio Grande, 22 September, in Del Rio, Texas.



Fatima Shbair

- Palestinians return to the rubble of their destroyed homes in Beit Hanoun, Gaza, 24 May.

Fatima Shbair, 24, is a self-taught, freelance photojournalist based in Gaza. Shbair is the youngest winner of the [Anja Niedringhaus Courage in Photojournalism Award](#).



- A Palestinian girl stands amid the rubble of her destroyed home on 24 May 2021 in Beit Hanoun, Gaza.





- Farah al-Bahtiti, 5, and Sarah Al-Matrabiee, 4 in the Zeitoun neighbourhood, who were injured by missile strikes on the Gaza Strip in May.



Hollie Adams

[Hollie Adams](#) is a freelance photographer based in London shooting largely for Getty Images. Her coverage of UK news has stood out, from rare London snow in January through a turbulent year.

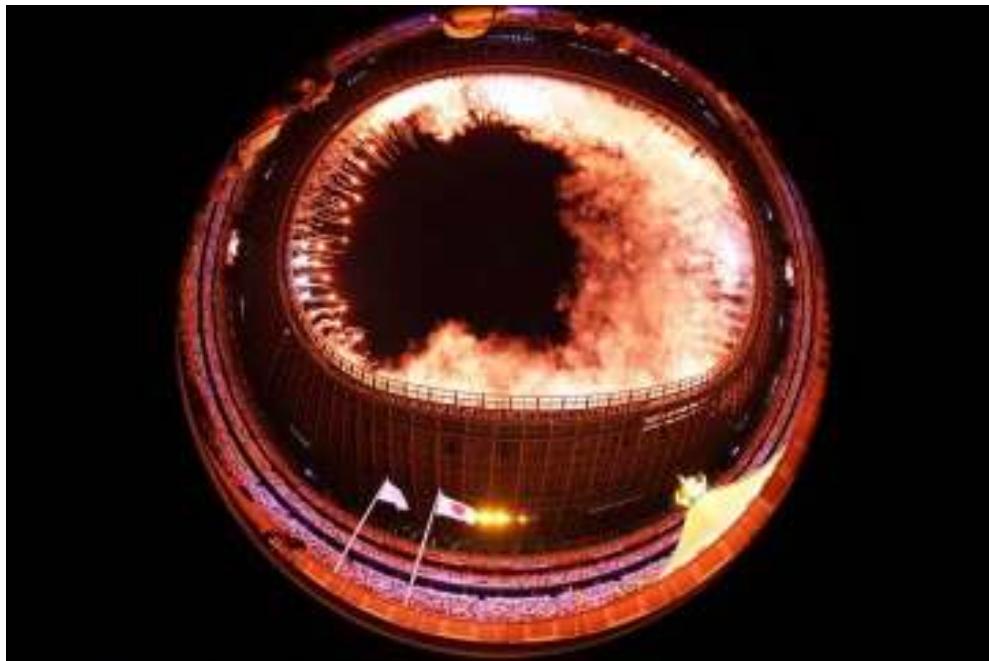


- A patient is transported out of an ambulance by medics at the Royal London hospital on 2 January.





- Demonstrators hold smoke flares during a Reclaim Pride March, 24 July. Right; women in The Purge costumers pose for a photo on Halloween at Between the Bridges at Southbank on 31 October.



Hannah McKay

- Fish-eye view of fireworks after the Olympic cauldron is lit during the Opening Ceremony of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games.

Reuters staff photographer [Hannah McKay](#) is based in London. In 2021 her images from the Clapham Common vigil arrest went viral.



- Patsy Stevenson is held down by two male officers at a vigil in Clapham, south London, following the kidnap and murder of Sarah Everard, in London, 13 March.



- Olympic athletes in action as rain falls in Tokyo, 2 August.





- People watch a Fridays for Future march from their windows, and activist Greta Thunberg speaks later in the day at the same march, 5 November, Glasgow.



Christopher Furlong

- Messages of support at the newly repaired mural of England footballer Marcus Rashford by artist AKSE_P19 in Withington, Manchester, after it was defaced by vandals in the aftermath of England's Euro 2020 final loss on 13 July.

[Christopher Furlong](#) is Getty Images chief photographer in the UK covering news, documentary and daily life.



- Dancers take to the famous Blackpool Tower Ballroom and move to the sound of the famous Wurlitzer organ, 5 August.



- Festival fans listen to the Lathums during day two of the Tramlines Festival at Hillsborough Park in Sheffield, 24 July.





- Boris Johnson tries to open his umbrella next to Prince Charles, at the dedication ceremony of the new national UK police memorial at the National Memorial Arboretum in Alrewas, central England, on 28 July 2021. Right; Nine migrants drift in the Channel after their engine failed in Dover, 6 September.



Wakil Kohsar

- A Taliban fighter walks past a beauty salon with images of women defaced using spray paint in Shar-e-Naw in Kabul on 18 August.

Few nations endured as tumultuous a year as Afghanistan in 2021, and Afghan-born Wakil Kohsar currently serving as the chief photographer for AFP in Afghanistan, captured the dramatic fall of the country to the Taliban following the sudden American withdrawal in August including the scenes at Kabul airport.



- Afghan people climb atop a plane as they wait at the airport in Kabul on August.



- A US soldier point his gun towards an Afghan passenger at the Kabul airport in Kabul 16 August. Right; Afghan newspaper journalists Nematullah Naqdi and Taqi Daryabi show their wounds in their office in Kabul after being released from Taliban custody.

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James Bond

‘Riz Ahmed would bring intensity and a truly modern sensibility’: readers on who should be the next 007



Final bow ... Daniel Craig at world premiere of *No Time To Die*.
Photograph: Toby Melville/Reuters

[Guardian readers](#) and [Georgina Quach](#)

Fri 10 Dec 2021 04.44 EST

Speculation has surrounded the choice of the next actor to play James Bond after Daniel Craig hung up his tux with [No Time to Die](#). On 7 December Barbara Broccoli, producer of the Bond franchise, told [Hollywood Reporter](#) that the candidate should be a British man of any ethnicity or race.

Guardian readers share their take on which British actor should be the next 007.

Idris Elba



Cool and suave ... Idris Elba. Photograph: David M Benett/Getty Images

'He is the one – we all know it'

Who else other than Idris Elba? He has everything – charisma, presence and confidence. In Luther he showed us how much he can play a tormented soul. I don't have anything else to say. Just look at him, he is the one. I know it, you know it, we all know it. **Emeric Pierre, state worker, France**

'Fleming's image of Bond'

He is very like Fleming's image of Bond – and unlike others, he can act. He is also very cool and suave in the way that Bond is supposed to be. **Morag, charity worker, Kirkcaldy**

Henry Cavill



Brooding presence ... Henry Cavill. Photograph: Ken McKay/ITV/Rex/Shutterstock

‘Gravitas and presence’

He is a good actor and has had commanding roles such as Superman. He has something of the same brooding presence that Daniel Craig had in the role. The last Mission: Impossible movie shows he’s got quite a range and has the ability to play different roles. I think he would quickly grow into the role of Bond. He was interviewed by Lorraine Kelly on TV earlier this week and I was impressed by his gravitas and presence. **Robert, retired civil servant, Devon**

‘There is a suaveness about him’

He is a good actor, has a beautiful voice and is very good looking. There is a suaveness about him that goes with the Bond character, yet he looks tough enough to do the job. We loved Daniel Craig, but it might be good to see how Cavill approaches the role. I sincerely hope they choose him. **Nadine Gardner, retired, Melbourne**

Tom Hardy



Can do comedy, too ... Tom Hardy. Photograph: Joel C Ryan/Invision/AP

‘Streets ahead of anyone else’

I’d be very excited if Tom Hardy was given the role. Craig has raised the bar in so many ways. Maybe Hardy is “more of the same”, but he’s just such a top actor. Streets ahead of anyone else and the obvious choice for me. **Brett Turner, videographer, Dubai**

‘Gritty and comedic’

His gritty and comedic performance as Alfie Solomons [in Peaky Blinders] suits the style I believe a modern James Bond needs. I think Bond needs to be both. The one-liners and cheese of the older films shouldn’t be forgotten and need to be cherished. **George Hexton, estimating and design manager, Lincolnshire**

Riz Ahmed



Modern sensibility ... Riz Ahmed at the British Independent Film awards.
Photograph: David M Benett/Getty Images

'He would bring a unique intensity'

He's an absolutely phenomenal actor and would bring a unique intensity to the role, as well as a truly modern sensibility, something that was lacking even in the Craig films. **Tony McCarney, data engineering consultant, Coventry**

'He represents intersecting British identities'

He's young and a good actor. He can do the thoughtful parts of Bond as well as the action, and represents today's intersecting British identities very well.

Chris Oxley, psychologist, Ottawa

Richard Madden



Looks the part ... Richard Madden. Photograph: Samir Hussein/WireImage

‘Charismatic as hell’

He’s a bit “on the nose”, admittedly, but I think he ticks all the boxes. He looks the part, is charismatic as hell and fundamentally looks like, if the mood took him, he could kill or shag anyone in the room – which is the acid test for any Bond actor. With the right script he could be another Dalton. I may be biased, but I’d love a Scot to take the role back. **Mike Prior, financial services worker, Glasgow**

‘Could bring that classy status’

His role in [Bodyguard](#) was a very clear sample of his chances as a Licence to Kill match. Bond roles require more than a pretty face. Madden is young, has that hard face, and could bring that classy status required by the classic character Ian Fleming wrote. **Octavio Maya Rocha, filmmaker, Mexico City**

Asa Butterfield



James Jr? ... Asa Butterfield. Photograph: David M Benett/Getty Images for Everyman Cinema

'He could play a younger, more arrogant Bond'

Bringing a young, fresh approach to the films, Asa Butterfield would be an unconventional and unexpected choice. He could play a younger, more arrogant Bond, who is new to the secret service and must learn and grow as he completes his first missions and first kills. **Harriet, fashion student, London**

Henry Golding



Dangerous but sleek ... Henry Golding. Photograph: Michael Tran/AFP/Getty Images

'A growing talent'

A growing talent who will be stepping up rather than sideways to play the role. Golding is well known for [Crazy Rich Asians](#) but anyone who saw him in [The Gentlemen](#) got to see a dangerous but sleek presence who could bring a grit and humanity to a younger Bond, while perhaps bringing some much-needed humour to the franchise. **Anonymous civil servant, Kent**

'A British-Asian Bond would be a welcome leap'

I think it's time for Bond to diversify from the British white man, and a British-Asian Bond would be welcome. Golding has been fantastic in recent roles which are adjacent to Bond, like [Snake Eyes](#) and [The Gentlemen](#).
Aaron, 24, Northern Ireland

Jason Isaacs



Screen presence ... Jason Isaacs. Photograph: Tristan Fewings/Getty Images for BFI

'Better looking than the recent ones'

I've followed Isaacs' career with interest. He can play anything: posh diplomat, Irish-American gangster (in the fantastic crime drama series [Brotherhood](#)), psychopath, starship captain or private eye. Everyone says he's too old to be the next Bond but he's still better looking and has more screen presence than most of the recent ones. You could see him go from playing a terrifying psychopath to a serious British ambassador to the US, all in the same week. **Stephen Haigh, retired animator, London**

Aaron Taylor-Johnson



Looks great in a tux ... Aaron Taylor-Johnson. Photograph: Broadimage/Rex/Shutterstock

'He has the dangerous physical edge'

He's got action and genre experience, but is still a relative unknown. He's the right build, looks great in a tux, and is young enough to carry the franchise for about 15 years, as Craig did, if he wants to. He's also a very good actor. I don't think there's any doubt he possesses the dangerous physical edge that Connery and Craig had, the suave manner that Brosnan had, and the cruel coldness that Dalton brought when it was needed. **Hugh Parker, architect, East Ayrshire**

Damian Lewis



Do the right thing by redheads ... Damian Lewis. Photograph: David M Bennett/Getty Images

'Exit blond Bond, enter red Bond!'

There are plenty of great contenders for the next Bond, and I'm well on board for promoting diversity. With this in mind, why not give it to Damian Lewis, supported by the red-haired ticket? Red-haired actors are at best typecast as a bumbling, comedic sidekick, and at worst written out completely. So why not do the right thing, and the best thing – exit blond Bond, enter red Bond! **Duncan, digital product executive, Altrincham**

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2021.12.10 - Coronavirus

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UK reports highest daily new cases since January – as it happened

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Coronavirus

Omicron could be spreading faster in England than in South Africa, Sage adviser says



A pharmacy worker prepares a Covid booster jab at a vaccination centre in London. Photograph: Neil Hall/EPA

[Ian Sample](#) Science editor

[@iansample](#)

Thu 9 Dec 2021 15.11 EST

Cases of the Omicron variant could be spreading even faster in England than in South Africa, according to a senior scientific adviser, who warned that the variant was a “very severe setback” to hopes of bringing the pandemic under control.

Prof John Edmunds, an epidemiologist at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and a member of the government’s Scientific Advisory

Group for Emergencies (Sage), said that [plan B measures announced by the prime minister](#) were “absolutely not an overreaction” even if Omicron turned out to be milder than the current dominant variant.

Edmunds told a Royal Society of Medicine webinar on Thursday that it was “extremely likely” there were many more cases of Omicron in the community than those confirmed by testing, and that the numbers were set to soar in the weeks ahead.

The UK [Health](#) Security Agency identified a further 249 Omicron cases on Thursday, almost twice the number announced the day before, bringing the UK total to 817. Edmunds said that if the UK had 1,000 cases today, then a doubling time of two to three days would drive the number up to 8,000 in a week and 64,000 in two weeks. Those would come on top of the continuing wave of Delta infections.

“Nobody wants to have to reintroduce these measures. It’s very damaging for parts of the economy – the hospitality and retail sector, in particular, are going to be affected – but unfortunately we have to do it,” he said.

“With the speed of spread of this virus, we may well have really significant numbers of cases by Christmas,” he added. “I suspect that whatever we do now, we are unlikely to overreact.” Given the rate of community transmission, he said, travel restrictions were “not really going to do much now”.

The warning came as the government reported a further 50,867 daily Covid cases, 813 more admissions to hospital and 148 additional deaths on Thursday, marking rises on all measures over the past week.

Speaking at the online event, Edmunds dismissed suggestions that the Omicron variant might be “good news” if it hospitalised people at only half the rate as the Delta variant. The hope comes largely from hospital admissions in South Africa, where the population is far younger than in the UK and so less likely to experience severe Covid illness in the first place. While the average age in the UK is just over 40, it is less than 28 in South Africa.

Edmunds said there was “not a shred of evidence” that Omicron was half as pathogenic as the Delta variant, but added that even if this were the case, it might not make the difference people hoped for. “This is a very severe setback. There is no question about that.”

“If you are worried about the time [at] which the NHS might start to get very stressed, then halving the hospitalisation rate means that buys you two to three days. I think it’s really silly to suggest this is good news; it couldn’t be further from that,” he added. “This is as bad news as you can possibly get, quite frankly.”

It will take several weeks for scientists to get a sense of how severe the disease is in the UK, where the vast majority of people have some immunity against earlier variants either through vaccination or previous infection. This week, [Pfizer released data](#) from a small lab study suggesting that three shots of its vaccine might hold up well against the Omicron variant, but Edmunds said it was the most optimistic of five or so studies he had seen on vaccine protection against the variant.

Despite the uncertainties, Edmunds said it was “absolutely critical” for people to get their booster doses “as rapidly as possible”: “I think it will help, and it will help very significantly, but I still think we are likely to be under quite a lot of pressure in a very short time.”

Prof Peter Openshaw, a member of the government’s New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group, who also took part in the webinar, said he favoured vaccinating children aged five to 11, adding that uncertainties over the medium- to long-term consequences of Covid were “much more worrying” than the potential side-effects of the vaccine. Edmunds agreed, adding that if the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency approved the jab for those aged five to 11, it should be rolled out as rapidly as possible.

“We’re certainly not out of the woods,” Edmunds said. “I think over the next two months we’re going to see a really rather large wave of Omicron. We are going to get a large number of cases, and it will result in a large numbers

of hospitalisations, and unfortunately it will result in a large number of deaths. I'm pretty sure of that.”

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Coronavirus

Stricter measures than plan B may be needed to rein in UK's Omicron growth



Under the new measures, the legal requirement to wear face coverings will be extended to most public indoor areas from Friday. Photograph: Amer Ghazzal/Rex/Shutterstock

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

Thu 9 Dec 2021 12.04 EST

Work from home, but keep going to Christmas parties: Boris Johnson's advice has prompted questions about the logic behind plan B and left a lingering sense of confusion about the scale of the threat posed by the Omicron variant. So does the plan stand up to scrutiny?

Scientists say that making working from home a first line of defence, ahead of social gatherings, is not necessarily a frivolous choice. In the hierarchy of

measures that can be deployed, working from home is an effective way to bring down people's daily contacts and is relatively painless economically. However, many fear that the threat posed by Omicron will require more than the first line of defence and that plan B does not go far enough.

"People working from home makes a lot of sense as it can massively reduce contacts at a population level," says Dr Deepti Gurdasani, a clinical epidemiologist and senior lecturer at Queen Mary University of London. "Having said that, the other measure that has the largest effect is reducing gathering sizes. For me it makes no sense to be instituting working from home policies and saying go ahead with parties. That is frankly ridiculous."

The problem is that we are on such a steep trajectory that hospitals could easily be overwhelmed by January, depending on how case numbers translate into severe illness. "What we are doing now is very unlikely to be sufficient," said Gurdasani.

This view is hinted at in official advice to the government by the Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Modelling this week that outlines a number of scenarios the UK could face. Under the worst three scenarios, which together are judged to be almost inevitable for the UK, "very stringent measures" are expected to be needed to control the growth of infections.

There are also questions about whether the usual hierarchy of measures still stands during the Christmas season and at a time when a highly transmissible new variant is spreading rapidly. [Christmas parties and large indoor gatherings](#) have already been linked to Omicron super-spreader events.

Work parties, in particular, bring together people who are more vulnerable to severe disease and younger people, among whom Omicron appears to be spreading most quickly at the moment. In addition, unlike the controlled workplace environment, parties often take place in crowded indoor settings, without masks and with loud talking and singing.

"The problem with Christmas parties, unlike clubbing, is that you get senior managers – wrinklies like me, who are not normally in high-transmission

environments,” said Prof Paul Hunter of the University of East Anglia.

“The advice I gave my university was to shut down faculty-level Christmas parties. Going out with a few direct colleagues doesn’t worry me. It’s where you get the whole faculty turning up and cramming into the atrium of a building and mixing for a few hours that is a risk.”

There is also a question of tone and how public health messages are interpreted, as well as the rules and guidance in place. Some say that encouraging parties also feels at odds with the looming wave of cases that has been projected and could potentially undermine public adherence to other advice.

“To tell people to work from home then to say to go to Christmas parties is contradictory and lacks coherence,” said Prof Susan Michie, director of the Centre for Behaviour Change at University College London. “It’s a high-risk situation and it undermines the message to work at home where you can and to be cautious. It’s a problem for both those reasons.

“Let’s learn from the past,” Michie added. “This is the third time of delaying measures when we have clear exponential growth of infection.”

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Joe Biden

Biden faces vaccine mandate pushback from own party despite support of scientists



Joe Biden talks about Covid vaccines at the White House in Washington DC in November. Photograph: Susan Walsh/AP

Melody Schreiber

Fri 10 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

Two Democratic senators have resisted Joe Biden's vaccine-or-test mandate for large businesses, illustrating problems the US president faces even within a faction of his own party, despite having the support of scientists and public health experts.

The US Senate on Wednesday evening voted to overturn the mandate as new cases and hospitalizations continue rising in the country.

The West Virginia senator [Joe Manchin](#), who co-sponsored the bill, and Montana's Senator Jon Tester crossed Democratic party lines to vote yes and join 50 Republicans in their political opposition to the public health policy.

The bill is seen as a largely symbolic gesture, since it would also need to pass the Democratic-led House and would probably be vetoed by Biden. The mandate was already put on hold by a federal appeals court, and the future of the mandates will likely be decided by courts, not lawmakers.

But the vote showed the significant political problems Biden has faced in carrying out his public health policies to combat the pandemic. He has encountered virtually implacable Republican opposition – now joined by rebel Democrat senators – that has ranged from ideological concerns over how far government power can be exercised to fringe conspiracy theories and quack science.

Manchin, who is vaccinated and boosted, said the rule represents federal overreach, which is why he co-sponsored the bill.

“It is not the place of the federal government to tell private business owners how to protect their employees from Covid-19 and operate their businesses,” he said in a [statement](#), nonetheless urging “every West Virginian and American to get vaccinated to protect themselves and their loved ones”.

West Virginia, which has the third-highest rate of deaths from Covid in the country, and Montana, where some health systems instituted crisis standards of care, have suffered devastating surges throughout the pandemic. Half of all West Virginians and half of eligible Montanans are fully vaccinated, both lower than the national average.

Public health experts fear the mandates, and political opposition to them, have further cemented the [politicization of health policies](#).

West Virginia has joined other states in suing to undermine the mandates for large businesses and government contractors, both of which have been blocked by federal courts. Governor Jim Justice has said there’s “[no chance](#)” vaccines will be mandated in West Virginia schools.

“The data is very clear that mandates work,” Christopher Martin, a physician and professor at the West Virginia University School of Public Health, said. “I don’t know of any other measure right now that would get more people vaccinated other than requiring them to do so.”

There is a long precedent of strong vaccination requirements in workplaces and schools in West Virginia and around the country.

But concerns over the Covid vaccines combined with political polarization have “unintended consequences” because “people are mistrustful of governments”, Martin said. The opposition is not based on public health concerns but on civil liberties and other arguments.

“That starting point of not wanting the vaccine in the first place again arises from this broad and inherent mistrust in institutions,” he said. “People perceived these institutions to fail them.”

In West Virginia, widespread job losses over the past several decades have eroded trust in the government. The vaccine mandates expose larger societal rifts, Martin said. “Vaccinations in particular in this current climate have really exploded the problems that we have in our society.”

Officials, including in public health, “need to begin the exercise of restoring trust”, Martin said.

In the meantime, vaccine mandates will work like seatbelt laws once did, gradually becoming the norm, he said. “It improves compliance, but it takes a long time.”

The US is now seeing an average of more than 119,000 new Covid cases and 1,700 deaths every day.

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Tories, look in the mirror: hasn't the price of being humiliated by Johnson become too high?

[Gaby Hinsliff](#)





‘Genuinely necessary public health measures are now unfortunately tarnished by association with the prime minister.’ Photograph: WPA/Getty Images

Fri 10 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

Thinking of throwing a boozy office party, a potential super-spreader event in the teeth of a Covid storm? Then knock yourself out, is the official advice from a government accused of being only too willing to open a celebratory bottle itself. Just don’t, whatever you do, enter the office to actually do some work.

The Omicron variant has finally prodded Boris Johnson into adopting his fallback [Covid Plan B](#), and what a classically Johnsonian plan it is; contradictory, rushed and shrouded in murky allegations. From Monday, everyone who can should work from home, but the prime minister wants office bashes and school nativity plays to go ahead. There will be vaccine passports for entering big venues, but no masks in pubs and restaurants.

If these compromises were meant to placate freedom-loving Tories, they failed; backbenchers threatening to rebel en masse were only further incensed when Johnson hinted he was considering making vaccination compulsory. That his own health secretary, Sajid Javid, promptly said this

[would be unethical](#) indicates how carefully that idea had been debated inside cabinet before being tossed out, seemingly on the hoof.

The kindest explanation for the chaos is that Johnson was distracted by his wife, Carrie, [going into labour](#), as he careered from parliamentary showdown to Covid press conference on Wednesday. But even some of his own backbenchers are no longer willing to be so charitable, publicly accusing him of playing games with public health to distract attention from the now notorious Christmas party allegedly held in Downing Street during last year's lockdown – just one of around half a dozen assorted leaving dos and other soirees alleged to have taken place when socialising was banned last year.

Downing Street has repeatedly denied any rules were broken on its premises but only 9% of voters believe them, according to a [poll for Sky News](#); meanwhile, genuinely necessary public health measures are unfortunately tarnished by association with the prime minister. Most people will rightly still obey the new rules, as they always have, for fear of infecting loved ones. But the corrosive suspicion lingers that, as Michael Kill, the dismayed chief executive of the Night Time Industries Association suggested, hospitality might have been [thrown under a bus](#) “for the prime minister to save his own skin”. Just as his magic rubbed off on Conservatives in the good times, now the muck splatters across everything he touches.

Watching a distraught Allegra Stratton gulp her way through her [resignation statement](#) this week, you could see this effect unfolding in plain sight. A little over a year ago, she was best known as the aide responsible for artfully polishing the halo of the squeaky-clean chancellor Rishi Sunak. Then she was poached by Downing Street to do something similar for Johnson, hosting the televised briefings he briefly considered holding but ditched shortly after she arrived. It was while rehearsing for this job which she never did that Stratton was filmed giggling through questions about a party she says she never attended. On Wednesday, she looked genuinely broken, as if realising for the first time what had become of her.

Whether he knew about the parties or not, the charge against Boris Johnson is that he's responsible for creating a louche and reckless culture in which anything seemingly goes but all too often those who follow his lead get

burned. The former Treasury permanent secretary Nick Macpherson this week [tweeted the same lines](#) from The Great Gatsby that have been echoing in my mind all week, about a gilded set who “smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness”, leaving others to pick up the pieces. The question is whether Johnson’s apparent willingness to throw his own team under the bus, by suggesting he had been misled about what happened inside his own building, finally encourages some of those helpful others to cut their losses.

Why do Tories keep metaphorically jumping into bed with him, knowing how it invariably ends? Some assume they can control him, as Dominic Cummings seemingly did, calculating that he would get Brexit done and could then be ousted. A few imagine that they can change him. Others are under no illusions but consider the trade-offs worth it, for now: a briskly transactional category covering many MPs who voted for him as leader. And it’s on their constantly shifting calculations that much depends.

If Downing Street had given straight answers from the start, Christmas parties might be ancient history by now. But the focus would have merely shifted to the Electoral Commission fining the Conservative party over its role in trying to get donors to [fund a makeover](#) of the Johnsons’ private flat, and a curious discrepancy between details in that report and what Johnson previously told Lord Geidt, the independent adviser on ministerial interests, about the renovations. If not that, it would have been fresh allegations that during the chaotic British evacuation of Afghanistan either Boris or Carrie Johnson [controversially intervened](#) to help get the animal rescuer Pen Farthing and his menagerie out of Kabul, which Downing Street has also previously denied.

It’s no longer just about whether voters care, but whether MPs sent out publicly to defend the line can look themselves in the mirror. The Conservative party must ask itself whether it is content to keep being humiliated like this by its own leader or whether, like a long-suffering mistress tired of spending weekends alone, it can finally summon the self-respect to break free.

- Gaby Hinsliff is a Guardian columnist

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[OpinionGermany](#)

From Hungary to China, Germany's toughest challenges lie to the east

[Timothy Garton Ash](#)



Illustration: Nate Kitch/The Guardian

Fri 10 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

The Lufthansa stewardess on the flight from London to Munich handed me one very small, yellow-wrapped bar of chocolate: the usual ration. When she saw that I was working my way through a long German document she gave me one more, exclaiming *Sie sind so fleissig!* ("You're so hard-working!") I explained that this was actually the 177-page coalition agreement between the three parties forming her new government. Excitedly, she showered me with a whole handful of the miniature chocolate bars, followed by yet another handful. Most of them I offered to my neighbour, who had young children, but I slipped a couple into my pocket. A few days later, I presented one to a key minister in the "[traffic light](#)" government of Social Democrats, Greens and Free Democrats that [formally took office](#) in Berlin on Wednesday. He accepted it with appropriate ceremonial gravity.

Some chocolate is called for. Given the difficulty of reaching common ground between three parties, the coalition agreement is remarkably coherent, substantial and ambitious. Parts of it are even well-written, with echoes of the inspirational rhetoric of the great chancellor of West German *Ostpolitik*, Willy Brandt. As befits a democracy now more widely respected than that of the US, it proposes a mixture of continuity and change. Yet the government headed by chancellor [Olaf Scholz](#) faces huge challenges from its very first day. As often before in German history, many of these lie in the east. They are Germany's new Eastern Questions.

The first is within its own borders, in the former East Germany. In September's [general election](#), roughly a quarter of the votes cast in Saxony and Thuringia went to the far-right xenophobic Alternative for Germany (AfD). Just this week there was a flashmob-style [demonstration in Saxony](#) against compulsory vaccination, reportedly organised by far-right activists. The social psychology of those two states of eastern Germany has more in common with other parts of post-communist central Europe, such as Poland and Hungary, than it does with, say, Hamburg or Stuttgart. Scholz's agenda of "respect" for those who feel ignored or disrespected has particular relevance here.

Germany's second new eastern question is about the erosion of democracy and the rule of law in Poland and Hungary. Germany's economic presence in these countries is enormous. Under chancellor Angela Merkel, Berlin has been largely responsible for a too-soft EU line towards their populist rulers. The coalition agreement is very strong on the need for more European unity and respect for the rule of law. Will the new government follow through, becoming a decisive advocate of all-European action to restore democracy in Hungary and the rule of law in Poland?

The third and fourth eastern questions are intertwined. They concern the lands between the EU and Russia – Ukraine and [Belarus](#) – and Russia itself. The balance between relations with Russia and the other countries of central and eastern Europe is one of the oldest conundrums of German policy towards the east. The last 300 years have seen every possible variant, including the most extreme: the brutal, total division of Poland between Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union along a secretly agreed line in autumn 1939. Old ghosts are easily awakened in east European minds. Many have seen the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, connecting Russia directly to Germany, as another example of Germany prioritising its relationship with Moscow over the interests of the lands between.

In this respect, the coalition agreement is remarkable. It puts the relationship with Ukraine and Belarus immediately after those with the US and UK, and before that with [Russia](#). It supports the Belarusian opposition's demand for new elections and declares: "The Russian intervention in favour of [Belarusian president Alexander] Lukashenko is unacceptable". It commits to supporting the restoration of the "full territorial integrity and sovereignty" of Ukraine and calls for an end to any further attempts to destabilise the country.

Yet before the ink is even dry, these fine words are being put to the test. Vladimir Putin is massing a large military force on Ukraine's eastern border, demanding respect for his "red line" that Ukraine should neither join Nato nor be militarily supplied or supported by Nato members. US intelligence says this looks like a serious invasion force. At least one participant in the annual Valdai Discussion Group meeting with Putin in October came back with the impression that the Russian threat was real. German intelligence apparently thinks it is still sabre-rattling.

Either way, credible deterrence is called for. US president Joe Biden is concentrating on [economic measures](#) and Germany is a key player within the European and western orchestra. Is chancellor Scholz prepared to say clearly to the Russian leader, at least in private, that if Russia were to invade Ukraine again, the Nord Stream 2 pipeline would become the world's largest underwater white elephant? That would upset Scholz's former party boss, Gerhard Schröder, who is – quite disgracefully – the chairman of Nord Stream 2, but it would be a major signal of the new government's democratic, European and western commitment.

The Russian/Ukrainian issue is the most urgent, but Germany's fifth eastern question is the biggest in the long run: China. Call it the far eastern question if you will. The language on China in the coalition agreement is again quite striking. It adopts the EU's triadic formula of "partnership, competition and systemic rivalry", mentioning human rights violations in Xinjiang, the destruction of "one country, two systems" in Hong Kong and the need for transatlantic coordination of China policy. It insists that any change of the status quo in the Taiwan Strait can only happen peacefully and by mutual agreement.

At this moment, China is blocking all imports from Lithuania, to punish the small Baltic EU member state for allowing the opening of a Taiwan representation office. Beijing is even pressuring multinational companies to drop their Lithuanian suppliers. The EU is supposed to be a single trading bloc, speaking with one voice. The European Commission is proposing a strong package of measures precisely to counter such bullying. Is Germany ready to support a robust EU response to Beijing's attempt to divide and rule inside [Europe](#), or is it too frightened of damaging its own economic relationship with China?

In addressing these eastern questions, the new German government faces two large domestic obstacles: German business, which for the most part just wants to go on making money in all these places, most especially in China, and German public opinion, which for the most part has simply not woken up to how threatening the world has become, especially in the east. But at least there is the intellectual understanding and proclaimed political purpose at the top. If Germany's new leaders succeed in striking the right balance in

each case, then not just one Lufthansa chocolate bar but a large box of the very best Belgian chocolates should be forthcoming.

- Timothy Garton Ash is a Guardian columnist
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OpinionQuantitative easing

Spending without taxing: now we're all guinea pigs in an endless money experiment

Satyajit Das



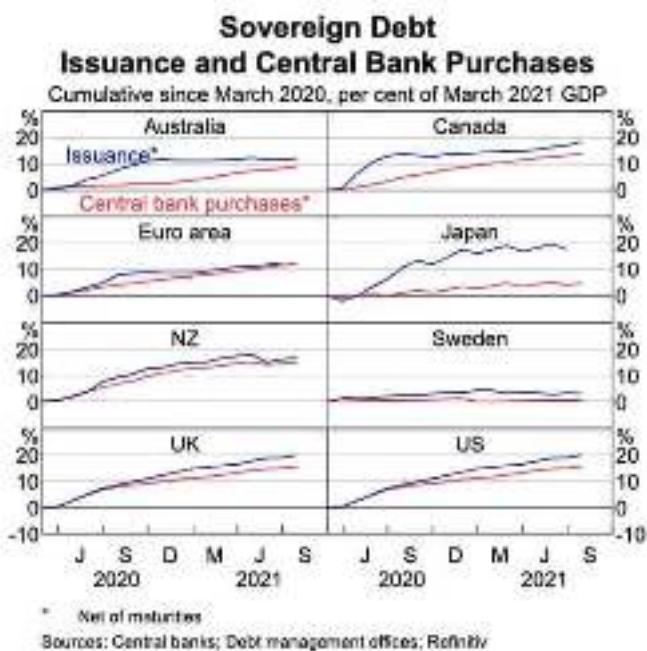
‘A state, MMT argues, finances its spending by creating money, not from taxes or borrowing. As nations cannot go bankrupt when they can print their own currency, deficits and debt don’t matter.’ Photograph: RBA/PR IMAGE

Thu 9 Dec 2021 19.54 EST

Today, citizens are unwitting participants in a covert policy experiment. It embraces the idea of higher government spending without the necessity of increased taxes. While [modern monetary theory](#) (MMT), the doctrine, has obvious appeal for politicians, irrespective of economic religion, the long-term consequences may prove problematic.

A state, MMT argues, finances its spending by creating money, not from taxes or borrowing. As nations cannot go bankrupt when they can print their own currency, deficits and debt don't matter. Accordingly, governments should spend to ensure full employment, guaranteeing a job for everyone willing to work. Alternatively, though not formally part of MMT, governments can fund [universal basic income \(UBI\)](#) schemes, providing every individual an unconditional flat-rate payment irrespective of circumstances.

While no government or central bank overtly advocates MMT, since the 2008 global financial crisis and, more recently, the pandemic, policymakers have adopted many of its tenets by stealth. Popular one-off payments and increased welfare entitlements, which could become permanent, increasingly support economic activity. As the graph below highlights, central banks now buy a high percentage of new government debt, effectively financing this additional spending by money creation.



Sovereign Debt Issuance and Central Bank purchases. Photograph: Reserve Bank of Australia

Source: Nick Baker, Marcus Miller and Ewan Rankin (2021 September) *Government Bond Markets in Advanced Economies During the Pandemic*; Reserve Bank of Australia Bulletin

MMT is actually a melange of old ideas: Keynesian deficit spending; the post gold standard ability of nations to create money at will; and quantitative easing (central bank financed government spending) pioneered by Japan. However, there are several concerns about MMT.

First, the source of useful, well-compensated work is unclear. While MMT suggests taxes can be used to direct production, government influence over businesses that create jobs is limited. The impact of labour-reducing technology and competitive global supply chains is glossed over. Getting one person to dig a hole and another to fill it in creates employment, but it is of doubtful economic and social value. The woeful record of postwar centrally planned economies, where people pretended to work and the government pretended to pay them, highlights the issues.

Second, excess government spending and large deficits financed by money creation risk creating inflation. MMT argues that this is a risk only where the economy is at full employment or there is no excess capacity, and can be managed by fine-tuning intervention.

Third, MMT may weaken the currency. Roughly half of Australia's government and significant amounts of state, bank and business debt is held by foreigners. Devaluation and loss of investor confidence in the stability of the exchange rate would affect the ability to and cost of borrowing overseas and importing goods. The expense of servicing foreign currency debt would rise.

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Fourth, while nation states able to issue their own fiat currencies, it is unavailable to state governments, private businesses or households who are major borrowers in Australia.

Fifth, who decides the target employment rate or UBI payment level? Unemployment, inflation and output gaps are difficult to accurately measure in practice. Effects on employment incentives, workforce participation and productivity are untested. How will policymakers control the process or what would happen if MMT failed?

The theory delegates management of MMT operations to politicians, rather than unelected economic mandarins. But financially challenged elected representatives may be poorly equipped for the task. Political considerations and cronyism may influence decisions.

Sixth, there are implications for financial stability. Lower rates, the result of central bank debt purchases, and inflation fears might drive a switch to real assets, increasing the price of property and shares representing claims on underlying cashflows. It may encourage hoarding of commodities. This exacerbates inequality and increases the cost of essentials such as food, fuel and shelter. Fear of debasement of the value of paper money, in part, is behind unproductive speculation in gold and cryptocurrencies.

Seventh, MMT might undermine trust in the currency. Instead of spending the payments, citizens may question a world where governments print money and [throw it out of helicopters](#).

Finally, Japan's use of persistent deficits to boost short-term economic activity and incur government debt (currently more than 260% of GDP, compared with [a global average of about 100%](#)) does not prove the effectiveness of MMT. The country's circumstances are [unique](#) and it has been [mired in stagnation](#) for three decades with its GDP largely unchanged.

MMT's allure is the irresistible promise of freebies; full employment, unlimited higher education, healthcare and government services, state-of-the-art infrastructure, green energy and "[the colonisation of Mars](#)". But monetary manipulation cannot change the supply of real goods and services or overcome resource constraints, otherwise prosperity and utopia would be guaranteed.

While the current game can and will continue for a time, the bill will eventually arrive. The borrowings will have to be paid for out of disposable income, higher taxes or through inflation, which reduces purchasing power, especially of the most vulnerable, and destroys savings. Other than nature's free bounty, everything has a cost.

Satyajit Das is a financier and author whose latest books include [A Banquet of Consequences – Reloaded](#) (March 2021) and [Fortune's Fool: Australia's](#)

Choices (forthcoming March 2022)

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Under the skin of the ocean, there's a super-loud fishcotheque going on

[Philip Hoare](#)



The author swimming with sperm whales in the Azores Photograph: Andrew Sutton

Thu 9 Dec 2021 13.31 EST

A coral reef in Indonesia thought to be dead has been [discovered to be erupting with glorious uproar](#) – the sound of fishes whooping and grunting as they communicate and search for food. It's like Finding Nemo come to life. We shouldn't be surprised. The ocean, like Prospero's island in The Tempest, is full of strange noises. It crackles and it roars. Jacques Cousteau may have been a great ocean explorer, but when he made his film [The Silent World in 1956](#), I wonder whether he was actually listening down there, through the bubbles of his aqualung.

Sound travels five times faster in the water. The ocean is a giant conductor of sound, an aquatic internet for every organism in it. They feel it in their bodies, and as they create sound, they are physically reaching out: from pistol shrimps that snap their claws so loudly that [the sound makes them seem a hundred times bigger](#), to the great whales who, as [Roger Payne](#), the first person to record and release whale song, has observed, make a sound as big as the ocean itself, and which can be [heard for thousands of miles](#). A humpback in the Caribbean can be heard by a fellow whale off the coast of Europe. At 230 decibels (an aeroplane 100 feet away reaches 140dB), sperm whales are [the loudest animals on Earth](#). Diving with these cetaceans in three-mile-deep waters off the Azores, I had to sign a consent form from the islands' government, waiving liability should my hearing be damaged. Indeed, when I was first echo-located by a large female sperm whale, I felt her sonar clicks judder through my body like an MRI scanner.

American scientists first recorded humpback song in the Atlantic in the 1960s, when trying to detect the sounds of Soviet submarines during the cold war. Instead they picked up the eerie, fluting calls of whales. In the early days of whaling, sailors who heard these sounds through the wooden walls of their ships believed they were the ghosts of their drowned comrades. The recording of that sound, when released, actually saved the whales, because they suddenly had voices, [a sense of culture and personhood](#).

Deep below what [Herman Melville](#) called “the ocean’s skin”, sound is the only viable sense, adding mystery to a world we know so little about. In the 1990s it was believed that an unidentified and [very loud bloop](#) detected in the benthic abyss was the sound of an enormous animal, possibly a kraken-like squid. In fact it has been proved to be [the noise of an Antarctic icequake](#).

Such uncanny sounds have convinced us of mythical creatures. The keening calls of female grey seals gave rise to the idea of selkies, humans in seal skins – or the other way around. Sound artist [Chris Watson](#) used recordings of grey seals to embody [A Song to the Siren](#), written by singer-songwriter Tim Buckley and poet Larry Beckett in 1967, its plaintive, elegiac tone evoking [the call of the sea itself](#); and, perhaps, Buckley’s early death and of the sad drowning of his own son, his fellow singer Jeff Buckley, when swimming at night.

The lure of the sirens is a myth dating back to Homer’s *Odyssey* and beyond: the notion that we might be drawn in by its hypnotic sound. But it also speaks to our ignorance of the sea and what it means to other cultures. The Wild Coast of South Africa is currently [threatened by sonic oil explorations by Royal Dutch Shell](#). Conservationists fear the use of “sound guns” will disrupt oceanic wildlife, from plankton to the southern right whales that breed in those waters. “Our ancestors’ blood was spilt protecting our land and sea,” [Reinford Zikulu, one of the protest group Sustaining the Wild Coast, said](#). “We now feel a sense of duty to protect our land and sea for future generations.”

The invention of steam engines, military sonar (ironically inspired by whales), and sonic surveys has created a cacophony threatening foraging fishes, the immune systems of mammals, and the social structures of many creatures. Yet the sound of the ocean remains the sound of life. Stick your head in any shallow sea and you’ll hear the crackling of shrimps and fishes as they grub for food in the sand or on a reef. It was a revelation to me when I first heard that sound. It made me realise the deep was not the fearful place I had imagined as a child, but a living entity, producing a beautiful music of its own.

It was somehow reassuring. After all, we first experience sound through the salt water of the womb, the little sea inside our mother. Is that why historically the sea has been regarded as a “she”? When I was scanned by that matriarchal whale in the deep blue Atlantic, I had just lost my own mother. I’d appeared in the whale’s domain, trying to understand who she was. And she in turn was trying to work who I was, too.

This article was amended on 10 December 2021. The sirens appear in Homer’s Odyssey, not the Iliad.

- Philip Hoare is an author whose books include [Leviathan, Or the Whale](#)
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2021.12.10 - Around the world

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Bosnia-Herzegovina

US hopes to walk Bosnia ‘back from the cliff’ as Serbs step up secession threat



Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik is pushing for the Serb-dominated part of Bosnia to pull out of the armed forces, judiciary and tax system.
Photograph: Dado Ruvic/Reuters

[Julian Borger](#) in Washington

Fri 10 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

The US is determined to walk Bosnia “back from the cliff” amid secessionist threats from Serb nationalists and is exploring sanctions among other options, a senior state department official has said.

Derek Chollet, a senior adviser to secretary of state Antony Blinken, was speaking ahead of a meeting on Friday of the Bosnian Serb assembly, which is expected to vote on whether to begin the process of opting out of the Bosnian army, judiciary and tax system.

Such steps, called for by the [nationalist leader Milorad Dodik](#), would represent a substantial step towards secession. There is likely to be a six-month delay before the assembly's decisions take effect, but a vote could start a clock ticking towards a possible return to conflict.

Chollet, whose formal title is state department counsellor, visited Bosnia last month as part of a diplomatic offensive by the Biden administration to address long festering problems and threats by Dodik to reconstitute a Serb armed force.

“We have really tried to accelerate some of our diplomatic efforts to try to walk this back from the cliff,” Chollet told the Guardian. “It’s notable that we are 26 years almost to the day since [the Dayton peace accords were signed](#) and there’s talk of potential return to conflict or a major crisis with Bosnia-Herzegovina, which is deeply concerning to us.”

During the war, the Bosnian Serb army carried out widespread ethnic cleansing, a nearly four-year siege of Sarajevo, and the destruction of the UN “safe haven” of Srebrenica. About 100,000 people were killed in the conflict.

Chollet said he had handed over a letter from Blinken to Bosnia’s leaders, stressing that peace in Bosnia was a priority for the administration.

“This is an issue that many people in this administration from President Biden on down have a long association with and feel very strongly about personally,” he said.

As a senator, Biden supported US military assistance to Bosnia’s Muslim-led government, Blinken was on the national security council staff when the US intervened militarily, and Samantha Power, now the head of the US Agency for International Development, was a journalist in Sarajevo during the war. Chollet was an aide to the US envoy, Richard Holbrooke, and wrote a book on the Dayton negotiations.

The second theme of Blinken’s letter was the threat of sanctions against political leaders who threaten the post-Dayton peace. Dodik, the main target

of that threat, has declared he does not “[give a shit](#)” about sanctions, but Chollet believes they can have an impact.

“I think we’ve seen some evidence that the leverage we have, that includes policies like sanctions, can be effective and trying to shape behaviour,” he said.

As for the possibility of reinforcing the international military presence in Bosnia, now just a few hundred EU troops, Chollet said he did not want “to get ahead of our discussions” but added “we are exploring all options”.

Diplomats who have recently visited Banja Luka, the largest town in the Republika Srpska (Serb Republic), said there was uneasiness among the business interests around Dodik about the impact of US punitive measures.

Jelena Subotić, a political science professor at Georgia State University, said Dodik also had to contend with war weariness among Serb voters.

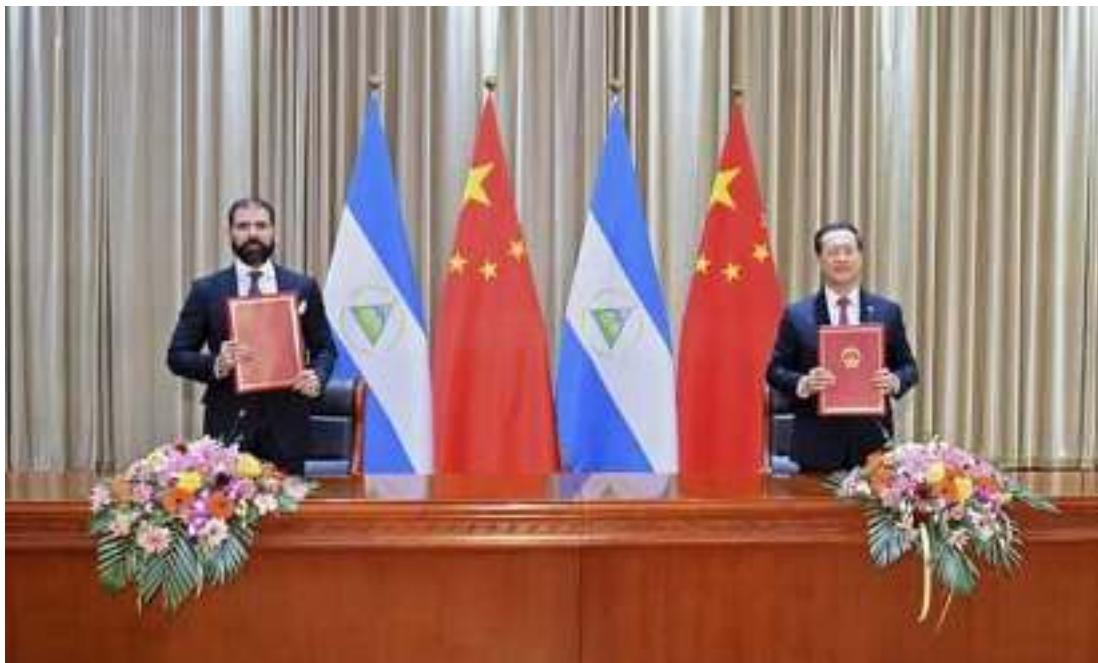
“I think we should take Dodik’s secessionist threat very seriously. He has been signalling his objectives for a number of years so this did not come out of thin air,” Subotić said. “A much bigger question is if the people of Republika Srpska will follow. It is one thing to engage in nationalist rhetoric, it is another to actually pick up arms.”

During the Trump administration, both the US and the EU floated the idea of ethnically based land swaps involving territory in Bosnia and Kosovo as a means of resolving regional grievances, but Chollet insisted “that’s not where we’ve been focusing on at all”.

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Taiwan

Nicaragua cuts ties with Taiwan and pivots to China



Representatives of Nicaragua and China display their jointly signed communique on the resumption of diplomatic relations. Photograph: Yue Yuwei/AP

[Helen Davidson](#)

[@heldavidson](#)

Fri 10 Dec 2021 00.33 EST

Nicaragua has switched diplomatic allegiance to China, leaving Taiwan with just 14 governments around the world that formally recognise it as a country.

The announcement by the Central American country's foreign ministry also recognised Beijing's claim over Taiwan as a Chinese province, a dispute that is at the heart of [escalating tensions in the region](#).

“The government of the Republic of Nicaragua today breaks diplomatic relations with [Taiwan](#) and ceases to have any contact or official relationship,” said the statement issued in Spanish and English.

“The People’s Republic of [China](#) is the only legitimate government that represents all of China, and Taiwan is an inalienable part of the Chinese territory.”

The announcement came after a meeting in Tianjin between China’s deputy foreign minister Ma Zhaoxu and a Nicaraguan delegation led by President Daniel Ortega’s son Laureano Ortega Murillo, who is the presidential adviser for investments, trade and international cooperation.

The Taiwan government expressed “heartfelt pain and regret” over Nicaragua’s decision and accused the Ortega-led government of disregarding a “longstanding and close friendship” between the two peoples.

“Taiwan has always been a sincere and reliable friend to Nicaragua and has long worked with Nicaragua to improve the livelihoods of its people and assist with its national development,” it said, adding that it would immediately terminate relations from its side and recall all diplomatic staff “to safeguard national sovereignty and dignity”.

President Tsai Ing-wen dismissed Nicaragua’s rebuff, saying: “The more international support we have, there will be more pressure from the authoritarian camp.”

The Kuomintang opposition condemned Nicaragua’s move, and expressed “regret” that Beijing “continuously sought to suppress our country’s international presence”.

Zhang Jun, China’s ambassador to the UN, welcomed Nicaragua’s move, saying it was “in line with the prevailing trend of the time and people’s aspiration”.

China’s foreign minister, Wang Yi, said those still recognising Taiwan were doing so because of dollar diplomacy and pressure from the US.

“The US has adopted outside standards on this issue,” Wang said. “The US itself established diplomatic relations with China some 40 years ago. What right do they have in preventing other sovereign countries from making their own choices?”

After Taiwan (formally the Republic of China) was expelled from the United Nations in 1971 and the seat was transferred to the People’s Republic of China, most governments switched their bilateral ties, many under intensive lobbying by Beijing, which is hypersensitive to any alluded or actual recognition of Taiwan.

Taiwan and China have often [traded accusations](#) of using financial incentives such as loans and infrastructure investment in seeking to retain or gain formal allies.

The most recent transfers of recognition from Taipei to Beijing were by Solomon Islands and Kiribati, in September 2019. That decision has at least in part driven recent [unrest in Solomon Islands](#).

El Salvador and the Dominican Republic switched in 2018, and Panama in 2017, after which it received [waves of Chinese investment](#). This year Beijing was accused of [offering Paraguay Covid-19 vaccines](#) in return for switching recognition, which Beijing denied. Nicaragua had previously cut its 55-year-long ties with Taiwan in 1985 before re-recognising it in 1990.

Now just 14 governments, primarily in the Pacific and Latin American regions, maintain formal ties with Taiwan. After Nicaragua, [many eyes are now on Honduras](#) and its newly elected president, Xiomara Castro.

Not all those who recognise Beijing also recognise its claim over Taiwan. The Chinese Communist party says Taiwan is a Chinese province that will be taken by force if necessary, and that its leaders are separatists. Taiwan’s democratically elected government says it is already a sovereign nation with no need to declare independence.

Nicaragua’s switch comes at a time of deteriorating relations with the US, which is one of Taiwan’s strongest allies despite not formally recognising it.

Ned Price, a US state department spokesperson, criticised the decision by the Ortega government, which he said had no mandate after a “sham election” in November.

“Without the mandate that comes with a free and fair election, Ortega’s actions cannot reflect the will of the Nicaraguan people, who continue to struggle for democracy and the ability to exercise their human rights and fundamental freedoms,” he said. He urged democratic countries around the world to “expand engagement with Taiwan”.

China recently took diplomatic and trade action against Lithuania after its government agreed to open mutual diplomatic stations with Taiwan, which included “Taiwan” in the office name.

This week the US invited Taiwan delegates, but none from China, to a democracy-themed summit, prompting days of Chinese state media outrage and government propaganda declaring [China was a superior democracy](#).

Additional research by Xiaoqian Zhu

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Jussie Smollett

Jussie Smollett found guilty of faking hate crime against himself



Jussie Smollett leaves the Leighton criminal court building after his trial on disorderly conduct charges on Wednesday in Chicago, Illinois. Photograph: Kamil Krzaczynski/AFP/Getty Images

[Maya Yang](#) and agencies

Fri 10 Dec 2021 08.06 EST

US actor [Jussie Smollett](#), known for his role on the TV show Empire, will return to court in Chicago in late January for a post-trial hearing and will learn at a later date whether he is going to prison after being found guilty late Thursday of faking a hate crime against himself to raise his celebrity profile.

Despite a gaggle of reporters and photographers at the courthouse clamoring for comment and pictures, Smollett strode past them without a word, despite other players in his three-year legal saga stopping to give interviews.

The [Chicago](#) jury, which deliberated for more than nine hours, convicted Smollett on five charges of disorderly conduct. He was acquitted on a sixth count, of lying to a detective in mid-February 2019, weeks after Smollett said he was attacked.

The charges against Smollett, who is Black and gay and said he was drawn to the role of a Black gay man in Empire because it was still relatively rare to see such a character onscreen, had become a touchstone in America's culture wars at the intersection of culture, racism, politics and celebrity.

Many fellow stars initially rushed to support Smollett when he first made the accusations in January 2019 that he had been attacked in Chicago in the early hours as he walked home by people shouting "This is Maga country," a reference to Donald Trump's trademark political slogan "Make America Great Again".

Smollett told police that he had been assaulted on a darkened street by two masked men. According to Smollett, his assailants put a noose around his neck and poured chemicals on him while yelling racist and homophobic slurs and expressing their support for Trump.

But a month later police arrested Smollett himself, accusing the actor of paying two brothers \$3,500 to stage the assault in a ploy to get public sympathy and boost his show-business profile.

Prosecutors had described the evidence against Smollett as "overwhelming", saying what he did in January 2019 caused [Chicago](#) police to unduly spend enormous amounts of time and resources.

"Besides being against the law, it is just plain wrong to outright denigrate something as serious as real hate crime and then make sure it involved words and symbols that have such historical significance in our country," special prosecutor Dan Webb told the jury in his closing arguments.

The verdict came after a roughly one-week trial in which two brothers testified that Smollett recruited them to fake an attack on him near his home

in downtown Chicago in January 2019. Smollett repeatedly denied the claims.

The brothers, Abimbola Osundairo and Olabinjo Osundairo, said Smollett orchestrated the hoax, telling them to put a noose around his neck and rough him up in view of a surveillance camera, and that he said he wanted video of the hoax made public via social media.

Abimbola Osundairo, who worked with Smollett on the Chicago set of Empire, and his brother also testified that Smollett paid them \$3,500 for faking the attack.

Smollett called the brothers “liars” and said their account was “100% false”. He testified over two days about being the victim of what he said was a hate crime, telling the jury “there was no hoax”.

Smollett said he wrote the \$3,500 check to Abimbola Osundairo for nutrition and training advice. Asked by his defense attorney if he gave Osundairo payment for some kind of hoax, Smollett replied: “Never.”

Under cross-examination on Tuesday, Smollett said that a few days before the alleged attack, he picked up Abimbola Osundairo in his car to go work out and that Osundairo’s brother, Olabinjo, came along. Smollett denied the brothers’ earlier testimony that they drove around together – circling the area where the alleged attack occurred three times – as part of a “dry run” for the fake assault.

Smollett said the money allegedly paid for the attack was in fact for meal and workout plans that Abimbola Osundairo was providing so the actor could be more toned for upcoming performances.

The 29 January assault was reported to police, prompting a massive investigation that a lead detective said included some two-dozen officers and 3,000 staff hours. The investigation which included video from surveillance cameras, GPS and taxi and rideshare records led police to the Osundairo brothers, who told detectives Smollett had staged the alleged hate crime.

Smollett's defense attorneys argued that the brothers attacked the actor who is gay and Black because they were homophobic and didn't like "who he was". They also alleged the brothers made up the story about the attack being staged to get money from Smollett, and that they told him they wouldn't testify against him if he paid them each \$1m.

Disorderly conduct is a class 4 felony that carries a prison sentence of up to three years, but experts have said Smollett is more likely to be placed on probation and ordered to perform community service.

The damage to his personal and professional life may be more severe. Smollett lost his role on Empire after prosecutors said the alleged attack was a hoax, and he told jurors earlier this week: "I've lost my livelihood".

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[China](#)

China: editorial says Communist party members must have three children



China's birthrate has plummeted to a record low, highlighting a looming demographic crisis for Beijing. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

[Helen Davidson](#)

[@heldavidson](#)

Thu 9 Dec 2021 23.01 EST

An editorial in a Chinese state-run news website has suggested Communist party members are obliged to have three children for the good of the country, as Beijing seeks to address [plummeting birthrates](#).

The editorial, which was first published last month, went viral this week and drew sharp reaction from Chinese internet users, with millions of shares, views and comments. As the wave of reaction grew, the original article disappeared from the website.

The piece, published by a state media outlet called [China](#) Reports Network, said every member of the ruling party – of which there are about 95 million – “should shoulder the responsibility and obligation of the country’s population growth and act on the three-child policy”.

“No party member should use any excuse, objective or personal, to not marry or have children, nor can they use any excuse to have only one or two children,” it said.

The post appears to have been deleted but screenshots have been widely shared, and associated hashtags reportedly viewed millions of times.

China is facing a demographic crisis with an ageing population and declining birthrates. More than 18% of the population is aged over 60, according to the 2020 census. Figures released by the country’s national bureau of statistics in November showed there were 8.5 births per 1,000 people in 2020, the first time in decades that the figure has fallen below 10. In 1978, the figure was more than 18 per 1,000.

The CCP has implemented a range of measures in response, including [relaxing long-held limits](#) on having children, easing the costs associated with education and child rearing, [subsidies](#) for second and third children, and introducing mandatory [“cooling off” periods for divorces](#), but they have had limited impact.

The one-child policy was formally ended in 2016, and replaced by a two-child limit on most Chinese couples, until this year when [it was lifted again to three](#). However young Chinese people continue to say the high cost of living and pressures of long working hours are obstacles to having children.

“Although the three-child policy has come out, many people don’t have the conditions, ability, money, or time to take care of children, especially for women, who have to go home early, and this will make more companies not want to hire women!” said one commenter on Weibo, China’s Twitter-like platform. “Shouldn’t society be balanced in development? When does it become a mandatory rule to have three children?”

Another said: “I’m just an ordinary person. My time, energy and money only allow me to raise a child in the future. Most party members are also ordinary people.”

Some warned that the editorial’s message could harm people’s faith in the party.

“‘Party members take the lead’ has always been our party’s fine tradition, which has withstood many tests of history,” said one commenter.

“The impact of this bad public opinion, like other public opinions, could easily change from accusations against the China Reports Network to resistance to the three-child policy and shaken trust in the government.”

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The Pacific projectPapua New Guinea

Villagers file human rights complaint over plan for giant PNG goldmine



The proposed gold, copper and silver mine is slated to be built along the Frieda River, which feeds into the Sepik River, the longest river in Papua New Guinea. Photograph: Education Images/Universal Images Group/Getty Images

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[Lyanne Togiba](#) in Port Moresby

Thu 9 Dec 2021 22.08 EST

More than 2,000 people in 60 villages in Papua New Guinea's north – where the country's largest gold, copper and silver mine is slated to be built – have filed a human rights complaint with the Australian government against developer PanAust.

The landowners of the proposed Frieda River mine, on a tributary to the Sepik in the north of New Guinea island, allege that PanAust failed to obtain their consent.

The coordinator of Project Sepik, Emmanuel Peni, said: “The failure by PanAust and its subsidiary Frieda River Limited to obtain consent from the Sepik River communities violates their right as Indigenous peoples to give their free, prior and informed consent to developments that affect them.”

PanAust, 80% shareholder in the project, is an Australian-registered miner ultimately owned by the Chinese government and part of state-owned Guangdong Rising Assets Management.

The complaint also alleges that “the proposed mine poses a serious risk for communities living on the Sepik River”. It was filed – on behalf of the affected community members by local organisation Project Sepik Inc and the Australian NGO Jubilee Australia Research Centre – with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Australian National Contact Point.

While the complaint does not stop development, Jubilee Australia’s executive director, Dr Luke Fletcher, said he hoped the National Contact Point would assess the validity of the complaint, perhaps looking at PanAust’s environmental impact statement – which the complainants allege does not adequately assess the impact of the project on water catchments – and organising meetings for the company, the NGOs and the Australian and PNG governments to “find a negotiated settlement”.

Fletcher said: “Those communities have the right to have their voices heard and to decide what happens on their land. The Sepik River communities have clearly voiced their concerns about this mine, but so far, those concerns have fallen on deaf ears.

“PanAust and its subsidiaries must pause all further mine development as all affected communities do not currently consent to the mine.”

The proposed 16,000-hectare mine would be built in one of the most seismically active regions in the world, with an accompanying dam to store 1,500 megatonnes of waste.

Government officials, environmental advocacy groups and villagers living along the river have [warned that the proposed dam is a potential environmental disaster](#) that could wipe out entire villages if there was a natural disaster.



The proposed Frieda River mine has been the subject of protests by residents of the Sepik River valley, downstream from the mine site. Photograph: Supplied

Similar concerns have been raised by 10 UN special rapporteurs, [who wrote to the governments](#) of Papua New Guinea, Australia, China, and Canada, as well as the Chinese state-owned [developers](#) of the mine, warning that the plan for the largest mine in Papua New Guinea's history carries a risk of catastrophic loss of life and environmental destruction and "appears to disregard the human rights of those affected".

PanAust says it has conducted "dam break analysis" which ensured "[appropriate factors of safety](#) have been incorporated into the design" of the dam.

"The probability of a [failure is very unlikely](#)," said the company's environmental impact statement. "However, the extreme consequences of complete failure leading to the uncontrolled release of large quantities of water and solids (from waste rock and tailings placement) would likely result in extreme downstream environmental and social impacts."

The proposed mine is forecast to yield gold, silver and copper worth an estimated US\$1.5bn a year for more than 30 years.

In response to detailed questions from the Guardian, a representative for PanAust said the company “politely declines the opportunity to provide comment”.

PanAust said in its environmental impact statement that the “nation-building project … presents broad commercial and socioeconomic development opportunities for Papua New Guinea”.

The mine plan also includes a hydroelectric plant, power grid, and road, airport and seaport upgrades.

PanAust said it had engaged in “extensive and ongoing engagement … over several decades” with those affected by the mine, running information sessions in nearly 140 villages attended by more than 18,000 people.

“Local opinions and issues have been sought through engagement campaigns … formal and informal meetings with village leaders, and through socioeconomic surveys conducted in villages between 2010 and 2018.”

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[Coronavirus](#)

Ministers at odds over Downing Street Christmas parties

01:07

'No rules were broken' if No 10 party took place, says police minister – video

*Peter Walker Political correspondent
@peterwalker99*

Mon 6 Dec 2021 04.31 EST

A party of the sort that is alleged to have taken place inside Downing Street last December might not necessarily have broken the strict lockdown rules in place at the time, the policing minister, [Kit Malthouse](#), has appeared to argue.

Malthouse's comments contradicted those made by Dominic Raab, the justice secretary, who [conceded on Sunday](#) that a "formal party" of the sort reported would have been contrary to the then-Covid-19 guidance.

Malthouse also took a different view to Raab's claim that the police "don't normally look back and investigate things that have taken place a year ago", saying it would be right for police to follow up any formal complaints about the event.

Questions about the gathering on 18 December, when London was in the top level of Covid restrictions, dogged Malthouse throughout a round of media interviews on Monday, one intended to showcase a new government strategy on drugs.

Malthouse was asked on BBC Radio 4's Today programme whether the type of party reported inside Downing Street, involving dozens of people

drinking, eating and playing games, would have contravened the rules if the BBC had done the same at the time.

He replied that this was not necessarily the case. He said: “You’re asking me a hypothetical question. I don’t know what the circumstances might have been, how far people would have been apart, what size and space it was. There’s all sorts of variations.”

Malthouse repeatedly dodged questions on how such a party could possibly have been in compliance with the rules, which explicitly barred any office gatherings not connected to work.

“The reassurances I have been given is that none of those rules were broken at Downing Street, that they complied with Covid regulations at the time,” he said.

Asked how this could be the case given Downing Street had not denied reports about the party, Malthouse said: “I wasn’t there. I don’t know. A description that hasn’t been denied doesn’t mean that’s what actually took place.”

Asked why No 10 had not denied such a party happened, Malthouse said: “I don’t know, you’d have to ask them.” Pressed on why he had not asked, he replied: “Well, I’m not an investigator. My job is to seek reassurance.” The controversy, he added, was primarily “of interest in the media”.

Asked if he believed Downing Street’s version of events, Malthouse said: “I’m comfortable with the reassurance they’ve given me, yes.”

He did, however, concede that the police should look into the matter if a formal complaint was made. Two Labour MPs have reported the alleged gathering at No 10 to the Metropolitan police.

“As policing minister, my view is that if offences are committed of any kind and reported to the police, there should be an investigation by the police,” Malthouse said in a separate interview with Sky News.

“They should examine it and decide whether they’re going to pursue it. That should be a decision for them, and not something that I ask a politician

should seek to influence.”

He added: “The police should be investigating anything that is a historic crime that is reported to them.”

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Coronavirus

Covid not over and next pandemic could be more lethal, says Oxford jab creator

01:15

Next pandemic could be worse than Covid, warns Oxford vaccine creator – video

[Andrew Gregory](#) and [Jessica Elgot](#)

Sun 5 Dec 2021 19.01 EST

The coronavirus pandemic that has so far killed more than 5 million people worldwide is far from over and the next one could be even more lethal, the creator of the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine has said.

As fears grow over the threat posed by the highly mutated Omicron variant, detected in more than 30 countries, [Prof Dame Sarah Gilbert](#) cautioned that while it was increasingly obvious that “this pandemic is not done with us”, the next one could be worse.

The message came as ministers were told by one of their scientific advisers that [the new variant was spreading pretty rapidly](#) in the UK, and travel rules starting on Tuesday would be too late to prevent a potential wave of infections. The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) on Sunday night reported 86 new Omicron cases, taking the total identified so far to 246.

Delivering the 44th Richard Dimbleby lecture, due to be broadcast on the BBC on Monday, Gilbert said that despite the destructive nature of a two-year pandemic that had already infected more than 265 million people, the next one might be more contagious and claim even more lives.

“This will not be the last time a virus threatens our lives and our livelihoods,” she said. “The truth is, the next one could be worse. It could be more contagious, or more lethal, or both.”

Gilbert, a professor of vaccinology at the University of Oxford whose team developed the Covid vaccine now used in 170 countries, said the scientific advances made and knowledge gained in research fighting against the coronavirus must not be lost.

“We cannot allow a situation where we have gone through all we have gone through, and then find that the enormous economic losses we have sustained mean that there is still no funding for pandemic preparedness,” she said. “Just as we invest in armed forces and intelligence and diplomacy to defend against wars, we must invest in people, research, manufacturing and institutions to defend against pandemics.”

Gilbert said the new variant contained mutations already known to increase transmissibility of the virus and that antibodies induced by vaccination or previous infections might be less effective at preventing infection with Omicron. But she also said reduced protection against infection “does not necessarily mean reduced protection against severe disease and death”. Gilbert added: “Until we know more, we should be cautious, and take steps to slow down the spread of this new variant.”

From Tuesday, all passengers arriving in the UK will be required to show proof of a negative PCR or lateral flow test taken no earlier than 48 hours before departure. Nigeria will also be added to the travel red list on Monday.

But Prof Mark Woolhouse, of the Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Modelling (Spi-M), said the new travel rules were too late to make a material difference. He told BBC One’s The Andrew Marr Show: “I think that may be a case of shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted.

“If Omicron is here in the UK, and it certainly is, if there’s community transmission in the UK, and it certainly looks that way, then it’s that community transmission that will drive a next wave. The cases that are being imported are important, we want to detect those and isolate any positive cases we find, as we would for any case anywhere. But I think it’s too late to make a material difference to the course of the Omicron wave if we’re going to have one.”

Though the emergence of the new variant has caused alarm worldwide, Dr Anthony Fauci, the top US infectious disease official, told CNN “thus far it does not look like there’s a great degree of severity to it” but he added that it was too early to draw definitive conclusions and more study was needed.

As of 9am on Sunday there were another 43,992 lab-confirmed Covid-19 cases in the UK. A further 54 people died within 28 days of testing positive for coronavirus.

The president of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine said the NHS would be in a difficult position if the Omicron variant were to trigger a surge in hospital admissions. Dr Katherine Henderson said hospitals were already struggling to cope. “It is pretty spectacularly bad now, it will get worse – and if the new variant becomes a thing in terms of numbers and translates into hospitals admissions we are going to be in a very, very difficult position.”

The government is expected to announce the chair of its long-awaited Covid public inquiry within the next fortnight, having pledged to bereaved families that a chair would be in place by Christmas. MPs have called for the inquiry to investigate the effect that rule-breaking by public figures had on public compliance.

Meanwhile, Keir Starmer has made his strongest intervention to date to criticise those resisting taking the vaccine, after the Guardian reported that [unvaccinated patients are dominating ICU beds](#).

The Labour leader, who will receive his booster jab on Monday, said those who are unvaccinated should “consider the impact of their decision, think again, and get vaccinated”.

“It is frustrating and worrying that medics are seeing too many hospital beds and NHS resources are taken by those that have chosen not to get the vaccine,” he said.

He also said the government needed to radically boost efforts to get third jabs into arms. New analysis by Labour reveals the total number of booster vaccinations currently being administered remains significantly below the

number of jabs that were being delivered at the same point in the first vaccine rollout earlier this year.

During the initial vaccine rollout, the number of vaccinations peaked at 602,265 a day on average. In contrast, the current total number of vaccines now being delivered a day on average is 435,542, over a quarter less than in March.

Separately, millions of people are being urged to get a flu jab by Friday to maximise protection over Christmas, as figures reveal more than half of all those who are pregnant or have underlying health conditions have still not been vaccinated. The UKHSA is encouraging eligible people to have the vaccine by 10 December to allow it take full effect before the festive season.

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2021.12.06 - Spotlight

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Interview

Chris Noth on feuds, family and Mr Big: ‘I never saw him as an alpha male’

[Hadley Freeman](#)



Chris Noth: ‘If I can be a small part of what people think of as New York City, that’s a really lovely thing.’ Photograph: The Riker Brothers



[@HadleyFreeman](#)

Mon 6 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

“I’m not supposed to talk for this long. I told my publicist beforehand: ‘I need to keep this short so I don’t give quotes I’ll regret,’” chuckles Chris Noth.

Too late for that. Ahead of our interview, I had expected Noth – best known as Mr Big from *Sex and the City* – to be a reluctant interviewee, because that’s how he came across in past articles, especially when he was talking about the TV show that turned him from a jobbing actor into, well, Mr Big. But those were from back in the day, when he bridled at his sudden celebrity. Noth had been in hit TV shows before, most famously when he played Detective Mike Logan for five years on *Law & Order*. But nothing could have prepared him for *Sex and the City*.

“Initially, when the show became a cultural phenomenon, I was really annoyed by it, because I don’t like to be called a character’s name on the street and actors don’t like [characters] sticking to them. But eventually I thought: ‘Just stop resisting this because it’s not going away. People, for some reason, will always relate you to that part, so just let what you resist

persist.' And if I can be a small part of what people think of as [New York](#) City, that's a really lovely thing," he says with a relaxed smile.

Surely all of the actors on Sex and the City will be seen for ever through the prism of the show, I say. "Yeah, [Cynthia \[Nixon\] ran for mayor](#), but she's still Miranda!" he hoots.



With Sarah Jessica Parker in Sex and the City in 2001. Photograph: Everett Collection/Rex Features

Maybe it's because he has a more relaxed relationship with Sex and the City these days that Noth, 66, is in an enjoyably loosey-goosey mood today. We are speaking by video chat ahead of the release of the HBO Max series [And Just Like That](#), the latest chapter to the seemingly never-ending Sex and the City juggernaut. Such is the hysterical security around it, I haven't been able to see any of it, so all I can un-exclusively reveal is that it stars pretty much all of the original cast, with the [notorious exception of Kim Cattrall](#), who we'll discuss shortly. Noth is talking to me from the Berkshires in Massachusetts, in one of his three homes, the other two being an apartment in New York and his family home in Los Angeles, where he lives with his wife and two sons (yes, there are definite benefits to being an actor with a character who sticks to you). From what I can see, it looks like a gorgeously

luxe cabin, and Noth says he has been coming to this area since he went to school nearby as a teenager.

“I’ve always had a love for this area, even though it’s changed a lot. I still love New York City, but that’s changed tremendously. I didn’t come to New York because it was clean, I came because it was exciting,” he says, and goes off on the classic New York rant about how the rents are too high now and the neighbourhoods are too swanky. I say it’s a bit rich for a star of Sex and the City to complain about the gentrification of New York, given a lot of people blame the show for that.

“Whoa! Hold on, I gotta sit down to answer that!” he says, laughing, scooping up his laptop and moving us to the sofa. “I feel a little guilty that our show became the look for what New York is. That glamour always existed, but it wasn’t the only look. It’s kind of like what the Kardashians have done to culture in America: millions of people following them because they have a thousand shoes in their closets. No, no – it’s not the same,” he interrupts himself hastily, presumably hearing the sound of a hundred HBO execs having coronaries. “Sex and the City has a lot to offer in terms of its vision of New York, because people do need a certain glamour. But many neighbourhoods have changed, so it’s a love-hate kinda thing.”

Surely Friends and Seinfeld provided a view of New York that was just as sanitised, I say. “I’m not sure if it was sanitised, but [Sex and the City] took one part of the city and made it ubiquitous,” he says. Though Sex and the City has always been a target in a way other shows weren’t, I say. It was criticised for its lack of diversity in a time when no one complained about it in Seinfeld or Frasier. “It was the time and we weren’t the only ones, right,” he says.

Now critics are focusing on how old Sarah Jessica Parker, Kristin Davis and Cynthia Nixon are. Noth rolls his eyes in despair. “People are like: ‘Oh the girls don’t look the same.’ Yeah, because it’s 25 years later! We’re normal people, we get older, we adjust – why, don’t you?”



On the set of And Just Like That... Photograph: Steve Sands/NewYorkNewswire/Bauer-Griffin/REX/Shutterstock

The truth is, only the lucky get to age. In September, Willie Garson, who played the much-beloved character Stanford Blatch, [died from pancreatic cancer at the age of only 57](#). Did Noth know he was ill? “No, most of us didn’t know. The last time I saw him was on set and I kick myself because I didn’t really get a chance to talk to him. He was extraordinarily fun and funny and there’s nothing to say but that it’s heartbreaking. It’s sad for everyone, and for the show, because I think he was going to have a really huge storyline. But he’ll be in it to the extent that he filmed. Oh God ...”

Then there’s Cattrall, who will be absent from the new series for a very different reason. [Rumours of a feud between Cattrall and Parker](#) date back to 2004, but things really stepped up a notch in 2018. Parker posted condolences on Cattrall’s Instagram when the latter’s brother died and [Cattrall accused her of being “cruel” and a “hypocrite”](#).

So, I ask Noth, why do you think Cattrall isn’t in the new series? “I have to tell you, I have absolutely no idea what her thinking is, or her emotions. I do know that I’m very close with SJ and [Cattrall’s] descriptions of her don’t even come close. I liked her, I thought she was marvellous in the show and some people move on for their own reasons. I don’t know what hers were. I

just wish that whole thing had never happened because it was sad and uncomfortable,” he says.

Did it put the rest of the cast in an awkward position? “I just don’t like to see anyone talking down about SJ because she’s a target and people can be nasty. I feel very protective of her and I was not happy about that. That’s all I’ll say about that.”

Noth himself nearly didn’t return for *And Just Like That*, and I can’t say I blame him. I adored the original show, but there’s no question that it has offered diminishing returns ever since. The first movie was awful. The second was unwatchable, all the originality and courage of the show swapped for nonsensical storylines and garbage dialogue. Does Noth agree that the movies felt different from the show?

“Yeah, it’s just the nature of being in a movie, I guess. They did pretty well, though. On my side of it, I thought it was less – I was a little uncomfortable with the, um, in the second one, how the issues between Carrie and Big were resolved,” he says with what sounds very much like cautious understatement. (For those who have spared themselves the second film, Carrie and Big’s problems are resolved in a completely stupid and unrealistic way, the opposite of the careful emotional truth-telling of the show.) “I don’t remember [the films], to tell you the truth. I just remember the series being a lot of fun. I saw the movies once at the premieres and that was it.”

Noth was hesitant about returning because he felt, not unreasonably, that he had taken Big as far as he could. So what convinced him otherwise? “A conversation with [the show’s writer and director] Michael Patrick King. It was a long conversation, it continued through the pandemic and he took in a lot of my ideas and we came up with a way for me to work into it.”



With Julianna Margulies in *The Good Wife* in 2009. Photograph: CBS/Allstar

Sex and the City 2 came out in 2010, meaning this is the first time we've seen Big post-Trump era, post-MeToo, and that alpha male Manhattan millionaire seems a little less aspirational these days, I say. "I never saw him as an alpha male, that's so funny that you say that. But it's true, I do get offers to play these power-broker types. I know how to put on a suit, but my wife put it perfectly when she said: 'I don't think people realise that you're kind of schlubby,'" he cackles.

Noth grew up in Connecticut, the youngest of three boys; his father was a war hero, and his mother was one of the earliest female news correspondents. His parents separated when he was a child and his father died in a car accident shortly afterwards, when Noth was 11. How did that affect him in the long term? "I was always looking to teachers in a needier way, because I substituted feelings of them being a father. I was desperately searching for that male voice," he says.

There is an irony that, as an adult, he ended up playing such male, ultra-masculine figures in *Law & Order*, *Sex and the City* and, later, as Peter Florrick, [the shamed politician in *The Good Wife*](#). But Noth shrugs when I mention that show. "I don't feel any connection to [it]. It's odd, because I

know it was well received. I have an emotional void about that part, I don't know why," he says.

How did his mother cope raising three boys on her own? "Not very well," he chuckles. "She had a hard time of it. There was a lot of wildness in my family. I went to a lot of different schools, basically trying to get away from parental discontent ... I'm lucky that my mom lived to a very old age so I could let her know she was appreciated, because I was rebelling against her for most of my life."

Exasperated by her youngest son's behaviour, Noth's mother eventually sent him to a boarding school, which got him back on track. What drew him to acting? "I don't know," he says, as though he has never considered the question before. "I did plays at college and it was kind of the situation where I thought: 'I'm having so much fun, why don't I take my fun seriously?'"

Noth went on to train with classic teachers, including Stella Adler. "But there are so many great actors, especially coming out of London, and I think they're so well-trained," he says.

Like who? "All the actors on *The Crown* – phenomenal!" You'd be good as Ronald Reagan or Bill Clinton on that, I say. "Oh I'd audition for that!" he says, eyes bright like Mr Big spotting a good bourbon.



With Queen Latifah in *The Equalizer*. Photograph: CBS Photo Archive/CBS/Getty Images

These days, Noth keeps busy looking after his sons, Orion, 13, and Keats, one; running his rock'n'roll bar, The Cutting Room, in New York; and starring in the US show [The Equalizer](#), alongside Queen Latifah. “I *love* Queen Latifah. I say this all the time to SJ: I’ve been riding on the coat-tails of female actors for a long time, and it’s carried me along,” he says.

So what did he learn about women from working on *Sex and the City*? “Never go into the makeup room and try to rush them,” he says and laughs. “No, no, let me think … It reiterated something I already knew from having a mother who was such a powerhouse: never underestimate a woman’s opinion.”

This article was amended on 7 December 2021 to correct a quote regarding the training of British actors that was misheard on the initial call.

And Just Like That ... is available from 9 December on Sky Comedy and streaming service Now, and for streaming on Binge in Australia

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Byelections

‘People are fed up’: Tories anxious about losing Owen Paterson’s seat



Helen Morgan, the Liberal Democrat candidate, canvassing in Wem in North Shropshire. Photograph: Christopher Thomond/The Guardian

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Mon 6 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

If Boris Johnson’s decision to join the campaign trail in North Shropshire on Friday was a sign of Conservative jitters before the upcoming by-election in the constituency, then Chris Pierce is just the sort of voter to exemplify such anxieties.

“I feel taken for granted,” complained the self-described former Tory supporter, standing outside his house in a neat, modern cul-de-sac on the edge of Wem, a compact market town just north of Shrewsbury.

“You could put a blue rosette on a straw bale and it would be elected in North Shropshire,” said Pierce, 50. “Owen Paterson would be parachuted somewhere into Wem High Street once every four years, photo taken, then quickly out before any local people realised he was there.”

Pierce would, he said, vote Liberal Democrat on 16 December, to the evident delight of Helen Morgan, the party’s candidate, nearing the end of another long canvassing session. But, Pierce added ruefully, he still expected “the guy from Birmingham” – a disparaging reference to the distinctly less-than-local Tory candidate Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst – to win.



Boris Johnson with Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst in the North Shropshire constituency on Friday. Photograph: Andrew Parsons/CCHQ

The odds do remain very much in favour of Shastri-Hurst, who if elected would become the latest in a near 200-year line of local Tory MPs, one broken just once, between 1904 and 1906.

But something unusual is happening in North Shropshire, and not just because the by-election was prompted by Paterson resigning in the wake of Johnson’s disastrous attempt to save him from punishment following a serious breach of lobbying rules.

One very obvious anomaly is that the [Conservatives](#), even in a mid-term slump, are concerned about holding a strongly rural pro-Brexit seat, one that returned Paterson with a majority of almost 23,000 in the 2019 general election.

Another is the way the Lib Dems have become the main challengers in no small part by loudly and repeatedly telling people that this is the case, arguing that strong local election results in May matter more than 2019's distant third place, behind [Labour](#).

Labour's young and energetic candidate, Ben Wood, vehemently disputes this narrative and talks up positive canvassing data. However, central party officials concede they are devoting few resources to the fight, and so far no senior shadow ministers have been spotted there.

Similarly, while the Greens [hold 12 of 18](#) council seats in Oswestry, the constituency's biggest town, the party privately concedes it does not expect to do especially well.

The Lib Dems' hopes of anti-Conservative sentiment coalescing around Morgan, an accountant and local parish councillor, are of course significantly boosted by [the party's astonishing win](#) in June's Chesham and Amersham byelection, overturning a 16,000 Conservative majority as the Labour and Green votes collapsed.

While Lib Dem activists stress North Shropshire is notably shorter of the sort of internationalist, pro-remain "soft" Tories who helped deliver last summer's victory, they argue both constituencies share a wider sense of disenchantment with Johnson and his government.

"When they talk sleaze, a lot of voters have a real tone of derision," one activist said. "And it's not, 'A plague on all your houses.' This is very much about the Tories. But perhaps the most toxic thing is picking a candidate from Birmingham. It's like they don't care."

As Morgan and her campaign team canvass in Wem, while the majority of concerns are distinctly local, including access to GPs and slow ambulance

response times, these are often expressed amid a wider sense that the Conservatives have neglected the area.

“The response we’re getting on the doorstep is people are fed up of being ignored, and they’re ready to send a message to say that,” Morgan said. “We’re definitely going to give the Conservatives a scare, and I think we do have an actual chance.”

The Lib Dems coming anywhere close to taking the seat would, certainly, spook many Tory MPs. Even the more likely outcome – a reasonably secure Conservative hold, but with many of the party’s usual voters staying at home – could be alarming.

Tory HQ appears to be hoping that a brief, slightly below-the-radar campaign – Guardian requests to speak to Shastri-Hurst or anyone from his team were ignored – will get them home.

The Lib Dems, in contrast, have sent party leader [Ed Davey](#) to campaign in the constituency three times already, with a succession of other MPs and peers on hand to persuade voters and deliver endless leaflets featuring one of the party’s trademark bar charts, this one explaining why only they can defeat the Conservatives.

“It’s like carpet bombing,” one opponent said, with a mixture of admiration and annoyance. “It really is win at all costs.”

Could it work? After Chesham and Amersham, no one would rule it out. But even Lib Dems privately agree it is a tough ask. “Winning Chesham and Amersham was like climbing a mountain,” one senior party official said. “But taking North Shropshire? It would be the Everest of byelection victories.”

Belarus

‘We are in limbo’: banned Belarus theatre troupe forced into exile



Some of the 16 Belarus Free Theatre members currently in London rehearsing for a production. Photograph: Linda Nylind/The Guardian

[Harriet Sherwood](#) and [Andrew Roth](#) in Moscow

Mon 6 Dec 2021 00.00 EST

For 16 years, the [Belarus Free Theatre](#) has advocated for freedom of expression, equality and democracy through underground performances from ad hoc locations to audiences hungry for an alternative voice to the country’s repressive dictator, Alexander Lukashenko.

Now the banned company has taken the momentous decision to relocate outside [Belarus](#), saying the risk of reprisals against its members is too great for it to continue its cultural resistance under the Lukashenko regime.

Sixteen members of the BFT ensemble [in London](#) rehearsing for a production at the Barbican next year, plus another nine family members, have decided they cannot return home for the foreseeable future. The BFT is the only theatre company in Europe to be prohibited on political grounds.

Its new base has not been established, but Poland and other eastern European countries are being considered. The troupe has ruled out applying for asylum in the UK as its members would be barred from working during the process, which could take more than a year.

Several members of the BFT were imprisoned amid widespread protests after Lukashenko declared victory in flawed elections in August 2020. The theatre group's co-founders, Natalia Kaliada and Nikolai Khalezin, have lived in London since being forced into exile in 2011.

Kaliada said it was unprecedented in 2021 for a theatre company to be forced to relocate out of a European country "for fear of persecution and torture". She added: "It is a disgrace that we allow not just artistic freedoms but basic human freedoms to be absolutely disregarded in a country that is a three-hour flight from London.

"The sheer existence of Belarus Free [Theatre](#) and our continued work, despite repression, is the greatest threat to dictatorship – the will of the people to continue telling the truth is the greatest show of power imaginable."

As the regime cracked down forcefully against [protests after the disputed 2020 election](#), "it became clear we needed to get our team out of the country", said Kaliada. "There was very severe repression and people being arrested every day."

The members of the company left Minsk in October, taking different forms of transport. Some were smuggled out of the country, she said. All left parents and other loved ones, and brought nothing apart from clothing and small personal items. "It is very painful for them to leave their families, and they have feelings of guilt," Kaliada added.



Oleg Sidorchik in *Being Harold Pinter* by Belarus Free Theatre at Soho Theatre in London in 2008. Photograph: Tristram Kenton/The Guardian

Members of the BFT were granted six-month artists' visas, which expire after their production of *Dogs of Europe*, a dystopian thriller, ends its run at the Barbican in March. In the meantime, the company will travel to Poland later this month where they have been offered accommodation, and return to the UK in February. "We are in limbo," said Kaliada.

Svetlana Sugako, the BFT's managing director, was one of those arrested in August 2020. She was held for five days, along with 35 others crammed into a cell meant for four people.

"There was no air, for three days we had no food, and we had to drink dirty water. I could hear people screaming and shouting as they were beaten. You don't know how or where it will finish," she said. "I didn't want to leave Belarus, but I had no choice. The future is unclear, but I'm alive."

Lukashenko's crackdown on dissent has ripped through the Belarusian arts community, leading to purges at state cultural institutions and driving hundreds of writers, actors, painters, musicians and others into exile.

"There were a huge number of creative people working in the context of protest," said Khalezin, a founding member of the independent Belarusian

Council for Culture. “People of art were among the first cast into Lukshenko’s cauldron of repression.” He said the number of people involved in the arts jailed in connection with the protests rivalled that of other at-risk groups such as journalists and human rights workers.

Belarusian security services have made it nearly impossible for independent artists to continue working in the country. One Minsk-based visual artist said she had abandoned a shared studio space after police began visiting her at home this year in connection with the protests. She asked a friend to retrieve and hide her paintings and other artworks because she was afraid they could be confiscated or destroyed.



Natalia Kaliada and Nikolai Khalezin in their apartment in London.
Photograph: John Sibley/Reuters

Vlad Kobets of the Belarusian Solidarity Centre, a non-profit group in Warsaw connected to the BFT, said the troupe’s expected arrival there in mid-December was part of a tide of prominent cultural figures choosing to live away from Belarus due to their opposition to the government.

“These people of culture … are often young people, the generation that is the driver of the protest,” said Kobets, pointing to other recent émigrés such as the opera singer Margarita Levchuk. The exodus had exposed the cultural

impoverishment of the Lukashenko government, he added. “You can’t build a country on nightsticks alone.”

The BFT has streamed many of its productions outside Belarus to audiences inside the country, and has clandestinely performed in residential courtyards, warehouses and garages in Minsk.

“We know we are stronger than the regime,” said Kaliada. “The authorities are more scared of artists than of political statements. Everyone believes that things will change in Belarus, but for now the company needs to be safe.

“We ask the UK public to stand in solidarity with us at this most critical time in our history. Solidarity is crucial for our survival.” The company is [appealing for donations](#).

The award-winning BFT’s patrons and supporters have included Václav Havel, the Czech playwright, dissident and president who died in 2011; the late Nobel laureate [Harold Pinter](#); the Czech-born playwright [Tom Stoppard](#); the actors Jeremy Irons and Kim Cattrall; and the Pink Floyd guitarist and vocalist David Gilmour.

The UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office had been very supportive, Kaliada said.

Will Gompertz, artistic director of the Barbican, said: “We are delighted to be working with our friends at Belarus Free Theatre and to be able to give the company a platform for their important work at this difficult time.”

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Emma Beddington tries ... being a mermaid: 'I'm more beached seal than beguiling siren'



'I love the idea of achieving otherworldly aquatic grace' ... Emma Beddington, at Jesmond pool, Newcastle upon Tyne. Photograph: Christopher Owens/The Guardian



[Emma Beddington](#)

Mon 6 Dec 2021 02.00 EST

I am too old for Disney's Little Mermaid. My sister was the right age, but our right-on 80s household was a princess-free zone (though [The Little Mermaid](#) is arguably one of the more [subversive films](#) in the canon, with its exploration of identity and conformity and nods to drag culture). I have, however, gleaned that the transformation from mermaid to human is a risky business; I believe [a crab says so](#).

But what about the reverse? Because today, I, a human, am becoming a mermaid, thanks to Donna Rumney of [Mermaids at Jesmond Pool](#), in Newcastle upon Tyne. Donna is booked out with children's mermaid parties but adult sessions are popular, too: everyone wants to be a mermaid now. There are mermaid [pageants](#) and [conventions](#); people pay thousands of pounds for custom-made silicone tails. Something about that in-between state, the [grace and fluidity](#), appeals when life on land feels so hidebound and joyless. I love the idea of achieving a state of otherworldly aquatic grace; what could possibly go wrong?

Well, I'm a terrible head-out breaststroker, for starters. Then there's the retro floral hat that I thought looked good but covers my ears, so I can't hear any

of Donna's instructions properly, and without my glasses she's just a blurry shape on the poolside. On top of that, four young staff members are joining in, as athletic and beautifully at home in the water as [selkies](#). The floating verruca-plaster cherry on top: we are sharing the pool with a group of teenagers learning lifesaving skills. It's an anxiety dream come to life. Thankfully, my hirsute husband (a keen freediver) is joining in and providing an entertaining distraction for all, testing out an orange stretchy tail.



Emma and her 'merman' husband, with pool staff. Photograph: Christopher Owens/The Guardian

To earn those tails, though, we have to pass a swim test. It's a width with faces submerged, then a width swimming "dolphin kick" (butterfly legs) on our fronts, backs and sides, both on top of and under the water. We do these exercises one by one when Donna calls our names. It would be reminiscent of school swimming lessons, if I hadn't avoided those by claiming to have my period every week. Still, uneasy memories of chlorine-tinged humiliation stir whenever I hear my name. I can put my face in the water, but I have no technique or breath control. [Swimming](#) on my back underwater proves physically impossible. How does anyone do it? I just bob up.

The movement is almost as hard to master. “Keep your knees and ankles together,” shouts the shape I assume is Donna. “The movement comes from the hips. Like belly dancing.” I understand what it should look like – sinuously elegant and powerful – but thrash about like a dying mackerel. Despite this, she lets me wriggle into my silky blue and purple scale-patterned tail and “mono-fin”, a flipper for both feet. Once equipped, I’m more beached seal than beguiling siren: a helpless, pity-inducing lump. Honking, I flop back into the pool, hoping I’ll be miraculously transformed into something lithe and amphibious.

I’m certainly splashier on my first trial run on the surface, which is not an improvement. “It’ll be much easier underwater,” Donna assures me – and she’s right: it *is* better down where it’s wetter. The hip movement makes more sense with a bit of resistance and the mono-fin is amazingly powerful. I’m astonished how quickly the pool wall appears.

We try another set of widths, on our fronts, backs and sides, on top and beneath. Everyone except me does brilliantly, including my husband, the traitor, who wows everyone with his flashy underwater merman action. “He’s a natural,” our pool staff classmates murmur. Then they quiz him on how long he can hold his breath and gasp at his answer; they even teach him to dive in a tail. His effortless physical competence is inconsiderate, and why I never usually let him come on Trying Something New outings.



‘The mono-fin is amazingly powerful.’ Photograph: Christopher Owens/The Guardian

The pool staff are absolutely adorable, exorcising the memories of the sporty mean girls at school. They tell me I’m doing “really well” – a lie – and, more plausibly, that I’m not the worst they have seen. Donna confirms this: she once hosted a mermaid hen party. “Only three of the 18 would put their faces in the water; the rest of them had their fins on top of the water doing breaststroke.”

Ego boosted, it’s time to put our moves together in a mini-routine: we swim underwater, switching from front, to side, to back, and front again. I say “we”: I manage a bit of side and front, and none of the rest; everyone else is flawless. Next, it sounds as if Donna says we should “try a handstand”, but surely that is the swimming hat playing tricks on me. I lift up the edge and cock my ear: no, she definitely, inexplicably, says “handstand”. At the count of three, everyone inverts themselves, perfectly vertical, like an Olympic synchronised swimming team. I do not. My head has no desire to be in the water, which, I accept, is a problem for a mermaid. “You need to get down low,” Donna says, “then get your legs up.” With little hope, I crouch, hands down, then heave my tail skywards. For a glorious nanosecond, it works. The Donna-shaped blur appears animated as I resurface, spluttering: I think it has both thumbs aloft. Front and backwards somersaults are less

successful, and when a hoop and some balls are produced to swim through and retrieve, respectively, I pretend not to see them, like a disobedient aquarium octopus.



Taking the plunge ... ‘It *is* better down where it’s wetter.’ Photograph: Christopher Owens/The Guardian

Finally, it’s free play time. I swim around the deep end in short semi-submerged wriggles. Sometimes, I manage a few decent undulations and get a tiny hint of that feeling of magical balletic freedom, before miscalculating the depth and coming up in a panic, nose full of water. As I surface, a swimming teacher and his tiny charge scoot out of my way. I can only hear his side of their conversation. “Yes, a mermaid!” “Yes, of course they’re real!” And for that moment, despite the chlorine and the teenage lifesavers hauling a dummy on to a raft behind me, I feel real.

Can water burn? Dolphin kicks deliver a brutal core workout. My midsection feels like jelly for days.

Smug factor: 3/5 – I’m an awful mermaid in motion, but love my tail, which covers a multitude of sins. You don’t see enough tails in fashion magazines.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/dec/06/emma-beddington-tries-being-a-mermaid-im-more-beached-seal-than-beguiling-siren>

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Coronavirus

Omicron is a ‘wake-up call’ to vaccinate poorer nations, experts say



The number of booster or third jabs administered in the UK is about the same as the total number of fully vaccinated people across all of the world's poorest countries. Photograph: Francisco Seco/AP

[Andrew Gregory](#) Health editor

Sun 5 Dec 2021 19.01 EST

Failure to vaccinate the world against coronavirus created the perfect breeding ground for the emergence of the Omicron variant and should serve as a wake-up call to wealthy nations, campaigners have said.

Scientists and global health experts have called for action since the summer to tackle the crisis of vaccine inequality between rich and poor countries. The longer large parts of the world remained unvaccinated, they said, the more likely the virus was to mutate significantly.

The emergence of such a variant threatens to derail efforts to end the pandemic. The World Health Organization says the heavily mutated Omicron variant is likely to spread internationally and poses a very high risk of infection surges that may have severe consequences in some places.

“Omicron is with us because we have failed to vaccinate the world,” said Winnie Byanyima, executive director of UNAids and co-chair of the People’s Vaccine Alliance, a campaign group. “This should be a wake-up call.

“Business as usual has led to huge profits for pharmaceutical firms, but many people left unvaccinated means that this virus continues to mutate. It is the definition of madness to keep doing the same thing and expect a different outcome. We need to press reset.”

The warning comes as new figures released by the People’s Vaccine Alliance show that the number of booster or third jabs administered in the UK is about the same as the total number of fully vaccinated people across all of the world’s poorest countries.

The UK has reached the milestone of 20m booster vaccines or third doses administered days after ministers announced a significant expansion of the programme to every adult in the country. At the same time, according to Our World In Data figures cited by the People’s Vaccine Alliance, only 20 million people across all the 27 countries classified as low-income nations by the World Bank had been fully vaccinated.

01:15

Next pandemic could be worse than Covid, warns Oxford vaccine creator – video

“With the new threat of the Omicron variant, it is clear that we cannot just booster our way out of the pandemic while leaving much of the developing world behind,” said Anna Marriott, health policy manager at Oxfam, which is one of about 80 organisations in the People’s Vaccine Alliance. “Unless all countries are vaccinated as soon as possible we could see wave after wave of

variants.

“We cannot correct the mistakes of the past 21 months but we need rich countries to chart a new path forward in which they step up and insist the pharmaceutical companies start sharing their science and technology with qualified manufacturers around the world, so we can vaccinate people in all countries and finally end the pandemic.”

Tony Blair said the “failure to organise mass vaccination globally has been a huge problem right throughout this crisis”.

The former UK prime minister told BBC Radio 4’s The World This Weekend: “Well it’s always been very obvious that if you don’t vaccinate the world, this is a virus that can mutate. If you’ve got large populations that are unvaccinated, it’s likely to mutate faster and further.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/06/omicron-wake-up-call-to-vaccinate-poorer-nations-covid>

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Schools

Covid: figures reveal vaccine lottery for children in England



Labour want to turbocharge the vaccination rollout among 12- to-15-year-olds. Photograph: Ian Forsyth/Getty Images

[Richard Adams](#) Education editor

Sun 5 Dec 2021 17.30 EST

Children in some parts of England are three times more likely to be vaccinated than others, figures from the House of Commons library show, prompting Bridget Phillipson, Labour's newly appointed shadow education secretary, to criticise the government for its lacklustre efforts to vaccinate young teenagers.

The figures – collated by the House of Commons library and distributed by [Labour](#) – reveal that in some parts of London just one in five children aged between 12 and 15 had received a vaccination at the start of December.

Phillipson, who was promoted to the shadow cabinet last week, said the government was making a strategic error in not improving vaccination take-up among children and exposing them to the Omicron variant. She wants children to be able to access walk-in clinics, as well as a campaign to promote the benefits of vaccinations to parents and discredit the “anti-vax disinformation” she said was being pushed at children and their families.

“As Omicron cases in the UK are starting to rise it’s even more important that we speed up vaccine rollout, but the government’s lacklustre approach is putting children’s education at risk of further disruption,” Phillipson said.

The figures show that by 2 December just under 20% of children aged 12 to 15 had received their first Covid vaccine in the London borough of Hackney and the City of London. But in Newbury and elsewhere in the West Berkshire local authority, more than three times as many (62%) of the same age group had been jabbed.

Overall, London has the lowest regional vaccination rate with just one in three children having received their first jab. The south-east of [England](#) is the only region where at least half of 12-to 15-year-olds have been vaccinated. But in the north-west and the West Midlands just 40% of children have done so, leaving many vulnerable to infection.

Labour said the government’s promise that all 12-to-15-year-olds would be offered a vaccination by the October half-term break has proved to be empty. The Department for Education’s latest attendance figures showed that Covid remains rife within schools in England, as more than 185,000 pupils and students were out of the classroom with confirmed or suspected Covid symptoms at the end of last month.

“The Conservatives have been complacent and children are paying the price. The government must get a grip and stop neglecting children’s education,” Phillipson said.

“Labour has been urging ministers to use every measure from pop-up and walk-in clinics to bringing back volunteers and retired clinicians to ramp-up

vaccine rollout. This must come alongside finally introducing the ventilation in schools that Sage recommended well over a year ago.”

The Department of Health and Social Care said that the vaccination programme in England has been “a phenomenal success,” with children able to be vaccinated at school or using the national booking system.

To “turbocharge” the vaccine programme covering schoolchildren, Labour is calling for better use of community pharmacies, walk-in clinics and pop-up clinics to make it easier for families to get children jabbed and for parents to get booster doses.

Labour said that “mayors, local authorities, and health leaders have worked hard to increase uptake but are urging government to provide more support”.

On the possibility of vaccinations for younger children, Labour also wants “clarity for parents” over approval of the vaccine for those aged under 12, after the Pfizer vaccine was approved for younger children by US regulators.

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Belgium

Belgian police fire water cannon at anti-lockdown protests



As the crowd dispersed into smaller groups around the European quarter, there were more clashes and some set fire to barricades of rubbish.
Photograph: Rex/Shutterstock

Agence France-Presse
Sun 5 Dec 2021 17.54 EST

Belgian police have fired water cannon and used teargas to disperse protesters opposed to compulsory health measures against the coronavirus pandemic.

About 8,000 people marched through Brussels towards the headquarters of the EU, chanting “freedom” and letting off fireworks.

The crowd was smaller than the 35,000 vaccine and lockdown sceptics who [marched last month](#), and police were better prepared.

Protesters were blocked from reaching the roundabout outside the EU headquarters by a barbed wire barricade and a line of riot officers. As two drones and a helicopter circled overhead, they threw fireworks and beer cans. Police responded with water cannon and teargas.

As the crowd dispersed into smaller groups around the European quarter, there were more clashes and some set fire to barricades of rubbish. Police said two of their officers and four protesters had been hospitalised, and 20 people had been arrested.

Several European countries have seen demonstrations in recent weeks as governments respond to a surge in Covid cases with tighter restrictions.

In Brussels, the organisers hoped to match the 21 November demo, in which police seemed caught off-guard and there were violent clashes.

The demonstrators oppose compulsory health measures – such as masks, lockdowns and vaccine passes – and some share conspiracy theories. Banners on Sunday compared the stigmatisation of the non-vaccinated to the treatment of Jews forced to wear yellow stars in Nazi Germany.

“Covid = Organised Genocide,” said one sign. “The QR code is a Swastika,” declared another, referring to the EU Covid-safe digital certificate.

Off-duty firefighters in uniform marched at the head of the protest as it wound its way through the city, to demand the right to refuse vaccination.

The measures imposed to fight Covid in [Belgium](#) were decided by the country’s own national and regional governments, but the EU has also attracted the sceptics’ anger.

On Wednesday, the European Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, said that in her view it was time to “think about mandatory vaccination”, a suggestion that was denounced by speakers at the protest.

On Friday, the Belgian prime minister, Alexander de Croo, announced a series of measures to tighten sanitary rules, bringing school Christmas holidays forward and asking children aged six and over to wear masks.

Belgium, with a population of 11 million, has recorded an average of more than 17,800 daily infections with Covid-19 over the past seven days, as well as 44 deaths.

About 800 people with severe forms of the disease are in intensive care in hospitals across the country, leading to overcrowding and the postponement of treatment for many other conditions.

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US news

Omicron brings fresh concern for US mental health after ‘grim two years’



A woman in New York City. There are fresh worries about the Omicron variant and the impact it could have on public life this winter. Photograph: Xinhua/Rex/Shutterstock

Eric Berger

Mon 6 Dec 2021 02.00 EST

Sarah Isaacs, a therapist in Raleigh, North Carolina, sees mostly clients between the ages of 22 and 30, many of whom missed out on the usual dating and networking because of the Covid pandemic.

“They literally haven’t been able to do anything for two years,” said Isaacs, who specializes in working with people with eating disorders and people who identify as LGBTQ+.

They are just some of the people in the United States whose mental health has suffered during the pandemic. A Gallup [poll](#) conducted in November found that, like last year, only 34% of Americans describe their mental health as “excellent”. Those are the lowest levels in two decades.

Even though many people in the United States are now vaccinated against the virus and able to engage in something like a pre-pandemic lifestyle, the country’s population continues to suffer from anxiety and depression.

And now there are fresh worries about the Omicron variant and the impact it could have on public life this winter. The new variant – which, early reports suggest, could be more contagious than previous strains – is already spreading in the US, triggering concern. If Omicron does lead to another Covid-19 surge, the impact on mental health will be serious.

“Despite vaccinations, we still see that people are not back to pre-pandemic levels of wellbeing,” said Silvia Saccardo, a social scientist and co-author of a recent [study](#) on college students at the University of Pittsburgh students. “And they are not back to pre-pandemic levels of physical activity, which could have consequences as well, and this is quite worrisome, because if lifestyle habits and wellbeing don’t naturally rebound, it’s important to think about what to do, about interventions to help them.”

Psychologists and others who study mental health attribute the high rates of anxiety and depression to continued worries about the virus, and lingering trauma from the worst parts of the pandemic.

That is not unusual, said Sharon Hoover, co-director of the University of Maryland-based National Center for School Mental Health. For example, more than 18 months after Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, 15% of youths exposed to the natural disaster continued to suffer from serious emotional disturbances, such as anxiety disorders, compared with a 4.2% national average, according to a [study](#) in the Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.

Like the twentysomethings Isaacs has seen, children and teens have also missed out on significant life events, Hoover said, and “that doesn’t get remedied overnight by reintroducing those things”.

“Many children and adolescents don’t yet have the coping mechanisms that they might need, and they are in some respects at the mercy of adults who are there to take care of them,” said Hoover. “It’s a grave mistake for people to say, ‘Our kids are going to be OK, it’s just the adults who are going to suffer.’”

The same concerns about mental health continue to linger on college campuses. Before the pandemic, in fall 2019, one-third of college students across the country reported that they were struggling with anxiety and a quarter reported depression, according to an American College Health Association [report](#). A survey [conducted](#) by the organization in spring 2021 found that one in four students had screened positive for suicidal thoughts.

“If there are still concerns about a variant or who knows what may come down the road, that poses a lot of anticipatory anxiety,” said John Dunkle, a former director of counseling services at Northwestern University who is now a senior director with the non-profit Jed Foundation, a suicide prevention organization.

To combat what some public health groups have [declared](#) a national mental health emergency, schools must build up coping skills for adolescents in classrooms rather “than waiting for kids to get routed to mental health providers that they may not see for six months” in part due to a workforce shortage, said Hoover.

“We got kids back to school to improve their learning loss in the context of Covid, but we have to also be putting social and emotional supports in the school settings,” said Hoover.

While there is a shortage of mental health professionals in the United States, Dunkle said focusing on the number of providers at a counseling center should just be one consideration. Schools must also educate other staff on how to respond to students’ mental health needs and help students navigate insurance issues, he said.

Despite worries about students’ mental health struggles, Dunkle sees causes for optimism. In conjunction with Dunkle’s organization, Ithaca College

recently established a “Stop and Breathe week”, aimed at helping “students cope with the stress of preparing for final exams”.

After two students at Saint Louis University died by suicide in September, the school canceled classes for a day to help students focus on mental health.

“That’s a good sign, where we say to students in the community, ‘Let’s stop and think about our mental health and balance,’” said Dunkle. Ideally, they would take such steps “proactively, not necessarily in the aftermath of a tragedy”.

Isaacs, the North Carolina therapist, also can take positives from recent reports on mental health in the United States. She and the other provider in her practice have a two-month waiting list of people seeking appointments, in part because therapy has become more normative, she said.

“I think the fact that people are seeking therapy in droves is a good thing,” said Isaacs. “It has been a grim two years, but I think everybody having it together at the same time has made people feel like they aren’t so alone.”

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2021.12.06 - Opinion

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OpinionCoronavirus

Covid jingoism will not protect the west from the threat of Omicron

[Nesrine Malik](#)



Passengers at Cape Town International Airport on 30 November.
Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

Mon 6 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

A friend's grandmother once told me a story about her late husband's English golf club. It was the 1960s, and she was having a drink on the club's terrace with some of the other wives. The men played golf on the links below, and one of them would swear loudly whenever he mis-hit a shot. The women complained to the manager, who promised he would address the matter. The next time the women went to go for a drink on the terrace they found a new sign. It read: "Terrace for male members only."

I am reminded of this story as I watch western governments react to the new Covid variant. South African scientists alerted the world to Omicron and in

turn, South Africa and several other African countries were promptly placed under travel and quarantine restrictions by the west. The first country to introduce a travel ban was, naturally, the UK. Thank you for informing us of the problem, our terrace is now closed.

There is something farcical about a political decision-making complex that has learned nothing from the past two years – two years during which the UK has tried to minimise and assume, at almost every turn, that it could escape the fate of other countries. Two years during which a very particular strain of Anglo-American swagger has emerged – one that falsely believes that if we raise our walls high enough, stockpile our vaccines and establish travel apartheid, then the pandemic will be over for us, even if it continues to rage elsewhere.

It does not seem to matter that during these two years, the worst tragedies did not happen abroad, but within our borders. They happened in our care homes, our hospitals, and in the wake of government indecisiveness over locking down (thrice) when it was clear that cases were rising. Imagine how many lives might have been saved had the UK government put the promised “protective ring” around care homes with the deftness and speed it red-listed and categorised other countries. But we are living in a state of inertia, where politicians continually fail to see that the problem is not that the virus and its variants make their way to the UK, but what happens when they do.

But this is how our institutions are built: to be nimble in some areas, almost paralysed in others. It is now the duty of the Home Office to cast a suspicious eye on entrants to the UK, to limit movement, to deport those deemed unworthy to be here. There is only one setting when problems set in: to shut our borders down. UK border policy is a hammer to which everything is a nail.

Meanwhile, programmes of foreign cooperation and alliance, be it our terminated membership of the EU or our slashed foreign aid budget, have been diminished by the belief that collaboration and sharing of resources with the rest of the world has no benefit to us internally. It is how we reach such biased conclusions that just because African scientists identified the latest Covid problem, the problem must be African. Meanwhile, research on

the new variant is being compromised because the necessary materials cannot be flown into South Africa due to the travel restrictions. The result is that tackling Omicron is compromised right at the very time when any new intelligence of the virus is critical. There is no starker example of how jingoism is a shot in the foot.

We move quickly to ban other countries because we are paralysed by the ideological and economic arrangements at home that have undermined much of the response to the pandemic. The stealth privatisation of the NHS, for example, and the stripping of its capacity in the name of “efficiency”. The deregulation of the labour market and weakening of trade unions, which has led to a generation of precarious workers having to choose between their health and their income when they should be isolating. We are caught between two equally powerful forces: the profoundly embedded ways we strive for short-term capital extraction at any cost, and a virus that thrives on the disorder this reckless pursuit of profit creates – as though it has been designed in the lab of a Thanos-like demigod raging against humankind’s propensity for self-destruction.

The government can choose to spin its wheels in futile theatrics in response to Omicron, or it can take sensible measures to prevent the spread of the virus. For starters: clarifying its position on mask wearing, acting decisively on any curbs to Christmas socialising, and learning from its mistakes. As we enter the third year of the pandemic, yet again bewildered by how the virus continues to be one step ahead, it feels like there will be no release until we repent. Until it is understood that there is no return to “normal” without dismantling the very notion of what that normal is, the pandemic will continue to resurge.

- Nesrine Malik is a Guardian columnist
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Opinion[Jack Dorsey](#)

Jack Dorsey's ditched Twitter for bitcoin. Has the social media bubble burst?

[Richard Seymour](#)



Illustration: R Fresson

Mon 6 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

Jack Dorsey is resigning from Twitter to spend more time with his other company, Square. In some ways, the choice between Twitter and Square is a straight choice between political clout and profit. Square, a payments platform co-founded by Dorsey in 2009, is worth almost three times Twitter's current value at [about \\$97bn](#) (£73bn). But Square will never be credited with the equivalent of the "[Twitter revolution](#)", or make headlines by banning a former president.

Venture capital is *pouring* money [into cryptocurrencies](#) and [payment platforms](#). Twitter, by contrast, having only started to become profitable since [2018](#), has always been more notable for its political impact than its commercial pull. However, Twitter, like the wider social industry of which it is a part, may be experiencing the limits of its growth. In terms of commercial reach, Twitter is [no competition](#) for industry giants such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram and TikTok, which each have well over a billion users. But even Facebook and Instagram are slowing down.

Generation Z is [turning off](#) the major platforms. Downloads of Facebook and Instagram have been [declining](#), according to a Bank of America report published in 2019. Both Twitter and Facebook have been losing ground with businesses due to this demographic shift in demand. By capitalising on the rise of video-sharing, TikTok has captured a much younger audience than Facebook or Twitter. Some businesses are also abandoning social media entirely, from fashion house Bottega Veneta, to Tesla, [Lush](#) and JD Wetherspoon.

It makes sense that investors are looking for the next big thing from tech, and that social media bosses would be searching for ways to profit from the cryptocurrency bubble. Before he left, Dorsey had been trying to expand Twitter into offering crypto-based payments and [non-fungible token](#) services. His replacement as CEO, [Parag Agrawal](#), was tasked with [developing Twitter's crypto strategy](#), and it seems likely that Twitter will continue to plough that field.

Twitter is not the only social media firm attempting to exploit such opportunities. Facebook's parent company, Meta, has been trying to launch a cryptocurrency that could be sent worldwide via Facebook products, so far to [no avail](#). This move makes more sense for a platform like Facebook, given that it has always offered a patchwork of services, such as video, photo, fan pages, gaming, buying and selling, and so on, compared with Twitter's straightforward microblogging service.

However, this isn't just about profitability. It is about the economic power of belief. Dorsey is also a cryptocurrency fanatic. A particular champion of

bitcoin, he claims it will one day “unite a deeply divided country” behind it, and eventually become the world’s “single currency”. Square accepts payments on its cash app from bitcoin, but no other cryptocurrency. Recently, Square released a [white paper](#) for a decentralised bitcoin exchange platform that would appear to freeze out competing cryptocurrencies.

Dorsey is also a doom-monger about fiat currencies – those issued by governments. “Hyperinflation,” he oracularly [warns](#), “is going to change everything. It’s happening.” This is baseless. Recent inflationary pressures due to the increased costs of production and transit caused by Covid and extreme weather patterns are real. But there is no hyperinflation in the global economy. Given Dorsey’s profile and potential impact on investors, it could be considered a reckless thing to say; but it also reflects the strange ideology of all bitcoin enthusiasts.

According to its devotees, bitcoin is a [deflationary force](#) that routes around the inefficiencies and tyrannies of central banks and fiat currencies. It is deflationary because it is designed to mimic the supply of a real-world commodity, gold. This means that the number of coins that it is possible to mine is restricted: the supply will eventually hit a ceiling with 21m bitcoins. So even though, as the People’s Bank of China recently noted, the digital coin is not backed up by any real value, it operates as its own virtual gold standard. Moreover, bitcoin’s apologists say, decentralised blockchain technology cuts out all middle men, a principle that can be deployed in [gaming](#), [finance](#) and [social networks](#). It makes transactions cheaper and faster and keeps efficient records without the oversight of a big state.



Jack Dorsey, co-founder and chief executive of Twitter, pictured in Seoul, March 2019. Photograph: Newscom/Alamy

The advantage of this “upstart” libertarian ideology is that it chimes directly with the commercial interests of bitcoin investors. Currently, one bitcoin will trade for £42,973. But it wouldn’t be worth a dime if enough investors hadn’t decided to treat it as though it were gold. It is a “hyperstition”: a fiction that makes itself true because enough people believe in it. All currencies rely on what Michel de Certeau called a “secret network” of believers. We all must believe, not only in the value of the currency we exchange, but that others believe in it too. We look to a higher power, typically the central bank, to guarantee this belief. In the case of cryptocurrencies, the tech itself is supposed to eliminate the need for all these elaborate systems. This is typical of the “California ideology”, which blends the values of the libertarian right with the countercultural ethos of some of the internet’s pioneers.

Yet, far from driving any great disruption, the value of cryptocurrencies is mainly a byproduct of developments in fiat currencies. The latter benefited from a glut of spare investment capital caused by the institutionalisation of quantitative easing. The crypto boom since Covid has therefore been made possible by central banks sending money supply through the roof. Ironically,

the cryptocurrencies have benefited from precisely the sort of central bank policies that the libertarian right tends to complain about.

Dorsey's belief in a single global cryptocurrency is not likely to happen. And, as the economist [Yanis Varoufakis](#) has pointed out, it would actually be disastrous if bitcoin did replace fiat currencies. The "bitcoin community" would have no incentive to expand the money supply in the event of a crisis. That scenario would benefit the rich holders of the coin, such as tech monopolists, investment bankers and energy oligarchs, while wrecking the lives of everyone else.

Nonetheless, we would be fools to underestimate belief backed up by spare investment capital. Since at least 2017, when a bitcoin was trading at less than \$1,000 (£750), there have been a glut of articles explaining why the bitcoin bubble is unsustainable. But, far from falling apart, it continues to surge. Even after Elon Musk dropped the coin earlier this year, and China banned traders from offering bitcoin prices, its tradeable value climbed. The total value of cryptocurrencies today is close to [\\$3tn](#). With Amazon looking to [accept payment in bitcoins](#), there is space for further growth. Dorsey's messianic belief in the power of crypto will probably be rewarded with profit for some time, in a way that the hype around Twitter never was.

If we underestimate the economic value of belief, we will underestimate how large the bubble can grow.

- Richard Seymour is a political activist and author; his latest book is *The Twittering Machine*
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OpinionLabour

The new Tory right is fanatical and dangerous – and should be Labour’s prime target

[John Harris](#)





Jacob Rees-Mogg and Steve Baker pictured at the Houses of Parliament in November 2018. Photograph: Peter Nicholls/Reuters

Sun 5 Dec 2021 09.12 EST

The House of Commons rarely hears speeches about what it is to be human, the elements of life that give it meaning, and the sanctity of free will. But last Tuesday, as MPs spent three hours considering what measures England should adopt in response to the arrival of the Omicron variant, the Conservative MP Steve Baker gave a [brief oration](#) that dealt with these things and more.

The debate, he said, was not really about modest proposals for mandatory face coverings in most public spaces, and 10 days of self-isolation for anyone deemed to have been a contact of someone infected with the new variant. Even if they didn't know it, MPs were fundamentally considering "the kind of nation and civilisation that we are creating in the context of this new disease".

He expressed concern about the effects of mask-wearing on children, and his worries about what a possible "pingdemic" might mean for the economy. But the nub of his argument was philosophical. "What is the relationship between the state and the individual?" he asked. "Are we to be empty

vessels or mere automata – things to be managed, as if a problem? Or are we free spirits with, for want of a better term, a soul?”

The latter was the truth, he said: all of us are “people who deserve the dignity of choice and the meaning in our lives that comes from taking responsibility. It is possible that meaning in our lives comes from little else”.

Having offered this somewhat dried-up vision of the human condition (what, you could only wonder, of the meaning given to existence by friendship, family or community?), he then told his colleagues that they were facing “a fundamental choice between heading towards heaven and heading towards hell”. Some of them seemed to agree: [32 Tories](#) opposed the self-isolation rules, and [20 voted against](#) the new mask mandate.

There it was again: that vocal element of the Conservative party that successfully pushed us into the hardest of Brexits, and these days spends a lot of its time railing against measures designed to control the worst effects of the virus.

In the wake of the 2016 referendum, MPs faithful to its view of things relaunched the [European Research Group](#) to push for the UK to leave the single market and customs union. Today, some of their most high-profile politicking is also done via the new(ish) [Covid Recovery Group](#). You might call the people involved Groupies: many are also members of the [Net Zero Scrutiny Group](#), reportedly overseen by Baker, who [thinks](#) that if the government achieves its carbon emissions target by 2050, people are “going to be poorer, they’re going to be colder … and they may be eating insects for protein”.

These Tories are often termed libertarians, but such beliefs seem to have their limits: notwithstanding one or two murmurings of concern, they have [supported the new crime and policing bill](#), and its swingeing restrictions on the right to protest. They tend to insist that masks should be a matter of personal choice, but tell us what that choice should be by [not wearing masks](#) in the Commons chamber. Their politics is essentially emotional: hostile towards the state being used to shape society and the economy, more about

the individual than any notion of the common good, and seemingly based on the insistence that people like them should be able to do as they please.

They clearly have a [strong influence](#) on the prime minister. When the leading lights of the ERG [agreed to vote](#) for his withdrawal agreement with the EU and opened the path to the 2019 general election, they ensured that he owed them a debt. The exit from Tory politics of remainers and Conservative centrists has been another boost, as has the presence in the cabinet of such ideological allies as Jacob Rees-Mogg, Priti Patel and Dominic Raab. Regular [whispers](#) about Nigel Farage returning to steal Tory votes maintain Baker and his comrades' influence. And their laissez-faire outlook chimes with one of the few sets of coherent convictions that Boris Johnson seems to possess, evident in his habit of claiming that Covid measures are a matter of huge reluctance, and the fact that he has almost seemed to make a point of being photographed without a mask.

There are indications that this kind of Conservatism might not suit once-loyal Tory people and places quite as much as its adherents think: recent [Tory losses](#) in council elections clustered in the south of England, the summer's Liberal Democrat win in the Chesham and Amersham by-election, even last week's low turnout and 10% swing to Labour in true blue Old Bexley and Sidcup. Viewed from this perspective, the new Tory right perhaps has a flaw it shares with zealots on the left, claiming to speak for "the people", but regularly falling out of step with large swathes of the public.

There are, of course, Brexit, me-first strands of public opinion that do seem to fit with its view of things. But [climate scepticism](#) and opposition to meaningful action now seems to be confined to an [increasingly small share](#) of the population, even at the upper end of the age range. Just before the latest Covid rules were introduced, YouGov found that 83% of us supported compulsory mask wearing in shops and on public transport. Were millions of people told that accepting such restrictions was tantamount to a descent into the moral underworld, they would surely conclude that they were listening to cranks and fanatics.

The [Conservatives](#) have a long history of focusing on the more eccentric, out-there elements of the Labour party and making hay, a habit that reached

its peak in the Jeremy Corbyn years, and is these days reflected in all those caricatures of anything deemed “woke”. But even now, Keir Starmer’s Labour party seems surprisingly quiet about the Tory right and its ever-increasing influence – rarely pointing out how far its stances are from public opinion, nor highlighting the hold it seems to have on Johnson.

If this were to change, Starmer might finally master something that has eluded him since the start of the pandemic: the ability to cast the Tories’ failings in moral terms, and offer a contrasting alternative. Think about it this way: if the most influential wing of the Conservative party favours flimsy ideas of personal choice over our collective wellbeing, that surely shines on everything from the prevalence among Tory MPs of second jobs and their aversion to face coverings, to Johnson apparently [allowing staff to hold parties in Downing Street](#) in defiance of lockdown rules. Such things are not only about arrogance, sloppiness and ineptitude: they also demonstrate what reckless individualism looks like in practice.

If Starmer needs an example of the tone he might strike, he could read an [old speech](#) by one of his predecessors. Socialism, said this Labour politician, was about “a moral purpose to life, a set of values, a belief in society, in cooperation, in achieving together what we cannot achieve alone”. He wanted, he said, a country where “your child in distress is my child, your parent ill and in pain is my parent, your friend unemployed and helpless is my friend, your neighbour, my neighbour”.

“We are not simply people set in isolation from one another,” he insisted, “but members of the same family, same community, same human race.” These were values, moreover, “shared by the vast majority of the British people”. There should be no nervousness among the [Labour](#) frontbench about rhetoric like that: Tony Blair said those words, when he and his party were less than two years away from finally sending the Conservative party into the wilderness.

- John Harris is a Guardian columnist
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OpinionBooks

I write ‘women’s commercial fiction’ – why is my work still seen as inferior to men’s?

[Emma Hughes](#)



Renee Zellweger in the film adaptation of Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Photograph: Working Title/Allstar

Sun 5 Dec 2021 10.25 EST

In the four months since my first novel came out, I've had the same conversation probably a dozen times.

“What’s it about?” a well-meaning stranger will ask. “Well,” I’ll reply, “it’s the story of a woman choosing between two very different men – as well as technology, divorce and the precariousness of renting in ...” “Oh!” they’ll interject. “You mean one of those books with high heels on the cover? That must have been fun to write.”

So I wasn't surprised to find that the Times and Sunday Times' best books of 2021 round-up did not, as they claimed, represent "every genre". It's a terrific list, full of books that have made an otherwise constraining year feel infinitely full of possibility. But in spite of crime fiction, historical novels, thrillers and science fiction all having their own categories, romantic fiction failed to get a look in.

I'm an author of what I'll call – for the purposes of this piece – women's commercial fiction (more on that later), and I was one of the many writers who took to Twitter to express their frustration at this omission. I don't think anyone at the Times was deliberately snubbing women's commercial fiction. But the same omission keeps happening, in review pages and on award longlists. Although we may no longer call these books "chick lit", they're still treated in many quarters as an embarrassing afterthought. Jeanette Winterson was so incensed earlier this year when a box of her newly reissued novels arrived looking like what she called "wimmins fiction" that she burned the lot.

This sniffiness stems from two outmoded beliefs that desperately need challenging. Firstly, that any book written by women about women's relationships is a capital-R Romance novel by default. And secondly, that Romance is a genre without substance or literary merit.

The whole question of genre is something that female writers of all stripes have to contend with far more than their male counterparts. Just look at people's obsession with categorising Sally Rooney. The idea that a young woman's pastel-covered novels about millennials falling in love might qualify as literary fiction causes a fair few commentators to start frothing at the mouth: in 2019, Will Self dismissed her work as "very simple stuff with no literary ambition" during an interview to promote (and I swear I'm not making this up) a line of macarons for the restaurant Hakkasan.

However you define it, women's commercial fiction is as diverse as the people who write it. Far from being lacking in what Winterson called "playful or strange or the ahead of time stuff", it's brimming with it. But there's a tendency for all of that to get stuffed into a box with a label on it: romance, high-end commercial, up-lit and so on. Of course, there's nothing

wrong with labels: they're invaluable in conceptualising a novel's "package". But they can also be limiting, and there's no getting around the fact that their application is heavily gendered. We don't call novels with titles like *Bravo Agent Mincemeat* and *The Leonardo Enigma* "men's commercial fiction" – we just call them "books".

To move on to the second misconception, that women's commercial fiction has nothing important to say – what makes a novel "serious"? Is it the subject matter, the quality of the prose, the author's ability to connect with readers? By every one of these metrics, it's the real deal. It's generally accepted that Marian Keyes and Jojo Moyes, both globally successful and beloved, write novels with weight. And Helen Fielding has had a bit of a reappraisal recently, with authors like Candice Carty-Williams citing *Bridget Jones's Diary* as a formative influence. But they're framed as the exception rather than the rule.

Just a glance at the pile of books by my bed right now would tell you that isn't the case. There's a proof of Laura Kay's *Tell Me Everything*, about a queer therapist's intimacy issues, and *The Mismatch*, Sara Jafari's sensitive look at first love and cultural differences. Each word of Mhairi McFarlane and Sophie Cousens's sentences is weighed and measured. And you only have to watch the *Sylvanian Families* trailer that Lindsey Kelk made for *On a Night Like This* to know that you're in the hands of a serious comic talent. My own novels devote just as much space to subjects like bias in dating app algorithms, premature ovarian failure, abortion and mental illness as they do to falling in love.

Another thing that's serious is the amount of money that women's commercial fiction is worth to publishing. As bestselling author Milly Johnson (who at the time of writing had only been outsold in the week's paperback fiction chart by Richard Osman) made clear in a [recent blogpost](#), romantic novels are one of the backbones of the industry, flying off the shelves in their millions. "We make profit," she wrote. "No one gives us publishing deals because they feel obliged to."

As any reader of romances knows, you often find love where you least expect it – usually by setting aside your preconceptions. Next year, I hope

that the people who put together the Times list of the best books of 2022 can do just that. And maybe one or two old-guard Booker nominees can too.

- Emma Hughes's latest book No Such Thing As Perfect is published by Century
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[France](#)

Far-right French presidential candidate put in headlock by protester at rally

00:33

Far-right French presidential candidate put in headlock by protester - video

Guardian staff and agency

Sun 5 Dec 2021 15.32 EST

The [far-right French presidential candidate Éric Zemmour](#) appeared to be put in a headlock by a protester at his first campaign, a few days after he formally declared his candidacy in a video highlighting his anti-migrant and anti-Islam views.

Videos online appeared to show Zemmour being grabbed by a man at the heated rally near Paris on Sunday, during which anti-racism activists were also reportedly attacked. He was later reported to have suffered light injuries.

L'agression de zemmour, digne des plus grands catcheurs
[#ZemmourVillepinte](#) pic.twitter.com/t50lis7W9L

— Benj ● (@benjdpl) [December 5, 2021](#)

The former TV pundit announced on Tuesday that he would run in next April's election, joining the field of challengers seeking to unseat centrist President Emmanuel Macron.

He held his first event at an exhibition centre in a suburb of Paris where thousands cheered every mention of reducing immigration and booed every reference to Macron loudly.

“The stakes are huge: if I win it will be the start of winning back the most beautiful country in the world,” Zemmour told the crowd.

Fighting broke out and chairs were thrown at activists when they stood up with “No to Racism” written on their T-shirts, with at least two of them seen bleeding as they were ejected from the auditorium.

A crew from the popular but critical *Quotidien* nightly TV news show were also booed and removed by security, with hostility to the media a feature of the speeches at the event.

The rally was seen as a chance for Zemmour to regain momentum after opinion polls showed support for him falling over the last month as he attempted to maintain suspense about his intentions.

Polls show that voters currently believe Marine Le Pen, the veteran leader of the far-right National Rally party, would make a more competent president than Zemmour.

The latest surveys suggest he would be eliminated in the first round if the election were held now, with Macron tipped to win ahead of Le Pen, but analysts warn that the outcome remains highly uncertain.

Zemmour vowed to reduce immigration to almost zero if he were elected, dramatically toughen up the naturalisation process, and expel failed asylum-seekers and illegal immigrants.

France’s right-wing Republicans party picked [the boss of the Paris region Valerie Pecresse](#) as its nominee on Saturday after a primary dominated by talk of immigration and crime.

Police were on alert for far-left activists and anarchists who disrupted Zemmour’s trip last weekend to the southern port city of Marseille, which ended with the candidate showing the middle finger to a woman who was protesting.

As well as a series of recent missteps, Zemmour has seen several influential figures on the far-right distance themselves from him, including his main

financial backer.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/05/far-right-french-presidential-candidate-put-in-headlock-by-protester-at-rally>

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[France](#)

Pécresse attacks ‘zigzagging’ Macron as French right goes after president



Valérie Pécresse celebrates after being selected as the presidential candidate for Les Républicains. She has said beating Macron is her ‘mission’. Photograph: Julie Douxe/News Pictures/Rex/Shutterstock

[Angelique Chrisafis](#) in Paris

[@achrisafis](#)

Sun 5 Dec 2021 14.09 EST

Emmanuel Macron came under fire from the French right at the weekend as Valérie Pécresse was chosen as the presidential candidate for Les Républicains, while the far-right TV pundit Éric Zemmour launched a new party and Marine Le Pen travelled to Poland for a show of force with the Polish prime minister and other European populist parties.

Pécresse said her “mission” was to stop Macron. She called him a “zigzagging” president who had “run [France](#) into the wall with debt and taxes, a society where there is no more respect or authority”. In her first interview, with the *Journal du Dimanche*, she said Macron had saddled future generations with a wealth of problems including “debt, commercial deficit, taxes, struggling public services [and] a chronic crisis of authority”. She added: “France is damaged and divided, everything has to be repaired.”

Pécresse will on Monday travel to the southern French heartlands of the hard-right deputy Éric Ciotti, [who she beat in the primary final](#) and who on Sunday piled pressure on her to prioritise his hardline policies on immigration and tax in order to win voters back from the far-right’s Le Pen and Zemmour.

The left’s Jean-Luc Mélenchon held a vast presidential campaign rally calling for an urgent show of “strength and unity” from leftwing voters in France, insisting that the nation was not lurching to the right after opinion polls in recent months have suggested greater support than ever for far-right candidates and hardline anti-immigration rhetoric.

The centrist Macron is likely to announce his re-election attempt in January or February before April’s presidential election. But this weekend’s choice of Pécresse as candidate for Nicolas Sarkozy’s party, Les Républicains, immediately ramped up the election campaign.

Macron’s government spokesperson, Gabriel Attal, told *Le Parisien* that there was no clear political line inside Les Républicains and that Pécresse would have to do political “acrobatics” to try to keep together all the “antagonistic” party views. He said the right was in “existential crisis” and argued that Macron’s transformation of the labour market, lowering of taxes and creation of police jobs meant “we have done everything that Pécresse could have done when she was minister [under Sarkozy], but which she didn’t do”.

Meanwhile, [Zemmour, who has convictions for inciting racial hatred](#) and no previous political experience, held his first campaign rally in an exhibition space 12 miles north of Paris in Villepinte. There were street demonstrations

against him by trade unionists in Paris as well as scuffles inside the rally itself after several people protesting against Zemmour took off their jackets in the audience to reveal anti-racism T-shirts.

Footage emerged of him appearing to be [put in a headlock by protesters at his first campaign rally](#), a few days after he formally declared his candidacy in a video highlighting his anti-migrant and anti-Islam views.

Zemmour announced he was forming a new political party named Reconquête, which means “reconquest”, as he vowed to save “the destiny of French civilisation” against what he called the threat of migrants.

He attacked the political system and the media, promised to raise wages for low-salary workers fed up with the boss class getting rich, and promised “immigration zero” if he came to power.

The 63-year-old polemicist has been attacked by historians for claiming the Nazi collaborator Marshal Philippe Pétain saved French Jews rather than aiding their deportation to death camps. He has been described by the French justice minister as a dangerous racist and Holocaust denier.

On stage, he denied he was a racist or misogynist, saying he was a lone defender of “free speech”.

Before the rally, several hundred people joined a demonstration against Zemmour in Paris which was led by trade unions with banners saying “Zemmour out” and denouncing him as racist.

Simon Duteil, spokesperson for the Solidaires trade union, said it was important to show people would stand up to the “advance of fascism”. A total of 48 people were arrested at anti-Zemmour protests in Villepinte and Paris.

It was a sign of the divisiveness of the presidential campaign that while Jacline Mouraud, a key Brittany figure of the *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests) movement, took the stage to support Zemmour, at the same time another figure from the *gilets jaunes* was arrested for protesting against Zemmour outside the rally.

Pécresse said of Zemmour: “In the history of France, people who divide have never been the savours. Merchants of fear do not bring solutions.” She said her party was the only “credible alternative”.

Mélenchon urged leftwing voters to unite behind him. The left is splintered into several different candidates, including the Socialist mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, and the Greens’ Yannick Jadot, with polls showing that division is stopping any candidate reach the presidential final round.

“France is not the far-right,” Mélenchon said. “France is its social security system, public health, emancipation, school, research and sharing.” The situation in France was “volatile”, he told Le Parisien, adding that the left would make it through to the presidential final if working-class neighbourhoods turned out to vote.

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Fashion

‘Just never going to be OK’: report finds luxury brands falling behind on animal welfare



Seven luxury brands, including Hermès, Prada and LVMH-owned Fendi, Louis Vuitton and Dior, received a score of 0% on a report into animal welfare in the industry. Photograph: Ron Adar/SOPA Images/REX/Shutterstock

[Lucianne Tonti](#)

Mon 6 Dec 2021 01.42 EST

Despite recent commitments from the luxury fashion industry to reduce its environmental footprint, a report has revealed luxury fashion brands are among the worst in the industry for animal welfare, driven by their continued use of fur and exotic animal skins.

As bans on the use of fur become more commonplace, the Animal Welfare in Fashion report highlights how out of step many luxury brands are with the rest of the industry.

Released on 6 December 2021 by global animal welfare organisation, Four Paws, [the report](#) assessed 111 brands across different markets, including Australia, on their commitment to animal welfare and sourcing transparency. While LVMH-owned Stella McCartney achieved the report's highest score of 90%, the luxury sector fared the worst overall, receiving an average score of just 23% (lower than fast fashion at 53%).

The luxury sector's attitude to fur changed significantly during 2021. In June [Canada Goose stated](#) they would stop using fur by 2022, in September, luxury conglomerate [Kering announced](#) all of its brands, including Gucci and Balenciaga, would stop using fur and the same month Oscar de la Renta also agreed to cease using fur, a move the New York Times reported was [brokered by singer Billie Eilish](#). On 3 December, [Elle magazine](#) said fur would be banned from its editorial and advertising content.

The report found that 57% of brands assessed have a formal animal welfare policy, a figure that has almost doubled since the inaugural report was published last year.

The highest performing fashion category was – unsurprisingly – “sustainability”, with an average score of 76%; closely followed by brands in the “outdoor” category, with an average score of 71%. One Australian brand, streetwear label Afends, ranked in the report's Top 10.



Sustainability focused luxury brand Stella McCartney received the highest score in Four Paws' Animal Welfare in Fashion report – but other luxury houses were listed as some of the worst performers on animal welfare.
Photograph: Nils Jorgensen/REX/Shutterstock

The report calls for brands to reduce the use of animal products, refine animal-based supply chain choices to encourage higher levels of welfare, and to replace animal products with sustainable alternatives.

The report drew on the [Five Domains Model](#) to assess brands, which was created by David Mellor, a professor of Animal Welfare Science at Massey University. The model measures welfare based on the animal's mental state, which is affected by its nutrition, physical environment, health status and behavioural interactions.

The report shares its methodology with Good On You, a website that ranks fashion brands across three areas – people, planet and animals.

According to Good On You CEO, Gordon Renouf, to calculate each brand's score on animal welfare, the platform rates brands based on publicly available information across five key areas: whether or not the brand has a welfare policy and how good this policy is; what materials they're using and whether or not they've committed to banning exotic skins and fur; what

certifications the brand is working with; how transparent and traceable their supply chain is; and how strong their governance model is.

They use these metrics to give each brand a score out of 100, which results in a rating of: “great”; “good”; “it’s a start”; “not good enough” and “we avoid”.

Seven luxury brands received a score of 0% and the lowest brand ratings, including Hermès, Prada and LVMH-owned Fendi, Louis Vuitton and Dior.

[Wild] animals are inherently difficult to farm in such a way that you can ensure a good level of animal welfare

Jessica Medcalf, Four Paws

According to the report, a rating this low is reserved for brands that have little transparency about their position on animal welfare, have not taken any steps to address animal welfare and may be using fur, exotic skins, and angora.

“A few position statements just doesn’t cut it,” says Four Paws global corporate engagement manager, Jessica Medcalf. “We’re looking for comprehensive animal welfare policies that lead to impact on the ground.”

Four Paws informed each brand they were being assessed, told them how they had scored and provided some insight into where they could improve via email. Though the report indicates broad factors that contribute to a low or high score, it did not publish specific details about what led to the failing scores of each individual brand.

The report also noted that some brands with a score of 0% do have policies around animal welfare and certified sourcing – this is the case for the LVMH-owned brands. Others, such as Prada have committed to being fur free.

“Not all the worst performing brands are exactly the same. They all have different attributes,” says Medcalf.

‘Much can be learned from brands that are improving’

Medcalf says they have not received a response from the companies that scored negatively in the report, but she is hopeful “we will get to work together to improve their standards of animal welfare”.

For all low performing brands, the continued use of “unacceptable” animal products had “the most adverse impact on their scores”.

Medcalf says the report’s criteria are impossible to meet when wild animals like crocodiles or snakes are bred, caged and killed on farms. She says, “these animals are inherently difficult to farm in such a way that you can ensure a good level of animal welfare”.

According to Medcalf, Hermès – billed as the lowest performer – received their rating because they “use the largest array of animal products in our entire sample of 111 brands” and for “their use of products made from wildlife who have been farmed”.

A spokesperson for Hermès said they have “science-based animal welfare policies and a commitment to converge by 2024 toward best-in-class certification” and can ensure strict control of the supply chain, in particular the traceability of leather materials.

On their use of crocodile leather – some of which is sourced from Australian farms owned by the brand – the spokesperson said, “regarding exotic skins, Hermès has been collaborating with ICFA (International Crocodilian Farmers Association) for several years now”.

On its website, Hermès outlines a plan to create the first specific standards for supply chains for alligator, crocodile and ostrich skins. However Medcalf says “we don’t believe that the crocodile industry can ever ensure a good level of animal welfare”.

She says this is the case for all non-domesticated animals. “They’re wild animals, used to far-ranging conditions”. This means a farm environment is

“just never going to be OK”.

When it comes to domesticated animals, the report places emphasis on the importance of certifications in promoting animal welfare. Medcalf says, “the main way that brands can take responsibility for animal welfare within their supply chains … is by showing a good certification is applied”.

The report specifically cited the [Responsible Wool Standard](#) and the [Responsible Down Standard](#) as preferred certifications – among others. Hermès [cites](#) they are moving towards both of these standards by 2024.

John Lau, the Dean of Academic Strategy at the London College of Fashion, is critical of the report and the methodology. He says it “is not entirely clear, because the results of the research are not published in full”.

Lau says only publishing the scores of the best and worst performing brands is also a missed opportunity, “much can be learned from brands that are improving” he says, specifically citing Kering’s efforts.

Medcalf says “we have withheld most scores, as we aim to give the majority of brands the space and support to understand and address animal welfare within their corporate and social responsibility goals”.

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However, she states that Four Paws intend to publish all brand scores in the next report, and the scoring will be updated over time on Good On You’s platform.

She says the goal of the report is to “benchmark how the fashion industry is progressing” in order to “motivate the brands to change” and “at the same time, give us the information that we need to be able to support those brands to change”.

Lau feels that the burden of change should not fall solely on brands. “Farms, which are at the start of the process, must be made accountable to how their animals, whether farmed-on-demand or a by-product, are being treated.”

Additionally, it is important to take a holistic view of the issues, Lau says. “Reducing the reliance on animal derived material may improve animal welfare, however this cannot be to the detriment of destroying natural habitat to grow more plant-based fibres, or developing polluting synthetic materials that affects wildlife.”

LVMH and Prada were contacted for comment, but had not supplied a response at the time of publication

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2021/dec/06/just-never-going-to-be-ok-report-finds-luxury-brands-falling-behind-on-animal-welfare>

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[Joe Biden](#)

Joe Biden restores tradition with return to Kennedy Center Honors



Honorees include (L-R): Justino Díaz, Lorne Michaels, Joni Mitchell, Bette Midler and Berry Gordy. Photograph: Scott Suchman/CBS

[David Smith in Washington](#)

[@smithinamerica](#)

Mon 6 Dec 2021 03.53 EST

“Tonight it is quite nice, very nice to see the presidential box once again being occupied,” [David Letterman](#) said to knowing applause. “And the same with the Oval Office.”

The comedian was introducing the 44th Kennedy Center Honors, where Joe Biden restored tradition merely with his presence after four years in which the annual gala [was snubbed](#) by then president Donald Trump and upended by the coronavirus pandemic.

Biden was joined by the first lady, Jill Biden, the vice-president, Kamala Harris, and her husband, Doug Emhoff. The House speaker, Nancy Pelosi, and Chief Justice John Roberts ensured the heads of all three branches of government were present in the main opera house.

Lifetime achievement [awards for artistic excellence](#) were presented to the opera singer Justino Díaz, Motown Records founder Berry Gordy, Saturday Night Live (SNL) mastermind Lorne Michaels, actor and singer Bette Midler and folk music singer Joni Mitchell.

It was the first full ceremony for America's most prestigious performing arts awards since the outbreak of Covid-19. Guests were required to show proof of vaccination and a recent negative test and to wear masks. It was also a return to political norms.

Trump's chaotic, rule-breaking presidency often meant events such as these could be rocked by a single tweet. Biden came into office promising to [restore order to Washington](#). His attendance at the Kennedy Center was one such small but symbolically important gesture and met with multiple standing ovations.



President Biden was joined by the first lady, Jill Biden, vice president Kamala Harris and her husband, Doug Emhoff. House speaker, Nancy

Pelosi, and chief justice John Roberts ensured the heads of all three branches of government were present in the Center's main opera house. Photograph: Michael Butcher for Elman studio

Biden held a black-tie ceremony for the five honourees earlier in the evening. Trump did not hold such a reception during his four years in office and did not attend the event, breaking from predecessors who nearly always showed up.

In lighthearted remarks about Michaels – the creator and executive producer of SNL – that again struck a different tone from Trump, Biden alluded to the comedy sketch show's struggle to find an actor to impersonate him.

“And Lorne Michaels – Mr Wise Guy over here,” [the president said](#). “He’s trying out seven guys to play me. As we say in our family: bless me father for I have sinned. I don’t know what’s going to happen. And, finally, it’s my turn to say something about him.”

Later, at the main event that ran for four hours, the audience was treated to a montage of SNL clips of actors’ impressions of presidents and other politicians which, perhaps to avoid any hint of controversy, did not include Trump or Biden.

Biden was not spared, however, by [Michael Che](#), a co-host of the show’s popular Weekend Update slot. He said: “It’s so nerve-racking, I’ve not been here in DC since January 6.” After the audience erupted in laughter, he added: “It’s not what you think: I needed a new laptop.

“It’s a bit intimidating to do jokes in front of President [Joe Biden](#). I keep having to remind myself, there’s no way he’s still awake right now.’

SNL cast members were cheered by members of the public as they entered the Kennedy Center, then sat together at a long table at a post-awards dinner in the atrium. Colin Jost was beside his partner, Hollywood actor [Scarlett Johansson](#), who chatted with SNL alumnus and late night TV host Seth Meyers.

The event, which will be broadcast on the CBS television network on 22 December, began with cellist Yo-Yo Ma playing the national anthem and asking the audience to sing the final lines together.

It featured speeches by Jimmy Fallon, Goldie Hawn, Steve Martin and Martin Short and performances by Brandi Carlile, Andra Day, Norah Jones, Billy Porter, Smokey Robinson, Paul Simon and Stevie Wonder.

Guests included the secretary of state, Antony Blinken, White House press secretary Jen Psaki, transportation secretary Pete Buttigieg and his husband, Chasten Buttigieg, former transportation secretary Elaine Chao, former House speaker [Newt Gingrich](#) and senators including Joe Manchin and Bob Menendez.

Letterman joked: “This night is about the honourees whose unique gifts cross all boundaries and represent all parties from the left to the far left.”



The event began with the cellist Yo-Yo Ma playing the national anthem and asking the audience to sing the final lines together. Photograph: Al Drago/UPI/Rex/Shutterstock

Earlier, Midler, who has received Grammy, Emmy, Tony and Golden Globe awards for a career spanning decades, told reporters on the red carpet: “It

was divine at the White House. Very clean. Lovely. Great staff. Food was excellent. Wine was a little sweet.”

Gordy, [a songwriter and record producer](#) from Detroit who shaped the careers of singers including Marvin Gaye, Michael Jackson and Diana Ross, said: “I think I’m in a dream, and it’s a wonderful dream.”

He added: “I had a wonderful talk with the president and I was very appreciative of him taking his time to come here when he’s trying to run the world and run all of the things that he has to do. I was thrilled. I didn’t realise he knew so much about Motown.”

Pelosi, also doing interviews on the red carpet, did not dwell on Trump’s past failures to attend. “I don’t want to go into what he didn’t do,” she said, before taking a playful dig at [Biden’s Irish ancestry](#). “For all the years that I have known him, he has always been quoting poets and Irish music. I think he thinks being Irish gives him a little bit of an edge in terms of the arts.”

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Headlines tuesday 7 december 2021

- [Afghanistan Raab rejects whistleblower's claims over Kabul evacuation](#)
- [Live 'Inaccurate': Raab defends record after damning account of handling of fall of Kabul](#)
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Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

Raab rejects whistleblower's claims over Kabul evacuation

00:47

Raab denies prioritising animals over humans during Afghanistan evacuation – video

[Jessica Elgot](#) and [Patrick Wintour](#)

Tue 7 Dec 2021 04.28 EST

Dominic Raab has rebuffed a number of charges from a whistleblower who claimed there was an incompetent and chaotic response to the fall of Kabul, saying he would make no apology for asking officials to resubmit urgent appeals for help from Afghans in a different spreadsheet format.

The chair of the foreign affairs select committee, Tom Tugendhat, said the [testimony from the former Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office staff member Raphael Marshall](#) was shocking and meant there were serious questions for the FCDO to answer.

“This is an individual, 25 years old, who states that at various points he was completely on his own dealing with a huge casework of incoming emails and phone calls, in a Foreign Office that was effectively a Mary Celeste at the time of national emergency,” Tugendhat told Radio 4’s Today programme. “Now if that’s true, that’s really concerning.”

Raab, now deputy prime minister and justice secretary but then foreign secretary, was on holiday as the [Taliban](#) took Kabul, as was the permanent secretary, Sir Philip Barton.

Marshall, who had three years’ experience, has quit the department and submitted testimony to the select committee. At one point at the height of the crisis, he says he was the only person working on the evacuation desk,

and was having to make life-and-death decisions on individuals to be evacuated on the basis of entirely haphazard criteria.

He has claimed Raab showed a misunderstanding of the process and the desperate position at Kabul airport by delaying several emergency evacuation referrals.

Raab said it was inaccurate to describe the system as dysfunctional. He said: “Well over 1,000 Foreign Office staff were working often night and day on rota system … as well as the troops on the ground in Afghanistan under incredible operational pressures. I would point to the fact that in just two weeks, 15,000 people were evacuated.

“I don’t think in living memory we’ve seen an operation on that scale and certainly in relation to this one, no other country bar the United States evacuated more.”

He said that the testimony was “inaccurate” and that desk officials were not making decisions. “There’s difference in processing and deciding. So I’m afraid I don’t accept that characterisation,” he said.

“All of the pressures were on the ground in Afghanistan, and they were twofold. We had a large number of undocumented people coming forward. The verification for undocumented applicants was one of the big challenges. The second one was getting people to the airport.”

Raab said it was a “reasonably swift turnaround” for it to take several hours to make decisions. Marshall said Raab had requested better formatted evidence. “It is hard to explain why he reserved the decision for himself but failed to make it immediately,” Marshall says.

“I make no apology for saying I needed the clear facts for each case presented precisely so that we can make swift decisions,” Raab told Today.

“You can’t just have emails coming through and examining them one by one, they need to be plated, the key facts drawn out and, of course, they need to be verified, which is why what London was doing was inextricably linked

with the challenges of gleaning information on the ground with the Taliban takeover.”

In his testimony, Marshall estimates between 75,000 and 150,000 people (including dependants) applied for evacuation under the special case scheme.

The vast majority of these applicants feared their lives were at risk as a result of their connection to the UK and the west and were therefore eligible for evacuation.

In a 39-page statement to MPs on the foreign affairs select committee, Marshall estimates fewer than 5% received help.

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

[**Politics**](#)

Leaked letter suggests Foreign Office covered up PM's involvement in dog airlift from Kabul, MP claims – as it happened

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[UK news](#)

Whistleblower condemns Foreign Office over Kabul evacuation



Afghans struggle to reach foreign forces to show their credentials to flee the country outside Kabul airport on 26 August 2021. Photograph: Akhter Gulam/EPA

[Patrick Wintour](#) Diplomatic editor

Mon 6 Dec 2021 19.01 EST

Tens of thousands of Afghans were unable to access UK help following the fall of Kabul because of turmoil and confusion in the Foreign Office, according to a devastating account by a whistleblower.

A former diplomat has claimed bureaucratic chaos, ministerial intervention, lack of planning and a short-hours culture in the department led to “people being left to die at the hands of the Taliban”.

The evidence of Raphael Marshall was deemed so serious that an internal inquiry was launched when he presented his account to the [Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office](#) (FCDO) permanent secretary, Sir Phillip Barton, at the end of August.

It is likely the whistleblower's evidence and the launch of the still unpublished internal inquiry contributed to the decision to move the then foreign secretary, [Dominic Raab](#), to a new cabinet role.

Marshall, an Oxford graduate with three years in the diplomatic service, had volunteered to work on the FCDO's special cases team at the height of the crisis in August following the sudden fall of Kabul to the Taliban.

He has now quit the department and, in testimony to the foreign affairs select committee published on Tuesday, he reveals the extent of the chaos he witnessed.

At one point at the height of the crisis, he says he was the only person working on the evacuation desk, and was having to make life and death decisions on individuals to be evacuated on the basis of entirely haphazard criteria.

He has claimed Raab showed a misunderstanding of the haphazard process and desperate position at Kabul airport by delaying several emergency evacuation referrals.

Rather than acting immediately, Raab – he said – insisted on further, better formatted evidence. “It is hard to explain why he reserved the decision for himself but failed to make it immediately,” Marshall says.

Marshall claims some of those that needed Raab’s consent never reached the airport, and in another case the team went ahead without waiting any longer for a response by Raab.

Marshall has also questioned whether Downing Street had been correct to tell parliament that all emails from Afghans attempting to leave the country had been processed by 6 September.

The whistleblower also reveals the uproar inside the Ministry of Defence when Boris Johnson ordered an [Afghan animal charity to be given priority for evacuation.](#)

The number of unread emails was already in the high thousands ... and increasing constantly

Raphael Marshall

In his testimony, Marshall claims: “There was a direct trade-off between transporting Nowzad’s animals and evacuating British nationals and Afghan evacuees, including Afghans who had served with British soldiers.”

The civil servant worked for a team responsible for helping people whose lives were at risk due to their connection with the UK.

The applicants did not qualify for the Arap (Afghan relocations and assistance policy) scheme – which was meant for those who had been directly employed by the UK government.

But they included Afghan soldiers, politicians, journalists, civil servants, feminists, aid workers and judges.

In his testimony, Marshall estimates between 75,000 and 150,000 people (including dependants) applied for evacuation under the special case scheme.

The vast majority of these applicants feared their lives were at risk as a result of their connection to the UK and the west and were therefore eligible for evacuation.

In a 39-page statement to MPs on the foreign affairs select committee, Marshall estimates fewer than 5% received help.

Marshall says: “At the height of the crisis on the afternoon of Saturday 21 August, I was the only person monitoring and processing emails in the Afghan special cases inbox.

“No emails from after early Friday afternoon had been read at that point. The number of unread emails was already in the high thousands, I believe above 5,000, and increasing constantly.”

Marshall said that, given the excess demand for places, it was critical that credible selection criteria were applied, but he says this did not happen. Instead, he claims the criteria provided were entirely subjective.

“Staff were scared by making hundreds of life and death decisions about which they knew nothing,” he says.

Specific failings include a rigidly enforced eight-hour working day culture, the inability to match the computer systems of the FCDO and the Department for International Development (DfID) – which had merged with the Foreign Office in 2020, the lack of computers for soldiers in Kabul calling forward selected evacuees, a complete lack of expertise including language skills, and a lack of coordination with US allies.

He claims the parallel Arap scheme was equally dysfunctional, saying that on the evening of Thursday 26 August, there were 4,914 unread emails in the Arap specific inbox.

There was confusion between the two email inboxes meaning cases were left for days without anyone noticing, he alleges.

For five nights in succession, he claims no night shift staff were deployed. DfID staff recruited to help “were visibly appalled by the system”.

Yet despite the urgency of the situation, the default expectation remained that staff in the FCDO would only work eight hours a day, five days a week. FCDO employees were only asked to work shifts for which they volunteered.

He adds that despite repeated requests it was not possible to find how many names had already been called up for evacuation, meaning the department never knew how many slots were still available. In the end, soldiers at the airport selected individuals on the basis of the order of their names on a Home Office spreadsheet.

He says it is unclear why, in contrast to the Ministry of Defence, the civilian planning for the evacuation was seemingly not finalised until four or five days after the fall of Kabul.

His statement to MPs adds: “Many of these emails also documented numerous recent grave human rights abuses by the Taliban, including murders, rapes and the burning of homes.

“The contrast between HMG’s statements about a changed Taliban and the large number of highly credible allegations of very grave human rights abuses HMG has received by email is striking.”

Marshall reveals he urged the permanent secretary to consider whether the chaos was so systemic that a breach of the ministerial code had occurred, but he was told the code did not in effect cover acts of inefficiency.

A source close to Raab said: “We evacuated over 500 special cases, including journalists, women’s rights activists and extremely vulnerable individuals.

“The major practical challenge to evacuation was verifying identity and securing safe passage to the airport, not the speed of decision making. At all times, the team’s focus was on saving lives.”

A UK government spokesperson said staff, including 1,000 from the FCDO, “worked tirelessly to evacuate more than 15,000 people from [Afghanistan](#) within a fortnight … [in] the biggest mission of its kind in generations and the second largest evacuation carried out by any country”.

They added: “The scale of the evacuation and the challenging circumstances meant decisions on prioritisation had to be made quickly to ensure we could help as many people as possible.

“Regrettably we were not able to evacuate all those we wanted to, but … since the end of the operation we have helped more than 3,000 individuals leave Afghanistan.”

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Dominic Raab

Fresh questions raised about Dominic Raab's role in Afghan rescue debacle



The whistleblower's testimony suggested there was little improvement in the situation once Raab returned from holiday on 16 August. Photograph: Tolga Akmen/AFP/Getty

Jessica Elgot Chief political correspondent

@jessicaelgot

Mon 6 Dec 2021 19.00 EST

The extraordinary claims in the testimony from a young Foreign Office whistleblower of the chaos of the Afghanistan withdrawal will raise fresh questions about Dominic Raab's leadership of the department – and not just during his absence on holiday.

The most damning of Raphael Marshall's allegations refer to the period when Raab was in direct control of the evacuation, the week after his return.

Marshall was a desk officer who has told MPs on the foreign affairs select committee that he worked in the Foreign Office's [Afghanistan](#) crisis response team.

In a 39-page statement provided to MPs, he described to them how he loved the department and how he had hoped to spend his career there.

During last August, however, he said he witnessed turmoil, incompetence and irrationality with potentially deadly consequences for those Afghans who begged the FCDO for help.

During the fall of Kabul in mid-August, Raab was holidaying with his family in Crete. With the country descending into chaos, Raab was forced to deny he was actually paddle-boarding at the time the Taliban entered the capital. He claimed he had been kept informed throughout and had been involved in key meetings.

But he also admitted he had delegated crucial tasks, including telling another minister to make a call to assist in the evacuation of former British military translators.

That moment made him the focal point for the anger of Conservative MPs at the spectacle of a humiliating retreat from the Taliban after 20 years of military involvement.

Yet Marshall's testimony suggested there was little improvement in the situation once Raab returned from holiday on 16 August. He described how junior staff with no experience or knowledge of Afghanistan were asked to make life-or-death decisions.

In the final days of the evacuation effort, with extremely limited capacity for removals, Raab was asked to personally approve exceptional cases. But Marshall claimed Raab took "hours to engage" – and then returned the files, asking for them to be submitted in a different spreadsheet format.

"There was very little time left for anyone to enter the airport, therefore the foreign secretary's choice to cause a delay suggests he did not understand

the desperate situation at Kabul airport,” Marshall told MPs on the committee.

Yet, according to Marshall, Raab still declined to defer the judgment to officials. “In the circumstances, it is hard to explain why he reserved the decision for himself but failed to make it immediately.”

Marshall said he believed the delay meant some never made it to the airport.

The prime minister’s own conduct has also been called into question.

Few visas were granted after 25 August, apart from those for the staff of animal rights charity Nowzad, which had become a cause célèbre, on the direct intervention of Boris Johnson.

Marshall has claimed the intervention to bring some of the animals to the UK put soldiers at risk and that staff were prioritised ahead of British army interpreters.

Raab has insisted [everyone was caught by surprise](#) by what happened in Afghanistan and that criticism of him was irresponsible. He also defended himself for having been on holiday, saying he had been in constant contact as the Afghan situation deteriorated before his return.

Despite his protestations, Raab has arguably paid some price for his leadership during those weeks after Kabul fell, being demoted from foreign secretary to justice secretary – with the consolation prize of the title of deputy prime minister.

That role has so far appeared to have little consequence, apart from an unedifying row over whether Raab’s successor, Liz Truss, or Raab should have access to the grace-and-favour stately home Chevening.

And cross-government reviews, which might have been designated to Raab, such as the investigation into measures to stop small boats crossing the Channel, have been handed to the Cabinet Office minister, Steve Barclay.

But Neil Coyle, a Labour member of the select committee that heard Marshall’s testimony, believes Raab has not paid anywhere near enough of a

political price for what had happened.

“It speaks volumes about this government that the minister ultimately responsible for the chaos, deaths and dysfunction in trying to evacuate from Afghanistan was promoted to deputy prime minister,” he said.

Raab was once viewed as a likely future Tory leader, talked of in the same breath as Truss and Rishi Sunak, especially after his caretaker leadership during the prime minister’s Covid hospitalisation.

The Afghanistan debacle most likely means the end of that ambition – though Johnson himself managed to overcome a blundering stint in the same role.

It will be little comfort those whose emails sat in FCDO inboxes, asking the foreign secretary to save their children’s lives.

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2021.12.07 - Spotlight

- Lost to the virus Michele Brown was vaccinated - but had a suppressed immune system. Would better health advice have saved her?
- 'I find it much tougher to watch today' David Thewlis on new show Landscapers and the misogyny of Naked
- Fahim's story How an Afghan reporter was left to the Taliban by the Foreign Office
- Chaos and inconsistency Whistleblower's main accusations
- Technology Best mid-range wifi 6 mesh systems to solve broadband dead zones



Michele Brown, who died last July. Illustration: Paul Ryding/The Guardian
[Lost to the virus](#)

Michele Brown was vaccinated - but had a suppressed immune system. Would better health advice have saved her?

Michele Brown, who died last July. Illustration: Paul Ryding/The Guardian
by [Sirin Kale](#)

Tue 7 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

The feeling of relief was immense as 58-year-old Michele Brown returned home from the vaccine centre. Her husband, Terry, 61, had taken time off from his job as a supervisor at a heavy machinery factory to drive her to her second Covid-19 vaccination at a Gateshead community centre. In the car, Michele told her partner of 40 years that she felt like a weight had been

lifted off her shoulders. “She said: ‘At least we’ve got that done,’” Terry remembers. “‘We’ll be OK.’”

It was 28 April 2021. Michele, who had rheumatoid arthritis, an underactive thyroid and diabetes, had spent the last year and a half shielding indoors, on government advice. She was careful. She had a Covid station set up on the breakfast counter: lateral flow tests, bottles of antibacterial gel and disposable face masks. When family came to visit, a mask-wearing Michele would banish them to the furthest corner of the living room. “We couldn’t kiss her,” remembers her daughter, Kim Brown, 41, who lives in Durham. “She would say: ‘You might have the coronies! I don’t want no coronies. You’re not giving me that crap.’”

After her vaccinations, Michele relaxed a tiny bit. She let her family visit more often, and stopped wearing a mask indoors when they did. But she still wasn’t going out much: her rheumatoid arthritis made even brief excursions exhausting. Most of the time, Michele stayed home, chatting to Kim on the phone, watching TV and ordering endless packages online. By the time they arrived she rarely had a clue what was in them. When the news came on, Michele would sigh. “She’d see the numbers go up,” says Kim, “and say: ‘Those poor people. Those poor families.’”

Michele’s family are mystified as to how she caught Covid – unless one of her rare visitors brought it into the house, or maybe it was when she went for a doctor’s appointment. It doesn’t really matter. When Michele became infected, it wrecked her body with brutal efficiency. Unknown to her, her immune system had been suppressed, most likely by the drugs she took to manage her arthritis, so her body had failed to mount a good response to the Covid-19 vaccine. In other words, the vaccine hadn’t worked for her.

“I never heard anything like ‘immunocompromised’,” says Terry, bewildered and distraught. “We never did.”



Terry Brown, Michele's husband. Photograph: Christopher Owens/The Guardian

Michele was born in 1962, in the village of Stannington, Northumberland, the eldest of seven children. Her parents split up when she was an infant. Her father eventually won custody of Michele, but at her request, left her with her grandmother Manuel, who raised her. "She had a difficult childhood," says Kim. "She swore her kids wouldn't have the same childhood. And we didn't. We had everything we wanted. Love. Affection. We didn't want for anything."

Terry lived on the same cul-de-sac as Michele and Nana Manuel. It was the sort of street where everyone knew each other. The boys would play football and the girls would watch. Everything took place outdoors. He remembers the first time he noticed her romantically. She was 17, sitting on a wall outside her grandmother's house. Dressed casually. No makeup, jeans. Terry was coming back from the pub. He noticed how lovely she was becoming. He tried to talk to her, but Manuel came out and shooed him away.

They kept noticing each other in the pub. Eventually, Michele's friend Brenda pushed them together. "She said: 'Isn't it about time you two went on a proper date?'" Terry recalls. "I thought, why would Michele want to date me? I was punching well above my weight." Their first date was in

February 1982; by March, they were a couple. Michele had already given birth to Kim by this point, although Kim's father was not in the picture. (Michele and Terry had a son, Terence James, in 1988.)

Back then, Michele was outgoing and carefree. She worked the cloakroom in a Newcastle nightclub with her best friend, Sid, but spent most of her time on the dancefloor instead. She dressed like a New Romantic and got her aunt to customise clothes she picked up in Oxfam. Her entire life, she loved music, even wearing headphones as she fell asleep. Her tastes were eclectic – everything from Slipknot to George Michael. “She had such a thing for George Michael,” says Kim. “We’d tell her he was gay, and she’d say: ‘So what! I’ll convert him.’”



Terry and Michele on their wedding day. Photograph: Courtesy of the Brown family

Michele worked in a factory, as a cleaner, and at a warehouse. She was clever, but unfulfilled. “If she’d applied herself when she was younger, she could have had a good career,” says Terry. “She was frustrated.” Michele was superb at general knowledge; people would sometimes call her, when they were on pub quizzes, to cheat. She also loved animals. Once, after visiting a zoo, she wrote the management a letter complaining that the cages were too small. In later life, she became obsessed with watching a family of

gorillas in a Japanese zoo on YouTube. When Terry came home from work, she'd talk about what the gorillas were up to.

Her health began to fail in her late 20s. She was diagnosed first with leukopenia, meaning that she had a low white blood cell count, and then with rheumatoid arthritis and diabetes. Because Terry was at work throughout the pandemic, as a key worker, Michele was sometimes lonely; she'd call Kim in the middle of the day and stay on the phone for four or five hours at a time. They were more like best friends than mother and daughter. "We'd talk about everything," says Kim. "Stuff you talk to your friends about. She was dead funny."

Despite her health issues, Michele was the fierce, uncompromising matriarch of the family. "She was the gaffer," says Kim. "Everything went through her." Sometimes she could be blunt. "She had a short temper," Kim says. "Everything was black and white. You couldn't explain things to her. If she got a bee in her bonnet about something you'd have to wait until she calmed down." But Michele had tremendous instincts, especially about people. "I used to ask her: 'Have you studied black magic?'" says Terry. "She was *really* good at picking up on people. I'd always say to her: 'Michele, you should give people a chance.' And she'd say no, and further down the line she'd usually be proved right. It would fascinate me, how she knew that."

It is hard for Kim to accept that her mother – a woman with such vitality and life force – is dead. "She had such a strong character," she says. "Her not being there, I can't understand." A few weeks after Michele died, Kim called her mobile. "It was only when the number didn't connect," Kim says, "that my heart sank, and I realised."

In England alone, [the Covid-19 vaccine](#) is estimated to have prevented up to 24.1m infections and 126,800 deaths. Two doses of the Pfizer or Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine [are](#) respectively 96% and 92% effective against hospitalisation with the Delta variant. (The effectiveness of the vaccines in protecting against the Omicron variant is not yet known.)

But although the Covid-19 vaccine is safe and highly effective, it cannot work on everyone. For some immunocompromised people, their bodies will not mount a good immune response to the vaccination, meaning they fail to produce the antibodies that should circulate in their blood and recognise the Covid-19 virus if they later become infected. For these people, life in post-lockdown Britain is full of risk and trepidation: they are not protected from Covid-19 by the immunity a vaccination would provide, and nor are they able to avoid the pandemic entirely, given that tens of [thousands of new infections](#) are being reported every single day.

People may be immunosuppressed for one of three reasons. First, they have a genetic condition that means they have a primary problem with their immune system. Second, because they are afflicted with a disease that causes their immune system to be underpowered. Third, because they are taking medication to treat an underlying condition that suppresses their immune system. Michele most likely fitted into this final category. The medication she took to manage her arthritis, rituximab, is a known immunosuppressant. (She was taking other medicines to treat mental health problems and diabetes, but none of these are known to have the same effect.)

“When you have rheumatoid arthritis,” explains the rheumatologist Dr Zachary Wallace of Massachusetts general hospital, “your immune system is basically overreacting. It’s recognising things that it shouldn’t think of as a danger, like its own joints, as a danger, and it is attacking them. That’s why we use medicines to suppress that process. But when we do that, the immune system doesn’t work as well at attacking viruses and other infections.” Wallace has been [monitoring breakthrough infections](#) in fully vaccinated patients with autoimmune conditions since early 2021. “People who receive rituximab appear to be particularly at risk,” he says. (Roche, which markets rituximab in Europe as MabThera, declined to comment.)

In the UK, a research team led by Prof Iain McInnes of Glasgow University has been examining the efficacy of Covid-19 vaccination in people with compromised immune systems. Initial findings from the [Octave study](#) said that about 11% of immunocompromised people failed to generate any antibodies to Covid-19 vaccination, and a further 29% generated a suboptimal antibody response, meaning they failed to produce the same level of antibodies a healthy person would generate in response to

vaccination. The study specifically identified rituximab as an immunosuppressant.

But Michele had no idea about any of this. She had never heard about immunosuppressant drugs or what impact they could have on Covid-19 vaccination. In late March 2021, the Department of Health and Social Care wrote to her, telling her that shielding would be paused from 1 April due to the fact that virus infection rates were low and nine out of 10 clinically extremely vulnerable people had been vaccinated. Although the letter stated that “no vaccine is 100% effective”, there was no mention made of the fact that immunocompromised people specifically might not be protected by the vaccine, and should consider extra measures to keep themselves safe.

People with suppressed immune systems have been an afterthought.
We’re only a small, inconvenient, part of the population

Labour MP Vicky Foxcroft

“There are some people,” says Vicky Foxcroft, the Labour MP for Lewisham Deptford and shadow minister for disabled people, “who were very aware that the vaccines might not work, and very scared. But for a lot of others, the comms from the government has been: everything is fine. Crack on. Do what you were doing.” Foxcroft is herself immunocompromised; like Michele, she has rheumatoid arthritis, and she has been advocating for immunocompromised people throughout the pandemic. “We’ve been an afterthought,” she says. “Probably because we’re only a small part of the population, and we’re inconvenient. But it’s still not acceptable.”

Foxcroft tells me that she often hears from immunocompromised people who are being forced back to work by their employers. Although the administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are currently encouraging employees to work from home where possible, that advice was cancelled in England on 19 July and has yet to be reinstated, despite the spread of the Omicron variant. “I’d like to see the guidance changed for employers,” Foxcroft says, “so that people are able to work from home if necessary.”

To make matter worse, when shielding was paused on 1 April, immunocompromised people and others in vulnerable groups lost the financial support that helped them to remain at home.



Michele with Kim and baby Terence in 1988. Photograph: Courtesy of the Brown family

Foxcroft herself does not feel safe in the workplace. “I wish people would wear their masks in parliament,” she says. “But I try not to think about it. Because how else would I do my job?”

Michele became ill on 6 July. She fainted on the way to the toilet and Terry had to carry her to bed. He called an ambulance but the wait time was four hours, and when the paramedics finally arrived and checked Michele over they said she was fine.

The following day, Michele was confused. She kept trying to drink from a bottle of water without taking the lid off. Terry called for an ambulance, but they told him it would be a five-hour wait. He tried to drive Michele to the hospital himself, but she refused to get in the car – Michele notoriously hated hospitals and would often escape from them if forcibly admitted.

By 9 July, Michele had stopped making sense. Terry asked her how she felt and she looked through him wordlessly. She couldn't remember her date of birth. Terry called 111 and asked for an ambulance, and was told that it would take two hours. When the paramedics finally arrived they asked Michele who Terry was. "She just stared at me blankly," he remembers.

After she was admitted, a doctor from the Queen Elizabeth hospital in Gateshead called Terry. He told him that Michele was seriously ill and asked if doctors should attempt to resuscitate her if her heart or breathing stopped. He also told Terry that Michele had Covid. "I didn't for one minute think she would die," says Terry. "She was double vaccinated. As far as I was concerned she was poorly but not seriously ill." Later, doctors told Terry that they had tested Michele, and found that she didn't have any antibodies from the vaccine.

I didn't for one minute think she would die. She was double vaccinated.
As far as I was concerned she was poorly but not seriously ill

Terry Brown

"Freedom Day" – 19 July – came and went for the Brown family in a fog of grief. Michele was by now in intensive care. Terry wasn't allowed in, due to the Covid visitor restrictions. He begged them to let him visit. "I said, 'We've had freedom day. Thousands of people at Wembley, cheering the England football team on. And you're saying I can't sit with my wife, who is dying?'"

Kim spoke to her mother on the phone, right before they put her on a ventilator. It was a disturbing phone call. Michele told Kim that she felt awful, and she was tired. Kim got the sense that she didn't want to hang up. She could hear her mother struggling to breathe, and coughing. "I just knew," Kim says. "I knew what was coming."

Doctors placed Michele on a ventilator, and dialysis, but it was no use. She died on 29 July. The hospital let the family visit Michele at the end. "It was horrific," says Kim. "I held her hand, and I was kissing it. But I knew that she was gone." The family decided to turn off Michele's ventilator. "She'd

been through enough,” says Kim. “She was bruised to bits, from where they took blood from her. We let her slip off.”

The hardest thing for Terry was not being able to see Michele after he left the hospital. “It was a closed coffin because of Covid. That killed me.” He thought he would be able to see his wife again, to say goodbye.

Stories of people who died of breakthrough infections – when a person becomes infected with Covid-19 after being vaccinated – are routine in online anti-vaxx or anti-lockdown communities. “Fully vaccinated man dies of Covid-19”, reads one post shared on an anti-vaxx Facebook group with 31,000 members. “The fully vaccinated die of Covid!” reads another post on a Facebook group with 6,500 members. “Will the mainstream media start recognising the facts of Covid vaccines – they are lethal?”

When the vaccinated former US secretary of state Colin Powell died with Covid-19 last October, anti-vaxxers and vaccine-sceptics heralded his death as proof that the vaccine is ineffective. “Colin Powell died from Covid and he was fully vaccinated,” read one typical post. “So what’s the point of the vaccine?” (Powell had myeloma, [a blood cancer](#) that put him at greater risk from the virus.)

“This narrative comes up again and again,” says Pippa Allen-Kinross of the factchecking organisation Full Fact, which has been examining online misinformation throughout the pandemic. “It’s really difficult, because we know the vaccine is not 100% effective. But we do know that it’s really effective, and makes a huge difference.”

In reality, when 4.3 billion people worldwide have received a dose of the Covid vaccine, [breakthrough infections](#) are to be expected. In the period 2 January to 2 July 2021, 640 fully vaccinated people died of breakthrough infections in England, out of 51,281 deaths. Of those 640 deaths, 84 (13%) [were in](#) immunocompromised people. Unvaccinated people are currently estimated to be 32 times [more likely](#) to die of Covid-19 than fully vaccinated people, although experts [have warned](#) that there is uncertainty in this headline figure.

“Deaths in vaccinated people have repeatedly been used to back up claims that the vaccines don’t work,” says the statistician Prof David Spiegelhalter of Cambridge University. “But when most vulnerable people have been vaccinated, and the vaccine is less than perfect, then it is inevitable that there will be deaths in vaccinated people, and indeed they have formed the majority of Covid deaths for months. This is basic maths.” He uses the example of seatbelts. “Most car occupants who die in crashes are wearing seatbelts, because nearly everyone is wearing a seat belt and they don’t provide full protection. This does not mean that seatbelts ‘don’t work’ – it just means they reduce risk.”

Part of the problem, says Allen-Kinross, is that government data is so easy to misinterpret. “It’s very easy for people to use this data in a misleading way, to suggest that vaccines don’t work at all.” She uses the example of the Joe Rogan Experience podcast, which is one of the most-listened to podcasts in the US. On 12 October 2021, Rogan hosted American journalist Alex Berenson, who stated – [incorrectly](#) – that “people who are vaccinated with two doses are more likely to be infected with Sars-CoV-2 than people who are not vaccinated”.

Full Fact subsequently [debunked Berenson’s claims](#). But given that Rogan’s podcast has an estimated audience of 11 million [an episode](#), these efforts, while a laudable endeavour, are likely to be seen by only a tiny percentage of the people who received the earlier misinformation. “This bad information,” says Allen-Kinross, “really ruins lives.”

At the Brown home in Gateshead, everything is unchanged. Michele’s dressing gown still hangs on the back of the bedroom door. There are bottles of antibacterial gel on the worktop. “The whole house is Michele,” Terry says. “It’s her home. It will always be her home, as long as I’m breathing.” He is racked with guilt. “Why did I let this happen?” he asks. “I didn’t protect her.”



Terry and Michele at their engagement party. Photograph: Courtesy of the Brown family

Terry wishes he had known that her vaccinations didn't work. "I keep thinking," Terry says, through choked sobs, "that if I'd been aware, we'd have stayed in our bubble. We wouldn't have allowed anyone to visit. We'd have stuck to the same regime we had at the start. That's what I'm finding difficult. Because we'd done everything we were supposed to do. The vaccines were to us like a lifeboat in choppy seas."

There are probably other families in the same situation as Terry and Michele: unaware that the vaccines they rely on to keep them safe may, in fact, be ineffective. "Very often people don't know how their medicines may affect them," says Lara Wong of [Clinically Vulnerable Families UK](#). "They don't realise, which means they may not be taking all the steps they possibly can to protect themselves."

In September, the Department of [Health](#) and Social Care wrote to people on the shielding list, to inform them that shielding had officially ended. It tells the Guardian: "We announced an end to the shielding programme based on the success of the Covid-19 vaccination programme in reducing serious illness and death from Covid-19 and the emergence of proven treatments."

The letter to shielders advised: “If you are immunosuppressed and have any concerns about what this means for you, then please raise this with your specialist at your next routine appointment.”

“I haven’t seen my specialist for months,” says Foxcroft, pointing out that there is an enormous post-pandemic backlog of non-urgent NHS care. “It’s impossible to get an appointment. And even if you do get advised to shield, there’s no government support available for shielders. So what do they do? Do they lose their job? What’s the score?”

For immunocompromised people who are aware that their vaccines may not work, or work less well – life in a post-unlocking UK is full of anxiety and trepidation. “People say: ‘Why don’t they just hide away?’” says Wong. “But what they don’t realise is that a lot of the people have been. They’ve been at home for the last two years. If infection rates were lower, they could have a life as well. When we protect the most vulnerable, we protect everyone.”

Booster jabs have gone some way to allaying their concerns: the initial findings from the Octave study, published in August 2021, were used to inform the government’s decision to offer at-risk groups, including immunocompromised people, booster vaccines in September. McInnes’s research team is now working on the Octave Duo study, to determine the effectiveness of booster vaccines in immunocompromised people. “The preliminary data,” says McInnes, “shows that a significant proportion of people are benefiting from a third inoculation, and we think it’s a good idea to further roll out this programme.” Last week, in response to Omicron, the government announced plans to offer severely immunosuppressed people a fourth dose of the vaccine as a booster.



Michele with grandchildren Cieran and Aaliyah in Mallorca. Photograph: Courtesy of the Brown family

But Wong points out that many immunocompromised people will have children attending school. Until the advent of the Omicron variant in late November, the government did not ask pupils to wear masks in English schools. Even now, it is only strongly advised in communal areas, and the bubble system has been scrapped. Some parents have been threatened [with prosecution](#) for pulling their children out of school when case numbers are high. This month, Clinically Vulnerable Families UK wrote to the education secretary, Nadhim Zahawi, urging him to permit remote education for the children of clinically vulnerable households, rather than mandate such children return to in-school education. “There are light-touch measures we could put into place that would make things safer for everyone,” Wong says. “Hepa air filters in school, to clean the air; mask wearing to be strongly encouraged.”

Some immunocompromised people have called for antibody testing to be routinely offered to those who request it, to see if the vaccine has been effective. “The problem is,” says Wallace, “these tests are difficult to interpret, because we don’t have all the information about what an adequate level of antibodies is yet.” [Monoclonal antibody treatments](#), which are laboratory-made antibodies to help a person fight infection, may also be

effective in treating people with low immunity. Wallace also urges his immunocompromised patients to “be cautious, wear masks in public, and avoid densely populated places that don’t have good ventilation. Only socialise with people they know are vaccinated and feeling well.”

These immunocompromised people seem doomed to continue to live a half-life for the foreseeable future. And with the Omicron variant spreading throughout the UK, it seems likely that the wider public will be forced into the anxious wariness that has become the norm for immunocompromised people for nearly two years. They watch, and they wait, while the families of the 145,000 people who have died with Covid-19 in the UK mourn. And they pray they won’t be next.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/dec/07/michele-brown-was-vaccinated-but-had-a-suppressed-immune-system-would-better-health-advice-have-saved-her>

Television

Interview

David Thewlis on new show Landscapers and the misogyny of Naked: ‘I find it much tougher to watch today’

[Zoe Williams](#)



‘I thought I was heading for a career in light entertainment – my parents were so proud’ ... Thewlis at home. Photograph: Amit Lennon/The Observer



[@zoesqwilliams](#)

Tue 7 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

David Thewlis, speaking by Zoom from his home in the Berkshire village of Sunningdale, has set his screen at a jaunty angle. His manner is equable, nerdy, eager to please. Nothing like what you'd expect, in other words – unless you had watched *Landscapers*, a new four-part TV drama in which Thewlis stars opposite [Olivia Colman](#). Perhaps he's one of those actors who doesn't de-role until he's on to the next character.

Landscapers is true crime, in so far as the protagonists are Susan and Christopher Edwards, the so-called Mansfield Murderers [convicted in 2014 of killing Susan's parents](#) and burying them in the garden 15 years before. Yet it is absolutely nothing like true crime. It jumps through time and genre, smashes the fourth wall then puts it back together as a jail cell. It is vividly experimental yet recalls the golden age of British TV, specifically Dennis Potter and his dreamlike, restless theatricality. “I didn’t think of that while we were making it,” says Thewlis. “But when I saw it, I thought of [The Singing Detective](#) – which I was in!”



Heart-wrenching performances ... in Landscapers with Olivia Colman.
Photograph: Photographer: Stefania Rosini/Sky UK/HBO/Sister

He and Colman – whose husband, Ed Sinclair, wrote the Sky series – give such devastating, heart-wrenching performances as these lovelorn Nottinghamshire killers that you can't help feeling for them. This (spoiler warning) is all the more surprising given their crimes: they didn't just shoot Susan's parents, they robbed their bank accounts and forged their signatures to get more money still. Then, bizarrely, they blew much of the cash on Hollywood memorabilia, including £20,000 on a signed photograph of Frank Sinatra. Despite amassing a total of £245,000, when they gave themselves up from their home in France, the couple had just one euro left. "In the end," says Thewlis, "what we're asking the audience to decide is not whether they're guilty, because they clearly are, but whether they deserve sympathy." It's very hard, on the bare bones of the events, to see how this sympathy could be generated, yet both Thewlis and Colman, with the sheer range of expressions on their desperate faces, demand the most human response.

Violence against women just wasn't what we talked about. Today, how could you not talk about it?

It's as far from being a murder procedural as it could be, and much more like a love story: two damaged, fragile people finding dark sanctuary in one another, told from the moment of their exquisitely awkward first date. "There were no attempts made to either cast younger actors or put dots over our faces for CGI," says Thewlis. "We just put wigs on. I thought, 'Really, is that all you're going to do?' I'll never see 30 again."

Thewlis is actually 58 and has no problem with getting older. "You're not so vain for a start," he says, "and you play things a little bit grotesque. I'm never concerned with making myself look good." While Colman has done plenty of romantic parts, this is the most intense performance of love I've ever seen from Thewlis, as if all the hard edges that defined his early career have been chipped off. "Softened?" he says. "What, in older age?" No, I say, that's not what I meant. He recalls Bertolucci's *Besieged*. "I'm quite romantic in that," he says. "I maybe used to take myself too seriously. I thought I was something I wasn't. But I think I'm much closer to myself now, in all respects."

It's almost 30 years since Thewlis's seminal performance in *Naked*, Mike Leigh's recently reissued masterpiece. Verbose, sexually violent, feckless and self-indulgent, his antihero Johnny sparked a lot of discussion about representations of misogyny. Were they intended to titillate and, if so, did this make them misogynistic?



‘Johnny was based on a person I knew who’d been ostracised by my friends’ ... controversial 1993 film *Naked*. Photograph: TCD/Prod DB/Alamy

But, surprisingly, that wasn’t the main critical focus of the film at the time. “When I was doing press for [Naked](#),” says Thewlis, “that was never put to me as an actor. Violence against women just wasn’t what we talked about. Now, how could you not talk about it? Violence against women – and unreported violence against women – is such a talking point. We want to discuss misogyny. We want to discuss the fact that members of our government don’t even know the meaning of the word. I found the film much tougher to watch this time than I did 25 years ago.”

He never thought of it as his breakthrough role, though. It wasn’t even his first Leigh film – and he was eight years into an already successful, if quite different, acting career. “I did a sitcom that went to two seasons, playing David Jason’s son in *A Bit of a Do*. I thought I was headed for light entertainment. I was the star of this show. My parents were so proud of me. I thought this was the dream. No one else I knew was getting work.”

Thewlis was born in Blackpool, where his parents ran a shop. He went to Guildhall school of music and drama in London and was cast pretty solidly from graduation on. This was a time when there “wasn’t nearly enough work around for young actors. I remember going to the movies and seeing Tim

Roth on a big screen and thinking, ‘Wow, that would be incredible.’ It was unimaginable to me.” He’s smiling as he describes how carefree his sitcom years were.

Leigh’s film-making process is, famously, improvised and collaborative. So perhaps audiences assumed Thewlis poured his own burning misanthropy into Naked, but that performance was actually based on someone real: “A person I knew, who was certainly guilty of sexual aggression, who’d been ostracised by my group of friends.”



The Harry Potter years ... Thewlis in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*. Photograph: Warner Bros/Allstar

Two things came out of Naked. Leigh was “bit of a mentor and changed my way of looking at acting. He opened up parts of me. From then on, I rarely got cast in comedy.” Secondly, after all the critical acclaim, he got noticed by Hollywood. “The first part I took was *Black Beauty*. I wasn’t sure what I was doing. I didn’t know if it was a very interesting part, but I thought, ‘It’s a studio film.’ It’ll get me away from being typecast as this sociopathic rapist. If you’re a guy who’s lovely to a horse, people are going to see you differently.”

That was in 1994 and ever since, he says, his career has divided into two paths. “I get cast as either extremely awful, terrible and cruel – or extremely good and saintly. In Kingdom of Heaven, I’m adorable.” Some projects weren’t as satisfying as others, which would include “big Hollywood things for the money like [The Island of Dr Moreau](#)”. But he has largely hopped from one delightful experience to another, particularly recently: the Fargo TV series and Charlie Kaufman’s 2020 psychological thriller [I’m Thinking of Ending Things](#). “I’m working with people I’d always wanted to work with, doing the kind of films I’d always wanted to do.”

His second novel, Shooting Martha, was published this year. Classifiable, loosely, as showbiz satire, it felt a bit disillusioned with the industry, but that wasn’t it at all, he says. “This character Betty becomes lost in an improvised character. She immersed herself so deeply she didn’t know who she was. So it was more about my experience on Naked – something cathartic from decades ago was coming out.” As he was writing it, he read it aloud to his wife, Hermine Poitou. “She’d criticise it and suggest things. I never felt like I was isolated.” Poitou, he says, is a retired ringmistress from a flea circus. I have no idea whether that’s true or a joke. And I didn’t ask, because I felt like even if he told me, I still wouldn’t know. He has a daughter, Gracie, from his previous relationship with Anna Friel.

His first novel, [The Late Hector Kipling](#), lampooned the art world and was well received. It came out in 2007, bang in the middle of the Harry Potter years. He played Remus Lupin, a half-blood werewolf, in five of the movies. Thewlis remembers the films principally for the company. “Maggie Smith, Michael Gambon, John Hurt and Alan Rickman. To become friends with Michael Gambon, to work with him every day, was extraordinary. And what better way to spend your life than hanging out on night shoots with Julie Walters?”

He’s not so sociable these days. “I don’t go out so much,” he says. “I’m quite private. Going to work is my social life. Especially on British film sets. There’s a lot of wonderful humour around.” He pauses and adds with a smile: “You can’t go on set and be a dickhead.”

Landscapers is on [Sky Atlantic](#).

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2021/dec/07/david-thewlis-landscapers-misogyny-naked-olivia-colman-mansfield-murders-julie-walters>

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Afghanistan

How an Afghan reporter was left to the Taliban by the Foreign Office



Passengers board a Qatar Airways aircraft at Kabul airport on 9 September. Many of those told by the UK Foreign Office that they were cleared to leave Afghanistan are still there. Photograph: Wakil Kohsar/AFP/Getty



Peter Beaumont

Mon 6 Dec 2021 19.01 EST

Fahim, a journalist who had worked with British media organisations, was one of thousands of Afghans who approached the [Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office](#) (FCDO) for help to escape Afghanistan after the Taliban's conquest this summer.

Told he was cleared to travel with his family to the UK, he was also one of the many left behind as the promised help from the FCDO failed to materialise.

A Panjshiri journalist, Fahim (not his real name) has not slept in the same house for more two nights in a row since the [Taliban](#) takeover four months ago, fearful for his life.

Leslie Knott, a documentary film-maker who has been trying to help Fahim leave [Afghanistan](#), told the Guardian what happened.

“On 18 August [in the midst of the evacuation crisis], I was asked for names of journalists who had worked with British news agencies so they could be included on a manifest for evacuation.

“[Fahim], his wife and nine children were included on this list that was submitted to the FCDO. He quickly received news that he was cleared by the FCDO and that he should pack his bags, keep his phone charged and be prepared to leave at any moment.

“No phone call ever came. Repeated attempts to reach the FCDO went nowhere.”

Fahim takes up the story. After initial contact by email with UK officials at the beginning of the evacuation crisis, he says he has heard nothing.

“They asked about me. Living in Kabul. What my problems were. It was a long time ago now. They were in touch two months ago. Since then I’ve heard nothing. I tried several times to contact them.”

Knott said what was most “heart-wrenching” was the knowledge that Fahim and his family were convinced by their contacts with the FCDO that they would be leaving. They even called her to ask how they should best prepare to leave.

“He wanted to know how much food they should bring for the children and how to secure their house. They were in the mindset they were leaving, so it was devastatingly disappointing.”

For many others who had worked closely with the west and western organisations, it was a similar story. Told they were cleared to travel, they say they did not hear back from UK officials either with coordination details for reaching the airport and evacuation flights, or later after the last flights had gone.

And while some managed to make their way to Pakistan and leave that way, many others have remained trapped in Afghanistan.

Another Afghan journalist, who like Fahim had been cleared to leave for the UK with his family, sent a message, seen by the Guardian, after the last British flight had left, saying simply they had been left behind and asking for help.

That journalist eventually managed to escape Afghanistan by himself.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/07/how-an-afghan-reporter-was-left-to-the-taliban-by-the-foreign-office>

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[Afghanistan](#)

Whistleblower on UK's Afghan evacuation: main accusations



Passengers repatriated from Afghanistan disembark from an RAF Voyager at Brize Norton, England. Photograph: Justin Tallis/AFP/Getty

[Aubrey Allegretti](#) Political correspondent

[@breeallegretti](#)

Mon 6 Dec 2021 19.01 EST

Damning new light has been shed on the hour-by-hour decisions taken and frustrations encountered by a civil servant trying to help desperate Afghans flee the country in the days after the Taliban takeover.

These are some of the key criticisms made by Raphael Marshall, a former desk officer at the Foreign Office.

Thousands of emails went unread

The government falsely claimed each request for evacuation was logged, when in fact thousands of emails – including many sent by MPs – went unread, Marshall said.

When Tom Tugendhat, the chair of the foreign affairs committee, complained to the then foreign secretary Dominic Raab’s private office that 10 cases he had raised in an email had not been read, a message was sent back to Tugendhat saying: “We were processing them.”

But Marshall said that was wrong: “In fact, none of these cases had so far been processed at all.”

Marshall estimated that up to 150,000 people applied for evacuation, but that fewer than 5% of those got any assistance. He added: “It is clear that some of those left behind have since been murdered by the Taliban.”

When a new system was introduced following fury at the masses of unread emails, Marshall said all emails were then read, but nothing was done with their contents and that he thought this was “to allow the prime minister and the then foreign secretary to inform MPs that there were no unread emails”.

The inbox was also at one point temporarily locked, which Marshall believes was evidence that the initial process was merely “a public relations purpose”.

Evacuees prioritised without consistency

Even for those whose pleas for help were read, the criteria for deciding who should be eligible for evacuation was “unhelpful”, Marshall said, because they did not lay out which, if any, should be met, leaving the decision to individuals’ discretion.

He claimed Raab approved a list of professions that should be prioritised – such as judges and intelligence officers – but that this was not provided to people processing the emails.

This meant guards who had protected the British Embassy were not prioritised for evacuation, Marshall said. A lack of evidence required to back

up people's claims about how much danger they were in also meant it was possible that "some evacuation spots were misallocated to people".

Those picked were then added to a spreadsheet; however, Marshall said, the summaries of people's cases were "inconsistent and likely often misleading".

A second spreadsheet was then created on which a single senior civil servant narrowed down further the people to prioritise. "There was therefore no effective review of these decisions," Marshall said.

Lack of staff, experience and equipment

No members of the Afghan special cases team had studied the country or worked on it previously, Marshall said. He said the "team leader" on two morning shifts "did not know that the correct term for people from [Afghanistan](#) was Afghans and referred repeatedly to 'Afghanis'".

Lack of experience was also a problem. Until 24 August, Marshall said calls were made "only in English", adding that the Dari text of emails inviting Afghans for evacuation was inaccurate, because it said a printed version of the email was necessary to enter Kabul airport, when in fact a digital copy was enough.

Soldiers drafted in to help with the evacuation requests were also given laptops that did not work because the FCDO's IT department had not issued the passwords to unlock them. Marshall believed this could "directly result in the deaths of people unnecessarily left behind".

FCDO 'working culture'

Despite the gravity of the situation, Marshall said, the default expectation remained that FCDO staff would continue to work normal hours, and only be asked to do extra shifts.

This resulted in frequent personnel changes and "serious shortages of capacity", Marshall said, blaming a "deliberate drive by the FCDO to

prioritise ‘work-life balance’”. He concluded: “The FCDO’s approach has undermined organisational effectiveness.”

Poor integration between departments

Once the FCDO finalised the evacuation list, the details were sent to the Home Office for security checks. However, anyone who had not provided all relevant details in their initial request – such as passport number and date of birth – was eliminated from the process.

It took six hours for the Home Office to start confirming who had passed security clearance, and most took longer. This was a “predictable consequence” of sending one group of around 1,000 names in a single batch, Marshall said.

The night before the mass list was sent, a shorter list of “very high priority cases” was sent over. But Marshall said that when he checked on its progress 24 hours later, he discovered it had been “lost somewhere”.

When soldiers were drafted in to fill shifts civil servants could only be requested to fill, Marshall said their MoD clearance was not recognised by the FCDO, so they “had to be escorted” to “guard against potential espionage”.

Even within the Foreign Office, civil servants who worked at the former Department for International Development who had volunteered to help were “appalled by our chaotic system” and could not have live documents or access to the shared inbox because the IT systems had not been integrated, Marshall said.

PM’s push to evacuate animals at ‘direct expense’ of those at risk of murder

Despite the huge numbers of people trying to escape, Marshall said the FCDO “received an instruction from the prime minister” to use “considerable capacity” to help animals leave Afghanistan that were in the care of Nowzad, the charity run by [Paul “Pen” Farthing](#).

The fact that Nowzad said it could charter a plane itself was irrelevant, because British soldiers would have to spend time escorting the animals instead of human beings and there was limited capacity at the airport, he concluded.

Marshall believed the government “transported animals which were not at risk of harm at the direct expense of evacuating British nationals and people at risk of imminent murder, including interpreters who had served with the British Army”.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/07/whistleblower-on-uks-afghan-evacuation-main-accusations>

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Wifi

Best mid-range wifi 6 mesh systems to solve broadband dead zones



If your broadband speed is good but your wifi is rubbish, these router upgrades will make sure your internet connection works all over your home.
Illustration: Guardian Design

[Samuel Gibbs](#) Consumer technology editor

Tue 7 Dec 2021 02.00 EST

With wifi more important than ever for keeping your home working and your online entertainment up and running, it may be time to banish those irritating “not-spots” and make your broadband work everywhere in your home with a router upgrade.

Now that most new devices, from laptops and phones to TVs and streaming boxes, support [wifi 6](#), I put several of the latest mid-range “mesh” routers to the test to see which ones deliver.

These [mesh systems](#) work by replacing your current wifi. One of the units connects via a cable to the current router from your internet service provider (ISP), and then connects wirelessly to other units dotted about your home to blanket it with strong wifi.

Dual or tri-band?



They may be smaller and cheaper than tri-band systems, but dual-band wifi 6 systems such as [the Eero 6](#) are not a meaningful upgrade on the older and cheaper 5 versions. Photograph: Samuel Gibbs/The Guardian

There are two main types of mesh routers. Cheaper “dual-band” systems connect to each other using the same frequencies they use for your phones, computers and other devices.

In testing, dual-band wifi 6 mesh systems provided good coverage but not meaningfully increased speeds across the home compared with older, cheaper wifi 5 equivalents. I would recommend spending less on older wifi 5 kit rather than the new dual-band wifi 6 systems if your broadband speed is less than 200Mbps.

The more expensive “tri-band” systems connect to each other using a separate band of wifi frequencies to the ones they use to connect your

devices to the internet, and they can provide considerably faster speeds across the home.

If your broadband speed is above 200Mbps, here are three of the best tri-band wifi 6 mesh systems available. Each were tested with 400Mbps broadband with more than 50 devices connected, including an [Apple MacBook Air](#), [iPhone 13 Pro](#) and [Samsung Galaxy S21 Ultra](#) with wifi 6, and a [Microsoft Xbox Series X](#) and [Amazon Fire HD 10 Plus](#) tablet with wifi 5, each used for testing speed and range.

Best for speed and coverage

Linksys Velop MX4200



The Linksys Velop towers are tall but fairly discreet. Note that the status light on the top of each node is very bright and cannot be turned off.
Photograph: Samuel Gibbs/The Guardian

RRP: £399 – deals from £300-£350 (two pack)

The tall, white towers of the Linksys Velop do two things better than any other tested: high signal strength over long range and high speed from every satellite.

The mid-range MX4200 version with three nodes thoroughly blanketed the house and provided a reliable signal at about 25 metres away from the house at the end of the garden – something none of the others managed.

Everything remained stable under high load, with multiple devices streaming and downloading simultaneously, while speed and latency were consistent across the home. Wifi 6 speeds matched those using ethernet on the main unit, and [ping times](#) were kept below 12ms – only 3ms slower than via cable - and dropped by only a few megabits at the extremities of the house, which was extremely impressive. Speeds for wifi 5 devices were equally good, holding consistently within 100Mbps of wifi 6 devices all over the house.

The Linksys [Wifi](#) app on a phone handles setting up the system and can then be used to remotely manage your network while you're away. The app is a bit slow and doesn't display the wifi version or speed of connected devices. More advanced settings require accessing the web interface of the system through a browser, too.

Each unit is identical, with three gigabit ethernet sockets and a USB3.0 port in addition to the socket for your ISP's router.

Velop covers most of the features that are table-stakes for routers, including a guest access option, port forwarding, speed testing, firewalls, automatic updates, device or video-call prioritisation for slower connections and other bits. It does not have a [VPN](#) built in for connecting to your home network while you are away, though.

Parental controls allow you to pause internet access manually or on a schedule and block specific sites on a device-by-device basis. Velop is also Apple HomeKit-enabled for improved security for some smart home devices.

Runners up

Netgear Orbi RBK753



The Orbi RBK753 units are bigger and more difficult to place than some competitors (seen here next to a large [Google Nest Hub Max](#) smart display).
Photograph: Samuel Gibbs/The Guardian

RRP: £629.99 – deals from £450-£550 (three pack)

Netgear's mid-range Orbi system came a close second to the Linksys, providing really fast wifi 6 speeds and low latency from the main unit, with only slightly slower speeds at the extremities of the house. Its wifi 5 performance was slightly worse than the Linksys, while its range was shorter, failing to provide a useable connection at the end of the garden. It struggled to put signal through [concrete block walls](#), too.

The main unit has three gigabit ethernet ports and a socket for your modem, while the satellite units just have two ethernet ports. The network remained stable under heavy usage, but struggled to migrate laptops between the Orbi units as they were moved between rooms, requiring manually disconnecting and reconnecting to wifi to get the best connection.

The Orbi app was simple for setting up the system. It has a few more features than the Velop, such as a network map of your connected devices, but is slow and lacks wifi version and speed information for each device.

The browser-based web interface has advanced settings, including a built-in VPN, which lets you connect to your home network remotely – handy both for privacy when on public wifi and using devices such as smart CCTV cameras when away.

Basic parental controls include manual pausing of the internet and blocking certain sites, but for more options Netgear charges £6.99 a month for "[smart parental controls](#)", which includes time limits, scheduling, website history and device usage tracking, content filters and a few other bits.

Standard firewall security is free, but Netgear also sells an [annual £85 "Armor" subscription](#), which is a proactive security solution from the [cybersecurity company Bitdefender](#) that helps stop viruses and other threats. I found it irritating, flagging my attempts to configure smart speakers and other devices as threats and blocking them.

Eero 6 Pro



The Eero 6 Pro units are small and fairly attractive, as networking gear goes, which makes placing them easier than some competitors. Photograph: Samuel Gibbs/The Guardian

RRP: £599 – deals from £419 (three pack)

Amazon's Eero 6 Pro is one of the most simple tri-band wifi 6 mesh systems to set up, with the option to login with an Amazon account.

But wifi 6 speeds were the slowest of the group test, losing 10% compared with using ethernet on the main unit and dropping off significantly when connecting at the extremities of the house. Wifi 5 performance was also disappointing by comparison. Each unit is the same, but they only have two gigabit ethernet ports each, one of which needs to be used to connect to your modem on the main unit.

Coverage within the house was good, but the Eero struggled with concrete block walls and had much shorter range into the garden compared to the others. I also had annoying issues with Sonos speakers and a Sky Q set-top box, which required replacing a faulty Eero and software updates to fix. The Eero system caused interference for Xbox wireless audio through headphones connected to the joypad, too.

There is no advanced interface for controlling the Eero, but the app is the best for the basics. That includes the ability to group connected devices into “profiles” so you can pause the internet manually or on a schedule per profile and see how much bandwidth they are using.

But parental controls – some of the best in the business – for filtering content, sites and services require the £2.99 a month [Eero Secure subscription](#), which also includes data consumption history, virus and ad-blocking, and a few other things.

The Eero also includes a built-in Zigbee smart home hub for direct connection of some devices to Amazon's Alexa, without third-party hubs, and supports the upcoming [Thread smart home standard](#).

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/dec/07/best-mid-range-wifi-6-mesh-systems-to-solve-broadband-dead-zones>

2021.12.07 - Coronavirus

- [As many as 6 million eligible Britons may not have had a Covid jab Who are they?](#)
- [Vaccines Moderna or Novavax after AstraZeneca jab confers high immunity, study finds](#)
- [Science Weekly How fast is the Omicron variant spreading?](#)
- [Health Child deaths fell by 10% during first year of pandemic](#)

Coronavirus

As many as 6 million eligible Britons may not have had a Covid jab. Who are they?



Eight in 10 of those aged 12 or older in the UK have received two doses of a coronavirus vaccine.

Photograph: Ian Forsyth/Getty Images

[Niamh McIntyre](#) and [Tobi Thomas](#)

Tue 7 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

Hundreds of cases of the new Omicron Covid-19 variant have now been confirmed in the UK and experts have called for a renewed focus on vaccination rates.

As of 4 December, just over eight in 10 people aged 12 or older UK-wide had received two doses of a coronavirus vaccine, according to data from the UK Health Security Agency, while 89% had received a first dose. This

means about 6 million eligible people may still be unvaccinated, based on [ONS population figures](#) as opposed to counts of GP records. So who are they?

Young people

Detailed age breakdowns for England and Scotland reveal it is largely young people who are not yet fully vaccinated. About 60% of under-40s in both nations have received two doses, compared with over 90% of those aged 40 or over.

About a third of English 18-24-year-olds have not yet been double-jabbed, falling to 30% of those aged 25 to 29. The government dashboard does not provide an age breakdown for Wales or Northern Ireland.

[Graph by age](#)

Scotland has been more successful in giving the vaccine to young people, according to Guardian analysis. Just under two-thirds of those aged 18 or under in Scotland have received a first dose, compared with 53% in England.

Dr Kit Yates, a senior lecturer at the University of Bath, said: “For young adults, the reasons behind the lower uptake may more be due to messaging than to accessibility. The government chose to remove all restrictions on 19 July before everyone in the country had been offered the opportunity to be jabbed. The message that sends is that it is not important for young people to be vaccinated, so it’s unsurprising to see the lower uptake rates in these younger age groups.”

“Rather than encouraging young people to get the jab by emphasising the benefits of vaccination to the individuals themselves, government ministers like Michael Gove have decried young people who have not had the jab as selfish.

“In contrast to other countries, England has not instated vaccine passes for entry into nightclubs and other venues. Such measures have been credited with improving vaccine take-up in younger people in countries like France.”

boosters

Older people

However, there are still big disparities in vaccination uptake at a local level, even among older age groups.

In some local authorities, virtually all adults aged 60-plus have received two doses of a vaccine. However, in Westminster, only 68% of the 60-plus population are fully vaccinated, the lowest in the country. The other areas with the lowest vaccination rates are also in the capital: in Camden, Tower Hamlets and Kensington and Chelsea, at least a fifth of those in the 60-plus age group have not yet received a second dose.

London has consistently lagged behind other regions in terms of vaccination coverage.

In some parts of the city, highly mobile populations and large numbers of second homes may mean vaccination figures [look worse than they really are](#); however, problems with reaching marginalised groups are also a factor.

Black and Asian people

Vaccination rates also vary by ethnicity, with disparities again visible even among older age groups. A fifth of black people aged 80 or older remain unvaccinated, the highest proportion of any ethnic group, according to [data from OpenSAFELY](#) using records from GP practices.

By contrast, virtually all white people aged 80 or older have been vaccinated, while about 10% of south Asian people in the same age group have not yet been jabbed.

An [official report published last week](#) found that poor vaccine coverage was a cause of severe Covid in some black and Asian groups, despite programmes to improve underwhelming vaccine uptake.

Booster jabs

The UK is pinning its hopes on the swift deployment of booster jabs to deal with the threat posed by the Omicron variant, and the government is aiming for half a million jabs a day.

The latest data shows that 60% of the UK's population aged 40 or over has received a third coronavirus vaccination, with younger age groups expected to be called in coming weeks.

Again, the local authorities with the lowest booster vaccination rates are in London: just 36% of Tower Hamlets residents have received a third vaccination, while the rate in Westminster and Newham was about four in 10.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/07/as-many-as-6-million-eligible-britons-may-not-have-had-a-covid-jab-who-are-they>.

Vaccines and immunisation

Moderna or Novavax after AstraZeneca jab confers high Covid immunity, study finds



Previous research had suggested that a mix-and-match approach could lead to enhanced immune responses. Photograph: Mike Segar/Reuters

Linda Geddes

Mon 6 Dec 2021 18.30 EST

Combining a first dose of the AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine with a second dose of either the Moderna or the Novavax jabs results in far higher levels of neutralising antibodies and T-cells compared with two doses of the AstraZeneca jab, a study has found.

The finding has important implications for lower-income countries that have not yet completed their primary vaccination campaigns, as it suggests you do

not need access to mRNA vaccines – and therefore ultra-cold storage facilities – to trigger an extremely potent Covid-19 vaccine response.

The strongest T-cell response of all was generated by a dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine followed by a dose of the Novavax vaccine – both of which can be stored in a standard refrigerator.

The University of Oxford-led [Com-Cov study](#) set out to establish whether mixing and matching Covid-19 vaccines during primary immunisation schedules could be detrimental or beneficial to the overall immune response to vaccination. Such flexibility could be crucial to ensuring the rapid deployment of these vaccines in low- and middle-income countries, where vaccine supply may be inconsistent.

“What we’re seeing is that there’s a great amount of flexibility in the primary immunisation schedule,” said Prof Matthew Snape at the University of Oxford, who led the research. “Just because you’ve received dose one of a particular vaccine, doesn’t mean you have to receive the same vaccine for dose two.”

The study also bolsters confidence that using the Moderna vaccine as a booster dose in people who have previously received the AstraZeneca jab should result in high levels of neutralising antibodies and T-cells.

It follows [separate data](#) published last week suggesting that both the Pfizer and Moderna jabs can dramatically strengthen the body’s immune defences.

The 1,070 British participants received a first dose of the AstraZeneca or Pfizer vaccine, followed nine weeks later by a second dose of the same vaccine, or either the Moderna or [Novavax](#) jab.

Levels of neutralising antibodies were 17 times higher among those who received the AstraZeneca vaccine followed by the Moderna vaccine and four times higher among those who received AstraZeneca followed by Novavax, compared with those who received two doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine.

For those who started with the Pfizer jab, receiving a second dose of the Moderna vaccines jab resulted in 1.3 times as many neutralising antibodies

than with two doses of Pfizer; while receiving Novavax as the second jab resulted in 20% fewer antibodies.

The study, published in the Lancet, also revealed differences in T-cell responses after combinations of different types of vaccines.

Vaccines that are mRNA-based, such as the Pfizer and Moderna jab, deliver a small piece of genetic code known as messenger RNA to human cells, instructing them to manufacture the coronavirus spike protein themselves; viral vector vaccines such as the AstraZeneca jab do the same thing, but use a harmless virus to deliver these instructions; whereas protein-based vaccines, such as the Novavax jab, deliver pre-made fragments of the spike protein alongside an immune-stimulating adjuvant.

While two doses of either the AstraZeneca or Pfizer vaccine resulted in similar numbers of T-cells, combining the AstraZeneca vaccine with a second dose of Moderna resulted in 3.5 times more T-cells. A second dose of Novavax resulted in 4.8 times more T-cells.

For the Pfizer jab, a second dose of Moderna resulted in 1.5 times more T-cells, while a second jab of Novavax resulted in fewer T-cells.

“It tells us that the RNA and the viral vector vaccines are doing something quite different when it comes to priming for the T-cell response,” said Snape.

Previous research on other viral vector vaccines, such as the Ebola vaccine, had suggested that a mix-and-match approach could lead to enhanced immune responses.

“What was a bit more surprising is that we didn’t see that so well with the RNA vaccines – especially when it comes to the T-cell response, said Snape. “RNA followed by a protein (Novavax) was slightly underwhelming when it came to the T-cell response.”

The study also examined the impact of these different vaccine combinations against the Delta and Beta variants. In all cases, there was a reduction in levels of neutralising antibodies, but there was very little drop-off in T-cell responses.

Both the UK's Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency and the World Health Organization are currently considering whether to authorise the Novavax vaccine, and are expected to announce their decision within days or weeks. WHO authorisation would enable the vaccine to be delivered via the Covax initiative.

Dr Richard Hatchett, chief executive of the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations, said: "This is extremely encouraging and valuable data on the potential to mix-and-match Covid-19 vaccines in primary immunisation schedules. Knowing that a second dose of a different Covid-19 vaccine can generate a robust immune response is advantageous in helping the rollout of Covid-19 vaccines through Covax, especially in populations still urgently waiting for their primary immunisation or in those partially vaccinated."

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Covid-19: How fast is the Omicron variant spreading?

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Health

Child deaths fell 10% during first year of pandemic



In total, 356 fewer child deaths were recorded between April 2020 and March 2021 than in the year before. Photograph: Thomas Barwick/Getty Images

[Andrew Gregory](#) Health Editor

Mon 6 Dec 2021 19.01 EST

Child deaths in England fell by about 10% during the first year of the coronavirus pandemic to what could be a record low, according to the first study of its kind.

The findings sharply contrast with overall mortality for England's population, which was 14% higher than the previous year.

The number of children in England who died fell to 3,067 between April 2020 and March 2021 – 356 fewer than were recorded in the previous 12

months – with the fall particularly marked in under-10s and those with underlying health problems.

It is likely to represent the lowest level of child mortality on record, researchers at the Universities of Bristol and Cardiff found.

In Archives of Disease in Childhood, they wrote: “What these data show is that, during 2020–21, when multiple measures were introduced with the aim of reducing morbidity and mortality from Covid-19 in the adult population, there was an unexpected fall in overall child mortality in England, most marked in younger children and those with underlying health conditions and infectious disease other than Covid-19.

“The magnitude of this fall (around 10%), including those children living in the most deprived conditions, a group for whom previous attempts to reduce excess mortality have generally been less successful, makes clear that we need to investigate what aspect of societal reorganisation and the restrictions faced by the whole population have had this effect.”

The study used data from the University of Bristol-led National Child Mortality Database (NCMD) – a first-of-its-kind initiative to collect comprehensive and timely data on every child death in England.

Researchers sought to quantify the relative risk of childhood deaths across England during the first year of the pandemic, compared with the year before.

Findings from the analysis showed that deaths from non-Covid infections and other underlying conditions fell, and there is some evidence of fewer deaths from substance abuse.

In addition, the reduction in mortality appeared to occur during the winter months, where the seasonal increase, often caused by infections other than Covid, was not apparent, researchers said. This period coincided with the prolonged lockdown in England from January to April 2021.

Prof Karen Luyt, programme lead for the NCMD and professor of neonatal medicine at the University of Bristol, said: “There was clear evidence that

the reduction in mortality was seen in two key areas: those children with underlying health conditions and those who died of infectious diseases other than Covid.

“Our data demonstrate that child deaths caused by seasonal infections are potentially substantially modifiable at population level.

“It is therefore important that we learn from the effects highlighted in this study to improve the outcome for the most vulnerable children in our society.”

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2021.12.07 - Opinion

- Forget levelling up: Rishi Sunak is deliberately increasing tax injustice
- The explosion of Covid PTSD cases is a mental health crisis in the making
- I'm not yet 50 – so why does everyone keep calling me middle-aged?
- I feel despair at Sudan's coup. But my children's mini protest gives me hope

OpinionTax and spending

Forget levelling up: Rishi Sunak is deliberately increasing tax injustice

[Polly Toynbee](#)



‘Rishi Sunak should be copying the one good reform Nigel Lawson enforced, when he equalised tax rates on all types of income.’ Photograph: Stefan Rousseau/PA

Tue 7 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

A wise tax plan silently vanished last week. The chancellor was due to narrow a notorious tax loophole for the wealthy by [raising capital gains tax](#). Now, in a quiet reverse ferret, he won’t. You might think any chancellor in these harsh times would collect what they could, and that this policy would be voter friendly, raising large sums from a few of the richest. But it would no doubt displease Tory donors and the influencers who will choose their next leader.

Besieged by urgent spending pleas, Rishi Sunak can’t pretend he doesn’t see the arid social landscape after a decade of depredation. One fragile sector after another teeters towards public scandal. Will a [report on the murder](#) of six-year-old Arthur Labinjo-Hughes expose the brutal cuts in child protection? An ambitious man eager to move next door to No 10 must surely fear the NHS buckling under current strains. But no, it seems not. Other political calculations come first.

The chancellor is abandoning the chance to raise as much as £14bn a year by reforming capital gains tax, according to his own [Office for Tax Simplification](#), the outfit set up by George Osborne to iron out anomalies and inefficiencies. Sunak asked the OTS to report on raising the tax from its current 20% to 25%. That would catch some of the sleight of hand that allows high earners with personal service companies or private equity magnates to disguise their annual income as a capital gain to avoid far steeper income tax rates. They usually do that by [taking pay in company stock](#), not cash, which cuts their tax rate from 45% to 20%. That’s how a hedge fund manager once notoriously boasted in 2007 that he paid less tax than his cleaner.

The OTS duly reported the facts, and its top estimate found the Treasury would gain a significant £14bn from raising capital gains tax. But last month the chancellor [slipped out a response](#) that stamped on the whole idea. Undertaxed, unearned wealth is soaring, but Sunak’s preferred choice is to

raise National Insurance from everyone else. Capital gains [trebled to £63bn](#) in the eight years before the pandemic: Arun Advani of Warwick University [reports the rise of “super gainers”](#) who declare more than £1m a year of their income as a capital gain. Now consider this: last week the ONS reported the assets of the rich skyrocketed [even faster during the pandemic](#). The Resolution Foundation [warns that](#) the pandemic has widened wealth gaps “with profound consequences for social mobility and future income inequality”. Those already on high salaries saw the value of their property, pensions and bank deposits soar.

Sunak should be copying the one good reform that Nigel Lawson enforced as chancellor in 1988, when he equalised tax rates on all types of income, rightly [declaring in the Commons](#): “There is little economic difference between income and capital gains.” Taxing all income at the same rate removed any incentive to disguise earnings as profits.

Forget levelling up under a chancellor who is deliberately increasing tax injustice. Last week Sunak let the Times know he would be [cutting taxes, not raising them](#). His “retail” offer ahead of the next election will be a 2p cut to income tax, but as ever, those in higher bands benefit most. The cut would cost the Treasury an estimated £12bn. Meanwhile he is piling on extra bonanzas, with plans to scrap the top 45% rate altogether and cut inheritance tax. Not surprisingly, the Institute for Fiscal Studies [has responded](#) brusquely: the income tax cut would be “indefensible”, said its director, Paul Johnson, as it “discriminates in favour of the wealthy”.

These are monstrous sums for the state to forgo while failing to keep basic services afloat in the NHS, social care, schools, skills and transport, let alone progressing to net zero emissions. Will he say where his axe will fall to pay for these tax cuts? Michael Gove’s white paper on levelling up has been postponed until the new year, amid a reported dispute over the chancellor’s decision to allocate only a paltry £4.8bn over three years for all levelling-up projects. Many have compared that with the £2tn it cost to level up East and West Germany – which only took them 85% of the way.

Labour’s shadow chancellor, Rachel Reeves, did say she would tax wealth more fairly, but without revealing a plan or responding to Sunak’s capital gains retreat. She mentioned a windfall on Covid profiteers, so she could

adopt the proposals in Tax Justice UK's report about the six companies that made £16bn in [excess pandemic profits](#). Some easy wins might include scrapping [business asset disposal relief](#) and reforming council tax and inheritance tax, according to Helen Miller, the deputy director of the IFS. Another move could be removing the VAT zero rate on food, which is an additional bonus for high spenders. This may sound regressive, but Miller says it would yield so much that it would be easy to compensate all lower earners and make them better off. A small fortune could be saved from the gigantic hidden welfare state that the well-off benefit from, such as pension tax relief, ISAs, charitable relief for private health and education and a host of other perks. These are waiting to be stripped away by any Labour chancellor brave enough to do so.

Sunak may have only one thought: how to prove himself a small-state anti-taxer to win the backing of the hardline Tory party selectorate. Maybe he's right that cash in the pocket buys most votes. But he risks a pyrrhic victory if the price of seducing a small and unrepresentative rightwing clique is to lose the next election due to public repugnance at levelling down everything, everywhere.

- Polly Toynbee is a Guardian columnist
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OpinionPost-traumatic stress disorder

The explosion of Covid PTSD cases is a mental health crisis in the making

[Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett](#)



‘The NHS forecasts that there will be 230,000 new cases of PTSD in England as a result of Covid-19.’ The national Covid Memorial Wall outside St Thomas’ Hospital. Photograph: Guy Bell/REX/Shutterstock

Tue 7 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

When the Covid-19 pandemic began, people working in the trauma field knew the psychological toll would be colossal. In the spring of 2020, I began interviewing professionals about the [mental health fallout of the pandemic](#), specifically its impact on frontline medical staff. During the first wave, two in every five intensive care staff in England reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

That work continued for almost a year, during which time a second wave hit and the initial traumas were exacerbated. But it wasn’t only frontline workers who were experiencing trauma symptoms: Covid has posed perhaps the biggest threat to mental health in England since the second world war. Now, at the tail end of 2021, the pandemic is still not over. The NHS forecasts that nationally, there will be [230,000 new cases](#) of PTSD as a result of Covid-19.

It is not only social care and medical staff who will be affected. Those who lost loved ones, and those who have been very ill or hospitalised (35% of Covid-19 patients who were put on a ventilator go on to experience [extensive symptoms of PTSD](#)) may also suffer. Then there are those living with the effects of domestic and sexual abuse, which may have worsened due to lockdown, and children and young people whose lives changed immeasurably due to our shift to a state of emergency. I imagine that some women whose birthing experiences were [marked by the pandemic](#) will also be experiencing symptoms.

Unfortunately, the current system is still not fully equipped to deal with this explosion in trauma cases. The Royal College of Psychiatrists says the NHS is already facing the biggest backlog in its history of those waiting for mental health help. As of September, [1.6 million people](#) were waiting for treatment, and the college says that more funds than those committed to by the government are desperately needed, including for extra psychiatry training places. Record numbers of children and young people – [almost](#)

[double](#) pre-pandemic levels in the months leading up to September – are seeking access to mental health services, while a report by Buttle UK warns that a [generation of children](#), especially those on low incomes, faces years of trauma and mental health problems as a result of Covid-19.

Although PTSD is still very much associated with veterans in the minds of the public, there does seem to be a broader comprehension of the condition and its symptoms than there was before the pandemic. It is not a mental health condition that made headlines much in pre-pandemic times, and media coverage has no doubt made people more aware of its existence. The “trauma bible” *The Body Keeps the Score*, by Bessel van der Kolk, has been a regular feature in the bestseller charts, and new books and memoirs are being commissioned by publishers. Among younger people, [trauma memes](#) and tweets proliferate, and there appears to be less stigma in talking about what PTSD actually entails, with terms such as “trigger” and “depersonalisation” or “derealisation” becoming more commonly used.

Unfortunately some of these words, especially trigger, have also become co-opted as part of a culture war which paints those who experience “triggering” as being oversensitive. [The ignorant response](#) to Labour MP Nadia Whittome taking time off work due to post-traumatic stress earlier this year, which included comments that she couldn’t have PTSD because she hadn’t been in a war, shows how much work still needs to be done.

While it’s positive to see increased discussion of this issue, more in-depth and empathic media exposure would be beneficial, including firsthand accounts of the disorder. What use is knowing the terminology if it isn’t underpinned by an understanding of what having PTSD actually feels like? So many sufferers I have spoken to only began to realise that what they had was a real, treatable mental health condition when they read about others’ experiences or heard them speak.

A trauma sufferer may experience the symptoms of depersonalisation – a dreamlike, detached state of being outside yourself and floating through life at a distance from it – without realising that this might have anything to do with the traumatic events that they lived through. Or they might be having horrific nightmares which, on the surface, share little in terms of content

with what happened to them. Anthologies such as Trauma, which was published by Dodo Ink last year and to which I contributed, show how diverse and multifaceted a mental health condition PTSD can be.

As ever with mental health, greater awareness can only be a good thing, but it must also be underpinned by real structural support and change. What good is it if, after finally recognising that her symptoms might be PTSD and that effective treatments are available, a patient then spends months and months languishing on a waiting list? With PTSD, early support is absolutely key to your chances of recovery, and yet the system is facing an unprecedented backlog.

The saddest thing about all this is that PTSD is eminently treatable, but the longer the pandemic goes on and the longer people are kept waiting, the more difficult it will become to do so. Volunteer therapists were used to plug the gaps in services, but they need to make a living. One of the things I heard about most in my reporting is how further Covid waves have compounded the initial trauma to result in, for some, complex or type two PTSD. That is usually seen in war veterans and victims of child abuse – people who have been exposed to repeated, sustained traumas. It is more difficult to treat and has poorer outcomes.

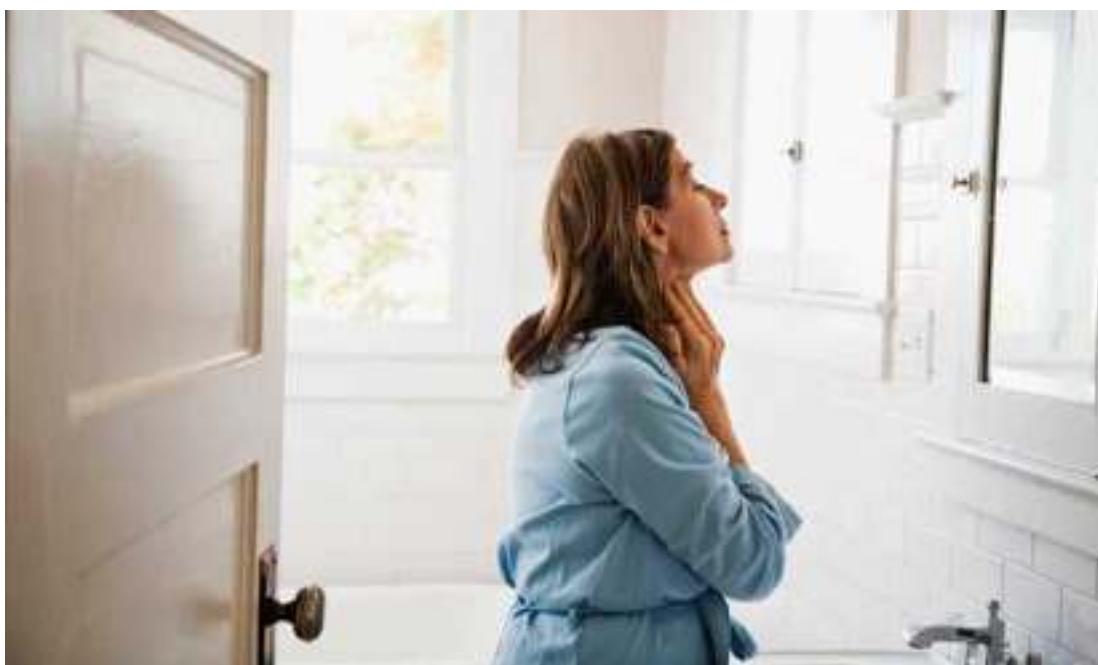
The explosion of post-traumatic stress disorder is a medical emergency, and a further strain on our creaking services. Without proper action and investment, it is a national mental health crisis in the making.

- Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett is a Guardian columnist
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Opinion[Middle age](#)

I'm not yet 50 – so why does everyone keep calling me middle-aged?

[Zoe Williams](#)



Whatever was screaming ‘middle years’ was more likely to be that I smelled of Parma Violets than that my jawline was disintegrating. Photograph: Gravity Images/Getty Images (Posed by a model)

Tue 7 Dec 2021 02.00 EST

“I’ve never seen you looking so middle-aged,” my mother said, with a kind of wonderment, an unspoken, “If you’re *this* age, what does that make me?” I was less offended than you’d think. Her eyesight is absolutely appalling: she can only tell the difference between the cat and the kettle when one is miaowing. Whatever it was about me that was screaming “middle years”, it was more likely to be that I smelled of garlic and Parma Violets than that my jawline was disintegrating and I’d taken on a fading skin tone. Even though both of those things may or may not be true – depending on the lighting.

Nevertheless, at a party later the same day, I found the time to complain about her, and a friend said, “Well, it must be quite weird, when your kids hit 50,” and I said, “But I *haven’t* hit 50”. And I didn’t even particularly mind that, since we were at a 51st birthday, and I guess it’s fair to assume that everybody at one of those will have met the milestone.

Still, on the phone the next day, I was moved to complain to a whole other person. How come C thinks I’m 50? We’ve known each other for *at least* 20 years, and been ageing at the same rate that entire time. What did she think I’d done, hit fast forward? “Well,” he said, “You’re 50-adjacent.” “Absolutely no way. 50-adjacent is 49. AND I’M 48. WHAT’S THE POINT OF EVEN HAVING NUMBERS, T, IF 48 IS THE SAME AS 49?”

So now it’s day three since the original detonation, and I’m complaining to person four about T, and his post-maths, which may as well be post-truth worldview, and person four circles back to the original remark and says, “I’m younger than you, and I think it’s fair to say we’re both middle-aged. We’ve neither of us got more life ahead of us than behind.”

Never think to dull an insult by repeating it to someone else. You just create a domino effect, an insult pile-up. It’s better to just suck it up. This is some quality middle-aged wisdom for you.

- Zoe Williams is a Guardian columnist
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I feel despair at Sudan's coup. But my children's mini protest gives me hope

[Khalid Albaih](#)



Sudanese anti-coup protesters take to the streets during a demonstration in Khartoum, Sudan, 30 November 2021. Thousands of protesters rallied against a deal reinstating the prime minister after his ousting in October's military coup. Photograph: EPA

Global development is supported by



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Tue 7 Dec 2021 02.00 EST

“All the goodness and the heroisms will rise up again, then be cut down again and rise up,” John Steinbeck [wrote to a friend](#) in 1941, just before the US entered the second world war. “It isn’t that the evil thing wins – it never will – but that it doesn’t die.”

Growing up, I was always interested in politics, politics was the reason I had to leave Sudan at the age of 11. At school, we weren’t allowed to study or discuss it, and it was the same at home. For years, I lay in bed and listened to my father and his friends as they argued about politics and sang traditional songs during their weekend whisky rituals. They watched a new Arabic news channel, Al Jazeera, which aired from Qatar. All the journalism my father consumed about Sudan was from the London-based weekly opposition newspaper, Al Khartoum. The only time he turned on our dial-up internet was to visit [Sudanese Online](#).

At the time, I never understood how Sudanese activists and political figures, like my diplomat father, who cared deeply about the country and had fought for their principles for so long, suddenly submissively stepped back. Or

worse, why they sheltered their children from the issues. I always wondered, “So *who* are you fighting for then?”

With guidance and access to citizen journalism, these younger generations are far more action-oriented. What we achieved in a decade will take them less time

In my adult life, opposing former president Omar al-Bashir’s authoritarianism and corruption became a personal battle for me, more so with every year I spent outside Sudan. It took shape slowly, until a few years before the Arab spring it peaked with the publication of my political cartoons on social media. I blogged, tweeted and posted, knowing that, although working in exile gave me a level of freedom unavailable to dissidents at home, I also risked everything through being unflinching in my criticism.

This last decade since the Arab spring has been a political rollercoaster. It was an honour to see my work shared by protesters all over the world – and be recognised by the BBC and the New York Times. I’ve published two books and had exhibitions around the world, been detained in two different countries, and wanted in my own. Like many fellow activists, I’ve experienced the effects of despair and burnout.

Deep into the long winter that has followed the quashed Arab spring, and just as I was ready to give in to my despair, a second wave of rebellion has hit Sudan. Bashir’s bloody 30-year rule ended, finally, in a revolution led by women, artists and unions. This uprising on the streets of Sudan was matched with huge support from members of the diaspora, exiled by Bashir’s regime. Returning in the wake of the uprising was an extraordinary experience. For the first time in a decade, I entered Sudan without expecting arrest. I tried to explain to my children how the people had won and collectively overcome this evil man who ruled Sudan; that although he dressed like a policeman, he was a criminal.

In the past rocky two years , Sudan has seen an influx of families who left three decades ago – people trying to regain what was lost. But it seems the counter-revolutionaries remain strong – determined to prevent democracy.

Even with international support limited to Egypt, Saudi and the UAE, the [October coup against the transitional government](#) has been a huge defeat for those working towards a free Sudan.

At 41, I hoped my children could experience Sudan as home. But it's hard to keep hoping it will be safe in Sudan to continue my activism and work as a political cartoonist anytime soon.

Now, I understand how my father and his friends felt. In a country that has had six coups since independence in 1956, I can understand the instinct to protect children from instability, uncertainty and tragedy. I spend most nights on WhatsApp sending frustrated voice messages about the situation. All my friends and I talk about is news about Sudan. I find myself trying to shield my children from the (mostly bad) news.

How do I explain that our [army is killing young men and women](#)? How do I explain that [bad men in police uniforms are back again](#)? That evil has returned so fast?

In the end I did not need to. My eldest daughter used her screen time to read posts and watch videos about Sudan. Early one Friday morning I awoke to a mini anti-coup protest with her and her younger siblings waving flags and shouting slogans in our living room.

With guidance and citizen journalism, these younger generations are far more action-oriented than we used to be. What we achieved in a decade will take them less time. As authoritarianism evolves, humans discover new ways to gain their freedoms. If my young children can stage a protest in their living room, despite my best efforts to shelter them from the news, imagine what's going on inside Sudan right now.

- Khalid Albaik is a Sudanese artist and cartoonist living in Qatar. His work can be found on Instagram [@khalidalbaik](#)

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Myanmar

‘No standing down, no giving up’: Myanmar’s resistance mobilises



Anti-military protesters in Yangon at the weekend with a banner quoting the words of Aung San Suu Kyi. Photograph: Santosh Krl/Sopa Images/Rex/Shutterstock



Rebecca Ratcliffe South-east Asia correspondent

Mon 6 Dec 2021 15.36 EST

On Sunday morning, a small group of protesters walked together in Kyimyindaing township, Yangon, waving bunches of eugenia and roses. They carried a banner reading: “The only real prison is fear and the real freedom is freedom from fear”.

The words are famously those of ousted leader Aung San Suu Kyi, whose sentencing by the junta to two years in detention was announced on Monday.

Minutes after they had gathered, witnesses told local media that a military vehicle rammed into the group. At least five people were killed, according to independent outlet Myanmar Now. Those who survived were arrested – some of the latest of more than 10,700 people to be detained since the February coup.

Almost a year has passed since the military seized power in Myanmar. Yet despite the generals arresting thousands, including the country’s elected leaders, and unleashing terror across the country, opposition to the junta remains widespread.

A civil disobedience movement continues to hold small, peaceful flashmob-style protests, while armed groups carry out guerrilla ambushes across the country. Young people have fled to the jungle to train and communities have taken up arms to defend their areas, at times in alliance with existing resistance organisations drawn from ethnic groups in conflict with the military.

“Six months ago, people didn’t think that an armed resistance was viable [...] But if you just look at the scale and breadth of armed resistance throughout the country, there are lots of groups that are mobilising,” said David Mathieson, an independent analyst who specialises in Myanmar.

The military, Mathieson added, has most likely been taken aback by the scale of opposition. “They must be thinking, what kind of hornets’ nest have we stirred here? It has fought for decades against ethnic armed organisations. Now they are now facing normal people, who a year ago wouldn’t have countenanced an armed revolt at all.”

Dr Sasa, spokesperson for the exiled opposition National Unity Government (NUG), said the public had no choice but to defend itself. “[The military] are not only destroying our democracy and freedom, but they are destroying every day our dignity as human beings. It’s, like, do or die.”

Such people’s defence forces, whose numbers Sasa did not specify, could stretch the army’s resources more thinly across the country, but analysts say they currently lack coordination. Some have pledged allegiance to the NUG, which was formed by elected lawmakers and declared a defensive war in September, while others have allied with ethnic armed organisations, or both. Some operate autonomously.

The NUG has produced ethical guidelines for such groups, though the level of control it has over various groups is unclear. “I don’t think they have anywhere near as much coordination as they claim to have,” said Mathieson. The guerrilla tactics used against the military include assassinations of its officials, bombing military property and sabotaging infrastructure such as telecom towers and bridges.

The NUG claims that almost 3,000 junta troops have died in fighting between June and November, and that 8,000 military and police personnel have defected. The junta says 75 soldiers and 93 members of the police were killed between February and late October, according to data quoted by AFP.



Protesters in Myanmar hold up portraits of Aung San Suu Kyi earlier this year. Photograph: AP

Such figures should be treated with caution, said Mathieson. While Myanmar's generals were surprised by the rapid formation of opposition defence forces, they are facing the second largest army in south-east Asia, which is supplied by China and Russia. Established insurgent groups are financed by illegal drug and jade trades, but newer ones lack the same financial clout and supply of weapons.

An arms dealer interviewed by Agence France-Presse said that, as Myanmar's kyat currency has plunged in the aftermath of the coup, the cost of weapons has risen sharply. In March-April, one M-16 rifle cost about 4m kyat (\$2,247), while an AK-47 cost 5m kyat; now the cost has almost doubled, forcing fighters to rely on homemade guns and donations.

Away from the training camps for anti-coup recruits, communities find ways to resist. Many refuse to pay their electricity bills, cutting off income to a

state-backed power company. Companies that are aligned with the military are shunned. A popular Myanmar shopping mall, Myanmar Plaza, is facing a mass boycott, after its security staff struck young students who were staging a protest.

Orders announced by the military are ignored. In Yangon, some residents hand out free face masks in defiance of military rules that forbid the wearing of face coverings near where soldiers are stationed.

Flashmobs continue to be held, despite the constant risk of military violence. On Sunday night in Yangon, the clanging of metal could be heard across the streets. From their homes, residents banged pots and pans to protest against the military, and to honour the lives of protesters killed that morning.



Yangon residents beat on pots and pans.

Photograph: Reuters

Chris Sidoti, of the Special Advisory Council for Myanmar, said the country was likely to descend into a protracted conflict unless pressure was placed on the military to negotiate. “The democratic movement is determined this time. It will not stand down, it will not give up,” he said. The international community should cut off cash and arms, he said, and make greater use of

non-military channels to deliver aid. According to the UN, about [3 million people require life-saving assistance](#).

Thinzar Shunlei Yi, a prominent anti-coup activist, said that every day she receives requests from people who are on strike as part of the civil disobedience movement and struggling to make ends meet. “Even if I can’t help, they say: ‘I won’t return to the ministry.’ They do [it] because of their political beliefs, so they are finding a way.”

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Facebook

Rohingya sue Facebook for £150bn over Myanmar genocide



Residents of the Rohingya refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.
Photograph: Tanbirul Miraj Ripon/EPA

Dan Milmo Global technology correspondent

Mon 6 Dec 2021 12.03 EST

Facebook's negligence facilitated the [genocide of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar](#) after the social media network's algorithms amplified hate speech and the platform failed to take down inflammatory posts, according to legal action launched in the US and the UK.

The platform faces compensation claims worth more than £150bn under the coordinated move on both sides of the Atlantic.

A class action complaint lodged with the northern district court in San Francisco says Facebook was "willing to trade the lives of the [Rohingya](#) people for better market penetration in a small country in south-east Asia."

It adds: “In the end, there was so little for [Facebook](#) to gain from its continued presence in Burma, and the consequences for the Rohingya people could not have been more dire. Yet, in the face of this knowledge, and possessing the tools to stop it, it simply kept marching forward.”

A letter submitted by lawyers to Facebook’s UK office on Monday says clients and their family members have been subjected to acts of “serious violence, murder and/or other grave human rights abuses” as part of a campaign of genocide conducted by the ruling regime and civilian extremists in Myanmar.

It adds that the social media platform, which launched in Myanmar in 2011 and quickly became ubiquitous, aided the process. Lawyers in Britain expect to lodge a claim in the high court, representing Rohingya in the UK and refugees in camps in Bangladesh, in the new year.

“As has been widely recognised and reported, this campaign was fomented by extensive material published on and amplified by the Facebook platform,” says the letter from the law firm McCue Jury & Partners.

Facebook admitted in 2018 that it had not done enough to prevent the incitement of violence and hate speech against the Rohingya, the Muslim minority in Myanmar. An independent report commissioned by the company found that “Facebook has become a means for those seeking to spread hate and cause harm, and posts have been linked to offline violence”.

The McCue letter says: “Despite Facebook’s recognition of its culpability and its pronouncements about its role in the world, there has not been a single penny of compensation, nor any other form of reparations or support, offered to any survivor.”

In the US and UK, the allegations against Facebook include: Facebook’s algorithms amplified hate speech against the Rohingya people; it failed to invest in local moderators and fact checkers; it failed to take down specific posts inciting violence against Rohingya people; and it did not shut down specific accounts or delete groups and pages that were encouraging ethnic violence.

The US complaint cites Facebook posts that appeared in a Reuters report, with one in 2013 stating: “We must fight them the way Hitler did the Jews, damn Kalars [a derogatory term for Rohingya people].” Another post in 2018, showing a photograph of a boatload of Rohingya refugees, says: “Pour fuel and set fire so that they can meet Allah faster.”

The number of Rohingya killed in 2017, during the Myanmar military’s “clearance operations”, is likely to be more than 10,000, according to the medical charity Médicins sans Frontières.

About 1 million Rohingyas live in [Cox's Bazar refugee camp](#), in south-eastern Bangladesh, where McCue and Mishcon de Reya, which is also working on the UK-based case, expect to recruit more claimants.

The UK case has about 20 claimants so far, while in the US the class action suit hopes to act on behalf of an estimated 10,000 Rohingya in the country.

The Facebook whistleblower [Frances Haugen](#) has alleged the platform is [fanning ethnic violence](#) in countries including Ethiopia and is not doing enough to stop it. She said 87% of the spending on combating misinformation at Facebook is spent on English content, while only 9% of users are English speakers.

Responding to Haugen’s revelations, Facebook has said it had a “comprehensive strategy” in place for countries at risk of conflict and violence, including use of native speakers and third-party fact checkers.

Facebook’s owner, Meta, has been approached for comment.

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Business live

Business

World stock markets rally as Omicron fears ease – as it happened

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Bitcoin

Australian man Craig Wright wins US court battle for bitcoin fortune worth billions



Jurors took a week to find Australian Craig Wright, who claims to be bitcoin creator Satoshi Nakamoto, did not owe half a million bitcoins to the family of David Kleiman. Photograph: Marta Lavandier/AP

Associated Press in New York

Tue 7 Dec 2021 03.52 EST

Craig Wright, an Australian computer scientist who claims to be the inventor of bitcoin, has prevailed in a civil trial against the family of a deceased business partner that claimed it was owed half of a cryptocurrency fortune worth tens of billions of dollars.

A Florida jury on Monday found that Wright did not owe half of 1.1m bitcoins to the family of David Kleiman. The jury did award US\$100m in

intellectual property rights to a joint venture between the two men, a fraction of what Kleiman's lawyers were asking for at trial.

"This was a tremendous victory for our side," said Andres Rivero of Rivero Mestre LLP, the lead lawyer representing Wright.

David Kleiman died in April 2013 at the age of 46. Led by his brother Ira Kleiman, his family has claimed David Kleiman and Wright were close friends and co-created bitcoin through a partnership.

At the centre of the trial were 1.1m bitcoins, worth approximately \$50bn based on Monday's prices. These were among the first bitcoins to be created through mining and could only be owned by a person or entity involved with the digital currency from its beginning such as bitcoin's creator, Satoshi Nakamoto.

Now the cryptocurrency community will be looking to see if Wright follows through on his promise to prove he is the owner of the bitcoins. Doing so would lend credence to [Wright's claim, first made in 2016, that he is Nakamoto.](#)

The case tried in federal court in Miami was highly technical, with the jury listening to explanations of the intricate workings of cryptocurrencies as well as the murky origins of how bitcoin came to be.

Jurors took a full week to deliberate, repeatedly asking questions of lawyers on both sides as well as the judge on how cryptocurrencies work as well as the business relationship between the two men. At one point the jurors signalled to the judge that they were deadlocked.

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Bitcoin's origins have always been a bit of a mystery, which is why this trial has drawn so much attention from outsiders. In October 2008 during the height of the financial crisis, a person or group of people going by the name

“Satoshi Nakamoto” published a paper laying out a framework for a digital currency that would not be tied to any legal or sovereign authority. Mining for the currency, which involves computers solving mathematical equations, began a few months later.

The name Nakamoto, roughly translated from Japanese to mean “at the centre of,” was never considered to be the real name of bitcoin’s creator.

Wright’s claim that he is Nakamoto has been met with scepticism from a sizeable portion of the cryptocurrency community. Due to its structure, all transactions of bitcoin are public and the 1.1m bitcoins in question have remained untouched since their creation.

Members of the bitcoin community have regularly called for Wright to move just a fraction of the coins into a separate account to prove ownership and show that he truly is as wealthy as he claims.

During the trial, both Wright and other cryptocurrency experts testified under oath that Wright owns the bitcoins in question.

Wright said he would prove his ownership if he were to win at trial.

The lawyers for W&K Information Defense Research LLC, the joint venture between the two men, said they were “gratified” that the jury awarded the \$100m in intellectual property rights to the company, which developed software that set the groundwork for early blockchain and cryptocurrency technologies.

“Wright refused to give the Kleimans their fair share of what [David Kleiman] helped create and instead took those assets for himself,” said Vel Freedman and Kyle Roche of Roche Freedman LLP and Andrew Brenner, a partner at Boies Schiller Flexner, in a joint statement.

Wright’s lawyers have said repeatedly that David Kleiman and Wright were friends and collaborated on work together, but their partnership had nothing to do with bitcoin’s creation or early operation.

Wright has said he plans to donate much of the bitcoin fortune to charity if he were to win at trial. In an interview, Wright's lawyer Rivero reconfirmed Wright's plans to donate much of his bitcoin fortune.

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