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The time-travelling art of Hilary Mantel • How one woman's death set Iran on fire

THE NEW STATESMAN

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The Truss Delusion

The ideas and thinkers behind
the UK's dangerous economic
experiment. By Jeremy Cliffe





One of these people gets holiday pay through work

Unserious government for serious times

In his speech announcing the government's "Growth Plan", Kwasi Kwarteng declared: "We are at the beginning of a new era." The Chancellor was soon proved right – but not in the way that he intended.

In the days that followed Mr Kwarteng's statement, the pound fell to a record low against the dollar, and the cost of government borrowing is now expected to rise by the largest monthly amount since 1957. Such was the loss of market confidence that the UK was soon paying higher interest on its bonds than heavily indebted euro-zone members such as Greece and Italy. Nearly 300 UK mortgage deals were withdrawn in a day as the market anticipated a surge in the Bank of England's base rate to nearly 6 per cent.

This, most assuredly, was not the plan. Indeed, the chief secretary to the Treasury, Chris Philp, prematurely tweeted on the morning of his boss's statement: "Great to see sterling strengthening on the back of the new UK Growth Plan." But the government should not have been surprised by the market revolt. In his statement, Mr Kwarteng swaggeringly announced £45bn of tax cuts – the largest of any single fiscal event since 1972 – without pausing to explain how he would fund such largesse. The Chancellor may have vowed to build a high-growth economy but this is a hope, not a promise – and the markets recognised it as such.

As David Gauke, the former chief secretary to the Treasury, writes in his column on page 25, in the post-Brexit era, the UK cannot afford to take its lenders for granted. The loss of confidence reflects "the cumulative effect of our government for some time becoming less serious, less risk-averse, less willing to face up to hard realities, less ready to support our institutions".

Mr Kwarteng's ambition of a high-growth economy, as we have previously argued, is the right one. Since the 2008 financial crisis, the UK economy has grown at an average annual rate of just 1.5 per cent (compared to 2.7 per cent before the crash). Of the G7 countries, only Italy has fared worse. This parlous performance has contributed to wage stagnation and helped deprive public services of much-needed resources.



Ms Truss has no answers to the UK's biggest problems, such as overwhelmed public services, low investment, and regional imbalances

But the measures Mr Kwarteng announced, such as the abolition of the 45p tax rate on earnings over £150,000, will do little to boost growth. A rise in Universal Credit, for instance, would be a far more effective stimulus since low-earners are forced to spend rather than save any gains they receive. Instead, the top 1.5 per cent of earners will receive a windfall that they do not need – or, in some cases, even want.

Such policies, as Jeremy Cliffe writes in this week's cover story on page 18, are not an accident but the product of a "deep-rooted network of ideas, institutions and thinkers" that has championed free-market economics for more than 75 years.

Yet the UK is a strange candidate for this experiment: by Western standards it is already a relatively low-tax, deregulated economy. Unlike in the Thatcherite 1980s, there is little left to privatise and militant trade unions are no longer a formidable force. Ms Truss's government, in short, is prescribing policy for a country that does not exist.

A more plausible vision was elucidated by Keir Starmer in his Labour Party conference speech. By promising to create "Great British Energy", a new publicly owned clean generation company, he recognised the need for an active, entrepreneurial state of the kind we have long argued for. At present, as the think tank Common Wealth revealed, almost 45 per cent of the UK's vast offshore wind capacity is owned by foreign state-owned entities (a mere 0.03 per cent is owned by the British government).

The UK's biggest problems – overwhelmed public services, low investment, regional imbalances – are ones to which Ms Truss has no answers. Indeed, her purported solutions will only deepen the malaise: a surge in interest rates will further deter public and private investment.

In a new era of permanent crisis, voters crave stability and security, not free-market utopianism. The hubristic Ms Truss and Mr Kwarteng may yet condemn their party to defeat at the next general election. But as has been proved with remarkable speed, there is much damage they can do before that point. ●



The other one is in the back seat

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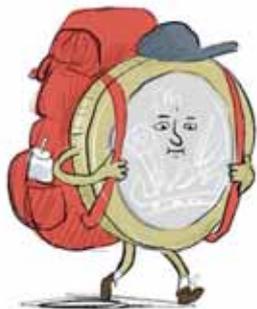
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THE POUND GOES TRAVELLING



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THE NOTEBOOK



BBC / BAD WOLF / HBO

Comment

The BBC's *Industry* is porn posing as prestige TV

By Ann Manov

I always wondered what went on at the trading floors at Goldman Sachs. I spent a year in the quiet legal department in New York, where the most shocking things I heard were stories revealing a level of human boredom I had never known existed (one man, asked why he was a vegetarian, said he needed to have one single thing about him be interesting). The traders, I imagined, had more exciting lives. Much later, I was seated at a dinner party next to a former Goldman banker who told me the astonishing things he'd done in single-occupancy toilets; but when he seemed incredulous that anyone would have less than a four-digit "body count", it became unclear whether anything he was saying was true.

The young traders in *Industry*, the workplace drama from the BBC and HBO now in its second season, have quite a bit of fun, though. And they don't stick to locked rooms: instead they amuse themselves in highly trafficked bathrooms, the office car park, the on-site gym, and even on the trading floor itself, right by the ▶

◀ glass entrance doors. This merrymaking is frequently evidenced by the depiction of a certain viscous fluid. Is daytime copulation at one's open-plan desk consistent with the premise of young traders anxiously vying to retain their positions at an international banking firm? No, but *Industry* is not a show concerned with consistency, nor does it evince any basic familiarity with human psychology.

At the close of its enthusiastically reviewed second season, *Industry* is a 16-hour compendium of preposterous sex scenes linked together by equally ridiculous scenes on a trading floor. Our main character is Harper (Myha'la Herrold), an American college non-graduate who begins her career in the London office of a fictional global investment banking company. At the start of the first series, the trainees are told that at the end of the year, half of them will be culled. I suppose the reality show-style set-up is meant to add interest to the insurmountable drudgery of share prices and data entry. So is the sex.

The problem is not that *Industry* is a stupid soap opera. The problem is that it so clearly conceives itself to be more than that. In an early scene, Harper blows a client's mind by saying she thinks there will be war in the South China Sea. It's utterly implausible for a first-year analyst – never seen to consume any media other than Instagram – to repeatedly outsmart full-time analysts. Meanwhile, the bank's most valuable market marker incessantly screams out lines such as, "What the fuck is an NFT?" and, "Does anyone here give a fuck about meme stocks?" (This is what the *Guardian* has called "background dialogue better than most show's [sic] actual scripts".) But the function of

The problem is not that *Industry* is a stupid soap opera, but that it believes it is more than that

these lines, as is the case across this rapidly gelling genre of prestige streaming drama, is to make the audience feel like insiders by giving them a vague familiarity with buzzwords. The *Atlantic*, calling this "the most thrilling show on TV", remarked, "The illegibility of the chitchat in these shows is part of the fun: the viewer comes to feel the thrill of initiation, an intellectual 'aha.'" Aha.

The show's attempts at class criticism are just as transparent. In the pilot, one character sarcastically remarks of another, "It took you that long to mention Eton!" One wishes the show could advance more than 17 minutes without such low-effort "social criticism".

Succession, which *Industry* yearns to be, is not just a show about a ruthless corporation; it is a show about a demented family, sustained by fantastic actors and terrific writing. *Industry* fails to capture any interest from its setting – who cares if any of these cartoon trades work out? Instead of developed characters, it aspires to complexity by making each equally evil, distinguishable only through variations in class and sexual proclivity. The only inner life here is what these people do in the bedroom (and the bathroom, club, hotel, cab, etc).

And so the feminine, seemingly submissive Lebanese heiress is into humiliating guys, and the former state-school pupil is into being humiliated. The tall blond "Chad" is secretly sleeping with the black Old Etonian. And an aggressive female client grabs the genitals of one analyst after another – the show's cowardly, "post-left" attempt to avoid a more typical sexual harassment scenario (of course, the state-school guy calls her "Mummy").

It would be fine if *Industry* were merely porn. HBO had a whole show premised on a gigolo being well endowed; *Game of Thrones* made it socially acceptable for blockbuster TV to have gratuitous and pornographic sex scenes, designed to arouse, not to elucidate. What grates is *Industry*'s smug satisfaction with its own pseudo-sophistication. If these sex scenes were heterosexual missionary, the show would read as bizarre smut; as they are, they are no more subtle, and no less full of prurient close-ups. And yet because of its sprinkling of novelty (polyamory, BDSM, female onanism, humiliation, etc), the show is considered "real".

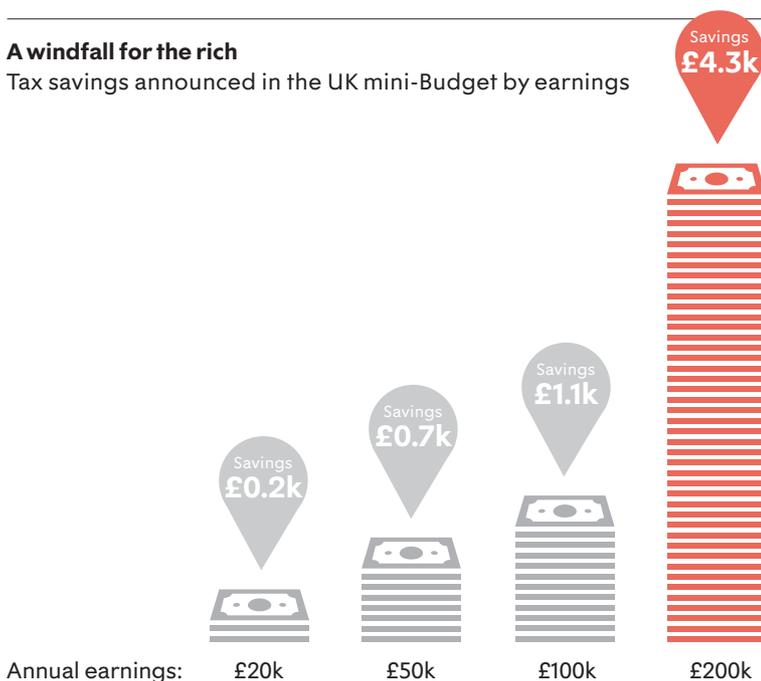
None of this is real. *Industry* is an outlandishly exaggerated view of the sex lives of young people, one exploiting youthful beauty in service of a reductive, alarmist world-view. Young colleagues do not speed through an exhaustive rotation of their co-workers. Nor do they harbour a secret sexual predilection that serves as a shorthand for their soul. And yet it's fun to watch them go at it in *Industry*, especially if you can simultaneously pat yourself on the back with your left hand for watching such gritty, socially critical art.

Ultimately, *Industry* is a void: charmless non-characters chattering like idiots into their headsets, and then running off for a few minutes of mercifully fewer words. In one scene, a character pushing a highly pessimistic investment strategy says, "It just so happens that the worst is also the truest." This seems to be *Industry*'s theory of art; but as it so happens, the worst is just the worst. ●

Chart of the Week

A windfall for the rich

Tax savings announced in the UK mini-Budget by earnings



SOURCE: BLICK ROTHENBERG VIA THE FT

The Diary

An alcohol-free Labour conference, missing my mother-in-law, and why *Strictly* matters

By Jess Phillips

The best piece of advice anyone has ever given me about party conferences is: you can either stay up late or you can drink a lot, but don't try to do both. You'll regret it the next morning, when you're in an 8am meeting with your local manufacturing lobby.

I have ventured on this year's Labour Party conference completely sober, which I've never tried before. I'm not pregnant, or in recovery. I am just on a health kick, which was in no small part inspired by the sudden death of my mother-in-law. I wasn't relishing the idea of conference without the wine.

But so far, so good, mainly because for the first time in a long time the Labour Party conference is largely a place of unity. It feels like we have a purpose for our future. We sang the national anthem and people cheered for fiscal responsibility without even a murmur of dissent, despite the suggestion that some Labour members might shiver at the sound of such policies. Turns out they're grown-ups. Page well and truly turned.

When Keir Starmer became leader, our party had recently suffered a historic defeat. The idea that we only had four years to turn it around and work towards building a government seemed as impossible as climbing Mount Everest in a pair of flip-flops. But in Liverpool, just over two years later, it is possible.

Labour's fighting force

I don't know why this is, but Starmer does not get anywhere near enough credit for turning around a huge leaking oil tanker. The progress of Labour under him is phenomenal. Anyone else who had managed such a feat would be presented as some sort of political magician. That he is considered and thoughtful, and not a



My brother saves people's lives, even if he did make mine tough at times. I'm proud to be known as his sister

joke-cracking charlatan or a lunatic trying to debase our currency, is presented, for some reason, as a negative. It's not fair and it's not accurate.

As I sat in the bar at midnight in a Liverpool hotel I wondered: why doesn't he get plaudits for changing everything? Perhaps I had given it less thought before because I would usually be a few wines down.

No number of cocktails in the world has ever made me feel as much like dancing as the idea that Labour is, for the first time in my political career, now a fighting force. Three cheers to that.

Kwarteng's trickle treat

The week has largely existed in the shadow of the Chancellor's mini-Budget. The good people of my constituency, Birmingham Yardley, were delighted to hear that Kwasi Kwarteng's plans mean that millionaires will be given a tax cut worth more than most of them earn in a year. As the markets reacted to the tumbling pound, the Chancellor managed to make oil and gas, which is traded in US dollars, even more expensive for the UK to import. The likelihood that mortgages will swiftly rise (which will also cause rent inflation for those not fortunate enough to own their home) is really some cracking tackling of the cost-of-living crisis.

Perhaps all the millionaires in Birmingham Yardley could give some of their £50k tax break to the families who will now suffer. Oh, but there aren't many, if any, millionaires in Birmingham Yardley. The trickles will have to flow uphill from the south-east. I'll put out a bucket and see what we can catch.

Siblings by association

"MP's brother to open 'safe houses' for addict students," read the headline in the *Times* on 26 September. I'm sure my brother, a recovered drug addict who is part of a team that has set up a drug recovery centre at the University of Birmingham, is thrilled that, once again, he has been labelled as just my brother. I'm not stupid; I know that I'm the news hook that means his project gets attention, and I'm pleased to help in this small way.

My kids often joke that they look forward to the day that I am described as their mom, rather than their being referred to as "Jess Phillips' son". I, on the other hand, look forward to the day when I read a headline that refers to me as the sister of a pioneering drug recovery chief. My brother saves people's lives, even if he did make mine pretty tough at times. I'm proud to be known as his sister.

A bittersweet return

As *Strictly Come Dancing* comes back to the BBC this year, I will be following it with a tinge of sadness. I used to watch it religiously with my lovely late mother-in-law, Diana. This is the first year she won't be by my side since the show started in 2004.

But I will push on and delight in the sequins and fake tan. After the last couple of weeks and, frankly, the last couple of years, *Strictly Come Dancing* and *The Great British Bake Off* are like group therapy for the nation. ●

Jess Phillips is the MP for Birmingham Yardley



Encounter

“Capitalism works best
with a strong state”
Dieter Helm on system
failure in the UK
By Will Dunn

In the age of populism, the electorate is presented with a series of complex disasters and asked to choose the policies that will fix them. Will it be huge increases or decreases in public spending? Renationalising industries? Selling them off? Every government arrives with a sweeping agenda for change, every new minister arrives with a new set of targets, and nothing seems to work. The rivers foam with sewage and agricultural run-off; energy is grotesquely overpriced and blackouts appear likely; the health service is on its knees. Britain’s infrastructure is creaking.

Dieter Helm, professor of economic policy at Oxford University, has been working on this problem for many years. He has advised both the UK government and the European Commission on energy policy, and wrote the 2017 *Cost of Energy Review*, which recommended many of the steps that the government is now, belatedly, undertaking to rationalise the energy market. In books including *The Carbon Crunch*, *Natural Capital* and *Net Zero*, he has addressed climate change and biodiversity loss, and was knighted in 2021 for his work on environment, energy and utilities policy. For Helm, the complex problems in energy, water, technology, health and education share a common root: a lack of coordination and integration; a systemic rot.

“Imagine you were wanting to build a house,” he explained, “and you didn’t bother to appoint a builder

ELLIE FOREMAN-PECK

or someone in charge of the contracts to sort out which bits need to be done when and how they're coordinated together. If you simply said, 'Someone can come along sometime and put a boiler in; someone can turn up and do the roof at some stage,' the shambles that would result [would be] very expensive."

Several years ago, Helm, now 65, laid this out for officials at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). Standing in front of a whiteboard, he began to add up the money spent by different bodies attempting to maintain the Thames as an environment. Agricultural subsidies pay farmers to pollute the river; water companies are paid to clean it up again; City Hall regulates property developers that build around the river; the Environment Agency tries to cope with flood defences; river drainage boards, river trusts, Defra itself and the regulator, Ofwat, are all separately spending in different directions. When the whiteboard was covered in agencies and estimates Helm turned to his government audience and asked: "Could anyone do it worse? Could anyone get less, for the amount of money that's currently being spent?"

While water is "the classic example of system failure", he told me, the same shambles is found everywhere. "You can see it in climate change and biodiversity loss... You can see it in the potholes in the road, the inability of the electricity system to handle electric transport, the state of the railways, the state of the sewers."

Helm recently described the UK's privatised utilities as "not fit for purpose", but he thinks it is not a matter of "private bad, public good". "Neither the nationalisation model nor the pure privatisation that we've inherited are fit for purpose," he said. Rather, Helm sees it as the job of the state to provide rules – a "system framework" – within which the private sector competes.

Trussonomics, according to the Prime Minister, is based on the embrace of "free markets", but that phrase is an oxymoron: no functioning market is objectively free of the state. "You must have property rights, you must have the enforcement of law and order, you must have quite a lot of regulation, to make a market work," Helm said. "People forget: capitalism developed most strongly from the Tudor period onwards. Why? Because capitalism works when you've got a strong state, within the framework of the rule of law. Getting government out of business doesn't solve anything."

He described Liz Truss's government as "very unconservative" in its approach to the environment and the economy, and in its idea that by spending and borrowing huge sums – at least £200bn on energy bill support, £161bn over five years on tax cuts, according to the Treasury – it can use demand to create supply: "It's like Keynesianism on steroids." The notion that the government should determine the growth rate is "actually very Chinese"; the free-market economist Friedrich Hayek, who was such an influence on Margaret Thatcher, would have "torn [his] hair out at the idea of governments announcing growth targets".

"For me, the primary job of the state in the economy is to ensure that the core infrastructures – and by that I include electricity, gas, water and communications, but also natural capital in the environment – are maintained

– proper capital maintenance – and enhanced so the next generation inherits a set of assets, which gives them the capabilities to live their lives as they choose to."

The term "capital maintenance" is important. In a business, it means the finance department can only chalk up a profit if the company's assets – which could be the money in the investment fund or the machines in the factory – have not reduced in value. In government, it would mean not borrowing for flashy new policies until the systems and services – the supply of affordable energy, water or data; the availability of healthcare – are maintained to at least their previous levels. Helm said capital maintenance should have "the first claim on revenues... You have to pay to fix the potholes in the road before you've got surplus money to spend. That's not what we do: we borrow to fix the potholes when they're a current cost and not a capital cost."

This is a crucial mistake, he said, as infrastructure is "absolutely essential for economic growth". The OECD is among a number of institutions that have observed that tax breaks, such as those introduced by Truss and Kwasi Kwarteng, "cannot compensate for poor infrastructure" when companies decide where to invest.

How decisions get made is also crucial. Helm's 2017 review notes early on the "highly effective growth in lobbying" in the energy sector. "You need to design institutions and regulatory frameworks which are as lobby-proof as possible," he told me, giving as an example the smart meters that have been rolled out to 29.5 million homes. In almost every other European country, these meters are installed in the distribution network, where they are "fantastically valuable" in coordinating power supply more efficiently. In the UK, thanks to "massive lobbying by the supply companies, who wanted to capture the data", they are installed in people's homes, where the onus is on consumers to be more efficient. "It's an example of everything that goes wrong when you follow ideology, and don't think about the system characteristics you're trying to get."

A similar commitment to ideology lies behind the government's fixation on fracking, which Helm says will not produce any meaningful amount of energy in the UK "unless the state pays for it, and the state couldn't possibly afford the cost that would be involved".

At the same time, he said, the public has failed to understand how integral fossil fuels are to the economy. "They think that lots of wind turbines mean we're not that dependent. We're 80 per cent dependent on fossil fuels, as we were in 1970. As is Germany, as is the globe. There has been no retreat from fossil fuels since 1990."

This makes it all the more urgent to have a government based on true "system planning", he said. Without a strong system that has agreed goals, government remains a fight rather than a process, and the costs – which are inescapable – continue to mount.

"We now face the need to recreate our infrastructure. This is a big, almost Victorian, moment," he warned. "We're not doing capital maintenance, we're not paying for the pollution we cause, we're living beyond our means. And that means we're just cheating the next generation, and doing it at a scale on which almost no previous generation has done before." ●

"We now face the need to recreate our infrastructure. This is a big, almost Victorian, moment"

ANDREW MARR



Politics

Keir Starmer's "Country first, party second" speech shows he is serious about power

Political conferences rarely alter much in the world beyond their policed nylon barricades and beer-scented fog of ambition.

But sometimes they mark a turn: a movement collapsing or reviving; a leader learning to lead, or a leader losing the plot. Think Neil Kinnock against Militant in Bournemouth in 1985; or Margaret Thatcher not turning in Brighton five years earlier; or Theresa May's disastrous speech in Manchester in 2017. Well, the Labour conference in Liverpool this year is up there in terms of significance.

It was a display of discipline, "God save the King" patriotism and a quiet lust for power, topped off by one of the best leader's speeches I have heard from any side for a long time. What did we learn? That after a dozen years Labour is almost certainly heading back to power.

Many on the left will have found the discipline suffocating, the lack of radical fire a bit deflating, and all those Union flags and references to the late Queen mildly nauseating. But unpatriotic parties don't win power. And all the radical fire in the world doesn't mean anything if you don't have power.

Important lines were drawn. One is on tax. The shadow chancellor Rachel Reeves's explanation of how she would spend the proceeds of reimposing the 45p rate – on nurses, midwives and the desperately needed expansion of medical school places – was perhaps the clearest example of how this crucial battle is going to be fought. Rail will be renationalised – so we know that device is still in the toolkit. The shadow work and pensions secretary Jonathan Ashworth's plan to

get hundreds of thousands of unemployed over-fifties back into the workforce may not be an obvious headline-grabber, but in terms of growth it matters.

Those looking for more imaginative thinking will get some of what they want later this year when Gordon Brown's commission publishes its work on tax, Scotland and constitutional reform. But Labour may not have too much time to refine and shape its messages. This whole conference was, of course, overshadowed by the dramatic news from the south about the pound and the cost of borrowing.

Buffeted by the markets, the Conservative Party is close to losing the plot, just as it finally gains a new leader. As we await the Bank of England's response to a tanking currency, market assumptions are for anything up to 6 per cent interest rates next year. This would be devastating for many middle-class mortgage holders and businesses; politically it could finish the Tories. You might think the most obvious response would be a U-turn, or at least an L-turn, in Truss-Kwarteng strategy. But they have made it crystal clear that isn't going to happen. And if it did, they'd have marginally less credibility in the Conservative family than the flower-pot men.

Although Kwasi Kwarteng is bringing forward his medium-term fiscal plan from

In the middle of a national crisis, the Labour leader found an inner belief

next year to 23 November, which is some kind of concession, he wants to go further on unfunded tax cuts despite the markets. They used to be regarded by the Tory right as an unanswerable reality. Now they are apparently dominated by unpatriotic, sandal-wearing, lentil-chewing bed-wetters. Who knew?

Meanwhile, the next part of the strategy – freezing public spending by rejecting a review – opens up what may turn out to be even worse politics. It isn't only tax cuts for the rich; it will soon be effective spending cuts across the public sector.

One recent poll had Labour scoring 45 per cent, a 12-point lead over the Tories, which would give them something like a 56-seat majority at the next election. This seemed an outlier until it was followed by another giving Labour a 17-point lead, the biggest for more than 20 years. As I say, this is a pivot moment.

It's possible the markets will rally and the growth-or-bust strategy will prove effective in the medium term. But if the pound continues on its current trajectory, interest rates are jacked up quickly and the promise is only of more tax cuts, then level-headed Conservatives will panic, and rightly.

But the Tories' options are very limited. They can't put the country through yet another leadership contest: how would panicky markets react to Britain having no government for another slice of the autumn? Some are speculating that Boris Johnson might try some kind of spectacular return. Perhaps he might unite with recent foes to propose an emergency government of all the Tory talents? But again, it seems bonkers. Forcing out Liz Truss and Kwarteng would be dirty and personal, the last spasm of a dying creature.

Back to Liverpool. From now until the next general election, the campaigning will be relentless. The big challenge for Starmer at the conference was to show that he could find the words to win a proper audience. He did.

All conference speeches have a certain windiness. But his was nailed on to the concrete experiences of everyday life: the raw sewage in rivers; the backlogs in courts and hospitals; burglaries going unpunished; the people told to drive themselves to hospital after a heart attack; the cold; the fear of bills.

It was the speech of someone who has properly listened to the worry pulsing through the country. After a tribute to the Queen following the Queen's death – he didn't forget that – Starmer spoke of "a Britain all at sea where a cloud of anxiety hangs over working people".

The speech relentlessly portrayed Labour as a party of reassurance, serious-minded common sense and patient duty – a rather Queen Elizabeth II Labour.

Starmer was brutal about the past failures of the left. He painted himself squarely in the tradition of Clement Attlee, Harold Wilson and Tony Blair. In different ways they would all have signed up for what might be the new Starmer slogan, bold at a gathering of the faithful: “Country first, party second.”

Much of the speech, quite rightly, focused on energy, the environment and green growth. He promised the creation of a publicly owned renewable energy company and the creation of a sovereign wealth fund. Labour’s emphasis on investment in carbon-free technologies isn’t happy-clappy, but essential and urgent. The party still needs to demonstrate more clearly how the £28bn annual climate investment is going to stay within the UK economy, creating jobs here, rather than bleed out into other countries building wind farm blades or solar panels. And it needs to crunch down its messaging so that everyone understands how it ends the sentence: “Labour will get growth by...”

But – and this was central to the speech – growth isn’t everything. People want security, belonging and decency as well. Less chaos and mayhem in our public realm would also be quite nice, wouldn’t it? When Starmer promised a politics of integrity that would unite rather than divide, respect other points of view and focus on the long-term rather than the short, it sounded curiously exciting. All that old dull stuff – policies that are clearly costed, borrowing only to invest for the future, an office for value for money – feels new and interesting because it’s what we need.

Politics depends upon its animal spirits. Labour has achieved much, but it has been missing something essential: a certain urgent gusto, an inner belief. In the middle of a grave national crisis, Keir Starmer found that something. He told the Labour conference to believe that Britain would deal with the cost-of-living crisis and get back its future, becoming again a force for good in the world and “a fairer, greener, more dynamic nation”.

Rhetorical conference blather, you may well think. The kind of thing speech-writers speech-write. Well, yes, I’m cynical. I’m grouchy and suspicious. I’ve seen and heard it all before. But growth does come from the bottom up and the middle out. I did feel a thrill of determination run through that stifling hall in Liverpool. Something in Labour changed there. This is going to happen. ●

THE NS

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Letter of the week

Fantasy economics



Both your Leader and Andrew Marr (Cover Story, 23 September) mention the desirability of a pro-growth policy. But it is difficult to see how Liz Truss's tax cuts will achieve 2.5 per cent growth in the long term, even though the cuts and the borrowing will give some short-term relief. Apart from the inequity of his tax reforms, Kwasi Kwarteng's measures appear to show little idea of how commerce and industry work. It is deluded to expect

that corporation tax cuts and uncapping banker bonuses will persuade investors frightened by Brexit to return to the UK with sacks of gold. The proposal for 40 "investment zones" sounds as tenuous as Boris Johnson's 48 "new hospitals".

We also hear much about a "high-skill, high-wage tech economy". In reality we see a government allowing the sale of successful British tech companies to foreign firms, such as DeepMind and SwiftKey to Google and Microsoft respectively, as well as other companies such as Autonomy, Arm and Newport Wafer Fab. Some of these acquisitions were approved by Kwarteng as industrial secretary. Meanwhile, the pound slides, interest rates rise and borrowing grows. *Geoff Brown, Walton-on-Thames, Surrey*

The growth gap

As your Leader (23 September) points out, Liz Truss's pro-growth provisions do not stimulate growth, as the rich save while the poor spend disposable income. It also suggests raising Universal Credit "would be both fairer and better for growth". In contrast, the latest provisions for Universal Credit claimants under Truss include a tougher regime of sanctions faced by those who do not attend sessions to help them find "better jobs". *David Clarke, Witney, Oxfordshire*

Margaret Thatcher's economic principles became the ten commandments of the Conservative Party, and Liz Truss has embraced them with the zeal of a crusader. Thatcher's apparent improvements were

the privatisation of monopolies (a disaster), fiscal discipline and changes to labour laws. But, given her history, screeching U-turn about capping energy prices and lax fiscal control, Truss's faith may turn out to be a case of, "Lord, give me chastity, but not yet." *Guill Gil, London N1*

Lifting the ban

The NS asks, "Where will fracking resume first?" (State of the Nation, 23 September). The only place that has been fracked in the UK is Cuadrilla's Preston New Road site in Lancashire. The site breached the agreed regulatory seismic limit of 0.5 with tremors measuring 1.6, 2.1 and 2.9 in a single week in 2019. A British Geological Survey report published in July 2022 concludes that we

don't have sufficient scientific information to allow fracking to restart in the UK.

Nonetheless, my bet is that the answer to your question is... Lancashire. *Austen Lynch, Garstang, Lancashire*

Dark matter

Having finished the book, I take issue with Imogen West-Knights' review of Robert Galbraith's (aka JK Rowling's) *The Ink Black Heart* (The Critics, 16 September). West-Knights' assertion that a crime thriller has no business "being 1,000 pages long" and failure to mention the book's main theme of dangerous off- and online misogyny (the real ink black heart) made me wonder whether she reached the end. West-Knights says that she would "hate to conflate the art and the artist", then blames Rowling for her going on to do exactly that – a fresh twist on victim blaming. *Lucy McCarraher, Norfolk*

Reform in name only

James McSweeney (Correspondence, 23-29 September) refers to David Cameron granting a referendum on electoral reform. Rather than proportional representation, the 2011 referendum was about the Alternative Vote (AV), which produces nothing like a proportional result. The Electoral Reform Society estimated that, under AV, Cameron's overall majority in 2015 would have been 24 instead of 12, despite the Conservatives receiving only 37 per cent of the vote. *Alan Pavelin, Chislehurst, Kent*

The incredible truth

Hats off to Howard Jacobson (The Diary, 23 September) for naming "incredible" as a linguistic irritant. It was Matt Hancock's superfluous repetitions of this superlative in a single paragraph of a Covid briefing that first alerted me; since when "incredible" has become the dominant adjective de jour, eclipsing all other more meaningful alternatives.

Its proliferation among BBC Radio 4 broadcasters, commentators and interviewees is a new norm of epidemic hyperbole. A nadir was reached, perhaps, when I heard an educated interviewee utter "incredibly unique". *Paul Anthony Newman, Winchester, Hants*

Major betrayal

Nicholas Lezard (Down and Out, 23 September) describes John Major as a “thoroughly decent man without airs and graces”. I fail to see how any politician who oversaw the selling of school playing fields could be described as such.

Christine Williams, Llandysul, Ceredigion

Riot act

Andrew Marr cannot believe that the British “moan but they don’t riot”. (Cover Story, 2 September). What about the major riots in 1981 (two), 1985, 1990, 2001 and 2011? Further back, 1768 (Wilkes), 1780 (Gordon), 1811/12 (Luddites) and 1830 (“Swing”) come to mind.

Jonathan Kiek, St Albans, Hertfordshire

Reading list

Regarding travelling on the Elizabeth Line to Reading, Nicholas Lezard (Down and Out, 2 September) should read *A Much Maligned Town: Opinions of Reading 1586-1997*. I lived there from 1956 to 1973 before escaping to London on British Rail.

Caroline Holmes, London N17

Taking up the cudgels

Kevin Maguire (Commons Confidential, 23 September) refers to a wooden implement used in shinty. The wooden implement is actually a caman.

Ian Hartgroves, Stourbridge, West Midlands

Write to letters@newstatesman.co.uk

We reserve the right to edit letters



“I feel as sound as a pound”

COMMONS CONFIDENTIAL

By Kevin Maguire



Keir Starmer and Labour were turbocharged at their Liverpool shindig by Kamikwazi shooting the Truss government in both feet with his special financial operation. The conference proved a juicy money-spinner, with Starmer boasting to exhibitors it was the most profitable ever. He disclosed that companies and organisations paid £1m for stalls to peddle wares and ideas. The applause from those he was shaking down was the sound of corporate Britain calculating that Starmer is on the road to Downing Street.

The first question to Starmer at a behind-closed-doors session for City slickers included a surprise confession. Sherard Cowper-Coles, once our man in Kabul and now a senior adviser to the chair and group chief executive of HSBC, outed himself as a “proud member of the Labour Party”. Bankers for Labour is arguably the most significant development since Jeremy Corbyn.

The switch in hereditary monarchs led nervy Labour to replace the slogan “A Fresh Start With Labour” with “A Fairer, Greener Future” to avoid any hint of disrespect. The rail union Micks, Lynch and Whelan, most of the Unite delegation, a shed-load of MPs and at least one peer stayed out of the hall to avoid singing God Save the King. One republican argued playing the anthem was sexist. “Labour’s never had a female leader in over 122 years and didn’t sing ‘God Save the Queen’ once during her 70 years,” sniffed the roundhead, “then along comes a man and we’re ordered to bellow praise to a King. What does that tell you?” It’s a theory anyway.

The left was largely marginalised if defiantly unbowed during all the Starmania. Revellers entering Dawn Butler’s Jamaica night were asked to show a recent photo of them on a picket line or pay a fiver. The workers, united, will always avoid entrance fees.

Corbyn, whispered a comrade, was on best behaviour – wrongly believing the whip may yet be restored to allow him to stand again in Islington North. He expressed solidarity with striking Liverpool dockers snubbed by the Labour leader, but at a Stop the War rally Corbyn avoided referencing Nato – criticism of the military alliance is a Starmer red line since Putin’s Ukraine invasion. The bad news for the past leader is his successor still won’t have him back.

Echoes of the early Blair era were everywhere in Liverpool. The door code at a boozy bash thrown by Woburn Partners, a communications firm set up by James Robinson, an adviser to Tom (soon to be Lord?) Watson when he was deputy leader, suggested many believe things can only get better. The pin number was 1997. ●

The applause was the sound of corporate Britain calculating that Starmer is on the road to Downing Street

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

Liz Truss and the rise of the market millennials

The free-market thinkers and ideas behind the most radical economic experiment in Britain for 40 years

By Jeremy Cliffe

For a period this summer, it was popular to dismiss Liz Truss as a flip-flopper. The argument went something like this: she was a Liberal Democrat, then a Conservative; a Remainer then a die-hard Brexiteer; a modernising Cameron then a darling of the Thatcherite hard right. In this reading, her free-market overtures during the party leadership campaign were merely the latest act of opportunism, a calculated but hollow pitch to a Tory membership still pining for a new Iron Lady.

This line was never very persuasive, as nothing in Truss's past was fundamentally incompatible with her proclaimed ideological commitment to a small-state, free-market model. And now, just three weeks into her tenure in No 10, it has been comprehensively buried. The unofficial Budget from her like-minded Chancellor, Kwasi Kwarteng, on 23 September, removed any remaining doubt by ushering in the biggest package of tax cuts since the Conservative chancellor Anthony Barber's expansionary "dash for growth" in 1972, and by targeting the benefit of those cuts overwhelmingly on the richest.

Far from popularity-chasing opportunism, this amounts to a huge experiment that, as the Conservative commentator Tim Montgomerie has put it, effectively treats Britain as a giant "laboratory" for economically libertarian ideas. The success or failure of that experiment will make or break Truss's government. Say what you like about the wisdom of this approach – and the markets have had their say – but it is absolutely not the method of a flip-flopper. Rather, it is that of a convinced member of a deep-rooted network of ideas, institutions and thinkers born on the shores of Lake Geneva over 75 years ago. It is impossible to understand the ideological zeal with which Truss and Kwarteng are pushing Britain towards the economic brink without understanding that network.

In 1947 the economist Friedrich Hayek convened the Mont Pelerin Society, named after the bucolic location of the Swiss hotel where this grouping of free-market thinkers gathered. Inspired by Hayek's warnings of a "road to serfdom" – as set forth in his 1944 book of that name – they were united in concern at the apparent march of international collectivism, in both its totalitarian (Soviet) and democratic (social democrat and New Deal) forms.

Over the subsequent decades members and associates of this group established successive generations of influential think tanks advancing anti-collectivist economics. In 1955, Antony Fisher founded the Institute of Economic Affairs in London (IEA). This would help inspire a second wave in the 1970s, including the Cato Institute and the Heritage Foundation in Washington DC and, in London, the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS) and the ▶



AXEL RANGEL GARCIA

Cover Story

◀ Adam Smith Institute (ASI). As the historian Daniel Stedman Jones puts it in his book *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman, and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics*, these transatlantic “ideological entrepreneurs” provided both a long-term incubator for such ideas and a bridge from high economic theory to applied policy practice. Both Reaganomics and Thatcherism would have been unthinkable without them.

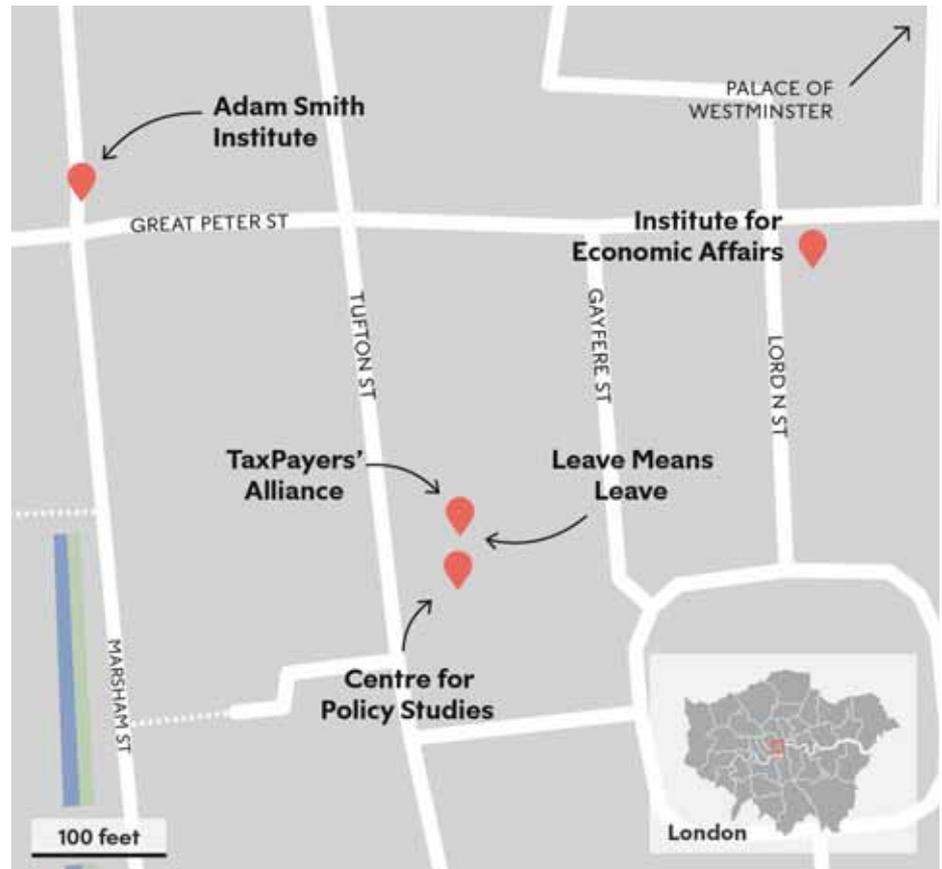
From the 1980s to the early 2000s came the next wave of more public-facing bodies such as Americans for Tax Reform and the TaxPayers’ Alliance (TPA). Matthew Elliott, who worked at the former before returning to his native UK to found the latter in 2004, would also go on to help establish and lead the Vote Leave campaign in the run-up to the 2016 Brexit referendum.

These bodies are not homogeneous. Cato, for example, is classically libertarian on social issues like LGBT+ rights, whereas Heritage is hard-line conservative. There are also differences of approach. Mark Littlewood, the director of the IEA, who has known Truss since their student days – they both attended Oxford in the 1990s – differentiates between more “upstream” think tanks like his own, which are closer to academia and concentrate on disseminating ideas among opinion-forming elites, and more “downstream” organisations, which are focused on government policymaking (like the CPS) and shaping debate in the mass media (like the TPA).

Marc Stears tutored Truss when she was a PPE student at Oxford and today leads the Policy Lab at University College London. He notes that the more theoretical “upstream” parts of the libertarian think-tank spectrum have grown in significance as academia has tilted leftwards. “There are fewer centres in the big universities where these thinkers cluster,” he told me. “So that makes the role of think tanks more important.”

Yet certain traits are common to the Mont Pelerin think-tank family. One is philosophical. Stears says: “Hayek’s ideas are really important because of the underlying spirit that animates them: that there is no such thing as collective intelligence; the state does not know things and only individuals can really know things. That faith in the wisdom of the crowd, as expressed in price mechanisms, is very deeply ingrained.”

He also points to a shared tendency to be patient, citing the Marxist philosopher GA



London: libertarian think tanks are concentrated around Tufton Street, Westminster

Cohen’s observation that the supply-side right has succeeded at “keeping the fires burning” even through periods in the political wilderness. Littlewood agrees that the greatest strength of organisations like his is to invest in the long-term dissemination of their ideas.

There is also geographical communality. The majority of these think tanks are clustered around Tufton Street, a Georgian terrace in Westminster, and Massachusetts Avenue, a long boulevard in Washington DC (a distinction being that “Mass Ave” is also home to think tanks of various other intellectual outlooks). These two worlds have long been linked by transatlantic personalities crisscrossing between them. Prominent examples include Fisher (who founded the Atlas Network, a Washington-based umbrella organisation of international free-market think tanks), Edwin Feulner (a former IEA intern who co-founded Heritage) and Eamonn Butler (an ally of Feulner’s who co-founded the ASI in London). Today they number Ryan Bourne – a Truss ally, formerly of the IEA and now at Cato; Daniel Hannan – a Brexiteer former MEP and founder of the Initiative for Free Trade (IFT); and Nile Gardiner – head of the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom at Heritage.

Ideologically, the institutions and thinkers

of this world share a common commitment to a low-tax, low-regulation, Anglo-Saxon social model, distinct from the social democratic “European” one. They tend to favour mechanisms for advancing that model, such as free-trade deals, “levelling down” state intervention, and demarcated zones pioneering extremely small-state government (variously referred to as “freeports”, “investment zones” or “charter cities”). They instinctively prefer market-led solutions to collective problems, such as climate change, over state-led ones. Perhaps not unrelatedly, many of them draw on opaque funding from big private-sector interests. Cato, for instance, has received backing from corporations such as FedEx and Google, and, in the past, from the tobacco industry – which has also been a source of funding for both the IEA and ASI.

In the Britain of 2022 these instincts express themselves in a particular analysis of the state of the country. This, as Truss-ite thinkers explain, starts from the argument that British governments since Margaret Thatcher – Conservative as well as Labour – have become much too sentimental about the distribution and moral character of growth, and too little focused on raising the



Washington DC: many US free-market institutes are on, or near, Massachusetts Avenue

overall growth level. As Bourne puts it: “Liz Truss would not consider it a failure if she got the growth rate up significantly but not equally across regions.”

It is not a politics of pursuing what is popular per se, but of letting “what works” (defined as whatever lifts the growth rate) speak for itself. “They won’t be transactional about policies,” Bourne says of Truss and Kwarteng. “It’s the whole string of things. Incrementally, the patient might not like the medicine, but overall they will feel healthier and revived.”

Even during her student years in Oxford, recalls Marc Stears, Truss prided herself on defying intellectual convention. “Her primary characteristic was a love of controversy, quirkiness and idiosyncrasy... Her thinking was always intriguing and contrarian, if not always fully worked through.” A brief flirtation with the Lib Dems is not entirely inconsistent with right-wing libertarianism (the party’s *Orange Book* tendency has links with this world too, and as a student Truss was also a member of the Hayek Society). “She definitely sat outside the prevailing social democratic orthodoxy even then,” Stears says.

Truss worked in think-tank land herself before her election to parliament, serving as deputy director of Reform from 2008 to 2010,

a period when the organisation was laying some of the intellectual foundations of the spending cuts and market-led approach to public services that would be introduced under David Cameron and George Osborne. “Cameron and Osborne may have been more Thatcherite where Truss is more Reaganite,” notes Tim Bale of Queen Mary University of London, a historian of the Conservative Party. “But they shared the basic belief that the market should be the main force in economic life, the state as small as possible and the individual as large as possible.”

Shared beliefs, yes, but with different degrees of intensity. In 2010, Truss typified a romantically Thatcherite intake of new Tory MPs who thought Cameron and Osborne were being too cautious about slashing the state.

“When you think that people’s politicisa-

At Oxford, Truss prided herself on defying intellectual convention

tion tends to take place in their teens and early twenties, it is perfectly understandable that MPs who had come of age around 1997 would equate past Conservative election victories with what they saw as Margaret Thatcher’s uncompromising free-market ideology, rather than her more compromising reality,” Bale says.

Truss rapidly became a figurehead for this generation. “Liz was the first convener of the Free Enterprise Group,” recalls Littlewood, referring to the establishment in 2011 of a cluster of like-minded Conservative MPs – which was effectively the IEA’s parliamentary branch. “And Kwasi Kwarteng was the second.”

Along with other free-marketeers from the Tory 2010 intake, such as Priti Patel and Dominic Raab, the duo co-authored *After the Coalition* (2011), and then the more radical *Britannia Unchained* (2012), both small-statist screeds drawing heavily on Tufton Street thinking.

If there is a moment when Truss appears to have been genuinely opportunistic, it was probably not her supposed conversion to the Brexit cause after the 2016 referendum but her initial support for Remain. That would explain the speed and conviction with which she emerged as a “born again” Brexiteer afterwards, a political rebirth that accelerated in a succession of speeches following her appointment as chief secretary to the Treasury in 2017.

A particularly notable speech was delivered at the Cato Institute in Washington in 2018. In it, Truss called for a new, small-state “Anglo-American dream” driven by an emergent generation of “market millennials” used to the freedoms of the app economy – “Uber-riding, Airbnb-ing, Deliveroo-eating freedom fighters”, as she put it elsewhere. “Free enterprise is a hymn to individuality and non-conformity,” she proclaimed to her Cato audience. “It’s what allows the young to flower and the anti-establishment to flourish.”

Bourne helped set up the speech. I put it to him that her argument ignores strong youth support for the likes of Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders. “It’s a case of stated preference versus revealed preference,” he said. “Liz’s essential argument is that, in their actions, young people in both countries are very entrepreneurial, independent, and enjoy the fruits of a liberal, dynamic economy. She thinks there is a latent enthusiasm for markets if we can reform things in a direction that enables these people to fulfil their wants and needs, like starting companies and buying homes.”

During that September 2018 visit to Washington, Truss held off-the-record meetings on “regulatory reform” with representatives of Heritage as well as discussions with ▶

Cover Story

◀ Americans for Tax Reform. Her visit was immediately followed by Cato and Hannan's IFT publishing an "ideal" UK-US free trade deal that included input from the IEA and Heritage. It promoted a greater role for private firms in British education and health-care, an end to the "precautionary principle" in British food regulation as well as watered-down environmental rules. (In her next role, as trade secretary, Truss would even appoint Hannan to the Board of Trade.)

It was around this time that she became engrossed in books by the American historian Rick Perlstein on the making of the Reagan revolution. These tell of how the Gipper adopted advice given to Richard Nixon by, of all people, the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev: "If the people believe there's an imaginary river out there, you don't tell them there's no river there. You build an imaginary bridge over the imaginary river." In Perlstein's telling of Reagan's rise, that meant a cocktail of infectious optimism and cynical exploitation of social grievances.

By the time Truss became foreign secretary in 2021 – and the prospect of a leadership election and the prize of 10 Downing Street came into view – her ideology, rooted in the school of thought founded at Mont Pelerin, was long-established. "Her ideological disposition is towards the likes of Robert Mundell, Alan Reynolds and Arthur Laffer," says Bourne, "the original supply-side thinkers in the US who influenced the underpinnings of the Reagan administration. The basic idea is that monetary policy deals with inflation and that fiscal and especially tax policy has to deliver incentives for long-run growth."

Another inspiration is "Rogernomics" in 1980s New Zealand, when the Labour government's finance minister Roger Douglas slashed trade tariffs and non-tariff barriers and pioneered monetary policy targeting. (The legacy of that neoliberal experiment remains deeply divisive on the New Zealand left.)

So total is Truss's faith in free-market ideas and the networks that produced them that, now she is Prime Minister, the supposed free-market outriders are finding themselves being outridden by the sitting government. Littlewood of the IEA marvels at the scope of the unofficial Budget. "I have long tried to fine-tune out criticism of Conservative governments for not being radical enough; now

they're being more radical than even we are requesting." He cites the government's commitment to scrap all remaining EU law as an example. Even when the IEA and Truss disagreed, the closeness was evident; its criticism of her energy price cap promptly elicited an explanatory call from No 10.

Old Tuftonians hold many of the senior jobs in her government. "Matt Sinclair is the standout example," says Littlewood of Truss's chief economic adviser, formerly of the TPA. "He is steeped in this world." Ruth Porter, deputy chief of staff, is an IEA alumna. Sophie Jarvis, No 10's political secretary, was formerly at the ASI. "She will have hired and appointed people who are on board with her ideologically," agrees Bourne. With Kwarteng as Chancellor, as well as James Cleverly as Foreign Secretary and Jacob Rees-Mogg as Business Secretary, the major cabinet roles are held by true believers.

Free-market think tanks, like the IEA, that have long considered themselves to be outside the broad British consensus have used provocation and controversy to catch attention, shake things up and try to shift debates. Truss, observes Marc Stears of his former student, is now bringing that approach into government. "She loves this idea that the action is in the reaction, prodding and provoking people. The unofficial Budget was like going to a slightly mad libertarian think-tank report launch."

He draws a contrast between Cameron, who took risks such as the Brexit referendum because he believed things were fundamentally stable, and Truss, who "actually wants to destabilise things. She thinks the prevailing order is wrong and there is a need to break things to rebuild."

In Tuftonland, and in its US equivalent, the announcements of 23 September are seen as just the beginning, despite the reaction from the markets. Next up, it is hoped and anticipated: spending cuts to balance out the tax cuts.



"I'm leaving you because your jokes are too obvious"

But where and what to cut? In 2015 Bourne and Kwarteng co-authored a book, *A Time for Choosing*, that proposed halving the number of Whitehall departments. During her leadership campaign, Truss floated the possibility of regionalising public sector pay (this idea was quickly dropped). In his statement, Kwarteng hinted at coming welfare cuts.

There is also an expectation of more deregulation. "Kwasi's advisers talk of unveiling a whole series of supply-side reforms in the next six weeks," says Littlewood, hopefully: "a permanent state of dramatic policy announcements."

Bourne cites childcare, infrastructure, energy and housing (street votes on city planning decisions, for example) as possible focuses, as well as farming ("where there might be a quid pro quo where they scale back government support but relax regulations"). "And I expect this philosophy to apply to lifestyle freedoms, too," adds Littlewood. "Deregulating ads for sugary drinks, McDonald's advertising on the London Underground, that sort of thing."

Think tanks, of course, do not need to worry about elections. But the Truss-Tufton mentality is that results trump politics. "Her broad view is 'We have to show, not tell,'" says Bourne. "We have to get on with free-market reforms and when they create results they create a baseline, and that wins hearts and minds." There are echoes of the Prime Minister's vision of "market millennials" here: that young people will come to recognise their small-state instincts when they feel the benefit of such politics put into action.

Littlewood acknowledges Truss's uphill electoral battle, but says it is time to start asking: "What sort of reforms might be considered for the event that she wins the next election and has five more years of power?"

Given the audacity of the Prime Minister's first moves in office and the dramatic market response, the mind boggles. The IEA's director is looking forward to October's annual conference of the Mont Pelerin Society in Oslo, and Randian discussions on big-picture libertarian topics such as whether cryptocurrencies will make state fiat currency obsolete over the coming decades.

Some on the left will read this article, note the apocalyptic market numbers and economic forecasts, and wonder whether it gives Truss too much credit to ponder the ideas, thinkers and institutions influencing her policies. But it is precisely the radicalism – in a reckless, negative sense of the term – that makes understanding this world-view so important. Arguably, the influence of institutions such as the IEA and the TPA, and their American cousins, has been too little scrutinised. So too has the in-

GEORGE LEIGH



tellectual assumptions they have popularised. In one televised debate during the summer's Conservative leadership contest, Rishi Sunak took direct aim at Truss's unfunded tax cuts, saying they would drive up inflation; she replied, with total conviction, that responding to inflation was simply a matter of being "tough enough on the monetary supply". Yet the discussion that ensued was concerned not with the underlying world-view that this revealed, but whether or not Sunak had "mansplained" to her. Substance in politics matters, for better or for worse. It demands engagement and sceptical analysis.

Moreover, for opponents of the Conservatives, studying the heritage of the ideas now being enacted by the most ideologically driven cabinet since the 1980s is key to understanding their political weaknesses. It would be foolish blithely to assume that Truss and her government will self-combust. Bad governments demand more opposition, not less. And opposition requires understanding.

The Mont Pelerin network – and the institutions it manifested in London and Washington – has long contained certain tensions that can be exploited by opponents of the Truss project. One tension is that between a Thatcherite insistence on sound money and a Reaganite debt-funded dash for growth. Why did the Mont Pelerin vision express itself as the former in Britain and the latter in America? Asking that question reveals fundamental differences between the two economies: the American dollar is more formida-

ble than the British pound and the US has more "expansionary" demographics (a younger population with a higher birth rate), making the politics of debt, and how the market views it, different in the two countries.

Related to this are the manifold differences between the Chicago and Austrian schools of free-market economics. The former is associated with Milton Friedman and tends to assert the perfect rationalism of markets and the value of printing money; the latter is associated with Ludwig von Mises and asserts that limited knowledge can lead to market failure, is sceptical about money printing and generally places less faith in achieving mastery over market conditions through data.

Another tension within small-state philosophy concerns what should fill the gap that's left when the state retreats. For some, like Truss, omniscient market forces are the answer, and the goal is a society of empowered individuals – "market millennials" and the like – freed from limitations.

It would be foolish blithely to assume that Truss and her government will self-combust

For others, the answer is non-market, but also non-state, forms of communal endeavour, like cooperatives. "Think of localist Tory MPs like Neil O'Brien, Michael Gove, Jesse Norman," urges Stears. "They're not big state, or big market either, but more believers in bottom-up power." It is from this Tory cooperative tradition that he reckons some of the most forceful opposition to Truss's free-market experiment could come.

Finally, there is the tension between the libertarian claim to be on the side of the little guy and the dissenter, and the reality that Tuftonland and the Massachusetts Avenue small-state set are extremely close to big-business insiders. When Ronald Reagan came to power with his Heritage-approved plan in 1980, the consumer-rights advocate Ralph Nader called it right: "Reagan really is much more of a corporatist than a conservative."

Over the course of his presidency corporate welfare, with subsidies benefiting large market insiders, flourished and the national debt tripled. Margaret Thatcher, though more averse to debt, provided established British firms with a similar boon in the UK, in the form of the privatisation of nationalised utilities and other state-owned assets.

Truss may wax poetic to rooms of supposedly Hayekian Washingtonians about market forces allowing "the young to flower and the anti-establishment to flourish", but her actions and policies are recipes to lock in the market and societal power of the already powerful.

On the visit to Washington in 2018, in which she gave that speech, Liz Truss tellingly met not with small firms of entrepreneurs but the American Legislative Exchange Council (a lobbying body that has been accused of giving big firms influence in American politics). So far, her environment policies seem designed to serve the interests of big polluters rather than market insurgents in the green-energy sector; her deregulation push appears tailored to the interests of existing market insiders with big lobbying budgets; and her proposed tax cuts will certainly benefit the already rich, rather than the worst off. None of this is a "hymn to individuality and non-conformity". It is corporatism.

The challenge now for Liz Truss's opponents, both inside the Conservative family and on the left, is to engage with these tensions and use them to expose the contradictions of the great unruly experiment being rolled out from Downing Street. Because to do so is to contest what is really driving it; to have a chance of changing the public debate and building a solid foundation for a different and better national project. Bad ideas make a much more obvious and persuasive target than bad intentions. ●



'Life affirming'

SundayTimes



'Its playfulness is infectious'

The Guardian



'A feel-good treat'

The Stage

The joyful and inspiring story of Neil 'Nello' Baldwin. Which really happened.

MARVELLUS



A play by Neil Baldwin and Malcolm Clarke

Adapted for the stage by Neil Baldwin and Theresa Heskins
Directed by Theresa Heskins



DAVID GAUKE



Another Voice Liz Truss's Conservative Party is now a danger to itself – and to the country

Budgets are a tricky business. You have to appeal to different audiences and balance competing objectives. Ideally, there should be something to keep your backbenchers and media cheerleaders happy; it should also appeal to the wider public; it should be sufficiently fiscally responsible to keep the bond markets off your back; and it should strengthen the ability of the economy to grow and prosper.

We do not, of course, live in an ideal world, and some of these objectives and audiences have mutually exclusive requirements. Preparing a Budget is all about trade-offs. If you are fortunate enough to be involved, the process is the most intellectually challenging that you will ever experience, even if you are rarely left fully satisfied. If you focus too much on good policy at the expense of good politics, you can walk into a political mess. Play it entirely safe on the politics and you feel as if you have wasted a precious opportunity to improve the country.

Whatever you do, you will be criticised for being insufficiently bold. You will be buttonholed at donors' receptions or a think-tank seminar or in the voting lobby and told that greater ideological purity is needed. You will mutter something about the political challenges or the need to prioritise scarce resources but it will rarely satisfy your interlocutor, who will wander off complaining about managerialism.

At least, that is how it normally works. Ministers worry about a broad range of issues and fail to satisfy the ideologues with a narrower focus. All that changed on 23 September. Now, the ideologues were in charge. Rather than needing to wrestle with

apparently intractable problems, our Prime Minister and Chancellor were able to come up with bold policies in days. They declared themselves liberated from worrying about the short-term politics ("never mind about the distributive implications, growth is all that matters") or the long-term public finances ("never mind about borrowing, growth is all that matters"). Devising policy became a bit of a breeze.

Except the breeze developed into a storm. It turned out that, even in our brave new era, the political and economic realities cannot be escaped for long.

The economic realities bit first with a run on the pound and a sharp rise in UK government borrowing costs. Losing fiscal credibility has severe consequences. The government will pay billions more in debt interest; there will be little scope for additional public spending in departments already facing an inflationary squeeze; loose talk of further tax cuts can be forgotten. Incidentally, those on the left who argued in 2010 that we did not need to worry about fiscal credibility because "we have our own currency" and "we have scope to increase demand because that will drive up productivity" are not looking that clever today. Ironically, those views are being tested to destruction by a government of the right.

We are witnessing the cumulative effect of our government becoming less serious

The political consequences are already following. Those Conservative MPs who backed Rishi Sunak for the party leadership are entitled to say "we told you so". When the former chancellor warned that Liz Truss's fiscal policies might lead to a run on the pound and borrowing rates rising he was accused by her allies of being "petulant". Unfortunately for the Prime Minister, "prescient" is the better word.

Truss began her time in office with quite a lot of goodwill from Conservative MPs, but the chaos following the mini-Budget has caused it to fall as quickly as the pound. If the market turmoil persists, the sense of a government losing control – as happened when the Callaghan administration accepted an IMF bailout in 1976 or the UK left the Exchange Rate Mechanism in 1992 – can be fatal.

Then there is the matter of mortgage rates. This will be a slow burn, only manifesting itself when people move off their fixed-rate deals, but the projections for what this will do to household finances by 2024 are grim. With interest rates at 6 per cent or so by then, a typical mortgage payer may see their monthly payments increase by several hundred pounds. This, in turn, will hit the housing market (remember negative equity?) and consumer confidence. And everyone will blame the government because of recent events. The smarter Conservative MPs are already concluding that these are not ideal circumstances in which to fight the next general election.

The temptation is to place all the blame on Truss and Kwasi Kwarteng, the Chancellor. They are certainly culpable but the market reaction cannot be attributed solely to the unexpected abolition of the 45p rate of income tax (practically everything else had been briefed). It is more grave than that. We are witnessing the cumulative effect of our government for some time becoming less serious, less risk-averse, less willing to face up to hard realities, less ready to support our institutions.

It is as if the Conservative Party has been infected by a virus. The symptoms emerged in the Brexit years as delusional beliefs started to take hold. The patient's inability to understand risk was increasingly evident when Boris Johnson was elected leader, but there were still antibodies in place (such as sensible chancellors) that prevented greater damage being done. A further moment of trauma (and a new leader) wiped out those antibodies, leaving the party lost in a fantasy world, no longer able to comprehend reality. Unless it makes a rapid recovery, it will continue to be a danger to itself and the country as a whole. ●

The unravelling of Vladimir Putin

Nuclear threats and mobilisation cannot hide the Russian president's weakening grip on power

By Katie Stallard

Vladimir Putin has a history of making other leaders wait for him. It is a crude power move intended to signal his own importance, and presumably to throw some of his interlocutors off balance. Among the figures the Russian president has kept waiting over the years are the late Queen Elizabeth, Pope Francis and the former US president Donald Trump. Once, in 2014, he kept the then German chancellor, Angela Merkel, waiting for more than four hours before a meeting. But at a regional summit in Uzbekistan on 16 September, it was Putin's turn to wait. He was seen awkwardly shuffling his note cards ahead of a meeting with the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Then he waited for the leaders of Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan.

Where Putin usually makes a point of striding purposefully into rooms and manspreading during meetings to assert his

physical dominance, during the conference in the Uzbek capital, Samarkand, his typical swagger was gone. The Russian president is not a tall man, but he looked smaller than normal, and somewhat diminished. As he stood waiting for leader after leader, he pretended to study his remarks. He clasped and unclasped his hands.

The situation did not improve for Putin once the meetings began. India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, scolded him in front of the cameras, telling him that this was "not an era of war". At the beginning of his talks with China's leader, Xi Jinping – the man who has previously called Putin his "best friend" – the Russian president was forced to admit that Beijing had "questions and concerns" over his faltering invasion of Ukraine.

It is possible to read too much into these appearances. Perhaps the Samarkand conference was just badly organised, and Putin was

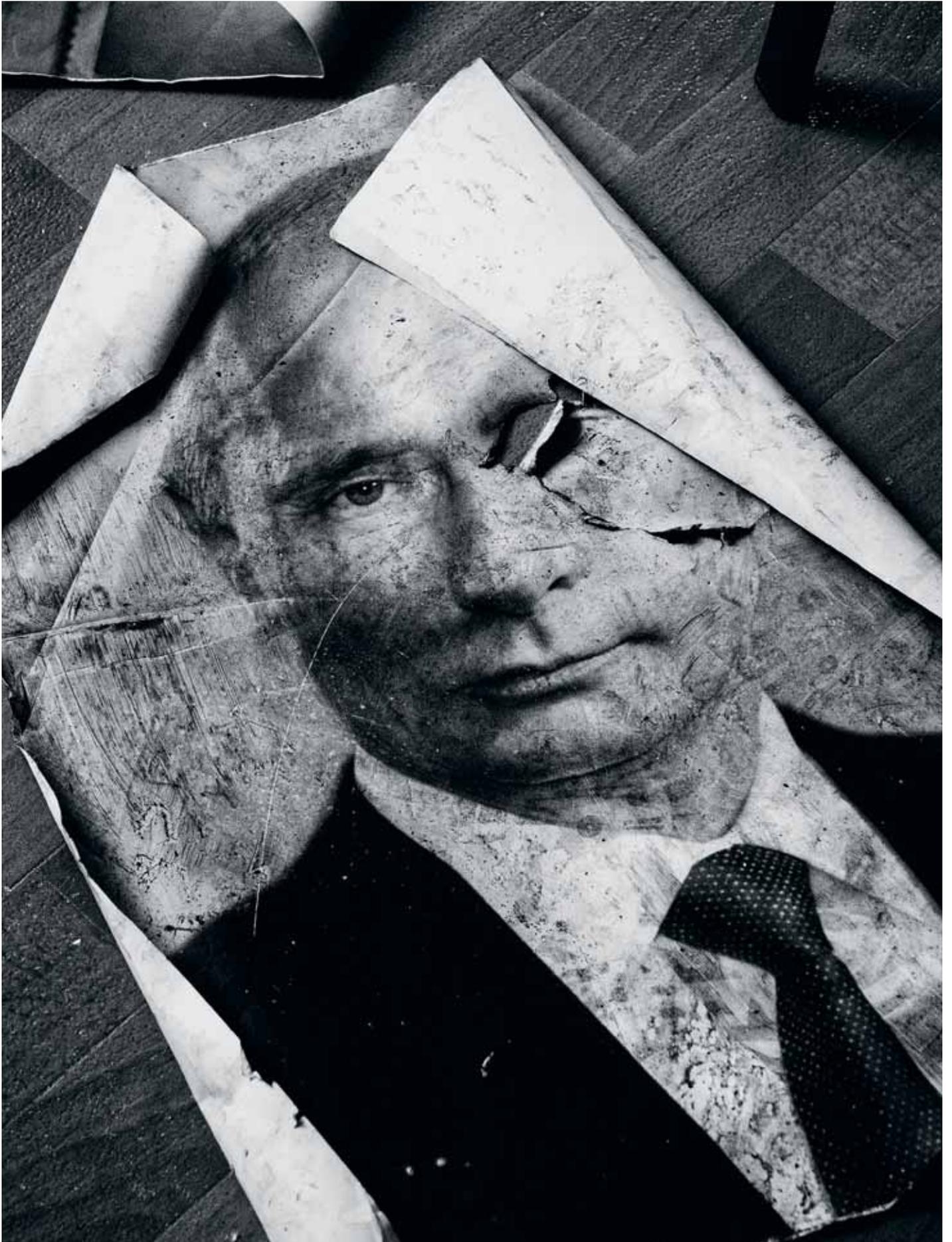
repeatedly asked to enter the room ahead of time. The public remarks by Modi and Xi were directed as much to audiences outside the room as they were to the Russian president himself, and neither shows any sign of cutting economic ties. Yet power is a subjective concept and as Putin's calamitous assault on Ukraine has unravelled in recent weeks, so too has his previously invincible-seeming facade. Where Western analysts have often viewed the Russian president as a wily former intelligence operative who was playing a bad hand well, increasingly it is clear that he is playing a bad hand badly. The poor decisions are stacking up. He has staked the future of his regime on a war that he cannot win, but instead of seeking to extract himself from the mess and cut his losses, he is doubling down.

On 21 September, five days after assuring Modi in Samarkand that he would "do everything to stop [the war] as soon as possible", Putin announced that he was preparing to annex as much as 15 per cent of Ukraine and drafting Russian citizens to fight.

In his first televised address to the nation since the beginning of the war almost seven months earlier, he acknowledged that Russian forces were encountering difficulties. But he insisted that this was because they were up against "the entire military machine of the collective West". In the parallel reality Putin conjured for his citizens, it is Russia that is threatened and reluctantly forced to defend itself, and the West that is resorting to nuclear blackmail. "Our country has different types of weapons as well, and some of them are more modern than the weapons Nato countries have," Putin warned. If Russia's territorial integrity was threatened, he continued, "we will certainly make use of all weapon systems available to us". He did not make explicit whether this would apply to the four Ukrainian regions – Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia – that he seeks to absorb, but he added: "This is not a bluff."

This is almost certainly a bluff. As Lawrence Freedman, emeritus professor of war studies at King's College London, wrote in the *New Statesman* shortly afterwards, it is difficult to see how nuclear weapons would help Putin on the battlefield. The fighting is dispersed across a 1,000km-long front line, as both Putin and his defence minister, Sergei Shoigu, stressed in their respective speeches on 21 September, which does not lend itself to a nuclear strike.

As well as breaching the normative bar on the use of nuclear weapons in war – which has held since the US bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 – and inviting international condemnation, Putin would also be irradiating territory that he is fighting to ►



ASHLEY CHAN/SOPA IMAGES VIA ZUMA PRESS WIRE

Reporter at Large

◀ control. It is difficult to reconcile his previous insistence that Russians and Ukrainians are “one people” with the idea that he might use nuclear weapons against the latter. There is also the significant risk of radioactive contamination in Russia itself.

Still, the possibility cannot be completely dismissed. “Russia has abundant stores of nuclear weapons, in a variety of shapes and sizes, and Putin might be desperate enough to use them,” Freedman warns. “Because he has already done some really stupid things, who can say for sure that he won’t do anything even stupider.”

Putin’s decision to draft hundreds of thousands of Russian citizens to fight in Ukraine also defies all but the most fantastical logic. It is true that the Russian offensive is running short of troops. US estimates in August put Russian losses – both killed and wounded – at between

60,000 and 80,000, or approximately one third of the initial invasion force. Mobilisation will force more Russian men to put on uniforms and pick up guns, but it won’t solve the problems that Russian units have consistently faced in Ukraine, such as bad tactics and intelligence, poor command, problems with logistics, low morale and an opposing force that is fighting for national survival and increasingly well armed.

Throwing more men on to the battlefield might enable Putin to prolong the war, but it will not bring him closer to winning it. Mobilisation could help Moscow to “stem the deteriorating quantity of the force, but not the deteriorating quality of the force and its morale” said Michael Kofman, director of Russia studies at the Center for Naval Analyses, a US-based think tank, after the announcement. “Having used up its best equipment, officers and personnel, I don’t see how this can be recovered.”

Pro-war commentators and nationalist bloggers in Russia have for months demanded mobilisation and for the Russian military to scale up its efforts in Ukraine, warning increasingly volubly in recent weeks that if it does not adopt a new approach, Russia could face defeat. Putin’s announcement of a partial draft will placate these critics in the short term, but as the Russian offensive continues to founder, they will soon be back to demand more.

Meanwhile, the domestic political risks for Putin are building. From the beginning of the invasion on 24 February, he characterised the war as a “special military operation” that would be fought by professional soldiers and willing volunteers. He promised that conscripts would not be sent to fight. As recently as 13 September, eight days before Putin’s draft speech, his spokesman insisted that mobilisation was “not being discussed”. The conflict was a constant presence on Russian state television, where the usual steady barrage of propaganda went into overdrive, but it was possible, for those who wanted to, to turn down the volume and ignore it.

Russian public opinion polls – albeit carried out under increasingly challenging conditions – have consistently recorded a strong majority in favour of the war, but it is harder

to measure the depth of that support, particularly when it involves meaningful sacrifices across more of the population. Support for the conflict has so far been primarily an intellectual exercise in Russia – outside of the handful of economically depressed regions that have supplied most of the troops – but that is now changing, as many more Russian sons, brothers and husbands are sent to fight.

As Denis Volkov and Andrei Kolesnikov, of the Levada Centre in Moscow and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, concluded in a study of the latest survey data on 7 September, the war had become a “routine backdrop to everyday life”. As long as the border remained open and there was no mass-mobilisation order, they predicted, “the feeling of basic normality is likely to continue”. But that feeling – that the war was happening somewhere far away – will be harder to maintain as the first draft orders are handed out and men are packed on to buses and trains. Delving further into the data, Sam Greene, director of the Democratic Resilience programme at the Center for European Policy Analysis, found that younger Russians were less enthusiastic about the war than older generations. In particular, young, married men were the most likely to avoid answering questions about their support for the war. In other words, it is the views of those who are now being drafted that are the least well understood.

Putin repeated four times during his 21 September speech that he was only ordering a “partial mobilisation”, and his defence minister Shoigu announced that 300,000 people would be drafted. Yet the key paragraph of the order was redacted and already there are claims that as many as a million people will be called up. Within hours, there were protests in 43 cities across Russia, according to the human rights group OVD-Info, with at least 1,368 people detained.

In Moscow protesters shouted, “No to War!” and, “Send Putin to the trenches!” The price of flights out of Russia soared and long queues built up at ground border crossings as many of those who could afford it fled. It will be the poorest and the least privileged Russian citizens – long the core of Putin’s political base – who are made to fight.

This does not necessarily augur revolution. During his 22 years in power Putin has systematically dismantled all but the barest simulacrum of democracy in Russia, crushing civil society and shuttering the independent media outlets that offered alternative sources of news. Opposition leaders have been jailed, poisoned and shot. Protesting already involved the risk of being beaten by Putin’s



In Moscow protesters shouted, “No to the war!” and, “Send Putin to the trenches!”

thuggish security forces and thrown into a prison system that is notorious for physical and sexual abuse, but now there are reports that some of the protesters are being drafted, served with conscription orders in custody. Across the country, local officials will be ordered to suppress protests, fulfil their draft quotas and silence dissent. There will be new campaigns to root out “national traitors” and show-trials to punish the accused. Putin has already strengthened the laws on desertion and refusing to serve. The greater the political threat he perceives, the more he will increase repression.

Yet the longer this continues, the more Putin risks eroding public support and reversing the approach that has worked so well for him over the past two decades. His past popularity, with approval ratings in independent polls approaching 90 per cent at times, has helped to ensure his job security as he has perpetuated the idea that he alone can solve Russia’s problems and command genuine enthusiasm among the masses. He has long traded on the notion that there is no credible alternative to his leadership.

There is a Russian term that captures this idea: *bezalternativnost*, or the absence of alternatives. As Timothy Frye, author of *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin’s Russia*, told me in the days after the start of the war, “It is much easier to be a popular autocrat than an unpopular one.” Putin’s popularity had protected him against revolts and palace coups to date, Frye explained, but the first cracks had already appeared, with growing concerns among the elite about the economic consequences of the conflict. “Many more elites may be re-evaluating their attitudes towards Putin,” Frye said, “but it is difficult to see from the outside.”

On 29 December 1999, two days before his ascension to power, Putin published a long essay on the Russian government’s website, entitled “Russia on the Threshold of the New Millennium”, which articulated his vision for the country and the critical challenges that lay ahead. He set out what he called the “Russian idea”, which he characterised as a mix of patriotism, traditional values, the desire for a strong state over individual freedoms and a “belief in the greatness of Russia”.

However, he warned that Russia was experiencing one of the most difficult periods in its history, after the collapse of the Soviet Union eight years earlier – with living conditions becoming unbearable and poverty reaching a “mind-boggling scale”. If it did not act quickly, he warned, Russia was in danger of becoming a second- or even a third-rate power. “Everything depends on us, and us alone,” Putin wrote. “On our ability to see the size of the threat, to pool forces and set our minds to hard and lengthy work.”

Twenty-two years later, it is Putin’s actions that now imperil Russia’s future and risk transforming it into a second- or third-rate power. Under his rule, and thanks to his imperialist aggression, Russia is becoming an international pariah whose citizens are no longer welcome in many European states and whose economy will only become more dependent on China. As they did during the decade-long Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Russian families once again have to live with the fear that their children will be sent to die in an unwinnable war.

This does not necessarily mean that those around Putin will now summon the courage to remove him from power. The Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin ruled for almost three decades despite his increasingly deranged behaviour and died in office, the Cold War historian Sergey Radchenko points out in a recent essay. He explains that the situation had deteriorated to the point where Nikita Khrushchev, Stalin’s eventual successor, remarked that senior officials had come to expect that Stalin would one day “pull down his pants and relieve himself in front of us, and then say that this was in the interests of the Motherland”. Yet they did not challenge

him. The risks of trying and failing to topple him persuaded his lieutenants that it was safer to comply with his tyrannical rule.

Khrushchev was the only Soviet leader to be ousted by his comrades, being overthrown in 1964, but only once those around him began to fear he was about to move against them, and only then at considerable risk.

“The plotters tolerated Khrushchev despite their dissatisfaction until he pushed them to move first to save their political lives,” Joseph Torigian, author of *Prestige, Manipulation, and Coercion: Elite Power Struggles in the Soviet Union and China After Stalin and Mao*, told me. “Up until the very end, the plotters were afraid that Khrushchev would still emerge victorious.”

Anyone plotting against the Russian president today would need to be similarly convinced that the danger of confronting him was outweighed by the risks of doing nothing. Yet those risks are growing. Certainly, they are greater than they were a year ago, and they may climb higher still, the longer this war continues. Putin knows this too. The more he begins to fear that his grip on power is weakening, the more paranoid and dangerous he will become. ●

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.

Out to pasture

The opportunity to nod off while counting real sheep has been unveiled. The “Shleep Sanctuary” in Sussex is a dome boasting views of a field full of... sheep.

Mattress firm Emma Sleep has launched a contest offering two people the chance to try it when it opens next year. *Metro* (Michael Meadowcroft)

Art attack

Middlesbrough shoppers were left bemused when CCTV speakers began making nonsense announcements.

Emma Martinez was walking through the town centre when she started to hear a voice. One broadcast started, “Good morning, good morning, good morning, and what a lovely day it is. Rise and shine,” before playing jolly jingle music.

Another, sounding like the voice of Boris Johnson, said: “We intend to unite and level up across the whole of our United Kingdom.”



Andrew Glover of Middlesbrough Council explained: “This is a temporary installation as part of Middlesbrough Art Weekender.” *South West News Service* (Steve Morley)

Just desserts

A herring gull dived into a bin filled with jam and custard. The bird swooped on the container at a dessert manufacturer when the lid was briefly left open. The gull was hauled out in a net, then taken for a shampoo and blow-dry, and freed after a few days’ recovery. *Sunday Mirror* (Amanda Welles)

A ton of bricks

Police are hunting a Lego thief stealing thousands of pounds’ worth of the toy bricks from supermarkets across Suffolk. *Sunday Mirror* (Daragh Brady)

The meaning of the Metaverse

Mark Zuckerberg's virtual realm has been ridiculed for its dismal aesthetics – but we have got the online world that we deserve

By Justin EH Smith

In October 2021, Meta Platforms, Inc, released a “trailer”, hosted by the company's CEO Mark Zuckerberg, to give a visual tour of its recent expansion into the Metaverse – the immersive, virtual-reality world that is expected to be the next great iteration of our internet technologies.

It was a curious piece of work. The trailer began with Zuckerberg standing in a living room with a fireplace, a stunning mountain view, and other conventional signifiers of wealth. The Zuckerberg who first greets us appears to be the real one; he quickly proceeds to summon up a nearly life-size digital avatar of himself, and then runs through a sequence of possible costumes to dress his Meta-self in ahead of a virtual meeting with his Meta colleagues (or, more accurately, his yea-saying underlings). He briefly considers some more outlandish outfits before deciding on one that exactly matches what he, the

real Zuckerberg, is already wearing: an unassuming anti-fashion ensemble for which he has long been known, consisting of a black shirt and black trousers. This comedic set-up reveals something about the mentality behind the dismal aesthetics of the Metaverse as we have seen it so far.

After Zuckerberg dresses his avatar, he enters a virtual conference room where he finds his colleagues eager to start discussing business. It is a cute and diverse bunch, for whom the boundary between remunerative labour and freely given conviviality seems non-existent. Most appear in ordinary human form, though one of them has decided to come as a robot – and not just any robot, but a huge round-edged, red cartoonish one. Though mechanical, the robot is in some respects the most lifelike of the gang, reminiscent of any number of non-robotic side-kicks from Obelix to Chewbacca. Soon

enough some other colleagues phone in from the streets of SoHo, New York City, to share the “3D street art” they've discovered.

Next, Zuckerberg's wife Priscilla appears on a screen, and shows the gang what the family dog has been up to; Zuckerberg asks Priscilla to share this delightful clip with his dad. The world of the street-art hunters and of his wife and dog is – as far as we can tell – just the regular world: the real streets of SoHo, a real backyard. The sight we catch of that world simultaneously ruptures all the virtual magic that was meant to captivate us, and at the same time it reminds us just how far Meta has to go before it mounts any serious alternative to the phenomenal reality mediated by our sense organs in contact with the ordinary world.

All of this happened almost a year ago. At the time it seemed reasonable to suppose that what we were being shown was only an



Post-reality postcard: Mark Zuckerberg's avatar appears in front of the Eiffel Tower and the Sagrada Familia

early rough draft, and that the still-hidden goods around which all the buzz had begun swirling would be revealed soon enough.

How puzzling it was then, when in August of this year Zuckerberg, celebrating the opening of Meta's Metaverse features in France and Spain, released a selfie featuring his avatar standing in front of the Eiffel Tower and the Sagrada Familia church (the distance between the monuments having been eradicated).

Reaction on social media was caustic, vicious and hilarious. Zuckerberg's fauvist-drawn face was described as "unprecedented cringe" and similar to an image you would see in a picture book for babies. One person wrote that the graphics were well-suited to Zuckerberg's face, which appears to have only three or four discernible features. Countless people said the image looked like a game made for Nintendo Wii in circa 2002.

It was apparently a grave failure and

seemed to be a significant step back even from the modest preview we had been offered the previous year. What could have been going on at Meta headquarters?

Many people speculated that the company was simply giving up on its Metaverse project, just as Facebook has shed countless features over the years when they had failed to garner the expected interest. I rushed to a more extreme conclusion, and presumed that there was something more devious going on. Perhaps the company had conspired to make its product appear retrograde and ridiculous as part of a more elaborate and multi-phase advertising campaign, keeping the low-information masses away from investing in Metaverse real estate so to allow a privileged group of investors to buy it all up first.

These theories, however, slowly gave way

to a simpler and less pleasing one. The Metaverse is only as ugly as the average of all of our species' current unrelenting output of material and digital-cultural artefacts. Whether you approve of it or not, Meta's vision of the Metaverse is a pretty good representation of what our world looks like today.

Some will protest that I am exaggerating; after all, it is precisely Meta's failure to meet the standards of graphic detail and "realism" that now dominate in CGI-saturated entertainments, such as the Marvel Cinematic Universe, that has provoked the most passionate mockery. And yet our new cinematic realism is anything but. I have heard so-called photorealism in painting being referred to as "the neoliberalism of portraiture". By the same token, we may say that CGI-realism is what reality looks like when the only incentive to represent it is profit. The graphics in the *Avengers* might be "good" – unlike those in ▶

Critic at Large

◀ Zuckerberg's most recent bid for our attention – but the operative notion of goodness here bears no relation to the usual evaluation criteria used throughout the history of art. This is a “goodness” that does not bring us any closer to discovering truths about the world and our place in it, but seeks to buffer and protect us – at least momentarily – from such discoveries. So at least in this respect, though superhero movies are graphically “good” and Meta's Metaverse world is graphically “bad”, aesthetically they are both bad in the same way.

The principal sources of aesthetically good representational art on the internet today are mostly anonymous meme creators, and their work is, from a graphics point of view, aggressively and gleefully terrible. They delight in copy and pasting incongruous images into a single composition, with no attention given to proportions or perspective – for example putting a crying “Wojak” cartoon head on Joe Biden's body, or attaching a muscular yet still somehow canine body to the head of a Shiba Inu dog. There is a difference between good graphics and good art, and exuberant teenage meme-makers intuitively understand this, yet it is something that the profit-hungry content industry is, in its very nature, unable to ever grasp.

When we move down the scale from the extremely online avant-garde with their delirious memes, to the masses of “normies”, we find significant continuity in attitudes towards graphic precision and elegance. Similar to the vanguard, the masses care little about whether their memes look “good”; what matters most is raw feeling. This feeling is often conveyed through smiling or laughing emojis, or text-and-image jpegs featuring flowers, sunsets and pre-packaged Hallmark sentiments.

A 2018 *Wall Street Journal* article reported that “the internet is filling up because Indians are sending millions of ‘Good morning!’ texts”. These texts are frequently accompanied by images, borrowed from websites such as wishgoodmorning.com, showing, for example, a red rose along with the words: “Good Morning to my life's rose. Your fragrance makes all of life's thorns worth tolerating.” Another image shows a toddler wearing a fedora telling you how to lead a good life.

One 71-year-old user, who had never used a computer and only recently got a mobile phone with WhatsApp installed on it, de-

clared with touching earnestness: “These WhatsApp messages are really my thoughts put into words.” He was soon getting up at 6am everyday to send good morning greetings to 50 friends. That same year more than 20 billion New Year's messages were sent throughout India, and Facebook reported numerous problems with system overloads, while many Indians too complained that the constant barrage was freezing up their low-memory mobile phones.

It is worth also recalling how Zuckerberg's social-media project grew beyond its role as a platform for Harvard University students to rate the hotness of one another. It grew into a huge data corporation in large part thanks to the agriculture-simulation game known as FarmVille, which launched on Facebook in 2009, as well as similar immersive game apps such as Happy Farm and Candy Crush. By design, these games are simple, and mildly addictive in their doling out of rewards for the completion of simple tasks (harvesting crops, lining up lemon-drops). They are also utterly unimpressive with respect to their graphics and their overall aesthetic feel. The world Zuckerberg evoked in his Franco-Spanish selfie recalled nothing so much as that of the ducks, cows and pumpkins still remembered by millions of us.

Simple, pleasing, and aimed at the mass-market, Zuckerberg understands that the Metaverse is going to draw us in by the billion not by looking like some esoteric Wojak meme, and still less like the film *Last Year at Marienbad* or any of the high-art visual culture

of the 20th century that a small handful of us still think any representation of reality should emulate. Rather, it is by looking like FarmVille or a “Good Morning!” meme delivered up courtesy of wishgoodmorning.com. The 71-year-old who skipped straight from a culture of orality to a culture of mobile tech is the ideal user of Meta's Metaverse features. There are billions of people around the world who share broadly in his sensibility. If you are reading this, you are probably not the ideal user of Meta's Metaverse features, but that doesn't matter.

The aesthetics of the Metaverse were not conceived with you in mind. Zuckerberg understood that it made sense to roll the new product out, to let the extremely-online vanguard mock it for a few weeks before moving on to delivering it to others. For Meta's business model – which has long proven to be successful – is to cater to the normies.

Our “real” world remains a normie world. It demands little in the way of aesthetic excellence from the various platforms through which content is delivered, and as long as profit is the only motive for its delivery, creators have no more reason to pursue aesthetic excellence than normies have to expect it. Our virtual worlds can only be as sharp and compelling as the imaginations of the people who make them. Or, to put that another way, every real world gets the virtual worlds it deserves. We're getting Zuckerberg's Metaverse. ●

Justin EH Smith is a historian of philosophy. His latest book is “The Internet Is Not What You Think It Is” (Princeton University Press)



Threadbare: Zuckerberg dresses his avatar in the 2021 trailer for the Metaverse

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How one woman's death set Iran on fire

By Megan Gibson

It began with a trip to Tehran. Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old woman from north-west Iran, was visiting family in the capital with her brother in September when she was detained by the country's notorious morality police. The "guidance patrol" reportedly arrested Amini for violating Iran's strict hijab law, which requires all women to cover their hair. Eyewitnesses reported that police beat Amini with batons; she spent three days in a coma, before dying in a hospital on 16 September. Authorities told her family that she had suffered from sudden heart failure; her family insists that she'd been in good health.

As news of Amini's death spread across Iran, protests and violent demonstrations soon followed in dozens of towns and cities. Her death has catalysed months of frustrations with Iran's repressive regime, particularly for women, who are routinely harassed and abused by police tasked with enforcing modest dress. Footage shows Iranian women marching, chanting and ripping off their headscarves, before tossing them on to bonfires in the street. In many of the clips shared online, chants of, "Death to the dictator!" – in reference to Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei – can be heard; other videos show violent confrontations with security forces, with Iranians hurling objects and petrol bombs at police.

While the uprising is the largest anti-government protest since the Green Movement in 2009, when millions of Iranians took

to the streets following a contested presidential election, discontent in the country has been intensifying. In the past year there have been labour, teacher and farmer protests following years of foreign sanctions and economic mismanagement by the regime. Yet the anti-veil demonstrations appear angrier and more violent than these. "There has been a crescendo to the demonstrations," Sanam Vakil, the deputy director and senior research fellow of the Middle East and North Africa programme at Chatham House, told me, "in terms of violence, and in terms of the pushback against the police taking place on the streets."

In a country where the hijab was once banned, public views on the veil are mixed. Yet even Iranians who support the idea of women wearing the hijab have largely rejected the way the regime has mandated – and policed – it. A survey in 2020 found that 72 per cent of Iranians oppose the compulsory hijab, which was enshrined in law in 1983. Some form of morality police force has operated in Iran since the formation of the Islamic Republic in 1979. President Ebrahim

State media has put the number of deaths at 41, though the real total may be far higher

Raisi, who took office in August 2021, has increased funding to clamp down on arbitrary violations of laws on dress and behaviour. It's notable that while women have led the demonstrations, men have marched alongside them. Even Iran's clerics have been divided on the laws: the *Financial Times* reported on 23 September that Morteza Javadi Amoli, an influential cleric, said after the death of Amini that it was a "strategic mistake to deal with religious and cultural issues through security and police measures".

As with past uprisings in Iran and abroad, social media has played a key role. In a country where press freedom has long been quashed, videos of civil disobedience have spread via Instagram and WhatsApp, two of the few social media platforms not previously blocked by the regime. Recognising the power of these visual dispatches, the government has wasted little time disrupting communications: several mobile networks have been disabled, and access to WhatsApp and Instagram has become patchy.

Clamping down on the internet is part of the Islamic Republic's well-established method for dealing with public unrest. So too is the arrest, often violent, of protesters and rioters. Videos from protests in late September show security forces firing rubber bullets and using tear gas and batons on civilians. More than 1,200 demonstrators have been arrested, according to Iranian official reports, including many journalists. State media has put the number of deaths at 41 so far, though Amnesty International estimates that the real total is far higher.

Despite the brutal response by the regime, there is hope among local activists and foreign observers that the unrest will augur a permanent change in the country. Satellite protests in support of Iranian women have taken place in countries around the world, including the UK, Turkey and Canada.

Western leaders have also rallied behind Iranian civil society. On 22 September the US announced fresh sanctions on the country's morality police, and the next day changed existing sanctions to allow tech companies to operate more easily in Iran to counter the state's internet restrictions.

The regime is not invulnerable, and efforts to quell the unrest haven't yet been successful. Yet the state has stamped out larger and more violent uprisings in the past, most notably the Green Movement 13 years ago. Analysts warn that despite the momentum behind the protests, regime change isn't likely. "The Islamic Republic has a monopoly on force and they're not afraid to use it," says Chatham House's Sanam Vakil. "I've been watching protests in Iran since 1999 – and they've all ended one way." ●



OZAN KOSE/APP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Marching for Mahsa: a protester holds a portrait of Mahsa Amini, who died in Iranian custody, during a protest in Istanbul on 20 September

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Books

The spectral art of Hilary Mantel

The novelist, who has died aged 70, had an uncanny connection to the past – and a remarkable ability to make it present

By Erica Wagner

Hilary Mantel and I were sitting in the Albemarle Suite at Hampton Court Palace. A wood-panelled chamber; the palace gardens stretching out beyond the glass. This was in 2020, and the final instalment of her Tudor trilogy, *The Mirror and the Light*, would be published in a few months' time. We were discussing what it was like to feel so intimately connected to the past that it seemed as if you belonged there. She told me how, at 12, she had come down from her native Derbyshire for a visit to this very place.

"It was the first time I'd been to the south," she said, in her distinctive voice: high, breathy and yet always authoritative. "We stayed with a cousin who lived near Richmond, and we came on the boat – which is the way to arrive. I was very emotional that day. I think you've so few skins at that age, and I was really moved by the beauty of the palace and by the Long Water [a man-made canal by the palace]. It was a glorious summer's day, but when we went into those little panelled rooms, I did have a moment..."

She trailed off. Her beloved husband, Gerald, was sat off to the side, happily listening to our conversation. "I don't know how to describe it. It wasn't any sense of presences or ghosts or anything like that; it was a feeling of, 'Well, I'll just settle down in this corner and why should I ever go anywhere else?' It was as if I'd walked into something very... consequential. It was a distinct feeling and the first time I had such a feeling. It was just, 'This matters.'"

It mattered to all of us, in the end. Over the course of the past decade Dame Hilary became my friend, though we did not meet often; I had my own sense of

mysterious connection to the past thanks to my passionate link to Washington Roebling, the chief engineer of the Brooklyn Bridge in New York. It was a link that began for me too when I was a girl. Hilary understood. After listening to her tell that story I described standing on the Brooklyn Bridge for the first time at 16 and thinking, this is the place for me. "That's exactly it!" she exclaimed. "You've said it. 'This is the place for me.' Yes. And it's more real, somehow, than other places."

Hilary Mantel made the past absolutely real. How extraordinary to be able to take a familiar period of history and make it new: *Wolf Hall*, the first volume of the Tudor trilogy, introduced us to Thomas Cromwell, a figure whose consequential role in the reign of Henry VIII had somehow been previously ignored. "So now get up," the novel begins, an imperative, commanding the reader's attention. How canny of her too to understand, as she did very well, that 2009 was the only year in which to publish this book, it being the 500th anniversary of Henry's accession.

First one Booker Prize, and then another for *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012), the second book in the set. A stage adaptation of the books with the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) followed, and there was a television adaptation starring Mark Rylance; she was made a Dame, she delivered the Reith Lectures, and became the only living author whose portrait was hung in the British Library.

She loved the attention. She was being listened to – as she always should have been – at last. Up until that point she had been that creature of the dark corners, a literary author. She knew what it meant, however, to bide her time. *A Place of Greater Safety*, her magnificent novel of the French Revolution, was published in 1992 as her fifth novel – but it was, in fact, her first. She tried to get it published in the early 1980s but was told there was no market for historical fiction. Practical as ever, she returned to her desk and wrote *Every Day is Mother's Day* (1985), a darkly comic contemporary novel that alerted her early readers to her fascination with the world of the spirits, later explored so brilliantly in *Beyond Black* (2005) and her pin-sharp memoir, *Giving Up the Ghost* (2003).

Mantel was not afraid to cause trouble. I sat with her – and Gerald, of course – in her seafront flat in Budleigh Salterton not so very long after her "Royal Bodies" lecture, delivered in 2013, in which she appeared to criticise (note my use of the word "appeared") Catherine, then the Duchess of Cambridge, now the Princess of Wales. "Kate Middleton, as she was, appeared" – there's that pesky word again – "to have been designed by a committee and built by craftsmen, with a perfect plastic smile and the spindles of her limbs hand-turned and gloss-varnished," she said. David Cameron, the then prime minister, was outraged, leaping to the defence of the person he referred to (bizarrely) as "Princess Kate". She laughed as she described photographers accosting middle-aged women on the promenade, hoping that each one might be Hilary Mantel. She, of course, had given them the slip. ▶



Hilary Mantel photographed for the *New Statesman* in 2012 by Leonie Hampton

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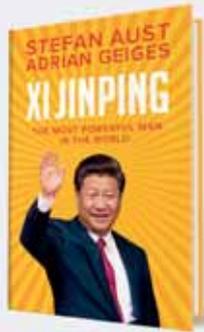
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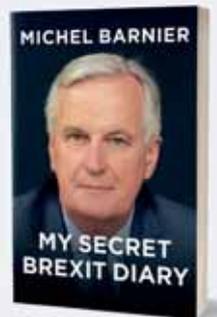
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◀ The following year she published a short story collection: its title piece, “The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher”, imagined the former prime minister’s death at the hands of an IRA gunman. The *Daily Telegraph* was furious; Timothy Bell, former PR adviser to Thatcher, called on the police to investigate.

But neither of these episodes sprang from a desire to provoke for provocation’s sake. Read “Royal Bodies” and you will understand the subtlety of her thinking; no sound-bite could do it justice. Subtlety, however, wasn’t always what was required. As to Margaret Thatcher: “I would say that she wrecked the country,” she told the *New Republic*. “I loathed her.” Yet the story itself is a small masterpiece of close observation and harrowing tension.

Her death is an incalculable loss to our national life and literature. How I was looking forward to her observations on the reign of King Charles III; and to her next novel, on which she was hard at work. She had just published *The Wolf Hall Picture Book*, a collaboration with Ben Miles and his brother, the photographer George Miles. Ben Miles, who took the role of Cromwell in the RSC’s stage productions and was her literary collaborator in the adaptation of *The Mirror and the Light*, was, for Mantel, the perfect embodiment of her brilliant, cunning protagonist. They formed what can only be described as an eerie mind-meld; in 2014 Mantel told me that Miles was “the only one who really understands the structure of *Wolf Hall*”.

The picture book takes a sidelong glance at the past through the medium of the present: photographs taken by Ben and George Miles as the trio traced Cromwell’s routes through contemporary Britain over the past seven years. “The object was always to sneak around a location and get behind the obvious,” Mantel wrote in her introduction. “To see what Historic Royal Palaces left out for refuse collection, or to catch a glimpse of a ghost’s coat-tail whisk away from multipurpose conference rooms or banqueting venues. We believe that you don’t attune yourself to the spirit of the place by earnest enquiry. You just hang about, make yourself available. You show willing.”

Hilary Mantel showed willing, always. She was greedy for experience: watch her avidly shooting a Vickers machine gun – her grandfather knew its manual by heart – in the BBC documentary *Hilary Mantel: Return to Wolf Hall* and dare to doubt me. She began her Reith Lectures by quoting St Augustine: “The dead are invisible, they are not absent.” The past was always perfectly present for her; how grateful we must be she made it visible to us. *The Mirror and the Light* ends, as it must, with her avatar Cromwell’s death. “He has vanished; he is the slippery stones underfoot, he is the last faint ripple in the wake of himself. He feels for an opening, blinded, looking for a door: tracking the light along the wall.” ●

ALAMY *Erica Wagner is a New Statesman contributing writer and a former literary editor of the Times*

Performance Notes

By Ellen Peirson-Hagger



Rebellion: Pussy Riot’s raucous multimedia art is more pertinent than ever

The band howled in Russian about “pricking Putin’s ass with a pin” so he would “jump up into hell”

On 21 September, the day that Vladimir Putin announced a mobilisation of army reserves to fight in Ukraine, Pussy Riot performed at the Gulbenkian Arts Centre in Canterbury. It has been ten years since the balaclava-clad Russian punk group were arrested following an anti-Putin performance in a Moscow cathedral, but their raucous performance art is more pertinent than ever.

Maria Alyokhina has borne the Russian state’s wrath at her rebellion ever since. One of three Pussy Riot members sentenced to two years in prison in 2012 for “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred”, she spent time in a penal colony in the brutal surroundings of the Ural Mountains. Since her release she has been assaulted in public and arrested countless times. Threatened with another prison stay, she fled her home country in April 2022, and is now bringing a new iteration of *Riot Days*, a multimedia retelling of her time in the darkest depths of Putin’s Russia, to UK audiences.

Onstage in a white dress, a crucifix hanging around her neck, Alyokhina kept her gaze straight ahead. Olga Borisova joined her on vocals, the pair howling in Russian about “pricking Putin’s ass with a pin” so he would “jump up into hell”, and recognising security agents at their door by their silly, pointy shoes. A screen behind them showed English subtitles of their lyrics and red-tinged footage of their demonstrations.

There was no sign of an electric guitar: Taso Pletner played a guttural flute and Diana Burkot – one ankle impaired after she had flung herself off the stage at a previous gig – hammered away on drums and electronics. Pussy Riot’s punk spirit lives in their ability to mock the dangerous pageant that is the Kremlin. Before returning for an encore in which they stood in solidarity with the people of Ukraine, Alyokhina made it clear that despite state pressure to keep quiet, Pussy Riot’s rebellion is far from over. “I’m riding in a car that is picking up speed,” she shrieked. ●

The vision of Vaughan Williams

In reviving local and popular musical traditions, the composer found haunting new expressions of Englishness

By Rowan Williams



Music maker: Ralph Vaughan Williams at home in Surrey, January 1949

One of the most intriguing features of British social history of the later 19th century is the emergence of a cultivated, liberal upper-middle class whose roots lay in industry and craft as well as in the more traditional world of the “professions”: teaching, medicine, church and law. Often originating in the Midlands and the north of England, and with connections in the networks of dissenting (non-Church of England) religion, they built modest fortunes, sometimes allied themselves by marriage with more conventional establishment dynasties, and provided a seedbed for much of the radical and creative thinking of the late Victorian age and beyond.

Prominent in any catalogue of such families are the Wedgwoods and the Darwins; the Trevelyan, Sidgwick and Bensons are among other names that come to mind. The narrowness of the English university system in the 19th century meant that gifted young men from these families were likely to meet as students – and, for whatever reason, Cambridge attracted more of them than Oxford. Their families intermarried, and created a huge spider’s web of cousinage across the cultural world of Victorian and Edwardian England.

The families never constituted a European-style intelligentsia, politically restless, pushing against bourgeois tyranny and philistinism; and they stood at a remove from the aristocratic and literary coteries of the age, although a certain amount of overlap developed in the early 20th century. But they were committed to progressive causes, liberal or mildly socialist in politics, intellectually unafraid, religiously agnostic or at least unorthodox, and sometimes idiosyncratic in behaviour (Gwen Raverat’s wonderful childhood memoir, *Period Piece*, is an unforgettable portrait of the Darwin family in all their majestic oddity). They nurtured some of the most serious scholars of the period, and at least one of the most justly and lastingly celebrated of English musicians – Ralph Vaughan Williams, the subject of a new biography by Eric Saylor, published on the 150th anniversary of his birth.

Seeing RVW – as he was regularly referred to in his lifetime – against this social background helps us understand why he was able to combine being (across several generations) an icon of national stability and cultural identity with a striking detachment from both the competitive anxieties and the rewards of the establishment (he refused a knighthood and only reluctantly accepted the Order of Merit). He approached “Englishness” out of a historical experience that was neither that of simple inherited power and entitlement, nor that of privation and struggle.

Born in Gloucestershire in 1872, Vaughan Williams was the son of a prosperous clerical family that had married into the Darwin/Wedgwood clan, part of a social world which had to some extent rewarded hard work and inventiveness and which coped well with eccentric individualism. As Saylor, an American music professor, puts it, many in RVW’s family and immediate circle “occupied positions outside the usual class boundaries of British society, providing a certain latitude in their beliefs and behaviour”. Their sense of

national and cultural identity was not mortgaged to imperial mythologies or to the defensive xenophobia of popular Victorian sentiment.

RVW was from an early age determined to be not only a composer but a particular kind of composer, one whose music would open doors for an entire national community and provide a shared language. He was as devoted as any Gareth Malone to communal music-making, from his early days as a (somewhat rebellious) church organist to his work with the Leith Hill Musical Festival, conducting amateur orchestras and choirs. But this deep commitment to the local and national was inseparable from his concern that the groups he worked with should be exposed to a challenging, innovative and international musical tradition. Writing for and working with an English public was for RVW a matter of affirming the distinctive features of a local musical genius within a rich diversity of musical cultures.

He grew up in a musical world where the prevailing orthodoxies were fixed by German models; serious music was firmly in the succession running from Beethoven to Mendelssohn. The prominent English composers of the day, figures such as Hubert Parry and Charles Villiers Stanford, produced stately, rich and often emotionally powerful work firmly within this style; it worked well as far as it went, but it could also be overpoweringly stodgy.

RVW began his studies in composition under Parry himself, but was intrigued by older and less familiar strands in musical practice, pre-modern and non-European. He experimented with melodies based on modes, which divide up the notes in an eight-note sequence in ways other than the familiar do-re-mi scale (try playing a succession of scales starting from different notes using the white notes of the piano only, and you have some idea). Such modal melodies are heard in folk songs and early Western music and (with some refinements) in plainsong. He explored the use of the pentatonic scale (this time, play only the black notes on the keyboard), which is common in Asian music. Parry, although a bit baffled by RVW's enthusiasm, gave him generous encouragement; Stanford, with whom RVW also studied, was less tolerant.

But the really significant development was when RVW – already a Cambridge doctor of music and a seasoned choir director, with a few well-received compositions to his name – decided in 1907 to study in Paris with Maurice Ravel. RVW had already worked briefly in Germany, but felt the need to immerse himself in a completely different musical atmosphere. Ravel, the quintessentially Gallic musical voice of his time, was the true catalyst for RVW's distinctive English style. He famously said that RVW was the only pupil of his “who does not write my music”; and it is true that what RVW took from Ravel was not a set of musical ideas but a new boldness and clarity in orchestration.

RVW came back from France with a new lightness of touch and a much enhanced imaginative flair in bringing out the contrasting voices of different instruments within an orchestral composition.

Throughout his career as a composer, he knew exactly how to deploy a solo instrument or a small group of instruments to intensify transitions in a piece or to create a specific climate of feeling. The use of the solo trumpet in the *Pastoral Symphony* of 1922, of oboes in dialogue in the *Fourth Symphony* (1935), or of the solo violin in “Five Variants of ‘Dives and Lazarus’” (1939) are just a few examples. Perhaps its supreme instance in his early work is the meditative ebb and flow of violin and full orchestra in “The Lark Ascending” (1920) – for many people, one of the most hauntingly lovely of all his works.

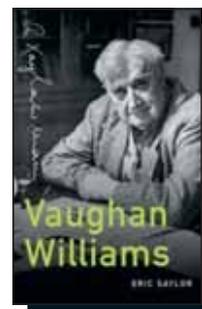
But RVW was also able to marshal larger instrumental forces with a new intelligence and power. The arresting opening to the song-cycle “On Wenlock Edge” (1909) and, most overwhelmingly, the colossal but fluid energy of the massed strings in the great 1910 “Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis” illustrate some of the ways in which Ravel's teaching had released something distinctive in RVW's voice.

RVW was undoubtedly one of the great songwriters of the era. It is startling to realise that he composed “Linden Lea”, a setting of a poem by the Dorset writer William Barnes and one of the best-known of his smaller vocal works, at the age of 29; and he was still setting poems literally up to the day of his death. His “Five Mystical Songs” (1911), using text by the 17th century poet George Herbert, is still a standard in the repertoire of any self-respecting baritone – even if (to express a heretical opinion) he doesn't quite find the right register for the fifth of these (“Love Bade Me Welcome”), where the prosaic and austere words are swamped by an uncomfortably romantic choral backing.

And of course there is the enormous treasury of his settings of English folk song (the Ralph Vaughan Williams Society has recently been sponsoring a complete programme of recordings under the label of Albion Records); RVW was a major participant along with Cecil Sharp and Maud Karpeles in the rediscovery and cataloguing of traditional songs in the 1890s and 1900s, and maintained throughout his life an active concern with folk singing and traditional dance. It was part of his dedication to music as a genuinely democratic business (a conviction that he shared with Parry, though they found radically different ways of expressing it). Music for RVW was not – or not just – an affair of high art or solitary genius: it was something that came from the grass roots and was always nourished by them, something that needed to return to local and popular tradition to be revived.

In the same spirit, the composer was, among other things, a jobbing music-maker. RVW – rather like JS Bach – made a living as a teacher and conductor, as someone always willing to turn out a commissioned piece, whether for a coronation, a friend's wedding or a local community celebration. Saylor's book, which alternates strictly biographical chapters with brief but engaging surveys of the music of particular periods, provides a full and accessible catalogue of RVW's works. A brief glance at this will show the variety of the output.

The undramatic, unselfish work of editing was something he undertook willingly: *The English Hymnal* ▶



Vaughan Williams

Eric Saylor
OUP, 336pp,
£26.99

Music for RVW was not – or not just – an affair of high art or solitary genius: it came from the grass roots

◀ of 1906, compiled in collaboration with an idiosyncratic Anglo-Catholic socialist priest, Percy Dearmer, and another jobbing composer, Martin Shaw, is a lasting monument to RVW's belief that even rather dim and unadventurous Anglican congregations deserved the liveliest possible musical diet.

He ransacked his folk-song collections as well as the spirited metrical psalms of the 16th century and a variety of European sources – German, French, Welsh and Russian – for tunes that had real musical quality, as opposed to the dutiful automatic-pilot productions of Victorian religiosity.

The English Hymnal – along with his *Mass in G Minor*, perhaps the best piece of liturgical music written in the 20th century – is an odd legacy for someone who had abandoned his family's religious beliefs as a teenager; but RVW's agnosticism was a complex affair. He retained a strong attachment to the sounds and spectacle of traditional worship, returned repeatedly to Christian texts and themes in his work, and was always hospitable to those dimensions of human experience that defied verbal analysis.

Saylor's work is an attractive and readable introduction to this great figure. As he admits, it cannot replace the pair of seminal books from the 1960s, Michael Kennedy's survey of Vaughan Williams's music and the biography by RVW's widow, Ursula, a work of great warmth and vividness. Saylor is refreshingly matter-of-fact in his treatment of the one major issue left unmentioned by Ursula Vaughan Williams – that she and RVW began a passionate affair well before the death of the composer's first wife, Adeline, and Ursula's first husband, and that RVW's first wife (by that time physically disabled and seriously ill) almost certainly knew about this and probably encouraged it.

But Saylor is also clear, rather more so than Ursula in her biography, that Adeline continued to play a vital role of comment, criticism and encouragement in RVW's creative work up to the end of her life; the marriage was a rock of stability for RVW, and Adeline's death left him desolate. Ursula, 40 years younger and a talented poet, brought him new inspiration and security and they collaborated happily on several works. It is right, though, that Adeline's musical intelligence receives due recognition here, with welcome quotations from her correspondence.

When he died in 1958, English (and British) music had changed greatly, and even RVW's brand of radicalism could look old-fashioned. It was tempting to view him as a musical equivalent of John Betjeman, a national treasure of the teddy-bear type (though anyone seeing it in those terms could not have read Betjeman very carefully). Saylor's judicious, comprehensive study makes us look again at the novelty and the emotional and imaginative courage of the work. It illuminates, RVW's organic blend of localism and internationalism, and the subtext of tragedy beneath the surface lyricism – as in the *Pastoral Symphony*, for example, which disturbingly pulls us away from the English idyll it begins by celebrating, and forces a new perspective on us,

The NS Poem

Leelanau

Taylor Strickland

i.m. John Martin

Cherryless orchards uncoil to winter.
Shanties rank with whitefish, the river's
creaky docks. He knew every trap-net tug
by their wakes: long, dwindling epilogues
written across the lake. He would smile,
Ohio State-red dimples below calm
esquire's eyes, watching through the window
their leeward work. His error and wound:
Leelanau was 'delight of life'... He half-
laughed knowing how often lake turns to lack
and takes after the sky after the sky turns grey,
after the Great Lake freighters ply
January, whose second, greater blank
outgrew the pane in which he saw himself.

Taylor Strickland is an American poet based in Glasgow. His pamphlet "Commonplace Book" will be published by Broken Sleep Books in October

inflected by the horrors of the First World War. RVW had worked in the trenches with the Royal Army Medical Corps, and so had seen the worst; he did not forget the experience. The *Sixth Symphony*, on which he worked during and after the Second World War, paints a frighteningly desolate picture of a world of endemic conflict and ultimate dissolution.

He is a tougher, stranger composer than we might have thought – still a master of heartbreakingly beautiful melody, but a musician who has earned the right to lyrical pathos and intensity by his honest gaze at a world where (as in his great "Masque for Dancing" based on the Book of Job) the dance of the morning stars is always balanced by the Satanic energy that pushes us towards pain and despair. It was RVW's conviction, secularist as he was, that something had to be done in the name of redemption and promise for individuals and for national communities alike. That was what his music was for, in all its profusion and variety. ●

Reviewed in short

Accelerate!: A History of the 1990s

by James Brooke-Smith

The History Press, 304pp, £20

Charting the history of the 1990s from the end of the Cold War to 9/11, James Brooke-Smith endeavours to make sense of a decade that resists characterisation. It is a period that has passed neither into history proper, nor into historical caricature (like the “Roaring Twenties”). Brooke-Smith, a professor at the University of Ottawa, shows how instead of the triumphant release after a prolonged period of tension, the 1990s was a decade of disorientation and division. To do so he explores the era’s trends, hits and contradictions across film, literature, music, TV, gaming and the internet.

The amount of material he marshals is impressive, but reading the book is a bit like falling down a “Wiki hole”, where you bounce from topic to topic without pausing to ask questions about power or capitalism. Wiki-holing can be fun and occasionally instructive, but it’s hardly credible as a method of history. Without any theoretical keystone to hold the source material together, Brooke-Smith can only describe what happened – or what was produced – at that time, rather than explain what it all meant and if any of it mattered.
By Gavin Jacobson

Act of Oblivion

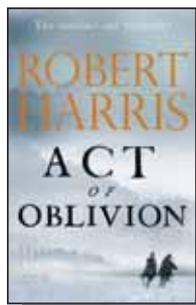
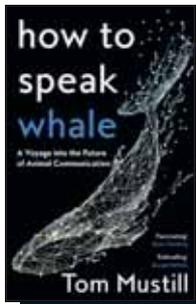
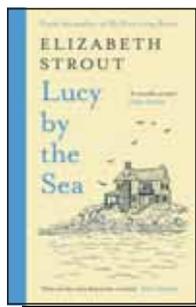
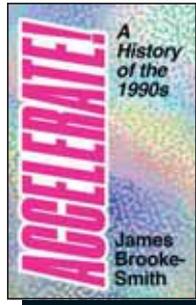
by Robert Harris

Hutchinson Heinemann, 480pp, £22

In 1660, under the restored monarchy of Charles II, the Indemnity and Oblivion Act was passed by parliament. It granted a general amnesty for most of the crimes committed during the Cromwellian Commonwealth. Exempt, however, were those men directly involved in the regicide of Charles I: no pardon for them, but a death sentence. In Robert Harris’s latest taut and suspenseful novel, Colonel Edward Whalley and his son-in-law Colonel William Goffe – real historical figures – are two such men, on the run for their lives.

This is a classic chase yarn, a 17th-century *Rogue Male* or *Day of the Jackal*. The two condemned men flee to America, where they are followed by the manhunter Richard Nayler, an invented character. Nayler has been tasked with catching the fugitives, dead or alive, but is motivated – obsessed, even – by a personal desire for revenge rather than by duty or a bounty. Harris, deft as ever, weaves a hefty amount of historical fact into the narrative – politics, religion, colonial life, family ties – as well as themes of forgiveness and reconciliation. Underneath it all though is the remorseless and building propulsion of hunter and prey.

By Michael Prodger



Lucy by the Sea

by Elizabeth Strout

Viking, 304pp, £14.99

Elizabeth Strout’s fiction is rightly praised for its startling insight into the human condition, written in exceptionally clear prose. In the first three novels in her Lucy Barton series, Strout details the life of a successful author who had a traumatic childhood in a poor town in Illinois. As an adult Lucy is highly empathetic but often self-absorbed. She experiences infidelity, divorce, loss and new love – and somehow, in writing about the specifics of one person’s life, Strout writes about us all.

By contrast, the events of *Lucy by the Sea* feel less involving. This is the fourth Lucy Barton book, published less than a year after *Oh William!*, which is shortlisted for the 2022 Booker Prize. It is March 2020, and Lucy narrates the mundanities of her new locked-down life, as well as what is taking place in the outside world: the increasing severity of the pandemic; George Floyd’s murder; the storming of the Capitol. In focusing so laboriously on recent historical events, Strout loses much of her character’s humanity. In her best work this comes out in Lucy’s less likeable traits, but disappointingly few are explored here.

By Ellen Peirson-Hagger

How To Speak Whale: A Voyage into the Future of Animal Communication

by Tom Mustill

William Collins, 288pp, £20

The author and biologist Tom Mustill writes that today’s attempts to decrypt the natural world take place “where big data meets big beasts”. By “bugging” animal habitats and training machines to comb the data, scientists are conceiving ever more ingenious ways to access their minds. And this author has particular reason to pursue what whales are thinking.

Ever since 2015, when a humpback breached on to his kayak, missing him and his friend by inches, Mustill has wondered: was the creature trying to kill them? Or did it jump by mistake and then swerve mid-air to spare their lives? The incident was caught on camera by holidaymakers and went viral online, sending him on a quest to better understand the ties that exist between species. Mustill, who is also an Emmy-nominated film-maker, has already produced a BBC documentary about his findings. He now channels his story into this even more extensively researched and energetic book. We may never be able to fully comprehend what goes on in the minds of other species. But it is via the informed, far-reaching empathy of intermediaries such as Mustill that we stand our best chance of seeing into the non-human depths.

By India Bourke

Football's data delusion

Why the English Premier League is still searching for its *Moneyball* moment

By Simon Kuper

Liverpool FC's research department has featured an astrophysicist, a chess champion and an alumnus of the Large Hadron Collider at Cern near Geneva, all led by a polymer physicist from Cambridge. In 2017 the department lobbied the club's manager, Jürgen Klopp, to sign Egyptian forward Mo Salah from Roma.

The analysts used a statistical term, covariance, which measures the relationship between different elements. What was the covariance between, say, two forwards? Did they complement each other? The analysts concluded that Salah would combine well with Roberto Firmino, a striker already recruited

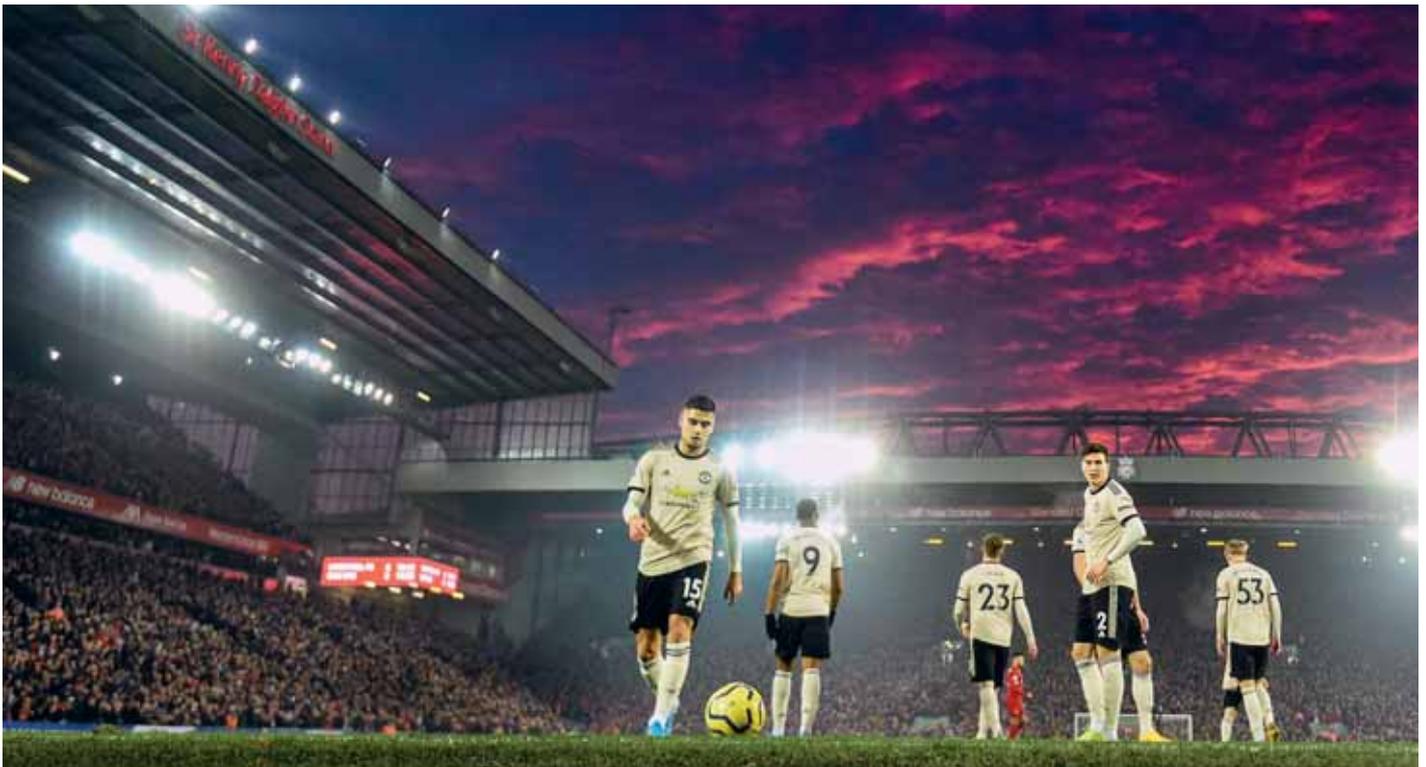
largely because of his data. Klopp initially rejected Salah, but eventually the analysts persuaded him. In 2019 and 2020, Liverpool won the Champions League and then their first Premier League title since 1990.

Data analytics in football has leaped ahead this last decade, argues the *New York Times'* chief soccer correspondent Rory Smith in his breezy, readable, useful introduction to the story. Analytics has made a historically stupid game more intelligent. Smith goes so far as to herald an "unspoken revolution", though that's not right: football analytics is much trumpeted and not quite a revolution. Rather than transforming the game, analytics has so far only improved it marginally.

The origins of data in football are conventionally timed to 3.50pm on 18 March 1950, when the RAF accountant Charles Reep (glamorously ranked "wing commander") began logging match events during the second half of a Swindon Town game. In that half he recorded 147 attacks by Swindon. Extrapolating from this tiny sample, Reep calculated that 99.29 per cent of attacks in football failed.

But only this century did analytics seep into clubs. Michael Lewis's 2003 book *Moneyball*, which showed how analytics had transformed American baseball, inspired many in football, especially in England. Video games like the *FIFA* and *Pro Evolution Soccer* series, which calculated complex ability ratings for players, also fed interest in data. And as clubs got richer, they began hiring statisticians to see if they might add any value.

Increased computing power produced data more telling than the useless old stats on tackles made, passes completed and kilometres run. The logging of match events was outsourced to cheap hires in the Philippines, Egypt or Russia, who not only documented where a



Spot the statistic: Liverpool play Manchester United in the Premier League at Anfield, January 2020

MICHAEL REGAN/GETTY IMAGES

player had passed from but also tried to quantify how much pressure he had been under. New “tracking data” helped show what each player did in the 89 minutes a game, on average, that he didn’t have the ball.

Gradually, modern football’s key metric emerged from the fog: “expected goals” (xG), a measure of how many goals a team would typically have scored based on the quantity and quality of its chances in a match. Once a team’s xG had been determined, you could break down each player’s contribution to that number.

An iron rule of football is that people from outside the sport are cleverer than insiders. Perhaps to combat this, insiders have produced a dogma which holds that only ex-players truly understand the game. Many managers were suspicious of data analysts whose rival form of expertise could make them redundant. Often, the geek would be shut away in a distant office where nobody could hear him scream.

About three quarters of the book is a story of disappointment. Smith follows analytics enthusiasts who are employed by clubs, and ultimately depart without having made much difference. They tell him about their brilliant data-driven signings of players, but – as he acknowledges – less about their bad data-driven signings. Often, even when the analytics evangelist identifies a gem – like Hendrik Almstadt urging Arsenal to buy the young Kevin De Bruyne – the club decides against. The temptation for Smith in writing a book such as this is to overclaim for data, and it’s to his credit that he rarely does. But the cumulative effect is anticlimactic.

Most clubs today use data primitively and only as a plug-in extra. In an urgent industry, they lack time and expertise: often, nobody on staff has a maths degree. A club that wants to sign a player might cherry-pick data points to justify its predetermined decision. Some clubs monitor sprint data to identify shirkers. Footballers increasingly understand this, and find ways to game the analytics. When matches stopped for injury breaks, Manchester City’s veteran right-back Pablo Zabaleta would boost his stats by running sprints, writes Smith.

But data hasn’t particularly powered the game’s ceaseless evolution. Football’s most influential coach, Pep Guardiola, spends much more time watching videos than studying spreadsheets.

Only late on does Smith identify the football clubs doing a *Moneyball*: Brighton, owned by professional gambler Tony Bloom, and Brentford and FC Midtjylland in Denmark, both owned by Bloom’s former employee Matthew Benham. Armed with numeracy and oodles of data, these men have lifted relatively small clubs into the top division. They’ve identified undervalued players and found data-led ways to score from the set pieces – free kicks, corners, even throw-ins – that other clubs waste. (The convention is that the star player is allowed to line up a free kick, go into meditation mode and then blam it into the crowd when he should have passed.)

“Midtjylland are now regularly the most effective team at set pieces... in Europe,” writes Smith. Benham’s long-time point man Rasmus Ankersen says:

“Midtjylland is further ahead of the team in second than the team in second is ahead of the team in 73rd.”

But it’s easier to achieve such a transformation at their level, football’s middle reaches, where undervalued players abound. At the top, where players are closely scrutinised, talent tends to be already recognised.

Smith needs an elite example of a *Moneyball* team and he picks Liverpool, owned by the American commodities trader John Henry. Ian Graham, the club’s director of research, believes the main impact analytics can make is on recruitment. Almost all of football’s money goes on talent. If a club can find good players, they will generally do the rest themselves. And Liverpool does indeed seem to recruit efficiently. In the new edition of our book *Soccernomics*, Stefan Szymanski and I show that from 2011 through to 2021 the club’s net spend on wages plus transfers was lower than that of its rivals Manchester City, Chelsea and Manchester United.

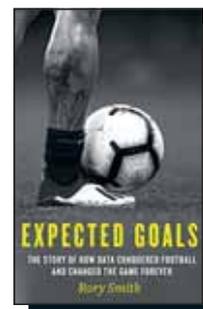
But Smith misses the true recruitment star: Tottenham Hotspur. Spurs in that decade regularly challenged competitors at the top of the table while averaging an annual net spend of just £283m, half that of Chelsea and less than half that of the two Manchester clubs. Smith does discuss Spurs’ early use of analytics: the data firm Decision Technology was contracted to the club until 2018. But even its staff don’t know whether anyone at Spurs so much as read its stream of reports. What happens inside Daniel Levy’s Spurs is a black box. I’m guessing, though, that they have replaced Decision Technology with world-class in-house analytics.

Smith’s focus on Liverpool over Spurs illustrates the book’s limitations. The great barrier in football writing is access: clubs rarely give it. So when insiders do talk, the temptation is to exaggerate their roles. Smith ends up apparently unsure of what he thinks. The book’s subtitle is “The Story of How Data Conquered Football and Changed the Game Forever”, but his conclusion is more downbeat. He quotes Daryl Morey, pioneer of analytics in basketball, as saying that soccer’s “data sucks, no one cares, and no one should”. Many analysts inside clubs sympathise with that view, Smith admits.

There are new frontiers ahead, though. In 2017, AlphaZero, an artificial intelligence program created by Google’s research lab DeepMind, beat the world’s best computer chess engine, having taught itself chess in a matter of hours. AlphaZero, blind to tradition, reasons out the best way to play. Liverpool are now reportedly investigating whether AI can reveal the secrets of football. It may show, for instance, that you should never shoot from a free kick. Perhaps football analytics has barely got started.

Rory Smith has seen inside parts of football, and has good stories. But the whole feels a touch shallow, as reflected in hurried, magazine-feature prose: “Mayfair, with its grand Georgian façades, its private members’ clubs, its dazzling veneer of money”; “the fast-talking, somewhat hot-headed Bostonian”; “park its tanks on its old rival’s lawn”; “caught the gimlet eyes of teams higher up the food chain”; and so on. Like most of us outsiders, he has run into football’s locked doors. ●

Simon Kuper writes for the FT



**Expected Goals:
The Story of How
Data Conquered
Football and
Changed the
Game Forever**
Rory Smith
Mudlark,
304pp, £20

**Clubs rarely
give access.
So when
insiders
do talk, the
football
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temptation is
to exaggerate
their roles**

Lucian Freud's pitiless style

The painter was a scrupulous observer of faces and flesh who refused to demean his art by flattering his subjects

By Michael Prodger

According to Lucian Freud, “Gossip is only interesting because it’s all there is about anyone.” If he was right, then there was an awful lot to Freud. Gossip and anecdotes about him are not just legion but usually true. He was determined not to be trammelled by conventional morality and acted accordingly; indeed, the psychologist who assessed him for wartime conscription exempted him on the grounds that he was “a destructive force in the community”. His behaviour, especially towards women, was frequently appalling, but he gave himself a get-out clause: “A painter,” he said, “must think of everything he sees as being there entirely for his own use and pleasure.” It was a convenient credo.

Freud, however, was also committed to painting and was steadfast in his adherence to the old genres of figure painting and portraiture in particular. Artistic styles were less interesting to him than the problem of representation. He wanted to “move the senses” not through colour, abstraction, the appropriation of pop culture or any of the other themes of the art of the second half of the 20th century, but through what he called “an intensification of reality”. His ambition was huge, and unrealisable: “I would wish my portraits to be of the people, not like them. Not having a look of the sitter, being them.”

He stuck to this conviction for 70 years, even if it cost him dearly. It is hard to imagine now, but in the late 1980s and early 1990s Freud was so out of favour that after a squabble with his dealer he sold nothing for two and a half years. He seemed then merely the descendent of a worn-out tradition and kept himself afloat by gambling until flashier newcomers lost their lustre, and the seriousness and particularity of his

“A painter must think of everything he sees as being there entirely for his own use and pleasure”

work – what his biographer William Feather describes as the “sheen of hair, weight of eyelids, and individuality of wrist, fingernails and nipples” – was re-appreciated. If there was much ignoble about Freud, there was nobility in his refusal to change his course.

Freud was born in 1922 (he died in 2011) and this centenary year sees a major exhibition of some 65 works at the National Gallery, “Lucian Freud: New Perspectives” (1 October – 22 January 2023); a show at the Garden Museum next to Lambeth Palace recognising him as a scrupulous observer of flora, “Lucian Freud: Plant Portraits” (14 October – 5 March 2023), while “Horses & Freud”, a loan display at the Ordovas gallery on Savile Row in London (runs until 16 December) reveals his fascination with the equine world. “Lucian Freud: The Painter and His Family” presents a selection of his work and assorted memorabilia at the Freud Museum, the north London home of his grandfather Sigmund (runs until 29 January 2023). And there is also the publication of a collection of his early illustrated correspondence, *Love Lucian: The Letters of Lucian Freud 1939-1954* (Thames & Hudson).

Of course, Freud’s own fame – or infamy – was inextricable from the paintings themselves. He arrived in England from Germany in 1933 when his parents escaped the Nazis, and his celebrated surname marked him out from other émigrés. Despite intermittent schooling – including expulsion from Bryanston for a bottom-bearing prank – and a stop-start artistic training, he was a person of interest from his teenage years onwards, quickly becoming part of a high artistic and literary circle where he was compared to Rimbaud and to Tazio in *Death in Venice*. One of his sitters later said that to be with him was “like putting your fingers into an electric socket”, and among those who felt his charge was Stephen Spender, who confided to TS Eliot that he was in love with the 17-year-old Freud. “There’s nothing I understand more,” the elder poet wrote back.

One of the few artists whose influence the painter would acknowledge was Cedric Morris, who ran an unconventional art school, attended by Freud, at Dedham, in Constable country on the Essex-Suffolk border. Freud would later claim he burned the place down courtesy of a discarded cigarette. However, other influences were perhaps more apparent: his work of the 1940s is, for example, evidence of how closely he had examined the work of first the German expressionists and then Hans Holbein and 15th-century Flemish “primitives” such as Hans Memling, as well as the French neoclassicist Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. Freud’s pictures such as *Girl with Roses* (1947-48) and *Girl with a Kitten* (1948) are thinly painted, small in scale, delicate and exemplify his desire that they “reveal some of the results of my concentration”.

The sitter for these two paintings was Kitty Garman, the daughter of the sculptor Jacob Epstein and niece of Freud’s former lover Lorna Wishart (herself a lover of Laurie Lee, with whom Freud had fisticuffs: Lee’s “blood, or sweat, smelt revolting”, recalled the painter). Freud and Garman married and she gave birth to the first of his innumerable children (another lover, the ▶



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Still life: *Girl with Roses*, Lucian Freud, 1947-48. Most of Freud's works feature a figure, an interior and a prop



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◀ painter Anne Dunn, once said that if she had trouble sleeping, “instead of counting sheep, I count Lucian’s children”). After the marriage broke up, Epstein would refer to his former son-in-law as “the spiv Lucian Freud”.

The hallucinogenic force of Freud’s pictures of Garman, however, express the intensity of his feelings both towards her and the craft of painting. He turned her into a still life; as the painter Michael Ayrton pointed out, in his pictures, “content is utterly static”. Garman does not so much hold the rose or the kitten as squeeze them into immobility so that her febrile concentration is a mirror of the painter’s own. It was pictures such as these that led the prominent art theorist Herbert Read to tag Freud the “Ingres of existentialism”.

In the 1950s Freud’s minimalist style gradually evolved into something more expansive. He concentrated almost exclusively on portraits, although plants, either with or without a sitter present, continued to appear: he painted, drew and etched some 100 botanical pictures (one of them, *Two Plants*, took three years – 1977-80 – and proved so difficult that it drove him “around the bend”). *Interior at Paddington* (1951), for example, is dominated by a yucca plant shown not only with the same fidelity as the standing figure of the odd-job man and photographer Harry Diamond but in the same drab khaki colours and closer to the viewer. Spiky, dishevelled and slightly wilting, it is as much the real subject of the picture as the man.

This ménage – figure, interior scene, prop – remained the basic scenario for the majority of Freud’s pictures for the length of his career and stayed consistent as his style changed. The paint became thicker, the paintings larger and the perspective tilted so that floorboards lurch like the deck of a ship, but the key elements were the same.

Freud rarely painted portraits to commission. Madonna pestered him: “Would I phone her urgently. I never did.” John Paul I was rejected, as was Andrew Lloyd Webber, who wanted his wife painted: “He even threatened me with theatre tickets.” Instead he took his daughters (“It’s nice when you breed your own models”) and his friends as his subjects, and he had plenty of both. Modelling for him was an arduous and extended ordeal. For Andrew Parker Bowles it meant innumerable sittings over two years: “What on Earth do you want to go and do that for?” asked Prince Philip. Nevertheless, Parker Bowles gave Freud – both were great horse fanciers – a tip for the Cheltenham Gold Cup that netted the painter £1m.

Parker Bowles and the plutocrats Jacob Rothschild and Heini Thyssen (who stationed two security guards outside the studio door when he was being painted) were allowed to keep their clothes on. Many of his other sitters, from his daughters and Freud himself to the performance artist Leigh Bowery and the then benefits supervisor Sue Tilley, were painted nude. “I don’t think of genitals as special,” he said. Rather, depicting naked flesh was a way of continuing the classical tradition (Titian was a hero figure) and he found it “exciting to see the forms repeating right through the body”.



***Bella and Esther*
Lucian Freud,
1988**

It was also perhaps a means to intimacy. Freud confessed to his failures as a father and spending time painting some of his children was a way of making up for his absenteeism during their childhoods – a restitution he would reinforce with the gift of a flat or payment of school fees. During sitting after sitting, he got to know them. With his mother, Lucie, whom he painted over and over again, even after her death, depiction was an expression of love. For decades he had felt smothered by her affection and had avoided her, but when his father died in 1970 she attempted suicide and it brought Lucian back to her. It has been estimated that during the 1970s alone he spent 4,000 hours painting her, and his pictures of Lucie, often compared to those by Rembrandt of his own mother, are the most personal and tender of all his works.

The liquid licks of Freud’s paintings of the 1960s and 1970s gradually turned into thicker impasto and in the early 1980s he started to translate his absorbed gaze on to 6ft canvases. These pictures in the grand tradition tended to contain a precarious balance in which floors turn upwards while the artist’s/viewer’s gaze looks down on a figure or figures splayed on a mattress or daybed. The sitter, despite the heft of some of them, is almost on the verge of toppling.

The painter Celia Paul, another of his lovers, said sitting for Freud was “pitiless”, but then he believed that “the one thing more important than the person in the painting is the picture”. His naked models are not just stripped of clothes but of their personality and position too. He was not interested in whether the acreage of flesh was lovely or unlovely; it was simply necessary to him. Some of the six-footers could take three years to complete, with days accounting to no more than a dab or two. Bowery would infuriate him by adding a blob of paint here and there when Freud left the room.

One of the rough-trade crew who were his neighbours in Paddington in the 1950s once asked him: “Ere, Lu: do you do that Epstein stuff? That Picasso stuff?” He didn’t explain that what he did, and what he would always do, was Freud stuff. ●

**Madonna
pestered
Freud for
a portrait:
“Would
I phone her
urgently.
I never did”**

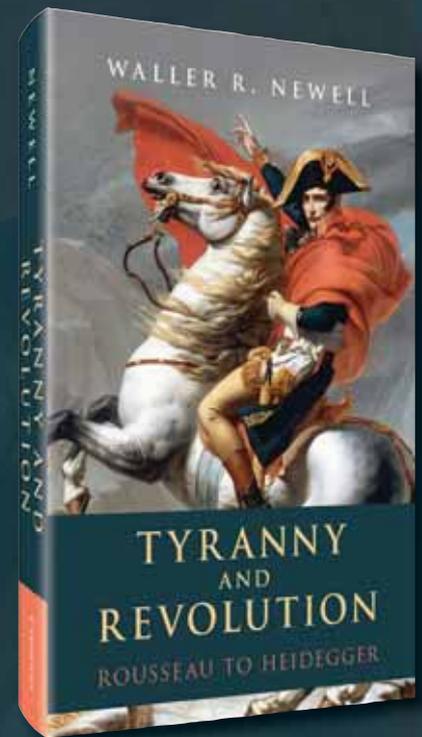
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Film

Alice through the looking-glass

The derivative *Don't Worry Darling* puts Florence Pugh in an idyllic 1950s community where all is not what it seems

By Ryan Gilbey

Don't Worry Darling is an ironic title for a film that arrives bearing nothing but woes. Did Florence Pugh really fall out with her director and co-star Olivia Wilde? Did the pop singer Harry Styles publicly spit at his fellow cast member Chris Pine? And what's up with Styles' American accent? Don't worry, darling: such folderol need not detain us. There is a fair amount wrong with the movie but Wilde deserves better than to have it judged on tittle-tattle and allegations of expectorating.

If the rumour mill has been powered by misogyny – in particular the notion, last seen on this scale around the time of Elaine May's *Ishtar* (1987), that entrusting a costly studio movie to a female director is like putting a chimpanzee at the wheel of a juggernaut – then so too is the world of *Don't Worry Darling*, where women paint their faces and bite their tongues. Pugh plays Alice, and her wonderland is the Victory project – a utopian planned community lined with palm trees and surrounded by desert, where she lives blissfully with the dapper Jack (Styles). Except for the nightmares in which scabby-faced dancers march towards her in monochrome.

It is the late 1950s; everywhere you look could be a *Life* magazine cover. Alice, Bunny (Wilde) and the other wives wave their husbands off each morning to jobs in the “progressive materials” business. Then it's time to do the housework before relaxing with a cocktail. ▶



Desperate housewife: Florence Pugh's Alice tends to the domestic chores in *Don't Worry Darling*

◀ “Remember ladies, there is beauty in control,” says the local dance instructor. This is the theory peddled by Frank (Pine), the community’s charismatic guru. “Nasty word, chaos,” he shudders.

But discord is in the air. Alice’s neighbour Margaret (KiKi Layne) has been staring vacantly into space and voicing doubts about Victory, while Alice imagines herself trapped under glass or wrapped in cling film. Standing at the stove, she crushes eggs in her palm only to find nothing inside.

Those empty shells risk becoming a symbol of sorts for a movie that feels simultaneously over-egged – Wilde hasn’t found a sinister sound effect or fussy camera angle that she didn’t like – and strangely vapid. The director and her screenwriter, Katie Silberman, spend an awfully long time reiterating that Victory is too good to be true, which leaves no room to explore the questions raised by a twist in the final half-hour, or to delve into unresolved tensions surrounding Margaret’s breakdown. It is not insignificant that she is one of the few people of colour in the Victory project, yet the film skims over the implications of that, and of her suffering becoming a catalyst for white enlightenment.

Katie Byron’s production design, Matthew Libatique’s cinematography and Arianne Phillips’s costumes supply some of the pleasurable jolts lacking in the Stepford-by-numbers script. One effective touch is the platoon of red-suited handymen who materialise to quell dissent. Scrambling up a hill in pursuit of an errant citizen, they resemble livid pustules colonising a healthy body. There are witty character sketches, too, among the husbands. Douglas Smith excels as a gauche newcomer eager to keep up with the Joneses; Asif Ali is amusing as a wiseacre in thrall to Victory’s leader. Spotting Frank in an open shirt at a dinner party, he admonishes himself and hurriedly removes his own tie.

Any possible complaints about Styles’ performance are eventually rendered superfluous by the plot. There is a narrative reason, it transpires, for his ineffectual manner, just as there is for his uncertain accent. And though there is a sense that Pugh has been through this lark before (*Midsommar* also required her to sit at the head of the table, and to witness people falling to their deaths), she doesn’t use that as an excuse to coast. This is not an actor with an autopilot setting.

Wilde invested real personality in her debut film, the lively comedy *Booksmart*, so it’s disappointing that *Don’t Worry Darling* feels so anonymous. The most that can be said is that it reflects modern anxieties (over gender roles, technology vs humanity, reality vs fantasy, healing vs trauma) which have been more skillfully addressed on television in *Black Mirror*, *WandaVision* and *Severance*, as well as on stage in *Blueberry Toast* (written by Mary Laws, who was raised in a planned community) and Laura Wade’s *Home, I’m Darling*. It is just possible that there is a snappier, less derivative little thriller somewhere inside Wilde’s movie. Like the inhabitants of the Victory project, however, it is in dire need of liberation from its gilded, airless prison. ●

“Don’t Worry Darling” is in cinemas now

Television

An incarcerated Sherlock Holmes

By Rachel Cooke

Inside Man
BBC One, aired
26 September;
available on
catch-up

Stanley Tucci: discuss. I’ll go first. I like him. I think he makes bad stuff OK, and good stuff even better. I’m keen on the wit he brings to every role; that twitch at the side of his mouth that tells you he’s playing with his line and, by extension, with his audience. He’s brilliant at sullen and snooty. He’s the master of a certain kind of camp. A vague air of intelligence trails him, like expensive cologne. To sum up: I would like to see a lot more of Tucci on TV. But I guess he’s picky. Not for him the dreary Sunday night police procedural; the cop with a paunch, a drink problem, and a furious ex-wife.

In Steven Moffat’s (*Doctor Who*, *Sherlock*) intricate but batshit-crazy new drama, *Inside Man*, Tucci plays a death-row prisoner, Jefferson Grieff, known to us mostly as Grieff. He is, I think, well-named. A former professor of criminology who strangled his wife, he now whiles away the time left to him by taking on cases the public bring to his attention: small mysteries he’ll only agree to solve if he believes that doing so has some moral worth. The prison authorities are weirdly



Come to Grieff: Stanley Tucci (centre) plays a condemned criminology professor

easy-going about this, facilitating visits and enabling phone calls, but somehow we don't question it. *Inside Man* is completely preposterous; in the light of day, you can pick it apart like the remains of a roast chicken. While you're watching it, though, you willingly suspend your disbelief. It's so gripping and strange and – yes – convincing.

But I digress. It's Grieff's contention that everyone is, potentially, a murderer. "All it takes is a good reason, and a bad day," he says. As if to illustrate this, on the other side of the Atlantic a vicar called Harry (David Tennant) is indeed teetering on the edge of just such a circumstantial precipice. I want to avoid spoilers, so let us only say that this particular escarpment involves illegal pornography, his son's maths teacher, Janice (Dolly Wells), and the vicarage's cellar. Hmm. Now I've written this down, it sounds terrible: a bit more than a bad day. But honestly, things do spiral out of control for this patently decent man – or is he? – very quickly. You watch Harry, and every stage on his descent into hell seems unavoidable, somehow. It's like slipping on ice, or something.

What connects these two men, Grieff and Harry? Again, no spoilers. All I will tell you is that a young crime reporter, Beth (Lydia West, of *It's A Sin*), is in contact, for various complicated reasons, with both Grieff and Janice. As I write, I've seen three of four episodes, and I honestly have no idea what's going to happen next. Will Harry kill someone? Or will Beth, guided (perhaps) by Grieff, manage to prevent this? And what of Grieff? Will he be executed? (He admits his case is not a miscarriage of justice.) Or will he live to solve another case, this Sherlock Holmes of the American penitentiary system?

Moffat has written the television equivalent of a game of chess. Each move a character makes has consequences, some foreseen and some not. It demands total concentration. Turn away for even a moment, and you'll literally lose the plot.

It's hard to write about; I really would hate to ruin it for everyone. So I'll move on to some of its more inconsequential aspects. It's very nice to see a vicar in a drama such as this. Ever since the Queen's funeral, I've been thinking about how the left treats Christianity (with contempt mostly; certainly, it would never openly speak of other faiths in the same way). It isn't so much that Moffat makes Harry real; it's that he makes his faith real. But maybe he also concentrated too hard on Harry; Beth, like almost every TV "journalist" I've ever seen, is utterly unconvincing, a walking, talking collection of hack clichés.

David Tennant, of course, is excellent: he and Stanley Tucci are so well-matched on actorly weight and charisma, but plaudits must go, too, to Dolly Wells. She makes Janice a sublime combination of ordinary and extraordinary, to the point where you never know quite who, or what, it is you're watching. Is she really just a rather sweetly old-fashioned suburban GCSE tutor, or could she in fact be the Mycroft to Tucci's Holmes? ●

Radio

Mind-reading for TikTok teens

By Rachel Cunliffe

**Influenced with
Joel M**
Podcasts

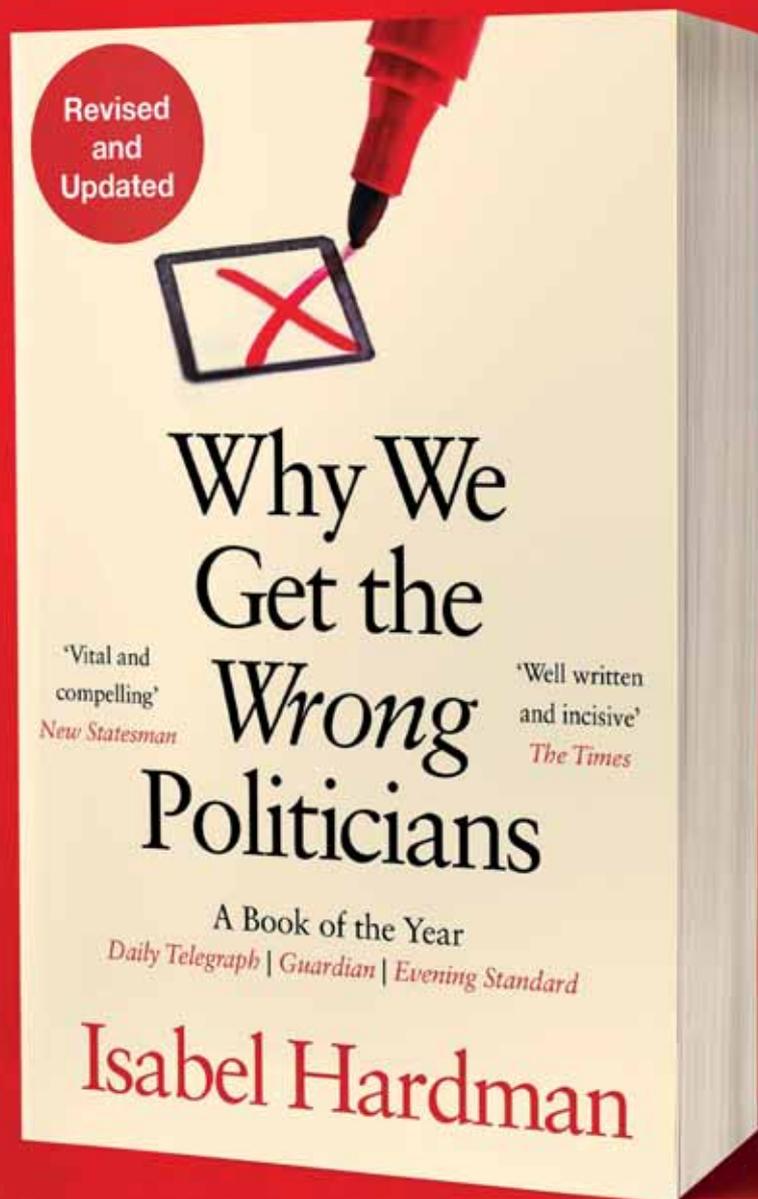
Joel M and his team are not being subtle about what they're trying to do: "This is Derren Brown for the podcast generation," reads the strapline for his new show, *Influenced with Joel M*. The 25-year-old has gained more than 16 million TikTok followers and two million YouTube subscribers with his 21st-century take on magic. But a 40-minute podcast is a very different offering to a 20-second video clip. There's no smoke and mirrors here, no trick packs of cards, optical illusions, or option to cut the video at the crucial moment. Joel is going to have to perform magic with his voice alone. How on Earth does that work?

The clue's in the name: this is a show about influencing – "a podcast that will get inside your mind", as he puts it. More mentalist than magician, Joel interviews a celebrity guest each week and uses his subliminal messaging skills to both read their mind and guide the answers they give. Episode one features the Scottish singer-songwriter Nina Nesbitt. Joel plays games with her – two truths and a lie, guessing the name of her first pet – with asides to listeners explaining (or pretending to explain) how he's doing it. It's light-hearted and engaging ("Is this a reptile?" "Yeah." "No it's not."), but the aim is to prime Nina for the real trick at the end.

Yes, you've probably seen this sort of thing done by Derren Brown and other illusionists over the years, but there's something very different about experiencing it in a format that relies on audio alone. It's less showy and more intimate – in fact, much of the podcast feels more like a cosy chat show than a spectacular performance. For podcast listeners, that's a definite plus – I was just as interested by Nina's story of accidentally almost joining a cult in Oregon than whether Joel's mind-bending would be successful. I'm just not sure his TikTok followers, used to watching him produce coffee beans out of empty mugs or balloon animals out of his brother's mouth, will feel the same way. ●

**Joel M has
amassed
16 million
followers
with his
21st-century
take on
illusions**

CAN WE LEARN FROM THEIR MISTAKES?



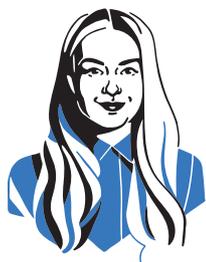
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critically acclaimed Book of the Year

Revised and updated to include the explosive
political events of 2021 and 2022

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Deleted Scenes



Pippa Bailey

In moving house again I am moving away from my old, hurt self too

It is odd how much smaller a room looks once it is empty. When all that is left of the furniture is dents in the carpet and only a few nails remain in the walls to suggest where pictures once hung, there is nothing to provide a sense of scale except the odd ball of dust. Previous flats looked good naked – all ceiling roses and sash windows – but this modern box is soulless left to its own devices: white and somehow flimsy. I see flaws I'd never noticed before – the paint flecks on the wooden floors, the streaks on the balcony windows, and, damn, was that chip in the worktop my doing?

The first time I moved house was shortly after my parents' divorce. I was 17, and it happened while I was on holiday over the summer: I packed up my bedroom before I left and returned "home" to somewhere that wasn't home at all. I spent only a few short years in the house into which we moved, but they were formative ones: driving tests and exam results and break-ups and dinner parties hosted while my mother hid in her bedroom upstairs. I moved out twice – once to go to university (three different flats, but each time the same boxes consisting mostly of the

complete works of Shakespeare and a trolley's worth of Ikea), and again into my first adult home in London. Four flats followed, in which I won jobs and was made redundant, found love and lost it, drank a lot and laughed a lot, held and was held. In which I stayed up all night for US elections and referendum results and the Oscars. I found leaving each of them both anxiety- and nostalgia-inducing.

But this most recent move was different. I closed the front door for the last time without pausing to remember, without one last, wistful look around. My life was already elsewhere. This cold detachment is partially, I am sure, self-protection: when you move every year (or every couple, if you're lucky), it is too exhausting to imbue each upheaval with great emotion. Moving is simply a sequence of steps that must be followed, and I know this dance well by now. I no longer need to write notes to self about meter readings or Polyfilla.

I am in touch with the new tenants of my former home, and I spend a long time with them on FaceTime, trying to explain how the hot-water tank works. Seeing them pass between the rooms I once inhabited is not unsettling or

disorientating, but strangely neutral. They have no idea – and I realise that this is verging on *Daily Mail*-article-about-the-setting-of-some-long-ago-grisly-murder-being-listed-on-Zoopla territory – what those walls have seen, and their blissful ignorance is enviable.

My first stop is house-sitting for some friends who are travelling around Australia and New Zealand for a couple of months. I expected living in someone else's home, among their family photographs and holiday souvenirs, to feel unreal, even uncomfortable, but I find it suits me rather well. My bedroom is in the attic, up three flights of stairs, and I sweat out the hangover from my best friend's wedding hoisting boxes up to it. I am not used to having multiple floors over which to roam (the novelty, after years of living in flats, of internal stairs!) and my only complaint is that I now spend what feels like hours of each day climbing between them to fetch things I have forgotten. I throw myself into hosting to make the most of the abundance of space, and so every weekend I have a succession of different visitors for first breakfast, second breakfast, elevenses, luncheon...

I feel, in a way, like a different person in this house: something has lifted, eased. It pleases me to think that A – no longer knows where I am, as though this means he no longer knows *who* I am. It puts me even further out of his reach. I am no longer surrounded by reminders of him that flood my mind with tiny, barely registered details I did not know I had retained. Before I moved, I sold the sofa on which we ended things. Its new owners – a pair of Italian brothers I meet via Gumtree – send me a picture of it in its new home and I forward it to my mother: "Bye, break-up sofa."

At the time of that first move when I was a teenager, I was furious with her for making us leave my childhood home, the last piece of our former family life, the only thing that proved, it felt, that any of it had been real. Of course, the memories that made that house so precious to my brother and I were exactly what made remaining there so painful for her.

On one of the two occasions I saw A – again after that night, he told me that he will never forget the noise I made after he closed the front door behind him, as the grief poured out of me. I have no recollection of making it, but I often remembered his words in the year that followed, as I shut that same door. I understand, now, my mother's act of self-preservation; her leap for freedom. ●

The Fan



Hunter Davies

After the England-Germany game, I have a cunning plan to win the World Cup

Alfred J Prufrock, wrote TS Eliot, measured out his life with coffee spoons. In “Hey Bulldog”, a song with dopey lyrics, John Lennon said that some kind of happiness is measured out in miles. My life has been measured out in England-Germany football matches.

The first one I saw, on 30 July 1966 at Wembley Stadium, made me awfully happy. It still makes me smile every time I see my framed ticket hanging on my lavatory wall. I paid £5, which was about the most expensive seat. I must have been well off then. Most seats were 10/6.

During these past 56 years, watching England has mostly been a disappointment. Yet we always seem to persuade ourselves that this time will be different, the lads will do it for us. Every season there are indeed new young players, new faces, but when they get their chance for England, they seem to shrink, become overawed.

My heart missed a beat recently when I saw the England team coming out in red – the colour they wore when they won the World Cup – in memory of the Queen, who presented them with the trophy in 1966. I

quickly changed into my black suit, which I wore in 2014 when the Queen gave me my gong. I am wearing it now, as I type this. Out of respect.

For most of the first half, I crouched behind the sofa. I did not want to witness any appalling errors, but too late. I caught goalie Nick Pope dwelling too long on the ball and his defenders clutching their heads as the Germans whizzed past them. Not that their team was much better.

They are both middling, disappointing, annoying teams. England were already relegated from the Nations League, whatever that is, whoever cares. It's the World Cup, innit, wot matters.

Now and again Harry Maguire did go forward – look at me, oh, am I not brave? – before suddenly stopping, remembering who he was, Harry Maguire, lump of this parish, then turning and sending the ball all the way back to his goalie. Job done. He had not given the ball away. John Stones passes the ball blind, so he can't be blamed for giving the ball away.

Both teams did that in the goalless first half. Or fell over, failing to control the ball. Poor old Raheem Sterling. What has happened to him? Is he the next Dele Alli,

about to disappear into space? Kyle Walker also seems to have lost his essence.

Yet the back pages have recently been going on about a vintage generation, how we are blessed with so many good young players. If so, surely they would have managed at least one win in their last six competitive games.

Yes Harry Kane is good, but he has little support or supply, so he lumbers, and is too willing to go back and get the ball. He has none of the energy and flair and menace of Erling Haaland.

The second half, though, was pretty exciting, with England coming back from 2-0 down to a 3-3 draw. So jolly well done. Still not a win, but come on, they could well have got stuffed, after losing two quick goals.

Both teams, though, look poor bets for the Fifa World Cup in Qatar, which begins in November. I imagine all German fans are as annoyed and disillusioned as England fans. Whatever will become of us?

And Gareth Southgate? He did look neat and serious and sensible in his dark suit and little beard. When he does get the push, I hope he will take holy orders. He will make a perfect curate. But he is secure until after the World Cup. For once, one of his subs was no worse than the player taken off, as Mason Mount did get a goal. Phew.

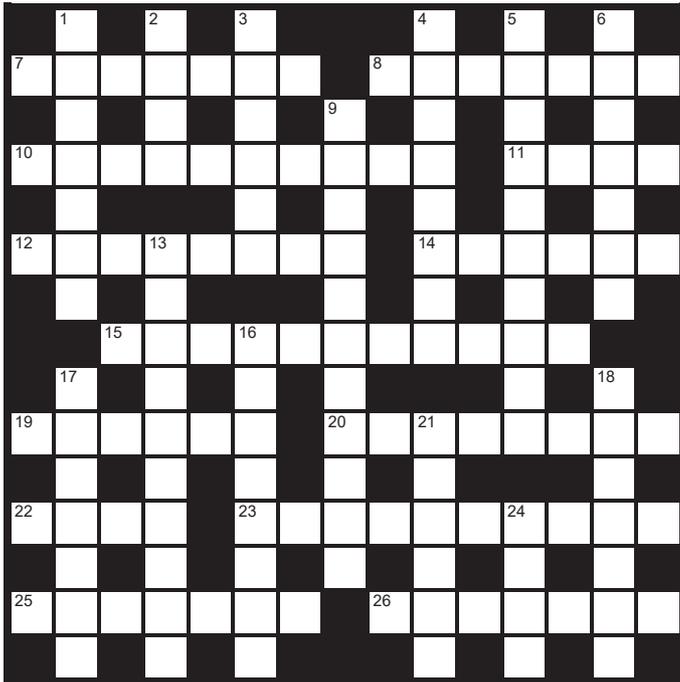
But still no win in six games. What on Earth is the problem? Is England's present state of woe a reflection of the country's present economic situation? Both in dire straits. Harold Wilson tried to take credit for England's World Cup win in the Sixties, as a reflection of good times off and on the pitch. All fantasy of course.

I think the solution is obvious. Instead of sending to Qatar the so-called Lions we have seen play in recent weeks – falling over themselves, running into each other, without a leader on or off the field – I think we should send the Lionesses. All of them. The whole squad. Plus their excellent manager, Sarina Wiegman.

I've had a look at the World Cup rules and can't find where it says that England must send out 11 *male* players. I can't see a mention of women being banned. So let the Lionesses run out for England against Iran on 21 November. They will play much better than the present male team. And wouldn't that amaze and alarm the Qatar and Iran FAs..? ●

“Love in Old Age: A Year in the Wight House” by Hunter Davies is published by Head of Zeus

The NS Cryptic Crossword 601: Alphabetical Jigsaw by Anorak



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

- A Punctuation mark that's perhaps too odd (10)
- B Sound measures to seize half Russian's capital (8)
- C Touchstone was a fool at Wimbledon (5,6)
- D Travel info on the NEWS! (10)
- E Somewhere to dine, seated, no frills, by railway (6)
- F Take off, when left in charge (4)
- G Snap up a bit of a bargain? (4)
- H Those moved and left backpackers' accommodation (6)
- I One doctor having one bed for drunk (7)
- J Australian youngster secures places for Ashes tour (7)
- K Take out US weekly and while away the hours (4,4)

- L Kitty and Buddy setting up computer (6)
- M After a while, little girl shows her magic power (4)
- N Worst of anything I kept in home (10)
- O Monstrous creature, so should be retired (4)
- P Think about mother getting a scented sachet (8)
- Q Referenced and gave estimate of cost (6)
- R At ease with bank endlessly applying cuts (8)
- S Stay with offspring about one day in France (7)
- T Live drama venue at three, roughly (7)
- U Ragamuffins are old city features (7)
- V I came from Rome, my lad, for game (7)
- W Commemorative posies from the wars (7)
- X Stranger anxiety confusing iPhone with a box (10)
- Y Yukon rig Joe demolished. Seriously? (5,6)
- Z Ardent Olympic head wants a look-in (7)

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

Answers to crossword 600 of 23 September 2022

Across 7) St Lucia 8) Bygones 10/24/26) Into the valley of death rode the six hundred 11/12) Shoulder blades 13) Brother 16) Gestapo 19/21) Alfred Tennyson 25) Darling
Down 1) At anchor 2) Sudoku 3) Sighed 4) Syllable 5) Forecast 6) Remote 9) Ivory 14) Throttle 15) Enduring 17) Provided 18) Study 20) Leeway 22) Not out 23) Yields

Subscriber of the Week: Dr Keith Hamnett

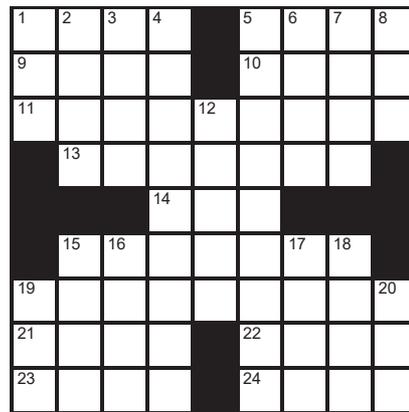
What do you do?
Retired teacher/lecturer/tour manager. Currently a writer and translator.
Where do you live?
In Southport, Lancashire.
Do you vote?
Always, of course!
How long have you been a subscriber?
A few years, having graduated in the 1960s from *New Society*.
What made you start?
The NS seemed to fit nicely between Lib and Lab.
Is the NS bug in the family?
Not really, but I pass it on to my uni-bound grandson.
What pages do you flick to first?
Contents and go from there.



How do you read yours?
Usually over a few days.
What would you like to see more of in the NS?
Comment on sport.
Who are your favourite NS writers?
Maguire, Marr and Hunter Davies stand out.
Who would you put on the cover of the NS?
Boris Johnson – I need a new dartboard.
With which political figure would you least like to be stuck in a lift?
Any Johnson supporter.
All-time favourite NS article?
Martin Fletcher's 2020 demolition of Boris Johnson.
The New Statesman is...
indispensable and fair.

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

The NS Crossword In Brief 50: by Brendan Emmett Quigley



Answers to crossword 49 of 23 September 2022

Across 1) Island 7) Antonio 8) Ned Devine 10) Era 11) Meme 12) Tip 13) App 15) TTYL 18) Tie 19) Free Agent 21) Aerates 22) Basset
Down 1) Ind 2) Stem 3) Love 4) Animates 5) Nine pin 6) Doe 7) Adapters 8) Net 9) Eritrea 14) Pet 16) Yeas 17) Late 19) Fab 20) Get

Across

- 1 "Huh?"
- 5 Lowly labourer
- 9 Per person
- 10 ___ McCool (*Derry Girls* girl)
- 11 *Doctor Who* race
- 13 Turn off
- 14 Salman Rushdie's title
- 15 Mature insects
- 19 Condition treated with a brace
- 21 Kae Tempest work
- 22 Fairy-tale bear
- 23 Small carpenters
- 24 ___ Lusk (*Up* series woman)

Down

- 1 ___ Leg ("Chaise Longue" duo)
- 2 Ponytail make-up
- 3 Top
- 4 Old Testament book
- 5 Billiards halls
- 6 Goes wrong
- 7 Antique, quaintly
- 8 *Stillmatic* rapper
- 12 Mario's brother
- 15 iPhone picture
- 16 Tap brand
- 17 Biblical brother
- 18 Rapper Little ___
- 19 Health club
- 20 Pronounce

Down and Out



Nicholas Lezard

As Trussonomics looms, when will I be able to afford to eat eggs Benedict again?

Today has been a momentous one. For the first time in three, maybe four years, I went to a café, sat down and had a meal. I am not sure I can get much of a story out of this but I shall plough on anyway. The last time was an expensive disaster. I was with my eldest son, who had been staying with me in Brighton. (In those days I had a very comfortable sofa people could crash on.) The café over the road did an excellent breakfast, and I remember the bacon with particular fondness: thick, smoked back bacon, with the rind not only left on, but cooked to crispy, puffy goodness. When my son and I went there, though, feeling a little hungover, I noticed that it had changed hands and had become vegetarian/vegan. But I saw from the chalkboard outside that they served eggs Benedict, so I ordered those.

The “M” in the abbreviation “RTFM” usually means “manual” (“R” and “T” stand for “read” and “the”). That day, I discovered that the “M” can also stand for “menu”. After a disbelieving first mouthful, I looked at the “M” again, and it confirmed what my appalled tastebuds had just screamed at me: that, ethically

forbidden from using ham or bacon in their eggs Benedict, some sadist had decided that a layer of shredded beetroot would be an acceptable substitute. Reader, it is not. I had a couple more mouthfuls just to see if they were going to be as bad as the previous one (the hollandaise was from a packet that had been bought in a Moscow supermarket at the height of the Cold War and was like curdled salad cream), and went back to bed, a broken and bitter man. Later, at night, I crept out and burned the place to the ground. And I’d do it again.

Since then, until today, no more cafés for me. The reason being not only that the burnt hand fears the flame, but that I simply can’t afford it. If I have a craving for bacon and eggs, then it is off to the shops and making them myself. Last weekend I was visited by an old friend (an ex-lover, as it happens; the one that dedicated long-term readers will remember as the WIL, or Woman I Love(d)), and basic civility meant going to a restaurant for lunch on Friday and Saturday, and the pub on Friday, and, even only eating starters, this hollowed out the bank account to such a degree that by Tuesday I had to beg for some money from someone who owed me some. So this

morning I saw some cash in the kitty and thought: sod it, I’m going to have someone else cook for me again.

I went to Billie’s, a beautiful joint which is something of a Brighton institution and, like the wild and crazy guy I am, ordered eggs Benedict. (“Do you make the hollandaise fresh?” “No.” “Oh, I’ll have it anyway.” It was £3.35 cheaper than their full English.) The sauce was not the best I’ve ever had, but it was a long, long way from being the worst, and the eggs and the bacon beneath them were cooked to perfection, and with it I had a large and extremely delicious Americano, black, of course, which, four hours later, is still giving me the jitters. This is a good thing. And all for a tenner.

The point of this story, which I am sure has gripped you almost as much as it has gripped me, is that it will be a while, I fear, before I can afford such extravagance again. And everyone will soon be in the same boat as me; indeed, I wonder if Billie’s will be able to stay open once its heating bills go through the roof. The number of people in this country who will be qualified, on financial status alone, to write their own “Down and Out” column is also going to go through the roof. (I will thank you not to park your tanks on my lawn, if I may use a tasteless-under-current-circumstances metaphor.)

We now live in a country whose prime minister has declared that the first action she will take to get the economy moving again is to remove the cap on bankers’ bonuses; the second is to make British taxpayers protect energy companies’ profits; and the third is to ask the Office for Budget Responsibility to shut the hell up about the forthcoming Budget. On what planet, in which alternative universe, are any of these things a good idea? The only good thing about them, and it really isn’t a very good thing at all, is that they immediately confirmed everyone’s grim foreboding that Liz Truss will be an even worse PM than her predecessor.

While waiting for my food, I read the pamphlet “The Right to Be Lazy” by the Cuban-French socialist (and Karl Marx’s son-in-law) Paul Lafargue. It was extremely instructive. “By working,” he writes, “you increase your poverty, and your poverty spares us having to impose work on you by force of law.” I think we are going to find out, over the next couple of years, that work actually is going to be imposed on the unemployed by force of law; certainly enough Tories are baying for it. So I try to enjoy life while I can. ●

State of the Nation

Highlights from the NS's online data hub

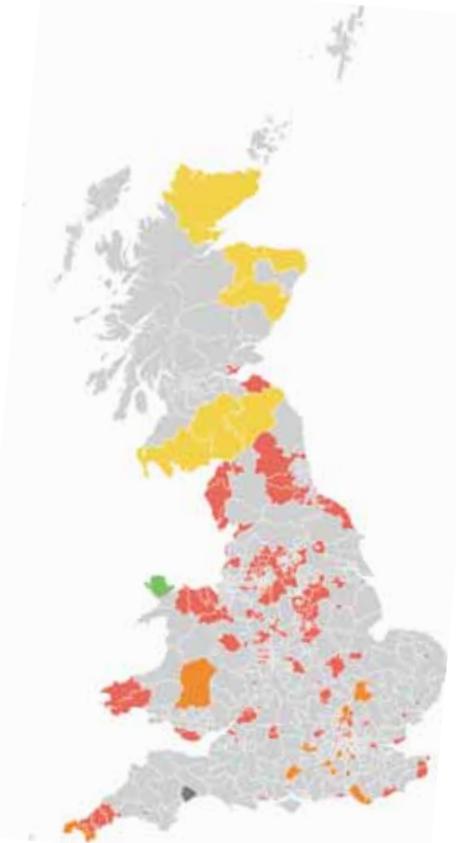
How does the UK compare to the rest of the world?

	GDP growth forecast for 2022 (%)	GDP growth forecast for 2023 (%)	Interest rate (%)	Inflation rate (CPI, %)	Petrol prices (US\$ per litre)	Monthly internet prices (60Mb/s, US\$)
Great Britain	3.2	0.5	2.3	9.9	1.9	34.06
Brazil	1.7	1.1	13.8	8.7	1.0	19.99
Canada	3.4	1.8	3.3	7.6	1.3	61.10
China	3.3	4.6	3.7	2.5	1.3	13.04
France	2.3	1.0	1.3	5.9	1.5	28.96
Germany	1.2	0.8	1.3	7.9	1.9	34.16
Italy	3.0	0.7	1.3	8.4	1.7	27.92
Japan	1.7	1.7	-0.1	2.6	1.2	31.81
Russia	-6.0	-3.5	7.5	14.3	0.8	8.53
Spain	4.0	2.0	1.3	10.5	1.7	35.81
US	2.3	1.0	3.3	8.3	1.0	68.26

SOURCES: IMF, JULY; TRADING ECONOMICS; GLOBAL PETROL PRICES

The challenge facing Liz Truss

Seats that would change hands (and to which party) if an election was held today

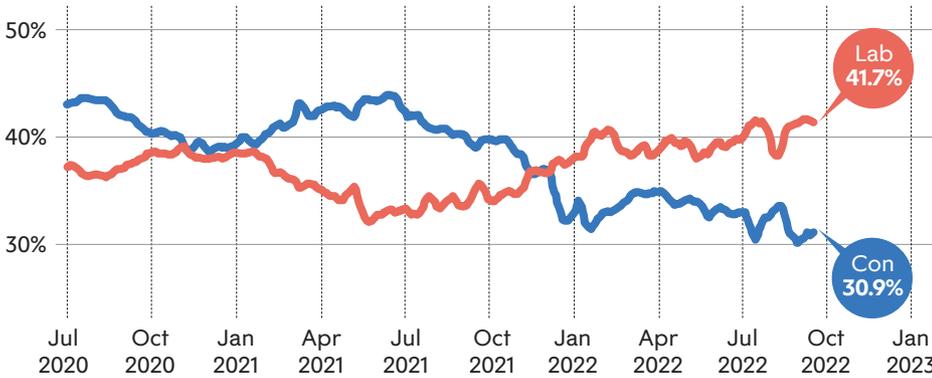


■ Lab 340 (+138)
 ■ Lib Dems 25 (+14)
 ■ Con 206 (-159)
 ■ Plaid Cymru 5 (+1)
 ■ SNP 53 (+5)
 ■ Other

SOURCE: BRITAIN PREDICTS

Britain Elects: Westminster voting intentions

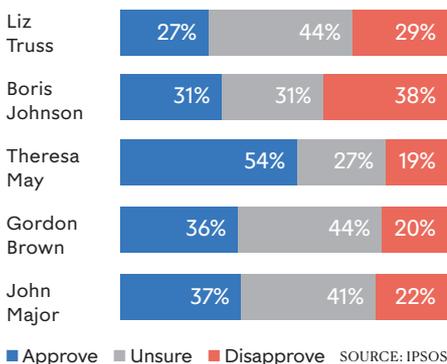
How popular is the Labour Party compared to the Conservative Party?



SOURCE: BRITAIN ELECTS

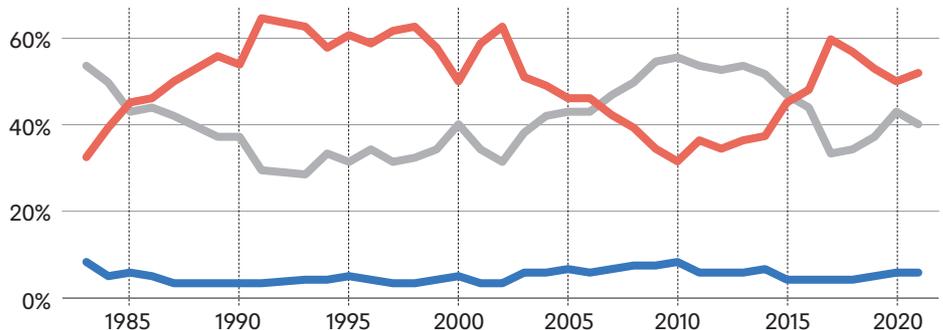
Hostile reception

Liz Truss enters No 10 with the lowest approval rating of recent prime ministers



The majority of the British public want to be taxed more

Should taxes and spending on health, education and social benefits increase (■), stay the same (■) or decrease (■)?



SOURCE: BRITISH SOCIAL ATTITUDES

The NS Q&A

**“I’d like Picasso to paint me:
I always wanted a pointier jaw”**

**Erinch Sahan, sustainable
business advocate**



Erinch Sahan was born in Turkey in 1981 and is the business and enterprise lead at the Doughnut Economics Action Lab. He has previously worked at Oxfam and as the CEO of the World Fair Trade Organisation.

What’s your earliest memory?

Climbing a disused cannon in my home town just outside Bursa. It was last used in the aftermath of the First World War. People would gather there annually on the anniversary of the liberation of the town from Greek forces, which happened to coincide with my birthday. I used to think they were celebrating my birthday.

Who are your heroes?

Michael Jordan was my childhood hero. I thought if I practised enough I could hit

game-winning baskets as he did. As an adult, it’s George Orwell. The raw honesty of works such as *Down and Out in Paris and London* continues to resonate for me.

What book last changed your thinking?

Hello, Stranger by Will Buckingham. I have struggled to stay put, while yearning for a sense of home. His book gave me a sense of why this is a struggle for so many.

Which political figure do you look up to?

The Turkish opposition leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. He’s built a movement that cuts across society. Fighting the forces of division is one of the hardest things to do.

What would be your “Mastermind” specialist subject?

How to design businesses. I get excited

when I see models such as Patagonia’s steward ownership or platform cooperatives like Fairbnb. I think about how such businesses can do things regular businesses can’t – like pay workers much better and invest boldly to save our planet.

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

The early 1900s. It would be exciting to watch the modern world emerging. Technology was progressing, ideas were bubbling, people were travelling, and there seemed to be a number of different ways humanity could go.

What TV show could you not live without?

The West Wing. It portrays a comforting fantasy of the post-Cold War era when good people in positions of power were creating a better world for us all.

Who would paint your portrait?

Picasso. I’ve always wanted a pointier jaw.

What’s your theme tune?

“NY State of Mind” by Nas.

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

Sit with the discomfort – of conflict, frustration, disappointment, pressure. I try to follow it. But sometimes I do retreat from uncomfortable moments.

What’s currently bugging you?

That culture wars are emerging around climate change. People who are taking action (vegans, cycling advocates) are being labelled as smug hipsters. This seems to me like a convenient way to avoid confronting the truth: that we all need to change our lifestyles.

What single thing would make your life better?

Fewer car-centric streets.

When were you happiest?

March 2011, when I landed in Oxford from Australia, newly recruited to work for Oxfam, enthusiastic to meet new friends and build a new life.

In another life, what job might you have chosen?

A basketball commentator. I spend too long listening to NBA podcasts.

Are we all doomed?

Probably. But let’s go out fighting. ●

Erinch Sahan will appear at the Cheltenham Literature Festival on 10 October

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