

# The Guardian

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## 2022.03.20 - Opinion

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## [Opinion](#)[P&O Ferries](#)

# The Observer view on P&O deserving to face justice for sacking its staff

Observer editorial

The government owes it to the 800 workers who were summarily dismissed to do more than wring its hands



Two of P&O Ferries sacked staff members collect their belongings at the Port of Dover on 17 March 2022. Photograph: Gareth Fuller/PA

Sun 20 Mar 2022 02.00 EDT

Fair play, sanctity of contract and respect for human dignity are principles deeply embedded in British culture. P&O Ferries' summary [sacking of 800 workers](#) in a pre-recorded Teams message so they could be replaced within hours by agency workers at allegedly half the cost offended all three. It was a callousness from which even 19th-century mill owners and ship owners shrank. Conservative ministers, given to see each principle through employers' eyes as expendable if the circumstances so require, were roused

to share the widespread outrage. The archbishop of Canterbury caught the public mood when he described the act as “[inhumane and unethical](#)”.

Both the business secretary, Kwasi Kwarteng, and the transport secretary, Grant Shapps, wrote to the company accusing it of outrageous behaviour, offering the government no time to organise remedial action – managing to correct their originally wrongly addressed letter to P&O’s now departed chair with unusual alacrity. The mistake betrayed the distance between government and business that is part of the problem. Meanwhile, the case has been [referred to the Insolvency Service](#) to see if any law has been broken. If so, warns Kwarteng, the company could face an unlimited fine. This is not a case where ministers can take the side of the company, even one anxious to limit losses it says run at £100m a year.

The risk of a swingeing fine will have been priced into P&O’s decision

However, P&O, a subsidiary of Dubai’s [DP World](#), will have taken care to see that it remained on the right side of Britain’s feather-light employment law, an international byword for laxity, wholesale bias to employers and legendarily weak enforcement. It justified what it did as a last resort, having effectively bypassed trade unions and bought out the employees’ consultation rights with a package at least as attractive as what they could achieve in a tribunal. Obeying the rule of law is thus recast as a business cost: if the rate of return is higher by buying out fundamental statutory obligations, then for an international company careless of its reputation it is an investment well worth making.

Nonetheless, one of Britain’s leading employment law experts, Bristol University’s Prof Alan Bogg, [identifies two areas](#) where the company may have transgressed the law. The dismissals are most likely unfair under the dismissal legislation, and consultation rights over collective redundancies are sure to have been breached by these peremptory actions. However, the process of government lawyers coming to a judgment, possibly imposing a fine and then fighting the inevitable appeal will take months, if not years, as P&O will have calculated. The risk of a swingeing fine, unlikely even in this case, given the notorious laxities of employment law enforcement, will have

been priced into P&O's decision. By the time the issue is settled, it will be trading with its new agency staff – and those sacked on Thursday will be living with the consequences.

Brexiters argued that Brussels' insistence on offering a modicum of worker rights throttled business. The claim was always arrant nonsense but the government promised a new employment act to exploit the alleged “opportunities of Brexit”, to codify the law around minimalist principles to remove any trace of dark anti-British values such as offering workers’ rights, entitlements and dignity at work. Those were for the sclerotic EU.

The bill is stalled, the government not daring to strip British workers of the remaining legacy of European rights, even though it did [block a private members' bill](#) aimed at ending the egregious practice of firing and rehiring the same workers on lower wages and worse entitlements. Anti-trade union attitudes are deeply ingrained, but further weakening of employment law is now politically much more difficult. The proposed creation of a single enforcement body – perhaps even properly resourced – might finally be brought forward. There might (and should) also be clauses more closely aligning British and European law over collective redundancies and consultation, so that cynical employers cannot exploit differences. There is also an urgent need to consider stricter penalties and remedies to prevent fundamental rights being treated as business costs. Britain should be setting a gold standard in such regulation – not leading the race to the bottom.

P&O’s trading problems, like those of swathes of UK-based businesses, were a direct result of plummeting trade with the EU post Brexit, in its case, collapsing freight volumes on its ferries. Negotiating participation in the single market, however off-limits the proposition may currently be to Britain’s political class, and aligning our employment law to the EU’s where necessary, would do much to restore trade flows, underpin real wages and promote decent behaviour in the workplace.

Capitalism does not have to be like this. DP World professes a commitment to best corporate governance and responsible capitalism, but its refusal to abide by its promises has already triggered the resignation of one non-executive director, Mark Russell.

British company law, like employment law, is phenomenally lax. As an international ferry operator, P&O provides a key public service. It should be allowed to trade in Britain only if it incorporates as a company consecrated to delivering public benefit, to be held to account by its shareholders and stakeholders for so doing. The government could do more than wring its hands over the bad name P&O has given to capitalism. It could act to change the current dynamic for the benefit of all. Be sure it won't.

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## OpinionTransgender

# The Observer view on gender identity services for children

Observer editorial

The Cass review's interim report finds children with gender identity issues are ill served by adults who shut down debate



Keira Bell took the Tavistock and Portman NHS trust to court after regretting taking puberty blockers at the age of 16. Photograph: Facundo Arrizabalaga/EPA

Sun 20 Mar 2022 02.30 EDT

Ideology has no place in medicine. An individual's healthcare must not be influenced by a clinician's biases. But an independent review has highlighted that the quality of care for children with gender dysphoria in England has been unconscionably compromised in recent years, partly as a result of adult affinities to an unevidenced worldview.

[The review](#), led by the distinguished paediatrician and former president of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health Dr Hilary Cass, has published its [interim](#) report. Its findings echo concerns already flagged by the courts, the Care Quality Commission, and, as the *Observer* has reported over the years, several NHS whistleblowers.

The report highlights a profound lack of evidence and medical consensus about the best approach to treating gender dysphoria in children. Yet the NHS's specialist Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS) takes a child's expressed gender identity as the starting point for treatment. This "affirmative approach" leaves little space for exploration of the potential relationship between their dysphoria and neurodiversity or psychosocial needs, including those arising from childhood trauma or internalised hostility to same-sex attraction. GIDS has compounded this lack of evidence with its own failure to track patient outcomes.

Young people's gender identity can remain in flux until their mid-20s, but there is a lack of data on regret

As referrals to GIDS have increased, capacity has not kept up, meaning that children face unacceptably long waits for care. Also, it has been applying the affirmative model in a looser form than in the Netherlands, where it was conceived, and to a patient group whose characteristics have changed dramatically from those for whom it was developed – teenage girls, whose gender dysphoria has manifested in adolescence rather than in early childhood. The majority of young people now referred to GIDS have other complex mental health issues or neurodiversity, but GIDS has failed to assess these needs in the round.

The review is also clear about the lack of evidence about one of the affirmative model's treatment pathways: puberty-blocking drugs, which, for the vast majority of children prescribed them, function as a precursor to cross-sex hormones. The long-term health consequences of puberty blockers are unknown, and there is clinical confusion about their purpose. It is unclear whether children progress to cross-sex hormones because their

gender identity was already settled, or whether puberty blockers interfere with the natural resolution of gender dysphoria.

Young people's gender identity can remain in flux until their mid-20s, so the risk of regret following irreversible treatment needs to be understood, but there is a lack of data on regret. The report notes the lack of services and support for young detransitioners like Keira Bell, who took the trust that runs GIDS [to court](#), and who has played a vital role in drawing attention to its inadequate care.

There has been a deplorable tendency to mislabel clinical concerns about the affirmative model as transphobia

The reason that these failures in children's healthcare have taken so long to be addressed is the polarised nature of the adult debate about gender identity. There has been a deplorable tendency by some to mislabel clinical concerns about the affirmative model as transphobia. This polarisation has contributed to a climate in which clinicians both inside and outside GIDS are fearful of raising concerns. An employment tribunal found that NHS [whistleblowers at GIDS](#) faced shocking levels of vilification and attempts to undermine their professional integrity.

Even in the wake of the Cass report's hard-hitting findings, some clinicians and charities continue in their efforts to [shut down](#) legitimate debate about the affirmative model. These adults must examine their consciences, because it is children whose care is compromised as a result of their ideology.

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**Observer comment cartoon**

**Ukraine**

## **Will China come to Putin's aid? – cartoon**

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NotebookArt

## A great exhibition of immigrant art. Why not pay a visit, Priti Patel?

Rachel Cooke



The Conservative frontbench could learn a thing or two from the works on show at Postwar Modern at the Barbican



Postwar Modern at the Barbican. Photograph: Tim P Whitby/Getty Images for Barbican Art Gallery

Sat 19 Mar 2022 11.00 EDT Last modified on Sat 19 Mar 2022 15.44 EDT

I can't remember when there was last such an abundance of wonderful exhibitions in London. But if I could frogmarch our current cabinet to only one show, it would be to [Postwar Modern: New Art in Britain 1945-1965](#) at the Barbican. Bordered by barbed wire and suffused with atomic dread, it speaks volumes both about the darkness of conflict, and the particular quality of the light that rises after the bombs cease falling. Most strikingly of all, a sizable amount of the work was made by immigrants to these islands. Of 48 artists, I counted 11 who were born elsewhere.

Some are well known: the painter Frank Auerbach, who arrived in Britain thanks to the Kindertransport; the potter Hans Coper, who fled Germany in 1939, only to be interned here as an enemy alien. But there are other, less familiar names, too: Magda Cordell, a Hungarian refugee whose *Figure 59* (1958) recalls a body torn by shrapnel; Eva Frankfurter, another escapee from Nazi Germany, whose tender double portrait, *West Indian Waitresses* (1955), adorns an exhibition poster; Gustav Metzger, the son of Polish Jews who arrived here as a boy, and whose swirling installation, *Liquid Crystal Environment* (1965), is a highlight of the show.

It is, I know, almost impossible to imagine Priti Patel and co wandering a gallery of a weekend. But we live in hope. Someone (not Nadine Dorries) should organise an outing. How good it would be to find the odd oil or sculpture on political social media accounts; to have the Conservative frontbench see that by opening doors, rather than closing them, we always gain vastly more than we lose.

## Carnality on campus



It's all happening on the campus... Photograph: Ian Dagnall Commercial Collection/Alamy

Having grown up on [David Lodge](#) and [Malcolm Bradbury](#), it's good to discover that the campus novel is not, after all, dead and dusted. *Vladimir* (no, not that Vladimir), by the American playwright Julia May Jonas, casts a savagely fresh eye on badly behaved academics, its author having chosen as her narrator a woman who's not only married to a literature professor who stands accused of #MeToo crimes, but who's also in the grip of a scandalous drive of her own.

Vladimir is her younger colleague – all three characters teach in the same department – and she is sexually obsessed with him, to the point of wanting to tie him up.

If this doesn't sound thrilling enough for you – in which case, I must ask: does a heart really beat inside your ribcage? – let me add that this unnamed middle-aged woman has, in the course of this brilliantly written new book, a series of deeply satisfying run-ins with her ridiculously frail-minded woke students. An extraordinary debut, this critic writes, about to press it on everyone she knows.

## Yes Minster



Walking the Roman walls in York. Photograph: Richard Saker/The Observer

By the time you read this, I'll be on my way back home from York, where I will have spent a longish weekend queuing for Bettys and mooching round secondhand bookshops. Time spent in York involves several traditions for me, one of which is always to walk its walls. When I did this as a child, I was forever on the lookout for the chessboard my dad convinced us had been carved into the wall's flags by some bored Roman soldiers (not quite true, I fear).

But these days my mind is usually on bigger (if equally elusive) matters: yes, property. Which house, I ask myself, would be mine in another life? This one, with the red front door and a magnolia tree in the garden? Or that one, with its magnificent gable and superbly easy access to the pub?

# Rachel Cooke is an Observer columnist

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**Opinion****Evgeny Lebedev**

## **It's possible Evgeny Lebedev's only crime is absurdity. Perhaps his editors could let us know**

[Catherine Bennett](#)



In all the recent chatter about the press baron, one group has been silent – his media execs



Evgeny Lebedev with George Osborne at the 64th Evening Standard Theatre Awards in 2018. Photograph: David M Benett/Dave Benett/Getty Images

Sat 19 Mar 2022 15.00 EDT

‘I am not some agent of Russia,’ wrote a pained [Evgeny Lebedev](#) in one of the newspapers he owns with his father, [Alexander](#), the former Russian spy. ‘I am not a security risk to this country, which I love.’

And for once, the sheer preposterousness of Lord Evgeny, the most elaborately costumed proprietor in press history, is on his side. Perhaps it’s reading too much John le Carré, but are serious security risks also likely to be party-mad showoffs, enthralled by celebrities, with titles that sound – “Baron Lebedev, of Hampton in the London Borough of Richmond on Thames and of Siberia in the Russian Federation” – as if they were dreamed up by a rather worrying 10-year-old? Though in that respect it might shed some light on an affinity sometimes considered suspect between Lord Siberia and the no less preposterous world king, [Boris Johnson](#), whose determination to enoble Lebedev has now embarrassed both. Is it impossible that Tuscan parties featuring celebrities and (Rory Stewart was told) “girls”, might, for such men, represent the pinnacle of human achievement?

The similarities don't stop there. Johnson thinks it stylish to flourish the classics; Lebedev was accessorised with *De Profundis* and *Areopagitica* for an appearance at the Leveson inquiry, an early signal of his claim, now endorsed by a Russian winner of the Nobel peace prize, to be called a press "freedom fighter". Back in 2012 Lebedev tweeted: "Forgot to tell Leveson that it's unreasonable to expect individuals to spend £millions on newspapers and not have access to politicians."

Both men like posing with their dogs, have fathers who hit people, and with their shared weakness for costly furnishings we can picture them pricing whatnots with the same fervour they bring to discussing Putin's annexation of Crimea (in 2016 Johnson blamed the EU). Lebedev is said by one editor to have "exquisite taste"; a supporter said the exact same thing about Carrie Johnson, when her taste for neo-colonial polychrome was attacked.

Can a person who invariably looks in close-ups as if he's auditioning for the Bullingdon Club be a security threat?

Still, for a Russian peer attempting to convince us of the innocent trajectory of his ambitions, "Siberia" is strange. Why allude to the gulags? At once silly (if he wasn't always on about Russia) and sinister (if he wasn't always on about Elton John), the title pretty much encapsulates the difficulties with Evgeny Lebedev. Can a person who invariably looks in his countlessclose-ups as if he's auditioning for the Bullingdon Club really represent a security threat? Unless this fairly crude caricature of Etonian affectations, added to the [Lebedevs' past efforts](#) to [detoxify Putin](#), should only intensify doubts about Johnson's judgment?

Supposing, picking the first option, that Lebedev is guilty of nothing more than absurdity, social mountaineering and, like some valued Tory donors, living on a fortune gained by an occasional endorser of a murderous tyrant, there are many distinguished party guests who could testify to, if nothing else, his generosity. Although to date, we have heard more from Keir Starmer and [Rory Stewart](#), both refusers of Lebedev invites, it's too soon to conclude that smarter guests have, in the manner of the friends who once enjoyed Philip Green's toga parties, scented disgrace and fled.

It can't be long, anyway, until we hear from much better informed intimates, from former editors qualified to endorse Johnson's view of Lord Siberia as a blameless victim of "Russophobia". Or alternatively, from former editors who, unless they endorse various [Lebedevian equivocations](#) on, say, the [Litvinenko](#) and novichok poisonings, support the contention that he isn't. There would be no shame, you could argue, in the admission that without any actual instructions, they would naturally work, as [Harold Evans](#) once said of Murdoch's system, "towards the Fuhrer". "He doesn't have to give direct orders. His executives act like courtiers, working towards what they perceive to be his wishes or might be construed as his wishes."

Some executives might be more embarrassed to recall what was always plain: that even editors with journalistic talent effectively doubled – given the pressure to cram Lebedev's newspaper campaigns with scaleable heaps of politicians, royals and celebrities – as his diary secretaries.

In Sasha Swire's excellent memoirs, George Osborne is reportedly "concerned" that "Evgeny Lebedev is going to use him to arrange his social life". Pending personal contributions from Osborne and fellow editors including Geordie Greig, Amol Rajan, Sarah Sands, Emily Sheffield and Chris Blackhurst, her account remains, in fact, the closest you can get to squaring Rachel Johnson's [tribute](#) to Lebedev, "much smarter and funnier than people think", with a tweet he once addressed to some *Guardian* journalists: "Up yours."

For Swire, when they were David Cameron's guests at Chequers, Lebedev was "a charisma-free zone". It was "extraordinary", she noted in 2015, that the son of a KGB operative had penetrated "the very core of the British establishment by buying a newspaper". Lebedev senior, she noted, even before junior embarked on some informal diplomacy, "is still pally with Putin".

How was it done? Did journalists serve, in this instance, with the same uncritical alacrity that is now condemned in the politicians, lawyers, estate agents, PRs and other enablers who made London so agreeable for oligarchs? Or was Lebedev smart enough, with Dad, to perform this feat solo? Rajan, once Lebedev's media adviser, then his *Independent* editor, has

stressed his old boss's "terrifyingly good memory", how he was "terrifyingly sharp".

By great good fortune, Rajan is now the BBC's media editor, star interviewer and *Today* presenter, thus uniquely placed and equipped to offer insight on this important story. Presumably he's simply been too busy to comment, to date, on whether Johnson's passion for Evgeny's elevation was understandable, or, when you factor in the ex-KGB father and his Crimean investments, fully as reckless as Cameron's earlier infatuation with the Murdochs. There are those, you hear, who feel the BBC is overly dazzled by the ubiquitous Rajan: what a way this would be for him to prove them wrong.

Catherine Bennett is an Observer columnist

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[\*\*OpinionUkraine\*\*](#)

# The public's urge to help Ukrainians pitched them against the government's miserly response

[Sonia Sodha](#)



While the Home Office dragged its feet, 150,000 people registered to host those fleeing the war



Protesters in London on 5 March, calling on government to do more to aid fleeing Ukrainians. Photograph: ZUMA Press, Inc./Alamy

Sun 20 Mar 2022 03.00 EDT

There is a feeling of powerlessness that can quickly take hold when watching awful images from conflict zones in the comfort and security of your own home. Whether it's in Kyiv, Damascus or Kabul, it's hard to know how to respond to stories of families being ripped apart, of people fleeing from being shot in cold blood, of children deliberately targeted in war crimes.

The case for military intervention on humanitarian grounds is rarely as open and shut as its strongest proponents and detractors would have us believe. However, there is one aspect of the humanitarian response that could not be easier to get right. How wealthy countries that can offer safety choose to treat those fleeing war and terror is a reliable test of the moral character of a government: and it is one that Britain is failing comprehensively.

More than [three million people](#) have fled Ukraine since the conflict started just under a month ago. The EU responded swiftly, waiving all visa requirements for Ukrainians. Poland is now host to almost two million

Ukrainian refugees; Romania half a million. Ireland, a country with less than 10% of the UK population, has offered refuge to 6,500.

Britain stands in contrast to the rest of Europe by the mean-heartedness of our response. Ukrainians with family members settled in the UK can obtain a visa to join them but they have reported long delays, which left vulnerable refugees scrabbling to fund hotel stays as they wait for [Home Office bureaucracy](#) to creak into action. Those arriving in Calais were being told to go back to visa centres in Paris or Brussels. [Just 4,000 visas](#) for Ukrainians, out of 17,100 applications, have been granted so far. In the first week of the crisis, a Home Office minister posted a now-deleted tweet suggesting that Ukrainians could apply for [fruit-picking visas](#).

It quickly became clear that the [public were not going to stand for this](#). And so the government, last week, introduced an additional resettlement route, Homes for Ukraine, that allows those without family members in the UK to come, so long as they are sponsored by a named individual in the UK willing to house them for at least six months, who will be paid £350 a month for doing so.

There are things to like about this scheme. Perhaps most of all, it shows the strength of public feeling that Britain should be doing more: [150,000 potential hosts registered](#) their interest ahead of its launch on Friday. Placing refugees in people's homes on a temporary basis can have great mutual benefit: helping them make friends and settle into life in their new communities as well as being incredibly enriching for host families. Unlike refugees who apply for asylum once they reach the UK, people on this scheme will be pre-approved to work, although only for three years.

To realise these benefits though, the scheme must be thoughtfully developed as part of a wider, more generous offer to Ukrainians and others fleeing conflict. Instead, the government appears to have rushed it through in response to a public demand for action, without addressing its risks.

This is a recipe for abuse of female and child refugees: for sex trafficking, sexual exploitation and modern slavery

Those risks are serious. Without a trace of irony, given the significant administrative hurdles faced by Ukrainians who are eligible for visas and are trying to get here, Michael Gove told MPs that the government wanted to “minimise bureaucracy” in matching refugees to sponsors. That means only light-touch vetting checks, although the government has now bowed to pressure to, in time, run more extended checks on those who will be hosting families with children. Refugees must be sponsored by an individual, in many cases someone they have never met. The government has said it envisages the scheme applying to individuals who have hotels or Airbnbs with empty rooms as well as spare rooms in their own homes.

This is a recipe for abuse of female and child refugees: for sex trafficking, sexual exploitation and modern slavery. Unsavoury people – including criminal gangs fronting this with individuals without criminal records – will see this as an opportunity to get paid as refugee sponsors while using the hold they have as named sponsors on the visa to exploit women for sex and free labour. There is no justification for asking refugees fleeing conflict to accept an individual they have never met as a visa sponsor – indeed, the Scottish and Welsh governments will act as “super-sponsors” to avoid this. There are no details about what will happen if the relationship between sponsor and refugee breaks down; though the government has said refugees will not be allowed to apply for housing benefit, which risks allowing sponsors using the threat of homelessness to exploit vulnerable adults.

To realise the benefits while minimising the risks, this scheme should have been part of a wider visa-free offer not capped at the number of people willing to offer accommodation. Refugees placed with hosts should have access to a case manager – either in a local council or charity – to help manage the placement and get them out at the first signs of exploitation.

That the government has not done this suggests it is driven more by headlines and less by a concern for refugee welfare. It is in keeping with a government whose driving motivation for immigration policy has been to make the UK as hostile as possible to those not born here, even though it came at the price of terrible consequences for the Windrush generation, who have legitimately lived here for decades, or of cruel levels of bureaucracy and extortion for young people who have grown up in the UK hoping to secure their status when they turn 18. Indeed, Priti Patel’s nationality and

borders bill – which the Commons will vote on this week – seeks to break the spirit and the letter of international law by criminalising those arriving in the UK to claim asylum, and sending them to be processed offshore to a territory like [Ascension Island](#).

It is very revealing that Boris Johnson appeared to treat the safe evacuation of cats and dogs from Afghanistan as a higher political priority than getting out individuals who had worked to support British forces. However, the scale of the response to Homes for [Ukraine](#) is a reminder that while the government may see refugees as legitimate fodder for its culture wars, the British public are more generous in their approach to asylum than successive Conservative prime ministers have given them credit for.

- Sonia Sodha is an Observer columnist
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**Opinion**[\*\*Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe\*\*](#)

# I watched up close as ministers' ignorance and incompetence kept Nazanin in Iran

[Tulip Siddiq](#)

Her local MP reveals the obstacles put in the way of the six-year campaign to free her

- [Family's MP says Johnson's 'poor grasp' of Zaghari-Ratcliffe case led to errors](#)



Richard Ratcliffe and MP Tulip Siddiq on their way to a meeting at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in November 2021.  
Photograph: Stefan Rousseau/PA

Sun 20 Mar 2022 03.06 EDT

The first time I heard about Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe's case in 2016, I was in my living room with Richard Ratcliffe and Jeremy Corbyn while breastfeeding my newborn. Aside from feeling utterly sorry for this softly spoken accountant, a constituent of mine, I remember being apprehensive about Richard's determined plans to go public about his family's plight.

In his typically calm manner, he told me the Foreign Office (FCDO) had strongly advised him to [stay quiet](#), as had lawyers he had consulted. Yet he was dismayed the FCDO hadn't been able to locate or even communicate with Nazanin in 30 days. The officials simply seemed pleased that Iran wasn't denying her existence, he told me in disbelief.

As a legislator, I felt conflicted. Were we putting Nazanin's life in danger by going public, I asked him tentatively. He said he had put a great deal of thought into it, and that he believed going public would keep his wife safe. I decided to take my cue from Richard and offer support for his campaign, as his MP. It was important to give Nazanin a voice, for her story to be heard. Within three days of going public, Nazanin was allowed a visit from her family, and soon afterwards was transferred out of solitary confinement. We had to recognise these small victories, even though they weren't enough.

Over time, I became bolder in my view that going public was the right approach, but not all parliamentarians agreed. One FCDO minister told me that every time I mentioned Nazanin in parliament I added five years to her prison sentence. Given I was granted eight urgent questions and countless debates in parliament about her, that was an alarming thought. Thank goodness, the maths didn't add up.

I also got into hot water when [telling the press](#) that Nazanin's treatment in prison fitted the UN's criteria for torture – another FCDO minister tracked down my personal phone number in order to berate me. But soon afterwards, Nazanin was finally allowed a medical examination. When speaking to her months later, while under house arrest, she thanked me and said the campaign meant she was the best-protected inmate in Evin prison.

As the years went by, the link between [Britain's historic debt of £400m](#) for a cancelled arms deal with Iran and Nazanin's imprisonment became a

growing source of tension. Along with Labour's then shadow foreign secretary, Emily Thornberry, I repeatedly raised concerns over state hostage-taking and Iran's clear pattern of behaviour in this area. Nazanin was repeatedly told by her captors that her arrest was linked to the debt, while the then Iranian foreign minister, Javad Zarif, cited it in an interview at the United Nations General Assembly in 2019.

While we are overjoyed at the outcome, it's impossible not to regret all the time that was wasted

Despite this, all three prime ministers and the four foreign secretaries that I dealt with refused to acknowledge the link, beyond off-record briefings to journalists. They were not alone. In March 2021, I asked Jacob Rees-Mogg, then leader of the House of Commons, whether he would agree there was a clear link between Nazanin's case and the debt. In a call to the prime minister the day before, the Iranian president, Hassan Rouhani, had all but confirmed that resolving this debt was the key to diplomatic progress and could help Nazanin's case. Rees-Mogg replied: "It would be quite wrong to link payments of any money to the release of somebody who is improperly detained." The message seemed clear: this government would not acknowledge the link.

A breakthrough came towards the end of 2021 when we met [Liz Truss](#) (our fifth foreign secretary). For the first time, an elected government official seemed to explicitly acknowledge the link, and she has since described the debt as "legitimate". Richard and I have, in recent days, found ourselves laughing in sheer disbelief at how the narrative has changed, with the entire government now openly celebrating how it paid the debt to get Nazanin back. While we are overjoyed at the outcome, it's impossible not to regret all the time that was wasted.

I also cannot reflect on Nazanin's story without lamenting the [prime minister's damaging role](#) in it. In 2017, Boris Johnson, then foreign secretary, wrongly told the foreign affairs select committee that Nazanin had been in Iran "simply teaching people journalism, as I understand it". His remarks were weaponised in the Iranian state media and cited by the Iranian judiciary as evidence for her "crimes".

This disastrous blunder meant Johnson was forced to meet us. Again, I raised my concerns about the debt, which were flatly denied by him. Incredibly, he asked if Richard had enjoyed his visit to Iran. Anyone who had read a newspaper article on the case was aware that Richard had been at home in the UK when his wife was arrested in Iran. To this day, I feel astonished by Johnson's extremely poor grasp of his brief. (Richard gasped at the question.) I should add that this was certainly not the case for the FCDO officials who knew the details of the case inside out.

In contrast, I pay tribute to Jeremy Hunt during his time as foreign secretary. He too went against advice from officials when he granted Nazanin diplomatic status. He was frank that it had given him sleepless nights, but said it was the right thing to do as it made her case a state-to-state dispute. While his biggest regret was not bringing Nazanin home, he told me Richard inspired him, reminding him of the need to be there for ordinary people who need help: "We all need that prompt sometimes."

Ultimately, was Richard Ratcliffe vindicated for going public on his wife's case? Could Nazanin have come home earlier if we had stayed quiet? We will never know, but a great deal of credit must be given to his campaigning, which raised global awareness and ensured the debt was centre of people's minds. No doubt the government's need to find another source of energy helped expedite things too.

But in my opinion, Richard has been vindicated because his goal evolved as the campaign ran on. It wasn't just about getting Nazanin home, but also drawing attention to hostage taking and arbitrary detention. As one former foreign secretary said, "Thanks to him, a global scandal has been uncovered." Not bad for an accountant from West Hampstead.

Tulip Siddiq is the MP for Hampstead and Kilburn

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## [For the recordUK news](#)

# For the record

This week's corrections

Sun 20 Mar 2022 02.00 EDT

Dmitry Rybolovlev is not the owner of Club Brugge; it is another Belgian football club, Cercle Brugge, that he owns ([Abramovich is but one in a long list of tainted owners. Is there no end to this sportswashing?](#) 13 March, p46).

Valery Gergiev was described on first mention as a conductor and on second as a composer. The former is correct ([Charity that supported St Petersburg ballet and opera closes its doors](#), 13 March, p11).

The illustrator of a retelling of Rudyard Kipling's *How the Rhinoceros Got His Skin* is Daron Parton, rather than Miles Kelly ([With just two days to make an outfit, we settle for an inside-out jumper and an improvised horn](#), 13 March, Magazine, p49).

The main picture with a travel feature on walks ([Reach your peak](#), 13 March, Magazine, p45) showed hikers on the Peak District's Mam Tor, not Chrome Hill as the caption said.

Benjamin Hoff's *The Tao of Pooh* was published in 1982, not 2003 ([Are blockchain-based DAOs really a utopian revolution in the making?](#), 13 March, the New Review, p27).

Other recently amended articles include:

[Why has Abramovich's billionaire friend been left off the UK sanctions list?](#)

*Write to the Readers' Editor, the Observer, York Way, London N1 9GU,  
email [observer.readers@observer.co.uk](mailto:observer.readers@observer.co.uk), tel 020 3353 4736*

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## Observer lettersRefugees

# Letters: Johnson and Patel, take note: xenophobia has no place in our town

In Hastings, people prefer to be kind to refugees, rather than reject them



A discarded dinghy on the south coast of England. Photograph: Dan Kitwood/Getty Images

Sun 20 Mar 2022 02.00 EDT

Nick Cohen's excoriating analysis of the government's unforgivably cold-hearted response to Ukrainian refugees nails it precisely: Boris Johnson and Priti Patel demean us all in their assumption that most of us are racist and xenophobic ("[The Tories claim we are worse than we are – and it's the Ukrainians who suffer](#)", Comment). They are wrong. Even before the tragedy of Ukraine, poll after poll showed that most people want to be kind and decent to those seeking refuge. But Johnson and Patel pay attention only to that minority who don't. And whip them up.

In my own small town of Hastings, local refugee support groups have a strong presence, and collectively many thousands of followers on social media. When tiny boats crammed with desperate refugees arrived on our beaches a few months ago, there was an outpouring of support, including over £34,000 collected in a few days in hundreds of donations by local people. The response to the people now fleeing the tragedy in [Ukraine](#) is similarly powerful. Over 1,260 have signed a petition to our MP urging her to oppose the nationality and borders bill and vote for the Lords' amendments which threw out so many of its iniquities. On the streets, in the pubs, the cafes, the churches, we find an empathy that far outweighs the repulsive narrative so mendaciously claimed as what "the British people want".

A few days ago, a local fisherman told me that he had been instructed by Border Force to report any dinghies in the Channel but to let them drift. "I'm not doing that!" he declared. "On sea, no matter who it is, no matter where they come from or why, everyone is my responsibility – let them drift? Hah!"

We are desperate to be listened to by our own parliamentary representative, a fellow party member with Patel and Johnson. Patel and Johnson may lack any smidgen of the imaginative capacity needed to empathise with our fellow humans who are fleeing for their lives – but most of the rest of us are better than that.

**Felicity Laurence**  
Hastings, East Sussex

## Why museums matter

The headline of your article gave the impression that museums are failing to make any difference to the lives of pupils ("[Why a day out at the museum won't result in better exam grades](#)", News). Nothing could be further from the truth – museums across the UK worked hard throughout the pandemic to ensure that children had access to engaging experiences of culture, art, science and history. These experiences are not designed to help children pass specific exams, but to contribute to their wider development and understanding of the world.

As your article recognises, there are numerous other recent studies that demonstrate the broader development and wellbeing benefits that museum visits can bring. Museums are brilliant places for discovering who we are, where we have come from and what we might become. There is no exam for that.

**Maria Balshaw**, chair, National Museum Directors' Council; **Sharon Heal**, director, Museums Association; **Andrew Lovett**, chair, Association of Independent Museums; **Jenny Waldman**, director, Art Fund

## Reframing Corbyn ‘disaster’

I must take issue with the framing of some of Rachel Cooke’s assertions and questions in her interview with Ed Miliband (the [New Review](#)). It is irritating to read that “the Jeremy Corbyn years (were) a disastrous period for the Labour party”, with no qualification or analysis of whether that was actually the case.

In 2017, Theresa May was expected to increase her majority; instead, Labour demolished it, winning over 40% of the vote for the first time in decades. Corbyn was able to communicate Labour’s optimistic and transformative agenda precisely because so few figures in the mainstream press believed he was a serious contender.

The result appeared to terrify liberal and conservative journalists alike, who spent the next two years recasting Corbyn as some sort of folk devil, even as Labour party membership rose to over 560,000 and its MPs enjoyed the fruits of their – temporarily – vastly increased majorities. Their efforts made a substantive contribution to the genuine disaster of the 2019 election.

I was and remain agnostic about Corbyn himself, believing him to be temperamentally unsuited to the role of party leader. What his leadership represented, however, was something entirely different: a genuine belief in the capacities and capabilities of ordinary people, to which millions of voters responded in kind. If that’s a disaster, I don’t know what success is.

**Lynsey Hanley**  
Liverpool

## Sustainability, not shiny toys

While I agree with Will Hutton on the need for a swift transition to renewables, having spent the last 20 years working as an engineer in the space sector, I have my doubts that beaming microwave solar power to Earth from space can ever be part of the solution (“[Warmed-up Thatcherism was never going to be the answer. Now it would be a disaster](#)”, Comment). Can you imagine the planning process? How does “Residents object to plans for death ray from the skies” sound as a headline in the local paper? And that’s before we get to energy security: what exactly will we do when a hostile power’s satellite “accidentally” collides with our orbiting power station, and how to fix it when it goes wrong?

But what is most frustrating is the unchallenged techno-utopianism underpinning much of the talk of net zero. We are constantly grasping for the next shiny toy, betting the farm (and our children’s futures) on the off-chance that yet more marginal gains and elaborate schemes will keep pace with our ever-growing appetites. Where in all this is the discussion of reducing demand, or an honest appraisal of how to live sustainably on a single planet with finite resources too much for us to face?

**Kevin Middleton**

Stanford in the Vale, Faringdon, Berkshire

## Don’t focus on phones

It is astonishing to see the chair of the social mobility commission, Katharine Birbalsingh, claim “it all starts with smartphones” (“[Take away children’s phones to boost social mobility](#)”, News).

The past decade has seen the devastation of Sure Start children’s centres, a squeeze on education spending that has hit the most disadvantaged areas hardest, and steep cuts to social security benefits that have increased child poverty. Each of these factors will have damaged social mobility. Focusing on smartphones falls into a long tradition of blaming individual behaviour to distract attention from deep structural inequalities. The commission is supposed to hold government to account on its actions. It is not hard to see why Birbalsingh was the government’s choice as chair.

## **Dr Kitty Stewart**

Associate professor, Department of Social Policy, Associate Director, Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, London School of Economics and Political Science, London WC2

## **All Russians are not Putin**

Hans Kundnani's article makes the crucial distinction between Vladimir Putin and the Russian people ("[First, we did too little to oppose Russia. Now do we risk going too far the other way?](#)", Comment).

We must not make the mistake a second time of failing to respect and work with the Russian people after Putin's inevitable fall. The "west" – including particularly the United States – erred the first time by failing to support Mikhail Gorbachev and thus enabling him to achieve a far more gentle and constructive breakup of the Soviet Union. The cataclysmic implosion it suffered fatally destroyed Gorbachev's credibility and contributed significantly to the estrangement of Russia from the west.

Disastrously, the United States, abetted by other western governments, encouraged exploitative capitalism to feed off the fall of the Soviet Union and it was this that produced the oligarchs who quickly grasped the sale of state assets. The collapse of the rouble in 1998 was the final straw, not least as it caused increased poverty among millions of Russians. They blamed Gorbachev and his successor Boris Yeltsin and, instead of following democracy, they looked for a strong nationalist leader – and there was Putin waiting in the wings. Putin is very much the collateral damage of the west's mistakes. The Russian people rightly have great pride in their culture, much of which in its music, its opera, its ballet and even its literature, is European. We must constantly make the point that we also recognise Russian culture and draw Russia after Putin into a closer relationship.

## **Michael Meadowcroft**

Leeds

Your news article states that "Russians over 65 are 51% more likely to watch television than under-25s" ("[Moscow's family divide](#)"). This still leaves 49% of over-65s who aren't more likely to watch television, and not all of the 51% are swallowing the propaganda. Russian blogger Ilya Krasilshchik's

110,000 followers does not constitute a major proportional ratio of a vast country to endorse the impression in your article that older Russians are pro-war in the Ukraine. Is it the over-65s who massacre, mutilate and rape civilians in war?

**Liana Marletta**

Glasgow

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[\*\*Opinion\*\*](#)[\*\*Vladimir Putin\*\*](#)

## **Those on the right who loudly praised Putin have now fallen strangely silent**

[\*\*Nick Cohen\*\*](#)



Most collaborators in the west are at least coming up with excuses after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. That's not the case in Britain



Putin apologist Nigel Farage addresses the Conservative Political Action Conference in Orlando, Florida on 25 February 2022. Photograph: Chris duMond/Rex/Shutterstock

Sat 19 Mar 2022 14.00 EDT

Across the west, institutions that collaborated with Vladimir Putin's Russia are having a moment of revelation. Lawyers who persecuted investigative journalists and a financial service industry that feasted on oligarchical loot are shocked beyond measure by the invasion of Ukraine.

They happily overlooked the levelling of Grozny, the war crimes in [Aleppo](#), the missile attacks on civilian flights, the invasion of Crimea, the destructions of Russian democracy, the endemic corruption, the endless lying, and the poisoning of [Alexander Litvinenko](#), [Sergei and Yulia Skripal](#) and [Alexei Navalny](#). Only now they realise that the Kremlin may not be a reputable business partner after all.

In the 20th century, the opponents of totalitarianism on the left talked of their "Kronstadt moment" – the instant when they realised Soviet communism was not an emancipatory force but a foul tyranny. Today we see "Mariupol moments" as everywhere the men and women who excused and

profited from the Russian empire express their determination to do better. Everywhere, that is, except the one place where self-criticism is needed most: the Anglo-American right.

If Britain were ever to have an authoritarian leader, this government would have cleared their path

No Conservative leader has matched Keir Starmer's instruction to tyrannophile MPs to [renounce](#) Jeremy Corbyn's [Stop the War](#) movement for giving "succour to authoritarian leaders who directly threaten democracies".

The Tory press will run as many pieces as it can on the inability of Corbyn and his allies to call imperialism and militarism by the right names even as the cruise missiles land. Yet nowhere do they find space for examinations of its failure to confront Nigel Farage for his "[admiration](#)" of Putin's skill as an operator, or to ask why the Russian ambassador liked Farage's bagman Arron Banks so much he offered him "opportunities not available to others" in the form of Siberian gold mines and the support of a [Kremlin bank](#). Nowhere do we hear Tories talk of their determination to build an impassable border between democratic conservatism and the authoritarian right.

The [Conservatives](#) in power have allowed corruption to flourish. Their failure to come to the immediate aid of Ukrainian refugees disgraced their party and their country. But you cannot pretend that Russian money has bought Conservative foreign policy. Boris Johnson and the defence secretary, Ben Wallace, are feted in Ukraine for supplying the resistance with weapons and training. They fight against Putin abroad but will not condemn his admirers at home.

Similarly, Republicans in the US Congress have implicitly rejected Donald Trump by voting for Joe Biden's vast package of military aid for Ukraine, while refusing to explicitly take on Trump's tenderness for the Russian regime.

The only attempt at a reckoning I have seen in our rightwing press was by one [Eric Kaufmann](#), a populist professor of politics (if you can picture such

a creature) at Birkbeck, University of London. Writing more in sorrow than in anger, that greasiest of styles, he sighs that it is a “real shame for populist conservatism” that Steve Bannon, Trump, Marine Le Pen, Éric Zemmour and Viktor Orbán had “carried water for this killer”. If only they had concentrated on attacking wokeness, crime and immigration, all would have been well.

Didn’t he notice that their water carrying was not an eccentric aberration? Trump subverted elections in the US and Orbán all but abolished press freedom in Hungary. Indulgence for Putin on the “alt-right” wasn’t a bug but a feature, because he offered a road to autocracy his western admirers yearned to follow.

The partisan do not like to take on their “side” for fear of giving comfort to the enemy. Perhaps more conservatives than said so in public admired Putin for being a white, muscular Christian leader who opposed the evils of liberalism. Or maybe they hated the EU as much as Putin hated the EU and, in the words of Trump’s sidekick [Bannon](#), “believe that at least Putin is standing up for traditional institutions”. But the best explanation for the silence is that the complicit find it hard to condemn. There is no clear dividing line between the right and the far right in the 2020s.

Perhaps more conservatives than said so in public admired Putin for being a white, muscular Christian leader

The supposedly mainstream Johnson is threatening to institute voter suppression and is attacking the independence of every institution from the BBC to the House of Commons. He is not on the same level as an Orbán, let alone a Putin, but if Britain were ever to have an authoritarian leader, this government would have cleared their path. In an episode that has been too quickly forgotten, the Conservative party and Brexit party worked as an alliance in the 2019 general election, and, who knows, may need an electoral pact in future. Finally, to return to the oligarchs and their lawyers, you should never underestimate the chilling effect of the English law on public debate. Banks’s decision to sue the *Observer*’s [Carole Cadwalladr](#) personally, so that she faces ruin if she loses, is a sobering deterrent to Tories searching for the courage to speak out.

Conservatives can always find reasons to postpone their Mariupol moment, particularly when any investigation of Russian influence runs into the Brexit referendum, whose sacral purity can never be questioned.

The history of the left shows why they should make the effort. In 1948, the Labour politician Richard Crossman edited *[The God That Failed](#)*, a collection of essays by writers who had lost their illusions about Russian communism. Louis Fischer, who had been a foreign correspondent in Moscow, blamed himself for not seeing the truth about communism in 1921 when sailors at the Kronstadt naval base outside St Petersburg were shot for demanding freedom of speech, trade union rights and the release of political prisoners.

Fischer had his Kronstadt moment after seeing Stalin use the secret police to settle political disputes in the 1930s (plus ça change, you may say). Others had theirs when Hitler and Stalin agreed to carve up eastern Europe in 1939, or when the Soviet Union invaded Hungary in 1956.

A few never reached Kronstadt. They [switched their allegiance](#) from Soviet communism to [Putinist gangsterism](#) after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and carried on as before. They became Corbyn's senior advisers and led the Labour party to a devastating defeat in 2019.

Their lesson is that, if you don't cut out the rot on your own side, it will bring your house down. That silence on the right will one day be broken by the tolling of a funeral bell.

Nick Cohen is an Observer columnist

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# Headlines

- [Doctors 791 medical graduates could miss out on NHS placement](#)
- [Cost of living crisis UK wages fall at fastest rate since 2014 as cost-of-living squeeze bites](#)
- [Cost of living crisis UK 'must spend on home insulation and heat pumps'](#)
- [Coronavirus Lateral flow tests could cost care home visitors £73 a month](#)
- [Travel UK's Covid restrictions to be dropped despite rise in cases](#)

**NHS**

## 791 medical graduates could miss out on NHS junior doctor training

Highest ever number of medical students have been told there are no places for them this year



The lack of junior doctor training places comes despite the NHS's crippling shortage of medics. Photograph: Peter Byrne/PA

*[Denis Campbell](#) Health policy editor*

Tue 15 Mar 2022 02.00 EDT

Almost 800 medical graduates could be denied the chance to train as doctors in the [NHS](#) this year, despite the health service's crippling shortage of medics.

A total of 791 medical undergraduates who have applied to start training as junior doctors at the start of August have been told there are no places for

them – the highest number ever.

The risk that young would-be doctors may not be allocated to start their training at a hospital in the UK has sparked concern among the medical students affected, as well as medical organisations.

Pressure is growing for action to close the gap between the number of training places available across the NHS and the number of graduates seeking one, so medical talent is not wasted and hospitals hire as many fresh recruits as they can to help tackle the widespread lack of medics.

Doctors are worried that the mismatch between demand for and supply of training places will lead to the NHS missing out on medics it sorely needs and that some of those denied a place will either go to work abroad instead or give up medicine altogether. The most recent [official figures showed](#) that the NHS in England is short of almost 8,200 doctors.

Dr Dustyn Saint, a GP in Norfolk, tweeted the health secretary, Sajid Javid, about the situation, saying: “Sajid Javid sort this out! You know how much general practice needs these people in a few years, standing by and doing nothing is inexcusable.”

Another doctor said: “It’s bonkers that 800 would-be doctors could be denied training places at a time when the NHS in England is short of 8,200 doctors.”

Half (393) the 791 will soon graduate from UK medical schools while the other half (398) are “eligibility applicants” – those with a medical degree from an overseas medical school who are entitled to work in the UK or who graduated from a British medical school before August 2020.

The UK Foundation Programme (UKFPO) ensures that aspirant doctors who have just graduated from medical school are able to start foundation one training, the bottom rung of the ladder that leads to medics becoming fully qualified. Training usually starts in the August after graduation.

But the UKFPO has [warned](#) that the foundation programme is “over-subscribed” to a record level this year, raising the prospect that some of the

791 may not be allocated a training slot.

While it has already filled 8,209 foundation training places, the 791 who have missed out so far have been put on a reserve list.

The UKFPO, which is run by [Health](#) Education England (HEE), has told them that: “We would like to reassure the applicants on our reserve list, who may be feeling anxious, that we are currently working very hard to find additional places for everyone who needs one.”

It works with the health departments in the four home nations to ensure that the NHS has as many new trainee doctors as they need and works with them to increase numbers if necessary.

The 791 is the largest number of applicants on record that the UKFPO has not placed by this stage of the year. In 2017 only 25 graduates were in that position, though that number has risen sharply in recent years and by last year had risen to 494.

HEE has blamed the situation on a record number of applicants and promised “pastoral support” to medical graduates on the reserve list, many of whom are anxious about their futures.

“There have been record numbers of applicants for the 2022 foundation programme. Although the statutory medical education bodies have increased the number of foundation posts available, we recognise that 791 students have been placed on the reserve list,” said Prof Liz Hughes, HEE’s deputy medical director.

It has sought to reassure graduates without a training place that they will get one somewhere in the UK by August. Places will be freed because historically about 7% of applicants withdraw between applying and starting their F1 training, it said.

The British Medical Association has voiced concern about the large number of unallocated medics. “Now we have a situation where a record number are left with unnecessary uncertainty about where they are headed this August,” said Khadija Meghrawi, the co-chair of its medical students committee. “In a

time where student mental health is declining, this additional source of uncertainty and stress is particularly unfair.”

Prof Martin Marshall, the chair of the Royal College of GPs, said: “It is important we get to the bottom of why this has happened and address it as soon as possible. It’s encouraging that we have so many people completing medical school and wanting to continue their training. This needs to be matched by capacity in foundation training schemes.”

Azeem Majeed, a professor of primary care and public health at Imperial College London, said: “It’s essential that workforce planning in the NHS is adequate, given that there are shortages of many health professionals, including doctors. This means having enough foundation posts for newly qualified doctors.

“It’s likely that most of the 791 people without foundation doctor posts will eventually be allocated one but it does create undue stress for them and they may be allocated a role in a part of England where it may be difficult for them to work due to family reasons.”

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## UK unemployment and employment statistics

# UK wages fall at fastest rate since 2014 as cost-of-living squeeze bites

Unemployment rate falls below pre-Covid level but rising prices and energy bills hit wages



Average UK wages plunged after taking inflation into account. Photograph: Dominic Lipinski/PA

*[Richard Partington](#) Economics correspondent*

*[@RJPartington](#)*

Tue 15 Mar 2022 07.24 EDTFirst published on Tue 15 Mar 2022 04.03 EDT

Average wages in Britain have fallen at the fastest rate since 2014 as annual pay growth fails to keep pace with rising inflation amid Britain's cost of living crisis.

The [Office for National Statistics](#) said that annual growth in regular pay, excluding bonuses, fell by 1% in the three months to January after adjusting

for its preferred measure of inflation – the biggest fall since July 2014.

Average total pay including bonuses rose slightly by 0.1% amid a bumper bonus season in the finance sector.

### [UK cost of living chart](#)

Against a backdrop of soaring energy bills and the rising cost of the weekly shop, the latest snapshot showed a steady recovery in the jobs market from Covid was offset by high rates of inflation that experts warned would be worsened by surging energy prices after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

In a sign of strength for the labour market, unemployment fell back below pre-Covid levels for the first time. The unemployment rate dropped to 3.9% in the three months to January from 4.1% in the three months to December, dropping below 4% in February 2020 before the pandemic took hold in the UK.

### [UK unemployment chart](#)

Frances O'Grady, the general secretary of the TUC, said the government needed to use next week's spring statement to outline measures to support workers amid the worst hit to living standards in decades.

"Working people deserve financial security and a wage they can live on. But instead, they are facing the steepest decline in real pay for eight years, and a cost of living crisis that will get worse if the government doesn't act now," she said.

"Energy bills will rise at least 14 times faster than wages this year. Household budgets are already stretched to the brink and can't take any more."

The latest snapshot showed the number of job vacancies rose to a fresh record high of 1.3m, suggesting a sustained increase in demand for workers after the end of furlough and despite the emergence of the Omicron variant hitting the economy.

Employment continued to rise over the period, although the official employment rate remained one percentage point below pre-pandemic levels amid a decline in the number of self-employed workers and more older staff leaving the workforce.

Analysts said the strength in the labour market suggested the Bank of England was likely to increase interest rates again on Thursday in response to soaring inflation. Average wages, including bonuses, rose at an annual rate of 4.8% before taking account of inflation – an increase from 4.6% in the three months to December, and a faster rate than expected by City economists.

Rishi Sunak, the chancellor, said the government's economic support measures had driven a stronger jobs market rebound than many observers predicted.

"I am confident that our labour market is in a good position to deal with the current global challenges," he said. "We know people are concerned about the rising cost of living so alongside continuing to help people find great jobs – we're providing direct support worth more than £20bn this financial year and next."

However, employment experts and poverty campaigners warned signs of strength in the jobs market would offer little comfort to workers seeing their pay packets eroded by soaring inflation.

"It doesn't matter that a record number of people are now on UK payrolls or that there is still a record number of job vacancies, people in work are feeling the pinch and it's going to get worse," said Danni Hewson, a financial analyst at the stockbroker AJ Bell.

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"It's not because wages aren't rising, how could they not in such a tight labour market, it's just that the cost of simply living is getting more and more expensive."

The latest figures showed that pay growth was strongest in the private sector and among finance and professional services. Before taking account of inflation, average private sector pay, including bonuses, rose by 5.4% in the three months to January, compared with just 2.4% in the public sector.

Nye Cominetti, a senior economist at the Resolution Foundation, said the pay squeeze was unlikely to end soon. “Overall surging inflation will wipe out any wage gains in 2022,” he said. “Britain’s real pay squeeze, which started as far back as summer 2021, will get deeper in 2022, and is unlikely to end until summer 2023.”

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## Cost of living crisis

# UK must spend on home insulation and heat pumps, ministers told

Civil society groups call for £3.6bn for insulation, £4bn for heat pumps and return of universal credit uplift



Campaigners are concerned measures that could provide rapid relief during the cost of living crisis, such as home insulation, will be sidelined.  
Photograph: Andrew Matthews/PA

*[Fiona Harvey](#) Environment correspondent*

Tue 15 Mar 2022 02.00 EDT Last modified on Tue 15 Mar 2022 02.02 EDT

The UK government must urgently bring forward billions of pounds in pledged spending on insulation and heat pumps, and reinstate the universal credit uplift to help poor households cope with soaring energy and food prices, civil society groups have told ministers.

Vulnerable households are already [facing stark choices](#) between heating and eating, with hardship set to become even worse before next winter as rises in the cost of living bite, fuelled by the war in Ukraine.

Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, Save the Children and Age UK are among 33 civil society groups that have written to the prime minister, Boris Johnson, the chancellor of the exchequer, Rishi Sunak, and the business secretary, Kwasi Kwarteng, to call for £3.6bn for insulation grants to all households, and an extra £4bn by 2025 to install heat pumps in place of gas boilers.

The letter, seen by the Guardian, also called for benefits to be increased in line with April's inflation rate, rather than the lower 3.1% planned, and for the £20 uplift in universal credit that was part of the Covid-19 response to be restored.

The government promised in its [2019 election manifesto to spend more than £9bn on insulation and energy efficiency](#) for British homes. Ministers are understood to be finalising plans over the coming days for a new energy security strategy that will [boost renewables](#) such as wind and solar power, and to pump more oil and gas from the North Sea, while the [chancellor will unveil the spring statement](#), or "mini budget", next Wednesday.

But climate and poverty campaigners are concerned that measures that could provide rapid relief to poorer households, such as home insulation, will be sidelined as [debate within government rages over projects such as fracking and new licences for the North Sea](#).

Juliet Phillips, senior policy adviser at E3G, one of the groups behind the letter, said: "Green homes are the [most obvious energy security solution](#) no one is talking about. Energy security starts at home: this means supercharging a renovation wave to cut energy bills and permanently reduce the exposure of families to volatile international gas markets – boosting energy efficiency and rolling out electric heat pumps."

Fracking is unlikely to be viable on a large scale in the UK, and would not produce any gas for years. New exploration in the North Sea would also take

years, if not decades, to produce gas. However, some Conservative backbenchers and sections of the media have called for them as a response to surging energy prices.

Officials are also understood to have engaged in informal early-stage contacts with EDF, Drax and Uniper, which operate coal-fired or biomass power stations, about the possibility of delaying planned closures of coal-fired units, or increasing coal burning. However, the Guardian understands that this is a contingency plan that is unlikely to be necessary as the government believes electricity supplies in excess of those recommended by the National Grid have already been secured through its contracts for a different scheme.

A government spokesperson said: “The UK remains committed to ending the use of coal power by 2024. We will be setting out plans to boost our long-term energy resilience and domestic supply shortly. The operation of UK coal plants is ultimately a commercial matter and we have made no formal request to EDF.”

Rebecca Newsom, head of politics at Greenpeace UK, said insulation and support for vulnerable households were more effective ways of reducing Russia’s ability to weaponise energy prices. “This is a fossil fuel crisis, and new fossil fuels from the likes of fracking or new North Sea oil and gas aren’t going to solve our problems. We can reach true energy freedom and stand up to [Vladimir] Putin, but that needs the government to back properly funded measures to support households, accelerate renewables and properly fund home upgrades to reduce our use of gas altogether,” she said.

Children were already feeling the impact of the sudden increases in the cost of living that have followed the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, campaigners said. Dan Paskins, director of UK impact at Save the Children UK, said: “Parents are telling us they’re struggling to meet basic needs, leaving them having to make impossible choices between heating their homes and buying clothes for their children, and children are paying the price. Without action, things are only going to get harder.”

There is good evidence that insulation schemes work, according to the Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit, a thinktank, which has calculated that

energy efficiency measures installed in the last decade save UK householders nearly £1.2bn a year. Those savings could have been much higher, but the [rates of home upgrades dropped sharply](#) after the government [abandoned its flagship scheme in 2015](#).

Heat pumps could also be rolled out far faster, according to Jan Rosenow, director at the Regulatory Assistance Project thinktank. He found that the UK could eliminate fossil fuel imports completely by increasing insulation and installing [heat pumps in place of gas boilers](#). Heat pumps will be about £260 a year cheaper than gas boilers from April.

According to the letter sent to the government, the costs of grants to vulnerable households, and incentives that could be offered to all households for insulation and the switch to heat pumps, could be met through the government's [£16bn green gilt](#) programme, the [UK Infrastructure Bank](#), and a new green funding scheme from the Bank of England.

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## Coronavirus

# Lateral flow tests could cost care home visitors £73 a month

‘Completely unacceptable’ to expect visitors to pay, says Age UK, as Covid cases rising for people over 70



Resident Doreen (left) with her daughter Sandy at Sunrise of Bassett care home in Southampton, Hampshire. Photograph: Andrew Matthews/PA

*[Nicola Davis](#) Science correspondent*

*[@NicolaKSDavis](#)*

Tue 15 Mar 2022 03.00 EDT Last modified on Tue 15 Mar 2022 03.02 EDT

Lateral flow tests could cost care home visitors £73 a month, a leading UK charity has said, as it renewed calls to keep the devices free in such settings.

The government has previously announced that free testing for the general public will end from 1 April, and that this will [include care home visitors](#).

However, charities have warned the shift away from free tests could place a heavy financial burden on those visiting care homes, where testing is still advised.

[Boots has announced it will offer](#) the devices at £2.50 for one or £12 for a pack of five, or £17 for a pack of four with the extra option to send results to the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA).

James White, the head of public affairs and campaigns at the Alzheimer's Society, said the proposed charge on lateral flow tests for visitors to care homes was a cruel tax on care.

"Over the past two years, we've consistently heard many tragic stories from families struggling to visit their loved ones in care homes. For many people with dementia, this isolation has led to a significant deterioration in their condition and mental health," he said.

"With infection rates rising once again, the government must provide free lateral flow tests for all visitors to care homes so that families are not put in an agonising position where they are forced to ration visits, leaving people with dementia once again isolated and alone."

Dr Sam Royston, the director of policy and research at Marie Curie, which runs hospices, also raised concerns.

"Without the provision of free testing, many people living with a terminal illness and their families will face additional costs at a time when we know people are often struggling. This extra cost would put further strain and pressure on people's lives at a time when their basic living costs are already rising exponentially due to the high cost of living and energy," he said.

"For those who can't afford the extra financial burden of paying for testing, this could lead to more people facing further social isolation towards the end of life."

The Alzheimer's Society is running [a petition to keep testing free](#) for care home visitors – which has been signed by more than 7,000 people – with the

charity suggesting there are a number of options to do so, including providing tests to care homes or sending weekly tests to essential caregivers.

Caroline Abrahams, Age UK's charity director, said: "No one should have to pay out of their own pocket for tests in circumstances where the expert advice is clear that testing remains an important safeguard against Covid," she said.

"If care home visitors are going to continue to be asked to keep testing to protect their loved ones, it would be completely unacceptable to expect them to pay."

The concerns come as data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) suggests [infection levels in the UK are on the rise](#) once more, with the proportion of those over 70 who had Covid in the most recent week the highest since the ONS survey began.

The Department of Health and Social Care currently advises that testing for visitors to care homes should continue, in line with the wider care home testing regime.

However the Guardian understands measures around testing as well as infection, prevention and control measures – including for care home visiting – are currently under review. The DHSC has said further details are to be set out by 1 April.

The DHSC is also soon expected to announce which at-risk groups will be eligible for free symptomatic testing. At present, it is thought this will include people over 80 or with compromised immune systems, as well as NHS and social care staff.

A DHSC spokesperson said: "As set out in the government's Living With Covid plan, the approach to managing Covid-19 in adult social care services will continue to evolve in the coming months. We will continue to focus on providing care for those that need it and supporting people who are most vulnerable to Covid-19."

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## Coronavirus

# UK's Covid travel restrictions to be dropped despite rise in cases

Remaining rules including mandatory passenger locator forms and tests for unvaccinated arrivals will end on Friday



A passenger arrives into Heathrow airport. The ending of travel rules comes as health officials raised concern at the number of people being hospitalised with the virus. Photograph: Matt Dunham/AP

*[Aubrey Allegretti](#) and [Gwyn Topham](#)*

Mon 14 Mar 2022 16.55 EDTFirst published on Mon 14 Mar 2022 13.00 EDT

All remaining Covid travel restrictions are to be dropped across the UK from later this week, despite a [concerning rise in cases](#) and hospitalisations.

Ministers approved the scrapping of passenger locator forms and the requirement for all unvaccinated arrivals to get tested, with the changes to

come into force from 4am on Friday.

Quarantine hotels, which have not been used since the “red list” of countries was emptied in December but have been kept on standby, will also be fully stood down from the end of March.

Tory MPs and the aviation industry had [put pressure on the government](#) to make the move before April, given all domestic restrictions have already been repealed.

Announcing the change, the transport secretary, Grant Shapps, said on Monday it would “mean greater freedom for travellers ahead of the Easter holidays”.

The decision will be welcomed by the travel industry. On Monday, Heathrow announced that air passengers travelling through the airport will no longer be required to wear a mask from Wednesday. British Airways and Virgin Atlantic said they were also preparing to drop the requirement onboard, when flying to destinations that do not require face coverings on planes.

Heathrow said it would still strongly encourage people to continue to wear masks at the airport, in recognition that the pandemic was not over, but it would no longer be a firm requirement – mirroring the practice around UK transport.

BA and Virgin said rules would depend on the destinations with masks required on many routes, including to the US until at least 18 April. Virgin flights to the Caribbean from both Heathrow and Manchester will see optional mask-wearing.

It comes as Britain’s Covid situation deteriorated further, with health officials concerned that the number of people being hospitalised with the virus was also growing at a fast rate.

In the past week, 444,201 positive cases have been recorded – an increase of 48.1%. The number of patients admitted to hospital has also risen steeply to 10,576 in [England](#) as of 8am on 14 March – 19% up on the previous week.

Boris Johnson's spokesperson on Monday insisted there was no need for any fresh restrictions to help curb the spread of the virus.

He said the prime minister was "keeping a close eye on the data" but that "at the moment, we don't see anything nearing any of the sorts of pressures we saw at the peak of the pandemic, when such large proportions of the population weren't vaccinated or boosted".

He added: "We obviously will always have contingency plans, but the prime minister and others have talked about how the vaccination and our therapeutics mean we will not need to return to the lockdowns of the past that saw such significant measures be necessary."

The health secretary, Sajid Javid, also said the UK was in a "very good position" given the take-up of vaccines, and that a rise in infection rates was to be expected.

In a bid to appease those concerned about the dropping of border measures, he vowed: "We will continue monitoring and tracking potential new variants, and keep a reserve of measures which can be rapidly deployed if needed to keep us safe."

The Department for Transport said that the "default approach will be to use the least stringent measures" and that contingency measures "will only be implemented in extreme circumstances".

Last month, Johnson significantly loosened remaining Covid restrictions, announcing that those with the virus were no longer required to isolate and that free mass testing would end from 1 April.

Self-isolation support payments were also jettisoned, while sick pay rules reverted to less generous pre-pandemic arrangements.

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## Rail industry

# ‘Spring of discontent’: wave of strikes looms for Covid-hit railways

Pandemic upended finances, and action over possible job cuts, pay freezes and closures seems likely



The RMT says: ‘It’s our belief that they want to close virtually every ticket office on the mainline railway.’ Photograph: Steve Parsons/PA



[Gwyn Topham](#) Transport correspondent

[@GwynTopham](#)

Tue 15 Mar 2022 02.00 EDT Last modified on Tue 15 Mar 2022 05.08 EDT

A “spring of discontent” is looming for the railways as unions and senior rail officials prepare for widespread industrial action in response to curbs in government emergency funding that spell job cuts, pay freezes and closures.

Talks between the industry and unions to negotiate the £1.5bn-£2bn savings demanded by the Treasury were held through last year on the basis of no compulsory redundancies and no walkouts. That agreement lapsed at the end of 2021 – leaving unions warning of immediate strike action should any jobs be axed.

That outcome now appears inevitable, with formal [proposals for cuts](#), including substantial job losses in maintenance roles to save £100m annually at Network Rail, expected in the coming weeks. Train operators will try to cut staff costs in a move to contactless ticketing. Mick Lynch, the leader of rail’s biggest union, the RMT, says: “It’s our belief that they want to close virtually every ticket office on the mainline railway.”

We know travel habits and passenger demand have changed and the industry has to change, too

*Network Rail's Tim Shoveller*

The roots of the dispute lie with the coronavirus pandemic, which has upended the finances of rail firms – potentially even more than those of the London Underground, where [two 24-hour strikes earlier this month](#) closed the tube. Passenger numbers have fluctuated similarly on both networks, from deserted at the start of the pandemic to between 60 and 70% of pre-Covid levels now.

Yet the past two years have brought other changes that mean some are questioning how much power a stoppage still holds to disrupt on national rail and [London](#) transport.

Tim Shoveller, a [Network Rail](#) regional director, said: “Even as passenger numbers start to recover, we know travel habits and passenger demand have changed and the industry has to change, too. We cannot keep relying on government handouts. We are discussing ideas with our unions about how we can modernise to create better and safer jobs for our people.”

Unions argue that their members, who kept transport services running during the pandemic, should not pick up the tab, either on national rail or in the capital. More RMT walkouts are likely in London, where pensions as well as job cuts are in the frame, after the mayor, Sadiq Khan, was told to find £500m in annual cost savings in order to receive almost £5bn in [emergency state funding](#) to cover shrinking tube fare income.

But do rail strikes still work for unions? Bringing London to a standstill for most of the working week would have been intolerable to many businesses before Covid; with Tube trains normally now only two-thirds full, the impact this month was muted. Many commuters could dodge the disruption by staying at home to work, leaving the city’s remaining trains, buses and roads crowded but far more functional than in strike days gone by.

A similar picture could emerge on national rail this spring: some key commuter railways, such as South Western, which once heaved with annual

season ticket holders riding daily to the City, have been left with their lucrative regular clientele melting away. A senior industry source says of the strike option: “They used to have an ace of spades. Now it’s a five of hearts.”

Others disagree. Mick Whelan, the general secretary of Aslef, the train drivers’ union, contends that the threat of a strike could be “more powerful in the confusing new world created by Grant Shapps”. Under the transport secretary’s reforms to franchising, more of the railway is under central control through new contracts where all fare income goes to government rather than being at the operators’ risk.



There are fewer annual season ticket holders on some key commuter routes.  
Photograph: Graham Hunt/Alamy

The London School of Economics professor Tony Travers, a local government expert, argues that despite the falling numbers of affected commuters who may be stranded by a rail strike, “the government, in a curious way by guaranteeing the income, has re-empowered the unions. They can use their muscle in the normal way because the government and Khan still want to keep the tube and the national railway running.”

While smaller than the RMT, the drivers' union has a greater ability to stop trains: in the Southern dispute of 2016-17, rail managers attempted to step in to replace striking RMT conductors but nothing ran on the few days that Aslef went on strike.

At the moment, it is relatively relaxed about its members' prospects: train companies remain short of drivers and rely on overtime – and about 2,000 drivers, who are typically middle-aged men, are due to retire in the next five years. However, Whelan says: "There are issues that would, rightly, lead to national action. Let's remember that many of our members, who put themselves at risk for two years during the pandemic, have received no pay rises. That cannot continue."



Commuters travel to work during a tube strike in London this month.  
Photograph: Guy Bell/Rex/Shutterstock

The final year of an inflation-linked pay deal has kept tube salaries up in London but on national rail, Lynch says a two-year freeze is "effectively a 10% cut so far and the clock is ticking". A total of 1,450 managers have also left Network Rail, so far by voluntary redundancy, saving £100m. The TSSA union said any compulsory cuts would prompt immediate industrial action.

The Rail Delivery Group estimates that £14bn in fare revenue has been lost to the industry since the pandemic started, with another £6bn shortfall over the next three years. A spokesperson said it had been “an unprecedented financial shock”, adding: “The whole industry needs to respond to the challenges we face with the acceleration of changing travel patterns and more passengers migrating to digital technology.”

We don’t like going on strike. Our members lose money, we take a lot of heat and it’s not a great position

### *The RMT’s Mick Lynch*

Ticket offices are under threat of closure – a politically difficult prospect, not only because of union opposition. “People see there’s no argument when you do the sums,” said a senior figure at a rail operating group. “But they don’t want their own one closed.”

For the RMT at least, there is no sign of strikes abating. The union has been coordinating action ranging from the night tube dispute, which has stopped Transport for London relaunching 24-hour weekend services, to walkouts by conductors on TransPennine Express, and outsourced train cleaners at Churchill in the south-east.

“We don’t like going on strike. Our members lose money, we take a lot of heat and it’s not a great position,” Lynch says. However, he adds: “The reason people see us is because our union will not be cowed. The unions that have given way have lost membership and lost the ability to fight for people.”

For Lynch, the point of this month’s walkouts was clear: “Where unions don’t fight, people end up on the minimum wage, no pension, no rights. I think it will make a difference because it shows people that we’re serious.”

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[Social media](#)

## Stop doomscrolling! The 50 cheeriest social media accounts – from dancing academics to seal pups



Let the good times scroll ... (clockwise from left) Seal Rescue Ireland; Stevie Martin; Mondo Mascots; Happy Eco News; Peter Lovatt; Second Chance Animal Rescue; Radha Modgil; Postcards From the Past; Tulips in

Holland; Foxes in Love. Composite: Guardian Design; Tash Pszenicki; JacobH/Getty Images

Now more than ever we all need to sprinkle some happiness into our social media feeds. Here are the best accounts to follow, whether you love spectacular jelly creations or hilarious Japanese mascots



[Stuart Heritage](#)

[@stuheritage](#)

Tue 15 Mar 2022 02.00 EDT Last modified on Tue 15 Mar 2022 06.47 EDT

Everything is terrible. You know this as well as anyone because, like the rest of the world, you have spent the past few years pummelled by waves of awful historical events, each more debilitating than the last. The only thing that would make everything even worse is dunking your head into the furious, screaming world of social media.

However, it doesn't have to be this way. In times of enormous crisis, one way to find temporary respite is to dilute your feeds with goodness. Below, I – along with some wonderful Guardian readers – have tracked down 50 feelgood social media accounts. Some are on Twitter, some on [Instagram](#), some on TikTok. Some are uplifting, some are funny, some are weird, many

have dogs in them. Sprinkle your accounts into your scrolling and you should end up in a much better frame of mind.

## Funny

**Bananner Joe, TikTok** For the most part, this is simply a meme account. But it warrants inclusion here for its “shampoo prank” videos, in which a bodybuilder’s attempts to rinse shampoo out of his hair are perpetually thwarted by a hidden stranger. Maybe the hardest I have laughed at anything ever.

**Abraham Bunga, TikTok** Abraham Bunga only really has one joke – showing how people from different parts of London react to various circumstances – but luckily it’s a good one. The more of his videos you watch, the more you anticipate the punchline. And, since the punchline always dunks on people from west London, it’s always delightful.

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**Scott Seiss, TikTok** Nobody on the internet has ever quite captured the hell of retail work like Seiss, who spends his videos talking back to a succession of awful unseen customers. If you have ever worked in a shop, getting to live vicariously through Seiss is joyful.

**Alistair Green, Twitter** Comedian Alistair Green is notorious for his neatly observed one-man videos that skewer politicians, male feminists, artificially woke brands and, increasingly, himself.

**Rosie Holt, Twitter** In Holt’s videos she poses as rightwing figures outraged about whatever happens to be in the news. Recently she went viral for pretending to be an MP so convincingly she tricked actual MPs.



Viral success ... Rosie Holt. Photograph: Antonio Olmos/The Observer

**[Stevie Martin, Twitter](#)** Martin makes videos with Lola-Rose Maxwell, in which she becomes increasingly bewildered by various aspects of the modern world. Funnier than I've made it sound.

## Positivity

**[Good News Network, Twitter](#)** If, like me, your Twitter feed feels perfectly calibrated to ruin your emotional resilience, the Good News Network exists to counter that. It only posts happy, fun news stories. None of them are essential, but doesn't the idea of non-essential news sound great?

**[Goodable, Twitter](#)** (*submitted by Ben Marshall, Australia*)  
A great companion account to the Good News Network, delivering happy news only. Particularly great at finding the chinks of light in times of war.

**[Happy Eco News, Instagram](#)** Every day for the past four years, Happy Eco News has posted five hopeful, uplifting stories about the environment. They're not all topical (one recent example was just a description of cassowaries), but it's good, wholesome content nonetheless.

### **Heroic Girls, Twitter** (*submitted by James Vallance, Oxfordshire*)

James says: “Highlighting strong role models for girls, particularly in comics. It’s great to scroll through their tweets to get ideas for my daughter and me to read up on.”



A well of happy thoughts ... Dr Radha Modgil. Photograph: Courtesy of Dr Radha Modgil

**Dr Radha Modgil, Instagram** During the pandemic, Dr Radha took to writing short, helpful posts listing tiny steps that people can take to ease the burden of everything. This practice has continued since the end of lockdown, and Radha remains an undefeated well of useful positivity.

**Good Good Good Co, Instagram** Like the good news Twitter accounts, except the stories are boiled down to their essentials and spread through Instagram, which makes it better somehow.

**Wholesome Memes, Twitter** Try to imagine a joke book where all the punchlines are happy endings. This is Wholesome Memes. There’s still a fighting chance that the whole thing is a big sarcastic joke at our expense, but it feels good anyway.

**Peter Lovatt, Twitter** Author of The Dance Cure, Lovatt is an academic who regularly posts videos of himself dancing with wild abandon. I follow

Peter, and the ease with which his dancing can cheer me up is frightening.

## Miscellany, interesting

**Tommy Winkler, TikTok** There are plenty of food accounts on TikTok, but none radiate the same level of slapdash joy as Winkler's. None of his food looks particularly nice, and all of it is bad for you. Nevertheless, his sheer infectiousness makes him an instant go-to.

**Mr Forge, TikTok** Everyone loves a TikTok account with a purpose, and Mr Forge has the best purpose of all time: can he cook food with superheated molten metal? Spoiler: not really, no.

**Adventures in Jelly, Instagram** (*submitted by Jennifer Cranmer, Dumfries*) Jennifer says: "Caroline collects vintage jelly moulds and makes the most fantastical jellies. She videos them with music sometimes, which is hilarious – these incredible creations jiggling on a plate make me smile every time."

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**Satisfying Soap ASMR, Instagram** In which a woman with a very sharp knife gently slices through various bars of soap. Honestly, one of the most profoundly satisfying things on the internet.

**Salvage Rebuilds UK, Instagram** (*submitted by Chris Shea, Godalming*) Chris says: "Two guys (Rob and Chris) from Kent who buy old cars and fix them up. They love what they do, and it's just very soothing watching them pottering about, having cups of tea and enjoying their work."

**Kitpbs, Instagram** (*submitted by Peter Stubbs, London*)

Peter says this account "does micrographics of kit that runners wore to commemorate personal bests. There's no judgment or sneeriness – everyone

is celebrated equally, whether a super fast 5k runner or someone who just completed their first marathon.”

**[Francis Bourgeois, TikTok](#)** Currently the world’s most famous trainspotter, Bourgeois enjoys tracking down rare rolling stock and then, with the help of a GoPro attached to his head, records his own infectious delight.



Full steam ahead ... Francis Bourgeois. Photograph: Francis Bourgeois/PA

**[Enbiggen, TikTok](#)** The effort that goes into maintaining the Enbiggen TikTok must be phenomenal. It’s a series of beautifully constructed Rube Goldberg machines that, as they unfold, play note-perfect recreations of famous songs. Staggering.

**[The Object, TikTok](#)** If you ever wanted to see closeup what a blueberry looks like when it’s cut with a hot knife, this account of compelling, satisfying macro videos is for you.

**[Beautiful Abandoned Places, Instagram](#)** Exactly what it sounds like – objects and buildings that have outlived human use are revisited and photographed. Eerie and beautiful.

**[Tatsuya Tanaka, Instagram](#)** A miniaturist who makes entire worlds from everyday objects. A recent favourite is the escalator made from a sandwich.



Tatsuya Tanaka's 'Mall of Sandwich'. Photograph: Courtesy of Tatsuya Tanaka

[\*\*Stanley Chow, Instagram\*\*](#) One of the world's most instantly identifiable illustrators displays his wares – and occasionally fan-submitted pictures of him holding a picture of himself for some reason.

[\*\*Yuki Kawai, Instagram\*\*](#) A still, meditative account, where a Zen-inspired artist makes shapes in sand. Instant mindfulness.

## Animals

[\*\*Phoebe the Doodle, Instagram\*\*](#) (*submitted by Ellen, London*)

Unsurprisingly, animals were an enormous hit with readers. Of Phoebe, a photogenic dog, Ellen says: “Have you seen her doing a handstand? It’s hilarious!”

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**Foxes in Love, Instagram** (*submitted by Shelley Thomas, Manchester*)

Shelley says: “The creator produces cartoons of two foxes, which represent him and his partner. It is relatable, wholesome and feelgood and brings a smile to the face every morning it is published.”

**Second Chance Animal Rescue, Facebook** (*submitted by Alan Grieve, Dunfermline*)

A rare diversion to Facebook, for an animal rescue centre. Alan says: “Ena and Frank Conyon, who run the kennels, are the administrators of this joyous page, which celebrates the stories of all the dogs and their new owners.”

**The Asher House, Facebook** (*submitted by Lynette Coleman, Canterbury*)

Lynette says: “Lee Asher rescues all sorts of animals, giving them a wonderful life at his beautiful estate sanctuary in Oregon. He’s an amazing guy with a genuine love for the animals, a huge personality and a sense of humour. And he’s a real good-looking hunk!”

**Woof Woof TV, Instagram** Billing itself as “your one and only source for doggo posts” (legal disclaimer: it is far from the only source), Woof Woof TV is just loads of pictures of dogs. Cute dogs, silly dogs, big dogs, tiny dogs, dogs dressed as vegetables. Please, go crazy.

**Seal Rescue Ireland, Instagram** The official page of a centre that saves, heals and releases sick and injured seals. However cute you think this account might be, triple it and you still won’t be close.



Seal the deal ... the sort of content you might find on Seal Rescue Ireland.  
Photograph: Courtesy of Seal Rescue Ireland

#### [Anne Louise Avery, Twitter](#) (*submitted by Chris Murphy, Chesterfield*)

Chris says: "Anne's beautifully written, daily Old Fox short stories touch on current events, but also provide some welcome escapism and brightness in otherwise gloomy times."

[Dogs Working From Home, Instagram](#) If you like looking at photos of dogs looking at laptops, some of them while wearing glasses, then this Instagram account will give you what you want to an almost scary degree of accuracy. The account doesn't update frequently, but it's usually a doozy when it does.

## Nature and travel

[Old Time Hawkey, TikTok](#) If you have ever dreamed of running away from this hellish world and starting again with nothing, Old Time Hawkey is basically an instruction manual. He cooks food on open fires. He goes ice fishing. He walks through snowy woodlands with his dog. Instantly relaxing.

[Cabins in the Woods, Instagram](#) Incidentally, while you're planning to run away, here is an Instagram account full of the most beautifully designed

woodland cabins you will ever find. You could lose hours here, in both admiration and jealousy.

**[Asa Steinars, Instagram](#)** Some of you might find that this account is a little too influencer-y – Steinars does like to position herself in the centre of most of her photos – but the appeal lies in all the spectacular Icelandic landscapes. This is where we should all run away to.

**[Tulips in Holland, Instagram](#)** During the winter months, Tulips in Holland is a haven of springtime. You'll find loads and loads of pictures of tulips here; some closeup, some in formation, all beautiful.

**[Anne Par Avion, Instagram](#)** Photos of landscapes and architecture so well framed they occasionally threaten to stray into Wes Anderson territory, in the sense that Wes Anderson movies make you want to go on holiday.

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**[Victor Cheng, Instagram](#)** More Wes Anderson-y photography, except Cheng lives in Hong Kong. All his shots are of teeming cities, with a speciality in absurdly tall residential skyscrapers. Beautiful.

## Miscellany, weird

**[Mondo Mascots, Instagram](#)** (*submitted by Jay, Cardiff*)

Jay says: “An almost-daily venture into the many absurd, bizarre or downright adorable Japanese mascots out there. For example, meet Tokitama, a hairy-legged egg wearing a fried egg on its head – a mascot for a shopping street.”

**[One Minute Briefs, Twitter](#)** (*submitted by Ciaran McKeon, Dublin*)

Ciaran says: “Each day, they post a daily ‘brief’ for anything, from

paperclips to dog food. You are then challenged to post your idea to advertise that item, and it should take you only one minute.”

**Spurs Trophies, Twitter** (*submitted by Tim, Hertfordshire*)

Tim says: “Who wouldn’t want to wake up every day to a reminder of how long it is since Spurs won a trophy? Currently 5,132 days.”

**Retronaut, Twitter** Just a bunch of fascinating old pictures. A woman on a stove. A man with a cat in his beard. The shark from Jaws. Tina Turner. A tilted bus. There’s no pattern to them, but they’re all excellent.

**Postcard from the Past, Twitter** A series of old postcards. What makes this account brilliant is that each card is accompanied by some of the messages on the back. My favourite? A Dartmoor postcard, with the message: “Uncle Tony’s A NAUGHTY BOY.”



Bob and I hated it.

Happy holidays ... memories of a trip to Weymouth from Postcard from the Past. Photograph: Postcard from the Past

**70s Dinner Party, Twitter** A collection of genuinely monstrous food photographs from 1970s recipe books, including Frankfurter stew, illuminated gelatine, and something called “celery-stuffed celery”. It is amazing we’re not all dead.

**Hydraulic Press Channel, Instagram** An account where a mysterious user destroys things with his hydraulic press: a pumpkin; a Minion; a tub of glitter. Not only is it immensely fun, but it also feels suitably nihilistic for 2022.

**Actual Heathcliff Comics, Twitter** All this account does is post real Heathcliff comic strips, in a bid to show the world what an absurdly inward-looking receptacle for bizarre anti-jokes the character has become. It is astonishing.

**Moldogaa, TikTok** The greatest person on the entire internet, this woman spent months attempting to sing Louis Armstrong's What a Wonderful World one letter at a time, to the obvious detriment of her mental health. She must be celebrated by everyone.

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## [Japan](#)

# Why are Tokyo residents saying sayōnara to Japan's capital?

Population of world's most populous city fell in 2021 for first time in more than 25 years, thanks in part to the pandemic



Giant Torii gate near lake Chuzenji in Nikkō in Tochigi prefecture.  
Photograph: Leonid Andronov/Alamy



[Justin McCurry](#) in Tokyo

Mon 14 Mar 2022 21.00 EDTLast modified on Mon 14 Mar 2022 21.16 EDT

When Kazuya Kobayashi decided to leave [Tokyo](#) to pursue his dream of running his own ramen restaurant, Sano was an obvious choice. As well as being the spiritual home of [Japanese cricket](#), the town in Tochigi prefecture is famed for its ramen shops, many of which are struggling to find successors.

“The [coronavirus](#) came along, and my wife is medically vulnerable, so it seemed like the right time to move,” said Kobayashi, who hopes to open his own restaurant next year.

The 40-year-old is not alone in wanting to bid *sayōnara* to the world’s most populous city, a megalopolis of 13.9 million people with a GDP bigger than that of the Netherlands.

The capital’s population fell in 2021 for the first time in more than a quarter of a century, with a net loss of 48,592 from a year earlier, according to a recent metropolitan government estimate.

The number of people seeking advice on starting a new life beyond Tokyo's concrete sprawl rose dramatically last year – a trend experts say has been accelerated by the coronavirus pandemic and the advent of teleworking.

A government project launched in 2015 to [revitalise Japan's regions](#) is bearing fruit, according to Hiroshi Takahashi, chairman of the Hometown Return Support Centre, a nonprofit that helps people relocate from the Tokyo region to rural areas.

The centre received almost 50,000 consultations last year from people hoping to move from greater Tokyo, more than 70% of them from people younger than 50. The most popular choice of new home was Shizuoka – a prefecture on the Pacific coast that can be reached by bullet train in about an hour – but second place went to Fukuoka prefecture, 550 miles south-west of the capital.

Although Japanese companies have given [remote working](#) a cautious welcome, the pandemic proved it was possible for people to limit their time in the office and still stay productive.



People on the famed Shibuya scramble crossing in Tokyo in January 2022.  
Photograph: Kiichior Sato/AP

But according to Takahashi, would-be emigrants from big cities cite quality of life, childcare services and the cost of living more frequently than teleworking in explaining their desire to start a new life in the regions.

Changes in Japan's economy had encouraged more people to leave the capital, he said. "During the postwar years, people dreamed of living in Tokyo," he said. "[Japan](#) achieved its economic transformation, but in the 30 years since the bubble burst, life is more uncertain and Tokyo has lost some of its attraction. Now more people dream of leaving."

Takahashi believes the "goodbye Tokyo" trend will continue long after the pandemic has ended. "In the past, work was all that mattered, but now families are thinking about their living environment, too. People's values have changed."

That view is supported by a recent cabinet office survey, which found that almost half of people in their 20s living in central Tokyo said they were interested in moving out.

Sano has capitalised on its association with Japan's favourite comfort food to attract prospective chefs like Kobayashi. Two years ago, it launched a "[ramen](#) migration project" that provides training in everything from making noodles to management and accountancy. The local government also offers financial assistance and helps match newly qualified chefs with ramen shops.

"I worked in restaurant kitchens in Tokyo and have always wanted to run my own place, so when I saw the ramen project on the TV I decided to apply," said Kobayashi, 40, whose wife is expecting their first child. "I spent 15 years in Tokyo and liked it there, but the cost of living is much lower here and people come from all over to eat Sano ramen, so it makes sense financially."



The Nikkō shrine in Tochigi prefecture, a Unesco world heritage site, in 2013. Photograph: Christian Kober/Alamy

Sano began offering incentives to new residents in an attempt to arrest depopulation, according to Mitsuru Ozeki, an official in the town's emigration division.

"We wanted to find a way to set Sano apart from other places and its connection with ramen was the obvious way to do that," Ozeki said. "We offer incentives to young people to buy homes here, and there are other financial benefits. The rents are low, the air is clean and the food is delicious."

Last April, Gakuto Nishimura, a born-and-bred Tokyoite, quit his job in mobile phone sales and left for the mountainous idyll of Chichibu, a town of 60,000 people a two-hour drive from Tokyo.

"I'd been thinking about changing jobs, and the pandemic pushed me into making a decision," said Nishimura, whose interest in Chichibu had been piqued by its appearances in anime films.

Chichibu officials say they are receiving a growing number of inquiries from young people. To encourage them to take the plunge, the town provides cash

to renovate unoccupied homes or to buy a car, and the chance to live in a local home for up to a week to get a feel for life there.

Nishimura, 24, now organises events targeting other Tokyoites who are thinking of following suit.

“I tell them about the nature here, and the low rents, but also how much easier it is for young people to move around these days, as many of them are in jobs they can do remotely,” said Nishimura, whose apartment is significantly larger, and cheaper, than his old place in Tokyo.

“I have no regrets about leaving Tokyo and, even though it’s my home town, I have no intention of going back.”

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Interview

## I spent two years squatting in the Musée d'Orsay – the great Sophie Calle on her ‘lost’ days

Benoît Loiseau



‘There were dead cats and noises and no light’ ... Calle in her Paris home with her stuffed albino hedgehog. Photograph: Ed Alcock/The Guardian

The French artist, famous for following strangers and photographing people asleep, has a show at the Musée d’Orsay – based on her squatting days in the once decrepit building. Our writer meets her for coffee with her cat

Tue 15 Mar 2022 02.00 EDT Last modified on Thu 17 Mar 2022 06.26 EDT

When I press the buzzer of what looks like an old steel warehouse in the Parisian suburb of Malakoff, a faint voice responds. “To the garden,” it instructs. I push a heavy metal door and step inside a dark hallway. “Over here,” the voice calls. “Can you see me?” The voice belongs to Sophie Calle, one of the most influential artists in the world today, a woman whose four-decade career spans video, writing, photography and strange rule-based scenarios, often featuring detective-like attempts to get closer to people and places. Her work is populated by fortune-tellers, strippers, lovers, heartbreakers, sleepers, dying family members and blind people discussing their vision of beauty.

In a well-tended back yard, Calle greets me nonchalantly, a pair of oversized tinted glasses perched on her nose. She gestures towards the sliding windows leading to her home studio, housed in a building she remodelled in the early 1980s with her friends, the artists Annette Messager and the late Christian Boltanski. A black cat she calls Milou tries to catch up with her glazed orange leather boots. I follow them inside where, to my surprise, I find myself suddenly being stared at by a menagerie of stuffed animals. Each specimen is named after one of the artist’s loved ones: a tall giraffe bust for her dead mother Monique; a green monkey for the writer Hervé Guibert; a teeth-baring wolf for her gallerist, Emmanuel Perrotin. Membership of this exclusive club is, apparently, much sought after.

But there’s something else Calle wants to show me. In a corner of her studio, she opens an old suitcase filled with chipped red enamelled plaques. They once served as room numbers at the Hotel d’Orsay, part of the old railway station before it was turned into one of Paris’s best-loved museums. The 68-year-old artist salvaged them in the late 1970s while squatting in a room of

the then disused hotel. Over the course of two years, she roamed its innards collecting relics, from rusty keys and customer records to cryptic messages addressed to a Beckettian figure named Oddo.



‘It was a place where I could go and be alone’ ... Calle in her d’Orsay squat in 1979. Photograph: Richard Baltauss

“I just took whatever came to hand,” says Calle. “And I kept everything. I don’t think I ever said to myself, ‘Hey, that’s going to be useful!’ That seems impossible. The plaques were pretty and lively. But the notebooks with the water meter readings? I don’t think I ever thought, ‘Well, I know what I’m going to do with those!'”

What she has now done with all these relics is return them to their original home. This week, the Musée d’Orsay – otherwise known for its collection of impressionist and post-impressionist masterpieces – is opening a solo exhibition chronicling Calle’s formative years as a non-paying guest. Titled *Les Fantômes d’Orsay*, or *The Ghosts of Orsay*, the show features about 300 items: a 19th-century chiming doorbell and a Haussmann-like lock with a copper handle rub shoulders with black and white pictures of a young and shy-looking Calle sitting on a filthy mattress, as well as recent eerie photographs of the empty museum taken during lockdown.

“I was lost,” says Calle of her squatting days, while sipping a coffee. “I had just come back to Paris after being away for seven years.” She had briefly studied sociology at the city’s Nanterre University, then an activist hotbed in the wake of the May 1968 protests, but quickly lost interest. Her oncologist-cum-collector father Bob had pledged to financially support her as long as she passed her exams. So she persuaded her professor – Jean Baudrillard, whose theory of simulacra inspired *The Matrix* – to mark her papers favourably while she went off travelling the world.



‘I took what came to hand and kept everything’ ... room numbers from the old hotel. Photograph: François Deladerrière

“He put my name on other students’ papers so I could travel and still get my degree,” she says, bringing her cup to her lips. “Merci, Jean!” She never bothered to collect the degree she *thinks* she earned. “I’m pretty sure I have a master’s in sociology,” she says. “It was never any use to me. I never intended to be a sociologist.”

Calle returned to Paris at the age of 25, not knowing what to do with herself. “So I started following strangers in the street. I thought they would take me to new and unexpected places.” This became her way of reconnecting with the city – a method she complemented with photography, in a bid to please her father (who approved of the medium) and thereby secure her monthly

allowance. “It wasn’t so much the people that interested me,” she says. “It was Paris.”

At this point, Calle suddenly exclaims: “Wait! I’m drinking your coffee!” She offers to make me another, but I tell her I don’t mind hers, despite the sugar. “Just don’t stir!” she advises.

During one such expedition, she came across a door on the left bank of the Seine. “I don’t remember what it looked like. I can’t find any photos. But I imagine it must have been very small. I like small doors in big places. I always find them quite moving.” It was connected to the hotel of the former Gare d’Orsay, a beaux-arts building that had fallen out of favour.

“So I walked in,” says the artist, who found herself inside an empire of dust. “The atmosphere was a bit disturbing. It was totally abandoned. There were dead cats and noises and there was no light. It was a gigantic, totally empty place. I took it slowly.” She remembers ascending a split staircase and, over several days, proceeded to explore its five storeys and 370 damp rooms covered in decrepit wallpaper. The latter has been recreated for the exhibition, but in a modernised version.

Calle set up camp in room 501. “It was a place where I could go and be alone to do what I wanted.” When she wasn’t curled up with a book on a bug-infested couch, or photographing dead cats elsewhere in the building, she would go for a twirl under the gilded ceilings of the ballroom. “It was an amazing ballroom and had been left intact. At the time, I had loved a play by Robert Wilson in which dancers spun around like dervishes. I said to myself that I wanted to join a troupe, so I decided to practise spinning.” At dusk, unable to cope with the dark and the insects, she would walk back to her father’s place.



Case study ... Calle in her garden with the suitcase of relics. Photograph: Ed Alcock/The Guardian

Rather than a period of confusion, Calle's Orsay days were where she found herself and truly came into her own. In February 1979, one of her regular stalking sessions famously led her to Venice where, armed with a Leica camera and a blond bobbed wig, she shadowed a man for 13 days. This resulted in a book, *Suite Vénitienne*, which was later converted into gallery-based works: surveillance-like reports, creepy annotated maps and strangely seductive black and white photographs imbued with a voyeuristic quality.

Back in Paris, she recruited a variety of people to sleep in her bed at her father's place. For eight consecutive days, 28 participants – her mother, neighbours, distant acquaintances – lined up to donate eight hours of their sleep while Calle photographed them. One sleeper's husband – a critic and curator – was so taken by the project he invited Calle to show the resulting 176 photographs and 33 texts at the Paris Biennial, at the Musée d'Art Moderne. "It's he who decided that I was an artist," she says. "I had only pretended I wanted to be a photographer so that my father would lodge me." Visibly amused, she adds: "The day I came to hang my pictures was the first time I ever stepped inside that museum!"

The day I found an architect on the fifth floor, I knew it was the end. I left and never went back

But later that year, when she returned to her squat from a summer holiday, she found a building site at its entrance. She walked straight in, greeting the builders confidently, and retired to her quarters. “They were invading my territory,” she remembers. Little did she know that her precious hideout was being turned into what would become a world-class museum. “The day I found an architect on the fifth floor, I knew it was the end. I left and never went back.”

When I suggest that, appropriately, themes of hospitality dominate her early works, her smile fades into a frown. “Non!” she says, as Milou starts chewing on my pen, which I take as a warning. “The obsession is rather with absence: an empty hotel, rooms in which there are no customers, following a stranger who isn’t really there, and then people who die, people who leave.”

This is a reminder that Calle came of age in the heyday of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, whose theory-filled seminars about *le manque* (“lack”) and *la pulsion de mort* (“death drive”) dominated Paris’s cultural life. Growing up in the 14th arrondissement, she enjoyed spending time at Montparnasse cemetery – the final resting place of the French intelligentsia, from Charles Baudelaire to Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Both her parents are now buried there but Calle, unable to secure a spot, got herself a place in Bolinas, California, instead. “The cemetery was the green space of our neighbourhood,” she says. “We lived 100 metres away and my school was on the other side. So that was the first place in Paris I appropriated.”

Just as Calle is telling me that she’s now working on a project involving her will, a loud miaow erupts from somewhere in the background. As I scan the room for Milou, Calle tells me the noise was in fact a phone notification that sounds whenever he leaves through his app-monitored flap. “We didn’t want to play with him,” she shrugs, “so he left.”



Beaux-arts masterpiece ... the old station and hotel became the Musée d'Orsay. Photograph: Stéphane de Sakutin/AFP/Getty Images

At the Venice Biennale in 2007, Calle received both praise and criticism for showing an 11-minute film that documented the final moments of her terminally ill mother's life. In a corner of her deathbed, the artist had placed a video camera that filmed for days. "I wanted to be with her," Calle says. "I said to myself that I had to be there *all* the time, in case she had something to ask me before she died – something, a story, to tell me."

Changing the tape every hour became Calle's way of reclaiming the time she had left with her mother – a way of taming death. "Instead of counting the hours she had left to live, the tape became my obsession. The time passing had become that of the cassette and no longer that of her life. So I could go out without being afraid – I felt like I was always with her. I think, for her too, she felt I was always there. She told me she liked the presence of the camera."

Much like the Orsay objects, Calle never intended to use the footage, until the US curator Robert Storr – then in charge of the biennial – got wind of it and suggested making a film. "I said no," explains the artist who feared the project would be too messy and unfocused. "It was out of the question." But as Storr insisted, she gave in. "What really intrigued me was that I couldn't

detect death,” Calle says. “It was invisible. It was elusive. That intrigued me.”

When I ask what kind of ghost Calle would like to be, she pauses then says: “Maybe a cat at my friends’ house. A cat that hears and understands everything. But in any case – a ghost who can spy.”

Les Fantômes d’Orsay is at the Musée d’Orsay, Paris, until 12 June.

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## 2022.03.15 - Opinion

- Britons have shown clear support for Ukrainian refugees. Why can't ministers follow suit?
- Britain's consumer champions are on fiery form – it must really be time to worry
- Women need to see themselves in politics. It's the only way change will come to Zimbabwe
- As the ocean industrial revolution gains pace the need for protection is urgent

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## [OpinionUkraine](#)

# **Britons want to welcome Ukrainian refugees into their homes. Here's how the plan can work**

[Enver Solomon](#)

The ‘homes for Ukraine’ scheme is ambitious, but refugees will need a lot of support to keep them safe and well once here



‘In one area the UK’s approach remains far more restrictive: the insistence on visas.’ Ukrainian refugees in Brussels. Photograph: Thierry Monasse/Getty Images

Tue 15 Mar 2022 02.00 EDT Last modified on Tue 15 Mar 2022 10.06 EDT

As we watch the conflict in Ukraine unfold, many people are struggling with a sense of their own powerlessness. They have a fierce urge to do something to help. [Recent polling](#) shows that the public believes the UK government should be doing more to welcome Ukrainian refugees. It’s clear our country

has been moved and wants to help those whose lives have been turned upside down by the conflict.

The government is now attempting to harness this wave of compassion and sympathy with its [“homes for Ukraine” scheme](#). On the face of it, the plan is bold and ambitious. Any person who wants to take a Ukrainian refugee into their home will be able to do so as long as they can name them and they have a visa. The echoes of David Cameron’s [“big society”](#) are impossible to miss.

The scheme certainly has great potential to bring people face to face with the experience of refugees and support them. It’s already happening in Poland, Germany and other countries in Europe where Ukrainians don’t need visas to enter and are being granted permission to stay for up to three years with full rights and entitlements. The public welcoming refugees into their homes in this way and on this scale feels unprecedented.

However, in one area the UK’s approach remains far more restrictive than that of our neighbours: the insistence on visas. The government is relying on what is effectively a managed migration route to respond to a humanitarian crisis. This inevitably means paperwork and bureaucracy are being put before people’s urgent needs. Imagine a child who has been separated from their mother and father having to navigate a visa application to reach safety in the UK.

Despite the failure to waive the visa requirements, some Ukrainians will be able to get to the UK under the new scheme. Ensuring their safety and wellbeing when they arrive will be vital. Even with the best of intentions on all sides, there are potentially many things that could go wrong which need to be addressed in advance. Sponsors may not always be sensitive or reasonable in their expectations – we all know stories about flat shares, housemates or landlords that don’t work out. Living with someone you’ve only just met can be difficult for both sides, for all the joy it can also bring. There are also risks that refugees will end up in inappropriate or at worst exploitative conditions.

The government has said that those offering accommodation will be vetted, and it's imperative appropriate checks are put in place. At the Refugee Council, we are particularly concerned that people coming here who have already had their lives shattered will not have access to housing benefits. If the relationship with the sponsor breaks down and they are unable to pay for private rented accommodation without welfare support there is a real risk they could end up homeless, which would be devastating. Allowing them to access housing benefit would also give them the opportunity to move into their own home if they choose to in the longer term. I understand there are some Ukrainians who have arrived already and who are keen to do this. If the government is refusing to facilitate this, there must be an alternative safety net so no Ukrainian ends up sleeping on the streets.

The women and children arriving from [Ukraine](#) will also have specific needs given the traumatic experiences they have been through. They should all be given an initial health check and be able to register with a GP. Children will need to get into schools or childcare as quickly as possible too. So the government needs to ensure that doctors, schools, mental health and counselling services have the resources to respond to these needs. There must be a standard public service offer to any Ukrainian regardless of where they are housed in the country, and access to a specialist support worker. The programme should certainly not be delivered on the cheap.

We should also not forget the needs of refugee communities already in this country. Many refugees from Afghanistan are still stuck in hotels without longer-term accommodation. There are also about 25,000 people in the asylum system having to cope in basic, sometimes very cramped, hotel rooms. While our attention is understandably on the plight of Ukrainians let's not ignore the fact that the asylum system needs to be properly resourced so that claims can be resolved more quickly and people can be housed in accommodation that meets their needs. At present a Ukrainian arriving through the asylum system could have to wait months and months to be granted permission to stay.

It is also deeply ironic that at this time when the public so badly want to show their support to refugees from Ukraine, there is legislation before parliament that seeks to criminalise and repel any refugee who reaches our shores. The government's nationality and borders bill is a cruel and

misguided attack on refugee rights. Now more than ever is the time to strengthen our commitment to welcoming refugees from all parts of the world, not seeking to slam our door in their face.

The outpouring of public support is remarkable. The challenge now is to harness it in the best possible way, ensure all Ukrainians have a genuinely warm, safe and secure welcome, and use this moment to rethink our approach as a country to all refugees, to strengthen our commitment to refugee rights rather than weaken it.

- Enver Solomon is chief executive of the Refugee Council
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**Opinion****Cost of living crisis**

## **Britain's consumer champions are on fiery form – it must really be time to worry**

[Zoe Williams](#)



From Martin Lewis schooling the chancellor to Richard Murphy on energy profits, financial experts are showing how essential they are as the cost-of-living crisis hits



His predictions were absolutely stark ... Martin Lewis. Photograph: Linda Nylind/The Guardian

Tue 15 Mar 2022 03.00 EDT Last modified on Tue 15 Mar 2022 07.03 EDT

Into the mix of the spiralling energy cost crisis came two opinions that were fascinating for different reasons. The first was from the radical accountant [Richard Murphy](#), a professor of accounting practice at Sheffield University Management School, who did a breakdown of energy costs, trying to get to the bottom of why prices were rising so precipitously. I assumed that [his thoughts would contain a lot of graphs](#), which I would fast cease to comprehend the minute they stopped being pie charts, but in fact it was devastatingly simple. Only 36% of “a typical bill” comprises the actual cost of energy, the rest being tax, delivery, billing, customer services, environmental schemes and profit. So even if the price of gas doubles, triples, goes wild, only just over a third of your bill should double, triple or go wild, the other costs being static, give or take inflation. Murphy posed a second question, why should people who get their energy from renewables suffer the same hikes? He ran some speculative numbers on how much of your new bill would go towards energy company profits. He could find no explanation for the coming price rises, beyond exploitation.

The other opinion was from [Martin Lewis](#), the founder of [Money Saving Expert](#), a far less political figure than Murphy. It takes a certain sort of sober person to bring his amount of seriousness and purpose to making sure you're on exactly the right mobile phone tariff. Speaking to the Today programme last week, he was absolutely fiery. He would not stand by and listen to a Conservative minister blaming the war in Ukraine for the cost of living crisis. He would not accept that anyone could weather the coming squeeze with a bit of planning and tweaking. His predictions were absolutely stark – without serious intervention by the chancellor, poverty was set to become so severe that civil unrest would follow.

When financial experts are this interesting, it is time to really worry. But, also, thank God for interesting accountants dragging corporate flam-flam and political diversion tactics back to reality.

- Zoe Williams is a Guardian columnist
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[\*\*Opinion\*\*](#)[\*\*Global development\*\*](#)

## **Women need to see themselves in politics. It's the only way change will come to Zimbabwe**

[Fadzayi Mahere](#)

As a young woman in politics I've experienced prejudice – audiences ask about my marital status instead of my policies. But we must continue to step up for the next generation



Fadzayi Mahere: 'Once people see you as a leader of integrity, they start to see beyond gender.' Photograph: Courtesy of Fadzayi Mahere

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### [About this content](#)

Tue 15 Mar 2022 03.00 EDT Last modified on Wed 16 Mar 2022 06.25 EDT

It is fair to say there has been reasonable progress for women in political leadership and decision-making in the past three decades. Yet, 27 years after the [Beijing declaration](#) at the world conference on women, adopted by 189 countries and seen as the key moment for radical change in gender equality, too much remains the same.

Since 2015, women in almost every country have had the right to vote, at least in theory. The world has seen impressive female leaders including [Ellen Johnson Sirleaf](#), Mia Mottley, Angela Merkel and Jacinda Ardern. A few countries, such as Finland, even have cabinets dominated by women. These achievements have in large part happened because of measures invoked since the Beijing conference.

However, there has been very slow progress in other areas. In [Zimbabwe](#), women remain under-represented in party politics, in parliament and in cabinet.



In Zimbabwe, women remain under-represented in party politics, in parliament and in cabinet. Photograph: AFP/Getty

Deep-seated patriarchal and political violence are sustained by legacies of masculinised nationalist politics that helped liberate Zimbabwe from equally patriarchal colonial rule. Masculinised nationalism finds powerful expression through Zanu-PF, the ruling party for more than four decades.

Women make up less than 50% of parliamentarians, yet gender parity is a constitutional requirement. Since independence in 1980, there has not been a female president. The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission only registered five female voters in one of the country's biggest provinces, Mashonaland Central last year. [Women](#) are excluded from political processes, to the detriment of society.

The mere fact of being a woman does not give one the right to lead. Both men and women must be held to the same standards of non-patriarchal values, integrity, accountability, transparency; these are all key components of ethical leadership, regardless of gender. We should focus on choosing leaders who connect with people, drive positive social change, focus on uplifting their communities.

In my journey as a relatively young woman in politics, I have observed and experienced prejudices and stereotypes. Sometimes, when I open my mouth to speak, instead of engaging with the content, my audience will ask: “But why aren’t you married?” Instead of taking issue with the government and fighting the system, I’m told I should get married and have children. Some sexualise my appearance and, rather than focus on the substance of a press conference, comment on my face or hair. Then there is cyberbullying, trolling and fake news.

One of the main things to increase women’s democratic participation is seeing other women in leadership – the role-model effect

Opponents mount disinformation campaigns that are easily sexualised in the political context.

I deal with it by choosing not to be a victim. I am not the sort of politician who is going to sing every day about how everything is so unfair. I focus on what I can control: my competence and my delivery. It takes time to gain public trust. But once people see you as a leader of integrity – that you are transparent, accountable and prepared to accept criticism with a measure of humility – they start to see beyond gender.

One of the main things to increase women’s democratic participation is seeing other women in leadership – the role-model effect. Women comprise an embarrassingly low 14% of councillors in Zimbabwe. This lack of representation can lead to apathy, as women fail to see themselves represented. Having women stand as examples of public leadership and investing in the next generation of female leaders creates models in the public imagination and pushes more women to get involved. It builds courage.

I remain optimistic about the future of Zimbabwe. Despite the present challenges of patriarchy, poverty and corruption, it is a country with all the ingredients necessary for success. But people, women especially, must register to vote. When the election comes in 2023, they must elect non-

patriarchal women and men who will address the gender disparities in Zimbabwe's political, social and economic realms.

Apathy aids the patriarchal, anti-people status quo. Voting is the most powerful non-violent tool we have to bring an end to dictatorship and win change for Zimbabwe.

- Fadzayi Mahere is an advocate at the high court of Zimbabwe, spokesperson for Citizens' Coalition for Change and a leading activist in getting women to register to vote

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## Seascape: the state of our oceans

# As the ocean industrial revolution gains pace the need for protection is urgent

Douglas J McCauley

With the growth of the ‘blue economy’, the UN must act decisively to protect our shared seas – or industry will decide their fate for us



The New England seamount chain in the north Atlantic Ocean is home to forests of deep-sea corals, such as this spiral coral, and is a migratory route for endangered right whales. Photograph: NOAA Office of Ocean Exploration and Research/AP

Seascape: the state of our oceans is supported by



### About this content

Tue 15 Mar 2022 03.45 EDT Last modified on Thu 17 Mar 2022 12.35 EDT

The ocean is often seen as the last wild frontier: a vast and empty blue wilderness where waves, whales and albatrosses rule. This is no longer true. Unnoticed by many, a new industrial revolution is unfolding in our seas.

The last several decades have seen [exponential growth](#) in new marine industries. This includes expansion of offshore oil and gas, but also exponential growth of offshore renewables, such as wind and tidal energy.

Aquaculture, or farming underwater, is one of the [world's fastest growing food sectors](#). Fishing occurs across [more than half of our ocean](#). More than [1m km](#) of undersea data cables crisscross the high seas. And our ocean highways carry about [1,600%](#) more cargo on ships than they did in the 1980s.

### [Marine aquaculture production reached 58m tonnes in 2019](#)

New industries are also lining up to join this booming ocean economy: companies are jockeying [to start ocean mining](#) in the Pacific; [new experimental fisheries](#) are targeting deep ocean life previously thought

impossible to catch; and [geoengineering ventures](#) are looking to operate in the ocean.

The onset of this marine industrial revolution puts into context the urgency of a [new UN treaty being finalised](#) this week that will dictate the future of the single biggest piece of our ocean and our planet: the high seas.

Encompassing all waters 200 nautical miles beyond nations' shorelines, the high seas cover two-thirds of the ocean. Uniquely, this vast expanse belongs to us all.

Unfortunately, sharing hasn't worked out well. Fishery resources are monopolised by a few wealthy actors. Approximately [97% of the trackable industrial fishing](#) on the high seas is controlled by wealthy nations, with 86% of this fishing attributable to just five countries. Some of our most lucrative and nutritionally important high seas fish populations are in decline.

Biodiversity on the high seas is ecologically important, diverse, unique – but also fragile and increasingly threatened by the explosion in marine industry. Many [great whale](#) species have been driven to the brink of extinction by lethal interactions with the fishing and shipping industries as well as the legacy of whaling. Even [ocean snails](#) have been declared endangered due to the risks posed by deep-sea mining.

One high seas region in the Pacific deserving of protection hosts an ancient undersea mountain chain whose peaks rise up from the deep where they are adorned with crowns of golden corals, some [more than 4,000 years old](#), and flanked by schools of jewel-like endemic fish species found nowhere else on Earth. This same area is threatened by [bottom trawling](#) and ocean mining.

The UN treaty being negotiated in New York provides hope for creating new tools to more intelligently plan out this explosive growth in the “blue economy” and reverse at least some of these negative trends. One historic element of the treaty would be the opportunity to set up high seas marine protected areas.

Nations from around the world have already joined scientists to back a commitment to protect [30% of our ocean by 2030](#). Unfortunately, we are terribly behind. At best, [8% of the world's oceans](#) are protected. To get to 30%, and to make such a system ecologically representative, we will need to establish high seas protected areas.

Inaction means industry will decide the fate of the high seas

The treaty is also an opportunity to [promote climate resilience](#). Networks of high seas protected areas could serve as stepping stones for climate stressed species attempting to escape ocean warming.

Today, a mosaic of more than 20 organisations hold different slivers of responsibility for our increasingly busy high seas. A lot slips through the cracks. In our rapidly and haphazardly developing oceans, it is as if we created departments of sanitation, roadworks and water but never quite got around to electing a mayor to bring it all together.

As the marine industrial revolution advances and our ocean grow busier, solutions for high seas management slip further away. Inaction means industry will decide the fate of the high seas for the world, instead of the other way around.

The ocean provides about half of the world's oxygen, nutrition for billions of people and trillions of dollars in jobs and revenue – it is our fate, as much as anything else, that is being decided by this treaty.

*Douglas J McCauley is a professor of ocean science at the University of California Santa Barbara and the director of the Benioff Ocean Initiative*

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This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/mar/15/as-the-ocean-industrial-revolution-gains-pace-the-need-for-protection-is-urgent>

## 2022.03.15 - Around the world

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## [Ethiopia](#)

# **Video of armed men burning man alive in western Ethiopia sparks outrage**

Eleven people, including nine ethnic Tigrayans, were killed on 3 March in the Benishangul-Gumuz region



An Amhara Fano militia fighter in 2021. According to researchers, the men in the video spoke Amharic and some were from the militia group.  
Photograph: Solan Kolli/AFP/Getty Images

*[Emmanuel Akinwotu](#)*

Tue 15 Mar 2022 01.30 EDT Last modified on Wed 16 Mar 2022 01.09 EDT

A video posted on social media [showing armed men burning a man to death in western Ethiopia](#) has drawn condemnation and renewed fear over increasing horrific incidents of ethnic violence.

Eleven people, including nine ethnic Tigrayans, were killed on 3 March in the Ayisid Kebele of Metekel zone, in the Benishangul-Gumuz region where

waves of ethnic violence over the last year have killed hundreds of people.

Ten of the people were shot dead while the 11th, a Tigrayan man, was burnt alive according to the [Ethiopia](#) Human Rights Commission (EHRC). The commission said the “extra-judicial killings” were carried out by Ethiopian forces and other armed groups according to its investigations.

In clips from the graphic five-minute video which emerged on social media on Saturday, more than 50 armed men, including from the Ethiopian army, are seen carrying a man in plainclothes towards a charred, burnt out heap, where it appears people had already been burned.

After lobbing insults at him, they throw him on to the heap, adding branches, wood and grass to reignite the fire. According to researchers, the men spoke Amharic and some are thought to be from the Amhara militia group, Fanos, a regional ethnic militia group that has been fighting alongside Ethiopian forces according to several reports, during a bloody, on-going conflict between Ethiopia and the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front, in the north of the country.

In a statement on Sunday the EHRC said, “the act of burning bodies and a person into death was perpetrated by members of government security forces and the involvement of other people and the action was an extra-judicial killing.”

The killings happened after government forces and other armed groups responded to attacks that occurred the day before, when 20 government security force men and three civilians were killed by militants in the restive area. The following day, government forces conducted widespread searches, and intercepted a bus full of either Tigrayans who had just been freed from detention.

The Tigrayans were accused of aiding the militants who carried out the attack, eyewitnesses told the EHRC. “You are the ones who provided the information (to the gunmen)” the Tigrayans were told, and were then shot dead, alongside two others, eyewitnesses said. Another Tigrayan found hiding in a government security vehicle nearby was then taken away and

burned alive, recorded in the footage that has since sparked widespread outrage and demands for accountability in Ethiopia.

A war that began in November 2020, when Nobel prize winner and prime minister Abiy Ahmed launched a military offensive against the TPLF, has further exploded historic, regional and ethnic divisions in Ethiopia. Forces from Amhara and Afar in Ethiopia, as well as historic foe Eritrea, have been involved in the conflict. Mass atrocities along ethnic lines have taken place on all sides, yet many are committed by Ethiopian aligned forces.

According to William Davison, a senior analyst on Ethiopia at Crisis Group, the “horrifying video” fits a pattern of incidents in recent years where Tigrayan citizens have been targeted in Ethiopia and blamed for being involved in plots to undermine the state.

“Accompanying the civil war in northern Ethiopia has been a broader suspicion of Tigrayans for supporting Tigray region’s armed resistance, which has led to persecution of that group. There have been other incidents in recent years of mob violence against Tigrayans. So the fact that these Tigrayans in Metekel have been accused and summarily executed does fit a pattern,” he said.

“Metekel Zone in Benishangul-Gumuz region has experienced serious intercommunal and insurgent-counterinsurgent violence for a number of years,” he added.

Government and regional forces have been deployed in the Benishangul-Gumuz region since unarmed groups, suspected to be made up of ethnic Gumuz people in Metekel, targeted government officials and security forces, as well as other ethnic minorities.

The region was already host to more than 70,000 Sudanese and South Sudanese refugees and more than 500,000 internally displaced Ethiopians. More than 20,000 refugees have since fled to other areas, according to the UN.

In response to the video of the burning, Ethiopia's government said on Saturday: "A horrific and inhumane act was recently committed" and vowed to bring the perpetrators to justice.

"Regardless of their origin or identity, the government will take legal action against those responsible for this gross and inhumane act." Yet rights groups have accused the government of failing to adequately investigate alleged abuses by its troops during the conflict, or during spates of intercommunal violence.

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This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/15/video-of-armed-men-burning-man-alive-in-western-ethiopia-sparks-outrage>

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## [Donald Trump](#)

# Trump accused of campaign finance violations in FEC complaint

Democratic Pac alleges former president is raising campaign money without announcing candidacy



Donald Trump at a rally in South Carolina on 12 March. Photograph: Richard Ellis/EPA

[Maya Yang](#)

Tue 15 Mar 2022 01.00 EDT Last modified on Tue 15 Mar 2022 01.02 EDT

A Democratic fundraising organization has announced that it is filing a [complaint](#) to the Federal Election Commission in which it accuses former president Donald Trump of violating campaign finance laws by spending political funds for a 2024 presidential bid without officially declaring his 2024 candidacy.

The American Bridge Super Pac, which filed the complaint on Monday, said in the complaint that “Trump has been illegally using his multi-candidate leadership PAC to raise and spend funds in excess of Commission limits for the purpose of advancing a 2024 presidential campaign.

“His failure to timely file a Statement of Candidacy with the Commission is a clear violation of the [Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971].”

Under federal election campaign rules, candidates are required to register with the FEC within 15 days of receiving contributions or spending more than \$5,000 on a presidential campaign.

The complaint uses Trump’s own words, including the address he delivered at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Orlando last month, in which he said: “We did it twice and we will do it again … We are going to be doing it again a third time.”

According to the complaint, Trump’s primary Pac, Save America, has spent over \$100,000 weekly on Facebook ads and has “consistently raised more than \$1 million per week”.

“Save America’s ads are clearly an attempt to influence Mr Trump’s election to federal office in 2024,” the complaint says.

Save America’s expenditures include those spent on Trump’s travels, events at Trump properties, rallies where Trump is a featured speaker and consulting payments to former Trump campaign staff.

American Bridge has asked the FEC to “compel disclosure of any expenditures made to further Mr Trump’s candidacy, enjoin Mr Trump from further violations, and fine Mr Trump the maximum amount permitted by law.”

In a [statement](#) reported by the Washington Post, Jessica Floyd, president of American Bridge, said Trump needs to be held accountable by Democrats and Republicans alike.

“Whenever they are taking a break from calling for tax hikes for Americans and Obamacare repeal, Republicans are scrambling to see who can praise Trump the most – even as he continues his effort to graft his way back to the White House. They should be ashamed to support such obvious lies, and we should all see him for what he is and hold him accountable.”

Trump’s team criticized the filing, [calling](#) it a “cheap gimmick” that revealed how the Democratic party “has become a dumpster fire that’s void of solutions and substances”.

“America is spiraling into disaster because of the Democrats’ failures, and instead of reversing course, they are busy filing frivolous complaints that have zero merit,” Trump spokesperson Taylor Budowich said.

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## [Canada](#)

# Delays hamper Canada's bid to resettle Ukrainians fleeing war

Bureaucratic issues in Ottawa mean new arrivals will likely have to rely on Canadians' generosity to get settled



A person holds a sign reading ‘stand with Ukraine’ at a rally in Vancouver last week. Photograph: Ryan Walter Wagner/ZUMA Press Wire Service/REX/Shutterstock

*[Leyland Cecco in Toronto](#)*

Tue 15 Mar 2022 05.00 EDT Last modified on Tue 15 Mar 2022 14.25 EDT

Canada has promised to resettle an “unlimited” number of displaced Ukrainians, and officials in country’s Prairie region want to be the first choice for those fleeing Russia’s invasion. But despite strong public support, bureaucratic delays at the federal level have highlighted the challenge of quickly resettling those fleeing war.

The United Nations estimates more than two and a half million people have escaped [Ukraine](#) since Russia invaded the country in late February, creating the worst refugee crisis on the European continent since the upheaval of the second world war.

While eastern European nations have absorbed the vast majority of refugees, Canada, home to the [second largest Ukrainian diaspora](#), has agreed to resettle as many people as it can amid a mounting humanitarian crisis.

“We will allow [Ukrainians] to study, work, when they come here,” Justin Trudeau told reporters during a trip to Poland last week. “Many of them will hope to be able to return to Ukraine after this conflict, many will also choose to continue their lives in Canada, and we look forward to welcoming as many as we can.”

The federal government has created a [new visa system](#), permitting Ukrainians to stay in Canada for as long as two years – but those looking to travel won’t receive federal government support afforded to many refugees.

Instead, new arrivals will probably have to rely on the generosity of Canadians to get settled.

“There’s a huge outpouring of support for hosting families right now,” said Ostap Skrypnyk, a member of the Manitoba chapter of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress and vice-president of the Canada Ukraine Foundation.

The Congress has been so overwhelmed with interest in helping resettle families that it had to temporarily pause the process after receiving more than 700 applications in less than 48 hours.

“And these people are signing up to help not even knowing what will be asked of them.”

Last week, Saskatchewan’s minister of immigration said his government wanted to make the province the first choice for Ukrainians, announcing hundred of thousands in funding to help the resettlement process. Saskatchewan has one of the largest Ukrainian populations in Canada, with 13% of residents identifying with Ukrainian heritage, many of whose

ancestors came to farm the land under government programs in previous decades.

Despite popular support for resettlement, Canada's recent failure to resettle tens of thousands of Afghan refugees as promised has prompted concern its pledge for "unlimited" Ukrainians might fall short. Since early March, Canada has resettled only 8,580 of the promised 40,000 Afghan refugees since the country was taken over by Taliban forces in August 2021.

"Will the visa system be inundated when it goes live next week? Will it be able to hold and will they be able to really process people in a timely manner?" said Skrypnyk. "We'll just have to wait and see. But when you build up new architecture, there are always blips."

Federal immigration minister Sean Fraser told CBC News that his department can "do more than one thing at a time" amid worry the government's recent focus on Ukraine would once again delay those efforts to aid Afghans and also slow down new visa applications.

Once families are approved, documents will be issued in as little as two weeks, meaning the first wave could arrive in early April.

"Seeing images of war and this huge influx of people in Poland and Slovakia, there's been this sense of helplessness in the Ukrainian community here," said Skrypnyk.

"And so when these first families began arriving, there's finally something we can do for them. We can help."

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## [China](#)

# China Covid cases hit two-year high with millions in lockdown as outbreak spreads

Nearly 90% of new infections in Jilin province, while tens of millions of people across the country remain confined to their homes

- [Read all our coronavirus coverage](#)



Jilin province has locked down its population of 24m and set up temporary hospitals and ensure infectious people and their close contacts are isolated as the outbreak spreads. Photograph: AP

*Staff with agencies*

Tue 15 Mar 2022 00.44 EDT

China has posted a steep jump in daily Covid-19 infections with new cases more than doubling from a day earlier to a two-year high as a virus outbreak expanded rapidly in the north-east.

A total of 3,507 domestically transmitted cases with confirmed symptoms were reported on Monday across more than a dozen provinces and municipalities, the National Health Commission said, up from 1,337 a day earlier.

Since the coronavirus first emerged in the central city of Wuhan in late 2019, China had successfully suppressed large-scale outbreaks through its strict “zero-Covid” strategy, which involved hard lockdowns that confined huge sections of the population to their homes.

While the country’s case load is still tiny by global standards, health experts said the rate of increase in daily cases over the next few weeks would be a crucial factor in determining whether its tough containment approach was still effective against the rapidly spreading Omicron variant.

A Covid-19 forecasting system run by Lanzhou University in China’s northwest predicted that the current round of infections would eventually be brought under control in early April after an accumulated total of about 35,000 cases.

The university said in its latest assessment published on Monday that while the outbreak was the most serious on the mainland since Wuhan in 2020, China could bring it under control as long as stringent curbs remained in place.

At least 11 cities and counties nationwide have been locked down because of the latest surge, including the southern tech hub of Shenzhen, home to 17 million people.

In the financial hub of Shanghai, authorities battling an outbreak across the city were cordoning off individual apartment buildings and testing all residents.

China's aviation regulator said that 106 international flights scheduled to arrive in Shanghai would be diverted to other domestic cities from 21 March to 1 May due to Covid.

Confirmed symptomatic infections in Shanghai stood at 21 on Monday, including 12 imported from overseas, with an additional 130 asymptomatic cases.

Nearly 90% of the mainland's confirmed new symptomatic cases on Monday were found in the north-eastern province of Jilin, which has banned its 24.1 million population from travelling in and out of the province and across different areas within the province without notifying local police.

Jilin officials should step up the preparation of temporary hospitals and designated hospitals and make use of idle venues to ensure all infections and their close contacts were isolated, a local Communist party authority-backed paper said, citing the provincial head of the party.

An outbreak at Volkswagen Group factories in the Jilin city of Changchun also prompted three sites to shut on Monday for at least three days, according to a spokesman.

The number of new asymptomatic cases, which China does not classify as confirmed cases, stood at 1,768 compared with 906 a day earlier. There were no new deaths, leaving the death toll unchanged at 4,636.

As of 14 March, mainland China had reported 120,504 cases with confirmed symptoms, including both local ones and those arriving from outside the mainland.

*Reuters and Agence-France Presse contributed to this report*

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**Roman Abramovich**

## **Roman Abramovich spotted at Israeli airport following UK sanctions**

Photograph shows Chelsea FC owner in VIP lounge shortly before jet linked to him took off for Istanbul



Roman Abramovich at Ben Gurion international airport on Monday.  
Photograph: Reuters

*[Richard Partington](#)*

*[@RJPartington](#)*

Mon 14 Mar 2022 16.05 EDT Last modified on Mon 14 Mar 2022 17.01 EDT

Roman Abramovich, the billionaire owner of Chelsea FC who was subjected to sanctions by the UK government last week, has been spotted at a VIP lounge at an airport in Israel.

One of seven Russians who had their [assets frozen last Thursday](#) in an attempt to ratchet up the pressure on Vladimir Putin after the invasion of Ukraine, Abramovich was seen in Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion airport on Monday shortly before a jet linked to him took off for Istanbul.

A photograph obtained by Reuters showed the oligarch sitting in the airport's VIP lounge with a face mask pulled down over his chin. The news agency said it could not independently verify if he boarded the flight to Turkey.

The sanctions against Abramovich – brought in years after campaigners first raised concerns about his ties to the Russian president – have come amid a wider western crackdown on the country's wealthy business elite.

EU authorities have [begun seizing assets, including superyachts docked in Mediterranean ports](#), over recent weeks, prompting oligarchs accused of being close to Putin to seek safe havens elsewhere.

One source told Reuters the plane used by Abramovich flew into Ben Gurion late on Sunday from Moscow. The flight-tracking website Radarbox said the aircraft, which has the tail number LX-RAY, took off on Monday for Istanbul.

Israeli restrictions imposed on private jets since the invasion of [Ukraine](#) meant it could not remain on the ground for more than 24 hours. A British transport ministry source told Reuters on Friday that the UK was searching for helicopters and jets belonging to the oligarchs named in last week's sanctions.

[Abramovich was targeted](#) because the UK government's Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation suspected that a steel company he had effective control of, [Evraz plc](#), supplied steel to the Russian military to produce tanks.

Abramovich, who also holds Israeli and Portuguese citizenship, has denied having close ties to the Russian president.

In the wake of sanctions being imposed, Russian oligarchs have reportedly fled western capitals, including London, where they have business links and homes, with the country's wealthy elite said to be either returning to Moscow or heading to countries outside the UK, EU and US. Reuters said one of Abramovich's own yachts, thought to be worth \$600m (£460m), arrived in Montenegro's territorial waters on Sunday.

However, the UK government has faced heavy criticism from opposition MPs for acting too late to stop oligarchs, who became concerned about the threat of sanctions weeks ago, from removing their assets from the country.

Abramovich's private jet reportedly left the UK in late February. Although he has built up a property portfolio in London, the billionaire has previously said he effectively lives on a plane, splitting his time between Moscow, London and New York. In 2006 he told the Guardian he did not regard the British capital as home, although he said it was his "first choice" of place to be after Moscow.

His UK properties reportedly include a 15-bedroom mansion on Kensington Palace Gardens in central London that was bought for £90m in 2009, and a Chelsea penthouse overlooking the River Thames bought in 2018 for a reported £22m.

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# Headlines

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- [Tehran British-Iranian Morad Tahbaz returned to prison](#)
- [The left behind The dual nationals still in jail in Iran](#)
- ['They can't stop hugging' Zaghami-Ratcliffe's reunion with daughter](#)

## [Iran](#)

# Iran made Ashoori family raise £27,000 in 12 hours to secure his release

Family of freed British-Iranian detainee Anoosheh Ashoori had to pay last-minute fine in cash



Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Anoosheh Ashoori arrive at RAF Brize Norton after being released from years of detention in Iran. Photograph: Simon Dawson/No 10 Downing Street/EPA

*[Patrick Wintour](#) and [Jamie Grierson](#)*

Fri 18 Mar 2022 18.00 EDT Last modified on Sat 19 Mar 2022 19.11 EDT

The family of the British-Iranian detainee Anoosheh Ashoori had to scramble at the last minute to raise £27,000 to pay a fine to the Iranian government, delivering the money in cash to the authorities in Tehran's Evin prison for it to be counted and authenticated.

The Iranian government told British Foreign Office negotiators late on Monday that his release would be blocked unless the fine, linked to his 10-year jail sentence, was paid the following day. Ashoori was [released along with Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe on Wednesday](#) after the UK paid Iran a longstanding £400m debt.

Iranian authorities arrested Ashoori in August 2017, when he was visiting his mother. In August 2019, he was sentenced to 12 years in prison – 10 years for allegedly “spying for Israel’s Mossad” and two years for “acquiring illegitimate wealth”. Ashoori denied both charges.

Ashoori’s wife, Sherry Izadi, told the Guardian: “We had less than 12 hours to raise the money, taking out loans using our credit cards, and opening new accounts. My only thought was: ‘How are we going to do this in time?’”

She added: “At first the government officials in Tehran demanded my nephew meet them outside the prison with a suitcase full of cash, but he demanded he went inside the prison and be given a receipt. They kept dragging it out, demanding to count the money and check whether it was counterfeit.”

She also revealed that when she spoke to her husband in prison by phone on Monday she had been sworn to secrecy by the Foreign Office and was unable to tell him that a negotiating team was in Tehran finalising his release. He had been told that he was about to be conditionally released, but he did not believe it until he was on a plane since similar promises had been made before. “I could not tell him what I knew since I was told lives were at risk,” she said.

Elika Ashoori, the daughter of Anoosheh Ashoori, said they struggled to draw attention to her father’s plight because the UK media [did not see the family as “very relatable”](#).

Speaking on BBC Radio 4’s Today programme, Elika Ashoori said the family had experienced an “outpouring of love” since her father’s return but the last five years of his captivity had been very different and they had to fight for help.



Elika Ashoori, right, with her brother and mother in 2021 campaigning to free their father. Photograph: Kirsty O'Connor/PA

She said: “It has been a very big struggle trying to get my dad’s name out there; we were slightly more successful in the last year of our campaign because of the efforts of Amnesty and other organisations that finally joined us.

“But because of his name, age, his looks, us being grownup children, and us not being very relatable so we couldn’t really engage on a major scale with the media and public no matter how hard we tried.”

The family, not wealthy, are planning [a crowdfunding website](#) to help them pay back the £27,000 debt.

In Tehran conflicting reports emerged about the fate of Morad Tahbaz, the British, American and Iranian citizen who the UK was unable to persuade Iran to release along with Ashoori and Zaghari-Ratcliffe.

Distressed members of the Tabhaz family claimed [he had been taken back to Evin prison](#) after only 48 hours on furlough at his family home in Tehran.

But the UK Foreign Office said it had been assured by the Iranian government that he had gone to the prison only to have an ankle tag fitted

that should have been installed when he initially left the prison.

The Foreign Office said any extended stay back in the prison would be in breach of the undertakings given to the British government that the 69-year-old conservationist was being put on indefinite furlough. It added it was still working with the US to secure his permanent release.

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[Iran](#)

## British-Iranian Morad Tahbaz returned to Tehran prison

Family says he was taken from home in Iranian capital by armed guards only 48 hours after being released



Morad Tahbaz. Photograph: Morad Tahbaz/Facebook

*[Patrick Wintour](#) Diplomatic editor*

Fri 18 Mar 2022 10.49 EDT Last modified on Fri 18 Mar 2022 17.31 EDT

Morad Tahbaz, the British-Iranian given a furlough as part of a deal [to release Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Anoosheh Ashoori](#) has been returned to Evin prison in Tehran under armed guard only 48 hours after being released.

The Foreign Office insisted that the Iranians have told them that Tahbaz is only being returned to the prison to have an ankle tag installed and they expect to see him returned home in the coming hours.

The department made clear that anything but a return home in the coming hours would be considered a breach of the commitments made over his indefinite furlough. They added they were working with the Americans to secure his indefinite release.

Earlier, his family said he was taken from the family home in Tehran in a black car with three armed guards and his wife standing by in tears.

A distressed member of the Tahbaz family said “the furlough negotiated by the UK government with the Iranians was just a cover so the UK could free the other two British-Iranians, and then enjoy a victory lap”.

They insisted that Tahbaz, a conservationist [sentenced to 10 years in jail](#) in November 2019 for being in contact with the US, was the only British-born member of the group of three whose release was being negotiated.

The family member said “an armed guard was present in the family home, and the visit was first for 10 hours and then extended to 24 hours and finally to 48 hours. It was never a proper furlough, but a short family visit.”

Efforts by the British ambassador to Tehran to visit Tahbaz failed.

The exact understanding between the British Foreign Office and the Iranian government over the extent of his furlough was never revealed.

Liz Truss, the UK foreign secretary, made it clear in interviews that although she was seeking Tahbaz’s release along with that of [Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe](#) and Anoosheh Ashoori, she was not prepared to make it a condition of the payment of a £400m debt to Iran that all three were released.

An earlier negotiation between the Iranians and the Foreign Office then led by the then foreign secretary, Dominic Raab, broke down in January 2021 when Tahbaz insisted his release should be part of the deal.

The Iranian government regards Tahbaz as an American – he has American, British and Iranian citizenship – so were resistant to him being part of any deal.

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## Iran

# The left behind: the dual nationals still in jail in Iran

Anoosheh Ashoori and Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe are free but other families in the west are waiting anxiously



The French anthropologist Fariba Adelkhah was first jailed in June 2019.  
Photograph: Thomas Arrive/Sciences Po/AFP/Getty Images



Patrick Wintour *Diplomatic editor*

Sat 19 Mar 2022 01.00 EDT

Dotted across Europe and America are families of as many as 17 dual nationals still held in jail in Iran, watching nervously to find out whether their loved ones will follow [Anoosheh Ashoori and Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe](#) on a plane to freedom, or be left behind.

Many fear their freedom is not being made a precondition of the west agreeing a nuclear deal with [Iran](#) in the talks nearing a climax in Vienna. Without an acknowledged debt to repay like the UK's, some of their countries may have trouble striking deals, and that worries the families.



Nahid Taghavi. Photograph: Supplied

In Germany, Mariam Claren, the daughter of [68-year-old Nahid Taghavi](#), said: “It is a bittersweet moment. I am so happy for Richard [Ratcliffe], and his family, but I am very, very nervous that only American prisoners will be freed.

“In one and a half years there has been no proper movement in my mother’s case. I am one person only and I do everything I can, but I feel a little bit frustrated with the German government. My mum is 67, she spent seven months in solitary confinement in Evin prison and she needs back surgery. She is diabetic, and has neck pain. She caught Covid but was the only one not allowed to leave jail.”

Taghavi – who had lived in Frankfurt – was arrested in October 2020 on the streets of Tehran by 12 men and has been sentenced to 10 years on charges of “forming a group composed of more than two people with the purpose of disrupting national security” and “propaganda against the regime”.

Claren explains: “I can speak to her five times a week for five minutes. She is trying to keep her mind alive teaching German to prisoners, and reading all the time. She wants to know everything that is happening in politics, about Ukraine and Afghanistan.

“The German coalition government says they are doing all they can, but I do not know if our government really makes her release part of the talks on the Iran nuclear deal. The new foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock, is so busy, and I do not know what priority this has. The only thing I hear from the foreign office is no stone is left unturned.”

Germany, like France and the UK, is a signatory to the Iran nuclear talks, but it has strong business relations with Iran, so Claren can only wait and hope. The German foreign office told a Green MP of other German-Iranian dual nationals in Iranian jails.



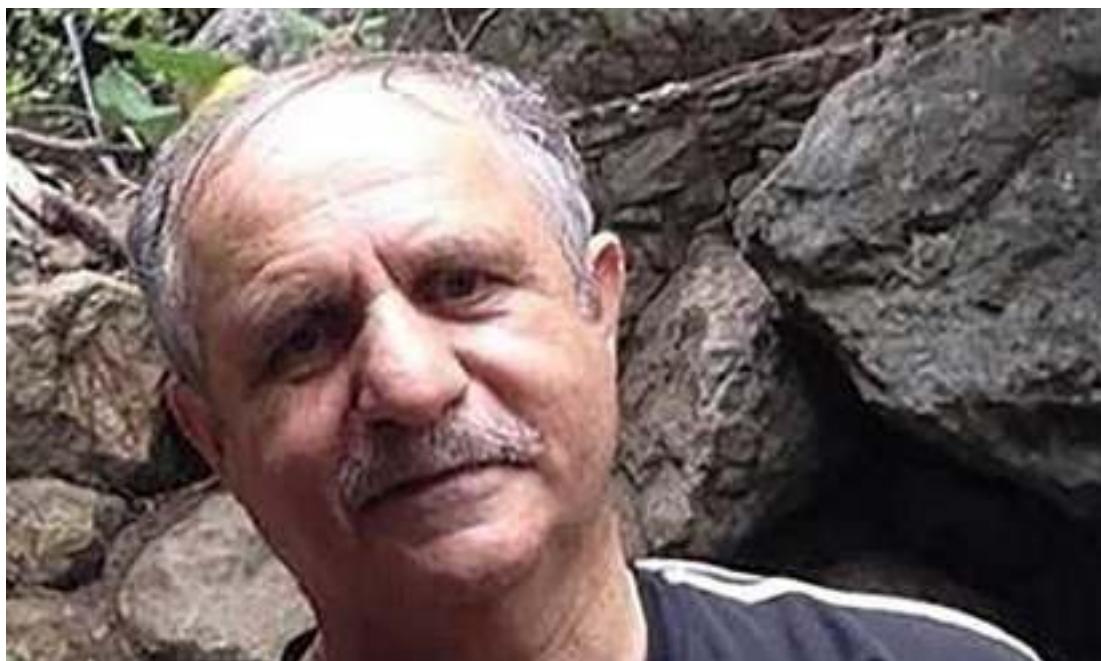
Kamran Ghaderi. Photograph: Courtesy of Ghaderi family

In tears on the phone in Austria, Harika Ghaderi manages to be happy for the released Britons, but feels at her wits' end as the nuclear talks come to a close. A mother of three, her children were two, nine and 12 years old at the time [their father, Dr Kamran Ghaderi](#), was picked up at Tehran airport in January 2016. She says: “For the first three months, he was held in a solitary confinement and tortured until he signed a false confession that he was a spy working for Austria and for the United States.

“I am now at the end of my energy. I cannot understand how the nuclear deal can be signed and these people ignored. They are innocent. My nine-year-

old has never known his father.” Unlike those in the UK, she has no big network of support.

The French anthropologist Fariba Adelkhah, specialising in Iranian society, was first jailed in June 2019, allowed on furlough in October 2020 and then [suddenly reincarcerated in January 2022](#) for allegedly breaching the terms of her house arrest, a charge she denies. She and the French academic community wait nervously.



Mehran Raoof. Photograph: Facebook/IASW

There are also British citizens left behind. Least well known is [Mehran Raoof, a trade unionist](#) arrested in Tehran on 16 October 2020. A friend of his to whom the Guardian spoke said he was unable to place calls to the UK and his lawyer could not speak to reporters from outside Iran. He has no immediate family in Iran. He has been sentenced to 10 years for subversion. He says he sleeps on the floor.

For years he divided his time between the UK and Iran, teaching English, meeting with other labour and women’s rights activists, and helping them translate materials from and into English.

The communication between him, his friends and the Foreign Office seems less than ideal. In August 2020 at the time of his arrest, the Foreign Office

said: “We continue to do all we can to support Mehran and his family, and continue to raise his case at the most senior levels.” But in her comments this week the foreign secretary, Liz Truss, made no voluntary reference to Raoof, suggesting he was never part of the negotiations over the debt.

Pressed by Jeremy Corbyn about his case, Truss replied: “I must respect the individual’s request of whether their case should be raised in public. That is why we mention publicly only those individuals who have asked to be named.”

Jo Atkins-Potts, Amnesty International UK’s urgent actions campaigner, said she “was very worried he was being left behind”, saying he was a victim of arbitrary detention. Amnesty has no indication that Raoof has asked not to be named, especially given that he is unable to use a phone. The charity plans to ask Truss for clarification on the comments.



Morad Tahbaz. Photograph: Morad Tahbaz/Facebook

By contrast, [Morad Tahbaz, a London-born businessman and conservationist](#) with British, US and Iranian citizenship arrested in January 2018, had been mentioned by the Foreign Office. But the UK, unlike in previous negotiations with the Iranians, took the painful decision, in the interests of getting Ashoori and Zaghari-Ratcliffe home, to exclude him from the trade.

A very cold call between the family and Truss showed the family the British had chosen to make him America's problem.

But his case is complicated by the fact that although he was born in Hammersmith hospital in west London, Iran also views him as American. Negotiations over his furlough and the fate of his wife filled some of the last frantic hours at Tehran international airport before Zaghami-Ratcliffe and Ashoori were put on the Sultan of Oman's private plane to Muscat.

Within 48 hours his family reported armed officers had taken him [back to jail](#), and his family accuse the Foreign Office of a betrayal. The foreign secretary in the Commons was never asked about the length of the furlough, but gave the impression she had negotiated a substantive change from his appalling prison conditions.

The family said they believed it was now clear a true furlough was never agreed. "It was just a home visit to get him out the way, so the Foreign Office could have their victory lap," they said. The Foreign Office insisted that the Iranians had told them that Tahbaz was only being returned to the prison to have an ankle tag installed and they expected to see him returned home in the coming hours.

Claren concluded: "All our families are just pawns in a shaming international game of chess. The only lesson is that this hostage-taking has to be stopped."

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[Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe](#)

## **‘They can’t stop hugging’: Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe’s reunion with her daughter**

The woman freed from six years’ detention told her MP about the fraught last moments in Iran and the bliss of her return



A picture tweeted by Tulip Siddiq of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and her daughter, Gabriella, making pizza. Photograph: Rebecca Ratcliffe



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Fri 18 Mar 2022 13.35 EDTFirst published on Fri 18 Mar 2022 12.44 EDT

Even as she entered the airport clutching her British passport for the first time in six years, [Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe](#) said she could not believe she was finally about to return home to her husband and daughter.

The last moments of her ordeal in [Iran](#), where she had been held by the regime, in effect as a hostage, on trumped-up charges, were far from straightforward and fraught with anxieties.

Speaking to her MP, Tulip Siddiq, on Thursday night, Zaghari-Ratcliffe described how even at the airport in Tehran, conversations continued between Iranian and UK officials. Nothing was straightforward.

As she arrived to board the flight, a reporter from an Iranian news channel appeared, one she recognised and who had spread misinformation about her before one of her earlier trials, to try and bounce her into an interview.

Siddiq, the MP for Hampstead and Kilburn who has been a vociferous and dogged campaigner for Zaghari-Ratcliffe's freedom, spoke to her on

Thursday for the first time since she landed at RAF Brize Norton in Oxfordshire in the early hours of Thursday morning.

Zaghari-Ratcliffe and her husband, Richard, who mounted a worldwide publicity campaign to free his wife, are now staying in a safe house with their seven-year-old daughter, Gabriella, to give the family who have spent so many years apart some privacy and downtime before they return home to north [London](#).

“Nazanin’s last 24 hours in Tehran were eventful and far from straightforward. She told me about the whirlwind of being taken to Tehran airport and hurried conversations with officials from both Iran and the UK,” Siddiq said.



Tulip Siddiq MP, left, with Gabriella and Richard Ratcliffe as they handed in a petition to 10 Downing Street, London, in September to mark the 2,000th day Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe had been detained in Iran. Photograph: Kirsty O'Connor/PA

“The news channel who spread misinformation about her during earlier trials even tried to corner her for a cloak-and-dagger interview in a corner of the airport. Right up until the last minute she was pushing back against the machinations of the Iranian authorities.”

Siddiq described their conversation as intense and uplifting, having spoken with Zaghari-Ratcliffe many times previously while she was in prison and under house arrest. “She is over the moon to be home but exhausted at the same time. She told me that it all still feels surreal, like a dream,” Siddiq said.

The British-Iranian dual national was arrested in 2016 when Gabriella was 22 months old, accused of various implausible charges linked to her work at the BBC World Service Trust and Thomson Reuters Foundation. During her detention she was described as a “diplomatic pawn”, held until the UK paid a historical £400m debt for tanks sold but not delivered.

“Gabriella has already attached herself to her mother like an extra limb, beside herself with excitement to have both parents in the room at the same time for the first time in six years,” Siddiq said. “For Nazanin, Gabriella is all she can talk about. They can’t stop hugging each other and kissing.

“They then all collapsed into one bed, all three of them and fell asleep, Gabriella in the middle of her parents. She says all day Gabriella looks like she’s beside herself with excitement.”

Zaghari-Ratcliffe told Siddiq she was impatient to begin her involvement in her seven-year-old daughter’s life in London, which she has missed so much of since they have been separated.

“Nazanin is eager to learn more about her daughter’s school, her life and her community in West Hampstead. While Richard has of course kept Nazanin updated over the period of her imprisonment, she wants to get to know the people involved in her daughter’s life and become part of it again.”

Siddiq said it would take time for Zaghari-Ratcliffe to process the trauma of what had happened and to feel safe again. “She says she still doesn’t believe it, but her sleep-deprived status is adding to the confusion,” Siddiq said.

“Throughout our conversation, Nazanin must have used the word ‘blissful’ half a dozen times, which took some getting used to given that I am used to her calling me under house arrest with an ankle tag.

“Richard and Gabriella have both changed a lot in the last six years, and they want to get to know each other again and make up for lost time. She said she was going to stay low for a bit, but I am hoping that in time we will be able to host her in parliament to celebrate her freedom and the frankly inspiring work of her husband, Richard, and his family in campaigning for her release.”

Siddiq said Zaghami-Ratcliffe spent a long time in their conversation expressing her gratitude for those involved in campaigning for her release, which she said would be a “long process” of thanking many people. “She may have been detained in Iran for six years, but she’s always been a constituent of mine and a part of the community in Hampstead and Kilburn, which never gave up on her,” she said.

“It’s crazy to think that I still haven’t met Nazanin, but I feel like after six years of campaigning for her freedom I know her well. Nazanin is undoubtedly a woman of steel, and I was amazed by how calm and composed she seemed after what must have been the most chaotic and uncertain of weeks.”

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This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2022/mar/18/local-mp-tells-of-nazanin-zaghari-ratcliffe-blissful-return-home>

## 2022.03.19 - Spotlight

- Charli XCX ‘People who take it too far are better than people who don’t’
- Ai Weiwei on the new Silk Road ‘This is China’s counterattack in a global game of chess’
- NoViolet Bulawayo ‘I’m encouraged by this new generation that wants better’
- Kate Mosse: ‘A taxi driver said I wasn’t as tall as he’d expected. He thought he was picking up Kate Moss’

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Interview

## **Charli XCX: ‘People who take it too far are better than people who don’t’**

[Rachel Aroesti](#)



Swing when you’re winning ... Charli XCX. Photograph: Emily Lipson

The hyperpop star's new album is an experiment into how far she can push the 'pop star character' she's created. Can she stave off a rebellion from her fans in the process?



Sat 19 Mar 2022 05.00 EDT

If you are ever in need of a stark reminder that social media is not real life, I can recommend Zooming with [Charli XCX](#). Moments before I am due to speak to the pop star, she posts a series of images on Instagram to trail the release of her new single, Baby. On all fours in a tasselled leather bikini, with dramatic eye makeup and talon-like nails, she is the epitome of the provocative, vampish pop star.

So when she appears live on my computer screen, it is slightly jarring to see the 29-year-old looking utterly ordinary: dark hair scraped back, no makeup, grey baggy jumper and cradling a mug of coffee. Instead of dramatically writhing, she is thoughtfully musing – in the kind of unclipped, middle-class English drawl that makes everything sound deadpan and dry – about her 13-year career, the majority of which has been spent at the coalface of experimental pop.

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list of our weekly highlights.

To be confronted by these two very different Charlis is extremely fitting. Because for her new album, Crash, the musician – otherwise known as Cambridge-born, Essex-raised Charlotte Aitchison – has decided to embrace the artifice and industrial mechanisms of big-money pop like never before. “I’ve been playing the game,” she explains, in her matter-of-fact way.

Despite signing a five-album major label deal at the age of 16, Aitchison has never neatly slotted into the mainstream pop landscape. She initially caught the attention of record executives with a string of bratty indie-electro tracks, which combined unfiltered, uber-British, Kate Nash-style vocals with n rave era keyboards (even their titles – Art Bitch, !Francheskaar! – feel painfully evocative of their time). In 2013, she pivoted to moody, maximalist pop for her debut album, [True Romance](#) – which was greeted with good reviews but lacklustre sales – and in the same year scored a No 1 single with the anthemic [I Love It](#) (she gave the song to Swedish duo Icona Pop, but appeared on it as a featured artist).

And then she changed tack again. Working with members of the pioneering London label [PC Music](#), Aitchison began moving in increasingly daring and innovative directions, helping to establish the abrasively modern and overwhelmingly digital genre known as hyperpop. This era has cemented her status as a critically celebrated pop futurist, beloved by a huge, devoted online fanbase – but it has also seen her move away from mass appeal. With Crash, she is resetting her sights on the mainstream: both in a genuine sense and in a tricksy, meta way – by approaching conventional pop stardom as a form of performance art.



In a field of her own ... Charli on stage at the Reading festival, 2019.  
Photograph: Burak Çingi/Redferns

Crash is at once, she says, a “great pop record” – full of slick, upbeat and hyper-consumable tracks with an 80s sonic flavour and 2020s urgency – and also a “commentary on what a pop star is.” The record will be her last in her deal with Atlantic (the storied major label whose artists also include Cardi B, Ed Sheeran and Sia), and to mark the occasion, Aitchison is conducting her “own personal experiment of how far I can push myself into this 2022 pop star character who’s signed to Atlantic Records”.

After years of rebelling against such a role, she is now embracing its trappings. Not only by writing songs that are more “commercially friendly” (see: the almost maddeningly infectious dance-pop of Good Ones), but also working with a broad spectrum of collaborators (Crash’s credits feature everyone from cerebral electronica maestro Oneohtrix Point Never to chart-pop producer Digital Farm Animals). She also uses interpolations – snippets of old songs woven into new material – to cultivate a sense of inbuilt familiarity: sultry recent single Beg for You featuring [Rina Sawayama](#) incorporates the Europop megahit Cry for You by Swedish singer September. All of this is designed to curry favour with hit-making streaming platforms, she explains, and help tracks fly on social media apps such as

TikTok, which in turn will “allow the label to pour more money into the project”.

It is an approach you imagine may be lost on great swathes of the listening public – and Aitchison is keen to stress the album works as a straightforwardly enjoyable collection of tracks as well. Despite maintaining a massive profile over the past decade – no mean feat in the mercurial world of pop – Aitchison has never had a Top 10 album in the UK or US. It’s a situation that’s meant she’s spent practically her entire career on the brink of the big time. Is she hoping for a major commercial breakthrough to go with her majorly commercial attitude?

Is commercial success going to make me happy? Probably not. I’ve learned I’ll never be satisfied

Not really, she says, with some ambivalence. In a sense, she has been there, done that and found the experience unfulfilling. In the mid-10s, Aitchison had a trio of bombastic hit singles that were for a time inescapable – she followed Icona Pop’s *I Love It* with similar crowd-pleasers such as *Boom Clap* and the Iggy Azalea collaboration *Fancy* – but it didn’t bring her any joy.

“I’ve never really cared a lot about commercial success after having experienced it and feeling really lost within it,” she says. “I think it’s cool that *Beg for You* is doing really well in the UK. Is it going to make me happy? Probably not. I think I’ve learned that I will never be satisfied; I get to one goal and it becomes irrelevant and I want to do the complete opposite.”

Wanting to do the complete opposite is actually the real reason Aitchison is embracing artifice, pretence and naked business-mindedness. She says she is rebelling against what she sees as a recent trend towards authenticity in pop: “Over the past four or five years there’s been this desperate craving of realness from pop stars – of needing pop stars to be human.” She doesn’t think social media is to blame, though admits that “obviously the more an artist is active on social media, the more ‘real’ they become, and fans feel like they know who they are”.

Instead, she sees it mainly “from the media and artists themselves: if I’m not seen as authentic or real, I’m not going to be able to be connected with, or they’re not going to believe me”. It’s a trend that not only encourages a down-to-earth persona among the megastars (see: Ed Sheeran, Adele), but also requires artists to have written their own material in order to be seen to be communicating something of themselves in their work. You only have to witness the recent furore when [Damon Albarn claimed](#) Taylor Swift didn’t write her own songs to realise how important this is to modern pop; Swift responded that it was “fucked up to try and discredit my writing”, and Albarn issued a grovelling apology.

As somebody concerned with pushing pop into the future – and also something of a contrarian – Aitchison feels as if she is over this. “I’ve already been authentic for a very long time and I’m interested in the opposite of that, to take songs that have been written for me, to play into this hypersexualised character. I’m just interested in doing what is not really wanted right now, which is probably my flaw,” she laughs.



Getting Iggy with it ... on stage with Iggy Azalea at the 2014 Billboard music awards. Photograph: Kevin Mazur/Billboard Awards 2014/WireImage

It may not be a surefire path to popularity, but isn’t that how artists move culture forward? “To be honest I think it is and there are a lot of people who

are annoyed at me for that. I've seen a lot of commentary [online] of 'She's taken it too far – she really has sold out!' But people who take it too far are better than people who don't. I don't want to feel safe in the hands of musicians I admire, I want to feel like: fuck, I don't know what they're going to do next."

Aitchison's previous album, 2020's Mercury prize-nominated [How I'm Feeling Now](#), could be said to have gone too far in the "authentic" direction. Made at her LA home in just six weeks over the first lockdown, it was created DIY-style with help from PC Music founder [AG Cook](#) and Bon Iver producer BJ Burton – and also her fans, who were invited to give feedback on songs as they were being made. She workshopped lyrics with them on Instagram Live and invited them to submit artwork and video ideas. And she chronicled the whole exhausting process with great candour on her social media feeds (a documentary about the process, *Alone Together*, is coming to UK cinemas next month).

Aitchison says collaborating with her fans was a very easy process "because I have always really respected their taste. I genuinely feel that there are a lot of similarities between us: we grew up on the internet, my fans are also outsiders a little bit and I feel very much like that. We are very much inspired by queer culture and have been embraced by that community or, in some cases, are part of that community."

Sometimes the way you can have the loudest voice as a fan is by being negative about the artist

She talks about her fans as if she knows each and every one of them personally – which, considering she has 3.9 million Instagram followers, is clearly impossible. How difficult is it to navigate this large-scale, internet-based relationship? "What are you trying to ask? I feel like you're trying to ask something but you're not fully asking it," she shoots back.

I am not entirely sure what she means, but it's clearly a delicate subject. I try again, more delicately. Does she think much about the unusual nature of these fan relationships – sometimes referred to as parasocial relationships – where one party has an intimate but completely one-sided knowledge of the

other? “Totally, and I’m very much aware that comes with the territory, I think it would be extremely naive to not understand that.” Aitchison knows she is both the focus and also merely a convenient meeting point for like-minded people. “The artist is the common ground. I’ve had some fans tell me ‘I found my friend through your music’ or ‘We met at a show’ or whatever, so there is that connective tissue of me in their relationships.”

Still, being at the centre of a huge social media community is – famously – not all a bed of roses. With passionate devotion comes a sense of ownership and with that comes criticism – most vehemently directed at detractors, but also sometimes the artist in question, too. Aitchison admits this discourse can “sometimes cause pressure – well, not pressure, that’s the wrong word – but sometimes the way you can have the loudest voice in a fan community is by saying something negative about the artist. Unfortunately, we live in a world where positive isn’t really rewarded that much, especially online.”

In February, Aitchison wrote a post on Twitter telling her followers that she was stepping back from the platform. “I can’t really handle it on here right now,” she explained, having noticed “lately that a few people seem quite angry at me – for the choices of songs I’ve chosen to release, for the way I’ve decided to roll out my campaign, for the things I need to do to fund what will be the greatest tour I’ve ever done, for things I say, things I do”. Some of the criticism was directed at her new music and some was prompted by her decision to play at the exclusive Las Vegas music festival Afterparty, where tickets are linked to the ownership of NFTs – an event she has since pulled out of.

She doesn’t particularly want to talk about the statement, she says, but gamely gives what sounds like a well-rehearsed overview. “I have felt really, really low for the majority of this year so far and that’s actually unrelated to my career, it’s just a general feeling I’ve been trying to deal with. And obviously when you’re feeling low, things that sometimes aren’t really very triggering to you suddenly become triggering. Therefore, reading comments on social media, no matter what they’re about, is sometimes just hard to deal with when you’re already in a low space. It’s not that deep – if you feel sad don’t read bad things about yourself – but it’s also so instinctual of humans to focus on the negative and the danger and try and protect yourself.”

Has she stayed off social media? “I stuck to it for a week but now I’m very much back on,” she admits. This becomes very apparent in the days after we speak, when she makes headlines for replying to a critical fan. “Bitch BYE. I will NEVER understand what possesses people to be such C\*NTS online,” went one since-deleted tweet.



Born to do it ... an early TV appearance in 2013. Photograph: Rob Kim/Getty Images

Ultimately, though, Aitchison’s social media break is symbolic of a much bigger shift she dreams of making in her life. “I’ve been doing this since I was 16 years old – I’m going to be 30 in August. I feel like I need to just take time to be a human being and live and maybe not constantly be thinking about music.” Is that something she’s been able to start doing yet? She practically scoffs at the suggestion. “No, not right now because I’m obviously about to release the album. Maybe after this album.” She muses on the practicalities. “I don’t know if it’s possible, because it’s all I’ve done in my life – this is my life, it’s not something I can dip in and out of.”

She may be a self-confessed workaholic, but Aitchison is aware that a golden opportunity to pause is approaching. She describes the conclusion of her Atlantic deal as “the end of an era, it’s very comparable to completing school” as well as an “in limbo time. I’m not just saying this because I don’t

want to tell you: I genuinely don't know what I'm going to do next: whether I'm going to sign another deal with Atlantic, whether I'm going to sign with a different major, whether I'm going to go independent."

It is also a chance to look back at the 16-year-old her, who made inroads into the industry by uploading her songs to Myspace, where they gained impressive traction for the time. Now, of course, the sorts of numbers required to get the attention of labels are vastly different: "I did have online success, not really at the level that artists who are signed young now have – like a million TikTok followers or whatever."

Aitchison is not nostalgic for that less complicated time – in fact, she welcomes TikTok wholeheartedly, delighted by its power to resurrect older songs and take away some of pop's blink-and-you'll-miss-it time-sensitivity. Last year, her 2017 track *Unlock It*, overlooked at the time of release, went through a mini resurgence on the platform. "It felt really cool that *Unlock It* had that moment because I've always loved that song," she enthuses. "And for the record I really love TikTok. In ways, I wish I had only just started my career because I feel like I would absolutely crush on TikTok at 16; I'd be making TikToks every single day, doing dance routines constantly."

You don't doubt the teenage Aitchison would have known exactly what to do with 2022's technology if she'd been handed it in 2008: this restless, pioneering pop star has always been ahead of her time.

*Crash is out now. *Alone Together* is in cinemas for one night only on 14 April and shows at BFI Flare, London, 19 March.*

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A freight train leaves Khorgos, on the border of China and Kazakhstan, October 2017

## Ai Weiwei on the new Silk Road: ‘This is China’s counterattack in a global game of chess’

A freight train leaves Khorgos, on the border of China and Kazakhstan, October 2017

China is pouring trillions into the developing world. It is, the artist and activist says, an audacious power grab

by [Ai Weiwei](#). Photographs: Davide Monteleone

Sat 19 Mar 2022 05.00 EDT

The landscapes in Davide Monteleone’s images of China’s belt and road initiative are very familiar to me. We can see desert, uninhabited wasteland and views along the Yangtze River and in north-west [China](#). There are also

photographs showing the characters “Stay strong, Wuhan!” on skyscrapers in neon lights.

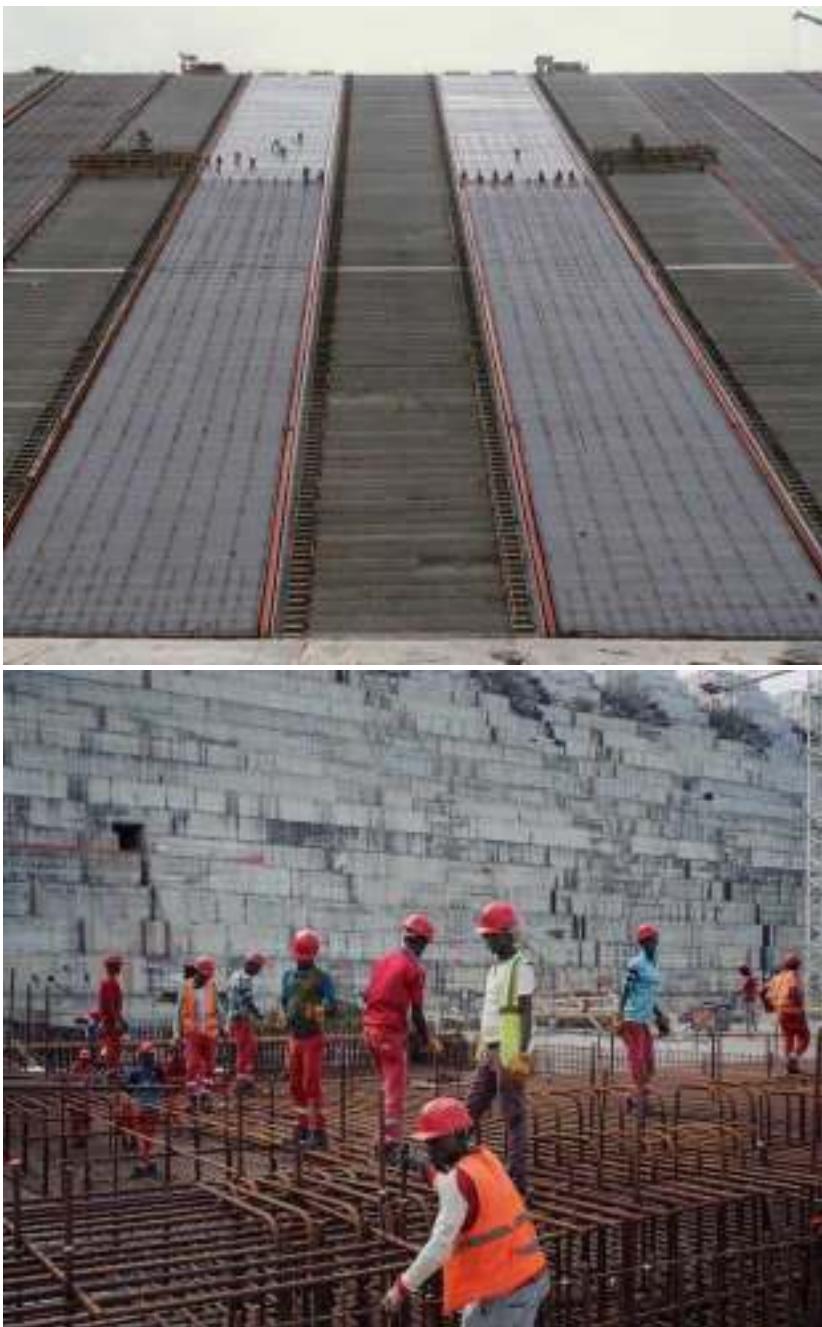
They are reminiscent of [images](#) I took in China, which captured dilapidated cities before they were rebuilt; energy plants; the development of impoverished areas and large-scale architecture. At that time, I wanted to write a new encyclopedia to elucidate new concepts and thoughts that emerge with rapid urbanisation, and to form a new language. The project was too ambitious, and I did not complete it. It was my failed “belt and road”.



- ‘Stay strong, Wuhan!’ The Chinese city of Heihe seen from Blagoveschensk, Russia, across the frozen Amur River, February 2020

The initiative, which has been likened to the Silk Road trade routes of imperial China, was proposed by the current Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, as a blueprint to reposition China in the era of globalisation, and to change the world order in a Chinese way. The thinking behind this [\\$1tn project](#) is ambitious. Such long-term planning, coherent political goals and effective implementation are rare, both in Chinese and in human history. The ruling

party in China has laid bare its determination to occupy an important role in the world.



- Local people at work on the Great Renaissance dam, Ethiopia, September 2019. The mammoth project, which began on the Blue Nile in 2011, is one of the largest hydroelectric power plants in the world. China has contributed about \$1.8bn of the \$4.8bn total cost



- The Tecno Mobile factory in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, September 2019. The Chinese phone manufacturer stopped doing business in Asia in 2008 to focus on the African market. It is now the second biggest supplier of smartphones on the continent

The goals of the belt and road initiative are pragmatic, unlike those proposed by the Chinese Communist party in their early days, and embodied in slogans such as “Exceeding the UK, Catching the US” in the 50s and 60s. China, with a huge amount of accumulated wealth and managerial and production experience, has understood that it can fill the gaps in parts of the world that are forgotten and abandoned by the west. These regions thirst for a strong economic entity to piece together fragmented, disorganised territories with longstanding historical differences. This is where China comes in.

About [145 nations](#) have joined the belt and road initiative by signing a memorandum of understanding with China, including countries in Europe, south-east Asia and the Middle East. It is an initiative that mainly focuses on basic infrastructure and engineering projects, such as transportation through rail, road and ports, to facilitate global trade and offer solutions to the problems of developing countries – as the Chinese saying goes, “If you want

to be rich, build roads first.” Many people in China, and also in the developing world, feel optimistic about this initiative, and mock Europe and the US for failing to match its vision.



- Aktau, Kazakhstan, October 2017. The city's port offers access to the Caspian Sea; from 2016 to 2020, trade between China and the Caucasus region almost doubled



- A monument in Nurkent, Kazakhstan, October 2017. The newly built town will accommodate 100,000 workers serving the nearby Khorgos dry port. A Chinese logistics company has 49% ownership of the land

The belt and road was not a decision taken on a whim. The idea comes from an article by Mao Zedong titled "[People of the world, unite and defeat the US aggressors and all their lackeys](#)", published in 1970 and commonly known as the "520 statement". In this article, Mao prompted the developing world to be united and fight against western political power led by the US. He stressed the importance of nationalist revolutions, independence and liberation movements as the wave of unstoppable historical change. Mao quoted the Confucian philosopher Mencius – "a just cause attracts much support, an unjust one finds little" – to illustrate his belief that people in the world would triumph over Anglo-American imperialism.

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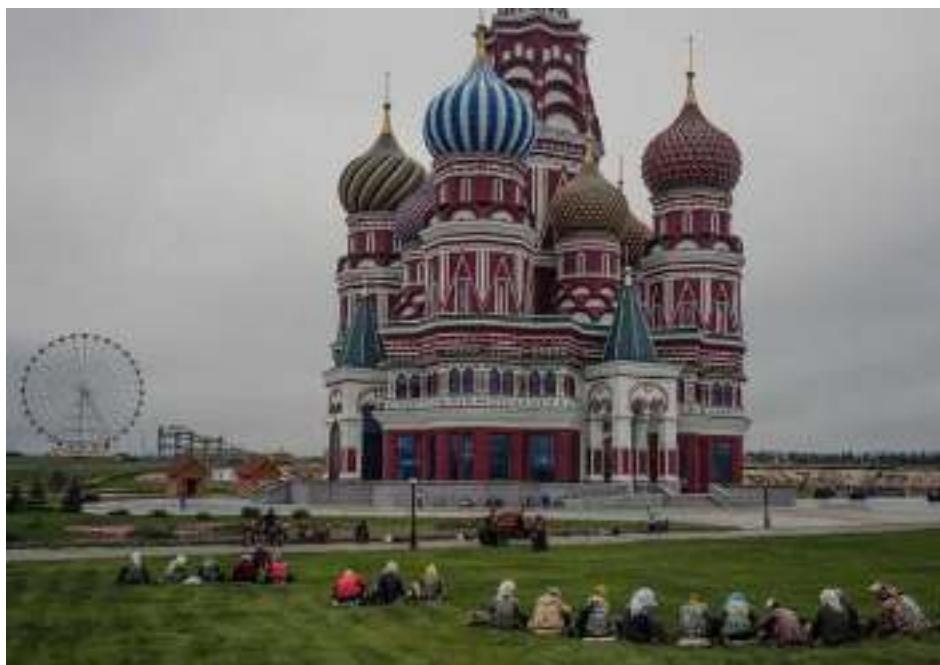
When my generation was growing up, these thoughts permeated the entire country. I belong to the same generation as Xi. We were encouraged to

“have the entire motherland in mind and the whole world in view” and to start revolutions everywhere in the world. These arrogant ideas relate to the ideology of that era. Based on these thoughts, the belt and road initiative is a strategic move that corresponds to the country’s rapid development. The question is: will its goals be achieved in a world that is much more complicated than it once was?



- Sihanoukville, Cambodia, December 2019. The once quiet tourist town on the coast has been transformed, its skyline dominated by casinos built to accommodate those seeking to avoid the ban on gambling in mainland China. More than 90% of businesses are Chinese-owned and locals complain the newcomers are turning the city into a de facto colony, forcing up rents and making them second-class citizens in their homeland

Monteleone's photographs are broad in scope and encompass many stories and strange landscapes. The Italian photographer began his project in Russia in 2014 before visiting vast rail and road projects across Asia; container ports; factories; casinos; and the Grand Renaissance dam in Ethiopia. The images clearly depict China's strategic ambitions, very different from the original Silk Road, which operated from around 130BC until the mid-15th century. The Silk Road was a network of trade routes, whereas the belt and road initiative embeds a political ambition beyond commerce. The issue in question here is: who will be the centre of the world? Who will rise to world power?



- A copy of Moscow's St Basil's Cathedral in Manzhouli, China, August 2015. The small city on the Russian border is one of China's biggest

trade hubs. The Ukrainian crisis has given fresh impetus to Chinese efforts to forge a closer relationship between the two nations, as Russia faces sanctions from the west

From my perspective, China refuses to waver in its policies, no matter what setbacks it encounters. The belt and road initiative is its counterattack in a global game of chess. The democracies of Europe and the US are very different from China.





- Images from Ai Weiwei's Provisional Landscapes project in China.  
Photographs: courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Under pressure to solve short-term problems during their terms of office in order to get re-elected, western governments concentrate their efforts on capital projects and economic competition. The corporatocratic west, primarily measuring political success according to economic profitability, has lost its vision of pursuing mutual benefit and the wellbeing of humankind.

This, however, is not to say that China is necessarily bringing real benefits to the developing world. The belt and road initiative, launched to benefit China, is tinted with colonialism.

It leads this ancient country of 1.4 billion people to a swamp of pragmatism and egoism. While China is pumped up with ambition, it also sinks into contradiction and confusion, because of its lack of self-awareness. The ideological superstructure and economic base will be at odds with each other for a long time.

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[NoViolet Bulawayo](#)

## **NoViolet Bulawayo: ‘I’m encouraged by this new generation that wants better’**



‘This book was not even about Mugabe, really: it needed to be about the common people.’ NoViolet Bulawayo. Photograph: Nye Lyn Tho

The Booker-shortlisted author talks about Zimbabwe after Mugabe - and drawing on Orwell for her brilliant new political satire

Alex Clark

Sat 19 Mar 2022 05.00 EDT

On the day I talk over Zoom with [NoViolet Bulawayo](#) in Zimbabwe, she is relying on a generator to power her internet connection; when she has a tickle in her throat and excuses herself to fetch water, she returns laughing, having forgotten that there is none today, and relieved that her sister has furnished her with a bottle. Ahead of travelling to the US for the publication of her second novel, Glory, she is in Bulawayo, the home city that provides half of her pen name; the other half, NoViolet, links the Ndebele word for “with” to the name of her mother, who died when her daughter was 18 months old. It was an early loss that, she says, means her writing will always have a strong awareness of how personal lives intersect with larger historical and political forces. “Some of these things that we carry, we don’t sign up for. But we’re here and, you know, everything and anything can happen to us. It’s part of my story. But it also doesn’t define me or define who I am and where I’m going.”

Born Elizabeth Zandile Tshele in 1981, the year after Southern Rhodesia became Zimbabwe and Robert Mugabe its first prime minister, Bulawayo has used her work to explore the importance of naming as an act of self-possession, so much so that her debut novel was entitled [We Need New Names](#). She herself, she once said on stage, grew up with many names, and didn’t know she was called Elizabeth until her first day at school.

We Need New Names, published in 2013, was shortlisted for the Booker prize, making Bulawayo the first Black African woman and the first Zimbabwean to feature in the final six. Earlier, what became its opening chapter had won the Caine prize for African writing under the title Hitting Budapest, a reference to the nickname given to a wealthy area by the group of hungry children who go there, from the shantytown called Paradise, to steal guavas. The novel moved from [Zimbabwe](#) to its protagonist’s new home in the American midwest, a geographical and cultural journey mirrored by its author, who studied in Michigan and Texas before earning a master’s at Cornell University and being awarded the Truman Capote Fellowship, both in creative writing. Having left Zimbabwe at 18, to join an

aunt, it would be 13 years before she visited her home country again, due to her studies and the instability in the country. In previous interviews, she has talked about the beginning of her life in the US as a time of silence, where previously she had been a noisy, gregarious child.



A demonstration in Harare against the Mugabe regime in November, 2017.  
Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

Bulawayo went on to teach at Stanford and elsewhere, but 2017 provided her with an exceptional and pressing reason to return to the country of her birth: the end of Mugabe's rule, following a coup d'etat that ended with his former deputy, Emmerson Mnangagwa, being installed in his place. "Because it was so momentous, I knew right from the start that there was a story there," she remembers. Initially, she planned to write nonfiction, before realising that, by the time she had assembled her material, "everything worth saying would have been said". When the tumultuous and violent elections of 2018 came round, she knew she needed a different approach. "Spending time on the ground, just witnessing people's hopes and dreams and fears and optimism, and very crucially witnessing that fall apart with the outcome of the elections, made me realise that, OK, this book was not even about Mugabe, really; it needed to be about the common people, the ordinary people and their stories."

Even then, the project was to undergo another more radical shift. Bulawayo would wake in the morning, turn on the news, and see that reality was moving more quickly than she could hope to take account of; every new development would complicate or render obsolete a plot line or character. At the same time, she says, Zimbabweans were making frequent use of George Orwell's [Animal Farm](#) to discuss the political situation. Blending that with her memories of her grandmother's animal-led stories, she decided to forsake the human world entirely.

I don't want to say the world does not care about Zimbabwe – but it doesn't seem to know what to do with our situation

The result is a novel that opens with the citizens of the imaginary Jidada gathering in sweltering heat to celebrate Independence Day under the eye of the Old Horse and his wife, Marvellous the Donkey, their security assured by a retinue of Chosen Ones and a ferocious pack of dogs, the Defenders. The Old Horse, now reaching the end of his powers, imagines that the animals will stay loyal for ever, but bargains without their swelling discontent:

“But the Father of the Nation didn't know us either, didn't know that what was happening to him was actually the best thing to ever happen to us. That after the last election he'd in fact rigged, following the previous one he'd also rigged like the other ones before that he'd stolen – yes, after he and his regime had frustrated all the proper and possible ways at our disposal to remove him in a peaceful and constitutional manner, we'd been left with no choice but to become the kinds of animals to welcome his demise and welcome his demise whichever way it came.”

Bulawayo spent a year in Zimbabwe and another in South Africa, and then, after six months back in the US, she returned home, where she continued to experience the reality of daily life for Zimbabweans: hours spent queueing for fuel or at the bank to withdraw money, frequent disruptions to utilities and limited access to medical care. How did it feel after the surge of hopefulness that followed Mugabe's deposition? How quickly did that feeling, which she describes as a turning point after decades of stasis, begin

to fade? “I think it became apparent very, very quickly,” she replies, citing the 2018 election as the moment at which those who had been prepared to grant the new administration the leeway to create a new start “realised that, OK, we were still in trouble, nothing had changed”.



A still from the 1954 animation adaptation of George Orwell's Animal Farm. Photograph: Halas & Batchelor/Allstar

I ask her how she felt at the time, and feels now, about the reaction of the international community. “I mean, at some point, if you come from a place like Zimbabwe, and you live the life that some of us have lived, you come to appreciate that you are really on your own; that the world does not – I don’t want to say does not really care – but doesn’t seem to know what to do with our situation. So if anything, it wasn’t disappointment in the international community, it was just a feeling of, OK, we are back to square one, and there is no way out of it.”

But that sense of isolation doesn’t have to lead to insularity. There’s an extraordinary, electrifying moment in Glory when a group of animals, waiting for the results of what is ironically called the #freefairncredible election, are galvanised by news from afar, and gather round a phone to watch footage of a brutal murder carried out by officers of the law in another country: “We see them talking, the murdered Black body at their feet like a

reaped harvest, like a big black bundle of nothing.” The page resolves into the repetition of a single phrase: “I can’t breathe.”

The murder of [George Floyd](#) and the [global protests](#) that followed it prompted Bulawayo to reflect on the links between abuses of power across countries and societies, and on her own responsibility as a writer. “This is a point in my work where I have to pause and consider how I position myself in relation to the world, and what is happening; to push my art to do more, to be engaged, and to continue to be in solidarity with struggles for all kinds of freedom everywhere.”

Western women are also going through their own stuff. And the thing is to find the solidarities

She is appreciative of the part that social media has played in allowing those engaged in such struggles to connect with one another, and in the way that it has democratised the news and reportage, providing multiple perspectives and voices. But she notes the importance of continuing to participate and engage once one has logged off, and of remembering that “some of the people engaged in these movements do not always have access to the internet, depending on where they are. It’s easy for the few of us who have the privilege of connectivity to actually think, ah, this is normal. This is the real world. But the reality is that a big chunk of these battles are fought quietly outside of the spotlight of social media, that there are important names that will never trend, and that there are generations of freedom fighters who have been doing this work without the internet, without being spotlighted.”

We talk about how this relates to issues around feminism, and how the proliferation of platforms for sharing experiences and priorities can challenge a dominant western narrative, one that sees women beyond it as victims of oppression in need of salvation. “Western women are also going through their own stuff,” she remarks. “And the thing is to find the solidarities. I think there’s so much to be gained from a truly connected movement, an intersectional movement, women connecting across borders, across time, across all kinds of divisions that are really artificial.”

I wonder how those artificial dividing lines fit into her own experience of living in the US for such a long time. The seismic events of the last few years there, she says, felt disheartening in the sense that they reminded her how “what happens in one part of the world can easily happen even to those other parts that think they are better because they have this democracy thing figured out”. But she remains committed to retaining her dual identity. “I fiercely love both countries. It took me a while to own America as home, because it’s a complicated business. I’m an immigrant, I’m not from there. There is a way in which the country, especially during the Trump years – and really before, but it was certainly amplified then – can remind you of your otherness, of your foreignness. And that can certainly create a tension in how you see yourself in terms of belonging. But the reality is that I’ve lived in both countries for more or less equal years now. I’ve made my life in both countries, and my life continues to be in both countries. So, it is no longer an option to be detached from one place or the other, no matter how maddening they can be.”

Glory is dedicated to “all Jidasas, everywhere”, and it is undeniably a powerful celebration of the strength of a united citizenry, of a moment when those living under tyranny decide that they have had enough – a sentiment that has particular force as we speak, in the immediate aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. But it’s also impossible to read it without an awareness of Zimbabwe’s post-Mugabe challenges and, indeed, it is a novel filled with pain and loss. What does Bulawayo feel the future looks like from the present moment? She considers carefully. “As a writer and as a Zimbabwean, there is a feeling of despair, in the sense that nothing is working,” she says. “I know that’s a totalising way of framing it, but the reality is that the future is not encouraging. And understandably, because those who are in charge of the country are inefficient, they are inept, they are corrupt, they do not care about the lives of ordinary Zimbabweans. And, given what just happened in the last election, it doesn’t seem like it’s going to be easy to remedy the situation. That’s where the despair comes from. That said, it is always important to hope, to be optimistic. I am encouraged by this new generation that wants better, and I think that’s really going to be an important component of us figuring out the way forward, because for you to go somewhere you have to want better.”

And what will she be up to? She smiles. “What I’m doing next is a whole bunch of relaxing. I’ve been writing since 2017. And this book drained me. I think it’s one of the hardest things I’ve ever done.” And, mindful of the drain not only on her but on her generator, we say goodbye.

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- *Glory* by NoViolet Bulawayo is published by Chatto & Windus (£18.99). To support the Guardian and the Observer buy a copy at [guardianbookshop.com](https://guardianbookshop.com). Delivery charges may apply.

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Interview

**Kate Mosse: ‘A taxi driver said I wasn’t as tall as he’d expected. He thought he was picking up Kate Moss’**

[Rosanna Greenstreet](#)



Kate Mosse: ‘Something extinct I’d bring back to life? University grants.’  
Photograph: Peter Flude/The Guardian

The author on a kiss at a school disco in 1977, her love of Mini Cheddars and her hoard of 25,000 books

Sat 19 Mar 2022 05.30 EDT

Born in Chichester, Mosse, 60, worked in publishing and in 1996 co-founded the Women’s prize for fiction. She went on to become a radio presenter before leaving to write Labyrinth – the first novel in her bestselling Languedoc Trilogy – which was published in 2005. Her books have been translated into 38 languages, and The City of Tears, the second in The Burning Chambers series, is out in paperback. She is married with two children and lives in Chichester.

**What is the trait you most deplore in yourself?**

Hoarding books: I have 25,000.

**What is the trait you most deplore in others?**

Unkindness.

**What was your most embarrassing moment?**

Launching the Women’s prize. I was almost invisible behind the lectern – lecterns are made for tall men and I’m 5ft 2in – so I stood on a cardboard box. I was saying, “Ladies and gentleman, I’m delighted to welcome you ...” when I went through the box and disappeared.

**Describe yourself in three words**

Hopeful, energetic and short.

**What would your superpower be?**

To sleep through the night.

**What do you most dislike about your appearance?**

I’ve learned to be happy with myself.

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**If you could bring something extinct back to life, what would you choose?**

Grants for university so that any young person who wanted to learn and who had the talent could go without incurring huge amounts of debt.

**What is your most unappealing habit?**

Clearing away after people when they are still eating their meal.

**What scares you about getting older?**

Running out of time.

**What did you want to be when you were growing up?**

First I wanted to be in the circus, then a tap dancer, then prime minister. I have failed at all three.

**What is the worst thing anyone's said to you?**

A taxi driver said, "You're not as tall as I'd expected" when he thought he was picking up [Kate Moss](#).

**Would you choose fame or anonymity?**

Something in between the two.

**What is your guiltiest pleasure?**

Mini Cheddars.

**What does love feel like?**

Breathing.

**What was the best kiss of your life?**

School disco 1977, 10cc playing I'm Not in Love and kissing my husband for the first time. We were 16. I was at the girls' comp and he was at the boys' comp, so there were joint school discos.

**What has been your biggest disappointment?**

Not working in another country.

**When did you last cry, and why?**

Last night, watching [Grey's Anatomy](#).

**How often do you have sex?**

I don't kiss'n'tell.

**What keeps you awake at night?**

Thinking about all the things I have failed to do during the day.

**Would you rather have more sex, money or fame?**

I think I have enough of all of those.

**What is the most important lesson life has taught you?**

There's always tomorrow.

**What happens when we die?**

If I knew I would tell you.

**Tell us a joke**

I'm a supermodel.

**Tell us a secret**

I'm not a supermodel.

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## 2022.03.19 - Opinion

- So much has changed since 1938, but not the very British way of coping with crisis
- Who pays the P&O ferryman? The 800 staff thrown overboard, of course
- Here in Hong Kong, Covid has surged and we've run out of coffins. Please learn from our mistakes
- The government is too cosy with P&O's owners to strengthen workers' rights

## OpinionUkraine

# **So much has changed since 1938, but not the very British way of coping with crisis**

[Ian Jack](#)



People knew the news was grave before the second world war. They feel that now. In both eras, we have developed strategies to get by



‘The Munich crisis of 1938 gave Mass Observation a marvellous chance to find out the opinions of the nation.’ Neville Chamberlain at Heston airport on 3 October 1938 after a summit with Adolf Hitler. Photograph: Mirrorpix/Getty Images

Sat 19 Mar 2022 04.00 EDT Last modified on Sat 19 Mar 2022 08.30 EDT

Armed conflict, especially when fought against a more powerful enemy, produces the loftiest national rhetoric. It keeps our spirits up, and we tend to remember the best bits. [In his speech](#) to the Westminster parliament last week, Volodymyr Zelenskiy echoed Churchill’s “We shall fight on the beaches” passage from his post-Dunkirk oration, but the Ukrainian president might just as appositely have referenced one of Britain’s most hostile critics.

“These are the times that try men’s souls,” the English radical and American patriot Thomas Paine [wrote in 1776](#), when the American revolutionary war was only a year old and its outcome far from certain. “The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country,” Paine continued, “but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered: yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph.”

The words began Paine's essay in a pamphlet – the first of 16 – that he hoped would inspire and sustain the colonists' opposition to London rule. Like a lot of rhetoric, it includes nonsense more apparent today than when it was first heard or read. King George III is now nobody's idea of a tyrant, and when Paine compares London's oppressive regulation to slavery – if it isn't slavery, he says, then "there is not such a thing as slavery upon Earth" – he reveals a remarkable blindness to the real, non-metaphorical chattel slaves who underpinned so much of the American economy. Still, "the summer soldier and the sunshine patriot" is a memorable phrase, the prose has an appealing rhythm, and, not the least of their attractions, the titles of the pamphlets place them firmly in the modern age. Some were called The American Crisis and others simply The Crisis. A more urgent era had begun.

The word itself is ancient – from the Greek *krisis* meaning decision, used by Hippocrates to describe the turning point in the progress of a disease that leads either to recovery or death. By the 17th century its usage had begun to spread beyond medicine. In 1627, Sir Benjamin Rudyerd MP, [trying to mediate](#) between Charles I and parliament, spoke of the "crisis of parliaments; by this we shall know whether parliaments will live or die". Astrologers were soon using the word to describe a conjunction of the planets that was critical to human affairs. Gradually, it came to mean something more prolonged than a life-or-death moment. The factory owner and social reformer Robert Owen edited a [short-lived newspaper](#), The Crisis, that promoted "the change from error and misery to truth and happiness", while Marx and Engels in the Communist Manifesto describe "crises that by their periodical return put the existence of the entire bourgeois society on its trial, each time more threateningly".

In the 20th century, anxiety and feelings of powerlessness became central to the experience. Charles Madge and Tom Harrisson, founders of the [Mass Observation movement](#) in the crisis-afflicted 1930s, decided that the word had no very exact meaning, but had come to be one of those things, like epidemics and earthquakes, "which suddenly arrive to threaten the security of our ordinary lives". National or international, a crisis was "a kind of melting pot for boundaries, institutions, opinions".



Illustration by Matt Kenyon

It was the last that most intrigued Madge and Harrisson: how opinions were formed, how they changed, what they were alleged to be, and what they actually were. The [Munich crisis of September 1938](#) and the events leading up to it gave Mass Observation a marvellous chance to find out, and its 1,500 voluntary observers – interviewers and eavesdroppers in the cause of a primitive anthropology – were deployed to record both public and private moods.

The results [appeared in a Penguin Special](#) published the next year, price sixpence. I bought a secondhand copy 50 years ago, and it remains a favourite book. There's so much life, variety and wit in it. (Observer to barmaid in Bolton: "What do you think of the Austrian crisis?" Barmaid: "Oh, I'm not fussy.") Britain was a different country then – patriarchal, monocultural, with newspapers, BBC radio and rumour the only sources of information outside the personal experience of family and friends. Nonetheless, attitudes that were common then still persist. The bad news of 1938 produced reactions that have become familiar again in the past few years. One is that there is simply too much of it – too much news, too much of it bad. Mass Observation found the public's interest in crises was decreasing. After all, what could people do to change things?

A clerk in 1938: “I am getting tired of people talking about wars in Spain and China … if people start talking about another war I feel like saying, ‘For goodness sake shut up.’”

My neighbour in 2022: “I buy the Week and read it once a week. That’s it. I never read, watch or listen to any other news for the sake of my psychic health.”

Wife (to me) in 2022: “Should we switch from the Today programme to Radio 3 in the morning like we did during Covid?”

Newspapers were by far the biggest opinion formers in 1938, though the people whose opinions they formed often didn’t trust them. Madge and Harrisson pointed out the irony: “It is like being led through [a] strange country by a guide who may turn out to be a gangster. Hence most opinion, except the most fanatical, is tinged with uncertainty … ”

Today, mainstream sources of news are flatly contested as well as distrusted. Walking to the tube to get to the Russian embassy the other day, and carrying a placard (STOP PUTIN, STOP WAR), my wife had two encounters. A man by an ice-cream van shouted to her: “You’ve got to be careful about your sources of information … CNN is putting out poison … You’ve got to keep your radar spinning.” Then, at the station, a woman who turned out to be Russian approached, trembling and hyperventilating. “No, no, it’s lies, it’s American lies,” she said. “The Ukrainians have been killing people for years … in the war they would shoot children.”

My wife said that in Russia they couldn’t be having this conversation, and the woman said frankly that was true. “But the Americans will soon make it like that here, too.”

Russia had better things to do than invade [Ukraine](#), morally and practically. The permafrost is melting all the way across Siberia, swelling the land as if it had boils and releasing huge quantities of methane. A force of nature, it may well be unstoppable – impossible, unlike the burning of fossil fuels and chopping down of rainforests, to moderate by changing human behaviour. This is a crisis to end crises, and a rhetoric has still to be found to match it.

- Ian Jack is a Guardian columnist
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[Opinion](#)[P&O Ferries](#)

## Who pays the P&O ferryman? The 800 staff thrown overboard, of course

[Marina Hyde](#)



The Dubai-owned ferry company's treatment of its former employees has managed to appal even the UK government



P&O ferries at the port in Dover, 18 March 2022. Photograph: Andy Rain/EPA

Sat 19 Mar 2022 11.40 EDTFirst published on Fri 18 Mar 2022 09.51 EDT

Mesmerising work by P&O Ferries, whose decision to [sack 800 seafaring staff](#) over a Microsoft Teams meeting makes them slightly more distasteful boat owners than several people on the international sanctions list. Indeed, for the duration of the HR chief's message on Thursday, there may even have been people smugglers in the Channel who would have been more palatable. Certainly, they seem to operate some of the same routes more reliably.

And so to how the day unfolded. On Thursday morning, P&O Ferries recalled its vessels to port with the most ominous words in the shipping forecast – “all-colleague announcement” – promising that “long-term viability” was about to be secured. Sounds good! At which point, the human resources guy delivered [a pre-recorded message](#) from some kind of middle-management bunker, as though he were coordinating the resistance of a besieged eastern European country and not just avoiding having to look any of the staff in the eye when he tells them they’re being “restructured” with immediate effect. The former employees were informed their jobs would be promptly taken over by cheaper agency workers. Whether this is even legal

is a [matter of some debate](#); suffice to say the implications of the story continue to unfurl themselves like the petals of a [stinking corpse lily](#).

Having made their peace with losing out on Employers of the Year 2022, P&O Ferries apparently followed up the video message by sending balaclava-wearing, handcuff-trained [private security guards](#) on to the boats to clear away all remaining ... colleagues, is it? Some staff refused to leave their vessels but eventually dispersed when it was suggested that they were risking their severance. Justified outrage is apparently above their paygrade. Sorry – ex-paygrade.

Even the government seems appalled, while a lot of people have a lot of questions. None of which are, “Ooh, is that HR guy single?” For the video alone, he must be judged the worst person associated with ferries since Chris Grayling. (Although, as I know you’ll recall, Chris was more associated with [firms that didn’t have any ferries](#). That was kind of the problem. All right, all right – [one of the problems](#).)

I can tell you that a mere four months ago, a P&O honcho was on LinkedIn pushing a video celebrating the company as an employer who wanted to “do things differently”. As this uplifting film explained of working at the company – “It’s not just a job; it’s a career. It’s not just a job; it’s the future of seafaring. It’s not just a job; it’s family.” Righto. Unfortunately, it’s the [Roy family](#). What a crew this is.

Dimly and belatedly realising that perhaps he ought to say something, P&O Ferries’ chief executive, Peter Hebblethwaite, [wrote to staff](#) on Friday morning, touching euphemistically on what he called “changes we’re making to our crewing model”. Why do people talk like this even in their employees’ hour of anguish? It’s not “changes to a crewing model” – it’s sacking them. I see he’s also claiming it is “essential” that staff “avoid posting any comments or views on social media”. So I’m happy to point out that Peter will be paid hundreds of thousands of pounds a year to be this much of a cowardly arse.

Of course, it’s not just Peter and the P&O family guys we see – in many ways they’re the monkeys as opposed to the organ-grinder. As you’d expect

of any self-respecting island nation, Britain's P&O Ferries is now owned by the [Dubai-based DP World](#). Things we know about DP World? They have a [£146m unpaid debt](#) with the Merchant Navy Ratings pension fund, which is supposed to offer P&O Ferries staff security in their retirement. And they've also just spaffed £147m sponsoring golf's European tour. Which seems a little on the nose, even by the debased standards of the age.

As for the age, it continues to feel not-as-billed. The movies might have led you to believe that late stage capitalism would feature a charismatically monstrous overlord, shot on a multimillion-dollar lighting budget. In fact, it's just a HR guy reading off his Notes app, as he explains that your immediate financial devastation is "well beyond the statutory requirements". Hard to imagine how this could have been more excruciating, unless he had prefaced it with a poem by Bono, as the [House speaker, Nancy Pelosi, did](#) the same day in her St Patrick's Day remarks.

Affectlessly aware that they can do whatever they want, executives like our HR guy talk like the hold music to the underworld. Perhaps appropriately. After all, in ancient Greek mythology, Charon the ferryman would carry the newly deceased souls across the River Styx. It was a fairly turbo-capitalist transit system itself, actually – if you didn't have the fare you had to wander the shores for a hundred years, probably while a lot of spectral figures explained how you could easily have saved for a house deposit if you'd just had the drive to live a bit longer. Charon was described as a "sordid god" by Virgil (who was not the poet Bono is, but still quite good), though that was all thousands of years ago. These days, we should expect our passage to the other side to be helmed by someone very like our HR guy, probably droning "get in the hole" as he watches European tour highlights on his phone. Might as well start sucking it up, passengers – you're a long time dead.

- Marina Hyde is a Guardian columnist
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[Opinion](#)[Hong Kong](#)

## **Here in Hong Kong, Covid has surged and we've run out of coffins. Please learn from our mistakes**

[Ilaria Maria Sala](#)

To keep out the virus, the city shut up shop – and shut down protests. But low vaccination rates mean it has now stormed our defences



The commercial centre at Causeway Bay, Hong Kong Island, March 2022.  
Photograph: Liau Chung-ren/Zuma Press Wire/Rex/Shutterstock

Fri 18 Mar 2022 08.37 EDT Last modified on Fri 18 Mar 2022 14.41 EDT

The streets are quiet. The beaches are inaccessible. Theatres, museums, schools, gyms and libraries are shut. [Hong Kong](#) is going round in circles, closing down and opening up just a little bit, in an endless loop that has everybody feeling claustrophobic. For more than two years, the city's success in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic relied not on vaccinations,

but almost entirely on keeping the virus out, and making it hard for people to get together in large groups. Now the virus has breached the defences – and we’re paying the price.

At the beginning of the pandemic, Hong Kong’s [biggest political upheaval in decades](#) was still under way, with daily protests, at times violent, and countless arrests. The health crisis allowed for the imposition of emergency measures that kept the virus at bay – along with crowds of people. For most of the past two years, no more than four people could meet up in public; [now that number is two](#). It has been difficult to disentangle the measures taken to prevent illness from those taken to prevent political protests – and this mix has bred a toxic mistrust.

Still, the restrictions contained the virus. Living in Hong Kong felt a bit like being in a strange bubble. Leaving the city was not easy – the former transportation hub is still [far behind pre-pandemic flight levels](#), and an airline that comes bearing Covid-positive passengers [can be banned for a fortnight](#). Travellers languish in quarantine hotels (it used to be three weeks, now it has been [shortened to two](#)) adding considerable costs to anyone who would like a holiday or to visit friends and family abroad. Going across the border to mainland China is not easy, either, as the crossing [still has not been reopened](#). So-called “ambush lockdowns” happen regularly, when all of a sudden entire residential blocks are cut off and reopened only when everyone inside has been tested.

All of this was the price to pay in pursuit of “zero Covid”. It was tough, but the numbers were kept low. The absence of an exit strategy, however, has made the economic cost painfully high, with [businesses going under](#) and one-way departures from the city becoming a heartbreakingly norm.

Many have left to escape from the political stagnation in which Hong Kong now finds itself, in particular after the [national security law](#) (NSL) was imposed by Beijing in June 2020. This introduced vaguely defined crimes of secession, subversion, terrorism and foreign collusion, which have caused much concern. It has led to the closing down of many local and international NGOs, the [disbanding of a major trade union](#) and a chilling effect on [news organisations](#). When disaster struck in the form of thousands of new Covid

cases every day, Hong Kong simply no longer had the various communication channels that unions, independent media and grassroots-level councillors could provide. This has meant that in a moment of crisis the Hong Kong government could only rely on its own, not always trusted, channels to communicate new anti-pandemic measures, explain the need for vaccinations and help those who found it hard to navigate the emergency. (Many local politicians have been disqualified from standing for office, while 47 of the most prominent opposition figures find themselves awaiting trial for alleged crimes relating to the NSL.)

Eventually, the virus made its way into the city through community infection – strict anti-Covid measures were never going to be impenetrable for ever – allowing the more contagious Omicron variant a foothold. And so, a population that had felt very little need to vaccinate itself in the absence of local cases was hit as strongly as the rest of the world was two years ago. By way of comparison, New Zealand, which also attempted a zero-Covid strategy, has a 2% unvaccinated rate among the over-80s; in Hong Kong, when this latest wave hit, 66% of over-80s had not been vaccinated. There are relatively low levels of immunity from previous infection among the population, and sub-par official messaging has meant that vaccine hesitancy has not been seriously addressed.

In less than two months, Hong Kong has run out of coffins and space in the morgue. Pictures of sick elderly patients on hospital beds outdoors – and of body bags piling up next to patients in a chaotic hospital ward – have shocked the population. In recent days Hong Kong has had the highest mortality rate since the beginning of the pandemic anywhere in the world. What's more, there are fewer and fewer people left to ask the authorities hard questions – accountability has never felt further out of reach.

The way forward is still unclear. And all this at a time when Hong Kong is supposed to be preparing for the festivities around the 25th anniversary of its handover to China on 1 July – festivities that will, of course, be free of those pesky pro-democracy protesters.

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Ilaria Maria Sala is a writer and journalist based in Hong Kong

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**Opinion****P&O Ferries**

## The government is too cosy with P&O's owners to strengthen workers' rights

[Louise Haigh](#)



Never again should any company think they can treat British workers with such contempt

- Louise Haigh is the shadow transport secretary



‘A decade-long assault on workers’ rights under successive Conservative governments must come to an end.’ Demonstration against the sacking of P&O workers in Dover on Friday. Photograph: Glyn Kirk/AFP/Getty Images

Fri 18 Mar 2022 14.13 EDT Last modified on Fri 18 Mar 2022 14.31 EDT

Yesterday’s [shock sackings of 800 seafarers](#) by P&O Ferries was an act so outrageous that it prompted near-universal disgust across the country. The sight of security guards, apparently wearing balaclavas and wielding handcuffs, ambushing ordinary British workers and forcing them off their boats and into immediate unemployment was unprecedented.

These workers need a government that will step in and act to protect their jobs, not offer up meaningless platitudes. Shockingly, despite being informed of these plans [the previous night](#), the government did not lift a finger to find out if these sackings were illegal, and if there was anything that could be done to stop them.

It is unbelievable that no alarm bells were set off. Did they not think to find out how P&O Ferries proposed to dismiss 800 staff with a click of their fingers – and at least attempt to warn it off its proposed course of action in the strongest possible terms?

The government has had fair warning that there were serious issues at P&O Ferries. Two years ago, Sultan Ahmed bin Sulayem, the billionaire head of Dubai-based DP World, the owners of the ferry company, claimed that P&O Ferries [needed £257m in aid](#) to avoid collapse and asked the UK government for £150m – all while paying DPW shareholders £270m. They were turned down – and one month later, they made over [1,000 employees redundant](#).

Yet none of this stopped the Conservatives cosying up with DP World. Last September, the chancellor, Rishi Sunak, [said he was “thrilled”](#) to greenlight hundreds of millions of pounds of DP World investment in Thames Gateway and Southampton. A month later the company [partnered with](#) the Foreign Office’s development finance. And for the last two years, DP World [has sat on](#) the UK government’s trade advisory group.

It seems that just like with the Russian oligarchs, the government has lost sight of the national interest, writing blank cheques without asking for anything in return – not even basic protection and human decency towards British workers. Why is it that P&O has sacked [almost a quarter](#) of its British staff, while [regional media in France](#) is reporting that [no French employees](#) have been affected?

On the surface, this is a case of “[fire and rehire](#)”. The sacked workers can reapply via an agency, who will now be providing P&O staff on worse terms and conditions. For some workers, this option is [not feasible](#). It would appear that the end result will be existing staff replaced by new agency workers.

This national scandal has to mark a moment of real change.

A decade-long assault on workers’ rights under successive Conservative governments must come to an end. This has to be a line in the sand. We are calling on the government to suspend and review all licences and contracts held with DP World, and suspend it from the trade advisory group. And the Conservatives must bring forward legislation immediately to outlaw fire and rehire – and strengthen workers’ rights.

Never again should any company think they can treat British workers with such contempt – and be given the green light by the government to do so. Labour will make Britain work for working people.

- Louise Haigh is the shadow transport secretary and Labour MP for Sheffield Heeley
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## 2022.03.19 - Around the world

- [Ukraine crisis Joe Biden warns Xi Jinping of 'consequences' if he backs Russia](#)
- [Business Pressure mounts on Koch Industries to halt business in Russia](#)
- [Food 'weaponised' UN warns of global famine over blockade of Ukraine's grain exports](#)
- [War in Ukraine Gay rights activist among latest known victims](#)

## US foreign policy

# Joe Biden warns Xi Jinping of ‘consequences’ if China backs Russia

Leaders spoke for nearly two hours but Biden did not make any direct requests to Xi to persuade Putin to end the attack

- [Russia-Ukraine war: latest updates](#)



Joe Biden speaks with Xi Jinping from the White House on Friday.  
Photograph: The White House/AFP/Getty Images

*[Julian Borger](#) in Washington*

Fri 18 Mar 2022 15.53 EDT Last modified on Sat 19 Mar 2022 04.20 EDT

Joe Biden spoke for nearly two hours with [Xi Jinping](#) as the US sought to dissuade China from backing Russia’s war on Ukraine.

A White House account of the call on Friday said that the US president “described the implications and consequences if China provides material support to [Russia](#) as it conducts brutal attacks against Ukrainian cities and civilians”.

A senior administration official said there would be consequences “not just for China’s relationship with the United States, but for the wider world”, but would not give more details on whether Biden had gone into specifics on possible sanctions, other than to point out what had happened to Russia as an example.

“The president really laid out in a lot of detail the unified response from not only governments around the world, but also the private sector to Russia’s brutal aggression in [Ukraine](#),” the official said. “The president made clear that there would likely be consequences for those who would step in to support Russia at this time.”

Biden did not make any direct requests to Xi to persuade Putin to end the attack.

“The president really wasn’t making specific requests of China. He was laying out his assessment of the situation … and the implications of certain actions,” the official said. “Our view is that China will make its own decisions.”

The Chinese account of the conversation in the [state news agency, Xinhua](#), said it was “candid and in-depth” but gave little detail about Ukraine. The report said that Xi expressed the wish that the war was not happening, but gave no sign of what the Chinese leader’s intentions were towards support for Moscow.

Xi said the situation in Ukraine had developed to such a point “that China does not want to see” according to the report, which stuck to Beijing’s policy of avoiding the words “war” or “invasion”.

Beijing’s readout of the call did not suggest any Chinese role in ending the war. It quoted Xi as referring to a favourite aphorism, “Let he who tied the

bell on the tiger's neck take it off", a seeming reference to China's position that the US and Nato are ultimately to blame for Vladimir Putin's actions.

Beijing blames the war on Nato's refusal to rule out future Ukrainian membership of the alliance, and western supplies of weapons to the country. Xi also expressed concern about the impact on Taiwan, which he has vowed to restore to rule from Beijing.

Xi claimed "some people in the United States are sending the wrong signals to the 'Taiwan independence' forces, which is very dangerous".

"If the Taiwan issue is not handled properly, it will have a subversive impact on the relationship between the two countries," Xi added. The US "One China" policy acknowledges that Taiwan is part of China, but Washington does not recognise Beijing has sovereignty over the island.

Before the call, the White House press secretary, Jen Psaki, said Biden would question Xi about Beijing's "rhetorical support" of Putin and an "absence of denunciation" of Russia's invasion.

US officials fear that Xi has already decided to give Russia economic assistance and some military aid, though it unclear what difference Chinese arms supplies would make on the battlefield, as the more sophisticated weapons, like drones, would not be compatible with Russian equipment.

France's president, Emmanuel Macron, and Germany's chancellor, Olaf Scholz, both had hour-long conversations with Putin on Friday morning,

According to Scholz's office, the German leader had "put pressure on [Putin] to introduce a ceasefire as soon as possible, to improve the humanitarian situation and to make progress in the search for a diplomatic solution for the conflict".

A spokesman gave no details on whether any progress had been made, adding that the conversation had been focused on the war and attempts to stop it.

In the Kremlin's version of the conversation, put out ahead of the statement from Berlin, it was described as "harsh but businesslike", with Putin

complaining about war crimes he said had been committed by the Ukrainian army, referring to attacks he said had taken place in the eastern cities of Donetsk and Makiivka that had led to “numerous deaths”.

“These war crimes are being ignored by the west,” Putin said according to Russian news agency reports referring to the Kremlin. Putin reportedly told Scholz the Russian army “is doing everything to avoid civilian victims”.

According to the Kremlin’s account, Putin accused Ukraine of trying to “slow down” the discussions with Russia, and said that the government in Kyiv was making “unrealistic suggestions”. It added that the Russian leadership was “ready to seek solutions appropriate to its basic views”.

The Kremlin account of Putin’s call with Macron said the Russian president had talked about the Kremlin’s approach to peace talks with Ukraine but gave no details. The Elysée Palace said Macron had said he was “extremely concerned” about Mariupol, which has suffered constant shelling. According to the Kremlin version, Putin repeated the claim that Russian forces were doing everything possible to avoid civilian casualties.

The US, UK, France, Albania, Ireland and Norway have all accused Russia of committing war crimes in Ukraine, and the prosecutor at the international criminal court has begun collecting evidence. The UN’s international court of justice has ordered Russia to halt its invasion, declaring that it had no evidence to support Russian claims, used to justify the attack, that Ukrainian forces were committing genocide against Russian speakers in the east of the country.

The UN security council met on Friday to hear a repetition of Russia’s unsubstantiated claims, circulated after the invasion as a justification, that Ukraine had run biological weapons laboratories with US help.

“The UN was clear that there was no evidence. It was nonsense then. It’s nonsense now,” the UK permanent representative, Barbara Woodward, said afterwards. “And as far as we’re concerned, frankly, this is the disinformation of the desperate. Things are clearly not going well for Russia in Ukraine.”

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## [Koch brothers](#)

# Pressure mounts on Koch Industries to halt business in Russia

While hundreds of companies have paused operations, three Koch subsidiaries are still operating in the country



A sign advertising Koch Industries is seen in Boston in 2019. Photograph: Charles Krupa/AP

*[Dominic Rushe in New York](#)*

*[@dominicrue](#)*

Sat 19 Mar 2022 03.00 EDT Last modified on Sat 19 Mar 2022 03.02 EDT

Pressure is mounting on Koch Industries, the conglomerate run by the rightwing billionaire Charles Koch, to pull out of [Russia](#) after it was revealed it was continuing to do business in Russia through three wholly-owned subsidiaries.

Hundreds of companies including Coca-Cola, KPMG, McDonald's, Netflix and Starbucks have [paused operations](#) in Russia following its invasion of Ukraine. But, as news site [Popular Information](#) revealed last week, three Koch subsidiaries are still operating in the country.

"Koch Industries is shamefully continuing to do business in Putin's Russia and putting their profits ahead of defending democracy," the Senate majority leader, Chuck Schumer, and Senator Ron Wyden, said in a joint statement. "As the democracies of the world make huge sacrifices to punish Russia for Putin's illegal and vicious invasion of [Ukraine](#), Koch Industries continues to profit off of Putin's regime."

"It must stop," Schumer [wrote on Twitter](#), adding that he and Wyden were "exploring legislation to add Russia to existing laws denying foreign tax credits for taxes paid to North Korea & Syria."

Koch has defended its Russian operations. The company has three subsidiaries still operating in the country: Guardian Industries, a glass manufacturer; Molex, an electronic components manufacturer; and Koch Engineered Solutions, a provider of industrial products.

In a [statement](#) released on Wednesday Dave Robertson, Koch president, condemned the invasion. "The horrific and abhorrent aggression against Ukraine is an affront to humanity," he wrote. But he said the company would not "walk away" from its employees.

"Koch company Guardian Industries operates two glass manufacturing facilities in Russia that employ about 600 people. We have no other physical assets in Russia, and outside of Guardian, employ 15 individuals in the country. While Guardian's business in Russia is a very small part of Koch, we will not walk away from our employees there or hand over these manufacturing facilities to the Russian government so it can operate and benefit from them (which is what [the Wall Street Journal](#) has reported they would do). Doing so would only put our employees there at greater risk and do more harm than good," he wrote.

Robertson said the company was “complying with all applicable sanctions, laws and regulations” and would continue to monitor the situation.

The statement was released on the same day that the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, made an address to Congress. “All American companies must leave their market immediately because it is flooded with our blood,” said Zelenskiy.

The Kansas-based conglomerate – the second-largest private company in the US – is one of 40 companies “[digging in](#)” and refusing to leave Russia, according to a [tally](#) compiled by the Yale professor Jeffrey Sonnenfeld and his research team.

Popular Information also revealed last week that a network of pundits and groups funded by Koch has been [publicly advocating](#) against imposing economic sanctions on Russia.

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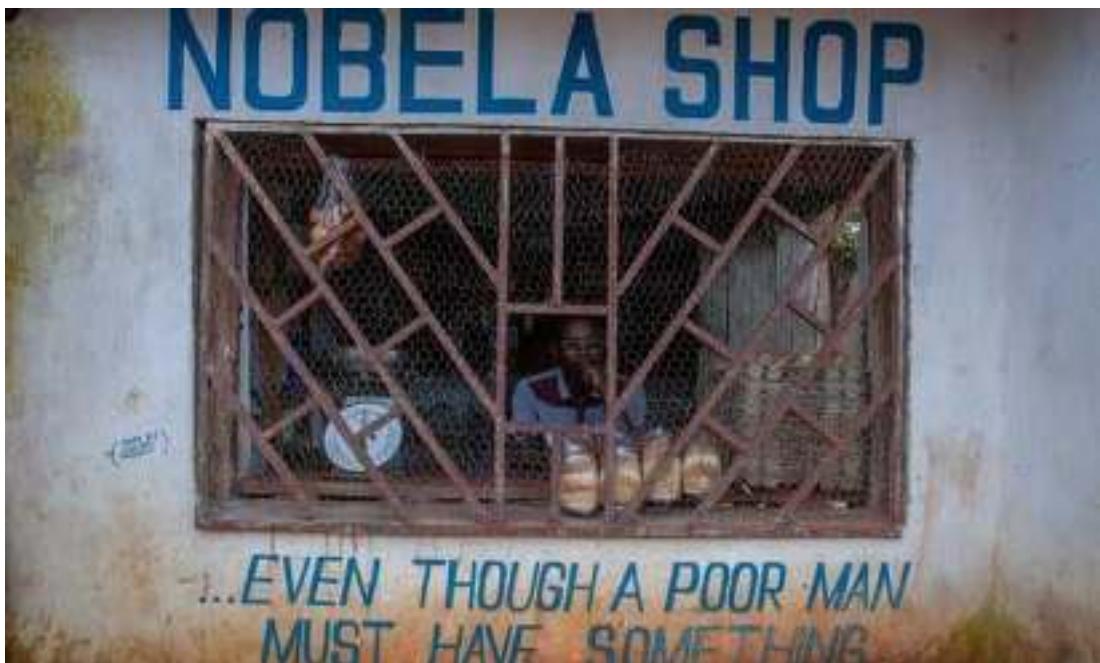
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## Food security

# UN warns Russian blockade of Ukraine's grain exports may trigger global famine

Special rapporteur on right to food sees risk of deepening hunger crisis in countries such as Yemen and Ethiopia

- [Russia-Ukraine war: latest updates](#)



A grocer sits with four loaves of bread in Lilongwe, Malawi. Africans are feeling the impact of the Ukraine crisis in increases in the price of grain, as well as fuel and fertiliser. Photograph: Amos Gumulira/AFP/Getty Images

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[Kaamil Ahmed](#)

Fri 18 Mar 2022 14.12 EDT Last modified on Fri 18 Mar 2022 14.27 EDT

The United Nations has warned that Russia's invasion of [Ukraine](#) could trigger global famine, as Moscow's Black Sea blockade delays crucial grain exports, and stoked fears of a deepening hunger crisis in countries such as Yemen and Ethiopia.

The UN's special rapporteur on the right to food, Michael Fakhri, warned on Friday of a global famine as the result of Russia's invasion.

"For the last three years, global rates of hunger and famine have been on the rise. With the Russian invasion, we are now facing the risk of imminent famine and starvation in more places around the world," said Fakhri.

He warned of long-term disruptions because of the ongoing fighting during planting season in Ukraine and Russia.

He also warned of rising hunger in Russia as a result of any general sanctions that could affect the wider population rather than being targeted at individuals and businesses.

“As with any military invasion, all countries must work in solidarity to address the urgent nutritional needs of all vulnerable people especially refugees, older persons, people with disabilities and children,” said Fakhri.

“Food should never be weaponised and no country in the world should be driven into famine and desperation.”

Meanwhile Ukraine’s grain exports through the Black Sea were reported to have stalled entirely, German media reported, quoting Jörg-Simon Immerz, head of grain trading at Germany’s largest agricultural trader BayWa.

At least 100 ships are reportedly stranded in the Black Sea and Sea of Azov, prompting calls for Russia to open a [“blue corridor”](#) to allow their exit.

The London-based International Grains Council (IGC) said the suspension of port activities was limiting Ukraine’s exports and that attempts to find other solutions were unlikely to satisfy the unmet demand.

“Immediate threats are mainly centred on the disruption to export flows. Commercial Black Sea port loadings are currently suspended in Ukraine. Although there are efforts to increase exports via railway routes through the country’s western borders, overall volumes are likely to be limited,” it said in a report on Wednesday.

The IGC downgraded its forecast for Ukraine’s grain exports by almost a quarter, from 62.8m tonnes to 47.8 million, compared with the forecast made last month.

It said that while Russia’s ports had resumed activity in March, export volumes could still be limited by sanctions while other sources for grain exports were unlikely to be able to replace the gap left by Ukraine.

The Moscow-based Institute for Agricultural Market Studies (IKAR) said [Russia had temporarily banned grains exports](#) to former Soviet states because of concerns at how quickly grains were being exported.

Russia and Ukraine’s combined wheat exports are crucial to a number of countries, including Egypt, Turkey, Bangladesh and Iran, who get 60% of their grain imports from the two countries, according to the UN.

The World Food Programme said the loss of access to grains and pulses from Ukraine could increase the cost of buying food by up to [\\$23m a month](#), threatening already underfunded crises in Yemen, Ethiopia, Afghanistan and Syria.

Last week, Ukraine banned the export of several grains, including barley, rye, oats and millet.

David Beasley, head of the World Food Programme, appealed to donors to not ignore crises beyond Ukraine and warned that rising hunger could fuel further instability.

“While you’re focused on Ukraine, please don’t neglect the Sahel, please don’t neglect Syria and Jordan, Lebanon. If you do, the consequences will be catastrophic,” he said. “Without food security, you’re not going to have peace. It’s just that simple.”

“Is it fair for us to take food from children in Ethiopia to give to the children in Ukraine? No,” he said.

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This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/mar/18/un-warns-russian-blockade-of-ukraines-grain-exports-may-trigger-global-famine>

## Ukraine

# Gay rights activist among latest known victims of Ukraine war

Details emerge of deaths of a Kharkiv Pride volunteer, an actor, and an American visiting his partner

- [Russia-Ukraine war: latest updates](#)



Elya Shchemur ‘inspired and motivated all volunteers around’, colleagues said. Photograph: Kharkiv Pride/Sphere NGO

[Kevin Rawlinson](#)

Fri 18 Mar 2022 13.28 EDT Last modified on Sat 19 Mar 2022 04.20 EDT

## **Elya Shchemur**

A gay rights activist from Kharkiv, Shchemur was killed during the Russian bombardment of the city centre, her colleagues at Kharkiv Pride said on

Thursday. She was killed at the local territorial defence office where she volunteered, they said.

“Elya was an activist and a patriot: she participated in all possible actions and democratic events of Kharkiv. Together with Elya, we went through three Kharkiv Prides and three women’s solidarity marches. Elya was actively engaged in human rights interventions and pride performances,” the colleagues said.

“She inspired and motivated not only our team but all volunteers around. People followed her into her struggle for freedom and equality. And when she smiled, everyone smiled back. Elya was one of the first Kharkiv Pride volunteers that joined the Kharkiv defence office. She was brave and courageous. A patriot and a hero. And this is how we will remember her and never forget.

## Oksana Shvets



Oksana Shvets. Photograph: Twitter

Shvets, an actor, was killed in a rocket attack on a building in the Kyiv, according to the theatre company of which she had been a member since

1980.

The performers talked of their “irreparable grief” as they announced the news of her death on Thursday, and vowed never to forgive the Russian forces who had invaded [Ukraine](#). The Kyiv Post, an English-language news outlet, referred to her death as “murder”.

According to an obituary in the showbusiness magazine Variety, Shvets had been honoured with a “merited artist of Ukraine” award for her work in theatre and was known for her performances at the Ternopil music and drama theatre and the Kyiv Theatre of Satire, as well as for her work in several Ukrainian feature films.

## **James Hill**



James Hill. Photograph: Facebook

The American was on one of his regular visits to Ukraine to spend time with his Ukrainian partner, Ira, who has multiple sclerosis, when the Russians struck. Hill, originally from Mahtomedi, Minnesota, stayed behind even as the bombs fell around him in the northern city of Chernihiv.

Those Russian bombs eventually took his life, his relatives have now learned, though it is more or less all they have been able to piece together about his death.

“He was not going to leave Ira’s side in her condition. Jim was in Ukraine this time because he had gotten medicine from the United States and had found a doctor in Chernihiv that would treat her,” Hill’s sister Katya told CNN, describing her brother as the “helper that people find in a crisis”.

She said Ukrainian police had told them he died during artillery fire, but the US embassy had provided no specifics. The family have been unable to find out where his body is and have been equally unsuccessful in contacting Ira’s family.

“The hardest thing that we’re going to have to go through is not having that kind of closure,” Katya said.

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# Headlines

- [Live P&O Ferries sackings ‘clearly illegal’ says union in ‘dark day for shipping industry’](#)
- [Shipping industry Mass sacking by P&O Ferries ‘a new low’, says union](#)
- [‘There were grown men in tears’ P&O crews stunned by mass sackings](#)
- [‘I’m ashamed to be British’ P&O Ferries customers vent fury](#)

[\*\*Business live\*\*](#)

[\*\*Business\*\*](#)

# P&O Ferries ‘give business a bad name’ amid rising anger and protests over sackings – as it happened

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## P&O Ferries

# Government knew of P&O Ferries sackings the day before, No 10 admits

Labour and unions demand immediate action including suspending licences of parent company DP World

- [Are the P&O Ferries mass sackings a result of Brexit?](#)
- [Angry protests against P&O Ferries take place at ports across UK](#)
- ['There were grown men in tears': P&O crews stunned by sackings](#)

01:54

'Sacked by email': P&O seafarers protest sudden UK redundancies – video report

*[Gwyn Topham](#), [Heather Stewart](#) and [Mark Sweney](#)*

Fri 18 Mar 2022 09.33 EDTFirst published on Fri 18 Mar 2022 04.57 EDT

Unions and the Labour party have demanded immediate action over the [sacking of 800 British crew by P&O Ferries](#), including suspending the licences of its parent company, DP World, as it emerged the government was made aware of the move the previous night.

Amid public calls for a boycott of P&O and protests at ports, unions demanded the government urge the firm to reverse its decision, and curb DP World's involvement in planned freeports.

The shadow transport secretary, Louise Haigh, said: "This was a despicable assault on workers' rights. But British seafarers do not need meaningless platitudes – they need action."

She has written to the prime minister proposing the government should claw back taxpayers' money claimed by DP World, including £10m in furlough payments; suspend its licences to operate until the situation is resolved; and remove it from the government's transport advisory group.

"The government must now stand up for loyal workers in Britain being undermined by overseas billionaires," she said. Labour would also like the government to legislate to outlaw "fire and rehire".

The defence minister, James Heappey, said on Friday morning that it would be "the right thing to do" for P&O to hand back £10m in furlough money, calling the company's behaviour "disgraceful".

He told Sky News: "It certainly feels to me that it would be the right thing to do for P&O to hand that money back, and I am sure that colleagues at the Treasury and Department for Transport will be looking into it. It's absolutely disgraceful behaviour by P&O."

Sources at the DfT said it was made aware of the impending mass sackings and suspension of ferry services on Wednesday night.

Boris Johnson's official spokesperson had said on Thursday: "We weren't given any notice to this."

He confirmed on Friday that senior officials at the DfT had first been informed about the firm's plan on Wednesday evening but had kept the information within a small group, because of concerns about commercial sensitivity.

The spokesperson said ministers were investigating whether P&O Ferries broke the law, describing the firm's behaviour as "extreme".

"We expect companies to treat their employees fairly. It is only in extreme circumstances that employers need to make extreme decisions to secure the future of their businesses if all other avenues have failed, including negotiations between employer and employees.

“We don’t believe this was the case for P&O staff,” he said, adding: “We are looking into this very carefully.”

He also said he did not think P&O was discussed when Johnson visited the [United Arab Emirates](#) on Wednesday. DP World is owned by the government of the UAE.

The RMT union’s general secretary, Mick Lynch, said: “The fact that the government knew the day before that a foreign owned company planned to cause major disruption to UK ports but did nothing to prevent it is shocking.”

He said the union had “been overwhelmed by the widespread public and political support”, adding: “But there is still time to reverse this shameful decision and today we are presenting a plan of action which needs to be acted upon immediately and if necessary, the government should introduce enabling legislation to make it happen.”

The RMT has called for a suspension of contracts with P&O and for DP World’s freeport interests in the UK.

The boss of the maritime union Nautilus called the mass sacking “a new low”, as he prepared to join protesters at Dover.

Mark Dickinson, the general secretary of Nautilus International, said demonstrations were also planned in Hull and Liverpool on Friday.

“It is a dark day for the shipping industry. I have been in this industry for over 40 years and I’ve seen some curve balls and shocking developments, but this is a new low for a shipping company – to treat due legal process in such an underhand and callous way has shocked me, it has taken my breath away,” he told BBC Radio 4’s Today programme.

Beth Hale, an employment lawyer at CM Murray, said P&O’s actions were “almost certainly” not within the rules and could potentially mean directors are criminally liable.

“What they ought to have been doing is consulting with staff, consulting with the unions about potential dismissals, considering whether there were

any suitable alternative roles, going through the processes,” she told Today.

“They also ought to have made a formal notification to the government, about the proposed dismissals – when there are dismissals in these numbers that’s a legal obligation and so there is potential criminal liability for directors as well, so it’s potentially an enormous breach.”

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Dickinson said Nautilus and RMT were “actively progressing” legal action over the move on Thursday by loss-making P&O Ferries to [sack staff, halt services and look to bring in cheaper agency crew](#) to run its vessels.

“It is clearly illegal,” he said. “The company is duty-bound to consult with trade unions. We have collective bargaining agreements for all the affected seafarers, for all the vessels on all the routes. We are actively progressing that.”

Dickinson said the UK’s Maritime and Coastguard Agency would have to be “absolutely clear and confident” that the cheaper agency could do the job safely.

“They are unfamiliar with the vessels, the routes, the berths. Crossing the English channel – the busiest shipping lane in the world – is like walking across a six-lane motorway at rush-hour,” he said. “This is an intensely worrying situation.”

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## Shipping industry

# ‘There were grown men in tears’: P&O crews stunned by sackings

Workers say they have been ‘treated abysmally’ as questions are raised about legality of firm’s actions



Lorries queue at the Port of Dover as a result of suspended ferry services.  
Photograph: Jodie Lingard/The Guardian

*[Rachel Hall](#)*

*[@rachelahall](#)*

Fri 18 Mar 2022 03.00 EDT Last modified on Fri 18 Mar 2022 15.27 EDT

Sacked P&O workers have spoken of their devastation after they unexpectedly [lost their jobs](#) on Thursday, warning that the redundancies will wreak major damage on a local community in which many people’s livelihoods depend on the shipping company.

Employees were angry that P&O had delivered the message in an online meeting, and dismayed that handcuff-trained security guards were employed to take crew members off ships. They said they had watched former colleagues, who had woken up this morning expecting to complete a normal shift, carry their bags off ships in floods of tears.

Furious ex-staff held a demonstration close to the ports around lunchtime, but had dispersed by early afternoon amid concerns about the impact on their severance offer.

One former employee said many of his ex-colleagues were worried about how they will pay their mortgages, especially since in many households in Dover “both breadwinners” work for P&O.

One 46-year-old P&O crew member, who has worked on the decks for 30 years, said he was worried about how he would support his family with two young children. “The news still hasn’t really sunk in. There aren’t many opportunities in this area,” he said.

“There was no ‘thank you for your service’. There were grown men in tears worrying what to do about their mortgages. We’ve been treated abysmally. This was planned for ages, it’s not off the hoof,” he added.



Darren Procter, national secretary of the RMT union. Photograph: Jodie Lingard/The Guardian

The three former P&O employees who spoke to the Guardian, who between them had given the company 100 years of service, asked not to be named due to P&O's policy against speaking to the media.

Commiserating over beers in the [RMT](#) office, they were visibly distraught, but were comforted by messages of support on social media and from MPs debating the issue in parliament.

They said that the terms and conditions for the new agency jobs are so poor that they did not plan to re-apply for roles as they would not be able to support their families.

The workers also worried about the impact on safety of the crews' rapid replacement since the new staff members have less training and experience than those they have replaced.

The new workers will be employed by an agency, and the RMT understands that employees will be paid less, with a possibility that European employees could receive below minimum wage on the Calais to Dover crossing since this operates under international maritime law, as [Irish Ferries](#) has done. They are not expected to receive sick pay or holiday.

01:54

'Sacked by email': P&O seafarers protest sudden UK redundancies – video report

RMT's national secretary, Darren Procter, said he understood that P&O ferries would not operate for around a week while the new crew are trained on the ship. He added that the new crew members have signed non-disclosure agreements.

The union plans to fight the redundancies by putting pressure on ministers, including to persuade them to remove freeport status from DP World, which owns P&O, and to detain the vessels while the dispute is resolved. An initial

meeting on Thursday evening did not result in any concrete action, but the shipping minister, Robert Courts, has pledged to consider next steps, he said.

The RMT also plans to continue hosting demonstrations across the UK, with one demo planned in Dover for noon on Friday. “We’re not going to stand by and watch this happen,” Procter said.

He said the union was currently exploring whether P&O’s approach, which he described as “fire and rehire”, had breached employment law.

He added it was the first time he had seen this approach in the maritime industry. “This is aggression on a different scale. These guys brought in jabs during the pandemic, and this is how they treat the staff. We’re a maritime nation, seafaring is the foundation of what we do. P&O is one of the most iconic companies in the UK,” he said.

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## [Travel & leisure](#)

# ‘I’m ashamed to be British’: P&O Ferries customers vent fury

Passengers report being left stranded as ferry operator sacks 800 crew and suspends crossings

[What can I do about my P&O ferry booking?](#)



Lorries queue on the A20 for the Port of Dover in Kent as P&O ferry services were suspended on Thursday. Photograph: Gareth Fuller/PA

*[Rob Davies](#)*

*[@ByRobDavies](#)*

Thu 17 Mar 2022 12.46 EDT Last modified on Fri 18 Mar 2022 05.01 EDT

Furious P&O Ferries customers have rounded on the company for leaving them stranded at short notice, causing confusion over refunds, and for its “abysmal” treatment of 800 staff, whose [abrupt sacking on Thursday](#) triggered chaos at ports across the country.

P&O initially told passengers that services were unable to run “for the next few hours”, affecting the Dover-Calais crossing and the routes from Hull to Rotterdam, Liverpool to Dublin, and Cairnryan to Larne.

But as furious workers responded to their dismissal by staging sit-ins on board P&O boats, the company announced that many services would not run “for the next few days”, before later indicating it could take up to 10 days for operations to return to normal.

01:54

'Sacked by email': P&O seafarers protest sudden UK redundancies – video report

Gabi Breithaupt, 60, from Beverley, near Hull, said her son was supposed to be visiting for the Easter holidays after four years without seeing him.

“We were all so looking forward to his visit and now it is all up in the air,” she said. “Four years is a long time for a mum and it’s the highlight of our year. I hope it still happens.” She added that P&O’s treatment of its staff was “inhumane”.

Peter Theakston, 53, had been visiting his ill mother in Yorkshire and was due to return to The Hague, in the Netherlands, at 8pm on Thursday, on a £200 foot passenger ticket. He said the company had not been in touch to explain what was happening or offer any advice, and was not picking up the phone.

“I’m pissed off,” he told the Guardian on Thursday afternoon. “There’s no news at all about the sailings. They’re updating everything else but not Hull-Rotterdam and they’re still taking bookings even though they say they’re not sailing.”

Theakston, who has been using the Hull-Rotterdam overnight service for 20 years, said he was unable to reach the company for hours. When he did speak to someone, he was told not to expect a refund as the service hadn’t yet been cancelled.

However P&O, which has no competition on the route, said later on Twitter that the service had been cancelled.

Theakston said the company's decision to sack 800 staff out of the blue, via a video message, was "totally obscene".

"It makes you ashamed to be British that the government lets the company do this," he said.

00:27

'Your final day of employment is today': P&O staff told they're being laid off — video

The official P&O Ferries Twitter account told passengers on Thursday that it was trying to arrange alternative passage for them with rival ferry companies, such as DFDS and Stena.

"Where possible we are organising travel via an alternative operator," it said. "Space is very limited so we would suggest if your journey is not essential, please do not travel today. We apologise for any inconvenience."

Some passengers, however, reported difficulty in transferring their tickets. One said the company had told her that her booking would be valid on a Stena boat, but Stena had told her to rebook. "What are we supposed to do about the refund?" she asked. P&O said in a Twitter response that she would receive a full refund.

We were sent to Stenaline and told we will be allowed to board with our P&O booking no. Stenaline asking us to make a fresh booking online. What are we suppose to do about the refund?

— Pearlean Chadha (@Pearlean) [March 17, 2022](#)

David Reger, 67, was due to be sailing from Hull to Rotterdam at 8.30pm and travelling home to Germany after a few days working in Leeds.

He said: "I'm fed up. We've not been told anything but it doesn't look like it's going to sail today. I've told them they have to book me alternative

travel or put me in a reasonable hotel for the duration that they're stopping me from travelling.

“If they don’t I’ll stand in front of the counter and not let anyone else get to it, and it’ll start getting like it is in Dover.”

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## 2022.03.18 - Spotlight

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Interview

## Folk star Vashti Bunyan: ‘My voice made me think of sorrow. I didn’t even sing to my children’

[Jude Rogers](#)



Vashti Bunyan at home in Edinburgh: ‘I wonder if the feeling that I couldn’t keep things when I was younger has made me keep so much.’

Photograph: Murdo MacLeod/The Guardian

Groomed to be a 60s pop star, the singer instead headed for the Hebrides in a horse-drawn cart and then withdrew from music for 30 years. She recalls those fraught, naive but incomparable times

[@juderogers](#)

Fri 18 Mar 2022 02.00 EDT Last modified on Fri 18 Mar 2022 05.12 EDT

On paper, what Vashti Bunyan did in the late 1960s sounds like the ultimate hippy dream. A young female singer-songwriter leaves London for the Outer Hebrides with her boyfriend, travelling in a wagon drawn by a black horse called Bess. The 650-mile trip takes two years; she makes an album about it, 1970’s [Just Another Diamond Day](#), full of precise, quietly sung songs such as Glow Worms and Rainbow River, conjuring atmospheres of innocence and wonder.

Only a few hundred copies were pressed before it disappeared almost immediately into obscurity. Thirty years later, it was rediscovered, reissued and Bunyan’s career was revived. Two new albums, international tours and a 2008 documentary followed, plus collaborations with young artists she had inspired: Joanna Newsom, Devendra Banhart, Animal Collective and Max Richter among them. Now comes Wayward, a book Bunyan began in 1994 “to explain to my kids why they had lived a life less than ordinary – although then I sent out my synopsis to silence”. Returning to it during the first Covid lockdown, a story steeped in trauma, grief and poverty emerged – not just a dream.

Those who have called her style “fragile” or “vulnerable” may be surprised by the stronger character in these pages. “I hate those words,” Bunyan, 76, says, her accent belying the many years she has spent in Scotland since her childhood in London. “And twee.” She delivers the word with bite.



Vashti Bunyan playing guitar and singing at Piccadilly Circus, 1966.  
Photograph: Phillip Harrington/Alamy

I meet Bunyan not in the thatched Berneray barn where her trip ended up in 1970 – she lived there for only six months – but on a bustling staircase at Edinburgh’s main station, in her jeans, smock top, bangles and trainers, with her partner of nearly 30 years, Al Campbell. They walk me to their nearby Georgian flat: music magazines and posters from Bunyan’s 21st-century tours line the bathroom, while pretty crockery sets, china dogs, drawings and ephemera crowd shelves and cabinets. “I wonder if the feeling that I couldn’t keep things when I was younger has made me keep so much,” Bunyan says, settling down, pouring the tea. “Because the wagon couldn’t be too heavy. We had to leave so many things behind.”

Born in 1945, by far the youngest of three children after a brother, John, and sister, Susan, Bunyan was told she was named after a boat owned by her father, John (a dentist “and a bit of a rogue”, she adds – he would sell her instruments to passing scrap merchants). Vashti had also been a nickname for her mother, Helen, inspired by the Old Testament queen who refused to show off her beauty before her husband’s cronies, before being banished; Bunyan recalls watching her mother secretly dancing and singing when she was a child.

She compares her to Molly Drake, the talented mother of Nick, [whose soft songs went unreleased in her lifetime](#). “Molly couldn’t take that talent out into the world in her life, any more than my mother could have. And once you were married, that was it – and I didn’t want that.”

So the teenager threw herself into music. In her book, she recalls a 1961 Cliff Richard gig in Blackpool, where she felt “incandescent” with glee. A few years later, after being kicked out of the Ruskin School of Art (where she befriended Michael Palin and Terry Jones), she’s knocking on doors in Tin Pan Alley, knowing her tender songs could be hits. A female agent introduces her to the Rolling Stones manager, [Andrew Loog Oldham](#), who starts grooming her to be the next Marianne Faithfull, to her distaste. He admitted in the 2008 documentary that her song I Want To Be Alone should have been the A-side of her debut single. Instead she was given a Mick Jagger and Keith Richards composition, Some Things Just Stick In Your Mind, for which Jimmy Page played guitar.

Bunyan enjoyed performing on TV pop shows. “It felt like young people like us were grabbing the moment. But it was also as if I was watching it from the outside.” She was struggling with her mental health through those years, her book reveals; prescription drugs made things worse. One day, Bunyan screamed at her mother for not understanding her agonies, and moments later, her mother collapsed with a stroke. A rare heart condition and cancer were also diagnosed at hospital; her mother was never the same. “I was terrified, terrified,” Bunyan remembers. “And also guilty as hell.”

Soon after, Bunyan reconnected with Robert Lewis, a rebellious art student she had met the previous year as a hitchhiker. One day, he said he had cast a spell on her, and that she would never leave his side. They briefly lived in a field, then Donovan – a famous friend of a friend – said he was setting up a commune on Skye. He would go up in his Land Rover. Bunyan and Lewis had nothing but a grandfather clock to sell. This got them their wagon and horse, but the journey “was not a statement of any kind” for Bunyan, she says. She began the journey shoeless, wearing only her late aunt’s 1930s nightdress, being stared at by bus drivers on Islington High Street.

It was a way to escape distress. “It felt ephemeral, but with a purpose: we didn’t know where we were going to be tomorrow, but it’d be somewhere down the road. What saved me was that I didn’t have to think too hard about anything except wood for the fire, water for the horse. Immediate things.”



The wagon in which they travelled to Scotland, after the journey had ended.  
Photograph: Christopher Simon Sykes

Lewis’s appearances in the book are edgy but slight. “I could have said so much, but wanted it to be my story,” Bunyan says; they have three grownup children together – Leif, Whyn and Benjamin – and you sense she still wants to protect them. Late on in the book, she writes that their relationship was open but one-sided: “I instinctively understood that only one of us, in the kind of couple that Robert and I were, could be the one to have other people.” She also mentions “trying not to be hurt ... [to] not let caustic jealousy overwhelm my days”.

She would never have instigated the trip herself, she says, but she wouldn’t have missed it for the world. “When we met, we did properly meet in our ambition to shape our lives differently, in a rejection of the world where we felt disapproved by others so much.” They learned to be self-sufficient by finding things and selling them; this continued into parenthood, when they set up a furniture restoration business, stripping pine and waxing wood.

They also learned lots about the kindness of strangers, and Bunyan's portraits of older women are especially tender – such as the islander Wally Dix, named for her walrus-like daily swims in the freezing sea, who made up stories to tell visiting Scottish folklore collectors. Women like Wally were “rebellious in undercover ways and totally irreverent”, Bunyan smiles. “Values that have stayed with me.”

When Bunyan and Lewis finally got to Skye, there was no place for them or their horse at the commune. Some had left; the schoolhouse was also deliberately empty, reserved for Donovan's return, from “world-touring and stadium-filling”, Bunyan writes, archly. Settling on the island of Berneray instead, many locals were antagonistic to them. She recorded her album in London soon after, and found out she was pregnant; she realised she didn't want to live so remotely.

She cringes now at her naivety. “I had wanted to go back and find out how things used to be before the internal combustion engine, without thinking how hard life could be.” She remembers the electric poles coming, and a man “having the first television, so proud, lining up all the chairs in his living room”, and also a woman “hurling her beautiful Victorian oil lamp out on to the rocks, this pink glass shattering”.



‘I wanted to get back to childlike wonder’ ... Vashti Bunyan. Photograph: Murdo MacLeod/The Guardian

She knows now what she was yearning for then. “I wanted to get back that feeling of childlike wonder, to remember what it was like to find the world extraordinary, about there being so much to learn.” She tried to convey that in her lyrics and drawings, she says, both of which feature in Wayward. Later, she shows me the lyric book she made on the trip, held together with colourful stitches, her handwriting schoolgirl-perfect inside it, her young dreams still pristine.

But she couldn’t listen to her album for decades after what she saw as its failure. “My voice made me think of sorrow and confusion. I didn’t even sing to my children.” But by the late 1990s – separated from Lewis, and by now with Campbell – she found out about the growing interest in her rare record on her new internet connection at home. That interest continues: original copies sell for [an average of £1,200 on Discogs](#).

A reissue came out in 2000; Bunyan read out her four-star review in the Guardian to her beloved, dying brother, who “burst into tears”. In 2002, she sang on a track called Crown of the Lost by the post-rock/ambient band Piano Magic; it felt “like opening a cupboard that had been shut for 30 years”. That voice has been heard widely since – when the Avalanches sampled [Glow Worms on 2020’s Reflecting Light](#), Bunyan “was amazed to hear that voice of mine from 50 years ago in amongst their music”.

She has also been creative in other ways, producing [2014’s Heartleap](#) herself. “The place where I learned music production had said I was too old when I applied.” She smiles. “But I wasn’t.”

Writing a book has been her toughest task yet, but Bunyan wanted people to know that her trip “wasn’t just a lovely trip through the daffodils and daisies. But then again” – she corrects herself – “I also didn’t want to spoil the dream.”

She’s nervous about the book coming out, she adds, quickly. She still wants to run away sometimes. “A bit of that dream is still me.”

Wayward: Just Another Life To Live will be published by White Rabbit on 28 March (£16.99). To support the Guardian, order your copy at [guardianbookshop.com](https://www.guardianbookshop.com). Delivery charges may apply.

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The Wyndford estate in Maryhill in Glasgow.

[The Guardian picture essay](#)

## Glasgow homes under the jackhammer – a photo essay

The Wyndford estate in Maryhill in Glasgow.

Photographer Chris Leslie talks to residents of Glasgow's Wyndford estate, slated for demolition and regeneration.

by [Chris Leslie](#)

Fri 18 Mar 2022 03.00 EDT

Glasgow is no stranger to demolitions – the city's built environment has been torn down, built up, and then torn down again every generation. It has witnessed the wholesale demolition of many of its tenements in the 1950s and 60s and then more recently the demolition of its high-rise flats that were built to replace its torn down tenements.

Since 2005 the city has lost 35% of these high-rise housing blocks and schemes, and next for the wrecking ball are four high-rise blocks in Maryhill's Wyndford estate in the West End of the city.



- The view from Norman Cunningham's balcony overlooking the city

Norman Cunningham, who has lived on the estate for three years says perceptions of a high-rise living city are partly to blame for driving the demolitions. Deemed as either sink estates at worse or no longer fashionable at best, Glasgow's high rise social blocks have long been stigmatised as hotbeds of criminal activity, and the cause of everything undesirable and antisocial.



There are thousands of people living quiet, peaceful, harmonious lives happily and contentedly in high rises all over Glasgow

*Norman Cunningham*

Letters and a brochure were sent to all residents in the blocks at the end of November 2021 from landlords Glasgow [Housing](#) Association (GHA), inviting residents to take part in a consultation about the “£54m transformation project” which included the demolition of all four high-rise blocks. Residents say the letter was the first anyone had heard about the demolition plans.

The accompanying glossy brochure talked of “a bright new dawn for Wyndford” and how a “new Wyndford is taking shape” but many residents believe that there is no real consultation, and minds at the GHA and city council have already been made up.

Daishin Stevenson, a Zen Buddhist monk, poet and photographer has lived in the flats for five years with her partner, Greum. She does not want the blocks to be demolished; instead she wants to see the flats get better maintenance and repairs.



I support the rejuvenation of the Wyndford, but not the demolition of the high flats. Why is rejuvenation without demolition of the high flats, not an option?

*Daishin Stevenson*

Her partner, Greum, explained the pending demolition in simpler terms: “Gentrification, to put it generously. Social cleansing, to put it realistically.”

The Wyndford high-rise blocks are a stone’s throw from the affluent Kelvinside district in Glasgow’s West End, where properties have an average price of more than £300,000 and the residents fear that real estate speculation is the driving force behind the demolition plans.



- Kelvinside in Glasgow's West End, viewed from the Wyndford flats.

Suki Sangha and her dog, Harry, have lived in the flats for over three years and would like to see investment in the area and for the flats to be upgraded, not demolished, but fears the driving force is profit.



We are so close to the affluent West End, and in that regard, the land is probably seen as highly profitable but you can't address the challenges that exist in our city by pushing people out of their homes and neighbourhoods, further embedding the problems

*Suki Sangha*

Confirmation of the demolition and the proposed demolition dates have yet to be announced and GHA said tenants in the affected blocks would be given a choice of another home in the area or in “another Wheatley community” – Wheatley being Scotland’s largest social landlord – but as all the flats are single bedroom many residents worry about where they might end up being rehoused.



- Three of the Wyndford blocks awaiting demolition

Jazzminn had been living as a nomad and subsequently ended up homeless until she was offered a flat at Wynford in flats in late November 2019.

Despite having some issues with maintenance and repairs she doesn’t want her home to be demolished but she knows that new homes filled with

families and mid-market rent will generate more rent for the housing association.



This is my home, a beautiful home that I have filled with so much love & memories, a home I have spent countless hours, energy and money creating. My first home in over seven years and one that is an absolutely perfect representation of myself

*Jazzminn*

Deliveroo cycle courier Sam Sharp, who has lived in the flats for four years, has joined with other residents to challenge the demolition and demand a proper consultation. He speaks highly of high rise living – having his own space, great views and access to plenty of wild green spaces – things he says most cities should strive for.



Yes, there is plenty of work that could be done to improve them, but I see no reason why they need to be demolished. A responsible approach would be to invest in the housing stock that exists and ensure that all tenants can live with stability and dignity.

*Sam Sharp*

Sean Baillie, a GMB Scotland worker, fears the demolition will go ahead and the residents opposing it are fighting a losing battle. He has knocked on the doors of all his neighbours to do his own consultation to find out what people actually think of the proposed demolitions.

However, most recent residents in the past few years have been in supported accommodation of one form or another and that has made them reluctant to question the plans or speak out.



Many of our neighbours rely on the support of various charities and other third sector organisations and are a little more hesitant to engage in anything they worry might impact or stop the support they receive

*Sean Baillie*

News of the demolition came just weeks after Glasgow hosted the climate summit Cop26 and at a time when 50,000 buildings, including many residential high-rise flats, are demolished every year in the UK.

Critics say this normalised, systemic and wasteful destruction of buildings – spaces where people live, work and play, is unnecessary as many of the buildings could be retrofitted for the future.

Sitting on his balcony enjoying the winter sunshine and views over the city, Norman Cunningham questioned this bigger picture behind the demolitions: “It is just wrong in so many ways. Not least the environmental carbon release damage done in demolition and then new builds.

“Did Cop26 actually happen? In Glasgow? This is all just social engineering and greed disguised as being for the greater good.”

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## Fossil fuels

# ‘Not the future we should be going for’: the reopening of Wales’s Aberpergwm coalmine

Jacob Rees-Mogg’s call to once more dig for coal at the colliery has been granted and many fear it will hamper tourism as well as damage the environment



The Aberpergwm colalmine in Glynneath, south Wales. Photograph: Dimitris Legakis/The Guardian



Sandra Laville

Fri 18 Mar 2022 03.00 EDT Last modified on Fri 18 Mar 2022 20.18 EDT

Nestled beneath waterfall country in the south western tip of the Brecon Beacons national park, the town of Glynneath is perfectly positioned to exploit the visitors drawn to the beauty of the landscape.

It is as Jacob Rees-Mogg said in the House of Commons, our green and pleasant land. But a powerful group of Tory MPs pushing back against the need to pivot away from fossil fuels to meet the UK's net zero targets believe it should play host not to a future involving clean air, renewable energy and sympathetic tourism but to the revival of the coal industry.

As energy prices soar, and Russia's war in Ukraine forces many countries to review their energy supplies, [politicians in the net zero scrutiny group](#) are embarked upon a battle with the party and the wider public over the climate crisis. They call for cuts to green taxes, a return to fracking and an increase in fossil fuel extraction; despite evidence that the scrapping of climate policies over the last decade [has raised UK energy bills by £2.5bn](#).

The latest focal point is a colliery which sits at the western edge of Glynneath, off the A465.

Rees Mogg's rallying call to continue to dig for anthracite – hard coal – at the Aberpergwm colliery was granted when the Coal Authority, which sits within the UK government, [agreed to extend the licence to its owners EnergyBuild Mining Ltd](#) to allow it to extract up to 40m tonnes of coal over the next 18 years. Most of it will be used at Port Talbot steelworks, which has been identified by the Welsh government as an area it must address to cut carbon emissions.



Opencast anthracite coal mining pits are seen from a hilltop. Photograph: Bloomberg/Getty Images

The Welsh government says it was powerless to intervene because the conditional licence to the company preceded new devolution powers that came into force in 2018. The licence was granted just weeks after Boris Johnson hosted the Cop26 climate conference and called on other countries to “consign coal to history”.

Local activist Dai Richards says the area is in need of regeneration: “The focus, I believe, should be on creating jobs for tourism and driving the focus for the area towards this growing industry.”

“We probably have the best collection of accessible waterfalls in the UK on our doorstep, we are on the edge of the Brecon Beacons which is rising in

popularity as a holiday destination. There is a new zipline just opened a couple of miles away ... It's a tourism revolution bypassing Glynneath because politicians and civil servants alike are too small minded to see beyond the rape of the land and the pollution of the world for greed and profit."

Aside from local pollution concerns, the impact of the new Aberpergwm scheme on the UK's commitment to net zero could be devastating. If burned, it is estimated the coal could emit more than 100m tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> over the mine's lifetime.

But there is some strong support for the extension of the mine from those living around it. Local councillors – all of whom are on the mine's liaison committee with the community – are swayed more by what they say is the need to save jobs. The colliery employs 160 people, including 16 apprentices, and the company promises it is diversifying the uses of the anthracite.

Del Morgan, Plaid Cymru councillor for the town council, said he had to protect jobs in his community. "What I am being told by the company is there are opportunities for the mine to evolve fairly rapidly from the old way to use the anthracite in clean industries. They are doing so already. There are 160 jobs there, and if you take the licence away and close the mine they will go. This is needed."



Glynneath Photograph: Dimitris Legakis/The Guardian

Most of the coal will be destined for Port Talbot steelworks, which produces 15% of Wales's carbon emissions. Another 20% will go to domestic heating.

Whatever the uses of the coal in future, the extraction itself would produce up to 1.17m tonnes of methane, a potent greenhouse gas, according [to research by Global Energy Monitor](#).

For some, the tradeoff of the climate in favour of jobs is not one worth making. Alyn Evans spent decades working at Aberpergwm, which was closed in 1985 by the National Coal Board, and reopened in 2011, before closing again and reopening in 2018. “This claim that there will be local jobs is one of the main reasons I am fighting against this mine,” said Evans, who is now in his seventies. “I would say there are probably about less than 10 local people working in the underground jobs.

“There are no local miners any more, they are all dead or too old. No one wants to work the shifts now, it is a myth that this mine will provide large numbers of local jobs.”

Instead, he said, the reality was that Glynneath would be subjected once more to pollution, the coalmine at the bottom of the town would remain an

“eyesore” and an obstacle to developing tourism, while the wider environment would be subjected to more climate-heating greenhouse gases.

“For every cubic metre of anthracite coalmined, 42 cubic metres of methane is released, probably the most toxic gas in the atmosphere, and they have been given a licence to extract 40m tonnes of it. This is not the future we should be going for,” he said.

Another local resident, Emma Eynon, said as a traditional mining community it was right to celebrate “our proud history”, but that what was needed now was investment in a new future. “The communities in my local area have been suffering for many years with a lack of investment by the Welsh government,” said Eynon.

“Our communities are desperate for real investment and support … we want to move forward with tourism, small business growth and local regeneration plans which will mean real jobs with real futures.”

Energybuild has said the Aberpergwm project would sustain 160 jobs and dozens more in the supply chain. It has promised to gradually move away from supplying steelworks at Port Talbot and said it aims to have a greater share of its coal destined for other end uses such as water filtration, which at present accounts for about 15% of its market. The firm says it is the only producer of anthracite for filter media in Europe.

The granting of the licence now faces a legal challenge by [campaign group Coal Action Network](#), which successfully [fought against opencast mines in the north-east of England](#). Coal Action Network said other mining companies would be watching the Aberpergwm project closely, warning it could spark a disastrous new wave of coal mining applications. A decision is expected soon on plans for the first new deep coalmine in the UK for 30 years in Cumbria.

Isobel Tarr, of Coal Action Network, said: “This is a time to be investing in alternative technologies for producing steel and it is well past the time to be investing in something better for these communities who have a vision for post-coal. The Welsh government must listen if it is to commit to leaving coal in the past.”

Energybuild was contacted by the Guardian but did not provide a comment.

A Welsh government spokesperson said: “We have been clear that we do not support the extraction of fossil fuels and are focused on the climate emergency. We do not have the powers to make a decision in the case of Aberpergwm. This licence pre-dates our powers on coal licensing.

“The fundamental issue is having a Coal Authority whose duty is to maintain a coal mining industry in the UK. We have been calling for the UK government to change this duty in the Coal Industry Act to reflect the climate emergency.”

This article was amended on 19 March 2022 to correct a picture caption: in an earlier version we mislabelled the street scene in Glynneath as showing Aberpergwm.

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[Two years on: the legacy of lockdownFamily](#)

## Annie Macmanus on the legacy of lockdown: I was forced to stand still – and realised what I wanted



Annie Macmanus at home during lockdown. Photograph: Courtesy of Annie Mac

The Radio 1 DJ left her family to work each weekday evening and spent years trying to squeeze things in. Lockdown made her realise what she was missing out on

*Annie Macmanus*

Fri 18 Mar 2022 02.00 EDT Last modified on Fri 18 Mar 2022 05.34 EDT

At the start of 2020, my eldest son was seven and my youngest was three. For as long as they could remember, I had left the house at about 5pm every weekday evening to go to my radio show, and I had worked late DJing on the weekends. “When are you coming home?” was my eldest son’s most asked question to me.

Lockdown meant that, one by one, all the plates I was spinning smashed to the floor. Suddenly we were in one another’s hair all day long. The tight home-schooling schedule unravelled quickly, but my youngest’s speech came on in leaps and bounds. My eldest created elaborate dens in the garden and bonded with our nextdoor neighbour. We explored every park within a three-mile radius. Sometimes, we drove around a post-apocalyptic London to see the sights minus the tourists: Buckingham Palace, the Thames, Hyde Park. It was a strange type of fun, until my youngest would start crying: “I don’t want to go home.”

I learned that my happy conviction in being a Londoner was conditional on regular pitstops to Dublin, to visit my family. As spring turned into summer and Ireland’s lockdown guidelines tightened, I became jumpy. I needed to get my fix of family to remember who I was. I hated the feeling of being locked out.

At the start, there were enthusiastic attempts to include the children’s grandparents in their home-schooling curriculum, but, as the weeks rolled by, the kids stopped engaging. I got cross with them, but really I was cross with the whole situation. Cross with the bad internet connections, the stilted interactions, the worry pulling at me all the time that something would happen to my parents.

With the announcement of the second lockdown in November, we shrank into each other. We pulled out the sofa bed in the living room and had family sleepovers, the room a mess of duvets and wriggling kids, biscuit crumbs everywhere. It was something to tie the week around. When December came with the news that we were going into tier 4 and we wouldn't see the grandparents at Christmas, my youngest sat silent on the floor, eyes pulled wide, sucking his thumb, while my eldest wept.

Pressure mounted as school was cancelled at the start of the new year. We found a childcare bubble and the kids shared their days with another local family. It was a godsend. I could still work. And, when Easter came, the buds began to open up along with the world around us as restrictions were relaxed.

My kids are now aware that their world is unpredictable and that change, when it comes, can upend everything they know. Time will tell whether the pervasive fear of the past two years will have a permanent effect. I can tell you that they are currently happier and more settled than they have ever been. Maybe more resilient, too.

As for me, after two decades of charging forwards, the pandemic forced me to stand still. In doing so, I realised what I wanted. I wanted to eat dinner with my sons and to put them to bed at night. I wanted to be the parent who was plugged into their learning, who finally joined the class WhatsApp group. I wanted life to not feel like a game of Tetris any more. I was tired of unfulfilled obligations piling up and up. I was tired of trying to squeeze things in.

I had fallen in love with writing and knew this was a golden opportunity. I left my evening radio show and moved my working day to within school hours.

Now we eat dinner together and I put them to bed. I have witnessed the pre-bedtime hysteria that my husband had told me about with the traumatised air of a war veteran. I have learned that my sons need time to wrestle and chase each other around the kitchen after dinner. Every night, they change their minds about which toothpaste they like. My youngest always wants to read

the same book about the life cycle of a shark. My oldest needs to know exactly which rooms I will go to after I walk out of his bedroom, and how long I will spend in each one.

I have learned that, for the past six years, I have had a knot in my stomach. It tightened with the fear of not having enough time to do all my work well. It tightened with the varying moods of my world-weary, after-school children and their reactions to me leaving to go to work. I had no idea it was there until it was gone. It's a strange and pleasant feeling, this lack of knot. This stillness.

I watch my eldest when he reads his books to me at night, his little flat voice bulldozing through the words. For now I feel peaceful, but I know that nothing stays the same.

*Annie Mac is a DJ and (as Annie Macmanus) a writer. Her book [Mother Mother](#) is out now*

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## 2022.03.18 - Opinion

- Pensioner poverty is at a new high – so why are older people still voting Tory?
- Who's profiting from the cost of living crisis? Right now, it's big business owners
- Netflix's Byron Baes is contrived, trashy and awful. It's practically a public service
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## Pensioner poverty is at a new high – so why are older people still voting Tory?

[Polly Toynbee](#)



To solve this crisis, we need to share some of the unearned wealth of richer pensioners with those who need it most



'Pension credit, devised by Labour to stop old-age poverty, is a minimum income guarantee. But a third don't claim it.' Photograph: Peter Byrne/PA

Fri 18 Mar 2022 03.00 EDT Last modified on Fri 18 Mar 2022 12.33 EDT

It's happening again: elderly people suddenly getting poorer. Since the dawn of time, to be old was to be poor. Workhouses were abandoned not out of revulsion at their practices, but because virtually everyone in them became too old and sick to work. William Beveridge's state pension was universal partly because many old people were too poor to be worth means-testing.

An under-heralded success of the Brown and Blair years was to lift so many older people out of poverty that by 2010, for the first time ever, pensioners were [less likely](#) to be poor than the rest of the population. Some still fell below the threshold, but the number was too small to tilt the statistics. Still, there's no gratitude in politics, so it didn't stop them voting Tory in ever greater numbers with each year of ageing. [In 2019](#), 64% of over-65s voted Tory, compared with just 19% of under 24s. Age only became the strongest predictor of voting after 1980, when those two-thirds of older people turned less generous and redistribution-minded than older cohorts before them.

Mindful of that, the Tories showered pensioners with higher benefits while chopping support for the rest, especially children. A triple lock guaranteed

the pension rose every year by whichever was highest – inflation, 2.5% or average wages. But no longer. The chancellor abolished the lock this year, assuming inflation was a temporary blip.

The Centre for Ageing Better's [annual report](#), published on 17 March, finds that there were [200,000 more poor pensioners](#) in 2021. That means nearly one in five now fall below the official poverty threshold. The trend for working longer has gone into reverse: many older people lost their jobs during the pandemic, with their incomes plunging when they didn't find new work.

Now add the shocking finding that life expectancy has gone into reverse, along with years of healthy life. Shocking too is the steep rise of 92,000 more pensioners trapped in private renting, most likely to be “non-decent” homes, as home ownership among older people falls. Sally West, Age UK's policy manager, is appalled that some elderly people in need of money are selling their homes and renting instead: “a bad mistake”, she says.

But here's the statistical tyranny of averages. Elderly people are most likely to be very rich too, as inequality between pensioners rises higher than among other generations. Since the 2008 crash, two-thirds of all the extra wealth created has gone to the over-65s, according to Prof Bobby Duffy, author of Generations. Insane property booms vastly enriched those who bought long ago, and over-50s, just a third of the population, do half of all consuming. While they're cruising, young families are sinking.

Duffy shows inequality is greatest *within* generations, not between them, with wealth sealed by inheritance. The political question is how to persuade wealthy older generations to vote for the interests of young people, rather than only their own.

Maybe the government doesn't much mind more old people joining the ranks of the poor, if they reckon they belong to the third of pensioners who [don't vote Tory](#). Here's the government's disgraceful dereliction. [Pension credit](#), devised by Labour to stop old-age poverty, is a minimum income guarantee: that currently stands at a meagre £177.10 for a single person, but it takes them just over the poverty line. But a third [don't claim it](#), because they don't know they're owed it. Nor do they know of other benefits that

come with it – help with rent, council tax, a free TV licence and an extra payment if they are carers. Ministers like to pretend it's because they're "proud", but this is a scandal: every single one of those 1.3 million pensioners missing their credit could easily be found by the Department for Work and Pensions, as it already sends them their basic pension.

The DWP knows who those people are and where they live. DWP data is linked to HMRC, so the department could identify those too poor to pay any tax as a first step. It could knock on every door – or commission local Age UK groups and others to check every pensioner gets what they are owed.

But why would it do that? No doubt, next week's budget will deliver a few modest mitigations for the great cost of living crisis, but if this chancellor bothered about the crisis happening in low-income households, he would never have cut the £20 a week uplift to universal credit. The 50 [charities](#), [Gordon Brown](#) and more than 50 local council leaders writing to him this week all point to huge income losses for 9 million low-income families due to only raising benefits by 3.1%, not the real 7% inflation rate.

There is no need to pit one generation against another when it comes to poverty. Polling shows young people are remarkably generous in wanting to protect older people, according to Duffy. That's far more than the other way round. The big question is how to lever some of the unearned wealth out of my lucky generation of home owners with old-fashioned work pensions, and redistribute it to whoever needs it, of whatever age. Maybe this news of growing pensioner poverty might make Tory-voting oldies more willing to shell out for the destitute of their own generation than they have been for the nation's young.

- Polly Toynbee is a Guardian columnist

[\*\*Opinion\*\*](#)[\*\*Cost of living crisis\*\*](#)

# Who's profiting from the cost of living crisis? Right now, it's big business owners

[Christine Berry](#)

We've built an economy where life-or-death decisions on prices and wages are driven by investors' interests



Illustration: Ben Jennings/The Guardian

Fri 18 Mar 2022 04.00 EDT Last modified on Fri 18 Mar 2022 14.40 EDT

The UK's cost of living crisis seems to escalate almost by the day. According to experts, we are facing the biggest fall in living standards since [the 1970s](#). Announcing a phase-out of Russian oil imports, Boris Johnson spoke of "[dark days ahead](#)" – as if the days we live in were not already dark enough.

This crisis cannot be blamed solely on Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine. The return of high inflation may be traceable to short-term supply shocks. But the things that turn it into a crisis have been decades in the making.

In the 70s, “stagflation” – low growth coupled with high inflation – put an end to three decades of rising living standards. Now, it comes on top of a lost decade. Real wages are [no higher than in 2008](#), when the financial crisis hit. Millions of households were already struggling to make ends meet. It does not take much to tip them into the red.

It is not just that wages have been squeezed: simply existing in the UK has become inordinately expensive. This is partly because we have gone further than almost anywhere else in turning essential goods and services into financial assets. Because people literally cannot do without them, owning these assets is a reliable way to [extract huge rents](#) while doing very little. By putting the means of a decent life in the hands of private gatekeepers whose only concern is to maximise their rents, we have built an economy that systematically inflates costs for consumers while also driving down wages.

The most obvious and egregious example is housing. When [soaring housing costs](#) are taken into account, living standards have been falling for most working-age households since 2002. House prices have risen [20%](#) since the start of the pandemic and are at a [record high](#), both in absolute terms and relative to earnings. This leaves growing numbers of people trapped in the private rented sector, where about a [third of their income](#) is gobbled up by rent alone. Average rents have risen [8.6% in the past year](#) and now stand at over £1,000 a month. This comes on top of a decade where rents already rose [far faster than wages](#). Of course, renters' losses are landlords' gains. Attracted by these outsize returns, buy-to-let investors have [swallowed up](#) a substantial chunk of available homes in recent years.

We see the same patterns elsewhere, from care to water, energy to transport. Britain's childcare system is the [third most expensive](#) in the world: bad news for parents but good news for the [private equity investors](#) buying up nurseries. Meanwhile, about [£1 in every £10](#) spent on social care is extracted from the system by highly financialised companies that own and control

assets within it – contributing to an eye-watering [30% increase in costs](#) for self-funded care since 2012. [Rail fares have risen 20%](#) in real terms since privatisation, and water bills 40% – with excess profits inflating the latter by an estimated [£2.3bn a year](#). Meanwhile, as the thinktank Common Wealth [points out](#), the monopoly owners of the grid are achieving 40% profit margins, and pay out over [£1bn a year](#) to shareholders.

The Bank of England governor, Andrew Bailey, recently [warned](#) against the threat of inflation caused by increasing wages. The bogeyman lurking behind the governor's intervention was the “wage-price spiral” – whereby rising wages drive prices up further, leaving nobody better off. This plays into the idea, beloved by mainstream economists, that the interests of workers and consumers are essentially a seesaw: for one to gain, the other must lose. But this conveniently ignores the third actor in the equation: the owners. In the UK today, owners are the one group who actually have the power to set both wages and prices. Indeed, they have been systematically handed that power by decades of deregulation and trade union decline.

So why did Bailey ignore them? Why, the FT commentator [Martin Sandbu pondered](#), did he not call on powerful businesses to “moderate” their profits, rather than asking less powerful workers to “moderate” their wage demands. Perhaps, as Sandbu observes, because mainstream economics has a “blind spot” for the power of capital, and correcting this would mean asking uncomfortable questions about “who bears the cost” of rising inflation and who benefits.

High energy costs may have millions wondering how they will heat their homes, but BP's chief executive boasted unashamedly that they turn his company into a “cash machine”. BP's and Shell's profits soared to a [combined \\$32bn](#) last year, with BP shareholders standing to benefit from a \$1.5bn share buyback. Demands for a windfall tax [have proved popular](#) because people intuitively understand that these enormous rewards are unearned and unfair.

But even companies on the wrong end of rising input costs have significant power to decide who takes the hit: do they pass it on to customers by hiking prices, or to shareholders by squeezing margins? In the case of

supermarkets, as the campaigner Jack Monroe has [made clear](#), this effectively means power to decide whether the poorest families can afford to eat. The problem is that the companies making these life-or-death decisions recognise no duty other than to maximise investors' returns. In France, state-owned [EDF has shielded citizens](#) from the pain of rising energy costs. In the UK, where public ownership has been systematically dismantled, we lack both the democratic levers and the political will to do the same.

In the US, where corporate power is even more concentrated than in the UK, commentators warn that the real danger is not a wage-price spiral but a “profit-price spiral”. US corporate profit margins are at a [70-year high](#), and have risen 37% in the past year alone. In [one survey](#), more than half of retailers admitted to raising prices by *more* than their increase in costs – with larger firms most likely to be doing so. The narrative about inflation offers a convenient smokescreen for fattening margins, as investors brazenly admit. In the [words of one asset manager](#): “What we really want to find are companies with pricing power. In an inflationary environment, that’s the gift that keeps on giving.”

In the face of such shameless profiteering, calls for slower wage growth are as economically wrongheaded as they are inhumane. Yes, there is a group who have been creaming off excessive rewards for decades, and who now need to tighten their belts in the face of supply shocks. But it’s not ordinary workers. As those firebrand socialists at [Morgan Stanley recently argued](#), it’s profits that must shrink to absorb the pain of inflation – making up for decades in which capital has increased its share at the expense of workers and consumers alike. More fundamentally, we have to ask whether the UK’s world-beating experiment with privatisation has run its course. The astounding sums handed to investors might have passed unnoticed in better times. Today, this largesse is something we quite literally cannot afford.

- Christine Berry is a writer and researcher based in Manchester
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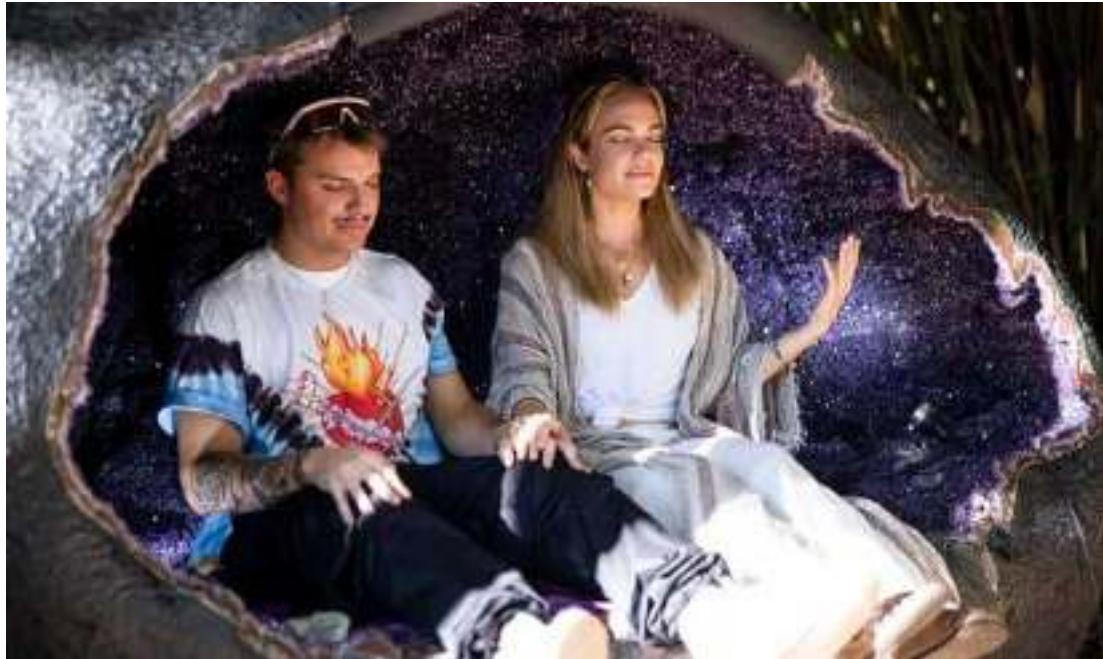
[\*\*OpinionAustralia news\*\*](#)

# **Netflix's Byron Baes is contrived, trashy and awful. It's practically a public service**

[\*\*Emma Brockes\*\*](#)



The streaming giant has served up a new reality show full of dreadful characters. What better respite from the real world?



Jade Kevin Foster and Hannah Brauer in an episode of *Byron Baes*.  
Photograph: Ben Symons/Netflix

Fri 18 Mar 2022 05.00 EDT

I'm not proud of this fact, but over the course of the past 24 hours, and in defiance of a to-do list a mile long, I binged all eight episodes of [Byron Baes](#), Netflix's "first Australian reality show". This is, obviously, what you are supposed to do with a show like *Byron Baes*, which is not a product to be savoured or lingered over. It is wholly contrived, full of horrible characters and premised on an idea of life in which words such as "wellness" play a meaningful role. It is also expertly designed to suck you into the drama and offer you respite from the real problems of the world.

If there's a squeamish element to watching [Byron Baes](#), it is the knowledge that the show works by encouraging a specific response in audiences that might be summarised as hate therapy. The cast are all young, affluent and deluded to one degree or another, identifying as designers and influencers, and living in a coastal town that was at one time a [hippy surfing community](#). A few years ago, American movie stars began moving in – the location is stunning – and the place became promptly appalling. As an Australian friend told me: "It's been ruined by Hemsworths and Damons" – after which, the deluge: hordes of crystal-waving, linen-wearing Instagrammers who,

inevitably after a few seasons, attracted the attention of Vanity Fair. In 2019, the magazine did [a long piece](#) about various eco-entrepreneurs in Byron Bay, one of whom specialised in “ethical bed linens for babies” while another eschewed the US because of its “consumerism”. That piece was the springboard for the show, and here we are.

Fifteen years after the Kardashians first aired, it is curious to consider the evolution of the format, and the psychology of those who take part in it. Every episode of *Byron Baes* is organised around an event, either a product launch or a party, at which a confrontation between two or more characters is preordained. The show’s participants are, directly or otherwise, incentivised to compete for screen time through drama and to bring about various staged disagreements. The rest of the cast then picks a side and jumps in. It is a whisper away from being scripted and an enjoyment of the show is watching a group of people turned so inside out with self-consciousness that their performances are on a par with [Mrs Overall in Acorn Antiques](#).

And it’s cleverly edited to build in some surprises. Initially, I thought Hannah, who helps her parents run their online interiors business, was unremittingly awful, only to discover she’s among the most sympathetic characters in the cast. Jess, a designer, seemed vaguely self-aware for two episodes before descending into pot-stirring hell. Alex, a proxy for the regular person, rolls his eyes and barely belongs in this show, and Jade is straightforwardly dreadful throughout. Meanwhile, various large, male dimwits move around the landscape like those boulder people in [Frozen II](#). Observing these characters is an old-school pleasure reminiscent of the first few seasons of *Big Brother*, with the added fascination of knowing that every one of them signed up fully aware of what they were getting into.

Unlike TV talent shows, which prey on the genuinely desperate, it is hard to see much exploitation here, beyond something very broad about what happens when interior life is scooped out by Instagram fame. A theme of the show is authenticity, and the Byron Bay locals like to distinguish themselves from people from, for example, the [Gold Coast](#), who are disparaged for having “spray-on dresses and fake lips”. With many lumbering cues, the show’s audience is invited to consider that Gold Coasters, with their tans and

tiny dresses, live a more authentic existence than the parade of shallow oddballs in Byron Bay.

Each character has, very obviously, made the calculation that exposure and the opportunities that come with it are worth the cost of derision. Elle throws a fundraiser to draw attention to the destruction of ocean life, at which she serves tuna canapés and is delivered cleanly to the audience on a plate. Jade, who presents like a creation of [Sacha Baron Cohen](#)'s, is exposed for allegedly buying his Instagram followers in Turkey. There are no politics in this show, except for something nebulous about unchecked privilege and the adoption of good causes for likes, an impulse, after all, not exclusive to Byron Bay. The show is a padded room, like one of those places you can pay to enter to safely break things and work out your anger. Netflix, by offering these people up for a universal disparagement univen by the usual conflicts and divides, is practically providing us with a public service.

- Emma Brockes is a Guardian columnist
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[Opinion](#)[Death and dying](#)

## **Grief, like death, is still taboo for many of us. But is that starting to change?**

[Gaby Hinsliff](#)



There are often no words for what we endure. Yet after the pandemic, more people are trying to find a language of loss



Clover Stroud, author of *The Red of My Blood*. Photograph: Chris Floyd/The Guardian

Thu 17 Mar 2022 11.00 EDT Last modified on Thu 17 Mar 2022 11.09 EDT

Widow is an awful word. It conjures up such drab and lonely images; and besides, it defines a woman by what she has lost and what she no longer is. But at least there is a word for having lost your husband. For the other heart-stopping losses that come to many in midlife, and some even earlier – the death of your parents, or of a sibling, [or a child](#), or perhaps a best friend – there isn't even a word. Yet these are life stages in their own right too, and deserving of closer understanding. For some reason, which may or may not be connected to the raw and unpeeled state of our emotions after a pandemic, a small window now seems to be opening on to an underexplored world.

The writer [Clover Stroud's \*The Red of My Blood\*](#), a memoir about trying to make sense of the death of her 46-year-old sister, Nell, from cancer, was published recently to a chorus of recognition and relief from some bereaved readers. After the funeral and the flurry of condolence letters, and the awkwardness of people just not knowing what to say, there is still the long haul ahead of reconstructing a good life without someone who used to be central to it. And that's what this book is about. Clover is a working mother of five: she might be dazed with grief but there is still pasta to be cooked,

school runs to be done. In the spaces in between, however, she is constantly puzzling over the seeming impossibility of Nell being gone. How can she simply stop existing? The book revolves around Clover's constant search for her sister, looking for her in photographs and in places they went as children and in the last things she touched when she was still alive. When you lose someone you love, they are suddenly everywhere but nowhere. Decades on, I still remember that irrational lurch of recognition at the face in the crowd that surely has to be them – except, of course, when you get closer it isn't, and can't ever be again.

More pragmatic but no less quietly moving was [the interview Harriet Harman gave last week](#) to Sky News's Beth Rigby about coming to terms with the loss of [Jack Dromey](#), her husband of 47 years. They were one of the most devoted couples at Westminster, and Dromey's unstinting support for his wife powered her through the most gruelling stages of her career, juggling small children with working in a parliament still deeply hostile to women. But intensely as she will have felt the loss, as she points out she might have decades left to live without him – and she is trying to figure out how widowhood can become a different chapter in life, not the end of it. “People say, ‘Oh now that you’re on your own ...’ but – I’m not with Jack any more, but I’m not on my own. I’ve got my children; I’ve got my friends; I’ve got my work colleagues. And I don’t agree with the notion that’s somehow out there that when you’re a widow your life is over and that somehow you’re a lesser person,” she told Rigby.

For all the grief and loss, she said, “people are themselves in widowhood just as they are themselves in the rest of their life”. As women they are very different characters, but both Stroud and Harman are grappling with essentially the same thing: how to find life again in the midst of death, without pushing away or denying the reality of what has happened.

It's a stage most of us would perhaps rather not think about, even though grief comes to almost everyone who loves someone in the end. But if death itself is the [last taboo](#), then the final frontier to be breached is what comes after; the slow, difficult process of learning to live with that loss, which takes much longer than the impatient outside world is often willing to accept. Time heals, everyone says, and there is a sort of truth in that. The wound

doesn't go away but it does change, slowly solidifying into scar tissue that will always be there. The beauty of Clover's book is that there is no neat ending, just as in death there so often isn't. What's left, however messy, is the search for a different way of living.

- Gaby Hinsliff is a Guardian columnist
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## 2022.03.18 - Around the world

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## Animals farmedBullfighting

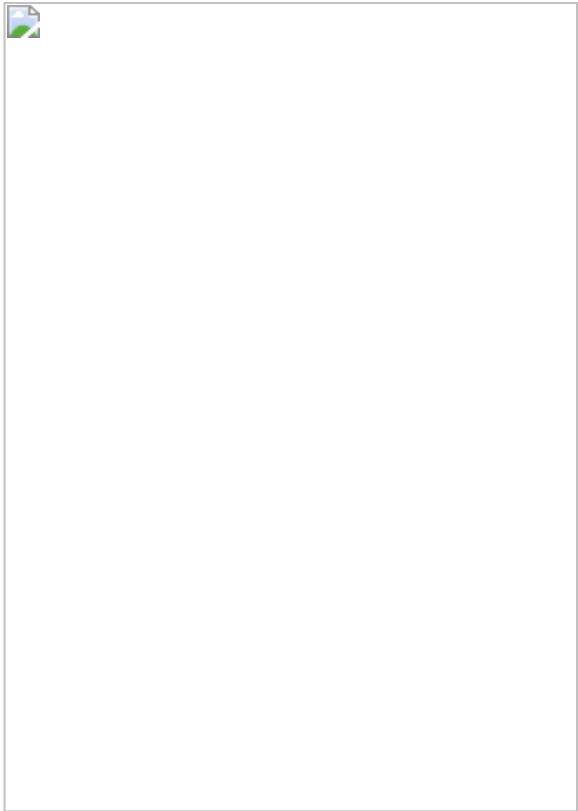
# Bullfighting still benefits from millions of euros a year in EU farming subsidies

Public funds to farms breeding bulls keeping ‘cruel practice’ of bullfighting alive, say animal rights campaigners



La Malagueta bullring in Malaga, Spain. MEPs have made several attempts to ban subsidies to farms breeding fighting bulls. Photograph: Jesús Mérida/SOPA Images/REX/Shutterstock

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## [About this content](#)

[Ashifa Kassam](#) in Madrid

[@ashifa\\_k](#)

Fri 18 Mar 2022 02.30 EDT Last modified on Fri 18 Mar 2022 17.35 EDT

Bullfighting across Europe is being kept alive by millions of euros paid out by the EU, claim campaigners, despite attempts by MEPs to ban the subsidies.

The funding goes to farms that breed bulls for fighting through the EU's common agricultural policy (CAP), a long-running system of subsidy

support to the sector.

Spain's Unión de Criadores de Toros de Lidia, which represents the interests of 347 breeders, [has estimated](#) that a ban on the subsidy payout would mean an economic hit of around €200m (£170m) a year for the sector across Europe.

In 2015, in a move welcomed by animal rights campaigners who described bullfighting as a "[cruel practice](#)", MEPs voted overwhelmingly in favour of blocking agricultural funds "for the financing of lethal bullfighting activities".

More than six years later, however, there has been little change, with the ban set aside over concerns that it would modify the legal provisions of the CAP.

Joe Moran at animal advocacy organisation Eurogroup for [Animals](#) said: "While we agree with the MEPs entirely in their moral outrage and what they're trying to do, the legal avenues to do this are pretty difficult. In fact, I would say they're impossible."

To remove the funds altogether would require animal welfare to be an official competence of the EU, coupled with a law that would ban the raising of bulls for this purpose or prohibit bullfighting altogether, added Moran.

An EU official said that while there were no funds specifically designated for breeding bulls for fighting, "it is not excluded", and bull breeders could still receive public funds from agricultural funding.

Since 2003, EU farm [subsidies](#) have mostly been allocated on the amount of land farmed, rather than output or the final destination of products.



Bulls on a Spanish farm. An estimated 1,000 farms are breeding animals for bullfighting across the EU. Photograph: Cristina Quicler/AFP/Getty

Green MEPs tabled a [2020 amendment](#) to the CAP calling for funds to be barred for cattle whose final destination was “the sale for activities related to bullfighting”, but it was dropped as the European Commission, Council of the EU and parliament finalised the policy.

Portuguese MEP Francisco Guerreiro described the funds as “an oxygen balloon that is continually helping this industry to stay afloat”, as the number of festivals involving bulls has declined.

Europe’s bullfighting industry [racked up reported losses](#) of more than €150m (£125m) during the Covid pandemic as events such as Pamplona’s San Fermín festival [were cancelled](#) and bulls sent [straight to slaughter](#).

The pandemic hit as the sector was struggling to recover from Spain’s economic crisis, which saw cash-strapped municipalities halt festivals involving bulls. In 2007 – a year before the financial crash – 3,651 events featuring bulls [were held](#) across Spain. A decade later, the number of events [had plunged](#) to 1,553.

Breeder associations in Spain, France and Portugal continue to defend the estimated 1,000 farms breeding bulls for bullfighting across the EU.

Antonio Bañuelos, president of Spain's Unión de Criadores de Toros, said: "It's discriminatory to create this concept that the fate of these cattle can be tied to receiving funds or not." Many of the farms produce a variety of products while also raising bulls, meaning any ban would erode their right to access funding on par with other EU farmers, he said.

The industry has also lobbied MEPs [claiming](#) that the fighting bulls, raised in extensive areas, have less impact on the environment than pigs or sheep.

An association of Spanish veterinarians opposed to bullfighting has [said](#) the public suffering inflicted on bulls was unjustifiable.



A protest against bullfighting outside Las Ventas bullring, Madrid, in September 2021. Photograph: Reuters

It [told](#) MEPs that instruments ranging from barbed darts to an 80cm sword were used on bulls during bullfights that lasted approximately 15 minutes, causing "deep wounds, significant bleeding, intense suffering and painful death".

Bañuelos claimed that the [death of a fighting bull](#) is “quicker and entails less suffering” than many animals raised commercially.

“There are thousands of animals that die every day in very painful circumstances. But the focus is on bullfighting because it is the most exposed when it comes to publicity and it is an easy target,” he said.

*Sign up for the [Animals farmed monthly update](#) to get a roundup of the biggest farming and food stories across the world and keep up with our investigations. You can send us your stories and thoughts at [animalsfarmed@theguardian.com](mailto:animalsfarmed@theguardian.com)*

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## Global development

# ‘A wonderful accomplishment’: success for cleanup of Nigeria’s deadly lead pollution

Children in the mining town of Anka were dying each day at the height of the crisis, but now poisoning cases have been virtually wiped out



Children at an MSF clinic in Anka, Zamfara state. Hundreds died and many more were left with brain damage as a result of pollution from local mining.  
Photograph: Kola Sulaimon/AFP/Getty

Global development is supported by



[About this content](#)

[Emmanuel Akinwotu](#) west Africa correspondent

Fri 18 Mar 2022 04.00 EDT Last modified on Fri 18 Mar 2022 04.04 EDT

For five years, Frederick Chukwuemeze had the grim task of treating children poisoned by lead in Anka, a mining town in north-west [Nigeria](#).

Since 2010, more than 600 children have died from lead poisoning in Zamfara state and hundreds more have been left with brain damage and physical disabilities as a result of hazardous artisanal gold mining.

“I’ve seen patients with continuous seizures that couldn’t be controlled with any medication. [Children](#) that can’t talk, can’t walk. Always in bed, not knowing where they are. And then, of course, children dying. It’s actually heartbreakingly when we see such cases,” said Chukwuemeze.

But no child has died on his watch since October last year, thanks to a joint effort between local and international agencies that has virtually wiped out lead poisoning cases in the state.

“It’s a wonderful accomplishment – for the patients and for me,” said Chukwuemeze, who works with [Médecins Sans Frontières](#) (MSF), which was involved in the clean-up operation.

The huge effort followed an [outbreak of lead poisoning](#) in at least seven villages in Zamfara in 2010. Over six months, 400 children died in a crisis that sent shockwaves throughout the country and brought into sharp focus the dangers of mineral processing in a largely impoverished and rural area.

The intervening years have seen more deaths and hundreds of poisoning cases, including children who have been left with brain damage and physical disabilities.

Alhaji Muhammadu Bello, the head of Dareta village, said that at the height of the crisis: “In my village, 120 children died. Six or seven were dying every day.”

The cause of the poisoning was found to be contamination of soil, water and food from the processing of gold deposits in village homes and residential areas.

Artisanal – small-scale – mining is a source of income for many in Zamfara, a mineral-rich state, and many children who are out of school in the region are involved.

In response, MSF joined forces with OK International, an organisation specialising in occupational and industrial health, and TerraGraphics International Foundation, an environmental engineering group, to work with Zamfara state health, environmental and other government officials to devise a long-term programme to reduce lead poisoning. Their task was not made any easier in villages regularly overrun by militants and inaccessible to aid.



MSF joined forces with other NGOs and state officials to reduce lead poisoning cases, but work was hampered by the precarious security situation. Photograph: Kola Sulaimon/AFP/Getty

After an intensive monitoring programme, more than 8,000 children in affected mining communities have been screened by MSF and state health officials, and more than 3,500 have been through lengthy chelation therapy to remove lead deposits from their blood.

A “safer mining” programme has seen more than 5,000 miners and community workers trained on improved standards to prevent exposure to lead, and designated processing sites – with showers – have been set up 2 to 3 miles away from residential areas to prevent miners bringing mineral deposits home.

As a result, no child has died of lead poisoning this year, and cases are now rare.

“Each of the village heads and council leaders have the responsibility to ensure that people aren’t bringing mining processing home but processing in designated areas for every village,” said Benjamin Mwangombe, MSF’s project coordinator in Zamfara.

Alhaji Shehu Anka, the head of Zamfara state's environmental sanitation agency, said excavation work removed waste from soil and mineral processing left in wells and ponds.

"The mining activities had really damaged the local environment so we had to undertake a major effort to restore the environment and make it safe," he said.

"Because of the security challenges we were doing some of this environmental work and environmental training remotely. We used to invite miners that come from those villages. Then collect soil samples from the homes of children that are not responding to treatment, then they would remediate the environment themselves," he added.

Mwangombe said the success of the project, which was now being handed over to the Zamfara state government to lead, was due to the engagement of the communities and local and state officials.

"We realised the reason the outbreak happened was because people brought mineral processing to the villages. People didn't have any knowledge on how to mine safely. Now we believe there is a good level of behavioural change," he said.

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## [US news](#)

# Arnold Schwarzenegger appeals to Russian people to reject Kremlin misinformation

Former California governor, 74, calls on Putin to stop attack on Ukraine and says ‘this is not the Russian people’s war’

- [\*\*Russia-Ukraine war: latest updates\*\*](#)

02:18

Arnold Schwarzenegger tells Russians Putin is lying about 'illegal war' with Ukraine – video

*Richard Luscombe and Reuters  
@richlusc*

Thu 17 Mar 2022 15.39 EDTFirst published on Thu 17 Mar 2022 14.56 EDT

Former California governor [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#) on Thursday told the Russian people that they are being fed misinformation about their country's assault on Ukraine and appealed to President Vladimir Putin to stop the attack.

The Hollywood star said in the nine-minute video on Twitter that the Kremlin was intentionally lying to Russians by saying the invasion was intended to “denazify” Ukraine. [Russia](#) describes its actions as a “special operation”.

“Ukraine did not start this war, neither did nationalists or Nazis,” he said, noting that the country’s president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, is Jewish. “This is not the Russian people’s war.”

Starting with a tale about meeting his hero, the world champion Russian weightlifter Yuri Petrovich Vlasov, in Vienna when he was a 14-year-old, Schwarzenegger went on to explain his deepening affection and admiration for the kindness of the Russian people.

Addressing in turn Russian citizens, troops and the country's leadership, he said he was speaking with the same "heartfelt concern" with which he [spoke to the American people](#) after the 6 January insurrection last year.

Schwarzenegger's Twitter account has 4.9 million followers – and is one of the 22 followed by the Kremlin's official account.

Europe's biggest invasion since the second world war has ravaged Ukrainian cities and sent more than 3 million refugees fleeing to neighboring countries. It is unclear how much people in Russia know about the war after the Kremlin cut access to various media channels and websites.

"I love the Russian people. That's why I have to tell you the truth. Please watch and share," Schwarzenegger said [in the tweet](#) accompanying his video, which had already amassed more than a quarter-million likes by Thursday lunchtime.

Schwarzenegger asked Russians to spread the word about the "human catastrophe" and told Russian protesters the world is watching.

"The world has seen your bravery. We know you have suffered the consequences of your courage," he said. "You are my new heroes."

The 74-year-old Republican, who started as a bodybuilder before reaching worldwide fame in action films, called on Putin to stop the invasion. He said thousands of Russian soldiers had been killed while their leaders had lied to them.

Austria-born Schwarzenegger told the story of how his father, who fought for Germany in the second world war, was left broken by his experiences of the battle of Leningrad, in which he was wounded. He went on to tell Russian soldiers that they have been lied to, and that thousands of them have already been killed.

“Some were told the Ukrainian people would treat them like heroes. Some were told they were simply going on exercises. They didn’t even know they were going to war,” he said.

The video concludes with Schwarzenegger pointing out that 11 million Russians have family connections to Ukraine.

“Every bullet you shoot, you shoot a brother or sister,” he said.

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## US news

# Carcinogenic chemical benzene found in hundreds of US personal care products

Independent lab found the chemical in more than a quarter of items it tested – sometimes at levels considered ‘life threatening’



Toxic benzene has been found in antiperspirants, shampoos, sunscreens, hand sanitizers, and other products. Photograph: Niyi Fote/Zuma/Rex/Shutterstock

*[Tom Perkins](#)*

Fri 18 Mar 2022 04.00 EDT Last modified on Fri 18 Mar 2022 12.24 EDT

Independent testing has found hundreds of popular personal care items in the US to be contaminated with benzene, a highly carcinogenic chemical, prompting several big brands to voluntarily recall dozens of products in recent months.

The lab, Valisure, last year detected benzene in hand sanitizers, sunscreens, deodorant, dry shampoos, conditioners, antiperspirants, deodorants, body sprays and anti-fungal treatments. The contamination has been most frequently detected in aerosol or spray products, some at levels the Food and Drug Administration [characterized](#) as “life-threatening”.

The findings suggest that benzene contamination is widespread and is probably in more products that have not yet been tested, said David Light, Valisure’s chief executive.

“Benzene really shouldn’t be there at all,” he said. “What we’re seeing is a fundamental problem in the manufacturing of a lot of consumer products.” To date, Valisure has tested 662 items and found the chemical in 180, or about 27%, of products.

Procter & Gamble, Bayer, [CVS](#) and Johnson & Johnson have issued voluntary recalls for widely distributed brands including [Brut](#), [Sure](#), [Pantene](#), [Herbal Essences](#), [Old Spice](#), [Secret](#), [Tinactin](#), [Lotrimin](#), [Coppertone](#), [Neutrogena](#) and [Aveeno](#). Among the recalled hand sanitizer brands are Art Naturals, Best Brands and Natural Wunderz.

Light pointed to “[decades of research](#)” that has found no safe levels of benzene exposure because it’s so toxic at very low levels. The petroleum-based chemical “causes cancer”, especially leukemia and in blood forming organs, the US Department of Health and Human Services [wrote](#). The toxin has also been shown to harm the central nervous system and reproductive organs.

The US banned benzene’s use as an ingredient nearly 45 years ago, and it is “somewhat unique in that it’s pretty well established to be incredibly toxic – that’s been known for decades to over a century,” said David Andrews, senior scientist at the public health advocate Environmental Working Group.

Advocates took aim at the Food and Drug Administration for failing to do more to protect the public. In a December [statement](#), the agency said it was investigating the situation, doing its own testing and urged companies to recall contaminated products.

Though the agency lacks the authority to order recalls and may be limited in its pre-market authority to require testing, advocates are calling on the FDA to clarify an existing benzene limit, set new exposure limits, and conduct more testing of products on store shelves to ensure they are safe, instead of leaving that up to independent labs. The FDA's system "really lacks independent review" because it relies on companies to self report, Light said.

Federal rules allow benzene to be used in the manufacture of personal care products, and that can cause it to end up in goods, even if it's not listed as an ingredient. Benzene can also be added in emergency situations, like the pandemic, or if it provides "significant therapeutic" advantages. In such scenarios, the FDA's limit is two parts per million, but some products that provided no therapeutic advantage were found with levels as high as 21 ppm.

In a statement, the FDA wrote it "continues to monitor the issue" and work with companies to recall contaminated products. Though the agency doesn't have exposure limits, it informs companies that "solvents such as benzene should not be employed in the manufacture of drug substances, excipients, or drug products because of their unacceptable toxicity."

Some companies have capitalized on the confusing regulations and gaps to downplay the problem. Johnson & Johnson, which recalled sunscreens in July, said "daily exposure to benzene in these aerosol sunscreen products at the levels detected in our testing would not be expected to cause adverse health consequences."

The company's statement was posted by the FDA on its website even though agency scientists found in a July [analysis](#) obtained by [Consumer Reports](#) that benzene-contaminated sunscreen did pose a "life-threatening risk".

"Is the FDA serving these companies or the public?" Andrews asked.

How benzene is landing in products remains a bit of a mystery in some instances. Companies claim they aren't adding it to their formulas, and the FDA [theorized](#) that it's probably in contaminated thickening agents, preservatives, spray propellant or ethanol.

In many cases, Valisure found one batch of a product would contain benzene while another of the same product would not. That highlights the complexities and lack of oversight in the global supply chains that produce personal care products. A propellant like butane that's refined very early in the manufacturing process "touches dozens of different hands" in its journey from raw material to sunscreen on a shelf, yet nobody detected benzene, Light said.

Valisure most frequently found benzene in body sprays, which includes deodorants and anti-perspirants: nearly half of the 108 products from 30 different brands contained it. The highest levels were found in Sure, Old Spice, Secret, Equate, Right Guard, Tag and Brut.

Valisure tested nearly 300 sunscreens or after-sun products and found detectable levels in 77, or about 27%, of samples. Among those with the highest levels were Neutrogena, CVS, Sun Bum, Raw Elements and Banana Boat. Though spray-on sunscreen was found to be contaminated most frequently, the chemical was also detected in lotions and gels.

Valisure's hand sanitizer analysis found the highest levels of benzene in small brands that popped up as demand for the product spiked. Out of 260 samples from 168 brands sold on Amazon, at pharmacies and at box stores such as Target, 44, or about 17%, had detectable levels of benzene. Products from household names like Purell and Suave didn't contain the chemical.

In its December statement, TPC Hot Acquisition, which owns Brut and Sure, wrote: "To date, no reports of adverse events related to this recall have been reported. This voluntary recall is being conducted out of an abundance of caution."

However, it's nearly impossible to legally prove that one specific chemical has caused an illness, and Andrews noted benzene has a latency period of 10 to 15 years. "The time lag between exposure and cancer can be a long period of time," he said.

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[\*\*Peru\*\*](#)

## **Peruvian court approves prison release of ex-president Alberto Fujimori**

Decision restores humanitarian pardon granted to Fujimori, who is serving a 25-year sentence for murder and corruption charges



Alberto Fujimori walks out of jail in Santiago after posting bail in May 2006. Photograph: Martin Bernetti/AFP/Getty Images

*Guardian staff and agencies in Lima*

Thu 17 Mar 2022 16.44 EDT

Peru's constitutional court has approved the release from prison of former president Alberto Fujimori, who is serving a 25-year sentence for murder and corruption charges.

Judge Eloy Espinosa-Saldana confirmed the 4-3 ruling in remarks broadcast on local channel Canal N. It was unclear when Fujimori could leave prison

or if new legal challenges could halt the decision.

The decision restored [a humanitarian pardon granted to Fujimori](#) on Christmas Eve in 2017 by then president Pablo Kuczynski. [That pardon was overturned in 2018](#) when the supreme court ordered the former strongman returned to jail to serve out his sentence for human rights abuses.

Kuczynski had said he pardoned Fujimori because he suffered a heart condition made worse by prison conditions, though the move was widely seen as an attempt to stave off impeachment by courting favor with Fujimori's allies in Congress. The pardon sparked protests across the country and Kuczynski resigned three months later.

Fujimori, 83, governed between 1990 and 2000. His sentence was to end 10 February 2032.

He remains a polarizing figure in Peru. Some Peruvians laud him for defeating the Maoist Shining Path guerrilla movement, while others loathe him for human rights violations carried out under his government.

A former mathematics professor, Fujimori was a political outsider when he emerged from obscurity to win Peru's 1990 presidential election over writer Mario Vargas Llosa.

Peru was being ravaged by runaway inflation and guerrilla violence when he took office. He quickly rebuilt the economy with mass privatizations of state industries. Defeating the fanatical Shining Path rebels took longer but his fight won him broad-based support.

But his presidency collapsed just as dramatically as his rise to power.

After briefly shutting down congress and putting himself into a third term, Fujimori fled the country in disgrace in 2000 after leaked videotapes showed his spy chief, Vladimiro Montesinos, bribing lawmakers. Fujimori went to Japan, his parents' homeland, and sent in his resignation by fax.

Five years later, he stunned supporters and enemies alike when he flew to neighboring Chile, where he was arrested and extradited to Peru. Fujimori's goal was to run for Peru's presidency again in 2006, but instead he was put on trial.

His daughter, Keiko Fujimori, was a presidential candidate last year and vowed to release him if she got elected. But Pedro Castillo defeated her in a runoff election.

Fujimori also faced charges stemming from his role in a 1990s government program in which many Indigenous women in poor communities said they were forcibly sterilized and for the murder of six farmers by a military death squad during his administration.

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## [Politics](#)

# Plans to cap UK MPs' earnings from second jobs dropped

Exclusive: ministers tell Commons standards committee that a ceiling on such earnings would be 'impractical'



Former attorney general Geoffrey Cox has been paid nearly £6m as a lawyer since joining parliament. Photograph: Hannah McKay/Reuters

*[Rowena Mason](#) and [Jessica Elgot](#)*

Thu 17 Mar 2022 01.00 EDT Last modified on Thu 17 Mar 2022 01.15 EDT

Plans to cap MPs' earnings from second jobs have been dropped months after the issue provoked a sleaze scandal that plunged Boris Johnson's government into crisis, the Guardian can reveal.

Ministers told the Commons standards committee that a time limit or ceiling on such earnings would be "impractical".

The prime minister pledged last year to clamp down on MPs' second jobs after the [Owen Paterson lobbying scandal](#) and a furore over Geoffrey Cox [being paid nearly £6m](#) as a lawyer since joining parliament, voting by proxy on days he was undertaking paid work.

At the time, Dominic Raab, the deputy prime minister, said the government would back reasonable limits on MPs' outside earnings, saying: "You could do it in one of two ways, you could do it by the amount or you could do it by the number of hours. We've asked the committee on standards to work up the detail by January." Another minister, Anne-Marie Trevelyan, suggested that around [10-15 hours a week](#) would be reasonable.

However, the government revealed that it no longer backs such limits in its [submission](#) to the current consultation by the Commons standards committee, seen by the Guardian.

The conclusion, from Steve Barclay, the chancellor of the duchy of Lancaster, and Mark Spencer, the leader of the House of Commons, said: "It is the government's initial view that the imposition of fixed constraints such as time limits on the amount of time that Members can spend on outside work would be impractical.

"The imposition of time limits would not necessarily serve to address recent concerns over paid advocacy and the primary duty of MPs to serve their constituents. It could be possible, for example, for a Member to conduct work within the accepted time limits but that does not necessarily mean such work is 'appropriate' even if it did not constitute 'paid advocacy'."

They add: "In respect of a cap on earnings from outside work to impose such a limit could serve to prohibit activities which do not bring undue influence to bear on the political system. Earnings from activities such as writing books for example, would not preclude Members from meeting their principal duty to their constituents."

During his time as an MP, Johnson registered £88,000 as an advance from the publisher Hodder & Stoughton for a book "as yet unwritten" in 2015.

The government said it would support reforms to “restrict the type of outside work which MPs are able to undertake” but did not set out what these should be beyond supporting the current proposal to ban “paid parliamentary advice, consultancy, or strategy services”. It will make its final decision after the consultation is concluded and the committee has produced its final report.

In contrast, the Committee for Standards in Public Life put forward a suggestion of an “objective means of setting reasonable limits” on earnings by MPs from second jobs.

“We believe the Standards Committee and the House should set an indicative limit of hours and remuneration, with a rebuttable presumption that paid outside employment exceeding those limits would be considered unreasonable,” its chair, Lord Evans, said in his submission.

The government also took issue with a number of other suggested changes, including the idea that MPs could be referred to the standards commissioner for behaviour in the Commons. It opposed changes to the MPs’ code of conduct to make it an offence for any member to “subject anyone to unreasonable and excessive personal attack in any medium”. The government said this could have a chilling effect on free speech and unduly stop MPs from expressing their views.

Numerous – largely Conservative – MPs also responded to the consultation on their standards regime with a wide range of criticisms. Tory MP Craig Whittaker described some of the proposals on limits and declaring contracts for second jobs as “more nonsense! Bureaucratic, burdensome and just plain ridiculous” and [“another ‘barking mad’ idea!”](#).

Philip Dunne, a Tory MP and former minister with a second job that pays him £3,400 a month as a non-executive director, [warned](#) that a system to ban paid parliamentary consultancy had “led to the loss of experienced and qualified experts from parliamentary discourse” from the House of Lords.

The committee on standards [released its proposals](#) for the code of conduct in November. It said MPs should face a complete ban on working as paid

consultants and ministers should be more open about any potential conflicts of interest.

Other recommendations included an obligation for MPs to have a written contract for any outside work, available for inspection if needed, and which would spell out that they cannot lobby on behalf of the employer.

It also raised the possibility of limits on how much time MPs can spend on outside jobs or other interests, and how much they can be paid for them, but said this would need cross-party support.

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Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Anoosheh Ashoori after flying out of Iran.  
Photograph: AP

[Guardian morning briefing](#)

## **Thursday briefing: Britons held captive by Iran home at last**

Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Anoosheh Ashoori after flying out of Iran.  
Photograph: AP

Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe touches down on British soil ... Russia accused of strike on theatre where civilians were sheltering ... and why Kenya is flooding

by [Warren Murray](#)

Thu 17 Mar 2022 02.31 EDT Last modified on Thu 17 Mar 2022 02.41 EDT

**Top story: ‘Is that mummy?’ Heartwarming scene at airport**

Hello, I'm Warren Murray with the things that are making headlines this morning.

Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe has [touched down on British soil](#) for the first time since she was detained in Iran six years ago. Wearing a blue dress and a yellow scarf, the colours of Ukraine, Zaghari-Ratcliffe stepped off a plane at RAF Brize Norton in Oxfordshire in the early hours of this morning. Alongside 44-year-old Zaghari-Ratcliffe as she disembarked was fellow British-Iranian Anoosheh Ashoori, 67, who was also released from jail in Iran on Wednesday.

01:12

Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliff and Anoosheh Ashoori arrive in UK after release – video

Zaghari-Ratcliffe was seen hugging and carrying her seven-year-old daughter, Gabriella, inside the airport reception building where they were surrounded by other [family members](#), including her husband, Richard, who campaigned for years for her release. Gabriella was heard asking “is that mummy?” as her mother disembarked the flight. Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Ashoori had been accused of plotting to overthrow the Iranian government and of spying respectively. As part of years-long negotiations, the UK is understood to have agreed to [pay £393.8m owed to Iran](#) since it cancelled an order of Chieftain tanks after the overthrow of the Shah in the revolution of 1979.

A third British detainee, Morad Tahbaz, has been released from prison on furlough but remains in Iran. All three deny the charges. Liz Truss, the British foreign secretary, said on Thursday morning that the government would “continue to work intensively” for the freedom of Tahbaz. Iran is treating Tahbaz, 66, as an American citizen, even though he was born in Hammersmith, west London, and holds US, UK and Iranian citizenship. The Tahbaz family told the Guardian they felt “let down and betrayed by the British government ... The British now just say he is an American problem.”

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**‘Weapons and sanctions’** – Volodymyr Zelenskiy has [likened the “siege of Mariupol” to Leningrad](#) while promising that “every Russian soldier who lays down his arms will get a chance to survive.” In a video address, the Ukrainian president said: “The Russian army is suffering losses that it did not see in Syria or Chechnya; that Soviet troops [didn’t have] in Afghanistan.”

00:45

Mariupol theatre and swimming pool where civilians sheltered lie in ruins – video

Joe Biden has [called Vladimir Putin a “war criminal”](#) as Ukrainian officials accused Russian forces of further atrocities in Mariupol, including an [airstrike on a theatre where hundreds of displaced people were believed to have been sheltering](#) and a strike on a swimming pool where pregnant women and young children had gathered. Zelenskiy’s foreign minister, Dmytro Kuleba has said the “fierce resistance” of Ukrainian forces and citizens is forcing Russian negotiators into concessions, whether the Kremlin admits it or not. In a CNN interview, Kuleba discussed what was needed to strengthen Ukrainian negotiators’ hand: “Weapons and sanctions, and the rest will be done by Ukraine.” [Keep up with developments at our live blog.](#)

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**Second job curbs dumped** – Plans to cap MPs’ earnings from second jobs have been dropped, [only months after the issue plunged the government into crisis](#), the Guardian can reveal. Boris Johnson pledged to clamp down after the Owen Paterson lobbying scandal and furore over Geoffrey Cox earning nearly £6m as a lawyer since joining parliament – voting by proxy on days he was doing paid work. Now, the government has told the Commons standards committee it no longer backs limits on hours or amount of work. The government said it would support reforms to restrict the type of outside work, but did not set out what these restrictions should be, other than banning “paid parliamentary advice, consultancy, or strategy services”. In contrast, the Committee for Standards in Public Life has suggested an “objective means of setting reasonable limits” on earnings by MPs from second jobs.

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**‘Denial of structural racism’** – Ministers will drop the term black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME), more closely scrutinise police stop and search, and draft a model history curriculum to teach Britain’s “complex” past in response to the Sewell report on racial disparities. Launched as a response to the Black Lives Matter protests, the report [caused controversy when it was published last year](#) for broadly rejecting the idea of institutional racism in the UK. In the government’s response, called Inclusive Britain, ministers acknowledge racism exists but stress the importance of other factors. Taiwo Owatemi, Labour’s shadow equalities minister, said the report still “agrees with the original report’s denial of structural racism. Boris Johnson’s Conservatives have once again failed to deliver meaningful action.” The report sets out a long list of policies, some new and others already in place.

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**Pensioners mired in poverty** – One in five pensioners – [more than 2 million people – are living in relative poverty in the UK](#), according to the Centre for Ageing Better’s annual State of Ageing report, published today. It says inequalities within older generations are some of the most extreme in society: the wealth of the richest 20% doubled between 2002 and 2018, while that of the poorest 20% fell a third. In a YouGov poll, more than 80% of respondents said the government was failing to ensure a decent life for older people. Ministers meanwhile are under growing pressure to soften the impact of the cost of living crisis amid fresh warnings that millions of low-income households risk sliding into further debt, hunger and poverty. More than 50 charities are urging ministers to [uprate all benefits in line with inflation](#), which is projected to be running at 7.25% by April, instead of the planned benefits increase of 3.1%.

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**Spies in UK undisturbed** – New laws to make it easier to expel Russian spies and other foreign agents need to be urgently speeded up in light of the Ukraine crisis, opposition parties have said, with the UK lagging behind other nations in tackling interference. Laws forcing foreign agents to sign a register were promised in last year’s Queen’s speech. The government fast-tracked its economic crime bill to help speed up sanctions against oligarchs this week, but the bill to deal with espionage has never been published, even in draft form. Since Russia invaded Ukraine, the US has expelled 12 Russian

diplomats that it accuses of being spies; at the same time [the UK has not expelled any diplomats or spies](#).

## **Today in Focus podcast: Refugees now welcome here**

People in Britain have been signing up in their thousands to [offer a place in their homes to those seeking refuge from the war on Ukraine](#). Recent government policy sits at odds with this spirit of generosity, says Amelia Gentleman.

Today in Focus

### **Refugees now welcome here**

00:00:00

00:38:01

## **Lunchtime read: Kenya's quiet slide underwater**

Kenya's great lakes are flooding, in a devastating and long-ignored environmental disaster that is displacing hundreds of thousands of people. Plate tectonics? Climate change? Or a cyclical phenomenon last seen in the 1940s? Carey Baraka [examines the theories and visits the areas affected](#).



Submerged tourist lodges at Lake Baringo in Kenya. Photograph: Celine Clery/AFP/Getty Images

## Sport

Jürgen Klopp promised Manchester City [a “proper fight” for the title](#) after [ruthlessly efficient Liverpool](#) pulled to within a point of the longstanding league leaders with [a 2-0 win over Arsenal](#). In the Champions League, Chelsea survived a scare as Christian Pulisic and César Azpilicueta helped fend off Lille to [progress to the last eight](#) as the club’s off-field turbulence continues. Three late goals earned Villarreal a stunning 3-0 second-leg victory at Juventus to condemn the Serie A side to a last-16 exit for [the third successive season](#). Manchester United are monitoring Thomas Tuchel’s situation at Chelsea as they [intensify their search for a new manager](#) and also have [Sevilla’s Julen Lopetegui](#) on their shortlist.

Joe Root scored his 25th Test century but Dan Lawrence was out to the last ball of the first day of the second Test against West Indies as [England reached 244 for three](#) at stumps. Emma Hayes cautioned that Chelsea have the tougher run in after her side cut Arsenal’s lead at the top of the Women’s Super League to two points with a [comfortable 3-0 defeat of Everton](#). None of the four tennis grand slam tournaments will feature extended final sets any more after it was announced that [a 10-point tie-break will be enforced](#).

And the RSPCA is prosecuting the West Ham defender Kurt Zouma and his brother Yoan under the Animal Welfare Act, [the charity has said](#), after a video emerged last month of a cat being kicked.

## Business

The Federal Reserve raised US interest rates for the [first time since 2018](#) yesterday and promised another six hikes this year. Today it is the turn of the Bank of England's policy committee who [must decide](#) whether tackling inflation with another rate increase is the priority, or whether raising UK borrowing costs for a third time in succession risks tipping us into recession. The pound could benefit from the latter scenario and is up slightly today at \$1.316 and €1.193. The FTSE100 is down 0.6% in futures trade.

## The papers



With the war in Ukraine [relegated to the second spot in most papers](#), the **Times**' splash headline says: “Free at last, Nazanin will ‘learn to be happy again’” alongside a picture of her on the plane out of Iran. The same picture dominates the front page of the **Guardian** as well, under the headline [“Zaghari-Ratcliffe released after six years in Iran jail”](#). The **Mirror** goes

with a domestic angle: “Home … for a nice cuppa” after her husband said she was looking forward to one.



Guardian front page, 17 March 2022.

The **Telegraph** says ““Mummy really is coming home”” and the **Daily Mail** also likes the family line with the splash headline “Mummy’s home at last!”. The **Express** speaks to the picture of Zaghari-Ratcliffe with the headline “Smile that says: I’m free”. The **i’s** headline is almost the same while its main story is “Russia bombs theatre being used as shelter”.

The **Financial Times** has “Zaghari-Ratcliffe released from Iran after UK pays \$530m debt”. But it too leads on Ukraine with “Moscow and Kyiv explore neutrality plan in peace talks”. The **Metro** leads with “Nazanin jets home”.

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## Race

# UK government to scrap ‘BAME’ in response to race inquiry

Response to Sewell inquiry also lays out plans for greater police scrutiny and a ‘model history curriculum’



The Sewell report was launched as a response to the Black Lives Matter protests that swept the UK in summer 2020. Photograph: Guy Smallman/Getty Images

*[Heather Stewart](#) Political editor*

Wed 16 Mar 2022 18.30 EDT Last modified on Thu 17 Mar 2022 01.14 EDT

Ministers will drop the term black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME), beef up local scrutiny of police stop and search and draft a model history curriculum to teach Britain’s “complex” past in response to the Sewell report on racial disparities.

Launched as a response to the Black Lives Matter protests, the Sewell report caused controversy [when it was published last year](#) for broadly rejecting institutional racism as an explanation for many of the challenges faced by ethnic minorities in the UK.

In the government's response, called Inclusive Britain, ministers acknowledge that racism exists but stress the importance of other factors, too.

Kemi Badenoch, the equalities minister, said: "I strongly believe that Britain is the fairest and most open-minded country in the world, but there is more we can do to foster inclusion and enable everyone to reach their full potential."

She added: "The causes behind racial disparities are complex and often misunderstood. Our new strategy is about action, not rhetoric, and will help create a country where a person's race, social or ethnic background is no barrier to achieving their ambitions."

Taiwo Owatemi, Labour's shadow equalities minister, said: "It's disgraceful that we've had to wait almost a year for the government's response – and worse still that it agrees with the original report's denial of structural racism. Boris Johnson's Conservatives have once again failed to deliver meaningful action."

Inclusive Britain recommends dropping the term BAME across government, as it is too much of a catch-all, and gathering more fine-grained data to inform future policymaking.

The report sets out a long list of other policies, some new and others already in place.

These include the Home Office working with police and crime commissioners to draw up a new framework to ensure that police powers, including stop and search and the use of force, are subject to more scrutiny by local communities.

Another plan, which had been trailed by the education minister, Robin Walker, is to draw up a “model curriculum” to “help pupils understand the intertwined nature of British and global history, and their own place within it”.

To be developed by 2024 by a panel of historians and school leaders, the materials in the curriculum will not be compulsory, but will “stand as an exemplar for a knowledge-rich, coherent approach to the teaching of history”.

Sewell’s report was amended last year after a backlash over its suggestion that there was a new story to be taught about the “slave period”, which was not just about “profit and suffering”.

A footnote was added to clarify: “This is to say that in the face of the inhumanity of slavery, African people preserved their humanity and culture. This includes the story of slave resistance.”

Other plans in the Inclusive Britain report include publishing new guidance for employers about how to implement positive discrimination policies in the workplace and convening a new Inclusion at Work Panel made up of experts to examine workplace equality training.

The Department for Education, working with the race disparity unit in the Cabinet Office, will also look at what lessons can be learned from the multi-academy schools trusts that are “most successful at bridging achievement gaps for different ethnic groups and raising overall life chances”.

Existing government policies on everything from using more out-of-court disposals to deal with first-time drug users to tackling online safety are also included.

Badenoch was moved into Michael Gove’s Levelling Up department last September, taking the equalities brief with her.

Launching Inclusive Britain, Gove suggested that tackling racial disparities is part of his levelling up agenda. “Central to Levelling Up is equality –

giving everyone the same access to a great education, a well-paid job and a good standard of living – regardless of their background,” he said.

Tony Sewell, chief executive of the educational charity Generating Genius, welcomed the government’s response to his report, saying: “This is a major step towards a fairer, more open and more inclusive society and, importantly, focuses on the practical actions that will improve people’s lives.”

The Sewell report was commissioned when the government came under intense pressure to respond to the groundswell of support for the Black Lives Matter movement in the UK in summer 2020, with protests across many cities after the death of George Floyd at the hands of US police.

After its publication, [it was reported](#) that large parts of the report – in particular the denial that institutional or structural racism exist – had been authored by No 10.

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This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/16/uk-government-scrap-bame-response-sewell-race-inquiry>.

## Race

# Government strategy sidesteps Sewell race report's most criticised conclusions

Analysis: ministers publish response almost a year after commission delivered its controversial findings



A protester holds up a Black Lives Matter placard during the Million People March in London in August 2020. Photograph: Justin Tallis/AFP/Getty Images

*[Rajeev Syal](#)*

Wed 16 Mar 2022 17.33 EDT Last modified on Thu 17 Mar 2022 01.15 EDT

When Tony Sewell released the report by the Commission on [Race](#) and Ethnic Disparities last March, it was met by an avalanche of criticism.

Wednesday's reaction from ministers, after a year of delay, artfully ignores its most damaging and ridiculed conclusions.

Academics pulled apart Sewell's claims that teaching about the UK's colonial past should include material that "speaks to the slave period not only being about profit and suffering, but how culturally African people transformed themselves into a remodelled African/Britain".

David Olusoga, the author and professor of public history at the University of Manchester, said it was a similar argument to one used by slave owners 200 years ago: "The idea that by becoming culturally British, black people were somehow beneficiaries of the system."

Doreen Lawrence, who campaigned for justice for 18 years after the murder of her son Stephen by racists, warned that the Sewell report risked pushing the fight against racism "back 20 years or more" for undermining the existence of structural racism.

Public health experts said the report was "divorced from the reality" of health disparities that black, Asian and minority ethnic communities faced and that were rooted in structural racism. Windrush campaigners condemned the report for paying so little attention to the scandal that was exposed by the Guardian four years ago.

Wednesday's briefing on the government's Inclusive Britain strategy, which has been released as a response to the Sewell report, has been shorn of some of the references that provoked such scorn.

There is no mention of slavery, let alone how it might be taught. Instead, the briefing speaks of "establishing a diverse panel of historians to develop a new knowledge-rich model history curriculum by 2024 to support high-quality teaching of our complex past".

There is no mention of who might sit on the panel or who will choose the historians.

The Sewell report concluded that the "claim the country is still institutionally racist is not borne out by the evidence". It also downplayed structural racism, the wider political and social disadvantages within society.

Instead, the government's response makes recommendations to increase scrutiny of the police at local levels and of "stop and search" tactics, which have been criticised for disproportionately targeting black youths, and introduce an automatic "opt-in" to help minority ethnic groups and others receive the legal advice they need when in police custody.

It also suggests a white paper on tackling health disparities.

There is no mention of some health claims in the Sewell report: for example, that high Covid death rates among some minority ethnic groups were mainly due to external factors such as a greater likelihood to live in deprivation or to do a public-facing job.

Last year's report concluded that racism is a "real force" but that Britain is no longer a country where the "system is deliberately rigged against ethnic minorities".

It also criticised the "accusatory tone of much of the current rhetoric on race, and the pessimism about what has been, and what more can be, achieved".

The briefing suggests help for BAME people in the workplace, including "a new in-work support offer to every jobcentre" from April, with 37 new specialist "progression champions" to support working claimants.

It also suggests closely working with industry to collect data on the ethnicity of business owners applying for finance, a new HSBC scheme to help more people from ethnic minorities to become entrepreneurs, and "developing regulatory standards and guidance to address potential racial bias in AI".

And there is still no mention of Windrush.

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## 2022.03.17 - Spotlight

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- [The long read A drowning world: Kenya's quiet slide underwater](#)
- [Two years on: the legacy of lockdown The pandemic made it clear there is such a thing as society](#)
- [Lake District holidays I hated walking for 20 years, now I'm aiming to climb all 214 peaks](#)

## Private healthcare

# ‘Betting against the NHS’: £1bn private hospital to open in central London

US-owned Cleveland Clinic London is in talks about providing care for NHS patients but critics fear moves to two-tier health system



The new 184-bed private hospital Cleveland Clinic is about to open in London, the second-largest in the capital. Photograph: Graeme Robertson/The Guardian



[Julia Kollewe](#)

Thu 17 Mar 2022 10.50 EDTFirst published on Thu 17 Mar 2022 02.00 EDT

A new 184-bed private hospital is about to open in London, the second-largest in the capital, where patients will enjoy views of Buckingham Palace and will be treated by doctors understood to be paid up to £350,000 a year.

It provides a stark contrast with the NHS, which is buckling under the strain of [record waiting lists](#), backlogs for cancer care and routine operations and a resurgence of Covid cases that is putting pressure on wards and staffing.

The opening of the Ohio-based Cleveland Clinic's first London hospital at the end of this month comes at a time when the private health sector is booming. With 29 intensive care unit beds and eight operating theatres staffed by 1,200 people, the eight-storey site – estimated by analysts to have cost £1bn – will add to concerns about the emergence of a two-tier healthcare system.



Cleveland Clinic. Photograph: Graeme Robertson/The Guardian

Among London's 19 private hospitals, it will be second biggest after the Wellington hospital in St John's Wood, which is run by the US company HCA.

Specialising in neurology, cardiology, orthopaedics and digestive care, the new hospital boasts a neurosurgical operating theatre twice the usual size, with an MRI scanner in the room beside it – allowing the surgeon to wheel a patient over during an operation to check whether a brain tumour or other abnormalities have been completely removed.

In most other hospitals, more surgery is required when further abnormalities are discovered in the weeks after an operation. The [NHS](#) National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery in Bloomsbury, central London, and other NHS hospitals around the country, for example in Sheffield and Nottingham, also have an intra-operative MRI set-up.

Unlike other British hospitals, Cleveland Clinic London has a pharmacy robot that laser-cuts strips of tablets into single doses and adds a barcode. These are then administered to patients via automated dispensing cabinets, with the aim of reducing errors and wastage.

About 270 consultants will be working at the new site, the vast majority of whom also work for the NHS, and will typically spend one to two days a week at the clinic. The company has [reportedly](#) offered most of them fixed salaries of up to £350,000 a year, rather than the fee-per-service basis common in the private sector, triggering a recruitment war.

Generally, the private sector's fees for "rain makers" – top-level consultants – resemble "football-level salaries", according to Ted Townsend, an analyst at the London-based consultancy LaingBuisson. Some earn up to £500,000 a year from a combination of private and NHS pay, [clinical excellence awards](#) and professorships, he said.

The new hospital will also employ 450 nurses, with more than half coming from other private operators or from Cleveland Clinic's hospitals in Abu Dhabi and Cleveland, with the rest having moved over from the NHS, which employs 300,000 overall and is facing nursing staff shortages.

The company's chief executive, Tom Mihaljevic, who flew over from Ohio for the unveiling of the new hospital, joked that it would not charge extra for its rooms with a view of Buckingham Palace. He said: "We take care of very complex and sick patients. People come to Cleveland Clinic when they run out of hope."

While targeting UK patients with private health insurance or the [growing number of people who are paying for treatment themselves](#), along with overseas patients, the Cleveland Clinic London is also in talks about providing complex procedures for NHS patients to help reduce waiting lists.

Brian Donley, an orthopaedic surgeon who is now chief executive of the clinic, said: "We are in those discussions with all different parts of London, with different NHS trusts on how we can support [reducing] that backlog. We do expect to see some NHS patients, in particular around complex care, in particular around diagnostics." A spokesperson said these would mainly be tests for heart disease.

A number of London NHS trusts have come to rely more on the private sector during the pandemic. HCA, which has six London hospitals, [provided](#)

an unprecedented amount of cancer care, cardiology and other services to several NHS trusts in the capital last year.

David Rowland, the director of the thinktank Centre for [Health](#) and the Public Interest, said: “The worry is the two-tier health system. London has always been the centre of the private hospital market. An estimated £1bn investment in a single hospital is a sign of how strongly foreign investors are betting against the NHS being able to meet the future health needs of the population. And the government seems entirely relaxed about this shift.”

Rowland added that “the pulling away of NHS consultants and nurses is problematic. Private companies are paying significantly more.” He pointed to ophthalmology, where growing numbers of consultants are leaving NHS jobs to join large private companies.



The hospital will specialise in neurology, cardiology, orthopaedics and digestive care. Photograph: Graeme Robertson/The Guardian

Cleveland Clinic is partly banking on the return to London of overseas patients – known as “embassy patients” as foreign embassies often pay for their treatment. They have been slow to come back since the pandemic, but travel restrictions to the UK have now been relaxed by Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Qatar – all leading sources of private patients.

The US group, which has 22 hospitals and 226 outpatient centres globally, was founded in 1921 as a non-profit group and has no shareholders, which means profits are ploughed back into the business, in a similar way to the British health companies Bupa and Nuffield Health.

The private sector has been criticised for using consultants and nurses that have been trained by the NHS, paid for by the UK taxpayer. Cleveland Clinic is trying to address this and has partnerships to train 150 student nurses, and to host neurology PhD students in its hospital. It will also let junior NHS doctors work there to gain expertise, its chief commercial officer, Will Rowberry, said.

This article was amended on 17 March 2022. An earlier version incorrectly said the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery in Bloomsbury was the only NHS hospital with an intra-operative MRI set-up.

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People using a boat to evacuate their village, near Lake Victoria, after flooding in May 2020. Photograph: Thomas Mukoya/Reuters

[The long read](#)

## A drowning world: Kenya's quiet slide underwater

People using a boat to evacuate their village, near Lake Victoria, after flooding in May 2020. Photograph: Thomas Mukoya/Reuters

Kenya's great lakes are flooding, in a devastating and long-ignored environmental disaster that is displacing hundreds of thousands of people

by [Carey Baraka](#)

Thu 17 Mar 2022 02.00 EDT Last modified on Thu 17 Mar 2022 06.27 EDT

One of the first scientists to realise that something was wrong with the lakes was a geologist named Simon Onywera. He came to the topic by accident. Between 2010 and 2013 he had been studying Lake Baringo, Kenya's fourth-largest lake by volume. The bones of residents of the area around the

lake weaken uncommonly fast, and Onywero was investigating whether this may be linked to high fluoride levels in the water. Then, in early 2013, while he was meeting with residents of Marigat, a town near the lake, one old man stood up. “Prof,” he said. “We don’t care about the fluoride. What we want to know is how the water has entered our schools.”

Curious to know what the man was talking about, Onywero visited the local Salabani primary school. There, he found the lake lapping through the grounds of the school. Nonplussed, he took out his map. He looked at the location of the lake and the location of the school, and wondered how the lake had moved 2km without it becoming news.

Onywero rushed back to Nairobi, where he and his colleagues at several Kenyan universities studied recent satellite images of the lake. The images showed that the lake had, in the past year, flooded the area around it. Then Onywero searched for images of some of the lakes nearby: Lakes Bogoria, Naivasha and Nakuru. All of these had flooded. As he extended his search, he saw that Lake Victoria, Africa’s largest lake, had flooded, too. So had Lake Turkana, the largest desert lake in the world.

By September 2013, after further investigation and mapping, it was clear to Onywero and his colleagues how extreme the damage was. In Baringo, schools had been flooded and people had been displaced. Lake Nakuru, which was previously enclosed by a national park, now extended beyond it. It had increased in size by 50%.

Onywero, who has the air of a stern, experienced teacher, went to see the governor of Baringo County a few months later, but without much hope. He claims the governor showed little interest. Benjamin Cheboi, however, the then governor of Baringo County, disputes this, and says that he and Onywero never met.

Throughout the 2010s, the lakes rose slowly, and tens of thousands of people were forced to move from their homes. Then, at the start of 2020, after a particularly vicious period of rain in Kenya’s highlands, the lakes’ expansion accelerated.

## A map of Kenya's lakes

Lake Turkana swept past the Barrier volcanic complex – four overlapping volcanoes that had previously separated it from the much smaller Lake Logipi, which it now swallowed whole. Lake Baringo swallowed up the lesser-known Lake 94, and proceeded inland for about eight miles, while Lake Oloiden disappeared into Lake Naivasha's clutches. Lake Baringo, which is freshwater, and Lake Bogoria, which is saltwater, moved towards each other, threatening to become a single body of water, which would devastate the wildlife in both lakes. At one point, the lakes came within four miles of each other.

Only were found it extraordinary how little attention was being paid to the problem. Once the pandemic took hold in March 2020, the government seemed to take even less interest. Apart from a series of publicity visits to these areas triggered by a few news reports in Kenyan media, these lakes, and the people around them, were ignored.

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Kenya is a nation of lakes. If you look at a satellite image of Africa, one patch of blue stands out amid the greens of forests and the browns of deserts. Lake Victoria is situated at the meeting point of Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya. Move east, further into Kenya, and zoom in. The country is covered in blue: Lake Turkana in the north, reaching up into Ethiopia, and Lake Natron in the south, pushing down into Tanzania. Between them, running in a line down the western half of the country, a smattering of smaller lakes: Baringo, Bogoria, Naivasha, Nakuru, Magadi. All these lakes are in the Kenyan section of the Great Rift valley, an elongated lowland region formed by tectonic plates moving apart from one another, which runs 4,000 miles south from Lebanon to Mozambique.

As a child, Kenya's lakes loomed large in my mind. I grew up in the city of Kisumu, on the shores of Lake Victoria. I remember my excitement at the discovery that Victoria was the second-largest freshwater lake in the world, and third-largest lake overall. Here was something we Kenyans excelled at, I thought. Lakes! Every few months, my family and I would spend an afternoon by the water's edge. At Impala Park, you could picnic by the water while gazelles grazed next to you. At Hippo Point, boat rides awaited, as

well as the occasional hippo sighting. We used to skim stones across the water's surface, and count how many times we could make them bounce.



Flood waters after River Nzoia burst its banks due to heavy rainfall in May 2020. Photograph: Thomas Mukoya/Reuters

Kenya's lakes are vital to the country's people, economy and wildlife. A few are salt lakes, which sustain abundant marine and bird life – among them, flamingos, endangered species of eagles and vultures, and cranes – as well as local industries. Lake Magadi provides more sodium carbonate – used in cleaning products, food production and glass manufacturing – than anywhere else in Africa. Other Kenyan lakes – Turkana, Baringo and Naivasha – are freshwater, and support the roughly 1 million people who live near them. [Water](#) from Lake Naivasha supports most of Kenya's flower industry. Kenya is the third-largest exporter of cut flowers in the world, and 70% of these flowers go to Europe.

Over the past decade, as these lakes have risen, they have become a source of alarm rather than pride. Hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced from their homes. And this seems to be just the start of the disaster. A [recent UN report](#) about Lake Turkana declared that flooding, which was until recently considered a rare event, “is likely to become more regular” unless adaptation measures are put in place.

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Last year, I spent a few weeks travelling across Kenya to see the rising lakes for myself. From Kenya's capital, Nairobi, I first drove north-west to Nakuru, 100 miles from Nairobi, descending steep escarpments and into the Rift valley. Then I drove 60 miles north to Marigat, the nearest big town to Lake Baringo and Lake Bogoria, where Onywere had begun his research. On my first day in town, I met George Okeyo, the ranking education official in the area. Okeyo settled into his plush leather office chair and began to speak.

The rapid expansion of Lake Baringo had started in December 2019, he told me. Baringo is a desert area but for about three months, until March 2020, there had been heavy downpours. Residents of the area expected that when the rain stopped, the lake would retreat. Instead, it kept rising. In March 2020, as Covid spread, schools across the country closed. When they reopened seven months later, 11 schools in Marigat had been completely submerged by the lake.

In one school, from their desks, the students could see hippos frolicking. Okeyo told me that crocodiles had killed two children who had been playing at one of the schools before they reopened. To deter these animals, thorny poisonous mathenge trees were planted to serve as walls. But there were multiple news stories of other crocodile and hippo attacks in the area.



Crocodiles swim next to a group of people at the shore of Kampi Ya Samaki in October 2021. Photograph: Daniel Irungu/EPA

A few local schools had received donations from the national government and from charities, but Okeyo dismissed these as pitiful: a few tents, and some corrugated iron sheets for building classrooms. When Okeyo went to the Ministry of Education in Nairobi at the start of 2021, the records showed that each of the secondary schools around Lake Baringo had been allocated 10m shillings (£67,000), and the primary schools 4m shillings (£27,000) each. “The officer I was talking to said the money had been sent,” Okeyo said. On the ground, these schools knew nothing about the money. (Some financial assistance arrived months after I visited, more than a year after the schools were flooded.)

The next day, Okeyo and I set out to visit some of the schools that had relocated. At Ng’ambo primary school, whose student population had dropped down to 40 children from a pre-pandemic high of 500, classes were under way beneath the shade of trees and in two white Red Cross tents. Outside one tent was the staffroom: a bench where teachers sat, grading exam papers. In one outdoor class, a teacher took his pupils through some English grammar. Today’s lesson was capital letters. Around the children, goats walked in the dust.

Mr Parkolo, the headteacher, told me that what used to be the school’s classrooms were now submerged, nine miles away. Then, noticing my camera, he instructed the teachers to gather at the staff bench for photos. He told the children to put on their face masks. We were in the middle of a pandemic, after all.

A few hours later, I visited the old site of another school, Salabani secondary. Here, the lake had receded a bit, so we could explore. A group of children, who were not students at the school, led me, as well as the principal of the school and his deputy, through the floating water hyacinth that was everywhere in the compound. We walked past hippopotamus footprints and stepped on to an elevated room that used to be the classroom for form two. Before us was the lake. Pelicans, white and hungry, waded in the water. The principal, Moses Chelimo, pointed out what used to be a boys’ dormitory, now barely visible across the water. Behind it was the

school farm, where two hectares of maize grown to feed the students was underwater. One of the children who had guided us into the school said that a hippo usually sleeps next to one of the classrooms. I asked him if it sleeps inside. “*Haizetosha mlango*,” another child said. (“It doesn’t fit past the door.”) We all laughed.

I looked to my right. There was a stretch of water, and then a series of classrooms with elevated verandas. Two fishermen were using one of the classrooms to dock off. Because they didn’t want to make too much noise and scare away the fish, they were using rafts which they propelled using plastic oars.

The boys got excited. A hippo! They pointed to it in the water, its head visible. Chelimo was unmoved. He told me that there were a lot of the hippos where the teachers’ quarters had been, swimming around the rows of houses that were now underwater. He and the deputy, Kibet Zakayo, looked out across the lake, surveying what used to be their school.

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Everywhere I went, people had theories about what was happening to the lakes. One explanation is that the rise of the lakes is cyclical. “I hear that it happened in the 1940s, but I wasn’t alive to know,” a local in Ahero, near Lake Victoria, told me. When I spoke to Lawrence M Kiage, a professor of geography at Georgia State University, who studies the history of climate breakdown in east Africa, he said something similar: “If we go back in time, the Rift valley lakes have had higher levels. What we are seeing now is not something new.” Sean Avery, a hydrologist who has lived in Kenya since 1979, has pointed out that the current level of Lake Turkana is no higher than it was in the 1970s or in the 1900s.

Other popular explanations focus on the lakes’ location: the rising Kenyan lakes are almost all situated along the eastern branch of the Great Rift valley. (The western branch stretches from the north of Uganda to the south-east of Tanzania, and its lakes are rising, too, albeit more slowly, displacing families in the [Democratic Republic of Congo](#), [Burundi](#) and Uganda.) Many observers find this too striking to be a coincidence: they feel that the rising lakes must be connected to tectonic activity. The Great Rift valley is splitting apart at a rate of roughly 2mm a year, and will at some point in the

next tens of millions of years eventually separate east Africa from the rest of the continent. A common theory I heard was that, as the Rift valley separates, fresh groundwater has been brought to these lakes from a previously unknown underground aquifer.

When I asked Onywero whether the tectonic movement of the Rift valley could be the cause of the current expansion of the lakes, he dismissed the suggestion instantly. For him, the fact that Lake Victoria was also rising, despite not being on either branch of the Rift valley, disproved any tectonic theories. Instead, Onywero told me, what was happening was a result of the climate crisis. There had been more rain in the Kenyan and Ethiopian highlands, and the volume of the rivers feeding these lakes had increased. Since 2010, [Kenya has received more rainfall than usual](#) – the yearly average has been significantly up on 2010's 650mm almost every year since. In 2019, Kenya received the third most rainfall it had ever recorded.



Aftermath of floods at Lake Naivasha, October 2021. Photograph: Tony Karumba/AFP/Getty Images

While accepting that tectonic theories do not explain Lake Victoria's rise, Kiage isn't completely sure that anthropogenic climate breakdown is the cause. "I'm not trying to downplay the role of humans," he told me. "Humans are clearly doing something, but it can't explain the sudden rise."

What was needed, said Kiage, was a molecular investigation of the water, to determine where it was coming from.

For years after he first stumbled upon the problem, Onywere had also been pushing the national government to study the rising lakes and to determine how best to help the people who had been affected. In October 2020, he got his wish. The government announced the formation of a multi-agency team of geologists and hydrologists that would investigate the rise of the lakes. Onywere was appointed head of the team to Lake Turkana.

On the hot June morning I visited, as I edged over the crest of a rocky hill, the greenish-blue hues of the water glinted next to the road, the desert sunlight reacting with the water's alkali matter to give the lake its nickname, The Jade Sea. In a village on its shores, the El Molo people who live there mourned the rising of the lake. The village elders told me how, with the movement of the water, they had been forced to move their village, Luyeni, carefully uprooting their thatch houses and relocating them further from the lapping water. As we spoke, white gulls floated lazily over the water, wafted along by a zephyr.

The elders had noticed the lake increasing in size, and through their fishing expeditions, they knew that it was becoming deeper, too. They told me about a road that had last been used 10 years ago, before it went underwater, and predicted that the road I had taken to come to Luyeni would also soon be underwater. They knew, too, that this is not solely a Turkana phenomenon; they had heard that the same thing was happening in other Rift valley lakes, as far away as Kisumu. The elders had their own theories about what was happening to their lake, *Mpaso*, in the local El Molo language. "Maybe there's a broken spring in the ground, and the rocks have cracked, so it's throwing water up," one of them said. Maybe River Omo in Ethiopia is the one with the crack, another elder offered.

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In August 2021, the Ministry of Environment told the media that once the multiagency report on the lakes was published, the Kenyan government would be appealing to the international community for assistance. In the short-term, 3bn shillings (£20.1m) was needed. Longer term, an extra 5bn was needed.

But a number of people on the team that prepared the report shared with me their scepticism about the government's interest in helping the victims of the rising lakes. Instead, they suggested, what really motivated Kenya's notoriously corrupt political class was the prospect of international donations. After all, these lakes had not risen in secret. They had been rising steadily for 10 years. Only when the UN Environment Program published its own [report](#) about Lake Turkana in July 2021, and the prospect of foreign aid became more likely, did Kenya's politicians really become interested. A number of people I spoke to were angry at the apparent insinuation that help was meant to come from the international community, rather than from the Kenyan government itself. The government, Okeyo had told me in his office in Marigat, did not care about the plight of minority communities such as those who live around Lake Baringo.



Tourist lodges at Lake Baringo now submerged. Photograph: Celine Clery/AFP/Getty

In October 2021, the government finally released [the](#) report. While allowing for the possibility that tectonic activity was partly responsible, it stated that greater levels of rainfall, caused by the climate crisis, was the main cause. Other forms of human interference with the environment – such as deforestation – had also led to landslides and increased water runoff, which had in turn contributed to the rising water levels. The report noted that

nearly 400,000 Kenyans had been displaced, and that they required “urgent humanitarian assistance”.

The impact was particularly severe around Lakes Victoria, Naivasha and Baringo, which support densely populated areas. On the edge of Lake Naivasha, about 50 miles west of Nairobi, I visited a settlement named Kihoto, where [4,000 families](#) had been displaced. There I waded through the water with a landlord named Gideon, who had stayed in the area after the flooding in order to guard his houses, which were now empty. On the news, he had seen government representatives claim that relief food had been given to the residents of Kihoto, but he said that hadn’t received any. This was a common refrain as I traversed the country. In Loruk, a town next to Lake Baringo, I had met a man named Wesley Jeptumo, who complained that apart from a Red Cross team that had arrived to take photos of the flooding, no one had come to help. Near Lake Victoria, the motorbike taxi driver had told me that residents had seen my car and thought I was Raila, a popular Kenyan politician – someone here to help them at last. Their disappointment on discovering that I was a freelance journalist must have been deep.

The morning after my initial meeting with Okeyo in Marigat, I’d taken a boat ride at Kampi Ya Samaki, a fishing centre on the shores of Lake Baringo. The sun, just risen, filtered its rays through thin grey clouds. Everywhere, there were birds. From the top of one tree, an eagle dived into the water and emerged with a fish in its beak. On the tips of other trees, long-tailed cormorants, Madagascan bee-eaters and kingfishers perched, looking for food. The boat operator, Evans Limo, pointed out buildings that were in the water. Here, some houses. There, the local health centre. Some churches. Ostriches, which had been kept as pets by a hotel that was now half-submerged, roamed around the dry parts of the hotel’s grounds.

Most disturbing were the tall trees that stood inside the lake, brown and leafless. Almost everywhere I went, it was the dead trees that haunted me. Inside Dunga Hill Camp, a popular picnic site next to Lake Victoria, pools of water surrounded [jacaranda trees](#) that were planted in the colonial era. When alive and in bloom, these trees are crowded with heavy cones of purple blossom, each flower a violet bell. Now, though, they were drab and brown. Seagulls and herons took off from their dying branches.

About 110 miles east of Lake Victoria, in Lake Nakuru national park, I saw a forest that had been swallowed by the lake. Its once-green acacia trees were being slowly suffocated by the water, which has pushed beyond the bounds of the park and into Nakuru city. A decade ago, in an earlier visit, I had climbed to the top of the Menengai Crater that overlooks the city, and peered down at Lake Nakuru, its blue edged with pink – flamingos – as if by a child’s careful crayon. Then, all around, the green of a lush forest that hid lions, buffalo, leopards and other animals. But by the time of my most recent visit, the lake had pushed its way through the forest. The animals had moved to still-dry parts of the forest, but if the water continued to move, their habitats were doomed.

I looked down at the drowned giant acacias and Babu, a ranger who accompanied me, pointed out to me the houses of the Kenya Wildlife Service staff. I couldn’t see anything.

“Where?” I asked him. He pointed again. They were completely submerged.

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[Two years on: the legacy of lockdownSociety](#)

## **Elif Shafak on the legacy of lockdown: The pandemic made it clear there is such a thing as society**



‘The lesson is that we are a family, undivided by religion or race or geographical proximity.’ Photograph: Wavebreakmedia Ltd IP-201115/Alamy

In the face of death and disease, it became urgent to appreciate family and friendship. But in the face of global challenges, the author argues we now need to embrace humanity more widely

[Elif Shafak](#)  
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Thu 17 Mar 2022 02.00 EDT

Early in the pandemic, several international publishers – with good intentions, no doubt – posted tweets claiming that the lockdown probably would not make a huge difference for fiction writers, who are, as a general rule, solitary creatures, used to working from home. Not knowing office work or team effort, novelists would be less affected by the changes brought about by Covid. My experience, however, has been the opposite. The pandemic upended life as we knew it; authors and artists were not outside the struggles of wider society. Just because we are hopeless introverts doesn't mean we were not thrust into a liquid world along with everyone else.

This is a major crossroads for all of us – shaped by the pandemic but also the urgency of climate destruction, growing inequalities and conflict on the European continent and beyond. The decisions that we make now will determine the quality of life for generations to come. None of us has the luxury of being disconnected, disengaged or numb.

In my latest novel, *The Island of Missing Trees*, one of the characters says something that I keep churning in my mind: “There are moments in life when everyone has to become a warrior of some kind. If you are a poet, you fight with your words. If you are a painter, you fight with your paintings … but you cannot say, ‘Sorry I am a poet, I’ll pass.’ You don’t say that when there is so much suffering, inequality, injustice.” Ours is the age of anxiety, and many of us are struggling with negative emotions ranging from anger to fear, frustration and confusion. It is emotionally taxing, but if this were to evolve into the age of apathy, it would be a much harder and darker world to live in.

At the heart of our most vital present debates is a set of basic concepts which have been taken for granted for too long: democracy, society, family, freedom. What do these words mean, exactly? This is a time when our most fundamental terminology needs to be defined and redefined. Despite what Thatcher, Reagan and their international counterparts claimed under the banner of the New Right, there is such a thing as “society”. The pandemic made clear that we are not atomised individuals each occupying our own little corner of the free market. At the root of the word “society” is the Latin *societas*, from *socius* – companion. When we define what a society is, we are also defining who is a part of “us” – and who, therefore, is not.



‘Despite the claims of the New Right, there is such a thing as society’ ... Shafak. Photograph: David Hartley/REX/Shutterstock

This world of polarisations and constant tension does not encourage us to celebrate diversity, pluralism and multiplicity. We are constantly reduced and pushed into monolithic boxes. The word “identity” is too deeply and stubbornly associated with uniformity and sameness – but in truth, identity is more fluid than solid, more diverse than homogeneous. It does not have to be reductionist; it can grow and expand, like ripples in water. The early Stoic philosopher Hierocles developed the idea of *oikeiōsis*, a theory of belonging represented by concentric circles. The innermost circle represents the individual, with the surrounding circles symbolising immediate family,

extended family, townspeople, countrymen, citizens of the land and, finally, humanity as a whole.

The pandemic was a good time to embrace this idea. In the face of death and disease, we could have recognised our common humanity and interconnectivity like never before. Yet, while to some degree this was achieved, we also ended up with another type of division and duality: vaccine nationalism. Richer countries hoarded vaccines while large swathes of people across the world had barely any access to such protection.

This is the age of anxiety – we must not let it become the age of apathy

Then came war on the European continent and a horrific humanitarian crisis following Putin's invasion of Ukraine. Again, instead of bringing people together and uniting around common values, populist demagogues are busy dividing humanity. The response of the European public towards Ukrainian refugees gives me hope, but if we cannot show the same solidarity and sensitivity to other refugees – from Syria or Afghanistan, or the climate refugees of the future – we are not learning the lessons of our times.

That lesson is that we are a family, undivided by religion or race or geographical proximity. We are an international community. But it is this notion of humanity as family that is being attacked right now, from the terrified women and children in basement shelters across Ukrainian cities to women's rights activists in Afghanistan, human rights activists in Syria, climate activists in Brazil and LGBTQ+ activists in Bangladesh. We have entered a new era, with massive global challenges ahead of us. We cannot deal with these challenges by reviving the forces of isolationism, tribalism and a me-first approach. Likewise, we cannot be single-issue people: if you care about climate injustice, you also need to care about gender injustice. Women and children are affected disproportionately by environmental destruction, and whenever there is massive displacement, there is also an alarming increase in sexual violence and gender discrimination. If you care about gender inequality, you should also care about racial inequality, class inequality, regional inequality and so on. Unless we connect the dots, nothing will improve.

I am sick and tired of culture wars and the way they are stoked by politicians in power. In a time of real war, we cannot afford to be divided. Too much is at stake. Time to abandon, once and for all, populist myths of identity that have been used to divide people and keep them apart.

The pandemic made it urgent to appreciate the immaterial things in life: family, friendship, sisterhood. Now, we must broaden our horizons: family is humanity, friendship extends beyond national borders and sisterhood means nothing unless it is translated globally.

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**I hated walking for 20 years, now I'm aiming to climb all 214 Lake District peaks**



A view towards Braithwaite on the Coledale Horseshoe trail in the Lake District – one of the author's favourite walks. Photograph: trekkingimages/Alamy

Returning to her native Cumbria, our writer sets off to bag all the Wainwrights – and discovers the soothing power of the hills



[Ella Braidwood](#)

Thu 17 Mar 2022 03.00 EDT Last modified on Thu 17 Mar 2022 03.02 EDT

The summit of Catbells – a fell in the Lake District – is a distinctive bulge that paws at the sky, before slightly drooping to one side, like the tip of a Smurf's hat, only less severe. It's early February when my parents and I find ourselves walking in weather typical of the Cumbrian winter; it is, mostly, gusty and wet, so my waterproof trousers balloon in the wind like a double-pronged windsock. But there are brief moments of calm, such as on our way to Maiden Moor, another fell, when we turn to look back at Catbells' summit and see the sun momentarily overcome the cloud, illuminating the scenery around us. A rainbow manifests, then quickly fades away. It is fleeting, but beautiful.

It's taken me over 20 years to reach this summit, thanks to a tantrum at the age of eight, some yards from the top, on my first attempt. At the time, I hated walking, and berated my parents whenever they dragged me out on to the fells at the weekend. Believing it to be the ultimate protest, I lay down on the ground, declaring I would not go any further. My family went on

without me. They collected me on their way down. (My parents would like to stress that I was in sight at all times during my demonstration.)



Ella (centre) with her brothers on Catbells in January 2002 – the day of her tantrum. Photograph: Lynne Braidwood

From the summit, I look back over the ridge we've just walked along, its grassy slopes laden with the brown fronds of dead bracken. Bassenthwaite, the Lake District's only official lake by name, lounges in the distance. When I'm in London, where I now live, I often feel miserable in the bad weather. But here, I'm grinning in the rain. On my right lies Derwentwater, a three-mile-long expanse peppered with tiny islands, among fields, woodland and fells.

“It’s just around the corner!” my mum used to tell me, whenever I asked – yet again – how far away the summit was. “Don’t you feel a sense of achievement?” she’d puff proudly at the top, and I’d glare at her as if this person innocently dressed in Berghaus and a woolly hat was responsible for all the world’s ills. Skulking in the Lakes was a theme of my upbringing in Cumbria. I thought walking was boring and uncool, preferring trips to the cinema with friends.



The author at summit of Catbells in February 2022. Photograph: Lynne Braidwood

When I moved to London, aged 18, I saw it as an escape. The countryside had been stifling and lonely, particularly as a teenager struggling with my sexuality. I didn't miss it for years. Instead, I threw myself into London life: parties, new people, gay bars and, finally, things to do at the weekend.

Clouds began to clear in front of us, smudging into the sunlight, like walking into an oil painting by Turner

In my early 20s, something started to shift. I think, ultimately, it took leaving for me to realise the exceptional nature of the place I'd always taken for granted. That, and I grew up a bit. London is my favourite city, but its bad parts began to grate on me. It is polluted, and expensive, and you can cry on a bus and nobody will come to comfort you. Back in the capital after the holidays, I missed the clean air, friendliness and quiet.

I began to thrive on the physical challenge of fell walking, relishing the peace that arrives after a hailstorm. I found joy in things that surprised me, like scaling a fell in thick mist only to stumble across a tarn unexpectedly, or hear a beck flowing somewhere nearby, just hidden from view. There were specific moments such as, a few years ago, when my family and I were

descending Helvellyn in poor visibility and the clouds started to clear in front of us, smudging into the sunlight, like we were walking into an oil painting by Turner.



Descending Helvellyn as the clouds parted. Photograph: Ella Braidwood

A couple of years ago, I got hiking boots for my birthday and set out to bag the Wainwrights. That is, a challenge to climb 214 peaks in the Lake District, all but one above 1,000ft (305 metres), as meticulously described by the fell walker [Alfred Wainwright](#) in his handwritten pictorial guides. So far, I've done 52.

Still, I used to hate those guides. When we reached a fell top, my dad would pull the book from his rucksack, reading aloud Wainwright's reflections to my brothers and me – these range from heartfelt to cutting – adding his own terrible jokes or inserting us into the descriptions to check if we were still listening. Now, the Wainwrights are a love I share with my parents, who have completed them all. I even like it when dad reads out Wainwright from the top.

Throughout the pandemic, walking in the Lakes has made things feel more normal. In that first summer, as restrictions eased, weekends were spent ticking off Wainwrights. It was a return to my childhood, only this time I

liked it: the packed lunches, pub gardens and alfresco toilet breaks with views over Buttermere. There were the navigational woes: climbing every mound and touching every cairn on a ridge to make sure you reach the true summit. (There is nothing worse than climbing a fell, with all the physical exertion that entails, only to later find out you missed the summit by a few metres.)



A view from the summit of Catbells. Photograph: Ella Braidwood

“The hills have a power to soothe and heal which is their very own,” said Wainwright. When I’m mired in anxiety or consumed with depression, fell walking can seem counterintuitive – especially if it’s raining. But I always feel better afterwards. If bad things happen in my life, or I feel it’s just stagnating, walking gives me a simple purpose: to get from one point to another, or back to the start again. More than once, it’s hauled me out of a rut. If nothing else, it is a distraction: heartbreak is harder to be sad about when you’re keeled over and exhausted on the steep slopes of Skiddaw. (As Wainwright said of another fell: “One can forget even a raging toothache on Haystacks.”)

The Lakes have been my constant, through the best and worst times in my life. I’ve devoured cheese-and-pickle sandwiches on a sunny High Pike summit while completely in love. I’ve also sat, cradling my knees, looking

over Windermere from Orrest Head, where Wainwright famously fell in love with the Lakes, on the anniversary of a friend's death.



Ullswater from Arnison Crag. Photograph: Paul Richardson/Alamy

As a landscape, it ranges from astoundingly beautiful to bleak, even dangerous. You can stroll under clear blue skies, casually admiring the Herdwick sheep, purple heather and scree, only to find yourself suddenly plunged into a thunderstorm. (If you do go fell walking, make sure you check the forecast and wear proper gear.) It is inspiring – a catalyst for conversations with family, friends and strangers. Perhaps most importantly, walking here is a huge privilege.

There are no tantrums any more. Last month, I was sitting on top of Arnison Crag with my mum, eating satsumas and drinking tea from a flask in the winter drizzle. It is a small fell, not particularly impressive when pitted against the big guns of [Scafell Pike](#) or Blencathra. But it reminded me of how I've grown to love something in a way that continues to surprise me. With Ullswater stretched out below us, I felt calm, happy and brimming – like my mum always said – with a sense of achievement.

## Ella's favourite routes so far

## Blencathra



Photograph: George Robertson/Alamy

Blencathra, my favourite mountain for its fantastic views, is also known as Saddleback for the distinctive shape of its summit, a name my parents like to shout excitedly when they spot it from the A66 going towards Keswick. From this road, the peak looks magnificent, particularly when the top is dusted with snow. It actually has six summits, the highest being Hallsfell Top, with Wainwright recording more ascents up this fell than any other. These include Sharp Edge, overlooking Scales Tarn, a knife-edged ridge only to be attempted in good conditions and even then with care. The [White Horse Inn](#) at the base of Blencathra is worth a visit afterwards.

## Coledale Horseshoe

One of my happiest memories is doing this more than nine-mile route, bagging seven Wainwrights, on an unseasonably hot day with my parents in September 2020. Also known as the Coledale Round, it was a long slog, sweaty and draining, but it was a welcome holiday from the seemingly never-ending terrors of Covid-19 in which we were engulfed at the time. Once down, we had a great meal at the nearby [Coledale Inn](#), sitting outside in the day's last sunlight.

## Holme Fell

I did this fell on a sunny day with my mum a few years ago. It was a turning point for me as it was here that I fell in love with walking in the Lakes. We climbed it because, on her first attempt, mum accidentally didn't reach the true summit on the southern end (she went to a second top instead, Ivy Crag, which somewhat misleadingly boasts a large cairn). It's a dinky hill, just 317 metres in height, but despite its size, it commands impressive views over [Coniston Water](#). [Chesters by the River](#), a modern cafe now firmly on the tourist trail, is a 10-minute drive away.

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## OpinionSlavery

# As the government's anti-slavery chair, I see the Home Office failing – and victims suffering

[Sara Thornton](#)

We're sending back far too many victims of modern slavery to unsafe countries. Change is overdue

- [Ministers ‘failing to protect’ people trafficked to UK as modern slaves](#)



‘Confirmed victims of human trafficking have no automatic right to stay in the UK.’ A protest against modern slavery, London, 14 October 2017. Photograph: Stephen Chung/LNP/Rex/Shutterstock

Thu 17 Mar 2022 02.00 EDT Last modified on Thu 17 Mar 2022 04.25 EDT

Modern slavery is a violation of human rights, affecting millions of men, women and children across the world and in the UK. People who are vulnerable due to circumstances of poverty, instability or forced migration are taken advantage of and exploited in situations of unfree labour, trafficking and abuse. Women and girls fleeing war are particularly at risk and I am concerned about the possibility of trafficking for migrants as the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine unfolds.

Given all of this, you might expect that the UK government and the Home Office were doing all they could to help victims of modern slavery in Britain. You would be wrong.

Confirmed victims of human trafficking have no automatic right to stay in the UK. Despite this, Home Office guidance states that they will be automatically considered for temporary leave to remain if they do not already have this. Guidance also makes clear that this is appropriate in exceptional circumstances or for compassionate reasons. However, the number of victims of trafficking granted temporary leave remains extremely low – thanks to a freedom of information request from the children's rights charity Ecpat, we know just 8% of applications were granted in 2021.

One aspect of the government's nationality and borders bill, which is now making its way through the House of Lords, seeks to codify in law the circumstances in which temporary leave to remain will be granted to assist the person in their recovery, to enable them to seek compensation or to cooperate with the police. Last week, Lord McColl tabled an amendment to make this provision more generous, providing at least 12 months' support for confirmed victims of modern slavery, which was supported by peers.

I hope the government gives this amendment serious consideration, but there is also more work to be done in terms of how the Home Office makes its decisions – an area that concerns me. Take the case of Jane (not her real name), who left Eritrea in the early 2000s with the help of an agent. She travelled with her employer to the UK and other countries. During this time she was abused, controlled, threatened and not paid. She was eventually confirmed to be a victim of trafficking and recognised as being particularly

vulnerable. Despite this, temporary leave to remain was not judged necessary to protect and assist in her recovery.

I have not seen all the paperwork so cannot comment on whether this decision was right, but I am in a position to comment about the way the decision was made. This is because I've seen her rejection letter.

Leaving aside that it referred to Jane as a male throughout the correspondence, the letter made use of a US government report on trafficking to justify its decision. The US Department of State Trafficking in Persons report ranks governments' efforts every year to combat trafficking. The report on Eritrea is pretty damning and places the country in tier 3, the lowest, implying that the government does not meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and is not making significant efforts to do so. This includes not having adequate victim protection, with no efforts to identify or protect victims reported since 2015. The assessment reports that Eritrea does not provide any services directly to victims and it references the suggestion from an international organisation that returning asylum seekers had a well-founded fear of persecution.

However in the Home Office's hands, the very few positive aspects of the assessment, such as the establishment of a committee, have been cherrypicked and used as evidence that the authorities in Eritrea are willing and able to provide assistance.

While the Home Office decision-maker relied on the assessment of the US, the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office determined Eritrea to be one of 31 human rights priority countries in a ministerial statement from November 2021. This stated that Eritrea had made no improvements in the human rights situation during the first half of 2021 and that arbitrary detentions, indefinite national service and restrictions on freedom of expression all continued. Should the Home Office be flying victims of human trafficking back to such a country?

Ministers have repeatedly provided assurances that decisions on granting leave to remain for survivors of trafficking will be made on a case-by-case basis. But it is hard to have confidence in the system when confronted with this quality of decision making. Lord McColl's amendment would ensure a

more generous approach to vulnerable and traumatised victims of the most serious crimes. Seriously considering it would be the least the government could do.

- Dame Sara Thornton is the government's independent anti-slavery commissioner
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## [OpinionUkraine](#)

# Vladimir Putin knows the power of stories. With a better one, we can beat him

[Jo Nesbø](#)

I faced Russia's wrath for my TV series, Occupied. The Kremlin knows art can tell the truth about war – and it fears that

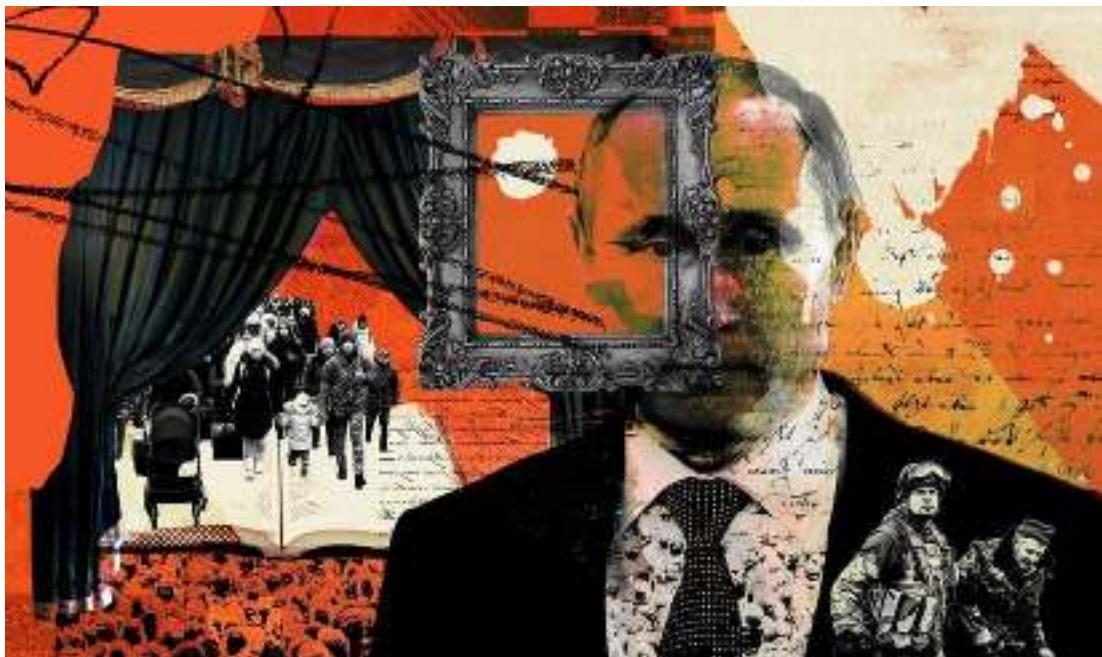


Illustration: Eleanor Shakespeare/The Guardian

Thu 17 Mar 2022 03.00 EDT Last modified on Thu 17 Mar 2022 06.45 EDT

In 2015, the first season of Occupied was [broadcast on Norwegian television](#). The series depicts a Russian occupation of Norway, something that is tacitly accepted by the EU and the United States as a way to restart oil production facilities that had been shut down by the green Norwegian government.

My aim for the show was to focus on the moral dilemmas faced by ordinary people in an extreme situation – to parallel what our parents and grandparents experienced during the German occupation of Norway between 1940 and 1945. The manoeuvring between a smaller country, a powerful neighbour and the rest of the world's ruling nations, balancing political principles against economic considerations and their own security, was the backdrop.

I thought it would be obvious that the point of the fictional world in Occupied was not to say anything about Russia – just as Steven Spielberg's aim in Jaws was not to say anything about great white sharks. However, the Russian authorities did not take it very well. Vyacheslav Pavlovsky, the ambassador to Norway, told the Russian news agency Tass that “it is certainly regrettable that in this year, when the 70th anniversary of the victory in the second world war is being celebrated, the authors have seemingly forgotten about the heroic contribution of the Soviet army in the liberation of northern Norway from the Nazi occupiers, and decided, in the worst cold war tradition, to frighten Norwegian viewers with a nonexistent threat from the east”.

It may be that the ambassador was a little touchy, because Russia had annexed Crimea the year before. But Occupied had been written and put into production long before that and it was a work of fiction in which, for once, the Russians weren't depicted as a group of robotic, uniformly evil “bad guys”. So why the fury?

Perhaps the answer is that in an era in which the truth has been devalued by fake news, in which leaders are elected on a wave of emotion rather than their merits or political viewpoints, facts no longer carry the weight they once did. In writing about Russia's latest war in [Ukraine](#), a frequently used quotation comes from the US senator Hiram Johnson, who said in 1917 that “the first casualty, when war comes, is truth”. It is used, among other things, to remind journalists of just how vulnerable the truth is when two sides are fighting for the dominance of their own version of events.

In 1937, when the fascist General Franco bombed the town of Guernica, massacring the civilian population, many could testify to what happened. As

soon as images of the destruction and the victims began to emerge, Franco and his generals realised the emotions they would stir both in Spain and abroad, and claimed that the Republican inhabitants had destroyed their own town. For a time, this version of events was believed – at least by those who wanted to believe it. But the Republicans had a better storyteller on their side. Pablo Picasso responded with one of his most famous paintings, Guernica, which depicted the inferno in the small Basque town. That work, painted by someone who lived in Paris and the product of an artist's imagination and experience, opened Europe's eyes.

If Guernica was both propaganda and a masterpiece, the same can be said of Sergei Eisenstein's film Battleship Potemkin, commissioned by the Soviet authorities to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the 1905 revolution. Though both works purport to depict real events, they also make use of significant artistic licence – the famous massacre scene on the steps in Odesa never actually took place, for example.

But the narrator of fiction does not need to worry about such details; the aim is to say something true, not necessarily something factual. To move hearts and minds, not report on the who, what, where and when. This freedom is what gives fiction its power, particularly when we as an audience are unaware that we are being propagandised.

Tanner Mirrlees, author of Hearts and Mines: The US Empire's Culture Industry, describes the way the US Office of War Information created a division to work with Hollywood during the second world war, the Bureau of Motion Pictures. Between 1942 and 1945, the Bureau reviewed 1,652 scripts, revising or removing anything that depicted the US in an unfavourable way, including material that made Americans seem “oblivious to the war or anti-war”.

Films were, and remain, the perfect vehicle for shaping popular opinion, Mirrlees said, because watching a film provides people with a galvanising, shared experience. Hollywood marketed American military ideals throughout the cold war, and it continues to do so even now.

Today, the entire world is essentially sitting in the same movie theatre, watching events unfold in Ukraine. But what we are seeing – figuratively

speaking – are dubbed versions, featuring subtitles in our own languages. There is a battle under way between different versions of the story, and the best one will prove triumphant.

The question, therefore, is what measures we are prepared to take to win those hearts and minds, especially when Vladimir Putin is deploying the kind of censorship and propaganda we thought had been banished to the past. Is it desirable – or appropriate, even – to play by his rules? It seems contradictory that a democratic country would give up principles such as freedom of speech and transparency, even in an attempt to temporarily protect those freedoms.

We might hope that the truth – the imperfect, subjective truth of a journalist, an artist or some other storyteller who is *trying* to express something true – will win. There are examples of this, after all, such as a Soviet Union that collapsed from within or a Donald Trump who was thrown out of the White House. Faced with an exhausting tangle of different versions of reality, we do not have to give in and accept that every version is equally true. Some really *are* more true than others.

Putin's narrative around why Russia has gone to war in Ukraine is gaining ground with a majority of Russians without access to social media or foreign reporting.

But the younger generation in Russia uses virtual private networks and other technological loopholes to access different views on what is happening. Their numbers are still small, but they are a resourceful group who will, themselves, eventually become journalists, writers and artists, using stories as weapons.

We follow the military developments, sanctions and diplomacy from day to day, but the war for the narrative is the long war. Ultimately, it is a war that Putin will lose.

Franco ruled Spain for almost 40 years. But in the end he was defeated in the history books. Guernica was first shown in Spain in 1981, six years after Franco's death. It was seen by more than one million people in the first 12

months alone, and is still one of the biggest draws at the Reina Sofia gallery in Madrid. Because the truest – if not the most factual – stories are the best.

- Jo Nesbø is a bestselling Norwegian novelist, screenwriter and musician. This article was translated from the Norwegian by Alice Menzies
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[Opinion](#)[Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe](#)

## **Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe is free. But why now? And why did it take so long?**

[Simon Tisdall](#)



The charity worker and fellow detainee Anoosheh Ashoori were treated cruelly by Iran. But the UK is far from blameless



‘Richard Ratcliffe’s campaign for his wife’s release won the respect of the British public.’ Ratcliffe with his and Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe’s daughter, Gabriella, speaking to the media in London on Wednesday. Photograph: James Manning/PA

Wed 16 Mar 2022 13.03 EDT Last modified on Thu 17 Mar 2022 03.01 EDT

She’s free! In a world overwhelmed by woeful tidings, the [release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe](#) after six years of hell in Tehran provides a rare moment of joy. Yet when the cheering stops, there will be many questions to answer – such as why now, and why on earth did it take so long?

Pleasure and relief over this [sudden breakthrough](#) will be deservedly felt, first and foremost, by Nazanin’s husband, Richard Ratcliffe, and their seven-year-old daughter, Gabriella. The family of another British-Iranian detainee, Anoosheh Ashoori, are celebrating his freedom, too. But Morad Tahbaz, a British-Iranian-American, has not been so fortunate. Although he has been released and placed on furlough inside the country, Iran is reportedly treating him as an American citizen and thus part of a separate negotiation with the US.

During an ordeal that [never seemed to end](#), Richard Ratcliffe’s tirelessly intelligent, passionate campaign for his wife’s release won the respect not only of the British public, but also of a too secretive Foreign Office.

Whitehall mandarins prefer to handle such matters privately, behind closed doors.

But their softly-softly approach, genuinely intended to avoid antagonising the Iranians, seemed only to embolden them. Hardliners such as Sadeq Amoli Larijani, a former chief justice who presided over Nazanin's unjust, illegal incarceration, and his like-minded deputy, Ebrahim Raisi, who was [elected president last year](#), are chief among the guilty men.

Another is Boris Johnson. As foreign secretary, he [disastrously misrepresented](#) Nazanin's activities in Tehran. But despite this, Ratcliffe kept going. His [very public hunger strike](#) last autumn showed again his determination not to let her plight drop out of the headlines. Now his love, tenacity and courage – and hers – have been rewarded at last.

Of the many unanswered questions surrounding this affair, one of the most pressing was whether, despite denials on both sides, the payment of an acknowledged [£400m British debt to Iran](#) was indeed the price of Nazanin's freedom.

Confirmation has now been made that the debt has been paid, with the money ringfenced for humanitarian purposes. So it appears the government, de facto, has just paid a ransom for the release of hostages in contravention of stated principles. Or are we really expected to believe these two supposedly unconnected issues have been dealt with in parallel and separately?

Before Johnson and Liz Truss start taking bows for springing Nazanin and Anoosheh, they should also explain why it all took so long. Why was the debt repayment withheld if it would be paid later? Were the years of delay, during which time Nazanin suffered extreme psychological torture and physical hardship, entirely due to bloody-minded Iranian intransigence?

Or is it true, as many suspect, that Nazanin's case became inextricably mixed up with broader western concerns relating to the US-Israeli stand-off with Iran under Donald Trump, with competing attempts to salvage or

torpedo the [2015 nuclear deal with Tehran](#), and with complex negotiations involving American-Iranian detainees?

This week's breakthrough coincides with rising hopes that a [revised nuclear deal](#) will soon be agreed. Following the Ukraine invasion and subsequent western action to curb Russian energy imports, the US and Europe suddenly have a powerful incentive to lift sanctions and allow Iranian oil and gas back into a damagingly overpriced market.

Perhaps Nazanin, a victim of these protracted nuclear wranglings, is now a belated beneficiary of their prospective resolution. She may also have benefited from being disentangled by British negotiators from ongoing, so far unsuccessful US attempts to secure the release of four or more American citizens, including the unfortunate Tahbaz.

Iranian state TV quoted unnamed sources in May last year claiming Washington had agreed to pay \$7bn for four detained Americans. At the same time, it said the UK would pay its debt in return for Nazanin. [The US denied the report](#), British officials declined to comment, and nothing happened.

Then, last month, MPs were told the UK had indeed signed an agreement to secure Nazanin's release last summer, but it [had fallen through](#). No reason was given – but it was suggested it was because the US side of the deal had not been agreed. This time, unlike last summer, it seems Britain, quite rightly, has not waited for an American OK.

Such murkiness aside, there are clear questions for Iran's rulers to answer, too. The treatment of Nazanin and her fellow detainees is and was unforgivable. What kind of bent and twisted government exploits the misery of innocent people, using them as hostages for crude political ends? Is this really how Iran proposes to build its influence across the Middle East? Why, if a new nuclear deal is agreed, has the west any reason to trust this rogue regime?

- Simon Tisdall is a foreign affairs commentator
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**Nils Pratley on financeBusiness**

## Rishi Sunak's energy crisis package for low-income households is already out of date

[Nils Pratley](#)



After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the muddle-through plan for the summer won't suffice – it needs a complete re-design



The number of households in fuel poverty, defined as those spending at least 10% of their net income on energy, will rise from 4.7 million to almost 8 million next month. Photograph: Jacob King/PA

Thu 17 Mar 2022 02.01 EDT

Rishi Sunak last month merely claimed to be “taking the sting out” of the sharp rise in energy bills that will apply from the start of April. He was wise not to make a grander boast. Six weeks on, his £9bn support package, which in any case involved a fiddle with a £200 “rebate” that isn’t really a rebate because it is repayable later, looks grossly unequal to the size of the energy challenge.

The first problem is the one highlighted by Gordon Brown, the former prime minister, and more than 70 Labour local government leaders today: the number of households in fuel poverty, defined as those spending at least 10% of their net income on energy, will rise from 4.7 million to almost 8 million next month.

That figure, note, is calculated after adjusting for Sunak’s measures that offered straightforward support: the £150 reduction for council tax payers in bands A and D, for example, and the widening of the eligibility for the warm

homes discount. In other words, the sting will still be severe for low-income households.

Brown and co suggest a series of responses, including capping next month's national insurance increase, restoring the £20-a-week increase in universal credit and uprating benefits in line with inflation. All should be on the table in the spring statement.

The second problem, though, is potentially enormous: when the energy price cap is next revised in October, the mechanical model is likely to spit out a truly astronomical figure. Barring a rapid and miraculous plunge in wholesale gas prices, the next cap is currently projected by analysts to come out at close to £3,000. That would make April's £1,971, seen as shocking when regulator Ofgem published it last month, feel almost gentle.

It's obviously not Sunak's fault that [gas prices have soared \(again\) after Russia's invasion of Ukraine](#), but the chancellor looks to have assembled his original £9bn support package on the hopeful premise that something like "normal" energy prices would return in time for next winter and that a muddle-through approach would suffice during the summer months of low consumption.

It's time to abandon such wishful thinking. More artful fiddles with "rebates" will not cut it. Nor would further expansion of eligibility for the warm homes scheme – extending a £150-a-year discount to more people is little more than tokenism if the price cap ends up being hiked by another £1,000.

Universal credit is the most direct and effective means to boost support, and is the obvious policy tool to use. Alternatively, lift benefits, currently due to rise by only 3.1%, or raise national insurance thresholds, or a combination of the above. The important thing is to signal action in response to an energy crisis that is only intensifying. The original bits-and-pieces support package for low-income households is out of date already. It needs a complete redesign.

## **Fever-Tree and TRG face up to higher input costs**

Inflation is upon us – especially in companies’ use of the phrase “mitigating actions”. Fever-Tree, the tonic firm, and the Restaurant Group, owner of the Wagamama and Frankie & Benny’s chains, sprinkled the words across their results statements on Wednesday [as they faced up to higher input costs](#). Both, however, left the impression that mitigation will only get you so far.

The commodity prices that bother Fever-Tree are primarily aluminium for cans and glass for bottles. The firm can move some production to local markets and try to duck a few logistics costs, but “significant uncertainty in relation to input costs” translated to a downgrade of approximately £6m in the top-line profit forecast (now £63m-£66m) for 2022. That’s despite the revenue line continuing to skip along nicely as Fever-Tree makes waves in the US. Shareholders got a £50m special dividend to ease the slimline feeling.

Over at TRG, the mitigating actions sounded like things the company would do anyway – tweak the “labour deployment model” to take account of dine-in versus takeaway trends, and have a chat with suppliers to see if there are volume-related deals to be done.

The group predicted cost inflation in food and drink of 5%-plus, which sounded almost benign until it added that the calculation was before “any consequential inflationary impacts arising from the conflict in Ukraine”. Well, yes, that is the big unknown for the entire food industry. Managements, like the rest of us, don’t have a clear idea of what to expect.

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## 2022.03.17 - Around the world

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- [The Pegasus project Human rights officials call for spyware ban at El Salvador hearing](#)
- [Ethiopia 'Nowhere on earth are people more at risk than Tigray,' says WHO chief](#)
- [Chinese economy Property shares soar on Beijing stimulus, despite continued debt crisis](#)

## South Korea

# South Korea reports record Covid deaths as daily cases surge past 600,000

Despite record infections and fatalities, public opinion appears to support plans to ease Covid curbs in the coming days

- [Read all our coronavirus coverage](#)



A decision on whether to ease further measures, such as a current six-person limit on private gatherings, is expected as early as Friday. Photograph: Jung Yeon-Je/AFP/Getty Images

*Reuters*

Thu 17 Mar 2022 02.16 EDT

South Korea reported record daily Covid infections and record deaths caused by the virus, as the country which once took an aggressive anti-pandemic

approach is set to end Covid restrictions.

On Thursday, authorities said 621,328 new daily cases of the virus were recorded, and 429 deaths.

The Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency said the highly infectious Omicron variant was driving the record wave of infections and while a public survey revealed many expected to catch the virus, few feared serious health consequences.

Daily infections are far higher than health authorities had predicted. On Wednesday the government said it expected the wave to top out with daily cases in the mid-400,000. Less than a month ago it had predicted the peak of the wave would come in mid-March at 140,000 – 270,000 daily cases.

Despite the numbers, the government shows no sign of rethinking plans to remove almost all social distancing restrictions in coming days and weeks, and public opinion appears to support those moves.

It has pushed back a curfew on eateries to 11 pm, stopped enforcing vaccine passes, and plans to drop a quarantine for vaccinated travellers arriving from overseas.

A decision on whether to ease further measures, such as a current six-person limit on private gatherings, is expected as early as Friday. South Korea also mandates masks in all public indoor and outdoor spaces.

Though it never adopted a “[zero Covid](#)” policy and never imposed wide lockdowns, South Korea once used aggressive tracking, tracing, and quarantines to control new cases.

That has been largely ended or scaled back, though it still tests widely. South Korea has avoided the crisis unfolding in places like Hong Kong, limiting deaths and serious cases largely through widespread vaccination, experts have said.

Nearly 63% of the country's 52 million residents had received booster shots, with 86.6% of the population fully vaccinated, the KDCA said.

A government analysis of some 141,000 Omicron cases reported in the country over the past year showed that there were no deaths among people under 60 who had received a booster shot, Son Young-rae, a health ministry official, said on Wednesday, adding that Covid could be treated like the seasonal flu.

"We see this could be the last major crisis in our Covid responses, and if we overcome this crisis, it would bring us nearer to normal lives," Son told a briefing.

In a survey released on Tuesday by Seoul National University's graduate school of public health, the number of South Koreans who think they are likely to contract the virus was the highest since its surveys began in January 2020, at around 28%, but the number of those who worry about a serious health impact from the infection was the lowest, at about 48%.

"People's awareness about the virus' danger has clearly changed," said professor Yoo Myung-soon who led the study.

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**Malaysia**

## **Malaysian government's 'gay conversion' app pulled by Google Play**

App claimed that it could help LGBT+ people 'return to nature' but the tech company has now made it unavailable for downloads



An app produced by the Malaysian government promoting gay conversion therapy has been removed from the Google Play store. Photograph: Nicolas Economou/NurPhoto/REX/Shutterstock

*[Rebecca Ratcliffe](#) South-east Asia correspondent*

Thu 17 Mar 2022 02.11 EDT Last modified on Thu 17 Mar 2022 02.13 EDT

An app produced by the Malaysian government that promised to help the LGBTI community "return to nature" has been removed from the Google Play store, after it was found to be in breach of the platform's guidelines.

The app was first released in July 2016, but attracted fresh attention after it was shared on Twitter by the Malaysian government's Islamic development

department. It claimed the app would enable LGBTI people to return to a state of nature or purity, and that it included an e-book detailing the experience of a gay man who “abandoned homosexual behaviour” during Ramadan.

When approached by the Guardian, Google said in a statement: “Whenever an app is flagged to us, we investigate against our Play store policies and if violations are found we take appropriate action to maintain a trusted experience for all.”

The app has since been removed from the Play store. Its guidelines do not allow apps “that attempt to deceive users or enable dishonest behavior including but not limited to apps which are determined to be functionally impossible.”

Malaysia’s Islamic development department did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Rachel Chhoa-Howard, Amnesty International’s Malaysia researcher, said such material was dangerous and hateful.

“Conversion therapy is a deeply discriminatory and harmful practice which can cause long-lasting damage to those who are subject to it. It has been criminalised in many countries. We call on the Malaysian authorities to immediately abandon its use of Hijrah Diri, and instead ensure respect and protect LGBTI rights in the country,” she said.

Numan Afifi, the founder of LGBT+ rights group Pelangi Campaign, said Google and other platforms should improve the moderation of content they host on their platforms. Community groups that try to counter harmful material already face an uphill battle, he added, including the risk of surveillance, censorship and raids on in-person gatherings.

“Now that the general election is looming I am pretty sure that the demonisation of the LGBT community is going to get more intense, especially among those who are trying to [win] conservative votes,” he said.

Malaysia's LGBTI community faces widespread discrimination, including laws that ban same-sex relations and non-normative gender expression.

The Play store has previously removed an app from a US-based group Living Hope Ministries that promoted so-called “conversion therapy”. The app, which suggested that users could “pray away the gay”, was removed in 2019.

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## The Pegasus projectEl Salvador

# Human rights officials call for Pegasus spyware ban at El Salvador hearing

Inter-American Commission on Human Rights holds hearing on using Israeli spyware against journalists and activists



The NSO Group company logo is displayed on a wall of a building next to one of their branches in the southern Israeli Arava valley near the Sapir community centre. Photograph: Menahem Kahana/AFP/Getty Images

[Nina Lakhani](#)

Thu 17 Mar 2022 03.30 EDT Last modified on Fri 18 Mar 2022 01.23 EDT

Senior human rights officials have repeated calls for a ban on the powerful Israeli spyware Pegasus until safeguards are in place to protect civilians from illegal hacking by governments.

Calls for a moratorium on the sale and use of the military-grade spyware were made on Wednesday at a hearing of the Inter-American Commission

on Human Rights (IACtHR) into widespread unlawful surveillance using Pegasus spyware against journalists and activists in [El Salvador](#).

“There’s no doubt that malware marketed for complex security threats is being manipulated and used against the media and civil society … which is having a chilling effect on democracy,” said Scott Campbell, senior human rights and technology officer of the UN office of the high commissioner for human rights.

“Pegasus malware should stop being marketed and used until there are better global and national safeguards.”

The IACtHR hearing follows a [joint investigation](#) published in January by [Access Now](#) and [Citizen Lab](#) which confirmed the use of NSO Group’s Pegasus spyware against 35 journalists and human rights defenders in El Salvador.

The hacking took place over 18 months from July 2020 to November 2021 and included 22 from the investigative news outlet El Faro. One journalist was hacked 49 times, another almost constantly for 269 days.

Amnesty International’s Security Lab peer-reviewed the findings and independently [verified forensic evidence](#) showing the military-grade spyware was being operated by a single customer within the country, suggesting the Salvadoran government was the likely operator.

“We urge El Salvador to implement an immediate moratorium on the use of spyware technology,” said Likhita Banerji from Amnesty International, which is calling for international standards and domestic legislation to limit surveillance, require greater oversight and transparency about contracts, as well as remedies for victims who are targeted illegally.

El Salvador is one of the most deadly countries in the Americas where gangs, extrajudicial violence, corruption and poverty have [forced hundreds of thousands to migrate](#) over the past decade.

The illegal cyber-surveillance took place amid mounting attacks on independent news outlets and human rights groups following the election of self-proclaimed reformer Nayib Bukele in June 2019, the hearing was told. This included El Faro being banned from government press conferences, ministries withholding information, a surge in online and in-person harassment, and threats and physical violence (including threats of sexual violence) against female journalists.

Carlos Dada from El Faro said the hacking coincided with investigations into controversial and potentially embarrassing stories about [the president's negotiation with the street gangs](#), dealings with Venezuelan officials, government corruption and the adoption of bitcoin as legal tender. “We fear for ourselves, our families and our sources,” said Dada, whose phone was under surveillance for 167 days.

The El Salvador cases add to the [findings of the Pegasus project](#), an international consortium of 17 news organizations including the Guardian, on abuses of the spyware by the governments of at least 10 countries including Mexico, Saudi Arabia and India.

The project, coordinated by the French non-profit group Forbidden Stories, last year reported on a leaked database containing tens of thousands of phone numbers of activists, lawyers, academics, journalists, political figures, business leaders, priests and dissidents who are believed to have been selected as people of interest by NSO’s government clients.

Once infected with Pegasus, [operators have total access](#) to the phone, including the ability to intercept calls, read text messages and emails, control the microphone and camera, infiltrate encrypted apps and track an individual’s physical location.

In Wednesday’s hearing, the Salvadoran government denied any knowledge of the illegal hacks, arguing that officials had also been targeted by the Pegasus spyware. “An extensive investigation is under way,” said a representative from the attorney general’s office, who accused the victims of stalling the investigation by failing to share information – an accusation vehemently refuted by the journalists.

NSO says that it only sells its software to vetted government clients to prevent “terrorism and serious crime”.

John Scott Railton, senior researcher at Citizen Lab with years of experience tracking Pegasus, said that it was not uncommon for governments to spy on their own officials, and questioned the government’s so-called extensive investigation. “I am unaware of any contact by the government with my team.”

IACHR representatives also seemed unconvinced by the government’s investigation.

“This was a serious attack on democracy and democratic standards … one doesn’t wish to keep a list but so many rights were violated,” said Margarette May Macaulay, the rapporteur on the rights of persons of African descent and against racial discrimination. “The investigation must be as rigorous as possible and as quickly as possible … [But] there seems to be no urgency from the state.”

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## Global development

# ‘Nowhere on earth are people more at risk than Tigray,’ says WHO chief

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus says even with war in Ukraine, the world must not forget the crisis unfolding ‘out of sight’ in Ethiopia’s northern region



Refugees arrive at a compound near the city of Semera, Ethiopia. The WHO director general is calling for an end to a de facto blockade of aid supplies.  
Photograph: Eduardo Soteras/AFP/Getty

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[Lizzy Davies](#)

Thu 17 Mar 2022 03.30 EDT Last modified on Thu 17 Mar 2022 03.33 EDT

The head of the World Health Organization (WHO) has urged the world not to forget the [humanitarian crisis](#) in Tigray, saying that even amid the war in Ukraine there is “nowhere on Earth” where people are more at risk than the isolated region of northern Ethiopia.

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO director general, is from Tigray and has incurred the wrath of the Ethiopian government in the past after accusing it of placing the region under a de facto blockade. Prime minister Abiy Ahmed’s government has accused him of bias, and of spreading misinformation.

At a press conference in Geneva on Wednesday, Tedros implicitly addressed those concerns. He said such was the scale of the crisis, it would be a dereliction of his professional duty not to speak out.

“Yes, I’m from Tigray. And this crisis affects me, my family and my friends very personally,” he said. “But as the director general of WHO, I have a duty to protect and promote health wherever it’s under threat. And there is

nowhere on earth where the health of millions of people is more under threat than in Tigray.”

Alluding to the Russian invasion of its neighbour, he added: “Just as we continue to call on Russia to make peace in Ukraine, so we continue to call on Ethiopia and [Eritrea](#) to end the blockade, the siege, and allow safe access for humanitarian supplies and workers to save lives.”

The UN has been unable to get emergency food supplies into Tigray since mid-December. And while in recent weeks medical supplies have started to trickle in, after a six-month hiatus, the WHO and doctors on the ground have said the amount arriving is nowhere near enough to meet the needs of the population. Often there is not enough fuel to get supplies to where they need to go.

Staff at Tigray’s biggest hospital [told the Guardian](#) earlier this month that patients were dying due to a lack of medical supplies. On Wednesday, Tedros said there was no treatment available for 46,000 people with HIV. “And the programme has been abandoned. People with tuberculosis, hypertension, diabetes and cancer are also not being treated, and may have died,” he added.

Despite this “catastrophic” plight, he said, a communications blackout meant Tigray was “a forgotten crisis. Out of sight and out of mind.”

Earlier this year, the government of Ethiopia sent a letter to the WHO, accusing Tedros of “misconduct”. Ethiopia’s ministry of foreign affairs said: “Through his acts, (Tedros) spread harmful misinformation and compromised WHO’s reputation, independence and credibility.”

The government has denied placing Tigray under a de facto blockade, accusing fighters with the Tigray People’s Liberation Front of disrupting aid delivery routes and looting hospitals in areas once under their control.

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## [China](#)

# China property shares soar on Beijing stimulus, despite continued debt crisis

Plans to shore up real estate and tech sectors welcomed by investors, but downgrade of third-biggest developer Sunac shows problems persist



Help for China's sluggish property market lifted shares in Hong Kong and the mainland on Thursday, despite more bad news for major developer Sunac. Photograph: Peter Parks/AFP/Getty Images

*[Martin Farrer](#) and agencies*

Thu 17 Mar 2022 02.52 EDT Last modified on Thu 17 Mar 2022 06.27 EDT

Chinese property shares have soared for a second day thanks to a decision by Beijing's leadership to throw the country's struggling real estate sector a lifeline amid growing pressures at home and abroad.

Despite a downgrade for China's third-biggest property developer Sunac on Thursday, stocks in the sector lifted again in Hong Kong and the mainland

thanks to an announcement by vice premier Liu He, China's economic tsar, on Wednesday that the government needed to reduce risks in the industry.

In a sign of the heightened concern inside China's Communist party leadership about the property sector and the economy in general – best illustrated by the near-collapse of the [giant developer Evergrande](#) – Liu urged the roll-out of market-friendly policies to support the economy.

That pushed up the Hang Seng mainland properties index 14.8% by midday in Hong Kong on Thursday, versus a 5.8% gain in the main Hang Seng index. The sub-index had already jumped 14.7% on Wednesday.

Technology shares have also bounced back after being under pressure for months. The Hang Seng tech tracker rose more than 7% after a stunning 22% gain on Wednesday, though has still halved in value from its peaks last year.

However, some investors are concerned that the property rally is not sustainable because it comes against a backdrop of continued problems for China's biggest developers.

Sunac China, the nation's third-biggest property developer by sales, was downgraded to B- credit rating by the agency S&P on Thursday – making it harder to borrow money – because of concerns that it might not be able to meet its huge debt repayments of nearly \$4bn due this year.

Analysts at S&P have revised Sunac China's liquidity position downwards from “less than adequate” to “weak”, and warned that the ratings will be reviewed as soon as “we have greater visibility on Sunac's refinancing plans”.

They wrote: “Sunac China Holdings Ltd is facing concentrated debt repayment over the next six to 12 months, resulting in considerable refinancing risk and weak liquidity. Capital market confidence is weakening rapidly.”

Despite this gloomy assessment, Sunac's shares were up 60% in Hong Kong on Thursday afternoon. Other major developer Country Garden and Evergrande were both more than 20% to the good.

The real estate sector, a key driver of growth, has struggled for months as Beijing's campaign to reduce high debt levels triggered a liquidity crisis among some major developers, resulting in bond defaults and shelved projects.

After Liu's comment, the banking and insurance regulator also said on Wednesday it would seek to stabilise land and home prices, transform the real estate sector and encourage mergers and acquisition loans for developers to purchase distressed assets.

The finance ministry later said China was putting a planned property tax trial this year on ice, state-run Xinhua news agency reported.

Bill Bishop, the China observer and author of the Sinocism newsletter, said on Thursday that the move by Liu to try to shore up the markets showed how concerned Beijing had become.

"The readout shows how worried policymakers have become about the markets, real estate and the economy but I would be cautious in assuming that the messaging from Liu He and other financial regulators means the tough days are over," he wrote.

"They are certainly trying to send a signal that they don't want markets to go down more, but is it not clear this a real shift or more of a calibration to stabilize things."

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- [Housing Tenants face having to find extra £1,000 for rent and bills](#)
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- [Boss Bassey and raucous gags What we learned from the Baftas 2022](#)

## Cost of living crisis

# Cost of living for UK's poorest could be 10% higher by autumn, thinktank warns

Resolution Foundation says prolonged Russian invasion of Ukraine would drive up food and energy prices



Volunteers pack food parcels in Edinburgh. The poorest tenth of households are spending twice as much of their budget on food and fuel as the richest.  
Photograph: Peter Summers/Getty Images

*[Heather Stewart](#) Political editor*

Mon 14 Mar 2022 02.00 EDT

The poorest households in the UK could see their cost of living jump by as much as 10% by this autumn if Russia's invasion of Ukraine leads to a

prolonged conflict, a thinktank has warned, as Rishi Sunak faces mounting pressure to tackle the cost of living crisis.

The chancellor will deliver his spring statement on 23 March. He is reluctant to commit to significant extra spending, but Treasury sources concede he has acknowledged the necessity to take some limited action.

Options could include increasing benefits in April by more than the planned 3.1%, a new cut in the taper rate for universal credit so that claimants keep more of their earnings, or an increase in the national insurance threshold.

Labour and many Conservative MPs have urged Sunak to scrap the 1.25 percentage point rise in national insurance contributions, earmarked for health and social care, but government sources insist it will go ahead as planned next month.

The Resolution Foundation said the public finances look healthier than expected at the time of the autumn budget, with borrowing on course to be £30bn lower than forecast.

However, the economic outlook has deteriorated significantly. At the time of the budget, inflation was expected to fall back later in the year. Instead, the Resolution Foundation said food and energy prices were likely to continue to be driven higher, pushing inflation to a “second peak” above 8% in the autumn.

With the poorest tenth of households spending twice as much of their budget on food and fuel as the richest, they are likely to be hardest hit, experiencing an inflation rate of perhaps 10%.

James Smith, the research director at the thinktank, said: “The chances of a living standards recovery this year are receding as rapidly as inflation is rising, and the risk of another recession is looming into view. The chancellor will therefore need to make some tough, and potentially expensive, choices in how to respond.”

Separate analysis by another thinktank, the New Economics Foundation (Nef), suggests that even by April almost half of all children will be living in households that are unable to meet the cost of some basic necessities.

Nef found that a third of households, or 23.4 million people, would have to cut back on some basics, such as food or heating, as their income falls short of what they would need to provide a decent minimum standard of living – typically by as much as £8,000. As many as 48% of all children will fall into households in this category, Nef calculates.

Sam Tims, an economist at Nef, said: “The cost of living is increasing faster than at any point in recent history. While all families are set to feel a squeeze come April, the lowest-income households will be hit proportionately harder. There is little time left for the chancellor to take action to avert the worst real-terms incomes squeeze in 50 years.”

Nef’s projections are based on the minimum income standard – the budget needed to afford what members of the public believe are essentials. It is calculated by Loughborough University’s Centre for Research in Social Policy.

The consumer expert Martin Lewis said last week that some families would [“simply starve or freeze”](#) as a result of unmanageable increases in their cost of living, particularly driven by energy prices.

Sunak announced measures in February aimed at cushioning the blow, as the energy regulator, Ofgem, announced that the price cap that puts a ceiling on average bills would rise by almost £700.

His package included a £150 council tax rebate for properties in bands A to D, and a £200 cut in energy bills from October, to be paid back over five years.

However, the scheme was predicated on energy bills falling back again from next year, something that has now been thrown into doubt. It emerged last week that the business secretary, Kwasi Kwarteng, had been asked by

Downing Street to draw up options for beefing up the scheme, though these would not be enacted until the autumn.

Meanwhile, the shadow transport secretary, Louise Haigh, warned that rising global oil prices in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine meant the average family would spend an extra £386 on petrol in the year ahead.

"This is a savage extra cost for millions of working people," she said, renewing Labour's call for the government to impose a windfall tax on oil companies profiting from surging prices.

"The Conservatives could help working people being hit hard by soaring prices; instead they've rejected the choice of a one-off windfall tax on oil and gas producers raking in billions. And to add insult to injury, within weeks they want to clobber families with a huge tax hike," she added.

The Liberal Democrat leader, Ed Davey, used his speech at his party's spring conference in York on Sunday to renew his call for a VAT cut as a response to surging inflation.

"The war in Ukraine has turned a cost of living crisis into a cost of living emergency. That's why I've called for an emergency measure," he said. "I've called for a cut in VAT, right now. A fair tax cut – worth £600 a household. To help families. To help businesses. To help our economy."

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## Cost of living crisis

# Tenants face having to find extra £1,000 for 2022 rent and bills

Hamptons expects sums to become 54% of post-tax income for average rented household in Great Britain



Hamptons says the average household in Britain spent 42% of their post-tax income on rent in 2021 – the highest proportion since its records began in 2010. Photograph: Nathan Stirk/Getty Images

*[Rupert Jones](#)*

Sun 13 Mar 2022 20.01 EDT Last modified on Mon 14 Mar 2022 01.12 EDT

Tenants already struggling with the cost of living crisis typically face having to find an extra £1,000 this year to cover higher rent and essential bills, research shows.

The estate agent Hamptons said tenants' finances faced a record squeeze as higher rents and energy bill increases combined to pile more pressure on

households in Great Britain.

Recent research from other property firms such as Rightmove has already shown that rents have been rising at their fastest rate on record as tenants making plans for a post-pandemic life jostle for properties. In its latest monthly lettings index, Hamptons said this strong growth led to the average household in Great Britain spending 42% of their post-tax income on rent in 2021 – the highest proportion since its records began in 2010.

When other costs such as gas, electricity, council tax, broadband and a TV licence were included, it meant a typical household spent 52% of their post-tax income on rent and bills in 2021.

This figure is set to climb further as the cost of living crisis deepens. By the end of this year, Hamptons predicts that the average rented household will be spending a record 54% of their post-tax income on rent and bills.

This will typically cost them an extra £1,008 this year alone, with their total outlay set to rise to £17,914 – up from £16,906 in 2021. The 2022 figure includes an estimated £4,015 for household bills, compared with £3,350 in 2021.

Private rents are still rising, with the new report putting the average monthly cost of a newly let property in Great Britain at £1,118 in February. That was 6.7% or £70 higher than 12 months earlier.

The annual rate of rental growth has gradually been coming down over the past few months – in July 2021 it was running at 8.7% – and Hamptons expects it to slow to about 2.5% by the end of this year.

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However, the latest national figure disguises wide regional variations. In south-east England and outer London, average rents are 1.5% to 3% higher than a year ago, and in the south-west they are up by 13%.

During the coronavirus pandemic, some tenants quit London and other big cities after deciding they wanted to live in the suburbs, the countryside or near the sea. Others are planning to do so.

Aneisha Beveridge, the head of research at Hamptons, said: “Financial pressures are raining down on households but while last year it was rental growth that ate into tenants’ incomes, this year it’s more likely to be energy costs.”

She said that with more income tied up in essentials, it was likely that discretionary spending was set to fall later this year, which she noted was “bad news for the wider economy”.

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## Employment law

# Government plans let ‘dodgy umbrella companies off the hook’, warns TUC

Trades Union Congress renews calls for ban on umbrella firms to address labour market abuses



The Guardian last year found evidence of possible umbrella company tax dodging in NHS test and trace. Photograph: Justin Tallis/AFP/Getty Images

*Jasper Jolly*

*@jjpjolly*

Mon 14 Mar 2022 03.00 EDT

The Trades Union Congress (TUC) has warned that government plans to address labour market abuses by umbrella companies are inadequate, amid signs that thousands of temporary workers may be being denied pay and basic rights.

As many as 600,000 temporary workers in the UK are thought to be [employed by umbrella companies](#) – used by recruitment agencies and companies to cut temporary payroll costs, which are usually charged as fees to the workers instead. The problem costs workers and the government as much as [£4.5bn in fraud and misappropriation](#), according to estimates recognised by the government.

The government is working on new rules for the temporary labour market as evidence has mounted of unscrupulous umbrella companies taking advantage of workers.

In a response to a government consultation the TUC has said the business department's Employment Agencies Standards Inspectorate (EASI), which may be tasked with enforcing the new regulations, has less than a fifth of the officers needed under UN standards.

Under current proposals, independent contractors who are not classed as “agency workers” could still fall outside the scope of regulation, despite being forced to use umbrellas, the TUC said.

The use of umbrella companies has increased significantly, including in the NHS and the education system, since the government changed [tax rules for contractors](#). The Guardian last year found evidence of possible umbrella company [tax dodging in the test-and-trace programme](#).

The union body, which repeated its call for a ban on umbrellas, cited abuses such as a locum physiotherapist in London who did not receive pay for five weeks of work from his umbrella company employer. The worker had been forced by the NHS trust to sign up to the umbrella, but neither the trust, the recruitment agency or the umbrella will take responsibility for the loss of wages, the TUC said.

Other workers have said how they were denied holiday pay by umbrella companies that did not inform them of their rights until it was too late.

Frances O’Grady, the TUC’s general secretary, said: “It has long been clear that our lack of regulation lets dodgy umbrella companies off the hook –

allowing them to act with impunity and treat workers appallingly.

“But the government’s proposals fall far short of what’s needed. Hundreds of thousands of workers using umbrella arrangements might miss out on protection because they aren’t agency workers. And there aren’t enough inspectors to make sure companies stick to the rules.

“Tinkering around the edges won’t cut it. It’s time for a ban on umbrella companies.”

Rebecca Seeley Harris, a tax expert and former senior adviser to the Treasury, said umbrella companies “need to be regulated and sooner rather than later” but said she did not believe they should be banned, to allow businesses flexibility.

“In an ideal world, maybe umbrella companies would not be needed but, such is the complexity of hiring someone off-payroll, umbrella companies have found a place in the labour supply chain,” Seeley Harris said.

“Unfortunately, the government has failed to take notice of this market despite being warned of the need to regulate and now bad practices have been allowed to develop.”

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## Baftas 2022

# Baftas 2022: The Power of the Dog wins best picture and director

Jane Campion's western takes the big two prizes at Sunday's showpiece event while Denis Villeneuve's Dune scores five



Benedict Cumberbatch accepts Jane Campion's best director Bafta..  
Photograph: Guy Levy/Shutterstock for BAFTA

*[Catherine Shoard](#)*

*[@catherineshoard](#)*

Sun 13 Mar 2022 15.49 EDT Last modified on Mon 14 Mar 2022 11.48 EDT

The Power of the Dog, [Jane Campion's slow-burn western](#) starring Benedict Cumberbatch as a ferocious rancher in 1920s Montana, has taken the top two prizes at this year's Baftas: best film and best director.

Cumberbatch accepted the award for director the absence of Campion, who was still in Los Angeles having attended the Directors Guild America awards there on Saturday.

Cumberbatch missed out in the leading actor category, losing to Will Smith for his performance as the father of Venus and Serena Williams in [King Richard](#). The win makes Smith a huge favourite to triumph at the Oscars in a fortnight, where Campion is also heavily tipped to win.

Reinaldo Marcus Green, the director of King Richard, picked up the prize in place of the actor who, he said, “when he put on those short shorts, was like Superman”.



Joanna Scanlan poses in the winners room after winning best actress for After Love. Photograph: Samir Hussein/WireImage

Best actress was awarded to Joanna Scanlan, the veteran Welsh star of stage and small screen for her astonishing performance as a bereaved Muslim convert in Aleem Khan's debut, [After Love](#). Scanlan gave thanks to Khan as well as her parents and her husband, Neil, “who is living proof there is no such thing as after love”.

Dune, Denis Villeneuve's sci-fi extravaganza starring Timothée Chalamet, took the most awards of the night – five – sweeping the board in the technical categories including cinematography, production design, visual effects and sound.

Kenneth Branagh won outstanding British film for his autobiographical drama, Belfast, and used his speech to thank cinemagoers for heading out to see it. Advances in streaming were admirable, said Branagh, but “all hail the big screen too! It’s alive! And long may they live together!”



Kenneth Branagh collects the gong for Belfast. Photograph: Guy Levy/Shutterstock for BAFTA

He continued: “A black-and-white film about the Troubles [was] not an easy pitch, but if you build it they will come”. Film-makers, he said, needed to “believe in the imagination of the public to embrace any and every kind of story, well told”.

Sunday night’s event was a confident return to real-life razzmatazz for the Baftas, presented with brio to a receptive, full-capacity crowd at the Albert Hall. An 85-year-old Shirley Bassey opened proceedings with a performance of Diamonds Are Forever to mark 60 years since Dr No, which set the tone for an excitable and ebullient ceremony.

There were scant references to the pandemic and only fleeting mentions of the invasion of Ukraine, including a dig at home secretary Priti Patel's immigrant policy from Andy Serkis, as well as from host [Rebel Wilson](#).

Wilson, seen as a bold hire by Bafta following a badly received two-year stint by Joanna Lumley, won her biggest round of applause after she raised a middle finger and explained “in all sign languages, this is the international sign for Putin”.

02:04

Baftas 2022: Rebel Wilson hosts awards as Power of the Dog wins best movie – video highlights

This was blurred out in the pre-watershed TV broadcast, which Wilson had previously vowed would not prevent her from delivering as risque a ceremony as possible. She sailed close to the wind in her opening monologue, expressing a desire to sit on Daniel Craig’s face and drawing a pair of nipples on the 007 logo.

Later, Wilson unveiled a cake she had made in the shape of Cumberbatch’s face, the cheekbone of which she then devoured “so I can tell people I had him inside me”.

She also made reference to disgraced actor Armie Hammer, the open marriage of Will and Jada Pinkett Smith, the lockdown parties at Downing Street and JK Rowling’s contributions on the transgender debate. Prince Andrew’s evening at Pizza Express in Woking also merited a mention, as did Oprah Winfrey’s TV interview with Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, the drama and tension of which Wilson praised.

Prince William, the president of Bafta, did not attend the ceremony due to “diary constraints” but did make an appearance by video link in which he expressed his pride in Bafta’s mentoring scheme, Breakthrough.



Shirley Bassey opens the show. Photograph: Guy Levy/Shutterstock for BAFTA

Troy Kotsur became the first deaf actor to win a Bafta for his role in family drama [Coda](#), pushing him into pole position at the Oscars. Kotsur is the second ever deaf actor to be nominated for an Academy Award after his Coda co-star Marlee Matlin, who won 35 years ago. The film also took best adapted screenplay.

Supporting actress went to Ariana DeBose, whose turn in [West Side Story](#) was her screen debut. DeBose paid tribute to the film's casting director, Cindy Tolan, who earlier in the evening triumphed in her category. Tolan noted that Steven Spielberg's update of the musical was the first film for 50 members of its cast, selected from some 30,000 hopefuls.

Lin-Manuel Miranda's [Encanto](#) was named best animation. Speaking on the podium, composer Germaine Franco said she had wanted to make a film that tells "my beautiful brown children they are seen and heard and they're important".



Ariana DeBose poses with her award for best supporting actress.  
Photograph: Peter Nicholls/Reuters

Paul Thomas Anderson was a surprise winner in the original screenplay category for his coming-of-age comedy drama [Licorice Pizza](#). The film's star Alana Haim and composer Jonny Greenwood picked up the prize in his absence.

Ryusuke Hamaguchi won the award for best film in a foreign language for [Drive My Car](#), his epic road movie based on the Haruki Murakami short story. The film is seen as a successor to the likes of Parasite in moving from acclaim at Cannes, where it took three prizes, to a substantial showing at the Oscars, where it is up for four awards including best picture and best director. It is the first Japanese film up for the former while Hamaguchi is only the country's third ever director nominated – and the first since Akira Kurosawa in 1985.

The awards were decided by the 7,000 members of the British Film Academy, which has undergone a considerable behind-the-scenes overhaul since the backlash to the lack of diversity in its shortlists two years ago. A raft of 220 new rules and regulations were brought in, including quotas for film-makers and the compulsory viewing by voters of at least 15 randomly

selected titles in contention. Such measures were credited with this year's notably wide-ranging set of nominees.

Join Peter Bradshaw and fellow Guardian film critics for a Guardian Live online event ahead of the Oscars on [Thursday 24 March](#).

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[Baftas 2022](#)

## Filthy gags, muted politics and Bassey bossing it: what we learned from the Baftas 2022



Keeping it lively ... Rebel Wilson hosts the 75th Baftas at the Royal Albert Hall, London. Photograph: James Veysey/Shutterstock for Bafta

The key takeaways from a ceremony that saw The Power of the Dog triumph – but Coda and Belfast emerge the real winners

[Catherine Shoard](#), [Andrew Pulver](#) and [Alex Needham](#)

Sun 13 Mar 2022 19.53 EDT Last modified on Mon 14 Mar 2022 11.46 EDT

## **1) Rebel Wilson a lively host by even the crudest measure**

Joanna Lumley's two-year stint as [Baftas](#) host was not a happy one – the prolific and brutal slaughter of gags was worthy of a Quentin Tarantino movie. Could Rebel Wilson, who brought the house down a couple of years ago ripping into Cats, do any better? Well, she scored a few direct hits. For instance (on her weight loss) "I've had quite a transformation – I hope JK Rowling still approves" and her gag about Will Smith's open marriage. Balanced against that, however, was the cringey "back to the cinema" skit, which seemed mainly to be an opportunity to cram in a pixellated shot of her naked from the waist down along with various euphemisms for going for a dump. The gags about how many actors in the audience she wanted to shag also got a little stale ... literally, when she brought out a cake of Benedict Cumberbatch's face. AN

02:04

Baftas 2022: Rebel Wilson hosts awards as Power of the Dog wins best movie – video highlights

## **2) Belfast makes a late comeback**



Kenneth Branagh arrives at the Baftas. Photograph: Neil Hall/EPA

For a while, back last autumn, Belfast looked like the film to beat this awards season. Kenneth Branagh's drama tickled the Academy's favour in a similar fashion to Alfonso Cuarón's Roma: black and white, coming-of-age, cineaste autobiographical. But then it dipped. Other films built up a head of steam and Belfast looked increasingly doomed. Now, it rises once more, its spell out of the limelight re-energising the race and endearing it to anyone slightly jaded by big skies and conflicted cowboys. Branagh was popular on Sunday night, delivering a warm, button-pushing, fight-the-good-fight rallying cry for cinemas – and he's even more popular in Hollywood. A good outside punt. CS

### **3) Coda's feelgood story mightn't be over yet**

Every awards year seems to have a little movie that could; Coda is the one that has got the nod this time. A remake of [a fairly obscure French film](#), entrusted to a director with a pretty short CV, it has ridden a wave of excitement for its emotive narrative arc and its discovery of a veteran talent in Troy Kotsur, only the second deaf actor to be up for an Oscar (after Marlee Matlin, who plays his wife in the movie). Coda seemed to have inspired real affection within the industry if the roars of approval greeting its two wins tonight were anything to go by. Director Sian Heder will be up

against the same crew on Oscar night for best adapted screenplay; she may not repeat the trick, but Kotsur now looks nailed on for best supporting actor. AP



Coda star Troy Kotsur with his Bafta for best supporting actor. Photograph: Neil Hall/EPA

#### **4) Lots of Oscars still to play for ...**

The Power of the Dog will win the Oscars for best picture and director – that's written in stone. Not just because, despite failing to take any other Baftas, it still won those two, but because it has now won every single picture prize going. And on Saturday [Jane Campion](#) won the Directors Guild America award – the most reliable bellwether of the Academy Awards. So: done deal.

But aside from those categories – and the actor awards, with Will Smith and Troy Kotsur being locks – there's still lots to play for in the next fortnight. Might Coda and Licorice Pizza go home with the screenplay awards (there was a lot of love for the latter at Bafta)? CS

#### **5) ... with best actress impossible to call**

It's when you come to the best actress categories that the Baftas and Oscars really struggle to correlate. Joanna Scanlan, who won the Bafta, isn't up for the Oscar but Olivia Colman and Kristen Stewart – both snubbed by Bafta – both are. Is it too soon for more Colman? Might Jessica Chastain's shocked speech at the SAGs have won her sufficient favour to take it? Or does [Nicole Kidman's Lucille Ball](#) tick the right boxes? Meanwhile, Judi Dench's advanced years and treasure status could mean she gets a second supporting actress Oscar, though the smart money must be on Ariana DeBose – whose charming speech on Sunday can only have helped her cause. CS

## **6) Bond remains at the centre of the industry's psyche**

While No Time to Die only won a single award – for best editing – Bond loomed large over the ceremony. Rebel Wilson showed her Daniel Craig tattoo, Troy Kotsur was asked about the possibility of a deaf Bond and Shirley Bassey opened the show by singing Diamonds Are Forever. It's 60 years since the first Bond film, and Bassey is now 85 – but her commitment to glamour and drama remain unshaken, and indeed unstirred, by the passing of time. It was rather moving. AN

## **7) Sign language interpreters steal the show**

What was the night's best performance? Rebel Wilson's finger-waggling smutfest? Dame Shirley's rafter-shattering vamping? Troy Kotsur's engaging pitch for 008? I'd argue it was the amazingly graceful sign-language interpreters, who accompanied Kotsur and his director Sian Heder on stage when they picked up their awards – and even more splendidly [accompanying Emilia Jones' performance](#) of the song from the movie. They really raised the level of the show. AP

## **8) Bafta grows in power ... but still harbours inferiority complex**

Now the Golden Globes are out of the picture, the road would appear clear for the Baftas as the unarguable silver-medal position in the awards race (with the Oscars still defeating all comers). But Bafta's relationship with the US Academy is still tricky: it's both saucer-eyed at its counterpart's wattage and wants to assert its own homegrown traditions. Even if Joanna Scanlan's triumph as best actress demonstrated a bit of independent thinking, some of the other decisions show the boot is still on the Oscar foot. That's the only way to explain Ariana DeBose winning over Jessie Buckley (a result even DeBose didn't see coming), and Will Smith defeating Benedict Cumberbatch (the latter taking it gracefully). And the number of awards presented to no-shows told its own story; pitching for Oscar votes is a demanding business. **AP**

## 9) Political gestures stay surprisingly discreet

With war raging in Ukraine, it seemed likely that a succession of stars would take the opportunity to share their thoughts about the crisis. Perhaps aware of the dissonance between a glitz awards show and the horror of the invasion, however, few did. Rebel Wilson showed us the “universal sign language” for Putin – a raised middle finger. Andy Serkis made a convoluted joke about Priti Patel. Benedict Cumberbatch indicated on the red carpet that he wanted to be part of the “homes for Ukraine” scheme. Many wore blue and yellow badges to show their support. But grandstanding, in the main, was conspicuous by its absence. **AN**

Join Peter Bradshaw and fellow Guardian film critics for a Guardian Live online event ahead of the Oscars on [Thursday 24 March](#).

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Interview

## **‘I’ll never grow up!’ Derry Girls’ Lisa McGee on comedy, class and her new show Skint**

[Zoe Williams](#)



Lisa McGee: ‘There’s a punk attitude to teenage girls in Derry. They’ve got a very bold sense of humour.’ Photograph: Linda Nylind/The Guardian

The writer wowed the world with her sitcom about five working-class kids. Now she’s tackling poverty in a series of monologues for the BBC. She talks about the childhood that inspired her, the breaks that got her into TV – and the barriers that keep so many out



[@zoesqwilliams](#)

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When Lisa McGee was a kid in Derry in the 90s, she swore she would never write about Northern Ireland, least of all about the Troubles. She wanted to write *Murder She Wrote*, or better still, to grow up and become its heroine, the author turned detective Jessica Fletcher. “I just thought her life was class. She lived in this beautiful place and she wrote novels really easily because she had all this time to solve murders as well.”

Now McGee, 40, has got the fairytale for real that Jessica Fletcher had on screen, minus the murders. “Taxi drivers and Sainsbury’s delivery men will go: ‘Are you the Lisa McGee that writes *Derry Girls*?’ And I’ll have come to the door in my pyjamas. Occasionally in *Murder She Wrote*, someone would

come over and go: ‘Are you *the* Jessica Fletcher? And now it’s like that for me.’”

In case you haven’t seen it, *Derry Girls*, set in the mid-90s, is technically a sitcom, but “dramedy” feels closer. Its five working-class teenage girls create a tight, effervescent ensemble, getting into scrapes. It will lose a bit in the translation when I say they set fire to things, steal things, get impossible crushes, fall foul of nuns – it sounds slapstick, because it is, but there’s a depth to the characters and a bossy, hard-bitten tenderness in the family dynamics that add layers to the comedy. It took months to cast them, since their chemistry is so important. Plus, McGee says: “I really wanted them to feel like girls from Derry, not people doing accents. There’s a punk attitude to teenage girls in Derry. They’ve got a very bold sense of humour. They’re fearless. You have to have that sort of swagger. It’s hard to pretend to have that.”

Were her own teenage years just like the *Derry girls*? “I know a lot of female writers who object to this question,” McGee says, sternly.

We meet in Broadcasting House, the Beeb’s London HQ. “I feel like I’m in W1A,” she says, excited, as if she’s on a tour of the building for the first time, rather than an extremely accomplished writer who has been in and out for years. As for W1A, she watches *a lot* of telly and, when it’s good, will always say so.

McGee with a mask on, as she is when she arrives, looks quite Hollywood, glossy chestnut hair and huge eyes; without a mask on, she has a very warm smile and, I must admit, I don’t find her stern voice very scary. What would other writers object to? “The fact that if you’re a woman and you write, it has to be a true story, basically. But I don’t mind talking about it because obviously some of it is very much my life.”

Erin in particular, played by Saoirse-Monica Jackson, is pretty much McGee; her mum and dad are not at all dissimilar to the writer’s own, who left school at 14 and 15 respectively. “They met in Woolworths when my dad was a lorry driver and my mum worked in shops.” And, oh my God, the

grandad: “My grandad was even called Joe [like the patriarch in Derry Girls]. He was a big, big character, a force of nature. A lot of my family feel like he’s not gone, because of Derry Girls. It’s really cute.”

A measure of Derry Girls’ popularity is the evangelical zeal it inspires – people will still forcefully recommend it, four years after it premiered, without a thought to whether they sound slow off the mark. It’s partly down to Jackson, who has a rare, clownish quality that makes you laugh before she has said anything. “Saoirse is very physical,” McGee says thoughtfully. “I’m not someone that writes physical jokes normally, but she just looks so funny when she falls over.”



Derry Girls ... (from left) Orla (Louisa Harland), Joe (Ian McElhinney), Sarah (Kathy Clarke) Michelle (Jamie-Lee O'Donnell) and Erin (Saoirse-Monica Jackson). Photograph: Helen Sloan/Aidan Monaghan/Hat Trick

True to her younger self, McGee never set out to write something about the Troubles, but unavoidably, given the period in which the show is set, that context hovers over the capers like a shadow. “I’ve only realised this lately,” she says. “If I was a different writer, Derry Girls could be quite a bleak show. I’ve always leaned towards funny.” Viewers who aren’t familiar with this recent history can hear the seriousness under the gags, “and not only in Britain. You read some really funny things about people in Mexico, going

into Google [rabbit] holes about Northern Ireland.” And for those who lived through it, “they’ll start talking to you about Derry Girls and Northern Ireland, and it starts funny, and then they’ll be telling you other stuff that isn’t funny. Me and the cast have all found this. It’s a way in, and there’s still a lot about that period that isn’t spoken about. There’s a lot of trauma and a lot of ghosts.”

Meanwhile, the teenage dialogue is, line for line, among the best, the closest, in the TV canon, and while McGee tries to wave this off with some arch self-deprecation – “I don’t think I’ll ever grow up. Fifteen is the point that I have sort of stuck at” – she has made these girls so comical by taking them seriously. “I really like teenagers, and they’re often not well written, particularly in drama. They’re either treated like mini-adults, and it’s weird and sexual, or they’re not treated with the respect they deserve.”

We are actually here to talk about Skint, a BBC Four series of mainly heartbreakingly monologues from “people striving under tough circumstances”. McGee wrote one of the eight 15-minute episodes, featuring Jackson as an unhinged waiter, but is the series’ creative director. Tonally, the range is very wide – some of the films are really funny, some absolutely harrowing – and it took her a while, she says, to adjust to the fact that there was no single vision, no one voice holding everything together.

She is absolutely passionate about the importance of getting the lived experience of poverty on to the screen. “It gets forgotten in the mix of all these discussions, and that’s the thing that affects everybody. If you’re poor, you’re poor, no matter what. It takes race and religion and all that stuff out of it. Everyone that’s very poor is screwed, and people in that situation need to be heard.” Her own trajectory – growing up working class in a grindingly poor area, getting a degree at Queen’s University Belfast, then almost immediately finding paid work at the National Theatre, in London – she doesn’t think would be possible for a young writer now, in a creative world where the barrier to entry is the endless unpaid internship. “You do loads of talks, and panels, people saying: ‘What can we do to get these [underprivileged] voices in?’ And I just say: ‘Give them money. Find the people and just give them a cheque. You don’t need masterclasses. You don’t need 100 people in a competition.’ I think it’s simpler than people make out.

There's going to be a lot of not very great plays soon, if it's just all the same people talking only to each other. It's really depressing."



Saoirse-Monica Jackson in Skint. Photograph: Tommy Ga-Ken Wan/BBC/Hopscotch Films

Owing to the colossus presence of Sally Rooney, I now think all Irish universities are exactly like Trinity Dublin. In her novel *Normal People*, she sort of does a *Brideshead* on the uni, making it seem impossibly glamorous, full of beautiful people awash with money and boho sensibility. But Queen's wasn't like that at all. "Northern Irish people can never take themselves that seriously. We wouldn't get away with it. That can be a problem when you're at university, where you're supposed to be engaging with ideas that are a bit wanky." She says she still feels guilty that she didn't do any work: "It was such an opportunity compared to what my parents were faced with. And I just had a lot of craic."

In fact, the craic was quite a useful apprenticeship, since she says she's still using jokes now that she heard in pubs in the late 90s. Meanwhile, her mum did get a degree, as a mature student, and trained as a social worker, "around the same time as I was doing my GCSEs", she says. "I remember being quite pissed off that she was stealing my thunder."

She got the attachment at the National by sending them a play. “The great thing about writing is you have a physical thing – you can do it or you can’t. I didn’t have to go and do the interviews.” It’s much harder to get into directing and producing TV if you’re not really well connected. “When I meet a director who is working class, who has an accent, basically, I think they must be brilliant.”

The National gave her a little space to work in, access to all the shows, a salary – it sounds like a dream, and, she says, “thank God I had no idea. I just walked into the writers’ room like an eejit. If I’d known it was a big deal, I probably would have ruined it by thinking I shouldn’t be there.” That was 2006, when she was pretty fresh out of university, putting on plays that never made any money. When she got the call from the National, she had to borrow the flight money from her mum.

By her mid-20s, she had been commissioned to write her own show for the Irish national broadcaster, RTÉ. Raw was a playful, anarchic drama set in a restaurant in Dublin. It was such a success that it was moved to a primetime slot, but that took the fun out of it a bit for McGee. “It was a very young show, and very rude. As soon as it got big figures, it became more mainstream. I was 27 and I wanted to do cheekier work.”

Amid all this, she had moved to rural Donegal, thinking that was the kind of thing a writer would do. “Then I realised: ‘There’s nobody about and I can’t drive.’ I was in the middle of Donegal for no good reason.”

So she moved back to London and the commissions kept coming. She was one of the writers for [three seasons of Being Human](#), Toby Whithouse’s genre-fusing series about flatmates who are, some of them, also vampires (others are werewolves). “I really connected to that. The ordinariness, the everlasting life, the drinking blood, it has a lot in common, vampire life, with the Catholic church.” She then had another show commissioned, [London Irish, about Belfast expats](#), but it only did one series. “Not that I wasn’t grateful but it was really disappointing.”

Overall, though, it was a more or less unbroken streak of green lights, which had its pros and cons. “I don’t regret any of it because it’s where I learned my craft. But I always had to work – there was this fear of stopping, I had no

safety net. I actually wrote Derry Girls when I was pregnant, because I stopped for the first time. I really don't know if my way was better, or if you should have this pure vision and only do your own stuff. I don't know what plays I would have written if TV hadn't been paying me real TV money. But my husband says: 'You could write a play now' and, yeah, I suppose I could."



Emily Reid and Ciara Berkeley in *The Deceived*. Photograph: Channel 5

She has two sons, six and two, and the family (she is married to the actor and screenwriter Tobias Beer) moved to Belfast after lockdown. "London became somewhere that didn't make sense with young kids when you can't go anywhere." The Northern Irish capital is going through its own creative boom; every cafe you walk into, apparently, has someone talking into their AirPods about a film they're making. She manages to convey that this is very handy, while at the same time not the Belfast she knew and loved.

The *Deceived*, for [Channel 5, came out in 2020](#) and McGee co-wrote it with Beer. "The first thing for me was that he had to be good," she says. "Because what would you do?" She breaks off to imagine that perfect horror, of having to tell your husband that he can't write. Anyway, he could, so that was fine, and "the writing totally saved our sanity. We are so boring. We only talk about TV shows anyway. So we might as well be writing one, and

arguing about what things should be where, rather than anything else.” They’re working together on a new project, though Beer is doing most of it while McGee is taken up with *Derry Girls*, for its third and final season. “I think once it goes out, people will know that’s the right place to end. Hopefully. It’s always been a three-season plan.”

Skint, meanwhile, with its tight, gritty, sparse dramas, is a departure for McGee, given her sensibility. “You wake up every day and everyone’s depressed and lonely. People need joy, they need to laugh, I definitely don’t want to be spending all my time doing something depressing.” But looked at from another angle, it’s weirdly on-brand. “This sounds mad, considering what they are, but I think of them like a joke. You have your setup, and then you have a trick in the middle – this is what it’s going to be about, a red herring – and then you have a reveal.” She’s not always prospecting for the lolz, but she brings a fascinated seriousness to the magic and mechanics of humour.

*Skint* airs on BBC Four from 20 March. Series three of *Derry Girls* is coming soon to Channel 4 and All 4.

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## Non-fungible tokens (NFTs)

# Are NFTs really art?

Collectible and cartoonish, these digital multiples, traded in cryptocurrency, confer membership of an exclusive club – sometimes literally. But do they have any aesthetic value? A critic weighs in



Join our club ... a ‘roadmap’ showing forthcoming Lazy Lion NFTs.  
Photograph: @LazyLionsNFT

*Philippa Snow*

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In January, a clip from The Tonight Show featuring Jimmy Fallon and Paris Hilton went viral: not because either had said anything particularly interesting or scandalous, but because the interview was so uncanny in its content and its style. In the video, Hilton, who looks like a telegenic, radioactive Barbie in a lime green cocktail dress, is discussing Bored Ape NFTs, the popular crypto images that have been selling for a minimum of \$200,000 since their first release in April 2021.

“I’m so happy I taught you what they were,” she informs Fallon in a voice a little lower than her usual characteristic purr.

“You taught me what’s up,” he agrees, “and then I bought an ape.”

Their back-and-forth, in spite of both these people having worked in entertainment for at least two decades, has all the breezy naturalism of a conversation between chatbots, as if somebody had made a Paris-Hilton-Jimmy-Fallon deepfake carefully designed to fail the Turing test.

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Hilton, as it happens, is not the only quintessentially 00s cultural icon to have embraced NFTs (non-fungible tokens; a one-off digital artwork), even if she might be the only one who describes them as having “literally taken over my entire mind and soul”. Lindsay Lohan, who once helped advise the readers of Interview magazine on how to get [“filthy rich on NFTs”](#), has worked with a collective called Canine Cartel to [release a much-mocked “fursona” NFT](#) that depicted her as a sultry cartoon wolf. Gwyneth Paltrow revealed last month that she had [acquired a Bored Ape NFT](#), its blond hair and Breton shirt selected to reflect her subtle taste. Eminem – never one to miss an opportunity for wordplay – [bought a so-called “EminApe”](#).



The Bored Ape known as Emperor Tomato Ketchup. Photograph: Courtesy of Yuga Labs

There is something oddly perfect about the marriage between NFTs and the most memorable figures of this period, maybe because many of the most popular works tend to approximate a mid-to-late-00s aesthetic: bright, cartoonish, closer to a two-dimensional Funko pop than to fine art. “A lot of the NFT market is based on collectibles,” the art critic JJ Charlesworth told Vice, “and there’s always been a visual culture in collecting: from comics, to trainers, baseball cards – that is very mainstream.”

The most popular NFTs feature a single figure on a colourful background, making Charlesworth’s comparison to a baseball card especially apt. The Bored Apes all showcase the same humanoid ape wearing a variety of accessories and disguises; Lazy Lions do the same thing, but with lions; CryptoSharks, at least, have the distinction of being shown in various lurid, vaguely rendered global settings, as if they have been transposed into an acid-tripper’s vision of Hollywood or Beijing. I recently received an email about a limited run of NFTs called “Lobstars”, which depict “hyper pop” lobsters dressed as familiar works of art, including Andy Warhol’s soup cans and Marcel Duchamp’s urinal. On OpenSea, the popular NFT marketplace, it is possible to type in almost any animal and find a corresponding series. (I was somewhat stunned, for instance, to discover that some enterprising soul

had produced 11 loudly patterned “Lazy Anglerfish”; one has sold so far for roughly the equivalent of £22).

NFTs are art as a status symbol-cum-investment, packaged in a mainstream shell

The upside of many NFTs having a uniform visual style is that, theoretically, as many of the medium’s biggest fans will stress, there is something inherently democratic about their design and their acquisition. If not every NFT creator makes the kind of money Bored Ape Yacht Club makes, they still have a fairly equal opportunity to share their work. Searching OpenSea for pieces is still easier by far than buying physical work from a gallery or an auction, and the only barrier to entry is a working knowledge of cryptocurrency. Buyers and artists who grew up on the internet of the 00s, meanwhile, may experience *deja vu* when given the opportunity to customise what is effectively an avatar, harking back to online cartoons like Blingees or Dollz Mania. When a rash of articles appeared in 2021 suggesting NFTs might be the Beanie Babies of the 2020s, the comparison was meant to be an insult; still, it is hard to overestimate the power of nostalgia when it comes to millennials on the web.

In part, the interchangeability of these bestselling NFTs is the result of the way they are produced: Bored Apes and Lazy Lions, for instance, are created with an AI that adds minor variations to a template until 10,000 unique versions have been minted. Their similarity also allows those who purchase them to mark themselves out as a member of a club, making them as obvious a flex of the purchaser’s wealth as a Birkin bag or a shiny red Ferrari. In the case of Bored Ape NFTs, the purchase literally buys the owner entry into private online parties, making them a gateway into networking with other influential people.



Paris Hilton talks to Jimmy Fallon about NFTs. Photograph: NBC/NBCU Photo Bank/Getty Images

Unlike Fallon, I have not been lucky enough to have NFTs explained to me by Hilton; I *can* see, though, why they might appeal to internet-savvy celebrities, especially those devoted to growing a social media following. If they recall any previous art-world trend among extremely famous people, it might be the craze for buying pieces by the New York artist KAWS, whose Mickey Mouse-like figures with cartoonish skull-and-crossbones heads began cropping up in celebrity homes in the 2010s, and whose work became particularly popular with the Kardashians due to its Instagrammable aesthetic.

“If branding and concept are the two most important elements in becoming a world-conquering artist in 2021,” a GQ profile of the artist suggested, “then KAWS is one of the few to have mastered both.” Setting aside the fact that this may be one of the most depressing sentences that anyone has ever written about art, if “branding” does make up a 50% share of what it takes to become “a world-conquering artist”, it makes sense that NFTs are conquering a very similar space to the one previously dominated by figures such as KAWS and, even earlier, by pop artists including Jeff Koons. [Art](#) that exists as a status symbol-cum-investment, packaged in a shell so mainstream that it requires absolutely no knowledge of art history to

appreciate its style, has long been of interest to those looking to express themselves, impress their moneyed peers, and add to their financial portfolios in one fell swoop.

Like Koons, who has produced garish bags for Louis Vuitton, and KAWS, who has designed a runway show for Dior Homme, Bored Ape Yacht Club has recently announced it is undertaking its own fashion collaboration with Adidas – a move that proves to be far easier for an artist or collective when its work already resembles a logo. If Bored Apes, Lazy Lions and Lobstars might be seen as fitting into an age-old tradition of artists depicting animals in their art, they might just as easily be seen as following the Ralph Lauren Polo horse, the Lacoste crocodile or the Swarovski swan in a long line of instantly recognisable fashion creatures designed to telegraph status and expensive taste.

Just because the most popular NFTs tend to be simple, bright, cartoonish and produced in enormous, variable sequences does not, of course, mean that this is the only form of NFT that can be minted. It is possible, for instance, to make one out of a video. Rewatching that very eerie, very 2022, segment of Hilton and Fallon talking with restrained enthusiasm about MoonPay and Bored Apes, I found myself wondering whether anyone had yet been savvy enough to make this particular clip into an NFT. The flatly artificial TV lighting and the stilted dialogue both give the scene an unreal, almost hallucinatory quality. As in some of the CGI pop culture collages minted by the artist Beeple, who once released an eye-popping NFT of an absurdly muscular Elon Musk in front of an exploding rocket, we are seeing familiar figures in a disconcerting, unfamiliar context.

As a historical artefact, the interview also ably captures a very specific time in human history: one in which the phrase “You taught me what’s up, and then I bought an ape” means something entirely different from what it might have only six months earlier. At the end of the video, Hilton tells the audience that she is giving each of them an NFT, and Fallon says that this must be the first NFT giveaway in television history. “Iconic,” Hilton smiles, and in accordance with the loosey-goosey, hyperbolic modern usage of the word – one that can apply to a TikTok or a jpeg of an ape as easily as it can apply to, say, a work by Basquiat – she may be right.

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## Royal Shakespeare Company

Interview

# ‘Experience Shakespeare by seeing it – even better, be in it’: inside the RSC’s new epic

[Michael Billington](#)

Owen Horsley’s new production of Henry VI, Parts 2 and 3, uses a cast of 120, including professionals and community participants, with some of them filming the action on stage



‘I banned the word weak in rehearsals’ ... Ashley Gayle (as Edward) and company in rehearsal for Wars of the Roses. Photograph: Ellie Kurttz



[@billicritic](#)

Mon 14 Mar 2022 02.53 EDTLast modified on Mon 14 Mar 2022 05.03 EDT

I discovered recently that Richard Wagner liked to spend his evenings at home performing scenes from Henry VI. You can see why Shakespeare's monumental trilogy would appeal to the creator of the Ring cycle. You could also hardly have a starker contrast than Wagner's solo efforts – “in the face of which,” said his wife, Cosima, “mortals can only be silent” – and the RSC's upcoming production of Henry VI Parts 2 and 3, which will feature a total cast of 120.

This massive project is in the hands of [Owen Horsley](#), who last year co-directed, with [Gregory Doran](#), a streamed version of Henry VI: Part 1, which broke all the usual rules by [allowing viewers access to rehearsals](#). Meeting Horsley during a lunch break on his epic venture, I was struck by the calm assurance of this Fife-born Scot. And, having spent eight years with Cheek by Jowl and as long working on the RSC history cycle, he clearly knows his Shakespeare.



‘In this industry, comparison is such a waste of time’ ... Owen Horsley in rehearsals. Photograph: RSC/Ellie Kurttz

Of Henry VI, he says: “These plays, whenever they are done – especially at the RSC – invite experimentation. So I’m working with a company of 25 professional actors including eight recent drama school graduates. For Part 2, which we call Henry VI: Rebellion, they will be joined by 74 adults recruited from the length and breadth of England – though, sadly, not Scotland – and 21 young performers from the [RSC’s Next Generation](#) company. They will all come together for Jack Cade’s rebellion when there’s a stage direction that says ‘Enter Cade and all his rabblement’.” Although, as Horsley says, there is a sense of scale to these plays, these 95 recruits “aren’t simply there to make up the numbers”. Some will have speaking parts, such as the character of Saunder Simpcox, who lays fraudulent claim to a miracle cure. “One way to experience Shakespeare is to see it,” says Horlsey. “Even better is to be in it. We are offering people the opportunity to connect with Shakespeare and hopefully pass on the joy of that experience to others.”

Horsley’s appetite for experiment doesn’t stop there. He has edited the text so that Act 5 of Part 2 now opens Part 3, forming a sequence of battles aptly titled Wars of the Roses. As if he didn’t have challenges enough, Horsley is also exploring the use of cameras and projected images on stage. “What Shakespeare is interested in,” he says, “is the humanity behind the history.

There is a scene where Henry has to decide what to do when the Duchess of Gloucester, his aunt, is accused of treason. We will have a closeup of Mark Quartley as Henry to explore the dilemma he faces in making a judgment. During the battle scenes, we'll also have cameras on stage taking us into the thick of the conflict. The actors themselves, in medieval costume, will be working the cameras." When I say that this sounds "very Katie Mitchell", Horsley laughs and accepts it as a great compliment.



'These plays invite experimentation' ... Chuk Iwuji as Henry VI in the RSC's 2006 production. Photograph: Tristram Kenton/the Guardian

These plays naturally have their own history within the RSC. It was the Peter Hall and John Barton production of The Wars of the Roses, with [Peggy Ashcroft](#) and David Warner, that in 1963 shaped the company's identity. In 2008, along with Richard III, they formed the climax of an eight-play History cycle directed by Michael Boyd. I wondered if Horsley felt intimidated by the weight of the past. "I've never seen these plays on stage," he says, "and I did my edit of the text without checking what others have done. I've since gone back and been astonished at how much new material Barton wrote and I loved Michael Boyd's use of ghosts to show the interaction of past and present. But, as a director, you have to trust your own instincts and remember that you are doing these plays for an audience in 2022. In this industry, comparison is such a waste of energy and time."

Critics, however, live by comparisons and some will inevitably be made with past RSC glories. But what strikes me is Horsley's passion for, and acute perceptiveness about, these plays. He points out that the chasm of experience between the high and low-born is pinpointed by a line from the wife of the fraudster, Simpcox, who says "Alas, sir, we did it for pure need". He also says that on the first day of rehearsals he banned the word "weak" in describing Henry VI, seeing him as a complex man whose indecision stems from a desire to balance competing arguments. And when I ask if it has been unnerving to rehearse these plays at a time of war in eastern Europe, he says that there have been discussions every morning about the day's news. But he adds that although these plays are all about power, murder and ego, you don't have to strain to make them seem topical. "I've always seen Shakespeare," he says with a commonsense rare in the age of auteur directors "as allowing the resonances to arrive unaided at the audience's ear".

- [Henry VI: Rebellion](#) opens at the Royal Shakespeare theatre, Stratford, on 1 April and [Wars of the Roses](#) on 11 April.
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## Slobbing out and giving up: why are so many people going ‘goblin mode’?



‘Goblin mode is about a complete lack of aesthetic. Because why would a goblin care what they look like?’ Illustration: Esme Blegvad/The Guardian

The term embraces the comforts of depravity and a direct departure from the ‘cottagecore’ influence of early pandemic days

## Kari Paul

Mon 14 Mar 2022 03.00 EDT Last modified on Wed 16 Mar 2022 15.13 EDT

At some point in the stretch of days between the start of the pandemic's third year and the feared launch of world war three, a new phrase entered the zeitgeist, a mysterious harbinger of an age to come: people were going "goblin mode".

The term embraces the comforts of depravity: spending the day in bed watching 90 Day Fiancé on mute while scrolling endlessly through social media, pouring the end of a bag of chips in your mouth; downing Eggo toaster oven waffles with hot sauce over the sink because you can't be bothered to put them on a plate. Leaving the house in your pajamas and socks only to get a single Diet Coke from the bodega.

Inherent to the phrase is the idea that it can be switched on and off, said Dave McNamee, a self-described "real-life goblin" whose tweet about goblin mode recently went viral. Goblin mode is not a permanent identity, he said, but a frame of mind.

When people say "goblin mode" this is what they mean  
<https://t.co/LEaCJOej93>

— A-List Actor Dave McNamee (@DaveMcNamee3000) [February 19, 2022](#)

"Goblin mode is like when you wake up at 2am and shuffle into the kitchen wearing nothing but a long T-shirt to make a weird snack, like melted cheese on saltines," he said. "It's about a complete lack of aesthetic. Because why would a goblin care what they look like? Why would a goblin care about presentation?"

First appearing on Twitter as [early as 2009](#), "goblin mode" [has also been linked](#) by some to a viral Reddit post from a user claiming to secretly walk around their house "like a goblin", collecting trinkets and "making goblin noises".

But [according to Google Trends](#) it started to rise in popularity in early February and spiked after a [doctored headline](#) attributed a quote with the phrase to Kanye West muse and it-girl of the moment Julia Fox.

“Just for the record. I have never used the term ‘goblin mode’,” Fox later clarified in an Instagram story. The Twitter user who made up the Fox quote as a joke said that while the headline was fake, she believes goblin mode is a very real phenomenon.

“Goblin mode is kind of the opposite of trying to better yourself,” [says Juniper](#), who declined to share her last name. “I think that’s the kind of energy that we’re giving going into 2022 – everyone’s just kind of wild and insane right now.”

On [TikTok](#), #GoblinMode is affixed to videos of everything from “smoking weed alone and getting scared”, to “not taking your meds”, and “hoarding weird shit just in case you run out”. In other videos, it is associated with women wearing no makeup and mismatched sweat suits, speaking confessional-style into the camera.

The trend represents a direct departure from the hyper-curated “cottagecore” influence of early pandemic days, a standout trend of 2020 that included pastel colors, bucolic scenery and the showcasing of wholesome homemaking skills such as baking and embroidery. Cottagecore [thrived](#) under the wistful ethos of making the best of what many people assumed would be only a few boring weeks at home in 2020.

But as the pandemic wears on endlessly, and the chaos of current events worsens, people feel cheated by the system and have rejected such goals. Peter Hayes, a Bay Area tech worker who says he and his friends have jokingly called themselves goblins, said the term has taken off as the pandemic eliminated the need to keep up appearances.

“At home there’s no social pressure to follow norms, so you sort of lose the habit,” he says. “There’s also a feeling that we’re all fucked, so why bother?”

On TikTok, #goblinmode is often accompanied by the adjacent phrase #feralgirlsummer. That hashtag has 366,000 views and features videos of users proclaiming to be the opposite of “that girl” – a highly curated aesthetic popular on TikTok in recent years.

There are nearly 3bn views on videos using #thatgirl, many of them show influencers organizing pristine refrigerators full of freshly cut vegetables, making organic breakfasts, and doing elaborate skincare routines. “You have to start romanticizing your life,” they tell us as they make green tea lattes at home.

The trend “sets an unrealistic standard for girls to think that if they aren’t waking up early to exercise, their lives are not put together”, one blog indictment of “that girl” culture reads.

“I have absolutely no interest in being ‘that girl’,” one video with 160,000 views says. “I will never wake up at 5am and drink green juices and be hyper-organized. I will instead be in 4am Reddit holes, Diet Coke first thing in the morning, [and] fistfuls of raw pasta as a snack.”



Goblin mode ‘is kind of the opposite of trying to better yourself’, said Juniper. Photograph: Lorenz Aschoff/Getty Images/EyeEm

Though they do not explicitly use the term “goblin mode”, videos expressing similar ideologies have been rising in popularity. “My body is a garbage can with an expiration date and I got no time for healthy shit,” one with 90,000 [views says](#). “I love barely holding on to my sanity and making awful selfish choices and participating in unhealthy habits and coping mechanisms,” said [another with 325,000 views](#).

The goblin mode umbrella can encapsulate many kinds of aesthetics and behaviors, says Cat Marnell, an author who has been [tweeting extensively](#) in recent weeks about entering goblin mode herself.

Although many people tweeting about goblin mode have characterized it as an almost spiritual-level embrace of our most debased tendencies, Marnell says there is “healthy goblin mode and destructive goblin mode”. For her, it embodies a certain air of harmless mischief.

“The power of goblin mode is that it takes over your body,” she says. “It is a scrambling of the brain. It’s when you act crazy, and you enter a very mythological space – you want to jump on the back of a salamander and make trouble.”

Call it a [vibe shift](#) or a logical progression into nihilism after years of pandemic induced disappointment, but goblin mode is here to stay. And why shouldn’t it? Who were we trying to impress, anyway? As one #goblinmode audio says: “If you can’t handle me in goblin mode, you don’t deserve me at my slay.”

“It is cool to be a goblin,” Marnell says. “Everyone is so perfect all the time online, it is good to get in touch with the strange little creature that lives inside you.”

*If you’d like to hear this piece narrated, listen to The Guardian’s new podcast, [Weekend](#). Subscribe on [Apple](#), [Spotify](#), or wherever you get your podcasts.*

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## 2022.03.14 - Opinion

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## [OpinionIslamophobia](#)

# **Look at ministers' plans to secretly make Britons stateless and what do you see: Islamophobia**

[Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan](#)

The idea is the result of toxic perceptions about Muslims and people of colour. It shows how prejudice creates shameful policy



Two Muslim men kneel and pray during a Black Lives matter march in London in 2020. Photograph: Luke Dray/Getty Images

Mon 14 Mar 2022 04.00 EDT Last modified on Mon 14 Mar 2022 04.14 EDT

We are woefully underserved by the current conversation about Islamophobia. In recent weeks, the debate has hinged on whether or not the government's decision to introduce new national counter-extremism legislation on the basis of the [bogus “Trojan horse” letter](#), which was full of

anti-Muslim tropes, was Islamophobic. Research has suggested that [middle-class Britons](#) hold more prejudiced views of Islam than any other social group. And a Tory minister recently alleged she was sacked for her “[Muslimness](#)”. In all these stories, Islamophobia is approached at worst as a political gaffe, and at best a moral failing, allegation or faux pas.

At the same time, mainstream news outlets have reported that Russia’s war in Ukraine is horrific because it is taking place somewhere that is “not like Iraq or Afghanistan”. Journalists have suggested that Ukrainian refugees deserve to be welcomed because they are “not from Syria”. Such coverage is not only shot through with [Islamophobia](#), but premised upon it. References to Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria evoke wars associated with Muslims that the west justified through its “war on terror”. Unlike “westerners”, a racially and religiously coded marker that one reporter helpfully clarified as meaning Christian and white, the characterisation of Muslims as deserving of, or at least predisposed to, violence means our lives do not carry the same value. We cannot be deemed victims of occupation or war in the same way as Europeans.

War is often assumed the natural destiny or perpetual condition of predominantly Muslim countries and their people. As such, the right of Muslims to live free from war and persecution is thrown into doubt. This dynamic is not unique; we have seen it play out in the familiar devaluation of Black lives, too. It is the same dynamic that global border controls reinforce, and which we are witnessing currently in the war in Ukraine, where African students have been actively [denied escape routes from war](#). For Black Muslims, dehumanisation is always compounded – where was the anti-war and pro-refugee sentiment when the [US bombed Somalia](#) at the same time that Russia invaded Ukraine?

These forms of dehumanisation are all manifestations of white supremacy. Discussing Islamophobia as an embarrassing faux pas at the middle-class dinner table is an astounding diversion from this fact. The ideology of white supremacy devalues lives and justifies dispossession and persecution. It has clear ramifications within Britain: as we speak, the [nationality and borders bill](#) is in its final phase in parliament. The controversial [clause 9](#), which the

[House of Lords has rejected](#) but MPs are yet to agree upon, allows the home secretary to secretly strip people of their citizenship without notifying them. The policy builds on years of extraordinary expansion to such powers, notably the [Immigration Act 2014](#), which allowed the British government to revoke citizenship on often secret grounds, so long as they are “satisfied” that a person will not be made stateless. Making a person stateless is against international law, but this act created a loophole for deprivation of British citizenship even when a person has no citizenship in any other state.

Such measures disproportionately target people of colour. The state assumes that we will be eligible for citizenship in other countries (even if we have never visited them). United Nations experts are clear that this specifically threatens the human rights of people of colour “[and especially people from Muslim and migrant communities](#)”. Clause 9 is a human rights abuse. Consider the fact that several British Muslims who have reportedly travelled to Syria to distribute aid have [had their citizenship stripped](#) and been made stateless. Human rights only apply if you are seen first as human.

Islamophobia is not the preserve of a fringe group. It is the common language of the political and media establishment. You are less likely to lose your job over Islamophobia than retain it – Michael Gove remains a top government minister [despite ignoring police recommendations](#) that the “Trojan horse” letter was bogus, and pursuing an [Islamophobic agenda](#) that has devastated communities in Birmingham. Islamophobic sentiments can even help you become president or prime minister.

Islamophobia flourishes, despite the violence it leads to. The recent [People's Review of Prevent](#) painstakingly documented how the government's Prevent programme undermines safeguarding and free speech. Hundreds of academics and organisations, such as [Amnesty](#), have long agreed that it encourages discrimination. Elsewhere in the world, Muslims are being directly persecuted. Recently, India's ruling party shared a cartoon on Twitter of [Muslims being lynched](#). Experts warn that calls for anti-Muslim violence have put the country [on the path to genocide](#). Where is the outcry from European states?

Mainstream conversations about Islamophobia reflect a racist disregard for life. This is upheld in basic understandings about when violence is justified

and when it is not, who can cross borders, whose deaths deserve inquiry, whose citizenship is a right and whose can be stripped away. White supremacy and Islamophobia colour our approach to all of these issues and more. Without confronting this, we will continue down a slippery path. The secret removal of Muslim people's citizenship brings us one step closer to disappearing Muslims by other means.

- Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan is a poet, educator and author of [Tangled in Terror: Uprooting Islamophobia](#)
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**Baftas 2022**

## **Jane Campion leads roll-call of worthy winners as Baftas hit all the right notes**

[Peter Bradshaw](#)



Saluting stirring auteurs and old-school movie stars, this year's awards were a celebration of cinema at its crowdpleasing best



Speaks to all of us ... Joanna Scanlan with her Bafta for best leading actress.  
Photograph: Neil Hall/EPA

Sun 13 Mar 2022 17.21 EDT Last modified on Mon 14 Mar 2022 11.47 EDT

The Power of the Dog, the story of a troubled family of ranchers in 1920s Montana, is an essay in dysfunction, a film in the business of upending social and generic norms. It is a hugely satisfying, intriguing, stimulating drama with a whiplash of an ending that took us from the realm of alt-western to alt-body horror. It was this film's mythic quality, its dreamlike knight's-move away from the world generally represented in westerns, that no doubt resonated with Bafta voters, who awarded it best film and gave best director for the increasingly celebrated Jane Campion.

On an evening that celebrated dissident, revisionist westerns, the outstanding debut prize went to the ultraviolent gonzo revenge movie [The Harder They Fall](#), starring Jonathan Majors, Zazie Beetz and Idris Elba. It is a headbangingly, flesh-splatteringly freaky debut from Jeymes Samuel that reclaims the African American side of the genre. The drumbeat of brutality became a bit too uniform for me, but it is stylishly made.

02:04

Baftas 2022: Rebel Wilson hosts awards as Power of the Dog wins best movie – video highlights

Denis Villeneuve's colossal science fiction adventure [Dune](#), taken from Frank Herbert's classic novel, is a big film in every way and appropriately it was a huge winner at the Baftas, including for Hans Zimmer's thrumming musical score. This was a movie that benefited from the reopening of cinemas, a movie about a doomed colonial tyranny on a mineral-rich planet, a movie whose ineffable vastness has to be experienced on the big screen. These awards feel like justice, although they might reinforce the impression that Dune was a cloudy impressionistic experience: one giant visual effect whose actual narrative is fading in the memory. But it's a massively audacious film and part of a vibrant tradition of epic movies.

I was very pleased to Kenneth Branagh's enormously warm – subversively warm – movie [Belfast](#) pick up best British film, and maybe it's a measure of how emollient this movie is that labelling a film about the Troubles as "British" isn't as controversial as it might have been. This is a film whose streak of sentimentality has alienated some: some Belfast-dwellers have written it off as inauthentic, others from Belfast have found it entirely real. I personally responded to its richness and heartfelt humanity.

As far as the acting prizes went, Joanna Scanlan's Bafta for best actress in the fascinating [After Love](#) was a reward for work of the very highest quality: a complex, painfully real and honest study of a woman who makes terrible discoveries about her husband after he has died. It is a career-best for Scanlan, and hugely well deserved.

Will Smith's best actor Bafta for [King Richard](#) (beating the early favourite, Benedict Cumberbatch for The Power of the Dog) was a testament to his old-fashioned movie-star potency and an emotional connection to movie audiences. It's impossible to overstate just how much warmth Smith can generate in the right role – and this one was the juiciest.

The crowdpleasing heart-of-gold dramedy [Coda](#) (remade from the French film [La Famille Bélier](#)) had a really good night, with wins for best adapted

screenplay and supporting actor. It is a film about a young hearing girl with hearing-impaired parents: a “CODA” or “child of deaf adults”. It’s a movie widely felt to be well-intentioned if a tad micro-engineered – perhaps it played well on streaming video with Bafta voters at home. Ariana DeBose was a thoroughly deserving winner of the best supporting actress prize for her fiercely engaged and theatrically exuberant performance in Spielberg’s [West Side Story](#).

Elsewhere, it was good to see Paul Thomas Anderson win best original screenplay for his satirically outrageous and gorgeously atmospheric age-gap comedy [Licorice Pizza](#), set in 70s LA. It deserved more, but this unclassifiably brilliant film was always in danger of slipping through the cracks entirely. And it was pleasing to see Ryusuke Hamaguchi’s wonderfully intelligent Murakami adaptation [Drive My Car](#) named as best foreign-language film.

I was sad to see nothing for Guillermo del Toro’s noir thriller [Nightmare Alley](#) (a film superior to his much prize-garlanded [The Shape of Water](#)) and nothing for Joel Coen’s outstanding version of Shakespeare’s [Macbeth](#). But this was a well-judged and satisfying Bafta list of winners.

Join Peter Bradshaw and fellow Guardian film critics for a Guardian Live online event ahead of the Oscars on [Thursday 24 March](#).

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**Opinion**[Nigel Farage](#)

## Nigel Farage's hard-right faction won Brexit. Now net zero is in its sights

[John Harris](#)



A small group of rightwing MPs are jangling Tory nerves and using questions about living costs to undermine climate action



Illustration: Nathalie Lees/The Guardian

Sun 13 Mar 2022 08.53 EDT Last modified on Sun 13 Mar 2022 16.10 EDT

First it was Brexit, followed by a spurt of very [successful campaigning](#) to ensure that Britain left Europe on the most stringent and self-harming terms. For a while, Nigel Farage then [opposed Covid restrictions](#). Now, he is reviving his [old hostility](#) to action on the climate emergency, with a new vehicle called Britain Means Business, which has spawned a campaign called Vote Power Not Poverty. Both were recently launched by an [article](#) in the Mail on Sunday. “Net zero is net stupid,” wrote Farage, who drew a line from the government’s green targets to the rising cost of living and made the case not just for a referendum on the issue, but also the return of fracking and coal-mining.

Later this month, alongside his close ally Richard Tice and the local Tory MP, Farage was meant to be the star of an anti-net zero rally at Whites Hotel in Bolton, Greater Manchester, built into the home ground of Bolton Wanderers FC. Their putative hosts soon announced that the event was “not something the club and business wishes to be associated with”, and [pulled the plug](#): a “Moscow-style rebuke to free speech”, said the organisers. But, as it turned out, this was an irrelevant blip. The event is now happening at another venue, and besides, Boris Johnson is reportedly set to review the current moratorium on fracking – “the first victory for common sense,” [says](#)

Farage – as part of plans to increase the UK’s production of oil and gas. Johnson’s pretext is Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, and what it means for the UK and Europe’s energy security – but he is clearly responding to months of pressure on net zero from the political right, both inside and outside the Conservative party. Brexit was its defining big win; now it has its eyes on another.

In the midst of the Ukraine crisis, there is a comfy and complacent view around that the links between rightwing populists and Putin will hasten their downfall. It’s an idea symbolised by the Italian politician Matteo Salvini’s public shaming on a visit to the Polish-Ukrainian border for his pro-Putin posturing, and Marine Le Pen’s shredding of leaflets featuring an image of her alongside the Russian president. These people do indeed look suddenly wrongfooted and nervous – but Farage and his allies play by a different set of rules, partly because they do not have to worry about parliamentary representation and any aspiration to power (and, therefore, responsibility). Because they have been shut out by our electoral system, they long ago developed a much craftier and more light-footed way of operating: making as much noise as possible outside the normal structures of power and politics while encouraging rebellious Tories, and thereby putting continual pressure on the Conservative party via its right flank.

The result is a transformation of Tory politics that is still too little understood. A loose but hugely influential hard-right coalition has cohered, buoyed up by our exit from the EU, and now determined to use questions about living costs and energy security to destroy any meaningful prospect of climate action. In parliament, some of its key voices congregate around such Conservative MPs as Steve Baker and Mark Harper, who are responsible for an ever-evolving list of bodies including the European Research Group and the Net Zero Scrutiny Group (and, like Farage, well aware that you can wield power without having to worry about accountability). In the cabinet, their ideological torch is carried by such ministers as Priti Patel, Nadine Dorries and Jacob Rees-Mogg.

But the new right’s key element is a political faction outside the party walls, with a very modern grasp of how 21st-century politics works. Farage

remains this element's unchallenged leader and figurehead: its clout is based on agile organising skills and handsome funds, a constant platform in the rightwing press, a big presence on social media – and now, the TV channel GB News. (The channel's [viewing figures](#) belie its significance: it exists chiefly as a source of endless clips that are spread on social media, in which dubious and toxic opinions – not least about Russia and Ukraine – are presented in the same context as mainstream news, and thereby normalised.)

Faced with a prime minister as weak and biddable as Boris Johnson, all these people know that their key task is a kind of elevated trolling. In byelections, the latest Farage vehicle need only get a relative handful of votes to jangle Tory nerves: back in December, when Tice and the new Reform party got a mere 6.6% of the vote at Bexley and Old Sidcup, the Spectator's Katy Balls [wrote](#) in the Guardian that his performance highlighted fears among ministers "that a party will emerge that will outflank them on the right". Those anxieties inform a huge chunk of policy. Farage's return to politics, let us not forget, was presaged by all the noise he made about people crossing the Channel: now, even as he tells his GB News viewers that he is "[open-minded and open-hearted](#)" about people fleeing Ukraine, the government's cruel treatment of Ukrainian refugees is partly based on fear of how much noise the post-Brexit right would make if Britain did the correct thing and followed the open-door lead set by the EU.

In keeping with the old rules of politics, a lumbering, hidebound Labour party still focuses just about all its energies on attacking the Conservative leadership. But Johnson and his allies are actually downstream of the new right, much as the traditional US Republican party is now subservient to a political movement that began well outside the political mainstream. Indeed, by the time the government announces its latest policy shift, it is usually too late: the work has been done elsewhere, by people and forces that Labour barely acknowledges. Worse still, there is a constant sense that Farage and his allies' portrayal of kind of Brexit-supporting voters concentrated in so-called red wall seats also exerts a [strong pull](#) on Keir Starmer and his colleagues.

Who does Farage actually speak for? Even in England, his base probably amounts to no more than five to 10% of the population. To some extent, his career represents a rearguard action against the fact that social conservatism

and belligerent nationalism – along with climate scepticism – find [increasingly little echo](#) among younger people, and, for reasons that have more to do with demography than politics, their appeal will, sooner or later, start to wane. I have been to enough Farage events to know his people by sight: a passionate and fearful crowd, disproportionately male, and often well-versed in the vocabulary of conspiracy theories. Even if their views blur into a much bigger mess of fear, insecurity and prejudice, that should not blind anyone to how out-there they are, and how straightforwardly Farage's transparent opportunism could be taken down. But seemingly for fear of giving him even more publicity, even as Brexit's failures and lies pile up, he is largely left alone.

In that sense, his success says as much about his opponents as it does about him. Indeed, those of us who would like a kinder, better country than the one he claims to speak for perhaps have a lot to learn from his methods, as last week's events prove. If net zero is to happen, its complexities and challenges will have to be explained to a lot more people than the comparative few who have so far bought into the idea. And in that sense, even if Farage's rally ran into trouble, it highlighted a very telling question: for all their zeal and righteousness, when was the last time that people who support net zero organised a big event in Bolton?

- John Harris is a Guardian columnist. To listen to John's podcast Politics Weekly UK, search Politics Weekly UK on [Apple](#), [Spotify](#), [Acast](#) or wherever you get your podcasts. New episodes every Thursday.
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[Opinion](#)[Poverty](#)

## The UK government is balancing its books on the backs of the poor

[Jack Monroe](#)



The Conservatives' economic policy has failed its duty of care to those living in poverty



A food bank in Kingston, south-west London. Photograph: Vickie Flores/EPA

Sun 13 Mar 2022 05.00 EDT Last modified on Sat 19 Mar 2022 08.07 EDT

In a modern-day twist on the age-old riddle: which came first?

The [cold, damp housing](#) forced on people with the lowest incomes across the private rental sector or the [upswing in respiratory illnesses?](#)

The lack of funds for a nourishing and balanced diet, or malnutrition and the return of [Victorian-era illnesses such as rickets](#)? The deliberate policies of penury and deprivation over the last 12 years of Conservative-led rule, or the emaciated bodies of those left to rot by the ideologues of unnecessary austerity?

Numbers are cold, stark and loveless things; it's easy for those in the halls of power to disassociate from a statistic and forget that each and every one of those numbers represents a hungry, traumatised, exhausted human being.

Every one of the 3.8 million disabled people struggling to meet their most basic needs, the 4.3 million children and their parents living in poverty and the millions of people in work and yet are still scrabbling to survive.

The Trussell Trust has reported that nearly half the people referred to its food banks for emergency aid are in debt to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Those numbers have steadily increased; not, as some MPs claim, because availability of food banks has increased. [Food banks](#) expand according to the need for them, not the other way around.

Speaking on the BBC's *Politics Live* on Wednesday, business minister Paul Scully claimed that the government was not going to balance the books of the economy on the backs of the poorest and most vulnerable. And I – who had only been sneaked on to the panel at the last minute after the work and pensions select committee meeting over the road – could barely contain my contempt for the audacity of the lie.

This government has routinely balanced its books on the backs of those least able to shoulder the burdens, and the macabre and heartbreaking roll call of the names of those who have died as a result of the failures and cruelties of the DWP runs to the thousands. And if their deaths, and lives, are not learned from, than many, many more people will die in the months and years to come.

Every one of these numbers represents a hungry, traumatised, exhausted human being

Nobody who serves in the Houses of Parliament can pretend to be ignorant of the facts around the stratospheric rise in the need for food banks. None of you can pretend not to have noticed the neighbourhood food collection points in every single supermarket in the land.

Not one of you can bluster that somehow the thousands of national newspaper articles about the state of the nation have somehow passed you by.

And I suspect there is not a single member of parliament who has not heard from at least a dozen of their constituents about the increasingly desperate poverty they are living in. Ignorance is no longer a defence.

And as long as one person in this country is going to bed cold, hungry, destitute and increasingly unwell, it is because of a conscious decision by those who claim to serve them not to use the power granted by the poorest of their constituents to make a radical and meaningful difference to their lives.

Because you hold that power. It's in the stroke of your pen, the votes in your chambers, the voices you can raise, the debts you can table, the whips you can decline. And as long as one single child in this country is going to bed cold and hungry, you're making a conscious decision every single day not to use that power for those who have granted it to you.

This article was amended on 19 March 2022. An earlier version said that the Trussell Trust "has consistently reported, for the last 10 years, that more than half the people referred to its food banks for emergency aid are there because they are in debt to the Department for Work and Pensions". In fact the latest State of Hunger report by the Trussell Trust shows that, in 2020, 47% of referred users had debts with the DWP, up from 26% in 2018, which was the first year this data was collected. The trust also says such debts may combine with broader social security issues in driving these referrals.

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## 2022.03.14 - Around the world

- [Shenzhen China shuts down city of 17.5m people in bid to halt Covid outbreak](#)
- [Japan Tokyo schools cut controversial rules governing hairstyles and underwear](#)
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## [China](#)

# China shuts down city of 17.5m people in bid to halt Covid outbreak

Authorities adopt a zero tolerance policy in Shenzhen, imposing a lockdown and testing every resident three times



Residents line up outside a nucleic acid testing site of a hospital in Shanghai.  
Photograph: China Daily/Reuters

*Helen Davidson in Taipei, and agencies*

*@heldavidson*

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China's government has locked down Shenzhen, a city of 17.5 million people, as it tries to contain its worst ever Covid-19 outbreak across multiple provinces, with case numbers tripling from Saturday to Sunday.

A government notice on Sunday said all residential communities were now under “closed management”, meaning they would be locked down. Every resident would undergo three rounds of testing, for which they were allowed to leave their homes, and all buses and subways were suspended.

All businesses in the finance and technology hub, which borders Hong Kong, were ordered to close or work from home unless they supplied food, utilities, or other necessities, according to the notice. On Monday afternoon Foxconn, which produces iPhones for Apple, announced it was among businesses suspending operations in Shenzhen. Its larger production site in Zhengzhou remains open, and the company said it would reopen when advised by the local government.

No one can leave the city except in special circumstances and with a negative test result obtained within 24 hours prior to exit. Local communities and residences had established monitoring teams with a “warm-hearted service hotline”, it said.

The restrictions are due to stay in place until at least 20 March, adding Shenzhen to a number of other cities under various restrictions, including China’s most populous city Shanghai, and the northeastern city of Changchun in Jilin province. Of the 1,938 new cases confirmed on Sunday, more than 1,400 were in Jilin. Some residents of Cangzhou, south of Beijing, were also told to stay home after nine cases were reported there, according to a government notice.

In Jilin 831 new cases were reported in Changchun, 571 in the nearby Jilin City and 150 in the eastern port city of Qingdao. Authorities in the province are stepping up anti-disease measures after concluding their earlier response was inadequate, according to Zhang Yan, deputy director of the provincial [Health](#) Commission.

“The emergency response mechanism in some areas is not sound enough,” Zhang said at a news conference. The mayor and deputy Party chief of Jilin city, the director of the Changchun health commission, and the Party chief at a Jilin university are among at least 26 officials sacked or punished for their alleged poor responses to the current outbreak, state media reported.



A health worker gives a girl a Covid test in Beijing, where new cases have been reported. Photograph: Noel Celis/AFP/Getty Images

The case numbers reported among China's 1.4 billion people are low compared to other countries, but represent the country's worst outbreak so far. China's zero-Covid strategy of swiftly crushing outbreaks through resource-intensive mass testing and lockdowns has so far been successful. However, as in other countries, the emergence of the Omicron strain - a more transmissible variant of the virus - has challenged defences. Chinese authorities have for the first time approved antigen self-testing products to supplement the government-run nucleic acid testing.

China is among just a few governments around the world which remain committed to the zero tolerance approach. Across the strait, Taiwan is reporting just a few - or zero - daily community cases and appears to have contained Omicron outbreaks. It is maintaining its strict border controls, and some social restrictions, and is yet to be faced with a large-scale Omicron outbreak.

In Hong Kong [the variant has overwhelmed the city](#) and its government's insistence on sticking to a strategy of elimination over mitigation. On Sunday it reported more than 32,400 cases. Hospitals have been swamped,

with patient beds in lobbies and carparks. As of last week Hong Kong had the highest death rate in the developed world, [inflaming criticism of the government](#) for failing to adequately prepare for a large-scale outbreak during the two years of being largely Covid-free.

“People should not get the wrong impression that the virus situation is now under control,” said Dr Albert Au, an expert with the government’s Center for [Health](#) Protection. “Once we let our guard down, it’s possible that (infections) will bounce back and rise again.”

Zhang Wenhong, China’s top infectious disease expert, on Monday warned Hong Kong’s outbreak was in the “early stage of an exponential rise”, and said it was inevitable that some would panic but people should retain confidence in the effectiveness of lockdowns, testing, and restrictions. “As long as we slow down, the virus will not be fast,” he said.

Zhang said opening up would be “disastrous” for China, with many elderly people unvaccinated, but once the outbreak was contained there must be a “moderate and sustainable” lasting strategy.

“We must take advantage of the rare opportunity period and window period brought about by the inevitable social reset, and prepare more complete, smart, and sustainable coping strategies,” he said.

*Additional reporting by Xiaoqian Zhu*

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[Japan](#)

## Tokyo schools cut controversial rules governing hairstyles and underwear

Public high schools and other educational institutions will drop five regulations, including one requiring students to have black hair



Some high schools in Tokyo are dropping strict requirements for hair colour  
Photograph: Viola Kam/SOPA Images/REX/Shutterstock

[\*Justin McCurry\* in Tokyo](#)

Mon 14 Mar 2022 02.02 EDT Last modified on Mon 14 Mar 2022 19.24 EDT

Controversial rules on hairstyles and underwear are to be scrapped at high schools run by the Tokyo metropolitan government, after pressure from students.

Almost 200 public high schools and other educational institutions will drop five regulations, including [one requiring students to have black hair](#), from

April, the Mainichi Shimbun said, citing official sources.

The newspaper said rules designating the colour of students' underwear and a ban on the "two block" hairstyle – short at the back and sides and longer on top – will also be dropped.

The move comes after a survey carried out last year of 240 schools in the capital found that 216 retained regulations that an increasing number of people in education – including the children themselves – say are outdated.

Some of the rules will stay in certain schools, however. While some will abolish a requirement for students to show proof that their hair is naturally curly or a colour other than black, some will keep the regulation, reportedly at the request of students and parents.

Yuto Kitamura, a member of the Tokyo metropolitan board of education, said the decision to scrap the most egregious regulations was a "major step forward," according the Mainichi.

Another member, Kaori Yamaguchi, praised the move but said it had taken too long to address students' grievances.

"Japanese people have been taught to believe that it is a virtue to simply abide by the rules," she said. "I hope this will be an opportunity for people to discuss what we should do to create a society where rules are observed in a way that's acceptable to everyone."

The debate over strict dress codes intensified several years ago after a high school student, then aged 18, sued education authorities in Osaka after her school had told her to dye her naturally brown hair black or face exclusion.

Last year, the Osaka district court rejected her claim that she had been forced to dye her hair, but said the removal of her desk and name from the roster after she stopped attending classes had been unreasonable. It ordered the board of education to pay her ¥330,000 [£2,152] in compensation.

Last year, all public high schools in Mie, a prefecture in western [Japan](#), abolished rules governing hairstyles, underwear colour and dating, with local officials conceding that the requirements were “relics” from a different age.

Some schools had told students they must wear undershirts in beige, mocha or other colours that were not easily visible beneath their uniforms, while only “monotone white, grey, navy blue or black” underwear was permissible.

Some students have successfully campaigned for girls to be allowed to wear trousers to school, while others have called for a lifting of bans on makeup and hair products.

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[Fox News](#)

## Kremlin memos urged Russian media to use Tucker Carlson clips – report

Russian government document instructed outlets to show Fox News host ‘as much as possible’, Mother Jones says



Fox News host Tucker Carlson in Phoenix, Arizona, in 2021. Photograph: Brian Cahn/Zuma Press Wire/Rex/Shutterstock

[Martin Pengelly](#)

[@MartinPengelly](#)

Mon 14 Mar 2022 00.00 EDT Last modified on Mon 14 Mar 2022 09.50 EDT

The Fox News primetime host Tucker Carlson has been widely accused of [echoing Russian propaganda](#) about the invasion of Ukraine. According to [a report](#) on Sunday, earlier this month the Putin regime in Moscow sent out an instruction to friendly media outlets: use more clips of Carlson.

[Mother Jones](#), a progressive magazine, [said](#) it had obtained memos produced by the Russian department of information and telecommunications support.

One document, it said, was entitled “For Media and Commentators (recommendations for coverage of events as of 03.03)”, or 3 March. The magazine [published](#) pictures of the memo, which it said it was given by “a contributor to a national Russian media outlet who asked not to be identified”.

It [said](#) the memo included an instruction: “It is essential to use as much as possible fragments of broadcasts of the popular Fox News host Tucker Carlson, who sharply criticises the actions of the United States [and] Nato, their negative role in unleashing the conflict in Ukraine, [and] the defiantly provocative behavior from the leadership of the eastern countries and Nato towards the Russian Federation and towards President Putin, personally.”

The document, Mother Jones [said](#), summed up Carlson’s position on the Ukraine war as “Russia is only protecting its interests and security” and included a quote: “And how would the US behave if such a situation developed in neighbouring Mexico or Canada?”

Carlson and [Fox News](#) did not comment to Mother Jones. Fox News did not respond to a Guardian request for comment.

On air last Wednesday, 9 March, Carlson [said](#) testimony by Victoria Nuland, a US undersecretary of state, about Ukrainian “biological research facilities” had shown Russian claims of US involvement were “totally and completely true”.

Factcheckers [said they were not](#).

“Russian state TV [featured Carlson’s take](#) the next day,” the Washington Post said, adding that the Russian claim about US participation in biological laboratories in Ukraine was “straight out of the old Soviet playbook. But that doesn’t mean prominent commentators like Carlson should be so quick to fall for it.”

Citing another Russian “recommendations for coverage” memo, dated 10 March, Mother Jones said the text advised Russian hosts to relay the message that “activities of military biological laboratories with American participation on the territory of [Ukraine](#) carried global threats to Russia and Europe”.

On Sunday Joe Biden’s national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, told NBC Russian claims about biological warfare facilities in Ukraine could indicate Russian willingness to use such weapons.

“When Russia starts accusing other countries of potentially doing something, it’s a good tell that they may be on the cusp of doing it themselves,” he said.

Mother Jones said no other western journalist was named in the memos it obtained, which it said also included advice on how to cite Carlson about how “Biden’s sanctions policy” was actually an economic “punishment for the American middle class”. That memo, the magazine said, also cited the New York Post, like Fox News owned by Rupert Murdoch.

On Sunday afternoon, Julia Davis, an analyst of Russian media, [tweeted](#) a still from “Russia’s state TV” showing “none other than Tucker Carlson” on a screen above a discussion panel.

“They always follow the Kremlin’s directives,” Davis wrote, “namely to use Tokyo Rose clips as often as possible.”

“[Tokyo Rose](#)” was a nickname given by Americans to several women who broadcast Japanese propaganda during the second world war.

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## Christianity

# Russian Orthodox church in Amsterdam announces split with Moscow

Clergy takes ‘difficult decision’ to cut ties with the Moscow patriarchate over the invasion of Ukraine

- [Russia-Ukraine war: latest news](#)



A Russian Orthodox church in Amsterdam in 2020. More than 280 Russian Orthodox priests and church officials from around the world have signed an open letter expressing their opposition to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Photograph: Koen van Weel/ANP/AFP/Getty Images

*Pjotr Sauer*

Sun 13 Mar 2022 14.03 EDT Last modified on Mon 14 Mar 2022 01.14 EDT

A Russian Orthodox church in Amsterdam has announced it is to split with the Moscow patriarchate, in the first known instance of a western-based church cutting ties over the invasion of [Ukraine](#).

“The clergy unanimously announced that it is no longer possible for them to function within the Moscow patriarchate and provide a spiritually safe environment for our faithful,” the clergy said in a statement [posted](#) on its website. “This decision is extremely painful and difficult for all concerned.”

The head of the Russian Orthodox church, Patriarch Kirill, a trusted ally of Vladimir Putin, has declined to condemn the Kremlin’s decision to invade its neighbour, referring to Russia’s opponents in Ukraine as “evil forces”. In a Sunday sermon last week he also [said](#) gay pride parades organised in the west were part of the reason for the war in Ukraine.

The statement said the Russian Orthodox parish of Saint Nicholas of Myra had asked the Russian archbishop of the diocese of the Netherlands, who is based in The Hague, to grant the church “canonical dismissal”.

The clergy of the parish said they had requested to join the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, the Istanbul-based Orthodox branch, seen as a rival to the Russian Orthodox church.

Kirill’s position on the war has led to unease among some Russian Orthodox priests who object to the invasion of a country often referred to as a “brotherly nation” in religious circles.

More than 280 Russian Orthodox priests and church officials from around the world [signed](#) an open letter expressing their opposition to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. It said “eternal torment” awaited those who gave “murderous orders”.

The Russian Orthodox church in Amsterdam, which consists of four priests and a deacon – one of the biggest Russian Orthodox congregations in the Netherlands – has been critical of Russia’s role in the war since the start of the invasion on 24 February.

It said last week it would no longer mention the name of Patriarch Kirill in its liturgy because of his backing for the invasion of Ukraine. “We as the clergy of St Nicholas parish in Amsterdam have expressed our shock at the invasion of Ukraine by the armed forces of the Russian Federation … We distance ourselves from Patriarch Kirill’s narrative,” it wrote on its Facebook page.

The statement went against the official policy of the Russian Orthodox church not to use the word “war” and “invasion” to describe Russia’s actions in Ukraine.

The Russian priests in Amsterdam [told](#) the Dutch outlet ND that Archbishop Elisey of the Netherlands visited their church afterwards, warning that “Moscow was watching their actions closely”.

The Amsterdam church held a closed session on Sunday in which the head of the parish reiterated the decision to break with Moscow. “We asked our former Patriarch Kirill to stop the war. Unfortunately, this did not happen,” he said in a video address posted on the church’s YouTube [page](#).

A Russian member of the church’s choir who was standing outside the church told the Guardian she supported the decision to separate from Moscow. “Once the war started, there was only one way out of this,” she said, asking not to give her name.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has also been criticised by other Christian religious leaders, including the head of Patriarchate of Constantinople, Bartholomew I of Constantinople, and Pope Francis, who on Sunday issued his [toughest condemnation yet](#) of the invasion, saying the “unacceptable armed aggression” must stop.

Bartholomew, considered to be the spiritual leader of the world’s Eastern Orthodox Christians, earlier said Putin had committed “a great injustice” by going to war against his “coreligionists” and had “earned the hatred of the whole world”.

In 2018 the Russian Orthodox church cut ties with the Patriarchate of Constantinople, seen as the spiritual authority of the world’s Orthodox

Christians, after Bartholomew granted independence to the Ukrainian Orthodox church, which was previously under Moscow's control.

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[\*\*Iran\*\*](#)

## **Iran claims responsibility for missile strike near US consulate in Iraq**

Revolutionary Guards say target in Erbil was Israeli ‘strategic centre’ following attack in Syria



A building damaged by the Iranian missile barrage in Erbil, northern Iraq.

Photograph: Azad Lashkari/Reuters

*Associated Press*

Sun 13 Mar 2022 13.11 EDT Last modified on Mon 14 Mar 2022 01.13 EDT

Iran has claimed responsibility for a missile barrage that struck early on Sunday near a sprawling US consulate complex in the northern Iraqi city of Erbil, saying it was retaliation for an Israeli strike in Syria that killed two of its Revolutionary Guards.

No injuries were reported in the attack, which marked a significant escalation between the US and [\*\*Iran\*\*](#). Hostility between the countries has

often played out in Iraq, whose government is allied with both countries.

Iran's Revolutionary Guards said on their website that they launched the attack against an Israeli "strategic centre of conspiracy" in Erbil. They did not elaborate, but in a statement said that Israel had itself been on the offensive, citing the strike in Syria.

Earlier, a US defence official and Iraqi security officials said the strike was launched from neighbouring Iran.

One Iraqi official in Baghdad initially said several missiles had hit the US consulate in Erbil and that it was the target of the attack. Later, Lawk Ghafari, the head of Kurdistan's foreign media office, said none of the missiles had struck the US facility but that areas around the compound had been hit. A statement by the interior ministry of Iraq's Kurdistan region said the missiles were launched from outside Iraq, from the east, without naming Iran.

The US defence official said it was still uncertain exactly how many missiles were fired and exactly where they had landed. A second US official said there was no damage at any US government facility and that there was no indication the target was the consulate building, which is new and currently unoccupied.

Neither the Iraqi official nor the US officials were authorised to discuss the event with the media and spoke to Associated Press on condition of anonymity.

The satellite broadcast channel Kurdistan24, which is located near the US consulate, went on air from its studio shortly after the attack, showing shattered glass and debris on the studio floor.

The attack came several days after Iran said it would retaliate for the Israeli strike near the Syrian capital, Damascus. On Sunday, Iran's state-run IRNA news agency quoted Iraqi media acknowledging the attacks in Erbil, without saying where they originated.

The Iraqi security officials said there were no casualties in the Erbil attack, which they said occurred after midnight and caused material damage in the area.

Another US official said in a statement that the US condemned what it called an “outrageous attack against Iraqi sovereignty and display of violence”.

US forces stationed at Erbil’s airport compound have come under fire from rocket and drone attacks in the past, with US officials blaming Iran-backed groups. The top US commander for the Middle East has repeatedly warned about the increasing threats of attacks from Iran and Iranian-backed militias on troops and allies in Iraq and Syria.

In an interview with Associated Press in December, Marine Gen Frank McKenzie said that while US forces in Iraq have shifted to a non-combat role, Iran and its proxies still want all American troops to leave the country. More attacks may be triggered as a result, he said.

The Biden administration decided last July to end the US combat mission in Iraq by 31 December, and US forces gradually moved to an advisory role last year. The troops will still provide air support and other military aid for Iraq’s fight against Islamic State.

The US presence in Iraq has long been a flashpoint for Tehran, but tensions rose after a US drone strike in January 2020 near Baghdad airport killed a top Iranian general. In retaliation, Iran launched a barrage of missiles at al-Asad airbase, where US troops were stationed. More than 100 service members suffered traumatic brain injuries in the blasts.

Iraq’s prime minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, tweeted: “The aggression which targeted the dear city of Erbil and spread fear amongst its inhabitants is an attack on the security of our people.”

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