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OpinionPolice

The Observer view on the erosion of our civil liberties

Observer editorial

Freedom of association is too precious to be denied by the police acting alone

Women gather amid floral tributes to Sarah Everard at the Reclaim These Streets vigil on Clapham Common, south London. Photograph: Leon Neal/Getty Images

Women gather amid floral tributes to Sarah Everard at the Reclaim These Streets vigil on Clapham Common, south London. Photograph: Leon Neal/Getty Images

Sun 14 Mar 2021 01.00 EST

The right to protest is a fundamental human right, enshrined in law. Yet last night, women were arrested at a vigil for Sarah Everard on Clapham Common in an utterly disproportionate and misogynistic response to the commemoration of the lives of women who have been killed by men. Earlier in the week, women from Reclaim These Streets, who were planning a peaceful vigil, were told by the Metropolitan police that if it went ahead they would each risk a £10,000 fine.

We may be living through a pandemic. But it is not up to the police to determine what does and does not constitute legal protest, especially not when the man charged with Everard's kidnapping and murder is a serving Met officer. The organisers made several suggestions for how the protest could take place in a Covid-secure way, and Scotland Yard refused to engage. Had it behaved more responsibly, it could have worked constructively with organisers to ensure the vigil happened in the safest way possible. Instead, women wanting to protest against society's failure to adequately police male violence were told by a police force complicit in that failure they were not allowed to do so.

As the parliamentary joint committee on human rights has highlighted, there is a lack of clarity about how to apply the new Covid regulations, which have not been subject to parliamentary scrutiny, in a way that is consistent with the legal right to freedom of association. Matt Hancock, the health secretary, could clear this up in a moment by applying the exception that already pertains to protests for tiers 1, 2 and 3 in the Covid regulations to this current national lockdown.

> The police have given women and people of colour good reason to distrust them

It should particularly concern us given that the police have given women and people of colour good reason to distrust them. The Met has a long history of institutional sexism and racism. Several officers are currently being investigated by the Independent Office for Police Conduct for allegedly taking and sharing photos of themselves with the bodies of two black women knifed to death in Wembley Park last summer. It has come under intense scrutiny for its mishandling of sexual assault allegations,

including one unit that encouraged women to withdraw rape allegations in order to improve its conviction rates. Undercover Met officers used the stolen identities of dead children to trick women into long-term relationships with them; one officer even had a child with the woman he was spying on. It is not just the Met: police forces all over the country have been subject to a super complaint by the Centre for Women's Justice for failing to use their existing powers against men perpetrating domestic abuse, harassment, stalking and rape.

More than 20 years after the Macpherson inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence identified the use of stop and search as discriminatory, its disproportionate use on black people has almost doubled. Two Met police officers are under criminal investigation after allegedly filming and sharing CCTV footage of the murder of a black man, with laughter heard in the background, according to his mother. Yet two years ago, Cressida Dick, the commissioner of the Met, marked the 20-year anniversary of the Macpherson report by asserting that the force is no longer institutionally racist. This is not a police leader who demonstrates understanding of what institutional discrimination is, let alone what to do about it.

The police simply cannot be left to make decisions about what is and is not legitimate protest alone. Yet the home secretary, Priti Patel, is proposing to further extend police powers to curb protest. The government last week published a policing bill that dramatically increases police discretion to clamp down on the right to protest and gives ministers power to amend key definitions in the act, without proper parliamentary scrutiny. If the government has its way, police forces that struggle to combat racism and misogyny from within their own ranks will increasingly become the arbiters of the freedom to associate that is the cornerstone of democracy. This cannot be allowed to happen.

Observer comment cartoon
UK news

In Britain, even the good news offers scant comfort – cartoon

NotebookMeghan, the Duchess of Sussex

Why I kept my counsel on Meghan and Harry

Tim Adams

George Smiley would not have expressed an opinion on the Sussexes and he would have been right

Alec Guinness as George Smiley in Smiley's People, 1982. Photograph: Ronald Grant/BBC

Alec Guinness as George Smiley in Smiley's People, 1982. Photograph: Ronald Grant/BBC

Sun 14 Mar 2021 03.15 EDT

Many years ago, on leaving university, I was asked to go to a windowless office in the Mall to see if I might be interested in becoming an agent of the British secret service. Over a series of interviews, it became clear that I was not cut out to be George Smiley, let alone James Bond. A single bit of wisdom that I picked up in that process has never left me, though. At one point, the interviewer set out the hypothetical details of a complex conflict in a distant corner of the world in which I was theoretically stationed.

What steps would I take to advise the desk in London of how to respond to this crisis? I set out a few embarrassing platitudes about gathering information from all sides, before coming to a firm opinion and a clear course of action. When I'd finished, my interviewer leaned back in his chair.

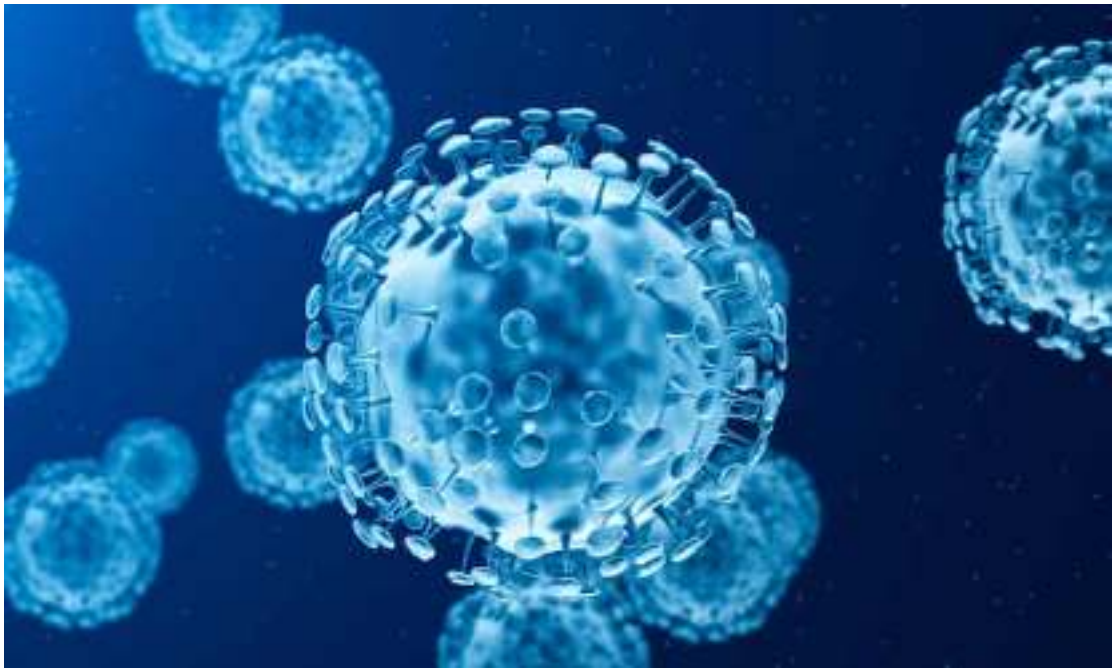
"There is a crucial question you haven't asked yourself," he said.

“There is?”

“Why do we need to have a strong, settled opinion about this conflict at all?”

In the years since, as strong, settled opinions about everything from homeschooling to hijabs have apparently become essential markers of personal identity, I’ve often been reminded of that put-down. It came to mind watching Oprah’s interview with Meghan and Harry and the inevitable, fevered which-side-are-you-on? arguments that followed. “Do I need to have a strong, settled opinion about this?” a voice in my head asked. On balance, I guessed, “probably not”.

Eel or rock?



The B117, or ‘Kent’, strain of the Covid-19 virus, first detected in November 2020. Photograph: Jezper/Alamy

Life’s Edge, a new book by Carl Zimmer, science columnist for the *New York Times*, explores the history of thinking about what it means to be alive. The most newsworthy chapter centres on the nature of viruses. When viruses – “oily bubbles of genes” – were first properly identified in the 1930s, Zimmer suggests, they appeared to occupy a new category of

existence: they mutated, but they did not grow or eat or reproduce. They were "not as alive as an eel or dead as a rock". In the past year, we may feel we have got to know the habits of one particular virus – Sars-CoV-2 – too well. As Zimmer points out, there are plenty more viruses for us to discover, not least the 140,000-plus species now known to exist, generally quite happily, in our gut. Are they alive or dead? The scientific and philosophical jury is still out.

No end in sight

Rupert Murdoch, who entered his 10th decade last week. Photograph: Mike Segar/Reuters

Rupert Murdoch turned 90 last week. There was a time when it looked like he might be slowing down, contemplating the end – out of that imagined last act, the drama of *Succession* was born. Since his marriage to Jerry Hall, however, he has seemed as up for the fight as ever. His mother lived to be 103. Executives at News Corp long ago coined the euphemism "in 30 years" to tread carefully around the post-Rupert future. Apparently, depressingly, the phrase is still in use.

Play's the thing

Children enjoying their local playground in Lambeth, south London. Photograph: Andy Hall/The Observer

So far this year, daily life outside has been like watching football on TV without the simulated crowd reaction. Last week, though, I was stopped in my tracks by the return of the most joyous background noise of any street: that high-pitched cacophony of schoolchildren yelling and screaming and running every which way in a blustery playground, just because they can. Martin Buber, the philosopher, had a nice term for it: “Play is the exultation of the possible.” Just as good, as I stood listening, was a sudden memory of that childhood hymn that described “rough and tumble, rattle and noise”.

Tim Adams is an Observer columnist

OpinionBoris Johnson

Boris Johnson a feminist? Well, apart from his policies, his antics and his jokes...

Catherine Bennett

His press secretary ignores a lifetime of chronicled sexism to contort the truth about her employer

Boris Johnson is said to have addressed female London Assembly members as ‘dear’. Photograph: Leon Neal/AFP/Getty Images

Boris Johnson is said to have addressed female London Assembly members as ‘dear’. Photograph: Leon Neal/AFP/Getty Images

Sat 13 Mar 2021 14.00 EST

An unusual tolerance for the unbelievable and contemptible was always going to be an essential qualification for anyone willing to become Boris Johnson’s press secretary. But Allegra Stratton, the former journalist who has for some reason accepted this role, has already exceeded expectations.

A presumption that she might struggle, given an earlier acquaintance with professional accuracy, with the regular exculpation of a serial fabulist, looked misplaced last week as Stratton threw herself into her work. Twenty times she insisted that, despite having been found out in a significant new fabrication at PMQs, her employer had nothing for which to apologise.

This time, Johnson had twice claimed, the better to dodge Sir Keir Starmer’s questions about nurses’ pay, that Labour had previously voted against a nurses’ pay rise. By the time this was exposed as fiction Johnson

had hurried from the chamber; the Speaker accepted Labour's "clarification" – there had never been such a vote.

Questioned, Stratton would only repeat that the latest untruth "has been dealt", an aptitude for undeviating evasion that must surely settle some of the disquiet about the £125,000 or thereabouts salary that the public is paying for this promised equivalent of Kayleigh McEnany. Add to this the mental and verbal agility essential in a senior fact-contortionist, what compensation would be enough for an apologist who is also willing, in the course of promulgating official fantasies, to insult her entire sex?

Last week, Stratton chose International Women's Day to make her wildest claim yet - Johnson is a feminist. The sun goes round the Earth. At night, Johnson grows wings and flies around London distributing soft blankets to the homeless. And he is all about promoting women. Albeit, Stratton stressed, with nothing like the haste or conviction that allows other male-dominated governments to establish parity in their assemblies and cabinets. "In the months and years ahead," she said, carefully, "as he perhaps rearranges his top team, he will be mindful of making sure that that cabinet looks like the British public."

> Stratton's recruitment is designed to project an impression of high-level female participation in government

Of course Stratton could not herself have been mindful, as she claimed Johnson for feminism, that the searing disappearance of Sarah Everard would shortly expose mystifying levels of male ignorance about the routine sexual harassment and male predation that defines women's experience of public space, from girlhood onwards. But since it has, one recalls that Boris Johnson's dearest wish, as the capital's mayor, was to "reclaim" London streets for cyclists. As for listening to women: female London Assembly members (AMs) said he called them "dear", treating women, as one formally complained, "in a disrespectful, patronising way at meetings and in a manner that you do not display when dealing with male AMs".

In Downing Street, Stratton's recruitment is now designed to project an impression of high-level female participation in a government that, as

demonstrated throughout the pandemic, actively excludes and disrespects women, where possible ignoring their experience. To go further, as Stratton has, in depicting a demonstrably misogynistic career sleazebag as his literal opposite, is a level of fantasy to which even her Trumpian counterparts never aspired.

Stratton is not the first Johnsonist to have have promoted this ambitious inversion of the truth. Carrie Symonds's friend Nimco Ali previously argued that her patron's long history of objectifying women ("Voting Tory will cause your wife to have bigger breasts") should be overwritten by an epiphany or two. Maybe if Johnson had actually built on his concerns about female genital mutilation (having been educated in this by Ali) and girls' education, then Stratton's claim might be less preposterous. But even Johnson's Conservative allies, including some male Conservative allies, can recognise that his sporadic public outbursts about sex equality carry roughly as much weight as his bloviation about world-beating superiority – with the significant difference that he could actually, where women are concerned, have delivered. Probably all Johnson needed to do, to show willing, was add one woman, however resentfully, to a single-sex "quad", tolerate a prominent woman civil servant and promote, instead of demoting, all the able female ministers in a party in which over three-quarters of the MPs are male.

Last week, Andrew Gimson, writing on the conservativehome website, noted that Johnson could have appointed exclusively women to the House of Lords (where 92 seats are reserved for the hereditary male quota). But Johnson's feminist vision had to be sacrificed, you gather, to his need to control more men via peerages – and distribute any spares to friends and siblings.

> Any pay-off in self-advancement is likely to come, after all, at the cost of reputational self-harm

Out of superstition, if not respect for Madeleine Albright's remark about a "special place in hell" for women who don't help other women, one should probably consider whether there could be a respectable reason why an intelligent woman, living outside a repressive dictatorship, would portray a

priapic sexist who habitually denies women power, as a feminist. Any pay-off in self-advancement is likely to come, after all, at the cost of reputational self-harm. Could it be that Stratton is merely taking to its extreme the once popular idea that women would benefit if prominent men with no discernible interest in women's safety or progress modelled T-shirts commissioned by *Elle* magazine reading "This is what a feminist looks like"?

If in 2014 Nick Clegg, the Zuckerberg sidekick who back then ran a political party with seven female MPs out of 56, could so easily declare himself a feminist, why should not Johnson, the inventor of the "tottymeter" (which anticipated Zuckerberg's FaceMash by eight years), do likewise? Well, possibly, and perhaps unfairly to Johnson if he expected similar acclaim, because looking at the impact of the 2014 experiment it pretty much encapsulates the reasons why men – and in particular privileged men who haven't been on the losing side in sexual inequality, or feared its physical consequences, nor ever cared enough to do much about it – might want to consider the justice of that descriptor.

Clegg may support feminism but he is not what a feminist looks like, nor was Ed Miliband and nor, now, is Johnson, not even if he suddenly disowned a lifetime's lavishly chronicled misogyny.

Catherine Bennett is an Observer columnist

The weekly stats uncoveredCoronavirus

Speedy Covid tests are very useful, but not conclusive

David Spiegelhalter and Anthony Masters

Behind the numbers: why the devices being used in England's schools need another test to confirm positive cases

- Coronavirus latest updates
- Coronavirus - see all our coverage

Students at Hailsham Community College in East Sussex take their lateral flow test last week. Photograph: Anthony Harvey/Shutterstock

Students at Hailsham Community College in East Sussex take their lateral flow test last week. Photograph: Anthony Harvey/Shutterstock

Sun 14 Mar 2021 03.00 EDT

Last Monday, schools in England returned, with secondary school students having "lateral flow" tests (LFTs). These device kits operate like pregnancy tests – a liquid sample flows along a pad. Instead of expecting a baby, positive tests mean students and families are expected to isolate.

All tests are imperfect, but the statistics of diagnostic tests are notoriously confusing.

The false-negative rate is the proportion of infected people who get a negative test: the most recent estimate for people without symptoms, published last Wednesday by NHS Test and Trace and Public Health England, is a LFT false-negative rate of around 50% relative to a PCR (polymerase chain reaction) test. The LFT picks up only around half of infected people without symptoms, so even with a negative test you could still be infectious: rapid tests are not green lights.

On the other hand, the false-positive rate is the share of uninfected people who get a positive result, recently estimated in LFTs to be at most 0.1% and possibly as low as 0.03% (3 in 10,000). This sounds excellent. But there are serious statistical issues with diagnostic screening in populations when the disease is rare and it's best not to trust intuition.

Crucially, this does not mean that if you get a positive test, there is only 0.03% chance that the test is wrong. Far from it. In fact, very far from it.

The latest data from Test and Trace says that, in secondary schools, five in 10,000 LFTs came out positive. But we have seen that we would expect at least three false positives in every 10,000 tests of uninfected people. So out of those five positive tests, at least three will be false positives. Whilst lateral flow tests act as a dragnet, this explains the need for PCR confirmation.

If you pick what looks like a needle from a haystack, then your confidence that it really is a needle depends on how many are in the haystack in the first place. If you know there's just one in there, then you should be very cautious when making a claim that you've found it.

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

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Hidden gems from the world of researchPubs

Save your local pub and help defeat populism

Torsten Bell

As support for Ukip is fuelled by local decline, the chancellor's scheme to help people buy their boozers is a welcome initiative

One of many pubs where last orders have been called. Photograph: Geoffrey Swaine/Rex/Shutterstock

One of many pubs where last orders have been called. Photograph: Geoffrey Swaine/Rex/Shutterstock

Sun 14 Mar 2021 01.30 EST

Even before it was illegal to be poured a pint, our pubs were closing. One in five shut this millennium, with fewer than 50,000 pubs left pre-pandemic.

This isn't a huge surprise for a nation that's drinking less over time – at least it was before home schooling kicked in.

Now, new research finds that pub closures pre-crisis didn't just reflect our drinking habits, they swayed political opinions too. Looking at closures of pubs from 2013 to 2016, the author finds that people in areas that saw an additional community pub close were more than four percentage points more likely to support Ukip.

This fits the argument that support for rightwing populists is fuelled by a sense of local decline and greater isolation.

The author isn't, however, making a binary distinction between economic/social drivers of populism. In fact, she finds that the impact of pub closures on voting is particularly large in economically deprived areas of the country.

Maybe this also helps us understand the collapse of Ukip as well as its rise. Brexit happening was obviously quite bad for the single-issue party. But the final nail in the coffin? The number of pubs increased by 320 in the year to March 2019. So if you want to beat the populist right, it's time to save your local pub.

It's not a total coincidence the chancellor used the recent budget to announce £150m to help communities takeover their local boozers. Pubs, it turns out, are political.

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

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Names in the newsThe Weeknd

Snub to the Weeknd shows the Grammys as unfit judges of music

Rebecca Nicholson

No wonder one of the world’s biggest artists is turning his back on an increasingly irrelevant award

The Weeknd performs during the halftime show of the NFL Super Bowl. Photograph: Ashley Landis/AP

The Weeknd performs during the halftime show of the NFL Super Bowl. Photograph: Ashley Landis/AP

Sat 13 Mar 2021 12.30 EST

It's shocking, I know, but an awards ceremony with at least 683 distinct categories, which takes roughly four days to get through and almost certainly has a gong for best backing vocals on a rap-classical crossover in the Portuguese language, has again run into trouble amid accusations of an opaque and complex voting system that some artists claim damages the integrity of the process.

There were no Grammy nominations this year for the Weeknd, one of the world's biggest and bestselling pop stars, who headlined the Super Bowl half-time show in February for around 96 million viewers. After being left out, the Weeknd has announced that he will no longer submit his music for their consideration, blaming his exclusion on "secret committees" and a lack of transparency. His announcement followed tweets from Zayn Malik, who criticised the awards for allowing "favouritism, racism and networking politics to influence the voting process". Drake and Frank Ocean have also

been critical of the Grammys in recent years; the *New York Times* points out that, staggeringly, the last black artist to win album of the year was Herbie Hancock, in 2008, for *River* – his tribute to Joni Mitchell.

After the week's big interview, you know the one, David Baddiel astutely tweeted that the fallout is "what happens when an institution that has always relied to some extent on silence has to exist in a world that no longer does silence". The sentiment fits far more than just the royal family. For all the fun and pomp and silliness, and I do love a good red carpet, plenty of award shows exist in a grey area of back-scratching and behind-the-scenes brokering and they have done for as long as they have existed. However, that relies on a silence that is starting to break.

People will always argue that anyone who complains is simply hurt because they've been overlooked, but the exclusion of the Weeknd is undeniably bizarre, if not downright belligerent. Such omissions devalue the Grammys, in the same way that failing to even nominate *I May Destroy You* devalued the Golden Globes. It makes the old institutions look outdated, creaky and unfit for purpose and that, in turn, makes the audience less interested. I'm sure the pandemic didn't help, but the Golden Globes lost two-thirds of its viewing audience this year and had its lowest ever rating among 18-49-year-olds. Unless they adapt, award shows are in danger of becoming irrelevant.

Patricia Lockwood’s ebook left me questioning my internet use

Patricia Lockwood: ‘witty, brilliant’. Photograph: Artem Nazarov/The Guardian

During the very first lockdown, which now seems like years ago, still flush with a sense of newly free time that might be used creatively – rather than in a state of guilty, dribbling inertia – I set about trying to read the longlist for the Women’s prize for fiction. (I suppose that viewing awards as reading lists/film lists/playlists is one good argument against burning all of them to the ground.) I appreciated the guidance and managed a good portion, thanks, in large part, to the excellent local library service. Until last year, I had no idea that libraries offered ebooks and audiobooks and, even though I don’t understand why there is still a waiting list for something with no physical form, it has been a godsend. I have become evangelical about telling people they can borrow ebooks – for free – so if you were not already aware, please consider this my gift to you.

This year’s longlist has been announced and it is an appetising selection, from Dawn French to Raven Leilani, from Ali Smith to Brit Bennett. It

turns out that I've read three of the nominees already, and, of those, an early favourite is Patricia Lockwood's witty, brilliant *No One Is Talking About This*, which has had me questioning my internet use on a daily basis, as well as alternating between belly laughs and sobs. When the list appeared, I screen-grabbed the nominees, went straight to my BorrowBox app and reserved eight of them, all thanks to the local library. At the very least, it should mean that some of my outrageous lockdown screen time is put to good use.

Adam Driver, a shoo-in for best jumper

'Impeccable': Adam Driver and Lady Gaga on the set of House of Gucci. Photograph: instagram.com/ladygaga

Last week, Britain was a nation divided yet again, between young and old, royalist and republican, left and right, rich and poor, but there was at least one thing on which we could all agree: didn't Adam Driver look nice in his jumper? On Instagram, Lady Gaga shared a first look at her new film, Ridley Scott's biopic, in which Gaga is playing Patrizia Reggiani, the wife of Driver's Maurizio Gucci. The idea of anything or anyone upstaging a woman who will for ever be associated with the words "meat" and "dress" would once have been laughable, but there was something about Driver's impeccable knitwear that drew the eye away from Gaga and straight to him.

The internet loved it, turning it into instant meme fodder; not since Chris Evans in *Knives Out* has one thick knit done so much for one man. I admired it from its high neck to its intricate pattern and it took me back to the knitwear glory days of Sarah Lund in *The Killing*.The only issue is that the weather in the UK is slowly turning springwards; it' s cruel to remind us of the cosy might of a heavy knit, just in time to pack the jumpers away.

Rebecca Nicholson is an Observer columnist

Observer lettersDomestic violence

Letters: the law is failing abused women

Women have been left unprotected because courts cannot issue arrest warrants for breach of non-molestation orders

Karen Ingala Smith, co-creator of the Femicide Census, which analyses the deaths of women at the hands of men. Photograph: Sophia Evans/The Observer

Karen Ingala Smith, co-creator of the Femicide Census, which analyses the deaths of women at the hands of men. Photograph: Sophia Evans/The Observer

Sun 14 Mar 2021 01.00 EST

A simple change in the law to reduce domestic killings – half happening around separation – would be to let family courts attach powers of arrest again to non-molestation orders ("We've ignored the grim toll of femicide for too long," Editorial). A misguided criminal law prevented judges from

attaching these when breach of such orders became a criminal offence in 2007.

Before 2007, if a woman reported her injunction had been breached by a threat of violence or actual violence, the police had to immediately arrest the respondent and bring him before a senior judge within 24 hours for committal proceedings. Namely, to show why he should not be sentenced to a maximum two years' custody if found in breach ("contempt") of a court order. With consequences so immediate, 90% of orders were obeyed. The resulting calm allowed courts to decide issues keeping women vulnerable to former partners, such as jointly owned property, children matters and permanent accommodation.

Now, on breach, victims lose the injunction's protection, and their legal aid, to become mere witnesses in criminal proceedings, if police believe there is a realistic chance of conviction – and if they can face these. There are already many criminal laws to punish abusers, with more coming. Yet women's clear priority on separation is protection. Civil injunctions, without victim-empowering powers of arrest attached, cannot offer them and their children the safe, lasting route from abuse they once did. The new bill – another criminal justice response, like its failed predecessor – so far does nothing to address this.
Jan Williams, director, The Campaign for Effective Domestic Abuse Laws
Knaresborough, North Yorkshire

Give NHS staff a tax break

The outcry against the government's proposal to award a 1% pay rise to NHS staff clearly demonstrates its inadequacy ("Ministers face public backlash on 1% pay offer to 'NHS heroes' ", News). Instead of a percentage pay rise, I propose all NHS staff have their tax codes changed for the next two years, so that none pays any basic rate tax. This would provide a massive boost in take-home pay for lower-paid staff. It would be very simple to implement and would provide a strong incentive for staff to remain in their jobs.
Chris Bell
Sheepwash, Devon

Pain of special needs pupils

Chaminda Jayanetti highlighted the pressures faced by special needs pupils as schools reopened ("Many special needs pupils are dreading start of term", News). My heart aches for the two children in the article and others like them. I am autistic and know what it is like to be bewildered and confused by the hurly-burly of classrooms and playgrounds, the butt of teasing and bullying, when all you want to do is hide in the library. I survived (I am 73), but not without some scars. Many do not survive and the result is talent wasted and lives blighted. The DfE spokesperson's quote says that everything is fine, when it most emphatically is not.
Dr Margaret Pelling
Cumnor, Oxford

Doctors in fear of lawsuits

Surgeons are right to fear lawsuits as a result of the impact of the pandemic ("Surgeons fear wave of lawsuits over delays to cancer treatment", News). In the Medical Defence Union's experience of supporting more than 200,000 UK healthcare professionals, the NHS is facing a potential avalanche of litigation related to the pandemic.

The MDU has helped members with more than 3,800 complaints and adverse incidents since the first lockdown in March 2020. Many have the potential to become clinical negligence claims. Claims will be paid for by the state, affecting NHS finances. This does not mean healthcare staff are shielded from the lengthy and stressful process of litigation, long after the event, with all the damage that can cause the individuals concerned. The extraordinary circumstances described by cancer surgeons call for extraordinary action to be taken by the government to shield healthcare staff. If we wait until claims arrive, it will be too late.
Dr Christine Tomkins, chief executive, Medical Defence Union
London E14

Sturgeon's brave stand

Sonia Sodha highlighted the incompetence of those involved in the original investigation of sexual harassment allegations against Alex Salmond and the hypocrisy, political opportunism and outright misogyny involved in the subsequent inquiry into the collapsed court case ("Why should a woman be held to account for a man's transgressions?", Comment). Nicola Sturgeon will certainly not emerge smelling of roses, but she has taken a stand against predatory behaviour by a one-time friend and colleague – how many others would do the same, especially if their career and ambitions were likely to be compromised?

Bill Stewart
Glasgow

Dumbing down at the V&A

Dalya Alberge rightly draws attention to the absurdity of turning the National Art Library at the V&A into "a publicly accessible reading room of the arts", privileging those living in South Kensington ("Guardians of our literary jewels at risk in V&A plan to cut key library staff", News).

Less obvious are aspects of director Tristram Hunt's plans affecting the V&A's curatorial and conservation staff who are not only to sustain inevitable cuts, but also have their departments reconfigured along chronological lines, drastically repurposing the museum and divorcing its experts from libraries and archives. This can only diminish the specialist knowledge for which the V&A is admired.

John Mallet
London W14

Deaf people deserve better

Susan Kelly's legal action highlights the problems that deaf people – those who have no useful hearing – suffer in this country ("Widow sues NHS over deaf husband's 'diabolical' care", News). More people have British Sign Language as their first language than Gaelic, but it was only recognised by the British government as a language in 2003. In Scotland, BSL has the protection of legal status. Westminster has no appetite to do the

same, so although you can legally take your dog into a consultation with your GP, you don’t have the right to a BSL interpreter.

Legally, deafness is a disability, but the Equality Act is insufficient to protect the deaf. Organisations that would quickly act if there was a problem with wheelchair access tend not to recognise their obligations to the deaf. The government shows the same disregard by not providing signing interpretations of its daily briefings.

Judith Harvey
London, NW8

For the recordUK news

For the record

This week's corrections

Sun 14 Mar 2021 01.00 EST

An article ("Revealed: why millions of tonnes of recycling are going up in smoke", 7 March, page 20) said freedom of information requests made for Channel 4's *Dispatches* revealed that 45% of waste collected for recycling in Southend-on-Sea was sent for incineration, while the amount for Warwickshire was 38%. After publication both councils stated that they had inadvertently provided incorrect figures to the programme-makers. Southend says 8%-9% of material collected for recycling is incinerated; Warwickshire estimates that it burns 5%-10%.

The town of Cardigan is in the county of Ceredigion, not Pembrokeshire as we had it in a feature about hotels by the sea ("Shore leave", 7 March, page 31, Magazine).

When mentioning an award of funding for its renewal we referred to "Newark Cathedral" when Newark Castle was meant ("Contested grants to hidden cuts: how 'Scrooge' Sunak's shine faded", 7 March, page 6).

Other recently amended articles include:

Fans and artists must have Covid vaccine before attending music festivals, say some organisers

To expand women's prisons is idiotic and inhumane. We should phase them out

School Covid tests: positive results 'very likely' to be false

[The Train review – it's Lancaster v Scofield in this French Resistance thriller]

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OpinionCassette tape

Thank you for the music, Mr Ottens. Nothing will ever top the mixtape

Barbara Ellen

The death of the inventor of cassettes should sadden anyone for whom they were the final word in cool

A stack of mixtapes. Photograph: Alicia Canter

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The inventor of the cassette tape, Lou Ottens, has died, aged 94. It's quite a moment for those of us whose youths were defined by the humble mixtape, the ecstasy and the agony of all those unspooling C90s and twisted-up C60s.

I take that back: there was nothing humble about the mixtape. A great mixtape was a work of art, requiring focus and vision. The careful selections. The all-important *order*. The different-coloured pens. The naming of the tape across the spine (felt-tip, bubble graphics, perhaps a tragic years-too-late anarchy symbol). Occasionally, you'd find old, cracked cases in your pocket, or at the bottom of bags, sometimes in two pieces, like a broken heart, and you'd scan titles, wincing at Former You's poor choices. The Bangles slapped next to Wire? Was I some kind of monster? I say "attention to detail", you say "clear signs of neuroticism bordering on sociopathy", and maybe we're both right.

Now there's Spotify but, back then, mixtapes were the ultimate expression of the high-voltage, gloriously unreasonable teenage brain. They represented hinterland ("This is who I am and I should probably apologise for that"); dexterity (finger poised to turn the record button on and off at the right moment); criminality (if home taping was killing music, we all had blood dripping from our hands); frustration (your mum boiling a kettle halfway through a track); and, of course, romance: the giving/receiving of a mixtape was the supreme heartfelt gesture, the sonnet of its time, albeit one that sometimes ended in heartbreak and pettiness: "I don't like you any more. Give me my tape back."

Mixtapes allowed music fans to be their own superstar DJs and, crucially, they were all about autonomy. You could slip a tape into your machine of choice (tinny tape recorder, dinky Walkman, full-throated ghetto blaster) and go wandering, anywhere you liked. In this way, the mixtape was as portable as a good book. If you got it right, it was equally inspiring, an anthology of sound.

With all this going on, it would be easy to get stuck in the thick dust of tech nostalgia, though Ottens wasn't overly sentimental about cassettes. He was also involved in developing CDs, and considered them far superior, though I was never sure about that. CDs didn't scratch? Pfft, they did once I'd drunkenly dropped them on the floor and staggered over them a few times. Does it really matter, the format that music (and memory) comes in? Years ago, I found a carrier bag of old mixtapes. It was like the opening scenes of *Chernobyl* – the stuff of fag ash, cider and nightmares. I needed tongs to touch them; I'd have required vaccinations to play them. Into the bin they went with a fond laugh: "You were played. You were loved. Goodbye."

RIP, Mr Ottens. Your contribution was music to the ears.

Netflix should be a little more caring about sharing

Gary Oldman portrays Herman Mankiewicz in a scene from Mank, on Netflix. Photograph: Nikolai Loveikis/AP

Netflix looks set to crack down on several people sharing one password across friends and family. It's testing a verification code system to check that password-holders live in the same household. Which Netflix has every right to do. It's a business in an increasingly competitive arena; it needs people to pay for content. However, the timing sucks.

In January, Netflix hit 203 million global subscribers and it hasn't done so badly out of lockdown. Talk about a captive audience! To its credit, Netflix has delivered. In terms of entertaining the nation, it, and other streaming services, could be viewed as the fourth emergency service. However, with many people struggling, perhaps, customer relations-wise, it could hold off about passwords until lockdown properly lifts.

Look at the Morrisons supermarket group. Despite higher sales its profits halved and it has fallen out of the FTSE 100 share index. However, the CEO, David Potts, says he wears that as a "badge of honour" because, as well as not holding on to £230m of government business relief, unlike other supermarket groups, Morrisons focused on keeping stores open, protecting and supporting staff and giving discounts for NHS workers.

Good attitude, Morrisons, and one your customers should appreciate. Stay classy, Netflix.

The trick of being both a mother and a performer

Paloma Faith: struggling to juggle career and motherhood. Photograph: Attitude Magazine/Getty Images

Happy Mother's Day to singer Paloma Faith, now a mother of two. A forthcoming BBC documentary, *Paloma Faith: As I Am*, will show her struggling to be a mum as well as an artist: trying to record and perform, while also attempting to look after her children. This isn't because Faith is surrounded by Evil People straight out of showbiz central casting, but because the demands the music industry places upon artists are generally so extreme that something has to give and the thing that tends to give is the mother and child.

If that sounds dark, that's because it is. The pop business doesn't care about performers being mothers – it just wants them to be profitable. Given all the terrible things happening to the music industry during lockdown, it's sobering to think that some female artists may be quietly relieved about this one aspect – not having to go on tour when they have small children to care for.

What's more, there's all that chauvinist tosh about female artists being less sexy and marketable after they've had kids. While the Unsexy Dad label doesn't seem to get slapped on to male performers quite so much, even very successful mothers in the music industry have been made to feel past it and therefore paranoid. Thus they're encouraged to work even longer, pout even harder, to prove that they've "still got it", "it", by that time, being unmanageable stress levels.

Bear in mind that Faith is a platinum-selling act, whose needs would be acknowledged more than less established performers. It's no surprise to hear that the music industry is tough, nor that it's tougher on women. Bravo to Faith for making it clear that it's toughest of all on mothers.

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