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Race

Downing Street suggests UK should be seen as model of racial equality

Anger as long-awaited report on race and ethnic disparities concludes ‘claims of institutional racism not borne out’

Tony Sewell, head of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, said if the commission’s recommendations we implemented, Britain could be ‘a beacon to the rest of Europe and the world’. Photograph: the Conservative party

Tony Sewell, head of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, said if the commission’s recommendations we implemented, Britain could be ‘a beacon to the rest of Europe and the world’. Photograph: the Conservative party

Peter Walker and *Aamna Mohdin*
Tue 30 Mar 2021 19.01 EDT

Downing Street's official response to the racial justice movements connected to Black Lives Matter has suggested the UK should be seen as an international exemplar of racial equality, and has played down the impact of structural factors in ethnic disparities.

The much-delayed report by No 10's Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities is likely to spark an angry response from activist groups, with race equality experts describing it as "extremely disturbing" and offensive to black and minority ethnic key workers who have died disproportionally during the pandemic.

A preview summarising the report, which is described as a "major shift in the race debate", notes that while overt racism does still exist in the UK, achievements elsewhere should make the country "a model for other white-majority countries".

It emphasises the academic achievements of children from minority ethnic backgrounds, saying that many students from these communities do as well or better than their white peers. It does, however, call for extended school days to help disadvantaged pupils catch up.

The 264-page report has 24 recommendations. However, these are not yet known, as the Government Equalities Office, which is organising its release, opted to put out only a brief summary of the findings on Tuesday.

One of the main conclusions of the report appears to be a pushback against the idea of structural racism. In an open rebuff to the arguments of the BLM movement, and the protests that erupted after the death of George Floyd in the US, the report is described as saying "the well-meaning idealism of many young people who claim the country is still institutionally racist is not borne out by the evidence".

A spokesperson for Black Lives Matter UK said that while the report focused on education, "it fails to explore disproportionality in school exclusion, eurocentrism and censorship in the curriculum, or the ongoing attainment gap in higher education.

"We are also disappointed to learn that the report overlooks

disproportionality in the criminal justice system – particularly as police racism served as the catalyst for last summer's protests," the spokesperson said. "Black people in England and Wales are nine times more likely to be imprisoned than their white peers, and yet, four years on, the recommendations from the Lammy review are yet to be implemented."

Halima Begum, chief executive of the Runnymede Trust, said: "As we saw in the early days of the pandemic, 60% of the first NHS doctors and nurses to die were from our BAME communities. For Boris Johnson to look the grieving families of those brave dead in the eye and say there is no evidence of institutional racism in the UK is nothing short of a gross offence.

"The facts about institutional racism do not lie, and we note with some surprise that, no matter how much spin the commission puts on its findings, it does in fact concede that we do not live in a post-racist society."

The report does note that some communities are still very affected by historical cases of racism, creating "deep mistrust" in the system, adding: "Both the reality and the perception of unfairness matter."

One conclusion is that the term BAME, (black, Asian and minority ethnic) is "of limited value" and should no longer be used by official bodies. As expected, it also calls for a move away from unconscious bias training.

On pay and other work-based disparities, the report calls this "an improving picture", saying that overall, "issues around race and racism were becoming less important and, in some cases, were not a significant factor in explaining disparities", with areas such as social class viewed as of equal importance.

The report says: "We found that most of the disparities we examined, which some attribute to racial discrimination, often do not have their origins in racism."

Munira Mirza oversaw the appointment of the commission panel. Photograph: Mary Turner/Getty

The language contained in the precis appears to mirror much of the thinking of Munira Mirza, the head of the Downing Street policy unit, who is seen as a particular influence on Boris Johnson on race and other cultural issues. Mirza, who oversaw the appointment of the commission panel, is a longtime and outspoken critic of previous government attempts to tackle structural factors behind racial inequality.

Maurice Mcleod, chief executive of Race on the Agenda, described the conclusion of the inquiry as "government level gaslighting" and criticised the summary for claiming communities are being "haunted" by "historic cases" of racism, creating "deep mistrust" in the system that could prove a barrier to success.

He said that the implications of the report were that "the reason so many black people don't get on well in this society is because they are stuck in the past and this makes them mistrustful. So racism isn't the problem, people talking about racism is the problem."

He said: "We would argue that you cannot tackle structural racism if you don't believe it exists. The only substantive thing in the report is the decree

that the public sector should stop using the term BAME; 250,000 people didn't march through our cities during a pandemic demanding better syntax."

Black Lives Matter UK said the movement was "perplexed by the fact that the report claims to reject the term BAME, describing it as 'of limited value', yet uses the category to analyse income gaps. I'm doing so, the commission insidiously disguises the inequalities faced by Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Caribbean and African workers".

In 2017, Mirza condemned an audit of racial inequalities in public services commissioned by Theresa May, writing that it showed how "anti-racism is becoming weaponised across the political spectrum".

It is understood Mirza had initially hoped to involve Trevor Phillips, the former chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, who had referred to UK Muslims as being "a nation within a nation", as a member of the new body. Her eventual choice to chair the commission, Tony Sewell, has also previously questioned the effects of institutional racism.

Begum said: "This commission long lost the confidence and the trust of the ethnic minority communities when it appointed Tony Sewell to lead it, a figure who asserts with others in this government that institutional racism does not exist."

Sewell said, in a quote released with the report summary, that one finding was "just how stuck some groups from the white majority are. As a result, we came to the view that recommendations should, wherever possible, be designed to remove obstacles for everyone, rather than specific groups."

He said: "Creating a successful multi-ethnic society is hard, and racial disparities exist wherever such a society is being forged. The commission believes that if these recommendations are implemented, it will give a further burst of momentum to the story of our country's progress to a successful multi-ethnic and multicultural community – a beacon to the rest of Europe and the world."

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Wednesday briefing: UK a multiracial 'model' for others, says No 10 report

Trees and forests

Destruction of world's forests increased sharply in 2020

Calls for forests to be high on Cop26 agenda after loss of 42,000 sq km of tree cover in key tropical regions

Smoke billows from a fire in the Amazon rainforest in Oiapoque, Amapa state, Brazil, last October. Photograph: Nelson Almeida/AFP/Getty Images

Smoke billows from a fire in the Amazon rainforest in Oiapoque, Amapa state, Brazil, last October. Photograph: Nelson Almeida/AFP/Getty Images

Fiona Harvey *Environment correspondent*
Wed 31 Mar 2021 00.00 EDT

The rate at which the world's forests are being destroyed increased sharply last year, with at least 42,000 sq km of tree cover lost in key tropical regions.

According to data from the University of Maryland and the online monitoring platform Global Forest Watch, the loss was well above the average for the last 20 years, with 2020 the third worst year for forest destruction since 2002 when comparable monitoring began.

The losses were particularly severe in humid tropical primary forests, such as the Amazon, the Congo and south-east Asia. These forests are vital as carbon sinks in the regulating the global climate, as well as for their irreplaceable ecosystems. Losses from this type of forest alone amounted to 4.2m hectares (10.4m acres), equivalent to the annual carbon dioxide emissions of more than 575m cars, according to the World Resources Institute (WRI), which compiled the report.

Graphic: The tropics lost 4.2m hectares (10.4m acres) of humid primary forests in 2020, an area the size of the Netherlands

Altogether, 12.2m hectares of tree cover were lost in the tropics in 2020, an increase of 12% on 2019.

Brazil's forested areas fared the worst, with 1.7m hectares destroyed, an increase of about a quarter on the previous year. Fires swept through the Amazon at a greater rate than in the previous year, despite the government imposing a ban on the use of fires to clear trees and deploying soldiers to curb the practice. The government of Jair Bolsonaro has presided over a massive increase in deforestation, after a long period of improvements in reducing the destruction.

Top five worst nation for primary tree loss in tropical regions

Frances Seymour, a distinguished senior fellow at WRI, said: "Brazil had achieved a huge reduction in deforestation, but we are now seeing the unravelling of that success, and it is heartbreaking."

While the Amazon region has grabbed attention, scientists are also increasingly concerned about Brazil's Pantanal, the world's biggest tropical wetland. About a third is estimated to have been hit by fires last year, with devastating effects on biodiversity. Most of the fires were started by people to manage land for agriculture, but the region has also had its worst droughts

in more than 40 years, and many fires continued to burn out of control. The areas affected by these unprecedented fires will take decades to recover.

The Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns around the world did not have a clear impact on forest loss patterns, according to Rod Taylor, the global director of the forests programme at WRI. “The data does not show a systematic shift,” he said.

However, there has been anecdotal evidence of people forced to return to rural areas by lockdowns and the worsening economic situation in cities, and that this could have greater impact in future, he said.

Seymour said countries that faced high levels of debt owing to the economic fallout from the pandemic could be tempted to give in to commercial interests to exploit their forests unsustainably, or could be forced to reduce resources for forest protection.

“Unless we offer alternatives, it is likely that governments will try to recover on the back of forest loss, [particularly] governments facing high levels of debt,” she said. “The longer we wait to tackle deforestation, the more likely it is that these carbon sinks will go up in smoke.”

Seymour pointed to some success stories in tackling deforestation as proof that strong policies accompanied by the needed finance and government enforcement could reduce the rate of forest loss.

Deforestation is decreasing in Indonesia, which has dropped out of the WRI’s list of top three countries for primary forest loss for the first time. Tree loss in Indonesia in 2020 fell for the fourth year in a row, down from a peak in 2016 after devastating forest and peat fires led the government to place a moratorium on the cutting down of primary forest and converting peatland to agriculture while restricting licensing for palm oil plantations.

Malaysia, which has lost about a third of its primary forest since the 1970s, has also recently succeeded in reducing deforestation, with tougher laws on illegal logging.

Wealthier countries are not immune to forest loss. In Germany there was a threefold increase in forest loss in 2020 compared with 2018. The increase was largely due to damage from bark beetles feasting on trees made vulnerable by the hot and dry weather brought by global heating. Australia had a ninefold increase in tree cover loss over the past two years, largely owing to extreme weather and forest fires.

Climate breakdown is also making forest loss worse, with humid forests drying out, causing trees to die off and fires to burn for longer, in a vicious cycle.

On Wednesday, the UK, which will host the vital UN Cop26 talks this November, is holding a conference on climate and development at which wealthy nations will be asked to come up with plans to help the most vulnerable countries cut emissions and cope with the effects of climate breakdown. Campaigners hope to raise the issue of forest funding there.

“Forests need to be on the agenda for Cop26,” said Seymour. “The world’s forests are still an enormous carbon sink, and we need to keep that carbon sequestered to avert catastrophic climate change.”

Alok Sharma, the president of Cop26, said wealthy countries must step up to help poor nations bearing the brunt of climate breakdown: “The people who have done the least to cause the climate crisis are suffering the most. This is a searing injustice. And so developed countries have a particular responsibility to support the response of communities which are most vulnerable to climate change. We are running out of time.”

ButterflywatchButterflies

A good year for UK butterflies but third of species still in decline

Conservationists warn about lowering of expectations as people forget earlier biodiversity

The marbled white had a good year; its numbers have been rapidly growing. Photograph: Ross Hoddinott/Getty Images/Nature Picture Library

The marbled white had a good year; its numbers have been rapidly growing. Photograph: Ross Hoddinott/Getty Images/Nature Picture Library

Patrick Barkham
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Wed 31 Mar 2021 01.00 EDT

Last year was the third good summer in a row for butterflies and the 10th best since records began, but one-third of Britain's species are still in long-term decline.

Conservation scientists warned against overstating the butterfly boom, saying perceptions of a "good" year have lowered in the light of plummeting insect numbers.

"Perhaps because of the sunny spring weather last year and the fact that more people were enjoying nature as part of their day-to-day activities, butterflies seemed more numerous," said Richard Fox, of Butterfly Conservation. "But in fact our baseline experience of the nature around us has changed over time."

The UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme (UKBMS), the most comprehensive scientific insect survey in the world, showed that 2020 had the 10th best summer since 1976, continuing a run of above-average summers. The summer of 2019 was the seventh best, and 2018 the 15th best.

Even so, almost half (27) Britain's 58 resident species had below average numbers last year.

Common species such as the brimstone and orange tip enjoyed good years, as did the rapidly expanding marbled white. Rare butterflies that have been the target of specific conservation action also thrived, including the large blue (its joint second best year), silver-spotted skipper (third best year), silver-studded blue (joint fourth best year) and Duke of Burgundy (joint sixth best year).

The once common small tortoiseshell rallied after four very poor years but still showed a 79% decrease in abundance compared with 1976. Populations of wall, grayling and small skipper all remained low and the small pearl-bordered fritillary had its third worst year on record, with populations down by 68% since records began.

Butterfly populations fluctuate with the weather but conservation scientists expect numbers to build up during a run of sunny and warmer-than-average summers.

"It is worrying that, even after three good years, population levels of so many butterfly species continue to be down compared to 40 years ago, with just under a third (31%) of butterfly species assessed in the UK showing long-term declines," said Fox.

"We need to be wary of shifting baseline syndrome, whereby we forget (or never experienced) the greater biodiversity that occurred in the UK in former decades and therefore lower our expectations and aspirations for conservation. Here the UKBMS has a vital role to play in showing how insect populations have declined over time."

Air transport

Elite minority of frequent flyers 'cause most of aviation's climate damage'

Small group taking most flights should face frequent flyer levy, says environmental charity

In the US, 12% of people took 66% of all flights. Photograph: PA

In the US, 12% of people took 66% of all flights. Photograph: PA

Damian Carrington *Environment editor*
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Wed 31 Mar 2021 01.00 EDT

An “elite minority” of frequent flyers cause most of the climate damage resulting from aviation’s emissions, according to an environmental charity.

The report, which collates data from the countries with the highest aviation emissions, shows a worldwide pattern of a small group taking a large

proportion of flights, while many people do not fly at all.

In the US, 12% of people took 66% of all flights, while in France 2% of people took half of the flights, the report says. In China 5% of households took 40% of flights and in India just 1% of households took 45% of all the flights.

It was already known that 10% of people in England took more than half of all international flights in 2018. A global study reported by the Guardian in November found that frequent-flying "super emitters" who represent just 1% of the world's population caused half of aviation's carbon emissions in 2018. Almost 90% of the world's population did not fly at all that year.

The coronavirus pandemic has slashed the number of flights taken but campaigners fear government bailouts of airlines will cause aviation to return to its pre-pandemic growth trend.

Possible, the group that produced the new report, is calling for the introduction of a frequent flyer levy, whereby the first flight in a year incurs little or no tax and it therefore does not penalise annual family holidays. But the levy then ramps up for each additional flight.

Almost half of people in England did not fly internationally in 2019

"If left unchecked, emissions from polluting industries like flying threaten to crash the climate," said Alethea Warrington, a campaigns manager at Possible. "This report shows [that] while the poorest communities are already suffering the impacts of a warming climate, the benefits of high-carbon lifestyles are enjoyed only by the few. A progressive tax on aviation would treat frequent flying as the luxury habit it is."

Leo Murray, a director at Possible, said there were "desperate efforts by politicians to return aviation to its former planet-burning growth trajectory by throwing public money at airlines".

Murray added: "Air travel is a uniquely damaging behaviour, resulting in more emissions per hour than any other activity, bar starting forest fires. So targeting climate policy at the elite minority responsible for most of the

environmental damage from flights could help tackle the climate problem without taking away access to the most important and valued services that air travel provides to society."

Boris Johnson's 'jet zero' green flight goal dismissed as a gimmick
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Finlay Asher, a former airline engineer turned climate activist, said: "As an engineer working on future aircraft technology, I quickly realised that technology development is moving too slowly compared with growth in air traffic. The only way to reduce emissions from the sector in time is government policy to fairly limit demand for flights. Without that, no amount of technology will help."

Data in the report shows the US, China and the UK had the highest national emissions from aviation in 2018, while British and Australian citizens had the highest per capita emissions from flying, after people from Singapore, Finland and Iceland.

Michael Gill, executive director at the International Air Transport Association, which represents the world's airlines, said: "Taxes have proved to be an ineffective way to tackle emissions. The focus instead should be on practical means to mitigate the CO_2 impact of aviation, while still enabling people to fly for business and family reasons."

"Airlines are investing billions in cleaner aircraft, sustainable aviation fuels and the use of carbon emissions trading or offsetting as part of a long-term strategy to cut 2005-level emissions in half by 2050.

"We would also dispute the description that frequent flying is a 'luxury habit'. Many, if not the majority, of frequent flyers are business people who need face-to-face contact with clients and staff, particularly over the coming months as business returns to normal."

Britney Spears

'I cried for two weeks': Britney Spears responds to documentary about her life

Singer said that she was ‘embarrassed by the light’ in which Framing Britney Spears cast her

Britney Spears has responded to a documentary about her life, saying she ‘cried for two weeks’ after seeing parts of it. Photograph: Valérie Macon/AFP/Getty Images

Britney Spears has responded to a documentary about her life, saying she ‘cried for two weeks’ after seeing parts of it. Photograph: Valérie Macon/AFP/Getty Images

Guardian staff and agencies
Wed 31 Mar 2021 01.14 EDT

Britney Spears said she “cried for two weeks” after watching part of a high-profile documentary that explored her career.

Framing Britney Spears premiered in February and examined the pop superstar's rise to the summit of the music industry, her treatment at the hands of the tabloid media, her involuntary commitment to a psychiatric ward in 2008, and the subsequent conservatorship (an "imposed power-of-attorney-on-steroids") given to her father that has had him oversee her finances and personal affairs since 2008.

Framing Britney Spears review – a sobering look at sexism and celebrity
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While Spears, 39, had previously addressed the documentary indirectly, she put out a statement on Tuesday night via Instagram: "I didn't watch the documentary" but what she has seen of it left her "embarrassed by the light they put me in".

"I cried for two weeks," adding, "and well .... I still cry sometimes !!!!".

The statement was accompanied by a video of the pop star dancing to the Aerosmith song Crazy.

In the post Spears wrote: "I have been exposed my whole life performing in front of people !!! It takes a lot of strength to TRUST the universe with your real vulnerability cause I've always been so judged... insulted... and embarrassed by the media... and I still am till this day !!!!"

She added: "As the world keeps on turning and life goes on we still remain so fragile and sensitive as people !!!"

The betrayal of Britney Spears: how pop culture failed a superstar
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After touching on the documentary, she said: "I do what I can in my own spirituality with myself to try and keep my own joy ... love ... and happiness !!!! Every day dancing brings me joy !!! I'm not here to be perfect ... perfect is boring ... I'm here to pass on kindness."

In the latest hearing on the conservatorship, Spears' lawyer, Samuel D Ingham III, told a Los Angeles judge that Spears wished for her temporary care manager, Jodi Montgomery, to be permanently installed to manage her personal affairs.

However, Jamie remains co-conservator of his daughter's financial affairs, an arrangement she is not happy with.

– *With Press Association*

Science policy

UK scientists warn of 'catastrophic' impact of funding cuts

Loss of grants, driven by deep cuts to foreign aid, threatens research and international collaborations

Boris Johnson examines a sample during a visit to Porton Down science park, near Salisbury. Photograph: WPA/Getty Images

Boris Johnson examines a sample during a visit to Porton Down science park, near Salisbury. Photograph: WPA/Getty Images

Ian Sample *Science editor*
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Wed 31 Mar 2021 01.00 EDT

Senior scientists fear that deep cuts to government research spending will have “catastrophic” consequences for the UK, with projects cancelled midway through and some of the brightest minds moving to other countries.

Hundreds of research projects tackling issues from the Covid pandemic to antimicrobial resistance and the climate crisis are already being axed after the country's main science funder, UK Research and Innovation, told universities its budget for official development assistance (ODA) grants had been cut from £245m to £125m.

But with the UK now out of Europe, the funder may also have to find up to £2bn per year from its existing £8.5bn budget for British scientists to join research under the EU's international Horizon programme. The move, which could imperil 18,000 research jobs, would reverse the past two years of science budget rises.

"It is absolutely vital that the government continues to support science. Some of the cuts we've been hearing about would be catastrophic, even existential," said Sir Paul Nurse, the Nobel laureate and director of the Francis Crick Institute in London.

"It will drive scientists elsewhere, it will destroy networks, it will damage the UK's soft power to make connections throughout the world. None of this makes any sense."

Boris Johnson has repeatedly stated his aim to make the UK a "global science superpower", but as researchers have pointed out, those in the UK are now braced for cuts as other countries are investing more. The problem is exacerbated by a slump in medical charity funding prompted by the Covid crisis.

"It's no good talking the talk if you don't walk the walk as well, and we ask the government to walk that walk," said Nurse. "I am sure the government will see sense over this. If they can't see sense, they have no right to govern."

Prof Julia Buckingham, the president of Universities UK and vice-chancellor of Brunel University London, said the prospect of UKRI paying up to £2bn per year for association to Horizon Europe was "really terrifying", adding "this is not the impression we were under".

She added that the loss of ODA grants, driven by deep cuts to foreign aid, threaten international collaborations that have built and deepened ties with countries around the world.

Existing projects have developed low-cost diagnostic tests for malaria, improved water pumps and electrical grids, brought evidence-based decisions to plastic waste management in Malaysia, and bolstered tsunami and earthquake defences in Indonesia.

The scrapping of ODA projects will lead to a “loss of trust” in the UK that “will take years to rebuild”, warned Prof Anne Johnson, the president of the Academy of Medical Sciences.

Asked when the UKRI would find out what bill, if any, it must foot for scientists to take part in Horizon Europe, a spokesperson for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy said: “The UK remains a world-leading aid donor. This year alone, we will spend more than £10bn to address poverty, tackle climate change, fight Covid and improve global health.

“We are working with our delivery partners, including UK Research and Innovation, to implement a new research and development settlement for 2021-22 as part of our wider commitment to maintain the UK’s world class reputation for science, research and innovation.”

Greenhouse gas emissions

Urgent policies needed to steer countries to net zero, says IEA chief

Economies are gearing up for return to fossil fuel use instead of forging green recovery, warns Fatih Birol

Protesters hold a banner reading ‘Climate: let’s reduce emissions, not our ambitions’ at a demonstration in Nantes, France, on Sunday. Photograph: Loïc Venance/AFP/Getty Images

Protesters hold a banner reading ‘Climate: let’s reduce emissions, not our ambitions’ at a demonstration in Nantes, France, on Sunday. Photograph: Loïc Venance/AFP/Getty Images

Fiona Harvey Environment correspondent
Wed 31 Mar 2021 02.00 EDT

New energy policies are urgently needed to put countries on the path to net zero greenhouse gas emissions, the world’s leading energy economist has

warned, as economies are rapidly gearing up for a return to fossil fuel use instead of forging a green recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Most of the world's biggest economies now have long-term goals of reaching net zero by mid-century, but few have the policies required to meet those goals, said Fatih Birol, the executive director of the International Energy Agency (IEA).

The IEA's latest figures show global coal use was about 4% higher in the last quarter of 2020 than in the same period in 2019, the clearest indication yet of a potentially disastrous rebound in the use of the dirtiest fossil fuels, following last year's lockdowns around the world when emissions plummeted.

Birol told the Guardian: "We are not on track for a green recovery, just the opposite. We have seen global emissions higher in December 2020 than in December 2019. As long as countries do not put the right energy policies in place, the economic rebound will see emissions significantly increase in 2021. We will make the job of reaching net zero harder."

World needs to kick its coal habit to start green recovery, says IEA head
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He urged governments to support clean energy and technology such as electric vehicles, and make fossil fuels less economically attractive. "Governments must provide clear signals to investors around the world that investing in dirty energy will mean a greater risk of losing money. This unmistakable signal needs to be given by policymakers to regulators, investors and others," he said.

The IEA is holding a meeting of governments on Wednesday to sketch out net zero plans. The UK, host of the Cop26 UN climate talks later this year, will urge countries that have not yet adopted net zero targets – including India, Indonesia, Mexico, Russia and Saudi Arabia – to take on such commitments, and ask all countries to come up with targets for emissions reductions in the next 10 years that will pave the way to the long-term goal.

Alok Sharma, the UK minister who is president of the Cop26 summit, wrote in the Guardian recently that both long-term net zero targets and short-term 2030 plans would be needed from all countries for the talks to succeed.

Birol said stronger 2030 targets were essential to meet net zero. “Looking at the energy sector, the next 10 years will be very, very critical,” he said. “If governments put money in clean energy finance, in the context of their economic recovery plans, that will make the challenge less difficult.”

He called on the US to lead the way on setting out a national plan, called a nationally determined contribution (NDC), for cutting emissions strongly in the next 10 years. “NDCs should be ambitious, credible, accountable and backed with credible energy policies,” he said. “The US’s current NDC is not ambitious enough, and not in line with the US leading an international climate campaign.”

Birol also urged governments to put in place strong policies to discourage drivers from buying SUVs, which make up nearly half of all cars sold in key economies. The US led the switch to SUVs, but the vehicles – which can emit a third more carbon dioxide than smaller cars – are now increasingly popular in the UK and elsewhere in Europe, as well as in large emerging economies including China and India.

“It will not be possible to reach our climate goals if SUV sales continue at these rates,” he said. “We must either change the technology, to electric vehicles, or change tax policies to provide financial disincentives to consumers to go for the SUV option.”

In the UK, the National Audit Office found that greenhouse gas emissions from cars had declined by only 1% since 2011, largely as a result of the widespread switch to SUVs. The UK government has also come under fire from campaigners for reducing electric vehicle incentives while freezing duties on petrol and diesel fuel.

The UK is also hosting a conference on climate and development this week, in the run-up to Cop26. Ministers from around the world will attend virtually and donor countries will be encouraged to come forward with plans to support the countries most vulnerable to the effects of climate breakdown.

Britain will need the support of more than 130 developing countries to make Cop26 a success. Green campaigners have written to the government to warn that cuts to the overseas aid budget risk undermining confidence in the UK's presidency.

UK news

Archbishop of Canterbury: Harry and Meghan's legal wedding was on Saturday

Justin Welby appears to contradict assertion by Duchess of Sussex that she got married three days before royal wedding

Meghan told Oprah Winfrey she had had a secret marriage ceremony three days before the public event at Windsor Castle on Saturday. Photograph: Gareth Fuller/AFP/Getty Images

Meghan told Oprah Winfrey she had had a secret marriage ceremony three days before the public event at Windsor Castle on Saturday. Photograph: Gareth Fuller/AFP/Getty Images

Lucy Campbell
Tue 30 Mar 2021 17.50 EDT

The Archbishop of Canterbury has addressed for the first time the claim made by the Duchess of Sussex that she and Prince Harry got married three days before the royal wedding.

During her tell-all interview with Oprah Winfrey, broadcast earlier this month, Meghan said the pair had the secret marriage ceremony with the archbishop, Justin Welby, in their "backyard".

The duchess said nobody knew the couple had shared personal vows for "just the two of us" ahead of their wedding day in Windsor on Saturday 19 May 2018.

However, it was thought that this could not have been a legal ceremony as it lacked witnesses and a registered venue, and was instead likely to have been an informal exchange of vows.

In an interview with the Italian newspaper la Repubblica, Welby was asked about what happened. He said the legal wedding took place on the Saturday, adding: "But I won't say what happened at any other meetings."

The archbishop told the paper: "If any of you ever talk to a priest, you expect them to keep that talk confidential. It doesn't matter who I'm talking to. I had a number of private and pastoral meetings with the duke and duchess before the wedding.

"The legal wedding was on the Saturday. I signed the wedding certificate, which is a legal document, and I would have committed a serious criminal offence if I signed it knowing it was false."

During the interview, Meghan had told Winfrey: "You know, three days before our wedding we got married. No one knows that, but we called the archbishop and we just said, 'Look, this thing, this spectacle, is for the world, but we want our union between us.'"

She said the vows they have framed are "just the two of us in our backyard with the Archbishop of Canterbury". Both Harry and Meghan said it was "just the three of us".

The Sussexes, who are expecting their second child – a daughter – in the summer after a miscarriage last year, started a new life in Santa Barbara, California, away from the work of the royal family.

The suggestion of a secret wedding was just one revelation in the explosive Winfrey interview, which raised up serious questions about how "the firm" handled the duchess's concerns about her mental health and the couple's marginalisation within the institution.

Among the most damaging allegations made by Meghan and Harry involved an unnamed member of the royal family – not the Queen or the Duke of Edinburgh – who raised concerns about how dark their son Archie's skin tone would be before he was born.

Meghan disclosed to Oprah that amid a barrage of negative press and an atmosphere of racial hostility, she felt utterly unprotected by "the firm" and had thoughts of suicide during that time. "It was all happening just because I was breathing," the duchess said. "I just didn't want to be alive any more. That was a clear, real, frightening and constant thought."

In the aftermath of the interview, Buckingham Palace said the issues raised, especially over race, were "concerning" and would be addressed by the Queen and her family privately. Prince William, Harry's older brother with whom his relationship is currently strained, also told journalists at the time: "We're very much not a racist family."

David Cameron

Business card puts Greensill founder at the heart of Downing Street

Lex Greensill described as ‘Senior Adviser, Prime Minister’s Office’, adding to pressure on David Cameron over links to failed financier

David Cameron texted Rishi Sunak, the chancellor, last year asking him to include Greensill in the government’s Covid rescue schemes. Photograph: Jason Lee/AFP/Getty Images

David Cameron texted Rishi Sunak, the chancellor, last year asking him to include Greensill in the government’s Covid rescue schemes. Photograph: Jason Lee/AFP/Getty Images

Heather Stewart and *Kalyeena Makortoff*
Tue 30 Mar 2021 16.10 EDT

Labour has renewed its calls for a full investigation into David Cameron’s role in the collapse of the Greensill finance empire after a business card

emerged that appeared to confirm its founder, Lex Greensill, had a role at the heart of Downing Street.

The card, handed to Labour by a business contact who said they received it in 2012, describes Greensill as "Senior Adviser, Prime Minister's Office", and gives a personal No 10 email address at which he could be contacted.

A source close to Greensill confirmed the card was genuine, saying it dated from a period when the Australian banker held the title senior adviser, a position to which they said he was appointed by the civil service.

A business card for the financier Lex Greensill from when he worked as an adviser to then prime minister David Cameron. Photograph: Twitter/Jim Pickard

This was before 2014 when he was made a "crown representative", a post meant to help the government identify ways to save money, and which also includes management consultants and other corporate experts.

Cameron has come under mounting pressure to explain why Greensill was allowed to become an unpaid adviser to government – a role in which he was reportedly allowed to pitch his financial projects across Whitehall.

The Guardian view on David Cameron and Greensill Capital: questions to answer | Editorial
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Subsequently, Cameron took on an advocacy role for Greensill Capital, urging the chancellor, Rishi Sunak, in text messages last year to include Greensill in the Treasury's Covid rescue schemes.

The shadow chancellor, Anneliese Dodds, said: "This raises further serious questions about the special access Lex Greensill was granted to the heart of government. The public have a right to know what happened here – we need a full, transparent and thorough investigation."

Greensill Capital collapsed into administration earlier this month. Cameron was cleared last week by watchdog the Registrar of Consultant Lobbyists on the grounds that as an employee of the firm his behaviour did not formally constitute lobbying; but fresh questions have continued to emerge about the relationship between the two men.

The Financial Times has reported that Greensill was brought into Downing Street by the then cabinet secretary Jeremy Heywood, who had come across the financier during a stint at City bank Morgan Stanley, where Greensill worked before setting up on his own.

Cameron's government launched a supply-chain finance initiative that allowed banks to play a go-between role between Whitehall and local pharmacies.

Greensill's business card, which appeared to confirm his closeness to Cameron and access to No 10, emerged as Sunak was accused of breaking the ministerial code for failing to declare Cameron's approaches.

Tom Brake, a former Liberal Democrat MP who helped design the lobbying register while he was deputy leader of the House of Commons, said the law required the chancellor to publicly declare any unplanned discussions with lobbyists such as Cameron, who joined Greensill as an adviser in 2018.

The code says that ministers who end up meeting and discussing official business without another official present, "for example at a social occasion or on holiday", should pass any "significant content" back to the department as soon as possible afterward. Any unplanned discussions will then be published in a report of ministers' external meetings, which is released four times a year.

Brake's accusations rest on an interpretation that texts conversations are covered by the code. The fact that Greensill was not listed on the formal register of ministerial meetings meant that Sunak did not follow the rules as they were intended, the former MP has claimed.

"The ministerial code is clear. Attempts to lobby Rishi Sunak, even an informal one such as receiving multiple text messages, a) must be reported back by Mr Sunak to the Treasury; and b) the contact must then be formally reported in Mr Sunak's quarterly report of ministerial meetings," Brake, who now works for campaign group Unlock Democracy, said.

"It is not clear whether the first happened. The second did not. This is a significant breach by the chancellor of the ministerial code and the transparency rules," Brake said.

The ballooning scandal surrounding Greensill hit Whitehall after it emerged that Cameron had contacted the chancellor on his private phone last April while working as an adviser for the firm. At the time, Greensill was trying to secure access to hundreds of thousands of pounds of emergency Covid loans it did not qualify for.

Granting Greensill access to the 100% government-backed Covid corporate financing facility (CCFF) would have meant bending the rules, since lenders are not meant to borrow money through the programme.

However, it is understood that most of Cameron's texts went unanswered and that Sunak later directed him to speak to Treasury officials, who denied Greensill access to the CCFF. The bank was allowed to issue loans to its

customers under a scheme run by the state's British Business Bank, which were 80% guaranteed by the taxpayer.

Greensill Capital saga raises serious issues about politicians, officialdom and business
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"The chancellor's silence on the Greensill affair is deafening," the shadow City minister, Pat McFadden, said.

"It's time he came forward and set the record straight on what role he played in opening the door to Greensill and to explain what his department is doing to investigate this affair. He needs to set the record straight."

David Cameron and Greensill Capital: 10 unanswered questions
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A spokesperson for the Treasury said: "Senior officials and ministers routinely meet with a range of private sector stakeholders and the government received many representations from the entire spectrum of British business during the pandemic.

"The company was directed to the appropriate officials and, following a consultation process involving several firms in the same sector, their request was denied."

Cameron's office did not respond to requests for comment.

Switzerland

Swiss army to begin issuing female recruits with women's underwear

Female recruits to stop being given male underwear in a bid to up recruitment

The Swiss army will begin issuing female recruits with women’s underwear in a bid to increase recruitment. Photograph: Fabrice Coffrini/AFP/Getty Images

The Swiss army will begin issuing female recruits with women’s underwear in a bid to increase recruitment. Photograph: Fabrice Coffrini/AFP/Getty Images

Helen Sullivan
@helenrsullivan
Tue 30 Mar 2021 22.25 EDT

The Swiss armed forces is taking a big step to recruit more women – by no longer making female recruits wear men's underwear.

At present, all recruits are issued with "loose-fitting men's underwear, often in larger sizes", the BBC reported. In a trial set to begin in April, the Swiss army said women would be issued with two sets of female underwear – one for warmer months and one for colder months.

The Swiss armed forces hope to increase the percentage of female recruits from 1% to 10% within the next decade.

"The clothing is designed for men, but if the army is really to become more feminine, appropriate measures are needed," said MP Marianne Binder.

Army spokesperson Kaj-Gunnar Sievert told Swiss news site Watson: "The old generation of uniforms was not geared enough to the specific needs of women."

'Pink taxes': higher expenses for women add insult to gender pay gap injury
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Other pieces of clothing and accessories, including combat clothing, backpacks and protective vests were also being re-evaluated, said Sievert.

The defence minister, Viola Amherd, reportedly welcomed the move, saying "compatibility" needed to be improved.

Women and men in the Swiss armed forces have had the same duties since 2004. An unnamed female soldier told Watson the underwear, "makes a difference whether you have to crawl on the floor with 27 kilograms of luggage or sit quietly on an office chair."

Switzerland's is not the only army to commit gender discrimination in the drawers department.

Earlier in March the US marine corps announced that it would remove an underwear replacement allowance previously given only to male recruits, Military.com reported. The discrepancy was noticed as part of a report by the Government Accountability Office which found that some female

recruits spent more than $8,000 of their own money on clothing over the course of their careers, while men sometimes had leftover allowances.

US news

G Gordon Liddy, mastermind of Watergate burglary, dies aged 90

Political operative went to prison before becoming a popular radio talkshow host

Gordon Liddy in October 1974, the year Richard Nixon resigned from office. Photograph: AP

Gordon Liddy in October 1974, the year Richard Nixon resigned from office. Photograph: AP

Associated Press
Tue 30 Mar 2021 21.47 EDT

G Gordon Liddy, a mastermind of the Watergate burglary and a radio talkshow host after emerging from prison, died on Tuesday at age 90.

His son, Thomas Liddy, confirmed the death but did reveal the cause, other than to say it was not related to Covid-19.

Liddy, a former FBI agent and army veteran, was convicted of conspiracy, burglary and illegal wiretapping for his role in the Watergate burglary, which led to the resignation of Richard Nixon. He spent four years and four months in prison, including more than 100 days in solitary confinement.

“I’d do it again for my president,” he said years later.

Liddy was outspoken and controversial, both as a political operative under Nixon and as a radio personality. Liddy recommended assassinating political enemies, bombing a left-leaning thinktank and kidnapping war protesters. His White House colleagues ignored such suggestions.

One of his ventures – the break-in at Democratic headquarters at the Watergate building in June 1972 – was approved. The burglary went awry, which led to an investigation, a cover-up and Nixon’s resignation in 1974.

Liddy also was convicted of conspiracy in the September 1971 burglary of the defense analyst Daniel Ellsberg’s psychiatrist. Ellsberg leaked the secret history of the Vietnam War known as the Pentagon Papers.

Liddy speaks at a rally for troops in Washington in 2003. Photograph: Lisa Nipp/AP

After his release, Liddy – with his piercing dark eyes, bushy moustache and shaved head – became a popular, provocative and controversial radio talkshow host. He also worked as a security consultant, writer and actor.

On air, he offered tips on how to kill federal firearms agents, rode around with car tags saying "H20GATE" (Watergate) and scorned people who cooperated with prosecutors.

Born in Hoboken, New Jersey, George Gordon Battle Liddy was a frail boy who grew up in a neighborhood populated mostly by German Americans. From friends and a maid who was a German national, Liddy developed a curiosity about Adolf Hitler and was inspired by listening to Hitler's radio speeches in the 1930s.

After 50 years, the Pentagon Papers give up their final secrets
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"If an entire nation could be changed, lifted out of weakness to extraordinary strength, so could one person," Liddy wrote in Will, his autobiography.

Liddy decided it was critical to face his fears and overcome them. At age 11, he roasted a rat and ate it to overcome his fear of rats. "From now on, rats could fear me as they feared cats," he wrote.

After serving a stint in the army, Liddy graduated from law school at Fordham University and then joined the FBI. He ran unsuccessfully for Congress from New York in 1968 and helped organize Nixon's presidential campaign in the state.

When Nixon took office, Liddy was named a special assistant serving under the treasury secretary David M Kennedy. Liddy later moved to the White House, then to Nixon's re-election campaign, where his official title was general counsel.

Liddy, right, appears on Good Morning America in 1980. Photograph: AP

Liddy was head of a team of Republican operatives known as “the plumbers”, whose mission was to find leakers of information embarrassing to the Nixon administration. Among Liddy’s specialties were gathering political intelligence and organizing activities to disrupt or discredit Nixon’s Democratic opponents.

While recruiting a woman to help carry out one of his schemes, Liddy tried to convince her that no one could force him to reveal her identity or anything else against his will. To convince her, Liddy held his hand over a flaming cigarette lighter. His hand was badly burned. The woman turned down the job.

Liddy became known for such offbeat suggestions as kidnapping war protest organizers and taking them to Mexico during the Republican national convention; assassinating the investigative journalist Jack Anderson; and firebombing the Brookings Institution, a left-leaning thinktank in Washington where classified documents leaked by Ellsberg were being stored.

Liddy and his fellow operative Howard Hunt, along with the five arrested at Watergate, were indicted on federal charges three months after the June 1972

break-in. Hunt and his recruits pleaded guilty in January 1973, and James McCord and Liddy were found guilty. Nixon resigned on 9 August 1974.

After the failed break-in attempt, Liddy recalled telling the White House counsel John Dean: “If someone wants to shoot me, just tell me what corner to stand on, and I’ll be there, OK?” Dean reportedly responded, “I don’t think we’ve gotten there yet, Gordon.”

Liddy claimed in an interview with CBS’s 60 Minutes that Nixon was “insufficiently ruthless” and should have destroyed tape recordings of his conversations with top aides.

Liddy learned to market his reputation as a fearless, if sometimes overzealous, advocate of conservative causes. Liddy’s syndicated radio talkshow, broadcast from Virginia-based WJFK, was long one of the most popular in the country. He wrote bestselling books, acted in TV shows including Miami Vice, was a frequent guest lecturer on college campuses, started a private eye franchise and worked as a security consultant. For a time, he teamed on the lecture circuit with an unlikely partner, the 1960s LSD guru Timothy Leary.

Liddy always took pride in his role in Watergate. He once said: “I am proud of the fact that I am the guy who did not talk.”

Medical research

British study links alcohol with lower risk of developing cataracts

Research finds lower risk among those who drink up to 14 units a week – especially if they drink red wine

Antioxidants found in wine could help explain why moderate drinkers are at up to 23% less risk of having to have cataract surgery. Photograph: Bastian Lizut/Getty Images/EyeEm

Antioxidants found in wine could help explain why moderate drinkers are at up to 23% less risk of having to have cataract surgery. Photograph: Bastian Lizut/Getty Images/EyeEm

Denis Campbell *Health policy editor*
Wed 31 Mar 2021 01.00 EDT

People who consume up to 14 units of alcohol a week have less chance of developing cataracts, especially if they drink red wine, a new British study

has found.

Antioxidants found in wine could help explain why moderate drinkers are at up to 23% less risk of having to have cataract surgery than people who shun alcohol, the researchers believe.

Cataracts – cloudy patches that form in the lens of the eye – are a major cause of impaired eyesight and blindness, mainly in older people. Removing them in a short procedure is the commonest surgery carried out by the NHS, which performs about 450,000 such operations a year in England.

Academics from Moorfields eye hospital in London and University College London's institute of ophthalmology studied the medical and lifestyle history of 492,549 participants in either the UK Biobank or Epic-Norfolk studies of people's health over many decades.

They found that people who drank within the 14 units a week maximum recommended by the government – equating to about six and a half glasses – were less likely to have cataract surgery. Risk was lower among wine drinkers than those who consumed beer or spirits. In the Epic-Norfolk study those who drank wine at least five times a week were 23% less likely to have cataract removal than non-drinkers while those in the UK Biobank study were 14% less likely.

Michael Mosley on drinking in moderation
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"Cataract development may be due to gradual damage from oxidative stress during ageing. The fact that our findings were particularly evident in wine drinkers may suggest a protective role of polyphenol antioxidants, which are especially abundant in red wine," said Dr Sharon Chua, the first author of the findings, which have been published in the journal Ophthalmology.

Dr Anthony Khawaja, who led the research, added: "We observed a dose-response with our findings – in other words, there was evidence for reducing chance of requiring future cataract surgery with progressively higher alcohol intake, but only up to moderate levels within current guidelines."

The authors stressed, though, that while there appeared to be a close association between moderate drinking and cataracts, they had not found a definite causal link.

The NHS has identified drinking as one of the risk factors for cataracts, alongside smoking, diabetes and family history.

Dr Sadie Boniface, the head of research at the Institute of Alcohol Studies thinktank, cast doubt on the findings. Longitudinal studies such as UK Biobank could give a skewed picture of the nation's health because many volunteers were often in good health, she said.

"Comparing the health of moderate drinkers with that of non-drinkers also carries problems. Non-drinkers are a diverse group, including people who have stopped drinking because of health problems. This means moderate drinking can artificially look like it carries health benefits, because the moderate drinkers are compared to people on average in poor health," said Boniface.

"The bigger effect seen among wine drinkers may be because of other characteristics of this group to do with their cataract risk which weren't accounted for. If the amount of alcohol or number of units somebody drinks was having a direct effect, you'd expect this to be similar regardless of drink type."

2021.03.31 - Coronavirus

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Coronavirus live
Coronavirus

Coronavirus live news: WHO chief says lab leak theory worth examining further; Quito hospitals overwhelmed

Coronavirus

About half of people in UK now have antibodies against coronavirus

Study by Office for National Statistics based on data from blood test results

- Coronavirus – latest updates
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Rhi Storer

Tue 30 Mar 2021 13.13 EDT Last modified on Wed 31 Mar 2021 00.11 EDT

A volunteer paint hearts on the National Covid Memorial Wall on the Embankment in central London. Photograph: Andy Rain/EPA

Half of people in the UK now have antibodies against coronavirus, either through infection or vaccination, tests conducted by the Office for National

Statistics (ONS) show.

According to the most recent coronavirus infection survey, an estimated 54.7% of the population in England would have tested positive for antibodies to coronavirus from a blood sample in the week ending 14 March 2021.

Quick guide

Vaccines: how effective is each one?

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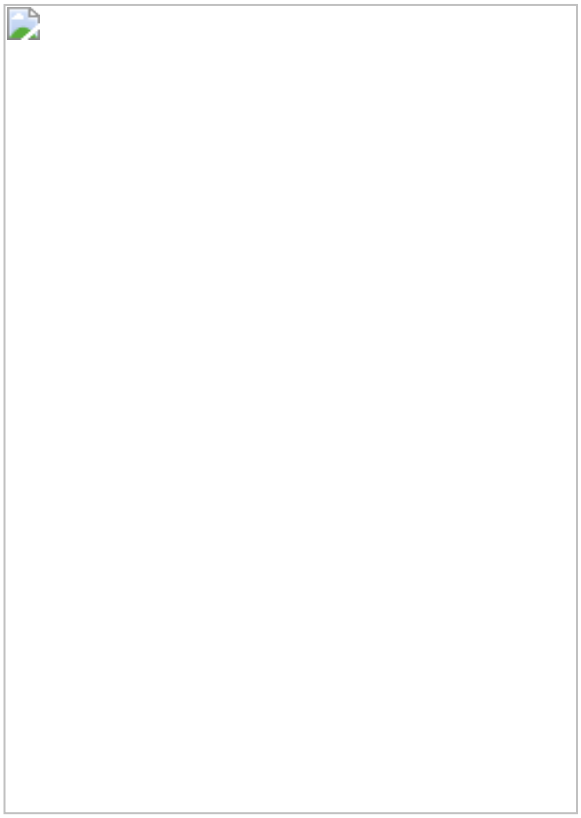

Pfizer/BioNTech

Country US/Germany

Efficacy 95% a week after the second shot. Pfizer says it is only 52% after the first dose but the UK's Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) says this may rise to 90% after 21 days.

Doses Clinical trials involved two doses 21 days apart. The UK is stretching this to 12 weeks.

Oxford/AstraZeneca

Country UK

Efficacy 70.4% 14 days after receiving the second dose. May have up to 90% efficacy when given as a half dose followed by a full dose. No severe disease or hospitalisations in anyone who received the vaccine. There have been concerns it is less effective against the South African variant of the coronavirus, and some countries have suggested that it is less-effective against either older patients or younger patients.

A UK government-funded study of care home residents in England found that their risk of infection with Covid-19 – either symptomatic or asymptomatic – fell by 62% five weeks after they received their first Oxford/AstraZeneca or Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine dose.

Doses Two, four to 12 weeks apart

Moderna

Country US

Efficacy Phase 3 trial results suggest 94.1%.

Doses Two, 28 days apart

Novavax

Country US

Efficacy Phase 3 trials suggest 89.3%.

Doses Two

Janssen (part of Johnson & Johnson)

Country US

Efficacy 72% in preventing mild to moderate cases in US trials but 66% efficacy observed in international trials. 85% efficacy against severe illness, and 100% protection against hospitalisation and death.

Doses: One, making it unique among Covid vaccines with phase 3 results so far

Photograph: Stéphane Mahé/X02520

In Wales, an estimated 50.5% of the population would have tested positive for antibodies to coronavirus, while the figure for Scotland was 42.6% and for Northern Ireland 49.3%.

The study was conducted based on blood test results taken from a randomly selected subsample of individuals aged 16 years and over, which are used to test for antibodies against coronavirus. It points to a success in the UK's vaccination programme, with 30 million people having received at least one dose.

The infection survey also found variation in antibody positivity between regions in England. Over 60% of individuals in the north-west have antibodies for coronavirus, compared with 50.3% in the south-east.

Age is also a factor in increased antibodies. More than 76% of people aged 70 years and over have tested positive for Covid-19 antibodies in the UK. The higher levels of antibodies observed in older age groups reflect the high vaccination rate in older people.

Of those aged 80 years or older, in England, 86% tested positive for coronavirus antibodies. In Wales it was 79.2%, Scotland 74%, and in Northern Ireland 76.4%.

The ONS is careful to draw a distinction between testing positive for antibodies and having immunity. In their report they state antibody levels can vary and sometimes increase, but are still below the level identified as "positive" in tests.

The figures show a rise in the number of people having protection against coronavirus – up from approximately a third of people testing positive when levels were measured at the start of March.

The UK has recorded 56 further deaths and 4,040 new cases, according to the latest update on the government's dashboard. Coronavirus-related deaths are falling at the rate of 35% while new cases are falling by 7.9% week on week.

Other figures released by the ONS on Tuesday confirm that more than 150,000 people have died from coronavirus in the UK.

Based on mentions of Covid-19 on death certificates, 150,116 deaths were recorded by 19 March. However, this measure is less up to date than the government count of fatalities within 28 days of a positive test. The Guardian reported on Saturday that the 150,000 milestone had been passed based on a different methodology.

Australian politics

NSW and Queensland premiers hit back after Morrison government blames states for slow Covid vaccine rollout

NSW health minister Brad Hazzard demands an apology after Scott Morrison comments as Australia falls 3.4m doses short of target

- Follow the latest news on our live blog
- Queensland Covid hotspots • NSW Covid hotspots
- GPs frustrated at Covid vaccine delivery problems
- Australia's vaccine tracker: how is the rollout progressing?

NSW health minister Brad Hazzard with premier Gladys Berejiklian, who says it is time to 'put the facts on the table' about Australia's coronavirus vaccine rollout. Photograph: Lisa Maree Williams/Getty Images

Australian states have hit back at the federal government after it blamed them for a slow vaccine rollout, with the New South Wales health minister,

Brad Hazzard, demanding an apology, while Queensland's deputy premier, Steven Miles, called on the Nationals deputy leader, David Littleproud, to "give himself an uppercut".

The federal government initially committed to administering 4m Covid-19 vaccine doses by the end of March, including up to 1.4m doses to the most high-risk people as part of phase 1a of the rollout. Australia is 3.4m doses short of that target.

The federal government is responsible for acquiring and delivering the vaccines to the states and territories, which are then responsible for administering them. On Tuesday, Morrison blamed the states for the delays, saying states and territories have had the vaccine delivery schedule for the past 12 weeks. But Hazzard said NSW had not been given enough warning about vaccine deliveries and the number of doses.

"We were under the impression from the advice we received from the federal government that we would receive just over 13,000 vaccines," Hazzard said. "What they actually gave us, with no forward announcement, was 45,000 and then a few days later there is a press report saying we haven't distributed them all. Well, you get 45,000 items dumped on your front door at night and told 'Now you should have it out by the next morning'. No one would be able to do that."

He said public health staff had been working "into the wee small hours" to administer the vaccine. He said he was "not happy at all today". "The federal government should be offering apologies to not only our government but other governments around the country," he said.

The NSW premier, Gladys Berejiklian, said 150,000 people in the state had received a vaccine – either the first shot or the second shot or both. Of these, she said 100,000 were provided by the state government, while just 50,000 were provided by the commonwealth.

"Please note, as many of you here and at home would know, for many weeks I have been saying to the commonwealth, to the federal government, that NSW is ready and willing to make sure that we support you in the vaccine rollout," she said.

“What we are saying to the commonwealth is we will have at least 100 hubs across the state, please allow us to work with you so that we have a chance of meeting the October deadline. We have put this request in and I am going to write formally to the prime minister today.”

She added it was “extremely unfair” that the federal government was giving the state just 24 to 48 hours notice about how many new doses were incoming, and that it was time to “put the facts on the table” about the rollout.

Guardian Australia has asked the health minister, Greg Hunt, for detail on what proportion of the 1.4m doses promised as part of 1a have been administered, but is yet to receive a response.

The Queensland Labor premier, Annastacia Palaszczuk, backed the NSW criticism, accusing the federal government of an “orchestrated attack against the states and territories”.

“It really is quite outrageous. I mean, God knows, they’ve got a lot to deflect from right now,” Palaszczuk said.

The agreement between the states and territories and the commonwealth leaves responsibility for 70% of the vaccination task with the federal government, Palaszczuk said. Like Hazzard, she said the state government was not regularly updated about supply.

“We need surety of supply by the federal government, and if the states are releasing their figures every day, I think that it is only fair, fair and reasonable, that the federal government releases its figures every day,” she said.

Miles, the state’s deputy premier, weighed in on Twitter, responding to comments made by Littleproud on Nine’s Today program on Wednesday. Littleproud said: “If the federal government hasn’t done their job, we deserve an uppercut. But let me say the states have been sitting on their hands, they’ve been too complacent. We are going to help the states but they have to admit they have a problem because they have done three fifths of bugger all and they are holding this nation back.”

Miles retorted that Littleproud should “give himself an uppercut”.

“Federal government ministers have once again lined up to attack Queensland over our Covid response,” he wrote on Twitter.

“They attacked our borders and they attacked our lockdowns. Now they’re attacking our vaccine progress, something THEY’RE responsible. This morning David Littleproud said that the federal government should get an uppercut if the vaccine rollout wasn’t up to scratch. Well he should give himself an uppercut.”

On Wednesday afternoon, the ACT health minister, Rachel Stephen-Smith, said comments from some commonwealth ministers had been “extremely disappointing and betray a real lack of understanding”. She noted the federal health minister, Hunt, had not made comments blaming the states.

During a press conference on Wednesday afternoon, Hunt attempted to ease tensions, praising the states and territories.

“The states and territories are doing a first-class job, the general practices have stepped up, the commonwealth is contributing, and all are coming together to see that figure of 72,000 vaccinations in the last 24 hours and 670,000 vaccinations cumulatively,” Hunt said. “We have confidence in all of the states and territories. They are all managing their programs as they best see fit and they are working towards making sure that all of those vaccines are used.”

Asked when the 4m target would be met, Hunt did not give a clear time frame but said the program was “on track” to meet other rolling targets throughout the year now that local production of the vaccine had accelerated.

“We remain on track to complete first doses for all Australians who seek it by the end of October,” he said.

Asked about Queensland having to withhold some doses of its Pfizer vaccine to ensure it had enough in stock for people to receive their second

dose, and about the comments from Littleproud that this meant vaccine was "sitting on the rack". Hunt said he "fully" supported Queensland's work.

The saga prompted the Greens on Wednesday to call for an urgent independent review into what they described as "the serious and widespread problems with Australia's vaccine rollout".

"The vaccine rollout for which both the federal and state governments have responsibility is having more than so called 'teething problems' and these are having real-world consequences with the latest Covid-19 outbreaks spreading in Queensland and threatening in NSW," the Greens spokesperson on health, senator Rachel Siewert, said.

"Targets have well and truly been missed. There are low supplies of vaccine and some of what vaccine is available is apparently sitting unused. It appears there is poor communication between levels of government, and some doctors are reported to be requiring pre-vaccination consultations. Frontline workers and vulnerable people are being let down. We are a month into the vaccine rollout and we still haven't vaccinated all of our frontline workers, aged care and disability care staff.

"It appears that the only way to get governments to take responsibility for these failures is through an urgent and rapid independent review to identify and fix the current issues."

Coronavirus

Tourists in Greece and Spain but most of Covid-hit Europe plans Easter at home

Several thousand Germans head to Crete and Balearic islands as pandemic third wave spreads across EU

- Coronavirus – latest updates
- See all our coronavirus coverage

Jon Henley in Paris, Angela Giuffrida in Rome and Stephen Burgen in Barcelona

Tue 30 Mar 2021 12.32 EDT Last modified on Wed 31 Mar 2021 00.10 EDT

Tourists in Mallorca this week where several thousand Germans were expected to arrive after Berlin announced it was no longer considered a high-risk area. Photograph: Jaime Reina/AFP/Getty Images

The first foreign tourists may have landed in locked-down **Spain** and **Greece**, but as a third wave of the pandemic accelerates across the EU, few Europeans will be enjoying an Easter break abroad – or even away from home.

German holidaymakers began arriving on Crete on Monday, with six half-empty flights landing at Heraklion airport after the tourist minister, Haris Theoharis, said some visitors could be permitted before the country's planned reopening on 14 May.

Several thousand Germans were also expected in Spain's Balearic islands for Easter after Berlin announced that Mallorca was no longer considered a high-risk area. Travel company Tui also announced there was "significantly more interest" in Mediterranean breaks.

Although welcomed by the Covid-ravaged tourism industry, the arrivals have caused resentment among some locals who remain subject to travel bans. Spaniards may leave their own region only for essential reasons, including over Easter, while most Greeks are confined to their municipality.

With cases continuing to rise across Europe, governments are still advising against non-essential foreign travel. German officials have urged people to stay at home at Easter and on Tuesday toughened land border checks to match those at airports.

Authorities in Greece and Spain have also stressed foreign visitors will be subject to the same rules as locals, and foreign holidaymakers in both countries must show a negative polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test before arriving, and another before boarding their plane home.

In Greece, restaurants, cafes and non-essential shops remain closed and no one may leave home without a valid reason approved by text message. On the Balearic islands, including Mallorca, bars and restaurants must close at

5pm and a night-time curfew applies from 10pm. Groups at bars and restaurants are limited to four people.

Conditions are less strict in Madrid, where foreign tourists can fly in with a negative test but residents may not leave the region until 9 April. Bars and restaurants are open in the Spanish capital and its curfew starts at 11pm.

Pictures of drunken foreign – often French – revellers have caused outrage in Spain, while Madrid police broke up 353 illegal parties, mainly in rented Airbnb flats, over the weekend. The raids were mostly sparked by complaints from neighbours.

The uptick in tourism comes even as the pandemic, fuelled by the more contagious B117 variant first detected in Britain, continues to gather pace. Spain's health emergency chief, Fernando Simon, said the country was "in a phase of expansion" in terms of infections and the trend was likely to continue.

Italy is set to announce a five-day quarantine on travellers arriving from other EU countries, both residents and foreigners. Much of the country has been under tough restrictions in recent weeks, meaning residents must stay in their local area, and the whole country is due to go into lockdown over the three-day Easter weekend starting on Saturday.

All non-essential shops, bars and restaurants will close unless providing takeout services, but people can walk or exercise close to home, and a maximum of two guests may visit another household within their town no more than once a day.

The new foreign travel restriction will require anyone arriving from an EU country to show a negative test before departing for Italy, and a second after five days of self-isolation, with only cases of "proven necessity and urgency" exempt.

Highlighting the contradictions of Europe's haphazard travel rules, it appeared aimed as much at limiting the number of Italians seeking an overseas break, since current mobility restrictions do not include trips to the airport.

“I can’t leave my municipality, but I can fly off to the Canary Islands – it’s absurd,” Bernabo Bocca, head of the federation of Italian hoteliers, said, adding that his members felt “mocked – 85% of us are forced to stay closed. Meanwhile, we are gifting tourists abroad.”

In Germany, Angela Merkel is coming under growing criticism for failing to spell out a detailed plan to reverse rapidly rising coronavirus infections, which health officials warn could jump to 100,000 a day from 20,000 now.

The chancellor, who last week dramatically reversed a plan to close churches and shops over a five-day period at Easter, is running into opposition from the leaders of the country’s 16 federal states to plans for a tougher lockdown if infections surge.

One leading economist, Clemens Fuest of the IFO economic institute, accused her of dithering and called for a tough two-week lockdown. “In a situation like this you cannot say, ‘let us wait another 10 days’,” he said. “The Easter holiday is a chance to do something. It’s incomprehensible to let it slip.”

In **France**, restrictive measures are only half as successful at keeping people home as France’s first full lockdown, Google data showed, and experts are increasingly warning tough new steps will be needed to stop hospitals being over-run.

President Emmanuel Macron, who has repeatedly sought to avoid another full lockdown, is widely expected to decide on Wednesday – and announce on Thursday – whether closing schools and prohibiting people from leaving their home other than for essential reasons has again become necessary.

The government closed some non-essential stores and barred people from travelling 10km (6 miles) from home in some regions, adding to a nationwide curfew. But hospitals are reaching breaking point, with more Covid-19 patients in intensive care units in Paris than at the peak of the second wave in November, and critical care wards at 140% of capacity.

Russia

Merkel, Macron and Putin in talks about using Sputnik V jab in Europe

Kremlin says leaders discussed possibility of shipments and joint production amid shortage of doses inside Europe

The German government confirmed last week it would be open to using Sputnik V if and when it is approved by the European Medicines Agency Photograph: Claudio Santisteban/ZUMA Wire/REX/Shutterstock

The German government confirmed last week it would be open to using Sputnik V if and when it is approved by the European Medicines Agency Photograph: Claudio Santisteban/ZUMA Wire/REX/Shutterstock

Jon Henley Europe correspondent
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Tue 30 Mar 2021 19.53 EDT

Vladimir Putin, Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron discussed Russia's Sputnik V vaccine and its use in Europe on a conference call on Tuesday, the Kremlin said.

Moscow's statement said that among other subjects the Russian, German and French leaders discussed prospects for the registration of the vaccine in the EU and the possibility of shipments and joint production in EU nations. It did not say who raised the topic.

The EU's sluggish vaccine rollout has been dogged by an early shortage of doses, but those shortfalls were expected to ease significantly from the beginning of next month with more than 300m doses of Pfizer/BioNTech, Moderna, Johnson & Johnson and AstraZeneca vaccines set to arrive in April, May and June.

Heroes to zeros: how German perfectionism wrecked its Covid vaccine drive
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The German government confirmed last week it would be open to using Sputnik V if and when it is approved by the European Medicines Agency, with Merkel's spokesman Steffen Seibert saying an eventual green light from the EMA would make the shot "worth considering for Germany".

Referring to the Russian vaccine, the chancellor herself said Germany "should use any vaccine that has been approved" by the EMA, while the German health ministry said last week "all vaccines are welcome if they have been approved by the EMA".

France has been considerably more circumspect, however, with the French foreign minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, last week accusing both Russia and China of using their vaccines to gain influence and score points abroad.

"In terms of how it is managed, [the Sputnik V vaccine] is more a means of propaganda and aggressive diplomacy than a means of solidarity and health aid," Le Drian told France Info radio.

Thierry Breton, the French EU commissioner who heads the EU executive's vaccine taskforce, has also said the bloc has "absolutely no need of Sputnik

V" since it "clearly has the capacity to deliver 300 to 350m doses" by the end of June.

The Sputnik V manufacturer responded aggressively, saying in a series of Twitter posts that Breton was "clearly biased" and demanding: "If this is an official position of the EU, please inform us that there is no reason to pursue EMA approval because of your political biases."

Russia's Sputnik V Covid vaccine gaining acceptance in Europe
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The European regulator launched a rolling review of Sputnik V earlier this month, a step towards it being approved as the first non-western coronavirus jab to be used across the bloc. EU experts are due to visit Russia in April to check the results of clinical trials and inspect the production process.

Russia registered the shot in August before large-scale clinical trials, prompting initial fears about its safety. But reviews since have been largely positive, with The Lancet publishing results showing the vaccine is safe and more than 90% effective.

Russian manufacturers have not so far managed to increase domestic production to meet demand at home and abroad, but the government has said the country aims to produce 178m individual doses of Sputnik V and two other vaccines, EpiVacCorona and CoviVak, by the end of June.

It has also said it hopes to fully vaccinate 30 million Russians by the same date, leaving a possible 118m domestically produced shots available for export. It also has reportedly set up production deals with 10 other countries to produce its vaccines outside Russia.

Russian pharmaceuticals company R-Pharm said last week it expected to begin joint production of Sputnik V shots in its plant in Bavaria, southern Germany, with doses starting to become available from June. Italy, France and Spain have also been named as potential production sites for Sputnik V production within the EU.

The three leaders also discussed the Iranian nuclear standoff and the conflicts in eastern Ukraine, Libya and Syria, the Kremlin said in its readout. It said Putin also responded to questions about the jailed Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny during a “frank and businesslike” discussion.

Coronavirus

European commission says AstraZeneca not obliged to prioritise vaccines for UK

Spokesperson contradicts health secretary Matt Hancock's claim that deal gives UK priority on deliveries

- Coronavirus – latest updates
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The Oxford-developed vaccine is a cornerstone of the immunisation rollout in the UK and the EU, which has purchased 400 million doses. Photograph: Claudio Cruz/AFP/Getty Images

The Oxford-developed vaccine is a cornerstone of the immunisation rollout in the UK and the EU, which has purchased 400 million doses. Photograph: Claudio Cruz/AFP/Getty Images

Philip Oltermann in Berlin
@philipoltermann

Tue 30 Mar 2021 17.46 EDT

The European commission has denied that AstraZeneca has a contractual obligation to the United Kingdom that would prevent a full delivery of Covid-19 doses, deepening the Anglo-Swedish pharmaceutical company's problems as Germany and Canada became the latest countries to limit its vaccine for seniors over suspected links to a rare blood clotting disorder in younger people.

A spokesperson for the European commission on Tuesday contradicted the UK health secretary Matt Hancock's claim that AstraZeneca's deal with Britain would justify prioritised deliveries to the United Kingdom.

"AstraZeneca confirmed to us not being under any obligation to other parties that would impede to complete the fulfilment of its obligations", the spokesperson said at a news conference.

The Oxford-developed vaccine is a cornerstone of the immunisation rollout in the UK and the EU, which has bought 400m doses, as well as the UN-backed Covax initiative, which aims to distribute vaccines to poorer countries.

How the AstraZeneca vaccine became a political football – and a PR disaster
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As well as being the subject of an acrimonious tug-of-war between Britain and the European Union, however, the Anglo-Swedish company has been plagued with PR problems over trial data and safety reviews, not just in the EU but also the US, Switzerland and Norway.

On Tuesday, Canada became the latest country to suspend the use of the Oxford/AstraZeneca jab for those under 55 as a precautionary measure, pointing to new data from Europe suggesting a link to a rare blood-clotting disorder.

"There is substantial uncertainty about the benefit of providing AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccines to adults under 55 given the potential risks," said Dr

Shelley Deeks, vice-chair of the National Advisory Committee on Immunization, which recommended the new guidelines.

Germany will from Wednesday administer the Oxford/AstraZeneca jab mainly for people over 60, after the country's vaccination commission reported more cases of a very rare and specific type of blood clot in the cerebral veins in people who had received the vaccine.

Younger people, including those who have already received a first dose, will still have the option to receive the Oxford/AstraZeneca shot after being advised on the risks by their GP, Der Spiegel reported. The chancellor, Angela Merkel, consulted on the issue with the heads of the country's 16 states on Tuesday night.

Initially, Germany's vaccine commission approved the use of the Oxford/AstraZeneca jab in people under 65 only, citing insufficient data on its effects on older people. But the vaccine was cleared for all age groups on 4 March.

About 2.7 million people in Germany have been given a first shot of the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine in total, with about 800 people having received a second dose. The Paul Ehrlich Institute, the German medical regulatory body for vaccines, has recorded 31 cases of cerebral venous thromboses in those who have received the jab, 19 of which occurred together with lowered platelets (thrombocytopenia). Twenty nine of these cases were among females under the age of 70.

The Paul Ehrlich Institute reported nine deaths as a result of these side-effects. The latest data would suggest a risk of blood clots that could be as high as one in 100,000, higher than the one in one million risk believed before.

The British vaccine regulator, the MHRA, has reported only four cases of cerebral venous sinuous thrombosis cases in people who have received an Oxford/AstraZeneca shot between the start of the year and 14 March, compared with two cases among those who have had the Pfizer/BioNTech jab.

In a statement on 25 March, the MHRA said a rigorous scientific review did not suggest that blood clots in veins were caused by the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine, and that there had been less than one in a million cases of the disorder in the UK.

There have also been reports in the US of immune thrombocytopenia in people who have received the Pfizer/BioNTech or Moderna shot, though the data does not show whether the problems were directly linked to the vaccine.

Several other European countries have already restricted the use of Oxford/AstraZeneca on people who are at a higher risk of dying from Covid-19: those aged 55 or older in France, 65 or older in Sweden and Finland, and 70 or older in Iceland.

Coronavirus

How wealthy nations are creating a ‘vaccine apartheid’

Activists have called for changes to intellectual property laws in an effort to speed the global vaccination project

A homeless man receives a Covid-19 vaccination in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Photograph: Miguel Schincariol/AFP/Getty Images

A homeless man receives a Covid-19 vaccination in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Photograph: Miguel Schincariol/AFP/Getty Images

Jessica Glenza
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Wed 31 Mar 2021 02.00 EDT

A chorus of activists are calling for changes to intellectual property laws in hopes of beginning to boost Covid-19 vaccine manufacturing globally, and

addressing the gaping disparity between rich and poor nations' access to coronavirus vaccines.

The US and a handful of other wealthy vaccine-producing nations are on track to deliver vaccines to all adults who want them in the coming months, while dozens of the world's poorest countries have not inoculated a single person.

Activists have dubbed the disparity a "vaccine apartheid" and called for the world's largest pharmaceutical companies to share technical know-how in an effort to speed the global vaccination project.

"The goal of health agencies right now is to manage the pandemic, and that might mean not everyone getting access – and not just this year – in the long-term," said Peter Maybarduk, director of Public Citizen's access to medicine program.

Covid: new vaccines needed globally within a year, say scientists
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"If we want to change that, if we're not going to wait until 2024, then it requires more ambitious and a different scale of mobilization of resources," said Maybarduk. Right now, "it's not even clear the goal is to vaccinate the world".

The pressure to get more vaccines to poor nations has also weighed on the Joe Biden administration, which is now considering whether to repurpose or internationally distribute 70m vaccine doses. After outcry, the US has shared 4m AstraZeneca vaccine doses with Canada and Mexico.

"There's no question poorer countries are having a hard time affording doses," said Dr Howard Markel, a pandemic historian at the University of Michigan School of Public Health. "Even if they were at wholesale or cost there are a lot of different markups."

As it stands, 30 countries have not received a single vaccine dose. Roughly 90m vaccine doses expected to be distributed through Covax, the global alliance to distribute vaccines to poor countries, have been delayed through

March and April by a Covid-19 outbreak in India. In Europe, rising Covid-19 cases and a slow vaccination campaign have also prompted vaccine export controls.

Beyond existing vaccine supply, many activists see a bigger fight in patent laws, and are drawing on experience advocating for greater access to antiretroviral drugs for HIV.

“More is possible than we believe,” said Maybarduk. “It was assumed Aids drugs could not be produced for less than $10,000 per person per year, right up until the moment they could, and they were produced for $1 per person per day.”

Similarly, Maybarduk said the technology for Covid-19 vaccines, along with other supplies, should be shared among the countries of the world. Activists have used Moderna as a key example of the leverage the US government might have, if it chose to use it.

Though popular shorthand often refers to it as just the Moderna vaccine, it was developed in partnership with the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease (NIAID). American taxpayers provided $6bn in late-stage development funds, in return for potential vaccine doses. It was also tested on Americans, who volunteered for research across 99 research sites.

“It is literally the people’s vaccine,” said Maybarduk.

Part of the proposal from activists focuses on a petition to temporarily suspend intellectual property laws governing World Trade Organization member states. Suspending those patent laws could urge companies to share technology, they argue, and better protect the whole world from emerging variants that can blunt vaccine efficacy.

“This is a classic case where you have an industry that has a very direct stake in protecting itself, and there’s very little understanding among the public how much is at issue,” said Dean Baker, an economist and co-founder of the Center for Economic and Policy Research. Activists argue pharmaceutical companies should share production know-how, and be appropriately compensated.

One part of this fight centers on a provision of international trade law called the Trips agreement, or more formally, the agreement on trade-related aspects of intellectual property rights. Put in force in 1995, Trips requires all member states to recognize 20-year monopoly patents for pharmaceuticals, including vaccines.

“What Trips was about was imposing US-European style copyright on the whole world,” said Baker. “Most developing countries had very little idea what they were dealing with.”

In October 2020, South Africa and India introduced a petition to suspend the Trips agreement through the pandemic. India is home to one of the largest generic drug manufacturing industries in the world. South Africa has the largest HIV epidemic in the world, and is part of a group of sub Saharan African countries which were priced out of antiretroviral therapies in the 1990s.

“Even if we say, ‘OK, this is highly specialized knowledge’ ... the idea it wouldn’t benefit everyone to share that knowledge is kind of crazy,” Baker said. “The industry’s argument – we’re just stuck – that makes zero sense.”

However, some vaccine researchers counter that the lack of vaccine access is far more complicated than lifting patent restrictions, because there is so little manufacturing outside of the US and Europe.

“In my experience from working on vaccines for the last few decades, the patents are not the biggest problem [and] the intellectual property is not the biggest problem,” said Dr Peter Hotez, a vaccine researcher and dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine in Texas.

Hotez is currently working to develop a low-cost, easily manufactured vaccine that can be distributed in low- and middle-income countries. “The problem with vaccines is having the infrastructure and the human capital to know how to make vaccines,” Hotez said.

Reliance on these major pharmaceutical companies, Hotez said, has resulted in a dearth of vaccine candidates designed for regional Covid-19 variants

and suited for local administration. “We’ve still not fixed a broken financial model for how to get vaccines for the poor,” Hotez said.

On this, both camps agree.

“There should be major facilities in Africa and Asia and Latin America, as well as North America, that help respond to future pandemics,” said Maybarduk. “What is not agreed on is what the political economy of that looks like: who controls those facilities, will the technology be openly available, will they be publicly accountable.”

The fight also comes at a time when annual or booster Covid-19 shots appear increasingly likely – in part driven by the possibility variants could emerge in populations without vaccine access – and as pharmaceutical companies eye future profits.

“The big players are Astrazeneca, Moderna, BioNtech – these are not really vaccine companies,” said Hotez. They are involved because technological advances will, “provide a glidepath so they can accelerate their technology to down the line make actual money making products”, such as vaccines to treat cancer and neurodegenerative disorders.

The Trips agreement is expected to be discussed again in April, though it is unclear whether the coalition of more than 80 poorer nations will succeed. Opposition to the Trips petition has come from wealthy countries, including the US, which for the last four decades has traditionally argued for enhanced patent protections. It is unclear how the recently confirmed US trade representative, Katherine Tai, might handle the talks.

“Here you’ve got the equivalent of a blockbuster vaccine, because everybody needs it,” said Markel. “If you need it every year, boy, what a boon.”

2021.03.31 - Spotlight

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Sex

The return of the bonkbuster: how horny heroines are starting a new sexual revolution

Illustration: Monika Jurczyk Monsie

Illustration: Monika Jurczyk Monsie

I longed for novels about female desire - women empowered by sex and their expressions of lust. So I sat down and wrote my own

Daisy Buchanan
Wed 31 Mar 2021 01.00 EDT

The idea for my novel Insatiable emerged from a simple question: where were all the horny women? I knew that we were secretly legion. In fact, I suspected that I was surrounded by women, sitting on buses, standing in queues, staring out of the window and simultaneously entertaining all kinds

of filthy daydreams. After all, millions of us had bought and read Fifty Shades of Grey. Even if half the sold copies were bought by people who wanted to mock it, that left millions of genuinely horny women unaccounted for – and buying the sequels.

I was not transported in the way I had hoped; I did not find Christian sexy, I did not relish the BDSM and, most of all, I struggled to connect with the beautiful, blank lead character, Anastasia. She seemed similar to every other sort-of-horny woman I had seen on screen, a sexual object before she was a sexual subject, a person who had to be perfect and prove herself desirable before she was allowed to pursue desires of her own.

Phoebe Dynevor, left, and Rege-Jean Page in Bridgerton. Photograph: Liam Daniel/AP

In the years that followed, I often thought of Fifty Shades of Grey – and whether there were other women, like me, who felt underserved. As I dreamed of writing my own novel, I revisited Look at Me by Anita Brookner. I had adored this book as a teenager – it is a dry, darkly funny story of a young woman's friendship with a glamorous and manipulative couple who pull her into their world, only to eject her. I remembered, at 16, being certain that this was a stealthily sexy story. There is an undercurrent of tension, a hinting of a dark and problematic past. What if this were made

explicit? Brookner's novel is about a woman who tries to suppress all of her desires and cravings to seek social success. But what if a young woman found those cravings overwhelming, uncontainable – and that her desire made her desirable?

While my mind was racing with these possibilities, the sky turned dark and the news was full of stories of sexual violence. Numerous women, including a number of high-profile actors, courageously shared their experience of abuse and exploitation. There was a feeling of change in the air, a public reckoning, a long overdue call for justice.

But I was starting to understand why horny women were hiding. What chance did we have? When sex is weaponised and stories of sex are so often accompanied by stories of violence, it felt as if there was nowhere for us to express desire freely or safely.

As reported by newspapers in this period, sex acts were something "done to" professionally beautiful women, usually against their will, by powerful, wealthy men; assaults rather than expressions of mutual desire.

Dealing with this was, of course, a matter of urgency. But I was saddened that there didn't seem to be any good stories about desire; no women empowered by sex, no happy endings. So I hid away and wrote my own, mostly for my own amusement. I didn't want to live in the world I saw in the news, so I invented one, starring a girl who never felt beautiful or perfect, but gave herself permission to lose herself to desire – and find herself in it.

When Insatiable was submitted to publishers, many found the explicit sex off-putting (and that was after my agent made me take out the threesome I originally introduced on the second page). Yet, over the course of its journey, it has found itself in exciting company. Raven Leilani's bestselling Luster begins with its heroine, Edie, inviting us to join her in an experience that is explicit and intimate: "The first time we have sex we are both fully clothed, at our desks during working hours, bathed in blue computer light." Luster won the prestigious Kirkus prize and was chosen by Barack Obama as one of his books of 2020 – remarkable when the title is an elegant, monolexical shorthand for "the story of a horny woman".

Melissa Broder's acclaimed Milk Fed juxtaposes sexual desire with hunger and appetite, exploring what happens when a woman embraces every urge she has been frightened to explore and instead seeks satiety. Melanie Blake's recent novel Ruthless Women focuses on the erotic adventures of women over 50, who have multiple partners and search for hedonism in all its forms.

Raven Leilani, whose book Luster won the Kirkus prize in 2020.

These books feature women who don't just experience desire; they are motivated by it. That seems radical. Even more radical is the fact that these heroines and protagonists don't necessarily fit the mould when it comes to what – or who – is usually permitted to be "sexy" in modern culture.

The bliss of a book is that each reader can tailor their vision to their specifications. Reading is an intimate experience – it is much harder to exclude someone from a story when it is their own imagination that brings it to life. When we see sex on screen, we are much more likely to be seeing a limited interpretation of sexiness, where so many bodies and experiences go unrepresented. But things are changing.

The Shondaland smash hit series Bridgerton has been praised for inclusive casting, and the way it centres on women's desire and presents sex from a female perspective. This isn't just a smart way to pick up liberal brownie

points, but a brilliant way to meet the unmet needs of an audience of horny women; it broke Netflix viewing records and was watched in 82m households, the platform's largest audience to date. The series is based on Julia Quinn's steamy Bridgerton novels – which are some of the bestselling titles of 2021 so far, despite being published more than 20 years ago.

The Bridgerton universe is written for readers to escape to, rather than relate to. Jackie Collins' heroines bust balls, Quinn's attend balls. But the success of the series, with its clever referencing, indicates that we are keen on a little reality with our fantasy. When I interviewed Raven Leilani for my podcast, You're Booked, she revealed that she got hooked on sexy books by accident, after reading Anne Rice's Interview With the Vampire and discovering that there was plenty of erotic literature out there, packaged and sold as part of the fantasy genre.

I still remember a single, thrilling "horny woman" sighting when I was a teenager. In the TV classic Friends, Rachel Green (long established as conventionally desirable, before she expressed desire) is caught reading a dirty book – and when she is teased about a vicar, we are led to believe that the story is a historical romance. For a long time, many of the sexy stories written for women, or by women, have been labelled genre fiction. If vicars or vampires get you hot under the collar, all power to your elbow.

But I am curious about whether this is because female desire has been ghettoised or marginalised – or whether it's such a powerful force that it needs a vast, imaginary, expansive realm in order to fully exist.

When they read historical fiction, horny women can hide in plain sight. But I hope we don't need to hide any more, unless we want to. The contemporary literature that we are reaching for has sex at its centre. The content is not implied coyly by a heaving bodice on the cover. The message is made as explicit as the story itself, and it is this: women don't need to be shinily and effortfully sexy in order to pursue sexually fulfilling lives.

However, there would certainly be no Insatiable without Jilly Cooper. The bonkbusters of the 80s were responsible for my sentimental sex education. Like millions of readers, I fell in love with every aspect of the universe Cooper created. The glamour was wholly intoxicating, yet the cosiness she

conjured up was even more seductive. I was desperate to read about how Rupert Campbell-Black might rip someone's backless ballgown off her body – and just as desperate to read about him putting his tattered cashmere sweater back on.

In other seminal works of the era, the heroines are able to express desire because they know, primarily, that they are desirable, but Cooper's best-loved characters were made to be adored by horny, insecure teenage girls. They worry about their weight, get spots before important occasions, go to parties and feel underdressed and outclassed. Yet they still get the guy – and their orgasms. More often than not, their sexual confidence is based on their own enthusiasm, and they find more happiness in the bedroom than anywhere else.

Antonio Banderas in the 1994 film Interview With the Vampire. Photograph: Warner Bros./Allstar

Of course, horny women have existed in literature for thousands of years. The Wife of Bath was brought into being in the 14th century and might be the most famous example of a troubling literary motif – the Loathly Lady, an unattractive woman rendered desirable by male attention. Chaucer set the tone. A glad glance from an errant knight and specs, bets and knickers are

off, and the curse of ugliness is lifted. (See Pygmalion, My Fair Lady, She's All That.)

But maybe it is time to lift a different literary curse and challenge the male gaze for good. It is time to understand that horny heroines are quiet radicals. If they can inspire readers to seek pleasure in our bedrooms, they can start a revolution. I want to live in a world where everyone can lust out loud and where any person can voice their longing without being laughed at or ignored, or made to feel vulnerable. We are still far from an era of sexual safety, but maybe, eventually, life will imitate art. For now, horny women can see themselves in print, and embrace and celebrate their urges in a place of safety.

Insatiable: A Love Story For Greedy Girls by Daisy Buchanan (Sphere, £12.99) is out now. To order a copy, go to guardianbookshop.com. Delivery charges may apply.

Business

How David Cameron got caught up in a classic lobbying scandal

The Greensill Capital affair is the exact type of lobbying row that the ex-PM warned about and vowed to eradicate

David Cameron pictured in 2012 The former PM warned that political lobbying would be ‘the next big scandal waiting to happen’. Photograph: Murdo MacLeod/The Guardian

David Cameron pictured in 2012 The former PM warned that political lobbying would be ‘the next big scandal waiting to happen’. Photograph: Murdo MacLeod/The Guardian

Rupert Neate *Wealth correspondent*
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Wed 31 Mar 2021 02.00 EDT

In the wake of the 2009 expenses scandal – in which MPs were found to have submitted claims for among other things a £1,600 floating duck house and a £2,200 bill for cleaning a moat – the then-Conservative leader David Cameron warned that political lobbying would be "the next big scandal waiting to happen".

Cameron took it upon himself to reform "the far-too-cosy relationship between politics, government, business and money", which he said had "tainted our politics for too long".

More than a decade later, the former prime minister is caught up in what could turn out to be exactly the kind of lobbying scandal he once sought to eradicate. It involves the collapse of a $7bn (£5bn) bank, text-message lobbying of the chancellor of the exchequer, and a desert camping trip with the Saudi prince accused of ordering the brutal murder of a journalist.

David Cameron and Greensill Capital: 10 unanswered questions
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When he resigned as both PM and a Conservative MP shortly after losing the 2016 Brexit referendum, Cameron promised he would not become a political "distraction".

He would, he said, be too busy writing his memoirs in his two £25,000 shepherd's huts at holiday homes in the Cotswolds and Cornwall.

His book, For The Record, wasn't a hit with the critics. It sold just 65,000 in its first year, far below the 350,000 sales of Tony Blair's book A Journey and less than the 91,500 copies of John Major's autobiography, according to figures collated by Nielsen Book Research.

> pic.twitter.com/PVH2nNYRp8
>
> — John Harris (@johnharris1969) September 24, 2020

He also squeezed in a little public speaking at a rate of £120,000 an hour at the Washington Speakers Bureau.

It's not too bad an hourly rate, but Blair has been paid up to $500,000 (£365,000) for a 20-minute speech.

His company, the Office of David Cameron Limited, made a profit of £836,000 in 2019 – the most recent year available at Companies House. But sources close to Cameron have suggested he may feel his post-political career has not turned out as successfully as that of his Cabinet colleagues.

George Osborne, who was Cameron's chancellor, has worked as editor of the Evening Standard and is now a partner at an investment banking firm where the previous two partners have shared out £207m in pay over the last six years.

The Guardian view on David Cameron and Greensill Capital: questions to answer | Editorial
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Nick Clegg, the Liberal Democrat deputy prime minister under Cameron, is now Facebook's vice-president of global affairs, and said to earn a "seven-

figure salary".

There was a period, soon after the actor Danny Dyer described Cameron as a "twat" who had scuttled off to Europe "with his trotters up" in 2018, that Cameron was said to have told friends he was "bored shitless" and was considering a return to politics, according to The Sun.

It has now emerged that Cameron took a different direction, signing up as lobbyist for controversial billionaire banker Lex Greensill, whose eponymous bank collapsed into administration earlier in March. Greensill Capital's demise has plunged other businesses into crisis including Liberty Steel, which employs 5,000 people in the UK.

Cameron reportedly told friends that he was granted stock options worth up to 1% of the company. Last year, Greensill was hoping to float on the stock market at a $7bn valuation, which would have valued a 1% stake at $70m (£51m).

While he was working hard to secure his potential windfall, Cameron failed to declare his work for the bank with the official Register of Consultant Lobbyists – a watchdog designed to increase transparency in the murky world of lobbying and introduced under his own premiership.

Cameron's work for Greensill has included lobbying the chancellor, and, according to the Financial Times, going camping in the desert with Lex Greensill and Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi crown prince who was found by the US authorities to have approved the 2018 murder of the Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi consulate in Turkey.

Greensill is said to have boasted that Cameron helped him bond with Mohammed bin Salman. The trip to Saudi Arabia came soon after Cameron prompted public outcry with another visit to the kingdom for the October 2019 "Davos in the Desert" summit.

The trip came just days after SoftBank, the investment fund run by Japan's richest man Masayoshi Son, announced it was investing a further $655m in Greensill. Softbank's Vision Fund was one of Greensill's biggest investors

having invested about $1.5bn, before the collapse. The biggest investor in the Vision Fund is Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund.

Cameron is said to have repeatedly texted Chancellor Rishi Sunak's private phone asking him to give Greensill special access to millions of pounds of emergency Covid loans during the height of the coronavirus crisis in March last year.

He also held 10 virtual meetings between March and June 2020 with the second permanent secretary to the Treasury and other senior figures, according to transparency records. Soon afterwards, Greensill was accredited as a lender under the coronavirus large business interruption loan scheme.

Cameron did not respond to requests for comment, and has not spoken publicly about his work for Greensill.

The Register of Consultant Lobbyists investigated Cameron's lobbying of Sunak but found that the former PM did not breach the rules as they only apply to third-party lobbyists and not in-house lobbyists. "Based on detailed information and assurances provided, Mr Cameron's activities do not fall within the criteria that require registration on the Register of Consultant Lobbyists," the watchdog said.

Kwasi Kwarteng, the business secretary, insisted that Cameron had done "absolutely nothing wrong" in his work for Greensill. Speaking on Sky News on Tuesday, Kwarteng said now that Cameron had been cleared of breaking lobbying rules, people should now "just move on".

Housing market

UK housing crisis: how did owning a home become unaffordable?

Buying a house is off-limits to many thanks to rising rents, pay freezes and a lack of affordable homes. But it hasn't always been this way. What went wrong?

- Covid frontline workers priced out of homeowning in 98% of Great Britain

Wed 31 Mar 2021 03.00 EDT Last modified on Wed 31 Mar 2021 03.01 EDT

Covid crisis watchEconomic growth (GDP)

A year of Covid crisis: a glimmer of economic hope at the end of the tunnel

Twelve months after the pandemic struck the Guardian's economic tracker reveals real risk of lasting damage

- UK economy poised to recover after Covid-19 second wave
- Andy Haldane: only a skills plan can protect against fallout

A near-deserted London Bridge in late March 2021, almost a year since lockdown restrictions first began. Photograph: Andy Rain/EPA

A near-deserted London Bridge in late March 2021, almost a year since lockdown restrictions first began. Photograph: Andy Rain/EPA

Richard Partington Economics correspondent
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Wed 31 Mar 2021 01.00 EDT

When Boris Johnson announced the first stay-at-home order, effectively shutting down whole sections of the economy, it was hoped the tide could be turned within 12 weeks. As many months later, lockdown measures are being relaxed for a third time and Britain still faces a lengthy road to recovery from the worst recession for 300 years.

As restrictions ease, the chief economist at the Bank of England, Andy Haldane, warned that despite the reopening of the economy, the risk of a "jobs equivalent of long Covid" remains for workers across the country.

Writing in the Guardian to mark a year since the first lockdown, he said the outlook for the post-Covid transition was set to be smoother than the 1980s, when the jobs market took a generation to recover from industrial decline. However, more support for unemployed workers is needed to prevent lasting damage.

"A useful down-payment on those policies has been provided in the UK, with new initiatives focused on vocational training and lifelong learning. But these will need to increase in scale, and expand in scope, to meet the skills challenge facing the UK economy and limit the long-term scarring to it," Haldane said.

In the past year, the Guardian has tracked the economic fallout from the pandemic on a monthly basis; following infection rates, eight key growth indicators and the level of the FTSE 100. Faced with the deepest global recession since the Great Depression, the Covid crisis watch also monitored Britain's performance compared with other countries.

Redundancies across the UK have risen at the fastest rate on record after economic activity collapsed with unprecedented speed, with governments around the world using rolling lockdowns to contain multiple waves.

After sending its population indoors later than other countries and keeping restrictions in place for longer than others last summer, Britain suffered the deepest recession in 300 years. Gross domestic product fell by 9.8% in 2020 – the worst performance in the G7 – thanks to some of the highest infection rates in the world and a higher share of social spending than other nations.

Billions of pounds in emergency state support and trillions pumped by central banks into the financial system helped to prevent a worse reckoning for jobs and growth, while the Covid vaccine offers hope for a stronger recovery as the UK makes faster progress than other big economies.

As lockdown measures are relaxed, UK unemployment is up to 2 million lower than feared last summer, helped by the Treasury's multibillion-pound furlough scheme – which has topped up the wages of more than 11m jobs since it was launched a year ago.

Retail sales have remained resilient, staging a sharp recovery close to pre-pandemic levels amid a boom in online spending while high street shops were forced to close. With repeat closures in the hospitality sector and many people saving money while working from home, spending on retail has risen as consumer interest in gardening, cycling and DIY boomed during lockdown.

However, clothing sales plummeted and more than 11,000 chain outlets closed for good on Britain's high streets last year, in a reflection of the upheaval for the retail industry that will become increasingly clear as restrictions are eased and shoppers return to town and city centres.

There are hopes a consumer-led recovery can take hold, fuelled by £180bn of extra household savings built up while spending on commuting, holidays and socialising went down. Tourism and hospitality firms have reported a surge in bookings, in a signal of pent-up demand.

However, savings have mainly been accumulated by higher-earning households and retirees, as low-paid workers and those in more precarious jobs suffered the worst of the financial damage, raising the risk of lasting inequality.

Raising hopes for the post-Covid recovery, the jobless rate fell slightly in January despite tougher restrictions at the start of the year, dropping to 5% from 5.1% at the end of December.

Despite this, the number of workers on furlough has reached almost 5 million. After repeated attempts to close the scheme last autumn when

redundancies were still rising, Rishi Sunak used this month's budget to extend furlough until the end of September. With the economy not expected to return to full strength until at least next year, job losses are forecast to rise to 6.5% after the scheme closes.

Haldane said it should be easier than in the 1980s for unemployed workers to transition to new jobs. This was because job losses have been most heavily concentrated in the service sector of the economy, where skills are more easily transferable.

However, he warned that the hardest hit people in the pandemic were younger workers, the least experienced and those with the fewest skills, and that more was required to support the transition to a stronger post-Covid economy.

"This means the risk of workers facing the jobs-equivalent of long Covid is considerable. Avoiding that chronic economic ailment will require structural, skill-focused policies, equivalent in speed and scale to the demand-side policies already put in place," he said.

Covid crisis watch
Economic growth (GDP)

UK economy poised to recover after Covid-19 second wave

Our latest snapshot of key economic indicators shows the deficit soaring but unemployment holding steady

- A glimmer of economic hope at the end of the tunnel
- Andy Haldane: only a skills plan can protect against fallout

Online sales have boomed despite lockdown hurting the high street. Photograph: John Morrison/Alamy Stock Photo

Retail sales return close to pre-pandemic level in online boom

Online sales boomed during lockdown, although the forced closure of high street stores damaged the retail sector overall. The total volume of retail

sales has, however, recovered close to pre-pandemic levels, after falling by the most on record during the first wave. With pubs and restaurants closed and people spending less on services during lockdown, supermarket sales have surged, while DIY and gardening spending rose sharply as people spent more time at home. Clothing sales on the other hand have fallen and many physical shops in town and city centres have been pushed to the brink of collapse as their doors remained closed. More than 11,000 outlets permanently disappeared from high streets last year.

UK suffers worst recession in the G7

G7 chart

As well as having one of the highest coronavirus death rates in the world, the UK economy suffered the worst performance among the G7 group of wealthy nations last year, as the government entered lockdown later than other countries and then took longer to relax restrictions. Only Spain suffered a sharper decline among EU countries. The structure of the UK economy, with a greater dependence on social consumption – face-to-face spending in restaurants and shops – was among factors contributing to the bigger decline. The Treasury has also argued that other countries use a different approach to calculating GDP, resulting in lower figures for the UK. However, economists believe this does not fully account for the UK's underperformance.

Covid-19 caused most infectious disease deaths since 1918

Deaths from infectious diseases

More than 150,000 people have died from coronavirus in the UK, according to Guardian analysis, far exceeding the worst expectations from a year ago. This is the highest rate of deaths from infectious and parasitic disease since 1918 during the Spanish flu, the last big pandemic to strike. New daily coronavirus cases peaked at more than 80,000 in the winter second wave – more than 15 times the peak recorded in the first wave – before gradually falling this spring. More than 30 million people have received a first dose of

a Covid vaccine, more than half the adult population and one of the highest rates in the world.

Travel plunged during lockdown

The number of trips taken on UK roads and public transport collapsed during each lockdown, reflecting weaker economic activity as fewer people left home for work or socialising. Britain's roads were the quietist since the 1950s in the first wave, helping reduce pollution levels, while cycling boomed. International air passenger arrivals have also collapsed, down 91% in January from a year earlier. According to Apple mobility data – which records requests made to Apple Maps for directions – driving and public transport use is creeping up again, despite the continued lockdown. But with many city commuters still working from home, transit levels remain significantly below pre-pandemic levels.

Stock markets rally after worst crash on record

Global financial markets were plunged into turmoil last spring as the Covid pandemic brought western capitalism to its knees. Big landmark moves that typically take years to reach fell like dominos in a matter of hours and days, with the FTSE 100 suffering its worst day since Black Monday in 1987. On Wall Street, the pace of decline of the Dow Jones outstripped the speed of the 1929 Wall Street crash. Global central banks cut interest rates close to zero and pumped billions into the financial system using quantitative easing to restore confidence, stabilising the situation. Since then, several big indices have rallied to fresh record highs. Shares in big US tech firms have soared as the pandemic pushes more activity online, boosting the fortunes of the world's richest billionaires. However, the FTSE 100 remains about 1,000 points below its pre-pandemic peak.

Inflation drops with economy under pressure

Faltering demand for goods and services during the pandemic has depressed the rate of inflation, with the consumer prices index (CPI) falling close to zero as energy costs dropped and many firms cut their prices to entice reluctant buyers. Reflecting the collapse in demand, US oil prices turned

negative for the first time in history. With record support from governments and global central banks, economists expect inflation to rise as consumers go on a spending spree after lockdown measures are relaxed.

Unemployment rises by less than feared

The impact of Covid on the economy drove up redundancies at the fastest rate on record last year, far surpassing the damage caused by the 2008 financial crisis. Young workers, those in precarious employment, and those in hardest-hit sectors such as hospitality, bore the brunt. The unemployment rate reached 5%, representing 1.7 million people, up from 4% before the crisis struck. However, the rate fell slightly in January from 5.1%, the first decline since the pandemic started. In July last year, the Office for Budget Responsibility forecast peak unemployment of 12%, or about 4 million people. The Treasury watchdog has since downgraded its estimate to 6.5%, about 2.2 million.

Covid-19 fuels biggest peacetime government deficit

Public finances chart

The government has pumped more than £400bn into its emergency coronavirus response since the pandemic began, while tax revenues have collapsed. The UK government's budget deficit – the gap between spending and income – is on track to reach a peacetime record of £355bn this year, or 17% of GDP in the financial year ending in March. The national debt – the combined total of every deficit – has risen above £2.1tn, almost 100% of GDP, the highest level since the 1960s. However, the cost of servicing Britain's debts has plunged to historical lows. The chancellor, Rishi Sunak, plans to raise taxes and cut public spending in response. Some economists say there is no need if the economy recovers quickly, while others warn efforts to cut the deficit too soon would choke off growth.

GDP shrinks by the most since 1709

Historical GDP chart

Official figures confirmed the UK economy suffered its biggest annual decline in 300 years in 2020 but that a double-dip recession at the end of the year was avoided. The ONS said gross domestic product (GDP) fell by 9.9% in 2020, the biggest decline since the Great Frost of 1709. However, the nation has adapted to restrictions, preventing steeper falls in economic activity in the second and third lockdowns. With rapid progress administering the vaccine, the economy is forecast to return to its pre-pandemic size earlier than expected next year, but lasting scars are expected to remain.

House prices soar despite Covid recession

House price chart

Unlike previous recessions, when house prices typically track declines in economic activity, the Covid crash has been accompanied by a boom in property values. The government's stamp duty holiday has fuelled growth, as well as people reassessing where they live during lockdown and moving – looking for more space, or a home away from big city centres. The housing market is also supported by more affluent households able to save during the crisis while working from home. Meanwhile, lower-income workers have fallen behind on rent. Property industry experts have warned prices could fall after the tax break ends and as unemployment rises.

And another thing we've learned … furlough pays the wages of millions of workers

Furlough chart

The government furlough scheme, which pays 80% of a worker's wage up to £2,500 a month, has been used to protect more than 11m jobs in the UK in total since its launch last March, at a cost of more than £57bn so far. Extended by Rishi Sunak until September, the scheme has been credited with preventing a far higher surge in unemployment. Almost 9m jobs were furloughed in May last year at the peak of the first wave. Usage of the scheme then fell steadily last summer but remained above 2m when Sunak insisted furlough would end last October (before he later extended it),

driving up job losses. Furlough numbers then rose sharply in the second wave, but hit a lower peak of close to 5m, as employers adapted to lockdown. Still, about 4.7 million workers remained furloughed at the end of February, according to the latest official figures, with the highest take-up rates in London, among women and younger workers, and in the accommodation and food services sector.

Covid crisis watchEconomics

Only a large-scale skills programme can protect against Covid's fallout

Andy Haldane

Huge fiscal support has safeguarded jobs and demand, but only skills and training can prevent long-term economic scarring

- A glimmer of economic hope at the end of the tunnel
- UK economy poised to recover after Covid-19 second wave

Huge fiscal support has been needed to protect demand and jobs from the short-term effects of the Covid crisis, but even that wasn't enough to save a slew of shops from going under. Photograph: Nathan Stirk/Getty Images

Huge fiscal support has been needed to protect demand and jobs from the short-term effects of the Covid crisis, but even that wasn't enough to save a slew of shops from going under. Photograph: Nathan Stirk/Getty Images

Wed 31 Mar 2021 01.00 EDT

Keynes famously likened the economy to a piece of string which, in recessions, could not be pushed. A better economic metaphor now is that it is like a piece of elastic. Stretch it too far and the economy becomes permanently distended – so-called hysteresis.

The stretching of the economy's elastic in the first half of last year saw activity fall anywhere between 10% and 25% across the world. There are very few historical precedents of the economy being stretched quite so far, quite so fast.

Well over 100 million people lost their jobs globally, according to the International Labour Office. Many more, perhaps around a billion, saw their incomes fall. An over-stretched economy led, naturally enough, to over-stretched finances for hundreds of millions of people globally and at least 10 million people across the UK.

This Tory budget is Keynes reborn | Will Hutton
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The policy response to these events has been as dramatic, in scale and speed, as the collapse in activity and jobs. Central banks globally quickly cut short-term interest rates to around zero and provided an additional $6tn (£4.4tn) (and counting) of quantitative easing (QE) to keep borrowing costs low.

In the UK, the Bank of England's monetary policy committee (MPC) has announced more QE in the past 12 months (around £450bn) than in the preceding 12 years.

Unlike 12 years ago, however, this monetary medicine has been supplemented by a massive dose of fiscal support too. In many cases, that has amounted to anywhere between 10% and 30% of a given country's GDP. In combination, it is unlikely there has ever been a larger combined global macro-economic (fiscal and monetary) policy response. And it is not difficult to see why.

An overwhelming show of policy strength has been needed to protect demand and jobs from the near-term effects of the Covid crisis – and not just those near-term effects.

At least as important from a policy perspective was the desire to prevent any near-term hit to demand and jobs damaging the economy's supply-side potential over the medium term (the output and income it can generate when operating at full capacity).

Experience in the UK and elsewhere during the 1980s illustrated the lasting damage large recessions can inflict on the economy's potential.

If plant and machinery stands idle for too long, its usefulness depreciates and with it the economy's potential growth. And if workers lose their job and cannot find a new one, their skills and experience will depreciate too, further damaging the economy's growth prospects.

Once the recession of the early 1980s had taken UK unemployment from 1.4 million to over 3 million, it took 25 years to return it to pre-recession levels. Economists even borrowed the word "hysteresis" from physicists to describe this phenomenon. The scarring effect of that experience, financially and psychologically, has shaped public policy importantly in the period since.

At the time of the global financial crisis, macro-economic policy support was large and front-loaded to support jobs and demand and prevent the economy's elastic being over-extended.

That policy playbook has again been followed, at even greater speed and in even larger scale, during the Covid crisis. Without it, UK unemployment might already be up to 2 million higher than it now is and the longer-term scarring on livelihoods would have been that much greater.

Even with this exceptional policy support, however, the changes in behaviour and business models as a result of the Covid crisis means some jobs, regrettably, will not return. Giving displaced workers the skills they need to re-enter the workplace, and thrive in it, will be key to preventing a longer-term economic scar being left.

Even before the Covid crisis struck, about 10 million workers across the UK faced a mismatch between their skills and the requirements of their job. The

Covid crisis has added to those skills mismatches, hitting hardest the young, the least experienced and those with fewest skills.

This upgrading of skills should be easier than in the 1980s. Back then, the economy was pivoting from manufacturing to services. With many skills of these not readily transferable, this made the retraining journey a difficult one for many and increased the degree of hysteresis in the jobs market.

During the Covid crisis, it is jobs in the services sector that have been hardest hit. With service sector industries tending to grow over time, and with skills being more easily transferable within this sector, this should shorten and simplify the retraining journey for displaced workers and lower the degree of hysteresis.

Nonetheless, the scale of the skills challenge in the UK was huge pre-Covid and is larger-still now, particularly among the youngest and least-skilled. This means the risk of workers facing the jobs-equivalent of long Covid is considerable. Avoiding that chronic economic ailment will require structural, skill-focused policies, equivalent in speed and scale to the demand-side policies already put in place.

A useful down-payment on those policies has been provided in the UK, with new initiatives focused on vocational training and lifelong learning. But these will need to increase in scale, and expand in scope, to meet the skills challenge facing the UK economy and limit the long-term scarring to it.

The macro-economic policy response so far – large-scale, sure-footed and front-loaded – has reduced significantly the risk of hysteresis. But the only way of immunising against economic long Covid will be through a skills programme every bit as large-scale, sure-footed and front-loaded.

Andy Haldane is the Bank of England's chief economist

Animals farmedLive exports

How nearly 3,000 cattle came to be stranded at sea for three months

After being refused entry to several countries on health grounds, the surviving animals were ordered back to Spain for slaughter

Read more: Stranded cattle ship ordered to dock in Spain after ‘hellish’ three months at sea

A crane moves a container next to the livestock ship Karim Allah at Escombreras port in Cartagena, Spain, on 27 February. Photograph: Juan Medina/Reuters

A crane moves a container next to the livestock ship Karim Allah at Escombreras port in Cartagena, Spain, on 27 February. Photograph: Juan Medina/Reuters

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About this content
Sophie Kevany
Wed 31 Mar 2021 02.00 EDT

After more than three months stranded in the Mediterranean, the surviving bulls onboard a livestock ship were humanely slaughtered by the Spanish authorities in Cartagena on Sunday. An official Spanish veterinary report described dire conditions onboard the Elbeik, on which 179 bulls had already died.

The Elbeik and a second livestock ship, the Karim Allah, had been refused entry to multiple countries on health grounds. We look back on the events that shaped this "hellish ride".

18 December 2020
Two livestock ships, the Karim Allah and the Elbeik, leave Spain bound for Turkey loaded with young Spanish bulls. The Karim Allah departs from the port of Cartagena carrying almost 900 animals and the Elbeik leaves from Tarragona with nearly 1,800.

27-29 December

The Karim Allah arrives in Turkey on 27 December and the Elbeik on 29 December. Both ships are refused entry due to fears the bulls may be infected with a bovine disease called bluetongue. The shippers blame a mistake on health certificates issued by Spain's agriculture ministry; the ministry denies this. On 1 January, the Karim Allah leaves the Turkish port of İskenderun and the Elbeik leaves from another Turkish port, Derince.

6 January
The Karim Allah arrives in the Libyan port of Tripoli on 6 January and departs again on 9 January with all the bulls on board, after being refused permission to unload.

9 January
The Elbeik arrives in Tripoli on 9 January and leaves again on 25 January, after also being refused permission to unload. The ship's next port of call is Alexandria, Egypt, arriving on 1 February and leaving on 4 February.

27 January
The Karim Allah reaches the Italian port of Augusta, Sicily, and leaves again on 29 January.

Timeline for stranded cattle

19 February
The Karim Allah arrives in Sardinian waters near the port of Cagliari. On the same day, the Elbeik anchors off the coast of northern Cyprus, near the port of Famagusta. Animal welfare organisations call for vets to visit the ships. Cypriot vets are placed on standby to check the animals but neither ship approaches or requests veterinary assistance.

22 February
The Karim Allah returns to waters near Cartagena, Spain, but does not enter. The shippers plan to have the cattle's blood tested and, if the animals are cleared of any disease risk, to re-export them. The shipper says the Spanish agriculture ministry has said the animals "face immediate slaughter" if the ship docks.

25 February

The Spanish agriculture ministry's deadline for the Karim Allah to slaughter its cattle expires. A legal tussle ensues as the shippers try to block an official Spanish slaughter order.

00:40

Hundreds of calves stranded at sea due to suspected disease – video

26 February
An official Spanish vet report dated 26 February finds 22 of the Karim Allah bulls died at sea, with two corpses still on board. The report notes that other corpses were chopped up and thrown overboard during the journey. It concludes that the animals suffered from the lengthy journey, were generally unwell and not fit for transport outside the EU, nor should they be allowed into the EU for disease-control reasons. Euthanasia would be the best solution, it says. The report does not say if the cattle have bluetongue, but it notes a range of other skin, eye and leg conditions including alopecia, flaking, scabs and joint inflammation compatible with septic arthritis.

6 March
The legal tussle ends and the slaughter of the Karim Allah bulls by Spanish officials begins on 6 March. By 9 March, all the Karim Allah bulls are dead.

EU revealed to be world's biggest live animal exporter
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18 March
Under orders from Spanish officials, the Elbeik finally returns to port in Cartagena three months after it left Spain, following stops near Cyprus, in Greece, to stock up on supplies, and off the coast of Menorca.

19 March
Spanish veterinary officials complete and sign a report describing dire welfare conditions onboard the Elbeik. The report cites the Elbeik's captain as saying that, of the 1,789 bulls originally loaded, 179 died during the journey. The bodies were chopped up and thrown overboard. Ten other carcasses were also found on board, the report says, and of the remaining animals, some are dying, while others are starving and extremely dehydrated. In some pens, it notes, "the crew had placed fodder in the corral

in a way that the starving animals were forced to eat on the corpses of their companions". The urine and manure buildup covers the animals' hooves, it says, leaving them without dry areas to lie down.

22 March
A separate veterinary inspection, conducted on behalf of the Elbeik cattle owners, found that only 136 of the bulls required immediate euthanasia. The rest, it said, could recover after a period of rest and adequate feeding if cleared of the risk of bluetongue or other diseases.

28 March
The last of 1,610 surviving bulls from the Elbeik are slaughtered in the port of Cartagena. Spain's agriculture ministry says it has forwarded the veterinary report to the public prosecutor on the basis that "the facts described therein could constitute indications of a possible offence in relation to the current legislation on animal welfare". The cattle owner, who does not wish to be named, has disputed the findings of the report.

Arrival and departure times for the Elbeik and the Karim Allah were supplied by Marine Traffic.

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Culture in perilGlastonbury festival

Glastonbury live-stream festival: Coldplay, Michael Kiwanuka and Haim to perform

Damon Albarn, Idles, Jorja Smith, Kano, Wolf Alice and Honey Dijon will also appear at Live at Worthy Farm, a ticketed virtual event on 22 May

‘We wanted to capture that feeling of the emergence of hope of the summer ahead’ ... (L-R) Este Haim, Chris Martin, Michael Kiwanuka. Composite: Getty, PA

‘We wanted to capture that feeling of the emergence of hope of the summer ahead’ ... (L-R) Este Haim, Chris Martin, Michael Kiwanuka. Composite: Getty, PA

Laura Snapes
Wed 31 Mar 2021 02.50 EDT

The organisers of Glastonbury have announced that Coldplay, Damon Albarn, Haim, Idles, Jorja Smith, Kano, Michael Kiwanuka and Wolf Alice will perform at Live at Worthy Farm, a ticketed live-stream event to be broadcast on 22 May.

The five-hour film, directed by Grammy-nominated film-maker Paul Dugdale, will be presented as an uninterrupted production, tracing the arc of what festival co-organiser Emily Eavis called “one continuous wild night” at the festival, via festival landmarks including the Pyramid stage, the stone circle and the notorious south-east nightclubbing corner.

The event will be broadcast in full across four different time zones, with tickets costing £20 and an unlimited capacity. “We always try to keep the ticket price down,” said Eavis. “Some people said, ‘You could charge £60.’ We were like, no. For a while we thought we could do it for free. But actually, we do need to have a ticket price and £20 seems really reasonable for that many acts.”

Glastonbury lost £5m from having to cancel in 2020. This year’s cancellation came earlier, significantly lessening the losses. “We know we’re not going to recoup £5m, obviously, but we will be able to make a bit back,” said Eavis.

Staging Live at Worthy Farm will “cost a lot of money”, she said. “I can’t give an exact figure because we’re not even there yet, but I think we’ll be able to make a significant donation to the festival pot and to our charities, so that’s really all that matters.”

The performers, also including DJ Honey Dijon, waived their fees. “We were in the very fortunate position of being approached by a few people offering their support or help if we did something,” said Eavis.

“It’s important for me to support Glastonbury because it’s been such a landmark event since I’ve been alive or indeed been playing my music,” Michael Kiwanuka told the Guardian. “It’s something that brings people together for all the right reasons, but primarily as a celebration of live music.”

“In all honesty there probably isn’t a lot that Wolf Alice wouldn’t do for Glastonbury,” said the band’s drummer Joel Amey. “We’ve had the best times both there and at the Pilton Party, and we’re so excited to be involved in this one.”

In addition to Live at Worthy Farm, the Glastonbury organisers are still planning to open a family campsite on the site this summer, and hoping to stage an event for the public in September. Greater certainty on the the latter would happen in May, said Eavis. “We’re hoping that the UK festival scene will be bouncing back in August, but we have to take it step by step.”

Live at Worthy Farm trailer – video

The idea of staging a live-streamed event on site arose last March as the pandemic hit. “One of the things that we get asked the most about is getting an insight into seeing the farm,” said Eavis. “The idea started forming of bands performing in some of the areas that are most recognisable during festival time, but surrounded by nature, immersed in the depths of the Somerset countryside.”

While planning is ongoing, she confirmed that Albarn would perform in the festival’s famous stone circle at sunset, while Block9, the artists behind much of the festival’s late-night clubbing zones, would stage Honey Dijon’s sets in the south-east corner. Other surprises will include poets delivering a spoken-word narrative to link the musical performances, along with rappers, magicians and visual installations.

Glastonbury usually takes place close to the summer solstice. While the Live at Worthy Farm date has no specific pagan resonance, Eavis said they chose late Spring to celebrate a sense of rebirth. “In May, the farm is buzzing with life, the hedgerows are full of cow parsley and wild garlic. Everything is bouncing back and what we wanted to capture is that feeling of the emergence of hope of the summer ahead. Coming out of this really horrific time of Covid, bridging [the gap] between people being allowed out en masse at the end of June.”

Compared with the festival’s usual 210,000-capacity scale, planning a comparatively small-scale event had allowed the festival organisers to take a more “interactive” role, said Eavis, particularly regarding how to shape a performance while “taking away the wall of the audience”.

“I love the creative element of the festival, bringing together different collaborations and things like that. But on a huge scale, you spend your year curating an event that you don’t really see anything of and you rely completely on feedback. This [year] is really us delivering a film to the public, so that people can get a different insight and view, follow this story and see the farm as they’ve never seen it.”

Dawn at the stone circle during Glastonbury festival, 26 June 2017. Photograph: David Levene/the Guardian

Proceeds from a limited edition lineup poster will benefit Stagehand, the charity helping live music crew members who have not been able to access government financial support during the pandemic. Getting staff and crew back on the site had been revitalising, said Eavis. “Everyone was really, really happy to be back. The UK needs festivals, we need to get everything going. So doing something on the ground and using crew that have been basically redundant, it’s a good feeling.”

'I got a job on a fishing trawler' – Covid: one year on, stars of music and theatre look back
Read more

She said they were considering a competition for some members of the public to attend the live-stream recordings, or for local NHS staff to attend, depending on Covid restrictions come May.

The Glastonbury team had been participating in Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport steering committees with doctors and scientists regarding the future of live music events, said Eavis. “We’re the biggest [festival] so we are by far the hardest to get back. Anything up to 100,000 is

much more manageable in terms of safety. We also have the largest demographic – lots of young people and lots of older people. So it's all working out what's possible."

She revealed that they had confirmed all three headliners for 2022, but couldn't say whether any of 2020's planned main draws, Taylor Swift, Paul McCartney and Kendrick Lamar, would return. "It would be too easy to work out who it is. It's looking like a different lineup, but there will be some crossover."

When Glastonbury returns in full, Eavis said she would remain committed to achieving gender equality on the festival's lineup, as she has previously pledged. A recent wave of UK festival announcements for summer 2021 was criticised for heavily weighting male performers. "It's not an accident any more, it's a statement of exclusion," Maxie Gedge of Keychange, the PRS Foundation's initiative encouraging music festivals to commit to balanced lineups, told the Guardian.

"We've managed to do it with our live stream, it's not actually that hard," said Eavis. "I'm not targeting any particular festivals here, but if you book with [gender equality] in the back of the mind, you can actually design a lineup that works for men and women in equal parts. It's not rocket science. People talk about it like it's this really cryptic, impossible thing to work out. Guys, I'll help! Ask! I'll send them some suggestions."

She reiterated her previous call for "the whole industry to get on board" to solve the problem. "It's not just the live sector, it needs to go right back to playlisting, radio, signings with labels. It's a much bigger issue. But it's not hard, I promise you. Sometimes we have less female acts, sometimes we have more. It doesn't have to be bang on 50-50. But just make a bit of an effort."

Spotlight onStage

Jessica Hung Han Yun: a designer tripping the light fantastic

The bright mind who lit up Blindness at the Donmar and the National Theatre's panto approaches each job like a mystery

'People think of failure as negative. It's not' ... Jessica Hung Han Yun. Photograph: Morgan Eglin

'People think of failure as negative. It's not' ... Jessica Hung Han Yun. Photograph: Morgan Eglin

Arifa Akbar
@Arifa_Akbar
Wed 31 Mar 2021 02.00 EDT

After Jessica Hung Han Yun's first professional gig as a lighting designer, she seriously considered leaving the industry. It was Tosca at the King's Head theatre in London in 2017. "I remember feeling like I hadn't done this show justice but I couldn't figure out why. At that point I wasn't confident in myself so I wasn't confident in my ideas. I wanted to try things but was too scared to try them so I went for a safer option."

That taught her an important lesson: "to be brave in the way you design and the way you approach work." If you fail, she adds, there is always another way of approaching lighting. "People always think of failure as negative. It's not, it's also positive because you learn from it." Since that moment, Hung Han Yun has gone out of her way to take risks. At 27, she has already won huge acclaim for the imagination and beauty of her designs.

Zachary Hing and Gabby Wong in Pah-La at the Royal Court in 2019. Photograph: Tristram Kenton/the Guardian

She discovered her love of lighting accidentally at school in Essex. “I decided to take GSCE drama because I thought it would be easy to pass and I wasn’t any good at other subjects. Then I did it and I thought: ‘Oh god I’ve got bad stage fright and I can’t act!’”

It was when a school technician, Pete, suggested she try her hand at sound or lighting that she felt an instant click: “I thought ‘Whoa, this is so much fun.’ I felt like I was painting with light. Until then, I had thought of lighting as functional. I didn’t think it could tell a story or evoke so much emotion. Pete really taught me how to appreciate it.”

She went on to Rose Bruford College and graduated with a degree in lighting design in 2014, followed by a couple of years of working in retail and then travelling before following her passion in earnest. Hung Han Yun, who is of Chinese Mauritian heritage, grew up in Essex where her father worked two jobs, seven days a week, while her mother raised four children. She was not taken to the theatre as a child and had no shortcuts into the industry.

Blindness at the Donmar Warehouse. Photograph: Helen Maybanks

“I was applying for arts jobs every day. It was hard to get into the industry because I wasn’t sure who to contact or how to let people know I was out there. Then I did a show called Nine Foot Nine at the Bunker theatre and it snowballed. It went to Edinburgh and round the same time I did an immersive circus piece at the Vaults.”

Excelling quickly, she worked on some of the most daring and politically charged shows of recent years including Fairview, Pah-La and Seven Methods of Killing Kylie Jenner. She draws inspiration from films and from installation artists such as James Turrell and Olafur Eliasson but her starting point is always her own emotional response to the script.

Amy Booth-Steel in Dick Whittington at the National Theatre. Photograph: Tristram Kenton/The Guardian

The pandemic temporarily halted Hung Han Yun's work – and also brought anxieties on how to survive. She struggled to pay the rent, went on universal credit and began calculating how long her savings would last until she was forced to take a temporary job in another field. Then, she was asked to work on Blindness, at the Donmar Warehouse, arguably the most accomplished production of the pandemic, which was as much a light and sound installation as a play. "I was so grateful to be working and I put pressure on myself because I wanted to do it for everyone in the industry, to show we could come back and come back stronger."

More recently, she designed the lighting for the Orange Tree's show Inside, live-streamed from the venue under socially distanced conditions. It's amazing to be back, she says, and has reminded her how much she loves the collaboration and camaraderie of it all.

Later this year, she will work on Anna X, a play by Joseph Charlton starring Emma Corrin, to be staged as part of the Re:Emerge season in the West End. "I'm really excited about the creative team and the narrative of the story. If I read something and think 'I don't know how you would stage this', it's like a mystery and I want to find out more, to explore it and see what I can do."

From the CV

Ira Mandela Siobhan and Ethan Kai in Equus, Theatre Royal Stratford East, 2019. Photograph: Richard Davenport/The Other Richard

2021: Inside, Orange Tree theatre, London

2021: The Band Plays On, Sheffield Crucible

2020: Dick Whittington, National Theatre, London

2020: Blindness, Donmar Warehouse, London

2019: Fairview, Young Vic, London

2019: Equus, Theatre Royal Stratford East, London

2019: Seven Methods of Killing Kylie Jenner, Royal Court, London

2019: Dear Elizabeth, Gate theatre, London

2019: Pah-La, Royal Court, London

2018: Hive City Legacy, Roundhouse, London

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Seascape: the state of our oceansShipping industry

Who pays for Suez blockage? Ever Given grounding could spark years of litigation

Ship likely to be centre of protracted legal battle over what caused it to run aground in the Suez and who is to blame

A man waves the Egyptian flag after the Ever Given was dislodged. It caused an estimated £7bn daily loss in trade and cost the Suez canal up to £10.9m a day. Photograph: Suez Canal Authority/Getty

A man waves the Egyptian flag after the Ever Given was dislodged. It caused an estimated £7bn daily loss in trade and cost the Suez canal up to £10.9m a day. Photograph: Suez Canal Authority/Getty

Seascape: the state of our oceans is supported by

About this content

Ruth Michaelson and *Michael Safi*

Tue 30 Mar 2021 12.06 EDT

After hauling its 220,000-ton bulk down the Suez canal a week after blocking the essential waterway, the Ever Given container ship is likely to become the centre of a protracted battle over who will pay for its rescue.

The 400-metre-long vessel was aground on the banks of the Suez canal for a week, causing an estimated £7bn loss each day in trade owing to ships stuck on either side, and up to £10.9m a day for the canal. "We managed to refloat the ship in record time. If such a crisis had occurred anywhere else in the world, it would have taken three months to be solved," said Osama Rabie, the head of the Suez Canal Authority (SCA).

But questions about who will walk the plank financially are likely to entangle insurers and investigators, possibly for years. Investigators boarded the ship, now at anchor in the nearby Great Bitter Lake, on Tuesday, to find answers on what caused the grounding and who is ultimately responsible.

How a full moon and a 'huge lever' helped free Ever Given from Suez canal
Read more

The Ever Given's technical operator, Bernhard Schulte Shipmanagement (BSM), has repeatedly blamed strong winds. "Initial investigations rule out any mechanical or engine failure as a cause of the grounding," it said. Observers pointed to the "sail effect", when containers piled high on top of a large vessel are more susceptible to strong winds.

Others have disagreed, with reports including that the Ever Given lost power. The SCA said initially the ship lost the ability to be steered in high winds and a dust storm, although Rabie later added that "technical or human errors" may be to blame.

The Japanese firm Shoei Kisen Kaisha, which owns the Ever Given, apologised for the "tremendous worry" caused to other vessels stuck in the canal.

Sal Mercogliano, a former merchant mariner, a maritime historian and associate professor at Campbell University in North Carolina, said conflicting reports about the reasons behind the grounding were related to who was ultimately held responsible.

"If it was a mechanical or a human error, then all of a sudden BSM and [the Taiwanese operator] Evergreen Marine become responsible," he said. But, he added, "if there was a danger of wind, the [canal] pilots shouldn't have brought the Ever Given into the canal. That's on the pilots to bring her in. Remember, she was only in the canal for about five miles when this happened. She had just started her voyage." The SCA's rules, however, state that the vessel is "wholly responsible" for any damage, unless the ship's operators can prove it occurred by accident.

James Davey, of Southampton University's Institute of Maritime Law, categorised five potential areas of litigation: damage to the vessel; damage to its cargo; the cost of the refloating and salvage operation; the SCA's financial losses including damage to the canal itself; and losses to the other delayed vessels.

Ever Given graphic

“The cost of refloating and salvage is likely to be enormous,” he said, adding it would probably be shared between the insurers of the ship and of the cargo. There was also the extremely expensive question of who would foot the bill for damage to the canal itself. “Because there are hundreds of millions of pounds involved, this will take a long time,” he said.

The law firm Clyde & Co estimated that the Ever Given may be worth up to $110m, while the value of the cargo could stretch to another $500m. “This case may well involve the largest salved fund of any container ship casualty to date,” it said.

Capt Jamil Sayegh, a former master mariner now with the Lloyd’s agency in Beirut, said the ship’s captain was unlikely to face criminal responsibility, but could be liable if he were found to have been negligent. He said the future of the Ever Given would be one of complicated overlapping legal battles, where each of the 20,000 containers on board the ship could have eight or nine different interests, in addition to the $9.6bn (£6.994bn) of cargo on the 300 waiting vessels. Fitch Ratings called it a “large loss event for the reinsurance industry”.

Sayegh said the grounding would be a case study – “a lot of litigation will follow”. Most third-party claims were expected to fall to the Ever Given’s insurer, the UK Protection and Indemnity Club, which said this week that “all valid claims will be considered by the vessel owner, the UK Club and its legal advisers in due course”.

The result could mean tens of billions of dollars and years of litigation. Sayegh said the firm “has busy years ahead, and so do maritime lawyers”.

2021.03.31 - Opinion

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OpinionBoris Johnson

How did the man with no self-control swallow the words 'Barnard Castle'?

Marina Hyde

Standing in his god-awful new briefing room, Boris Johnson restrained himself from naming the new location for bottling Covid vaccines

The prime minister holds a virtual press conference on coronavirus. ‘The new briefing room is, I’m afraid, absolutely gopping.’ Photograph: WPA/Getty Images

The prime minister holds a virtual press conference on coronavirus. ‘The new briefing room is, I’m afraid, absolutely gopping.’ Photograph: WPA/Getty Images

Tue 30 Mar 2021 10.09 EDT

How did he do it? How, in the name of everything he takes unseriously, did Boris Johnson announce that up to 60m doses of the Novavax vaccine will be bottled and finished by GlaxoSmithKline, but somehow stop himself looking straight down the camera to add: “And they’ll do it at their plant in … [Roger Moore-style eyebrow raise] … Barnard Castle”? There are few scarcer commodities than Johnsonian self-control, but having overcome that particular urge, the prime minister now surely has no personal restraint left for the rest of the year. Lock up your infosec entrepreneurs, parents.

Still, Barnard Castle: but OF COURSE. Of course they’ll do it there. Like some avenging good news bear, Johnson seems to be on the kind of roll that could see him exorcise the unfavourable connotations of every accursed site in his back catalogue. He’s going to find 40m doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine down the back of the sofa on which he shagged Jennifer

Arcuri 10 minutes before his former wife got home. He's going to dispense single shots of it from behind the bar where Matt Hancock was pictured posing with the publican turned PPE supplier who WhatsApped the health secretary the words, "Matt Hancock – never heard of him". He's going to lift up the bullwhip on Gavin Williamson's desk and discover beneath it a portal to the resting place of the holy grail. He's going to announce that the lost original crown jewels of England have been traced and found after 800 years by a complete amateur. "And the name of that complete amateur? [Roger Moore eyebrow] … Dido Harding."

And so to Johnson's first outing in his government's new briefing room, which I'm afraid is absolutely gopping. Not only was the previous wood-panelled location far smarter, but the party of business seems to have been completely rinsed for their £2.6m. It looks like it cost about what a leading public school would spend on the set for a sixth-form play about a man who becomes prime minister. Which I suppose is what we're watching.

The podium Johnson took last night will most frequently be the domain of his press secretary, Allegra Stratton, whose televised briefings apparently begin in May. Yesterday, she could still be found backstage in Downing Street, batting away the implications of the latest revelation of his four-year affair with Jennifer Arcuri. (Has any story ever been sensationally "revealed" more frequently? I feel even more up to speed on this particular background than I do on what happened to Batman's parents.)

"He does believe in the wider principles of integrity and honesty," ran Stratton's official verdict on Boris Johnson, one of the leading liars of the age. "He acts with integrity and is honest." To which the most seemly reply is: LOLOLOLOLOL. Or as his press secretary preferred it yesterday: "Of course the prime minister follows the Nolan principles when conducting himself in public life." OK but which Nolan – Christopher? I guess there are thematic consistencies between the prime minister and the movie director's oeuvre. Both would very much like you to believe there's no such thing as objective truth, and that after a while, the audience will simply lack the energy to understand or argue with what they're watching.

Perhaps that's what has happened during the pandemic. It is impossible to read Failures of State, the frequently jaw-dropping book by Sunday Times

journalists Jonathan Calvert and George Arbuthnott, and not conclude that the British people deserved far, far better from the government. Yet its deeply healthy approval ratings suggest that people didn't think they did. That is a tragedy in its own way, though not for the Johnson administration. It is, of course, hugely encouraging news for a cabinet of this calibre that people expect to be governed badly – indeed, are taken to approve of it.

What the people got from the government was the highest death toll in Europe and the worst economic hit, with the serial belatedness of our lockdowns meaning we endured our losses of freedom for far longer than would otherwise have been necessary. So yes, we can all see why Johnson would wish to place himself front and centre of his briefing room folly on the sunny day on which these very lengthy restrictions began to be very slightly lifted.

But I can't think of anything more beaten than being GRATEFUL to the guy who had us locked down far longer than we might otherwise have been. Our own rights are now being graciously sold back to us by Johnson, far more expensively than they should have been. I would fall back on the idiom that if you believe he's done a good job, then I have a bridge to sell you – except, of course, Boris Johnson does always literally have a bridge to sell to you.

And for all my genuine relief and delight at being able to do things taken for granted for the entire rest of my life, I honestly couldn't be more bored with hearing, from Johnson, that he's done his best. And? I should hope you have done your best, prime minister. What do you want – a participation medal?

Having had to live with the calamitously bullish version of Johnson for most of the pandemic, we're now stuck with this equally needy data shagger. I imagine it's rather similar to being Johnson's partner over the period of an infidelity, followed by its discovery and aftermath. You think nothing could be worse than the cavalier, exuberant, secretive Johnson – until you're stuck at home with the dreary, careful, performatively penitent Johnson, forever inviting you to check his phone just to be sure.

As usual, he won't be able to suppress himself for long. Indeed, the ongoing revelations about David Cameron's prime ministerial afterlife as a high-level lobbyist for collapsed financial service firm Greensill have had me

wondering just what a clusterfuck Johnson's post-prime ministerial career will be. Can you imagine the japes once Johnson – forever whining about money – moves into this restraint-free zone? Today's FT reports that Cameron's search for the big bucks saw him private-jetted to Saudi Arabia early last year, where he and CEO Lex Greensill took a camping trip with none other than cuddly Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

Cameron refuses even to take calls on this, needless to say, while Johnson himself was not even asked yesterday about the implications of Arcuri's revelations. But then, public life isn't what it was. Nobody at the top seems to see it as anything much more than a game to which any number of moral failings have been "priced in". Nobody resigns any more, nobody says sorry any more, and nobody really needs to take anyone's calls any more. You can see why people have learned not to expect better. It saves time.

Marina Hyde is a Guardian columnist

Guardian Opinion cartoon
Boris Johnson

Steve Bell on Boris Johnson's new £2.6m press briefing room – cartoon

OpinionMarketing & PR

Prince William is not the world's sexiest bald man – but the 'study' that says he is raises a vital issue

Arwa Mahdawi

Pretty much every year there is a viral story based on statistics generated for PR purposes. They show just how quick and easy it is to disseminate junk science

Prince William ... sexier than Stanley Tucci? Photograph: Aaron Chown/AFP/Getty Images

Prince William ... sexier than Stanley Tucci? Photograph: Aaron Chown/AFP/Getty Images

Wed 31 Mar 2021 02.00 EDT

There are lies, there are damned lies, and then there's a viral statistic claiming Prince William is the sexiest bald man in the world. Over the past few days the internet has been losing its head over a headline-grabbing "study" claiming the hairless heir is more attractive than Stanley Tucci and Vin Diesel. Who on earth could be behind that startling conclusion?

The answer is not, as some people wondered, Buckingham Palace's PR department. Rather, the study was run by a medical tourism facilitator that connects UK patients with hair transplant surgeons in Turkey. Creating dubious surveys designed to generate headline-friendly results that get your company's name in the news is a bog-standard PR technique. (I have shamelessly been attempting to coin the term "advertistics" to describe the practice, but, alas, it hasn't stuck.) Pretty much every year there is a viral story based on a "study" that turns out to be complete nonsense. You might remember, for example, when a number of reputable newspapers claimed that 7% of US adults think chocolate milk comes from brown cows. This

was very much a case of fake moos. The survey, commissioned by the US National Dairy Council, was worded so nobody would be able to answer the question “where does chocolate milk come from” accurately.

Manipulating survey questions so they generate the result you want is something of a dark art. It may be morally suspect, but I can respect the craft behind it. So I’m disappointed to report that the hair transplant people didn’t put the slightest bit of effort into making their study seem credible. It seems someone just Googled “sexy” next to a bald man’s name and looked at how many results came up. If you Google my name next to “billionaire genius”, 22,100 results come up; that doesn’t mean I’m a billionaire. Anyway, despite the obvious flaws in the methodology, the Sun picked up the story and a number of other outlets followed suit.

Of course, while this particular study was obviously nonsense, it was harmless nonsense. The real issue here isn’t Prince William’s head, but how easy it is to disseminate junk science in the media. Of the bald men I surveyed, 92% agree.

- Arwa Mahdawi is a Guardian columnist

OpinionLocal elections

It should be Super Thursday for voters – but not while London holds the reins

Rafael Behr

Local and mayoral elections feel all too ceremonial, because real power always seems to lie elsewhere

‘Andy Burnham, in Greater Manchester, and Sadiq Khan, above, are more substantial figures in the Labour firmament than anyone in the shadow cabinet, apart from Keir Starmer.’ Photograph: Aaron Chown/PA

‘Andy Burnham, in Greater Manchester, and Sadiq Khan, above, are more substantial figures in the Labour firmament than anyone in the shadow cabinet, apart from Keir Starmer.’ Photograph: Aaron Chown/PA

Wed 31 Mar 2021 02.00 EDT

Opinion polls are a useful guide to the political mood, but opinion is all they capture. Real votes cast in ballot boxes provide a different quality of information. For election nerds, 2020 was a data drought, but rains are coming.

On 6 May a slew of ballots deferred because of the pandemic will be held alongside the scheduled 2021 batch. Every voter in England, Scotland and Wales is invited to a polling station, although the contests are not of equal consequence. Nicola Sturgeon’s position at Holyrood matters more than Tory control of Solihull. In parts of England, only the local police and crime commissioner post is up for grabs.

There is also a byelection for the parliamentary seat of Hartlepool. Already that contest is attracting disproportionate media interest. The result will

probably be the subject of more Westminster commentary than the distribution of seats in the Cardiff Senedd. There is familiar Westminster folklore attached: the apocryphal tale of Peter Mandelson, former MP for the seat, mistaking mushy peas for guacamole. There are no funny avocado-related pegs on which to hang the Welsh parliament, just the banal fact of it being the seat of government for a devolved nation of 3.1 million people.

That is because the byelection comes as a flatpack political story: safe Labour seat turned marginal by Brexit; loose brick in the "red wall" that might yet be dislodged.

Sadiq Khan's bid to retain the London mayoralty will also get ample media coverage. The competition isn't close but it is in the capital, where most people who make the news have a vote.

British politics is heavily weighted to London. That brings a particular kind of cosmopolitan narrow-mindedness that thinks it is immune to parochialism because it looks out from a global hub. Even when ministers know there is a problem of excessive centralisation, they reach for patrician solutions. They offer to lift benighted provinces with gifts from the metropolis – a Treasury satellite for Darlington; a stretch of Whitehall transplanted to Wolverhampton.

That power imbalance causes all kinds of problems. A recent report by the Institute for Government identified failure to coordinate with local authorities as a significant cause of error in managing the pandemic. The report's authors found the relationship marked by "bitterness" and "suspicion". One of their sources highlights a "disgraceful, patronising view of local government" as incapable and inexperienced.

Relations with devolved administrations were also tense, but for more partisan reasons. Boris Johnson's Downing Street takes Nicola Sturgeon seriously enough, but that doesn't make the dialogue more constructive or respectful.

These are old problems. Historically, local government faced a catch-22 situation. The power and prestige that came with the job were not sufficient to attract impressive candidates; the low calibre of candidates justified

central government's reluctance to bestow more powers and thereby bolster the prestige. That is now (mostly) an outdated prejudice, but Whitehall attitudes are slow to adapt.

How did the man with no self-control swallow the words 'Barnard Castle'? | Marina Hyde
Read more

Even when the agenda is "levelling up", the mechanism is to cordon off a heap of cash in the Treasury and invite regional leaders to make their case, while making sure that Tories on electoral target lists jump the queue.

Few top-ranking national politicians do an apprenticeship on their local council. Youthful ambition is satisfied quicker as a special adviser, although the skill sets thus acquired are different. Councillors often have to build coalitions with rivals. Spads learn how to undermine and destroy.

Johnson blazed a trail by reaching Downing Street by way of London's City Hall, although it was the glamour of the capital that appealed. (It is doubtful he would have run for mayor of the West Midlands combined authority, had the role existed at the time.)

Other high-profile mayoralties are exerting political gravity. Andy Burnham, in Greater Manchester, and Khan are more substantial figures in the Labour firmament than anyone in the shadow cabinet, apart from Keir Starmer. Both mayors communicate more freely and more convincingly than they did as MPs. It is as if their throats are clearer and the devolved air easier to breathe than the stale Commons atmosphere. Bristol's Marvin Rees also speaks with refreshing natural authority.

Andy Street, the Conservative mayor of the West Midlands, has had less impact for various reasons. He is not a colourful speaker. A duty of loyalty to Downing Street means fewer opportunities to stand out by standing up for the region. If Street loses to Liam Byrne in May (and the race is tight) it will be interesting to see if opposition control raises the height of the mayoral platform.

Not all metro mayors have the same powers. The system has evolved by a convoluted trail of negotiation, legislation, stitch-up and referendum. It is a weird constitutional patchwork. There are four different types of mayor in England. In Liverpool, one mayoral job (running the city council) is vacant because the incumbent was arrested in connection with allegations of systemic corruption. But another mayor (for the city *region*) is not embroiled in the scandal and is running for re-election.

There is an unresolved question about the very basis on which power should be distributed – geography or identity? Scots feel more intensely Scottish than West Midlanders feel West Midlandish. But meeting a historical claim to self-determination is a different challenge to deciding at what level public services should be run. The devolution debate tangles the two issues.

Following lines of jurisdiction can feel like analysing structures in the Soviet Union, with its semi-autonomous regions within provinces within republics. In reality, power was transmitted down from the Kremlin along party lines.

The difference is that Britain has a multiparty democracy. The votes cast on 6 May will count. Local regimes will change. And yet there will also be a gap between the scale of the electoral event and its impact. In a less centralised system and a less parochial political culture, it would be Super Thursday: an occasion when the country wielded the power of the ballot box. Instead it will be another one of those days when millions of trips to the polling station feel all too ceremonial, because real power is somehow always elsewhere.

- Rafael Behr is a Guardian columnist

OpinionRape and sexual assault

If we're urging girls to report rape in schools, we need to fix the legal system

Joan Smith

Rape and serious sexual assault are the only crimes where victims, not the likely perpetrators, are treated with suspicion

Protest against violence against women and new proposed police powers, London, 15 March, 2021. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

Protest against violence against women and new proposed police powers, London, 15 March, 2021. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

Tue 30 Mar 2021 11.41 EDT

Suddenly everyone is talking about a “rape culture” in schools. Not for the first time, it has to be said, but influential MPs, headteachers and senior police officers are urging anyone who has been attacked to report their experiences. “Every victim who comes forward will be believed, will be

listened to and dealt with sensitively," according to Simon Bailey, the national police lead for child protection. Really?

I don't doubt that "rape culture" exists within schools, or that some headteachers have been reluctant to confront it. At meetings of the mayor of London's Violence Against Women and Girls Board, we have heard anecdotal evidence about schools where girls wear shorts under uniform skirts to protect themselves from sexual assault. But there is nothing unique about what happens in educational settings. It reflects what is happening in the wider world, where the stark fact is that very few sexual predators face any form of justice.

Official figures tell the story: on average, about 1,060 women report a rape to the police in England and Wales each week. Only 40 of those rapes will lead to a prosecution, and about 27 will end in a conviction. More than 1,000 men a week are getting away with rape, in other words, and that's only the cases known to the police. Many more go unreported, never featuring in the statistics.

When public figures urge girls to report rape, they should be honest about the fact that they are directing victims into a completely broken system; rape has all but been decriminalised, encouraging a culture of impunity among perpetrators. Hardly any rapists end up in prison, so what do they have to fear?

The government is poised to publish the latest in a long line of reviews of what's gone wrong with rape investigations, but I could have saved it the trouble. Rape and serious sexual assault are the only crimes where it is victims, not the likely perpetrators, who are treated with suspicion. When a rape inquiry opens, police focus on complainants, making incredibly intrusive inquiries into their previous history. Girls who may now be thinking of going to the police need to know they will probably be asked to hand over their mobile phones, even if they contain intimate photos and messages, and to provide access to school and medical records.

Cases often collapse as a result: say a girl accuses boy X of rape, and detectives find a jokey text message from three months ago telling a friend she fancies X. Understanding of consent is so poor that it will be treated as

undermining the credibility of her complaint, even though we are all entitled to change our minds about whether to have sex with someone, especially if the other party is rough or threatening.

There are now more than 8,000 posts on the Everyone's Invited website, but it does not seem likely that they will change this atmosphere of corrosive distrust towards victims. Bailey's statement that girls who come forward will be believed is hard to square with pronouncements from the country's most senior police officer, the Metropolitan police commissioner, Cressida Dick, who in 2018 reversed her force's policy of believing individuals who report rape.

It was national policy at the time, adopted in 2011 after an outcry over the impunity Jimmy Savile enjoyed in his lifetime. But then the Metropolitan police were severely criticised over the way they handled Operation Midland, the disastrous inquiry into a nonexistent paedophile ring at Westminster. The complainant was a male fantasist, quite unlike most rape victims, and he subsequently went to prison for perverting the course of justice.

Dick's kneejerk response was to tell her officers to have an "open mind" when they hear a rape allegation. She also made remarks that don't bode well for girls weighing up whether to report attacks at school: "Speaking as a cop, opposed to a citizen, I'm interested in crime. If it's a long time ago, or it's very trivial, or I'm not likely to get a criminal justice outcome, I'm not going to spend a lot of resources on it."

Some may be the type of case that the police and prosecutors find most challenging, where the accuser and alleged perpetrator are known to each other, and may have consumed alcohol before the attack. I don't doubt that the assurances now being offered are sincere, but the risk of creating unrealistic expectations is very high.

We live in a society where half the population faces an ever-present threat of sexual harassment and assault at school, at work and in our own homes. But the criminal justice system is so intent on protecting the interests of men and boys accused of rape, it no longer does its basic job of providing justice for victims.

- Joan Smith is the author of Misogynies and co-chair of the mayor of London’s Violence Against Women Board

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Opinion World Cup 2022

Could a Norway boycott of the Qatar World Cup change the future of football?

Håvard Melnæs

Football fans are asking leaders of the game difficult questions, and it all started with a club north of the Arctic Circle

‘Last weekend we saw the Norwegian national team, including goal-scoring sensation Erling Braut Haaland (above) and Arsenal player Martin Ødegaard, in T-shirts championing respect and human rights.’ Photograph: Jon Nazca/Reuters

‘Last weekend we saw the Norwegian national team, including goal-scoring sensation Erling Braut Haaland (above) and Arsenal player Martin Ødegaard, in T-shirts championing respect and human rights.’ Photograph: Jon Nazca/Reuters

Tue 30 Mar 2021 09.03 EDT

“Tromsø IL thinks it is time for football to stop and take a few steps back. We should think about the purpose of football and why so many love our sport. That corruption, modern-day slavery and a high number of workers’ deaths are the fundament to our most important tournament, the World Cup, is totally unacceptable.”

This surprise statement, released by Norwegian top-flight club Tromsø on 26 February, from a city located north of the Arctic Circle, quickly gained national traction. In the days and weeks that followed, six more leading clubs – including the three biggest and best-supported, Rosenborg, Vålerenga and Brann – followed suit, urging the Norwegian FA to formally boycott the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. Fourteen of 16 supporters’ groups in the top flight are joining the demand.

It didn’t stop there. Last weekend, the Norwegian national team, including goal-scoring sensation Erling Braut Haaland and Arsenal player Martin Ødegaard, wore T-shirts championing respect and human rights, while the national teams of Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark had similar initiatives before their games. Now reporters from all over Europe are asking players how they feel about the World Cup in Qatar.

Norway players take human rights stand before World Cup qualifier
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Two important things occurred the same month Tromsø IL declared its stance. A new cross-club supporters’ initiative, Vår Fotball (Our Football), was formed aiming to prevent Norwegian football becoming part of “sportswashing” – and Qatar 2022 is by definition a sportswashing event. And the Guardian published an article stating that more than 6,500 migrant workers had died since Qatar won the hosting rights to the 2022 World Cup in December 2010.

The Norwegian FA rarely and only hesitantly appears in debates. But this time around it probably felt it couldn’t produce a proper reason to decline. Its president, Terje Svendsen, claimed that dialogue with the Qatar government may indeed have made life somehow easier for the migrant workers.

Few were convinced by this. The debates went on. Each day the Norwegian FA produced new responses: if we boycott, we will lose 100m kroner in income. If we boycott, it can have unfortunate consequences for the migrant workers: they might lose their jobs. If we boycott, it can affect all our national teams. We can be expelled from future Fifa tournaments.

The Norwegian FA didn't win any hearts and minds with these shifting arguments, and making a connection between the loss of life for some of the world's most vulnerable people and economic loss for itself was deemed too cynical even for football politicians to make.

For a long time Norwegians supporters have felt that football has been taken away from them by the people at the top level, that football's true values have been sacrificed by greed and corruption, selling its soul to the highest bidder and, conversely, sacrificing the lives of the globe's poorest.

But grassroots campaigns are nothing new. So why has this boycott movement made the FA's top brass quiver? Because Norwegian football is a democracy. Clubs are by law owned and run by their members who, once a year, vote on the club's policies, amendments of its statutes and so on. Any paid-up member over the age of 15 is eligible to vote – the law applies to all clubs, from the smallest community-based outfit to former Champions League regulars Rosenborg.

At the Norwegian FA's AGM on 14 March, the decision was taken to delay a verdict on the possible boycott, and an extraordinary general meeting will be held on 20 June to decide this one issue. This, of course, gives the pro-boycott movement plenty of time to rally around its cause and gather support.

If the majority of the delegates vote in favour, there will be a boycott. It doesn't matter, then, that the leadership vehemently opposes a boycott: this leadership is bound by the will of its people.

We must all stand up to the world's richest nation and oppose its use of modern slavery
Read more

A line must be drawn somewhere, and for Norwegian football fans, that line is a World Cup in Qatar. Awarding the festival of football to an apartheid-like state accused of practising modern-day slavery is the epitome of the greed and corruption at play in the higher echelons of football governance.

The FA in Norway is viewed by many football fans as a local Fifa department. When Fifa's president, Gianni Infantino, boasts that Qatar will be the most beautiful World Cup ever, that is the voice of a man our FA helped get elected. And the Norwegian football grassroots finds it macabre that Infantino can utter words like this when he knows the human cost of hosting the World Cup in Qatar.

The boycott movement is first and foremost a protest against how football is run. It is understandable if the Qataris feel singled out. The World Cup 2018 was also a sportswashing event, and in Russia, too, tens of thousands of migrant workers were exploited. But for me the telling moment was at the Fifa congress in Moscow the day before the opening match. In the middle of the congress, it was announced that President Vladmir Putin would make a special appearance. On the stage enters one of the world's most autocratic leaders, and the vast majority, if not all, of football leaders from every corner of the world rose from their seats and gave him a standing ovation.

This told you all you really needed to know abut where football is at the moment. And as each day passes, it seems football takes another step down the abyss.

In Norway, supporters have decided to draw the line with Qatar. Because if we accept Qatar's treatment of its migrant workforce, what can come next? World Cup stadiums built by child labourers or maybe North Korea getting the hosting rights?

So are we witnessing a wind of change in international football, or is this all moral window-dressing? The demonstrations against the World Cup in Qatar may backfire. Because, where do you draw the line? Shouldn't Martin Ødegaard, when protesting against worker exploitation in Qatar, do the same against his club's most important sponsor, the United Arab Emirates, which treats its migrant workers the same or perhaps worse than Qatar?

But the most important thing here is that football is finally being asked some inconvenient questions.

- Håvard Melnæs is editor of Josimar, a Norwegian football magazine (www.josimar.no, www.josimarfootball.com)

OpinionPolice

For democracy to thrive, clashes between protesters and police require proper scrutiny

Owen Jones

From Orgreave to Hillsborough, and now Bristol, the media has too often taken the police’s version of events at face value

A police officer swings a baton at a protester during a demonstration in Bristol last week. Photograph: Matthew Horwood/Getty Images

A police officer swings a baton at a protester during a demonstration in Bristol last week. Photograph: Matthew Horwood/Getty Images

Tue 30 Mar 2021 12.10 EDT

After protests in Bristol turned sour last week, one account came out on top as numerous media outlets splashed on reports from Avon and Somerset police that injuries to officers included broken bones and a collapsed lung.

To the average reader, such headlines helped build an incriminating and unsympathetic portrait of protesters as anarchic thugs. Given this was a protest over the policing bill – a piece of legislation granting the authorities sweeping powers to ban any protest – the story of a beleaguered force struggling to hold back the mob was politically convenient. Controlling the narrative is a precondition to winning any political battle.

Later in the week, the force reported that no serious injuries took place. This correction failed to receive comparable coverage with the original story. Curiously, an on-duty NHS worker told the Observer that no officers received hospital treatment, while “the hospital designated for protesters was inundated with injured people”.

Police accused of using shields as weapons at Bristol 'kill the bill' protest Read more

Yet with most media outlets uncritically repeating the police's original claims, the narrative was of a rabble of protesters versus a police force under siege. The forces of the state were portrayed as requiring ever more sweeping powers, while dissidents need further containment. It is easy to see how these narratives can lead to, as one former police chief warned, "paramilitary policing".

What is so jarring about media deference to the police is not just that the fourth estate styles itself as courageously speaking truth to power while all too frequently finding itself complicit in the stripping away of hard-won rights, but that this gullibility appears immune to lessons from history. Media outlets have repeatedly amplified false police claims about demonised '"others"' – striking workers, working-class football fans, protesters and Black people.

In some cases, there have been concerns that media organisations have actively collaborated in facilitating outright police dishonesty. After the "battle of Orgreave" – a confrontation at the height of the 1984-85 miners' strike – miners and the Independent Police Complaints Commission reported that the BBC ran the coverage in the wrong order to make it look as though the miners had initiated a violent confrontation, when it was actually the other way round. The BBC has never officially accepted this account. Most of the media did little to reveal the active cover-up of police brutality at Orgreave and the miners' battle for justice remains.

When police unleashed brutality against green activists, anti-nuclear protesters and festival-goers on their way to Stonehenge in 1985 – pregnant women were among those clubbed by officers – most media outlets refrained from reporting on what had happened. The widespread demonisation of the festival-goers paved the way for the repressive 1986 Public Order Act.

Worse was to come. In 1989, the Sun reported police lies about Liverpool fans at the Hillsborough stadium disaster, stalling the bereaved families' struggle for justice. The legacy of this still lives on today, and the newspaper is widely boycotted in Merseyside.

When the police swept away climate camp protesters at the Kingsnorth power station in 2008, they justified their expensive and belligerent operation with widely reported claims of injuries. Thanks to freedom of information requests submitted by the Liberal Democrats, it turned out those "injuries" were actually insect bites, diarrhoea and toothache.

In 2009, when homeless newspaper vendor Ian Tomlinson died on his way home while walking through protests during the G20 summit, the London Evening Standard splashed on police claims, and the headline ran: "Police pelted with bricks as they help dying man." It was only thanks to a private citizen's video of events that this narrative was upended.

The police have their version of the Bristol protests. Locals tell a different story
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Tomlinson had been struck from behind without provocation by a police officer, hurling him to the ground in what an inquest later found was unlawful killing. More recently, Sussex police had to apologise after falsely claiming that large numbers of Crystal Palace fans attempted to enter a football match armed with "knives and knuckledusters".

All too often, much of the media have either failed to robustly scrutinise police claims, passed them off as concrete facts, or actively collaborated in disseminating false narratives. The dangers are self-explanatory: it risks manufacturing consent for the stripping away of rights and freedoms on the basis of false claims.

Several diligent journalists reported that the protests in Bristol were peaceful until aggressive policing began: that in itself should start a conversation about the role of the police in a state where citizens have the right to collectively come together to make their voices heard. But an authoritarian mentality within the police – as appears to be exemplified by one senior officer using Twitter to declare "peaceful protest is a qualified not absolute right" and that "technically we're crown servants not public servants" – is not being robustly challenged.

The consensus between media outlets, the police and a government determined to repeal rights won by our ancestors – including those struck by police batons – threatens our democracy, and should be called out as such.

- Owen Jones is a Guardian columnist

Nils Pratley on financeTechnology sector

Oxford Nanopore float offers London a proper tech future

Nils Pratley

Planned IPO of life science group will test LSE’s appetite for funding high-growth tech

- Oxford Nanopore to float on London Stock Exchange

Oxford Nanopore is likely to debut on the London Stock Exchange later this year. Photograph: Oxford Nanopore

Oxford Nanopore is likely to debut on the London Stock Exchange later this year. Photograph: Oxford Nanopore

Tue 30 Mar 2021 14.30 EDT

Another day, another tech float on the way for London. This one involves proper technology too: cutting-edge DNA sequencing and analytics, as opposed to takeaway food delivered by bicycle. Oxford Nanopore's likely arrival on the London Stock Exchange later this year is therefore very welcome. The UK market is short on life sciences companies capable of commanding multibillion-pound valuations.

Let's not pretend, though, that the choice of London is some sort of national triumph. Oxford Nanopore was founded in 2005 as a spin-out from Oxford University. Its manufacturing and research base is near the city. And the company received a useful leg-up last year, courtesy of the UK government, via a contract for Covid testing worth up to £113m, which is not bad for a business whose revenues in 2019 were £52m. It would have been very unsporting to run off to the US to join the biotech brethren on Nasdaq.

The live question is what Oxford Nanopore is worth given that Covid has transformed prospects beyond mere testing. The company's kit is used in identifying variants and the biggest long-term demand may lie in virus surveillance. An "analyse anything anywhere" philosophy has also taken the firm into territory ranging from cancer research to crop yields.

IP Group formally values its 15% stake at £340m, implying £2.3bn for the whole company, but that may be conservative. Analysts at Jefferies reckon £4bn based on comparisons with listed US rivals. Others go higher. A wide range of estimates is only to be expected at this point: this is a classic case of a "scale-up" story after several rounds of investment.

The reception for Oxford Nanopore may therefore tell us more about London's real appetite for funding high-growth tech companies than either Deliveroo, which will limp across the line with a bottom-of-the-range price tag on Wednesday, or secondhand car merchant Cazoo, which grumbled about UK investors and took the US route. A healthy life sciences sector is the most interesting tech opportunity for London.

Saving Liberty Steel is by no means simple

Kwasi Kwarteng has done the easy bit. He, or rather the government, has refused Liberty Steel's request for a £170m rescue loan. That decision will have taken about two minutes since the structure of the parent company, Sanjeev Gupta's GFG Alliance, is indeed "opaque", as the business secretary put it.

But is there an actual plan to save Liberty Steel if the collapse of Greensill Capital, the main lender, proves terminal? At the moment Kwarteng is at the "all options open" stage, which presumably is a hint that some form of temporary public ownership, as with British Steel in 2019, would be contemplated to save thousands of jobs.

There are at least two complicating factors, however. First, Liberty is an amalgam of several businesses. The position could become messy if Gupta succeeds in re-financing some, but not all, of his UK operations.

Second, British Steel was eventually steered into the arms of Jingye – a Chinese firm, as many are in the steel business. This time any deal involving Beijing is surely impossible in a political climate of sanctions. So the pool of potential buyers may be shallow.

A complete list of options, then, would include a more full-throated, or longer-lasting, form of nationalisation. One could make an easy case for attempting a publicly funded reboot. Liberty's Rotherham plant has two electric arc furnaces, which fit exactly into the government's industrial decarbonisation drive. And the operation in nearby Stocksbridge makes high-spec steel for the aerospace industry, the added-value end of the market.

Does the government's scenario-planning include such a medium-term project? It should if it still has a half-claim to having an industrial strategy.

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George Floyd

Teen who filmed killing tells court George Floyd was 'begging for his life'

Darnella Frazier said Derek Chauvin did not ease up as he pinned Floyd down and that she still loses sleep over the killing

01:09

Teen who filmed video of George Floyd's death weeps at trial – video

Chris McGreal
Tue 30 Mar 2021 21.36 EDT

The woman who recorded the shocking video of George Floyd's death that prompted mass protests for racial justice around the world has told the Derek Chauvin murder trial of her feelings of guilt at being unable to intervene to save his life.

Darnella Frazier, who at times sobbed as she gave evidence on the second day of Chauvin's trial in Minneapolis, said that she still loses sleep over the killing of the 46-year-old Black man.

'Believe your eyes, it's a homicide': key quotes from day one of the Chauvin trial
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"I ended up apologising and apologising to George Floyd for not doing more," she said.

But, Frazier added, it is not about what she should have done.

"It's what he should have done," she said in apparent reference to the Chauvin.

Frazier was 17 when she recorded the video as a bystander.

Chauvin, 45, who is white, has denied charges of second- and third-degree murder, and manslaughter, over the death of Floyd last May. He faces up to 40 years in prison if convicted of the most serious charge

Frazier's more than nine-minute video of Chauvin kneeling on Floyd's neck as he lies prone on the ground outraged millions of people in the US and beyond in part because the now former Minneapolis police officer ignored increasingly desperate pleas from Floyd as he repeatedly said he could not breathe.

Prosecutors have presented Frazier's video as compelling evidence of Chauvin's guilt.

"You can believe your eyes, that it was homicide, it was murder," one of the prosecutors, Jerry Blackwell, told the court in his opening statement on Monday.

Frazier, who is now 18, said she began recording the incident because Floyd looked "terrified and scared, begging for his life".

She was so horrified by coming across the scene that she told her younger cousin to go into a food store so she would not have to see it, the court heard.

The prosecution used Frazier to reinforce the case they are building that Chauvin maliciously kept his knee on Floyd's neck even when it was clear the detained man was not resisting arrest and was increasingly in danger.

Frazier said that despite the appeals from the crowd, Chauvin did not ease up as he pinned Floyd down.

"He had like, this cold look," she said. "It seemed as if he didn't care."

At another point, Frazier said Chauvin reacted to appeals from the crowd by increasing the pressure on Floyd.

“If anything he was kneeling harder, like he was shoving his knee into his neck,” she said.

The prosecution’s questioning of witnesses through the second day sought to established that police officers did nothing to help Floyd despite his growing distress and struggle to breathe.

Prosecutors also sought to head off defence claims that Chauvin’s actions were influenced by threats to his and other officers safety from an increasingly alarmed crowd of bystanders.

Frazier denied defence claims that the police were threatened by the growing crowd. She said they wanted to intervene to help Floyd, who was in distress.

“Anytime anyone tried to get close, they [the police] were defensive,” she said.

Frazier said she felt threatened by the police officers, including Chauvin, who put their hands on the containers of mace spray that officers carry.

Genevieve Hansen, a Minneapolis firefighter with emergency medical training who was off duty and passing by, testified that the police would not let her give medical attention to Floyd.

“He wasn’t moving and he was cuffed. Three grown men putting their weight on was too much,” she said. “It didn’t take me long to realise that he had an altered state of consciousness.”

Hansen said her training told her that he needed immediate help.

“What I needed to know was whether he had a pulse anymore,” she told the court.

Hansen said she identified herself as a firefighter with medical training to one of the officers, Tou Thao, who was not restraining Floyd but was keeping onlookers at bay and in effect standing guard for Chauvin.

She said Thao responded that if she really was a firefighter she should know better than to get involved.

“I tried to be reasonable and then I tried to be assertive,” she said. “I pled and was desperate.”

Hansen said she felt helpless because there was a man being killed in front of her and she was denied the opportunity to help him.

Earlier in the day, another witness to Floyd’s death said that he called the emergency services during the incident because “I believed I witnessed a murder”.

Donald Williams, a mixed martial arts fighter, said he pleaded with Chauvin to stop what he termed a dangerous “blood choke” on Floyd.

“You could see that he was going through tremendous pain,” said Williams. “You could see his eyes go back in his head … You could see he was trying to gasp for air.”

Williams told the closely watched trial he was prevented from intervening to help Floyd by Thao who pushed him in the chest and back on to the curb.

Williams said he raised his voice in anger but did not otherwise intervene “for fear of myself and fear of people around me” from the officers.

As Floyd was taken away by ambulance, Williams called the 911 emergency number to report what he believed to be a crime – essentially calling the police on the police.

He can be heard repeatedly saying “murderers bro” on the call, audio of which was played in court.

On cross examination, defence lawyer Eric Nelson put it to Williams that he was increasingly angry and threatening as he taunted Chauvin by calling him “a bum” at least 13 times, “a bitch” and telling him that “within next two years you will shoot yourself”.

Williams denied he was letting his anger get the better of him.

Thao – and two other officers who were next to Chauvin and helping restrain Floyd – are scheduled to be tried together later this year on charges of aiding

and abetting murder and manslaughter.

The trial continues.

New Zealand

New Zealand raises minimum wage and increases taxes on the rich

Jacinda Ardern says the changes to wages and benefits will help support the most vulnerable

New Zealand’s unions have been calling for minimum wage rises to reflect the sacrifice made by many low-paid essential workers during the coronavirus pandemic. Photograph: Kai Schwörer/Getty Images

New Zealand’s unions have been calling for minimum wage rises to reflect the sacrifice made by many low-paid essential workers during the coronavirus pandemic. Photograph: Kai Schwörer/Getty Images

Tess McClure in Auckland
@tessairini
Tue 30 Mar 2021 20.15 EDT

New Zealand is raising its minimum wage to $20 an hour and increasing the top tax rate for the country's highest earners to 39%.

The changes will be rolled out on Thursday, alongside small increases to unemployment and sickness benefits. The government estimates the minimum wage increase – a rise of $1.14 per hour – will affect up to 175,500 workers, and increase wages across the economy by $216m.

The new top tax rate will apply to anyone earning more than $180,000 a year, about 2% of New Zealanders. The government estimates it will bring in an additional $550m in revenue this year.

Jacinda Ardern flags four-day working week as way to rebuild New Zealand after Covid-19
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OECD data shows that New Zealand's previous minimum wage, as of 2019, was already among the top five highest in the world. Over the course of the Covid pandemic, many of the country's essential workers have been minimum wage earners – including those who work at the airport and in border jobs, and are considered the frontline defence against the virus.

In 2020, unions called for an increase to the living wage, $22.10, for those on the front lines. "It's a big deal to these workers. Part of it's the money, part of it's the dignity of feeling rewarded by the community for the sacrifices they're making," United Union national secretary John Crocker told TVNZ at the time.

Speaking about the changes this week, the prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, said they fulfilled a pre-election promise and represent "real and long-overdue improvements to the support we provide our most vulnerable".

"There is still much more to do, including building more homes, improving our health system, investing in education, training and job opportunities," she said.

New Zealand continues to struggle with high child poverty rates and housing costs. Housing in Auckland, for example, is among the most unaffordable in

the world, with house prices sitting at around 11 times average income.

The housing shortage has hit vulnerable New Zealanders particularly hard. On Tuesday, Stuff reported that waiting lists for public housing had hit a new record, with more than 22,800 households waiting for a home.

The opposition National party opposed the minimum wage increase: "Sharply increasing the minimum wage during a period of extreme uncertainty for small businesses is economic vandalism," said its workplace relations spokesman, Scott Simpson. The ministry of business, innovation and employment had advised the government to delay the increase due to economic uncertainty caused by Covid-19.

The Ardern-led government has raised minimum wage gradually over the past four years, adding up to an increase of $4.25 an hour since 2017. Last year, Ardern made headlines for encouraging New Zealand employers to consider adopting a four-day workweek and other flexible arrangements as a way to rebuild from Covid-19.

"I hear lots of people suggesting we should have a four-day workweek," she said at the time. "Ultimately that really sits between employers and employees. But as I've said there's just so much we've learnt about Covid and that flexibility of people working from home, the productivity that can be driven out of that."

Myanmar

Myanmar: US orders diplomats to leave as coup spurs ethnic tensions

UN security council set for emergency meeting as death toll from military crackdown passes 520

Relatives mourn over the body of Aung Ko Oo, who died on Monday during a protest against the military coup, in Yangon. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

Relatives mourn over the body of Aung Ko Oo, who died on Monday during a protest against the military coup, in Yangon. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

Agence France-Presse
Wed 31 Mar 2021 01.49 EDT

The United States has ordered the departure of non-essential diplomats from Myanmar, amid growing violence following the military coup to oust

civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Daily protests demanding the restoration of the elected government have been met with a military crackdown that has left more than 520 civilians dead in the weeks since the February 1 coup.

The junta's violent response has triggered international condemnation – and threats of retaliation from some of Myanmar's myriad ethnic armed groups.

The Guardian view on Myanmar's generals: impunity has bred this ruthlessness | Editorial
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The US State Department said it was ordering the departure of "non-emergency US government employees and their family members". The decision was taken to protect the safety and security of staff and their families, the State Department said.

World powers have repeatedly condemned the violent crackdown on dissent and hit top junta cadres with sanctions. But the pressure has not swayed the generals. Saturday, the annual Armed Forces Day, saw the biggest loss of life so far, with at least 107 people killed.

The UN security council will hold an emergency session on Myanmar on Wednesday, requested by former colonial power Britain. The 15 members will meet behind closed doors, beginning with a briefing from the UN's special envoy on Myanmar, Christine Schraner Burgener.

The spiralling bloodshed has angered some of Myanmar's 20 or so armed ethnic groups, which control large areas of territory mostly in border regions.

Three of them – the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, the Myanmar Nationalities Democratic Alliance Army and the Arakan Army (AA) – on Tuesday threatened to join the protesters' fight unless the military reined in its crackdown.

US to stop trading with Myanmar until return of democratic government

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While the trio has yet to act on their warning, two other outfits – the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) – have stepped up attacks on military and police in recent days.

A police station in Bago was reportedly hit with a rocket attack that injured five officers on Tuesday, though it was not clear who was responsible.

The KNU, one of the biggest rebel groups, took over an army base in eastern Kayin state at the weekend, prompting the military to respond with air strikes. Further strikes were launched on Tuesday, but Padoh Saw Taw Nee, the KNU's head of foreign affairs, said the group would continue its position of "strongly supporting people's movement against [the] military coup".

The KNU's Fifth Brigade put out a statement on Tuesday condemning the air strikes and warning it had no option but to "confront these serious threats" posed by the military.

Around 3,000 people fled through the jungle to seek safety across the border in Thailand after the weekend strikes. The Thai foreign ministry said late on Tuesday about 2,300 have returned to Myanmar, while about 550 remain in Thailand.

Karen activists have accused the Thai authorities of pushing people back and accused them of blocking UN refugee officials from the area.

Thai prime minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha insisted that there was "no influx" of refugees and that the kingdom's authorities had not "scared them off with guns or sticks".

Some Karen people injured in the weekend strikes sought medical treatment on Tuesday on the Thai side of the border – the most serious case was a 15-year-old with a collapsed lung and broken rib.

Amazon

'Fake' Twitter users rush to Amazon's defense over unions and working conditions

Similar accounts have been used before during periods when the company was facing increased scrutiny and criticism

‘Many of these are not Amazon FC Ambassadors – it appears they are fake accounts that violate Twitter’s terms. We’ve asked Twitter to investigate and take appropriate action,’ an Amazon spokesperson said. Photograph: Pascal Rossignol/Reuters

‘Many of these are not Amazon FC Ambassadors – it appears they are fake accounts that violate Twitter’s terms. We’ve asked Twitter to investigate and take appropriate action,’ an Amazon spokesperson said. Photograph: Pascal Rossignol/Reuters

Michael Sainato
Wed 31 Mar 2021 02.00 EDT

Sign up for the Guardian Today US newsletter

A surge of “fake” Twitter accounts have emerged to defend Amazon and push back against criticism of working conditions at the company amid a fiercely fought union election for the Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama.

Many of the account handles start with “AmazonFC” followed by a first name and a warehouse designation. The accounts often respond to criticism against Amazon on Twitter, dismissing concerns and reports about robotic working conditions and high injury rates.

One, now suspended, account tweeted: “Unions are good for some companies, but I don’t want to have to shell out hundreds a month just for lawyers!”

Similar accounts have been used before in periods when criticism toward the company went viral in 2018 and 2019. Several of the Amazon Twitter user accounts cited in reports from 2018 and 2019 no longer exist. Others have switched names. Some of the accounts have been exposed as using fake profile pictures from stock photos.

In Trumpian move, Jeff Bezos reportedly orders Amazon chiefs to hit back at critics
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Some Amazon employees act as “ambassadors” – sharing positive experiences of working with the company. The company confirmed that some of the latest tweets allegedly coming from its ambassadors were fake.

“Many of these are not Amazon FC Ambassadors – it appears they are fake accounts that violate Twitter’s terms. We’ve asked Twitter to investigate and take appropriate action,” said an Amazon spokesperson.

The spokesperson did not clarify how many Twitter accounts are run by real Amazon ambassadors, or which accounts still on the platform are actually run by Amazon workers serving as public relations ambassadors. Amazon had declined to provide information on these accounts in previous reports as

well, including how these workers are compensated for serving in these roles on social media, though some previous reports have noted these workers work on social media in lieu of warehouse work, and can receive perks such as free gift cards or days off.

The investigative journalism site Bellingcat has compiled a list of at least 56 Amazon FC Ambassador Twitter accounts.

Some of the accounts that became active recently on Twitter, such as @AmazonFCDarla and @AmazonFCLulu were suspended by Twitter. In response to the accounts, some Twitter users created obvious parody accounts mocking the robotic defenses of Amazon and uniform design of the accounts.

Amazon's public relations tactics have received scrutiny over the years, and more so recently after the Amazon CEO Dave Clark and the Amazon News Twitter account criticized senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren and Congressman Mark Pocan on Twitter. These attacks backfired after leaked memos to The Intercept revealed Amazon engineers flagged the tweets over concerns the account may be compromised and characterized the tweets as "unnecessarily antagonistic (risking Amazon's brand)."

Other leaked memos also revealed Amazon managers had complained about Amazon delivery drivers leaving bottles of urine and bags of feces in trucks, after Amazon's PR account claimed reports of workers urinating in bottles were false. NBC News also reported the National Labor Relations Board is currently determining whether to consolidate multiple complaints from workers over the past year alleging interference from Amazon against workers' attempts to organize or form a union.

On 30 March, Amazon's senior vice-president for policy and communications, Jay Carney, a former Obama Administration staffer, joined in on the pushback against high profile critics like Sanders. The recent uptick in Amazon's public relations team and executives antagonizing critics reportedly stems from complaints from Amazon founder Jeff Bezos himself, who recently complained to other Amazon executives they weren't pushing back on their critics enough.

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Business live
Business

UK economy grew faster than expected in second half of 2020 - business live

US politics

Hunter Biden calls Trump 'vile' in new book and denies Ukraine allegations

- Joe Biden's son will publish memoir next week
- 'I became a proxy for his fear he wouldn't be re-elected'
- US politics – live coverage

Hunter Biden with his wife Melissa Cohen and their son Beau on 26 March 2021. Photograph: Olivier Douliery/AFP/Getty Images

Hunter Biden with his wife Melissa Cohen and their son Beau on 26 March 2021. Photograph: Olivier Douliery/AFP/Getty Images

David Smith in Washington
@smithinamerica
Tue 30 Mar 2021 15.59 EDT

In a keenly awaited memoir, Joe Biden's son Hunter attacks Donald Trump as "a vile man with a vile mission" who plumbed "unprecedented depths" in last year's US presidential election.

Want to book Donald or Melania for an event? Trump has a website for that Read more

Hunter, 51, is a lawyer and businessman who has been the focus of Republican bile ever since Trump and his lawyer Rudy Giuliani sought information on his business dealings in Ukraine to use in the 2020 campaign.

On the page, Biden insists he did nothing wrong in joining in April 2014 the board of Burisma, the gas company at the heart of the Ukraine affair. He dismisses the controversy as "remarkable for its epic banality". But he says he would not do so again.

He found the company's role as a bulwark against Russian aggression under Vladimir Putin "inspiring", though the five-figures a month fee was also a factor. Biden acknowledges that his famous surname was considered "gold" by Burisma. "To put it more bluntly," he writes, "having a Biden on Burisma's board was a loud and unmistakable fuck-you to Putin."

Giuliani's search for dirt saw Trump impeached – and acquitted – for the first time. Republican attacks on Hunter Biden have continued, focusing on his business dealings and also his troubled personal life, including well-known struggles with drink and drug addiction and recently a decision to purchase a gun which became part of a domestic dispute.

Biden's memoir, Beautiful Things, deals with such personal issues as well as the deaths of his mother and sister in a car crash in 1973 and that of his older brother, Delaware attorney general Beau Biden, from brain cancer in 2015. The book will be published next week. The Guardian obtained a copy.

Describing what it felt like to be in the eye of a political storm over business interests he says "sometimes" unavoidably coincided with his father's work as vice-president to Barack Obama, Biden writes: "I became a proxy for Donald Trump's fear that he wouldn't be re-elected.

"He pushed debunked conspiracy theories about work I did in Ukraine and China, even as his own children had pocketed millions in China and Russia

and his former campaign manager [Paul Manafort] sat in a jail cell for laundering millions more from Ukraine."

He adds: "None of that matters in an up-is-down Orwellian political climate. Trump believed that if he could destroy me, and by extension my father, he could dispatch any candidate of decency from either party, all while diverting attention from his own corrupt behavior."

Insisting he is "not Billy Carter or Roger Clinton" – relations of previous presidents who proved magnets for media and opposition attention – Biden writes that he knows his surname has helped him in business. But, he adds, "I am not Eric Trump or Donald Trump Jr. I've worked for someone other than my father. I rose and fell on my own."

'Welcome to the family': Fox News hires Lara Trump as a contributor
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Biden criticises Trump for his efforts to attack his father on the debate stage last October, writing that Trump showed "trademark callousness" in playing "the only card he ever plays: attack".

Joe Biden defended Hunter then, saying he was proud of how he handled his struggles with addiction and telling viewers: "There's a reason why [Trump is] bringing up all this malarkey. He doesn't want to talk about the substantive issues. It's not about his family and my family. It's about your family."

Hunter Biden also criticises Trump allies, calling the Florida congressman Matt Gaetz a "troll".

The South Carolina senator Lindsey Graham, he writes, is a family friend from Joe Biden's long service in the Senate who nonetheless "morph[ed] into a Trump lapdog right before my eyes, slandering me and my father in the coldest, most cynical, most self-serving ways."

In the book, Hunter offers some insights into the Biden family, including an occasion when his father sought to intervene in his addictions by bringing two counselors from a rehab centre to the family home in Delaware. When

Hunter refused, Joe Biden “suddenly looked terrified” and chased him down the driveway, then grabbed him, hugged him and “cried for the longest time”.

Hunter had a brief romantic relationship with Beau’s widow, Hallie, after Beau’s death. “Our relationship had begun as a mutually desperate grasping for love we both had lost, and its dissolution only deepened that tragedy,” he recalls.

Biden administration

Antony Blinken says the US will 'stand up for human rights everywhere'

Secretary of state takes veiled swipe at Trump administration and says change of approach is ‘in America’s interests’

Secretary of state Antony Blinken speaks about the release of the ‘2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices’ at the state department in Washington. Photograph: Mandel Mgan/AP

Secretary of state Antony Blinken speaks about the release of the ‘2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices’ at the state department in Washington. Photograph: Mandel Mgan/AP

AFP in Washington
Tue 30 Mar 2021 17.57 EDT

The United States will speak out about human rights everywhere including in allies and at home, secretary of state Antony Blinken has vowed, turning a

page from Donald Trump as he bemoaned deteriorations around the world.

Presenting the state department's first human rights report under President Joe Biden, the new top US diplomat took some of his most pointed, yet still veiled, swipes at the approach of the Trump administration.

"Some have argued that it's not worth it for the US to speak up forcefully for human rights – or that we should highlight abuse only in select countries, and only in a way that directly advances our national interests," Blinken told reporters in clear reference to Trump's approach.

"But those people miss the point. Standing up for human rights everywhere is in America's interests," he said.

"And the Biden-Harris administration will stand against human rights abuses wherever they occur, regardless of whether the perpetrators are adversaries or partners."

Blinken ordered the return of assessments in the annual report on countries' records on access to reproductive health, which were removed under the staunchly anti-abortion Trump administration.

Blinken also denounced a commission of his predecessor Mike Pompeo that aimed to redefine the US approach to human rights by giving preference to private property and religious freedom while downplaying reproductive and LGBTQ rights.

Pompeo claims private property and religious freedom are 'foremost' human rights
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During Pompeo's time in office, the state department was aggressive in opposing references to reproductive and gender rights in UN and other multilateral documents.

"There is no hierarchy that makes some rights more important than others," Blinken said.

In another shift in tone from Trump, Blinken said the United States acknowledged its own challenges, including "systemic racism."

"That's what separates our democracy from autocracies: our ability and willingness to confront our own shortcomings out in the open, to pursue that more perfect union."

Blinken voiced alarm over abuses around the world including in China, again speaking of "genocide" being committed against the Uighur community.

The report estimated that more than one million Uighurs and other members of mostly Muslim communities had been rounded up in internment camps in the western region of Xinjiang and that another two million are subjected to re-education training each day.

"The trend lines on human rights continue to move in the wrong direction. We see evidence of that in every region of the world," Blinken said.

He said the Biden administration was prioritising coordination with allies, pointing to recent joint efforts over Xinjiang, China's clampdown in Hong Kong and Russia's alleged poisoning of dissident Alexei Navalny.

Blinken also voiced alarm over the Myanmar military's deadly crackdown on pro-democracy protesters, attacks on civilians in Syria and a campaign in Ethiopia's Tigray that he has previously called ethnic cleansing.

The report, written in dry, factual language, did not spare longstanding US allies.

It pointed to allegations of unlawful killings and torture in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, quoting human rights groups that said Egypt is holding between 20,000 and 60,000 people chiefly due to their political beliefs.

Biden earlier declassified US intelligence that found that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman authorised the gruesome killing of US-based writer Jamal Khashoggi.

While the human rights report remained intact under Trump, the previous administration argued that rights were of lesser importance than other concerns with allies such as Saudi Arabia – a major oil producer and purchaser of US weapons that backed Trump's hawkish line against Iran, whose record was also heavily scrutinized in the report.

The latest report also detailed incidents in India under prime minister Narendra Modi, an increasingly close US ally.

It quoted non-governmental groups as pointing to the use in India of "torture, mistreatment and arbitrary detention to obtain forced or false confessions" and quoted journalists as assessing that "press freedom declined" including through physical harassment of journalists, pressure on owners and frivolous lawsuits.

The Pacific projectTaiwan

Palau to welcome first tourists in a year with presidential escort

Two-dogs beach in Palau’s Rock Islands. Local people will be kept away while tourists are visiting in order to minimise the risk of Covid-19 transmission. Photograph: Richard Brooks

Two-dogs beach in Palau’s Rock Islands. Local people will be kept away while tourists are visiting in order to minimise the risk of Covid-19 transmission. Photograph: Richard Brooks

Palau is opening up to visitors from Taiwan under strict Covid-safe measures, but locals still have doubts

- See all our coronavirus coverage

Supported by

About this content

Bernadette Carreon in Koror and Erin Hale in Taipei

Tue 30 Mar 2021 19.45 EDT

On Thursday, 110 people from Taiwan will be able to enjoy the thing so many around the world have been dreaming of since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic: an international holiday to a tropical island paradise.

The tiny Pacific country of Palau, in the north-west corner of the Pacific with a population of around 20,000 people, will this week begin welcoming tourists from Taiwan as part of a travel bubble.

Tiny Pacific nation of Palau detains 'illegal' Chinese fishing vessel
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Palau's first visitors for more than a year will get the royal treatment, with Palau's president travelling to Taiwan to personally escort them to the islands.

For a chance to travel to Palau, one of Taiwan's few diplomatic allies, Taiwanese must fork out between $2,100 and $2,800 to join a group tour booked via a travel agency. They must also tick a series of health regulation

boxes, including an assurance that they have not left Taiwan within the past six months, and undergo a Covid-19 test at the airport.

The trip itself is limited to fewer than eight days and will largely avoid crowded locations in Palau. But even with the rules in place, travel agents in Taipei say they have been getting enquiries since the bubble was announced on 17 March.

KKDay, a popular travel startup offering discounts on bookings, has already sold out two Palau tours according to its website as well as more than 1,000 lottery tickets for a chance to win a spot on a multi-day tour.

The tiny Pacific country of Palau is to start welcoming up to 200 Taiwanese visitors in early April. Photograph: Kate Lyons/The Guardian

‘We’ve been running on empty’

Ngirai Tmetuchl, chairman of the board of Palau Visitors Authority, said the bubble would benefit both nations.

Taiwanese tourists would get to “go to another country and enjoy the pristine waters of Palau” while his countryfolk could benefit from the boost to the

archipelago's economy, which is heavily reliant on tourism and which has been hit hard by the Covid-related border closures.

Before the pandemic, tourism accounted for nearly 50% of Palau's GDP, with Taiwan making up the third-largest group of tourists to the country, after China and Japan.

Though the initial numbers arriving will be small, "Two hundred [tourists coming in the first two weeks] is more than zero, our options are zero or 200. We've been running on empty for a year, " Tmetuchl said.

On the itinerary for the tourists will be trips out to Palau's famous Rock Islands and the idyllic turquoise Jellyfish Lake, where swimmers can float amongst millions of gently-pulsating golden jellyfish, which have no stingers.

Eledui Omelau, president of Palau's Boat Owners Association said it had been a difficult year for Palauan boat owners, with most of them taking out loans to survive and that the prospect of Taiwanese tourists was welcome.

"We have been hit hard, this travel bubble it's a good opportunity for us, but at the same time we want to make sure we are ready," Omelau said.

One of Palau's top visitor attractions is Jellyfish Lake Photograph: Richard Brooks

Despite the potential financial lifeline, he is not alone with his concerns about the risks that come with opening the country up to foreign tourists.

"We have to be very very careful," said William Tsung, owner of Landmark Hotel, which will begin receiving tourists in April. "[The] ministry of health and the government did a good job, but opening this market in such a short time, is very, very scary. We are a Covid-free country but Taiwan is not Covid-free, Taiwan is Covid-safe … what happens if that one [case] comes in? After all this hard work for more than one year, we don't want to see it, because we will end up suffering more than before."

'I am not ready'

The bubble will be tightly controlled, with strict rules about what tourists can and cannot do, including social distancing and minimal interaction with locals. No members of the community will be able to travel to the areas that tourists are visiting at the same time the tourists are there.

President Surangel Whipps Jr. has assured the country that the bubble, or what he calls the "sealed corridor", poses minimal risk. Taiwan is considered to have handled the pandemic well, with just over 1,000 cases and 10 deaths in total.

"First of all Taiwan is Covid-free in the community, but we are testing them at the airport before they get on the plane," he said. "But even without the testing, statics show that the chance of the Covid arriving in Palau is one-in-four million, or one in 40,000 flights."

Boats at harbour on the island of Palau, where tourism accounted for almost 50% of the economy prior to the Covid-19 pandemic Photograph: Kate Lyons/The Guardian

He argues that Palau has the medications and facilities to treat and contain any cases and also points to the country's successful vaccination programme. More than 60% of Palau's adult population is on track to have been vaccinated by mid-April, with 80% set to have received vaccinations by the summer.

"We are vaccinated. The high risk people have been vaccinated, the frontline [workers] have been vaccinated, the people in the travel agency have been vaccinated, that's the protection we are getting . Yes, there is a risk but very minimal," Whipps said.

Palau's marine sanctuary backfires, leading to increased consumption of reef fish
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"We want to open Palau but we are doing it safely, I know there are a lot of concerns but I hope that people will feel more confident and comfortable that we are doing this with much precaution as much as possible."

The president is optimistic that if the first two weeks of the bubble are successful, more flights can be put on and the initial tourist cap of 200 can be lifted.

Despite Whipps' reassurances, Tsung is also concerned that the restrictions imposed to ensure safety, especially those on room limits and hotel occupancy, will make it difficult for providers to make money.

"We will try our best to receive the tourists coming from Taiwan but so far for Palau, everything has gone up [in price]. You can feel everything is expensive. Groceries have come up. Oil has gone up since a year ago … and manpower is difficult too, because a lot of the workers left. Where can we find the manpower locally? My business is not ready, I am short staffed by 60%, even though my hotel is small. I am not ready," Tsung said.

Global development

'The heart of darkness': neighbors shun Brazil over Covid response

A woman lays a rose on mattresses symbolising coronavirus victims, at a protest in Rio against Bolsonaro's pandemic response. Photograph: Carl de Souza/AFP/Getty Images

A woman lays a rose on mattresses symbolising coronavirus victims, at a protest in Rio against Bolsonaro's pandemic response. Photograph: Carl de Souza/AFP/Getty Images

Latin American countries scramble to protect themselves from a country where nearly 60,000 people are expected to die in March alone

About this content

Tom Phillips in Rio de Janeiro Uki Goñi in Buenos Aires and Joe Parkin Daniels in Bogotá

Tue 30 Mar 2021 09.08 EDT

It has long been regarded as a soft power superpower, the sun-kissed, culturally blessed land of Bossa Nova, Capoeira and Pelé.

But Brazil's shambolic response to coronavirus under far-right president Jair Bolsonaro has cast Latin America's largest country in an unfamiliar and unpleasant role: that of a Covid-riddled, science-shunning, politically-unstable outcast on whom many regional neighbors are now shutting the door.

"The other day I saw a pretty strong article saying Brazil was starting to be seen by its neighbors as a sort of leper colony … and it's probably true," conceded Ricardo Ricupero, a veteran Brazilian diplomat who quoted Joseph Conrad, not João Gilberto, to describe his country's predicament.

"The horror! The horror!" the retired ambassador lamented last week, before his country was plunged into further political turbulence by Bolsonaro's

unexpected sacking of the defence minister. “Brazil is in the heart of darkness.”

Brazil’s neighbors, who are now scrambling to respond to the meltdown next door, seem to agree, with Argentina, Colombia and Peru banning flights to their Portuguese-speaking neighbor and Venezuela’s leader, Nicolás Maduro, berating his rightwing rival over a calamity that has killed more than 300,000 Brazilians.

“It’s alarming, even distressing, to see the reports out of São Paulo and Rio … and the reckless attitude of the Trumpist Brazilian right and Jair Bolsonaro towards the people of Brazil,” Maduro declared last week as he ordered a 14-day lockdown to counter the more contagious P1 variant at the heart of global fears over Brazil’s unchecked outbreak.

“Brazil now represents a threat to the world. And whose fault is it? Jair Bolsonaro’s,” Maduro proclaimed, jabbing his index finger into the air. “It’s just madness. There’s no name for it.”

Covid: Bolsonaro tells Brazilians to stop 'whining' as deaths top 260,000
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Seven thousand kilometres south of Caracas, in Uruguay, there are signs of similar alarm, with authorities racing to vaccinate residents of its border region with Brazil. “The idea is to create an epidemiological shield,” said Rodney Colina, a government Covid adviser and virologist who detected Uruguay’s first P1 cases and has been calling for tough restrictions to stop its spread. “If we start seeing P1 circulate widely we’d need to go for a total closure of almost everything,” Colina warned.

Close to 60,000 Brazilians are expected to die in March alone, making it by far the most deadly month of Brazil’s 13-month epidemic.

In Argentina, too, sleep is being lost over the mayhem. A group of leading Argentinian scientists recently penned an open letter imploring their government to close its 761-mile land border with Brazil.

“Brazil is a mirror we would rather not have to look into. That’s why it’s so important to impose travel restrictions straight away because once contagions start to rise it will be too late,” said Humberto Debat, an Argentinian biologist who helped produce the appeal, which condemned Bolsonaro’s “irresponsible and denialist” behavior.

Last Thursday, as Brazil recorded more than 100,000 Covid-19 cases in a single day for the first time, Argentina announced it would ban flights from Brazil, Chile and Mexico. Soledad Retamar, a statistician working on Covid data who backs such moves, said: “The fear is that we could start seeing the kind of mortality rates they had in Manaus earlier this year if the P1 variant starts circulating in Argentina.”

Colombian officials banned flights from Brazil in January as well as halting internal flights to the Amazon border town of Leticia, where immunization efforts are targeting younger adults in an attempt to block the spread of the P1 variant. Ana Mauad, an international relations professor at Bogotá’s Javeriana University, said Bolsonaro’s “complete lack of strategy and mishandling of the pandemic” had shocked the region.

“Bolsonaro has managed to turn Brazil into a gigantic hellhole,” Colombia’s former president Ernesto Samper tweeted last week, as the World Health Organization admitted “the dire situation” in Brazil was now affecting its neighbors.

Brazil's foreign minister, who bashed China and praised Trump, resigns
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Bolsonaro’s administration has reacted awkwardly to the chorus of international criticism.

“I think this is … terribly unjust,” Brazil’s pro-Trump foreign minister, Ernesto Araújo, told the Estado de São Paulo newspaper earlier this month. Araújo, who resigned on Monday after a rebellion from diplomats and lawmakers who accuse him of helping trash Brazil’s international reputation, rejected the idea that there was anything “out of control” in his country and claimed Brazil was the victim of “discrimination”.

“It’s as if … people are only dying in Brazil,” Bolsonaro grumbled last week.

Ricupero said there was no hiding that his South American country had become the pandemic’s “absolute epicentre” and predicted regional restrictions would increase in the coming weeks in countries such as Bolivia, Colombia and Peru.

“Right now, Brazil is at the hour when darkness reigns,” he said.

Italy

Three men held in Italy over fake Syria kidnapping that turned real

Three Italians arrested for masterminding plan that saw two businessmen held captive by jihadist group for three years

Italian police said the three men who were arrested had associates in Turkey who carried out the kidnapping and handed the two Italians over to jihadists. Photograph: Luca Zennaro/EPA

Italian police said the three men who were arrested had associates in Turkey who carried out the kidnapping and handed the two Italians over to jihadists. Photograph: Luca Zennaro/EPA

Agence France-Presse in Rome
Tue 30 Mar 2021 15.01 EDT

Three Italian men have been arrested for masterminding the kidnapping of two businessmen who were held captive in Syria for three years.

Over the course of 2016, the three who were arrested – all from the northern Brescia province – had convinced the two businessmen from the area to travel to Turkey.

One of the two, Alessandro Sandrini, was convinced to go with the offer of faking his own kidnapping during the trip, and earn ransom money.

The other businessman, Sergio Zanotti, made the journey after being promised a business deal involving Iraqi currency.

Once in Turkey, both businessmen were captured for real near the Syrian border and taken to Syria, where they were held captive by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, a jihadist group.

According to a police statement, the three men who were arrested had associates in Turkey who carried out the kidnapping and handed the two Italians over to the jihadists.

Zanotti left Italy in April 2016 and remained a prisoner until April 2019. Sandrini arrived in Turkey in October 2016 and was freed in May 2019.

Media reports, which quoted investigative sources, said Sandrini was charged with fraud and simulating a crime, as part of the same inquiry that led to Tuesday's arrests.

Police said a third businessman was approached about making the trip to Turkey but pulled out at the last minute, refusing to board his plane.

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