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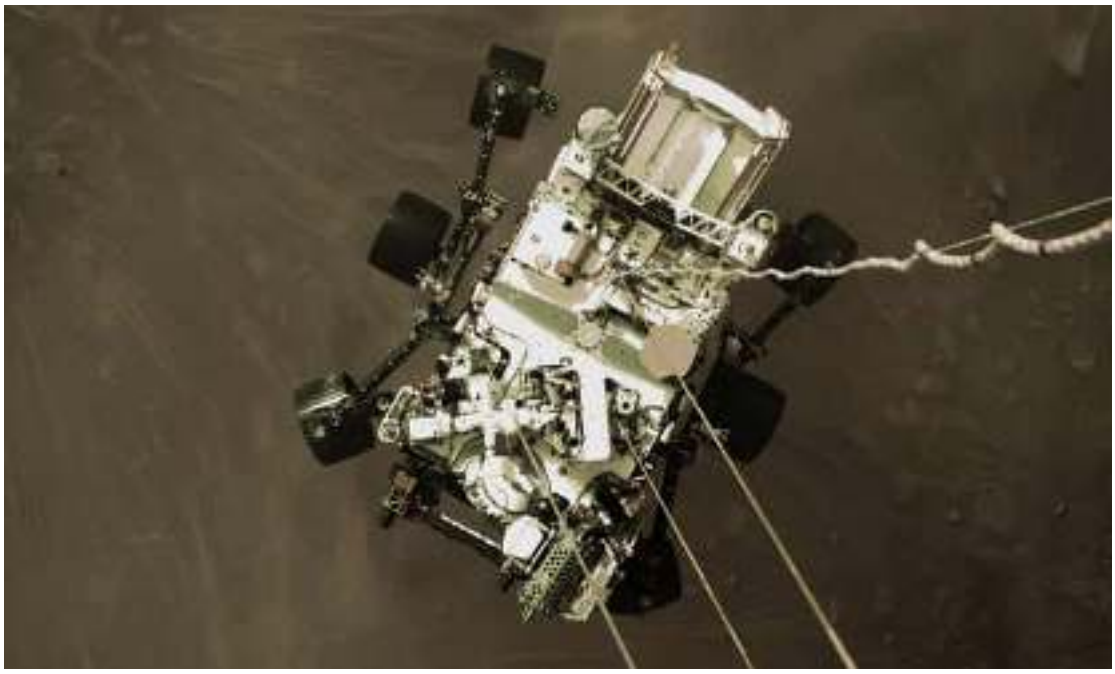
OpinionMars

The Observer view on triumph on Mars and tragedy in Texas

Observer editorial

As with space travel, co-operation is crucial in solving the country's infrastructure problems



Nasa's Perseverance rover lands on Mars. Photograph: Nasa/JPL-Caltech/Zuma Wire/Rex/Shutterstock

Nasa's Perseverance rover lands on Mars. Photograph: Nasa/JPL-Caltech/Zuma Wire/Rex/Shutterstock

Sun 21 Feb 2021 01.15 EST

As a contrast in extremes, last week's extraordinary developments in space and the southern United States take some beating. At the very moment Nasa's Perseverance rover scored a technological triumph with its flawless

landing on the surface of Mars, millions of American citizens in Texas were thrust back into a chaotic, pre-industrial dark age of no electricity, no water and, for some, no food by unprecedented freezing temperatures.

Many lessons may be drawn from the confluence of these two events, positive and negative. The performance of the Perseverance mission is frankly breathtaking. Having travelled the 38.6m miles from Earth – measured by Mars's closest approach in 2020 – over seven months, the rover touched down without any apparent damage to its sophisticated scientific equipment and cameras.

The landing marks the beginning of a new era of space exploration in which rocks from the red planet will be returned to Earth for the first time. Nasa's photos of the descent are a marvel in themselves, and may become as celebrated as those of the first Moon landing. From its base in the Jezero crater, Perseverance will begin to offer answers to age-old questions about space – including one of the biggest of all: was there (or is there) life on Mars?

Volunteers distribute drinking water in Houston, Texas, after power outages and water shortages. Photograph: Justin Sullivan/Getty

What a success for science, for technology, and for the people who designed and built Perseverance. As one excited Nasa controller said: "This shows what we can do when we all work together." Indeed it does. That's a lesson worth holding on to as selfish commercial and nationalistic instincts fracture the global fight against Covid-19. Last week's G7 leaders' meeting reached a similar conclusion. It bears constant repetition.

The misery and mayhem in Texas and neighbouring states show what can happen when that lesson is ignored. The Lone Star state is one of the wealthiest in the US, itself one of the wealthiest nations. Texas is famous for its bountiful energy resources and big-hatted, big-hearted oilmen. So how could a few days of admittedly extreme weather create such a startling breakdown, leaving millions in need and many dead?

Biden to declare major disaster in Texas as millions hit by water shortages
Read more

One obvious answer is global heating and the climate crisis, which last week produced considerably higher temperatures in Anchorage, Alaska, than in Austin, Texas. Greg Abbott, the state's Republican governor, can carry on denying that climate is a factor if he must. At one point in the crisis, he blamed blackouts on frozen wind turbines, even though they accounted for only 13% of outages. Ever fewer people believe him. That, hopefully, is another lesson learned.

The virtual collapse of many of Texas's life support systems – water supply pipelines, food distribution networks and natural gas, coal and nuclear power plants were all temporarily knocked out – speaks to a bigger, ongoing national failure to invest in critical infrastructure. This is partly the result of repeated Republican tax and budget-cutting. In 2016, Donald Trump said he would fix the problem. He didn't. Joe Biden promises to do so.

Texan travails have also highlighted inequality. In Houston, less well-off residents complained of sudden, unaffordable rises in rents and water and gas charges as price-gougers took advantage. The shameful decision by Ted Cruz, the millionaire Republican Texas senator and Capitol Hill

insurrectionist, to head for warmer climes in Mexico dramatically symbolised this gulf.

It's ironic that Texas Republicans, normally so keen on self-reliance, political autonomy and state's rights, are now welcoming financial aid from Washington. Abbott has asked Biden to declare a "major disaster", making the state eligible for federal funds. It would also "allow eligible Texans to apply for assistance to help address broken pipes and related property damage". It seems that central, unified government has its uses after all.

Biden will offer personal reassurance to Texans in a visit this week. As this moment of extreme national triumph and tragedy, working together works.

Opinion Coronavirus

The Observer view on Boris Johnson's Covid roadmap announcement

Observer editorial

Scientific advisers must insist that data is crucial to setting dates to ease restrictions

People enjoy mild temperatures on Wimbledon Common in London as the government prepares to announce the gradual lifting of lockdown restrictions. Photograph: Amer Ghazzal/Rex/Shutterstock

People enjoy mild temperatures on Wimbledon Common in London as the government prepares to announce the gradual lifting of lockdown restrictions. Photograph: Amer Ghazzal/Rex/Shutterstock

Sun 21 Feb 2021 01.00 EST

'Let's use data, not dates" – so said the government's deputy chief medical adviser, Angela McLean, on Thursday to MPs as she was questioned over the right framework for the roadmap out of lockdown. Tomorrow is the

long-awaited day when the prime minister sets out his plan, and it's plain that he and his medical advisers are at odds. Both have seen very encouraging data – the number of reported cases is falling sharply, as are hospitalisations and deaths. Imperial College's React 1 study last week showed that infections in England have dropped by two-thirds in less than a month. The R rate is now estimated to be between 0.6 and 0.9, well below the 1.0 above which the virus spreads exponentially. Public Health England has early data suggesting the vaccination success is beginning to have an impact on Covid's transmission.

What is provoking debate is how much this encouraging data can inform pre-announced dates for easing over the next few months. The answer, beyond 8 March, is not at all – with McLean's boss, Chris Whitty, reportedly unhappy that Johnson is insistent that dates for action should frame decision-making, even if caveated by how the data evolves. Instead, data should be the alpha and omega of the whole process.

There is one area of agreement. Extrapolation of trends to 8 March means that even cautious scientists recognise that the risks of opening primary schools, allowing hand-holding in care homes, reopening socially distanced outside sports such as golf and tennis, and meeting one person outdoors, outside one's bubble, are very low. The boosterish prime minister will be allowed to announce some, if not all these measures as good news. The issue is what lies beyond.

In thrall to a vocal libertarian right, Johnson then wants to announce, at two- or three-week intervals, trigger dates for decisions under the banner of a "cautious but irreversible relaxation", so that by early summer the country – save for continued social distancing and mask-wearing – will be back to semi-normal. Under this timetable, non-essential shops would open at the end of March; outside hospitality over Easter; universities and all schools after Easter; and further easing to allow pubs and restaurants to open by early May. The Tory right will be jubilant, but the country is the constituency, not one wing of his party. The approach of easing by trigger dates is wrong.

> We still don't know for how long vaccines afford protection, how quickly mutations spread, and to what extent the vaccinated can spread

The disagreement is not over whether this must be the last lockdown: everyone wants that. The social, educational, economic and mental health costs are known to us all. Everyone would like every act of easing – from opening schools to socialising more freely indoors – to be irreversible too, but this is where bitter disagreement arises. Johnson cannot promise this is to be the last lockdown under the excuse that pre-announced dates are only indicative and will not trigger easing if the data suggests otherwise. The medical officers know Johnson is incapable of resisting pressure from the right of his party and pre-announcing dates invites a repeat of the mistakes that have led to Britain having among the highest Covid death rates in the world.

Instead, the prime minister should say that data will drive lockdown easing, which cannot be irreversible if the trends suddenly become adverse. He will be guided at all times by advice from the Joint Biosecurity Centre on appropriate alert levels, and stick to one overriding target, rather than switching targets as they suit political exigencies. The Blair Foundation suggests only one target makes sense: to keep the R rate below 1.0 and reported cases stable or falling. The correct approach is to aim for this target, with the government agile enough to tighten pre-emptively, according to the data, or relax earlier if improvements are enduring.

Whitty at odds with Johnson over 'big bang' reopening of schools in England
Read more

Despite the vaccination success, too much is still unknown. It may be true that by the end of April nearly every 50-year-old will be vaccinated, and healthy under-50s made up just 0.94% of deaths in 2020. But we still do not know how much and for how long vaccines afford protection, how fast the vaccination programme will go, how quickly mutations are spreading and whether they are resistant to vaccines, and even to what extent the vaccinated can spread the disease. Johnsonian boosterism in this context is mad.

The good news, beyond the vaccination programme, is that the test-and-trace system is beginning to function well. People are now contacted on average within 78 hours of being near a Covid carrier, down from 120 hours in the autumn. Coming out of lockdown, local government and the NHS now have access to data, testing results, and a functioning test-and-trace system that would allow the tiering system to work in a way it did not in the autumn – especially if there were proper financial compensation for those who have to self-isolate. It is long overdue for the Treasury to model the costs of not incentivising compliance and spread of the virus, rather than worrying over the costs of furloughing.

The sooner the virus is under control, the better the economic prospects. It is a critical moment. Lives and sustained economic recovery, capitalising on the vaccination success, depend on the prime minister putting data before dates, sticking to the clearest of targets and relaxing step by secure step as alert levels indicate. His scientists and medical officers know these truths. It is time they backed them with resignations if they fear they are being ignored. Too much hurt, privation and death is at stake for any other action.

Observer comment cartoon
Coronavirus

Boris Johnson's lockdown roadmap – cartoon

The weekly stats uncoveredVaccines and immunisation

Is 12 weeks between Covid jabs too long?

David Spiegelhalter and Anthony Masters

Behind the numbers: there are good reasons to believe the UK's vaccination experiment will work

A GP-run mass vaccination clinic in Thurso, Caithness. Photograph: Murdo MacLeod/The Observer

A GP-run mass vaccination clinic in Thurso, Caithness. Photograph: Murdo MacLeod/The Observer

Sun 21 Feb 2021 02.15 EST

The UK has a controversial policy of giving second doses of coronavirus vaccine 12 weeks after the first dose, rather than the three-week gap used in

other countries. What is the reasoning behind what the *Washington Post* described as "one big, high-stakes science experiment"?

First, since there are limited doses of vaccine, this strategy means protecting more people, faster. This is an optimisation problem against supply constraints, time and a deadly virus. Modelling showed that, provided the first dose delivered reasonable efficacy, then most lives would be saved by lengthening the gap. By 17 February, there had been about 17 million vaccinations in the UK, with more than 16 million people having had a first dose. If a three-week gap had been used, only about 10 million would have had any vaccine.

Second, biology suggests that a delay should not be harmful, and may plausibly be beneficial. Andrew Pollard, the Oxford Vaccine Group head, said: "The immune system remembers the first dose and will respond, whether the later dose is at three weeks or three months."

Third, the limited data available suggest that the great majority of protection comes via the first dose. The AstraZeneca vaccine trials had a range of intervals between the two doses, with a vaccine efficacy of 73% from 22 days up to 12 weeks after just one dose. The immune response was also larger following a longer interval. For the Pfizer vaccine, Public Health England estimated 91% efficacy for 15 to 28 days after the first jab alone, and a recent Israeli study found similar efficacy in their rollout. Although there is no direct evidence that this efficacy continues up to 12 weeks, there is no reason to think it would not.

In this global pandemic, both science and interventions have to be conducted at speed, using imperfect data and background knowledge to deal with inevitable uncertainty. And in a way the *Washington Post* was correct about an experiment: the UK is going to carry out a randomised controlled trial of different dose intervals, and this will be of huge benefit to the world.

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

OpinionMartin Scorsese

Martin Scorsese: talk to me about great films, not ‘content’

Rebecca Nicholson

The director has mounted a spirited attack on those who insist on branding cinema – and all art – as a commodity

Martin Scorsese: taking a stand. Photograph: Dia Dipasupil/Getty Images

Martin Scorsese: taking a stand. Photograph: Dia Dipasupil/Getty Images

Sat 20 Feb 2021 12.30 EST

I have long harboured an irrational loathing for the word “content”, especially when used as a casual stand-in to mean something like a film, a television show, or a piece of art or music.

I suspect that often when people use the word it is to make them feel as if they’re in *Succession*, when it’s more like we’re all languishing in an endless episode of *The Apprentice*. It is representative of the kind of insidious business speak that has become normal for non-business people to say, like “personal brand”, or “blue-sky thinking”. Don’t get me started on touching base.

Imagine my pleasure, then, when I read Martin Scorsese’s essay for *Harper’s* about Federico Fellini, which is disdainful about the notion of art as “content”. Scorsese’s piece is ostensibly about the Italian director, although it is also an expansion of his ideas about how risk-averse the industry is becoming, which he first put forward in 2019, talking about the success of superhero films and how they are “not cinema”. I love a Marvel movie as much as the next nerd, except for the ones that break the three-

hour barrier, because none of them need to be that long and it's just showing off, but Scorsese argued that putting out superhero sequel after superhero sequel was simply satisfying an existing demand, rather than allowing films to be surprising or unexpected, which could create new demand.

He returns to similar territory in *Harper's*, with a lengthy, erudite piece about the art of cinema, referencing Truffaut, Godard, Cassavetes and Antonioni, with some thoughts about the problems with algorithms dictating what films we, as viewers, are made aware of. I enjoyed his praise of curated platforms such as Mubi, even though my own Mubi subscription lingers as a regular reminder of how I am a terrible person for spending the evening watching yet another reality show about dogs who don't know how to behave, when I should be watching an overlooked French classic about heartbreak and infidelity before it disappears.

Scorsese argues that "the art of cinema is being systematically devalued, sidelined, demeaned, and reduced to its lowest common denominator, 'content'", noting that a word used almost exclusively in the context of business is now applied to "all moving images". It is worse than that. It is used for everything. A song, say, is content, as is the material around it, as is an interview to promote it, as is a post by someone about how much they like it. Scorsese is taking a stand, but I worry that it is already too late.

Countdown is not the place for spite

Anne Robinson: a consonant, please. Photograph: Dan Wooller/Shutterstock

My lockdown-three bingo card, handmade from sourdough starter and salty tears, of course had Tory backbenchers clamouring for an early end to restrictions, science be damned.

What it didn't have was Anne Robinson being slated on Twitter for something she said during an episode of *The Weakest Link*, a quiz show that ended in 2012. When she was named as the new host of *Countdown* a clip resurfaced, showing her being nastily snobbish to a contestant.

It was the kind of nasty not much seen in pop culture now, although it used to be common, before viciousness was outsourced to trolls. *The Weakest Link*'s selling point was that she was hard on the contestants; she purred insults at them, and they took part expecting to be insulted.

This was also the era of *The X Factor* spotlighting people who couldn't sing and sneering at them for daring to think they could. The last couple of years have seen attempts to rethink that period, with documentaries like *Jade: The Reality Star Who Changed Britain*, *Celebrity: A 21st Century Story* and *Framing Britney Spears* showing how cruel the spotlight could be.

Times have changed. Robinson is taking over from Nick Hewer, who became famous on *The Apprentice*, a show not known for being kind to its wannabe magnates. He didn't host *Countdown* as if Alan Sugar were about to fire each contestant. I'm sure Robinson will avoid berating anyone for their personal lives, when all they would like is a consonant, please.

Jason Donovan should be on danger money

Back pain: Jason Donovan. Photograph: ITV/REX/Shutterstock

D*ancing on Ice* fans will be disappointed to learn that there is to be no live dancing on ice or otherwise on ITV this weekend, after a combination of Covid and injuries greatly reduced the number of celebrities able to take part in the episode.

You know what they say: losing one contestant is careless, but losing five is a sign, perhaps, that the competition is more *Hunger Games* than Olympic Games. Jason Donovan's back pain had meant that he would miss another show, while *Emmerdale*'s Joe Warren-Plant had to withdraw after testing positive for Covid, just as Rufus Hound did earlier this month.

"The welfare of all of those involved is important to us and we felt it prudent to take a week's break at this juncture," a spokesperson told the

BBC, to which you can only reply, duh. *Dancing on Ice* is, inexplicably, on its 13th series, and I say inexplicably, because I can't work out how there are any uninjured celebrities left to appear.

If it ever does come to an end, perhaps they could try another activity. I propose *All About That Base*, a new concept in which celebrities try base-jumping, and hope they can pick up the skills in time.

- Rebecca Nicholson is an Observer columnist

Observer lettersPoverty

Letters: the chancellor must heed the plight of poorer families

Withdrawing the extra £20 paid to those in need would plunge another 400,000 children into poverty

Rishi Sunak prepares to announce his budget in March 2020. He has said he intends to withdraw the extra £20 paid to families claiming universal credit. Photograph: Tolga Akmen/AFP/Getty Images

Rishi Sunak prepares to announce his budget in March 2020. He has said he intends to withdraw the extra £20 paid to families claiming universal credit. Photograph: Tolga Akmen/AFP/Getty Images

Sun 21 Feb 2021 01.00 EST

Torsten Bell writes that the number of people claiming universal credit has risen over the last pandemic year to more than 6 million families ("Not everyone can afford to save more during lockdown", Comment). In March, when we are told that the chancellor, Rishi Sunak, intends to withdraw the

extra £20 allotted to the claimant families, Bell's Resolution Foundation states that 400,000 extra children would be thrown below the poverty line. The suffering of the families on universal credit has been known since the publication of Professor Philip Alston's UN report on poverty in the UK.

We two who have signed these words insist that the £20 must remain awarded in the March budget, and indeed be raised forthwith; brutality should not be the signature of any government in our poor country.
Vanessa Redgrave and Miriam Margolyes
London W4

Retired people whose income is from occupational pensions they worked for decades ago are indeed better protected from the economic catastrophe that the bungled lockdown regimes have caused for those reliant on current wages. The Keynesian tool kit needed to repair the damage is the same one that was pursued with inadequate nerve by US, UK and EU politicians and central bankers in 2008. Those worst hit, now as then, need steely nerves from our chancellor in his forthcoming budget to continue to borrow against the future to get us through the present.

But this government has been invertebrate when facing down Brexit fetishists, the fiscally orthodox and those who put profit before protection. We urgently need politicians who will show some backbone on behalf of those in most need.
Mary Pimm & Nik Wood
London E9

Exit tweed, stage left

As a worker in the theatre industry, I can add other examples of post-Brexit difficulties to those encountered by Bennett Silks ("As half its sales are wiped out, silk firm joins exodus to Europe", News). Due to the new costs and bureaucracy, a major European opera house has instructed its staff to stop buying UK products. No more Yorkshire wools and Scottish tweeds on the main stages of Europe? A first-rate Italian supplier of fine tulles refuses to accept UK orders for the same reasons. Should we perhaps try to make our ballet tutus with linen from Northern Ireland?

Allan Watkins
London SE10

Keep Brexit under review

Both Toby Helm ("Starmer facing pressure to end silence on Tory Brexit failures", News) and Nick Cohen ("In the fairytale land of Brexit, we're trading with the world. It's a fantasy", Comment) raise the issue of Keir Starmer's reluctance to hold Boris Johnson to account over his Brexit deal. While I share the frustration of many over the lack of serious challenge to the government, it is understandable that only a few weeks after the signing of the deal, despite all the already obvious problems, and with imminent local and mayoral elections, it is not yet prudent for Labour to essentially take a stance that could be understood by Leave voters as: you were wrong/gullible.

Clearly, the government is doing everything in its power to avoid scrutiny of the deal: shutting down the Brexit select committee; refusing to subject the deal to an Office for Budget Responsibility impact assessment; and denying the mounting self-evident serious problems. We need an overarching, politically neutral body to review Brexit. Such a body could be formed by a joint initiative of the CBI and the TUC, with an independent chair commanding wide ranging respect and credibility – someone akin to Mark Carney. Such a body should publish a regular quarterly report, which would facilitate meaningful political and media debate.
David Newens
Great Linford, Milton Keynes

Universities in the digital age

John Naughton issues a call to universities that they have ignored for too long ("Universities need to wise up – or risk being consigned to history", the New Review). Covid has changed all that. Blended learning has been a game changer for many universities, offering a creative and varied model of high education teaching.

Naughton challenges the sector to consider the role of universities in the digital age. He states he is not hearing many answers. Perhaps he is asking the wrong people. Many of us in the field have been using these approaches for years, winning awards for them, increasing students' inclusion, reducing awarding gaps among minority ethnic groups, improving student outcomes and the quality of their learning experiences, and helping them into graduate level jobs.

These approaches need considerable investment and a different skills set and mindset. Any post-Covid return to business as usual will risk consigning some to history. But many will continue to thrive so long as they continue to build on the successes of hybrid forms of delivery.
Patrick Callaghan, dean of the School of Applied Sciences and professor of Mental Health Science
London South Bank University
London SE1

John Naughton is looking for other ways of teaching and learning in universities. This is about to happen at Black Mountains College in Wales. Hopefully starting in 2022, the degree will be taught in immersive, intensive, single topic blocks of three to five weeks each, with class sizes capped at 20. It is designed to foster confidence, creativity, critical thinking, emotional intelligence and the ability to communicate and collaborate in order to imagine – and deliver – far-reaching changes to current systems. The foundation of the BMC degree is learning how to learn in relation to the natural world and human society in order to become an agent of change.
Virginia Brown
Talgarth, Powys

Bombs away

I hate to challenge Brian Blessed's memories ("This much I know", Magazine) but, whatever he fired his bow and arrows at in order to defend Sheffield towards the end of the Second World War, they could not have been V2 rockets. V2s had a maximum range of 200 miles (320km) and thus the only UK cities within that range from their Belgian and Dutch launch

sites were London, at which most of them were aimed, Ipswich and Norwich.

They had very primitive guidance systems which meant that, at least in the case of Norwich, most failed to hit their targets. I live in a village over 10 miles south of that city and we have the remains of two V2 craters to indicate just how far from their intended objective many of them fell.

Richard Carden

Denton, Harleston, Norfolk

For the recordUK news

For the record

This week's corrections

Sun 21 Feb 2021 01.00 EST

An interview with the author Val McDermid misdescribed the words gallus and thrawn – used in McDermid's latest novel – as "Gaelic"; they are actually Scots vocabulary ("'You had to be twice as good as the guys'", 14 February, the New Review, page 37).

An article about couples who wed during the pandemic referred, in one instance, to the occasion taking place at the "register office" and in other instances at the "registrar office". As our style guide notes, the former is correct ("To have and to hold", 14 February, Magazine, page 17).

A review of *One Night in Miami* said it imagined Malcolm X, Cassius Clay, Jim Brown and Sam Cooke being brought together to celebrate a Clay victory in 1964. The meeting between the four men did take place in real life; the film speculates on the events that happened there ("History in the making", 10 January, the New Review, page 26).

Other recently amended articles include:

Fury at 'do not resuscitate' notices given to Covid patients with learning disabilities

Don't mess with Jackie Weaver, boys. She's got a mute button and knows how to use it

Hold on to your sun hats … how to book a great British summer holiday

Muslim boy, 4, was referred to Prevent over game of Fortnite

Hello, Mr Resident: Is Palm Beach ready for the Trumps to move in?

[Now for the nudes: thousands turn to online life drawing]

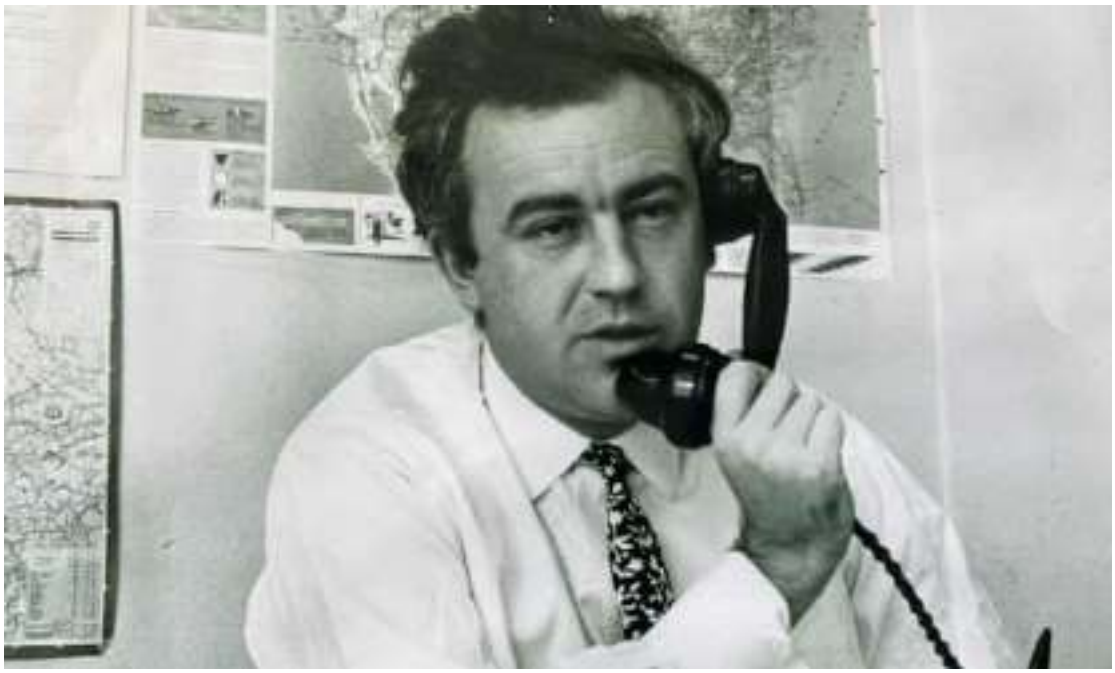
Write to the Readers' Editor, the Observer*, York Way, London N1 9GU, email observer.readers@observer.co.uk, tel 020 3353 4736*

OpinionNewspapers

Godfrey Hodgson: Observer journalist who covered the Cuban missile crisis, JFK's assassination and the Prague Spring

William Keegan

The former Washington correspondent, who has died aged 86, was also widely admired for encouraging younger reporters



Godfrey Hodgson, the Observer's Washington correspondent from 1962-1965.

Godfrey Hodgson, the Observer's Washington correspondent from 1962-1965.

Sun 21 Feb 2021 02.00 EST

Godfrey Hodgson, who has died at the age of 86, was one of the most distinguished journalists of his generation. After an impressive early academic career – Magdalen College, Oxford and the University of Pennsylvania – plus some reporting experience on the *Times*, he joined the *Observer* in 1960, and was soon recruited to be one of the proprietor/editor David Astor's team to increase foreign coverage.

Becoming the paper's Washington correspondent at 28 was a rapid promotion, and Godfrey lived up to it. There was no shortage of "events". He covered the Cuban missile crisis, the Kennedy assassination, the early phase of Lyndon Johnson's presidency and the buildup of the civil rights movement. He later worked on the *Sunday Times* Insight team and for ITV. He was immortalised in sociologist Jeremy Tunstall's book *Newspaper Power*: "A youthful Godfrey Hodgson covered three big stories in the

single year of 1968 – the Prague Spring and the Soviet tanks; the Paris ‘events’ of May 1968; and the US Presidential election.”

Much of his later career was devoted to a series of well-received books, including *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* (2009).

Godfrey could be a fiery character, and encountered difficulties with colleagues as a director of the Reuters Foundation (1992-2001). But both there and in his work for the Green Templeton College, Oxford, and City University he encouraged the training of young journalists and was widely admired. He had been a good friend of that other *Observer* luminary Anthony Sampson, and raised the money for the Anthony Sampson chair of investigative journalism at City University.

As recently as last year, Hodgson was mentoring a young trainee journalist I know and encouraging him with an investigation into the mysterious business affairs of one Dominic Cummings.

- William Keegan is an Observer columnist

OpinionPrince Harry

Forget the royals, public service is most often performed by the public

Barbara Ellen

Harry and Meghan should take note of the good deeds being done out of the spotlight

The Duke and Duchess of Sussex at a pre-school learning centre in Los Angeles, California, last year. Photograph: Matt Sayles/Reuters

The Duke and Duchess of Sussex at a pre-school learning centre in Los Angeles, California, last year. Photograph: Matt Sayles/Reuters

Sat 20 Feb 2021 13.30 EST

The latest skirmish between the royal family and Harry/Meghan may be a good moment to remember that there's "public" in "public service". First off, if I were the Windsor family therapist, I'd have something wise and stern to say about engaging in public slanging matches.

However disappointing the loss of royal duties, Harry should not have been snitty with his 94-year-old grandmother (viz. that sign-off, "We can all live a life of service. Service is universal"). At the same time, the passive aggression of the royals and their supporters towards the Sussexes is fast becoming so swollen and gaseous that it won't be long before it's visible as a royal-crest-shaped mist.

I keep reading that there's a big difference between royal public service and Harry and Meghan's brand of A-list LA-based yolo-philanthropy. Fair enough, but certain commentators may be overestimating the majesty of royal public service, when some of us remain stubbornly underawed by the

pious ribbon-snipping and patronising handshaking. Of course, this is too reductive: the royals do far more than that. Nevertheless, some of this "good work" – particularly when it comes to charity – is performed by motivated celebrities.

Is this what the Sussexes were getting at, that they don't need to be technically royal to do good?

For some, the Sussexes' philanthropy is undermined by the reportedly multimillion-dollar deals with Netflix and Spotify, the upcoming schmoozefest with Oprah Winfrey, and other lucrative pursuits. (To summarise the carping: Harry and Meghan are definitely helping people – it's just that the "people" happen to be themselves.)

Even if they are entirely sincere, they may also be misguided. How could "public service" ever be defined by their mega-wealthy do-gooding mates attending awareness-raising retreats on private islands, tweeting shared "messages of hope" afterwards?

Perhaps both the royals and the Sussexes need a wake-up call that it's not all about them. The most striking recent examples of public service have come from, well, *you*.

Ordinary people going out of their way for others. (I'll include Marcus Rashford in this. Just as he transcended his background to become a footballer, he transcended his celebrity to campaign for hungry children.) Then there are the NHS workers and all the others on the frontline. The volunteer vaccinators. Those collecting for food banks outside supermarkets. Others who deliver shopping for shielding neighbours. And so on, without fanfare, day after day.

With such acts, public service is revealed as a democratic, elastic concept that anyone is capable of. It's not a royals v Sussexes ethical grudge match.

Public service isn't just for the public, it's also from the public and by the public, and never more so than right now.

Dolly Parton deserves a statue for not wanting one

Dolly Parton: doesn't want to be put on a pedestal. Photograph: Robyn Beck/AFP/Getty Images

Isn't Dolly Parton the classiest of class acts? Parton, 75, has asked for a bill to be withdrawn that would have led to the erection of a statue of her on the capitol grounds in Nashville, Tennessee. Parton said: "Given all that is going on in the world, I don't think putting me on a pedestal is appropriate at this time."

Parton was nominated for the statue for all that she has contributed to Tennessee and the world, not just for music, but also for her myriad charitable and philanthropic works. Latterly, these include founding the Imagination Library (to aid child literacy) and donations to Vanderbilt University that helped develop the Moderna coronavirus vaccine. Then there was her public support for racial justice (a not insignificant stance in country music circles). Parton also turned down the presidential medal of freedom from Donald Trump. *Twice*. Did I mention that Dolly was classy?

Frankly, I don't think many people would have been critical had Parton allowed the statue to go ahead. However, the fact that she considered it a bad idea (for now at least) says a lot about her character. Statues have become a vexed topic. (Who deserves one? Who doesn't? Which should come down? Which should stay up?) But it still feels unusual for someone

to turn down one honouring themselves. It positions Parton as the anti-celebrity for our times. Even now some celebrity grifters scrabble and claw for recognition, airtime, cash, holidays in Dubai (any attention or privilege they can get), a bit like gamblers hoarding chips in the tilting casino of the Titanic. Parton has the self-awareness to realise that now is not the time.

It would be foolish to argue that the brains and moxie behind Dollywood doesn't have an ego, but look how she uses it. By turning down her statue, Parton has shown exactly why she is so worthy of one.

The mullet has stood the test of time. I just hope it doesn't return

The 5cm-tall figure of a Celtic deity sports a moustache and a mullet. Photograph: National Trust/Oxford Archaeology East/James Fairbairn/PA

Hug your children close tonight. Disturbing evidence has emerged that the mullet may have predated Chris Waddle and Pat Sharp. A Roman figurine has been unearthed at the National Trust's Wimpole Estate in Cambridgeshire showing an ancient Briton sporting what could be described as "maximus mulletis".

This was the second shock archaeological discovery of the week, after excavations on the Isle of Man uncovered gaudy jewellery that my untrained eye concluded probably belonged to Viking Medallion Man.

As scholars of social history know, the mullet (spiky at the top, tendrils down the back) terrorised western democracy, chiefly from the mid 70s to late 80s. The follicular threat appeared to originate in the popular game of football, replacing Kevin Keegan's "school dinner lady" bubble perm as the Most Unnecessary Hairstyle Ever, quickly spreading across other sports, resulting in The Agassi.

For a tense period in history, the mullet was omnipresent, causing immeasurable distress to blameless women forced to date men who resembled car dashboard gonks. Now the discovery of the Roman-era Waddle suggests the mullet has strong historical precedent and could happen again. Forget about hugging your kids – you'd be better off hiding the hairdressing scissors.

- Barbara Ellen is an Observer columnist

Hidden gems from the world of researchIndustrial policy

Innovation and invention are the keys to levelling up

Torsten Bell

New research shows that universities working with businesses can help bring regions out of the doldrums

Big regional productivity gaps in the UK lie behind the government's 'levelling up' agenda. Photograph: David Davies/PA

Big regional productivity gaps in the UK lie behind the government's 'levelling up' agenda. Photograph: David Davies/PA

Sun 21 Feb 2021 01.45 EST

Nationally, the UK could do with more innovation. After all, we've had next to no productivity growth since 2008, which partly explains why we haven't had a pay rise either. Big regional productivity gaps, which have

been with us for decades, also lie behind the government's "levelling-up" agenda.

With London, the south-east and east accounting for 52% of total R&D spending, government has been under pressure to be transparent about how much public innovation support different regions receive. Some propose new universities, or proper endowments for existing ones, in the north of England. A new paper offers support for the idea that such institutions make a real difference to innovation.

In the mid-1990s, the Swiss government established universities of applied sciences, with technical researchers working closely with business. The institutions increased both the quantity of regional innovation (patent numbers rose by 6.8%) and its quality (lots of patents are rubbish, so this is as important). For those who fear this was because the Swiss have strong local economies, the researchers found positive effects even outside bigger, already successful cities.

So institutions matter, but don't get too excited. Patenting is only part of the innovation jigsaw. And innovation is only one part of the even harder productivity jigsaw, where our skills, how well our firms are run and how easy it is to trade with the rest of the world all matter. There is no "levelling-up" magic bullet.

- Torsten Bell is chief executive of the Resolution Foundation. Read more at resolutionfoundation.org

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OpinionBrexit

How David Frost’s dizzying ascent of the greasy pole damaged Britain

Nick Cohen

The bureaucrat was going nowhere in his career until he turned himself into a hardcore Brexiter

David Frost looks on as Boris Johnson signs the Brexit trade deal with the EU in No 10 last December. Photograph: Leon Neal/Getty Images

David Frost looks on as Boris Johnson signs the Brexit trade deal with the EU in No 10 last December. Photograph: Leon Neal/Getty Images

Sat 20 Feb 2021 14.00 EST

Every revolution “evaporates and leaves behind only the slime of a new bureaucracy”, said Franz Kafka. Britain’s Brexit revolution is evaporating now and leaving behind the slime of David Frost.

The most damning criticism of the Brexit that Frost negotiated is that not one industry or trade can say that, however greatly others are suffering, we at least are benefiting from being outside the EU. Even fishermen and women, whose precarious lives were exploited with such cynicism by Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson, are finding they must fill in 71 pages of paperwork to export one lorry of fish, as new bureaucracy extends to every fishing village in the land.

Yet, while the country suffers, no one has done better than Frost. His rise mirrors Britain’s fall. At the time of the Brexit referendum, he was just Mr David Frost. He went to Oxford University but left no impression. His tutor told *Prospect* magazine he had fond memories of Frost’s “brilliant” tutorial

partner, who went on to be a professor. But of the man who was to impose the hardest of Brexits, the man whose name will be for ever associated with the narrowing of the horizons of millions, “I remember nothing at all about him”.

Frost moved from Oxford to the Foreign Office, where he became a figure familiar in many workplaces: the frustrated middle manager, whose resentment at an indifferent world that overlooks him gnaws at his pride. Do not underestimate the anger of the men no one remembers.

Frost became Britain’s ambassador to Denmark. It was a decent job – who wouldn’t enjoy free board and lodging in a smart Copenhagen home? But it was “not a serious job”, as a senior Conservative politician put it to me. The most sensitive task at the embassy is managing relations between the British and Danish armed forces “and that is dealt with by the defence attache”.

> David Frost shows there are civil servants who yearn to become politicians, as long as they do not have to stand for election in the process

Frost was going nowhere. John Kerr, a former head of the diplomatic service, described his former staffer as being “very diligent and conscientious, good at carrying out instructions, not always as good at querying instructions”. Kerr didn’t mean it as a compliment. Frost became a director of strategy at the Foreign Office and a director for Europe at the business department. Good jobs, once again, but not serious jobs: not permanent secretary or ambassador to the UN. He quit in 2013 to join the Scotch Whisky Association, and that appeared to be that. A civil service colleague who was at his leaving party told me: “He had a chip on his shoulder about not being promoted. I’d say he was definitely right of centre at the time but he wasn’t a hardcore Brexiteer.” But then nor was Boris Johnson. For Frost, like Johnson, Brexit was an opportunity. He began to flash come-hither smiles at the Tory right after the referendum. In pieces for the *Telegraph*, he said we must “stop flapping” about Brexit and realise that this “great country” would be successful “whatever we do”.

These were odd sentiments for the chief executive of the Scotch Whisky Association. Yanking the UK out of the single market was to kick the whisky business along with so many other businesses. But for an ex-diplomat with frustrated ambitions, vacuous boosterism was the smart career move.

When Kerr said Frost was "not always as good at querying instructions" he was describing every man or woman who has climbed a hierarchy by sucking up to the boss.

Johnson recognised a useful servant, and called him in. He took to greeting him as "Frosty", telling everyone within earshot that here was his new pal and banter buddy ready to play along in the great game of Brexit. In 2016, Johnson, then the foreign secretary, made Frosty his special adviser. In 2020, he turned Frosty, the former Mr David Frost, into Baron Frost, of Allenton in the county of Derbyshire – an extraordinary breach of the constitutional principle that a government adviser should not have a seat in legislature. Last week, Baron Frost shifted shape again as Johnson elevated him to the rank of cabinet minister with responsibility for dealing with the EU.

For years, liberals have warned about the danger of politicians corrupting the independence of the civil service. The inexorable rise of David Frost is a lesson to us. It shows there are civil servants who so want to be politicised that they yearn to become politicians, as long as they do not have to stand for election in the process.

His cabinet post may work out for him but it will not work for the rest of us. I can predict it with certainty because the hard Brexit deal he negotiated was a disaster and, crucially, a disaster on its own terms. Frost went into the negotiations saying that the EU simply did not understand the nationalist wave sweeping Europe. The UK was "not prepared to compromise". We were a free and sovereign country and Brussels had better get used to it.

Irish Sea border protest posters reflect loyalist anxiety in Northern Ireland
Read more

Frost played hardball by persuading Johnson to threaten to break international law. He only made the EU hit back harder. It demanded the UK adhere to labour, environment and state aid laws or else, and a weak, meek Britain accepted. Brexit had “the most onerous level-playing-field terms the EU has demanded”, the government’s former trade official David Henig told me. Even communist China got a better deal.

Does Frosty realise it? I ask because last week his “friends” were briefing political correspondents that he would take an “assertive role” over the border in the Irish Sea that he and the other defenders of the nation state agreed to as they partitioned the actual nation state of the UK. Does he not see how he will fail again? Does he not realise that Brexit left the UK isolated and deluded, and choking in a level of paperwork that can only be described as Kafkaesque?

Perhaps all he sees is how well he has done. From Mr Frost to Frosty to Baron Frost to cabinet minister Frost is one hell of a rise. Not bad for a lad whose political career seemed over in 2013. Not great for anyone else.

• Nick Cohen is an Observer columnist

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