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Sophie McBain on the Mumsnet wars • Andrew Marr on why Westminster politics is broken

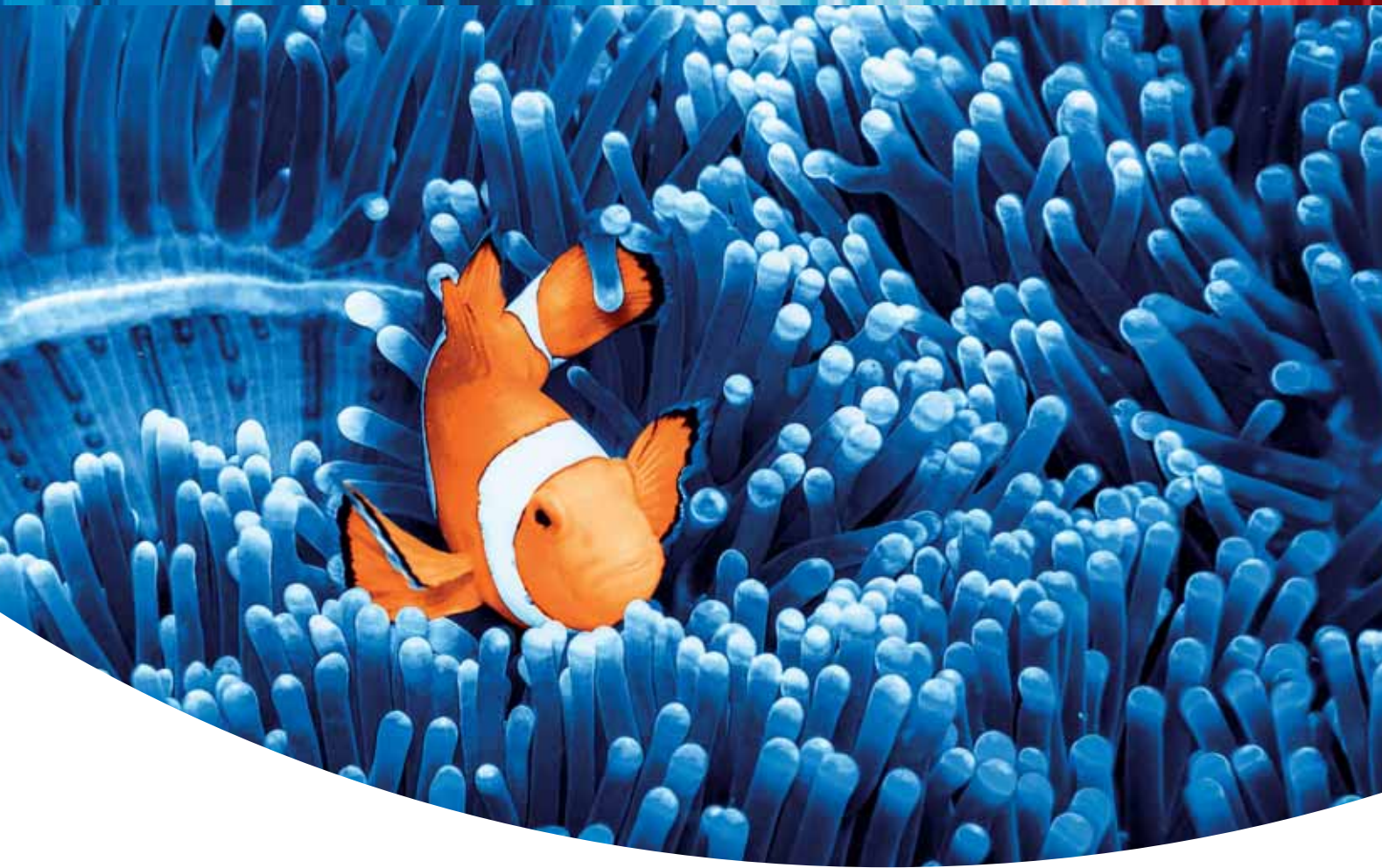
THE NEW STATESMAN

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Putin vs Nato

The alliance is back – but it can't save the West. By Adam Tooze





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Searching for new ideas

The UK is facing one of the deepest economic and social crises in postwar history. Living standards are predicted to fall at the fastest rate since records began in 1956-57 as inflation is expected to surpass 10 per cent. From April to May, more than two million adults went without food for an entire day. Having already suffered one lost decade for living standards, Britain looks likely to endure another.

Meanwhile, even as the memory of Covid-19 recedes, the country still bears the scars of the pandemic. An overburdened NHS and social care system are struggling to meet post-lockdown demands: ambulance waiting times are at a record high (with 11,000 people forced to wait more than three hours before reaching A&E), there are more than half a million adults on waiting lists for social care and one in nine of the population in England is now on a waiting list for routine surgery.

In education, the pupils who suffered most from school closures during lockdown have been neglected. Two-thirds of British primary headteachers have warned of inadequate “catch-up” funding from the government, while a third have used pupil premium funds – money intended for the most disadvantaged children – to fill gaps in their budget.

Yet confronted by this battalion of woes, Westminster politics appears devoid of ideas and solutions. The Queen’s Speech on 10 May merely confirmed that Boris Johnson’s government now has no cause beyond its own survival. Having failed to justify his rhetoric of “levelling up”, the Prime Minister has resorted to populist clichés and reheated Thatcherism: slashing “red tape” (even as Brexit expands it), bashing Brussels, cutting civil service jobs and deporting asylum seekers.

Mr Johnson is blessed with the largest Conservative parliamentary majority since 1987 but he shows no sign of knowing what to do with it. His government can point to achievements: one of the fastest and most successful Covid-19 vaccine roll-outs in the developed world and the laudable furlough scheme (which helped protect 11.7 million jobs in the depths of lockdown). But these policies have not been translated into a wider vision of the active state or the common good.



The Queen’s Speech on 10 May merely confirmed that Boris Johnson’s government now has no cause beyond its own survival

Far from supporting the most disadvantaged, Mr Johnson’s government has presided over punitive cuts in benefits and pensions (which rose by just 3.1 per cent despite inflation reaching 7 per cent). The Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, insisted that “technical problems” meant some benefits could only be increased once a year. But as Deven Ghelani, who developed Universal Credit, told the *New Statesman*: “Where there is a will, there is a way. People on legacy benefits could be sent a one-off supplement.” As so often, what is lacking is not funding but political imagination and commitment.

In this arid climate, Labour should be advancing its own vision of national renewal. Yet even before Keir Starmer pledged to resign if he is fined by the police for breaking lockdown rules, the party appeared becalmed. Where is the radicalism and sense of national mission that animated the Attlee, Wilson and Blair governments?

Labour MPs and aides contend that the party should give little away before a general election for fear of unsettling swing voters or gifting a moribund administration new ideas. But unless the party provides an attractive and compelling programme, the risk is that the public will resign themselves to perpetual Conservative rule in England, if not Scotland and Wales.

A contrast with Mr Starmer’s stolid Labour is provided by Andy Burnham, the mayor of Greater Manchester, who, as Andrew Marr writes on page 14, is “flaming with energy about the need to rewire the whole country, get rid of the House of Lords, change the voting system and embrace a new economic and tax system based on wealth and land, rather than incomes”. Mr Burnham would use the latter to fund a National Care Service – a Beveridge-style project for this century – and has argued for a Universal Basic Income to boost people’s financial resilience.

For too long, the UK has avoided the transformative change that its economic, social and constitutional dysfunction necessitates. Britain is trapped in a deadly cycle in which the paucity of change – the antiquated House of Lords being a prime example – serves only to confirm its impossibility. As poverty grows in the country, the biggest danger at Westminster is the poverty of ideas. ●



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THE NOTEBOOK



GETTY IMAGES

Newsmaker

How the iPod changed the way we listen

By Tom Gatti

Farewell, then, to the iPod, which has finally shuffled off this mortal coil. On 10 May Apple announced that it is discontinuing the iPod Touch, the last iteration of the MP3 player that was launched in 2001.

It's worth recalling just how revolutionary the iPod was. Those of us raised on the Walkman would use up every available minute on our blank cassettes: the 35-odd minutes left on a TDK D90, after your home-taped copy of, say, Snoop Dogg's *Doggystyle* or Blur's *Parklife*, could be crammed with a motley crew of B-sides from CD singles picked out of the bargain bin at WH Smiths, or bonus tracks recorded from Radio 1. But you were still confined to 90 minutes of listening. And now this little gadget could fit – wait, *what?* – 1,000 songs? It was mind-boggling.

The portable MP3 player had been around since 1998 and the iPod's storage wasn't record-breaking: Creative's Nomad Jukebox, released in 2000, could hold around 2,000 tracks. But Apple's design and

◀ marketing genius meant its product immediately overshadowed its competitors. The classic iPod was – is, for I can still hold my black seventh-generation model lovingly in my hand – a tactile wonder. Perfectly palm-sized, it had an interface in which fiddly buttons were banished in favour of the delightfully intuitive click-wheel. The thumb, which now figures so heavily in our swipe-driven tech world, here became a key player, brushing forwards and backwards in order to flip through the proud owner’s music library (a gesture captured with nostalgic reverence in Edgar Wright’s 2017 film *Baby Driver*, as its young protagonist cues up another track on one of his many iPods).

To have that library in your pocket was a remarkably freeing feeling. The choice of what to listen to on the commute was staggering – will you stick at first click with *Abba Gold* or *Abbey Road*, or will you spin on through the alphabet to *Survivor* (Destiny’s Child) and *Surrealistic Pillow* (Jefferson Airplane), or beyond?

Crucially, the music was yours – made up of albums you owned, whether you’d spent many evenings patiently “ripping” your CD collection to your iTunes (it was lucky I already had a girlfriend by my early twenties otherwise I might have struggled to find one) or spent your disposable income in the infinite aisles of Apple’s digital music store. Of course, there were the illegal downloaders, too – peer-to-peer file-sharing continued long after Napster was shut down in July 2001. But I suspect the music fans who dumped enormous quantities of material onto their iPod for free ultimately regretted it – stuck in an endless scroll of the entire Bob Dylan and Jay-Z back catalogues, they lost sight of what they actually liked.

And now this little gadget could fit – wait, what? – 1,000 songs? It was mind-boggling

Which is, of course, where we find ourselves today: stuck in a digital landscape dominated by Spotify and other streaming platforms, in which music is not exactly free, but not owned either. Instead of a collection that has been expanded and cultivated over years, we have a bottomless pool of recorded music. You can “like” an album and “follow” the artist, but the transaction is so low-stakes that it feels meaningless, and your “library” is not really yours at all.

The iPod was a thing of wonder; it was also something of a Pandora’s Box. Apple’s digital iTunes store, which opened in 2003, “unbundled” albums, making individual tracks available to download for 79p each – a development that many artists (such as Radiohead, who boycotted iTunes until 2008) hated as they felt their masterworks were being stripped for parts. This sense was only confirmed by the randomising “shuffle” feature, which was so popular that in 2005 Apple launched a miniature version of the player designed to do nothing else.

If the iPod allowed some users to embrace a post-album world, for others it only deepened their relationship with their music collections. The same could not be said for the iPhone, launched in 2007, the year after Spotify. Yes, it offers access to significantly more than 1,000 songs, but it is also a powerfully addictive multi-functional zone of distraction, serving users dopamine-triggering notifications and nudging us away from concentrated listening. And as far as Apple is concerned, it’s the future of its business.

We are not, however, helpless to resist. There’s no denying the unstoppable tide of streaming, but the present vinyl revival shows many music fans flocking back to physical media: UK vinyl sales have increased by more than 2,000 per cent since 2007 (in 2021, 5.3 million records were sold in the UK, the highest total since 1990). Meanwhile, in the US, CD sales increased in 2021 for the first time in 17 years. As the pandemic years pushed even more of our lives online and onscreen, returning to analogue formats felt like a small but important act of resistance, something that would reinscribe value to music, demand our full attention, and – more shallowly – look really good in our Zoom backdrops.

Though its function was purely digital, the classic iPod, with its pleasing weight and stubborn lack of internet connectivity, seems part of that older world of physical music. In the age of the smartphone, it now feels like a symbol of simpler times: with a device created purely to play music, we weren’t also checking Twitter, skimming a viral long read and WhatsApping our mums; and our simple carousel of album covers (did you bother to add the artwork? Of course you did) was free of the algorithm-driven suggestions that constantly intervene in our “user journey”.

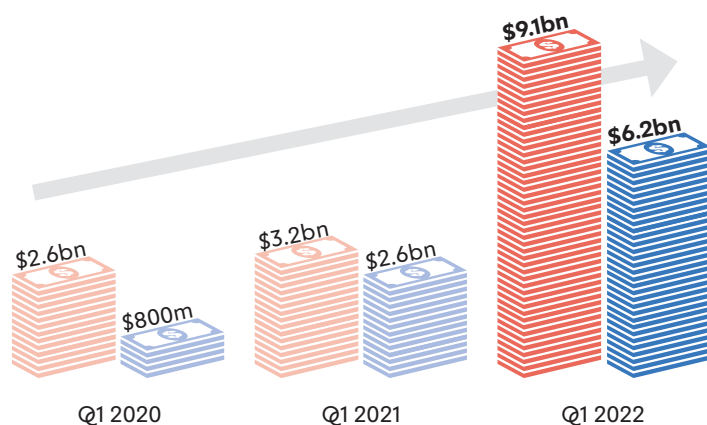
And you know what? Joni Mitchell isn’t on Spotify. But she is where she should be: on my record shelves, and on the whirring hard-drive of my trusty iPod. ●

Tom Gatti is executive editor for culture at the New Statesman, and editor of “Long Players: Writers on the Albums That Shaped Them” (Bloomsbury)

Chart of the Week

Shell and BP’s profits have soared in the past two years

First quarter profits for Shell (■) and BP (■) from 2020 to 2022



SOURCE: COMPANY FILINGS

The Diary

Keir Starmer's honourable announcement, rooting out dirty money, and why I'm a proud granny

By Margaret Hodge

Westminster loves a scandal, so perhaps it's no surprise a beer and a curry during a campaign event in Durham have received so much attention. There was a burst of frothing excitement from the press at Keir Starmer's announcement that he would resign if he receives a fine for having a dinner break in Durham. According to commentators, he is deliberately taking a big risk. I disagree. Starmer is not a rule breaker – he never has been. He defines himself by his integrity and respect for the law. However this ends up – and I am sure that we will find that the Labour leader adhered to the rules – he has demonstrated a consistent and principled approach which is so different from the slippery and consummate lying that defines our prime minister.

Cracking down on kleptocrats

Putting the tabloids' obsession with curries to one side, I try to do what I have always done – make progress on the issues I care about. The big event in my calendar was the launch of a new initiative to drive out dirty money from our financial system. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group (APPG) on anti-corruption and responsible tax, I released our Economic Crime Manifesto, together with Kevin Hollinrake MP, the Conservative chair of the APPG on fair business banking. We are building a cross-party, back-bench coalition to persuade the government to act seriously on money laundering and fraud. There is a groundswell of support from MPs keen to join our campaign.

I was first plunged into this world of financial wrongdoing when I chaired parliament's Public Accounts Committee. Through hearings with Amazon, Google and Starbucks it became obvious that big



Britain's poor regulation of its financial services makes it near impossible to enforce the law

corporations use complex financial structures – such as offshore tax havens and shell companies – to reduce tax. It didn't take long to learn that the same structures are used by kleptocrats and oligarchs to hide and then launder their illicit finance in the legitimate system.

Britain has become the jurisdiction of choice for dirty money. Our poor regulation of financial and professional services, our pathetically underfunded enforcement agencies, and our lack of transparency and accountability make it near impossible to follow the money and enforce the law. The cost of this economic crime is immense – an estimated £290bn a year. That's roughly equivalent to 25 per cent of annual public spending. It's depressing that it took the war in Ukraine to bring the issue centre stage, but we must grasp the opportunity to bear down on this corruption.

Our Economic Crime Manifesto is full of pragmatic reforms that will help us do just that. It's great to work in a positive way with MPs from all parties, building a consensus that the government cannot resist. It shows parliament at its best.

The doctor won't see you now

Next on my agenda is a difficult meeting with my friend Jacqui Smith, who now chairs two NHS healthcare trusts in north-east London. I know our friendship is strong enough to survive a policy disagreement. The latest "deckchairs on the *Titanic*" proposal is yet another reorganisation to merge all the local hospitals. That inevitably means that in the fight for limited resources, the powerful teaching hospitals – such as St Bartholomew's and the Royal London – will win and in poorer areas, such as in my constituency of Barking, where health outcomes are worse, local services will suffer. Health inequalities will simply get bigger.

I finally managed to meet with a group of local GPs who work in Barking after my constituents complained that it can take six weeks to get an appointment. GPs know that their patients need more but they are spending too much time responding to problems arising from the cost-of-living crisis. One case they described was of a patient who has a chronic heart condition that requires regular medication. She exercises frequently and watches her weight; but she can't afford the prescription and so isn't taking the drugs she needs. The outlook for her, and many like her, is grim.

Start them young

At least my week ended with a bit of joy. The real celebrity in our family is my grandson, who has been scouted by Arsenal and is making a real name for himself as a goalie in their academy. I took him to his training session and he was ecstatic at meeting some of his heroes, including Granit Xhaka and Cédric Soares. The way things are going, one day I may need him to pay for my residential care as the Tories will undoubtedly fail to sort it out. But at only seven, he's got a little way to go! Everybody tells me it's harder to become a professional footballer than it is to become a High Court judge. Yet as a proud granny, I'm full of hope. ●

Margaret Hodge is the Labour MP for Barking, east London



Encounter

“Agriculture is arguably
the most destructive
industry on Earth”
George Monbiot on
revolutionising the farm
By Philippa Nuttall

In 1987, not long out of university, George Monbiot travelled to Indonesia to investigate President Suharto’s transmigration programme. Two years later, aged 26, Monbiot moved to Brazil to live in the Amazon jungle. Time in east Africa with the nomadic people of Kenya and Tanzania followed. Today, the environmental activist, *Guardian* columnist and author lives in Oxford. He has renounced flying to far-flung locations to reduce his carbon footprint. Instead, he spends his time digging down into the soil (literally and intellectually) – a vertical journey of discovery he believes is vital for the future of humanity.

“There are times when I struggle to understand myself,” Monbiot muses in his new book *Regenesis*. “Why, when I have spent over half a century immersed in the living world... have I neglected the substrate that provides, directly or indirectly, roughly 99 per cent of the calories we consume?” Few of us take much time to consider soil, yet its health is utterly vital to life-sustaining processes – determining the quantity and quality of our food as well as regulating the amount of carbon in the atmosphere. We enthuse about exotic forests and dismiss local soil as “dirt”. But “English soils could be as diverse as the Amazon rainforest, and as little studied”, writes Monbiot.

Our ignorance and incuriosity about the details of food production is the more remarkable given that, as

TOM PILLSTON FOR THE NEW STATESMAN

Monbiot observed when we spoke over Zoom, “how we feed the world without devouring the planet is possibly the greatest predicament we face”. Yet decision-making about agriculture and land use is clouded by what Monbiot terms “magical thinking” – a tendency to romanticise the countryside and agrarian practices.

This idealisation has a long precedent in pastoral literary traditions – in the rural idylls eulogised in ancient Greek poetry, the Old Testament and the poetry and plays of the Renaissance. Sentimental portrayals of rural life are especially prevalent today in children’s books and television, Monbiot told me. “There’s this repeated trope of the farmyard being a place of harmony. You’ve got your rosy-cheeked farmer and one pig, one horse, one cow, one duck and one cat, and they are a happy family together. Of course, there’s no indication of what the farmer has got planned for them.” Agri-tourism – petting farms where people bottle-feed lambs and hold little chicks – helps to “reify” the distortions of this literature, Monbiot warned.

These childhood images and experiences, often highly disconnected from the reality of contemporary farming, become “deep-rooted metaphors that govern our perceptions of the world” as adults, said Monbiot. We see “cattle and sheep grazing in lovely flowering pastures” and absorb the idea that that’s what we need to preserve. *Regenesis* is a call to raze this pastoral imaginary so that we can begin to think clearly about how we produce food and steward the soil, and how we might do these things differently. In particular, Monbiot insists, we must end meat and dairy production. “The biggest population crisis is not the growth in human numbers, but the growth in livestock numbers,” he writes.

It is estimated that global agriculture production will need to increase by 60-70 per cent from the current levels to meet food demand in 2050. All these animals must be fed – in Western countries, largely on imported soya, the intensive cultivation of which devastates rainforests, wetlands and savannahs. Monbiot is not only opposed to factory farming, whose inhumanity and polluting consequences are well-documented, but, more controversially, to supposedly benign forms of livestock farming. Organic, pasture-fed beef and lamb, Monbiot insists, “is arguably the worst of all agricultural products” because of the vast tracts of land required for grazing cows and sheep. Livestock is a “phenomenally profligate means of producing food”, Monbiot told me. Animals cover 77 per cent of the world’s agricultural land, yet produce only 18 per cent of the world’s calories.

But livestock is far from the only problem. Ploughing, seeds dressed with pesticides, overuse of the land, and increased drought because of climate change are also weakening the soil’s resilience and fertility. In *Regenesis* Monbiot explores alternative farming techniques being trialled by maverick agriculturalists. These include an organic grower who regards biodiversity as “the driver” of his farm and the

vegetables he harvests as “a by-product”, plus a farmer who eschews ploughing. Monbiot also discusses experiments to multiply, as cheaply and efficiently as possible, a bacterial protein to replace meat, and a new perennial crop called Kernza, which, persisting over several years, would end the need to clear and sow the ground for every harvest, meaning “we would not depend on smashing living systems apart to produce our food”.

Popularising these innovative food production practices isn’t straightforward, however. Farmers have significant “cultural power”, said Monbiot, and many insist measures to protect the environment will “destroy our way of life”. In Britain, farmers account for just 1.4 per cent of the labour force. Yet on many rural issues, “we have granted them, and landowners in general, almost a monopoly”, Monbiot said. “There are loads of people living in the countryside who want things done differently, but they’re almost disenfranchised.” Difficult discussions can “demonise townies and incomers” and even produce an “ugly politics” of “ethno-localism”. “We cast the countryside as a seat of innocence and purity, but it can be just as cruel and corrupt as a city.”

Clear-eyed scrutiny and reform of our farming practices “gives us possibly the best chance we have of avoiding environmental catastrophe this century”, said Monbiot. Ending injudicious subsidies for agriculture would trigger this shift, he believes. Every year, around \$500bn-\$600bn is spent worldwide on “perverse, destructive” farm subsidies, which buttress “arguably the most destructive industry on Earth”. Cut off these funding streams and meat production would virtually end, Monbiot told me. Farmers could then instead be paid to restore the land by rewilding it – the subject of Monbiot’s 2013 book *Feral* – planting trees and growing crops and vegetables in ways that encourage wildlife to return.

I ask Monbiot how he reconciles his devotion to the natural world with his advocacy of technology-enhanced industrialisation of food production. “There are trade-offs,” he replied. “There’s no pure and perfect solution.” He agrees “there’s a real danger” new food technologies could end up in the hands of a few large corporations. Weak patents and strong anti-trust laws would be a “pretty good formula” to help forestall monopolisation. His vision of factories powered by renewable energy serving local markets with farm-free produce “could deliver food sovereignty, food justice and food security far more effectively” than the current system.

Monbiot’s proposals are radical and some are contentious; he acknowledges that the “counter-agricultural revolution” he envisages “will be extremely disruptive” and would encounter “bitter resistance”. But he is correct that voluntary lifestyle changes – “micro-consumerist bollocks” – such as buying plastic-free cotton wool buds or planting a few trees in a field are inadequate. To have any chance of turning the age of extinction into an age of regeneration, systemic reform, based on the facts, not pastoral myth-making, is essential. ●

“We cast the countryside as a seat of innocence and purity, but it can be just as cruel and corrupt as a city”

ANDREW MARR



Politics

The Palace of Westminster is falling down – and so is our centralised political system

Two surprises in the past week – a journey to Manchester and a leaked directive from a cabinet minister – push to the same conclusion, underpinned by this month’s local elections. It isn’t a startling one, at least for *NS* readers, but it is elbowing its way up the agenda: Westminster is now utterly incapable of fixing inequality. A new deal for non-metropolitan England should be at the heart of the next general election.

I mean more than levelling up, crucial though that is. I mean a radical redistribution of power – hence vigour, hence self-confidence – away from London. We have been talking about it forever. But nothing happens. It’s time.

For at least a lifetime, constitutional reform has been discussed by the wrong people, sometimes including the younger me. It excited tangle-haired, pamphlet-scribbling political nerds and corduroy-shanked historians, with a few disaffected MPs around them. Books. Fringe meetings. But not the right people. Not ever the voters. Set “the system” beside the NHS, the cost of living, immigration... and the right people, the people for whom the system exists, don’t give a monkey’s.

That’s been so for more than a century in England. The Edwardians got hot under the collar about the need to scupper the House of Lords, and about the voting system, and the distribution of power around the UK. Elsewhere, it was a different story. The Scottish devolution movement and the Northern Ireland peace process energised tens of thousands. In England, however, constitutional change became a fringe issue, placed somewhere between the land tax and organic apple

stalls at West Country liberal conferences. Do you remember the north-east English devolution referendum of 2004? Nope? Nor do 999 in 1,000.

My journey to Manchester was for LBC, to interview Labour’s Andy Burnham, as well as the Tory mayor of Tees Valley, Ben Houchen. Burnham was flaming with energy about the need to rewire the whole country, get rid of the Lords, change the voting system, and embrace a new economic and tax system based on wealth and land rather than incomes.

But Houchen and Jim O’Neill, the crossbencher who served as a Treasury minister under David Cameron and was one of the key proponents of the Northern Powerhouse, both argued the case for varied regional taxation – something that horrifies the Treasury today – and more representation for the regions in parliament. The ideas are not identical across the party spectrum, but the hunger for change is. I went home buzzing.

The second “surprise” was a leaked directive from Michael Gove, the cabinet minister in charge of levelling up, to the Speaker of the House of Lords. Gove informed him that when the ornate chamber had to be vacated for the huge programme of rebuilding the Palace needs, the peers must not just shuffle down the

Mass immolation of the aristocracy seems an excessive solution to the Lords issue

road to a Westminster conference centre. They should up silver sticks and hie themselves to Stoke-on-Trent, Burnley, Edinburgh, Sunderland, Plymouth, Wolverhampton or York instead.

Well, absolutely right. Although it is impossible to work at Westminster for long without developing a sentimental attachment to the lurid fake-medieval architecture and the uniquely musty atmosphere, lightly scented with broth and halitosis, a forced march of the buffers north would probably save many frail lives. The building, I’m told by a friendly peer, is now incredibly dangerous. There are small fires breaking out all the time. “It won’t be long before there is a real, catastrophic conflagration.” Sceptical as I am about the second chamber, the mass immolation of what’s left of the aristocracy would be an excessive solution.

But, much more importantly, it’s almost impossible to work for long in the Palace of Westminster without succumbing to a kind of groupthink. Our unusually centralised political system has failed most of England, has failed Scotland, has failed Wales, and is failing Northern Ireland as well. Moving parliamentarians isn’t enough.

The failure of the current system is one of the unavoidable conclusions of the 2019 general election, and before that of the rise of the SNP and Plaid Cymru, never mind the current brouhaha in Belfast.

Unionists in Scotland would rightly point in turn to the failures of the SNP-Green government. But unhealthy SNP dominance is the result of Tory dominance in England, and the Brexit vote. It has been created by winner-takes-all Westminster parliamentary absolutism. Similarly, the struggle over the protocol at Stormont is the direct consequence of the Brexit deal struck by Westminster.

And the longer history of British democracy has never been about the dominance of Westminster thinking. Whether it was Joseph Chamberlain and the municipal Liberal radicalism of Birmingham, or the Chartists, or the suffragettes, or Manchester, or the Irish Home Rule disruptors, Westminster was most alive when it was flushed with intellectual energy from elsewhere in these islands. It wasn’t always fusty. It wasn’t always somnolent. The very building, like a Plantagenet theme park, tells an untrue story about historical continuity.

We are close to a real chance for reshaping. It is being caused not by pamphlets or seminars, but the right people, the voters. The local election results rammed home the message that

neither the Conservatives nor Labour any longer stretch across the UK.

The English Tories are now having to fight on two flanks. The party is retreating at speed not just in Scotland but now in Wales as well; it has been hammered in London. Labour has largely failed to take back the swathes of the Midlands and northern England that it lost in 2019, and it is still stuck in Scotland. Smaller parties, from the Liberal Democrats to the Greens and Sinn Féin, did better. Crucially, polling suggests that if a general election was held tomorrow, the result would be a hung parliament.

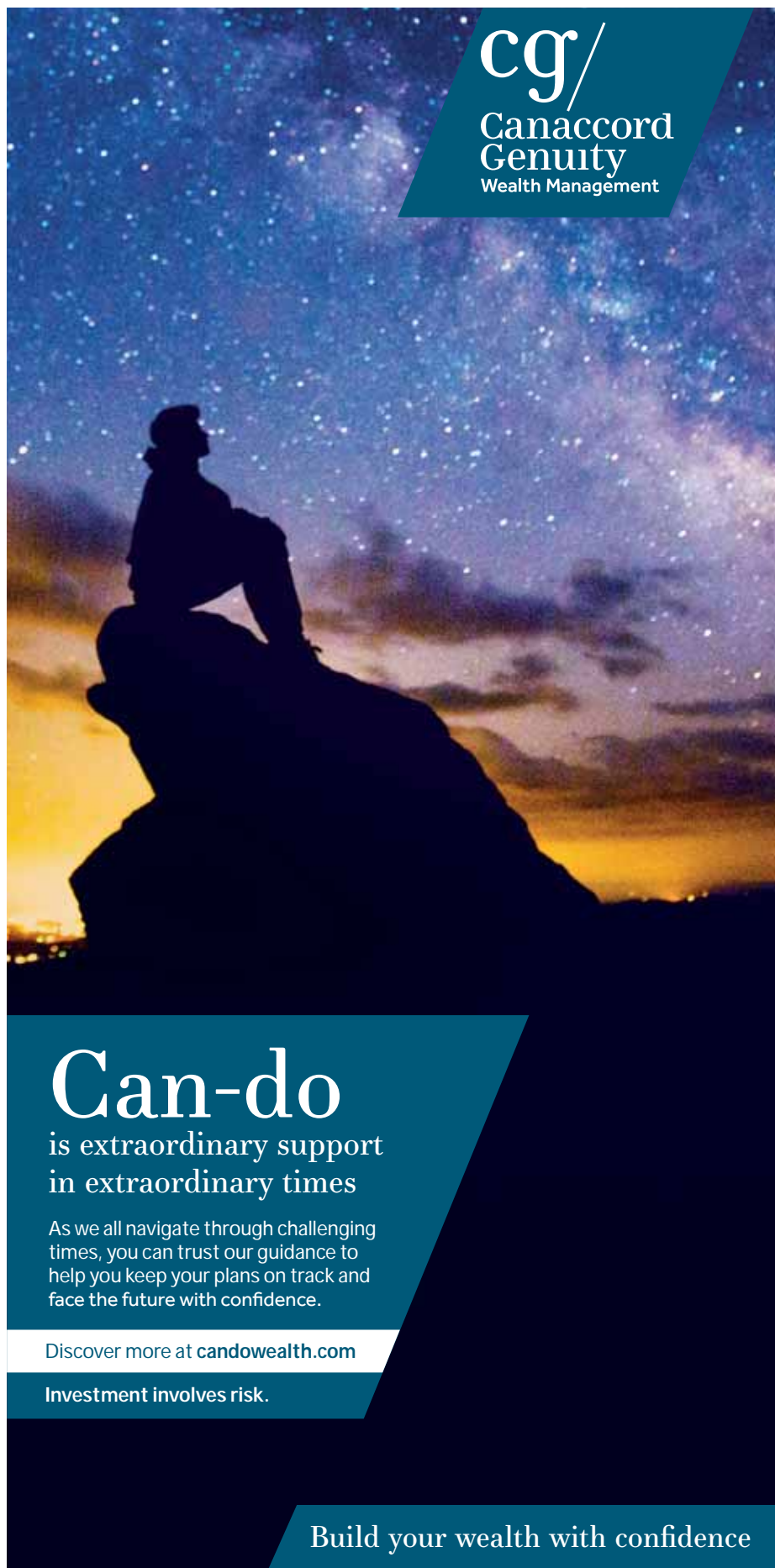
As I wrote in these pages last week, Conservative strategists are already planning to warn voters against enabling a “chaotic” coalition of the SNP, Labour and the Lib Dems, which would go on to rewrite the constitution of the country. And this from the party that has brought us the chaos of Brexit.

But I agree to this extent: gazing at the incomplete and scattered picture painted by the local elections, we can see the dim shape of an unfamiliar politics ahead. Brexit has brought us not the single, irresistible bass voice of a national community reborn, as the Johnsons and Rees-Moggs of this world hoped, but a babble of competing voices. Not a politics based on class and ideology, but increasingly on geographical proximity and, in particular, on resentment against London and the concentration of power and wealth in the south-east of England.

In Scotland and Northern Ireland the remorseless churn of demography looks fatal in the longer term for the UK. The younger the cohort, the less affection there is for Britishness. Changes in Northern Ireland encourage those in Scotland, and vice versa. In their tone, personal stories and constitutional outlook, Nicola Sturgeon and Michelle O'Neill chime.

The great missing piece of the jigsaw is England. Prickly English hostility to the “great wen” of festering London arrogance has never died, and the dissolution of the wider Union would worsen the imbalance inside England, not resolve it. The opposition must think about alternative models. It should take another look at Asquith’s 1912 “Home Rule all round”, a different shape for a modern federal Britain, which was never realised. It should be picking up the boldest of Tory ideas about local regeneration and negotiate with the other opposition parties to build a different kind of politics.

It must. It should. But we all know it won’t unless the voters force the pace. I hope they do, before that fire breaks out. ●



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Letter of the week Starmer's social solidarity



Oliver Eagleton's Notebook article (Comment, 13 May) is unpersuasive on a number of counts. He asserts that Keir Starmer's emphasis on compliance with Covid rules is embedded in a cold, bureaucratic respect for law and conventions. However, Starmer has consistently framed such compliance as a matter of social solidarity and collective sacrifice to protect the most vulnerable. Eagleton also berates Starmer for local election results that are little better than Jeremy Corbyn's in 2018. At that time, Labour's "creative ambiguity" on Brexit was still holding. As this policy unravelled, and both Leavers and Remainers realised they were being strung along, the party's vote share plummeted, and is only just beginning to recover.

Labour needs to reconnect with many different parts of its electoral coalition. It cannot rely solely on the young, whose "libertine energies" do not always stretch to voting – Ipsos Mori estimates that about 74 per cent of over 65s voted in the 2019 election compared to only 47 per cent of 18-24 year olds. This may explain why Starmer is trying to project an image of competence and maturity.
Madeline Thompson, Cambridge

Post-truth politics

I was alarmed by Oliver Eagleton's Notebook piece (Comment, 13 May). He attacks Keir Starmer for presenting himself as a leader who would run "the state as a clean, efficient bureaucracy", rescuing it from "crankish ideologues and incontinent hedonists". Such "righteous pedantry" sets him up as a hypocrite. So any appeal, even to the most basic ethical decency can be dismissed as potential hypocrisy?

A few paragraphs later Eagleton explains that "accuracy in politics is subordinate to power. Beergate has shown that, with enough media pressure, it is possible to reverse a supposedly impartial police decision and convince the majority of the electorate an offence likely took place." So that's OK, is it? Rather like Donald Trump

persuading half of America that Joe Biden's election victory was a fraud? Perhaps Mr Eagleton should join Boris Johnson in the post-truth brigade.
David Perry, Cambridge



Reasonable objections

The handling of so-called beergate that Andrew Marr describes (Cover Story, 13 May) is emblematic of Labour's struggle to present a distinctive message. Hitherto, Keir Starmer has played safe by refusing to make political capital out of a global crisis, unless and until the most egregious and wilful blunders occurred. He has avoided making commitments that could come back to haunt him and the party during a general election campaign. But the outstanding problem is that he comes over as a very reasonable lawyer, rather than the leader of a political party, one of whose former leaders he once admiringly quoted, saying Labour is "a moral crusade, or it is nothing". Right now the party is neither crusading nor cruising towards victory. Step forward, Lisa Nandy, flanked by any number of female colleagues, as a putative leadership team.
Les Bright, Exeter, Devon

Your Leader on Keir Starmer (13 May) is built on the premise that he is a mere technocrat with no idea of what kind of Britain he would lead, and timid to boot. Having read his Fabian pamphlet "The Road Ahead", I think your premise is a little flawed. He paints a detailed picture of change from the malaise we currently endure towards a more productive and equitable economy; equality of opportunity; security at work and in neighbourhoods; a genuine programme of recovery from the pandemic and more, all to be delivered in a less centralised state. It may be argued that this lacks stunning originality but I am fed up with being stunned, and this is an agenda that has the support of millions.
Roger Truelove, Sittingbourne, Kent

Donne reading

In a characteristically subtle review of Katherine Rundell's biography of John Donne (The Critics, 13 May), Rowan Williams makes two observations that don't quite do Donne justice. He writes of "the famous 'Batter my heart...' sonnet with its stark concluding image of divine rape", and of "the silent partner" in the poem beginning "For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love". Donne was a master of double meanings. Since the 1300s "ravish" was used to mean mystical union with God as well as rape or other forms of violence; the image is therefore nuanced

rather than “stark”. And in “For God’s sake hold your tongue” he is surely telling the male reader not to bother him: he could hardly urge a lover to chide his gout! In “The Dream”, at the moment of mutual orgasm, he concludes his hardly silent partner has not angelic but divine knowledge of his own excessive joy. No misogyny there!
Bill Myers, Leicester

Mutual muse

It was good to see the article on Mildred Eldridge, whose art has been overshadowed by the poetry of her husband, RS Thomas (The Critics, 13 May). Michael Prodger is right in saying they were essentially isolated from one another, so it is all the more remarkable that two of the loveliest poems in the language are those he wrote about her and their marriage: “The Way of It” and “A Marriage”.
Richard Harries, London SW13

Stumped for words

I enjoyed Peter Wilby’s review of the 2022 *Wisden Cricketers’ Almanack* (The Critics, 6 May) and commend him for bringing attention to Azeem Rafiq’s story, but one point he made left a sour taste. I understand that, as a traditionalist, he doesn’t like that the language of the game is being changed. But the examples he cites (of “batsmen” becoming the gender-neutral “batters”, as well as the loss of “chinaman”, referring to a style of bowling, from cricket’s lexicon) will make the sport more inclusive and reduce abuse in the long term.
Calum Trenaman, London SE11

Carry on broadcasting

A confession: sometimes when reading the *NS* there is a long piece on a somewhat interesting subject, but I think, “Do I *really* need to read this?” Such a moment came with Stuart McGurk’s “The revolution will be televised” (Reporter at Large, 6 May) – but it was such a pleasure to read about the ineptitude of the launch of GB News, and there were laugh-out-loud moments. If only the right was always as incompetent.
Geoff Skinner, London NW10

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Commons Confidential

By Kevin Maguire



Bank of England governor Andrew Bailey is in the sights of restless Red Wall Tories. I’m reliably informed that a group are discussing a letter to Rishi Sunak demanding the Chancellor sack the central banker only two years into an eight-year term. The governor has been accused of washing his hands of the cost-of-living crisis after blaming “apocalyptic” food prices and the highest inflation for three decades on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Bailey, who in his first year in the job earned more than £575,000 – and who told MPs in February that he “couldn’t tell you exactly” what he was paid, after advocating wage restraint for workers – is likely to be defended by the Chancellor. But my snout predicted calls will grow for his dismissal. “Dozens of Red Wallers want him gone,” whispered the snout. “If he can’t do anything about inflation, what’s the point of keeping him?”

Boris and Carrie Johnson enjoyed a convivial evening in Claridge’s at Lord and Lady Rothermere’s Covid-delayed soirée to celebrate 125 years of the *Daily Mail*. According to Dominic Cummings, the PM regards the *Telegraph* – which paid him £250,000 as a columnist, a sum he once described as “chicken feed” – as his “boss”, but he has good reason to be grateful to his host. Relations were so bad when the *Mail* was edited by Geordie Greig, when it exposed Johnson using Tory donors to pay for his wallpaper, that I was told on good authority (No 10 denied it at the time, obvys) that the PM muttered that his fellow Old Etonian should “f*** off” and called him a word rhyming with punt. Current editor Ted Verity obsessively hammering Keir Starmer over a beer and curry is much more to Johnson’s taste. My informant with the Champagne flute mused that the PM owes Verity so much he should’ve bought the night’s fizz.

Labour MPs were surprised to receive formal invitations from foot-in-mouth Tory Lee Anderson to “arrange a time for colleagues to visit” a food bank in his Ashfield patch. The right-whinger, who bought a six-bedroom house a few months before asserting that the poor struggle to afford food because they can’t cook, defected to the Conservatives in 2018 after being dumped as a Labour councillor. The reasons given by the party panel included, I’m told, a reference to childcare being something that is only for women. A Conservative informant shuddered that in his party, blue-collar Tories are more reactionary than grouse-shooting toffs.

No 10 has dismissed 90 per cent of government departments’ cost-of-living saving plans as impractical or total rubbish, I’m told. The same percentage could be applied to the Prime Minister’s big ideas – among them a garden bridge, an island airport and a bridge from Scotland to Northern Ireland.

The day Johnson flew to Belfast to pretend the Brexit protocol was nothing to do with him, a PR company emailed journalists to announce it now represented “one of Northern Ireland’s most recognisable celebrities”. Van Morrison? Rory McIlroy? Christine Lampard? James Dornan? Try, er, Arlene Foster. ●

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

“There are dozens of Red Wall Tory MPs who want the governor of the Bank of England to go”

The second coming of Nato

Will the revived alliance survive in the new world order?

By Adam Tooze

In November 2019, from the *salon doré* of the Élysée Palace, where Charles de Gaulle once held court, Emmanuel Macron warned his fellow Europeans that Nato, the transatlantic alliance that had secured Europe since 1949, was on the point of “brain death”. President Donald Trump’s administration, to the horror of America’s own soldiers, had just unilaterally withdrawn support from the Kurdish forces in northern Syria, sacrificing them to Bashar al-Assad and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Within a year, the US would impose sanctions on Turkey, a member of Nato since 1952, for its purchase of Russian anti-aircraft missiles. Disunity reigned.

In 2017 Angela Merkel had returned from a chaotic meeting with Trump to declare that Europe could clearly no longer count on America as an ally and must look to its own resources for its security. Macron’s concern over two years later was that little had happened to make good on that realisation.

The antics of leaders such as Trump and Erdoğan would be hard to contain in any formal alliance. But Nato’s problems went deeper than populism. What was still a compact, anti-Soviet alliance in the 1980s had, thanks to expansion in the 1990s and 2000s, grown into a sprawling and aimless organisation. As west European defence spending dwindled, the alliance relied ever more on America’s huge military budgets and eager new east European recruits. The failures of Nato intervention in Afghanistan from 2001 and Libya in 2011 were demoralising, something that in 2021 would be underlined by another unilateral American withdrawal – this time from Afghanistan on the orders of Joe Biden.

For Macron, Nato’s old rationale of keeping the Soviets out and the Germans down no longer seemed relevant. Despite Vladimir Putin’s moves against Ukraine in 2014, Berlin was buying more Russian gas and Macron wanted to reopen diplomatic channels to Moscow, reviving one of de Gaulle’s great hopes of Europe as a balancer between Washington and Moscow. Meanwhile, from the American point of view, insofar as there has been a clean line of strategy in the last decade it has largely bypassed the Europeans and been directed against China and the battle for influence in the so-called Indo-Pacific – a geopolitical construct that gained widespread currency after 2010.

Now, in the spring of 2022, and thanks to Putin’s ill-judged assault on Ukraine, the picture is transformed. All eyes are on Europe and Nato. Sweden and Finland are applying for membership. For the first time in its history, the Nato Response Force has been deployed as part of a collective-defence mission. Even Germany’s government has ▶



JONATHAN MCHUGH

Cover Story

◀ agreed to increase its military spending. From Berlin the US secretary of state, Antony Blinken, has publicly affirmed the “deep cooperation and coordination that is at the heart” of the alliance.

It is hardly surprising that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has helped to revive Nato. But is this a sign of true mental reactivation? Does Nato have a new vision? Or is the reaction to the war in Ukraine more in the manner of a knee-jerk, an involuntary spasm induced by Putin’s hammer blow?

The Atlanticist jubilation is so loud that people seem to have forgotten that if Nato’s aim was to deter Russian aggression and keep the peace in Europe, it has failed. Whether or not the talk of Ukraine joining the alliance can really be said to have triggered Putin’s invasion, it certainly encouraged nationalist opinion in Kyiv to take a hard line against Moscow, and also fuelled Russian propaganda. And for all the assistance and training that Ukrainian forces had received up to that point from the US, UK and Canada, Moscow clearly assumed that it had military superiority. Western threats of economic sanctions were brushed aside.

If things had gone as most Western intelligence agencies appear to have expected, Russia would have rolled over Ukraine. That would have terrified its neighbours to the West and given existing Nato members every reason to reinforce their defences. But whether Sweden and Finland would then have rushed to join Nato is far from obvious. Would they have risked provoking Moscow if the Russian army was rampant? Moldova, for one, has no intention of applying. Even now, it would be far too risky.

What has created Nato’s moment – it cannot be emphasised too often – is what was least expected: Ukraine’s effective and sustained armed resistance. Despite Nato forces’ long interaction with Ukraine’s military – Ukraine deployed troops to both Iraq and Afghanistan – that resistance has been a total surprise, which is hardly a testament to the closeness of those operations. In terms of military intelligence about Ukraine, Macron’s assessment of Nato “brain death” seems not too inaccurate. Ahead of the war we had no real understanding of the true military balance between Russia and Ukraine.

It is the fact that Russia’s offensive has been both blatant and, thanks to Ukraine’s heroics, unsuccessful that makes Nato membership for Sweden and Finland so obvious. Whether their applications will be straightforward is unclear. The issue of Kurdistan, which in 2019 first prompted Macron’s provocative diagnosis, has resurfaced. Ankara has raised objections over Sweden’s alleged sponsorship of the Kurdish independence movement.

Once war began and Ukraine endured, Nato members rallied. But talk of a Nato response to Putin’s war is the kind of smoke-and-mirrors operation that is the organisation’s forte. In fact, while Nato has issued declarations in support of Ukraine, the aid is being supplied by the individual member states. And that aid follows an all too familiar pattern.

Proportionally, the Baltic states are providing huge amounts – around 0.8 per cent of GDP from Estonia and Latvia. Poland is contributing almost 0.5 per cent. But above all it is the US that is arming Ukraine and doing so on a gigantic scale – well over \$4bn in defence since the war started, with tens of billions more in the pipeline. If anything, the crisis has confirmed the imbalances that have increasingly discredited Nato. Nor is Washington embarrassed to advertise that reality. From the American side the rhetoric is redolent not of the collective commitments of the Cold War, but the hub-and-spokes model of Lend-Lease, under which between 1941 and 1945 the US supplied allied nations with food, fuel and materiel, and cemented its role as the arsenal of democracy. But, if the US is leading the way, does Washington have a real plan?

On strategy, Washington has not one but several brains. Biden himself sounds bullish. His rhetoric towards Putin smacks of regime change. The defence secretary, Lloyd Austin, speaks openly of exhausting Russia. The CIA is more cautious, warning of the risks of further escalation. Using Ukraine to humiliate Russia is one thing that America’s warring parties in Congress seem to be able to agree on. The Ukraine Lend-Lease Act, which gives Biden the powers to accelerate further deliveries, passed easily through both chambers. Agreeing the additional aid packages proposed by the Democrats – an extra \$40bn in

Russia is irrelevant to the US economy – the same cannot be said for Europe

additional military, humanitarian and economic support – will require horse-trading. Assuming they do pass, the question remains: is the US developing a new grand strategy for Europe and Nato or is grinding down Russia an end in itself – a project that plays well with the American electorate, while freeing the Pentagon to focus on China?

Beyond the immediate need to back Ukraine, what is America’s vision of a workable security order in Europe? Does it even need one? Barring a nuclear escalation, Russia is far away and irrelevant to America’s economy – the same cannot be said of its relation to Europe.

It suits governments in eastern Europe, the Nordic countries and the UK to talk tough on Russia. If anyone is truly invested in the idea of a Nato revival, they are. Better equipped, with steady American leadership, larger European contingents, squarely focused on the East. But everything has to work out just right. To imagine that this is going to be the outcome of our current situation entails hoping for the best on three fronts.

The first and most important is the war in Ukraine itself. If Ukraine prevails and manages not only to stop but to roll back Russia’s offensives, do we really believe that Moscow can tolerate that outcome? If not, shouldn’t we expect Russia to escalate asymmetrically? The US director of national intelligence, Avril Haines, has recently warned of the risk that Putin may be “moving along an unpredictable and potentially escalatory trajectory”. If Putin reaches for his nuclear arsenal then what we have experienced so far is merely a prelude, a phoney war. The real test for Nato lies ahead.

If the war drags on, with America providing substantial aid, but Russia proving able to stop Ukraine’s counteroffensives, does Europe want the equivalent of another Afghanistan on its doorstep – a decades-long conflict with a devastating humanitarian fallout? That might suit Washington, but can Europe live with it? The dialogues between Olaf Scholz, Macron and Moscow in recent weeks suggest that Paris and Berlin are still looking to offer Putin a way out. If the Ukraine crisis extends into the distant future, what will be the impact on the front-line states, above all Poland? If Afghanistan is the analogy, we should be concerned that eastern Europe does not suffer the fate of Pakistan, where America’s anti-Soviet campaign helped to strengthen the deep state and stoke popular radicalisation.

Then there is the US itself. If Nato was facing an existential crisis in 2019, it was largely due to Trump’s erratic attacks on America’s European partners. The competent leadership from the Biden team during the Ukraine



Trail of destruction: a man pushes his bike in Bucha, Ukraine, 6 April 2022

crisis – unlike over Afghanistan – has been reassuring. But here too we may be experiencing the calm before the storm. By November 2022 the Republican Party will most likely be back in control of Congress. The presidential race in 2024 will probably be closer than the midterms, but on their present showing, the Democrats will be lucky to hold on to the White House. The return to power of Trump, or one of his ideological protégés, would be a disaster for transatlantic relations. But we should not be under any illusions about the Republicans even without Trump. The political-cultural gap between the norms of European politics and those of the GOP is wide and growing. Already in 2014-15, the late senator John McCain and hawkish voices in Washington DC made life very difficult for European diplomacy over Ukraine. America's eager new allies would be well-advised to bear that in mind.

Finally, there is the larger question of what lies beyond the Ukraine crisis. If America succeeds in its more or less open strategy of bleeding Russia dry, why should that betoken a reorientation towards European security, rather than the opposite? If the US is willing to take risks to weaken Russia as a strategic

competitor, that is presumably to be better able to focus on China. And that poses the greater strategic question: on China, are Europe's interests aligned with those of the US and what has Nato got to do with it?

So long as the current crisis keeps the focus on values and principles – democracy vs dictatorship – one can construct a master narrative of the free world vs the authoritarianism of Xi Jinping and Putin. But in other respects it takes a pretty fervid imagination to see France's sprinkling of colonial possessions in the Indo-Pacific as equivalent to America's stake in the glaxis that consists of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. Germany, for its part, continues to maintain close economic relations with China. As Herbert Diess, the CEO of Volkswagen, has frankly remarked: "If we would constrain our business to only established democracies, which account for about 7 to 9 per cent of world population, and this is shrinking, then clearly there would not be any viable business model for an auto manufacturer... If you are not in China, you have a problem. If you are in China, you have a chance."

For Berlin, a pivot from an energy war with Russia to a trade war with China would be an economic worst case.

It would be vain to imagine that the Western powers will dictate the course of future relations with China – we ought to have learned the limits of our agency in Ukraine. In December 2020 Brussels, Paris and Berlin, to the horror of the Biden team, offered an economic olive branch with the Comprehensive Agreement on Investments, which Beijing spurned. That made it easier for Europe and the US to align on China during Biden's first year in office than many expected. In the summer of 2021 Nato for the first time issued a statement on the security challenge posed by China. But then in January 2022 came the storm over Lithuania upgrading Taiwan's diplomatic recognition. Faced with Beijing's threats, the Baltics lined up with the US, presumably with a view to anchoring American support against Russia. Meanwhile, Berlin and much of the rest of the EU distanced themselves, refusing to get drawn into a clash with Beijing. For all the talk of partnership it is far from clear how Europe and the US align on China in the long term.

That a Russian invasion of Ukraine should revive the energies of Nato is hardly surprising. But does this refute or rather confirm Macron's diagnosis in 2019? With hindsight Macron's advocacy for a rapprochement with Putin was wildly over-optimistic, but that optimism did at least have the effect of freeing him to call for Europe to face new strategic challenges. Those challenges might include China; conflicts with Turkey and in North Africa; migration; climate; or America's own democratic crisis. By contrast, the new mobilisation against Russia has elicited a compulsive return to old antagonisms and Cold War ideological tropes. We are reheating images of "the West", both in the élan of Ukraine's national self-assertion and in the more technocratic, cold-eyed excitement over Nato's "*Vorsprung durch Technik*" – "lead by technology" – exemplified in Javelin "top attack" anti-tank missiles or imagined scenarios of Finnish snipers hunting down hapless Russian invaders.

As incongruous as it may seem, in the 1950s and 1960s this cocktail of existential ideas of individual freedom, liberal constitutionalism and advanced military technology was the stock in trade of Natopolitan ideology. Through the 1980s, freedom, initiative and intelligent training combined with the right hardware was touted as the formula that would enable Nato to prevail despite being outnumbered against the invading hordes of the Warsaw Pact.

It is no doubt comforting to have that formula revived in the 21st century, and it ▶

Cover Story

◀ seems to be working on the battlefield in Ukraine. But it should not be confused with an adequate answer to Europe's security problems. What Macron was asking for in 2019 was greater European strategic sovereignty and greater imagination. Given the three great imponderables hanging over Europe – future relations with an even more resentful nuclear-armed Russia, the state of US politics, and the confrontation between the US and China – that call is more pressing than ever.

What Europe's strategy should consist of remains undefined. Macron was asking for fresh thinking not patented answers. As the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has suggested recently, Europe must surely recognise its historical and politico-cultural distance from the patriotic enthusiasm so spectacularly on display in Ukraine. Europe must own its own post-heroic state.

It should also, however, stand at a distance from America's technology-obsessed, militarised strategic culture, which has a track record in recent decades that no one would wish to emulate. If Europe's bitter history of violence helps to inoculate against any great enthusiasm for militarism, that should be regarded as an asset, not a liability.

But Europe should not, on the other hand, fall into the self-deceiving vanity of imagining that its "values-based" politics places it beyond the hard choices and dirty-hands problems of power. The EU as it stands is far from harmless and the development of a real conversation about strategic autonomy will begin when it recognises that reality.

Not only do certain member states continue to have live military capacity with plenty of contemporary experience – most notably France – but we should also remember that the first people to wear EU uniforms are the officers of the Frontex border guard, who among other things are involved in pushing back migrants in the Mediterranean. A debate about strategic autonomy should start there. Is this what strategic autonomy looks like faced with the demographic and economic trends of Africa and west Asia? A primitive fortress Europe? If not, what is the alternative?

Or take the energy transition. How much

are Europeans willing to pay to avoid dependence on Putin's gas? That is a strategic question, and so too is the question of the commercial and ethical trade-offs in importing Chinese solar panels. It is not at all obvious what that has to do with the long-range anxieties about Taiwan, which preoccupy America. Slave labour in Xinjiang and European industrial policy, on the other hand, are immediately relevant.

Though air power has played a subordinated role in Ukraine, it may be relevant to debate how many hundreds of billions of euros should be devoted to developing an independent European Future Combat Air System to rival America's gargantuan F-35 project. But if Europe is to have that discussion, it should not be as a shamefaced return to "proper" strategic debate with a ring-fenced budget allocation, but alongside and in light of other commitments that will also be vital to Europe's security – the Green Deal, for instance, or digital investment programmes.

All of this may involve cooperation with the US and others, inside and outside Nato. Faced with Putin's assault, Nato is an essential first line of defence. But as far as the future is concerned it is at most a partial solution, quite possibly a distraction, and at worst a historic dead end. ●

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MARTIN FLETCHER



Another Voice The Conservative Party lacks any core purpose beyond ensuring its own survival

There was a protest outside Downing Street on 15 May. Entitled “Stop the Rot”, it was staged by Open Britain – which evolved from the pro-EU referendum campaign – and other like-minded organisations to decry Boris Johnson’s “lies, incompetence and corruption”. It was not huge, alas, but it was the first demonstration I can recall that was directed not against a war, a contentious government policy or some unsavoury foreign leader, but against the personal morality – or immorality – of a British prime minister.

David Lammy, Peter Tatchell and the several other speakers didn’t lack for material. The problem was where to start. Johnson’s congenital lying? His lockdown revelry? His disdain for the law, trashing of the ministerial code, endless broken promises, demonisation of opponents, fomenting of division and disgraceful cronyism? His refusal to apologise or be held accountable for his actions? His criminalisation of desperate asylum seekers? His abandonment of thousands of vulnerable Afghans?

Nobody, not even the most ardent Johnsonian or Brexiteer, could deny that Britain has become a nastier, crueller and more fractured country during the nearly three years Johnson has been prime minister. My fear is that it will become yet more so as he struggles to fend off partygate, the cost-of-living crisis and defeat at the next general election.

His game plan was disclosed recently by David Canzini, the election strategist and Lynton Crosby acolyte, whom Johnson recruited to restore his political fortunes in February. “Find the wedge issues in your

department and hammer them,” Canzini is said to have told ministerial aides. Or, put another way, produce ideas that will garner big, enthusiastic headlines in the *Mail*, *Telegraph*, *Sun* and *Express*, while enraging readers of the *Guardian*.

Thus Johnson is threatening unilaterally to junk parts of the Brexit agreement’s Northern Ireland protocol, however emollient his rhetoric. No matter that the protocol is part of the “oven-ready” EU trade deal that he negotiated, hailed and ratified less than three years ago. Never mind that breaching it would sully Britain’s global reputation, dismay Washington and risk a trade war with the EU in the midst of the Ukraine conflict and a deepening economic crisis. Confronting Brussels delights his Leave-voting base.

Thus the Home Secretary, Priti Patel, is lifting restrictions on police stop-and-search powers, according to the *Telegraph*. She is also planning to send asylum seekers to Rwanda, of course, and if “leftie lawyers” try to block her, so much the better. The plan “plays well” in Red Wall seats, says Canzini. Or, as Johnson gleefully informed the *Mail* earlier this month: “There’s going to be a lot of legal opposition from the types of firms that for a long time have been taking taxpayers’ money to mount these sorts of cases, and to thwart the will of the

Britain has become nastier, crueller and more fractured with Boris Johnson as PM

people. We’re ready for that. We will dig in for the fight – we will make it work.”

Thus Jacob Rees-Mogg, the Brexit Minister who somehow manages to surpass even Patel in his toadying to Johnson, has declared war on another big, soft target: the civil service. Again, Johnson jumped in, saying he planned to axe 91,000 civil service jobs, a fifth of the total, to save £3.5bn for tax cuts for struggling families. That is economic tosh, of course, and were it a serious plan he would not have announced it in – you’ve guessed it – the *Daily Mail*.

Thus, too, unnamed cabinet ministers have started blaming yet another easy target, the Bank of England, for failing to control Britain’s surging inflation, according to a timely splash in the *Sunday Telegraph*. Johnson’s government bears no responsibility, of course.

The Queen’s Speech was another cynical exercise in chucking red meat to the mob. There were rabble-rousing measures to tear up EU regulations, block parole for “high-risk” offenders, curtail eco-protests, protect soldiers who served in Northern Ireland from prosecution, counter “wokery”, end “cancel culture”, stop “spurious” human rights cases, and give residents a say on changing street names.

The government’s legislative programme was also conspicuous for what it omitted. There was no plausible strategy for mitigating the intensifying cost-of-living crisis (even making MOT tests biennial failed to make the cut). There was no reform of planning laws and no new target for expanding onshore wind farms – moves that would have upset Conservative backbenchers. There were no measures to fulfil the government’s post-Brexit promise to improve workers’ rights. The government abandoned plans to ban buy-one-get-one-free deals for junk food as part of its anti-obesity drive. Audit reform was simply deemed too boring. Canzini “vetoed proposed government policies based on whether they will go down well with voters”, the *Financial Times* reported.

The Tories are exhausted after 12 years in power. Johnson’s government has lost any semblance of intellectual coherence. Having “got Brexit done”, and without the funds or long-term commitment required to make levelling up anything more than a slogan, it lacks any core purpose beyond ensuring its own survival or, more specifically, the Prime Minister’s.

Henceforth, more than ever before, the government’s imperative will be to stir up its base against imagined enemies. That’s how its actions will be determined. Intensify the populism, stoke division, and to hell with morality and the nation’s interests. ●

Culture wars in motherland

Is the online forum Mumsnet a lifeline for parents or a haven for transphobia? Its co-founder Justine Roberts explains why she embraces “difficult” conversations

By Sophie McBain

In late March an American journalist wondered on Twitter why the “UK elite” contains more “Terfs” (trans-exclusionary radical feminists) than those of the US or Canada. “The answer is Mumsnet, I believe,” the *New York Times* columnist Ross Douhat responded. Not for the first time, the British parenting forum went viral on social media.

On Mumsnet’s “Feminism: Sex and Gender” discussion board, where much of the conversation on trans identity takes place, users were unimpressed by a group of American “beardy bros” exchanging theories about British feminism. “Do they ever even for a second think we have different opinions to them for a good reason, rather than being brainless, hate-filled crones?” asked one user. “So many men sad that women have a place (and space) to talk,” suggested another. A few wrote, however, that it was indeed thanks to Mumsnet that they had started to

take an interest in trans issues: it was on here that they’d first encountered the argument that gender self-identification provisions threaten women-only spaces, such as bathrooms, refuges and prisons.

Over on Mumsnet’s other talk boards – there are dozens of them – business continued as usual. There were questions about Covid and about pregnancy. A woman was scared because she’d started bleeding at 11 weeks; another wanted advice about turning a baby in breech position. Relationship problems were shared. A woman wondered how she would cope with the funeral of her father, who had abused her for years: how could she stomach people expressing condolences over the loss of her “lovely” dad? You don’t have to go, some users advised: fake a cough, consider grief counselling. Then there was the usual, less serious stuff: questions about baby products, fashion and sex.

Mumsnet was founded 22 years ago by two friends who met at an antenatal class: Justine Roberts, a sports journalist, and Carrie Longton, a TV producer. It was intended as a way for parents to pool tips and expertise. The site recalls an earlier internet, the online chatboards that pre-dated social media, and yet it has survived the rise of Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. According to Mumsnet’s data, the site clocks up 8 million unique visitors each month and 1.2 billion page views each year. Nine in ten users are women. Last year, the number of hours Mumsnet users spent on the site rose by 15 per cent; this figure has risen every year since 2000.

In the age of the global internet, Mumsnet remains a curiously national phenomenon: its 2021 census revealed that just 5 per cent of users are based outside the UK. The tone and humour are distinctly British. On the US discussion forum Reddit, another similarly anomalous early-internet survivor, one of the most popular threads is “Am I the Asshole?” The Mumsnet equivalent is the more understated “Am I Being Unreasonable?”, shortened to AIBU. Roberts likes to say that one reason there’s no Dadsnet is that men don’t tend to ask themselves that question.

Roberts, 54, remains at the helm (Longton left in 2018). She has four children, with Ian Katz, the former *Newsnight* editor (now the chief content officer at Channel 4) and started the site when her eldest two, who are twins, were toddlers. In its scrappy early years, the operation was run from her spare bedroom and the website was, she told me, “mostly me talking to me, under a host of different nicknames”. She has overseen its rise to become a considerable force in British politics, as well as its more recent entanglement in the fraught politics of sex and gender.

Her manner, when we spoke over Zoom, was warm but brisk. She wore an office shirt and power spectacles, and kept her background blurred out. Any controversy over how the site hosts and moderates discussions about trans rights hasn’t – publicly at least – shaken Roberts’ self-assurance. In her view, Mumsnet’s mission and values remain clear: from the outset, it has provided a forum for women to share their thoughts anonymously. This is what has made it unique, and also radical, enabling conversations that would not happen elsewhere. “Mumsnet is a place where women can anonymously express their viewpoints and speak the truth, in a way that maybe they can’t on Facebook or elsewhere. Because they might come across as something we’re not supposed to be: a bit stroppy, bolshy and all the rest of it,” Roberts said.

And it’s true that here you’ll find women discussing taboo subjects such as maternal



Open forum: Mumsnet CEO Justine Roberts says the site allows women to “speak the truth in a way that maybe they can’t elsewhere”

regret or sexual abuse. Many of the site’s political campaigns have grown out of its users’ conversations. In 2012, long before the #Me-Too movement, Mumsnet ran a campaign called “We Believe You”, having observed how often users shared experiences of sexual assault they had never reported. A 2020 analysis of threads suggested users had helped at least 6,000 women escape domestic abuse in the previous three years. It is a site many stumble on in early motherhood, searching for ways to get some sleep, or googling odd post-partum symptoms. A friend said she’d recently ended up on the site after googling why she only felt like sex while ovulating (it’s a real phenomenon, Mumsnetters confirmed).

Alongside anonymity, Roberts said, another pillar of Mumsnet was ideological diversity. The first paid staff were professional moderators, whose role it is to sustain a civil, supportive atmosphere while allowing

users to express divergent views. Roberts argues that in a world of online echo chambers, Mumsnet has been designed to allow people to encounter new perspectives. “There’s no algorithm showing you stuff you agree with or like. You can’t follow people. We don’t have ‘likes’, and we do that for a specific reason. We think that the discussion of different and difficult viewpoints actually educates people, and is the only way you’re going to reach a compromise.”

The complication is that Mumsnet’s Sex and Gender board looks a lot like an echo chamber: occasionally a user will challenge the prevailing narrative that trans rights threaten women’s sex-based rights, but they are quickly shut down. The site’s online anonymity is double-edged: it can be liberating – and it can unleash hateful, trolling behaviour. Mumsnet has been labelled a “toxic hotbed of transphobia” (*Vice* magazine) where hate-

speech spreads unchecked. A 2018 article in the US magazine *Outline* suggested that “Mumsnet is to British transphobia... what 4Chan is to American fascism.”

Roberts, unsurprisingly, resists this. “There are many things we do think are transphobic, and we have removed them. We ban people, and we moderate quite aggressively. But do we believe the expression of gender-critical beliefs is transphobic? No – and nor does the law, by the way,” she said. “We don’t think shutting that down would be in the spirit of the site... It’s difficult stuff that requires a resolution, and we won’t get a resolution by both sides staying in their zones, as it were. We have to discuss difficult issues around things like women’s sport, women’s prisons and women’s refuges.”

It is easy to follow Mumsnet’s logic: why should a site committed to facilitating discussion of all aspects of womanhood and ▶

Reporter at Large

◀ motherhood not allow its users to share their views, and concerns, about issues such as gender self-identification? Shouldn't a parent, seeking advice about how to support their trans child, have access to a range of viewpoints? Its critics would counter that Mumsnet does not host a range, and that trans people cannot feel welcome in a community where many view their demands for equality as a threat. The site's goal of hosting a diverse and conciliatory discussion might be admirable – but in this polarised political climate, is such a conversation even possible?

Roberts is often infuriated by the way Mumsnet is portrayed. Before the site became known primarily for its discussions of sex and gender, it was often dismissed as too bitchy, too “irredeemably” middle class (three quarters of users have a degree). Its users are a “coven of poisonous women” (*Daily Mail*) or “the Mean Girls gang” (*the Times*). They invite endless references to hummus-eating and Boden: an *Evening Standard* profile of Roberts once described her, bizarrely, as a “tippy-tippy Bodenfrau”.

“It's partly misogyny, but there's something specific about 'mum'. We all psychologically have some feelings about mothers which are not entirely fair – that they're humourless and boring and dull. And actually Mumsnet is none of those things,” Roberts said. “The *Sunday Times* once ran a huge story on the fact Mumsnet users discuss sex: what did they think, that these were all virgin births?”

But the site's reputation is not always undeserved – and it has long attracted controversy. In 2006 the parenting expert Gina Ford threatened to have the website shut down over “highly defamatory” remarks made by users who objected to her strict sleep-training techniques. Mumsnet settled with Ford for an undisclosed figure, and users have subsequently referred to her, Voldemort-style, as “She Who Must Not be Named”. Roberts says the incident reflected the failure of defamation laws to keep up with the internet, with regulators treating comments as comparable to newspaper articles.

Mumsnet has also attracted the ire of men's rights groups such as Fathers for Justice, which in 2012 held a naked protest outside a London branch of Marks & Spencer's (a Mumsnet advertiser) over the site's alleged “anti-male agenda”. In 2015 Roberts was the victim of a “swatting attack”, when an anonymous

caller falsely told the police that someone was prowling around the house with a gun. In the confusion, Katz was briefly handcuffed.

In 2006 David Cameron, the new Tory leader, became the first politician to answer questions on Mumsnet. “He was very much into the idea of being a modern, new face, who could embrace the digital world and do engagement in a way his predecessors were awkward with. He was pretty good at it, actually,” Roberts recalled. Since then, appearing on Mumsnet has become a campaign stop for politicians hoping to woo “the women's vote”.

But if Mumsnet has helped shaped motherhood into a political force, ministers often misunderstand what that means. “Politicians have had some weird idea that all Mumsnetters are going to vote the same way. You know, like the women's vote is a homogeneous thing, which is just bonkers!” Roberts said. On subjects such as Brexit, users are split. But the website has offered a new way for women to organise around shared concerns such as high childcare costs, poor miscarriage care, or the sexualisation of young girls – three issues that have become official Mumsnet campaigns.

In 2009 Gordon Brown found himself at the centre of a strange media storm for allegedly being unable to name his favourite biscuit during a Mumsnet webchat (he may not have noticed the question). A more recent Q&A with the Labour MP Stella Creasy and the Conservative MP Caroline Noakes was derailed when user after user asked them, “What is a woman?” For some gender-critical feminists, this question is foundational, because when politicians fail to give a straight answer (or rather the answer they want: “adult female human”) it appears to erase women as a political class. For Mumsnet's critics, as well as for many casual observers, the encounter suggested that the site had become dominated by women whose focus on trans identity has eclipsed all other issues. (Roberts intervened during the Creasy-Noakes discussion to ask people not to keep asking the same question: “It's clear how strongly you feel, but you can't set the rules of the discussion,” she wrote.)

Mumsnet was not always like this. If you go right back, a 2013 guest post by the mother of a trans man drew universally positive comments from women who praised her

“I bridle at the idea that it's a discussion about trans rights – it's a discussion on women's rights”

support of her child. But by 2018, when another parent of a trans child invited users to ask her questions, the mood was more interrogatory: “When you say you have a son, what do you mean?” asked one. “When growing up did you encourage your child to stick to gender stereotypes?” asked another.

The public discussion had shifted in those intervening years. Sarah Pedersen, author of *The Politicization of Mumsnet* (2020), told me that users were discussing trans women's participation in women's sports, as well as prisons and bathrooms, long before these subjects were well-covered by mainstream outlets. In 2010 the site created a “Feminism” chat in response to its users' request for a new forum to talk about the politics of sex and gender.

Partly, this focus reflects Mumsnet's core demographic: a community largely defined by biological function and sex, and by giving birth and its aftermath. Academics such as Angela McRobbie have argued that Mumsnet projects a neoliberal, consumerist model of motherhood, more focused on “leaning-in” for personal advancement than on supporting less privileged women. Such a perspective, which gives little consideration to how race, gender and class intersect, lends itself more naturally to a narrow view of womanhood.

But this focus is also a function of how the internet is regulated. “This is a discussion that is framed as one that is very hard to have elsewhere on the internet, and that was particularly closed down on places like Twitter or Reddit,” Pedersen told me. In this context, Mumsnet's hosting of gender-critical discussions became one of its “USPs”, she explained. It's unclear how many users joined Mumsnet because they were banned elsewhere; but during the Q&A with Noakes and Creasy, the TV writer Graham Linehan – permanently banned from Twitter for “hateful conduct” – asked the MPs if Eddie Izzard is a woman. (Creasy gave him short shrift, writing: “Am bemused to hear from you and your view that a discussion around mums in politics needs to be framed by a question about Eddie Izzard.”)

The journalist Freddy McConnell, a trans man who recently gave birth to his second child, says Mumsnet is a forum he will stumble on while “googling things in the night” while looking for recommendations or reassurance – “and I'm grateful to those people for having those conversations”.

But he said he would click on any other site in preference. “I would never go near the Sex and Gender board. The premise of the site as a whole feels old-school – the idea that parenthood is shaped by ‘mums’ does not recognise that families come in all shapes and sizes, that they might be shaped by dads, gay or straight, by people of colour, that they might involve surrogacy.” (McConnell publishes a children's picture book inspired by his own family, *Little*

Seahorse and the Big Question, next month.)

He questions the site's commitment to anonymity and to diverse voices. "The work being done around the online safety bill points to the value of moving away from anonymity. People are not going on to the Sex and Gender board to talk to people who don't agree with them – they are looking for people who *do* agree. If I was at Mumsnet, I would question why my site has become such a welcoming space for bigotry and for misinformation around trans issues." He cites Reddit, Facebook groups and the Slate podcast *Mom and Dad are Fighting* as "open and mixed" online communities where parents can have such conversations without entering a culture war.

Matters came to a head for Mumsnet in 2018 when Emma Healy, a former intern, tweeted that the "vast majority" of discussions about trans issues on the site "descend into scaremongering and hate speech". She wrote that Mumsnet made "no attempt to keep this discussion civil or polite", and that criticism was dismissed by senior staff as a "smear campaign by trans activists". In a 2018 piece for the youth magazine *Huck*, another former intern described the site as a "breeding ground for transphobic voices".

Later that year Mumsnet issued a new moderation policy that affirmed its commitment to "free speech and civil debate" and zero tolerance for posts that are "aggressive or derogatory" towards trans people. It specifies that trans people find it hurtful when people deliberately use the wrong pronouns, and that it will delete posts that use terms such as "trans-identified male (TIM)" or "cis" and "Terf" in an "inflammatory or derogatory way". Some people claim there is a false equivalence between a word such as "cis" and terms such as "TIM" – but Roberts was not swayed. "There are a bunch of women on the site who feel very strongly that they are not cis women, they are women," she said. "I wouldn't delete cis as a rule of thumb. It's when it's being used aggressively, in the way that calling someone a TRA [trans rights activist] is not particularly conducive to discussion."

She had no patience for those who accuse Mumsnet of hosting hate speech. "We disallow hate. But if you think that discussion of biological sex and gender issues is hateful, then I guess you can say we allow it, so we're hateful. But you know, I don't think it is," she said. "Mumsnet is basically women supporting women, 98 per cent of the time," she added later, describing it as "much more civilised than it is below the line at the *Mail*". (This is arguably one of the lowest possible bars.)

Roberts said that while many sites use automated moderation, Mumsnet employs around 30 people who are trained to moder-

ate "based on values". There are often "grey areas", she acknowledged, but the site was doing its best to "allow discussions of different opinions and not allow the minority to squash the majority". When Roberts has reported Twitter abuse herself in the past, she has received an automated response promising a decision within a week, and often never heard back. On average, she said, Mumsnet moderators respond within an hour.

In 2019 Flora pulled out of a commercial partnership, saying the site needed to do more to tackle discriminatory posts. Of this, Roberts said: "Look, it's very easy for a few – and it's only a few – trans activists to target our advertisers on Twitter. We've had a couple of companies who have pulled out of advertisements who have said, we know [you're not transphobic], but we're not interested in social media storms or controversy." Despite this, Mumsnet's revenues (mostly from advertising) were more than £7m last year. Roberts has resisted approaches from potential buyers.

Roberts told me her "personal view" is that "we need to embrace trans women and recognise them", while acknowledging the potential risks for women should predatory men abuse gender self-identification rules. When I referred to Mumsnet's discussions of "trans rights", she objected to this framing. "I bridle at the idea that it's a discussion about trans rights – it's a discussion about women's rights," she said.

One increasingly frequent type of post is those from parents of trans children seeking advice. There has been an attempt to carve out a separate space for this group, by creating an "LGBT children" board, on which users are asked to be supportive. Nonetheless, the responses are often ideologically skewed. In a 2021 post the mother of a trans son said that she'd once described herself as gender-critical but had become uncomfortable at the level of "outright hostility to trans people". She wrote that she was locked in a debate with Mumsnet over its moderation rules,



"As soon as the sun comes out, everyone starts stripping off"

and that simply banning personal attacks did not prevent "an incredibly hostile environment for parents like me". There were "a lot of generalisations" about trans parents, that "we're homophobic, we subscribe to sexist gender roles, we're lying to our kids, we have Munchausen by proxy", she wrote. "And as long as it's not aimed at the individual, it's allowed to stand. What other groups is it OK to do this to?"

But sometimes giving people space to say the unsayable can be quietly transformative. In March a user posted that they couldn't cope with their child being transgender. Some responded that they would not "tolerate" this either, while others urged the poster to reconsider. "Imagine how hard it must have been for your child to feel like this," one observed. Another wrote: "It's up to you whether you 'go along with it' or not. However, you'll have to face the fact that if you don't you might lose your relationship with your child. Is that a hill you want to die on? Because it certainly wouldn't be mine."

It's an exchange that would be hard for any trans person to read, and most people would wish that no parent is capable of denying their child. But if this mother had nowhere else to talk about her feelings, might she be even less likely to come to terms with her son's transition?

How key, then, is Mumsnet to understanding gender-critical feminism in Britain in 2022? Its conversations about trans rights certainly reflect British society's ideological fault-lines – and may have helped deepen them. Roberts argued that it is motherhood itself, rather than Mumsnet, that politicises women – though she thought the website had the power to change people. A 2013 Mumsnet survey found that 58 per cent of users said they were more likely to consider feminist perspectives on everyday issues as a result of the site, and 32 per cent had changed the way they parent.

Roberts' twins are now 23, and her youngest child is 16. She told me she felt that the past 20 years had brought some progress: women had greater political representation; users reported a more even distribution of household chores; and the proportion of Mumsnetters who worked outside the home had risen, from two-thirds to around 80 per cent. At the same time, the site's campaigns on domestic and sexual violence were as urgent as ever.

When I wondered how Mumsnet had changed her, Roberts answered without hesitation, but gave a politician's answer. "I think it's made me more sympathetic to other people, in other situations," she said. "And I think the benefit of this honest and truthful discussion is you can see other perspectives, and learn and grow." ●

The nine lives of Norman Scott

He was a model, socialite and, most famously, Jeremy Thorpe's lover, testifying against the Liberal leader at his 1979 trial. Now, Scott is settling some scores

Norman Scott's house is so old, so much part of the earth, that it has a lot of the outside inside: riding boots and milk-churns in the hallway; the smell of horses and dogs. It is a medieval longhouse on Dartmoor, squat and dark with a roof of black thatch. A flight of ancient steps runs up the outside to a small oak door halfway up the wall. There is a heart-shaped hole in the oak, hewn by Scott himself, while a carving above the entrance misdates the place by 200-odd years. Even the muck pit out front is Grade II-listed. When English Heritage came down to assess it, eight people turned up in smart shoes. "They all wanted a glimpse of Norman Scott," he says. He made six of them wait in the road.

The man whom *Private Eye* alluded to as "Mr 'Sweetie' Roughtrouser" picks his way across the farmyard. Scott was once the lover of Jeremy Thorpe, who became leader of the Liberal Party in 1967, and was at the centre of one of the 20th century's biggest political scandals after a hitman tried to shoot Scott on Exmoor in 1975. Four years later Thorpe, a married man, stood trial for conspiracy to murder – an apparent attempt to silence Scott, who was accused of blackmailing him over their on-off affair. Though Thorpe was acquitted, it was the end of his career.

At 82, Scott is tall – 6ft – wiry and rather powerful. Three white cats, all pregnant by the same gentleman caller, curl around his feet as he walks towards me. There are four tiny Affenpinscher dogs, and two tiny ginger Shetland ponies, too. Scott likes big dogs – like the Great Dane, Rinka, killed by the alleged hitman Andrew Newton before his gun jammed – but he's not allowed to take on a rescue dog at his age. He wants one he can ride out with – he can go 15 miles on the moor without reaching a road – and his Affenpinschers' legs are too short. Not that he can ride at the moment: on a recent trip to London, celebrating the publication of his recent memoir, *An Accidental Icon*, Scott bust an Achilles tendon walking the full length of Kensington High Street and back again.

His stiff legs suggest a lifetime of horses, and the traces, perhaps, of older accidents. At a riding school in Ireland in the 1960s, Scott fractured six vertebrae falling off a nervous mare called Miss Kop and was left unable to raise his arms. In an image burned into the mind from his book, he refused to recover in hospital, instead tying sacks around his legs and moving about the yard on his knees, dragging pails of water. Scott always wanted to work, while Jeremy Thorpe kept him like a rent boy, on a retainer of £5 per week.

The ancient house feels more like a church than a dwelling place. The walls must be 4ft thick: one room is crammed with stained glass and stone bosses. The tang of ▶



Norman Scott photographed at his home on the edge of Dartmoor for the *New Statesman* by Abbie Trayler-Smith

Interview

◀ woodsmoke emanates from a huge fireplace in the living room, fashioned from three granite slabs, rough and heavy as a tomb. A fertility symbol above the fire was carbonated to the 11th century: the orange embers look as if they have been burning forever. There are two deep, velvet sofas and every surface is covered in photos. There is Scott's late friend April Ashley, the first trans model ("She went to a horrible place to get it done – but *Vogue* only used April for their underwear shoots, because she had the most beautiful body and legs"). And a photo of Ben Whishaw, who played Scott in the 2018 BBC One drama *A Very English Scandal*.

Of Whishaw, he says: "He is a lovely friend. We met at the Golden Globes. He called me a 'queero', which was rather sad; hero would have been nice! And gosh, I don't want to hurt people. But no, I can say it. He did his job, and people loved it, but it wasn't me. I've never been that camp, mincing queen.



I wouldn't run after a Great Dane in that silly way. I'd say [he barks], 'Come here!'"

Scott's eyes are sharp. His speech is quick and smart; you wonder how many other grandfathers would punctuate a sentence with an ironic, *Wayne's World* "not". He pours two goblets of sweet white wine. "Whatever you do," he says urgently, "please promise, please make clear, that I was never, ever a stable boy."

He tells me he fell out with John Preston, who wrote the book on which the BBC drama was based. "You may think it's a good book. I don't! He came down every week for months. I gave him lunch, wine, cooked, I told him everything, and he then didn't give me a penny! Well, he did in the end. Oh, and he gave me a pair of trousers! I said, 'Those are very nice trousers you're wearing,' and the next time he came, he brought me some, well cut."

Preston gave you his trousers? "No, they would never have fitted me, the little squirt!"

He thinks the television drama, written by Russell T Davies, was too camp on the whole. "If you've seen any of his things, they are very gay, camp, and that just isn't me. He came here four or five times and he didn't get me. They made it into a black comedy, but it isn't. It's somebody's life."

If Scott's book is anything to go by, there was indeed some poetic licence taken. Would the show have been enjoyed as much had Thorpe, played by Hugh Grant, raped Scott that first night in his mother's house, as *An Accidental Icon* claims? All Thorpe's sexual advances, Scott writes, were motivated by violence: a change would come over him; he gave Scott the nickname "Bunnies" because he looked so frightened before their first encounter. But in Davies' version, the seduction rather recalls Uncle Monty's scene in *Withnail and I*, with Grant in an embroidered gown, and a giant, almost radioactive tub of lube.

It was just one of several changes that shifted his story into farce. On screen, Newton's gun was fired haphazardly; in Scott's book, he describes the barrel against his head. He recalls it now, tracing his right temple with two fingers.

The problem is, the way Scott tells his story – and the way he told it at the Old Bailey in 1979 – is funny, almost compulsively so. He is big on absurdity ("I mean, I read my

“Jeremy Thorpe lived on a knife-edge of danger, and he was inherently mean”

book,” he tells me. “And I was exhausted! I had to have a drink!”), but in person he uses more detached expressions when describing the reality of rape, abuse or madness: it was “horrid”, “horrible”, “wicked”, “well, awful, you know?”. “I always laughed at myself, and at situations, and that's how I've managed,” he explains. “But that's not to say my story is a comedy: it's just me laughing.”

He has been back to the spot on Exmoor where he was nearly executed just once. It is 30 miles away – the ground peaty and soft, where Dartmoor is rough and rocky. Newton had already dug a grave for him, he says.

A clock chimes delicately on the sideboard. A landline rings – one of his friends, you imagine, calling to say they've read his new book. Everyone in the village knows Scott, but “not everyone likes me”. He used to goad the locals in the 1980s with a Lib Dem sticker on one of his gates. But for every person he alienated, there seems to be another who has gone to astounding lengths to show him kindness. The house was given to him in 1985 by a friend, a lawyer, “one of the few people who was on my side”. Scott has to give it back when he dies, but it's his first permanent home (he has slept in lavatories and phone boxes).

You wonder where he got all this stuff, how he amassed and transported things when he moved so much – just as you wonder how he managed always to keep animals: the Jack Russell, Mrs Tish, who accompanied him to parliament; his two whippets, who began modelling around the same time he did (they were featured in *Harper's and Queen* magazine, posing with a young Cary Elwes).

Scott filed such a large book to his publishers that they granted him another 10,000 words. He says he would go riding every day and return having remembered more things: “I have a very retentive memory.” But in 1979, as the trial of Thorpe progressed, he says he started to forget things. “I rather gave in, and thought, ‘Well, I'm never going to win,’ so I let a lot of stuff go” – as if all his life he had been making mental snapshots, compiling evidence, just as he collected Thorpe's letters, and took them here and there in suitcases – to Switzerland, to Ireland, to the police.

He seems to have felt some peace after the trial, despite Thorpe being acquitted of conspiracy to murder. Perhaps it was simply because he'd been heard: he had literally shouted the words “my homosexual relationship with Jeremy Thorpe” in the witness stand. If the motif of his life was people trying to stop him talking – a policeman once dashed his head into a wall – then the scandal, and the press attention, were enough, you suspect, to relieve some of the pressure in his head. Just after the shooting,



Not guilty: Jeremy Thorpe is mobbed by the press outside the Old Bailey, June 1979

he cooked a roast for six reporters, and played football with a group of press from Japan.

But you misrepresent him at your peril: “Seriously, I wasn’t going to have you here today,” he tells me, “because of what happened with the last three articles. I’ve had some pretty horrible journalists. Why do they just read Wikipedia, or old books written when I’ve been too ill to question?”

Some reviews of *Accidental Icon* by near contemporaries bear a whiff of older attitudes to Scott and what he stood for. Lynn Barber wrote, in the *Telegraph*: “This is his first full autobiography. And, frankly, it seems to justify the judge’s verdict of ‘a hysterical, warped personality.’” Scott says, “Oh, I destroyed her on Facebook,” with a flash in his eye. “Shall I find it for you? Should I do this?” He pads out of the room.

I cast my eyes about: there is a family of Staffordshire porcelain spaniels on the windowsill, and a photo of a rather beautiful teenage boy on the sideboard, milking a cow.

He returns with an iPad and scrolls through his Facebook page, then reads what he wrote of Barber: “I would have thought she must be a contemporary of mine, age-wise, seeing her photograph, and therefore

knowing how things were at the time. But perhaps she forgets: I’ve noticed this in others of my age. But Ms Barber, I have been blessed with a very retentive memory, and surprise, surprise, all that you have read is true. Those who scorn please carry on, it matters not a jot. I wonder how you would have fared if you were living my life.”

Iwonder how you would have fared if you were living my life. Sometimes, when you are with someone who has had a long and strange existence, it is hard to believe that this is the same body in front of you, all in one piece. Here, for the record, is a brief rundown of what has happened to Norman Scott. Sexual abuse as a child; time in a remand centre; periods spent in mental hospitals; multiple suicide attempts; month-long sedations by kindly doctors; conversion therapy, of which more later; repeated rape; a monumental amount of casual sex; addiction to prescription medication; homelessness; delusions; police brutality and attempted murder. After the Thorpe trial, Scott lost so much weight that there were rumours he had Aids.

It was his mother – a widow with six children – who sexually abused him, as a child of

four or five. He sometimes gets flashbacks in his upstairs bathroom. “She only did that for a few years,” he interjects, “and it stopped once she started meeting men. I think she just used me as a sex toy.”

It is striking to hear him say “just”, I say.

“Well, I have to, you know?”

In Thorpe, it is tempting to say he found an echo of his mother – the confusion of a charismatic protector turned abuser. But he would not necessarily make this connection himself: Scott does not do therapy speak, and says simply that she made him flinch; she meant nothing to him. The book is full of his struggles with depression, but when I ask about his mental health he draws back a little, saying he has no black dogs whatsoever. He adds: “I suppose I’m still as batty as I was! But no, I am bloody strong. I’m a very honest, strong person, and if people don’t like it, it’s very easy to walk on. But they should walk on knowing that I’m a truthful person.”

He is tormented by the distinction, made by some, between “his truth” and “the truth”. In *An Accidental Icon*, after failed attempts to work in France, Ireland, Switzerland and Wales, he returns to Devon where he “unexpectedly” found himself – quite unexpectedly, he insists – in Thorpe’s constituency (“With no other option, I stayed”). According to Scott, he turned up at Thorpe’s house in Cobbaton one night in 1974 in order to claim his National Insurance card (Thorpe’s wife Marion shouted, “Your nut is here!”). Scott says that Thorpe had promised to supply him with one after he left his with a former employer: it never materialised – a way of keeping him powerless and dependent, Scott thinks. But as far as the authorities were concerned, each attempt to pin down Thorpe was a pretext for blackmail.

“And if you’re going to ask me – I know you’re going to ask me – ‘Why didn’t you just go and get another card?’” I am not. The National Insurance card was Scott’s obsession, his *idée fixe*. He left a lover in Ireland – the “love of [his] life” – in one attempt to retrieve it.

“The most important thing, always, was my card! It sounds crazy, because the young don’t even know what it means nowadays.” Scott says he doesn’t get the full state pension even now, because his stamps weren’t paid by Thorpe.

“There were two things about Jeremy Thorpe: one, he lived on a knife-edge of danger; and the other, he was inherently mean, when he wanted to be.”

Then his tone shifts. “But no, honestly. Look, how lovely is this?” He casts his hand around the room. “And because it’s lovely, I just adore it. And I’m so lucky... People can’t quite understand how it is that if I’ve got very little money, I live in such a place. But that’s nobody’s business but mine.” ▶

Interview

Norman Scott was an illegitimate child who left his secondary modern in Bexleyheath at the age of 15. He spent time in a remand centre, after stealing a bale of hay for his horse. Thorpe gave him access to a new world, and in many ways, he stayed there. He says he slept with Francis Bacon in the 1960s, and breakfasted with a young David Bowie. He had – he gestures to a spot over his shoulder – an armchair given to him by Violet Trefusis, the lover of Vita Sackville-West. He brought it back from her villa in Florence and held on to it – only recently disposing of it in a skip when Michael, his partner of 25 years, said he didn't care for it. Michael is an artist who lives 60 miles away in Crewkerne. "I think he'd have liked a lot of my life in the past to go."

Scott was "wowed" by Thorpe and by parliament, he tells me. He would regularly watch Thorpe speak in the Commons from the Strangers' Gallery. "There are no statesmen today," he says. "At least – God, am I really going to say this – Thorpe was a statesman, you know? I'd see him talking to Rab Butler: he was a statesman. I saw Clement Attlee, looking like a little rat, walking through the Commons. He was a statesman, too."

Today's Westminster is a very different world from the one Scott dipped his toe into. "Not just my toe!" he says. "I mean, you respected it. It's much worse now. I certainly won't vote Conservative, and I always had done. It won't improve until Boris goes. I think he's terrible. You know, I knew them" – he means the Johnsons – "when they lived over on Exmoor. That father was a real martinet. He treated them like dirt. I'm sure they hunted them! I mean, chose which one to chase out over the moors. No, they're horrible. Horrible."

I ask him about the former Liberal Democrat leader David Steel, whom he visited armed with love letters from Thorpe. To this day, Steel denies he had any knowledge of Thorpe's sexuality, or the plot to kill Scott: he was elected leader of the Liberal Party after Thorpe stood down.

"What a prat!" Scott says. "In very large letters, he is a dick. He got where he got through me, in a way, because he knew the real truth about Jeremy, because I told him."

But of Neil Parish, the Conservative MP who stepped down in April after watching porn in the House of Commons, Thorpe says, "I felt rather sorry for him. I'm sure they're all doing it, really."

How does he feel about being described as a "disaster magnet", as he often is? One woman with whom he had a relationship later took her own life; another drank herself to death. "It sounds as if I'm a car crash, and I have the most lovely life – and would have had, had I not met all these..." he breaks off. Then it comes again. "Would any of these people have lived my life and survived?"

"The Me thing" has helped his case, Scott says, referring to the #MeToo movement: respect for the establishment is critically low, while the exploitation of vulnerable people by the powerful dominates the conversation. Attitudes to homosexuality have changed most of all. "Though I don't know how much, really," he says. "It's like racism: at home, I'm sure, people are still as horrid as they were."

Still, the BBC presenter Evan Davis interviewed him at the Charleston Festival on 19 May; Graham Norton had him on his radio show; and Wishaw called him "an icon". It's about as far away as you can get from the moment in 1979 when a neighbour in his former Devon home, leaving a Sunday service in the village church, told a BBC journalist that if she had a gun she would shoot Scott herself.

"I don't honestly think I ever loved Jeremy Thorpe," he says now. "I was in his thrall. It's so awful to say that about someone who's done what he did to me, but when you were with him, he was enormous fun."

Scott still thinks he would not have been gay, had he never met Thorpe. "I'd have been a wonderful father and had lovely children riding ponies. But it didn't happen, and I made quite a good fist of being gay! That's awful. A fist of being gay!"

Yet sex with Thorpe became the sex he wanted? "Yes, but it hurt so."

He struggles to recall the time a friend paid the equivalent of £4,000 for him to undergo gay conversion therapy with a Dr Fahey in Dublin. He was heavily sedated. "I can remember two Irish girls taking me to the loo. I can't remember anything, but was



"Oh no! Look how much more expensive you've become"

I hypnotised? How mad am I, but I was in this state of so wanting to not be gay."

When did he come to terms with it? "Just in the mists of time somewhere," he says wryly, waving his hand.

Scott has two children: a son from a brief marriage in 1969, and a daughter from an encounter with a friend, on the night of his attempted murder. His daughter lives not far away, and he has a relationship with her and her four girls.

I ask him when he felt that he had finally grown into himself and he answers immediately: just after his son was born. But he is not referring to a scene of domestic happiness. His wife Susan had post-natal depression ("I was going to say post-traumatic stress disorder, living with me!") and he paints a picture of himself hovering while she lay in bed, with the baby under one arm, then jumping in a taxi to go off modelling in London, with the baby wrapped in a crocheted blanket.

"That's when I felt so happy. Because I had somebody who needed me – and he needed me totally. That's why animals have always been so marvellous, because you've got to care for them, and they never turn on you: they always love you. That little boy loved me. It's so sad that he doesn't want me now, but that's life. But he did want me then."

Scott began *An Accidental Icon* as an open letter to Benjamin, now in his fifties. His access to his son was limited to 30 minutes, four times a year. Susan cited his gay lovers in the divorce papers, though he says she knew about Thorpe before they married, and others, "along with a window dresser from Harrods".

After her suicide in 1986, Benjamin, aged 18, came to see his father. Scott goes to the dresser and fetches me the photograph of the young man milking the cows. Shortly afterwards, he says, he was duped by some *News of the World* journalists, who published details of his children, and Benjamin cut him off. He now lives in Ibiza under another name.

Scott picks up his iPad again and shows me an internet genealogy site. An entry for Benjamin, a faceless head and shoulders, Scott says, had been revised to read: "Benjamin Scott: died 18 November 1969" – the day he was born. "How could anyone be so cold?" Scott says. "To do that to your father. Well, it's another car crash, isn't it?"

I leave him to have some lunch. He closes the taxi door, and thanks me for coming.

"I just feel that I'm fair game for people, sadly," he says. "But I hope every time – get ready for this – I hope, every time, that I'll read the right piece about me, you know. That someone gets me." ●

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KATIE STALLARD



World View

North Korea has finally been hit by Covid, and it's ill-equipped to fight the outbreak

For more than two years, North Korea insisted that it had not recorded a single case of Covid-19. Despite scepticism among Western experts that this was true, the country appeared to have avoided a large-scale outbreak by sealing its borders in January 2020 and severely limiting international trade. This brought its own dangers, with aid agencies warning in late 2021 that the population was on the brink of famine as poor harvests were compounded by the enforced isolation. Yet North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un praised the country's "shining success" in keeping the "malignant epidemic" at bay.

Then, on 12 May, North Korea's state news agency, KCNA, announced that the first coronavirus case had been detected in the capital Pyongyang. The authorities declared a state of "maximum emergency" and a nationwide lockdown. But it was already too late. The following day KCNA reported the first death from the virus and warned that it was spreading "explosively" across the country, with at least 350,000 people showing symptoms. By 16 May the death toll had reached 50, with more than 1.2 million people showing signs of infection. Kim appeared on television wearing a mask and warned that North Korea was experiencing "great turmoil" as he mobilised the military to join what he called the "epidemic battle".

North Korea is uniquely ill-prepared to withstand a major Covid outbreak. It is one of only two countries, alongside Eritrea, where the population is thought to be completely unvaccinated, and the previous policy of trying to keep the virus out at all costs has led to low levels of natural immunity. To make matters worse, North

Koreans are chronically malnourished. At least 10 million people – more than 40 per cent of the population – were described as "food insecure" by the UN in 2020, which, combined with the country's high rates of tuberculosis, could make them even more vulnerable to the effects of the virus.

The decrepit healthcare system is also poorly equipped to handle surging infections. Many clinics and hospitals lack clean water, reliable electricity and basic medicines, let alone ventilators. According to the Global Health Security Index in 2021, North Korea was ranked 193rd of 195 countries in its ability to respond to a health emergency. So far, it appears to be struggling even to accurately diagnose the virus, with state media outlets referring to "fever" cases across the country, and testing capacity said to lag far behind demand.

Kim has lashed out at government and public health officials for the crisis, denouncing their "irresponsible work attitude" and failures in "organising and executing ability". By contrast, he has been pictured chairing emergency meetings and visiting pharmacies to conduct spot checks as part of the regime's attempt to show him taking charge of the outbreak and stress his selfless dedication to caring for his citizens. Of course, what they do not mention is how much responsibility

Pyongyang refused three million doses of China's Sinovac Biotech vaccine

he bears for this dire state of affairs.

Obviously, the coronavirus pandemic is not Kim's fault. But he is at least partly to blame for the conditions that have left his citizens so vulnerable to this outbreak, most notably his failure even to begin a vaccination programme. The World Health Organisation-led Covax programme allocated as many as eight million doses of Covid vaccines to North Korea in 2021, but the country has so far failed to arrange the delivery of a single batch. Pyongyang also turned down three million doses of China's Sinovac Biotech vaccine last year. There have been reports that the regime is concerned about the possibility of side effects, but the more likely explanation is that Kim prefers to perpetuate the myth that the country does not need foreign help and is handling the pandemic in "our style". He is presumably also wary of the monitoring requirements that would accompany an international vaccine programme, which could include handing over public health information and allowing foreign experts into the country.

None of this should come as a surprise. Kim has consistently placed the survival of his regime above all else, investing scarce resources into the nuclear and missile programmes he insists (and perhaps genuinely believes) are needed to protect North Korea from its foreign enemies.

There is also a grim precedent for the Kim dynasty's response to a catastrophe that threatens the lives of its citizens. The current leader's father, Kim Jong Il, was in power during the terrible famine of the 1990s, which killed at least 660,000 people (though some estimates range up to three million). Despite the immense suffering, the elder Kim put the needs of the military and the regime elite first, letting North Koreans starve rather than ceding political control. When he eventually allowed in international aid agencies, they were only permitted to travel to certain parts of the country, and under strict supervision.

Perhaps the most important lesson to learn from that previous catastrophe is that the true scale of the devastation only started to become evident to the outside world long after it had already taken hold. This time, South Korea and the global Covax programme have already offered help, and it is essential that the international community does everything in its power to encourage Pyongyang to accept. Now, as then, it is safe to assume that the situation is already much worse than the Kim regime is prepared to admit, and that every day counts as the virus ravages North Korea's unvaccinated and extremely vulnerable population. ●

It's been a historic period in the crypto world. On 12 May, Terra – the third-largest stablecoin and one of the biggest blockchains – collapsed, erasing more than \$41bn in value in what was one of the largest single-asset financial events in history. For comparison, Lehman Brothers was worth \$60bn when it collapsed in 2008.

What was Terra? The crucial thing to know is that the Terra blockchain created a form of cryptocurrency that was meant to stay permanently pegged to the US dollar. Stablecoins are important in the world of crypto because they allow investors to move in and out of a stable unit of value without having to exchange their crypto assets for actual fiat currency, such as US dollars. So, if an investor thinks that Bitcoin will decline in value, they can exit their position by buying a stablecoin and return to Bitcoin when the price is right.

The problem with stablecoins is similar to the problem with currency pegs in general – where one currency's exchange rate is tied to the value of another, more stable currency. If investors stop believing the value of the peg can be maintained, they will sell their currency, and the subsequent pressure on others to do the same will undermine any attempt to defend its value. There was little the Terra authorities could do because the coin was backed not by a central bank, or even solid assets, but by market forces.

The system was supposed to work owing to the existence of arbitrageurs – investors who target market inefficiencies, and whose activities tend to have a stabilising effect on prices. Arbitrageurs moving between two of Terra's coins – UST and Luna – would in theory steady their values, like two planets permanently balanced by gravity. But when these investors lost faith in the Terra system it crashed. Bitcoin suffered. Ethereum suffered. Following the Terra crash, cryptocurrencies lost more than \$200bn in less than 24 hours. Many retail investors lost all their savings.

Those who mock crypto or remain indifferent should reconsider their views. Crypto is reaching the point where it may well trigger a global financial crisis when the next Terra-like crash happens.

The damage seems to have been contained. That a financial crisis of this scale took place on the blockchain in full public view was somewhat exhilarating. Everyone could watch it happen in real time and decide accordingly. This was no eurozone crisis where only a few could view the relevant data and Goldman Sachs and others could use their access privileges to gain from the turmoil. Rather than

BRUNO MAÇÃES



These Times The Terra crash won't destroy the crypto market – but it could give it a political edge

sharpening their knives, regulators might want to turn to crypto markets as a source of lessons about transparency.

There is another reason to check your schadenfreude. Crypto may well be the canary in the coal mine. To fight inflation, the US Federal Reserve raised interest rates, which sent crypto markets tumbling, but the Nasdaq Stock Market in New York City is also under pressure. Even Amazon's share price is down more than 30 per cent since the start of the year and Alphabet, Google's parent company, is down around 20 per cent. Easy money is being sucked out of the financial system. There is a lot of easy money in crypto, but where does it stop? With another squeeze from the US Federal Reserve expected soon, the damage and pain may spread far and wide.

Over the past few years crypto has become a kind of Nasdaq on steroids, the riskiest and most speculative of tech stocks where people flock in search of fame and fortune. For some, this development was a radical betrayal of the crypto promise. True believers do not think of crypto as an investment or even as a technology. They think of it as a new way to organise the economy, society and the state.

It is now possible to imagine a great schism in the crypto world. Some will continue to regard it as a market for

exciting new technologies. They may accept greater public regulation if that means access to larger sources of capital. Slowly, crypto might start to change the way finance works. Smart contracts will replace human decision in many economic areas, but the political energy of crypto will be lost or tamed in the process.

A large part of the crypto space will never reconcile itself with this outcome. For the true revolutionaries, Terra's implosion showed crypto is not going far enough. Stablecoins still look to fiat currencies as their model and so suffer from the same flaws the US dollar and its peers have always exhibited. They are tools of power, ways to control wealth and channel it in certain directions. Crypto utopians picture a world where mathematical truth becomes the overriding political authority. If this sounds like Platonism, it's because it is Platonism. But there is a reason Platonism continues to attract us. Behind the notion of an immutable blockchain lies the dream of the unmediated rule of truth over society.

We saw it on 12 May. There was real anger in the crypto world and many complained of foul play from the establishment. Perhaps a hedge fund had launched an attack against Terra. After all, many famous investors have spent the past year or two proclaiming that crypto needs to be destroyed. Warren Buffett called Bitcoin "rat poison". It is unlikely that crypto believers will lose faith. They may lose their savings, but as a result the movement will gain a political edge it has lacked so far. A sense of danger and vulnerability will turn crypto into a leading political movement – Platonism for the people – and one sharing very little with existing creeds. ●

Crypto has become a kind of Nasdaq on steroids – the riskiest of tech stocks

THE CRITICS

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Books

Your own digital hell

The internet is run by intrusive tech companies that we depend on but deeply distrust. Is an alternative possible?

By William Davies

The popular history of the internet can be divided into roughly three phases. There was the decade between the launch of the World Wide Web in 1990 and the dotcom crash of 2000, in which “surfing” the web was a novel and rare activity, which typically required a visit to a library or use of a telephone line. Other than through message boards and email, opportunities to publish information online were still largely confined to those users capable of writing code. Phase two, occurring over the first decade of the new century, saw the birth and consolidation of what would become known as “platforms”, giant companies, massively capitalised with the aid of Alan Greenspan’s ultra-low interest rates, which became embedded in our everyday lives, and devoured data in the process. A “social” element crept in, making it easier for internet users to share content with one another via blogs and social networking sites.

A third phase began in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008: the mobile internet, based around apps and APIs (application programming interfaces), pieces of code that allow applications to communicate with each other, typically without the user being aware. Facebook seized these affordances in a bid to become an indispensable utility, the very gateway to the public sphere. “Disruptors”, such as Uber and Deliveroo, aimed to remake the basic conditions of municipal life. Wireless connectivity also unleashed the “internet of things”, a growing panoply of “smart” devices that could communicate with one another in the home, the workplace or the street. The capacity for surveillance just kept on growing.

Critics arrived late. Partly because the denizens of

the early web retained some countercultural optimism, and partly because of the stranglehold that futurists held over discussions of the digital age, it wasn’t until phase three that popular criticism began in earnest. Jaron Lanier’s *You Are Not a Gadget* (2010) and Evgeny Morozov’s *The Net Delusion* (2011) signalled a change of mood, casting doubt over the fresh wave of tech-utopianism that accompanied the Arab Spring, in which social media and smartphones played a significant role. But it was the unscrupulous use of Facebook as a propaganda machine by the Trump and Vote Leave campaigns in 2016 that really turned the tide, triggering the so-called techlash.

It is now quite ordinary to denounce the internet as a weapon of mass surveillance and disinformation, and a cause of our anxiety, narcissism and political polarisation. Many of us find ourselves in the alienating position of using (even relying on) technology companies we distrust and hate, knowing that they are bad for us and for society, but somehow being unable or unwilling to escape. Besides big energy providers and Big Pharma, there are no other businesses towards whom we feel such animosity and such dependence simultaneously. Twitter is colloquially referred to by many of its users as “the hell-site”.

What makes the internet especially difficult to oppose or escape is that it’s not always clear what “the internet” even is. Of course it involves devices, cables and codes, which perform particular functions and often have identifiable proprietors. But this fails to capture its entanglement in our culture, politics and even inner thoughts. When Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer were writing their despairing and bombastic denunciations of the Californian “culture industry” in the 1940s, the objects were tangible and visible: cinema, billboard advertising and radio were things one could point at and accuse. The same is not true of the internet, which either requires critics to expand the scope of their despair and bombast, or to give up on some wholesale critique altogether in favour of narrower concerns. The emergence of discrete scholarly fields of “software studies” and “platform studies” over the last 15 years is partly an effort to establish some boundaries around the objects of research and critique.

Justin EH Smith and Ben Tarnoff engage with this problem in a different way. Both are comfortable focusing on “the internet” (as opposed to, say, platforms, algorithms or “tech”), and both seek to demystify and encapsulate this entity by placing it back in the context of its history – a great deal of history, in Smith’s case. For Smith, a philosophy professor in Paris, the way to understand the internet today is to recognise it as the latest stage of a scientific and philosophical genealogy that can be traced back to early modernity, in which dreams of computation, connectivity and automated intelligence are writ large. For Tarnoff, the internet we know and hate today is the outcome of more than three decades of “privatisation”, a deliberate political project, prosecuted by and on behalf of capital, to enclose a set of technologies that might otherwise be put in the service of human flourishing.

The Internet Is Not What You Think It Is: A History, a Philosophy, a Warning

Justin EH Smith
Princeton,
208pp, £20

Internet for the People: The Fight for Our Digital Future

Ben Tarnoff
Verso, 272pp,
£14.99



Critics arrived late, partly because the denizens of the early web retained some optimism

Smith's book is his latest salvo in a long-running critique of our digital public sphere, which often feels more like a vigorous vendetta against it, not least because he evidently feels that the culture of the internet represents a vendetta against the kinds of seriousness and scholarly attention that he cherishes. Part of what makes Smith such an engaging online intellectual is the spectacle he generates of the resolutely literary scholar dancing precariously around the seductions of digital bullshit, and not always fully resisting them. As he confesses in *The Internet Is Not What You Think It Is*, "I myself have spent far more time over the past year scrolling through Twitter than I have spent reading literature, but I do not recall consciously making any such attentional commitment. It is in part for this reason that my scrolling strikes me as a moral failure on my part, and at the same time a moral wrong against me on the part of those who contrived to reduce me to this condition for profit." Many of us will be able to relate.

PAOLO BEGHINI

Much of Smith's critique of the internet follows familiar paths, albeit with a philosophical verve and wit that refreshes the standard "techlash" lines. The internet has crippled our powers of attention, turned each form of intellectual and cultural exchange into a game and dragged every aspect of our lives within the scope of surveillance. Its overwhelming significance – a "revolution at least as massive as the agricultural and industrial revolutions that preceded it" – is that we are now exploited for profit as sources of data, simply by living and behaving. These claims are not in themselves very novel, but it is Smith's ability to contextualise them with often bizarre details from the history of science that renders them intriguing.

More curiously, having established what is so extraordinary and unprecedented about the technological paradigm of the past 30 years, he dedicates the bulk of his book to showing its various precedents from the previous 400. Smith jumps

◀ liberally across historical epochs, dwelling at length on the work of the 17th-century mathematician and thinker Gottfried Leibniz (his area of philosophical specialism), while also introducing stories of animal communication systems, obscure texts and exotic machines. “We always knew the internet was possible,” he remarks. “Its appearance in the most recent era is only the latest twist in a much longer history of reflection on the connectedness and unity of all things.”

As Smith meanders through anecdotes about spiders’ webs, cybernetics and pre-modern conceptions of artificial intelligence, one senses far more enthusiasm for these proto-internet dreams than for the actually existing internet of today. This, it turns out, is no Luddite tract, but an excitable tour through a curiosity shop of past scientific imaginings. Quite what it has to do with contemporary platform capitalism, or what it implies about the internet’s ontology (other than it’s not what we think), is not always clear. With Smith, one must be willing to enjoy the ride, and not worry too much if the driver sometimes seems to be going the long way round.

Tarnoff is no less appalled by the internet that we have now, but far more optimistic about the one we might have in the future – or could have had today, had different political choices been made. While he wears it lightly, the critique is plainly Marxist in nature: a set of technologies, invented by human beings, has the capacity for human emancipation but has instead been put in the service of profit. The internet, he argues, is now a necessary condition of progress and political citizenship, and yet it has been co-opted in various ways by capital and used against us. Ideology – including the very language of “platforms” – has obscured this reality from us and made the internet’s current form appear inevitable, even natural. Like any good Marxist, Tarnoff’s task is to deploy historical economic analysis to show us what’s really been going on, which is a form of digital enclosure movement, authorised by the US government.

His story begins in 1990s United States, “when the internet became a business”. Until the early Nineties, the internet had been routed via various non-profit regional networks, operated by the National Science Foundation, a US government agency. This was a similar model of publicly owned infrastructure to the US Postal Service. But as Bill Clinton and Al Gore set to work on building the “knowledge economy” around an “information superhighway”, and as the most powerful telecom companies hovered, this vision of a digital public good was abandoned. Neoliberal ideology and the quest for profit meant that the basic infrastructure of the internet was privatised, and alternative visions of local, democratically accountable networks came under threat.

From this moment, the forces of privatisation steadily moved up the “stack”, starting with the basic physical pipes and routers through which information runs, then dictating the types of software through which information is accessed and shared, before producing the giant platforms and apps which are now

woven into our everyday social being. If the Clinton era sought to privatise the basic means of connectivity, the second phase of the internet was about extracting value from users once they were already connected.

Tarnoff resents the term “platform”, which he believes is “designed to mystify rather than clarify”. Instead, Amazon, eBay, Facebook, Google and others are better understood as “online malls”, commercial spaces we are encouraged to visit and hang out in, where our attention and experiences can be carefully controlled and exploited. We may not always be spending money in these malls, but they are shaped by the commercial imperative to identify revenue streams, whether through selling advertising or consumer goods. For Tarnoff, the malaises often associated with the internet – mass surveillance, gruelling “gig” work, right-wing extremism – are all ultimately effects of this privatised model, in which the owners and operators of the digital world are solely interested in extracting attention, data and money from us.

What might the alternative internet look like? Tarnoff is scathing about attempts to reform the likes of Facebook and Amazon into socially responsible companies, and expresses little hope in competition law. Better, he argues, to just abolish the online malls, rather as Angela Davis has argued for the abolition of the police and prisons – a demand that has over the past 20 years opened up space for alternative visions of politics and social security on the American left. Along with the example of small-scale community networks, he takes inspiration from the example of the 1980s Greater London Council, which – under the leadership of Ken Livingstone – established five “Technology Networks” around London, to “democratise the design and development of technology”. Why not have “millions of social media communities”, Tarnoff asks, “each with their own rules and customs and cultures”?

This faith in bottom-up experimentation is a welcome respite from the fatalism that often accompanies discussions of Big Tech, but it leaves open the question of what (if any) “big” or universal services would be available in Tarnoff’s socialist vision. There are reasons why the internet generates monopolistic giants that are not solely the fault of capital, namely the phenomenon of “network effects”, meaning that users flock to where the other users are.

A centralised internet is often more useful than a decentralised one, as the example of eBay demonstrates (it’s where other buyers and sellers are). But so does the example of (non-capitalist) Wikipedia, a “platform” that Tarnoff virtually ignores, but which Marxists such as the late Erik Olin Wright have viewed as exemplary of how socialism can work. Smith, for example, happily acknowledges that Wikipedia occupies an exceptional position in escaping the pathologies and propaganda that have plagued so many other platforms. Perhaps it’s too obvious a case, but it is curious that Tarnoff doesn’t show more curiosity as to why Wikipedia has bucked so many of the trends he laments.

When it comes to the collection and ownership of data, Tarnoff rightly demands a more democratic, accountable and transparent model, based around

What’s really been going on is a form of digital enclosure, authorised by the US government

public and municipal agencies. “Platform cooperatives” (imagined as an alternative to Uber or Deliveroo) provide part of the answer. But if the critique is only ever of the “privatised” internet, and not of surveillance and behavioural control as such, the uneasy question remains of what such technologies might be put in the service of. The original publicly owned internet was, as Tarnoff notes, developed on behalf of the US military. China’s infamous Social Credit System is evidence of how contemporary platform technologies work just as well in the service of an authoritarian state as in the service of private profit. No doubt the democratically controlled internet, which Tarnoff advocates, would be put in the service of whatever its voters or members wanted. Setting some a priori limits on what these might be strikes me as a worthwhile project, but that brings us back to the mundane task of liberal regulation.

Nobody could read *Internet for the People* and accuse it of lacking answers or recommendations. The political origins of our digital woes are named and blamed, and the alternatives are articulated. This is a polemic in the great tradition of experimental, democratic socialism, in which non-capitalist ventures are assumed to exist all around us, and simply need discovering and learning from. Tarnoff is to be commended for politicising issues that are too often reduced to matters of personal behaviour, as if the answer to Facebook and Uber is a “digital detox” in a rural spa.

But the increasingly totalitarian reach of the internet (now encompassing “smart” homes, APIs, screens, algorithms, endless ratings and feedback mechanisms, cloud technologies) also invites a degree of pessimism that neither Tarnoff nor Smith is quite willing to engage in. Smith is too fascinated by modernity (especially its early intellectual protagonists) to condemn entirely the technological web in which he finds himself trapped – or perhaps too conscious of the risks and clichés of counter-Enlightenment romanticism. Tarnoff’s Marxism provides him with a focus and an explanation, but it also retains a deep Marxian optimism regarding technology itself.

A more cautious assessment might be that neoliberalism was necessary but not sufficient for the genesis of today’s internet. The additional ingredients (as critics such as Shoshana Zuboff and Richard Seymour have in different ways observed) lie in the darker recesses of our psyches, and the 20th-century fantasy of complete behavioural control, which was never exclusively profit-driven. As mid-20th-century cultural critics such as Erich Fromm and Vance Packard argued, we have walked into this society of control out of our own volition, and must on some level desire it. The question then remains of what resistance even looks like, beyond throwing one’s hands up in horror or locking one’s phone in a safe. ●

William Davies’s books include “Nervous States: How Feeling Took Over the World” (Vintage)

The NS Poem

Bede’s Sparrow

Isobel Dixon

A sparrow flits through the hall,
its hubbub of feasting men,
the meaty, fuggy, smoke of them.

A spell of warmth and hearth,
post to post, high perch,
a crossbeam bird’s-eye view –

head cocked to reckon it,
the mead-hall din below.
Jocular glut, jostling stories,

battle-talk and rut; crumbs
among the rushes, toppled cup,
the hanging cauldron’s heat.

Mark the sparrow’s pause, now
the slanting rain it tumbled from
has ceased to beat. This quieting –

breath upon a pipe, the click
of deer-horn dice. Sky-sough,
a sigh of flakes upon the thatch.

Hound-yawn, haunch-twitch
in the fire’s glow. A fan of feathers,
wing-flex, flight: bird-blink,

up and out into the night,
the mystery and purity of snow.

Isobel Dixon’s collections include “Bearings” (Nine Arches Press). “A Whistling of Birds” is due to be published in 2023



Written in stone: the northern tip of Prins Karls Forland, in the Arctic archipelago of Svalbard

The rocks that make and break us

A genre-straddling book shows what stones and minerals can tell us about the human condition

By Kathleen Jamie

An “unconformity” is a geologist’s term. It denotes “a discontinuity in the deposition of sediment”, “a material sign of a break in time”. But how can time break? Surely time goes on like an arrow, through one damn thing after the next.

Well, maybe it doesn’t. This extraordinary book will win devotees among that minority who don’t see “stories” everywhere, who resent the hegemony of narrative, and who perhaps experience time more like a spiral or, as Roberto Bolaño puts it in the epigraph, “not a river but an earthquake happening nearby”.

Each of the six main chapters circles round a type of rock or mineral, except for one, “Blubberstone”, which is an invented composite. The book is an invented composite itself – part travelogue, part memoir, part history, part psychogeography. The author travels from New York to Scotland, Svalbard to Greenland, but the first person features rarely; it glints, like the mica he considers in the epilogue.

Hugh Raffles, a British anthropologist, has lived in

Manhattan since the 1990s. There, bedrock of any kind is rare to see, being mostly buried under silt, but marble occurs. What in a more conventional book would serve as an introductory paragraph occurs on page 38, when we're encouraged to take the subway to the northern tip of the island and Inwood Hill Park, "the closest you'll come in Manhattan to the landscape and soundscape before the city took root". Bedrock is visible there, a marble "soft, silent and subject to sugaring". Being of little use for building, it only features in the city as a grand arch, now crammed in behind apartments and the Brito Body Shop on Broadway at 217 Street, and some old, illegible gravestones.

In the park are caves once used by the Native American people now known as the Lenape, until their world broke. The beginning of the end could be dated to 1609, when Captain Henry Hudson moored his ship at the entrance to the Spuyten Duyvil creek, having retreated from the northern ice. The sailors saw Manhattan as a pleasant land, worthy of settling, little realising it had been created thus by its occupants. And so it began.

There follows one of Raffles' extraordinary sentences; many occur in the book. This one concerns the Lenape and the Munsee and the Delaware peoples, the first to speak an Algonquian language. The sentence proceeds for around 700 words, contains 25 semicolons plus parentheses and several of his beloved lists. It is a cascade of clauses hymning the culture of the peoples who occupied a territory from the Catskills to Connecticut. When it eventually ends, it leaves you not breathless but wonderstruck.

Then came the horrors of settler-colonialism, the destruction and forced removal of these original Manhattanites. However, it's not over: the "First United Lenape Nations Pow Wow and Standing Ground Symposium" was held in 2018. Discussion was dominated by tradition, renewal, resistance, which, like bedrock, breaks cover "even in everyday places easily reached by subway, bus and foot".

The same Henry Hudson features in "Blubberstone", which is Raffles' name for the "residue of thousands of whales boiled in cauldrons, congealed with sand, gravel and coal". We are now on the Arctic archipelago of Svalbard, where lumps of it lie strewn along a particular beach. Like Trinitite, formed at the New Mexico atomic test site in 1945, and plastiglomerates, first recorded in Hawaii in 2013, blubberstone is "a geological artefact of world history".

It was Hudson who named this archipelago "Whales Bay" and so signalled an extraction industry, with numbers that still beggar belief. Everyone piled north: Basques, Dutch, French, English, exterminating up to 200,000 bowhead whales in 240 years, as well as seals and walrus – a thousand walrus could be slaughtered in seven hours. The result was inevitable. In 1911 a British ship cruised for an entire season without sighting a single bowhead; the Svalbard population was extinct. The exploiters turned to coal, until the industry collapsed, exhausted. The remnants of mining settlements litter the islands. The Soviet mining town of Pyramiden had a sports hall, theatre, library,

music rooms – all now inhabited by kittiwakes. "Coal was an animal here, just as the whales and walrus were simply matter."

The longest and most complex chapter is "Iron", which takes us to Greenland, and the present-day township of Savissivik. For 1,000 years Arctic peoples had only one source of metal: iron from fragments of a meteorite that had slammed into the Earth many millennia ago. This meteoritic iron, which native people could chip off and fashion into tools, serves as the lodestone for the chapter as it ranges through the fate of Greenlandic peoples and the other, metaphorical meteorites that have since crashed into their cultures: contact with European sailors, abduction, smallpox, theft, enforced clearances, rampant US militarism, climate change. Even the meteorites themselves have been stolen from their landscapes; the arch self-promoter/adventurer Robert Peary carted several huge pieces back to New York.

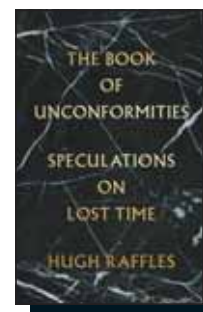
So we begin to understand what an unconformity might mean: something closer to a catastrophe. Time breaks, futures are lost, or stolen. There are fissures in understanding and knowledge. Life-ways that have developed over millennia for peoples or animals can be snapped.

Raffles describes a sense of sudden, grievous breakage entering his own life. He began collecting rocks, like anchors for the unmoored, after the sudden deaths of two of his sisters. The chapter titled "Gneiss" takes us to the Scottish island of Lewis, where his sister Franki lived near the Neolithic stone circle at Calanais, before her death in childbirth. His sister Sally took her own life four months later. What are these disasters against the great scheme of time, and geology? "Even minor horrors transform all that follows; the world's great horrors are composed of personal loss and unresolved grief."

The epilogue "Muscovite" is appropriately slender, and reminiscent of WG Sebald in its purling, page-long sentences, the unspooling ribbons of facts and ricochets in time. Here again are the world's great and minor horrors: Raffles' great aunt Emma was transported from Berlin to the camp at Theresienstadt, (which Sebald explored in *Austerlitz*) and obliged to work with a razor, splitting muscovite (mica) into thin sheets. Ten hours a day, perched on a backless stool, she and other women prepared the mica, essential in aeroplanes and other wartime applications. Emma survived and kept a few samples of sheet mica for the rest of her life; they are now preserved in the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. Raffles travelled to Theresienstadt and immersed himself there but eventually felt he'd "lost his appetite to add to the literature of terror", as it reawakens all around us.

This is an astonishing book. High octane but precise (Raffles understands that poetry is not "poetic" but exact), both copious and profound, it reveals that "even the most solid, ancient, and elemental materials are as lively, capricious, wilful and indifferent as time itself". ●

Kathleen Jamie is Scotland's national poet, or Makar



The Book of Unconformities: Speculations on Lost Time

Hugh Raffles
Verse Chorus
Press, 392pp,
£19.99

Raffles began collecting rocks, like anchors for the unmoored, after the deaths of two of his sisters



The Mahatma's Western disciples

It was not only Indians who fought for an end to British rule

By Soumya Bhattacharya

In this illuminating and engaging study, Ramachandra Guha, one of India's best known historians and public intellectuals, turns his attention to seven Westerners who fought to free India from the rule of the British Raj.

All were white, five were British, and two American. Four of them were men, and three women. The first of them arrived in India in 1893, and the last died in India in 1984. All were connected to Mahatma Gandhi and together, their time in the country spanned nearly a century of modern Indian history.

Guha's wide-ranging research and lucid narration brings to life these men and women, who came to India, lived like Indians, and gave their all – through pioneering work in fields as diverse as journalism and environmentalism – for the liberation of the country.

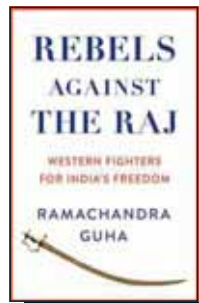
Annie Besant, a theosophist born in London to Irish parents, arrived in India towards the end of the 19th century. She threw herself into the freedom movement, and was elected the first woman president of the Indian National Congress. Of the figures profiled in the book, she is the only one who occasionally had a publicly adversarial relationship with Gandhi.

By contrast, Madeleine Slade, a concert pianist and the daughter of a British naval officer, was treated by

East meets West: Mahatma Gandhi and Mira Behn in Switzerland, 1931

Rebels Against the Raj

Ramachandra Guha
William Collins,
496pp, £25



Gandhi as his daughter after she met him at his ashram. Calling herself Mira Behn, she spent her life as his disciple, spreading his teaching. She was also a key contributor to Richard Attenborough's 1982 film *Gandhi*.

Meanwhile, Catherine Mary Heilemann, British born, took the name Sarala Behn, and worked tirelessly for the environment and women's rights in the villages in the Himalayas. BG Horniman came from London and was a campaigning newspaper editor in Bombay, siding with the independence struggle at great personal cost. Philip Spratt, a Cambridge-educated communist, was so enraptured by the Mahatma and his teachings that he ended up a Gandhian, and battled for the rights of workers.

The two Americans profiled in the book both arrived as Christian missionaries. Samuel Stokes, a Quaker from Philadelphia, converted to Hinduism, called himself Satyanand, and helped abolish the practice of forced labour in the foothills of the Himalayas. Meanwhile, Dick Keithahn worked for the uplift of the poor in south India's villages and founded a rural university and a charitable hospital.

All the protagonists in the book were either jailed or deported by the Raj for their part in India's freedom struggle. "Imprisonment or banishment," Guha writes, "signified the depth of their commitment to the cause."

The result of that commitment was that all seven rebels were active participants in the shaping and reshaping of modern India. "Their work spoke directly to what was happening on the ground. For these men and women were anti-colonial crusaders as well as nation-builders."

Rebels Against the Raj, however, makes a larger, more important and incisive point. In the prologue, Guha describes the lives and work of these rebels as a morality tale for the world we now inhabit – a world incandescent with xenophobia and jingoism, and full of contempt for thoughts and ideas that a culture can imbibe from outside its borders. He names and shames Narendra Modi and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh Hindu nationalists in India, Donald Trump and the white supremacists in the US, Boris Johnson and the Brexiteers in the UK and Xi Jinping and his Confucian Communist Party in China.

In the epilogue, Guha turns his attention forensically on his own country. He makes a telling case for how much he believes nativism and xenophobia will cost India if it travels further in this direction. "Proclaim with pride that you are a Hindu – such is the leitmotif that has accompanied the rise to power of the political movement known as Hindutva," he says. "Hindus, it is now said, are destined to be the world's Vishva Guru, teachers to the rest of humanity. They have apparently nothing to learn from or gain from the world in return... So many years after the last of these rebels passed on, what they did and what they said still speaks to Indians today. If only we could listen." ●

Soumya Bhattacharya is a journalist and author. His novel, "Thirteen Kinds of Love", is published by HarperCollins India

Reviewed in short

On Agoraphobia by Graham Caveney

Picador, 208pp, £12.99

"If we're talking agoraphobia, we're talking books," the author Graham Caveney writes in this short yet expansive work exploring his all-consuming fear of open spaces. Confined at home, he escaped through reading. The first agoraphobic he encountered through a book, he realised years later, was Harper Lee's reclusive Boo Radley – but the literary world is replete with people like him. Caveney draws on literature, history and philosophy to better understand his condition, and writes in fragmentary prose. His own story fits into the margins. He writes of the alcoholism that almost killed him, and of his support group, where fellow agoraphobics trade coping strategies and one-liners: "Agoraphobia: don't leave home without it."

Caveney traces the roots of his phobia to the sexual abuse he experienced at the hands of a Catholic priest when he was a child. He later sued the Marist order, and his agoraphobia became evidence. "The process taught me how slippery our stories can be, capricious and slanted..." he writes. "Lives are messy, contingent, mysterious. Our stories about them should never be too neat, but disrupt and surprise, make us as different to ourselves as to others." This striking book embraces the slipperiness, the mess and the mystery.

By Sophie McBain

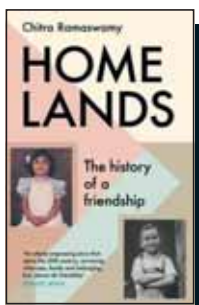
Bold Ventures by Charlotte Van den Broeck, translated by David McKay

Vintage, 304pp, £16.99

Are architects more fatally susceptible than other artists? This is the conclusion of Charlotte Van den Broeck, a Belgian poet who is fascinated by the mirroring of architectural flaws and the psychological faults in their creators. Her book looks at 13 buildings that were implicated in the suicides of their architects. The case studies include Eduard van der Nüll, an architect of the Vienna State Opera who killed himself because of the critical opprobrium heaped on the building; the great baroque architect Francesco Borromini, who took his own life while grappling with one church design; and the architects of a Washington DC cinema who killed themselves in the years following a fatal roof collapse.

Except, however, that not all of her deaths had anything to do with buildings. Indeed, Van den Broeck's book is less about her case studies than herself and the nature of creativity, as if she fears that her own mental scaffolding won't be strong enough to support her chosen life as a writer. Less of her personal stucco and more bricks and mortar would have helped.

By Michael Prodder



España: A Brief History of Spain by Giles Tremlett

Head of Zeus, 320pp, £25

"Spain is different" went the slogan cooked up during the Franco years to lure western European tourists to the costas. It captured a deeper truth: the country is indeed intriguingly and often intoxicatingly distinctive from the rest of Europe. But why? Giles Tremlett, a veteran Madrid correspondent, provides an excellent whistle-stop tour through the history that explains it all. From the geological foundations of the Iberian Peninsula to the eurozone crisis and beyond, his new book places geography at the core of its argument. In many senses Spain sits at the crossroads of history: a meeting point between the European, Atlantic, Levantine and African worlds. Yet it is also together with Portugal a peninsula at Europe's far south-western edge. It is at once pivotal and peripheral.

In Tremlett's brisk and readable telling, the country's past plays out as a contest between these two realities and the contradictory forces they produce: those of purist isolation and heterodox openness. Spain emerges from his account as a stone fortress somehow still capable of absorbing new arrivals (from the Romans, Visigoths and Moors to practically every 20th-century "-ism" going), a synthesis of insularity and integration.

By Jeremy Cliffe

Homelands: The History of a Friendship by Chitra Ramaswamy

Canongate, 368pp, £16.99

Fleeing Nazi Germany, Henry Wuga arrived in Britain in the late 1930s on the Kindertransport. He got married in Glasgow and worked as a baker before establishing his own kosher company. The journalist Chitra Ramaswamy, who was born in the 1970s to Indian migrant parents, was sent to interview Wuga as part of a piece on the experience of refugees living in Scotland. Despite their different backgrounds, they developed a close friendship against the backdrop of Brexit, increasing anti-Semitism and the rise of the far right.

Ramaswamy chronicles Wuga's story from Nuremberg to Scotland (including stays at numerous British internment camps), threading into it details from her own life. As she goes she asks: what constitutes a home? Ultimately, she discovers there is no real answer beyond the fact that "disorientation is the true birthplace of millions of us". Drawing inspiration from James Baldwin, and WG Sebald's *Austerlitz*, *Homelands* is the latest in the proliferating genre of the intergenerational memoir and an eloquent testament to the tribulations of national belonging.

By Gavin Jacobson

independent thinking from polity

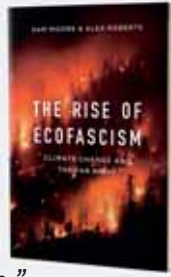
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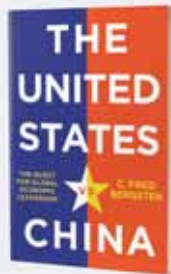
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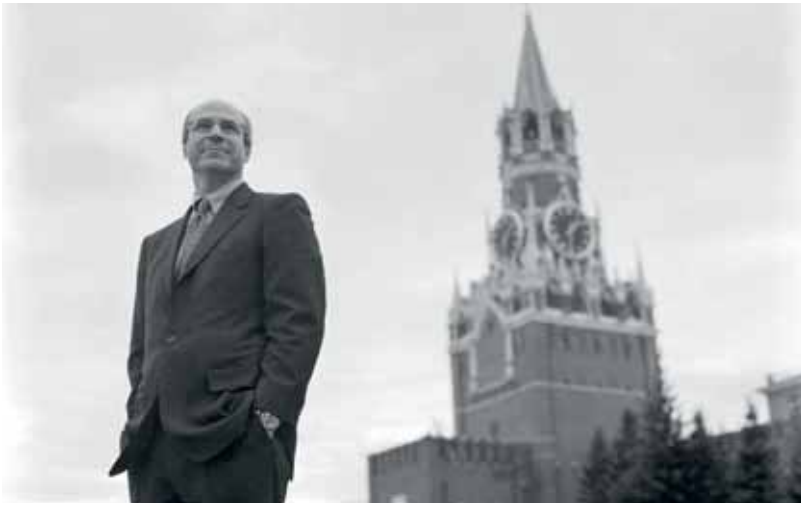


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Gangsters in the Kremlin

How one man paid with
his life for exposing Putin's
financial corruption

By Katie Stallard

When a young Moscow lawyer uncovered the theft of £185m from the Russian treasury in 2008, he was confident that justice would be done. Sergei Magnitsky had pieced together how corrupt interior ministry officials had faked a claim for a huge tax refund – the largest in Russia's history – using documents and materials they had stolen from Hermitage Capital, the investment fund where he worked. But instead of the perpetrators being arrested, the very same officials were placed in charge of the investigation and began summoning his colleagues for questioning.

"Two of our lawyers quickly fled Russia for London under cover of night," writes Hermitage founder and CEO Bill Browder in his new book *Freezing Order*. But Magnitsky decided to stay. "We begged him to leave as well, but he wouldn't. He believed Russia was changing for the better and that the rule of law would ultimately protect him."

Magnitsky was arrested and interrogated. He was held in the notorious Butyrka pre-trial detention centre for almost a year, where he described raw sewage flooding the floor of his cell and said he was repeatedly pressured to withdraw his allegations. But he refused. After 358 days in detention, having lost 40 pounds in

Crime scene:
Bill Browder in
Red Square, 2004

Freezing Order
Bill Browder
Simon & Schuster,
336pp, £20



weight and become seriously ill, Magnitsky died in custody in November 2009. He was 37 years old. I met his mother when I was a reporter based in Moscow. She showed me photos of the deep cuts to her son's wrists and the bruises that they had found on his body that were consistent with him being severely beaten during his final hours while wearing handcuffs. Four years after his death, Magnitsky was tried and posthumously convicted of the tax fraud he had uncovered, along with Browder, who was convicted in absentia.

Freezing Order is the second of two books Browder has written about Magnitsky's death and his more than decade-long campaign since to hold those responsible to account. His bestselling first book *Red Notice* ended with the US Congress passing the Magnitsky Act in 2012, which gives authorities the power to freeze assets and impose travel bans on individuals accused of serious human rights violations, including the officials allegedly responsible for Magnitsky's death.

But the sequel also details the legal challenges and threats Browder and his team have faced as the Russian government and its associates have pushed back against the legislation and tried to intimidate them. Browder recounts how he was arrested in Madrid on a Russian Interpol warrant (later dismissed by the Spanish authorities) and was warned in London about a plot to kidnap him and take him to Moscow.

In 2018, Browder watched in horror as Vladimir Putin suggested to Donald Trump at a press conference in Helsinki that he would be prepared to trade a number of his intelligence operatives in return for Browder, which Trump declared an "incredible offer" (the proposal was later dropped). Other figures depicted in the book have met much more serious fates. The Russian opposition politician Boris Nemtsov, who supported Browder's campaign to pass the Magnitsky Act, was shot dead near the Kremlin in 2015. His close friend Vladimir Kara-Murza has survived being poisoned twice and at the time of writing is imprisoned in Moscow.

Browder has his critics, who note his penchant for putting himself at the heart of the story, but he has campaigned relentlessly, at great personal risk, to ensure that Magnitsky's name is not forgotten and to expose the corruption and violence that have always been at the core of Putin's regime. He was calling for action to target illicit Russian money and assets in the West long before Russia invaded Ukraine. Fast paced and engaging, Browder's book reads like a spy novel, but it also makes a powerful and remarkably prescient case for the need to use all the legal and financial tools available to separate Putin's financiers from their foreign-held bank accounts and luxury yachts.

"I can't bring Sergei back," writes Browder. "But his sacrifice has not been meaningless. It has saved, and will continue to save, many, many lives." In the 13 years since his agonising death, 34 countries including the UK, US, Australia, and Canada have adopted their own version of the Magnitsky Act, which has been used to sanction hundreds of individuals from multiple countries for human rights violations. It is not justice, but it is, perhaps, a fitting legacy for a man who believed above all in the rule of law. ●

Music

Pop in a time of war

Ukraine's triumph at the Eurovision Song Contest shows how music can be a powerful political force

By Adrian Bradley

Eurovision, the world's biggest live music event, returned on 10 May. And the circus that comes with it descended on Turin, which gained the right to host the contest after the rock band representing Italy, Måneskin, won last year.

The 2022 contest had the feel of a release valve being opened after a difficult two years. Eurovision was one of the first major events to be cancelled due to the pandemic in 2020, and in 2021 a limited show took place without the usual festival that surrounds it. This is the sixth time I have attended Eurovision and it's hard to describe what a joy it is, year after year. In the lead-up to the grand final on 14 May, fans from all over Europe (I've decided the collective noun for them is a "euphoria") came together to dance with abandon in a sweaty basement bar to the entry that placed 16th in 2013. (It's "Solayoh" by Belarus's Alyona Lanskaya, if you want to add it to your playlist.)

It seems apt that this year's contest was held in Italy, a country that was hit early and hard by Covid. Walking around the Eurovision Village in the Parco del Valentino, I saw Turin residents thrilled to be able to party again. For Italians the contest represented a chance to launch what they hope will be a bumper summer for tourism, as restrictions are finally lifted.

There's another dark cloud over Europe, however: Russia's invasion of Ukraine. After initially trying to maintain its long-standing policy of staying out of politics, the European Broadcasting Union, which runs the contest, responded to pressure from its members to ban Russia from taking part. Stefano Lo Russo, the mayor of Turin, told me that the organisers couldn't

Maria, a Ukrainian refugee, had tears in her eyes when she recalled the moment her country won



ignore the conflict: "It's an opportunity to promote music and the message of unity on the European level, especially in a moment that is so difficult for our continent with the war in Ukraine."

That message resonated: having long been the bookmaker's favourite, Ukraine won the contest. The country's entry – "Stefania" by the folk-rap group Kalush Orchestra, an ode to mothers with a message that has connected with many Ukrainians during the invasion – was just the right song at just the right time. The European public gave it 439 points out of a maximum of 480, suggesting that voting for Ukraine was a way for many across Europe to show their solidarity.

This was the atmosphere throughout, from the very opening of the contest ("Give Peace a Chance" was played, the crowd chanting along) to the messages of support delivered by other artists on stage. The song was Ukraine's third win: its 2016 entry "1944", about the Soviet deportation of Crimean Tatars, came in the wake of the Russian annexation of Crimea. "Stefania"



has travelled around the world on the video-sharing app TikTok, soundtracking more than 150,000 videos on the platform.

TikTok has played a big part in the transformation of the contest. Someone who knows that better than many is the UK's entry, Sam Ryder, who came second, turning around our historically dismal fortunes with his glam-rock song "Space Man". Ryder started his pop music career by posting covers on TikTok, where he has amassed 12 million followers. He brought some relief to British fans who had been desperately waiting for a good performance from their country for most of the 21st century. "Eurovision is a celebration of everything that it stands for: peace, love, inclusivity, expression, songwriting, music, joy," Ryder said when we met at his hotel in Turin a few days before the grand final. As I queued for drinks at the Euroclub, I was constantly pinching myself as fans from the Netherlands and

GIORGIO PEROTTINO/GETTY IMAGES

**Europe united:
Kalush Orchestra
of Ukraine are
named the
winners of the
66th Eurovision
Song Contest,
14 May, Turin**

France told me, unprompted, how much they love the song. But the final scores weren't overly important to Ryder. Instead, he hoped that the contest will allow the UK to connect with a global audience.

Eurovision is a song contest, but for some watching, it is more than that, too. Ukraine's win is a small gesture viewed alongside the country's struggle for survival, but it meant something to Ukrainians in the crowd.

I met Maria and her son – two Ukrainian refugees currently living in France – at the train station the next day. They had been in Turin for the contest and were now heading back to Paris. Maria asked me for a photo when she spotted I was wearing a T-shirt from the 2017 contest in Kyiv. She had tears in her eyes as she remembered the moment Ukraine won and said seeing Europe express its support for the country was "amazing". But her thoughts were mostly on when she'd be able to take her son home to Kyiv – and maybe when she does, the Eurovision circus will be there to welcome her. ●

Prime Amazon

The 17th-century painter Frans Post was the first artist to record the New World

By Michael Prodger

The 16th and early 17th centuries saw assorted European states signify their claims on tranches of North America with the addition of a simple prefix: along the eastern seaboard cropped up New Sweden, New England, New France and New Netherland. South America, meanwhile, was left largely to Spain and Portugal. In the early 1630s, however, the lure of Brazilian sugar plantations proved too much for the newly formed Dutch West India Company, and a successful invasion against the ruling Portuguese and subsequent consolidations meant that by the middle of the decade the Dutch controlled a large and profitable swathe of the country.

In 1637, Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen, a relative of William of Orange, arrived in the territory as the governor-general of New Holland. He was determined not just to oversee but to improve and record his new fiefdom, so among his retinue he included the German natural scientist Georg Marcgraf, the physician Willem Piso and two painters, Albert Eckhout and Frans Post. Eckhout was tasked with recording the people of the colony and Post its landscapes. Post thus became the first professional artist to show what the terrain of the New World looked like.

Nothing of Post's early work is known so it seems likely he owed his place in the Brazil entourage to his architect brother Pieter. Pieter Post was one of the architects responsible for building Johan Maurits's new palace in the Hague – today the Mauritshuis museum – constructed during the governor's South American sojourn. What Frans Post clearly took with him, though, were the lessons of the Dutch landscape school.

Post (1612-80) was born in Haarlem to a father who was a stained-glass painter, and who may also have

View of Itamaracá Island in Brazil, 1637
Frans Post



been responsible for the artistic education of his son. Haarlem was a particularly glittering nugget during the Dutch Golden Age and Post's immediate peers there included Frans Hals, who would later paint his portrait; the uncle and nephew landscapists Salomon van Ruysdael and Jacob van Ruisdael; and Isaac and Adriaen van Ostade. Whether or not they knew each other, Salomon van Ruysdael specialised in views with low horizons and land cut by rivers under big skies – exactly the sort of format Post would go on to apply to his Brazilian pictures.

The country's landscapes became Post's speciality, even after his return to the Netherlands in 1644. In the seven years he was there, however, he painted just 18 views, of which only seven are now known to exist. What is striking about them is how unexotic they are: some incidental details of palm trees and slaves aside, the scenes could pass at first glance as images of the wet, low-lying countryside of his homeland.

Intentional or not, this was of a piece with Johan Maurits's intention to imbue his colony with the civic attributes of the Netherlands. He aggrandised the capital, Recife, with public buildings, gardens and



bridges and then promptly had the new town renamed Mauritsstad in his own honour. He promoted religious tolerance, not just for the long-established Portuguese Catholics and the monastic orders that were allowed to keep their privileges but for the Jewish population too. To embed the Portuguese further he included them alongside his Dutch followers in new local councils. This enlightenment did not, however, extend to the indigenous Tupi people and the African slaves, mostly from Angola, who continued to work in brutal conditions on the sugar plantations that funded the entire enterprise.

In this painting, *View of Itamaracá Island in Brazil* (1637), the first he executed after his arrival and now on loan to the Mauritshuis, Post shows just this social and racial structure. Two white settlers and their horses are attended by a pair of African slaves with baskets of fruit. The island in the distance, where Maurits first intended to build a new capital, is bound by the Amazon, and one of the figures signals to Fort Orange over the river for a boat in which to cross. When the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam acquired

ALAMY

Post's views could pass at first glance as images of the wet, low-lying countryside of his homeland

the painting in 1879, its director, Johann Wilhelm Kaiser, claimed the man on horseback was Maurits himself in his "Brazilian costume"; in fact he is Portuguese, so this is a painting of the world the Dutch settlers inherited.

It is an unexpectedly simple and topographical image, with all ideas of the picturesque studiously ignored. There is little foliage, the bare riverbank dominates, the water takes on the dun colour of the sky. A European river scene would be full of boats and a sense of recession; here, though, the water is empty and the far bank unfurls with little differentiation and with only a spine of palm trees to give variety. It is a no-nonsense picture, factual not fawning, stating little more than: here is the landscape, here are its inhabitants, and all is calm. There is nothing triumphal about it, no signifiers of the benefits of Dutch suzerainty and nothing to hymn the glory of Post's patron.

When Post was back in the Netherlands he continued to produce Brazilian scenes, finding a ready market among former colonists. In these pictures, however, drawing on the many sketches he had made in situ, he created composite landscapes with brighter blue skies and greener foliage than he had painted in Brazil, and in which slices of real views were exoticised with added flora and fauna.

About a decade ago, a group of 34 unknown Post watercolours and drawings of animals were discovered in the North Holland Archives in Haarlem. He drew most of these animals from life – Maurits had helpfully established a menagerie to house his collection of South American wildlife – and used them to pep up his pictures. Among them, accompanied by his own annotations, are a "Chilean sheep" (a llama), an armadillo ("a kind of armoured pig, two feet in size. Good to eat, tastes like chicken"), a jaguar ("a tiger, as large as a common calf; they are very ferocious and strong"), as well as anteaters, alligators and pythons.

Post's landscape drawings were also turned into engravings for an illustrated account of Maurits's tenure, *Rerum per octennium in Brasilia*, published in 1647, while in 1679 no fewer than 27 of his pictures of Brazil were given by Maurits to the Sun King, Louis XIV of France, as a peace offering at the end of the six-year Franco-Dutch War.

Post's success was such that he was made treasurer of the Haarlem painters' guild and included by Arnold Houbraken in his book *The Great Theatre of Dutch Painters and Paintresses*, published in the early 18th century. However, at some point Post turned to alcohol – perhaps prompted by the early deaths of two of his sons – and this may be the reason he did not travel with Maurits to Paris to give his Brazilian paintings to Louis XIV in person and why for the last decade of his life he seems to have stopped painting altogether.

Post's demise mirrored that of the Netherlands' overseas territories: Angola was retaken by the Portuguese in 1648, Brazil in 1654; in 1664 the British took New Amsterdam and shortly afterwards renamed it New York, and in 1674 the Dutch West India Company itself was declared insolvent. Against this narrative, Post's matter-of-fact paintings record a transient moment and are not just scrupulously descriptive but prescient. ●



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The solitary life of Siegfried Sassoon

Terence Davies's *Benediction* is both a biopic of the wartime poet and an outsider's restrained self-portrait

By David Sexton

All the best work of Terence Davies, considered by many to be Britain's greatest living film-maker, is autobiographical. His wonderful first feature, *Distant Voices, Still Lives* of 1988, is intensely faithful to his memories of family life in Liverpool, as the youngest of ten children in a working-class Catholic family. The British Film Institute (BFI) DVD of this masterpiece includes Davies's excited commentary on each scene – so moved to see his own images, affirming their truth, excusing even the smallest alteration as “poetic licence”.

The Long Day Closes, about a shy, imaginative 12-year-old boy growing up in the mid-Fifties, followed in 1992. Davies has since made several literary adaptations and the extraordinary collage-documentary about Liverpool, *Of Time and the City*.

His last film, *A Quiet Passion*, was an intimate biopic of the reclusive poet Emily Dickinson (Cynthia Nixon), filmed in a recreation of her Amherst home. Davies, who describes himself as an outsider – “I'm not a participant in life,” he says simply – identified deeply with the subject, saying, “In a sense, the Emily Dickinson film is my most autobiographical.”

Now, here's *Benediction*, a biopic of another poet with whom he identifies, Siegfried Sassoon. It appears, however, that the subject was suggested to him by the CEO of the BFI, Ben Roberts. Initially, Davies knew little about Sassoon (not that he was gay, or a Catholic ▶



Searching for redemption: Jack Lowden as the young Siegfried Sassoon

◀ convert even) but rapidly realised how much affinity he felt for him, above all for his lifelong search for redemption, “which never comes”, says Davies, “because you can’t find redemption in anyone or anything. You have to find it in yourself.” Or not.

Benediction opens with the heroic epoch of Sassoon’s life, his courageous “Soldier’s Declaration” of 1917, in which he publicly denounced the conduct of the war. Having won the MC for conspicuous gallantry at the front, Sassoon (played as a young man by tough-looking Jack Lowden) is not court-martialled but sent to military hospital in Edinburgh. There he is sympathetically treated and meets a soulmate, Wilfred Owen (an endearing Matthew Tennyson), whose poetry he influences for the better, in the film’s best scenes. But their relationship is unconsummated.

Already the frustration of his life has been foreshadowed, the film proceeding associatively rather than chronologically. Sitting in a church, the young Sassoon morphs into his older self (Peter Capaldi). “Why Catholicism, father?” his son George asks. “Something permanent, unchanging,” Sassoon replies, hopelessly. “You can get that from dressage but without the guilt,” retorts George (sub-Wildean pertnesses are always a feature of Davies’s dialogue).

After the war, Sassoon, until then sexually reserved but now guided by the genial Wilde supporter Robbie Ross (Simon Russell Beale), seeks fulfilment in high society and gay affairs. Ivor Novello (a pretty Jeremy Irvine) soon proves a prize bitch, sneering “if you want fidelity, Siegfried, buy a pet” as he dumps him.

Benediction has the most overtly gay subject matter in Davies’s work but it is hardly celebratory. Davies has said that he found his brief experience of the gay scene appalling, “sexually venal, cruel, narcissistic” – and that’s how he shows it here. He is no more in favour of heterosexual family life, though. Siegfried is targeted for marriage by the heiress Hester Gatty (Kate Phillips when young; Gemma Jones when older). “You must redeem my life for me,” he tells her, on tying the knot.

In reality, Siegfried and Hester separated after 14 years, but Davies keeps them locked together into old age in depressing suburbia. After inheriting a fortune, in 1933 Sassoon bought a 52-room pile with 220 acres of park in Wiltshire, and lived there until his death in 1967, but this doesn’t fit Davies’s scenario. Nor do bloodsports: he has simply deleted Sassoon’s passion for hunting and with it his finest and most successful work, *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*. The film ends with a long shot of the old Sassoon, slumped on a bench, morphing back to his uniformed younger self, sobbing after a recital of Owen’s poem “Disabled”, while Vaughan Williams’s yearning *Pastoral Symphony* plays.

Asked “Why do you hate the modern world, father?”, Sassoon says: “Because it is younger than I am.” Davies, now 76, has never made a film set after 1955 and freely says he’s afraid of the modern world. *Benediction*, once again so beautifully filmed, so restrained and tactful in its visual world, is nothing less than a perfected statement of a life unredeemed. ●

“Benediction” is in cinemas now

Television

Here be monsters and melodrama

By Rachel Cooke

The Essex Serpent
Apple TV+

It can be infuriating, the way some people talk of the Victorians. “Oh, they were just like us!” they insist, trying their best to reassure themselves, as well as everyone else. But while this may well be true in the sense that of course our ancestors experienced anger and jealousy, happiness and sadness and lust, it’s also to ignore the fact that they were troubled by codes and moralities we struggle to understand; that their grasp of the world was altogether different to our own; that the Victorians were, in summary, very weird indeed. In my eyes, to deny this is to reduce them. Far from making them seem more “relevant”, it renders them less interesting, less vivid and less real.

How does Apple TV’s adaptation of Sarah Perry’s bestselling novel *The Essex Serpent* fare on this score? In the weirdness stakes, I’m going to give it a stern six out of ten. This isn’t to say that I’m not enjoying it, because I am. If Perry’s book is a novel of sensation posing as a novel of ideas, then Anna Symon’s screenplay is more of the same; if you’re after melodrama, you’re in the right place. And it looks exquisitely creepy: not only the stinking Essex marshes,



A breezy radical: Claire Danes as proto-feminist Cora Seaborne

permanently cloaked in a disorientating mist, but the interiors, too, all mahogany, casual taxidermy and loudly ticking clocks. Like Perry, its director, Clio Barnard (*The Arbor*, *The Selfish Giant*), recognises that, in the gothic, buildings are as intensely potent as landscapes; they can be both prisons and places of refuge. But I still feel that everyone – or almost everyone – is too modern by far, and for this reason the plot never quite sweeps me away.

It is 1893. Cora Seaborne (Claire Danes) is a recently widowed young woman with a small, odd son called Frankie and a passion for naturalism. Liberated from the control of her violent husband, she reads newspaper reports of a “sea dragon” reputed to be abroad in Essex and determines to travel there, convinced that it is a plesiosaur, or some other creature that has swerved evolution (Cora is a follower of Darwin’s friend, the geologist Charles Lyell). But in the wilds of Essex, forthright females do not go down quite so well as they might in London. Even her closest ally in the tiny village of Aldwinter, its dashing and educated vicar, Will Ransome (Tom Hiddleston), is wary of her arguments, for if the beast is real, how will he reassure his terrorised congregation, who believe the serpent to be an incarnation of the devil?

Lots of things follow from this clash of faiths, and I don’t want to spoil them for you. Suffice to say that some are more plausible than others. Yes, there were radical Victorians: think of the two great Georges, Eliot and Gissing, and of how they lived their lives. But in *The Essex Serpent*, to be middle class is, it seems, automatically to be daring – revolutionary, even – and it feels a bit much. Cora’s doctor friend and admirer Luke Garrett (Frank Dillane) performs life-saving heart surgery; her companion Martha (Hayley Squires) is a Marxist; Will’s wife, Stella (Clémence Poésy), is his “equal” in all things. Cora wears trousers with braces when she’s out digging for fossils, which is fine by me. But I balked when she gatecrashes, alone, a funeral wake, and Danes delivers every line she speaks with an uncommon breeziness, as if her character’s inclinations involve no nervousness whatsoever on her part and could not possibly jeopardise her position in the world, which seems entirely wrong. Wouldn’t Cora be more cautious? Wouldn’t she better manage the risk that comes with such proto-feminism?

The greater problem, though, lies with Ransome. If Tom Hiddleston is my kind of priest – in his knitted scarf, which looks like he picked it up at Paul Smith, he makes me all too painfully aware of my sinful soul – this may be in part because his character’s thinking is so woolly; he would do just fine in the 21st-century Church of England. Why on earth has this forward-thinking man removed himself to the land of eels and oysters, where women burn sacrifices to the God they have displeased, and the curate believes Satan may be effectively repelled with a fence? When Ransome tells his parishioners that “God lives in doubt”, that at the moments of greatest darkness His light will burn the most brightly, I’m afraid that I struggle to buy it, however hard Hiddleston frowns, his brow as deeply furrowed as the silvery estuary close by. ●

Radio

The road from Damascus to Kyiv

By Rachel Cunliffe

Red Lines
BBC Radio 4,
available on
BBC Sounds

In Alan Bennett’s *The History Boys*, a schoolboy argues that Winston Churchill only became prime minister because Lord Halifax missed a key meeting to go to the dentist, remarking: “If Halifax had had better teeth we might have lost the war.” I wonder if the historian Anthony Seldon and the media consultant Craig Oliver had those words in mind when writing their new radio play. *Red Lines* purports to tell the inside story of Bashar al-Assad’s chemical attack on the rebel-held Ghouta, on the outskirts of Damascus, in August 2013 – or rather, of David Cameron’s failed attempt to convince the British parliament to back a military response. It draws a direct line from Cameron’s defeat in the Commons to the rise of American isolationism and the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Oliver (played by *Dead Ringers*’ Jon Culshaw, who also does a spectacular impression of William Hague) knows what he’s talking about – he was, after all, Cameron’s director of politics and communications. But that doesn’t mean he knows how to write a radio play. Much of the dialogue is laughable: a super-cool Barack Obama addresses Cameron with “Hey brother”, while Vladimir Putin tells the PM, “I’m sending you a big hug.” We’re barely two minutes in when we get a clunky mention of the title (“a proportionate response when red lines are crossed”). The only moment of wit is when David Davis is called a wanker.

Much worse is the unobvious message. Cameron just wants to do the right thing, but is hindered by the political machinations of Ed Miliband and the shadow of the Iraq War. Should we miss the point, Oliver (the character) helpfully explains that MPs oppose a military strike on Damascus because “they think it’s 2003”. You can see what this is trying to do, but the play’s heavy-handedness undermines its credibility. And while it may be useful to view Putin’s aggression in the context of the West’s reluctance to act decisively in Syria, pinning the crisis in Ukraine today on squeamish MPs in 2013 feels as simplistic as suggesting the Second World War was won on a dental appointment. ●

A super-cool Barack Obama addresses Cameron with “Hey brother”, while Putin tells the PM, “I’m sending you a big hug”



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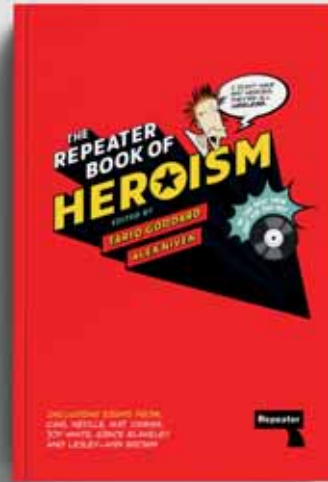
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THE BACK PAGES

Nature



John Burnside

My sleepless hours are filled by birdsong – a solace that will soon be lost

It was hot in my room, even though my hotel was on the edge of Zürich, just a stone's throw from the tree-lined park at Lindenhof – and, naturally, I couldn't sleep. A lifelong insomniac, I have lain awake in all kinds of places, but there is no worse combination, for me, than sleeplessness and a free minibar crammed with potato snacks, wine and extravagant quantities of Swiss chocolate.

Now, I was sitting in the corner, as far from temptation as I could manage, with the window wide open. Across the street, behind a stone wall, a row of trees stood eerily still and windless – and, till around 3am, quite silent. Then, suddenly, a bird



◀ began to sing. It might have been due to my insomniac state, but it seemed that I had never heard birdsong so inventive, so musical. I had been praying for a distraction; instead, I got a concert. That nightingale sang almost constantly for the next three hours and when it left off I fell asleep in my chair.

It is one of the tragedies of industrialised life that we forget what the other animals mean to us. We see conservation as a principle – something that ought to be *done*, like putting archaeological finds in a museum, or hanging Old Masters in national galleries – but we take little account of what the other animals do for the human spirit, whether individually or communally. This applies not just to birds but to every living thing, from polar bears to hawk moths.

We know (and do little) about the melting of the Arctic ice, but in Britain the number of flying insects has dropped by almost 60 per cent since 2004, which is one (though only one) reason why our bird populations are also in dramatic decline. By now, it seems that the time is fast approaching when a sleepless hotel guest can no longer hope for the solace of a random nightingale. The deadly hush that Rachel Carson predicted in her 1962 environmental classic *Silent Spring* will be upon us.

What brings all this to mind is a compelling new book by Patrick Galbraith, *In Search of One Last Song: Britain's Disappearing Birds and the People Trying to Save Them*, in which, as the title suggests, the author travels around these islands to meet people who are involved, in any number of ways, with safeguarding and conserving birds. It is a book filled with beautiful

moments, amazing and sometimes rather surprising characters, and, if we could only learn from them, reasons for hope.

Galbraith's book foregrounds the knowledge and wisdom of ordinary people: ex-soldiers and schoolmasters, fishermen, and even retired gamekeepers, who know all too well how our present dilemma has come to pass and have practical, constructive ideas about how to reverse the tide. It is a treasury of a book, because these are the people we should be listening to, not the politicians, landowners, energy companies, and for-hire "experts" whose funding is rarely as transparent as it ought to be.

We have lived with Carson's threat of a silent spring for 60 years now and, for the most part, the threat has always been downplayed – a situation reminiscent of Benjamin Franklin's complaint, in 1786, about how casually the dangers of lead poisoning had been ignored, in spite of over half a century's worth of incriminatory data about its effects. "You will see by it, that the opinion of this mischievous effort from lead is at least above 60 years old," he wrote to the radical politician Benjamin Vaughan, "and you will observe with concern how long a useful truth may be known and exist, before it is generally received and practiced on."

Most of the reasons we are losing birds are known to us, yet the devastation continues. Why? Because our political systems heap power and favour not on the folk who have the knowledge and the will to foster abundance and diversity, but on those who have long abused, exploited and degraded the Earth. ●

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.

Quack thinking

Rescuers coaxed five ducklings out of a storm drain by playing duck noises on their phones. The flock, trapped in Pontypridd, Wales, is now being cared for by the RSPCA. *Metro (Amanda Welles)*

A man's best friend

A derelict cottage in the

Cornish countryside has been put up for sale. But a knackered appearance hides a beautiful story.

Pontious Piece Cottages, now empty and up for auction, used to be the home of Tony Trewin and Scrunch, a roughly half-ton Highland cross bull.

Trewin shared the cottage with Scrunch, who he hand-raised after finding the bull freezing to death. The inseparable pair kept each other company for years, and even watched TV together. *Cornwall Live (Kate McIntosh)*

What's in a name?

An owner is "distraught" at being ordered to change his horse's name, which was dubbed "inappropriate" by racing chiefs. Nick Rhodes called his two-year-old colt Buggerlugs, in memory of

his late father Les. The "informal, old-fashioned" term is "for referring or speaking to someone in a slightly insulting but friendly way," according to the Cambridge Dictionary.

However, just a day before the juvenile horse's debut at Beverley Racecourse, Rhodes was told he would have to think of a new name.

He said: "We are distraught by being told to change the name of the horse. My late father used to call me 'little Buggerlugs' as a child." *Daily Mirror (Nigel Huddleston)*



Off the Record



Louise Perry

Reading to my son, I realise you can get away with murder in children's books

I Want My Hat Back by Jon Klassen is currently at the top of my one-year-old son's pile of bedtime stories. I want to say that it's his favourite, but in all honesty it's impossible to tell, since he adopts the same baffled expression throughout the reading process, regardless of which book we choose. All I can say with any confidence is that *I Want My Hat Back* usually holds his attention. He seems to like it slightly more than the copy of *Quantum Physics for Babies* that my husband keeps forcing on him. But he seems to like it slightly less than an empty cardboard box.

And yet all the adults love *I Want My Hat Back*, including me. In fact, it's "the funniest book ever written" according to one reviewer. A brief synopsis: there's a bear, and he's trying to find his lost hat. He asks the other animals if they've seen it and they all say no. But one of them is lying. The foolish bear doesn't notice that the deceitful rabbit is wearing the stolen hat. Until, suddenly, he does. In the book's slightly shocking finale, the bear retrieves his hat and eats the rabbit.

So our protagonist is guilty not only of murder, but of disposing of a corpse with intent to obstruct a coroner's inquest. He may also have committed robbery, given that his hat is reacquired only through force. "This book has a terrible message" reads one of the (rare) one-star reviews on Amazon. It's hard to disagree.

But so what? *I Want My Hat Back* is funny and silly and doesn't actually defy the moral strictures typically imposed on 21st-century children's fiction. Modern protagonists are allowed to be extremely naughty, sometimes even criminal. Our library includes tales of unruly dogs ruining picnics, ill-mannered tigers inveigling their way into homes, and moles who go around pooping on other characters' heads.

Beatrix Potter's disobedient characters always got their comeuppance: think of Peter Rabbit trapped in chicken wire, or Tom Kitten wrapped up in pastry. Her Edwardian readers would have been left in no doubt about the perils of naughtiness. Go back a little further, though, and the moral message in children's books is even more foreign. Mary Martha Sherwood was a contemporary of Jane Austen's and one of the most successful children's authors of her day. But her books are now almost unreadable.

Sherwood's *History of The Fairchild Family*, for instance – a bestselling series published between 1818 and 1847 – follows children Emily, Lucy and Henry as they discover their original sin and consequent need for redemption. This combination of sentimentality and preachiness is dialled up further in Sherwood's colonial novels, featuring pious little English children who convert their Indian servants to Christianity and then die in a very tragic and beautiful manner.

I do wonder if there were some 19th-century parents who couldn't quite stomach Sherwood's books, just as there are 21st-century parents who avoid our modern moralising genres. Our local (and very lovely) children's bookshop has a section devoted to race and gender. The most successful book on these shelves is Ibram X Kendi's *Antiracist Baby*, which promises to provide "the language necessary to begin critical conversations at the earliest age... the perfect gift for readers of all ages dedicated to forming a just society" (you see, original sin remains a prominent theme in the literature we give to our children, even if we don't describe it as such).

The moral message hasn't disappeared from children's books, but the content of the message has subtly changed. In the past it was more likely to emphasise the virtue of obedience, today it most values the virtue of inclusion.

I Want My Hat Back is a fun read, in part because it foregoes the heavy-handed moralising of so much children's literature, past and present. Our bear may be a robber and a murderer, but we can forgive him those sins. Does my one-year-old son have any idea of the book's "terrible message"? I would ask him, but he's rather busy with his cardboard box. ●

Tracey Thorn is on sabbatical



Moralising hasn't gone from children's literature, but the content of the message has subtly changed

Down and Out



Nicholas Lezard

With little left to be proud
of in this country, at least
we still have county cricket

It was a day
when I wanted
an absolute
minimum of
excitement.
Sussex vs
Middlesex,
about to draw,
was perfect

A couple of weeks ago I was trying to think of things I like about this country, or things this country does better than anyone else, and all I could come up with was asparagus and rhubarb. That I included rhubarb in this brief list shows how desperate I was, because I don't even like rhubarb. I think hatred of this government and the Prime Minister might have clouded my thinking. Over the last fortnight I have thought of several other things. They are mainly different kinds of cheese, but it's a start, I suppose. The list of things this country does worse than anyone else, or just unforgivably badly, is a lengthy one. I found myself, from sheer masochism, scrolling through the readers' comments beneath the *MailOnline's* report on the casting of the new Doctor, as in Who.

As you might have expected, it was educational, but not edifying. Readers of the *Mail* thronged to the internet to denounce the choice of a young black man as the new Time Lord. (TV series about eccentric time travellers: that's something we do better than anyone else. Then again, no one else seems to be doing it at all.) Anyone who said "He seems nice" or "He's a very good actor" found their comment downgraded at the very least, or sneered at in another comment from some rancid bigot or other. Can a publication be held responsible for the character of its readers? It's a bit of a chicken-and-egg situation but I think, yes, it can.

To soothe myself I thought of the day I had just passed, a day in which I experienced what I came to realise was one of the quiet glories of the English summer: the last day of a four-day county cricket match.

I had not actually been to Hove cricket ground (it's called the 1st Central County Ground now, after an

insurance company) even though I've been living here – well, Brighton, actually – for three years. The first year I was here I was marooned at the top of a steep hill and the ground was about half an hour's walk away; then Covid happened, and cricket was suspended and no one was going anywhere except of course to Barnard Castle to get their eyes tested. (I have a photo of myself standing waggishly outside the town's Specsavers.) Last summer cricket happened again but if you blinked you missed the county season and it was all limited-overs cricket, which could have been – and, now I come to think of it, probably was – invented to keep snobs and old farts like me from turning up.

But last Sunday I had a deadline, and little inclination to meet it. I checked to see what was on and it was day four of a match between Sussex and Middlesex, and it was lovely sunny weather, so I thought, why not? It's now only a ten-minute walk to the ground and there aren't any inclines to worry about. It had been a high-scoring match, I saw, with a draw seemingly the most likely outcome, despite a sporting declaration from Sussex. Perfect. I wanted a day with an absolute minimum of excitement. Off I went, taking my passport with me, of course, in case there were any problems at the border with Hove.

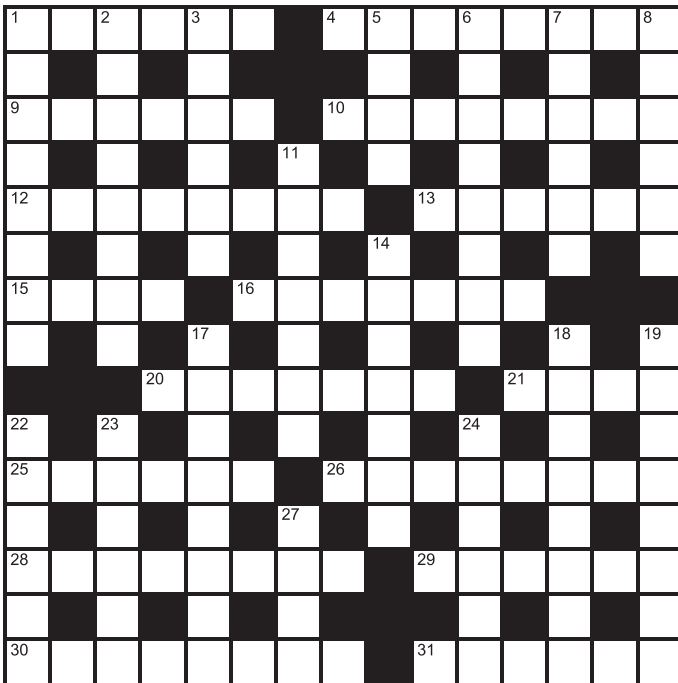
Ticket offices at county cricket grounds have a relaxed attitude to entry if you turn up at lunch on the last day, so they let me in for a tenner. "I'll put you down as a senior," said the nice lady at the desk, which I suppose is a milestone for me of a sort: the first time in my life I have been officially declared what used to be called an Old Age Pensioner. As it meant I was being let in for a tenner I kept my mouth shut.

A cricket ground bathed in sunlight, I remembered as I walked in, is a wonderful sight. That the ground has a modest capacity – 6,000 – makes it even better. Only some of the seats are tiered, so almost everywhere was in the sun. I bought myself a Harvey's (the local beer, of course) and settled down. I would be happy with any result: Middlesex might have been my team, as I was born and raised locally to them, but I am now a Sussex resident, and I like to see them do well, too.

As it turned out, the game got rather interesting. Without going too much into technicalities, what looked like an almost impossible task – scoring over 350 in the final innings – soon turned out to be increasingly possible. It was as if the Middlesex batters had realised that an important writer from the *New Statesman* had entered the ground, and it was time to raise their game. So they started whacking the ball around.

And here is the great thing, the thing that actually brings a lump to the throat and a tear to the eye as I type: that even though every boundary brought the opposition's team closer and closer, the spectators – I think there were about 500, if that – applauded every scoring shot. They also applauded good fielding from Sussex, of course; but the main thing is that they gave audible credit to the opposition's talents. All cricket fans know this, as do I, but to see it happen is still delightful. And I asked myself: is there any other sport in the world where this kind of thing still happens? ●

The NS Crossword 584: by Aranya



Across

- 1 Simple street fashion leading the way (6)
- 4 Writer aims for this exactly in small article (3,5)
- 9 Female relative is more lively without clothes (6)
- 10 Satire by dissipated playboy (8)
- 12 Suet I'm to put out for bird (8)
- 13 Annoy almost the whole of the North (6)
- 15 Excellent sweet (4)
- 16 Tenth muse heads off to wax lyrical (7)
- 20 Following no rule of another country (7)
- 21 Book about the body (4)
- 25 Pick up extremely tasteless suit (6)
- 26 Guileful geisha's after husband, in the main (4,4)
- 28 Three-quarters of EU nation lay deserted and disorganised (8)
- 29 Plump female parent (6)
- 30 Some lovers tepidly transgress (8)
- 31 Heedless rabbit losing tail (6)

Down

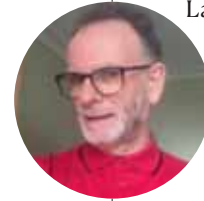
- 1 Engineer immediately abandoning DIY when one scoffs (8)
- 2 Giving gift and gin to vagrant (8)
- 3 Small child loves sledge (6)
- 5 Stone axes found under side of cricket field (4)
- 6 Nice setter overcoming a terrible envy (8)
- 7 Women in jeans turned up to pirouette (6)
- 8 Seven sly sons left in a calm manner (6)
- 11 In pieces when falling short (7)
- 14 Vexation of Greek fettered by shackle (7)
- 17 Unprofitable ship south of Merseyside port (8)
- 18 Mates who screwed up a bit (8)
- 19 Chat about an American lake (8)
- 22 Therapist is round after bubbly, we hear (6)
- 23 Release of prisoner, a boring pleb (6)
- 24 Tense 60 minutes completely in bondage (6)
- 27 This, for example, is oddly cultured (4)

Answers to crossword 583 of 13 May 2022

Across 1) Fatten 5) Accuracy 9) Insolent 10) Robing 11) Bell-founders 13) Main 14) Adelaide 17) Minstrel 18) Sack 20) Inflammation 23) Studio 24) Easterly 25) Tenement 26) Dismal
Down 2) Arne 3) Trombones 4) Needle 5) Act of parliament 6) Carousel 7) Rabid 8) Contradict 12) Marionette 15) Absentees 16) Primrose 19) Missed 21) Lodge 22) Plea

Subscriber of the Week: Phillip Walsh

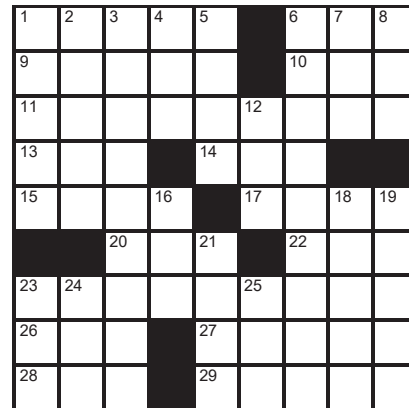
What do you do?
Teach.
Where do you live?
Sheffield.
Do you vote?
Always, but, like Pascal's wager, more in hope than expectation.
How long have you been a subscriber?
Forty years plus.
What made you start?
A spat between Christopher Hitchens and Michael Foot over Indira Gandhi's state of emergency in India.
Is the NS bug in the family?
It's spreading.
What pages do you flick to first?
Poetry. Nature. Q&A.



What would you like to see more of in the NS?
"Capitalist democracies can't solve climate change." Discuss. *Who are your favourite NS writers?*
John Burnside (word angel), Laurie Penny (so right, so often), Jeremy Seabrook (sage sociologist).
Who would you put on the cover of the NS?
Marina Ovsyannikova and others arrested for opposing the Putin regime.
All-time favourite NS article?
Colin McGinn on the philosophy of mind: "All machine and no ghost?"
The New Statesman is...
Something for the weekend.

Please email ellys.woodhouse@newstatesman.co.uk if you would like to be featured

The NS Crossword In Brief 33: by Hoang-Kim Vu



Answers to crossword 32 of 13 May 2022

Across 1) Boom 5) VCRs 9) Tube 10) Rhea 11) Scotch egg 13) Healers 14) Via 15) Agendas 19) Sparks joy 21) Isis 22) Ease 23) Dole 24) Trot
Down 1) BTS 2) Ouch 3) Oboe 4) Metaverse 5) VR headset 6) Cher 7) Regs 8) Sag 12) Clink 15) Apso 16) Gail 17) Ajar 18) So so 19) Sid 20) Yet

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

Across

- 1 Scrap
- 6 Lib ___
- 9 Honeydew, eg
- 10 Qualified in textspeak
- 11 Raising the price
- 13 Scotch ___
- 14 Former Japanese PM
- 15 Dive site
- 17 YouTube genre (abbr)
- 20 Actor Wallach
- 22 Eastern philosophy
- 23 Hijacking, as a transfer
- 26 Stout alternative
- 27 Tim of the BBC
- 28 Certain honorific
- 29 Baa, in other words

Down

- 1 Tree resin
- 2 Ecru alternative
- 3 Elder bloke
- 4 "Spare the ___"
- 5 Miller of "Years and Years"
- 6 Biscuit
- 7 Combatant in a 1932 "war"
- 8 Cleaning tool
- 12 Org for Ogunya Anunoby
- 16 Seasonal affliction
- 18 Craze
- 19 Alternative writer?
- 21 Credits site
- 23 Heat source
- 24 "Da ___ G Show"
- 25 Mate

Long Reads

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

Listen now



I was Joni Mitchell's
"Carey": an interview
with Cary Raditz

By Kate Mossman



Operation Warm
Welcome: the hotel that
became home to
100 refugees

By Sophie McBain



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

By Jeremy Cliffe



Big Tech and the quest
for eternal youth

By Jenny Kleeman



**Long
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Podcast**

Ease into the weekend with writing from our authors – including Kate Mossman, Jeremy Cliffe and Sophie McBain – published every Saturday morning.

Search 'Audio Long Reads from the *New Statesman*' wherever you get your podcasts.

State of the Nation

Highlights from the NS's online data hub

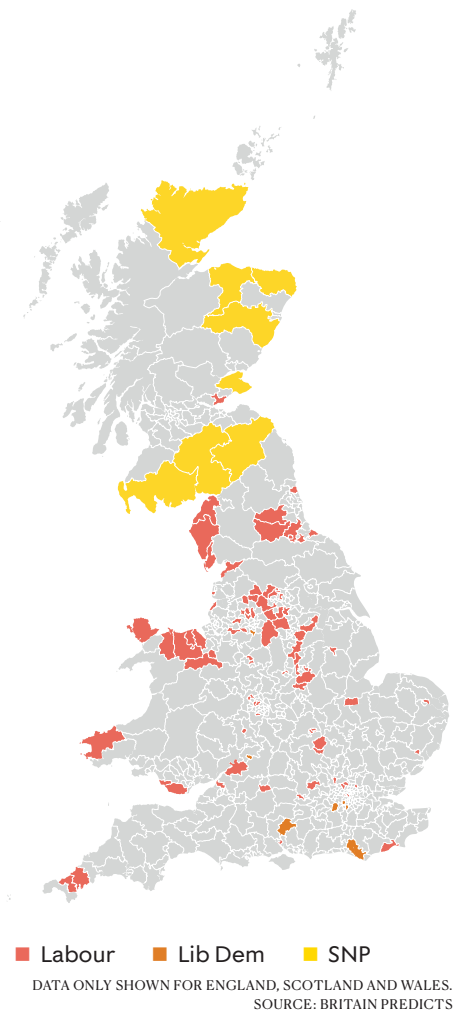
How does the UK compare to the rest of the world?

	Inflation rate (CPI, %)	Latest unemployment rate (%)	Latest youth unemployment rate* (%)	GDP forecast for 2022 (%)	GDP forecast for 2023 (%)	Average property price per m ² (US\$)	Average yearly wages (US\$)
Great Britain	7.0	3.8	11.3	3.7	1.2	4,877	47,147
Brazil	12.0	11.2	–	0.8	1.4	1,152	20,213
Canada	6.7	5.2	10.1	3.9	2.8	4,195	55,342
China	1.5	5.8	–	4.4	5.1	–	–
France	5.4	7.4	16.3	2.9	1.4	5,177	45,580
Germany	7.3	2.9	5.5	2.1	2.7	5,264	53,745
Italy	6.5	8.3	24.5	2.3	1.7	2,851	37,769
Japan	0.8	2.6	4.0	2.4	2.3	6,087	38,514
Russia	17.8	4.3	–	-8.5	-2.3	1,641	–
Spain	8.3	13.5	29.6	4.8	3.3	2,841	37,922
US	8.5	3.6	8.2	3.2	2.3	2,846	69,391

*YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT REFERS TO ADULTS UNDER 25 YEARS OLD. SOURCES: OECD; IMF; NUMBEO

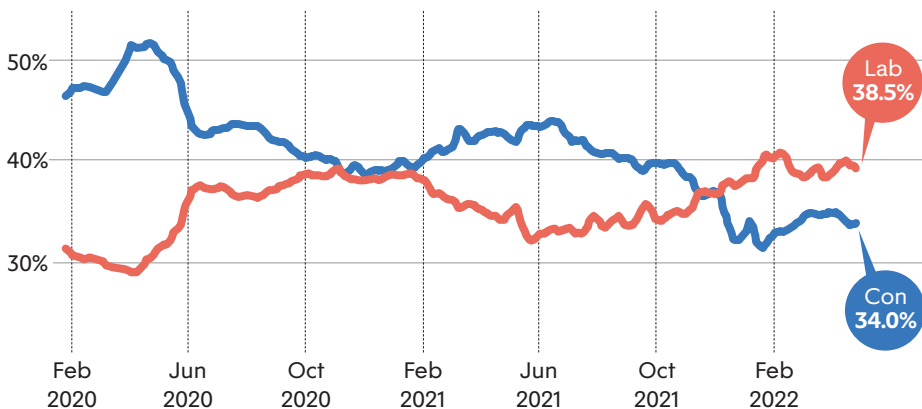
Westminster shake-up

Which seats would change hands if an election was held today?



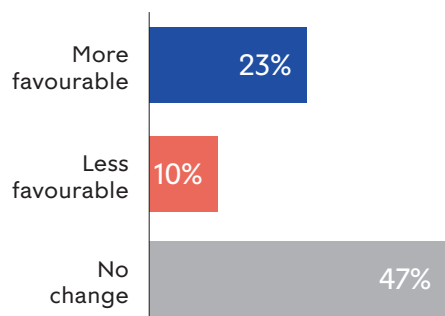
Britain Elects: Westminster voting intentions

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



Party of law and order

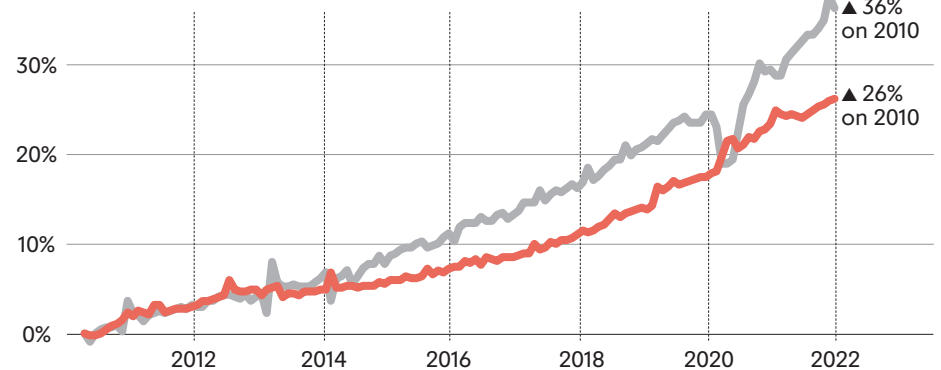
Has Keir Starmer's response to beergate changed your view of him?



SOURCE: OPINIUM RESEARCH, 11-15 MAY

Public vs private: which sector's pay is growing faster?

UK sector-based wage growth, public (■) and private (■)



SOURCE: ONS

The NS Q&A

“Being in love is a kind of existential happiness”

Christer Sturmark, Digital entrepreneur



Christer Sturmark was born in Sweden in 1964 and is a digital entrepreneur and a prominent secular humanist. He is also the CEO of the publishing house Fri Tanke, which he co-founded with the Abba member Björn Ulvaeus.

What's your earliest memory?

Sitting in our summer house at Gotland watching the first moon landing on 20 July 1969. I remember watching the little black and white TV screen, and then going out to watch the moon to see if I could see something happening myself.

Who are your heroes?

My teenage hero was David Bowie, a charismatic and intellectual genius. When I was 15 years old, I discovered another hero: Bertrand Russell. I was mesmerised by his

role as both a philosopher and an activist. He is still my hero today.

What book last changed your thinking?

Naming Infinity by Loren Graham and Jean-Michel Kantor. It is a wonderful book about the development of the concept of infinity in mathematics at the end of the 19th century. It changed my mind about what actual infinity is, as opposed to potential infinity.

Which political figure do you look up to?

Nicolas de Condorcet, the 18th-century French philosopher and mathematician. His ideas embodied the ideals of the Age of Enlightenment, including support for a constitutional government, liberal economy, and equal rights for all, no matter what their gender or race.

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

I would love to live in the future at a time when we have found an intuitive understanding of the quantum physics “weird” phenomena. I think it will transform our understanding of reality more than Einstein’s theory of relativity.

What TV show could you not live without?

I’m a big fan of *Borgen*, the Danish political drama.

Who would paint your portrait?

MC Escher. His fantastic *Drawing Hands* has stayed with me since I was a kid.

What's your theme tune?

David Bowie’s “Fascination”.

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

As a young entrepreneur in the IT industry in the early Nineties, I received this advice from my mentor: write a list of your strongest qualities and create an environment where they can bloom freely. And write a list of your shortcomings, and make sure you involve people in your project that compensate for these. If you don’t do that, a great emptiness will fill your life. And that’s when you start playing golf. I have never played golf.

What's currently bugging you?

Tribalism and identity politics, in its radical forms.

What single thing would make your life better?

Champagne and more time to read.

When were you happiest?

When I had my son, who is now 12 years old. Being a father has given me meaning. And this summer I’m getting married to a wonderful woman. Being in love is truly a kind of existential happiness.

In another life, what job might you have chosen?

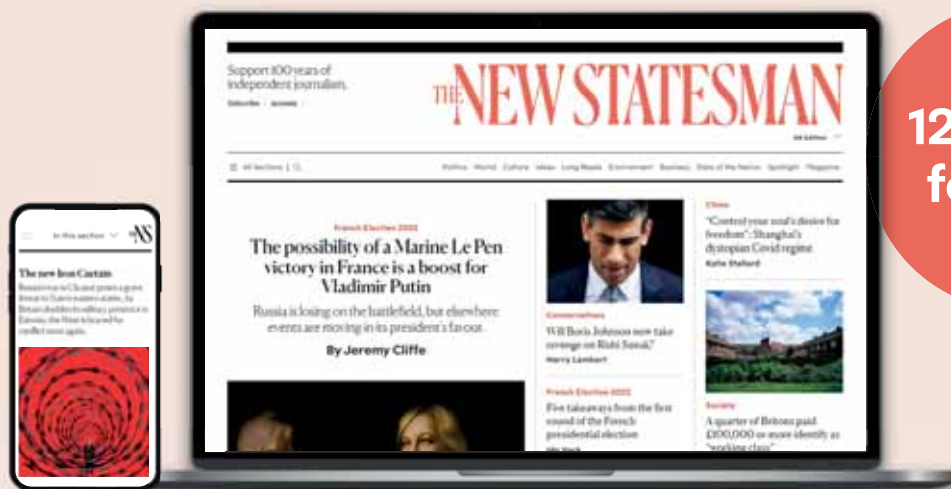
A software developer in Lisp or Prolog, two beautiful programming languages.

Are we all doomed?

The sun will one day stop shining, but it’s not something that worries me: it’s too far ahead. But we certainly need to deal with humanity’s irrationality before it causes great destruction to us and our planet. ●

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