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OpinionMeghan, the Duchess of Sussex

Will Harry and Meghan learn the A-list art of saying nothing at all?

Barbara Ellen

To join Clooney, Gates, Beyoncé and co, the royal couple might need a little discretion

Oprah Winfrey interviewing the Duke and Duchess of Sussex. Photograph: Joe Pugliese/Harpo Productions/PA

Oprah Winfrey interviewing the Duke and Duchess of Sussex. Photograph: Joe Pugliese/Harpo Productions/PA

Sat 20 Mar 2021 14.00 EDT

Considering where Meghan and Prince Harry wish to end up, are they blowing it big-time? In the commotion over who the Sussexes are upsetting (royal family, British press, British public, and the real victim in all this, Piers Morgan's wife, who has him back, cluttering up the kitchen in the morning), are we forgetting that the couple may have become too noisy and leaky for the scrupulously private mega A-list ranks they evidently yearn to join?

The serious issues of race and mental health have been much discussed. But let's look at this through the lens of the type of celebrity and status the Sussexes appear to be aiming for. First, *that* interview, where Oprah Winfrey was allowed to bash away at the Sussex piñata for headline-generating goodies. Now the leak from Oprah's mate, Gayle King – about the couple's "non-productive" talks with Prince William – presumed to emanate from Meghan.

So, from speaking their truth to leaking their truth? That was quick. Is this a good look for the "global philanthropy"-minded couple? Put it this way: has Michelle Obama ever sat on a TV sofa bitching about her sister-in-law?

Supporters and detractors alike perceive the Oprah interview as the Sussexes' golden ticket into the US elite, but it's not as simple as that. While it's accepted that such behaviour is offensive to the royals, it's forgotten that it's also the antithesis of how the mega-rich, uber-influential, notoriously private elite conduct themselves. The Sussexes aren't going after standard-issue celebrity: one doubts their game plan is to end up on *Dancing with the Stars*. This is about the higher echelons of fame, at least Beyoncé/Clooney level, maybe Obama/Gates, considering those philanthropic impulses, a bit of swishing around with earnestly normcore billionaires or trillionaires, tech moguls and the like.

Anyone who's ever fleetingly ventured into such elite orbits will tell you that they're a discreet breed, living in micro-managed worlds, operating a strict privacy-first code. Getting close to them is like pushing through plasma. If they give out personal information, it's in a tightly disciplined way. These people are unlikely to feel true kinship with people who give explosive gut-spilling interviews, never mind leak private family conversations to showbiz journalists.

In such rarefied circles, the Sussexes simply don't fit in. Whatever supportive platitudes are spouted, in private, eyebrows may be being raised at the oversharing.

I wish the couple only well, because – chrissakes! – why not? However, they may have catastrophically miscalculated reverting to Meghan's *Suits*-level fame strategy (Push. Publicise. Repeat.). When (oh, the irony!) the royal family's oft-maligned, tightly buttoned "never explain, never complain" reserve would have far better endeared them to the elite circles they wish to join. They say you should dress for the job you want, and perhaps, exposure-wise, the Sussexes should have maintained self-control for the social position they want. It's a bit late now.

Imagine no do-gooding celebrities, it’s easy if you try

Gal Gadot persuaded a host of celebrities to wail plaintively into cameraphones. Photograph: Leon Bennett/WireImage

It’s the anniversary of that hilariously tone-deaf Imagine video – you know, the one that marked the start of lockdown, inadvertently serving as a before/after shot of splashing celebrity tears being worth anything at all.

For those who’ve yet to see it, this version of John Lennon’s Imagine was, I suppose, imagined by Wonder Woman actor Gal Gadot, who pulled in a host of other celebrities (Will Ferrell, Natalie Portman, Mark Ruffalo, Labrinth, Amy Adams, Sia, and more) to wail plaintively into cameraphones in an effort to unite the world. And unite the world they did – in outright derision.

Back in the real world, people were getting sick and dying, while others were wondering whether to go the full Mad Max, snatching toilet rolls off supermarket shelves. In the video, the famous folk, with expressions set to peak anguish, warbled through the tune, mostly remembering to keep their mansions and swimming pools out of shot.

Astonishingly, it didn't make the world feel any better to witness the simpering celebrities in expensive jumpers imploring us to imagine "no possessions". Well-meaning though they undoubtedly were, all they did was highlight the grinding solipsism of do-gooding celebrity culture.

Then again, are the rest of us sometimes too hard on celebrity do-gooders? Today, even legitimate charitable efforts get slammed as vanity projects or cynical exercises in career resuscitation, but how are famous people supposed to react when they're asked to do something? "Sorry, I can't visit sick kids in hospital because it would look too much like virtue signalling." It's getting to the point where the famous could be forgiven for being a little gun-shy about pitching in.

Hurrah for Glastonbury! That said, I'm still not going

A scene from Glastonbury 2017. Photograph: Guy Bell/Alamy

Glastonbury festival may be happening in a scaled-down form in September. Although it's hard to predict what might happen, pandemic-wise, organiser Emily Eavis has announced that she's applied for a concert licence. Which feels like great news. Which, in turn, feels weird. What's

happening to me? Is it time to stand in front of the mirror, paw my face, and whisper: “Who am I?”

Thing is, I loathe and detest Glastonbury. It’s always struck me as a festival of annoying, mud-splattered, jester-hatted capering hippies and equally irksome poseurs slurping bottled lager in corporate yurts, and smoking tiny, badly rolled spliffs. For me, this was as close to a vision of hell as it was possible to get, whatever acts happened to be performing. Just the mention of Glastonbury was always guaranteed to grate on my nerves.

Now look at me – reduced to giving internal little cheers that “Glasters!” might happen in some form, even though I’m statistically more likely to be abducted by aliens than go. Oh, whatever. I may as well succumb. Good luck to Glastonbury and all the other festivals and live events that are trying to happen this year. As for my personal turnaround, it appears that the pandemic has changed us all in ways impossible to fathom.

Barbara Ellen is an Observer columnist

OpinionVaccines and immunisation

The Observer view on the dangers of vaccine nationalism

Observer editorial

Covid-19 is a global problem, sharing our surpluses and science is not only ethical but will speed our own return to normality

- Coronavirus – latest updates
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Bottles of the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine. Photograph: Monicah Mwangi/Reuters

Bottles of the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine. Photograph: Monicah Mwangi/Reuters

Sun 21 Mar 2021 02.15 EDT

A week ago, there was a palpable sense that spring was approaching and that our long Covid winter was coming to an end. All the data told the same story – of a virus being forced into retreat by a superbly orchestrated vaccine campaign that was further aided by citizens who were prepared to endure the hardships of lockdown for months.

Now that comfortable picture looks less rosy. Numbers of people being vaccinated remain extraordinarily high – with more than half a million jabs being administered in the UK on several days recently and half of all adults now having received at least one dose. However, we were also made painfully aware last week of the fragility of our position in the midst of a pandemic that still rages across the planet. Reserves of precious vaccines that are our lifeline to normality have come under threat as supply chains have begun to buckle under the strain of manufacturing the billions of jabs needed to free our planet from the curse of Covid-19.

In addition, EU leaders and health agencies have shown an extraordinary ineptness – verging on downright incompetence – in trying to fashion a coherent vaccination policy. Vaccine nationalism, in which states and political blocs vie for supremacy of supplies, now threatens to become a global realty. The extent of this looming crisis was revealed most clearly last week by European commission president, Ursula von der Leyen. She warned that the EU may halt vaccine exports to nations failing to show reciprocity by allowing supplies to reach the bloc. Nor did she disguise the fact that the UK would be a prime target for such a ban, a warning that came as a third wave of the pandemic spreads across the continent, threatening an exhausted and frightened population.

> The UK has access to 100m surplus vaccine doses. Such supplies should not be used to gloat over other developed nations

Britain has no right to feel complacent about its responses to Covid. The nation verged on criminal incompetence over its attempts to control the disease last year and it is only in the last few months – with its well-organised, NHS-based vaccination programme – that it has shown signs of being able to tackle Covid. The incompetence of the EU's response makes us look better than we deserve.

The United Kingdom should therefore resist temptations to sneer at neighbouring countries. For a start, reversals in national fortunes have been all too common over the history of this pandemic. In addition, indulgence in vaccine nationalism would be a betrayal of our global responsibilities. As Jeremy Farrar, director of the Wellcome Trust pointed out yesterday, the UK now has access to 100m surplus vaccine doses. Such supplies should not be used as a means to gloat over other developed nations. They should be given to those nations who have most need of them – as a matter of urgency.

Such a move is a straightforward ethical imperative, a means to save millions of lives by helping nations who lack health services to develop Covid vaccines on their own. That is sufficient motivation in itself – though there would be other benefits. If Covid-19 is left to spread unchecked across the globe, the virus could mutate to an extent that current vaccines and treatments might no longer work – leaving us all exposed to waves of re-infection. Thus science is providing us with an exit strategy, but it is one that will only work if it can be shared with the rest of the world.

Covid-19 is a global problem that must be dealt with globally, for until we are all safe, no one is safe. Indulging in vaccine nationalism will only postpone the day when we can return to a life unfettered by lockdowns, social distancing and all the other restrictions of our current Covid winter.

OpinionBashar al-Assad

The Observer view on bringing Assad to justice after a decade of war in Syria

Observer editorial

An international tribunal is the best way to deliver a reckoning for the dictator's devastation he has wrought on his country

Syrians demonstrate against Bashar al-Assad's regime in Idlib on 18 March. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

Syrians demonstrate against Bashar al-Assad's regime in Idlib on 18 March. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

Sun 21 Mar 2021 02.00 EDT

He turned his country into a graveyard. Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed, including 25,000 children. Millions more have been forced to flee. Terrible crimes – war crimes, crimes against humanity,

widespread torture, indiscriminate bombing, chemical attacks – have been committed in his name, and continue to this day. Syria lies in ruins. So why, 10 years after the war began, is Bashar al-Assad still in power?

It's a question with many answers, which boil down to one: inertia. Syria's dictator-president has survived this long because the international community has allowed it. The UN's independent international commission of inquiry has produced dozens of damning reports since 2011. Its latest records how tens of thousands of civilians have been "forcibly disappeared" by the regime, or subjected to "torture, sexual violence or death in detention".

The commission's chair, Paulo Pinheiro, points to a collective global failure. "Parties to this conflict have benefited from the selective intervention and woeful negligence of the international community that has left no Syrian family unscathed. [Syrians] have paid the price as a brutal, authoritarian government unleashed overwhelming violence to quell dissent," he said last month.

"Opportunistic foreign funding, arms and other support to the warring parties poured fuel on this fire that the world has been content to watch burn."

Yet while few will dispute his analysis, even fewer pay him heed. The UN's reports gather dust. A mountain of evidence has been collected by UN and European organisations – but is not systematically acted on. Assad's tyranny continues unchecked.

Many other factors have kept his regime in power. One is the refusal of the western powers to forcibly intervene. Pressure to do so peaked in 2013 after Assad's chemical weapons killed hundreds of people near Damascus. Fearful of another disaster like Iraq, MPs rejected UK military intervention. Days later, Barack Obama and the US Congress followed suit. The then Labour leader, Ed Miliband, said the Commons had spoken "for the people of Britain". Perhaps.

Assad also owes his survival to the opposite instinct, as exhibited by Russia and Iran. Vladimir Putin's decision to step in militarily in 2015 almost

certainly saved the dictator's skin and changed the course of the war. Russian forces were accused of war crimes, too, as Assad reconquered roughly three-quarters of Syria's territory. Pro-Iranian militias played their callous, sectarian part. Again, civilians paid with their lives, their homes, their futures.

Assad is still in power despite the fact his murderous barrel-bombing of opposition neighbourhoods, sarin and chlorine attacks, and air strikes on hospitals, clinics and schools forced more than 6 million Syrians to flee abroad. That exodus stoked a migrant crisis across Europe, for which there are still no humane solutions. Rather than send these helpless victims to remote offshore islands, Boris Johnson and the home secretary, Priti Patel, should instead address a root cause of the problem: Assad.

Assad has thrived on chaos. Outside meddling by Arab regimes made matters worse. Israel regularly bombs Syrian territory to keep its enemies at bay. Turkey generously gave shelter to millions, then spoiled its record with divisive military incursions. The Islamist terrorists whom Assad claims to be fighting profit, like him, from international disarray.

And yet, and yet... even after 10 years, Assad is not untouchable. Tyranny, inertia and impunity cannot be allowed to triumph. If there is ultimately to be any redress, it is most likely to come in the form of legal action – for only this now offers a realistic way to make him pay for his crimes. If the international criminal court continues to be stymied by Russia and China in the UN security council, Britain, the US, EU and other like-minded countries should join forces to establish an ad hoc international criminal tribunal for Syria.

Precedents exist, in the form of the one-off tribunals created to prosecute crimes in former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. There is no good reason why such a court should not be created to try Assad and senior regime figures as well as opposition groups and militias also accused by the UN of war crimes. Prosecutions in national courts of alleged offenders, such as that successfully concluded in Germany last month, should also be prioritised and expanded in scope under the principle of universal jurisdiction.

This terrible tragedy demands a reckoning. If Boris Johnson's government, for example, really aspires to be a global "force for good" that champions human rights and universal values, it must henceforth insist, in every international forum, at every meeting with Russian, Chinese and other influential leaders, and at the G7 summit it will chair this year, on the establishment of an international tribunal. The US and other allies should act likewise.

The aim is justice. Justice for all those powerless people, living and dead, who have suffered so horrendously. Justice for a nation butchered and betrayed as the world looked on. Justice, most of all, for a dictator whose appalling crimes shame and demean us all. Until Assad stands in the dock, Syria's war will never truly be over.

NotebookConservatives

Downing Street’s £2.6m briefing room screams Worst Marketing Conference Ever

Rowan Moore

The Tories might have been after Patriotism, Authority and Tradition, but all they got was blue, blue and more blue

Downing Street's new £2.6m press briefing room. Photograph: ITV News/PA

Downing Street's new £2.6m press briefing room. Photograph: ITV News/PA

Sun 21 Mar 2021 03.15 EDT

"It's absolutely not something we would ever cut corners on," said the Downing Street press secretary, Allegra Stratton, "and every refurbishment across the government estate is to the highest standard, and those standards are always met."

Sometimes, obviously, her job requires her to be not quite truthful. Because the design of the new £2.6m media briefing room in No 9 Downing Street is bad. It is 1970s low-budget costume drama bad, Worst Marketing Conference Ever bad, Most Excruciating Wedding Reception bad, Warsaw Pact Corrupt Ministry bad.

You could call the look Nuremberg Radisson. Someone must have wanted it to say Patriotism, so it has flags, four of them, which is three more than even Donald Trump found necessary. They wanted it to say Authority, so it has tall vertical oblongs marching across the back wall. Also Tradition, so

there's oak, and Dynamism, so there's a thrusting-but-veneered podium, a stunted reject from some abortive and long-forgotten Forest of Dean space programme. They very much wanted it to say Tory, so it is blue, very, very blue, Eternal Party of Government Blue, Conservatives Forever Blue, like those party conference sets from which bits fall off.

The question is why. Sheer incompetence? To express their contempt for journalists? Or perhaps to announce the last stage of Vladimir Putin's takeover of British government. We have heard much of his use of techniques from post-modern theatre and conceptual art, as developed by his now-departed aide Vladislav Surkov, to subvert his enemies. What could be more devastatingly effective than to put the British prime minister in the centre of an absurdist drama, in which the very decor is laughing not with him but at him? There has been concern about the involvement of the Russian company Megahertz in the technical equipment, which if you ask me is a distraction. The real story is hiding in plain sight.

... and this really sucks

The only good thing about the briefing room is the appearance of a Henry vacuum cleaner in the published shots. Ever since the early Blair years, the preposterous products of Singapore's James Dyson have been presented as the future of British industry. Better to fly the flag with some domestic cleaning equipment that actually does its job well.

Prizing the unloved

The 2021 Pritzker prize winners Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal, pictured in their workshop in Montreuil, outside Paris. Photograph: Joel Saget/AFP/Getty Images

A piece of uncomplicatedly good news: the world's biggest architecture prize, the Pritzker, has gone to the French pair Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal. They have long been showing how to make the most unloved buildings beautiful, by adding to and modifying them with skill and imagination. Which, environmentally, socially and architecturally, is usually better than blowing them up and starting again. The rest of the construction and development world is slowly waking up to this fact. The recognition that comes with the prize can only help.

Generous by design

‘An exceptional man’: Zeev Aram, who died last week. Photograph: Anna Huix/Commissioned for Weekend magazine

Zeev Aram, who died on Thursday aged 89, was an exceptional man. His Aram store in Covent Garden, founded in 1964, brought the greatest modernist furniture to Britain, by Le Corbusier, Jean Prouvé, Marcel Breuer and others. In the early 1970s he persuaded Eileen Gray, then elderly and half-forgotten, to permit him to make and sell editions of her furniture, which played a major role in her rediscovery as one of the most important designers of the 20th century. He was a genial, generous and honoured regular at the Ivy restaurant. Aram was himself a designer, but it is for his championing of others that he will be most remembered. It is sometimes such people who play the most vital roles.

Rowan Moore is the Observer’s architecture critic

Observer comment cartoon
Boris Johnson

Boris 'I'm still a bumbling charlatan' Johnson – cartoon

The weekly stats uncoveredVaccines and immunisation

Don’t fear the AstraZeneca jab, the risks are minimal

David Spiegelhalter and Anthony Masters

Health regulators have said there’s no increased thrombosis risk from the Covid vaccine, but has the damage been done?

A doctor prepares a dose of the Oxford-AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine. Photograph: Piroschka van de Wouw/EPA

A doctor prepares a dose of the Oxford-AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine. Photograph: Piroschka van de Wouw/EPA

Sun 21 Mar 2021 03.00 EDT

Statistics about the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine have dominated the news, with concern over blood clots leading many European countries to suspend its use.

Then, on Thursday, the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and the UK Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MRHA) declared there was no general increased risk of thromboses, but they were continuing to look at a rare type of clotting linked with low platelets, particularly in the brain.

From nearly 12m Oxford/AZ vaccinations up to 7 March, the UK "yellow card" system has recorded 61,000 reports detailing 228,000 reactions, around double the rate for the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine. There have been huge numbers of immediate side-effects such as pain, nausea, fatigue, headache and fever, with other notable reports including palpitations (1,318), "feeling jittery" (10), "screaming" (4), chilblains (10), alcohol poisoning (2), libido increased (1), libido decreased (1), and one remarkable report of a pregnancy following vaccination. But some have been serious events, including 289 deaths soon after the jab, and all of these will have been examined carefully.

Every decision has trade-offs. Both UK vaccines have had more than 200 severe allergic reactions (anaphylaxis), which is why we have to sit for 15 minutes after the jab. So it's reasonable that, rather than saying the vaccine is "safe", the EMA and MRHA emphasise that the benefits of the vaccine outweigh the risks of side-effects.

In the UK there has been one of these rare blood reactions in 2m jabs. But for every 2 million people in their 50s getting a jab, the current group being vaccinated, we would currently expect to prevent around five deaths a week. The ratio of benefit to harms is high, and even higher on mainland Europe as their third wave starts.

The "cautionary" pause in many countries may mean increased vaccination hesitancy. France has moved from initially not approving the Oxford/AZ vaccine for over-65s, to pausing it for everyone, to now not approving it for under-55s. It would not be surprising if people are confused by this. Confidence can shatter like glass and be hard to remake.

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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The shifting patterns of EnglishFrance

May I have a word about… why Roman numerals are as elegantly easy as I, II, III

Jonathan Bouquet

The French want to turn Louis XIV into Louis 14. Who do they think he is - a footballer?

Louis 14: ‘sun king’ or footballer? Photograph: Alain Jocard/AFP/Getty Images

Louis 14: ‘sun king’ or footballer? Photograph: Alain Jocard/AFP/Getty Images

Sun 21 Mar 2021 02.30 EDT

Funny lot, the French. Even as Emmanuel Macron and his European colleagues perform ever more absurd contortions over the AstraZeneca vaccination – it doesn’t work… just look at all the blood clots across the

continent… but that doesn't mean we're not going to commandeer millions of shots – trouble of an equally knicker-twisting variety is brewing far closer to home, on his doorstep, in fact.

The Carnavalet Museum of Parisian History has decreed that, for the sake of "universal accessibility", the use of Roman numerals is to be severely restricted, so that from now on Louis XIV will be known as Louis 14. The head of visitor services says: "We have nothing against Roman numerals, but they can be an obstacle to understanding."

Absolute tosh. They are elegant on the page and have served us well for centuries. Louis 14 sounds like a footballer or a sports car. At least Jacques Gaillard, the writer and Latinist, is fighting back. "For 20 years we have been under the American influence and the Americans don't know how to read Roman numerals. Knowledge is being wiped out." Well said, comrade Gaillard. To the barricades and take that slacker Macron with you.

Actually, things aren't much better here. I noticed on an advert for Barclays bank that you can now consult a "money mentor". Is this what used to be known as a bank manager? Captain Mainwaring would roll his eyes, and rightly so.

And this week's prize for plain speaking goes to Jeremy Paxman, not for the first time. "Look, I'm not going to get into the business of shitbagging my former colleagues if that's what you want," he harrumphed in an interview. Not quite as elegant as a Roman numeral, but equally explicable.

Jonathan Bouquet is an Observer columnist

Names in the newsOttessa Moshfegh

Ottessa Moshfegh survived lockdown by writing a novel

Rebecca Nicholson

The author wrote to survive while most of the rest of us eventually settled for doing as little as possible

Ottessa Moshfegh wrote a novel during lockdown, ‘to survive’. Photograph: John Francis Peters/The Guardian

Ottessa Moshfegh wrote a novel during lockdown, ‘to survive’. Photograph: John Francis Peters/The Guardian

Sat 20 Mar 2021 13.30 EDT

Despite the recent vaccine delays, I remain optimistic about the prospect of this third lockdown being the last, though I also wonder if this new positive attitude is blind, desperate faith rather than reason.

It brings to mind an article I once read about plane crash survivors, who recalled that when it was obvious something was wrong, far from the panicked screaming and hysteria you might expect, most of the passengers fell into an eerie, stunned silence. Third lockdown certainly has been the worst of the three, without so much as a dramatic loo roll shortage to spice things up. The people around me have found it a tough slog that has been getting tougher. “How are you?” text messages now get a “fine, I think?” in response. Nobody seems to know how they are.

In a short piece for *Vox*, as part of a clever look at people who created work that seemed to predict the pandemic and its circumstances, the author

Ottessa Moshfegh wrote about how sales of her novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* had gone up significantly. The book, about a woman who tries to drug herself into sleeping through 12 months of her life, struck a chord with readers. (If they thought that was prophetic, they should try her latest, *Death in Her Hands*, in which an isolated woman passes her lonely days walking her dog and getting fixated on an increasingly irrational project; this is not dissimilar to my own "knitting era".) Moshfegh revealed in her piece: "I also wrote an entire novel during this period. I needed to. To survive."

> The people around me have found lockdown a tough slog that has been getting tougher

I find myself envious of productivity like this. I feel lazier, now, than I have ever felt before. At the beginning, I had put a positive spin on enforced down time. I signed up for online classes, I thought about starting a zine. In those early days, I was disciplined, and did Yoga With Adriene. But as summer came, and washed into autumn, which washed into winter, and as we all trudged on, stuck in the same place, in the same routine, missing our families, it became harder. Conversations with friends were more spaced out, because what was there to say? How are you? Fine? We think?

Anyone who has managed to be productive during this time is my hero. Moshfegh wrote a novel to survive, and I look forward to reading it. I set an alarm and went for a lot of walks. Ultimately, I had to stop feeling guilty about the descent of idleness, but summer can't come soon enough.

Jodie Comer: perfect timing for Villanelle's vanishing trick

Bowing out: Jodie Comer as Villanelle in Killing Eve. Photograph: BAFTA/PA

Few shows have been as simultaneously entertaining and infuriating as *Killing Eve*, which has announced that its fourth season will film in summer and be on TV in 2022 and, oh, by the way, it will also be its last. Naturally, fans were upset that the show is coming to an end, but I think it is a classy move, a Villanelle-like flourish; the assassin has many good qualities, despite her murder-lust, and I suspect that leaving a party at just the right moment is one of them.

The show has made a star out of Jodie Comer, and given Sandra Oh a role that equals, if not surpasses, her *Grey's Anatomy* gig, and even when I struggled with some of it, I made a point of watching every episode, as soon as I could. Only *Masterchef* and *Drag Race UK* (bing bang bong!) pull that kind of dedication out of me. But there's nothing worse than a show limping on past its best, and I wish more had the courage to pull the plug in their prime. Imagine if *Homeland* or *24*, or even *Lost* had ended with a bang instead of meandering to a close. Four seasons is a neat amount of time in which to finally wrap up the will-they-won't-they storyline with some kind of definitive resolution, rather than keeping it blurry for the sake of longevity. There is talk of a *Killing Eve* spin-off or even spin-offs in

development, but if it doesn't involve Comer in a fabulous clown costume ruining a child's birthday party each week, they're missing a trick.

Brickbats and bouquets could await Glenn Close

Glenn Close in a scene from Hillbilly Elegy. Photograph: Lacey Terrell/AP

Glenn Close has joined an elite club, becoming only the third person in history to be nominated for both an Academy Award and a Golden Raspberry for the same film, yet more evidence of how silly these things can be. Close got a nod for best supporting actress and worst supporting actress for her portrayal of Mamaw in Ron Howard's divisive Netflix melodrama, *Hillbilly Elegy*. This dubious nomination double-whammy last went to Amy Irving in 1983, for her role in *Yentl*, and before her, to James Coco, for *Only When I Laugh* in 1981.

The Razzies, spotlighting cinema at its worst, are an interesting proposition these days. They're mean-spirited, sure, and as such, slightly anachronistic; these are sensitive times, though I always think Hollywood is a big boy, and can take it. Sandra Bullock famously and gamely turned up in person to collect her Razzie, as did Halle Berry, which shone a flattering light on both of them. But nobody has won an Oscar and a Razzie for the same part, so if Close – who has been nominated for an Academy Award eight times – pulls

it off, she will have made history in more ways than one, which is enough of a reason to root for her.

Rebecca Nicholson is an Observer columnist

Observer lettersHouse of Lords

Letters: the price of failure? A seat in the Lords

After a disastrous reorganisation of the NHS, Andrew Lansley was elevated to the upper house. He won't be the last…

Andrew Lansley, centre, with former prime minister David Cameron during a discussion on the future of the NHS in 2012. Photograph: Stefan Wermuth/REUTERS

Andrew Lansley, centre, with former prime minister David Cameron during a discussion on the future of the NHS in 2012. Photograph: Stefan Wermuth/REUTERS

Sun 21 Mar 2021 02.00 EDT

In reflecting on ministerial incompetence ("The record-beating cost to the taxpayer of this shockingly wasteful government", Comment), Andrew Rawnsley says: "The worst that the most egregious ministerial bunglers can

expect is to be quietly dropped or gently moved to another department when a cabinet reshuffle comes around."

Is it not also disgraceful that failure in office is often followed by elevation to the House of Lords? For example, Andrew Lansley, formerly the health secretary, was the mastermind behind a big reorganisation of the NHS in 2012, a plan that has now been found to be so unsatisfactory that it is to be binned. Lansley is now in the upper House, that ludicrously bloated and expensive retirement home for politicians. And we can be sure that, eventually, he will be joined there by the likes of Williamson, Gove, Hancock, Patel and Johnson.
Dr David Mervin
Arnside, Cumbria

Andrew Rawnsley's article about the shattering cost of Johnson's government's incompetence overlooked one point. The eye-watering cost of the NHS test and trace programme looks even worse when you consider that its operation did not extend north of the border. In Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon's government did what Johnson's did not; it used the expertise of public health and local authority officials rather than expensive outsourcing to private providers.
Gavin Brown
Linlithgow, West Lothian

The perils of foraging

I read with interest and concern your article on foraging ("Wild garlic, nettles and berries… how foraging went mainstream", News), which suggests that increasing numbers of people are foraging in parks and the countryside. Nowhere in the article were readers reminded that foraging can cause damage and could be construed as wilful damage.

Parks are public places where plants are there for the visual pleasure of all, not to be torn up or trampled by people picking them. Farmers and landowners will not appreciate foragers tramping over fields and woodland in pursuit of "free" food.

Elizabeth Wood
Brede, Hastings

Our favourite fantasy

David Olusoga argues persuasively for the operation of "fantasy" in the current royal controversy ("The royals are just like much of our press – trapped in a fantasy version of Britain's past", Comment). However, myth-making is even more heavily implicated than he describes, for the royal family itself is the nation's favourite fantasy. No other British institution so peculiarly combines codes of secrecy with so many willing interpreters of its affairs.

Even when criticising the family, the public constructs reassuring alternative myths with which to scold it: witness the near canonisation of Princess Diana for offering the kind of compassion that is commonplace among the general population but which, in her, somehow became a special gift all the better to contrast her with her in-laws.

These fictive royals seem indispensable to our national self-image; an image that needs constant flattering by a selectively amnesiac historical memory on the one hand and, on the other, vigilant policing by a professional commentariat, whose racial airbrush locks on to controversy with algorithmic reliability, the better to control the mood of a public too often willing to suspend its disbelief.
Paul McGilchrist
Colchester, Essex

Inbuilt misogyny of benefits

Sonia Sodha's excellent article about male violence covers many of the things that contribute to the hostile environment that's normal for women and girls in the UK, such as lack of education for boys about equality and the power of the internet to spread radical misogyny ("Domestic violence, refuges, rape charges… why do we get it wrong on male violence?", Comment). She also recognises that most femicide and violence against women happens indoors, within families.

Commentators must start to highlight the inbuilt misogyny of the benefits system that traps women within those households by taking away their financial independence. Universal credit goes into a single bank account, making partners, most often women, highly vulnerable to financial control by their abusers. We've lived for so long with the narrative dehumanising people on benefits ("scroungers" and "benefits cheats") that it's preventing a debate about how the benefits system is taking away women's legal and financial independence, and putting their lives at risk.

Deborah Fajerman
London SE26

Too much, not too little

Another article riffed on the theme of "why hair falling out affects our sense of self so deeply" ("I think I'm losing it", Magazine). As a woman who has suffered from excess facial hair since the age of 16 (and paid for the pain of having it removed by electrolysis for the last 40 years), I am left wondering, yet again, when we are going to see articles discussing the issue of women and girls experiencing lack of self-esteem and confidence due to excess facial and body hair.

Melanie Joy
Nottingham

Let the Angel shine forth

The Angel of the North is a historic landmark in the north-east ("Now you see it… Angel of the North views at risk from new road plan", News). As you approach Gateshead on the A1, the statue speaks of the history of the region – the metal structure that reflects the work in the shipyards.

It is beautiful as well as symbolic. To diminish its presence shows a disregard for its meaning and reflection of the history of the community. Seeing it always brings a sense of identity with the area and I admire Antony Gormley for his awareness and his beautiful work. Please let it remain a dominant feature and not obscured to ease congestion.

Heather Worsley
Teddington, London

Icebound? I should cocoa

If marine archaeologists want to find out about the effects on the human psyche caused by sitting on a boat in freezing temperatures and unable to go anywhere, there really is no need to go to the Canadian Arctic ("What really happened on the Terror? Divers plan return to Franklin wrecks", News). Just give me a ring, I'll talk to anyone.

Ian Grieve
Gordon Bennett
Llangollen canal

For the recordUK news

For the record

This week's corrections

Sun 21 Mar 2021 02.00 EDT

A leader column referred to the killing of two women in "Wembley Park" last year; this should have said Fryent Country Park, which is near Wembley Park station in Brent, north-west London ("Our freedom of association is too precious a right to leave to the police", 14 March, page 40)

A super-complaint by the Centre for Women's Justice, documenting reports of domestic abuse incidents perpetrated by police officers and others employed by the police, was filed in March 2020, not March this year, as an article suggested ("Stop minimising. Murder of women by strangers is not 'incredibly rare'", 14 March, page 3)

The album *French Duets*, performed by Paul Lewis and Steven Osborne, was recorded on 22 and 23 March 2020 before England went into full lockdown, not after, as a review implied ("Classical & Theatre", 14 March, page 29, New Review).

Other recently amended articles include:

The Walking People; Seven and a Half Lessons About the Brain; A Long Petal of the Sea – reviews

When it comes to race and gender, oppressed people can be oppressors too

Lloyd Webber: Theatreland must 'stop wringing its hands and pay for drama diversity'

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

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Hidden gems from the world of researchSocial mobility

Success is less about where you're from, than where you go

Torsten Bell

Levelling up policies must address the problem of social mobility as much as geography

Analysis suggests poorer city dwellers are more likely to gain a university place than similar students elsewhere. Photograph: Alamy Stock Photo

Analysis suggests poorer city dwellers are more likely to gain a university place than similar students elsewhere. Photograph: Alamy Stock Photo

Sun 21 Mar 2021 02.45 EDT

Geography is back in fashion. Long seen as the preserve of middle-aged men with elbow patches, it's now centre stage with the prime minister's talk

of levelling up poorer regions. The problem with Britain's elite belatedly returning to geography is that they don't seem to grasp its complexity.

I keep being told the problem facing the "red wall" seats in the north and Midlands that swung to the Conservatives from Labour in 2019 is that all the young people leave for university or work. But young people in those seats are much less likely to leave. It's this lack of mobility that defines England's new political battlegrounds.

Research on access to elite universities reinforces the complexity. In headline terms, rural areas do best for top university places but that's not the story's end. Once the authors correct for the very different populations of different areas (that is, generally richer in the shires), they find disadvantaged young people in our big cities (such as London's east end) were actually more likely to gain a place than similar students elsewhere.

This tells you two things. First, big cities have more than their share of poor families – overall, Londoners have below average disposable incomes. Second, instead of worrying that the young are leaving, we should ensure disadvantaged youths outside cities have more opportunities so they can decide whether or not to take them up. The lesson? Geography, like life, is complicated.

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

OpinionCoronavirus

We’re living in a time of high stakes and scientific risks need to be taken

Sonia Sodha

It’s not enough now for science to move in a stately fashion with great caution

Scientists studying coronavirus vaccines have reached vastly different conclusions with the same information. Photograph: Fredrick Kippe/Alamy

Scientists studying coronavirus vaccines have reached vastly different conclusions with the same information. Photograph: Fredrick Kippe/Alamy

Sat 20 Mar 2021 15.00 EDT

There’s nothing like living through a global pandemic to engender a dawning realisation that real-world science is a different beast from the “hypothesise, test, repeat” science we learn at school. And that just because a claim is made by an eminent scientist it is not automatically elevated to a gold standard truth.

A year ago, I would have predicted that the role of science in a global pandemic would be fairly straightforward. The scientists do the science. Then they tell the rest of us what to do, and lives get saved. I would have been shocked if someone had told me how politicised the scientific debate would become, that people claiming to be informed by science would be arguing on the basis of the same facts that we should take directly contradictory action, when the stakes couldn’t be higher.

The latest example is the different decisions governments across Europe came to about whether or not to halt the rollout of the AstraZeneca vaccine in light of concerns it could be linked to a tiny number of cases of clotting disorders. The UK and European medicines regulators have said there is no evidence that the clotting cases are caused by the vaccine. Many scientists have said the number of clotting incidents is no greater than you might expect to see without a vaccine, and that the health risks of restricting its supply while these rare incidences are being investigated far outweigh the benefits.

Why did different countries reach such different conclusions from the same information? The most flattering explanation is some governments still thought it better to temporarily halt the rollout, to maintain long-term public confidence in Covid vaccines. The less flattering one is that governments already feeling hostile to AstraZeneca after its recent row with the EU over supply were predisposed to this decision, risking harming public confidence via a stop-start approach unjustified by the evidence.

A helpful lens through which to understand all this is "post-normal science", a concept that emerged out of scientific controversy around BSE, climate science and GM crops, which I came across when making a Radio 4 documentary on Covid science . It describes the kind of science that takes place in conditions of great uncertainty, where the values around science are in dispute, the stakes are high and decisions are urgent. Covid science is post-normal science on steroids, and it helps in understanding how the science that many of us like to think of as sitting above the fray, churning out wise insights, has become so politicised.

Post-normal science is more vulnerable to bad science. Covid is a novel virus about which we know relatively little: any scientific consensus is fledgling and it is possible to find scientific studies that reach contradictory conclusions. In these conditions, "following the science" easily becomes picking and choosing the science that suits your political agenda. This is not a new phenomenon: tobacco and oil companies have sought to undermine the scientific consensus about climate change and smoking by funding their own studies for decades. But in the empirical ground zero of Covid any amateur ideologue can find a study to wave around. Want to make the case

against masks, or lockdowns, but appear to do it based not on values but truth? Look hard enough and there'll be a scientist out there for you. The result is that the debate about a relatively low-cost, low-hassle intervention like masks has become bizarrely politicised.

> Want to make a case against masks, but appear to do it based not on values but truth? There will be a scientist out there for you

The high-stakes, highly uncertain nature of post-normal science also paves the way for scientists' own bias to creep in. There have been some eyewatering bloopers in the past 12 months. After President Donald Trump wrongly claimed hydroxychloroquine was an effective treatment for Covid, the *Lancet* published a paper by Harvard researchers that claimed it was actually associated with an increased risk of death, based on an analysis of 90,000 patient records owned by a company called Surgisphere. The World Health Organization immediately suspended its hydroxychloroquine trials. But then other scientists noticed serious red flags: there had been more Australian deaths in the study than Covid deaths in total. It turned out the Harvard researchers had not actually seen the raw data, and the paper was subsequently retracted. We'll never know exactly how or why this got published, but a desire to prove Trump not just wrong, but really dangerously wrong, may well have been part of it.

It might seem odd to be talking about weaknesses in science when it has delivered us several effective vaccines against Covid in just a year. But the politicisation of Covid science has almost certainly affected high-stakes government decisions over the past year, including the timing of lockdowns. And there are important lessons for how we do science in post-normal conditions in the future.

A big part of the problem is that expectations are so high: we idealise science as the pure pursuit of truth, unblemished by politics and profit, and scientists as people who deliver prescriptions so sage they almost eliminate the need for politicians. It is in so many people's interests to leave this illusion unshattered: the politicians making difficult decisions who want to hide behind "I just did what the scientists told me"; the celebrity scientists happy to blur the boundaries between science and values-based advocacy

because it gets them listened to and the contrarians who thrive on sowing unnecessary dissent. The uncomfortable truth is that science has its limits, and is far from value-free. Forget the post-truth idea that expertise doesn't matter – in the last year, we have enthusiastically embraced the notion that expertise is unassailably everything. That is no less unhealthy.

- *Analysis: Science in a Time of Covid* is on BBC Radio 4 on 22 March at 8.30pm

- Sonia Sodha is an Observer columnist

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