

Salman Rushdie and the fight for free speech: Elif Shafak • Erica Wagner • Anthony Barnett  
Harry Lambert on why Sunak failed • Pippa Bailey on the forgotten women of the Middle Ages

# THE NEW STATESMAN

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# In defence of the open society

The fatwa issued by the Iranian state against Salman Rushdie on 14 February 1989 was, the late *New Statesman* writer Christopher Hitchens once observed, “a simultaneous death sentence and life sentence”. For decades, Mr Rushdie has borne this burden with dignity, humour and courage. In an interview last month, the novelist spoke hopefully of how his life was “very normal again”.

This apparent calm was broken on 12 August by the horrific attack on Mr Rushdie while he was on stage at an event in New York state. Though he survived up to 15 stab wounds, he suffered what his family described as “life-changing injuries” (including the potential loss of an eye). It is a mark of the fatwa’s baleful legacy that the 24-year-old Hadi Matar, who was charged with Rushdie’s attempted murder, was not even born at the time of the original pronouncement. Mr Rushdie had been due to address an audience on the US’s role as an “asylum for writers and other artists in exile and as a home for freedom of creative expression”. If this is grimly ironic, it is also entirely fitting, for Mr Rushdie’s life and work have embodied the struggle for free expression.

*The Satanic Verses*, the 1988 novel that prompted the fatwa and which was publicly burned by a crowd in Bradford, stood in a proud tradition of religious satire. As Michael Foot, the former Labour leader, remarked at the time: “Montaigne’s books were put on the Papal Index, Swift was accused, on the highest regal or ecclesiastical authority, of defaming all religions; many of Voltaire’s volumes were actually burnt. So Salman Rushdie keeps good company.”

The *New Statesman* showed solidarity with Mr Rushdie. In an editorial published on 20 January 1989, a week after the book-burning in Bradford, we warned that “such intolerance must be fought and defeated before it stimulates and excites further intimidation and intolerance”.

But others choose a convenient moment to fall silent or even to side with Mr Rushdie’s aspirant assassins. As Anthony Barnett, the founding director of Charter 88, writes on page 31, “many saw him as an uppity native who should have been grateful to the UK for its hospitality



**A healthy liberal democracy must guarantee freedom of expression; it must not guarantee freedom from offence**

rather than lancing its hypocrisies”. (The former Conservative cabinet minister Norman Tebbit claimed Britain had no duty to protect Mr Rushdie from “the consequences of his egotistical and self-opinionated attack on the religion into which he was born”.)

Even before the attack on 12 August, Mr Rushdie’s foes had left a trail of blood. The fatwa was not only imposed on the novelist but “all the editors and publishers” aware of the content of *The Satanic Verses*. Mr Rushdie’s Japanese translator was murdered, his Italian translator stabbed and his Norwegian publisher shot three times. What further evidence is required that there can be no compromise, no “understanding” with religious extremists?

But in the decades since the fatwa, the excuses and equivocations that were made at the time have become more rather than less common. Recall the tepid response to the murder of the Dutch film-maker Theo van Gogh by an Islamist terrorist in 2004, the ransacking of Danish embassies in 2006 (following the publication of cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in a Danish newspaper) and the murderous assault on the French satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015. “The bad thing is that death threats have become more normal. Not only politicians get them, even American teachers who take certain books off the syllabus,” observed Mr Rushdie in his last interview before he was attacked.

In this climate of fear, writers and publishers now resort pre-emptively to self-censorship, frozen by what the novelist Kazuo Ishiguro has described as “an anonymous lynch mob”. Would *The Satanic Verses* be published today? The question answers itself. This trend exemplifies the decline of the literary and intellectual culture that Mr Rushdie has so bravely defended. A healthy liberal democracy must guarantee freedom of expression; it must not – either in theory or practice – guarantee freedom from offence.

“A poet’s work is to name the unnameable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep,” wrote Mr Rushdie in *The Satanic Verses*. The best response to his attempted murder is to affirm this truth anew. ●

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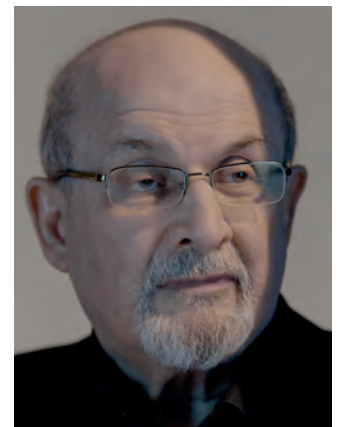
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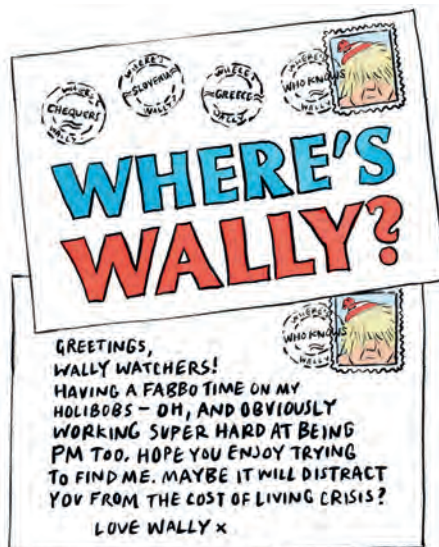
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## Outside the box **By Becky Barnicoat**



B. BARNICOAT FOR THE NEW STATESMAN '22 (AFTER MARTIN HANDFORD)



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# THE NOTEBOOK



EVGENIA NOVOZHENINA/REUTERS

Taking a stand: the anti-war protester and journalist Marina Ovsyannikova attends a court hearing in Moscow, 28 July

## Newsmaker

Resistance in Russia:  
“They can’t imprison us all”

By **Katie Stallard**

**O**n 14 March, just over two weeks into the war against Ukraine, the Russian journalist Marina Ovsyannikova smuggled a homemade poster denouncing the conflict into the newsroom of the state-run television network Channel One, where she worked as a senior producer. She hid the rolled-up poster in the sleeve of her jacket and waited. When she saw that the security guard outside the live broadcast studio was distracted, she seized her chance.

Ovsyannikova ran on to the set of Russia’s most-watched evening news show, *Vremya*, shouting, “Stop the war, no to war, stop the war!” She held up her poster, which said, “No war” and “Russians against war” in English. In Russian, she had written, “Don’t believe the propaganda, they are lying to you here.” For a few brief seconds, the channel unwittingly broadcast the truth. Then the camera cut away and the security guards tackled her. She was taken to a police station and interrogated for the next 14 hours. She was prepared for this. She had recorded a video ▶

◀ statement explaining her actions, which was released by the Russian human rights group OVD-Info after her protest. “Only we have the power to stop all this madness,” she urged. “They can’t imprison us all.”

At first, the official response was lenient. So much so that rumours began to circulate that Ovsyannikova, who is 44 and had worked at the channel for 19 years, was a Kremlin stooge. Given that spreading “false news” about the war had just been made punishable by up to 15 years in prison, some wondered how else she could have escaped with a 30,000 rouble (around £215 at the time) fine shortly after her protest. Asked about this directly by a *Politico* reporter, she said that she thought the Kremlin was deliberately trying to discredit her, hoping that her case would soon fade from the headlines and that she would take the hint and move abroad.

Ovsyannikova, who was born in Ukraine, did briefly move to Germany, but she returned to Russia in July after her ex-husband, who works for the Kremlin-backed broadcaster RT (Russia Today), filed for custody of their two children. She staged another protest soon afterwards on 15 July, holding a poster near the Kremlin that said, “Putin is a murderer, his soldiers are fascists... How many more children must die before you stop?” For this, she has been charged with spreading false information about the Russian military and could face up to ten years in prison. Her home has been raided by the police and she has been placed under house arrest, where she is forbidden to speak to anyone but her family and her lawyer. During a brief court appearance in Moscow on 11 August, however, she was defiant. From the

**The latest independent poll found that 68 per cent of Russians think their country is going in the right direction**

defendant’s cage, she held up another handwritten sign that said, “May the dead children haunt your dreams.”

Ovsyannikova’s actions are extraordinary. And yet, hers is just one example of the courage of the hundreds of thousands of Russians who have protested against Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine since it began in February, despite the tremendous personal risk this involves. Some are well-known opposition politicians, such as Ilya Yashin, 39, and Vladimir Kara-Murza, who is 40 and has already survived being poisoned twice. Both men are in custody, charged with the same offence as Ovsyannikova – spreading false information about the military – and face prison sentences of up to ten and 16 years, respectively.

There are other, less familiar figures whose bravery is no less remarkable. Alexei Gorinov, a 60-year-old city councillor from Moscow, was sentenced to seven years in prison on 8 July for criticising the war during a council meeting and suggesting a minute of silence for the victims. Aleksandra Skolichenko, a 31-year-old artist from St Petersburg who goes by the name of Sasha, could be jailed for up to ten years for replacing five price tags in a local supermarket with descriptions of Russia’s atrocities in Ukraine. According to OVD-Info, more than 16,000 people have so far been detained for protesting against the war. Each now faces consequences that range from losing their jobs, or getting expelled from university, to serving time in a prison system notorious for torture and sexual abuse.

It is true that these protesters are a small minority in Russia. The latest poll by the independent research group the Levada Centre in July found that 68 per cent of respondents said the country was moving in the right direction. This was up from 50 per cent in January. Putin’s approval rating also increased from 69 per cent in January to 83 per cent in July, although the current political conditions make it increasingly difficult to know what people really think.

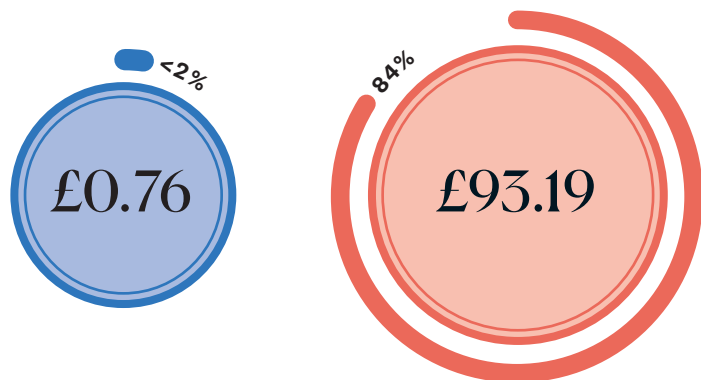
But the best way to ensure that Putin’s critics remain in the minority would be to do as Ukraine’s president Volodymyr Zelensky has suggested, and what several European countries are now considering, and ban Russian citizens from travelling to the West. Ukraine is fighting for its survival and Zelensky’s plea is understandable. Yet such a ban will only serve to cut Russians off from information that could challenge Kremlin propaganda and reinforce Putin’s message that there is no alternative to his rule.

Ovsyannikova has credited her own political awakening to her immersion in Western news feeds at Channel One, where her job involved monitoring outlets such as the BBC and the *New York Times*. In the process, she told one interviewer, she came to understand the growing chasm between what was really happening in the world and what Russian networks such as hers told their viewers. It is worth remembering that during the Cold War it was the East German regime that built the Berlin Wall in 1961 in order to keep its citizens in and foreign information out. The West should not help Putin to do the same. ●

## Chart of the Week

### Liz Truss’s National Insurance (NI) cut would do nothing for Britain’s poorest

Monthly savings from proposed NI cut, in £ and as a percentage of total respective cost-of-living increases



**Poorest 10%**  
Monthly costs will rise by £48.90 pre-NI cut

**Richest 10%**  
Monthly costs will rise by £110.38 pre-NI cut

SOURCE: TONY BLAIR INSTITUTE FOR GLOBAL CHANGE

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# The Diary

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## Taking a tumble, my week at the Edinburgh Fringe, and a spellbinding chat with Angela Rayner

By Iain Dale

I spent ten glorious days in Edinburgh hosting two shows at the Fringe: live versions of my podcasts, *Iain Dale All Talk* and, with Jacqui Smith, *For the Many*. I've been going to the Fringe as a punter or performer since 2015, and normally it rains more or less the whole time. This year, there was bright sunshine every day. I host the shows wearing a rather magnificent (or ghastly, depending on your sense of fashion) burgundy suit – mainly because it's the one pictured on the posters that adorn many of Edinburgh's walls. My main problem this year was mobility. In late July I fell from the stage at Buxton Opera House into the orchestra pit and buggered my knees. Being in a wheelchair or on crutches has given me a very different perspective, but thankfully I am on the mend.

The big sensation of my time in Edinburgh was the former Conservative MP Rory Stewart, who attracted an audience of around 630 people. They loved him and his message. But the biggest audience was for Keir Starmer, who attracted 662 keen souls.

Before we went on stage, the news came through that Salman Rushdie had been attacked. Starmer's team and I debated whether we should start by discussing it. Details were sketchy. My view was that it was wrong to say anything until we knew more. I asked Starmer's head of communications, Matthew Doyle, to WhatsApp me with any updates, but just before we started the show we saw a report saying Rushdie had walked off the stage. "OK, let's leave it," I said. Had I said the opposite, Starmer wouldn't have had to deal with the social media onslaught that followed, with people complaining that neither he nor Angela Rayner had made a statement



No other MP could have held the audience as Rayner did. Labour should make more of her

immediately after the attack. I still think it was the right thing to do.

### A woman of the people

Angela Rayner appeared on *All Talk* with me on 8 August and was a revelation. She had brought two of her sons with her and it was the first time they had seen her perform live. They were mystified as to why anyone would pay £15 to see their mother! Teenagers, eh. My favourite moment of the Fringe was when I asked Rayner whether she thought Rishi Sunak could relate to people living on the breadline. She then spoke – uninterrupted by me – for about five minutes about her own experience, and that of the community she was brought up among, of a semi-permanent cost-of-living crisis. The audience was spellbound, as was I. No other MP in the House of Commons could have done this. Labour needs to make more of Rayner. She cuts through.

Bizarrely, a few environmental protesters tried to disrupt the event near the end. I was about to ask Rayner an audience question when I heard a rather posh young woman shout: "My name is Katie, I am from Green New Deal Action" (or something like that). I let her say her piece and it all fizzled out. The protesters had filmed it, but, I note, it hasn't appeared on social media. I'm not surprised. It was all a bit sad.

### For the best

One of the nightmares of putting together a Fringe programme is when a guest pulls out at the last minute. This happened to me three times. Diane Abbott did so with no explanation; just plain rude.

We replaced one of the three with the broadcaster, *Loose Woman* and imminent *Strictly* star Kaye Adams – a strange replacement for Arlene Foster, a former Northern Irish first minister, you may think, but Adams was also a revelation. She hosts a podcast called *How To Be 60*, about the fear many of us have of turning that age. I achieved the milestone in July and still haven't quite recovered. Kaye interviewed me for an upcoming episode and I'm afraid that I rather overshared when discussing aspects of my coming out experience. If that doesn't get you listening...

### Opposites attract

One of the joys of the Fringe was co-hosting six shows with my friend Jacqui Smith, the former home secretary. Over the years we've not only forged a political double act on TV and launched the *For the Many* podcast, but we've become the best of friends. We come from different political backgrounds but people say we are a living example of disagreeing agreeably. We even finish each other's sentences.

Jacqui joined me for the Keir Starmer interview, where, when asking about Labour's response to the cost-of-living crisis, she told Starmer that she looked forward to him revealing the size of his package. Oooh, er. ●

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Iain Dale presents the Evening Show on LBC Radio



## Encounter

“Starmer’s Labour could be a version of the Tories”

Mick Lynch on strikes and supporting Brexit

By Freddie Hayward

When Mick Lynch left school to become an apprentice electrician in 1978, trade unions were central to working-class life. “They used to have social clubs, sports clubs, cultural activities, art clubs, outings, holidays – all sorts of stuff that big companies used to provide,” the general secretary of the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union said. We met one recent morning in his office at the union’s yellow-brick headquarters, a few hundred yards from three of London’s biggest railway stations.

Lynch grew up on a council estate in Paddington, west London. His mother was a cleaner and his father a labourer and postman. They had emigrated from Ireland during the Second World War. “And we were always in unions. When you left school, you joined the union,” he told me. “It was an everyday thing... And it was good... people just expected to have a more community lifestyle.”

Trade unions no longer play such a prominent role in society. After a brief rise between 2017 and 2020, union membership has resumed its 40-year decline (just 23.1 per cent of UK employees are members). Unlike in the 1970s, the unions do not have the power to shut down the economy. Harsh regulation and dwindling memberships have weakened them.

Lynch believes unions can reclaim their former influence. This summer, as inflation surges and a

CHARLIE FORCHAM-BAILEY FOR THE NEW STATESMAN

recession looks increasingly likely, Lynch is leading more than 40,000 railway workers in the largest railway strikes since 1989. The RMT is hoping to force greater pay rises, protect working conditions and prevent job cuts. The government has refused to participate in negotiations, insisting they are a matter for the RMT and the railway companies, even though ministers set the parameters of what the companies can offer.

Lynch believes the RMT's campaign is part of a broader struggle for better worker pay and conditions. "There's so many people fed up with the way they've been treated at work. There's a lot of people on low pay," Lynch said. "Something has got to be done – otherwise, we're all going to be skint." According to the union, the average salary of those on strike is £33,000.

Since the rail strikes began on 21 June, Lynch has become known for dispatching ill-prepared interviewers such as Piers Morgan with his blunt advocacy for workers. People now stop him in the street to offer support. Lynch's popularity on social media, particularly among younger users, is reminiscent of Jeremy Corbyn's during his time as Labour leader. Yet he seems unfazed by the attention. "I carry on," he said, leaning back in his chair. "I bulldoze my way through. I don't know what I'm doing in some ways. I just keep going."

Lynch has only been general secretary since May last year. "I didn't have any ambition [to become general secretary]. I was on the tools for 37 years. I was never an officer of the union... And then Bob Crow died [in 2014], who's up there, second from the end," he said, gesturing to a row of photos of his predecessors on the wall. "Mick Cash won the election to become general secretary... and then he retired last year, and I was asked to stand for his position. But I never had any ambition."

The Labour Party is peripheral in Lynch's vision for the future of trade unionism. "The message has got to be separate to the Labour Party's message; I believe it's got to be a union-first message." That's unsurprising in some respects: unlike many unions, the RMT is not affiliated to Labour. Nonetheless, the relationship between it and Keir Starmer soured after the Labour leader refused to support the recent strikes. That approach has caused Starmer problems. Some of his front-bench team, such as the former shadow transport minister Sam Tarry, have visited picket lines despite instructions to stay away. (Tarry subsequently lost his shadow cabinet role.)

For Lynch, whether the shadow cabinet join a picket is beside the point. "I don't care if Keir Starmer comes on a picket line... but what he's not doing is saying he supports us," Lynch said, his tone shifting from indifference to mild contempt. Instead, he wants policy solutions, such as extra funding for public services, that enable wages to rise without spending cuts elsewhere.

But he also believes the divide is deeper than policy; it's cultural. "Working-class people cannot relate to [Labour's front bench]," he said, in part because they have "never actually worked in any of these industries. They come out of PR and law, communications, finance or whatever. They've never worked in a factory

or in a supply centre... They're not saying anything about anything. In fact, they could be another version of the Conservative Party."

Starmer and Lynch also differ on Brexit. Lynch and the RMT supported leaving. Why? "Because the European Union has privatisation embedded in its constitution," he said. "I don't like the idea that you give your sovereignty and democracy away to a load of bureaucrats and bankers." Lynch said that Corbyn's putative programme of nationalisation would not have been legal had Britain remained in the EU.

"The free movement of labour I don't think helps anyone," he continued, "because it means the countries that people are coming from have lost some of their most able people... and it didn't help the labour market in Britain," he said. "But people don't argue that – they argue that they can't get olives, or they've got a long queue to get to Tuscany."

Has Brexit weakened the EU in the face of Russian aggression and the rise of China? "The EU also provoked a lot of the trouble in Ukraine. It was all about being pro-EU and all the rest of it," he said, referring to the pro-EU Maidan revolution in Ukraine in 2014. "There were a lot of corrupt politicians in Ukraine. And while they were doing that, there were an awful lot of people [in Ukraine] playing with Nazi imagery, and going back to the [Second World] war, and all that. So, it's not just that this stuff has sprung from one place."

Lynch's line about the role of Nazi or neo-Nazi groups in Ukraine resembles that of the Kremlin's. But in March, Lynch and the RMT condemned the invasion and called for the Russian army to withdraw.

He is also sceptical of the prevailing narrative about China. "I don't know if what I'm told by the *Telegraph* and by American policy writers [about China] is true," he said. "We were told Saddam Hussein was the greatest threat to the Western world that there had ever been... what he actually had was a very oppressive regime against his own people, and a collection of pots and boilers that he'd strung together as so-called Scud missiles. We were told all that by the same analysts that are telling us now that China wants to commit all of this aggression against all of these people," Lynch said. "We should stop being so belligerent towards countries."

But does he think, for instance, that Uyghurs are subject to slave labour in China's Xinjiang province? "Slave labour is happening in Leicester," he retorted. "Why do we want to start on the Uyghurs if we don't want to start on the Palestinians?"

Lynch's views hark back to a time when Labour politicians such as Tony Benn and Michael Foot wanted to strengthen the unions and restrain Western power abroad. Labour, he said, should return to "what used to be called Old Labour: you believed in some fairly traditional values, communitarian values, but you also weren't ashamed of being patriotic because I don't think there's anything wrong with that".

Instead, Mick Lynch thinks Starmer's Labour has a "veneer of not caring", and it falls to the unions to identify with working-class politics. If the unions do that, Lynch believes Labour's leadership will follow. ●

**"I don't like the idea of giving your sovereignty away to a load of bureaucrats and bankers"**





## In the picture

The low water level at Pontsticill Reservoir near Merthyr Tydfil, Wales, on 11 August 2022, during the heatwave. The Met Office reported that in July there was just 53 per cent of expected rainfall in Wales; the nation is experiencing its driest year since 1976. A hosepipe ban is due to begin on 19 August in Pembrokeshire and parts of Carmarthenshire.

Photograph by  
Carl Court

# PHILIP COLLINS



## Politics

### Why Keir Starmer's cunning energy strategy should worry the Conservatives

The next prime minister, whether it is Liz Truss or Rishi Sunak, will have to do something that Harold Macmillan, Margaret Thatcher and John Major all did: win an election after the economy has gone wrong. For all its recent attempts to conjure new culture wars after the political success of Brexit, the Conservative Party is confronting an acute crisis of living standards, and it might be hard, this time, to find a way out.

Economic travails have almost always accounted for the downfall of Labour prime ministers, but Tories tend to withstand them. There was a short-lived and shallow recession after the Suez crisis in 1956, but the change of leadership from Anthony Eden to Macmillan and the long three years before a general election allowed the latter to beat Hugh Gaitskill in 1959. Margaret Thatcher presided over a recession from the first quarter of 1980 to the first quarter of 1981 and inflation hit 18 per cent, but Michael Foot's Labour was in no position to capitalise. The recession of 1990, in conjunction with the poll tax, did help to end Thatcher's premiership, but John Major was able to win in 1992 all the same.

But there is reason to think that Truss and Sunak have more in common with the likes of Stanley Baldwin, Alec Douglas-Home and Ted Heath – Tory prime ministers who were not immune to financial turmoil. The recession of 1921-22 contributed to Baldwin's defeat in the general election of December 1923. The memory of unemployment and inflation in 1961 was in part why Douglas-Home lost

the 1964 general election. Heath presided over the prototype energy crisis and blackouts in 1974, and lost to Harold Wilson later that year.

This time, the new prime minister will walk straight into an economic storm with no clear escape route. Inflation on the full basket of goods is expected, says the Bank of England, to reach 13 per cent this year. But the acute crisis is in energy. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) says it expects energy prices to rise by an extraordinary 141 per cent in 2022-23. The scheduled change in the energy cap from £1,971 to around £3,600 in October will be calamitous for some families. And real average weekly earnings fell by 3 per cent in the three months to June, the biggest fall since 1977.

Sunak, during his time as chancellor, was always dragged reluctantly to action. In his bones he does not want to be taxing corporate profits, and neither does Truss. Eventually Sunak was forced to do so, but the £37bn cost-of-living support package will not be enough. Both Sunak and Truss have said they do not want either to extend or increase the windfall tax on oil and gas companies, but doing nothing will be a tough call.

It will be tougher, too, because of Keir Starmer. Here, Baldwin, Douglas-

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### The plan to help families was a model intervention by an opposition leader

Home and Heath offer another historical parallel. They all faced clever, ingenious Labour leaders: Ramsay Macdonald, in Baldwin's case, and Wilson, who saw off Douglas-Home and Heath. Starmer's recent performance ought to worry his Tory opponents. There are signs that the Labour leader is becoming Wilson-like, which is to say canny and precise.

Wilson had his flaws, but losing elections wasn't one of them (he won four) and it is always worth asking, in the contemplation of any tricky moment of opposition, "What would Harold do?" Starmer rightly admires Wilson, who played the role of leader of the opposition as well as anyone in postwar British politics. Earlier this month we witnessed the Labour Party responding well to the issue of the day; this is an opposition that is clearly learning on the job.

Labour came through with a plan that allowed Starmer to say, with clarity, that under it no family would pay a penny more in energy costs this winter. This would cost £15bn, in addition to the cost of the support the government has already announced, and would be funded by backdating the windfall tax on oil and gas companies to January, raising £8bn. The government's £400 energy rebate would be dropped, and the consequent effect on inflation of these measures would, according to Labour's calculations, reduce annual debt interest payments by £7bn.

This was a model intervention by an opposition leader: precise, targeted on the critical issue of the day, and offering a cast-iron answer to the question, "What would you do?" Labour has developed a good critique of the Tory party – that it is incompetent, wanting nothing other than Brexit – but that analysis was not always accompanied by a plausible idea of what it would do differently. With Starmer's energy announcement, it emphatically was.

This kind of intervention is what people mean when they demand that Labour should have more "policy". The conventional wisdom of effective opposition is that ideas should not be revealed too soon. A magpie government might steal a good idea and the effects of policy announcements wear off quickly: any ideas revealed today sound tired by the time the election comes around. Besides, there is little popular or press appetite for the intricacies of policy.



Very few people are genuinely interested in the details of Labour's plans for a local industrial strategy or quite how the party intends to regulate the Murdoch press. What they want is an answer to the question, "What would you do?" on the issue of the day, and that is what Starmer gave them.

There is a legitimate concern about whether frantic state intervention is a sustainable energy policy. If prices do not come down, constant government support is going to be very expensive. Paul Johnson of the IFS showed that this support would be as costly as the furlough scheme if it were extended beyond the initially intended six months. Britain cannot go on funding furlough after furlough. Eventually, we have to stop the short-term fixes and deal with the problem.

Energy markets are complex and global, and the present crisis is exacerbated by the interruption of Russian supplies. A durable solution requires a more sophisticated response than a series of national windfall taxes. At some point, the raiding of corporate profits will start to affect investment decisions. The inflated profitability of oil and gas companies is not a given. Companies understandably feel aggrieved that, if the fluctuations of the marketplace depress profits, they have to withstand the fall, but any increase is subject to the needs of government. It's not as though the energy market is an arena of rampant profitability: 28 suppliers have gone bust in the past two years.

That said, bad policy and good politics are often allies, and it is naive to think that good politics will lose the battle. It should be noted that Labour does have an extended set of intriguing energy and climate change policies, such as a home insulation scheme. These have received almost no attention and nobody thinks of them as the solution to the energy crisis, because households need hard cash now. Politics and policy, in other words, operate to different time-scales.

Over the postwar period there has been a reliable relationship between consumer confidence and the fortunes of the incumbent government. The two rise and fall with one another. That does not always presage a change of government, as we have seen. For that to happen you need to add the presence of a credible opposition, and, with his energy price plan, Starmer did what Harold would have done. ●

THE NS

# Morning Call

The daily politics newsletter



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# CORRESPONDENCE

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## Letter of the week Labour's missing localism



Kate Mossman's extended interview with Lisa Nandy ("The Wigan warrior", 29 July) provided readers with insights into how she sees politics – a game of two halves, played both on the home pitch and "away" grounds like Westminster. Given her genuine passion for promoting the unique needs of towns, Labour should by now have a comprehensive policy, and programme for government, addressing why and how towns have been "left behind", that exposes the thinness of the government's understanding and its inability to articulate what it means by "levelling up".

It is perfectly possible to see Nandy as a future Labour leader, but she needs to be careful not to be divisive. Knowing what to do with a Wigan barm cake – or not, in David Lammy's case – must not become a lazy test of whether we understand what matters to people, and where we stand on justice and equity. The north does not have a monopoly on being ignored and under-provided for – the gap is between Westminster and the rest of the country.

*Les Bright, Exeter, Devon*

### For the birds

I have read Helen Macdonald's article (Summer Reflection, 29 July) on seabirds again, having just swum out along the shore to a beautiful stacked arch by Souter Lighthouse, where I saw some amazing rock formations and seabirds. The gulls, shags, fulmars and the odd tern were initially unsettled by my presence but the cormorants pretty much ignored me. Being so close to them was such a privilege. Helen's article made me think about how poorly we as a species interact with wildlife: everything must be on human terms even though we are the relative newcomers – "their crime", as she writes, "being little more than failing to treat humans and human spaces with due respect".

*Marie Donnelly, Sunderland*

### The expat dream

As much as I would very much support Boris Johnson leaving Britain and going far, far away, I fear the US presidency is out of reach (Correspondence, 29 July). He was born in New York, which would usually make someone eligible for US citizenship, but he gave up this status in 2016, apparently to demonstrate his loyalty to the UK.

*Christopher Rossi, Enfield, Greater London*

### Lost leader

Gordon Brown may not have charisma ("As Gordon Brown intervenes, where is Keir Starmer?", *NS* online, 11 August), but he showed leadership in the 2008 financial

crisis, and was our last decent prime minister. Keir Starmer is an honourable man, but he does not seem to be a natural politician, and so far he and the Labour Party have come up with very little political strategy that the public can grasp.

*Rosanne Bostock, Oxford*

### Forgotten Ephron

In her review of Nora Ephron's biography (*The Critics*, 29 July), Anna Leszkiewicz notes "Ephron's trademark wit, her instinct for life's absurdities" yet doesn't mention *Michael*, in which John Travolta plays an overweight, smoking, slob of an angel. Despite being panned by the critics it was a box office success, yet it has gone into oblivion. It deserves to be resurrected.

*Peter and Gillie Foster, Edinburgh*

### No Larkin about

It's a pity to find the great and good so ready to polish Philip Larkin's reputation (*The Critics*, 29 July), and a puzzlement why many are so fond of the grim old "national treasure". The bias against the poor, the paralysing fear of death, the everyday miserablism – they're visible enough in the poems. Larkin nostalgia has become a subset of the tinselled national nostalgia that has helped fuel our present crisis. A skilful poet? Certainly. And skilful enough to be dangerous.

*Richard Warren, Walsall, West Midlands*

It was interesting reading such varied views on Larkin. But Michael Henderson's contribution declares Larkin's narrow and rather ignorant descriptions of the music of John Coltrane and Thelonious Monk as "spot on". Mr Henderson is clearly a "mouldy fig" on jazz, as was Larkin.

*Alistair Loftus, Bere Alston, Devon*

### Bob Gregory (1935-2022)

Bob Gregory, the *NS* crossword compiler "Cullen", died at his home in Cardiff on 6 August. I met Bob in 2013 through an article on the centenary of the British crossword in *Saga Magazine* – for which he compiled the challenging cryptic crossword for nearly 20 years. He presented the weekly puzzle in the *Jewish Chronicle* for just as long. He joined the *New Statesman* compiling team in March 2017, with his final

puzzle appearing in January 2022. Bob was CEO of an international firm in Cardiff, and his greatest claim to fame was setting the light-aircraft world speed record between London and Hong Kong in 1974. He will be missed from these pages.  
*Tom Johnson ("Anorak"), crossword editor*

### @ JEyal\_RUSI

*Jonathan Eyal, associate director at the security think tank RUSI*

If you wish to understand the tone-deaf behaviour of Germany's political and intellectual establishment to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, read this excellent @JeremyCliffe extensive essay.

**"A fatal attraction",  
Jeremy Cliffe, 27 July**

### @ MWilsonFRSA

*Mark Wilson, social impact specialist and managing director of Goodlabs Consulting*

A great piece by @paulmasonnews. Genuine "common ownership" not statist "nationalisation". This is one of the key economic ideas that will get to the root of the domestic energy cost crisis.

**"The case for public ownership of energy has never been stronger",  
Paul Mason, 27 July**

### @ LibraryAuction

*Jim Spencer, Hansons books auctioneer*

Amazing. Gillray of our Age. One to frame. One for future historians. One for anyone who ever doubted the power and importance of art – and comedy.

**On Cold War Steve's Summer Special cover, 29 July**

*Write to letters@newstatesman.co.uk*

*We reserve the right to edit letters*



**"I knew I still had it somewhere – my old anti poll tax placard!"**

# COMMONS CONFIDENTIAL

*By Kevin Maguire*



**Seemingly destined for installation** by the Conservative cult as prime minister without a general election, Liz Truss is labelled a malfunctioning cyborg by an admiring Tory MP. Terminator Truss earned the doe-eyed admirer's awe for her unstoppable progress, despite glitches such as short-lived public sector pay cuts and disparaging her good state school. The human side requires, he conceded, constant updating. A radar-lugged eavesdropper was surprised to hear an aide urging Truss to look into a TV camera and imagine seeing voters at the other end. Sound counsel... for a rookie.

**Team Truss boasts** that the Welsh Secretary, Robert Buckland, and former Tory ministers Alun Cairns and Chris Skidmore aren't her rival's only supporters who are switching sides. Advisers working on Rishi Sunak's faltering campaign, whispered my snout, are putting out feelers to the likely victor. A PM's patronage extends to special advisers, and there's a rumour that a rat on Sunak's sinking ship is prepared to trade inside info for a lifeboat after 5 September.

**Truss's campaign is based** in a £3m Westminster townhouse used by Boris Johnson in 2019. The launchpad is owned by Conservative peer and Norfolk landowner Greville Howard, an Old Etonian and former private secretary to Enoch Powell. While Truss's team settle in, Michael Gove has housing issues. Without a cabinet role, eviction awaits from a Carlton Gardens grace-and-favour residence usually reserved for the foreign secretary and in the gift of the PM.

**Energised on return from holiday** by a plan to pull the plug on heating-bill rises, Keir Starmer privately apologised to trade union general secretaries for ordering shadow ministers to blacklist picket lines. Brother Starmer told a delegation including Mick Whelan, Paddy Lillis and Matt Wrack that he got it wrong. The negotiated withdrawal explains why Lisa Nandy wasn't disciplined for visiting BT strikers and why Sam Tarry was officially sacked as shadow transport minister for unauthorised media appearances rather than for standing with striking rail workers. Solidarity is for sometimes.

**Buoyed by capturing three blue bastions**, Ed Davey's targeting Labour for a fourth grab. The Lib Dem leader wants back the history-essay notes he lent to Ed Balls more than 30 years ago when both were at the fee-charging Nottingham High School. Bullish Balls is refusing to hand over the scribbles, arguing they really belong to Davey's brother. Taking a fourth Tory seat could prove a more achievable goal, particularly if Balls has lost the disputed notes.

**And the winner is Liverpool?** Word is that Culture Secretary Nadine Dorries is determined her home city will host Eurovision. It contains the only reds she likes. ●

*Kevin Maguire is the associate editor (politics) of the Daily Mirror*

**Ed Davey wants back the history-essay notes he lent to Ed Balls at school more than 30 years ago**

# Putin's war without end

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Six months of aggression in Ukraine have reshaped the world order. We have entered a new, dark period of history and democracy seems evermore fragile

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**By Jeremy Cliffe**

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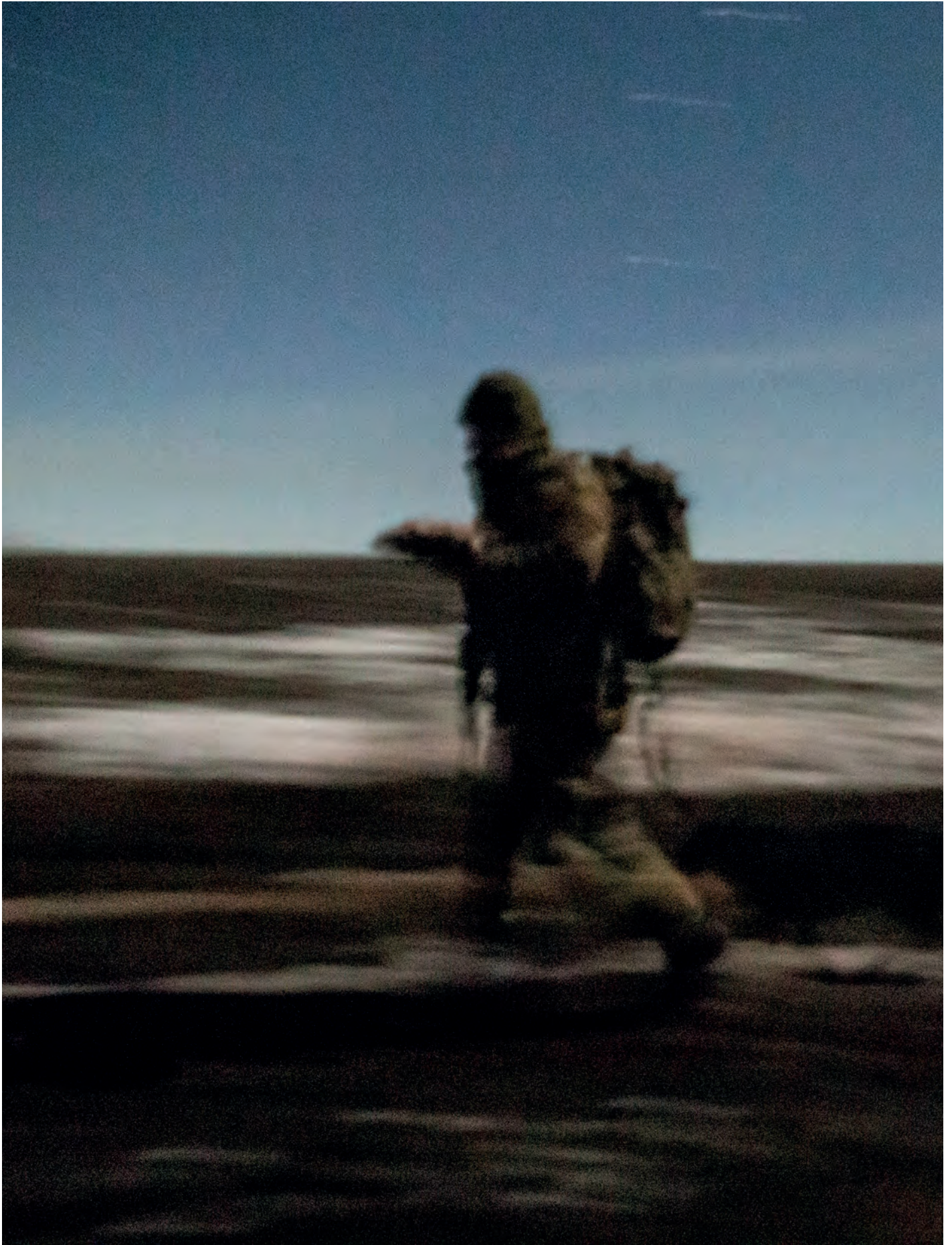
It feels like an eternity ago, that grim wintry pre-dawn of Thursday 24 February. A time before the place names Bucha and Irpin, Kramatorsk and Mariupol became by-words for the bloodiest war in Europe since 1945; before the letter Z became emblematic of a new fascism; before a new Iron Curtain fell over the continent; before it became impossible to describe the Covid-19 pandemic as a “once in a decade” shock to the global system. A time when a British prime minister could, as Boris Johnson had done in November, blithely declare that “the old concepts of fighting big tank battles on the European landmass are over”.

The final act of that pre-invasion era was at one with the dark poetry of the moment. In a ten-minute video address issued in the early hours of 24 February, after months of Russian troop build-ups on the Ukrainian border and increasingly deranged rhetoric from Moscow, Volodymyr Zelensky made a last-ditch plea for peace. Ukraine's president appealed directly to Russian citizens in their own language: “The people of Ukraine want peace,” he said, but warned that the country would defend itself: “While attacking, you will see our faces. Not our backs. Our faces.” Then, just before 5am local time, Vladimir Putin announced a “special military operation”. Within minutes, air-raid sirens and the first explosions were heard in cities across the country.

The world woke up to a new reality. In a piece for the *New Statesman* website that morning I argued that “precedents will be set in the next days: precedents about what is acceptable in the international system of the early-to-mid 21st century and what is not; precedents that will shape the decades to come”. It would be up to Ukraine and its Western allies, I wrote, to ensure Putin did not achieve mastery over this historical turning point. At the time reports were emerging that US officials believed Kyiv could fall within one to four days, with Putin then expected to install a Kremlin puppet government and partition Ukraine.

Set against this, however, was the obvious Ukrainian determination to resist. Half a year on, it is true that swathes of the country lie in ruins. Barbaric Russian acts in Kyiv's northern suburbs during the first weeks of the war and in southern and eastern cities over the spring and summer recalled the genocidal worst of the Balkan wars and the Second World War. Despite many thousands of Ukrainian military and civilian casualties, and the displacement of millions of its citizens, a democratic and free Ukraine still stands tall.

Russian troops turned out to be poorly prepared and unmotivated. They were not able to seize Kyiv in the first weeks of the war and withdrew from the area at the end of March. And while Russia has made gains in the eastern Donbas and along a southern ►



MANU BRABO/GETTY IMAGES

◀ Black Sea corridor to Crimea – itself illegally occupied in Putin’s initial 2014 attack on Ukraine – Russia appears to be making slow progress towards taking the whole Donbas region. US estimates put the numbers of Russian dead or injured at up to 80,000 – more in six months than the Soviet Union incurred during its entire 1979-89 war in Afghanistan.

The war has also changed the geopolitical landscape. Ukraine’s defence has drawn not just on its own impressive resolve, but also on huge transfers of Western military and economic aid. The conflict has jolted American attention back to Europe and revitalised Nato, which is now sending substantial reinforcements to its eastern flank and admitting Sweden and Finland as new members. It has disrupted flows of staple commodities – oil and gas, grain and fertiliser – and contributed to rising inflation, a looming global recession and humanitarian crises in poor countries. It has reshaped how powers further afield, notably China, view the decades ahead.

As much as the morning of 24 February 2022 was a turning point – the *Zeitenwende*, or epochal shift, of German chancellor Olaf Scholz’s coinage three days later – it cannot be understood in isolation. It came against a tumultuous global backdrop: the debacles of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the rise of China and relative decline of the West, the turmoil of the Trump presidency, Europe’s waning relevance, the shift towards a more multipolar and anarchic world order and, most recently, the Covid-19 pandemic. To understand the meaning of the war, six months in but far from over, is to situate it with that wider move away from the easy optimism of the immediate post-Cold War years and towards something new and, for now, still hazy.

If the war had gone as Putin had hoped, that work of analysis would have been rather straightforward. A Ukraine successfully subjugated and sundered as punishment for its alignment with the West would have made a potent symbol of a new post-Western era, the collapse of the old order and the rise of a new, authoritarian-friendly multipolarity. Instead the events of the past six months tell a sufficiently complex story – of democratic resilience, of shifting power balances, of both authoritarian revisionism and weakness, of global systems both brittle and adaptable – to spark a genuine debate about what they mean.

Putin still clings to the narrative he had hoped the war would substantiate. At the St Petersburg economic summit on 17 June, he accused Western countries of being in denial over their own decline: “They do not realise that in recent decades, new and powerful centres have been formed on the planet, each of which is developing its own political systems and public institutions.” This chimes with the Chinese view of the conflict. Writing of a recent discussion with a Beijing academic, Mark Leonard of the European Council on Foreign Relations reports: “My Chinese interlocutor sees the situation in Ukraine not as a war of aggression between sovereign countries, but rather as a revision of post-colonial borders following the end of Western hegemony.”

Within the West itself, opinion is divided. Optimists see in Ukraine’s resilience, and in the new purpose the war has given Nato, the seeds of some sort of Western revival. By contrast, realist-pessimist types have mostly deemed it either a distraction from America’s contest with China or a demonstration of the need to do unpalatable deals with thugs like Putin to prevent international chaos – or some combination of the two. Thus the war has conformed to the wider habit of sweeping, “return of the West” or “death of the West” binary arguments. Such thinking goes back decades, but it has intensified in the recent years of international and domestic turmoil.

I noted one example of this feast-or-famine demeanour last summer. A year before, in February 2020, the Munich Security Conference had warned of an era of Trumpian “Westlessness”. Yet by June 2021, ahead of a G7 meeting in Cornwall that would be the first of Joe Biden’s presidency, the hubristic slogan of the moment seemed to be “the West is back” (as if one favourable US election result could rewind the clock to the late 1990s). I argued then that a better term for new global realities would be “Westishness”, defined as a middle-ground scenario “in which aspects of the West’s values and power endure but others fragment”. This might include a “Eurasian” Europe more bound up with events to its east, as well as more heated internal battles about the values and meaning of the West and a fragmentation of global governance.

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## If support for Ukraine had been left to Europe alone, Kyiv might now be in Russian hands

What that term “Westishness” lacks in lexical elegance it perhaps makes up for in nuance. It captures something of the past half-year of war in Ukraine, and of an age defined not by the binary triumph of one system over another but by its own in-between-ness. We are living through neither the old post-Cold War era nor the first chapter of a fundamentally new international order, but a transitional period with its own distinct rules and realities.

A useful exercise after six months of a war that has exemplified Westishness is to ask what it tells us about this interstitial time. To ask: what are the defining characteristics of a Westish world? In the hope of starting a discussion, and of at least providing some examples, here are ten:

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### 1. A West over-reliant on the US

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For all its misery, the war has been a reminder of US strength. From halfway around the world, Washington has supplied Ukraine with intelligence, military and economic resources, enabling the country to largely hold off a nuclear-armed aggressor with a military budget ten times its own. Between 24 February and 1 July this year, America allocated €23.8bn in military aid, while the largest European donors, Britain and Poland, committed €4.4bn and €1.8bn respectively. It is thanks especially to American HIMARS (multiple rocket launchers) that Ukraine has been able to stall the artillery-led Russian advance in the Donbas. The Biden administration has driven the reinvigoration of Nato in recent months: it has committed to establishing a new permanent military headquarters in Poland and providing the backbone of a proposed expansion of Nato’s rapid-response force to 300,000 troops.

These developments are the quintessence of Westishness. They tell a story of robust, even awe-inspiring US strength that simply does not square with the gloomy proclamations of American collapse and retreat issued at dark moments, such as the storming of the Capitol on 6 January 2021 or the debacle of the Afghanistan withdrawal eight months later. Yet they also tell a story of in-betweenness, of circumstances produced by the very fact of the West swaying between supremacy and decline. For the war has also illustrated Western over-reliance on American strength. After all, if support for Ukraine had been left to the Europeans, Kyiv might now be in Russian hands. And an overly US-centric West is emphatically vulnerable to a Trump or Trumpist victory in the 2024 US presidential election.



Precious cargo: a ship carrying grain from Odesa, Ukraine, reaches Istanbul, August 2022

## 2. Technology over size

In mid-August, Russian forces in southern Ukraine have been blindsided by devastating strikes on their anti-aircraft missile systems, including one on a major airbase in occupied Crimea. These may have involved advanced anti-radar Harm missiles, part of a recent US arms shipment. By contrast, Russian military hardware captured by Ukrainians has turned out to contain US-made microchips – some of them reportedly extracted from dishwashers and refrigerators, in a sign of Russian technological backwardness.

The role of Western technology in helping to level the field in the David-vs-Goliath struggle points to a broader trait of the Westish world: it is at least debatable whether the reality of the West's declining relative economic weight matters as much as its prevailing (if now contested by China) technological leadership. Washington certainly hopes it does not. As Adam Tooze wrote for the *New Statesman* last year (“The new age of American power”, 10 September 2021), “the ultimate goal of the Pentagon planners is to loosen that link between economic performance and military force”, by using “ultra-advanced technology”.

## 3. Disorderly interdependence

Another element of the in-between state is that interdependence, the watchword of the

1990s utopians, has not gone away. Borders, in many places, still matter less than they used to. Nation-state sovereignty remains, on the whole, relative rather than absolute. Yet, as the world becomes more anarchic, that interdependence is creating more and more vulnerabilities. The invasion has exposed the weaknesses of multilateral international institutions like the UN. Europe is now bracing for a chilly winter of gas cut-offs, the political effects of which could be severe. Putin's blockage of Black Sea ports – now tentatively lifted – has threatened famine and political breakdown in states such as Ethiopia and Egypt. This is neither a world of “the West is back” nor of ubiquitously rising walls, but of highly networked international systems that no institutions or rules are capable of managing.

## 4. Globalisation reshaped

In the Western pessimist camp, it is fashionable to proclaim globalisation over. The war in Ukraine has lent credence to this idea. By triggering severe Western sanctions on Russia, pushing Russia and China closer together, and spooking Western investors out of Chinese markets – given the parallels between Putin's war and a possible Chinese invasion of Taiwan – it has accelerated the shift to a world of closed economic blocks.

Yet the story really is more complex. Western trade with Russia has been replaced by

trade with others – witness the European rush to do gas deals with Azerbaijan, Algeria and the Gulf states. Likewise, as John Springford of the Centre for European Reform noted in a recent article for the think tank, Covid-19 has caused services trade to rise and goods trade to fall but recover relatively quickly, while foreign direct investment and migration flows have continued to surge. Globalised systems can adapt, in other words. And much of what is termed “deglobalisation” is in fact politics taking primacy over economic considerations. As power becomes more contested and diffuse in a Westish world, globalisation is not dying; rather, it is being shaped more by those contests and less by purely market- and price-based factors.

## 5. Weaponised global crises

We live in an era of crises of the “Anthropocene” – that is, crises caused directly by humankind's impact on the planet. But those crises can also be harnessed for geopolitical goals, as Russia attempted to do in recent months by limiting grain and fertiliser flows out of Ukraine and Russia. Putin may lack the economic and technological heft to defeat a Western-backed adversary, but he does hope to sow chaos in the West's near-abroad (through, say, the collapse of a Western security client like Egypt or massive new European migration crises). The greater the strains on environmental and commodity ecosystems, the more opportunities such actors will have to exploit them.

## 6. An ambivalent Global South

On 2 March, the UN General Assembly voted on a resolution condemning the invasion. Countries representing fully 59 per cent of the world's population either abstained or voted against this. That pattern has continued in the months since: states in the Global South have broadly erred towards neutrality. Most notable among them is India. The country about to overtake China as the world's most populous is aligned with the West on several topics – most notably the containment of China in the Pacific and Indian Oceans – but has in the past months shown its resistance to Western pressure to condemn Russia over its war.

That resistance is rooted in decades of Indian strategic doctrine, specifically a military relationship with Russia dating back to Soviet days, but it is also a window onto the mercurial instincts of states in the Global South in a period of Westishness. ▶

### 7. Power to the pivot states

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Related to this is a particular role for states capable of pivoting between Western and non-Western powers. It is a useful ability in a Westish age: no economic alliance remotely competes with the West – the US remains by far the world's greatest power – and yet the West's relative decline also presents new openings for contrary alliances. States that can walk this tightrope have particular advantages.

One is Kazakhstan, long in Russia's shadow but a state that has sought to keep its distance from Putin's war in Ukraine (refusing to recognise the Kremlin's puppet regimes in the Donbas, for example) while maintaining cordial relations with both the West and China. Another example is Saudi Arabia, as tightening oil markets have thawed a relationship with the US that had been frozen by the brutal murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Other pivot states include Algeria, Vietnam and Brazil. But perhaps the best example of all is Turkey, where President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has simultaneously supplied Ukraine with valuable Bayraktar drones while maintaining relations with Russia and negotiating a deal to free up grain shipments through the Black Sea and the Bosphorus. The symbolic capital of Westishness is surely Istanbul.

### 8. Authoritarian limits exposed

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Ukraine's resilience and the role of US might and technology have shown the limitations of authoritarian systems. Russia's leadership has been exposed as overly centralised, its troops as under-motivated and its system as slow to correct mistakes. It so happens that this has taken place over the period in which the weaknesses of the Chinese system have also become clear. The emerging superpower's inept Covid strategy has merged with twin debt and property crises to raise doubts about when – and even whether – China will overtake the US as the world's most powerful state.

That does not change the fact of Western decline. But it does indicate a dangerous new reality: of authoritarian states strong enough to accrue more relative power within the global system but not strong enough to found new poles of stability. Much has been made in recent months of the new links between China, Russia and Iran, for example. But the

notion of the three coalescing into a serious, trusting, enduring alliance comparable even to today's fragmenting Nato is ludicrous.

### 9. Old assumptions examined

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A Westish international order is inherently fluid. Therefore one of its defining traits is a constant and febrile process of debate and questioning. In the US, Putin's invasion of Ukraine has put Biden's central foreign policy agenda in doubt. (Is an "alliance of democracies" really the priority of a president fresh back from a trip-of-necessity to Riyadh to bump fists with the man behind Khashoggi's murder and dismemberment?) In Washington it has intensified debates between defenders of a proactive liberal-democratic America (say, writers like Anne Applebaum or David Frum), voices of old-school realism (such as the political scientist John Mearsheimer) and the new "restrainers" (such as the historian Stephen Wertheim) arguing for a US policy of non-intervention abroad. In Berlin the war has triggered an unsettling examination of Germany's old assumptions about "*Wandel durch Handel*" (change through trade). In London it has coaxed out a fascinating tension between idealist Atlanticist Brexiteers (like Liz Truss) and Brexiteers of a more realist persuasion (like Dominic Cummings).

### 10. New challenges at home

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To the extent that it has been tough and proactive, America's response to the war speaks of internal robustness. It has required: Biden to have prevailed over Trump's attempt to override the US constitution in early 2021; the country to draw on its economic and technological supremacy; and American politics to generate stable consent for the White House to do things such as revitalise Nato.

Likewise, the extent to which Europe will get through a winter of gas shortages orchestrated by Moscow will be largely determined by the state of its political and economic systems. Can the EU, its states, firms and citizens, pull together to get through the cold months with disrupted energy supplies?

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**The notion of China, Russia and Iran forming a trusting, enduring alliance is ludicrous**

In a world in which many Western strengths endure, but the challenges to them are becoming more formidable, the deciding factors may turn out to be domestic ones. America retains the ability to attract many of the world's brightest scientists and researchers in a way China cannot. Europe's economies can adapt to adversity and change in ways that Russia's cannot. But all that depends on a degree of cohesion and openness that is far from certain in times of such disruption. Whether these can be sustained may well ultimately decide what sort of world-historical era follows our own period of Westishness.

Observant readers will notice just how many of these points also apply to the pandemic. Covid-19 also showed us many of the contours of a Westish world: the centrality of technology; the awkward middle-zone of an interdependent order without the structures to manage its own interdependence; an adaptive but political globalisation; a geopolitical edge to an Anthropocene crisis; authoritarian states at once too strong to be boxed in entirely by Western power but too weak to provide real stability; and a West whose fortunes depend most on its own internal cohesion. The pandemic and the war belong together as a double-headed crisis.

Truly, then, we are in a global *Zeitenwende*. But history tells us that such epochal shifts tend to take at least a couple of years to play out. The French Revolution was more than the Storming of the Bastille. The start of the Second World War was more than the first German tanks rumbling into Poland. The end of the Cold War was more than the Berlin Wall falling on 9 November 1989. If we are indeed entering the era of Westishness, the period of transition will surely be dated to at least as early as the start of 2020 and at least as late as 2023.

That is not to take away from the importance of the war. In a future in which, say, the world of 2060 looks back on the early 2020s as a significant turning point, 24 February 2022 will doubtless be a – or even *the* – date that serves as shorthand for a wider shift.

So too will the events of autumn and winter 2022. At the time of writing, Ukraine's long-mooted offensive to retake Kherson (the only major occupied city west of Crimea) is reportedly stalling for lack of weaponry. Its success depends on further increases in Western backing. China has just conducted its biggest ever military exercise simulating an invasion of Taiwan, yet remains mired in its Covid woes at home. Donald Trump is said to be canvassing the announcement of a second-term run. These are symptoms of an age of Westishness that may well last decades. The mid 21st century is dawning. ●



# LOUISE PERRY



## Out of the Ordinary Beyond the hype, Drag Queen Story Hour is safe titillation for middle-class parents

Usually, being the mother of a toddler puts one at a disadvantage in the world of journalism. Long hours, travel and tight deadlines are all radically incompatible with being home at 5pm for the dinner and bedtime routine. The sudden interest in Drag Queen Story Hour, however, has made a child companion an unexpectedly useful accessory for journalists in the field.

Drag Queen Story Hour events invite children to enjoy a story read by a performer in drag. This summer, a touring group called Drag Queen Story Hour UK has brought the originally American franchise to this country and with it an American style of culture war – and British journalists have been eager to report on the action. But you can't very well show up to a children's event without a child. Enter my 15-month-old son – the Woodward to my Bernstein.

I should start by saying that we witnessed nothing outrageous at the Drag Queen Story Hour we attended. There have been several controversial incidents in the US over the past three years, however – some of which have been picked up by the mainstream press, including apparently incriminating images that have sparked outrage and debate.

Earlier this year, footage from an event in Dallas showed children handing out dollar bills to drag queens marching down a runway topped with a neon sign reading "It's not gonna lick itself". And last July Redbridge council launched an investigation after a performer at a children's event held at Goodmayes Library in east London was photographed wearing

a rainbow monkey suit with exposed fake nipples, fake buttocks and a fake penis.

Protests at these events have become heated. In the US, the right-wing group the Proud Boys stormed a reading in a library near San Francisco in June. Drag Queen Story Hour UK, meanwhile, claimed on 18 July that a "far-Right neo-Nazi group" had block-booked 2,000 tickets to try to prevent its tour from going ahead. Ten days later, police had to escort the drag performer Sab Samuels to safety after a group of about 25 protesters gathered outside a Drag Queen Story Hour event in Bristol.

When my son and I arrived at our own Drag Queen Story Hour event in a London suburb, this backlash was the subject of conversation among the cluster of parents gathered outside. The consensus was that the controversy was driven by right-wing media. "It's all just a confected culture war," remarked one mother, to nods from the others. Everyone seemed excited.

I had wondered if the event might attract a lot of same-sex couples, but looking around that didn't appear to be the case – and among our audience the fashion choices seemed on the conventional side. And, despite the event being held in a very diverse area, everyone was white.

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If the point of the event was to challenge gender norms, it did nothing of the sort

Our compère joked that the drag queen was late because vacuum cleaners were on sale in the local shop – the kind of sexist joke that would normally raise gasps in a crowd like this. We were all asked to call out the performer's name and in she came. To my surprise, it turned out that our drag queen was a woman.

Adorned in a 1950s-style petticoated dress and high heels, with a blonde bouffant and exaggerated make-up, this performer was a "female queen". (Female queens account for a small proportion of drag performers and are not always welcome on the drag scene.) She shimmied around the room, singing a song for the children. The experience was much like any other kind of playgroup. The only difference was that this playgroup leader had dressed up as a caricature of an airheaded woman obsessed with housework and looking pretty. Who, exactly, was this event for? What was its purpose?

In 2020 an American drag queen who opposes these events, and goes by the name of Kitty Demure, released a video addressed to "heterosexual women" considering taking their children to a Drag Queen Story Hour reading: "I understand that you might want to look like you're with it, that you're cool... And honestly you're not doing the gay community any favours. In fact, you're hurting us."

Demure explained that these events function as a progressive provocation, a deliberate attempt to get a rise out of conservatives. It was inevitable that adding risqué nightclub entertainers to children's events would result in occasional boundary transgressions like the ones we've seen (fake penises and the like), which would inevitably invite outrage. Thus the Drag Queen Story Hour phenomenon rains down fire on a form of entertainment that has traditionally been the preserve of gay men.

The point, supposedly, is to challenge gender norms, but the event we attended did nothing of the sort. We were a bunch of white, middle-class heterosexuals who had brought our children along to watch a woman put on a bizarrely exaggerated display of femininity.

Sitting in that stuffy room, I realised that this phenomenon has nothing to do with children – and everything to do with their parents. There is always enjoyment to be had in feeling deliciously transgressive while staying safely within the bounds of conventionality. Drag Queen Story Hour presents the perfect opportunity to do just that. ●

# Small and medium businesses can power our recovery

In partnership with  **NatWest**

As strong economic headwinds and the cost-of-living crisis start to bite, small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are bracing themselves for the multiple challenges that lie ahead. Following on from the uncertainty caused by the pandemic, lockdowns, the fast easing of restrictions, and now a difficult economic climate, many SMEs, which play a vital role in their communities, will have their resilience tested. However, if small businesses are given the right support, and if they are given the opportunity to prosper and grow, with access to finance and the networks that buttress success, they can play a vital role in promoting social mobility, spurring growth, building back better and in levelling up in every part of the UK.

In June, NatWest hosted the first-ever in-person round table of the SME Taskforce, a group established in 2020 to bring together policymakers, business groups, as well as small businesses themselves, to discuss the issues they are facing. The SME Taskforce uses a collaborative approach to develop ways in which businesses' problems can be addressed and solutions found in partnership with government and the financial services sector, but had only met virtually up until this point.

The choice of a first meeting place was in a propitious location: the Yorkshire city of Bradford, which had only the week before been announced as winner of the UK City of Culture 2025 under the banner "Our Time, Our Place". It was in this spirit that the gathered decision-makers, business leaders and SME groups explored some of the issues facing the communities around them.

Ahead of the round table, SME Taskforce members spent the morning in the Bradford Impact Hub, a social innovation and co-working space in the historic Little Germany district of the town centre, helping social entrepreneurs, start-ups and change-makers come together to make a positive social impact. "Bradford is the UK's youngest city, and it has so much growth potential," said Impact Hub CEO Kamran Rashid. But the city had more than its fair share of problems – economic deprivation, poor connectivity, and low levels of literacy, to name just a few – he added.

SME Taskforce members went on to discuss the opportunities presented by developing responsible business practices at a later "Seeing is Believing" event organised by Business in the Community (BITC), with contributions from senior business leaders from across the country,



including the NatWest chief executive Alison Rose. BITC's work bringing together hundreds of businesses to help use their power to create a fairer and more sustainable future was highlighted by its chief executive, Amanda Mackenzie.

"What we realise is that our leverage and power as businesses in the community, our power to make changes in our society, is second to none," Mackenzie told delegates. Through its work, which includes a focus on UN Sustainable Development Goals, BITC and its affiliates had "been doing 'levelling up' for 40 years – before the phrase was ever invented", she said.

Rose highlighted NatWest's work with BITC and described "Seeing is Believing" events as "an opportunity for those of us

who are running businesses to get out into the communities where we live and work, and that we support, and see what's really going on".

"It's about listening and finding out what's working and how we can practically help and learn to support local communities," Rose continued. Unlocking people's potential, and unleashing the entrepreneurial spirit and business acumen that exists up and down the UK would be essential to building back better and driving prosperity, she said.

"NatWest is the largest bank supporting thousands of businesses in places like Bradford and up and down the country," Rose told attendees. "Our job is to provide support, empower and enable SMEs to create jobs and enable the economy to thrive."

Accompanying delegates from national and multinational firms working in a range of sectors, SME Taskforce members joined the NatWest chief executive on a site visit to a vibrant local business, the Huma Humad bridal shop. The company, run by brother and sister Hummad and Humma Ilyas, has seen success serving the British Asian community of Bradford, as well as through exporting all over the world and

participating in fashion weeks as far away as Pakistan and Dubai. Huma Humad was a prime example of an SME making an impact and having strong roots in its local community. But Hummad told BITC and SME Taskforce delegates that the company had been through many "trials and tribulations", particularly when it came to initial funding and financing.

"There's so much opportunity, and so much potential, but it's just too hard to get access to all of the support that's out there," said NatWest's Rose. From training, advice and guidance to finance or equity, "our job is to make it easier for people who are running businesses to get that support", she added.

To discuss these levers of support in more detail, the SME Taskforce concluded its Bradford visit with the aforementioned round-table discussion, including representation from NatWest, the British Chambers of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB). They were joined by members of the regional SME Taskforce for the north and members of Bradford City Council. Martin McTague, national chair of the FSB, emphasised the cost pressures that his members and many small businesses were currently facing. "A lot of small businesses are operating on less than three months' cash," he said. "They just don't have the resources and a lot of them are really struggling." Now more than ever, access to finance would be essential to keeping many afloat and spurring new growth, he added.

Andrew Harrison, head of business banking at NatWest, reiterated a central commitment to collaboratively work out ways to create a better environment for SMEs to be successful. This wasn't, he said, about one bank or one council or one business group becoming a one-stop shop for support, but instead a network of organisations working in partnership to embrace a holistic approach to creating SME success stories. Through that success, SMEs can continue to play a role as dynamic centres of their communities, innovating, growing and providing essential services and local employment both directly and through their supply chains. Harrison committed to using the SME Taskforce to create an ecosystem of SME support, "continue sharing best practice" and foster collaboration into the future. "I don't think there's a silver bullet," he warned attendees, "but together, if we break down our silos, we can help move this agenda forward." ●

What we realise is that our power to make changes in our society is second to none

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# A voice that will not be silenced

## In the wake of the attack on Salman Rushdie, writers consider the future of free expression

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Erica Wagner

Rushdie showed me the value of freedom – to criticise and to laugh

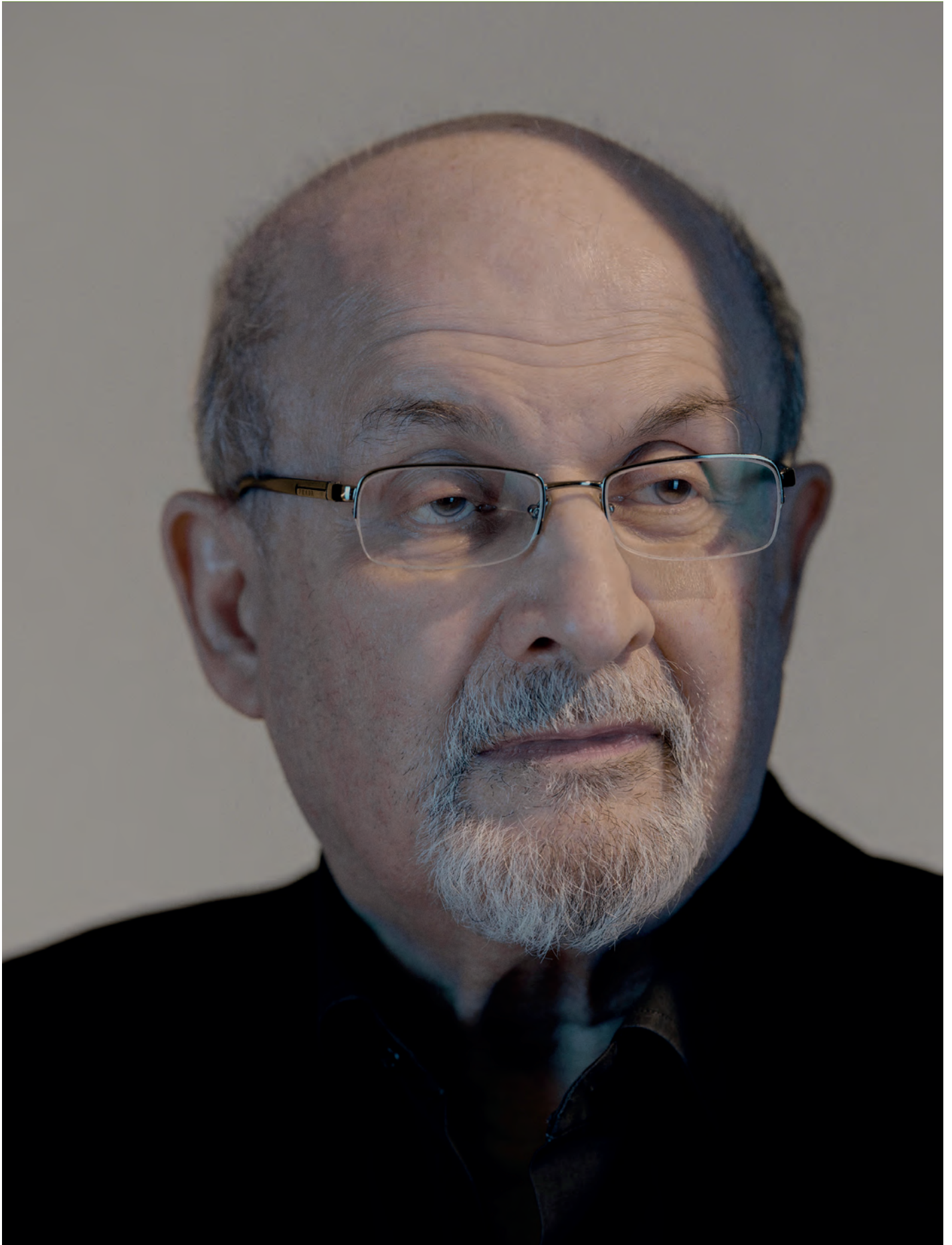
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As I write this, I am relieved to hear that Salman Rushdie is conscious and able to speak, though still in a hospital bed. On Friday 12 August he had been due to address an audience at the Chautauqua Institution in western New York state when a man rushed on to the stage and stabbed the author at least ten times. Rushdie's agent and friend Andrew Wylie has said the author is likely to lose an eye; his liver is damaged and the nerves in his arm have been severed. It is a cliché to say of someone who has been gravely injured that there is cause for optimism because "he's a fighter" – yet if this is true of anyone it is true of Rushdie. For decades he has fought against the threat of violence with eloquence, with humour, with the optimism that pervades his extraordinary body of work.

"Free speech is the whole thing, the whole ball game. Free speech is life itself." Any writer should keep these words pinned above their desk. They were spoken by Rushdie in a lecture he gave at Columbia University in 1991, a thousand days, give or take, since Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued an edict known as a fatwa in February 1989 that ordered Muslims to kill Rushdie, and placed a bounty on his head. Rushdie's 1988 novel *The Satanic Verses* fictionalises elements of the Prophet Muhammad's life; this, according to the then ayatollah, was blasphemy, and the fatwa was the result.

I thought of those words when, in the wake of last week's ghastly attack – an attack on my friend, an attack on one of our greatest contemporary authors, an attack on all of us – I was asked by a radio producer whether a publisher now might not be more "sensitive"; whether they might refuse to publish such a novel. The answer is, quite possibly, yes, and we are all the poorer for it.

Salman Rushdie knew better than anyone that this kind of "sensitivity", while well-meaning, is a threat not only to freedom of expression but also, finally, to those it purports to protect. In an interview with the *Guardian's* Hadley Freeman last year, Rushdie said that although there was much that was valuable in what he called "a youthful progressive ►



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## Reflections

◀ movement”, he also saw within it “an acceptance that certain ideas should be suppressed, and I just think that’s worrying. Wherever there has been censorship, the first people to suffer from it are underprivileged minorities. So if in the name of underprivileged minorities you wish to endorse a suppression of wrongthink, it’s a slippery slope.”

In 2015 Rushdie, who lived in hiding for almost a decade following the ayatollah’s decree, spoke out strongly against the decision of six writers, including Peter Carey and Michael Ondaatje, to withdraw from a Pen America gala honouring the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* – its offices had been attacked and its staff slaughtered after it published cartoons satirising Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. “If Pen as a free-speech organisation can’t defend and celebrate people who have been murdered for drawing pictures, then frankly the organisation is not worth the name,” Rushdie said. “What I would say to both Peter and Michael and the others is, I hope nobody ever comes after them.”

Rushdie knows what he stands for; he never wavers. What is remarkable is how his serious, joyous work has never been stained by his ordeal. Now is as good a time as any to return to *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), written for his then 11-year-old son Zafar when he first went into hiding. It is – like all truly great children’s books – both serious and delightful, with echoes of the *Arabian Nights* and of L Frank Baum’s *Oz*, and hints of Carroll’s *Alice*. In it the tyrant Khatam-Shud expresses his fear of stories – and the source of their power. “Inside every single story, inside every Stream in the Ocean, there lies a world, a story-world, that I cannot Rule at all.”

Rushdie knows how vital, how serious the business of storytelling is; yet in my encounters with him – the most recent, a convivial drink in his adopted home of Manhattan just a few nights before the attack – he never took himself seriously. I’ve had the privilege and pleasure to chair many public events with him – events not so dissimilar to the one at Chautauqua. At one of our more recent talks he was asked by a young audience member how he coped with his fame; how he was able to bear – as the questioner imagined – being recognised wherever he went. This was, after all, an author who was friends with Carrie Fisher and who appeared on stage with U2.

He smiled. He said that never happens. Well, he allowed, he could recall one single



time, when he was stopped in the streets of New York by an older Indian gentleman. “Salman Rushdie?” came the enquiry. “I am,” the author acknowledged. A finger was wagged in his face: Rushdie, a great performer always, mimicked the gesture, causing our audience to burst out laughing. “Salman Rushdie,” the fellow scolded. “Not as good as VS Naipaul!”

Now I was laughing, and the audience, and Rushdie. It is the freedom to laugh – the freedom to criticise – our ability to take offence and bear it, that we must treasure, as we treasure the work of Salman Rushdie and hope for his swift return to health. Free speech is life itself.

## Elif Shafak

### Storytelling must prevail in a world in which democracy is under threat

It is not easy to be a storyteller in a world that increasingly chooses online hearsay over knowledge, amnesia over memory, apathy over empathy, uniformity over diversity, dogma over doubt, tyranny over democracy, and, ultimately, silence over stories. Anyone who has dedicated their life to books and literature knows that freedom of expression, the oxygen we desperately need in order to write and dream and connect beyond borders, is being depleted. Writers, like fish

in heavily polluted rivers, are either swimming around frantically searching for those last remaining pockets of oxygen, or slowing down and retreating into pessimism and fatigue. Those of us from parts of the globe that have been shaped by waves of populist authoritarianism, ultra-nationalism, extremism and jingoism, those of us from badly wounded democracies, have already learned the hard way that words can be heavy and literature, at its core, is resistance. From politics to sexuality to history, no subject is easy to write about any more. The truth is we have been feeling this way for a long time, and yet it was still a total shock when, on 12 August, a 24-year-old extremist attacked and repeatedly stabbed one of the world’s leading novelists, essayists and public intellectuals, Salman Rushdie. He will be left with life-changing injuries and a trauma that will probably never truly heal.

There are two ways of reading this horrific incident. We can view it as an isolated attack, in which case we will focus mainly, if not solely, on the author and his book *The Satanic Verses*, which has caused outrage ever since it was first published. A substantial portion of the world’s media coverage has followed this part of the story. Article after article has highlighted the 1989 fatwa against Rushdie, which not only called for his assassination but also the assassination of everyone involved in the book’s publication.

There are several milestones in this history: the Japanese translator of the novel, Hitoshi Igarashi, a professor of Arabic and Persian literature, who was knifed to death in 1991. The Italian translator, Ettore Capriolo, was attacked that same year, and in 1993 the Norwegian publisher William Nygaard was shot and seriously injured. In Turkey, the author

MIRRORPIX/GETTY IMAGES

Aziz Nesin translated and published excerpts from *The Satanic Verses*. In 1993, when Nesin was visiting the Anatolian city of Sivas for a festival, a mob of religious fundamentalists gathered around his hotel and set it on fire. The perpetrators knew there was also a number of artists, writers and poets inside the hotel, most of them from Turkey's minority Alevi background. Nesin escaped, but 37 people were murdered that day as extremists kept chanting slogans. To this day, it remains one of the most despicable and tragic assaults against democracy, diversity and arts.

In 1989, a letter addressed to the editors of the *New York Review* was penned by several "writers and scholars from the Islamic world". Their aim was to publicly condemn bigoted violence. Among them were the late Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said and the Indian-born poet Agha Shahid Ali. That letter ended with these words: "We deplore and regret this sort of thing, and we reaffirm our belief in universal principles of rational discussion and freedom of expression." Since then the chasm between those with such beliefs and those without has been widening.

This is why it is important to understand that there is a second way of analysing the attack against Rushdie: by realising that this is not an isolated incident, but connected to the political, cultural and social changes we are living through. Until recently, many people assumed human rights, women's rights and the need to defend basic freedoms were challenges for other parts of the world, not the West. Now it is evident that these assaults, these attacks on democracy, can and do happen anywhere. All across the world, alongside the proliferation of digital technologies and social media, there is an alarming increase in abuse targeted against authors, poets and journalists. Women and minorities are among the worst affected.

Over the years I have shared multiple literary platforms with Salman Rushdie, including the Booker shortlist readings in 2019. Always eloquent and clear-minded, he understood the importance of extending solidarity to all persecuted writers, from Afghanistan to Ukraine. I observed how he appreciated literary festivals as spaces where one could have nuanced conversations, proper intellectual exchange, both to speak one's mind freely but also to hear someone else's story. While in daily life everyone rushes constantly, inside cultural spaces people naturally slow down to listen to each other.

That this awful attack occurred in a peaceful, inclusive and diverse cultural space is not some random detail. The perpetrator wanted not only to silence a prominent author but also to bring fear and chaos into one of our last remaining democratic spaces – a literary festival. Many Western politicians, including

Joe Biden and Emmanuel Macron, have spoken up in the aftermath of the attack. If they are sincere, they must support cultural festivals, literary venues and, especially, local libraries. The loss of culture and literature has huge social consequences. The art of storytelling is not an incidental element, a luxury that can be pushed aside or discarded. Stories are central to who we are as human beings. But also, as we have seen, they are central to the well-being and survival of our democracies.

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## Anthony Barnett

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### The fatwa against Rushdie changed British identity forever

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When you are living through a historic turning point you know it. What you cannot know is the direction history will point when the turning stops. This was true of 1989. It culminated in one of Europe's greatest playwrights, Václav Havel, being sworn in as president of Czechoslovakia in an unprecedented, peaceful triumph of free voice over oppression. But it opened with Ayatollah Khomeini issuing his Valentine's Day fatwa against one of Britain's greatest novelists.

One of the differences between Britain then and Britain today is that in 1989 the left confronted a reactionary system that was confident and successful, rather than one undergoing a Brexit breakdown. At the end of the 1980s most of us on the left felt it was imperative to challenge Thatcher's rampant "regime". This led to new forms of defiance. *Marxism Today* – a left-wing magazine – was declaring "New Times"; Scottish civic and political groups combined to make a Claim of Rights; the reform project Charter 88, which I coordinated and Salman assisted, demanded a modern, European constitution; the June 20 group of writers, launched from the home of Harold Pinter and Antonia Fraser, discussed how the left could succeed. And a refusal to pay the poll tax was gathering strength.

The deeper earthquake was the end of the labour movement's historic allegiance to collectivism. Symbolised by Thatcher's crushing of the miners, its cause was the end of "Fordist" mass production. The challenge was to create new ways to confront the reckless supremacy of finance capitalism. On the left we explored the positive aspects of "globalisa-

tion" for answers, as communism had corrupted the ideal of "internationalism". This was the heady context in which *The Satanic Verses* was conceived.

Tragically, the far right, in the form of Islamic fundamentalism, attacked globalisation before progressives could get a measure of it. Khomeini's "mumbo-jumbo", as the journalist Francis Wheen described it, was born in 1979, the year Thatcher came to power. But the ayatollah's bigotry and xenophobia were far worse. And so, in 1989, with only a few months to live, he lashed out with the fatwa.

At the time, I was coordinating Charter 88 from the offices of the *New Statesman*. Two weeks before the fatwa the editor, Stuart Weir, asked me to write an editorial denouncing the burning of *The Satanic Verses* in Bradford, where around 1,000 protestors had gathered to torch it. I argued that the book's burning put "the very principles of pluralist democracy... to the stake". The protest was treated as a local upset. But the fatwa could not be so ignored. A foreign state had singled out a UK citizen to be assassinated for writing a book.

Had Rushdie been a white Christian, the public uproar would have been substantial. Instead, many saw him as an uppity native who should have been grateful to the UK for its hospitality rather than lancing its hypocrisies. The fatwa initiated a redefinition of what it meant to be "us"; being British included defending people like Rushdie with all the resources of the state. But his novel, and his defiance, represented a challenge to Islam that was greater still. By claiming it was his right, as a person born into the Muslim faith, to mock the absurdities of its orthodoxy, Rushdie asserted the ultimate migration: the right to become like "the other" and lay claim to the highest, secular standards of his new culture. In *The Satanic Verses*, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha go to England and confront a central issue of modern life: are you true to yourself by leaving your roots behind or by remaining loyal to your origins?

Thus a new global conflict began in 1989 that still defines our time: a war of power, wealth and dogma against the wider potential of humanity. An arbitrary hatred for rivals – distinct in their intensities and registers – was shared by both Thatcher and Khomeini. As they are by today's strongmen, who are the enemies of human creativity and possibility.

This is why Rushdie is so important. Not as a victim of oppression or a symbol of liberal values, but as the bearer of the disruptive, knowing laugh that reminds us that history is complicated, ambiguous and never settled. Which is why you cannot know where a turning point will take you. ●

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*Anthony Barnett is the co-founder of OpenDemocracy*

# Why Rishi Sunak failed

## The former chancellor was once Britain's most popular politician, poised to succeed Boris Johnson. Now, No 10 seems out of his reach. Where did he go wrong?

By Harry Lambert

It is hard now to remember how different the world was a year ago. No war engulfed Europe. Energy bills were still payable. Droughts plagued California, not Britain. And Rishi Sunak was the most popular politician in the country, still trading on the acclaim he won as a munificent boy wonder of a chancellor during the pandemic. Liz Truss, meanwhile, was little more than a jobbing cabinet minister, plying her parodic mix of pomp and pageantry as Boris Johnson's international trade secretary. Johnson himself believed he was heading for a decade in power.

Today, Johnson has been defenestrated. But it is Truss, not Sunak, who is most likely to replace him. Sunak has been unable to alter the fundamental truth that has plagued him in this summer's Conservative leadership contest: the party membership is still defined by its views on Brexit, and its ranks are dominated by Tory Leavers who much prefer Truss to Sunak. Sunak is popular among the party's

Remainers, but the membership has almost four times as many Leavers.

To beat Truss, Sunak needed to change the way he was seen by Tory Leavers, but he had little time to do so. Conservative members vote soon after receiving their ballots, and recent polls suggest that Truss has already got the votes she needs to win. A YouGov poll in August found that 60 per cent of Tory members support Truss, and that five in six of those had made up their mind how they would vote. If so, she has secured 50 per cent of the vote, and Sunak just 18 per cent.

But the race cannot be understood through Brexit alone. Sunak, after all, backed Brexit in 2016, while Truss did not. Yet it is Truss who is considered the true believer in the cause, and Sunak who Tory members feel represents the establishment that they, through Brexit, wished to take on, if not take out. "Liz is seen by members as a shot of adrenaline whereas Rishi is being cast as a manager of decline,"

says a Tory MP. "These are lazy analyses but you can see how they can be painted. Somehow what Liz is doing is dressing up her lack of ability as a form of authenticity. She is managing to be the continuity and change candidate at the same time."

But only three in ten Tory MPs voted for Truss as leader in the final round, and many are concerned that the party is making a grave error. "I don't think she's up to it," says one. "I'm profoundly concerned we could find ourselves in an Iain Duncan Smith situation," he says, recalling the ill-fated winner of the 2001 Tory leadership contest. "Ken Clarke was a better vote-winner but the membership didn't agree with him."

The problem with that parallel, however, is that Sunak is not clearly the superior vote-winner. Far from being a boy wonder, he has, since January, resembled a child playing an adult's game. He failed to resign over Sue Gray's preliminary partygate report, which





was released on 31 January, but also didn't back Johnson over the scandal and criticised his boss's attack on Keir Starmer over Jimmy Savile. Johnson never forgave Sunak, and started referring to him disparagingly inside Downing Street. The Prime Minister's No 10 team is suspected of then planting the stories that revealed the non-dom tax status of Sunak's wife and that Sunak held a US green card for more than 18 months while chancellor.

Those stories reinforced the stereotype that haunts Sunak: that he is a multimillionaire member of an international elite for whom Britain is just one playground. "Our membership is provincial," says a Red Wall Tory MP, who thinks that members find Sunak "too slick, too polished". Sunak was also arguably over-praised in 2020. As the *New Statesman* reported at the time, Britain's defining economic interventions, including the furlough programme, were thought up by civil servants at the Treasury and the Bank of England

(some of them veterans of the 2008 financial crisis). Sunak was the frontman, not the fountain of ideas.

His lack of political imagination, and misunderstanding of the Tory membership, was perhaps made most apparent on 23 March, when he delivered his Spring Statement to the House of Commons. I watched Sunak's address from the press gallery, and it was noticeable how little of it drew excitement from the Tory benches. Sunak, a man comfortable espousing the orthodoxies of the Treasury (that spending must be restrained, taxes maintained and deficits tackled), may have failed to take advantage of an opportunity. He could have used Russia's invasion of Ukraine the previous month to upend those orthodoxies and cast himself as a wartime chancellor: raising defence spending, cutting taxes, in some way delivering on Brexit.

The fiscally conservative Sunak would have thought this bad government, but it would

have made for good politics. Truss has a finer understanding of which matters more in the contest to succeed Johnson: she has won fame by signing immaterial trade deals, reportedly overruling advice from officials to do so. But bad policy can make for good pictures. What mattered to Tory members, Truss understood, was for her to be seen beaming beside Union Jacks in the name of Brexit. Sunak, by contrast, has come to be viewed as a grey Treasury man, a Brexiteer in name only.

Could Sunak have won power if he had resigned earlier in the year, precipitating a leadership contest at the peak of the furore over partygate? Perhaps. But there is a deep mismatch between Sunak and the electorate that he needs to win over that may always have been insurmountable.

This electorate – the Tory membership ▶

## Inside Westminster

◀ – is completely unlike the country at large. It represents a sliver of the public: of the 32 million people who voted in the 2019 election, around one in 200 was a Tory member. And it holds unrepresentative views on everything from the economy and immigration to Brexit. Yet it is to members' whims and prejudices that Britain's aspiring Tory prime ministers must cater – and Sunak is failing to do so.

Take the economy. The UK is enduring its worst living standards crisis in a generation and many observers, including Tory MPs, have been bewildered that Truss has refused to guarantee further state support if she enters No 10. "The way I would do things is in a Conservative way of lowering the tax burden, not giving out handouts," she has said, even though the two major taxes she is promising to scrap – Sunak's planned corporation tax rise from 19 per cent to 25 per cent, and his recent National Insurance levy – are not paid by the poorest.



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This position is, critics argue, quizzical at best and immoral at worst. But it has helped Truss to distinguish herself from Sunak, who announced a windfall tax on energy firms and a costly set of "handouts" for households as chancellor three months ago. And, crucially, it is Truss's stance on the economy that reflects the world-view of the Tory membership.

In 2020 an extensive poll showed that only 17 per cent of the membership believe the government should, as a rule, redistribute income from richer households to poorer ones, despite this being the basis of the British welfare state. Only 19 per cent agreed that "ordinary working people don't get their fair share of the nation's wealth". In 2018 the same researchers found that just 11 per cent of members thought austerity had "gone too far". Conservative members think that British capitalism works, and few believe that its inequities need to be redressed by the state.

These are the beliefs that Sunak was forced to defy for two years as chancellor. His actions during the pandemic proved popular with voters, but their popularity with Conservative members was always more muted. And having spent £376bn to support the economy through Covid, Sunak has since raised taxes to a 70-year high in a bid to reduce the UK's £2.4trn national debt. For some members, this, rather than any disloyalty to Johnson, may have been Sunak's original sin.

Tory members are overwhelmingly well-off. They are unlikely to have benefited much from Sunak's help for households, but they are now likely to be paying for it. Yet few members, as the data shows, believe in the power of tax to redistribute wealth. "There's an element of, 'Well we don't like taxes, and Liz doesn't like tax,'" says a Tory MP.

The Conservative membership rose by half between 2018 and 2019, to nearly 200,000, as, after the Brexit referendum, the party at large won back voters who had migrated to Ukip in the early 2010s. ("We've obviously absorbed elements of Ukip," says an MP who has served since 2015.) At the same time, centrist Tories, exemplified by former cabinet ministers such as Rory Stewart and David Gauke, have left the party, dismayed by its rightwards turn. This is self-defeating, as it ensures that the Farage tendency, though a minority in the country, is a majority in the Conservative Party, which is choosing the UK's prime minister for the second time in just over three years.

Johnson is a third elephantine figure in this contest. It is his continued supporters who are gifting victory to Truss. Two recent polls have shown that members would elect Johnson over both Truss and Sunak. Truss is winning because Johnson's

bloc is breaking three-to-one in her favour. By not resigning from the cabinet at any point this year, she has absorbed a strong base of Johnsonian support.

"Maybe the best time for Rishi to resign was never," a Red Wall MP reflects. "There's still definitely a pro-Boris element" in the membership, he says. A struggling Sunak has sought to win such voters by aping some of Truss's policies – a tactic that MPs think has fallen flat. "He started U-turning on cutting VAT for energy bills, and sounding more right-wing on cultural issues than is credible for him. He lost his USP as he did so."

Sunak's campaign has been defined by an inconsistency of message, with no sense of mission. He has long failed to offer anything other than anodyne prescriptions for Britain. In his Mais lecture in London on 24 February, a landmark address for a chancellor, he offered little more than an introductory course in economics (countries, he said, need "capital, people, ideas" to thrive). His message was so banal, and his delivery so robotic, that I soon struggled to pay attention.

If Sunak has a cause, it is the pursuit of "sound money", and he has, like a good Treasury civil servant, sought to attack Truss's economic credibility. Indeed, Sunak is beloved by his officials, but that wins him no credit with the Tory membership, who have long had enough of experts. Sunak's realism does not fit their post-referendum narrative, their guiding myth: that Brexit will deliver, if only they could find the right crusader to lead the march.

"If you try to explain things with nuance," an MP observes ruefully of Sunak, "it's seen [by Tory members] as being part of the problem. Everything is seen as: if only politicians could use their common sense – but, of course, common sense is a rather subjective quality. Whatever your grievance, they think, 'Liz is going to govern as a Conservative.'"

The Tory membership have been living in a parallel universe since 2016, and they are not ready to come home. Nigel Farage, whose views so many members appear to share, told this magazine in 2017: "Brexit is an instruction from the electorate to turn around the ship of state by 180 degrees." The problem for Sunak is that, in the eyes of Tory Leavers, he embodies the state, the status quo they want to upend. Any true Brexiteer has to "actually, passionately believe in what you're doing... It's like an act of going to war," Farage said in 2017. The views of many people have since shifted: polling shows the British now think Brexit was a bad idea. But the Tory membership have not, and in Liz Truss they have found their crusader. In a contest to lead a movement motivated more by fiction than fact, Rishi Sunak never stood a chance. ●

# JONATHAN LIEW



## Left Field

### Serena Williams has been a tennis player like no other, and perhaps the greatest of all

Before we talk about what she meant, let's talk about who she was. A black girl from Los Angeles with a sister she worshipped and a father she adored. Richard Williams was a tough and fiercely clever man from Shreveport in Louisiana who had spent his childhood running from the Ku Klux Klan. He had his nose broken three times, was chased down the street with chains and bats, stabbed in the leg with a railroad spike because he wouldn't call a white man Mister. From her earliest days, Serena Williams would be taught that true freedom came only from safety, which came from money and power, which could only be secured through knowledge and hard work, the hunger to win and keep winning.

Venus was the older sister by 15 months, but it looked like more. Venus towered over Serena when they played together, moved with effortless grace around the court, hummed with poise and frightening power. It was Venus who turned professional first, reached the top ten first, won the first three tour matches between them, and was anointed as the new star of the game. Overpowered and overshadowed, Serena was forced to adapt. She developed a subtler game, working the angles, playing more drop shots, learning to hang in there. And when her height and strength finally arrived, they were merely the finishing touches to a game that was now ready to conquer all it encountered.

There is an interview with the Williams sisters from the early 1990s, shortly after they had relocated to Florida to pursue tennis careers. "If you were a tennis player," the interviewer asks Serena, "who would you want to be like?" Serena thinks for a

long time. Eventually, she says: "I would want other people to be like me." She was 11 years old.

That revolutionary streak, the lust for originality, the need to be regarded not simply as a player but as a prototype: none of this ever left her, even in her departure. Other players retire in a bouquet of garlands and tributes. Serena, by contrast, is "evolving away from tennis", as she put it in a recent *Vogue* article, and does so not in triumph or with a sense of peace but with resentment at being forced to choose between growing her career and growing her family. "I hate that I have to be at this crossroads," she wrote. "There is no happiness in this topic for me."

What will remain of her? The wins, certainly: 39 Grand Slam titles in singles and doubles, four Olympic gold medals, 319 weeks as world number one, a haul that would have been more impressive still had she not lost years of her career to injuries, pregnancy and postnatal depression. The advocacy: her bold support for racial justice and gender equality, the investment in black-owned businesses through her venture capital firm. The cultural footprint: the fashion statements, the music videos, the way that a generation of young black players such as Sloane Stephens and Coco Gauff was able to rise through

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Others retire in a bouquet of garlands. Serena is "evolving away from tennis"

the game with a fraction of the revulsion that greeted the Williams sisters.

But the real legacy of Serena Williams in tennis is not so much a sheaf of numbers or a stack of precious metal but an energy: the way she filled a tennis stadium and made it sway and rock to her will. Sometimes she won because she was the more talented, sometimes because she had the rub of the green or the coolness of mind to endure the big points. But there were also times when she won simply by being Serena, a mesmerising human force that seemed to conceive and portend victory long before it had been executed.

The fight never ended, and perhaps that was because there was never any shortage of enemies. She could be a volatile presence on the court, sometimes outrageously, profanely so. But nothing could ever justify the sheer weight of dislike and distrust she attracted, the accusations of surliness and disrespect, the racially loaded way in which her body and appearance were discussed, the sense that whatever she achieved her presence was somehow alien, hostile, sinister. The incorrigibly petulant John McEnroe was warmly accepted into the tennis establishment. Tim Henman smashed a Wimbledon ball girl in the face and was a national hero within 12 months. But somehow, something always needed to be done about Serena.

Perhaps this is why, even at the age of 40 and with a trophy collection that may never be surpassed, there is still a sense of unfinished business there. There are always more frontiers to conquer, more doubters to be silenced. Since 2017, when she won her 23rd and most recent Grand Slam title at the Australian Open – a tournament she won while two months pregnant – she has pushed her body and spirit to breaking point in an attempt to carry on the fight.

The greatest of all time? It's a pub game, a meaningless question in many ways. What we can say with certainty is that she did what she always said she would. Serena Williams was like no other tennis player who had ever walked the earth or ever will again. Instead, other people ended up being more like her. Tennis is more professional these days, a more aggressively competitive sport, and for all its flaws a kinder and more diverse place too. For Serena Williams, a short farewell tour beckons, along with one last grab for glory at September's US Open. But in more than one sense, her work is done. ●

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Jonathan Liew is a sports writer at the *Guardian*



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# Books

## American culture's original sin

Sarah Churchwell's new book is a 458-page indictment of *Gone with the Wind*. Frankly, should we give a damn?

By Adam Hochschild

Spend time talking with enough white American Southerners and you will soon hear that yes, slavery was regrettable, but the Civil War wasn't really about slavery; it was about states' rights and preserving a way of life. After all, did you know that many black troops fought for the South?

Travel through the former Confederacy and you will find restored plantation mansions – usually museums or resorts now – their magnolias, ballrooms, and white-pillared porticos conjuring up gracious women in long dresses and gallant men on horseback, peaceful stewards of a gentle, pastoral, now-vanished world. Republican politicians also speak of the old South in these terms. The former South Carolina governor Nikki Haley, now a presidential or vice-presidential hopeful, has declared that before white supremacists “hijacked” it, the Confederate flag was a noble symbol of “service, and sacrifice and heritage”.

The classic thousand-page expression of that imagined heritage is Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel *Gone with the Wind*. According to a new study by the cultural historian Sarah Churchwell, it is the bestselling American novel of all time: more than 30 million copies in print, with 300,000 more still pouring out each year in many languages. The film adaptation has reached even more people, and, taking inflation into account, is the highest-grossing movie of all time. At its 1939 premiere in Atlanta, the state of Georgia declared a



DOMINIC BUGATTO

holiday and 300,000 people watched the cast and crew – minus black members – parade down Peachtree Street.

“If *Gone with the Wind* is one of the most popular stories America has ever told about itself,” Churchwell writes, “then it matters that it is profoundly anti-democratic, and a moral horror show.” For her, the novel “provides a kind of skeleton key, unlocking America’s illusions”. The society whose destruction the story chronicles was, of course, based on slavery. At the novel’s end, the dream of its heroine, Scarlett O’Hara, to restore her plantation to its former grandeur certainly does not include sharing its ownership with the former slaves, who are still presumably needed to till the fields. “Ah done had nuff freedom,” one of them tells her. “Ah wants somebody ter feed me good vittles reg’lar, and tell me whut ter do an’ whut not ter do, an’ look affer me w’en Ah gits sick.”

Churchwell’s book-length prosecutorial brief against a novel more than 80 years old sometimes seems like a matter of beating a dead horse. But, she reminds us, the horse is not so dead, for a deep sense of white grievance is a driving force in the nation’s politics today. The battle over taking down statues of Confederate heroes during the last few years has been a bitter one. Many such memorials are still in place, and one of the invaders of the Capitol on 6 January 2021 paraded a Confederate flag through the building.

*Gone with the Wind*, Churchwell says, “records the creation myth of white victimhood in America”. It is no wonder that Donald Trump is a fan of the movie. (When, to his annoyance, the South Korean film *Parasite* won the Oscar for best picture in 2020, he asked, “Can we get, like, *Gone with the Wind* back, please?”) And even though Churchwell’s rage at the novel sometimes feels excessive, she is right to emphasise how significant it is that its principal characters “burn with hatred for the United States, and despise its government”.

Mitchell’s tale has long been a battleground. The novel, appallingly, won her the Pulitzer Prize in May 1937, but many black critics attacked it. Further controversy greeted the film two and a half years later, even though the producers built up the slave roles enough so that Hattie McDaniel, playing Mammy, Scarlett’s nurse, became the first black actor to win an Academy Award. (That evening, she was forced to sit at a table against the wall, away from the other cast members, because LA’s Ambassador Hotel, site of the ceremony, was segregated.) Attacks on *Gone with the Wind* over the years include the bestselling *The Wind Done Gone* (2001), by the black novelist Alice Randall. It imagines some of the same events as seen through the eyes of a young slave woman who is the daughter, out of wedlock, of course, of Scarlett’s father and Mammy. Even though Randall did not use the names of Mitchell’s characters, the Mitchell estate sued her publisher.

Churchwell pores over the story of *Gone with the Wind*, explaining the real history that Mitchell mythologised. For example, in one scene, Scarlett is assaulted by two men – one white, one black, but with the black man leading the attack – outside Atlanta’s sinister “Shantytown”, described by Mitchell as a “dirty, sordid cluster of discarded army tents and

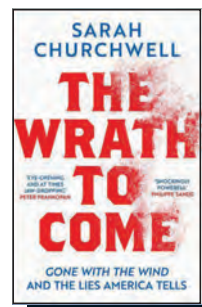
slave cabins”. Scarlett’s male friends form a lynch mob to dispose of the assailants, reinforcing the legend that black rapes of white women were common and had to be combated. In the film, the principal attacker was the white man – one of many ways in which the novel’s blatant racism was sanitised. But neither novel nor movie explains that these shanty towns grew up in Southern cities after the Civil War because former slaves were searching for housing and work – and for protection by federal troops against the Ku Klux Klan.

Similarly, some of the plot turns on Scarlett’s struggle to pay what she sees as unfair taxes on the plantation. But what were these taxes? “Property taxes were raised on white Southerners after the war,” Churchwell writes, “partly to fund social programmes, including free education, but also as a means of weakening the white hold on the land and furthering black ownership. Poorer citizens, white and black, hoped that taxation would force white property onto the market and enable redistribution.” The Union general William Sherman had even promised freed slaves “forty acres and a mule” as his forces swept through Georgia.

Sadly, in one of America’s many betrayals of the newly liberated slaves, his promise was not kept. The short-lived Reconstruction period immediately after the war saw the beginnings of schooling for blacks, and black men elected to municipal, state and federal office (something which in the novel greatly appals Scarlett and her friends). But the Klan soon put an end to such office-holding, and the Compromise of 1877 – which settled the disputed 1876 presidential election – removed federal troops from the South and with them what remained of protection for black advances. White vigilantes murdered thousands of blacks – often around election day. They codified segregation with Jim Crow laws and for decades maintained a terrifying, steady drumbeat of lynchings, whose total often surpassed 100 a year. Few Southern blacks could go to the polls again until Congress passed the Voting Rights Act in 1965.

Significantly, the plot of *Gone with the Wind* ends in 1873, a mere eight years after the close of the Civil War. Those few years, when many Southern whites smarted both from losing the war and losing their slaves, represented the peak of their sense of victimhood. After that, in what they called “the Redemption”, they succeeded in pushing blacks back, not into outright slavery, but to the humiliating second-class citizenship whose heritage lingers so tenaciously today. *Gone with the Wind*, Churchwell writes, “endlessly transforms black suffering into white martyrdom”.

Her zeal to condemn the racism of the novel and of American society today is understandable, but sometimes careless. The country’s sins do not include “the perpetual imprisonment of a huge majority of America’s black male population”. Did she mean to say “huge proportion”? Nor was “the most famous fascist in America” in the 1930s the writer Lawrence Dennis; surely that dubious honour goes to Father Charles Coughlin with his vast radio audience. And, in preacher-like tones, she declares that for our racist sins, “a reckoning ▶



**The Wrath to Come: Gone with the Wind and the Lies America Tells**  
Sarah Churchwell  
Head of Zeus,  
458pp, £27.99

**Hattie McDaniel, the first black actor to win an Academy Award, sat at her own table because the Oscars ceremony was segregated**

◀ looms, at a scale we can't assimilate". One would hope so – but a definitive judgement day seems far off.

Why is the myth of the Lost Cause, the vision of the old South, so appealing, not just to white Southerners, but also to other white Americans? And, judging from the novel's translation into everything from Latvian to Japanese, and the film's even larger global audience, to people in many other countries as well?

We feel loss keenly – more keenly, psychologists tell us, than never having had the lost thing in the first place. *Gone with the Wind*, both novel and film, arrived in a decade ravaged by the Great Depression and filled with people who had lost jobs, farms, businesses and a sense of a secure place in the world. The villains in the story – carpetbaggers, “uppity” blacks, Union soldiers – were safely distant in time but could easily be emotional stand-ins for ill-understood forces closer to home.

We live in a world today where some people are still losing: jobs disappear to automation or globalisation, women and people of colour are also competing for positions once effectively reserved for white men. Politicians are always eager to declare that your fall, or apparent fall, is someone else's fault. In the US, they used to do it in a coded way, as with Ronald Reagan's talk of “welfare queens” and Bill Clinton's “war on crime”. Now, with Trump and his blatant dislike of people with dark skin – and we Americans are still living in his era – they do so more openly.

Such scapegoating has a long and sordid history. Hitler built his movement on the myth that Jews, pacifists and communists had betrayed Germany in the First World War, depriving the nation of victory. It is surely no coincidence that he is reported to have watched *Gone with the Wind* three times.

He is far from the only demagogue to gain power by rallying his people behind what the Polish writer Ryszard Kapuściński called “the Great Yesterday”. Trump's slogan was “Make America Great Again”. The “again” is crucial. When examined carefully, of course, yesterday often wasn't so great. But for anyone in a grubby and unstable present, the idea of a glorious past has enormous appeal. People of a different colour are moving into your neighbourhood, your son is gay, your wife earns more than you do, and your job itself is about to be offshored – but, by God, there was once a time when the US was strong, and won its wars, and nobody pushed us around. Why can't things be like that again?

This is the grievance that Trump spoke to so brilliantly. We can hear similar echoes in Viktor Orbán's “Greater Hungary” and in Narendra Modi's evocation of an India before the Muslim invaders. And, in justifying his attempt to conquer Ukraine, Vladimir Putin has evoked Great Yesterdays from the Kyivan Rus' to the Romanov empire to the Stalin-era Soviet Union. One wonders if he, like Hitler, hasn't ordered up a few private screenings of *Gone with the Wind*. ●

*Adam Hochschild's next book, “American Midnight: The Great War, a Violent Peace, and Democracy's Forgotten Crisis”, will be published in October by Mariner Books*

## Stories from the housing crisis

Two new books show how Britain is blighted by landlordism, homelessness and Thatcher's legacy

By Anoosh Chakelian



**Tenants**  
Vicky Spratt  
Profile Books,  
426pp, £20



**Down and Out**  
Daniel Lavelle  
Headline,  
304pp, £18.99

Every morning I am confronted with the housing crisis, in the form of scaffolders stomping past my bedroom window. I live among housing association tenants, private renters and leaseholders in a low-rise, ex-local authority block, which is having two extra levels of flats built on top – known in the jargon as developing “airspace”.

Despite the leaks, sudden water outages and persistent drilling, I am trying to accept the work as necessary. The London borough where I live has a long waiting list for social housing: it can take 14 years for some applicants. The national need for living space is desperate – as illustrated in *Tenants: The People on the Frontline of Britain's Housing Emergency* by the journalist Vicky Spratt. One in three people in the UK, Spratt tells us, is without a safe and stable home. Daniel Lavelle, an investigative journalist who grew up in care and has slept rough, brings a first-person perspective in his memoir, *Down and Out: Surviving the Homelessness Crisis*.

Both writers have experienced housing stress. Spratt remembers the bailiffs knocking when she was seven, when she lost her family home. More recently, when she split with her partner and co-homeowner she felt the precariousness of Help to Buy – David Cameron and George Osborne's scheme to create more first-time buyers, which simply stoked demand and, in turn, house prices. She reflects on the postwar “golden age” when council houses were “deliberately aspirational”: Spratt's grandmother tells of how the brand new maisonette she and her husband rented from Croydon Council in 1956 changed their life.

Lavelle, who has ADHD and struggled with alcohol abuse and depression, suffered trauma in his childhood that he doesn't detail. As a result, he grew up a “human pinball” in and around Oldham: by the time he was 17 he had ricocheted between 11 different addresses, including children's homes and foster families. In adulthood, he moved between run-down council flats, private rentals, and – at the age of 26 – a tent. Stints living and working at Emmaus charity accommodation, which he characterises as a “workhouse”, left him feeling conflicted and ultimately exploited.



While their personal stories differ, Spratt and Lavelle uncover the same injustices. “No-fault evictions” (or section 21 notices) – which allow private landlords to repossess their properties for no reason – can make even those with solid incomes vulnerable overnight. When Lavelle was studying journalism in London, he received a text on New Year’s Eve in 2017 notifying him of his eviction date: a blow after decades trying to get on his feet. Tony, a retired 66-year-old Braintree resident interviewed by Spratt, was prescribed sleeping pills, antidepressants and blood pressure statins after enduring five no-fault evictions in a decade.

The concept of “intentional homelessness”, when someone is deemed to have “decided” to leave home, punishes those who flee domestic violence, intimidating landlords or unsuitable residences: councils withhold help because the individual is blamed for their so-called choice. Those judged “not homeless enough” are left in limbo. Lavelle, when he presented himself as homeless, was told by the council he was not a priority because he did not display as many vulnerabilities as others (he describes the process as “a sort of *X Factor* for the destitute”). Weeks later, he was on the streets. Limarra, a 25-year-old Starbucks manager with a young daughter living in Peckham, south London, told Spratt that a housing officer described them as “not homeless enough” when they received an eviction notice. She ended up overdosing, after a long, fearful wait to hit the required level of hardship.

Each book shows the human cost of a genuinely Kafka-esque bureaucratic system. Lavelle’s case studies are eccentric, often troubled, characters, let down by poor social services, underfunded addiction provision and punitive schooling. The tenants interviewed by Spratt are often doing OK before a glitch in the housing matrix pulls the lino from under their feet.

Right to Buy, Margaret Thatcher’s 1980 reform that let council tenants buy their homes, plays a villainous role in each book. Described by Spratt as “ground zero” of the housing emergency, and Lavelle as “the greatest heist in modern history”, this policy and its many tired

## A 25-year-old with a young daughter was told she was “not homeless enough” and ended up overdosing

**The great heist: Margaret Thatcher presents the house deeds to the Greater London Council’s 12,000th council house buyer**

iterations (in June, the government recycled plans to extend it to housing association tenants) has had a damaging effect on how people live in Britain today.

By the end of the Seventies, almost a third of all households lived in stable social housing. In 2016-18, just 17 per cent of households in England rented their homes from a local authority or housing association. Private leases have returned to 1950 levels: the days of notorious slum landlords such as Peter Rachman, who was chauffeured around in a Rolls-Royce as he ripped off black tenants in particular, whom he housed in run-down properties in west London.

With Right to Buy came scarcity, followed by inflation. From 2011 to 2018, rents in England rose by 16 per cent, outpacing wages, and on average private renters now spend a third of their earnings on rent. House prices, too, have spiralled, hence the easy money of “landlordism”: by 2014, more mortgages were loaned to buy-to-let landlords than first-time buyers. “The economics of being a buy-to-let landlord are pretty simple,” writes Spratt. “You want more money coming in than you’re dishing out while you sit back and watch your ‘nice little earner’ climb steadily in value and eclipse the mortgage you’ve taken out on it.”

Spratt observes that the problem is not simply about supply. Yes, Right to Buy gobbled up the municipal housing stock, but our “almost feudal” renting system has other causes, including “politically sanctioned house price inflation” and the “deregulation of the private rented sector in favour of landlords”. The UK could have rent caps, or better protections for tenants (in France, you can’t be evicted in winter). In England, one often has fewer consumer rights when renting a property than when hiring a car or buying a fridge.

Homelessness is the extreme result of this mess, but there are myriad other societal consequences. The humiliation of cohabiting with a “friendlord” (who lives off your rent when you are ostensibly housemates); “millennial adulthood”, whereby thirtysomethings trapped in houseshares watch their chances of ever starting a family vanish; the rise of “inheritocracy”; and “exported” residents – rehoused in unfamiliar places away from their support networks and childcare arrangements.

As the sky above me turns to concrete and steel, housing policy in this country seems ruled by upside-down logic. This government has backed out of relaxing planning rules for fear of losing votes in green and pleasant suburbia, where more homes would have been built under its abandoned housebuilding formula. The Tory leadership candidate and former chancellor Rishi Sunak is promising to ban housebuilding on the green belt. He and his rival, Liz Truss, have lost focus on “levelling up”: an agenda that aims to halve the number of “non-decent” rented homes by 2030. Michael Gove, the former housing secretary proposing a Renters Reform Bill, was sacked by Boris Johnson hours before the Prime Minister conceded his own time was up. The “British Dream” of a home of one’s own is fading – and, for many, has turned into a nightmare. ●

*Anoosh Chakelian is the New Statesman’s Britain Editor*



PA IMAGES / ALAMY

# When women were warriors

In the Middle Ages, women governed men and led them into battle. So why aren't our history books full of them?

By Pippa Bailey

On the island of Björkö, in Lake Mälaren, Sweden, is a curious-looking landscape of gently undulating grassy mounds, from which more than 1,000 burials have been unearthed. This grave field is part of Birka, a Viking settlement that was occupied between 750 and 950 AD. When the skeleton marked as “Bj 581” was first excavated there in the late 19th century, it was assumed to be that of a man because of the axe, sword, spears and quiver of arrows buried alongside it, and was dubbed the “Birka Warrior”. This identification was questioned in the 1970s, as the slender forearm and the wide inlet of the pelvis were commonly female characteristics, but it wasn't until 2017 that DNA extracted from a tooth showed two X chromosomes. The Birka Warrior was a woman.

Surviving law codes show that Viking women could own property, run their own estates and divorce their husbands if improperly treated. At Birka, the weights and scales of traders were found in more female graves than male. The incredibly preserved Oseberg ship, one of two now displayed at the Viking Ship Museum in Oslo, was found in the burial mound of two high-status women. The Vikings even venerated women as gods: their second most important deity was Freyja, goddess of no less than love, death, sex, beauty and war. Given what we now know of women's place in Viking society, “the grave at Birka suddenly seems less of an anomaly”, writes the BBC broadcaster and Oxford academic Janina Ramirez in *Femina*, an interdisciplinary, revisionist history of the women of the Middle Ages.

If some historical female figures have been unwittingly overlooked, others were deliberately erased by those threatened by their power. The name of Alfred the Great, the 9th-century king of Wessex, has become legend, but few have heard of his daughter, Æthelflæd. The noblemen of the kingdom elected Æthelflæd ruler of Mercia (roughly, the modern-day Midlands) following the deaths of her father and husband – a rare event in early medieval history. She negotiated with and commanded the

loyalty of Vikings, and her armies triumphed in some of the most important battles of the early 10th century, taking Derby and Leicester. The Vikings of York were prepared to cede to her and, had she not died before they could, Æthelflæd would be venerated as the woman who unified England. A 12th-century poem remembers her thus:

Heroic Æthelflæd! Great in martial fame,  
A man in valour, though a woman by your name:  
Your warlike hosts by nature you obeyed,  
Conquered over both, though born by sex a maid.

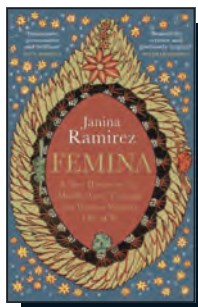
Before her death, Æthelflæd ensured that her crown would go to her daughter, Ælfwynn – the only time rule passed from one woman to another in early medieval England. And yet, the Lady of the Mercians is little known. Ramirez writes that her brother Edward, who succeeded Alfred as king of Wessex, “actively suppressed her reputation” out of fear that her power might rival his, and removed Ælfwynn from the throne she had inherited.

If there is a logic behind Ramirez's selection of these women, it is not explained, though it is surely deliberate that her chosen figures are less familiar than, say, Margaret of Anjou, Eleanor of Aquitaine and Empress Matilda, about whom many books have already been written. Also considered are Jadwiga, the 14th-century female king of Poland, who was one of only two women in Europe to have been titled “Rex” rather than “Regina” (the other was her sister Mary, king of Hungary); and Margery Kempe, a Christian mystic and contemporary of Joan of Arc, whose *Book* is considered by some to be the first autobiography written in English, and whose pilgrimages took her from Norway to the Middle East. Queen Cynethryth jointly ruled Mercia with her husband Offa (of Offa's Dyke fame) for 25 years in the 8th century and is the only Western medieval woman to have had her own coinage minted – the earliest known depiction of an English queen. She signed herself “Queen of the Mercians by the Grace of God” long before the concept of the divine right of kings was enshrined in the motto of the English monarch, “*Dieu et mon droit*” (“God and my right”), by Henry V.

Ramirez begins each chapter by considering an artefact linked to one of her subjects – a structure that, when it works (as in the case of the Birka Warrior), is illuminating, but feels repetitive and tenuous when it doesn't. In one chapter, the Bayeux Tapestry is used as a jumping-off point to write about Queen Emma: the wife of two successive kings of England, Æthelred the Unready and Cnut, today we might call her the “continuity candidate”. Ramirez theorises that Emma may be the tapestry's mysterious “Ælfgyva”. Six pages are given over to her story, before Ramirez concludes “it is unlikely to be Emma depicted on the Bayeux Tapestry”. Both Queen Emma and the tapestry are more than worthy of inclusion in *Femina*, but their framing here is unnecessarily distracting.

**Femina: A New History of the Middle Ages, Through the Women Written Out of It**

Janina Ramirez  
WH Allen,  
464pp, £22





Northern powerhouse Freyja was the Norse goddess of war, beauty, love, sex and death (illustration circa 1900)

More successful are Ramirez's portraits of religious figures such as nuns and mystics, through which she convincingly argues that in the Middle Ages there was an expansive and stimulating role for women in the Church. Before nunneries were closed during the Reformation, monastic life allowed noblewomen to "bypass marriages... and instead form their own centres of learning where they could be rich, respected and remembered". Early medieval convents weren't the places of austerity we might imagine, either: archaeological finds at the site of a double monastery in Whitby include decorative hairpins, books with covers of gold and a comb inscribed with runes.

Of the monastery's founder, Hild, Bede writes that "kings and princes sought... her counsel". In 664 she presided over the consequential Synod of Whitby, at which the church of Northumbria was brought into line with the Catholic church of Rome; five men who trained under her went on to become bishops. "If there were king-makers in the medieval world," writes Ramirez, "then she was the bishop-maker."

Hildegard of Bingen, a 12th-century German abbess who had visions from a young age and wrote several works of theology documenting and interpreting them, is perhaps the most remarkable of Ramirez's women of God. A polymath whose life could fill Ramirez's pages many times over, she was a composer, writer and mystic who corresponded with three popes, Henry II of England and Eleanor of Aquitaine. Her words are shockingly modern: in one treatise she gives instructions for performing an abortion; in another, she encourages the drinking of beer, since it "fattens the flesh and... lends a beautiful colour to the face".

She wrote graphically about sex, too, defying preconceptions of the chaste abbess – the first known description of the sensation of the female orgasm, written in 1150, was Hildegard's. In her time, her works weren't rejected or censored, but were studied by scholars and even endorsed by the pope. "It is not simply that she is extraordinary," Ramirez concludes, "but the world she grew up in was more hospitable to extraordinary women than we might think."

The word "femina" was an annotation used in post-Reformation libraries to mark books that were written by women and were therefore "less worthy of preservation". It is a neat illustration of the way the motivations and biases of those who record history can change it. But despite her tantalising title, Ramirez spends too much time on the what of her subjects' stories, and too little considering how and why they were lost from history. Just one paragraph, for example, is dedicated to how Hildegard, so venerated and accepted by her male contemporaries, came to need rediscovering in *Femina*. Are there parallels to be drawn between the fears of the medieval men who propagandised and embellished male narratives in order to diminish women such as Æthelflæd, and the Victorian historians who preferred the study of Great Men and could not recognise a female skeleton for what it was? There is, of course, value in plainly recognising previously neglected women for the great thinkers and nation-makers they were. But while each of her case studies is fascinating, Ramirez identifies little that links her disparate subjects apart from their gender, and so *Femina* is missing a broad, considered thesis beyond the obvious question: "But what about women?" ●

The first known description of the female orgasm, written in 1150, was Hildegard's

# Interview

## Mark Haddon: “I’m lucky to be alive”

After a triple heart bypass and debilitating mental illness, the *Curious Incident* novelist is slowly returning to writing

By Ellen Peirson-Hagger

Mark Haddon has been volunteering as a Samaritans “listener” for six years. The novelist compares the experience to that of “a power hose cleaning the inside of his head”. During his weekly four-hour telephone shifts speaking with people who are having a difficult time, perhaps feeling suicidal, Haddon is focused firmly on the other person. “Not being able to think about yourself for four hours is great. It’s certainly wrong to say you enjoy it, given what a dreadful time many callers are having. But it is a positive experience. I always call it a holiday from myself.”

Most people would do better to dwell on themselves less; those who delve inwardly to make a living face an even greater challenge. “Thinking about yourself too much is of course a perennial professional problem of writers,” Haddon said over video call from his home in Oxford, sitting in front of bookshelves in what an estate agent would call “the lower ground floor” – it’s not quite a basement as it gets plenty of natural light, he explained. He turned his camera around to show a long, colourful room full of paraphernalia: more books; paintings; a low table hosting half-finished sculptures and the artistic materials required to complete them.

This is the workspace of Haddon, the poet, playwright and author of numerous books for children and adults, mostly famously *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), which sold 10 million copies. His more recent works include *The Porpoise* (2019), which was shortlisted for the Goldsmiths Prize. He also paints, illustrates and sculpts in this room, sharing his abstract, graphic works on Instagram, and occasionally exhibits.

Escaping from his own brain has, in recent years,

**“I’d love to say that I suddenly feel flooded with creativity and back to normal again. I’m getting there”**

been a crucial respite for Haddon. In February 2019 Haddon, now 59, had a triple heart bypass. A long-time vegetarian and keen runner, he had experienced no chest pain but a CT scan showed that his coronary arteries were severely narrowed. Haddon and his wife Sos Eltis, an English fellow at Brasenose College, Oxford, decided to tell their two sons, then aged 18 and 15, the news with a multiple choice quiz. “I said: ‘I’ve got some possibly difficult news for you. Is it a) Sos and I are splitting up? Is it b) cancer? Is it c) I’ve lost a lot of money and we have to move out of this house? Or is it d) that I need a heart bypass?’” The eldest guessed correctly, before taking out his phone to look up the procedure on the NHS website, and informing his dad that he wouldn’t be able to have sex for six weeks after the operation. “I was relieved that he took it so well. Although, having had the operation,” Haddon reflected, “Frankly, if you have sex within six weeks you deserve a medal from the NHS.”

The procedure was serious, but it has not been the most gruelling part of the past few years for Haddon. “The heart thing was the easy thing, relatively,” he said with characteristic understatement, before quickly adding: “I’m quite lucky to be alive.” His physical recovery was fast, but after the surgery he experienced “brain fog”, a common but poorly understood after-effect for people who have been on a heart-lung machine. He found it difficult to read or to write.

This passed after about a year, and the six months that followed were productive. Then, near the beginning of the first Covid lockdown in 2020, Haddon was “struck down again” by the mental ill health that has “dogged” him for decades. He has the mood disorder bipolar II – though he has written that he rarely uses the phrase, given its association with bipolar I, “which is a merciless destroyer of lives”. The bipolar spectrum was the subject of his 2010 play *Polar Bears*.

While the brain fog following his heart surgery felt like a “physical affliction”, this experience “was about the meaning of the world. Everything became lacking in meaning. I couldn’t understand why we did anything.” He wasn’t able to write for 18 months. “If you lose the ability to find interest in the world, you can’t write about it. Your days become empty. It wasn’t even the interesting mental health you could get a memoir out of,” he laughed. “I look at these people publishing mental health memoirs and I think – this is a bit harsh – ‘Yeah, you had a shitty time, but you were lucky to get the right kind of shitty time to get a book out of it!’”

Volunteering for the Samaritans helped him get through that period. As did coming off medication, after a year “going round a whole continental buffet of psychiatric drugs”. “I’d love to say that I suddenly feel flooded with creativity and back to normal again, but it’s a bumpy exit. I’m getting there.”

Haddon, who was born in Northampton in 1962, studied English at Merton College, Oxford, and began his career as a community volunteer, often working with people with disabilities. He then became an illustrator, drawing for newspapers and magazines. He doesn’t think he is a “natural writer. I’m very good at editing, throwing away,



rewriting and rewriting. But there's nothing that naturally flows out of me that is good writing. I've never lost the ability to write absolute crap."

Since coming off psychiatric drugs, he has started writing again. "Thank goodness. I feel it's one of the reasons I'm on the planet. If I'm not writing, I don't quite know who I am." His need to create is "pathological", he said, "in the very best sense of the word. It's just something I have to do. It's like being a dog that needs to go for a run. I am also a dog that needs to go for a run, and a dog that needs to make things." At the moment he is writing short stories, though quite long ones. He doesn't know in what form they may end up.

It is because of the immense success of *A Curious Incident*, which has been translated into 36 languages and adapted into a popular theatre production, that Haddon has the life that he does. The novel is narrated by 15-year-old Christopher, who "finds certain relationships really difficult" (the word "Asperger's" appeared on the book's cover, although Haddon prefers not to label his protagonist's condition as such), as he investigates the murder of his neighbours' dog. The book has continued to appeal to children and adults, and is taught in schools in the UK and the US.

**Mark Haddon  
photographed  
for the *New  
Statesman* by  
Tom Pilston**

Haddon has long donated "dog money", as he calls it, to various causes, including Oxfam and Refuge, and in July this year made public his pledge to give all future US royalties from sales of the novel to the National Network of Abortion Funds, after the US Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe vs Wade*.

"I wanted to do it as a person who's written a book that's in lots of schoolrooms," he said. "I almost wish it could be like a great metaphorical octopus and have some influence in all those homes. That ruling, which is so terrible, particularly for its out-weighted effect on women of colour and on poor people, somehow has all the problems of the rise of the right welded into one: the religious values of a small group of people, allied to very rich corporations, being forced upon everyone; the collapse of church and state boundaries."

*The Curious Incident* has been "the subject of attacks – and this simplifies matters a lot – by both ends of the political spectrum", Haddon said. It was banned in some US schools after parents complained about the bad language in the book. On the left, disability advocates have questioned the accuracy of the depiction of its protagonist, despite Haddon never using terms such as "autism" to describe Christopher. But there are also readers around the world who see themselves in the character; many have written to Haddon to thank him.

Haddon believes book bans are "useless", but engaging young people in conversations about free speech and the importance of literature can only ever be a good thing. We speak at a time when the publishing industry is in the middle of a culture war about whether authors ought to be "cancelled" because of their political views. "I think many recent arguments are contemporary manifestations of an old and cyclical phenomenon: getting old is tough when you're a writer. The current argument is framed in terms of really important political issues of race and identity, but it's fundamentally not that different. Your readership is slowly shrinking and wanting new entertainment, and the angry and passionate young are always snapping at your heels. I think you can react in two ways. You can be defensive. You can complain that you're being silenced. You can complain that people are trying to 'police the imagination'... Alternatively you can be interested in this new world coming into being around you. You can listen to the voices of those who have not been heard. You can question your own world-view. Sometimes this is really uncomfortable, because change is always uncomfortable. But as a writer I feel a duty to listen to other voices."

It was during his Samaritans training that Mark Haddon realised how bad we are at listening. When someone is talking about their troubles, "it's so easy to say to other people, 'Don't worry, things will get better,' or, 'Tomorrow is another day,' or, 'Oh, something similar happened to me.' All of which are versions of saying: 'I'd rather not talk about what you're going through.'"

Why, as a writer, would you put your hands over your ears, he wondered. Samaritans calls work – though not all do, he insisted – because they are about "hearing something difficult and saying, 'Tell me more about that.'" ●



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# Reviewed in short

## Another World Is Possible: How to Reignite Social and Political Imagination by Geoff Mulgan

Hurst, 352pp, £20

We have become a society of pessimists. Anxiety and despondency dominate political discourse. We are facing no end of existential catastrophes: climate change, pandemics, the strain of ageing populations, the polarisation and breakdown of democracies. It's no wonder we feel like giving up – and that in itself, argues the public-policy expert Geoff Mulgan, is the real crisis. “We can more easily imagine the end of the world than a better future,” he writes in his introduction to *Another World Is Possible*. And if we can't imagine solutions to these challenges, how can we hope to confront them?

Mulgan has decades of experience working with governments and NGOs; he knows that, while progress isn't easy, it's not impossible. His book is a manifesto for creativity, and for thinking big. It's full of radical policy suggestions such as replacing the creaking welfare state with a universal basic income, or moving to a holistic healthcare system focused on the lifestyle and environmental factors that contribute to morbidity, not to mention his ideas for averting ecological disaster and saving the planet. It's a touch idealistic in places, but, as he argues, “our imagination is limitless”. If we could learn to use it again, maybe our ambition could be too.

By Rachel Cunliffe

## Original Sins: A Memoir by Matt Rowland Hill

Chatto & Windus, 320pp, £16.99

The life of a heroin addict can seem in many ways eventless – the “monotony” of scoring and shooting up occasionally “interrupted by some lurid drama”. But to those for whom this Ur-drug remains a mystery, it's irresistibly interesting. This built-in voyeurism doesn't remotely account for why Matt Rowland Hill's debut is so spectacularly riveting – as well as very funny, sad and wise. A memoir about becoming disenchanted with the evangelical faith of his parents, discovering heroin at Oxford University and then spending a decade in the throes of addiction, Hill's book is superbly made – from its taut construction to its immaculate sentences, full of perfectly judged verbs and arresting metaphors.

The book is about more than heroin, of course. It's about what heroin dispels: pain – and thus about life (“life is pain management”). When Hill first uses, the “gorgeous, amniotic silence” the opiate induces alerts him to “an alarm bell [that] had been screaming inside me every second of every day”. This exceptional book invites reflection on our own inner alarm bells and our sometimes desperate means of quelling them.

By Lola Seaton



## The Crane Wife: A Memoir in Essays by CJ Hauser

Viking, 320pp, £16.99

Amid the glut of personal writing online, occasionally an outstanding piece cuts through. In 2019 that piece was “The Crane Wife”, an essay by CJ Hauser published in the *Paris Review*, about her decision to call off her engagement and the field trip she subsequently joined to study the whooping crane in Texas.

As is customary following such a hit – Kristen Roupenian, for example, was offered a seven-figure advance for her debut book after her short story “Cat Person” became one of the *New Yorker's* most-read pieces in 2017 – a collection of Hauser's work was swiftly snapped up. “The Crane Wife” was appealing because of its intimacy, its digital-friendly pith, its weaving of a Japanese folk tale with the gut-punch of reality. In *The Crane Wife*, in which she explores romantic escapades throughout her life, there is wryness and certainly online vernacular – “The thing about chatting with people on Tinder is that it is boring” – but less of the precision that made her *Paris Review* piece fly. She meanders and reflects through literature (Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*) and cinema (the classic romcom *The Philadelphia Story*). And yet it is still “The Crane Wife”, wedged somewhere in the middle, that stands out.

By Emily Bootle

## Lilly and Her Slave

by Hans Fallada, translated by Alexandra Roesch  
Scribe, 256pp, £9.99

Hans Fallada came to the attention of the English-speaking world in 2009 with *Alone in Berlin*, his tense story of anti-Nazi resistance originally published in 1947. Fallada, however, was long an established name in Germany, as both a writer of note in the interwar years and a troubled man with a history of drug dependency, irrational behaviour and suicide attempts. This collection of stories was discovered only a few years ago in the files of Ernst Ziemke, his psychiatrist, and they were written in 1925 when Fallada was in prison for a series of drug- and alcohol-induced thefts.

There are six short tales here. They all feature figures standing just outside society and recount their stories with a no-nonsense authorial eye and in spare prose. The opening line of “Pogg, the Coward” – a story with autobiographical overtones – could stand for all of them: “This story must be told by sticking strictly to the facts.” The narratives take in themes of despair, disappointed love, sexual predation, benighted hope: they are shot through with bleakness but together they have a percussive effect.

By Michael Prodger

# “Unions are helping improve conditions for drivers like me”

Ali Haydor, an Uber driver and GMB Union activist, on organising in the gig economy

In association with **Uber**



Ali Haydor has been driving a private hire vehicle, picking up passengers around the cities and towns of England's south coast, for almost two decades. “I actually started in 2003 in Brighton, where I used to live,” he says, “before I moved to Southampton.”

Two years ago, having worked for various minicab firms, Haydor began driving with the Uber app. “I'd heard a lot of positive stuff about the company, but also a lot of negative,” he admits, “but I thought I'd just try it out.”

The 40-year-old is a representative of the GMB trade union, one of the largest member organisations in the country, which represents over half a million workers across nearly every industrial sector. Last year, the union announced a ground-breaking recognition deal with Uber. The recognition agreement covers around 80,000 drivers. The union has negotiated improved terms and conditions, and has a forum to voice drivers' concerns with Uber's leadership team on a regular basis.





“I’ve always been a firm believer in trade unions,” Ali is keen to note. In various jobs, from working in offices to his private hire cabs, he has been a union member since the age of 16. “I believe in the unions’ collective approach and togetherness. It improves the conditions of drivers like myself, working on platforms, helping us make sure we have decent jobs that give us a good quality of life”.

Since its launch in the UK in 2012, the ride-sharing app has attracted its share of critics. Some had concerns over the treatment of drivers, who (like those in the taxi trade) were classed as self-employed and therefore ineligible for some of the benefits enjoyed by employees. More recently, reporting on leaked documents from before 2017 raised questions about company working practices under its historic leadership. The growth of the app came to symbolise what was known as the emerging “gig economy”, with people increasingly working autonomously and flexibly, often for themselves, or using mobile-based platforms to get short-term, un-unionised, and ad hoc work.

But Uber’s recognition agreement with GMB is a landmark in contemporary labour relations. Trade unions, historically concentrated in traditional industries and the public sector, had previously found it difficult to adapt to the new economy. “I think they realised that this is an area that they need to be in,” Haydor says of the union, “and that they need to be in there with a hands-on approach.”

GMB estimates that there are currently 200,000 drivers working with other ride-hailing apps in the UK without the protections to which they’re entitled. Drivers tend to work in isolation, Haydor explains, which is why to date there wasn’t “much drive in terms of union recognition in our industry”. But that’s all changing now. “Since the recognition, a lot of drivers out there are not only joining GMB, but they also realise that there is help available if they join.”

Since March 2021, all Uber drivers in the UK are treated as workers,<sup>1</sup> giving them access to holiday pay, a pension plan and a guarantee to earn at least the National Living Wage. Two months later, Uber and

GMB signed the first trade union recognition agreement in the gig economy. Haydor is clearly enthused by the terms reached between Uber and workers’ representatives from his union.

“Along with those, drivers are also still able to choose the hours they want to work and the days they want to work, and also they get to choose the jobs they want to do. Now that is a proper agreement. It’s giving work-life balance, and full flexibility at the same time as good wages. Now you tell me what other workers’ contracts in the UK provide that flexibility at the same time as all the other benefits? There are none that I know of,” says Haydor.

Indeed, Uber is the only major app-based operator in the UK to now treat its drivers as workers as opposed to self-employed, driving up standards across the industry. In addition to the flexibility and social protections Haydor lists, Uber also provides a range of benefits for drivers on the app. Drivers have access to a new parent payment upon the birth of a child, and they and their families can access free Open University courses, language classes, subsidised gym memberships and cheaper financing deals to switch to an electric vehicle.<sup>2</sup>

The gap between public perceptions of the company’s treatment of drivers and drivers’ own perceptions persists, however. Last year, research by Public First found that almost two thirds of Uber drivers had a favourable opinion of how the company treats them, while only 20 per cent of the public thought the same.

“The working relationship between the company and the union is excellent,” Haydor says, adding that this is partly because there is mutual interest. He believes the company is listening to concerns that the union is raising, and by extension, giving its time to the drivers. “And that’s important. Because you don’t always expect a company that has previously had a certain set-up to change something that had been working for them.”

After twenty years in the taxi and private hire business, and his whole adult life in trade unionism, Haydor is more content with his working life than ever. It might seem incongruous that a lifelong labour organiser would speak so positively about their place of work, but Uber is, he says, on balance, “the best company I have worked [with]”. ●

<sup>1</sup> *The third category in employment law between self-employed and traditional employment (employees)*

<sup>2</sup> *Subject to eligibility criteria*

## Netherlander by nature

Patrick Nasmyth overcame physical disabilities to model himself on the landscapists of the Dutch golden age

By Michael Prodger

In 1878, 47 years after the death of Patrick Nasmyth, a minor painter and truffer of artistic anecdotes named Richard Langley published a collection of painters' lives. Among the figures gathered in *Farewell to Life: Lyrical Reminiscences of British Peers in Art*, was Nasmyth: "now a magical name to all refined and true lovers of art" and a landscapist who had not "been out-rivalled (if equalled) up to the present time by any who have followed him".

Langley drew much of his information from one of Nasmyth's oldest friends and staunchest collectors, William Harrison. But this was not reason alone that he went into raptures about "the beautiful finish, the felicitous pencilling, the flowing pellucid light, the exquisite harmony and truth to nature his genius conveyed into his works". Nasmyth (1787-1831) may have been under-appreciated during his lifetime but posterity was making up for the neglect.

Langley tells of frequenting London's salerooms and picture dealers and coming across numerous examples of faux Nasmyths and indeed of meeting jobbing artists keen to boast of their ability to forge his pictures. By the mid-Victorian age, Nasmyth had become an artist worth pastiching. Today, however, Nasmyth has once again dropped below the horizon and when he is seen, if at all, it is as a highly skilled artist albeit of limited scope, merely one of a tranche of professional landscapists who serviced the Georgian art market without innovation or particular distinctiveness.

Indeed, Nasmyth was not the most distinguished member of his own family. His father was Alexander Nasmyth, an eminent Scottish landscapist, portraitist, teacher and friend of Robert Burns, while his brother James both invented the steam hammer – a key tool in

**Penshurst Place, Kent**  
Patrick Nasmyth,  
circa 1824-30

Victorian heavy industry – and was the first astronomer to observe solar flares. For good measure, six of Patrick's sisters became artists of note.

Patrick – although he sometimes appears in documents as Peter – was born in Edinburgh and studied painting under his father, who was by some accounts a strict judge of the boy's nature drawings. It was while on a sketching outing with his father that Patrick somehow badly injured his hand in an accident: his response was simply to learn to draw left-handed. The same dedication was displayed in his determination to be a landscapist in inclement Scotland. Rather than confine himself to the studio to work from sketches, he designed a small travelling tent which he would take into the countryside, allowing him to work from nature in all weathers, despite the ridicule of his peers. Sometime around the age of 17 he became deaf, supposedly as a result of sleeping on a damp mattress.

Nevertheless, Nasmyth's paintings started to attract attention and in 1807 he moved to London. There he came across the work of the 17th-century Dutch landscapists, in particular Meindert Hobbema and Jacob van Ruisdael, and began to imitate their style of depicting nondescript corners of the landscape with intense fidelity and observation. So closely did he follow the Dutch manner that, despite being Scottish, he became known as the "English Hobbema".

Perhaps he learned from the Netherlanders a touch too well. *Watson's Art Journal* of 1867 recounts how Nasmyth was employed by a picture dealer to "sharpen up the foliage, and add some figures after Ruisdael" to a painting by the minor landscapist Cornelis Decker and then give it Ruisdael's signature. The altered picture sold for 480 guineas and Nasmyth took home 11 guineas for his part in the sharp practice. He would have been in no position to complain later when his own works were forged, although he did legitimately once give a landscape background to a painting of a bull and a frog by the young Edwin Landseer.

Patrick's brother James recalled how his brother's real loyalty was to the still-rural environs of Lambeth and Dulwich, which "abounded with the most charming and appropriate subjects for his pencil". He favoured these "rural 'bits'", with their "tangled hedges and neglected fences, overrun with vegetation clinging to them", over grander vistas. When sketching such scenes "he was in his glory". Although Nasmyth produced numerous pictures with distant views of London, Edinburgh or Bristol, the majority of his work shows snippets of unprepossessing countryside: "However neglected these might be by the farmer, they were always tit-bits for Patrick."

This painting, *Penshurst Place, Kent* (circa 1824-30), now in the Yale Centre for British Art, shows him at his best. The grand house in the distance was the birthplace of Philip Sidney, the poet and courtier to Elizabeth I whose pastoral romance *The Arcadia* (1598) was said to be based on its gardens and parkland. James Nasmyth would later retire to the village, where he named his home "Hammerfield" and made detailed observations of the moon. The house and village, however, are of secondary interest to Patrick. His focus



is on the details of the high-sided Wealden lane that drops down towards the settlement.

Nasmyth was particularly adept at painting the sky and this pearlescent version has a soft light that bathes the landscape in an Italianate glow, illuminating the details of tree roots and pitted soil in the foreground, with the little group of rustics giving a touch of alleviating human and animal interest. In his biographical sketch, Langley commented on the “moist freshness” Nasmyth was able to evoke and that no one equalled him “in pencilling the old rutted trunks of oak or elm”. Just such traits, the fruits of innumerable sketching trips, give the scene its verisimilitude: here is a real view, part topographical and part nature study.

**A**lthough Nasmyth was “destitute of patronage” for much of his career he was proud of his abilities. When once chided with being a “niggling painter” he shot back: “Eh, say you so? I’ll let you see whether or not I’m but a niggling painter” and proceeded to paint a landscape eight feet by six by way of riposte. Some mentions of Nasmyth describe him as “a silly or half-witted being” but this was more likely his deafness and what Langley called: “A soul too noble to push its worldly way by acting in a manner

GETTY IMAGES

**When he badly injured his hand in an accident, Nasmyth’s response was simply to learn to draw left-handed**

approaching to servility towards those in a position to have encouraged and patronised him”. He was dogged too by reports of late-life drunkenness, so severe that he couldn’t start work “without first partaking of a bumping glass” and then working with a stiffener beside his easel and knocking back “pints of rum”.

Whatever the truth, it wasn’t drink that felled him at the age of 44 but painting itself. On one of his drawing excursions he stood too long on wet ground near the River Thames and developed pneumonia-like symptoms from which he never recovered. On his deathbed he asked for the curtains to be drawn back so he could see the setting sun: “How glorious it is!” were his last words. Nasmyth’s fellow Scottish artists in London paid for his gravestone, which lauded his “modest and unassuming” character and “the productions of his pencil” that were “tasteful and vivid”.

James Nasmyth’s recollections of his brother were less bound by convention. He recalled how much pleasure Patrick’s career had given their father and remembered with delight a gentle soul who, although taken advantage of by dealers, loved a mystery yarn and his violin. Above all, James recollected his brother’s pleasure in “the careless grace of nature” and, touchingly, how he would whistle as he roamed the countryside looking for “tit-bits” to paint. ●

## When aliens came to California

Jordan Peele's sci-fi horror *Nope* – like his previous works *Get Out* and *Us* – knits the political and the cinematic

By Ryan Gilbey

“Watch the skies!” That was the warning at the end of *The Thing from Another World*, the 1951 alien horror later remade as *The Thing*. But what if it's the skies that are watching us? This is the idea behind *Nope*, written and directed by Jordan Peele, whose chilling 2017 debut *Get Out* argued that racism had found no greater camouflage than the liberalism of the Obama era.

*Nope* swoops off into *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* territory, complete with references to *The Wizard of Oz*, including a bloodthirsty chimp as terrifying as any winged monkey. Issues of race remain pertinent. Introduced to Otis Haywood Jr (Daniel Kaluuya), a horse wrangler whose animals are used in movies, a white actor looks alarmed: “Your name's OJ?” she winces. (Peele's previous picture, *Us*, also featured a white character invoking the spectre of OJ Simpson.)

OJ and his sister, Emerald (Keke Palmer), suspect that there are aliens in the skies above their Californian desert ranch, and set out to capture the spectacle on film. The Haywoods are descendants of the black jockey photographed by Eadweard Muybridge in “The Horse in Motion”, the 1878 series of images that preceded the invention of the zoopraxiscope and the film projector. “Since the moment pictures could move, we've had skin in the game,” Emerald says during an



Rider of the storm: Daniel Kaluuya plays a horse-wrangler trying to take a photograph of the “little guys with the big eyes”

UNIVERSAL PICTURES/ALAMY

excitable sales pitch. Her taciturn brother looks on, not so much chalk to her cheese as monolith to her Catherine wheel.

Pairing him with the manic, bopping Palmer offsets Kaluuya's stoniness perfectly. He's a languid Robert Mitchum type – even if the lights appear to be off, there's always somebody home – which makes it that much funnier when his responses prove ineffectual. Sitting in his truck as the silvery night sky is torn apart by extraterrestrial turbulence, he presses down the puny little lock on his door. That'll show 'em.

If *Nope* resembles a Western, with its horses and parched landscape, then it's not one that John Wayne would recognise. Black actors have occupied the genre before (*Buck and the Preacher*, the 1972 Sidney Poitier/Harry Belafonte movie referenced here, is one example) but there's real potency in the spread of heroes: two African-Americans, one of them gay; an Asian-American theme-park entrepreneur, Jupe (Stephen Yeun); and a Mexican tech specialist, Angel (Brandon Perea), who needs no convincing about "the little guys with the big eyes".

The picture begins with an attack from the heavens, as though a sniper were using not bullets but objects found down the back of a sofa. A key is embedded in a horse; a nickel takes out a man's eye, killing him and providing the first in a series of Cyclops-themed images (a winking cartoon cowboy; a mirrored crash helmet bearing one circular eye). A grizzled film-maker named Holst (Michael Wincott) intones the lyrics of a novelty record as portentously as if they were scripture: "It was a one-eyed, one-horned, flying purple people-eater..."

What is it with Peele and peepers? In *Get Out*, a blind man tells his captive (also played by Kaluuya) that he craves "your eye. I want the thing you see through." In *Us*, a man trapped in a body-bag pokes a single spy-hole through the fabric. Such imagery is bound to have a heightened resonance in *Nope*, a film about seeing and being seen, with everything that the phrase entails. As a former TV child star, it's understandable that Jupe would refer to the aliens as "the viewers", but the choice between looking and looking away is central to *Nope*, and to how it ends.

It is an unusual sort of horror film that is concerned not with vanquishing an extraterrestrial enemy but photographing it – getting what the Haywoods call the "Oprah" shot. Money plays a part in their mission (such a picture would be lucrative), but the potential of the recorded image to reveal and expose has been a consideration, not least for people of colour in the US, since decades before the murder of George Floyd.

If this sounds like stretching a point, then beware of underestimating Peele, who can knit the political and the cinematic with aplomb – as in the shot of Emerald garlanded in yellow police tape, as if her body itself has become a crime scene. Of course, meanings in *Nope* spring eternal, and they are surely too numerous to be absorbed in one go. A repeat viewing, then? I wouldn't say nope. ●

"*Nope*" is in cinemas now

# Television

## The life of an ordinary couple

By Rachel Cooke

### Marriage

BBC One, aired  
14 August, 9pm;  
now on catch-up

For all that I believe Stefan Golaszewski's *Marriage* to be a stone-cold masterpiece – it's *Terry and June* as written by Harold Pinter, and what isn't there to like about that? – this doesn't mean it's enjoyable, exactly.

Yes, it may be tender and wry and funny; yes, Sean Bean and Nicola Walker give two of the greatest performances of their careers. But it's also intensely bleak, and sometimes a bit boring, and its strange intimacy has the added side effect of making the viewer feel weirdly self-conscious about her own relationship. God forbid that someone should hear the way you speak to your (in my case) husband in private, however (also in my case) sweetly you may do this. After I watched the second episode, I went upstairs to ask A if he wanted a cup of tea. Such ordinary words – and yet, how odd they sounded.

Golaszewski (*Him & Her*, *Mum*) has said that in *Marriage* he has tried to write about what it is like to be a person, as opposed to a person on television, and that in doing so he has been influenced by – wait for it – Zola, George Eliot, Bach and Stravinsky.

What all this amounts to in effect, I think, is a kind of beautifully repetitive internalised drama: one that we are somehow able to witness and understand courtesy only of his barely-there dialogue, and of the tiniest changes in the expressions of Bean and Walker, who play the characters of Ian and Emma, a couple of 27 years' standing.

As with Bach, there are variations on themes: jealousy, loneliness, joy, kindness. As with Zola, there is an attention to the physical: warmth, cold, wind, the urgent desire to pee. As with Eliot, there is a moral undertow, one that has to do, perhaps, with loyalty. I'm still thinking about Stravinsky. Maybe it is connected to the rhythms beaten out by a certain breed of modernism.

*Marriage* doesn't have a plot, exactly: this is a case of information withheld and then slowly revealed. When it begins, Ian, who has recently been made

**Sean Bean's performance is the one I adore. Oh, how sad men are! How they struggle to talk, and even to love**

◀ redundant, is coming to terms with long and lonely days at home while Emma is out labouring for a posh toddler of a solicitor called Jamie (Henry Lloyd-Hughes), of whom Ian is now wildly jealous. The couple have an adopted daughter, Jessica (Chantelle Alle) – I'm not going to say more about her place in their lives, for the simple reason that I don't want to spoil this series for a single soul – and Emma has a controlling elderly father, Gerry (James Bolam).

In essence, we follow their days, sometimes quotidian (Ian has a sudden urge to buy some revitalising shower gel), and sometimes more momentous (Jessica's new boyfriend comes to dinner, and turns out to be a prick).

As neither Ian nor Emma is much of a talker, the viewer must rely on empathy and observation. What volumes are spoken by the loading of a dishwasher, the watering of hydrangeas, the eating of a takeaway prawn cracker in front of the telly! Disparate emotions mingle like lime added to a pint of lager, embarrassment giving way to sudden pride, fondness shading into massive but unspoken irritation. Like life, all this is beautiful but painful.

It's wonderfully cast. Bolam gives Gerry a mean-spiritedness that is full of pathos. Lloyd-Hughes deftly suggests Jamie's entitlement may cover something more feeble (here is a man who likes sugary, yellow-iced cakes more than the Burgundy he swills about in his glass as if it were liquid gold). Walker, of course, is marvellous: flinty, watchful, gauche.

But it's Bean's performance that I adore. Oh, how sad men are! How they struggle to talk, and even to love. In his too-long jeans, he's like some ancient standing stone, worn by the weather and circumstance to the point where no one notices him – save for Emma, who makes a point of kissing him at the bottom of the stairs, on tarmac paths, in the car park at B&Q. When he talks to his cursed father-in-law, he's still, after all these years, ingratiating – “Hello, young man!” said in the accent of my childhood – and it fairly breaks the heart.

Watch him in this show, if you can bear to, and feel grateful for all of his talent, his skill, his highly particular workaday genius. ●



Long-term love: Nicola Walker and Sean Bean in *Marriage*

# Radio

## How to sell your soul for clicks

By Rachel Cunliffe

**Careering**  
BBC Sounds

I'm not used to finding erotica on BBC Sounds, but if it comes alongside searing commentary about how modern work culture crushes young people's dreams, I suppose it's justified. *Careering*, the recent novel by the award-winning journalist Daisy Buchanan, now adapted for radio, is all about being in a toxic relationship – with your job. But it's also about a society that mines young women for their most salacious personal stories, encouraging oversharing under the guise of feminist empowerment.

Imagine *The Devil Wears Prada* updated for Gen Z. Twenty-something Imogen lands her dream job at what is supposedly a fierce and feminist online media start-up. Only, instead of fashion reviews and lifestyle tips, what she's mostly told to write about is her sex life: the kind of raw, overly honest explorations of intimacy and ambiguity that are heralded as bold and inspiring yet feel somehow exploitative at the same time. Her account of a threesome goes viral and before long she's being sent to fetish parties and naked speed-dating, and invited on TV to debate sex positivity in an outfit designed to appeal to “every woman who has ever had a sexually confusing experience and wants to wear nice trousers”. No one asks if this is the type of journalism she wants to do. After all, everything is copy.

The book has been beautifully adapted into ten 15-minute episodes for radio, read by Ellie White as Imogen and Ruth Everett, who plays Imogen's world-weary boss, Harri. It's full of humour and tenderness, with real laugh-out-loud moments in between wry observations on journalism. But ultimately, I'm not sure what *Careering* is trying to say. Evidently the world of glossy women's magazines is no utopia, but it's unclear if Imogen is meant to regret baring her sexual soul for clicks, even as it launches her career. Similarly, should we feel guilty for being entertained listening to it? And if so, why did the BBC have to make it so entertaining? ●

# THE BACK PAGES

Drink



**Nina Caplan**

I became a wine-lover aged ten, at my father's side, and it connects us still

**A** gourmand needn't start young, but a few extra years of research doesn't hurt. I was lucky, as readers of this column will know, to have a father with a passion for wine, and while he was a loving parent, child-rearing was different back then. Which is how I came to attend my first wine tasting in the Dordogne, at the age of ten.

I had been present at tastings before this, naturally. Majestic Wines under the arches in Vauxhall, then one of just a few London stores, had a brick forecourt ideal for roller skates, so two small girls and one middle-aged man could divert themselves in their respective manners with no need for expensive ▶



◀ babysitting. But the French tasting was different, because I participated.

Monbazillac is a rich, sweet white made from Sémillon, Sauvignon or Muscadelle grapes that have been affected by noble rot, the ugly fungus that, like a witch in a fairy tale, transforms plump fruit into wizened scraps. These nonetheless make a luscious, fabulously complex dessert wine: the happily ever after, with the winemaker as handsome prince.

It was the perfect first drop for a curious child. And I was only given a drop – the 1980s weren't as primitive as all that. But I adored it. The golden colour and viscous texture made me think of egg, and from this promising beginning there hatched a wine-lover – one who now spends her life trying to convey, by means direct and oblique, this potion's delectable magic.

Writing about wine is, for me, a matter of looking over my shoulder – like Orpheus glancing back at Eurydice, if with happier results. The people who tend vines their parents planted, the roots drawing nourishment from the crumbled past, the wine that comforts us for everything we have known and lost.

I remember the warm boards of the winemaker's trestle table, that liquid the colour of sunshine, and the certainty that the adults around me were very tall, very strong and very wise. For years afterwards I would request "eggy wine". While I haven't drunk any for years, I know that it would still caress my tastebuds, however jaded they may now be, then enfold me in a recollection of absolute comfort – of being very young, with all the people

I loved best alive and near. If feelings had scents, then security, for me, would exhale the perfume of a Monbazillac, tasted for the first time on a hot summer's day in France.

My father taught me that wine is knowledge and memory, dedication and sensation and dialogue. Most of all, dialogue. The only afterlife I believe in comes when plucked grapes are pressed into wine, the best of which allows me to continue conversing with someone who has been gone, now, for 19 years.

I won an award for my first column about him – like a gift from beyond the grave – and others for the book I wrote, in part, to expand on that conversation. Researching it, I talked to living winemakers in England, France, Spain and Italy, and also learned from ancient Romans who were as captivated by this magic liquid as I am today.

But my job isn't all glory, any more than it is all gloom: mostly, it is the purest good fun. I have learnt about fermented grape juice in vineyards and restaurants and monasteries and châteaux. I have had the luck to roll great wines across my tongue as generations of knowledge flowed from their makers into my ears. Wine is an ocean both broad and bottomless, and I will never willingly step out on to dry land.

There is too much I still don't know, even with the most golden head-start a girl could have had. And too many people to talk to and drink with, continuing a discussion that is certainly not limited to the dead. People like you, dear reader. May your mind be ever open and your wine glass always full. ●

## 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.*

### Smooth service

When a great-grandmother was served up a glass of bubbly on her 106th birthday by a naked butler, her eyes rested not on his bare buttocks but on his "impressive" hairless chest.

Toasting staff at the East Midlands care home where she has been a resident since last year, Nora Shaw admitted it

was the first time she had ever seen a butler in the buff: "He had no hair on his chest at all, which impressed me. I had never seen anything like it."

*The Independent (Steve Morley)*

### Post haste

An entire Cornish village had to be evacuated by police after what turned out to be an old fence post triggered a bomb alert. Hundreds of residents in Godolphin Cross were told to get out of their homes after a suspected unexploded bomb was discovered in a garden near the primary school.

*Cornwall Live (Daragh Brady)*

### Just before you draw your terminal breath...

A terminally ill university lecturer who flashed his buttocks at a police van as part of his bucket list has been

cleared of obstructing an officer after singing a Monty Python song at him.  
*The Times (Amanda Welles)*

### What's in a name?

Strict officials at the Commonwealth Games are threatening legal action to force a harmless series of bar games held in Birmingham pubs to change its name. What was known as the Commonman Games is now having to consider altering its name to the (un)Commonman Games.  
*Wolverhampton Express & Star (Steve Dyson)*





## Off the Record



### Pravina Rudra

We're told not to have too many friends – but for me, there's no such thing

**T**he millennial playbook advises that having a lot of friends is a bad thing, verging on the impossible. You should have only a few close relationships, the theory goes, or your connections become shallow and unfulfilling.

“Drawbridge goes up” is a phrase I've heard used to describe the period in your late twenties that marks the start of adulthood proper: from now on, between romantic relationships, procreation and everything else that comes with settling down, we can only lose friends.

And yet, at 28, I am making more friends than ever. Initially this was out of necessity. In my mid-twenties, my peers started coupling up at a dizzying rate; as soon as I became close to a new friend, bam, they'd meet someone and no longer be in the mood for a night out – or anything that didn't involve their partner. The pandemic, with its long stretches of isolation and non-spontaneous gatherings, intensified my desire for connection.

Nurturing lots of friendships was my portfolio approach: an insurance policy based on the assumption that people will come and go. This more-is-more philosophy does not apply to my romantic life. It's a running joke among my (ever-expanding) circle of friends that I struggle to find anyone I am attracted to. But I feel platonic chemistry constantly: I am forever grabbing a new friend's hand and exclaiming, “Oh my God, me too!”

Post-Covid, I reconnected with a couple of primary school friends and made the joyful discovery that I like them now for the same reasons I did in Year Two. Colleagues I assumed were too serious for me became “work friends”, and then real friends; there is a thrill in finding that someone who seems straight-laced is not.

Opening myself up to those with whom I thought I had nothing in common has liberated me. In the past year I have mentored younger women and gained as much as they have. Having Gen-Z friends who don't care about the prestige of their jobs has made me rethink my own approach to work; their readiness to go unshaven has relaxed my beauty standards.

Last summer I found myself in queer circles despite being straight; once, I was the only woman at a party with 30 gay men. Rather than priding myself on being an “ally”, I found these friendships challenged my expectations about when or if I should get married or have children. Exempt from the expectations society often places on straight relationships, my gay friends are more willing to do away with “shoulds” altogether.

Having lots of friends is not the same as being friends with everyone or being undiscerning. That is the beauty of being an adult: you can pick people from different walks of life, rather than be limited to whoever is in your class or clique at school.

I've found social media facilitates these scattergun friendships. Just two minutes spent flicking through Instagram Stories while I brush my teeth each night gives me a pretty good insight into the lives of most people I know. And these days, you don't have to have known someone for years in order to be there for them. In an era in which therapy is mainstream, there is a new openness. On a night out after I'd just broken up with someone, a friend's new housemate – someone I'd never met – spent half an hour counselling me in the smoking area. Post-pandemic, we are prepared to be more vulnerable; Facebook status updates saying, “If anyone's lonely, reach out to me” have proliferated.

Can you have too many friends? I resent the question's implication that, like notches on a bedpost, a wide circle makes you somehow cheap or insincere. It's a puritanical idea. Indeed, the Bible says: “A man of too many friends comes to ruin.” But the ability to bond with new people surely makes us less transactional – opening our minds and worlds.

The downside, of course, is that eventually you'll have to introduce them to each other. Part of me is dreading doing so at my next birthday: what if they all hate each other? Or, worse still, like each other, and start hanging out without me? ●

Opening myself up to those with whom I thought I had nothing in common has been liberating



## Down and Out



### Nicholas Lezard

#### I blot out the anxiety over my chest X-rays by buying a nine-pack of loo roll

The *Wisdens* outnumbered the medical books by a factor of five. It was the single most reassuring sight I've seen in a doctor's surgery

Intimations of mortality: crossing the road to catch the 5B to Hangleton, I am nearly murdered by a Deliveroo rider on an electric bike. This is not the first time this has happened: they are fast, silent, and have enough kinetic energy to do a lot of damage. In Hove, the bus pauses for a very long time, and I look out of the window to see our driver and a similarly uniformed companion walking up the steps of a building announcing itself as the Samaritans. I blink and shake my head: it is actually a Salvation Army building. (There had been a sign for the Samaritans a few yards before, and the memory had lingered.) And the reason I am on the bus in the first place is because I am going to get an X-ray at the Hove Polyclinic to investigate a pain in my chest that had only partially been assuaged by antibiotics. Why do they say "chest"? They mean "lung". And at the polyclinic I see a black-frosted priest with a magnificent grey beard stalking the reception area. I consider doing as Italian men do when they see the clergy in a public place: touching my balls to ward off bad luck. The waiting room is empty: I could get away with it. But I decide not to. On the walk back to the bus stop from the clinic I pass a 1930s bungalow. It has a name: The Shingles. I take a photo.

I am not terribly worried. I have a friend, though, who is. At first she thinks I have pleurisy.

"I do not have pleurisy," I text back.

"How do these rumours start?" she asks.

"Welcome," I say, "to the internet."

As I'm heading back she asks, "What did they say?" and I reply, "Put your affairs in order." They didn't really, but she goes a bit frantic. Another friend texts me.

"What did they say?" she also asks. "Take off your shirt," I reply.

"Then what?" she asks.

"OK, you can put your shirt back on now."

They're checking to see if a patch of scar tissue, or something that looks like it on an X-ray, has grown since the last time they looked at it, three years ago. It was unchanged from before, and they think it's the remnant of childhood whooping cough, which I dimly remember: the flickering candle in the Wright's Coal Tar Vaporizer lamp next to my bed. This, when I was a child, was considered an efficacious remedy for respiratory illness, and yes, you read that correctly: the candle heated a lozenge or a fluid which filled the room with coal tar gas. It smelled medicinal: therefore it was considered to be medicinal. I believe the health establishment has come to its senses by now, in this respect at least.

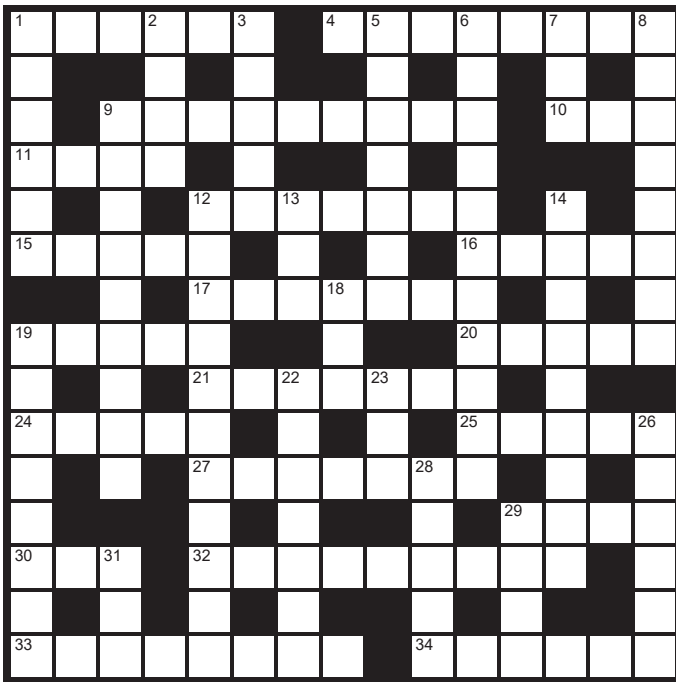
So I am not too worried: the doctor who packed me off to the clinic didn't seem too agitated. I once had an incredibly beautiful doctor – a Dr James – who, after a CT scan of the same lung, held my hand and simply asked if there was anything she could do for me. Dinner somewhere nice? I thought, but didn't say it aloud. I was still with my wife.

My latest doctor – whose name, I noticed, was the same as a pseudonym I once adopted when working as a porter in a block of flats overlooking Regent's Park – appeared appreciably younger than me, but had a collection of *Wisdens* on his shelves, each year from 1978 to 2021, outnumbering by a factor of five the medical volumes. I told him it was the single most reassuring sight I had ever seen in a doctor's surgery. I asked why they were there, and not at home, and it turned out to be the same old story: his partner saying, in effect, either they go or I go. I also told him I was writing for the next issue. "No way!" he said, delighted.

Apparently, it takes two working days for the results and interpretation of the X-ray to come in; I write this on the morning of the second day. No news is good news, but then it is, as I have said, early in the day. The pain in the chest is worst at these times: for some reason, it more or less vanishes around the time I take the first glass of the evening.

Otherwise, life goes on. A letter from the council saying "DO NOT IGNORE THIS LETTER", which I have not ignored; then again, I have not opened it either. Yet. In Waitrose, they had run out of four-packs of loo roll. But, as the body continues to evacuate, I need loo roll, and time waits for none of us, so I buy a nine-pack. The only other time I have done this when living on my own was in the early days of the pandemic, and everyone was buying loo roll like it was going out of style, and all the four-packs had gone. I hated walking back up the hill looking like a loo-roll hoarder. I now look at the huge, hulking mass of toilet paper in the bathroom. Nine rolls! How long will it be before I run through them? Suddenly, I have a terrible fear that they might outlive me. Maybe it is time I made a will. I could leave them to the Samaritans, or the Salvation Army, or the bus driver. ●

## The NS Cryptic Crossword 595: Jumbles by Anorak



Each clue contains a definition and a jumble of consecutive letters of the solution.

### Across

- 1 Porridge for a celebrity (6)
- 4 Photo Brighton's passageways (8)
- 9 Enjoyed pleasant walk by the sea (9)
- 10 Northern hill (3)
- 11 Fundamentally not messy (4)
- 12 Squire's lance having unequal sides (7)
- 15 Allocate third annual tax (5)
- 16 Colleague's instrument (5)
- 17 Another clergyman's gleeful laugh (7)
- 19 Houston, renowned singer (5)
- 20 Flower from Mesopotamia (5)
- 21 Passes hapless emigrants (7)
- 24 Build intricate creation (5)
- 25 Admit chap won unlawfully (3,2)
- 27 Steed or Purdey never agree (7)
- 29 Madonna – striking celeb (4)
- 30 Dark rituals annoy (3)
- 32 The next scientist's life (9)
- 33 Late drink, watching *Poirot* (8)
- 34 Truth has really hit hard (6)

### Down

- 1 Holidaymaker contemplated an ice cream (6)
- 2 Imprecise stage direction (4)
- 3 Fragrant shrub will acclimatise (5)
- 5 Man-eaters under your nose (7)
- 6 Unearthed corpse resembled forefather (11)
- 7 Withering strike (3)
- 8 Boringly annoying customer is ejected (8)
- 9 Accursed teenager who is from Walford (9)
- 12 Ancient Greece's startling spy (6,5)
- 13 Commotion abroad (3)
- 14 Completely remove base metal in ingot (9)
- 18 Censure partisans (3)
- 19 He isn't a professional stage player (8)
- 22 Team race in the States (7)
- 23 Long astilbes droop (3)
- 26 Nantwich is a priest's domain (6)
- 28 Choose telecom (5)
- 29 Rascal's sign of an injury (4)
- 31 Greek goddesses' barrel (3)

### Answers to crossword 594 of 29 July 2022

Across 1) Ramsay Street 9) Susan 10) Lou 11) Clive 12) Exam 13) Piper 14) Mike 17) Angharad 18) Harold 20) Delude 23) Nape 25) Madge 26) Jane 30) Inure 31) Tor 32) Chris 33) Alan Fletcher Down 2) Mrs Mangel 3/15) Anne Haddy 4) Sullivan 5) Routes 6) Each 7) Visitors 8) Helen Daniels 9) Stefan Dennis 16) David 19) Doggerel 22) Martin 24/21) Paul Robinson 27) Aargh 28) Nell 29) Scot This puzzle was published on 29 July 2022, the day the final episode of "Neighbours" aired in the UK

## Subscriber of the Week: Moses Seitler

What do you do?

I work with refugees and asylum seekers.

Where do you live?

North London.

Do you vote?

Yes, but I've lost each time.

How long have you been a subscriber?

Eight years.

What made you start?

I wanted to sound clever when applying for university.

Is the NS bug in the family?

Not yet.

What pages do you flick to first?

The Leader then short reviews.

How do you read yours?

On the Piccadilly Line and in bed with tea.

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

Refugee voices and policy, and wealth inequality.

Who are your favourite NS writers?

Jonathan Liew, Pippa Bailey,

Andrew Marr.

Who would you put on the cover of the NS?

Yara Rodrigues

Fowler or Mick Lynch.

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

Priti Patel.

All-time favourite NS article?

Russell Brand on revolution. I was young and impressionable!

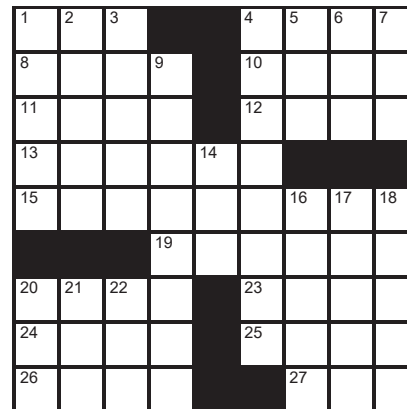
The *New Statesman* is...

a humble guide that keeps me angry.



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 44: by Ali Gascoigne



### Answers to crossword 43 of 29 July 2022

Across 1) Awe 5) Very 9) Bell 10) Aviv 11) Baby Spice 13) AKA 14) Tiles 15) QED 16) Scrum 19) Jaw 22) Taoiseach 24) A pop 25) Anti 26) Nets 27) Rest Down 1) Abba 2) Weak 3) Elba 4) Sly 5) Vapid 6) Evil 7) Rice 8) Yves 12) Stems 15) Quips 16) Stan 17) Cape 18) Root 19) Jane 20) Acts 21) Whit 23) Ear

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

### Across

- 1 "Shame on you!"
- 4 Something fiddly
- 8 Batter's objective
- 10 Not imagined
- 11 Tesla, for one
- 12 Fighting force
- 13 Swahili for "journey"
- 15 Do a runner
- 19 Some belly buttons
- 20 Azerbaijan's capital
- 23 Fail to mention
- 24 Quick haircut
- 25 Place for *un chapeau*
- 26 Little drinks
- 27 \_\_\_/her/hers

### Down

- 1 The next PM?
- 2 The next PM?
- 3 *Cluedo* weapon
- 4 "Soz, no can do"
- 5 \_\_\_Lingus
- 6 Mum, Dad, bro and sis
- 7 Go by air
- 9 Sports venues
- 14 Did a marathon
- 16 Change in the US
- 17 Port near Edinburgh
- 18 First name in cosmetics
- 20 K-pop megaband
- 21 Singer Grande, to fans
- 22 Sleep, slangily

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# POSITIVE IMPACT AWARDS

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6 DECEMBER 2022 | LONDON

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CELEBRATING CHANGE FOR THE BETTER  
IN POLITICS, BUSINESS AND SOCIETY

The New Statesman Positive Impact Awards recognises teams or individuals who have shown leadership and created real change across business, politics, society and the environment.

This inaugural event will celebrate those who have made a positive impact in the fields of equality, sustainability and social enterprise. Judges will be looking for evidence that a campaign, initiative, product or innovation has made a social, financial or environmental improvement to UK society.

**Entries close  
2 September  
2022**

# State of the Nation

## Highlights from the NS's online data hub

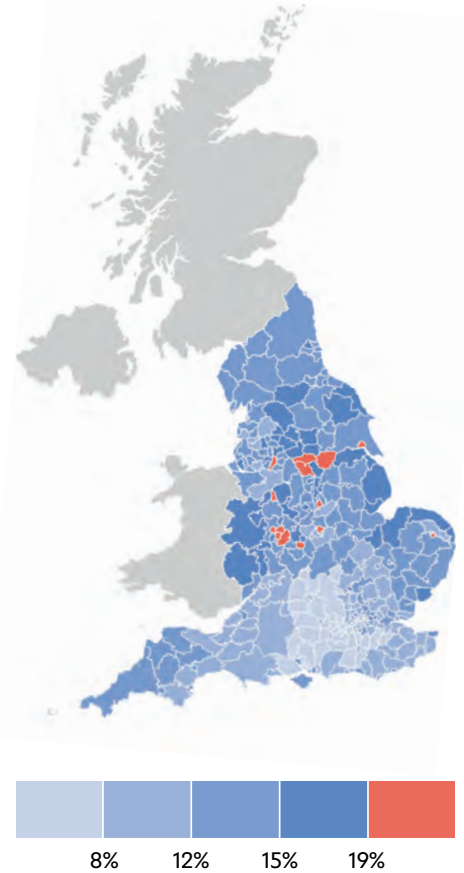
### How does the UK compare to the rest of the world?

	GDP growth forecast for 2022 (%)	GDP growth forecast for 2023 (%)	Population exposed to excessive air pollution (%)	Per capita CO2 emissions from domestic aviation (kg)	Share of population with mental health disorders (% 2019)	Share of children who report being bullied (% 2015)
<b>Great Britain</b>	<b>3.2</b>	<b>0.5</b>	<b>66.5</b>	<b>22.5</b>	<b>15.1</b>	<b>25.0</b>
Brazil	1.7	1.1	68.1	42.9	16.7	31.6
Canada	3.4	1.8	0.0	168.3	15.0	32.0
China	3.3	4.6	100.0	45.2	11.3	29.0
France	2.3	1.0	78.2	69.7	16.6	32.0
Germany	1.2	0.8	89.2	18.4	15.0	30.0
Italy	3.0	0.7	94.8	37.1	15.0	9.0
Japan	1.7	1.7	76.8	74.0	10.6	36.8
Russia	-6.0	-3.5	91.6	63.3	11.3	33.0
Spain	4.0	2.0	41.1	61.6	18.3	14.0
US	2.3	1.0	3.3	385.5	16.9	26.0

SOURCES: IMF, JULY; BRAUER ET AL (2017) VIA WORLD BANK; INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL OF CLEAN TRANSPORTATION; INSTITUTE FOR HEALTH METRICS AND EVALUATION, GLOBAL BURDEN OF DISEASE (2019); KNOW VIOLENCE IN CHILDHOOD REPORT (2017)

### Where could fuel poverty hit hardest?

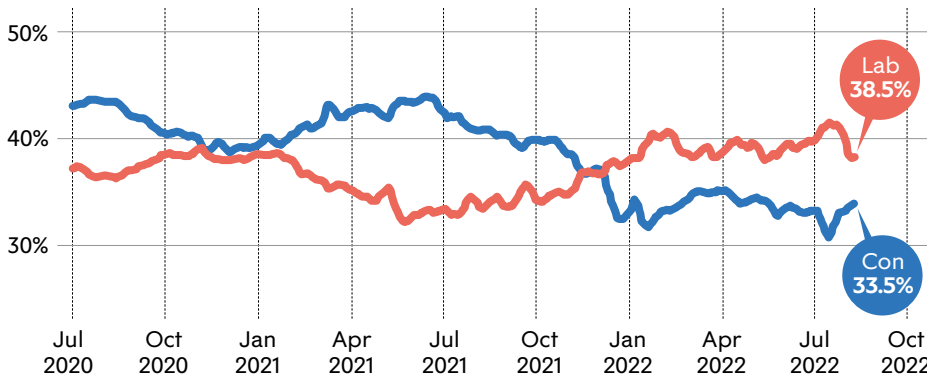
Percentage of households in England deemed "fuel poor" in 2019



SOURCE: DEPARTMENT FOR BUSINESS, ENERGY & INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

### Britain Elects: Westminster voting intentions

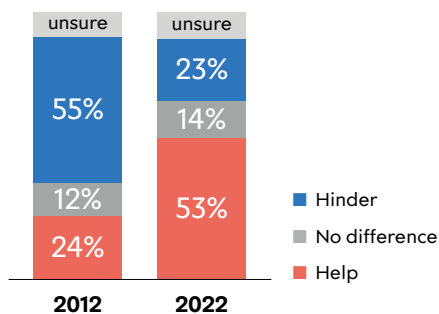
How popular is the Labour Party compared to the Conservative Party?



SOURCE: BRITAIN ELECTS

### UK attitudes to immigration are changing

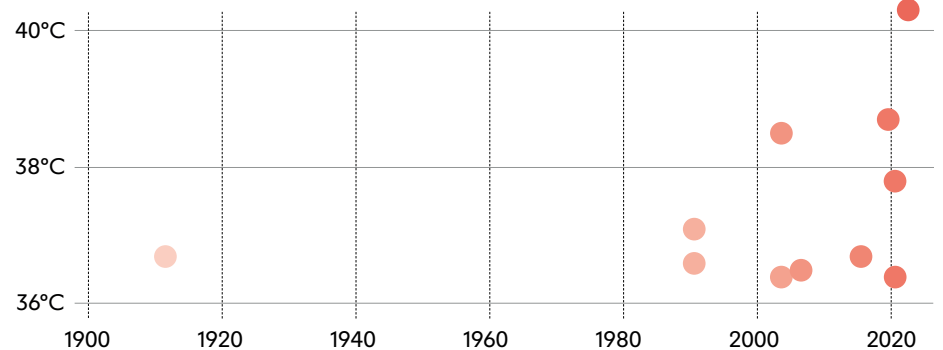
Will migration help or hinder an economic recovery?



SOURCE: IPSOS FOR BRITISH FUTURE

### Britain's hottest days have become more frequent

Hottest temperatures recorded in the UK, 1900-2022



SOURCE: MET OFFICE

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## The NS Q&A

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“Pay something attention and it rewards you a hundredfold”

**Sarah Langford, farmer**



**Sarah Langford was born in Hampshire in 1980. She worked for ten years as a criminal and family barrister before moving to her husband's family farm in Suffolk, which the couple now manage.**

*What's your earliest memory?*

My nursery teacher crouching down and telling me “You're ready, Sarah”. She led me from the baby room into the big kids' hall. It was huge and terrifying but I felt so proud to be there. I sometimes still tell myself “You're ready, Sarah”.

*Who are your heroes?*

Madonna: I like people who don't care about disapproval. And Lady Eve Balfour, the farmer and co-founder of the Soil Association. She understood soil in a way we are now relearning nearly 100 years

later. She wasn't bothered by disapproval. She lived openly with her female partners, rode motorbikes and flew Tiger Moth planes, and subsidised her farm during the Great Depression by playing saxophone in a jazz band and writing crime novels.

*What book last changed your thinking?*

Graham Harvey's *Grass-Fed Nation*. It changed how I think about food.

*Which political figure do you look up to?*

Rory Stewart. He not only has principles but acts upon them.

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

The soil. I've just completed a soil science module at university where I'm studying for a diploma in agriculture. The complexities

of our soil, its relationships with plants and animals, blows my mind.

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

San Francisco, 1975. The changes happening in culture, society, music, politics and art must have felt electric.

*What TV show could you not live without?*

*Mad Men*. It is a work of art.

*Who would paint your portrait?*

Maggi Hambling. I know I would have to leave my vanity at the door and let her see into my soul.

*What's your theme tune?*

“King” by Florence and the Machine.

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

“Attention is the beginning of devotion”, a line from an essay by the poet Mary Oliver. When I moved to Suffolk I began learning the names of wildflowers, bird calls and trees, and looking closely at the soil. The more I knew, the more I saw and heard. When you pay something attention – whether a person or a plant – it rewards you a hundredfold.

*What's currently bugging you?*

The impending US trade deals, in case our shelves fill with low-quality imports that destroy our farmers. Climate catastrophe. The five-year-old child hanging off my leg.

*What single thing would make your life better?*

Someone to do all my young children's laundry, cooking, life-diarising and clearing up so I can write more.

*When were you happiest?*

I feel happy often. Happiness rarely comes solely from wealth and success but from connection and a sense of your place in the world. I am very lucky to have these.

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

A private investigator: I'm pretty good at drawing information out of people. You should hear some of the stories I've been told by strangers on buses.

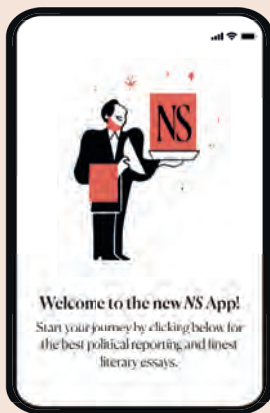
*Are we all doomed?*

What is a life if there is no hope? There's plenty of it about, if you look for it. ●

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*“Rooted: Stories of Life, Land and a Farming Revolution” by Sarah Langford is published by Viking*

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