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## [Opinion](#)**Coronavirus**

# The Observer view on British scientific success on Covid-19

## [Observer editorial](#)

Our scientists' accomplishments on vaccines and genome sequencing are exemplary and must be shared with the rest of the world



A key worker from North Shields receives the Pfizer-BioNTech Covid-19 vaccine in Newcastle upon Tyne, northeast England, on 9 January. Photograph: Ian Forsyth/AFP/Getty Images

A key worker from North Shields receives the Pfizer-BioNTech Covid-19 vaccine in Newcastle upon Tyne, northeast England, on 9 January. Photograph: Ian Forsyth/AFP/Getty Images

Sun 14 Feb 2021 01.00 EST

A remarkable milestone will be passed today when government figures reveal that more than [15 million people](#) in Britain have received at least one dose of a vaccine that will protect them from the severest impacts of Covid-19. It is a striking achievement. In just over two months, more than 20% of the population of the UK has been given protection against the worst ravages of a virus that has paralysed the nation and brought much of the rest of the planet to a standstill. For the first time since lockdown was imposed last March, the population can realistically conceive of enjoying some sort of a return to normality – not immediately, perhaps, but within some reasonable timeframe.

And for that reassurance, we should acknowledge our debt to the scientists who have strived so hard to bring the Covid-19 pandemic under control. This, we should stress, has been a global effort by researchers working across the globe in myriad disciplines, from genetics to immunology and from disease modelling to vaccine design. Science is, above all, an international activity and the work of its practitioners in China, the US, Germany and a host of other countries has been crucial in limiting the worst impact of the pandemic.

At the same time, it is appropriate to note the efforts of our own scientists who have played such a significant role in the battle against Covid-19. Britain may have achieved notoriety because our government has managed to bungle so much of the national response to the virus: calamitous failures that include our lateness in imposing our first lockdown; the [shambolic distribution of effective PPE kit](#) for our health workers, the pitiful rollout of the UK's test, trace and isolate programmes: and the [bewildering U-turns](#) that were made over later lockdown measures in autumn and winter. A time will come when those responsible for these failures will be held to account.

In contrast, the efforts of scientists and doctors in the UK have been exemplary, with three striking examples illustrating the first-class quality of their work. The first focuses on the accomplishments of the [Recovery](#) programme set up by Oxford scientists Martin Landray and Peter Horby at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Their programme uses randomised controlled trials of drugs to test the effectiveness of medicines that have been suggested by doctors as possible Covid treatments. Last year, these

trials revealed that [dexamethasone](#), a cheap treatment for inflammation, could save lives of seriously ill patients while a trio of much-touted therapies were shown to have no effect.

It has since been estimated that dexamethasone has saved the lives of more than 650,000 seriously-ill Covid patients. That is a stunning achievement and has now been followed up by Landray and Horby, who revealed last week that Recovery had determined that a second medicine – Tocilizumab, an immuno-suppressive drug used mainly in the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis – [could also save lives of people with severe Covid-19](#). Another weapon has been added to the armoury for fighting the virus.

Second on this list of British scientific achievements is the work of our genome sequencers. These scientists – working for the [COG-UK](#) (Covid-19 Genomics UK) consortium – now carry out almost half of all the world's sequencing of genomes of Covid-19 strains that have been isolated in samples taken from patients across the world. It is thanks to their work that new variants have been isolated and their precise genetic structures determined with remarkable speed. Such work is destined to play a crucial role in determining the world's responses to the inevitable appearance of potentially devastating new mutations. Britain is a world leader in the field of genetic sequencing.

And finally there is the work of the Oxford Vaccine Group, which is led by Sarah Gilbert and Andy Pollard and which has been responsible for the development and manufacture of the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine. Approved in the UK by regulators late last year, the vaccine was given [resounding backing](#) by the World Health Organization last week, with the head of the WHO's department of immunisation, vaccines and biologicals, Kate O'Brien, describing the jab as "efficacious" and "an important vaccine for the world". Unlike many other vaccines, the Oxford jab is cheap and easy to store, making it a strong candidate for use in developing nations where costs and the difficulty of refrigeration would otherwise pose severe logistical problems.

Britain therefore finds itself well-placed, scientifically, in the battle against Covid-19. However, it would be a grievous mistake to limit our scientific competence to alleviating the suffering of our own people and keeping our

discoveries to ourselves. The vaccines and drugs we have developed and the knowledge of the viral strains that we have isolated must be shared, as a matter of urgency, with the rest of the planet. Apart from the fact that there is a moral imperative for us to use our scientific expertise to help other countries, we must also acknowledge that we will never be free of Covid-19 until the entire planet is free of it.

The virus has no regard for national borders. As Jeremy Farrar, head of the Wellcome Trust, has observed, [until we are all safe, no one is safe](#). The pandemic is a global problem and we must share our vaccines, drugs and knowledge as widely and as quickly as possible.

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## [Opinion](#)**Myanmar**

# The Observer view on the response to the coup in Myanmar

[Observer editorial](#)

As the military cracks down ever harder on protesters, the west and China must work together to prevent disaster



Protesters near the City Hall on 13 February in Yangon, Myanmar.  
Photograph: Hkun Lat/Getty Images

Protesters near the City Hall on 13 February in Yangon, Myanmar.  
Photograph: Hkun Lat/Getty Images

Sun 14 Feb 2021 01.15 EST

It began with red balloons and ribbons, silent symbols of resistance to Myanmar's military coup. Then came the subversive banging and clanging of saucepans and gongs, a traditional way to exorcise devils. As the initial



shock of the 1 February putsch began to wear off, the first street demonstrations started in cities and towns across the country. Now the [protests](#) are occurring daily, huge in numbers and bravely, passionately defiant.

An [epic battle of wills](#) is under way in Myanmar that the world cannot ignore. On one side of the divide stand young people, students, teachers, oil workers, Buddhist monks, housewives, artists, activists, election officials and civil servants, their hopes of an open, democratic future connected to the modern world sacrificed to the selfish ambitions, historical amnesia and authoritarianism of the coup leader, Min Aung Hlaing.

On the other side [stand the generals](#), Myanmar's de facto rulers, self-appointed national guardians and highly conservative economic power-brokers. Even after they stepped back in 2015, allowing Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) to take a frontline role in politics, the men in uniform retained overall control through a constitution written by them. Brutality, bullheadedness and venality are what they do best.

This seismic battle is not simply about who's in charge, although Min Aung Hlaing's claim that the NLD's landslide election victory in November was fraudulent is absurd. It's about competing visions for a country that, despite a wealth of natural and human resources, has been criminally misgoverned, corruptly exploited and set against itself on ethnic lines for decades. Let's not forget it was these same generals who created the 2017 [Rohingya](#) Muslim genocide.

How this battle plays out is of [increasing concern](#). Aung San Suu Kyi and other leading politicians are under arrest. So, too, are an estimated 350 civil society leaders. Latest reports speak of growing terror as security force goon squads drag people from their homes in the dead of night. Social media has been curtailed, curfews imposed and the police response to protesters appears to be hardening alarmingly. Down this trajectory lies tragedy.

Only the people of Myanmar will ultimately decide the country's future.

But that's not to say a watching world cannot influence events. On Friday, a resolution by the United Nations human rights council, watered down by China and Russia, called for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and other detainees and a halt to violence against demonstrators.

Much more is required in terms of practical steps – for the junta will certainly ignore the UN, as in the past. Joe Biden's swift action in imposing [penalties](#) on individuals involved in the coup and freezing assets held in the US has provided a lead. What is needed now is a broader tranche of internationally enforced sanctions, carefully targeted at the military as an institution and at its commercial interests, as well as a total arms embargo.

For this to work, China – Myanmar's neighbour, trading partner and biggest investor – must be brought on board. Beijing has so far refused to condemn the coup outright. But it holds the key. The US, the UK, the EU and regional countries in Asean (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) should act together to persuade China to help mount an urgent diplomatic intervention. The aim? The immediate [release of all political prisoners](#) and all-party negotiations to get the country back on track.

China will suffer more than most if the battle for Myanmar's future turns violent and the country is destabilised permanently. Beijing already has one failed state on its doorstep – North Korea. It surely does not want another. But if the chaos deepens the biggest losers will be ordinary people now bravely standing up for their rights. Myanmar need not be another democratic disaster – and it could be a turning point. The west and China must work together to resolve this crisis.

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[Observer comment cartoon](#)

[Boris Johnson](#)

# Home schooling with Boris Johnson – cartoon

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## OpinionCoronavirus

# Is Covid more deadly and contagious than seasonal flu?

[David Spiegelhalter](#) and Anthony Masters

Behind the numbers: the short answer is yes, and scientists still have much to learn about it



Ambulance staff attend an emergency in snowfall in London – the measures taken to bring down the R number of Sarx-CoV-2 have almost eliminated seasonal flu. Photograph: Wiktor Szymanowicz/REX/Shutterstock

Ambulance staff attend an emergency in snowfall in London – the measures taken to bring down the R number of Sarx-CoV-2 have almost eliminated seasonal flu. Photograph: Wiktor Szymanowicz/REX/Shutterstock

Sun 14 Feb 2021 02.15 EST

Covid-19 and influenza are both [respiratory diseases](#), but there are important differences, which statistics can help us understand.

First, Sars-CoV-2 is more infectious than seasonal flu. We're used to hearing about the reproduction number  $R$ , the average number of people whom someone with the virus will infect. In a population without immunity and policies such as social distancing,  $R$  for Sars-CoV-2 is [now estimated](#) to be around 3. New mutations have raised  $R$  further.

In comparison, [reproduction numbers](#) for seasonal flu are about 1.3, varying [yearly](#). In the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic,  $R$  was higher, at roughly 1.8. That explains why the distancing and other measures being taken, which can bring  $R$  for Sars-CoV-2 from 3 to below 1, are enough to [almost eliminate seasonal flu](#).

Second, the novel virus is more deadly. The proportion of all those infected by Sars-CoV-2 who die of the disease is estimated to have been about 1.1% in a [high-income country](#) in the first wave, although the risk in different age groups varies around this average.

Due to improvements in treatment, this rate will be lower in the second wave. In comparison, the World Health Organization states the [fatality rate](#) of standard flu is "usually well below 0.1%", around a tenth as lethal as Sars-CoV-2.

Third, Covid-19 has had a greater mortal impact than seasonal flu. [Flu-attributable deaths](#) average around 10,000 each year in England, but with huge variability: only 4,000 in the winter of 2018-2019, but more than 22,000 in the preceding bad winter. These figures are not taken from death certificates – only about [800 a year](#) put flu as the underlying cause of death – but are modelled estimates of the number of deaths in winter over what we would expect given the seasonal colder temperatures.

In contrast, [registered deaths](#) in England involving Covid-19 are more than 100,000 since the pandemic began – 55,000 of those since September; 90% of these have Covid as the underlying cause.

There is much more to learn about the novel coronavirus, but it is certainly worse than seasonal flu.

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

# Rod Ponton is not a cat, but he gave us plenty of lockdown joy

[Rebecca Nicholson](#)



The Texas lawyer trapped in a Zoom filter perfectly encapsulated the surreal working life so many of us endure



Rod Ponton appearing as a cat during a virtual court hearing in Texas.  
 Photograph: 394th District Court of Texas/AFP/Getty Images

Rod Ponton appearing as a cat during a virtual court hearing in Texas.  
 Photograph: 394th District Court of Texas/AFP/Getty Images

Sat 13 Feb 2021 13.00 EST

It used to be that Zoom made ordinary people briefly notorious for two reasons: either they were inappropriately dressed for the digital workplace (such as the lawyer who attended a virtual hearing [shirtless](#), and was reprimanded by the judge), or they had failed to locate the mute/video off button at a very unfortunate moment (like the director who was caught [talking disparagingly](#) about an actor's apartment).

As another, hopefully final lockdown trundles on, this *Return of the King* of third acts – essential, but dreary and interminable – has caused [Zoom](#) to evolve. We are now entering its surreal late period.

[Jackie Weaver](#) walked so [Rod Ponton](#) could run. If the chattering classes spent the first half of the week discussing the Handforth parish council meeting that went awry in a storm of tempers and petty point-scoring, then the world was tickled warmly by Ponton, the lawyer from Texas who, on Zoom, presented himself to the judge as a cat. The brief, sweet video

suggested a rising panic in Ponton's voice as he insisted to the court that he was not a cat, all the while appearing on screen as a talking kitten on the brink of tears. "I'm here live. I'm not a cat," he said, which is exactly what a cat attempting to sneak into a court hearing would say. Ponton eventually revealed himself to be human, and he could see the funny side. "It's provided a good laugh for the country," [he told](#) Radio 4's *Today* programme, goodnaturedly, via Zoom, of course, looking very much like an adult man, though I was half-hoping he might miaow his way through the interview.

A recording of the hearing showed a small reminder in the top left of the screen that recording the hearing was prohibited and might result in a fine or jail term. A price worth paying – I'm sure those of us who spent the latter half of the week muttering "I'm here live, I'm not a cat" to cheer themselves up would happily chuck in a fiver for the person who saw its potential.

Ponton's mishap was a pure delight, the new Julie's iPad, an unexpectedly joyful burst of entertainment in the most mundane of settings. I started watching the US version of [The Office](#) for the first time last week, to fill an unforgivable gap in my television knowledge. For years, friends had been telling me I would love it. I did, and do, but I am starting to feel as if the world is becoming one giant workplace comedy, a collection of scenes written for *The Office* that never got filmed. We are all here live. We are not a cat.

**Watching Buffy will never be the same again**



Joss Whedon: allegations of mistreatment. Photograph: Dan Wooller/REX/Shutterstock

It wasn't as if it was a surprise, but the allegations of mistreatment made by *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* star [Charisma Carpenter](#) against Joss Whedon, who created both shows, were a depressing read.

She said he was cruel and abusive; several other *Buffy* and *Angel* stars have since come forward to support her account. She said she went public after *Justice League* star Ray Fisher [accused Whedon](#) of abusive and unprofessional behaviour. That was last summer. The rumours had been circulating for longer. Few *Buffy* fans could claim this comes as a shock.

It is hard to hear, nonetheless. *Buffy* was about a teenage girl who saved the world (a lot). It was about misfits triumphing over evil. In interviews, Whedon used to say he was a feminist. I've heard that countless times before. It is usually a red flag for men who turn out to be anything but. Will it be possible to watch the series now, and not think about the sourness beneath it? It is an increasingly common conundrum, to wonder if we will be able to enjoy the art without considering the unpalatable nature of its creation, and I am never sure how it will feel in a harsh new light.

There are few TV series that meant so much to so many as *Buffy*. To see that washed away would be heartbreaking. In response to the news, Sarah Michelle Gellar, who played Buffy, [wrote](#): “While I am proud to have my name associated with Buffy Summers, I don’t want to be forever associated with the name Joss Whedon.” Maybe it is a copout, but I wonder if the same could be applied to the show itself.

## Mary Beard: wiser and funnier by far



Mary Beard: ‘Women with long grey hair can make people anxious.’  
Photograph: Dominic Lipinski/PA

Writing about the dark arts in *Radio Times*, which is a fabulous thing to do, [Mary Beard](#) argued that society still uses the term “witch” as an insult, masking a broader anxiety about older women, and what to do with women once they are past the age of child-rearing.

“As I can confirm, women with long grey hair can make people anxious,” [she wrote](#), adding that she had frequently been called a witch herself on Twitter.

I feel sorry for people (and I’m saying people, although I can’t imagine there are many women furtively typing the word “witch” at a professor of

classics who has the audacity to be a television presenter) who feel this way, for whom the thought of an older woman conjures up such insecurity. When it comes to interviewing celebrities, I am always thrilled when I am asked to speak to any famous women over the age of 60.

I am generalising wildly here, I know, but in my experience they have more stories, better stories, and are far more likely to be comfortable with who they are. What's more, they tend to be far, far funnier. Give me a witch any day.

- Rebecca Nicholson is an Observer columnist

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## [Observer letters](#)Labour

# Letters: Labour must nail ‘unpatriotic’ myth

The party needs a considered debate about how to demonstrate its commitment to the national interest



A Labour supporter and her daughter at an election rally in May 2017.  
Photograph: Ian Forsyth/Getty Images

A Labour supporter and her daughter at an election rally in May 2017.  
Photograph: Ian Forsyth/Getty Images

Sun 14 Feb 2021 01.00 EST

Thank goodness for Sunder Katwala bringing some sanity to coverage of the issue of patriotism and the Labour party (“[The problem is not the flag but the left’s needless anxiety over patriotism](#)”, Comment). As the news stacks up daily of British businesses having to deal with the damage caused by the Brexit trade agreement, the binary myth that wishing to remain in the EU was somehow “unpatriotic” needs to be comprehensively nailed.

If [Labour](#) is being perceived as anti-British for having resisted Brexit, it now needs a considered debate about what the national interest is and how it seeks to demonstrate its commitment to that. Kneejerk responses to the leaked findings of a focus group will not achieve this, but Katwala's thoughtful analysis may help to advance the discussion.

**Anna Moszynska**  
Pyrton, Watlington  
Oxfordshire

Andrew Rawnsley states quite rightly that Keir Starmer should use May's elections to show progress beyond the polling ("[Keir Starmer must use May election battles to prove Labour's progress](#)", Comment).

Where I feel Rawnsley is wrong is when he says Labour will be hoping that door-knocking and leafleting will be permitted because they have many more activists to put on the streets than the Tories.

Over the last few months, the Labour party has suspended constituency and branch chairs and secretaries and lots of its most active campaigners on the most spurious grounds. It's the unpaid activists who tend to do the vast majority of campaigning and they're the ones whose experience and knowledge is so key to winning local elections. This divisive behaviour has also led to tens of thousands of members leaving the party.

**Matthew Bradshaw**  
Shipley, West Yorkshire

## **Don't cut payout – double it**

Toby Helm is right to point out the huge pressures on the poorest in our society ("[Benefit claimants face mounting debt burden](#)", News). But an economist in the article refers to the emergency £20 a week added to universal credit and due to end in March as a "vital uplift", as if it were an extra that the chancellor benignly supplies. It isn't. The income of families in the bottom decile has fallen by about £1,800 a year since the Conservative government imposed a benefit freeze in 2016. The additional £20 a week is partial compensation for cuts visited most harshly on the poorest. The least we can do in the March budget is to double it.

**Peter Taylor-Gooby**  
Canterbury

## **Those in glass houses...**

Simon Tisdall (["The world's bad guys are winning. Is anyone going to stand up to them?"](#) Foreign affairs commentary) writes as though the moral high horse the west likes to sit on has not been ridden over piles of corpses, many of them – like the 40,000 victims of US sanctions in Venezuela or the 233,000 killed in Yemen by Saudi forces with US and UK backing – recent.

**Paul Atkin**  
London NW9

## **Accentuate the positive**

Thank you, Anna Tims, for your positive column highlighting readers' experience of companies giving excellent customer service (["After lockdown, these are the firms we'll remember"](#), Cash). In these dark Covid days it is always a breath of fresh air to hear good news. A while back, Anna's name elicited a positive response from a company I was having problems with. So keep up the good work!

**Jude McGowan**  
London W7

## **Pipe down, men**

As Gaby Hinsliff points out, the domination of men in mixed discussions has been well established by research for decades (["Don't mess with Jackie Weaver, boys. She's got a mute button and knows how to use it"](#), Comment). As feminists have observed, the amount of talking women do is often judged as too much whenever it exceeds silence. I used to keep a rough tally of who did the speaking in classes I taught at university and it always astonished me that even in a course on gender in education there was no occasion when the men did not take up a disproportionate amount of speaking time.

**Dr Lorna Chessum**  
Brighton

## Parcel force? Not after Brexit

Your Focus article shows the widespread and devastating effects of Brexit on UK business ([“Border chaos!”](#)). Another unexpected casualty might be something closer to home, namely those with families abroad: a parcel sent on 30 December to Sweden has resulted in import taxes having to be paid before the parcel can be delivered, so a “saw this and thought of you” moment has taken nearly seven weeks to arrive and an unintended cost to the recipient. Present-giving will never be quite the same again.

**Julia Meakin**

Dunmow, Essex

## Kick the Amazon habit

The excellent Barbara Ellen is quite right – we, collectively, definitely do need to talk about Jeff (Bezos) ([“Spare a thought for Amazon’s staff, not Bezos and his millions”](#), Comment). She writes: “Most of us use Amazon, so it would be hypocritical to fully slam the Bezos business model.” In light of the many justifiable complaints against the man and his empire, surely it would be more hypocritical to continue to use Amazon. I stopped 16 years ago and my life is no poorer for it. Other retailers are available. Please don’t let Bezos and his ilk off the hook any longer.

**Alan Seeley**

Hilton, Cambridgeshire

## Scotland worth a wager

Eddie Jones shouldn’t lose any sleep over Scotland beating England at Twickenham for the first time in 38 years ([“‘I accept responsibility for Scotland defeat,’ says Eddie Jones”](#), Sport). Scotland won the first match between the two countries in 1871, the centenary match in 1971 and the 150th anniversary match on Saturday. At that rate, Scotland are a good bet to beat England again at Twickenham in 50 years’ time.

**Mike Pender**

Cardiff

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## [For the record](#)UK news

# For the record

This week's corrections

Sun 14 Feb 2021 01.00 EST

We muddled our figures when we referred to an open letter signed by 287,000 people claiming Brexit had “shamefully failed” the music sector. More than 100 musicians were signatories and a related petition had 287,000 names ([“Border chaos!”](#), last week, page 32).

An article mentioned tracker funds and said the typical cost of an index tracker was between 0.1% and 0.5% per annum, so that “if you invest £1,000, you could pay between £10 and £50”. That should have said between £1 and £5 a year ([“How to invest spare lockdown cash in the stock market ... safely”](#), 31 January, page 58).

The rock'n'roll photographer Mick Rock is to auction three new limited edition prints to mark Lou Reed's birthday, not 12, as an article said ([“Social media means we won't see another Bowie or Reed again”](#), 31 January, page 20).

In [Dear Mariella's advice column](#), an error in the editorial process led to the inclusion of a reference to Mencap, whereas Mind would be a more appropriate charity for those seeking help with mental health issues (31 January, Magazine, page 42).

We heralded a book, *The Natural History of Edward Lear*, as “new”. In fact, it is a paperback edition of a book published in 2016, but with previously unpublished illustrations and a new chapter on Lear's fascination with pets ([“How Lear's rare artistic genius led to The Owl and the Pussy-cat”](#), 31 January, page 23).

Other recently amended articles include:



[As birth rates fall, animals prowl in our abandoned ‘ghost villages’](#)

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email [observer.readers@observer.co.uk](mailto:observer.readers@observer.co.uk), tel 020 3353 4736*

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## OpinionCoronavirus

# Not everyone can afford to save more during lockdown

Torsten Bell

The financial regulator's latest report hints at a bleak prospect of an uneven post-virus recovery



Food banks, like this one in Burnley, have never been busier while many, particularly older people, are saving money during lockdown. Photograph: Jon Super/REX/Shutterstock

Food banks, like this one in Burnley, have never been busier while many, particularly older people, are saving money during lockdown. Photograph: Jon Super/REX/Shutterstock

Sun 14 Feb 2021 01.45 EST

In recent years, the Financial Conduct Authority has started running major surveys to examine the public's financial vulnerabilities. I'm a big fan of this from the regulator of our financial markets and firms – after all, the point of regulation is to improve people's lives. So it's good to see their latest Financial Lives [report](#).

The results are pretty bleak. You'll have heard a lot about the [extra saving going on during lockdown](#). People not being able to spend on holidays or restaurants has led to a staggering £125bn in extra savings. But this report crucially notes that not everyone is racking up the cash. Pre-Covid, 10.7 million of us were over-indebted or had low savings. That has now risen to 14.2 million.

The generational aspect of this is huge. Overall, the number of financially vulnerable adults rose by 3.7 million (or 15%) to 27.7 million. For those aged 18-34, the rise is 40% while it has actually decreased among retirees. There's some rubbish written about income inequality having soared during the pandemic ([it hasn't](#), although the savings increase has been top heavy since it's the rich who splurge on holidays). However, I'm increasingly worried by the prospect of an unequal recovery in the coming months with the rich and old out consuming while unemployment rises and the young (particularly, poorer parents) are left to struggle with higher debt. That's not a society building back better, it's one growing apart.

- *Torsten Bell is chief executive of the Resolution Foundation. Read more at [resolutionfoundation.org](#)*

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## [OpinionBrexit](#)

# In the fairytale land of Brexit, we're trading with the world. It's a fantasy

[Nick Cohen](#)



The Tories – and much of the media – would have us believe we're living in Shangri-la



Trade minister Liz Truss in Mumbai last week. Photograph: Rajanish Kakade/AP

Trade minister Liz Truss in Mumbai last week. Photograph: Rajanish Kakade/AP

Sat 13 Feb 2021 14.00 EST

In a time of bogus conspiracy theories, the only real conspiracy is the conspiracy of silence. No one should be able to deny that Britain is in an economic and political crisis brought on by [Brexit](#). Yet the government won't talk about it. The opposition dare not mention it. The rightwing press won't cover it. And broadcasters fear they will be damned as biased if they admit it. Rather than face reality, we live in an imaginary Britain, a land of make-believe, where the political class act out parts as if they are on a film set.

We have the hardest of possible Brexits because the Conservative right insisted we must leave the European customs union and single market. Every promise they made to the public is turning to ashes in their mouths as a result. Take trade. Boris Johnson and Michael Gove's [Vote Leave swore to the electorate](#) in 2016 that Brexit would free Britain to strike deals "with major economies like China and India". It was just another in the

interminable list of false pledges they made, safe in the knowledge that, by the time the truth came out, Brexit would be done. Yet, even now, they try to maintain the pretence. Last week, the *Sun* announced that Liz Truss, the international trade secretary, had created a post-Brexit “[Enhanced Trade Partnership](#)” with Delhi. Already it had “created” 1,540 jobs, courtesy of the Indian tech firm Tata Consultancy Services.

It was pure propaganda: utter bullshit. No one knows what “Enhanced Trade Partnership” means, the former government trade official David Henig told me. I asked Truss’s department when it was signed and how might exporters read its terms. They can’t. There’s [nothing there](#) beyond a “commitment” to a “long-term India-UK partnership” and the hope of drawing up a “road map”. The UK and India have signed no agreement. Tata Consultancy is already in Britain. Indeed, it was ranked as the “[UK’s top employer](#)”. Truss’s department accepts Tata’s new jobs are “not linked directly” to the alleged partnership.

Perhaps later this year, Britain and India will agree to reduce a few tariffs and harmonise a few standards. There won’t be a real free-trade deal with India, however. Liam Fox promised one in 2017, but could not deliver because India wanted greater freedom of movement for its people into Britain and, in any event, the Indian government is [committed to protecting large parts of its economy](#).

Much of the rightwing press would rather tell us fairy stories than admit their mistake in selling Brexit

The *Sun* and much of the rightwing press would rather tell us fairy stories with happy-ever-after endings than admit their mistake in selling Brexit to their cozened readers.

The government, too, must try to keep us trapped in a joyless version of Disney World. It cannot tell the truth to its voters or, I suspect, to itself. I met Truss before we left the EU. She carried the secret smile of the zealot convinced they are in possession of a truth the uninitiated could never grasp. The glow of the convinced fanatic shone from her face, as if it was emitting a harsh, fluorescent light. The oldest question in journalism is: are



they lying or are they genuinely that stupid? I am sure I am being too kind but my impression was that Truss was genuinely stupid enough to believe her Brexit promises.

Now she is being “[mugged by reality](#)” – a phrase conservatives once used about naive liberals, yet it applies to them in spades. My sources report that Truss changes her mind constantly and civil servants are exhausting themselves as they try to keep up with her contradictory demands. She insists her special advisers rewrite her civil servants’ briefs to make them more ideologically palatable, as if Conservative political appointees can make Britain great again by redrafting the country in Microsoft Word.

Reworking reality is preferable to accepting that Brexit has left us ripe for exploitation. Like a conman eyeing a mark, the world can sense our neediness. Last year, a desperate Truss [unilaterally suspended tariffs](#) imposed by the EU on US goods. She hoped that a grateful America would respond by dropping its tariffs on Scotch whisky, which have cost jobs and £500m in sales. The US was certainly grateful. It accepted the gift but [gave nothing in return](#).

I’d get used to humiliation if I were a Tory. I grant you that, one day, there will be a trade deal with the US, but only when the Conservatives break their promises to farmers and consumers about never allowing in US chlorinated chicken and hormone-treated beef. I am not being over-cynical. They are already [pushing through a trade bill](#) that will allow them to do just that.

Hong Kong and persecution of the Uighurs make a China trade deal impossible, so that's another Vote Leave promise gone

The new cold war, Hong Kong and the persecution of Uighurs make a trade deal with China impossible, so that’s another Vote Leave promise gone. Instead, the government is, in apparent seriousness, proposing that Britain join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. Alert readers will know that these islands are not Pacific islands. They will understand that, like every country in the world, we [trade most with our neighbours](#) and our neighbours are Europeans. We are a part

of Europe, “a piece of the continent, a part of the main”, as John Donne said. The Conservatives have ripped us from our only possible home.

I can see why Truss, Johnson and Gove hope no one will notice that their hard Brexit has seen the people of [Northern Ireland suffer](#) the consequences of a border in the Irish Sea, [Amsterdam overtake London](#) as Europe’s largest share-trading centre and businesses [drown in paperwork](#). They lied to the nation and to themselves and don’t want to suffer the consequences. Their spinning and diversionary tactics are to be expected.

For the life of me, however, I do not understand why Labour and those parts of the broadcast media outside the control of the political right play along with the deception and pretend that the world as it is does not exist. It’s as if Britain were a Victorian family keeping up appearances. As if not just a government with every reason to conceal, but the opposition and media are bound by a promise to never wash Britain’s dirty laundry in public – even as its stink becomes overwhelming.

- Nick Cohen is an Observer columnist

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