

# THE NEW STATESMAN

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## Unsafe Places

Rape culture and the crisis in British schools.  
A special report by Sophie McBain

### Harry Lambert

Why the Greens are missing their moment

### Helen Thompson

The energy crisis and the return to the 1970s

### Ed Smith

What the best leaders can learn from the Army



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Bradford

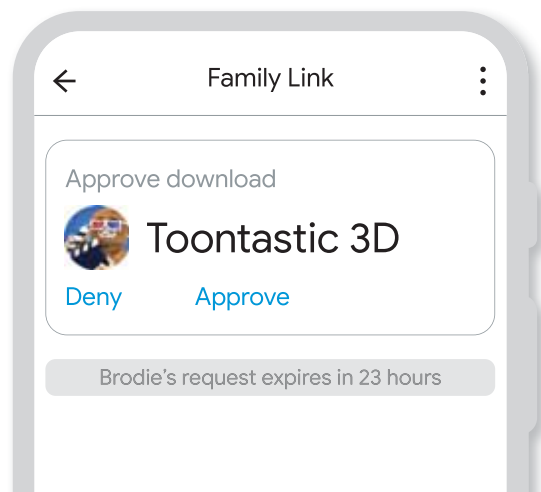
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# Back to the future

At the 2019 general election, as the Conservatives campaigned against Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party, the Tories repeatedly invoked the spectre of the pre-Thatcherite 1970s as a warning of what might befall Britain. Yet it is now the Tories themselves who stand accused of reviving this maligned decade.

As Helen Thompson, professor of political economy at Cambridge University, writes on page 11, energy shortages and rising inflation in Britain make "the parallels appear obvious". The oil shock of the 1970s led the price of a barrel of crude to rise from \$3 to \$12. This year, wholesale gas prices in the UK have similarly quadrupled – leading to the collapse of 12 energy suppliers. Fifteen million households have seen their energy bills rise by £139 to £1,277 a year. As Greg Jackson, the CEO of Octopus Energy, noted in an interview published on newstatesman.com: "We're in a double crisis now: a cost crisis, and a carbon crisis."

People's living standards have been squeezed for much of the past decade, but households now face dangerous new threats. Petrol prices have risen to their highest level since 2013 owing to a chronic shortage of lorry drivers. Rents and house prices are increasing at their fastest rate for a decade. Universal Credit payments have been cut by £20 a week (or £1,040 a year). The British government's furlough scheme, which continued to provide 1.6 million people with 80 per cent of their pre-pandemic salaries, has now ended. From April 2022, National Insurance contributions will rise by 1.25 percentage points, taking the tax burden to its highest level since the Second World War.

Those on the median full-time salary of £31,461, and others on far lower incomes, will soon feel the chill winds of austerity. Boris Johnson has sought to put a positive spin on such woes, as he invariably does. Confronted by labour shortages, the Prime Minister has implored businesses to pay staff more and has argued that the UK is transitioning into a post-Brexit "high-wage, high-skill economy".

Britain – under both Labour and Conservative governments – has long been over-reliant on low-cost workers. The so-called jobs boom of recent years



**The so-called jobs boom of recent years has disguised the structural weakness of the UK's labour market**

disguised the structural weaknesses of the British labour market: a lack of training, investment and productivity. Two-thirds of the growth in employment from 2010 onwards was accounted for by self-employment, zero-hours contracts and agency work.

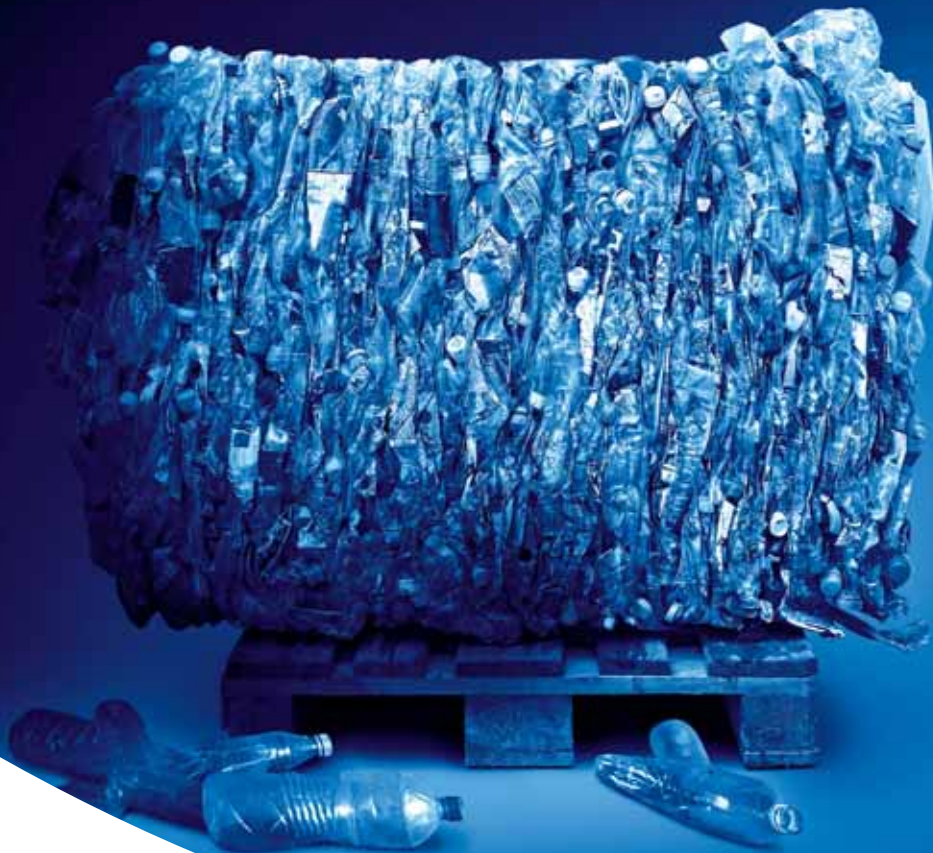
To its credit, the government has increased infrastructure investment to its highest level as a share of GDP since the 1970s. But Mr Johnson cannot cast the chaos of recent weeks as part of some economic masterplan. Having failed to prepare for the challenges posed by Brexit and the end of free movement of labour, the government is belatedly reacting to them.

After ignoring industry warnings for months, it eventually announced temporary visas for 5,000 heavy goods vehicle drivers and 5,500 poultry workers. But as of 5 October, only 127 lorry drivers from overseas had applied. A more astute government would have invested in free training for HGV licences not just months but years in advance. The choice posed by Mr Johnson between higher wages and labour shortages is a false one. Improved workers' rights could help meet both objectives.

Unlike the enfeebled Labour governments of the 1970s, Mr Johnson's party is strong: the Conservatives command a House of Commons majority of 82 seats and maintain a consistent opinion poll lead as Labour struggles to win the public's trust.

But the government cannot control global supply chains or energy demand, and it has made avoidable choices: though Britain already has one of the least generous welfare states in Europe, it has chosen to cut Universal Credit at this time of challenge and difficulty for many. Though UK house prices have increased by 166 per cent in real terms since the 1970s, ministers have chosen to tax work, rather than wealth, to fund social care.

Faced with the aftershocks of the Covid pandemic, the inevitable disruption of Brexit, the UK's £2.2trn national debt and a divided opposition, voters may be prepared to tolerate a new era of austerity. But the government must do more than insist a new economic model is being born – it must show it has a plan to deliver one. ●



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# World Review

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**Jeremy Cliffe** on Germany's coalition talks

**Ido Vock** on the attempt to unseat Viktor Orbán

**Emily Tamkin** on AI Gore: a hero of the climate movement?

**Philippa Nuttall** on the COP26 summit

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# CORRESPONDENCE

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## Letter of the week

### The future lies in the East

I like the magazine's new look. What's more, you boast an impressive line-up of contributors, and the line sketches make them look younger. In many respects this redesign puts the *New Statesman* in the top rank of the international media I rely on. But there is one missed opportunity. It feels like a current affairs perspective that is still stuck in a transatlantic, liberal-democratic bell jar.

The future lies in the Indo-Asia-Pacific in every sense – demographically, economically, geopolitically – and it needs the contribution that the *New Statesman* has to offer, just as much as you need the reality check to the bell jar of the West that the region presents. If liberal social democracy cannot engage with this region, it is in danger of becoming an increasingly irrelevant Eurocentric view of the world.  
*Peter Davis, Auckland, New Zealand*

#### Winning with class

I do not know how Michael Meadowcroft (Letter of the Week, 1 October) can sustain his argument that a party cannot deliver a government by relying on class loyalty. How does he think the Tories have managed? England is conservative and class-ridden; it just prefers the upper class. Our prime ministers seem to be Old Etonians after Old Etonians. Blair was a public school man who didn't get on with the trade unions so was acceptable.

Someone has got to fight for the underdogs. Labour mustn't give up. Even Corbyn won 40 per cent of the vote in 2017.  
*Tim Mann, Waterlooville, Hampshire*

#### Inside Afghanistan

It is certain the West lost in Afghanistan, but not as much as the people of that country. Jeremy Bowen (Diary, 1 October) posits that the correct course of action after the Taliban's defeat in 2001 would have been to talk to the group. But, given the Taliban's

atrocious behaviour during its rule in the 1990s, that was not a realistic option.

What would have been realistic is to have recognised that effective government in Afghanistan meant recognising local power brokers and ethnic leaders. Inevitably, that would have involved talking to Taliban leaders – not as Talibs but as leaders (not exclusively, but mainly) of the Ghilzai Pashtuns, one of the major Pashtun sub-groupings. Rightly, the former president Hamid Karzai said that the prime characteristic of the Afghan conflict was that it was first and foremost an intra-Pashtun war, then an Afghan civil war, and only lastly an international conflict. If the reader is confused, good, because the West was hideously naive when we entered Afghanistan, and only a little better enlightened when we left. If anyone thinks Afghanistan's nearly 50 years of conflict is over, they should think again.

*Simon Diggins OBE, colonel (retired), defence attaché, Kabul 2008-10, Rickmansworth, Herts*

I smiled when I read about Jeremy Bowen's adoption of the shalwar kameez when in Afghanistan. Sharp-eyed observer that I am,

I never noticed him wearing a kippah, kappel, or yarmulke – call it what you will – when reporting from Israel as a courtesy to the local dress code. The cost would have been only a few shekels and there would have been no need for a tailor since they are readily available from any good Judaica shop on any high street in Israel. Is this another example of the Jews-don't-count syndrome described by David Baddiel in his book of the same name?  
*Joe Hayward, Stanmore, Middlesex*

#### How to read Houellebecq

In Andrew Hussey's article "The decadent society" (1 October), there is mention of "the great replacement" theory "popularised by the white supremacist author Renaud Camus... that French universalism will be replaced by the universalism of Islam (this is the plot of [Michel] Houellebecq's 2015 novel *Soumission*)". Attaching the theory to Houellebecq's novel is reductive. There is more familiar territory with France's recent criticism of *Islamogauchisme*, whereby political leftism and Islam walk hand in hand (but with fingers crossed behind their backs). Anyone familiar with Houellebecq will take note that the text is more about a spiritual void in France, which is satisfied by Islam, and the protagonist's/France's apathy towards this, allowing for an Islamic party to become a driving force. The result? The protagonist (a male university lecturer) finds himself quite comfortable.

Associating a conspiracy theory with Houellebecq's book does not do justice to the work, and I would urge anyone to read the text without this expectation.  
*Simon Crosby, via email*





#### Early learning

I wrote in January to tell you about my two-year-old son's interest in the *NS* and its staff through his recognition of the byline portraits. No Saturday morning has been complete without the yells of "Stephen!" and "Philip Collins!" over his Cheerios. I am sad to report that since the (most excellent) redesign, he has shown no interest in assisting me with my knowledge of your writers. I am sure the change will garner many more discerning readers, but you may have lost one of your younger ones.  
*James Vickers, Bourne, Lincolnshire*

*We reserve the right to edit letters*

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# THE NOTEBOOK



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## Comment

### The energy crisis and the spectre of the 1970s

By Helen Thompson

In the 1970s, energy crises and inflation stalked Western democracies. For 25 years, the US had presided over an age of cheap oil and rising living standards. Largely self-sufficient in oil, it was able to control prices. But as national output declined and the US became an oil importer, the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (Opec), the Saudi-led cartel of oil producers, became the decisive force in energy markets. During the Yom Kippur War in October 1973, it slashed production and its Arab members prohibited the export of oil to any state that supported Israel. Oil became scarce and expensive. Later that year, the British Conservative government asked motorists to eschew weekend driving. By the end of the month, it was issuing petrol ration books. Meanwhile, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) had begun an overtime ban, curtailing the supply of coal to power stations.

In an age of high energy costs and constricted supply, inflation and unemployment rose together. Forced to choose, governments and central banks

◀ decided to prioritise controlling inflation. Western governments made it harder for trade unions to strike, curtailing the ability of workers to demand higher wages. The US Federal Reserve then administered a severe monetary shock to the world economy. In driving interest rates up to exceptionally high levels, Paul Volcker, the chair of the Federal Reserve, accelerated the deindustrialisation of most Western economies.

The decade's energy shocks produced considerable geopolitical turbulence. Oil-producing countries in the Middle East acquired a divisive political weapon. Western governments had to decide whether to run from the embargo or ask industries and consumers to bear severe shortages. Edward Heath's government upended Britain's longstanding support for Israel to avoid the 1973 embargo. The Nixon administration and the Dutch government decided to forfeit Opec imports. When Henry Kissinger, the US national security adviser, tried to organise an oil-consumer collective to counter Opec – what became the International Energy Agency – France, not wanting to subordinate French policy to Washington, refused to join.

Energy shortages and the spectre of inflation have now returned. The parallels appear obvious. Western economies are experiencing simultaneously rising energy prices and upward pressure on wages. Higher prices and scarce supply in one energy sector are impacting others, with the shortage of gas in Europe

## Russia is not exporting enough gas to allow European economies to build up winter reserves

and Asia driving up coal prices. Russia may not be wielding gas as a weapon in the aggressive way Opec did with oil in 1973, but it is not exporting enough to allow European economies to build up winter reserves.

There are, however, significant differences between the 1970s and now. In Britain, the NUM used the oil crisis to pursue higher wages. It was striking miners who caused Britain's national energy emergency during the first three months of 1974 – which saw a three-day working week and household blackouts – not a global shortage of coal. Now, trade unions have much less wage-bargaining power. The present inflationary pressure from wages is the result of the labour shortage wrought by the pandemic, and in Britain's case amplified by Brexit. This has spilled over into the country's energy crisis because labour shortages have disrupted the transportation of fuel.

The energy crises of the 1970s were supply-side shocks with geopolitical origins. Today, supply constraints around gas and oil are evident once more. These are in part geopolitical – for example, Russia's influence in European gas markets. They also reflect the reality that the world's largest oil fields, not least in Saudi Arabia, are ageing. But, crucially, these constraints are happening at a time when energy markets are still absorbing what is already a 20-year Asian demand shock. Per capita energy consumption in China was more than 700 per cent higher in 2019 than in 1973. However unseemly the scramble for oil between the Western countries in 1973, there was no equivalent to the most recent situation of the Chinese government demanding that energy companies procure supply of all energy sources at any cost.

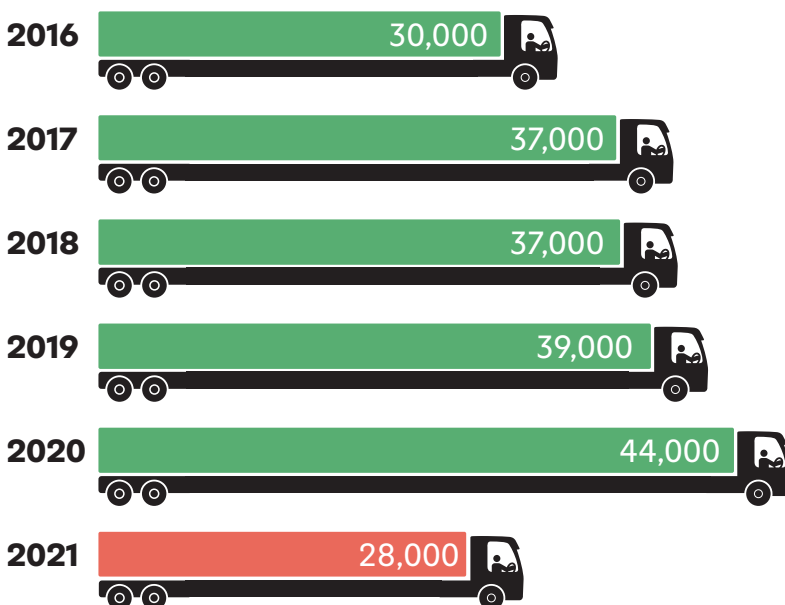
In the 1970s, faced with shortages and high prices, governments hoped to develop alternative energies. In 1979, US president Jimmy Carter set a target that 20 per cent of the country's energy consumption would come from renewable sources by 2000. But he did not want to curtail radically the use of fossil fuel energy. In a bid to end foreign energy dependency, he committed the US to achieving higher domestic oil production. Today, since the energy policies of Western governments discourage investment in oil and gas, reduced supply of these two energy sources is a desired end. The problem is that demand cannot fall fast enough to avoid a supply crisis.

This decade will prove more challenging than the 1970s. Although Volcker took the credit for both reducing inflation and the blame for the resulting unemployment, it was the fall in energy prices that decisively ended the 1970s inflationary crisis. The cost of oil came down because the high prices that prevailed in the 1970s encouraged investment in oil that was more expensive to extract. Conveniently, most of this new oil supply came from the Western hemisphere and the North Sea, ending Opec's oil weapon. Now, governments cannot encourage new production anywhere without compromising their net zero commitments. Instead, they will have to preside over reduced energy consumption and discover that politics is becoming a contest over who can access energy and at what price. ●

## Chart of the Week

### Brexit and Covid-19 have led to a fall in drivers from the European Union

The number of EU large goods vehicle drivers in employment in the UK (year ending March)



SOURCE: ONS ANNUAL POPULATION SURVEY

# The Diary

## Joining the veterans' club, the lessons of the political past, and why "future leaders" fail

By Steve Richards

A curious characteristic of political journalists is that while we criticise politicians with an often wounding brutality, we struggle to put up with even a minor barb against ourselves. I recall witnessing a former editor of the *New Statesman*, Peter Wilby, reading a media column from a rival magazine in which his raincoat was the subject of an unflattering comment. Peter can go after politicians with an elegant force and yet he was deeply hurt by the attack. "There's nothing wrong with my raincoat!" he declared furiously and frequently. I have discovered recently that I am even more sensitive than him.

Or at least I am when a particular adjective is applied to me. In a couple of reviews of my latest book, *The Prime Ministers We Never Had*, I am described as a "veteran" political journalist. I erupt with rage as that wretched word heads towards me like a missile. When I joined the *New Statesman* at the age of 34, I was sometimes referred to as the "youthful" new political editor. I could put up with that, although the term seemed a little patronising. But "veteran" is in another league of dismissive imprecision. Here I am performing regular one-man shows in London and, pre-pandemic, at the Edinburgh festival, more likely to watch performances at the Soho Theatre than at the Royal Opera House, cycling everywhere youthfully – and yet there it is, in print forever. Apparently these are the endeavours of a veteran.

During an epic speech in 1979, the last to be delivered in the Commons by a Labour cabinet minister for 18 years, Michael Foot noted of the then Liberal leader, David Steel: "He's passed from rising hope to elder statesman without any intervening period whatsoever." I was not even a rising hope.



**Prime ministers are much harder to remove than all the speculation about who will succeed them suggests**

### History repeating

Probably the reason why I am so unjustly abused is that when I write about today's politics I tend to contextualise, going well beyond the recent past. When John Birt was director-general of the BBC he argued that a key role of a constrained impartial media organisation was to place fast-moving events into context. Only then could the significance of a news story be recognised. There are still a noble few at the BBC that attempt to contextualise, but on the whole such notions are out of fashion there. Sometimes I hear reports suggesting politics is one disconnected event after another, but there are always deep reasons why politicians behave as they do. They are framed by how they choose to learn from previous decades. The present only makes sense by understanding the past.

### Leading by example

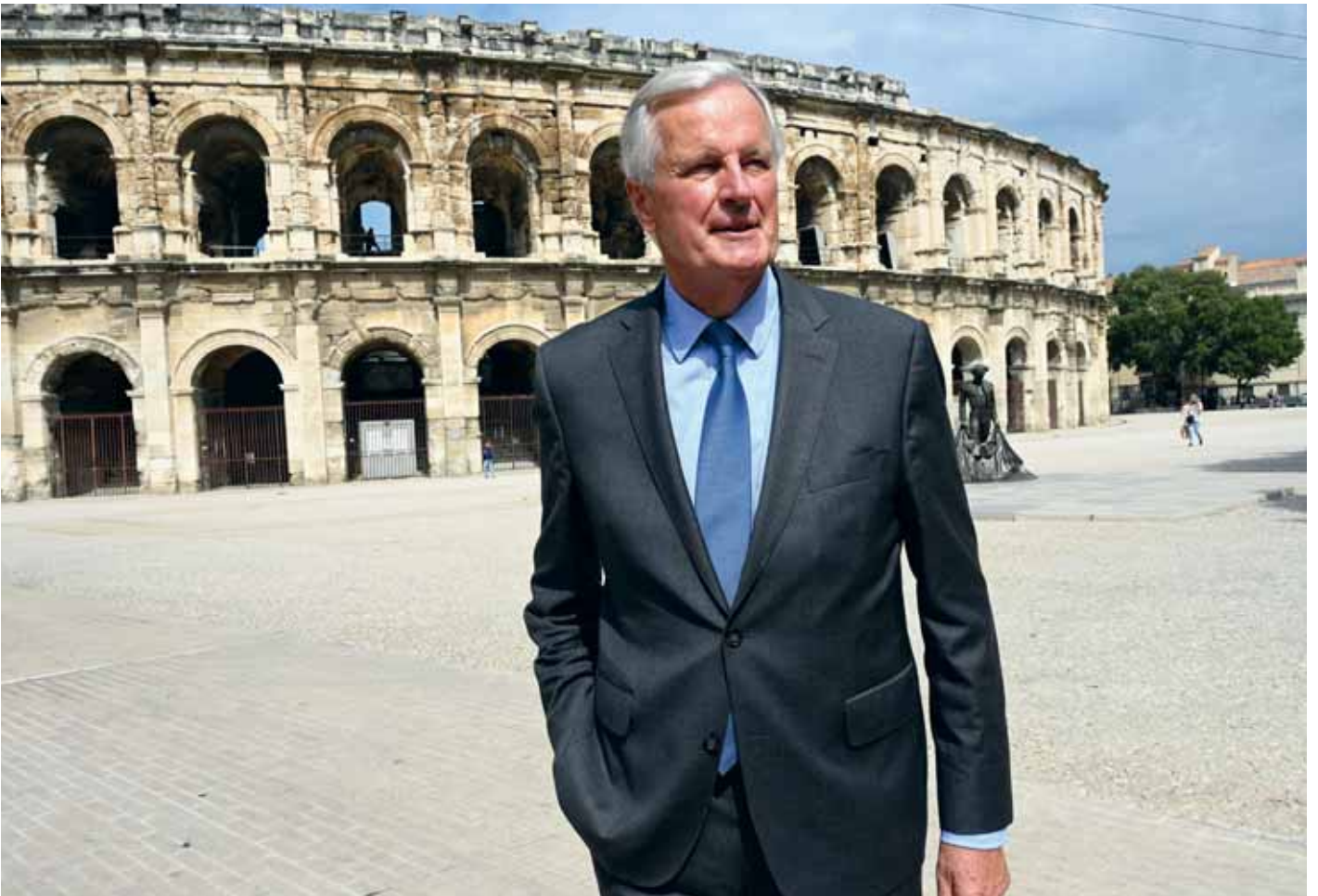
To weigh up the chances of Rishi Sunak becoming prime minister – a current favourite theme – it is necessary to explore why other chancellors seen as likely leaders failed to seize the crown. Why did Rab Butler, Roy Jenkins, Denis Healey and Ken Clarke, all of them formidable chancellors, not reach the top in spite of a widespread assumption they would do so? We tend to view politics in terms of "future leaders" and yet the hopes of such figures are usually dashed. I heard much talk during the Labour conference hailing the leadership chances of Rachel Reeves, Angela Rayner and Andy Burnham. As well as Sunak, Liz Truss is up there as a possible Tory leader. Michael Gove has been seen in such terms since around the mid-1840s. (By the way, why is he not described as the veteran Michael Gove?)

Prime ministers are much harder to remove than is assumed in all the speculation about their successors. I make the observation having written and read around a thousand columns from 2001 wondering whether Gordon Brown was about to take over from Tony Blair and another 500 on when Theresa May would fall after the 2017 election. Blair lasted until 2007 and May was in No 10 until July 2019, when Boris Johnson took over. Johnson's ascendancy highlights the fundamental lesson of leadership in a party-based system. Potential leaders only become leaders if they are at one with their parties on the big issues of the day.

### Access all eras

An early press release that accompanied the publication of my new book declared I had "unique access" to the prime ministers we never had. Perhaps some reviewers assume I am as old as Rab Butler would have been if he were still alive. This is more plausible, I guess, than my having had unique access to him from a cot in north London. But I am falling into a terrible trap. Looking back on this diary I have referred to Foot, Steel, Butler, Jenkins and Healey – figures of the past, but of huge ongoing significance. I can feel that deadly missile heading towards me once again. ●

Steve Richards presents "Rock 'n' Roll Politics" live at Kings Place, London, on 11 October. "The Prime Ministers We Never Had" is published by Atlantic Books



## Encounter

“We have to answer the questions Brexit raised”  
Michel Barnier on  
the EU and why he wants  
to lead France

By Ido Vock

Michel Barnier could not have picked a better week to visit the UK if he tried. As the effects of Brexit are finally felt, with Britain experiencing chronic labour shortages in part due to the end of freedom of movement, the outcomes the EU’s chief Brexit negotiator warned of appear to have happened. Though other European countries are facing some of the same issues as the UK, Barnier emphasised that “in addition to these problems, you have the consequences of Brexit” when we recently met in London.

Barnier’s new book, *My Secret Brexit Diary*, is an account of his time negotiating with the UK from 2016 to 2021. The tome is hardly a page-turner – entries are replete with mentions of that day’s edition of the *Financial Times* and filled with technical detail about fishing rights and customs duties – but it is an important account of how the EU comprehensively out-negotiated the UK.

It portrays Barnier as in command of the detail and the EU as having a clear idea of what it wanted from the negotiations from the outset: to maintain the integrity of the single market and to ensure that no country outside of the EU had the same rights and responsibilities as one within the bloc. While the UK government was negotiating with itself, having triggered Article 50 in March 2017 without

PASCAL GUYOT/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

an agreed plan, Barnier was travelling to the capitals of the EU 27, building consensus and ensuring that member states would not be drawn into bilateral talks with London.

The EU's canny insistence on "sequenced" negotiations – meaning issues such as citizens' rights and Britain's "divorce bill" had to be decided before talks on the future relationship could begin – forced the UK into concession after concession as the clock ran down and the risk of no deal rose.

Barnier, 70, a French politician for more than three decades before he moved to Brussels, is now returning to the domestic political sphere by seeking the nomination of France's centre-right Republican party for next April's presidential election. The question is whether he can capitalise on his reputation for effective technocratic management after a decade in Brussels.

The means by which Barnier chose to reintroduce himself to the voters of his home country have not failed to shock. He has refashioned himself from a consummate Brussels technocrat into a Eurosceptic, anti-immigration radical. His flagship measures are imposing a moratorium on immigration from outside the EU for up to five years, holding a referendum on immigration quotas, and passing laws to allow France to ignore certain rulings of the European Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights, the bloc's highest courts.

The introduction to his book is titled "A warning". The Brexit vote was a wake-up call for the EU, he told me, raising questions about European citizens' relationship to Brussels that can no longer be ignored. "We have to answer the questions asked by the British people because although it's too late for them, it's not too late for us."

How, then, would Barnier change the EU? He has four main proposals: less naivety in Europe's trading relationships; making it harder for non-EU investors to take over some companies in strategic sectors; more common investment, modelled on the EU's €750bn recovery fund; and a "common migration policy". At least three would likely require more cooperation at the EU level; none would involve repatriating powers to the member states. It's a fine manifesto for a politician in the tradition of Europe's moderate centre right; as a Eurosceptic battle cry it falls flat.

Indeed, when it comes to extolling the virtues of a united Europe for French power, Barnier – whom Jean-Claude Juncker defeated to become the European People's Party (EPP) candidate for president of the European Commission in 2014 – speaks fluently and convincingly. Referring to some economic projections that he said showed every European country except Germany falling off the list of the ten largest economies in the world by 2050, he said: "I don't want my country to be a spectator of its own destiny."

Only a united Europe can arrest this trend and expect to credibly stand up to the great powers of the 21st century, he argues. "*La grande illusion*" to which the French title of his book refers is the notion that Britain

## A union without common rules and enforcement ceases to be a union in any meaningful sense

alone will be strong enough to influence the tides of global affairs rather than be passively dragged around by them. "We need to be together... to be respected by China or the US."

Barnier is persuasive when he speaks of the benefits of a united Europe. He is less so when he argues for an opt-out from the European courts' rulings. As he correctly recognises in his book, a union without common rules and enforcement ceases to be a union in any meaningful sense – a principle he sought to uphold in negotiations with the UK.

To some who knew him during his time in Brussels, the sudden Eurosceptic transmutation does not come across as particularly sincere. "These are certainly not the views I have seen articulated by him in the past," Lucinda Creighton, a former Irish minister for European affairs who served with Barnier as a vice-president of the EPP, the main centre-right grouping in the European Parliament, told me. "He seems to be playing to a domestic audience in the context of a heated election campaign."

Nor are voters, for the moment, buying it. Barnier is trailing his main rivals for the Republican party nomination, Xavier Bertrand and Valérie Pécresse, in the polls. "I wonder whether, for your presidential run, you are playing the Eurosceptic at the expense of your genuine European convictions," one caller to a radio show on France Info mused to Barnier.

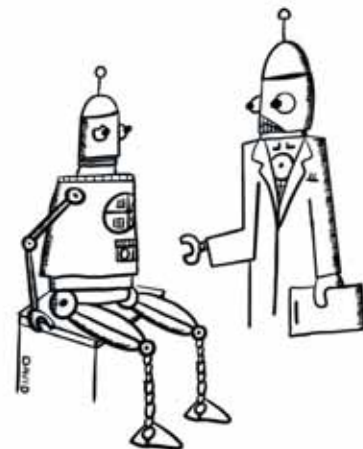
In common with many of his rivals for the presidency, Barnier is betting that the political winds have changed and that voters are in the mood for anti-immigration radicalism. While Barnier was never the liberal hero some pro-European Brits took him to be during the Brexit negotiations, he will have to answer whether the shift from Brussels technocrat to Eurosceptic firebrand came rather too swiftly.

Barnier's argument is that the Europe he loves needs to change before it dies. His task over the next months will be to prove that he – the ultimate defender of the EU's status quo during the Brexit negotiations – is best placed to deliver that message. ●

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*"My Secret Brexit Diary" is published by Polity Press*

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**"Have you tried turning off and back on again?"**







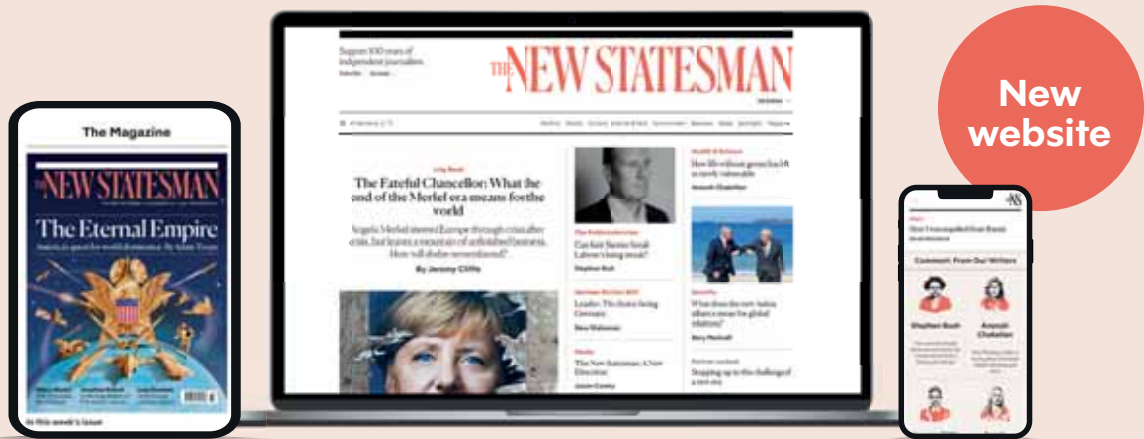
## In the picture

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Summerhill Force in Teesdale, County Durham, looked spectacular as floodwater thundered over Gibson Cave on 5 October 2021. Heavy rain in the north-east of England had caused river levels to rise and flooding in the region.

Photograph by  
David Forster / Alamy

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# STEPHEN BUSH



## Politics

### The growing gulf between Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak should worry the Tories

Although Rishi Sunak does not drink alcohol, he is not free of vices. One is Mexican Coca-Cola, which is made with cane sugar rather than fructose syrup. Another is a love of gadgets. One Treasury official told me recently that the best way to pull the Chancellor off course in meetings is if someone has bought along a new smart device, such as the £180 temperature-controlled mug he was photographed with last year.

Sunak is fascinated by the technology of the future and the opportunities it brings. The Chancellor has been a committed Eurosceptic since his teenage years, partly because he believed that leaving the European Union would allow the United Kingdom to thrive in the 21st century. Yet while he likes to surround himself with the latest kit, he is, politically, a rather old-fashioned Conservative who would fit more comfortably in the David Cameron era. That puts him in awkward company in Boris Johnson's post-Brexit cabinet of culture warriors.

Nadine Dorries, the new Culture Secretary, told a conference fringe event in Manchester on 4 October that her priority was making sure there is a path to success for aspiring actors who want to be the next Benedict Cumberbatch "but [didn't] go to private school". Kwasi Kwarteng, the Business Secretary, has reportedly argued in cabinet that road hauliers should pay lorry drivers higher wages to resolve the supply chain crunch. And Johnson himself has taken a radically different approach to Conservatism, pledging to invest in northern England's former industrial heartlands – which backed his party in 2019

– instead of feathering the already soft nests of traditional Tory voters in the south of England.

When he took the stage to deliver his keynote speech in Manchester, however, Sunak did not mention levelling up once. Instead of pursuing culture wars, he made an impassioned argument against the politics of division. Less than a month from the Cop26 world environment summit, which the Prime Minister is hosting, the word "climate" did not appear at all. The central pillars of Johnson's plan for Britain were apparently not top of the agenda for the Chancellor. The sense of a gulf opening up between Johnson and Sunak is risky for both men, and for their party.

Conservative MPs chose Johnson as their leader because he is a winner. His promise to voters to be a different kind of Tory is valuable to his party for two reasons. First, it represents a direct policy concession to the party's new supporters in Labour's former Red Wall, and second, it symbolises the Conservatives' ability to renew themselves in office. One veteran Tory pointed out that, thanks to Johnson, although the party has been in power as long as Margaret Thatcher's Conservatives had been in 1990 and New Labour had been in 2008, it feels fresh and re-energised. After 11 years in office, both Gordon Brown's

### The Tories are nervous about the impact of the current cost-of-living squeeze

Labour and Thatcher's Tories were in desperate need of political resuscitation.

Yet Sunak's approach is markedly different. In fact, his offer to the party faithful in Manchester made the case for hard choices and fiscal responsibility, harking back to the coalition government and the austerity Budgets of George Osborne. He even praised his predecessors for keeping faith with the foundations of traditional Conservative economic policy. As one Cameron loyalist noted to me: "That was the only speech here that could have been given back in our day."

Sunak's defence of the party's cuts to Universal Credit is also a direct echo of arguments made by Osborne: that the Conservatives believe in balanced budgets and keeping the welfare bill low, while Labour can't be trusted on the economy. It is a line of attack that has worked for the Tories before, when Cameron pressed Labour's bruise at every opportunity before the 2015 election, brandishing the infamous note by Liam Byrne, chief secretary to the Treasury under Gordon Brown, in which he apologised to the incoming government for there being "no money" left.

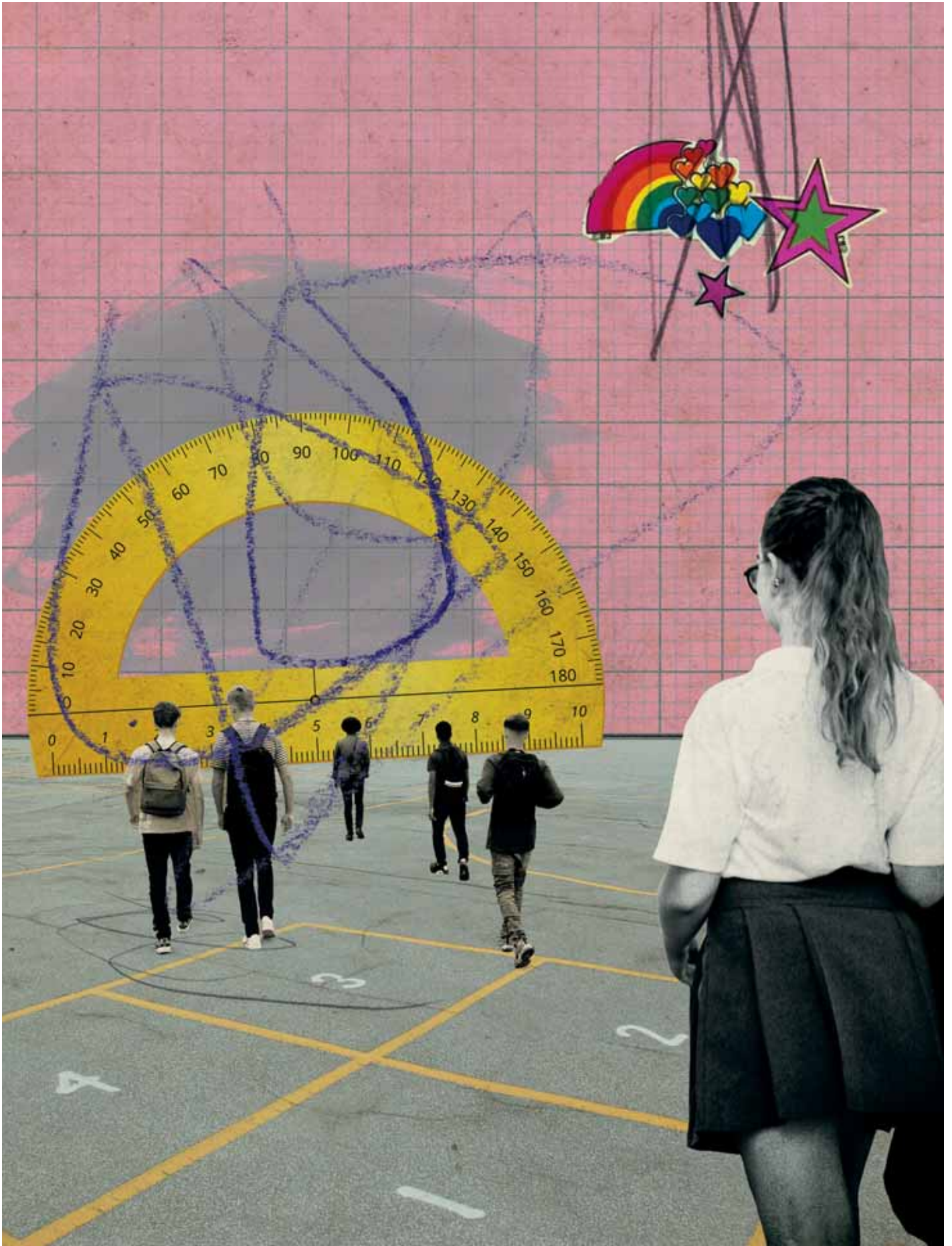
But Sunak had another target in mind: his own colleagues. Backbenchers – and indeed the Prime Minister – often support fiscal restraint in theory but oppose it in practice. The party is nervous about the impact of the cost-of-living squeeze on Tory voters, especially with Treasury-driven welfare cuts and tax rises about to bite. This crisis was a dominant theme in discussions in the bars, fringe meetings and drinks receptions in Manchester. MPs and party officials fear it could take a long time to fix the supply chain problems without relying on immigration.

This is all likely to lead to pressure being put on the Chancellor to pull consumer-friendly rabbits from his hat when he delivers a Budget and spending review on 27 October. To use a Cameron-era phrase, Sunak may be "rolling the pitch" for a Budget that disappoints the Johnsonian Tories of 2021 but which would have worked fine for Osborne a decade earlier.

Johnson and Sunak have a lot of talking to do before the spending review is agreed. How they close the ten-year lag separating their political outlooks might prove to be the defining question for the Tories in the run-up to the next election. If Sunak gets his way, a return to austerity – or at least to fiscal conservatism – would put the party on a path to repeat its election campaigns of 2015 or 2017. The Chancellor's gamble is that he won't end up being blamed if the result of those elections takes the Tories backwards, too. ●

# The reckoning Girls say a sexual assault epidemic is gripping British schools. Is anyone listening?

**By Sophie McBain**



MICHELLE THOMPSON

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## Cover Story

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S carlett Mansfield began taking notes in 2011, when she entered the sixth form at Colchester Royal Grammar School (CRGS), a boys' secondary in Essex that sends more pupils to Oxbridge than any other state school in the country. CRGS, which dates back to the 16th century, began accepting girls to study for A-levels in 1998. When Mansfield joined, she was one of 30.

She kept a diary, a Word document that she updated almost daily, in which she wrote about romances and conversations with friends, school trips and parties. She also wrote about the boys who harassed and bullied her; the friend who locked her in a car one night and forced her to give him oral sex; another who raped her. Even then, Mansfield called the file something like "CRGS exposé". Just before graduation in 2013, her classmates debated on Facebook the titles they would award one another in the leavers' year book: "Rear of the year", "Most likely to beat their wife/children", "Biggest sexual predator", "Best ethnic minority"; she showed me the screenshots. She had argued with her friends about this, but most of the time she felt that keeping notes was all she could do. She was a rebellious 18-year-old who drank a lot; she thought it unlikely anyone would believe her, or care.

After leaving school, Mansfield tried to put these experiences behind her, even changing her name. While studying for a master's in history at Oxford she volunteered with a charity called Sexpression, giving talks at schools about consent. In early 2020, aged 25, she sought counselling – but revisiting her school memories precipitated a breakdown. She had been an adventurous traveller, and had booked tickets to Thailand. But in the months leading up to the first Covid lockdown, she could barely leave her bedroom. She became suicidal, once begging her local hospital to admit her – but was sent home. She was placed on new medication, met her current girlfriend, and slowly began to feel better.

And then, on 3 March 2021, Sarah Everard, a 33-year-old marketing executive, was abducted while walking home in south London by Wayne Couzens, a police officer, who then raped and murdered her. Everard's killing prompted a surge of female protest over endemic sexual harassment and violence. Everyone's Invited, an Instagram account set up in June 2020 by Soma Sara, a 22-year-old UCL graduate, to gather anonymous accounts of sexism and sexual abuse at UK schools, was

inundated. By early April it had collected thousands of testimonies (by late September it had 54,000), which implicated some of the country's most prestigious schools in perpetuating what Sara describes as "rape culture". By this, she means the normalisation of sexist jokes, sexual harassment and online abuse, which creates the conditions for more extreme violence. In March students at Latymer and Highgate, two private schools in London, staged walkouts to protest rape culture. In June, Everyone's Invited released a list of almost 3,000 English schools that had been named in testimonies: around one in ten schools, state and private. It seemed a #MeToo-style reckoning had reached British education.

When Mansfield heard interviews with Sara, she thought, "This is exactly what I've wanted to say for so long!" Mansfield became outspoken on social media, and when her employer asked her to refrain, she quit her job in digital marketing.

On 7 April she published a post about CRGS on her blog. She and her friends had been promised "the best education money *can't* buy", she wrote, but instead they were left "traumatised". She wrote that the school fostered an "unparalleled sense of superiority and entitlement" among the boys, and described how her male peers established a club they called a "rape society". Some filmed girls' bottoms as they walked to class; some assaulted them at parties. The blog was read more than 30,000 times and covered by the BBC, the *Daily Mail* and others.

Mansfield set up a website for current and former CRGS pupils to submit their own stories anonymously, eventually publishing more than 200. Together they describe an undercurrent of misogynist, racist and homophobic microaggressions and abuse, as well as instances of sexual violence: there are dozens of first-person accounts of sexual assault or rape by CRGS pupils, sometimes at parties and sometimes on the school grounds. One woman described how a friend, who was drunk at a party, was raped while four or five CRGS boys took photos. Many submissions alleged that teachers turned a blind eye to sexist "banter", and that victims who spoke out were bullied by their peers.

Mansfield thought that if she presented

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**"We were kids: it was the teachers' job to protect us. Some of them knew what was going on"**

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the school leadership with these accounts, they might invite her to speak to them, and that she might be able to help change CRGS's culture. It didn't work out that way. This is the story of a reckoning – and the backlash.

The government has known for years that sexual harassment is rife in British schools. In April 2016 the Women and Equalities Committee published the results of an inquiry showing that 59 per cent of girls and women aged 13 to 21 said they had faced sexual harassment at school or college in the previous year, and almost a third of 16- to 18-year-olds had experienced unwanted touching. It found that almost half of young people said they had not learned how to tell when a relationship is abusive, nor been taught about consent. "The evidence we have gathered paints a concerning picture: the sexual harassment and abuse of girls being accepted as part of daily life... teachers accepting sexual harassment as being 'just banter'," the report concluded. It accused the government of having "no coherent plan" and recommended national guidance for an effective "all-school response". It also recommended that schools inspector Ofsted begin assessing schools on how well they respond to reports of sexual abuse, and that classes in relationship and sex education (RSE) become a statutory requirement.

These changes took years. The guidance was not updated until 2019; Ofsted updated its inspection framework in September that year, when it began asking schools to submit harassment and abuse cases they had recorded. In June this year Ofsted revealed only 6 per cent of inspected schools had done so: 46 per cent said they had not recorded any cases; 48 per cent ignored the request. The compulsory RSE curriculum was introduced in September 2021, delayed for a year by Covid.

On 31 March 2021, in response to Everyone's Invited, Ofsted announced it would conduct an urgent review of sexual abuse in schools. On 10 June it published its report, which drew on visits to 32 schools and discussions with more than 900 young people. Asked how often harmful sexual behaviour happened between people their age, 92 per cent of girls said sexist name-calling occurred "a lot" or "sometimes"; 73 per cent said having photos or videos of themselves shared without their consent was commonplace; and 79 per cent said sexual assault of all kinds happened "sometimes" or "a lot". (Among boys these percentages were lower, but substantial.) The report suggested that schools should "assume" sexual harassment and online abuse is happening, even if there are no reports.

Speaking to the *Guardian* soon afterwards, the Conservative MP Maria Miller – chair of the Women and Equalities Committee in 2016



Scarlett Mansfield, photographed for the *New Statesman* by Kate Peters

– described the situation as a “massive safeguarding failure by Ofsted”. “We wouldn’t expect, as adults, to have our workplaces dominated by people asking us for nude images of ourselves or receiving ‘dick pics’. Yet we are expecting young women in our schools to endure that sort of pressure,” she said. When contacted by the *New Statesman* last month, Ofsted said that it was strengthening its inspections, but that under-reporting was a problem. It acknowledged that inspectors “have not always been rigorous enough in questioning schools that claim to have no recorded incidents” and said it had updated its safeguarding policy “to be more challenging”. But this isn’t solely Ofsted’s responsibility: the Department for Education (DfE) is responsible for updating guidance for schools, and for implementing the RSE curriculum.

Amid the noise, a few people – including Scarlett Mansfield – noted a significant detail in the June report. The Ofsted inspectors wrote that at one unnamed school such serious safeguarding failures were uncovered that an initial visit was ended and a formal inspection carried out. That school was CRGS.

One morning in mid-July, Mansfield picked me up from Manningtree train station in her red van, which she’d recently converted into a camper, and bombed down the winding Essex lanes to a nearby tearoom. She took out a laptop, on which she had stored dozens of screenshots of online conversations and text messages, her old diary, email exchanges with CRGS teachers and messages with pupils, and

recordings of school assemblies that current students had given her. Mansfield is tall, blonde and crackles with energy. She can talk for 20 minutes without pausing for breath and is disarmingly open – not many people would read aloud from their teenage diary while a journalist peers over their shoulder.

The diary is funny in parts. CRGS has a diverse catchment area: it takes in the brightest pupils from the poorest parts of Essex as well as students richer than anyone Mansfield had met. “He has a roundabout in his driveway. It’s ridiculous and so cool at the same time!” she wrote after attending one of her first parties. “I’m talking rather posh these days but I can’t help it,” she wrote later. There are other things she describes as funny that she sees differently now. She wonders why – “ha ha” – she kept crying during sex. “I thought there was something wrong with me,” she told me. “In hindsight it’s that you were raped, and you didn’t even realise.”

As Mansfield’s testimonies circulated this spring, the school initially tried to downplay her findings. On 14 April, a spokesperson told the *East Anglian Daily Times*: “While our students have been clear that there is more work to do... CRGS is evidently a different place to the school Ms Mansfield attended.”

Pupils’ accounts, including those collected by Mansfield, suggest otherwise. One current sixth former, a boy I’ll call Will, told me by email that, when he was in Year 10, a pupil had raped and threatened him with a knife, on school grounds. He was scared that if he told a teacher, it would make it worse. “There’s a large ‘snitches get stitches’ culture,” Will wrote.

“This severely discourages anyone from speaking out... I was scared that the support would be behind the abuser.”

In a statement to the NS, CRGS said it could not comment on specific allegations, but that every report was taken seriously. “Staff and governors remain very clear; any act of prejudice or discrimination is unacceptable, and we do all that we can to ensure that the values we promote in school will influence the behaviours and safety of our students at all times.” It added that it was “deeply concerned if people feel that they are unable to share any concerns with us. We are committed to doing everything we can to address this.”

Mansfield’s activism created tensions among her school contemporaries. Some women were privately supportive, but when she asked for help they fell silent. One friend, who had also been assaulted, asked her to stop messaging: the subject was too traumatising. While Mansfield understood, it created a sense of alienation. “There’s no one to talk to about this who gets it,” she told me. “The people who could talk about it are so traumatised, they don’t want to.” She was told that some male former pupils were undermining her in WhatsApp groups: one suggested that she was trying to drive traffic to her website.

But around ten former schoolmates, all men, messaged Mansfield to apologise. She read a few of their messages to me. One wrote: “I’ve concluded in recent years that it’s a toxic environment and the same-sex element is completely unnatural and detrimental and without a doubt affected my own development and social skills. I don’t think there’s a place for same-sex schools in modern society.” Mansfield asked if he’d realised that he, having joked about domestic violence when he was at school, had featured in her blog. “No I didn’t, and quite frankly that embarrasses and disgusts me,” he replied.

“I’m shocked and genuinely mortified by the fact this went on and nothing was done about it and even more so that I was part of the culture,” wrote another. Mansfield replied: “As you can imagine, it’s hard to take these apologies seriously when you were one of the key people perpetuating this culture.”

Two members of staff contacted Mansfield to say they had been trying to reform the school’s culture but were frustrated by the pace of change. (Both declined to comment when contacted by the NS.) Sometimes she felt sorry for the teachers – it must be hard – but often she felt indignant. Why were there no whistleblowers? “We were kids: it was their job to protect us,” she said. “Some of them knew what was going on.” After she published her blog she wrote an email to a staff member, appealing for his support, and received a defensive response that he demanded she keep private (though she let me read it). ▶

## Cover Story

◀ On 19 May BBC Three published an investigation by the reporter Hannah Price about CRGS, with Mansfield's support, which detailed two rape allegations against current students. The timing was unwittingly bad: the previous day, a CRGS pupil had died in an apparent suicide. The two events were unrelated, but it meant that journalists descended on the school while pupils were in shock. Mansfield began to receive angry messages from current pupils on Instagram. Some said that she was making a fuss over nothing; others accused her of waging a vendetta. A few said she was ruining their sixth form experience.

Mansfield was upset and sometimes felt scared when checking her Instagram profile. "Imagine being a student in the school who is telling me about the abuse they're experiencing, while everyone around them is going, 'Oh, that girl [Mansfield] is crazy – that stuff doesn't happen around here,'" she told me.

Mansfield's campaign made ripples far beyond the school. One woman, whom I'll call Rachel, had been trying for years to put her time at CRGS behind her. When she read Mansfield's blog, the traumatic memories returned. Rachel was a bookish teenager, a self-described "nerd", who joined the school in the late Noughties. She finds it strange, on reflection, how unremarkable the sexism seemed to her at the time: the girls were rated out of ten and given nicknames that all the boys knew but they didn't. "It was not uncommon to have your bum smacked, or your skirt lifted up," she told me. The teachers often ignored sexist jokes, and sometimes joined in.

Rachel wanted to tell me her story to illustrate what can happen when sexism in the classroom goes unaddressed. In her first half-term at sixth form, she went to a party. Unused to drinking, she got black-out drunk. She woke up in a strange bed, bloodied and in pain. At the time, Rachel could not bear to tell her mother what had happened: she only said that she'd made a "big mistake" and had sex with a boy. Together they got a morning-after pill and an STI test. She couldn't tell a teacher or even her friends – she was too ashamed.

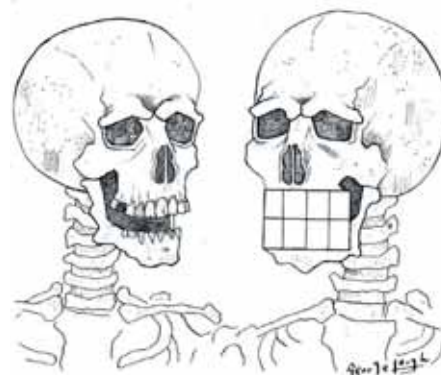
Someone had taken a video of Rachel going upstairs with a boy; she texted him to ask if they'd had sex and he denied it. She ended their friendship nonetheless, and kept a low profile that term, waiting for the rumours to die down. Years later, when she was home from

university, she spoke to a male former classmate who told her a more devastating truth. A group of male pupils had found her passed out, and raped her. This classmate had found it strange that she had remained friends with the ringleader. He had no idea she didn't know.

Rachel started therapy in her twenties, and it was only then that she finally understood that what happened hadn't been her fault. When the Everyone's Invited campaign began, she felt something close to relief: the knowledge that she wasn't alone quieted the part of herself that felt responsible. "It's terrible that this has happened to so many people. But also, you can't continue to think, 'Maybe I'm just an exceptionally bad person and that's why this happened,'" she told me. A few years ago, she learned that a close friend had experienced something similar at CRGS; they had both suffered in silence.

Behind the scenes, Rachel and her friends began to mobilise for change. In April and May they lobbied the school, disclosing some of their personal experiences, but only one received a response from the chair of governors. One emailed the head and received a phone call from a police officer soon after; the head's response had not mentioned that her details had been forwarded to the authorities.

When she heard that Ofsted was investigating sexual abuse, Rachel and her friends wrote letters urging the inspectorate to visit CRGS; so did Mansfield and the BBC. The inspection took place in May, and on 7 July the Ofsted report downgraded the school from "outstanding" to "inadequate". "A significant number of pupils feel uncomfortable or unsafe in school, and report being the subject of insulting and damaging comments regarding their gender, appearance, race or sexual orientation," it found. "Pupils are too often reluctant to pass on their concerns to staff. Systems for dealing with safeguarding matters do not work properly." The report said that "parts of the school had become a hostile environment for some pupils" and that the sex education offered was "weak". It added that the "leaders



"They say you were a Hollywood actor"

have failed to recognise or address a pervasive culture in the school which does not promote equality or respect".

It was a vindication of sorts for Mansfield, but now she found that parents who had supported her turned against her. She had taken things too far, one couple told her – it wasn't fair that teachers were being punished.

The day before the report was made public, the head teacher, John Russell, emailed parents. "We may feel the Ofsted framework means the strengths of the school are not reflected in the report," he wrote, "but this is the measure against which schools are judged – and it is right that we continue to listen and act." Three days later, the regional schools commissioner Sue Baldwin issued a "termination warning notice" that threatened to strip CRGS's trust of funding should it fail to make changes. In a further letter to parents, Russell wrote that the notice does not "as the wording implies, suggest the school will close... we are already working at pace to prepare for all that will be asked of us".

In late August, Russell updated parents on the school's response to the Ofsted report: CRGS was committing to more RSE education and external training for all staff; it had commissioned an external safeguarding review, and would involve students in reviewing its equality and diversity policies. The school was rolling out an anonymous reporting system. To foster a culture of reporting incidents that are "perceived by some as less serious", it was exploring "call-it-out software" and recruiting student "listeners" who would represent minority groups. In a letter sent to parents last month, Russell wrote: "We have been working tirelessly to address the issues raised."

When I contacted the sixth former Will again this summer, he said that while he felt the school's suggestion that it did not deserve the Ofsted rating was unhelpful, the steps it was taking were positive: "With time, a lot of progress can be made – it's just whether it will be enough." There were "lots of good ideas", Mansfield acknowledged, though she was doubtful they could be implemented under the current leadership. She noted the school's plan mentioned Everyone's Invited, but said nothing of Mansfield's campaign, or of the more than 200 testimonies she had collected.

Many of those I spoke to wanted to make it clear that sexual harassment is not a problem exclusive to CRGS – that it is almost everywhere in UK schools. There were aspects of life at CRGS that might have made it worse: the boys' limited interactions with girls before sixth form; the sense of superiority fostered by the competitive entrance exams; the focus



on academic success. But the women I spoke to were also aware that being well educated and wealthy enough to pay for therapy meant they were better positioned than most to speak out. If CRGS were not such a prestigious school, would anyone have cared?

Sandra Paul, a solicitor at Kingsley Napley who focuses on serious crime, told me that, as the Everyone's Invited campaign gathered pace, at her firm she saw a 50 per cent surge in cases involving boys who were subject to police investigations. The allegations ranged from having someone sit on their lap inappropriately to upskirting and rape. Paul was concerned that schools were becoming so spooked by reputational damage that they were too quick to involve the police. "I've had children arrested at school – nothing justifies that," she told me. In her experience, this had never happened in such cases before, unless there was an "evidential or safety issue".

"I definitely would not want to be a boy right now," Paul said, "because whatever you do runs a risk." While she would not deny there are serious cases, she was concerned about what she saw as the unforgiving atmosphere Everyone's Invited had created. "I think the system is fundamentally broken now. I think schools and the police see themselves as potential targets of criticism if they fail to take what looks like a decisive, punitive step whenever and wherever these things are reported. We've created a monster – what we need is a fair way to navigate this for all parties."

Even those who don't think boys are being unfairly targeted would tend to agree on the importance of supporting rather than punishing young perpetrators. There is also widespread agreement that schools are not given enough support. We are asking a lot from already overstretched teachers when we expect them to intervene sensitively in complex, emotionally fraught situations – or to distinguish between the many shades of grey that separate a misunderstanding from a criminal act. How responsible should a teacher be for what happens at a party? Parents clearly have a role to play – but bullying often happens far away from the classroom, and no one argues that teachers shouldn't therefore intervene.

A 2019 survey by the children's charity the NSPCC found that half of teachers did not feel confident teaching the new RSE curriculum, and more than three-quarters wanted face-to-face training. This has not been provided. The DfE's own research has found that it would cost between £17.63m and £58.8m to deliver the new curriculum. The department told me last month that it had invested around £4m – a vast shortfall. Andrew Fellowes, associate head of policy and public affairs at the NSPCC, told me he was concerned that the DfE's guidance, issued in 2020, for teaching RSE could have a "chilling effect" on class-

## "The next steps are critical. It's not enough to say schools are rubbish and not help them"

room conversations. This guidance warns schools against working with external agencies that promote "extreme positions", including those that promote "divisive or victim narratives that are harmful to British society".

Jessica Ringrose, a professor of the sociology of education and gender at University College London, told me she objected to the "name-and-shame" approach taken by Ofsted and the government. "It's just creating more panic and fear on the part of schools, not giving them the tools to know how to redress the situation, which is not specific to any school: it's culture-wide." She pointed out that few schools have counsellors, and that there is no specialist training to become a sex education teacher (in the way you might train to be a maths teacher). It is rare that a whole school body is educated on the issues – around gender equality or sexual violence – that are essential to addressing a problematic culture before it escalates. Ringrose said it frustrates her that Ofsted has remained focused on judging schools according to their reporting systems, when pupils have consistently told her they want support and opportunities for open discussion, not official responses that take matters out of their own control. (A spokesperson for Ofsted told the *NS*: "Of course it is important that schools develop safe spaces for young people to openly discuss sexual abuse and harassment. However, it is also vital that there are clear reporting arrangements and appropriate sanctions.")

Ringrose described the impact of Everyone's Invited as "profound". By speaking out on social media, young people had galvanised the government and schools in a way that other campaigners hadn't. But having experienced an "important cultural moment", the country had reached a crossroads, Ringrose said: "The next steps are critically important... it's not enough to say schools are rubbish and not give them any resources to address it."

Following its June report, Ofsted said it now expects teachers to "assume" that sexual harassment is happening at their school even when there are no specific reports, and to have an all-school approach in place. If schools are found not to have sufficient measures, "the

overall grade is likely to be 'inadequate'". What happened at CRGS was unusual: no one expects one of the highest-achieving schools in the country to be downgraded so dramatically. But it is unlikely to be the last.

In July I spoke to the Everyone's Invited founder Soma Sara on Zoom. The site had recently surpassed 100,000 followers on social media, and she had been meeting experts and politicians to chart a path forward. She was composed and polished, emphasising the importance of reconciliation. "It's so crucial that we have empathy for boys and men, that we're inviting them into this dialogue and giving them a place in this movement," she told me. She believed it essential to understand the challenges they faced; they might not have understood the impact of their behaviour, or that it was wrong.

"Things like 'cancel culture' don't help anyone," Sara said. "It just removes the problem from view. It's important to be mindful that if you're cancelling someone, you're dehumanising them. And dehumanisation is at the heart of rape culture." When I asked her to identify schools that had responded particularly well or badly to allegations, she declined. "This is a cultural issue, it's pervasive," she said. "If you're singling out institutions, you're making it seem like it's only a problem there, when it's everywhere."

Mansfield had emailed Everyone's Invited seeking help but received no response. As Mansfield and I drove back to Manningtree station in July, we reflected on the toll the campaign was taking on her, and on her difference in approach to Sara. Sara was working at the macro level: she could talk about rape culture in general, less personal terms that made it easier to build bridges. Mansfield was on the front line, where ideals of empathy and reconciliation collided with the mess of reality. Rape culture is easy to condemn in the abstract: who doesn't think it important that students are safe at school? But what if your son's school is downgraded, and you worry he might be damned by association, or that some stupid joke he made might be blown out of proportion?

Mansfield had a meeting with her MP, Will Quince, that afternoon, to talk about tackling rape culture in Essex schools. (In September Quince was appointed as a junior minister for the DfE.) She had lots of policy ideas: what if school rankings were weighted by their student-welfare scores, too? She felt relief at shifting her focus away from CRGS, and hoped that taking a broader view might insulate her from personal attacks. For a moment she felt regret that she hadn't taken that approach earlier. But then her characteristic defiance returned: look how much she'd achieved already. And she'd only just begun. ●



# AFGHAN CRISIS APPEAL

“Fighting in Afghanistan had been intense since May, but in August the situation got progressively worse.”



**SARAH LEAHY**  
**PROJECT COORDINATOR**

“For a time, the frontlines ran right by our hospital in Lashkar Gah.

We were located in between strategic buildings and rockets would be going over the hospital, explosions occurring and bullets hitting the buildings all the time. We were exposed to the crossfire and twice we were hit by rockets.

It was very intense, but through all the fighting we carried on working. It's a huge hospital, one of MSF's biggest projects, and is an absolute lifeline in

Helmand province. We have nearly 1,000 Afghan staff, an emergency room where we treat more than 500 patients a day and a maternity ward with an average of 60 deliveries a day.

During the fighting we were getting 30 to 40 people in for surgery each day with bullet wounds and injuries from shelling and explosions.

Many people who needed medical care struggled to reach us. People were forced to wait at home until the fighting subsided, while others were caught up in crossfire on their way to hospital. People would be coming to see us for pneumonia, then get caught up in the fighting and arrive with a bullet in the

shoulder or the leg. Roads and bridges had been bombed, so what should have been a 40-minute journey to hospital took four hours. There was no fuel, but people were coming on foot from all over the province, on pushbikes with pregnant women, all in 48-degree heat.

The health system in Afghanistan has essentially collapsed. It wasn't in great shape in the first place, but now the situation is desperate. That's why it's so important that MSF is still there, conducting surgeries, helping women give birth, giving people the basic, lifesaving healthcare that they need. It's vital that Afghanistan and the people who need our help are not forgotten.”

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The Afghan Crisis Appeal will fund MSF's work in Afghanistan, as well as supporting our work in neighbouring countries.


Above: An MSF team perform surgery in one of three operating theatres at Boost hospital, Lashkar Gah, Helmand province. Photograph © Tom Casey

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It was the biggest misconception of the post-1989 era: as it became richer, China would become more liberal and a “responsible stakeholder” in a US-led global order. As the country has become richer but more authoritarian, especially since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, that stock theory has been replaced with a very different one: that China has detached prosperity from liberalism and that its upwards trajectory as a state-capitalist autocracy is all but certain.

This new assumption is so inherent to our understanding of the world that we rarely question it. I am guilty of this, often dropping the term “China’s rise” into my own writing about world affairs without troubling to justify or explain it.

The habit is near-ubiquitous. In the White House under Joe Biden, almost every big decision is viewed through the prism of an ever-mightier China that, the president has said, threatens to “eat our lunch”. When Biden joined forces with Boris Johnson and the Australian prime minister Scott Morrison to announce the “Aukus” submarines deal on 15 September, the three did not mention China, but they did not need to; the imperative to unite to contain the rising superpower before it becomes uncontrollable was implicit. Other governments seek more of a middle way between the US and China, but one still predicated on the expectation that the latter will end up at least as powerful as the former.

Beijing obligingly furnishes this expectation with awe-inspiring detail, from the staggering proportions of its economy (its property market is valued at \$52trn) and the glittering, vertiginous skylines of its cities, to the cowing of Hong Kong, and the bombast with which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) marked its 100th birthday in July – at which Xi warned the country’s enemies would “find their heads broken and bashed bloody against the great wall of steel forged by the blood and flesh of 1.4 billion Chinese people”. How could you not be daunted by such fierce vigour?

Yet when so many decisions by the West especially – economic, military, diplomatic – rest on that premise, it is worth asking what it would mean if the assumptions about China’s inexorable rise are disproved over the coming decades.

The months since the regime’s strutting display in July give ample reason to stress-test the idea. China is entering a politically sensitive time: the run-up to the CCP’s congress in November 2022, at which Xi will seek another five years at the helm, making him China’s longest-serving leader

# JEREMY CLIFFE



## World View

### China is stumbling. So the West must ask: what if its rise is not inevitable after all?

since Mao. The party wants to resolve some of the negative effects of the country’s sustained growth: reining in inequalities and corporate excess under the slogan “common prosperity”; squeezing the powerful tech firms that serve the retail and social-networking appetites of a burgeoning middle class; cleaning up a coal-heavy economy; and managing the demographic fallout produced by the combination of increased prosperity and a one-child policy relaxed only in 2013. On all of those fronts it is facing difficulties.

Today, China’s Evergrande – the world’s most indebted property developer with \$300bn of liabilities – is on the verge of a default as Beijing tightens rules on leverage and the country’s long real estate boom tilts towards bust. As the China expert George Magnus wrote on newstatesman.com, the firm’s unravelling could send a shock through the financial system of a country that has “never experienced a meaningful decline in property prices”. The crackdown on technology giants such as Alibaba and Tencent, also part of Xi’s war on excess, has wiped more than \$1trn combined off tech firms’ stock prices and spooked investors. China’s marriage of market economics and political Leninism appears to be faltering.

Rolling power cuts in recent weeks have

prompted coal production to be ramped up, demonstrating the awesome scale of the challenge of decarbonising the Chinese economy. Combined with new outbreaks of the Delta Covid variant leading to local lockdowns, the energy crisis is slowing the economy. Manufacturing activity contracted in September.

Then there is that other long-term threat to Chinese prosperity: its rapidly ageing population. A census published in May showed China’s birth rate had dropped to 1.3 children per woman (compared with 1.6 in the US), while a new study by medical journal the *Lancet* projects that China’s population will halve by 2100.

These challenges all suggest that China has not managed to reconcile prosperity and authoritarianism as smoothly as the bullish accounts of its ascent suggest. Unfashionably bearish books that have warned about China’s future – Magnus’s *Red Flags* and Carl Minzer’s *End of an Era* – are now looking strikingly prescient.

What, then, if China’s problems turn out to be more than minor setbacks? This would demand the rethinking of many other assumptions too. Western corporate leaders and finance ministers reliant on Chinese growth would need to find a way to survive without it. Western strategists expecting a new Asian superpower would have to contemplate the prospect of a stagnating one. A Western order seemingly threatened by Chinese aggression and overconfidence might find that Chinese insecurity and instability pose the greater risk. Certainly, these are only possibilities. But possibilities surely momentous enough to warrant the question: “What if?” ●

### Xi Jinping’s war on excess has wiped \$1trn off Chinese tech giants’ stock prices

# Why the Greens are missing their moment

## In Germany they are heading for power. But Britain's Green Party is mired in the culture wars

By Harry Lambert

Why isn't the Green Party one of the most powerful political forces in Britain? Sea levels are rising. Forests are burning. Fires and floods are forcing people out of their homes each year. We have an energy crisis. And only one party has spent three decades propounding the environmental cause, making the Green Party name perhaps the most valuable brand in British politics today.

In August one in three Britons named climate change as one of the most important issues facing Britain, and the world, with the

issue ranking second only to the Covid pandemic – ahead of the economy, the NHS and Brexit. And yet, the Greens are a resolutely minor party and often mired in internecine conflict. Far from challenging Labour as the party of the left, they are still struggling to surpass the Liberal Democrats. Meanwhile, the Greens in Germany are likely to form the next government as part of a centre-left coalition.

Why are the Greens missing their moment? Why are they so marginal?

We know parties can surge in popularity

in a short time. In the 2010 general election, Ukip won 3.1 per cent of the vote. Three years later, it was polling 18 per cent. By 2013 Ukip's growing popularity had persuaded David Cameron to promise voters the Brexit referendum. At the 2015 general election, Ukip won nearly four million votes. In a brief window in the 2010s, Nigel Farage and Ukip changed British political history.

The Greens appear nowhere near to effecting such change. In the 2019 general election, the party won 2.7 per cent of the vote. Two years later, polls suggest it has doubled its support, to 6 per cent. But support will have to double again before the Greens begin to matter at Westminster. Is that likely? Should it already have happened? And is the party that controls a priceless name sufficiently well-run, led and organised to ride the surge of support for green issues?

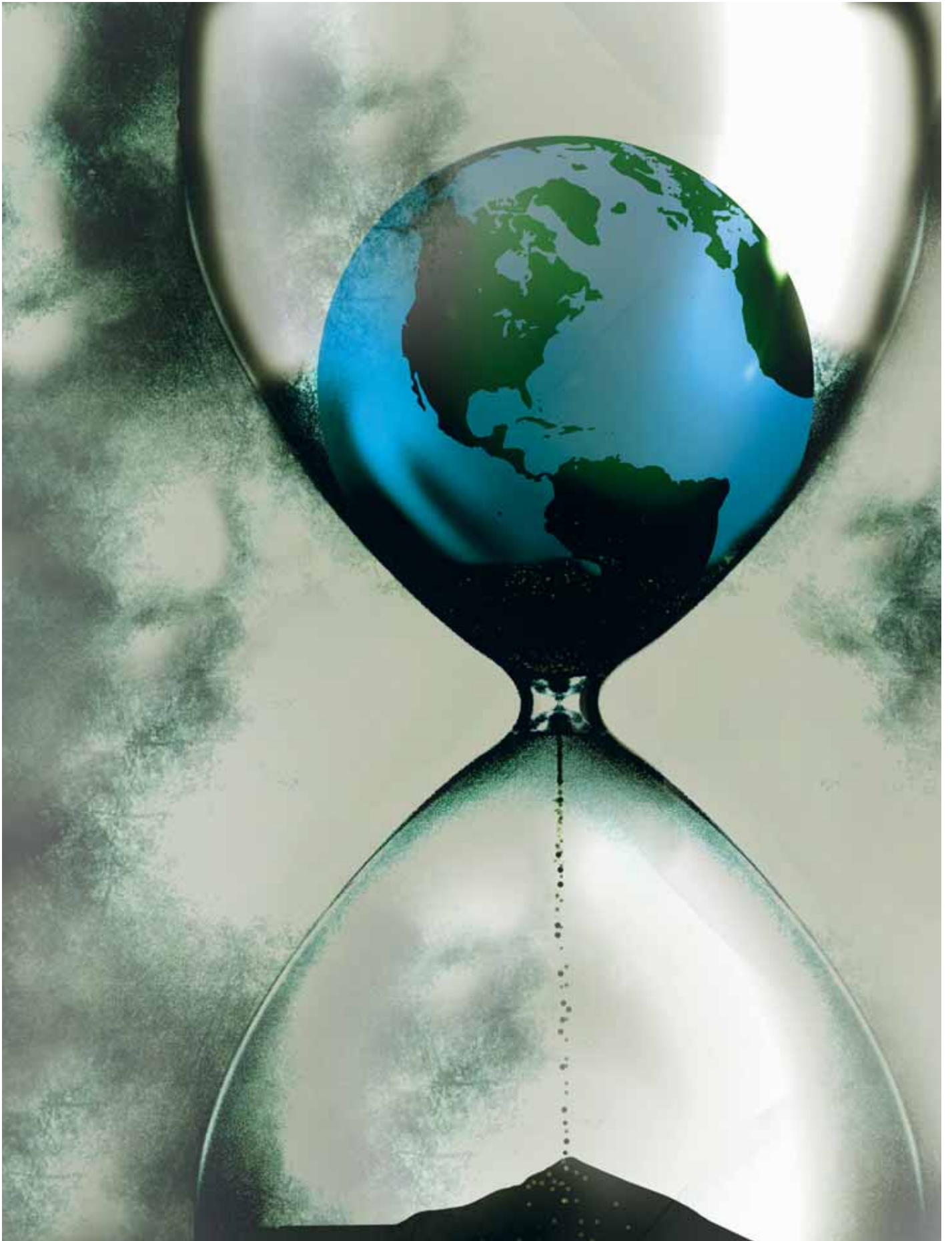
"Scientists are running out of language to describe the speed at which we need to act," Caroline Lucas, the Greens' sole MP, tells me. "We face an absolutely existential threat to our existence." The Greens, she says, "sadly will be helped by the accelerating nature of the climate crises". For Jonathan Bartley, who recently stood down as party co-leader, "It is the Greens' moment. The penny is dropping, we have been on the right side of history."

But Lucas describes the party she once led as "deeply old-fashioned" in the way it is run, and this is holding the Greens back. The Greens are not leader-run. In fact, the party scarcely has leaders at all. "Our leaders are just principal spokespeople, relabelled," Bartley says. "We have influence, but very little power. We have no power to set policy, no power to tell the party how to conduct itself, no involvement at all in disciplinary actions."

Green leaders, Lucas says, "don't have any more formal power than anyone else in the party". She has been trying to change that for years, but her and Bartley's plan for a complete overhaul of the way the party works (which would shift power away from its volunteer-run executive committee, on which Green leaders are but one of many members) has been blocked at repeated party conferences. Nothing official can happen in the Green Party unless it is passed at a conference. Every policy must be passed by members before it can be adopted. Leaders simply promote policies decided on by party activists.

The Green Party, in other words, has all the disadvantages of a bureaucratic monolith without any of the advantages of scale. It is small yet it is not mobile. "The party needs to be fit for purpose," Bartley tells me. "Hand on heart, I'm not convinced it is ready to meet the opportunity that is there for it."

British politics is a leader-led culture. In the UK, elections are becoming increasingly presidential in style, with voters often ▶



## Reporter-at-large

◀ backing the party whose leader they prefer at recent general elections. Yet, the Greens eschew empowered leadership. The party's name may be an invaluable asset, but no enterprising outsider can take control of it and drive through a change in culture, policy or appeal. The Greens will not be modernised by a Margaret Thatcher or a Tony Blair. The charisma of any Green leader will always be checked by their powerlessness.

"The question the Greens should be asking themselves," says Patrick O'Flynn, a key force in Ukip's modernisation in the 2010s, "is why aren't they on 20 per cent? Intuitively they own the biggest issue of the era." O'Flynn thinks that the Greens are failing to learn from Ukip's strategy in the 2010s, when the party's leadership cut anything from its policy programme that "wasn't popular". Most notably, Ukip ditched its ideological libertarianism and swung behind public funding for the NHS. Some of its politics were described as "Red Ukip".

The Green Party is anchored to its historic policy programme, and that programme is not just green but deep red. The party's economic ideas are far to the left of the Labour Party and indeed the German Greens. That's popular: many British voters, according to polls, are economically to the left of Labour. But the Greens are also socially to Labour's left – a far less popular position – with the party's policy on gender rights having caused stark internal divisions, for instance. The party's core policies are many-coloured: green and red, and pink and light blue.

The Green Party is not, in short, a party focused on the environment alone. Its internal democracy empowers its members but narrows its appeal. That has its electoral advantages, but in any bid for national popularity, says Rob Ford, co-author of *Brexitland*, the party is "going to be hamstrung by its own activists".

On 1 October Adrian Ramsay, the former deputy of the Green Party, and Carla Denyer, a councillor in Bristol, were elected as the Green Party's new co-leaders. One of their first issues is to resolve the internal conflict over gender rights exposed by the party's leadership contest. Shahrar Ali, a "gender-critical" candidate, who opposed the blanket introduction of gender "self-ID" for access to single-sex spaces, won 21 per cent of the vote in the leadership

election's first round, polling third. Self-ID is a Green Party policy, which the party defines as the right to change your legal gender by declaration alone, "without medical or state encumbrance". After the contest, Ali tweeted to his supporters, "You may be considering your continued membership", but encouraged them to remain in the party.

Bartley is regretful that the contest revolved around the vexed issue of gender rights, for which he blames Siân Berry, with whom he served as co-leader. When Berry chose not to stand again as leader after Bartley stood down in July, she publicly challenged Ali's position – that there are times when biological sex takes precedence over self-declared gender – saying that she could not work alongside him.

"I don't think it was wise for Siân to say she wasn't running again over this issue," Bartley tells me. "It made the whole leadership election about the gender split. I think it was a political mistake. Whenever we now go and do an interview, it comes up and it's the story."

The party, Bartley adds, has "some wonderful policies on active peace-making, on reconciliation, on non-violence. But the way that it conducts itself internally is a long way from those values. It played a factor in me standing down."

Bartley became wearied by the Green Party's internal conflicts. "We should be the party best at conflict resolution but actually we are very poor at it." He likens his attempts to defang opponents in the gender debate to "wading through treacle".

"There are a whole bunch of people who want this to be a fight, and to win and expel the other people. But the future for the party is to learn to listen, and to instil the values that we say we have. The bigger battle within the party is whether we'll embrace peaceful resolution. If we do, we will survive. If we don't, we will rip ourselves apart."

When I ask Ramsay, 40, the new co-leader,



"Let's help the country run out of wine"

how he hopes to resolve this issue, he is calm, if indirect. Ramsay, who was raised in Norwich and studied there, became a Green councillor in 2003, aged 21. During the leadership campaign, Ramsay's co-leader Denyer, 36, referred to the LGB Alliance – which represents lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people and argues that there is a conflict between LGB rights and trans rights – as "a hate group" for its exclusion of trans activism. This statement is, perhaps, unlikely to help unite the party or broaden its appeal. Ramsay is less provocative when I ask him whether, at times, it is appropriate for spaces to be exclusively reserved to those born female, a principle laid out in the 2010 Equality Act.

"Under current legislation," he says, after a brief silence, "there are circumstances where service providers can make judgements on a case-by-case basis and prisons is an example of that, where safeguarding decisions are made that way."

Ramsay did not elaborate, but his position is obvious: it may indeed be acceptable to restrict access to a space on the basis of sex, as in current law. That is a more nuanced position than the one held by Ed Davey, the leader of the Liberal Democrats, who recently declared that those born female do not have a right to their own spaces.

Ramsay cannot independently change the Green Party's policy, whether or not he wants to, but he will speak for it. He can emphasise or soften its edges. When I asked Lucas, who backed Ramsay and Denyer's candidacy, if single-sex spaces were appropriate she declined to answer. "It's clearly part of what needs to be discussed," she said, noting that there are "people who are upset" by the party's policy. Lucas thinks the way to deal with that is "to try to find safe spaces to discuss this with respect, and a bit of kindness, rather than people just leaping to the barricades".

How did gender rights become the issue that Green Party leaders spend their time evading? Why is the party preoccupied by anything other than the environmental emergency? For Patrick O'Flynn, the Greens should be "the party of David Attenborough" and little else. But that is not the party that has developed out of Britain's environmental movement.

The Green Party was the party's third name, wisely seized upon in 1985 after the Greens began life as first the People Party (in 1972) and then the Ecology Party. In 1989 the party's Scottish branch detached itself; the Scottish Greens now sustain the SNP in Holyrood under an informal coalition.

After the first Green breakthrough in the 1989 European elections, with the Greens polling 15 per cent, David Icke, a television presenter, joined the party and soon came to



**New broom: Carla Denyer and Adrian Ramsay, the Green Party's new co-leaders**

be seen as its de facto leader – until he resigned in 1991 to announce he was the son of the Godhead and that the world would end in 1997. The Greens are no longer haunted by such inauspicious beginnings, but the party remains anchored by an evolving text – “Policies for a Sustainable Society” – that dates back to its founding. The Green Party has, for instance, been arguing since 1975 that “continued industrial expansion” is “not sustainable”.

**T**oday, the Greens are keen to highlight their success at attracting both Labour and Tory voters in recent local elections, but only the former seem likely to back the party in strength at a national level. Natalie Bennett, the former leader, and Lucas both tell me that the party can be a natural home for “small-c conservatives”, especially in rural areas. Yet the party’s economic radicalism may deter such conservatives, however environmentally concerned they may be.

The party’s red economic vision is captured by a set of long-standing Green ideas: a universal basic income; a four-day working week; a move away from GDP as a measure of economic health; and a spike in wealth taxes to pay for the transformation to a green economy. The Greens have been calling for a basic income for 40 years. Bennett echoes Marx in describing the policy to me: “Everyone has the freedom to choose

their own life, the freedom to choose how you want to spend your time, with no boss or state telling you what to do.”

The policy itself may not be quite so emancipatory: it guarantees adults just £4,628 per year, about a quarter of the minimum wage. Bennett tells me she is often asked if she’s a socialist, to which she replies, “no I’m a Green, and a Green is more radical than a socialist”.

I ask Ramsay if the party is a threat to moneyed interests, as those behind the Jeremy Corbyn project claimed they were. He answers diplomatically. “The biggest threat we face is the environmental and ecological emergency. That threatens everybody regardless of their wealth.” A mass re-insulation of homes, he says, needs to be government-funded; it should be progressively taxed.

Whatever you may wish the Green Party to be in Britain, it is clear what it is. Its

**As Labour moves to the right on cultural and economic issues, it is vacating space to its left**

narrowness as a project may disappoint some, but it has an electoral upside. As Labour moves to the right on the economy, it is vacating space to its left. Former Corbyn voters may drift to the Greens. The party may win several new MPs. As Ford puts it to me, “If you, as a party, win under-40 socially liberal graduates, there are seats where there are a lot of them.” That is a problem for Labour: the party racks up votes in safe seats, especially in cities where young graduates are clustered. But Labour’s problem is the Greens’ opportunity. “The young aren’t tribal at all,” notes Ford, “they’re very flighty.” Many could be won over.

In its narrow form, the threat the Green Party poses is to Keir Starmer’s party, which can little afford to lose the youthful, idealistic wing of Labour’s fragile coalition. It is the Tories who will benefit from the over-definition of the Greens. Too many colours other than green run through the party’s programme for it to appeal to the broad set of voters that a purely environmental party could win. At the next election, the Greens are more likely to split the parties of the left than to win the votes of the soft right: of market-sceptic conservatives committed to a more harmonious vision of conservation and preservation.

Caroline Lucas is confident enough to predict at least five new Green MPs by 2030. But the perennial problem for the party, aside from its lack of funding – the Conservatives out-raised the Greens by 100 fold in the 2019 election – will be Britain’s first-past-the-post electoral system. Support for the party, says Lucas, is continually “suppressed because many can’t vote with their hearts”. Why vote Green when every election is, in the end, a choice between the green policies of the two major parties?

Britain’s Green Party looks longingly to Germany, where the Greens benefit from a proportional voting system that allows them to enter government after winning 15 per cent of the vote. But there are deeper differences between the parties, ones that Britain’s Greens are reluctant or unable to recognise.

The modern German Greens are moderate and pragmatic: they empower their leaders, who are unafraid to shed policies and positions that are likely to alienate the electorate, and they have a realist foreign policy. They want to be a broad church, and at one point earlier this year polled 25 per cent, almost eclipsing the SPD, the historic party of the German centre left. In their present form, Britain’s Greens have little hope of making such an impact. They will likely disrupt British politics over the next decade, but not change it. The Green moment is here. The Greens are missing it. ●

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# PHILIP COLLINS



## The Public Square Keir Starmer has sidelined his party's left. But does Labour really want to win?

Most party conference speeches last about an hour in the convention hall and then disappear. Keir Starmer's address to the Labour Party conference on 29 September – in which I confess an interest and to which I lent a hand – lasted half an hour longer and might linger longer too in the public mind. I do not recall any speech to a party conference that made a strategic leap as large as that made by Starmer. It's nowhere near a sufficient condition for a Labour recovery but it was undoubtedly necessary.

Ten minutes before the end of the speech there was a long-delayed moment of catharsis. Smuggled into a section ostensibly designed to mock the Conservative Party's lack of seriousness on levelling-up, the floor of the Labour Party conference applauded the achievements of Tony Blair's government. It ought not to be noteworthy that a party congratulates itself on former glories. Yet, in the hall, it felt like a reckoning. It is somehow typical of the Labour Party that it had to have a reckoning not with its defeats, but with its victories. There was a palpable sense, for the first time in a decade, of a party preparing to compromise with the electorate.

The length of the speech is a testament to that. In rehearsal it had not been notably long. The conference speech is always the hardest in the calendar as there are so many people who need to be mentioned, and so many topics – too many – that would be odd to omit. Tough editing, however, had kept it to time. We knew, of course – or, at least, we hoped – that there would be applause. Yet a few of us sitting in a small hotel room, offering

perfunctory applause at the right moments, as if someone had just played a nice cover drive on the village green, didn't remotely prepare us for what unfolded.

Galvanised by the presence of hecklers and critics in the hall, the majority of the spectators began to clap linking lines and cheer routine observations. Almost a third of the length of the speech was applause, which is far too much. To behold a Labour Party conference hall spoiling the leader's speech by liking it too much was a novelty – and rather telling, given some of the lines that received acclamations. It has been a long time since the Labour Party clapped the idea of being tough on crime, or membership of Nato, or support for the military, or the hope that good businesses will make a healthy profit.

Here is the question now posed. The BBC documentary *Blair and Brown: The New Revolution* shows how far the two principals stretched the Labour Party in order to win the 1997 victory. Following this year's party conference, the strategic discussion that matters in Labour will be between those who think that Starmer has gone far enough and those who think he now needs to go a lot further. There will be a lot of sound and fury from the left but Starmer's speech in Brighton made them irrelevant, at least until the next election.

There was a palpable sense of a party willing to compromise with the electorate

We mustn't be tempted to draw too much from the victorious past. The documentary on Tony Blair and Gordon Brown is a historical film, not an instruction manual. The context today is far more difficult. Starmer inherited a much weaker position from Jeremy Corbyn than Blair inherited from John Smith in 1994. Nor does Starmer have the platform for change that Neil Kinnock had painstakingly and courageously built over many years. The Labour Party of 2019 was in a far worse state than Labour in 1994, and Boris Johnson's party was stronger than John Major's. Since the election, Starmer has had to contend with a pandemic in which the usual rules of opposition were suspended.

Politics itself is very different, in obvious ways. Labour has no core vote to rely on. Brexit has accelerated the shift from politics based on occupational status to politics based on cultural values. There is no template from a previous time that will yield the perfect answer for now. But it is still true, because it will always be true, that if the Labour Party is not regarded as economically competent or essentially patriotic it is never going to win. And on both, Corbyn's 2019 vintage was found wanting. We might as well be blunt about this. It may not be long before the next polling day and if Labour does not change it will lose a fifth consecutive election.

The question now is whether the party is willing to make the necessary reforms. The Labour leader's speech in Brighton offered a momentary glimpse of a different sort of Labour Party. By 1994, Labour had become hungry for power. Does that desire yet exist in the party of 2021? Perhaps not; perhaps the party is not yet ready for office.

In 1962, when Hugh Gaitskell gave his famous speech in which he denounced the European Union, his wife Dora Gaitskell remarked that all the wrong people were cheering. Starmer's conference speech inspired the opposite spectacle; in public all the right people were sneering. It is a law of Labour politics that if the left, or even the soft left, is happy, then the Labour Party is on course to lose the next election.

Labour has spent a decade pretending this is not true, but it is. The left of the party cannot chart a path to victory. They know what they think but they don't know how to win and, unless they win, what they think doesn't matter at all.

So how much will the Labour Party change? No single speech is ever the last word on anything and Starmer's was not the final answer. But it did at least pose the question. ●

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## By Spotlight

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The UK is on the cusp of an electric vehicle revolution. Last year, the government set an ambitious target to end the sale of new petrol and diesel cars by 2030, and National Grid has estimated that 35 million electric vehicles, or EVs, will be on the road by 2050. Billions of pounds are now being invested in charging infrastructure across the country and, although there is much more to be done to ease the transition to our EV future, Britain now has more EV charging points than it does traditional petrol stations.

The transition to electric vehicles is key to both the fight against climate change and to achieving our net-zero targets, as government figures show that around a quarter of the UK's greenhouse gas emissions currently come from road transport. As well as helping us reach carbon neutrality by reducing our emissions, the switch to EVs will, by reducing the level of toxic particles emitted from exhausts, also be crucial to improving air quality. Over the course of their lifetime, EVs will emit 60 per cent less greenhouse gas than a conventional diesel car – a figure that will only improve as more and more of the grid's energy comes from renewable sources such as wind, wave and solar power.

But a crucial element that is going to play a central part in accelerating EV roll-out is underexplored – and that's the role of smart meters.

Smart meters allow energy consumers to see how much electricity and gas they are using and how much it is costing them in near real time. They are available from energy suppliers at no extra cost, and they can help customers save on their bills not only by making them more aware of the costs of their energy usage, but also by potentially unlocking tariffs that reward customers who are using energy during off-peak, cheaper periods. As well as allowing a more adaptable, flexible billing system that better suits people's lifestyles, they're also essential to building a modern, efficient smart energy system that can better regulate supply and demand, predict energy usage and manage distribution more effectively.

So what does this have to do with electric vehicles?

As EV use increases over the coming years, demand for energy will grow alongside it. Modern batteries have an immense capacity and are improving all the time – many new EVs can travel over 300 miles without needing to be recharged, and most can travel at around 90mph. This means a large amount of energy could be drawn from the system whenever an EV is



plugged in. “An electric car can use three or four times the normal household amount,” says Robert Cheesewright, a director at Smart Energy GB and an expert in smart meters. So EV users will want to make sure they are getting the best deal by recharging their car batteries at a time when energy prices are at their lowest. And a smart meter can help them do that.

Smart meters can help automate the charging of cars off-peak and at night, allowing EV owners with flexible tariffs to get the best possible deal and run their vehicles as cheaply as possible. In the future, there might even be situations where energy customers are paid to charge their cars – on windy nights, for example, when there is excess renewable energy

## The smart meter roll-out is going to play a crucial part in accelerating electric vehicle take-up

being produced, and it is easier to turn car chargers on than it is to shut down whole wind farms.

“If you don’t have a smart tariff and smart charging then you’ll be paying a flat rate for your energy,” says Cheesewright. “And in that instance, if you’re charging your electric car, you’ll be charging your car with expensive energy.” The costs of going electric can often seem prohibitive, but it doesn’t have to be that way and smart meters can make EV use far more economical. In fact, having a smart meter-enabled smart tariff, at times of high energy demand, can even allow EV users to sell energy back to the grid at a profit.

“One of the problems we have,” Cheesewright explains, “is with storing renewable electricity.” Since many renewables, wind and solar, for example, cannot provide guaranteed and steady power, the difficulties of storing energy for use at a future date are a serious obstacle to achieving net zero. “The wind blows when it blows, and the sun shines when it shines,” Cheesewright says. “But if we are able to store all the energy coming from wind, solar and waves, and never waste a single unit of it, then that’s the key to a very highly renewable-based electricity system.

“Imagine someone who comes home from work at 6pm. Instead of charging their car immediately at a period of high demand when the grid needs electricity, what a smart meter will do is tell the car charger that electricity is really expensive and the grid is desperate for electricity. That’ll be the signal for it to send the energy from the car battery back into the grid, selling the energy in the car (that they’ve got overnight, off-peak, really cheap) back to the grid at a time when it’s much more expensive. And that’s because they’re providing an important service to the grid, to help it balance and make sure there’s enough electricity on the system.”

In this way, working in tandem, smart meters and electric vehicles will act as crucial building blocks in constructing an efficient, digitised, decentralised and flexible smart energy system. As smart meters boost the commercial viability of EVs, and while EVs help contribute to energy storage and regulation of the grid, the two could become pillars of our journey to carbon neutrality by 2050. ● *Join the energy revolution and contact your energy supplier to request a smart meter. For more information visit [smartenergygb.org](https://www.smartenergygb.org)*

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# In a lonely place The internet was meant to bring the world together. How did it go so wrong?

By Richard Seymour

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Tech capitalism proclaims to offer connection in a lonely world. According to Nick Bilton, author of *Hatching Twitter* (2013), the platform's breakthrough came in 2006, when one of its founders, Noah Glass, realised that the technology could "erase" loneliness – during a crisis, when a marriage ends or an earthquake strikes, there will always be someone to talk to. Eradicating solitude, and "building a global community", as Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg puts it, remains the overarching vision of the social media industry.

People would depend on the internet for community even without lockdowns. But almost no one has made as much money out of the pandemic as the owners of technology stocks. Share values in Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Alphabet/Google and Microsoft soared in 2020, driving a Wall Street boom during one of the worst crises in capitalism's history.

But except for the tech bosses themselves, few are happy with how social media works. Platforms regularly change their rules and design with no accountability to users. The "community guidelines" stating what content is permissible on their platforms are ineffectual against bullying, trolling and bigotry, and yet have never offered fully "free" speech. The way platforms utilise their monopoly over user-generated data is shrouded in secrecy.

The communities they facilitate don't appear happy, either: multiple studies have linked screen time with an increased risk of depression. Since 2016 social media firms have been charged with promoting fascist subcultures, ultimately enabling violent outbursts such as the US Capitol riot earlier this year. More menacingly, Facebook, as it was forced to admit in 2018, had been used to incite the Myanmar genocide against the Rohingya from 2016 to 2017. For a world of "connection", the internet is a lonely, paranoid and volatile place.

These ills first emerged in the 1990s, out of what Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron have identified as the "Californian model" of internet provision – that is, one almost entirely commercialised and deregulated. This was when online communities were converted into tradeable resources, as the role of advertising – informed by user engagement – incentivised internet services to manipulate users. Social media feeds became algorithmically tailored to goad people into more febrile engagement. The less happy the system made us, the more it compelled us to participate. This was the route to profit.

Three decades after Tim Berners-Lee introduced the Web to the world, we are compelled to ask: could the internet have been different? In commercial terms, it is hard to imagine what might replace advertising-funded platforms. There are subscription and fee-based models, such as Substack and ▶



REBECCA HENDIN

## The NS Essay

◀ OnlyFans. But their “communities” are small paying audiences rather than participants. Substack has reportedly reached half a million subscribers and OnlyFans over 120 million users, but Facebook has 2.89 billion. This is partly due to the “network effect”. The usefulness of a platform like Twitter or Facebook depends on how many people use it. The more users they have, the more connections they can offer each user. Platforms that charge fees are thereby likely to restrict the number of users and so reduce the value of the service.

Yet the history of internet technology shows that there have long existed alternatives to our present digital derangement.

Before the triumph of the Californian model, there were two online communities with different conceptions of social life. In the late 1960s, a tech-savvy faction of the hippy commune move-



ment was led by Stewart Brand, later joined by Larry Brilliant. The bible of this movement was the *Whole Earth Catalog* (1968), which offered commune-builders information on how to use land, erect shelters and craft goods. With the rise of personal computing from the early 1980s, Brand and Brilliant found a way to implement the values of the commune movement through an online forum and email system they called the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (Well).

The Well used a Bulletin Board System connecting users on a dial-up network. The community of “Wellbeings”, as they named themselves, was an attempt to realise the communal values of 1960s counterculture in a digital context. The majority of online communities in this era were, as the American critic Howard Rheingold describes, “computer enthusiasts, engineers, and college students”. The Well strived to be accessible to anyone with a modem, but was biased towards educated, male, West Coast professionals and hackers.

The Well turned traditional concerns on the left – about computing and its relationship to military power – on their head. During the Cold War, computing and cybernetics had emerged from the same military-industrial complex that had produced nuclear bombs. The idea that social networks were webs of information, later called the “information society”, was a weapon of war developed in government-sponsored research laboratories such as the Radiation Laboratory at MIT.

But according to Fred Turner in *From Counterculture to Cyberculture* (2006), by appropriating these new communications technologies the Well made the ambitions of commune-builders “commensurate with the technological achievements of mainstream America”. The success of the Well in providing users with friendship, emergency support and communities for hobbyists and political chat entered into legend.

Intriguingly, however, part of what made the Well so successful was what makes it distinct from the internet today. It encouraged users to combine online discussion with “fleshmeets” – meeting in person. This is unlike the internet now, where online discussion largely replaces physical encounters.

The “failure” of the modern internet is sometimes blamed on the hippy values that survived in the Well and in hacker communities on the US West Coast during the 1980s. The computer scientist Moshe Vardi argues that the hippy belief in sharing, the idea that “information wants to be free”, not only created an information commons but also produced a “tragedy of the commons” in which individual users exploit communal resources for their own purposes. Another prominent computer scientist, Jaron Lanier, similarly claims that the ideology of “free information”

left tech firms with little financial choice but to fund their businesses through advertising.

This criticism overstates the hippy foundations both of the internet and of the Well itself. Stewart Brand was earning a fortune working as a conference organiser for companies like Shell, Volvo and AT&T soon after he launched the Well; his co-founder Larry Brilliant was a multi-millionaire who owned a company that made computer conferencing systems. Their vision of “networked entrepreneurship”, which they introduced to the World Economic Forum in 1996, made the liberal values of the counterculture compatible with the right-wing libertarianism of tech stockholders and executives. By conceiving of the internet as an electronic agora, a marketplace where people could speak freely without censorship, they promised that the technology provided a form of self-determination. One could experiment with identities, sexualities and lifestyles in a free virtual space. But it would be self-determination on the terms of the free market, with minimal government regulation.

For all of the hackers and tech enthusiasts who had provided free labour and invention on the West Coast during the 1980s, the money and infrastructure of the early internet came from the US state looking for ways to enhance military domination and industry. Everything from packet-switching technology – which helps transmit data across networks – to the iPhone went through phases of public sector development and private investment.

But there was nothing inevitable about online communities being captured for commercial ends. This happened as a result of decisions made in Washington, DC, beginning with the wave of telecom deregulations in the 1980s. In the 1990s, the Clinton administration then rolled back limitations on commercial use of the internet, and transferred innovations developed by the public sector to private companies. This was part of the broader political programme of Bill Clinton’s New Democrats, which favoured extensive privatisation.

The major beneficiary of this Web 1.0 was America Online (AOL), which was the first to experiment with commodifying online communities. It did so by using the free labour of over 10,000 volunteers to make its message boards turn a profit. But it was Google, and later Facebook and Twitter, that established the advertising model based on extracting data from users. The social industry, where social life is turned into profit, was born.

Was the communal dream of the internet compromised from the beginning? It is telling that the idea of the online community was phrased in the language of the “electronic frontier” and “virtual homesteading”. This is the internet as settler-colonialism – the

dreams found among early Quakers fleeing to the New World, or hippies forming rural communes in the 1960s, that utopias can be built by sidestepping messy social struggles. In reality, there is no escape: they brought the old worlds with them.

In the 1970s, long before the establishment of Silicon Valley, the French state had pioneered its own national online system: the internet before the internet. It was called the *Médium interactif par numérisation d'information téléphonique* (Minitel). After all but leaving Nato in 1966, the French state anticipated the “computerisation of society” and began intensive research into its own version of the communications networks that were being explored by the US military.

Minitel emerged from this research in 1981. It was a public sector-owned videotex service, delivered on a small, sleek, brown box with a keyboard that flipped out to reveal a screen. Users could get the terminal free from their local authority and pay a small usage fee to access online pages of text and images. It was an open platform, guaranteed by the public sector. Anyone could set up the equivalent of a website, a service, provided they registered to do so. Users could shop, chat, book concert tickets, play games, check their bank accounts and even – foreshadowing the “smart home” – operate remote-control thermostats and appliances. It was an enormous success. By the mid-1990s there were 6.5 million Minitel terminals in use.

Although it was developed to help modernise the French economy, it was through Minitel that a new left cyber-utopianism emerged. In 1986 social movement organisations created their own Minitel service: 36-15 Alter. It combined 25 associations representing farmers, anti-racist students, psychiatric patients and others, who paid the membership fee and managed content collectively. In the same year, student protesters used the web service provided by the left-wing daily *Libération* to organise protests against education minister Alain Devaquet’s reforms to the university system, forcing his resignation. Two years later, striking nurses used Minitel to coordinate their industrial action against low wages and staff shortages. The psychotherapist and philosopher Félix Guattari commended the way the nurses used Minitel for “transversal communication”, and looked forward to a “post-media era”. No longer would people rely on mass media, with its “element of suggestion”.

Minitel was not a leftist utopia, but a state-maintained free market. And because its infrastructure was not commercialised, and there was no way to profit from clicks, it did not lead to the model of addiction and trolling that characterises the social industry today.

## Social media changes who we are and how we interact – this is real political power

Drawing on the early success of Minitel, an alternative to the Californian ideology momentarily presented itself in the early 1990s. France Télécom (known as Orange today), was the nation’s publicly owned telecommunications utility. Hoping to ingratiate itself with the West Coast tech scene, it hired John Coate, one of the founders of the Well, to develop a new internet service.

The end of the Cold War, and the global ascendancy of the US, had accelerated the privatisation of industries and economies. Instead of fusing a public sector internet service with the grass-roots community-building that was flourishing on the West Coast, France Télécom merely developed another proprietary service for the wealthy called “101 Online”, comparable to the services then offered by CompuServe and AOL. It flopped.

So, too, did Minitel. The lack of adequate investment meant that it was lagging behind technologically and in no condition to compete with the World Wide Web when it emerged in 1991. The government ceased to provide terminals free of charge, while the European Commission recommended that EU states adopt what was essentially the Californian “free market” model of internet provision. Soon, Minitel terminals were outmoded by the spread of mobile phones, and yet the system remained surprisingly popular until it was retired in 2012.



“Forks!”

What chance is there for major internet reform, now that the “free market” enthusiasms of the 1990s have given way to overpowering corporate monopoly? Even the slightest tweak to regulations provokes the wrath of the social industry bosses. When in 2014 the Spanish government tried to impose an intellectual property law forcing Google to pay news providers for links and excerpts provided on Google News, the firm announced that it would shut down its service in Spain. A similar move by the Australian government led to Facebook temporarily banning news pages on its platform in that country earlier this year.

Despite American liberals’ ire over Big Tech, the Biden administration is likely to preserve industry power. Even with the appointments of two prominent antitrust crusaders – Tim Wu to the National Economic Council and Lina Khan to the Federal Trade Commission – Biden’s team is stacked with industry representatives, and is lobbied hard behind the scenes. This is no surprise: the Democratic Party is close to Big Tech. The Clinton administration laid the foundations for globalising the internet on American terms, while the Obama administration enabled the social giants, even while struggling with them over the state’s rights to user data – the justice department, for example, demanded that Twitter hand over access to the accounts of WikiLeaks volunteers.

The power of the social industry is political, not just economic. Although social media platforms operate for profit, they also create human communities. They don’t organise us as a market or a democracy: rather, they encourage us to accumulate likes, shares and retweets, to build followings and behave like celebrities. This feverish, competitive world is lucrative, but it also changes who we are and how we socialise – this is real political power. Our dependence on these platforms, and the social life they promote, perpetuates our civic impoverishment. It leaves us disorganised, dependent on professionals and defenceless against power: what sociologist Theda Skocpol calls “diminished democracy”.

Yet in the 20th century, as Skocpol writes, hundreds and thousands of civic organisations were run on a democratic, federal basis. We can do the same with online platforms. Business empires such as Facebook and Google are unlikely to be taken into public ownership. But it would be possible to experiment with digital cooperatives, eroding the grip of these behemoths and dispelling the myth that our internet is inevitable. ●

Richard Seymour is the author of *“The Twittering Machine”* (The Indigo Press)

# LOUISE PERRY



## Out of the Ordinary The Met Police is in disgrace – but its problems are decades in the making

Since she took on the role of commissioner of the Metropolitan Police in 2017, Cressida Dick has endured a succession of crises, and the latest is worse than most. The kidnap, rape and murder of 33-year-old Sarah Everard by Wayne Couzens, a serving Met police officer, is a disgrace and a humiliation, both for Dick and for her police force. The Met's reputation was worsened by the shambolic policing of the vigil held for Everard in south London in March, and by the absurd recent statements advising women to "wave down a bus" if stopped by a police officer they do not trust.

The Met is facing accusations of institutional misogyny, and the calls for radical action that critics have been making for some time have grown markedly stronger. Safeguarding procedures can always be strengthened, just as they were after the Harold Shipman and Baby P cases; Priti Patel announced on 5 October that there will be a public inquiry into the "systematic failures" that allowed Couzens to remain a police officer after incidents that now appear to foreshadow Everard's murder. But doing so will not make the Met's crisis go away, because the larger crisis in policing existed long before Couzens committed his dreadful crimes – in fact, it was brewing even before he was born.

"The function of policing is essentially to regulate and protect the social order, using legitimate force if necessary," wrote the criminologist Robert Reiner in a now 30-year-old paper on the precipitous fall in public respect for the police since the mid-20th century. Although the police

maintain a fairly high level of public support – interestingly, the demographic with most confidence in their local police is Asian women – they have lost the faith of a particularly powerful group, what Reiner refers to as "the chattering classes".

This souring of the relationship between the opinion-forming elites and the police has formed part of the historical phenomenon that Ralph Miliband termed "de-subordination": the decline in traditional patterns of unquestioning acceptance of authority. The police and their work remain fascinating – note the many films, TV dramas and novels with police protagonists – but they are no longer considered legitimate objects of deference.

The process of de-subordination has occurred across much of the Western world. The United States, France, Australia and Canada are all in the midst of conflicts over the conduct of their police forces, despite significant variation in how these forces operate. While misconduct demands punishment, and there will always be scope for reform, the problems besetting these societies go much deeper than any particular instances of police malpractice.

The function of policing is to protect the social order, so when we find ourselves in political tumult, and the preferred form of social order is contested, it shouldn't surprise us that the police are caught in the crossfire. They are confronted with a range of social phenomena that don't sit comfortably with what the American political writer Wesley Yang refers to as "successor ideology".

This is the ideology that has emerged triumphant out of the post-1960s

cultural revolution and is now riding high in universities, NGOs and much of the media. Successor ideology prizes egalitarianism, pacifism and gender equality, none of which the police can provide, given the nature of their task. Patterns of offending are not and never have been egalitarian, since they vary significantly according to sex, race, age and class.

One can call to "defund the police" but there will always be instances when force is required, and social workers, for example, cannot legitimately use force – only the police can. A pacifist police force is an oxymoron since the police must use "legitimate force" to carry out their role. Most police officers are male, and seem likely to remain so, given that the people they arrest are also mostly male, and almost all men are stronger than almost all women.

My guess is that the recent focus on recruiting graduates into this traditionally blue-collar profession is at least partly motivated by the hope that media commentators might be softer on a police force that is more like them and shares their values; graduates are more likely than non-graduates to have absorbed the commitment to successor ideology that prevails in universities. More than a third of top journalists went to Oxbridge, whereas until recently 62 per cent of police recruits didn't have a degree. This strategy has been combined with sometimes cringeworthy efforts to make the police look superficially more progressive, such as the rainbows and stars daubed on some police cars, apparently in a display of inclusivity.

I doubt that any of this will soothe the fiercest critics of Cressida Dick. Senior police are attempting a corporate makeover of a profession that is fundamentally different from any other because its function is to maintain social order, using violence when necessary. Those who present an alternative vision of social order are not likely to be fooled by a few rainbows and stars.

There have been similarly appalling cases in public institutions of comparable stature – including NHS general practice and the Shipman case – but the outcry the Everard tragedy has caused is unique. This inconsistency of response demonstrates that, with enough public trust, an institution can withstand a single horrific case. The Met is foundering because its status was in tatters long before the terrible murder of Sarah Everard. ●



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# Books

## What the best leaders know

A British Army commander illuminates the wisdom and moral courage that produces effective leadership

By Ed Smith

This excellent book sustains an implied compliment to the reader. Instead of proposing a glib answer to the problem and challenge of leadership, *The Habit of Excellence* explores a series of fundamental tensions that all leaders must manage. But those tensions and balances can never be perfectly resolved. Langley Sharp, a lieutenant colonel in the British army, takes us not only into the heart of battle, but also into the heart of the matter: leadership is messy, never-ending and full of painful trade-offs. Indeed, if leadership doesn't feel difficult, it probably isn't happening at all.

This book inverts the water-cooler/sound-bite genre of popular non-fiction. Instead of taking a complex idea and repackaging it as gloriously simple and contrarian, it takes a popular concept and explores its complexity and subtlety.

Sharp outlines a series of balances that effective leaders usually maintain and nurture: planning versus instinct; tradition in tension with innovation; loyalty to a subgroup (in the army's case, the regiment) yet also allegiance to the whole (the army); having a baseline of compliance yet leaving room for mavericks; the demands of professionalism in tension with the need for space and freshness; the encouragement of risk-taking within a context of responsibility. As always, finding the appropriate balance in each of these situations relies, above all, on good judgement.



Best laid plans: Winston Churchill and Field Marshal Montgomery (centre) in France after the Allied invasion of Normandy, 22 July 1944

The origin of the book reveals another tension: between theory and practice. “You will be called on later to be the brain of an army,” a French general told young officers over a century ago, “So I say to you today: learn to think.” Sharp is the head of the Centre for Army Leadership (CAL) at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst. His task is to provide and refine intellectual models that help leaders to make better decisions. The army, however, has been training its future leaders at Sandhurst for centuries; CAL is only a few decades old. *The Habit of Excellence* is therefore an expression of a relatively recent mission: to provide a useful theoretical framework that unites and also interacts with the historical patchwork of inherited wisdom and practice.

One trait of effective leadership is giving due respect to different types of knowledge: what is learned in the abstract as well as what is acquired from experience. There should always be two-way traffic, with theory and practice challenging and refreshing each other. Appropriately, there are two statues above the famous steps of Old College at Sandhurst: Mars and Minerva, god of war and the goddess of wisdom.

At Sandhurst the army’s past and future intersect. It is a mistake to think that the past always holds the whip hand in that conversation. “Do not let us be mesmerised by what worked in past wars,” Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery wrote in 1954. “We must take off our hat to the past and roll up our sleeves for the future.” Symbol and ceremony – cap, badge and parade – are effective tools for creating a sense of identity and belonging. They should not be confused with living in the past. “Modernisation is continuous,” Sharp writes, “and must move at the same speed as the environment that surrounds it.” That is why the civilian descriptor “moderniser” is so limited. Everyone in power should be a moderniser – to an appropriate degree. Tradition and innovation cannot be separated: every innovator must recognise aspects of tradition to protect; every traditionalist must know when it’s time to concede ground and move on.

The doctrine of “mission command” is the army’s framework for managing another tension: the need to plan set against the necessity of adaptability. In “mission command”, the commander sets “intent”, but explicitly allows for interpretation of that intent in the field. “No plan survives first contact with the enemy” is one of the most famous military aphorisms. No plan can survive without adaptation to the ever-changing context – which no single person can completely understand. A former head of Sandhurst used to ask the winners of the Sword of Honour (the highest accolade for cadets), “What have you learned of leadership?” He rated “To sacrifice control in order to gain command” as the best answer he ever received.

This is a paradox of effective leadership. Good leaders take risks and accept the personal responsibility for doing so (owning the risk is proof of their investment). But they also encourage those below them to take risks and seek similar responsibility. Leadership is therefore not a zero-sum game in which responsibility is “divided up” between people (a classic flaw in organisational charts). Instead, true leadership

exerts a magnifier effect, expanding the capacity and bandwidth of the whole organisation.

The book is clear-eyed about both the strengths and potential flaws in the regimental system (the army is “a tribe of tribes”). One of the lance corporals in Sharp’s regiment was awarded the Victoria Cross in recognition of his actions while serving in Afghanistan in 2013. Under enemy fire, Joshua Leakey rescued a US Marine Corps captain who’d been shot and wounded. “I did it for this,” he said, pointing to his regiment cap badge, “I couldn’t let the reg down.” But Sharp also explains how over-association with the regiment can lead to parochialism and narrow-mindedness. Sport provides examples of the same tension. The great West Indian cricket team of the 1980s and the Australian team of the 1990s-2000s were fuelled by inter-island and inter-state rivalries. But when they played as West Indies and Australia, the teams came together. In contrast, before Gareth Southgate’s deft leadership, former players have admitted the England football team was sometimes weakened by Premier League club cliques.

Readers who assume that the military relies on blind compliance will be surprised to discover that the army teaches the art of intelligent disobedience. “Knowing when and how to disobey is a higher-order skill than just to obey.” Just as weak leaders surround themselves with cozy cronies, a confident leader exposes himself to the constant risk – and therefore opportunity – of being challenged.

As its title implies, *The Habit of Excellence* explores the Aristotelian art of learning how to live well in order to lead well. The most persuasive, powerful and transferable passages focus on the concept that knits together every aspect of army leadership and all the themes of the book: moral courage.

Good organisational “culture”, far from being a fluffy mask for ineffective niceness, emerges as a daily battleground. Doing the right thing, especially when it is uncomfortable, demands that those in charge are constantly prepared to “court unpopularity”. Effective leaders, as Sharp explains, need to protect their own distance and perspective. Leadership is an effect as much as a capacity. And it’s often only clear how much we all rely on good leadership when we see the contours of organisations that have given up on it.

Sharp concludes: “A leader who consistently takes the path of least resistance is encouraging the behaviours that will undermine discipline and cohesion when they are needed most. By contrast, one who is prepared to take the unpopular decision and insist on the inconvenience of high standards is making an essential investment in future success. By extension, they create the permission to do similarly, building the collective stock of moral courage.”

No two readings of this book will be the same. But it’s hard to see how any leader, whatever their field, wouldn’t benefit from reading and rereading it. ●

*Ed Smith is the director of the Institute of Sports Humanities and a former England national cricket selector*

### **The Habit of Excellence: Why British Army Leadership Works**

Langley Sharp  
Penguin Business,  
336pp, £20

**If leadership doesn't feel difficult, then it probably isn't happening at all**

## Jonathan Franzen's bland late style

How the American novelist's search for "pure realism" left his fiction lifeless

By Lola Seaton



The overcorrections: Jonathan Franzen embraces "primary psychic stuff"

Jonathan Franzen's evolution as a novelist makes for a satisfying story: he has gradually weaned himself off the postmodernist "systems novel" in favour of the realist "novel of character", given up encyclopaedically charting an entire culture and settled for minutely dissecting a family. The trajectory, in Franzen's telling, entailed a kind of personal growth: from flaunting his cleverness to pursuing emotional honesty, from self-display to self-examination, from exhibiting his knowledge about "issues" to investigation of "the primary psychic stuff inside me".

Appropriately, Franzen describes this evolution as a familial, indeed oedipal, psychodrama. The influence of his father, "who admired scholars for their intellect and their large vocabularies", marks his first novel, *The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988), in which the domestic crisis of the Probst family is eclipsed by a complex conspiratorial plot, evidence of a desire to prove his intellectual seriousness through emulating the smart postmodernists – Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo et al. *The Corrections* (2001), Franzen's third, bestselling novel, which rocketed him to literary superstardom, represents a hybrid, midway point, a "softened DeLilloism", as the critic James Wood put it. The Lambert family were centre-stage but the novel contained "leftovers" from his prior ambition to write a "social-realist masterpiece". Now, with his sixth novel *Crossroads*, the first of a planned trilogy, the transformation is complete. It is a work of "pure realism", as he put it in a recent interview, which abandons concepts for "the feel for relationships" he inherited from his mother, "a lifelong anti-elitist". *Crossroads* "was the long-postponed victory of my mother over my father".

The softened aesthetic arrives with a mellower ethic: rather than "inflict[ing] painful knowledge" on his "comically blundering characters", as Franzen once described his approach to *The Corrections*, he is more interested in "joining the characters in their dream". His mother, Franzen said, "would have appreciated that [in *Crossroads*]... I love all the characters, that I'm not making fun of anyone. I'm taking them as they are." The kindness to his characters is matched by a generosity towards his readers, to whose pleasure and entertainment Franzen is committed.

Franzen's friendly authorial ethos shares much with the philosophy of "Crossroads", the cultish Christian youth group at the centre of the book. More group therapy than pious gathering, its staged confrontations and screaming exercises demand emotional display, cushioned by unconditional acceptance of others. The material of the new novel is familiar – the fraught relations between two generations of a dysfunctional family in a Midwestern suburb, a floundering marriage, the spectre of adultery – and, as in earlier novels, Franzen rotates between family members whose perspectives he expertly inhabits. The Lamberts in St Jude in the 1990s (*The Corrections*) and the Berglunds in St Paul in the 2000s (*Freedom*) have been replaced by the Hildebrandts in the 1970s in New Prospect, a prosperous suburb of Chicago, where Russ is an associate pastor, which entitles him to live in the "Crappier Parsonage" with his wife Marion and their

children – Clem, Becky, Perry and Judson.

Franzen's embrace of character plays out in his style: where his early prose crackled with the desire to impress and amuse – straying into technical vocabularies and relishing wordplay and imagery – his mature style is plain and largely free of metaphor, aiming to provide what he calls “transparent access” to his stories. The restraint is a measure of his commitment to his characters – cleverness and comedy are only permitted in their voices, and seldom at their expense. Consider, for example, how Franzen's unwanted sandwiches have changed. In 2001, a character “unwrapped a sandwich and opened it to a slice of bologna on which the texture of bread was lithographed in yellow mustard. His shoulders slumped. He wrapped the sandwich up again loosely in its foil.” Two decades on: “The sandwich on the plate was ham and Swiss on rye. He was grateful that she'd made it, too sick with exhaustion to want it.” *The Corrections'* fine-grained image has been superseded, in *Crossroads*, by unadorned description, and close observation of expressive behaviour by directly reported feeling.

Franzen's gift for notating consciousness and evoking psychological states is undiminished, from the subtle – Perry “felt a little downward tug inside him, the slipping of a gear, the first shadow of the end of feeling well” – to the extreme, and often substance-fuelled (*Crossroads* showcases varieties of stonedness, from the paranoid to the transcendent). Even in this more subdued, frugal mood, Franzen is capable of verbal inventiveness and emotional precision: when Perry turns up at the house of a friend he has offended, the friend greets him seeming “pre-annoyed”.

But the gain in “transparency” – we're not distracted by marvelling at metaphor or required to deduce emotion from behaviour – is achieved through a studied loss of detail. At times, Franzen's depictions of states of mind have a set-piece quality, as if insufficiently routed through the personality and body of the character. For example, in the elated aftermath of a first kiss, Becky's parents' alarm “wasn't the usual cruel morning sound but a promise of everything the day ahead might hold”; she avoids mirrors, fearful “of finding the change as invisible from the outside as it felt momentous from within”. Such passages struck me not as false exactly, but generic.

Franzen believes “the deepest purpose of reading and writing fiction is to sustain a sense of connectedness, to resist existential loneliness”. Is “connectedness” achieved in the impression that Becky's post-kiss glow could be mine, or yours, or anybody's? To connect you need differentiation, without which there's only homogeneity. One goes to characters, as to people, not just to identify with them but to collide with the bracing edge, the reassuring solidity, of otherness. Franzen has said he always makes the mistake of “trying to write from the top down” – from big ideas – and has “to learn the hard way to begin with character”. There may be evidence of a different mistake here, of starting with “the primary

psychic stuff” inside all of us – universal human drives, patterns of family conflict – rather than the particular form such stuff takes in living people.

Most of the novel unfolds on a single afternoon in 1971, in which nearly all the Hildebrandts are undergoing an identity crisis. After a confrontation with his older sister Becky, the troubled, intelligent Perry decides to get rid of his stock of marijuana and spend the proceeds on a camera for his younger brother Judson. Clem, beset by a different addiction, resolves to renounce sex with his girlfriend and give up his student deferment of his draft to Vietnam. Becky, beautiful and squeaky-clean, has a religious conversion and falls in love. Russ, meanwhile, is pursuing a younger, recently widowed parishioner, and Marion is preparing to visit an ex-lover in California.

Each character, introduced in the thick of a moral dilemma hingeing on a shameful pleasure, can seem too single-minded, an implausibly undistracted locus of conflict between appetite and conscience, badness and goodness – acutely preoccupied but not aimlessly confused enough. Occasional slips reveal an author perhaps too in command of overfamiliar material, or who knows the workings of unhappy families well but hasn't quite got to know this one: Clem's “political views were a perfect replica of his father's, and they must have been authentic, because they survived his mother's praise of them”. The final clause has a whiff of the punchline: not a psychological truth discovered through close observation of the author's inventions, but a pre-prepared insight applied to a new scenario.

The underfurnished characters may be an effect of the concentration of incident. There was something pleasingly unwieldy about the intersecting narratives of *The Corrections* and *Freedom*, whereas *Crossroads* is more streamlined, the cuts between perspectives brisker, with chapters ending on near-cliff hangers and opening with lines such as, “The time had come to take action...” The hyper-expressive *Crossroads* culture might sound like a propitious environment for a novel, but the characters are too often in confrontation mode, explicitly discussing their relationships. The reader is deprived of subtext, the tragicomic realism of what people can't say to each other finding perverse or trivial expression in what they can. *Crossroads* lacks the incidental domestic folklore, the random, revealing *stuff* that persuades you a family has a history that extends beyond the action of the novel.

Franzen's *Crossroadsy* attitude to his creations is quite unlike our relationships with real friends and relatives, whom we're mean to, impatient with, and laugh at all the time. I don't just want to understand characters, but to feel infuriated, repulsed, bewildered by them. The finer brushwork and thicker paint of Franzen's earlier, more raucous canvases produced more vivid, flawed, funnier personalities. The “pure realism” of *Crossroads* sometimes feels purified of the clutter of reality – the behavioural debris that provides it with texture and comedy – and its living, breathing people reduced, through Franzen's unwavering warmth, to anodyne essences; a novel of character sublimated into a novel of souls. ●

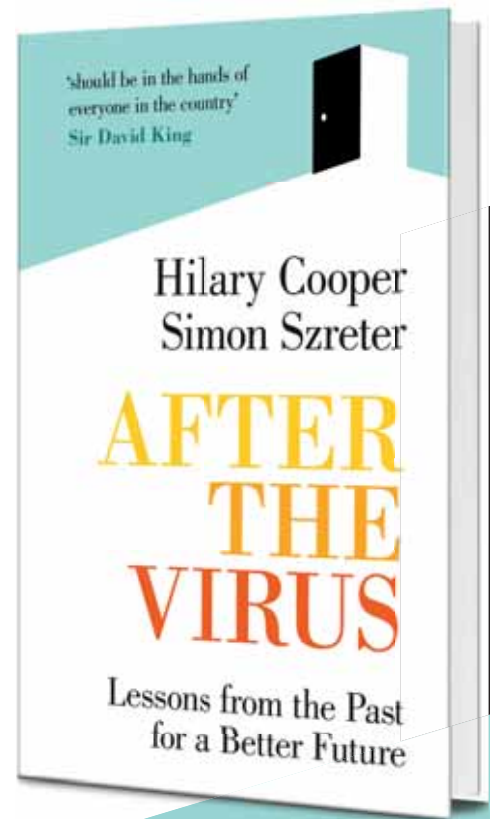
**Crossroads**  
Jonathan Franzen  
Fourth Estate,  
592pp, £20

**Franzen's gift for notating consciousness and evoking psychological states is undiminished**

# AFTER THE VIRUS

Lessons from the Past  
for a Better Future

Hilary Cooper and Simon Szreter



*After the Virus* is a provocative manifesto for change post-COVID-19. Shining a light on the deep fractures in our society, Hilary Cooper and Simon Szreter reveal why the UK was unable to respond effectively to the pandemic and what we can learn from our own history to forge a fairer, more resilient future.

“This is a critically important assessment of the current state of governance of healthcare and the economy in the UK ... The disastrous mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK provides an ideal launch-pad for this critique, which also demonstrates a clear path to a better future. It should be in the hands of everyone in the country, particularly in Parliament, who cares about, and has responsibility for, our future.”

Sir David King, former UK Chief Scientific Adviser and Climate Envoy, Chair of Independent SAGE

[www.cambridge.org/afterthevirus](http://www.cambridge.org/afterthevirus)



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## Reviewed in short

### **Being You: A New Science of Consciousness** by Anil Seth

Faber & Faber, 368pp, £20

In the 1990s the philosopher David Chalmers described the “hard problem of consciousness”: how can physical mechanisms give rise to a rich inner life, the subjective experience of being? The neuroscientist Anil Seth, co-director of the University of Sussex’s Sackler Centre for Consciousness Science, believes that research into the relationship between the brain and conscious experience will “dissolve” the problem. His research shows that we cannot separate consciousness from the material world: we do not passively perceive an external reality; our brains are constantly refining predictions about ourselves and our surroundings.

In lucid, engaging prose Seth deftly navigates long-standing philosophical debates over the nature of consciousness. He sometimes illustrates his arguments with *trompe l’oeils* that expose the guesswork that underpins how we view the world. Seth is an optimist, believing that our increasing ability to explain conscious experiences will demystify consciousness so that we can see ourselves more clearly. But using hard science to chip away at the hard problem won’t make the topic any less fascinating or awe-inspiring.

By Sophie McBain

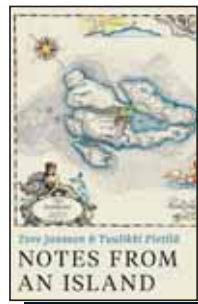
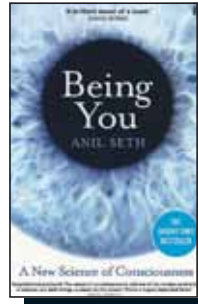
### **Notes from an Island** by Tove Jansson and Tuulikki Pietilä, translated by Thomas Teal

Sort of Books, 112pp, £12.99

On an almost barren skerry in the Gulf of Finland is a cabin built by a comic-strip author, an artist and a maverick fisherman. The cottage – a single room with windows facing in all four directions – belonged to the late Finnish author Tove Jansson, creator of the Moomin stories, and her artist partner Tuulikki “Tooti” Pietilä. The couple spent 26 summers there, making the journey each year like migratory birds until old age thwarted them. *Notes from an Island* chronicles these summers, from the construction of the cabin until the last reluctant crossing back to Helsinki, and does so in its authors’ preferred languages: Jansson in prose – sparse and essential as the landscape – and Tooti through etchings and wash drawings, some soft and muddy, others finer, almost choppy.

Now translated into English, *Notes* gathers these illustrations, diary entries and vignettes into a thin coffee-table book. It is both a memoir and a love letter to all things wild and weathered, to a forbidding place – mostly rock and brutal winds – that becomes a restful home. There, the women sail, fish and forage through each summer until the autumn of their lives.

By Katherine Cowles



### **Chief of Staff: Notes from Downing Street** by Gavin Barwell

Atlantic Books, 432pp, £20

Gavin Barwell was Theresa May’s *consiglière* during her brief, ill-fated premiership. Chief of staff is a role he likens to being a Swiss Army knife, with blades for everything from helping his boss choose which outfit to wear, to offering her political counsel and breaking bad news to her when no one else will.

In this detailed and compelling behind-the-scenes memoir of his time in “the most amazing job I’ll ever have”, Barwell’s admiration for May’s staunchness in the face of innumerable difficulties is clear. But he is candid about her – and therefore his – failures too, citing botched reshuffles, her catastrophic 2017 conference speech, a maladroit response to the Grenfell Tower fire, the premature triggering of Article 50 and the inability to sell her plan for a new relationship with Europe to her MPs. There are a lot of warm words for backroom team members and fewer warm ones for front-of-house players such as Boris Johnson – who, to no one’s surprise, was found to be “not on top of his brief”, “discourteous”, “rude” and “ill-disciplined”, and also, apparently, a man who snores on aeroplanes.

By Michael Prodger

### **Taste: My Life Through Food** by Stanley Tucci

Penguin, 336pp, £20

Stanley Tucci, the Hollywood grandee who over the past four decades has steadily conquered the stage, small and big screens, is now flourishing in a new chapter of his career, centred on his greatest passion: food.

Tucci’s charming new memoir follows on from the success of his food and travel TV series *Stanley Tucci: Searching for Italy*. He writes as if the reader were sitting as a guest at his table, regaling them with memories from his childhood, life and work, and richly describing the meals that underpinned them. Tucci recalls sampling the culinary delights of Iceland, New York and Italy, weaving wry anecdotes – such as the time he dined with Meryl Streep in Normandy and they were both left gagging after trying a traditional French sausage – with more painful memories, such as losing his appetite during chemotherapy for cancer. *Taste* is full of recipes, but it’s not only about Tucci’s love of food; it captures the joy that he draws from cooking and sharing meals with friends. For Tucci, food is “nothing more than everything”. My advice: don’t read this book on an empty stomach.

By Christiana Bishop

# Making the rules of government

Modern constitutions were produced not by liberal ideals but by the demands of war

By Colin Kidd

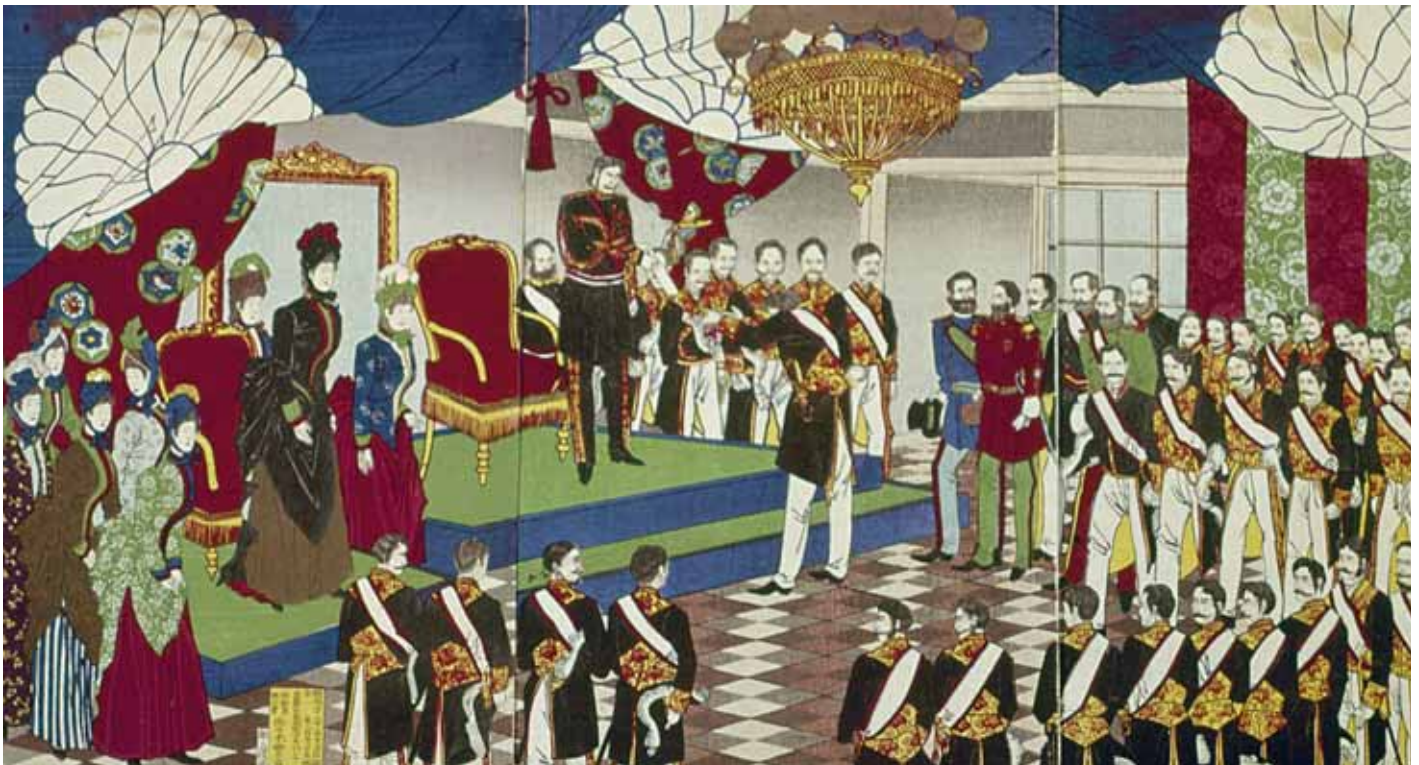
It's one of the more unusual political gaffes if a dictator blurts out the blatant truth that he does what he does because he can. The boast offends against the closest thing there is to a globally recognised norm, for all regimes pay lip service to the idea of constitutional government. Every country bar three – the UK, Israel and New Zealand – possesses a written constitution. In many cases, these documents provide little more than a fig leaf of legitimacy for corruption and abuse. And although we think of written constitutions, such as the US's, as foundational texts with a long life, most come and go with a disturbing frequency. While incoming juntas might rip

**The Gun, the Ship and the Pen**  
Linda Colley  
Profile,  
502pp, £25

up inconvenient constitutions and draft new ones without irreparably breaching decorum, ruling without any constitution is considered a boorish lapse in global etiquette.

Whereas authoritarian governments cynically observe – at best – the mere letter of constitutional practice, liberal democracies are increasingly responsive to the core ethos of constitutionalism: the idea that there are established, entrenched limits to naked government power. This is true in democracies with written constitutions and in the three exceptions, which have all begun to move towards some halfway-house. In Britain, the Human Rights Act of 1998 authorised the courts to issue declarations of incompatibility when a domestic statute infringes the European Convention on Human Rights. In the following decade the Supreme Court was detached from the House of Lords, and the UK rectified the anomaly of the Lord Chancellorship, whose blending of roles within the executive, legislature and judiciary made a mockery of the separation of powers. More recently, we have seen the judiciary challenging the government when ministers are seen to exceed their constitutional authority, most spectacularly in the prorogation furore of 2019.

We tend to assess constitutional government by standards drawn from jurisprudence and political theory: the rule of law, government accountability, the separation of powers and the rights of minorities. And we assume that there is a gulf of philosophical difference between such liberal restrictions on governmental power and the constitutionalist window-dressing we see in dictatorships. But Linda Colley, in her surprising and insightful new book, asks us to view the development of constitutionalism across



A “rejuvenating miracle”: the Meiji emperor Mutsumoto presents the Constitution of the Empire of Japan, 1889

CRANGER HISTORICAL PICTURE ARCHIVE / ALAMY



the globe as part of an interlinked set of historical processes whose direction and tempo were dictated largely by militarism and warfare. Take Myanmar's baroquely contorted constitution, which by according special political and administrative powers to the armed forces effectively enabled the coup in early February 2021. Viewed in the light of Colley's argument, the Myanmar constitution – whatever its obvious deficiencies – seems less alien.

She argues that written constitutions, whose function in liberal democracies today is to constrain government action, have historically been means of justifying the empowerment of the state and mobilising for war, and this is as true in the West as in the rest of the world. Liberal-state constitutionalism and constitution-fronted authoritarianism are twins, both products of a history that stretches back to the great power rivalries of the mid-18th century.

This ubiquitous "technology" of governance, it transpires, is much misunderstood, and not just by liberal theorists. Historians have too often focused on the revolutionary background to constitutional change rather than the changes in warfare that caused the revolutions. Yet it was the shift to what Colley calls "hybrid warfare" in the 18th century – the imperative for competitor states to furnish mammoth land armies and build navies able to wage war across the oceans – that imposed enormous stresses on bureaucracies and systems of public finance.

When regimes buckled and succumbed to revolution, their successors in government experimented with written constitutions for the public relations sheen they offered, and their capacity to invigorate nations under arms. But even states that endured saw the potential of written constitutions to win support for heavy taxation and the enlistment of manpower. The latent militarist origins of constitutionalism, Colley contends, help explain why in many places it took women longer than working-class men to win the vote. Democratization and military participation went hand in hand; service in the ranks offered a route to political privileges.

A parade of military leaders comprises Colley's main protagonists. Constitution-makers of the late 18th and early 19th century could not forget that – in a turbulent world of revolution and counter-revolution, conquest and counter-conquest – a state's very viability depended on its fiscal-military underpinnings. Colley reminds us that following the American Revolution the celebrated essay series the *Federalist Papers* – one of whose co-authors, Alexander Hamilton, was a former aide-de-camp of General Washington – began with a number of articles on the strategic position of the newly independent American states, while several later essays asked how Americans could afford the sort of army and navy necessary for transoceanic warfare.

Napoleon looms large in Colley's story, as an exponent of "Napoleonic lawfare". Bonaparte introduced various constitutional experiments in the frontier zones of his empire, the most significant of

which was the Statute of Bayonne (1808) which granted representatives from Spain's vast overseas empire a place at a newly reconstituted Spanish legislature. The liberal Cadiz Constitution of 1812 extended these principles, before the Bourbon restoration of 1814 squashed the dream of a pan-imperial "mega-parliament", only to boost the cause of Latin American independence led by Simón Bolívar – yet another soldier with constitutional blueprints in his knapsack.

Colley reminds us that the constitution of the 19th and early 20th century was an emblem of modernity – rather than of liberalism or democracy – and that such texts proliferated in traditional societies such as monarchies and empires that sought to recharge their economic and military energies without wholesale political transformation. This panacea worked a rejuvenating miracle in Meiji Japan's constitution of 1889, though the Ottoman constitution of 1876 showed that it was far from infallible. These examples scarcely give a full flavour of Colley's richly integrated history – of transport and communications as well as politics and warfare – which connects places as far apart as Haiti, Persia, pre-American Hawaii and Tahiti.

Where does Britain – with our supposed allergy to written constitutions – fit in to Colley's story? The doctrine of an unlimited sovereign parliament was rarely so dominant that it drowned out contrapuntal themes – whether the notion of a fundamental law embodied in Magna Carta; Jeremy Bentham's hyper-rationalist schemes of constitutional government; the People's Charter of 1838; and a plethora of draft constitutions for export to the colonies, from *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina* (1669), which was co-authored by John Locke, onwards. Nevertheless, Colley – correctly in my view – does not explode the idea of English exceptionalism. Rather, she suggests that the parliamentary monarchy established at the Glorious Revolution of 1688 enabled the major experiments in public finance that followed, which in turn allowed the 18th-century British state to wage hybrid warfare without the regime collapsing. The seeming permanence and reliability of the British state allowed us to sail complacently towards the present without any pressing need for a written constitution.

Until now. No longer is the UK a byword for political stability. The stresses introduced by Brexit – amplified by Covid and the lopsidedness of devolution – have undermined the legitimacy of our uncodified constitutional arrangements. We were already drifting towards a semi-coordinated kind of constitution, but now we need to up the pace. A complete overhaul under the auspices of a constitutional convention? It might sound melodramatic, especially to English ears. However, either the UK decides to draft an explicitly federal constitution, or a new market for written constitutions will emerge among its soon-to-be-former component nations. ●

Colin Kidd is professor of history at the University of St Andrews

The UK, New Zealand and Israel are the only three states without a written constitution

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# Interview

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## The double life of Ian Rankin

The crime writer on alter-egos, Scottish independence and why he refused to meet Ian Brady

By Kate Mossman

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The windows in Ian Rankin's office stretch right to the floor. He lives just over the way, so his wife can look out and see whether he's working, or slacking off and listening to his records. Unlike most writers, Rankin does not seem to struggle with discipline, but there is little evidence of his feverish industry in this room. No sign that Inspector Rebus is concocted here – that on this unassuming desk, with great regularity, he pulls out his decaying, unhappy, ingenious alter-ego. Five months for each book, December to May, seven days a week; short stories in the summer; then publishing in October, and press until Christmas, when he starts the whole process again. It could be the work station of any Edinburgh University student: a laptop, a portrait of Muriel Spark – the subject of Rankin's unfinished PhD – and a few Post-it notes with inspirational quotes which you can't imagine he'd need: "Every book is the wreck of a perfect idea" (Iris Murdoch).

Last year, Rankin "wrote himself out of the pandemic" with a new project, completing the final novel of the late Glaswegian crime writer William McIlvanney, whose detective series inspired his own. He also wrote the reality TV crime show *Murder Island*, which aired on Channel 4 on 5 October. And he managed one book about Rebus, whom he'd saddled with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease in 2019. Rebus would have a tricky time with Covid, so Rankin wrote a play, *Rebus: Lockdown Blues*. Brian Cox, the actor he'd always wanted to play Rebus, performed it on Zoom from a cabin in upstate New York.

Rankin walked the streets of Edinburgh during the lockdowns, but wonders, as he stirs his instant coffee, "Is a city still a city when there's no one in it?" He

couldn't drink in his favourite bar, the Oxford on Young Street, a tiny Georgian pub bare to Calvinist proportions, with no music and six locals at the bar, all of whom know him. On his 60th birthday last year, he took a beer and a pint glass and stood outside, alone.

He is skinny, with the kind of impressive brown thatch you might see on a Britpop star grown to middle age. On his walls are Blu-Tack'd VIP passes to Brian Wilson gigs, his huge record collection is alphabetised, and an altar of quality hi-fi equipment stands in the other room. "I like old-fashioned rock stars," he says. "Proper magical, otherworldly rock stars, like the Stones in their *Exile on Main St* period. So I'd have probably been a very bad rock star myself." He once sang with the band Best Picture, which had Bobby Bluebell, who wrote "Young at Heart", on guitar. He really liked being a frontman. "If I'd had success early on with the books, I'd have been a nightmare. It'd be gold jukeboxes and pinball machines and helicopters. By the time success found me, I was quite grounded."

Nothing reaches Rankin's publisher or agent until his wife Miranda, whom he met at university 40 years ago, has read his first draft. This is the most nerve-wracking part of the process, he says: "until you show somebody, it's perfect". His editor asked for some changes to the McIlvanney novel: "He felt it was mostly just men smoking in pubs and having conversations. I said to him, go and read his three other Laidlaw novels and you'll see that's what happens." Rankin's own beloved con, "Big Ger" Cafferty, owes much to McIlvanney's gangster John Rhodes. Like Laidlaw, the early Rebus quoted Walt Whitman, until Rankin realised that was highly unlikely. Rebus grew into himself – but the challenge of ghosting McIlvanney was too sweet to resist. He received a hundred pages of notes from the writer's widow, including the bones of a prequel, Laidlaw's first case.

There was a beginning, and a postscript, but not much of a middle. "In the deep structure of Willy's notes was the answer to who did it and why, but he hadn't laid it out." There were also bits of another book entirely, Laidlaw's *last* case, notes about politics, and bits of handwriting that his widow couldn't read – including the regular appearance of the word "syzygy", meaning a confluence, a coming together of things. "It looks like a bad hand in Scrabble," Rankin says. "But there is a theory, the 'Caledonian antiszyzygy', which I'm sure William would have known about, which is about the Scots wanting to be where extremes meet, like a clash of head and heart. Like magnets being held apart."

Rankin once said that authors who write about amateur sleuths only do so because they don't need to understand how the police work. McIlvanney's Laidlaw prequel is set in 1972 – meaning no mobile phones, GPS positioning or CCTV, the banes of every crime writer's life. But '72 was a big year for Ian Rankin, too. It was the year all the boys at his school in Cardenden, five miles from Kirkcaldy in Fife, started wearing bover boots and Harrington jackets and talking about *A Clockwork Orange*. It was the year he moved from the child section of the local library to the adult, and read *The Godfather*. Glasgow was ▶



Ian Rankin, photographed in Glasgow for the *New Statesman* by Kieran Dodds

◀ “gangs, razors and Stanley knives” but Edinburgh had “skinheads, Doc Marten boots and fists”. Rankin claims to have an aversion to violence. “Whenever I’m in a situation that looks like it might turn violent, I get really queasy.” How did he avoid it as a child?

“By being a chameleon. It was a small community, it didn’t do to be different. So I did a really good act of looking like I fitted in. I’d be hanging on the street corner, giving hard stares to the cars that went through the main street with everybody else. But when they said, ‘Right, we’re going to have a fight with the next village over; I’d go, I’ve gotta go home,’ and I’d write about it instead. I’d sit in my bedroom and quietly write, without telling anybody that I was writing. Song lyrics and poems and stories and stuff.”

Crime writers, he says, are more interested in why crime exists, and in the meeting point of good and evil, than in violence itself. He was good friends with the late American TV presenter Anthony Bourdain, who wrote chef-centred crime novels before his food shows made him famous. Bourdain once told Rankin, “Evil is when fairly decent people make compromises. That’s the evil I want to understand more, when good people struggle with the evil within themselves.” Bourdain, like Rankin, was squeamish: one of his own scenes, involving a rotary meat slicer, he was never able to reread.

“In Scottish literature, we’ve always had this thing with Jekyll and Hyde,” Rankin explains. “With people being one thing on the surface and something else underneath, or being ‘schizophrenic’. There’s possibly a Calvinist thing going on. People who, on the surface, are pious but there’s all sorts of demons driving them.”

Does this explain the biggest cliché of crime fiction, a fascination with the line between criminal and cop? “Well, these days, crime writers who write about cops, on both sides of the Atlantic, are having to deal with things such as [the murder of] George Floyd and the stuff that’s happened in the UK with heavy-handed police,” he says. “You’re thinking, are we writing about the good guys? In Scotland, we’ve had the killing of Sheku Bayoh [a young Sierra Leonian who, in 2015, died in police custody in Kirkcaldy], which was our own George Floyd moment, though it’s hardly mentioned... You think, can I stand up for that? I’m lucky. I’m not writing about cops any more – I’m writing about a retired cop, thank God.”

In 2002, while making a TV series on the subject of evil, Rankin turned down a meeting with the Moors murderer Ian Brady. His producer had contacted Brady’s mother, but received a direct message from her son: “Mr Rankin talks to me.”

“The director was very excited,” he recalls. “I said, ‘No fucking way am I letting him inside my head.’ Because you can’t unmeet him. I knew he played tricks – he had nothing left to do but play mind games with his victims, and the family of his victims. He’d written a book called *The Gates of Janus*, which is basically an apologia for serial killers. I said, ‘No, I don’t want to meet him.’ So, there are lines I don’t cross.”

There cannot be many crime authors who would turn down an exclusive with the UK’s most feared murderer. The commercial potential would have been

huge. You can’t help but wonder whether this highly-organised writer feared the loss of his magic formula, should Brady really mess with his head. The loss, perhaps, of Rebus.

Between 1987 and 1997, Rankin wrote about his detective for no clear audience and limited sales. He lived for six of those years in a remote village in the Dordogne, in order to afford to do so. A friend of mine – whose father mowed Rankin’s garden – stayed in the house as a child, and knew it was owned by a fledgling novelist. She recalls watching electrical storms from a veranda, slipping on slugs in the garden; an unearthed fridge you could only safely open with an oven glove. Rankin was far removed from the press circuit there – all he had, back in the UK, were the slow efforts of book sellers, saying, “If you like Ruth Rendell, try this guy”, year upon year. But his ambitions for the series were not small. He likes to say that every Rebus novel is a piece of a jigsaw which, once complete, will show you modern Edinburgh, and modern Scotland.

**H**e insists it is perfectly normal for crime writers not to know who committed the crime when they start on a new book, or even until quite far into it. At the turn of the millennium, Rankin conceived of a trilogy about the Scottish parliament. In book one, *Set In Darkness*, the main character would be campaigning to be an MSP. In book two, he’d be elected; and in book three, parliament would be up and running. But he ended up killing his man off at page 20, instead – later saying one book was all the Scottish parliament deserved. “Giving Scotland its own parliament made people think about how much power they wanted, compared to what they’d been given,” he says. “If you want more self-determination, how far do you have to go to achieve it?”

On the subject of independence Rankin tends to play as he did as a child – chameleonic: “I prefer a nice quiet life.” It is a tricky subject for him as a hero of Scottish literature: Nicola Sturgeon is a fan. Rebus, he’s said, would not vote for independence. But his DS Siobhan, of English parentage but raised in Scotland, would.

“There’s plenty of English people who made their home up here and are fervently pro-independence,” he says. “They look at Westminster, and think, what a mess, surely we can do better than this? Scots tend to vote for parties who don’t end up running the UK. If you can’t foresee a time when the Labour Party or the Liberal Democrats would be in charge, then you think you’ve got no voice and your vote is wasted. You think, if we vote for independence our vote won’t be wasted. I can see the attraction of that. But I’m a Labour Party member, for better or worse. I have a dream that one day the Labour Party will get back in power.”

He is a friend of Alistair Darling, who once lived a few doors down in Edinburgh, and of Gordon Brown, another Fifer. When Brown assisted in a financial buyout to save Raith Rovers Football Club in 2005, Rankin bought shares: “He said, you’ll never see a penny of this money back but I’m calling it shares anyway.” Rankin was invited to 11 Downing Street for dinner when Darling was chancellor, and Brown was prime minister.

**“Gordon Brown is a very, very clever man who got the job he wanted and it crumbled to dust in his hands”**



That night, Brown gave him a tour next door. “He didn’t want a separate office in No 10. His desk was mixed with all the staff – he didn’t want to be at arm’s length,” he recalls. “Brown is a very, very clever man who got the job he wanted, and it crumbled to dust in his hands. It must have been an extraordinary thing to happen.”

Does he think Scottish independence is inevitable? “Nothing’s inevitable. I don’t happen to think this is the right time. I think there’s a hell of a lot more we have to deal with first. There’s a lot our politicians should be focusing on instead. Everything’s become very binary, in life and in politics. Us and them, yes and no, you’re for us or against us. Most people are conflicted and most people have got doubts. If you’re saying 50.5 per cent is a big enough margin to take a country out of a union, you’re having to take 49.5 per cent of the population with you who don’t want it – and that’s not easy.”

It’s almost as though we are back to the Caledonian antisyzygy, the place of tension where opposites meet. “Good and evil is binary; yes and no is binary,” he says. Brexit was the “real, hard wrench”. “In Scotland, we’ve always thought of ourselves as being very European. I remember going to France and going, ‘je suis Ecossais’ and talking about the Auld Alliance, and the French would go, ‘What the fuck is he on about? We’ve never heard of any of this stuff.’ For the Scots, it was drummed into us. The French couldn’t care less. They thought it was a team that sometimes beat them at rugby.”

Rankin may be the best-selling crime writer in the UK, but he intended to become a literary novelist and a professor of English: teaching was something his parents could get behind. His father worked his way up in Fraser’s Greengrocers in Lochgelly, Fife, from delivery boy to store manager. Both his parents were married and widowed before they met: Rankin was a late arrival, in their early forties.

His mother died when he was 19, in his first year at Edinburgh University. Even today, he does not know what ended her life. “They said it was a stroke or multiple sclerosis. Even on her death certificate they

**Local hero: in 2005 Gordon Brown persuaded Rankin and others to assist in a community takeover to save Raith Rovers Football Club**

still weren’t sure what killed her.” He’d be “talking about bloody Milton during the week”, he says, “and then going home to see my dad, and my mum would be in bed, deteriorating”. Within two months of her death, Rankin got meningitis, which he believes he contracted working in a chicken factory over the summer. “I was conscious when they gave me a lumbar puncture,” he says, with a flicker of ghouliness. “The fluid flew halfway across the room. I could feel the pressure on my brain release straightaway as they got the fluid out my spine. So, that was a happy time, spending a summer of my 20th year in a hospital, reading Chaucer.”

Rankin got a high 2:1 (“They didn’t want to give too many firsts,” he says). He was given funding for his Spark PhD at the last minute. He produced 16 chapters while writing his first novel, which are now in the National Library of Scotland along with his personal archives. His 1997 novel *Black and Blue* was on the Scottish curriculum for a time: it was the Rebus novel that broke through, bringing him back from France. It was, he has said, a book written in anger.

Rankin’s two sons, Jack and Kit, were born in the Dordogne. As a baby, Kit developed slowly: “France was a weird time for all sorts of reasons,” he says, “partly because when Kit came along, we had no idea what was wrong with him.” The nearest hospital was 50 miles away and for many weeks the family drove back and forth for appointments, his wife struggling to translate the medical terminology. Eventually, a specialist “saw Kit chuckling away” and identified the neurogenetic disorder Angelman syndrome, a diagnosis of mental and physical special needs.

Now 27, Kit lives in a community in Edinburgh that was closed to Rankin’s family during the pandemic. For a year, they could only see him over the wall, or through the gate. The staff suggested FaceTime, “but two-dimensional screens don’t mean anything to him. It would upset him because he’d hear our voice and think, ‘Why am I not getting a hug?’” With the broadcaster Jo Whiley, whose sister Frances has learning disabilities, Rankin led a successful “double-pronged” campaign to give people with special needs higher priority for Covid vaccines. Now, the family can take Kit out again.

When Rankin discovered his son would not be able to walk, he took it out on his detective. In *The Hanging Garden*, he put Rebus’s daughter in a wheelchair after a hit-and-run. “He’s been a good punchbag for me,” he says of Rebus. “A great way of dealing with all kinds of psychological trauma. Not least dealing with Kit. ‘How am I going to deal with this? I’ll give it to Rebus.’”

Does he love Rebus? Rankin looks mildly disgusted. “No, I don’t. I’ve got a very complex relationship with him. He certainly wouldn’t love me. We’ve got nothing in common.” Does he ever fantasise about killing him? “No, but I guess it’s going to have to happen at some point. Either I’ll die or he’ll die. I just don’t know which one of us it’s going to be.” ●

*“The Dark Remains” by William McIlvanney and Ian Rankin is published by Canongate*

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## A gentleman never behaving badly

In Daniel Craig's final outing as 007, Bond has transformed into a sentimental family man

By David Sexton

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The director of the 25th Bond movie, Cary Joji Fukunaga, caused a stir before its release by asking: "Is it *Thunderball* or *Goldfinger* where Sean Connery's character basically rapes a woman?" That wouldn't fly today, he observed.

*No Time to Die*, Daniel Craig's fifth and final outing as 007, long delayed by the pandemic, is accordingly very much a Bond for today. Not only is this Bond not rapacious or in any other way badly behaved, he is positively uxorious, a sentimental family man, even if he can't actually bring himself to say that word. It is remarkable proof of Craig's charisma that he can make this regretful saint work at all as an action hero.

Scripted by Fukunaga (Californian, 44, previously best known for *True Detective* and *Beasts of No Nation*) and long-standing Bond writers Neal Purvis and Robert Wade, with Phoebe Waller-Bridge contributing gags, *No Time to Die* shows signs of emerging from an over-deliberated, market-sensitised production process. Much too protracted at 163 minutes, it delivers the set-pieces without ever trying to connect them with any urgency, almost like an anthology or remix.

The pre-credits sequence is more than 20 minutes long. We see Madeleine Swann as a little girl, witnessing her mother's murder by a masked assassin who is taking vengeance for her father's murder of his whole family. Then the adult Madeleine (Léa Seydoux) surfaces in the sea, happily holidaying with Bond in some glamorous ▶



A "regretful saint": Daniel Craig stars as James Bond for the last time in *No Time to Die*

◀ paradise. They drive off to a romantic Italian hill-town (Matera) promising to tell each other past secrets so they can make a future together. “No need to go faster – we have all the time in the world.” But, sorrowfully visiting Vesper Lynd’s grave, Bond is attacked (car and bike chases up and down steps) – and blames Madeleine for dobbing him in to Spectre. He puts her on a train instead of topping her, though.

After Billie Eilish’s theme, it’s five years later. Ruthless Spectre agents steal a deadly new bug of a weapon: nanobots that can be targeted through DNA to kill certain people (from individuals to whole ethnicities) while not affecting the others they infect, although they be passed on by a simple touch (a MacGuffin concocted pre-Covid). Bond, enjoying retirement as a simple fisherman in Jamaica, is persuaded to come back to work by the CIA operative Felix Leiter (Jeffrey Wright), not the Brits. He pairs up with the foxy agent Paloma (the athletic Ana de Armas in a backless gown) for a huge battle, in Cuba perhaps (locations, which include the Faroes as well as lots of London, are tastefully not specified).

But after this scene, Paloma, the film’s best new piece of casting, is inexplicably never seen or heard from again. Instead, Bond’s back with all his old pals: grouchy M (Ralph Fiennes); wry Moneypenny (Naomie Harris); fey, adorable Q (Ben Whishaw). There’s just one big novelty – he’s been replaced as 007 by a woman, Nomi (bold Lashana Lynch). Much banter ensues – “It’s just a number” – though they soon come to admire each other, in this great respect-fest. “I have a thing for old wrecks,” she jokes.

On the villainy side, Blofeld (Christoph Waltz) is still doing his worst from a high-security prison cell, turning full Hannibal Lecter when Bond goes to visit. But he has been supplanted by a fresh monster, Lyutsifer Safin (Rami Malek, cadaverous and pockmarked after an early poisoning mishap). Safin is manufacturing the deadly new weapon at his stylish base, on an island somewhere, planning mass attacks. Why? He just wants the world to be a little tidier, he says, to which Bond responds by scoffing that he is just the latest in “a long line of angry little men”. Not being able to offer any political, religious, ethnic or even geographical context or motive for the baddies any more does leave thrillers peculiarly aimless.

And then the extreme sentimentality with which this Bond ends – using a little girl in peril as a tearjerker with a shamelessness that Arnie or Bruce Willis might envy, while Bond himself makes speeches about love – makes for a surprisingly glum farewell too.

*No Time to Die*, three times delayed by the pandemic, is an enormously important release for re-establishing cinema-going – and all the broadsheet reviewers have duly served the greater good by acclaiming it as unmissable, a triumph, whatever reservations they might have more privately. Fans will be well enough served; Craig is still a muscular marvel. But perhaps the time has come, nearly 60 years after *Dr No*, to move on. James Bond and #MeToo don’t mix. ●

“No Time to Die” is in cinemas now

# Television

## Fear and loathing in the East End

By Rachel Cooke

**Ridley Road**  
BBC One,  
Aired 3 October,  
9pm; now on  
catch-up

**T**he first episode of the BBC’s new drama, *Ridley Road*, comes with a shameless whiff of the Beatles’ “She’s Leaving Home”.

It’s 1962 and in suburban Manchester, a young hairdresser called Vivien Epstein (Agnes O’Casey) is about to disappear to London in search of her on-off boyfriend, Jack Morris (Tom Varey). “I had to go,” reads the note she leaves for her parents, whose frantic worry at her departure is, we soon gather, mostly a front for their embarrassment about her running out on her incredibly boring fiancé, Jeremy. “His mother won’t look at me at *shul*,” wails Liza Epstein (Samantha Spiro), when her daughter finally calls from a phone box somewhere near Trafalgar Square.

Until this point, the viewer has assumed that Jack must be a bad lot; surely poor Viv isn’t the only girl in his life. But no, he’s a good lot. Moments later, her Uncle Soly (Eddie Marsan), a London cabbie who’s as wide as Pall Mall, bundles her off to the godforsaken railway siding that is Jack’s hiding place. Her true love, it seems, has daringly infiltrated the neo-Nazi National



Deep undercover: Agnes O’Casey as Vivien Epstein in *Ridley Road*

BEN BLACKALL / BBC / RED PRODUCTIONS



Socialist Movement, part of an effort by a group of Jewish anti-fascists to stop attacks on synagogues by its thugs. Thanks to the intelligence Jack passes on, Soly and his gang are often able to thwart the movement's plans. "Everything seems absolutely fine until the moment that it ain't," her uncle shouts, trying to explain the fear that is spreading like wildfire in the Jewish East End. Viv, though, doesn't really need to be told. In Manchester she shared her bedroom with Rosa, a camp survivor who could be brought to terrified tears by the clunking of the Epsteins' boiler.

*Ridley Road*, adapted from Jo Bloom's novel by Sarah Solemani, is based (loosely) on historical events. In these years, unfathomable as it seems now given the closeness to the end of the war, the far right was indeed on the rise once again; Colin Jordan, played here by Rory Kinnear, really was the leader of the National Socialist Movement. Is Viv, having dyed her hair blonde, about to follow Jack's example by becoming a spy in Jordan's camp? Thanks to a brief flash-forward, all we know at this point is that she and a small boy who calls Jordan "Daddy" will soon be holed up with him in a huge pile in Kent – which is where *Ridley Road* spirals, perhaps a bit preposterously, into fantasy (Jordan actually married Françoise Dior, the fascist niece of the fashion designer, in 1963).

Of course, an outlandish plot doesn't necessarily make a show unwatchable – the nation stuck like glue to *Vigil*, after all – and while some of the more cartoony performances may, at times, be on the wrong side both of "gor, blimey" and "*baruch hashem*", O'Casey is captivating as Viv, just the right combination of innocence and burgeoning experience. She and Kinnear are reasons to stay with it. And at least its producers seem to understand that the decades, far from being the distinct entities beloved of popular historians, sit inside one another like matryoshka dolls. They give us rag-and-bone men in horse-drawn carts as well as the new tower blocks; bomb damage as well as girls in lime-green mini-skirts. That Viv knows how to come by a prescription for the pill doesn't mean she won't have to endure kippers for breakfast with her quietly racist landlady, Nettie (a surprise turn by Rita Tushingham).

But Solemani's script strains predictably hard for parallels with our own times – you will hear the words "we want our country back" more than once – and thanks to this, it doesn't dare do anything other than take Jordan and his rabble far too seriously, inadvertently imbuing them with a horrible glamour they do not deserve. The National Socialist Movement and the various parties that succeeded it were endlessly riven by in-fighting; they never came close to achieving power. If I also tell you that in 1975, Jordan was convicted of shoplifting three pairs of women's knickers from a Leamington Spa branch of Tesco, Rory Kinnear's Nazi salutes may start to seem more ridiculous than sinister: a pantomime that can't disguise his character's essential smallness; his utter cowardice, his lack of any real ideas. ●

# Radio

## The makings of a Very Good Dog

By Rachel Cunliffe

**The Curious Cases of Rutherford and Fry**  
BBC Radio 4,  
Aired 7 October,  
4pm; now on  
catch-up

I have two reasons for choosing *The Curious Cases of Rutherford and Fry* to review this week. The first is that the news feels particularly bleak as the days grow darker and the prospect of spiralling energy prices and an NHS winter crisis looms, and we all need a little intellectual escapism. The geneticist Adam Rutherford and the mathematician Hannah Fry investigate everyday scientific mysteries in expert yet accessible detail that allows the over-anxious brain to switch off while still learning something. The second is that I have been accused of pro-cat bias for previous *New Statesman* articles, and balance is important in journalism. So this review is all about dogs.

The first episode of the new *Curious Cases* series begins with Hannah cooing at some puppies playing in a paddling pool. The duo want to find out how guide dogs know where they're going, and start at the beginning. Humans have been using dogs to help us hunt for 10,000 years, Adam tells us, but how did the transition from wolves to dogs happen? "Wasn't it just that one day there was a particularly nice wolf who was a bit less bitey than the other wolves, and then that nice wolf had nice baby wolves?" asks Hannah. This is the kind of content for which I pay my BBC licence fee.

Hannah visits a guide dog training centre. There's an obstacle course where Very Good Dog Wilmott has to work out whether spaces are wide enough for his handler to walk through, and a terrifying exercise where Also Very Good Dog Wendy helps a blindfolded Hannah cross the road. We learn that, while dogs see mostly in black and white, thanks to advances in display technology they can now watch television. "My dog enjoys Wimbledon," one trainer tells us.

By the end, I know far more about the unique relationship between guide dog and owner. I also feel more relaxed than I have all week. Adam compares dogs to the dæmon companions in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* series, calling them "an extension and a reflection of your own internal state". It's enough for me to acknowledge they might be *almost* as good as cats. ●

**We learn that, while dogs see in black and white, thanks to advances in display technology they can now enjoy TV**



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# THE BACK PAGES

## Food



**Felicity Cloake**

Whether you like yours mild, bitter or bright pink, it's time to revive the turnip

**N**ow that we've come to our collective senses and realised that kale is a leaf not a lifestyle, and supermarkets have largely stopped trying to flog us plastic-wrapped cauliflower "steaks" for more than a whole head of the stuff, I'd like to formally launch my campaign for the revival of a far more deserving vegetable: the forever-unfashionable turnip.

Despite the best efforts of Michelle Obama – who, in 2014, went viral dancing to Lil Jon's "Turn Down for What" with a "turn-ip" (get it?) to encourage healthy eating – and Nintendo's wildly successful *Animal Crossing* series, which uses them as a trading



◀ commodity, turnips in this country have struggled to shake off their association with Blackadder's dung-gathering sidekick Baldrick and his famous Turnip Surprise (the surprise being "there's nothing else in it").

Turnips are rarely far from the word "humble". The website LoveFood (which one would think might be more open-minded) once ran the headline, "Are turnips the most miserable of all winter veg?" Even the omnivorous Nigel Slater was slow to succumb to the turnip's charms, once describing the "watery pulp" he endured at school as "a plate of hate".

A cookery book won as a domestic science prize by my grandmother somewhat before Nigel's time suggests boiling the poor things for 45 minutes, so perhaps it's not surprising that turnips were the original scary Halloween jack o'lanterns long before pumpkins arrived on these shores. In fact, they have classical pedigree, being, the scholar Alan Davidson writes, "an important food for the Romans". He tells the story of the third-century war hero Curius Dentatus, who was approached by a hostile army while roasting turnips over the fire and offered vast amounts of gold to defect. A simple man, he chose to stay with his turnips instead.

Native to northern Europe, the turnip spread east through central Asia – where it's a popular addition, the *Red Sands* author Caroline Eden tells me, to meaty stews – and eventually made it to Japan, where they developed a variety so mild and juicy that it's more like a radish. Indeed, I'm reliably informed that if you can't find Tokyo turnips, daikon makes a better substitute than the more strongly flavoured Western versions. That said, all turnips contain a compound called

cyanoglucoside, which some people are genetically predisposed to find unpalatably bitter (if this is you, comfort yourself with the thought you'd also find cyanide harder to swallow).

Diminutive spring turnips are still delicate enough to eat whole, but at this time of year they're likely to be "coarse [and] cow-sized", as the wonderful Jane Grigson put it in her *Vegetable Book* of 1978. Perfect for carving, in fact – and, having done just this last year to distract myself from the news of a second national lockdown, I'd recommend a stout serrated grapefruit spoon for the job. Mash the scooped-out innards with spice and peas, Punjabi style, or whizz them up into a creamy purée or soup. The bittersweet flesh works particularly well with rich ingredients such as dairy or cured meats, and strong flavours including mustard and chilli (Yotam Ottolenghi has a recipe for spicy turnips on his website that will knock your socks off). The French often pair turnips with duck, while in the Middle East they pickle them, dye them shocking pink and eat them with almost everything.

In the interests of national unity, I must also mention the larger, orange-fleshed swede. Known as a neep north of the border, and a plain old turnip in other parts, it is actually a 17th-century cross between a turnip and a cabbage that only arrived in the UK via Sweden in 1781, but quickly elbowed its way into both the Burns supper and the sacred Cornish pasty. Slightly sweeter, but similarly good mashed with large quantities of butter and pepper, it also makes a decent Halloween lantern, even if it lacks the long and noble history of the original. Still, at least it's not a cauliflower, eh? ●

## This England

*Each printed entry receives a £5 book token. Entries to comp@newstatesman.co.uk or on a postcard to This England.*

*This column – which, though named after a line in Shakespeare's "Richard II", refers to the whole of Britain – has run in the NS since 1934.*

### Guiding star

A police officer feared she was being pursued for miles by a drone – but the bright light in the sky was actually a planet. It was only after a drawn-out "pursuit" that she sought help from senior officers, who told her it was Jupiter – some 365 million miles away.

A police source said:

"Everyone was quite concerned so you can imagine the red face and embarrassment felt when it was pointed out that the bright light following her was a planet millions of miles away."  
*Daily Record (Ron Grant)*

### A good urn

A masked man has returned two flowerpots which were stolen from outside a retired policeman's home and which contained his mother's ashes.

Allan Clifford, 63, had reported the theft in Herne Bay, Kent. When the stranger, who was "a bit cagey" about how he came to have found the pots, turned up with them, Clifford was moved to tears.  
*The Times (Linda Calvey)*

### On home turf

A baffled homeowner found

"keep clear" markings painted on the road outside his home – a converted village school that closed down 18 years ago.

Greg Smith, 56, bought the building in Grewelthorpe, North Yorkshire, eight years ago. He said the work had left him in the "ridiculous" position of risking a fine for parking outside his home.

Despite his protestations, he said council contractors repainted the zig-zag markings and suggested he go out with a tin of black paint once they had left.

*BBC Yorkshire (Edwin Clark)*



## Off the Record



### Tracey Thorn

## Though Covid has aged us, a seaside sundae makes me feel ten years old again

I missed my last column. You may have noticed the words “Tracey Thorn is away” sitting in the place where I should have been, and you may have pictured me on a beach. Truth is, I was actually in the dreaded state of being bereft of ideas and lost for words. It’s all got me down a bit the past few months: the isolation, the anxiety, the endless cancelling. Everything I wrote sounded, even to me, like a self-pitying whine. So I offered my feeble excuses to my lovely editor and hung my head in shame. And then I ran away to Whitstable with my sister.

My God, it did me the power of good. The weather finally settled for our few days at the seaside, and clear blue skies and temperatures in the low twenties made it feel like the south of France. We watched sunrises and sunsets, and saw the full moon hanging over the sea, in a sky more full of stars than I have seen in a long time.

On a bus to Canterbury, we sat on the top deck rocking our way over the gentle hills, before wandering round a town that has named everything it can after Chaucer, as though someone has gone mad with a Dymo label-maker. So there’s Chaucer Hospital, Chaucer Bookshop, Chaucer House hotel, a Chaucer Travelodge, a care home, a college – ENOUGH CHAUCER we were thinking after a while.

We’d come here in order to walk back to Whitstable along the Crab and Winkle Way, a cycle path made largely from a disused railway line. Climbing the steep hill to the University of Kent, we looked back and saw the cathedral shimmering in the morning heat haze. I thought of pilgrims, and journeys, and the culmination of Powell and Pressburger’s extraordinary film, *A Canterbury Tale*, which ends with the main characters arriving in Canterbury, and receiving some kind of

blessing. I could do with a blessing, I thought.

Beyond the university the path, dusty and soft underfoot, passed through fields of stubble, which were neatly lined, rising away to the horizon and looking exactly like those beautiful prints by Eric Ravilious. We arrived at Blean church – “the church in the fields” – and pushed open the door. Inside was a musty silence, and shafts of sun through the stained glass windows, which lit up the dust in the air. I thought of Philip Larkin’s “Church Going”, and that line about even non-believers finding meaning in such a space, “if only that so many dead lie round”. It’s a poem that has always resonated with me. I often find myself close to tears inside a silent church.

The next day we got the train to Broadstairs, and found that everything there was named after Dickens: the Charles Dickens gastro pub, the Charles Dickens School, Copperfields B&B, The Old Curiosity Shop, the Barnaby Rudge pub – you get the picture.

Our grandparents moved to Broadstairs in the 1960s, so my sister and I visited quite a lot, walking along the sands of Viking Bay and Joss Bay, playing in rock pools with shrimping nets, eating an ice cream at Morelli’s, which is still here and still looks the same. We got a sundae in a tall glass with a long silver spoon, and briefly felt ten years old again – which was a good thing as we were each about to celebrate a birthday, and mine had me turning 59.

Which brings me back to the mood in which I began this column. I’m reflecting a lot at the moment on how Covid seems to have exacerbated the ageing process. I feel more than the 18 months older I have become since the pandemic started. We’ve been forced into a kind of early retirement, and though it might not be permanent, I am realising that it will take an effort to regain the momentum and energy that has dissipated during these quiet months at home.

Back in Whitstable later that day, I spotted yet another literary reference – this time a Somerset Maugham mural on a wall. The chosen quote – “Writing is the supreme solace” – seemed suitably positive for such a tribute, but when I googled to find out how long it had been there, I discovered that the artist had almost gone with another quote entirely: “It was such a lovely day I thought it a pity to get up.” Mmm, I know. ●



**It will take an effort to regain the momentum that has dissipated during these quiet months at home**

## Down and Out



### Nicholas Lezard

#### In Edinburgh, I find both the perfect pub and the world's most objectionable drunk

To Edinburgh, to visit my friend Margo and do some work for her. It is always a pleasure to see her and I haven't been to Edinburgh for years, plus she's paying for half my ticket, so it would really be silly not to go. What feels like weeks of illness has left me feeling somewhat cooped up; England has lost its mind in a way Scotland hasn't; also, conference is on in Brighton, and the spectacle of Labour Party members tearing each other to shreds on my doorstep always leaves me feeling a little queasy.

At the end of Margo's street in Morningside there is a pub called the Canny Man's [sic]. I pop in there on the way back from doing some shopping. The sign outside shows a uniformed policeman kneeling down and firing a rifle; this suggests some kind of sectarian position about which I suspect it would be unwise to enquire. But inside the pub – oh, it is heaven. A deep crimson warren of dark-panelled snugs, every available inch of space occupied by some ancient knick-knack or other – a tuba here, a moose head there – this is what the inside of a pub should look like.

Budgetary constraints – yes, after last week's good news my financial position is more or less back to the status quo ante – mean that I can't stay there for more than one pint. To take my leave of the place almost breaks my heart. "What an incredibly beautiful pub," I say to the barman. "Thanks," he says. "I made it myself."

On the Sunday night we decide to go out. It is about 9.30pm and, bizarrely, inexplicably, cruelly, the Canny Man's is shut. I feel bereft; I have been shown a glimpse of paradise, and now it is to be denied to me. But Margo knows another pub down the road, Bennets, which I have been recommended by friends who know the area (I discover that almost everyone I know has

been to the Canny Man's. Once again, I am the last person at the party).

Margo is, I should explain, one of those people to whom things... happen. There is a type of person who is not made for a quiet life, and she's one of them. It's a kind I seem to attract. They're all women, for some reason. And for some reason, it is important to bear in mind that she has a strong Russian accent. The last time we met, the evening ended with the dawn, and a breakage whose details I don't think I will share with you.

We sit down outside so we can smoke. The atmosphere inside is, I have to admit, rather subdued. The place is almost empty; I wonder if Morningside has a history of grimly joyless Presbyterianism. But then behind me I hear a vague noise, as of a drunken man making a tit of himself about 50 yards away. Margo looks up, amused, and out of the corner of my eye I see someone cavorting around a lamppost.

"Oh look," says Margo. "He's doing a pole dance."

Please don't wave at him, I think to myself. Don't wave. Surely I don't need to say this aloud? Margo waves to him. Clearly, she feels that the evening is underpopulated, and she feels in the mood to make new acquaintances. I, however, am in no such mood, and even before turning around I can tell that the person who is about to join us is a wrong 'un.

He is extravagantly drunk; I'd say in his early thirties, always a dangerous age for someone to be inebriated. Young enough to be stupid, but also young enough to be full of energy. He waves a half-empty litre bottle of beer at us and then tries to climb over the railings. He is at that stage of the evening where doors are boring. The pub staff become aware of him.

At which point I become aware of the man's accent. It, just like my friend's, is Russian. Oh God, I think to myself, he is going to hear her voice and do some Slavic bonding ritual which will mean that they will never be parted. This is so much what I do not want to happen. So I start doing a kind of diplomatic dance: suggesting the drunkard disappears into the night, pacifying the increasingly annoyed barmaid, and not making my belief that Margo has acted with extreme unwisdom too obvious. I like to think that I am good at defusing situations like this, and gradually things seem to be calming down.

And then the drunken Russian sticks his arm out in the well-recognised position, and says: "Heil Hitler." He apparently thinks this is an acceptable conversational gambit, so he says it again.

When I heard it the first time, I suddenly became very unhappy. Hearing it a second time doesn't improve my mood. If anything, it makes it worse. It is not often that I contemplate violence, but I imagine what it would be like to spread this cretin's nose all over his stupid face. But oh, then there would be police, and paperwork, and possibly a corpse, and flashing blue lights disturbing the peace of a Sunday night.

Well, eventually, everything is settled, and when we get back to the flat I make Margot write out "I will not wave to drunken Russian fascists in Morningside" one hundred times. So that's settled, then. ●

The man waves a bottle of beer at us and tries to climb over the railings. He is at that stage of the evening where doors are boring

## The Fan



### Hunter Davies

## From Ronaldo to Vardy, today's strikers will do anything to endure

I am always being asked how at my age I am so fit and active, still rushing around madly, still so productive, all these columns and books, blah blah, still at the top of my game, despite being 85 and three quarters. I smile modestly and say I have a young girlfriend, that's why. Nudge nudge.

No, really they say, what is your secret? At least a bottle of wine every day. That's my aim, though I often go over. Next question. I try not to go on about it too much. It sounds like boasting.

But dear God, if you ask any of today's super-fit, super-successful older football stars, beware. They can go on for days about their wonderful health regime and lifestyle. Your eyes will glaze over as a messianic expression covers their face and their six-pack quivers.

Cristiano Ronaldo's ten billion followers worldwide have come to expect updates on exactly how many meals he has had – none is the answer, just a dried fig on the half hour. Or how often he sleeps. He doesn't, just six cat naps a day.

Ronaldo is 36, Lionel Messi 34, Luka Modrić 36, Karim Benzema 33, Robert Lewandowski 33, Thiago Silva 37, and Edinson Cavani 34, and they are all still at top clubs. Notice how nearly all of them are attacking players; yet they get the worst knocks, the hardest tackles. Traditionally, such players lost their speed and edge with age, while lumpen defenders soldiered on. Yet we have so many super strikers, still among us, not yet ready to hang up their boots.

Our native Brit-born oldies tend to keep quiet about it. I have failed to hear James Milner, 35, sharing his cold bath routines. Shame. Bound to come. And recipes for his nut cutlets. But Jamie Vardy has already begun to reveal his body secrets. Unlike Ronaldo, who

was a boy wonder, Vardy had to slave away for years in the lower leagues, so perhaps he feels now it is time to share, to encourage *les outres*. At 34, Vardy is still a top man, still hitting the net.

I had always imagined him as an old-fashioned British player – a few beers with the lads after a game, full English on a Sunday. But blow me, he is just as fanatical about his health regime as CR7. Did you know he wears recovery boots after a game that pump lactic acid out of his muscles? And then he crawls into a cryotherapy chamber. Don't ask me. Just pass the Beaujolais.

Just a few decades ago, a professional footballer was considered old at 28. At 30, they began sliding down the leagues, their resale value plummeting. Now at 30 they are getting into their prime. Ronaldo has promised us he will be here to delight us at 40.

It's strange in some ways. You might have thought the opposite would have happened, now that even the most lumpen Prem player is a multi-millionaire. That some would have said sod this for a lark, I'm off to stuff my face and visit some of my exotic properties I have never seen – no more training and having bastard coaches shout at me.

Yet I can't think of one still-fit, still-desired player who has voluntarily given the game up. It demonstrates there is something else driving them on besides the money. This is clear in Ronaldo and the other oldies, a determination to achieve more. The non-rich often think that the wealthy in every field are purely motivated by money. Which is bollocks.

So what has happened, why are there so many oldies today in football? One obvious reason is the improved diets, health and fitness regimes and medical treatment. So many players and managers in England today have come from other places, other cultures, bringing new methods and ideas. Being a vegetarian or teetotal would once have drawn ridicule in the dressing room.

Styles of play have also changed – and the rules. At one time, every team had an enforcer, a thug whose job it was to injure the opposition stars. Fancy dans can now last longer. And pitches are better. Playing on perfect grass is easier on the ankles than ploughing through mud.

Football fans live in good times, with so many players of greatness still active. Enjoy them. ●

I can't think of one still-fit, still-desired player who has voluntarily given up; something drives them on besides money





Italy's Jasmine Coast is a haven for the Loggerhead Turtle. Today a British charity is fighting for its survival



SAVE  
THE  
TURTLE



**S**et on the southernmost tip of the Italian peninsula, the Sea Turtles Rescue Centre is based in Brancalona a small seaside village on the so called 'Jasmine Coast'. It is managed by the animal welfare group Blue Conservancy CRTM.

The 'Jasmine Coast' is in fact at the centre of the migration routes of the sea turtles and its beaches constitute the most important nesting site of loggerhead turtles in Italy and one of the most important in the Mediterranean. About 200,000 turtles are accidentally caught in fishing nets every year in the Mediterranean alone. 40,000 die shortly afterwards and for every two turtles, one has plastic in its stomach. The loggerhead is an endangered species threatened by plastic pollution and habitat reduction. The decline of the species is heightened by the fact that the animals reach reproductive age at about 35 years and after a brief mating season females might not breed again for up to 9 years. Sadly, the trend seems to be that most of the turtles rescued by the centre are very young; hence highlighting the fact that it is becoming increasingly difficult for them to reach reproductive age unscathed.

The centre is effectively a hospital for sea turtles and provides veterinary care and rehabilitation to animals caught in fishing nets or victims of plastic pollution. The centre houses quarantine tanks; a filtered rehabilitation tank; heaters; X-ray machines; and an operating theatre. As you may imagine, filtering and heating systems are expensive to purchase and run.

Today, The Anglo-Italian Society for the Protection of Animals (AISPA), in co-operation with Blue Conservancy, is raising awareness to ensure the survival of these beautiful but vulnerable creatures. With a history dating back to the 19th century AISPA is a British based charity which raises funds worldwide in support of grassroots animal welfare projects in Italy. With your financial support AISPA can work to ensure these turtles survive along Italy's 'Jasmine Coast'.



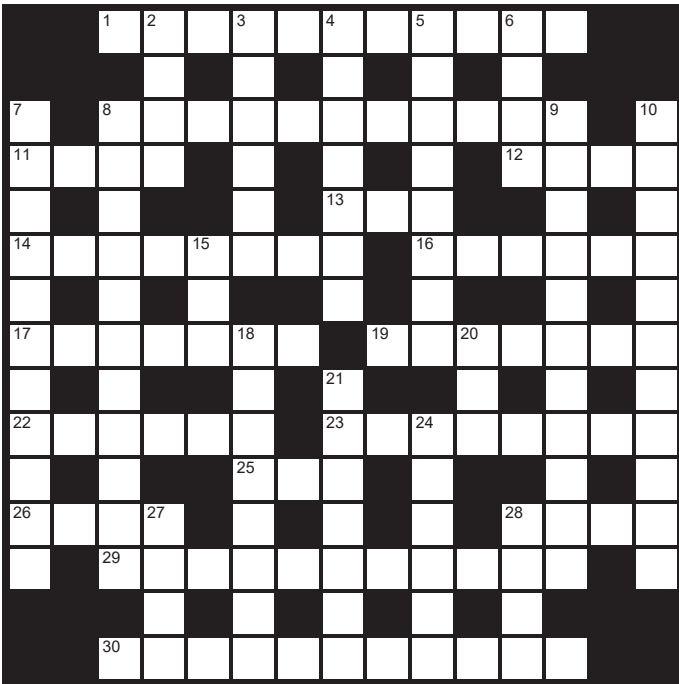
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## The NS Cryptic Crossword 557: Concise Crossword by Simon



Nine clues are to be taken literally and each lacks its definition.

### Across

- 1 R (5,6)
- 8 IVI (5,6)
- 11 Jump cut longways first (4)
- 12 Tallyman tentatively included stake (4)
- 13 House key used by gardener (3)
- 14 Agree Ray was confused by unclear situation (4,4)
- 16 Romania with repeatedly firm art style (6)
- 17 Take away cart Ted vandalised (7)
- 19 Climbing was unfashionable so it was modernised (7)
- 22 Man round bringing meat (6)
- 23 Circular device found where gal played (8)
- 25 Way of paying for fish (3)
- 26 Roman day that is to say incomplete (4)
- 28 Takes in common food (4)
- 29 BE DRY (6,5)
- 30 4-44 (4-2-5)

### Down

- 2 Stony greeting (4)
- 3 Attacker found assistant protected by senior cleric (6)
- 4 Small measure actor had in district of London (7)
- 5 RENNUR (6-2)
- 6 Odd section of interior railing (4)
- 7 INORB (6,5)
- 8 MEN ETC (6,5)
- 9 Y (3,2,3,3)
- 10 L (6-5)
- 15 Commander once more not available (3)
- 18 Global leaflet (8)
- 20 Deposit left overnight (3)
- 21 Regular soldier (7)
- 24 Stare at former pupil coming up to building in garden (6)
- 27 Musical piece for one card game (4)
- 28 Reversible gown's a handicap (4)

*This week's solutions will be published in the next issue.*

### Answers to crossword 556 of 1 October 2021

Across 1) Gander 5) Azalea 10) Transport 11) Thigh 12) Finishing school 13) Shandy 15) Face-lift 17) Badgered 19) Ostler 23) Cross the Channel 25) Piece 26) Trouseau 27) Nantes 28) Lancet  
Down 2) Again 3) Disused 4) Rookie 5) Antigua 6) Article 7) Editorial 8) Staffs 9) Chalet 14) Andromeda 16) Pet hates 17) Biceps 18) Easiest 20) Swanson 21) Roll up 22) School 24) Niece

## Subscriber of the Week: Daniel Nixon

### What do you do?

I work as a telephone banker.

### Where do you live?

Glasgow, Scotland.

### Do you vote?

Always. I can see my polling station from my flat!

### How long have you been a subscriber?

During university, then I resubscribed a few months ago.

### What made you start?

I was looking for a fresh perspective on current affairs during my politics degree.

### Is the NS bug in the family?

No, but it got read on holiday with my in-laws this month.

### What pages do you flick to first?

The Leader and Q&A.

### How do you read yours?

Gradually through the week.

### What would you like to see more of in the NS?

British political history.

### Who are your favourite NS writers?

George Eaton and Stephen Bush.

Who would you put on the cover of the NS?

Jacinda Ardern.

With which political figure would you least like to be stuck in a lift?

Very obvious, but Trump.

### All-time favourite NS article?

"A ghost town comes to life" by Nick Burns.

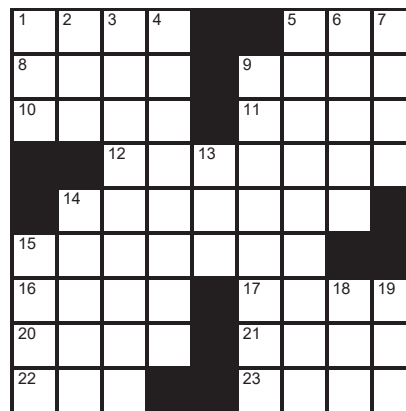
### The New Statesman is...

A source of optimism.



Please email [ellys.woodhouse@newstatesman.co.uk](mailto:ellys.woodhouse@newstatesman.co.uk) if you would like to be featured

## The NS Crossword 5: In brief by Hoang-Kim Vu



### Answers to crossword 4 of 1 October 2021

Across 1) Sao 4) Thug 8) Cronyism 10) Tit for tat 11) Ifs 12) Bet 13) Pics 15) Shaw 18) Ham 20) Ewe 21) Group chat 24) Riot gear 25) Role 26) Pye  
Down 1) Scifi 2) Art school 3) Oof 4) Tyres 5) Hit the hay 6) USA 7) GMT 9) Nob 10) Tip 14) Saute 16) Aware 17) Wet 21) Grr 22) Rio 23) Cep

### Across

- 1 With 14-across, BBC Two quiz
- 5 Txt format inits
- 8 High wind?
- 9 News source, perhaps
- 10 Composer Zimmer
- 11 Potent starter?
- 12 White and yellow flowers
- 14 See 1-Across
- 15 Looks after
- 16 Macmillan predecessor
- 17 Woes
- 20 McDonald's "\_\_\_ Chicken"
- 21 Castle defence
- 22 Post- alternative
- 23 Loose \_\_\_

### Down

- 1 "Blimey!"
- 2 League for "CP3" and "King James"
- 3 Millennium Wheel
- 4 "Sort of"
- 5 Punctuation in a list
- 6 Olympia painter
- 7 Equipment at Glenshee
- 9 Run slow, as a watch
- 13 \_\_\_ and outs
- 14 Tree on Lebanon's flag
- 15 Office go-fer, often
- 18 Whippersnapper
- 19 Bond and Baker, eg (abbr)

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## The NS Q&A

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“A life in death has taught me to make the most of here and now”

**Kathryn Mannix, physician**



**Kathryn Mannix was born in Cheshire in 1959 and qualified as a doctor in 1982. She is the founder of the UK's first cognitive behaviour therapy clinic exclusively for palliative care patients.**

*What's your earliest memory?*

Walking, alone and determined, to the beach. I'm two and a half, I'm clutching my bucket and spade, and I'm utterly unaware that my dad is following (at a distance) with great amusement.

*Who are your heroes?*

As a child I thought my parents were capable of any feat, no matter how challenging. Their superpower, it turns out, was to make their children believe that of ourselves. And Catwoman, probably because she was a baddie.

*What book last changed your thinking?*

*Stories We Tell Ourselves* by Richard Holloway made me rethink forgiveness.

*Which political figure do you look up to?*

I loved Mo Mowlam both for her resilience during treatment for a brain tumour and for her impish humour. I heard that whenever Northern Ireland negotiations got bogged down, she would remove her wig to scratch her head, reminding all present that she was on borrowed time.

*What would be your "Mastermind" specialist subject?*

I'm developing an expertise on the dietary preferences of domestic chickens. We keep a small flock who range around the garden. They come running if I announce treats: it's like being mobbed by tiny dinosaurs.

*In which time and place, other than your own, would you like to live?*

A life in death has shown me that here and now is the time to make the most of.

*What TV show could you not live without?*

It would have to be *Strictly*: my fellow "talking about dying" campaigner, Greg Wise, is competing. We are proud patrons of End of Life Doula UK, and Greg is dancing in honour of his late sister Clare.

*Who would paint your portrait?*

I'm spoiled for choice: I have two nephews who are artists, Christian Wright and Dominic Cooper. Neither would produce a conventional portrait, and I'd be intrigued to see what they came up with.

*What's your theme tune?*

Anything I can hum. I can only apologise to all the musicians and composers whose genius I have reduced to a distracted and absent-minded burbling.

*What's the best piece of advice you've ever received?*

"Seize the moment." I used to think that meant doing things, but I've discovered it means being fully present. This moment I'm appreciating comfy slippers and tea.

*What's currently bugging you?*

Shouty opinions; climate change; noisy chickens; sore knee; hot flushes.

*What single thing would make your life better?*

Richard Osman has already requested *NS* readers' spare knees. I'll hobble on. Most things are improved by excellent tea in a china cup, I've found.

*When were you happiest?*

Hearing our first-born, aged three, explaining to the new baby, "That's our mum. She loves us and looks after us." We waited a long time for children, and that scene is seared in my mind as a moment of happiness I never dared to hope for.

*In another life, what job might you have chosen?*

A wildlife gardener. I'd create beautiful habitats using native plants: texture, colour, shape, movement in the breeze, all generating hospitality for wildlife.

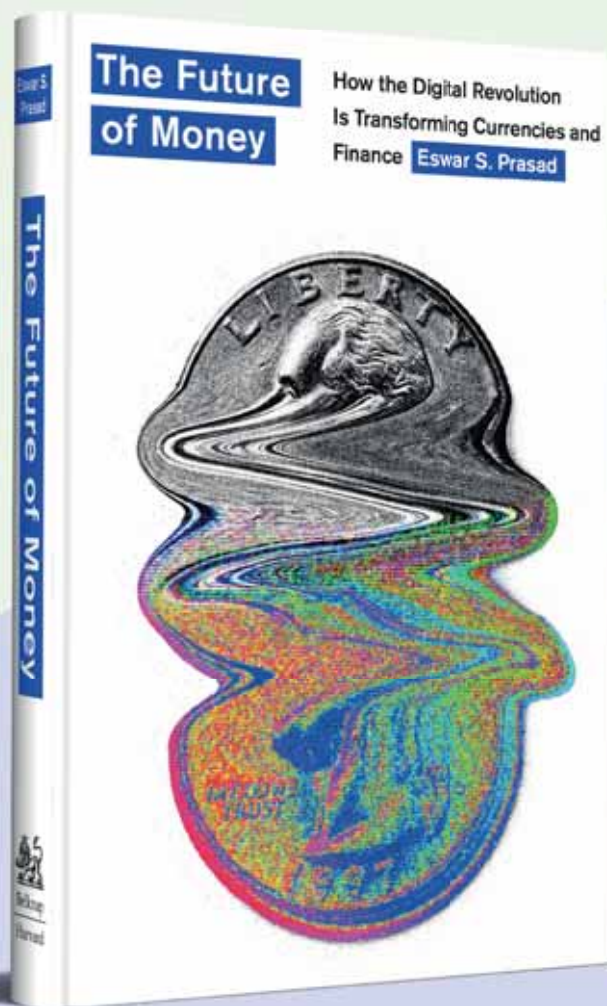
*Are we all doomed?*

Not while there is still kindness. ●

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*"Listen: How to Find the Words for Tender Conversations" by Kathryn Mannix is published by William Collins*

**How accelerating financial change, from the end of cash to the rise of cryptocurrencies, will transform economies for better and worse.**



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**–Mark Carney,  
former Governor of the Bank of England**



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## Product of the environment

When polar ice melts, it harms habitats as far away as Asia and Africa. In 2022, conservationist (and Christopher Ward Challenger) Tom Hicks will lead an expedition to the North Pole to measure ice melt rates for the David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation (DSWF). On his wrist will be the C60 Anthropocene GMT. Able to monitor two time zones at once, waterproof to 600m and with a sapphire dial that recalls polar ice, it can withstand whatever the Arctic throws at it. And with five percent from the sale of each watch going to DSWF, it's playing its own part in the fight against climate change.

[christopherward.com](http://christopherward.com)

 **Christopher  
Ward**

Ingeniously English.  
Unsurprisingly Swiss.