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OpinionBrexit

The Observer view on the cost of Brexit being huge. Just ask the Northern Irish

Observer editorial

With UK exporters shutting up shop and anger simmering, Boris Johnson's reassurances to businesses ring increasingly hollow

An anti-Brexit sign near the entrance to Larne port, Northern Ireland Photograph: Brian Lawless/PA

An anti-Brexit sign near the entrance to Larne port, Northern Ireland Photograph: Brian Lawless/PA

Sun 7 Feb 2021 01.00 EST

On Christmas Eve, the prime minister heralded the Brexit trade agreement he had signed with the EU as the start of a new "giant free trade zone". He ignored all the trade experts warning of new frictions at the UK border,

declaring that it was a deal that "should allow our companies and exporters to do even more business with our European friends".

A few weeks later, those words are ringing hollow. Businesses were promised frictionless movement of goods between the UK and the EU and between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. Instead, non-tariff export barriers – new rules and regulations and hugely bureaucratic and costly processes – are threatening the future of many small British exporters and are interrupting the supply of food and agricultural products into Northern Ireland from the rest of the country. On the one hand, senior ministers have been forced to acknowledge that Brexit will lead to significant disruption for some businesses. On the other, Boris Johnson continues to gaslight businesses by pretending things are "going so smoothly" in the face of significant evidence to the contrary.

The situation in Northern Ireland is the greatest cause for immediate concern. The Good Friday agreement was predicated on a delicate equilibrium that, through the absence of a border on the island of Ireland, allows the citizens of Northern Ireland to embrace an Irish or British identity – or both – as they wish. That equilibrium, in turn, hinged on both the UK and Ireland being members of the EU's single market and customs union. In order to maintain that absence of a border after Brexit, the Northern Ireland protocol established the need for customs checks on goods moving into Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK.

Rather than confront the issues that this would create – and make preparations to reduce the disruption – ministers chose simply to deny that there would be any checks. Last year, Johnson told businesses they would "absolutely not" have to fill in forms to send goods across the Irish Sea, suggesting that he either does not understand the withdrawal agreement or that he has no qualms about misrepresenting it.

Brandon Lewis, the Northern Ireland secretary, has consistently insisted there would be no border in the Irish Sea. These interventions flatly contradict the government's own analysis: just four days after Johnson signed the withdrawal agreement, a government report warned that the resulting administrative costs for goods moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland would hit small businesses hardest, while a leaked

Treasury presentation cautioned that it "has the potential to separate Northern Ireland in practice from whole swaths of the UK's internal market" and that this could lead to unionists perceiving a "symbolic" separation from the rest of the union.

And so it has come to pass. There have been empty supermarket shelves in Northern Ireland as even large chains have struggled with the administrative burden of getting some goods through the new checks. The bureaucracy has forced some UK businesses to stop selling goods to customers in Northern Ireland altogether. Just over a week ago, the EU took the incendiary step of triggering article 16 of the Northern Ireland protocol with no consultation or prior notification as part of its row with AstraZeneca over vaccine supply. It rightly retracted this almost immediately – but not before it had further damaged trust between the EU and the UK, lowering the bar for threats to trigger article 16 in future disputes.

The UK has now written to the EU with a list of demands, threatening to use "all instruments at its disposal" if the EU does not meet its terms, while the Democratic Unionist party has called for the suspension of the protocol altogether. Inspections at Northern Ireland's two busiest ports were stopped last week after threats were made to staff running checks. This is a delicate but entirely foreseeable situation, created by Brexit.

British exporters sending goods into the EU have been similarly hit by border frictions. For a small exporter, the costs of the regulatory checks, filling in long and complex forms and meeting new rules around VAT can be crippling. Some businesses have simply had to stop exporting to the EU because of these costs, putting jobs at risk. New rules for shellfish and livestock have led to a dramatic drop in trade. The Road Haulage Association reports that export loads to the EU have been reduced by as much as 68% and that there are only around 10,000 of the 50,000 customs agents who are needed to cope with the flow of goods to the EU. This will have a detrimental impact on the viability of the road haulage industry, also affecting businesses that rely on imports of goods coming into the UK: six in 10 firms are already reporting delays in shipments coming from the EU.

Ministers have responded with claims that these are just "teething problems". They are ignoring industry voices who point out that many are

structural problems that will not go away within weeks, or even months, without a significant renegotiation. Little wonder that business representatives say the biggest problem they have with the government at the moment is denial of reality. Calls for meaningful engagement from the government to find solutions go unheeded, even as government trade advisers are encouraging exporters to set up separate companies inside the EU to get around export charges. Ministers simply continue to claim that Brexit is going well.

This is the inevitable cost of Brexit. People have spent their lives painstakingly building up a livelihood, only to find it wiped out almost overnight by a government that has eagerly embraced new barriers to trade. They are existing in a warped reality, where it suits neither the government nor the opposition to acknowledge the gravity of their situation. And so, even as jobs disappear and incomes plummet, there will be little political accountability for the flawed political choices that have brought us here.

OpinionJoe Biden

The Observer view on Joe Biden's first foreign policy speech

Observer editorial

The US reversal over Yemen marks the country's welcome re-entry into world affairs

President Joe Biden makes a foreign policy speech at the State Department in Washington DC on 4 February. Photograph: Jim Lo Scalzo/EPA

President Joe Biden makes a foreign policy speech at the State Department in Washington DC on 4 February. Photograph: Jim Lo Scalzo/EPA

Sun 7 Feb 2021 01.15 EST

His intentions had been repeatedly trailed in advance. Yet Joe Biden's first foreign policy speech as president, delivered appropriately at the state department, the home base of American diplomacy, was still a breath of

fresh air. The main headlines were an end to US support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen and a brisk warning to Russia that its easy ride under Donald Trump was over. But the speech also marked a broader policy shift.

Gone were Trump's trademark "America First" slogans and the ugly isolationism, protectionism and xenophobia that frequently underpinned them. Biden said he was sending "a clear message to the world that America is back". By this, he meant recommitment to multilateralism, to alliances such as Nato, to UN agencies such as the World Health Organization and to international agreements such as the Paris climate agreement and Iran nuclear deal.

It would be facile to apply terms such as the "Biden doctrine" to what was essentially a restatement, or reassertion, of longstanding American policy objectives after a four-year hiatus. Yet at the same time, the speech was more than a mere touch on the tiller. It signalled a significant change in the means the US will employ to achieve those objectives. Biden's way is the diplomatic way, not the way of war, arms sales, punishment, tantrums, stunts and threats.

All this is very welcome. Yet like every president, Biden will be judged by deeds, not words. The relief among UN agencies and aid workers that he has, in effect, called time on the Yemen war is palpable. After the Saudis and the UAE launched their air campaign in 2014 against the country's Iran-linked Ansar Allah (Houthi) rebels, Yemenis died in their tens of thousands and were plunged into the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

David Miliband, who heads the International Rescue Committee, applauded Biden's actions as "a vital first step". He said "the shift from a failed war strategy towards a comprehensive diplomatic approach cannot come a moment too soon". Among other measures, Biden has paused arms sales to Riyadh, halted US military support and appointed a peace envoy.

Biden should go further – by immediately resuming, and preferably boosting, US humanitarian aid to areas controlled by the rebels, where 80% of Yemenis live. Trump's last-minute designation of the Houthis as a global terrorist organisation, which impedes relief work and economic

reconstruction, was rescinded on Friday. In addition, the US should back an independent inquiry into war crimes committed by all parties to the war.

Biden's Yemen démarche, though not unexpected, will jolt Riyadh, other Gulf capitals and Israel – for it reflects a wider shift in tone and substance after Trump's unstinting, unwise political indulgences. He pledged to continue to help US regional allies defend themselves against Iran. And he has made no move, yet, to reopen nuclear-related negotiations or build bridges to Tehran.

But this may be coming, as is publication of a classified CIA report into the murder of the Saudi journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, which is expected to implicate the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman. Biden and his secretary of state, Antony Blinken, also want to revive the Palestine-Israel two-state solution that Trump and Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, did their best to bury. In short, a period of increasingly strained relations is in prospect.

This is not necessarily a bad thing, if it restores balance and perspective to the conduct of Middle Eastern affairs. Likewise, Biden's tough words for Vladimir Putin – "the days of the US rolling over in the face of Russia's aggressive actions are over" – were an overdue corrective. Putin's jailing last week of the courageous opposition activist Alexei Navalny was but his latest, egregious affront to justice, freedom and democracy. Biden is right to take him on. What he may ultimately achieve is less certain.

Observer comment cartoon
Brexit

Michael Gove admits to a sinking feeling over Ireland – cartoon

The weekly stats uncoveredVaccines and immunisation

Just how effective is the Oxford coronavirus vaccine for the over-65s?

David Spiegelhalter and Anthony Masters

Behind the numbers: why some European countries have called into question the AstraZeneca jab

A vial of the Oxford-AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine. Photograph: Peter Cziborra/Reuters

A vial of the Oxford-AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine. Photograph: Peter Cziborra/Reuters

Sat 6 Feb 2021 14.30 EST

While the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) and the European Medicines Agency have both approved the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine for all adults, Germany, France and six other European

nations have recommended it only for those under 65, Belgium and Italy for people under 55 and Switzerland for nobody at all. Why are different regulators making different decisions?

The problem is the relevant trials recruited only 660 subjects aged 65 or over: 6% of participants. It is inevitable some groups are under-represented in studies; the Pfizer trials included only 4% with Asian ethnicity; nobody over 89 took part. But to have so few from those at highest risk from Covid-19 is unfortunate, to put it mildly.

Only two cases in this age range developed Covid-19: one among vaccinated subjects, the other in the group who had the dummy injection. We cannot estimate efficacy from this data alone. Many regulatory agencies concluded there was insufficient evidence on older people, but they certainly did not suggest the vaccine was "quasi-ineffective", as President Emmanuel Macronthe French president asserted. It is vital to distinguish between absence of evidence and evidence of absence.

In contrast to saying there is no evidence for protection, the MHRA stated: "There is nothing to suggest lack of protection." Scientific knowledge and indirect evidence lie behind this. First, other approved Covid-19 vaccines do not show efficacy dropping with age. Although AstraZeneca is a viral vector vaccine, rather than mRNA. Second, rather than repeating whole trials on groups who did not take part in clinical trials, say of different ethnicities, researchers use "bridging studies" that compare biological responses. For the AstraZeneca vaccine, there were similar levels of neutralising antibodies across age. It is reasonable to assume protection in older people will be like that in younger adults.

These are not normal circumstances, so the calculus of caution changes. There are nearly 2,500 reported Covid-19 daily deaths across the European countries that have restricted the vaccine. Direct evidence on older people will be coming from a US study, which could change future decisions. But in the meantime, unless there are ample alternatives, regulatory choices may delay protecting the most vulnerable and so cost lives.

• 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

The shifting patterns of EnglishCoronavirus

May I have a word about… jabs in the arm and hospital settings

Jonathan Bouquet

As more and more Britons receive Covid vaccinations, the English language continues to be abused

A medical setting: the Royal London Hospital, east London. Photograph: Guy Bell/REX/Shutterstock

A medical setting: the Royal London Hospital, east London. Photograph: Guy Bell/REX/Shutterstock

Sun 7 Feb 2021 01.00 EST

I bet you have a word, phrase or image, during the pandemic, that is trotted out ad nauseam and does nothing to ease your blood pressure. (We will

gloss over early-period Boris Johnson and his quite hopeless road maps, etc.)

Instead, let us consider the phrase “jabs in the arm”. On Thursday, I heard this uttered three times on news programmes. What I think the reporters were trying to say was “inoculated”. Needless dressing-up masquerading as reporting simply doesn’t cut the mustard.

“Hospital settings” can be added to that, which last week, and the week before, and the week before that, has been a noisome presence. I think the word “hospitals” covers all bases. And too many are the incidences of “skyrocket”. I can only imagine that the normal trajectory of a rocket must be turbocharged to add dramatic tension. Rest assured, talking heads, it doesn’t. I’ve already railed in this column about cohorts and vectors, but here’s another one, courtesy of Jon Snow last week, when talking to David Attenborough - “quadrant”. What a quadrant has to do with the natural world is quite beyond me, but I’m sure it was meant to add gravitas. It didn’t, Jon, and please stop looking so smug when you announce that you’ve had your first “jab in the arm”. It’s neither pretty nor grown-up.

Now, I know Ursula von der Leyen hasn’t covered herself in glory, but what should we make of the following? According to one diplomat: “She needs to go. Now. She told fucking no one. After four years of tedious skulduggery over the backstop. Surely the commission could have thought of the optics.” Hardly diplomatic language. And what are optics in this situation? It just made me think of pubs. Oh happy days.

• Jonathan Bouquet is an Observer columnist

Names in the newsMichaela Coel

Golden Globes awards nonsense can't diminish Michaela Coel's genius

Rebecca Nicholson

I May Destroy You should be up for an award but perhaps this year’s perplexing nominations reflect our troubled times

Michaela Coel is not among Golden Globes nominees, despite wide acclaim for her TV series I May Destroy You. Photograph: Conde Nast/British GQ for Conde Nast/Getty Images

Michaela Coel is not among Golden Globes nominees, despite wide acclaim for her TV series I May Destroy You. Photograph: Conde Nast/British GQ for Conde Nast/Getty Images

Sat 6 Feb 2021 12.00 EST

Every time I react passionately to the nominations for any awards ceremony, I have to recognise that I am playing along with the game. I can talk about the Oscars or the Emmys or the Baftas as some sort of monolith, able to point a single benevolent finger at the chosen ones, but they are essentially surveys of big groups of people with different interests and tastes (it may be, though, that it is their similarities that are the problem). Sometimes, they highlight the very best of any given year and are a useful guide to what to watch; more often, they offer a hodgepodge of picks based on politics and fashion. A quick look at the best picture winner at the Oscars, for example, shows that often the winner has not been the film that stood the test of time.*Crash* beat *Brokeback Mountain*. *Dances with Wolves* beat *Goodfellas*. *Forrest Gump* beat *The Shawshank Redemption* and *Pulp Fiction*.

However, the Golden Globes have lost it completely by managing to not nominate *I May Destroy You* for anything at all. Michaela Coel's brilliant television series, about sex, assault, relationships, identity and so much more, is a masterpiece and that is not hyperbole. To omit it from one category would have been careless and a little weird. To omit it entirely seems pointed and that is shameful. Coel has made a series that will stand the test of time and she deserves to be recognised for it.

In the usual way of sporting arguments about nominations, the uproar goes from outrage to comparing what was left out with what was included. *Emily in Paris* earned a nod for best comedy and best actress for Lily Collins; even a writer on that show pointed out that something about this appearing and not *I May Destroy You* did not seem right. More nominations seem off than usual this year. Poor films and series seem to have been rewarded for simply existing. But maybe that is what's going on. It has been a tumultuous year for television and film; this is, perhaps, a reflection of the fact that everyone is wondering what the hell is going to happen next. It feels bizarre, certainly, that awards season is beginning again and whether it's a glimmer of hope or a shot into the unknown is not yet clear.

There was a positive note. Having nominated only five female directors in its 78-year history, the Golden Globes nominated three this year, who will compete against two male nominees. But surely that should have been the talking point and not the absence of *I May Destroy You*.

Evil Chucky has the last laugh in Texas

This photo provided by The Texas Department of Public Safety shows an amber alert test for Chucky and his son, Glen Ray. Photograph: AP

Pity the poor residents of Texas, who were told to keep an eye out for a suspect in a child kidnapping. An alert was sent out three times via email, warning Texans that a five-year-old called Glen Ray had been abducted. The suspect was 28, just over 3ft tall and weighed 16lb. He was said to have red or auburn hair and blue eyes, was wearing blue dungarees and carrying a kitchen knife. It was another detail, however, that stood out – his race was listed as "Other: doll". The Texas Department of Public Safety had sent out an alert for Chucky, star of the Child's Play horror movie franchise. "This alert is a result of a test malfunction," a spokesperson told the San Antonio news station Kens 5, apologising for any confusion.

There is a strong argument to be made that, even if Chucky were on the rampage, at this stage of the past 12 months, it would raise an eyebrow, at most. You have to feel sorry for the poor person whose job it was to test the system, who must have expected to have a little private giggle, all to themselves, for using Chucky and his son as the sample suspect and victim. (A side note: Chucky has a son? How did that work? Is it best not to know?) I can think of few things more nightmarish than reading an official alert that a murderous fictional doll is on the loose, but as mistakes in the

workplace go, pressing send, three times, this one is up there. On the plus side, it's the most I have laughed all week.

What a rollercoaster ride for Taylor Swift

Taylor Swift: an Evermore unlikely law suit. Photograph: Andrew H Walker/REX/Shutterstock

As Americans seem to view litigation as something casual, like small talk, it is little surprise that Taylor Swift is being sued again. This time, it's by a theme park in Utah called Evermore. The owners are alleging that Swift's most recent album being named Evermore has "confused visitors", who have asked if the park is a result of a collaboration with Swift, and that the album has pushed them down search engine results. Swift's lawyers have dismissed the suit as "baseless", pointing out that it is unlikely that anyone would confuse a theme park with an album.

I was going to attempt to make a lazy joke about looking forward to Swift's next album, Chessington, or Drayton Manor, or Lightwater Valley, but as it turns out, during this indie-Taylor-in-the-woods era, all British theme parks sound as if they could reasonably be Taylor Swift album titles. It must be awful for Evermore, the theme park, to suddenly have international attention like this. I believe it is well known in the leisure resort business

that the fewer people who have heard of you, the better. Future contestants on *The Apprentice*, consider this strategy my gift to you.

• Rebecca Nicholson is an Observer columnist

For the recordUK news

For the record

This week's corrections

Sun 7 Feb 2021 01.00 EST

The author of the book *111 Gründe, England zu lieben* is Christophe Fricker, not Fricke as an article said ("A Brexit nightmare", 24 January, page 36). The piece also said that a group of famous musicians had written a letter to the *Times* complaining about the impact of EU visa restrictions on their "money-spinning tours". To clarify, they voiced concerns on behalf of all performers and support staff who would be affected, "especially young emerging musicians".

We omitted to credit photographer Gideon Mendel for the picture published last week of a nurse, June Bruton, sitting with an HIV patient, Ian, on the Broderip ward of Middlesex hospital ("'We were so scared': Four people who faced the horror of Aids in the 80s", 31 January, page 41). Furthermore, the caption dated this image to the 1980s; it was taken in 1993.

Sirin Kale's byline was missing on an article about how passwords rule our lives ("Th3 tyr@nNy of pAssword$", 31 January, Magazine, page 24).

An article about Tony Hart's original drawings for the *Blue Peter* badge logo indicated that editor Biddy Baxter had launched the programme, and the badges, in 1958. Baxter was not editor when the show began that year and the badges were not introduced until 1963 after Baxter had become editor ("Here's one that sailed earlier... the sketch that launched a badge", 10 January, page 16).

We mispelled Wirksworth in Derbyshire as Wirkswirth ("Bring me sunshine", 31 January, Magazine, page 36).

Other recently amended articles include:

Jair Bolsonaro could face charges in The Hague over Amazon rainforest

‘Find of the century’: medieval hoard of treasures unearthed in Cambridge

Professor Avi Loeb: ‘It would be arrogant to think we’re alone in the universe’

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

Opinion Labour

Letters: It is vital that Labour fights for equality

The party must be in a postion to offer solutions to Britain's social and economic challenges

Keir Starmer delivers a speech on 11 January, calling for economic security for families during the pandemic. Photograph: Stefan Rousseau/PA

Keir Starmer delivers a speech on 11 January, calling for economic security for families during the pandemic. Photograph: Stefan Rousseau/PA

Sun 7 Feb 2021 01.00 EST

Roy Hattersley makes a timely case for the party to underpin its emerging policy stances with a philosophical commitment to social equality in wealth and power ("Labour should be bold and declare that equality is its abiding principle", Comment).

An opportunist Tory leadership is currently floating ideas to "steal" some traditional Labour policies – more funding for the NHS and schools, state support for certain strategically significant enterprises – to gain popularity and distract from the increasingly evident disruption generated by Brexit. Labour needs to offer a more coherent and consistent approach to tackling the UK's underlying social and economic challenges.

Hattersley also reminds us that "equality and liberty go hand in hand". This Tory Brexit already threatens to further erode rights at work and risks lower UK living standards through measures to undercut neighbouring EU industries and services. A Labour emphasis on genuinely creative education, democratising workplace life and on promoting stronger local communities and well-financed local government would underline this key point. Greater social equality empowers our individual freedoms and meaningful democratic practice.

John Chowcat
Hythe, Kent

Hattersley's encouragement to the Labour party to make an abiding and overarching commitment to equality is timely. The pandemic has exposed so much inequality: to adequate income, good health, educational opportunity. The barriers posed by race, geography and age have been laid bare.

The Equality Trust and its affiliated local groups vigorously champion the lessons of *The Spirit Level*, the seminal 2009 book on equality: happier, healthier societies based on a fair distribution of both income and wealth.

Seeking equality shouldn't be the sole preserve of the Labour party; the principles extend across the political spectrum at both national and local government levels. Greater equality ensures both a strong private sector and a well-funded and flexible public sector. Fairness does not apply solely to human encounters; it applies to the way we treat the life-support systems that planet Earth affords us, reminding us to treat these with restraint and respect if they – and we – are to flourish.

Rob Pearce
Dorset Equality Group
Wimborne, Dorset

Johnson's brief bounce

Andrew Rawnsley's article demonstrates the short-term nature of contemporary politics ("The bad taste question about Covid that everyone in Westminster is asking", Comment). What matters to the denizens of Westminster is less good governance than the "bluebird of spring" that will transform their poll ratings.

There is no doubt that a successful vaccination programme will do this. People grateful for the vaccine will forget the policy mishaps that led up to this moment. However, this boost will be temporary, as his many other policy failures will have a negative impact on people's lives.

This bad Brexit will generate a number of problems, which by winter will take the shine off this government. Brexit is already causing trouble in Northern Ireland. A government whose sole NI policy has been to pander to the DUP will struggle to deal effectively with any future crisis there.

While the successful Covid vaccination programme will boost this government's standing with the people it is unrealistic for this government with its record of bad governance to expect future "bluebird" events to bail them out.

Derrick Joad
Leeds, West Yorkshire

A chance to rebuild our cities

If the closure of Arcadia and Debenhams stores will lead to the release of 1.4m square feet of retail space in city and town centres, doesn't this present a fantastic opportunity to reshape our urban environment by rebuilding, but this time in the shape of residential units for young people and retired people ("Physical retailing is at death's door – and tinkering with business rates can't save it", Business leader)?

It could be the chance to build sustainable housing creating green jobs as part of the Green New Deal and divert pressure from the constant assault on our countryside and green spaces for new housing estates that are expensive

and certainly not sustainable. It could also rebuild communities that would benefit and thrive from living at the hub of urban cultural quarters.

And how to finance this? Well, how about a one-off wealth tax on Amazon and the other corporations that are doing so well out the pandemic and the death of the high street?
Paul Goodman
Loughborough, Leicestershire

Books are priceless assets

Further to your report on the outcome of Liverpool artist's model June Furlong's gift to the Williamson Art Gallery & Museum in Birkenhead, it is worth pointing out that lesser-sung bequests to public libraries have also met a similar fate ("Were the last wishes of muse who inspired Freud and Lennon ignored?", News).

As a former employee of a Carnegie-founded public library, I witnessed the exploitation of books given in good faith for the benefit of the local community sold to dealers who took their pick of the more financially remunerative items.

The squeeze on library services funding during the 1980s and 1990s put huge pressure on collections where the intention was to enrich the cultural experience and knowledge of the public, not the bolstering of hard-pressed councils. The cultural damage that this has done, not just to local communities, but nationwide, really doesn't have a price attached.
Felicity McGowan
Cardigan, Ceredigion, Wales

OpinionMarilyn Manson

Was Marilyn Manson hiding abusive behaviour in plain sight?

Barbara Ellen

For too long, the music industry has passed off misogyny, and worse, as rock ‘n’ roll excess, just part of the backdrop

Evan Rachel Wood accused Marilyn Manson of grooming her as a teenager. Composite: Rex, Getty

Evan Rachel Wood accused Marilyn Manson of grooming her as a teenager. Composite: Rex, Getty

Sat 6 Feb 2021 13.00 EST

When are we all going to learn that rock stars do not live by different rules where abuse is concerned?

Actress Evan Rachel Wood has accused Marilyn Manson (real name Brian Warner) of abuse when they were in a relationship. She claims that he groomed her as a teenager – they began dating when she was 19 and he was 37 – and he manipulated her into submission. Wood previously accused an unnamed person of sexual, emotional and physical abuse, including rape and torture, leaving her with PTSD. Other women have come forward and made similar accusations.

Manson's ex-wife, Dita Von Teese, and former partner Rose McGowan say he didn't behave that way with them. (McGowan still supports Manson's accusers.) Manson denies all allegations as "horrible distortions of reality", but he has now been dropped by his record label, talent label and management.

One striking aspect is that Manson never hid anything, from music journalists or anyone else. Extremely provocative statements and behaviour were integral to his public persona (though we shouldn't confuse them with abuse). BDSM sex, drugs, excess, alienation, satanism, stage shows where naked women were dragged around on dog leads and more. His autobiography, *The Long Hard Road Out of Hell, is* relentlessly hardcore. (Nine Inch Nails' Trent Reznor has come forward once again to deny a segment about him and Manson sexually assaulting a heavily intoxicated woman.) After he and Wood split, Manson told an interviewer: "I have fantasies every day about smashing her skull in with a sledgehammer." What was *that*: a red flag or "Manson just being Manson"? Therein lies the problem, and not just with Manson, rather with the darker elements of rock'n'roll culture itself.

This goes some way to explaining why the #MeToo movement has struggled with exposing past and present abusers (and not only artists). Overt misogyny and sexual boorishness have long been embedded in music culture, involving artists, the people around them and the structure they work within. Also, some of the most powerful enablers of all: music fans who wish to live vicariously through rock stars (drink, drugs, sex) and who celebrate and ultimately drive their worst excessive behaviour. It's these fan-enablers who have traditionally given artist-abusers the financial incentive and cultural permission to continue.

All of which is fine when it's confined to daring, chaotic "excess all areas". Who doesn't want that from rock stars? It isn't fine when it leads to abuse, using the excuse of "rock'n'roll behaviour" and the other unspoken justification – that the women, even when insensible and defenceless, were "into it".

Who are the fan-enablers who helped make this culture acceptable? (Me? You?). Is it finally changing? Certainly, the stale argument of "different times" no longer holds. Whatever happens regarding Manson, the music industry was *never* right to indulge the mindset that the abuse and exploitation of girls and women was wild, sexy and aspirational. It was *always* grotesque that fans bought into it. Musicians have been let off the hook for far too long.

Spare a thought for Amazon's staff, not Bezos and his billions

Jeff Bezos announces his plans to spend more time with his money and rockets. Photograph: Alex Wong/Getty Images

Call me hard-hearted, but I couldn't care less about the quality of Jeff Bezos's life. His workers are another matter.

Bezos is partly stepping down from the day-to-day running of Amazon. He'll still be involved in some capacity, but he will also have time to pursue other interests, including the *Washington Post* (purchased in 2013) and space exploration. Ooh, the same as Elon Musk! Just what is it about male multibillionaires and feeling an urge to point enormous phallic rockets at the sky?

Bezos may be wanting to duck out of forthcoming investigations into Amazon's business practices or maybe he just fancies kicking back and having a softcore midlife crisis. Good luck to him. On the other hand, Bezos has proved consistently allergic to Amazon paying rightful amounts of tax. His record with small businesses isn't the greatest. Then there are the relentless issues with pay, hours and working conditions for Amazon staff .

Is Bezos still accountable for Amazon's problems as well as its successes? It seems he is and not just because he still owns a significant share of the company. Coco Chanel was wrong – you *can* be "too rich", at least if you wish to fly completely under the ethical radar. Bill Gates seems to have become aware of this, especially in recent years. At a certain point of mega-wealth, you become a moral disgrace if you aren't seen putting conspicuous effort into giving back – or just paying taxes.

In this context, Bezos wandering off in his yoga pants to ponder the meaning of existence, solve the mysteries of the solar system and alarm innocent journalists by being more available for editorial meetings comes across as rather grating. Most of us use Amazon, so it would be hypocritical to fully slam the Bezos business model. However, as our online champ downsizes and de-stresses, let's not forget some of the messes he left behind.

No wonder Matt Hancock was inspired by a disaster movie

Matt Hancock: "Dude, seriously, it's a movie, not a Sage briefing." Photograph: Stefan Rousseau/PA

It could be a sign of the times that Matt Hancock's admission about how Steven Soderbergh's 2011 film *Contagion* influenced the UK's vaccine strategy has not caused much more of a furore.

Hancock said that watching *Contagion* made him realise that there would be a global rush for the vaccine and " huge row about the order of priority". Hence, the health secretary decided to ensure that Britain would be first in the queue, after which, one presumes, he fetched some popcorn from the kitchen and treated himself to a viewing of *Tenet*.

In fairness to Hancock, he made it very clear that *Contagion* wasn't his main source of scientific inquiry. He also noted that *Contagion* had employed top epidemiologists who went to great pains to be accurate. However, disaster movies, even good ones, shouldn't feature in any way in official government pandemic strategy. And while the epidemiologists should be respected, most films of *Contagion*'s nature would ensure they hired experts for the "science bits".

Above all, Matt, dude, seriously, it's a movie, not a Sage briefing. And why are you even talking about this? Maybe it's only the *second* worst news that Hancock used *Contagion* as part of his vaccine strategy. The worst thing is that he was dumb enough to admit it in public.

• Barbara Ellen is an Observer columnist

OpinionDemocratic Unionist party (DUP)

Duped again: Irish unionists and the long, sorry history of Tory betrayal

Nick Cohen

The Conservatives have always been happy to sell their allies down the river

Sir Edward Carson's statue in the grounds of Stormont in Belfast. Photograph: Niall Carson/PA

Sir Edward Carson's statue in the grounds of Stormont in Belfast. Photograph: Niall Carson/PA

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In 1921, Sir Edward Carson, leader of the Irish unionists, uttered words anyone tempted to fall for the charms of English Tories should learn by heart. "What a fool I was. I was only a puppet, and so was Ulster, and so was Ireland, in the political game that was to get the Conservative party into power."

The Liberal Democrats have been saying much the same for five years. Working-class voters in red wall constituencies will be saying much the same in five years' time. Today's puppets, however, are Carson's heirs in the Democratic Unionist party. Couldn't they see what would happen? Did they not read the polls that showed English Tories would rather accept a united Ireland and independent Scotland than give up on Brexit? Boris Johnson's wives, mistresses and colleagues all learned he would rat on them in the end. What made East Belfast Protestants think they would be different? Johnson duly ratted on them and dealt Ulster unionism a historic

and perhaps terminal blow by partitioning the United Kingdom with a border in the Irish Sea.

I am searching my bookshelves to find an example to compare with their bottomless stupidity. The Trojans and the horse: at least they thought the war was over. Napoleon and Moscow: at least he had grounds for thinking himself invincible. Their motives were comprehensible. The DUP's reasons for first supporting Brexit, and then allying with the Tory right in wrecking Theresa May's deal, which aimed to preserve the territorial integrity of the UK, are beyond ordinary comprehension. They lie in the irrational urge to destroy.

Johnson's Conservative party of the early 21st century imitates Andrew Bonar Law's Conservative party of the early 20th. Before the First World War, the Tories incited the army to mutiny rather than accept home rule for Ireland. They wanted to use the fury of the Ulster Protestants Carson led as a weapon against the Liberal government.

> In the early 21st as in the early 20th century extreme nationalism worked at the ballot box for the Tories

As George Dangerfield wrote in his *Strange Death of Liberal England*, Tories became sick of caution and respectability. They no longer could bear to hold on to "that attitude of critical and grumbling respect for government". They no more cared that rejecting home rule would lead to war in Ireland than today's Tories care that Brexit will lead to dole queues, borders within the UK and the revival of Scottish nationalism.

"Move fast and break things" is the authentic slogan of the Conservative party then and now. Own the libs. Don't be a cuck. Crush the saboteurs, the mutineers, the enemies of the people. To ask what will be left of the UK, whether there even will be a UK, when everything is broken is to miss the point spectacularly. In the early 21st as in the early 20th century extreme nationalism worked at the ballot box for the Tories because now, as then, the Nietzschean mood was the spirit of the age.

The DUP could not resist it. With Donald Trump rising in the US and Nigel Farage and Johnson rising in the UK, could they really be expected to be left behind muttering timid cliches about "being careful what you wish for"? The voters of Northern Ireland tried to warn the DUP by voting 56% to 44% to stay in the EU.

Everyone who understood international relations said that, if loyalists and Protestant fundamentalists imagined Brexit would lead to the restoration of the border with the Republic, the United States and the EU would soon put them straight. The only way to avoid a border within the UK was to agree to a soft Brexit. It was their last chance. And the DUP used the power it had in the hung 2017 parliament to rule it out.

How they loved the attention. Jacob Rees-Mogg, a proper English toff, or close enough to Belfast eyes, told them: "I won't abandon the DUP because I think they are the guardians of the union of the United Kingdom" and they believed him. Sammy Wilson rolled around the radio studios praising Boris Johnson's "shock tactics" without it ever occurring to him that Ulster unionists would end up being the most shocked of all.

They think of themselves as tough political operators. "This is a battle of who blinks first and we've cut off our eyelids," the DUP declared in the Brexit negotiations. In truth, the Good Friday agreement had made them marks waiting to be conned. By guaranteeing the DUP and Sinn Fein would always be in control, power sharing in Northern Ireland had atrophied their political skills. They didn't see the threat coming.

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Carson cried out his despair in 1921 because he wanted the whole of Ireland to stay in the British empire. After the Easter uprising and the Irish war of independence, London was no longer prepared to fight to retain control of the south. The Tories were back in power and would stay in power pretty much continuously until 1945. They could safely dump Carson and his friends.

The DUP's stupidity is truly bottomless because no Irish republican war forced them to embrace Brexit and partition the union. Democratic Unionists weren't, like so many settlers of the British empire, abandoned by the Tory metropolis when the price of maintaining colonial rule grew too high. Rather, they egged Tory England on as it went berserk. They hope now that the EU's brief threat to impose a vaccine border in Ireland will save them.

But there's no way out. Now, as always, the choice is a soft Brexit or no Brexit, which they ruled out; a border on the island of Ireland, which the world will not accept; or a border in the Irish Sea, which cuts unionists off from the rest of the UK and forces them to integrate with the Republic and the EU.

Last month, Ian Paisley Jr pointed at Conservative MPs in the Commons and said: "What did we do to members on those benches over there to be screwed over by this protocol? Ask your hearts, every single one, what did we do?"

I'll tell you what you did, Paisley, you betrayed the best interests of your cause and country by allowing yourself to become a puppet in the political game to keep the Conservative party in power.

• Nick Cohen is an Observer columnist

Hidden gems from the world of researchBrexit

Why the wealthy were happy to back a Leave vote gamble

Torsten Bell

An important Brexit study reveals that financial security makes voters more likely to take risks

Property wealth made people more likely to vote for Brexit. Photograph: A Astes/Alamy

Property wealth made people more likely to vote for Brexit. Photograph: A Astes/Alamy

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Elections often come down to whether the public wants to stick or twist. But how does voters' wealth affect their appetite for a ballot-box gamble? It increases people's willingness to risk a big change is the answer from an important new Brexit study. Challenging simplistic claims that Brexit was

driven entirely by the economically left-behind, it shows that having wealth (especially housing) made people more likely to vote for Brexit.

Previous research has shown people in high house-price areas tended to vote Remain, but this study digs deeper, focusing on voters' own wealth. Having lots of it makes you particularly likely to have voted Leave if you live in an area such as the home counties. Why?

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Wealth made people more relaxed about the economic impact of Brexit – wealth, after all, is a form of insurance. The authors show higher wealth is associated with not thinking Brexit would have an impact on personal finances even though it didn't affect views on the national economic impact.

This doesn't mean Remainers can say Brexit was forced on the nation by Surrey stockbrokers alone; it means poorer individuals favoured leaving but didn't vote for it, given their financial concerns. The balanced conclusion is that the insurance wealth offers against economic pain helps explain why the Brexit coalition included both the economically insecure and the economically insulated.

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

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