

Jonathan Liew on Qatar's bizarre World Cup • Bruno Maçães on Elon Musk's Twitter dystopia  
Lola Seaton on the banalities of Michelle Obama • Andrew Marr on Labour's Brexit opportunity

# THE NEW STATESMAN

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## Russian Roulette

Is Zelensky losing the support of the West in Ukraine?  
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# What the World Cup tells us about power

Until 90 minutes before England's opening match against Iran at the World Cup in Qatar on 21 November, Harry Kane had planned to wear a rainbow armband in support of LGBTQ rights. The England captain, along with his counterparts from Wales, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland, had vowed to wear the "OneLove" armband throughout the tournament as a powerful symbol of the sport's progress towards greater diversity and inclusion. Instead, just before kick-off, the teams announced that they would not be wearing the armbands after all.

In a joint statement, the respective football associations said that while they would have paid fines for wearing the armband, they could not risk their players being booked or sent off, as they had been informed their captains would be. Fifa, which organises the tournament, has strict rules in place against players wearing kit that includes "political, religious, or personal" slogans. The Belgian football association said that it had been forced to remove the word "Love" from the inside of its team's shirts.

It is not surprising that Fifa, an organisation mired in allegations of corruption, including over the decision to award this World Cup to Qatar, has adopted this approach. It is in keeping with the priorities it has consistently demonstrated to appease the autocratic sheikhdom that rules Qatar – a state where homosexuality is illegal, human rights are abused, and thousands of migrant workers are thought to have died building the new stadiums – over the players' attempts to combat discrimination. The machinations at Fifa also serve as a sobering reminder of a broader geopolitical truth: that Western liberal democracies do not hold as much sway over autocracies as they might hope. Fifa's power is also a parable of the delusions of the West: its values are not universal and many countries reject them, notably China and Vladimir Putin's Russia.

Instead of backing down, if the seven associations involved had held the line together and resolved that every single player would wear the armband, appealing to other teams to join them and daring Fifa to send them all home, perhaps they would have prevailed. If not, the images of



**In sport, as in politics, principles do not count for much if we only observe them when the cost of doing so is not too high**

top players across multiple countries proudly being carded for wearing their armbands would have been more inspiring – and enduring – than any individual result. In sport, as in politics, principles do not count for much if we only observe them when the cost of doing so is not too high.

Fifa's president is Gianni Infantino, who just happens to live in Qatar. He says that it is hypocritical for the West to criticise the Gulf state. "I think for what we Europeans have been doing for 3,000 years around the world, we should be apologising for the next 3,000 years before starting to give moral lessons to people," he declared in an eccentric speech in Doha ahead of the opening ceremony. This is the tired argument that defenders of dictatorships advance around the world. Western countries must confront both their own national histories of colonialism and racial injustice, while at the same time standing up for their professed values.

We should also dispense with the fiction that holding major sporting events in autocracies like Qatar advances human rights. This argument has also been applied to the decision to stage the 2022 Winter Olympics in China, where more than a million Uyghur Muslims are held in internment camps in Xinjiang, and the 1978 football World Cup in Argentina, which was then under a brutal military dictatorship. A version of this reasoning was even applied to the staging of the 1936 Olympics in Nazi Germany. It is beguiling to believe that the attention drawn by such events will effect change. This is a fantasy. Gay people in Qatar will not be safer as a result of this World Cup, just as Uyghurs have not become more free in China. The junta in Argentina ruled for another five years after the tournament ended. We know what Hitler did next.

It is delusional to expect institutions, particularly those motivated by profit such as Fifa, to defend liberal values. We must start with individuals. In Doha on 21 November, the England team took the knee before the match in support of racial justice. The Iranian team refused to sing along to the national anthem, apparently in solidarity with anti-government protesters at home. Sport has the power to inspire and to create real change. We must support those who are brave enough to act. ●



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# IN THIS ISSUE

9

## Problems of *Today*

Why Radio 4's morning news show is trapped in the past

18

## New world disorder

Katie Stallard on a turning point in the Ukraine war

24

## Jens Stoltenberg on the future of Nato

Megan Gibson meets the alliance's secretary-general

36

## A moral desert

Jonathan Liew on footballing controversy in Qatar

38

## The signals in *White Noise*

How Don DeLillo's 1985 novel predicted today's world

46

## View from the top

Lola Seaton on Michelle Obama's self-help banalities

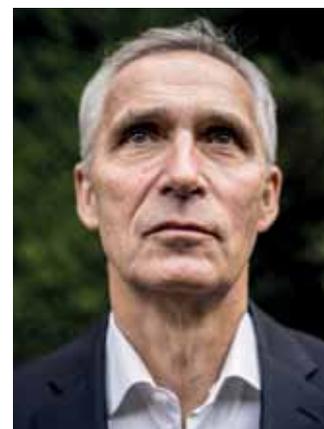
52

## Uncomfortable truths

Michael Prodger on the women who shaped modernism



War fatigue: for how long will the West support Zelensky?



Plain talk: Jens Stoltenberg



Disrupter: Gabriele Münter

# MORE IN THIS ISSUE

## Up front

- 3 Leader
- 16 Correspondence
- 17 Commons Confidential

## The Notebook

- 9 Peter Williams on the *Today* programme
- 11 Lisa Nandy writes this week's Diary
- 12 Rachel Cunliffe meets the parliamentary statistician Georgina Sturge

## Columns

- 14 Andrew Marr on Brexit
- 29 Jeremy Cliffe on power shifts in the EU
- 36 Jonathan Liew on a morally compromised World Cup

## Features

- 18 Katie Stallard on whether Volodymyr Zelensky is losing the West's support
- 24 Megan Gibson meets Jens Stoltenberg, Nato's secretary-general
- 30 Bruno Maçães on Elon Musk's big Twitter gamble

## The Critics: Books

- 42 William Davies on *The Capital Order* by Clara Mattei
- 44 The NS Poem: "The Mad" by Will Eaves
- 45 Reviewed in short
- 46 Lola Seaton on *The Light We Carry* by Michelle Obama

## The Critics: Arts

- 38 Chris Power on Don DeLillo's *White Noise*
- 50 Ann Manov on *She Said*
- 52 Michael Prodger on "Making Modernism" at the Royal Academy
- 55 Film: Ryan Gilbey on *Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery*
- 56 TV: Rachel Cooke on *The English*
- 57 Radio: Rachel Cunliffe on *The Sleeping Forecast*

## At the back

- 58 Deleted Scenes: Pippa Bailey
- 59 Subscriber of the Week and crosswords
- 60 Down and Out: Nicholas Lezard
- 61 State of the Nation
- 62 The NS Q&A: Cho Nam-joo

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

IF IN DOUBT, BLAME  
LIZ TRUSS'S  
DISASTROUS  
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# THE NOTEBOOK



ELLIE FOREMAN-PECK

## Comment

The *Today* programme is unbearably complacent

By Peter Williams

Having recently turned 65, the *Today* programme, we are told, is in trouble. Once the agenda-setting morning news briefing, the Radio 4 show is rapidly losing listeners, around 600,000 in the past year. Meanwhile, the station's commercial rivals, especially LBC, are growing steadily (albeit from a much smaller base) in audience and profile with their more lively, partial and forthright style.

Some unconvincing explanations have been given, from a post-Covid summer-holidays exodus to a decline in eventfulness since 2017, when *Today's* audience peaked at 7.5 million. As if we weren't still reckoning with the Brexit wars, the Trump presidency, the Grenfell fire and everything else from that time – along with war in Europe, a cost-of-living crisis and the failed-state vibes at Westminster. There's a reason Collins Dictionary has just declared "permacrisis" its word of the year.

But as someone who prefers to start the day, if start it must, with a black coffee and a blast of music, it's ▶

*Today* sounds like a hermetically sealed world, and its hosts speak accordingly

◀ clear to me where the programme's problems begin: in the acoustics, the stultifying, airless hush. On Radio 4 everything sounds flat and close, yet muffled. With no musical beds, the programme exists in an aural space where nothing reverberates.

If *Today* sounds like a hermetically sealed world, its hosts speak accordingly – as if all the issues at hand were taking place somewhere very far away, and were mere fodder for arch grumbling in the senior common room. Nick Robinson presides with a tone of vague, disconnected jocularity, whether trailing an apocalyptic new report on global heating or indulging in some wan, BBC-strength banter with co-anchor Mishal Husain and proto-Partridge sports reporter Garry Richardson.

The presenters – Robinson, Husain, Amol Rajan, Justin Webb, Martha Kearney – are exceedingly capable and well-paid, and yet not invited to stretch themselves, compared with the demands placed on former colleagues elsewhere. In podcasting, *The News Agents'* Emily Maitlis and co have to be interesting enough for people to seek them out amid infinite choice; on LBC, the *NS's* Andrew Marr has to marshal rolling news and interactions with the public.

*Today* also can't claim to be superior in its stock reporting. Its bulletins are written in the same taut journalese and cliché you would find elsewhere, except the bulletin readers recite these apparently timeless phrases – “fuelled speculation” “scored a blowout victory” “economic gridlock” – in plummy accents. While other voices do feature, mainly thanks to the number of Scots on the political team, RP and very mild Estuary are the immutable root notes. Regional English accents are most likely to appear in the sports bulletins.

The format is both too baggy and too rigid. The items drag – an amble through the newspaper headlines; chummy conversations with correspondents; guest interviews. Unless a story breaks live, the reporters aren't cajoled into urgency. Some, such as political correspondent Nick Eardley, are able to generate it themselves, but others plod along at their leisure.

And interviewees get an easy ride too. In recent programmes, the Kentucky congressman James Comer, and the new Lord Mayor of the City of London, Nicholas Lyons, were given only polite questions with barely a hint of challenge and intent, rather than being pressed on the Republicans' embrace of conspiracy, say, or the City's offshore dependencies.

Any aggression is reserved for domestic political interviews, but these have lost their pre-eminence and sting. In fairness, there is little doubt that the quality of the political subject has deteriorated. As little as 20 years ago *Today* presenters might have been up against Tony Blair, William Hague, Mo Mowlam – people of substance and mental agility, willing to give the odd ankle-flash of personality. These days, if they aren't avoiding interviews altogether (AKA the Johnson manoeuvre), most ministers, such as Michelle Donelan and James Cleverly, are too well versed in defensive tactics – dodging, waffling, stalling – to get caught out, with Cleverly recently allowed to ignore Husain's most telling question about the new migrant deal with France.

And then there are those who are so hopeless there is no need to force a mistake. Take disaster accentuation specialist Chris Philp, who crawled out of the smoking wreckage of the post-mini-Budget Treasury only to plop straight into the moral sewer at the Home Office. Here is someone who is just as likely to make headlines later in the morning broadcast round, having been softened up by the previous encounters. Philp was recently reduced to abject terror by that noted harvester of souls, BBC *Breakfast's* Charlie Stayt, asking what his credentials were to be police minister. By the time he reached Times Radio Philp was declaring “it was a bit of a cheek” for asylum seekers at Manston to expect scabies-free living conditions in Britain, in the 21st century.

It is also striking how Liz Truss, our most recently departed prime minister, was so expertly dismantled by a series of presenters on BBC local radio – now threatened with cuts – having wrongly supposed that would be a softer option than going on *Today*.

Away from the wearisome matter of the present day, there is plenty of looking backwards and inwards. An interview with the BBC's former chief political correspondent John Sergeant remembered the late psephologist David Butler, whose innovations, including the swingometer, still feature in the BBC's election night coverage; there was another for the BBC centenary with Ian Lavender of *Dad's Army*, complete with an extended meditation on “Don't tell him Pike” (Del Boy falling through the bar is for another day, one presumes).

Although the *Today* programme, and presenters such as Brian Redhead, did a great deal to end excessive deference towards politicians in the 1970s and 1980s, it still seems a relic of a more patrician age, exemplified by the presence of “Thought for the Day”. This is current affairs as liturgy, with the same air of protraction, of improving boredom, and the awkward commingling of the parochial and the profound. Listening to it in 2022 feels like being stuck on the scene-setting first page of a middlebrow, mid-century novel.

If ever there was a postwar era of benevolent paternalism, a time when Britain was more secure in its self-image and had a greater sense of common purpose, with the BBC at the heart of it, it is over now. Elsewhere, presenters with views ranging across the mainstream political spectrum, from Iain Dale to James O'Brien, are proving it's possible to inject their own point of view into news analysis and interviewing without compromising fatally on balance and rigour.

Current affairs coverage needs to reflect a time in which everything is at stake – the way we live, work and consume; the existence of the United Kingdom; our liberal democracy – and everything is contested, even the reality of global heating. If the BBC can't allow its highest-profile presenters the political freedom of its rivals – which it can't – then others will move on. To remain worthwhile, *Today*, or whatever comes after it, needs to have its journalists crusading for the facts, to go all out for the essential underlying truths and realities that define our age.

Time to leave the airlock and enter the fray. ●

*Peter Williams is head of production at the New Statesman*

# The Diary

## The lessons of a housing tragedy, writing through rail chaos, and why good manners cost nowt

By Lisa Nandy

The death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak from prolonged exposure to mould in his home in Rochdale should shame a nation. For years Awaab's parents pleaded to their landlord for help and were either ignored or told the mould was the result of "lifestyle issues" – a claim proven by the coroner to be absolute rubbish.

When MPs met recently in the House of Commons to discuss this tragedy, many told stories of families living in cold, damp homes, where water runs down walls covered with thick black mould and cries for help go unanswered. There is complete political agreement that this is unacceptable but action has been achingly slow. The government has been consulting on a decent homes standard for four years and the Social Housing Bill, which gives tenants more power and a greater voice, has been in train for three years (and still isn't law). Meanwhile, local housing budgets have halved in the past decade and now are expected to fall again following the Autumn Statement of 17 November.

This is what Bobby Kennedy once described as "the violence of institutions; indifference, inaction and slow decay". The family of Awaab Ishak said the tragedy must be a "defining moment" for the housing sector, but many families will only believe change is happening when they see it – and it should never have taken the death of a little boy to get us here.

### Making common cause

Inspired by the many people I've met in Britain and across the world, two years ago I decided to write a book. *All In* is about the country we could be if we handed power and resources to people in every part of the UK who are quietly building and preserving



Trying to power the UK economy with a handful of sectors is like flying a jet with one engine

everything of value. Too often they have to fight the system, but imagine what they could achieve if they could feel the whole system pulling in behind them, with a government that had the same ambition for their families, community and country as they do.

It took some graft to get it down on paper: much of the book was written on my phone between trains at Crewe station as I navigated the rail chaos that has been a chronic feature for those of us in the north of England for nearly a decade. Sadly, I've been less successful at promoting it. Keen to host all my parliamentary colleagues at the launch, I've somehow managed to invite 400 people to a venue that can only hold 100. Not so much *All In* as all out.

### Insult and injury

Parliament can get pretty lively sometimes but it was a new one to be told to "shut up" in the Commons chamber. A debate on 15 November on Labour's motion to stop Liz Truss and Kwasi Kwarteng taking thousands in ministerial pay-offs after crashing the economy and adding hundreds of pounds a month to people's mortgage payments was never going to be good-tempered. One Conservative backbencher, though, excelled himself when he told me and my colleagues Sarah Owen and Paula Barker to "shut up". It seems to have backfired. As well as getting a bollocking from the Speaker, the Tory MP's rudeness ensured our opposition day debate was written up everywhere, from the *Daily Mirror* to *Cosmopolitan* magazine. As we say in Wigan, good manners cost nowt. It turns out bad manners can cost you quite a lot.

### Levelling down

The big moment of last week was the Autumn Statement. It's not unusual to hear a Chancellor trash his (sadly, so far it has always been "his") predecessor but it normally happens after a change of government. This cabinet trashes its own record so often that it's impossible to keep up. It was never going to be easy to explain away a £30bn invoice for a disastrous 44 days of Tory government, but the Chancellor gave it a good go. By my count, we're currently up to five culprits: so far the government has blamed Vladimir Putin, the Bank of England, the Labour Party, the bond markets and "society". I wonder who'll be next.

The biggest loser in Jeremy Hunt's statement was the department I shadow, Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. The significance wasn't lost on some of the sharper news outlets such as the *Yorkshire Post*. Levelling up was the answer to Britain's lack of economic growth. Trying to power a modern economy using only a handful of people in a handful of sectors in a few parts of the country is like trying to fly a jet on one engine. By making levelling up the gravest casualty of the Autumn Statement the Tories have not only ditched the promise that won them the election in 2019, but any attempt to grow the economy too. ●

Lisa Nandy is the Labour MP for Wigan. "*All In: How We Build a Country That Works*" is published by HarperNorth and reviewed on page 45



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## Encounter

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“The numbers don’t  
count. People do”  
Georgina Sturge on how  
bad data shapes politics  
**By Rachel Cunliffe**

If you’ve ever wondered how many pets there are in the UK or whether free universal childcare would really create 1.7 million jobs, you should talk to Georgina Sturge. She is a statistician in the House of Commons Library and it’s her job to provide MPs and their staff with the data they require. And while politicians might pepper their speeches with facts and figures that sound impossible to dispute, she knows there’s often a more nuanced story to be told.

“Numerical data is seen as more solid than other forms of evidence, yet I’d often notice that beneath the surface it really wasn’t solid at all,” she told me when we met in a busy French café a short walk from the Palace of Westminster. Her new book, *Bad Data: How Governments, Politicians and the Rest of Us Get Misled by Numbers*, is a whistle-stop tour of all the ways the data that forms the basis of policymaking can fall short.

Sometimes, she explained, how the data is collected leaves huge holes that make it virtually useless, such as the International Passenger Survey that was used as a guide for the number of people migrating to the UK. It was only collected at the UK’s biggest airports (Heathrow, Gatwick and Manchester), which meant it missed everyone arriving from the post-2007 EU states in eastern Europe on the new budget airlines, which ran to cheaper regional airports. The result? The 2011 census revealed that migration had been

HANNA KATRINA JEDROSZ

underestimated by nearly half a million people.

Or sometimes the same data can paint radically different pictures. Sturge writes about Boris Johnson and Keir Starmer clashing over whether child poverty had gone up or down since the last Labour government. The reality was both politicians were right – depending on whether you started counting from the year 2009-10 or 2010-11 (Gordon Brown left office in May 2010), there were either 100,000 fewer children in poverty by 2019, or 600,000 more.

“That’s a basic example of the decisions you make in your analysis completely changing the conclusions you draw.” Sturge fixed me with a piercing stare. “So my question would be: well, what’s the reason you’ve chosen that specific year?”

Sturge, 33, has something of the look of a tech CEO with her black polo-neck and hair pinned up high. She is not a mathematician by training, studying English at Balliol College, Oxford University, before travelling to the Netherlands to do a master’s in public policy and human development at Maastricht University. (The Netherlands is a bit of a theme during our interview – as well as providing an instructive comparison with the UK, it’s also where Sturge’s wife is from and where her wedding was held over the summer. Data, she told me laughing, was integral to their wedding planning – “I did use quite a few spreadsheets.”)

A humanities or social science background is useful for statisticians, she believes, because her job is not just about crunching the numbers but thinking about all the human factors that go into collecting them. “If you really understand where they come from, then you know a lot more about them than if you were to come at them from a purely mathematical perspective and take them at face value.”

You might want to understand, for instance, how it can be that the two main ways of measuring crime – information recorded by the police and data from the Crime Survey, which has been running since the 1980s – seem to show opposite trends. One reason is the way that successive governments have repeatedly tweaked how the police record crimes: changing targets that can incentivise officers to use their discretion over whether or not a particular incident is counted as a crime.

Meanwhile, public perceptions of what is or isn’t a crime also change over time, as do people’s willingness to report it. Comparing rates of sexual violence or hate crime to a past era when cultural values were very different (marital rape was only made a crime in 1991, while our hate speech laws are just three decades old) isn’t necessarily helpful for policymaking. So are certain types of crime rising or falling? Sometimes we just don’t know – but that won’t stop MPs from using the data to make a point.

And that’s if the data exists at all. “We naturally tend to expect that there will be data on important topics and you can find an answer on any question if you just look hard enough,” Sturge told me. “I was surprised to find that in some important areas” – inequality, benefits, unemployment, children out of school – “there just isn’t the kind of hard data you would expect.”

One issue is the reluctance in Britain to connect

different data sources. We have no national population register – rather, data is haphazardly collected by local councils, the NHS, HMRC, the Passport Office, and a host of other organisations. The Office for National Statistics makes a sterling effort, but there are still major gaps in between censuses. Compare that to the Netherlands, where in 2011 the government joined up all the data it already had on people: “The entire ‘census’ involved 15 staff, had a budget of €1.4m and took a matter of days,” Sturge writes in *Bad Data*. “The UK’s 2021 census is due to cost around £1bn and will take years to process.” By which time, of course, much of the data will be out of date.

The UK, Sturge was at pains to point out, is better at data collection than a lot of other countries. Our censuses may be clunky and expensive, but at least we do them every ten years; the Democratic Republic of Congo’s last census was in 1984. And some countries don’t even have data on births and deaths – “According to Unicef, one in four children in the world ‘doesn’t exist’ because their birth was never registered,” she writes.

But we cannot allow ourselves to be complacent – because when data is missing or used in the wrong way, the consequences can be devastating. In the Windrush scandal thousands of people were harassed by the Home Office and in 83 cases wrongly deported, because the government hadn’t kept adequate records of their right to live in the UK.

Sturge also cites the cautionary tale of Carmen Reinhart and Kenneth Rogoff, two Harvard economists whose 2010 model purported to show that, if a country’s debt-to-GDP ratio exceeded 90 per cent, the risk of a negative impact on long-term growth became significant. This research was used by George Osborne to justify austerity, on the grounds that if the UK didn’t get its debt under control, the economy would shrink. The only problem? Reinhart and Rogoff had made an error, missing off five rows of data on their spreadsheet, negating their conclusion about the risk of negative growth. By the time this was spotted, austerity was well under way and its effects are still being felt now. And while it’s a stretch to say that David Cameron and Osborne would have pursued a different course had the mistake been caught earlier, bad data gave them cover for their economic programme.

If we want our politicians to use data more responsibly, Georgina Sturge argues, we need to invest in better ways of collecting it. It’s perverse that we know more about the performance of Premier League footballers than how many children are out of school. She also believes MPs should be bolder about admitting when the data is uncertain or comes with serious caveats, warning that “there are so many cases where people have been confident in data that hasn’t really been up to the job”. But whether offered up by surveys, government records or artificial intelligence, the key is for all of us to keep asking questions about where the data that governs our lives comes from, she says, and what assumptions those gathering it were making. After all, “the numbers don’t count themselves. People do.” ●

The UK’s censuses may be clunky and expensive, but at least they are done every ten years

# ANDREW MARR



## Politics

### Keeping quiet on Brexit is a shrewd move for Labour, but a strategic disaster

It has started. No man is an island; and in the modern world economy, no island is an island, either. The Chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, has “great confidence that over the years ahead, we will find outside the single market we are able to remove the vast majority of the trade barriers that exist between us and the EU”. Anonymous senior government sources have told the *Sunday Times* that Britain is mulling over Swiss-style relations with the EU in the hope that they lead to frictionless trade.

It’s not really true. But as soon as the Brexit revolutionary strategy of slashing taxes and regulations failed, it was obvious that British politicians would begin to “mull” alternative strategies.

It was equally obvious that, with growing evidence from economists, businesses and the Office for Budget Responsibility about the effect on the economy of being outside the biggest nearby market, this rethinking would include the possibility of a closer relationship with the EU.

What wasn’t obvious was that Liz Truss, of all people, would give the issue such sweaty, eye-popping urgency. Her smash-up was the wrong answer to the right question; how to recover from a dozen years of torpid growth. Because of her failure, everyone is talking about the need for an alternative “growth strategy”. Tony Danker, director-general of the CBI, wants a more liberalised immigration policy. In this atmosphere it was impossible that British-EU relations wouldn’t become hot again.

So the little row over the *Sunday Times*

report was inevitable. Lord Frost, Brexit’s Cardinal Wolsey, has had to be revived with smelling salts. Jacob Rees-Mogg was threatening to take off his waistcoat. The European Research Group was out punching tourists again.

And it was all nothing. Within hours of the *Sunday Times’* article of 20 November, its sister newspaper was reporting breathlessly that Rishi Sunak, far from mulling a Swiss-style relationship, was in fact ruling one out. Since Switzerland pays into the EU budget, sticks closely to EU regulations and allows freedom of movement in both directions, “Switzerland”, like “Singapore”, would be a long way from the Brexit deal promised by the Johnson-era Tories. It’s a ludicrously complicated relationship that the EU dislikes and it won’t be replicated.

British governments don’t exist without parliamentary majorities. Moving to a more rational relationship with the EU would mean Sunak losing his in the time it takes to snap your fingers. Even if he could hold his MPs together on this (he can’t), there is also the ever-present threat to the Tories of a right-wing breakaway. Nigel Farage, outrageously excluded from the national conversation by being given his own television show, is already doing his

### What is the opposition’s thinking about Britain’s place in the world?

high-kicking seasonal “I might be coming back into politics” jig.

In the six years since the Brexit referendum, “Europe” has been mostly more dangerous for Labour than for the Tories. Boris Johnson’s peeling-away of English northern voters has so spooked the party that Keir Starmer sounds more absolutist against reopening the debate than Rees-Mogg himself. Talking to the *Sunday Express*, for instance, Starmer said: “Let me be really clear about Brexit. There is no case for going back into the EU and no case for going into the single market or customs union. Freedom of movement is over. There will be no return to that, either. What we want to do is make Brexit work.”

For Starmer and the Tories alike, the key issue is again immigration. Because of recent press around Channel crossings, it is once more among the top issues of concern for many voters – 33 per cent of them, according to YouGov. But this does not necessarily change their views on Brexit and the economy.

The latest survey on the topic from YouGov found 56 per cent of people polled think leaving the EU was the wrong decision, and only 32 per cent still think it right – the largest gap so far, and a huge swing in opinion since summer 2021. Of those who voted for Brexit, one in five now thinks it was the wrong decision.

You might argue that this is the perfect time for a bold opposition to execute a judo move and try to upend Brexit Britain – not by going back but by promoting some kind of association agreement, for instance. There are senior people across the Labour Party who think this, and who are deeply frustrated with Starmer for not agreeing.

It is certainly an issue of leadership. When it comes to short-term tactics, Starmer is clearly right. The “Swiss” row is a ludicrous confection – in which Tory right-wingers see George Osborne’s lily-white fingers all too obviously present. But it reminds us how deeply divided and quietly paranoid the party remains on the subject. Indeed, it may yet be the issue on which this government falls. So, why interrupt your enemy? Rubbing his hands, smiling and saying nothing interesting is shrewd tactics from Starmer.

But alongside tactics, there is always strategy, and strategy matters more. What does Labour actually want? Does it really want the UK to be outside the European market forever? If it doesn’t see Britain as a member of the social democratic

European family, where does it see Britain? If the plan is to win power, maintain fiscal discipline, retain all current barriers to trade and keep out migrants, where, really, is the growth agenda?

I am not talking about returning to the EU – that is another matter entirely. It doesn't want us and would insist on too high a price. But some kind of trade treaty formalising the underlying political reality, which is that we are very close neighbours without being quite "of" Europe, is the obvious way forward. And if the British centre left wants a different relationship, now is the time to start moving. You rarely win arguments by declining to have them.

So, I say again, where is the big picture? Brexiteers are probably right that it is early to make a definitive judgement. But the economic indicators are grim. Today, more importantly, the Brexiteers have no alternative economic prospectus that makes sense in a country that wants to think of itself as fair, environmentally conscious and engaged in the rest of the world.

Sunak is trying to find out whether sticking with a hard Brexit while smiling broadly at the French will change things. I'm all for the smiling; much better than silly strops. But the hard realities don't change, and better personal relations won't be transformational. The true believers, meanwhile, would have us picking in turnip fields with wooden staves and then limping back to wattle huts before they conceded any economic harm from Brexit.

What is the Labour strategic thinking about Britain's place in the world?

Make no mistake, this is an emotional subject. I am a European Scot who lives in London, and I feel far more affinity for the French, Dutch, Germans and Italians as they struggle to balance living well with shaping their future in an unstable climate than I do with furiously divided, culture-warring Americans. That may seem self-indulgent; but as a political issue, this one is instinctive and it's about identity.

However tactically astute it might be for Labour under Starmer to maintain that Brexit is not just irreversible, but is to be celebrated and applauded, the strategic silence worries me. If we are at a time when the country's direction is genuinely at stake, then progressives need to be fuelled by belief. To stand back and watch the Conservatives destroy themselves might seem a reasonable, even mildly enjoyable, pastime. But things are too serious now. Third time of asking: where is the bigger picture? ●

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# CORRESPONDENCE

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## Letter of the week

### The new resource war



John Gray (“The dangerous conceits of the green revolution”, 18 November) rightly highlights the dependence of green technology on conflict minerals. Nowhere is this felt more than Eastern DR Congo (where I have worked with coffee farmers in the North and South Kivu and Ituri provinces since 2008).

However, while he states that mineral-related conflict and violence continued for many years after 2002, he doesn’t say that brutal armed struggle over control of these resources continues to this day. More than five million people are currently displaced in DR Congo in appalling conditions, in what the Norwegian Refugee Council says is the most neglected refugee crisis in the world. At least 230,000 have had to flee their homes so far in 2022, and overnight I have received reports of yet another massacre in North Kivu. It is vital that the green movement demands traceability and accountability in the supply chains for the minerals that we need to create a sustainable planet.

*Richard Hide, Sheffield*

#### Gray vs green

The essay in response to Greta Thunberg’s guest edit (“The dangerous conceit of the green revolution”, 18 November) contained John Gray’s usual mix of interesting insights and dubious generalisations. The points about shifting to a decarbonised energy system and the strain this will place on other resources doesn’t receive enough attention. However, regarding “bourgeois protest culture”, a cursory glance at these groups shows they represent a wide range of socio-economic positions; they often include pensioners, students with large debts and ordinary workers.

*Jack Garganey, Fife*

John Gray’s piece was, as ever, interesting, provocative and challenging. But as I read

the part dismissing those taking various forms of direct action to highlight the climate crisis, I couldn’t help wondering what he might have written about the suffragettes. Would he have been equally dismissive of those women who took direct action in the fight for votes?

*Jol Miskin, Sheffield*

#### Looking for a new England

Andrew Marr (Cover Story, 18 November) is correct to identify that Lords reform would signal Labour’s determination to transform Britain, but his worry that a democratically elected second chamber would challenge the primacy of the Commons is unfounded. Dividing all the seats in the upper house in direct proportion to the votes cast in the

general election would create a revising chamber whose mandate is secondary to that of the Commons, ensuring its members can’t challenge MPs’ primacy.

*Billy Bragg, Bridport, Dorset*

Clarity is in short supply in Westminster, but Andrew Marr nails the problem: the lack of a long-term (or any) narrative for the UK and the almost complete severing of the experience of the majority of people outside of Westminster from the politics practised there. The problem of debating England’s national identity without rage remains untouched by either main party, while the elusiveness of a unifying story most of the country can agree upon, and vast wealth inequality, were a big part of what led to the self-harm of the Brexit vote.

*Marie Donnelly, Newcastle upon Tyne*

#### Tilling the land

At last, an editorial that mentions land value tax (Leader, 18 November). Here is a policy which is fair, socially beneficial and produces lots of cash for the public purse. Taxing land annually on its maximum permitted development value ensures that public funds benefit from these increased values, ensures that the rise in value caused by public planning policies comes back to the community, and greatly inhibits the hoarding of land.

*Michael Meadowcroft, Leeds*

#### Law of the jungle

Bruce Daisley (The Diary, 18 November) portrays Matt Hancock as a hapless victim of bullying, but Hancock agreed to go on *I’m a Celebrity*, presumably in the belief that by taking the humiliations he could reboot his career. Hancock must also have realised he would be a target because of what the audience knows about him – including that he’s moonlighting from a well-paid job.

*John Harris, Llanelian, Anglesey*

#### A true great

Michael Henderson (“England still expects”, 11 November) states: “England has never produced a Pelé, a Di Stéfano, a Cruyff or a Zidane.” But England had one man who rose from the ashes of Munich, February 1958, gracing every playing field with his balance and balletic artistry. Are

you telling me Bobby Charlton would not be in this football pantheon? I beg to differ.  
*Dermot Dolan, London E17*

### Decluttering the hard way

Oh Nicholas (Down and Out, 11 November), please don't fall out of the window. Yours is the first column I read after my NS lands on my doormat. I don't understand how you lose so much stuff when your flat is so small. Losing the brush from the dustpan-and-brush set, destroying your only frying pan while trying to close a window: what calamities befall you. You should visit the wonderful charity shops on London Road. How do you think all the students manage?  
*Terri Charman, Coulsdon, Surrey*

### Looking for a new England, pt 2

The Proclaimers, "too Scottish" (The Critics, 18 November)? In what parallel reality can I buy an NS wherein Billy Bragg is too English?  
*Ernie Watt, Edinburgh*

### @ anneapplebaum

*Anne Applebaum, historian and journalist*

"A system with an emphasis on individual rights and open, competitive markets – the very basis of US strengths – faces existential questions in an age of big data and AI." The more fundamental questions posed by the mess at Twitter, from @JeremyCliffe.

**"The chaos at Elon Musk's Twitter is a parable of US power in the age of Big Tech", Jeremy Cliffe, 16 November**

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*We reserve the right to edit letters*



**"Actually, my university diet was plant-based back in the sixties... cannabis, cocaine, magic mushrooms..."**

# COMMONS CONFIDENTIAL

*By Kevin Maguire*



**Eviction from Downing Street** and more holidays than Michael Palin have left bumbling Boris Johnson a lost soul in Westminster. My snout followed the discarded PM leaving the Commons chamber and hurtling towards the members' cloakroom. Unable to open the not-that-recently-installed security doors, he pressed the emergency alarm by mistake. A guard was summoned to silence the high-pitched squawk as the back-bench MP blushed below his thinning blond barnet. It was hardly Johnson's first noisy and embarrassing political exit.

**Dirks are being sharpened** to depose waistcoat-wearing Ian Blackford as the SNP's leader in Westminster. Stephen Flynn, the party's MP for Aberdeen South, has denied he is planning a formal challenge. This has bought Blackford time, but my informant suggested we observe the stone-faced quiet of many of his MPs when he speaks, their unhappiness fuelled by the mishandling of a string of scandals. Bruiser Blackford, one-time chair of a funeral-plan company, is battling to avoid his own political burial.

**Rugby-playing Tory Ben Everitt** turned poetic and spouted a Shakespearean "friends, robots, countrymen" at a Westminster reception promoting autonomous delivery machines in his Milton Keynes North constituency. One colleague noted Everitt's language has improved since he had to apologise after a 2011 tweet abusing the late Labour MP and peer Tessa Jowell resurfaced in 2020. Perhaps he realised words without thoughts never to heaven go, in a Buckinghamshire "Hamlet" with a now-vulnerable 6,255 majority.

**Tax rises, interest rate increases, spending cuts** and Keir Starmer's Blair-esque poll leads are panicking Red Wall Tories with thin majorities into making plans for their future after Westminster. A lobbyist whispered that two with majorities below 2,000 had told him they would be available for hire after the election. "We don't really need Tories – there'll be a glut of them," sniffed the lobbyist. "We want Labour people."

**Blink and you'd have missed him as Ukip leader**, but ousted Henry Bolton told me he was nevertheless offered £310,000 to go on a reality TV show with Bear Grylls – but the final call never came. Camel-penis-eating moonlighter Matt Hancock may feel a reported £400,000 fee isn't enough for the ridicule he's faced. Wait until the Covid inquiry, when he'll really be screaming "Get me out of here".

**Damehoods, knighthoods and peerages** are on the Liz Truss bells-and-whistles resignation honours list, I hear. Britain will be permanently short-changed from only seven weeks of her rule. ●

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

**"We don't really need Tories – there'll be a glut of them," sniffed the lobbyist. "We want Labour people"**

# Is Zelensky losing the support of the West in Ukraine?

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The Ukrainian president's political blunder over the Poland missile incident has irritated Western leaders, who are already showing signs of war fatigue

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**By Katie Stallard**

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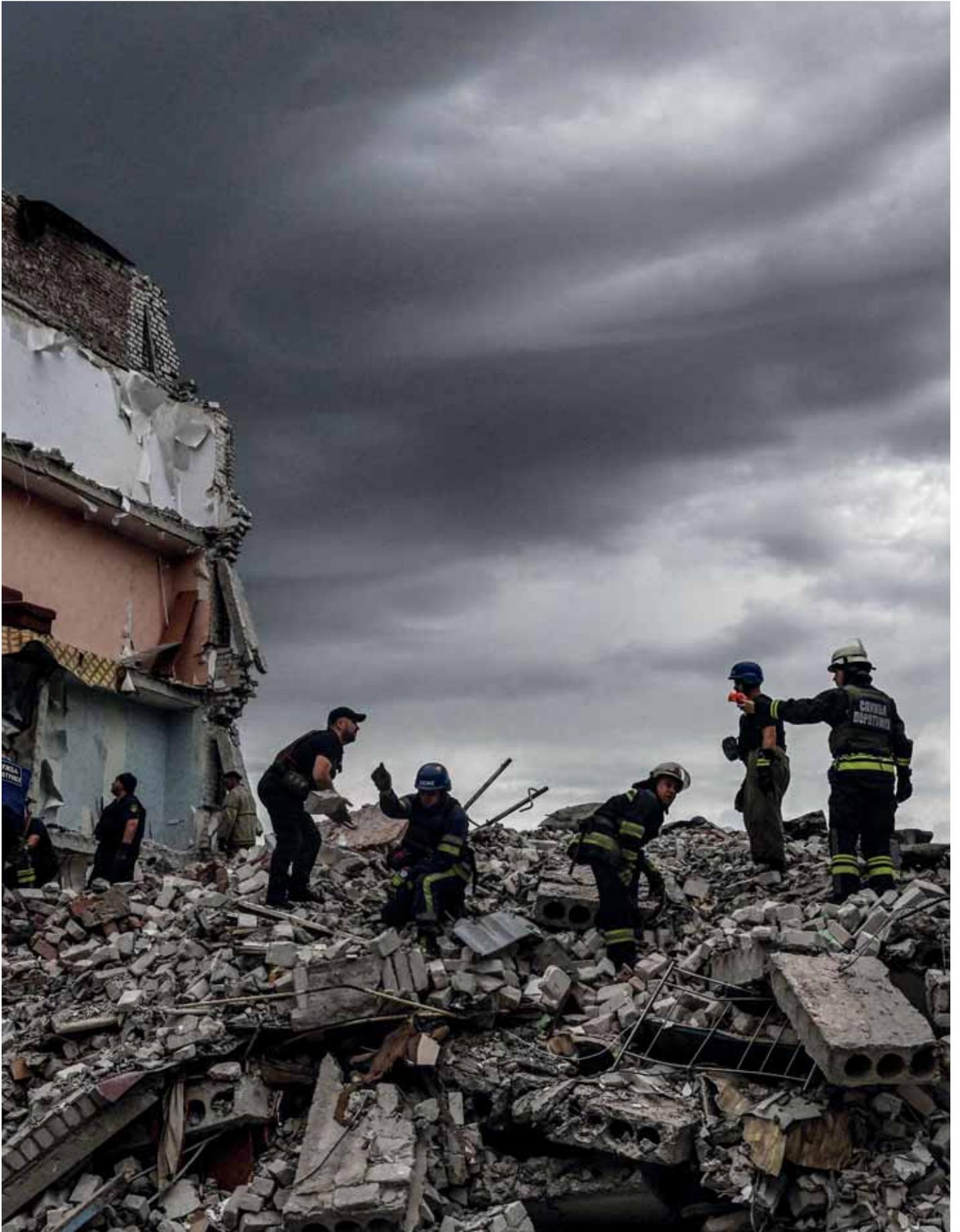
The first reports of the suspected missile strike in eastern Poland on 15 November were distinctly ominous. There had been an explosion in the village of Przewodów near the border with Ukraine. Two people had been killed. Russia was thought to be responsible. The Associated Press cited a senior US intelligence official as saying that Russian missiles had crossed into Polish territory. Poland's government ministers rushed into an emergency meeting of the national security council in Warsaw. Polish military units were ordered to a heightened state of combat readiness. If the strike was found to be deliberate, it would mean that Russia had attacked a Nato member, which could then decide to invoke Article Five of the alliance's treaty, according to which an attack against one member is considered to be an attack against them all.

On the other side of the world, the US president, Joe Biden, who was attending the G20 summit in Bali, was woken by his aides. In the early hours of the morning, wearing a T-shirt and looking distinctly sleep-deprived, he spoke by phone with Poland's president, Andrzej Duda. Soon afterwards, Biden and the leaders of the other Nato countries at the summit, including the British prime minister Rishi Sunak, German chancellor Olaf Scholz, and French president Emmanuel Macron, gathered. A photograph of the meeting showed the leaders huddled together, their facial expressions uniformly tense.

From the outset, Biden urged caution, pointing to preliminary information about the missile's trajectory and questioning whether it could really have been fired from Russia. The Polish prime minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, also warned against jumping to conclusions. "I am calling on all Poles to remain calm in the face of this tragedy," he said in a late-night press conference. "We must exercise restraint."

Within hours, it was clear that the early reports were wrong and that there had been no Russian attack. Investigators concluded that the missile was likely a Soviet-era S-300 rocket fired by Ukrainian anti-aircraft defences in response to the Russian air strikes that had pummelled the country throughout the day. "This is not Ukraine's fault," stressed Jens Stoltenberg, Nato's secretary-general, who is interviewed on page 24. "Russia bears ultimate responsibility."

Yet the incident laid bare the usually subterranean tensions between the Ukrainian government and its Western backers. Speaking on television on 16 November, Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine's president, insisted that "it was not our missile" that struck Poland. He said that he had been personally briefed on the issue by his military leadership, and that he had "no grounds to doubt them". ▶



MICHEL MEDINA/AFP

Trail of destruction: emergency workers search through rubble in Chasiv Yar, eastern Ukraine, after a Russian bombardment

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◀ When asked about Zelensky's comments on his return to the White House the following morning, Biden responded curtly: "That's not the evidence."

"This is getting ridiculous," an unnamed diplomat from a Nato country told the *Financial Times* in Kyiv. "The Ukrainians are destroying [our] confidence in them. Nobody is blaming Ukraine and they are openly lying. This is more destructive than the missile." Zelensky subsequently adopted a more equivocal approach, sending investigators to Poland and conceding that he did not know "100 per cent" what had happened. A Ukrainian air force spokesman acknowledged on 18 November that it was possible that at least some of the missile fragments had come from Ukraine as he described an intense battle to defend the country against the Russian bombardment.

The narrowly averted crisis also focused attention on the danger that the conflict could escalate beyond Ukraine, drawing Nato members into the fighting and leading to a direct confrontation between nuclear powers. This is not a new concern. Since the start of the war on 24 February, the US and its European allies have weighed how to enable Ukraine to defend itself without risking a wider war.

This calculation played into Nato's decision to turn down Ukrainian pleas to "close the sky" by enforcing a no-fly zone over the country during the early weeks of the war. When Poland offered to send fighter jets to

Ukraine in March, the US similarly shut down the idea, concerned that a Russian attack on the planes during their transfer – or on the US air force facility in Germany where they are based – could drag Nato into the war.

Washington has also taken a cautious approach to the supply of long-range weaponry to Kyiv, such as the Army Tactical Missile System, which it has refused to send (although it has provided HIMARS and other powerful rocket systems), wary of facilitating strikes deep into Russia that could be viewed by the Kremlin as crossing a red line. As Biden has reportedly reminded his aides at regular intervals: "We're trying to avoid World War Three."

Vladimir Putin has deliberately exploited these fears to deter greater Western involvement. Three days into the conflict, on 27 February, the Russian president was shown on television ordering the country's nuclear forces to be

**Ukraine won't pursue a ceasefire deal without first "removing the root of the problem"**

placed on a "special regime of combat duty". The order itself appeared to have no practical effect, but it achieved the desired result of sending chills through European capitals and focusing minds on Russia's nuclear arsenal. Putin has returned to his nuclear threats on several occasions since: invoking the US bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, which he said had "created a precedent"; and when he announced the "annexation" of four new regions of Ukraine in September, promising to use "all available means" to defend the territory.

In addition to this nuclear sabre-rattling, the suspected Russian sabotage of the Nord Stream gas pipelines in the Baltic Sea in September seemed designed to highlight the vulnerability of Europe's energy infrastructure if the Kremlin decided to extend the scope of the war. Russia has also threatened to pull out of a United Nations-brokered deal to allow Ukrainian grain and other agricultural goods to be shipped from the country's Black Sea ports, ending a months-long naval blockade that had exacerbated a global food crisis. "People cannot be fed with printed dollars and euros," Putin warned in his annexation ceremony speech. "And you can't heat anyone's home with... inflated capitalisations – you need energy."

In other words, he has continually sought to stoke fears of how the conflict could expand beyond Ukraine, and how many others in Europe and around the world could be made to suffer, if he is pushed too far.

This strategy has proved effective. Comparing the threat to the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, Biden warned of the prospect of "Armageddon" during a speech in October. "We are trying to figure out: what is Putin's off-ramp?" he said. "Where does he find a way out?" Each new Ukrainian victory has been followed by hand-wringing among international observers as to how much further it should attempt to go. Putin's decision to begin mobilising Russian citizens and signs that his forces are digging in along more defensible lines in southern and eastern Ukraine – where they have been installing concrete fortifications known as "dragon's teeth" – have also raised questions as to how long the West will be able to sustain the current level of support.

Those concerns have only intensified as Russia has systematically targeted Ukraine's power and water plants, damaging or destroying an estimated 40 per cent of the country's critical energy infrastructure as winter sets in, with no end to the bombardments in sight.

Renewed shelling at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant on 20 November, which Kyiv and Moscow blamed on each other, has also increased fears of an ▶



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◀ accidental catastrophe. The head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the UN's nuclear watchdog, warned that whoever was behind the attack was "playing with fire" and that if the plant's cooling systems lost power, it could cause a major nuclear disaster.

While publicly vowing to support Kyiv for "as long as it takes", US officials have also privately urged the Zelensky administration to show that it is open to negotiations with Russia to head off growing "Ukraine fatigue" as the conflict enters its tenth month. There has been little domestic political cost for Western governments supporting Ukraine so far. Boris Johnson's repeated visits to Kyiv and public backing for Zelensky during the early months of the war arguably helped him to cling on as prime minister into the summer before he was finally consumed by a tide of scandals and incompetence.

Even Giorgia Meloni, the new far-right prime minister of Italy, has vowed to continue the country's support for Ukraine, although some Italian commentators have suggested that she faces opposition from within her own party. A relatively mild European autumn has seen gas prices fall and fears of imminent power shortages recede, but Putin will undoubtedly be hoping for a long, cold winter and surging inflation to erode popular support for Ukraine.

In the US, which has provided the bulk of military and financial support to Ukraine, Biden has asked Congress to approve another \$37bn in emergency aid before the Republican Party assumes control of the House of Representatives in January. But a group of Republicans led by the Georgia congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene has already unveiled a resolution calling for an audit of all aid to Ukraine.

Polling carried out by the *Wall Street Journal* in October found that while a majority of Americans still supported sending aid to Ukraine, 48 per cent of Republicans surveyed said the US was doing too much to help, up from just 6 per cent in March. Donald Trump Jr responded to the missile incident by asking his 9.2 million Twitter followers: "Since it was Ukraine's missile that hit our Nato ally Poland, can we at least stop spending billions to arm them now?"

Yet the problem with the entirely rational focus on how long the West can sustain its support for Ukraine is that it overshadows the much more important question: what will happen if it doesn't? Russia's aggression against Ukraine didn't start in February. Even before the first Russian tanks crossed the border earlier this

year, more than 14,000 Ukrainians had already died in the war that started in the country's east in 2014.

I reported extensively from both sides of the front line during the conflict, and I was in the south-eastern Ukrainian city of Mariupol (currently occupied by Russia) in September 2014 when the first Minsk agreement was signed. The 12-point ceasefire deal, named after the Belarusian capital where it was agreed, was meant to halt the fighting and lead to the withdrawal of heavy weaponry, but on the ground little changed. The shelling continued around us. If anything, it intensified.

None of the Ukrainian soldiers I spoke to expected the "ceasefire" to last, if it even took effect. "If there is a ceasefire, it will only be from our side, so it's meaningless," a Ukrainian volunteer sitting on top of an armoured personnel carrier on the outskirts of the city told me. "Putin can't be trusted," said a journalist-turned-soldier named Tatyana, whose husband had been killed in the fighting three weeks earlier. "We have experience with that."

She was right. The first Minsk deal soon broke down, as did the second, which was signed in February 2015. Ukraine had also signed an agreement with Russia, along with the US and the UK, in 1994, known as the Budapest Memorandum, which was supposed to assure the country's security and protect Ukraine from the threat or use of force in return for giving up its nuclear weapons. Even if Moscow was showing any real interest in negotiations, which it is not, why would Kyiv view this as anything other than an attempt to pause the fighting to allow the Russian forces to regroup and rearm before resuming their offensive?

Ukraine's reluctance to pursue a new ceasefire deal without "removing the root causes of the problem" is based on "our experience with the Minsk I and II agreements in 2014-15", Mykola Bielieskov, a defence analyst at the National Institute for Strategic

Studies in Kyiv, told me. "These agreements brought a false sense of normalcy at the expense of Ukrainian citizens and territories and allowed Russia to continue modernising the army and launch a new round of aggression." Rather than asking why Ukraine was not more focused on achieving a truce, he said many of the people he spoke to in Kyiv were "perplexed that Western governments don't want to learn the lessons of dealing with Russia, like the fate of Minsk I and II".

It is not only Russia that will be closely studying the West's actions in the coming months. If domestic political divisions prevail and Ukraine's backers falter, other revisionist powers such as China – with its military modernisation almost complete and its sights firmly on Taiwan – will learn that Western resolve is liable to crumble in the face of any real cost. Beijing will be reassured that its assessment of the West as divided and decadent turned out to be true. Do we really want to send the message to authoritarian regimes, such as North Korea, that neighbouring countries can be invaded and their borders changed by force as long as you possess a suitably powerful nuclear arsenal?

Inherent in the idea that it is possible to offer Putin a tempting "off-ramp" and a truce deal that will restore lasting peace to Europe in the near term is a desire to time-travel; to go back to an earlier period – perhaps the late 1990s or the early 2000s – when the post-Cold War order seemed assured and the prospect of large-scale conflict between states appeared to be receding. Russia was instituting democratic elections. China was opening up and joining the World Trade Organisation. North Korea was a communist relic that seemed destined to collapse. But these states learned different lessons from the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. That order was never as durable as it appeared.

"The post-Cold War era is definitively over," said the Biden administration's national security strategy, released in October, "and a competition is under way between the major powers to shape what comes next." That contest is already taking place in Ukraine. The West's capacity to stay the course and sustain Ukraine's ability to fight will determine whether that order is shaped by liberal democratic principles and international norms, or a world of great-power rivalry in which might makes right and Putin and his fellow autocrats learn that they can take what they want with enough force. ●



"Today, I feel a cartoon villain"

Katie Stallard is the NS's senior editor, China and global affairs, and author of *Dancing on Bones: History and Power in China, Russia, and North Korea* (Oxford University Press)

# “We will support Ukraine for as long as it takes”

Jens Stoltenberg, Nato’s secretary-general, on why Europe faces its most dangerous moment since the Second World War

By Megan Gibson

Jens Stoltenberg, Nato’s secretary-general since 2014, knows the importance of a measured response. When we meet in central Brussels, less than 72 hours after a missile had exploded in the Polish village of Przewodów, close to the Ukrainian border, he looks understandably exhausted. In the immediate aftermath of the explosion on 15 November, which killed two Polish farmers, many feared the worst. Łukasz Jasina, a Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson for Poland – a Nato member since 1999 – released a statement calling the missile “Russian-made”; Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelensky, said in his nightly televised address: “Russian missiles hit Poland, the territory of our friendly country.” That same day Russia had launched its biggest missile onslaught against Ukraine since the war began.

The atmosphere was febrile and Western

analysts speculated on whether Article Five of Nato’s founding treaty – in which an attack on one member is considered an attack on all members – would be invoked, dragging the West into direct military conflict with Russia. It wasn’t long before “World War Three” began trending on Twitter.

By the morning of 16 November, however, Stoltenberg, who is 63 and a former Labour prime minister of Norway, had convened a meeting of Nato ambassadors in Brussels and liaised with the Polish government. By this time, it was apparent that the explosion had been caused by a Ukrainian air defence missile that had been fired to head off Vladimir Putin’s assault. A wider war had been averted, but Stoltenberg was disturbed. “This is the most dangerous moment for Europe since the end of the Second World War,” he told me. “Of course, we had the Cold War, we had the Cuban Missile Crisis – but

what we see now is a full-fledged war in Europe. And wars are dangerous: accidents may happen and incidents may happen, and there’s always a risk for escalation.”

Ever since Russia launched its full-scale invasion on 24 February, Stoltenberg has committed Nato’s unequivocal support to Ukraine. But now in the West concern grows about “Ukraine fatigue”, as inflation and energy prices continue to rise, in part as a consequence of the conflict. But Nato will not falter, Stoltenberg promised. “We will support them for as long as it takes. That has been stated again and again... both to ensure that Ukraine prevails as a sovereign independent nation, but also to ensure that President Putin and other authoritarian leaders do not believe that this behaviour pays off.”

How does he think the war will end?

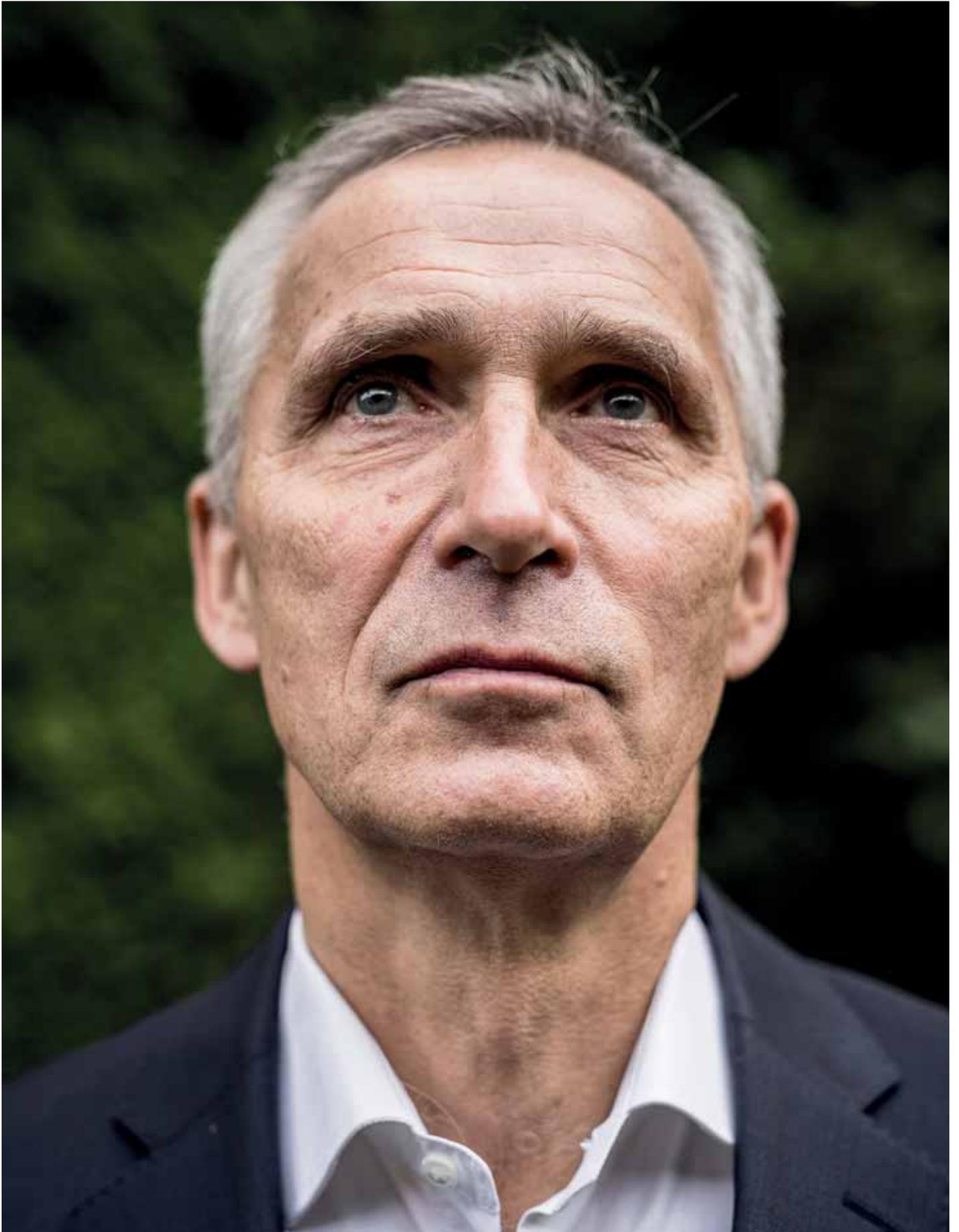
“At the negotiating table,” he said. “But what happens around that negotiating table is fundamentally closely linked to the situation on the battlefield. So the best way we can maximise the likelihood of an outcome acceptable for Ukraine is to support them militarily.”

But if the interests of Ukraine and Nato were mapped out as a Venn diagram, they would not entirely overlap. Ukraine wants to win no matter the price; Zelensky told British MPs in a House of Commons address on 8 March, paraphrasing Churchill: “We will continue fighting for our land, whatever the cost.” Stoltenberg also wants Ukraine to win, but he doesn’t want Nato to become mired in direct conflict with Russia, a declining but still dangerous nuclear power. “Of course, the war is devastating for Ukraine, but it’s also dangerous for Europe.”

Nato, he said, would not hesitate to invoke Article Five. “There should be no misunderstanding and no room for misunderstanding in Moscow about our willingness and readiness to protect and defend all our territory. It continues to be the best way to ensure peace.”

Yet as long as the war grinds on, as recent events in Poland demonstrated, “there may be many different types of potential incidents or accidents or provocations. So we need to be prepared for all eventualities. And that’s exactly what Nato is.”

Jens Stoltenberg was born in 1959 in Oslo into a cosmopolitan and political family. His father, Thorvald, served as Norway’s defence minister for the Labour party and then foreign minister, and later became a diplomat. He believed in “kitchen table diplomacy”, as Stoltenberg puts it, inviting leaders and human rights activists from all over the world to discuss politics with him at home; Stoltenberg first ▶



Jens Stoltenberg photographed for the *New Statesman* in Brussels by Valentin Bianchi

# CONFLICT APPEAL



## HELP US DELIVER MEDICAL CARE BEYOND THE FRONTLINES



An MSF medic treats a patient onboard the medical train. Photograph © Andrii Ovod/MSF

### CHRISTOPHER STOKES IS COORDINATING MSF'S MEDICAL WORK IN UKRAINE

23 October 2022

"On 10 October I had just left the train station in Dnipro, eastern Ukraine, when the car suddenly started shaking. A second later, we heard the blast from the first missile. By the time we reached the office, we'd felt four more shockwaves from strikes. Since then, there have been regular waves of bomb attacks targeting infrastructure and civilian areas. Yesterday there were more hits close to where we were working.

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*giftaid it*

◀ met Nelson Mandela as a boy over breakfast. His mother, Karin, also a politician, had previously been married to a Canadian poet and was friends with Leonard Cohen, the singer-songwriter.

After studying economics at the University of Oslo, Stoltenberg became the leader of the youth wing of Norway's Labour party, which then opposed Nato membership; Stoltenberg later changed his stance on the alliance. He rose through the party and served twice as prime minister, from 2000 to 2001, and then from 2005 to 2013.

It was during his second term, in July 2011, that Anders Behring Breivik, a neo-Nazi, killed eight people in a bomb attack in central Oslo and then another 69 in a mass shooting on the nearby island of Utøya during a Labour youth camp. Many of the victims were children and Stoltenberg knew several of them.

Norway, he said as prime minister, would respond to the atrocity with "more democracy, more openness and more humanity – but never naivety".

**S**toltenberg takes a similar approach to being secretary-general. While he could be described as doggedly diplomatic – refusing to be drawn on, for example, Nicola Sturgeon's desire to remove the UK's independent nuclear deterrent from Scottish waters – he's not in denial about the challenges.

When he became secretary-general in October 2014, soon after Putin annexed Crimea, Nato's direction seemed unclear. Commitment to the alliance – and defence spending more generally – varied among member states; Donald Trump called Nato "obsolete" in 2017, and Emmanuel Macron referred to its ongoing "brain death" two years later. The divisions in Nato caused by Trump's presidency, and the uncertainty he instilled in America's European allies, lingered even after he left office.

Meanwhile, new challenges emerged. China was becoming an increasingly powerful – and increasingly aggressive – actor on the world stage, crushing civil society in Hong Kong and escalating its threats against Taiwan. Yet Nato members remain divided on how precisely to contain China, with the US taking a more adversarial position and many European nations, including Germany and France, a more conciliatory one. The Covid pandemic brought its own diplomatic and security pressures for the world as borders closed and supply chains fragmented. Then, in late February of this year, a major conflict broke out in Europe.

Putin's war in Ukraine has reinvigorated Nato's mission. Finland and Sweden have applied to join the alliance; 40,000 troops

are under direct Nato command along its eastern flank. Yet fissures remain. Turkey has stonewalled Finland and Sweden's membership over a dispute about policy on certain Kurdish organisations.

But when asked about the disunity within Nato, Stoltenberg is characteristically pragmatic. "There have always been differences in this alliance. We are 30 democracies, with different histories and different geography from both sides of the Atlantic. During the period of President Trump, of course, we saw differences on issues like climate change or the Iran nuclear deal. But the success is that despite all these differences, we have always been able to unite around the core task, and to protect and defend each other, because you know that we are stronger together than alone. That has always been the case. It helped to preserve peace through the Cold War. It helps us to stand together in the fight against terrorism. And it helps us also today, in facing a more aggressive Russia invading neighbours."

He neither criticises nor praises any one Nato head of state. When asked if Boris Johnson's enthusiastic support for Ukraine was appreciated by Nato, Stoltenberg is strikingly cool. "The very strong support from the United Kingdom to Ukraine has been appreciated over a long period of time. It is also a strength that [Ukraine] has had strong bipartisan support, and has been supported by different prime ministers going back to 2014."

**I**t's true that Nato survived the Trump years and Stoltenberg deserves some credit for what happened. Trump's chief complaint was that other member states weren't investing 2 per cent of their GDP on defence, as Nato members are asked to do. This was a familiar American concern. Barack Obama described countries not paying their fair share as "free riders" when he was in office. Stoltenberg has always maintained that all Nato members should be meeting their spending targets and urged them to do so. In 2019, Trump said of Stoltenberg: "I'm a big fan."

Notably, since Russia invaded Ukraine, even the most reluctant members have come around; days after the war began, the Ger-

man chancellor, Olaf Scholz, announced a special €100bn fund to upgrade Germany's armed forces and pledged to honour the 2 per cent Nato defence spending target.

Stoltenberg is the longest-serving secretary-general of Nato; his tenure ends in October 2023. (Though it's not yet clear who his replacement will be, a few names have been mooted, including Canada's Liberal deputy prime minister, Chrystia Freeland.) As he and other Western leaders have warned, the war in Ukraine shows no sign of ending. There is a possibility that Trump – or a similarly unpredictable national populist such as Ron DeSantis, the Florida governor – could enter the White House in 2024.

What, I asked Jens Stoltenberg, is the future of Nato in this era of great power rivalry, and as war rages in Europe? "The lesson we have learned from two world wars and the Cold War is that this transatlantic bond between North America and Europe is important for Europe... [and] in Nato, the United States has friends and allies in a way that no other major power has." Much has changed since the defence alliance was first formed in 1949. "We live in a more dangerous world," Stoltenberg said. But, also, "Nato is much stronger now." ●

**"Nato means the US has allies in a way that no other major power does"**



# CONFLICT APPEAL



## HELP US DELIVER MEDICAL CARE BEYOND THE FRONTLINES



An MSF medic treats a patient onboard the medical train. Photograph © Andrii Ovod/MSF

### CHRISTOPHER STOKES IS COORDINATING MSF'S MEDICAL WORK IN UKRAINE

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# JEREMY CLIFFE



## World View

### How the balance of power in Europe is shifting in favour of its eastern states

In the decades since the fall of the Iron Curtain, to live in central and eastern Europe has often been to experience marginalisation. The reunited continent's core remained Carolingian: Germany, France and the Low Countries, the nucleus of its leading political (EU) and military (Nato) institutions and the site of its economic heartlands. New members of the EU as well as membership applicants and aspirants beyond were condemned, as Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes argue in their 2020 book *The Light That Failed*, to imitating Europe's west and playing catch-up with its socio-economic standards.

Many in the continent's core looked down on those outside it. In 2003, just months before the EU admitted eight former Soviet-bloc states, France's then president, Jacques Chirac, chided them for "missing a good opportunity to shut up" in debates over the Iraq War. Once inside the EU, they often found themselves in the background of major events: the eurozone crisis largely played out in the south; during the migration crisis they were dismissed as authoritarian intransigents; Europe's responses both to Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2014 and to the Covid-19 pandemic were spearheaded by France and Germany. No one born east of the Elbe has yet occupied either the post of Nato secretary-general or that of European Commission president.

Early this year, as Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine loomed, the major EU and Nato powers did not deem Kyiv capable of prolonged resistance and expected to be dealing with a victorious Vladimir Putin soon enough. In the words of Eerik-Niiles Kross, Estonia's former

intelligence chief and now an MP: "Biden, Scholz and Macron were all ironing their shirts in preparation for the negotiations." Yet the war has forced many to revise their estimations of Ukraine. And more than that: it has shifted Europe's entire centre of gravity eastwards.

No city today has a better claim to be the spiritual capital of European ideals than Kyiv. Russia's first attack on Ukraine in 2014 was a response to the pro-EU Maidan movement. That the country is now repelling Putin's invasion in order to, in part, maintain the freedom to choose a European path is surely the biggest vote of confidence in the history of the project – and why EU leaders granted Ukraine formal accession candidate status in June. With each new battlefield victory, Kyiv has gained more leverage in terms of everything from visits by foreign leaders to military and financial support.

Elsewhere, reports Tara Varma of the European Council on Foreign Relations from Paris, "Topics that were not so high on the French agenda are really high up it now, like the western Balkans, the Caucasus and how France supports Moldova." This was apparent in Prague in October when Emmanuel Macron, along with the Czech government, convened the first summit of the European Political

### Nato is pouring resources into Poland, and the US is building a new base there

Community (EPC), a new forum for political and strategic discussion encompassing the EU but also the Caucasus, the Balkan states and Ukraine. The second EPC summit is planned for Moldova in the spring.

In a speech in September, Olaf Scholz explicitly acknowledged that "the centre of Europe is moving eastwards", envisaged a future EU expanded from 27 to "30 or 36" members and discussed the reforms needed to make such a union work, such as ending the requirement for unanimity on decisions about foreign policy and tax.

For the first time since 1989, central and eastern states in the EU and Nato are not just at the heart of a major crisis but are also leading the continent's response. They have welcomed the bulk of the roughly eight million Ukrainian refugees who have fled the war; pioneered and championed sending aid to Kyiv; and agitated successfully for bolder measures from Brussels on European defence and energy security. "The Balts are punching above their weight," observes Milan Nič of the German Council on Foreign Relations. "The Czechs are having a good presidency [of the EU Council]. The Romanians have been strong on defence issues." Vocal leaders such as Estonia's Kaja Kallas and Finland's Sanna Marin are wielding outsized influence (the latter illustrating how Europe's centre is tilting not just east but somewhat north, too).

The most important example is Poland, which is emerging as the main bulwark on Europe's eastern flank. Nato is pouring new resources into the country, the US is building a new permanent base there, and Warsaw is investing in its army to make it the largest in the EU, with 300,000 troops. That it has the resources to do so points to another development altering Europe's balance: new member states are converging economically with the old ones. Czechia is now wealthier per head than Spain, and Poland could overtake the UK by 2030.

Poland, however, also presents the biggest caveat to this trend. It is increasingly prosperous, a bridge to Ukraine and an emergent European superpower, but – like Viktor Orbán's Hungary – it is also politically at odds with Brussels in a way that limits its influence. The populist Polish government's abuses of the rule of law have prevented the emergence of the Paris-Berlin-Warsaw axis that should be running this new Europe. Yet that might be about to change. Poland's more liberal opposition will be competitive in next year's parliamentary election. The outcome of that election will be pivotal for the future of the entirety of Europe – east and west. ●

# Inside the Twittering machine

## Will Elon Musk turn the dysfunctional social media platform into a digital dystopia?

**By Bruno Mações**

---

There is something prophetic in the way the tech barons Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos and now Elon Musk seem to have staked their fortunes on the plausibility of new virtual worlds. Meta, the company that owns Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, wants to build virtual reality platforms – the so-called metaverse – where the internet can finally deliver on its promise: experiences instead of screentime. Amazon is a universal marketplace that might eventually shift all aspects of economic life to the digital world. Musk seemed to be an exception – an engineer working with atoms rather than bits and computer code. But his acquisition of Twitter on 27 October this year was a calculated ploy to conquer the metaverse.

Indeed, there is a good case to be made that Twitter is the first metaverse. Why spend time and effort building a virtual world when one is there and ready for the taking?

Musk was interested in the obvious contradiction between Twitter's central importance for politics and culture and its shortcomings as a business. An extraterrestrial visitor to Earth might well conclude that Twitter was the nervous system of human existence. Most major world leaders, business chiefs, celebrities and journalists are present and active on the platform. Politicians and public figures often communicate between themselves on Twitter as journalists wait for their pronouncements to appear there first, before they're circulated on traditional media.

Travelling around the world to give lectures on global politics, I often ask audiences which city they would nominate as the world's capital. Some say New York. Others choose London. Still others suggest Beijing or Shanghai, swayed by the idea that a new hegemonic power has risen in the east. They are all wrong. The capital of the world in our

time is Twitter. Are you better connected with the course of events by logging on to Twitter, or by walking on the streets of New York or Shanghai and looking for action and inspiration in their thousands of lifeless coffee shops? Today, cities are places where you can sit down in a quiet corner to access current affairs and debates that are happening elsewhere – the internet.

Musk, then, wanted to acquire this capital, and he did so in the quick, decisive style of a military conqueror. His logic seems obvious: a platform of such social and political power needs only to be properly managed in order to become a source of endless economic advantages for its possessor. It is difficult to think of a case in history in which political power could not be turned into virtually infinite riches. Think of the East India Company in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Power is the easiest thing to monetise.



**Musk try harder: if Twitter can be tamed, it could be a source of endless economic advantage for its new owner**

What makes Twitter so special and so unique compared to larger platforms such as Google or Amazon? First, Twitter is dangerously immersive; addictive, if you prefer. I say that as someone who has spent too much time scrolling its timeline – but without ever regretting it. Perhaps the reason is as simple as the limit on what you write. Your posts, confined to 280 characters, are so brief that they quickly get subsumed by the mass of other posts and users. On Twitter you are never in control. You enter Twitter. You are inside the machine.

Second, Twitter feels like a game. For some, this idea is perverse, but once you realise you are playing a game rather than having a conversation, your expectations for decorum and the depth and quality of exchange quickly adjust. Twitter is a series of gamified moves during which you take certain

risks with your avatar to accumulate high scores in attention and approval, measured by followers, likes and retweets.

Twitter isn't a platform (a medium of communication) so much as it is a virtual world where a parallel life is constantly developing in different directions, even during the times you are logged off and not using it. I like to give the example of the PR executive a few years ago who boarded a long-haul flight from London to South Africa immediately

**For entrepreneurs,  
no concept can  
compare to building  
a virtual world**

after posting a uniquely stupid tweet: "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get Aids. Just kidding. I'm white!" By the time the plane landed in Cape Town, she was trending worldwide, and her whole life had collapsed.

Twitter culture, and the norms and rules that define it, is idiotic, dangerous and destructive of generous and reflective habits – the kind that might obtain in a real coffee house or seminar room. But it's also immensely exciting. As a game but also, more and more, as a way of life. Spending an hour on Twitter is like being at a cocktail party with thousands of people, where you can listen to just one sentence and immediately turn away to listen to someone else. For some, it might feel better than the real thing.

It is because Twitter is such a precocious metaverse, and so much more successful than any existing rival, that Musk couldn't resist the urge to own it. For an entrepreneur, nothing ►

# NALINI MALANI

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◀ can compare to the concept of building a virtual world to which everyone might one day migrate. Transportation or energy networks might be foundational to modern life, but they exist in the material plane. The metaverse is a new virtual world to replace the real one. And everyone is supposed to live in that world – a world you built and, therefore, control.

Here is a possible path to the metaverse as Musk conceives it. Start with Twitter as it exists today: a giant self-promotion machine where creators of all types converge in search of fame and money. So far the company has been unable to monetise this potential, but that feels like a lack of imagination more than anything else. How many books does Twitter sell? How many television shows, how many movie tickets? Imagine creators began to be rewarded on Twitter for their work, the way writers are on Substack or artists are for creating NFTs. And imagine further that Twitter did this by using its own proprietary currency, the future currency of the internet. Even a tiny fee on each transaction could transform Twitter into the most profitable firm on the planet.

The second stage of the Twitter masterplan would concern location. If Twitter is a virtual world rather than a platform, then this world must be built according to a general structure. Some users will be able to occupy central locations, with the algorithm making them stand out from the masses, while others will vegetate in some remote corner, leading an almost invisible existence. Deciding on these matters would constitute a power of life or death over our virtual selves. Soon you may be asked to pay to be seen and admired.

Almost everything about this vision is deeply disturbing, even before we consider its feasibility. When Zuckerberg says the metaverse will be distinct from the internet because we will be “inside” the new digital environment, he points to a basic problem: no single firm should be allowed to organise how a virtual world works, as the whole point of a virtual world is to guide our movements, our thoughts and our emotions. Those who controlled the nature of reality – even virtual reality – would be like gods ruling over mortals.

Another problem is whether a virtual world can actually be built by a single company or actor. There is a contradiction in terms in the notion of a metaverse that has been constructed by one company, something that Meta is reluctantly accepting. To all evidence, its ambitions have been scaled down and Zuckerberg is looking for partners to help build it. A metaverse requires high levels of autonomy and persistence, which cannot survive if one organisation remains in charge.

The technical capacity of an individual company can no doubt offer specialised services such as chat or payment platforms, but the complexity of a virtual world capable of rivalling the real one is beyond what Meta or Twitter can provide. If the metaverse ever comes into existence, it must be the product of genuinely decentralised structures. Twitter’s success in the past was partly due to the decentralised power structure within the company, where it often seemed that no one was in charge. Its co-founder and former CEO, Jack Dorsey, was more guru than boss. Musk is mistaken if he thinks Twitter will be better when subjected to a unified leadership.

The way this contradiction will unfold in practice has been obvious for some time. To acquire full control over Twitter, Musk had to load the firm with about \$13bn in debt. The company’s interest expense is now at least \$1bn a year, possibly more if interest rates in the US continue to rise. It is unclear how Twitter can generate this kind of money. Musk’s strategy is to gut its workforce, while looking for ways to increase revenue, even if they come at the expense of Twitter’s appeal to a broad audience. Some of the ideas look desperate, such as a proposal to allow users to pay to send direct messages to celebrities, or the \$8

subscription for blue ticks – previously awarded for free to validate the authenticity of high-profile Twitter accounts – which was introduced in early November.

In the meantime, it’s been reported that hundreds of Twitter employees have resigned in response to Musk’s cultural reset, with many leaving after he sent an email on 16 November that asked staff to sign up for “long hours at high intensity”. Building a metaverse with just a few dozen desperado programmers and engineers will generate a cascade of technical problems. We might expect the \$1.2bn that Twitter spends annually on research and development to be diverted to more pressing financial obligations, such as servicing all the new debt and equity interests.

Twitter is not alone. Many of the same problems seem to affect Meta, and even Amazon, although on a much smaller scale. Zuckerberg recently admitted that he overestimated the feasibility of his metaverse dreams. We are heading towards something of a showdown, when it will become clear that the boldness of Big Tech’s projects, the next stage in the digital revolution, exceed what individual companies – despite their wealth, resources and access to political power – are able to achieve on their own. ●

## 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.*

### Flight of fancy

A man who spent £25,000 on a fake airport sign in Wales is bringing the joke to an end after 20 years.

For the past two decades, a billboard for Llandegley International has been a landmark near the Powys village.

It looks like an ordinary road sign, but actually directs drivers to an airport that only exists in people’s imagination.

After spending thousands of pounds to erect and maintain the sign, the owner decided it’s time to take it down.

*BBC Wales (Neil Stone)*

### Call me maybe

A battered 90-year-old phone box is on sale for £25,000. There is no phone in it, two panes are missing, one of the white “Telephone” signs is damaged and it needs a lick of paint.

But it does have an electricity connection, meaning the 3ft-square kiosk could be converted into a tiny shop.

*Daily Mirror (Daragh Brady)*



### Guess who

Social workers may stop asking dementia patients who the prime minister is in memory tests due to the high turnaround at No 10.

After three leaders in four months, it was felt the question was unfair as those without the disease may struggle to name the current leader.

*Daily Mirror (Amanda Welles)*

### Gnome fixed address

A couple are baffled after six gnomes were put in their garden over the last 18 months – then a seventh came in the post with a return address of Paris.

Christine Lock, who lives with her husband, Stephen, in South Molton, Devon, said, “They’re nice and look pretty, but I worry I’ll wake up and the garden will be covered!”

*Metrolife (Michael Meadowcroft)*

# “People want to buy and source locally now”

Working with farms like the Lakes Free Range Egg Company boosts food quality, local economies and sustainability

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In Stainton, a small village near Penrith, Cumbria, stands a 150-year-old farm that prides itself on supplying free-range eggs. In 1989 former air force pilot David Brass returned to the farm where he was born – which was originally a dairy, beef and sheep farm – and took over the family business with his wife, Helen. The pair made their first foray into poultry when they farmed turkeys for Christmas markets in the 1990s. By 1997 they had set up The Lakes Free Range Egg Company, where they farm free-range laying hens.

The business is McDonald's longest-standing UK supplier of free-range eggs, having worked with the chain for the past 20 years. McDonald's only uses free-range eggs across its entire menu, in items like the Sausage & Egg McMuffin®. The company also uses only organic milk in its coffee, tea and happy-meal milk bottles. Working with UK-based suppliers with the same attitude to sourcing high-quality and sustainable ingredients is crucial.

McDonald's works with more than 23,000 British and Irish farmers to provide ingredients for its menu, and spends more than £1bn every year on sourcing food from its British supply chain. David says that McDonald's has very high technical standards around quality and sustainability – so much so, that the Lakes Farm had to enhance a number of its processes to meet McDonald's standards over the two years before becoming a supplier to the brand.

“You tend to find McDonald's are very loyal to their supplier base,” he says. “They don't change suppliers often, because they have difficult technical standards to achieve.”

Being a McDonald's supplier has really helped improve how the farm is run, Helen adds, including by encouraging the pair to bring more resource and expertise into their team to keep improving their output.

“[Being a McDonald's supplier] has been a huge benefit really,” she says. “The business has helped us to professionalise a lot of our standards and made us think more to the future. Within the food industry, the bar to supply for McDonald's is very, very high.”

Quality of produce is intrinsically linked with animal welfare, and McDonald's has helped the Lakes farm develop in this area, too. In collaboration with the company, the farm worked with the sustainability group the Farm Animal Initiative (FAI) on a major piece of research over four years, which showed how planting trees in bird ranges on farms was beneficial for welfare, as the tree cover makes the hens feel safe from predators, meaning they range



further and are more active. The Lakes subsequently implemented this, planting more trees to enhance welfare and improve the quality of produce.

The relationship with the FAI has also resulted in research into how innovation can improve the well-being of the farm's chickens. For instance, working with Newcastle University, the farm has tested and implemented digital systems that monitor acoustics in chicken ranges, which analyse the animals' vocalisations to understand if they are stressed or unhappy.

"The farmer can't be there 24 hours a day whereas a computer can," says David. Innovation is a vital part of McDonald's Farm Forward programme – the company's initiative to support UK farmers, raise animal welfare and sustainability standards, and make environmental improvements. A core part of achieving this is investing in new technology.

Beyond quality and animal welfare, sourcing ingredients from within the UK also helps to boost local economies. The Lakes is now one of the biggest employers in its area. This has a domino effect, as the

farm also works with other producer farms at its packaging station, which employ even more people. By working with other businesses locally, they in turn support the staff that those farmers employ. "Economically, that puts a lot back into the local community," says Helen.

The symbiotic relationship with McDonald's has also allowed the Lakes to up-skill and educate the local community. "As the company grows, it allows you to do stuff you never would have thought about doing when you were a smaller company," says David. This includes teaching young people about agriculture and sustainability, from tree-planting workshops for primary school children through to farming robotics tutorials for A-level students.

The farm has also taken part in McDonald's Progressive Young Farmer programme – an initiative to help young people kick-start their career in the food and farming industry by spending a year experiencing the McDonald's supply chain, from farm to front counter. In the Lakes' case, the programme has fed into employment; one participant returned to the farm after graduating from university for a permanent role.

Ultimately, sourcing nationally and sustainably not only benefits farms, local communities and customers, but McDonald's too. Working with farms like the Lakes contributes to the company's Plan for Change, the business's sustainability plan. This has a positive impact across the supply chain and in local communities, right through to the food served in McDonald's restaurants.

For people in Stainton, the fact that David and Helen's farm is a McDonald's supplier gives local customers reassurance about the origins of their food. "Perceptions have changed since Covid, people want to buy and source locally now," says Helen. "If people know that Helen and David's eggs go to McDonald's, then every time they go [to a McDonald's restaurant], it brings that story home, and makes them think that somebody they know might have packed those eggs or might be eating them now too." ●

*\*Since these interviews were conducted, in accordance with government guidelines and the national housing order introduced for all birds across England, all hens at the Lakes are being temporarily housed in barns*

I touched down in Doha late on a Sunday night. The World Cup had already begun, my first game (England vs Iran) was on Monday afternoon, and so I had arrived in the country as late as possible: a decision I now realise was borne of extreme ambivalence. Foreboding was not quite the right word: any World Cup, even one as flawed and soiled as Fifa/Qatar 2022, is still apt to inspire a certain wonder. Grotesqueness and fascination go hand in hand. This is perhaps the siren call of journalism: the dangerous thing, the sickening thing, the thing that pushes you away, somehow also draws you closer. And this is the most infamous snuff movie in the history of modern sport. Is it braver to step away, or step inside?

Still, wanting to see is not quite the same as wanting to be there. I realised this now, as I unlocked the door to my simple apartment in the capital, lit by a harsh phosphorescent light, chilled by a juddering air conditioning unit. The walls were unadorned, the bed simple and bare, the single chest of drawers coated in a fine layer of dust. Outside the traffic roared on the Al-Rayyan Road. Just beyond, a giant poster of the French striker Kylian Mbappé was draped over one side of a skyscraper. By the door was a switch marked “Do Not Turn Off”.

Qatar has been likened to many things: a giant theme park, a computer simulation, a dystopian desert hellscape. It is perhaps all of these and less. The closest parallel I could come up with, as I rolled through the city on empty metro trains and trudged past glittering car showrooms and luxury penthouse blocks, was the gated executive village. An elaborately curated façade with a dark, malicious heart, a place with its own unspoken order and own unknowable code, where everyone is secretly going mad.

In common with much of ex-communist eastern Europe, the whole of Qatar is calibrated to make the individual feel small. Huge, unlabelled 20-storey buildings stretch across the skyline, casting the streets into shadow. Battalions of security police, some barely older than children, line the entrance to every metro station and every supermarket. The guard outside our building hasn't had a day off in more than a year. You realise why this country and this competition have proved so resistant to even the most basic idea of human rights, which are based on the principle that every person has some innate, individual worth. In the Fifa/Qatari-government mindset, the opposite is true: the individual is by default worthless until they can prove otherwise.

# JONATHAN LIEW



## Left Field

### The Qatar World Cup is a moral disaster – is it braver to step away, or step inside?

“Everybody is welcome,” Fifa’s president, Gianni Infantino, proclaimed in his extraordinary monologue on 19 November in which he rounded on Qatar’s critics and condemned European “hypocrisy” over human rights. But of course Infantino didn’t literally mean “every body”. To do so would require a recognition of individual worth and, by extension, individual suffering. What he meant, in general, was that people are welcome. Where resistance sees the exception, power sees only the rule.

How far should you want to immerse yourself in this? To what extent do you absorb this world, and at what point does it begin to absorb you? It’s easy enough to come to Qatar and see nothing at all. In many ways, this is how it has been designed: from the moment you arrive there are colourful signs and miles of barricades, unsmiling volunteers filtering you to where they need you to go. You can eat your dinner in the hotel restaurant, head down to Souq Waqif and get some pictures to put on Instagram, spend your time almost entirely with people like yourself.

Then, of course, there is the football, in many ways the perfect foil for the unreality of this place. Even within the stadiums, the entire experience feels profoundly and proudly inauthentic. Ear-splitting music fills the gaps before and after the game, fills the

half-time break, kicks in a millisecond after a goal is scored. Weird virtual-reality replays appear on the big screen, showing action from earlier in the game but rendered in CGI. The games themselves seem to stretch into eternity. England’s 6-2 win over Iran on 21 November ran to 117 minutes after substitutions, injuries and video assistant referee checks. For decades computer games strove to recreate the aesthetic of real football. Now football resembles a computer game: a high-definition product that you can see but never touch, and which for some reason can always be paused.

And so perhaps the most interesting aspect of this World Cup is the grapple for control of the stage, between the powers who have conceived it into being and the people who make it function. Before their game against England, Iran’s players refused to sing their national anthem in protest at government violence against peaceful demonstrators in their country. The fans – from the Welsh supporters who belted out “Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau” to the gleeful Saudi supporters toasting their team’s shock 2-1 defeat of Argentina – have seized their limited opportunities to contribute. And the BBC deserves praise for declining to show Qatar’s opening ceremony in favour of a sober discussion on the ethics of the tournament.

Nothing that happens on the pitch can possibly salvage the horrors that brought this tournament about. The final takes place on 18 December, but even this is only an arbitrary cusp, the point at which most of the world will stop caring about the injustices and indignities of Qatar. Perhaps, in the absence of anything tangible or solid, the very least we can do is to keep seeing. ●

Even in the stadiums,  
the experience feels  
profoundly and  
proudly inauthentic

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# THE CRITICS

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**Critic at Large** Chris Power on *White Noise* and Don DeLillo's vision of America. 38

---

**Books** William Davies on austerity economics and the liberal admirers of fascism. 42

---

**Books** Lola Seaton on the banal "life lessons" of Michelle Obama's *The Light We Carry*. 46

---

**Film** Ann Manov on the problem with *She Said* – a #MeToo movie without the sex. 50

---

**TV** Rachel Cooke on *The English*, a modern masterpiece set in the Old West. 56

---

**Radio** Rachel Cunliffe nods off to the sounds of the BBC's *The Sleeping Forecast*. 57

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## What Don DeLillo saw coming

In 1985, *White Noise* captured America's nascent attention economy. Can an \$80m Netflix adaptation live up to his vision?

By Chris Power

In January 1985 Don DeLillo published a novel that achieved a rare hat-trick: the highest sales of his 14-year career, adulatory reviews and an enhanced reputation in any university English department interested in postmodernism – which in 1985 was all of them. Ten months later it won the National Book Award. According to the novelist Richard Powers, *White Noise* “placed Don DeLillo at the centre of contemporary cultural imagination. I can think of few books written in my lifetime that have received such quick and wide acclaim while going on to exercise so deep an influence for decades thereafter.” Now approaching 40, it re-enters the culture in the form of Noah Baumbach's \$80m Netflix film adaptation. Will this version establish itself at the centre of our cultural imagination? Certainly not, although that has nothing to do with its quality; it's because there is no centre now – something the decentred, fragmentary work of DeLillo, a noun rarely positioned far from the adjective prescient, saw coming a long way off.

*White Noise* tells the story of Jack Gladney (played by Adam Driver in the film), a professor of Hitler Studies at College-on-the-Hill, a small liberal arts university in the American Midwest, his wife, Babette (Greta Gerwig), who teaches posture and reads tabloid newspapers to the blind, and their large post-nuclear family: seven children from six different marriages and relationships, none of them both Jack and Babette's. The film alters this last fact, making the youngest child theirs, implying a solidity to their marriage that the book withholds and providing an early clue that this might be a more reassuring ride than its source text.

Another is the Gladney residence, which in the film is an idyllic college-town specimen: large, ramshackle,

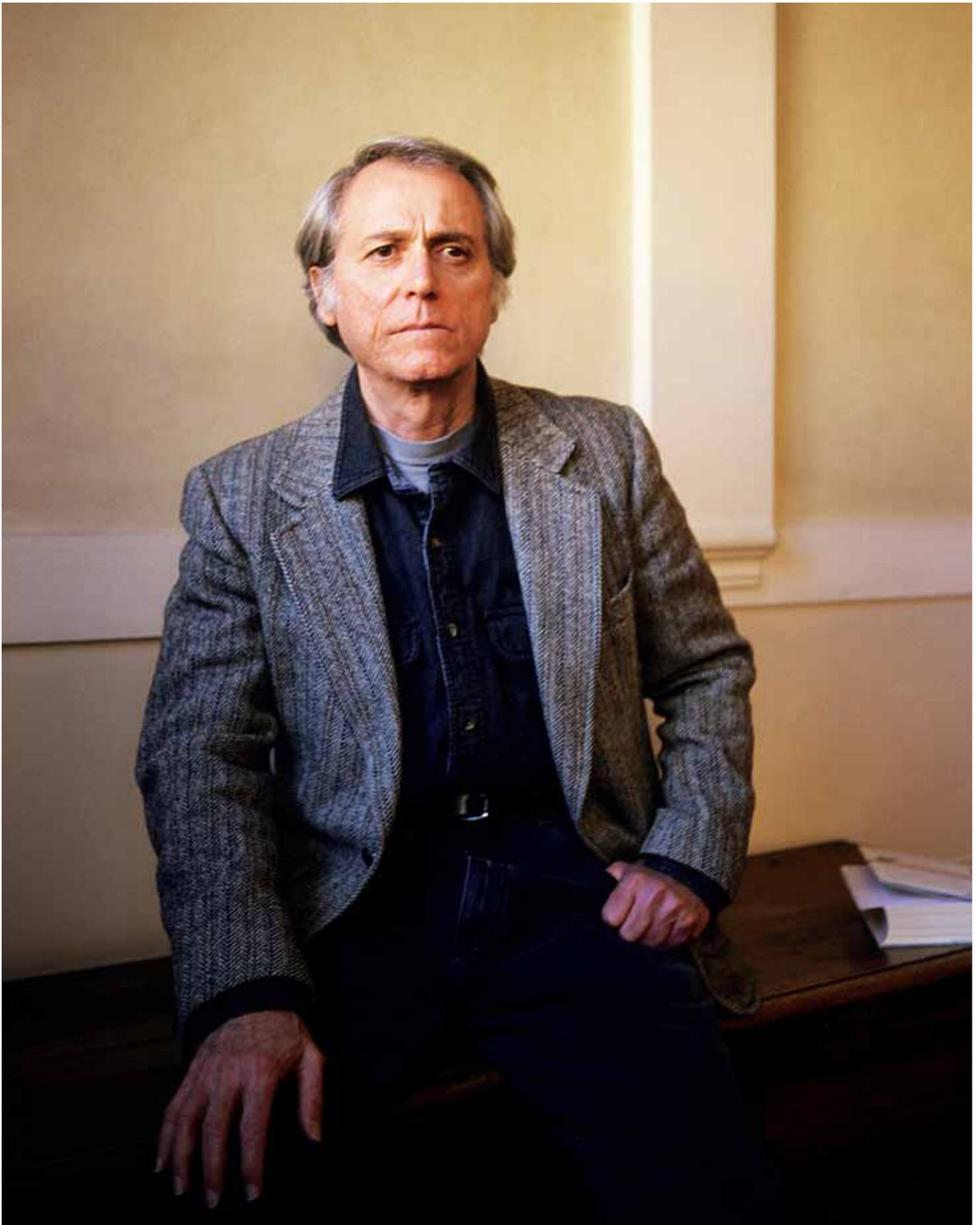
cosily cluttered, on an elm-lined street where neighbours wave from porches and children toss baseballs. In DeLillo's version it is more troublingly poised between two Americas: on one side the idyll, but on the other the ground plunges to an expressway that provides the novel's first instance of its analogue for death: white noise. “There is an expressway beyond the backyard now, well below us, and at night as we settle into our brass bed the sparse traffic washes past, a remote and steady murmur around our sleep, as of dead souls babbling at the edge of a dream.” The story's territory is set out: the family, a system throbbing with life, poised above the river of death.

Both book and film contain a glut of words. In the crowded Gladney house, in the supermarket and the college cafeteria everyone is voluble and no one is ever far from a TV or radio, voices running under, over and alongside the overlapping dialogue. “We still lead the world in stimuli,” a neurochemist says proudly of the United States in the novel, a statement the film emulates with its busy soundbed. While some scenes are shuffled or cut, words reassigned from one character to another, structurally it is a very faithful adaptation. Beginning with a lecture by Murray Siskind (Don Cheadle) on the meaning of the car crash in American cinema, it's an academic satire that becomes a family sitcom, only to be derailed and transform into a disaster thriller that gives way to a story about addiction, infidelity and revenge. “All plots tend to move deathward,” Jack tells his students. “This is the nature of plots. Political plots, terrorist plots, lovers' plots, narrative plots, plots that are part of children's games.”

Plot isn't really what DeLillo does, but he does do death, and *White Noise* is his most single-minded investigation of the theme. At the outset death is abstract, a matter for domestic chatter and lecture hall ruminations (“Who will die first? The conversation comes up from time to time, like where are the car keys”). But when an accident at a train yard causes a toxic spill, the novel tightens into a disaster narrative, albeit with more semantic debate. Is the airborne toxic event a “billowing cloud” or a “feathery plume”? Even as they flee it, the Gladneys spend time parsing definitions, clinging to analysis as if it might stave off death (talk of *White Noise* as a Covid film is overdone, but it's here, as the radio lists symptoms, that parallels with the pandemic are most apparent).

Whether cloud or plume, the event drives the middle section, an oddly placed climax. Here Jack is exposed to Nyodene D, which persists in the body for 30 years with unknown but almost certainly terrible results, and he is “tentatively scheduled to die”. The third section meanders again, as Jack and his stepdaughter, Denise (Raffey Cassidy), try to understand Babette's addiction to an unlicensed drug called Dylar, designed to overcome the fear of death. This propels Jack, who now possesses a gun and the belief that he might be able to “kill death”, on a mission to murder a rogue pharmacist who Babette has been sleeping with in exchange for pills. (“It was a capitalist transaction,” she confesses.) Jack finds the dealer but the confrontation doesn't go ▶

**At the outset death is abstract, a matter for domestic chatter and lecture hall ruminations**



LEONARDO CENDAMO/GETTY IMAGES

**An American life: Don DeLillo has built a reputation as a serious, intellectually ambitious, sometimes abstruse writer**



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St Mary's and All Saints Church, Fotheringhay, Northamptonshire. © Bob Stewart.

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◀ to plan. Jack tries to ignore death; when that fails, to flee it; when that fails, to defeat it; when that fails, to accept it. It's the nature and quality of this acceptance where book and film stand furthest apart.

DeLillo, born in 1936 into a large Italian family in the Bronx, New York City, was 48 when *White Noise* was published. With his previous seven novels he had built a reputation as a serious, intellectually ambitious, sometimes abstruse writer who engaged with modern America in a way that was considered not just current but predictive. In the Seventies, having quit his ad-man career, he wrote about a TV executive fleeing New York to "explore America in the screaming night" (*Americana*), college football and nuclear war (*End Zone*), reclusive rock stars and teenage maths geniuses (*Great Jones Street* and *Ratner's Star*), Wall Street traders getting involved in terrorist plots, and journalists hunting for a Hitler sex film (*Players* and *Running Dog*).

Then followed the imperial phase. Between 1982 and 1997 DeLillo published the books that, in various combinations, represent the top five for most of his readers. *The Names* (the number one hipster choice; "a 21st-century novel published in 1982", according to Geoff Dyer) entangles an unwitting CIA operative with a murderous Greek language cult. *Ma II*, begun as a response to the fatwa imposed on Salman Rushdie in 1989, posits that novelists can't compete with "the emergence of news as an apocalyptic force", an idea that became commonplace a decade later after the fall of the World Trade Center (a brooding presence in the novel). Then came six years of near-silence broken in 1997 by *Underworld*, an 800-page epic about lives lived in the shadow of nuclear annihilation during the second half of the 20th century. Incredibly, and without abandoning any of the positions he had worked from throughout his career – narrative fragmentation, the individual's saturation by mass media, atmospheres of paranoia and what he refers to in *Players* as "accumulating dread" – he produced a great social novel of the kind few thought he had either the inclination or the specific skills to write.

Watching Baumbach's film, a blur or lag between his *White Noise* and DeLillo's becomes apparent. Take the Gladney home, every bit as stuffed with content as Elliott's in *ET* (a critical mass of possessions I lusted after as a child), or *White Noise*'s second most important setting, the supermarket. The A&P is shot to amplify its dizzying bounty, at one point the camera rising to show the serried shelves in a tableau that recreates Andreas Gursky's photograph *99 Cent*.

In the novel this overabundance troubles Jack: "Why do these possessions carry such sorrowful weight? There is a darkness attached to them, a foreboding." But the film's beautiful production design fetishises it: old Coke cans, Lucky Charms cereal boxes, foam-cushion headphones, plastic visors, Minnie Mouse sweatshirts, vintage Volvos. It all looks so good! So authentic! The retro pleasures negate the book's futurity. Reviews of the novel felt that DeLillo was commenting on the present

in a way that defined it, so certain was his grasp on what he has called "American forces and energies" (eerily abetted a month before publication by the Union Carbide gas leak in Bhopal, the worst airborne toxic event in industrial history). Baumbach's film lacks any of this bleeding edge, being instead one more unit in an avalanche of 1980s-themed content; *Stranger Things* with a side of Jean Baudrillard.

Similarly, the thrall that television exerts – a family debate is brought to a halt by the cry, "Plane crash footage on TV!" – plays differently in 2022. When we see the Gladneys intent on the screen, unblinkingly lifting noodles to their mouths, it hits not as an image of alienation but a nostalgic portrait of an era when families stared at one screen rather than six different ones. In the novel DeLillo, via Murray Siskind, fingers television as "the primal force in the American home", but elements of his cultural diagnosis persist in the age of the attention economy: there is, Murray says, "a wealth of data concealed in the grid". In 1985 the *Village Voice* praised DeLillo's grasp of how television sounds but complained that "perhaps he's come to regard the box as too sinister, too important". In an irony that runs in DeLillo's favour, after a brief cinematic run the film will exist on Netflix. The small screen has become even more dominant than he foresaw.

There's irony, too, in Baumbach's fidelity to DeLillo's novel being what renders the film unfaithful to the book's atmospheres – the authentic prophecies of 1985 becoming 2022's artful but artificial reconstructions – particularly when the film is so alive not just to the book but its hinterland. Among DeLillo's working titles for *White Noise* were "The American Book of the Dead" and "Panasonic", his final choice until Matsushita Electric refused permission. It's a detail the film playfully acknowledges when Jack wakes at night and stares at his bedside clock, the Panasonic brand name as prominent as the ruby-red digits.

Speaking in 1979 about what characterises the novels he finds most rewarding, DeLillo said, "There's a drive and a daring that go beyond technical invention. I think it's right to call it a life-drive even though these books deal at times very directly with death. No optimism, no pessimism... [they] open out on to some larger mystery." The closing supermarket soliloquy of *White Noise* strikes just this line between optimism and pessimism, acknowledging the bodily pleasures, entertainments and scandals designed to distract us from death. In Baumbach's version, which ends with a musical routine (a *danse macabre*, but a celebratory one), living is reward enough for the inevitability of death, whereas DeLillo's conclusion suggests acceptance is impossible, but avoidance just might work.

Here again the film hews closely to, but definitively isn't, DeLillo's *White Noise*. It reminds me of another simultaneous presence and absence, at the National Book Award ceremony in 1985 when DeLillo delivered his one-line acceptance speech: "I'm sorry I couldn't be here tonight, but I thank you all for coming." ●

*"White Noise" is in select cinemas from 25 November and on Netflix from 30 December*

Noah  
Baumbach's  
version is  
*Stranger  
Things* with  
a side of Jean  
Baudrillard

# Books

## The fascist roots of austerity

What does today's Tory government have in common with Mussolini? A willingness to uphold capitalism at all costs

By William Davies

The extraordinary events that befell British politics over the course of September and October 2022 will be subject to considerable historical interest. Liz Truss's record as Britain's shortest-ever serving prime minister gives the crisis a whiff of tragedy in retrospect, though the unforced error of Kwasi Kwarteng's infamous "mini-Budget" perhaps marks it out more for its comedy.

But in other ways, Britain witnessed a succession of more familiar political steps. In sacking Tom Scholar, the permanent secretary to the Treasury, and sidelining the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR), Kwarteng hoped to override economic expertise (which he believed was to blame for Britain's sluggish economic performance) with nothing but his own political authority. In doing so, he united economic technocrats across the planet against him: the International Monetary Fund, the US secretary of the treasury Janet Yellen, George Osborne and the Bank of England were among the more prominent voices warning of grave consequences. Within a month, Kwarteng and Truss were gone, the "mini-Budget" was scrapped, and a "sensible" team of Rishi Sunak and Jeremy Hunt was in charge, who quickly allied themselves to the OBR and Bank of England. Talk turned immediately to austerity.

The pattern is one known to citizens of Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Ireland and, indeed, Britain over the past 15 years. An event occurs that dramatically



Marching towards dictatorship: a crowd gathers in Piazza del Quirinale during the 1922 March on Rome that put Mussolini in power

DE AGOSTINI PICTURE LIBRARY / GETTY IMAGES

repoliticises the economy. Economic expertise is suddenly trumped by political possibilities and uncertainty. For a while, the institutions of “the market economy” are revealed as malleable constructs, as opposed to natural or timeless entities. Fearing a genuine challenge to capitalism, a counteroffensive is launched, with unelected technocrats thrust into power, warning of dire implications if budgets are not balanced and sound money not restored. Regardless of political or democratic legitimacy (or impact on human welfare), austerity is imposed, foreclosing political alternatives and detonating social projects.

That this pattern was witnessed in the eurozone and the UK after 2009 is a reminder of how potentially transformative events were over the previous two years. The bank bailouts and nationalisations publicly affirmed what liberalism exists to deny: that “the market” is not actually some autonomous sphere, external to politics, but depends on the state for its functioning and its power.

In 2008-09, it was impossible for anyone to say where “the state” ended and where “the market” began. This, as Clara Mattei’s illuminating book *The Capital Order: How Economists Invented Austerity and Paved the Way to Fascism* shows us, is a terrifying situation for anyone invested in the perpetuation of capitalism. The purpose of austerity is to redivide the “political” and the “economic”, killing any lingering dreams of a different economic settlement. The old liberal order must be reinstated at all costs, and those costs are often devastating.

Mattei’s historical cases are Britain and Italy a century ago, a time when capitalism faced grave political threats. The experience of the First World War, in which states became responsible for economic decisions that had previously been deemed the preserve of “the market” and “private enterprise”, generated a flowering of socialist ideas and experiments, in which production, consumption and distribution would be organised differently. As workers and trade unions saw new ways of coordinating industry and labour relations in the context of modern warfare, so the demands for redistribution, reorganisation and even revolution were emboldened in the immediate aftermath of the war. Across Europe in 1919-20, visions of planning, public ownership and economic democracy were in the ascendant, while trade union membership surged. Given what had been achieved by wartime governments, it was no longer possible simply to dismiss such demands as unrealistic or utopian.

Among Mattei’s most intriguing claims is that these worker movements didn’t merely express a set of class interests or material desires, but offered a different way of doing economics – a “methodological revolution” – that defied liberal orthodoxies. *L’Ordine nuovo*, an Italian paper founded by four young Marxists (including Antonio Gramsci), provided a space to circulate ideas and policies that straddled the terrains of politics and economics. In Britain, *Solidarity* and the *Worker* were published by the shop steward movement, outlining plans for democratic control of industry. Just as the war had catalysed innovation in the management of

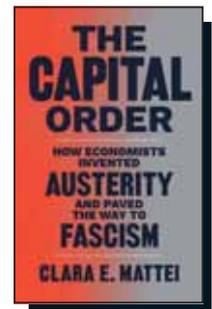
industry and the economy, so it had bred intellectual innovation within the left regarding possible blueprints for a postwar, post-capitalist system.

The political and intellectual fecundity of that immediate postwar period for the left makes for a fascinating history in itself. But Mattei is more concerned with the counter-revolutions that were subsequently launched in defence of capitalism, in which academic economists and civil servants played a key role, channelling whatever political forces were most amenable to them, including the political project of Benito Mussolini, Italy’s prime minister from 1922 to 1943. At the core of this agenda was a novel explanation of how capitalism worked, that diverted attention away from production, consumption and distribution, and towards savings and surpluses. Only if individuals and states could be made to live within their means could financial surpluses, and therefore investment, arise.

Austerity comes in various forms. Monetary austerity pushes up interest rates, starving businesses of credit and rewarding savers. Fiscal austerity cuts spending and raises taxes, with a view to reducing the public debt. Attacks on organised labour aim to bring down wages. Profligacy, waste and idleness are attacked, if not by economic policy, then by moral re-education. All of this is justified in the name of “realism”, the idea that subsidies, credit, wage bargaining and public provision all hide the truth of how capitalism actually functions – and that self-restraint (manifest in saving and abstinence) is the basis of economic progress. In 1920, the British chancellor Austen Chamberlain complained that the government’s £45m bread subsidy was not only too costly, but “conceal[s] the real facts of the situation from the country”. The demand for austerity is always pitched in terms of a reckoning with uncomfortable truths.

The question in the 1920s, as in the 2010s or 2020s, is who is willing to convey this unwelcome news. And the answer, then as now, is often the unelected technocrat. In Mattei’s account, mass democracy, which expanded rapidly during the 1920s, is fundamentally at odds with capitalism, in as much as the latter requires that most people accept their subjugation via a reliance on wages, and the primacy of private property, which they may never themselves benefit from. Unless capitalism could be defended by some non-democratic or even anti-democratic power structure (for instance, more systematic constraints placed on trade unions), its long-term security would be in doubt. This was the same problem that would later animate networks of neoliberal intellectuals such as Wilhelm Röpke, Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman in Europe and the United States from the 1940s onwards.

In 1920 and 1922, International Finance Conferences were held at Genoa and Brussels, at which economists and Treasury officials met to discuss the policies that would reinstate a stable capitalist order, based around a creed of “work more, consume less”. From Mattei’s perspective, their agenda was clear: to reassert the class inequalities on which capitalism depends. But for the ▶



**The Capital Order: How Economists Invented Austerity and Paved the Way to Fascism**

Clara Mattei  
University of Chicago Press,  
480pp, £24

**Italy’s recent history has been a protracted wrestle between technocrats and political nationalists**

attendees, the discussions were framed in scientific, expert terms. Thus the advice that emanated from these conferences could be presented not as “political”, but simply as the necessary, even regrettable truths of how economies must be governed. The restoration of the gold standard was an urgent policy recommendation, no matter what social pain might result from such deflationary measures. This cloaking of class war in the language of neutral economic expertise would later become familiar to wage labourers living under Paul Volcker’s US Federal Reserve in the early 1980s or Mario Draghi’s European Central Bank in the early 2010s.

From its origins, therefore, austerity has been waged as much as an epistemic battle against “the people” – with their ignorant demands for bread and circuses – as a political defence of finance capital. For Mattei, this becomes especially vivid in the early 1920s, because the intellectual question of how capitalism works had become such a live one across the political spectrum. In one respect, the technocrats and the socialists were both concerned with stripping away the veneer of economic fictions, to reveal the mechanics underneath. But where the socialists believed that 1914-18 had revealed the primacy of labour, cooperation and planning, the economists who assembled in Genoa and Brussels believed that the First World War (and its aftermath) was a mere diversion from the necessity for frugality and discipline.

Britain and Italy don’t simply provide parallel national case studies, but also an exemplar of how austerity operates as an international project, just as it would later do under the auspices of the Washington Consensus during the 1980s and 1990s or within the eurozone during the 2010s. The British Treasury, which in 1920 still occupied a central role within the world economy, was aghast at the failures of the Italian government to impose order on its own economy. British Treasury officials issued stern advice to their Italian counterparts, to adopt austerity policies such as running surpluses and defending their currency. The alternative, it seemed, was a gradual descent towards socialism and mob rule, from which foreign investors – including British banks – would suffer.

It was in this context that Mussolini appeared to be a solution in the eyes of British technocrats and liberals. On taking power in 1922, Mussolini introduced the very measures that the British officials had been demanding, securing the rights of foreign investors and cutting taxes on capital. A week after Mussolini had seized power, the British ambassador in Rome reported back that “I have the honour to report that the political events of the last week appear to have had a favourable effect on the Italian exchange”. The British liberal media were delighted, with the *Times* characterising the new fascist regime as “an anti-waste government”, and the *Economist* praising the Blackshirts’ violent oppression of political opponents (including the murder of the socialist deputy, Giacomo Matteotti) as a welcome “clean-up” of the political system. The priority was achieving economic order, and in the imagination of British elites, fascism was the

## The NS Poem

### The Mad Will Eaves

Answers are pat.  
They do not reach the mad  
At the end of long tables.  
They do not even reveal  
Who makes such ugly tables.  
Today the whole street  
Is full of knowing, but silent  
Like the inside of a mirror.  
The neighbourhood felines,  
Released from window duty,  
Exchange frank looks that say  
Without saying all they might:  
If it’s answers you’re after,  
Try better questions.

*Will Eaves is the author of five novels, two books of poetry and, most recently, a pamphlet, “Exposed Staircase” (Rack Press)*

only kind of order that Italian politics was capable of.

Any reader of *The Capital Order* will be struck by the contemporary resonances. To anyone who assumed that market-oriented technocracy dates only to the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s, this is a startlingly corrective. If it serves as a historical analogy to the events that have befallen Italy since 2009, that is surely deliberate. On the surface, Italy’s recent history has been a wrestle between technocrats and nationalists, not unlike the conflicts in Britain between Remain and Leave, or in the US between red states and blue states.

The toppling of Liz Truss, and her rapid replacement by Rishi Sunak, appeared to some liberals to herald a welcome return of “realism” after years of Brexit-based fantasies. Among Mattei’s many contributions here is an invitation to look beneath or beyond these comforting binaries, and consider the various continuities between liberal technocracy and nationalist authoritarianism. One merely needs to consider Sunak’s choice of home secretary to see that this continuity is alive and well today. ●

*William Davies is a professor of political economy at Goldsmiths, University of London*

## Reviewed in short

### All In: How We Build a Country That Works by Lisa Nandy

HarperNorth, 224pp, £16.99

There is an alternate universe in which Lisa Nandy won the 2020 Labour leadership election. For anyone wishing to imagine the kind of leader she would have been, her new book, *All In*, will help. Here, the MP draws from her own background – she grew up in Manchester with an English mother and an Indian father – and her time as shadow secretary for foreign affairs and, later, levelling up, to diagnose modern Britain's malaise.

Whatever one makes of the style, replete with typical politician anecdotes – “It was the summer of 2018 and I was on the picket line” – Nandy makes a powerful argument for rethinking politics. The reason Labour should “seek power,” she writes, “is to give it back” to communities. The fate of the individual is bound up in the whims of multinationals and far-off world leaders. She argues that a “quiet patriotism” is part of the answer, yet refuses to provide her own “blueprint for Britain”.

On occasion the book is revealing. Politics sometimes “has the unreal feeling of a charade about it”, Nandy writes. “This is why, when the rush to attend Prime Minister’s Questions begins on a Wednesday morning, almost without exception, I’m found heading in the other direction.”

By Alona Ferber

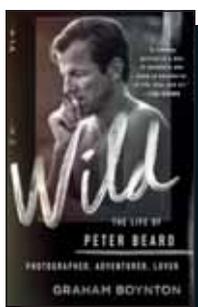
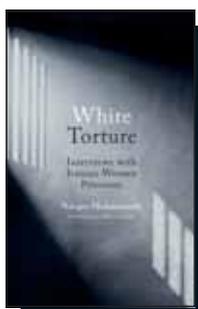
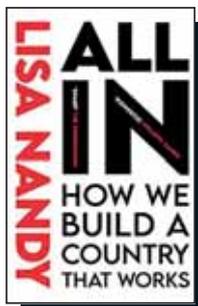
### Wild: The Life of Peter Beard by Graham Boynton

St Martin’s Press, 352pp, £27.99

Peter Beard was a man blessed. He came from American railroad money, was unfeasibly good-looking and a darling of other beautiful people, and he turned photographing African animals into an art form. Beard, who died in strange circumstances in 2020, first visited East Africa as a hunter and only later realised that the big game needed saving, although he hated the word “conservation”. Photography was his chosen method, and what elevated his prints was the addition of everything from marginalia and newspaper clippings to leaves and dried blood – often his own.

Beard’s life amounts to an unwritten Hemingway novel. He attended bull fights with Picasso and was a friend of both Andy Warhol and Salvador Dalí; he was painted by Francis Bacon and was a neighbour of Karen Blixen; his innumerable lovers included Lee Radziwill and his later wife Cheryl Tiegs; and his equally innumerable scrapes included being whipped for mistreating a poacher and being gored by an elephant. It is all a gift to a biographer, and Beard’s long-time friend Graham Boynton, a journalist raised in Zimbabwe, does justice to his preposterously full life.

By Michael Prodger



### White Torture: Interviews with Iranian Women Prisoners by Narges Mohammadi

Oneworld Publications, 272pp, £20

As civil unrest continues in Iran – prompted by the murder in September of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini by the country’s “morality police” – the regime has found increasingly savage ways to crack down on demonstrators. The personal stories compiled in *White Torture* offer an insight into the especially grim way Iranian authorities dole out punishment.

The journalist and human rights activist Narges Mohammadi has interviewed 13 women, including Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, about their experiences in Iranian prisons, where they were all subjected to solitary confinement – a monstrous practice known as “white torture”. Mohammadi is a knowledgeable interviewer: she has spent many years in prison and is currently incarcerated. The women, all of whom were jailed for political reasons, recount mentally destructive isolation, unhygienic living conditions, manipulation and harassment by male interrogators, and horrific physical abuse (including electric shocks). It makes for harrowing reading, but their stories highlight the bravery of those still demonstrating against the regime each day – many of them young women – in the hope for something better.

By Megan Gibson

### Ghost Music by An Yu

Harvill Secker, 240pp, £14.99

This novel uses an unassuming symbol to explore the meaning of life: the mushroom. In *Ghost Music*, An Yu examines loss – not only in terms of death and relationships, but also her protagonist’s dissipating sense of self. Song Yan is a young woman who gives up her lifelong ambition of becoming a concert pianist in order to marry. But her emotionally distant and frequently absent husband does not want to start a family, and she is stuck in an apartment with a mother-in-law who does not like her. She experiences an existential crisis.

Orange mushrooms appear and multiply as “ghosts” to taunt her at moments of emotional epiphany, from the horror she feels when she forgets how to play long-practised piano pieces to the pain she experiences on discovering her husband’s darkest secrets. Yu uses magic realism to infuse mystical elements into an otherwise ordinary Beijing city setting, and her symbolism is perplexing in places. Despite this, *Ghost Music* has beautiful prose and claustrophobic imagery that intensely evokes its protagonist’s alienation.

By Sarah Dawood



Empath-in-chief: Michelle Obama's forte is a gift for popularity itself

## Michelle Obama's self-help slogans

In converting her life story into self-empowering bromides, the former first lady has exposed the limits of her politics

By Lola Seaton

One of the refrains of Michelle Obama's memoir *Becoming* (2018) – which charts the former first lady's journey from her working-class origins on the South Side of Chicago to the White House, by way of Princeton, Harvard, a high-end corporate law firm (where she met Barack), and a series of executive jobs in the non-profit sector – are “four words that reliably plague even the most accomplished and powerful people I know”: *Am I good enough?*

While her husband is portrayed as a bookish dreamer full of languid self-confidence, Obama (née Robinson) presents herself as driven, industrious and fastidious: a “control freak”, “a detail person”, a “box checker” whose idea of a group holiday (she is “rigorous about friendship”) is a “boot camp” featuring multiple daily workouts, and no dessert or booze. At Princeton, Obama writes in *Becoming*, “Beneath my laid-back college-kid demeanour, I lived like a half-closeted CEO, quietly but unswervingly focused on achievement... Such is the life of a girl who can't stop wondering, *Am I good enough?* and is still trying to show herself the answer.”

In the introduction to her new book, *The Light We Carry*, Obama recalls this old inner doubt surfacing one night just before the publication of *Becoming*: “*Have I said too much? Can I pull this off?... Am I good enough?* In that moment, I had no answer except for *I don't know.*” Given the way things have turned out since that anxious evening in 2018, it seems reasonable to suppose that Obama's doubts are at least in abeyance. Her autobiography – the rights to which had reportedly been jointly bought with Barack's memoirs for \$65m – went on to sell 17 million copies worldwide, becoming one of the most sold books of all time.

In 2019 Obama packed out not bookshops or lecture halls but stadiums (an “international arena tour” is how she refers to it in the new book) in more than 30 cities across the US and Europe. The tour became the subject of a Netflix documentary (also called *Becoming*), released in 2020 (and produced by the Obamas' own media company, Higher Ground), in which you can see fans – somehow “readers” doesn't quite capture it – reduced to hysteria at book signings.

If the magnitude of Obama's stardom is difficult to overstate, it's also tricky to categorise. “Rock star, role model, world's most admired woman...”: these were among the epithets Oprah Winfrey reached for when interviewing Obama in 2020. Obama's unfixed status perhaps owes something to the amorphousness of the role that launched her celebrity. First lady of the United States – or “Flotus” – is a protean “non-job”: ambassadorial, symbolic, entailing few defined responsibilities and lacking in official authority, but an influential platform from which to champion politically uncontentious causes (children's health, girls' education, and support for military families, in Obama's case).

Obama's speciality – her “superpower”, as Winfrey puts it to her – is, in her own view, “empathy” (she loves children and famously hugged the Queen). But her forte might more accurately be described as a gift for popularity itself, or for a kind of familiar, charismatic

JOYCE N. BOGHOSIAN/THE WHITE HOUSE VIA GETTY IMAGES

public performance that made her a great asset on her husband's campaign trails. She has an ability to amplify intimacy and to project a demeanour of warm authenticity, charming even vast audiences by seeming "real", though always formidably self-possessed.

Obama has arguably been honing her life into a paradigmatic shape since entering the political spotlight with her speech at the 2008 Democratic National Convention in Denver, during which she said her story embodied the "American Dream". Obama is a gifted communicator and a practised auto-mythologiser, but not a writer and *Becoming*, though absorbing, is not a literary achievement (and not notable for its original descriptions: "the little jolt of satisfaction", "a zing of anticipation", "a pang of longing followed by a bruising wallop of inadequacy").

The book is too conspicuously collaborative – written with the help of "an incredibly gifted team", helmed by the journalist Sara Corbett – to be stylish. Obama's workaday prose is personable in a blandly impersonal way: plain, direct, sometimes folksy, in the manner of the campaign speech ("Bear with me here..."), with the occasional incursion of corporate jargon (there are frequent references to "outcomes" and "goals").

*Becoming* was lauded for its ostensible candour and "vulnerability": it covers personal topics, ranging from the trivial – Barack's irritating way of being late for dinner and leaving the butter out – to the painful: infertility, miscarriage, marriage counselling, the early death of her father, who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in his 30s. Such self-exposure created a compelling impression of ordinariness despite Obama's remarkable achievements and exceptional experiences.

**T**he *Light We Carry* codifies, with considerably greater banality, the sorts of "life lessons" that were perfectly easy to infer from *Becoming*, where the narrative was so taut and well-organised that its reminiscences acquired a kind of casual instructional force. But the instruction was less offensively platitudinous when left implicit, and not distilled in mawkish slogans ("Starting Kind", "Going High"). The vivid particulars of *Becoming* – the scratch keyed into the side of her father's beloved Buick during a visit to a predominantly white Chicago suburb – have given way to vague exhortations: "to step forward rather than back, to stand up rather than sit down, to say more rather than less".

Subtitled "Overcoming in Uncertain Times", the book's introduction sketches the *mise-en-scène* in the customary lofty clichés – "uncertain" here meaning Donald Trump, the pandemic, and "issues of injustice and instability". The first chapter ("The Power of Small") opens with a recent photograph of Obama, beneath which a caption of breathtaking bathos informs us that "Knitting has helped show me how to settle an anxious mind". The change of prefix – from "becoming" to "overcoming" – signals an unfortunate shift of genre (from memoir to self-help), and so from showing to telling. There are still anecdotes – perhaps the most diverting chapter ("Partnering Well") is an account of Obama's first visit to Barack's family in Hawaii in the

early stages of their romance. But stories are scarcer – you have to trawl through the generic disquisition on whatever bromide is being dispensed to get to one.

The new genre also entails a transformed mode of address: this is no longer the Michelle Obama of *Becoming*, emerging dazed from eight years in the "bubble of the White House" (its bulletproof windows must, apparently, always remain closed), unsure of how she would be received, reflecting on the surreal process of "becoming known". The Michelle Obama of *The Light We Carry* has seen the arenas and book sales, is deluged with letters asking for existential advice and appears comfortable with her status as all-purpose idol, offering guidance from her perch as empath-in-chief.

Notwithstanding the gestures to distinguish herself from those "high-earning, successful women" who "give off a certain effortless vibe" – "I am here to tell you that it's more complicated than this" – the candour on offer in *The Light We Carry* is mostly about what it's like at the summit: "Please know that, like everyone else, I find myself needing to overcome. Also, those heights so many of us are striving toward? I've reached a fair number of them... I can tell you that doubt, uncertainty, and unfairness live in those places, too."

In *Becoming*, Obama seems concerned with squaring personal ambitiousness with her "values" – hence her leaving corporate law for high-powered public-spirited jobs. But amid all the memoir's disclosures, there is no mention of the raw will to power that must be an ingredient in even the most altruistic of presidential aspirations. The implausible impression the book conveys is that Barack Obama stumbled across the highest office in the country as a consequence of the escalatory logic of his irrepressible optimism and his passionate wish to make an impact.

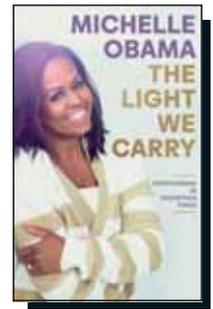
In a not dissimilar way, the self-help ethos of *The Light We Carry* conceives of one's contribution to the world and relation to others as bound up with self-care and individual progress. Obama's "toolbox" for inner resilience may be helpful, even necessary, especially when, as she writes, the "message" of the elite, white-dominated spaces she was once excluded from (at high school she was told she was not "Princeton material") is: "I don't see you as being entitled to what you've got".

Nonetheless, the attempt to hitch social concern to personal success betrays a political world-view which has no interest in "togetherness" of a more substantial kind, nor of collective power. In this world there are individuals, families, communities and our "common humanity", but people's fates are not fundamentally connected – instead they are tenuously linked via the philanthropic intentions of those at the top.

Rather than collectively shaping the world, we must each develop techniques for surviving it: "How do we adapt", stay "balanced and confident", "keep moving forward even during times of high anxiety and stress"? How, that is, do we minister to our own flames, maximising our progress and comfort in a darkening world? ●

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Lola Seaton is an associate editor at *New Left Review* and a contributing writer at the *New Statesman*



**The Light We Carry: Overcoming in Uncertain Times**  
Michelle Obama  
Viking, 336pp, £25

**There is no mention of the raw will to power that must be present in even the most altruistic of presidential aspirations**

# Why public health policy needs to refocus

Addressing the causes of unhealthy lifestyles will be a game-changer

In partnership with

**SUNTORY**  
BEVERAGE & FOOD GB&I

Amid the turbulence and political drama of recent months, there has been uncertainty around the future direction of public health policy. There have been big shifts back and forth in the UK government's efforts to help people lead healthier lifestyles, none more so than with the "anti-obesity" agenda and long-promised restrictions on food and drink that is high in fat, salt or sugar (HFSS). Plans were delayed due to the cost-of-living crisis, then the restrictions were going to be scrapped, and now it's unclear which direction the new leadership will take.

Given the current economic situation, it's understandable why clarity on the government's direction on healthier lifestyles has not yet been forthcoming, but this needs to change. Improving the health of the nation isn't just a societal priority but will help reduce economic pressures in the longer term. Today, nearly two-thirds of adults in England are overweight, with costs tied to loss of productivity and increased social care estimated to be up to £7.5bn.

That's why the *New Statesman* and Suntory Beverage and Food GB&I (SBF GB&I) – the makers of Lucozade, Ribena and Orangina – recently brought together a panel of parliamentarians, industry experts, academics, and health campaigners to debate how we can work together to encourage healthier diets and active lifestyles.

## Healthier diets

A large focus of the debate was on how to deliver reformulation, innovation and choice for consumers. SBF GB&I started reformulating its drinks back in 2013, long before the HFSS restrictions or "sugar taxes" were considered. Today, all its drinks are non-HFSS, meaning it has removed over 98bn calories and 25,000 tonnes of sugar from consumers' diets, all while matching or improving the taste. The company has launched low- and no-calorie alternatives for every brand, providing choice for consumers, and invested over £13m into its factory to bolster capacity to produce new lower-sugar drinks and brands.

This work aligns to SBF GB&I's "Growing for Good" vision of having a positive impact on the lives of its consumers. But it is also aligned with the findings from McKinsey's comprehensive 2014 report into obesity, which found that reformulation is one of the most impactful interventions available.

While industry has been making progress, there was consensus that government policy over the past decade

has not always provided the stable environment that would enable businesses to invest the time and money necessary for successful innovation and reformulation. As Nikki Pegg, research and development director of SBF GB&I, commented: “It takes a number of months, if not years, to develop a product and it gets very tricky if goalposts are changing throughout this process, especially when we’re also having to balance the needs of retailers and our consumers.”

The “on/off” approach to anti-obesity agendas has therefore created uncertainty and undermined confidence, becoming a barrier to further progress. It was noted that governments send mixed signals by seeking to encourage reformulation and innovation through policies but failing to publicly support the tools required for such work, including sweeteners, which are thoroughly tested and confirmed as safe by regulatory authorities around the world.

It was agreed more could be done to support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), as they often have neither the time nor financial resources to reformulate. One participant referenced the Scottish Government’s Reformulation for Health programme, which has helped SME food companies reformulate their products since 2019. If mirrored by the UK government, this programme has the potential to improve diet and health across the whole nation.

Finally, there was consensus that industry needs clear targets for reformulation. The introduction of the 2004/05 Nutrient Profiling Model (NPM), which categorises food and drink that is HFSS, was welcomed as it gave industry a clear goal and one which is now widely used. It was agreed that realistic and stable targets are needed to incentivise businesses to invest time and resources into developing healthier product lines. Most believed that all UK nations should continue to use the current NPM, with concerns raised that divergence among the devolved nations could create supply chain complexity and potential costs for consumers.

### Promoting sport and physical activity

Alongside discussing diets, participants agreed that innovation from manufacturers needs to be accompanied by wider measures, such as promoting physical activity. Indeed, recent YouGov polling released at the debate found 69 per cent of MPs believe sport and physical activity are the most important ways to encourage healthier lifestyles.



**Parliamentarians, industry representatives and academics met in parliament to discuss how best to encourage healthier lifestyles**

This is an approach already adopted by SBF GB&I – a £30m investment into its “Made to Move” campaign resulted in 1.5 million people across the UK doing more activity over three years. Company representatives also outlined how they leverage the power of the Lucozade Sport brand, the 15th most culturally relevant sports brand in the world (Fan Intelligence Index, 2019), to help unlock potential including by growing women’s football, and being the London Marathon’s longest-serving incumbent partner.

Participants reflected on physical activity levels, which are lowest in the most deprived communities. There was a call for government to identify and address the societal challenges and inequalities that currently limit people’s ability to be active.

Born Barikor, founder and CEO of community exercise organisation Our Parks – which is sponsored by Lucozade Sport – raised the importance of understanding exactly what it means to be “active” or “inactive”, acknowledging the variation in definitions. He suggested an easily understandable, universal system should be introduced, akin to the “five a day” target for fruit and vegetables, and this was met with agreement.

Participants also discussed how physical activity is often treated as a mechanism to address obesity,

neglecting its overall role in good health and mental well-being. The need to recognise these alternative benefits was emphasised, with some participants calling for a renewed focus on “establishing and maintaining a healthy lifestyle”. This was presented as an alternative view for the government to adopt when approaching health policy.

Ending the session, participants reiterated their calls for a shift in policy focus from “obesity” to “healthier lifestyles”, and a need to address causes not consequences. As Carol Robert, chief operating officer at SBF GB&I, concluded, while there is no silver bullet for encouraging better health, “there is a genuine opportunity for both business and government to think about the wider equation, which includes both diet and active lifestyles”. ●

*Attendees at the roundtable discussion included: Carol Robert, chief operating officer, SBF GB&I; Nikki Pegg, research and development director, SBF GB&I; Born Barikor, CEO, Our Parks; Lord Bethell, former minister for innovation; Dr Adam Briggs, senior policy fellow, The Health Foundation; Tom Burton, national partnership lead (health and inequality), Sports England; Kate Halliwell, chief scientific officer, Food and Drink Federation; Dr Dolly Theis, visiting researcher, MRC Epidemiology Unit*

## Taking the sex out of #MeToo

*She Said* has no answers for Hollywood's sexual abuse problem. It's too afraid to ask the right questions

By Ann Manov

One sweltering Friday in New York, the summer I was editing the catalogue of a so-called anti-woke film festival, I was trying to persuade a producer to let us run his films. Doors were slamming in my face, this one included: the producer declined the invitation. But he liked *me*, he continued: if it was just *me* running the festival, he'd run the films in a heartbeat. In fact, he asked, would I like to be assistant producer on his new film? This was a major project: it had been discussed in industry publications and the lead had more than ten million Instagram followers. And I wasn't just going to be fetching coffee, I was assured: this was a serious opportunity. I was thrilled.

I can't tell you, however, exactly what an assistant producer does, as when I texted the producer to ask what time I should arrive to the office on Monday, he replied saying it was of the utmost importance that I be dressed appropriately. I could confirm this by sending him pictures of myself, I read in one blue text bubble after another. White panties, a thigh-scraping skirt and a crisp, tight button-down shirt. If not, I'd have to submit to the appropriate discipline. (He had been to Catholic school, he explained.) My efforts to avoid that one, predictably, ended in a freeze-out.

This was not, of course, the first time something like this had happened to me. I look back with horror at the debating coaches who encouraged me to flirt with judges when I was a teenager, or the respected artist who, under the guise of helping edit my film, invited me to the Manhattan townhouse he shared with his in-the-Hamptons wife, before insulting me viciously. And yet, with almost astounding speed, the schoolgirl incident infected everything I did in film.

**With #MeToo under attack, it feels myopic to watch two pretty stars with perfect shag haircuts discuss fact-checking**

I was surprised by my own inability to function. I began to break down in tears in front of even those I was working with. I was angry at the producer and a gaggle of friends who, I imagined, must have known; I was ashamed of myself for seeming to be merely a girl "like that" and for thinking I had been anything more. Any recognition I had ever received was now suspect, and I could only imagine the gossip.

When I cried, some people – women included – asked me if I was sure it had really happened (I was, as this married man had inexplicably committed his thoughts to text) and if the producer would have ever given me the time of day had I not been a young woman. So here's a punchline: I worked for the anti-#MeToo film festival, and all I got was sexually harassed by a producer.

This producer was far from a big shot, no Harvey Weinstein. But do people still want to hear about Weinstein? Despite the inescapable ads for the \$32m movie *She Said* (they are all over buses and subway stations in New York, and all over my internet browser), the film, which chronicles how the *New York Times* brought Weinstein's sexual crimes to light, is bombing at the box office. The cinema I saw it in contained only three people. But I don't think overexposure to this particular story explains why the film offers little insight into an experience that I, and so many women in the arts, have had. Instead, the reason is its anodyne, undramatic, complacent preaching to the choir. The story of sexual abuse in Hollywood was about young actresses: charismatic and seemingly untouchable, but always one misstep from disaster. This film is about professionally adept female journalists, their triumph already a given, their travails insultingly trivial.

The reviews of the film, based on the book by Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey (played here by Zoe Kazan and Carey Mulligan), are generally positive – it is a *New York Times* critic's pick – but is that surprising? As I sat, it dawned on me what is so bizarre about *She Said*: its director, Maria Schrader, took the revelation that the most esteemed company in the most glamorous industry in the world had, for decades, sanctioned the rape of the most beautiful women in the world, who had, for decades, kept silent about it – and she decided to make a film about how great the *New York Times* is?

Who, besides professional journalists, would ever see this film? Five years after those horrific revelations, pop culture is clearly veering into backlash: take HBO's *Industry*, with its oh-so-"nuanced" #MeToo subplot, and more recently, *Tár*, the paint-by-numbers prestige flick that, like *Industry*, uses abusive women to acceptably "challenge the narrative" and "complicate" things. And, of course, there's that festival I mentioned.

With #MeToo so under attack, it seems myopic to watch two pretty stars with perfect shag haircuts and overpriced workwear discuss the importance of fact-checking. We're mechanically told several times how bad non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) are, but we never experience their emotional impact directly. For all *She Said* employs crescendo strings, it is not a thriller: there is not one moment of tension (we all know how this story ends) or fear. What are the "stakes", you



ask? The leads worry Ronan Farrow's *New Yorker* article will come out first. With respect: are you kidding me?

**V**ariety has opined that audiences aren't ready for the film's "searing look at an abuse of power". In fact, it is pitifully timid. It is so wimpy, so afraid of confrontation, that when Weinstein's character finally shows up to the office to yell at the journalists, Schrader pulls away: Weinstein's dialogue fades into the soundtrack, only the back of his head visible as the camera zooms into a soft focus on Carey Mulligan's daydreamy expression. But wouldn't a "searing look at an abuse of power" let us hear the bad words – the defence? This is not edifying: it is evasive.

It is evasive of a real and difficult story: the first-hand experiences of any individual involved. Set aside that these experiences are presented in *She Said* in a sanitised form, two decades after the fact, told to a reporter through a Zoom screen. Try to imagine, instead, the multiple impulses at work in the young woman at the moment of the knee-touch, the hair-tousle, the keycard at the hotel room door. Why does she want to be in film? How is she aware of using her beauty? How much of her sexualisation excites her – when does it begin to disgust

**Behind the times: Carey Mulligan and Zoe Kazan as the journalists who helped bring down Harvey Weinstein**

her, and why? And after that – why do some people speak and others stay silent? Why do some forge ahead and others collapse? What, actually, is the experience of a sexy young woman being sexually harassed?

This is the key question. It is also one that people have barely begun to ask, despite the commended efforts of *New York Times* journalists. On the liberal left, the complexity of harassment is reduced to sudden attacks by hideous men. On the reactionary right, it's reduced to calculating jezebels entrapping decent men to get what they want. No one, it seems, is willing to really think about sex: its terrible importance to art; its split-second shift from dream to ordeal; the way beautiful young women breathe by it and choke by it. In *She Said*, Schrader has taken the sex out of #MeToo.

Perhaps a conscientious Hillary Clinton donor will dutifully watch this humourless, tepid, cowardly film and be confirmed in his or her every opinion. But for everyone else – those who feel torn between the sanitised sanctimony of the left and the cruelty of the patriarchy, who sense sex all around them with its appalling impositions – the film makes #MeToo, feminism and even journalism merely a tedious, box-ticking snooze. ●

## The women who shaped modernism

A formidable group of artists brought new perspectives to 20th-century German art

By Michael Prodger

The men-first attitude prevalent in art in the early 20th century was encapsulated in the career of Marianne Werefkin. She was born in Russia in 1860 and, as the daughter of a distinguished military official, inhabited the upper echelons of society. Nevertheless, she trained as a painter with Ilya Repin, the leading artist practising there at the time, and won the nickname “the Russian Rembrandt”. In 1892 she met another painter, Alexej von Jawlensky, and a few years later they moved to Munich. On arrival in Germany, however, Werefkin suddenly stopped painting. She put her work aside and dedicated herself – and her finances – to furthering Jawlensky’s career. He was the important one. It was a decade before she started painting for herself again.

Being a woman painter at the time, even a privileged one such as Werefkin, meant overcoming difficulties their male peers did not have to confront. Husbands, lovers and children vied for attention; many of Europe’s painting academies – especially the life classes – were closed to women; exhibition opportunities were limited; collectors were wary.

“Making Modernism”, a wonderfully enlightening show at the Royal Academy, looks at a group of female painters who nevertheless forged independent careers and made a distinctive contribution to the development of modern art in Germany in the first decades of the century. The exhibition concentrates on four women in particular who were associated with expressionism: Werefkin, Paula Modersohn-Becker, Gabriele Münter and Käthe Kollwitz. All are rare sightings in this country and most of the 68 works on show have never been seen here before. It is a revealing exhibition, and not just for the novelty of the exhibits.

**Making Modernism**  
Royal Academy,  
London W1  
Runs until 12  
February 2023

These artists did not try to emphasise the fact that they were women and took on many of the same subjects as their male equivalents, such as self-portraits (which Kollwitz called “a visual form of soliloquy”), still lifes, interior scenes and city life. Through them, a women’s-eye perspective of the world gradually emerged.

Münter’s interiors don’t only show what was traditionally the female realm but include vivid portraits of fellow artists such as Wassily Kandinsky (her fiancé) and Paul Klee. The men are at their ease or in lively conversation – these are images of life and art as a shared enterprise. So too are Modersohn-Becker’s still lifes, such as one dated 1906 and showing oranges and a bowl of goldfish. It is not simply a set piece but a reaction to Cézanne, just as her *Nude Girl with Flower Vases* from the following year is a reaction to Gauguin.

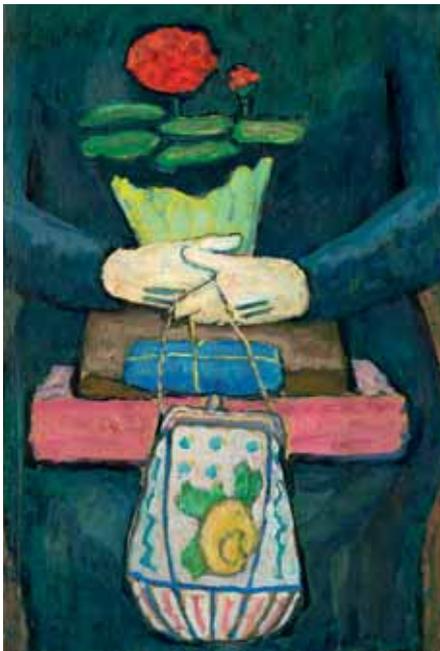
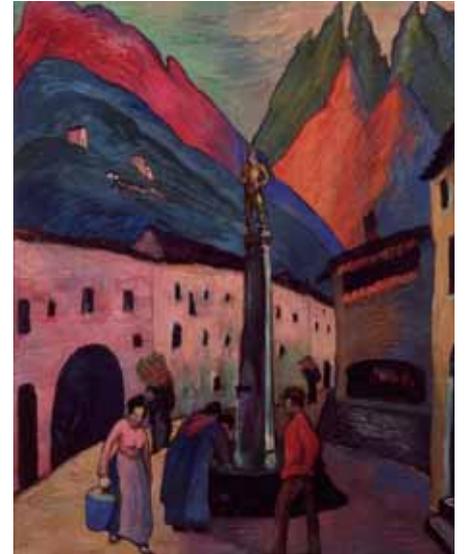
If these demonstrated that the women were au fait with avant-garde art in Paris they also revealed a willingness to engage pictorially with modern life itself. In 1912, for example, Münter, a keen photographer, painted a close-cropped pile of shopping in the lap of a woman on a tram and later the portrait of an unnamed black woman, part of the increasing racial mixture in Germany’s cities at the time. Werefkin showed a circus ring being prepared for a performance and the drudgery of women walking home heavily burdened along a gaslit street in Vilnius.

Where Kollwitz and Modersohn-Becker were noticeably different from the men, however, was in their portrayals of the female body and infants. In 1906, Modersohn-Becker started painting nude self-portraits, the first by a woman in Western art, and in doing so wrenched the old genre away from the male gaze. When she added children, as in *Mother with Child on Her Arm, Nude II* (1906), she updated the Madonna and child genre too. She stands unapologetically monumental; her melding of the unidealised body and the maternal is deeply affecting and transmits the physical and emotional experience of motherhood in a way no man could.

This was also the time when there was a new focus on children, not least in the writings of Sigmund Freud, and Modersohn-Becker made a series of works showing infants not as autonomous creatures but as vulnerable and dependent – cradled, suckling or, in the case of a naked three-year-old girl seated with her legs pulled defensively up, profoundly apprehensive.

It was Kollwitz, though, who best transmitted the love and sometimes grief of being a mother. She was a committed socialist who painted working women not, she said, out of compassion but because she found something in their lives “beautiful”. Traditional beauty is nevertheless rare in her large etchings, drawings and woodcuts. What is there is the fierceness of love and loss: a woman rocks in bestial agony at the death of her child, another holds her baby in all-consuming protection, even her lovers cling together in desperation.

Modernism was about confronting the uncomfortable, too, and this exhibition demonstrates that all these women did that, each in their own way – but none as viscerally as Käthe Kollwitz. ●



Clockwise from top left: Käthe Kollwitz, *Woman with Dead Child*, 1903; Marianne Werefkin, *The Contrasts*, 1919; Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Mother with Child on her Arm, Nude II*, 1906; Gabriele Münter, *Still Life on the Tram (After Shopping)*, circa 1912

© KÄTHE KOLLWITZ MUSEUM KÖLN, MUNICIPALITY OF ASCONA, MUSEO COMUNALE D'ARTE MODERNA, MUSEUM OSTWALL IM DORTMUNDER U. PHOTO: JURGEN SPILER, DORTMUND, DACS

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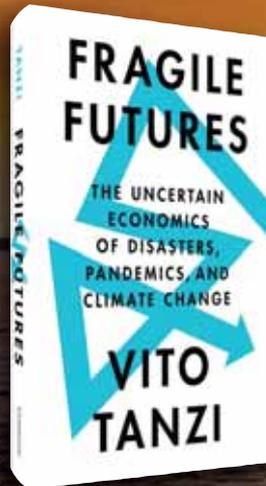


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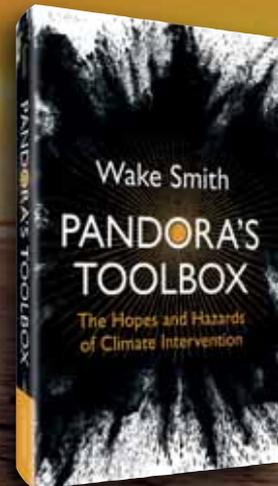


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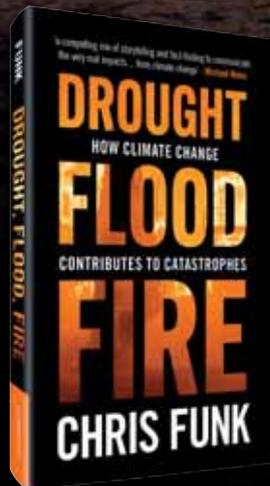


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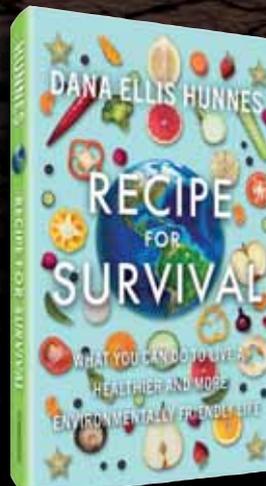


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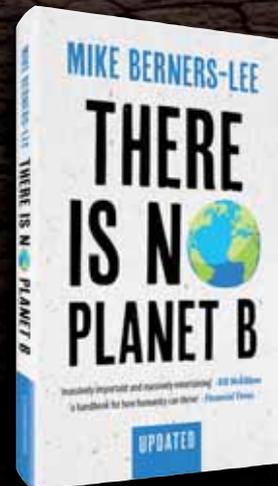


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# Film

## A billionaire's murder mystery

In this *Knives Out* sequel, “disruptors” gather mid-pandemic on the private island of a Musk-style tech bro

By Ryan Gilbey

The larky comic thriller *Knives Out*, released at the end of 2019, allowed Daniel Craig, as the Southern-fried gumshoe Benoit Blanc, to be goofy in the way that James Bonds often are when they're playing hooky from the day job. The film begins with the murder of a novelist who refused to allow his books to be adapted. The dead man's son complains that he even sent Netflix packing – but the director Rian Johnson has not followed that example. After the original picture made more than \$310m, the streaming platform slapped down \$465m for two sequels.

What distinguished the first movie was its success in mixing contemporary commentary on the US under Trump with an old-fashioned, corkscrew-shaped plot. The new instalment, *Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery*, has little of the first one's catty interplay between its characters, but it couldn't be any more topical. The story involves a billionaire tech bro and self-described “disruptor”, Miles Bron (Edward Norton), who has more than a whiff of Elon Musk about him, while the climax features environmental catastrophe and attacks on priceless works of art. Conspiracy theorists might wonder if Netflix has manipulated the recent news cycle purely to plug the film.

Bron has invited four fellow disruptors – a Connecticut governor (Kathryn Hahn), a “men's rights” YouTuber (Dave Bautista), a scientist



NETFLIX

On Craig's list: everyone's a suspect in Rian Johnson's wealth-skewering whodunnit

◀ (Leslie Odom Jr) and a supermodel-turned-entrepreneur (Kate Hudson) – to a murder mystery weekend on his private Greek island in the early months of the Covid pandemic. The victim, Bron announces, will be him, and it's up to his guests to determine the guilty party, all while admiring his opulent mansion with its robot porters, Matisse in the bathroom, and *Mona Lisa* on loan from the Louvre.

There are two surprising attendees: Bron's ex-business partner, Cassandra (Janelle Monáe), stiffed by Bron in a court battle, and Blanc, who received his invitation from an unknown source. This time around, we learn that the debonair detective has a romantic partner back at home: it's a male voice (Surprise Guest Star alert!) that calls to him as he soaks in the tub in his swish Manhattan apartment. It is here that he complains to friends on Zoom that he needs another big case to sink his teeth into. Not just any friends, mind. These include the late Angela Lansbury and Stephen Sondheim, to whom the film is dedicated as well as indebted; *Glass Onion* wouldn't be what it is without *Murder, She Wrote* or *The Last of Sheila*, the camp, sun-kissed 1973 whodunnit that Sondheim co-wrote with Anthony Perkins.

It's all a jolly cake-walk for Craig, who dons a dandy new neckerchief in every other scene and shouts "shitballs!" when injured – very un-Bond. As ever, Blanc's role is ultimately to facilitate redress for an overlooked or exploited woman. In the first film, that was the murder victim's devoted nurse, played by Ana de Armas. (She went on to upstage Craig in *No Time to Die*. How's that for gratitude?) Now it is Cassandra, swindled out of credit for Bron's innovations, and spoiling for revenge.

Among the other guests, Hudson is a riot as the dim-bulb ditz prone to face-palm moments, such as dressing as Beyoncé ("It was meant as a tribute") or comparing herself to Harriet Tubman ("In spirit!"). When she boasts about having "no filter", Blanc gives her a ticking-off: "It's a dangerous thing to mistake speaking without thought for speaking the truth."

The movie contains lots of these on-the-nose digs at internet-era narcissism and moral bankruptcy, as well as bits and bobs of ideas that don't lead anywhere. It seems odd to borrow the title from the Beatles song, and even to show Bron strumming "Blackbird", also from the band's *White Album*, and not to draw the rest of the soundtrack from the same collection, especially when "Piggies" or "Happiness Is a Warm Gun" would have been so pertinent.

*Glass Onion* still has the edge over the year's other whodunnits (including *See How They Run* and *Bodies Bodies Bodies*), if only because of the sublime Monáe, whose character reveals complex motives at the halfway point. Then again, a single close-up of her offers intrigue enough. The plot feels cursory in comparison – there is no mystery greater than what she might be thinking. ●

"*Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery*" is in cinemas now, and on Netflix from 23 December

# Television

## Cricket whites in the Wild West

By Rachel Cooke

### The English

BBC Two,  
1 December, 9pm;  
now on catch-up

It's hard to know quite what to say about Hugo Blick's new drama *The English*. Three episodes in and I'm still in a state of slack-jawed awe. My God. What *does* it look like? Nothing I saw at the National Gallery's Winslow Homer show came even close to these prairies and skies, vast bands of yellow and navy that stretch as far as the eye can see. However gently the grass whispers, there's no lullaby in it – unless you're talking about the longest sleep of all.

In Blick's hands, the American West is a boundless graveyard, literally and metaphorically. Wooden crosses mark the spot where someone lies beneath, people snuffed out here as quickly as candles. But they also point to the future, to a place where adequate reparation for crimes against both people and land will be far beyond possible. If Blick (*The Honourable Woman*, *Black Earth Rising*) wants to give us an exciting adventure, he has also written an origin story of sorts.

Is *The English* a masterpiece? I'm not sure. But it's certainly like nothing else I've ever seen, its script



Get your gun: Emily Blunt as Cornelia Locke, who is looking for her son's killer

DRAMA REPUBLIC/BBC/AMAZON STUDIOS

a perfect illustration of the maxim that an artist does not need to be credible if he is convincing (we are far too involved to care about implausibilities).

The action begins in 1890, when an English woman, Lady Cornelia Locke (Emily Blunt), pitches up in Oklahoma in search of the man who murdered her son. In possession of large amounts of hard cash, naturally she's soon surrounded by bandits and murderers, brutes who are provoked not only by her looks and her independence, but by her sudden, unwarranted kindness to a man called Eli Whipp (Chaske Spencer), a former US army cavalry scout and a member of the Pawnee Nation, who is on his way to claim a few acres in Nebraska. Somehow, though, Whipp rescues her, and together they begin the ride north: a double act 100 times more unlikely than the Lone Ranger and Tonto.

What happens next? Everything! Blick's plotting is intricate, his feeling for suspense extreme. The series comes with a stylised violence I find both compelling and hard to watch. Danger lurks everywhere, and comes in every possible human form: in the West, everyone's out for themselves. Here is a potty-mouthed Welsh woman with no eyelids, and here is an English aristocrat bearing a rudely aborted calf. Here are guns, blowpipes and bows and arrows, and here are scalpings, lynchings and drownings.

I feel I should warn latecomers about an early scene in which a crook called Richard Watts (Ciarán Hinds) eats some prairie oysters (aka bullocks' testicles), his jaw grinding away suggestively at their horrible softness. But even that was not half so startling as the scene in which a group of English men played cricket in their whites and blue caps on a plain somewhere in Kansas. One never thinks of what the settlers, whether German, Swedish or English, might have brought with them to the US, save (perhaps) for their Bibles. Will Eli get the land that he is owed for his army service? Will Cornelia find the killer of her child? And what might their strange partnership eventually become? I want, quite desperately, to know the answers to these and other questions.

Blick, who also directs, gives us so much to admire. It's marvellous, the way he riffs topsy-turvily on the films some of us grew up watching – I thought occasionally of *Shane*, the classic from 1953 starring Alan Ladd that was a favourite of my father's – and he has drawn such fine performances from his actors. I will admit to being uncertain about Blunt's voice, which sounds peculiar and jarringly anachronistic to me, but I love her way with a gun, which she fires fiercely, only for the tears to come when she hits her target. Even Stephen Rea, an actor I can't usually abide, puts in a decent turn as the sheriff of a town so nascent it looks like scenery flats on a studio lot.

But it's Spencer who's the real star of the piece. He is amazing: so still and quiet and controlled. What charisma. Impossible to take your eyes off him. There's poetry in his every monosyllable. "Huh," he'll say, and it might as well be Shakespeare. ●

# Radio

## A maritime lullaby

By Rachel Cunliffe

**The Sleeping Forecast**  
BBC Sounds

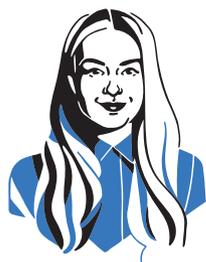
**T**his column will be a little different to normal – but I promise you, it is worth it. Rather than review an upcoming programme or recent podcast, I am going to tell you about something that has been on BBC Sounds for over two years but which, if the reaction when I shared it on Twitter is anything to go by, so many people have yet to discover. It is called *The Sleeping Forecast*, and it is the most soothing thing I have ever listened to.

The concept (as the title suggests) is a play on *The Shipping Forecast*, which needs no introduction. For nearly a century on the BBC this "lyrical weather report" has been keeping seafarers safe and enchanting listeners who have no ties to the ocean but are nonetheless calmed by the poetic litany of mystical sounding places – Faeroes, South Utsire, Cromarty, German Bight. My mother always said it helped her drift off – it seems she wasn't alone. For in June 2020 someone at the BBC had the genius idea of asking Radio 4 announcer Neil Nunes, who has the most beautiful and reassuring voice imaginable, to recite snippets of this distinctive maritime forecast over classical music in hour-long episodes. It is exquisitely soporific. I'm feeling relaxed just thinking about it.

I love the idea that something intended for a very specific nautical audience has become part of our collective psyche, a unique and cherished institution that has lulled generations of insomniac Brits to sleep. And now the words first used to warn sailors of storms have been taken entirely out of context to provide a very different kind of lifeline to an anxious nation. One day, perhaps, ships will be captained by artificial intelligence and there will be no need for announcers solemnly to tell us some mysterious force is "veering north-westerly" and "losing its identity". But whether you prefer the original or *The Sleeping Forecast's* wildly popular musical remix, I think many of us will still be falling asleep to the prayer-like incantation of "rain or thundery showers, moderate or good, occasionally poor". ●

**Something intended for a nautical audience has become a cherished part of our collective psyche**

## Deleted Scenes



**Pippa Bailey**

### What Charles and Camilla's dirty phone call taught us about the English language

Critics seem to be sad that *The Crown* has become a soap opera, trading stockings and clipped vowels for divorce lawyers and toe-sucking. But I am rather happy for the entire monarchic edifice to look as silly as possible, in the hope that it might hasten its demise. I, of course, believe in the fundamental right of the individual to have phone sex without it being recorded and broadcast to the world, but you try reading the Tampongate transcript and then tell me you still believe in the divine right of kings.

On watching episode five of the new series, however, I was less concerned by Charles' longing to live inside Camilla's trousers and more concerned by the earlier, entirely innocent portion of their conversation. (For those unfamiliar with this particular piece of tabloid-fodder, in 1993 the *Sunday Mirror* published the transcript of a sordid call between our now King and Queen consort from December 1989, when both were married to other people; I'll leave you to google the exchange and discover what tampons have to do with anything.) In Peter Morgan's creation, the pretext for the call is that

Charles wants to run past Camilla a speech he is due to give in Oxford – subject: “the teaching of the English language in schools”. It was this that caught my ear.

“It is quite astounding,” Dominic West's Charles recites, “to think that in England we have produced one of the world's most beautiful languages. However, the rate at which that language is deteriorating has become a cause for concern... The rot begins in the very institutions whose duty it is to preserve our proud linguistic and cultural heritage.”

“I think it's brilliant,” Camilla (as played by Olivia Williams) squeals. “I think you could go further: our language is like an endangered species, it needs to be protected. It's a scandal the way we're letting it be slaughtered.”

*The Crown's* imagining is not so far from a very real speech that the then Prince of Wales gave on 19 December 1989 at the presentation of the Thomas Cranmer Schools Prize. He lamented that English had become “so impoverished, so sloppy and so limited – that we have arrived at such a dismal wasteland of banality, cliché and casual obscenity”.

Charles was certainly not alone in his

wish for linguistic purism, for “proper” English to be protected and preserved – though he was perhaps a little late to the idea. Thomas Jefferson observed in a letter in 1825 that: “I learn... with great pleasure, that a taste is reviving in England for the recovery of the Anglo-Saxon dialect.” Charles Dickens stressed his fondness for the Germanic: “Let [an Englishman] write Saxon, and the Saxons understand him,” he wrote. Among his advice for writing well in *Politics and the English Language*, George Orwell expresses his dislike of the overreliance on loan words from Latin and Greek.

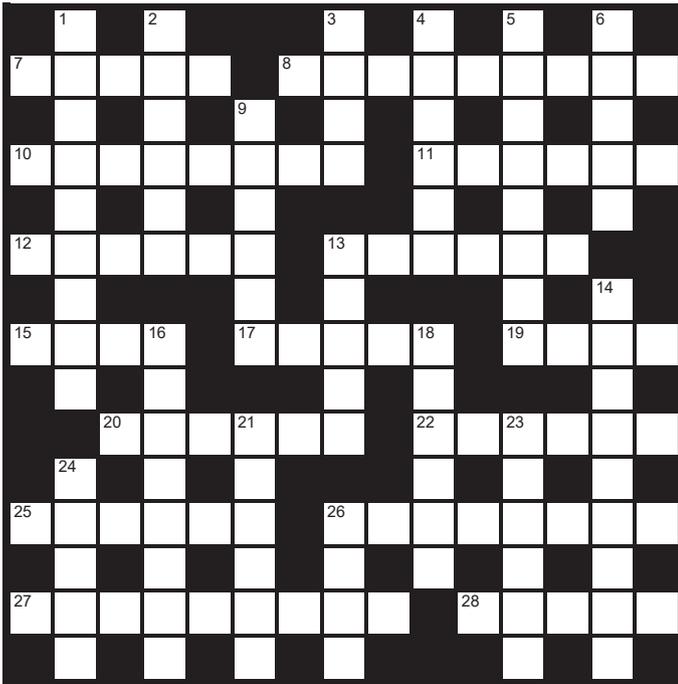
But the English language has long been a shapeshifter, fashioned and recast by centuries of invasion, expedition and empire. The UK has no academy of language, such as exists in France and Italy, to decide on the borders of English – what's in and what's out. Even the Teutonically inspired Old English the Victorian purists considered to be true English had itself displaced the Celtic languages originally spoken by the Britons. And who's going to tell Dickens that the Saxons were not a single entity, but a cultural group that emerged gradually through stop-start conquering and assimilation, blended and messy – just as “the English” are.

“Complaints that young people cannot write grammatically, spell accurately or express themselves clearly can be found stretching back into the last century,” Charles said at the Cranmer ceremony – neatly undermining himself. Complaints of his kind *do* stretch back – far enough, in fact, that they were no doubt made by the Prince of Wales's elders about his own generation. As the editor of the Oxford English Dictionary, James Murray, once pondered: “At which Englishman's speech does English terminate?” Perhaps Charles would have answered: the Prince's English.

I thought of our King recently when I heard *Countdown's* Susie Dent describe the English language as a “democracy”. She was speaking at an Oxford University Press word of the year announcement – only this year it hasn't chosen one, leaving it up to the public to vote between three options: “metaverse” (in use since 1992 but made more popular of late by Mark Zuckerberg's legless world), “#Istandwith” (which spiked around the invasion of Ukraine, though “to stand with” dates back to the 1300s) and “goblin mode” (“behaviour that is unapologetically self-indulgent”). You have until 5 December to vote, Your Highness. ●

MARTA SIGNORI

## The NS Cryptic Crossword 609: by Anorak



### Across

- 7 Coffee taken from middle of tray (5)  
 8 Sailor dispatched to look up those not present (9)  
 10 Dissertation with changes to last two part of peace agreements (8)  
 11 Rachel perhaps revealed her assistant (6)  
 12 It's "short in duration", and made from real ice, out east (6)  
 13 Very small amount of time? (6)  
 15 Wide-awake displaying brainwave (4)  
 17 Finally arriving in Stone, a Midlands town (5)  
 19 Small shire and bullock working (4)  
 20 Car attendant (6)  
 22 Declining renovation of Big Ben (6)  
 25 Town in 19 said to provide brown pigment (6)  
 26 Sweet-smelling tree – old and new varieties (8)  
 27 Cunning plot for making very large pies rise (9)  
 28 Leave nothing but capital (5)

### Down

- 1 Defend author sheltering dishonourable fellow (9)  
 2 A floosie's upset rock bands (6)  
 3 Instrument that's not broken evenly (4)  
 4 Enclosure housing a male bird (6)  
 5 Weapon, badly lit, during fight (8)  
 6 Tory leader involved in payments for honours (5)  
 9 Driver's aid is a red top (6)  
 13 Possible power? (5)  
 14 lbs0h reveals old paper money (5,4)  
 16 Dog Latin, as a translation (8)  
 18 Gives in and gives out (6)  
 21 Like certain cricket matches some time in the future (3,3)  
 23 "Oh! be quiet and clunk click!" (4,2)  
 24 Pool equipment, extremely tacky (5)  
 26 Regrets French ways (4)

### Answers to crossword 608 of 18 November 2022

Across 1) Astounding 6) Onus 9) Ungodly 10) Tactile 12) Refractory 13) Ail 15) Almaty 16) Seraglio 18) Ravenous 20) Disown 23) Nut 24) Incomplete 26) Mr Right 27) Aintren 28) Cant 29) Alpenstock Down 1) Abut 2) Tag team 3) Understanding 4) Dry ice 5) Nitrogen 7) Naipaul 8) Spellbound 11) Cayman Islands 14) Patronymic 17) Muscatel 19) Veteran 21) Ontario 22) Impale 25) Seek

## Subscriber of the Week: Colin Richards

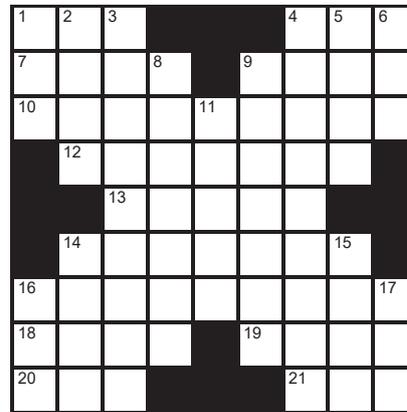
*What do you do?*  
Retired school inspector and academic; old fart but never knowingly boring.  
*Where do you live?*  
The Lake District.  
*Do you vote?*  
Yes, but never for a party on the right.  
*How long have you been a subscriber?*  
Only four months, but now totally converted.  
*What made you start?*  
I read a retweeted article.  
*Is the NS bug in the family?*  
No. I'll keep working on them.  
*What pages do you flick to first?*  
The front cover.  
*How do you read yours?*  
Page by page.



*What would you like to see more of in the NS?*  
More on education and even more cartoons.  
*Who are your favourite NS writers?*  
David Gauke and Andrew Marr.  
*Who would you put on the cover of the NS?*  
Mo Mowlam, in memoriam.  
*With which political figure would you least like to be stuck in a lift?*  
Michael Fabricant.  
*All-time favourite NS article?*  
An even more difficult choice than those now facing the opposition.  
*The New Statesman is...*  
a healthy dose of cautious political optimism.

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

## The NS Crossword In Brief 58: by Brendan Emmett Quigley



### Answers to crossword 57 of 18 November 2022

Across 1) Judo 5) I can 9) Anon 10) Bode 11) Midsummer 13) Den 14) Elf 15) Lettuce 17) Eur 18) IRL 19) Trillions 23) Tiny 24) Asia 25) Edge 26) Held Down 1) Jam 2) Uni 3) Doddering 4) Onset 5) IBM 6) Come close 7) Adele 8) Nerf 12) Until 15) Lurid 16) Uriah 17) Ette 20) Lye 21) Nil 22) Sad

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

### Across

- 1 Radio 1 fodder  
 4 Hit Cairngorm, say  
 7 "Too bad"  
 9 BSC Young Boys' city  
 10 Where Björk was born  
 12 Mourns  
 13 Statesman Sadat  
 14 \_\_\_ water  
 16 Wimbledon boundaries  
 18 Looked over  
 19 Spots on the face  
 20 Natural \_\_\_  
 21 "When RU gettin' here?"

### Down

- 1 Average at St Andrews  
 2 Russian oligarch Deripaska  
 3 They pack on the pounds  
 4 TV show set in Kier, PE  
 5 Kardashian matriarch  
 6 Printing need  
 8 Removed the peel  
 9 Munich's state  
 11 Stone  
 14 *Little Women* actress Hawke  
 15 Easter predecessor  
 16 Make an appeal  
 17 Irish \_\_\_

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## Down and Out

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**Nicholas Lezard**

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### The Chancellor takes me back to 2013, Watership Down and being in love

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I write this on the day of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's Autumn Statement, as a result of which living standards are predicted to drop by 7 per cent. I wonder: is this across the board, or will there be wide variations, as with the effects of climate change? I heard on the Radio 4 news, helpfully, that in growth terms we are being taken back to 2013. I'll return to this.

A 7 per cent drop in living standards doesn't sound good. It means a significant drop in wine consumption, for a start. I could make a joke about 7 per cent of sod-all still being sod-all, but I don't have sod-all and it's no use pretending I do. Certain expenditures are tricky, and fall into the "I'll put it off" category. The most pressing item is a haircut. I really think I could do with one, and have thought this for three weeks. Eventually, the state of the barnet will become untenable, like it did in lockdown when my sideburns crept into my peripheral vision, but for the moment it's an extravagance I will have to do without. A haircut in this town costs £15 and that's two bottles of wine. Can I do without two bottles of wine? I suppose it's possible in theory, but then how to deal with the boredom and screaming existential anguish

that comes with sobriety? The screaming still happens after or during drinking, but it's muffled, as if in a box.

Meanwhile, 2013... "Ah, no; the years O!/  
How the sick leaves reel down in throngs!" as Hardy put it in one of his cheery little poems. But 2013 – that was all right. I could live in 2013 again. I had a girlfriend, who was lovely. We were even living together, and one winter I read the whole of *Watership Down* to her at bedtime. It took a while because she would drop off after a page or two, and it's not really a short book. It became something of a running joke. "OK, where were we?" I'd ask. "They've decided to leave the warren," she'd say, every time, and that's on about page 12. (I defer to no one in my love for *Watership Down*, and was once honoured to write the introduction to the Penguin Modern Classics edition, where I got to write what is still the sentence I am proudest of, despite having written professionally for 37 years: "This book is, inescapably, about rabbits." The other one bit of writing I'm proudest of is typing "Bleak Mouse" by accident in the first draft of a Folio Society catalogue; it survived until final proofs. So close!)

Another thing about 2013 is that I was earning twice as much then, because I still had a column in the *Guardian*. How could I have ever had the brass neck to complain about being broke in those days? Surely I was living like a king? But no; even with the income of my Beloved, who had an actual job, we would find ourselves bumping up hard against the last week of each month. But not like now. Now is a kind of joke.

I had a taste of former glory the other day, when my friend Sam took me to lunch at Beach House in Brighton. Sam gets a full namecheck rather than the traditional initial followed by an em-dash, for she edits the excellent magazine *Silver*, which is, as far as I can gather, a magazine for people of a Certain Age who are not yet ready to take up bowls or knitting (yes, yes, I know knitting is for young people these days. My daughter used to do it, and my friend D—, who is 23 years younger than me, is taking hers with her for a weekend away. But you know what I mean).

Anyway, Beach House is Brighton's branch of posh and pricey private members' club Soho House, which, because I am an ex-Groucho Club member, I am obliged to sneer at. But the food and the service were impeccable, and afterwards I was told that Dan, the front-of-house guy, kept putting my jacket back on my chair because it kept slipping off. As George Eliot put it, "the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts", so thank you, Dan. And Sam, of course.

That was great but otherwise the modern world is giving me grief. The other day I had a Very Important Meeting on Microsoft Teams. Lockdown was kind to me for several things, not the least of which was only needing to have one remote meeting, and that was for a radio programme so it didn't matter that my camera was bust. This time I had a laptop whose camera did work, so I got everything ready. I shaved, I tamed my unruly locks, I put on a cleanish shirt and sponged the soup stains off my waistcoat. I even poured my wine into a mug so it would look as though I was drinking tea. (I thought of filling my Sports Direct mug but even I don't drink that much.)

And, of course, Microsoft Teams didn't work. It didn't work on my phone either and that's a newer gadget than the laptop. Also, I am not technologically illiterate so it's not my fault. I howled and raged but to no avail, and the Very Important Meeting progressed without me. So, nuts to the modern world. And come back 2013, all is forgiven, not that there is much to forgive. ●

# 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 (%)	GDP growth forecast for 2024 (%)	Interest rate (%)	Inflation rate (CPI, %)	Unemployment rate (%)
<b>Great Britain</b>	<b>3.6</b>	<b>0.3</b>	<b>0.6</b>	<b>3.0</b>	<b>11.1</b>	<b>3.5</b>
Brazil	2.8	1.0	1.9	13.8	6.5	8.7
Canada	3.3	1.5	1.6	3.8	6.9	5.2
China	3.2	4.4	4.5	3.7	2.1	5.5
France	2.5	0.7	1.6	2.0	6.2	7.4
Germany	1.5	-0.3	1.5	2.0	10.4	5.5
Italy	3.2	-0.2	1.3	2.0	11.8	7.9
Japan	1.7	1.6	1.3	-0.1	3.7	2.6
Russia	-3.4	-2.3	1.5	7.5	12.6	3.9
Spain	4.3	1.2	2.6	2.0	7.3	12.7
US	1.6	1.0	1.2	4.0	7.7	3.5

SOURCES: WORLD ECONOMIC OUTLOOK, OCTOBER; TRADING ECONOMICS

### Rents are surging

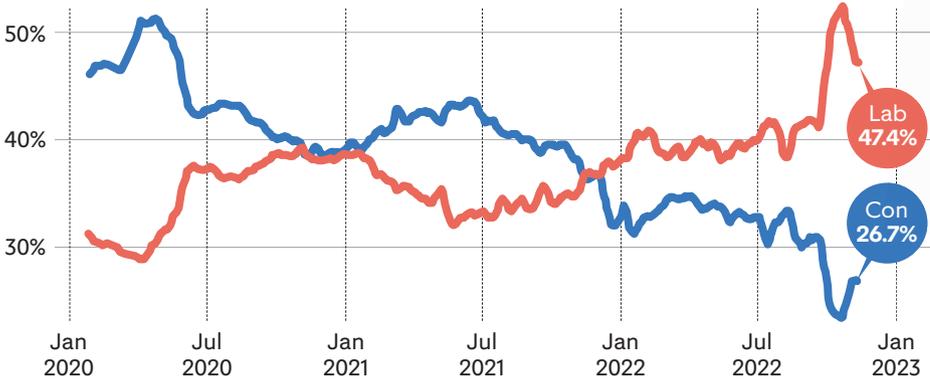
Growth in private housing rent since January 2015



SOURCE: ONS

### Britain Elects: Westminster voting intentions

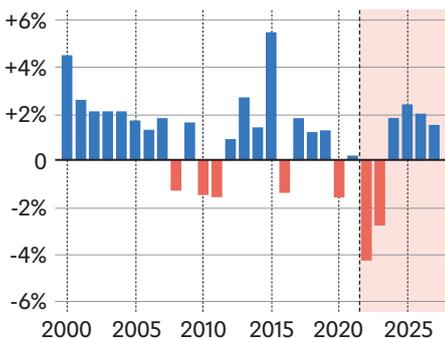
How popular is the Labour Party compared to the Conservative Party?



SOURCE: BRITAIN ELECTS

### UK faces record fall in living standards

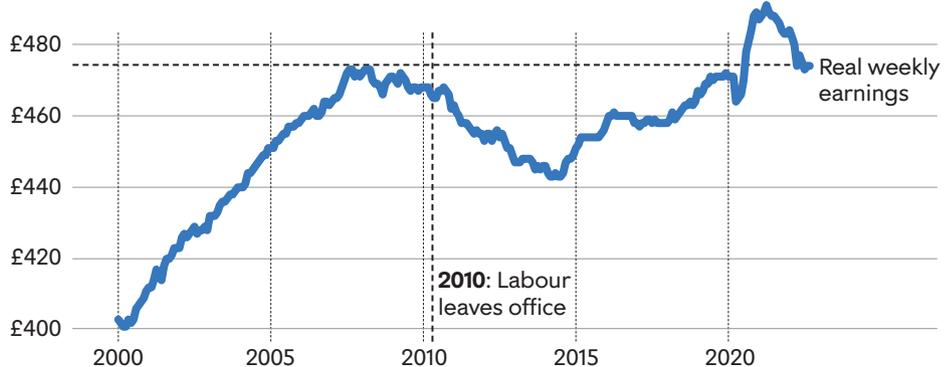
Real UK household disposable income per person, fiscal-year growth rate



SOURCE: ONS; OBR

### Real wages struggle to stay above 2008 levels

Regular average weekly earnings, seasonally adjusted (based on 2015 prices)



SOURCE: ONS

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## The NS Q&A

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“I want to live without colliding with humans”

**Cho Nam-joo, novelist**



**Cho Nam-joo was born in South Korea in 1978. She is best known for her 2016 novel *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982*, which has sold more than a million copies and is often credited with propelling a feminist movement in South Korea.**

*What's your earliest memory?*

When I was five, we moved from Bucheon to Seoul. I sat in a truck on my mother's lap. She was holding a wall clock with a glass cover and the sunlight reflected off the glass, dazzling my eyes.

*Who are your heroes?*

I didn't have a hero as a child but as an adult I admire the rapper Lee Young-ji, the producer and television presenter Jaejae, the writer Lee Seul-ah, and the comedian Song Eun-yi. They are people who build

their own content in a way that has never existed before.

*What book last changed your thinking?*

Right now I'm reading *I Met You* by Kim Jong-woo. It talks about the production of a TV documentary in which people are invited to experience meeting their deceased families again through virtual reality (VR) technology. Though I still think that death is the end, I have come to think that the things that make me feel regretful are not in the past but in the future.

*Which political figure do you look up to?*

The former president of South Korea Kim Dae-jung and his wife Lee Hee-ho. I respect their belief in democracy, human rights and peace. Their government actively implemented women's policies.

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

K-pop. I've been a fan since the Nineties.

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

Earth in the very distant future, when human beings have disappeared, or another planet in a distant universe without human beings. There, I might no longer be human myself, but that's fine. I want to live without colliding with humans.

*What TV show could you not live without?*

Korean dramas. Recently, I enjoyed *Little Women* and now I am watching *Glitch*.

*Who would paint your portrait?*

Do-kyung, a character in my novel *Saha*. An illegal immigrant, he works as a portrait painter and really captures the essence of his subjects.

*What's your theme tune?*

Lee Lang's "Everyone in the World Started to Hate Me". When I first heard it, I thought: "Oh, it's like my situation right now!"

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

During the pandemic, my favourite band held an online concert. I hesitated because I wondered if there would be any sense of presence behind the screen. My daughter convinced me that it would be better than not seeing it at all. In the end, I bought a ticket and it was a lot of fun.

*What's currently bugging you?*

Left wrist pain. I've been receiving treatment for over ten years, and it's getting worse and worse these days. I still have my wrist straps on and am hitting the keyboard.

*What single thing would make your life better?*

Making the world a better place.

*When were you happiest?*

I am always equally happy and unhappy. (I can't pick a time.)

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

Singer, musical actor, or anything related to music.

*Are we all doomed?*

Yes. There is no hope for humans. Our only hope is cats. ●

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*"Saha" by Cho Nam-joo, translated by Jamie Chang, is published by Scribner*

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