

Why the right are losing everywhere – except Britain • The joyless rise of Anna Wintour  
Christopher Steele interview: the author of the Trump dossier on the plots against Putin

# THE NEW STATESMAN

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## Out of Control

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# Why the right keeps losing

Until recently, the centre left in many Western democracies appeared to be in steep decline. Far from being a “progressive moment” as the former Labour leader Ed Miliband once claimed, in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis social democrats were routed across Europe and beyond.

Some traditional centre-left parties remain moribund. At the recent French presidential election, the Socialist Party’s candidate Anne Hidalgo recorded a mere 1.75 per cent of the vote. But elsewhere, social democrats are showing signs of recovery.

In Australia, the centre-left Labor Party has just returned to power for the first time in nearly a decade, while in New Zealand Jacinda Ardern’s Labour Party won re-election by a landslide in 2020. In Germany, Olaf Scholz’s Social Democratic Party (SPD) last year ended 17 years of Christian Democrat rule and entered into coalition with the Greens. Centre-left parties have similarly regained office in Spain, Portugal and all five Nordic countries. The US, Canada and France are governed by liberals, leaving the UK as the only major European power or Anglosphere country with a conservative administration. What accounts for this electoral shift?

Though social democrats have returned to power, it would be wrong to suggest that they are in rude health or that the left is strong. The German SPD won just 25.7 per cent of the vote at the 2021 election, while its Swedish counterpart won its lowest ever share in 2018 (28.3 per cent). In a fragmented electoral landscape, the centre left has survived by managing decline rather than overcoming it, and it benefits from proportional representation.

But social democrats have also reinvented themselves according to local circumstances. In Spain and Portugal, where eurozone austerity ravaged voters, this meant aligning with the radical left (including communists) and adopting a more economically interventionist programme. Earlier this year, having dramatically reduced unemployment and boosted growth, the Portuguese Socialist Party leader, António Costa, won only the second majority in his party’s history.

In Scandinavia, meanwhile, social democrats have



**Could Boris Johnson, like his Australian counterpart Scott Morrison, be undone by a centre-left coalition?**

moved rightwards on social and cultural issues such as immigration. The Danish Social Democrats countered the far-right People’s Party and appealed to working-class voters by embracing policies such as a cap on non-Western immigrants and the deportation of asylum seekers to North Africa.

So this is not a social democratic moment comparable to the postwar Keynesian era or even to the late 1990s, when a new generation of self-styled progressive leaders embraced the “Third Way”. The more telling trend, perhaps, is the decline of the centre right. As well as losing office to social democrats, conservatives have failed to prevent liberal leaders such as Emmanuel Macron and Justin Trudeau from achieving re-election. Donald Trump and Boris Johnson won national elections, but only by embracing a form of right-wing populism that owes little to traditional conservatism.

Such defeats point to an intellectual and political malaise among the right. In our era of permanent crisis – climate change, the pandemic, collapsing living standards – conservatives are struggling to provide solutions. The Thatcher/Reagan project – which gave the right momentum as it cut taxes, privatised industries and curbed trade unions – ended, but there has been no true replacement. Nor is there an intellectual revolution comparable to the Hayekian “new right” insurgency of the late 1970s.

Could Boris Johnson, like his Australian counterpart Scott Morrison, be undone by a coalition of social democrats, greens, liberals and moderate Europhile Tories? While Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan advanced by winning over the young, today’s conservatives are struggling among the under-40s. As the economist Thomas Piketty has charted, in perhaps the most important electoral shift of the past 50 years, where previously the right won among higher-educated voters, today it is the left that is dominant among the so-called Brahmin graduate class.

This is no guarantee of a “progressive future”. Brexit and Trumpism showed the fallacy of assuming the electorate is becoming ever more liberal. But there is an opening in Britain for the opposition parties finally to defeat the Tories. It will be unforgivable if they fail to take it. ●



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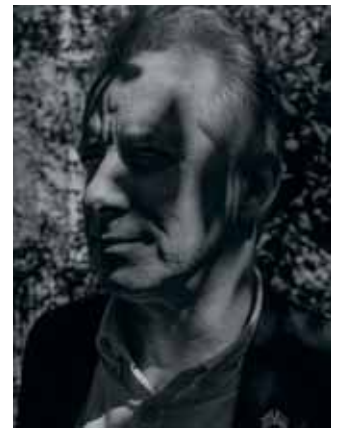
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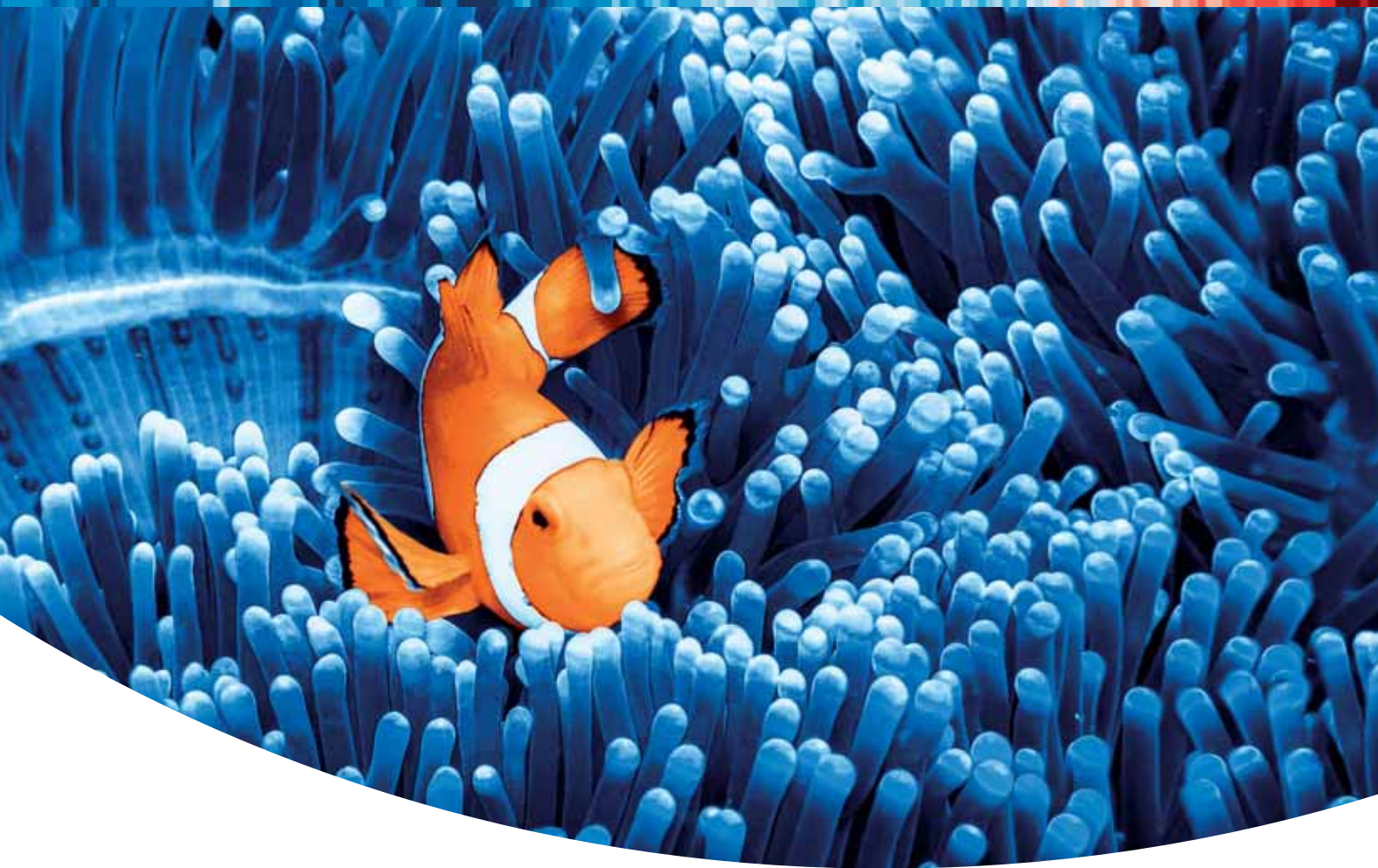


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# THE NOTEBOOK

CHRIS STADING/ANDREW ORCHARD SPORTS PHOTOGRAPHY/LAMY



## Newsmaker

### Jürgen Klopp and the mystique of the team

By Michael Henderson

We are bound for heaven, and Jürgen Klopp is of the company. Supporters of Liverpool football club may feel like amending the painter Thomas Gainsborough's celebrated remark about Anthony van Dyck as they contemplate the Champions League final against Real Madrid. Victory in Paris would cap a magnificent campaign, in which they won both domestic cups and finished second in the Premier League, a point behind Manchester City.

Under Klopp, only the second manager of an English club to claim a clean sweep of the three domestic trophies and the Champions League, Liverpool have won friends everywhere with their bracing style. City, managed by Pep Guardiola, are more beautiful. But Liverpool's explosion of flavours stirs the taste buds.

The first person to accomplish that quartet of prizes was Alex Ferguson, manager of Manchester United during the two decades (1993-2013) they

◀ dominated the English game. Klopp, however, has performed the feat in a shade under seven seasons. When he joined Liverpool in October 2015, they had not won the championship since 1990. Now they are back, and United – a rest home for has-beens and never-weres – have been knocked off their perch.

Through expert acquisition of fine players, and exceptional personal qualities, Klopp has transformed the club. Five players (full-backs Trent Alexander-Arnold and Andy Robertson, centre-half Virgil van Dijk and forwards Mo Salah and Sadio Mané) would be strong contenders for a place in an all-time Anfield XI. Klopp has also “got” the city, and no city is linked so umbilically to its figurehead club as Liverpool.

It has been a consummate team performance, supervised by a man who has always taken a broad view of the world. Born in Stuttgart, Klopp coached successfully at Mainz and mighty Borussia Dortmund before Liverpool offered him the chance to revive their fortunes. Liverpool have not always been popular. The great football writer Brian Glanville described their all-conquering Eighties team as an exercise in “inspired pedestrianism”. How distant those days are now.

What makes a great team? In football the first point of reference must be the Brazilian World Cup winners of 1970, led by Pelé, the greatest player of all. At club level, the standout Europeans remain the Real Madrid side of Alfredo di Stéfano and Ferenc Puskás, and Ajax of Amsterdam, when Johan Cruyff, their star forward, became, in Brian Clough’s lovely phrase, “the human Catherine wheel”.

In rugby there have been many outstanding New Zealand teams, though to British eyes the great Welsh

## Five current Liverpool players would be strong contenders for a place in an all-time Anfield XI

XV of the Seventies, led by Gareth Edwards, tops the list. Followers of the 13-man code will respond with the Wigan rugby league team dominated by Ellery Hanley, Shaun Edwards and Joe Lydon.

It was Ian Chappell, captain of Australia’s outstanding cricketers in the Seventies, who said the knack of leadership was keeping the players who thought you were a bastard away from those who weren’t quite sure. Nobody ever said great teams had to get on.

Duke Ellington’s band in 1940 was unsurpassable. Ellington could call on the tenor-alto-baritone trio of Ben Webster, Johnny Hodges and Harry Carney, supported by Rex Stewart, Ray Nance, Lawrence Brown, Jimmy Blanton and Sonny Greer. Stars all, who blended their talents into a formidable ensemble.

The Beatles, between October 1965 and June 1966, recorded *Rubber Soul* and, going up a notch, *Revolver*. The partnership of Paul McCartney and John Lennon had ideal balance: left and right, tenor and baritone, bass guitar and rhythm, sweet and sour. Alone, one man wrote the feeble “Mull of Kintyre”, and the other that revolting dirge “Imagine”. Together, in one golden year, they gave the world “We Can Work It Out”, “Day Tripper”, “Eleanor Rigby”, “For No One”, “You Won’t See Me” and “Norwegian Wood”.

Under Herbert von Karajan, the Berlin Philharmonic set standards of orchestral playing beyond words. In this country, John Barbirolli’s association with the Hallé (1943-70) stands a-tiptoe with Simon Rattle’s stewardship of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (1980-98). “JB” took over an orchestra in wartime, Rattle a band in a city emerging from industrial unrest. Both succeeded through force of personality as well as remarkable talent.

The Moscow Art Theatre, which produced Chekhov’s four great plays under Konstantin Stanislavski. The Ballets Russes, where Sergei Diaghilev ruled like a monarch. A real monarch, King Alfonso of Spain, once asked the impresario what he did. “Like your Majesty,” replied Diaghilev, “I do nothing. Like your Majesty, I am indispensable.”

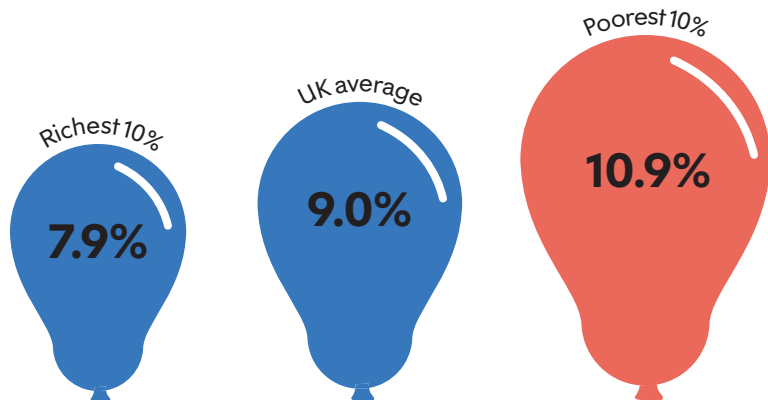
Michael Balcon led Ealing Studios through its glory days in the Fifties. Peter Hall established the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1960. Sidney Bernstein created Granada Television in 1954, and saw it become the finest independent company in the world. Nor should we overlook the *Carry On* team, and all those films (well, some) we secretly love. Even they must bend the knee to “the Archers”, Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, who made nine classics in a row between *49th Parallel* (1941) and *The Small Back Room* (1949).

Football usually disgraces itself once a week, through the tribalism of its followers and the sickly sentimentality of a sport that too often takes itself too seriously. Liverpool supporters, with their tiresome “Scouse, not English” proclamations, are the most sentimental of all. Three cheers, then, for Jürgen Klopp, who has created a team that transcends tribalism. It isn’t hard to cheer on these modern Liverpoolians. ●

## Chart of the Week

### The poorest UK households face a higher inflation rate than the richest

The year-on-year change in the Consumer Price Index by household income decile, April 2022



SOURCE: INSTITUTE FOR FISCAL STUDIES

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# The Diary

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## My nephew is on hunger strike in an Egyptian prison. Can the British government save him?

By Ahdaf Soueif

He is on the other side of the glass in the huge new Wadi el-Natrun prison, north of Cairo. He's talking into the handset at top speed, gesturing, his movements precise as he taps the narrow shelf. He's in prison blue with close-cropped hair and beard. My sister holds the other handset, listens and nods. We know National Security are listening in. He's talking to his mother about prisoners he's left behind in Tora Maximum Security Prison Two, and what they need. He is completely like himself – except his face is thinner, and his heavy sweater tells us that after 47 days of hunger strike his body can't stay warm.

Alaa Abd el-Fattah's British citizenship came through on 15 December. We thought that since – unlike in the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe – Egypt and Britain enjoyed and often broadcast “important strategic relationships”, consular visits would be granted quickly. Held in pre-trial detention since September 2019, Alaa had been denied sunshine, exercise, books, writing material, music, bedding. The officer in charge of the prison was personally hostile. The atmosphere was lethal. On 20 December, he was sentenced to a further five years of imprisonment – taking no account of the preceding two. The only hope we had of bettering his conditions and negotiating his release relied on the intervention of the UK Foreign Office. When for 15 weeks Egypt's government stalled the British embassy's repeated requests for a visit, Alaa took matters into his own hands: on 2 April he went on hunger strike.

### Writing Egypt's revolution

This is a story about communication. About a man serving five years for an act of communication: sharing



Since 2006, every regime that has come to power in Egypt has tried to silence Alaa

a post about a prisoner who had died in jail. About a man whose forte is to communicate between English and Arabic, old and young, the worlds of technology, business, literature and human rights, the disciplines of maths, science and art. A man who epitomises his generation's intersectionality.

Alaa is 40. At 14, he was one of the earliest bloggers. At 23, he won the Special Reporters Without Borders Award. At 29, he was at the heart of the international techie community, and spent his time travelling, designing open-source platforms, mentoring. Then he flew home to join the revolution and build a new Egypt. In the streets, he brought people together in open forums fuelled by social media. He invented an initiative for thousands of volunteers to spread out into the country and ask the questions that would write the People's Constitution. He was an original thinker, a passionate advocate for a true secular democracy. And he never stopped writing. A book of his selected works, *You Have Not Yet Been Defeated*, compiled by friends, was published last year.

Since 2006, every regime that has come to power in Egypt has tried to silence Alaa. He has spent eight of the past ten years in prison. For six of the months that he was “free”, he had to spend 12 hours a day in a police station. When they “tried” him for sharing a factual post in December, the judge wouldn't let him talk to his lawyers. There can be no appeal or review; only a pardon from the president for an Egyptian, or deportation for a British citizen.

### Citizens advice

This is a story about communication.

1939, Cairo: my 12-year-old mother, Fatma Moussa, has rheumatic fever and is spending her days on a sofa. Miss Sage, her schoolteacher, comes to read to her. By the time she's better, my mother has fallen in love with Austen, Byron, Dickens, Eliot. Her life's work will be in the contact zone between Arabic and English literature. Each one of her children bears its mark.

1956, London: it's a Saturday in April and I'm with my father in Battersea Park. He's promised we'll ride the big dipper. My mother is in the Senate House Library. She is very pregnant and trying to get as much work done as she can before the birth. Her PhD thesis is on the influence of the Oriental tale on the Romantics. My sister, Laila, will be born on Labour Day.

Sixty-three years later, and after many visits to the UK, in 2019, when Alaa has been arrested yet again, Laila's children explore whether they too are British. Laila's daughters, Mona and Sanaa, find they are de facto citizens. Alaa, born before the British Nationality Act came into force in 1983, has an “inalienable right” to citizenship. It takes two years to apply, but he gets it.

It is Alaa's will to live a life that is full and useful that drives his hunger strike. We hope it will be that contact zone between the governments of our two countries that will save his life and restore to him the freedom of which he has been robbed. Stay with us. ●

---

*Ahdaf Soueif is a novelist and commentator whose books include “Cairo: Memoir of a City Transformed” (Bloomsbury)*



## Encounter

“Keir Starmer needs  
the left to win”

The socialist MP  
Zarah Sultana on  
her viral fame

By **George Eaton**

In recent years, the Labour left has had little cause for celebration. The Corbyn project ended in the party’s worst general election defeat since 1935. Keir Starmer went on to win the leadership by a landslide and marginalised the left with ruthless speed.

But consolation has been provided by Zarah Sultana. Since her election as MP for Coventry South in 2019, Sultana, 28, has become that rare thing: a genuinely viral politician. On Tik Tok, the Socialist Campaign Group co-chair has 315,000 followers (the highest of any MP), on Instagram she has 205,000 (the third highest) and on Twitter she has 252,000 (the highest of any post-2015 MP).

For a backbencher who has never stood for the party leadership or held a shadow ministerial position, such reach is extraordinary. Sultana has thrived by capturing the political imagination of an alienated generation (in one viral video, she held up her student loan statement in the House of Commons and observed: “In the last year, interest added was £2,022.65”). Commentators are fond of asking “where is the British AOC?” – in reference to New York socialist Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez – but too few have noticed the homegrown star under their noses.

I met Sultana in her parliamentary office, whose walls feature images of her political heroes: Malcolm X, Angela Davis, the pioneering British Black Panther

THOMAS DUFFIELD FOR THE NEW STATESMAN

Olive Morris (who died of cancer aged 27), and the late Liverpool manager Bill Shankly. What radicalised her as a teenager?

"I was very much shaped by where I grew up," Sultana said. "I'm from inner-city Birmingham, an area called Lozells." (Her grandfather migrated to the city from Kashmir in the 1960s.) "Growing up, I felt as though I was being defined by my postcode. At school, teachers would say you just have to work hard and get good grades, only for senior police officers to go to Birmingham City Council – despite never visiting my school – and say 'I could go to any kid in that school and tell you which gang they'll end up in'. And I just felt powerless to change that narrative."

In common with much of what sociologist Keir Milburn calls "Generation Left", Sultana was politicised by the Iraq War and the austerity unleashed by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government.

"I was studying for my A-levels, watching politicians triple university tuition fees and cut the Education Maintenance Allowance, despite mass protests, and feeling like nothing is going to change."

Sultana was inspired to join Labour (her father was a member) and at the University of Birmingham, where she studied international relations and economics, was elected to the National Executive Council of Young Labour and the National Union of Students. But it wasn't until Jeremy Corbyn's election as leader in 2015 that she wholeheartedly embraced the party.

"It felt like this was a Labour Party that didn't want to throw immigrants under the bus, that actually wanted to democratise and bring people in, and that was fun and exciting to be part of."

Sultana is part of a crop of young socialist women of colour – Nadia Whittome, Bell Ribeiro-Addy, Apsara Begum – who have been likened to the US "Squad" of congressional radicals in the Democratic Party.

"It's always something that I feel really flattered by," Sultana said. "Because looking at AOC, Ilhan [Omar], Rashida [Tlaib] and Cori Bush, the way that they articulate their politics, the way that they are very proud of their backgrounds and the fact they're very unapologetically socialist, you can only admire and respect that."

"But I've never called us the Squad; we're just a group of friends and we have very similar experiences. It's a sisterhood and we've been through a lot, getting some of the hate that we do and being there for each other."

As a Muslim woman of colour, Sultana receives a disproportionate level of abuse on social media. She is frank about her experiences, and what she believes needs to change.

"I wasn't surprised by the fact I got abused. But I was surprised by the level and just how much of it comes at certain times. And I find that it often correlates with interventions, or tweets, or statements about migrants' rights and about racism."

"People say we need to police social media more, we need to get rid of anonymity. But I get abuse through the post or through email, when people aren't trying to hide their identity. I don't believe it comes

from a vacuum, there is a huge role that people in public life play. I always find myself going back to the fact we have a prime minister who's got away with really derogatory remarks about single mums, about black people, about gay men, about Muslim women, and doesn't feel the need to apologise or feel any remorse."

During the 2019 election campaign, Sultana faced calls to resign as Labour's candidate after social media posts from 2015 were unearthed, including one in which she boasted she would celebrate the deaths of Tony Blair, Binyamin Netanyahu and George W Bush. Sultana apologised at the time, but how does she respond to those who now refuse to engage with her?

"It's about understanding that people are on a journey," she said. "When you're young, you often don't represent yourself in the best light and in a way you wouldn't when you're older. I have no regrets about apologising and I would apologise again if it was brought up because that's not how I would represent those views. I can be critical of Netanyahu and Tony Blair without phrasing things in that way."

Sultana has long polarised opinion within Labour. In her maiden speech she declared: "I want to look teenagers in the eye and say with pride – my generation faced 40 years of Thatcherism and we ended it." Though Margaret Thatcher herself described New Labour as her greatest achievement, Sultana was accused of implying there was no difference between a Labour government and a Conservative one. Other MPs from the 2019 intake were warned by senior party figures: "Don't do what Zarah did with her maiden speech..."

How does Sultana view Starmer's leadership to date? "There are things that I definitely wouldn't approve of, in particular the shift from the pledges that were made during the leadership race... The focus on attacking the left hasn't been constructive. To have a Labour prime minister in Downing Street, the electoral coalition that you need is young people. It's ethnic-minority communities, its Muslims and its progressives. And the local election results in England suggest that we are perhaps losing prospective Labour voters to the Greens and to the Lib Dems. And that's something that I think the leadership should pay a lot of attention to."

As for those on the left who argue that Labour is no home for socialists, her message is clear. "I am a firm believer that to address the crises we face, we need to win state power. And as socialists, the vehicle for that is the Labour Party. If people on the left abandon Labour, how are we going to rapidly decarbonise? And as a Liverpool fan, our anthem is 'at the end of the storm, there's a golden sky'. And that's very much politics as well. You have to go through the storm."

Though she is the second-youngest MP (after Whittome), Zarah Sultana is already spoken of by her admirers as a future Labour leader. Would she like to stand?

"I would like to be re-elected as the MP for Coventry South by a stronger majority because I only have a majority of 401. And that's it. I'm a simple girl. That's what I want." ●

**"As a fan of Liverpool, our anthem is 'at the end of the storm, there's a golden sky'. That's very much politics as well"**

# ANDREW MARR



## Politics

### From court backlogs to crumbling dental care, No 10 has shed its responsibilities

Writing this, because of print deadlines, before the publication of the Sue Gray report, two predictions, nonetheless. First, it will set off a thundering avalanche of front pages, a frenzy of denunciation and many thousands of broadcast interviews by embarrassed Tories. Second, in the short term, it will not dislodge the Prime Minister.

I'm not saying these moments don't matter. They do. The honesty of the people in charge of the state and the independent-mindedness of senior civil servants are of the utmost importance. The publication of a picture clearly showing the Prime Minister cheerfully toasting colleagues at a party, when he had told the Commons there was no party that night, and no rules broken, suggests real trouble ahead. The Privileges Committee, looking at whether parliament was lied to, may be more dangerous for Boris Johnson than anything before.

That includes the Met. Brian Paddick, the Met's former deputy assistant commissioner, now a Lib Dem peer, told me this week the police might not have thoroughly investigated the parties "because they didn't want to upset No 10". They would have to explain, he said. Meanwhile junior, often female, civil servants have been thrown to the wolves to protect male bosses. It is all horrible.

Well, the whirligig of time brings in its revenges. But something bigger is afoot. Westminster has been hypnotised for months by the pursuit of Johnson for rule-breaking and lying. This irresistibly lurid tale has been full of thrilling twists and cliff-hangers. The latest photographs! The new rumour about letters to the

chief whip! The humiliating failure of PC Useless, yet again!

Such a narrative is meant to end only one way, with the apprehension of the fuming culprit in the final chapter, and then his expulsion from power on the last page. The state is cleansed. Normal service resumes. The chair of the 1922 Committee is carried on the shoulders of relieved, honest, ruddy-faced journalists, while Tory MPs fling rose petals at cheering voters. Honest coppers and delighted charladies join hands and dance in the street. You get the picture.

Clearly, however, we have the small problem that the culprit declines to cooperate in this moving and edifying story. He squirms. But he sticks. It's embarrassing for everybody.

However, we may have been following the less important series of events all along. Try to forget the Borisodrama, at least for a moment. While we've all been looking in that direction, isn't the bigger story that we no longer have a government?

Not really. Oh, we have cabinet ministers and departments of state. We have striding-about, smartly dressed young people with significant WhatsApp group memberships and high ambitions. We have command papers and supper parties. We have media-round interviews and "grids".

**If we forget partygate, isn't the bigger story that we no longer have a government?**

But we no longer have a government in the sense of a single national authority, which knows in a general way what it's about and is taking the nation in a clear direction. We have, instead, a general paralysis – a mush – a debilitating, exhausting shapelessness.

That which ought to be done is being left undone. As inflation ravages family budgets, ministers are unable to decide about a windfall tax on energy companies. It is not a very difficult, or even a very big, decision. You do something useful and popular at the expense of a little Labour jeering. Against that, you've just swiped the only recognisable policy they have. How hard is this?

Still, they can't decide. When that dangerous social revolutionary Iain Duncan Smith suggests it might be a good idea to uprate Universal Credit to compensate for rocketing fuel and food bills, the minister class panics.

And what about – well, everything else? What about the justice system, where the backlog in English Crown Court cases is so great, magistrates have had to be given the power to send people to jail for up to a year – a solution that may produce more appeals and make everything worse? Stephanie Boyce of the Law Society and Jo Sidhu of the Criminal Bar Association both say that there simply aren't enough judges, prosecutors or defence lawyers to cover the backlog. Boyce warns that, unless things turn round, "we will no longer have a criminal justice system worthy of the name". Meanwhile, according to the chief inspectorate, prisoners are still spending 22 hours and more in their cells every day.

English rivers? Here's the Commons Environmental Audit Committee recently: "Only 14 per cent of English rivers meet good ecological status, with pollution from agriculture, sewage, roads and single-use plastics contributing to a dangerous 'chemical cocktail' coursing through our waterways. Not a single river in England has received a clean bill of health for chemical contamination."

The privatisation of the water companies, with all the extra investment we were promised, does not seem to have helped. Despite a new Environment Act, the MPs found "a lack of political will to improve water quality, with successive governments, water companies and regulators seemingly turning a blind eye to antiquated practices of dumping sewage and other pollutants in rivers."

If this is all beginning to sound a little Dickensian – the turd-filled rivers, the clogged-up courts – then let's turn to teeth. Appropriate: Charles Dickens seemingly

had horrid problems with his rotten, wobbling teeth, and the ineffective plates he was given to allow him to keep eating.

Dickens would do better today. He became wealthy; dental care can now be fabulous in this country. But only if you pay for it: a recent and widely publicised study by Healthwatch found that 80 per cent of people were struggling to get any access to NHS dental care, including for emergency treatment. We now have “dental deserts” for many working-class people. Before the Covid pandemic, around 30 per cent of us felt positively about NHS dental treatment. That’s now down to 2 per cent. Some 2,000 dentists have left the NHS.

Courts, rivers, teeth – three examples of areas where urgent action is needed from a government with a sense of direction and priority. There are so many others, from ambulance call-out times to military waste, high street dilapidation to the crisis in children’s services. In each case, more money is needed. But the British state is running out of money, or at least thinks it is.

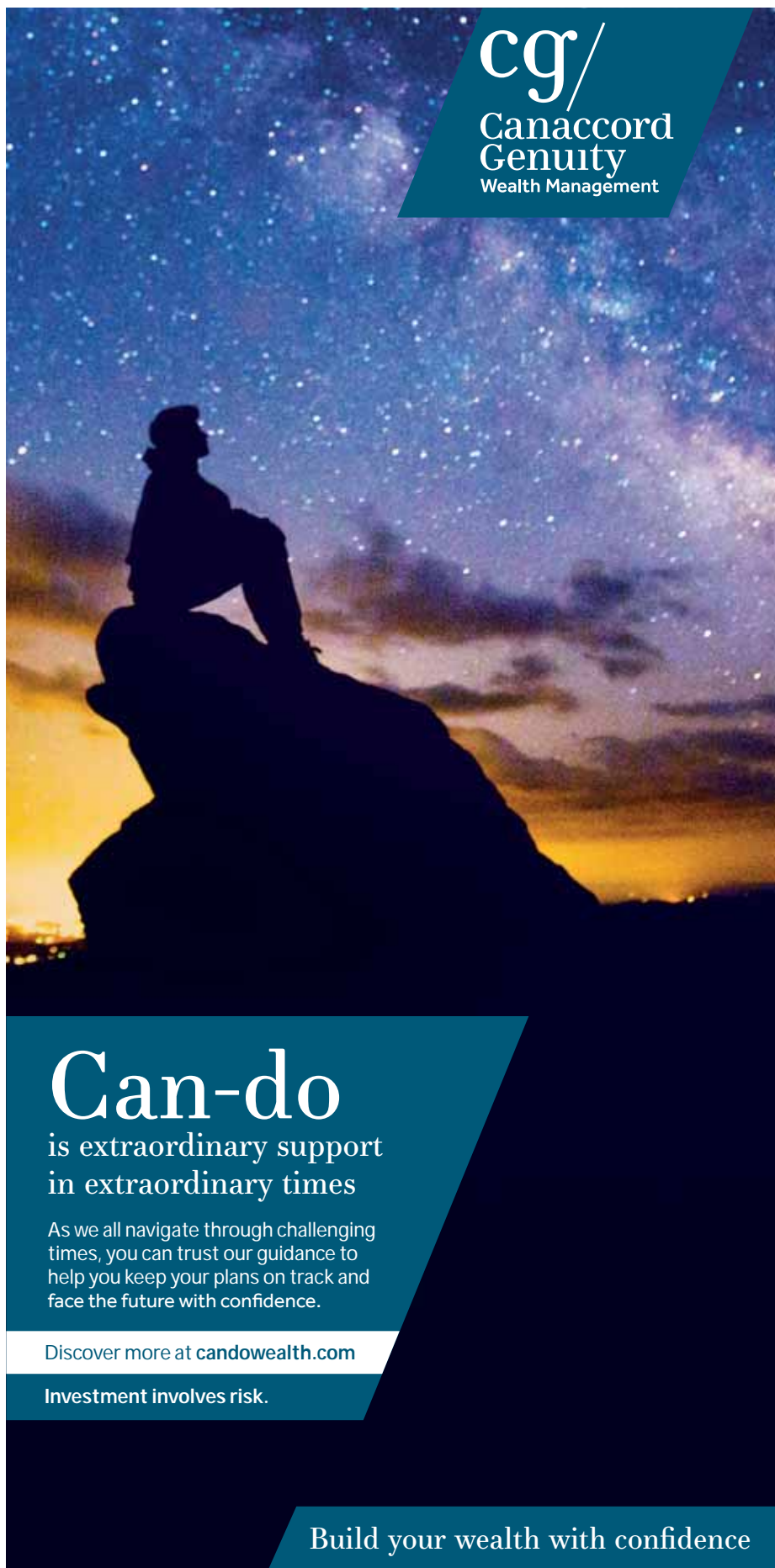
And this takes us back to the root of the problem, identified by Jeremy Hunt: “We have a high-inflation, low-growth economy, when we need a low-inflation, high-growth one.”

Inflation we know about. On growth, with the war in Ukraine clouding arithmetic, it’s harder to be sure. It’s best to take a longer perspective, as the *NS* data journalist Ben Walker did recently. UK GDP per capita growth since 2015 has been 10 per cent, very low by European standards – Germany managed 24 per cent and France 18 per cent.

Britain has had a growth problem for a long time but it is particularly severe now. Intellectually, Michael Gove’s levelling-up agenda provides good answers. But we can’t ignore the elephant in the column. Far from unleashing our economy to grow faster, Brexit has held back our exports and exposed structural weaknesses.

Returning to my original point about a directionless government, initially there was a big idea, a story, a sense of direction. This was to be “build back better”: the post-Brexit, reconstruction-and-regeneration-of-Britain government. Wasn’t it?

Hampered by war and pandemic, struggling with debt and inflation, riven by feuds and distracted by its own ridiculous melodrama – what a falling-off there has been. This government still remembers what it hates (the BBC, lefty lawyers, immigrants), but it has no idea of where it’s going. That’s the story. Johnson’s secret weapon was always his infectious optimism. He needs it now as, all around him, his government becomes a kind of... what shall we call it? A bewilderment. ●



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## Letter of the week The party of levelling up



Andrew Marr (Politics, 20 May) bids Labour to think about a “modern federal Britain” and pick up “the boldest of Tory ideas about local regeneration” to radically redistribute power and level up the UK. Yet to do both requires a huge investment of political resources with uncertain consequences.

It appears that Labour intends to promise more devolution within proposals for a federal constitution while the Tories are pursuing economic levelling up as an alternative national mission. Labour politicians are increasingly realising they may have made the wrong choice. A blueprint for a stable federalism is extremely hard to achieve. England does not want to regionalise and a unitary England that is perceived to dominate a federal UK is a Celtic separatist’s dream. There is a cold logic to Boris Johnson recognising that reducing territorial economic inequalities taps in to the interests of the dispossessed. Labour’s politics, of course, align more naturally with this mission. Perhaps it’s time for it to focus on fashioning a more compelling version of state-wide, devolved and locally led levelling up.

Jonathan Bradbury, Cardiff

### Right to vote

Andrew Marr (Politics, 20 May) is right to say that the “right people, the voters” need to see electoral reform and constitutional change as a top priority before any changes are likely to occur. This is also true for many issues that never get to the top of the list such as tackling poverty, introducing a land or wealth tax, and universal basic income.

This is because the people who would most benefit from these radical changes never set the agenda, and hear nothing in the mainstream media about the benefits of tackling these issues. We all have a role to play in changing this in asking questions of our elected representatives. We, the voters, must force the change.

Ruth Potter, Stamford Bridge, East Riding

If, as Andrew Marr writes, Michael Gove is serious about getting the House of Lords out of London, a simple solution is at hand. Twenty-six Church of England bishops and archbishops sit in the Lords



“My favourite. Fishfinger, chip and pea”

as Lords Spiritual. Most of them spend at least one or two weeks a year at Westminster as “duty bishop”, and each of them has a more or less capacious cathedral. Let the Lords go to the bishops rather than the bishops to the Lords, and you have a genuinely peripatetic chamber.  
Andrew Connell, Cardiff

### A lost compass

I agree with Martin Fletcher (Another Voice, 20 May) that this government is only interested in survival. But I also think now even ardent Conservative grass-roots members must be wincing at the populist modus operandi of their party’s leaders and toadying acolytes in the cabinet. This is not a Conservatism I recognise; it’s one where ministers appear to delight in trashing norms and upending legal agreements. And the public are still appalled by partygate. Love it or loathe it, this party once had a certain moral compass, which has now been completely mislaid.

Judith A Daniels, Cobholm, Norfolk

### Commons resurrected

I was glad to see Kevin Maguire (Commons Confidential, 20 May) back in the print magazine. I hope it is not a fleeting visit. Given that many MPs are increasingly failing to clear a very low bar in terms of competence and probity, having Kevin back on the case, publishing the absurd goings on in Westminster, is a good thing.

Jeff Howells, London SW16

### Nato’s priorities

It is a pity Adam Tooze chose not to highlight the futility of Sweden and Finland joining Nato (Cover Story, 20 May). Sweden and Finland are welcome to join, but when it comes to it the US will not go beyond Nato’s apparent objective, which since 1989 has been not to protect Russia’s neighbours, but to prevent the reconstitution of the former Soviet Union.

Randhir Singh Bains, Gants Hill, Essex

Early in April the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s (IPCC’s) sixth assessment report warned that greenhouse gas emissions must peak by 2025 to give the world a chance of limiting



future heating to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels; still a possibility, it says, and at a cost of just a few per cent of global GDP by mid-century. But only provided the right actions are undertaken extremely urgently.

Yet in his cover story Adam Tooze relegates “the Green Deal” to sit alongside other security commitments such as defence spending or “digital investment programmes”. These are steps that don’t sound like humanity growing up and shedding patriarchal empire-building, or urgently addressing the climate crisis and the extinction of species.

*David Murray, Wallington, Surrey*

### Meat myths?

Ironically, George Monbiot (Encounter, 20 May) demonises dairy and livestock farmers in the same way he claims country folk demonise “townies and incomers”. Monbiot ignores the negative impacts of non-dairy milk and yoghurt on our water supply and wider environment, and that milk and meat are vital for early-childhood diets and development. His world-view is essentially expensive and elitist, and light years away from the Iceland food shopper on a limited budget. Or the African pastoral nomadic farmer and her family.

*Dr Alan Bullion, agricultural policy analyst, Tunbridge Wells, Kent*

Philippa Nuttall is incorrect to say that farm animals are “largely fed” on imported soya. Even in the most intensive systems soya is only a fraction of the diet. Many farmers use no soya at all, relying on home-grown rapeseed meal as a source of protein while others simply feed grass, either fresh or conserved, as their animals’ entire diet.

*Rob Bevin, Willey, Warwickshire*

### Reading for pleasure

No doubt all parents recognised and shared Louise Perry’s joy (Off the Record, 20 May) in the amorality of so many hilarious children’s stories. Saki’s biting satire in *The Story-Teller* reminds us that not everyone before the First World War thought that stories needed to be morally improving.

*Graham Williams, Sydney, Australia*

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We reserve the right to edit letters

## Commons Confidential

### By Kevin Maguire



**Until partygate detonated**, Covid VIP lanes for Tory cronies and donors were the biggest scandal engulfing the government. Conservative peer James Bethell, a health minister during the pandemic, admitted deleting texts and WhatsApp messages about £90m worth of testing contracts that were challenged in court, pleading that he mistakenly believed there would be back-ups. Official guidance stating ministers should use government systems or, if going private, ensure copies are provided to their department, isn’t deterring Bethell. He’s to speak at an Institute for Government “WhatsApp in Westminster” seminar as a digital comms evangelist, asking colleagues for successful examples. It’s akin to inviting Dracula to head the NHS blood service.

**Haughty Jacob Rees-Mogg** notoriously dismissed partygate as “fluff”, and now the office bore risks being, as he might say, hoist with his own petard. The Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency, who obsessively hounds civil servants working from home, is accused of putting in only a four-day week himself and takes no official papers back to Somerset for long weekends. “The minister does not take a box on Fridays,” advised a Whitehall email. One grafter observed it smacks of 21st-century hypocrisy from an 18th-century throwback.

**West Midlands mayor Andy Street** needs to get out more. His assertion that the “Conservative Party conference is the biggest political event in Europe” – in a bid to cajole Tory members into registering for October’s gathering in Birmingham – wouldn’t survive fact-checking. Attendance at Tory conferences is far lower than at Labour’s and, in recent years, miffed cabinet ministers have been banished to side rooms to avoid rows of empty seats in the main hall. The Durham Miners’ Gala, which is likely to attract a six-figure crowd in July, is a political city compared with Labour’s town and the Tory village fete.

**Sneers for Tony Blair**, who skipped the recent 25th anniversary party celebrating Labour’s 1997 general election victory, to hawk cryptocurrency alongside old mucker Bill Clinton at a conference in the Bahamas, a tax haven trip presumably profitable for both. The crypto markets coincidentally suffered a major crash soon afterwards. “Things can only get richer for Tony, if nobody else,” scoffed an uninvited Labour survivor of the Blair era.

**More on foot-in-mouth** Tory and working-class troll Lee Anderson. The great reactionary claimed on Facebook that his dad, 77, also a former Nottinghamshire miner, confessed that during the pit strike, when he was unpaid, he lifted two bags of potatoes from a farmer’s field to feed his hungry family. Couldn’t he cook?

**Hereditary press baron** Lord Lebedev of Siberia’s peerage continues to backfire on Boris Johnson. No 10 suspects the *Daily Telegraph*’s noticeably harsher coverage over recent months of its one-time star columnist is because the newspaper group’s chair Aidan Barclay, his deceased father, David, and David’s twin, Frederick, were never draped in ermine. Patronage dispensed breeds resentment from the overlooked. ●

**The Durham Miners’ Gala is a political city compared with Labour’s town and the Tory village fete**

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# The New World Disorder How Britain's failure to reckon with global forces led to a cost-of-living crisis

By John Gray

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For those with long enough memories, the current British economic crisis resembles that of the 1970s in a number of ways. Not only is inflation rising and seemingly uncontrollable, but public services are stretched, sometimes – as in the NHS – to breaking point, and trade union militancy is reviving. There is a pervasive sense that the government is losing control, and it is hard to escape the suspicion that we are nearing the end of a regime.

That regime is the market-led capitalism that Margaret Thatcher installed, which every British government has consolidated ever since. In 1979, the postwar settlement was foundering. A corporatist edifice built on collusion and collaboration between corporate and trade union power was visibly crumbling. Armed with a few simple ideas and policies, Thatcher succeeded in replacing it by a settlement that endured for a generation. That era is now in the past. Rather than market choice, voters are demanding shelter from market chaos.

Unlike in 1979, however, there is no clear successor to a failing model of government and the economy. Haunted by the spectre of Corbynism, Labour has reverted to the Blairite orthodoxies of the late Nineties. Instead of offering a compelling alternative to the raddled crew clinging to power in Downing Street, Keir Starmer has presented his party as less scandal-ridden and more competent. At the same time, Boris Johnson's project of reinventing the Conservatives as the political voice of working people has stalled. It is not only that in every aspect of domestic policy Johnson has proved to be emptier of ideas than his worst detractors could have imagined. The Conservative Party as whole is an empty vessel. Having come to power on "getting Brexit done", it has no idea what to do with Brexit.

In other circumstances the intellectual exhaustion of the two main parties might not matter greatly. The British government could trundle on, not terribly competently, without recurring crises. But the regime shift that is under way reaches back well before the years when Edward Heath, Harold Wilson and James Callaghan were in office. Across the world, a century-long trajectory of advancing and retreating globalisation has entered a new phase.

The First World War marked the end of the international economic order that developed under the aegis of European power. As the continent sank into dictatorship the pre-1914 global market disintegrated, and it was only 100 years later that an analogous economic order was in place. Believed by its neo-liberal architects to be everlasting, globalisation began its present breakdown following the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014. The war in Ukraine is accelerating this process. ►



PETER REYNOLDS

## Cover Story

◀ A new wave of de-globalisation is the context in which the current difficulties of the British economy must be understood. Rising inflation and a worsening cost-of-living crisis are not simply consequences of past and present errors by the Bank of England, damaging though these may have been. Fundamentally geopolitical in their causes, they are blowback from intensifying great-power struggles.

Vladimir Putin has weaponised world food supplies by blockading exports from Odesa. Hunger and unrest in poor and vulnerable countries such as Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco will be the result. In Europe, Moldova is being badly hit by shortages of seeds and fertiliser.

Escalating energy costs reflect Europe's attempts to wean itself off Russian fossil fuels and Putin's increasing threats to curtail supplies to countries he perceives as hostile. In addition, Xi Jinping's brutal and ruinous zero-

Covid policy has weakened supply chains already damaged by the pandemic. Many of the global logistical networks that kept prices low are now disrupted. Despotism waging full-spectrum hybrid warfare and making catastrophic policy blunders do not breed economic stability. Leaping prices in British supermarkets are part of the resulting fragmentation of the global market.

Yet it would be a mistake to put all the blame for our economic problems on malevolent autocrats. A pivotal role was played by monetary expansion in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008. The ensuing experiment in electronic money-printing, commonly known as quantitative easing, may have been unavoidable – without it, there could well have been another Great Depression. But turning on the money taps inflated financial assets beyond any reasonable levels, enriching those who possessed them while leaving the majority with stagnant or declining incomes. So-called populist movements were partly responses to these growing inequalities.

Neoliberals in all parties believe the answer to inflation is an aggressive programme of interest rate rises. But mounting debt has left many companies and households dangerously exposed. Abruptly turning off the money tap would risk crashing the economy. There is no way of returning to the economic status quo before the financial crisis.

A Hobbesian demand for security from hardship and destitution is driving an expansion of government throughout much of the world. Voters are looking to the state for protection against disruption of their daily lives. People who cannot afford both to eat and heat their homes will not support governments that proclaim their impotence in the face of global forces. Ruling parties that fail to grasp this fact and act on it are headed for a long spell out of power.

It would be fanciful, at this point, to expect the Conservatives to muster any display of collective purpose. Partygate is far from over. The photographs that have appeared of the Prime Minister toasting his departing communications chief Lee Cain next to a table littered with wine bottles will surely be followed by others that are equally if not more damaging. The electorate will not forget the indifference and contempt Johnson has displayed for their sufferings during lockdown.

At the same time, his party does not want a leadership challenge. With Rishi Sunak no longer a contender, there is no candidate around whom a coalition of MPs could easily coalesce. A polarising contest between Liz Truss and Jeremy Hunt could divide and further damage the government in the eyes of voters. Yet it is hard to see how an already exhausted party can limp on for over two more years. A change of leader would not overcome

the Tories' fundamental weakness, but it could offer MPs some consolation.

Even if Johnson was capable of devising a fresh policy package, the institutional inheritance of neoliberalism would make a change of direction problematic. Gordon Brown conferred independence on the Bank of England in 1997. Until the present governor took over, the Bank discharged its duties tolerably well. Mistakes were made, as the former governor Mervyn King has noted in an unusual intervention. But Andrew Bailey's unwise reference to "apocalyptic" rising food prices plants a question mark over the powers of the institution. If inflation has proved to be neither transitory nor moderate, what does he propose the Bank do about it? Doing nothing is hardly an option, if only because a protracted run of high inflation in daily necessities could spark civil disorder, as it has in some emerging states. The notion that such disturbances cannot happen in Britain could be severely tested.

At a time when it most needs them, British politics is bereft of radical ideas on the role of the state. A hard Brexit makes little sense unless it enables the UK to diverge from European regulatory frameworks, but the government has done little to make use of the freedom it gained when it left the single market. The impasse over the Northern Ireland protocol is symptomatic of a profound incoherence in thinking.

The boundaries between states and markets that supposedly existed in the era of globalisation were always largely imaginary. Allowing high-tech firms to pass into potentially hostile foreign hands – as happened a year ago, when a Dutch subsidiary of a company part-owned by the Chinese state acquired Newport Wafer Fab, a Welsh micro-chip factory – poses a threat to national security. Sticking to neoliberal dogmas today is dangerous and politically costly.

Labour has learned the wrong lessons from the election debacle of 2019. While traditional Labour voters rejected Jeremy Corbyn's anti-Western politics, his economic programme was not unappealing to many of them. Reframing Labour as a bastion of fiscal orthodoxy will not win them back. Equally, neo-Thatcherite free marketeers misread traditional Labour voters' support for Brexit. People in Blyth Valley and Stoke-on-Trent did not vote to leave the EU in order that the government could launch a programme of across-the-board deregulation and unfettered free trade. They wanted protection from global markets that were threatening their jobs, and better public services.

British politics has failed to adjust to the realities of a rapidly de-globalising world. When Thatcher dismantled the postwar settlement in Britain she was





**Illuminating headlines: Londoners read front-page stories about the ongoing miners' strike by candlelight, February 1972**

tracking a trend that was already under way. Market reform in China began after the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. Ronald Reagan may have been Keynesian in his attitude to budget deficits, but he was a staunch free-trader. Thatcher's programme was part of a worldwide shift to free markets.

Over 40 years later, longer historical cycles are at work. As in 1918-19, de-globalisation has coincided with a global pandemic. Geopolitical conflict is being waged by new players. The Great Game has resumed in Africa, with China leading the struggle for control of scarce metals. In Ukraine, empire is being resisted by an anti-authoritarian nationalism, but this time it is Russian imperial power that is being challenged. Once a major force, Europe is a geopolitical nonentity. The willingness of America to intervene in Europe's wars, however, cannot be taken for granted.

The passing by an overwhelming Senate

majority of Joe Biden's \$40bn package suggests a strong consensus on aiding Ukraine in prosecuting the war, but the dangers of escalation and darkening economic prospects in the US could quickly erode it. Already, the *New York Times* and Henry Kissinger at the World Economic Forum in Davos are warning against Ukraine defeating Russia and calling for a reversion to the borders in place before the war. Vladimir Putin may yet be proved right in his belief that Western opposition to his aggression will fracture and falter.

The deeper concern on Capitol Hill is the threat from China. By some measures it is nearing parity with the US in military and economic terms. Yet there can be no certainty that China will move on to achieve global supremacy, or that the US will act to reclaim its position as the hegemonic power. Instead, there may be a protracted stand-off. With America descending into its worst culture war

ever over the issue of abortion, the country could be entering a period of introversion. Whether a Republican administration would continue Biden's policy towards China is an open question. If Donald Trump runs in 2024, all bets are off. Rather than a period in which the baton of leadership is passed from one great power to another, as it did when Europe's self-destruction enabled American ascendancy, this could be the beginning of an era in which there is no global hegemon.

We will not have to wait another century to see how the new cycle works out. These days, for good and ill, events move rather more quickly. As long as the balance of nuclear terror continues to hold, the world wars of the 20th century can be avoided; but another global regime will not emerge in a year, or a decade. It may be some while before the supermarket shelves look as they did in times we used to think normal. ●



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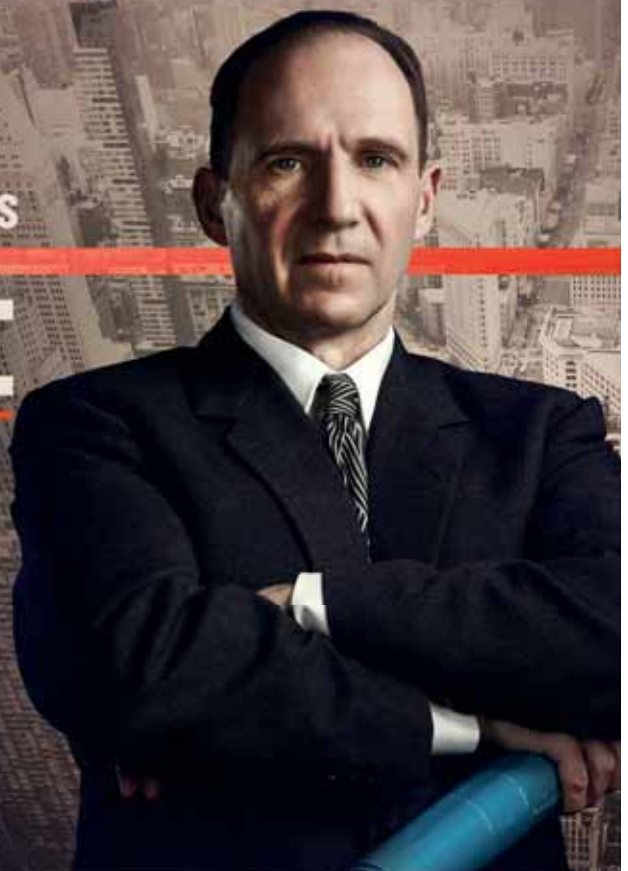
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# HELEN THOMPSON



## These Times As China's growth stalls and supply chains falter, the West faces a stagflation trap

**E**conomic news today appears as the harbinger of more gloom. Diesel supply is short, with the consequent price increase erasing the benefits of the fuel cut that Rishi Sunak announced in his Spring Statement in March. Globally, wheat prices rose to a record high after India declared a ban on exports on 14 May. This year's crop in China is threatened by heavy rains earlier in the season, and in France – the EU's largest wheat producer – by unusually high temperatures.

Soaring energy and food prices mean inflation is rising across the world. UK inflation hit 9 per cent in April, the highest rate for 40 years. In Germany, producer price inflation rose by a third in April, the greatest increase since records began in 1949. Outside Europe, the inflation problem is even worse: overall prices in Turkey have increased by 70 per cent year-on-year.

Growth prospects are simultaneously diminishing. UK consumer confidence is at its lowest level since it was first measured in 1974. In China, retail sales dropped by 11 per cent year-on-year in April and industrial output shrank for the first time since the beginning of the pandemic.

The likely result in Western economies is stagflation: rising inflation and falling growth. Stagflationary conditions that are driven by rising energy prices reduce the effectiveness of monetary policy – the only choice central bankers now have is deciding what sort of harm they should impose on the economy. They are currently choosing to raise interest rates: the US Federal Reserve lifted its principal rate by 0.5 per cent on 4 May – its largest single increase in more than 20 years –

and the Bank of England pushed its rate up the following day. But if inflation does come down, it will only be because central bankers have engineered a recession.

For the Global South, the dangers are graver. A rising dollar is putting pressure on local currencies. Sri Lanka passed the 30-day grace period on 19 May on a missed sovereign interest payment, becoming the first Asian state to default since Pakistan in 1999. Three days earlier, the new prime minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, told his compatriots that the next months “will be the most difficult of our lives”. The country, he said, had one day's supply of petrol left and lacked dollars to buy more.

Across the world, the disruption originates from a series of structurally driven shocks. Oil supply chains have not recovered from the pandemic. The refining industry was hit particularly hard by the fall in demand for transport fuel in 2020. Globally, about three million barrels a day of capacity have been lost, a third of which is in the US. Since diesel is central to agriculture and industry, the lack of it constitutes a systemic shock, affecting food prices and causing supply blockages.

Meanwhile, China's capacity to act as the engine of growth for the world economy is diminished. In 2019, the International Monetary Fund said that

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**It is difficult to meet the global demand for oil and gas without Russian supplies**

China's falling growth rate was the reason why the world was experiencing a synchronised slowdown. Last autumn, China's economic recovery meant energy demand outstripped supply, leading to serious rationing of electricity to industry. Now, after the lockdowns in Shanghai and Guangzhou, China's economic growth for this year could be lower than the US's for the first time since 1976 – the final year of Mao's rule. While the dual circulation strategy, first articulated in 2020, aims to make the rest of the world dependent on supply chains running through China, the Chinese leadership's willingness to shut down the country's most significant ports and ration energy only encourages economic decoupling. Where the food crisis is concerned, China's priority is domestic resilience: the US Department of Agriculture says China has 69 per cent of the world's grain reserves, compared with just under 40 per cent a decade ago.

Russia's war against Ukraine has dramatically intensified these underlying stresses. Since Russia exports a high volume of final petroleum products, including diesel, the war has increased the need for refining capacity elsewhere at a time when such adaptability does not exist. The war has also weakened the supply chains that connect the Mediterranean basin to some of the world's most fertile soil. Russia's food exports have decreased and its naval blockade of the north Black Sea coast means Ukraine cannot use its ports to move the grains and sunflower oil it sells abroad. Having been a contributor to the United Nations' World Food Programme that provides aid to poor countries, Ukraine is now a recipient of it.

The US and its European allies have been unable to inflict a sufficient economic shock on Russia to make Vladimir Putin recalculate. The only way to reconnect Ukraine to its ports is for Nato to risk escalating the war by entering the Black Sea. Any such possibility depends on persuading Turkey, which hasn't imposed sanctions on Moscow and controls access to the Black Sea, to consent to such a move.

Energy sanctions against Russia have been so limited because China's rise has permanently changed energy markets. Quite simply, it is difficult to meet present world demand for oil and gas without Russian supplies, even when China's consumption is constrained by “zero Covid”. World economic growth depends on Chinese growth but, when it comes to the supply of oil and gas, neither the world economy nor China appears likely to cope when China's economy does accelerate again. ●

# “There is a serious vacuum in the Kremlin. It can’t last”

Christopher Steele, the former spy and author of the Trump-Russia dossier, emerges from the shadows to talk Putin, the war in Ukraine, and Russian influence

By Jeremy Cliffe

The meeting is at a London restaurant, smart but neither grand nor flashy, and quiet but for a few tourists and a couple of parents with prams in the corner. A man with silver hair and of average height appears at the door and makes his way over. The only feature that might make the former spy, Christopher Steele, stand out from the crowds of besuited commuters on the concourse at nearby Victoria Station is his lapel badge, bearing the flags of the UK and Ukraine. I have been asked to find somewhere discreet, so am sat at a table towards the back of the room. If the meeting sounds cloak-and-dagger, it is not — or at least, it is much less cloak-and-dagger than it would have been a few years ago.

Steele joined the UK's Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, popularly known as MI6) after graduating from Cambridge University in 1986, and was soon posted under diplomat-

ic cover to Moscow, where he saw the decrepit Soviet order give way to the chaotic Boris Yeltsin presidency. Further postings in Paris and Afghanistan were followed by a senior job on the SIS Russia desk from 2006-09. He then set up his own firm, Orbis Business Intelligence, in the barely less secretive world of non-state spying. “It was always in the shadows,” Steele tells me of his former existence. “We were never the story, I was never the story.”

That all changed in 2016. Orbis had been contracted in June by a private investigative firm working for Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign to research links between Donald Trump and the Russian government. The series of reports that it produced alleged both a Russian conspiracy to help Trump win the November election and Russian possession of *kompromat*, or compromising personal information, on the Republican candi-

date. What would later be called the “Steele Dossier” was swiftly shared around Washington DC, even landing on Barack Obama's desk in December 2016. Steele initially remained anonymous. No image of him existed in the public domain. But on 10 January 2017 *Buzzfeed* published the dossier in full, attributing it to a British former intelligence agent. The next day the *Wall Street Journal* named Steele, and he and his family went into hiding. Two months later he re-emerged to give a short, terse statement on camera outside what was then the Orbis office in London.

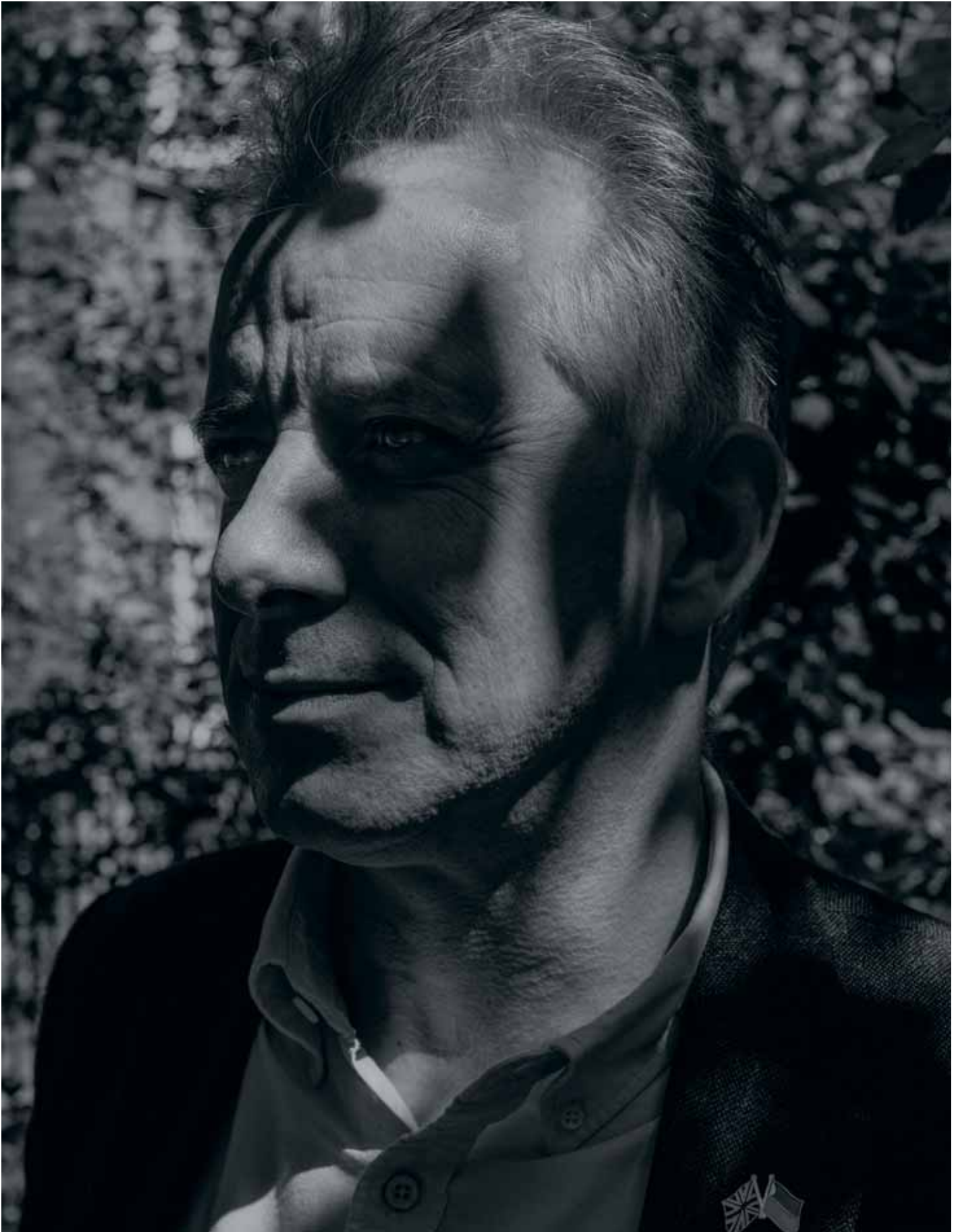
Five years on, Steele tells me that his life has changed “entirely”. “Now I am a public figure and defined as such legally in the US, which has its advantages and disadvantages.” The political scandal unleashed by the dossier would later intertwine with calls for Trump's impeachment and Robert Mueller's report into Russian interference in the 2016 election. Unsurprisingly, Trump rounded on Steele, tweeting of the dossier: “Fake news – a total political witch hunt!” Steele is still of interest to John Durham, a special investigator for the US Department of Justice who was appointed by William Barr, Trump's politicised attorney general, to investigate the origins of the FBI probe into Russian interference.

“It's stressful and difficult, particularly for family members,” Steele says. I ask about how he has changed his security arrangements. “To some extent, given my previous life, it's a matter of degree rather than kind, but we have to be careful about how we go about our business.” Steele has not travelled to the US since 2016 – on personal security and legal advice – and Orbis recently moved to a new London office without a publicly listed address.

Still, he concedes that the spotlight also has its upsides. “It gives me a platform. I can have influence on policy debates in a way I wouldn't have done before.” In October 2021, Steele gave his first major TV interview, telling ABC's George Stephanopoulos: “I stand by the work we did, the sources that we had.” Sitting down with the *New Statesman* marks his first on-the-record interview with the British print media, in which we go beyond the endlessly parsed dossier to survey current events in Russia, Ukraine and beyond.

We start with the man at the centre of it all. What are the chances that Vladimir Putin will still be in power in 12 months? “I think they are slight,” replies Steele. “There is now a serious vacuum in the Kremlin in terms of command and control. I don't think it can last a lot longer. I think it is worse than anyone has dared to express, in terms of the collapse of governance in Russia.” Steele says that Putin is seriously ill: “quite possibly a cancer and also Parkinson's disease”. This vacuum ▶





Christopher Steele photographed in London for the *New Statesman* by Kalpesh Lathigra

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## The NS Interview

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◀ means the Russian president is both micro-managing the war and cut off from its realities: “Even Hitler’s generals and field marshals would tell him the truth about what was happening on the battlefield. That has not happened in this war. Russian soldiers in Ukraine don’t know what they are up against. They don’t know the weapons systems they are up against. They don’t know the tactics that they are supposed to be using. They don’t know what their objectives are. Half the time it changes from day to day. You cannot conduct an efficient military campaign on that basis.”

Steele then sets out how the vacuum could be filled: events on the battlefield in Ukraine, sanctions and international isolation combined with Putin’s failing health could open a window in the coming months for another senior figure to move against the Russian president. “There is a sense of who has got the potential power resources to do it and they are very few. The two mentioned are Alexander Bortnikov and Nikolai Patrushev,” he says, naming the hard-line current and former head of the Federal Security Service (FBS), Russia’s main security agency. “Not Sergey Naryshkin?” I ask him, referring to the director of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) who previously called for more dialogue with the West. “No. Probably sadly,” he replies. Valery Gerasimov, the chief of the general staff of the Russian Armed Forces, “has disappeared”, Steele says. “He hasn’t been seen in Moscow for at least a week.”

The ex-spy sees Putin’s defenestration happening in one of two ways. “One is that they go to Putin and offer him the sort of deal that Putin offered Yeltsin and his family, and that Putin accepts that deal because he is too ill to do otherwise. Or he refuses and there is bloodshed, as there was when Stalin died and Beria tried to take over.” Any such bloodshed, he clarifies, would probably take place within the Kremlin walls. “You don’t see it turning into some sort of civil war?” I ask. “I wouldn’t think a large-scale civil war, but I wouldn’t rule anything out,” Steele replies: “Russia is like one of its famous silver birch trees – with a shiny strong bark, but as soon as you drill into it it’s full of woodworm.”

I ask if it is fair to say that little information about the war in Ukraine has filtered down to the Russian people. “I think that’s charitable, to be honest,” he counters. Steele reckons that Russian casualties in Ukraine (“probably north of 20,000 dead and 50,000 to 60,000

injured”) will gradually percolate through society back at home. Moreover, “my belief is that significant strata of the Russian population support this war and are sufficiently brutalised and brutal to condone the methods that are being used... Of course there are incredibly brave, capable people who are opposed to the war but I think it is a mistake to think everyone in Russia has been hoodwinked by official propaganda”.

We turn to the trajectory of the war. Steele reports that the Ukrainians believe fighting will continue intensively until about September, followed by a longer low-level conflict. Russia could lose the whole of the Donbas region if its forces continue to struggle and may even concede it in a post-Putin deal, he adds. The sticking point would be Crimea – occupied by Russia since 2014 – where neither side would be likely to budge.

**H**ow much store can we set by Steele’s brand of intelligence gathering? Certain details in his Trump dossier have been disproven and he has conceded it is not 100 per cent accurate (he has told friends the figure is about 70-90 per cent). Fiona Hill, a respected Russia expert at the Brookings Institution, has called it a “rabbit hole” and has suggested it includes planted Russian disinformation – a possibility Steele has accepted but considers unlikely.

We do, however, know two things for sure. The first is that Steele is a serious and well-connected authority on Russia and Ukraine. He has a reputation in intelligence circles for being cautious (“sober”, “professional” and “conservative” says an associate quoted in the journalist Luke Harding’s book *Collusion*). US intelligence officials are known to have rated Steele’s past work and he overwhelmingly uses sources who have proven their accuracy before. He says frankly whenever I ask a question that he believes he cannot answer authoritatively, and gently declines my occasional invitations to indulge in speculation.

The second is that intelligence is not a black-and-white business: some details may be vague or sketchy and others firm, with assessments often drawing on multiple sources with a range of degrees of confidence. In our conversation, Steele is meticu-

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**Steele provides a list of UK policy decisions he thinks were shaped by Moscow’s influence**

lous in differentiating between possibilities and certainties, contingent analysis and concrete fact, assessment and speculation. A reasonable approach, then, is to keep in mind that intelligence – and especially the sort of raw intelligence that appears in the dossier – is an art and not a science.

**I** move on to Russian influence operations. Does the war and its fallout hamper them? Steele distinguishes between the “front door” (overt influence methods such as the propaganda broadcast media RT and Sputnik) and the “back door” (surreptitious influence-buying through political parties and other institutions, blackmail and other methods). “While, laudably, the UK government has shut the front door on Russia it still hasn’t shut the back door,” says Steele. “There is still a refusal by Boris Johnson and people at the top of the Conservative Party to think that the money that has come into the party from foreign-based sources is not clean, and that refusal to reassess what has been going on is not good.” He calls for a UK equivalent to the US Foreign Agent Registration Act, and a law criminalising proxy activity on behalf of sanctioned individuals.

Steele is not alleging some grand, all-encompassing conspiracy. He sees London-grad – the now-notorious nexus of Russian oligarchical power and British politics – as a two-way process whereby rich Russians in the UK have accumulated influence that they use to their advantage back in Moscow. “It isn’t just that these people are all ordered to do certain things in Britain by the Kremlin, but they are conscious that the better placed they are in Britain, the more influence currency they have to trade back home.” He cites prominent Russians with links to the Conservative Party as examples not of a plot but of how, voluntarily, Britain has left both its front and back doors open – with the latter remaining ajar even now.

Darker forms of influence also prevail. I ask Steele if he is aware of attempts to use *kompromat* in the UK in the same fashion as what he set out in the Trump dossier. “Yes,” he replies, with a bluntness that catches me off-guard. “People have done bad things in the past and [the Kremlin] is aware, and the Russians will subtly remind them of that from time to time... Look at policy issues that have been playing out over the past few years. The lack of this legislation I’m talking about, why the Russia report [by the Intelligence and Security Committee, into Russian influence in British politics] was suppressed, why its recommendations haven’t been implemented, and so on. That isn’t just coincidence.”

Later, he adds the UK’s failure to arm and train the Ukrainian military between 2014 (when Russia first occupied parts of the



Lean in: Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump hold a bilateral meeting at the G20 summit in Hamburg, 7 July 2017

country) and 2021 to a list of policy decisions seemingly shaped by Russian influence. “I have heard that there were people arguing strongly against doing this [arming Ukraine from 2014 onwards] and they were probably under the influence of agents from Moscow.” In the British government? “Yes. Or in and around the British establishment and elite.” It is a striking accusation, and I return to it later in the conversation: to his knowledge, is *kompromat* part of that story? Steele pauses, and I sense he is mulling what to share in his reply. “Certainly, *kompromat* is in play.”

What might Russia now be seeking to achieve through its influence operations? Steele says that “anything that divides Britain from its natural democratic allies” is beneficial to Moscow. “You can even argue that things spinning around trade or Brexit can be used in that way... Stirring up the French over the [Aukus] submarine deal is unhelpful in terms of Western unity. It’s quite clear that Boris Johnson’s relationship with Emmanuel Macron is poor. His relationship with Joe Biden isn’t great, particularly because of the Irish situation. All this plays into Russia’s hands.”

And more widely? The former spy identifies two major international areas where Russia is operating. The first is that the Kremlin is using its blockade of Ukrainian ports on the Black Sea to cause a crisis of food, grain and fertiliser exports. “In 2010-11 one of the reasons why you had the Arab Spring was a bad harvest in Russia and Ukraine. There was nothing conscious about it. The bad harvest pushed

up the price of grain in places such as Egypt and Syria. So the Russians have already seen how it can play out. But this time it’s an artificial problem.” He identifies Egypt and Ethiopia as two countries where Russia is particularly keen to sow turmoil, to disrupt Western security interests and perhaps even trigger a new migration crisis on Europe’s borders.

“Russia is probably working hard at the moment in Turkey, [which is] a powerful player in this situation because it controls the Bosphorus.” The two topics are, of course, related: “In order to overcome this Russian manipulation of the grain and fertiliser markets, all [Turkey’s leaders] need to say is: ‘unless you lift these sieges on [Ukraine’s] ports, none of your ships are coming through the Bosphorus either’. That would soon turn it around.”

Then there’s the country where Steele’s past work has had the greatest impact: the US. There he expects new influence operations to be aimed at the midterm elections in November and, perhaps, the 2024 presidential election, with the goal of creating an “isolationist, mercantilist” US. “Are you aware of any ongoing links between the Trump team and Russian interests?” I ask him. “It depends how widely you define the Trump team.”

Steele is convinced that a second Trump term would mean “the end of democracy in the US as we know it”. He draws on three examples to detail how this would look. The domestic example is 2020-21, the final year of Trump’s first term, when he broke loose of

institutional constraints and appointed acolytes and political henchmen to roles in defence and intelligence. “I think the rule of law would start to collapse and the worry is that the Supreme Court justices [appointed] by him would go along with it.” The international examples are South Africa’s apartheid-era National Party (“which believed that the rights of democracy and the rights of rule of law only apply to a certain part of the population”) and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Turkey (“where the executive would have a huge amount of power to conduct political vendettas”).

“I think liberal democracy in the US today is under a bigger threat than it has been in at least 100 years,” Steele concludes – just in case I had not already got the message.

I switch off my Dictaphone and we chat about Steele’s decision to give the interview. I ask him if the recently set up @Chris\_D\_ Steele Twitter account is him. He confirms it is, but says he has not yet received the blue tick that indicates an account’s author has been verified, because he does not conform to an established category (politician, official, journalist or similar) and has not yet got enough followers to be otherwise accredited.

The predicament captures something of the hybrid nature of his new life. Steele is both a private figure with one foot in his secret world, and a public one with the other in the limelight. His public role is multifarious: a businessman and former official, but also a man with firm opinions as a citizen and a politico. He is passionate about his subjects, clearly enjoys debating them (he was president of the Cambridge Union) and holds his own distinct views (presciently hawkish on Russia, and broadly progressive). “It’s quite instructive because, of course, being at the centre of [the firestorm about the dossier] you are the only one that knows the full truth and so you can see how these people are all nibbling around it but never quite get there,” he says. Nibbling around the truth is a neat image for the role of an intelligence officer – and perhaps, in fact, for all of us in an age of social media, news saturation, disinformation and seemingly ever-faster flows of events.

Steele has painted an alarming picture of escalating global disorder: war, coups, violence, famine, political manipulation, espionage and crisis. It occurs to me that if there is a personality who somehow sums up this time of international breakdown (however inadvertently) it is perhaps Christopher Steele himself. Half in the shadows, half on Twitter; concerned but clear-eyed about the storms on the horizon; a shaper and subject of great-power conflict; a dealer in data, in information, and a prognosticator of the global crises to come; the personified zeitgeist of our era of transformation and turmoil. ●

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# How the Marshall Plan made Europe

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It is 75 years since the US launched its ambitious aid scheme to rebuild postwar Europe and protect it from Soviet hostility. Is this the model the West should now use to help Ukraine?

By David Reynolds

Seventy-five years ago, on 5 June 1947, the US secretary of state George C Marshall delivered a brief address at the Harvard University commencement ceremony. He told the graduating class that urgent action was needed to address the economic crisis in postwar Europe, so as to “permit the emergence of political and social conditions in which free institutions can exist”. Many students took little notice of his words – Marshall was a soldier, not an orator and he spoke for only 12 minutes – but his dry, clipped speech launched a defining initiative of the early Cold War.

What became known as the Marshall Plan – officially the European Recovery Program (ERP) – played a vital role in the resurrection of western Europe between 1948 and 1951, helping its coalescence as a group of capitalist democracies oriented to the United States. In the process, the ERP sharpened the Cold War division of Europe into two hostile blocs.

Today, as Vladimir Putin wages war on Ukraine, there is talk from Western politicians of a new Marshall Plan. But is this serious policy or mere sloganising? The 75th anniversary is a good moment to ask what that Harvard speech was about and to explore its relevance for our own troubled times.

Europe was not at war in 1947. Marshall spoke more than two years after Allied victory against Nazi Germany and – despite Winston Churchill’s speech at Fulton, Missouri in March 1946 – the “iron curtain” had not yet descended irretrievably. Politically, much of Europe had lurched leftward: for many, memories of the 1930s Depression as well as the horrors of Nazi rule discredited both capitalism and fascism. In parts of eastern Europe, peasant and socialist parties worked with communists to redistribute large estates and nationalise heavy industry. Further west, Labour had trounced Churchill’s Tories in Britain’s 1945 election, social democrats held sway in Norway and Sweden, and centre-left coalitions governed France, Belgium and Italy – including communists, who had played a leading role in the wartime resistance.

Many Europeans inclined towards a “third force” strategy to avoid close alignment with either of the new “superpowers”. In March 1946 Ernest Bevin, Labour’s foreign secretary, called Britain “the last bastion of social democracy”, holding its ground against “the red tooth and claw of American capitalism and the communist dictatorship of Soviet Russia”. Britain and other western European countries were sceptical of the US as a peacetime ally, mindful of how after 1918 Woodrow Wilson’s internationalist crusade had degenerated into economic nationalism and diplomatic isolation. Yet there was no doubting America’s importance for postwar Europe. In 1945 it produced half the world’s manufactured ►



ALAMY

The whole world in their hands: a poster promoting the European Recovery Program, known as the Marshall Plan

◀ goods and held over half the world's gold reserves. US credits were crucial to bridge the "dollar gap" and purchase vital imports.

After 1945 the Truman administration continued to dole out aid on a bilateral basis to countries ranging from France to Greece. But Europe was not recovering. In his speech Marshall attributed this less to physical destruction than to "the dislocation of the entire fabric" of Europe's economy, including loss of faith in national currencies and the withdrawal of many farmers from the market. People in the cities were short of food and fuel, "so the governments are forced to use their foreign money and credits to procure these necessities abroad". Therefore, "substantial additional help" must be provided to restore "the confidence of the European people in the economic future of their own countries and of Europe as a whole".

The secretary of state said the US would not "draw up unilaterally a programme", declaring: "The initiative, I think, must come from Europe. The role of this country should consist of friendly aid in the drafting of a European programme and of later support of such a programme so far as it may be practical for us to do so." He also stated that "the programme should be a joint one, agreed to by a number, if not all European nations".

Marshall gave his speech in the wake of a visit to Moscow, where for seven weeks the foreign ministers of the four Allied victor powers – Britain, France, the US and the USSR – failed to reach agreement on what to do about Germany: the most formidable economy in continental Europe back in 1913 and now the potential powerhouse of European recovery. Marshall had no doubt that the Soviets were the main stumbling block.

But the debate was not yet a simple Cold War divide. Whereas Britain and the US wanted to revive the German economy and reduce the costs of feeding and supplying their zones of occupation, opposition came from France and the USSR, who feared Germany would once again convert its economic power into military might. Haunted by the humiliation of 1940 and Hitler's brutal occupation, many in Paris were attracted by the punitive policy advocated by the Kremlin, whose wartime losses amounted to perhaps 27 million people, about one-seventh of the 1940 Soviet population. Without any Allied agreement on German reindustrialisation or a currency to replace the worthless Reichsmark, let alone a

new German government, the country staggered along as a barter economy. In the US and British zones, the main medium of exchange was cigarettes.

So ludicrous was the situation that in the summer of 1946 the Labour government introduced bread rationing in Britain – something not imposed even in the depths of the war – so as to free up grain imports from America to feed Britain's occupation zone in the Ruhr. "We are paying reparations to the Germans," fumed Hugh Dalton, the chancellor of the Exchequer. This was the "vicious circle" that Marshall wanted to break. But, as he said, the initiative had to come from "Europe" – whatever that meant.

Within six weeks of Marshall's speech, the shape of postwar Europe could be discerned. Bevin quickly got the message: "It is up to us to tell them what we want." So, too, did the French foreign minister, Georges Bidault, representing the centre of a shaky coalition against the extremes of the anti-German Gaullist right and the pro-Soviet communist left. After some jockeying between the two governments, Bevin agreed that a European conference to discuss Marshall's offer should be held in Paris and that the USSR had to be invited to placate the French left. In return he extracted a commitment from Bidault that France would go ahead regardless of any obstruction from Moscow.

Stalin sent a delegation of 100 to Paris, which suggested a readiness to talk. But the Russians came to find out how much money might be on the table, to demand huge reparations from Germany, and to block any "joint" European programme intruding into the USSR's closed economy. Once it was clear that none of their conditions would be met, the Soviets left, and eastern European countries, notably Poland and Czechoslovakia, were warned off participating in the discussions. And so, Bidault later reflected, Moscow chose "the only way to lose for sure". If the Soviets had stayed, they might have secured some aid or, more likely, ensured by their involvement the Plan's defeat in the US Congress.

In any case it was hard enough to get "western Europe" to draw up a statement of

**Even before the aid began to flow, the promise of the Plan helped to stabilise key countries**

"availabilities and requirements" for 1948 to 1951. Britain resisted Washington's attempts to make aid conditional on opening up its empire-based trade and currency system. The French feared that the Marshall Plan would mean putting Germany first. Smaller countries resented direction by London and Paris, and the Scandinavians hoped to continue "bridge-building" with the USSR and its satellites.

Given all this friction, it was almost miraculous that the Paris conference came up with anything within the six-week deadline. This was largely due to its British chairman, Oliver Franks. But Washington was unhappy with the amount requested (\$28bn over four years) and what it considered the obstinately national approach ("16 shopping lists"), rather than a coordinated plan to move Europe on from war. After tough transatlantic bargaining, the total amount was cut and vague pledges were added about boosting production, cutting trade barriers and creating a permanent organisation. In December 1947 Truman sent his ERP to Capitol Hill, asking for \$17bn over four years.

The president had to deal with a Republican Congress – controlling both House and Senate for the first time since 1931. Suspicious of federal spending, it insisted on close accountability and annual appropriations, rather than a four-year package. But context was as critical as content in gaining congressional support. In February 1948 the communists had seized power in Czechoslovakia, and in mid-April Italians would vote in an election that many Western observers feared could lead to a socialist-communist government. It was this general sense of alarm that helped ease the Marshall Plan through Congress. On 3 April Truman signed it into law and the aid began to flow that summer.

In 1948-51 the funds provided for western Europe amounted to some \$13.2bn. If this was American imperialism, it was "empire by invitation", as the Norwegian scholar Geir Lundestad observed. The Kremlin practised empire by coercion. Over that same period the USSR extracted a comparable amount from eastern Europe in reparations and rip-offs.

Early commentators struck a celebratory note. In 1970 the historian Richard Mayne lauded the Plan as Europe's "great leap forward" which saved the continent from "imminent economic ruin" and laid "the real foundations of later prosperity". Recent economic historians have been less effusive. Over its entire course, the Marshall Plan probably amounted to no more, on average, than 2.6 per cent of the recipient countries' GDP. It's also clear that western Europe's economy was already recovering by the time the aid began in mid-1948. It therefore sustained, rather than triggered, growth,



Breaking the blockade: the Anglo-American airlift of 1948 brings supplies to West Berlin

servicing, to quote the historian Charles Maier, like “the lubricant in the engine – not the fuel – allowing a machine to run that would otherwise buckle and bind”.

But none of this academic revisionism has dampened Mayne-style hype. The Marshall Plan developed a life of its own – proffered as a panacea for a plethora of economic and social problems. In 1991-92 George HW Bush was pressed to create a Marshall Plan to help post-Soviet Russia; his son urged one for post-Taliban Afghanistan after 9/11. Politicians today have also proposed it for Ukraine. The lead was taken by Boris Johnson, who responded to Volodymyr Zelensky’s video-address to the British parliament on 8 March by promising “a new Marshall Plan” for the country’s recovery. Characteristically, Johnson did not add any detail, and critics discerned another headline-grab to divert attention from the political problems of the Tory party’s party-leader. But other European politicians also deployed slogans without substance – among them Christian Lindner, the German finance minister, and Johannes Hahn, the European Commissioner for budget and administration.

Politicians often use “history” as clichés that can be cited without need for further comment because they are immediately recognised as a “good thing” (such as the Marshall Plan or “finest hour”) or a “bad thing” (appeasement, for instance, or the “Fourth Reich”). Although it sounds erudite, history for effect can often be an excuse for sloppy

thinking. In the case of the Marshall Plan the idea of a quick-fix injection of financial aid misses the larger historical context of Europe in the late 1940s. The legislation was officially called the Economic Cooperation Act, but it was about politics as much as economics. This is critical to understanding the true significance of the Plan and its relevance for 2022.

The political dimension took three forms: stabilisation, state-building and security. Even before the aid started, the promise of the Plan helped stabilise politics in key countries. A month before the crucial Italian election, Marshall warned that if Italy chose a government hostile to the ERP, it would effectively rule itself out of the programme. Similar warnings were issued to the coalition governments in France and Belgium. More positively, Washington presented the ERP as largely development aid, downplaying its more technical aspects such as currency reform. This was an early sign that Marshall Hype mattered as much as the Marshall Plan in the battle for hearts and minds. On 18 April 1948 the Christian Democrats under Alcide De Gasperi won a majority in Italy’s Chamber of Deputies. Vatican warnings about communism and CIA money helped, but the prospect of aid influenced the result. Across western Europe the centre right began to look with hope to what seemed a new America, different from the era of isolationism.

It was in Germany that stabilisation proved

most important. In January 1947 the British and the Americans merged their occupation zones in order to revive industry and trade. In April and May 1948, as the Marshall Plan was signed into law, they met in London with the French to agree a policy on Germany, including the fusion of all three zones and a new currency. The introduction of the Deutsche Mark into West Berlin prompted Stalin’s attempt to blockade the city and the ensuing Anglo-American airlift all through the winter. Meanwhile, as was also agreed in London, the Germans convened a constituent assembly to create a new government for western Germany. Bidault warned reluctant colleagues that, if they refused, Britain and the US would go ahead anyway and France would probably be cut out of the ERP. It was not until May 1949 that the Federal Republic of Germany was born – with Konrad Adenauer, a Christian Democrat, as chancellor – but already, in the Marshall Plan summer of 1948, stabilisation had developed into state-building.

And also into revolutionary new security relationships. While the ERP was being haggled through Congress, the Czech communist coup spurred Britain, France and the Benelux states to form the Brussels Pact – a military alliance that was intended to advance economic and cultural cooperation as well. The crisis was nudging Britain beyond its “finest hour” sense of splendid isolation. Talks began in Washington to enlarge the Brussels Pact into a transatlantic alliance. Bevin told the State Department that this was essential to “inspire the necessary confidence to consolidate the West against Soviet infiltration”.

With the Berlin blockade adding urgency to the discussions, the North Atlantic Treaty was signed in April 1949 – bringing together the US, Canada and ten disparate western European states in a mutual defence pact. At this stage the alliance was simply a pledge, but the North Korean invasion of the South in June 1950 put the “O” into Nato – to quote the Washington insider Averell Harriman – turning a paper pact into a proper military organisation, with a US commander-in-chief backed by four American combat divisions.

Aid, stabilisation, state-building and security: this European revolution of 1947-50 depended on fortuitous political conjunctions on both sides of the Atlantic. In the US, despite Republican hegemony on Capitol Hill, there was a degree of bipartisanship inconceivable in our time. Arthur Vandenberg, chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and a diehard isolationist in the 1930s, worked closely with the Democratic administration to push the North Atlantic Treaty through the Senate. Later, after Truman’s surprise victory in the November 1948 presidential election, the Republicans lurched into knee-jerk opposition against anything he proposed. ▶

## The NS Essay

◀ But that brief bipartisan moment was crucial in shaping transatlantic history.

Equally creative was the period of Christian Democrat leadership in western Europe. Bidault and his colleague Robert Schuman headed France's Mouvement Républicain Populaire (MRP) – a Christian Democrat party akin to those led by De Gasperi in Italy and Adenauer in West Germany. The MRP had a positive policy towards Germany, unlike the communists and the Gaullists. Its predominance didn't survive the 1951 elections, but in that short time it brought France into the Marshall Plan and transformed relations with Germany through the Schuman Plan.

Much of France's Marshall aid was used for intensive industrialisation – centred on coal, steel and electric power. In peacetime, France had been reliant on coal imports from the Ruhr. With Germany now recovering fast, Schuman recognised the need to prevent its revival becoming a threat. On 9 May 1950 he proposed that all French and German production of coal and steel should be “placed under a common High Authority, within the framework of an organisation open to the participation of the other countries of Europe”. This would “make it plain that any war between France and Germany becomes not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible”.

European integration had always been an aim of the Truman administration. It hoped that the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation that oversaw the European end of the ERP would become an instrument of integration, but this was resisted by Britain and France. Yet the Schuman Plan is an example of how Marshall Aid fostered integration less directly. As the historian William Hitchcock has observed, “the genius of the scheme” was that by “restoring economic choices to Europeans, the Marshall Plan also restored political choices”. In 1950 it gave Robert Schuman the courage to dare. The European Coal and Steel Community was a first step towards the Treaties of Rome in 1957 – the foundations of the European Communities.

Much more than a dash of cash was therefore required to create what George Marshall called “political and social conditions in which free institutions can exist”. That should be remembered by those who breezily advocate a Marshall Plan for Ukraine. Indeed, as Adam Tooze recently remarked in the *New States-*

*man*, “judged by the actual scale of the original ERP, the sobering fact is that between the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and Putin's invasion in February 2022, Europe, the US and the IMF already delivered a ‘Marshall Plan for Ukraine’ and the results have been underwhelming”. The country was notorious for fractured politics and endemic corruption. Money disappeared down a black hole – just like it did in Russia after 1991.

In 2022 perspectives on Ukraine changed dramatically. Zelensky's charisma, and the courage of his people and armed forces in the face of Putin's invasion, saw to that. Millions followed the fate of Kyiv or Mariupol on TV news bulletins or applauded Ukraine's triumph in the Eurovision Song Contest. But the country's economic problems have not disappeared; on the contrary, the war has made them worse. Yet Ukraine's new hero status has made the West eager to help on a scale hitherto inconceivable.

Many of the bright ideas fail to appreciate the magnitude of the challenge. If the Marshall Plan era is to offer any model, we have to take seriously the nexus of stabilisation, state-building, security and integration that financial aid enabled. And all of this in relatively developed countries whose brutal enemy had been totally defeated. None of this applies to Ukraine. Not only is the country still a battleground but the war shows no sign of ending soon, and that means no hope of stabilisation. Zelensky's Ukraine may now have a keen sense of nationhood, but state-building remains in suspense. Only when (or if) there is a definitive end to the war can we see whether the country has avoided another partition or significant loss of territory. Would Ukraine without the Donbas and the Black Sea ports be a viable and prosperous state?

Most challenging of all is security. A recent “Blueprint for the Reconstruction of Ukraine” – published on 6 April with commendable speed by a group of economists – was built on two basic assumptions. First, “Ukraine has



“Roger wait... it's not how it looks”

security guarantees such that another Russian invasion cannot happen” and, second, that it could and should be put on the fastest possible track for EU membership. Yet neither of these proposals seems like practical politics.

What security guarantees would be sufficient? Western policy has been to keep Ukraine fighting while avoiding being drawn directly into war against Putin's Russia. So the Nato protection that worked for western Europe, especially West Germany, in around 1950 is ruled out. As for the EU, it usually takes several decades for a candidate country to reach the standards of economic, social and democratic convergence deemed essential. This point is made repeatedly by Emmanuel Macron, as guardian of these hallowed verities – most recently on 9 May, the anniversary of Schuman's visionary speech and also of Russia's Victory Day in the Great Patriotic War.

Ukraine's fight for freedom has rejuvenated Nato and the EU. The institutions created by Marshall and Bevin, Adenauer and Schuman were adapted after 1989 to manage the transition into what seemed like a new era. As the historian Kristina Spohr showed in *Post Wall, Post Square* (2019), these bodies were “conserved, modified and eventually enlarged to encompass the states of central and eastern Europe”. By the 2010s – the era of Trump and Brexit – Nato and the EU seemed tired and embattled, but Russia's invasion has given them new energy. Yet will it spur new thinking suited to the 21st century? Are both organisations going to keep enlarging the membership without addressing the structural problems avoided by the men of 1989 as they trod softly-softly out of the Cold War? How long can western Europe expect to shelter under America's nuclear umbrella? Do Macron's cherished criteria hinder a multi-speed EU that could accommodate the likes of Ukraine more easily?

The window of opportunity for decisions, like that in 1947-50, will be short. After this November's midterm elections, will the US Congress become deadlocked? Will an emboldened Donald Trump return to the White House in 2025? And how might an ailing Putin react to endless war in Ukraine – whose reconquest is his legacy project?

On 5 June 1947, the day of that momentous Harvard speech, 12 honourees (all male) were recognised by the university. Sitting with George Marshall on the stage were TS Eliot – the visionary poet of *The Waste Land* – and J Robert Oppenheimer, godfather of the atomic bomb. Which of those three, one wonders, might be the muse of our own times? ●

David Reynolds is an NS contributing writer. His recent books include *The Kremlin Letters*, co-authored by Vladimir Pechatnov

GEORGE LEIGH



# TIM SOUTPHOMMASANE



## World View

### Why Labor's win in the Australian election is a major turning point for the left

Australia's extraordinary election on 21 May has not only unseated a government – it also heralds a realignment of the nation's politics. After nine years in power, the Liberal Party was defeated, its brand of conservative politics repudiated. Under the prime minister Scott Morrison, the Liberal-National coalition's vote slumped by 5 per cent, with at least 15 seats lost. A movement of female candidates – the “teal” independents who campaigned for climate change action, political integrity and better treatment of women – dislodged Liberal incumbents in their affluent heartlands in metropolitan Sydney and Melbourne.

It is not yet clear whether the centre-left Labor Party, led by Anthony Albanese, can form a majority government, though a series of wins in Western Australia put it very close. Yet the victory is still sweet. It is redemption for the party's loss of an unlosable election in 2019 under former leader Bill Shorten. But this wasn't a classic political victory featuring a mandate for reform. Rather, it follows an election campaign defined by “small target” politics. In place of a contest of policy, Australian voters have had a contest of character and personality.

For the past three years, Morrison has been dogged by criticism of his leadership and growing unpopularity. Alongside his lacklustre response to the deadly bushfire crisis of 2019-20 and to sexual harassment and violence within the Australian parliament, there have been questions about his propensity for being less than truthful. Political analysts have even christened Morrison Australia's first post-truth prime minister.

Albanese is a very different character. A product of Sydney's inner-city working class, he grew up in public housing and was raised by a single mother on a disability pension. He appeared a more empathetic alternative to the abrasive Morrison. Yet he also faced questions about his leadership. Under scrutiny over his political match-fitness, Albanese ran a gaffe-riddled campaign. His failure to recall the unemployment rate and the cash rate (the interest rate Australian banks charge one another) hurt Labor. When Albanese was in Covid-induced isolation midway through the six-week campaign, he was outshone by more media-savvy colleagues who stepped up in his absence.

In one sense, the Australian election presented voters with a referendum on leadership. The electorate has responded: while it didn't believe Morrison deserved another term, it also has doubts about Albanese. Labor's primary vote was 33 per cent, trailing the 36 per cent claimed by the Liberal-National coalition (though under the Australian preferential voting system, it ended leading the coalition 52-48 on the two-party preferred vote). Anger at the Morrison government hasn't translated into an enthusiastic endorsement of Labor. Instead, it has been channelled into support for independents and the Greens.

This is the larger story: the 2022 election confirms a reshaping of Australian political culture. It extends the steady, long-term decline of Liberal and Labor, the country's two main parties. About one-third of the national vote was registered with minor parties and independents.

For now, victory has numbed that painful reality for Labor. But there is no

such relief for the Liberals. A section of their base – professional women in cities – has revolted and given its vote to the teal independents. Voters have defenestrated a significant number of moderate Liberals from parliament, including the erstwhile treasurer Josh Frydenberg – until now regarded as a likely future prime minister.

Liberals now face an intense period of reflection. Does the party want to be a populist right-wing party? Or does it want to revert to being liberal? And who will lead it? Former defence and immigration minister Peter Dutton, a hard-line conservative, looms as a probable leader. If he wins, the Liberals would lurch further to the right.

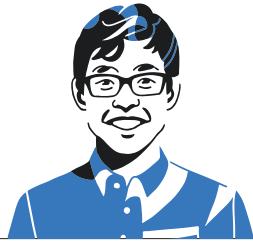
Climate change has been a key trigger of the country's ideological convulsions. Confronted by epic bushfires and floods, Australians see that the climate crisis is transforming the country. Morrison, an enthusiast for Australia's fossil-fuel industry who once brandished a lump of coal on the floor of parliament, failed to see this. With his defeat, the “climate war” that has defined Australian politics for the past decade may finally come to an end.

Which brings us to a very clear lesson from the election. Centre-right parties in the English-speaking world may be tempted by the polarising style of culture-war politics. But while it may work in the US – the home of the culture wars – parties elsewhere might ultimately be punished when they drift too far from the middle. This realisation came late for Morrison. Heading into his campaign's final week, with Labor's attacks biting, he offered a mea culpa. He was a “bulldozer” in getting things done, and pleaded that he was ready to change – to listen, to be kinder. Yet he leaves the legacy of a spectacular bulldozing of his party's electoral base.

For Albanese, the path is now open to become the unifying nation-builder he has promised to be. It is an adage of Australian politics that if you change the government, you change the nation. In taking office as Australia's 31st prime minister, and becoming only the fourth Labor leader to defeat a Liberal government since the end of the Second World War, Albanese will govern a country that wants to reset the way politics is conducted. As this narrow victory shows, Labor still needs to persuade many Australians it can deliver such change. But, for now, a win is a win. ●

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# JONATHAN LIEW



## Left Field

### The secret to Iga Swiatek's dominance in tennis is not just winning, but enjoying it

The genius of Iga Swiatek does not reveal itself in an instant. She is neither a physical freak nor a flamboyant risk-taker. Her technique is robust rather than refined, compact rather than exuberant. To grasp what makes the world No 1 from Poland so good, you need to spot the small details. The deceptive power she generates from her 5ft 9in frame. The way she constructs points, gradually pushing opponents further and further out of their comfort zone. She has a deep topspin forehand to make you retreat, and a gossamer drop shot to punish you for retreating. These are the attributes behind the astonishing rise of a player who, at 20, may be the finest women's tennis player since the prime of Serena Williams.

On 23 May, Swiatek beat Lesia Tsurenko of Ukraine 6-2, 6-0 in the first round of the French Open. It was her 29th straight victory on the tour, a run of dominance in which she has won five consecutive tournaments and beaten most of her main rivals. Already, the discussion is not about whether Swiatek will win in Paris, but who she might face in the final, who might conceivably beat her in the future, how long her reign will last.

If this seems a touch excessive for a player who has won only one Grand Slam, it helps to understand the landscape Swiatek entered when she joined the tour three years ago. Since Williams won her last Grand Slam in 2017, women's tennis has experienced a period of unprecedented openness. Emma Raducanu's win at last year's US Open felt like a stunning anomaly, but in fact it was largely in keeping with a sport that has thrown up

numerous breakthrough stars, surprise winners and one-hit wonders over the years. The last 21 Grand Slams have had 14 different winners.

Occasionally, briefly, some women have threatened to turn their initial fire-streak of success into a lasting dynasty. The brilliant Naomi Osaka looked like becoming the new face of the sport after winning four Grand Slams in 29 months, but has regressed on the court after taking prolonged breaks to protect her mental health. The torch passed to Ash Barty of Australia, who was world No 1 for almost three years either side of the pandemic. But in March, Barty shocked the world by announcing her immediate retirement at the age of 25, claiming she no longer had the "physical drive or emotional want", and pronouncing herself "spent".

Over time, women's tennis has almost internalised this sensation of permanent impermanence: the precarity of knowing that what feels certain today can evaporate in an instant, that stardom and form are fleeting and that a career at the top is an impossibly fragile thing. Heroes and saviours are crowned overnight, and then brought down almost as quickly. The physical and emotional demands of upholding an elite level of performance in a lonely 12-month global sport, living adrift

### Swiatek may be the finest player in women's tennis since Serena Williams

from loved ones, floating from practice court to hotel room to airport to hotel room to practice court, form an almost impregnable barrier to sustained success. For many of the young women at the centre of this world, dealing for the first time with an explosion of scrutiny and interest, the pressure to maintain their level of tennis, their physical fitness, their off-court obligations and their sanity all at the same time can be unbearable. Many have been bruised or broken by it.

Sofia Kenin was anointed as the new star of American tennis when she won the Australian Open in 2020, only to succumb in the second round the following year. "My head wasn't there," she wept afterwards. "I knew I couldn't really handle the pressure." Stricken by an unfortunate run of injuries, she is now ranked No 147 in the world. Bianca Andreescu, the 19-year-old first-time winner of the US Open in 2019, has missed most of the past three years through recurring knee injuries. Raducanu, for her part, has had her own injury struggles, cycled through coaches and won only nine of her 21 matches since winning the US Open.

For a while, it looked as though Swiatek might meet a similar fate. After winning the French Open in 2020 as a 19-year-old unknown, she spent the next few months pounding the tour trying to build her profile and accumulate ranking points. By the time she was knocked out in the quarter-finals of her title defence the following year, she was drained. "When I close my eyes, I only see tennis courts and balls," she lamented.

But Swiatek had also learned a thing or two from her predecessors. She is one of the few players to have a full-time psychologist, Daria Abramowicz, who often travels on tour with her. She speaks openly in the media about the importance of mental health, recognising her own emotional triggers, embracing her natural self-doubt. In a sport that frequently drags its athletes in a hundred directions, that forces them to become self-run businesses at a ridiculously young age, Swiatek has succeeded by prioritising herself.

She may not win in Paris – although on the basis of bookmaker and pundit opinion, it would be an almighty shock if she didn't. But watching her on court, you glimpse something even more important: the relish and enjoyment of hard work, the satisfaction of thinking her way through a match, the pleasure of a well-honed process. The real lesson isn't that Swiatek wins. The lesson is that she's happy. ●

*Jonathan Liew is a sports writer at the Guardian*

MARTA SIGNORI

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# THE CRITICS

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# Books

## The men who sold the world

More than 30 years ago we had the knowledge to mitigate the climate crisis but failed to act. Who is really to blame?

By Lola Seaton

“Our old world, the one that we have inhabited for the last 12,000 years,” Mike Davis declared in 2010, “has ended.” A decade later, David Wallace-Wells sounded the same death-knell in his 2019 book *The Uninhabitable Earth*: “The climate system that raised us... is now, like a parent, dead.”

The official onset of the Anthropocene has been accompanied by many such requiems. But another kind of obituary has also begun to appear over the last decade, marking not only the expiry of our old world, but the closing of the political window in which it could still be preserved. Beneath the stream of eco-literature proposing solutions and strategies, an undertow of gloomy counterfactuals has emerged, whose titles speak for themselves: Dale Jamieson’s *Reason in a Dark Time: Why the Struggle Against Climate Change Failed – and What It Means for Our Future* (2014), Roy Scranton’s *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of Civilization* (2015), Nathaniel Rich’s *Losing Earth: The Decade We Could Have Stopped Climate Change* (2019), and Jonathan Franzen’s 2019 *New Yorker* piece “What if we stopped pretending?”

It’s an incongruous phenomenon. Official climate discourse is relentlessly future-oriented – the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the global authority on the subject, deals in forecasts, models, “scenarios”, “pathways” – and is characterised by perpetual deferral, its deadlines and targets periodically extended and updated as they are missed. Meanwhile, portents of progress, however glaringly inadequate, accumulate – from the huge youth protests of 2019 to the plummeting costs of clean-energy technology to governments’ net-zero pledges. The full

**Fire and Flood**  
Eugene Linden  
Allen Lane,  
336pp, £20

**Climate Change as Class War**  
Matthew T Huber  
Verso, 320pp,  
£16.99

The year 1988 has become totemic for the dawning of climate consciousness

transition to a post-carbon economy is becoming more cost-effective, technically feasible, existentially imperative and, seemingly, politically inescapable. Yet the failure to effect it “in time” is simultaneously being historicised as a *fait accompli* (or rather *non accompli*).

Few of these histories are nihilistic in spirit, urging not passivity but clear-eyed resourcefulness before an irrevocably altered reality. And some, such as *Fire and Flood*, a new “people’s history of climate change” by the veteran environmental journalist Eugene Linden, ultimately follow a redemptive arc. His tiered history charts the ruinous lags between four “clocks”: the reality of climate change itself, the “state of the science”, “public awareness” and the somewhat nebulous group, “the world of finance and industry”. The progress Linden recounts is halting, at times reversed, strewn with false dawns, but now, he writes, “a real dawn of climate action finally seems at hand”.

Meanwhile, even the most dedicated political strategising must, as Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright contend in their book *Climate Leviathan* (2018), prepare to intervene in a world wracked by the consequences of our failure to do so earlier. Matthew Huber’s new book *Climate Change as Class War* – an incisive reflection on how to mobilise a working-class coalition behind a Green New Deal-style programme – begins from the premise that “we are ‘losing’ the climate fight. And losing badly.”

That we have failed to seriously mitigate climate change is self-evident. The failure is not only legible in emissions statistics, which continue their annual rise, only stalling in periods of economic recession or collapse (the Great Depression, the fall of the Soviet Union, the 2008 crash and, most recently, the Covid-19 pandemic). Today it is also disquietingly perceptible, in extreme weather events that are becoming more frequent and severe, in uncanny, subtler shifts – earlier springs, milder winters – and, most vividly, in raging fires, soaring temperatures and devastating droughts.

When did we begin to fail to halt climate change? We started burning fossil fuels at an industrial scale in the early 19th century – initially coal, led by the British cotton industry’s turn to steam power, analysed by Andreas Malm in his revelatory history *Fossil Capital* (2016), and later oil and gas. The heat-trapping effects of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere had been the subject of scientific speculation since around the same time, but it wasn’t until the late 1950s that concern about releasing enormous quantities of the trace gas started to gain traction in the scientific community – the first (and extant) carbon dioxide monitoring station was established in 1958. By the end of the Sixties, as Dale Jamieson recounts in *Reason in a Dark Time*, a nascent consensus had emerged that “humans could destabilise the climate”.

Climate change attracted presidential attention as early as 1965 – when Lyndon Johnson mentioned it in a special message to Congress – but its percolation into the upper echelons of the US government is often dated to a major 1979 review commissioned by the



DAVID MCNEW/GETTY IMAGES

Carter administration. The Charney report concluded, with evocative understatement, that “if carbon dioxide continues to increase, we find no reason to doubt that climate changes will result and no reason to believe that these changes will be negligible”. The starting point of both Eugene Linden and Nathaniel Rich’s histories is 1979 – the year by which, Rich claims, “nearly everything we understand about global warming was understood”. (Linden’s more detailed chronicle complicates the story somewhat: climate science, he explains, underwent a “complete paradigm shift” in the Nineties, when studies of Greenland ice cores ominously revealed that past climatic changes were not always “stately and incremental”, as scientists had assumed, but “could be dramatic and swift”.)

The fundamentals of the science were established by the end of the Seventies – not only among scientists and technocrats but oil executives too. Executives at the US corporation Exxon were so certain about oncoming climate change that, even as they prepared to finance elaborate disinformation campaigns, they began planning for it – building elevated drilling platforms in anticipation of rising sea levels, for

**Emissions of failure: Marathon Petroleum’s refinery in Los Angeles, April 2020**

example. Yet it was another decade before global warming metastasised into a truly public issue. The year 1988 has become totemic for the dawning of climate consciousness: it was then that the IPCC was founded, and Nasa scientist James Hansen testified before a US Senate committee, contending (during, dramatically, a heatwave) that the “greenhouse effect” was already discernible. The following year, the climate activist and author Bill McKibben published *The End of Nature*, among the first popular books on climate change (and reissued in 2022 as a Penguin Modern Classic). And in 1992 the first UN Earth Summit was held in Rio, a show of global consensus that provided the groundwork for future international climate negotiations.

“As it turned out,” McKibben reflected in 2019, when the world was awakening to the threat at the end of the Eighties “we were on the edge of the abyss.” By then, carbon dioxide concentrations in the atmosphere had increased from a pre-industrial average of 280 parts per million (ppm) to around 350ppm. This was the level deemed “safe” by Hansen in late 2007 (by which time it was already 383ppm), and the figure after which the climate change organisation McKibben founded, 350.org, is named (though, ▶

◀ disturbingly, the IPCC objective of keeping warming well below 2°C degrees implies a higher red line). Today, the number approaches 420 ppm.

By most estimates we've released more carbon dioxide over the past three decades than in the rest of human history. David Wallace-Wells distils this dispiriting fact memorably in *The Uninhabitable Earth*: "We have now engineered as much ruin knowingly as we ever managed in ignorance." The failure to avert climate change, in the conventional telling, is a phenomenon of the last 30 or so years.

Nathaniel Rich's *Losing Earth* deviantly locates our "excellent chance" to have dealt with global warming in the decade before it hit the headlines, and before the fossil-fuel industry had launched its extravagant crusade to undermine climate science, spearheaded by the execrable, now-disbanded consortium the Global Climate Coalition, formed in 1989. A suave, behind-the-scenes dramatisation of high-political dynamics, Rich's story climaxes in 1989, with "the first major diplomatic summit on global warming", held in Noordwijk in the Netherlands. Despite growing momentum in favour of emission-reduction targets, Noordwijk's final statement was toothless and vague, and "a decade of excruciating, painful, exhilarating progress turned to air".


But most accounts locate their various squandered opportunities, fateful decisions and unfortunate conjunctions in the 1990s and after. Inspired by the 1987 Montreal Protocol, which had successfully curtailed the use of ozone-destroying CFCs, global diplomatic efforts to reduce carbon emissions began energetically with the 1992 Rio conference, followed by the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, through which the first binding targets for advanced economies were agreed. But this first expectant stretch of diplomacy culminated with the "debacle" of the Copenhagen negotiations in 2009, when a last-ditch deal, controversially brokered behind closed doors, did not produce binding commitments. (Although even Kyoto's targets were hardly binding in practice: the US, uniquely, never ratified the agreement, and Canada withdrew in 2011 without facing sanctions.)

The year 2009 represented a "tremendous missed opportunity" in the US domestically too, Naomi Klein argues in *This Changes Everything* (2014). The newly

inaugurated Barack Obama was enjoying his brief Congressional honeymoon before the deadlock ushered in by the 2010 midterms, while the global financial crisis conferred exceptional political licence and fiscal latitude. Yet Obama, who on securing the Democratic nomination in 2008 announced that this was the moment "our planet began to heal", failed to affix a transformative piece of climate legislation to his \$831bn stimulus package, the 2009 Recovery Act – just \$90bn of which was devoted to clean energy. During his tenure the US became the world's biggest fossil-fuel producer ("That was me, people," he boasted in 2018), buoyed by the rise of fracking in the 2010s (in a 2012 speech in Cushing, Oklahoma, Obama gloated about having constructed "enough new oil and gas pipeline to encircle the Earth and then some").

While 2009 might have been an opportunity to reverse course, that course was set, in Klein's view, in the developments of the 1990s – namely, the liberalisation of global trade, whose infrastructure was being cemented in a series of treaties (the North American Free Trade Agreement, adopted in 1992; the World Trade Organisation, established in 1995, and China's accession to that body in 2001). Not only would goods now travel vast distances in "carbon-spewing container ships and jumbo jets, as well as diesel trucks", but the new agreements also paved the way for corporations to sue governments for imposing laws – such as anti-pollution regulations – that jeopardised their profits. The 1990s represented a "tragedy" for Eugene Linden, too: instead of powering their development with renewables, China and India took the "fossil-fuel-intensive path" to industrialisation blazed by the advanced economies. The world's 20th- and 21st-century "factory" would, like the 19th-century "workshop of the world", be fuelled substantially by coal. Between 1990 and 2019, China's greenhouse-gas emissions increased fourfold, Linden notes, overtaking the US to become the world's largest emitter, and India's tripled.

These dismaying histories of missed chances, their authors maintain, are not gratuitous elegies to bygone political eras, but instructive exercises, yielding, in Andreas Malm's phrase, "a realistic assessment of the obstacles to the transition" – or what Nathaniel Rich calls "the villains". Who or what, then, are the villains named or implied by this history? While nations'



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refusal to subordinate economic self-interest to the exigencies of the ecosphere appears a universal impulse, the United States has played a starring role. Having promised in a 1988 campaign speech to combat the “greenhouse effect with the White House effect”, George HW Bush nearly didn’t attend the 1992 Rio conference and, once there, avowed that the fossil-fuel-hungry “American way of life is not up for negotiation”. The US signed but then didn’t adopt the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, after the Senate unanimously passed a resolution opposing a treaty. At Copenhagen in 2009, Washington “led the way in blocking all but the most limited, voluntary agreements”, as John Bellamy Foster and his co-authors recount in *The Ecological Rift* (2010).

With evidently pointless diplomatic tact – given the US’s notorious withdrawal from the accords under Donald Trump – the 2015 Paris agreement was expressly devised so as not to be binding on the US. More recently, Biden’s Build Back Better bill, which included climate initiatives, has stalled in the Senate, thanks to the intransigence of Joe Manchin, a former governor of West Virginia (the US’s second-largest coal-producing state) and a shareholder in the coal brokerage firm he founded, now run by his son.

Rather than indicting capitalism *tout court*, both Naomi Klein and Bill McKibben lay particular emphasis on its most recent, virulent iteration, neoliberalism, which, distinguished by deregulatory fanaticism and extreme disparities of wealth and power, has emerged as a conspicuous saboteur of action to temper corporations’ ecological destructiveness. Klein describes the climate crisis as an “epic case of bad historical timing”, since its advent as a political issue – and one patently demanding enlightened state intervention – coincided with the ascendancy of “extreme free-market ideology”. Linden similarly censures, in rather sloppier terms, “our modern market economy” (“amoral, blind and easily gamed”) and “consumer society”.

**A** final, junior culprit in these histories is the too-slow diffusion of knowledge about climate change. This encompasses not just the malign – the fossil-fuel industry’s disinformation offensive – but the mundane: Linden even reserves some blame for the slow and cumbersome nature of scientific inquiry itself. The climate crisis as a consequence of an information deficit occurs in more oblique guise in the influential notion that it amounts to a “market failure” – “the greatest and most wide-ranging” ever seen, as the economist Nicholas Stern dramatically described it in his 2006 review to the UK government. Prices, the idea runs, omit the true “cost” of consuming carbon – its “neighbourhood effects”, as Milton Friedman termed them, or “negative externalities”, as they are known in mainstream economics (which can be “internalised” by, for example, imposing a carbon tax). “If the markets had the incentives and penalties to price in the likely future costs of climate change,” Linden writes, “the world would have acted decades ago.”

The notion that failure to tackle climate change is a consequence of a lethal interlude between the science being settled and the burgeoning of public alarm – or a discrepancy between the real “costs” of burning carbon and the market “price” of doing so – is powerfully debunked by Matt Huber in *Climate Change as Class War*. Our inaction on climate change, he insists, is not “due to misinformation” but a “lack of power”. And the “villain” in Huber’s telling is not “consumerism” nor collective inertia, not the “market economy” nor the capitalist system in aggregate, but the “fraction of the capitalist class that controls the production of energy from fossil fuels and other carbon-intensive industries”.

The idea that we would already be living in a post-carbon world if awareness of the harm of carbon emissions had been more pervasive is underpinned by what Huber characterises as a “naive and highly liberal theory of social change”. In this world-view, public pressure (or even mere public consciousness) leads inexorably to an adequate reaction from politicians, just as price signals, correctly adjusted, spontaneously guide the economy away from carbon-intensive activity. Here, collective power is exercised in the accumulation of individual decisions. We exert social influence by expressing our preferences – in how we vote and what we buy – which are efficiently processed by putatively rational systems: the immaculate mechanics of the market and the perfectly representative electoral system.

We know what’s required to avert catastrophe, says Linden in asking “the existential question: will we?” “The ‘we’, of course, is humanity,” he submits with consummate insipidity. Huber’s bracing diagnosis complicates the bleached idea that climate change is something “we” have “failed” to “prevent”. The “small minority of capitalists” in carbon-intensive sectors “produce climate change”, he argues. Huber proposes a far more coherent and potent principle of aggregating individuals into strategic coalitions to defeat this fraction – not as consumers or passive conduits of alarm, but as a class structurally alienated from “the ecological means of life: food, housing, energy and more”.

This vision of social change as necessitating struggle against powerful groups that need to be coerced or overcome by a countervailing force, not merely enlightened or lobbied – let alone implored to “tell the truth”, as Extinction Rebellion’s first “demand” has it – is daunting. It’s certainly more demanding than the frictionless model of progress outsourced to technology, or the market, or responsive politicians. Eco-socialists are routinely chastised for their lack of realism or unhelpful combativeness – calling for improbable transformations while the planet burns. The irony is that ostensibly modest technocratic reforms, which so often omit to anoint a credible force that can compel their implementation, are beginning to seem the more irresponsibly utopian. Meanwhile, as a devastating global food shortage looms, inflamed by crop-withering drought and heat, the future is already here. If there is no such thing as “success” now, the urgent need remains to devise and ruthlessly pursue ways of failing better. ●

**Under Obama the US became the world’s biggest fossil-fuel producer. “That was me, people,” he boasted**

## The rise of Empress Wintour

An account of the iron-fisted *Vogue* editor's ascent struggles to find the human being behind the shades

By Johanna Thomas-Corr



When Anna Wintour was 18, she arranged to meet a date at a big anti-Vietnam War protest in London. Her father, Charles Wintour, then editor of the *Evening Standard*, recalled how she spent two hours choosing her outfit before leaving the family home in Kensington, only to patter up the steps again. “I opened the door and she said: ‘Daddy, am I for or against Cambodia?’”

A slightly ungracious thing for a father to share, perhaps? In the same interview, given in 1986, two years before Anna had ascended to the editorship of British *Vogue*, Charles was careful to add that he was “almost sure” his favourite child was now aware that there were two political parties in the US. But the story, recounted in Amy Odell’s new biography of Anna Wintour, does highlight the crucial factors that have allowed her to become the most famous editor in the world: an instinct for being where the action is; an exacting eye for outfits; a background of immense privilege; and a certain flexibility when it comes to politics. The morning after Donald Trump’s election, Wintour gave a tearful speech to staff in defence of the rights of women, immigrants and LGBTQ+ people. Weeks later, she was hosting Trump at the offices of Condé Nast, “grinning at her guest of honour” and floating the idea of photographing his wife again for the magazine.

Wintour is “endowed with the rare ability to turn attachments – to both outcomes and people – on and off like a switch”, Odell notes. In 2010 she stubbornly insisted on featuring Asma al-Assad, the wife of the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, in the magazine just as he was ordering the murder of thousands of his people; only later to sack the journalist and long-time friend, Joan Juliet Buck, who had interviewed Asma (Buck insists she never wanted to write the piece). Wintour also, according to one source, maintained that “black people don’t sell”. Until, that is, diversity became fashionable, whereupon, *Vogue* ran a specially commissioned painted portrait of a little-known black designer on the cover.

Odell’s not-quite-authorized biography is an attempt to peer behind Wintour’s sunglasses and tell the story of how the 72-year-old has managed to maintain her 34-year reign at American *Vogue*, becoming a meme, a useful ally to presidents, the inspiration for *The Devil Wears Prada* and one of the fashion world’s leading tastemakers. A fashion journalist, Odell is in the rare position as biographer of having been interviewed by her subject (for *Vogue* jobs) but not having interviewed her – which might help explain her overreliance on sightings of Wintour’s tears as confirmation that there is something human going on inside her. But though Wintour declined to speak, she did grant Odell access to a few key colleagues and friends; the book draws on 250 interviews as well as some delicious tidbits retrieved from the archives. I had no idea that Andy Warhol declared Wintour a “terrible dresser” or that she found Bill Gates “attractive” (it’s a power thing, apparently) or that Serena Williams asks her advice on how to win tennis matches. She also hates all vegetables except green beans.

“There is a person there,” one loyalist claims. “She



laughs and everything," says another. Her allies strain to paint her as, in private, a disco-dancing, parlour-game-playing, nappy-changing granny. But there are dissenting voices. Odell quotes the late André Leon Talley, once her most beloved lieutenant, who called Wintour "a colonial broad", adding: "I do not think she will ever let anything get in the way of her white privilege." A childhood friend, Vivienne Lasky, recalls that Wintour maintained a costly beauty regime at school (including visits to a dermatologist and regular haircuts at Vidal Sassoon) and rarely spoke to her classmates. "She wanted to be in her own rarefied air."

**A**s I was reading about Wintour's rise, I found the opening refrain from *Hamilton* playing in my mind: "How does a bastard, orphan, son of a whore... grow up to be a hero and a scholar?" For Wintour, the question would be more like: "How does an independently wealthy, extremely well-connected daughter of a successful newspaper editor grow up to run a fashion magazine?" Wintour was determined to prove herself to her intellectual family ("They've always thought I am deeply unserious," she once said). But her ascent feels monarchical, all failures cushioned, all doors left ajar.

Her father's career ensured she grew up surrounded by eminent political and cultural figures. Her mother Nonie was an American journalist turned social worker who possessed a "sharp eye for the weakness of others" and a large inheritance. At the age of 15, Wintour was given the basement apartment of her family home, with its own entrance. By the time she was in her early twenties, she was receiving lump sums from her grandmother's trust fund which, as Odell writes, "made it possible for her not only to enter the poorly paying publishing field but also take the risks that would lead to her advancement".

It helped too that her father called in favours: first fixing her a job at the Biba fashion store (she was later sacked, Odell reports, for suspected shoplifting) and then at *Harpers & Queen*. While his interventions occasionally backfired, family wealth came in handy when she moved to New York to work in women's magazines, seemingly paying her assistants out of her own pocket. At *New York Magazine*, she dismissed other colleagues' sections as "rubbish". By the time she got her first role at US *Vogue*, she was "moving through the world like the star of her own never-ending photoshoot".

Since 1988, Wintour has run the magazine with "unprecedented, iron-fisted discipline". She is a hellish person to work for, ritualistically hazing and humiliating junior colleagues – though she is no different from her senior male Condé Nast colleagues in this respect. Odell paints her as equal parts creative genius and calculating apparatchik. While Wintour's *Vogue* has followed trends ("I want to do something about Asians. They're everywhere," she told colleagues in 1994), the magazine has remained loyal to her rather conservative aesthetic: "English garden party" with plenty of "happiness, smiles, sunlight". She favours thin, white "girls of privilege", preferably socialites or princesses, with Ivy League degrees. But even if you've

won Wintour's favour, it can be lost. When it was suggested that the magazine run a piece about Gwyneth Paltrow's Goop skincare line, Wintour said: "If you do it, just make sure we're retouching her because she's looking quite rough these days." She once told a picture editor to retouch the fat around a baby's neck – and even asked if the Metropolitan Museum of Art could board up the ancient Temple of Dendur at the Met Gala because she found it ugly.

Nevertheless, Wintour's single-minded focus on "beauty" has proved to be a weakness, as the Asma al-Assad incident proved. "We tried and tried to talk her out of that," claims former managing editor Laurie Jones: "The human rights, all the indignities... Anna just wanted that picture." Odell wonders whether Wintour's editorial instincts are faltering. She has been rewarded for upholding "whiteness and elitism [that] have historically resulted in praise and magazine sales". ("Could somebody tell André that not every month is Black History Month?" she responded when Talley suggested that she feature more black women.) Now, that imperiousness seems more like a liability, "perhaps as it should have been perceived all along".

Odell claims Wintour has a difficult working relationship with her former contributing editor, Edward Enninful, who became the first black editor-in-chief of British *Vogue* and is tipped as her successor on the flagship US edition. Enninful is gay and from a working-class background, his family having immigrated from Ghana. He grew up in Ladbroke Grove in west London, down the road from Wintour's childhood home, but their trajectories couldn't have been more different. He didn't have a trust fund for designer clothes so he learned to be resourceful. Handy, now that ad revenue is down, production costs have been slashed and fashion is faster, tougher and less rarefied.

Does this book tell us much about Wintour we couldn't have guessed? Odell admits that the many people she interviewed "had a hard time explaining why she is so powerful and what her power amounts to". So does Odell, who never quite locates the substance behind the style. It's a shame, therefore, that she didn't feel she could have more fun with the ludicrous antics at Planet Vogue. I had to amuse myself with the names of the fashion posh, such as Carlyne Cerf de Dudzele, Stephanie Winston Wolkoff, Gloria von Thurn und Taxis and – my favourite – Min Hogg.

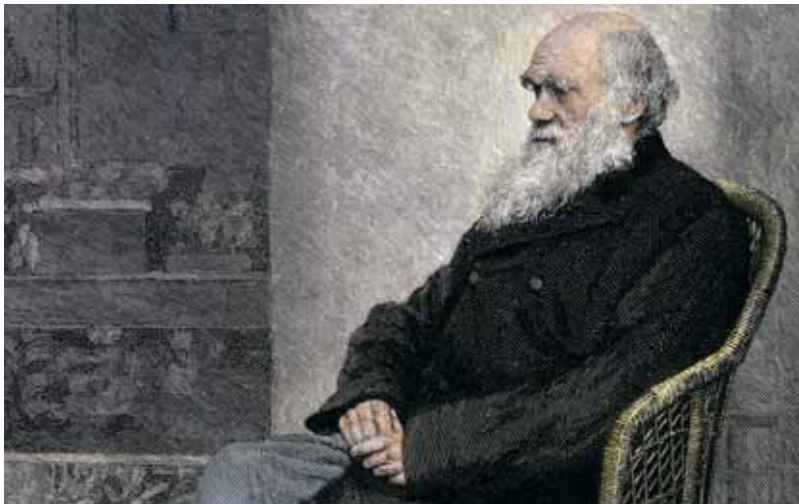
But ultimately, I found something rather depressing about the story of Wintour's success and what it tells us about how a woman gains and sustains power. First, that she needs the backing of a rich and influential father. Second, that she has to develop such a Machiavellian approach to relationships. Third, that her reign of power requires an austere and unswerving routine. And fourth – perhaps most disheartening of all – that to maintain this image of steely control, she must wield silence as her ultimate weapon, rarely explaining her decisions, just barking orders.

It's so joyless, so samey, so uptight, so lifeless. Wintour has insisted she will never write her memoirs, telling her friends: "I'm so bored by me". By the end of this book, so was I. ●



**Anna: the Biography**  
Amy Odell  
Allen & Unwin,  
464pp, £20

**André Leon Talley once said of Wintour, "I do not think she will ever let anything get in the way of her white privilege"**



## The myth of the European genius

Darwin acknowledged the influence of other cultures in his scientific work. Why don't we?

By Will Dunn

“If I have seen further,” Isaac Newton wrote to his fellow scientist Robert Hooke in 1675, “it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants.” Long seen as our greatest scientist’s greatest line, it may have been a sarcastic joke: Hooke, a rival who had claimed credit for Newton’s discoveries and whom Newton came to dislike intensely, was a short man.

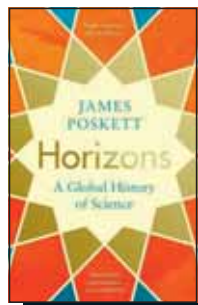
It was true, however, that Newton was supported by people who remained unseen. This was very much the case with his finances: Newton was an investor in the slave trade. He bought thousands of shares in the South Sea Company, the principal enterprise of which was to transport people from Africa to the Americas. Newton invested in this business for over a decade, making a significant profit (and then losing it in the crash of 1720).

Art cannot exist without its creator, whatever else they may have thought or done. But knowledge – especially the natural laws of physics and mathematics – is discovered. Why mark it with the personal lives or beliefs of the individuals who found it? As the historian James Poskett points out in *Horizons*, which tells the story of the global roots of modern science, there are many good reasons to do just that. The call to “decolonise” subjects by acknowledging their cultural context is seen by some as needlessly political, but

**Evolving thought:**  
Darwin found a reference to selection in ancient Chinese literature

**Horizons:**  
A Global History of Science

James Poskett  
Viking, 464pp,  
£25



Poskett argues that science was already politicised. The idea that scientific revolutions are the preserve of the European male genius – Newton, Darwin, Copernicus, Galileo, Einstein – is, he argues, a political project to reinforce the idea that people who support a particular system of government, or live on one side of a border, are more curious, inventive and adept than others.

The scientific revolutions of the last four centuries took place not just at the same time as political and religious conflict, invasion and enslavement, but because of these things. Newton’s understanding of celestial mechanics did not pop into his head with the falling of an apple, but was made possible by the expanding world of empire. Travellers such as the French astronomer Jean Richer were brought by the ships of slave-trading companies to “new” lands, where they made observations of the sky and the movements of pendulums upon which Newton – who never left England – was able to form his theories. The same was true of evolution, a theory that was not simply arrived at by Charles Darwin but formed over decades by scientists across the world, and which Poskett links to shifts in global power such as the decline of Spain’s empire in South America and the expansion of Russia’s empire in central Europe.

Like Newton – who wrote, “all the world knows that I make no observations myself” – Darwin readily acknowledged that he was drawing conclusions based on work from around the planet. “The principle of selection I find distinctly given in an ancient Chinese encyclopaedia,” he wrote in *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Copernicus, too, cited the Islamic astronomers whose work was essential to the heliocentric model of the universe he described in *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* (1543). The independent genius is a modern invention.

What purpose does this myth serve? Science has always been an instrument of power – as Poskett explains, the ability to create a calendar or understand the pharmacology of a certain plant can have far-reaching implications. In the 20th century the power of science became increasingly evident, as ever more technical learning allowed for ever more destructive weapons. With the arrival of the Cold War it became necessary to pretend there was such a thing as Soviet science, or that Islamic science belonged to some past “golden age”, or that Europe was the only place where a renaissance of knowledge happened in the 17th century (it happened everywhere from Timbuktu to Tibet, and the “renaissance” wasn’t named until everyone involved had been dead for 200 years). The truth was far more complex, international and diverse, but the myth was easier to understand. The story of the apple tree is easier to explain than the inverse square law.

But if science is now constrained by a reverence for the past, it’s not the first time this has happened. During the medieval period, studying science or medicine meant reading ancient texts in Latin and Greek; it was the breaking of these traditions that enabled a new age of discovery. An honest conversation about the history of science is therefore not just of moral importance – it is part of what makes discovery possible. ●

## Reviewed in short

### **Black Ghost of Empire: The Long Death of Slavery and the Failure of Emancipation** by Kris Manjapra

Allen Lane, 256pp, £20

According to the Tufts University history professor Kris Manjapra, although the period from 1780 to 1880 saw an end to centuries of the enslaving of African peoples, the former slaves were none the better for it. In numerous places captive labour continued for years after slavery's end was declared, while freed slaves received neither reparations nor recognition. In Africa colonial expansion imposed new constrictions; in the Caribbean the apprenticeship system intended to ease the transition to freedom could be even harsher than slavery itself; in northern US states slaves had to pay for their own freedom. However noble the aims of the abolitionists, in practice emancipation "aggravated slavery's historical trauma and extended white supremacist rule and anti-blackness", says Manjapra.

Consequently, his book offers a frequently unsettling counter-narrative to the congratulatory strand of abolitionist history. "The history of slavery and emancipation is not a story of endings, but of unendings" and, he adds, the effects and the lack of meaningful restitutions and redress still affect post-slavery societies today.

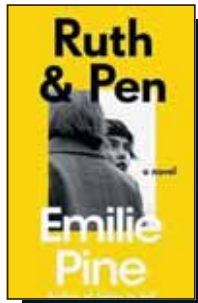
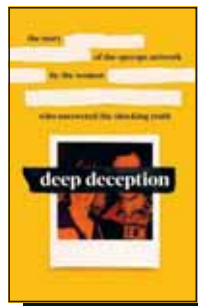
By Michael Prodger

### **Bear Woman** by Karolina Ramqvist, trs Saskia Vogel Bonnie, 400pp, £16.99

In 1542 a French noblewoman, Marguerite, was marooned on a remote island for having a scandalous affair with a fellow passenger while onboard a naval expedition to "New France" (in today's Canada). Her lover, maidservant and, later, baby, were stranded with her, but all perished except for Marguerite, who braved the wild animals (hence "bear woman") and was eventually retrieved by fishermen.

Conforming to a tiresome vogue, *Bear Woman* does not simply reconstruct this sparsely documented historical episode, but embeds Marguerite's story in a pedestrian memoir about the process of telling it (and googling it – the search engine is mentioned upwards of 20 times). The details of the narrator's writing process and research trips aren't reliably scintillating ("My coffee was still so hot that the cup burned my fingers. I had to set it down and blow on it"). This hybrid-memoir is weighted towards personal candour and immediacy, but these need to be artfully deployed and transfigured by style. Ramqvist's modishly spare prose, translated by Saskia Vogel, doesn't achieve the austere radiance it perhaps aspires to.

By Lola Seaton



### **Deep Deception: The Story of the Spycop Network, by the Women who Uncovered the Shocking Truth** by Alison, Belinda, Helen Steel, Lisa and Naomi Ebury Press, 400pp, £20

This is a book not just about deception or state surveillance, but also misogyny. It's about law enforcement recklessly trampling on the lives of five innocent women by using them to shore up the false identities of police officers seeking to infiltrate non-violent left-wing movements. It is a story about how the state uses women and disposes of them, about institutional sexism and corruption at the highest level. In *Deep Deception* the women who were betrayed by the Spycop scandal – many of whom remain anonymous – speak candidly about the men who broke their hearts and lied to them: from the first "I love you" to reflections on moments of suspicion; incriminating photos, credit cards and passports in different names.

But rather than wallowing in pity, their collaborative work claims victory. When the women find out about their partners' alternate lives they seek legal action, despite the power of the establishment that they confront. Arriving at a pivotal moment, when both the Met Police and Westminster are facing a reckoning over their treatment of women, this is an inspiring read that elucidates the power of justice.

By Zoë Grünewald

### **Ruth & Pen** by Emilie Pine Hamish Hamilton, 256pp, £14.99

Emilie Pine's debut novel is set in Dublin over a single day; comparisons to James Joyce's *Ulysses* are somewhat inevitable. But Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* is clearly the major modernist influence on this story. Pine's two protagonists are strangers to one another; her prose follows the rhythms of their thoughts as they go about their respective days.

Pen is an idealistic and autistic 16-year-old, skipping school to attend a climate march with her crush, Alice, and struggling to balance her competing excitement and anxiety. (She has recently read "that book" about "the man with shell shock".) Ruth is a psychotherapist, reeling from a shock in her marriage. Both are immersed in their own worries, temporarily interrupted by the sensory distractions of the city. "Strange, Ruth thinks, pausing at a shopfront, how you can smell the scent of olives or spices and the fact that your husband possibly/maybe/probably hates you can be pushed aside, put almost out of mind, at the prospect of food."

Pine is best-known for her essay collection *Notes to Self*; here, she shows promise as a sensitive, empathetic writer of fiction.

By Anna Leszkiewicz

## The nature of things

From an exploded shed to steamrollered trombones, Cornelia Parker exposes the hidden meanings of objects

By Michael Prodger

Whatever one thinks of Cornelia Parker's work, there is no doubting the quality of her address book. She has a hotline, it seems, to an array of august – and compliant – institutions, among them the British Army, HM Revenue & Customs, the Royal Mint and the Palace of Westminster, as well as Madame Tussaud's and the Colt firearms company. Without their help, her art would be very different and infinitely less resonant.

These institutions have respectively helped her blow things up, gifted a bag of incinerated cocaine, donated a pile of coin blanks, given her both Victorian encaustic tiles and permission to fly a drone inside the House of Commons chamber, allowed her to use the guillotine that decapitated Queen Marie Antoinette, and donated a pair of modified .45 pistols. To her list of "Without whom none of this would have been possible" benefactors she could also add Texan snake farmers, the police, the Imperial War Museum, and a steamroller company. All of them have provided either the material or the tools for her pieces.

This range is indicative of Parker's conviction that art can come from anywhere and be made anyhow and of anything. It is a creed that could cut either way – banality and mess or, as in Parker's case, inventiveness and a rigorous aesthetic. What she has done with her relentless curiosity over the past 34 years is currently thrillingly laid out at the major retrospective of her work at Tate Britain.

Parker's work is about transubstantiation, an idea she grew up with as part of a mass-attending Catholic family. As with what she calls "the double flip with a little piece of rice paper (bread) and wine as stand-in for the body and blood of Christ" at Communion, so

**Cornelia Parker**  
Tate Britain,  
London SW1  
Runs until  
16 October

with her array of materials: "In my work the process liberates the meaning of the objects." Not that the meaning is always clear, even if the works are evocative.

There is, for example, *Stolen Thunder* (1996-97), a display of ten smudged handkerchiefs, each of which bears the tarnish of an historical object. These are the smears left when Parker polished artefacts such as Guy Fawkes's lantern, Nelson's candlestick, Henry VIII's armour and Charles I's spurs. Without the information about where each came from they are no more than stains but, as Parker says, the objects' owners "all had vivid lives that we are familiar with and their history imbues the tarnish with their presence". The ghostly marks recall the Shroud of Turin and in their making there is a form of performance art going on, as well as the elevation of the found object that Marcel Duchamp turned into one of the precepts of 20th-century art. In Parker's telling there is a dose of overthinking waftiness, too: "There is an exchange going on: I polish their objects, leaving them with reflected glory, and take away their tarnished reputations."

Other instances of transformation include *Poison and Antidote Drawings* (2010), in which she mixed rattlesnake venom ("a pint of bright yellow liquid – enough to kill quite a lot of people!" bought for \$20) with black pigment and antivenin with white and then made a set of Rorschach test ink blots. Each of the resulting organic blobs that resemble monotone jellyfish is both an abstract if suggestive image and a literal incarnation of life and death. Another series, *Pornographic Drawings* (1996), uses X-rated videotape confiscated by HM Revenue & Customs that Parker dissolved in solvent; the resulting ink is used for more blots. In a quirk that Hermann Rorschach himself would have enjoyed, they irresistibly call to mind squidgy sexual organs.

Elsewhere she turns bullets into wire that is weaved into skeins and meshes; pours rubber into the cracks between the paving stones of Bunhill Fields in London, where William Blake is buried, to give a congealed grid; or presses a hot poker on to folded paper, which, when opened out, gives a grid of burned holes. It is all neat, clever and interesting.

What really engage the senses though are still Parker's large-scale installations. The piece that cemented her reputation, *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* (1991) – a shed and its contents exploded by the army using Semtex – remains potent in the flesh despite its familiarity. Each piece of wood, melted Wellington boot and twisted garden tool is suspended by wire and lit by a single lightbulb at the centre to cast the shadows of each of the hundreds of pieces spectrally on the walls. It is a simulacrum of the microsecond after the explosion – the Big Bang in miniature – and freezes both time and power. The work, the very opposite of the idea of carving to release the figure in the stone or of modelling to build something from nothing, shows that sculpture can simultaneously be about destruction as well as creation.

Almost as affecting is a room draped in the red paper left behind by the process of making Remembrance Day poppies. The sheets are like rolls of



Flat notes: *Perpetual Canon* (2004), a circle of squashed brass instruments, depicts the sound of music silenced

wallpaper with blanks left where the poppies have been punched out. Parker has hung them from the ceiling and walls of one gallery so that the viewer enters into a sanguine marquee. Here though the red – and the negatives left behind from each of tens of thousands of absent poppies – marks a lost life. If tents are cocooning safe spaces then Parker turns the idea upside down: the room is formally beautiful; what it brings to mind is anything but.

Not everything works so well. There are documentary films shot on an iPhone showing a Palestinian man making a crown of thorns from barbed wire, the poppy factory machines in action and, in slow motion, New York Halloween revellers queuing outside a nightclub, which, like much video art, promise more than they mean. Nor do the sub-Martin Parr photographs she took of protesters and newspaper front covers in her role as official artist of the 2017 general election differ from those of any snapper artfully showing street life from supposedly interesting angles. *Island*, her most recent work, is a little-Englander Brexit commentary piece. Combining a greenhouse (recalling her

childhood garden) with white daubs on its panes made from the chalk of the white cliffs of Dover, and with encaustic floor tiles rescued from the Palace of Westminster after restoration, it is a strained and unpersuasive mashing together of motifs.

This piece highlights the paradox that applies to almost all her work. Parker's art relies on association, and that association on the knowledge of the materials and processes that brought it into being. Without the backstory, most of the pieces are null. Some are independently beautiful – *Perpetual Canon* (2004), for example, a circle of squashed brass musical instruments suspended at head height, forever silent, the visualisation of the last echo of a brass band that has marched out of sight. Most, however, rely on knowledge. Without learning that her infrared photographs of clouds were taken using a camera that belonged to Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz, they are just wannabe Gerhard Richter skiescapes; with that knowledge they take on a slew of unnerving interpretations and emotions.

At her best, however, Parker inventively matches concept and form to practise a kind of alchemy, turning mundanity into profundity. ●

**Parker's benefactors include Texan snake farmers, the police, the Imperial War Museum and a steamroller company**

# Critic at Large

## Last of the action heroes

In its Reaganite military pomp, *Top Gun* seemed to mark the end of an era – but a new sequel shows it may not be over yet

By Leo Robson

**T**op Gun, the ludicrous film about naval aviators released in 1986 and now begetter of a sequel, boasts dozens of memorable, meme-friendly elements. The movie contains topless beach volleyball, topless locker-room conflict, the term “wingman”, the line “I feel the need... the need for speed” (capped by a clumsy sideways high five), the jargon “bogey” and “MiG”, along with infectious songs either yelled on screen (“You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feelin’”, “Great Balls of Fire”) or ladled over the soundtrack (“Danger Zone”, “Take My Breath Away”).

The producer Jerry Bruckheimer had come across an article about an F-14 crew in the May 1983 issue of *California* magazine, and, with his partner and fellow pioneer of the high-concept blockbuster, Don Simpson, plotted to create “*Star Wars* on Earth”. A pair of punchy monosyllables was a key part of the formula. Ehud Yonay’s piece – 8,000 words, plus a trio of informative sidebars – had been titled “Top Guns”, a description of the pilots. The “s” was dropped, out of fidelity to the name used for the Fighter Weapons School at Naval Air Station Miramar, near San Diego, though it doubles as slang for the slot that the trainees are all after.

The writers up the ante right from the on-screen prologue, explaining that Top Gun (the school) was founded in the late 1960s both to revive the “lost art of



COLLECTION CHRISTOPHEL / ALAMY

I feel the need... the need for a sequel: Tom Cruise reprises his iconic fly-boy role in *Top Gun: Maverick*

aerial combat” and to create “the best fighter pilots in the world”. Tom Cruise, initially reluctant, agreed to sign up once persuaded that the film was “about excellence”. As Pete “Maverick” Mitchell, gutsy, boastful and haunted by his father’s death in Vietnam, he became acquainted with his favourite type of future co-star: shiny, fast-moving machines. The director, Tony Scott, had worked in ads, and peddled a by then familiar formula of slow-motion, smoky light and synths. Reviewing the film in the *New Yorker*, the critic Pauline Kael asked what *Top Gun* was selling, and decided: “It’s just selling.” That was prophetic to a degree. People pre-ordered the VHS in record numbers, bought the soundtrack, Blu Tacked the poster to their bedroom doors. But Kael’s answer was also naive.

When the film opened in May 1986, the US president was a former actor whose credits included *Hellcats of the Navy*, and an avid Red-baiter who had endorsed another slice of late Cold War entertainment, Tom Clancy’s novel *The Hunt for Red October* (“the perfect yarn”). *Top Gun*, with its Pentagon backing, its loathing of abroad, its thrusting, toothy, unselfconsciously manic lead and a supporting cast that contained three female speaking parts – Cruise’s love interest and a pair of wives – was steeped in the most Fifties-ish elements of Eighties America. The White House press secretary Mark Weinberg, in his dewy memoir *Movie Nights with the Reagans*, about the regular screenings held at the naval support facility known as Camp David, recalls that his old boss welcomed *Top Gun*’s “unabashedly pro-military” stance. He also describes a conversation between Cruise and Reagan in California in 1989, shortly after Reagan left office – a meeting of minds between two men who, Weinberg maintains, “helped us” emerge from the shadow of Vietnam. Geoff Dyer, in *Another Great Day at Sea*, his 2014 portrait of life on an aircraft carrier, said that he met only one person who wasn’t there because of *Top Gun*.

In other ways, the film’s legacy has been limited, or at least contained. The critic Andrew Britton, sizing up “Reaganite entertainment” in 1986, before the release of *Top Gun*, observed a new phenomenon: the brazen desire to celebrate the armed services, “recuperate Vietnam” and assert the primacy of father-son relationships. *Top Gun*, while a culmination of that logic, was also a terminus. For one thing, it is an overwhelmingly white contribution to a film sub-type notable for the dominance of African-American actors: Eddie Murphy, Will Smith, Denzel Washington. And it was totally at odds with what soon became the prevailing Hollywood attitude to the exercise of American power.

Oliver Stone, a decorated veteran, had released one anti-war film, *Salvador*, weeks before *Top Gun* came out, and had another due out at the end of the year, *Platoon*. In his memoir *Chasing the Light*, Stone recalls an offer from Don Simpson to adapt the *California* article. “My problem was the content,” he wrote: “a big commercial picture about our hotshot competitive fighter pilots.” But it wasn’t a totally zany match-up. Stone had recently written a film about male excitability full of period trappings – *Scarface*. And, as Pauline Kael observed,

even when “left-leaning polemic” became his thing, it was paired with “a right-wing macho vision” characterised by such Simpson-friendly properties as “gaudiness”, “sensationalistic propulsiveness”, “filtered light”, “romanticised insanity”. *Top Gun* was the highest-grossing film of the year, but *Platoon*, made on a \$6.5m budget, came third, and it swept the Oscars (*Top Gun* had to make do with Best Original Song). Stone was a champion crowd-pleaser, but of a different kind. Barely six months after *Top Gun* was watched by the Reagans at Camp David – a period that also witnessed the Iran-Contra affair – the shadow of Vietnam returned. (“Your film has changed the direction of a country’s thinking,” Jackie Kennedy wrote to Stone.)

Meanwhile, John Grisham, a lawyer and Democrat in the Mississippi House of Representatives, was hard at work on his debut novel, *A Time to Kill*, and six weeks after *Top Gun* came out, a sometime actor, Aaron Sorkin, heard from his sister, a naval lawyer, about a strange case down at Guantánamo Bay, and started writing a play. Though Tom Cruise made his name with a series of roles in which he gets to be good at things – “He could play brash, energetic, go get ‘em at any cost, cut any corner,” Stone wrote – he soon traded virtuosity for virtue, or placed one in the service of the other. He earned his first Oscar nomination working with Stone, playing the campaigner Ron Kovic in the Vietnam story *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), then starred as hotshot lawyers facing down thuggery in adaptations of Sorkin’s *A Few Good Men* (1992), which resembles *Top Gun* in half a dozen ways, and of Grisham’s breakthrough novel *The Firm* (1993).

In the three and a half decades since *Top Gun*, tales of military-industrial derring-do have been relatively rare. The blitheness of the Reagan era gave way to knowingness, incredulity, eloquence, a liberal consensus. The revelations of the US navy lieutenant Paula Coughlin – the Tailhook scandal of 1991 – exposed a culture of sexual harassment among aviation officers. The closest thing that the Nineties offered to *Top Gun* was Paul Verhoeven’s savage, satirical film *Starship Troopers*. Stone and Sorkin became the dominant political storytellers. The actor Tim Robbins, who had a grinning supporting role in *Top Gun*, directed prominent films about Republican corruption (*Bob Roberts*) and capital punishment (*Dead Man Walking*). Pretenders to Cruise’s throne, Matthew McConaughey and Matt Damon, emerged with studies in the limits of machismo – respectively playing an arrested high-school playboy in *Dazed and Confused*, and a traumatised, opioid-addicted army medic in *Courage Under Fire* (which starred Meg Ryan, one of the *Top Gun* wives, as an army pilot being considered for the Medal of Honor). Then they proceeded to Grisham adaptations.

Cruise himself diversified wildly, sometimes deconstructing his persona, sometimes relinquishing it, sometimes – in films as varied as *Magnolia* and *Austin Powers in Goldmember* – sending himself up. The next time Simpson and Bruckheimer made ▶

**Top Gun was totally at odds with what soon became the prevailing Hollywood attitude to American power**

◀ a film involving the armed forces – again with Tony Scott – it was a more nuanced affair, *Crimson Tide*, with a couple of scenes written by the pre-eminent cine-literate voice of the 1990s, Quentin Tarantino, who had just devoted one of his regrettable acting appearances, in the 1994 film *Sleep With Me*, to a riff on homosexuality in *Top Gun*.

**T**op Gun: *Maverick* is close at times to a reboot, and that's what saves it. Jorge Luis Borges, in his story about a fictional writer named Pierre Menard who set out to produce a line-by-line transcription of *Don Quixote*, suggests that while Cervantes in one passage offers "mere rhetorical praise of history", Menard, using the identical phrasing three centuries later, puts forth a radical account of history's claims to truth. A version of that logic can be applied here.

*Top Gun: Maverick* opens with the same message as its predecessor. Aerial combat is still a "lost art", but what was once the occasion for nostalgic bloodlust seems, in the age of drones, an honourable form of combat, akin to duelling. Repetition forms the basis of riposte, even critique. In the original, Maverick's "ego [was] writing cheques" his body couldn't cash, here he needs "an ego check". All this time we thought he had tamed the tendencies enshrined in his call sign, and stayed on as a Top Gun instructor. Now we learn he lasted all of two months, and, though he has excelled as a pilot, never rose above the rank of captain. He is that most un-Reagan-like creature, the middle-aged non-conformist.

In general, the film's construction is less carbon copy than mirror image. Maverick has been called in to prepare a group of Top Gun graduates for a geographically vague high-stakes mission. The counterpart to his younger self is Rooster (Miles Teller). Rooster has a dead naval-pilot father – Goose, Maverick's wingman last time around – and an imbalance in his make-up, albeit the opposite to that suffered by Maverick: too much thought, not enough instinct. Maverick's position in Rooster's life is therefore closer to cheeky uncle than proxy dad – he urges him to take more risks. One of the odd things about the original film was that the spectre of a father who died on a flying mission induced a daredevil streak in the son. The knock-on effect was that the putative bad guy, Iceman (Val Kilmer), with the obnoxious quiff and vampire vibe, was forced to assume the role of goodie-goodie, a stickler for safety who was basically right in his censure of Maverick's recklessness. So while the new film is not as memorable, or of its moment, it's a more coherent piece of character drawing (the Iceman descendant, Hangman, is intrepid), a more exhilarating spectacle, and, by virtue of not being made in the mid-1980s, altogether less daft.

What, then, is *Top Gun: Maverick* selling? This time, it would be true to say the film is just selling – at least selling itself, its brand of escapism. "The future is coming, and you're not in it," Maverick is informed by a grumpy superior (Ed Harris) who believes in



**Date night: the Reagans held regular movie screenings at Camp David, including one of *Top Gun***

**While the new film is not as memorable or of its moment, it's a more exhilarating spectacle and altogether less daft**

"unmanned" aircraft. Maverick, of course, insists on the primacy of the pilot – an assertion that the film supports with its awe-inspiring stunts, and its lack of green-screen effects. Cruise has hardly been averse to science fiction, and when he appeared in *Top Gun* he was rebounding from Ridley Scott's fantasy flop, *Legend*. But the new film reasserts the virtue of the mortal and corporeal. Its director, Joseph Kosinski, worked with Cruise on the futuristic adventure *Oblivion*, but just as relevant, one suspects, was his 2017 film *Only the Brave*, also based on a magazine article (in *GQ*), and concerned with the work of firefighters.

*Top Gun: Maverick*, though it may draw on memories of unrivalled American hegemony, is really harking back to the era of star-led genre film-making that started in the mid-1980s with *Beverly Hills Cop* and *Top Gun*, gathered pace with *Die Hard* and ended around 2000, the last time the year's biggest film wasn't animated, computer-generated or fantastical. The film was *Mission: Impossible 2*, with Cruise as producer-star, and there have been four more since, with a further two on the way. So the new *Top Gun* film forms part of a broader ongoing project, not to replicate *Star Wars* on Earth but *Thor*, or perhaps *Captain America*, without a cape. Cruise is ranging his forces – the influence on studios, the stardust, the various pilot licences – against Marvel and DC, and also the streaming services, rejected as an option even after the advent of Covid. It may be less a matter of reversal or revival than of a last hurrah. "Your kind is headed for extinction," Maverick is told. "Maybe so, sir," he replies. "But not today." *Top Gun: Maverick* is at once a portrait and an exhibition of resilience. We shall see if the public opts to ratify its message. ●



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# Film

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## The Quiet Girl is a muted masterpiece

A remarkable adaptation of Claire Keegan's short story follows a child sent to live with relatives in 1980s rural Ireland

By Ryan Gilbey

“There’s nothing wrong with it, not a word,” remarked the novelist David Mitchell of Claire Keegan’s short story “Foster”, set in rural Ireland in 1981. The same applies to the film adaptation, *The Quiet Girl*, though there aren’t many words in it. One of the picture’s themes is how silence, distinct from secrecy, can be as expressive as speech, absences as forceful as any presence. The director Colm Bairéad’s remarkable debut is invested with meaning, lyricism and life. The images sing but they also breathe.

Cáit (Catherine Clinch) is the taciturn figure of the title, packed off to distant relatives while her mother gives birth to a sixth child. Her scowling father (Michael Patric), the only person in the film who won’t let a word of Irish cross his lips, drives her in his lemon Cortina to a middle-aged couple on the coast. Unloading her there without a goodbye (“Try not to fall into the fire, you”), he zooms off with her suitcase still in the boot, leaving the child with only the clothes she’s wearing. He has given her guardians permission to “work her”, but that frock already looks like it’s been up a chimney.

Eibhlín (Carrie Crowley) seems welcoming enough, though it could fall either way: the firmness with which she overrules the girl’s gentle complaint that the bath water is too hot suggests she will brook no dissent. When Cáit wets the bed, however, ▶



Timid yet vivid: Catherine Clinch as Cáit “parcels her words out cautiously, as though any one of them might be booby-trapped”

◀ she spares the child's embarrassment with an observation that is both casually poetic and too glorious to spoil here. Not for the last time, the screen is warmed through by an uncommon generosity of nature.

Her husband, Seán (Andrew Bennett), takes a while to thaw in the child's presence, and loses his temper when she briefly goes missing on his farm. The sound of Cáit's pattering footsteps as she runs off to escape his anger blurs wonderfully into the applause on television when we cut to later that evening. As Seán bids her a gruff goodnight from his armchair, there is some skilful acting-in-profile from Bennett, who moves his head a millimetre or two once she's gone, the camera keeping vigil long enough to catch regret on that sliver of face. The next day, he offers a conciliatory token in the form of a golden Kimberley biscuit placed on the table. Cáit couldn't look any more astonished if it were an entire gingerbread house.

The rest of the performances are every bit as subtle. Crowley has the weather-beaten regality of Geraldine James, and the same expression of hopeful concern steeling itself for disappointment. Clinch, a 12-year-old newcomer with wide eyes and a slow blink, makes Cáit timid yet vivid. Her voice is high, soft and even; she parcels her words out cautiously, as though any one of them might be booby-trapped.

*The Quiet Girl* was shot in the 4:3 aspect ratio, which produces an image that's almost square, and it is on this intimate canvas that the picture charts Cáit's pinched existence as it is reshaped by kindness ("All you needed was some minding," says Eibhlín) and by the peculiarities of adulthood. Why are calves on a farm fed with powdered milk, she wonders, while humans hog the dairy? Why does Eibhlín boast of a skincare secret after decreeing that secrets are a source of shame?

Information flows both ways. Adults use this enigmatic child to comprehend experiences that are hidden from them, like dolphins sending out echolocation to see what comes bouncing back. Keeping one's own counsel finds its staunchest defender in Seán. "You don't have to say anything," he reassures Cáit. "Many's the person who missed the opportunity to say nothing, and lost much because of it." Hear that, 2022?

It's a dubious business measuring a film's value in tears, but it would be difficult to resist the charged unclenching of the closing seconds, when emotion that has been carefully squirrelled away is allowed a momentary release – not an outpouring, but enough to prick the heart. As the end credits rolled, I sobbed quietly in the dark, only for my companion to whisper: "It's OK. Everyone's crying." The lights came up, and little pockets of embarrassed laughter began to punctuate the sniffles as strangers clocked one another's wet faces. Where else could you find this kind of experience but at the cinema? For once, it was our eyes that were streaming, not the film. ●

*"The Quiet Girl" is in cinemas now*

# Television

## Making art in honour of HMQ

By Rachel Cooke

**Grayson's Art Club**  
Channel 4, aired  
25 May, 10pm;  
now on catch-up

Everyone of a certain age remembers the *Blue Peter* advent crown. Fashioned from a wire coat hanger, some tinsel and four candles, it was the sole reason an entire generation of Girl Guides was determined to try to get their firefighter badge (well, that and the promise of sliding down the firemen's pole – or am I just speaking for myself?). But I must be honest. It wasn't at the front of my mind when I began watching the Queen's Jubilee special edition of *Grayson's Art Club*. I was expecting stuckist daubs, crocheted corgis and the odd risqué object formed from clay, not Prue Leith deciding to ignore every health and safety regulation going by constructing a similar highly flammable monstrosity. Though now I think of it, having voted for Brexit, perhaps she is already impatient for Jacob Rees-Mogg's promised bonfire of the quangos.

Leith arrived at the studio, dressed as a rainbow, with an idea for a chandelier-come-installation. It was going to be majorly camp, and would make use of her collection of old teacups, which would hang from it



Colourful characters: Philippa Perry, Grayson Perry and Prue Leith

along with many strings of coloured beads – and yes, there would be candles, too, which, as Grayson pointed out later, did rather bring John Noakes et al to mind. Not that he cared. On the contrary. If Grayson's Turner Prize-winning pots have their roots in the fine earthenwares of the late 18th century, his TV shows also connect to those of the past: to *Blue Peter*, *Vision On*, *The Generation Game*. As for his *Art Club*, it's as British as the Queen herself, purpose-built for a nation whose people have turned bunting into a kind of religion; for whom the words "Crayola" and "crafting" are far more beautiful than anything in Milton or Shakespeare; who think nothing of using a boiled sweet as a ruby in their (not very) convincing replica of the crown jewels.

Grayson's wife, Philippa, who is a psychotherapist as well as his co-presenter, said that a surprising number of people dream about the Queen – and at times I did feel I was in a nightmare. Margaret Seaton's woollen model of Sandringham, the result of spending 15 hours a day for two years with her knitting needles clacking, was bad enough; creepy in the way that model villages are creepy. But it was nothing compared to the comedian Harry Hill's project, which involved him sticking a pair of huge foam lips over his own, covering them in black paint, and pressing his face against a roll of paper as he said the words: "Congratulations, Your Majesty, on your Platinum Jubilee." Honestly, this happened. But hey, the idea of the *Art Club* is that everybody can join in. Even the utterly terrifying. Even – there may be some crossover here – Brian May fans (work inspired by Queen, the band, was popular).

At the heart of it all, like some crazed impresario lining up new music-hall acts, was Grayson, who was all the while attempting to choose work submitted by the public to include in a special Jubilee exhibition. I'm still not sure if this exhibition is merely notional, a realm to be wandered only in our minds, but if it is real, I boggle at the thought of where it might be held. The Tate? The Serpentine? The end of Blackpool Pier? You would take his wild praise for the loopy things people send in as insincere were it not for the fact that he is fine with liking what others do not – and this, in turn, is what makes him so likeable. He doesn't give a damn for what is woke or modish.

At one point, he and Philippa and Prue watched TV footage of the Queen's coronation, and when it was over – when the dukes and earls were ready to throw their coronets in the air – he pronounced himself moved. "A human sacrifice!" he said of HRH, swarmed by chinless men in ermine. And then, with more relish: "She looked *vulnerable!*" The whole production was, he pronounced, a seriously good bit of performance art, something that may still have been in his mind when, later on, he sang Billy Joel's "Just the Way You Are", seemingly in honour of HMQ, while boogying round the room. Oh, boy. If television is, as I believe it to be, a barometer of our national cultural health, this country is getting madder by the minute. ●

# Radio

## The scary world of deepfakes

By Rachel Cunliffe

**The Future Will Be Synthesised**  
BBC Sounds

**W**hat would you do if one day you stumbled across pornography – of you? Only it isn't you, it's porn actors – with your face superimposed onto their bodies?

That was the reality for Noelle Martin, a survivor of "deepfake porn", who has spent years trying to get sexualised content that uses her face taken off online platforms and campaigning for governments to tackle this new form of abuse.

Martin's story, told in episode one of *The Future Will Be Synthesised*, is just one consequence of the deepfake phenomenon. "Synthetic media is all around us," says presenter Henry Ajder; the technology now exists to create realistic videos of things that never happened. You might have seen a viral clip of Barack Obama warning about a "f\*\*\*ed-up dystopia" – an obvious fake, made by *Buzzfeed* and the filmmaker Jordan Peele to highlight where synthetic media is taking us. There are more sinister examples: in March, Volodymyr Zelensky appeared to broadcast a video telling Ukrainian troops to put down their weapons. Deepfakes are already a weapon of war, and the democratic risk they pose will be covered in future episodes.

But there's a reason Ajder starts with the porn rather than the politics: it's harrowing to contemplate this technology being turned not on world leaders or celebrities, but on us. This kind of digital abuse is an "industry", with websites where prospective buyers can order "custom deepfakes" of people they want to see play out their degrading fantasies. One service offers to "nudify" women – to strip the clothes from them in a fully dressed photo – promising "there is no woman in the world who cannot be nudified by this technology". There is little victims can do to get content removed.

I don't doubt Ajder's assertion that a world in which anyone can build their own scarily convincing simulations of reality is a threat to democracy. But listening to Martin's story made me think the title is wrong. Forget the future – welcome to the synthesised present. ●

**One service offers to "nudify" women – to strip the clothes from them in a fully dressed photo**

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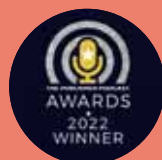
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# THE BACK PAGES

## Gardening



**Alice Vincent**

A shadow hangs over this year's Chelsea Flower Show – our climate crisis

Over the years I've been fortunate enough to cover the Chelsea Flower Show, I've developed a strategy to prevent it from overwhelming me. Most people who write about gardening will have their own, I'm sure. I knew of one editor who masterfully lined up a schedule of the exhibits passing out free booze, ensuring several hours of civilised quaffing among the roses.

Mine is less glamorous. I get there as early as possible – the gates open at 7am on press day – and stash my bike rather illegally backstage, among the spare plants deemed not desirable enough to be planted. Then, I potter quietly around the show ▶



◀ gardens, stepping over the thick wires that snake from television cameras, careful not to photobomb any professional shots of the garden with my iPhone-wielding arm. There are no celebrities or politicians here yet; sometimes Monty Don will be doing his bit. Broadcasters run through their lines while pacing around immaculate pieces of patio. I just get to look.

This is the first time Chelsea has opened in May since 2019 (it was virtual in 2020, and postponed until September in 2021). Those three years have seen stark Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports, Black Lives Matter protests, a global pandemic, and the cost-of-living crisis. It's not as if Chelsea wasn't seen as elitist, inaccessible and ecologically problematic before, but it feels impossible, now, to view it as simply a pretty flower show. To remove a garden – and the act of gardening – from the politics that bolster its existence is a privilege. The Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) can't ignore the conditions that facilitate the show any more.

It's not an easy task: a Chelsea show garden is inherently wasteful. Sponsors – including, this year, Meta (formerly Facebook) – funnel hundreds of thousands of pounds into plots that are created to exist for a week. Design entrants must now state what will happen to their gardens after the show. Jamie Butterworth's Sanctuary Garden, for example, will be rebuilt at a school – but the carbon footprint of the reconstruction is enormous. This week, judges will be trialling new criteria to award gardens on their ecological merits, which they might formalise for 2023.

The RHS has vowed to phase out peat usage across its shows by 2025, which seems too late for many, considering peat bogs are a carbon trap. You can learn more about that at the discovery zone inside the

pavilion, where a peat bog has been created for visitors to step into – and then, presumably, go and admire a load of plants grown in the stuff.

There's also the widely overlooked issue of unpaid labour: as pointed out by professional gardener Claire Vokins, while designers and contractors get paid, the great majority of people who meticulously plant up Chelsea's gardens are volunteers, and the great majority of those volunteers are women.

Chelsea is a spectacle: all that magic, all that hard work, poured into a field in the middle of London. The designers are immensely talented, the nurseries and craftspeople remarkable. Many have made the decisions and the effort to create exhibits that respond to the challenges posed by our ailing planet. It all looks wonderful, but it's impossible to ignore the waste: many gardens showcased wildflowers that thrive in our natural spaces on rainwater, and yet I still saw volunteers out with a last-minute hose.

Chelsea's gardens reflect our times, and this year's demonstrate a dreamy, drifting escapism grounded by comforting nooks – for reflection and well-being – and a celebration of naturalistic planting. Adam Hunt and Lulu Urquhart have built a beaver dam, surrounded by plants some visitors will think of as weeds, such as herb-robert, which will prompt some necessary conversations. The Meta Garden (its actual name) was inspired by the “soil, fungi and plants” that comprise our “resilient woodlands”. The gardens are undeniably beautiful: the white umbellifers of cow parsley, the drift of ragged robin, the curl and pattern of bearded iris, but they also made me think of the forests and meadows, which would weather with the seasons. Imagine if we spent a week broadcasting those on the BBC, instead. ●

## 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.*

### Losing Faith

A church minister whose rescue dog Faith sank its teeth into an elderly parishioner has been ordered to pay compensation. Reverend Heidi Hercus' “wolf-like” pet lunged for the 75-year-old woman, who was delivering a food parcel.

A court heard that the pensioner later found three or

four bite marks under her right armpit and chest.  
*Aberdeen Press Journal*  
(Ron Grant)

### Leaves on the lino

Trees will not be removed to prevent leaves being deposited on pristine plastic lawns, Central Swindon North Parish Council has said.

Sales of plastic lawns were up by 20 per cent during the lockdowns. However, buyers have been told that such lawns may not be as low-maintenance as they seem. They may have to be frequently hoovered to get rid of debris from trees.

*The Times*  
(Linda Calvey)

### One's Freedom Pass

An Oyster card made the ideal match with the royal pearls when the Queen officially

opened the Elizabeth line in central London. Dressed in sunshine yellow, Her Majesty, 96, met Elizabeth line workers at Paddington Station.

One, Kofi Duah, said he was “thrilled” to present her with an Oyster card. “I told her she can tap it on the yellow reader,” the customer assistant explained. “She said ‘Where can I use it?’ I said ‘You can use it across our line, so from Paddington to Abbey Wood.’ She said ‘Oh nice, splendid’”

*Metro*  
(Jenny Woodhouse)



## The Fan



### Hunter Davies

Joyous fans, strange signs  
and football to savour – it’s  
been a remarkable season

Well, what a season. I can’t decide if it’s the comparison with all those dreary, eerie months when the grounds were empty and echoing. It seems aeons ago now, like an ancient nightmare. But no, really, it has been remarkable. In a way, the recovery and relief from Covid did help, making the players more energised, the fans more exuberant.

I am still deaf from Spurs’ stuffing of Arsenal – goodness, the volume – while at Everton, Burnley, Leeds they have had games just as wild and joyous. Burnley soon came down to earth, alas.

So what have been the highlights? Gather round.

**Man City and Liverpool.** Shame they didn’t both reach the Euro final. Or couldn’t have both won the Prem. But they kept us gripped to the last syllable of recorded Prem time and delighted all true football fans. Our star teams of the past, such as Man United and Liverpool, always had a clogger, trying to kick the opposition, but Man City and Liverpool this season have been trying to go forward, play football and please us all.

**Spurs and Arsenal.** Oh God, the agonies they have caused their fans. Such flawed teams, such unreliable performances, so hard to love, so many lumps, yet on occasions they sent their fans into ecstasies.

**Haircut of the season.** The award goes to Cristiano Ronaldo for doing nothing with his hair. For once he has not been fussing, just letting it lie there.

**Disappointments.** There was a feeling that Jack Grealish was a waste of money, but Pep still talked him up – yet did not pick him to start the final game. Harry Maguire has not seemed himself all season. The surprise decline was in the player considered

among the best of his generation, Raheem Sterling. He appears in desperate need of a change. Especially now that half-boy, half-monster Erling Haaland is coming to City.

**Manager of the year.** Just to survive as a Prem manager this season was an achievement. Conte at Spurs came good in the end, but with his track record, and inheriting three world stars, he should never have struggled. So the gong goes to Eddie Howe of Newcastle. He was patronised by the back pages for years, a humble, home-bred, unstarred English manager – nice bloke but no chance of managing a top-six team; you have to be foreign for that. He’s not yet running a top team, but he has been brilliant at Newcastle, turning round a shambolic squad without moaning at referees, screaming and shouting, blaming the board – just quietly getting on with it.

**Player of the season.** Not necessarily the best but the most inspiring, considering what he has been through. So quiet, so calm, so unflashy – so well done, Christian Eriksen. It would be a shame if Brentford didn’t keep him for another season, but he would transform Spurs’ midfield.

**Clichés of the season.** The old ones are back, falling from the lips of commentators as if newly minted. “At this level, mistakes are punished”; “The next goal is vital”; “What a story, scoring on his birthday”; “We must apologise if you heard any inappropriate language there”. Come on, what do you think we are shouting at home? “Football, don’t you love it?” – which Sky commentators must say during any decent match, of which there have been many this season. Let us decide.

**Big boards.** I am convinced the perimeter advertising billboards at the Etihad Stadium have doubled in size this season. When a player is standing in front of them, taking a throw-in, he disappears. The FA should stop it. My eyes are getting strained.

**Confusing signs.** Eintracht Frankfurt, while depriving Rangers of a deserved Uefa Cup, had “Indeed – Jobs Finder” on their shirts. Must be their sponsor, but why was it in English? And what does it mean?

I will have all summer to ponder. While watching Liverpool winning in Europe and Ingerland getting ready to win the World Cup... ●



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## Down and Out



### Nicholas Lezard

#### My footwear choices are a protest against encroaching old age

The mother of my children pointed to my shoes and said, “This is what mutton dressed as lamb looks like”

I write this the day after my birthday. No, I am not hungover: the party is this evening, when my children come down from London to play in the beer garden of that most excellent pub, the Battle of Trafalgar. I like to joke that I have a sentimental attachment to the pub because I was conceived during the Trafalgar victory celebrations. But goodness, I am old. Not old enough for a Freedom Pass yet but certainly not the kind of age I imagined reaching as a child. One of Gerry Anderson’s Supermarionation shows was set in the year 2020, and I remember watching it when it came out and doing a little maths in my head. I realised that in 2020 I would be well into my fifties, and the idea seemed so ludicrous that I think I burst into laughter.

All young people asked to draw people over 40 depict them with walking sticks, or as skeletons, or underneath gravestones. I am not feeling ready for the grave just yet, but today I received a letter which said, on the front, in large letters, “You’ve got eight days.” Something about that full stop made it particularly unnerving, and I like to think that TV Licensing (for it was they) knew they were getting their money’s worth when the copywriter sent them the bill. What could I do in eight days? Some horrible part of me just piped up “Write a novel”, but I’ve checked and not even Georges Simenon could write a novel in eight days. It takes me the best part of a week to write these columns, damn it. Also, the very idea of writing a novel, even had I all the time in the world, gives me the Horrors.

Ah, I grow old, I grow old... I shall wear the bottom of my trousers rolled. Although I won’t, because that’s not in fashion. At the moment, on my lower extremities I am wearing what I call my Brighton

Converses, which are regular low-rise Converse All Stars but with dayglo yellow laces and painted in a splash of vivid pink, yellow, orange and blue; the toecaps are a deep lilac. I remember when the girlfriend I nicknamed the Lacanian (“Love is giving something you don’t have to someone who doesn’t want it”) gave me an ordinary black and white pair of Converse and – for this was in the days when David Tennant was the Doctor – when I went to pick up my youngest from school all the kids thronged round me. I thought this was great until the following weekend, when I came to collect the offspring for my alternate weekend of parenting, and their mother pointed to my shoes and said, “This is what ‘mutton dressed as lamb’ looks like.” That was 15 years ago; I wonder what she’d say about my footwear now. I have a feeling she would be speechless.

As, I suppose, I would have been had someone said all those years ago that I would one day happily be wearing clobber like that. But I remember when I first moved to Brighton with only one pair of shoes, which needed extensive repairs, and I couldn’t afford a new pair. Then I remembered my friend S—, who is a woman but has the same size feet as me. I borrowed a pair of silver Doc Martens from her and as I walked back home from the Timpson in Hove I felt like I was, finally, in the right place: pretty much anywhere else in the country and those DMs would have sparked unfriendly comment. Here, it is a mild surprise they don’t hand out glittery DMs or dayglo Converse when people get off the train.

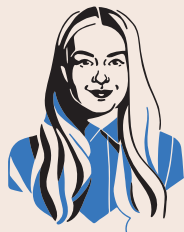
My fashion tip is to dress very conventionally from the top down until you reach the feet. I can imagine Jeeves looking approvingly at my beige Aquascutum jacket, my fawn chinos, and then bursting a blood vessel in his brain when he sees the shoes. I speak figuratively, of course, and wish Jeeves no ill, but he can be a little hidebound at times.

Like those more conventional Converse, these, too, were a present – I could never really have bought them myself – but from a friend, not a lover. (The Lacanian was a tireless groomer. “You have to wear a jacket with a T-shirt.” “You have to grow your hair longer,” etc. As it turned out, she was only trying to get me to look like the kind of woman she fancied more than me – ie a bit like her – but that’s another story for another day.) No, these Converse were from my Brighton friend N—, whom I have mentioned before. She is the only person I have allowed into the Hove-I for any extended period of time, having seen more of human depravity than anyone else I know outside of a war zone – although her job is not known for its great life-expectancy and whenever she goes off-radar for more than a month I get rather anxious. But I got an email from her the other day and she’s not dead – she’s in Luton, but hopes to escape one day. She rounded off her message with these lines of Hotspur’s from *Henry V*: “O gentlemen, the time of life is short... An if we live, we live to tread on kings.”

That’s what I’ll do with my eight days. I’ll write a play. ●



## Deleted Scenes



**Pippa Bailey**

### In an age of streaming and endless choice, I cling to my DVD collection

I remember the first time I saw an iPod. I was 13 and on a coach to who knows where – Longleat, maybe, or Chessington World of Adventures – on a school trip. It was pink, and belonged to my best friend.

Listening to music had previously been either a solitary or a collective experience, but now, shared between two, an earphone each, it was thrillingly conspiratorial. Never mind that my friend and I had wildly divergent music tastes; I expect we met somewhere in the middle with Queen, say, or McFly. (Incidentally, my friend tells me she still has a notebook in which, on the same trip, we wrote stories about falling in love with each of the latter's band members. See, I've always written about what the tall, funny South African termed my "shitty love life".)

Reading my colleague Tom Gatti's farewell to the iPod (Apple has discontinued it) in last week's magazine caused me to reflect on my own experience of listening, watching, owning. It has been many years since I passed on my last iPod – a chunky Video on which I never watched videos – to a friend, but I remain wedded to my iTunes library. Rather than pay for streaming, I resolutely buy albums, putting my money behind the artists I love. And they are always albums. I don't allow myself to listen only to the songs I am first drawn to: an album must be allowed to grow up around them. Of course, these days my new albums are collections of M4A files rather than physical discs – though it has only been a few years since my dad stopped buying me CDs for Christmas, selected from the music press's best albums of the year lists. But there remain relics of the days of painstakingly burning CDs to my laptop: band names spelled and styled multiple ways (I have, for example, both "Florence &

the Machine" and "Florence + The Machine"); albums forever lost in the black hole of "Various Artists"; songs that can't be synced because they're "not authorised for use on this computer".

Such purchases may be considered retro behaviour, but at least they're all held on a modern(ish) smartphone. My DVD collection, on the other hand, has been a source of bemusement among friends for years now. The hours I once spent browsing the "three for £20" aisles at HMV are now put in at the charity shops of Holloway Road: gentle afternoons tracing my fingertips over rows of neglected films. I buy them new, too, Best Picture Oscar battles replayed on my shelves: *Three Billboards...*, *20th Century Women*, *Parasite*.

I sidestep the interminable indecision of streaming and select my entertainment from a pleasingly contained collection of my best-loved: *American Beauty*, *Thirteen Days*, *Almost Famous*, *Children of Men*, *The Silence of the Lambs* (this last one incurred a lifetime ban from film selection at teenage sleepovers). There's the perfect sick-day duet of *Erin Brockovich* and *When Harry Met Sally...*, and *Indiana Jones* and the Clint Eastwood back catalogue await a rainy weekend. I have lost count of the times I have imploringly pressed *The Handmaiden* or *Headhunters* on a friend, only to be told they don't have anything with which to play a disc. And it's not just films: who needs Netflix when you have the holy trinity of *This Life*, *Bodies* and *Prime Suspect* in literal boxset form?

I do all of this not out of any high-minded principles about creator rights, but because the finite is comforting in a world of unending choice. And because there is something of my identity stored in those boxes, in those long-ago-burned CDs. I need there to be evidence, a demarcation of where my taste begins and ends in order for it to feel graspable, real. It is too vital to be left to an algorithm's understanding of what I might like. Handing someone my phone with iTunes open or standing by while they browse my DVDs feels akin to saying: this is who I am.

Every time I move flat, faced with the prospect of having to pile hundreds of DVDs into boxes, I resolve to return them to the charity shops from whence they came. And, every time, I can't quite bring myself to do it. I suppose I'm holding out for the day the DVD player is held in as high esteem as the turntable. ●

**Who needs Netflix when you have the holy trinity of *This Life*, *Bodies* and *Prime Suspect* in literal boxset form?**





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

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

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

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

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

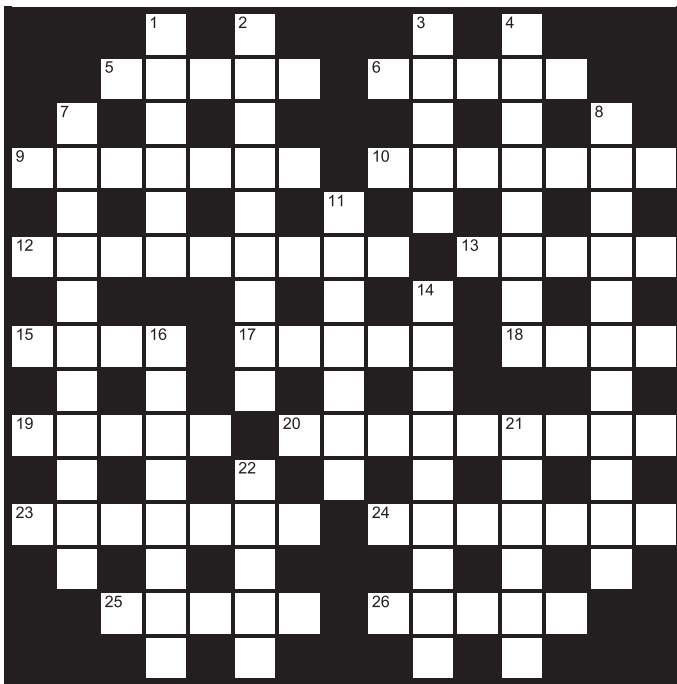


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## The NS Crossword 585: Alphabetical Jigsaw by Anorak



Solve the clues that lead to solutions beginning with the letter indicated and then fit the solutions into the grid, jigsaw-fashion. (Clue numbers in the grid are shown to ease presentation of the solutions in the next issue.)

- A Letter-writer Cooke makes a shopping aid on air (8)
- B We left bathroom in a mess for a saint (11)
- C Fiz and Chesney's mother in *Corrie* destroys lilac and Black! (5)
- D Novelist Moggach backing award in difficult surroundings (7)
- E Idle among the rich! (4)
- F Fish in country working for oneself (9)
- G Fetched and attacked (4,3)
- H Erica and Tory PM with Q (7)
- I How to march properly – on foot? (6)
- J *Doctor Who* actress sees GI embracing Princess (5)
- K Work dough is a requirement, it's said (5)

- L US state inhabitant with Stevenson's middle name and Rankin's twice! (11)
- M Created shelter holding fashionable girl with sponge cake (9)
- N Actor Havers from Elgin (5)
- O Take 'ero out to source of wood (7)
- P Actress Keith with writer run off to wed (8)
- Q Piece from *Humoresque* enjoyed (5)
- R Interviewer Day gets the bird (5)
- S Actress Powers with peas in the mix (9)
- T Tallis working out maths problem including zero (6)
- U Take weapons away from a French active sailor (5)
- V "Loving" Saint let Vi and Anne out (9)
- W Just a literary schoolboy with death-wish at 01.00 (7)
- X Cross English stream endlessly by boat (5)
- Y Canadian territory where you deceive, we hear (5)
- Z South African athlete finishes cheese (4)

### Answers to crossword 584 of 20 May 2022

Across 1) Modest 4) Mot just 9) Auntie 10) Sybarite 12) Titmouse 13) Boreal 15) Mint 16) Enthuse 20) Foreign 21) Soma 25) Hearts 26) High seas 28) Slovenly 29) Father 30) Overstep 31) Blithe  
Down 1) Mealtime 2) Donating 3) Skidoo 5) Onyx 6) Jealousy 7) Swivel 8) Evenly 11) Asunder 14) Chagrin 17) Bootless 18) Somewhat 19) Causerie 22) Physio 23) Parole 24) Thrall 27) Clue

## Subscriber of the Week: Mark Lynch

*What do you do?*  
Television director.  
*Where do you live?*  
South Warwickshire.  
*Do you vote?*  
Always – though where I live, it doesn't have much impact!  
*How long have you been a subscriber?*  
Eight years.  
*What made you start?*  
I started reading it at school, then I bought it from newsstands for years before realising subscribing made more sense.  
*Is the NS bug in the family?*  
Yes. My wife reads it.  
*What pages do you flick to first?*  
At the moment Andrew Marr, then the culture section.

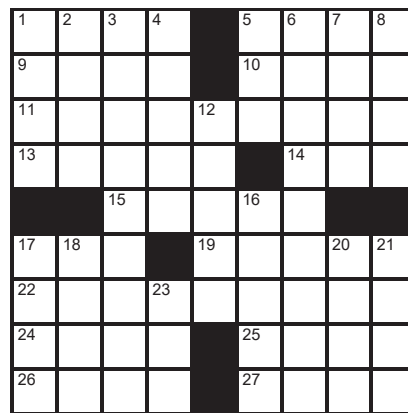


*How do you read yours?*  
A quick look through when it arrives, then slowly throughout the week, front to back.  
*What would you like to see more of in the NS?*

More coverage of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.  
*Who would you put on the cover of the NS?*  
Jürgen Klopp.  
*With which political figure would you least like to be stuck in a lift?*  
Jacob Rees-Mogg.  
*All-time favourite NS article?*  
"The peak", by Edward Docx.  
*The New Statesman is...*  
A sane, erudite beacon in the gloom.

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

## The NS Crossword In Brief 34: by Brendan Emmett Quigley



### Answers to crossword 33 of 20 May 2022

Across 1) Abort 6) Dem 9) Melon 10) IMO 11) Bidding Up 13) Egg 14) Abe 15) Reef 17) ASMR 20) Eli 22) Tao 23) Gazumping 26) Ale 27) Davie 28) Sir 29) Bleat  
Down 1) Amber 2) Beige 3) Old Geezer 4) Rod 5) T'Nia 6) Digestive 7) Emu 8) Mop 12) NBA 16) Flu 18) Mania 19) Roget 21) IMDB 23) Gas 24) Ali 25) Pal

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

### Across

- 1 Thepeak thith way
- 5 Iberian infant
- 9 Bluesy James
- 10 Think piece
- 11 Some strikers hit them
- 13 More 24 Across
- 14 \_\_\_ fever
- 15 Not strict
- 17 \_\_\_ Lankan
- 19 Perfume, eg
- 22 Where some went topless
- 24 "\_\_\_ Breaky Heart"
- 25 Come to
- 26 Dole (out)
- 27 Shortly, poetically

### Down

- 1 Easel's threesome
- 2 "Count me as well!"
- 3 2022 hit by Dave
- 4 Caveman diet
- 5 Short life's story
- 6 Act with 13 UK No 1 songs
- 7 Second letter
- 8 A snap
- 12 "Let's drink!" in Germany
- 16 Upside-down e
- 17 Unread email
- 18 London Marathon, eg
- 20 Alt-country's Case
- 21 *Shout* reader
- 23 London \_\_\_

# Long Reads

A new podcast showcasing the best of our reported features and essays, read aloud

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I was Joni Mitchell's  
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Welcome: the hotel that  
became home to  
100 refugees

**By Sophie McBain**



Travelling through  
Macron's France, from  
the Channel to the  
Mediterranean

**By Jeremy Cliffe**



Big Tech and the quest  
for eternal youth

**By Jenny Kleeman**



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# State of the Nation

## Highlights from the NS's online data hub

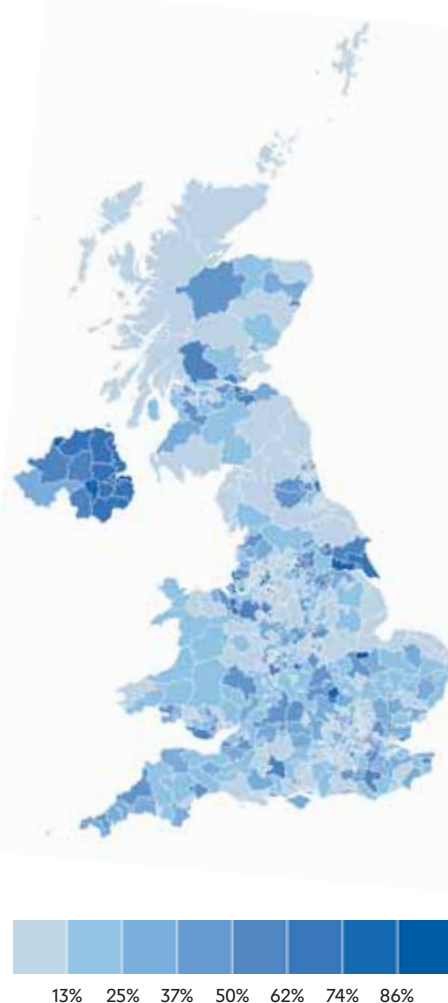
### How does the UK compare to the rest of the world?

	Inflation rate (CPI, %)	Most recent unemployment rate (%)	GDP forecast for 2022 (%)	GDP forecast for 2023 (%)	GDP generated per hours worked (US\$)	Average working week (hrs, 2019)	Average yearly wages (US\$)
<b>Great Britain</b>	<b>9.0</b>	<b>3.8</b>	<b>3.7</b>	<b>1.2</b>	<b>57.4</b>	<b>32.1</b>	<b>47,147</b>
Brazil	12.1	11.2	0.8	1.4	-	32.8	20,213
Canada	6.7	5.2	3.9	2.8	56.9	32.5	55,342
China	2.1	5.8	4.4	5.1	-	41.7	-
France	4.8	7.4	2.9	1.4	64.2	28.9	45,580
Germany	7.3	2.9	2.1	2.7	63.4	26.7	53,745
Italy	6.0	8.3	2.3	1.7	53.1	33.0	37,769
Japan	2.1	2.6	2.4	2.3	45.2	32.5	38,514
Russia	17.8	4.3	-8.5	-2.3	27.7	37.8	-
Spain	8.3	13.5	4.8	3.3	51.2	32.4	37,922
US	8.3	3.6	3.2	2.3	73.4	33.9	69,391

SOURCES: OECD; IMF; PWT

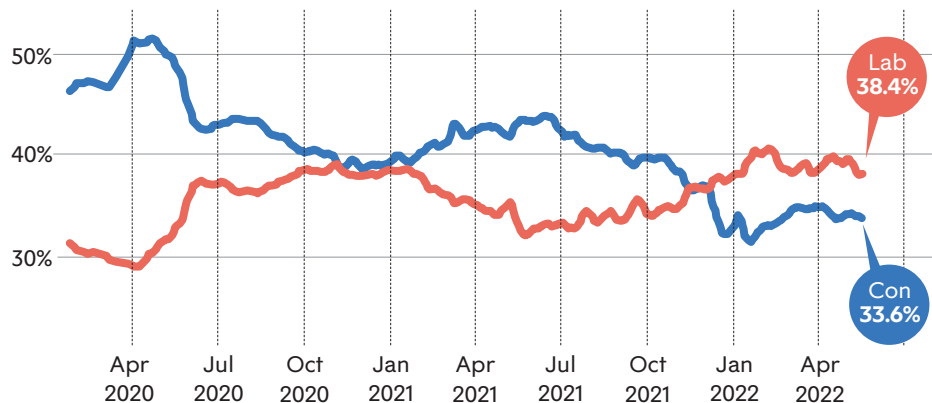
### Connecting the UK

Areas where full fibre broadband is available (%)



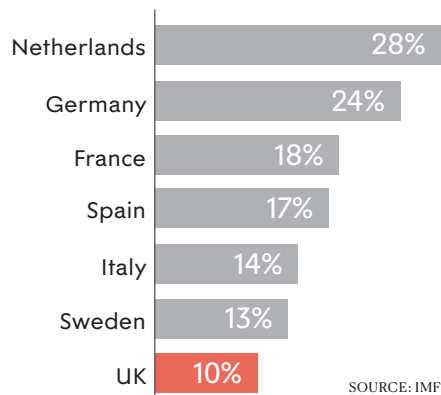
### Britain Elects: Westminster voting intentions

How popular is the Labour Party compared to the Conservative Party?



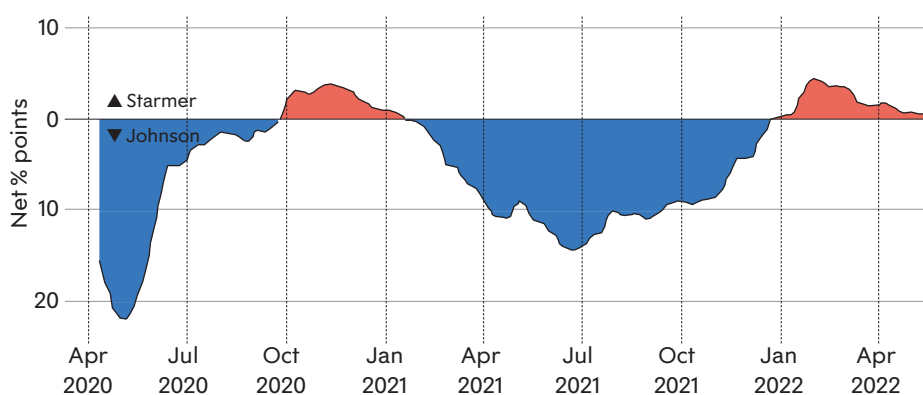
### The sick man of Europe

GDP per capita (US\$) growth, 2015-22



### Seeking approval

Who is more liked: Keir Starmer or Boris Johnson?



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## The NS Q&A

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“My hero? There’s a tree in my yard that I’m quite fond of”

**Hannah Gadsby, comedian**



**Hannah Gadsby was born in Tasmania in 1978. A comedian, writer and actor, she is best known for *Nanette*, a stand-up set and acclaimed Netflix comedy special that explores her experiences of homophobia, sexism and mental illness.**

*What’s your earliest memory?*

Having chickenpox aged two. I was very itchy, which tracks. I remember feeling relieved for a brief moment, then it returned. I still have a scar between my eyebrows because I scratched this one spot so much. Now it looks like I’ve been thinking very hard for a very long time.

*Who are your heroes?*

My childhood hero was Sergeant June Ackland on *The Bill*. My adult hero is... well, there is a tree in my yard that I’m quite

fond of. A thornless cockspur hawthorn. She’s a real steady babe.

*What book last changed your thinking?*

The memoir *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running* by Haruki Murakami. I always thought I was going to run a marathon at some stage in my life, and then I read that book and thought “nah”.

*Which political figure do you look up to?*

I’m sure I don’t understand enough about politics to think any of them are good.

*What would be your “Mastermind” specialist subject?*

I have a lot of special interests. I have autism... hello! But a surprising one might be fabrics. I’m a closet haberdashery voyeur. My mum made all my clothes when I

was a kid, so I am intimately familiar with the world of bolts and Buttericks.

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

I struggle on long-haul flights. Please don’t make me travel in both time and space.

*What TV show could you not live without?*

I’m fine. I just don’t depend on it.

*Who would paint your portrait?*

Lucy Culliton. She usually does still lifes, but I don’t move much.

*What’s your theme tune?*

“The Boys Light Up” by Australian Crawl. It just makes me feel really seen. Nothing like a little harmonica from the early Eighties to drop a big helping of nostalgia on your current-day brain plate. It also makes me feel very unseen. Because it’s about the luminosity of boys.

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

A lot of people – most of them on the internet – have said, “Shut up.” I clearly have not followed that.

*What’s currently bugging you?*

People who think freedom of speech is saying things out loud and never being held accountable.

*What single thing would make your life better?*

A fully functioning left leg. Ever since breaking it in several places on a fjord in Iceland recently, it hasn’t been very supportive. I might get some couples’ counselling; my right leg is understandably tired of being the unpaid support.

*When were you happiest?*

When I was five. I didn’t have to do so much for myself. I had the same haircut I have now, but it wasn’t a statement. It was just the same bowl everyone got.

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

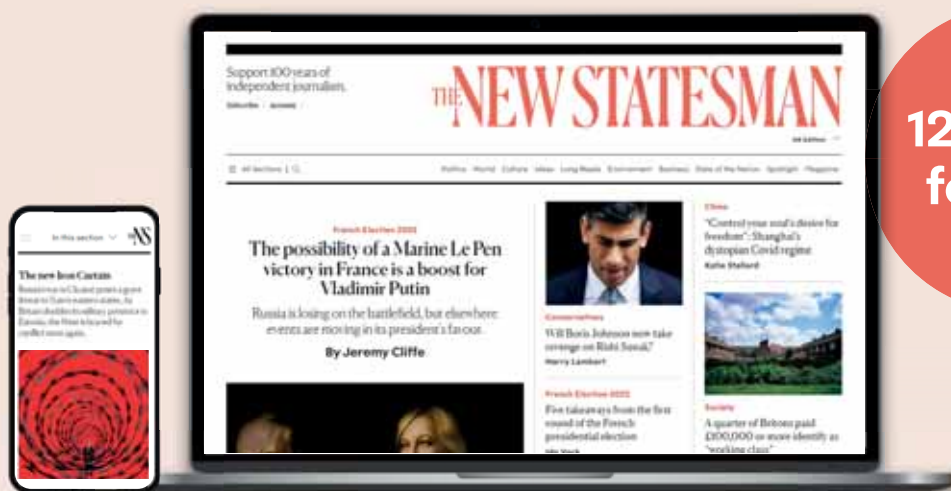
A gardener. I’d love to spend all day mowing lawns and growing sweet peas. Seasonally dependent, of course.

*Are we all doomed?*

Absolutely. Look at what we’ve done to the world. Look at who’s in charge. Look at all the little boys who still don’t want to relinquish power. ●

*“Ten Steps to Nanette: A Memoir Situation” by Hannah Gadsby is published by Atlantic*

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