

# THE NEW STATESMAN

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## The end of the party

David Gauke on how the party he served has been destroyed by Boris Johnson

+ Stephen Bush and Armando Iannucci on the Tory crisis



**Lola Seaton**  
The liberal platitudes of Michael Ignatieff

**Rachel Cooke**  
Sex, drugs, violence and TV's bleakest teen drama

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# The closing of the Conservative mind

This year marks the centenary of the BBC's creation. How, one might ask, does Boris Johnson's government intend to celebrate this occasion? On 16 January the Culture Secretary, Nadine Dorries, provided the answer. "This licence fee announcement will be the last," she peremptorily tweeted.

Ms Dorries did not propose an alternative funding model but such carelessness is typical of the mediocrities who sit in Mr Johnson's cabinet. Ministers in it are seldom prized for their ability, seriousness or independent thought, but rather for their unquestioning loyalty... to Mr Johnson. As a consequence, government departments once headed by Rory Stewart, Jeremy Hunt, Dominic Grieve and David Gauke (who laments the intellectual decline of the Conservatives on page 18) are now led by opportunists such as Ms Dorries (who until recently believed that Channel 4 received public money).

The timing of the announcement that the licence fee would be frozen for two years and could be abolished in the future was no accident. Mr Johnson is desperate to distract from the shambles of his Downing Street set-up. But as cynical as Ms Dorries' intervention was, it serves no one to pretend that the BBC is beyond criticism or reform. Despite a 30 per cent cut to its public funding since 2010, the public service broadcaster remains bloated, with too many overpaid managers and presenters. Its commitment to impartiality has too often led to an embrace of "false equivalence", with climate change deniers pitted against scientific experts. And its flagship TV news programmes – notably the 10pm bulletin on BBC One – have lost authority as they pursue an agenda of vox pops and excessive deference to the United States.

The charge most often levelled by conservative critics against the BBC is that it has a liberal, or even "left-wing" bias. This, one might note, has not prevented a succession of BBC executives – Robbie Gibb, Craig Oliver, Guto Harri, Will Walden – from serving recent Tory administrations. In reality, the BBC



**Nadine Dorries has not proposed an alternative funding model for the BBC, but such carelessness is typical of the Prime Minister's cabinet**

has an establishment bias: it is instinctively sympathetic to those who wield power. Rather than pursuing a genuinely independent approach, it too often follows a news agenda set by the right-dominated press.

But these defects are arguments for improving the BBC, not for destroying it. Through its foreign affairs reporting, documentaries, sports and arts coverage and children's TV, it upholds its founding mission to "inform, educate and entertain". *Start the Week* and Melvyn Bragg's *In Our Time* on Radio 4 are wonderful programmes. During the Covid-19 pandemic, as even the government was forced to recognise, the BBC has performed an invaluable service.

The purpose of the licence fee and the Royal Charter agreed each decade is to provide the BBC with independence from both the whims of the market and the government. It is easy to inveigh against the flat £159-a-year levy, but it is far harder to design a plausible alternative.

Turning the BBC into a Netflix-style subscription service, as many Conservative MPs propose, may be compatible with drama series such as *Line of Duty* but live television and radio news broadcasts cannot be paywalled. Those households who lack high-speed broadband (as far too many in the United Kingdom do) would be penalised.

Forcing the BBC to become an ad-funded service, as ITV and Channel 4 are, would leave it dependent on a precarious and shrinking source of revenue. Replacing the licence fee with direct government funding would make it more vulnerable to political manipulation and austere spending settlements.

In short, the licence fee may be the worst funding model apart from all the others. Ms Dorries protests that the levy is an unfair imposition on "families who are struggling to make ends meet". But from a government that has just increased National Insurance by 1.25 percentage points and cut Universal Credit by £1,040 a year, this is darkly comic. For all its shortcomings, the BBC remains an institution of which the UK should be proud. ●



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Standard House, 12-13 Essex Street, London WC2R 3AA.  
Tel 020 7936 6400

**Editor-in-chief** Jason Cowley  
**Chief Executive** Ken Appiah  
**Global Head of Sales** Phil Davison  
**Events Director** Sara Donaldson  
**Marketing Manager** Alfred Jahn

Cover illustration André Carrilho

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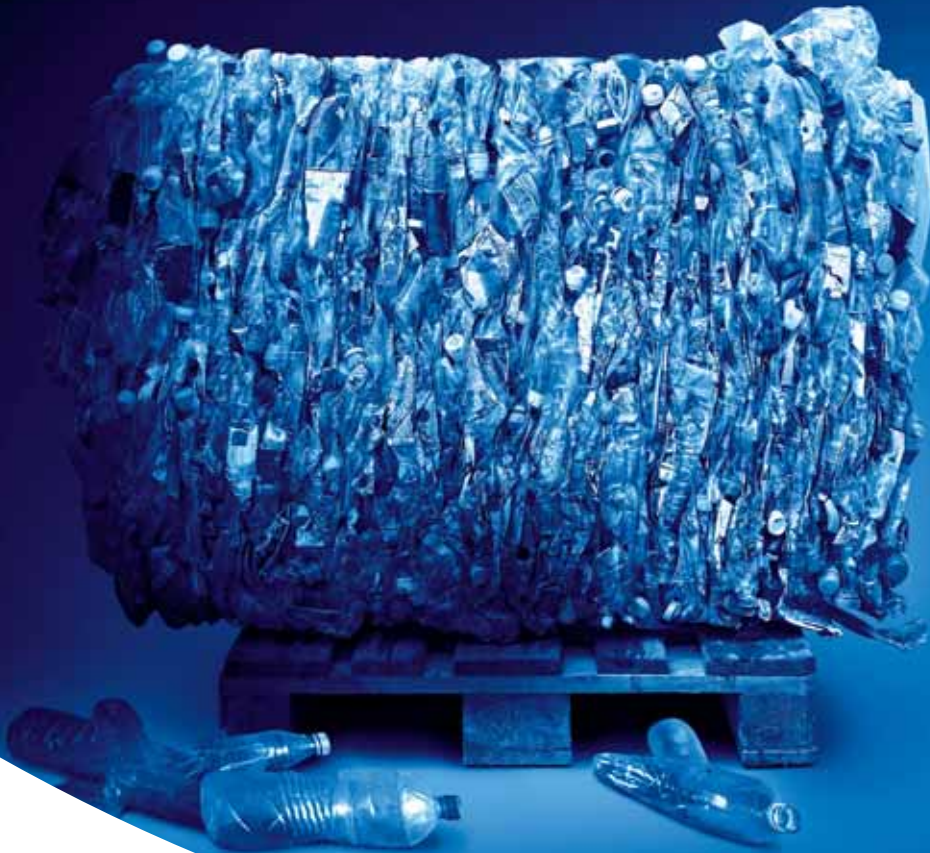
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## Outside the box **By Becky Barnicoat**



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# THE NOTEBOOK



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## Comment

We should not penalise  
the unvaccinated

By Rachel Cunliffe

All governments want to increase rates of vaccination against Covid-19. With the Omicron variant putting health systems across the world under strain, anger at those who still refuse to be vaccinated is growing.

Desperate times warrant desperate measures, you might say—measures such as fining the unvaccinated. On 11 January it was announced that the Canadian province of Quebec would penalise the unvaccinated by imposing a “significant” health tax (exact amount to be decided). Quebec joins Greece, which fines people over the age of 60 €100 for each month they don’t get their jab, and Singapore, where unvaccinated Covid patients are required to pay their own medical bills. There have been calls for Britain to introduce similar measures.

Could it be that simple? There’s a pragmatic issue of whether coercive tactics such as fines and vaccine passports actually help push up vaccination rates. That is an incredibly complex question which depends on the level of vaccine take-up and the reason for vaccine

◀ hesitancy in the first place – so far the answer seems to be that we’re not sure. But let’s say it does work. Does Quebec – or Singapore, or the UK – want a system where a person’s poor choices affect what they pay for healthcare? Because while charging unvaccinated patients may seem a relatively clear-cut example, once a universal healthcare system begins imposing penalties for behaviour deemed medically reckless, the issue quickly gets very muddy.

If someone who refuses to get inoculated against Covid deserves a health tax, what about other vaccinations – the flu jab, say? Or should parents who decline the MMR vaccine be charged if their children then need care (and if they can’t afford it, are we comfortable denying treatment to children)? What about people who go on holiday to areas with high hepatitis or typhoid risk but don’t get the correct travel inoculations? For that matter, what about people who travel to high-risk areas full-stop? Why should the UK taxpayer subsidise the treatment of someone who caught a rare tropical disease in a country they had no need to visit beyond their desire to see the world?

Then there are the other choices we make every day that could have adverse health outcomes. There are periodic demands that alcoholics, smokers and drug addicts should be made to contribute for the care they receive. It is interesting that those who enjoy extreme sports rarely incur the same ire; for some reason we seem much happier about taxpayers funding the treatment for someone’s ski accident than we do about an addict’s overdose. We might also consider the reasons someone is driven to drink and drugs: if their addiction is the result of past trauma can they really be

**Above a certain age, the most costly thing someone can do for the NHS is to keep living**

said to be at fault? It is all very well to bang the drum of personal responsibility, but not if those standards are applied haphazardly based on societal prejudices.

One solution, of course, is to do away with the idea of universal healthcare altogether. Let people make their own choices and pay the consequences themselves, or look to the insurance market to assess the risks, as is essentially the case in the US. Somehow I don’t think that’s what the premier of Quebec had in mind when he announced the tax for the unvaccinated. He said, rather, that it was “a question of fairness”.

But fairness is hard to quantify when it comes to health spending. In Britain we talk often of the “cost” to the NHS of people who smoke or are obese. The health support service One Small Step, for example, points out that smoking costs the UK government £12.6bn a year, £2.5bn of which is spent on NHS smoking services. On the same page, however, it notes that “half of all life-long smokers die early, losing on average ten years of their life”. Given how dramatically the cost of care increases as someone ages past retirement, those ten lost years represent a saving for the taxpayer.

That is an immensely grisly – not to mention heartless – way to look at things. But if your argument is that those who cost more should pay more, it is vital to crunch the numbers. Despite the perception that certain lifestyle choices would save money as well as lives, research by the Institute of Economic Affairs concludes that: “By dying early, overweight and obese people saved the government £3.228bn in pension, healthcare and benefit payments in England and Wales in 2014.”

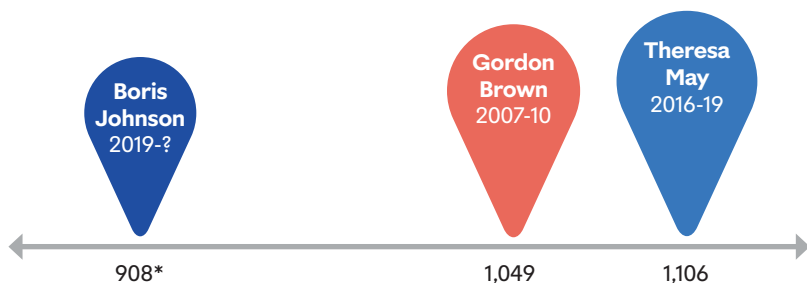
The more you think about it, the darker it gets. It is a triumph of medical science that people are living longer and surviving conditions that would once have killed us: someone who three decades ago would have died of cancer at 70 can now have a life-saving operation and live another 15 years. That’s wonderful – but those 15 years of other age-related ailments have a price-tag attached, for the government purse as a whole and in terms of healthcare specifically. Figures from the Nuffield Trust in 2016 show how health spending in the UK is skewed towards the over-65s: more than £7,000 a year was spent per person on those above the age of 85 compared to a national average of £2,069, with an 85-year-old man costing the NHS seven times more than a man in his thirties. Miraculous but expensive new drugs compound the challenge. The unpalatable truth is that, above a certain age, the most costly thing someone can do in terms of burdening the NHS is to keep living.

No one wants to live in a society where healthcare is rationed by age, with the elderly denied treatment because it is too expensive to keep them alive. But a healthcare model that allocates spending based on whose actions have cost the system the most money raises uncomfortable questions. The very premise of universal healthcare is that someone turning up to a hospital should receive medical attention free at the point of use, regardless of the decisions which may have led them there. However determined governments are to keep vaccination rates high, they should be wary of violating that principle. ●

## Chart of the Week

### The length of Boris Johnson’s premiership

The Prime Minister has been in office for fewer days than Gordon Brown or Theresa May



*If Boris Johnson leaves office before 7 June, his time in No 10 would be the shortest this century*

\*Data as of 17 January 2022. Source: House of Commons / PA

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# The Diary

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## The challenges of Dry January and why I called on Boris Johnson to resign

By Caroline Nokes

**D**ry January really begins to grate in the second week. I had wondered whether this was a wise year to commit to my annual exercise in abstinence. But on the first Wednesday back in Westminster I'd had a chat with a BBC political reporter who said it felt as though the Christmas party story was "over". We were all moving on – what could possibly go wrong in 2022?

When the atmosphere in parliament gets febrile, I find it best to get my head down, carry on with the commitments I've made, and engage with my own inbox. I'm proud of my reputation for responding to my constituents promptly and honestly. It's crucial to find out what your voters, party members and neighbours are thinking about the issues in the headlines. The Westminster bubble can skew your perspective, whereas the residents of SO51 tend to be about as blunt and straightforward as their MP.

### Spurning journos

Unlike the rest of Westminster, I didn't spend the morning of 11 January dwelling on whether the Prime Minister had attended parties during lockdown. The Women and Equalities Select Committee is doing important work on menopause and the workplace, so I had a webinar scheduled with Peppy, a digital platform specialising in under-served areas of healthcare, and I recorded a podcast with the awesome anti-ageism campaigner Nicky Clark. Both were fun, interesting and a chance just to be me, talking about issues I care about.

It made it easy to forget about the increasing agitation in Westminster, or would have made it easy if I hadn't been constantly having to turn down requests from journalists to give my thoughts on the crisis.



**My voters are angry, but above all sad that a PM they had invested so much hope in has let them down**

### Speaking truth to Peston

In November 2021 I had agreed to appear on the Robert Peston show. I can remember the conversation I had in my office when I told my staff that I would go on but, "not before Christmas, pick a random date in the new year". The "random date" turned out to be Wednesday 12 January. Timing is everything.

Meanwhile, the emails from my constituents were stacking up. I told them that I was as angry as they were at Downing Street for not abiding by the rules. One constituent kindly sent my unvarnished thoughts to Alastair Campbell, who tweeted it. The messages from journalists then quadrupled. No, I was still not coming on their programme. Niceties were now jettisoned.

*Peston* producers, however, grew excited as it became clear I was not speaking to the media and waiting until the evening of 12 January to let people know what I thought about the Prime Minister's position. The blog *Guido Fawkes* and the GB News correspondent Tom Harwood had a discussion on Twitter that afternoon about whether I had already called for Boris Johnson to resign; at that point I definitely hadn't. But I made my views about the Prime Minister clear on the show: "He either goes now, or he goes in three years in the general election," I told Peston. "He's damaging the entire Conservative brand with an unwillingness to accept the strictures that other people have lived by."

Unusually for me, I very much enjoyed filming *Peston* – it might have been the fan-girl moment with fellow guest Armando Iannucci. For those who are familiar with *Veep*, I have had terrible Selina Meyer "I may have said something" moments – to the extent that the phrase is engraved on a plaque in my office.

### The irate majority

Returning to my constituency in Hampshire at the weekend is the high point of the week. With local elections approaching, I spent my Saturday door-knocking with the Conservative team in Southampton. We can best describe my constituents' mood as "angry", and they were not afraid to let me know their views, forcefully, on the doorstep. There were some ardent supporters of the Prime Minister to be found, but they were heavily outnumbered by the irate. An ICU nurse stands out in my mind; she was apoplectic.

I finished the weekend buried deep in my inbox. Three headteachers had sent emails to thank me for speaking out, along with two retired Royal Navy officers, while a woman who has been a Conservative Party member for 50 years said that my honesty on *Peston* was the only reason she didn't tear up her membership card. I opened emails from councillors and association officers all thanking me for my bravery. Of course, some disagree with me – at the last count, eight out of the 480 I have managed to read and respond to so far. My constituents are angry, disappointed and above all sad that a PM they had invested so much hope in has let them down. I never want to encounter an inbox like that again. ●

*Caroline Nokes is the Conservative MP for Romsey and Southampton North*



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## Newsmaker

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### Michel Houellebecq and the soul of France Sex, death, politics and terrorism – and the return of the great writer

By **Andrew Hussey**

It is hard to think of any writer in the English-speaking world equivalent to the cultural and political phenomenon that is the French novelist and provocateur Michel Houellebecq. When Houellebecq first came to international prominence with his great novels *Atomised* (1998) and *Platform* (2001), he wrote as an outsider. His characters – primarily male – were disillusioned, cynical, given to alcoholism and general despair about the decline of Western civilisation. He grappled with big subjects – race, religion, sex, terrorism and death – always in a tone that veered from irony into vicious, sneering sarcasm. He was a bestseller nonetheless, partly because his books were page-turners, and partly because he tapped into the mood of self-doubt that characterised French society, as it still does today.

Since then his status in France has shifted. He is now treated as something like a national monument. In 2010 he was awarded the Prix Goncourt, the country's most prestigious literary prize, for his novel *The Map and the Territory*, and soon afterwards he returned to France after ten years of living in Ireland. In 2019 he was made a knight in the National Order of the Légion d'Honneur, the equivalent of an OBE and an award that dates back to Napoleon Bonaparte.

These days, a new Houellebecq novel is met with a mixture of reverence and anticipation long before

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publication, and on arrival is almost treated as a national event. Houellebecq, once a man of the left, has acquired the rare and unusual position of being a writer who has not only a deep understanding of the complexity of France in the early 21st century, but a direct impact on political life in the country. What he says matters. He may once have been seen as a snarky outsider with deliberately provocative and unsettling views, but, aged 65, he is now a part of the fabric of everyday French life.

This process has become more marked since the publication of his novel *Submission* (2015), which imagined an Islamist government in France that had come to power in alliance with the political left. *Submission*, by a horrible coincidence, was published on 7 January 2015, the day of the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre. Thereafter it seemed prescient if not prophetic of the Islamist attacks and massacres that horrified France, and the world, later that year – most notably the Paris attacks of Friday 13 November, in which 130 people were killed.

It is notable that Houellebecq's new book *Anéantir* (best translated into English as "Destroy" or "Annihilate") was also published on 7 January this year, if only perhaps to make the defiant point that Michel Houellebecq is a survivor, still writing, despite the horrors of 2015.

Unsurprisingly, on the day of publication my local bookshop in Paris had sold out of *Anéantir* within a few hours. Houellebecq's publisher, Flammarion, ordered an initial print run of 300,000 copies (a huge number for a literary writer) but it seems likely that the sales of the book will quickly exceed that figure. One explanation for Houellebecq's enduring popularity is that although he writes about 21st-century issues, he does so more like a 19th-century writer, creating, in the mode of Honoré de Balzac or Émile Zola, a complete world in which you can immerse yourself.

**A**néantir is 736 pages long, and so there is indeed much to be immersed in. It is, however, an open question whether the book deserves so much of the reader's attention. The critics have mostly been kind to Houellebecq so far. This applies across the political spectrum, from the right-wing *Le Figaro*, whose critic Sébastien Lapaque described it as a study of the "melancholy of the human condition", to the decidedly left-wing *Libération*, where it was praised as moving between "tragedy and irony without ever losing hope". There were a few dissenting voices in *L'Obs* and *Les Inrockuptibles*, magazines generally favourable to Houellebecq, but most reviews have suggested that *Anéantir* may be his masterpiece.

In truth, much of the book is a slog. It begins promisingly enough as a kind of political thriller, set in 2026 and 2027 in the run-up to the presidential elections. Real figures appear: the far-right politicians Éric Zemmour (praised by Houellebecq in his non-fiction collection *Interventions 2020*) and Marine Le Pen are named, and the unnamed president is easily

identifiable as Emmanuel Macron. Other named characters include Philippe Lançon, the author and contributor to *Charlie Hebdo* who was seriously injured in the Islamist attack of 7 January, and who wrote a compelling memoir of his physical and mental recovery called *Disturbance*.

*Anéantir* begins with the kind of mystery that is not too far removed from the much-praised television series *Le Bureau des Légendes*, which reveals the inner workings of the French version of MI6. The main character Paul Raison, a senior official at the ministry of the economy and finance, is puzzled by a series of cyber-attacks that escape all explanation. One of the attacks features a video depicting the beheading of the minister Bruno Juge – a character widely rumoured to be based on the politician Bruno Le Maire. He has worked for the Macron government since 2017 as minister of the economy and finance, and is claimed as a friend by Houellebecq. In 2019 Le Maire received death threats, including bullets sent in the post.

The premise of the novel is intriguing but the pace is slow. It slackens further as we spend more time with Raison, who is middle-aged, melancholic (by now a staple of Houellebecq's fiction) and given to introspection and meditations on his not-very-successful sexual past. Paul's marriage is under strain. His wife, Prudence, is named after the song "Dear Prudence" from the Beatles' *White Album*, which Paul wistfully judges "not to be one of their better works". She is in favour of veganism, and prefers yoga and meditation to sex.

The plot becomes even more convoluted and at times you have the feeling of reading three books at once. The writing is often flat and overloaded with detail. There are too many digressions. Yet the book quickens when Paul's personal life is disrupted by the news that his father has had a stroke.

At this point, the novel turns into a family saga, describing how a dysfunctional family can be brought together by the sickness of a parent. When Paul himself falls ill from a cancerous tumour and contemplates his own death, *Anéantir* is transformed into an extended meditation on human frailty and the lack of spirituality in the Western world.

These final chapters are moving as Houellebecq displays compassion and empathy, and a belief in the redemptive power of love. Far beyond politics, these are the real themes of the book. They are also the reasons why *Anéantir*, for all its faults, is worth reading.

There has been much talk in the French press that the tenderness revealed in *Anéantir* is the sign of a new, more "mature" Michel Houellebecq. But it could also be argued that he is returning to his roots. Houellebecq began his career as a poet, and the final pages of *Anéantir* seem to me to be much closer in tone and style to his early poems – they recalled Philip Larkin or early Morrissey from the Smiths – than the cynicism and apparent heartlessness of the novels. ●

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*"Anéantir" is due to be published in translation in the UK later this year*

**Houellebecq not only understands 21st-century France, but has a direct impact on its political life**

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# STEPHEN BUSH



## Politics

### Boris Johnson hangs on because there is no compelling leader-in-waiting

Conservative politicians are furious. One bemoans the stupidity and thoughtlessness of their party's leadership and predicts that the local elections in May will be "a catastrophe". Another complains that they are spending most of their free evenings persuading their colleagues not to quit the party or fight the next election as independent candidates. A third brands the party membership – only a quarter of whom, according to an Opinium survey released on 17 January, think that Boris Johnson should stand down – as "witless".

The good news for the Prime Minister is these three politicians have something in common: they are councillors facing difficult local elections in May, not MPs who hold Johnson's fate in their hands. Similar opinions can be heard among the parliamentary party, but they are rarer.

Although most MPs accept that the slew of lockdown-breaking parties in Downing Street and across Whitehall have damaged Johnson's standing, perhaps fatally, the mood is not one of immediate revolt. It helps, of course, that the next election is at least two years away and that the electoral waters can be tested by the party's luckless councillors before Johnson leads the party into another national contest.

One should consider, too, the available replacements. Neither Rishi Sunak (the bookies' favourite and the preferred choice of the party membership, according to Opinium) nor Liz Truss, who consistently tops ConservativeHome's survey of likely future party leaders, have yet constructed a formidable machine in parliament.

Of the cabinet ministers frequently discussed as leadership contenders, it is

Priti Patel who has the most well-established operation at Westminster. She, or at least her office, is good at remembering personal details about MPs, such as birthdays, the ambitions of their children and other small acts of cultivation that help build a parliamentary following.

Patel's political stock is low, however, because of the government's failure to halt migrants from crossing the Channel. One MP on the right of the party, who has long admired Patel and talked up her prospects as a future leader, despairingly joked to me that "our Priti has developed a fault – I hope we've got the receipt somewhere".

As for Sunak and Truss, they both have a similar problem: how to navigate their proximity, or lack thereof, to the Prime Minister. Truss has her own distinct identity as an unashamed defender of free markets and lower taxes, both causes that Johnson championed before becoming Prime Minister, yet she is ultimately a Johnson loyalist and a candidate with similar assets as him. "If Labour's strength is reassuring steadiness," one Tory MP told me, "the solution can't be a more ideologically driven and competent version of Johnson." That Truss is relatively unknown outside Westminster

### Some anxious Conservative MPs are thinking longingly of Jeremy Hunt

makes her a riskier bet for any MP worried that they will lose their seat if the next leader turns out to be a dud.

For Sunak, the tricky task of balancing loyalty to the incumbent Prime Minister with his own leadership ambitions is fraught with risk. One MP complained crudely that the Chancellor should "shit or get off the pot" and that his attempt to position himself as both a loyal cabinet minister and a quiet opponent of the ideological heresies of the Johnson era simply makes him look weak and shifty.


Sunak's biggest advantage over Truss is that the next Budget, which will be delivered on 23 March, is another opportunity to enhance his national profile. His biggest weakness is that a politically frail government, coupled with a tough economic backdrop, could bring him down as well as Johnson.

As a result, some MPs are thinking longingly of Jeremy Hunt. He has served on the back benches throughout the Johnson era and is seen as best placed to refresh the Conservative government. He is untainted by lingering questions over the Covid-19 pandemic or a rotten culture in Whitehall. But though Hunt has signalled that he might still have leadership ambitions, he does not have an organised operation in parliament. MPs who are, as one put it to me, "open" to the former health secretary complain that they have not heard from either him or his closest allies.


Johnson's survival – for now – reflects the reality that none of the frontrunners to succeed him enjoys supremacy within the parliamentary party. But this could change: Sunak's Budget could cause his stock to leap or bring his leadership hopes to an abrupt end. A Russian invasion of Ukraine could strengthen Truss's standing among Tory MPs or shatter it. An intensification of the "partygate" scandal could lead anxious MPs to turn to Hunt. Or an unexpected event could force the Prime Minister's departure at a time of no one's choosing, with uncertain consequences for the contest to replace him.

So the parliamentary party bides its time – not out of any genuine affection for Johnson, but because there is no unquestioned successor. After all, it's not urgent: it's not as if they're local councillors.

This gives Downing Street the hope that Boris Johnson might yet survive: that uncertainty over his replacement is his biggest asset. The truth, however, is that the one thing certain about Boris Johnson's present position is that it is unstable, and that the conditions keeping him in place can't possibly last. ●



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# CORRESPONDENCE

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## Letter of the week What leadership looks like



Tom Harwood's shock (The Diary, 14 January) at Nicola Sturgeon's put-down of the *Scottish Daily Mail's* political editor is somewhat disingenuous. Surely he must know that throughout her career Sturgeon has enjoyed her reputation as a "nippy sweetie" who is well able to defend herself against hostile critics? Whether one supports her nationalist agenda or not, as First Minister – along with her Welsh counterpart Mark Drakeford – she has given a lead during the pandemic and exposed the inadequacies of the UK government's approach.

Unlike the Prime Minister, Sturgeon has never gone awol and taken off to a Mediterranean villa or held drinks parties in her official residence during lockdown. She has stayed at her post throughout. Her stamina is extraordinary and her communication skills are superb. That she can occasionally find herself irritated by a right-wing journalist is perfectly understandable and certainly forgivable.

Alison Summers, via email

### Parallel universe

The location of Kat Rosenfield's dystopian new "moral universe" where catching Covid has become "a sinner's mark" (Another Voice, 14 January) is unclear. Is she suggesting that the UK too has fallen prey to the grotesque parody of behaviour she presents for the US? In either case, it seems that she seizes upon a desire to avoid serious illness and re-characterises this as supercilious piety, fearful neurosis and privileged, door-slaming reclusiveness.

This caricature is insulting to millions, particularly those whose vulnerability means any contact with an unvaccinated person could be perilous, and who have no choice but to adopt the hermit-like life she ridicules. Many such people live on low incomes. As to her side-swipe at the

"so-called pandemic of the unvaccinated", I wonder on what basis she asserts this to be a "myth". I believe many epidemiologists would disagree with her, as would many doctors and nurses.

Gillian Bargery, St Leonards-on-Sea, East Sussex

### The kids are all right

Bruno Maçães (World View, 14 January) does young people a disservice in his analysis of youth rebellion. As the world changes, what we rebel against and what this looks like must too.

I am a teacher of history and politics, and my students are adept at debating and passionately want change. There are those who want to discuss the finer points of Chomsky, which is way above their years.

The social media platform TikTok is not just for dances, it helped organise the climate strikes.

I wish to remain anonymous as I do not want people to assume I am teaching my personal opinions to children. The students are very opinionated already!

A sixth form teacher

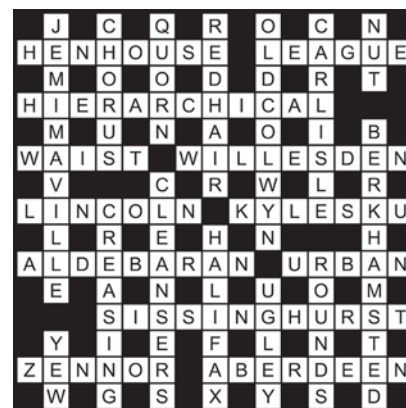
### Mushroom cloud

Jan-Werner Müller (The Critics, 14 January) quotes Hobbes as saying "men emerge from the earth like mushrooms", meaning that they are without mutual obligations. We now know that the mycelium network from which mushrooms grow carries complex and sophisticated signals to tell its friends where to go for nourishment, also acting as a Wood Wide Web to assist other species. Does this make Hobbes' underlying assumptions about man dubious?

Margaret Sherborne, Barry

### By popular demand

Please see below for the complete solution grids for the Christmas double crossword.



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# How my party lost its way

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Even the fall of Boris Johnson would not banish the delusions that define the ruling Conservatives in this age of upheaval

By David Gauke

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We have learnt in recent weeks that there was a culture within 10 Downing Street of ignoring the rules. For those who are mystified about how this could have happened (and, in theory, there may be such people), all I can say is that this would not have happened under Theresa May. Or David Cameron. Or, I suspect, any other prime minister in modern times.

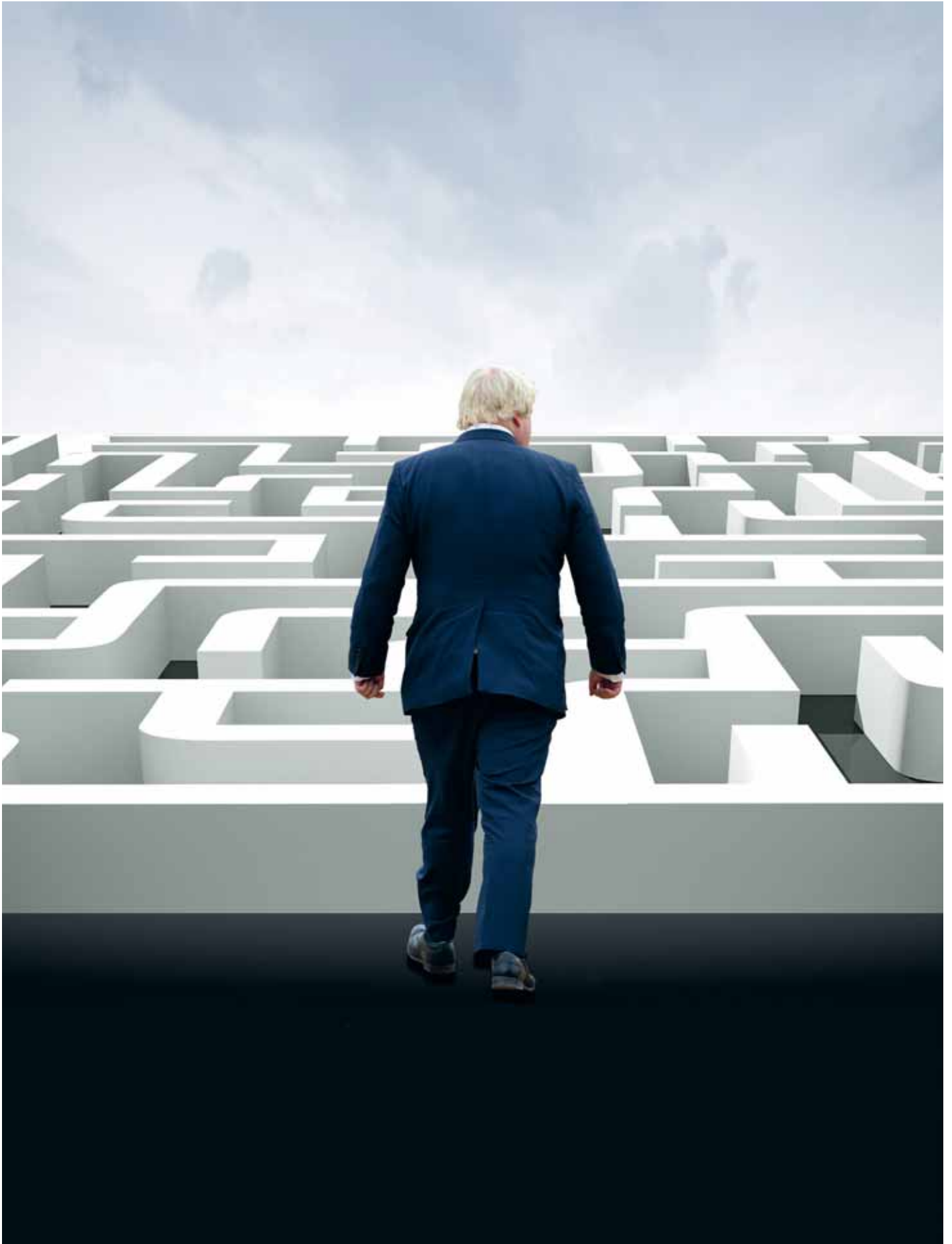
This is a Conservative government very different from its predecessors. In its attitude to rules and conventions, the manner and style of leadership, its coalition of electoral support, its policy priorities and its views towards our institutions; it all represents a distinct break with the past. This break has enabled a Conservative Party that had been in office for nine years to renew itself and win the support of new voters. It has also, on a number of occasions, caused queasiness from supporters of, and senior figures from, previous Tory administrations.

Are these characteristics determined by the character of the Prime Minister or are they the consequence of larger forces? Are the years of Boris Johnson an aberration or evidence of a more fundamental change in our politics? As Johnson's hold on office weakens and the prospect of a change of prime minister increases, the answers to those questions will help explain the future direction that the Conservative Party – and the country – will take.

There is no doubt that Johnson was an unusual figure to become Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. He came to office without having been leader of the opposition or long years as a minister. He had a brief and undistinguished spell as foreign secretary – a grand position but of little relevance in understanding domestic policy – and eight years as mayor of London where he was content to delegate many of his responsibilities.

Johnson was an inexperienced minister, however, he was an experienced public figure. He had been a household name for more than 20 years as a television personality who also happened to be a politician. People described him as “colourful” and “larger than life” and they very often liked him.

In 2008, when I was canvassing in my constituency I would find people volunteering that they were “voting for Boris” in the London mayoral elections, at least until I pointed out that they lived in Hertfordshire. Some years later, May's cabinet held an away day and travelled by train to Runcorn station in Cheshire. There were a few locals milling around as the entire cabinet (minus the prime minister) walked along the platform unrecognised before the excited cry went up – “there's Boris!” Johnson has always been judged more as a celebrity than as a ▶



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## Cover Story

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◀ politician. This has contributed to him being generally more highly regarded by those not closely engaged with politics than by fellow politicians.

He was widely viewed – including by Conservative MPs – as lacking administrative ability, a deep understanding of policy (only now, we learn, is he reading his briefing papers) and, it has to be said, a reputation for integrity. These perceptions blew up his 2016 leadership election campaign when the crown was there for the taking. It also meant that he was not the obvious successor to May for most of her time in office but, by the time of her fall in 2019, the majority of his colleagues were prepared to put aside their reservations and support him. He was seen (correctly as it turned out) to be a solution to the Brexit impasse and a means of delivering a Conservative majority. This was more important than competence and honesty.

The politics of 2019 were extraordinary and, if you want to make the case that Johnson is an aberration, one can argue that he would only have assumed office in those extraordinary circumstances. Now that those circumstances have passed, the argument goes, we can return to normality. The Conservative Party can elect a more conventional leader and pursue a more conventional Tory agenda. Post-Johnson politics can look like pre-Johnson politics (only with the UK outside the EU because, after all, he got Brexit done). Let us not speak of him again.

Just at the moment, this prospect is somewhat tempting for many Conservatives, but it would be a misreading of events. It ignores the causes of the Brexit impasse, it ignores the political risks that faced the Conservative Party in 2019 and it ignores the political opportunity which Johnson seized at the last general election and which the Conservatives are likely to want to replicate.

Johnson skilfully exploited the nation's weariness with a problem he had helped to create – the apparently endless drama that was leaving the European Union. Reassured by Leave politicians that this would be a simple and straightforward matter in which the UK held all the cards, it came as a shock to the electorate that negotiations proved to be complicated and that the EU was not prepared to give the UK everything it demanded.

Matters were not helped by the most intractable issue being one of little direct relevance to the population of Great Britain – the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. This received little attention at the time of the 2016 referendum (despite the best efforts of Tony Blair and John Major) but the logic of the issue meant that there was no way of delivering a satisfactory Brexit.

The UK's regulatory and customs divergence from the EU meant that a UK-EU border was necessary. In the context of Ireland, this meant either a border between Great Britain and Northern Ireland (raising questions about the integrity of the UK) or between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (raising questions about the Northern Ireland peace process). We could, of course, have decided not to diverge on regulatory and customs matters, but this would have brought into question the whole point of Brexit.

It was this trilemma that sunk May's withdrawal agreement. As a sincere unionist and someone acutely conscious of the risks of creating a border on the island of Ireland, she obtained an agreement that effectively kept the UK in the single market for goods until the border issue could be resolved. This was a practical solution to the trilemma, but it failed the Brexiters' purity test.

Brexit had become redefined so as to mean that any compromise with the EU (or, indeed, any compromise with logic) was unacceptable. As one of the leaders of the Leave campaign, Johnson might have engaged with and understood the issue and tried to explain to his followers that it was necessary to address a real practical problem. Where he led, Brexit supporters might have followed.

Instead, Johnson dismissed the Northern Ireland border as nit-picking by Remainers (once likening it to moving between the two London boroughs of Islington and Camden) and sided with the sovereignty purists of the European Research Group. His answer to the Northern Ireland border question was to hang tough, shout louder and threaten the EU with a no-deal Brexit.

On the substance, Johnson turned out to be wrong. He thought he could avoid a border but agreed in October 2019 to putting

one in the Irish Sea. He tried to reverse this while negotiating a new EU trade deal in the autumn of 2020 but again backed down and is still trying to renegotiate the Northern Ireland Protocol without much success. His position, however, did bring political rewards – the support of the European Research Group in the Conservative leadership election and a comfortable victory among the staunchly Eurosceptic party membership.

Johnson's triumph among Conservative MPs was not, of course, limited to the diehard Brexiters. It helped enormously that he was the favourite among the members and was always likely to win. That can focus the minds of those wanting a front-bench career. He was also the candidate who could most plausibly see off Nigel Farage's Brexit Party, the winner of the 2019 European Parliament elections.

The risk for the Conservatives in 2019 was that they faced being squeezed on the Brexit-supporting right by Farage while being squeezed on the Remain-supporting centre by the Liberal Democrats. This had happened in the European elections and Conservative MPs were terrified that it would happen again in a general election.

Johnson's strategy was to unite the Brexit side of the debate. Brexit had created a risk but also created an opportunity. By seeing off Farage, it meant that the Conservatives could appeal to a new part of the electorate – cultural conservatives who had voted Labour and Ukip in the past and who wanted to see Brexit done. They liked Johnson – a charismatic, anti-establishment, politically incorrect, optimistic, patriotic, affable character who did not take himself too seriously. He promised them change, more nurses and police officers and a bit of a laugh. He was also up against Jeremy Corbyn. In December 2019, Johnson's ambition was fulfilled and he won an 80-seat majority.

It is worth dwelling on this moment. It tells us three things about modern politics that are relevant to the post-Johnson world as well as his emergence as Prime Minister – the nature of the parliamentary party; the determination to close down space to the Conservatives' right; and the changing alignment of British politics.

Johnson's three predecessors as Conservative prime minister – John Major, David Cameron and Theresa May – were all brought down (or, at least, deeply damaged) by their inability to control the Eurosceptic right. Johnson, in contrast, exploited the right.

For a sizeable element of the Tory party, sovereignty has assumed an almost theological quality. They no longer exist in a world of trade-offs and compromises, of pros and cons, but a world of absolutes. In the context

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## Johnson was seen as a solution to the Brexit impasse and a means of delivering a Tory majority



of Northern Ireland, this requires a continued refusal to accept the choices available and an insistence that we can avoid a border in the Irish Sea and diverge from the EU. Future leadership candidates will be acutely aware of this.

Incidentally, for most of these MPs, they also have a vision as to what Brexit means. Divergence is for a purpose and that purpose is to make the UK more competitive, to deliver the next stage of the Thatcherite revolution. The reality is that Brexit means reversing much of Thatcherism – putting up taxes because the economy is smaller than it otherwise would have been, erecting trade barriers and imposing new regulatory burdens on business – but the increasing tendency is to blame Johnson's Big State instincts for this predictable turn of events.

The events of 2018-19 also revealed a wider change of temperament within the parliamentary party. Conservative politics became about campaigning not governing, with well-organised factions talking to the like-minded, and using every method possible to exert

pressure on the government. The Tories became more a party of protest than of government, with a research group for every cause.

In recent weeks, the most prominent of these groups has organised opposition to Covid restrictions. The country is fortunate that Omicron has turned out to be as mild as it has – something that was not certain when a hundred Conservative MPs rebelled over the Plan B restrictions. Had these MPs got their way, with Plan B not implemented, (and had Chris Whitty, the chief medical officer, and Jenny Harries, the chief executive of the UK Health Security Agency, not warned the public to ration their socialising), the NHS may well have been overwhelmed this January.

Again, as with Brexit, Covid-19 has exposed a tendency among Conservative MPs to view the world as they would like it to be, not as it actually is. Their risk appetite is insatiable. Johnson's removal would not change this – he was relatively cautious on Omicron.

The threat of an alternative party to the right of the Conservatives has diminished since 2019. This is partly due to Johnson's positioning and partly due to coronavirus.

Farage and other Brexit veterans have associated themselves with the anti-lockdown cause, which has had little cut-through with their traditional older, Covid-vulnerable supporters. The Reform Party has consistently performed poorly in by-elections and opinion polls.

Post-Covid, however, the opportunity to change the subject and prompt public animosity towards immigration will increase. A significant breakthrough for the Reform Party remains unlikely but Farage's influence comes not from his own success but his influence over those Conservatives easily spooked by the prospect of losing votes to him. If anything, Johnson's removal would increase these Tory concerns because his successor will not have Johnson's track record of diminishing Farage's appeal.

The final lesson is that there is a long-term realignment of politics in the UK and throughout the developed world. Whereas once the economically secure voted centre-right and the economically insecure voted centre-left, voting behaviour has become increasingly influenced by cultural matters. The way in which a particular constituency votes increasingly depends not on income levels but upon population density, ethnic diversity and education levels.

This has created an opportunity for the centre right and helped deliver the Red Wall to the Tories. Johnson, with his performative patriotism, ideological flexibility and apparently disarming personality, was able to woo this part of the electorate in a way that few Conservatives can. Reconciling the small-state instincts of many Tories with this electoral opportunity is a challenge that any leader of the Conservative Party will have to address but, with our current political geography, it is hard to see how the views of the median voter in a Red Wall swing seat (economically to the left, culturally to the right) can be ignored. This does not suggest a return to Cameroon-style liberal conservatism any time soon.

Johnson's period in office may be coming to an end. What replaces him will not be Johnsonian as such. He never offered a coherent philosophy and, ethically, any change will be a step in the right direction. Rule-breaking parties won't be an issue. But the forces apparent in 2019 – an unruly, even delusional, parliamentary party, the fear of a threat from the right, and a realigned electorate that rewards cultural conservatism – will continue to drive the politics of the Conservative Party for years to come. ●

*David Gauke is a former Conservative secretary of state for justice and was MP for South West Hertfordshire from 2005 to 2019*

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There comes a point in the course of a government when the party in power starts to look more than mildly deranged. The appointment of Nadine Dorries as Culture Secretary was a tip-off, and the reports that the BBC licence fee will come to an abrupt end in 2027 was the confirmation. The intricate arguments about the broadcasting market will in time be interpreted in the popular mind as a needless government campaign to abolish David Attenborough, and that is, to say the least of it, not very advisable.

The moment of evident derangement is, at the same time, the moment of maximum opportunity for an ambitious opposition. In a recent Opinium poll, not only were the Tories 10 percentage points behind Labour, but Boris Johnson's personal approval had fallen below the worst numbers ever recorded by Theresa May. In the latest Redfield & Wilton poll, Labour had taken a lead of 13 points, its largest since 2013. Labour is now polling 43 per cent and the Conservatives are languishing on 30 per cent. The shift in the polls is significant, and feels like an abiding change, not a fleeting verdict.

We really might be witnessing the grand unravelling of the cult of Boris Johnson. The Prime Minister won an 80-seat majority in 2019 by being a Brexit man who was not, unlike all those staid characters in parliament, really a politician at all. The disastrous consequence of his behaviour during lockdown is that he suddenly conforms to the public's low view of all politicians. The moment that more recent Tory voters start to think that Johnson is no different from the rest of the political class, he is in trouble.

In fact, someone who has disappointed voters may be punished even harder than one in whom no faith was ever placed. The political charge of Brexit has now gone too, which helps to explain the Culture War Secretary's ludicrous attack on the funding model of the BBC.

It might be thought, then, that Labour could sit tight and let the Tories implode. Indeed, that might be enough. Perhaps we are approaching the moment at which the public decides that a decade and a half of the Tories is long enough. No party has ever won, or partly won, five consecutive general electoral victories since the resumption of two-party British politics after the Second World War. The Tories have burned through their talent and are left with a policy-free C-team. They have already, in their wisdom, provided three prime ministers, two of whom their members put into Downing Street before the electorate was consulted. It feels like we might be

# PHILIP COLLINS



## The Public Square Events have conspired to give Labour another chance. Will Keir Starmer seize it?

neering the end of their time. When that happens, when enough of the public is simply fed up, it's over. It might be true, in a way, that this would be more a case of Johnson doing badly than Keir Starmer doing brilliantly, but so what?

The argument for complacency and staying quiet goes no further than that, though. Perhaps a safety-first victory can be won by Labour, but the approach is, paradoxically, fraught with risk. There is a small chance that if Labour does not step into the political space vacated by Johnson, the Prime Minister might recover. Perhaps his obituaries have been written too soon. Time may heal; memories may fade. If Labour does not present a compelling alternative, then perhaps the new Tory vote could offer Johnson one final chance at redemption. A greater risk for Labour is that the Tories once again dispatch their leader and that Rishi Sunak is able to restore a sense of calm and purpose in a more traditional Conservative administration. While Sunak is not exactly box office, he could perhaps win a solid victory, as John Major did in 1992.

Even if the Conservatives cannot reinvent themselves yet again, a cautious approach from Labour might produce only a slender victory or put the party into government with the consent of other

parties. This both hampers what can be done in office and makes the prospect of a second victory less likely. Harold Wilson spent too much of his time in Downing Street with an eye on the next election, forced to use his low political cunning to combat internal rivals. A small victory is better than no victory – especially for such an unsuccessful party as Labour – but it's not the road to the next new Jerusalem.

There are good reasons, then, for Labour to be bolder. The critique of the Conservatives has landed and the public is starting to take a second look at Starmer's party. This is in itself a political achievement, but Labour now needs to win back a lost reputation for economic competence, as well as develop a reform programme for the public services. There are signs, in the early speeches of the shadow chancellor Rachel Reeves, that Labour is edging towards some tougher positions based on value for money. Sadly, not many people spend their weekends perusing political speeches, so this shift in attitude needs to be painted in primary colours.

At the time of writing, Reeves is due to give a speech in Bury, Greater Manchester on 20 January. There is a statue in the town of Robert Peel, the great Red Wall Tory. Peel was prepared to split the Tories for the cause of lowering the price of bread for the people. In 1846 the interests of the merchants and the interests of the public led to a fatal political collision. Today events have conspired to give the Labour Party another chance. When we come to do the audit of the next election, it is likely that the next few months will be found to have counted. ●

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## The Tories have burned through their talent and are left with a policy-free C-team

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# No country for the unvaxxed

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As the presidential election approaches, Italians are obsessed with one subject: the rights and wrongs of the Covid pass

By Tim Parks

Just how toxic can conversation get? In recent years I have frequently rejoiced that living in Italy spared me the poisonous Brexit divide. Then Covid brought us the “green pass” and all too soon old friends were falling out. Every meeting was a potential quarrel, electrified by the Italian tendency to see all issues in terms of belonging and exclusion. “LET’S GET GOING AGAIN IN SAFETY” announces the government’s green pass website. The pass “keeps citizens safer at work, school and in many daily activities”. But which citizens, and how?

The pass was initially proposed by the EU in that distant time when it was supposed that vaccinated people could not transmit the virus. You would be able to move from one country to another if double vaccinated. Alternatively, you could have a pass for 48 hours with a negative test. But once installed on our phones, the notorious QR code offered all kinds of fascinating possibilities. In August Italy made the pass a requirement to get into restaurants, cafés, museums, cinemas, concert halls and football stadiums. “The measure will bring serenity,” Prime Minister Draghi promised. On holiday in Puglia, my daughter was barred from the campsite café, the hub of her friends’ activities. She had been vaccinated, but the pass does not become active until 15 days after the jab. I missed an evening of Mozart when my phone battery died in the queue outside the concert hall.

In October the pass was extended to workplaces and universities, while hospital staff and teachers had to prove they were vaccinated. “If it means they don’t keep closing classes down,” enthused my headmaster friend, “I’m for it.” But protests began and positions hardened. A five-day week for an unvaccinated person means three tests, each costing €15 at the pharmacy. Anti-vaxxers felt united in grievance. Newspapers and broadcasters appeared solidly behind Mario Draghi’s government. Any serious voice of dissent was met with ridicule.

The popular historian Alessandro Barbero, himself vaccinated, signed a petition against the green pass requirement for university students. Dante, he claimed (and no Italian argument is complete until Dante has been invoked), would put the government among the hypocrites in the eighth circle of the Inferno, because ministers insisted there was no mandatory vaccination, “except that you can’t live without it”. Major newspapers published ad hominem attacks against Barbero, who was their darling until the day before. A professor friend admitted he was ashamed he hadn’t signed the petition, but he was up for promotion and it would put him in a bad light. An unvaccinated mother told me other parents had excluded her child from their playgroup.





**You shall not pass: protesters gather in a demonstration against Italy's green pass on Piazza Duomo, Milan, 16 October 2021**

By now it was no longer possible to deny that vaccinated people could contract and pass on the virus too. So the government introduced a new rule that if you test positive, your pass is suspended. In late October came the first indication that while pass requirements had initially led to a blip in vaccinations, this had now plateaued. The unvaccinated, less than 10 per cent of the population, were digging in. Many seemed transformed into missionaries of a sect. Undeterred, Draghi extended the pass requirement to trains, metro, buses and trams. My headmaster friend changed his position. Two of his classes had been sent home and he had to dismiss three excellent teachers because they refused to be vaccinated. A lose-lose situation.

In early December the "super-green pass" was announced, available only to those with proof of vaccination or recent recovery. An ordinary green pass would do for public transport, but the super version would be required for restaurants, gyms, museums, concerts etc. "Isn't it fantastic," a friend told me as we raised our glasses at a meal, "to know for sure that there are no anti-vaxxers in here!" The unvaccinated are pariahs. It is

legitimate, even a duty – certainly a pleasure – to despise them. To feel united against them. *Corriere della Sera* kept up its barrage of accounts of anti-vaxxers dying of Covid. Deathbed repentance is especially appreciated. "Anti-vaxx father refuses ventilation. Watch son's tearful video call to convince him," is a typical item.

Ordinary Italians now find themselves with serious policing duties. Some café owners scan you at the door. Others ask you to leave your phone unlocked on the table. Some are apologetic, calling you politely by the name that comes up on their screens. Others relish this new power. At Milan's Museo del Risorgimento, a particularly suspicious woman demanded to see some identification. How could a "Parks Timothy Harold" possibly address her in decent Italian? I proudly whipped out my new ID, which says "*Cittadinaza Ita*". After 40 years in the country, I belong.

The more essential the green pass became, the more crime prospered. In Ascoli Piceno, in central Italy, a doctor was arrested for pretending to vaccinate anti-vaxxers while in fact throwing the doses away. There were reports of parties where youngsters deliberately sought to contract the virus, since re-

covery means you receive a pass. Hospital doctors declared their exasperation with anti-vaxxers. Seriously ill anti-vaxxers started to arrive later and later for treatment because they were unsure of the reception they would get. Or they were simply pig-headed.

The word fascism was bandied about. This too is a staple of any Italian ruckus. For the mainstream media the fascists were the violent fringe at anti-green pass demonstrations. For those who loathe the pass, the fascists were the authoritarian majority excluding a minority from public life; the pass had become a symbol of submission to the regime.

In mid-December Draghi announced that a standard green pass, obtainable with a negative test, would no longer enable EU citizens to enter Italy. You must be vaccinated or have recovered, or accept quarantine. When the EU objected, Draghi pointed proudly to Italy's low infection rate. Severity was paying off. Then days later winter arrived and Omicron exploded. On 16 January there were almost 200,00 infections and more than 300 dead – numbers higher than in the UK. The overall death rate per million people and the levels of vaccination are similar to the UK. What has the pass achieved? At the start ▶

## Letter from Milan

◀ of January Draghi made vaccination obligatory for the over-50s and extended the green pass to shops, hairdressers, banks and post offices. Two infections in a secondary school class and any unvaccinated pupils will be condemned to distance learning. Whatever it takes! The fine for an over-50 “surprised without a pass”, as *Corriere della Sera* put it, is €100.

**M**ario Draghi. Will he become president? This is the only other talking point in Italy. Sergio Mattarella has reached the end of his seven-year mandate. On 24 January members of the House and Senate will begin the process of electing his successor by secret vote. Does it matter? In ordinary times an Italian president’s powers may seem little more than ceremonial. But potentially a president can choose the prime minister he or she wants, approve or reject legislation, and even dissolve parliament. The ex-head of the Euro-

pean Central Bank, parachuted into the prime ministership in February 2021 to enact the reforms the EU required of Italy to qualify for a €191bn Covid recovery package, Draghi seems the perfect candidate. He is not an MP and has no party affiliation. But, if he takes the job, who will keep the present ramshackle coalition together until the next elections in 2023? Some floated the idea that Draghi could continue to direct the government as president. At which others heard alarm bells. “Anyone who supposes the parties will have room for manoeuvre with Draghi as president,” observed the historian Ernesto Galli della Loggia, “is imagining the unimaginable.”

The conundrum goes to the heart of Italian democracy. What powers will political parties have when so many policy decisions now originate from Brussels and when a man from a European institution has been placed in a position of authority above them? What sense will the 2023 general election have, if we know Draghi will dictate policy anyway?

Is there another candidate? Silvio Berlusconi has made it clear he is interested. This is a man convicted of tax fraud in 2013 and famous for his “bunga bunga” sex parties that have led to any number of trials, two of which are ongoing. He is 85. Yet the same papers that delighted in Italy’s reputation for serious-

ness in the war against Covid say nothing of the disaster his election would mean for Italy’s standing in the world. Berlusconi remains an immensely wealthy *padrone* and a great distributor of expensive gifts. The former prime minister Giuseppe Conte, of the Five Star Movement, the largest party in parliament, has said that now is the moment to elect a woman as president. But he named no names. The nation waits with bated breath.

At the first vote a two-thirds majority is required. From the fourth, 50 per cent plus one is enough. In 1971 Giovanni Leone was elected at the 23rd ballot. Meantime, to punish us for the high Covid infection rates, we have been ordered to wear masks in the open again, everywhere, and medical grade FFP2 masks on public transport. Required where it is of no use, “the mask is the new equivalent of the black shirt”, claims the philosopher Diego Fusaro. A friend texted to say he was ordered off a vaporetto for standing outside, alone, “the sea and wind in my face”, without an FFP2. And I must get a booster; the super-green pass lapses after six months and my new citizenship risks becoming decidedly second-class. ●

*Tim Parks's latest book is "The Hero's Way: Walking with Garibaldi from Rome to Ravenna" (Harvill Secker). He speaks to Jeremy Cliffe on the World Review podcast*

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# LOUISE PERRY



## Out of the Ordinary Childcare costs put mothers in a bind, but free daycare is not an easy way out of it

**T**he Labour MP and mother-of-two Stella Creasy is determined to change the conversation on maternity rights. In an interview published on 16 January, she described her struggle to secure formal maternity leave for MPs, as well as universally funded childcare for children from the age of six months.

I'm following her progress with interest because, although I have just about managed so far by doing a lot of my work while my eight-month-old son is asleep, I have started to spend most of my waking hours worrying about childcare.

The UK's childcare is the third most expensive in the world. On average, a full-time place at a nursery or childminder will cost almost as much as sending your child to a private prep school, while a full-time nanny can cost nearly as much as boarding at Eton. Right now, having a baby is one of the most stupid financial decisions you can make.

If Creasy had her way, my husband and I would now have the option of taking up a free daycare place – a policy that “pays for itself”, she says, since it allows mothers to return to jobs sooner and to work longer hours.

One problem with this proposal is that it's incredibly unpopular. According to a British Social Attitudes study from 2012, only 4 per cent of Britons think the “best way” to organise family life is to have both mothers and fathers of preschool children working full-time. There is an age skew, with older people likelier to favour more traditional arrangements (with a male “breadwinner”, for example), but it's not as extreme as one might expect. Men and women are roughly agreed on how to split

childcare duties, contrary to a popular feminist narrative that portrays stay-at-home mothers as frustrated and miserable.

For most parents in Britain, however, the traditional model is out of reach economically, particularly in the south-east. A family composed of two parents and two children under four needs a net household income of more than £85,000 for a “decent standard of living” in London, according to a research project funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. To support a partner who isn't working, you would need to be in the top 5 per cent of earners.

We find ourselves in a situation where most parents of small children must go to work, must spend a large proportion of their income on childcare, and then must compete for housing against other families who are doing the same thing. The supposed freedom that women have to go back to work after maternity leave has morphed into a necessity to do so. The economist and US senator Elizabeth Warren has described the difficulty facing dual-income families following the influx of middle- and upper-middle-class women into the workforce in the latter half of the 20th century:

Families were swept up in a bidding war, competing furiously with one another for

**The freedom to go back to work has morphed into a necessity to do so**

their most important possession: a house in a decent school district... Mum's extra income fitted in perfectly, coming at just the right time to give each family extra ammunition to compete in the bidding wars – and to drive the prices even higher for the things they all wanted.

For selfish reasons, if nothing else, I'm glad women now have access to jobs we were once excluded from. But I'm sceptical of the view that higher rates of employment among mothers of preschoolers is an unambiguously feminist development.

There's no doubt that getting mothers back into the workforce as quickly as possible is good for the economy, which is why our tax system penalises single-income households. As the chair of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Bill Emmott, put it recently on BBC Radio 4, countries that do not encourage mothers into paid work are “under-using” female citizens, and are thereby undermining their own growth.

But is it good for children to have their mothers more intensively “used”? The countless hours I've spent researching the effects of group-based childcare on young children have produced a clear answer, I'm afraid: it seems it does not benefit the under-tuos, unless they come from an abusive or severely deprived home, and there is evidence of increases in aggression and hyperactivity longer term.

This is why the child psychologist Oliver James strongly advises against daycare for young children, insisting that a mother's care is best. Failing that, “Daddy is better than Granny is better than Nanny is better than Minder is better than daycare.”

For working mothers like me, this makes for grim reading. While there are some women who are quite happy to get back to work as soon as possible, it's more common among my peers to hear half-whispered accounts of guilt, regret and weeping in the nursery car park. Feminists are in a bind, since the representation of mothers in the workplace – including in parliament – can seem at odds with what might be best for their children, and what many mothers say they want: to spend more time at home.

Every morning, I walk my son past the nursery that has offered us a place. It's in a large and beautiful 19th-century building that looms over the adjacent houses. Ofsted has rated it outstanding, and it has excellent reviews from parents. But I hate the sight of it. “It's OK to put a baby in daycare,” a mother friend reminds me, “and to also believe that daycare is not the optimal model.” For all my reservations, I know that she's right. ●

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# Why inflation could break Britain

## The cost of living crisis is about to get much worse

By Will Dunn

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In a conference speech to Conservative Party members last October, Boris Johnson announced that the country was changing direction. “The present stresses and strains,” he said, were “mainly a function of growth and economic revival.” Wages were rising faster than before the pandemic struck, as Brexit turned off the tap of cheap foreign labour and brought better pay, more employment and higher productivity to British workers and businesses.

In the US, similar sentiments were held by the Biden administration. Even before the pandemic, Janet Yellen – now the US Treasury secretary – had expressed a desire to “run the economy hot”, allowing the pressure of demand to deliver higher wages. Policymakers reassured one another that the impending arrival of inflation would be “transitory”.

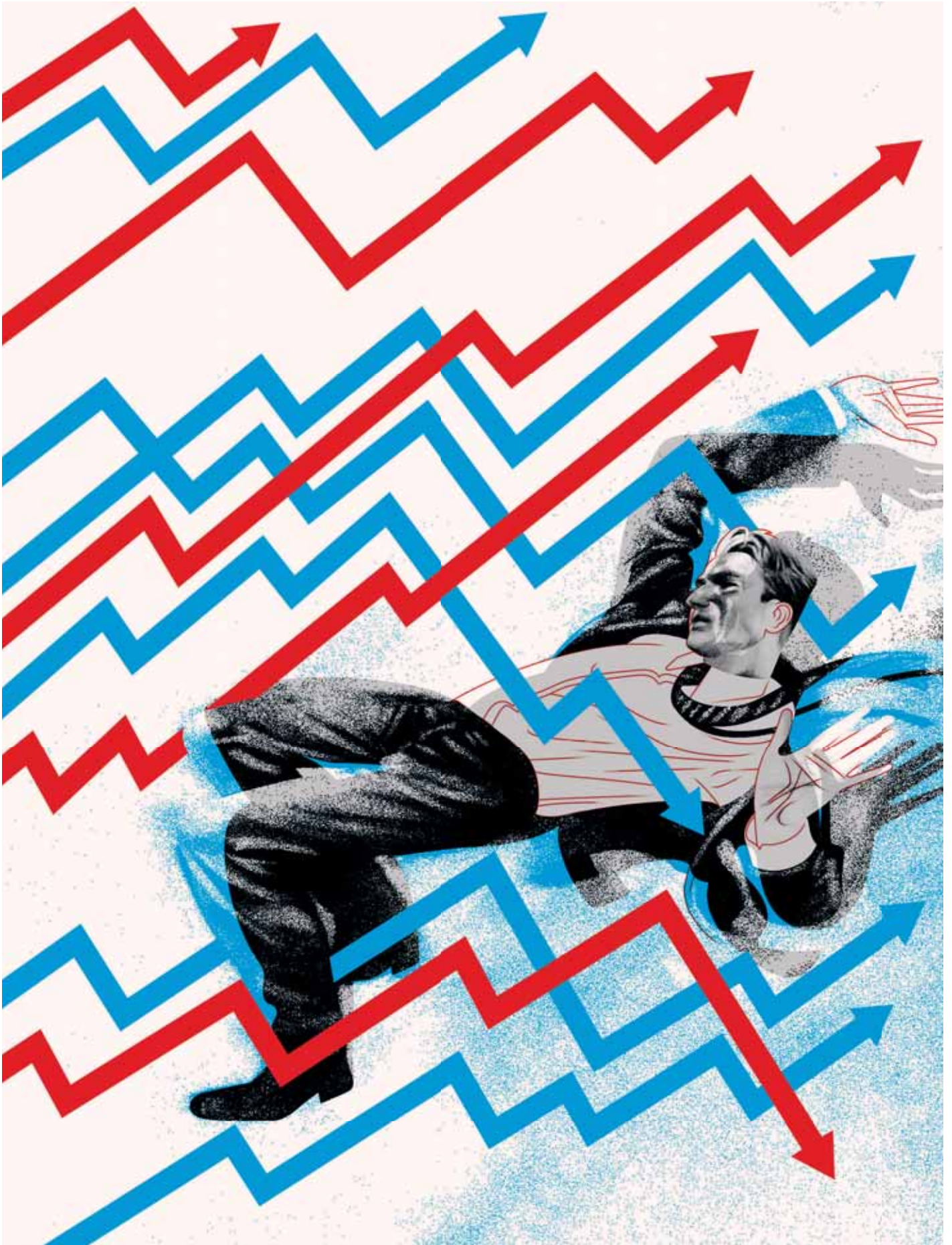
For governments that had just raised trillions to stimulate their economies during the pandemic, a little inflation was also attractive: higher prices and wages can mean higher tax receipts. But the heat has arrived faster and hotter than many anticipated: inflation in the US is already more than 7 per cent, its highest level for more than 40 years. The 6 per cent inflation that the Bank of England predicted for April 2022 arrived almost six months early.

The higher wages Johnson celebrated are arriving, but so too are galloping prices, a cost-of-living crisis and deepening inequality, which could do even greater damage to public services already stretched perilously thin.

The current period of inflation looks less and less like the transitory effect of a revitalised economy, and more like a long-term trend – the beginning of a period of great uncertainty, and one for which Britain in particular is systemically unprepared.

Energy prices – as in the sudden rise in oil prices in the 1970s, or the price of gas today – are an important factor in inflation because they affect the cost of everything; nothing is manufactured, no one is employed, without energy bills being paid. A period of inflation sets in when these price rises spread out into the costs of goods and services, and people demand higher wages to keep up with rising prices – as with the “wage-price spiral” that characterised the 1970s.

This particular wage-price spiral was sustained partly by the unions, which enabled workers to bargain collectively for higher wages. Today, as the Prime Minister has trumpeted, we have Brexit, which is indeed putting pressure on wages, as skilled and readily available staff from Europe are no longer an option. A survey by the British Chambers of Commerce found that 83 per cent of construction and hospitality businesses have had difficulty finding staff. ▶



ANDRÉ CARRILHO

## Reporter at Large

◀ Whitbread, which owns hotels and restaurants including the Premier Inn chain, raised wages in October; the company expects to do so again in the spring. The Pret a Manger sandwich chain has raised wages twice in the past four months.

But prices, too, are rising, and faster still. "It's across the board, from house prices to wages in certain sectors, energy prices, prices of food, prices of goods," says Jim O'Neill, the former Goldman Sachs chief economist and commercial secretary to the UK Treasury. "It's the first time we've seen a number of factors that drove 1960s and 1970s inflation, all occurring at the same time."

Paul Mortimer-Lee, deputy director of the National Institute of Social and Economic Research, agrees that "it's not just a few things. If you look at the distribution of inflation, even the bottom 10 per cent of goods – their rate of inflation has picked up... the whole distribution is moving up."

Mortimer-Lee says the increase in the price of goods is partly down to a relative increase in demand for goods rather than services – people are shopping online rather than eating in restaurants, for example. One important question is whether goods will get cheaper again, or if services will simply catch up. "If that happens," he says, "you get very sustained inflation."

Today, the price of goods in the UK is much more dependent on what happens elsewhere in the world than it was in the 1970s. The price of a car in Britain relies more on how many semiconductors are made in Asian factories than how many workers go on strike in British ones. New cars are already in such short supply in the UK that some second-hand vehicles are selling for more than the retail price of a new model, thanks to a global chip shortage. But the supply of goods and components may get worse. On 10 January, the co-head of Asian economics research at HSBC, Frederic Neumann, wrote to clients that a spread of the Omicron variant – yet to become dominant in Asia – could create the "mother of all supply chain stumbles" if a new wave of infections caused factories to close.

It is also much more expensive to move goods that have been made in other countries – such as the 98 per cent of our clothes that are made abroad – to Britain. In 2019, the world's shipping containers flowed around the planet as if on a river, following the path of least resistance. In 2020, lock-

down interrupted the flow everywhere as factories closed and trucks remained parked. Containers were marooned inland while the ships that carried them headed back to Asian ports. As economies restarted, the demand for shipping shot up and the supply of containers was restricted. Prices doubled, and doubled again. Data collected by the shipping consultancy Drewry puts the profit forecast of most of the world's largest shipping lines at more than \$150bn for 2021. This is more profit than the same lines have made in the past 20 years. The British International Freight Association has called this "blatant profiteering" and appealed to competition regulators. But it is a cost that manufacturers, importers – and by extension, consumers – in the UK will have to bear for some time.

Persistent inflation will create a difficult environment for the government and the Bank of England. "We live in an age of wishful thinking," says O'Neill, in which "governments think that they have to always do what everybody wants. So raising interest rates a lot, and tightening fiscal policy, especially when we've come out of this horrific pandemic – that's not what policymakers want to do." But action will quickly become unavoidable.

**T**his April, persistent high inflation – previously an abstract concept to anyone who was not a working adult in the 1970s – will become a factor in people's everyday lives once more.

The cost of domestic energy in the UK, already punishingly high, will rise by at least half again as the energy price cap – the maximum amount that an energy company can charge an average household on a standard tariff – rises by about £600, according to analysts at Cornwall Insight. Households will also take on the cost of rescuing customers from failed suppliers (estimated at £2.4bn, or £90 per household) through their bills.

As the country returns to more in-person work, doing so will become more expensive.



"Don't patronise me!"

Rail fares will rise in March by up to 3.8 per cent, increasing the cost of an annual season ticket between, say, Reading and London by more than £184, to more than £5,000. For the two-thirds of the country that drives to work, the price of fuel – which reached its highest ever level in October – is already adding more than £10 to the cost of every tank, but oil prices may have further to go. A faster economic recovery in other parts of the world, especially Asia, could push oil to more than \$100 a barrel (as Goldman Sachs has predicted), moving prices at British pumps well beyond £1.50 a litre.

According to the latest survey by the British Chambers of Commerce, 58 per cent of businesses are planning to raise prices – but wages will not keep up. Data from the HR services company XpertHR shows that of more than 1,000 pay deals covering 5.5 million British jobs, the average pay rise over the past 12 months was 1.8 per cent, while inflation in the 12 months to November was 5.1 per cent for the Consumer Price Index (CPI) and 7.1 per cent under the Retail Price Index.

At the same time, households will begin paying more tax. Higher National Insurance contributions, imposed to pay for social care, will cost the average earner about £230 per year extra. And for those who get a pay rise in the new financial year, more income tax will be due. The freezing of the personal allowance and higher-rate income tax thresholds will cause 1.5 million people on the lowest wages to begin paying at 20 per cent (on their taxable income) over the next four years, according to the House of Commons Library. Another 1.2 million people will be nudged into the higher (40 per cent) tax bracket, and parents in this group will lose some or all of their child benefit.

While prices and taxes are increasing, benefits are being cut. Not for all; the government is reducing the "taper rate" for Universal Credit payments and increasing the in-work allowance, making 2.2 million families who are employed and claiming benefits better off. But a further 3.6 million families will be worse off than they would have been if the government had kept the £20-a-week uplift to benefits instead, according to the Resolution Foundation.

Debt will become more expensive, too. Between now and April, the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee will meet twice to decide on whether to raise interest rates. Making borrowing more expensive is the Bank's primary means of curbing spending, dampening demand and reining in inflation – but this will also lead to bigger payments on the mortgages, credit cards and other elements in the UK's £1.7trn of consumer debt.

The UK consumer, O'Neill points out, "has a higher degree of fixed-rate, long-term debt"

TOMCHITTY

than those in other countries, “so the UK consumer is definitely more vulnerable” to these cost pressures.

Two of the biggest sources of this long-term debt are house prices (which aren't included in the CPI inflation measure) and the cost of education. In the UK housing affordability – the median cost of buying vs the median wage – is approaching ten times earnings, a level not reached since the late 19th-century – when about two million people lived as servants in other people's houses. Britain also has the world's highest and fastest-growing university tuition fees. A country that already spends more than one-third of income on housing costs will begin to have to make hard choices. Under such pressure, the cracks in the British system will widen.

During the 2008 financial crash, the UK government was credited with having “saved the world financial system”, as the American economist Paul Krugman put it, with a vast programme of equity injections and loan guarantees to prevent a collapse of the credit system. But in the years that followed, the rationale of the coalition and Conservative governments was that the rescue would have to be paid for through radical cuts to public spending.

Frank van Lerven, senior economist at the left-leaning New Economics Foundation, says the policy of austerity created a systemic weakness in the British economy.

“Because government spending is such a big part of spending in the overall economy,” he explains, cutting government spending “effectively shrinks the size of the economy, and shrinks private-sector incomes.”

Van Lerven says the then chancellor George Osborne was aware of this problem, but expected foreign investment from countries such as China – attracted by the prospect of the UK “getting its house in order” – would make up the shortfall and provide economic growth without public spending. But with the single largest source of spending in the economy reduced by almost one-third, “investors see that your economy is shrinking [and] they know people aren't spending”.

O'Neill publicly warned Osborne against cuts to public services at the time. He points out that the current pressures “are evidenced in virtually every Western society, and others”, most of which did not follow the same programme of cuts, but he says the fiscal policy of low spending and low corporate tax “didn't seem to lead to any permanent benefit in the trend growth of the economy – and once it's been abandoned, as we've seen during Covid, the financial markets haven't been concerned about it, until they saw signs of inflation. So why was it, in hindsight, so crucial?”

## By the end of the year, millions could be spending 15 per cent of their income on fuel

Whether a lower deficit played any role in keeping the British economy afloat, it created one serious problem for a future chancellor facing inflation: public sector pay. Between July and September last year, 27,353 NHS workers resigned from their posts, more than at any point in the health service's history. But this may be only the beginning of even greater level of resignation from public services, driven partly by rising inflation.

The problem, explains David Bell, professor of economics at Stirling University, is that the pay offered to nurses, doctors and police officers in the Spending Review last October formed part of a “tight Budget” from Rishi Sunak – one that appeared to account little for a higher cost of living. “If the increase in wages that the government has assumed doesn't meet the increase in prices, then you're looking at real falls in the standard of living of public-sector employees,” Bell warns. This is a problem that the NHS, which has lost more than 20,000 workers from the EU because of Brexit-related effects, can't afford, but it is not a problem confined to the health service. Last year, a National Education Union survey found that 35 per cent of teachers planned to leave the profession within five years.

The austerity years were also characterised by a long period of stagnant wage growth, one that is still happening. Van Lerven says the “shock to income” of the 2008 crash “translated into this manifestation of insecure work in the gig economy”. Unemployment peaked in 2011, then fell as a new type of employee – the gig worker – began driving for Uber and riding for Deliveroo. “Instead of laying people off,” says Van Lerven, “we gave them zero-hours contracts.”

O'Neill agrees that “the winners of the technology era have been spectacular, but a pretty narrow few”, but sees the problem as broader still. “It's almost like the economy is – rigged might be too strong a word – but the mechanics of market economics haven't really worked properly... All this era of strong profit growth, low interest rates, low corporate tax rates, and so on, should have led to a big rise in private-sector investment spending. It's supposed to lead to a lot of new entrants and competition; it's supposed to lead to productivity improvements, and it's

supposed to lead to higher real wages. None of those things happened.”

In the North Sea, 18 miles off the Yorkshire coast, stand two platforms that look much like oil rigs. These are the platforms of the Rough gas field, and in the porous rock deep beneath them 72 per cent of the UK's gas reserves were once stored. In 2017 the Rough's owner, Centrica, closed the 32-year-old facility, and no storage was built to replace it. Despite warnings from the energy industry, it was decided that pipelines from Norway and container ships from Qatar could supply all the gas the UK would need.

These rusting hulks are emblematic of the predicament that Britain faces: first, that this inflation is not a domestic phenomenon, but the product of global competition for resources. Gas is not suddenly more expensive because the Bank has printed money, lowering the value of money against gas, but because there is huge demand and limited supply in a global market. They also represent a failure by the British government and a private sector it has not properly regulated or held to account to insure against coming uncertainty.

In energy prices, more extreme weather events caused by climate change will make both the disruption to supply and swings in demand more pronounced. The supply of liquefied natural gas (LNG) delivered by ship – the UK's back-up to its pipelines – is very precarious: when *Ever Given* blocked the Suez Canal last year, freighters carrying half a million tonnes of LNG sat waiting behind it.

This will affect a much greater problem that successive governments have also failed to address: inequality. The poorest 10 per cent in the UK spends three times as much, as a share of income, on electricity, gas and other fuels as the top 10 per cent. By the end of the year, millions could be spending 15 per cent of their income on fuel.

And without changes to public sector pay, the services that even more of the population will be likely to need may not be available.

Some economists I spoke to cast this as a political choice, but it may be something more fundamental still. Most, if not all of those with power in the economy – executives and politicians – would like to do something about the inequality and inadequacy that inflation reveals. So why can't they? Perhaps efficiency itself – the just-in-time, waste-free economy – is the problem. It is a goal of which Britain, which employs twice as many management consultants as China, has been the most committed proponent, but this has been at the cost of resilience. In the new age of uncertainty, a new model may be needed. ●

*Will Dunn is business editor of the New Statesman*

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# Why appeasement was unforgiveable

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The Munich Agreement of 1938 failed to prevent war with Hitler. A new Netflix film, based on Robert Harris's novel, attempts to rehabilitate Neville Chamberlain. But the former prime minister is discredited for the right reasons

By Richard J Evans

Has Neville Chamberlain been unfairly treated by history? In his 2017 thriller *Munich*, the author Robert Harris argued the case in a mixture of fictional narrative and historical reasoning. According to Harris, Chamberlain wasn't weak and unintelligent – the common charge – and didn't allow himself to be manipulated by Hitler when the two met in the Bavarian capital in 1938. Instead, by signing the Munich Agreement, which he believed averted a European war that otherwise would have been inevitable, the British prime minister was cleverly playing for time as his nation rearmed itself.

The German director Christian Schwochow has now delivered a cinematic version of the book. Full of beautifully re-created historical detail, and filmed in many of the locations where the action originally happened, the movie has a rich, sumptuous feel and a convincing sense of time and place. Only a few details are misplaced, such as Jews being forced by Nazis to scrub pavements in Berlin (they were not – this happened only in Vienna). The script is for the most part sensitive to the conventions of the day: the English address each other by their surnames, and the Germans speak to each other in German, helpfully subtitled. Much of the detail is taken from the historical record. And yet, the movie doesn't convince any more than Harris's book did.

The action takes place over a short period at the end of September 1938. Hitler had annexed Austria earlier in the year and has his sights set on neighbouring Czechoslovakia, an artificial state carved out of the defunct Habsburg empire at the end of the First World War. Three million ethnic Germans live in the Sudetenland on the border with the German Reich, and Hitler has manipulated their leaders into demanding union with Germany – a move that would destroy the integrity and viability of the Czechoslovak state. As his propaganda machine intensifies its attacks on the alleged mistreatment of the ethnic Germans by the Czechs, it becomes clear that Hitler intends to invade the country. At this point, Chamberlain decides to intervene. His motivation, well conveyed in the film, is to prevent another European war, since a new world war, he fears, would inflict even more suffering and death than the first one. Self-confident to the point of arrogance, he believes this would be the first step in a wider peace settlement that would bring Hitler's destabilisation of European politics to an end.

The movie underplays the wider sentiment in England and France that the principle of national self-determination, which was supposed to form the basis for reordering Europe in 1919, had been denied to the Germans, ►





SARAH MLEE / NETFLIX

**Unforgiven: Jeremy Irons plays Neville Chamberlain in the Netflix thriller *Munich***

## Critic at Large

◀ so that the Sudeten Germans were justified in wanting to join Hitler's Reich. But it correctly shows Chamberlain's belief that if this was allowed to happen, Hitler would be appeased and his campaign of territorial aggrandisement would come to an end.

The movie implies that one of Chamberlain's motives was to buy time while Britain rearmed. But Germany was rearming, too. By destroying the territorial integrity of Czechoslovakia, the Munich Agreement opened the way to the German conquest of the rest of the country, with its well-equipped army and flourishing arms industry. As a result, Czech-made tanks played a significant part in the German invasions of Poland, France and the Soviet Union between 1939 and 1941.

In 1938, however, many senior figures in Germany's military did not believe that German rearmament, which had begun only in 1933, had prepared the country to fight a



Resistance: Adam von Trott zu Solz

major war. Alarmed by the pace of Hitler's aggression, they devised a conspiracy to arrest him as soon as the invasion of Czechoslovakia was under way. This was a serious plan, involving generals as high-ranking as the chief of the army general staff, though whether it would have succeeded is a moot point.

The film's plot centres on a fictional junior official in the German foreign office, Paul von Hartmann, a member of the conspiracy. He comes into possession of a copy of the Hossbach memorandum, a genuine document that recorded a confidential conference held in 1937 in which Hitler outlined his plans for the destruction of Czechoslovakia, Austria and Poland, and a subsequent war for European domination against Germany's "hate-inspired antagonists" Britain and France. With the help of an old Oxford friend, the fictional Hugh Legat, now one of the prime minister's private secretaries, Hartmann succeeds in conveying the document to Chamberlain, who now understands the sheer extent of Hitler's ambition. Chamberlain forces Hitler to sign an additional undertaking, with the latter affirming "the desire of our two peoples never to go to war with each other again". Hitler calls off the invasion, spoiling the plan to arrest him, as the plotters had rightly feared the new agreement would.

Although the movie suggests that Chamberlain now distrusted Hitler, privately calling him a "gangster", there's no indication of this in the historical record, just as his viewing of the Hossbach memorandum is also an invention. The film correctly shows Hartmann telling Legat that the British don't have the faintest idea of the depths of Hitler's deceitfulness or the breadth of his ambition – "none of you knows who he really is!". Chamberlain wrote to his sister that he thought Hitler was a man to be trusted; he also believed that Hitler trusted him as well. But Hitler had nothing but contempt for the prime minister, whose limited horizons were illustrated by the radio broadcast he made about the situ-

ation, quoted in the movie: "How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas masks here because of a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing." He was out of his depth in dealing with Hitler, whom he misguidedly regarded as a conventional European statesman.

Chamberlain is centre-stage throughout the film, portrayed brilliantly by Jeremy Irons. Hartmann and Legat remain pale and two-dimensional characters in comparison, despite the efforts of Jannis Niewöhner and George McKay, the young actors who portray them. The character of Hartmann appears to be loosely based on Adam von Trott zu Solz, who was executed for his part in the bomb plot of 20 July 1944 against Hitler. Trott made many friends in Britain during his stay as a German Rhodes scholar in Oxford in the 1930s, including the philosopher Isaiah Berlin. The opening scene of the film builds on the story of Trott's Oxford days to suggest this is where Hartmann and Legat became companions, but the conversion of Hartmann from a supporter of the Nazis to a bitter enemy after he sees his Jewish girlfriend's life destroyed by them is too abrupt to be convincing. Trott's own non-Nazi German nationalism was more consistent than this, and he believed the annexation of the Sudetenland was justified. What he objected above all to was Hitler's drive for a general European war. There's a good deal of historical licence here, too, since Trott wasn't even an official of the German foreign office in 1938.

The critics of the Munich Agreement are not mentioned in the movie, not even Winston Churchill. The agreement convinced Hitler that further aggression would not meet much opposition from Britain or France. On the other hand, the movie depicts vast crowds cheering on the negotiations. This, too, was a major factor behind Chamberlain's desire for a settlement. Neither the House of Commons nor the British public was ready for a war. Less than six months later, following the German annexation for the first time of a non-German-speaking part of Europe – rump Czechoslovakia – the situation changed. As Hitler deployed troops into Poland at the beginning of September 1939, Chamberlain, still refusing to recognise Hitler for what he was, again tried to mediate. This time he found virtually no support, neither in the House of Commons nor in the cabinet, nor indeed in the public. "Everything that I have worked for," he said, "everything that I have hoped for, everything that I have believed in during my public life, has crashed into ruins." ●

"Munich: The Edge of War" is on Netflix now

# ARMANDO IANNUCCI



## Another Voice Caricatures of Westminster insiders are false. They're even worse than we thought

There came a point during the drip-feed of Downing Street party revelations when I wondered if the whole thing wasn't being masterminded by some bright young bod in the Prime Minister's Office itself. "Think about it," says the adviser to the PM. "No need to resign, no need to fire anyone, and certainly no need to bring in the police – until Sue Gray has completed her report. But here's the thing: Sue Gray's remit has been left open-ended to include investigations into any further disclosures about parties that may come her way. So we can keep Sue Gray busy by slowly leaking information about each of the parties we held, leaking say one or two a week. That should keep her going until the next general election, which we'll boot as far into 2024 as we can. Am I not a genius and even though I'm only 23 can I have some sort of peerage? And a party to celebrate?"

"Let's go for it!" says the PM. "Although you never heard me say that."

It's come to an ugly pass when the above scenario would seem unbelievable in a fictional dramatisation of what goes on in Westminster, but be regarded as totally credible by all of us if it were to emerge as fact. Such has been the corrosive power of the events of the past few weeks: all those caricatures of the grotesquery of Westminster behaviour are revealed to be horrendously accurate! The booziness, the lack of concern for the public, the 20- and early-30-somethings running the place like they own it – aides and advisers who haven't run anything but a car or a squash ladder, but who find themselves drawing up plans to shut

elderly dementia sufferers in their only room for months on end. These Shite Young Things really are much, much more horrible than any writer ever imagined. They really do drink while strategising tax tapers every Friday. They really do snog under a portrait of Henry Campbell-Bannerman. And, yes, they actually did wheel a booze fridge in by the Downing Street back door.

Who are these people? Those people we saw in that Allegra Stratton video before Christmas, and their like? What was most devastating about that video wasn't the admission about a knees-up, but the complete lack of ethical alarm that what they were discussing was in any way wrong, let alone illegal. Yes, there was a sniggering sort of guilt when discussing the drinks, but it didn't sound like real remorse; more like the faux-guilt 15-year-olds have when laughing embarrassedly at how smashed they got the night before, but loudly to make sure the quantity has been heard, noted and given respect.

There was no, "My God, that's awful: there's was a party! At a time like this?" but instead a lolloping, lazy flurry of random lies: it was a business meeting, it was a work event; say it was smaller than it was, say it was socially distanced when it wasn't. The most honest moment came

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People who go into politics are the sort who say "fist bump" when they fist bump

when Stratton said, "What's the answer?" It was a frozen point of recognition that they were all trapped in a language game where truth wasn't allowed to play – and that there was now no way out.

I've always thought that people who go into politics really are a different species. Odd fish. Not like us. No time for television, which is why they're happy to trash the BBC. Keen to let us all know when they've been to see a *Star Wars* movie or football match. The sort who say "fist bump" when they fist bump. I don't mean the majority of those who end up as committed MPs or civil servants, working an anonymous and unglamorous life for their departments or constituencies, but those who crave power, who go into politics with a vague set of beliefs. If they have a doctrine, it is one built around self-interest and ambition.

They're a weird mix. Some see the whole thing as a bit of a lark. Given how young they are, they can't quite believe the amount of influence they wield. They cover up the fear that they're just busking and about to be found out by confidently texting, "I've only gone and spent all night with Rishi devising a f\*\*\*ing furlough scheme!" to their friends next morning.

The other sort are the quiet but deadly ones: they know precisely what they believe and want. They've already made their decisions on what will happen and which institutions it will happen to, and nothing can persuade them to deviate from their mission: there is no expert or event that can show that their plan won't work; no sickness, no deaths, nothing. They are convinced that their plan is correct, the right thing to do, good for us all, and history will not judge them wrong.

Both these types are dangerous. One sees truth as a killjoy, the other doesn't believe it can call itself truth if it doesn't match their fixed opinion. And increasingly prime ministers have let these people set the tone for their actions. Downing Street is now a playpen for ideology and immaturity: a lethal mix that confirms the ethical rot at the heart of the state.

Government is neither a think tank nor a bit of a laugh. It should be deadly serious and acting to standards higher than all of us. It would be great if politics was populated with normal people, but, since it's not, and if those running the country really are going to be marked as different from everyone else, it should be because they're better than us and not worse. ●

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*Listen to Armando Iannucci's "Westminster Reimagined" on the New Statesman podcast feed now. Series two will come later in 2022*

# AFGHAN CRISIS APPEAL



An MSF paediatrician examines a newborn baby in the neonatal ward of the MSF Khost maternity hospital, Afghanistan, 18 October 2021. Photograph © Oriane Zerah



**MARIA FIX, MSF NURSE,  
BOOST HOSPITAL, AFGHANISTAN**

“At the moment, we are the only major hospital in the region that is functioning. There are around 1.5 million people living in Helmand province and the health system across the region has essentially collapsed.

Our hospital is super-congested and we're incredibly busy. We have 300 beds, but at times recently we've had between 330 and 350 patients. That means a lot of juggling and making do, with children sharing beds. It's not ideal, but otherwise we wouldn't be able to treat all the patients coming to us. Our paediatric department is overwhelmed. We're treating a lot of malnourished children and their number is increasing.

Even before the change of government, around half of the population relied for food support on aid organisations, but now a lot of that support has collapsed and many children are going hungry.

I don't think you ever get used to seeing malnourished children. Often they arrive dehydrated and in shock. We work to stabilise them in the emergency room

before moving them to intensive care and then to the inpatient therapeutic feeding centre, where we feed them and slowly build up their strength.

It's very moving to see a child who has been so sick and malnourished recover and come back to life. But it's challenging at the same time, particularly when you know that, even if we stabilise them here and they recover, they're going to face the same problems – the same lack of food – as soon as we discharge them. But we do what we can and it's important that we do.

It's so important that MSF is here. When I was preparing to travel to Afghanistan at the end of August, people asked me why I was going there just as everybody else was leaving. When you're here, it does feel like Afghanistan has been abandoned – so many international organisations have left. But I'm so happy and proud that MSF has stayed. The people here are suffering and it's vital for us to be here, providing medical care to people who so desperately need it.”

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# Books

## The brain delusion

Why human excellence is the result of creative thinking and intuition, not orderly systems

By Ed Smith

Crikey, quite an undertaking this. Iain McGilchrist's new book *The Matter with Things – Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World*, while anchored in neuroscience, expands quickly into a treatise on philosophy, the scientific method, intuition, creativity, truth, reason and the rise and fall of civilisation itself. After 800 pages of volume one, you are directed to volume two. Imagine batting all day against 95 miles per hour bowlers on a bouncy cricket pitch, getting through to the close of play, and being told to grab a quick ice-bath then get back out there under the hot sun again tomorrow. Confession: this reader is taking time out for a quick intellectual recharge before padding up for volume two (though return I will).

One strand of the book is an attack on narrow and over-specialised thinking which lacks real-world relevance, so perhaps there is no need for me to apologise for a lack of expertise in neuroscience. But any reading of this immensely broad and ambitious work can only be personal and selective. No reader could relate to all the themes (poetry one minute, schizophrenia the next) with anything approaching even-handedness. It's a book with a single big idea, explored in numerous different contexts, and everyone will connect more fully with some parts than others. In my own case, the book led to many reflections on



ANA YAEI

sport, even though it's one of the few spheres of human endeavour that McGilchrist doesn't much explore (even he can't do absolutely everything).

Building on his previous book *The Master and His Emissary*, McGilchrist interrogates the distinction between the brain's left hemisphere (LH) and its right hemisphere (RH). He urges us to trust the RH, which perceives the whole, and defer less to the LH, which lasers in on details but tends to devalue things. The RH's "purpose is to help us to understand, rather than manipulate the world: to see the whole and how we relate to it". In the RH "all is flowing and changing, provisional, and complexly interconnected with everything else".

In contrast, the LH has "got a long way on its reputation as the bright one", but its speed is derived from the failure to account for ambiguity and uncertainty. The LH has "an excess of confidence and a lack of insight". It gets angry when things aren't as neat as it wants them to be.

McGilchrist dismisses the perception of the LH as "cool" and "rational" and the RH as "emotional":

The right frontal cortex is essential to emotional understanding, it is also the seat of inhibitory control over emotional arousal ... Being emotionally savvy doesn't mean that one is at the beck and call of emotions – rather, the reverse.

That's why the most emotionally gifted people can appear to be the least "emotional": they perceive the emotional dimension of a context so quickly and deftly that they rarely get into an angry tangle about their dealings with the world.

So it's a game of two halves, but we know where the referee stands. Indeed, by page 371, when we are informed that the LH is "unreliable in just about every way that matters", if it were a boxing match, LH's cornerman would surely have thrown in the towel and shouted: "Stop the fight!"

The narrative builds with example after example, which are often drawn from the testimonies or descriptions of patients who've suffered damage to either LH or RH, and analysis of how the imbalance affected their feelings and behaviour. Along the way, McGilchrist has plenty to say to his intellectual critics, enough to persuade this amateur reader that there is some disagreement about his thesis among neuroscientists. Yet the great success of the book is just how besides-the-point the "scientific consensus" feels. McGilchrist is as much philosopher as neuroscientist, and his philosophical sweep benefits from – but doesn't wholly depend upon – the insights he's derived from studying the brain.

It doesn't particularly matter if you see the LH-RH formulation as partly metaphorical (McGilchrist doesn't; I do). It would be tempting to say that the book seems more wise than it feels strictly true. But that observation, by failing to concede that wisdom could be ranked higher than "truth", would be a classic example of the kind of flawed "left hemisphere thinking" that McGilchrist decries throughout the book.

McGilchrist rails against the idea that humans are suboptimal machines and celebrates the things that only humans can do: intuition, insight, creativity and judgement. Conversely, almost nothing of value can be turned into simply "running" the system without creativity.

**M**y experience of elite sport supports that argument: without insight, "process" and "methodology" don't hold much value. Insight is the first domino. It is the quality that the greatest coaches and strategists possess, above everything else. They see the game in an original way, allowing them to perceive – in ways that others cannot – how winning happens. In this respect, they are like poets and scientists: they apprehend the game more clearly and form a superior understanding. Often their insights are bound up with making surprising connections or seeing analogies that others miss. "The creative mind," in Jacob Bronowski's phrase, "is a mind that looks for unexpected likenesses."

It's ironic that so much time is wasted studying the "motivational tactics" of great sports leaders (invariably personal and impossible to imitate), which entirely misses what's actually inspiring and motivating about them: their gift of apprehension, the clarity of their insights, the freshness of their vision. A great coach might or might not be articulate; but they are certain to have a philosophical talent for seeing through to the essence of the game.

McGilchrist's arguments have implications for how organisations which claim to pursue excellence – whether businesses, schools, universities or hospitals – should perceive and arrange themselves. He argues in favour of wide-ranging thinkers who have the imagination to apprehend what's needed, and then the perspective to know which levers and methods are best suited to bringing the project to fruition. Instead of trying to turn life into a machine, adapt your thinking and approach to life.

The primacy of insight and perspective also explains why organisational charts – designed so that accountants can apportion salaries and bureaucrats can file "appraisals" – are not only often fantastical but counterproductive. By encouraging a delusion of mechanistic order, they cut against creativity and genuine collaboration.

"The idea of a Gestalt is central to this book," McGilchrist writes, "by it I mean the form of a whole that cannot be reduced to parts without the loss of something essential to its nature." This idea is also highly relevant to team sport. A team must and can only be a collective and living whole. The whole is always different from the sum of its parts. That is true even in sports which (superficially) appear to be a series of independent events, such as cricket and baseball, as well as sports which have intrinsic flow, such as football and rugby. (It is a myth, as the cliché has it, that cricket is "a team game played by individuals". It is, in fact, an individual game played by teams.)

McGilchrist attacks the notion that a collective endeavour can be chopped up, the elements



**The Matter with Things, Volume I and Volume II**

Iain McGilchrist

Perspectiva,  
1,500pp, £89.95

**McGilchrist dismisses the perception that the left hemisphere of the brain is "rational" and the right hemisphere is "emotional"**

◀ polished separately, and then subsequently reassembled into a superior whole. He sees it as inappropriate in the human sphere. Indeed, it isn't even true for machines. Russell Ackoff, the American systems thinker, asked his students to imagine a lecture hall filled with the best component parts drawn from every car manufacturer (the best brakes, the best suspension and so on). If all the best bits were then assembled, would it create the best single car? Of course not. The way a car fits together is, to a significant degree, the majority of what a car manufacturer does.

McGilchrist puts it like this: "I suggest that relationships are primary, more foundational than the things related: that the relationships don't just 'connect' pre-existing things, but modify what we mean by the 'things.'" In this context, I don't think McGilchrist is using "relationships" to mean "how people get along with one another socially". He means "how they relate to each other fundamentally in the creation of the whole". This connects with the point made by Juanma Lillo – the mentor of Manchester City's manager, Pep Guardiola, and who is now assistant manager at the football club – when he warned against criticising players without appreciating the context: "My mentality is interaction and relation. If you say, 'Let's evaluate the right-back,' I say, 'But who is alongside him? Who is in front of him? Nearest to him?'" (Lillo also said, "You can't take an arm of Rafael Nadal and train it separately.")

Of course, everyone wants to believe that success can be turned into a system – because a system can be copied and profitably "scaled up". But there are no systems which can deliver success without intelligent steering by good thinkers. Good process can certainly filter out errors (which is very useful) but it cannot yield insights.

Further, and this theme runs throughout the book, insight and creativity can only be controlled and willed up to a certain point (even among people who have the talent). Believing there is a complete process for creativity is fundamentally anti-creative. "Brainstorming is practically the antithesis of creativity," McGilchrist argues, which is reassuring if you feel looming despair every time someone picks up a marker pen in front of a whiteboard and says "let's brainstorm".

In its exploration of creative (and effective) thinking, *The Matter With Things* connects with Nassim Taleb's *Antifragile*, John Kay's *Obliquity*, Mervyn King and John Kay's *Radical Uncertainty* and David Epstein's *Range*. One shared theme is how ultra-professionalism often ends up serving the system, not the true goal. To be effective at improving actual performance, leaders and executives (whether they are CEOs, vice-chancellors or principals) have to fight incredibly hard against the system that purportedly exists to create the conditions for excellence. That's why, alongside McGilchrist's other wide-ranging chapter titles ("Perception", "Judgement", "Creativity") there is scope for one more abstract noun which supports many of the others: bravery.

There is certainly great audacity in McGilchrist's

## The NS Poem

### Januaries

#### Paula Bohince

A cold most lethal, the pine  
if looked at long enough. My ice vision,  
crown of deer inside, beheld, coats smoldering,  
and one valiant cardinal above  
stringing invisibles. When it becomes  
unbearable, I'll describe this in the colors of  
a children's book. Winters with Annie  
playing orphans in the woods: foraging, peeling  
hours in all those blades beneath a bitter  
lemon sun, made sweet by not being alone.  
Enter, snow. One dissociation sifts over  
another, with decades between, hooves retreating  
into the past, whatever that is, the cold  
accumulating all its meanings.

*Paula Bohince is a poet based in Pennsylvania. Her most recent collection is "Swallows and Waves" (Sarabande)*

prose style, which is sometimes Wagnerian. You become familiar with formulations along the lines of "The West is wrong to..." and "Science must take this into account..." not to mention the occasional "civilisation depends on..." But it's hard to see how huge generalisations could have been avoided, partly because the kind of ideas – or supra-rational insights – under review are more often addressed by poets and composers than writers of closely argued non-fiction.

For McGilchrist, you wonder if there are any big ideas left for him to grapple with. In contrast with such majestic authorial ambition, your reviewer must admit that he finished the book with a rather smaller question: how long is needed for intellectual rest and rehab before he's in decent enough shape to take on volume two? ●

*Ed Smith is director of the Institute of Sports Humanities, University of Buckingham, and former national selector for the England cricket team*



## Reviewed in short

### **The Glory and the Sorrow: A Parisian and His World in the Age of the French Revolution** by Timothy Tackett

Oxford University Press, 232pp, £18.99

Adrien Colson was a Parisian lawyer who lived through the waning *ancien régime* and the most turbulent years of the French Revolution. He would have disappeared from history were it not for the 1,000 letters he sent to a friend in central France. In them he gave eyewitness testimony of the revolution as it caught flame in ways neither he nor his neighbours on the shabby Rue des Arcis could have predicted. Timothy Tackett deftly uses the correspondence to create a vivid picture of Colson and his thrilling, terrifying times: his book stands in the tradition of Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou*.

Colson is revealed as representative of the masses – a man caught up in events, in thrall to rumour and the bewildering speed of events. He went, like so many Frenchmen, from respect for the king to admiration for Robespierre to apprehension as to where it was all heading. He reported on the storming of the Bastille and the royal family's flight to Varennes, and maintained his Catholic faith even when it was proscribed. What a shame he died in 1797, before the Napoleonic adventure unfolded.

By Michael Prodger

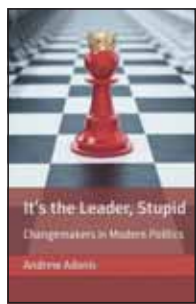
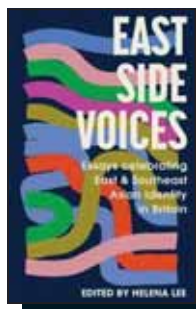
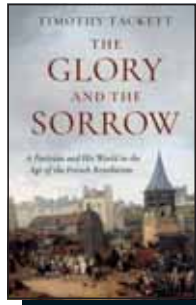
### **It's the Leader, Stupid: Changemakers in Modern Politics** by Andrew Adonis

Amazon, 313pp, £10

In a letter written towards the end of the American Civil War, Abraham Lincoln declared: "I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me." The historian turned Labour politician Andrew Adonis believes this is nonsense. Lincoln had the power to avert civil war when he entered office in March 1861, Adonis argues, but he chose instead to defend Fort Sumter in the Deep South and thus provoke war with the Confederacy.

This case study forms part of a breezy collection of profiles of major political figures ranging from the former foreign secretary Ernest Bevin to the European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen (Europe's Hillary Clinton, according to Adonis). Running through them is the idea that leadership is the decisive factor in politics – a thinly veiled rendition of Thomas Carlyle's "great man" theory. But Adonis's loose mix of portraits assumes rather than argues for Carlyle's maxim that "the history of the world is but the biography of great men". In doing so, Adonis neglects the social and economic currents so central to the lives of his cast.

By Freddie Hayward



### **East Side Voices: Essays Celebrating East and Southeast Asian Identity in Britain** Edited by Helena Lee

Sceptre, 224pp, £14.99

This illuminating essay collection is the book form of a project conceived after the racial stereotyping in Quentin Tarantino's film *Once Upon a Time in... Hollywood* led Helena Lee to despair at the lack of meaningful representation of east and south-east Asians in the media. As Lee, an editor at *Harper's Bazaar*, notes in her searing introduction, this has become even more relevant now: police estimate there were three times as many racially motivated hate crimes in London towards people of east and south-east Asian heritage during spring 2020 compared with the same period of 2019.

Contributions to the collection are wide-ranging in form and scope but always affecting, and come from writers including the poet Mary Jean Chan, the journalist Zing Tsjeng and the actor Gemma Chan. Most poignant is the Chinese-Malaysian novelist Tash Aw's understanding of the British interest in genealogy as a method of reinforcing "attachments" to Britain. "As we face greater pressures to identify with one clan," he posits, "it feels more powerful to insist on the difficult pluralities of our existence than to deny them."

By Ellen Peirson-Hagger

### **Violeta** by Isabel Allende

Bloomsbury, 336pp, £16.99

For the past 40 years the Chilean-American novelist Isabel Allende has drawn readers into her richly imagined narratives, often inspired by her own history or that of South America. In her latest work, *Violeta*, she revisits themes of exile and displacement, which she has experienced in her own life: in 1973 a coup against Salvador Allende, her father's cousin and the elected president of Chile, forced her to flee to Venezuela.

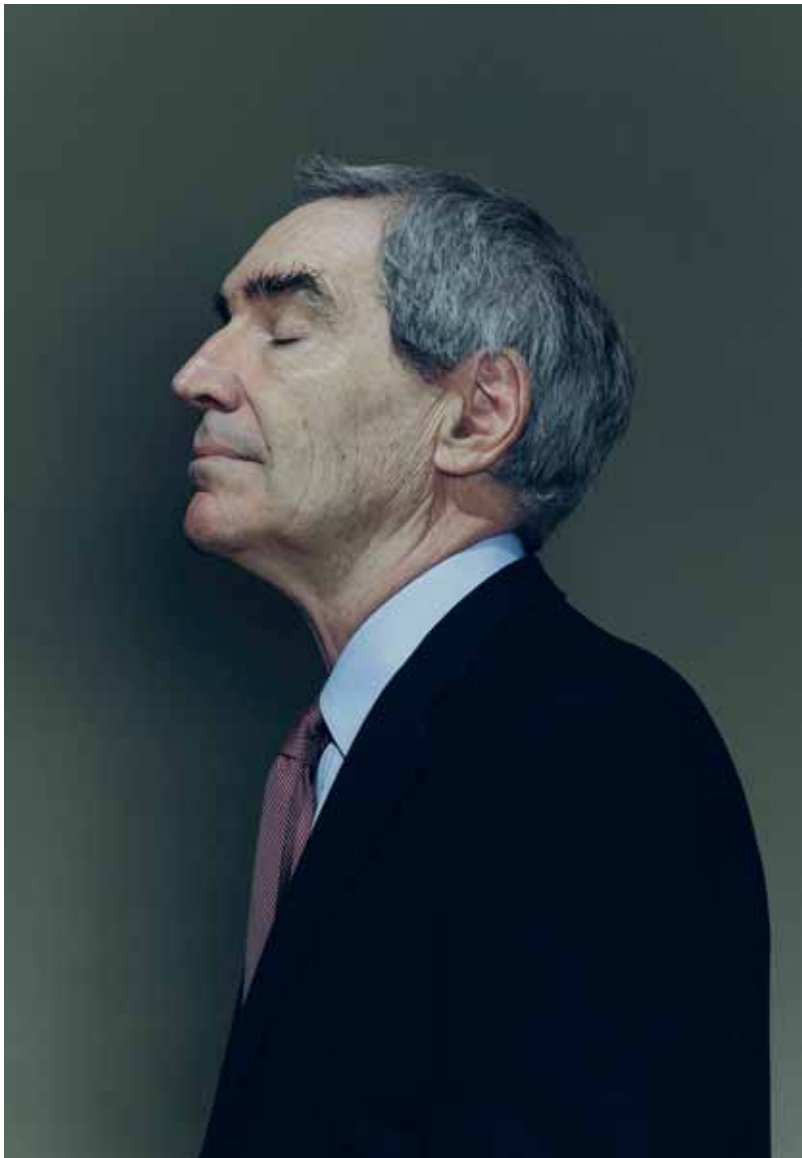
We meet Violeta in 1920 when she is born to the aristocratic Del Valle family just as the Spanish influenza pandemic reaches South America. Her fortunes, however, quickly change with the death of her father, whose legacy of scandal and debt forces Violeta into exile in the countryside. As Violeta matures, we witness her tenacity in reinventing her life, and so transcending her circumstances – becoming a wife, then a mistress, a businesswoman and, eventually, the matriarch of her family. With her customary vibrant and compelling prose, Allende's *Violeta* is a moving exploration of both the pain and the freedom of being an outsider.

By Christiana Bishop

## Cold comfort

Michael Ignatieff promises to show how writers and artists found solace in suffering – but delivers only liberal platitudes

By Lola Seaton



Quietism on the Western front: Michael Ignatieff searches for hope

Raymond Williams once witheringly described Christopher Caudwell, an English Marxist critic who died fighting in the Spanish Civil War, as “not even specific enough to be wrong”. Reading Michael Ignatieff’s *On Consolation*, the phrase kept coming to mind, or rather my botched, inferior version of it: “not specific enough to be true”. This is only partly true of *On Consolation*, meaning not somewhat true throughout, but entirely true of parts of the book. A chronological suite of “portraits of particular men and women in history struggling to find consolation” – Western men and women (mostly men), from Job to Boethius, Montaigne to Abraham Lincoln, Marx to Primo Levi – *On Consolation* has two rhetorical modes: sprightly biographical narrative (thankfully predominant) and sententious philosophising, particulars and platitudes.

Ignatieff, a Canadian academic, journalist, novelist, broadcaster and, briefly, politician, is an agile and engaging, if not dazzling, storyteller. But he too often succumbs to his evident penchant for declarative abstraction, even in his fiction. His Booker-shortlisted, autobiographical novel *Scar Tissue* (1993), in which the narrator, a philosophy lecturer, sinks into personal crisis at the slow demise of his mother, contains insightful but detachable meditation on dying, during which the book feels less like a novel than a cerebral memoir, the narrator more like a conduit for thought than a vividly ramified consciousness. His family history, *The Russian Album* (1987) – about his paternal grandparents, members of the Russian aristocracy who fled during the revolution, finding eventual exile in Canada – also begins with thoughtful but slow-moving reflections on the relations between memory and selfhood, history and photography, before it proceeds to the story proper and the imaginatively enhanced historical mode in which Ignatieff excels.

The abstraction in *On Consolation* is less insightful and inquiring, more sermonising and mawkish. “Consolation is possible only if hope is possible, and hope is possible only if life makes sense to us... The hope we need for consolation depends on faith that our existence is meaningful or can be given meaning by our efforts.” The cascading definitions confer an ambience of profundity that disguises the repetitiousness (consolation requires hope that life makes sense; consolation requires hope that existence is meaningful). With the accumulation of this lofty vocabulary – “faith”, “hope”, “justice” etc – the prose becomes impenetrable and ultimately stupefying. There may be truth here, but it’s not experienced as such.

When he snaps out of this numbing magniloquence, Ignatieff is an energetic scene-setter and an agreeable portraitist, even if his historical sketches are by necessity somewhat cursory. This is primarily what the chapters are made of – not exegesis or analysis, but lightly embellished biography and quasi-novelistic forays into capturing each figure’s immediate context and state of mind, plus a companionable paraphrase of their consolatory works. The crowd listening to Lincoln’s second inaugural address outside the Capitol in March 1865, “had come through the rain and now

stood in the breaking sunlight". Chapters often have an emotional arc: the one on Max Weber opens with the "39-year-old German professor" recovering from "a depressive illness that had forced him to... abandon his professorship" and crescendos, after he recovers his capacity to work and write, with Weber delivering a triumphant lecture: "When he stepped off the stage, at the end of this prodigious evocation of polar night, he would have been euphoric. He joined his lover, Else von Richthofen... and later they tasted the delights of love in a railway carriage."

Similarly intimate speculation attends the chapter on Marx – a "fervent, relentless, tough, broad-shouldered man with a black halo of crinkly hair and a dark complexion" – and his wife Jenny, who arrive in Paris from Cologne: "For two young revolutionaries, the excitement of being together, in love, and in the home of world revolution must have been overwhelming... Fellow radicals were impressed by his vigour, his manliness, his cold fearlessness. She would have been attracted to that too." Ignatieff likewise imagines Boethius's "distracted and desperate mind" when writing *The Consolation of Philosophy* while awaiting death in prison: "Whatever the physical hardships he endured, it was the longing for a lost life that tormented him... Psychic suffering plus hard rations caused him to waste away and his hair to turn white." The inconspicuous hedges ("would have been", "must have been") license a kind of imaginative extrapolation from the evidence, which, however intellectually gratuitous, does humanise figures whose personalities are often overshadowed or ossified by the canonisation of their work.

The two modes Ignatieff switches between in *On Consolation* – anecdote and generalisation – correspond to the two categories of his liberal humanism: the suffering individual and the consolation found in transhistorical "solidarity" or "kinship". But can the consolation founded on these categories – man and Man – be anything other than banal? Or, to put it differently, can it avoid carrying in its train the bland, quietist politics of blurring the distinction between suffering we can't do much about – the ineluctable, perennial sort – and suffering we can: the contingent, potentially avoidable kind?

Ignatieff writes that "To live in hope, these days, may require a saving scepticism towards the drumbeat of doom-laden narratives" and counsels us to "retain some sceptical self-command in the face of [them]". We must not "let our own resilience buckle before the tide of public commentary that predicts environmental Armageddon, democratic collapse, or a future blighted by new plagues". "To see ourselves in the light of history is to restore our connection to the consolations of our ancestors and to discover our kinship with their experience. We will be astonished when we do." Ignatieff's chronic recourse to that cloying, coercively inclusive "we" is symptomatic, while "resilience" here is subtly equivocal – is Ignatieff recommending political resolve or resigned endurance (or even "defensive indifference" or "denihilism", as Richard Seymour puts it in his forthcoming book *The*

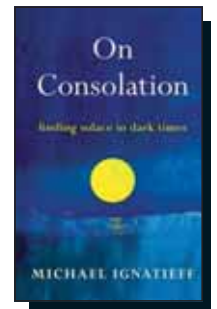
*Disenchanted Earth*)? It may be true that we live in an age not just of catastrophes but catastrophising, alarmism mixed up with legitimate causes for alarm. But Ignatieff's "light of history" turns out to mean almost its opposite – the haze of eternity, sifting through "the human record" in search of timeless wisdom about suffering and solace.

*On Consolation* is not an explicitly political book, but the vestiges of Ignatieff's unwaveringly liberal biases, however reflexive and subterranean, interfere with its sentimental humanism, or with one's – my – capacity to be moved by it. Occasionally, the political flavour of Ignatieff's idea of consolation becomes arrestingly overt: "To be consoled is to make peace with the order of the world without renouncing our hopes for justice." This gradualism surfaces even in the act of attempting to suppress it: "Consolation is the opposite of resignation... We can derive consolation, in fact, from our struggle with fate and how that struggle inspires others." Invoking "fate" – an impersonal, immovable, supra-political force – is odd even in the context of the book: it is striking how much of the suffering it describes is political in provenance – death sentences, exile, war, genocide.

The chapter on Marx ends with the perplexing suggestion that rather than questioning whether Marx's "utopia" is "attainable", it would be better to ask whether "a world beyond consolation is... even desirable". Ignatieff never pursues the thought, but it's not obvious, given consolation is by definition second best to not needing it in the first place, why we'd prefer it to a world with less suffering.

In a personal epilogue, Ignatieff discusses failure – perhaps alluding to his leadership of the Liberal Party, defeated in Canada's 2011 election, and more euphemistically, to his public support for the Iraq War (and its eventual public retraction) – as well as the "all-access pass" that comes with privilege. (Ignatieff has spent much of his adult life outside of Canada, enjoying berths at Cambridge, Oxford, Harvard.) "It takes some time to accept the emergent sense of solidarity with the rest of mankind that begins to dawn when you do hand in that pass, when you realise that your previous liberal protestations of abstract solidarity had been so false, when it finally hits you that you are yoked together with all others in a common fate." This is, of course, only true in the most banal of senses. Far from being "yoked together", we have drastically uneven relations to – responsibility for, exposure to, ability to change the course of – the contemporary crises Ignatieff cites. Solidarity must be continually forged, not blandly asserted as another spontaneous facet of the "human condition".

The only common fate (for now, anyway) is death, a subject Ignatieff has thought deeply about. But how and when and why each of us dies, as with how each of us lives, are always partly political questions to which there are radically divergent answers. As liberal professions of solidarity go, *On Consolation* is just as abstract as the previous efforts Ignatieff disowns – sincere, but not specific enough to ring true. ●



**On Consolation:  
Finding Solace in  
Dark Times**  
Michael Ignatieff  
Pan Macmillan,  
304pp, £16.99

**It may be that  
we are living  
in an age  
in which  
alarmism is  
mixed up with  
legitimate  
causes  
for alarm**

# Leading Leeds United

The club had one triumphant streak under the ruthless Don Revie. Can the purist Marcelo Bielsa sustain another?

By Jonathan Liew

Historically speaking, Leeds really isn't much of a football city. This might sound counter-intuitive, but for much of the 20th century rugby league was its sport of choice. Leeds Rhinos can trace their origins back to the 1870s; Leeds United was only founded in 1919, and the club has spent much of the intervening period mired in mediocrity: bobbing between the top two divisions, struggling to fill its stadium, occasionally flirting with extinction.

Twenty-four clubs have spent more seasons in the English top flight; ten clubs have won more league titles; 23 have won more FA Cups. Meanwhile, almost all of Leeds's tangible success came in a white-hot

streak between 1968 and 1974 that brought six major trophies. The other 96 years of its existence have brought one. And so when people speak of Leeds as a giant of English football, what they are really referring to is one fleeting era of dominance. They mean the Leeds of Don Revie.

When Revie took over in 1961, Leeds were a struggling Second Division team with no money, few devoted fans and no pedigree to speak of. Within eight years of his departure in 1974, Leeds were back in the Second Division, restored to their natural state of mediocrity. By rights, his biographer Christopher Evans contends, Revie should be remembered alongside men such as Bill Shankly, Matt Busby and Alex Ferguson as one of English football's greatest ever managers.

And yet to many he will be remembered as a mercenary, a cynic, perhaps even a cheat. His early Leeds sides were brutal, physical and often negative. Unproven but persistent accusations of fixing and financial irregularity continue to tarnish his reputation. His unhappy three-year tenure as England manager between 1974 and 1977 ended with Revie resigning to take a lucrative job in the United Arab Emirates, a betrayal for which he was never really forgiven.

Evans, the Labour Co-operative MP for Islwyn, in south-east Wales, sets out to redress the balance. His book is impeccably researched, based on dozens of new interviews, and attempts to recast Revie as a visionary, a trend-setter, the ultimate professional who reinvented the game for the modern age. Players such as Billy Bremner, Peter Lorimer and Norman Hunter were plucked from obscurity and transformed into world-beaters. Scouting was taken to a new level, with



The don: Leeds manager Don Revie celebrates winning the 1972 FA Cup, with players (l-r) Jack Charlton, Billy Bremner and Paul Reaney

EXPRESS/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

opponents analysed in painstaking detail and thick dossiers issued to players. Time-wasting, gamesmanship, rough-house tactics: virtually nothing was off-limits in pursuit of a competitive edge. In one game against Leipzig, played on a treacherously icy pitch, Revie ordered his players to file down their studs to expose the nails underneath, giving them a better grip. Before long, the shins of the outraged Leipzig players were dripping with blood.

Underpinning all this was Revie himself: a proud, driven, superstitious and avaricious man whose footballing credo essentially derived from fear. Born into poverty in Depression-era Middlesbrough to an unemployed joiner, that haunting sense of insecurity and mistrust never really left him. Defeat was death. Ruin lay around every corner. Revie lived like a man who could feel the breath of poverty on the back of his neck. As a life and times, Evans's account is immaculate. What it lacks – in comparison to books such as *The Unforgiven* (2003) by Rob Bagchi and Paul Rogerson, another history of Revie's tenure at Leeds – is wider context, the sense of romance and fierce fragility that the club under Revie embodied, how he changed the city and the game around him.

Revie died from motor neurone disease in 1989, revered in Leeds but nowhere else. After a brief flurry of success under David O'Leary around the turn of the century, the club sank to its lowest ebb: relegated in 2004 and again in 2007 after going into administration. A conveyor belt of hapless owners oversaw a conveyor belt of hapless managers. Attendances at Elland Road sank to about half what they were in the Premier League. The soul of Leeds United was in the gutter, and it took a mercurial Argentinian named Marcelo Bielsa to restore it.

When Leeds first approached Bielsa in 2018, he arrived armed with detailed research on all the club's Championship rivals, lists of the players he wanted to sell and keep, and Land Registry drawings of the club's training complex, annotated with improvements that had to be made as a condition of his appointment. This was Bielsa in microcosm: a manager whose fascination with football often veered into obsession, even absurdity; one who inspired an almost religious devotion among players, fans and fellow coaches, but hadn't won a club trophy in more than 20 years.

For Bielsa, football is something to be lived completely or not at all. No compromises. No shortcuts. Players who displease him or who fail to meet his exacting physical standards were jettisoned without remorse. Training games unfold at bone-shattering speed. This is why his teams play with a stirring, hyperactive intensity, ripping sides apart with beautiful high-wire football. It is also why he had never previously spent more than two years at any club.

Like Revie, he studies opponents in ridiculous detail and compiles extensive dossiers on every player and situation. Unlike Revie, he does not share them with his players. They are for his consumption alone: a form of penance, something to help him sleep at night. "It allows me to keep my anxiety low," he says in

Phil Hay's *And It Was Beautiful*. "Why do I do it? Because I'm stupid."

Bielsa isn't stupid. But nor is he the wizened sage or philosopher-king that so many of his posturing disciples think he is. Raised in an upper-middle class family of politicians and lawyers in Rosario, Bielsa has encountered enough real intellectuals to know that he's not one of them. And yet such is the solipsism and self-seriousness of the modern game that footballing genius is often confused for the real thing. (Arsène Wenger, too, was a subject of the fallacy that coaching football and sounding gnomish in press conferences qualifies you as a public intellectual.)

Perhaps Bielsa and Leeds saw a little of themselves in each other: tortured, misunderstood but nonetheless convinced that grace is at hand. In Bielsa's first season, Leeds narrowly miss promotion. In his second, they return to the top tier for the first time in 16 years. His third season is covered in *And It Was Beautiful*: part footballing chronicle, part enthralling character study, part reflection on what football means to a place.

Now at the *Athletic* after 15 years covering Leeds for the *Yorkshire Evening Post*, Hay has long been known as one of the best-informed local correspondents in the country. Here, he blends excellent reportage with a keen eye for detail and deeper thoughts on Bielsa and the city that embraces him with unfettered love. Murals spring up around the city. Fans glimpse him in the coffee shops and supermarkets of Wetherby. Though he is a private man, Bielsa is always generous with his time, aware that football is played not for sponsors or owners or television executives, but for the people. One of his first moves is to make Leeds players pick litter for three hours, because that's how long the average fan has to work to buy a ticket.

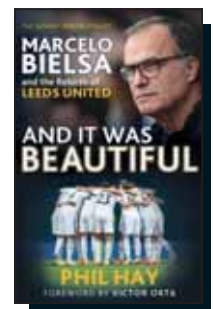
Of course, there's a natural dissonance here. Bielsa earns a handsome salary (much of which he gives away), but makes even more money for others. The Italian media mogul Andrea Radrizzani bought Leeds in 2017 for £45m and now wants to turn it into a £1bn asset. Bielsa's face is used to sell season tickets, satellite packages, even Hay's book. Replicas of the blue bucket upon which he sits to watch Leeds matches have been sold in the club shop at £80 a pop. While extolling football's idealism and purity, Bielsa helps to sustain the very system and structures he detests.

Revie understood this dichotomy perfectly. One of the most poignant moments in Evans's book is in about 1963, when Revie takes his son Duncan out onto the Elland Road pitch and explains his vision. "One day, son, there'll be boxes there," he says, pointing across the weathered terraces. "There'll be people coming for lunch at 12, not five to three. There'll be sponsorship on the shirts. There'll be television worldwide. It will be a complete revolution." If Bielsa sees football as it can be – its beauty, its purity, its possibility – then Revie saw it as it really was. The irony is that in a way, both were men out of their time. ●

*Jonathan Liew is a sports writer at the Guardian*



**Don Revie: The Biography**  
Christopher Evans  
Bloomsbury Sport, 384pp, £20



**And It Was Beautiful**  
Phil Hay  
Seven Dials, 288pp, £20

**One of Bielsa's first moves was to make his players pick litter for three hours – the average time a fan has to work to buy a ticket**

## Confessions of a prodigy

Blending anger and fragility, Tori Amos's debut album still sounds as radical as it did 30 years ago

By Kate Mossman

I wasn't a fan, but my friend was, and I was rather scared of my friend. We took the National Express to the Ipswich Regent in 1994 to see Tori Amos, where I found myself in an audience of girls with bright red hair. Amos sang her biggest hit "Cornflake Girl", which terrified me, because it seemed to be about bullying between young women.

She wove her way through my 1990s and into the next decade: my first experiences of love, lying on a university room floor, took place with "Northern Lad" playing on repeat in the background (he was a northern lad, turned on to Tori by his gay best friend). I still think it's one of her most beautiful songs, but it is shot through with dread ("I feel the west in you"). There is something that Amos did – thumped the piano, then threw out a descending, wavering long vowel; a "here" or "feel" or "see" – which still sends me rushing down a time-tunnel to the loneliness and fear of young adulthood. She set exquisitely pretty musical phrases alongside lyrics that were full of threat, as in "Winter", about her relationship with her father: "When you gonna make up your mind/Cos things are gonna change so fast..." She once described herself as "a magnet for people who want to be alone with themselves".

She was brought to the UK by her record label, Atlantic, which thought that eccentric female artists had a better chance of making it in the land of Kate Bush. *Little Earthquakes* wasn't exactly her debut: she fronted a synthpop band called Y Kant Tori Read in the 1980s featuring the drummer who later joined Guns N' Roses. Their self-titled album, the cover of which showed her posing with basque and sword, sold so badly she had it deleted, and it

**Were *Little Earthquakes* a picture, it would be snow spotted with blood; wild horses; and the first time you wore your boyfriend's clothes**

fetched large sums on the bootleg market for a time. *Little Earthquakes* was a full restart: in "Girl", she says "she's been everyone else's girl/Maybe one day she'll be her own".

At the heart of the album, released 30 years ago, is "Me and a Gun", an a cappella song about a rape so brutal that were Amos emerging now, the experience would define her entire public identity. In a few of her earliest interviews, her rape is edited out, passed over as "a frightful event", though she had clearly spent part of the interview talking about it. Who knows whether it scared the male-dominated music press of the 1990s; whether it contributed to the way Amos was seen – as someone both away with the fairies and too raw and physical to be comfortable with. An *NME* review of *Little Earthquakes* described it as "a sprawling, confusing journey through the gunk of a woman's soul". Her brand of sexuality was a challenge for straight men, as she humped her piano, or suckled a pig in images for her third album, *Boys For Pele*. She was no Kate Bush after all. Asked once who would play her in a film, she replied: Tonya Harding.

The lyrics still sound radical: "So you can make me come/That doesn't make you Jesus" ("Precious Things"). "Boy you'd best pray that I bleed real soon/How's that thought for you?" ("Silent All These Years"). *Little Earthquakes* is a simmering ball of explosive material cooled by the music of winter landscapes. Amos was a piano prodigy at five, kicked out of music school because she preferred to play by ear: by 13 she was earning money in the Washington, DC piano bars frequented by political lobbyists, dropped off and picked up by her Methodist preacher father.

Perhaps because of her close physical relationship with her instrument, she is one of those musicians who has created an entire soundworld – her music, which hasn't changed much over the years, is a mental stage-set full of tone colours and word-painting. "Silent All These Years" was inspired by *The Little Mermaid*, written for Al Stewart to sing – then later used in a campaign for rape awareness. The phrasing of "China" soars into Broadway territory. "Leather" is cabaret: "Look I'm standing naked before you/Don't you want more than my sex?" If *Little Earthquakes* were a picture – which it kind of is – it would be snow spotted with blood; wild horses; a crucifix, and the first time you wore your boyfriend's clothes. Anger defined the work of the female singer-songwriters of the mid-1990s, but Amos had a fragility too, and *Little Earthquakes* was holding something back. It was a statement of intent. This is who I could be...

The hits would come later – Amos preserved her emotional clout, continued to deliver those little musical moments that made your stomach drop like a marionette on slack strings. But she gradually moved away from confessional songwriting, and these days inhabits a law-unto-itself lyrical world where she'll cover climate change, native American rights, the Democratic party and her mother's death all in one album. No one, these days, would call that a confusing journey through the gunk of a woman's soul. ●



ROGER SARGENT/SHUTTERSTOCK

## Something lurking

The elusiveness of  
Alessandro Magnasco's  
flickering landscapes

By Michael Prodger

The only near contemporary source we have about the life of Alessandro Magnasco (1667-1749) is a book of brief biographies written by a minor painter named Carlo Giuseppe Ratti about the painters, sculptors and architects of Genoa. It was published in 1769 and even then, Magnasco was slipping from view. Ratti, however, was clear about the painter's most distinctive feature – his brushstrokes “composed of quick, careless, but artful touches, applied with a certain bravura which is difficult to explain”. What he didn't spend time or ink on was the fact that Magnasco's entire art is difficult to explain.

Magnasco was not the only contemporary painter to depict friars, bandits and crowded street scenes, but he did so both with more imagination than most and in a highly personal style that seemed almost a century ahead of its time. As a painter, Magnasco was nowhere near El Greco (1541-1614) in status, but he too had what might be called a nervous brush and dealt in flickering, strobe-lit, attenuated scenes that still seem strange to the modern eye and must have been all the odder to his peers. Magnasco was, however, an outlier in style only: he had a long career, influential patrons, and left his mark on some distinguished later painters.

Magnasco, also known as *il Lissandrino* – little Alessandro – because of his short stature, was born to a painter father who died when the boy was young. When his mother remarried she sent him, aged ten, to join the household of a wealthy patron in Milan. There, Alessandro was encouraged to learn mathematics as preparation for a career in the commercial world but managed to persuade his guardian to sponsor his apprenticeship as a painter to Filippo Abbiati, one of the city's leading artists.

### Friars in a Wood

Alessandro  
Magnasco

Magnasco's early career was as a portraitist, but he moved on to genre scenes and landscapes. He spent the bulk of his career in Milan, with one lengthy sojourn in Florence, where his works were much appreciated by Giovanni Gastone de' Medici – who would become the last Medici grand duke of Tuscany – and hung in the Pitti Palace.

On his return to Milan, the newly married Magnasco remained in demand – with the city's Austrian governor among his patrons – until his daughter persuaded him to return to his native city of Genoa in 1735. It was not the happiest of homecomings: Ratti reports that the Genoese found his style “worthless” and “ridiculous”. Nevertheless, Magnasco continued to paint until increasing feebleness and “a strong tremor of the hand” led him finally to put aside his brushes. Even then he was happy to talk about art to amateurs and students “with vigour and grace”.

This largely successful career gives few clues to the nature of Magnasco's paintings or the origins of his style. His intentions also remain mysterious: what was meant by his scenes of torture, his images of Quakers and the inside of a synagogue, his friars gathered round a fireplace? Some commentators suspect him of being a satirist, others merely an imaginative chronicler of the picturesque. Meanwhile, the art historian Rudolf Wittkower sagely admitted it was impossible to fathom “how much quietism or criticism or farce went into the making of his pictures”.

Since his rediscovery in the early 20th century, after a century and a half of neglect, a series of artists have been credited with influencing his style: among them Jacques Callot, whose engravings of the miseries of the Thirty Years War Magnasco knew; Salvator Rosa with his dramatic scenes of brigandage; and the Dutch and Flemish Bamboccianti low-life painters active in Rome. Magnasco also regularly collaborated with other painters, producing figures for numerous works with Anton Francesco Peruzzini, who painted in the landscapes, and Clemente Spera, a painter of classical ruins. He worked too with Marco and Sebastiano Ricci and Cosimo Tura, so many “Magnasco” paintings are in fact the product of more than one hand.

This undated painting, *Friars in a Wood*, in the Museo Civico Giannettino Luxoro in Genoa, is one of numerous treatments of the theme from Magnasco's brush. In it two itinerant friars, either Benedictine or Carthusian according to the colour of their habits, pray by a wayside cross set up in a wild landscape. Such crosses were common but the scene is fanciful and designed to snag the eye. Nevertheless, the treatment of the landscape has a religious dimension: the trees arch to form a natural church, the shaft of light that illuminates the figures and the cross is the light of grace, and the landscape opens up with a transcendence that mimics the soul in communion with God.

Yet, in a typically Magnascesque way, the scene also has an edge of menace and a frisson that isn't solely religious. The skittish brushwork makes this place both alive and impermanent. Nature here is not wholly benign and these friars – one exhausted, one imploring – aren't out of the woods yet. ●

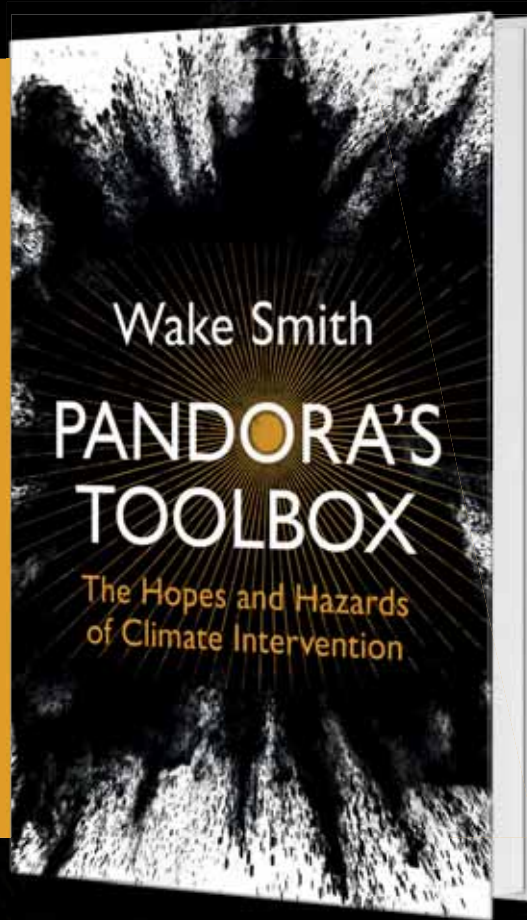




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Smith explains the need for carbon dioxide removal and even solar radiation management to preserve our societies and ecosystems.



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# Film

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## A troubled childhood

Kenneth Branagh's autobiographical *Belfast* is a nostalgic portrait of youth interrupted

By David Sexton

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Many of us turned to examining our pasts in lockdown, in a desire to understand how we got to where we were, what we'd left behind and what truly mattered still. In March 2020, with theatres and cinemas closed, Kenneth Branagh began writing the script for this film about his life as a nine-year-old boy in Belfast, 50 years earlier. Without any distractions, and needing to do no research, he finished it in just eight weeks. By September that year, it was being shot, under stringent safety protocols, not in Belfast but in an exhibition centre near Farnborough.

The film is entirely Branagh's own story, in a way nothing else in his prolific career has been – but he does not appear in it. A coda was shot of him returning as an adult to the street in Belfast where he grew up, accompanied by the cast who play his family, but it was cut from the final edit: it would surely have been both superfluous and disruptive of the film's integrity.

*Belfast* opens with panning aerial shots of Belfast today, looking its best in bright colours, repeated at intervals throughout the film. Then we're suddenly at street level, on 16 August 1969, filmed in gorgeous monochrome. It's an idyllic street community, children playing, neighbours chatting, everybody knowing each other. Little Buddy (quite brilliantly played by 11-year-old newcomer Jude Hill) has been fighting dragons with a wooden sword and dustbin lid shield. And then, out of nowhere, comes an astonishingly violent riot, petrol ▶



Cinema paradiso: *Belfast* presents life at the onset of the Troubles, as viewed by Little Buddy (Jude Hill, second from right)

◀ bombs, stonings, a car exploding, smashing up this little paradise. Buddy's Ma (Caitriona Balfe) uses that dustbin lid to get him to safety. The Troubles have begun, and Buddy's world has shattered.

The film follows the family's agonising decision to leave the Belfast they love (Branagh's family moved to Reading when he was nine). Pa (Jamie Dornan) is working in England as a joiner, returning at weekends when he can, struggling to pay off a tax debt – but their life otherwise is a marvel of love and warmth. Buddy has not only his absurdly glamorous parents and an older brother and sister, but a great pair of grandparents at hand too: Pop (Ciarán Hinds) and Granny (Judi Dench, perfect), full of kindness and quips.

It's ruthless, this film-making. Every scene, every word, is calculated for maximum effect, every button pushed hard. Branagh's theatrical career has made him expert in holding and moving an audience – and, since this is a once-in-a-lifetime project, why not give it everything and embrace full sentimentality? So it's all explicit, all fully staged. The dialogue is a series of perfected moments. Granny says she was a great one for the pictures when she was young, mentioning *Lost Horizons*. Did she ever go to Shangri-La, Buddy asks. "There were no roads to Shangri-La from our part of Belfast," says Granny, significantly.

Buddy hears a hellfire Protestant preacher ranting about there being a fork in the road, one path leading to salvation, the other to eternal torment ("thanks very much, really good", he responds politely), providing a recurrent image of the family's dilemma.

Buddy's understanding is shaped too by the movies and the theatre; he sees a performance of *A Christmas Carol* in the theatre and watches *One Million Years BC* and *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* in startling colour at the cinema. The Westerns *High Noon* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* play on through the television: he interprets Belfast's street battles as epic stand-offs.

Thumping Van Morrison anthems crown every emotional highlight (like an episode of *Desert Island Discs*): eight classics plus one new song. And the filming is ceaselessly expressive too, a lot of ground-up angles and pointed framings. Throughout there's a play on barriers going up, from stairway bannisters to barbed wire, culminating in an amazing shot of Granny, bidding farewell from behind a frosted door window.

If this all seems intolerably over-egged, it can be recuperated as not just a child's-eye view, but justified in its nostalgia as well, as Branagh's memory now of the boy he once was. You can even defend casting a pair of such beauties for his own parents this way.

*Belfast* is directly in the line of Louis Malle's *Au Revoir, Les Enfants* (which is one of Branagh's favourite films), John Boorman's *Hope and Glory*, and, more recently, Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma*. Branagh has made it his own, though. And universal: "We remember childhood as the fabulous years of our lives, and nations remember their childhood as fabulous years" (Giacomo Leopardi). Having won the People's Choice Award at the Toronto International Film Festival, *Belfast* promises to score at the Oscars too, even if the *Hollywood Reporter* has feebly protested it needs subtitles. ●

# Television

## Sex and drugs in teenage suburbia

By Rachel Cooke

**Euphoria**  
Sky Atlantic, aired  
10 January, 9pm;  
now on catch-up

At the beginning of the first episode of the second season of *Euphoria*, a woman with long, blonde hair who vaguely resembles Donatella Versace carefully makes her way through a strip club until she reaches a back office where an old guy is busy receiving a blow job. Naturally, he breaks off from this activity when she appears, and thanks to this – and to the series' blunt-minded producers – we get to see his erect penis in the moments just before his visitor lifts her gun and shoots a bullet right into it. Seriously. There it is, bobbing around angrily, looking just like one of those cheap Polish sausages that have a little too much paprika in them.

As cultural initiations go – I hadn't seen *Euphoria* before – this was quite something; in the moments afterwards, feeling obscurely polluted, I resolved dramatically to increase my intake of Feel New tea, a cleansing herbal brew I'm currently using in place of exercise. But even so, it didn't fully prepare me for what would follow. Sam Levinson's Bafta-nominated series about a group of young people (I'm not going to call



Uncomfortably numb: Zendaya plays Rue in *Euphoria*

them friends, since they can hardly be said to be straightforward pals) is as unrelenting as a bulldozer when it comes to sex and violence. Inevitably, the action mostly involves either one or the other, with only the odd interlude in which people take drugs. The same episode concluded with the dealer Fezco (Angus Cloud) beating Nate (Jacob Elordi) to a pulp at a New Year's Eve party, a scene in which human flesh turned to tinned tomatoes in as long as it takes to say: "Wanna beer?" (Incidentally, Donatella, it turns out, was Fezco's granny, and the opening scene is a flashback to his dysfunctional childhood.)

Some parts of the media have come over all Mary Whitehouse about *Euphoria*. "What will this stuff do to teenagers?" they ask, seemingly oblivious that for this generation far worse has only ever been two clicks away. But it's not the sex that bothers me – though all the breasts (and the rest) we get to see are entirely gratuitous, and personally, I'd rather not watch someone being throttled during intercourse; and the violence is no more extreme than that in, say, *Breaking Bad*. It's the prevailing tone, at once nasty and tedious, that I loathe; watching the show, my mood hovers somewhere between boredom (there's really nothing duller than someone who's off their face attempting conversation) and dread (the sense that something unbearable is always about to happen).

Yeah, yeah. I know this series isn't aimed at me; I know, too, that I don't have to watch it. Nevertheless, the idea that a teenager might enjoy, let alone relate to such unrelieved numbness makes me feel utterly miserable. When you're young, the word "euphoria" shouldn't be shot through with irony. It should be what you feel at least half of the time.

I see that it's slick. The soundtrack is great, and it has a Bruegel-like energy, the camera moving through crowded rooms with the dexterity of a practised clubber. I suppose the dialogue is pleasingly edgy, too, if self-conscious with it; even the bathroom scenes are determinedly witty (truly, the pleasure *Euphoria* takes in the scatological is worthy of a toddler). Its star, Zendaya, who plays Rue, a recovering (or non-recovering) drug addict, is mesmerically convincing, and I like Sydney Sweeney as Cassie (we last saw her as the spoiled, dead-inside Olivia Mossbacher in *The White Lotus*), her eyes like marbles, her pink cheeks somehow bringing to mind a couple of sea anemones.

But I don't think that people – by which I mean, really, those non-teenagers who live in dread of appearing superannuated – should mistake extremity for mastery. When Cassie removes her knickers in the car en route to a party, and then twists her body in such a way as to enable Nate, her driver, to get a good look at her pudenda, it's not revelatory of her character; nor is it, in itself, a particularly funny thing to do. Given, then, that this scene is also the product of the imagination of people (men!) much older than the girl who's going commando, it seems kind of... *porny*. So tell me: does this make me seem superannuated? Or does it make me sound like someone who wants television to be a race, not to the bottom, but to the top? ●

# Radio

## Strangers to the truth

By Rachel Cunliffe

**The Coming Storm**  
BBC Sounds

In November 2020, just after the US presidential election was called for Joe Biden, the BBC reporter Gabriel Gatehouse was in Arizona covering a Donald Trump rally when he met a bizarre character: a bare-chested man draped in furs wearing a set of horns on his head, who called himself "the Q Shaman". They chatted, but Gatehouse decided his story – of a shadowy cabal of satanic paedophiles, led by Hillary Clinton, that was trying to steal the presidency – was too preposterous to broadcast on the BBC. You might find the description of the Q Shaman familiar: when Trump supporters stormed the US Capitol on 6 January 2021, he was there, horns and all, photographed in the Senate chamber. Somehow, a conspiracy theory known as "QAnon" that began on obscure web forums had spread so widely that its believers had tried to orchestrate a coup.

How did we get here? In seven episodes, *The Coming Storm* tries to uncover the origins of "a new dark fantasy [that] had infected the bloodstream". The conspiracy long pre-dates Trump; narratives about the evil machinations of Bill and Hillary Clinton have been swirling around for decades. The first and second episodes trace the perception of the Clintons as corrupt back to Bill's early political career in Arkansas. This is about far more than his affairs – one interviewee recalls a doctor claiming to have a list of Hillary Clinton's 50 murders, while a 1994 documentary accused Bill of everything from drug smuggling to assassination.

Part politics, part history and part technological quest, Gatehouse's thesis is that the groundwork for "an epidemic of disorientation" has been being laid since the earliest days of the internet. His reporting is meticulous, his storytelling as compelling as it is chilling. Millions of Americans now believe the US government is being controlled by a cannibalistic child sex-trafficking ring – and some are prepared to pick up machine guns for their cause. As Gatehouse uncovers who is behind this "plot to break reality", I wonder if it's past the point of being able to be fixed. ●

**Millions of Americans believe the US is being controlled by cannibalistic sex-traffickers**

# 4 times as many investors are concerned about climate change than executive pay packets\*...

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# THE BACK PAGES

## Gardening



**Alice Vincent**

Confined to my house,  
I am giddy with excitement  
for the world beyond it

I can tell that my Omicron symptoms are mild because I can still smell the paperwhites. We were meant to be in Cornwall, walking through Lamorna, fuelling ourselves on crab sandwiches, but Covid got in the way. The salty air with which I hoped to start the new year has turned sweet and heady, expansive grey skies traded for the dim yellow glow of a table lamp.

Before we set off (we managed to get as far as Dorset before I tested positive), I unpicked the crispy pine garland that had sat atop the mantelpiece and put a vase of paperwhites there instead, thinking I'd miss them flowering. Instead, I've spent the endless hours ▶



◀ of self-isolation watching their silhouettes shift and grow across the walls.

For some gardeners, planting paperwhites (*Narcissus papyraceus* “Ziva” are the ones in question, but the same can be done with other spring bulbs) is a crucial part of the run-up to Christmas. The bulbs are forced, meaning they’re tricked into thinking winter has happened in order to flower with the dawn of a false indoor spring. Planted a couple of months before late December and left somewhere cool and dark – a garage, a shed, a cupboard – they are then taken out to participate in a horticultural magic trick, pumping out scent and flowers as the world outdoors sleeps; white rabbits in glass hats.

As has happened many times over the past couple of years, time’s slippage meant I didn’t plant mine until mid-December, by which point they were impatiently shooting in the dark of their cardboard boxes. Nestling the bulbs among gravel in vases and watering them seemed to galvanise them. No pretend winter was needed here: they were budding by Christmas in spite of the mercury rising outside. Those I gave to people as presents poked through the wrapping paper, keen to crack on. At the end of a long year, the vitality in those bulbs was both jarring and galvanising; how keen they were for new beginnings.

Gardeners know better than most how meek the first days of a year can be, stacking up seed catalogues in lieu of doing much outdoors. Outside, even the best gardens are tidy and damp, neat lines of mulch and matter. It’s why many of us force our Christmas bulbs to flower a little later. The elegance of a paperwhite, the fantastical glamour of a *Hippeastrum*, the pure poise of a snowdrop: in October, we plan these little

January parties for ourselves so there’s something to enliven the space once the fairy lights have been wrestled back into their box. It’s a small distraction, but a welcome one. Among the abandonment of resolutions and beleaguering weather, these unlikely flowers offer a growing reminder that brighter days are ahead.

Currently, the paperwhites are two feet tall and dazzling, bursting stars of white petals with immaculate and tiny golden crowns. They’ve become a kind of time-keeper in themselves: as the number of remaining isolation days dwindled on my NHS app, the petals dried out. I will let their green stems linger and feed the bulb beneath, then plant them in the garden.

Thanks to self-isolation, I’ve been able to enjoy flowers that otherwise would have opened into an empty flat. Perhaps that’s a happy irony, perhaps it’s fitting: the past two years could be seen as a kind of pretend winter, all of us stuck indoors, waiting for the release of spring. This January, like the last one, bears a heavier version of the usual improving promise of a new year. This year might be when the freedom of normality returns, when we all bloom triumphantly after such dormancy.

That may sound naive, depending on your outlook, depending on how you are finding this particular kind of Groundhog Day. But what is undeniable is that we have been forced – inside, yes, but also to consider and desire things more urgently. After not being allowed to leave the house, I’ve become giddy for the world beyond it. Bring me the pink sunsets, the sugary hit of daphne, the first fat crocus. I want to stretch my legs into this lingering new year. ●

## 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.*

### Age is no limit

A grandfather who took up skateboarding at the age of 82 has insisted “age is no limit” in life. Don Morton began his new hobby in September after previously being a passionate skier and rollerblader.

The grandfather-of-two said: “I am the living proof that age is not a barrier. There is no

reason to not take it up – older people can have a very fun time just going on the pathways. I’m in the process of building up speed.” *Scottish Herald (Daragh Brady)*

### Too close to home

It may have been intended as a light-hearted jibe at its West Yorkshire counterpart, but a new strapline on “Welcome to Hull” signs has provoked a wide-ranging reaction on social media.

The sign, on roads on the border with East Riding, now features a strapline that says: “We know we aren’t perfect, but at least we aren’t Leeds.” *Yorkshire Post (Michael Meadowcroft)*

### A salty shock

A Cardiff woman says she was stunned when she opened a

Walkers multipack and one of the packets had no crisps in it.

Yarna Davies had bought a multipack of cheese and onion Walkers crisps. When she arrived home she tucked into a packet and was so hungry she dove in for another. But to her horror the second packet had no crisps in it at all, “not even a crumb”, she said, reflecting on her ordeal.

Walkers has apologised, blaming a production error. “I was annoyed,” Davies said. “But it’s a once in a lifetime thing.” *Wales Online (Christopher Rossi)*





## Health Matters



### Dr Phil Whitaker

## Coercing healthcare workers into being jabbed is wrong in every way

After Sajid Javid's visit to King's College Hospital in London on 7 January, social media was flooded with posts from NHS staff. Doctors and nurses rushed to proclaim their Covid vaccination status (invariably double-jabbed and boosted) and counter the comments made by the consultant anaesthetist Dr Steve James.

The YouTube clip of the encounter has had more than 2.5 million views at time of writing. The Health Secretary asks the assembled hospital staff what they think of his policy to make vaccination mandatory for all front-line healthcare workers from 1 April. There is a long silence with several staff making awkward eye contact with each other over the tops of their masks before James is heard to say off camera, "I'm not happy with that." The consultant says he has been working on a Covid ICU throughout the pandemic, has gained some degree of immunity from having had coronavirus in the past, doesn't want to be vaccinated and stands to lose his job in a couple of months' time as a result.

James's attempt to rationalise his position by citing scientific evidence – which he claimed "isn't strong enough" to justify making immunisation compulsory – was misguided. He presented only part of the picture and got some of his figures (on transmission of Covid in vaccinated individuals) wrong, too. His comments were seized upon by the anti-vaxx movement as supporting their vehement scepticism, and excited an equal and opposite reaction from the wider medical community. Neither side was right. James was trying to argue a very different point: that he disagrees with compelling healthcare workers to get jabbed.

Vaccine uptake among doctors is at least 90 per cent. Some of the unvaccinated may be exempt, but that still

means as many as one in ten scientifically literate medics have not yet taken up immunisation. We don't know the full reasons why Steve James doesn't want to be vaccinated; but we can be sure that his reasons will feel entirely rational and compelling to him – and that will be true for every other vaccine-hesitant person. They won't be explicable in terms of the scientific evidence as currently understood, but that isn't the point. Humans often incorporate rationality into their decision-making but there are always other influences that, at certain times, create countervailing forces that weaken or even overturn rationality entirely.

Those who are pro-vaccination can be just as partial as James was with the scientific evidence. While immunisation does reduce the chance of healthcare workers transmitting Covid to patients, it is only a modest effect. Vaccination does not dispense with the need for the full range of infection-control measures.

Of course, patients should expect to have the risks of acquiring Covid in a healthcare facility minimised. Equally, though, the government is willing to make trade-offs here when it suits. In general practice we have experienced huge political pressure to increase face-to-face consultations, driving up Covid transmission between patients in our waiting rooms. And now self-isolation conditions are being pared back for staff with a proven infection, meaning some will inevitably bring Covid into work when they return.

In such equivocal circumstances, it generates huge ill-feeling when a government compels individuals to be jabbed against strongly held beliefs, or deprives them of their careers should they refuse. Coercion and discrimination – whether against doctors, nurses, or indeed tennis players – feeds anti-vaxx paranoia, polarising the discussion and making it less likely that some hesitant people might yet be amenable to rational persuasion. Furthermore, in healthcare, our entire culture is founded on free and informed consent to all medical interventions. Forcing vaccination on colleagues feels ethically deeply uncomfortable.

I am pro-immunisation and fully jabbed. That long silence and awkward eye contact among staff at King's College when Javid asked his question suggests there are others who share my disquiet. This mandatory vaccination policy is wrong – both morally and in its ultimate real-world consequences. ●



**In healthcare, our entire culture is founded on free and informed consent**

## Down and Out



### Nicholas Lezard

#### I buy a thermometer and suddenly find that I'm living in the past

As January limps along in that endless way it does, to the point where at times the calendar seems to be going backwards (“Not the 12th again...”) it is important to do what one can to alleviate the boredom and despair. To this end I bought a thermometer the other day. “A house thermometer?” asked the man at Robert Dyas suspiciously. I refrained from sarcasm or any display of wit. “All our thermometers are on the first floor,” he said, which saddened me, as I had not planned on climbing any stairs at Robert Dyas that day, “apart from these,” and he pointed at an absolutely darling KitchenCraft® thermometer that goes from -40 degrees Celsius and Fahrenheit all the way up to 50°C and 120°F. I’m not expecting to take it to either the North Pole or Death Valley (I will – I hope – never experience such extremes), but it’s nice to know it can cope with them, in the same way that car speedometers go up to 140mph.

It tells me what I already know, but to a greater degree of precision. I have been very scared of using the heating lately, having unpaid bills and no desire to get cut off, so I have been measuring my stoicism – my inner Yorkshireman, so to speak – with a certain kind of pride. My bedroom today achieved an impressive 14°C or 57.5°F, and I like to think that makes me hard, although it took me another two hours to summon up the courage to get out of bed. One interesting side-effect – and I am using the word “interesting” very loosely indeed here – is that up until now I had become, like most people in this country, if not most people my age, perfectly acclimatised to the Celsius system. But KitchenCraft® has, as is still common practice, put the Fahrenheit alongside it, and, at a

stroke, the years have fallen away and I have started thinking exclusively in Fahrenheit. Fourteen degrees Celsius? What even is that? I have also started wearing mustard-coloured trousers and wish we could have the referendum again so I could vote Brexit this time.

But what most impresses me about the KitchenCraft® thermometer is its price. It is a piece of white plastic a little under half a cubit long (these old-time measurements seem to come naturally now), and a thin strip of red-dyed mineral spirits in the... ah, dear Lord, you all know what a thermometer looks like. But what gets me is they charge £4.99 for it. I am not accusing Robert Dyas of an outrageous pricing system: I am looking, instead, at the people at KitchenCraft®. They are, of course, within their rights to charge whatever the market will bear, but if it costs more than 10p – or, to put it another way, two shillings – to make each one I will be somewhat surprised. Still, I love it, and like Mary’s little lamb, it follows me everywhere I go.

The other big change in the Hove-I is that, after a mere five months, I have a functioning kitchen window again. Did I ever mention it was broken in the first place? It basically fell out of its frame during a September gale and since then has been replaced by a rectangular piece of plywood that was never great fun in the first place, but which got more and more depressing as the months went by.

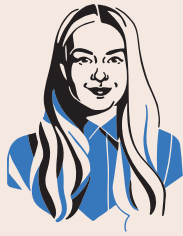
After blocking the light and the view, which are by some margin the best things about my kitchen, the plywood made things worse and worse because it cut off all air circulation. This meant, along with the cold temperatures outside, a good deal of condensation built up whether one was cooking or not. If you did cook, the condensation got so bad the ceiling started dripping. The plywood went mouldy. So did many other things. My packet of Maldon salt reverted to a kind of slush; my pappardelle turned green. I thought about cooking it just to see what ergotism felt like but after googling the effects I decided against it. Call me old-fashioned, in imperial measurements if you will, but if I want to get off my face I think I’d rather not have gangrene too, nor psychosis.

Even my oven glove started developing a kind of fungal growth. The kitchen cupboard is now spotted with mould; as is a corner of the kitchen behind the gas hob. Knowing that this is not something for which I am responsible is a kind of comfort, but it doesn’t make it any less disgusting, and I wonder whether this is why I have been wheezy for the last month despite having more or less stopped smoking since Christmas. I can go without smoking for days on end now, and this is without using any willpower whatsoever. In fact, smoking is what involves fortitude and perseverance: I have to go down two flights of stairs to smoke, then up two flights of stairs to get back inside, and if it’s freezing or raining outside it just doesn’t seem worth the candle.

So it is all change here. I did an awful lot of tidying up before the glaziers came in. Only an eccentric would actually call the place “tidy” but it’s in better shape than it has been for a while. Onwards and upwards, and see you next week, or in a se’ennight. ●

I have been measuring my stoicism – my inner Yorkshireman, so to speak – with a certain kind of pride

## Deleted Scenes



**Pippa Bailey**

I have just turned 30 and  
am rather surprised to find  
I am still so young

The first sight that greets you on entering my flat is a print by the Brooklyn-based satirical illustrator Julie Houts titled “On Death, Friday Night, My Wasted Youth”. It depicts two Friday nights – those of a 23-year-old and a 29-year-old. The former wears a black mini-dress and throws back her long blonde hair while quaffing champagne and flicking ash from a cigarette. Alongside her are phrases such as, “Lol I forgot to eat today!!!” and, “Money isn’t real!!!”. The latter hunches over a laptop in her pants, hair tied in a messy bun, skin daubed in a green face mask and cradling a slice of pizza as though it is all she has left in the world. The accompanying note reads: “It is important to take small bites so you don’t choke & die alone.”

When I bought the print, aged 24, it seemed amusing – especially as my life already better resembled the higher age bracket. I had never been one for hedonism or irresponsibility – though I am no stranger to short skirts (just ask the teacher who regularly told me off for rolling mine up at school). Now, having just turned 30, I am debating employing a little Tipp-Ex and amending the ages to “33” and “39”.

I began my week of celebrations (yes, a week; I approach my birthday with unseemly seriousness) with a surprise weekend away in the countryside organised by two of my closest friends. We drank wine and slept in, went on long, muddy walks and had philosophical conversations late into the night. On the Saturday morning I curled up under a blanket in front of the fire with my knitting and marvelled that I was not, despite appearances, approaching 80. The only suggestion of youth about the scene was the Nirvana T-shirt I was wearing as a pyjama top – though, as the rather lovely

American man I’ve been seeing (Grandma, I’ll call you later) remarked, the original Kurt Cobain fans are in their fifties now.

Whenever I mention this latest birthday, I do so in anticipation of the inevitable sympathetic grimace, the “How are you feeling about it?” question. I know I am supposed to be, at the very least, uneasy; to mourn the younger, freer days left behind. But the reality is that I feel just fine, thank you very much. If anything, I’m a little surprised to find I am still so young – as people often are when they learn my age. I have felt 30 – by which I suppose I mean I have felt like an established, put-together adult – since my mid-twenties.

I have long been old for my age. As a child I was so keen to learn to read and write that I insisted my mother taught me the alphabet before I started school. The resulting stories about “hamsun prins” (handsome princes), “sgwiruls” (squirrels) and parrots who “cudnd cip qiyt” (couldn’t keep quiet) are funnier than anything I’ve written since. I was so desperate to be an adult that I insisted on helping my mother unpack the food shopping, breaking as many eggs as I managed to store safely in the fridge door. And an oft-quoted line among my family is the time I turned to a friend while in a shopping centre, aged three, and precociously said: “Rachel, this music sounds rather familiar.”

But I was likely not, my therapist would remind me, entirely born this way. I am the eldest sibling of a childhood divorce, inevitably and inescapably altered; the responsibility assumed, the emotional burden shouldered too young. I wonder, sometimes, about who I might have grown to be had family life gone a little differently for me: would I still feel others’ struggles as if they are my own, would I take myself less seriously? Would I be surprised to turn 30 because I felt too young for it, rather than too old?

I have been assured many times in the past week that your thirties are the best decade because you know who you are, what you want – as if I did not understand deeply, long fervently before; as if I am now unchanging, immovable. I do not know who I will be by the end of this next decade, but I hope they will be playful years, more irresponsible. That by the end of them, I might be a little less grown up. ●



I wonder,  
sometimes,  
about who  
I might have  
grown to be  
had family life  
gone a little  
differently  
for me



## Repeater's 2021 New Statesman Books of the Year

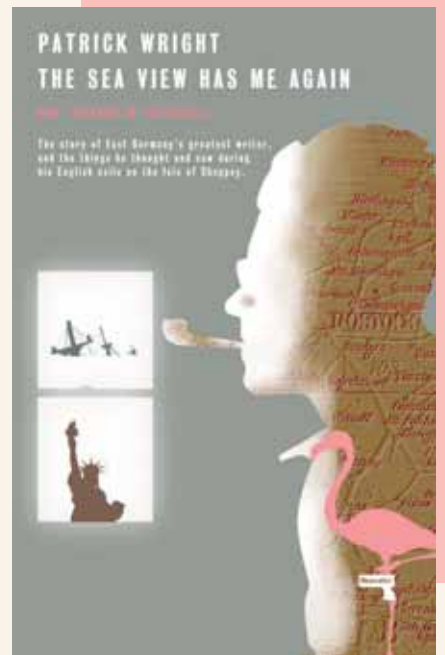
*"A book that feels fresher than anything I've read all year... You either know these working-class spaces, the precarity, or you don't."*



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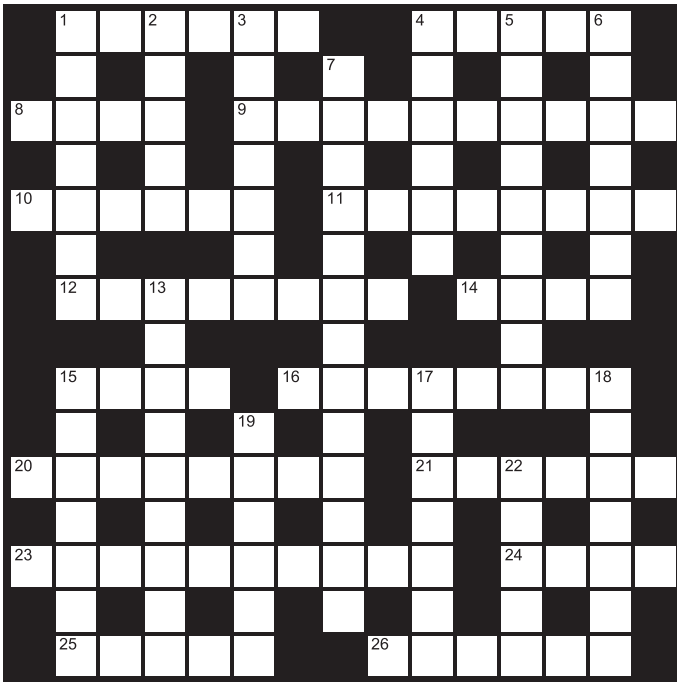
JONATHAN COE ON  
*THE SEA VIEW HAS ME AGAIN*  
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## The NS Crossword 568: Pottery by Mace



Each unclued light is entitled to follow one of the forenames clued in italics.

### Across

- 1 *Man's books set before Kings* (6)
- 4 *He needs time to look around* (5)
- 8 Arranged to tour a country house (4)
- 11 Sanctimonious seaman breaking rules at sea (8)
- 12 Pay for others to provide support for members? (8)
- 14 Wader primarily inhabiting broads in summer (4)
- 15 Further periodic sightings of Callisto (4)
- 16 Speaks on street and falters (8)
- 23 Likeness is limited, assuming uniform changes (10)
- 24 Lexicographer making an impression? (4)
- 25 Preacher's bearing divine nourishment (5)
- 26 *Case of jeopardy involving return of simple man* (6)

### Down

- 1 Lawman harsher if felon's captured (7)
- 2 Union striker, potentially (5)
- 3 More exotic guards for each ruler (7)
- 4 Mickey Mouse's attempt to support chum (6)
- 5 Current data lecturer's drawn on board (4,5)
- 6 Worker in playing fields withdraws (7)
- 7 Fat retainer dies – autopsies ordered (7,6)
- 13 Complex personal problem standing and sitting (9)
- 15 Dawkins's persuasion animated his team (7)
- 17 Worldly doctrine almost welcoming sin (7)
- 18 Copse in Scottish glen surrounding watering hole (7)
- 19 *Female judge raised question of self-identity* (6)
- 22 Yield from available funds reduced (5)

This week's solutions will be published in the next issue.  
Answers to crossword 567 of 14 January 2022

Across 1) Carpet 4) Leapfrog 8) Earliest 9) Strata 10) Heat 11) Narrated 14) Hostile 16) Foxtrot 18) Tea rose 20) Lebanon 22) No secret 24) Task 26) Inners 27) Balmoral 28) Escalate 29) Patina  
Down 1) Cher 2) Polyester 3) Theft 4) Litany 5) Peter 6) Reactor 7) Grandstand 12) Rhone 13) White noise 15) Loser 17) Transport 19) Arsenic 21) Stable 23) Carol 24) Tulip 25) Flea

## Subscriber of the Week: Matthew Harrison

*What do you do?*  
Semi-retired, self-employed HGV driver.

*Where do you live?*  
Beverley, East Yorkshire.

*Do you vote?*

Always.  
*How long have you been a subscriber?*

About four years.

*What made you start?*

The *New Statesman* gives a more balanced view than another unnamed magazine!

*Is the NS bug in the family?*

No, just me.

*What pages do you flick to first?*

Back pages, hoping Hunter Davies is in, then move on to the letters.

*How do you read yours?*

Initially skim through, and then when parked up in an unexotic lay-by, I read in more depth.

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

Less about Covid.

*Who are your favourite NS writers?*

Philip Collins, Pippa Bailey, Peter Wilby.

*Who would you put on the cover of the NS?*

Lillian Bilocca.

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

Margaret Thatcher.

*All-time favourite NS article?*

So many to choose from!

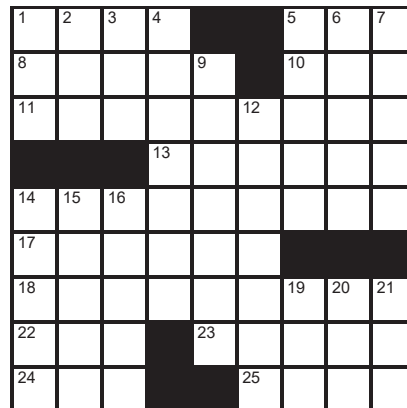
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Please email [elys.woodhouse@newstatesman.co.uk](mailto:elys.woodhouse@newstatesman.co.uk) if you would like to be featured

## The NS Crossword In Brief 17: by Hoang-Kim Vu



### Answers to crossword 16 of 14 January 2022

Across 1) Bod 4) Abba 8) Turf 10) Maul 11) Star signs 13) Gal 14) Ono 15) Squiffy 17) Tau 18) Els 19) Oven ready 23) Reef 24) Anna 25) Isn't 26) Day Down 1) BTS 2) Out 3) Drag queen 4) Ami 5) Bag of sand 6) Bunny 7) Also 9) Frau 12) Slier 15) Saves 16) Flea 17) Tori 20) NFT 21) DNA 22) Yay

### Across

- 1 It might follow Ham?
- 5 \_\_\_ oil (trendy therapeutic)
- 8 Register
- 10 "\_\_\_ House" (Madness song)
- 11 Slash across the face, say
- 13 Code cracked at Bletchley Park
- 14 Spurs
- 17 Works, as a brain
- 18 Conspicuous
- 22 Alfie Allen series (abbr.)
- 23 Not sharp
- 24 Berkshire home
- 25 Kedgeree component

### Down

- 1 Garden part
- 2 Aim after A-levels
- 3 Like some bishops (abbr.)
- 4 "Get that stick!"
- 5 Cold indication
- 6 Name changed in 1989
- 7 Fantasise
- 9 Last name in "Three Lions"
- 12 Tart cocktail with Gordon's
- 14 FKA \_\_\_ (Mercury nominee)
- 15 "... unless I'm wrong"
- 16 Threadbare
- 19 23 of 24
- 20 Yada, yada, yada
- 21 Countdown time on TV?

## The NS Q&A

“What would make my life better? Not needing a wee in the middle of the night”

**Alan Davies, comedian**



**Alan Davies was born in Essex in 1966. A comedian and actor, he is best known for his role in the BBC drama *Jonathan Creek* and as the only permanent panellist on the quiz show *QI*.**

*What's your earliest memory?*

I don't know. Childhood is a mixture of things you wish you could remember and things you wish you could forget.

*Who are your heroes?*

Barry Sheene, who won two motorcycle world titles in the Seventies. He owed his success in part to Ernst Degner, an East German racer who staged an accident in Sweden in order to defect in 1961. His family had already escaped the GDR in a car boot. Degner took his German engineer's ideas to the new Japanese outfit

Suzuki, who then built Barry's wonder-bike. My recent hero is Guz Khan, who I met making *Taskmaster*. I'd cast Guz as a self-made billionaire who buys up my character's restaurant in a return of the BBC Two sitcom *Whites*. He makes some changes to the kitchen staff with hilarious consequences.

*What book last changed your thinking?*

The A-Z.

*Which political figure do you look up to?*

Neil Kinnock. His speech to the Labour conference in 1985 was so inspiring I bought a copy of the text. Years later I was friendly with him and Glenys. In 2000 I had tickets to see England playing in Belgium in the Euros. The hotels were full so I called to ask if the Kinnocks knew of anywhere.

A message came back that they were away but I could stay at their house and help myself to the wine cellar. England beat Germany and when my friend Jez and I returned we set off an alarm, which triggered a security phone call. The deafening racket made me nauseous but Jez yelled the codeword into the receiver just before a European Parliament Swat team arrived *avec* CS gas. We then watched the highlights with a bottle of Sancerre.

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

Arsenal, the George Graham years.

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

I'd like to see dinosaurs, so a prehistoric camper-van holiday would be good.

*What TV show could you not live without?*

*QI*, obviously.

*Who would paint your portrait?*

Johnny Vegas.

*What's your theme tune?*

Having played Jonathan Creek, I already have a theme tune: Saint-Saëns' "Danse Macabre". I once caught myself humming it in a shop, which seemed like the worst act of attention-seeking.

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

"Enjoy yourself up there," from comedian Mike Wilmot, who sensed my apprehension when I was returning to stand-up in 2011 after ten years away.

*What's currently bugging you?*

Face mask on, glasses steam up. Argh!

*What single thing would make your life better?*

Not needing to get up for a wee in the middle of the night.

*When were you happiest?*

Riding a big Suzuki through Spain with my now wife.

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

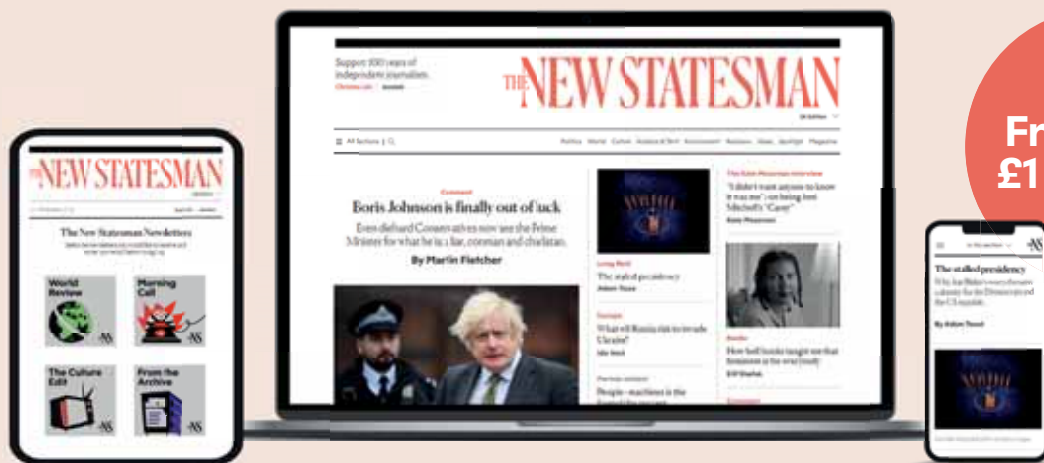
Cricketer in the summer, jobbing porn actor in the winter.

*Are we all doomed?*

TBC. ●

*"Just Ignore Him", a memoir by Alan Davies, is published by Little, Brown*

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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.