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Covid inquiry
UK news

Public support for Covid inquiry more than twice as high as opposition – poll

Exclusive: Guardian poll reveals 47% of people support formal independent investigation while only 18% oppose

- Coronavirus – latest updates
- See all our coronavirus coverage

Robert Booth Social affairs correspondent

Wed 17 Mar 2021 02.00 EDT Last modified on Wed 17 Mar 2021 02.02 EDT

Reports say Boris Johnson now regrets not locking down earlier in March 2020 and believes the advice he was receiving about infection spread was based on out-of-date projections. Photograph: Stefan Rousseau/PA

Public support for a statutory public inquiry into the UK's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic is running more than twice as high as opposition to the idea, exclusive polling for the Guardian has revealed.

As a growing number of doctors, nurses, scientists and the bereaved call on the prime minister to trigger a formal independent investigation, 47% of people said they supported a public inquiry which has legal powers to compel people to give evidence under oath. Only 18% said they were opposed. 35% said they neither supported or opposed it or didn't know, according to polling carried out by ICM last weekend.

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The top priority among those wanting an inquiry was an investigation into the government's preparedness for a pandemic which has left the UK with the highest mortality rate of any of the world's largest economies. The death toll among people who tested positive reached 125,690 on Tuesday.

Those polled believe an inquiry's next highest priorities should be examining how the UK controlled the movement of people through its borders and the timing and strategy of lockdowns, which epidemiologists have already concluded cost lives.

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The focus on lockdowns comes amid reports that the prime minister Boris Johnson now regrets not locking down earlier in March 2020 and that he believes the advice he was receiving about infection spread was based on out of date projections.

Protection of care home residents, around 40,000 of whom died with Covid; the provision and procurement of PPE, which has been mired in allegations of cronyism; and the effectiveness of NHS test and trace, which parliament's public accounts committee last week said had failed to avert further lockdowns despite a £37bn two-year budget, were the next priorities.

The highest levels of support for a statutory inquiry are in the north of England, Northern Ireland, Wales and the south-west, the poll revealed.

It follows calls by scientists, doctors, nurses, the bereaved and minority ethnic leaders for Boris Johnson to finally announce an independent inquiry with powers to compel witnesses to attend and to order the disclosure of documents. Downing Street said this week “now is not the right time to devote huge amounts of official time to an inquiry”.

A government spokesperson said: “There will be an appropriate time in the future to look back, analyse and reflect on all aspects of this global pandemic.”

Senior figures in the UK’s Covid response including Prof John Edmunds and Prof Andrew Hayward, who sit on the government’s scientific advisory group for emergencies (Sage), have spoken in support of an inquiry, while the former head of the civil service Lord Kerslake said it would be “criminal not to learn lessons”.

Amid increasing pressure on the prime minister to set up a statutory inquiry, the British Medical Association and the Royal College of Nursing also called for an inquiry, while Lord Woolley, the former chair of the advisory group to the government’s race disparity unit, said a public examination into the impact of Covid, which has disproportionately hit BAME communities, is a chance to rethink the nation’s social infrastructure.

Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice, which represents more than 2,800 families who lost loved ones during the pandemic, welcomed the poll as vindication of its calls since last summer for a full public inquiry.

“It’s as plain as day we need a proper public inquiry into the government’s handling of the pandemic,” said Jo Goodman, co-founder of the group, who lost her father, Stuart, to Covid. “Just one in five people think otherwise and as more and more information comes to light ever more people are realising how crucial this is for the whole country. This is a generation-defining crisis and if the government doesn’t learn from its mistakes then how will it save lives in the future.”

But in a sign that a decision on launching an inquiry – which is in the hands of the prime minister – could become highly political, the poll of more than 2,000 adults showed that Labour and Liberal Democrat voters at the 2019 general election were almost twice as likely to want an inquiry as Conservative supporters. The prime minister is likely to consider the impact of any conclusions from a public inquiry which could take several years may co-incide on the next general election expected no later than May 2024. Opponents of a public inquiry fear it could take years and an adversarial process that places as much emphasis on accountability as learning may hinder rather than help attempts to correct mistakes, in the short term at least.

Covid inquiry
Coronavirus

Pressure mounts on Boris Johnson to launch coronavirus inquiry

Exclusive: scientific advisers and ex-Whitehall chief join bereaved families, medics and ethnic minority leaders in calling for inquiry

- Coronavirus – latest updates
- See all our coronavirus coverage

Robert Booth and Ian Sample

Tue 16 Mar 2021 12.00 EDT Last modified on Wed 17 Mar 2021 01.09 EDT

A dozen influential figures told the Guardian they supported a public inquiry. Photograph: Hannah McKay/PA

Senior doctors, government scientific advisers and a former head of the civil service have spoken out in favour of a public inquiry into the UK's handling of Covid-19, raising pressure on Boris Johnson to finally launch the process as the UK's coronavirus fatalities rose to almost 126,000.

Thousands of bereaved families, nurses and ethnic minority leaders also backed calls for an inquiry into everything from lockdown tactics to test and trace after the UK's handling of the pandemic resulted in the worst death toll per capita of any of the world's large economies.

Lord Kerslake, the head of the civil service under David Cameron, and Prof John Edmunds, a leading scientific adviser to the government on Covid, are among a dozen influential figures who have told the Guardian they support a public inquiry. Kerslake said it could save lives and it would be "criminal not to learn the lessons".

"We can't rule out the possibility that we will hit this problem again," he said, adding the inquiry should begin by summer.

Prof John Edmunds, who supports a public inquiry. Photograph: Simon Dawson/Reuters/Alamy

Edmunds said: "An event of this magnitude needs to be looked at in detail, including – if necessary – compelling witnesses to attend."

With infections now at their lowest rate since September and close to 25 million people vaccinated with a first dose, others calling for the inquiry to be triggered include Prof Dame Donna Kinnair, the general secretary of the Royal College of Nursing, Zara Mohammed, the secretary general of the Muslim Council of Britain, Chaand Nagpaul, the chair of the British Medical Association council and Diane Mayhew, a co-founder of the Rights for Residents group, which campaigns on behalf of care home residents, about 40,000 of whom died with Covid.

But despite a promise last July by the prime minister to set up an "independent inquiry", Downing Street is refusing to start the process many consider essential to learn lessons for future pandemics.

"We are focused on protecting the NHS and saving lives and now is not the right time to devote huge amounts of official time to an inquiry," a government spokesperson said. "There will be an appropriate time in the future to look back, analyse and reflect on all aspects of this global pandemic."

Other leading scientists calling for an inquiry include Prof Sir Paul Nurse, the director of the Francis Crick Institute and a Nobel Laureate.

Prof Andrew Hayward, an expert in infectious disease epidemiology who also sits on the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage), said in a personal capacity: "Many would argue that much of this could have been avoided if different [or] earlier decisions had been made at various points in the pandemic. These decision-making processes therefore need to be scrutinised and I think they are only likely to become completely clear if people are compelled to give evidence."

He said the stress should be on "learning for the future rather than culpability".

The rising pressure on Johnson comes amid calls from more than 2,800 families bereaved by Covid for an "urgent" statutory inquiry with the power to demand witnesses give evidence and to uncover documents.

The Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice group is threatening legal action to force ministers to launch an inquiry, arguing an unprepared government "serially failed to take reasonable steps to minimise the effects of the pandemic, leading to massive, unnecessary loss of life".

"It's not just us bereaved families – there are millions of people around the country who want answers," said Jo Goodman, a co-founder of the group. "Did the prime minister do everything he could to prevent it? Could his government have been better prepared or did it ignore warnings? Were decisions made which cost lives rather than saving them? An urgent statutory public inquiry is essential if we are to learn lessons and save lives now and in the future."

Jo Goodman holds a portrait of her father, Stuart, who died after contracting coronavirus. She co-founded the Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice group. Photograph: Alastair Grant/AP

Some senior Conservatives have already indicated they want a public inquiry and the former prime minister David Cameron said earlier this month he expected an inquiry and that "more should have been learned from the experience with Sars and respiratory disease in terms of our own preparedness". The Commons constitutional affairs select committee,

chaired by the Tory backbencher William Wragg, called for an inquiry last summer.

Christinea McAnea, the general secretary of Unison, which represents 1.3 million health staff including porters, cleaners, care workers and nurses, said an independent, judge-led public inquiry should launch as soon as society opens up again – currently scheduled for 21 June.

“If the UK is to heal, people need to understand why things went so disastrously wrong,” she said. “There are key questions to answer about why care homes were left so vulnerable, frontline staff were without safety kit and testing was abandoned in the early stages.”

The two largest doctors’ and nurses’ membership groups – the British Medical Association (BMA) and the Royal College of Nursing – also backed the calls.

“We have seen suffering at levels people have not experienced,” said the BMA’s Nagpaul. “We have seen livelihoods lost and inequalities exacerbated to levels that have devastated communities. Putting all that together, of course it demands an inquiry.”

Dr Chaand Nagpaul, the chairman of the British Medical Association council. Photograph: BMA/PA

Kinnair said nurses were still experiencing a lack of PPE and that “a full inquiry into the preparation and management of Covid-19 is the only way the government, its agencies and advisers will … truly reflect and learn”.

Prof Andrew Goddard, the president of the Royal College of Physicians, said he expected an inquiry and it should “identify and recommend changes so we can improve preparedness for and management of future crises … [It should] look at how prepared we were and the decisions we took in terms of very practical things, such as stocks of PPE, the size of the NHS workforce and how many critical care beds we have … [as well as] the greater impact of Covid-19 in the UK because of the state of public health.”

Lord Simon Woolley, who until last summer was the chair of the advisory group to the government’s race disparity unit, said he wanted a public inquiry to reach beyond scientific and medical factors to include housing, health, education and employment.

“For black, Asian and minority ethnic communities [Covid] has been utterly devastating,” he said, adding that if an inquiry followed the disease it would expose societal fault lines.

“This inquiry is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to dramatically change the infrastructure,” he said. “Are we going to put a plaster on a gaping wound or are we going to have an infrastructure change that builds to a fairer society?”

Covid inquiry
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UK's response to Covid: issues that a public inquiry could examine

Britain has suffered one of the worst death rates and severest economic hits of all nations. Why?

- Coronavirus – latest updates
- See all our coronavirus coverage

Robert Booth and Ian Sample

Tue 16 Mar 2021 12.00 EDT Last modified on Tue 16 Mar 2021 17.20 EDT

A statutory public inquiry into the UK's response to Covid-19 could be the widest-ranging ever undertaken. Many believe the issues warrant it. A year since the virus took hold in Britain, the UK has the highest death toll in

Europe and the highest per capita fatality rate in the world apart from the Czech Republic.

The economy has been upended, social fissures have widened and the country is on alert for further shocks to come. Supporters say tens of millions of pounds spent on a coronavirus inquiry to respond better to a crisis that has already cost hundreds of billions might be money well spent. Detractors warn it could become an adversarial blame game. But what might it examine?

Were we ready?

Construction work takes place in preparation for the installation of hospital beds in a rugby stadium in Llanelli in March 2020. Photograph: Ben Evans/Huw Evans/Rex/Shutterstock

In 2016 the government war-gamed how Britain would respond to a fictitious “swan flu” pandemic. Exercise Cygnus concluded the UK was unprepared and predicted a crisis in care homes. In a series of prescient recommendations, officials urged “more distribution points for personal protective equipment and working on essential communications to the public” as well as extra capacity and staff in the care system.

How those calls were handled would be a key strand of any inquiry. Another would be why, as Jeremy Hunt, the chairman of the Commons health and social care select committee, told parliament, the UK suffered from "a major blind spot" because of "our focus on pandemic flu rather than pandemic coronaviruses, such as Sars or Mers".

The "match-fitness" of local and national emergency response systems and the capacity of public health resources – cut by a fifth in real terms over the last five years – are also likely to be studied.

Lockdowns

Pall Mall on day eight of the first UK lockdown in 2020. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

Until the vaccine arrived, lockdowns were our best defence and their timing had powerful consequences. One issue that has dogged Downing Street from the start has been: did the first lockdown come too late? The Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage) estimated the first lockdown on 23 March 2020 reduced transmission by 75%. Prof John Edmunds, a member of Sage, said last summer that the UK locked down too late and this "cost a lot of lives". Before the latest plans to lift lockdowns were released, the Imperial College epidemiologist Neil Ferguson, dubbed Professor

Lockdown, warned that even limited loosening could result in at least 32,000 more deaths. Boris Johnson regrets, it was reported by the Daily Telegraph this week, not locking down earlier. There were suggestions from unnamed "allies" that he was making decisions based on out-of-date projections. He would act "harder, earlier and faster" if he had his time again, they said.

In September, as infections doubled every week, Sage called for an immediate "circuit-breaker" lockdown, but ministers only limited social gatherings to six people and asked pubs to close at 10pm. A national lockdown was finally enforced on 5 November. A similar procrastination over Christmas gatherings followed. An inquiry could reveal how the government weighed competing priorities – including jobs and the economy and Tory backbench pressure – and recommend how such decisions are made in future crises.

Care homes

Bridgedale House dementia care home in Fulwood, Sheffield, where the staff were locked in with residents to protect them from the spread of Covid. Photograph: Christopher Thomond/The Guardian

Around 40,000 care home residents have died with Covid in the UK – around a third of all deaths. The health secretary, Matt Hancock, claimed last May the government had "tried to throw a protective ring round our care homes", but thousands of people were discharged from hospital into care homes, care workers were advised they didn't need to use PPE and for months care homes couldn't access testing as the NHS was prioritised. An inquiry might examine those decisions, the stretched funding of social care going into the pandemic and a staffing system that relies heavily on agency workers shifting in different homes, a practice which the government's own studies showed spread infection.

Black and minority ethnic communities

Street art in south London by Deanio_X, on a boarded-up pub, representing BAME NHS staff. Photograph: Jill Mead/The Guardian

Before Covid, overall white mortality was higher than black and minority ethnic mortality in England, but the virus reversed that. High increases in deaths were recorded among care workers and nursing auxiliaries, minicab drivers, and security workers, roles undertaken by a disproportionately high number of minority ethnic people. The first 10 doctors named as having died in April last year were all BAME and by May, the statistics showed per capita death rates in hospitals were twice as high for people from a

Bangladeshi background as among those from a white British background, deaths were 2.9 times as high among those from a Pakistani background and black African deaths 3.7 times as high. Was enough done after this to increase protections for those populations? A review of the issue for Labour led by Doreen Lawrence concluded: “This virus has exposed the devastating impact of structural racism.”

PPE

Boxes containing face masks are unloaded from a plane on 23 May 2020 in Bournemouth. Photograph: Finnbarr Webster/Getty Images

The government spent £18bn on PPE contracts as it rushed billions of masks, gloves and aprons to the frontline. The National Audit Office has led criticism of contractual practices that included creating a “high-priority” channel for suppliers with political connections where bids were 10 times more likely to be successful.

But in the first phase of the pandemic resources were sometimes scarce both in the NHS and in social care. Up to the end of last year 757 care, nursing staff and health professionals died from Covid. Coroners have been told inquests are not the place to consider the role of government policy on PPE, but a public inquiry could be. The Commons public accounts committee last

month concluded the government's "decision to prioritise hospitals meant social care providers did not receive anywhere near enough to meet their needs, leaving them exposed".

NHS test and trace

Coronavirus swab tests being carried out at a Covid-19 testing centre in Bolton. Photograph: Christopher Thomond/The Guardian

On 19 March 2020, Boris Johnson said the tide could be turned in 12 weeks and identified testing as crucial to beating the virus. But when community transmission took hold, the government decided to end testing and tracing and moved to lockdown. Some local directors of public health, experienced in quelling outbreaks such as salmonella, reckon they could have limited spread if they had been given resources. They would later complain the highly centralised NHS test-and-trace system that was launched on 28 May froze them out. It didn't promptly share names and addresses of people infected in their areas, thwarting attempts to get on top of local outbreaks.

NHS test and trace was supposed to prevent a second lockdown and was launched with a £22bn budget, rising to £37bn over two years. It ramped up daily testing capacity from 100,000 to 800,000 and advised 4.5 million people to self-isolate. But last week Meg Hillier, the chair of the Commons

public accounts committee, concluded it made no “measurable difference to the progress of the pandemic”. Slow return of PCR results early on, the mass rollout of less accurate lateral flow tests and an absence of financial support for people asked to self-isolate are among key criticisms. Meanwhile, an army of 2,500 consultants were paid £1,100 per day on average.

Scientific advice

Chris Whitty, the chief medical officer for England, and Patrick Vallance, the UK government’s chief scientific adviser arrive to attend a news conference with Boris Johnson. Photograph: Toby Melville/Reuters

The quality of scientific advice and its handling by ministers are likely to be among the most significant factors determining the outcomes of the pandemic. Three conclusions are imaginable: the advice was good but the government didn’t follow it; the advice was bad and the government did follow it; the advice was bad but the government did its own thing anyway, which wasn’t any better.

The nexus between Sage and ministers is key. Minutes have already shown that, by 10 March, Sage warned community transmission was under way, 500,000 people could die and care homes needed “special consideration”. On 13 March it said household isolation should happen “soon”. It was

another 10 days until the prime minister ordered lockdown. However, it is likely to be one of the most complex parts of any inquiry.

“Much of the scientific analysis, such as comparative analysis of different policy applications among nations, will take several years to surface fully,” said Sir Ian Boyd, a professor of biology at the University of St Andrews, who sits on Sage. “Therefore, the evidence base for any inquiry in the short term is going to be limited in scope. Epidemiologists and public health researchers will be analysing the data for many years to come.”

UK borders

Warning signs about new rules on the wall at Heathrow airport in February 2021. Photograph: Guy Bell/Rex/Shutterstock

A policy of asking incomers from high-risk countries to quarantine ended on 13 March 2020. From then until 8 June, the UK had no border measures in place. In the 10 days before the 23 March lockdown, thousands of new infections were introduced, according to MPs on the home affairs select committee. In June last year, genomic sequencing showed Spain, France, Italy, Belgium and the Netherlands were the main source of incoming cases. The open border was, the MPs said, “a serious mistake”. By contrast, New Zealand, which recorded 26 deaths compared with the UK’s 125,000, closed

its borders to China on 3 February and created a 14-day quarantine for all arrivals six weeks later.

The UK only introduced its toughest border restrictions in mid-January 2021 when new variants were emerging in South Africa and Brazil and all international arrivals into the UK were forced to quarantine as well as demonstrate they have had a negative Covid test.

Bereaved families call for judge-led public inquiry into UK Covid response

Covid inquiry
Coronavirus

Bereaved families call for judge-led public inquiry into UK Covid response

Boris Johnson can decide whether to heed calls for wide-ranging inquiry or keep a tighter focus

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Robert Booth and Ian Sample

Tue 16 Mar 2021 12.00 EDT Last modified on Tue 16 Mar 2021 18.32 EDT

Recent inquiries, including those into the Grenfell Tower disaster, Manchester Arena bombing and the Leveson inquiry into press practices have been led by current or retired judges. Composite: Guardian Design

The Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice group has told Downing Street it wants a statutory public inquiry led by a senior judge to "determine a definitive, official, evidence-based narrative of what did and did not happen, independent of political influence" during the pandemic. The group considers it potentially cathartic and wants the families' grief heard.

Frontline health workers also want a wide-ranging inquiry to provide a platform for their experiences, while minority ethnic leaders believe an inquiry can only determine what went wrong if wider societal inequalities relating to work, health and housing are investigated.

But while there is no dissent about the need for an inquiry, others fear this remit might be too broad – and fear lessons have to be learned now so the UK can properly protect itself from any future health emergency.

Sir John Bell, the regius professor of medicine at Oxford University, and Lord O'Donnell, head of the civil service under Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and David Cameron, want a different model more narrowly focused on determining future actions.

Ultimately the decision will be for Boris Johnson, who has significant latitude to set the terms and scope of any inquiry, including selection of its chair.

Speaking to the Guardian, Bell, who is also a government adviser on vaccines, warned against a "witch-hunt" and said he did not believe a lengthy public inquiry was the best route to learning from what went wrong. He fears a blame game would threaten preparedness for future crises.

"The one thing we cannot do is pause and wait to get going with a pandemic strategy for the next pandemic," he said.

He wants a rapid "non-recriminating" review to determine quickly the steps that need to be put in place to protect against fresh pandemics which could

be worse.

He highlighted the need not to get bogged down in an inquiry focused heavily on accountability by describing future pandemics as "more threatening than a nuclear war ... because it's more certain to happen".

O'Donnell wants a public inquiry, but told the Guardian it should be limited to examining governance and decision-making and should be led by an expert in the operation of government and not a judge. He has also said it should not become a forum for the public processing of grief, important though that is, with the impact of bereavement and issues such as access to dying loved ones handled separately.

"A lot of people bay for judge-led inquiries, but judges are not experts on public policy and how structures of government might work," he said. He suggested a figure such as Lord Macpherson, the former permanent secretary at the Treasury, could chair such an inquiry into governance.

Last year the Commons public administration committee urged consideration of a non-judicial chair in a "forward-looking and policy focused" statutory public inquiry.

Recent inquiries including those looking into the Grenfell Tower disaster, Manchester Arena bombing and the Leveson inquiry into press practices have been led by current or retired judges. The ongoing child sexual abuse inquiry is led by a social worker, Prof Alexis Jay, while the Iraq war inquiry was led by the career civil servant Sir John Chilcot.

O'Donnell and Bell's concerns are echoed by some other scientists. However, others believe it should be possible to learn rapid lessons for the future in science or statecraft while also allowing an inquiry to provide a platform for the bereaved to seek answers and justice.

The Grenfell Tower inquiry has achieved some of that. Its first stage involved a series of moving testimonies from the bereaved. Its second was a relatively rapid assessment of what went wrong on the night of the fire which produced safety recommendations, many of which have already been

implemented. Its latest ongoing stage is a forensic dive into the years of decision-making before the fire.

The Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice group cites the inquiry into the Hillsborough disaster, which produced an interim report in less than four months.

It also argues that, for the bereaved, a public inquiry is “likely to be the only way they can obtain answers to what happened to their loved ones, and whether the death could have been prevented”. It says the government has a duty to investigate under the European convention on human rights which demands it in cases where there is an arguable case that there has been a breach of the duty to protect life.

Other investigation formats are available if Downing Street chooses to defy rising pressure for a statutory public inquiry. Sir Ian Boyd, professor of biology at the University of St Andrews, who sits on the government’s Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage) suggested a royal commission given the potentially massive scope of a Covid-19 inquiry. Royal commissions are essentially committees of experts convened to investigate an issue with fewer evidence-gathering powers.

“The great danger is that we end up with a process which is more about apportioning blame than about learning lessons and that would probably be worse than useless,” he told the Guardian, speaking in a personal capacity.

Guardian morning briefing

Wednesday briefing: Uber U-turns on minimum wage

Uber app drivers will receive employee entitlements. Photograph: Henry Nicholls/Reuters

Atlanta

Shootings at three Atlanta massage parlors leave eight dead, police say

Man taken into custody after attacks, as police say many victims believed to be Asian women

- Atlanta massage parlor shootings: what we know so far

At least eight people have been killed in a series of shootings at three Atlanta area massage parlours, with a number of the victims described by authorities as women of Asian descent.

A 21-year-old man, Robert Aaron Long, has been taken into custody following an hours-long manhunt as police told local media that he was the suspect in all three shootings. An alleged motive has not been described.

Georgia's Governor Brian Kemp praised police for their quick apprehension of a suspect – without incident on the I-75 highway, adding: "Our entire family is praying for the victims of these horrific acts of violence."

The shootings occurred shortly after one another on Tuesday afternoon. Four people were killed at Young's Asian Massage near Acworth in Cherokee county, Georgia, about 30 miles (50km) north-west of Atlanta.

Shortly after, at 5.47pm, Atlanta police officers responded to a reported robbery at Gold Spa in the city's north-east where three women had been killed. Police were then alerted to another shooting across the street at the Aromatherapy Spa where the body of another woman was found.

Seven of the victims were women, and six were Asian, according to police. Another man was injured in the attacks.

Although police in Georgia have not described a motive, the NYPD counter terrorism bureau announced it had deployed officers from their Critical

Response Command to Asian communities around New York City.

“While there is no known nexus to #NYC we will be deploying assets to our great Asian communities across the city out of an abundance of caution,” the bureau said in a tweet.

On Tuesday evening the anti-hate group Stop AAPI Hate, founded in 2020 response to the rising xenophobia against Asian Americans during the Covid-19 pandemic, tweeted in response to the shootings: “Few details have been released, including whether or not the shootings were related or motivated by hate. But right now there is a great deal of fear and pain in the Asian American community that must be addressed.”

Booking photo released by the Crisp County Sheriff’s Office showing 21-year-old shooting suspect Robert Aaron Long. Photograph: Crisp County Sheriff's Office/AFP/Getty Images

On Tuesday evening, Long’s Facebook page appeared to have been removed from the site. A Facebook video, first reported by the Daily Beast, featuring Long at his local church, Crabapple First Baptist church, had also been removed.

According to the Daily Beast, the 2018 video shows Long talking about his journey towards baptism. “As many of you may remember, when I was eight

years old I thought I was becoming a Christian, and got baptized during that time. And I remember a lot of the reason for that is a lot of my friends in my Sunday school class were doing that," Long is quoted as saying.

On Friday evening police released a booking photo of Long dressed in an anti-suicide smock.

Atlanta

Atlanta massage parlor shootings: what we know so far

Eight people have died after three shootings at massage parlors in and around the city of Atlanta in Georgia

- Shootings at three Atlanta massage parlors leave eight dead, police say

Alison Rourke

Wed 17 Mar 2021 01.53 EDT First published on Wed 17 Mar 2021 01.42 EDT

Police say eight people died – including one woman at the Aromatherapy Spa, in the north-east of Atlanta, Georgia – in three separate shootings at massage parlors in and around the city. Photograph: Brynn Anderson/AP

Eight people have died in three separate shootings in massage parlors in Atlanta, Georgia. Here's what we know so far:

- **Eight people have died in three separate shootings** on Tuesday night at massage parlor venues in and around Atlanta, Georgia.
- Two of the venues were in the **city of Atlanta**, and a third was near **Acworth**, in Cherokee country, about 30 miles (50km) north-west of the city.
- At around 5pm, five people were shot at **Young's Asian Massage Parlor** near Acworth, police said. Two died at the scene and another two in hospital, police said.
- Police were also called to **Gold Spa** in the north-east of Atlanta at around 5.50pm after reports of a robbery taking place. Police found three women who had died from apparent gunshot wounds.
- While at Gold Spa, further calls reported **shots at the Aromatherapy Spa across the street**, where police found the body of another woman.
- **Seven of the victims were women, and six were Asian**, according to police.
- Although **no motive has been confirmed**, the NYPD counter-terrorism bureau announced it had deployed officers from their Critical Response Command to Asian communities around New York City. Atlanta police said they sent officers to check nearby similar businesses and increased patrols in the area.
- Police took a **21-year-old man, Robert Aaron Long, into custody** in south-west Georgia hours after the shootings. On Tuesday evening, Long's Facebook page appeared to have been removed from the site.
- "Our entire family is praying for the victims of these horrific acts of violence," **Governor Brian Kemp** said on Tuesday evening.

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Ofgem

Energy watchdog plans to make UK suppliers refund surplus credit

Some UK households in line for hefty refunds of up to £1,000 if new Ofgem plans go ahead

Jillian Ambrose

Wed 17 Mar 2021 02.01 EDT

New rules could force suppliers to hand back about £1.4bn in customer credit balances each year. Photograph: Lauren Hurley/PA

The energy regulator could soon call on suppliers to hand £1.4bn in customer credit back to households under plans to stop energy companies from holding on to customer credit balances.

Ofgem is concerned that some suppliers may be using customers' surplus credit balances – which tend to build up over the summer when bills are

lower – to fund otherwise unsustainable business practices.

Under the proposed rules, suppliers will need to "auto-return" the extra credit to their customers every year on the anniversary of joining the supplier. Some households would be in line for up to £1,000 from their energy supplier, but the regulator estimates that on average households stand to get £65 back.

Jonathan Brearley, the chief executive of Ofgem, said the regulator's proposals would ensure suppliers are "not holding on to more of customers' money than absolutely necessary".

"This is an important step in making the retail energy market fairer for consumers at a time when many are facing financial hardship," he added.

Households which pay for their energy bills through a fixed direct debit can find that they overpay during the summer – when less energy is used – and build up hefty credit balances which shrink again in the winter.

Some industry experts fear that smaller energy firms may be relying on the extra summer cash in their coffers to support the business while offering heavily discounted gas and electricity deals. This can lead to suppliers delaying customer refunds to stay afloat financially.

Kevin Pratt, a personal finance expert at Forbes Advisor, said the fixed direct debit payment model works well for customers "if the credit built up in summer simply soaks up the cost of extra usage in the winter".

"But it is clearly wrong that excessive balances can accrue to the benefit of the supplier. Consumers aren't cash-cows or sources of working capital," he said.

If the regulator's proposals are confirmed the rules would require suppliers to refund credit balances each year from 2022.

Ed Dodman, a director at the Energy Ombudsman, said the new rules should help to tackle the problem of unrefunded credit balances, which accounted for more than 1,000 complaints to the ombudsman in 2020 alone.

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“We know from looking at complaints that suppliers can sometimes take too long to issue refunds, which can be stressful for consumers,” he said. “Just as people are expected to pay their energy bills on time, we think it’s fair to expect energy suppliers to do the same with refunds.”

Natalie Hitchins, from consumer champion Which?, said recent research found that many homes were in credit on their energy accounts, with some by up to £1,000. However, not all suppliers are forthcoming when it comes to refunds.

“These proposals are good news for consumers, as many may prefer to keep this extra cash in their bank accounts rather than with their energy supplier,” she said. “It is worth keeping an eye on your balance, and if you consistently have excessive credit you should consider requesting a refund.”

Climate change

Government to announce £1bn fund to help reduce emissions

Funding given to industrial decarbonisation and reducing impact of schools and hospitals

Fiona Harvey Environment correspondent

Wed 17 Mar 2021 02.00 EDT Last modified on Wed 17 Mar 2021 02.02 EDT

Energy secretary Kwasi Kwarteng said the UK was ‘showing the world how to cut emissions’. Photograph: Barcroft Media/Barcroft Media via Getty Images

The government will spend more than £1bn helping schools, hospitals and industry to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and encourage the growth of new low-carbon technologies in the UK, under plans set out on Wednesday.

Kwasi Kwarteng, secretary of state for business, energy and industrial strategy said: “We were the first major economy to put into law our target to end our contribution to climate change, and today we’re taking steps to be the first major economy to have its own low-carbon industrial sector. Ahead of Cop26 [the UN climate summit to be hosted in Glasgow this November], the UK is showing the world how we can cut emissions, create jobs and unleash private investment and economic growth.”

However, the £1bn does not represent new spending, but refers to already announced spending that is now being allocated to specific projects.

The launch of the industrial decarbonisation strategy comes as the UK prepares to host vital UN climate talks, called Cop26, postponed from last November owing to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the day after the government’s integrated review of defence and foreign policy placed the climate crisis as the UK’s “foremost international priority”.

The government has allocated £171m to an industrial decarbonisation fund, to be split among projects including hydrogen gas and carbon capture and storage technology at sites in Merseyside, Teesside, Humber and Wales, and offshore engineering works in Scotland. The government said the strategy would create about 80,000 jobs over the next 30 years, with the aim of cutting emissions from industry by two-thirds in the next 15 years.

Separately, about £932m will be spent on 429 projects upgrading public buildings, including schools and hospitals, with heat pumps, solar panels and insulation. Areas to benefit include Manchester, where 36 schools and 22 leisure centres will be upgraded, as well as the transport authority, police and fire service, for about £78m; Leicester, where the city council will receive £24m for upgrading 93 buildings including 56 schools; and £24m for Hertfordshire county council to upgrade 183 council buildings, including 74 schools and 23 emergency service buildings.

The plans for public buildings stand in stark contrast to the government’s scheme for helping people upgrade their draughty homes, which make up 14% of the UK’s total emissions. The green homes grant scheme, originally intended to be worth about £1.5bn, has had most of that funding withdrawn

after a troubled start, including builders left unpaid and homeowners unable to get help.

Ed Mathew, campaigns director at green thinktank E3G, said: "This will help slash carbon emissions [from public sector organisations] while helping them to save millions on their energy bills – it's a no-brainer. The government now needs to put in place a long-term funding programme to help all households to do the same, following recent cuts to the flagship Green Homes Grant scheme."

Ed Miliband, Labour's shadow business secretary, contrasted the government's industrial plans with other countries' efforts towards a green recovery from the Covid19 crisis, and said the strategy did not go far enough.

"Once again, the government talks a big game on green but doesn't deliver with nearly the scale or ambition that's necessary. None of this money is new – these announcements simply allocate money already announced," he pointed out. "Strip away the rhetoric and we see the fact that while Germany is investing €7bn (£5.9bn) in a hydrogen strategy, our government is investing a tiny fraction of that. We need an ambitious green stimulus to support industry to decarbonise and secure jobs for the long-term, starting with a £30bn green recovery. The government has failed to deliver yet again."

Kat Kramer, climate policy lead at Christian Aid charity, said: "The government dismally continues to offer sops to the fossil fuel industry, including through nods to hydrogen produced from polluting fossil fuels and unproven-at-scale technologies like carbon capture and storage. Instead, the government need to focus on deep emissions cuts, while supporting a just transition to new green jobs for fossil fuel workers, and not propping up the very companies that have caused the climate crisis."

One of the key elements of the industrial strategy will be to help the steel industry reach net zero emissions. Coking coal is essential to making steel and is the subject of a major row over a proposed new coalmine in Cumbria. Proponents of the mine say that the coking coal it may produce will continue to be needed despite efforts to reduce emissions, but opponents say that to

meet the UK's net zero targets the industry will have to invest in alternatives.

Under the new strategy, the government wants steel-makers to reach net zero by 2035, which would imply phasing out coking coal at least by that date. Roz Bulleid, deputy policy director at the Green Alliance thinktank, said: "The country needs to move quickly if our steel industry is not to be left behind. Other countries, such as Germany and Sweden, already have trials in place for low carbon steel-making using hydrogen. It is becoming increasingly clear that the future of the steel industry will need to be based around clean steel that does not add to our carbon footprint."

Industry representatives welcomed the government's decarbonisation strategy. Rain Newton-Smith, chief economist at the CBI employers' organisation, said: "Creating and championing competitive low-carbon industries will ensure the benefits of a green economic recovery, and the longer term transition to net zero, are shared across the country. Ahead of Cop26, this is a welcome demonstration of the UK's commitment to act on climate change, to make our post-pandemic recovery a green one, and to give businesses the certainty they need to invest in the technologies of the future."

Stephen Phipson, chief executive of Make UK, the manufacturers' organisation, said: "The promise of financial help is critical. Britain's big corporations have large ringfenced budgets for green initiatives, but our smaller firms will need support to make sure they are able to make the changes necessary to ensure the UK meets its carbon targets, and that they can benefit from the dramatic changes to the way industry will work in the coming years."

Crime

Bill that curtails ability to protest in England and Wales passes second reading

Labour changed stance to vote against following the police's actions at Saturday's vigil for Sarah Everard

Labour MP Clive Efford said the police, crime, sentencing and courts bill was part of 'a Tory-led coup without guns'. Photograph: UK Parliament/Jessica Taylor/PA

A landmark government crime bill has passed its first parliamentary hurdle, even as some Conservative MPs served notice that they might subsequently support amendments to water down controversial restrictions against protests.

The police, crime, sentencing and courts bill, which groups together a range of changes to enforcement and sentencing in England and Wales, passed its second reading – the first chance MPs get to vote on a proposed law – by

359 votes to 263. An earlier vote saw an amendment tabled by the Labour leader, Keir Starmer, voted down by 225 votes for and 359 against.

While Labour says it backs a number of the elements within the bill, its MPs voted against it primarily over proposals to allow police significant leeway to stop protests on grounds including noise and disruption to the public.

Labour MPs had been due to abstain but the party changed its stance after a Metropolitan police operation against a vigil on Saturday for Sarah Everard highlighted worries about potential overreach over such gatherings.

The vast majority of Conservatives speaking in a second day of debate about the 307-page bill strongly backed its proposals, and in sometimes bad-tempered exchanges, accused Labour of not caring for the victims of crime by opposing it.

However, some expressed caveats. Rob Roberts, the MP for Delyn in north Wales, praised the bill but said he had reservations over the protest proposals, and that he expected these to be changed as it passed through the Commons.

“I’m not going to pretend that this is a perfect bill,” he said. “I sympathise with some of the concerns that have been raised about provisions that refer to protest. I’m sure that in committee these provisions will be carefully considered and scrutinised.”

Steve Baker, the Wycombe MP, was due to speak in the debate but missed his chance due to a lack of time. But in an article for the Conservative Home website earlier on Tuesday, jointly written with the ex-Tory MP and former attorney general Dominic Grieve, Baker also expressed worries.

The proposals in the bill “may create uncertainty by giving far too much discretion to the police” in determining the balance between protests and disruption “and far too much power to the executive to change the law by decree if it chooses”, the pair wrote.

In the Commons, some Labour MPs were notably more blunt, with Clive Efford, who represents Eltham, condemning the bill for being part of what

he called “a Tory-led coup without guns”.

The DUP MP Gavin Robinson said: “The loose and lazy way this legislation is drafted would make a dictator blush. Protests will be noisy, protests will disrupt and no matter how offensive we may find the issue at their heart, the right to protest should be protected.”

Another objection was over proposals in the bill to make defacing statues and monument punishable by up to 10 years in jail, with a series of Labour MPs noting that it would make it theoretically possible for someone to be more harshly punished for this than for rape.

Kerry McCarthy, the Bristol East MP, said the city used the toppling last year of a statue of the slaver Edward Colston as an opportunity to discuss the issues soberly, contrasting this with what she said was the government’s approach.

“We used that moment to bring the city together,” McCarthy said. “This government is now doing the exact opposite. When the communities secretary writes an op ed for the Telegraph saying, ‘We will save Britain’s statues from the woke militants who want to censor our past,’ we know what that is about. It’s about stoking up social and cultural anxieties to win votes, seeking out not what we have in common, but what divides us, fanning the flames.

“And now, whether it’s Black Lives Matter or Reclaim These Streets or the school climate strikes, or if you just want to pay tribute to a woman by lighting a candle and holding a vigil, you are all now collateral in this government’s trumped-up war on woke.”

Uber

Uber to pay UK drivers minimum wage, holiday pay and pension

Move follows supreme court ruling that drivers are workers but critics say they are still short-changed

Last month the UK supreme court dismissed Uber's appeal against a 2016 landmark employment tribunal ruling that its drivers should be classed as workers. Photograph: Matthew Horwood/Getty Images

Uber is to guarantee its 70,000 UK drivers a minimum hourly wage, holiday pay and pensions after a landmark supreme court ruling.

The ride-hailing app said drivers would start benefiting from the changes from Wednesday while retaining the right to choose when they work, as it accepted they were classed as workers in line with the ruling.

Uber, like many delivery and courier companies, has argued that its drivers are independent self-employed "partners" not entitled to basic rights enjoyed

by workers, which include the legally enforceable minimum hourly wage and a workplace pension.

Last month the UK supreme court dismissed Uber's appeal against a 2016 landmark employment tribunal ruling that its drivers should be classed as workers.

The company has previously argued that the ruling applied to only a small number involved directly in the case and that it is not obliged to apply its findings to its other drivers.

On Tuesday night the company made a dramatic U-turn, saying drivers would get at least the legal minimum wage, after expenses and holiday time at 12.07% of earnings, paid out on a fortnightly basis. They will also be automatically enrolled in a company pension plan with contributions from Uber alongside their own. Drivers will continue to have access to free insurance in case of sickness or injury as well as parental payments, which have been in place for all drivers since 2018.

Jamie Heywood, Uber's regional general manager for northern and eastern Europe, said: "This is an important day for drivers in the UK."

Recognising that its move was likely to put pressure on other gig economy firms to change tack, Heywood added: "Uber is just one part of a larger private-hire industry, so we hope that all other operators will join us in improving the quality of work for these important workers who are an essential part of our everyday lives."

Unions and drivers welcomed the decision. Mick Rix, national officer of the GMB union, said: "Other gig economy companies should take note – this is the end of the road for bogus self-employment.

"Uber had to be dragged kicking and screaming to do the right thing, but finally they've agreed to follow the ruling of the courts and treat their drivers as workers.

"It's a shame it took GMB winning four court battles to make them see sense, but we got there in the end and ultimately that's a big win for our

members.”

The TUC general secretary, Frances O’Grady, said the move “appears to be a big step in the right direction”. “Now the company must recognise trade unions. The TUC stands ready to host talks with Uber and private hire unions to begin that process.”

However, the App Drivers & Couriers Union headed by James Farrar and Yaseen Aslam, lead claimants in the successful Uber tribunal case, said that drivers were still being short-changed.

“While we welcome Uber’s decision to finally commit to paying minimum wage, holiday pay and pensions we observe that they have arrived to the table with this offer a day late and a dollar short, literally.”

They said that Uber had said minimum wage and holiday pay would accrue from when a trip was accepted to when a passenger was dropped off, not the whole time drivers were logged on to its app – the working time laid out by the supreme court. They said this meant that Uber drivers could miss out on up to 50% of potential earnings.

North Korea

US warns North Korea could be planning ICBM test 'in near future' in test for Biden

Comments come as US secretary of state and defence secretary begin visit to Japan and South Korea to discuss security

Justin McCurry in Tokyo and agencies

Wed 17 Mar 2021 00.34 EDT

Warning appeared to be based on North Korea's unveiling at a parade in October of what would be its largest ICBM yet Photograph: AP

North Korea could be planning to flight test an upgraded inter-continental ballistic missile [ICBM] "in the near future," a senior US military official has warned, in what would be the regime's first serious policy challenge for Joe Biden.

The warning, by Air Force Gen. Glen VanHerck, who as head of the Northern Command is in charge of defending the continental US, appeared to be based on North Korea's unveiling at a parade in October of what would be its largest ICBM yet, and not on specific intelligence about an imminent launch.

His comments came as US secretary of state Antony Blinken and defence secretary Lloyd Austin began a visit to Japan and South Korea to discuss security, and appears to reflect concerns that the North could be planning to raise the stakes in its nuclear diplomacy with Washington.

North Korea has not tested a nuclear weapon or ICBM in more than three years, but has continued production of nuclear weapons, improved the design of its ICBM and tested a number of smaller missiles.

VanHerck said Pyongyang's "considerably larger and presumably more capable" ICBM further increased the threat to the US, adding that he had confidence in US missile defence.

Noting that the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, had released himself from a moratorium on testing over a year ago, VanHerck said in written testimony to the senate armed services committee: "The North Korean regime has also indicated that it is no longer bound by the unilateral nuclear and ICBM testing moratorium announced in 2018, suggesting that Kim Jong-un may begin flight testing an improved ICBM design in the near future."

He also warned of the "alarming success" North Korea had achieved in demonstrating its ability to threaten the US mainland with nuclear-armed ICBMs.

Analysts said that while an ICBM test was not out of the question, tests involving smaller missiles were more likely.

Jenny Town, director of 38 North, a US-based website that tracks North Korea, said she believed the regime would be more likely to restart test launches with shorter-range missiles and submarine-launched ballistic missiles.

“It seems more likely that if North Korea is going to start testing missiles again, it will start with ones where testing has been almost normalised,” Town said.

After three years of nuclear diplomacy under Donald Trump failed to make any progress on dismantling North Korea’s nuclear capability, Biden was recently given an indication of the difficulties inherent in negotiating with Kim.

Earlier this week, the White House confirmed reports that the Biden administration had tried to reach out to North Korea in mid-February but had not received a response.

Kim’s influential sister, Kim Yo-jong, was quoted by North Korean state media this week as issuing a warning to the US over its ongoing joint military drills with the South.

Kim Yo-jong, who has made several colourful interventions on foreign policy, said that if the Biden administration “wants to sleep in peace for coming four years, it had better refrain from causing a stink at its first step”, according to the KCNA news agency. “War drills and hostility can never go with dialogue and cooperation.”

Blinken declined to comment on the warning, telling reporters: “We’re looking at whether various additional pressure measures could be effective, whether there are diplomatic paths that make sense … all of that is under review.”

The joint US-South Korea drills began last week, but have been limited to computer simulations due to the coronavirus pandemic and an apparent desire to build diplomatic bridges with the North.

Demi Lovato

Demi Lovato says she was raped as a teenager by someone she knew

In a new docuseries, the singer says she was assaulted as a teen and after telling somebody, the rapist ‘never got taken out of the movie they were in’

‘I’m just gonna say it: my #MeToo story is me telling somebody that someone did this to me, and they never got in trouble for it’, the singer said. Photograph: PR

Demi Lovato has said she was raped as a teenager while working for the Disney Channel in the late 2000s by someone who faced no repercussions when she revealed what happened. The singer does not say who the offender was, only that she “had to see this person all the time” afterwards.

The comments were part of a larger story told by Lovato in her YouTube docuseries Demi Lovato: Dancing with the Devil, which premiered at SXSW on Tuesday, about trauma, addiction and her near-fatal drug overdose in July 2018. Lovato, 28, has long been open about her struggles with drug

and alcohol addiction and bulimia, including in her 2017 YouTube Originals documentary Simply Complicated.

In several interviews filmed over the course of 2020, Lovato described the eating disorder and control by her then management team in 2018 that contributed to breaking six years of sobriety, and the overdose that landed her in Cedars-Sinai medical center in Los Angeles for several weeks. She said she was "left for dead" by her drug dealer after he raped her during the overdose, and that she saw him during a one-time relapse after a stay in a treatment facility in an effort to assert control.

Her return, she said, mirrored the experience she had as a teenager. "I lost my virginity in a rape," she said. "I called that person back a month later and tried to make it right by being in control, and all it did was just make me feel worse."

Both times were "textbook trauma re-enactments, and I really beat myself up for years, which is also why I had a really hard time coming to terms with the fact that it was a rape when it happened".

Lovato did not reveal when or where the assault happened, but noted it was during the time she was "a part of that Disney crowd that publicly said they were waiting till marriage", referring to the purity rings – jewellery symbolizing one's commitment to waiting for sex until marriage – temporarily worn in the late 2000s by young teenage Disney stars including Nick and Joe Jonas, Miley Cyrus and Selena Gomez.

Lovato said she wore a purity ring in 2008, when she shot to fame with the Disney Channel movie Camp Rock, filmed when she was 15. The film and its 2010 sequel co-starred the Jonas Brothers, Meaghan Martin and Alyson Stoner.

Her description of the experience was spliced with two interviews from the era: one on a red carpet for the American Music Awards in 2008, the other seemingly from the set of Camp Rock 2, in which she said she had become "more aware of just life and people and the way that the business works" since filming the first movie. "I think I'm able to protect myself a little more."

Lovato did not name an offender and described a consensual experience that turned traumatic: “We were hooking up but I said, ‘hey, this is not going any farther, I’m a virgin and I don’t want to lose it this way.’ And that didn’t matter to them, they did it anyways. And I internalized it and I told myself it was my fault, because I still went in the room with him, I still hooked up with him.”

She said the encounter, and the pressure to maintain an image of purity, contributed to her bulimia and self-harm at the time, and that she struggled to recognize it as rape. “The Christian, southern girl in me didn’t see it that way because sex was not normalized as a child or in the south,” she said. “And, you know what, fuck it, I’m just gonna say it: my #MeToo story is me telling somebody that someone did this to me, and they never got in trouble for it. They never got taken out of the movie they were in.”

Lovato did not reveal who she told at the time. She said she was speaking publicly “because everyone that that happens to should absolutely speak their voice if they can and feel comfortable doing so”.

Japan

Landmark Japan court ruling says not allowing same-sex marriage is 'unconstitutional'

Ruling is a major symbolic victory in a country where the constitution defines marriage as being based on ‘the mutual consent of both sexes’

Reuters

Wed 17 Mar 2021 01.21 EDT

Supporters hold a sign reading ‘unconstitutional decision’ as they celebrate Sapporo District Court’s decision about same-sex marriage Photograph: JIJI PRESS/AFP/Getty Images

A Japanese district court has ruled that not allowing same-sex couples to marry is “unconstitutional“, setting a new precedent in the only G7 nation

not to fully recognise same-sex partnership, though it rejected demands for damages to be paid.

The ruling, the first in Japan on the legality of same-sex marriages, is a major symbolic victory in a country where the constitution defines marriage as being based on "the mutual consent of both sexes".

As it now stands, same-sex couples can't inherit their partner's assets – such as the house they may have shared – and also have no parental rights to any children their partners may have.

Though partnership certificates issued by individual municipalities around the nation help with renting places to live and hospital visitation rights, they still don't allow the same full legal rights as for heterosexual couples.

The Sapporo district court threw out the demand for damages by the six plaintiffs – two couples of men and one of women – who had asked that the Japanese government pay one million yen each in acknowledgment of the pain they suffered by not being able to legally marry.

But the recognition that not allowing them to marry was unconstitutional was the victory the plaintiffs, their lawyers and activists had been hoping for as a key symbolic step forward and precedent-setter.

Similar cases are now being heard in four other courts around Japan and this ruling may influence the outcomes there as well.

By Asian standards, Japanese laws are relatively liberal. Homosexual sex has been legal since 1880, but social attitudes keep the LGBT community largely invisible and many have yet to come out even to their families.

Some in the business world say Japan's not allowing same-sex marriage makes it difficult for companies, especially foreign companies, to attract and keep highly skilled labour in an increasingly international economy.

The American Chamber of Commerce last year issued a statement saying that Japan's stance makes it less competitive internationally as a result.

A number of companies have taken their own steps to work around the situation, including both international companies and Japanese firms such as Panasonic. But there are limits.

“For things that are part of the national system, such as pensions, there’s nothing they can do,” said Masa Yanagisawa, head of Prime Services at Goldman Sachs Japan and a board member of the NGO Marriage for All Japan.

“All the other advanced countries have this, so Japan will lose out competitively. Then there’s the fact that people can’t be who they are. It becomes quite business critical.”

Whales

Sperm whales in 19th century shared ship attack information

Whalers' logbooks show rapid drop in strike rate in north Pacific due to changes in cetacean behaviour

When facing a human attack, sperm whales abandoned the defensive circles used against orca and swam upwind instead. Photograph: Alamy

A remarkable new study on how whales behaved when attacked by humans in the 19th century has implications for the way they react to changes wreaked by humans in the 21st century.

The paper, published by the Royal Society on Wednesday, is authored by Hal Whitehead and Luke Rendell, pre-eminent scientists working with cetaceans, and Tim D Smith, a data scientist, and their research addresses an age-old question: if whales are so smart, why did they hang around to be killed? The answer? They didn't.

Using newly digitised logbooks detailing the hunting of sperm whales in the north Pacific, the authors discovered that within just a few years, the strike rate of the whalers' harpoons fell by 58%. This simple fact leads to an astonishing conclusion: that information about what was happening to them was being collectively shared among the whales, who made vital changes to their behaviour. As their culture made fatal first contact with ours, they learned quickly from their mistakes.

"Sperm whales have a traditional way of reacting to attacks from orca," notes Hal Whitehead, who spoke to the Guardian from his house overlooking the ocean in Dalhousie, Nova Scotia, where he teaches. Before humans, orca were their only predators, against whom sperm whales form defensive circles, their powerful tails held outwards to keep their assailants at bay. But such techniques "just made it easier for the whalers to slaughter them", says Whitehead.

It was a frighteningly rapid killing, and it accompanied other threats to the ironically named Pacific. From whaling and sealing stations to missionary bases, western culture was imported to an ocean that had remained largely untouched. As Herman Melville, himself a whaler in the Pacific in 1841, would write in Moby-Dick (1851): "The moot point is, whether Leviathan can long endure so wide a chase, and so remorseless a havoc."

Sperm whales are highly socialised animals, able to communicate over great distances. They associate in clans defined by the dialect pattern of their sonar clicks. Their culture is matrilinear, and information about the new dangers may have been passed on in the same way whale matriarchs share knowledge about feeding grounds. Sperm whales also possess the largest brain on the planet. It is not hard to imagine that they understood what was happening to them.

The hunters themselves realised the whales' efforts to escape. They saw that the animals appeared to communicate the threat within their attacked groups. Abandoning their usual defensive formations, the whales swam upwind to escape the hunters' ships, themselves wind-powered. 'This was cultural evolution, much too fast for genetic evolution,' says Whitehead.

And in turn, it evokes another irony. Now, just as whales are beginning to recover from the industrial destruction by 20th-century whaling fleets – whose steamships and grenade harpoons no whale could evade – they face new threats created by our technology. ‘They’re having to learn not to get hit by ships, cope with the depredations of longline fishing, the changing source of their food due to climate change,’ says Whitehead. Perhaps the greatest modern peril is noise pollution, one they can do nothing to evade.

Whitehead and Randall have written persuasively of whale culture, expressed in localised feeding techniques as whales adapt to shifting sources, or in subtle changes in humpback song whose meaning remains mysterious. The same sort of urgent social learning the animals experienced in the whale wars of two centuries ago is reflected in the way they negotiate today’s uncertain world and what we’ve done to it.

As Whitehead observes, whale culture is many millions of years older than ours. Perhaps we need to learn from them as they learned from us. After all, it was the whales that provoked Melville to his prophesies in Moby-Dick. “We account the whale immortal in his species, however perishable in individuality,” he wrote, “and if ever the world is to be again flooded … then the eternal whale will still survive, and … spout his frothed defiance to the skies.”

2021.03.17 - Coronavirus

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Coronavirus

Why home-produced Covid vaccine hasn't helped India, Russia and China rollouts

Challenge of reaching vast, far-flung populations is combined with a lack of public interest

- Coronavirus – latest updates
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Michael Safi in Beirut, Theo Merz in Moscow and Helen Davidson in Taipei

Tue 16 Mar 2021 23.00 EDT Last modified on Tue 16 Mar 2021 23.03 EDT

Red Square, Moscow. Photograph: Yuri Kadobnov/AFP/Getty

The day India started coronavirus vaccinations, Amit Mehra's name was on the priority list. But he never made an appointment. "I'm not inclined to get vaccinated just because it's available," says the 47-year-old Delhi hospital worker.

Two and a half thousand miles away, strolling past a popup inoculation centre near Red Square in Moscow, Magomed Zurabov is similarly reluctant. Suspicious that the pandemic was deliberately engineered, he has no intention of being vaccinated, he says. Instead, he is "taking the necessary precautions": wearing a mask and using disinfectant.

As vaccinations rates soar in Israel, the UK, the United Arab Emirates and other countries that have monopolised supply, and poorer nations make do with a trickle of doses, a third category are beginning long climbs. Supply is less of an issue in Russia, China or India, all of which produce their own vaccines. But their respective government programmes have had slow starts, and there has been little public clamour to speed things up.

"People have not shown that eagerness and urgency to be vaccinated," says Ajeet Jain, a doctor at the Rajiv Gandhi Super Speciality hospital in Delhi. "India is going through that phase where the disease is no longer prevalent except in a few states. People are relaxed that the disease is over from their point of view."

A woman receives a dose of a Covid-19 jab at Dasappa hospital in Bangalore, India, this week. Photograph: Jagadeesh Nv/EPA

The experience of India, Russia and China may prove, in time, to be typical. Even once vaccine shortages are alleviated, much of the world could still take years to achieve widespread Covid-19 vaccination, encumbered by the challenges of reaching vast and far-flung populations, lack of interest from the public and other, more pressing health priorities.

Some countries may shake off growing pains: India's rollout has accelerated in the past fortnight, with private clinics enlisted to help administer shots and new groups, including anyone over 60, invited to make appointments. The programme hit 3m doses a day this week which, if maintained, would put it within reach of its target of vaccinating 20% of the population by August.

Uptake was slower than expected among the 30 million healthcare and frontline workers who were prioritised for the first round of doses, with some hesitant about receiving Covaxin, a locally developed vaccine that was pressed into use before the release of phase 3 trial results. (Interim data has since shown that it is 81% effective.)

“That caused quite a bit of confusion, as a result of which healthcare workers who were supposed to be vaccinated in the first round, and who understood this process a little better than other people, didn’t come forward as much as they should have,” says Dr Shahid Jameel, a virologist and director of the Trivedi school of biosciences at Ashoka University.

graphic

India has also held off from deploying its entire workforce of vaccine deliverers to fight Covid-19, keeping about half at work administering jabs for other deadly diseases, Jameel says. “There is a childhood immunisation programme, there is one for pregnant mothers, and they have to go on unhindered despite Covid.”

The most significant impediment may be that, since September, virus rates in India have dropped steeply. And in a country with a median age of about 28, Covid-19 has not proved especially deadly, implicated in about 160,000 recorded deaths, a third of the number of Indians who die from tuberculosis each year. Signs of a second wave taking off in the past week may change the calculation for some.

“Look at death rates in South Asia and you’ll know why people are not dying to get vaccinated,” says Oommen C Kurian, a senior fellow at Delhi’s Observer Research Foundation thinktank. “Their sense of risk is considerably lower than, say, a Londoner.”

The same is true for the average resident of Beijing, though not for demographic reasons. China has employed blunt but effective quarantine measures to contain Sars-CoV-2 successfully, and life in the country has largely returned to normal. Though it authorised its first vaccines for emergency use in July, just 4% of the country has been vaccinated so far.

“One of the most important contributors is this perception that China has a low risk of infection,” said Yanzhong Huan, director of the Center for Global Health Studies at Seton Hall University in New Jersey. “So people think, why bother to get vaccinated? We’re already safe.”

The country aims to inoculate 40% of its population by July, a target that will require administering about 4m shots a day, up from about 640,000 a day on the latest public figures.

But Beijing must also balance commitments to supply at least 463m doses to countries overseas, many of them donations to strategic partners. So far, it is under little pressure to hoard those vaccines for use at home. "People view this as an example of China being a global leader, something that showcases China being a responsible and reliable great power," Huang says.

Russia has been hit harder by the virus, losing 90,000 lives on official figures thought to be a significant underestimate. But there, too, uptake of the vaccine is tracking well short of government targets of inoculating 60% of the population by mid-year.

A poll of Russians this month found that two-thirds were unwilling to receive the locally developed Sputnik-V shot, in spite of peer-reviewed research suggesting that it is safe and effective. Their scepticism extended to the origins of the coronavirus, with 64% believing that it was a biological weapon, the independent poll said. (Most virologists disagree and say there is no evidence that the virus was engineered.)

Lack of trust in the Russian government is a key hurdle, says Sergei Rybakov, a representative of the Doctors' alliance, an opposition-linked medical union that has criticised the official response to the pandemic. Though the state has marketed Sputnik-V overseas, including with its own Twitter account, it has done less to promote the vaccine among Russians, he says.

"The task of the state is to show that the vaccine is necessary, the vaccine is safe. In Russia this hasn't been done to the extent it needs to be," Rybakov said. "You need to show people that not getting the vaccine is more dangerous than getting it."

Similar hurdles are likely to slow rollouts elsewhere, too, as countries assemble one of the largest logistical operations most have ever undertaken. Even once supplies are secured, some may struggle for years to reach the 70% of the population thought to be required for herd immunity, says Babak

Javid, an infectious diseases scientist at the University of California, San Francisco.

They might focus their efforts instead on reaching healthcare workers and the most vulnerable, he says. “You’re not going to eliminate Covid deaths, but you’ll eliminate the likelihood of healthcare infrastructure being overwhelmed.”

Covid inquiry

'Somebody has to answer for this': voices from the frontline on why we need a Covid inquiry

(Clockwise from top left) Nicola Richards, Lobby Akinnola, Prof. Christina Pagel, Carmel O’Boyle and Dr Arif Dasu. Illustration: Guardian Design

Coronavirus

Schools Covid catch-up programme 'not reaching disadvantaged pupils'

National Audit Office says less than half on scheme are from low-income homes

Rajeev Syal

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The report found parts of the £1bn programme could have been more effective in helping children who fell behind during Covid. Photograph: Graeme Robertson/The Guardian

The government's flagship programme to help pupils catch up after months of school closures is not yet reaching the most disadvantaged children, Whitehall's spending watchdog has warned.

In a report which examines the Department for Education's (DfE) response to the coronavirus pandemic, the National Audit Office said that less than half of the pupils who have started to receive tuition so far are from low-income families eligible for pupil premium funding.

The damning conclusion comes in a report which also highlights delays in distributing laptops and routers among children with the greatest needs following the first wave of coronavirus last year.

Meg Hillier, the chair of the public accounts committee, said the report shows that the government's reaction to the pandemic "was slower and less effective" than it could have been.

"The DfE's failure to do its homework has come at the expense of children and has hit those who were already disadvantaged the hardest," she said.

"The department must now ensure its support is properly targeted to prevent the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers from widening even further."

As part of the government's National Tutoring Programme (NTP), academic mentors are being placed in schools serving disadvantaged communities to help provide intensive catch-up support.

The charity Teach First placed mentors in 1,100 schools by February, but it had received requests for mentors from 1,789 eligible schools, meaning more than 600 disadvantaged schools requesting a mentor had not received one.

Wednesday's report found that of the 125,200 children allocated a tutoring place by February, 41,100 had started to receive tuition – of whom 44% were eligible for pupil premium funding.

"This raises questions over the extent to which the scheme will reach the most disadvantaged children," auditors said.

In June last year, Boris Johnson announced a £1bn catch-up fund to help pupils in England.

The package included £350m for the NTP to help the most disadvantaged pupils, and £650m for schools to help children from all backgrounds catch up.

The report concluded that aspects of its response "could have been done better or more quickly, and therefore been more effective in mitigating the learning pupils lost as a result of the disruption."

In early April, the DfE considered providing 602,000 laptops or tablets and 100,000 routers to ensure vulnerable children and those in priority year groups had access to digital devices, the report said.

Due to the practical difficulty of supplying devices on this scale, the department eventually distributed a total of 220,000 laptops and tablets, and 50,000 routers in June, the report said.

It emerged on Tuesday that a firm owned by a Conservative donor and handed a major government contract to supply laptops saw pre-tax profits increase by 50% to £206m.

Computacenter, founded by Conservative party donor Sir Philip Hulme, has been awarded £198 million worth of contracts to deliver devices by the Department for Education.

Gareth Davies, the head of the NAO, said: "The evidence shows that children's learning and development has been held back by the disruption to normal schooling.

"It is crucial that the department monitors the impact of its catch-up arrangements, particularly on disadvantaged children, and acts on the results."

A DfE spokesperson said the government has acted swiftly to help minimise the impact on pupils' education and provide extensive support for schools, colleges and early years settings.

"Schools have been open to vulnerable pupils throughout the pandemic, and getting all children back into the classroom, as they are now, has been the department's number one priority during the periods of national lockdown.

“We have invested over 2 billion into schemes to provide pupils with devices for remote education and ambitious catch-up plans with funding targeted at disadvantaged children and young people who need support the most,” the spokesperson said.

Coronavirus

AstraZeneca jab: EU regulator 'firmly convinced' benefits outweigh risks

Agency says there are ‘no indications’ the vaccine causes blood clots, but the risk may be higher for some groups

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The EU’s medicines regulator has said it remains “firmly convinced” the benefits of the Oxford/AstraZeneca Covid vaccine outweigh the risks, but isolated cases of blood clots “are a serious concern and need serious and detailed scientific evaluation”.

Emer Cooke, the head of the European Medicines Agency (EMA), said there was no indication the shot had caused any of the incidents, but the agency was investigating them thoroughly and would report its conclusions on Thursday.

The Italian prime minister, Mario Draghi, said on Tuesday he had spoken to the French president, Emmanuel Macron, and the two had agreed to resume vaccinations “quickly” if the EMA gave a green light. He described the preliminary statement from the regulator as “positive”.

Sweden and Latvia on Tuesday followed more than a dozen European countries, including Germany, France, Italy and Spain, in temporarily halting AstraZeneca vaccinations following isolated cases of bleeding, blood clots and low platelet counts.

While the number of incidents in vaccinated people “does not seem to be any higher than that seen in the general population”, Cooke suggested it was possible that the risks may be higher for some patient categories.

“What we’re understanding is that they may be associated with some sub-populations,” she said. Some experts have also said rare cases of highly unusual cerebral thrombosis in younger people could possible indicate a causal link to the shot.

Karl Lauterbach, a professor of epidemiology and a German MP, told German radio it “could be the case that the risks of the vaccine are higher for certain groups, such as young women. It is possible that the EMA will issue specific warnings.”

Germany’s health ministry on Tuesday said it had a “legal obligation” to suspend vaccination after receiving three more reports of a rare cerebral thrombosis, cerebral sinus venous thrombosis or CSVT, since Friday. Three of seven CSVT patients have since died, it said.

Statistically, the ministry said, the incidence rate of CSVT in AstraZeneca recipients appeared to be three or four times higher that would normally be expected, at about four per million rather than 1-1.4 per million.

Young people, especially young women, also seemed over-represented in the CVST cases, the ministry said, adding that while there was a legitimate case for carrying on vaccinating while it investigated, it had a duty of care to individual recipients.

Cooke declined to comment on national decisions, saying they were made “in the context of information at national level”. She said it was the EMA’s responsibility to “look at the science and see if these risks are causally related” to the vaccine.

The World Health Organization, which on Monday urged countries to continue using the AstraZeneca vaccine while the investigation was under way, said its expert safety panel was also meeting and expected to publish a statement on Tuesday.

The French health minister, Olivier Véran, said earlier on Tuesday he hoped the pause would not last long. “We expect some kind of verdict from the European scientific community by Thursday afternoon, allowing us to resume the campaign,” he said.

The head of France's vaccination programme, Alain Fischer, also said he expected the pause to be short-lived but added it was "reasonable" given "incidents that are significant more by their atypical nature than by their number".

The fact that there were "a few very unusual and troubling cases justify this pause and the analysis", Fischer said. "It's not lost time," he said of the suspension. "It's necessary time to carry out analysis."

Klaus Cichutek, the head of Germany's regulator, the Paul Ehrlich Institute, said it had uncovered "cases of sinus vein thrombosis in women between the ages of around 20 and 50 years, two of which tragically had a fatal outcome".

The German health minister, Jens Spahn, said on Monday the decision to suspend the shot was based on expert advice. Out of 1.6 million people in Germany who had received the AstraZeneca vaccine, seven had fallen ill and three died, he said.

Denmark and Norway last week reported incidents of bleeding, blood clots and a low count of blood platelets in several people who had received the AstraZeneca shot, both describing the symptoms as "highly unusual".

A 60-year-old Danish recipient has since died from a blood clot, while two health workers in Norway, both aged under 50 and described as previously fit and healthy, have died of brain haemorrhages. Italy has recorded eight deaths and four cases of serious side-effects after vaccination.

European governments have said they acted out of an abundance of caution, but are also concerned that their decisions will deprive them of much-needed doses to step up vaccination campaigns that have been dogged by scarce supplies.

In major EU member states such as Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain, AstraZeneca has accounted for 13-15% of shots administered since the rollout started almost three months ago, with Pfizer-BioNTech making up the majority.

Epidemiologists across the continent said clear guidance was urgently needed because of the importance of the global immunisation campaign in curbing the spread of the pandemic.

“In the risk groups the risk of dying of Covid is much, much higher,” said Dirk Brockmann of Germany’s Robert Koch Institute for infectious diseases. “That means one is probably 100,000 times more likely to die of Covid than because of an AstraZeneca vaccine.”

AstraZeneca said last week it would try to deliver 30m doses to the European Union by the end of March, only a third of its contractual obligation of 90m and a further reduction on its February promise to deliver 40m doses.

Opinion
Coronavirus

Johnson wants to move on from Covid – 125,000 deaths shows why we need an inquiry

Rafael Behr

The delayed lockdowns, the PPE failures, the billions wasted on test and trace, the cronyism: the public need answers

‘Boris Johnson declared himself ready to learn lessons, but only at some point in the future. That point is still unspecified.’ Photograph: Reuters

Boris Johnson likes to imagine history pivoting on the palms of heroic individuals. That is the thrust of his 2014 book, The Churchill Factor, which depicts Britain’s wartime leader as a man predestined for greatness by unique qualities in his character. The author drops unsubtle hints about his own uncanny possession of a similar spirit.

The pandemic tells a different story. If there has been a “Johnson factor” it will not be recorded as the key to national salvation, even by generous biographers. Too many people have died who might have lived if different decisions had been taken, or had the same decisions taken without procrastination. The current death toll exceeds 125,000, making Britain one of the deadliest battlefields in the global struggle against Covid. Why?

There are factors that are not political, and political factors that go beyond what was said in a Cobra meeting (or whether the prime minister bothered to attend that day). There is population density and the capital city’s status as a global hub. There are demographic trends and patterns of ill health. The emergence of a more transmissible strain of the virus in Kent was a significant stroke of bad fortune. There was also a decade of public sector

cuts, degrading the infrastructure that gives a nation resilience in case of civil emergency.

The tinder was dry, and Downing Street then ignored the smell of smoke when the fire caught. The prime minister's first instinct was to hope the whole thing would blow over. Even as the flames grew, he was complacent. His view, broadcast on 3 March 2020, was the opposite of good advice: "We should all basically just go about our normal daily lives." We should not have. It has since been reported that, in private, he suggested ignoring the virus.

Anonymous government sources have acknowledged that Johnson now wishes he had locked England down "harder, earlier and faster". In the same breath, those sources also complain that scientific advisers, to whom the prime minister deferred, underestimated the threat. Recriminations bounce around Whitehall, batted between ministers and civil servants.

Officials say that Johnson was ideologically allergic to anything that made a nanny of the state, and was unwilling to go public with portentous warnings that would undermine his optimistic, ebullient persona. Ministers complain that state structures were inadequate; that they were given an obsolete dashboard of rigid, rusty levers. The civil service riposte is that the machine is programmed by its political masters. It cannot fill gaps where leadership is absent.

These issues should all be aired in the inquiry that Johnson vaguely promised last July. He declared himself ready to learn lessons, but only at some point in the future. That point is still unspecified.

The answers provided by any investigation depend on the questions it is set and the powers it is given. Last September, a parliamentary committee recommended a statutory public inquiry with authority to subpoena witnesses, compel disclosure of evidence and hear testimony under oath. The committee also thought the optimal moment to begin was immediately, given that such things take time. The government disagreed.

Johnson has said only that an inquiry should be "independent", and the colour has already drained out of that faint pledge. In January he warned that

the time was still not right, that close examination of the record would be an unsuitable use of "vast state resources". He offered his own evaluation: "We truly did everything we could." The death toll had by then reached 100,000.

It is true that thorough accounting does not come cheap. The Bloody Sunday inquiry cost £211m. The vastness of the pandemic – its intrusion into every aspect of the national life – raises an intimidating volume of questions. Setting coherent parameters would be tricky, but not impossible.

Many bereaved families will want to satisfy their suspicion that official negligence was an accomplice to the virus. That is a different agenda to the one that seeks technical recommendations to upgrade civil service operating manuals for future reference. (It turned out, for example, that there were no relevant protocols to deal with the prime minister nearly dying in office.)

And the rest: why protective equipment was in short supply; whether the contracts to restock were channelled to government cronies; the discharge of infected patients into care homes; the test-and-trace system, with a £37bn budget and an effect too marginal to be observed when investigated by a committee of MPs; the app that became a ministerial vanity project; all the U-turns; the insistence on easing restrictions for Christmas when infection data signals were flashing red.

That is enough to keep an inquiry busy even before it turns to the impact of lockdown: conditions that went untreated because hospitals were dedicated to Covid; the cost of empty classrooms and abandoned exams; the hollowed high streets.

If Johnson could limit an inquiry's terms of reference to procurement of vaccines and the pace of their rollout, the hearings would have already started. But there is less clamour for answers when the question is how things went so right. There are useful lessons to learn from good government too, but that story will be told willingly and repeatedly. It will not have to be subpoenaed to appear.

Johnson hopes the national mood will be so buoyed up by the efficient delivery of shots into arms that bleaker memories will be effaced. Opinion

polls show a tonic effect already to the Tories' benefit. The prime minister wants the record of his failure overdubbed with celebration of his success.

That is frustrating to the opposition, who would like to see the government made formally culpable and chastened. But wishing political damage on the Tories is no better a reason to demand a public inquiry than wanting to avoid that damage is good grounds to refuse one. For most people, the pandemic is not a question of party allegiance, or political at all, in the sense of electoral rivalries fought out in Westminster.

That does not mean there is no interest in the truth. It is possible to see blameless tragedy and harm aggravated by incompetence reflected on different surfaces of the same event. The urgency in setting up an inquiry is not to accelerate the settling of partisan scores, but to secure for posterity the foundations of fact on which the history of the pandemic will be written. It is to begin the forensic work of excavating the site before it is flooded with propaganda and reshaped to the contours of a myth, narrated by the prime minister in the first person.

Johnson will want to draw a line and move on, which is what he does best. His career is a palimpsest of such lines scrawled over lapses in judgment and derelictions of duty. That is the "Johnson factor" that historians will one day study with fascination. It is an extraordinary quality, but far from a heroic one.

- Rafael Behr is a Guardian columnist

Coronavirus live
Coronavirus

Coronavirus live news: pandemic takes huge toll on South Asian women and children, says UN

Prince Charles

Prince Charles criticises anti-vaxxers, saying Covid vaccines can 'protect and liberate'

In a wide-ranging article for the Future Healthcare Journal, the prince advocates for bringing conventional and complementary medicine together

Reuters

Tue 16 Mar 2021 21.30 EDT

Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall visit a pop-up Covid-19 vaccination centre at the Finsbury Park Mosque Photograph: Reuters

Prince Charles has criticised those lobbying against coronavirus vaccines, saying the jabs can “protect and liberate” some of society’s most vulnerable members.

In a wide-ranging article for the Future Healthcare Journal in which he called for an integrated approach to healthcare, the heir to the throne also denounced those speaking out against Covid-19 shots.

“Who would have thought ... that in the 21st century that there would be a significant lobby opposing vaccination, given its track record in eradicating so many terrible diseases and its current potential to protect and liberate some of the most vulnerable in our society from coronavirus?” he wrote.

The prince, 72, who tested positive for the coronavirus himself in March last year, and other senior members of the royal family have been vociferous in their support of vaccines.

Last month, he and his wife Camilla, 73, had their first Covid-19 doses, while the Queen, 94, has also encouraged people to get a shot, saying it did not hurt and those who were wary about it should think of others.

However, the focus of the prince’s article, published on Wednesday, was his message that long-term health issues needed to be addressed by integrating science, public policy and personal behaviour.

“I also believe that medicine will need to combine bioscience with personal beliefs, hopes, aspirations and choices,” he wrote, calling for an open-minded approach to complementary medicine whose virtues he has long espoused despite criticism from some in the medical profession.

In 2011, a leading professor of complementary medicine accused the prince of “quackery”, saying that he and other backers of alternative therapies were “snake-oil salesmen” who promoted products with no scientific basis.

The prince said he had always advocated “the best of both worlds” to bring evidence-informed conventional and complementary medicine together and seek a middle ground over the issue.

“Only then can we escape divisions and intolerance on both sides of the conventional/complementary equation, where on the one hand, the appropriate regulation of the proven therapies of acupuncture and medical

herbalism is opposed, while on the other we find people actually opposing life-saving vaccinations," he wrote.

2021.03.17 - Spotlight

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- Laura Kenny I just thought I’ve had enough. I was in so much pain
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- Monkeys and eggplants How do men and women use emojis differently?
- From Tipperary to Silicon Valley How Stripe became vital cog in digital economy
- Beano hero Dennis the Menace turns 70

Society

‘The time for men to step up is right now!’: what all men can do to help end violence against women

Over the past week, women have shared their stories of abuse, harassment and assault. Is it time for men to join the fight to dismantle the culture that allows this violence to flourish? A panel of male experts on masculinity and violence against women explain the vital steps men can take

Sirin Kale

Wed 17 Mar 2021 02.00 EDT

Flowers left on Clapham Common after the death of Sarah Everard. Photograph: Hannah McKay/Reuters

In the wake of the killing of Sarah Everard, and the wider concerns about gender-based violence, women have shared their stories of abuse, harassment and assault. And the myriad ways they have tried to protect themselves from this. Men have, for the most part, listened. Now – given that violence against women and girls is primarily a male-perpetrated crime – is it time more men actively joined the fight against it? The Guardian convened a round table of experts to ask what men can do to help effect change among their friends and family, and in their workplaces.

Luke Hart of CoCo Awareness. In 2017, Hart's father murdered his wife, Claire, and their daughter, Charlotte. Days earlier, Claire and Charlotte had left the family home after a lifetime of coercive control and abuse. Luke and his brother Ryan are now anti-abuse activists: This week, and Everard's death, really took me back to what happened to my family. I feel deeply sorry for Everard's family; it's hard when things take on a life of their own and you just want to grieve. Events become something that other people feel they have ownership of. I remember, after my mother and sister died, some of the media reporting made me and my brother angry, to the point where we had to shut ourselves away. I remember one report saying that what my dad did was "understandable". We started to despair. So

I think this has to be a moment to remember Everard's family because it's so difficult when something you're going through becomes public property.

Dr Jackson Katz, educator and author of The Macho Paradox: Why Some Men Hurt Women and How All Men Can Help: Despite this tragic situation, there is some reason for optimism because young women in particular are using their voices to speak out about their own experiences of being survivors of violence. But, for decades, there has been a lack of male voices speaking up about violence against women.

Christopher Muwanguzi, former CEO of Future Men, a charity for men and boys: What really got me was Jess Phillips on International Women's Day last week reading out the names of all the women killed in Britain by men in the past year. So many names. And what's happening now? What's going to be happening tomorrow?

Jackson Katz, Luke Hart, Christopher Muwanguzi and Nazir Afzal. Composite: None

Nazir Afzal, solicitor and former chief crown prosecutor for north-west England. Afzal helped bring the Rotherham grooming gang to justice: Five years ago, I tried to organise a "million man march" on the subject of violence against women and girls. I got 52 signups.

Jackson Katz: Oh, man. Listening to some of the male voices on social media this week, I keep hearing people saying: "Not all men!" To which I would say: if you have the impulse to say "not all men", don't. It's silly, and it's not a good look. Because, yes, although men are more likely to die violently than women, and, yes, not all men are violent, there's no doubt that the overwhelming majority of violence that happens between the genders happens *by* men *against* women. And the vast majority of violence that men suffer is at the hands of other men. So men and women have a common enemy, which is male violence.

If men would realise that the same system that produces men who murder and assault women also produces men who murder and assault men, maybe they would think about working together, rather than being defensive and assuming that women are bashing them or that they're "anti-men" when they are really speaking up for their own dignity and basic right to walk free from the fear of sexual violence.

> One man told me that he installed tracking apps on his wife's and daughter's phones. I reported him to the authorities
>
> *– Nazir Afzal*

Luke Hart: I guess I'm the perfect example of that male ignorance. I grew up pretty ignorant about my father's behaviour. He wasn't beating us regularly, so I thought: *he's not dangerous*. But that wasn't the case. It was extreme coercive control. Ryan and I have spent a long time trying to answer why my father did what he did. I mean, people always ask us that question. And I think there are two reasons. First: incredible entitlement. He saw himself as the patriarchal peak of the home, and my mother was basically his slave. So there's that framing women as lesser. But the bit that makes men do the horrible things, I think, is just sheer resentment. The resentment fuels the action. Everything wrong in my father's life was down to my mother and sister. He wrote it in his murder note. So you have to understand that entitlement and resentment because it underpins everything: the harassment of women, the catcalling, everything you see in the streets. It's endemic.

Nazir Afzal: I've prosecuted hundreds of rapes, hundreds of femicides. And in all the rapes I've prosecuted – from looking at the evidence – not one of the men was motivated by sex. They were motivated by being able to control the woman.

People think we need to identify those men who are sex maniacs if we want to catch rapists. But rapists were motivated by that need to control and coerce. Sometimes it leads to rape, sometimes it leads to voyeurism, sexual assault, femicide or just controlling a women's choices so she can't go where she wants and see who she chooses. And you know what? Men can spot when it's happening.

I can't tell you the amount of friendships I've lost – deliberately. They make jokes and it's abundantly clear. You ask them what their wife is up to that evening, and they say: "She's not allowed to go out." One man I knew told me that he installed tracking apps on his wife's and daughter's phones. I sussed him out, and he knew. I've not seen him since. And I reported him to the authorities.

Christopher Muwanguzi: You know, we're all going to lose friends. Because sometimes you have to say: I'm sorry, but that's not acceptable. There is a teachable moment in every opportunity with a young person.

Nazir Afzal: Right! In order to change the culture, we need to hold everyone to account. Don't we? We can't say: "Oh, he's just like that." Because we don't educate people about this stuff. Hate is a learned behaviour; you don't learn things until people teach you. Misogyny is the earliest prejudice – it started in the Garden of Eden. We need to be teaching children from the age of five about gender equality, about good and bad relationships.

Christopher Muwanguzi: Let me jump on that train. You're right: this behaviour doesn't happen in a vacuum. These toxic behaviours are learned. There's this idea that manliness is about violence, aggression, power and holding people down, rather than supporting and being part of a community.

Jackson Katz: Yes! But the thing is, learned behaviour is passive. These attitudes and beliefs about manhood, they're actively taught. It's media

culture, sports culture, peer culture and porn culture. All these influences teach men certain lessons about manhood and social norms that are produced and reproduced at every level. The reason it's so hard to deal with these issues is because we can't just isolate individual perpetrators as pathological monsters. Because it is our society that's producing these abusive men on a regular basis, generation after generation, across class, race and ethnicity.

There's always this tendency when a tragic killing happens to think about the individual as crazy, sick, diabolical – as opposed to thinking: he's a product of society that has a group of norms along a spectrum. And when you start thinking of those norms on a spectrum, it implicates all of us. That makes a lot of guys get really defensive because they know they're part of the problem in a larger sense. And that means they have to be introspective and self-critical. They have to move past this idea that because they don't go out and murder women or beat their girlfriends, they're not part of the problem. Because they may still be perpetrating the norms of masculinity that contribute to this situation.

Christopher Muwanguzi: I think role modelling is the best solution. It can be as simple as not talking over women – recognising that's not acceptable and picking up on it when it happens. I was talking to a friend recently who works at a school. She was physically intimidated by a large group of boys. A male teacher said: "You know boys!" But that's him agreeing that intimidating behaviour is acceptable, and refusing to challenge it. He is all the men who turn a blind eye, who think things are OK, who say: "This is normal. It happens every day." We need to show young people better role models.

> It's not about being a superhero. It's about making it clear you don't tolerate sexism or misogyny
>
> – *Jackson Katz*

Nazir Afzal: We also need to look at our institutions. As men, we want to excuse male behaviour. That comes across in the media. How many times have you seen the headline along the lines of "Man with drink problem kills

wife", or "Man kills wife because she had an affair"? It is a problem in our legal institutions, too. You know, the conviction rate for rape in this country is about 1%. There's a feeling, quite rightly, that rape has been decriminalised. There's also a big systemic issue about how we treat sexual violence victims full stop.

There are many women who'll never again report a crime because of the way they were treated. The Norwegian model, where each victim gets their own paid-for lawyer, would be a good option, I think. It costs money. But we've got to start giving the victim more power than she has; that's the only way we're going to change things.

Jackson Katz: Earlier Christopher talked about teachable moments. Right now, in the UK, there's this huge explosion of outrage. Talk about a teachable moment! The time for men to step up is right now. How are we going to start holding men accountable in a positive way? The rehabilitation of individual men – everyone needs to be involved in it. It's not about pointing to individual men and saying: "He needs to go to therapy, the wiring in his brain needs to be fixed." If everyone is part of the change, it makes it easier for each individual. I believe in redemption. I believe you don't just toss people away. People can learn and be taught new ways of being. But it's not easy.

Christopher Muwanguzi: I also believe in redemption. But there needs to be consequences for actions, too, whether intended or unintended. And we have to think about how we tell the survivors' stories to men so that they can understand the impact.

I also want to talk about emotional literacy, mental wellbeing and health. It cannot be separated from this discussion. Because it is what's creating a system that allows individuals to go out and do harm. We need to create environments for men and women to tell their stories. Like Luke's story – my God, that's powerful. I listen to it and think about what sort of father I am to my son.

We need to be thinking: a woman has been killed. Am I checking my unconscious bias? Am I asking my sister, my mother, my wife, my friend, how they have felt? Am I listening?

Flowers from the vigil at Clapham Common bandstand. Photograph: Guy Smallman/Getty Images

Jackson Katz: I'm one of the architects of the "bystander approach" [which emphasises the roles witnesses can play in challenging behaviour]. This can be something as simple as intervening when someone tells a rape joke to stopping a rape in progress in front of you. It's not about being a superhero or rescuing the damsel in distress. It's about as a man, making it clear you don't tolerate sexism or misogyny – and if you hear that from your friend, you're going to make it clear that you're not cool with it, and he's violating the norms and values of you and the group he is a part of. That's peer culture policing – rather than looking for an external authority to police your peer's behaviour. If we can build that into schools, at the youngest age possible, you'll see a significant change.

Luke Hart: Part of being a bloke is putting up a facade sometimes. But men need to talk about how they're feeling and figure that out with other people. My brother and I were very stoical. We used to put a lot of our aggression into sport. One of the real challenges we faced in dealing with our dad was: what do we do with all our anger? Because you don't want to be like your father, right? Anger is bad. Aggression is bad. And that sort of tore us apart, internally.

Then we realised that you can use aggression to give you confidence and courage to tackle bad behaviour around you, and challenge the darkness in ourselves. For those who are in a dark place it can be useful to try to accept those parts of ourselves, and put them in their rightful place. Confront all of that difficulty. Only when you take responsibility for it can you do something about it.

That's something that was totally lacking in my father. He had no responsibility or control over himself. My father was not a happy man. You don't blow your head off if you've reached the pinnacle of achievement. So you have to realise: abusers are miserable too. They're making everyone around them miserable. So I would say: have the conversation. If there was ever a time to start talking about being a bloke, and doing it better, it's now.

The conversation in this panel has been edited for length.

Interview

Laura Kenny: 'I just thought I've had enough. I was in so much pain'

Donald McRae

Laura Kenny

Interview

Laura Kenny: 'I just thought I've had enough. I was in so much pain'

Donald McRae

The four-time Olympic champion on almost quitting cycling, the benefits of working with a female coach and her renewed desire to make history after the Tokyo Games were postponed

Laura Kenny says she was close to retiring when she broke a shoulder and an arm but now feels like she could 'keep going forever'. Photograph: Alex Whitehead/SWpix.com/Shutterstock

‘I do think it knocked my confidence a bit, which we’ve been working on,” Laura Kenny says as she remembers breaking a shoulder and then an arm last year just before the Tokyo Olympics were postponed. Those accidents were a blow to the seemingly impregnable Kenny who appeared to be on the brink of becoming the most successful British woman athlete in Olympic history. Only Katherine Grainger has won more medals, with four silvers and a gold, but Kenny has a perfect set of four gold medals from four attempts as a track cyclist at the 2012 and 2016 Games.

She has three chances to add to her medal count in Tokyo, as she is likely to ride in the team pursuit, omnium and madison. Her husband, Jason Kenny, is tied in second place with Chris Hoy in the overall British medal table, having won six golds and one silver as a sprint cyclist. The 10 Olympic golds owned by the Kenny household surpasses the amount won by more than 100 countries in the history of the Games. While the couple’s medal hunt will continue in Tokyo, the 28-year-old Kenny admits there is much more uncertainty to her task now. She even reveals that, less than a year ago, she considered retiring.

When asked to pinpoint how her confidence was dented after two accidents she explains how hard it became to think about riding in crowded and unpredictable races such as the omnium and madison. “It was a struggle getting back into a bunch. I’ve never broken a bone before, so to break my shoulder [in the World Cup in Canada last January] then get back on my bike and throw myself back at it at the World Championships [four weeks later in Berlin] and then break my arm, made me think: ‘Why I am putting myself through this? What’s the end game? I’ll just get hurt.’ I thought I could can this now and that would be it.”

Did she really come close to quitting? “Yes. We have a week off after the worlds and for that week I just thought: ‘I’ve had enough.’ I was in so much pain and it didn’t help that my arm was broken and we didn’t even know. I was going to the physios and they were working on my shoulder. I kept saying: ‘This bit’s really sore [she points to her arm] and it feels like a bone pain.’ My shoulder was so severe and hurt so much, I didn’t know what an average break felt like. I thought my arm was just badly bruised. But I couldn’t plait my hair or hold my arm up.

“I went to physio and told them I needed something done because there is a bursa in your shoulder that you can drain. The doctor was like: ‘We can get it drained if you want.’ I said: ‘Yes. I can’t deal with this pain anymore.’ I went to get it scanned and the guy said: ‘I can’t drain this because you’ve got a broken arm.’ I remember thinking: ‘Yeah, of course!’ [She laughs] I’d had a broken arm for a week.

“I rang Jason in the car on the way home and burst out crying. The Olympics hadn’t been cancelled at the time and I thought: ‘This is really bad.’ Jason said: ‘You got over a broken shoulder in four weeks so you can get over an arm.’ But it was one thing after another. I couldn’t even try to pick up Albie [her three-year-old son]. I couldn’t lift my arm up above my head for six weeks. I remember trying to do monkey bars in lockdown and being like: ‘I’m never going to be able to do monkey bars ever again.’”

Kenny laughs when I ask if she can do them now. “I can do a handstand. That’s not bad. So the pain has gone.”

Laura Kenny (centre) competes in the women’s elimination race at the UCI track cycling world championships in Berlin last year. Photograph: Odd Andersen/AFP via Getty Images

Once the 2020 Olympics were postponed Kenny felt her old desire to compete return with renewed force. “It made me realise I really wanted to go to the Olympics because once it got taken away I was gutted. I was heartbroken. But it also meant I had the time to get myself back in the right headspace.”

Kenny is approaching her physical peak, in terms of her age, but does she feel drained by her third Olympic cycle? “No, not really. It’s only because Paul Manning, our coach, left this year and I was like: ‘That’s 10 years.’ That seems mad.”

The change has made overdue history in the male-dominated world of British cycling where charges of reactionary masculinity and dubious approaches to winning have increasingly overshadowed the medal count. Kenny has always seemed tougher than some of her old-school male coaches, such as Shane Sutton, who dominated the velodrome before 2012. But she is clearly happy now: “In Monica Greenwood we’ve got our first female podium coach, which is obviously a massive step forward. It’s been a long time coming. Personally, I think it’s mad that there hasn’t been a woman podium coach before. We’ve got women’s sprints and endurance but we’ve never had a female podium coach.”

Have other track-cycling countries been more progressive? “Yes. New Zealand has got a woman coach. Canada too and a few other nations already have female coaches.”

> I would have felt a lot more comfortable when I was younger talking to a female coach

Kenny is thriving again under Greenwood. “It’s been really good and a really easy transition. I got so many messages when Paul left. People were like: ‘Oh, I’m so sorry’ because I’d worked with him for so long. I was shocked because I had no idea he was going to quit. I had such a good relationship with him and he could read me like a book. If I thought a session needed to be changed, he’d already changed it by the time I logged on to my programme. I thought: ‘I don’t know how I’m going to have that

relationship with someone else.' But Monica has taken over the lead role quite seamlessly."

Sutton always loved working with Kenny because she seemed fearless and far less complex than Victoria Pendleton, who won Olympic gold in 2008 and 2012. Pendleton found it difficult when male coaches such as Sutton could be abrasive. Does Kenny believe other female cyclists would have benefited from being coached by a woman?

"I guess personalities are different. You might get someone who's like a female Shane. You can't guarantee how people will coach. If I was comparing Paul and Monica, for example, I would say Monica is very decisive. When she's said it, that's how we're doing it and she sticks to it. Paul would put an idea out there and let you think about it for a little bit.

'I love the fact that the Olympics bring the nation together,' says Laura Kenny. Photograph: James Robinson

"But I think in terms of grassroots and the younger generation coming through that it would be easier for a female to talk to a female. And not just about periods. I would have felt a lot more comfortable when I was younger talking to a female coach about it, but it's not just that. It's life. Lots of girls find it easier to talk to another female one-on-one than with a man."

Did Kenny find it difficult in the past – especially when talking about her periods and how they might affect her performance? “I’ve never had a problem with telling a coach that I’m on my period. It’s part of life. Some people come to me saying that they couldn’t tell someone – but it’s very different now. It’s been so well-publicised that people are actually taking an interest in it. Our physiologist did a whole uni [thesis] on it. You hear athletics doing studies in it and that’s helped people talk about it.”

Kenny stresses that she has yet to be selected and the GB Olympic squad will not be finalised for a few more months. But it would be a major surprise if she was not chosen to ride in all three of her disciplines. “Team pursuit is always going to be my favourite,” she says. “I find it less stressful. You’re with the girls the whole time and it is the one that we train for. It’s the one that all our power targets are based around. It’s the most predictable as well. If you break the world record in training the chances are you’re going to do it in a race. It takes the stress out of it a bit – as long as you get selected.”

Four months ago, at the European Championships in Bulgaria, Kenny, Katie Archibald, Josie Knight and Neah Evans won the team pursuit final in 4:10:437 – only two-tenths of a second slower than the world record GB set in Rio.

When they were racing for those blurring four minutes did it seem to Kenny as if they were close to smashing their old world record? “No, it just felt hard but I thought: ‘That’s quite good.’ I did say to Neah before that if we can run at the back of a team we’ll get close to the world record. But I was half-joking because Neah loves a good target. So I was a bit gutted because I was like: ‘Damn it, to get that close!’”

After nine months in lockdown, and two terrible accidents, it was a positive sign that Kenny and her teammates could add to her Olympic gold medal haul. She makes the point that it is hard to know where they currently stand in contrast to their rivals – and that the omnium and madison are even more unpredictable. But they are racing regularly against the GB men’s under-23 squad at the Manchester Velodrome in preparation for their only remaining competition, in Belgium next month, before the Olympics.

> Jason was watching me train and saying: 'If you're going to do it, maybe I can too' … I can't imagine him retiring

Kenny is also working on a project to encourage the nation to get behind GB in a campaign called Home Support – which features artworks by the boxer Joe Joyce, the former triathlete Vanessa Raw and the mouth artist Henry Fraser. "For us as athletes," Kenny says, "home support is a massive part of competing and this year it'll be different. No one from Great Britain will be there so Purplebricks have put a campaign together to rally home support. The artworks are incredible and I love the fact that the Olympics bring the nation together."

Her husband retired after the 2016 Olympics but Kenny says she and Jason have no intention of giving up after Tokyo. "He was pretty adamant that was it after Rio," Kenny remembers. "Jason just fell out of love with it, almost. But [in 2017] he was watching me train and saying: 'Hang on, if you're going to do it, maybe I can too.' We started doing stuff together in the gym and going swimming and all of a sudden he was like: 'I do miss it.' He loves it that much now I can't imagine him retiring after the next one either [in 2024]."

What about Kenny herself? "Cycling has been part of my life so long I can't imagine retiring. With 2024 now so close it would be mad to think I'm going to stop. This is going to be me and Jase – we'll just keep going forever."

Laura Kenny is working with Purplebricks to encourage the nation to get behind Team GB in Tokyo. Visit https://page.purplebricks.co.uk/teamgb_homesupport/

What happened to the Syrian refugees who got stuck in Turkey?

Syrian families outside a Syrian grill on Inonu Street in Gaziantep, Turkey. Photograph: Ozan Köse/AFP/Getty Images

World nature photography awards – in pictures

Bornean orangutan (Pongo pygmaeus). Tanjung Puting National Park, Borneo – winner of the gold and grand prizes in the 2020 world nature photography awards. Photograph: Thomas Vijayan

Xiaomi

Xiaomi Mi 11 review: cheaper, top-spec phone undercuts competition

4 / 5 stars 4 out of 5 stars.

Great screen, flagship chips and good camera with a few corners cut for significantly cheaper price

Samuel Gibbs Consumer technology editor

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The Xiaomi Mi 11 offers most of what makes top-phones great but at a knockdown price. Photograph: Samuel Gibbs/The Guardian

With the Mi 11 Xiaomi, one of China's largest electronics firms, is attempting to undercut Samsung with a premium, top-spec phone costing significantly less.

The £750 Mi 11 is the first of Xiaomi's new top-spec phones for the year, replacing the Mi 10 series from 2020.

Xiaomi may not be well known in the UK, but chances are you may have seen one of its popular electric scooters on city streets across the country. The firm makes a smorgasbord of products from toothbrushes to laptops. Its range is a little more modest in the UK including phones and the aforementioned e-scooters.

The curved glass back makes holding the large phone a little easier. Photograph: Samuel Gibbs/The Guardian

It has the same glass-and-metal sandwich design as most smartphones. A big phone with a giant 6.8in screen, the Mi 11 feels slim and easier to hold than some super-sized rivals thanks to a curved back and 196g weight – 31g lighter than the Samsung Galaxy S21 Ultra.

The QHD+ OLED screen is stunning – matching the very best from Samsung – with very high peak brightness, which helps considerably in direct sunlight, and a 120Hz refresh rate (double that of an iPhone) that keeps scrolling super smooth. The screen is covered by the latest, more smash-resistant Gorilla Glass Victus, matching its best rivals.

The in-display fingerprint sensor is good, but not as fast as that on Samsung or Oppo's latest devices. Given how many times you unlock the phone even the slightest delay grates. Photograph: Samuel Gibbs/The Guardian

Specifications

- **Main screen:** 6.81in QHD+ OLED (515ppi) 120Hz
- **Processor:** Qualcomm Snapdragon 888
- **RAM:** 8GB of RAM
- **Storage:** 128 or 256GB
- **Operating system:** Miui 12 based on Android 11
- **Camera:** Triple rear camera: 108MP wide, 13MP ultra-wide, 5MP macro; 20MP front-facing camera
- **Connectivity:** 5G, dual nano sim, USB-C, wifi 6, NFC, Bluetooth 5.2 and location
- **Water resistance:** none

- **Dimensions:** 164.3 x 74.6 x 8.1mm
- **Weight:** 196g

Top performance, reasonable battery life

A full charge takes 52 minutes with the included 55W power adaptor, hitting 40% in 13 minutes. The phone supports 50W wireless charging and 10W power sharing too. Photograph: Samuel Gibbs/The Guardian

The Mi 11 is one of the first smartphones available with Qualcomm's latest Snapdragon 888 chip, plus 8GB of RAM and either 128GB or 256GB of storage, making it one of the most powerful Androids this year.

The phone is therefore snappy and responsive, able to pump out the latest games at maximum frame rates.

Battery life is also reasonable but not class-leading. I got about 32 hours between charges with the screen set to its maximum resolution and refresh rate, meaning it lasts from 7am on day one until 3pm on day two. That included just under five hours of screen-on time in apps, simple games and video, two hours on 5G and about 20 photos. Lighter usage sees closer to 35 hours.

Sustainability

Xiaomi does not provide an estimate of the number of full-charge cycles the battery should last. Batteries in similar devices can typically last for at least 500 cycles while maintaining at least 80% of their original capacity.

The phone is generally repairable by service centres and comes with a 24-month warranty, as well as one free screen repair in the first year. Out-of-warranty repair costs are detailed here for service within the UK including battery replacement. The Mi 11 was only awarded four out of 10 for repairability by specialists iFixit, however.

Xiaomi does not yet offer trade-in or recycling schemes in the UK, but does in Italy, France, Germany and the Netherlands. The company did not comment on the use of recycled materials in the smartphone, nor does it currently publish environmental impact assessments.

Miui 12

Miui is packed with options with almost every element of the way its interface looks or operates being customisable. Photograph: Samuel Gibbs/The Guardian

Software has been Xiaomi's Achilles heel in western markets, but the firm's latest Miui 12 – based on Android 11 – is significantly slicker, more palatable and has fewer pre-installed rubbish apps.

It is heavily modified from the standard Android experience with lots of differences and oddities compared to what you might see from Samsung or Google. But Miui is highly customisable with a plethora of different options that can change it from a more western-style Android to more Asian-style or even make it more like an iPhone.

The settings menus are a bit of a mess with options not where you'd expect to find them while some more advanced features caused a few issues in third-party apps.

It took some getting used to but Miui 12 ends up being a fast, attractive and adaptable experience after tinkering with customisation settings.

Xiaomi will support the Mi 11 with software and security updates for at least three years including two major Android versions.

Camera

The back of the phone has three cameras: a main 108MP camera, a 13MP ultra-wide angle and a 5MP macro camera, but no optical zoom.

The camera app is fairly straightforward for point-and-shoot photography with some fun tools should you want to get creative. Photograph: Samuel Gibbs/The Guardian

The main camera is good, capable of shooting detailed photos with a solid dynamic range and accurate colours in good light. Low-light performance is also good, but the camera struggles a little in middling light such as indoors on a cloudy day. Portraits come out well and there are plenty of modes to play with.

The ultra-wide camera is reasonable, but the digital zoom from 2x to 30x isn’t great; fine for simple shots at 2x but no substitute for a real optical zoom beyond that. The “telemacro” camera is an interesting addition, which is essentially a zoomed-in camera that focuses between 3cm and 10cm from the lens. It can be a little hard to get into the right place, but does produce some interesting super-close macro shots in bright light.

The selfie camera pokes through a small hole in the top left of the display. Photograph: Samuel Gibbs/The Guardian

The selfie camera is good, producing highly-detailed shots, but be warned that the “beautify” mode is active by default smoothing skin and adjusting everything from eye and chin size to hairline.

Video shot by the main camera is generally good, shooting up to 8K video or 4K at 60 frames per second. The camera app is packed with fun movie effects.

Overall the Mi 11’s camera won’t trouble the market leaders, but is generally pretty good as long as you don’t want a zoom.

Observations

The stereo speakers are tuned by audio-firm Harman Kardon to be loud, clear and very good, beating most competitors. Photograph: Samuel Gibbs/The Guardian

- The Mi 11 comes with a clear TPU case and screen protector in the box.
- The “super wallpapers” in Miui are fantastic, zooming from orbiting Earth or Mars when not in use to your choice of locations on the surface of the planet when unlocked.
- The sky replacement feature of the photo editing app is quite something, allowing you to insert still or moving images of various different skies, from sunsets or dawn to double rainbows and star tracks.

Price

The Xiaomi Mi 11 costs £749 with 128GB of storage or £799 with 256GB.

For comparison, the Samsung Galaxy S21 Ultra has an RRP of £1,149, the Galaxy S21+ costs £819, the Oppo Find X3 Pro costs £1,099, the OnePlus 8

Pro costs £799 and the Apple iPhone 12 Pro Max costs £1,099.

Verdict

The Xiaomi Mi 11 is a great value, top-spec phone that has most of the bells and whistles you could want, while significantly undercutting the competition at just £749.

It is a large phone with a big high-quality screen, good camera, solid battery and the top Android chip for snappy performance. Its simple design is attractive too. But it is not perfect. It has no formal water resistance and the fingerprint scanner can be a bit slow compared with the best.

While Miui is feature-packed and great for those who love to tinker with options, it is less good for those who just want the standard Android experience. Three years of software support is the bare minimum and far behind Samsung's four-year and Apple's five-year commitments.

> **Pros:** good value, top performance, great screen, good speakers, good camera, fast charging, sub-200g weight, reasonable battery life.
>
> **Cons:** no optical zoom camera, no water resistance, only three years of software updates, Miui takes some tweaking for western audiences.

The camera arrangement on the back is a surprisingly attractive feature of the phone. Photograph: Samuel Gibbs/The Guardian

Other reviews

- **Samsung Galaxy S21 Ultra review: the new king of Android phones**
- **Oppo Find X3 Pro review: Chinese smartphone champ can’t beat Samsung**
- **OnePlus 8T review: slick phone fully charges in just 37 minutes**
- **iPhone 12 Pro Max review: Apple’s longer lasting superphone**
- **Fairphone 3+ review: ethical smartphone gets camera upgrades**

Monkeys and eggplants: how do men and women use emojis differently?

Life and style

Monkeys and eggplants: how do men and women use emojis differently?

Studies have pointed to a gender gap and dating coaches agree – but researchers' findings don't always match stereotypes

Women use emojis more than men and generally understand their meanings better, researchers say. Illustration: Max Benwell

It's 2021, and despite some great advances in space exploration, we are no closer to really knowing whether men are from Mars and women are from Venus. In fact, the growing consensus is that we're all from Earth, and people are more complex than we usually give them credit for.

But what if there were a way of unlocking some of the hidden trends that exist among men and women, which reveal how they think, see themselves and communicate? And what if it were ... emojis?

A lot has been written on the so-called war between millennials and Gen Z and how they use emojis. According to the latest reports, the cry laughing emoji (😂) is passé among zoomers, who prefer to use the skull and crossbones symbol (☠) to convey that they are literally (but not literally-literally) dead.

But while this generational war is mostly overblown, there *are* some marked differences in how men and women use emojis, as evidenced by recent studies analyzing millions of messages between them.

Research has shown that there are broad but clear differences in emoji usage between genders. For example, when was the last time you saw a woman use the monkey (🙈) emoji ? A favourite among men who've just embarrassed themselves, it may be one of the most divisive out there. (One Twitter user jokingly asked "should men who use the monkey emoji have rights? be honest". It received 18,000 retweets.)

Why does the monkey emoji resonate so strongly? And does it really open up a giant door into male psychology? Of course, we shouldn't generalize. But in some cases, the answer seems to be ... yes, it does.

Why 'eggplanting' is a dating mistake

‘The eggplant emoji is the stupidest thing any any man could ever send to a woman.’ Illustration: Max Benwell

“Men are apologizing a lot,” says Max Alley, an online dating coach based in New York. He works with men and women on their dating profiles and messaging. A big part of his job is going through their chat logs and figuring out where his clients have gone wrong.

Often, emojis play a central role.

According to Alley, the biggest mistake straight men make with emojis is the same as their biggest mistake overall: being far too direct or inappropriate.

“The eggplant (🍆) emoji is the stupidest thing any any man could ever send to a woman,” says Alley. “But they do.” He says men will also use the purple devil emoji (😈) in a sexual way with women they barely know. And they’ll try to make it more palatable with the sweating-while-smiling emoji (😅), which shows that they’re being inappropriate, but also aware of the fact they’re being inappropriate.

Amie Leadingham, a dating coach based in Los Angeles, says she sees this too. “Men get too direct too quickly,” she says. “They assume the person is

ready to meet them already, and ready to like them. It can really be a big turnoff for women. The easiest dating secret in the world is make the person feel like they're the most important person in the room, you know?"

More often than not this causes a very awkward situation – and this is where the monkey emoji comes in. "It's like a facepalm but it's meant to soften the blow a little bit," says Alley. "To be like, I'm sorry, I messed up, but I'm still cute, though, right?"

Leadingham says she has seen all the different monkey emojis appear frequently in the messages her female clients have received. "Any of the evil monkeys, yeah," she says. "And then there's another one where the emoji has pink cheeks and big eyes like they're embarrassed for you (😳). Oh, wow. Those are not good."

But is it only the men making people feel uncomfortable? According to both coaches, the answer seems to be yes a lot of the time – but not always. "Honestly, some of my male clients get some weird stuff [from women] too," Leadingham tells me. The biggest mistake women make, in her experience, is overexposing themselves in a different way. You could call it "emotional eggplanting".

In her experience, if a female client does make a mistake, it's making themselves too vulnerable too soon. "Those are massive red flags, as vulnerability is great but with boundaries, right? They may tell you their life story, and with a lot of drama tied to it. And they're just dumping it on you."

In the same way that men then resort to emojis when they realize they've been too forward, Leadingham says that women will also express their embarrassment in the easiest way possible and rely on images to convey how they feel, rather than typing it out. In this way, emojis can be a crutch that helps avoid further displays of vulnerability, or at least soften them. She says common emojis women will use if they feel like they've said too much include the blushing face (😳), the zippered mouth (🤐), and the sad downtrodden one (😟) – especially if it's led to them being ghosted.

Alley also works with women, and says their big mistake in online dating is leading a guy on who is not worth their time. What this means is that women

may not realize just how sexually driven the man they're talking to is. They may use mildly flirty emojis without realizing that the man is interpreting them differently.

This may sound like victim-blaming, but obviously the onus is on men to be better at reading the room, so that mildly flirty emojis can just be that – mildly flirty – and not trigger a barrage of purple eggplants, devil faces or, God forbid, actual real penises.

Sport emojis, baths, showers and … trophies

'Female users are more likely to use only one emoji or discretely use multiple emojis in a message, [whereas] male users are more likely to consecutively use multiple emojis.' Illustration: Max Benwell

There are also differences between men and women's emojis that aren't quite as awkward. Alley very rarely sees straight men using Bitmoji, which allows you to create a cartoon version of yourself, whereas it's much more popular among women and gay men. And when it comes to his older clients (ie "boomers") he says emoji use is far more limited to simple smileys, or not used at all.

There are also big differences over repetition and emphasis. “Men will react with the fire emoji pretty frequently to show excitement,” says Alley. “They’ll also use it multiple times, so it’s like, double or triple fire”. Meanwhile, the women he’s worked with are more likely to use hearts and sparkles to convey positivity, and “find images that pair well together to make a statement from it, while men will often amplify the emotion of their statement by just tripling the emoji”.

Academic studies have made very similar findings. They’ve found that women use emojis more than men, are more likely to pair sports emojis with baths and showers (vs men who pair them with trophies) and generally have a better knowledge of their different meanings.

In 2018, researchers from Peking University and the University of Michigan were the first to undertake a large-scale analysis of emojis and gender. They looked at 134,000 anonymous Android users from 183 countries, who produced 401 million messages over three months in 58 languages. It was limited due to the fact that it only looked at men and women (rather than being inclusive of all gender identities), but it still threw up some fascinating results.

Chiming with Alley’s observation, the study found that “female users are more likely to use only one emoji or discretely use multiple emojis in a message, [whereas] male users are more likely to consecutively use multiple emojis”. It also discovered that compared to men, women are more likely to elongate their words to convey heightened emotion and say things such as “cooooooooooooollllll!”.

And then there are emoji users who do not claim a specific gender as their identity. “Past research has been limited to the gender-binary population,” says Sanjaya Wijeratne, a research scientist at the visual messaging app Holler.io who wrote his PhD on emojis.

Given that gender identities exist on a wide spectrum, can emojis help us better understand their various shades? It may be difficult, as the trends between men and women so far seem influenced by traditional notions of gender. In a 2018 study on how people interpret emojis, those who marked

their gender as “other” had more differences from the male and female participants than the men and women had between themselves.

While many of the paper’s findings broadly aligned with stereotypical notions of gender, some of them didn’t at all. “We are surprised to find that male users are significantly more likely to use heart-related emojis than females,” the researchers write. “This is contrary to psychological literature where males are reported to be less willing to express love in real life. Such a finding implies that although men reserve to express their love in real life, they are more willing to express love through emojis in textual communication.”

The paper also found that the 10 most popular emojis among women, in order, were 😂, ❤, 😍, 😘, 😭, 😏, 😊, □, □ and 😁. Meanwhile, the most popular among men were 😂, ❤, 😍, 😘, 😭, □ 😊, 😏 , □ and □.

The two lists are almost exactly the same, but with one exception: that cheeky, embarrassed, kind of creepy, why-did-you-just-say-that monkey.

Technology sector

From Tipperary to Silicon Valley: how Stripe became vital cog in digital economy

Brothers Patrick and John Collison's online payments empire is now valued at $95bn

Patrick and John Collison, the co-founders of Stripe, whose net worth is estimated at $11.5bn each. Photograph: Getty Images

The latest fundraising round by the digital payments firm Stripe has boosted the net worth of its co-founders, Patrick and John Collison, to about $11.5bn (£8.3bn) each, catapulting them into the top bracket of the world's millennial billionaires. Not bad for two brothers from the tiny Tipperary village of Dromineer, population: barely 100.

In little more than a decade the Collison brothers have developed Stripe, which has headquarters in Dublin and San Francisco, from a tech startup into a vital cog in the global digital economy, providing customer payment

and other e-commerce services to brands ranging from Google, Amazon and Uber to Deliveroo, Spotify and Peleton.

The coronavirus pandemic has accelerated the switch from physical to online payments over the past year and the brothers have just tapped investors for $600m to fund further expansion. This has boosted Stripe's valuation to a whopping $95bn, making it the most valuable of Silicon Valley's private tech companies.

It is all a far cry from the Collisons' childhood in Dromineer, a rural village with "nothing but mooing cows", elder brother Patrick told the Financial Times. The pair grew up in a house that was not even connected to the internet for the first decade of their lives.

Ready access to books and an encouragement to read voraciously led to a love of computers, an interest in coding, and to the boys' first investment pitch: encouraging their parents to install a satellite internet connection so they could continue their computer programming education. It was successful, and on day one, Patrick recalled in the same FT interview, he was already making his first web page.

Pat Phelan, an Irish entrepreneur and investor who knew the brothers before Stripe, recalls them as a pair of whip-smart teens whose mum brought them to blogger meetups.

"Being nice to everybody is difficult," says Phelan. "But a thousand Irish jobs [to be created from the latest Stripe fundraising], a European HQ, they've never forgotten [their Irish roots]. To be [expanding] a company of that size and not forgetting Ireland is just astonishing."

Patrick, now 32, and John, 30, launched their first tech startup, the shopping app Shuppa (even the name, a play on the Gaelic for shop, was a homage to their roots) from Limerick in 2007.

Turned down for funding in Ireland, they relocated to San Francisco, where both now live. A year later, they sold the startup, rechristened Auctomatic, for $5m, making the Collisons teenage millionaires.

The pair went to university in the US: Massachusetts Institute of Technology for Patrick and Harvard for John. But less than a year later, they dropped out for a second bout of entrepreneurship. And this time, they went straight to the Bay Area.

Stripe, the company that emerged, is the poster child for the third wave of Silicon Valley titans. The company's main focus has been described as a "programming language for money". The goal is to make adding payment infrastructure to a website or app as easy and developer-friendly as changing the background colour, or letting users log in with their Facebook accounts.

At its simplest, the pitch was that developers could add payments to their websites with just seven lines of code. And unlike PayPal, Apple Pay or other competitors, users did not need to even know that Stripe existed: they paid with their existing credit or debit cards, without making an account, remembering a password, or being confused by the weird name popping up on their bank statement. Stripe also offers anti-fraud tools, recurring subscriptions, and complex invoicing services.

However, it is not just a suite of services but also a platform. A digital company can build their entire business on top of the company's tools, paying contractors with the same system used to take payments from customers. The company's Atlas product goes one step further: for a flat $500 fee, Stripe will literally set up a company for you, filing the legal paperwork, opening a US bank account, and issuing stock to the founders.

The analyst Ben Thompson says the goal is, ultimately, to build the digital financial equivalent of the undersea cables that connect the world together. "Stripe isn't simply a platform, it is a platform for platforms," he says. "Stripe isn't necessarily competing with other fintech [platform and service] providers but instead is seeking to be the backbone for all of them, as well as an entirely new universe of platforms that can offer their unique customers financial services that are perfectly tuned to their needs."

That goal, of building the backbone of the financial internet, is not only a profitable pursuit (hence the eye-watering valuations): it also insulates Stripe from many of the culture wars at the heart of the modern tech industry.

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The company, and the Collisons themselves, have managed to remain friendly with all the different factions of the Bay Area.

Peer closely, and it is not impossible to guess where their sympathies lie. The company was backed by the Trump-supporting venture capitalist Peter Thiel at an early stage, and Patrick is closely involved with the same rationalist community as influential libertarian blogger Tyler Cowen.

But with alumni of the company including Saikat Chakrabarti, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's former chief of staff and a leading proponent of the Green New Deal, perhaps the Collisons' biggest achievement – beyond, even, their multibillionaire personal wealth – is in getting this far without making significant enemies along the way.

The Beano

Beano hero: Dennis the Menace turns 70

The perennial naughty schoolboy is entering his eighth decade as youthful as ever, with help from YouTube star Joe Sugg and a panel of young readers

Alison Flood

Wed 17 Mar 2021 02.01 EDT

‘The friend everyone wanted when they were growing up’ … Dennis the Menace (right) with YouTuber and guest editor Joe Sugg. Photograph: Beano/PA

Seventy years ago, on 17 March 1951, Dennis the Menace first strolled on to the pages of the Beano. The iconic red and black jumper of today was eschewed for a shirt and tie, and his faithful pooch Gnasher was nowhere to

be seen, but – as he defied an order to "keep off the grass" – Dennis was as much of a menace then as he is today.

Dreamed up when the Beano editor, George Moonie, heard a music hall song called Dennis the Menace from Venice, Dennis was the first naughty kid character for the Beano, which was first published by DC Thomson in July 1938.

"Dennis came along after the austerity of the 1940s, after this belief that kids should be seen and not heard, and then all of a sudden you have this character through whom kids can live vicariously," said Mike Stirling, editorial director of Beano Studios. "He started off as a half-page strip on page five, but he was so successful that by the end of the 1950s you had Minnie the Minx, the Bash Street Kids and Roger the Dodger as well, because the naughtiness was such a success. The kids aren't fighting against each other, they're fighting against the grownups. Kids were not just being seen, but being heard."

Beano Studios is marking Dennis's anniversary with a special birthday edition of the comic, guest edited by super-fan Joe Sugg. The YouTube celebrity has written multiple strips in the comic, including one that sees Dennis having a chuckle about Sugg fainting on an episode of the Great Celebrity Bake Off. Kew Gardens is also celebrating Dennis with a giant 3D Beano comic strip and an interactive trail called Dennis & Gnasher's Big Bonanza, this Easter. And a dedicated Dennis tartan has been created by mill Prickly Thistle to mark the milestone.

The Evolution of Dennis, drawn by long-time Dennis artist Nigel Parkinson, demonstrating the subtle changes to the character's appearance over the decades. Photograph: Beano Studios

By 1974, Dennis had replaced Biffo the Bear as Beano's cover star, and – although he remains forever 10 years old – he is now the comic's longest-running strip. The character's appearance has changed over the years; his shirt and tie were replaced by his red and black jumper by April 1951, the colours chosen because those were the two strongest colours of ink available to printers in the 1950s.

Gnasher, Dennis's Abyssinian wire-haired tripehound, didn't appear until 1968, when he was found wandering the streets of Beanotown after Dennis's dad had told him that "people always own dogs who look like themselves". The artist who first drew Gnasher, Davey Law, was told to "take Dennis's hair then give it a face and four legs"; it was artist David Sutherland who gave Gnasher "this wonderfully expressive, almost human face," said Stirling.

Gnasher's name was added to the strip's title in 1970. Dennis's pet pig Rasher debuted in 1979, while Dennis's family has also grown with the addition of little sister Bea, who was born in issue 2931 in 1998.

Dennis has grown and shrunk in size over the years, and his mouth has moved from behind his nose to further down his face, but one of the greatest changes in the strip has been the evolution of his nemesis and neighbour Walter. Portrayed in the past as weak and effeminate, today Walter is "more than Dennis's equal", said Stirling.

"It looked like Dennis was bullying Walter, and bullying is a big problem, so we didn't want to do anything that would ever suggest it's something we'd want in Beanotown," said Stirling. "So we made Walter physically Dennis's equal, and sometimes he gets the upper hand."

The Beano team consult a group of children from across the country, speaking to them each week about "what's happening in the playground, what they're watching on TV, what games they're playing, and these help us inform the character," says Stirling. "It makes sure our character is evolving, that Dennis is reflecting the life of a 10-year-old kid in the here and now."

Today, Dennis's fan club has more than a million members, including Star Wars actor Mark Hamill. Dennis's story has also been adapted for the screen; the first Dennis and Gnasher animated series aired in 1996, while the CBBC series Dennis & Gnasher: Unleashed! first aired in November 2017 and is in its second series.

Sugg, who grew up reading the Beano and would scour car boot sales with his cousin for boxes of old issues, calls Dennis "the perfect mix of cheeky and fun, the friend everyone wanted when they were growing up".

"I got the comic every week and to this day I still get sent the Beano Annual from my dad as a Christmas present, even at the grand old age of 29," he said. "I feel like the Beano is what taught me how to how to read, but also write, draw and get creative."

This week's issue of the Beano also includes a Menace family tree poster, which confirms that Dennis's dad is the 1980s-era Dennis grownup, while his grandad is the original 1951 Dennis. Dennis's surname, the Beano confirms, is Menace.

“I’m sure he’ll change again over the years,” said Stirling. “If kids are going around on hoverboards in 10 years’ time, Dennis will definitely have one. It’s really up to kids, and I think it’s always been that way, and that’s why we’re able to appeal to kids today as well as to their parents. He’s a great role model. That might sound counterintuitive because he’s naughty, but his mischief nowadays is a lot more driven by positive things, and just making sure kids are really listened to.”

2021.03.17 - Opinion

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The politics sketch
Boris Johnson

Boris Johnson gives China the yellow card and talks up the arsenal

John Crace

Incoherent on the delivery of more nuclear warheads, the PM was also short on detail about ‘Global Britain’

There’s nothing Boris Johnson likes more than his own grandiosity. Photograph: Jessica Taylor/UK Parliament/AFP/Getty Images

There’s a first time for everything. In his Commons statement on the integrated defence, security and foreign policy review, Boris Johnson opened by saying that its aim was to make the UK stronger, safer and more prosperous. If true, that would probably be the only occasion the prime minister has achieved those aims. Normally the one thing you can rely on him to achieve is to make things worse. By neglect if not on purpose. Just think of his handling of the coronavirus pandemic over the last year.

Still, there’s nothing Boris likes more than his own grandiosity so there was plenty of opportunity to talk up “Global Britain”. What was missing was the detail on how this was going to be achieved now that we had had a slight falling out with our Nato allies in the EU.

The UK would become a tech superpower and everything would just somehow fall into place. Our one aircraft carrier would spend more time in the Pacific and no country was too far or too near not to be considered a potential enemy. Russia was our main adversary and we were giving the Chinese a yellow card. If they didn’t improve their record on human rights abuses against Uighur Muslims, then we would get very cross indeed. China must be terrified. And don’t get him started on the French.

Keir Starmer replied by drawing a line between himself and his predecessor, Jeremy Corbyn. He did believe in defence and he did believe in nuclear deterrence. He just couldn't see why the government was increasing its nuclear warheads from 180 up to 260. Couldn't we flatten enough cities with our current capability? And why was there no mention in Johnson's speech of the cuts to the number of military personnel as outlined in the report itself. He also agreed with the threat posed by Russia but wondered if it wouldn't have been a better idea to have started by implementing the measures outlined in the Russia report, rather than start again from scratch.

"Labour is all over the place," Johnson declared, yet again accusing others of faults he fails to recognise in himself. Something many MPs from both sides of the chamber were quick to pick him up on. The China hawks, such as Tobias Ellwood, Tom Tugendhat and Julian Lewis, all damned the prime minister with faint praise. The UK was too needy, they said. So desperate for trade deals that it was prepared to overlook any signs of oppressive authoritarianism. Hong Kong's freedoms were being eroded on a daily basis and Boris was happy to sit back and say nothing.

Liberal Democrat Layla Moran and the now independent Margaret Ferrier, who ost the SNP whip after ignoring coronavirus regulations, both tried where Starmer had failed in seeking clarification of why the extra nukes were needed and why we weren't in breach of the nuclear proliferation treaty. This time Johnson was rather more forthcoming. If just as incoherent. It was like this. We were just going to say we were going to knock up an extra 80 more warheads and then, when we failed to deliver them, could claim to have cut our arsenal by 40%. Better still, we would be able to reallocate the money we hadn't spent as savings in the defence budget. Or something like this.

Other MPs were more concerned about the vagueness of the promise to reinstate the 0.7% overseas aid budget at some unspecified time in the future when we could afford it. Conservative Andrew Mitchell even warned the prime minister that he would be in breach of not just the manifesto but the law itself if he failed to reinstate the commitment in next year's spending commitments.

Boris merely looked disdainful. There would be no vote. MPs were in danger of talking Britain down, he said. The UK already gave more than most other countries as it was, so everyone should focus on our generosity rather than the cuts to spending. Besides, it was good for some of the poorer countries to learn to look after themselves rather than become reliant on our largesse. The UK economy had taken a big hit this year – though not so big that we couldn't afford not to pretend to increase our nuclear stockpile – and we would get back to the 0.7% aid budget at some point in the future. Definitely, maybe. Get back to him in 10 years or so.

After that the session rather petered out. Mostly because MPs couldn't quite believe that was all Johnson had to say. It had been much ado about not very much. Long on posture, grandstanding and ambition, short of any grounding in reality. No explanation of what benefits we would get from more nukes and just a vague promise to maintain army numbers with a Dad's army of reservists. It made about as much sense as the statement that followed by the junior housing minister, Eddie Hughes, on levelling up. The government would be levelling up across the whole country, he said grandly. Someone should let him know that rather implies maintaining the status quo.

Opinion
Protest

Boris Johnson is a champion of liberty – but only for people like him

Owen Jones

The government professes to defend ancient rights, but its new laws crack down on our most basic freedoms

Tue 16 Mar 2021 12.40 EDT Last modified on Tue 16 Mar 2021 12.42 EDT

A protest against the police, crime, sentencing and courts bill on Monday in London. Photograph: Guy Bell/Rex/Shutterstock

Boris Johnson is a freedom-loving libertarian: this is the yarn spun by much of the British commentariat. “If Boris Johnson has a political philosophy,” suggested ITV’s political editor, Robert Peston, earlier this year, “it is that he will not restrict our liberties unless there is an overwhelming reason to do so.”

That our prime minister failed repeatedly – last March, September and December specifically – to take decisive action to crush the pandemic, and delayed lockdowns in England, leading to one of the world’s worst death tolls, is thus attributed to an excessive attachment to ancient liberties rather than to the self-defeating prioritisation of economic interests over human life. His acolytes at the Spectator, where he was once editor, also like to relay breathless tales of Johnson railing “against the nanny state tendency”. At the office he would delight in seeing a “no bikes” sign covered by bikes. How cute!

This week, Johnson’s government is proposing legislation that allows for the criminalisation of protests that cause “serious annoyance” or “serious unease”. Here is a crackdown on one of our most basic freedoms, won through considerable sacrifice by our ancestors, that is more reminiscent of

Vladimir Putin's Russia than of a self-professed democracy. Any effective protest seeks to provoke serious annoyance or serious unease among the powerful: that is, indeed, the entire point.

Unlike the restrictions imposed during the pandemic that allegedly so violated Johnson's freedom-loving sensibilities, these new laws would be permanent. Police would be given discretion to ban any protest they so chose. It's not just protesters who would be affected: Johnson's increasingly authoritarian state would target Gypsies and Travellers, long among the most marginalised and discriminated-against minorities in Europe. Previously, the state could take action against Travellers only if they "caused damage to the land or to property on the land or used threatening, abusive or insulting words", according to the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, which this bill would amend. After this they wouldn't need to do anything beyond simply causing the police suspicion, in whatever way that was interpreted. The freedoms of a nearly voiceless minority would now be left to the whims of a police officer and their prejudices.

This then leads us to an instructive case study into how the likes of Boris Johnson understand freedom. Freedoms, as they see it, are for people like them: privileged, white, establishment men. Freedoms are not for protesters – certainly not, as we saw on the weekend, for women at the vigil for Sarah Everard in Clapham. They are not for minorities subjected to centuries-old bigotries, and they are definitely not for migrants and refugees. Thanks to the appointment of pantomime authoritarian Priti Patel, child detention has been brought back by stealth, while refugees in Folkestone are locked away in inhumane conditions, which predictably proved fertile ground for Covid-19.

Here is "freedom" as traditionally interpreted by elites. For example, we hear constant agitation for freedom for big business: to be liberated from regulations to protect workers' rights, consumer protections or environmental standards, all dismissed as "red tape". Workers, meanwhile, must endure "the most restrictive union laws in the western world", as Tony Blair boasted in 1998. And those have been made significantly more restrictive since.

The battle cry of "free speech" is yet another striking example. For the right, this is not a defence of genuine free expression – a precondition of any democracy worthy of the name – but rather of using public platforms to broadcast bigoted views against minorities, who largely lack representation in a media ecosystem dominated by the right. While we are told that there is a "free speech" crisis in universities, one study of 10,000 student events in 2020 found two instances of "no platforming" – one involving a convicted fraudster, the other Jeremy Corbyn.

All too often, "free speech" is misused as a veneer for publicly maligning, say, Muslims and trans people – not a courageous thing to do, given how widespread and socially acceptable prejudice is against both minorities – without facing challenge or consequence. How do we know this? Because the otherwise incessantly speaking "free speech" warriors are largely silent now on a genuine crackdown on freedom of speech, as embodied by legislation to allow the suppression of peaceful protest.

In 2019, we heard almost non-stop hysteria, including from liberals, about the menacing authoritarianism represented by Corbynism: always an absurd fantasy given the longstanding record of its leading lights rebelling against New Labour's own profoundly authoritarian impulses. Meanwhile, Johnson was portrayed as an anarchic libertine. "He is fundamentally a liberal and will take a noticeably less authoritarian approach" than Theresa May, the Spectator's political editor, James Forsyth, once cooed (Forsyth is married to Johnson's recently appointed official spokesperson, in another episode of "Britain is a totally normal country"). And yet no undeserved rehabilitation of Theresa May is required to point out that Johnson's onslaught on democratic freedoms is too much even for her.

Does Johnson truly believe in freedom? The answer is yes – for people like Boris Johnson. Freedom for this government is for the powerful and the privileged, not for dissidents or oppressed minorities. Freedom is for those who accept the status quo and don't deviate from accepted norms: but then even most openly authoritarian regimes confer this "freedom". For the dupes and the chronically gullible who helped pave the way for Britain's authoritarian turn, there will be no reflection, no pause for thought, and so our rights and freedoms are tossed on a bonfire, and they will now burn.

- Owen Jones is a Guardian columnist

Opinion
Dating

Could background checks on dating matches make dating safer? I'm not convinced

Arwa Mahdawi

The owners of Tinder have teamed with a non-profit to introduce a search on potential partners. It may have a noble aim but the unintended consequences could be disastrous

Wed 17 Mar 2021 03.00 EDT

‘Should we find ways to make online dating safer? Absolutely.’ Photograph: ibnjaafar/Getty

A sacred part of the modern mating ritual is the Google search. Unless you are Meghan, who swears she didn’t look up Prince Harry before their first date, it’s par for the course to find out all you can about a potential love interest before meeting them in person. Now Tinder, and other Match Group-owned apps, are making things easier for armchair detectives: they have partnered with a non-profit called Garbo so users in the US can run background checks on their matches. All you need is a full name or a first name and phone number and up comes his or her chequered past.

Should we be finding ways to make online dating safer? Absolutely. Is this the right way to do it? I am unconvinced. Not least because it seems you will have to pay for this feature, which will add a whole new dimension to victim-blaming. *They went on a date without paying for a background check? What did they expect?* Dating apps should be the ones responsible for ensuring known sex abusers don’t use their services; this shifts the burden of responsibility on to the user.

There is a lot to like about Garbo. It was founded by a female survivor of gender-based violence with the noble aim of preventing such violence. And it has been thoughtful about what sort of background information it divulges.

You won’t see traffic tickets or arrests related to drug possession, for example, because Garbo doesn’t want to inadvertently exacerbate racial bias. A disproportionate number of Black people are arrested for substance possession and, Garbo claims: “There is no link between drug possession and gender-based violence.” (That last point seems debatable.) In short, Garbo has good intentions, but the road to digital hell is paved with good intentions.

Garbo is now involved with an incredibly exploitative industry that has a history of scraping your personal data and giving it to third parties without your informed consent. So, while I applaud the sentiment, I do worry about the unintended consequences.

- Arwa Mahdawi is a Guardian columnist

The Pacific project
Coronavirus

Covid has reached my hospital in Papua New Guinea – people could soon be dying in the parking lot

Port Moresby General Hospital is one of the few safe places for women to give birth, but 30% of our workforce has Covid-19 and we may have to shut our doors

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About this content

Glen Mola

Tue 16 Mar 2021 19.17 EDT

A St John's Ambulance staff member sanitises his hands at the Drive in Covid Testing which has been set up at the Taurama Aquatic Centre in Port Moresby. Photograph: Kalolaine Fainu/The Guardian

At Port Moresby General Hospital, about 20% of women presenting in labour have symptoms of Covid-19. Of these, about one-third (four to five women a day) test positive.

We get the test results back about two to three hours after we take the swabs, so often by the time the woman is delivering her baby it is too late to transfer her to the Covid isolation ward for the birth and staff have attended to her and been exposed to the virus, without being able to don the appropriate level of PPE and practice other precautionary measures to protect themselves.

Since mid-February, the rise in Covid cases in PNG has been exponential. Even with our low rates of testing our total numbers have gone from 1,000 to 2,300 in the past month and deaths from 10 to 25 in the same period.

We now see that about 10 of our nursing and medical staff are becoming Covid positive every week, and the number is rising along with the community numbers. Positive staff are put off work until they test negative

some weeks later. To date we have lost 30% of our maternity department workforce.

Our midwifery protocols stipulate that one midwife should not have more than four women in labour to care for; however now we find that we sometimes only have two midwives on duty for our labor ward of 30 beds – all of which are typically full at any one time. Doctors are now filling in to provide a significant part of the midwifery care, especially on the night shift, but three of our 20 doctors have also tested positive this month.

My concern is that we will reach a point in the near future where we will have insufficient staff to keep the doors open. If we get to this point, what will happen to the more than 50 women who present for pregnancy care every day? Some may make it home again with their severe pre-eclampsia or life-threatening bleeding or to give birth, while others may end up dying in the hospital car park.

The Port Moresby General Hospital (PMGH) is the only hospital in the capital of PNG that offers maternity care for public patients. The service is basically free, and most of the time we are able to provide basic care for the 20,000 women who are admitted to our service each year without any additional cost to them.

Over the past 50 years, in the 92-93% of women who are booked for pregnancy care in our city's antenatal clinics, we have managed to achieve the lowest level of perinatal (babies) death of any public maternity in the low-to-middle-income world (18-19/1000) while having possibly the lowest caesarean section rate of any large public maternity in the world (5-6%).

In the rest of PNG only about 50% of the country's (mainly rural) pregnant women are able to access pregnancy and birthing care. This results in PNG having some of the highest national maternal and perinatal death statistics in the world. Port Moresby General Hospital has a track record to be proud of, but it is all possibly about to end – because the Covid-19 epidemic has finally reached PNG.

The same scenario is playing out in the general part of Port Moresby General Hospital. The Covid isolation ward has been full for the past week;

now we have taken over one of the medical wards to be an additional Covid ward. In addition, each part of the hospital has a small isolation area for Covid positive cases that are admitted with other problems and then found to be positive in the course of their admission. All of these are mostly full as well.

When the general hospital staff reach levels where the emergency department is unable to maintain the service, then its doors will close as well. Then we will have people who have car accidents, knife wounds, TB, typhoid etc. dying in the main car park, or being sent home to their fate.

We need a vaccine urgently, but by the time it reaches us it could be too late to save the health service of Port Moresby.

- Professor Glen Mola is the head of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at the School of Medicine and Health Sciences and Port Moresby General Hospital.

Opinion
Politics

Women killed: 118. Statues 'killed': 1. So guess which is the national priority?

Marina Hyde

The government wants tougher sentences for attacks on statues than on women: its culture war gets ever more absurd

Protesters throwing a statue of Edward Colston into Bristol harbour, June 2020. Photograph: Ben Birchall/PA

Such a strong look for the government's police, crime, sentencing and courts bill to allow for longer sentences for attacking statues than are handed down for attacking women. What if the victim of crime is one of those living statues who busk in public spaces – a Queen Victoria, say, or a Statue of Liberty? Do you prosecute the defendant as though he's merely harmed a woman, or do you go for the fullest force of law and treat him as if he has defaced an inanimate object?

Doesn't have to be a female living statue, of course. There's sometimes a living statue of Winston Churchill outside Covent Garden tube station. If a load of drunks set upon him – and living statues are constantly set upon, by their own accounts – do you close the investigation within about six hours owing to lack of resources? Or do you act as though someone has scrawled "is a racist" on a pedestal beneath 12 foot of insensate bronze, and push for 10 years in jail for a crime so supposedly emotive the perpetrator will be begging to be transferred to solitary after he's endured three days of HMP Frankland's welcoming party?

Either way, given how very far to go we have on dealing with violence against women and girls, it seems insulting in the extreme that the

government is spaffing so much as three seconds of legislative time on statues. When MP Jess Phillips stood up in parliament on International Women's Day last week and named all the women who have been killed in Britain in the past year where a man has been charged or convicted, it took her over four minutes. There were 118 women, and there will have been more since.

In the same time frame, there has been precisely one – ONE – statue "killed", which feels incredible given the absolute bedwetting about it all for months now. Four people in Bristol have already appeared in court charged with causing criminal damage to the long-contentious monument to slaver Edward Colston (1636-1721), and will face trial in December. But to repeat: one statue. Face it, if that's the casualty count in the so-called "woke war on statues", all we've learned is that snowflakes are utterly useless at war. (Except in Russia, admittedly. As one of the tsars once remarked: "January and February are my best generals.")

Anyway, those who appear to care more about statues than women are surely not the sort of company the government ought to keep. This is the domain of someone like Tommy Robinson, who along with the rest of the far right sees "defending statues" as his new hot-button issue, having exhausted the moneyspinning possibilities of pretending to give a shit about women and girls.

I say pretending, because when Tommy isn't trying to collapse grooming gang rape trials – which would clearly force victims through the anguish of a second trial and having to testify twice – he's got form for wholly inappropriate contact with them. "You're pretty fit for a Muslim," ran his opening gambit in one Twitter exchange a few years ago. "I'm 15," replied the girl, "and you got the cheek to call Muslims paedos." Robinson's reply: "Hows it feel to be nearly twice the age Aisha was when your prophet raped her …. Now stop flirting with me."

Robinson has now shifted this moral gaze to statues, with his clarion calls on the subject in recent months pulling in the donations, and encouraging troops of volunteers to "defend" statues they regard as under threat. Though like all superfans of Middlemarch, I very much enjoyed the comic spectacle of five

would-be hardnuts lined up in a defensive cluster around the statue of George Eliot in Nuneaton.

Naturally, it's not just Tommy Robinson stoking this culture war. The UK is unfortunately rich in the sort of narcissistic idiots who should serve as cautionary tales to the government to steer well clear of turning this into a bigger deal than they've already made it. Take Laurence Fox – please – whose big idea for his campaign to be London mayor is to erect "even MORE statues". The former actor is pledging that not a single statue would ever be pulled down on his watch, because "parents should be able to educate their children about those who came before, both good and bad".

If that's the case, where was Laurence in 2012, when a statue of Jimmy Savile was being removed from Glasgow's Scotstoun leisure centre? Sorry, I've just seen he was playing the future George VI in some mad historical drama directed by Madonna. But keeping that question rhetorical: where was Laurence when the Savile statue was removed from the leisure centre? Hang on: I can see he also banged out a few episodes of Lewis that year too.

But returning to the rhetorical: where was Lozza when Savile was toppled in a Glasgow leisure centre? By rights he should have been fighting "woke" Glaswegians in the foyer of Scotstoun, pointing out that Savile had been deeply woven into the fabric of a period of national life, and consequently covered by Laurence's decree that "parents should be able to educate their children about those who came before, both good and bad". As he keeps explaining, we must "celebrate our shared national history". Doesn't matter if that's slaving or paedoing – you HAVE to celebrate ALL history.

This level of dazzling absurdity is obvious to anyone who contemplates these issues for two minutes or more. It may be cheap for now, needlessly fanning the flames of culture wars instead of coming up with actual ideas to make people's lives better. But wow, do you pay the further you get down the line, where the government's preference for posturing over policy will turn out to have been the real insult to "British values".

- Marina Hyde is a Guardian columnist

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Opinion
Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva

‘Bolsonaro doesn’t know the Earth is round’: how Lula can win back Brazil

Andre Pagliarini

The mishandling of the pandemic has only strengthened the former president’s standing – and now he’s free to run again

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Lula da Silva receives a dose of coronavirus vaccine in Sao Bernardo do Campo last Saturday. Photograph: Reuters

On Wednesday 10 March, Brazil’s former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva gave a rousing comeback speech at the metalworkers’ union headquarters in São Bernardo do Campo, an industrial centre in the São Paulo metropolitan region from where Lula first emerged as a national figure in the 1970s. The day before, in a shocking turnaround that surprised even

those convinced of his innocence, a justice on the supreme court annulled the criminal convictions against Lula, rendering him eligible to run for a third term next year.

The ruling in Lula's favour would have been a major story even if his popularity had faded since leaving office in 2011. But recent polls show that he remains strikingly electable, ahead of the far-right incumbent, Jair Bolsonaro, who won the 2018 election. Other polls suggest a closer race, which is still notable given that Lula has not even started campaigning. Lula also led in the polls three years ago but was barred from running by an infamous judge who went on to join the Bolsonaro administration. For his part, Bolsonaro, a retired army captain who served without distinction in congress for 27 years, has presided over an unmitigated catastrophe. If Latin America's largest nation was once held up as a model for how to balance economic growth with dramatic poverty reduction, its current leadership seems perfectly content with being a global pariah (the foreign minister literally said as much last October).

From his handling of the environment and the pandemic, to cite a few prominent issues, Bolsonaro has shown himself immune to reason. This is why Lula seemed so intent on reasserting the primacy of facts in his nation's political discourse during his speech last week. "It is always important to reiterate whenever you can," he declared, "the planet is round … and Bolsonaro doesn't know it." He outlined all the steps he would have taken had he been in office when the pandemic struck, each measure more sensible than the last. Bolsonaro notably continues to downplay the virus even as international observers worry about Brazil becoming a hub for the dissemination of new variants.

Although it is unclear whether Lula will actually run again next year, the very fact that he can has shifted Brazil's political terrain. Both the current speaker of the house, elected to his influential position with Bolsonaro's support, and the previous one, a centre-right figure whose party has hinted it might endorse Bolsonaro in 2022, signalled an openness to Lula's rehabilitation. This is a stunning reversal from only three years ago when Brazilian society found itself in the grip of a reactionary groundswell that held progressives responsible for every social ill, real or imagined. The recognition Lula has received from the left and right in recent days can be

attributed to his ability to sell a conciliatory message, one rooted not in ideological confrontation but in a reclamation of the basic republican values that Bolsonaro nakedly disdains.

A glaring obstacle remains in the way should Lula pursue the presidency again: international market forces. As reported in Bloomberg, Lula's renewed political eligibility "sent stocks and the currency cratering, deepening some of the worst performances this year". Elsewhere, investors told Reuters that "the prospect of Bolsonaro running against Lula pits two 'populist' candidates against each other, hollowing out the center ground, which is more fertile for the economic reforms Brazil desperately needs". Amid the handwringing of observers most attuned to the narrow wishes of private investors, it is worth recalling the obvious differences between the incumbent and the would-be challenger who unsuccessfully ran for president three times before finally breaking through in 2002.

Under Lula's Workers' party, the Brazilian federal government implemented a flurry of innovative federal policies that transformed the lives of millions of Brazilians. Poverty plummeted, while the number of college graduates soared. Bolsonaro, for his part, whines about his inability to get anything done, pining for the days of military rule. He demonstrates a flippant attitude toward the wellbeing of anyone who is not a blood relative. That he won the presidency in 2018 is a testament not to the appeal of his agenda but to the erosion of basic civility in Brazil. This is the comparison to keep in mind as headlines appear in the months to come – and surely they will – alerting investors to the purportedly worrisome economic agenda of Lula and his party, the same "frightful bunch" who once lifted 28 million people out of poverty.

There have been also been some grumbles from retired military figures about the impropriety of Lula being eligible to stand for office. To his great credit, however, vice-president Hamilton Mourão, a retired general, threw cold water on any talk of conspiracy, saying people have every right to vote for the former president. It remains highly unlikely that a tragic history of military intervention will repeat itself. Lula's return to the scene has also thrown the centre-right into disarray. For example, João Doria, a former businessman who rode Bolsonaro's coat tails to the São Paulo governor's mansion in 2018, announced he may not pursue the presidency after all,

recognising the danger of splitting the rightwing vote. Doria's move is a tacit admission of the former president's ability to appeal to the broad centre of Brazilian politics.

As in 2002, when Lula promised a plausible social democratic alternative to the deprivations of neoliberalism, his timing might again prove impeccable. There is a feedback loop in his favour – poll numbers indicate that Lula does best against Bolsonaro among opposition figures, thus strengthening his hand as leader of the opposition, and leading to higher poll numbers as other anti-Bolsonaro voters flock to his side. Sensing this momentum, even centre-right figures have noted Lula's ability to build bridges, a dig at Bolsonaro's inability to do so. Perhaps it is a sign that the establishment that once bet on Bolsonaro to keep Lula's Workers' party at bay in 2018 is coming, in fits and starts, to the conclusion that he is no longer worth bringing the country to the brink of collapse.

- Andre Pagliarini is a lecturer of history and Latin American studies at Dartmouth College

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Opinion
Joe Biden

Maybe I was wrong about Joe Biden – is he actually the progressive president I was waiting for?

Arwa Mahdawi

I was a Bernie fan, but Biden's policies have impressed me. Still, I'm not hailing him as a 'transformational' leader just yet

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Joe Biden … a big shift in the right direction. Photograph: Saul Loeb/AFP/Getty Images

OK, fine, I was wrong. But, in this case, I'm very happy to be wrong: it seems that Joe Biden may be shaping up to be a progressive president after all. I supported Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primaries, but I can now see that Biden was the better choice.

When Biden announced he was running for president, I was dismayed. I thought he was Hillary Clinton 2.0 and we were going to see a repeat of 2016. (And I maintain that, had it not been for the pandemic, which changed everything, then it probably would have been.) Then, when Trump lost, I was relieved but not exactly thrilled by the prospect of a Biden presidency. He largely campaigned on a platform of returning the US to "business as usual" – but business as usual just wasn't working for most people.

Instead of simply turning back the clock four years, however, Biden has been pushing forward undeniably progressive policies. The $1.9tn pandemic relief bill that just passed is expected to reduce US poverty in 2021 by more than a third. And many of its provisions won't be temporary: the Biden administration has indicated that it will aim to make permanent the increase in child credits contained in the bill, which could cut child poverty in half.

How is all this going to be paid for? Partly by – get this – taxing the rich. Biden's next big move may be the first major federal tax hike since 1993. The White House is expected to propose raising the corporate tax rate, increasing capital gains tax for people earning more than $1m annually, and raising income tax for those earning more than $400,000. Whether all this will get passed by the Senate is yet to be seen, of course, but it's a big shift in the right direction.

I don't want to go overboard here. Biden is far from perfect. It only took him a month, for example, to start doing what American presidents love doing best: bombing the Middle East. And a number of things he is being effusively praised for also don't really stand up to scrutiny. Biden's executive order pausing new oil and gas drilling on federal land, for example, is riddled with loopholes; one industry analyst told the Financial Times it presented a "best-case scenario for the oil industry under a Biden administration". Indeed, Biden issued at least 31 new drilling permits in his first few days of office.

Nevertheless, he is advancing a far more progressive agenda than I expected. And, while I was rooting for Sanders to be president, I think Sanders would have got a lot more pushback than Biden from Republicans on the same policies. Sanders is a brilliant agitator: he has helped to bring into the mainstream a lot of progressive thinking in the US. In the end, though, I think he is probably more effective at putting pressure on Biden to move to the left than he would have been as the president.

In a recent New York Times column, David Brooks called Biden a "transformational" president. That is a ridiculously premature assessment: we are only a couple of months into his presidency. Plus, Biden is not going to change anything if Republicans block his most ambitious policies. For Biden to really be effective, he needs to end the filibuster – a tactic that has significantly increased in recent years, in which you debate a bill endlessly in order to block or delay it. Biden doesn't seem to want to do this – which is frustrating because he does have the potential to be transformational. Time and time again, it seems establishment Democrats like talking about change a lot more than they actually like making it happen. Still, I've been proved wrong about Biden once. I hope he proves me wrong again.

- Arwa Mahdawi is a Guardian columnist

Opinion
Technology

Ending over mending: planned obsolescence is killing the planet

Jeff Sparrow

As Australia considers the right to repair, it’s worth thinking about how the items we use daily became so disposable

‘Obviously, we are not going to end global warming just by repairing our iPhones. Yet if we can’t even do that, what chance do we have?’ Photograph: Chukrut Budrul/SOPA Images/REX/Shutterstock

In his novel Brave New World, Aldous Huxley writes of a society in which recorded voices subliminally prepare babies for their future role as consumers.

“I do love flying, I do love having new clothes,” they whisper. “But old clothes are beastly. We always throw away old clothes. Ending is better than mending. Ending is better than mending.”

Huxley depicts a dystopia. But the slogans he describes might equally apply to common products today.

“Before Apple, everything was interchangeable. Sure, every phone had its own special part, like different cars. But now, each year, Apple is changing its design on purpose to make it harder for us to fix them.”

That’s Nicholas Muradian from the repair company Phone Spot, talking about the serialisation of components for the new iPhone 12.

The latest iteration of Apple’s flagship product can’t be repaired – or, at least, not without using the company’s expensive proprietary service.

That's not uncommon. Some manufacturers now build with special screws or glue parts together, specifically to prevent home maintenance. Others simply don't provide the basic components that would give their products a longer life.

As the Australian Productivity Commission takes submissions into its Right to Repair inquiry, it's worth thinking about how the items we use daily became so disposable.

When the second world war ended, the tremendous productivity of the wartime American economy suddenly posed a problem, with manufacturers desperately requiring new markets to keep their assembly lines humming.

Disposability was one of the solutions adopted, as the industrial designer Brooks Stevens explained.

"Our whole economy is based on planned obsolescence," he said, "and everybody who can read without moving his lips should know it by now. We make good products, we induce people to buy them, and next year we deliberately introduce something that will make those products old fashioned, out of date, obsolete. We do that for the soundest reason: to make money."

Consumers in America and throughout the world were encouraged to become dissatisfied with perfectly serviceable items, so that instead of making one-off purchases they updated seasonally.

That psychological campaign was reinforced by mechanisms that made the continued use of household items difficult. As one designer exulted the "planned existence spans of products" was "the greatest economic boost to the American economy since the origination of time payments."

Environmentalists now refer to the late 1940s as the "Great Acceleration" – the period in which humanity's impact on the planet increased exponentially. If you're 80 years old or more, something like 90% of carbon emissions ever generated by humans can be dated to your lifetime, a consequence of the deliberately wasteful economy unleashed during the post-war economic boom.

The lack of repairability does not merely exemplify the problem with how we consume. It's also symptomatic of the way we now produce.

Until a few hundred years ago, people made or did things because those things were immediately useful to them or someone they knew.

Today, however, we live on a system dependent on commodity exchange. Capitalists don't make items because they're needed. They make them because they can be sold – which isn't the same at all. An item of plastic tack counts as a sale, just as valuable as a vial of Covid vaccine.

The relationship between human labour and its consequences become obscured by a process focused on the abstractions of profit. Climate change thus manifests as something entirely out of our control, rather than the result of particular choices made by particular people.

If we want to reverse the ecological catastrophe engulfing our planet, we must refocus attention on what is produced and how.

By tinkering in their garages, the hobbyists who take apart electronic devices exert a skerrick of agency over the gadgets churned out by multinationals.

And that's all to the good.

In an increasingly fragile world, we need more — much more — control over production. We need conscious choices which resources we use and which we don't, instead of letting giant corporations do whatever makes them the most money.

Obviously, we are not going to end global warming just by repairing our iPhones.

Yet if we can't even do that, what chance do we have?

Last year tied with 2016 as the warmest ever recorded. In the era of catastrophic climate change, it's very clear where ending over mending leads.

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Nils Pratley on finance
NatWest Group

The FCA's criminal prosecution of NatWest could cause real damage

Nils Pratley

Civil cases lost by other banks only led to financial penalties, but the verdict here may hit its reputation

Tue 16 Mar 2021 15.36 EDT First published on Tue 16 Mar 2021 15.34 EDT

NatWest faces charges under the 2007 money laundering act. Photograph: May James/SOPA Images/Rex/Shutterstock

NatWest had “resolved all its major legacy issues”, declared Sir Howard Davies, the chairman, 18 months ago, speaking far too soon. Here comes another potential nasty one. The Financial Conduct Authority is bringing criminal charges under the 2007 money laundering act, alleging the bank’s systems and controls “failed to adequately monitor and scrutinise” the deposit of £264m in cash in one corporate customer’s account between 2011 and 2016.

The City, in its normal breezy way, took the relaxed view that even if convicted, any hit to NatWest would be bearable. The bank’s shares fell only 1.5%. Maybe investors were thinking of the £163m penalty on Deutsche Bank in 2017, or the £102m on Standard Chartered in 2019, in civil cases brought by the FCA.

The point about a criminal case, however, is that it is different – or meant to be. If there is a conviction, the fine can be unlimited and, as importantly, the reputational impact on the bank is meant to sting. The latter factor is why HSBC was so anxious to secure a deferred prosecution agreement from the US Department of Justice in 2012, even as it agreed a thumping penalty of $1.9bn for money-laundering and sanctions-busting offences.

NatWest doesn't have the same international presence as HSBC, and the Treasury's 62% stake may serve as a useful real-world deterrent against a truly serious outcome. But the FCA clearly believes it is in the public interest to bring criminal charges for the first time under the 2007 legislation, which makes the consequences of a guilty verdict impossible to predict.

If the Treasury was thinking of selling a few more shares in NatWest, it should probably shelve the idea for the time being. The bank is back in the familiar world of limbo land.

Give ordinary shareholders a hi-tech voice

Here's a challenge for those financial technology, or fintech, companies that keep promising to rewire the financial system: design some wizardry to enable ordinary savers to express a view on how the shares in their pension pots should be voted at companies' annual meetings.

The idea comes from Charlotte Black, a non-executive director at investment trust Aberdeen Standard Asia Focus, and can be found in a collection of essays on "responsible capitalism" published by the Social Market Foundation thinktank on Tuesday.

Votes that actually count at annual meetings might be impossible, concedes Black, since custodial arrangements are cheap and efficient. But how about smartphone tech that would allow the saver to say whether she or he backs a resolution on, say, boardroom pay or climate? The fund management house would get a tally of views ahead of the company's meeting. If it opts to vote against the majority, it would have to explain why.

The idea isn't perfect but it might help to shorten "the long complex supply chain between savers and their underlying shareholdings", as Black puts it. That would be a useful service. If you really want to rein in boardroom pay, for example, ask the ultimate owners of the assets, as opposed to the people managing the assets, what they think.

AstraZeneca deserves a fair profit from the pandemic

Virtue has its reward, after all. AstraZeneca's vaccine is still getting bashed in various EU capitals (although not, note, by the European Medicines Agency) but the US seems keen on the company's separate Covid-19 antibody treatment. US authorities have submitted an order for extra doses, taking the value of agreements to $726m.

The antibody treatment is designed for people who can't take the vaccine or already have the Covid virus. The other difference is that AstraZeneca is allowed to make a profit from the antibody product. Given the political hassles the company has encountered with a vaccine that it is supplying at cost during the pandemic, that only seems fair.

2021.03.17 - Around the world

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Germany

Berlin Volksbühne theatre director resigns over harassment claims

Klaus Dörr steps down with immediate effect after accusations including humiliating older actors

Kate Connolly in Berlin

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The Volksbühne was once the main theatre in east Berlin but has received greater recognition since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Photograph: ViewApart/Getty Images

The director of Berlin's Volksbühne theatre has resigned after allegations of sexual harassment and the humiliating treatment of older female actors.

The theatre said that Klaus Dörr would give up his post with immediate effect, after the intervention of Berlin's culture senator, Klaus Lederer,

whose office also confirmed the decision.

Dörr, who took over as interim director at the theatre in April 2018, said he claimed "total responsibility" for the allegations.

"I take full responsibility as the artistic director of the Volksbühne, for the allegations which have been made against me," he said in a statement. "I deeply regret if I have hurt employees with my behaviour, words or gaze," he added.

Dörr was accused by 10 women who worked at the theatre – which translates as 'stage of the people' – of inappropriate behaviour towards them, including staring at them in an improper way, making sexist remarks and sending unsuitable text messages to them. The TAZ, a left-wing Berlin daily first reported just days ago that Dörr had been under investigation over the claims by Berlin's culture ministry, which has overall control of the theatre, since January.

The women accusing him secured support for their claims in a petition signed by mostly female directors, playwrights, authors and actors, calling for Dörr's resignation or sacking and urging the cultural ministry to take the claims seriously.

The scandal is the latest in a string of negative publicity incidents at the playhouse, once the main stage in the capital of the communist-led German Democratic Republic, which gained wider recognition as one of the most important avant garde stages in Europe following the fall of the Berlin Wall.

In 2018, its previous director, the Belgian Chris Dercon, formerly head of the Tate Modern in London, was appointed to the post by the cultural senator, following the effective ousting of the theatre's longstanding and renegade head, Frank Castorf, who had been in post for 25 years.

But employees reacted angrily at what they saw as a political and commercial appointment and protests included an occupation of the theatre, and threats to Dercon, including placing faeces at his office door.

Dörr was supposed to bring some calm to the theatre as a caretaker director. René Pollesch a respected and acclaimed German playwright and director, was due to take over this summer.

The resignation of Dörr comes at a time when Germany appears to be in the midst of its own belated #MeToo reckoning. Almost three and a half years since its birth, the social movement has led to prominent resignations and prosecutions around the world – most notably that of the US film producer Harvey Weinstein – but had so far appeared to have had relatively little impact in Germany.

Earlier this month it was announced that the TV and film director Dieter Wedel had been indicted, three years into an investigation by prosecutors over claims he raped an actress. Wedel denies the charges. Other actors have also come forward to allege that he sexually harassed them, using the #MeToo hashtag, in what had been Germany's most prominent case in the debate to date.

Last weekend Julian Reichelt, the editor in chief of Bild, Germany's largest newspaper, took a leave of absence following accusations by women who worked at the paper of sexual misconduct, which were made public by the magazine Der Spiegel. Reichelt denies the claims.

The Volksbühne said in a statement on a social media account that the women behind the accusations towards Dörr had the whole ensemble's "unreserved solidarity". It added: "Our industry suffers under out of date power structures, a discourse which must end with Klaus Dörr's resignation".

Gig economy

Courts close in on gig economy firms globally as workers seek rights

Companies such as Uber and Deliveroo have lost a string of cases in at least 40 legal challenges

Drivers and rider across the world are succeeding in cases brought against employers. Photograph: Getty Images

Gig economy companies, including Uber and Deliveroo, have faced at least 40 major legal challenges around the world as delivery drivers and riders try to improve their rights.

The analysis of 39 employment cases, and seven linked cases on matters such as competition law, covers legal action in 20 countries including Australia, Chile, Brazil, South Korea, Canada and across Europe.

The cases have been brought by gig economy workers seeking access to basic rights, such as minimum wages and sick pay.

Put together by the International Lawyers Assisting Workers Network of more than 600 lawyers from at least 70 countries, the report highlights a string of court rulings in favour of drivers including in Italy, where authorities have fined Uber Eats, Glovo, Just Eat, and Deliveroo €733m (£628m) for misclassifying 60,000 couriers. That case is being appealed against.

A court in Spain ruled last year that drivers for food delivery firm Glovo were employees and the government in Madrid has since announced legislation confirming delivery riders' status as salaried staff. In South Korea, a driver working via the Tada van hailing app was also ruled to be an employee.

Last month, the UK supreme court dismissed Uber's appeal against a landmark employment tribunal ruling that its drivers should be classed as workers with access to the minimum wage and paid holidays.

On Tuesday night, Uber announced it will guarantee its 70,000 UK drivers a minimum hourly wage, holiday pay and pensions, in a dramatic u-turn which could put pressure on other gig economy firms to change tack.

Jeff Vogt, at the Washington DC based Solidarity Center workers rights group, said there was a clear trend towards recognising improved rights and employment status for those working for gig economy companies dealing with food delivery and taxi hire. "The courts are closing in on them," he said.

However, the report also warns that not all claims are successful and states must act to enforce the regulations as gig economy firms use their considerable resources to defend their practices.

Tactics include contracts with mandatory arbitration clauses, which fend off legal action by forcing those with a grievance to pay costly administration and filing fees in the preliminary stages. This has proved a particular problem in the US.

The report also warns that after losing cases in jurisdictions with "weak or non-existent enforcement regimes", companies have forced drivers to sign

new contracts. The gig economy companies then claim that the court findings relate only to the old contracts. This has happened in the UK, when drivers for delivery firm City Sprint went back to court over new contracts after winning an initial action.

“These companies have gone to great lengths to insulate themselves from responsibility and have put an extraordinary burden on workers to claim their basic rights at work. Governments must step in now and enact legislation that protects the rights of all workers providing labour to a digital platform company,” Vogt said.

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In California taxi hailing firms Uber and Lyft spent more than $200m (£144m) on a referendum campaign to exempt their businesses from the newly introduced AB5 law which would categorise their drivers as employees. The proposition 22 measure won the vote in November last year.

Nigel Mackay, a lawyer at Leigh Day which is representing thousands of Uber drivers who wish to claim holiday pay, said: “In Europe it does seem the direction of travel is towards more rights for those who work in the gig economy.”

However, he added that legal success was only part of the solution: “There’s a problem in the system at the moment that the only way to enforce the rules is to bring claims. It isn’t right that low paid workers have to bring claims about being low paid.”

Ebola

Man who survived Ebola five years ago may be source of Guinea outbreak

Finding raises questions about virus's ability to lurk long term in outwardly healthy bodies

The 2013-2016 Ebola outbreak in west Africa killed 11,000 people. Photograph: Ahmed Jallanzo/EPA

An Ebola survivor is likely to have triggered the current outbreak in Guinea, scientists have said, in a shock discovery that means the virus may remain dormant for five years.

The finding, which comes after 29 cases and 13 deaths, raises fresh questions about the ability of Ebola to lurk in the body long term even while the survivor remains outwardly healthy.

"This is pretty shocking," virologist Angela Rasmussen of Georgetown University told Science magazine. "Ebolaviruses aren't herpesviruses

(which are known to cause long-lasting infections) and generally RNA viruses don't just hang around not replicating at all."

Up to now the longest the virus has remained dormant in the body and subsequently cause a new infection was 500 days, said Miles Carroll, a virologist and professor at Oxford University who conducted the world's largest study of Ebola survivors, which last year concluded immunity from the virus could last many years after infection.

Three independent groups of scientists studying samples from four people infected in Guinea concluded that the genetic makeup is hardly any different to the strain seen in the 2013-2016 outbreak in west Africa that killed 11,000 people.

Scientists say the similarity found in the genome analysis shows the virus is not likely to have passed from animals to humans but is likely to have been transmitted through virus in semen.

After the 2013-2016 outbreak, scientists discovered the virus could remain for extended periods of time in certain "immune privileged" sites in the body including the spinal cord, the brain, the eyes, placenta and the testes.

Sexual transmission was seen as the cause of occasional recurrence of the virus long after the World Health Organization had declared west Africa Ebola free.

"To have a new outbreak start from latent infection five years after the end of an epidemic is scary and new," Eric Delaporte, an infectious disease physician at the University of Montpellier, told Science magazine.

Scientists believe the index case was a female healthcare worker from a town in the forested region of the Nzérékoré prefect.

She died from a fever but following unsafe practices at her funeral the infection was transmitted to family members and spread to other parts of the country, with an international response swinging into action almost immediately.

MinIONs, mobile genetic sequencing devices, were quickly dispatched from Oxford Nanopore Technologies and a small diagnostics team travelled, from the Bernhard Nocht Institute in Germany, to Guinea to help sequence the virus sampled from infected individuals and compare them to those in the 2013-2016 outbreak.

“This vital sequence data ensured the most effective use of the public health response which will guide the WHO vaccination strategy and local health advice,” said Carroll.

Scientists were then able to determine that the virus was the Makona variant (Zaire ebolavirus) that was responsible for the 2013-2016 outbreak.

The discovery has profound implications for research into Ebola and public health messaging around safe sex practices for survivors, says scientists.

The initial data involved researchers from the Guinea health ministry, Senegal’s Pasteur Institute, the University of Edinburgh, the University of Nebraska Medical Center and the company PraesensBio, and was first published on the virological.org website.

US elections 2020

Russia targeted Trump allies to hurt Biden in 2020 election, US officials say

Intelligence report underscored allegations that Trump allies played into Moscow's hands by amplifying claims against Biden

- US politics – live updates

Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin hold a joint press conference in Helsinki, Finland, on 16 July 2018. Photograph: Grigory Dukor/Reuters

Russia tried to influence the 2020 US presidential election by proliferating "misleading or unsubstantiated allegations" largely against Joe Biden and through allies of Donald Trump, US intelligence officials said on Tuesday.

The assessment was contained in a 15-page report published by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. It underscored allegations that Trump's

allies played into Moscow's hands by amplifying claims against Biden by Ukrainian figures with links to Russia.

In a statement, the Democratic House intelligence chair, Adam Schiff, said: "Through proxies, Russia ran a successful intelligence operation that penetrated [Trump's] inner circle.

"Individuals close to the former president were targeted by agents of Russian intelligence including Andriy Derkach and Konstantin Kilimnik, who laundered misinformation into our political system with the intent of denigrating now President Biden, damaging his candidacy."

Kilimnik has widely reported ties to Paul Manafort, Trump's campaign chairman in 2016 who was jailed under the investigation led by special counsel Robert Mueller but pardoned by Trump shortly before the end of his term.

Derkach worked closely with Rudy Giuliani, the former New York mayor who has acted as Trump's personal attorney, in attempts to uncover political dirt on Biden and his family which were at the heart of Trump's first impeachment.

Biden beat Trump by 306-232 in the electoral college and won the popular vote by more than 7m. The electoral college result was the same as that by which Trump beat Hillary Clinton in 2016, despite losing the popular vote by nearly 3m ballots. US intelligence agrees that election was subject to concerted Russian attempts to tip the scales for Trump. Russia – and Trump – oppose and deny such conclusions.

The intelligence report issued on Monday said Russian hackers did not make persistent efforts to break into election infrastructure, unlike past elections.

The report found attempts to sway voters against Trump, including a "multi-pronged covert influence campaign" by Iran intended to undercut support for the former president.

But it also punctured a counter-narrative pushed by Trump's allies that China interfered on Biden's behalf, concluding that Beijing "did not deploy

interference efforts".

"China sought stability in its relationship with the United States and did not view either election outcome as being advantageous enough for China to risk blowback if caught," the report said.

US officials said they also saw efforts by Cuba, Venezuela and the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah to influence the election, although "in general, we assess that they were smaller in scale than those conducted by Russia and Iran".

Schiff said: "No matter which nation seeks to influence our political system and who stands to benefit, both parties must speak with one voice and disavow all interference in our elections. We must guard against and seek to deter all attempts at foreign interference and ensure that American voters decide American elections."

Mark Warner, the Democratic chair of the Senate intelligence committee, said: "The intelligence community has gotten much better at detecting these efforts, and we have built better defences against election interference.

"But the problem of foreign actors trying to influence the American electorate is not going away, and given the current partisan divides in this country may find fertile ground, in which to grow in the future."

Idaho

Crews rescue two people from truck dangling over Idaho bridge

Safety chains attaching pickup truck to camper trailer prevented it from falling

Associated Press

Tue 16 Mar 2021 21.20 EDT Last modified on Tue 16 Mar 2021 23.11 EDT

Authorities say a set of camper trailer safety chains and quick, careful work by emergency crews saved two people after their pickup truck plunged off a bridge, leaving them dangling above a deep gorge in southern Idaho.

Idaho state police responded to the accident at about 2.45pm on Monday, said Lynn Hightower, a police spokesperson. A trooper found a man and a woman inside the pickup truck that was dangling, nose-down, off the side of the bridge spanning the Malad Gorge.

The gorge is narrow but is roughly 100ft (30.48m) deep below the bridge, roughly the height of a 10-story building. The gorge reaches about 250ft (76.20m) deep at its deepest point.

The only thing keeping the 2004 Ford F-350 pickup from falling was the set of “safety chains” attaching the 30ft camper trailer, which remained on the bridge, to the pickup. A state trooper and local sheriff’s deputy first used an additional set of chains from a nearby semi truck to help support the dangling pickup truck, holding it in place until additional rescuers with cranes, rope rescue gear and other equipment could arrive.

Emergency crews were then able to rappel down to the hanging truck and attach a harness to each occupant, allowing them to be safely carried back to the bridge. Both were taken to hospitals, and neither appeared to have life-

threatening injuries, Hightower said. Two small dogs inside the pickup were also safely rescued and taken to the home of a nearby family member.

Workers were still attempting to pull the pickup from the precipice on Monday evening.

“It was terrifying,” Hightower said. “It was definitely a heroic rescue from everybody that was out there, and thankfully, they’re all fine.”

Witnesses said the truck appeared to lose control before the crash, first swerving to hit the right shoulder barrier before sliding over the left-side guardrail. The truck then tipped over the bridge, with the camper blocking both lanes of the bridge.

The case remains under investigation, Hightower said. Agencies from Gooding, Jerome and Twin Falls responded to the incident, along with regional sheriff’s offices and fire department and paramedic services.

“A rescue like this takes a lot of quick thinking and action but this is what they train for,” she said. “That training just paid off today, and two people are alive because of the hours and hours of training that these emergency responders do.”

Tasmania

Stoked! Surfboard lost in Tasmania turns up 2,700km away in Queensland

Board belonging to big wave surfer Danny Griffiths believed to have made the journey via New Zealand

Danny Griffiths catches a wave at Pedra Branca in Tasmania in 2017 just before he lost his surfboard, and the surfboard, covered in barnacles, found in 2021 by two brothers near Townsville in north Queensland, more than 2,700km away. Composite: Andrew Chisholm/Beau and Troy Breed

An Australian surfer has found a surfboard he lost four years ago after it floated at sea for thousands of kilometres, from the bottom of Australia to the top – potentially via New Zealand.

Danny Griffiths, a big wave surfer, lost his favourite board after he crashed off a wave at the very southern tip of Tasmania. It was found, covered in barnacles, by two brothers near Townsville in north Queensland, more than 2,700km away.

Griffiths said the brothers had held on to the board for years, until this year, when their parents took a trip to Tasmania and told local residents about the rare find, who realised that it belonged to him.

“Their parents were caravanning around Tasmania and got talking to a couple of local surfers on the west coast about their sons finding a surfboard while they were fishing,” he told Guardian Australia. “The local surfers – as Tasmania is a pretty small state – they all know each other. It only took a few surfers to figure out it was mine, and sent me some photos to piece it all together.”

Griffiths said he recognised the board because it was a distinctive bright green, and made by a small Tasmanian manufacturer who specialised in big wave boards. The Queensland brothers are now preparing the board to be mailed back to him.

“Even with the barnacles on it, I knew straight away,” he said. “All my big wave tow boards are straight fluoro green, and there are not that many big wave surfers around Australia. Everyone puts their straps on different. And the logo on it – they are a pretty small-known surfboard shaper here in Tasmania.

“I think the brothers hanged it on their wall for the past two years, as a trophy. They don’t surf. It’s not the type of surfboard that a general surfer can use. It’s built for one thing and one thing only, that’s the biggest swells possible.”

Edward Doddridge, an oceanoagrapher from the Institute for Marine and Antarctic Studies, told ABC Tasmania, where the story first appeared, that the board could not have travelled up the Australian east coast but rather “must have gone the long way round” via New Zealand.

“The big current that comes along the east Australian coast goes north to south, which means this board must have come some other way,” he told the ABC. “It must have gone east from Tasmania and then north up through the middle of the Pacific Ocean and then come back in towards the Australian coast.

“[New Zealand] seems like the only possible way for it to get from Tasmania to Queensland. It’s very unlikely to have gone straight up the east coast of Australia.”

Griffiths said he had lost the board in 2017 when he was surfing huge swells at Pedra Branca, a remote island 27km south of Tasmania’s coast.

“The right weather conditions to surf there, it only comes every two or three years,” he said. “You’re on a boat on a long time before you even get out there.

“The whole day was going pretty well, we got some pretty big waves. On my last wave, I fell off and had a wipeout, when I come up and was saved by the jetski, I couldn’t see it again. We lost it. We all talked about it, wondered where it is, wondered what could have happened.”

> They said it’s still rock solid, no holes or anything
>
> *Danny Griffiths*

Griffiths said he had been missing the board for years, and no new ones could compare.

“Two weeks ago we were back down there for the first time in nearly two years,” he said. “We were down there all talking about it, what happened to the surfboard. I got a few waves on my new one, but I was saying, ‘Nah, I don’t really like it. The old one used to go so much better.’”

He said the big wave board’s construction had probably helped it survive the journey north.

“They are built very strong and very heavy, up to 15 to 20kg just for one, like a bag of cement. The amount of fibreglass on them means they are really, really strong. It’s pretty much built like a rocket, to be able to punch through bumpy water and withstand high speeds. Possibly that’s why it’s still in one piece.”

Experts had told him the barnacles could have given a clue as to where the board had been, Griffiths said, but the brothers in Queensland had washed them all off.

“They were saying they could have traced it. What barnacles grew on it in different parts of the ocean. [But] they had taken it all off, pressure cleaned it.

“They said it’s still rock solid, no holes or anything – hopefully it’s still useable. The guys are, as we are speaking, bubble wrapping it and getting it ready to be sent. Hopefully in a week’s time it should be here.”

Michelle Obama

Michelle Obama voices hope for lessons learned over Sussex racism claims

Former first lady's comments seen as encouragement for royal family 'to act' after Oprah Winfrey interview with Harry and Meghan

Matthew Weaver

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Michelle Obama: 'Race isn't a new construct in this world for people of colour, and so it wasn't a complete surprise to hear [Meghan's] feelings and to hear them articulated.' Photograph: Yen Duong/Reuters

Michelle Obama says she hopes the royal family will learn from the allegations of racism made by the Duke and Duchess of Sussex in last week's TV interview with Oprah Winfrey.

The former first lady said she was not surprised by the couple's recollections about remarks made by an unnamed member of the royal family about the possible colour of her unborn son's skin.

Speaking to NBC News, Obama said she hoped the couple could reconcile their differences with the royal family, amid reports that the rift was continuing.

Obama added: "This, first and foremost, is a family. I pray for forgiveness for them so that they can use this as teachable moment for us all. Race isn't a new construct in this world for people of colour, and so it wasn't a complete surprise to hear her feelings and to hear them articulated."

Her plea to make this a "teachable moment" will be seen as urging the royal family to do more than deal with the issue privately as it had pledged.

Last week in its only comments on the interview so far, Buckingham Palace said: "The issue raised, particularly that of race, are concerning." The 61-word statement said: "Whilst some recollections may vary they are taken very seriously and will be addressed by the family privately."

Last Thursday, Prince William told reporters: "We're very much not a racist family."

At that stage he said he had not spoken to his brother, Prince Harry, since the interview. But according to a US-based friend of the Sussexes, Harry has now spoken to William and his father, Prince Charles.

Gayle King, the co-host of CBS This Morning, said she had spoken to Harry and Meghan at the weekend and was told of Harry's conversation with his brother and father.

"It's true, Harry has talked to his brother and he has talked to his father too, and the word I was given was that those conversations were not productive, but they are glad that they have at least started a conversation," she said.

Kensington Palace, Prince William's official residence, has not commented on King's remarks.

The royal family is still struggling to cope with the fallout from an interview that has posed the biggest challenge to the monarchy since the death of Princess Diana.

The most shocking disclosure in the interview was Meghan's account of how "concerns" were raised from someone in the royal household about how dark their baby son Archie's skin would be.

Neither Meghan nor Harry would say who made the remarks saying to do so would be "very damaging". Winfrey later clarified it was neither the Queen nor the Duke of Edinburgh.

Racism played a "large part" in why the couple left Britain, Harry said.

Plantwatch
Plants

Sapria: the stinking parasitic plant reveals another odd feature

Sapria himalayana has lost about 44% of genes normally found in flowering plants

Paul Simons

Wed 17 Mar 2021 02.00 EDT

Sapria himalayana is the first known case of a plant abandoning its chloroplast inheritance. Chloroplasts are the cell bodies that perform photosynthesis. Photograph: Alamy

Sapria is an extraordinary plant. It has no leaves, stem or root, can’t make food by photosynthesis, and exists almost its entire life as threads of cells sucking out all its nourishment from vines growing in the rainforests of

Borneo. The only time the parasite reveals itself in the open is when it bursts out as a huge flower the size of a dinner plate, coloured red with pale speckles, and stinking of rotting flesh. It's also a relative of the largest flower in the world, *Rafflesia arnoldii*, another parasitic plant.

Recently, another bizarre feature of Sapria has been revealed. The species *Sapria himalayana* has lost about 44% of the genes normally found in flowering plants, and has also totally scrapped all the genetic remnants of any chloroplasts, the cell bodies that perform photosynthesis, the first known case of a plant abandoning its chloroplast inheritance. Although other parasitic plants have junked many of their genes, it's nothing like as extreme as Sapria – the dodder parasite, for example, has only lost 16% of its genes. And to cap its extreme parasitic life, Sapria has also stolen more than 1% of its genes from its host vine.

Coronavirus

Chaos in Germany and Italy after suspension of Oxford vaccine

Decision has led to vaccination centres closing doors and appointments being cancelled

- Coronavirus – latest updates
- See all our coronavirus coverage

Kate Connolly in Berlin, Angela Giuffrida in Rome and Jon Henley in Paris

Tue 16 Mar 2021 10.08 EDT Last modified on Wed 17 Mar 2021 01.11 EDT

A deserted vaccination centre in Erfurt, Germany, after authorities suspended vaccinations with the AstraZeneca jab. Photograph: Martin Schutt/AP

There has been chaos and confusion in Germany and Italy after their decisions to suspend use of the Oxford/AstraZeneca Covid vaccine, with vaccination centres closing their doors and appointments being abruptly cancelled.

The countries are two of the biggest on a growing list of European nations that have in recent days ordered a pause in the distribution of the AstraZeneca vaccine.

The move came after seven reported cases in Germany of blood clots including deep vein thrombosis in people who had recently received the jab, three of which were fatal. In Italy eight people have died and four more have suffered "serious adverse events", according to Nicola Magrini, head of the Italian medicines agency Aifa.

Lithuania, Luxemburg, Denmark, Romania, Bulgaria, Norway, Ireland, the Netherlands, France and Sweden are among other countries to have taken similar steps.

Critics in Germany warned that the pause in the rollout of the vaccine could do lasting damage to the country's already sluggish inoculation campaign.

Vaccination centres across the country were forced to close their doors following the announcement by health minister, Jens Spahn, on Monday, after the federal medical regulatory body, the Paul Ehrlich Institute (PEI) recommended a suspension over reported cases of blood clots in recipients.

The move left many people with appointments stranded and some who had just been administered with the jab, reeling with shock. It also intensified a debate about the safety of the Oxford vaccine, which had already been viewed with mistrust after authorities decided weeks ago it could not be given to the over-65s, a move later reversed.

Approximately 1.6 million Germans have been given the AstraZeneca jab, about 17% of the total number of Covid-19 vaccines to have been administered in the country so far. With cases of the virus in Germany on the rise, and the faster spreading B117 (also known as the British or Kent) variant now making up around 60% of cases, there has been pressure to up

the speed of the vaccine campaign. So far 3.5% have received a full vaccination.

Graphic

In the capital Berlin, vaccination centres at the former airports Tegel and Tempelhof closed their doors and those queuing were sent home after doctors were told to stop administering the jab immediately on Monday afternoon. In the states of North Rhine-Westphalia and Hamburg, all appointments for those who should have been receiving the AstraZeneca vaccine had to be cancelled. People expecting to receive second doses have been advised to wait, while anyone who has received the jab has been instructed to seek medical help in case of ongoing side-effects, including headaches or blood spots (bleeding under the skin).

The education minister, Anja Karliczek, said the move had thrown into chaos the plan to vaccinate teachers and carers, which is seen as key to allowing kindergartens and schools – which began reopening last Monday – in particular, to stay open. The expectation that GPs would be able to start administering the vaccine in their practices from next month, seen as vital to speeding up the programme, is now also in doubt.

The government said a vaccine summit, due to take place on Wednesday would first await a decision by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) on Thursday, before it convened.

Resulting vaccine shortages make more likely the prospect that the Russian-made Sputnik V vaccine, whose makers have struck deals for it to be produced in Italy, Germany, France and Spain, will become a far more prominent part of the country's programme than previously thought, experts said. But that vaccine is still weeks if not months away from approval by EMA.

Klaus Cichutek, the head of the PEI, defended his institute's decision to pause distribution of the AstraZeneca vaccine. "I believe the citizens of this country will want to be able to rely on the fact that the vaccines which we offer, are safe and effective," he said, saying the institute had acted quickly

on the new data having previously said it had no evidence that it posed a risk of thrombosis.

But Karl Lauterbach, a qualified doctor and a health spokesman for the Social Democrats, called the vaccine pause a “mistake” that would threaten more lives than it might save. “We know that these complications are very serious, but we also know that they are extremely seldom and this needs to be weighed up. The damage that is done to the reputation of this vaccine will be irreparable … we are in the middle of a third wave of this pandemic, so to pause this vaccine will have serious consequences and it will be extremely hard to restore faith in it,” he said.

Some doctors warned that the psychosomatic effect on those who had already had the vaccine or were expecting to have it, could be considerable.

Similarly, in Italy there was also anger and confusion after thousands of appointments for the AstraZeneca jab were abruptly cancelled, further hampering the country’s vaccination programme amid the pandemic’s third wave.

The Italian medicines agency Aifa suspended the vaccine on Monday pending the ruling from the EMA on Thursday.

“I am perplexed and embittered,” Alessio D’Amato, the health councillor for the Lazio region, told Corriere della Sera, adding that he couldn’t understand on what grounds Aifa arrived at its decision. “The situation is dramatic … I’m concerned about the climate of mistrust and doubt, the suspicion and fear that will be generated in people regarding a vaccine on which Italy has focused a lot.”

More than a million people across the country have received the first AstraZeneca dose. There was chaos at various vaccine hubs after people found out about the suspension as they waited in line. “My worry is precious time being wasted,” Davide Rebegiani, a teacher who was waiting to receive the vaccine at a centre near Rome’s Fiumicino airport, told La Stampa. At the same time, many people had cancelled appointments in recent days over safety concerns.

Graphic

Italy registered 20,396 coronavirus infections on Tuesday and 502 deaths – the highest death rate since late January. Aifa's Nicola Magrini told La Repubblica that the decision was a "political one", while adding that the vaccine was "safe" and the benefit-to-risk ratio "widely positive".

The health minister, Roberto Speranza, said he hoped the EMA would give the green light for use of the vaccine to resume on Thursday.

Reaction in France to the government's decision to suspend the administration of the AstraZeneca vaccine, was more muted. Alain Fischer, the head of the French vaccination programme, said it was "reasonable" for national health agencies to be prudent faced with incidents that he described as "significant more by their atypical nature than by their number".

Le Monde said in an editorial that the success of a vaccination campaign was "as much about the effectiveness of the vaccine as about the confidence it inspires" and the second condition "has just been seriously shaken" in the case of the AstraZeneca jab.

At this stage "the causal link between the formation of blood clots in a few patients which can lead to serious complications and vaccination is only chronological", the paper said, but the few cases must be properly investigated.

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