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Universal credit

Cutting Covid top-up 'will put 700,000 people into poverty'

Ministers to decide in March whether to keep the £20 a week extra for universal credit

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Food bank, Cornwall. Photograph: Lucy Piper/Alamy Stock Photo

Food bank, Cornwall. Photograph: Lucy Piper/Alamy Stock Photo

Patrick Butler *Social policy editor*
Wed 17 Feb 2021 01.00 EST

Government failure to maintain the £20 a week Covid top-up payment for universal credit will overwhelmingly hit the incomes of working and

disabled people, and put more than 700,000 into poverty, according to a study by the Fabian Society.

Ministers have signalled that they will decide in early March whether to keep or scrap the temporary 12-month Covid payment – giving claimants just a month to plan for what could be a £1,050 a year cut in benefits.

The Fabians estimate that if the planned cuts to universal credit and tax credits go ahead it will put 760,000 people below the poverty line over the medium term. Of these, 490,000 (64%) will be in working households where at least one adult works, many with children.

Its analysis of how the cut impacts on different households concludes that households with a disabled adult will be hit by 57% of the cuts (£3.7bn a year); families with children will be hit by half (£3.2bn a year); and households where someone is a carer will be hit by 12% (£700m a year).

There is a consensus among opposition parties, charities and campaigners that retaining the £20 uplift is essential to prevent a rise in poverty levels after years of benefit cuts. Increasing numbers of backbench Tory MPs have also called for the top-up to be made permanent.

The Treasury is understood to have considered a range of alternatives to maintaining the £20 a week boost, including one-off £500 or £1,000 payments. The Department for Work and Pensions is opposed to one-off payments, arguing that a "steady sum of money" is more beneficial for claimants.

Andrew Harrop, general secretary of the Fabian Society, said: "If ministers cut universal credit this April, they will overwhelmingly punish working families and disabled people. People in these groups have shown huge resilience during the pandemic and have done nothing to deserve this.

"The chancellor's planned cut will strip £1,000 per year from 6 million families and plunge three quarters of a million people into poverty. Some politicians like to pretend that social security is just for the workshy. But the reality is that millions of working households need benefits and tax credits to

make ends meet, as do disabled people who are out of work through no fault of their own.

“If ministers are considering a few months’ temporary extension to the universal credit uplift, that just isn’t good enough. The 2020 benefit increase must be placed on a permanent footing.”

A government spokesperson said: “We are committed to supporting the lowest-paid families and those most in need through the pandemic, which is why we’re spending hundreds of billions to safeguard jobs, boosting welfare support by billions and have introduced the £170m Covid winter grant scheme to help children and families stay warm and well-fed during the coldest months.”

Coronavirus

UK quarantine hotels 'a death sentence' for at-risk Britons, says cancer patient

Stranded in ‘red list’ country Madeira, UK citizen Michael Thomas says government scheme has not been thought through

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Michael Thomas and his daughter in Madeira, December. Photograph: Michael Thomas/Guardian Community

Michael Thomas and his daughter in Madeira, December. Photograph: Michael Thomas/Guardian Community

Molly Blackall
Wed 17 Feb 2021 01.00 EST

A British man undergoing treatment for stage four cancer says he is trapped abroad because it would be medically unsafe for him to return to a quarantine hotel.

“I couldn’t do the hotel. I think I’d leave on a stretcher,” said Michael Thomas, who is stuck in Madeira with his wife and 14-year-old daughter.

Thomas, 68, is undergoing treatment for stage four incurable cancer, so had been shielding since the start of the pandemic. He flew out to the Portuguese archipelago for a family holiday in December, but said he has been advised by his GP and oncologist that it would be dangerous for him to return and stay in a quarantine hotel for 10 days, leaving him effectively stranded.

England hotel quarantine begins for arrivals from high-risk countries
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As of Monday, Madeira has been listed on the government’s red list of locations from which arrivals to the UK must quarantine in a hotel at their own expense. There are no exemptions for people with medical conditions.

Thomas requires a special diet, access to medical supplies and support, and also fears he could contract coronavirus from another guest or member of staff, which he describes as “a death sentence for people like me”.

“I’ve been in isolation since the beginning of the pandemic, but also quite a long time before because I wasn’t well enough to do much more than sit around and read books,” he said. “We came out for 10 days in December. I really, really needed a break.”

In the 10 days he was holidaying in Madeira, coronavirus rates in the UK rose significantly. British Airways cancelled his return flight and rescheduled it for early January, Thomas said, but his GP and oncologist recommended he stay put due to the growing risk of Covid in the UK. The family moved from their hotel to a nearby apartment and began chemotherapy in Madeira. Since the replacement flight, Thomas said all others have been cancelled.

“Madeira is indeed a part of Portugal, but it’s thousands of kilometres away in the middle of the Atlantic ocean,” said Thomas. “Moreover, the reason we came was because Madeira has very low incidences of Covid, and this remains so. But despite that, our government decided to lump it in with the mainland, which seems absurd.”

Four fined £10,000 at Birmingham airport for not declaring arrival from 'red list' country
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While those staying in UK quarantine hotels are able to leave for medical attention, Thomas’s GP has told him she thinks it would be too dangerous for him there.

“The stress isn’t particularly helpful either,” he added. “It means we’re basically banned from returning to our own country … We can hang out here for a bit, but that’s really not the point. Medium or long term, it’s not going to work. I’ve got a kid who I need to have a life.”

He has been offered a coronavirus vaccine from his GP, council and hospital in his home city of London, which he is unable to access, and he cannot get one in Madeira.

“I’m not saying anyone intended it to be this way, but they’ve not fully thought through these things that need to be taken into account. Surely there must be other people in a similar boat. It’s illogical. I have friends returning from LA this Thursday … and they’re going to walk through immigration and go home. It doesn’t make any logical sense.”

The Department for Health was approached for comment.

Vaccines and immunisation

‘Encouraging’ signs for Covid vaccine as over-80s deaths fall in England

Fatality rate dropping more quickly than for younger age groups yet to receive jab, analysis shows

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Anna Leach, Ashley Kirk and Pamela Duncan

Tue 16 Feb 2021 11.00 EST Last modified on Wed 17 Feb 2021 00.12 EST

Covid-19 deaths have fallen by 62% among over-80s since 24 January, 15 percentage points more than the fall recorded for those aged 20-64. Composite: Reuters/Alarmy/Guardian Design Team

The success of the UK's vaccination programme is beginning to be felt, with jabs appearing to cut deaths among the country's oldest and most vulnerable people, one of the world's leading statisticians has said.

Deaths from coronavirus have fallen by 62% among over-80s since 24 January, the point at which a third of that age group had some level of immunity against coronavirus, having received their first vaccine dose at least two weeks earlier, data analysis by the Guardian showed.

This drop was larger than among groups with a lower level of vaccination. Among people aged between 20 and 64 the drop in deaths was 47%, while the drop among those aged 65 to 79 was 51%.

Prof David Spiegelhalter, the chair of the Winton Centre for Risk and Evidence Communication at the University of Cambridge, said the effect was significant enough not to be a result of lockdown alone.

"Deaths in over-70s are now falling faster than in younger age groups, which is very encouraging and is likely to be influenced by vaccination – there has been a steep decline in outbreaks in care homes," he said.

As of 10 January, more than a third of those aged 80 and over in England – 1 million people – had received the first of their two vaccine doses. Adding two weeks for the inoculation to take effect, with a further two to three weeks being the average delay between a coronavirus infection and death from the virus, data from mid-February provides the first solid indication that the vaccine regime is turning the dial.

In comparison, fewer than 3% of under-80s in England had received a first jab by 10 January.

In total, 15.5 million people have received a first dose in the UK, making its vaccine programme one of the world's most successful.

The new analysis of deaths data tallied with Office for National Statistics (ONS) testing, which showed that 41% of over-80s in England have now tested positive for coronavirus antibodies. The presence of antibodies shows

some level of immunity and is higher in the over-80s than in any other group, indicating that the vaccination programme is starting to pay off.

While Spiegelhalter referenced the over-70s, the Guardian analysis focused on the over-80s because a significant proportion of that age group were vaccinated by early January.

After analysing the figures in the last week, George Batchelor, the director of the health data company Edge Health, said he also believed the positive effects of the vaccine were starting to become apparent. “The drop in the proportion of Covid-19 deaths for the over-80s relative to other age groups since early February is a good sign that the vaccination programme is working,” he said. However, he added: “There are reasons to still be cautious, deaths are still high and there are some concerns around the supply of vaccines.”

Some experts are more hesitant to identify the effect of the vaccine in the data, a stance echoed by the prime minister and England’s chief medical officer, Prof Chris Whitty, at a Downing Street press briefing on Monday.

Paul Hunter, a professor in medicine at the University of East Anglia, said: “It is still difficult disentangling the impact of lockdown from the impact of vaccine.”

He warned the data was “noisy” and it would take more time to be sure. “There is some suggestion of relatively greater decline in hospitalisations in the older age groups compared to the under-65s in the last few days and also in deaths in over-80s, but this data is intrinsically noisy so I would not have confidence for a few days yet.”

However, others point to promising data from Israel that showed both hospital admissions and deaths among elderly people were falling after widespread vaccination of those who were most vulnerable.

“Although studies from Israel are promising, we are not sure what levels of effectiveness are being achieved in practice in the UK,” said Batchelor.

A study released on Sunday by Israel's largest healthcare provider indicated the Pfizer/BioNTech jab offered 94% protection against Covid-19, echoing the results of vaccine trials.

Why we see the vaccine effect in deaths first

The impact of the vaccine is less visible in metrics other than deaths. Big falls in hospital admissions in the last month are more likely to be a result of lockdown measures – imposed in England since early January – rather than vaccines, with younger groups having very similar rates of hospital admission to older, more vaccinated groups, experts believe.

However, many older people with life-threatening coronavirus symptoms may not be sent to hospital, Spiegelhalter suggested. "It may seem the wrong order, but modelling suggests that we would expect vaccines to affect deaths before hospital admissions, since so many elderly cases do not get admitted to hospital. But there is a suggestion that admissions are now falling faster in the older groups," he said.

Hospital admission rates among those aged 85 and over remain much higher overall, because age makes people much more vulnerable to the virus. Over-85s still make up approximately 20% of all hospital admissions for coronavirus. This ratio has fallen only slightly since vaccination took effect at the end of January.

There are still more than 20,000 coronavirus patients in UK hospitals – more than during the first 2020 peak. The Guardian's analysis used NHS England hospital admission data for coronavirus, which is only available for age groups: 0-5, 6-17, 18-64, 65-84 and 85+. Population data used to calculate the rate for each age group in England is from the ONS 2019 mid-year population estimates. Deaths and hospital admission data for coronavirus is from Public Health England.

Home Office

Home Office ignored Covid advice not to put asylum seekers in barracks

Public Health England warned against using Napier facility before outbreak of coronavirus, court hears

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Private security guards patrol Napier barracks earlier this month. Photograph: Andrew Aitchison/In Pictures/Getty Images

Private security guards patrol Napier barracks earlier this month. Photograph: Andrew Aitchison/In Pictures/Getty Images

Diane Taylor
Tue 16 Feb 2021 13.58 EST

The Home Office ignored advice from Public Health England that housing asylum seekers in dormitories in army barracks was inappropriate in a pandemic, months before an outbreak of 120 Covid cases.

In a high court hearing on Tuesday – brought by six asylum seekers who claim that conditions at the barracks are inhumane – the Home Office conceded that it was arguable that the use of Napier barracks to house the group was unlawful and in breach of human rights.

Counsel for the Home Office admitted to failings and confirmed that, following the launching of several legal actions, sweeping changes to Napier barracks in Folkestone, which has been used to accommodate hundreds of asylum seekers, have been made.

Judge Martin Chamberlain told the court that Public Health England advised the Home Office on 7 September last year that dormitories were not suitable accommodation during a pandemic. However, the judge said: "This advice was apparently not followed." Following an outbreak of 120 cases at the barracks last month, the site was locked down, with residents told they couldn't leave.

At Napier accommodation is divided into blocks, with two 14-bed dormitories in each and shared shower and toilet facilities.

While the home secretary, Priti Patel, has previously rejected criticisms of the barracks – describing it as "an insult to say they are not good enough for asylum seekers" as they previously housed "our brave soldiers" – the court heard that sweeping changes had been made following legal challenges, including emptying the barracks of around fourth-fifths of its occupants.

Previously there were around 400 people at Napier but as of Tuesday Lisa Giovannetti QC, representing the Home Office, said there were just 63 people left in the barracks.

The judge said Giovannetti accepted that a letter circulated to the residents of Napier saying they could not leave the barracks under any circumstances gave a "false impression", as even when people are self-isolating due to

Covid 19 they can leave their homes to seek medical assistance or to avoid a risk of harm.

The barracks has been in use to accommodate asylum seekers since September 2020. It is a Ministry of Defence facility built in 1890.

Giovannetti said the Home Office would be meeting with public health officials on Thursday to discuss "how to safely manage a Covid outbreak at Napier going forward".

She said that how the 63 people remaining would be divided up in terms of dormitories and blocks was one of the matters that would be discussed at the meeting.

"None of the people in Napier should be detained," she said. Giovannetti added: "The secretary of state accepts unequivocally that there is no power to detain other than Covid restrictions. They are free to come and go."

Emily Soothill, a solicitor at Deighton Pierce Glynn, representing some of the asylum seekers who brought today's challenge, said: "We welcome today's concession by the home secretary that it is arguable that the use of Napier Barracks to house asylum-seekers is unlawful and in breach of human rights.

"Our clients were subjected to demeaning conditions in Napier Barracks for over four months while there was a widespread outbreak of Covid-19 in the barracks. Many suffered a deterioration in their mental health before the Home Office was ordered by the court to move them to alternative adequate accommodation. We are therefore pleased that our clients' claims will now proceed to a full trial on an expedited basis so that there can be proper scrutiny of the lawfulness of using disused military barracks to house asylum seekers.

"Refugees seeking sanctuary in the UK, many of whom have experienced torture and trafficking, have the right to be housed in humane conditions and both Napier and Penally barracks therefore urgently need to be closed."

A Home Office spokesperson said: “The government provides safe, warm and secure accommodation with three nutritious meals served a day, all paid for by the taxpayer. Napier has previously accommodated army personnel and it is wrong to say it is not adequate for asylum seekers.

“The Home Office has worked extremely closely with Public Health England to minimise risks of coronavirus and this track record will be robustly defended in court. Today’s initial hearing is one step in the legal process – the Home Office has not lost or conceded the case.”

Wednesday briefing: US big freeze brings deadly chaos

Climate change

Heating Arctic may be to blame for snowstorms in Texas, scientists argue

The wintry weather that has battered the southern US and parts of Europe could be a counterintuitive effect of the climate crisis

Kaleb Love, a municipal worker, breaks ice on a frozen fountain in Richardson, Texas, on Tuesday, as freezing temperatures grip the state. Photograph: LM Otero/AP

Kaleb Love, a municipal worker, breaks ice on a frozen fountain in Richardson, Texas, on Tuesday, as freezing temperatures grip the state. Photograph: LM Otero/AP

Oliver Milman
@olliemilman
Wed 17 Feb 2021 01.00 EST

Associating climate change, normally connected with roasting heat, with an unusual winter storm that has crippled swaths of Texas and brought freezing temperatures across the southern US can seem counterintuitive. But scientists say there is evidence that the rapid heating of the Arctic can help push frigid air from the north pole much further south, possibly to the US-Mexico border.

This week, a blast of winter weather has reached deep into the heart of the US, causing several deaths and knocking out power for about 5 million people. Sleet and ice have battered Oklahoma and Arkansas, while many people in Texas have been left marooned, amid unsafe travel conditions, in homes with no electricity.

Texas winter storm leaves two dead and millions without power
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“The current conditions in Texas are historical, certainly generational,” said Judah Cohen, the director of seasonal forecasting at Atmospheric and Environmental Research. “But this can’t be hand-waved away as if it’s entirely natural. This is happening not in spite of climate change, it’s in part due to climate change.”

Last year, Cohen co-authored a paper that found a strong uptick in winter storms in the US north-east in the decade leading up to 2018. This, Cohen and some other scientists argue, is a symptom of heating in the Arctic, occurring at a rate more than twice the global average, that is disrupting long-established climatic systems.

Cold air is normally concentrated around the north pole in the polar vortex, an area of low pressure that circulates in a tight formation in the stratosphere during winter. This rotation is likened by scientists to a spinning top, one that can meander if it is interfered with.

This interference, researchers say, is occurring through changes to the jet stream, a band of strong winds that wraps around the globe at lower elevations than the polar vortex. The warming of the Arctic, it is thought, is causing the jet stream to shift. “The energy escaping from the jet stream

bangs into the polar vortex so it starts to wobble and move all over the place," said Cohen. "Where the polar vortex goes, so goes the cold air."

This phenomenon has shown itself to a dramatic degree over the past month, with a splitting of the polar vortex helping cause huge flurries of snow in Europe as well as record cold temperatures in parts of the US more accustomed to milder winters.

"I'd say the situation this winter is consistent with research that has connected what's happening in the Arctic with extreme weather patterns in the mid latitudes," said Jennifer Francis, a senior scientist at Woodwell Climate Research Center who has studied the issue. "The polar vortex can elongate, stretch into different shapes and even split. We have seen a very big disruption this year."

There is no consensus among scientists over the interaction between Arctic heat and cold weather further south – Francis calls the topic an "active area of research". Global heating is causing warmer winters, and record cold temperatures are now being clearly outpaced by record hot temperatures, but the complex interplay of climatic conditions still requires further scrutiny, to the consternation of some and even mockery among others, including former US presidents.

"We still have a lot to learn on this," said Francis. "I think this year will be studied for a long time."

US weather

Millions without power and 21 dead as ferocious winter weather sweeps US

Houston on Monday. The storm left behind record-setting cold temperatures with wind-chill warnings from the US-Canada border to the US-Mexico border. Photograph: Reginald Mathalone/NurPhoto/Rex/Shutterstock

Houston on Monday. The storm left behind record-setting cold temperatures with wind-chill warnings from the US-Canada border to the US-Mexico border. Photograph: Reginald Mathalone/NurPhoto/Rex/Shutterstock

Officials warn of treacherous travel conditions as icy winter storm heads to America’s north-east

Erum Salam in San Antonio and agencies
Tue 16 Feb 2021 20.37 EST

Ferocious winter weather sweeping across large parts of the central and southern US has brought record-breaking cold temperatures, left millions without power and killed at least 21 people across multiple states.

The worst power outages were in Texas, where more than 4m homes and businesses remained without power on Tuesday in subfreezing temperatures. Elsewhere more than 250,000 people also lost power across parts of Appalachia, and 4 million people lost power in Mexico. Another quarter-million were without electricity following an ice storm in north-west Oregon.

In North Carolina, three people were found dead after a tornado hit a seaside town, while in Texas, four family members perished in a Houston-area house fire while using a fireplace to stay warm. Others deaths occurred in states such as Louisiana, Kentucky and Missouri, from causes that included car crashes and carbon monoxide poisoning.

The storms overwhelmed power grids and immobilized the southern plains, carried heavy snow and freezing rain into New England and the deep south, and brought painfully low temperatures. Wind-chill warnings extended from Canada into Mexico. In Chicago, a foot and a half (46cm) of new snow forced public schools to cancel in-person classes for Tuesday. Snow even reached the normally balmy coastline of the Gulf of Mexico.

Frigid temperatures grip Texas – in pictures
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Storms dumped snow and ice from Ohio to the Rio Grande through the long Presidents Day holiday weekend, and treacherous weather was expected to grip much of the United States through Friday. Forecasters predicted up to 4in of snow and freezing rain from the southern plains into the north-east.

The weather also threatened to affect the nation's Covid-19 vaccination effort. Joe Biden's administration said delays in vaccine shipments and deliveries were likely.

Officials in Texas have faced criticism as the state energy grid repeatedly failed, forcing rolling blackouts. As utilities attempted to restore power to

homes that lacked it while offices in downtown Houston remained lit up, the Harris county judge Lina Hidalgo, the top elected official in the city, told the Guardian: “History is going to remember who did their part and who didn’t.”

Congress Avenue after 5in of snow fell in Austin, Texas. Photograph: Sandy Carson/Zuma Wire/Rex/Shutterstock

Many Texans were struggling, most in houses not built to retain heat. In Austin, Matthew Micik had gone 24 hours without power, the temperature in his house below 35F (1.6C). After finding a hotel room in nearby San Marcos, he drove through ice and sleet only to find most of that town had lost power too. He spent the night in his car.

From Galveston, Jessica Knofla said: “Basically, everyone who lives here had no warning and is stuck on a blacked-out island with no major stores open and no lights on the road. It’s absolutely infuriating and I’m fucking pissed.”

At least three people killed after tornado hits overnight in North Carolina
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Many did not have water because of frozen or burst pipes. Kelsey Muñoz, an intensive care nurse in Dallas, said: “Currently, I have power and I’m hoping I am not jinxing myself by saying that. However, for water I’ve had to gather snow and melt it. Never thought I had to do that in Texas.”

The blackouts forced Harris county to scramble to get more than 8,000 doses of Moderna’s coronavirus vaccine into people’s arms, after the county public health facility lost power and its back-up generator also failed. Officials distributed the doses at three hospitals, Rice University and the county jail. Hidalgo said she didn’t believe any vaccines were lost.

The conditions also delayed vaccine shipments. State officials said Texas, due to receive more than 400,000 doses this week, did not expect deliveries until at least Wednesday.

Homes in the Westbury neighborhood are covered in snow in Houston on Monday. Photograph: Mark Mulligan/AP

The Southwest Power Pool, a group of utilities across 14 states, called for rolling outages because reserves were exhausted. Some utilities said they were starting blackouts, while others urged customers to reduce power usage. State officials said surging demand was driven by people trying to keep homes warm.

In a phone interview, Hidalgo told the Guardian: “We’re facing all kinds of frustrating situations. We’re asking folks to conserve energy. At last count, 1.37 million people in our region are without power. The other 3 [to] 4 million are conserving power to protect more from having to being cut. Then you have the buildings downtown lit up.”

Harris county covers Houston, where outrage spread over office buildings and others in the city center that still had power.

“We noticed those from the emergency operations center last night,” Hidalgo said. “We called around asking those leaders to take the power down. Some of them did around 11 [to] midnight. Some of them didn’t. It just tells you everybody has to do their part. And as I’ve been stressing to my community today, that’s not just the individuals. That’s the businesses. History is going to remember who did their part and who didn’t do their part.”

Hidalgo said the electricity provider CenterPoint had “figured out a way to actually cut the electricity from those buildings, which they couldn’t do last night because there’s critical infrastructure going through downtown. They’re doing that today throughout the day. It’s not something people needed with already the tragedy and the nightmare that has unfolded with more than 24 hours without power for other people.”

People push a car free after spinning out in the snow in Waco, Texas. Photograph: Jerry Larson/AP

Authorities in multiple states reported deaths in crashes on icy roads. Deaths in Texas included a woman and a girl from suspected carbon monoxide poisoning in Houston, from a car running in a garage at a home without electricity, police said. Law enforcement said temperatures were probably to blame for the deaths of two men on Houston-area roads.

“The number one challenge is the nightmare of the power being out,” Hidalgo said. “Many, if not most, of the first responders here with me at the emergency operations center have families back home that are having to also face no power and no water many times. We understand just how terrible this situation is.

“The second challenge after the power issue is the carbon monoxide poisoning. We’ve seen at least 50 incidents so far in the county as of this morning, but our fire marshal tells us that’s just the tip of the iceberg. If you need to be in your car to warm up, that’s fine but you’ve got to do it outside.”

Elderly and homeless people were most vulnerable. Cities implemented “emergency warming centers” but it was not clear how they could follow Covid-19 safety protocols. More than 500 people were at one shelter in Houston but the mayor, Sylvester Turner, said others had to be shut because they lost power.

People seek shelter from below freezing temperatures inside a church warming center in Houston. Photograph: David J Phillip/AP

The San Antonio transportation authority suspended service and deployed supervisors to look for homeless people who needed a ride to a warming center. Alex Fleming, a pastor, had been volunteering at San Antonio's First Baptist church, an emergency warming center. Capacity is 45. As of Monday night, he said, they had sheltered 26 people.

"I think we would be at capacity because each day it kept growing. A lot of places are getting overpacked," Fleming said. "The only hard [thing] is that you can only take so many. You've got to turn people away sometimes."

In west Tennessee, a 10-year-old boy died after falling into an ice-covered pond on Sunday, fire officials said.

Several cities had record lows: in Minnesota, the Hibbing/Chisholm weather station registered -38F (-39C). Sioux Falls, South Dakota, dropped to -26F (-32C).

Air travel was also affected. At midday, more than 2,700 US flights had been canceled, led by more than 800 at Dallas Fort Worth international airport and more than 700 at Bush Intercontinental in Houston.

Authorities pleaded with residents to stay home on Tuesday. About 100 school systems closed, delayed opening or switched to remote classes in Alabama, where forecasters said conditions might not improve until temperatures rise above freezing on Wednesday afternoon.

Reuters and the Associated Press contributed reporting

Texas

US conservatives falsely blame renewables for Texas storm outages

Lawmakers and the Murdoch media target wind and solar but grid operator says fossil fuel generators suffered biggest problems

Problems at fossil fuel power plants have led to blackouts in Texas, according to the state's grid operator. Photograph: David J Phillip/AP

Problems at fossil fuel power plants have led to blackouts in Texas, according to the state's grid operator. Photograph: David J Phillip/AP

Martin Farrer and agencies
Wed 17 Feb 2021 01.50 EST

The electricity outages suffered by millions of Texans amid frigid temperatures sweeping across the United States have been seized upon by conservative commentators presenting a false narrative that renewable power was to blame.

“We should never build another wind turbine in Texas,” read a Facebook post on Tuesday by the state’s agriculture commissioner, Sid Miller. “The experiment failed big time.”

Fox News also joined in with one of its presenters, Tucker Carlson, claiming that renewables were to blame and that Texas was “totally reliant on windfarms”. The Wall Street Journal said in an editorial that “the power grid is becoming less reliable due to growing reliance on wind and solar, which can’t provide power 24 hours a day, seven days a week”.

While some wind turbines did freeze, failures in natural gas, coal and nuclear energy systems were responsible for nearly twice as many outages as renewables, the Electric Reliability Council of Texas (Ercot), which operates the state’s power grid, said in a press conference on Tuesday.

Frozen instruments at gas, coal and even nuclear power stations were among the main problems, Ercot director Dan Woodfin said, according to Bloomberg.

Millions without power and 21 dead as ferocious winter weather sweeps US
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Despite evidence to the contrary, a variety of misleading claims spread on social media about renewable energy, with wind turbines and the Green New Deal on the receiving end of much of the attention.

A viral photo of a helicopter de-icing a wind turbine was shared with claims it showed a “chemical” solution being applied to one of the massive wind generators in Texas. But the photo was taken in Sweden years ago, not in the US.

Other social media users, including Republican congresswoman Lauren Boebert of Colorado, labelled the Green New Deal as the culprit. Boebert tweeted on Monday that the proposal was “proven unsustainable as renewables are clearly unreliable”.

But no version of the Green New Deal exists in Texas or nationwide, said Mark Jacobson, director of the Atmosphere/Energy Program and professor

of civil and environmental engineering at Stanford University.

“It’s really natural gas and coal and nuclear that are providing the bulk of the electricity and that’s the bulk of the cause of the blackouts,” Jacobson told the Associated Press.

Ercot said on Tuesday that of the 45,000 total megawatts of power that were offline statewide, about 30,000 consisted of thermal sources – gas, coal and nuclear plants – and 16,000 came from renewable sources.

While Texas has ramped up wind energy in recent years, the state still relies on wind power for only about 25% of its total electricity, according to Ercot data.

The agency confirmed that wellhead freeze-offs and other issues curtailing supply in natural gas systems were primarily to blame for new outages on Tuesday, after severe winter weather caused failures across multiple fuel types in recent days.

As Texas governor Greg Abbott ordered an investigation into the failures of the grid, Ed Hirs, an energy fellow at the University of Houston, said the problem was caused by lack of investment in the state’s deregulated power system. Texas is alone in having its own grid. The other lower 48 states are connected to either the eastern or western interconnection grids, and can draw on power supplies across state lines when necessary.

> American infrastructure, especially our power grids, are not prepared for a world in climate crisis. We need to wake up. Today it’s Texas, but these problems aren’t only local and they’re going to get worse. https://t.co/vfi2vy8xAJ
>
> — Dan Rather (@DanRather) February 17, 2021

“The Ercot grid has collapsed in exactly the same manner as the old Soviet Union,” said Hirs. “It limped along on underinvestment and neglect until it finally broke under predictable circumstances.”

Renewable energy is a popular scapegoat for new problems as more frequent extreme weather events strain infrastructure, according to Emily Grubert, an assistant professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering at Georgia Institute of Technology.

“It’s easy to focus on the thing that you can see changing as the source of why an outcome is changing,” Grubert told the AP. “The reality is that managing our systems is becoming more difficult. And that’s something that is easy to blame on the reaction to it, but it’s not actually the root cause.”

Frigid temperatures grip Texas – in pictures

Michelle DeFord bundles up in a blanket to stay warm outside the warming shelter at the George R. Brown convention center in Houston, where she is staying during the cold weather. Photograph: Brett Coomer/AP

Seascape: the state of our oceansGlobal development

Crew of oil tanker beached off UAE to go home after four years stranded at sea

Five men abandoned without wages on ship that ran aground have received settlements and will be repatriated to their families

Monchand Sheikh, one of the five crew, on the beach at Umm Al Quwain with the MT Iba in the background. Photograph: Spencer Shea

Monchand Sheikh, one of the five crew, on the beach at Umm Al Quwain with the MT Iba in the background. Photograph: Spencer Shea

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About this content
Karen McVeigh
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Wed 17 Feb 2021 01.00 EST

The crew of an oil tanker who have not set foot on dry land for nearly four years after being abandoned on board their ship, which later ran aground off the United Arab Emirates, are finally going home to see their families.

The seafarers, who said they experienced "living hell" on board the 5,000-ton MT Iba after the tanker's owner hit financial problems and stopped paying salaries almost three years ago, have been given a settlement for wages owed to them. They hope to be repatriated in March.

The five-man crew had a brief and emotional trip to dry land to meet with representatives of Alco Shipping, the vessel's owner, on the beach at Umm Al Quwain, on Monday. Two cheques from a new buyer, Shark Power Marine Services, were handed over to the crew via the Mission to Seafarers charity, which has been negotiating on their behalf. They agreed to accept $165,000 (£119,000) in unpaid wages, around 65% to 70% of the wages they were owed.

Work is under way to assess the damage to the oil tanker when it broke anchor and drifted from the busy port, before beaching two and a half weeks ago.

Nay Win, the 53-year-old chief engineer, who is from Myanmar, said: “The buyer has promised us we will get home and I hope I will get home after 5 March. My family are really happy.”

Win and Riasat Ali, a 52-year-old second engineer from Pakistan, have been on board since July 2017. Monchand Sheikh, 26, a cook from India, joined in late 2018, while Vinay Kumar, 31, another second engineer, and Nirmal Singh-Bora, 22, both from India, joined in late 2019.

The Rev Andy Bowerman, Mission to Seafarers regional director in the Middle East and south Asia, said: “Hopefully, all being well, 15 days from now, they will be at the port of Dubai and ready to go home.”

Four years at sea, now just metres from shore: 'living hell' of stranded UAE ship
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It was an emotional meeting at the beach, Bowerman said, marking the first time some of the seafarers had been ashore in almost four years.

“The crew came off and swam to the shore. Nay Win was in tears. He was off the boat, there was a cheque in my hands. But unfortunately they could not just step down and go home.”

The seafarers have agreed to stay on to do essential work on the ship before it is towed to Dubai, where they will wait 15 days for legal work on the sale of the vessel to be completed.

They will then be paid the other half of the money they are owed, and repatriated.

A spokesperson for the UAE Ministry of Energy and Infrastructure said the authorities were helping the seafarers renew passports via their embassies, so they could be quickly repatriated. The crew will require a PCR Covid-19

test, and will be allowed to fly if the test is negative; otherwise, arrangements will be made for quarantine.

Asked why the UAE is the worst country for seafarer abandonment, according to a database run by the International Maritime Organization, the spokesperson said that it was a busy maritime hub, with 20 active ports, and that more traffic led to more cases. New legislation that would allow the port to arrest an abandoned ship and auction it without the involvement of the courts was not yet in place.

Mohamed Arrachedi, Arab world and Iran network coordinator for the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) said the long-running case of the Iba was a "symptom that something very wrong exists and has to change".

"The seafarers are the workforce that keeps ships at sea. Their rights, wellbeing, wages, conditions and welfare must be at the centre of priorities."

Student housing

UK university students wasted £1bn in a year on empty accommodation

Average student has so far paid £1,621 in rent for unrefunded empty rooms, survey finds

- Coronavirus – latest updates
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Largely empty halls of residence are seen at Sussex University. Photograph: Jon Santa Cruz/Rex/Shutterstock

Largely empty halls of residence are seen at Sussex University. Photograph: Jon Santa Cruz/Rex/Shutterstock

Rachel Hall
@rachela_hall
Wed 17 Feb 2021 02.00 EST

University students have wasted nearly £1bn on empty rooms in flat shares and halls of residence that they have been unable to use because of coronavirus restrictions this academic year, according to a new estimate.

The average student has so far paid £1,621 in rent for empty rooms for which they have not received a refund, according to an annual survey of 1,300 university students by money advice website Save the Student.

Two in five (43%) respondents said they had spent under three months on campus, while nearly half (46%) would have made different decisions about where to live had they understood the likely impact of the pandemic on their education. One in three plan to ask their landlords for a break clause next year to give them more flexibility.

Hillary Gyebi-Ababio, the National Union of Students' vice-president for higher education, said: "Students have been consistently exploited and ignored during this pandemic. We are seen as cash cows, with many stuck paying extortionate rents for properties they either cannot use or cannot afford."

Students' anger with high rents, which Save the Student estimates take up three-quarters of their maintenance loans at an average of £146 per week, boiled over on UK campuses this term as students launched the largest rent strike in 40 years.

'We won't be cash cows': UK students plan the largest rent strike in 40 years Read more

There has been a patchy response from universities, private halls of residence and landlords, with some refusing discounts while others have offered full rebates. The survey suggests a third of students have been offered a discount, which averages at £75, though this has been extended to just 6% of students in private rentals. Half of the those surveyed were unhappy with their accommodation provider's response.

On 14 February, 92 students at the School of Oriental and African Studies became the first to withhold the outstanding 50% instalment of their tuition fee payments in protest at their university's coronavirus response. They were

joined by 1,000 students – a fifth of the student body – who signed a petition asking for fee reductions.

The government has so far responded to students' financial concerns with £70m in additional hardship funding, a figure that falls short of more generous packages in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Most students have been asked to remain at the address where they spent Christmas – in many cases their family homes – during lockdown. Plans for their return are expected to be announced next week, although university leaders are preparing for the possibility that many students will not be allowed on campus until 17 May, shortly before the end of the teaching year. St Andrews University and the London School of Economics have already told students that most will study online for the remainder of the year.

Universities UK said: "Decisions on accommodation costs are a matter for individual universities, taking into account the circumstances at their institutions and of their students. But with the vast majority of students not renting university-owned accommodation, there is an ongoing issue about support for those with contracts in the private sector as well as assistance for non-residential students who have been financially hit by the pandemic."

Children

Watchdog to accuse UK ministers of institutional bias against children

Children's commissioner Anne Longfield to criticise government as out of touch in departing speech

Anne Longfield will say it is a 'national scandal' that a fifth of children leave school without basic qualifications. Photograph: Gary Calton/The Observer

Anne Longfield will say it is a 'national scandal' that a fifth of children leave school without basic qualifications. Photograph: Gary Calton/The Observer

Sally Weale *Education correspondent*
Tue 16 Feb 2021 17.00 EST

Ministers are out of touch and "institutionally biased" against supporting children and families, while Britain is being put to shame by measures

unveiled by President Joe Biden in the US, the children's commissioner for England will say.

In an excoriating speech at the end of her six-year tenure, Anne Longfield will say it is a "national scandal" that a fifth of children leave compulsory education without basic qualifications.

She will call on Boris Johnson to introduce a "Covid covenant" of education and wellbeing support to help children and young people recover from the pandemic, saying that unless children are at the heart of his "build back better" campaign it is "just a slogan".

Longfield has been a thorn in the side of government since her appointment as children's champion in March 2015, but appears to have saved some of her harshest criticisms for her final speech before handing over the reins to the new commissioner, Dame Rachel de Souza, the founding chief executive of the Inspiration academy trust. The Cabinet Office minister, Michael Gove, once said he would like to clone De Souza "23,000 times".

In her speech, Longfield will confront ministers with the realities facing the most disadvantaged children post-pandemic, saying "it's impossible to overstate how damaging the last year has been for many children". She will accuse Whitehall of being remote and disinterested in the children for which it is responsible.

"I have been shocked to discover how many officials have never met any of the children they are responsible for," she will say, adding: "I have to force officials and ministers to the table, to watch them sit through a presentation, maybe ask a question, and then vacantly walk away."

In a pointed contrast with the UK government's record on child poverty, Longfield praises the new US president's bold proposals for a package of tax credits and benefits that promises to halve child poverty in a year.

"The Biden administration knows that children are the heart of our future economic success. Yet in the UK, we're on track to have the highest levels of child poverty since records began in the 1960s," Longfield will say.

“Two weeks ago the prime minister said educational catchup was the key focus of the entire government – yet we still don’t know if next month he is planning to take the universal credit uplift [£20 a week] away from millions of families.

“If the government is really focused on educational catchup, it wouldn’t even countenance pushing 800,000 children into the type of devastating poverty which can have a much bigger impact on their life chances than the school they go to or the catchup tuition they get.”

The speech goes on to accuse the Treasury of shortchanging children while other sectors benefit, committing little more than £1bn to children’s catchup while giving tens of billions of pounds to other sectors of the economy. “What all this shows is an institutional bias against children,” she will say.

In a direct challenge to government, Longfield will add: “Are you serious about children, and their life chances? Are you serious about ‘building back better’ and ‘levelling up’? And will you put those children who were already disadvantaged at the centre of it? This is not just about missing a few chapters in a textbook.”

The fact that after 14 years of compulsory education almost one in five children leave without basic qualifications is “abysmal”, she will say. “I don’t know what’s more shocking: that these things happen, or that they’re hardly recognised. It should be a national scandal.”

Longfield’s final intervention as children’s commissioner for England has been welcomed by the Children’s Society. The charity’s chief executive, Mark Russell, said: “When children go back to school this must be just the start of a long-term recovery plan and new focus on valuing children’s wellbeing, making this just as important as building the economy.

“Young people deserve so much more. We echo the children’s commissioner’s thoughts that the government must fight for and nurture the optimism and ambition in every child and we are grateful to her for all that she has done speaking up for children and young people.”

A government spokesperson said: “Protecting vulnerable children has been at the heart of our response to the pandemic, driven by our commitment to level up opportunities and outcomes. That’s why we have enabled the most vulnerable children to continue attending school in person, while providing laptops, devices and data packages to those learning at home and ensuring the most disadvantaged children are fed and warm.”

Financial sector

Oil firms should disclose carbon output, says BlackRock

World's biggest investor wants polluting industries to set targets to cut emissions and reach net zero

The shares, bonds and other assets BlackRock controls were worth $8.7tn (£6.4tn) at the end of December, including holdings of billions of dollars in oil companies. Photograph: Mark Lennihan/AP

The shares, bonds and other assets BlackRock controls were worth $8.7tn (£6.4tn) at the end of December, including holdings of billions of dollars in oil companies. Photograph: Mark Lennihan/AP

Jasper Jolly and *Jillian Ambrose*
Wed 17 Feb 2021 00.01 EST

BlackRock, the world's biggest investor, has said that oil companies and other polluting industries should disclose their carbon emissions and set

targets to cut them, in the latest sign of the rapid reassessment of climate risks by asset managers.

All companies in which BlackRock invests will be expected to disclose direct emissions from operations and from energy they buy, known respectively as scope 1 and scope 2 emissions, the investment firm said in a letter outlining its plans.

Fossil fuel extractors should base targets to cut emissions on the carbon released when their products are burned, known as scope 3 emissions, BlackRock said.

BlackRock is one of the most influential investors in the world because of its vast actively managed and index-linked funds. The shares, bonds and other assets it controls were worth $8.7tn (£6.4tn) at the end of December, including holdings of billions of dollars in oil companies.

Most major listed oil companies have already announced plans to disclose their carbon emissions, and reduce them in line with the target to reach net zero carbon by 2050 set by many governments across the world.

BP plans to cut its carbon emissions to virtually zero by 2050, in part by offsetting emissions through carbon capture schemes and natural restoration. It has also promised to grow low-carbon investments eightfold by 2025, and tenfold by 2030, while cutting its fossil fuel output by 40% in the next decade.

French oil firm Total has made several multibillion pound investments in renewable energy, and has one of the largest pipelines of clean energy projects of any major oil company.

Shell has been criticised for putting forward climate plans which are vague, and rely on “carbon intensity” targets in the near-term rather than outright emissions figures. It plans to reach net zero in absolute terms by 2050.

US oil company Exxon, considered a climate laggard, has committed to disclosing its emissions and has set near-term targets for reducing emissions,

methane and gas flaring. Like Shell, the targets are based on carbon intensity rather than absolute emissions.

BlackRock has long been a focus for criticism from activists who argued that it was not fulfilling its responsibilities. But in the last year it has started to vote against companies on climate grounds, in an abrupt turnaround. In 2020 it voted against management at 69 carbon-intensive companies, including on the re-election of 64 directors.

BlackRock said last month it would target net zero carbon emissions in its portfolio by 2050, and that it would eventually consider divestment from the polluters who did not take action.

Companies should set rigorous short, medium and long-term targets, BlackRock said. It highlighted the UN-backed science-based targets initiative as the leading example of an audited and reliable emissions reductions programme. Science-based targets are set to align companies with the aims of the 2015 Paris agreement of limiting global temperature rises to below 2C.

Activists welcomed the extra detail in BlackRock's policy, but said it should insist on more specific reductions to ensure polluters move more rapidly.

Wolfgang Kuhn, director of financial sector strategies at ShareAction, a campaign group, said: "These asks are totally necessary, and it is high time they were included in company engagement on a consistent basis. The issue is that they are in no way sufficient to get us out of the hole; the targets need to be ambitious, and companies need to explain how they are going about reducing their emissions.

"Without concrete steps to reduce emissions, action for net zero doesn't amount to much more than a bit of reporting on the side."

Global development

Fresh protests in Myanmar as Aung San Suu Kyi appears in court

Protesters march in Yangon, a day after Aung San Suu Kyi makes videolink appearance to face fresh charge

Protesters in Myanmar hold up the three-finger salute with signs calling for the release of detained civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi during a demonstration in Yangon on Tuesday. Photograph: Ye Aung Thu/AFP/Getty Images

Protesters in Myanmar hold up the three-finger salute with signs calling for the release of detained civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi during a demonstration in Yangon on Tuesday. Photograph: Ye Aung Thu/AFP/Getty Images

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About this content

A reporter in Yangon, Rebecca Ratcliffe and agencies
Wed 17 Feb 2021 02.19 EST

Thousands of people have taken to the streets of Myanmar's main city Yangon on Wednesday morning to voice their anger against the coup, after a fresh charge was announced against ousted leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Across Yangon, protesters marched with red flags signalling their support for their elected government, and carried signs denouncing the military. Roads were blocked by sit down protests, and by drivers who held a "broken down" protest, parking their cars with bonnets open.

"We will never lean down under the military boots," one banner read.

United Nations special rapporteur on Myanmar, Tom Andrews, said ahead of the rallies that he had received reports of soldiers being transported into the main city Yangon from other regions, adding that he feared "we could be on the precipice of the military committing even greater crimes against the people of Myanmar."

"In the past, such troop movements preceded killings, disappearances, and detentions on a mass scale," he said.

There were no signs of a strong military presence in Yangon on Wednesday morning.

About 1,000 university staff and students gathered outside the Secretariat, a sprawling colonial era that once served as the administrative centre for British Burma, to demand the release of Aung San Suu Kyi.

“I want Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, my president U Win Myint, and other leaders freed immediately,” said a retired teacher. “We want our democracy back.”

Aung San Suu Kyi has not been seen in public since she was detained more than two weeks ago. Her lawyer, Khin Maung Zaw, said that police had submitted charges against her to the court on Tuesday, including a new allegation that she violated a national disaster law by breaching Covid regulations during last year’s election. Aung San Suu Kyi was already accused of illegally importing walkie talkies.

Khin Maung Zaw said he was not informed in advance of the court hearing and so missed the proceedings. “As soon as we heard about it, we [lawyer and the National League for Democracy’s central executive committee] joined the video conference, but it was already over. The judge then explained what had happened,” he said.

He was not given notice, he added, because he has not yet been officially recognised as Aung San Suu Kyi’s lawyer. He has not been granted permission to speak to her.

It is not clear how long a future trial might take, he added, but it could last for more than one year.

Myanmar military files new charge against Aung San Suu Kyi
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More than 450 people have been arrested since the coup on 1 February, while the military has repeatedly blocked communications. On Tuesday, an internet blackout was imposed for the third night running, according to the monitoring group NetBlocks.

Demonstrators light candles during a protest against the military coup in Yangon, Myanmar, on Tuesday. Photograph: Reuters

Protests have taken place daily since the military seized control more than two weeks ago, with crowds taking to the streets in big cities and remote villages across the country. Public fury at the army has been fuelled even further by news of Aung San Suu Kyi's court hearing and by a junta press conference, in which the military promised to hold elections. The last period of direct army rule lasted about half a century.

'They want division': on patrol with Myanmar's civilian night watch
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The military has justified seizing power by alleging widespread voter fraud in November elections won by Aung San Suu Kyi's party, a claim dismissed by observers.

Military spokesman Zaw Min Tun said on Tuesday that both Aung San Suu Kyi and Win Myint were in a "safer place" and "in good health". "It's not like they were arrested – they are staying at their houses," the general, who became the country's vice-minister of information after the coup, told a press conference. Their next court hearing is scheduled for 1 March.

The US, which has announced targeted sanctions against the generals, condemned the new charge against Aung San Suu Kyi, and renewed calls for her release.

China did not initially criticise the coup, however the country's ambassador to Myanmar Chen Hai said on Tuesday that "the current development in Myanmar is absolutely not what China wants to see". He added that China had not been informed in advance that the military was planning to seize power.

Security forces have used increasing force to stop nationwide street protests and a disobedience campaign encouraging civil servants to strike. Rubber bullets, tear gas and sling shots have been used against protesters, and troops have fanned out around the country in recent days.

Protests in Yangon on Tuesday, the 11th straight day of demonstrations, were smaller than in previous days but strategically targeted. Student activists have gathered at the major Myaynigone Intersection while another rally was held outside the US embassy.

Pockets of protesters also held rallies outside government offices including the Central Bank, Myanmar Port Authority and the Customs Department, to pressure civil servants to join a civil disobedience movement that is crippling commercial and government functions and resisting efforts by the military to restore normality.

Donald Trump

Steve Bannon believed Trump had early stage dementia, TV producer claims

- Ira Rosen says Bannon had ‘great frustrations with Trump’
- Bannon ‘spoke of removing president with 25th amendment’
- US politics – live coverage

Steve Bannon, right, was a strategist in Donald Trump’s White House for several months in 2017. Photograph: Mandel Ngan/AFP/Getty Images

Steve Bannon, right, was a strategist in Donald Trump’s White House for several months in 2017. Photograph: Mandel Ngan/AFP/Getty Images

Martin Pengelly in New York
@MartinPengelly
Tue 16 Feb 2021 16.11 EST

Former White House strategist Steve Bannon thought Donald Trump was suffering from early-stage dementia and campaigned covertly to remove him from office via the 25th amendment, according to a veteran TV producer.

Sounds about right: why podcasting works for Pence, Bannon and Giuliani
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Ira Rosen, the author of a new memoir about his work for CBS, Ticking Clock: Behind the Scenes at 60 Minutes, was speaking to Skullduggery, a podcast from Yahoo News.

Rosen told hosts Michael Isikoff and Daniel Klaidman his book was "not a dish on this person or that person", then gave listeners a taste of the dish inside.

He was asked about his relationship with Bannon, which developed around attempts to set up a 60 Minutes interview. "Steve is a big talker, a big gossiper," Rosen said. "He became a source for a lot of media people in Washington."

The former investment banker and failed Hollywood producer who came to run the ultra-rightwing Breitbart News website was Trump's campaign chairman in his 2016 election victory over Hillary Clinton. But Bannon was fired as a White House strategist in August 2017, amid fallout over Trump's praise for white supremacist marchers in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Bannon was a source for tell-all books but re-entered Trump's orbit as the 2020 election approached. After his defeat by Joe Biden, Trump pardoned Bannon on a fraud charge relating to a fundraising effort for a wall on the US border with Mexico. Bannon remains a media gadfly, hosting a hard-right podcast.

In the early days of the Trump administration, Rosen said, he "became kind of a therapist" for Bannon, "loitering in the chief of staff's office, drinking Diet Cokes … and he would kind of download to me on stories".

Rosen took contemporaneous notes, he said, as he worked to build trust and secure an on-camera interview. It was not all smooth sailing. At one point,

he said, Bannon told him “the people at the White House are telling me you’re gonna fuck me”.

“And I said, ‘Steve, I’m not gonna fuck you.’ And he said, ‘All right that’s all I needed to hear, we’re good.’ And that was it. That was our conversation.” Rosen said he and Bannon also communicated by text, some of which Bannon marked as off the record.

In his book, Rosen writes that Bannon “believed Trump was suffering from early stage dementia and that there was a real possibility he would be removed from office by the 25th amendment, where the cabinet could vote that the president was no longer mentally capable of carrying out his duties.”

He also writes that one Bannon text said: “You need to do the 25th amendment piece. By the way brother I never steer you wrong.”

Potential use of the 25th amendment was widely discussed throughout the Trump administration, intensely so in the aftermath of the 6 January Capitol riot, when Trump incited his supporters to attack Congress in his attempt to overturn the election. The amendment was not invoked. Instead Trump was impeached – and acquitted – a second time.

Rosen said Bannon’s eventual appearance on CBS was “one of the all-time great” political interviews. However, it did not contain the 25th amendment claim, which in his book Rosen says Bannon was also making to the rightwing donor Rebekah Mercer.

“He didn’t want to talk about it on 60 Minutes at the time,” Rosen said. “You can’t force the guy. But he had laid out the record at the time.”

Trump remains 2024 candidate of choice for most Republicans, poll shows Read more

Rosen said Bannon had “great frustrations with Trump”, who had been “throwing him under the bus”, particularly over an interview Bannon gave to Time magazine.

Bannon, he said, regularly cited a New York Times column by David Brooks, in October 2017, which said some Republicans visiting the White House suspected Trump might have Alzheimer's disease – but gave him a standing ovation anyway.

"Bannon kept saying this, and he wanted to do something about it," Rosen said. "Now, the secret was that Bannon crazily thought that *he* could be president."

Asked to what extent Bannon's claims represented "legitimate news versus Bannon just kind of trying to get attention", Rosen said: "That's exactly the trick in trying to deal with Steve, because a lot of it is to draw attention to himself."

Space

Europe launches recruitment drive for female and disabled astronauts

European Space Agency aims to take on 26 people for missions to the Moon and eventually to Mars

‘When it comes to space travel, we are all disabled,’ said Italian astronaut Samantha Cristoforetti. Photograph: Ivan Sekretarev/AP

‘When it comes to space travel, we are all disabled,’ said Italian astronaut Samantha Cristoforetti. Photograph: Ivan Sekretarev/AP

Reuters
Tue 16 Feb 2021 19.16 EST

European space chiefs have launched their first recruitment drive for new astronauts in 11 years, with particular emphasis on encouraging women and people with disabilities to join missions to the Moon and, eventually, Mars.

The European Space Agency (ESA) said on Tuesday that it was looking to boost the diversity of its crews as it cavassed for up to 26 permanent and reserve astronauts.

Tensions rise as rival Mars probes approach their final destination
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But the ESA warned that it expected a "very high number" of applications to come in during the eight-week recruitment drive from 31 March, and said candidates would have to endure a tough selection process lasting until October 2022.

"Candidates need to be mentally prepared for this process," Lucy van der Tas, ESA head of talent acquisition, said at a media conference.

Adapting technology that enabled humans to be in space could open the opportunity for people with disabilities, Italian astronaut Samantha Cristoforetti said.

"When it comes to space travel, we are all disabled," Cristoforetti added.

Requirements for an astronaut job at ESA include a master's degree in natural sciences, engineering, mathematics or computer science and three years of post-graduate experience.

US billionaires vie to make space the next business frontier
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"I think it's a great opportunity ... It will be an opportunity to learn a lot about yourselves," Cristoforetti said.

It comes as human space flight appeared set for a revival.

After years in which the only launch site for crewed flights to space was Baikonur in the steppes of Kazakhstan, cooperation with private companies such as SpaceX has raised prospects for more human missions.

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Coronavirus live
Coronavirus

Coronavirus live news: WHO expects first Covax deliveries late February; New Zealand confirms third new case

Coronavirus

New global Covid cases fell 16% last week, says WHO

The number of deaths also fell 10% over the same period, says World Health Organization

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WHO director general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said Monday that the number of new cases had declined for a fifth consecutive week, dropping by almost half since the start of January. Photograph: Christopher Black/World Health Organization/AFP/Getty Images

WHO director general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said Monday that the number of new cases had declined for a fifth consecutive week, dropping by almost half since the start of January. Photograph: Christopher Black/World Health Organization/AFP/Getty Images

Agence France-Presse
Tue 16 Feb 2021 23.16 EST

The number of new Covid cases reported worldwide fell 16% last week, to 2.7 million, the World Health Organization has said.

The number of new deaths reported also fell 10% over the same period, to 81,000, the WHO said on Tuesday night in its weekly epidemiological update, using figures up to Sunday.

Five of the six WHO regions of the world reported a double-digit percentage decline in new cases, with only the Eastern Mediterranean showing a rise, of 7%.

New case numbers dropped 20% last week in Africa and in the western Pacific, 18% in Europe, 16% in the Americas and 13% in southeast Asia.

The global case total is nearing 110 million, according to the Johns Hopkins University tracker, with 2,418,416 deaths recorded since the start of the pandemic.

WHO director general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said on Monday that the number of new cases had declined for a fifth consecutive week, dropping by almost half, from more than 5 million cases in the week of 4 January.

“This shows that simple public health measures work, even in the presence of variants,” Tedros said. “What matters now is how we respond to this trend. The fire is not out, but we have reduced its size. If we stop fighting it on any front, it will come roaring back.”

Covid world map: which countries have the most coronavirus vaccinations, cases and deaths?
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In less good news, the coronavirus variant of concern first detected in Britain was reported in 94 countries in the week to Monday, the epidemiological update said, an increase of eight countries. Local

transmission of the variant, as opposed to imported cases, has been reported in at least 47 countries.

The variant first spotted in South Africa was recorded in 46 countries, up two, with local transmission in at least 12 of those nations.

The so-called Brazilian variant was detected in 21 countries, up six, with local transmission in at least two countries.

Meanwhile the Covax facility, the global Covid-19 vaccine procurement and distribution effort which aims to ensure poorer countries are also able to access doses, said its final shipment list for the first deliveries would be issued next week, after the WHO approved the AstraZeneca shots.

On Monday, the WHO gave the seal of approval to the AstraZeneca-Oxford vaccine being manufactured in plants in India and South Korea, meaning it can now be shipped out via Covax, giving many countries their first Covid-19 shots.

Coronavirus

Revealed: NHS could offer Covid vaccine to 32m in priority groups by Easter

Analysis suggests everyone in first nine priority groups could get jab four weeks ahead of schedule

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Initial vaccinations have been running at an average of 2.75 million over the past four weeks and if that rate were to be maintained over the next seven weeks the 32 million target would be hit on 4 April. Photograph: Paul Ellis/AFP/Getty Images

Initial vaccinations have been running at an average of 2.75 million over the past four weeks and if that rate were to be maintained over the next seven

weeks the 32 million target would be hit on 4 April. Photograph: Paul Ellis/AFP/Getty Images

Dan Sabbagh, Jessica Elgot and Niamh McIntyre
Tue 16 Feb 2021 14.53 EST

At current rates, the NHS could offer a coronavirus vaccine to the 32 million people in the first nine priority groups by Easter – four weeks ahead of the official schedule – according to analysis by the Guardian.

Government and health sources have described the ambition as to "under-promise and over deliver" amid an expectation that short-term pressures on the supply of Pfizer vaccine in February can be compensated for in March.

The initial administering of doses have been running at an average of 2.75m over the past four weeks and if that rate were to be maintained over the next seven weeks the 32-million target would be hit on Easter Sunday, 4 April.

That would allow for some second doses to be delivered 12 weeks after a first Pfizer or AstraZeneca jab was given at the beginning of the year – and be well ahead of the 30 April deadline set by the government on Monday night.

Completing the first nine groups would mean that some protection against coronavirus had been offered to everybody aged over 50, the clinically extremely vulnerable, those with underlying health conditions, and NHS and care workers. Together they account for 99% of all UK deaths from the pandemic.

But the shadow health secretary, Jon Ashworth, said it was now vital the government began to outline its plan for the next steps of the vaccine programme, and called for police officers and teachers to be among those given priority next.

"Based on the progress of recent weeks the NHS ought to easily hit its next target in advance. As we move into the next phase ministers need to outline a plan to vaccinate those groups particularly at risk including key workers. We still have to do all we can to reduce spread," Ashworth said.

Over the weekend the UK hit the initial target of offering a first dose vaccination to all 15 million people in the first four priority groups by 15 February, hailed by Boris Johnson as an "unprecedented national achievement".

The latest figures show that total has climbed by 275,000 in the last 24 hours to 15.57 million, with people aged between 65 and 69 and those with underlying health conditions now asked to come forward to get the vaccine.

The principal concern is how much Pfizer vaccine is available. Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland's first minister, warned on Tuesday that the US company had "rephased" its delivery, with supplies squeezed for the next few weeks.

Pfizer is scaling up production at its manufacturing plant in Belgium and needs to cut back supply while upgrade works are completed – but Sturgeon said that the company's overall commitment remained unchanged.

A Whitehall source added that Pfizer had told ministers that its "overall projected supply" of vaccines to the UK will remain the same to March despite the contraction. The US company has itself already said it will meet existing production targets over the whole first quarter.

Figures from Scotland on Tuesday suggested that vaccination rates would be cut by a third from 47,000 a day to 30,000 a day until the Pfizer squeeze – expected to last a fortnight to the end of the month – is resolved.

UK ministers refuse to release any figures for the amount of vaccine available, but AstraZeneca is understood to be providing a little over 2 million doses a week, somewhere around two-thirds or more of the recent supply.

A short-term contraction along Scottish lines would mean UK vaccination rates dropping from 3m achieved last week to around 2m, until Pfizer was able to lift supply again to its previously stated target.

On Monday, NHS England's chief executive, Sir Simon Stevens, said he thought that the official target of 30 April could be exceeded if more vaccines were available. "If supply increases then we think we can go

faster," he told a Downing Street briefing. The most number of vaccines that have been delivered in a day is 598,000 on 30 January.

Coronavirus

Ethnicity and poverty are Covid risk factors, new Oxford modelling tool shows

Campaigners demand black, Asian and minority ethnic groups have higher priority for vaccination

- Coronavirus – latest updates
- See all our coronavirus coverage

Sarah Boseley Health editor and Aamna Mohdin Community affairs correspondent

Tue 16 Feb 2021 11.35 EST First published on Tue 16 Feb 2021 08.59 EST

The new measures pull together ethnicity, social deprivation and body mass index and greatly expand the group of people considered vulnerable to

severe Covid. Photograph: Karwai Tang/Getty

Ethnicity and deprivation have for the first time been recognised as risk factors for severe Covid in new modelling, which will lead to nearly 2 million more people in England being advised to shield and 800,000 being fast-tracked for vaccines.

The risk analysis tool, commissioned by the chief medical officer for England, Chris Whitty, from a team at Oxford University, takes into account a multiplicity of health conditions and circumstances that increase people's likelihood of death, from obesity and severe mental health problems to homelessness.

The announcement prompted renewed calls from campaigners for black, Asian and minority ethnic groups to have higher priority for vaccination.

The race equality thinktank the Runnymede Trust called it a watershed moment. "Since March we have been pleading with Matt Hancock for race and deprivation to be considered as risk factors, and safeguarding measures to be implemented as a result," said its chief executive, Dr Halima Begum. "The new measures are by no means a complete solution. In fact, they're something of a halfway house. But they are a tremendously important step in the right direction and should be welcomed with open arms.

"By pulling together a trifecta of risk factors – ethnicity, social deprivation and body mass index – we offer a greatly expanded group of vulnerable people far higher levels of protection."

The chair of the British Medical Association council, Dr Chaand Nagpaul, said the BMA had "long highlighted the fact that people from an ethnic minority background, especially with underlying conditions, are at high risk of death from Covid-19 and that those from poorer areas are also twice as likely to die from this terrible disease.

"Many of these patients fall outside of the current JCVI [Joint Committee on Vaccines and Immunisation] priority groups for the Covid vaccine, and so it is now vitally important that these patients are prioritised for vaccination and urgently protected against the deadly effects of Covid-19."

Age is still the single biggest factor in the risk of dying from Covid, followed by certain cancers and organ transplants. But the more sophisticated modelling tool has shown that the shielding list should nearly double, adding 1.7 million people to the current 2.2 million who already isolate themselves at home. It was based on data from the health records of more than 8 million people during the first wave of the pandemic.

Among the many factors the model takes into account are ethnicity and postcode, which gives a measure of economic deprivation. There have been higher rates of death among people from black, ethnic minority and Asian communities and also people from poorer neighbourhoods with cramped housing. Body mass index will also be factored in, because obesity is known to increase the risk of severe illness.

All those newly identified will get a letter from their GP suggesting they shield until at least 31 March, which is later than the current date of 21 February. Most have already been vaccinated, because of their age or a particular health problem. The rest will now be prioritised as part of the group with underlying health conditions who are being called up.

Those affected are advised to stay at home full time and offered services such as delivery of their medicines. Statutory sick pay is available and those who shop for them can get priority at supermarkets.

Nagpaul said adding more people to the shielding list had to be carefully managed and they must be given information and support. “Understandably, this will be concerning for those who will now have to shield and may be questioning why, at this stage, they are being asked to do so, as well as having to manage fears over the implications for their lives going forward.

“It is also important the government works to mitigate the barriers that shielding presents for many, including those who are key workers, cash and gig economy workers, or those living in overcrowded housing and the knock-on effect this may have,” he said.

There has been a lot of concern about people with learning disabilities. Those with Down’s syndrome are already on the shielding list, but while

more of these people may be prioritised, who should shield will also depend on factors such as whether they are living in institutional care.

The new tool, called QCovid, has been in development for some months by a team led by Julia Hippisley-Cox, a professor of clinical epidemiology and clinical practice at Oxford. The methodology underpinning it was published in October.

Dr Jenny Harries, the deputy chief medical officer for England, said the new tool enabled health workers to go further in protecting the most vulnerable in the community. “This new model is a tribute to our health and technology researchers. The model … will help the NHS identify further individuals who may be at high risk from Covid-19 due to a combination of personal and health factors.

“Those most vulnerable to Covid-19 can benefit from both the protection that vaccines provide, and from enhanced advice, including shielding and support, if they choose it.”

The national disability charity Sense welcomed the announcement. Its chief executive, Richard Kramer, said: “Today’s announcement provides clarity and reassurance to a wider group of people who have been at higher risk of severe illness or death from the virus. Many of these adults will already have been effectively shielding since the start of the pandemic, without sufficient recognition. It is right that they are prioritised for vaccination and additional support.”

The TUC’s general secretary, Frances O’Grady, said the government should tell employers that new shielders must be furloughed if they cannot work from home. “This will be a very worrying time for hundreds of thousands of working people. Some will be able to work from home, but others will not. These new shielders who can’t work from home must not lose their jobs and livelihoods overnight,” she said.

Australia news

What Australia has learned from a year of Covid hotel quarantine

The strict 14-day hotel quarantine system has been key to keeping the nation's coronavirus cases low, but major leaks and controversies have forced constant rethinks

Workers in PPE load luggage on to a bus outside the Holiday Inn hotel on Flinders Lane in Melbourne on 16 February after the water-damaged Covid quarantine hotel had to be evacuated and guests moved. Photograph: Erik Anderson/EPA

Workers in PPE load luggage on to a bus outside the Holiday Inn hotel on Flinders Lane in Melbourne on 16 February after the water-damaged Covid quarantine hotel had to be evacuated and guests moved. Photograph: Erik Anderson/EPA

Elias Visontay
@EliasVisontay
Tue 16 Feb 2021 22.07 EST

Australia's strict 14-day hotel quarantine system, and simultaneous stifling of its citizens' ability to travel freely overseas, are widely acknowledged as a major factor in the nation's successful containment of Covid-19, low death rate and ability to resume a semblance of pre-pandemic life.

However the nation's quarantine regime has been progressively tightened in response to instances of the virus leaking out of hotels since the mandatory order was introduced for international arrivals from all countries in March last year.

After the country's initial lockdown largely suppressed the virus and new community cases dwindled, instances of new hotel quarantine breaches were noticeable, and often had the full attention of local health authorities.

Daniel Andrews vows to build standalone quarantine facility at Melbourne or Avalon airport
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Importantly, Australia's hotel quarantine program is also supported by a politically unpopular cap on weekly quarantine spots that has left tens of thousands of Australians stranded overseas.

While the specifics differ slightly between various states and territories, Australia's current hotel quarantine program has been shaped by breaches, and the key infection control lessons authorities have learned.

Beware of aerosol transmission

Australia's first and only major second wave of coronavirus occurred in Melbourne in the second half of year, with a review into the state's hotel quarantine program finding 90% of the the fatal outbreak's cases were genomically linked to a single family that returned to Australia and quarantined in a hotel.

Banning outdoor exercise, limiting movement to hotel rooms only, and ensuring some staff wear personal protective equipment while on shift have been permanent fixtures of the program, which was hastily formed around preventing transmission from droplets and surfaces.

However recent infections of hotel quarantine staff, including cleaners and security guards, at hotels in Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth, have highlighted the risk of the virus spreading via air particles – especially in the weeks since travellers have entered Australia with more infectious strains of the virus.

Authorities in Victoria implemented buffer zones around rooms where families are staying, after a returned traveller became infected from what authorities believed was a viral load so high emanating from an infected family across the hall that it jumped across the corridor.

Improve ventilation and airflow

Infection control experts in Australia continue to raise concerns about the virus remaining in stagnant air in corridors.

While there is a push for security to spend less time in hotel corridors – after a worker in Adelaide contracted the virus despite CCTV proving he had remained in place and not breached protocol – some experts now believe hotels, which lack ventilation in and between rooms, are not suitable for quarantine.

Pick the right type of accommodation

Many point to the Howard Springs complex near Darwin in the Northern Territory – a disused mining camp with outdoor cabins for rooms that now processes returning Australians – as a well-ventilated model to minimise transmission while in quarantine. Victoria's premier Daniel Andrews has recently indicated he wants to move away from using hotels and establish a standalone camp-style facility to quarantine international arrivals.

Meal delivery times – where food is placed at the foot of the door and collected by hotel guests once staff have cleared – are now staggered in some jurisdictions to avoid doors to different rooms being opened at the same time.

An arrival to Australia collects their dinner in a paper bag during their two-week mandatory quarantine period at a hotel in Sydney. Photograph: Scott Howes/EPA

Quarantine length and testing is vital

Unlike the UK's 10-day quarantine program, Australia has enforced a 14-day quarantine since its program's inception.

The 14-day length is at the recommendation of public health experts who believe this allows for two incubation cycles of the virus.

Guests are tested on day 2 and 12 of their quarantine. Early on, most jurisdictions moved to a system where guests who tested positive were transferred to separate hotels just for Covid-positive returned travellers.

However the emergence of more infectious strains has tightened some settings.

After a returned traveller in New Zealand – which has a similar hotel quarantine system – tested positive two days after finishing her stay, the Australian state of New South Wales introduced so-called day 16 testing, where health officials call everyone who leaves hotel quarantine, ask if they're exhibiting symptoms, and encourage them to get tested.

After a day 16 test detected a case in NSW this month, state and territory health authorities will now discuss making the extra test mandatory nationwide.

Australia has also introduced the need for anyone travelling to Australia to take a PCR test up to 72 hours before boarding their flight, with proof that a passenger is Covid-negative a requirement to board their flight.

Arrivals from New Zealand no longer have to quarantine when entering Australia, however the one-way travel bubble has been temporarily suspended on several occasions following recent cases in Auckland.

Labour-hire and casual workforces cause problems

Rules governing hotel quarantine staff have evolved substantially in recent months across Australia.

Testing of workers has been progressively ramped up, with measures taken in Victoria to address new strains of the virus now meaning staff are tested daily, including on days when they are not working.

While Australian defence force personnel and police are on site at most quarantine hotels, the use of untrained, private labour-hire contractors – as opposed to state-employed security, health and cleaning staff – have caused health authorities headaches, as some casual health workers did shifts between quarantine hotels and aged care facilities.

Some states have banned any hotel quarantine staff from working second jobs, including in other quarantine hotels.

Transport is a prime source of infection

Government criticised for letting Rita Ora into Australia ahead of 40,000 stranded overseas
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An inquiry into Victoria's hotel quarantine system recommended that infection prevention controls should also be applied when transporting returned passengers from airports to quarantine hotels.

Drivers are made to wear PPE, and buses used for hotel quarantine are set aside from vehicle fleets deployed on services for the general public.

In NSW, after a van driver who transported a family of returned travellers contracted Covid-19 in December, testing of transport workers was increased to daily saliva testing, and weekly throat and nasal swabs.

A driver relocates quarantining hotel guests at the Holiday Inn near Melbourne airport after an outbreak of the UK variant of Covid at the hotel. Photograph: Luis Ascui/EPA

Capping returns eases the load, but comes at a cost

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of Australia's hotel quarantine system was the decision to cap the number of people brought into the country, to levels that have fluctuated between 4,000-6,500 per week, to ease pressure on state health authorities managing quarantine hotels.

Unlike New Zealand, where travellers book a spot in managed isolation before their flight ticket, passenger limits are granted to airlines for each flight. Some carriers have admitted to prioritising more expensive air tickets to remain commercially viable in light of limits of as few as 25 passengers per flight.

As a result, Australians have struggled to return home, with roughly 40,000 registering with the government as being stranded, and the cost of the available tickets soaring.

The cap was introduced in July last year, following the initial influx of expats and travelling Australians returning home, and quarantine fees being

introduced.

Since March, Australians have also been barred from leaving the country, and foreigners banned from entering the country, without a pre-approved exemption.

Taiwan

Taiwan suggests China to blame after deal for 5m Covid vaccine doses is put on hold

Plan to buy the BioNTech shot has been delayed amid intervention by ‘outside forces’, says health minister

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Taiwan planned to buy 20m doses of Covid vaccines, inlcuding from BioNTech and AstraZeneca. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

Taiwan planned to buy 20m doses of Covid vaccines, inlcuding from BioNTech and AstraZeneca. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

Reuters
Wed 17 Feb 2021 01.57 EST

A deal for Taiwan to buy 5m doses of a Covid-19 vaccine developed by Germany's BioNTech is on hold, the island's health minister said, citing potential pressure from China for the delay.

Taiwan's health minister, Chen Shih-chung, said officials were on the verge of announcing the deal in December when BioNTech pulled the plug.

While he did not directly say China was to blame, Chen implied there was a political dimension to the decision and that he had been worried about "outside forces intervening", hence his caution in discussing the planned deal publicly.

China hopes 'vaccine diplomacy' will restore its image and boost its influence
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"Certain people don't want Taiwan to be too happy," he added, without elaborating, in a radio interview.

China, which claims Taiwan as its own territory, has repeatedly sparred with the island over the coronavirus pandemic.

Taiwan has been angered by China's assertion only it can speak for the island on the international stage about the subject, while Taiwan has accused China of a lack of transparency.

BioNTech signed a deal with Chinese firm Shanghai Fosun Pharmaceutical Group to exclusively develop and commercialise Covid-19 vaccine products developed using BioNTech's mRNA technology in mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan.

In return it agreed to pay up to $85m in licensing fees and invest $50m for a stake in the German firm.

BioNTech's development and distribution partner for the rest of the world is the US firm Pfizer.

Chen said BioNTech had not asked them to speak to Fosun, and the deal with BioNTech had not been "torn up", only that it was "pending".

BioNTech and Fosun did not immediately respond to a request for comment. China's Taiwan affairs office declined immediate comment. China is currently observing the week-long lunar new year holiday.

Taiwan announced late in December that it had agreed to buy almost 20m Covid vaccine doses, including 10m from UK drugmaker AstraZeneca, with the rest coming from the Covax global vaccine programme and an unnamed company.

Dominic Raab

Dominic Raab calls for ceasefires to enable Covid vaccinations

UK foreign secretary tells UN there is a moral duty to protect people in conflict zones

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Dominic Raab is chairing a UN security council meeting to try to bring ceasefires in countries such as Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen to enable vaccines to be distributed. Photograph: Mohammed Abu Obaid/EPA

Dominic Raab is chairing a UN security council meeting to try to bring ceasefires in countries such as Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen to enable vaccines to be distributed. Photograph: Mohammed Abu Obaid/EPA

Dan Sabbagh *Defence and security editor*
Tue 16 Feb 2021 19.01 EST

Dominic Raab, the UK foreign secretary, is to ask for ceasefires to be implemented in conflict zones so local populations can be vaccinated against coronavirus, arguing that the world has “a moral duty to act”.

The British minister is to chair a meeting of the UN’s security council in an effort to persuade members to agree a resolution calling for locally negotiated ceasefires in areas such as Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen.

“Global vaccination coverage is essential to beating coronavirus,” Raab will say at the meeting, reflecting concerns that wherever the disease is unchecked it could increase the likelihood of vaccine-resistant strains emerging.

But while charities welcomed the UK’s initiative, they called on wealthy countries to consider going further. Sam Nadel, Oxfam’s head of policy and advocacy, warned that the poorest countries enduring conflict risked not getting any vaccines without “a massive increase” in global production.

Nadel called on the British government to “unblock the supply problem by insisting vaccine science and knowhow is no longer treated as the private property of a handful of pharmaceutical corporations but shared with qualified manufacturers around the world”.

Last week the UK government came under criticism for refusing to halt the supply of bombs and missiles to Saudi Arabia that could be used in the war in Yemen, after the incoming Biden administration declared it would suspend such arms sales.

The UK estimates that about 160 million people are at risk of otherwise being excluded from vaccination programmes. “We have a moral duty to act, and a strategic necessity to come together to defeat this virus,” the minister is expected to add.

Ceasefires have been negotiated in the past to allow emergency vaccinations. In Afghanistan, in 2000 and 2001, warring factions agreed to stop fighting to allow over 10 million children to be vaccinated against polio, which remained prevalent in the country.

Wednesday's meeting has been called by the UK, which holds the monthly rotating presidency of the 15-strong UN body. It will also hear complaints from other member countries that not enough has been done to share Covid-19 vaccines fairly around the world.

According to research from Duke University's Global Health Innovation Center, high income countries have ordered 4.2bn doses of a Covid-19 vaccine, while the poorest countries have secured 670m. Britain has ordered 407m doses, about four times the size of its adult population.

Mexico's foreign minister, Marcelo Ebrard, said his country would highlight the inequality of vaccine availability across Latin America and the Caribbean.

"The countries that produce [vaccines] have very high vaccination rates, and Latin America and the Caribbean much less," Ebrard told reporters at a government news conference, adding that the situation was "not fair".

The UK said before the meeting that it wanted to support "equitable access" to the vaccines, and wants greater cooperation to help poorer countries with vaccine storage and managing the complex supply chains required to produce doses.

Covid is a chance to build a world where everyone has access to basic vaccines | David Miliband and Anuradha Gupta
Read more

It also wants more countries and other donors to contribute funding to the Covax initiative, which aims to allow 92 low or middle-income countries to buy vaccines in a bloc using money provided by wealthy countries. Despite recent cuts in the overseas aid budget, the UK has given £548m to the programme.

Formally, the UN discussion will review whether any progress has been made since last July, when the security council passed a resolution calling for a global ceasefire to tackle the pandemic.

That was sought by the UN secretary general, António Guterres, but only passed following several months of wrangling between the US and China. Critics said so far it has had very limited discernible impact on conflicts around the world, while new ones, such as the autumn war between Azerbaijan and Armenia, have flared.

2021.02.17 - Spotlight

- 'Beaten her black and blue for years' A month in the life of a women's refuge manager
- Amy Trigg Born performer with sci-fi dreams and a dizzying range
- Tights! Spatulas! Action! The madcap world of chain reaction videos
- Bolt from the blue Inside the hidden society of lightning strike survivors
- Framing Britney Spears review A sobering look at sexism and celebrity
- Ruth E Carter Nothing is set in stone until the camera starts rolling
- Lois Pryce's playlist 10 songs that bring back memories of my travels
- 'It is helpful to wear the uniform' Barrister's wig enjoys surprising popularity

Domestic violence

'He's beaten her black and blue for years': a month in the life of a women's refuge manager

Over the past year, reports of domestic violence have risen enormously – while refuge places are scarce. One woman explains what it is like trying to help those who have fled for their lives

The number of domestic-abuse-related deaths trebled in the UK in 2020, compared with 2019. Photograph: tapui/Getty Images/iStockphoto

The number of domestic-abuse-related deaths trebled in the UK in 2020, compared with 2019. Photograph: tapui/Getty Images/iStockphoto

Sirin Kale
Wed 17 Feb 2021 01.00 EST

The pandemic has had a devastating impact on women in abusive relationships, trapping them in their homes with violent, manipulative or controlling men. The UN described the global increase in domestic abuse as a "shadow pandemic", and in the first seven weeks of lockdown there was a domestic abuse call to UK police every 30 seconds. The Centre for Women's Justice noted the number of domestic-abuse-related deaths trebled in the UK in 2020, compared with 2019. At the heart of this storm are women's refuges, places of sanctuary that have seen their funding slashed in recent years. How are refuges coping? Here, we follow one manager over the course of a month.

14 December 2020

Every few days, Anna receives an urgent call: a woman needs a room immediately. This is one of those days. "There had been an incident quite recently; the police were involved, and she needed to flee," says Anna. But despite the desperate situation, there is nothing Anna can do. Christmas is always chaotic; this year, especially so. "The refuge is full," Anna says. "It

has been all year." She spends the morning ringing other hostels. Is there anywhere that may be able to fit the woman in?

Anna is a refuge manager at Idas, a specialist independent charity supporting people affected by domestic and sexual violence in the north of England. Before the pandemic, she tried to keep at least one of the eight rooms in her refuge free for women in urgent need. If necessary, she could hold it for a day or two to give the prospective occupant enough time to pack, say goodbye to family and friends – and, most importantly, plan an escape. This is especially important because leaving an abuser is the most dangerous time for victims of domestic abuse. But now there is a waiting list, and free spaces are snapped up immediately.

Anna, a mother of two, has been a refuge manager for 15 years. Born and bred in Yorkshire she is warm and open, but matter-of-fact. You can't be a crusading do-gooder and run a refuge – it's too dispiriting. After so many years witnessing violence against women and girls up close, idealism crystallises into pragmatism. Anna knows now that she won't be able to help all the women in her care – some of whom will return to violent abusers – but she has made peace with that. The most she can do is keep them safe while they are under her roof. To that she is absolutely committed.

Anna finds a space for the woman – but it is in the south of England. "There are a lot fewer refuge spaces available on the system [that refuge managers have access to] because of Covid," Anna explains. A new rail-to-refuge scheme – which allows survivors with a confirmed refuge place to travel free by train in England, Scotland and Wales – will cover the woman's transport costs. And as Anna is preparing to go home for the day, the doorbell goes. It's a woman dropping off a full Christmas dinner. "She said that Idas helped her in the past," says Anna.

Anna is touched, but not surprised. All week, donations have been pouring in. Chocolates and toiletries for the women; toys and board games for the kids. It's testament to the generosity of their local community, but it's more than that. Almost one in three women will experience domestic abuse at some point in their life. At this time of year, at Christmas, it's not something you forget.

Anna, the refuge manager at Idas. Photograph: Christopher Thomond/The Guardian

16 December

Today is the refuge's Christmas party. Shrieking children unwrap presents donated by local people under the lights of a twinkling Christmas tree. Staff members hover on the edges of the party. Cake, scones and jam are laid out on a table. Molly, a specialist children's worker, has set up party games for the children; the grownups play bingo. They dance to Christmas music.

Looking around, Anna is glad to see that Fatima is there. In her early 20s, she arrived a few weeks ago and is the youngest resident. She was brought to the UK for a forced marriage and her husband was violent – the marriage fell apart quickly, but returning to her family is not an option. "She has experienced horrific abuse," says Anna. "Her ex-husband did really degrading things to her."

Fatima's English is limited. The staff do their best to communicate with her, but there aren't any suitable interpreters and Google Translate has its limits. "She was a university student in her country," says Anna. "When you say: 'You must be very smart,' she beams. It's as if no one has ever said anything lovely to her."

Fatima spends most of her time in her room, coming out only to ask staff to go to the supermarket for her – she's too scared to go out by herself. But today Fatima is holding a cake she has baked. She sets it down with the rest of the buffet food, and gingerly perches herself at the fringes of the party, looking on.

She stays at the party for 15 minutes before it gets too much, and she slips back to her room. "She wouldn't have done that two weeks ago," says Anna. "There's no way." It is a tiny, faltering step forward, but it is progress.

17 December

Anna is visiting a domestic-abuse survivor – she had heard on the grapevine that the young mum was struggling. She arrives with armfuls of presents. "When she opened the door, she started crying, bless her," says Anna. The woman fled an abusive partner from another part of the UK. She doesn't know anyone nearby, and is isolated and lonely. Anna talks to her on the doorstep for half an hour, while her children open their presents.

The women's refuge movement emerged in the UK in the 1970s; a refuge in Chiswick, west London, was the first, created by second-wave feminists. "Battered wives" saw discreet newspaper advertisements and fled, arriving at the ramshackle residential house, which had mattresses on the floor and lengths of brown hessian demarcating personal space.

The refuge movement expanded rapidly from there. "Most were set up in women's spare rooms or in basements," says Prof Nicole Westmarland of Durham University, an expert in male violence against women. They offered not just a safe space, but were "consciousness-raising places, where women could realise that domestic violence was a political issue rooted in gender-based inequality".

Today, the sector is highly professionalised. Anna's refuge has six members of staff and each room is a self-contained unit with a kitchenette, table and fridge – the bigger rooms can house a woman and up to six children. There is also an institutional-looking lounge with games for the children, sofas and a TV, and a small garden. All the rooms are full, and five of the women are mothers, so there are eight school-age children in the refuge.

21 December

When she arrives, Anna runs into Melissa, a mum in her 20s, and her children, Tommy, a toddler, and Emily, who is under 10. Emily twirls around to show Anna her new dress – a gift from the Christmas party. “She was so giddy,” Anna says. “She told me that she had a lovely party and got lots of presents.”

Emily chatters excitedly about school. “If you saw her this morning,” says Anna, “you’d just see a happy little girl in a sparkly outfit. You’d have no idea what went on behind the scenes.” But at times Emily will recall details of her father’s abuse – reciting in a matter-of-fact, almost singsong way, how, for instance, he used to shout at her mum all the time.

Other children react to the trauma they have experienced by becoming taciturn. “There was a family in earlier this year; the children wouldn’t speak,” says Anna. “Their dad would go mad if they spoke at home because he didn’t want them making noise.” Molly helped them with play therapy, building up their trust until their thoughts and feelings about the abuse came tumbling out. Because of the funding shortages faced by refuges, not all can provide this. Other refuges, Anna notes, have to raise money through raffles and fun runs for these vital child support workers.

22 December

On the helpline, an IDAS staffer, Jill, receives a disturbing phone call. It is a woman called Maria. Her partner has been abusing her for decades. The violence is extreme, but she doesn’t have much evidence, like police or hospital visits. Now Maria’s partner is posing as the victim. This is something that Jill has experienced more of during Covid. “They try to manipulate you,” Jill says. (IDAS does support male survivors of domestic abuse and violence.)

Sometimes, the men make false allegations so they can claim for legal aid; at other times they want to punish their victims. Jill recently fielded a call from a perpetrator whose ex-partner had left him and taken their daughter with

her. “He told me that he wanted her ‘done’,” says Jill, “for taking his daughter.”

Maria’s partner has secured temporary custody of their children. “Her world has fallen apart,” says Jill. “She’s lost her children. He’s got away with beating her black and blue for years, and now she’s starting a battle, from scratch, to prove that he’s been abusing her. There is nothing in the system about the abuse. Where does she start?”

23 December

The refuge is quiet, with residents in their rooms, preparing for their Christmas celebrations. A local beauty bank delivers some goodies for the women. The government has just made yet another U-turn – people in lower-tier areas of England can only socialise in their Christmas bubbles for one day, not five. For Anna’s ladies – she *always* calls them her ladies – the announcement was a blow. “They were looking forward to visiting their family and friends on Christmas.”

She chats to Emma, a resident in her 20s with a small child. They’re getting ready for a walk in the park. She had been planning to visit her mum on Christmas Eve and have a friend over for a Boxing Day lunch. Now, she’s flat and upset. “She feels like her mum is missing out on watching her grandchild grow up,” Anna says. “You could feel her anxiety levels getting really high.”

Emma moved into the refuge after her abusive ex-partner was released from prison and found her. (The government has been releasing inmates early to help minimise the spread of coronavirus in prisons.) She had stayed in a refuge previously, after the abuse had escalated to the point that social services had taken her child into care. This time, Emma took charge and asked to come back to the refuge. “She didn’t want to stay in that situation and have social care remove her child again,” Anna says.

Emma can be one of Anna’s trickier ladies to deal with, as she puts it delicately. “It was a big decision for her to come here because she’s not someone who likes to live under other people’s rules. But she knows the refuge is the best place for her right now.” The truth is, no one wants to live

in a refuge. They're institutional spaces where women from all walks of life have to rub together regardless of whether they get on. Staff do their best to make the space as homely as it can be – before a new resident moves in, they make sure the room has matching bed linen and toys for the children. But there's a limit to what they can do.

Before Anna managed the refuge, she ran a hostel for homeless people. "A 42-bed hostel for single, homeless men with complex needs is easier to run than an eight-bed refuge," she says. "Because single men just want a place to wash and sleep for the night. But when women come to refuge, they have to flee a perpetrator. They're cutting ties with family and friends. They have to switch their phones' location services off. I've seen ladies who have been abused for 20-plus years. They may have drug and alcohol problems or severe mental health issues. Some have never been independent. Staff become everything to them."

A few years ago, they had a resident who had never even had a haircut or any money of her own. Because she wasn't allowed out of the house, she would harm herself so the perpetrator would take her to hospital. "We are social workers, drug and alcohol workers, and mental health workers. It can be chaos."

Idas also runs a phone line and community outreach service with three other refuges. Initially in the first lockdown in March, referrals dropped – women simply couldn't get away from their abusers for long enough to use a phone. And when they did, their calls often went unanswered, as council housing officers struggled to set up remote working. But in April, the floodgates opened. "It's been relentless," says Laura, who manages community outreach. Between April and December 2019, Idas managed 2,419 referrals. In the same time period in 2020, the figure was 3,485 – an increase of 44%. On average, Laura now manages 70 referrals a week – before Covid, it was closer to 50.

Alarmingly, many of these referrals are high risk: women who are facing serious harm or even murder. Such referrals often come through the police. "Lockdown has exacerbated a lot of abusive situations. People are getting to that breaking point much sooner," says Laura.

It's the same pattern across England and Wales – the Office for National Statistics reports a 7% increase in domestic-abuse related police calls from March to June 2020 compared with 2019. "The 'stay at home' messaging meant many women felt they couldn't escape during the first Covid lockdown," says Westmarland.

Men, too: a report Westmarland co-authored with colleagues at Durham University found that calls to the Men's Advice Line, a UK-wide service for male victims of domestic abuse, increased from 1,926 calls in March 2020, to 3,674 in May 2020, the highest since the service began in 2007.

It is too easy to blame the pandemic, says Cordelia Tucker O'Sullivan of the domestic violence charity Refuge. "Covid doesn't cause domestic abuse," she says. "It's not about being cooped up and angry, and lashing out. Domestic abuse is primarily a result of gender inequality, male entitlement, power and control." The surge in demand is because the pandemic has intensified the situation for victims. "They may have had respite dropping children off at school or visiting a relative," says Tucker O'Sullivan. "These opportunities for breathing space are now gone."

Local authorities are not legally obliged to house people fleeing domestic violence, so most refuges are funded by a mixture of local authority, police and central government budgets. And there hasn't been enough money in the pot for a long time. "Over the past decade, Refuge has seen funding cuts to around 80% of our services," says Tucker O'Sullivan.

For many women fleeing violence, the consequences are stark – they simply may not be given a space in a refuge when they need it; "64% of refuge referrals in England were declined last year, and the main reason was lack of bed space," says Tucker O'Sullivan. Women's Aid, a national domestic-violence charity, found that of the 243 victims turned away because of a lack of space in 2019-2020, 17 slept rough – one with her son – while 93 women sofa-surfed, until a space became free. Tucker O'Sullivan hopes the domestic abuse bill, which is about to pass into law, will improve matters by making it a legal duty for English local authorities to house victims and their children.

Of the 243 women turned away, almost half (43%) were from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. BAME service providers have been disproportionately affected by cuts. And women with no recourse to public funds because of their immigration status – such as Fatima – can find themselves at the bottom of the list. The domestic abuse bill does not make it a legal duty for refuges to house women without recourse to public funds. "They are massively failing a group of women who most need support," says Westmarland. (If Anna can't secure funding for a woman, Idas will pay for their room out of its own funds.)

Mothers and children at a women's refuge in Chiswick, 1974. Photograph: Hulton Deutsch/Corbis/Getty Images

24 December

Today, Anna has a catchup with Jessica, a long-term resident who is planning to move out in the new year. Jessica is in her 60s, and was pushed to the edge by the pressures of the pandemic.

"It was a lifetime of controlling behaviour," says Anna. "Not necessarily physical abuse, but financial, and isolating her from her family and friends – even her children." Jessica was with her partner for decades. She had tried to leave before, but went back. (Women often attempt to leave their abusers

several times before making a definitive break.) But during the first lockdown, the abuse became intolerable. She called the police, who put her in touch with Anna. Jessica slipped out of the house and came straight to the refuge.

Jessica is one of their success stories. “She wants to do some volunteering work,” says Anna, “and find a little place by the sea.” Most importantly, she is adamant that she won’t go back to her abuser, ever. “She has completely cut contact with him,” says Anna. “She’s talking about divorce.”

Not everyone can make as clean a break. Abusers are insidious, charismatic, calculating, cruel and volatile. They work their way into their victims’ lives like shards of glass. Sometimes, the victims find it too painful to remove them.

This was the case with Tina, who arrived about five or six years ago. She had substance abuse problems and poor mental health, and when she left the refuge she promised Anna and Jill, who was also working on her case, she would stay with a friend. Jill worked with the local authority’s housing team to place her in safe accommodation, but Tina was chaotic and didn’t always answer her phone. “I suspected she was going back to him,” Jill sighs.

When Jill got hold of Tina, she was indeed back with her partner. “I said to her: ‘I need you to understand that, in my professional opinion, I don’t think you’re safe.’” But Tina wanted to stay.

A few days later, Jill saw on the news that there had been a fire on Tina’s road. She knew instantly what had happened. Hours later, the fire brigade called. It was a probable murder. Accelerant had been used. Tina and her partner were dead. “I know in my heart of hearts that I did everything I could,” says Jill after a pause. “But I couldn’t stop her going back to him, and I couldn’t save her.”

25 December

Most of the residents have left to visit family. It’s just Jessica and Fatima on Christmas morning – Fatima has nowhere to go, and Jessica doesn’t feel safe

visiting her children in case her ex-husband tracks her down. Luckily, the two women have become friends.

In the afternoon, Lorna returns. She's in her 60s, and moved into the refuge in the autumn. She spent Christmas Eve with her child, but was too frightened to stay lest her ex-husband turn up.

For every woman who flees a domestic abuser after a sudden explosion of violence, there are women like Lorna, who are gradually worn down. "She got to the end of her tether," says Anna. "There was a lot of controlling behaviour. She didn't have access to money. There were a lot of subtle put-downs. She was stuck in the house with him telling her that she couldn't go to the shops or see her friends, and she finally realised that what she was living with wasn't normal."

Lorna's room is next door to Alesha, a woman in her 20s. Alesha is a night owl who likes to play music and chat to friends on the phone. It drives Lorna crazy. But not tonight. Not a creature is stirring. All is still, and all is well, and all is calm, in the refuge, this Christmas Day.

5 January 2021

A third national lockdown has been announced. Schools are to close, except for the children of key workers. (Women in refuges are allowed to continue to send their children to schools to minimise the disruption to their children's lives.)

Legally, the refuge counts as one household, meaning that residents don't have to wear masks in communal areas, but they are allowed to form support bubbles with another household outside the refuge, which poses a challenge for staff safety. "We don't know how many bubbles they're forming. People don't always keep to the rules," Anna sighs. Her office is in the middle of the refuge, and women often drop in for a chat without wearing masks.

But Anna's main concern today is Holly, a mother in her 30s with three children, all younger than 15. They fled Holly's ex-partner recently. He is an arsonist, and violent too. But two of her children are refusing to go to school. "They're anxious. They say they won't know anybody." Molly, the

children's worker, tries to persuade them, but it doesn't work, so she sets up home schooling for them instead.

Parenting in a refuge is hard. Mums may let their children skip homework or have McDonald's for dinner because they feel guilty taking them away from home. It's Molly's job to encourage them to reimpose boundaries. "She's really good at making sure the kids get back into a routine," Anna says. "School is the best place for them – they need the discipline."

7 January

Jill and Fatima go for a walk. It's only the second time Fatima has left the refuge, and the first time unaccompanied by a staff member. "She seems so much brighter now," says Anna of Fatima. "She's cooking and eating Middle Eastern food with the other ladies, which she never used to do."

14 January

A snow day. School is cancelled. Anna tries to drive to work, but her car is skidding all over the road, and she has to turn back. The mums take their kids sledging at a park. It's a good day.

18 January

Alesha is upset. Her children are in foster care. "It was a violent, volatile relationship, and the children were removed because of it," says Anna. "Her only hope of getting her children back is not to be in that relationship." Alesha came to the refuge in the hope of escaping her abuser. Since then, she has been fighting to get her children back; she hasn't seen them for more than a month. But now she has been told her family court hearing has been delayed for another month because of the pandemic. "She said that nothing ever goes her way," says Anna, "Nothing ever goes right."

22 January

Lorna is moving out. She's returning to her abuser. It's the way it goes sometimes. The main thing is to make sure things are as safe as possible;

Lorna's house is tagged by police, so that if there's an incident, they will come out straight away.

It is not that Anna has failed; Lorna's experience in the refuge has been positive. She's close to her children again. She has regained some self-esteem. "She's had a taste of what life can be like," says Anna. "Even though, to some, it might feel like a backwards step, she's moved on more than she would have done had she not come here." Yet Anna can't help but feel Lorna might have stayed if it wasn't for Covid. "People are isolated in domestic-abuse relationships, and then they come to the refuge to flee, but they're still isolated because they can't see their friends or leave."

Anna looks around the cleared-out room, then goes back to her office to check the new referrals. Within 24 hours, there is a new occupant – a woman in her mid-20s who was violently assaulted by a family member just before Christmas. He's in prison now, on remand.

Two more of Anna's ladies are moving on next week, but to council properties. Among them are Melissa and little Emily – Melissa is overjoyed. More women will arrive immediately. The cycle of male violence does not stop, but refuges like Anna's offer, if not quite a home, at least a place of greater safety and a chance for women to rebuild their lives.

Names, dates, ages and genders have been changed to protect the privacy and safety of the adults and children mentioned.

- *In the UK, call the national domestic abuse helpline on 0808 2000 247, or visit Women's Aid. In Australia, the national family violence counselling service is on 1800 737 732. In the US, the domestic violence hotline is 1-800-799-SAFE (7233). Other international helplines may be found via www.befrienders.org*

Spotlight onStage

Amy Trigg: a born performer with sci-fi dreams and a dizzying range

Our new series profiling theatre talents continues with a sparky, award-winning writer-actor committed to making her industry more inclusive

‘I was in an industry that wasn’t ready for me’ … Amy Trigg. Photograph: Claire Newman-Williams

‘I was in an industry that wasn’t ready for me’ … Amy Trigg. Photograph: Claire Newman-Williams

Arifa Akbar
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Wed 17 Feb 2021 01.00 EST

For as long as Amy Trigg can remember, she wanted to be a performer. Growing up in Essex, she fell in love with musical theatre and began ballet classes at five. She was born with spina bifida and did not see a single actor on stage using a wheelchair but that didn't deter her. Now 28, she has proven herself as a writer and actor with a rich, broad talent.

Speaking on Zoom, Trigg is charming, funny and disarmingly warm. As a performer, she has shown a dizzying range across dance, musicals and improvised comedy. She won acclaim for her parts in the Royal Shakespeare Company's The Taming of the Shrew and Measure for Measure, starred in the rock musical Tommy, and appeared in the Waterloo dance sequence for the hit film Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again, alongside Lily James and Hugh Skinner. "It was intense but so hilarious," she remembers.

She was one of two winners of the inaugural Women's Prize for Playwriting in 2020 and has also become a writer for the TV drama Ralph and Katie, which is Peter Bowker's spin-off to The A-Word. What came first, the writing or acting? "I knew I wanted to do something in theatre one way or

another. If I'm honest, I always wanted to be an actress first of all. But I also looked into directing, stage makeup and stage management."

Amy Trigg in Fusion at Sadler's Wells, London, in 2018. Photograph: Jane Hobson/Rex/Shutterstock

In 2013, she became the first wheelchair user to graduate from a performance course at Mountview, after which she found herself under-employed. "There were very few jobs for actresses in wheelchairs. Most of the theatres in London were not accessible. I felt I had the skillset for it [an acting career] but also that I was in an industry that wasn't ready for me."

So she started writing in the lull. She made a video of her talk Rearranging My Molecules, about being inspired to write and perform improvised comedy, which captured her warm and sparky personality. It led to the writer Scarlett Curtis approaching her to contribute to the book Feminists Don't Wear Pink (and Other Lies), alongside the likes of Keira Knightley and Gemma Arterton.

Trigg has seen greater inclusivity in recent times but there is some way to go on representation, she says, especially in the light of Sia's controversial film on autism. "I think deaf and disabled characters should be played by deaf and disabled actors. We should also be able to play characters who are not

specifically written as being D/deaf and disabled … People argue that it's impossible for disabled actors to play certain roles but there are clever ways to make someone look like they are walking, for example. If we can do crazy things with avatars, I think we can do this. And there needs to be more D/deaf and disabled creatives in powerful positions within the industry to enable this change."

Reasons You Should(n't) Love Me features a character with spina bifida and Trigg says she is caught in the paradox of wanting to feature disability in her work but being expected never to write beyond it. "I have been in pitching meetings where you can see they are waiting for the mention of a disabled character, and I say 'No, it's just a story about time travel.'"

There will always be a character who is disabled in her dramatic world, she says, "but I don't think all my work will be about disability. I want to write science fiction, and about superheroes. I would love to go into a writers' room where the projects are across genres and have as many different voices in there as possible."

From the CV

2021: Ralph and Katie, ITV Studios

2020: Winner of the Women's Prize for Playwriting with Reasons You Should(n't) Love Me, to be produced by Ellie Keel Productions and Paines Plough

2019: Taming of the Shrew and Measure for Measure, Royal Shakespeare Company

2018: Fusion, Sadler's Wells

2018: Mamma Mia! Here we Go Again

2018: The Sonnet Walks and Shakespeare in the Abbey, Shakespeare's Globe

2017: Goth Weekend, Stephen Joseph theatre in Scarborough and Live theatre in Newcastle

2017: Tommy, UK tour for Ramps on the Moon

2016: The Glass Menagerie, Nottingham Playhouse

Art

Tights! Spatulas! Action! The madcap world of chain reaction videos

‘If it was TV there’d be a stunt coordinator’ … Joseph Herscher perfecting his Morning Routine Machine, at home in Brooklyn. Photograph: Christopher Lane/The Guardian

‘If it was TV there’d be a stunt coordinator’ … Joseph Herscher perfecting his Morning Routine Machine, at home in Brooklyn. Photograph: Christopher Lane/The Guardian

Need your hair cut? Cake served? No problem! Lockdown has led millions to discover the work of Joseph Herscher and friends, whose absurdly complicated ‘labour-saving’ machines reveal the potential for magic in the everyday

Catherine Shoard
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Wed 17 Feb 2021 01.00 EST

“It’s one thing to maim myself,” says Joseph Herscher. “But maiming someone else? I’m not sure I could live with that. At least I’d have it on tape, but it’d still suck to be killed by one of my machines.”

Herscher, 36, is a chain reaction artist who works out of his bedroom in a Brooklyn flatshare. He builds elaborate contraptions using everyday items in the style of Rube Goldberg, the madcap American cartoonist and inventor.

An initial trigger – a lever being pulled or a marble released – sets off a sequence of unlikely connections climaxing in a daft goal: a stamp being licked, say, or a sandwich hurtling into his mouth. They are breathtakingly ingenious and often very funny.

The Busby Berkeley-ish carrots in Pass the Salt are the most purely glorious thing I watched last year. My young son can’t get enough of Power Tool Dinner Party. But we are not his only fans. The Lunch Feeder (asparagus archery, hotdog swing) has 100m views on YouTube.

Herscher's latest is a Morning Routine Machine to get you Zoom-ready in 30 seconds. An alarm clock triggers a flannel to be dunked then dragged across your face as you lie in bed. A ladle catapults moisturiser and an automatic mop rubs it in. Makeup is then applied by a huge, pre-painted sponge, strapped to a toy fire engine, which slams down a slope into the skin.

Testing the bellows, an unsuccessful element of the Morning Routine Machine. Photograph: Christopher Lane/the Guardian

In the video, released last week, it's introduced by Herscher, then tested by his friend Giselle. She looks worried. She was, he confirms. "She did basically have to push her face into a high-speed drill, which kept malfunctioning. And the car is very efficient, but it is a bit scary because it comes tumbling down at quite the speed. It took a while for her to feel comfortable with the shock."

No, he says, he doesn't have insurance. "If this was a TV show, you'd have checks. A stunt coordinator. But I'm just a one-man band. So I have to really have faith in what I'm building."

Generally, Herscher himself is the man in the machine, forever deadpan as grapes and spatulas dance about him, like some insane yet strangely

mundane Disney song-and-dance number. It's easy to look relaxed if you know the mechanics, he says.

The knives wielded by a spinning chandelier in The Hair Cutter are actually plastic. In The Cake Server (which co-opts a baby, smashes a laptop and is a good place to start), a hidden mirror stops him being decapitated by a wooden cartwheel and tiny bells are attached to the flying flowerpots.

Early prototypes of the Morning Routine Machine involved Nerf guns loaded with foundation and 10 fire bellows shooting makeup at close range. Both were scrapped. "I do have some moral responsibility. A lot of kids watch."

Herscher grew up in New Zealand, the son of musicians whose larky klezmer music – Franco-Jewish Gypsy music, big on accordions and handclaps – now soundtracks his videos. His mother chucked old junk in a box; he turned it into table football and a hands-free page turner. At university, he studied engineering, then worked as a computer programmer in Auckland.

Inspired by a Japanese TV show called Pythagora Switch, he and his housemates began to make their own chain-reaction machine. The others quit but Herscher plugged on for six months in his spare time, eventually filling a lounge with tubes, marbles, dominoes, kettles and – something of a signature trick – tea-lights that burn through twine, triggering a hammer.

It took Herscher three days to get one full, two-minute take, which ends with the smashing of a Creme Egg. He wept with relief, posted it online and vowed never to put himself under such stress again.

But the video went viral, brand commissions flooded in and Herscher quit his job. Twelve years on and he's one of a very small handful of full-time chain reaction artists in the world. He funds his work through a mix of client commissions, live events, contributions on crowdfunding platform Patreon and the tiny ad-revenue shares YouTube pays content creators.

That's how he knows 60% of his audience are male, predominantly from south east Asia and the US, that 90% of his work comes via the YouTube algorithm: ie suggested next videos, rather than organic searches. This is important because his income is dependent on views.

"The internet can be harsh. When a video doesn't do as well as you hoped a few times in a row it's like being slapped in the face over and over. Everything you do is immediately judged and quantified. And the system changes all the time."

A couple of years ago he made a short series back in New Zealand called What's Your Problem? in which he builds machines to help some characterful schoolchildren variously catch Santa, automatically feed a cat and prank a bully with an exploding lunchbox. Future episodes are not financially viable, after YouTube's introduction of curbs on data tracking and ads during content aimed at children.

"Often quite arbitrary aspects of it all twist the way you think about the art you want to make. The single most important choice I make is what to put in the thumbnail [the small photo that runs in a YouTube trail]. If there's not going to be a good image I have to seriously question whether I should make the machine." Anything showing food heading towards an open mouth tends to be a winner.

Of all the jobs affected by coronavirus, Herscher's is unusually insulated. He always works from home. Improvising with whatever was in the cupboard was bracing: "Constraint is often what creates innovation." Amazon helped, too, he admits. Even pre-pandemic, "I'm never going to find 10 fire bellows in the middle of Bushwick".

And Covid means audiences are perhaps more primed for his work. Cause and effect is suddenly on everyone's mind. Early reports about the spread of the disease often invoked chain reactions to illustrate how patient zero can infect millions. Interest in this kind of kinetic art has accelerated dramatically over the past year. Fresh examples pop up online every day as amateurs stuck at home fiddle about in their kitchens.

‘Constraint often creates innovation’ … Herscher in his home workshop. Photograph: Christopher Lane/The Guardian

Meanwhile, lockdown may mean we’re also more receptive to the main metaphysical joke: that the puff and palaver completely outweigh any benefits. Right back to the British artist William Heath Robinson, through to Wallace and Gromit, these machines are anti-automaton manifestos in the guise of efficient gizmos. Testament to the sort of resourcefulness we are now having to relearn – even to relish.

And they also seem particularly irresistible at a time of instability. “I think their appeal lies in seeing objects we never really thought had anything to do with one another come together in some kind of unexpected and perfect way,” says Herscher. “It imposes a sense of order on the chaos of the universe. It’s calming because the world is so seemingly confusing and random.”

In fact, his machines can appear to reveal order as much as impose it. Watching the contents of his cupboard miraculously collaborate taps into what Herscher calls a “primal human desire” to read a narrative into the seemingly unlinked. Patterns emerge as if by magic – hiding in plain sight, right there in your fruit bowl.

Increasingly, says Herscher, he's found the best results come when the objects dictate the design. In The Sandwich Maker, for instance – a recent invention with a superb vote-posting moment – an electric whisk madly scuttles along a board before hitching itself into position to jiggle a bowl of popcorn, from which emerges a ball that tips down a slope. Trying to predict the path the whisk would take was a non-starter. "I just gave in to the beater."

The other night he spent 15 minutes trying to get a bar of soap to fly in a predictable arc from the basin into the bath. "Everything has kinetic potential. If I drop something and it falls in an interesting way, then I'll try to repeat it. If it's consistent, I'll file that away at my library."

> I rarely get a take without 100 failures. But when it works everything in the universe just hangs together perfectly

The process of creation sounds 99% resignation to being a cog, and 1% thrill you might be a god. "I rarely get a take without 100 failures. It's very dejecting. But when it works, it's empowering and exhilarating. For that one moment, everything in the universe just hangs together perfectly."

What for me most distinguishes Herscher's work is its humour. He studies mime, Chaplin, Keaton, Lloyd, Tati and Mr Bean, in the belief that machines that operate in a vacuum, without human interaction, just aren't as interesting – or as funny.

"I'm designing an experience for a viewer. I'm thinking a lot about what they know at any given point, what will surprise them. I want to make the experience of watching them fun and delightful and not stressful and confusing."

Herscher's storytelling control, his expertise with rhythm, tension and pace, means his little videos bear comparison to some of the best scripted films. There are even red herrings. In Pass the Pepper, he trialled a revolutionary new element: the faux accident.

Three times, the machine appears to malfunction. A maze of tomato puree boxes collapses – yet the marble continues to its correct destination. Something awful happens to a MacBook Pro; or does it? A table flips after an overambitious dumbbells trick. It's a mess! But what lies beneath?

It is impossible to watch these rug-pulls without grinning. "I thought that it would be amazing to have people all round the world laughing at a video of a billiard ball – such a banal little object! It just shows the potential for magic and delight and play in the most boring things around us."

Herscher isn't sure how he'll next push the envelope, only that he must, to keep things interesting for himself, and for YouTube's all-important algorithm. There are plans for the world's smallest chain-reaction machine. For one on which you can mount a camera. For one entirely underwater.

He also wants to move out of New York, to a country with sufficient space for his studio not to be wedged between his bed and the door. "I now get really nervous if I have to get up to pee in the middle of the night and navigate all the machinery. That's not really sustainable."

Headed for a B&Q … Herscher. Photograph: Christopher Lane/The Guardian

Back to New Zealand, presumably? “It’s really isolated from the rest of the world, which is great during a pandemic, but it’s too small. It doesn’t seem like you’re living in the centre of the world, it feels like you’re watching them on TV.”

Instead, he’s thinking of London, probably Peckham, because it has a lot of pound shops and “a big B&Q”. I wonder if he’ll bring the Morning Routine Machine with him. My sense from the video was that Giselle might not be desperate to take it home.

He leaps to the machine’s defence. “It’s the only one out there! And it does legitimately work! Better than I thought it would.” He pauses. “I mean – she doesn’t look *great*. There were some issues around the lips. But from a distance, she looked beautiful.”

Band of three: the two other full-time chain-reaction artists

Steve Price, 26, San Diego

Steven Price, whose company, Sprice Machines, makes chain reaction art. Photograph: Courtesy: Steve Price

Herscher's collaborator on Pass the Salt, Price is best known for The Lemonade Machine and Pool Party: epic, jaw-dropping Airbnb takeovers constructed over a week with half a dozen like-minded builders.

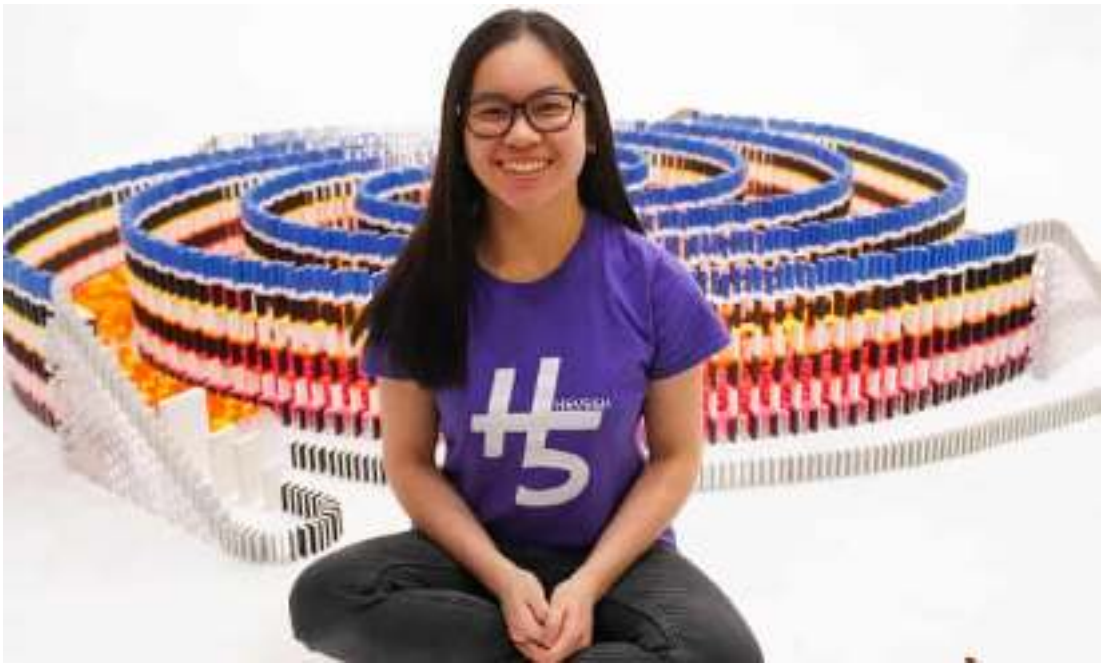
The former involved 117 moving elements and 86 takes over nine hours. The latter had 268 fails, as evidenced by the long shadows in the final version.

As with Herscher, Price became keen on the medium as a child, growing up in the rural midwest. "It's pretty cold for six months out of the year. So I was inside a lot. I looked at the different toys and objects I had and wanted to combine them to make something cooler than you could make with just one of the toy sets alone."

He works by instinct as much as planning – "it's just faster to try things than to calculate" – and believes the key is to "eliminate as many variables as possible so that the object has no choice" but to head in the direction you want.

Price's designs are staggering in their use of knives, jars of honey, printers, soft-close loo seats, mouse traps, roller skates and even bras. But he retains the most excitement, he says, for the humble mug: "It can roll, but there's also the handles and the insides for hiding things."

Lily Hevesh, 22, Boston



Lily Hevesh, a record-breaking domino artist. Photograph: Courtesy Lily Hevesh

Hevesh's primary medium is dominos: enormous, ingenious and frequently 3D topplings. She's broken records, launched her own toy set and later this year will be involved in a new domino competition show on US TV.

She frequently works with Price and teamed up with Herscher for an instructional video showing you how to make a cereal pourer. The two men's work is critically different from her own, she says, not only because they can endlessly reset their machines, which isn't feasible with 250,000 dominos.

"People just love seeing things get destroyed. But not in a super chaotic way. It's a controlled environment." She's particularly interested in how dominos could be employed in autism centres. "Something about the repetition seems to help people on the spectrum."

In the early days of the pandemic, James Corden used one of her displays as an explanation of the R-rate; Hevesh feels that the planning involved in her work has given her a considerable head start on such comprehension.

“I’m always thinking: what will happen if I do this? What are the consequences? Sometimes I feel like I live in the future rather than the present.

“I’m a very patient person. I understand that if you have a really big goal it’s going to take time and it should take time. And if you do get it within a day, you should question that.”

Inside the hidden society of lightning strike survivors

Guardian Selects
Life and style

Inside the hidden society of lightning strike survivors

After getting hit, they suffered devastating symptoms that wouldn't go away. It seemed no one could help – until they found each other

James Walker for Narratively

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Photograph: Matthew Kam/Narratively

The Jack Britt high school girls' soccer team was playing on a muggy evening in Fayetteville, North Carolina, when the sky grew dark. It was 30

September 2015. Shana Williams Turner, a 46-year-old teacher in the school's special education department, was supervising. She watched as the weather started to turn.

Thunder rumbled above, each clap bringing lightning closer. Shana saw a lightning bolt hit a grocery store across the street. Scared, she and the choir teacher, Richard Butler, ran to a nearby ticket booth to find shelter.

selects embed

Lightning struck again with a deafening crack. A transformer 30 feet awayexploded and burst into flames. Shana felt excruciating pain, as if her shoulders had been reduced to burning jelly, and she was thrown to the concrete.

Richard helped pick her up as other colleagues rushed over and asked what had happened. "I don't know exactly. I think I got struck by lightning," Shana replied.

"What do you need?" they asked repeatedly.

"I don't know what I need. But my arm is on fire, my feet are tingling and my chest hurts," she moaned.

Shana's 15-year-old son, Dillon, the youngest of her four children, had seen everything. A student at the school, he had been waiting for a ride home. "Mom," he cried. "You swore!"

Shana got up. By outward appearances, she seemed fine, if a little dazed. No one called an ambulance. Shana was stunned: "Did I really just get struck?"

Shana Williams Turner, lightning strike survivor, outside a Virginia hotel where a conference organized by Lightning Strike and Electric Shock Survivors International took place in November 2019. Photograph: James Walker/Narratively

She got into her car with Dillon and set off for home. As she pulled out of the parking lot, she called her sister. “Hey Ronda, can you look up on the computer what you do when you get struck by lightning?” There was a pause followed by some swearing.

“You go to the hospital!” Ronda shot back.

Shana had been to the local hospital before, but her mind felt hazy. “Ronda,” she said, as her chest tightened and the ringing in her ears grew louder. “I don’t know how to get there.”

Dillon texted Greg, Shana’s long-term partner, and told him what had happened. As Shana pulled into the driveway, Greg ran out of the house, helped Shana into the passenger seat, and sped to nearby Cape Fear Valley medical center.

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When lightning hits a person, it sends 300m volts of electricity across the body in three milliseconds. The current flows externally, disrupting or short-circuiting the body's electrical systems, such as the one that controls the heart. Cardiac arrest is the most common cause of death from a lightning strike. Brain damage from blunt-force trauma caused by the shock wave is also common. The jolt can severely burn skin, and in some cases it etches an intricate web of scars on the body that resembles the form of a lightning bolt itself, known as Lichtenberg figures, which fade within days for reasons unknown. Most people survive because the lightning hits the ground nearby or passes through a taller object such as a tree, or, in Shana's case, the transformer.

Greg pulled up to the emergency room entrance and Shana stumbled out. A security guard dragged her into the emergency room. When doctors learned that Shana had been struck by lightning, she was rushed on to a gurney and hooked up to an electrocardiogram. Nurses dashed around her in a blur, taking more vitals. Later, a doctor said that her blood pressure had been abnormally high but that there had been no burns or obvious signs of injury. For that reason, no additional tests were ordered.

Over the following weeks, every muscle in Shana's body ached and her ears rang. She felt constantly fatigued. She struggled to recall words, and her short-term memory failed her. One day, she was in class and one of her students approached her. She went to say his name but couldn't remember it. She hesitated, stuttered. "Give me a minute," she said, turning toward the blackboard to cry.

When Shana saw a neurologist, he was confused after she described the ringing in the ears, the hot tingling sensations, and how her right arm would swell up for no apparent reason. It was only later, when Shana drove to a cardiologist's office and let them see her arm pulsate before their eyes, that they began to take her seriously. She was prescribed six medications, including a painkiller, an antidepressant and a potent anti-fatigue medicine.

Shana and her support dog, Bolt, at the conference. Photograph: James Walker/Narratively

The complications stemming from the lightning strike extended beyond the physical. Shana struggled to juggle her work commitments and her family life, which included three teenagers. She became scared of public places; a flash from a camera or a sudden noise could trigger her anxiety. She was also petrified of the possibility of being caught outside during a thunderstorm. When dark clouds approached, her joints would ache and her anxiety would soar.

Shana and Greg began to argue. Shana felt that he was not trying hard enough to understand the complexities of her growing health problems – and perhaps even doubted them altogether. When she had to visit the neurologist, Greg forgot to request time off work to go with her. It was there that she says she learned she had damage to the right frontal lobe, a portion of the brain that helps control memory. The neurologist said that this was almost certainly the result of the lightning strike. According to Shana, Greg never asked how it went; he found out two months later during another argument. They separated soon after, bringing a seven-year relationship to a close.

After a year or so, Shana was asked by her insurance company to undertake an “independent medical examination” to challenge her workplace injury

claim. After four hours of IQ, psychological and personality tests, Shana says, a neuropsychologist concluded that most of her symptoms were the result of stress. He explained away Shana's brain damage, too, saying that she had probably had a stroke sometime in the past year. "The thing with you is you have absolutely no burns," he said, according to Shana. She was stunned; she had read academic research that said that physical injuries, including burns, occur in less than half of lightning strike cases. Soon, her financial support would be terminated, with workers' compensation no longer covering any of her medical expenses. After the appointment, she went to her car and broke down in tears.

Even keeping her medication and doctor visits to the bare minimum, Shana's medical bills still cost her $8,000 a year after insurance. She struggled to pay these bills and support her family on a teacher's salary; she fell behind on the payments for her car, which was repossessed.

Shana felt increasingly alone and started to sequester herself from the world. She watched as friends messaged her less and less. Then, one day, she received a text from her sister's friend. It was a link to a Facebook page called "Lightning Strike and Electric Shock Survivors Support Group". Shana got sucked in, spending hours reading survivor stories like her own. No one believed them, either. They were organizing a conference in Virginia. She quickly booked a bus ticket.

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Walking through the sliding doors of Comfort Inn & Suites, Shana didn't know what to expect.

Lightning strike survivors at the conference. Photograph: James Walker/Narratively

Lightning Strike and Electric Shock Survivors International was founded in 1989 by Steve Marshburn, who had been working behind the drive-up till of a bank 20 years earlier when lightning struck, traveling through a speaker and breaking his back. He has had surgery 48 times since. Back then, he says, there was no research being done on lightning injuries, so he started to document the effects he was experiencing and created a support group – organizing two conferences a year, so that survivors of lightning strikes and electric shocks could swap stories and tips on how to cope with their often debilitating injuries, as well as the skepticism of those around them.

In the conference room, two dozen people, most older than 50, sat around a table facing a projector screen. To the left of the entrance, three graying women were selling books and ring-bound academic papers, with titles like Life After Shock, Vol I and Behavioral Consequences of Lightning and Electrical Injury.

A middle-aged man with a thick brown chevron moustache beckoned Shana to the corner of the room. It was Gary Reynolds, a three-time lightning strike survivor who had contacted her via the Facebook group. She sat beside him. Soon, survivors started telling their stories one by one around the table. “Hi.

I’m Shana. I’m from Fayetteville, North Carolina,” she told the group before breaking into tears. Lisa Reynolds, Gary’s wife, came over to comfort her. Someone else brought a box of tissues.

“What you’re experiencing, most of us have been through,” a man named Norman Baldwin reassured her from across the table. Norman was a former coalminer from Boone county, West Virginia, who had survived a high-voltage electric shock from a piece of heavy machinery in 2005. “You’re not an outsider here,” he said.

Steve Marshburn, founder of the organization Lightning Strike and Electric Shock Survivors International, and his wife, Joyce. Photograph: Narratively/Courtesy James Walker

Tears streamed down Shana’s face as she gathered herself. She told them about the medical confusion surrounding her injuries and the disbelief from family and friends. The room nodded along knowingly. A man named Rodney Burkholder came to her side and stayed throughout. He says the group was of enormous support after he received a shock from a low-hanging power line in Virginia. His neighbor, who was nearby, heard a zap and watched as Burkholder fell from his ladder to the ground, where he drifted in and out of consciousness. “Where is Michael?” he asked his confused wife, who knew no one by that name. Friends have suggested that

it might have been a reference to the archangel Michael. Lightning and electricity have long inspired awe and allusions to the divine. One group member even put “Thor” on his nametag, for the Norse god of thunder.

Shana was the only newcomer to the group. For much of the conference, whenever there was a break between speakers, longtime members approached to offer advice. She was given a wad of academic papers about lightning injuries. Keith, an electric shock survivor who uses a wheelchair, told Shana to make a list of things she was grateful for. The group could see how fragile Shana was and offered her constant hugs, aware of the devastating effects an electric injury can have on one’s mental health. The group conducted a survey in 2017 of 595 of its lightning strike members and found that 280 of them suffered from depression and 67 were suicidal. Steve Marshburn, the founder, has personally talked 27 people out of suicide. “God,” he said, “gives you strength to do what you got to do.”

Toward the end of the conference, a man named Johnny approached the projector screen. An airplane engineer, he was on shift when lightning hit the aircraft he was working on and threw him to the ground. He showed the group a local news report in which he’d been interviewed just after it had happened. He explained that he’d continued his shift afterward, since he seemed fine, but that he had later developed a host of debilitating symptoms that had kept him out of full-time work for two years. Shana listened from her seat, noting the similarities between his story and hers, and she thought about how grateful she was that she had found people who actually understood her experience first-hand. The next day, Shana left Lynchburg emotionally drained but happy, believing that she had found a new family. She hasn’t missed a conference since.

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Shana’s journey toward accepting herself post-strike can be found inked across her body. On her upper-right shoulder blade, she has a tattoo of a lightning bolt striking a butterfly, which signifies the new her. On her ankle, she has a tattoo of an interlocking chain that she says represents the hold the lightning will always have on her. Attached to the chain are charms detailing her story: a thundercloud for the strike, a hand grasping a lightning bolt for her getting a grip on new challenges. Most important, though, she has

charms for her four children and two grandchildren. “They are my life,” she says. “I’m alive for them.”

Shana’s tattoo of an interlocking chain around her ankle, representing the hold the lightning will always have on her. Photograph: Narratively/Courtesy James Walker

In 2019, just as she got the last of those tattoos, Shana had started to come to terms with her new life. She was keeping to a strict routine, plotting her day step-by-step. When she got out of bed in the morning, she took her pills. She always kept her keys on a hook and her wallet in the car, otherwise she’d forget them, and she no longer carried a purse, as she too often put it down and then walked off without it. The constant pain continued, but Shana took measures to manage it. And with the help of her family and the support group, she started feeling less isolated. Shana adopted Bolt, a great dane puppy being trained as a support dog. When Shana drives, Bolt sits in the back with his head on the front console and listens to Shana’s breathing. If it starts to slow, a sign that she is dozing off, Bolt puts his head on her shoulder and nudges her with his nose.

Meanwhile, Shana’s eldest daughter pressed her to sign up for a couple of dating sites. Shana agreed, but she made sure she was upfront in her profile that she had been struck by lightning, which she had grown to accept as part

of her identity. In January 2020, Shana met Don. A New Yorker with a low-cut peppered beard, Don drove over an hour to her local Taco Bell, where, over chicken tacos and a Nachos BellGrande, she told him what it was like being struck by lightning. Don was humble and nonjudgmental, and there was an instant attraction – it felt as if they had known each other for ever. In late April, Don moved in.

Many couples have something – a first date, a first kiss, a first holiday – that marks a watershed moment in their relationship. For Shana and Don, it was their first thunderstorm. Outside, on the front porch, Shana watched as dark, rumbling clouds approached. Her joints started to ache and her chest tightened. Don took her hand and led her inside without saying a word. He turned up the TV to drown out the thunder and held Shana close under her blanket. "Everything's going to be OK," he told her. "I'm here."

- In the US, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is at 800-273-8255 or chat for support. You can also text HOME to 741741 to connect with a crisis text line counselor. In the UK and Ireland, Samaritans can be contacted on 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.org or jo@samaritans.ie. In Australia, the crisis support service Lifeline is 13 11 14. Other international helplines can be found at www.befrienders.org

This story originally appeared on the digital storytelling platform Narratively. Looking for more great work? Here are some suggestions:

- The masked vigilantes coming for your horrible boss
- Her best friend was her secret stalker
- The heroines of Halifax and the world's greatest explosion

Television

Framing Britney Spears review – a sobering look at sexism and celebrity

The hit documentary arrives on Sky and Now TV, and explores the feeding frenzy that has surrounded the pop star since she was 10 years old

Framing Britney Spears. Photograph: Sky

Framing Britney Spears. Photograph: Sky

Lucy Mangan
@LucyMangan
Tue 16 Feb 2021 17.30 EST

The measure of Britney Spears' celebrity can be taken by the fact that Sky has brought the New York Times documentary about the singer's life to the UK so quickly after it became a huge hit and talking point in the US. And by the near-certainty that it was already too late. Social media had instantly filled with advice on how and where to watch the programme illegally online and everyone who wanted to has done so – easily at first, as someone posted the entire thing on YouTube almost the minute the official broadcast was over, and with slightly more difficulty after it was taken down.

It's also a measure of her celebrity that the documentary was made at all. Spears has been a star in the celebrity firmament since, alongside the likes of a tiny Christina Aguilera, Justin Timberlake and Ryan Gosling, she was cast in The Mickey Mouse Club, Disney's all-singing, all-dancing children's TV show, in 1992 at the age of 11. She went supernova at 16 with her debut single (and album), … Baby One More Time, and has remained a superlative performer and tabloid fodder ever since.

The betrayal of Britney Spears: how pop culture failed a superstar

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The ostensible motivation of Framing Britney Spears is to investigate the controversy surrounding the conservatorship (a kind of imposed power-of-attorney-on-steroids) given to her father, Jamie, after Spears was involuntarily committed to a hospital psychiatric ward in 2008. “The only thing he ever said to me was: ‘My daughter’s gonna be so rich she’s gonna buy me a boat,’” recalled Spears’ record marketing director. “And that’s all I’m going to say about Jamie.”

This investigation was done relatively poorly, given the power and resources of the NYT, even in these journalistically straitened times. It mostly pulled together the information already out there – either generally, about this extreme form of control over a person’s life and assets, or specifically, about Spears’ circumstances.

Most of this had already been done by a group of fans who began a successful (in terms of its virality and traction-gaining) online protest campaign under the hashtag #FreeBritney. To express their support, they have gathered outside the Los Angeles court where Spears has begun a push to get her father replaced as conservator by an independent administrator. But the NYT was unable to verify the source of the anonymous voicemail that, claiming to be from a paralegal who had worked on the case, had given so much impetus to the movement. Nor was there anything else offered to solidify the long-felt discomfort and “common sense” distrust of Jamie’s motivations. His lawyer recently said: “Jamie Spears has diligently and professionally carried out his duties as one of Britney’s conservators, and his love for his daughter and dedication to protecting her is clearly apparent to the court.”

What the documentary did provide was a reconstruction of Spears’ career through a modern, post #MeToo lens. There is nothing stranger, of course, than the recent past – nor, in certain areas, more appalling. One moment from one of her earliest TV appearances – on the TV show Star Search, belting out Love Can Build a Bridge at the age of 10 with preternatural power, musicality and poise – could stand for the whole. After her barnstorming performance, the sexagenarian host Ed McMahon tells her she has pretty eyes and asks if he could be her boyfriend. You can see

bafflement, discomfort and a desire to be polite chase across the child's face. Politeness wins out. "Well," she says. "It depends."

Questions about her breasts (implants? No implants? The world needed to know) and virginity (she grew up in the Bible belt and her image initially traded in all-American dream-girl tropes) followed as she grew up. And once the "bad boyfriend" years, marriage(s) and pregnancies followed, so did paparazzi pursuits and tabloid narratives about promiscuity, unfit motherhood and all the vicious rest. Then came the notorious – heavily papped – head-shaving breakdown, which only stoked the fire.

This was a well-curated assemblage of interview footage and commentary from people there at the time – one who had worked with most big boybands noted that not one of their members was ever scrutinised to anything like the degree Spears was. It comprehensively showcased the overt and systemic misogyny Spears (and by extension any young, female performer) faced and faces, within the industry as well as beyond. Rehearsal footage shows a young Spears replying loudly but calmly to an unheard voice: "I am *not* a diva. I just know what I want."

The complicity of us all in feeding the frenzy that has surrounded her for 30 years, and the power we hand to the men in charge remain, even and especially as we assure ourselves that a sober documentary cannot be part of it. A point to ponder.

Film

Interview

Ruth E Carter: 'Nothing is set in stone until the camera starts rolling'

Nadja Sayej

The Oscar-winning costume designer of Black Panther talks her illustrious career as well as her future, including what to expect from the Marvel sequel

Ruth E Carter: ‘Afrofuturism is about trying to make a difference for tomorrow, trying to make a change.’ Photograph: Joe Scarnici/Getty Images for National Geographic

Ruth E Carter: ‘Afrofuturism is about trying to make a difference for tomorrow, trying to make a change.’ Photograph: Joe Scarnici/Getty Images for National Geographic

Wed 17 Feb 2021 02.03 EST

There were a number of historic breakthroughs as a result of Marvel's blockbusting adventure Black Panther: the highest-grossing film from a black director, the highest-grossing film with a black lead and the first ever black winner for the best costume design Oscar.

The winner was Ruth E Carter, whose major moment of recognition came after a career filled with trailblazing work which is being celebrated in Ruth E Carter: Afrofuturism in Costume Design, a 40-year retrospective at the Scad Fash Museum of Fashion + Film in Atlanta.

Chadwick Boseman remembered by Ruth E Carter
Read more

Until 12 September, the exhibition will showcase over 60 costumes from African-inspired Wakandan outfits to designs worn by Oprah Winfrey and Denzel Washington.

"I define Afrofuturism in a very humanistic way," said Carter to the Guardian. "How are we able to use technology so we can be a part of what shapes tomorrow? When you can sit for your own purpose, you're crafting your tomorrow."

Afrofuturism is many things: an art movement, the term being coined by culture critic Mark Dery in 1993, a philosophy on science that incorporates African culture with technology and an inspiration for creators including music group Sun Ra and author Octavia E Butler.

"When you see a protest march like Black Lives Matter, it's people being empowered to change their future," said Carter. "It ties into systemic racism and abolishes that mindset. Afrofuturism is about trying to make a difference for tomorrow, trying to make a change."

Photograph: Chia Chong/Photography Courtesy of SCAD

The exhibition features costumes from Selma, Malcolm X and Do the Right Thing, shown alongside sketches, research material and ephemera.

For her Black Panther designs, Carter was influenced by indigenous tribes across the continent, while incorporating African design influences, like neck rings worn by South African Ndebele and textiles from Ghana (she used a sheen, triangle motif on the superhero suit as a nod to the sacred geometry of African patterns).

“The opportunity to infuse the different cultures around Africa was a huge honor,” said Carter. “I felt there were still people who have this backwards mindset that Africa is just one monolithic place, people living in huts with flies on their faces.”

Among the Black Panther costumes on view, there is one worn by Dora Milaje, the tribe of women who served as special forces to Wakanda. The designs included beadwork inspired by the Turkana tribe in Kenya, the Himba tribe in Namibia and South Africa’s Ndebele tribe.

“To go into the tribes and use some of the techniques that they used was a language that we were able to adopt and present in a Marvel film,” she said.

“We combined the two in such a way that not only honored Africa but the African diaspora. It gave people something to be proud of to call their own.”

Danai Gurira, Lupita Nyong’o and Florence Kasumba in Black Panther. Photograph: Marvel/Disney/Kobal/Rex/Shutterstock

Something she’s loved has been seeing how kids would dress up as Black Panther characters for Halloween. “It empowered children to dress up like their favorite characters because it gave them ownership,” she said. “It’s very powerful what that film could do for people.”

There are also costumes from Ava DuVernay’s 2014 film Selma, as Carter turned Oprah Winfrey into the voting rights activist Annie Lee Cooper. “Being on the set of Selma, I feel like I was witnessing Ava DuVernay embody her own Afrofuturism,” she said. “She is a visionary creator. That is the mindset.”

It’s a testament to the much-overlooked job that costumes designers do, day in, day out, as visual storytellers in their own right – they can bring an audience into a decade, an era, seamlessly, with expert nuance. “There’s a leader, it’s the director,” said Carter. “They’re constantly mulling over how to best project the story. Sometimes they’re big adjustments, other times they’re small adjustments. You have to be in tune with those adjustments.”

She really cut her teeth on the set of Spike Lee's 1989 film Do the Right Thing. "When we made that film, we were seeing a future of black people in storytelling," she said. "It was a forward-thinking idea when we made that film."

A still from Do the Right Thing. Photograph: Everett/Rex/Shutterstock

The exhibit features a number of outfits from the film, including a handmade T-shirt that says "Bed Stuy or Die" (Carter says it was painted by a local Brooklyn artist).

"Spike Lee had a clear vision for the film, to support the community," said Carter. "Brooklyn has always been a hub for small businesses and the African diaspora. We wanted to show that Brooklyn has a strong sense of culture. We brought in a lot of African fabrics and colors that are very saturated, it looks like a mosaic."

The film was certainly a brighter version than what Brooklyn was like back in the late 80s. "If you look into the real Brooklyn, it was a duller palette, a greyer tone," she said. "We were creating a painting; a bit of surrealism went into it."

The exhibit also features a selection of retro 1970s costumes worn by Eddie Murphy for his role in the 2019 film Dolemite Is My Name. The actor calls

Carter "the best out there" in terms of costume design.

Carter is working with Murphy again for the comedy sequel Coming 2 America, out in March. "This is African royalty," said Carter of her work for the film. "We want to honor Africa, we want to honor the first movie and still want it to be modern and fresh."

The new film will show more of Zamunda, the African kingdom where Prince Akeem, Murphy's character, comes from. "We didn't see much of Zamunda, if at all, in the first movie," said Carter. "We just saw the deity with the royal bat on their throne. Now we get to see more of Zamunda. We were excited about telling that story."

Garcelle Beauvais in Coming 2 America. Photograph: Courtesy of Amazon Studios

All the crowns and jewels were 3D-printed, she says. "They were made on the computer, except one," explains Carter. "One crown from the original movie shows up here, James Earl Jones wore his original crown. For this film, we were all about the opulence of royalty."

Right now, Carter is in production for Black Panther 2, scheduled for release summer 2022. "I can't give away anything – I probably wasn't even

supposed to say that much," she said. "It's an honor to work on a film like Black Panther 2."

When she won her Oscar for Black Panther, she hoped it would open the door for more diversity in a field that's been lacking. "I hope through my example that there is hope and other people can come on in and win an Oscar just like I did," she said in 2019.

Even after all these years of experience in the wardrobe room, Carter says it boils down to instinct when knowing the right look for a film.

"You never really know," she laughs. "It feels good and you do what you like and present what you love. It's a journey, you're adjusting all the time. Nothing is set in stone until the camera starts rolling."

- Ruth E. Carter: Afrofuturism in Costume Design is at Scad Fash Museum of Fashion + Film in Atlanta until 12 September

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The soundtrack of my travelsTop 10s

10 songs that bring back memories of my travels: Lois Pryce's playlist

Desert rider … Lois Pryce has completed several epic motorcycle rides including London to Cape Town and Alaska to Tierra del Fuego. She is pictured in Monument Valley, US. Photograph: Lois Pryce

Desert rider … Lois Pryce has completed several epic motorcycle rides including London to Cape Town and Alaska to Tierra del Fuego. She is pictured in Monument Valley, US. Photograph: Lois Pryce

Songs from a desert hut in the Sahara to a pick-up truck in Alaska – and a men's prison in Belgium – have kept the author going in lockdown

Lois Pryce
Wed 17 Feb 2021 01.30 EST

The Old Home Place by JD Crowe and the New South

Boats have featured in my travels ever since the mid-90s when, aged 22, I bought a narrowboat to live on. I was working in London, but the boat was in Cheshire. I'd never piloted a narrowboat before and I had two weeks off work to get it down south. The soundtrack that came to define this eventful voyage was Kentucky banjo player JD Crowe's groundbreaking, eponymous 1975 album, now so revered it is known simply by its catalogue number: 0044. I became obsessed with this opening track, not just for JD's banjo mastery but for its nostalgic longing for a simpler, rural life, as I made my slow watery way through the backwoods of my own country.

Suku Suku Bam Bam by King Sunny Ade

'A recurrent theme has been the yearning for desert travel.' Photograph: Lois Pryce

I've spent the pandemic recovering from long Covid, which has given me plenty of time to revisit old adventures, as well as optimistically plan future ones. A recurrent theme has been a yearning for desert travel. This track

takes me back to my motorcycle ride from London to Cape Town and the surreal Algeria-Niger border post in the middle of the Sahara.

Marked by just a couple of huts in a vast sea of sand, the scenery didn't change across the frontier, but everything else did. After the austerity of Tuareg north Africa, suddenly I was being high-fived by customs officers while they danced in the sand to the joyous sounds of neighbouring Nigeria's musical hero, King Sunny Ade, booming out of their tape recorder.

Country Boy by The Heptones

Sign for Vinyl Sunday in Drapers, near Port Antonio, Jamaica

A couple of years ago I spent January in Jamaica, mostly around Port Antonio on the island's wild, eastern coast. In a tiny nearby village called Drapers, a weekly institution called Vinyl Sunday takes place – a DJ night of ska, rocksteady and reggae classics, all played off original 45s; the venue is ostensibly a roadside bar but the dancing spills out into the road. When a car comes along everyone simply skanks out of the way to let it pass and the party continues. The sight of two young guys grooving in the moonlight to this track is a moment of pure joy that will stay with me forever.

Crimson and Clover by Tommy James and the Shondells

The moon sets over Mount Susitna, across Cook inlet, in Anchorage, Alaska. Photograph: Dan Joling/AP

My first solo overland journey was a motorcycle ride from Alaska to Argentina. While waiting for my bike to arrive in Anchorage, I hired a pickup truck and cruised the snowy highways, radio tuned to the local oldies station. It didn't take long to realise their playlist consisted of about 10 tracks on relentless rotation. Fortunately, one of them was this symphonic, psychedelic masterpiece. Although hailing from the east coast and better known for his bubblegum pop hits, Tommy James's Crimson and Clover with its pulsing crescendos, spacey lyrics and trancey outro somehow served as the perfect sweeping soundtrack to Alaska's equally epic landscape.

Ça Plane Pour Moi by Plastic Bertrand

The Jolenes, behind bars, sort of, in Belgium

During my 10 years as the banjo player in bluegrass band The Jolenes, we were booked to play a series of gigs in Belgian men's prisons. In an attempt to tailor our set to our host country, we learned Plastic Bertrand's 1977 punk-pop hit, which transposed surprisingly well to the bluegrass genre. It was a tough crowd. All eyes were on our vocalist, gamely launching into the solo opening line in her best schoolgirl French. Confused looks passed among the audience. Then, as the instruments joined in and we burst into the unmistakable "Ooh-woo-ooh-ooh" of the chorus, the penny dropped. The crowd went wild – prisoners and guards alike, up out of their seats, dancing in sheer abandonment to Belgium's unofficial national anthem.

Hello Stranger by Emmylou Harris

Baja peninsula – ‘where my love affair with deserts began’. Photograph: Steve Casimiro/Getty Images

Mexico’s Baja Peninsula is where my love affair with deserts began nearly 20 years ago, and I try to return as often as I can. The best musical travel memories are often formed around a fleeting moment of carefree communion (think the Tiny Dancer scene in Almost Famous). This track belongs to such a moment: singing with friends in the back of a pickup truck, rolling down Baja’s Highway 1. It was originally written and recorded by the Carter Family in 1937, but Emmylou’s vocals take it up and into the sublime. It’s the theme song of any lonesome traveller who has known the kindness of strangers.

Train Kept A-Rollin’ by The Johnny Burnette Trio

Six months into my ride from Alaska to Argentina, I found myself standing stock-still under a speaker in a supermarket in Panama City. For the previous month I had been travelling alone through Central America. I’d been roughed up by the Honduran police, outrun bandits in Nicaragua, and not spoken English for weeks (this was pre-social media and I had no mobile phone). Detached and isolated, I was missing home, friends and family – and pining for my record collection. Then, inexplicably, this song from my

teenage rockabilly years came over a supermarket PA. I stood transfixed for the full two minutes and 14 seconds. My spirit revived, I got back on the bike and gunned it all the way to Tierra del Fuego.

Jerusalem Ridge by Kenny Baker

The Time Jumpers perform at the Station Inn in Nashville. Photograph: John Russell/AP

One summer I packed my banjo (and husband) into a vintage Russian sidecar outfit and we set out to drive across the US, from Richmond, Virginia to Seattle. The first part of the trip was spent hopping from jam session to jam session across the Carolinas, Tennessee and Kentucky. My banjo skills paled in comparison with the locals', but I received a warm welcome nonetheless. The only session I did not dare to join was at Nashville's legendary Station Inn where every Sunday the world's greatest bluegrass pickers get together to kick some serious ass. This is where I first heard Jerusalem Ridge. I texted my fiddle-playing friend back home: "We have to learn this tune!" In lockdown I finally nailed it, but not quite up to this speed!

Talagh by Googoosh

Googoosh left Iran in 2000. Photograph: Sarah Lee/The Guardian

Iran is the country I most long to return to, and many lockdown hours have been whiled away listening to this track and watching dreamy tours of Persian gardens on YouTube. It was on my first visit there in 2013 that I discovered the phenomenon that is Googoosh. Iran's superstar singer and actress reached peak success in the 1970s, combining Eastern melodies and instrumentation with western rock and funk, but the Islamic revolution of 1979 stopped her career dead. In 2000 she left Iran and re-emerged with a sellout world tour but still remains largely unknown outside of her home country and the Iranian diaspora. This song transports me back to arriving in Iran for the first time and the astounding hospitality and warmth of the Iranian people.

Pata Pata by Miriam Makeba

Lois Pryce and her trusty motorbike at the Cape of Good Hope, South Africa

My London to Cape Town motorcycle ride involved dodging landmines in Angola and tackling AK-47-toting soldiers in the Congo. It ended, rather unceremoniously, with me pushing my bike the final few yards to the Cape of Good Hope. After 10,000 miles of reliable service my motorbike had conked out with the end literally in sight. When I eventually fixed it and limped to a hotel in downtown Cape Town, I collapsed on the bed and turned on the TV, to be greeted with the glorious sight of Mama Africa herself, performing Pata Pata. I couldn't have asked for a better welcome to South Africa, or a more jubilant finale to my journey.

• Lois Pryce is the author of Revolutionary Ride: On the Road in Search of the Real Iran (Nicholas Brealey/Hachette) among other books. Her website is loisontheloose.com

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Barristers

'It is helpful to wear the uniform': barrister's wig enjoys surprising popularity

A 17th-century piece of horsehair is an important part of the criminal justice system, argue its wearers

The wig is helpful in equalising the status of barristers and in asserting their independence, say its wearers. Photograph: PjrNews/Alamy

The wig is helpful in equalising the status of barristers and in asserting their independence, say its wearers. Photograph: PjrNews/Alamy

Esther Addley
Tue 16 Feb 2021 12.33 EST

The justice secretary, Robert Buckland, is animated about the conduct of some lawyers, and what he intends to do about it. Invited by the Daily Mail

this week to give his views on the immigration system, Buckland said he intended to bring in reforms to stop the public "being taken for a ride" by lawyers bringing challenges to prevent the last-minute deportation of their clients.

Taking on "activist lawyers" is one thing, but it was on another subject that Buckland became particularly heated. No, he told the newspaper, it was not time to phase out the wearing of wigs in court. Or as he put it: "Never, never, never. I make no apology for it, and it will never happen on my watch."

With much in the justice system demanding urgent attention, from the longrunning crisis in legal funding to plummeting rates of rape convictions to an enormous backlog of cases due to Covid, Buckland's animation on the subject of barristers' dress may raise eyebrows.

Lawyers across the various legal jurisdictions of the UK have worn gowns and wigs since at least the 17th century, with their use being formalised in English common law in the 1840s. Stiff white horsehair wigs are certainly anachronistic and to outsiders frequently baffling.

For that reason, solicitors in England abandoned wearing wigs in the 1820s and many courts have done the same, from the civil and family courts more than a decade ago, to the UK supreme court in 2011, to the Scottish court of session three years later.

But for those lawyers who continue to wear wigs, including criminal barristers and others at trial or in the court of appeal, there is little enthusiasm to change the status quo, according to James Mulholland QC, a senior barrister with more than 30 years' experience, and the chair of the Criminal Bar Association.

"The wig is a very important part of the criminal justice system," he says, "because barristers are independent lawyers fighting for an individual and putting their case forward. They have no personal interest in the case. The wig emphasises their anonymity, their separation, their distancing."

John McNamara, who specialises in defending criminal cases, agreed, saying that wearing a wig is generally popular even among his younger

peers.

“I’m probably the first to acknowledge they are a bizarre thing, when you look at every other job. But I’m very in favour of them.”

Wigs bring a solemnity to proceedings, he says, and “as a younger barrister, it certainly helps level the playing field. If you’re against someone who has more experience, you feel that with both of you wearing wigs and gowns, your physical appearance doesn’t matter as much, because you’re recognised by the judge and jury as being qualified to deal with the case.”

They can become very uncomfortable in a hot courtroom and are awkward to carry everywhere, he says. But when he first meets a client, he likes to be wearing his wig and gown, “because I feel that it gives them a sense that I’m a professional doing the job, in the same way that you have reassurance with a doctor with a stethoscope”.

To Zoe Chapman, a barrister at Red Lion Chambers, wearing a wig has occasionally been helpful in ensuring she is recognised, “and I know some of my BAME colleagues report being repeatedly mistaken for the defendant, for example, at court.

“If you don’t meet the physical stereotypes of a barrister – male, white, perhaps older – it is helpful to wear the uniform because it stops any awkward conversations.”

On the other hand, she says: “They are rather ridiculous and perhaps contribute to an impression that the law, the legal system, is out of date. I don’t share the lord chancellor’s passion for a 17th-century piece of horsehair.”

While the subject of barristers’ dress comes up for debate periodically, says Mulholland, there are other, more urgent topics for the government to be discussing.

“We have a system that has crumbled due to lack of investment. We need now to have sustained reinvestment in the criminal justice system. So that, once again, we have a justice system of which we are truly proud.

“The wig always was a manifestation of that justice system but I’m afraid retaining the wig on its own will not be sufficient. It needs to be the wig and a considerable amount of money in the system. That is the answer.”

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OpinionCoronavirus

Humour over rumour? The world can learn a lot from Taiwan’s approach to fake news

Arwa Mahdawi

Matt Hancock should spend less time watching Hollywood films and more time studying the Asian country’s innovative approach to misinformation

Butt of the joke ... Taiwan's premier, Su Tseng-chang, fighting misinformation with his backside. Photograph: Sam Yeh/AFP via Getty Images

Butt of the joke ... Taiwan's premier, Su Tseng-chang, fighting misinformation with his backside. Photograph: Sam Yeh/AFP via Getty Images

Wed 17 Feb 2021 02.00 EST

Matt Hancock, we learned recently, got a few pointers on how to shape the UK's vaccine strategy from the 2011 movie Contagion. I don't know if that is something I would boast about if I were the UK health secretary, but, look, it is great that the man is not shy about seeking out diverse sources of advice. Still, he might want to think about looking towards Taiwan, rather than Hollywood, for further inspiration.

Taiwan has had only nine confirmed Covid deaths so far. The island of almost 24 million people managed to snuff out the virus without having a nationwide lockdown. In October, there was a big Pride parade. Life is mostly back to normal and the economy is doing well.

There are numerous reasons why Taiwan has handled the pandemic so successfully. It got burned by Sars in 2003, for one thing, and subsequently

developed a robust pandemic playbook. It also had an established culture of mask-wearing. But what has struck me most about Taiwan's response is its strategy of developing what Audrey Tang, the digital minister, has described as "nerd immunity".

Inoculating people from misinformation and tackling the "infodemic" are key to fighting the coronavirus. Tang, Taiwan's first transgender government minister and a self-described "civic hacker", has done this by fostering digital democracy: using technology to encourage civic participation and build consensus.

Tang has also quashed faked news by implementing a 2-2-2 "humour over rumour" strategy. A response to misinformation is provided within 20 minutes, in 200 words or fewer, alongside two fun images. Early in the pandemic, for example, people were panic-buying toilet paper because of a rumour that it was being used to manufacture face masks; supplies were running out. So, the Taiwanese premier, Su Tseng-chang, released a cartoon of him wiggling his bum, with a caption saying: "We only have one pair of buttocks." It sounds silly, but it went viral. Humour can be far more effective than serious fact-checking.

So, is Boris Johnson shaking his bum the answer to the UK's coronavirus problems? Probably (definitely) not. The lesson here is that a healthy democracy is built not from the top down, but from the bottom up.

- Arwa Mahdawi is a Guardian columnist

OpinionCoronavirus

Disabled people in care homes are at risk – why aren't they a priority for Covid vaccines?

Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett

I dreaded the news of an outbreak in my brother’s care home. This is the nightmare Jo Whiley and her sister are now living through

- Coronavirus – latest updates
- See all our coronavirus coverage

‘As ever, being disabled means having to continually fight the system.’ Photograph: PA

‘As ever, being disabled means having to continually fight the system.’ Photograph: PA

Tue 16 Feb 2021 08.42 EST

Since the pandemic began more than a year ago, one of my greatest fears has been losing my brother, who lives in a care home. He is in his late 20s, is severely autistic and has epilepsy, as well as other complex needs. He is extremely vulnerable. According to Public Health England, people with severe learning disabilities are six times more likely to die from Covid-19 than the general population. In my brother’s age group, the 18-34 bracket, the death rate is 30 times higher.

Then there is the added risk of where he lives. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), living in a care home is a “major factor in the increased exposure of people with learning disabilities to Covid-19”. The communal nature of these facilities, combined with how much contact is required between care workers and residents – my brother needs help with everything, from washing and dressing to preparing food – makes transmission much more likely.

Jo Whiley offered Covid vaccine before sister in care home with diabetes Read more

This is terrifying for families, many of whom are still waiting for their loved ones in care homes to be vaccinated and dread the news of an outbreak. This is the nightmare that the DJ Jo Whiley and her sister Frances are now living through.

If my brother did fall ill, he would be unable to communicate his symptoms. His epilepsy means that a high temperature could cause a life-threatening seizure. Were he admitted to a hospital, he wouldn't really understand what was happening. If treated using tubes for ventilation he would probably pull them out, and the fear might make him aggressive, so he could pose a risk to staff and patients. My fears for his life should he become ill were not helped by news about disabled people being sent "do not resuscitate" forms.

Then in January, we received the news that, along with other care home residents, my brother would be receiving the vaccine. I cried with relief. But the feeling was to be short-lived. After announcing that all care home residents in Wales would be vaccinated by the end of January, the Welsh health and social services minister, Vaughan Gething, said that he had meant only elderly care home residents.

To our shock, my brother was placed in category 6 of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) priority list. His carers were distressed and confused. They had all been vaccinated, and furthermore, the care provider's English residents had all been vaccinated too.

The JCVI guidelines focus on age groups rather than taking into account the "complex needs" of individuals such as my brother. At the same time, there is flexibility when it comes to making decisions about vaccine prioritisation under the UK's devolved health system. What has emerged is, essentially, a postcode lottery.

In England, there seems to be more willingness to take personal circumstances into account at all levels: government, health board, and GP. Some GPs have spoken to disabled people and their advocates and agreed to move them up the list on the basis of their being "extremely clinically

vulnerable". Other doctors, health boards and local authorities have diverted spare, perishable doses of leftover vaccines to care homes for disabled people.

However, Wales's adherence to the JCVI list has been especially rigid, and Welsh Labour's intransigence when prevailed upon to think again has been depressing. I have spent the past two weeks on the phone and sending frantic emails to everyone I could think of – the GP, our assembly members, the health board, public health, various charities – while crying my heart out in between. Every day we had to wait felt like the day my brother could become sick. As a family we felt left behind.

On Friday, the care home finally received news of a vaccination slot for my brother. This was a decision that was made on a GP level, due in part, I suspect, to the letter the care manager wrote to the doctor laying out all the ways in which my brother is extremely vulnerable, as well as the advocacy of our family. The other residents in my brother's care home, as in other Welsh care homes, are still waiting. Like the rest of group 6, they could be waiting until April (the Welsh government says it hopes to be more flexible with groups 5-9, but we will see how that works in practice). So while I am jubilant, I am also fearful for the 3,500 severely disabled people in care homes in Wales, and for the people across the UK who face similar battles.

It is still a mystery to me how the JCVI can lump all severely disabled people together when being in a care home puts a person at so much extra risk. Furthermore, it's unfair that access to a jab for severely disabled people is dependent on being noisy and knowing who to lobby, and having the time to do so. The postcode lottery is unjustifiable and puts added strain on disabled people, their families, their carers and their doctors.

How the Covid pandemic could end – and what will make it happen faster | Devi Sridhar
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Analysis by the ONS last week showed that six in 10 Covid deaths up to November last year were of people with a disability. Throughout this pandemic, disabled people and their families have been forced to confront the possibility of mortality. We have also had to face the fact that some

people do not deem disabled people's lives to be important or worthy, and would happily see them thrown under the bus if measures to protect them harm the economy. After 10 years of ideologically driven suffering at the hands of the Conservatives, the discriminatory tone of many lockdown sceptics has been a hard pill to swallow. Do not resuscitate letters are still being sent out.

When my brother gets his jab this week, I will be over the moon. It brings me one step closer to seeing his smiling face – it has been more than a year now since I have been able to visit. But I will also think of all the families who are not so lucky, and of those vulnerable people in care homes who, like Frances, caught Covid unnecessarily while they were waiting for a vaccine. I cannot imagine the fear and fury that Frances, Jo and her family are feeling. As ever, being disabled means having to continually fight the system. It's exhausting and it's unfair, and people will die because of it.

- Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett is a Guardian columnist

OpinionKeir Starmer

Keir Starmer's leadership needs an urgent course correction

Tom Kibasi

I helped elect the Labour leader, but his first year has seen an unnecessary war on the left and the lack of any authentic vision for the country

‘Starmer was the candidate blessed with the most intrinsic talent in [the leadership contest] and he still has it in him to turn things around.’ Keir Starmer at PMQs on 10 February. Photograph: Jessica Taylor/AFP/Getty Images

‘Starmer was the candidate blessed with the most intrinsic talent in [the leadership contest] and he still has it in him to turn things around.’ Keir Starmer at PMQs on 10 February. Photograph: Jessica Taylor/AFP/Getty Images

Tue 16 Feb 2021 09.00 EST

It makes sense for those who want to see Labour return to power to examine the lessons of Tony Blair's electoral victories: he was, after all, the only Labour leader to have won an election in half a century. Not such a surprise, then, that Keir Starmer has asked Peter Mandelson for help, according to reports at the weekend. As one of the strategic architects of Starmer's successful leadership campaign, however, I believe that after a year in the job he appears to have learned the wrong lessons and needs to alter course.

Blair understood the need to bring his party together and to keep them on his side; it was not until his second term in office that he broke with the Labour membership over the Iraq war abroad and public service reform at home. "We cannot protect the ordinary against the abuse of power by leaving them to it; we must protect each other. That is our insight, a belief in society, working together, solidarity, cooperation, partnership. These are our words. This is my socialism, and we should stop apologising for using the word." That was his first conference speech, a few months after being elected as leader of the Labour party. The first commitment on the famous pledge card of the 1997 election was to abolish the assisted places scheme and use the money to reduce class sizes for five- and six-year-olds – precisely the kind of antagonistic politics designed to appeal to the party faithful (and so widely used by Jeremy Corbyn).

The contrast with Starmer is stark. In his first year as leader, he has provoked a completely unnecessary war with the party's left. The fact that Starmer received more votes in 2020 than Corbyn polled in either 2015 or 2016 showed that the Labour membership recognised a different approach was needed. Some 40% of those that voted twice for Corbyn voted for Starmer. His campaign correctly assessed that Labour members were never the baying mob that much of the press made them out to be and that they could be persuaded to back a different approach. A full-frontal assault on the membership was both unnecessary and avoidable.

It was obvious enough to the public that Sir Keir Starmer QC, a distinguished former director of public prosecutions, is not Jeremy Corbyn. It was therefore strategically foolish to expend so much political capital making that negative point rather than positively defining the new leader of the party. The political logic appears to be that Corbyn is despised in "red wall" seats and so the new leadership would benefit from politically

spanking him. All it has done is to remind the public of Labour's divisions and to keep the conversation stuck in the past. As the former deputy leader Tom Watson pointed out during the Corbyn years (to cheers from Labour's right), you "don't enhance your brand by trashing your record".

When Starmer attempted to expel his predecessor from the Labour party, his office gleefully briefed that it would be his "clause IV" moment. But this is a spurious analogy. There was a democratic vote on the new clause IV; it was an act of persuasion, not the brute application of formal power. The message was that Blair had the courage of his convictions, would confront vested interests, and was prepared to take risks.

Whether in his keynote speeches or in weekly jousts at prime minister's questions, Blair attacked the Tories with gusto. Those attacks may have started on competence but never ended there: Blair was always careful to move on the argument to the Conservatives' underlying values and free-market ideology.

Starmer has instead let focus groups define his strategy, which is to go easy on the government, rather than developing a clear message of his own. This is profoundly naive: the public will always say they dislike politicians "playing politics". Letting randomly selected members of the public set the political tone is followership, not leadership. And going easy on the Tories was not the inevitable answer to a dislike of incessant squabbling during a national crisis. Starmer could have set out what a Labour government would do differently and why.

A successful political project must have an intellectual core. It demands an analysis of the present moment and a way forward for the country in the years to come. In his acceptance speech and every major speech thereafter, Blair set out the values, principles, and positions of the New Labour project that would carry the party into government and define the way in which they governed for 10 years.

In contrast, just as Ed Miliband had before him, Starmer has attempted a clumsy embrace of "blue Labour" and the politics of faith, flag and family. Parts of its analysis are compelling – that people crave strong relationships, a feeling of belonging, and dignity at work – but overall it points out

problems and not possibilities. It is a political dead end. If Starmer were to depart as leader tomorrow, he would not leave a trace of a meaningful political project in his wake.

What's more, Boris Johnson's great appeal is his perceived lack of artifice; what Westminster sees as buffoonish comes across to many as sincerity and authenticity. Attempting to manufacture a connection with the electorate by wrapping Labour in the union jack plays straight into Johnson's hands. Starmer's innate problem was always that he would lose to Johnson on the who voters would "rather have a pint with" test. It would've been better to emphasise his integrity – not pretend to be someone he wasn't – and question Johnson's honesty. Instead, his team have torpedoed his defence and left him open to being defined by the Tory party and rightwing press.

Meanwhile, the Tories themselves have been let off the hook for their disastrous mismanagement of the pandemic and for their dire Brexit deal, which has led to a slump in exports. And the government can now point to a stunning success in the form of its vaccines programme. The partnership between AstraZeneca, Oxford University and the government could prove to be a template for industrial policy. And the latest proposals to dismantle the internal market in the NHS show a government that is prepared to be more pragmatic and less ideological than many might have imagined. All these are signs that power won't be handed to Labour on a platter at the next election.

In last year's leadership contest, it was right for Labour members to vote for a change from a political project that had hit the buffers. Starmer was the candidate blessed with the most intrinsic talent and he still has it in him to turn things around. But a radical change in his approach is now needed if he is to become a great leader of his party and the next prime minister of this country.

The country cannot afford for Starmer to waste another year being hard on Labour and soft on the Tories. If that was not the strategic intent, then he must ask himself how it became the outcome. It's not what the opposition is there to do. It's not what a country dealing with a terrible death toll, a deep recession and the disruption of a hard Brexit needs. As the polls show, it's a journey to nowhere. Starmer must mend his relationship with his party and

confront the Tories. That might sound like obvious advice. But it seems that it still needs saying.

- Tom Kibasi is a writer and researcher on politics and economics

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Guardian Opinion cartoon
Gavin Williamson

Steve Bell on Gavin Williamson's free speech crusade — cartoon

Opinion Vaccines and immunisation

I'm an epidemiologist. I'll be glad to get whatever vaccine I'm offered

Gideon Meyerowitz-Katz

The rapid development of effective, safe vaccines in just under a year is something of a scientific miracle

‘Even the least effective vaccine available appears to reduce the risk of the things we care about most – hospitalisation and death – by a very large amount.’ Photograph: Michael Dantas/AFP/Getty Images

‘Even the least effective vaccine available appears to reduce the risk of the things we care about most – hospitalisation and death – by a very large amount.’ Photograph: Michael Dantas/AFP/Getty Images

Tue 16 Feb 2021 11.30 EST

At the start of the pandemic, it was very hard to predict anything. There were predictions of endless Covid-19 pain, wave upon wave of sickness and

death, and fears that we would be stuck with painful trade-offs between our health and livelihoods for years to come.

But the vaccinations have changed everything. The light at the end of the tunnel is now so much closer than we could've hoped back in March 2020.

Few people would've – could've – predicted the speed with which we have developed vaccinations. If you had asked most scientific professionals what was a realistic timeline for effective vaccines to be rolled out, most answers would've run to years. And this was an understandable assumption – prior to Covid-19, the quickest vaccination development took four years, and many vaccines took far longer than that.

Covid-19 was first sequenced on 10 January 2020. The first Covid-19 vaccination not as part of a clinical trial was given on 8 December 2020 in the UK. 333 days in total to go from the most basic science to an effective, safe vaccination that is already saving lives across the world.

AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine approved by Australia's drug regulator
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It's really something of a scientific miracle.

But with this miraculous success has come a slew of arguments. Should we be going with the most clinically efficacious vaccine that will block more transmission? What about herd immunity – which vaccine will provide us with the most protection long term?

To an extent, these discussions are important. Despite the early stage of the worldwide vaccine rollout, there is some data that certain vaccines have proven more effective in the short term against both the initial virus and its variants. If our aim is to keep Australia from having any disease outbreaks at all, as we have done so well with our Covid-19 restrictions, there's a reasonable debate to be had about which vaccine we want to use.

But equally, it's easy to miss the woods for the trees. Even the least effective vaccine available appears to reduce the risk of the things we care about most – hospitalisation and death – by a very large amount. While individual trials

were not powered to detect a statistically significant effect, the overall impact of vaccines seems to be that they reduce your risk of getting really sick from Covid-19 even if they don't stop you from getting the disease entirely.

On top of this, herd immunity isn't a sure-fire bet no matter the vaccine. We can deal with variants in the short term, perhaps, but when we consider the really long term, things become inherently uncertain. If one vaccination prevents onwards transmission for 24 months, but the protection wanes and then disappears entirely over the course of a decade – similar to, for example, the whooping cough vaccine – then herd immunity would be much harder to maintain. We might be left in a situation where, similar to influenza, we all have to get vaccinated every year, except instead of it being a public health bonus it's a national necessity because otherwise the virus will break out again in the community.

Given that the disease is unlikely to be eliminated in much of the world any time soon, we have to deal with the unwelcome fact that people will be bringing coronavirus into the country for the foreseeable future. SARS-CoV-2 will continue to mutate, and as I said at the start, making predictions is something of a fool's game.

All that being said, we can deal with what we know now, and what we know now is that all of the approved vaccines are safe and effective. Yes, there is some debate over whether, from a public health standpoint, the long-term benefits of one immunisation over another are important. I'm not trying to stifle that conversation – it's a discussion we need to have.

Our understanding of Covid and the vaccines is constantly evolving. That's a good thing | Abby Bloom
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But we should take a moment and consider where we were in February 2020, and how amazingly far we've come since then. We may have to live with Covid-19 for a time longer, but even the least effective vaccine approved so far is a level of success that no one predicted a year ago.

In Australia two vaccines have so far received approval from the Therapeutic Goods Administration: the Pfizer vaccine, which has an efficacy rate after two doses of 95%, and the Astra Zeneca vaccine, approved on Tuesday, which has an efficacy rate of 62%. A third vaccine, Novavax, with an efficacy of 89% in phase 3 trials, has been purchased in advance by the federal government but not yet approved for use in Australia.

So which vaccine will I be getting, as an epidemiologist and public health worker? Well, I agree wholeheartedly with Nobel laureate Professor Peter Doherty on this one: I'll take whatever I'm offered (and be glad to have it).

The best vaccine is the one that's in your arm.

• Gideon Meyerowitz-Katz is an epidemiologist working in chronic disease

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OpinionMental health

What it's like to be on both sides of a mental health section

Rebecca Lawrence

As a psychiatrist and a patient, I know how painful it can be. No amount of legal reform will change that

‘Few doctors entered medicine or psychiatry to be in a position of depriving people of liberty. It is a huge thing to do, and it isn’t supposed to come easily.’ Photograph: Loïc Venance/AFP via Getty Images

‘Few doctors entered medicine or psychiatry to be in a position of depriving people of liberty. It is a huge thing to do, and it isn’t supposed to come easily.’ Photograph: Loïc Venance/AFP via Getty Images

Tue 16 Feb 2021 11.00 EST

When I was first admitted to hospital, far away from where I now live, it was with the threat of the Mental Health Act (1983) hanging over me. The

horror lives with me still, with surprising clarity. The idea of losing one's liberty and being powerless to prevent it, whatever you say, is not easy to imagine. In fact, the more you say, the worse it gets, and there is a feeling of duality – of wanting to say all you are really feeling and thinking and also wanting to say anything that might get you out of the situation.

The result, for me, was that I was de facto detained, in that I agreed to admission only under duress, so had none of the rights that should come with actually being detained, even though that would happen if I tried to leave. Fortunately, it was a short admission, but it was very frightening.

In addition to lost liberty, I believed, wrongly, that being detained would mean I could never become a psychiatrist. I had been told this as a medical student, and it had stuck. I was training as a GP at that time, but hoped later to switch to psychiatry. I also thought that travel to certain countries could become impossible.

Pandemic has had negative impact on mental health: poll
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It felt far more like being a criminal than a patient; the use of the word *patient* doesn't feel apt here, as it hardly describes what it is like. "Sectioned" – meaning to be detained under one of the various sections of the act – is a word that is still used fairly frequently, and it has developed some unfortunate connotations. Recently, the law has been independently reviewed, and that review formed the basis for a white paper published by the government in January. The aim is to "to put patients at the centre of decisions about their own care and ensure everyone is treated equally". This is a good thing to aspire to, but I doubt if it will always turn out that way, even after reforms are implemented.

Liberty is a human right that many of us don't even think of until it's at risk. But it can never be unconditional. The rights of all interweave in such a way that makes it impossible. People who are mentally ill may present a risk to themselves and need protection; risk to others is far less common, but can have tragic consequences if not acted on. Sometimes illness is obvious, but sometimes it can be very challenging to assess. It may be difficult to know

whether this is a crisis that will quickly resolve or a more serious illness requiring assessment and treatment.

I managed to get on the wrong side of the act on one or two further occasions after returning to Scotland, which has a separate Mental Health Act, also currently undergoing its own independent review led by John Scott QC. Both were fortunately brief; my memory of the circumstances is very poor and I have chosen not to remember them, in so far as I can. More distressing was another occasion when I was an informal inpatient, and asking to leave. The threat of detention hovered once more, but the consultant came to see me and allowed me to go home, perhaps recognising the distinction between unhappiness and illness. And I was probably lucky as he knew me well; the outcome could have been very different.

There is always a power imbalance between psychiatrist and patient, and this is only increased by the possibility of detention. The proportion of inpatients who are detained has grown, as a natural result of decreasing overall bed numbers, and that must impact the experience of being in hospital for all patients. Nurses aren't jailers, but they can't let detained patients leave. Psychiatric medication can be distressing to take at the best of times but some people have no choice, and it is up to the nurses to administer it.

I work in addiction psychiatry, and few of my patients ever get detained. There are many other reasons why I chose it, but I am very grateful for this aspect. Having glimpsed the other side, I find it personally very difficult to use the Mental Health Act. This doesn't mean that I think it shouldn't be used; on the contrary, it undoubtedly saves people's lives and reduces suffering. I recently spoke with one of my trainees about this, and it made me realise that it is right to feel bad when you detain someone. Few doctors entered medicine or psychiatry to be in a position of depriving people of liberty. Trainees, in particular, need to understand that it is a huge thing to do, and that it isn't supposed to come easily.

The Mental Health Act can be complicated to understand, and a combination of misunderstanding, acute illness, and being prevented from leaving hospital is terrifying. The resulting distress should not be underestimated, and may not be fully alleviated by recovery and removal of detention. I think this is because both parties know that a line has been crossed, and that it

could happen again. As a patient, this can be very difficult. As a psychiatrist, it should be.

- Rebecca Lawrence is a consultant psychiatrist

- *In the UK, Samaritans can be contacted on 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.org. You can contact the mental health charity Mind by calling 0300 123 3393 or visiting mind.org.uk*

OpinionRape and sexual assault

Trauma like mine doesn’t have a gender. But too many men need to imagine a woman they love to feel empathy

Amy Remeikis

I was saved from an attack by people who wondered ‘What if it were our daughter.’ Did the others who continued driving past me only know men?

‘A woman’s value should not depend on the worth placed on someone else’s daughter. A woman should not need to wear another daughter’s face to be heard.’ Photograph: Alamy Stock Photo

‘A woman’s value should not depend on the worth placed on someone else’s daughter. A woman should not need to wear another daughter’s face to be heard.’ Photograph: Alamy Stock Photo

Tue 16 Feb 2021 11.30 EST

There’s a cape that survivors of trauma carry with them, like a shadow whispering against their necks.

You never know when you’ll be forced to wear it.

It engulfs you so suddenly it’s wrapped around before you recognise its weight, thrown on by Proustian madeleines better left in the dark.

Smells which transport you back to dark, confused spaces, phrases which send you reeling to another time, another you.

Australians don't need a father figure, Scott Morrison. They need a prime minister | Katharine Murphy
Read more

Noises. Photos. Seeing the date. Casual remarks or unexpected touches. Everyday, harmless actions which catapult you from the now to the moment you became someone else.

Your body always remembers. It starts in the stomach, in that deep, dark place you keep unwanted feelings and spreads. Clutches your heart. Captures your breath. Clouds your brain.

You can tell yourself you're safe, but your body remembers when you weren't and the cape wraps around you tighter, dragging you back. Nowhere is safe. Not home, not work, not bathrooms, not schools, not streets, not your own bed.

Back to the bitter shock of the moment you realised you had no power. That your wishes, your wants, your agency as a person no longer counted. The terror of wondering if these would be your last moments, the helplessness of your life no longer being yours to control, the sickening realisation your body no longer belongs to you and part of it never will again.

Survivors carry those feelings with them, always and forever, like stones you can't remove from your shoe.

And when you hear someone else's story, you're ripped back into yours. You are them, and they are you, and you pick up their stones and carry them with you, add their story to the tapestry of your cape.

Those who speak their own stories will inevitably hear from others, desperate for an anchor amid their own churning emotions.

As a woman who has spoken about her sexual assaults, including rape, my messages are filled with strangers and friends wearing their own capes, who recognise themselves in the despair and rage within others.

Women who are not sure if their assault was rape because the perpetrator was a friend or loved one. Women who realised their first sexual experience was an assault. Men who had no idea they knew a sexually assaulted woman (statistically, they know more than one). Men who want to assure you

they're different. Women who share a load they have carried silently for decades.

A man raped me, another tried to. They were not animals. They were men | Amy Remeikis
Read more

And those who want you to know they can't imagine what it's like, because "I just think, what if it were my daughter?"

The second time I was attacked, I was pulled down on to the ground by a stranger who saw me walking home from work and followed me, having taken a liking to my hair, and decided to see what else of mine he liked, pulling, and ripping, and punching to get at what he wanted.

I was saved by a couple, who had seen the attack occurring, but at first, drove on, turning around only when one asked the other, "What if it were our daughter?"

I will be forever grateful to them for stopping. But my value as a human that night should not have been determined by someone else's daughter's worth.

The image of a woman, pinned down beside a road, in obvious distress and screaming, was not enough. When she wore another woman's face, she was saved.

Did those people who continued driving past me that night only know men?

A woman's value should not depend on the worth placed on someone else's daughter. A woman should not need to wear another daughter's face to be heard.

Men, and it is an attitude so often shared by men, should not need to think of the women in their life suffering to feel empathy and demand change for a stranger who is crying for help, for action.

Trauma doesn't have a gender. Neither does empathy. But when the trauma belongs to a woman, too many men need a woman they love to think about how it would feel and what should be done.

And those women hear their worth reduced to someone else's, told their story is valuable because it could belong to someone else, and feel that cape wrap tighter and tighter.

Because not only did someone take your agency.

Now someone else is determining how they listen to you, based on women unrelated to you, or your experience.

And you have to be grateful.

Because the flipside – what if they had sons – is too devastating to contemplate.

OpinionMeghan, the Duchess of Sussex

Whatever you think of Harry and Meghan, their media critics are far worse

Marina Hyde

Self-appointed ‘defenders of the royal family’s honour’ may want to have a good, hard look at themselves

‘The biggest cry this week is that Meghan and Harry do want publicity, but only the kind that suits them. Um … yes? So does everyone.’ Photograph: Justin Tallis/AFP/Getty Images

‘The biggest cry this week is that Meghan and Harry do want publicity, but only the kind that suits them. Um … yes? So does everyone.’ Photograph: Justin Tallis/AFP/Getty Images

Tue 16 Feb 2021 10.04 EST

Like a lot of middle-aged newspapermen, the only reason I lose my mind over anything Meghan does is because I care – truly care – about the dignity of the royal family. There is something deeply sacred and pure about the throne of Olde England, which will in due course be inherited by a man who fantasised about being reincarnated as a tampon. The newspapermen know the thing about the tampon because the man’s phone calls were hacked, and then they published them. So yes, if it falls to Fleet Street’s noblemen to defend the honour of the crown against a Californian wellness bore, then so be it.

Harry and Meghan to break silence in Oprah Winfrey interview
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News that Meghan and her husband Prince Harry are expecting another baby is followed by news they will appear on Oprah. Both of these pieces of news follow last week's news that the duchess had won her privacy case against the Mail on Sunday, which had published her private letter to her father. As you can imagine, this triple-threat of tidings has caused the bed of some commentators to be completely shat.

Alas, no matter how ridiculous anything Meghan and Harry ever do is – and they frequently are ridiculous – it will never, ever be even a hundredth as ridiculous as the behaviour of those foaming at the mouth about it. Where do you start with people whose chief criticism of the couple is that they are privileged and largely talentless, and the only reason they're raking it in is because of their name? "We've got a caller on line one who says that up till now the royal family's always been a meritocracy." Can't believe they've denied talented grafters like Fergie's girls their chance.

As for the complaint that Meghan and Harry are using their association with the crown to enrich themselves, have we stumbled into the 11th century? If not, please catch up! It's always been this way. I guess Meghan and Harry's real crime is making money off TV companies as opposed to the backs of peasants or siphoning it out of the empire. On a PR level, it would probably help the Sussexes tactically if they now partnered with a pirate slaver, or commandeered an entire country's mining concessions. A series of tedious authored documentaries for Netflix is simply too grotesque a route to wealth.

As someone whose chief concern is the gaiety of the nation, I find the new power dynamics quite bracing. The sovereign grant paid by UK taxpayers to the British royal family is £85.9m, which is less than Netflix spends on a single series of The Crown. You have to remember that America is a place so gushing with money that even Duchess Fergie has found ways to get sprayed with it there. It's somewhere even former royal butler Paul Burrell had his own TV show. He was a judge on something called American Princess, which taught US girls how to behave like a princess. I never watched it, but hope one of the challenges was playing dead while Paul put a load of your dresses and more portable belongings in his car then hid them in his attic. For "safekeeping". Truly, he was Diana's rock.

I like to think of Paul as a rock in the Alcatraz sense, in that you honestly can't escape him. He still pops up, seemingly bi-weekly, to offer a verdict about how Meghan "isn't helping herself". Unlike Paul, who's certainly helping himself. Like the newspapers and the media outlets, Burrell serves as a reminder that only certain people and organisations are permitted – usually by themselves – to make money out of royalty.

As it goes, I always thought Meghan was an ideal fit with the House of Windsor. Like them, she has several appalling and grasping relatives, and though they are not as innately classy as Prince Andrew or the children of SS officers or anything, the no-good Markles gave obligingly car-crash interviews and obediently staged photos for the press. They are, in that sense, deeply Windsorian. Ultimately, the Markles seemed to understand it was their job to provide competitively priced content from which newspapers could profit much more handsomely than themselves. Just like the royal family Meghan and Harry have left behind on this septic isle.

Naturally you can see why some small-pond UK pundits simply can't handle the Sussexes' move to America. It's a horrendous moment when you realise your competition for royal stories and interviews is no longer some necrotic dipsomaniac on a rival tabloid, but Oprah.

Much UK media reaction to Meghan and Harry reeks of this gathering powerlessness. Though having less and less of a clue is certainly not limited to this matter. Face it, we're a country where one of the best ideas the government could come up with for hanging on to an independence-leaning Scotland was sending Prince Edward to live in it – a solution that treats Scotland like some Victorian attic. Maybe we should store some of Paul Burrell's dresses in Scotland.

We're a country where the guys leading the media charge against Meghan are so emotionally warped that the only way they can begin to release their feelings of social, racial and sexual resentment is by using a 94-year-old woman's feelings as a proxy. "They have disrespected the Queen" really means "they have disrespected this newspaper" or "they have disrespected me". So you keep hearing people saying "how could they do this to the Queen?" and "it's the Queen I feel sorry for". Why? She's not your grandmother. You don't know her socially. It doesn't count that you've been

through her bins or covertly taken pictures of her breakfast table or whatever. And it hardly needs saying that she would find you, personally, absolutely detestable. I honestly wouldn't wet your pants about it, you know?

It will come as a surprise to some, but even Meghan has a right to her privacy | Alan Rusbridger
Read more

Yet the wetting of pants continues. The biggest cry this week is that Meghan and Harry do want publicity, but only the kind that suits them. They "want it all their own way". Um … yes? So does everyone. So do I. So, most pertinently, do you.

You want people to care about only one human right, the right to free speech, unless it's Meghan and Harry, in which case they can't have it. You want people to think you're the greatest journalists in the world, even though you had the story of the prince and his paedo mate staring you in the face and preferred to run headlines like "Is Meghan's favourite [avocado] snack fuelling drought and murder?" You want people to only remember the driver was drunk, even though there was a large number of paparazzi chasing her at high speed. You want to loftily declare you will no longer use paparazzi photos, then use them all the time, every single day. In short, you want the fricking fairytale. Well, guess what: EVERYONE ELSE WANTS IT TOO.

So if it looks to you like Meghan's getting it, and you're not any more, then you need to face the unavoidable takeout: you've been outmanoeuvred by an emotional wellness podcaster. It's like being out-strategised by kale. As people who care – truly care – about dignity, do just let the absolute indignity of that sink in.

- Marina Hyde is a Guardian columnist

2021.02.17 - Around the world

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Joe Biden

Biden vows to make 600m vaccine doses available by end of July

President calls for teachers to be vaccinated sooner as he describes plans for tackling Covid-19 in televised town hall

Joe Biden speaks with a small town hall crowd in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Photograph: Saul Loeb/AFP/Getty Images

Joe Biden speaks with a small town hall crowd in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Photograph: Saul Loeb/AFP/Getty Images

Sam Levin
@SamTLevin
Tue 16 Feb 2021 23.01 EST

Joe Biden laid out his plans for fighting the next stage of the coronavirus pandemic in a primetime town hall on Tuesday, pledging to make 600m doses of the Covid-19 vaccine available by the end of July, saying teachers

should be moved “up the hierarchy” of the vaccine queue, and predicting most elementary schools would reopen by the end of his first 100 days in office.

Seeking to move beyond his predecessor’s impeachment trial and reassure the American people that more aid was on the way, Biden addressed a small crowd in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. After landing on a slick, snow-covered tarmac in below-freezing weather, he took questions from a small audience of Democrats, Republicans and independents invited for a small, socially distant gathering at the historic Pabst Theater.

The event began with the CNN anchor Anderson Cooper, who hosted the event, asking when ordinary Americans could expect to receive the vaccine, to which Biden replied: “By the end of July we will have 600m doses, enough to vaccinate every single American.”

“Do you mean they will be available, or that people will have been able to actually get them?” Cooper asked, briefly referencing Dr Anthony Fauci, the nation’s leading infectious disease expert, who had said earlier in the day that it may “take until June, July and August to finally get everyone vaccinated”.

Biden said he meant they would “be available” by the end of July.

Asked later by Cooper when life would “get back to normal”, Biden offered a tentative but hopeful assessment. “By next Christmas, we’ll be in a very different circumstance, God willing, than we are today.”

He said a year from now there would be significantly fewer people needing to socially distance and wear masks, but he added that experts advised him not to try to make predictions with certainty: “I don’t want to overpromise.”

The president also offered his his clearest statement yet on school reopenings, predicting that most elementary schools will be open five days a week by the end of his first 100 days in office, but saying it would be tougher for high schools to reopen at the same rate because of the risk of infection.

Biden said the key would be smaller classes, more ventilation and strict policies for wearing masks and social distancing. He added that teachers and other education workers should be prioritized for vaccines: “We should move them up in the hierarchy.”

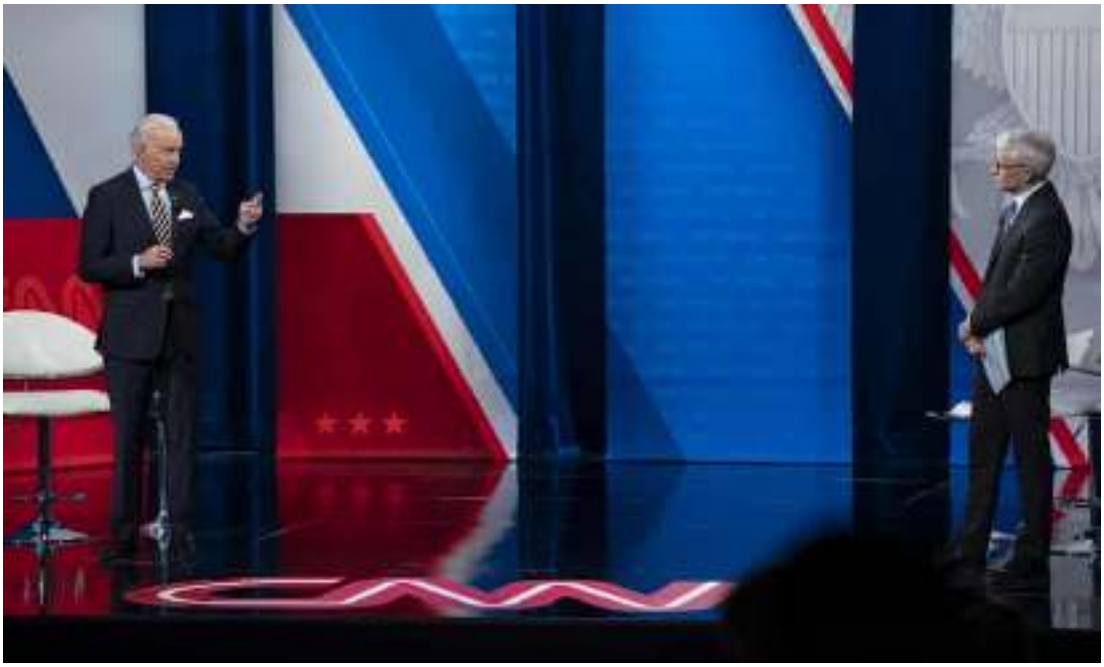
The town hall came as Biden is working to get a $1.9tn coronavirus aid package through Congress. The House of Representatives is expected to vote on the measure next week.

Trump and Giuliani sued by Democratic congressman over Capitol riot
Read more

Biden’s trip to Wisconsin, a political battleground state he narrowly won last November, comes as coronavirus infection rates and deaths are falling after the nation endured the two deadliest months of the pandemic so far. The White House is also reporting an increase in the administration of vaccines throughout the country after a slow start.

But Biden has stressed that the nation still has a long road ahead as thousands of Americans die each day in the worst US public health crisis in a century. The virus has killed more than 485,000, and newly emerging variants are complicating the response effort.

The Biden administration is trying to get enough Americans vaccinated to achieve “herd immunity” and allow life to return to a semblance of normalcy, and discussion of his plans to speed up the vaccination process was a focus of the town hall. Asked about the challenges people face finding appointments online, Biden blamed the Trump administration, saying: “We wasted so much time.”



Anderson Cooper asked Biden when life would get back to normal. Photograph: Evan Vucci/AP

Other questions included one about better vaccine access for Black Americans, to which Biden replied his administration was working to ensure they were available closer to home through local pharmacies and with mobile vans in hard-hit neighborhoods.

Kerri Engebrecht, a mother from Wisconsin, asked Biden why her teenage son, who has a health condition that left him with “the lungs of a 60-year-old”, and others with health vulnerabilities had not be prioritised for the vaccine.

Biden noted that each state controlled its own eligibility process but offered to personally aid in the case. “I can’t tell the state you must move a group of people up. But if you’re willing, I’ll stay around after this is over and maybe we can talk a few minutes and see if I can get you some help,” he said, a line that was met with applause.

The president spoke to the need for more government relief to help people who are suffering economically and to get the country back to pre-pandemic employment levels.

The president reiterated his support for a $15 minimum wage, a proposal that has been included in the coronavirus relief package, saying “it would grow the economy ... and benefit small businesses and large businesses”.

Asked how to ensure small businesses received the loans they need and that large corporations did not continue to reap the benefits, Biden blamed the previous administration for poor oversight of stimulus funds for companies and pledged that this time would be different: “The money is going to go to small businesses ... the Mom and Pop businesses that hold communities together.”

But many GOP lawmakers continue to bristle at the price tag of a package that calls for sending $1,400 checks to most Americans as well as assistance for businesses, schools and homeowners and renters. The Senate Republican leader, Mitch McConnell, on Monday told the Wall Street Journal that going too big could hurt Biden politically in the long run.

Biden has mostly stayed close to the White House since taking office nearly a month ago, leaving the Washington DC area only for weekend trips to his Delaware home and the Camp David presidential retreat in the Catoctin Mountains in Maryland. In addition to his visit to Milwaukee, Biden is to travel to Michigan on Thursday to visit a Pfizer vaccine manufacturing facility.

Fema opens mass vaccination sites in bid to reach communities of color
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The White House has been operating under strict social distancing rules, with most administration staffers working from home, mask-wearing required throughout the White House complex and limits on the size and duration of in-person meetings in the West Wing.

In choosing Wisconsin for his first trip, Biden picked one of the most politically divided states to test his pitch that he has the ability to bring the country together during one of the most difficult periods in recent history.

Ahead of the trip, the White House announced Biden was extending the federal foreclosure moratorium and mortgage forbearance through the end of

June to help homeowners who are behind on payments due to the pandemic. The president on his first day in office extended the moratorium on foreclosures, first issued by Donald Trump, until the end of March.

While discussion of the pandemic dominated the town hall, the town hall also saw Biden address topics of racial justice, policing, student loan forgiveness, and the ongoing threat of far right violence in the wake of the January attack on the Capitol, which he called “a bane on our existence”.

The trip came three days after the conclusion of Trump’s second impeachment trial, and Biden sought to avoid discussing his predecessor. Asked whether he agreed with Nancy Pelosi’s criticisms that the Republicans who voted to acquit Trump were “cowards”, Biden said: “For four years, all that’s been in the news is Trump. The next four years, I want to make sure all the news is the American people. I’m tired of talking about Trump.”

The Associated Press contributed reporting

Republicans

Trump remains 2024 candidate of choice for most Republicans, poll shows

59% of Republican voters said they wanted Trump to play prominent role in party, but tens of thousands left after Capitol riot

Supporters wait for Donald Trump to drive by in West Palm Beach, Florida on 15 February 2021. Photograph: Greg Lovett/AP

Supporters wait for Donald Trump to drive by in West Palm Beach, Florida on 15 February 2021. Photograph: Greg Lovett/AP

Martin Pengelly in New York
@MartinPengelly
Tue 16 Feb 2021 10.01 EST

If the 2024 Republican presidential primary were held today, Donald Trump would be the clear favorite to win big. That was the message from a Politico-Morning Consult poll released on Tuesday, three days after Trump's

acquittal in his second impeachment trial, on a charge of inciting the insurrection at the US Capitol on 6 January.

Wall Street Journal warns Republicans: 'Trump won't win another election' Read more

Among Republican voters, 59% said they wanted Trump to play a prominent role in their party, up a whopping 18 points from the last such poll, taken in the aftermath of the Capitol riot. A slightly lower number, 54%, said they would back Trump in the primary.

Tens of thousands of Republicans left the party after the Capitol insurrection, and a majority of Americans have told other pollsters they would like to see Trump banished from politics.

Though the 45th president will be 78 by election day 2024, he will be able to run again if he chooses, having escaped being barred from office after a 57-43 Senate vote to convict – with seven Republican defections but 10 votes short of the majority needed.

Mike Pence's life was threatened by Trump supporters at the Capitol, as the vice-president presided over the ratification of electoral college results confirming Trump's defeat by Joe Biden. He placed second in the Politico-Morning Consult poll, with 12%.

Name recognition is a powerful force so far out from the contest concerned. Donald Trump Jr shared third place, with 6%, with Nikki Haley. The former South Carolina governor and United Nations ambassador has tried to distance herself from Trump since the Capitol riot.

"We need to acknowledge he let us down," Haley told Politico shortly after the attack. "He went down a path he shouldn't have, and we shouldn't have followed him, and we shouldn't have listened to him. And we can't let that ever happen again."

She also said Trump was "not going to run for federal office again". Trump has not committed either way. After his acquittal, he told supporters: "Soon

we will emerge with a vision for a bright, radiant and limitless American future."

In a message seen by the Guardian on Tuesday, one former Trump White House insider said a run was "gonna happen … or he will be drafted".

Mitt Romney, a figure from the Republican past as the 2012 nominee but now a Utah senator who has twice voted to convict Trump on impeachment charges, scored 4% in the new poll. Ted Cruz of Texas, one of the senators who backed Trump's attempt to overturn his election defeat, scored 3%. Josh Hawley of Missouri, the other prominent Republican in objections to election results, was in a pack of names lower even than that.

The battle for the soul of the party is on. On Monday, Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell followed an editorial in the Wall Street Journal which said Trump would not win another national election with a column of his own.

McConnell restated his argument, made in a Senate speech in which he otherwise excoriated Trump, that Trump's acquittal was a matter of constitutional law. Scholars, and the Senate twice, have rejected the argument that Trump could not be tried because he had left office.

McConnell has also made clear that he will oppose pro-Trump candidates seeking Republican nominations in the 2022 midterms, if he thinks they would damage chances of beating a Democrat.

US politics

Family of anti-Trump Republican condemns him: 'A disappointment to us and God'

Relatives of Adam Kinzinger publish an open letter accusing the Illinois representative of joining ‘the devil’s army’

Representative Adam Kinzinger, a centrist Republican and six-term member of Congress thought to be weighing a run for statewide office in 2022. Photograph: Reuters

Representative Adam Kinzinger, a centrist Republican and six-term member of Congress thought to be weighing a run for statewide office in 2022. Photograph: Reuters

Tom McCarthy
@TeeMcSee
Tue 16 Feb 2021 10.25 EST

Family disagreements over US politics proliferated under four years of Donald Trump, with Facebook and other social media providing an accelerant for acrimony.

Trump remains 2024 candidate of choice for most Republicans, poll shows
Read more

But relatives of Adam Kinzinger, the Illinois representative who is one of Trump's rare Republican critics, have taken their beef with the congressman into the public square, in an open letter published on Monday by the New York Times.

Kinzinger, a centrist Republican whose ambitions could extend beyond the conservative district he serves, called for Trump to be removed from office after a mob of his supporters attacked the Capitol on 6 January.

Days later, nearly a dozen cousins and extended relatives in Illinois sent a blistering, handwritten, two-page letter to state Republican officials and to Kinzinger's father.

"Oh my, what a disappointment you are to us and to God!" said the letter, addressed to Kinzinger, the word "disappointment" underlined three times and "God" underlined once, according to the version published by the Times. "You go against your Christian principles and join the 'devil's army' (Democrats and the fake news media)."

The letter accuses Kinzinger of transgressions culminating in his rejection of Trump.

"President Trump is not perfect, but neither are you or any of us for that matter!" the letter says. "It is not for us to judge or be judged! But he is a Christian!"

Kinzinger, 42, a former air force pilot who deployed with the national guard as recently as 2019, emerged as a sharp critic of Trump that same year, after the former president threatened "civil war" on Twitter over the presidential election.

“I have visited nations ravaged by civil war,” the congressman tweeted. “I have never imagined such a quote to be repeated by a president. This is beyond repugnant.”

Once a Tea Party darling, Kinzinger represents a rural district that crosses his state to touch Wisconsin and Indiana. Politically the district is closer to Republican-held Peoria to the south than Chicago, a Democratic bastion to the north.

A six-term member of Congress, Kinzinger is thought to be weighing a run for statewide office in 2022, possibly against the incumbent Democratic governor, JB Pritzker, or against Tammy Duckworth, one of two Democratic Illinois senators.

Kinzinger retreated in his confrontation with Trump late in 2019 when he voted against charges that Trump abused his power and obstructed Congress in his first impeachment, calling the charges, relating to approaches to Ukraine for dirt on political rivals, a “culmination of that anti-Trump fever”.

As the 2020 election heated up and Trump’s attempts to subvert the vote intensified, however, Kinzinger’s criticism of the president likewise intensified. After the attack on the Capitol, in which five people died, Kinzinger made a public call for Trump to be removed under the 25th amendment.

“All indications are that the president has become unmoored, not just from his duty or even his oath but reality itself,” Kinzinger said. “It is for this reason that I call on the vice-president and members of the cabinet to ensure the next few weeks are safe for the American people and that we have a sane captain of the ship.”

In Trump’s second impeachment, Kinzinger voted in favor of an article charging incitement of insurrection. He later released a statement calling on fellow Republicans to break ranks with Trump, even if that means risking their careers.

“We have a lot of work to do to restore the Republican party and to turn the tide on the personality politics,” Kinzinger said. “For me, I am at total peace

with my decision on impeachment and my mission to restore the GOP, to uphold the principles we hold dear, and firmly put the country first. Our future depends on it."

The letter from Kinzinger's large family – his father has 32 cousins, the Times said –was not at total peace with the representative's decision.

"You should be very proud that you have lost the respect of Lou Dobbs, Tucker Carlson, Sean Hannity, Laura Ingraham, Greg Kelly etc. and most importantly in our book, Mark Levin and Rush Limbaugh and us!" the letter said, naming a string of Fox News hosts and conservative personalities.

"It is now most embarrassing to us that we are related to you. You have embarrassed the Kinzinger family name!"

Iran

After rocket attack, Biden faces first real test on Iran

Analysis: Fiery rhetoric of Trump era is gone, but flare-up in northern Iraq is a microcosm of tension to come

The attack on Erbil airport was likely aimed as much at testing Biden's mettle as at causing damage. Photograph: Thaier Al-Sudani/Reuters

The attack on Erbil airport was likely aimed as much at testing Biden's mettle as at causing damage. Photograph: Thaier Al-Sudani/Reuters

Martin Chulov Middle East correspondent
Tue 16 Feb 2021 13.31 EST

Joe Biden faces his first real test with Iran. A barrage of 15 rockets in northern Iraq that struck a US base, killing a military contractor and wounding a soldier, were likely aimed as much at testing the new president's mettle as they were at causing damage.

In the hours after the attack on Erbil airport, where much of the remaining US presence in Iraq is based, a Shia group loyal to Iran felt emboldened enough to claim it. Although the boast was from a hitherto unknown group, it left no doubt who was behind the first such barrage since Biden's inauguration.

The declaration struck a very different posture to that of the final months of Donald Trump's presidency, when Iran and its proxies remained mostly taciturn, carefully weighing every step. This time, the strike was openly dedicated to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the former head of Iranian proxy Kata'ib Hezbollah, and Qassem Suleimani, the most powerful Iranian in Iraq for more than a decade until both were killed in a Trump-authorised airstrike 13 months ago.

Within hours, the vehicles used to launch the rockets and the site from where they were fired was found – only 7km (4.3 miles) from Erbil airport, and well inside the region of Iraq secured by Kurdish forces. The implications were clear: the safe zone had been breached and such an attack could happen again. One of the last redoubts in Iraq was now vulnerable. It was now Biden's move.

Biden and his senior officials condemned the attack in pro forma terms, pledging solidarity with Iraq's Kurdish leadership and vowing to identify the rocket team. The fiery rhetoric of the Trump years was gone, and so was the uncertainty. Biden, well versed in the post-invasion chaos of Iraq and the ascendant influence of its eastern neighbour, has flagged a resumption of more traditional diplomacy – with return to the Iranian nuclear deal a regional centrepiece.

Signing the nuclear pact, which gave Iran sanctions relief in return for scaling back its attempts to enrich uranium to a standard that could be used to make a nuclear weapon, was the signature deal of the Obama administration. It was shredded by Trump, who instead reimposed even tighter sanctions under a policy that hawks in his regime called "maximum pressure", and threatened large-scale retaliation any time rockets were fired at Baghdad or Erbil.

Although divergent, the approaches had one one thing in common: viewing a reckoning of some sort with Iran as being central to multiple regional flashpoints. Iran has stakes in Lebanon, where Iranian ally Hezbollah remains dominant and the country unable to form a government yet again, as well as war-ravaged Syria and Yemen, where Biden this month overturned Trump's decision to designate the Houthis, who are supported by Tehran, as a terrorist group.

It also remains at odds with regional heavyweight Saudi Arabia where, three days after Biden took office, drones carrying missiles penetrated its airspace and bombed at least one palace.

US intelligence officials believe that attack was likely launched by Iranian proxies, possibly from Iraq, and viewed as a test of solidarity between Biden and Riyadh. Three weeks later, with no phone call from the new US leader, Iran may feel it has its answer, and is now testing its boundaries on another front, as well attempting to shore up its negotiating position, when the two sides eventually sit down again.

An opening position on that score may have been declared on Tuesday night, with a claim of responsibility for the Erbil attack that included a demand for the US to leave Iraq, and a warning to Kurdish leaders, as well as a taunt that other rockets have been stored inside Erbil.

The flare-up in northern Iraq is a microcosm of tension to come elsewhere in the region, the pinnacle of which is more likely to be fought out at the negotiating table.

Dubai

Princess Latifa: secret videos raise fears for ruler's daughter forcibly returned to Dubai

Smuggled footage from daughter of sheikh says she is hostage in villa surrounded by police

00:30

Michael Safi
@safimichael
Tue 16 Feb 2021 10.56 EST

The daughter of the ruler of Dubai, who tried to flee the emirate in 2018 but was forcibly returned, has used a smuggled phone to send a series of secret video messages taken over the past two years claiming she was being held "hostage" in a locked villa surrounded by police.

The messages have since ceased, and campaigners for Princess Latifa al-Maktoum are calling for international intervention in her case.

The new videos were obtained by BBC Panorama and aired on Tuesday evening in the UK. They are the first time the princess has appeared, other than in material released by the Dubai royal family, since a YouTube video surfaced after her escape attempt three years ago.

Kidnapping case: what happened to Sheikh Mohammed's daughters?
Read more

"If you are watching this video, it's not such a good thing, either I'm dead or I'm in a very, very, very bad situation," she said in that footage, which sparked international concern for her fate.

In a video from April 2019, she described being held in “a villa that has been converted into jail”. She said: “All the windows are barred shut. There’s five policemen outside and two policewomen inside the house. And I can’t even go outside to get any fresh air.”

“I’m doing this video from a bathroom, because this is the only room with a door I can lock. I’m a hostage. I am not free. I’m enslaved in this jail. My life is not in my hands.”

Latifa said she was worried about her safety and feared she would “never see the sun again”.

The UAE government has previously said Latifa, 35, is safe and happy with her family.

The new videos include her first account of how her attempt to flee in January 2018, which was years in the making, failed. In an operation planned with a French businessman, Hervé Jaubert, and her martial arts instructor and friend Tiina Jauhiainen, Latifa took a dinghy from the Dubai shore to a US-flagged yacht in international waters.

Eight days later, off India’s west coast, the yacht was stormed by special forces who, Jauhiainen claims, used smoke grenades to force her and Latifa to the deck and detained them at gunpoint.

A UK judge last year accepted testimony that the raid was conducted by Indian soldiers and that Latifa and others may have given their position away by communicating with people while at sea. “Latifa’s last words as she was dragged away kicking and screaming were to the effect that ‘You can’t get me back alive. Don’t take me back. Shoot me here, don’t take me back’,” the judgment read.

In the new footage, recorded more than a year after Latifa was returned, she tells of struggling with the soldiers on the boat, “kicking and fighting” and biting a commando’s arm, the BBC said. She says she was tranquillised and passed out as she was being carried to a jet, waking up in Dubai.

In one video shown by Panorama Latifa said she had been imprisoned since she was kidnapped: “No trial, no charge. Nothing.”

She said: “I’m reaching a point where I’m getting so tired of everything. It’s like a circus … I just want to be free. I don’t know what they’re planning on doing with me. The situation is getting more desperate every day.”

Jauhiainen and Jaubert were detained in the UAE for two weeks and then released.

Latifa’s father is Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai and the UAE’s vice-president. She is the second of his 25 children to try to flee the family, be recaptured, and then vanish.

Her older sister Shamsa was seized on the streets of Cambridge after fleeing the family’s Surrey estate in 2000. In an email she smuggled out from captivity in Dubai, Shamsa alleged: “I was caught by my father, he managed to track me down through someone I kept in touch with … He sent four Arab men to catch me, they were carrying guns and threatening me.”

I tried to help Dubai’s Princess Latifa to escape – a year on, I dream of her release
Read more

Latifa said in the video recorded before her escape bid that she had tried to escape once before, aged 16, but was captured at the border, jailed for more than three years, and beaten and tortured. “It was constant torture, constant torture, even when they weren’t physically beating me up, they were torturing me,” Latifa said. “They would make sounds to harass me and then they would come in the middle of the night, to pull me out of bed, to beat me.”

A UK family court ruled last year that Sheikh Mohammed, 71, orchestrated the abductions of the two women and “deprived [them] of their liberty”. The judgment was part of an action involving his sixth and youngest wife, Princess Haya, 46, who fled to London in April 2019 with their two young children, and whom the court said had been subjected to a campaign of “intimidation” by the sheikh.

The judgment accepted virtually all Haya's allegations as true on the balance of probabilities, including that the sheikh attempted to have her abducted by helicopter, arranged for guns to be left in her bedroom and published threatening poems about her online.

Mary Robinson, a former Irish president and UN high commissioner for human rights, was flown to Dubai to meet Latifa after she was returned there in 2018. The UAE foreign ministry later released pictures of the visit, claiming they showed Latifa was "receiving the necessary care and support she requires" and "rebut[ted] false allegations". Robinson also later said Latifa was "in the loving care of her family".

But Robinson told the BBC she had been "horribly tricked" during the visit and never asked Latifa about her situation, fearing it would exacerbate a mental condition she was told the princess had. The images were intended be private and to serve as a "proof of life", she added. "I was particularly tricked when the photographs went public. That was a total surprise … I was absolutely stunned."

Mozambique

Mozambique expels British journalist covering insurgency

Tom Bowker tweets that he has been banned from country for 10 years over alleged irregularities

Tom Bowker speaks to journalists at Maputo airport before boarding his flight out of Mozambique. Photograph: Ricardo Franco/EPA

Tom Bowker speaks to journalists at Maputo airport before boarding his flight out of Mozambique. Photograph: Ricardo Franco/EPA

AFP in Maputo
Tue 16 Feb 2021 15.31 EST

A British journalist covering an insurgency in northern Mozambique has been expelled from the country, he tweeted on Tuesday, days after his accreditation was revoked over alleged irregularities.

Tom Bowker, the co-founder of the anglophone Mozambican news website Zitamar News, had his foreign correspondent card withdrawn on 29 January – a move he has said was politically motivated.

At the time Mozambique's government said Bowker, a former Bloomberg correspondent for the country, was unable to prove the "legal existence" of Zitamar News, which is run between London and Mozambique's capital, Maputo.

> Right, that's it then! Expelled from Mozambique and banned for 10 years. A politically motivated move, without legal foundation. Thanks to everyone who helped us fight it, and who made the last 6 years so wonderful. Até! pic.twitter.com/X8eEdVSgbA
>
> — Tom Bowker (@TomBowk) February 16, 2021

Bowker announced his departure from the south-east African country on Twitter, ostensibly just before boarding his outbound flight.

"Expelled from Mozambique and banned for 10 years," Bowker wrote. "A politically motivated move, without legal foundation," he added. "Thanks to everyone who helped us fight it, and who made the last 6 years so wonderful!"

A Mozambique immigration spokesman, Celestino Matsinhe, confirmed the expulsion to AFP, saying it was ordered by the interior minister.

The UK Foreign Office said it had been in regular contact with the Bowker family throughout the case and was "concerned" by the expulsion of a British citizen.

"We have raised the case with the Mozambican government and encourage the authorities to allow for a swift and transparent appeal of the decision," a Foreign Office spokesperson said.

Zitamar, founded after Bowker left Bloomberg in 2015, provided daily news as well as analysis on Mozambique, with a particular focus on extractive industries.

Northern Mozambique in crisis as thousands flee escalating conflict
Read more

Its network of journalists published several articles on an Islamist insurgency wreaking havoc in Mozambique's remote northern Cabo Delgado province, where oil companies have invested billions of dollars in offshore gas exploration projects.

Media access to the area has been limited. Several local journalists have been arrested in the province since the unrest started in 2017.

The decision to revoke Bowker's accreditation made no mention of Zitamar's insurgency coverage, however, citing only alleged legal discrepancies around the site's status and operations.

"Sad that it ended this way," tweeted Zenaida Machado, a Human Rights Watch researcher, after Bowker's departure. "Another embarrassing move by the Mozambique government and a sign that the country is becoming a hostile environment to foreign journalists."

Women's rights and gender equality

Nepalis protest 'ridiculous' proposed ban on women travelling abroad

Activists warn new anti-trafficking law requiring permission from families to travel is evidence of ‘deep-rooted patriarchal mindset’

Protesters march for women’s rights in Kathmandu, Nepal, on 12 February. Photograph: Sujan Shrestha/REX/Shutterstock

Protesters march for women’s rights in Kathmandu, Nepal, on 12 February. Photograph: Sujan Shrestha/REX/Shutterstock

About this content

Arun Budhathoki *in Kathmandu*

Wed 17 Feb 2021 01.30 EST

A proposed law in Nepal that would ban women from travelling abroad without permission from their families and local government officials has been called unconstitutional and "ridiculous".

The proposals, introduced by the Department of Immigration last week in an attempt to prevent women being trafficked, would require all women under 40 to seek permission before they visit Africa or the Middle East for the first time.

Following criticism, the department said the law applied only to "vulnerable" women and stressed it had yet to be finalised.

On Friday, hundreds of Nepali women gathered to protest against the proposals at the Maitighar Mandala in the heart of Kathmandu, as part of a "women's march" to highlight rape and other abuses of female rights.

Hima Bista, executive director at Women Lead Nepal, told protesters: "What is extremely dangerous is the thought process behind it. The very fact that a

policymaker is thinking about drafting this law restricting the movement of adult girls and women tells us how deep-rooted the patriarchal mindset is.

How Nepal's migration ban traps female 'modern day slaves' in the Gulf
Read more

"A blanket approach targeting girls and women does not work. More homework is required if immigration rules are to be changed, across all genders and within the immigration department itself."

Ila Sharma, a former election commissioner of Nepal, said: "It's preposterous the way educated bureaucracy seems to be objectifying women. Clearly, they do not see women as fully fledged adults.

"Instead of empowering and building the capacity of women, as well as the rest of the emigrant labour workforce, they are being regressive, unconstitutional, not to say ridiculous."

Nepal's Human Rights Commission estimated that about 35,000 people, including 15,000 women and 5,000 girls, were victims of trafficking in 2018.

Activists pointed out that it is not just women who are trafficked, so immigration lawmakers should consider women and men in any proposed legal changes.

There have been several attempts over the past decades to combat exploitation through travel restrictions. The latest was in 2017 when the government banned Nepali citizens from working in the Gulf as domestic workers, a move that targeted women. Activists have long complained that banning women from travelling doesn't work and infringes their rights.

Meenakshi Ganguly, south Asia director at Human Rights Watch, said the current proposals could "force women into riskier, undocumented employment, increasing the danger of trafficking and abuse".

Ganguly said the government "should better regulate recruitment agencies, work with destination country governments to put protections in place, and

respond effectively to provide protection services when abuses occur”.

Minimum wage

US workers go on strike in 15 cities to demand $15-an-hour minimum wage

The Biden administration is attempting to push through what would be the first increase since 2009 as part of a pandemic relief bill

Demonstrators protest outside of McDonald's corporate headquarters in Chicago. Photograph: Scott Olson/Getty Images

Demonstrators protest outside of McDonald's corporate headquarters in Chicago. Photograph: Scott Olson/Getty Images

Michael Sainato in Florida
Tue 16 Feb 2021 16.14 EST

Workers at fast-food restaurant chains in 15 cities around the US went on strike on Tuesday demanding a raise in their minimum wage to $15 an hour.

The workers at McDonald's, Burger King and Wendy's, joined by home care and nursing home workers, took action as the Biden administration is attempting to push through an increase in the federal minimum wage from $7.25, in what would be the first increase in since 2009.

'Hopefully it makes history': Fight for $15 closes in on mighty win for US workers
Read more

Strikes occurred in Charleston, South Carolina; Chicago; Flint and Detroit, Michigan; Raleigh and Durham, North Carolina; Houston; Miami, Orlando, and Tampa, Florida; St. Louis; Oakland, Sacramento, and San Jose, California; and Milwaukee.

Since 2012, the Fight for $15 movement has organized low-wage workers around the US to push for state and local minimum wage increases and to increase the federal minimum wage to $15 an hour

"We hear you out there applauding essential workers. We see the big show you make of thanking us. But to be honest, that hasn't translated into changes for my life. We were living on a razor's edge long before Covid-19 hit South Carolina. And we're living on it still," said Taiwanna Milligan, a McDonald's worker in Charleston who makes $8.75 an hour after working at the restaurant chain for eight years, in a recent op-ed demanding a $15-an-hour federal minimum wage increase.

> Fast-food workers in Durham are on STRIKE for higher pay, safe workplaces, and respect on the job. We're also on Zoom with our allies from across the midsouth in the #FightFor15 pic.twitter.com/z69bwt9qMo
>
> — Fight For 15 (@fightfor15) February 16, 2021

Workers are conducting the strikes as a proposal to raise the federal minimum wage to $15 an hour by 2025 is included in the coronavirus relief

package House Democrats plan to pass and send to the Senate over the next two weeks.

In the Senate, the legislation still faces potential hurdles, including the Democratic senators Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona who have opposed including the bill in pandemic relief, and the possibility of the Senate's parliamentarian ruling a minimum wage measure can't be included in the relief bill.

Ieishia Franceis has worked at Freddy's Frozen Custards in west Durham, North Carolina since July 2020 and makes $9.20 an hour. She was one of several workers who went on strike on Tuesday.

"A $15 minimum wage would free me up to do a lot of things. My main goal is to be able to save enough money to put a down payment on a house and have home ownership. It would allow me to begin that process. It would allow me to have money left from one paycheck to the next, to provide for my family better as far as food, and allow me to get transportation so I won't have to take the bus," she said.

In October 2020, Franceis and her co-workers went on strike after their requests for paid sick leave for Covid-19 quarantining and testing were initially denied. The Families First Coronavirus Response Act passed in March 2020 exempted employers with more than 500 employees from granting employees two weeks pay if they needed to quarantine or recover from Covid-19. Now Franceis and her co-workers are fighting for a $15 minimum wage, hazard pay while they continue working during the pandemic, health benefits and ultimately a union.

"Sometimes businesses get so caught up in doing business that they forget who runs their businesses. We're going to keep fighting and not going to stop until we get all the equality we're fighting for," added Franceis. "Congress needs to put our money where their mouth is. During their campaigns, they said they were going to raise the minimum wage to $15 an hour. Live up to what you said. We shouldn't have to wait until next year or the next year. The bill is there. Just pass it and be done with it."

Based on a recent analysis by the Brookings Institution, 47% of essential workers are in occupations where the median wage is currently less than $15 an hour. Gradually raising it to $15 an hour would increase pay for 32 million workers in the US, including 59% of workers with a total family income below the poverty line. With the federal minimum wage increase, 31% of Black workers and 26% of Latino workers in the US would receive a raise.

Greece

Severe snowstorm forces Greece to halt Covid vaccination drive

Greeks told to stay at home to avoid extreme weather as giant vaccine centres close

- Coronavirus – latest updates
- See all our coronavirus coverage

Helena Smith in Athens

Tue 16 Feb 2021 14.18 EST Last modified on Tue 16 Feb 2021 14.41 EST

The Acropolis in Athens on Tuesday. The low temperatures are expected to continue. Photograph: Antonis Nikolopoulos/Eurokinissi/AFP/Getty Images

A snowstorm of rare vigour and durability has forced the Greek government to delay the country's Covid-19 vaccination drive after citizens were advised

to remain at home.

Inoculation centres, including mega facilities capable of vaccinating up to 20,000 people a day, were ordered to close as the unusually cold front swept across Greece.

“We obviously recommend great care be taken in all movement, all unnecessary movement should be avoided,” said the prime minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, after holding emergency talks with civil protection leaders. “I think we’ll all have to show patience as we deal with a phenomenon that is truly unprecedented.”

Meteorologists confirm Athens has received the most significant snowfall since 2008. Photograph: Maria Chourdari/NurPhoto/Rex/Shutterstock

Hampered by the slow rollout of vaccines across Europe, authorities have so far managed to inoculate only a fraction of Greece’s 11 million strong population.

An estimated 7.5 million people would need to have received the jab to achieve herd immunity, according to epidemiologists.

Health officials had accelerated the campaign on Monday, when giant vaccination centres in Athens and the northern metropolis of Thessaloniki

opened, before services were halted because of the storm.

Power shortages and water supply cuts caused by uprooted trees were reported in central Greece and in multiple municipalities across the capital, where most Greeks live. The fire service said it had received more than 600 calls for assistance in greater Athens by mid-afternoon. Some 450 men, women and children, forced to endure the freezing temperatures in tents in a refugee camp close to the city centre, were relocated to another installation.

Roman remains in Athens on Tuesday. Photograph: Louisa Gouliamaki/AFP/Getty Images

The vaccination drive to date has focused mostly on elderly people in care homes, with officials announcing the milestone of 500,000 inoculations being crossed at the weekend.

Greece has recorded 173,905 coronavirus cases and just over 6,000 deaths since the outbreak of the pandemic a year ago.

Greece covid deaths

Tuesday's blizzard arrived in the midst of a national lockdown, first enforced in November, and prolonged last week, as a surge in infection rates

filled beds in intensive care wards, putting immense strain on the ability of the health system to cope with more Covid-19 patients.

With the bad weather expected to hold through to Wednesday – and temperatures dropping to -25C in parts of northern Greece overnight – it was unclear when the vaccination programme will resume. Vaccines that went unused have been delivered to prisons so they wouldn't be lost, officials said.

Snowstorms, which also pummelled Turkey, are extremely rare in Athens further south.

The cold snap initially hit the sprawling capital's northern suburbs late Monday. But by daybreak, seaside suburbs along the Athenian riviera were turned white, while snow blanketed the Acropolis and other ancient monuments in the heart of the city. For the intrepid, the hills around the site became an impromptu piste as some took to the snow in skis.

The Norwegian ambassador, Frode Overland Andersen, was among them, and he posted a video of himself on Twitter skiing down a hill alongside his teenage daughter. The envoy said he had put on his skis after a friend in Oslo had challenged him to prove it was possible to ski in the Greek capital.

McDonald's

Black McDonald's franchise owner sues chain over claims of discrimination

Civil rights lawsuit says company's practices led to a $700,000 sales gap between Black- and white-owned franchises

The number of Black McDonald's franchise owners has fallen from 377 in 1998 to 186 today, while the total number of stores has more than doubled to 40,000, the lawsuit said. Photograph: Mike Blake/Reuters

The number of Black McDonald's franchise owners has fallen from 377 in 1998 to 186 today, while the total number of stores has more than doubled to 40,000, the lawsuit said. Photograph: Mike Blake/Reuters

Associated Press
Tue 16 Feb 2021 14.25 EST

The Black owner of 14 McDonald's franchises in Ohio says one of the world's largest restaurant chains has shown more favorable treatment to

white owners and denied him the opportunity to buy restaurants in more affluent communities, according to a civil rights lawsuit filed this week.

The lawsuit filed by Herbert Washington, a former college track star who played for parts of two seasons with the Oakland Athletics in the mid-1970s, said the Chicago-based company's discriminatory practices has led to a $700,000 sales gap between Black-owned franchises and those owned by whites.

The number of Black franchise owners has fallen from 377 in 1998 to 186 today, while the total number of stores has more than doubled to 40,000, the lawsuit said.

"By relegating Black owners to the oldest stores in the toughest neighborhoods, McDonald's ensured that Black franchisees would never achieve the levels of success that White franchisees could expect," the lawsuit said. "Black franchisees must spend more to operate their stores while white franchisees get to realize the full benefit of their labors," the lawsuit said.

McDonald's issued a statement on Tuesday denying Washington's assertions. The company said Washington is "facing business challenges" for which the company has "invested significantly in his organization" while offering him "multiple opportunities over several years to address these issues".

"This situation is the result of years of mismanagement by Mr Washington, whose organization has failed to meet many of our standards on people, operations, guest satisfaction and reinvestment," the statement said.

More than 50 former Black McDonald's franchise owners made similar claims in a lawsuit filed against the company in September.

Russia

Russian lab to research prehistoric viruses in animals dug from melted permafrost

Project aims to identify paleoviruses and study virus evolution using the remains, Siberian lab says

Researchers at North-Eastern Federal University in Yakutsk extract tissues from a prehistoric horse. Photograph: North-Eastern Federal University/AFP/Getty Images

Researchers at North-Eastern Federal University in Yakutsk extract tissues from a prehistoric horse. Photograph: North-Eastern Federal University/AFP/Getty Images

AFP in Moscow
Tue 16 Feb 2021 14.16 EST

A Russian state laboratory has announced that it is launching research into prehistoric viruses by analysing the remains of animals recovered from melted permafrost.

The Siberia-based Vektor lab said in a statement on Tuesday that the aim of the project was to identify paleoviruses and conduct advanced research into virus evolution.

The research in collaboration with North-Eastern Federal University in Yakutsk began with analysis of tissues extracted from a prehistoric horse believed to be at least 4,500 years old.

Vektor said the remains were discovered in 2009 in Yakutia, a vast Siberian region where remains of paleolithic animals including mammoths are regularly discovered.

Researchers said they would also probe the remains of mammoths, elk, dogs, partridges, rodents, hares and other prehistoric animals.

Maxim Cheprasov, head of the Mammoth Museum laboratory at North-Eastern Federal University, said in a press release that the recovered animals had already been the subject of bacterial studies.

He said: “We are conducting studies on paleoviruses for the first time.”

Frozen wolf's head found in Siberia is 40,000 years old
Read more

A former centre for the development of biological weapons in Soviet times, the Vektor laboratory in Siberia’s Novosibirsk region is one of only two facilities in the world to store the smallpox virus.

Vektor has developed a vaccine against coronavirus, EpiVacCorona, which was licensed in October in Russia and is scheduled to begin mass production later this month.

Scientists say the Arctic is warming twice as fast as the global average, endangering local wildlife as well as releasing CO_2 stored in the melting permafrost.

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Prince Harry

Harry and Meghan aim to avoid embarrassing Queen in Oprah interview

‘Tell-all’ interview announcement has prompted reports it will lead to couple being stripped of patronages

The Duke and Duchess of Sussex in Johannesburg in 2019. The couple are said to be determined to fight to retain their royal patronages. Photograph: Michele Spatari/AFP/Getty Images

The Duke and Duchess of Sussex in Johannesburg in 2019. The couple are said to be determined to fight to retain their royal patronages. Photograph: Michele Spatari/AFP/Getty Images

Caroline Davies
Tue 16 Feb 2021 11.15 EST

The Duke and Duchess of Sussex will not wish to embarrass the Queen despite frenzied speculation over their planned “wide-ranging” interview

with Oprah Winfrey, it is understood.

The announcement by CBS of a "tell-all" intimate account by Harry and Meghan of their "Megxit" departure from the UK has led to reports it is the final straw for an exasperated Buckingham Palace who will strip the couple of their royal patronages.

The couple are said to have the greatest respect and love for the Queen and will not say anything to undermine that, according to a source. They are determined to fight to retain their patronages.

Harry and Meghan to break silence in Oprah Winfrey interview
Read more

Reports that the interview will directly result in Harry being stripped of his honorary military titles, and of Meghan losing her patronage of the National Theatre, personally bestowed by the Queen, are understood to have conflated two issues. Rather, practical considerations, such as the couple living thousands of miles away, are likely to see them being forced to relinquish them under palace pressure.

Harry's military titles were put on hold for a year when Megxit was thrashed out at the Sandringham summit one year ago. The agreement stipulated the position would be reviewed ahead of 31 March. He is currently captain general of the Royal Marines, honorary air force commandant of RAF base Honington and honorary commodore–in–chief of small ships and diving.

Royal patronages are entirely in the gift of the palace, so the Sussexes have no control over them. The couple believe they have made their commitment clear to each of the organisations concerned, it is understood. Had it not been for the Covid-19 pandemic, it is said they would have regularly returned to the UK to support those organisations. They still hope to be able to promote and represent them on the world stage.

Buckingham Palace declined to comment.

One source said of the planned interview that as the duke and duchess were no longer working members of the royal family, any decisions they took

with regard to media commitments were matters for them. As non-working royals, they were under no obligation to inform the royal household of such plans, the source said.

Winfrey is a close friend and neighbour in southern California. She attended their 2018 wedding, and recently promoted a vegan latte business Meghan has invested in. Royal observers say the interview is unlikely to be hostile, and will have been carefully choreographed before recording.

But the announcement has led to a backlash against Meghan in the UK press, with accusations she is invading her own privacy just days after victory in the high court in her privacy battle against the Mail on Sunday.

There was no official comment from the Sussexes. One source indicated that the duchess's victory established that individuals had the right to agency over their own lives, and it was not for others to decide which elements of their private lives could be made public.

There are also questions over whether the interview will further strain relations between Harry and his brother, Prince William.

The 12-month review of the couple's status had been seen as a safety net while they explored whether they could achieve their ambition of being independently funded. Huge contracts with Netflix and Spotify have shown they have the potential to establish lucrative careers in the US.

The 7 March interview will be staged in two parts, with the duchess – who announced on Sunday she was expecting her second child – first being interviewed about "stepping into life as a royal, marriage, motherhood ... to how she is handling life under intense public pressure", according to CBS.

Later, they will be joined by Harry and the couple will speak about their move to the US last year and their future plans. Oprah with Meghan and Harry: A CBS Primetime Special has been described as an "intimate conversation" by the US television network.

"This isn't going to be an unscripted interview. It's going to be carefully thought out and choreographed," said Joe Little, the managing editor of

Majesty magazine. “But looking at the history of royal interviews, you just wonder if this will trip them up.”

“The timing is obviously significant because the [privacy] judgment had to take place before they could finalise the interview,” he added.

“I think Harry will lose his patronages, but not as a consequence of the interview. The 12 months is up and given he isn’t going to be returning to the UK any time soon, his appointments with the military and other patronages have lost their importance as far as the organisations are concerned.”

The Sussexes would not be happy at the prospect of losing their patronages, he said, before adding: “But finding freedom comes at a price.” Plans by Harry to fly back and forth from the US to support those organisations could be seen as hypocritical and undermine his “climate change credentials”, added Little.

Even without the royal patronages, the couple remain indelibly royal. “As long as they retain their royal styles and title, that is validation in itself. Harry, grandson of the sovereign, will be son of the sovereign, then brother of the sovereign. So that proximity to the throne is never going to change,” said Little.

Bitcoin

Bitcoin surges through key $50,000 level in European trading

Cryptocurrency value up 75% since start of year spurred by prominent business people

Bitcoin hit $50,547 on Tuesday but there are still many sceptics. Photograph: Chesnot/Getty

Bitcoin hit $50,547 on Tuesday but there are still many sceptics. Photograph: Chesnot/Getty

Phillip Inman
@phillipinman
Tue 16 Feb 2021 23.53 EST

Bitcoin soared through the key $50,000 level on Tuesday for the first time as the growing acceptance of the world's biggest cryptocurrency among large banks and investment funds continued to draw in mainstream investors.

After a meteoric rise in which its value increased by 75% since the start of the year, the currency hit $50,547.70 (£36,320) per coin in European trading at around 12.35 GMT.

The price surge means Elon Musk's electric carmaker Tesla has piled up a virtual profit of $420m in the week since the entrepreneur said the business had bought bitcoins then worth $1.5bn. At the time of the announcement, on 8 February, bitcoin was trading at $39,406.

Only last March, bitcoin was trading at below $6,000 and in 2016 a single coin was worth less than $400.

Analysts said the increase was a combination of endorsements from prominent business people, including Musk, and several investment banks that have said they would buy the currency.

Russ Mould, investment director at AJ Bell, said bitcoin's longer-term prospects depended on whether more people embraced the cryptocurrency. "The more people that adapt it and use it as money, the greater the chances of it perhaps being taken on board as a mainstream currency," he said.

Fawad Razaqzada, market analyst with ThinkMarkets, reckons some investors will be taking profits, as the $50k milestone had been seen as a key target. Once the profit taking is over, it could soar towards $55,000.

"Bitcoin remains fundamentally supported because of growing demand as major companies warm towards cryptocurrencies. So, we may not see the repeat of the late 2017-style sell-off," he added.

PayPal users in the US can buy and sell a selection of cryptocurrencies, while Jack Dorsey, Twitter's co-founder and chief executive, recently said he and the rapper Jay-Z would buy 500 bitcoin – now worth £25m – to start an endowment fund for Africa and India.

Morgan Stanley has said its $150bn investment fund is looking closely at a large purchase of bitcoins, while it is understood that Goldman Sachs and JP Morgan, which have been wary of cryptocurrencies, are soon to announce investments.

Is bitcoin a scam? – podcast
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As the price of bitcoin rocketed in late 2017, JP Morgan's chief executive, Jamie Dimon, called the currency a fraud that would not end well, saying he would "fire in a second" any JP Morgan staff member trading bitcoin, because it was against the bank's rules and was "stupid".

More recently, however, Dimon's views have changed, and he conceded at the end of last year that a number of "very smart people" were buying the cryptocurrency, although he said it was "not my cup of tea".

Critics have accused bitcoin miners who search for "hidden" coins of burning through terawatts of energy on their computers and of creating an unregulated market vulnerable to sophisticated fraudsters.

There are also many sceptics who say the price boom cannot last. Last month the Bank of America Securities' chief investment strategist, Michael Hartnett, said the recent surge in price may be "the mother of all bubbles".

European Central Bank governing council member Gabriel Makhlouf said he would not buy bitcoin. He also compared investment in the cryptocurrency to the 17th-century Netherlands tulip craze, which ended in collapse and widespread personal bankruptcies.

Bitcoin investors should be prepared to "lose all their money", he said, repeating a warning from last month, though he added that he is not advising people whether or not to invest in the digital currency.

"Personally, I wouldn't put my money into it, but clearly, some people think it's a good bet," said Makhlouf, who is also governor of Ireland's central bank. "Three hundred years ago, people put money into tulips because they thought it was an investment."

Bitcoin fell back below $50,000 at the start of the Asian trading session on Wednesday and was fetching $49,322 at 5am GMT.

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