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Coronavirus

NHS Covid app could be used to prove status and access venues in England

Measures being considered would see pubs and restaurants checking if customers have been vaccinated or recently tested

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Aubrey Allegretti and Jessica Elgot

Wed 24 Feb 2021 01.00 EST

Hospitality venues will be allowed to serve customers outdoors from 12 April at the earliest. Photograph: Giannis Alexopoulos/NurPhoto/Rex/Shutterstock

People could use a revamped NHS app to prove their Covid status on entering pubs or theatres in England under plans being considered by ministers, as one major care provider said staff have two months to get jabbed or lose their jobs.

Ministers are expected to give businesses in England the power to check Covid certification – whether people have been vaccinated or the result of recent tests. That will include small-scale venues like restaurants or bars.

However, the equalities watchdog and trade unions have said that any move that relies solely on vaccine certification could be unlawful and that passes must not be used to relax Covid safety measures in workplaces.

One method under consideration in a review being led by Michael Gove is to revise an NHS app, which could be used to prove vaccination status or the result of a recent test. It is unclear whether people could upload the results of self-administered lateral flow tests.

Boris Johnson said he understood "fervent libertarians" might object to a Covid certification system for England – a phrase that could raise eyebrows among some of his backbenchers. However, he said there was "a case for it" when people needed to prove their status.

Downing Street sources said business were already able to use their discretion on who they served, within discrimination law.

The review is intended to be concluded to allow introduction of the measures before the roadmap reaches its final phase – on 21 June – when the government hopes to lift all social restrictions, though advice on hand-washing, mask-wearing and social distancing could still be in place.

Ministers are also planning to set out parameters about how employers can operate with regard to vaccination and testing. Some employers, such as Pimlico Plumbers, have already said they will require staff to be vaccinated. There are concerns that people could feel they will lose access to services and the review will look at what protections can be put in place.

Dr Pete Calveley, chief executive of Barchester Healthcare, the second-biggest care home provider in the UK, said his 17,000 staff were told this week that if they choose not to have a vaccine despite being eligible, they will stop being offered shifts from the end of April.

Around 5% of workers across 240 care homes have refused a jab on non-medical grounds, so action had to be taken to protect residents – some of whom only want to be cared for by staff who have been inoculated, he said.

Replacement staff will be told to prove they have had a Covid vaccine by providing a document from the myGP app showing they received it on a particular date.

Dr Calveley said the vast majority of his staff support the policy and polling he commissioned from YouGov showed the same is true of public opinion.

Legal advice has also been taken by Barchester, he added, which said that there may be "an overarching consideration that there is a compelling reason for you to do this that actually overcomes the issue of being discriminatory".

Asked if the new measure could lead to staffing shortages, Calveley said: "It might do. It could be 10 to 12 staff in some homes, zero in many, and one to two in others."

The trade union Unison has said it could challenge employers who "strong-arm" employees into compliance. Its general secretary, Christina McAnea, said that "scaring or intimidating people into compliance will do more harm than good".

She added: "Employers can't be allowed to strong-arm staff into having the jab, and certificates shouldn't be used as a stick to threaten them.

"Doing so could have dire consequences for the care sector, which is already struggling to fill thousands of vacancies."

Any move to require Covid certification in order to enter smaller venues, rather than mass events, is likely to cause a backlash from Conservative MPs, though ministers believe that the option of having a negative test as an alternative will mollify backbenchers.

Sources have suggested ministers hope to avoid scenarios where vaccination is the only way to gain access to do something – and have stressed the importance of testing and vaccination being combined.

Scotland's first minister, Nicola Sturgeon, has gone further, saying that vaccine passports are "worth considering".

Sturgeon said, however, she would not support their use for access to public services. She added: "I don't close my mind to this, but I think, like everybody else, we want to think through this carefully."

A similar scheme is under way in Israel, which has begun lifting lockdown restrictions because of its advanced vaccination programme, opening places such as gyms, hotels and synagogues.

Those venues require a "green passport", a certificate on an app issued by the health ministry, valid for six months and available one week after the second dose of the vaccine.

Johnson confirmed that certification may not just be used for large-scale events, but smaller venues like pubs. "This is an area where we're looking at a novelty for our country. We haven't had stuff like this before," he said.

"We've never thought in terms of having something that you have to show to go to a pub or a theatre, so there are deep and complex issues that we need to explore. Ethical issues about what the role is for government in mandating people to have such things, or indeed banning people from doing such a thing."

One Conservative MP said there was "significant concern" on Tory WhatsApp groups about how the certification would operate – but said many would be won over if testing was allowed as proof of status as well as vaccination.

Another said: "I would never, ever support vaccine certificates to get into pubs. At that point, it's no longer a free choice. We can't be coercing people, regardless of our view. But test results I have no issues with at all – and I think that's where we'll end up."

But the Equality and Human Rights Commission said that vaccine certificates could lead to “unlawful discrimination”.

They added that while returning to normal life is “a priority for most of us”, the certificates should not be introduced because of the risk they will “disadvantage people who have not received the vaccine, unless they can be shown to be justified”.

The TUC’s general secretary, Frances O’Grady, said she wanted as many people to get vaccinated as possible but the government must consider the powers it would give to employers.

“Getting a vaccine, or being able to prove that you’ve had one, should not be a condition of employment. It may be discriminatory and open up employers to legal challenge,” she said. “And employers must not use vaccination or testing programmes as an excuse to slack on coronavirus safety at work.”

The GMB union’s Dan Shears said he was also concerned they would be used by employers to remove protective measures.

“Then there are obviously discriminatory aspects for those who cannot be vaccinated on health grounds or due to pregnancy, which could potentially breach both employment and equality law,” he said.

Gove is also to lead a second review into social distancing, which will examine home-working advice and whether restaurants and bars can be allowed to reach full capacity. But it will also examine some of the intricacies of the advice on human contact – including when it is safe to permit people to hug.

Guidance in the roadmap says the government will update its advice on social distancing between friends and family, including hugging by 17 May.

Schools

England's Covid catch-up plan for pupils: summer schools and tutoring

Critics say measures to close attainment gap including £400m extra funding do not go far enough

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Sally Weale Education correspondent

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A yawning educational divide has opened up between poor children and their more advantaged peers with schools closed due to coronavirus. Photograph: Daniel Leal-Olivas/AFP/Getty Images

Secondary schools in England are to be funded to run summer schools for pupils worst affected by the pandemic, the government has announced, as part of its latest education recovery plans to help children catch up on lost learning.

The new measures include £200m to expand the government's national tutoring programme, plus an additional £300m "recovery premium" which will go direct to schools to support the most disadvantaged children.

There was, however, no mention of more radical measures which have been mooted in recent weeks, including extending the school day or shortening the holidays to give pupils time to catch up.

Critics warned the government's latest package was nowhere near enough to address the yawning educational divide that has opened up between poor children and their more advantaged peers during the pandemic and called for a more ambitious recovery plan.

"While any additional support for schools is welcome, the government's package announced today is not enough to support pupils to catch up on their learning and to provide wellbeing activities for pupils of all ages," said Natalie Perera, chief executive of the Education Policy Institute (EPI).

The new recovery premium will provide an extra £6,000 for the average primary school and £22,000 for each secondary, "much too modest to make a serious difference", said Perera.

Paul Whiteman, general secretary of school leaders' union NAHT, added: "Summer schools will be of value for some pupils but it will be important not to overwhelm students. Recovery cannot happen in a single summer."

The government presented its plans as a new £700m recovery package, but £300m of that had already been announced by the prime minister last month. The £400m of new money takes the total catch-up fund to £1.7bn.

Of that, £200m will be invested in summer schools, which will be targeted initially at 11-year-olds moving up to secondary school next September. A

further £18m has been found to support language development in early years settings.

Unveiling the package, Boris Johnson said: "When schools reopen and face-to-face education resumes on 8 March, our next priority will be ensuring no child is left behind as a result of the learning they have lost over the past year.

"This extensive programme of catchup funding will equip teachers with the tools and resources they need to support their pupils, and give children the opportunities they deserve to learn and fulfil their potential."

Mary Bousted, joint general secretary of the National Education Union, said: "Some of this is recycled from previous commitments and much more will be needed to address the scale of the problem of the education divide between poor children and their more advantaged peers."

Geoff Barton, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, said he would have preferred the additional money to go directly to schools, colleges and early years providers.

"By allocating a large sum of money to the national tutoring programme and apparently earmarking another large sum of money specifically for summer schools, there is less available to schools and colleges to use for catchup support in general."

The government has appointed an education recovery commissioner, Sir Kevan Collins, to develop longer-term plans. He said: "We know that ensuring all children and young people can make up for lost learning will be a longer-term challenge, and the range of measures announced today are an important next step.

"But this is just the beginning and I'll be engaging with the sector, educational charities as well as families, to ensure this support is delivered in a way that works for both young people and the sector and to understand what more is needed to help recover students' lost learning over the course of this parliament."

Scotland

Nicola Sturgeon unveils plans for easing Scotland's Covid restrictions

First minister says lockdown will remain for at least six weeks, with gradual easing after 5 April

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Scotland's schools are expected to fully reopen in early April, with some household mixing allowed, after Nicola Sturgeon unveiled a partial route map to lifting the country's strict Covid controls.

In a statement to Holyrood, the first minister confirmed Scotland's lockdown would remain in place for at least six weeks, with the stay-at-home rule enforced until 5 April at the earliest.

She did not expect non-essential shops, or outdoor bars and restaurants, would be allowed to reopen until late April, the date at which the government expected to move to regional or local lockdown levels.

Sturgeon told MSPs the priority was to suppress the virus, with the goal of virtually eliminating it from the community, and that meant she would take a very precautionary approach to lifting the lockdown.

She said the vaccination programme in Scotland was "motoring", with nearly 1.5 million people having received their first dose, with all nine priority groups expected to be vaccinated by mid-April, a few weeks earlier than originally forecast.

Even so, until transmission rates were much lower and the vaccination programme completed, caution was needed. The new Kent variant was still at large and highly transmissible.

“It is by being cautious, careful and patient for the next period – while the vaccination programme progresses – that we will make that route as safe and sustainable as possible,” she said. “Taking the brakes off too quickly will allow the virus to get ahead of us again and put our progress out of lockdown into reverse.”

In contrast to Boris Johnson’s detailed route map published on Monday, which included target dates and covered all social and business sectors in England, Sturgeon offered few specific details about what else would reopen and when.

Ruth Davidson, the Scottish Tory leader in Holyrood, said that would disappoint many voters and businesses who had watched Sturgeon’s statement in the hope of getting greater certainty. There was no mention of sports venues, or weddings, or when social distancing rules would be eased.

“There is nothing on what would happen after 26 April,” Davidson added. “This isn’t a route map out of Covid; it’s a holding document for the next eight weeks.” Voters “were not expecting certainty but they were expecting the first minister to give them some form of hope”.

Business leaders urged Sturgeon to quickly offer more detail and longer-term targets with the owner of Glasgow and Aberdeen airports furious there was no clarity on air travel and holidays resuming. The Federation of Small Businesses said more than half of companies were worried they would not survive the next few months, and a third of owners worried about their mental health.

Sturgeon defended the strategy and said in the last week of April there would be a “significant” reopening of the economy, with hairdressers, non-essential retail, restaurants and gyms allowed to resume business.

From 15 March, all primary school children would be back in class, with senior secondary pupils allowed in part time. Non-contact group sports for children aged 12 to 17, and greater household mixing, allowing four people from two households, would also resume then. Schools would fully reopen from 5 April, as would limited communal worship.

Sturgeon said Johnson had warned his more detailed route map was conditional and open for revision, and refused to take up an invitation from Patrick Harvie, the Scottish Green co-leader, to attack the prime minister.

Even so, she said caution was a more prudent approach. “I want to give as much as possible today – while avoiding giving false assurance or picking arbitrary dates that have no grounding at this stage in any objective assessment,” she said.

Coronavirus

The forecasts that spooked Boris Johnson into slowing exit from lockdown

PM’s hands tied by gloomy prediction that rapid easing would lead to even fuller hospitals than in January

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Haroon Siddique

Wed 24 Feb 2021 01.00 EST Last modified on Wed 24 Feb 2021 01.02 EST

Boris Johnson ends his virtual press conference unveiling the roadmap out of lockdown on Monday. Photograph: Leon Neal/AFP/Getty Images

On Monday, Boris Johnson announced his roadmap for lifting all Covid restrictions by 21 June but faced criticism from some Conservative MPs for not providing for a speedier return to normal life. Here is some of the evidence the government and its scientific advisers have been considering, outlining the risks of lifting restrictions too early.

Deaths

Based on modelling by Warwick University and Imperial College London, the Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Modelling (SPI-M), a subgroup of the Scientific Advisory Group on Emergencies (Sage), warned that "rapid relaxation [of restrictions] results in a very large wave of hospitalisations and deaths".

It said that if all restrictions were lifted by 26 April (scenario one), even under the most optimistic of assumptions, including 4m doses of vaccine a week from 22 March, there would be "another wave comparable in size to January 2021, resulting in a further 62,000 to 107,000 deaths in England". More pessimistic vaccine efficacy led to a prediction of 102,000 to 176,000 further deaths.

Explaining the likely resurgence were restrictions lifted earlier, SPI-M says: “There are still many people in vulnerable groups who do not have protection; neither directly (either because they have not been vaccinated or because their vaccination has not prevented them from becoming infected then ill) nor indirectly from wider population immunity (because many younger age groups have not yet been vaccinated or infected).”

Hospital admissions

With warnings that the NHS is “on its knees” after three waves of the pandemic, ensuring it is not overwhelmed by a fourth wave is one of the key factors in the decision about whether to lift restrictions.

For its paper, discussed by Sage on 4 February, SPI-M asked University of Warwick and Imperial College to model four scenarios, with scenario one envisioning the earliest return to minimal measures (26 April) and scenario four the latest (2 August). SPI-M said: “All four scenarios modelled lead to a substantial resurgence in hospital admissions and deaths.” It found the models from the two universities to be in “remarkable quantitative agreement about hospital admissions”.

Daily admissions for Covid peaked at 4,134 on 12 January, but on Monday stood at 904. The most optimistic interpretation of scenario one in Warwick’s modelling suggested a resurgence in admissions later this year, peaking at between 4,000 and 6,500 admissions a day.

Hospital occupancy

In the same document, SPI-M said: “Unless vaccine efficacy is significantly better than assumed here, it is highly likely that hospital occupancy would be higher than that seen in January 2021, if all restrictions are lifted by the start of May, even under the optimistic vaccine rollout scenario modelled here of 4m doses per week from the end of March.”

The number of beds in England occupied by Covid patients peaked on 18 January, at 34,336. This has since fallen (the figure was 14,137 on Monday) but the modelling warned of a reverse if restrictions were lifted too early.

Under the most optimistic interpretation of scenario one, Warwick's modelling suggested occupancy of approximately 20,000 to 50,000 beds.

SPI-M wrote: "Relaxation of current restrictions would be safer the lower the prevalence and hospital occupancy reached before any relaxations commence. This would give a longer time window to respond if it becomes apparent that the relaxation of measures is leading to an unsustainable rise in hospital admissions. Lower prevalence of infection will also reduce the risk of the evolution of new variants.

"Hospital occupancy is still very high and will remain so for a significant length of time. SPI-M-O's [the operational subgroup's] medium-term projection of hospital occupancy in England on 8th March is between 5,600 and 12,1001."

Avoiding another lockdown

It is universally agreed on all sides of the argument that avoiding another lockdown is vital, whether to preserve people's mental health or to prevent businesses being forced into closure or to lay off employees. SPI-M makes clear that lifting restrictions in haste would risk a fourth national lockdown based on the modelling.

It states: "As restrictions are relaxed virus transmission will increase. The more slowly restrictions are relaxed, the greater the number of hospitalisations and deaths prevented by vaccination and hence it would be less likely that restrictions would need to be reimposed later to avoid hospitals being put under extreme pressure. Rapid relaxation results in a very large wave of hospitalisations and deaths."

Johnson has left a minimum of five weeks between each stage of restrictions being lifted and this, again, is supported by the evidence presented by SPI-M. It says: "It is much less likely that restrictions would need to be reimposed if an approach were taken in which each step was followed by a careful evaluation of data before any further unlocking was allowed. Several weeks between steps are required to determine if that change has significantly increased transmission."

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Guardian morning briefing

Wednesday briefing: Summer time to catch up on missed lessons

England’s schools are pegged to reopen fully on 8 March. Photograph: Martin Rickett/PA

David Cameron

Be 'muscular' and drive green recovery, Cameron tells Johnson

Free market can be overruled if necessary to create post-Covid growth, ex-PM advises former rival

Fiona Harvey Environment correspondent

Wed 24 Feb 2021 01.00 EST

Former prime minister David Cameron says green investments will spur economic recovery from Covid-19. Photograph: Jacob King/PA

Boris Johnson must be “muscular” in reshaping the economy to bring about a green recovery from the coronavirus crisis, former prime minister David Cameron has said, calling for an active policy of industrial intervention.

Cameron, who as prime minister from 2010 to 2016 oversaw the UK’s recovery from the 2008 financial crisis, said the lessons from that recession

were clear. “My advice would be, from what I learnt, is that as well as the framework [of climate and economic policy], you have to roll up your sleeves and be quite muscular in your interventionism,” he told the Guardian in an interview.

“The government has got a strong framework for green energy policy and in green investment, much of which we put in place, but it needs to combine that with active assistance and helping with key green investments that can make a difference,” he said. “There’s every opportunity for this recovery to be a green recovery.”

Cameron pointed to the example of his government encouraging the German company Siemens to build a wind turbine factory in Hull. “That is a transformational investment, that only happened because we really helped to make it happen. We cleared all the obstacles out of the way, we helped in lots of different ways. And I think there’ll be lots of opportunities like that [for Johnson],” he said.

Johnson has been seen as an instinctively free-market, anti-interventionist Tory in the past, though his response to the coronavirus crisis has shown a willingness to tear up the rulebook. Cameron said that even Conservative prime ministers could overrule the free market when they wanted to.

“[Being] Conservative is not intervening everywhere all the time but being quite selective. That’s what Margaret Thatcher was with the motor industry, getting Toyota and Nissan and Honda to come to Britain,” he said.

Cameron also wants the government to show leadership on the climate ahead of the UK’s hosting of the Cop26 UN climate summit this November in Glasgow, and as holder of the revolving G7 presidency this year.

The former prime minister has joined Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, former president of Liberia, former Irish president Mary Robinson, and other current and former heads of state, to focus attention on fragile states, and the opportunity to use solar and wind power to bring electric power to the 800 million people who lack it.

The Council on State Fragility, of which Cameron is co-chair, issued a call to action to the G7 on Wednesday, with a report that found 90% of the world's 800 million people who lack electricity live in fragile states.

Aid donors gave only $460m for fragile states to gain energy access in 2018, which the council said fell well short of the sums needed. Sirleaf warned: "The Covid-19 crisis has derailed decades of progress on extreme poverty and will continue to have devastating indirect effects on fragile states. A global, concerned push to invest in clean energy in fragile countries could transform lives by powering homes, businesses, schools and hospitals, which will be critical for these countries to recover."

Cameron said solar and wind power were now cheap options to bring power to countries beset by conflict, deepening poverty and instability. "All the stars are in alignment, because distributed green energy systems have become way more cost effective, they're way more available, and this links in with people's desire to see action taken to deal with climate change and shortage of electricity in a sustainable way," he said. "This year with the [UK presidency of] the G7 and the Cop coming at the same time, it's a very good moment to try and get it done."

Cameron said the government's decision to cut the overseas aid budget, which he set at 0.7% of GDP, to 0.5%, was "a big mistake" ahead of Cop26 and the UK's G7 presidency. "It's both a tragedy and a mistake … particularly as Britain is making its way in the post-Brexit world and wants to prove that it is a global power and can still punch above its weight, and has important elements of soft power. Our aid budget was an absolutely key element [of soft power]."

Cameron refused to criticise the government, as many others have done, for giving the green light to a new coal mine in Cumbria. "I need to look at this more," he said. "When I was prime minister, we really moved decisively away from coal for power. We still have an iron and steel industry that imports coking coal."

He added: "I try to limit my criticism of the government to one at any one time. And what's happened over DFID [the former Department for International Development, which was axed], and aid is the thing I have

called the government out on. On climate change and the targets they've set, I think they are still pursuing a very much world-leading strategy, which is what I put in place, and they've added to it with more aggressive targets, and I think that's all to the good."

Greenhouse gas emissions

Carbon tax would be popular with UK voters, poll suggests

Levies on flying, imports and other high-carbon services could raise £27bn a year by 2030, says Zero Carbon Campaign

Fiona Harvey Environment correspondent

Wed 24 Feb 2021 02.00 EST

Carbon taxes could be levied on transport including flying. Photograph: Justin Tallis/AFP/Getty Images

Taxing carbon dioxide emissions would be popular with voters, polling suggests, as the government moots ways to put a price on carbon that could help tackle the climate crisis and fund a green recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

Carbon taxes could be levied on energy suppliers, transport including flying, food, imports and other high-carbon goods and services. At present, the UK levies implicit taxes on carbon, for instance through duties on petrol and diesel, and some heavy industries pay an effective price on carbon. But there are no taxes for consumers that are explicitly geared to the carbon emissions created by the goods and services that they buy.

Two-thirds of people said a carbon tax was a fair way to raise money, and that the proceeds should be spent to benefit the country, according to a poll of 2,000 people carried out by Opinium for the Zero Carbon Campaign, which is trying to persuade the government to put a price on carbon ahead of the UN Cop26 climate summit in Glasgow this November.

A similar number (68%) would also like to see poorer people protected from the impacts of carbon taxes, and there was strong support for redirecting revenues towards creating green jobs and retraining workers, investing the revenues in clean energy, and using them to fund the NHS.

The poll also found a large majority in favour of a "green recovery" from the coronavirus crisis, with 65% of people calling for a green recovery and a similar number wanting the UK to show international leadership on the issue.

The Zero Carbon Campaign has estimated that a carbon tax could raise £27bn a year by 2030, and could work by replacing or simplifying existing green levies on industry. Supporters of the campaign include the actor Stephen Fry, who said: "If [the government] have the courage to make polluters pay, it will save many times more people than have died during the pandemic. Support for the plastic bag tax rose after it was implemented, and it was the same with other measures like the indoor smoking ban. It just requires leaders to lead. And now is the time."

The government is considering how to place a price on carbon, which could affect the cost of goods and services from food to flying. Large sections of industry are already covered by a carbon trading scheme, on the same principle as the EU emissions trading scheme, which covered the UK before Brexit. A broad carbon tax could face opposition from sectors that could see additional costs, such as farming. However, ministers are under pressure to

find ways of reaching the government's target of net zero emissions by 2050, as well as restoring the public finances.

Many economists advocate a price on carbon as a way of reducing greenhouse gas emissions globally, but attempts to coordinate carbon pricing at an international level have failed to take off. The EU is considering levying taxes on imports of high-carbon goods, called a carbon border adjustment, which is of concern to countries such as China and Australia. The government has stepped back from suggestions this could be a key topic of discussion for the UK's presidency of the G7 and Cop26 climate summit this year, however.

The prime minister, Boris Johnson, has made public commitments to "build back better" from the Covid-19 pandemic, but the main measure brought forward to achieve a green recovery is now in doubt. The green homes grant was unveiled last summer with £3bn funding to help households install insulation, heat pumps and other low-carbon measures. However, after only one in five of the 100,000 applications made under the scheme have gone ahead, more than £1bn funding remains unspent and ministers plan to rescind the unspent cash at the end of next month.

A Treasury spokesperson said: "We're committed to building back better and greener from the pandemic. The prime minister recently set out a ten point plan to achieve this green Industrial Revolution and the Treasury's Net Zero Review is looking at how the transition to net zero should be funded."

Joe Biden

Justin Trudeau says US leadership has been 'sorely missed' during first meeting with Biden

Canadian PM congratulates US president on rejoining Paris accord, saying ‘it’s nice when the Americans are not pulling out all the references to climate change’

Associated Press

Tue 23 Feb 2021 21.06 EST

Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau is beamed into the East Room of the White House to speak to Joe Biden after their first bilateral meeting. Photograph: Pete Marovich/UPI/REX/Shutterstock

Justin Trudeau has praised Joe Biden for rejoining the Paris climate accord during their first bilateral meeting, saying: "US leadership has been sorely missed over the past years."

The Canadian prime minister added: "And I have to say as we were preparing the joint rollout of the communique on this, it's nice when the Americans are not pulling out all the references to climate change and instead adding them in."

The meeting – held virtually between the Roosevelt Room at the White House and Trudeau in his Ottawa office because of the pandemic – was Biden's first with a foreign counterpart since taking office,

Biden returned Trudeau's compliments, saying: "The United States has no closer friend, no closer friend, than Canada."

After talking for about two hours, the two leaders emerged and said they planned to work closely together to beat the Covid-19 pandemic and combat climate change, with a goal of achieving net-zero emissions by 2050.

Trudeau also thanked Biden for reiterating US support for the release of two Canadians held by China, Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig. "Human beings are not bartering chips," Biden said. "We're going to work together until we get their safe return."

It was unclear whether Trudeau raised the idea of allowing Canada, which is struggling to vaccinate its population, to buy vaccines from pharmaceutical giant Pfizer's manufacturing facility in Michigan. Canada is getting vaccines shipped from a Pfizer plant in Belgium.

Trudeau brought up the issue when the two leaders spoke by phone last month, Biden's first call to a foreign leader as president. But Biden's "first priority" remains "ensuring every American is vaccinated", White House press secretary Jen Psaki said ahead of the meeting.

Another area of concern for Trudeau is the "Buy American" executive order that Biden signed during his first week in office. It's designed to encourage

the federal government to spend more of the roughly $600bn earmarked for procurement to boost US factories and hiring.

Biden said that as part of the push he was creating a “Made in America” office to evaluate contracts and make sure waivers were used only in “very limited circumstances”, such as when there is an overwhelming national security, humanitarian or emergency need in the US. The issue is crucial to Canada since the US accounts for about 75% of its exports.

“I don’t expect them to make any commitments during the meeting today,” Psaki said on Tuesday when asked about the possibility of Canada receiving a waiver to the “Buy American” order.

Spavor and Kovrig were detained in China following the arrest of Huawei chief financial officer Meng Wanzhou in Canada after the US requested her extradition to face charges that the Chinese telecom company executive committed wire and bank fraud and violated US sanctions on Iran. She denies the allegations.

China lashed out at Canada last week for joining the US and 56 other countries in endorsing a declaration denouncing state-sponsored arbitrary detention of foreign citizens for political purposes.

Canadian officials expect Trudeau to have a far more productive relationship with Biden than he did with Donald Trump. The Republican president, in a fit of pique in 2018, took to Twitter following a meeting of the Group of Seven industrialised nations to malign the prime minister as “dishonest and weak” after Trudeau voiced objections to Trump raising tariffs on steel and aluminium from Canada, Mexico and the European Union.

Environment Agency

Climate crisis hits 'worst case scenario' levels – Environment Agency head

Sir James Bevan says extreme flooding in UK indicates urgent need for change if humanity is to survive

Matthew Taylor

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Flooding in Telford after Storm Christoph in January. Bevan said the ‘reasonable worst case’ for flood incidents had happened in the UK over the last few years. Photograph: Nick Potts/PA

The climate emergency is already hitting “worst case scenario” levels that if left unchecked will lead to the collapse of ecosystems, with dire consequences for humanity, according to the chief executive of the Environment Agency.

Warning that this is not “science fiction”, Sir James Bevan said on Tuesday that in recent years several of the “reasonable worst case scenarios” had happened in the UK, with more extreme weather and flooding. And he urged politicians to take action to reduce emissions and adapt to the “inevitable” impacts of the climate emergency.

Sir James Bevan: ‘Our thinking needs to change faster than the climate.’ Photograph: House of Commons/PA

“Much higher sea levels will take out most of the world’s cities, displace millions, and make much of the rest of our land surface uninhabitable or unusable,” Bevan told the annual conference of the Association of British Insurers. “Much more extreme weather will kill more people through drought, flooding, wildfires and heatwaves than most wars have.

“The net effects will collapse ecosystems, slash crop yields, take out the infrastructure that our civilisation depends on, and destroy the basis of the modern economy and modern society.

“If [this] sounds like science fiction let me tell you something you need to know. This is that over the last few years the reasonable worst case for several of the flood incidents the EA has responded to has actually happened, and it’s getting larger.

“That is why our thinking needs to change faster than the climate. And why our response needs to match the scale of the challenge.”

Bevan’s dire warning comes nine months ahead of the Cop26 climate change conference in Glasgow, where the UK will host delegates and climate experts from around the world, aiming to drive action on adapting to the impacts of the climate crisis, reduce emissions and protect and restore nature.

Bevan said that what had happened in the UK in the past few years should serve as a clear warning about the course the world was on.

The stark intervention comes amid concern about the government’s efforts to tackle the climate emergency ahead of Cop26. Its flagship programme for a green recovery is in turmoil and it has come under renewed pressure after refusing to withdraw support for a new coalmine in Cumbria.

Bevan said it was time the government – and the public – put the same effort into tackling the “unseen pandemic” of the climate emergency that they had into the fight against the Covid crisis.

“We will get the environment we pay for, we will get the climate we work for,” he added

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South Korea

North Korean defector spends six hours walking around heavily guarded border unnoticed

Embarrassment for South Korea's military after guards fail to heed alarms despite man being picked up by five sets of CCTV cameras

Justin McCurry in Tokyo

Wed 24 Feb 2021 00.10 EST Last modified on Wed 24 Feb 2021 00.18 EST

Only a handful of the 31,000 North Koreans who have defected to the South did so via the heavily guarded DMZ. Photograph: Thomas Maresca/UPI/REX/Shutterstock

South Korea's military is facing criticism over security lapses along the country's heavily armed border with North Korea after a man was able to

cross into the South despite being spotted multiple times by surveillance cameras.

The man, wearing a wetsuit and flippers, reportedly swam to South Korea in the early hours of 16 February, but evaded capture for more than six hours, according to the Yonhap news agency.

After arriving on the South Korean coast via the East Sea, he reportedly crawled through a drainage tunnel inside the demilitarised zone (DMZ), hid his wetsuit and flippers and walked, undetected, along a road for about 5km.

He was apprehended after a guard spotted him via a CCTV camera and alerted his superiors.

By the time the manhunt began, the man had been picked up five times by coastal surveillance cameras. They twice triggered alarms, but soldiers failed to notice the warnings and took no action. He was able to continue his journey after three fence cameras near a frontline military post failed to trigger an alarm.

“Service members in charge of the guard duty failed to abide by due procedures and failed to detect the unidentified man,” an official from the joint chiefs of staff [JCS] told Yonhap.

An investigation into the incident found that a guard in charge of coastal surveillance equipment was addressing a computer issue and dismissed the alarms as technical errors, while a second guard at the military post had been distracted by a phone call.

The military’s embarrassment was compounded when it emerged that it had not even known about the drainage tunnel the escapee passed through during his flight from North Korea.

The man, who has reportedly said he wants to defect, made the perilous journey in the depths of winter, raising questions about how he survived for so long in freezing waters. The JCS said he had worn a padded jacket inside his wetsuit, adding that the tides would have worked in his favour.

Officials refused to give his name, describing him only as a fisheries worker in his 20s. Reports said he may have been attempting to hand himself in to South Korean civilians, fearing that border guards would immediately force him to return to the North.

South Korea's military was already facing criticism over security breaches after a North Korean civilian evaded capture for hours after crossing barbed wire fences last November.

He was apprehended after surveillance equipment spotted him near the town of Goseong at the eastern end of the DMZ, a 248km-long (155-mile) strip of land strewn with mines that has separated the two Koreas since the end of their 1950-53 war.

In 2019, four North Koreans crossed the maritime border undetected in a wooden boat before arriving at a port on South Korea's east coast.

Only a handful of the 31,000 North Koreans who have defected to the South did so via the heavily guarded DMZ. The vast majority escape via North Korea's long border with China and arrive in the South via a third country, often Thailand.

Tiger Woods

Police say Tiger Woods 'lucky to be alive' after car crash in California

- 45-year-old treated for multiple fractures of right leg
- Golfer ‘awake and responsive’ in hospital

Ewan Murray, Tom Lutz and Vivian Ho

Wed 24 Feb 2021 01.20 EST First published on Tue 23 Feb 2021 14.50 EST

Tiger Woods has had surgery for multiple fractures of his right leg after a car accident that a Los Angeles police officer said he was “very fortunate” to have survived.

The golfer was “awake and responsive” after the operation to insert a rod into his tibia and stabilize his ankle with pins, according to a statement by his TGR foundation on Tuesday night.

Carlos Gonzalez, the first LA county deputy to respond after Woods’ car went off the road in a single-vehicle accident, said the sports star had been “calm and lucid” despite being trapped inside his vehicle. Woods was removed from the crash by firefighters, and his vehicle suffered “major damage”.

Woods was transported to the nearby Harbor-UCLA medical center by ambulance and underwent surgery for “multiple leg injuries” after the incident early on Tuesday.

Woods had been driving a 2021 Genesis GV80 northbound on Hawthorne Boulevard when he drove over the center median, into the southbound lanes, struck a tree and rolled the vehicle several times, said Alex Villanueva, the Los Angeles county sheriff, at a press conference Tuesday afternoon.

Photos of the crash site showed Woods's badly damaged SUV at the bottom of an embankment in hilly terrain.

Tiger Woods's badly damaged car after the golfer's crash on Tuesday. Photograph: Étienne Laurent/EPA

The crash is still under investigation. Gonzalez noted that this "specific stretch of roadway is one of our trouble spots". Deputies have often caught motorists speeding here, sometimes at up to 80 miles per hour, which would be nearly double the locally reported speed limit. Gonzalez said Woods was responsive and coherent when he arrived on scene, and was able to tell him his name.

Though his injuries were visible, Woods appeared to be in shock and unconcerned with them, Gonzalez said. "I've been doing this for a while. I've seen fatal traffic collisions," the deputy added. "It was very fortunate that Mr Woods was able to come out of this alive."

Woods was the only person in the vehicle at the time of the accident and was conscious when deputies arrived on scene. While the cause of the crash has not yet been determined, Villanueva said Woods' vehicle was "going at a relatively greater speed than normal". When asked if Woods was under the

influence at the time of the crash, Villanueva said there was “no evidence of impairment at this point in time.”

Authorities previously reported that Woods had to be extricated from the vehicle by the jaws of life, but fire department personnel were able to remove him with the help of an ax and Halligan tool, said Daryl Osby, the Los Angeles county fire chief.

Responding to the news, Barack Obama said: “Sending my prayers to @TigerWoods and his family tonight – here’s to a speedy recovery for the GOAT of golf. If we’ve learned anything over the years, it’s to never count Tiger out.”

Tennis great Serena Williams said: “Love you big brother ... but We will get through this @TigerWoods.”

Justin Thomas, a fellow major champion, expressed concern for his friend. “I’m sick to my stomach … You know, it hurts to see one of your ... closest friends get in an accident. Man, I just hope he’s all right. Just worry for his kids, you know. I’m sure they’re struggling.”

Jack Nicklaus, the 18-time major champion and lone name above Woods on the all-time leaderboard, said he was “deeply concerned” by the news in a statement. “Barbara and I just heard about Tiger’s accident, and like everyone else, we are deeply concerned,” Nicklaus said. “We want to offer him our heartfelt support and prayers at this difficult time.”

Timeline

Tiger Woods: golfing great's highs and lows

Show Hide
April 1997
Breakthrough major win at Augusta

At the age of 21, Woods wins the first of 15 career majors so far with a 12-stroke win at the Masters. He becomes the youngest golfer and first black professional player to triumph at Augusta

April 2001
Masters win completes unique slam sweep

Victory at the 2001 Masters means Woods is the first player to hold all four grand slam titles - the Open, Masters, US Open and US PGA - at the same time

June 2008
Major No 14 amid growing injury concerns

Woods win his 14th major at the 2008 US Open after two play-offs at Torrey Pines, despite being hampered by damaged knee cartilage and two stress fractures in his leg

December 2009
Personal issues lead to break from golf

Weeks after a bizarre single car accident outside his home in Florida, Woods admits to having cheated on his wife, Elin Nordegren, and announces an indefinite break from playing golf. Woods and Nordegren divorced in 2010.

2014
Playing return dogged by back problems

Woods returns to golf and rises back to world No 1 in 2013, but is forced to miss the Masters a year later in order to have back surgery. After a stalled attempt at a comeback, he does not play again until 2016

May 2017
Fourth back operation and DUI arrest

Woods pulls out of an event due to back spasms, before undergoing a fourth back surgery in April. One month later, Woods is arrested in Florida and charged with driving under the influence. Woods passed a breath test, and later said his condition was caused by prescribed medication.

April 2019
Fairytale comeback win at Masters

Less than two years on from his arrest, Woods pulls off one of sport's great comebacks by winning the Masters. An emotional victory at Augusta earns Woods' 15th major after an 11-year wait **Reuters**

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The PGA Tour released a statement shortly after news of the crash broke, saying: “On behalf of the PGA Tour and our players, Tiger is in our prayers and will have our full support as he recovers.”

LA county deputies gather evidence from Woods’s car after the accident. Photograph: David McNew/Getty Images

Woods had been in California to film a TV programme for Discovery and Golf Digest, featuring the former NBA player Dwyane Wade and the actor David Spade. He also attended the PGA Tour’s Genesis Invitational at Riviera over the weekend. He has not played competitive golf this year after undergoing back surgery in January.

In May 2017, Woods was arrested on suspicion of driving under the influence in Florida after he was discovered passed out in his car. He later pled guilty to reckless driving over the incident, and said his condition was caused by prescribed medications.

Woods was also involved in another crash in 2009 near his home in Florida, which led to news that he had been unfaithful to his then wife, Elin Nordegren. The fallout led to Woods losing sponsors and he took an extended break from golf to address issues in his private life.

The 2017 arrest was seen by many as a turning point for Woods, whose career had slumped since the days when he was one of the most successful athletes on the planet. Less than two years later a rejuvenated Woods won the Masters, his first major championship since the 2008 US Open.

Authorities said that a second car accident occurred nearby while authorities were responding to the Woods crash, most likely a case of someone trying to see what was happening. No one was injured in that crash, Villaneuva said.

Counter-terrorism policy

New UK laws needed to stop hate speech and extremism, says report

Commission for Countering Extremism says possession of terrorist material should be a crime

Vikram Dodd Police and crime correspondent

Tue 23 Feb 2021 19.01 EST Last modified on Wed 24 Feb 2021 00.12 EST

British far-right anti-Islamists counter-demonstrating against Anjem Choudary and his Islam4UK group's protest at Regent's Park Mosque against Cameron's extremism policies in 2014. Photograph: Paul Davey/Alamy

Massive gaps in the law allow terrorism to be glorified and hatred to be spread, and a major crackdown is needed to stop more violence being triggered, an official report has said.

The report from the Commission for Countering Extremism (CCE) calls for new laws to be considered, with groups accused of spreading hate facing bans.

Potential targets named by the CCE could include the far-right English Defence League and Cage, which has been accused of supporting Islamist extremism and violence.

The commission, which was set up by the government in 2017, also claimed that a tougher approach could have spotted that Thomas Mair, the man who assassinated Labour MP Jo Cox in 2016, was heading towards violent extremism.

The report was co-authored by commission chair Sara Khan and former terrorism chief Sir Mark Rowley.

It said that under current law praising Adolf Hitler, denying the Holocaust, praising Osama bin Laden, and far-right murderers such as Anders Brevik and Christchurch mosque attacker Brenton Tarrant was legal as long as the material did not directly encourage violence.

Other legal material, the report said, includes "fascist extremist organisation circulating pamphlets which promote false claims about a 'white genocide' intended to stir up hatred against a racial or religious group, but which are not threatening, abusive, or insulting".

This amounted to a "gaping chasm", the report said, with Rowley adding: "Not only have our laws failed to keep pace with the evolving threat of modern-day extremism, current legal boundaries allow extremists to operate with impunity.

"Hateful extremism is creating an ever-bigger pool for terrorists to recruit from, as well as increasing violence, hate crime and tensions between and within communities. The current situation is simply untenable."

Rowley said even he was shocked by the extent of extremism and its spread, fuelled in recent years by the internet and social media.

The home secretary, Priti Patel, has been briefed on the report and is studying its recommendations.

Successive governments since 2005 have tried to toughen the UK's stance against extremism, which falls short of breaking current terrorism or public order laws. But previous efforts have failed because of concerns that new laws might criminalise dissent, free speech and unpopular opinions. An attempt by the Cameron government failed because it could not define extremism.

The report by the CCE has the support of critics of previous efforts including activist Peter Tatchell. Tony Blair and David Cameron have also backed the report's findings.

Rowley said this study avoided that pitfall by targeting the worst material, so called hateful extremism, where one group targets another to "to advance a political, religious or racial supremacist ideology" and wanting "to create a climate conducive to hate crime, terrorism or other violence".

It is based on a concept already in use in terrorism trials, the "mindset material" where extremist material, such as from the far right or Islamist terrorist videos, are accepted as evidence of pre-existing extremism.

The biggest example of extremism that caused major harm was that of Anjem Choudary who as spokesperson for Al-Muhajiroun and its successor groups was linked to up to 100 terror recruits.

The commission said possession of terrorist material should be criminalised. Such an approach may have captured Choudary's onetime friend Khuram Butt, ringleader of the 2017 London Bridge attack. In the years before the atrocity he was arrested and released despite being in possession of beheading videos and Isis propaganda because merely possessing them was not deemed on offence.

The new suggested approach drops talk of opposition to British values as being a sign of extremism and suggests a classification system could be used to rank the danger alleged extremist material poses, similar to that used for paedophile material or the harm drugs pose.

Rowley said a tougher approach for the internet was needed but technology companies had pointed out there was little more they could do until they was an accepted definition of what counted as extremism: “The magnifying effect of social media had transformed it from a sideshow to a major threat.”

The report said there were worrying signs the young were being duped by extremists.

The study quoted figures showing that 15% of young people and 20% of young male respondents to a 2020 poll said “the official account of the Nazi Holocaust is a lie”, and other polling showed the young were five times more likely than pensioners to believe lies against Jewish people.

Cage has long been a thorn in the side of government and counter-terrorism officials. Supporters say it is a community-based group fighting the excesses of the “war on terror”. Khan said Cage could meet the threshold for action if tougher measures were adopted.

Cage accused the commission of introducing a state version of cancel culture. A spokesperson said: “The CCE appears to be implementing an ‘official’ state-sanctioned policy of ‘cancel culture’ arguing for further restrictions on lawful speech. The views advanced by the CCE represent a fringe authoritarian and Islamophobic lobby within the halls of power.”

“Cage’s track record in seeking accountability for government overreach and violations of due process is well established. It is interesting that the CCE singles out a Muslim-led organisation for our warnings related to Prevent and ‘institutional Islamophobia’ even though this critique has also been made by a range of seasoned academics, UN rapporteurs and experts.

“After 3 years, and at great taxpayer expense, the CCE concludes its work without any further clarity on what ‘extremism’ is. Instead it promotes ideas from some of the most stridently Islamophobic and censorious organisations in the industry.”

County lines

Met police hails success in county lines drugs crackdown

Covid lockdowns and new tactics have contributed to rise in charges against drug dealers

Vikram Dodd Police and crime correspondent

Wed 24 Feb 2021 02.00 EST Last modified on Wed 24 Feb 2021 02.02 EST

The Met police has said county lines drug runners can no longer blend into the crowd on busy trains. Photograph: Simon Dack/Alamy

A fresh crackdown on county lines drug dealing has resulted in police in London bringing 1,000 charges in just over a year, the Metropolitan police has said.

The successes were the result of new tactics and the coronavirus lockdown prompting criminals to switch to riskier tactics, because child drug runners

travelling from the capital could no longer blend into the crowd on busy trains and coaches.

Country lines is a model of distributing drugs, sending them from bigger cities to smaller towns and rural areas. Users call a mobile phone and order their drugs. Drug dealers often believe the use of anonymous pay-as-you-go mobile phones, which do not have to be registered, protects them from detection.

But a senior officer revealed that police had been able to track the devices being used, seize them and get such good evidence of who was using the phone and when – by extracting communications data stored on the device – that they were able to bring hundreds of charges.

Deputy assistant commissioner Graham McNulty told the Guardian that the Met had reversed the sense of impunity that county lines dealers had felt: "We have not seen a change like this in such a short time."

Between November 2019 and January 2021, the Met had brought over 1,000 charges against county lines dealers and their associates.

More than nine in 10 people arrested in the crackdown had pleaded guilty without a need to go to full trial: "When we only go through the front door we get the individual, the phone and the charge, there is no bail," McNulty said.

The new tactics involve forces based where the exporters of drugs are located, and those where the drugs are sent, working together to track dealers who thought they were anonymous, but are trapped by their pay-as-you-go mobiles.

Police have used modern slavery and trafficking laws against dealers who have targeted children and the vulnerable, with some as young as 14 years old. Police have brought prosecutions against them without needing the cooperation of those pressed into drug dealing, so-called "victimless prosecutions".

McNulty said:“They are buying trainers, taking children for a meal, buying a phone, posing as their friend, but really it is just manipulation.”

Police revealed Covid lockdowns had meant the youths who crisscrossed the county on usually crowded trains and coaches, now stood out, meaning dealers had changed tactics.

McNulty said: “With Covid, the use of coaches and trains has stopped. In the last year we have seen more of a move to cars with older people.” These are then easier to track using automatic number plate recognition.

The Met said that between 1 November 2019 and 31 January 2021 a total of 587 county line dealers and their associates were charged with 1,135 offences including conspiracy to supply, possession with intent to supply and supply of class A drugs.

The successes so far are against smaller dealers. Met commissioner Cressida Dick vowed to go after the major importers and drugs barons: “Alongside our work to tackle county lines and lower level supply, we remain focused on disrupting those higher up the chain and responsible for the widespread distribution of substances across the UK.”

Alex Salmond

Alex Salmond will not address MSPs on Wednesday after evidence redacted

Former first minister was due to address Holyrood committee about alleged SNP conspiracy against him

- What is the Alex Salmond controversy all about?

Alex Salmond arriving at Edinburgh high court in March 2020. He was acquitted of every charge after a two-week trial. Photograph: Murdo MacLeod/The Guardian

Alex Salmond has refused to appear before a Holyrood committee on Wednesday after a submission about "malicious" attempts to smear him was edited following legal warnings from the Crown Office.

The former first minister of Scotland had been poised to give evidence to MSPs on Wednesday afternoon about an alleged conspiracy by his former

colleagues, but pulled out after a document was heavily redacted at the Crown Office's request.

His lawyer, David McKie, has suggested Salmond could appear on Friday instead to give him time to consider how that affects his testimony. "They put a torpedo through part of his evidence," said a source close to Salmond.

Sources at the parliament said it is closed on Friday, presenting serious logistical challenges, but a Holyrood spokesperson said the committee was meeting in private session on Wednesday morning to discuss its response.

Salmond's decision to pull out came after the Crown Office, Scotland's prosecution service, told Holyrood it had "grave concerns" one of his submissions could be in contempt of court following a ruling during his criminal trial in March last year.

His submission was then redacted by Holyrood lawyers. It involves allegations which Salmond argues are central to his explosive claims that Scottish National party and government figures wanted to destroy his reputation "even to the extent of having me imprisoned".

McKie told the parliament at 6.30pm on Tuesday those changes were a "serious legal impediment" for Salmond, who had been due to travel down to Holyrood from his home in Aberdeenshire on Wednesday morning.

Salmond had submitted several documents to the parliamentary inquiry into the devolved government's botched investigation into two allegations of sexual assault against him. The submissions were published by Holyrood on Monday night after weeks of legal wrangling.

Within hours of their publication, prosecutors wrote urgently to the Scottish parliament, calling on it to either withdraw or redact one of Salmond's documents. The parliament's corporate body went into emergency session early on Tuesday morning and agreed to edit it.

A Crown Office spokesperson would not confirm that it had complained or why. "We don't confirm what we may have done about concerns we may

have. One of the risks of providing details is that the potential impact of any breach may be worsened," he said.

In one submission, which remains unchanged on the parliament website, Salmond claims the group he alleges plotted against him included Peter Murrell, the chief executive of the SNP, who is Sturgeon's husband, as well as the party's compliance officer, Ian McCann, and Liz Lloyd, Sturgeon's chief of staff in the government.

Salmond said the Holyrood inquiry had already found evidence of behaviour by officials, advisers and ministers "which taken individually could be put down to incompetence, albeit on an epic scale".

"However, taken together, and over such a prolonged period, it becomes impossible to explain such conduct as inadvertent coincidence. The inescapable conclusion is of a malicious and concerted attempt to damage my reputation and remove me from public life in Scotland."

After winning his judicial review in January 2019, when a court ruled the internal inquiry was "tainted by apparent bias" and unlawful, Salmond was charged with 14 counts of sexual assault, including an attempted rape. He was then acquitted of every charge after a two-week trial in March 2020.

His allegations were immediately rebutted by the SNP, Sturgeon and Lloyd, who accused the former first minister of failing to produce any evidence to justify his claims.

In her own submission to the inquiry, Lloyd said any suggestion she sought to influence the government's complaints procedure used to investigate Salmond in 2018 was "demonstrably false". Nor did she have any say in the government's decisions about the judicial review he mounted and then won against its complaints investigations.

She rejected any insinuations she had leaked a report accusing Salmond of sexual misconduct to the Daily Record as unfounded. "I reject the allegation in its entirety and note that it is not substantiated by any evidence and is founded on a number of claims that are false," Lloyd said.

Sturgeon also rebutted Salmond's claims in television interviews broadcast before his submissions were published late on Monday evening.

"He [Salmond] has made claims, or he appears to be making claims or suggestions there was some kind of conspiracy against him or concerted campaign against him. There is not a shred of evidence about that, so this is the opportunity for him to replace insinuation and assertion with evidence," she told STV.

Late last week, Holyrood's ruling corporate body, made up of party representatives, agreed Salmond's dossier could be published after Lady Dorrian, Scotland's second most senior judge, amended a court order she imposed during Salmond's trial.

Salmond alleges the strongest evidence of a conspiracy is contained in text messages in the evidence from this trial, which the Crown Office has refused to release for legal reasons.

But he argues evidence already given to the committee clearly showed the Scottish government's complaints policy was designed to snare him, by making its terms retrospective to include previous ministers.

He accused Sturgeon and Leslie Evans, the permanent secretary of the Scottish government, of doing so in meetings in late 2017 when the policy was being drafted.

Evans and other senior civil servants have already denied under oath that they deliberately pursued Salmond. Backed by Sturgeon, Evans said the policy was necessary and lawful to ensure government employees had a safe workplace.

Business

Investors warn top UK firms over ethnic and gender diversity

Investment Association uses looming AGM season to issue ‘amber’ warnings to boards over lack of diversity

Julia Kollewe

Wed 24 Feb 2021 01.01 EST

The IA says three-quarters of FTSE-100 firms fail to report the ethnic make-up of their boards at last year’s AGM season. Photograph: PeopleImages/Getty Images

Investors are turning up the pressure on companies to improve ethnic and gender diversity on their boards ahead of the annual meeting season, according to an influential shareholder adviser.

The Investment Association (IA) will issue "amber-top" warnings – the second-highest level of alert – to the biggest 350 listed firms if they do not disclose the ethnic diversity of their boards or have a credible action plan to address the issue.

The advisory group, which represents 250 members with £8.5tn under management, is hoping to use the voting power of its members to encourage listed companies to adopt the Parker Review target of having at least one director from an ethnic minority background by the end of 2021.

The IA's institutional voting information service (IVIS), a paid-for service that provides independent information on listed companies, does not make recommendations to investors on how to vote, but uses amber and red tops to highlight areas of concern.

Andrew Ninian, the IA's director for stewardship and corporate governance, said: "The UK's boardrooms need to reflect the diversity of modern-day Britain. With three-quarters of FTSE-100 companies failing to report the ethnic makeup of their boards in last year's AGM season, investors are now calling on companies to take decisive action to meet the Parker Review targets."

The group is also seeking greater progress on gender diversity, by giving a red alert to companies with 30% or fewer female directors. This is an increase on last year's 20% threshold for a red alert.

On executive pay, the group said companies that received government support or raised capital from shareholders during the pandemic should not pay annual bonuses. Many firms have benefited from the government's furlough scheme or the business loan schemes; and 73 firms of the 600-strong FTSE all-share index raised fresh funds from investors between March and November as the Covid-19 pandemic struck.

"Investors also do not generally expect bonuses to be paid if a company has taken government or shareholder support – any company that chooses to do

so is expected to provide a clear rationale," said Ninian. The group also warned remuneration committees not to compensate executives for reduced pay last year by adjusting this year's pay packages.

The climate crisis will be another big focal point. This year, companies in high-risk sectors such as transport, energy, banks, airlines, travel and tourism, which do not comply with reporting standards set by the global Task Force for Climate-related Financial Disclosures (TCFD) will, for the first time, receive an amber alert. Investment managers want to see companies reporting on climate-related risks in a consistent, clear and comparable manner. The UK government intends to make climate-related financial disclosures mandatory by 2025.

Rich lists

London has more dollar millionaires than New York

One in 10 Londoners hold assets worth more than £720,000 as Covid crisis makes the rich richer

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A row of stucco-fronted Edwardian houses in Kensington, London. Photograph: A Astes/Alamy

London has overtaken New York as home to the highest concentration of dollar millionaires in the world, according to a report that reveals how much money the very richest people in the world have made during the coronavirus pandemic.

Nearly 875,000 Londoners are dollar millionaires (denoting assets worth more than £720,000), according to an annual study of the fortunes of the world's wealthiest people by the property consultants Knight Frank.

It means one in 10 people living in London are dollar millionaires, with the data highlighting the yawning inequality gap in the capital. More than 2.5 million (or 28%) of those living in London are classed as "living in poverty", according to government figures.

The report shows that 874,354 people in London have assets, including property, worth more than $1m, which makes them so-called "high net worth individuals" (HNWIs). That compares with 820,000 in New York, in second place.

Liam Bailey, Knight Frank's global head of research, said the high cost of housing in the capital had tipped many people into the HNWI category. "The main point is that our HNWI threshold is $1m, so £720,000, and with average house prices in London at £514,000, a lot of households fall into the HNWI category," he said. "Ironically, the high cost of housing in London is the main driver for categorising so many households as being wealthy."

Bailey dismissed other reports suggesting an exodus from London for the countryside because remote working during lockdowns enables people to base themselves anywhere for work.

The research found that London had the most so-called "prime" homes of any city in the world, with more than 68,000 units valued at more than £2m each. There have been a flurry of super-rich property sales during the pandemic as rich overseas investors exploit the drop in the value of the pound and tax advantages thrown as a result of Brexit.

London was also named the rich person's city of choice for lifestyle, according to Knight Frank's survey of what wealthy people demand from cities such as Michelin-starred restaurants, opera houses and theatres, universities, sports and shopping facilities.

London is said to have also benefitted from an influx of rich Hong Kongers, many of whom left the former British colony amid worries about China's

authoritarian clampdown.

There was a 68% increase in number of so-called golden visas issued last year to people from Hong Kong promising to invest at least £2m in the UK, according to separate research by the City law firm Bates Wells.

London has the highest proportion of people living in low-income households of all regions in the UK, according to Department for Work and Pensions data. Across the capital, 28% of people are said to be "living in poverty" compared with the national average of 22%. That figure rises to 32% for those living in inner London.

The data shows that 800,000 – or 39% – of the capital's children are living in poverty. It is the highest rate of child poverty since the data first started to be collected in 1994.

The Knight Frank wealth report shows that despite the economic destruction wrought by the pandemic on millions of people with modest incomes, those who were already very rich have been able to increase their fortunes.

More than 6,000 people joined the ranks of the ultra-wealthy last year as those in the top 0.1% were able to increase their already-vast fortunes despite the coronavirus pandemic.

The number of ultra-high net worth individuals (UHNWIs) – those with assets of more than $30m (£21.3m) – rose by 2.4% last year to 520,000.

The UHNWI population is expected to swell by a further 27% to 663,483 by 2025, the report estimates, as huge fortunes are being made in China, Indonesia and India. The number of dollar millionaires is expected to soar by 41% in the same period.

"Asia is the key wealth story. The US is, and will remain, the world's dominant wealth hub over our forecast period, but Asia will see the fastest growth in UHNWIs over the next five years," Bailey said. "China is key to this phenomenon with 246% forecast growth in very wealthy residents in the decade to 2025."

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The report found that a person living in the UK would need a $1.8m (£1.3m) fortune to join the so-called 1% club of the richest people in the country.

In Monaco, where many of the world's richest people live to avoid income taxes, a fortune of $7.9m is needed to join the top 1%. In Switzerland it is $5.1m. While in the US it is $4.4m, in Kenya the figure is $20,000.

The world's richest people are worried that growing inequality could lead governments to impose wealth taxes, with the prospect of such a levy listed in the report as their biggest fear after coronavirus. Such taxes have been introduced in Argentina, Bolivia and Morocco.

In the UK, three prominent economists, including an adviser to the Treasury, have recommended the introduction of a one-off tax on anyone with more than £500,000 in assets, including property. The Wealth Tax Commission suggests a 1% tax on those individuals for five years could raise £260bn – enough to cover the full cost of funding the NHS for a year.

Ghislaine Maxwell

Ghislaine Maxwell offers to renounce foreign citizenship in exchange for bail

The British socialite charged with aiding Jeffrey Epstein's sexual abuse has been denied bail twice since being arrested in July

Ghislaine Maxwell, charged with aiding Jeffrey Epstein, is being held in a jail in Brooklyn, New York. Photograph: MediaPunch/REX/Shutterstock

Ghislaine Maxwell, the British socialite charged with aiding Jeffrey Epstein's sexual abuse, has offered to renounce her UK and French citizenship in an attempt to secure bail.

The offer to surrender her foreign citizenship is the latest attempt by Maxwell's lawyers to secure bail for their client. Maxwell, 59, has been denied bail twice, with a judge deeming her to be a flight risk.

Maxwell is being held in a jail in Brooklyn, New York, after being charged in July with helping Epstein, a convicted sex offender, recruit three teenage

girls for sex. Epstein killed himself in a New York City jail in August 2019, while awaiting trial for numerous alleged sex crimes.

“If the court deems it a necessary condition of release, Ms Maxwell will formally commence the procedure to renounce her foreign citizenship,” her lawyers wrote in a court motion on Tuesday.

The move, according to Maxwell’s lawyers, “should satisfy any concerns the court may have that Ms Maxwell may try to seek a safe haven in France or the United Kingdom”.

Maxwell’s legal team said renunciation of her UK citizenship could be formalized immediately upon Maxwell being granted bail.

“The process of renouncing her French citizenship, while not immediate, may be expedited,” the lawyers said.

Maxwell, who has lived in the US for 30 years, was born in France in 1961 and grew up in the UK. The daughter of the British media tycoon Robert Maxwell, she became close to Epstein in the 1990s and eventually, prosecutors claim, recruited women for the New York financier.

Maxwell was arrested in July in New England, where she had been laying low in a tiny New Hampshire town, and charged with a litany of sex offenses including conspiracy to entice minors to travel to engage in illegal sex acts, enticement of a minor to travel to engage in illegal sex acts and transportation of a minor with intent to engage in criminal sexual activity.

The arrest drew unwanted attention to Prince Andrew, who was a close friend of Maxwell’s, and later Epstein’s, and a regular guest at parties thrown by Maxwell in New York City. In a lawsuit, Virginia Giuffre alleged that Maxwell drew her into Epstein’s circle under false pretenses, before forcing her, as a 17-year-old, to have sex with men, including Andrew. Andrew has denied Giuffre’s claims.

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Coronavirus

UK thinktank calls for door-to-door Covid jabs to tackle vaccine disparities

Exclusive: Runnymede Trust chief says uptake gap risks Covid becoming a disease of poverty

- Coronavirus – latest updates
- See all our coronavirus coverage

Nazia Parveen and Jessica Murray

Tue 23 Feb 2021 14.40 EST Last modified on Wed 24 Feb 2021 00.08 EST

Sign for a vaccination centre in Buckinghamshire. Currently, at-home jabs are offered to people who are registered as housebound or immobile. Photograph: Maureen McLean/Rex/Shutterstock

Ministers are being urged to offer vaccines door to door in hard-to-reach, deprived and minority ethnic communities amid fears that coronavirus could become a disease of poverty.

As leaders set out plans to reopen society, with one in three UK adults already having received their first dose, experts said the stark disparity in vaccine uptake in pockets of the country risked leading to the "vaccine-rich" being protected while the virus continued to circulate in disadvantaged areas.

Speaking to the Guardian, Dr Halima Begum, the chief executive of the Runnymede Trust thinktank, said if people were not able or willing to go to GP surgeries, hospitals or vaccination centres, members of the NHS vaccine army should go to them.

Currently, a vaccine is offered to people in their own homes if they are registered with their GP as housebound or immobile. NHS England said in some areas GPs were increasing their efforts, highlighting the case of the London-based GP Dr Farzana Hussain, who has phoned every patient from her surgery who has been offered but not yet accepted their jab. But there are no plans to roll out a door-to-door vaccine scheme for those in hard-to-reach areas.

Begum said black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities were particularly vulnerable to being left unvaccinated. "We would urge the government to take the jab door to door where necessary," she said. "Although there are a lot of vaccination centres in inner cities, a lot of elderly and immobile people are simply unable to get there."

Data last week revealed a huge disparity in vaccine uptake between areas with high and low BAME populations. In Birmingham's Sparkbrook and Balsall Heath East, an inner-city area home to a large Somali population and where 90% of residents are BAME, just 57% of over-80s had received their first jab compared with an estimated 93.4% nationally.

The ward is one of many in Birmingham with large BAME communities to have low vaccine take-up, compared with areas such as Rubery and Rednal,

which has a BAME population of 9% and where 91% of over-80s had received their first dose.

Birmingham map

Dr Mike Tildesley, a professor of infectious disease modelling at the University of Warwick and a member of the UK government's SPI-M advisory group, said on Tuesday that failure to ensure all communities were protected could lead to a societal split.

"We know there are certain areas – in particularly inner-city areas, deprived areas – where vaccine uptake is not as high. This is a real concern … that we may end up in a situation where we have the 'vaccine-rich', as it were, who are able to access the vaccine, who have taken up the vaccine and are at much lower risk, and maybe the people in society who have not taken up the vaccine.

"Potentially these individuals could be clustered in particular parts of the country, and there is increased risk there," he told BBC Radio 4.

Asked about the "alarming prospect" of society opening up thanks to the vaccine but Covid remaining as a "disease of the poor", he said: "This is a real concern for me."

Begum said the UK could not afford to have a vaccine divide. "Dr Tildesley is right with his predictions and confirms that those groups who are the poorest in society will be disproportionately impacted unless we focus on innovative ways to improve access to the vaccine," she said.

"Because we have a universal health system in the UK, access to the vaccine is presumed as a given. But what people don't see is the unequal access to health services which have led to less take-up of health services in deprived communities and areas across the UK.

"Usually, the affluent middle classes who can demand more from their health services will end up accessing services better, whereas those with less voice and who might experience … racism will experience barriers to health access."

The Runnymede Trust said urgent practical solutions were needed and that going door to door giving people jabs in their homes should be considered. Failure to act could risk communities being blamed for allowing Covid to keep spreading, Begum said.

“Unless we can level up the huge inequalities in health access, including access to the vaccine, we stand the risk that our BAME communities will be blamed for not playing their part in the national Covid recovery,” she said.

Evidence that minority ethnic people are at elevated risk of contracting and dying from Covid compared with their white counterparts is well established. This month ministers were criticised for failing to act more urgently on coronavirus vaccine disparities after data showed that white people were almost twice as likely to have been vaccinated as black people among over-80s in England.

The Labour MP Apsana Begum said on-the-ground interventions would help improve low uptake. “Where we have really densely populated areas, which has been identified as a factor behind high transmission rates, it would make sense for mobile units to come out on to some of our estates and offer the vaccine there,” said Begum, the MP for Poplar and Limehouse in east London.

“That would enable us to really quickly inoculate populations and also means it’s readily there and everything possible has been done to offer and make the vaccine available. Having those direct conversations with people is helpful.”

Last month a Covid vaccination bus was launched in Crawley, West Sussex, to target hard-to-reach and vulnerable communities. The mobile centre, on a converted Metrobus, has been set up by a group of 44 GP services called the Alliance for Better Care.

The Birmingham Labour MP Shabana Mahmood said any in-person engagement needed to come from people who understood the communities they were speaking to, and warned against a “one-size-fits-all approach” for different groups.

After Boris Johnson set out his roadmap out of lockdown for England on Monday, the health secretary, Matt Hancock, issued a renewed appeal for people to get the coronavirus jab. He said the government was working “incredibly hard” to ensure as many people as possible received the vaccine. “We want to see that vaccine uptake go as high as possible. But it’s absolutely on all of us to come forward and get the vaccine. It’s the right thing to do,” he said.

Timeline

How England's Covid lockdown will be lifted

Show Hide
8 March 2021
Step 1, part 1

All pupils and college students return fully. People can meet one other person outside, not just for exercise. Care home residents can receive one regular, named visitor. The “stay at home” order will otherwise stay in place.

29 March 2021
Step 1, part 2

Outdoor gatherings allowed of up to six people, or two households if this is larger, not just in parks but also gardens. Outdoor sport for children and adults will be allowed. The official stay at home order will end, but people will be encouraged to stay local. People will still be asked to work from home where possible, with no overseas travel allowed beyond the current small number of exceptions.

12 April 2021
Step 2

The official outline plan states that the next steps will rely on data, and the dates given mean "no earlier than". In step two, there will be a reopening of non-essential retail, hair and nail salons, and public buildings such as libraries and museums. Most outdoor venues can open, including pubs and

restaurants but only for outdoor tables and beer gardens. Customers will have to be seated but there will be no need to have a meal with alcohol.

Also reopening will be settings such as zoos and theme parks. However, social contact rules will apply here, so no indoor mixing between households and limits on outdoor mixing. Indoor leisure facilities such as gyms and pools can also open but again people can only go alone or with their own household. Reopening of holiday lets with no shared facilities, but only for one household. Funerals can have up to 30 attendees, while weddings, receptions and wakes can have 15.

17 May 2021
Step 3

Again with the caveat "no earlier than 17 May", depending on data, vaccination levels and current transmission rates.

Step 3 entails that most mixing rules are lifted outdoors, with a limit of 30 people meeting in parks or gardens. Indoor mixing will be allowed, up to six people or, if it is more people, two households. Indoor venues such as the inside of pubs and restaurants, hotels and B&Bs, play centres, cinemas and group exercise classes will reopen. The new indoor and outdoor mixing limits will remain for pubs and other hospitality venues.

For sport, indoor venues can have up to 1,000 spectators or half capacity, whichever is lower; outdoors the limit will be 4,000 people or half capacity, whichever is lower. Very large outdoor seated venues, such as big football stadiums, where crowds can be spread out, will have a limit of 10,000 people, or a quarter full, whichever is fewer. Weddings will be allowed a limit of 30 people, with other events such as christenings and barmitzvahs also permitted.

This will be the earliest date at which international holidays could resume, subject to a separate review.

21 June 2021
Step 4

No earlier than 21 June, all legal limits will be removed on mixing, and the last sectors to remain closed, such as nightclubs, will reopen. Large events can take place.

Peter Walker *Political correspondent*

Was this helpful?
Thank you for your feedback.

Some Tory backbenchers, who criticised the government over the slow pace of the easing of restrictions, said the country should not be "held back" by those who refused the vaccine.

"We know the uptake of the vaccine is over 90% in the top groups that have been vaccinated, [or even] above 95% [but the government has] assumed 15% of the population don't take the vaccine," Mark Harper, the chairman of the Covid Recovery Group of MPs, told LBC radio on Tuesday.

"I have two problems with that. One is that isn't realistic, that's not what's happening. But secondly there is a real question about whether the rest of the country should be held back for two months because some people choose not to take the vaccine."

Coronavirus

Number of UK Covid vaccinations falls by a third as vaccine supply dips

Factors at play include high uptake plus stockpiling for second doses, but Matt Hancock promises ‘bumper weeks in March’

- Coronavirus – latest updates
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Dan Sabbagh and Natalie Grover

Tue 23 Feb 2021 14.57 EST Last modified on Wed 24 Feb 2021 00.13 EST

Pfizer is reducing production of its vaccine this month to increase the amount it can make in March. Photograph: Guy Bell/REX/Shutterstock

The number of Covid vaccines administered in the UK has fallen by over a third in the last week as ministers warned of a short-term dip in supply

coupled with stockpiling to ensure people get second doses within the recommended 12-week limit.

The latest data showed 192,341 people received a first jab on Monday, the second-lowest daily total since 17 January – taking the number of people in Britain who have had an initial Covid vaccination to 17.9 million.

On Sunday the number of vaccinations was 141,719, the lowest figure since the UK daily count began on 10 January. Taken together, the total for the past two days is 35% lower than the equivalent figures last week.

Matt Hancock, the health secretary, said in a radio interview the country could expect "a quieter week this week" for vaccinations because of supply pressure but that the rollout would bounce back next month. "We're going to have some really bumper weeks in March."

Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland's first minister, also said in her daily press briefing that there had been "a temporary dip", but added there were other factors at play to suggest that UK vaccine stocks had been reduced.

Other reasons for the slowdown, the first minister said, included "the higher than expected uptake so far, and also the need to reserve stock so that second doses can be offered to people who received their first dose in December".

UK ministers have repeatedly said they expect supplies to be uneven, particularly while Pfizer reduces production at its European plant in Belgium during February to increase the amount it can make in March. AstraZeneca has promised to produce an average of 2m doses a week, but it acknowledges its production can be lumpy.

Modelling documents released by the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage) on Monday also appear to suggest that the UK could speed up its pace of inoculation towards the end of March.

A document from Sage's modelling subcommittee produced earlier this month suggests that vaccinations could potentially be carried out at the rate of 4m a week from 22 March based on scenarios "commissioned by Cabinet

Office" – although a second, more conservative forecast, suggests 4m a week could be hit by 25 April.

A little over a week ago, with average vaccination rates running at more than 400,000 a day, the UK hit a target to provide a vaccine to the 15 million people in the first four priority groups. Paul Hunter, a professor in medicine at the University of East Anglia, said: "Maybe they used up a lot more doses in the first part of February to make the self-imposed target and to look good."

Dr Michael Head, a senior research fellow in global health at the University of Southampton, said it was too soon to tell if there were any serious problems. "We probably need another week of data to have a clearer picture around whether this is a concerning trend, or indeed part of natural fluctuations," he said.

Sturgeon said Scotland would follow an announcement made by England over the weekend to bring forward a target to reach all people in the first nine priority groups by 15 April instead of 30 April.

That would mean everybody over 50 being offered a first shot shortly after Easter, as well as those with underlying health conditions plus health and care workers – a total of 32 million people across the UK. A rolling programme of second jabs in large numbers would also have begun by then.

Coronavirus

Step by step: how England's Covid lockdown will be lifted

Boris Johnson has set out a plan for reopening in four stages, with a minimum of five weeks between each

- Coronavirus – latest updates
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A man sits outside a closed pub in Eton, Berkshire. Most outdoor venues including pubs and restaurants will be allowed to open during step 2. Photograph: Maureen McLean/Rex/Shutterstock

Boris Johnson has announced detailed plans for the unlocking of England amid the coronavirus vaccination programme. Here is the proposed timetable, in four stages, and other initiatives announced by Downing Street.

No 10 is stressing that after the first step the subsequent stages of reopening could be subject to delay and that the programme would be guided by “data rather than dates”.

There is a minimum of five weeks between each stage – four weeks to collect and assess data and then a week for people and businesses to prepare for the next step.

All the changes will be England-wide with no return to regional tiers. The only exception could be localised efforts if a new variant of the virus is detected, for example additional testing.

Step 1, part 1 – 8 March

- All pupils and college students return fully, with before- and after-school clubs opened. For a period, secondary school pupils and older will wear masks in classes.

- People can meet one other person outside for, say, a coffee or picnic, not just for exercise. Children will still count towards this.

- Care home residents can receive one regular, named visitor.

- The “stay at home” order will otherwise stay in place.

Step 1, part 2 – 29 March

- Outdoor gatherings allowed of up to six people, or two households if this is larger, not just in parks but also gardens.

- Outdoor sport for children and adults will be allowed including outdoor swimming pools.

- The official stay at home order will end, but people will be encouraged to stay local – the definition of local will largely be left to people's discretion.

- People will still be asked to work from home where possible, with no overseas travel allowed beyond the current small number of exceptions.

Step 2 – no earlier than 12 April

- Reopening of non-essential retail, hair and nail salons, and public buildings such as libraries.

- Most outdoor venues open, including pubs and restaurants but only for outdoor tables and beer gardens. Customers will have to be seated but there will be no need to have a meal with alcohol.

- Also reopening will be settings such as zoos and theme parks. However, social contact rules will apply here, so no indoor mixing

between households and limits on outdoor mixing.

- Indoor leisure facilities such as gyms and pools can also open but again people can only go alone or with their own household.

- Reopening of holiday lets with no shared facilities, but only for one household.

- Funerals can have up to 30 attendees, while weddings, receptions and wakes can have 15.

- While it is not part of step 2, this is the earliest point after which the bulk of university students could know about the resumption of face-to-face classes. A review of this will take place at the end of the Easter holidays.

Step 3 – no earlier than 17 May

- Most mixing rules lifted outdoors, with a limit of 30 people meeting in parks or gardens.

- Indoor mixing will be allowed, up to six people or, if it is more people, two households.

- Indoor venues such as the inside of pubs and restaurants, hotels and B&Bs, play centres, cinemas, museums and group exercise classes will reopen. The new indoor and outdoor mixing limits will remain for pubs and other hospitality venues.

- This will be the earliest date at which international holidays could resume, subject to a review – see the list of reviews below.

- For sport, indoor venues can have up to 1,000 spectators or half capacity, whichever is lower; outdoors the limit will be 4,000 people or half capacity, whichever is lower. Very large outdoor seated venues, such as big football stadiums, where crowds can be spread out, will have a limit of 10,000 people, or a quarter full, whichever is fewer.

- Weddings will be allowed a limit of 30 people, with other events such as christenings and barmitzvahs also permitted.

Step 4 – no earlier than 21 June

- All legal limits removed on mixing will be removed and the last sectors to remain closed, such as nightclubs, will reopen. Large events can take place.

- There are likely to be changes to wider social distancing measures but this will be decided in a separate review – also see below.

Four reviews taking place within the unlocking process

- On whether "Covid status certificates" – ie vaccine or test passports – could be used to help reopen the economy and/or reduce restrictions on contact. This will be set out ahead of step 4. Officials say it is not a foregone conclusion that these will be used.

- An “events research programme”, with pilots to test the effects of larger crowds and/or reduced social distancing. This will start in April.

- A Department for Transport review into how to allow more inbound and outbound travel as soon as possible, given worries over new variants of Covid. It will report on 12 April, but international travel will not resume before 17 May at the earliest.

- A review of social distancing, for example the 1 metre-plus rule, and on masks and working from home. This will conclude before step 4.

Commons scrutiny and votes

- For most of the rules the government will lay a statutory instrument, a form of legislation, before 8 March and it will be debated and voted on before the Easter recess.

- Before this there will be a much more limited measure to allow one-to-one outdoor meetings and the reopening of venues such as after-school clubs.

Ireland

Ireland to start reopening schools as it extends other Covid restrictions

Education and childcare prioritised in cautious lockdown roadmap after disastrous Christmas relaxation

- Coronavirus – latest updates
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The taoiseach, Micheál Martin, is to announce the revised Living with Covid plan in a televised address on Tuesday evening. Photograph: Reuters

Ireland is to start reopening some schools next week but is extending other lockdown restrictions until April to prevent another explosion in Covid-19 cases.

The government has prioritised education and childcare in a cautious new roadmap out of restrictions after a disastrous relaxation before Christmas led

to Ireland having the world's highest rate of infection.

The taoiseach, Micheál Martin, announced the revised Living with Covid plan in a televised address on Tuesday evening.

He praised public compliance with restrictions and said he understood people hoped for relaxations. "The sacrifices you have made have a positive impact – our progress in response to the latest wave is among the best in Europe."

He said 64% of adults would be vaccinated by May. "We will get through this. I know how hard it is and the toll it is taking on people's mental health and wellbeing but I also know that the end is now truly in sight."

The cabinet agreed to extend the maximum level 5 restrictions until 5 April, which means non-essential retail, bars, cafes, construction, gyms and other sectors will remain closed. A 5km travel limit remains in place, as does a ban on household mixing.

Ireland's 14-day incidence rate per 100,000 population has fallen to 240, putting it in about the middle of Europe's table, and pressure on hospitals has eased, but authorities fear new, more transmissible variants of the virus will run riot without keeping a tight lid on the economy and society. They have urged the public to keep minimising social contacts.

Ireland cases

The government is making an exception for schools and childcare, with phased reopenings. Junior and senior infants and secondary school students facing their final year Leaving Certificate exams can return to class on 1 March.

The state's early childhood care and education preschool scheme will resume on 8 March, with the rest of primary school classes and fifth year students in secondary school returning on 15 March. All remaining secondary school students can return after the Easter holidays in mid-April.

Business representatives in hospitality and other sectors said this third lockdown was killing companies. The government agreed to pandemic

welfare supports until June.

Opposition parties accused the government of confused messaging and leaving loopholes. Sinn Féin, Labour and the Social Democrats want mandatory hotel quarantine for all arrivals, not just those from countries on a list of Covid hotspots.

In Northern Ireland, meanwhile, the Democratic Unionist party (DUP) is urging an earlier return to school than that recommended by health officials.

Arlene Foster, the DUP leader and first minister, urged the Stormont executive to "revisit" the plan after the UK prime minister, Boris Johnson, said children in England could return to school on 8 March.

"Unfortunately our health advisers didn't think that that was the right way forward," she said. Peter Weir, the DUP education minister, said health officials were being over-cautious.

Coronavirus

Four key questions on a Covid certification scheme in England

The government is reviewing the options on proof of vaccination or testing status

- NHS Covid app could be used to prove status and access venues in England
- Coronavirus – latest updates
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Vaccination or test status could be displayed on an existing NHS app. Photograph: Guy Bell/Rex/Shutterstock

The idea of vaccine certificates has gained traction in England, as the government weighs their potential usefulness in reopening sectors of society against concerns about privacy and discrimination.

As ministers prepare to launch a review into whether to introduce the documents, here are the key questions to be answered.

What might they look like?

It is still very early days, with the prime minister, Boris Johnson, only announcing on Monday that the certificates are being considered, after months of denials by senior cabinet figures.

But if they are adopted, the documents could be displayed using an existing smartphone app: either the myGP app, which is run by the NHS, or the NHS Covid-19 app.

Dr Pete Calveley, CEO of the care home provider Barchester Healthcare, has said he will expect the myGP app to be used by staff to prove they have had a coronavirus vaccine.

What is the precedent?

While the idea of vaccine passports for international travel has been talked about, the use of certificates in domestic settings like theatres and restaurants is a new development.

Johnson said on Tuesday that "this is an area where we're looking at a novelty for our country. We haven't had stuff like this before.

"We've never thought in terms of having something that you have to show to go to a pub or a theatre, so there are deep and complex issues that we need to explore. Ethical issues about what the role is for government in mandating people to have such things, or indeed banning people from doing such a thing. There are complex issues we need to work out."

Where in the world are they already used?

Israel, where Covid vaccines are being rolled out fastest, has already introduced a "green pass" for those either already inoculated or who have presumed immunity after contracting Covid.

The pass grants access to gyms, hotels, swimming pools, concerts, and places of worship. Restaurants and bars will be included from early March.

For everyone without a pass, including children under 16 who are not eligible for the jabs yet, many of the activities shut down during the year-long crisis will remain off-limits, although some will be available if they provide a negative coronavirus test.

Other countries are also much further along than the UK in developing immunity passports for international travel. Greece has already signed a deal with Israel to accept green passes, and is pressing the case for EU countries to adopt a bloc-wide approach.

The World Health Organization's director general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, has counselled caution over vaccine passports, saying last month: "We cannot afford to prioritise or punish certain groups or countries."

Who is for and against them?

Johnson has acknowledged that Conservative MPs might be opposed to the certificates on ideological grounds.

"I know fervent libertarians will object, but other people will think there's a case for it," he said on Tuesday, after criticism from thinktanks Liberty and Big Brother Watch.

Unions may back the certificates as a measure to protect workers and ensure the conditions they are working in are as safe as possible. But they will also be mindful of employers potentially locking out some staff who are not able to get a jab.

Tony Blair, the former prime minister whose suggestions have helped influence government thinking on coronavirus, has backed the idea.

Coronavirus live
Coronavirus

Coronavirus live news: AstraZeneca expected to miss EU vaccine target; WHO reports 20% drop in global deaths

Coronavirus

AstraZeneca expected to miss EU Covid vaccine supply target by half in second-quarter – report

Expected shortfall of 90m doses could hit the EU's ability to meet its target of vaccinating 70% of adults by summer

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AstraZeneca has reportedly told the European Union it expects to deliver less than half the coronavirus vaccines it was contracted to supply in the second quarter. Photograph: Brendan McDermid/Reuters

AstraZeneca has told the European Union it expects to deliver less than half the Covid-19 vaccines it was contracted to supply in the second quarter, an EU official told Reuters on Tuesday.

Contacted by Reuters, AstraZeneca did not deny what the official said, but a statement late in the day said the company was striving to increase productivity to deliver the promised 180m doses.

The expected shortfall, which has not previously been reported, follows a big reduction in supplies in the first quarter and could hit the EU's ability to meet its target of vaccinating 70% of adults by summer.

The EU official, who is directly involved in talks with the Anglo-Swedish drugmaker, said the company had told the bloc during internal meetings that it "would deliver less than 90m doses in the second quarter".

AstraZeneca's contract with the EU, which was leaked last week, showed the company had committed to delivering 180m doses to the 27-nation bloc in the second quarter.

Meanwhile, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced on Tuesday that global deaths from coronavirus-related complications have declined by 20% in the past week, with cases dropping for the sixth consecutive week worldwide. Deaths have been falling for three consecutive weeks, according to the WHO.

The global case total stands at 112m, according to the Johns Hopkins University tracker, with deaths at 2.48m.

Asked about the EU official's comment on vaccine doses, a spokesperson for AstraZeneca initially said: "We are hopeful that we will be able to bring our deliveries closer in line with the advance purchase agreement."

Later in the day a spokesperson said in a new statement the company's "most recent Q2 forecast for the delivery of its Covid vaccine aims to deliver in line with its contract with the European Commission".

He added: "At this stage AstraZeneca is working to increase productivity in its EU supply chain and to continue to make use of its global capability in order to achieve delivery of 180m doses to the EU in the second quarter."

A spokesperson for the commission, which coordinates talks with vaccine manufacturers, said it could not comment on the discussions because they

were confidential.

He said the EU should have more than enough shots to hit its vaccination targets if the expected and agreed deliveries from other suppliers were met, regardless of the situation with AstraZeneca.

The EU official, who spoke to Reuters on condition of anonymity, confirmed that AstraZeneca planned to deliver about 40m doses in the first quarter, again less than half the 90m shots it was supposed to supply.

AstraZeneca warned the EU in January that it would fall short of its first-quarter commitments due to production issues. It was also due to deliver 30m doses in the last quarter of 2020 but did not supply any shots last year because its vaccine had yet to be approved by the EU.

All told, AstraZeneca's total supply to the EU could be about 130m doses by the end of June, well below the 300m it committed to deliver to the bloc by then.

The arrival of fewer AstraZeneca Covid vaccines in the EU in the second quarter has been factored into Irish forecasts that were updated on Tuesday, prime minister Micheál Martin said after Reuters reported the shortfall.

The EU has also faced delays in deliveries of the vaccine developed by Pfizer and BioNTech as well as Moderna's shot. So far they are the only vaccines approved for use by the EU's drug regulator.

AstraZeneca's vaccine was authorised in late January and some EU member states such as Hungary are also using Covid shots developed in China and Russia.

According to a German health ministry document dated 22 February, AstraZeneca is forecast to make up all of the shortfalls in deliveries by the end of September.

The document seen by Reuters shows Germany expects to receive 34m doses in the third quarter, taking its total to 56m shots, which is in line with its full share of the 300m doses AstraZeneca is due to supply to the EU.

The German health ministry was not immediately available for a comment.

If AstraZeneca does ramp up its output in the third quarter, that could help the EU meet its vaccination target, though the EU official said the bloc's negotiators were wary because the company had not clarified where the extra doses would come from.

"Closing the gap in supplies in the third quarter might be unrealistic," the official said, adding that figures on deliveries had been changed by the company many times.

The EU contracts stipulate that AstraZeneca will commit to its "best reasonable efforts" to deliver by a set timetable.

Earlier this month, AstraZeneca said it expected to make more than 200m doses a month globally by April, double February's level, as it works to expand global capacity and productivity.

2021.02.24 - Spotlight

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Feed your moths and hide your trousers: the expert guide to making clothes last forever

Fashion

Feed your moths and hide your trousers: the expert guide to making clothes last forever

Orsola de Castro is a fashion designer who became a re-use revolutionary. Now she has written a book to help people care for their clothes – and the planet

‘It is not just aesthetic, it is also profoundly moral’ ... Orsola De Castro. Photograph: Tamzin Haughton

There is a rip in the armpit of Orsola de Castro’s jumper. She raises her hand high in the air so I can see it: a slash of pale skin peeks from tomato-red

wool. This “memory hole”, as De Castro describes it, tells the story of the jumper’s long life. It was owned by her cousin, then her daughter. “It is very old Benetton, from when Benetton was still made in Italy. You can’t see it on Zoom, but this is really nice wool,” she says, arm still aloft.

De Castro, 54, is an activist, a lecturer, a former designer and a co-founder of not-for-profit movement Fashion Revolution. With the release of her book Loved Clothes Last, she has also become a kind of anti-Marie Kondo. She advocates “radical keeping”, not decluttering. “The only antidote to throwaway culture is to keep. So I am an obsessive keeper,” she says.

The book is full of startling facts about fashion’s impact on the planet and its people. It is “as much about mending systems as mending clothing”, says De Castro. She had just four months to write it, so her daughter Elisalex de Castro Peake, who runs the independent sewing-pattern label By Hand London, and her colleague Bronwyn Seier helped with the research. “That meant that all I had to do was vomit words, which were nestling inside me, quite pumping to get out.” Those words are still pumping in today’s interview: she talks rapidly and lyrically, her eyes shining behind thick-rimmed cat-eye glasses, her salt-and-pepper curls trembling as she gestures energetically.

De Castro grew up in Rome. Her mother is an artist and runs a traditional printmaking school in Venice. Her father, who died when she was two, was a businessman. Her Venetian grandmother, whom she calls Nonna Stanilla, taught her how to crochet at the age of six. She moved to London at 16, did her A-levels, then had the first of her four children at 18. She made clothes for years, first with a small line of upcycled hats, then printed textiles.

‘It is as much about mending systems as mending clothing’ ... Estethica’s Noir show at London fashion week in 2020. Photograph: Sarah Lee/The Guardian

Mainstream fashion attention came in 1997 when she founded the brand From Somewhere, which specialised in salvaging knitwear others deemed irreparable. Liv Tyler and Nicole Kidman were among the fans of her decaying cashmere cardigans decorated with tightly crocheted stitching.

“Some people love rescuing pets. I started off rescuing clothes – and have never stopped,” she says. Her design process was initially creative, not ethically driven. A eureka moment came while she was “climbing mountains of rubbish in a warehouse” to source holey jumpers. “I thought: OK, I am not just designing – I am recuperating,” she says. “There is a purpose. It is not just aesthetic, it is also profoundly moral in many ways.”

De Castro showed the brand at London fashion week, an experience she found terrifying. “The minute I became political – which I guess took me five minutes, because I could always feed waste and the environment into the conversation – there was, from some, a sense of: ‘You’re exposing my back yard,’” she says. Ethical fashion was very marginalised – “considered crunchy and inadequate” – but, gradually, things changed. One baby step

came in 2007, when De Castro was invited to launch Estethica, an ethical fashion exhibition inside London fashion week.

In 2013, she and Carry Somers, a former Estethica designer, founded Fashion Revolution after the Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh, in which 1,135 people died when a textile factory complex collapsed. De Castro calls it "the worst 'I told you so' ever".

'The only antidote to throwaway culture is to keep' ... Orsola de Castro *(left)* and Carry Somers at De Castro's studio in south London. Photograph: Katherine Anne Rose/The Observer

Fashion Revolution now has a presence in 92 countries. It is growing alongside mainstream awareness of the climate crisis and the inequities of global capitalism. In fashion, sustainability is finally de rigueur, at least on the surface. However, the horror stories that have emerged during the Covid pandemic – allegations of Pakistani workers earning 29p an hour while making clothes for companies including Boohoo, and employees in Leicester working in unsanitary conditions without social distancing or hand sanitiser; garment makers in developing countries facing homelessness and hunger as brands cancel orders – have demonstrated that injustices remain deeply ingrained.

De Castro sees parallels between Rana Plaza and Covid: “It has highlighted the horrendousness, so I think there is a chance for many of the real issues around sustainability to be tackled. We’ve got a moment in time in which to operate before, unfortunately, we will forget about it again.” Developing a long-term mindset is one way to be part of the movement; here, she explains how to do it.

Be careful what you buy in the first place

“Your first habit should be turning your clothes inside out and reading the label,” says De Castro. Learning a bit about fabrics can be useful. For example, “polyester sheds millions of microfibres”, she says. “It has been found in the bottom of the ocean and the top of Everest. Every time you wash a piece of polyester, about 500,000 microfibres are released. So, how do you buy polyester? You buy something that doesn’t need to be frequently washed. You don’t buy polyester underpants; you buy a polyester overcoat that you can learn how to sponge-clean.”

Wash less often

Understanding the cleaning demands of different materials is ‘a wisdom we have lost’, says De Castro. Photograph: Adrian Ilie/Getty Images/EyeEm

Overwashing can send garments to an early grave. “Before the washing machine, washing was really arduous and laborious,” she says. “Women would do anything not to have to wash the family’s clothes and the level of invention of how to delay that wash is, in itself, literature. So brilliant: all the sponging, spot-cleaning, putting in the sun to bleach.”

Many of these techniques, De Castro says, are easier than you might think: “The majority of stains can be removed with a quick damp sponging.” She also advocates thoroughly sniff-testing a worn garment and putting it back on the shelf whenever possible. Examining washing instructions is important, too. “We all used to know that you can wash cotton, but wool will shrink. It’s a wisdom that we had and have lost – and need again.”

This is just as important for fast fashion as designer clothing, says De Castro, because price is not always an indicator of longevity. In her experience, a robustly made bra from the high street is likely to outlast most delicate, lacy designer underwear – if treated properly. However posh your pants are, she recommends retaining some of the water after a bath or a shower and hand-washing them.

Reframe decluttering

De Castro’s favourite quote is: “Nothing is created and nothing is destroyed, but everything is transformed,” attributed to Antoine Lavoisier, one of the progenitors of modern chemistry. “The fact that there is no ‘away’ is a chemical truth, not an activism ruse,” she says. “For every clearout, stuff goes into landfill or into an incinerator.” These landfills, she says, are often in countries “where regulations are way less stringent and therefore toxic materials are likely to decompose in a more harmful way. Often, decluttering yourself means cluttering up someone else’s life or land.”

Try a moth decoy

‘Woo, do they love my Shetland!’ A common clothes moth. Photograph: Tomasz Klejdysz/Alamy

Keep a sacrificial lamb – an old jumper or a ball of yarn in a fabric moths will love – that can get chewed in your wardrobe while other knits remain intact. You will need to experiment on fabric, De Castro says. “I don’t know if moths are regional, but camel wool does it for my moths. Shetland is another one – woo, do they love Shetland! I feed my moths like I feed my cats.”

Hide your clothes

“I have a game I play with myself. I hide things from myself for a long time. I put them in a bag and put it under the bed,” says De Castro. “I hide things that are not right for me, whether that’s because your body changes, your mind changes or trends change.” She says that, when she opens them, after about five years, she often loves them “beyond description”: “Two years ago, I rediscovered a skirt – I could never remember hiding it in the first place. Now I wear it incessantly.”

Embellish your imperfections

Make a feature of wear and tear. Photograph: Panther Media/Alamy

De Castro is keen on “pareidolia” – spotting faces and shapes in clouds, stones and other objects. She does it with stains. When her children were little, they would find a shape in the stains on their clothing and “draw” around them, creating patterns with embroidery.

Another tactic is to hide stains and holes creatively using brooches. “I always have two or three in my handbag; in case of a stain, I can cover it up temporarily.” She has one jacket that looks “military-like” with its rows of brooches covering moth-chewed lapels. “It gives me so much confidence. I feel like a properly decorated human when I wear it.”

In her book, she advocates *boro*, the Japanese art of mending denim, by which layers of fabric scraps are used as patches and affixed with visible stitches. This is not because she is an expert (she does not own a pair of jeans and points to the extensive tutorials on YouTube), but because “the first time I saw a pair of *boro* jeans I thought: ‘Oh, that looks like distressed denim’ and the connection was immediate.” She wonders why people buy distressed jeans – particularly when the process of distressing them artificially is often terrible for the planet – when you can live in them instead and appreciate their elegant decay.

Don’t upcycle

It is tempting to think that we can transform our wardrobes by upcycling, but De Castro warns against it. Amateur upcycling, she says, often generates more waste. Unless you are happy making mistakes while you learn complex techniques, her suggestion is “do what you can do well, but otherwise I am an absolute believer that people should do their job”. If you don’t have the skills, but you do have upcycling fodder in your wardrobe – “Perhaps two of your mother’s evening gowns that don’t suit your taste or style; how about you put them together and redesign them into something?” – she advises seeking out fashion students or local tailors or clothiers to bring a new garment to life.

Rethink donating to a charity shop

Most charity shops are nowhere near able to sell the glut of donations. Many items of clothing are shipped abroad, “often to Africa or Haiti or eastern Europe, where textile skills have been lost because of too much of our rubbish ... We’re not donating, we’re dumping.”

She urges exploring other avenues first. Her preference is giving items to friends and family who will wear them. If you donate, “think of it as though you are selling something. Pick up a broken hem, or clean and polish your shoes, bearing in mind that you should only donate something the charity will be able to profit from. You have to be really competitive with yourself. Think: ‘I want to see that in the window!’” Lesser-quality textiles could be cut up for use as kitchen rags or taken to a textile recycling bank.

Normalise mending – at all price points

‘The idea that cheap fashion doesn’t warrant mending is horrendous’ – so try to fix damaged clothes. Photograph: deefish/Alamy

Buying natural fibres and robustly made clothing is financially difficult for many people, while the time-poor may balk at the idea of trawling charity shops, spot-cleaning and sewing. Nonetheless, De Castro insists that her longevity manifesto is all-encompassing: “The idea that cheap fashion doesn’t warrant mending is horrendous.” She says “it is precisely people of limited economic or time means for whom longevity should have been invented”.

Her ardent wish is that repairing – already on offer from some brands, such as Toast, but often at a price that is out of reach of most – goes mainstream. She imagines a world in which there are repair stations in shops from Sainsbury’s to Primark (“Please, Primark, are you reading this article?”). This would help busy people and also mean that “we would see and understand the culture of repair”.

One thing that can be done is writing to governments and companies to request such innovations. “One-hundred per cent of the population wears clothes, so we have a responsibility as consumers, but brands and governments have an obligation to make it as sustainable as possible,” she

says. “We need societal intervention from the brands that have already made such a fortune on us – it’s give-back time.”

Loved Clothes Last by Orsola de Castro is published by Penguin Life (£8.99). To order a copy, go to guardianbookshop.com. Delivery charges may apply

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Leading questions
Work & careers

I have no motivation to work. How can I change my attitude?

You don’t get joy from work – not many people do, says **Eleanor Gordon-Smith** – but you won’t get more of it sitting at the computer promising yourself you’ll work soon.

Eleanor Gordon-Smith

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‘If you’re going to hate your job you might as well love not doing it.’ The Thyiad by unknown painter (18th century). Photograph: Sputnik/Alamy

I have always had a problem with work, I don’t have much internal motivation to do any and a lot of anxiety about it. Now I am supposed to

be working from home I feel even more disengaged. I get up at 11am, then procrastinate around the internet for a few hours.

I do appreciate having a salary and it would logically make sense to try and keep my job. My colleagues are all running themselves ragged working and home schooling and all that stuff. I hate the idea of all that rushing about. How can I change my attitude, and persuade myself do a few hours work every day?

Eleanor says: The answer to how to change your attitude depends on why you want to. There are three scenarios that I can imagine.

Scenario one: you are genuinely at risk of losing your job. The task then is to change your behaviour, not your attitude. Brute force it: install distraction-blocking software, put your phone in a box and tape the lid on, unplug the internet at the wall. Do the work first thing in the day, stop as soon as it's done, and just aim for mediocrity – set a timer and see how quickly you can get it over with. If you're really on the edge of losing money and you don't find that motivating, consider talking to a professional – many mental health problems feel like laziness before you learn their real name.

Scenario two: you want this to change because other people have to do the work that you didn't. I think you already know it isn't fair to make your ragged colleagues lives' worse so that your life can be easier – so try to keep that knowledge front of mind as you open another browser window. Change your password to the name of the exhausted mother on your team, stick a Post-it on your screen with a list of people who suffer if you choose not to work.

But the third scenario is I suspect the most common. In scenario three, the real world bears very few marks of your laziness. Your tasks eventually get done, nobody really knows what they were or when they were due, and the pay comes in.

Then listen: nothing needs to change. This is not bad. You do not need to do anything more at work than leave the to-do list clean for other people. If you can do that by clocking in at 1pm and out at 4pm, do. The world is full of what David Graeber called "bullshit jobs"; jobs where the only thing

accomplished by going to work is *that you are at work*, filing reports and returning emails and scheduling meetings about the reports and the emails. That this is supposed to take 50 hours a week is an idea as senselessly dogmatic as the idea that work for work's sake has moral virtue. You pay for both with your one non-replenishable resource: your time.

If you're in this scenario the only thing that needs to change is your attitude towards your attitude. You don't get joy from work – not many people do – but you won't get more of it sitting at the computer promising yourself you'll work soon. You just condemn yourself to a potentially infinite chain of minutes in which you never quite decide to not work, so you never quite get to live, either. Sixty individual minutes of slack-jawed screen-anaesthesia is a lot less fun than just deciding to take the hour off. So own it: decide not to work and fill your time in a deliberate way. If you're going to hate your job you might as well love not doing it.

Odd couple: can a leftie comic teach a Tory baroness standup?

Culture

Odd couple: can a leftie comic teach a Tory baroness standup?

She used to chair the Conservatives. He used to perform in his underpants. Could Nick Helm turn Sayeeda Warsi into a comedian?

Michael Segalov

Wed 24 Feb 2021 01.00 EST Last modified on Wed 24 Feb 2021 01.29 EST

‘I’m going to make you look good and I don’t want that’ … Helm with Warsi, as part of Channel 4’s Stand Up to Cancer special. Photograph: Ray Burmiston/Channel 4

A Tory baroness and a leftwing comedian walk into a bar. As setups for a punchline go, it sounds fairly promising. But on day one of filming, neither Sayeeda Warsi nor Nick Helm saw the funny side of their pairing. Helm, star of BBC sitcom Uncle and a panel show regular, was one of five comedians tasked with mentoring a famous face, helping them to write an original five-minute routine which they would then perform in front of a live audience, for a Stand Up to Cancer special on Channel 4.

“We were given the list of names quite late on,” says the 40-year-old comic over Zoom. As well as Warsi, it included broadcaster the Rev Richard Coles, Love Islander Curtis Pritchard, and Happy Mondays frontman Shaun Ryder. “When I first looked at the names,” says Helm, “I thought I’d be OK if I got anyone other than the baroness. When they paired us up, I had a sort of existential crisis.”

Helm wasn’t just worried that they’d have next to nothing in common, which would make coaching tough. There had been some noise in the standup world when the show was announced, he explains, with some accusing producers of taking work for standups and giving it to celebrities. “I thought that was ridiculous,” says Helm, “as it was actually giving work to comedians, including me, who haven’t had a lot of work this year.”

What’s more, filming was initially delayed by Covid, and by the time it kicked off he felt rusty. Helm’s biggest concern, however, was that he might look like a sellout: his views are fiercely progressive, even if he generally steers clear of politics in his material. “If I do my job well,” Helm recalls telling his partner, “then I’m going to make you look really good. And I don’t want that: I didn’t want my entire industry to think I’m a Tory turncoat.”

‘The craziness of the party’ … Warsi with David Cameron. Photograph: Mark Large/ANL/Rex/Shutterstock

“You should have seen Nick’s face!” says Warsi, jumping in on our call with a grin. “Within 30 seconds, he’d told me I was the person he least wanted!” Warsi, too, had some reservations. She wasn’t hugely familiar with Helm, so did a bit of research and soon concluded that he didn’t seem a natural fit for a woman who isn’t just a Tory but – for much of her life at least – has also seen herself as a stiff-upper-lipped, small-c conservative. “When I saw Nick running around the stage in his underpants on YouTube,” she says, “I thought, ‘God no!’ But I’m a politician, so I was polite when I met him. Nick was less so.”

Over the course of five sessions, though, their perspectives started to shift – if not on a political level, then a personal one. Helm’s obnoxious and loud onstage persona is markedly at odds with his more quiet and sensitive self. A trip they made to the one-bed in Yorkshire where Warsi grew up was just one sign of many that, while she might be a former chair of the Conservative party, this Muslim woman with northern working-class roots isn’t your run-of-the-mill Tory. Pretty quickly, they both saw these apparent contradictions had the makings of great material.

Still, it took a while for Warsi to loosen up. Both found the process frustrating. In an effort to draw Warsi out of her politician's shell, Helm dressed her up in increasingly absurd fancy dress, and encouraged her to dig deep and get angry. And then something clicked. In an empty rehearsal room, Warsi put down her notes and went off-script, letting rip with pent-up anger and frustration.

> Up there on stage, I realised I could say what I wanted and get away with it

"There is no way I'm going to let these posh bastards make me feel like I do not belong," she yelled, referring to her party colleagues. "And then you want to talk to me about Muslims, as if somehow they're just one big monolithic block. This blob that walks around and speaks for each other, having conversations about taking over the world. Have you ever met a Muslim? You get fucking two Muslims in a room you get six opinions. Most Muslims could not organise a piss-up in a fucking mocktail bar."

It's not hard to see where this tirade came from. For years, Warsi has been fighting what has appeared at times to be a one-woman war against Islamophobia in the Conservative party. Boris Johnson has been repeatedly accused of prejudice against Muslims. A 2020 report by Hope Not Hate found almost 60% of Conservative members believe myths about "no-go areas in Britain where sharia law dominates and non-Muslims cannot enter". Some 57% expressed negative views about Muslims; 21% registered very negative attitudes. In the past, Warsi has said her membership of the party is like being in an "abusive relationship".

"Comedy," says Warsi, "is a space where you can do things that politicians cannot. Up there, I realised I could say what I wanted and get away with it." Take, she says, the number of times she's sat in meetings and listened to "those 'Londonistan' theories". Warsi finds such notions of Muslim takeover farcical, given "we can't even agree on a day for Eid, or how to wash for rituals. So I talked about that on stage: about being a recovering Tory, about being stuck inside the Conservative party and trying to keep my sanity."

I wonder if raising all this on national TV is a last resort, an act of desperation even. Warsi's demands for action, after all, appear to have been all but ignored when she has made them in the press or in parliament. And this will be her biggest platform yet. "I don't think that was the reason for doing it," she says, "but I definitely learned that comedy is an incredibly powerful medium to have debates we just aren't having in politics."

Helm on stage … 'We've had hundreds of years of right-wing comedy. Most of them are either dead or banned now'. Photograph: Gordon Rutter/Alamy

She's quick to add that laughing about the absurdity of her situation is nothing new. She has always done it – but privately. "Whenever we get together, as women or Muslims, we tell loads of inappropriate jokes," she says. "And with Conservatives, we talk about the craziness of the Conservative party and where it seems to be heading. It was freeing to finally laugh about it all so publicly."

Our conversation turns to the politics of the comedy world itself. With the BBC's new director-general Tim Davie reportedly planning a cull of the Corporation's leftwing comedy shows, has this experience has left Helm wanting to see more rightwing comics on screen? "We've had hundreds of years of rightwing comedy," he says, rolling his eyes. "Most of them are either dead or banned now. And it's the Tories who are in power, so it makes

sense that satire is aimed at them. You deconstruct authority figures and challenge the establishment. And they are the establishment." If you want more rightwing comedians, he says, then let leftwing people govern the country for a change.

"Being to the left of politics also means you're more likely to be speaking for the underdog," Warsi chimes in, "whereas Conservatives preserve the status quo. And the status quo meant women would have been marginalised, black people would have been marginalised, gay people would have been marginalised. They're the groups punching up through comedy. Naturally it lends itself to the left."

> I've not met a Tory politican before. But I can say I at least get on with one of them

As someone who grew up on a diet of Mind Your Language, It Ain't Half Hot Mum and Alf Garnett, Warsi is glad that comedy has changed. "I look at what my parents used to watch and think, 'No, it was fricking racist, it was horrible. It was laughing at you not with you.'"

By the time Warsi's performance came round, the pair had clearly grown fond of each other. Helm brims with pride backstage as he watches his protegee wax lyrical to a crowd. Certainly, their vibe on our Zoom call is more old married couple than warring politicos. "I've not met a Tory politician before," Helm says, "so I won't make blanket statements. But I can say I at least get on with one of them."

Granted, he adds, this has been in a very limited and specific way, given that they weren't allowed to communicate off camera. "But still," he says, "we won't get anywhere as a society unless we listen to each other. And we managed it from different ends of the spectrum." Directing his remarks to Warsi, he adds: "Well, I suppose you're really more in the middle."

Warsi found it revelatory, too. During filming, Helm coined her a catchphrase that she now tries to live by: "I'm the baroness, bitches." She now uses it to psych herself up in both her professional and personal life. Warsi even emailed the prime minister to brief him about her material on the

show. He has yet to respond, not that she's bothered. "I'm going to be 50 in March," she says. "And that's been on my mind. I wanted to do something out there, change how I live my life. Nick made me do and say things I wouldn't dare to. And considering my age, that felt incredibly liberating."

This newfound freedom shines through in her set, in which Warsi pulls no punches. She riffs on how the government are "starving kids", takes pot-shots at the "batshit stuff" her Tory colleagues in parliament are doing, and ends on a gag about life on the Isis kill list. "Am I bothered?" she says with a smile. "Am I eff – because Isis needs to know that I'm the baroness, bitches."

• Stand Up and Deliver is on Channel 4 at 9pm on Thursday 25 February and Thursday 4 March. Click here for more information on Stand Up to Cancer.

‘Tonight will be a great feast’: My mountain rescue in Croatia

Travel encounters
Adventure travel

‘Tonight will be a great feast’: My mountain rescue in Croatia

In our third travel encounter, the writer is battered by a blizzard in the Velebit mountains but saved by Tomaš and his homemade wine

Nick Hunt

Wed 24 Feb 2021 01.30 EST Last modified on Wed 24 Feb 2021 01.32 EST

Tomaš leads the way the morning after an evening of carousing. Photograph: Nick Hunt

The blizzard hit me about two hours after I'd started climbing the mountain. A furious wind drove through the pine trees, making their trunks writhe and groan, and an icy spindrift erased all trace of the landscape below: the foothills of the Velebit mountains and Croatia's many-islanded Adriatic coastinwinter.

From lower ground, the snow had looked like a decorative touch to the mountaintops, and stupidly I had never expected to find myself inside it. But now I was in the midst of a snowstorm, shocked by the violence of the air, watching the trail ahead of me rapidly vanishing into whiteness.

Croatia map

Ironically, wind was the reason I was climbing this mountain. For months I had been following the invisible pathways of Europe's named winds – northern England's Helm, Switzerland's Föhn, France's Mistral and others – to write about how they affect peoples, landscapes and cultures. I had spent the previous fortnight walking from north-east Italy through Slovenia and Croatia in search of the mighty Bora, the freezing, gale-force northerly that sweeps this coastline, ripping up olive trees by their roots and tearing tiles off rooftops.

I hadn't found the Bora yet, but I'd heard that on this mountain's summit was a weather station called Zavižan, and I wanted to consult its resident meteorologist. I may have been looking for wind as part of my research, but not *this* wind, a raging bully that threatened to end my journey at any minute. Just as I was considering turning back to the safety of lower ground, I heard the sound of huffing breath approaching through the snow.

"Tomaš," said a beaming, purple-faced man in his 60s, whipping off one frosted glove to pump my hand.

"You are going to Zavižan? We will not be alone. Behind me are 20 people. Tonight will be a great feast, too much wine."

And then he said something I'll never forget: "There are no evil people on mountains."

Zavižan mountain hut at sunset in clearer conditions. Photograph: Nino Marcutti/Alamy

No evil people, just evil weather. Past the treeline, it got worse. In the blinding whiteout that lay above, I followed Tomaš's tracks through the snow, placing my boots inside his bootprints, which is a peculiarly intimate way to get to know a stranger.

He walked at a relentless pace, never stopping to look back, and it was all I could do to keep his silhouette in sight as he pounded through the murk to the summit of Zavižan. Half an hour later we were drying ourselves by a wood-burning stove inside the weather station, which also functioned as a shelter for climbers. Without further ado he pulled out bread, cheese and a battered plastic bottle of his rough but delicious homemade wine.

> During the night that followed, the feasting and drinking gave way to folksongs, dancing … and legends of the Bora

Shortly afterwards, the room was packed. Tomaš's friends had arrived, along with another climbing party, and the table was piled with pickles, meat and homemade alcohol. During the long night that followed, the feasting and drinking gave way to folksongs, drunken dancing, nostalgic anthems about communist Yugoslavia and, in the small hours, legends of the Bora, which I

scribbled down in my notebook in increasingly illegible handwriting. The grumpy meteorologist seemed obscurely suspicious of me, and in the end was the only one who didn't want to talk about the weather.

In the morning, Tomaš and I set out down the mountain alone. My plan was to follow the Velebit range south for the next two days, sleeping in other huts on the way, but overnight the weather conditions had grown even worse. A bellowing white cloud whipped around the mountaintop, obliterating everything, and my new friend persuaded me to follow him back to the lower world.

Another mountain hut amid the Velebit range. Photograph: Ivan Coric/Alamy

Once below the treeline, however, we came across a smaller trail that seemed to lead in the same direction by a more sheltered route.

"I will walk with you for 30 minutes," Tomaš said, sceptically.

"If it looks possible you can go on. If not, we both turn back."

And with those words he charged ahead even faster than before, crashing through snowdrifts and leaping over rocks and tangled roots. Half an hour

went by, an hour, two hours, until, abruptly, he stopped. “The path is good,” he said. “I think you will make it.”

Later, it occurred to me that perhaps his ferocious pace was a test to make sure I was fit enough. But I still had a long way to walk, and our farewell was brief.

“Do you have food? Water?” he asked.
“Yes.”
“Matches to make fire?”
“Yes.”
“Wine?”
“No …”
“You must have wine! This is for the end of the day,” he said, handing me a bottle. We shook hands, and seconds later he had vanished among the trees.

His confidence in my abilities turned out to be misplaced: I got lost almost immediately, was plunged into a blizzard again, and reached the next hut cold, wet and exhausted as darkness was falling. But there are no evil people on mountains. And at least I had some wine.

Nick Hunt is the author of Where the Wild Winds Are: Walking Europe’s Winds from the Pennines to Provence (Nicholas Brealey/Hachette), available to buy at Guardian Bookshop

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'Like moving a herd of elephants': San Francisco's history of houses on wheels

San Francisco

'Like moving a herd of elephants': San Francisco's history of houses on wheels

This weekend, the city moved a Victorian house six blocks – a practice that has continued for more than a century

Moving a Western Addition house in the 1970s in San Francisco. Photograph: Dave Glass

Hundreds of San Franciscans lined the streets on Sunday – phones drawn and ready – to glimpse a unique procession slowly making its way through the city. “Ladies and gentlemen, please stand on the sidewalk,” a police speaker blared. “There’s a house coming down the street.”

The two-story, 5,170-sq-ft green Victorian, known as the Englander House, had spent more than a century in the heart of San Francisco. But for years it stood vacant and fell into disrepair, sandwiched behind a gas station and loomed over by new apartment buildings. The city, which suffers from a housing shortage, was ready to build a 48-unit building in its place.

But instead of demolishing the beautiful building, teams lifted it off its foundation, put it on wheels, and heaved it to a new home six blocks away. Tree-trimmers, city workers, and excited observers joined the parade through sharp turns and narrow misses with balconies and light poles, as the six-bedroom house inched along at no more than 1mph.

The Englander House was moved to a new location about six blocks away. Photograph: Noah Berger/AP

Carla Schlemminger and Corrina Chow pose for a photo in front of the house. Photograph: Brittany Hosea-Small/Reuters

The move, which cost the owner, Tim Brown, roughly $400,000 (£280,000), was no easy feat. It was the first time a Victorian had been relocated in roughly 50 years, according to the San Francisco Historical Society – but it is certainly not the first time ever. San Francisco has a long history of relocating buildings, often in similarly dramatic fashion.

In the 1970s, 12 houses were moved from the city's Western Addition. Dave Glass documented the process. Photograph: Dave Glass

Even as far back as 1886, Samuel Clemens – better known by his pen name, Mark Twain – mockingly chronicled an ill-fated move for the local newspaper, the Daily Morning Call, as SFGate's Andrew Chamings noted in an article about the history of house moving late last year. "An old house got loose from her moorings last night and drifted down Sutter Street towards Montgomery," the author wrote, adding that, for several days, "the vagrant two-story frame house has been wondering listlessly about Commercial Street".

Back then, horses had to do the lugging. Crews used boards, ties, and oiled planks to slowly pull the houses over San Francisco's hills. It seems a difficult way to do things, but Diane C Donovan, who detailed the centuries of house-moving in her book San Francisco Relocated, found it was a fairly common practice. Some homes were even brought to the city by ship before being transported across town.

The city's most famous move – and probably its biggest – happened in the 1970s, when 12 Victorian homes were spared from destruction during San Francisco's Western Addition redevelopment plan. Two decades prior, the San Francisco redevelopment agency had set out to clear an entire community and build new housing that would attract affluent residents. Home to mostly Black and immigrant families, the Western Addition neighborhoods were slated for demolition in what is now considered one of the most egregious acts of gentrification. In the end, more than 800 businesses were closed and 4,729 households had to leave their homes. Roughly 2,500 Victorian homes were torn down.

Roughly 2,500 Victorian homes were torn down but 12 were saved. Photograph: Dave Glass

A worker signals to a truck driver pulling the Englander House through San Francisco on Sunday. Photograph: Noah Berger/AP

But 12 were spared. With public anger growing over the Victorians being wiped from the city, the redevelopment agency agreed to auction some of the houses and transport them out of the area.

“It was like moving a herd of giant elephants – and about the same speed,” said a former redevelopment agency official, Carlo Middione, in a video about the experience, published by FoundSF, a local history organization. The project took nearly a month to complete.

‘People who lived nearby would open their windows and see a big Victorian house passing by,’ Glass said. Photograph: Dave Glass

“It was a big spectacle,” said Dave Glass, a photographer whose parents emigrated from Poland and raised him in the Western Addition. They moved out to the Sunset District by the beach when his childhood home was demolished. Years later, he documented the relocation of the houses that were saved. “People who lived nearby would open their windows and see a big Victorian house passing by. It was really something to see.”

The Englander House makes its way through San Francisco. Photograph: Noah Berger/AP

The process has not changed much, Glass said. Photograph: Dave Glass

Glass was also out watching the Englander House move through the city last weekend. The process, he said, hadn't changed much. But he thinks the sentiment has. He lamented how the structures had not been valued in previous decades. "People didn't give a damn about the Victorian houses,"

he said, noting that even though dozens have been preserved, thousands were destroyed. “Now they are prized.”

Glass hopes it stays that way, that San Franciscans will have enough pride in the city’s history and aesthetic to protect the Victorians – even if that means making big moves. “We have these tall, ornate, redwood buildings,” he said. “Nobody else has those.”

Hear us out: readers defend their favourite hated movies

Hear me out
Movies

Hear us out: readers defend their favourite hated movies

As our writers continue to defend their favourite maligned movies, Guardian readers shared their picks for impassioned defence

Guardian readers

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Madonna in Dick Tracy, Tom Cruise in Far and Away, Naomi Watts in Diana and Taylor Swift in Cats. Composite: Alamy/AP/Allstar

Cats

Happily too. The CGI is a moot point. What stands up for me is a heartfelt story of being an outsider, belonging and creating the family you need. I thought it was a true and lovely film and one I could easily rewatch. **Juicylicious**

Sure, there's no plot to speak of, but that's beside the point. The movie is a lot of fun. It's just one big boffo production number after another, with crazy visual effects. The wide-eyed ingenue is very wide-eyed throughout, Taylor Swift's scene is wonderful, and Judi Dench looks like a cross between the Cowardly Lion and the beast in La Belle et la Bête. **dmitrir**

You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger

The best of Woody Allen's London films. Brilliantly plotted. Notting Hill looks great in it. Should have made Lucy Punch a star. **CrumlinBruiser**

Hudson Hawk

Photograph: Allstar/COLUMBIA TRISTAR

I understand the studios tried to retool the marketing after Bruce Willis was unexpectedly successful as a macho man action hero in Die Hard, confusing the audience who sat down to see a goofy comedy movie. And goofy it certainly is, but with it's fun back-and-forth between the heroes and the astonishing scene chewing by the villains, it was a fun film back then, and a fun film right now. Plus Italy looks great. Plus James Coburn! **SoleTwin**

Massively flawed but Bruce Willis at the height of his fame (both a positive and a negative here to be honest), Richard E Grant & Sandra Bernhard in scenery chewing form and the one-for-the-ages museum heist/singalong to Swinging On A Star. **mikebhoy**

Streets of Fire

I know it's not a good movie by any measure – it's definitely a lot of style over substance – but I like it anyway. It bombed when it was released in 1984, and unlike some other "bad" movies I enjoy that went on to become cult favourites, its reputation does not seem to have improved over the years. **witchland**

Far and Away

One of my all time favourite films is Ron Howard's Far and Away which everyone mocked and loathed from the day it opened, but to me is a fabulously entertaining and exciting romantic adventure.

It was obviously a big influence on Titanic which is essentially the exact same film with extra added sinking ocean liner, and for that film James Horner totally nicked Enya's Far and Away end credits song Book Of Days.

People often complain that Hollywood doesn't make 'em like they used to, but when Ron Howard delivers a hugely old fashioned and unashamedly "Hollywood" movie everyone complains! **AnwenWilson**

The Lady in the Water

M Night Shyamalan brings an intriguing , gripping and original fantasy quest story to a Philadelphia apartment block. Giamatti is engaging and funny, and is backed by a magnificent cast. Fans know that there is no other film quite like this one, while cynics who hate it can often be seen bitterly gnawing their fist as they dimly realise that they are no longer capable of experiencing enchantment. **alexito**

Aeon Flux

I am a fan of the original cartoon from the 90s, and I know the big film version is very different, but as far as I'm concerned, it is a pretty decent and fun sci-fi action film that is a bit underrated. **JoeMath**

Mommie Dearest

Photograph: 06/Allstar/PARAMOUNT

Although it has the unfashionable aesthetics of a 1981 American made for television film, it's both a decent adaptation of Christina Crawford's memoir and a realistic portrayal of that sort of borderline personality disordered type of mother. Speaking from experience here, Faye Dunaway's performance with its hairpin transitions from mannered "normalcy" to manic self-pitying

rage is brave and brilliant and true and honors the real-life horror that too many of us have witnessed as dependent children. **Lollywillowes**

End of Days

I love it because in my head I like to think that the film-makers intended to make an absurdist black comedy that is deliberately dumb and overblown. If you watch it that way then it is hugely entertaining. Of course, the film-makers were actually being deadly earnest and that somehow only makes it more fun. **Guffmonkey_McBawbag**

Dick Tracy

I loved it as a 12-year-old and was sufficiently taken with it to get a compendium of the comics which were fantastic. I'm now reading them all in date order as they are reissued (and unedited – some pretty bad stereotypes in there, but they recognise it and mention it in the forewords).

It did what it set out to do, brought over the top characters and baddies v goodies to life, and even Madonna is good in it because it is so camp and pulpy it doesn't matter if your acting is a bit rubbish. **Bilbicus**

Transformers

It's part fun, nostalgic coming of age story (that's Spielberg's bit) and part extraordinary spectacle (Bay's). The sequels get increasingly soulless and offensive, but this is just what it needs to be, a good dumb colourful smash-up. **jacobheath**

Take Me Home Tonight


Photograph: Photo Credit: Ron Batzdorff/SM

I know that it's been panned for being juvenile and stupid with stupid characters. Personally I could really relate to Matt (Topher Grace) who's got an education but doesn't really know what to do with his life. Awkward people doing awkward things are also quite relatable. Most importantly I was entertained. The humor never reaches the peaks of something truly intellectually stimulating, but it's a fun ride. Sometimes that's all you need from a movie. **Basiliskstare**

Sex Lives of the Potato Men

I can't think of a film that was more a victim of a snobby, class-ridden critical vendetta than this one. It's not exactly flawless, but it didn't deserve to face that line of smug, middle-class critics queuing up to give it a good kicking. I wonder if, in a few years time and with a swanky extra-laden Blu-ray release, it might be ripe for a critical reappraisal. **davidabsalom**

Cutthroat Island

Huge set pieces, brilliant actors let loose, fantastic soundtrack featuring a strong female protagonist. Fundamentally crass and with more than questionable dialogue? of course! It's a pirate film! And a laugh-out-loud

enjoyable one, once you get rid of all the prejudices against it! Arrrrrrr! **GonzaloCotelo**

Equilibrium

I always felt that Equilibrium was rather unfairly forgotten about. Yes, it was another early 2000's Matrix knock-off, but it was quite entertaining, especially the "gun-fu" fight scenes. Reign of Fire was pretty enjoyable too. It had some good special effects for such a small budget film and Christian Bale again appearing as a gruff, post apocalyptic anti-hero, a role is acting style seems to favour. **Timcab**

Diana

It seemed pretty sympathetic but also made her seem human. It wasn't a hagiography. I've no interest in royalty but I like history and the two can get intertwined. This film was treated pretty shabbily but that perhaps came with the territory of making a film on this subject. **Haigin88**

Quantum of Solace

Photograph: Allstar/UNITED ARTISTS/Sportsphoto Ltd./Allstar

Sure, it lacks the goofy gadgets and the same scale that's expected with Bond films, but neither did Royale, and everyone loves that film. The more subdued tone provides a Bond that's at his most vulnerable and therefore a film where each of his mistakes hits all the harder – there's a true sense that the lives Bond fails to save (or takes himself) actually have weight, which is so uncommon in not only the Bond series but the spy genre as a whole. Daniel Craig and Judi Dench remain great and the addition of Olga Kurylenko is a welcome one too, her character providing Bond a glimpse at a younger, more innocent version of himself that he thought forgotten (adding to that more human depiction of the super spy). On top of all that, Alicia Keys and Jack White's theme is easily the franchise's best – the instrumentals reflecting the cool, suave Bond we've known since Fleming's novels and the lyrics highlighting his newfound vulnerability. **FergalHarte**

It started on stage
Comedy

Garth Marenghi: how the Edinburgh award winner found his Darkplace

Our series exploring the stage origins of hit comedies continues with the cult hospital horror show that scared up audiences to become a fringe sensation

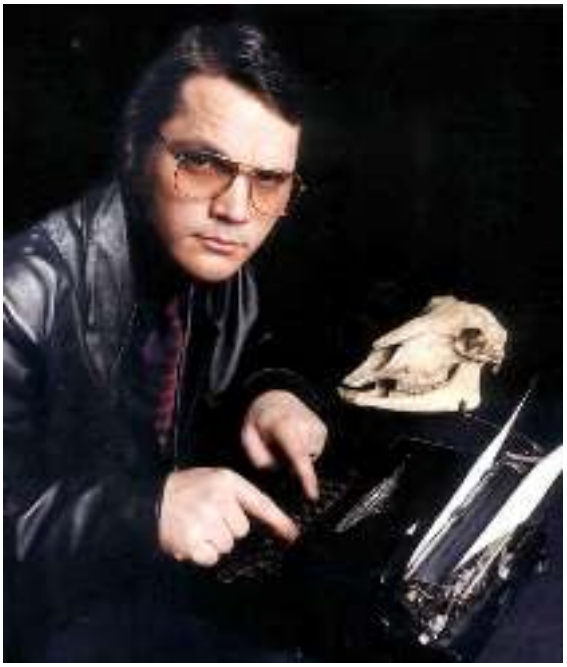
Rachael Healy

Wed 24 Feb 2021 01.00 EST Last modified on Wed 24 Feb 2021 01.02 EST

Garth Marenghi's Darkplace … from left, Matt Berry, Richard Ayoade, Matthew Holness (as Garth Marenghi) and Alice Lowe. Photograph: Channel 4 Picture Publicity

Garth Marenghi, serious horror writer and self-described "master of the macabre", was born in 1950 in east London. Yet it wasn't until the mid-90s that he first appeared in public, reciting a passage from one of his many horror novels (he's "one of the few people … who've written more books than they've read") at a Cambridge University cabaret night.

Long before Garth Marenghi's Darkplace – the Channel 4 series broadcast in 2004 – the prolific author was a star of the stage. Matthew Holness, the writer, actor and director behind the fictional horror writer, toured his Garth monologue with the Footlights. After university and temping by day, he then featured in the BBC sketch show Bruiser but felt "slightly disillusioned" with sketches. Holness began writing with Richard Ayoade, trying something character-led and horror-based. It was time for Marenghi to rise again.



‘Sheer terror’ … Garth Marenghi at his writing desk. Photograph: PA

Garth Marenghi’s Darkplace is a show within a show – characters give talking-heads commentary on the 1980s hospital-based horror series in which they starred. That conceit started on stage, where Ayoade’s character, publisher Dean Learner, would introduce Marenghi and his latest theatrical horror production. (Later, they would even stay in character during press interviews.)

“This writer was doing a very serious horror show and couldn’t understand why audiences were laughing – he was convinced it was a nervous reaction to sheer terror,” Holness says.

In 2000, they began experimenting at north London’s Hen and Chickens theatre pub, where The Mighty Boosh ran an alternative comedy night. They met Matt Berry who later joined the TV show. “Matt was doing strange Victorian characters, the Boosh were doing frightening comedy. They were little horror events,” says Holness.

The actor, writer and director Alice Lowe starred in the stage and TV versions of Garth Marenghi. When Holness and Ayoade decided to develop an hour-long Marenghi play for the Edinburgh fringe, they recruited Paul King (now a Bafta-nominated director) as director and Lowe as performer.

Lowe hadn't done comedy before and remembers being baffled watching them "running around in masks" at the Hen and Chickens.

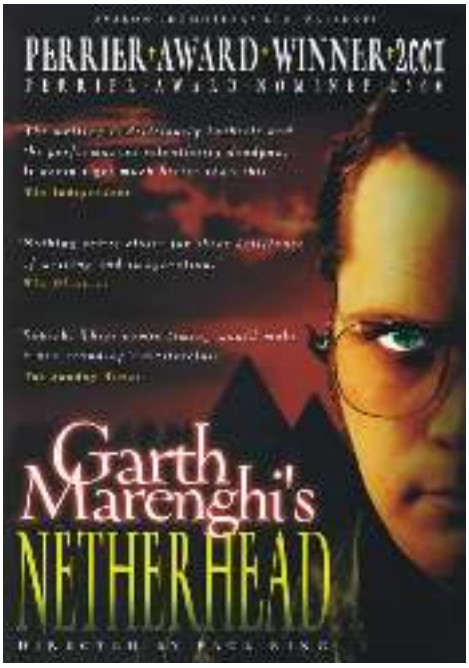
Lowe and King had devised theatre shows together at university and brought this approach to Garth Marenghi. When Lowe suggested playing an animal, her character became an animal expert, who would in turn play a seagull and "a sad camel that sings songs".

Spread the word … Paul King, Richard Ayoade, Matthew Holness and Alice Lowe in Edinburgh in 2000.

They created Garth Marenghi's Fright Knight, starring Marenghi as writer Neil Hack, whose muse is kidnapped by a monster. Lowe says: "It was about bad theatre, but every moment was considered."

By August 2000, they were in Edinburgh, performing to a near-empty room. While eating at a restaurant, they persuaded the waiting staff to come and watch. "They enjoyed it, but they were the only people there!" Lowe remembers. "That was my favourite gig," Holness says. "I always found the bad gigs more enjoyable because they fit with the idea that Garth's show was failing." These became rare. Word spread, shows sold out and Fright Knight was nominated for the Edinburgh Comedy award.

They decided to take another show to Edinburgh in 2001. In Garth Marenghi's Netherhead, Marenghi played Ken Dagless, descending into an Egyptian underworld to save his dead son. It featured deliberately bad props, including The Mind ("a papier maché brain on a broomstick with a cape around it") and a giraffe headdress that caused Lowe to corpse when it collapsed spectacularly.



Garth Marenghi's Netherhead flyer designed by James Bachman

Holness admits Netherhead was less fun – pressure was high following Fright Knight's success – but it too was nominated for the comedy award, and won. "That was amazing," says Lowe. "There was disbelief for me; there weren't many women at Edinburgh at that time. I never had plans to go into comedy or thought I would earn money being an actor. It was life-changing."

Moving to TV, the team retained creative control – they were allowed to shoot on film, edit, and Ayoade directed. Stage experiences of collaboration, rehearsing to perfection, and mastering doing stuff badly paid off. They discovered the right way to get it wrong on TV such as continuity errors and overlit faces. In one scene, Lowe suggested she be wheeled in on a platform with no explanation: "It was joyous to be able to do stuff like that."

Darkplace aired in 2004, relegated to a late-night weekday slot, and ratings were low. When the DVD was released in 2006, its popularity ballooned. Sadly, the chance for a second series (a parallel-universe Darkplace Hospital and snowed-in Christmas special) had passed. “I’d gone through the disappointment of having to say goodbye to it,” says Holness. “But we always knew it would have a following.”

> Things you find funny are potentially related to things you find frightening

Regardless, the Garth Marenghi stage stars forged fascinating careers. Ayoade won a Bafta for his role in The IT Crowd, wrote and directed films and music videos, presents The Crystal Maze, and is now writing his first children’s book. Lowe and Holness both continued creating work with hints of Marenghi-style weirdness and gloom. Lowe wrote, directed and starred in horror-comedy films Sightseers and Prevenge. Most recently, she was in the BBC Sounds series The Sink, a surreal escape into someone else’s dreams. Like Marenghi, it allowed for improvisation, with Lowe drawing on ASMR. “I could take it as strange as I liked. You dream of jobs like that,” she says. “In retrospect, the fact that they were open to me being odd as a female performer [in Garth Marenghi] set a course for my career.”

Lowe is set to shoot a reincarnation romcom, Timestalker, and Holness has a horror film in production. Likewise, he has weaved darkness and humour through his work, from starring in Scandi-noir parody Angstrom, to writing and directing Possum, a sinister exploration of childhood trauma. “Most of the stuff I’m writing now is serious horror,” he says. “But things you find funny are potentially related to things you find frightening.”

Art, unlocked: Italy's museums quietly reopen – in pictures

Visitors at the Vatican museum in Rome. Photograph: Maria Laura Antonelli/AGF/Rex/Shutterstock

2021.02.24 - Opinion

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Opinion
Brexit

Brexit is a machine to generate perpetual grievance. It's doing its job perfectly

Rafael Behr

The story of plucky Britain standing up to bullying Brussels spares leavers the discomfort of admitting they voted for a con

UK chief negotiator David Frost (left) looks on as Boris Johnson signs the Brexit trade deal at No 10, 30 December 2020: ‘Frost’s rapid elevation was propelled by personal devotion to the prime minister.’ Photograph: Leon Neal/AFP/Getty Images

Brexit has changed everything about Britain’s relationship with the European Union, and also nothing. For anyone trying to do business across borders newly gummed with bureaucracy, the comparison is stark and painful. But in politics, an old pattern is playing out – a cycle of suspicion and self-sabotage that began long before the 2016 referendum.

It starts with the belief that Britain does not depend on its neighbours for trade or anything else. That leads to neglect of the diplomacy required to make the partnership work. Going against the grain of economics and geography escalates every negotiation into a test of national self-esteem. Each adjustment for reality is resented as a surrender of sovereignty.

Euroscepticism is a machine for generating perpetual grievance. It works by making Brussels the enemy, spoiling relations and serving up the soured mood to a domestic audience as proof that the other side does not want to be friends.

Brexit has dismantled the institutional platform on which that drama used to be played, but it does not change the economic and strategic dynamics. The UK still needs things from Brussels, but it has lost the leverage it had from a seat at the EU summit table. This makes it harder for Boris Johnson to play the old double game of public belligerence and private compromise. (On that score, EU membership was the way previous prime ministers used to have their cake and eat it.)

Johnson has no interest in the practical side of European diplomacy. His 2019 promise to "get Brexit done" expressed a personal preference for changing the subject of British politics – a preference that chimed with the enervated public mood. Since Johnson only applies his brain to things when he can no longer hide from them, not talking about UK-EU relations allows him also to stop thinking about them.

That task has been outsourced to David Frost – formerly chief Brexit negotiator, now UK chair of the partnership council that oversees implementation of the EU deal. Frost was given a peerage last year, and his new role comes with a seat at cabinet. His rapid elevation was propelled by dogmatic Euroscepticism and personal devotion to the prime minister. He is a true believer in the cult of sovereignty. He was converted to the faith when his career in the Foreign Office stalled, then made zealous by the pursuit of an alternative career clinging to Johnson's coattails. Nowhere does his record speak of subtle or creative diplomacy.

Frost's appointment is not a malicious provocation, but a typical act of Johnsonian negligence. The prime minister likes to delegate the many aspects of leadership that bore him, but he trusts very few people (because he presumes his own tendency for deceit and betrayal is the norm). He needed someone, like Frost, who will obediently try to mop up the grief spilling out of his leaky, rickety EU deal.

Tension is already high over the Northern Ireland protocol, which creates a customs border in the Irish Sea. The mere existence of that trade barrier has infuriated unionists even before the full cost is felt. A "grace period", waiving some checks, expires at the end of March. The UK has demanded an extension on terms that amount to major renegotiation. The European

commission responds that Britain must honour the treaty it signed. And so the Brexit that was "done" turns out not to be done.

Were it not for the pandemic, loose ends and lost jobs would be making more headlines. Whether they would also be changing public opinion is a different question. Some enthusiasm is surely dropping into the chasm between Brexit as liberation theology and its real-world incarnation as rotting fish undelivered to a Calais market. But British political culture contains deep reserves of stoical resignation to adversity (especially other people's adversity). There is no simple road back, no better deal on the table, and it is easy for ministers to spin the pain mandated by their deal as aggression by vengeful Europeans.

Leavers will be attracted to that story because it spares them the discomfort of admitting that they voted for a con, and then made a prime minister of the con artist. Keir Starmer will not fight on that terrain since doing so gets him no affection in constituencies that were lost by Labour in 2019. Thus (in England, at least) the folly of Brexit is being buried for excavation some time in the future, perhaps by a different political generation.

It might happen sooner, but I suspect any shift in opinion on the EU will come only as a consequence of some wider collapse in Johnson's personal standing. He is the denial that people elected. For many voters, disillusionment with Brexit is downstream of disappointment with the whole "Boris" shtick in the flow of political events.

Meanwhile, there will be endless negotiations, largely unreported, except when they escalate into rows. At which point the rusty old template will be applied: plucky Britain standing up to bullying Brussels. It is the story the Eurosceptics used to tell when the UK was an EU member, but more potent because the 27-against-one dynamic that was a paranoid myth has become a fact. Over time, that dynamic will make it ever harder for the opposition to express a pro-European position without inviting the charge of siding with an enemy.

It is frustrating for remainers who still crave a moment of vindication, when the fraud is proved beyond doubt and the tide of opinion turns. But for that to happen, Brexit would have to be measured in terms of trade and

diplomacy. Those aren't the leavers' metrics. They long ago swapped economic argument for culture war bluster.

There is no defence of Johnson's deal if the ambition was serious advancement of the national interest. But there is another test. It is the one that matters most to the architects of Brexit, although they never admit it, even to themselves.

For the true believers, a good Brexit is one that keeps the grievance alive; that makes foreigners the scapegoat for bad government; that continues to indulge the twin national myths of victimhood and heroic defiance. Measured for that purpose, Johnson's pointless Brexit is perfect.

- Rafael Behr is a Guardian columnist

Opinion
Politics

Johnson is subdued but his dog is causing havoc. Are you thinking what I'm thinking?

Marina Hyde

Forget the spad wars at No 10 – the real drama is over Dilyn, the prime minister’s sexually incontinent canine

‘Think about it. That wild thing you see in the photographs, dragging Boris Johnson round, is actually Johnson himself.’ Photograph: Andrew Parsons/No 10 Downing Street

“I won’t be buccaneering with people’s lives.” I think you dropped an “any more”, prime minister. But hey – let’s not tell our sad stories. Last night was the big roadmap press conference, where Boris Johnson looked into our eyes and told us he just wanted to take things slowly. He respects us too damn much for anything else.

I know we’re supposed to say better-late-than-never, but honestly – there is something slightly galling about being lectured by this guy on the next long weeks and months of serious caution. I’m not saying I want to tear the pants out of it – fine, I want to completely tear the pants out of it – but you can see why the pace of release feels confusingly slow to some people. This, alas, is inevitable when you’re governed by a prime minister who doesn’t like to set boundaries.

For pretty much the entire pandemic, right up until about 10 minutes ago, Johnson has been the teacher who wants to be cool. You know the type – messes his hair up and calls you “mate”. High-fives you when you get a right answer but claims that, in many ways, there are no wrong answers. Tells you to call him by his first name. Deals with early speculative breaches

in discipline by announcing he's not going to send you to the headmaster, mate, because he comes at this stuff from different angles. Tells you to rip out the introduction to your pandemic textbooks.

Insists he's the same as you guys and totally gets what you're going through, in fact he actually feels it more deeply. Claims to have been expelled from three schools as a teen. Says he hates teaching because he's "about freedom". Rides a dirt bike. Raps Cardi B. Chaperones a school trip where 47 pupils die.

So yes, it was quite the spectacle watching Johnson come through Downing Street's Sars in their Eyes double doors and indicate that tonight, he was going to play the calm, authoritative setter of boundaries. Sorry, sir, but don't act like you didn't kill half of year 11.

The question on many people's lips – who on earth is this guy and what has he done with Boris Johnson? – made it off the lips of the Daily Mail's political editor, who inquired of the PM: "What's happened to you? Have you become a gloomster?"

It was at this point that Johnson said the buccaneering thing, and something about "the crocus of hope", and spring coming "both literally and metaphorically" (such a fabled wordsmith). He also claimed that "if you'd told me a few months ago" he'd be able to unlock at even this pace, then "I'd have struggled to believe you". Righto. Was this the few months ago that you were saying it would be normal by Christmas? Or the few months ago when you were refusing to lockdown despite it being blindingly obvious that it was urgent and necessary and that your failure to do it was going to cost thousands of lives and condemn us to months longer under the restrictions we're in now? Or the even fewer months ago when you were unlocking for Christmas? Or maybe one of the months in between? Or since?

Whichever it was, it's slightly unfortunate that at the same time Downing Street's training and makeover team are wheeling out this new, nerd-adjacent version of Johnson, the backstage machinations of his permanently dysfunctional court are spilling out in public. Disunity in his save-the-union unit has seen two resignations in the past fortnight, with one departed special

adviser's allies claiming it was on Carrie Symonds' instructions that Johnson furiously accused him of briefing against Michael Gove. Meanwhile, Johnson appointed unelected Brexit negotiator David Frost a minister, apparently to stop him from walking too.

Well now. I don't think we can pay the slightest attention to some unelected spads or unelected ministers criticising the prime minister's partner for being unelected.

Much more diverting is all the drama concerning Dilyn the dog, who is reportedly being used by Islington blogger Dominic Cummings "to fight a proxy war against the PM's fiancee". I can't believe that a) a nation run like this has the highest death toll in Europe and b) Dominic has time for briefings, having by now surely been snapped up by one of the big Silicon Valley companies.

And yet I read that Cummings reportedly holds a grudge against the Jack Russell cross, after it humped his leg at a No 10 away day. There is more – much more. The dog is said to have caused expensive damage to Chequers antiques, while according to the Mail "one visitor claims to have seen Dilyn 'mount' a stool made from the foot of an elephant shot by US president Teddy Roosevelt". Take a moment – I know I did.

In the Downing Street garden, Dilyn is said to have cocked his leg on some spad's handbag. "Dilyn is a much-put-upon animal who in a non-Covid world would have had his balls chopped off long ago," a No 10 aide explained to the Sunday Times. "It's not his fault that he is a bit exuberant." Right. Are we still talking about the dog?

And that was when it hit me. Maybe we're NOT still talking about the dog at all. In a very literal, very metaphorical sense – stay with this – is it possible that Boris Johnson's old larrikin spirit has transferred itself into Dilyn the dog?

Let's look at the evidence. We have a prime minister who suddenly appears vaguely housebroken. Meanwhile, we have a sexually incontinent dog who will fuck anything – even a trophy pouffe, or Dominic Cummings – and who is being extensively briefed against by factions unhappy with his

performance. It's surely the classic bodyswap comedy: "When he ingests a plot device, a struggling UK prime minister ends up in the body of his own resourceful and appealing rescue dog – and vice versa!"

Think about it. It's literally (and metaphorically) the only explanation that makes sense. That wild thing you see in the photographs, dragging Johnson round his daily Buckingham Palace runs, is actually Johnson himself. It was Johnson who pissed on the lady's handbag – huge Bullingdon Club energy, let's face it – and it was Johnson who wrecked the Chequers furniture and had it off with an elephant foot. The creature behind the lectern who's been trained to say "data not dates" for a chocolate drop is actually Dilyn.

Look, I don't know the trailer line for a paranormal state of affairs that's going to have to divert me till June. "Becoming a dog made him a man." "Can you teach an old prime minister new tricks?" But I do know that these types of movie transformation are always the route to self-examination, radical self-discovery and significantly deeper empathy – which is certainly the other one-way journey the prime minister should be currently embarking upon.

- Marina Hyde is a Guardian columnist

Rights and freedom
Refugees

Yazidis have been forgotten during Covid. They need justice, jobs and a return home

Nadia Murad

Survivors of Islamic State brutality are pushed further into the margins as the pandemic causes the world to turn inward

Rights and freedom is supported by

About this content

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Yazidi women attend a funeral of members of their community killed by Islamic State. The bodies had been exhumed from a mass grave and reburied in Kojo, Iraq, 6 February 2021. Photograph: Thaier Al-Sudani/Reuters

Staring at the same four walls day after day, unable to find work, reunite with relatives, or send your children to school. The Covid pandemic has rendered this bleak picture a reality for many people across the globe. Yet for many who have survived or are living through conflict, these hardships are hardly novel.

For the Yazidi ethnic minority in Iraq, Islamic State's 2014 genocide created adversity long before the pandemic ever did. For more than six years, hundreds of thousands of Yazidis have been in camps for internally displaced people (IDP) staring at the same four walls of their tents. They are unable to find work because Isis razed their farms and businesses. They cannot reunite with relatives still in Isis captivity or attend the burials of family members whose bodies remain in mass graves.

It will come as no surprise that the pandemic has made matters worse. As countries turn inward to cope with Covid's impact, those on the periphery of protection – the displaced, conflict-afflicted and survivors of sexual violence – are pushed further into the margins. The consequences of this

abandonment will probably be just as deadly and even more protracted than the pandemic.

At present, these consequences manifest in increased vulnerability to the Covid virus and a sharp decline in mental health. In the first 16 days of 2021, 11 young Yazidis took their own lives. Clustered cases of suicide have been surfacing in IDP camps since the 2014 genocide, but a precise picture of Yazidi mental health trends is muddled by a lack of resources for research and a failure to respond to the issue's root causes.

Q&A

What is the Rights and Freedom series?

Show Hide

A year on from the start of the world's biggest health crisis, we now face a human rights pandemic. Covid-19 has exposed the inequalities and fragilities of health and political systems and allowed authoritarian regimes to impose drastic curbs on rights and freedoms, using the virus as a pretext for restricting free speech and stifling dissent.

Rights and Freedom is a new Guardian reporting series to investigate and expose human rights abuses at this critical time, and elevate the voices of people on the frontlines, fighting back for themselves and their communities.

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There is no doubt that the atrocities perpetrated by Isis – including massacres, enslavement, conscription and rape – have inflicted communal and individual trauma. A study published in 2018 by BMC Medicine found that more than 80% of participants (Yazidi women, aged 17 to 75) met the criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder. The rates reached nearly 100% for women who had survived captivity.

It is clear that in the absence of adequate support Isis's violence continues to harm Yazidis. But this is not the only factor exacerbating the community's

vulnerability; the trauma of genocide is continuously compounded by poverty.

Even before the Yazidi genocide, an International Organization for Migration (IOM) report identified high rates of suicide in Sinjar which it partially attributed to the lack of economic opportunity, security and religious freedom. Each of these root problems has been aggravated by genocide, displacement and the pandemic. Yet efforts to comprehensively address them by sustainably redeveloping Sinjar are deferred and deprioritised time and again by national governments and international agencies.

Earlier this month, my organisation Nadia's Initiative met a committee of Yazidis to discuss their needs. Female survivors were unanimous in their priorities. Foremost is the desire for justice – for courts to try to sentence Isis perpetrators for their crimes of sexual violence and genocide.

Trials would serve to hold these criminals accountable. Perhaps more importantly, they would provide a formal acknowledgment of the harm and trauma endured by survivors and a recognition that the criminality of rape lies with the abuser, not the victims. Such an acknowledgment would hopefully help survivors reintegrate into their communities and lessen the emotional load of injustice.

The second – but equally critical – priority identified by the committee is livelihood support. A handful of organisations offer limited psychological care, but therapy is not a remedy for lack of income, clean water, education and healthcare. Yazidi survivors see work as a form of therapy. It keeps hands and minds busy, puts food on tables and revitalises communities. Livelihood opportunities generate hope to replace the despair that has settled in our hearts.

However neither of these priorities will be met until Yazidis are able to voluntarily and safely return home to a dignified living environment. The governments of Baghdad and Erbil have the ability to restore local governance, security and basic services in Sinjar, but political disputes have consistently undermined durable solutions. To governments and foreign actors, Sinjar is one piece on a political chess board. But for Yazidis, it is our

home, dignity, livelihoods and mental health that are sacrificed for their strategic interests. The international community must pair on-the-ground support with diplomatic pressure on Iraqi stakeholders for the sake of stabilising the Sinjar region.

The needs of many post-conflict communities have been deprioritised during the Covid pandemic. Their pathways to recovery face insurmountable odds with an international community that often neglects to provide comprehensive support to those most marginalised. Discussions around Covid's impact must include and be led by these communities.

It is vital that we use the opportunity to rebuild from Covid to spotlight the compounded effects of the pandemic on post-conflict communities and empower them to develop a healthier, more prosperous and more peaceful future.

- Nadia Murad is a human rights activist who was awarded the 2018 Nobel peace prize

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Opinion
Birds

All's fair in love and the suburban bird-feeding wars

Peter White

Once upon a time, our garden was a popular feeding site for birds of all sizes. Then our neighbour lured them away, and my wife is hatching a retaliation plan

Wed 24 Feb 2021 02.00 EST

‘I hadn’t realised that the apparently gentle practice of feeding the birdies could unleash dark feelings of envy and loss.’ Photograph: Ian Shaw/Alamy

We all know about the classic seeds of neighbourhood strife: unruly children and dogs; light-blocking trees and hedges; full-throated motorbikes arriving and departing when right-thinking folk are trying to sleep. What I hadn’t

realised until recently was that the apparently gentle practice of feeding the birdies could unleash dark feelings of envy and loss.

When we arrived at our current house, it already had a modest, slightly rickety wooden bird table on a pole, with one bird feeder attached. My bird-loving wife was originally content to add a couple of additional feeders, so that smaller birds such as tits, gold- and bullfinches, nuthatches, etc could get their fair share, while the bigger birds could feed off the table itself, and the food scattered on the lawn was enough to satisfy the crows and jackdaws.

For months, this worked very well, and she got a great deal of pleasure from watching their various morning routines. Then, out of the blue, they stopped coming.

At first, she couldn't fathom this desertion. Was the food wrong? Had Daisy the cat, usually too lazy to disturb them much, made a sudden attack? And then the problem was solved. A neighbour had set up one of those sophisticated bird-feeding stations: a thin pole, about six feet tall, with half a dozen containers, some mesh, some plastic, that are much more easily accessible than ours.

My wife feels this act of betrayal keenly (treachery by the birds as much as the neighbour) and is not minded to take it lying down. Plans are afoot for a counterattack.

This is not just a little local difficulty. Birdfeeding has become something of a craze in the UK. The British Trust for Ornithology says we spend between £200m and £300m a year on it.

Meanwhile, I'm wondering how competitive this business is going to get. There are two ways to fight a war: increase your own capabilities, or diminish those of your opponents. Will my wife simply buy a taller, more capacious bird-feeding station to tempt the birds back, or acquire bigger, braver, more energetic cats in an act of potential mutually assured destruction? I really can't imagine what Saint Francis would make of all this.

- Peter White is the BBC’s disability affairs correspondent

Books

Struggling in lockdown, I have found solace in the wisdom of my grandmother

My grandmother tells me off for bemoaning my life. Her memories of losing everything and beginning again continue to inspire me, writes poet Nikita Gill

Nikita Gill

Wed 24 Feb 2021 02.00 EST

A boy sits on the walls of a refugee camp in Delhi during the partition of India, 1947. Photograph: Photo 12/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

“You are the granddaughter of a family that has known war and trouble like it is the back of our hands. Building hope where there is none it is part of our

legacy.” My grandmother said these words, gently but firmly, on a recent phone call that I had spent lamenting the state of the world, and the pandemic, and feeling rather sorry for myself.

She was right, as she often is.

The youngest of nine children, and a teenager at the time of India’s independence, my grandmother had her whole life uprooted during the country’s partition. Her home was set alight before her eyes; the family survived the flames only through the foresight of her oldest brother, who knew war was coming. As they drove away from the only home they had ever known, through mobs and the wreckage of their village, they stopped to pick up as many of their neighbours as they could. To do this, they had to leave behind all their possessions. “People over things,” my grandmother said simply, and I hold this family memory tight in my chest to ground me in a world where people do not always do what is right by the vulnerable.

Even then, tragedy was not alien to my grandmother. Her mother had suffered from dementia since my grandmother was a little girl. Her oldest sister brought her up . And before she turned 20, she would lose her soldier brothers to war, and a sister to illness. Her father died shortly after their house was destroyed, when they arrived in Himachal to rebuild from scratch.

> I’ve called my mother and my family more than ever before because I know that pain can bring a family closer

“But how did you do it, Nani?” I asked her when I was 12, only just beginning to fathom that a home could be ripped away so violently. My memory of her in this moment is especially vivid: wearing a pale blue salwar kameez, tossing golden brown potatoes in mustard oil as she made Dum Aloo, a Kashmiri delicacy. “It wasn’t easy at first. We struggled and we mourned,” she told me. “But we knew that grief couldn’t consume us. So we built a community. Leaned on each other. We were kind to those we did not know and soon they became our own. We shared stories and recipes. We learned courage from our history.”

So often, trauma destroys families. Partition is a largely unspoken trauma. My favourite great aunt injured her back permanently and refuses to tell us the story, because she doesn't like to remember that time of her life. And yet, what remains of my grandmother's family is the happiest family I have ever known. They have a smile and a helping hand for everyone. The bonds between the remaining siblings are so strong that I have never seen them fight in three decades. My great aunt, when I was visiting her in Delhi seven years ago, said, "If we didn't let the pain bring us closer, it would have torn us apart. And that was not acceptable to any of us."

This hard-earned wisdom has stayed with me through this last year, through all the lockdowns and the global grief. I've called my mother and my family more than ever before because I know that pain can bring a family closer, even when they are so far away from each other. I have realised the small mercies I have that my grandmother did not: Facetime and Zoom calls so I can see the people I love even from thousands of miles away, TV shows and movies to keep me distracted and entertained. More than anything, I had poetry, and the time and peace to write it.

The last time I spoke to my grandmother she told me about the morning after the fire: how, when she woke up, she heard birds singing as the sun rose. They were still on the road and she remembered how strange it felt that the world simply kept moving – the sun rising and setting, the rivers flowing, unaware of the new borders being established around them. "Nothing taught me to live in the present more than this moment did," she told me. "I didn't know anything about my future. We had no certainty to rely on. Only hope, strong in our hearts, and the determination to create a new life."

As I write this, the sun has come out over a cold February day. The trees outside are bare bones of themselves but will grow leaves soon, and this is something I can rely on. Like my grandmother, I do not know what the future holds. There is still darkness to survive yet. But I know that I want to face it with the same hope and determination that she did all those years ago, on a road leading her to a brand new life she didn't yet know.

- Where Hope Comes From: Healing poetry for the heart, mind and soul by Nikita Gill is published by Trapeze (£14.99). To order a copy, go to

guardianbookshop.com.

Opinion
Climate change

To stop climate disaster, make ecocide an international crime. It's the only way

Outlawing ecocide would hold governments and corporations accountable for environmental negligence. We can’t wait

Jojo Mehta and Julia Jackson

Wed 24 Feb 2021 02.16 EST Last modified on Wed 24 Feb 2021 02.18 EST

Smoke rises from an illegally lit fire in an Amazon rainforest reserve in Para State, Brazil. Photograph: Carl de Souza/AFP/Getty Images

The Paris agreement is failing. Yet there is new hope for preserving a livable planet: the growing global campaign to criminalize ecocide can address the root causes of the climate crisis and safeguard our planet – the common home of all humanity and, indeed, all life on Earth.

Nearly five years after the negotiation of the landmark Paris agreement to limit greenhouse gas emissions and associated global warming to "well below 2.0C above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase even further to 1.5C", we are experiencing drastically accelerating warming. 2020 was the second warmest year on record, following the record-setting 2019. Carbon in the atmosphere reached 417 parts per million (ppm) – the highest in the last 3m years. Even if we magically flipped a switch to a fully green economy tomorrow, there is still enough carbon in the atmosphere to continue warming the planet for decades.

The science is clear: without drastic action to limit temperature rise below 1.5C, the Earth, and all life on it, including all human beings, will suffer devastating consequences.

Yet only two countries – Morocco and the Gambia – are on track to meet the 1.5C target. The largest emitters, including the United States, China, Russia and Saudi Arabia, are putting the world on course for 4C. At that rate, the polar ice caps will melt, causing dramatic sea level rise that will – in combination with other devastating effects like strengthening storms and droughts – cause mass famine, displacement and extinction.

Currently, much of humanity feels hopeless, but the establishment of ecocide as a crime offers something for people to get behind. Enacting laws against ecocide, as is under consideration in a growing number of jurisdictions, offers a way to correct the shortcomings of the Paris agreement. Whereas Paris lacks sufficient ambition, transparency and accountability, the criminalization of ecocide would be an enforceable deterrent. Outlawing ecocide would also address a key root cause of global climate change: the widespread destruction of nature, which, in addition to increasing greenhouse gas emissions, has devastating impacts on global health, food and water security, and sustainable development – to name a few.

Ecocide shares its roots with other landmark concepts in international law, including genocide. Indeed, ecocide and genocide often go hand in hand. Around the globe, ecological destruction is also decimating indigenous communities. To give just a few cases: Brazil's Yanomami are facing mercury poisoning generated by the 20,000 illegal miners in their territories.

87% of Native Alaskan villages are experiencing climate-related erosion, even as they face growing calls to drill on their lands.

Conviction for ecocide would require demonstrating willful disregard for the consequences of actions such as deforestation, reckless drilling and mining. This threshold implicates a number of global and corporate leaders through their complicity in deforesting the Amazon and Congo basins, drilling recklessly in the Arctic and the Niger Delta, or permitting unsustainable palm oil plantations in south-east Asia, among other destructive practices.

As a term, "ecocide" dates to 1970, when Arthur Galston, an American botanist, used it to describe the appalling effects of Agent Orange on the vast forests of Vietnam and Cambodia. On the 50th anniversary of the concept, we can take heart in the growing civic will to officially make ecocide an international crime.

Already, citizens, scientists and youth activists including Greta Thunberg are calling on global leaders to introduce ecocide at the International Criminal Court (ICC). Following the lead of climate-vulnerable ocean states Vanuatu and the Maldives in December 2019, French president Emmanuel Macron vowed to champion it on the international stage last June and has proposed a version of it in French law. Finland and Belgium both expressed interest during the ICC's annual assembly, and Spain's parliamentary foreign affairs committee has issued recommendations to consider it. The EU has also voted to encourage its recognition by member states. And Pope Francis was ahead of the game in November 2019 when he called for ecocide to become an international crime against peace. The Stop Ecocide Foundation has recently convened a panel of heavyweight international lawyers to draft a robust legal definition of ecocide which this growing list of states can seriously consider proposing as an amendment to the ICC's Rome Statute.

Criminalizing ecocide gives us the unprecedented chance to create a protective measure with legal teeth that could deter reckless leaders from damaging, short-sighted policies creating accountability in a way that Paris does not.

Just as important, we could motivate corporations to make dramatic shifts away from an unacceptable status quo that too often favors the destruction of

nature for short-term profits. As ecocide becomes an impending legal reality, corporate leaders would be forced to adapt, and quickly, re-examining the way they do business and make decisions with our planet in mind.

But ecocide would not just be a punitive measure for corporate leaders. It would also offer considerable opportunities for new sustainable ventures. The pristine areas that ecocide targets – virgin forests, wetlands and our oceans – are precisely the places that have value far beyond mere extractive industries, including in sustainably developing new pharmaceuticals that may help in the current Covid-19 pandemic and in future pandemics. True leaders in the public and private sector would much prefer ethical, sustainable and long-term value creation that does not exploit nature or humanity. By outlawing bad actors, we will empower many more good ones.

As a global community, we cannot wait for more warning signs or the "right moment". Last year alone has seen devastating examples of ecocide: fires ravaging the Amazon, the Congo Basin, Australia, Alaska and Siberia all at unprecedented rates; a large oil spill in Ecuador; and unending, accelerating plastic pollution, which could weigh up to 1.3b tons by 2040. Unfortunately, under cover of Covid-19, ecocide has accelerated. Deforestation in the Amazon basin increased by 50% in the first quarter of 2020, with rampant fires reaching a 13-year high in June.

In the midst of a global pandemic that demonstrates humanity's shared vulnerability – and our need to work together collectively in the face of crisis – we must begin to understand that what we do to our ecosystems, we do to ourselves.

Indeed, the meaning of ecocide is fully encapsulated by its etymology. It comes from the Greek *oikos* (home) and the Latin *cadere* (to kill). Ecocide is literally "killing our home".

- Jojo Mehta is chair of the Stop Ecocide Foundation
- Julia Jackson is the founder of Grounded.org

Opinion
Pregnancy

I'm so thankful for my daughter but I wish someone had prepared me for the physical toll of childbirth

I wonder how the early days with my baby might have been different if I'd had a better understanding of what to expect from my own body

Elicia O'Reilly

Tue 23 Feb 2021 16.00 EST Last modified on Tue 23 Feb 2021 21.05 EST

'The fact that pregnancy and childbirth are natural lulls us into believing that our bodies will easily cope with it, which is not always the case.' Photograph: d3sign/Getty Images

Recently, my daughter chipped my front tooth. It was an accident. She was simply being joyous and irrepressible, as three-year-olds are. She came up

and cracked me on the chin, and now that lovely smooth ridge at the back of my eye tooth is gone, leaving a jagged edge that stabs my tongue and scrapes my bottom lip. There's friction when my teeth meet. Weird pressure on one tooth. Chewing feels strange.

As I contemplate the new reality in my mouth, a few things come to mind. I think about Brad Pitt, who reportedly once had a front tooth surgically chipped for a role. Did he struggle with the new reality too? I also think about other changes to my body that are related to motherhood, and that I've worked hard to overcome or come to terms with: weight struggles, poor posture, carpal tunnel flare-ups, incontinence, a hip problem which limits the exercise I can do. This is yet another example of collateral damage to add to that list, testament to the ever-growing list of new realities I associate with motherhood.

Of these, the tooth is one of the most visible. But it's the more invisible changes that have been hardest to come to terms with. And of these, incontinence was the worst.

It began in the delivery ward. I'd not long given birth to a beautiful big healthy baby after an induced labour and with no drugs. The midwife helped me up off the bed and led me to the bathroom for a much-needed shower. The warm water hit my skin, and *bam,* out it streamed. I felt terrible.

A midwife later explained that immediate post-partum incontinence is basically par for the course with vaginal births, and many mothers continue to experience ongoing issues for months, if not years, afterward. Beyond this, while things may slowly improve for some with time and hard work, many others have to learn to live with some form of it for the rest of their lives.

Statistics show that incontinence is widespread among women. In Australia, 80% of all people affected by urinary incontinence (the most common form) are women, numbering up to 38% of those of reproductive age and above. Further, more than half the women living with incontinence in the community are under the age of 50. Evidence also shows that urinary incontinence doubles the risk of postnatal depression. In light of these statistics, the invisibility of this problem is astounding.

I vaguely recall one prenatal care doctor mentioning the possibility of incontinence in passing. Perhaps I should have paid more attention but no other health professionals brought it up, so amid all of the preoccupations of being a first-time expectant mum, I must have brushed it off. And why not? No mothers I had spoken to during my pregnancy – or before, for that matter – had shared experiences of post-partum incontinence, and very few openly discussed other childbirth-related dysfunctions (although I *was* quietly warned about post-partum haemorrhoids, thankfully). It wasn't until a physiotherapist in the natal ward handed me a brochure – "one in three women who have ever had a baby wet themselves" – that I realised just how common it was.

Why do mothers tend to be silent about the physical toll of childbirth? They've been there, nipples cracked and wrists aching from cradling a tiny new infant, sleepless and shell-shocked at the state of their bodies, wondering at just what they'd really signed up for. Possibly feeling guilt because they're supposed to be glowing with the joy of new motherhood, when instead they're struggling with the fatigue of labour, maybe a tapestry of stitches, a strangely changed relationship with the toilet and the jarring separation from circadian rhythm.

The question answers itself in multiple ways. Perhaps the silence exists because mothers don't want to take the shine off the excitement, anticipation and joy of being pregnant. Perhaps they don't want to add to the possible burdens of pregnancy either. Or perhaps it would just be plain awkward for all concerned.

All of these reasons are understandable, but the fact remains that the transition to a postnatal body, with all of its curious and sometimes distressing frailties, is just as much an inextricable part of motherhood as it is an invisible one.

We routinely make life choices that involve mistreating our bodies: sedentary lifestyles, poor ergonomics, sleep deficits, regular fixes of alcohol and caffeine. For women, perhaps this might also include childbearing and pregnancy. Because while pregnancy is not a "mistreatment" of the body per se, the fact that pregnancy and childbirth are natural lulls us into believing that our bodies will easily cope with it, which is not always the case.

The female body goes through such significant change over the course of pregnancy and childbirth, it's unfair to expect it to just bounce back. But in the absence of realistic representations of motherhood in the popular media we consume, and with the dearth of discussion about the postnatal body in professional and personal spheres, it's easy to understand why we might.

Since giving birth to my daughter, conversations with other mothers about the loss of bodily function are not uncommon. Does this mean that we regret becoming mothers? For my part, not at all. My daughter gives me more joy than I had ever thought possible. I'm so thankful that she's in my life, and I wouldn't change that for the world.

But I write this because I wonder how my first days, months and years with her might have been different if I'd had as much understanding of what to expect from my own body as I did of what to expect from my baby. The information about newborns that I amassed during pregnancy were certainly no match for lived experience, but there's no doubt that it helped.

I have no illusions that a map can ever fully prepare you for the territory, and motherhood is no exception. Even so, more visibility in multiple spheres for the postnatal body and its frailties (as well as its incredible resilience) may help mothers to better navigate the new realities of their bodies after birth, and give them comfort in the knowledge that they are not alone.

• Elicia O'Reilly is a journal editor and event programmer working in the culture and education space

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Nils Pratley on finance
HSBC

A demerger is HSBC's only way to solve its Hong Kong problem

Nils Pratley

With 90% of its profits coming from Asia, the bank’s ultimate decision will surely be to follow Beijing’s lead

Tue 23 Feb 2021 17.30 EST

HSBC is making a new pivot towards its banking operations in Asia. Photograph: Budrul Chukrut/SOPA Images/REX/Shutterstock

A new (ish) chief executive is at the helm of HSBC, so it's time for another bout of corporate introspection. "We're going to stop trying to be everything to everyone," says Noel Quinn. Was that – finally – a recognition that life as a socially responsible UK-regulated bank is impossible to square with the commercial necessity to dance to Beijing's tune when Hong Kong's last freedoms are being squashed?

Actually, no. Quinn's version of HSBC's longstanding "pivot to Asia" strategy was merely about shedding retail banking operations in the US and France. The UK operation is staying put, apparently. For good measure, he added an ode to the joys of the soulless Canary Wharf.

Well, maybe, but the dual-headed London/Hong Kong structure is hard to trust for the long term. Yes, as Quinn told a UK parliamentary committee last month, all banks have to comply with the laws where they operate, but it was still shocking to see Peter Wong, HSBC's top executive in Asia, sign a public petition last year in support of Beijing's draconian security laws.

Tensions between China and the west seem likely only to intensify with Joe Biden's arrival in the White House, meaning HSBC is more exposed than

ever to political blasts. About 90% of the profits come from Asia, so nobody should be under any illusions about the bank's priorities if push comes to shove. The question is if, or when, the board feels a split is inevitable.

Quinn and Mark Tucker, the chairman, clearly want to cling to the current setup as long as possible, and one can understand the temptation to sit tight and hope for the best. A demerger of the old Midland Bank that was bought in 1992 (and could be rebranded as First Direct for today's world) would be a dramatic move.

But note also Quinn's reference to how "the Covid-19 pandemic and the impact of geopolitics weighed heavily on our share price throughout 2020". Take the latter to be an admission that a "Hong Kong discount" sits on HSBC's valuation, which is clearly the case.

An effective cut in the dividend won't improve the mood and, unless things improve soon, one suspects shareholders, rather than western politicians, will demand reform to clear the political fog. The UK bank is ringfenced already and should be worth £10bn at a bare minimum. Demerger is the obvious next pivot.

Where are the female CEOs and chairs?

What's the best way to get more women into boardrooms of big public companies? The debate five years ago was whether voluntary targets would improve the scandalous level of under-representation, or whether quotas were needed.

The UK took the voluntary route and, credit where it's due, the aim of 33% female representation on FTSE 100 and FTSE 250 boards, as set by the 2016 Hampton-Alexander review, has been achieved. Not by every company, of course, but the average for the FTSE 350 has risen from 21.9% in October 2015 to 34.3% in January 2021. And the number of "one and done" boards has fallen from 116 to 16.

A few countries that took the quota route (France, Sweden, Norway and Italy) score better. Equally, some quota countries (the Netherlands, Spain and Germany) sit lower. Yet the big-picture headline numbers for the UK

obscure an uncomfortable fact: the number of female chief executives and chairs remains tiny.

There are only eight female chief executives of FTSE 100 companies, a net gain of only two since 2017. And the low representation in the chair's job – an increase from six to 11 – is almost more shocking because the role is usually a non-executive one and the increase in female non-executives has contributed most to the overall tally. There are more women in the boardroom but it seems they're not getting the top posts.

The final Hampton-Alexander report urges improvement but is short on explanation for the failures. On the chair point, here's the candid view of one woman who has served on a few FTSE 350 boards. First, there is a clue when companies use phrases such as "credibility in dealing with complex stakeholder situations" in their job adverts. The subliminal message, as she puts it, is: "Are you a man who will dominate a room?"

Second, chief executives have an effective right of veto over the appointment of a chair and a significant proportion of the men probably still don't want to work for a woman. Depressing – but also probably accurate.

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Rights and freedom
Global development

Sri Lanka at 'tipping point' with risk of return to past atrocities, activists warn

Civil rights groups say situation 'getting worse on a daily basis' as UN human rights chief expresses alarm over deepening impunity

UN commissioner Michelle Bachelet has warned of 'worrying trend' of repression under President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. Photograph: Dinuka Liyanawatte/Reuters

Sri Lanka could descend swiftly back into violence and human rights abuses unless decisive international action is taken, the UN high commissioner for human rights and civil rights groups warned.

In a speech to the human rights council on Wednesday, Michelle Bachelet is expected to issue a stark warning that the Sri Lankan government has "closed the door" on ending impunity for past abuses and is facing a return to state repression of civil society and a militarisation of public institutions.

In January, the UN high commissioner for human rights expressed alarm over “worrying trends” in the country since President Gotabaya Rajapaksa took office in 2019.

In a damning report published last month, which will be formally presented to the council, Bachelet documented deepening impunity and obstruction of justice for atrocities committed during the brutal civil war of 1983–2009.

In the report, Bachelet said: “Sri Lanka’s current trajectory sets the scene for the recurrence of the policies and practices that gave rise to grave human rights violations.”

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, centre, greets his elder brother Chamal Rajapaksa, after swearing him in as agriculture and trade minister, in Colombo on 22 November.
Photograph: Eranga Jayawardena/AP

Since 2020, the former army officer Rajapaksa has appointed at least 28 serving or former military and intelligence personnel to key posts, her report found. Some are senior officials implicated in alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity during the final years of the civil war, including army chief Shavendra Silva and defence secretary Kamal Gunaratne.

Rajapaksa, who was defence secretary when his brother Mahinda was president from 2005 to 2015, oversaw the defeat of the Tamil Tigers in 2009. During this period, unlawful killings and forced disappearances were widespread. It has been estimated that about 40,000 Tamils were killed.

The previous government had taken some steps towards accountability and war crimes tribunals, but these halted after Rajapaksa was elected in 2019. Last year, the government said it would no longer honour its commitments to a consensus agreed in 2015 to ensure truth, justice, reparation and an accountability mechanism for past abuses.

The failure to deal with past atrocities continues to have "devastating effects on tens of thousands of family members from all communities", who persist in seeking justice, reparations and truth about the fate of their loved ones, Bachelet said.

Q&A

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A number of UN officials and independent experts, including four former high commissioners signed a letter describing Bachelet's report as a "compelling case" for decisive international action and praising its focus on prevention.

They wrote: “In 2009 the international community failed Sri Lanka. We must not fail again.”

Bachelet’s report documents a pattern of surveillance and harassment of civil society organisations and human rights defenders, which was echoed by activists who spoke to the Guardian. One said the situation for human rights and the rule of law was worsening on a “daily basis”.

Sri Lankan civil rights activists and trade union members protest in Colombo on 16 June 2020. They say quarantine laws violate the freedom of speech, assembly and protest. Photograph: Chamila Karunarathne/EPA

Dharisha Bastians, a Sri Lankan journalist who wrote for the New York Times before being forced into exile by harassment and threats shortly after the 2019 election, said she hoped UN member states would heed Bachelet’s call.

“None of us expected this crackdown to happen so quickly,” Bastians said. “It is very disturbing and unfortunately it is a pattern we have seen before. Sri Lanka is at a tipping point.

“It is clear this government has no interest in advancing the cause of justice. On the contrary, every effort has been made by this government to obstruct justice. The president has set up a commission for political victimisation

which has exonerated every single military officer accused of human rights violations, without even hearing from victims or hearing about the investigations.

“In some of the cases, the officers are already on trial in court. The attorney general is being pressurised to drop cases, witnesses are being pressurised into recanting evidence and families are being harassed.”

This was a “tragedy” for the families of the disappeared, she said, urging the international community to act. “The continued focus on impunity for attacks against journalists will help to keep my colleagues safer on the ground in Sri Lanka. The spotlight would send a message to the Sri Lankan government that the world will not turn its eyes away.”

Activists and campaigners said intimidation and harassment of civil society in Sri Lanka had led to the shrinking of civil space, and had had a “chilling effect”.

Activists are taken into police custody for breaching quarantine laws during a protest against the murder of George Floyd, outside the US embassy in Colombo. Photograph: Saman Abesiriwardana/Pacific Press/REX/Shutterstock

Shreen Saroor, a rights activist who works with women's groups in the north and east of Sri Lanka, said groups had been forced to disclose information, including staff home addresses and phone numbers, and had been asked for bank details, to check funding sources.

"They want all charitable organisations and NGOs to register with the national secretariat for nongovernmental organisations, which comes under the defence secretary," Saroor said.

The defence secretary is Gunaratne, who was a unit commander at the end of the war, and is accused of war crimes.

"They are forcing us not to take foreign funding, unless we register with the defence secretary and we will need defence ministry approval for the work we do," Saroor said. She has been told that her work with war-affected communities is now "illegitimate".

Melissa Dring, campaign director of the UK-based Sri Lanka Campaign for Peace and Justice, said the situation on the ground for human rights was "getting worse on a daily basis".

Time was running out for the victims and survivors, she said. Since the beginning of the roadside protests by families of the disappeared, 78 people have died, she said.

"The resilience and determination of these protesters, the majority of whom are women, who have continued their protests over years and often been subjected to intimidation and harassment by the security forces and other state officials, is amazing," she said.

Sri Lankans hold portraits of relatives who disappeared during a protest to demand an investigation, in Colombo, on 14 February 2020. Photograph: Chamila Karunarathne/EPA

Meenakshi Ganguly, the south Asia director of Human Rights Watch, said: "If, now, the international community fails to act, starting with a strong resolution at the UN human rights council, there is every chance that there will be a repeat, even a rise, in the targeting of activists, critics, victim families and minority communities."

Amnesty International said in a recent report it had witnessed an "alarming crackdown" on civic space and the targeting of minorities, including Muslim communities, which make up 10% of Sri Lanka's population.

Earlier this month, a group of Muslim families launched a complaint to the UN human rights committee about Sri Lanka's policy of enforced cremation of all those confirmed or suspected to have died with Covid-19, saying it breaches their religious rights and is causing "untold misery".

The Sri Lankan government has dismissed Bachelet's findings of credible allegations of war crimes against senior government figures as "baseless".

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Aung San Suu Kyi tattoos flourish among Myanmar's resistance

Global development

Aung San Suu Kyi tattoos flourish among Myanmar's resistance

Studios report surge in requests for tattoos of the deposed civilian leader – and some are using their profits to support protesters

A reporter in Yangon

Tue 23 Feb 2021 23.19 EST Last modified on Tue 23 Feb 2021 23.20 EST

A man with a tattoo of Aung San Suu Kyi takes part in a protest against Myanmar's coup. Photograph: Reuters

In the last three weeks, Ye, 37, has inked more images of Aung San Suu Kyi than throughout his 19 years of tattooing.

"We love and respect her because she has sacrificed so much for us," he says, showing a photo of his latest artwork – a lifelike rendering of the deposed Myanmar leader, complete with jasmine flowers, on a woman's back.

If fans of the Nobel laureate were on the fence about getting a tattoo in her honour before the military coup on February 1, they are no longer. Studios across the country have reported a surge in Aung San Suu Kyi ink – and some are using their profits to support the protest movement.

Aung San Suu Kyi, 75, remains in detention, facing charges of illegally importing walkie talkies and violating Myanmar's natural disaster law. She faces up to three years in jail, with a court hearing reportedly set for 1 March.

While she remains beloved inside Myanmar, her international reputation was irrevocably tarnished when she travelled to the international court of justice in The Hague to defend the army against claims that it had committed

genocide against the Rohingya Muslims. Some say she was walking a tight-rope with the generals to preserve a fledgling democracy – in that sense, this is the fall. Others have labelled her a military apologist whose idea of equality falls short for persecuted minorities.

Whatever happens to the leader, she will leave a complex legacy. But in Myanmar's commercial capital Yangon – home to mass pro-democracy rallies in recent days – the picture is clearer.

A woman displays a tattoo of Aung San Suu Kyi on her hand as she bangs pots and pans in opposition to the military coup Photograph: Ye Aung Thu/AFP/Getty Images

"I don't even have tattoos of my parents," said Hlaing, 32, who described the coup as more painful than the six hours it took to complete her tribute to Aung San Suu Kyi on 3 February. "I felt wronged and oppressed, I had to get it."

Ye, who is working on a new Aung San Suu Kyi design, has collected donations for the country's civil disobedience movement, which aims to deprive the military of a functioning administration through nation-wide strikes.

“The military plans to imprison her so she gets older, just like they did before,” he says. “If they didn’t lock her up for 15 years, our country would be more developed, but the military knows all about that.”

Tattooing has formed part of Myanmar culture for centuries. Shan men in the north-east used waist-to-knee designs to symbolise virility, while in western Chin state elderly women still showcase the fading tradition of facial tattoos. Some believe the right depictions could offer magical protection.

But the practice of tattooing was banned during the British counterinsurgency in the 1930s and returned to the mainstream only during the political and economic reforms of 2011.

In Mandalay, tattoo artist Za responded to the coup by inking Aung San Suu Kyi designs for free, until 15 February, when he began charging $3.50 (£2.50). So far, he has completed about 70 and all the money raised has gone to civil servants on strike and others resisting the junta, he said.

“Just yesterday I spent the entire time giving tattoos of her,” he says. “More people are getting them and that has allowed us to support the movement.”

While getting their tattoos, most clients indulge in chatter about the coup and gossip about those who aren’t joining the civil disobedience movement.

“The conversations are never ending,” he says.

A man receives a tattoo of detained Myanmar civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi in Naypyidaw Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

Tin, a professional fighter, snuck in a visit to a Yangon tattoo studio in between training sessions of lethwei, an ancient sport. He does not care so much about the leader's party, the National League for Democracy, he said. Just for the woman who the country affectionately dubs "Mother Suu".

"I got it to express my faith in her and my support for her," he says. "I don't care if it gets me into trouble with the regime one day."

Ukraine

Iranian officials should be charged over shooting down of Ukrainian plane, UN expert says

In letter to Tehran, human rights advocate outlines six-month investigation into disaster

Julian Borger in Washington

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A man lays flowers during a commemorative ceremony for those on Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752, shot down in Iran a year before, on 8 January. Photograph: Genya Savilov/AFP/Getty Images

Many high level Iranian officials should be charged for the shooting down of a Ukrainian commercial airliner in January 2020, a UN human rights expert

has said, describing the killing of the 176 people aboard as a “profound and serious indictment” of the country’s civil and military authorities.

Agnès Callamard, the UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, delivered a 45-page letter to the Iranian government which was made public on Tuesday, outlining her findings from a six-month investigation into the disaster, and complaining about the lack of Iranian cooperation, which has left many of her questions unanswered.

Callamard issued a particularly strong condemnation of the Tehran government’s treatment of the victims’ families, who she said had been harassed and threatened, denied the return of remains and personal effects, and forced to go along with officially staged “martyr” funerals.

Ukraine International Airlines flight PS752 was shot down by an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) air defence missile battery shortly after it took off from Tehran’s international airport, at a time of high tensions, five days after a US drone strike killed an IRGC commander, Qassem Suleimani.

The plane was bound for Kyiv but had 55 citizens and 30 permanent residents of Canada aboard. After denying responsibility for several days, Tehran said the Boeing 737-800 was shot down by mistake by an air defence crew who mistook it for an incoming US missile.

“The inconsistencies in the official explanations seem designed to create a maximum of confusion and a minimum of clarity. They seem contrived to mislead and bewilder,” Callamard, said in the letter, which was sent to Tehran 60 days ago with a set of questions but has yet to get a reply.

The Iranian mission to the UN did not respond to a request for comment on Tuesday evening.

“At best, what we have here is an extraordinarily incompetent succession of actions ... to such an extent that they would be in my view, in a criminal court, be described as criminal and reckless,” Callamard told the Guardian.

She added that the downing of the plane was a “profound and serious indictment of Iran, both military and civilian authorities, in terms of the

violations of their human rights obligations".

The official Iranian account details a series of technical breakdowns and human errors that led to the tragedy, but Callamard said they just raised more questions that Tehran had failed to answer.

For example, the official account said the mobile missile unit that fired the two Russian-made Tor missiles that brought down the airliner had not been properly calibrated, so the radar systems showed the aircraft as incoming rather than outbound.

Callamard said she had not been given any explanation as to why this miscalibration happened, why it had not been detected, or why it had led to the missiles being fired. It was also unclear why the crew had not followed standard operating procedures that would have prevented the launch, why the airport had not been closed at a time of high tension and why the investigation was botched. The crash scene was looted and bulldozed before international inspectors arrived.

There have been conflicting reports about the arrest and prosecution of the missile crew, but Callamard said: "In terms of accountability, unfortunately we cannot expect Iran to charge those at the top or even the middle of the chain of command, and there are many high-level officials who should be charged."

There was no evidence, she added, that Iran had made the fundamental changes necessary to give the rest of the world assurance that the same mistakes would not be made again.

Callamard's letter lambasts the Iranian government for the treatment of the bereaved families. In many cases, personal items went missing after the looting of the crash site and baggage.

"Iranian officials sought to coerce families into publicly declaring their support for the government or risk the non-return of their loved ones' remains," the letter said. "Many families were reportedly also denied private funerals. Victims were declared 'martyrs' who died for their country. As a result, funerals were heavily controlled."

The inscription “congratulations on your martyrdom” was placed on the coffins of the victims against the wishes of the families, the letter added.

Families in Iran and Canada, it said, had been received death threats for being critical of Iran.

Callamard told the Guardian the treatment of grieving families was “cynical, cruel and criminal”.

She said she hoped that international efforts, in particular by Canada and Ukraine, would not be bought off or held hostage by the desire to salvage the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran.

Callamard said: “Under no circumstances should the search for justice for PS752 be impaired by the equally important search for a nuclear deal.”

China

Woman awarded $7,700 for five years of housework in China divorce ruling

Case is believed to be the first to set a monetary value on housework since the implementation of a new civil code

The verdict sparked a debate on social media in China about the financial worth of housework Photograph: Alamy Stock Photo

A Chinese divorce court has ordered a man to pay his wife the equivalent of US $7,700 as compensation for housework during their five-year marriage.

Under a new civil code that came into effect last month, a person may seek compensation from their partner during a divorce if they were the primary carer for children or elderly parents, or did most of the unpaid household work. The amount should be negotiated, but if that fails then it will be decided by court.

A Beijing court ruled the husband, surnamed Chen, must pay his now ex-wife, Wang, the sum of 50,000 yuan for not pulling his weight around the house.

Chen left the childrearing to Wang while he went to work, and "didn't care about or participate in any kind of chores", Wang told the court.

The couple had married in 2015 but separated three years later. Their son lived with Wang. Chen filed for divorce last year but Wang was initially reluctant, local media said. She later agreed and requested a division of property and financial compensation. As well as the 50,000 yuan compensation, Wang was also awarded custody of the couple's son and a monthly payment of 2,000 yuan.

The presiding judge, Feng Miao, said the division of property related to "tangible property", of which it was impossible to include housework. Housework "for example, can improve the ability of the other spouse to achieve personal, individual academic growth, and this is not reflected in the tangible property."

The case is believed to be the first to set a monetary value on housework since the civil code – which covers personal rights and family and contract law – came into force.

The verdict sparked a debate on social media in China about the financial worth of housework, which, in heterosexual relationships and marriage, is most often done by women, according to multiple surveys. Data from China's National Bureau of Statistics indicated married women spent more than twice as much time on housework than their husbands in 2016, a ratio wider than figures recorded for 1996.

More than 427,000 people responded to an online poll by Chinese media outlet, Pheonix Weekly, which asked if the compensation was right, wrong, too small, or too big. Almost 94% said it was right but not enough, with commenters saying it underestimated the job of stay-at-home wives and mothers. Some quoted an increasingly popular idiom: "to keep yourself, don't get married or give birth".

“Everyone who has done housework knows that doing housework is no easier than going to work, it’s often harder,” said one Weibo user commenting underneath.

“The key thing about being a full-time wife is that you lose your career growth opportunities,” said another. “After a while, your future career will be discounted a lot, and there is no way to measure this with money.”

US Capitol breach

US Capitol rioters ‘came prepared for war’, Senate hears in testimony

First congressional hearing on attack comes day after Merrick Garland said he would expand investigation into 6 January assault

- US politics – live updates

Ed Pilkington in New York and Joan E Greve in Washington

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Testifying on Tuesday in the first congressional hearing on the US Capitol attack, the chief of Capitol police who resigned over the riot said the pro-Trump mob which stormed the building “came prepared for war”.

Merrick Garland would seem to agree. In a confirmation hearing on Monday which set the scene for Tuesday’s session before the Senate homeland security and rules committees, Joe Biden’s nominee for attorney general said he would expand the criminal investigation into the 6 January assault, telling Congress domestic terrorism is a greater threat to American democracy than it has been for decades.

Before the Senate judiciary committee, Garland described the insurrection of Trump supporters and white supremacists as “a heinous act that sought to disrupt a cornerstone of our democracy”. He said his first act if confirmed would be to focus on domestic terror.

Describing the events of 6 January as “not necessarily a one-off”, Garland, currently a federal judge, pledged to use the full powers of the justice department to prevent a repeat attack.

“I intend to look more broadly at where this is coming from, what other groups there might be that could raise the same problem in the future,” he said.

On Tuesday, the two top officials in charge of securing the Capitol the day of the deadly assault were called to give evidence to Congress.

Paul Irving, the former sergeant-at-arms for the House, and Michael Stenger, his equivalent for the Senate, both resigned after the breach. Their testimony marked the start of a congressional investigation into security lapses behind the insurrection.

Stenger said: “This was a violent, coordinated attack where the loss of life could have been much worse.”

Irving said: “Based on the intelligence, we all believed that the plan met the threat, and we were prepared. We now know we had the wrong plan.”

Merrick Garland speaks during his confirmation hearing before the Senate judiciary committee on 22 February. Photograph: Xinhua/REX/Shutterstock

Two other officials, former Capitol police chief Steven Sund and the acting chief of police for Washington’s Metropolitan police, Robert Contee, also offered testimony. Sund also resigned in the wake of the catastrophe.

“These criminals came prepared for war,” Sund told senators.

Sund and Contee both expressed astonishment at delays at the Pentagon after the appeal went out for reinforcements at the Capitol and the deployment of the national guard. Sund said: “I was certainly surprised at the delays that I was hearing and seeing.”

Contee recalled a phone call between Sund and Pentagon officials in which Sund could be heard “literally pleading” for backup. When no immediate affirmation was forthcoming, Contee said, “I was just stunned. I have officers who are out there literally fighting for their lives.”

A captain in the Capitol police, Carneysha Mendoza, described 6 January as “by far the worst of the worst” of all the days she has worked.

“We could have had 10 times the amount of people working with us, and I still believe the battle would have been just as devastating,” Mendoza said.

The riot arose from a gathering to “save America” and “stop the steal”, inspired by Donald Trump’s lie that the 2020 presidential election was rigged and widely advertised on social media. Trump headlined the rally, delivering an incendiary speech which he had billed weeks earlier with a tweet saying: “Big protest in DC on 6 January. Be there, will be wild!”

The riot that ensued left five dead. A woman trying to break into the House was shot dead by police. A Capitol officer, Brian Sicknick, died after being struck with a fire extinguisher.

In the Senate on Tuesday, Rob Portman of Ohio**,** the top Republican on the homeland security committee, noted that two officers have killed themselves since.

“We will never forget the service and sacrifice” of those officers, Portman said. He was one of 43 Republican senators to vote to acquit Trump in his impeachment trial on a charge of inciting the insurrection.

Capt Carneysha Mendoza of the Capitol police testifies at a Senate hearing on 23 February. Photograph: REX/Shutterstock

The aggressive approach to investigating the 6 January riot, coupled with Garland's testimony, signals a sharp change of tack under Democratic leadership in Washington.

Garland's emphasis on white supremacy, and his clear labelling of it as domestic terrorism, marks a departure from the leadership of Trump and Mitch McConnell, the Senate Republican leader, who tended to minimize the danger or, in the case of the former president, actively refuse to condemn far-right and racist groups.

Garland's hearing saw him quizzed on his definition of domestic terror by one of the Republican senators accused of egging the seditionists on. Joshua Hawley of Missouri was photographed with a clenched fist in a display of solidarity with the "stop the steal" crowd outside the Capitol, shortly before violence erupted.

Hawley asked Garland if he thought violence against federal property during racial-justice protests was a form of domestic terrorism. Without mentioning Hawley's actions on 6 January, Garland replied that to disrupt democratic

processes, as in the Capitol insurrection, did fit the definition. “Attacking a courthouse at night” did not.

Garland is a credible voice on domestic terror. He was lead prosecutor of the Oklahoma City bombers in 1995. In his testimony he drew a line from the Capitol insurrection back to Oklahoma City, where 168 people were killed, and on to the “battles of the original justice department against the Ku Klux Klan”.

Tuesday’s testimony by the former Capitol security chiefs was arranged by Democrats Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota and Gary Peters of Michigan. The senators questioned their witnesses about why they seemed caught off guard.

The joint hearing was just the beginning of an anticipated welter of investigations. Though Trump was acquitted by the Senate, Democrats remain determined to review the actions and mistakes that led to the assault. A bipartisan independent commission may also be convened.

“This is certainly not the last hearing we will have on this attack,” Klobuchar said on Tuesday.

Daphne Caruana Galizia

Man guilty of Daphne Caruana Galizia murder given 15-year sentence

Vincent Muscat jailed for Maltese journalist's killing on same day three others re-arrested in the case

Placards reading 'mafia government' and bearing photos of killed journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia are held aloft at a protest in Valletta in 2019. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

One of three men accused of planting and detonating the car bomb that killed the anti-corruption journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia in 2017 has pleaded guilty to the crime and been sentenced to 15 years in prison.

Vincent Muscat is the first person to be convicted of the killing, which has embroiled Malta's ruling Labour party in political scandal and led to the resignation of its prime minister in late 2019.

In a day of dramatic developments, police made three new arrests, apprehending the brothers Adrian and Robert Agius, and their associate Jamie Vella, on suspicion of having supplied the bomb used to murder Caruana Galizia.

News of the arrests emerged just after Muscat's lawyer announced in court that his client was ready to change his plea to guilty.

Muscat, who is believed by police to have acted as a hitman in a contract to kill the journalist, is reported to have negotiated a more lenient sentence in exchange for supplying state prosecutors with information on others involved. He has also been granted a presidential pardon to help shed light on an entirely separate case – the 2015 murder of a lawyer, Carmel Chircop.

Malta's prime minister, Robert Abela, and his cabinet approved the request for Muscat's pardon on Monday. Chircop died aged 51, killed by gunmen on his way to work. The case has never been solved.

In a statement to the court, a lawyer for Caruana Galizia's family hailed Muscat's conviction, saying "this step will begin to lead to full justice".

The journalist is survived by her widower and three sons. Their lawyer, Jason Azzopardi, said: "A person who has admitted his involvement in the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia has denied her her right to life and has denied her her right to enjoy her family, including her grandchildren who were born after she was killed.

"The macabre murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia was intentional and should have been prevented."

At a press conference on Tuesday evening, the prime minister confirmed Muscat's pardon had been agreed after a recommendation in favour by the attorney general and the police commissioner. In statements posted on Twitter, Abela claimed the conviction was proof of "the effectiveness of the country's institutions".

"Today's events have edged us closer to establishing the truth in this dark chapter for the country and the Caruana Galizia family," he added.

Opposition leader Bernard Grech was critical, saying the state had failed in its duty to safeguard the victim. Caruana Galizia was one of Malta's most prominent journalists, known both as a columnist and for her scoops on political corruption. She was aligned with the opposition Nationalist party.

"Today's developments confirm one thing," Grech tweeted. "Had our institutions not been hijacked by those seeking to protect themselves, Daphne Caruana Galizia would still be alive."

Muscat has admitted to all six charges in the Caruana Galizia case: wilful homicide, causing an explosion which led to the death of a person, illegal possession of explosives, conspiracy to carry out a crime, promotion of a group intending to carry out criminal acts and participation in such a group. He could be released as early as 2027, with reductions to his sentence for time already served and good behaviour.

Evidence that he provided in hours of police recordings is expected to assist in prosecuting others. Arrested in December 2017, Muscat was charged alongside the brothers George and Alfred Degiorgio, who are still denying any involvement.

A third man, Melvin Theuma, has secured a presidential pardon. He claims to have acted as a middleman, hiring and paying the Degiorgio brothers to carry out the killing on behalf of the Maltese property and energy tycoon Yorgen Fenech.

The businessman, who was one of many targets of Caruana Galizia's investigations, is currently in custody, charged with masterminding the crime. He denies involvement in the murder.

The guilty plea was entered just after 1.30pm on Tuesday, with Muscat standing in the dock in a heavily guarded courtroom, while the Degiorgio brothers looked on from the benches behind him. Judge Edwina Grima sentenced him to 15 years in prison shortly afterwards, and he was ordered to pay €42,930 (£37,000) in costs to the court.

The Agius brothers, and Vella, were arrested along with 10 others during police raids in December 2017. However, no charges were brought and they

were released without charge. Last October, newspapers in Malta reported that a member of Muscat's family had been offered hush money by Robert Agius and Vella in exchange for his silence. The approach was corroborated on behalf of his client by Muscat's lawyer Marc Sant, who said the money had been refused.

Just before her death, Caruana Galizia had received a leak consisting of hundreds of thousands of emails and documents from a company partly owned by Fenech, which had secured a lucrative government contract to build a power station.

Police told a hearing in the case against Fenech last August that they believed the journalist was killed for what she was preparing to reveal about the power station, operated by a company called Electrogas.

Gérard Depardieu

Gérard Depardieu charged with rape and sexual assault

French star is being investigated over an incident with a female actor at his Paris home in 2018

Agence France-Presse

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Gérard Depardieu is free but under judicial supervision. Photograph: Tiziana Fabi/AFP/Getty Images

The French actor Gérard Depardieu has been charged with rape and sexual assault, allegedly committed in 2018 against an actor in her 20s, a judicial source told AFP on Tuesday.

An initial investigation into the rape accusations against Depardieu, 72, was dropped in 2019 for lack of evidence but reopened last summer, leading to

criminal charges filed in December, the source said.

The actor accuses Depardieu of having raped and assaulted her at his Paris home in August 2018.

Depardieu's lawyer, Hervé Temime, told AFP that Depardieu, who is free but under judicial supervision, "completely rejects the accusations".

According to a source close to the case, Depardieu is a friend of the woman's family.

Some reports have suggested Depardieu and the actor were rehearsing a scene of a theatre play, but the source said "there was nothing professional about the encounter".

The woman's lawyer, Élodie Tuaillon-Hibon, told AFP that she hoped her client's "private sphere will be respected" as the case unfolds.

Mount Etna illuminates night sky with 1,500-metre lava fountain

The moon is partially seen in the sky as lava flows from the Mount Etna volcano Photograph: Salvatore Allegra/AP

Technology

SolarWinds hack was work of 'at least 1,000 engineers', tech executives tell Senate

True scope of the breach, which affected 100 companies and several federal agencies, is still unknown

Kari Paul and agencies

Tue 23 Feb 2021 19.39 EST

Kevin Mandia, the FireEye CEO, Sudhakar Ramakrishna, the SolarWinds CEO, and Brad Smith, the Microsoft president, testify during a Senate hearing. Photograph: Drew Angerer/UPI/REX/Shutterstock

Tech executives revealed that a historic cybersecurity breach that affected about 100 US companies and nine federal agencies was larger and more

sophisticated than previously known.

The revelations came during a hearing of the US Senate's select committee on intelligence on Tuesday on last year's hack of SolarWinds, a Texas-based software company. Using SolarWinds and Microsoft programs, hackers believed to be working for Russia were able to infiltrate the companies and government agencies. Servers run by Amazon were also used in the cyber-attack, but that company declined to send representatives to the hearing.

Representatives from the impacted firms, including SolarWinds, Microsoft, and the cybersecurity firms FireEye Inc and CrowdStrike Holdings, told senators that the true scope of the intrusions is still unknown, because most victims are not legally required to disclose attacks unless they involve sensitive information about individuals. But they described an operation of stunning size.

Brad Smith, the Microsoft president, said its researchers believed "at least 1,000 very skilled, very capable engineers" worked on the SolarWinds hack. "This is the largest and most sophisticated sort of operation that we have seen," Smith told senators.

Smith said the hacking operation's success was due to its ability to penetrate systems through routine processes. SolarWinds functions as a network monitoring software, working deep in the infrastructure of information technology systems to identify and patch problems, and provides an essential service for companies around the world. "The world relies on the patching and updating of software for everything," Smith said. "To disrupt or tamper with that kind of software is to in effect tamper with the digital equivalent of our Public Health Service. It puts the entire world at greater risk."

"It's a little bit like a burglar who wants to break into a single apartment but manages to turn off the alarm system for every home and every building in the entire city," he added. "Everybody's safety is put at risk. That is what we're grappling with here."

Smith said many techniques used by the hackers have not come to light and that the attacker might have used up to a dozen different means of getting

into victim networks during the past year.

> This is the largest and most sophisticated sort of operation that we have seen
>
> *Brad Smith*

Microsoft disclosed last week that the hackers had been able to read the company's closely guarded source code for how its programs authenticate users. At many of the victims, the hackers manipulated those programs to access new areas inside their targets.

Smith stressed that such movement was not due to programming errors on Microsoft's part but on poor configurations and other controls on the customer's part, including cases "where the keys to the safe and the car were left out in the open".

George Kurtz, the CrowdStrike chief executive, explained that in the case of his company, hackers used a third-party vendor of Microsoft software, which had access to CrowdStrike systems, and tried but failed to get into the company's email. Kurtz turned the blame on Microsoft for its complicated architecture, which he called "antiquated".

"The threat actor took advantage of systemic weaknesses in the Windows authentication architecture, allowing it to move laterally within the network" and reach the cloud environment while bypassing multifactor authentication, Kurtz said.

Where Smith appealed for government help in providing remedial instruction for cloud users, Kurtz said Microsoft should look to its own house and fix problems with its widely used Active Directory and Azure.

Ben Sasse questions witnesses during a Senate intelligence committee hearing on Capitol Hill. Photograph: Reuters

“Should Microsoft address the authentication architecture limitations around Active Directory and Azure Active Directory, or shift to a different methodology entirely, a considerable threat vector would be completely eliminated from one of the world*s most widely used authentication platforms,” Kurtz said.

The executives argued for greater transparency and information-sharing about breaches, with liability protections and a system that does not punish those who come forward, similar to airline disaster investigations.

“It’s imperative for the nation that we encourage and sometimes even require better information-sharing about cyber-attacks,” Smith said.

Lawmakers spoke with the executives about how threat intelligence can be more easily and confidentially shared among competitors and lawmakers to prevent large hacks like this in the future. They also discussed what kinds of repercussion nation-state sponsored hacks warrant. The Biden administration is rumored to be considering sanctions against Russia over the hack, according to a Washington Post report.

“This could have been exponentially worse and we need to recognize the seriousness of that,” said Senator Mark Warner of Virginia. “We can’t default to security fatalism. We’ve got to at least raise the cost for our adversaries.”

Lawmakers berated Amazon for not appearing at the hearing, threatening to compel the company to testify at subsequent panels.

“I think [Amazon has] an obligation to cooperate with this inquiry, and I hope they will voluntarily do so,” said Senator Susan Collins, a Republican. “If they don’t, I think we should look at next steps.”

Reuters contributed to this report.

Ecuador

Dozens dead after Ecuador prison riots sparked by gang fights and escape bid

At least 62 inmates have been killed in jails in three cities, with 800 police required to quell the violence

Associated Press

Tue 23 Feb 2021 19.29 EST

A relative of an inmate outside a prison in Guayaquil on Tuesday. Dozens have died in riots across Ecuador. Photograph: Angel Dejesus/AP

Sixty-two inmates have died in riots at prisons in three cities in Ecuador as a result of fights between rival gangs and an escape attempt.

Edmundo Moncayo, director of prisons, said in a news conference on Tuesday that 800 police offices have been helping to regain control of the

facilities. Hundreds of officers from tactical units had been deployed since the clashes broke out late Monday.

Moncayo said that two groups were trying to gain “criminal leadership within the detention centres” and that the clashes were precipitated by a search for weapons carried out on Monday by police officers.

Photographs and videos on social media show alleged inmates decapitated and dismembered amid pools of blood.

Deadly prison riots have happened relatively frequently in recent years in Ecuador, whose prisons were designed for 27,000 inmates but house about 38,000.

Ecuador’s president, Lenín Moreno, said he had ordered the ministry of defence “to exercise strict control of weapons, ammunition and explosives in the outer perimeters of prisons” as a result of this week’s riots.

Moncayo said 33 died at the prison in Cuenca in southern Ecuador, 21 in the Pacific coast city of Guayaquil and eight in the central city of Latacunga.

Moncayo said that close to 70% of the country’s prison population lives in the centers where the unrest occurred.

Patricio Pazmiño, minister of government, sent a tweet blaming “the concerted action of criminal organisations to generate violence in the country’s prisons,” but added, “We are managing actions to regain control.”

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