

The Guardian Weekly

A week in the life of the world | *Global edition*
24 MAY 2024 | VOL.210 No.21 | £5.95 | €9

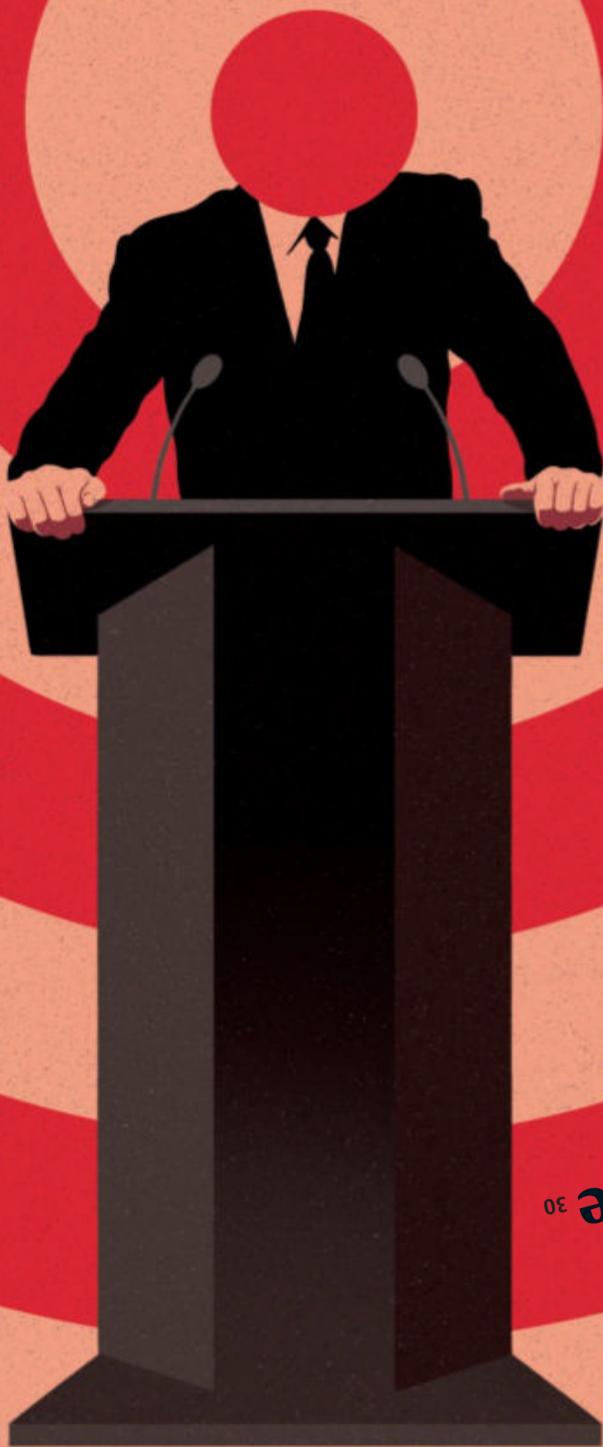
Plus ● What now for Iran? 15

High alert

The rising threat to Europe's politicians

10

● Remembering Alice Munro 57



● The truth about the menopause 30





Eyewitness

Morocco

PHOTOGRAPH:
FADEL SENNA/AFP/GETTY

📌 Mane attraction

A rider from the Beni Arous tribe controls his horse during the traditional equestrian game and performance known as Mata, near the village of Znied in Larache. More than 200 competitors took part in the annual three-day event where tribal teams ride bareback in displays to mark the arrival of spring.



The Guardian Weekly
Founded in Manchester,
England
4 July 1919

Vol 210 | Issue N° 21

Guardian Weekly is an edited selection of some of the best journalism found in the Guardian and Observer newspapers in the UK and the Guardian's digital editions in the UK, US and Australia. The weekly magazine has an international focus and three editions: global, Australia and North America. The Guardian was founded in 1821, and Guardian Weekly in 1919. We exist to hold power to account in the name of the public interest, to uphold liberal and progressive values, to fight for the common good, and to build hope. Our values, as laid out by editor CP Scott in 1921, are honesty, integrity, courage, fairness, and a sense of duty to the reader and the community. The Guardian is wholly owned by the Scott Trust, a body whose purpose is "to secure the financial and editorial independence of the Guardian in perpetuity". We have no proprietor or shareholders, and any profit made is re-invested in journalism.

A week in the life of the world
24 MAY 2024



4

GLOBAL REPORT

Headlines from the last seven days

United Kingdom 8

Science & Environment 9

The big story

Europe A disturbing increase in political violence.....10



15

SPOTLIGHT

In-depth reporting and analysis

📍 **Iran**

After Raisi's death, will anything change? 15

📍 **Ukraine**

Race to evacuate Kharkiv's border towns 20

📍 **United Kingdom**

The infected blood scandal: a wholly preventable tragedy..23

📍 **Environment**

Azerbaijan's priorities in the countdown to Cop29 24

📍 **Haiti**

Police try to hold the line in face of armed gangs 28

📍 **Science**

What's going on during the menopause? 30

34

FEATURES

Long reads, interviews & essays

Amit Shah, the feared enforcer behind India's Narendra Modi

By Atul Dev 34

A US addiction law was not enough to save its namesake

By Katia Riddle 40



45

OPINION

▼ **Martha Gill**

How the internet became a literal race to the bottom 45

📍 **María Ramírez**

Catalonia's turn away from dreams of independence.....47

📍 **Polly Toynbee**

A self-serving Tory war on overseas students..... 48

51

CULTURE

TV, film, music, theatre, art, architecture & more

📍 **Music**

Richard Hawley, Sheffield's home-loving man of steel..... 51

📍 **Music**

Ukrainian opera marries death metal with Schubert 54

📍 **Visual arts**

The blooming marvels found in artists' gardens55

📍 **Books**

Brooklyn's heroine takes a trip back to Ireland 58

“
Some call
the internet
a town square,
some a
wild west.
In fact, it's a
playground

60

LIFESTYLE

📍 **Tim Dowling**

Drilling through the DIY 60

📍 **Ask Ottolenghi**

Add a kick without chilli 61

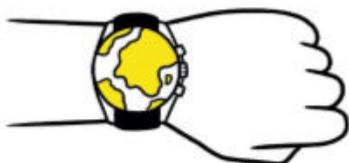
📍 **Recipe**

Aubergine orzo 61

Join the community

Twitter: @guardianweekly
facebook.com/guardianweekly
Instagram: @guardian

SPOT ILLUSTRATIONS:
MATT BLEASE



On the cover The attempted assassination of Slovakia's prime minister, Robert Fico, sent shockwaves through European politics. "My desire was to create something stark and arresting while referencing the violence in a non-specific way," says illustrator Pete Reynolds. "The image works as a generic metaphor for the violence but also as an alarm call to the world." *Illustration: Pete Reynolds*

Global report

Headlines from the last seven days

GW

Copyright © 2024 GNM Ltd. All rights reserved

Published weekly by Guardian News & Media Ltd, Kings Place, 90 York Way, London, N1 9GU, UK

Printed in the UK, Denmark, the US, Australia and New Zealand

ISSN 0958-9996

To advertise contact [advertising.enquiries@theguardian.com](mailto:enquiries@theguardian.com)

To subscribe, visit theguardian.com/gw-subscribe

Manage your subscription at theguardian.com/manage

USA and Canada gwsubsus@theguardian.com
Toll Free: +1-844-632-2010

Australia and New Zealand apac.help@theguardian.com
Toll Free: 1 800 773 766

UK, Europe and Rest of World gwsubs@theguardian.com
+44 (0) 330 333 6767

1 US/ISRAEL

Biden attacks ICC call for Netanyahu arrest warrant

Joe Biden attacked as “outrageous” an application by the international criminal court for warrants seeking the arrest of the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, along with senior members of Hamas, for actions carried out in Gaza.

The US president sided with Israel after the ICC’s prosecutor, Karim Khan, announced he was pursuing arrest warrants for Netanyahu and Yoav Gallant, the Israeli defence minister. Khan is also pursuing the arrests of three leading Hamas figures, Yahya Sinwar, Mohammed Diab Ibrahim al-Masri - better known as Mohammed Deif - and Ismail Haniyeh, over Hamas’s attack on Israel on 7 October last year.

Biden accused the ICC of drawing a false moral equivalence between the country and Hamas, a militant Islamist group that has run Gaza since 2006.

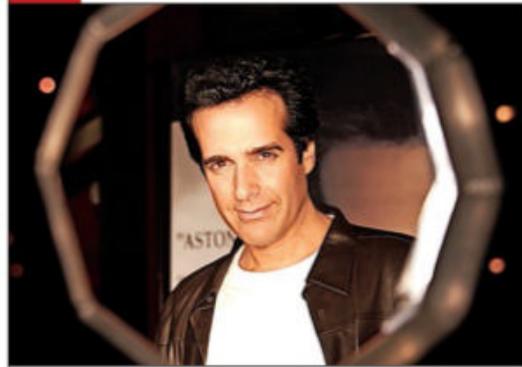
“The ... application for arrest warrants against Israeli leaders is outrageous,” Biden said in the statement. “And let me be clear ... there is no equivalence - none - between Israel and Hamas.”

Biden said that he was working to bring the region together and find a two-state solution.

The Guardian View [Page 49](#) →



2 UNITED STATES



Women accuse magician of sexual misconduct

The celebrated American magician David Copperfield has been accused by 16 women of engaging in sexual misconduct and inappropriate behaviour over the span of four decades, from the late 1980s to 2014, following an investigation by Guardian US.

The allegations against him - denied by the illusionist - include claims that he drugged three women before he had sexual relations with them, which they felt they were unable to consent to.

The Guardian has been examining these allegations as part of a series of stories that has drawn on interviews with more than 100 people and analysis of court and police records obtained through freedom of information requests.

4 GERMANY

Coup plotters go on trial amid high security

The most spectacular of a trio of trials of a group of far-right conspirators who plotted to violently overthrow the German state began in Frankfurt this week amid high security.

On trial are the group’s alleged ringleader, a self-styled aristocrat estate agent known as Prince Heinrich XIII, his Russian girlfriend and seven other founding members, including a former policeman and a former judge who is now an MP for the far-right AfD party.

According to federal prosecutors, the group planned to storm the Reichstag in Berlin with armed support via its paramilitary wing, to arrest members of the Bundestag, and to parade a shackled Olaf Scholz on television in the hope of winning ordinary Germans around to the coup. Heinrich, 72, expected to become the new chancellor.

A trial involving the group’s alleged military wing started in Stuttgart in April. A third trial is due to take place in Munich in June. A total of 26 people are on trial and the cases are expected to go on for a year or more.

3 UNITED STATES

Sean ‘Diddy’ Combs admits he beat ex-girlfriend

The rap mogul Sean “Diddy” Combs admitted in a video apology that he punched and kicked his ex-girlfriend Cassie, an R&B singer, in 2016, after CNN released footage of the attack. He said he was “truly sorry” and his actions were “inexcusable”.

Cassie, whose legal name is Cassandra Ventura, sued Combs in November over what she said was years of sexual, physical and emotional abuse. Several more civil lawsuits were filed, along with a federal criminal sex-trafficking investigation that led authorities to raid Combs’ mansions in Los Angeles and Miami.

5 UNITED STATES

Trump floats idea of three-term presidency

Donald Trump flirted with the idea of being president for three terms - a clear violation of the US constitution - during a bombastic speech to the National Rifle Association annual convention in which he vowed to reverse gun safety measures green-lit during the Biden administration.

“You know, FDR 16 years - almost 16 years - he was four terms. I don’t know, are we going to be considered three-term? Or two-term?” the ex-president and GOP presidential frontrunner said to the convention in Dallas, prompting some in the crowd to yell: “Three!”, Politico reported.



Usyk's boxing victory cheers war-weary citizens

From the capital, Kyiv, to the heavily attacked region of Kharkiv, news of Oleksandr Usyk's victory over Tyson Fury in Riyadh last weekend - making him the first undisputed world heavyweight boxing champion this century - brought war-weary Ukrainians a rare and very welcome moment of victory and celebration.

Usyk said his triumph was not his alone: "It's for my God, my supporters, my country, the Ukrainian soldiers, Ukrainian mothers and fathers, children."

"We are proud and happy," said Karina Kivernyk, a communications specialist in Kyiv. "Every Ukrainian victory is significant, because it symbolises the strength of Ukraine against the Russian aggressor."

Spotlight Page 20 →

6 FRANCE

Man shot dead by police after synagogue set on fire

Police shot dead a man armed with a knife and an iron bar who set fire to a synagogue in the Normandy city of Rouen last Friday.

The interior minister, Gérald Darmanin, said France was "deeply affected" by what he called an antisemitic act. He said the government was "determined to continue to fully protect Jewish people in France, wherever they are, and Jews should practise their religion without fear".

Emergency services were alerted after a fire was detected at the synagogue in the city 130km north-west of Paris. The man was spotted on the building's roof.

The interior ministry said the attacker was Algerian and was not known to police.

7 BRAZIL



State counts the cost of worst-ever flooding

Almost four weeks after one of the country's worst-ever floods hit its southernmost state, killing at least 155 people and forcing 540,000 from their homes, experts have warned that water levels will take at least another week to drop.

The death toll in Rio Grande do Sul is still increasing, and more than 77,000 people remain in public shelters, prompting the state government to plan four temporary "tent cities". The state's governor, Eduardo Leite, said the rebuilding costs will be "much higher" than the 19bn reais (\$3.7bn) he initially estimated.

8 ARGENTINA/SPAIN

Madrid demands apology for corruption allegations

The Spanish government recalled its ambassador from Buenos Aires and repeated its calls for Argentina's populist president, Javier Milei, to apologise after he used a speech at a summit of international far-right leaders in Madrid last Sunday to revive allegations that prime minister Pedro Sánchez's wife, Begoña Gómez, had engaged in corruption and influence-peddling.

The allegations from Milei, a self-described sworn enemy of socialism, infuriated Spain's centre-left government.

Sánchez has described the allegations as part of a smear campaign. The personal attacks caused Sánchez to weigh up his political future last month before finally deciding to stay in office.

10 GEORGIA

President vetoes divisive 'foreign influence' law

The country's president has vetoed a "foreign agents" bill that has split the country and appealed to the government not to overrule her over a law she said was "Russian in spirit and essence".

Salome Zourabichvili followed through on her stated intention to use her veto last Saturday, although the governing Georgian Dream party has the votes to disregard her intervention.

Under the law, which has prompted huge protests, civil society organisations and media receiving more than 20% of their revenues from abroad will have to register as "organisations serving the interests of a foreign power".

Spotlight Page 22 →

UN chief delivers warning over looming Gaza famine

The United Nations' humanitarian chief warned of "apocalyptic" consequences due to aid shortages in Gaza, where Israel's military offensive in the city of Rafah has blocked desperately needed food.

"If fuel runs out, aid doesn't get to the people where they need it. That famine, which we have talked about for so long, and which is looming, will not be looming any more. It will be present," the UN under-secretary general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator, Martin Griffiths, told AFP. He said 50 trucks of aid a day could reach people north of Gaza, but routes in the south were blocked.

Spotlight Page 18 →



Gantz gives PM ultimatum to adopt postwar Gaza plan

Benny Gantz threatened to resign from the war cabinet if Benjamin Netanyahu fails to adopt an agreed plan for Gaza. Gantz announced that if a plan for postwar governance of the territory is not consolidated and approved by 8 June, his opposition National Unity party will withdraw from the coalition government.

His press conference followed news that the body of Ron Benjamin, 53, had been found along with three other hostages - Itzik Gelernter, Shani Louk and Amit Buskila.

The Guardian View Page 49 →

Public mourning follows president's death in crash

Supreme leader Ali Khamenei announced five days of public mourning for president Ebrahim Raisi after his death last Sunday in a helicopter crash and confirmed Mohammad Mokhber as interim president. An election for Raisi's successor is expected by the end of June.

The helicopter crashed in thick fog in a remote mountainous part of northern Iran, the conditions hampering a rescue effort that was unlikely to have saved lives even if Red Crescent crews had been able to reach the victims quickly. State media reported that the aircraft had "hit the mountain and disintegrated" on impact.

Spotlight Page 15 →

Mass 'forced' marriage condemned by activists

Human rights activists launched a petition to stop a plan to push 100 girls and young women into marriage in a mass ceremony. The plan, sponsored by Abdulmalik Sarkindaji, speaker of the national assembly in the largely Muslim state of Niger, were criticised by Nigeria's women's affairs minister, Uju Kennedy-Ohanenye, who said she would seek a court injunction to stop the ceremony.

Sarkindaji said the girls and young women were orphans and he would pay dowries. The petition said the Niger state government should prioritise the girls' education.

Global report

15 AFGHANISTAN

**Attack at tourist site in Bamiyan leaves four dead**

Three Spanish tourists and an Afghan civilian were killed in central Afghanistan. Four suspects were arrested at the scene in the city of Bamiyan, in Bamiyan province, a top tourist area. Officials said an investigation was under way. There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the shooting.

According to Italian NGO Emergency, which operates a hospital in Kabul, tourists from Spain, Lithuania, Norway, Australia and Afghanistan, were also wounded.

The city is home to a Unesco world heritage site and the remains of two giant Buddha statues that were blown up by the Taliban in 2001. Since retaking power in 2021, the Taliban have encouraged a limited amount of tourism.

16 SOUTH AFRICA

Zuma cannot run in elections, court rules

The constitutional court ruled that former president Jacob Zuma cannot run for parliament in national elections on 29 May, the most competitive polls since the country's first post-apartheid vote 30 years ago. The court found that Zuma was ineligible to stand for election due to a 15-month prison sentence for contempt of court in 2021, after he failed to appear before a corruption inquiry.

Zuma was president of South Africa from 2009 to 2018, when he was forced to resign by the ruling African National Congress. He is now the figurehead of the new uMkhonto WeSizwe (MK) party.

17 CHINA

Mortgage rate cut aims to revitalise property market

Beijing will cut mortgage rates and allow local authorities to turn unsold homes from developers into affordable housing, in a series of drastic measures aimed at propping up the country's faltering property market.

The People's Bank of China said it would scrap the minimum rate of interest and reduce down-payment ratios to 15% for first-time buyers and 25% for second homes. It will also create a 300bn yuan (\$41.4bn) facility to support local state-owned companies to buy homes at reasonable prices.

The announcement is China's biggest effort yet to restore confidence in its ailing property market after data released last week showed month-on-month house prices were falling at the steepest rate in a decade despite previous efforts to curb losses.

The measures follow attempts by the Chinese government to stabilise the property market in a crisis that began when Evergrande declared itself to be in default in 2021. Markets were buoyed up the announcement, with real estate stocks up 9% on China's CSI 300 index.

18 TAIWAN

New president urges China to 'cease its intimidation'

The island's new president has urged China to "cease [its] political and military intimidation". Lai Ching-te was sworn in on Monday in Taipei, taking over from Tsai Ing-wen, whose eight years in power saw a deterioration in relations with Beijing.

China claims Taiwan as a province and has called Lai, 64, a "dangerous separatist" who will bring "war and decline". Noting Taiwan's strategic importance, Lai said its future was as important to the world as it was to Taiwan's people. He called on China to help "ensure the world is free from the fear of war".

19 NEW CALEDONIA

Macron calls third crisis meeting over violent unrest

Emmanuel Macron called a third meeting of France's security council over the deadly unrest in New Caledonia, after declaring a state of emergency and sending hundreds of troops to restore order in the Pacific territory.

French forces smashed through barricades in a bid to retake the main road to the international airport last Sunday. "Order will be re-established whatever the cost," said the French government high commissioner, Louis Le Franc.

The archipelago off north-east Australia, with a population of 270,000, has been convulsed by the worst violence in decades. Vehicles, businesses and buildings were set alight over plans to impose rules that would give tens of thousands of non-Indigenous residents voting rights.



20 AUSTRALIA

Backpacker visa lottery launched to level up system

Backpacker visas for citizens of China, India and Vietnam will be handed out by lottery in only the second time Australia has used the system, as the federal government escalates its crackdown on temporary migration.

A randomised ballot with a A\$25 (\$16.73) entry fee will begin in July. The change aims to make visa allocation more equitable for citizens of nations where demand exceeds places, instead of forcing applicants to physically queue.

Ballots are used to allocate visas in other countries, such as the United States' green card, but not until this year in Australia.

DEATHS



Alice Munro
Canadian writer and Nobel prize winner. She died on 13 May, aged 92.
Tribute, p57→

Ebrahim Raisi
President of Iran. He was killed in a helicopter crash on 19 May, aged 63.
Spotlight, p15→

David Sanborn
US saxophonist who worked with David Bowie. He died on 12 May, aged 78.

Tony O'Reilly
Irish media executive and rugby player. He died on 18 May, aged 88.

Frank Ifield
Australian country music singer and guitarist. He died on 18 May, aged 86.

Mary Wells Lawrence
The first woman to own and run a US advertising agency. She died on 11 May, aged 95.

Jimmy James
Jamaican-British soul and ska singer. He died on 14 May, aged 83.

Gudrun Ure
Scottish actor who played TV's Super Gran. She died on 14 May, aged 98.



HEALTH

Infected blood scandal was avoidable, inquiry finds

The scandal in which thousands of people in the UK became infected or died from contaminated blood was avoidable and inflamed by a “subtle, pervasive and chilling” cover-up by the NHS and government, a report has found.

In the conclusion to a five-year public inquiry, Sir Brian Langstaff, who chaired the investigation, said the calamity could “largely, though not entirely, have been avoided” – but successive governments and others in authority “did not put patient safety first”.

More than 30,000 people in the UK, 3,000 of whom have died, were infected with tainted blood from the 1970s through to the early 90s, either from receiving transfusions during surgery, or through products created using blood plasma and imported from the US to treat haemophiliacs.

The 2,527-page final report found that patients were lied to about the risks and, in some cases, infected during research carried out without their consent. There were also delays informing patients of their infections, stretching to years in some cases.

The prime minister, Rishi Sunak, declared Monday “a day of shame for the British state” as he apologised for successive governments over the scandal and promised to pay whatever it takes to compensate the victims.

“It did not have to be this way; it should never have been this way. And on behalf of this and every government stretching back to the 1970s, I am truly sorry,” Sunak said.

Details of the compensation scheme were expected this week.

Spotlight Page 23 →

COURTS

Assange granted fresh appeal in extradition fight

Julian Assange was granted leave to mount a fresh appeal against his extradition to the US on charges of leaking military secrets. He will be able to challenge assurances from American officials on how a trial there would be conducted.

Two judges deferred a decision in March on whether Assange, who is trying to avoid prosecution in the US relating to the publication of thousands of classified and diplomatic documents, could take his case to another appeal hearing.

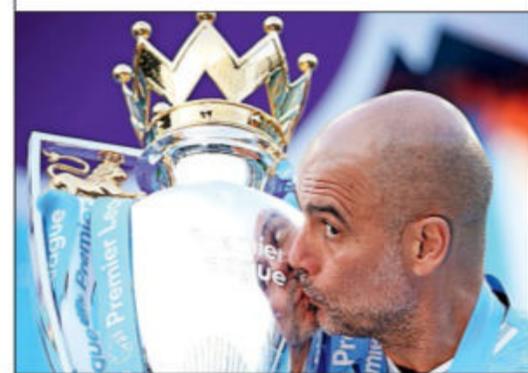
He has been indicted on 17 espionage charges and one charge of computer misuse, exposing him to a maximum 175 years in prison, over his WikiLeaks website’s publication of classified US documents almost 15 years ago.

SPORT

Manchester City win historic fourth straight title

Manchester City became the first team since the inception of the Football League in 1888 to claim four consecutive top flight titles. This year’s Premier League race went to the final day of the season, but a 3-1 win over West Ham saw City clinch the trophy, ahead of the nearest challengers Arsenal.

Afterwards City’s manager, Pep Guardiola (below), hinted that next season may be his last at the club.



HEALTH

‘Boil water’ notice lifted after parasite outbreak

Cases of an illness caused by cryptosporidium, a microscopic parasite, led to about 16,000 households and businesses in Brixham, Devon, and the surrounding area being told not to drink their tap water without boiling it first. The owner of South West Water said on Tuesday that normal service has been restored for 85% of its customers, although health officials expected more cases of a waterborne disease.

Residents and visitors reported falling ill and business owners spoke of their deep concern that one of their busiest times – the half-term break at the end of this month – could be wrecked.



LABOUR

Starmer sets out six key pledges to woo swing voters

Keir Starmer unveiled his version of New Labour’s pledge card for the next general election with six key commitments “put up in lights” as part of his party’s offer to swing voters.

The campaign material will be distributed across England as the Labour leader launches the party’s biggest advertising blitz since the 2019 election.

His commitments, which include stabilising the economy, cutting NHS waiting times, setting up Great British Energy, cracking down on antisocial behaviour and recruiting 6,500 new teachers, are the latest step in his five “national missions”.

He is also pledging a sixth – the launch of a new border security command – after the party was criticised for not having a separate mission for migration. Labour insiders said the “consumer focused” issues were chosen as they were expected to go down well in areas where the party hopes to pick up swing voters.



626

The number of items that went missing or were stolen from the British Museum’s storerooms that have been located. About 2,000 objects from its collection were found last year to be missing or lost



Do you have a recently taken picture you'd like to share with Guardian Weekly? Scan the QR code or visit theguardian.com/pictures-guardian-weekly and we'll print your best submissions

Reader's eyewitness

Kings of the mountain
Male desert bighorn sheep relax on petrified sand dunes earlier this month in the Valley of Fire State Park, Nevada, US.
By Scott Hauenstein, Las Vegas, US



SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENT



HEALTH

Cash incentive key to losing weight for obese men

Financial incentives could encourage obese men to lose weight, scientists believe. In a trial of 585 men living with obesity, those sent motivational texts and healthy eating tips, along with the promise of £400 (\$500) if they achieved a weight loss target, shed more than those receiving text messages alone.

Participants were also told money would be deducted if they did not lose enough weight or put weight back on over the year-long trial.

In the UK study, presented at the European Congress of Obesity, the cash incentive was linked to a 4.8% loss of body weight, compared with 2.7% for men sent texts alone.

ASTRONOMY

Earth-sized planet where days and nights last forever

Astronomers have discovered a new planet that is “practically the same

size” as our own. Speculoos-3b is 55 light years from Earth. It was spotted as it passed in front of its host star, an ultra-cool red dwarf that is 100 times less luminous than the sun.

The rocky world swings around the red dwarf every 17 hours, making a year on Speculoos-3b shorter than a single Earth day. However, the days and nights are never-ending.

“We believe the planet rotates synchronously, so that the same side, called the day side, always faces the star, just like the moon does for the Earth. On the other hand, the night side would be locked in endless darkness,” said Michaël Gillon, an astronomer at the University of Liège in Belgium and lead author, in *Nature Astronomy*.

It is only the second planetary system to be discovered around such a star.

MEDICAL RESEARCH

Proteins in blood could give early warning signs of disease

Proteins in the blood could provide warning signs of cancer more than seven years before it is diagnosed, according to research.

Scientists at the University of Oxford studied blood from more

than 44,000 people in the UK Biobank, including 4,900 who went on to have a cancer diagnosis. They identified 618 proteins linked to 19 types of cancer, including colon, lung and non-Hodgkin lymphoma.

The study, published in *Nature Communications*, also found 107 proteins associated with cancers diagnosed more than seven years after samples were collected and 182 proteins strongly associated with a diagnosis within three years.

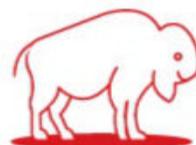
PSYCHOLOGY

One bad rumour can put a child off another, study finds

One bad rumour is enough to make children wary of another, research among seven-year-olds suggests.

A study of 108 Japanese children found good rumours were trusted when they came from several sources, but could be swayed by bad rumours they heard only once.

Researchers said the finding may reflect the risk of befriending new people. “It may be functionally adaptive for children to adjust their behaviour based on negative gossip simply to avoid harmful situations with a malevolent person,” they wrote in *Royal Society Open Science*.



170

The number of bison in a herd reintroduced to Romania's Ţarcu mountains whose grazing habits could help store CO₂ emissions equivalent to removing 43,000 cars from the road for a year, Yale scientists estimate

Warning signals

The attempt on the life of Slovakia's prime minister, **Robert Fico**, exposed divisions in one of Europe's most polarised countries and sent shockwaves across the continent



JANOS KUMMER/GETTY

PLUS

A rhetorical question

Why political violence is on the rise
Page 13 →

'It's time to step back'

Politicians risk boosting the far-right vote
Page 14 →

SLOVAKIA

By Pjotr Sauer BRATISLAVA

Father Tomáš stood solemnly in the small Catholic church nestled near a park along the banks of the Danube River in Bratislava last Friday morning. He had seen an increase in visitors since the shock shooting, two days previously, of Slovakia's prime minister, Robert Fico.

The priest, who did not wish to give his full name, planned to hold his weekly Sunday service to pray "for peace in Slovakia, so that we find mutual respect and understanding". But beyond the centuries-old walls of his church, such language of unity is harder to find.

The assassination attempt in Handlová, a town about 180km from the capital, has prompted soul-searching among the country's deeply divided society and shone a light on what many say is a far wider crisis in a Slovakia that has been marred by toxicity and violence.

Less than an hour after the shooting, as Fico was being rushed by helicopter to a local hospital - his health deemed too critical for him to be flown back to Bratislava for treatment - his allies rushed to criticise the opposition and elements of civil society, accusing them of having blood on their hands.

L'uboš Blaha, the deputy speaker of parliament and a senior member of Fico's Smer party, said: "This is your work. I want to express my deep

disgust at what you have been doing here for the last few years. You, the liberal media, the political opposition, what kind of hatred did you spread towards Robert Fico? You built gallows for him."

The interior minister, Matúš Šutaj-Eštok, later warned: "We are on the doorstep of a civil war. The assassination attempt on the prime minister is a confirmation of that."

Fico's critics instead said that the divisive climate cultivated by the prime minister and his allies was partly to blame for the attack.

By last Sunday, Fico was out of immediate danger but remained in intensive care. "We can consider his condition stable with a positive prognosis," the deputy prime minister, Robert Kaliňák, Fico's closest political ally, told reporters outside the hospital in the central city of Banská Bystrica, where Fico was being treated. "We all feel a bit more relaxed now."

Kaliňák said earlier that Fico had suffered four gunshot wounds, two light, one moderate and one serious.

Šutaj-Eštok said that if one of the shots "went just a few centimetres higher, it would have hit the prime minister's liver". The minister said officials were investigating the possibility the suspect may not have been a "lone wolf" as previously believed.

Journalists in the country fear the attack could be used as a pretext for a crackdown by a government that has been criticised for lashing out at independent media outlets and scrapping a special prosecutor's office.

"Slovakia is one of the most polarised countries in Europe with regular threats against politicians," said Milan Nič, an analyst at the German Council on Foreign Relations →



◀ Security staff carry Robert Fico towards a vehicle after he was shot. Below, police detain a man

AFP/GETTY



▼ Supporters lay flowers and gifts outside hospital where Robert Fico is being treated

BERNADETT SZABO/
REUTERS



and former adviser to Slovakia's foreign ministry. Nič pointed to the earlier decision of the country's first female president, Zuzana Čaputová, not to run for re-election after receiving death threats. "This cannot be seen as an isolated incident. The genie is out of the bottle," Nič said.

The suspected gunman, identified by Slovak media as 71-year-old former security guard and amateur poet Juraj Cintula, has been charged with attempted premeditated murder and was put in pre-trial detention by a special penal court last Saturday.

Cintula's conflicting biography has further stirred tensions in the country. Each side of the political spectrum quickly cherry-picked details from his background, searching for clues online to support their narrative of why the pensioner, who had previously shown no signs of violence, attacked the prime minister.

Supporters of the PM pointed to Cintula's anti-Fico statements on social media and his recent appearance at an opposition protest, while Fico's critics focused their attention on a 2016 meeting Cintula attended alongside a fringe pro-Russian paramilitary group, describing the shooter as a rightwing extremist.

In the capital, residents widely condemned the shooting, with some seeing it as the end product of the country's vitriolic political discourse. "Politicians have been stoking the flames for a long time," said Agnesa

Rybár, the owner of a clothing store in the city centre. "No one expected the prime minister would be shot, but it did not come out of the blue."

The attack is just the latest, if most dramatic, act of political violence that has become a grim fixture in recent Slovak history. In 2018, a journalist investigating alleged tax fraud involving businessmen connected to Slovakia's ruling Smer party was found murdered alongside his girlfriend. The killings sparked outrage and the largest protests in Slovakia since the fall of communism, forcing Fico, who has held the country's highest office on three occasions, to step down.

In 2022, a radicalised teenager shot dead two people outside a gay bar in Bratislava in a hate crime.

Observers say the Covid pandemic hardened already existing splits. As parts of society grew angry about government lockdowns, Fico - then polling under 10% - reinvented himself as a vocal pandemic and vaccine sceptic, rousing anti-government sentiments over its handling of the crisis.

Then came the war in Ukraine. Polls have shown that Slovaks have been divided on whether Russia or the west was responsible for the outbreak and whether the country should provide Kyiv with financial and military aid.

Gábor Czímer, a political journalist at Slovakian news outlet Ujszo.com, said Fico's return to power in 2023 uncovered signs that "Slovak society is strongly split into two camps": one that is friendly toward Russia and another that pushes for stronger connections with the EU and the west.

"Polarisation experienced in Slovakia isn't unique, just look to

Poland and Hungary," said Balázs Jarábik, a fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences and former Slovak diplomat, of neighbouring states that have also seen societal splits along political faultlines. "But Slovakia stands out in its political violence, which has often been linked to organised crime."

In the aftermath of the attack, Jarábik said he had not seen enough "self-reflection" from either side of the political landscape that would address the causes that led to the shooting.

But despite the gloom, some see hope and a window of opportunity for reconciliation. Nič and Jarábik said they were encouraged by the conference held after the shooting, where Čaputová appeared alongside the president-elect, Peter Pellegrini, an ally of Fico. Both leaders called for a de-escalation of tensions. "We saw the Slovakia of the past, let's see what Slovakia of tomorrow will be," said Nič.

Much of the response will depend on Fico's health. Jarábik said that if the prime minister was unable to make a full recovery, it would be difficult for the current government to rein in some of the more radical elements, notably the ultranationalist SNS party that forms part of Fico's three-way coalition. "But if Fico recovers, the situation will depend on what lessons he will apply from the assassination attempt," he added.

Jarábik said it was hard to predict whether Fico's ruling coalition would choose the path of further radicalisation or whether surviving the shooting would lead to the prime minister changing his combative approach. He added: "Based on historical experience, such a high-level assassination attempt will unlikely lead to the society's consolidation."

PJOTR SAUER IS AN INTERNATIONAL REPORTER FOR THE GUARDIAN

Alarm bells Behind the rise in violent attacks on Europe's politicians

By Nimo Omer

The attack on the Slovakian prime minister, Robert Fico, has horrified leaders across Europe who have voiced condemnation and called for calm in an increasingly febrile political landscape. In the build-up to next month's European elections, there is an unstable atmosphere in many countries across the continent - with political violence and unrest becoming more common.

Who is Robert Fico and why is he such a divisive figure?

Fico began his career as a member of the Communist party of Czechoslovakia when it was in power and later founded the Smer party in 1999. This is Fico's fourth term as Slovakia's prime minister, having won elections in 2006, 2012 and 2016, but he had to resign in 2018 amid mass protests over the murder of an investigative journalist and his fiancée. That left Fico in opposition for five years, from where his party adopted increasingly rightwing views on immigration, press freedom and LGBTQ+ rights.



He was elected in 2023, on a more anti-EU, pro-Putin platform: cutting funding for Ukraine was a key pledge in his campaign. His polarising political style has created deep rifts in Slovakia - critics have accused him of undermining the rule of law and media freedoms.

The response to the assassination attempt is emblematic of these schisms, with some in Slovakia seeking to "exploit divisions", says Armida van Rij, who leads the Europe programme at Chatham House. In the hours after Fico was shot, ministers were blaming the opposition and the media for the attack. There is a fear that this attack will be used to crack down further on civil liberties and press freedoms.

Are politicians at risk in other European countries?

While this may be an isolated incident, it happens against a backdrop of increasing polarisation across the continent.

Rij cautions against overstating the level of violence but, she says, "the reality is that if we look at the German context there has been a significant increase in attacks on politicians". The most affected party is the Greens, the junior partner in chancellor Olaf Scholz's coalition, which reported 1,219 incidents of verbal and physical attacks last year.

Other parties have also been affected. In the past month alone, two AfD politicians were physically attacked in Stuttgart; Franziska Giffey, a well-known figure in the Social Democratic party, was treated in hospital after she was struck in the neck and the head; and Matthias Ecke, an SDP MEP, required surgery after an attack by four people left him with serious injuries.

What's behind the increasingly toxic political mood in Europe?

There is a general sense of discontent in many countries that are still dealing with the effects of the pandemic, Russia's war in Ukraine and a globally volatile economy. Interest groups have been protesting about everything from farming to the war in Gaza, repression of civil liberties, the climate crisis, anti-immigration and pro-immigration policies. It is clear that much of the public does not feel heard by their representatives



▼ The German politicians Franziska Giffey and Matthias Ecke were attacked

MICHELE TANTUSSI/GETTY; JAN WOITAS/AP

and sometimes the pushback has turned violent. "There's been a lot of protesting and a lot of discontent, and I think it is reflecting increased divisions and polarisation within these societies," Rij says. "There's a bit of a parallel between the murder of Jo Cox before the Brexit vote in the UK, where it felt like the mood was really grim."

Politicians themselves are using more inflammatory rhetoric than ever. Drawing a comparison to the language Donald Trump used before the January 6 insurrection, Rij says: "This rhetoric has the potential to be very damaging - it is the responsibility of politicians to really think about the words they use because the fallout can be severe."

How is this likely to affect the European parliamentary elections?

The elections are less than two weeks away and many polls suggest that far-right parties are going to make significant gains, potentially coming first in nine EU states.

"Far-right parties in particular have been very good at galvanising people online," Rij says. "We know that conspiracy theories about lots of different issues are circulated widely and that has an influence on politics and the way people vote."

The fraught atmosphere also makes campaigning more difficult. "If there's a sense that politicians and volunteers can only go out with police protection, there is an impact on how visible politicians of certain parties are willing to be," Rij says. "That is really quite serious because, ultimately, we need to be able to hold elections where politicians have had a fair chance to campaign."

NIMO OMER IS ASSISTANT EDITOR OF THE GUARDIAN'S FIRST EDITION NEWSLETTER

'Politicians really need to think about the rhetoric they use because the fallout can be severe'

◀ Slovakia's prime minister, Robert Fico

THIERRY MONASSE/GETTY



COMMENTARY

Self-fulfilling prophecy? Political violence could benefit far-right parties in EU polls – if we let it

By Paul Taylor

The shooting of the Slovakian prime minister, Robert Fico, has dramatised the increasingly angry and polarised landscape of European politics. With just weeks to go before the European parliament elections, it is time to step back from the brink.

Little is known about the 71-year-old alleged gunman or his motives so far. But social media conspiracy theorists were quick to blame Europe's liberal elites for creating an environment of hate against Fico. It comes against a backdrop of growing political violence and threats against candidates, mayors and officials that have led some to abandon politics. Suspected far-right thugs beat up a Social Democratic MEP candidate in eastern Germany last month, putting him in hospital, and several Greens have also been attacked. French mayors quit last year after attacks on their homes by anti-immigration militants or urban rioters.

How the assassination attempt on a leader who opposed military aid to Ukraine and was sympathetic to Russia's war of aggression will affect the EU election remains to be seen. But populist and far-right parties promising to restore law and order may be the electoral beneficiaries of the anxiety generated by political violence. By hyping up the threat from anti-immigration nationalists, Europe's centre-left parties risk amplifying the very phenomenon they strive to prevent.

Yet a cool-headed analysis of recent opinion polls suggests that the far right remains a long way from

wielding any significant power in the EU's institutions. Polls so far suggest the two rival rightwing groupings contesting the elections will together win fewer than one-quarter of the seats in the 720-member legislature. Even if those groups could agree with each other on policies and alliances, which they can't, they would not have enough seats in a coalition with the centre-right European People's party (EPP) to form a majority.

Fico's Smer party, which originated on the left but has lurched towards Orbán-style Eurosceptical populism, was suspended from the centre-left Socialists and Democrats group last year and has not joined another political family, minimising its influence in Brussels.

Arithmetically, the only plausible coalition that can run the next EU legislature has to include both the EPP (expected to win about 175 seats) and the S&D, which is predicted to win about 140, plus the centrist liberal Renew Europe (RE) group (set to have about 85 members). They may also need the support of the Greens-EFA group (heading for about 50 seats) to pass some climate and environment measures.

A bigger far-right contingent will make for a noisier parliament, with more political theatre. At best, it may remind complacent mainstream politicians that the climate, energy and environmental policies they enact can have a financial impact on ordinary people's lives.

Wages have failed to keep pace with inflation since the end of 2019 in the Netherlands, Austria, France, Germany, Finland, Ireland and - most dramatically - Italy. That correlates almost exactly to the countries where the far-right has made the biggest poll gains, except for Ireland, where the leftist Sinn Féin has captured most of the angry vote.

If the threat of a far-right takeover of the European parliament is exaggerated, it has already made a huge impact on immigration policy across Europe by changing the narrative. Paying off foreign governments with dubious human rights records to keep refugees, asylum seekers and economic migrants at bay became official EU policy in 2016, when the then German chancellor, Angela Merkel, brokered a deal with Turkey to stem the flow of Syrian refugees and other migrants into Greece.

In national politics, the *cordon sanitaire* that once kept the far right isolated has broken down in several EU countries. Mainstream centre-right parties have brought them into past or present government as junior partners in Finland, Austria and now Croatia, and formed minority administrations that rely on their support in Sweden, the Netherlands and Denmark. In Italy, the two largest parties in government are rightists.

Anti-fascist scare tactics proved successful in Spain last year, when the prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, his Socialist Workers' party and its leftist allies successfully employed the civil war era slogan *No pasarán* ("They shall not pass") to beat off a challenge by the conservative People's party by pointing to its alliance with the far-right party Vox. That campaign, in a country with a living memory of fascist rule, cannot easily be replicated across Europe.

The left would do better to give anxious voters credible hope of better living standards and fairer taxation, rather than resorting to the fascist threat.

PAUL TAYLOR IS A SENIOR VISITING FELLOW AT THE EUROPEAN POLICY CENTRE

ILLUSTRATION:
PETE REYNOLDS

“
By hyping up the threat, Europe's centre-left risks amplifying the very situation it strives to prevent

AZERBAIJAN

Country at a crossroads as Cop29 nears

Page 24 →

Spotlight



ANALYSIS
IRAN

Rocky path President's death comes as challenges lie ahead

By Patrick Wintour
and Peter Beaumont



The death of the Iranian president, Ebrahim Raisi, in a helicopter crash comes at a time when the country, faced by unprecedented external challenges, was already bracing itself for a change in regime with the expected demise in the next few years of its 85-year-old supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

In the country's hydra-headed leadership where power is spread in often opaque ways between clerics, politicians and army, it is the supreme leader, not the president, that is ultimately decisive.

Indeed, in some ways the posts

of president and prime minister became overwhelmed in the drafting of Iran's constitution in 1979, leading to advocates of a more powerful presidency to claim the role was being subsumed in a form of autocracy created in the name of religion.

The presidency, however loyal to the supreme leader - and Raisi was considered very loyal to Khamenei - is often cast in the role as a scapegoat helping the supreme leader to avoid criticism. That was the fate of Raisi's predecessor, Hassan Rouhani, who became a punchbag for decisions taken elsewhere.

▲ Iranian women clad in black chadors hold posters of Ebrahim Raisi as they take part in a mourning ceremony in Tehran

ABEDIN TAHERKENAREH/
EPA

Continued



In recent months Raisi, elected president in 2021 but in practice handpicked by the supreme leader, had been mentioned as a possible successor to Khamenei. His death instead clears a thorny path for Khamenei's son, Mojtaba Khamenei.

The choice is made by an 88-strong "assembly of experts", and Raisi's departure increases the chances of a hereditary succession in Iran, something many clerics oppose as alien to its revolutionary principles.

Raisi's death will add to the sense of a country already in political transition. A new hardline parliament was only elected on 1 March in which turnout for some of the elections fell below 10%, and was presented as reaching a nationwide turnout of only 41% - a record low.

Reformist or moderate politicians were either disqualified or soundly beaten, leaving a new and, as yet, untested division in parliament between traditional hardliners and an ultra-conservative group known as Paydari or the Steadfastness Front. The effective exclusion of reformists from participation in parliament for the first time since 1979 adds to the sense of a country in uncharted waters.

The cumulative disruption also comes at a time when Iran can ill afford such uncertainty as it faces western challenges over its nuclear programme, a dire economy and tense relations with other Middle Eastern states.

The loss of Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, the foreign affairs minister, in the helicopter crash only adds to a sense of instability. His most likely successor is his deputy, Ali Bagheri, but hardliners may regard him as too willing to



▲ Rescue teams search near the crash site in Varzaghan, north-western Iran

AZIN HAGHIGHI/MOJ NEWS/AFP/GETTY

▼ Ebrahim Raisi became Iranian president after the 2021 election

VAHID SALEMI/AP

negotiate with the west over Iran's nuclear programme.

Although Iran has not lost a president in office since the revolution in 1979, the country has a clear formal system for succession in which the first vice-president - currently Mohammad Mokhber - takes charge. Few regard Mokhber as presidential material. A new president should be elected within 50 days, giving the supreme leader and his entourage relatively little time to select someone who will not only become president at such a critical time, but will also be in a strong position to succeed Khamenei.

Tehran's choice is whether to allow the vote to be semi-democratic and contested, or risk nothing by ensuring no candidate with any organisation or following stands against the hardliner likely to be chosen as the regime's preferred candidate. It is not likely to be a long discussion.

Recent experience suggests the regime will opt for the safety of an election in which its chosen candidate has no serious rival, even if this leads to a lower turnout and a disillusioned electorate. With so much external and internal

I don't anticipate a change or shift in direction of Iran's foreign policy

pressure, central to which is the looming need to replace Khamenei, the regime is unlikely to leave much to chance. This is a critical moment, Khamenei and his allies will believe, for continuity and security.

The immediate challenge of any new leader will be to control not just internal dissent, but the factional demands within the country to take a tougher line with the west and draw closer to Russia and China.

The perennial challenge to Iran remains relations with Israel, which reached a new pitch of danger in April when the two countries exchanged fire, sparked by an Israeli attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus, and more broadly by Iran's support for proxy groups willing to fight Israel, including Hamas and Hezbollah.

In the immediate aftermath of the fatal crash, Iran's regional proxies



offered their condolences. Hamas mourned Raisi as an “honourable supporter” of the Gaza-based group. Hezbollah praised him as “a strong supporter, and a staunch defender of our causes ... and a protector of the resistance movements”. Mohammed Abdulsalam, a spokesperson for Yemen’s Houthi rebels, said on X that Raisi’s death was a loss “for the entire Islamic world and Palestine and Gaza”.

Foreign policy in Iran - including on the nuclear issue - is set by Khamenei and the supreme national security council. Raisi and Abdollahian represented, in different ways, the enactment of the hardline policies that have come to the fore since Raisi was manoeuvred into the president’s office in 2021 with substantial assistance from Khamenei and the council of guardians, a powerful decision-making body.

Over that period, Iran has edged closer to the west’s red lines with higher levels of nuclear enrichment and a discussion over whether a decades-long religious edict against nuclear weapons is still appropriate.

On the regional front, too, Iran has become a far more overt actor via its network of proxies, bringing direct conflict, not least with Israel, far closer. Hezbollah, Iran’s proxy in Lebanon, has been engaged in a low-level border conflict with Israel since the Gaza war began in October.

There is also the question of Tehran’s support for Russia in the war in Ukraine, not least its shipments of drones to Moscow.

“I personally don’t anticipate a change or shift in direction of Iran’s foreign policy,” Dr Sanam Vakil, director of the Middle East and North Africa programme at Chatham House, said.

“Foreign policy is made in the supreme national security council where Raisi had some degree of influence. I expect the same approach to continue: maintaining bilateral ties across the region; continuing to support and build the capacity of the axis of resistance, and developing economic opportunities with Russia and China while playing divisive politics with Europe and the US.”

PATRICK WINTOUR IS THE GUARDIAN’S DIPLOMATIC EDITOR; PETER BEAUMONT IS A SENIOR INTERNATIONAL REPORTER

IRAN

News of Raisi’s death met with fireworks and few tears

By Deepa Parent

Activists in Iran have said there is little mood to mourn the death of the president, Ebrahim Raisi, who was killed in a helicopter crash near the border with Azerbaijan on Sunday.

Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, announced a five-day public mourning period after the deaths of Raisi, the foreign minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, and other passengers on the helicopter. However, Iranians who spoke to the Guardian refused to lament the death of a man who they said was responsible for hundreds of deaths in his political career.

Hours before Raisi’s death was confirmed by state media, videos circulated on Telegram showing celebratory fireworks. Iranians shared posts reminding the world of Raisi’s brutal presidency and his repression of political dissidents.

Speaking of the president’s death, a family member of a teenager killed by security forces during the **Mahsa Amini protests** said: “Raisi’s soul will never rest in peace because he killed my brother and the children of my homeland. He was a murderer who ordered the killing of so many children.

▼ A woman reads about the helicopter crash in Tehran on Monday

ATTA KENARE/AFP/GETTY

Amini arrests It was during Raisi’s tenure that protests swept the country after the death of the 22-year-old Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini, who died in police custody after being arrested by police for breaching Islamic dress codes. More than 19,000 protesters were jailed, and at least 500 were killed - including 60 children - during the Woman, Life, Freedom protests. The police continue to violently arrest women for violating strict dress codes.

My brother’s soul will rest in peace only when others like him are brought to justice. Until then, in God, we believe.”

Among those killed during the protests was also Minoo Majidi, a 62-year-old mother who was shot at close range by security forces with more than 160 pellets. Her daughters shared a video of them cheering to the news.

Majidi’s daughter Mahsa said: “I know it is not right to be happy about the death of a person, but they were not human. Congratulations to all the victims’ families and people of Iran. *Zan, Zendegi, Azadi* [Woman, Life, Freedom].”

Those interviewed by the Guardian inside the capital said the mood might have been “jubilant” on social media, but reactions were mixed in Iran.

A Tehran-based reporter said: “Many military agents have been stationed in the streets and even small squares since last night. The police have repeatedly warned that people who are happy about the death of the president will be prosecuted.

“The mourning period will see some arrests because people are in no mood to mourn and won’t follow the orders. The surrounding mood is nowhere close to sorrow, and people hope others will meet a similar fate.”

A 22-year-old woman, who was among the first to hit the streets in protest in September 2022, said: “I am not happy or sad about his death. But I will take it as a sign of justice for the deaths of my friends. We continue to face death every day for simply asking for basic human rights and that unfortunately will not change unless this regime goes down.”

Political activist Taghi Rahmani, the husband of the imprisoned Nobel prize winner Narges Mohammadi, said: “Raisi’s death in itself will not structurally change the leadership of the country, which is ensured by the supreme leader Khamenei. On the other hand, we must now scrutinise the looming political battle and the internal balance of power within the regime, since the Iranian constitution provides that new elections must be organised within 50 days.”

Another protester, 30, from Tehran, said: “Life in Iran has taught us that sometimes it is possible to be happy about the death of people. It is painful, but I am happy. We lost our homeland and hopefully, we will gain it back.”

DEEPA PARENT IS A HUMAN RIGHTS JOURNALIST





BALENCIAGA
MODE



📷 Fuelling up

Displaced Palestinian children line up to receive food in Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip, last Sunday. Humanitarian assistance began to arrive in Gaza last week along a US-made pier, but the US aid chief said the new sea corridor could not be a substitute for land crossings, and warned that deliveries of food and fuel entering Gaza had slowed to “dangerously low levels”.

The White House national security spokesperson, John Kirby, confirmed that truckloads of humanitarian aid, including food from the United Arab Emirates, sent by ship from Cyprus, had been unloaded on the Gaza coast and handed over to the control of the UN.

Last Saturday, images were released of Palestinians carrying boxes of humanitarian aid after rushing the trucks transporting the international aid from the Trident Pier near Nuseirat in the central Gaza Strip.

The head of the US Agency for International Development, Samantha Power, said the US would use the route to deliver “tonnes of life-saving aid, including nutrient-rich food to support thousands of Gaza’s most vulnerable children and adults; and critical supplies such as plastic sheeting for shelter, jerry cans to hold clean water, and hygiene kits”.

But, she added: “The pier ... does not replace or substitute for land crossings into Gaza.”

Israeli military operations around the southern city of Rafah have led to the closure of a nearby crossing point from Egypt, and the interruption of almost all land deliveries through another southern gate at Kerem Shalom. Meanwhile, trucks heading for the northern crossing at Erez have been ambushed and looted by Israeli extremists.

Power said the US was leaning on Israel to ensure there would be no repeat of the bombing of an aid convoy on 1 April, in which seven workers for the World Central Kitchen were killed. *Julian Borger*

AFP / GETTY



UKRAINE



The race to evacuate Vovchansk's remaining residents

Rescue operations ever more dangerous as fighting reaches Kharkiv town at the centre of Russia's latest offensive

By Shaun Walker VOVCHANSK

Evacuating the last remaining residents of Vovchansk, the town at the centre of Russia's recent offensive in Kharkiv region, becomes more dangerous with every passing day.

As fierce street battles between Russian and Ukrainian forces continue in the northern part of the town, local police and volunteers have been journeying in daily to evacuate the last, terrified residents out of a place that was once home to 18,000 people.

"We don't know how many people are left now, but we hope it's not more than 200," said Oleksiy Kharkivskiy, head of the Vovchansk police force, speaking last Friday morning in a nearby village.

The road into Vovchansk was under artillery fire at that very moment, he said. Dressed in military-style fatigues and with a pistol tucked into his body armour, Kharkivskiy's years of experience as a beat cop can hardly have prepared him for these rescue missions that require dodging drones and artillery fire.

The people who emerged from Vovchansk and the surrounding villages last Friday were mostly those who had planned to stick it out to the very end in their homes, but changed

▲ Residents arrive at the evacuation point

JĘDRZEJ NOWICKI

200

The number of residents rescuers think need evacuating from Vovchansk, once home to 18,000 people, as fighting in the region intensifies

their mind when the intensity of the fighting became too much to bear. Most of them were elderly, frail and deeply traumatised. They registered their identities with police and waited for a minibus that would take them to a hub for displaced people in Kharkiv.

"Why the hell didn't you leave earlier? We've been telling you all to leave for days," shouted one policeman, voice wrought with frustration, at Olha and Mykola, an elderly couple just shy of their 50th wedding anniversary, who were standing at the evacuation hub with a few plastic bags of possessions and a bucket of eggs, perhaps the last to be laid by their chickens.

"We didn't think it could get this bad," said Olha, forlornly, cradling a large grey cat, swaddled in a blanket from which it was attempting to wriggle free. "We didn't want to leave. It's our home. We don't know where to go." She said they would first stay in a shelter in Kharkiv and then hoped to stay with relatives, though she was not sure if there would be space.

Standing with them was Natalya, 55, the post office operator of Vilcha, just south of Vovchansk and with 1,800 residents before the war. "Our village is a Chernobyl resettlement village, it was built for us in the 1980s after the disaster, it was called Vilcha there too. Many of us moved together. And now everyone has been scattered all over," she said. She wasn't sure where she might go either; her immediate family is in Poland, and would not have space for her and her two dogs.

This region already spent seven months under Russian occupation at the start of the war, and if Vovchansk falls, it would be the first time Moscow has retaken a town already won back by Ukraine. In recent months, Russian forces have seized the initiative in the conflict, as Kyiv experiences shortages of reserves and weaponry, the latter partly caused by wrangling in Congress that delayed a military aid package.

The speed with which a relatively small contingent of Russian troops pushed several kilometres into Ukrainian territory has alarmed many in Ukraine, who have asked why defences were not stronger, and whether Kharkiv might be under threat again. Russia tried to take the city at the beginning of the war and was repulsed, but has been pounding Kharkiv with missiles in recent weeks.

To stave off the threat, there has been a flurry of military activity in

the area between Kharkiv and the Russian border, with trucks clawing out new trenches and fortifications. Military vehicles and jeeps packed with soldiers ply the roads.

President Vladimir Putin, speaking during a visit to China last Friday, said Russia does not have plans to seize Kharkiv, though he added a sinister “for now” to the sentence. Russia’s goal in the current operation is to create a “buffer zone” to protect border areas, including the city of Belgorod, from Ukrainian attacks, Putin claimed.

The visual consequences of this new offensive have been gut-wrenchingly familiar: urban landscapes assaulted with heavy weaponry, the glazed eyes of displaced Ukrainians who had little and have now lost it all, and spirited resolve from many soldiers and civilians who refuse to let the Russian army roll through the country unopposed.

Despite this, recent weeks caught many Vovchansk residents totally off-guard, partly because the fighting largely passed the town by in the opening stages of the war. The first time around, Russians entered Vovchansk with no resistance on their ultimately futile push towards Kharkiv. When they retreated, it was hasty and without major exchanges of fire.

“We went to the church to a service with the Russians in charge, and by the time we came out of church two hours later, the Russians had gone and there was a Ukrainian flag flying,” claimed Ludmyla Sorokolitova, a 39-year-old who is training to be a paramedic. “Nobody expected there could be fighting like this.”

Sorokolitova and her husband spent six days sheltering in a cellar, until 15 May, when they made a dash through incoming fire to her parents’ home, a kilometre away. They were able to leave, but both of their homes are destroyed beyond repair, she said.

Now the family is living in a room in the dormitory of a Kharkiv boarding school. Ludmyla is looking into apartment rentals, but her mother, Natalya, said she was determined to return home as soon as possible.

“We all want to go home,” said Ludmyla, quietly. “I’m just more realistic about the fact that we have nothing to go back to.”

SHAUN WALKER IS THE GUARDIAN’S CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE CORRESPONDENT

‘We didn’t want to leave. It’s our home. We don’t know where to go’

▼ Olha Vilcha resident



ANALYSIS
RUSSIA

Game of thrones War machine reshuffle reveals Putin’s fear of Kremlin rivals

By Samantha de Bendern



When the Russian defence minister, Sergei Shoigu, was removed from his post and appointed head of the security council last week, there were two big questions on everyone’s mind. What would his successor, Andrei Belousov, bring to the table, and what would happen to the former head of the security council, Nikolai Patrushev - seen by many as a potential successor to Vladimir Putin?

The second question has a straightforward answer. Patrushev, it seems, is being sidelined. The Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said he had been appointed to the grand position of presidential aide for shipbuilding - barring any further surprise moves, this is a considerable downgrade in role.

What Shoigu’s removal will mean is a bit trickier, but it may also be a case of Putin neutralising an ally who has become too powerful. The Kremlin reshuffle was initially interpreted as a much-needed anti-corruption clean-up within Russia’s



▲ Vladimir Putin with, right, Russia’s former defence minister Sergei Shoigu

security apparatus. There was last month’s arrest of Shoigu’s close ally, the deputy defence minister Timur Ivanov, and the reported detention of Yuri Kuznetsov, another senior defence figure, last week.

But the Russian political scientist Mikhail Savva insists that Shoigu’s dismissal, and Belousov’s nomination, “have nothing to do with Shoigu’s corruption”. This is about two things: taking back control of military spending and removing any threat to Putin.

Belousov is described as a trustworthy “bureaucrat among bureaucrats” who will take Russia’s military industrial complex to a new level of efficiency. Russia’s myriad of pro-war bloggers have welcomed him as a technocratic manager who will undertake a full audit of military spending but leave military issues to the general staff.

By putting an economist at the head of the defence ministry, Putin is showing the world that he is turning the whole of Russia into a war machine, and that he is digging in for the long haul. For this he needs a good technocrat who is above all loyal. Indeed, unlike Shoigu, Belousov does not come with a power base, is an introvert who does not seek the limelight.

Putin is terrified of a repeat of last June’s events, when Yevgeny Prigozhin led a rebellion. All of this points to his fear of the power struggles inside the Kremlin and the awareness that, as he builds his absolutist power, there are cracks that could widen unless he takes pre-emptive measures.

He has effectively just put the whole military industrial complex under presidential control. In the short term this makes him seem even more impregnable and underlines the fact that he is not interested in any kind of peace that would put a stop to the war, which feeds his power. Those who think Putin would be open to negotiating over a piece of eastern Ukraine and Crimea should bear this in mind when hoping for a quick negotiated end to this war. Putin needs war to survive.

SAMANTHA DE BENDERN IS AN ASSOCIATE FELLOW IN THE RUSSIA AND EURASIA PROGRAMME AT CHATHAM HOUSE



GEORGIA



◀ A rally against the controversial 'foreign agents' bill in Tbilisi

GIORGI ARJEVANIDZE/
AFP/GETTY

Moving back to Moscow: how dream of freedom unravelled

By Daniel Boffey TBILISI

The army of riot police had finally retreated from Tbilisi's Rustaveli Avenue, the broad thoroughfare in front of the parliament building, back into the barricaded parliamentary estate.

The last hour on the streets of the Georgian capital had been violent as officers, beating their shields with truncheons, surged forward to push the chanting crowds away from the graffiti-scrawled parliament building.

It was the afternoon of 14 May and the MPs inside needed to get out after passing the hated "foreign agents" law - which they did. But the police retreat, under a shower of plastic bottles and eggs, was raucously cheered.

Then the crowd started to sing: "So praise be to freedom, to freedom be praise." It was the Georgian national anthem, Tavisupleba, or Freedom, a bittersweet reminder to some of the

older protesters of a time of great promise - and disappointment. The significance of the "foreign agents" law may seem arcane to those outside Georgia, but for those on the streets it is *an attempt to smear dissenting western voices as traitors*.

Two decades ago it had been Mikheil Saakashvili, a US-educated and media-friendly ally of the west, leading the revolution. He became president with 96% of the vote but the support was genuine.

In his first term, his anti-corruption zeal and determination to bring Georgia closer to Nato and the EU won him accolades at home and abroad, and impressive economic growth. By the second term, international monitors and domestic NGOs were warning of the growth of a kleptocracy and creeping authoritarianism.

"The reforms were very top-down and they had to be fast," said Ghia Nodia, who served as the minister of education and science in Saakashvili's cabinet in 2008. "The idea was we don't have too much time. There was a concentration of power and, of course, Saakashvili is a power junkie, and there was really no opposition."

Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, after a confrontation between Tbilisi and Moscow over the breakaway region of South Ossetia, appeared to replenish Saakashvili's political stock.

When he announced a ceasefire after five days of conflict he was cheered by those who, a year earlier, had taken to the streets calling for his resignation over hasty reforms.

But Russia continued to occupy 20% of Georgia. Saakashvili's apparent disregard for upsetting Moscow would

come to be portrayed by the opposition Georgian Dream party as reckless.

Then there was a domestic scandal. Footage emerged on the eve of the 2012 election that appeared to show a half-naked prisoner begging for mercy as two guards abused him violently.

The scandal spoke to a perception in Georgia that what had started as a "zero tolerance" approach to crime had warped into something far more sinister. The mysterious billionaire and leader of Georgian Dream, Bidzina Ivanishvili, who had made his fortune in Russia in the 1990s, issued a statement condemning "these acts of torture by the Georgian government".

In the election, Ivanishvili's party swept to victory on a platform that promised to restore civil rights and reset relations with Moscow while pursuing EU membership.

Saakashvili accepted the voters' decision, in the first peaceful democratic transition of power in Georgian history. More ominously, the Kremlin welcomed the result.

David Katsarava, 46, is in hospital requiring surgery for fractured cheek bones after a brutal beating by riot police last Tuesday before the national anthem was sung. He is known for his work monitoring the "line of occupation" between Georgian-held territory and where Russian troops now sit.

Katsarava supported Georgian Dream in 2012. "We thought that with the changing of this government we can come back again in the right direction," he said. "This was a big, big mistake. Nowadays, we see that Georgia is governed by Russian government."

The story of the past 12 years has been of Georgia talking up its prospective membership of the EU while pursuing incompatible policies - and getting away with it, he said.

It was only when Russia invaded Ukraine that the Georgian government had to pick a side - declining to join the west in imposing sanctions. Even then, it was granted EU candidate status in December.

Back among the protesters, Ekaterine Burkadze, 45, and her 21-year-old nephew Paata Kaloiani are facing many more days and nights on the streets. "We protested at the Rose revolution, we protested against Saakashvili. Now we are here," she said. "We have to protect our republic and our peaceful future in the European Union."

DANIEL BOFFEY IS THE GUARDIAN'S CHIEF REPORTER

'Foreign agents' Civil society organisations and media receiving more than 20% of their revenues from abroad will have to register as "organisations serving the interests of a foreign power". The legislation is said to be part of an unravelling of all that has been achieved, albeit in fits and starts, since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

ANALYSIS
UNITED KINGDOM

Infected blood Final report vindicates the families still awaiting justice

By Haroon Siddique



“We have been gaslit for generations,” was the reaction of Andy Evans, chair of the

campaign group Tainted Blood, in response to the final report into the contaminated blood scandal, which was published on Monday.

More than 30,000 people in the UK, 3,000 of whom have died, were infected with tainted blood from the 1970s through to the early 90s, either from receiving transfusions during surgery, or through products created using blood plasma and imported to treat haemophiliacs.

To many who were infected, or whose parents, children, partners or other loved ones were, the report – the long-awaited conclusion to

a five-year public inquiry – merely confirmed what they already knew.

They have long maintained that this was a preventable tragedy, compounded by persistent attempts to evade accountability. In that sense, Sir Brian Langstaff’s report, which details numerous examples of opportunities missed to mitigate risks and says in black and white that there was a “cover-up”, offers them vindication.

If the general public doubted that those they had faith in to protect them could fail so catastrophically, they were wrong. If it was previously believed far-fetched that clinicians would ever treat people without explaining the potentially fatal risks, that people would be left waiting for years to be told they had HIV or hepatitis C, or that children would be experimented on without consent, people now know better.

Langstaff said 23 countries, mainly European, introduced screening for hepatitis C before the UK did so in 1991. He said it was reasonable to believe that, if recommendations made in 1952 by the World Health Organization to alleviate “serum hepatitis” had been adopted, “a significant part of the harm on which this inquiry is focused could have been prevented”.

Additionally, there was enough knowledge in 1973 to stop Factor VIII blood products from the US ever being licensed for importation.

In 1983, Ken Clarke, then a health minister, told parliament: “There is no conclusive evidence that Aids is transmitted by blood products.” The report says this line was widely echoed despite the fact that it was known by the middle of the previous year that whatever was causing Aids might be transmissible by blood and blood products.

The report says: “By 1986 the government can have been under no illusion about the scale of what had happened to people with haemophilia.” And yet successive governments declined to hold an inquiry – it was only announced in 2017 and began the following year.

Similarly, early offers of compensation were dismissed by Langstaff as “derisory” and the situation is far from resolved.

Against such a backdrop, it is understandable if campaigners might feel vindicated but still unwilling to trust.

The latter feeling is one evidently shared by Langstaff. Referring to the current government’s failure to pay interim compensation to bereaved parents and children, or set up a compensation framework, in compliance with his recommendations last year, he said: “It has led to a real and understandable fear that without a clear process or timetable there may be a dragging of feet.”

Accordingly, he has taken the unusual step of writing to the government to say that he does not consider the inquiry will be complete until he has seen what progress it is making on implementing his recommendations. He called for a progress report to be made to parliament by the end of the year and a commitment to the recommendations within 12 months, saying they should not be allowed to “collect dust on the Cabinet Office shelf”.

The delay in getting to this point has also scuppered campaigners’ hopes that anyone will ever be prosecuted (an issue that inquiries do not have powers to address). “Justice delayed really is, in this case, justice denied,” said Evans.

HAROON SIDDIQUE IS THE GUARDIAN’S LEGAL AFFAIRS CORRESPONDENT

Tragic toll
Generations
of suffering

30k
Number of
people in the UK
infected with
tainted blood

3k
The number
of those given
contaminated
blood who have
since died

23
Number of
countries that
began screening
for hepatitis C
before the UK
began to do
so 1991

◀ Families of
people affected
by the infected
blood scandal
gather for the
public inquiry’s
final report

LEON NEAL/GETTY



ANALYSIS
AZERBAIJAN

At a crossroads

Baku to step away from oil legacy as it prepares for Cop29

By Fiona Harvey



Oil is inescapable in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. The smell of it greets visitors on arrival, and from the shores of the Caspian Sea on which the city is built the tankers are eternally visible. Flares from refineries light up the night sky, and you do not have to travel far to see fields of “nodding donkeys”, small piston pump oil wells about 6 metres tall,

▼ Old oil fields around Baku, Azerbaijan, some dating back to the late 19th century

DAVID LEVENE

that look almost festive in their bright red and green livery.

It will be an interesting setting, in a few months' time, for the gathering of the 29th UN climate conference of the parties.

Mukhtar Babayev, Azerbaijan's minister of ecology who will chair the two-week summit, likes to position the country at the crossroads of the world. He says it can provide a bridge between the wealthy global north and the poor global south; as a former Soviet bloc country, between east and west; and between its fellow oil and gas producers, and the countries that provide its export market.

Azerbaijan is where the world's first oil wells were dug in the 1840s, more than a decade before the US dug its first well. It is one of the most fossil fuel dependent economies in the world: oil and gas make up 90% of its exports, and provide 60% of the government's budget.

This brought riches. “Oil and, more recently, gas have been largely responsible for the remarkable rise in living standards in Azerbaijan since the late 1990s,” according to the International Energy Agency.

But the country is moving to renewable energy, with plans to expand wind and solar energy. An interconnector is planned, to bring this low-carbon power to eastern Europe, under the Black Sea to Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania.

“Azerbaijan would like to share our experience,” Babayev said. “We would like to invite all the countries, especially the fossil fuel producing countries, to be together in this process. Because we understand our responsibility. We think that we can do more, and together.”

Last December, at the Cop28 summit in Dubai, countries agreed to “transition away” from fossil fuels. For many, that fell too far short of the full phase-out that more than 80 countries were calling for. Yet it was the first time that the causes of the climate crisis - fossil fuels - were identified and targeted. That is a testament to the power fossil fuel producers wield over the rest of the world. In the words of António Guterres, the UN secretary-general, they “have humanity by the throat”.

At Baku, the focus will shift, from what we have too much of - fossil fuels - to what the proponents of



▶ Baku's Olympic Stadium hosted games in the Euro 2020 football tournament

ALI BALIKCI/ANADOLU/GETTY

action severely lack: finance. To cut greenhouse gas emissions, to make the world's existing infrastructure more resilient to extreme weather, to bring about the "green transition" needed to hold global temperatures within 1.5C of pre-industrial levels – all of this requires vast investment. According to a landmark report led by the economists Nicholas Stern and Vera Songwe, about \$2.4tn will be needed each year by 2030, just for developing countries, excluding China, to bring about the changes needed.

The main aim for Cop29 is to set a "new collective quantified goal" for such finance. Mohamed Adow, director of the Power Shift Africa thinktank, believes the money could bring about a transformation in the fight for a liveable climate. "Tackling the climate crisis needs two things: political will and financial investment. In many parts of the global south, there is political will – what is missing is investment," he said.

But getting hold of finance is almost impossible for such countries, because lenders refuse or attach high interest rates and onerous conditions. "The risk perception they give to Africa, it's so high," he explained. "One, the big problem is that the financing is expensive. Two, is that it's not accessible. Three, it's not adequate at all. The conditions put forward for Africa to access that finance are almost impossible."

The problem for Azerbaijan, and the UN, is that although Cop29 has the responsibility for delivering a finance settlement, the levers of power lie elsewhere. The World Bank is the biggest development finance institution globally, but in the eyes of many poorer countries has failed on climate finance.

Mia Mottley, the prime minister of Barbados, has led the developing world in calling for reform of the World Bank. Along with the president of Kenya, William Ruto,

Oil and gas have been largely responsible for the remarkable rise in living standards here



90%

Exports accounted for by oil and gas

60%

Budget provided by fossil fuels

and Emmanuel Macron of France, Mottley is also spearheading an initiative to explore possible new sources of finance, such as a levy on frequent flyers, a carbon charge on international shipping, windfall taxes on fossil fuel producers and even a global wealth tax.



But who should be the main sources of climate finance? The definition of which countries are developing has remained unchanged since 1992. If a climate treaty were written today, it would seem absurd to class Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Singapore, South Korea and other states with high per capita income, many as a result of oil wealth, alongside the likes of Chad, Burkina Faso and Bangladesh.

Wopke Hoekstra, the EU's climate commissioner, insists the pool of donor countries must be widened. "We can no longer hide behind the logic of developed and developing," he said. Naming the Gulf states, Singapore and China, he added: "With affluence, with wealth, also comes responsibility. We need to move to a situation where those with the ability to pay actually do pay." China has been accused of overexpanding its capacity to manufacture key products and components, including solar panels and electric vehicles, in order to undercut US and European competitors and drive them from the market.

John Kerry, the former US special presidential envoy for climate, and his Chinese counterpart, Xie Zhenhua, shared a warm

rapport. Their successors show signs of trying to emulate that close cooperation, but the broader political currents may be against them. Two weeks ago, when China's new climate envoy, Liu Zhenmin, visited Washington DC for the first time, he was invited by John Podesta, Kerry's replacement, to a private dinner, which by all accounts was a cheerful affair. Days later, Joe Biden slapped tariffs on \$18bn of Chinese imports, including electric vehicles and solar panels.

Hoekstra's tough talking on China must be seen in the context of EU fears of a backlash against green policies from the right, driven by economic concerns, in parliamentary elections in June. In the US, meanwhile, the resurgence of Donald Trump poses potentially a much greater threat to climate action: in his last term of office, he started the process of withdrawal from the Paris agreement.

The war in Ukraine and the conflict in Gaza will also cast shadows. Azerbaijan was allowed to take the role of presidency of Cop29 only when Vladimir Putin, and Armenia, agreed. There are still tensions in the region after 30 years of simmering ethnic tension centred on disputed borderlands.

For Azerbaijan to bring about a successful Cop that solves the key questions of climate finance and brings trillions of dollars to the developing world to make the necessary green transition would be an extraordinary achievement. It remains unlikely, as there is so little agreement over where the investment should come from, and how it should be raised, and the sums being spoken of are nowhere near enough yet.

But it is possible for Cop29 to produce vital progress, perhaps a pathway to a global financial settlement, one that reassures developing countries that their needs are being recognised. "Let's face it," said Mary Robinson, former president of Ireland and former UN high commissioner for human rights, "we make the best we can with each Cop. They're never good enough. They're certainly never perfect. But we make the best we can."

FIONA HARVEY IS A GUARDIAN ENVIRONMENT EDITOR

PORTUGAL

Looking up The plaques that reveal hidden black history

Lisbon project celebrates the places where its African community has lived, worked and transformed the city

By Ashifa Kassam LISBON

▼ A statue of Gen Marquez de Sá da Bandeira, a 19th-century abolitionist
MARIA ABRANCHES

It takes just a short stroll around Lisbon's São Domingos church to get a sense of its centuries-long history; a monument bearing the Star of David commemorates the thousands of Jews killed by a mob in 1506, while the church's scorched pillars hint at the 1959 fire that ravaged its interior, laying waste to its gilded woodcarvings.

What has long remained hidden from view, however, is the church's deep connection to the city's African population, as the seat of a 16th-century black religious brotherhood.

Since the start of the year, the Batoto Yetu association, a Swahili name meaning "our children", has been working to change this, installing a series of 20 plaques across Lisbon that aim to reclaim the city's African history.

"This is Portuguese history," said Djuzé Neves of Batoto Yetu, as he pointed to the small, ivory-coloured plaque that tells of the black brotherhood and its efforts to advance the rights of black people in Lisbon. "This is history that has been erased, silenced, ignored and whitewashed."

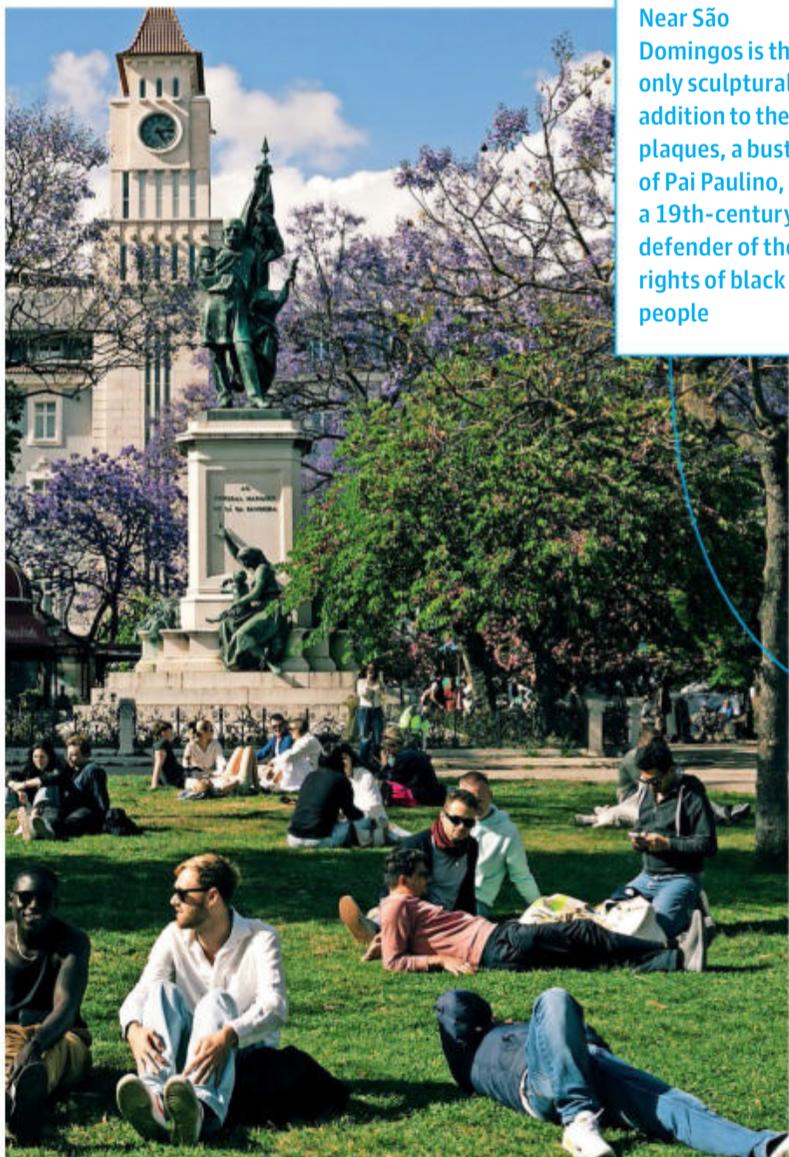
Neves added: "It's deeper than just a focus on slavery. The plaques cover

about 500 years of history, offering a tangible record of a community that included enslaved and free people. Some were pioneering doctors and journalists, while others had technical skills useful in the local shipbuilding industry. Others kept the city going with door-to-door sales of everything from food to coal."

In Terreiro do Paço, today a tourist-filled plaza facing the city's harbour, a plaque marks where many enslaved Africans first set foot in the city.

It's a starting point that speaks to the singular challenges the community faced, according to historian Isabel Castro Henriques, who was a consultant on the project. "These men, women and children came stripped of everything, treated as merchandise and were dehumanised constantly and continuously," she said. Despite all of this, they soon became part of the city's rich fabric, whether through work, the Catholic church or participation in cultural events.

At the Terreiro do Pelourinho Velho, or Old Pillory Square, a plaque tells how it was once home to a 16th-century marketplace where enslaved people were sold, while another in the



Near São Domingos is the only sculptural addition to the plaques, a bust of Pai Paulino, a 19th-century defender of the rights of black people



▶ Djuzé Neves of Batoto Yetu
▶▶ One of the new Lisbon street signs



'It's deeper than just a focus on slavery. This is history that has been erased, ignored'



vibrant Cais do Sodré neighbourhood notes that as much as 10% of the city's population was enslaved in the mid-1500s. In the central square of Rossio, tourists mill around a plaque that marks the spot as a longstanding meeting place for people of African descent, who would congregate in the plaza to sell their wares and skills.

For Batoto Yetu, the project was partly aimed at fostering a better sense of belonging among Lisbon's sizeable population of African descent. "The idea is to show that we are not just here because my parents migrated from Santiago, Cape Verde. We are here because this is our place, we were here," said Neves. "And to show that we didn't come as empty avatars: we brought knowledge."

Association members decided on a citywide installation of plaques, allowing them to directly challenge how Portuguese history - including colonialism and slavery - had remembered centuries of black lives in the city. "We didn't learn anything about any of this in school," said Neves.

City officials agreed to help with some of the funding. As Batoto Yetu sketched out plans for 40 plaques - whittled down to 20 due to costs - the pandemic took hold and elections ushered in a new mayor. The cost of the project grew, forcing the association to seek donations.

Six years on, it has finally become a reality. "Shouldn't we have got more help?" Neves said. "We don't have power, we don't have money, we don't have the museums, resources, historians - this is not just something for Africans, this is something for everyone. This is Portuguese history."

The project is coming to fruition as Portugal grapples with how best to confront its colonial and slave-trading past. Last month, the country's president, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, said Portugal should "pay the costs" for slavery and other colonial-era crimes, a suggestion dismissed by the new centre-right coalition government.

With just one plaque left to install, Neves is dreaming up other ways to make the city's long-overlooked histories more accessible. "This is just a small contribution," he said. "Now we need bigger goals. We need to think about concrete stuff, such as a museum or schoolbooks." *Observer*

ASHIFA KASSAM IS THE GUARDIAN AND OBSERVER'S EUROPEAN COMMUNITY AFFAIRS CORRESPONDENT



UNITED KINGDOM

▲ Puppeteer, or 'professor', Spike Lidington
UNIVERSITY OF EXETER

Judy fights back to give Mr Punch a modern touch

By David Barnett

After 362 years of frankly horrendous treatment at the hands of her husband, Mr Punch, Judy has had enough. For the first time, the female half of history's most famous puppet double act has been taking centre stage at a brand-new contemporary version of the British seaside favourite, Punch and Judy, at London's Covent Garden.

The show has been developed by a team at the University of Exeter as part of the Judy Project, a three-year investigation into the roles women have played in the puppetry tradition and how gender is portrayed.

The man in the booth - or "professor", as Punch and Judy puppeteers are known - is Spike Lidington. Aged 20, he is part of an emerging scene of younger people who are getting interested in the art of puppetry in general, and Punch and Judy in particular.

"Our challenge was how to work with, and update, a traditional form of entertainment that comes with a lot of audience expectation," Lidington said. "Whether you view it as misogynistic and making light of domestic violence, or as romping family entertainment, it tends to provoke a deep-seated response."

'It's always been a nimble puppet show, changing to reflect the time it is in

The first documented performance of the Punch character was recorded by Samuel Pepys in his diary on 9 May 1662, when a marionette called Pulcinella, rooted in Italy's *commedia dell'arte* tradition, played at Covent Garden and the court of Charles II.

The story since then has generally focused on the pathological violence meted out by Punch to the rest of the cast, usually with a big stick, with victims including his baby, his wife, a policeman who comes to investigate, a crocodile, a clown, and often a hangman and the devil, all of whom Punch traditionally outwits, kills or maims.

Not any more. For the first time, Judy actually questions her role. This version of the show also draws on historical figures and movements such as the suffragettes and Pride in its costumes and set colours.

The Judy Project's lead, Dr Alissa Mello, said: "At its core, this is a Punch and Judy show with familiar characters but not all fulfil their most familiar roles. There are subtle practical, narrative and design changes and updates that may or may not have meaning for everyone but that are there if one is looking. Each adds a new and modern layer, expanding who the show is for and the meaning it conveys."

When the new version was announced, the Sun newspaper dismissed it as a "woke makeover". Dr Tony Lidington, lecturer in drama at Exeter and a 40-year veteran of the seaside entertainment business (and Spike's father), shrugged off the attack. "For a start," he said, "woke simply means being aware of the society you live in, so I'm more than happy to be called woke."

"But people think of Punch and Judy as this very traditional form of entertainment that's never really changed, which isn't really true. It has always been a very nimble show throughout its history, and it has always changed to reflect its audience and the time it is in." For example, the cast of characters has changed, with Adolf Hitler replacing the devil during the second world war and characters such as Punch's mistress Pretty Polly being phased out over time.

"A show like Punch and Judy should evolve just as society evolves," Dr Lidington added. The new show still has lashings of violence, but "it's more about attacking the pillars of authority than individuals". *Observer*

DAVID BARNETT IS A CULTURE WRITER FOR THE GUARDIAN AND OBSERVER



HAITI

Outgunned Police cling on in critical battle with violent gangs

By Etienne Côté-Paluck
PORT-AU-PRINCE and Tom Phillips

Nine hours and countless bullets after gunmen began bombarding Stanley's police station in Port-au-Prince, the twentysomething officer started fearing he would not make it out alive.

"If you don't hear from me, it's because I'm dead," he wrote on a family WhatsApp group.

The officer's sister shivered as she read her sibling's parting text and - when he didn't answer her messages - rang one of his closest friends desperate for news. "I'm going out of my mind," she sobbed.

Contrary to his prediction, Stanley* did survive the recent assault on his fortress-like base but was left badly shaken. "What scared me the most was the idea of a needless death - that I might die and it would change nothing," the police officer said as heavily

armed gangs continue to sow terror in Haiti's capital despite the creation of a transitional government supposed to lead the country out of its latest crisis.

Other members of Haiti's embattled national police force have not been so lucky in the face of a coordinated gang insurrection that began in late February and has plunged Port-au-Prince into anarchy and forced the prime minister to resign.

Lionel Lazarre, the spokesperson for Haiti's police union Synapoha, said 17 officers had been killed and "many" wounded - mostly by gunshots - in the first four months of this year, in return for a salary of less than \$100 a week.

In the worst attack, five officers were killed when armed criminals stormed a police station in the city's north on 29 February. Videos of their mutilated victims spread on social media, the newspaper *Le Nouvelliste* reported. In one, it wrote, "the corpse of a policeman is seen lying on a wheelbarrow, his uniform soaked in blood". Another shows an officer being beheaded. In a brazen show of defiance, criminals later returned to the station to demolish it.

"It's clear the [previous] government failed in its security mission. Everyone says the police are overwhelmed by the recent events," said Lazarre. "There are neighbourhoods we used to go into easily but no longer can."

William O'Neill, the UN's top expert on human rights in Haiti, voiced amazement that Haiti's outgunned police force had avoided being completely overpowered by criminals boasting a military-grade arsenal, largely smuggled in from the US. "It's a minor miracle they're still hanging

◀ Police officers stand guard in Port-au-Prince

RALPH TEDY EROL/
REUTERS

Hanging on
Defiant against the outlaws

80%
The portion of Port-au-Prince that is run by criminal gangs

3k
The number of police officers that have left their jobs in the past three years

2.5k
The number of people killed or injured across Haiti, as a result of violence, in this year alone

on. I don't know how they do it," said O'Neill, who believes Haiti needs a 5,000-strong international security force to help the police restore order.

A UN-backed "multinational security support mission", reportedly led by 1,000 Kenyan troops, is expected to be deployed in the coming weeks to bolster the fight against the gangs that run about 80% of the capital. More than 2,500 people have been killed or injured this year alone and the airport and seaport forced to close.

Earlier this month, another 4,500 people were forced to flee their homes in the capital, according to the UN migration agency, taking the number of people displaced by the chaos to about 100,000.

A spokesperson for another police union, SPNH-17, last week called for the head of Haiti's national police, Frantz Elbé, to resign over the "critical and catastrophic" situation after another attack on a police station, accusing top police officials of being complicit with the gangs.

Peter, a Port-au-Prince cop in his mid-20s, recalled being ambushed during a patrol by fighters with assault rifles. "It seemed like bullets were coming from everywhere at the same time," he said. Peter and three colleagues managed to repel the assailants after a long shootout but one was injured and taken to hospital.

"I realised it could have been me who was injured or even killed," he said. "Thank God it wasn't me that day ... I still haven't told my mother."

Haiti's police are woefully ill-equipped for their battle against outlaws who flaunt their increasingly sophisticated arsenal in slick social media videos resembling those posted by Mexican cartels.

Peter said a lack of basic equipment meant some colleagues bought their own bulletproof vests or armour plates. In the past three years, more than 3,000 officers have left their jobs as the security situation unravelled after the 2021 murder of President Jovenel Moïse.

The shadow of death is never far away, said Peter, who is his household's sole breadwinner. "And when a policeman dies in service, what's left for the family?" he asked.

ETIENNE CÔTÉ-PALUCK IS A JOURNALIST COVERING HAITI; TOM PHILLIPS IS THE GUARDIAN'S LATIN AMERICA CORRESPONDENT

* Names have been changed

ALGERIA/
WESTERN SAHARA

Desert film festival brings home the plight of refugees

By Saeed Kamali Dehghan

From the outside, Asria Mohamed's tent in a refugee camp in south-west Algeria could be mistaken for a typical nomadic dwelling used by Sahrawis, people from Western Sahara, though it is smaller in size.

Inside is a series of QR codes attached to 19 *melhf*as, traditional clothing worn by Sahrawi women, that have been stitched to the tent's interior walls, forming a colourful tapestry. Visitors are invited to scan the QR codes to dive into the stories of the women behind each *melhfa*.

Jaimitna (Our Tent) is a collaborative artistic project, led by Mohamed, to highlight the plight of Sahrawis and their homeland on the north-west coast of Africa, which has been occupied by Morocco since 1976, when Spain's rule over its last foreign territory ended.

"You approach Jaimitna and it's made of a colourful fabric, and you think, 'Oh, it's so beautiful.' But then when you scan the QR codes you will get stories of horror," Mohamed said.

She added: "I asked 19 female human rights defenders from the occupied territory to send me their *melhf*as. One of the women, Zainabu Babi, sent me a bloodstained *melhfa* from when she was beaten up during a protest."

Hand-sewn by two women from the refugee camps, Jaimitna was at the centre of the Sahara international film festival, FiSahara, held this month at the Ausserd camp in Algeria. The theme of the festival was Jaimitna Fi Cinema (Our tent in the cinema): To Resist is to Win.

A tent, or *jaima*, is a symbol of

identity, hope and resistance for Sahrawi people. Nearly 200,000 Sahrawi refugees live in Algeria as a result of almost 50 years of conflict. Each camp is named after the towns deserted in 1975.

Morocco, which has erected a 2,700km barrier fortified with landmines across Western Sahara to stop guerrilla fighters, holds a tight grip on the territory, despite the UN not recognising its claim of sovereignty.

FiSahara, the only film festival held in a refugee camp, brings together artists from many disciplines. Those who attend are hosted by refugee families.

This year, the Palestinian film 200 Meters, directed by Ameen Nayfeh, won the festival's top film prize, the White Camel award. It tells the story of a family divided by Israel's separation wall.

The festival's second prize went to Unsubmissive, a Spanish documentary directed by Laura Dauden and Miguel Ángel Herrera, about the struggles of female Sahrawi activists.

Other films shown included DESERT PHOSfate - which explores the environmental impact of phosphates and their illegal extraction in Western Sahara - by the artist and climate activist Mohamed Sleiman Labat.

"Issues of self-representation and Sahrawis making films about themselves are part of the decolonisation processes we are going through," said Labat, who still lives in the camps. "My art is not for entertainment - it's to challenge our perception, question the status quo and highlight the importance

Visitors are invited to scan QR codes to dive into the stories of the women behind each garment



Photographs by Susan Schulman

of giving spaces to underrepresented voices and narratives."

Like Labat, Mohamed uses art to raise awareness about Sahrawis. "Jaimitna is like a coin which has two faces. One of resilience and one of suffering," she said. "Even though we are refugees impacted by the conflict, if you come to the camps, you see people dancing, and people appreciating life. When you read the story of each woman, you will see suffering but you also see their positive side; some of them are writers now."

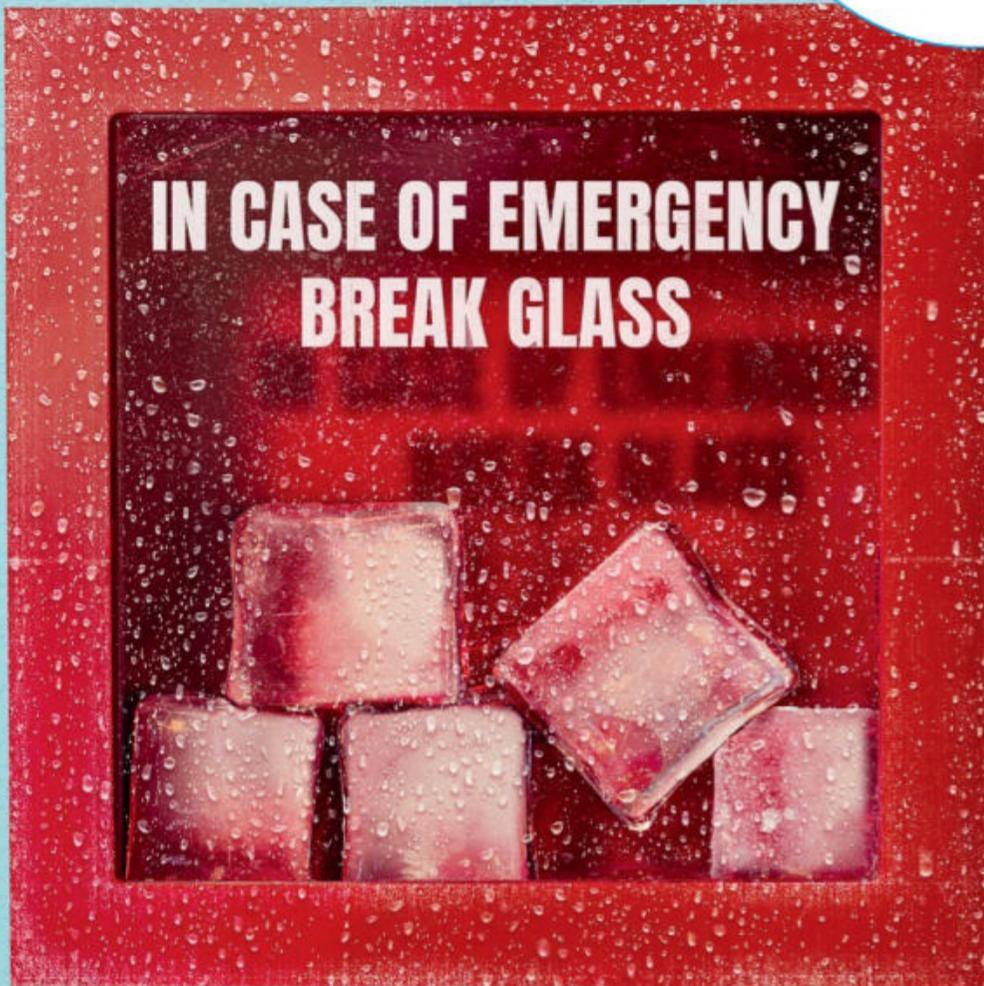
"Westerners often only show the victim side of refugees," she said. "I wanted to show our strength, too."

SAEED KAMALI DEHGHAN IS A GUARDIAN REPORTER

▼ Asria Mohamed, a Sahrawi journalist, artist and activist, in a *jaima* (tent) at the FiSahara film festival



In a survey of UK women aged 45 to 55, 84% said they felt exhausted, 73% had brain fog and 69% experienced anxiety or depression, while 54% said they had 'no or little interest in sex'



MENOPAUSE

Memory lapses can be scary and hot flushes excruciating. But we know much more now about the menopause. And the aftermath can be amazing

The heat is on

By Kate Muir

Menopause was previously seen as a source of ageist shame, an unexploded bomb, or a suspicious parcel. But it is a natural phase that marks the end of childbearing years and, at last, we have the science and the knowledge to resolve a lot of the surrounding mental and physical health issues. Now is the time to embrace menopause, rather than fear it, and tackle the changes holistically.

As the actor Gillian Anderson - who wrestled with an early menopause herself - once said: "Perimenopause and menopause should be treated as the rites of passage they are and, if not celebrated, then at least accepted and acknowledged and honoured." And the aftermath can be amazing; when hormones are steady, your moods sta-

bilise and periods have gone for ever.

In the UK we are starting to care properly for women facing this life shift and empowering them to prioritise their health. Women know more about helpful lifestyle changes - the importance of exercise and diet, for example. In the past two years, GPs and patients have become much better informed about the science, too, which is why I'd encourage people to ignore menopause, and its dastardly little sister perimenopause, at their peril.

If you want to move into a better second half, action is required when the ovaries stop producing eggs and the hormones oestrogen and progesterone start to drain away. This happens at the average age of 51 in white women, and often younger for Asian and Black women, or those who experience early menopause. The chaos begins in perimenopause, usually in your 40s but younger for some, as oestrogen hits unpredictable highs and lows.

This is often when women experience sleeplessness, become forgetful, suffer heart palpitations and inexplicable bouts of irritation. Progesterone promotes calm and helps us sleep; with lowered oestrogen, serotonin (the "happy hormone") decreases too. Just as the pressures of looking after elderly parents and irascible teenagers intensify, the hormones that have kept us on an even keel disappear, and prescriptions of antidepressants start to rise.

If hot flushes have not yet begun, women tend to blame themselves for emotional outbursts or failing concentration, rather than their hormones. Hot flushes are experienced by 85% of women, but around half get them before periods even stop.

Hot flushes are visible, and many women find them excruciating in public. But it is the invisible effects of failing oestrogen and progesterone, and testosterone (which is also a female hormone), that we need to understand, as they can contribute to increased risk of osteoporosis, type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Research is ongoing into the contribution of falling oestrogen levels on the risk of developing Alzheimer's.

Women, and some trans men and non-binary people, need to seize this moment for a health upgrade, including simple changes such as taking more exercise, eating more green foods, and finding ways to destress. This is also the time to consider hor-

hormone replacement therapy (HRT), and find out which version could be the safest for you. When properly prescribed (and that may involve revisiting your GP to get the dose right, as every woman's hormones are different), HRT does not just get rid of symptoms, but can provide long-term health protections.

Menopause has historically been seen as a loss of fertility - the word technically means 12 months after your last period - but we now understand it as a loss of hormones, which work in every part of your brain and body.

In the past few years, awareness and education have taken off. In 2022, the Fawcett Society published *Menopause and the Workplace*, a survey of 4,000 UK women aged 45-55, which provides revelatory data. The issues most reported, apart from hot flushes, were related to mental health: 84% said they were sleepless or exhausted, 73% had brain fog - memory loss, difficulty concentrating - and 69% had experienced anxiety or depression. Migraines can also increase in perimenopause, set off by hormonal fluctuations.

While this is a time of life when stresses can pile up, which may affect the ability to think clearly, women's brains can be significantly affected by hormone loss, and so, often, is their confidence in holding down a job. Sudden memory blockages can be terrifying, if temporary - retrieving a name or a fact 10 minutes afterwards is no use if you're in the middle of a meeting or PowerPoint. Although some men may suffer from memory problems in middle age, the impact on women seems to be more devastating: one in 10 women in the Fawcett survey said they had left work because of menopause symptoms, and 28% had either reduced their hours or gone part time.

When we look at pre- and postmenopausal brain scans, the transition reveals temporary chaos, as the energy metabolism in the brain changes. The ever-plastic brain then relies more on blood flow to keep firing on all cylinders, compensating for the hormonal losses. The Weill Cornell neuroscientist Dr Lisa Mosconi explains these changes - and what to do about them - in her new book, *The Menopause Brain*. "I like to say menopause is a renovation project on the brain," explains Mosconi. "The brain has all

these neuronal connections that link to the ovaries but, with menopause, many aren't needed and so can be discarded. And that leads to these brain changes which can also manifest as vulnerabilities." But it's important to see this as a transitional phase, Mosconi adds: the brain will "rewire, so a woman can get on with the next phase of her life".

What about the body? In perimenopause, 44% of women surveyed suffered extra-heavy periods, the "perimenopausal tsunami", that can sometimes last for over a week. This can create major difficulties at work, since timings are unpredictable. If you're, say, working in an Amazon warehouse or in an operating theatre, flooding periods are a nightmare.

Painful joints, arthritis and sports injuries often flare up in menopause, since oestrogen protects joints and decreases inflammation, and 67% of women surveyed reported joint pain. This can be helped by HRT - a study of almost 5,000 postmenopausal women showed knee osteoarthritis reduced by a third during the treatment.

When I was helping to write questions for the Fawcett survey, we stuck in one on heart palpitations, since for me this had been the first unexplained sign of perimenopause - waking at 4am in pure panic every

Midlife bites

The great transition

51

Average age of menopause in white women

10%

Proportion of women in the UK who quit jobs due to the symptoms

'The brain has many links to the ovaries, but with menopause many are discarded'

Dr Lisa Mosconi
Neuroscientist

morning, my heart battering away. I went for an electrocardiogram and was told I was fine, but "drinking too much coffee". There was nothing on the NHS website back then connecting low hormones with palpitations. But the survey mirrored my own experience: 44% reported heart palpitations. It turns out that lower oestrogen levels can overstimulate your heart, making it beat up to 16 times more per minute. My own heart palpitations disappeared within a day of starting HRT.

Not enough is written about sex in menopause, and it turns out that 54% of women told the Fawcett survey they had "little or no interest in sex". Topical vaginal oestrogen, in a dose small enough to be safe even for breast cancer patients, increases the general joy of sex. We are also learning about the vaginal microbiome, filled with good lactobacillus bacteria. Oestrogen helps prevent the urinary tract infections that affect 55% of women post menopause.

Next we come to a key part of menopause knowledge: as oestrogen and testosterone disappear, bone breakdown outpaces formation, and women can have bone loss of up to 20% in the 10 years following menopause. With one in three women suffering a fracture after 50, it's worth addressing that with regular weight-bearing exercise, a good diet, and vitamin D. But for women with a family history of osteoporosis, HRT has been shown over two years to increase bone density by 3%, and as much as 7% in the spine. When you stop taking HRT, the beneficial effect begins to decrease straight away, but the NHS now says "there is no fixed limit on how long you can take HRT".

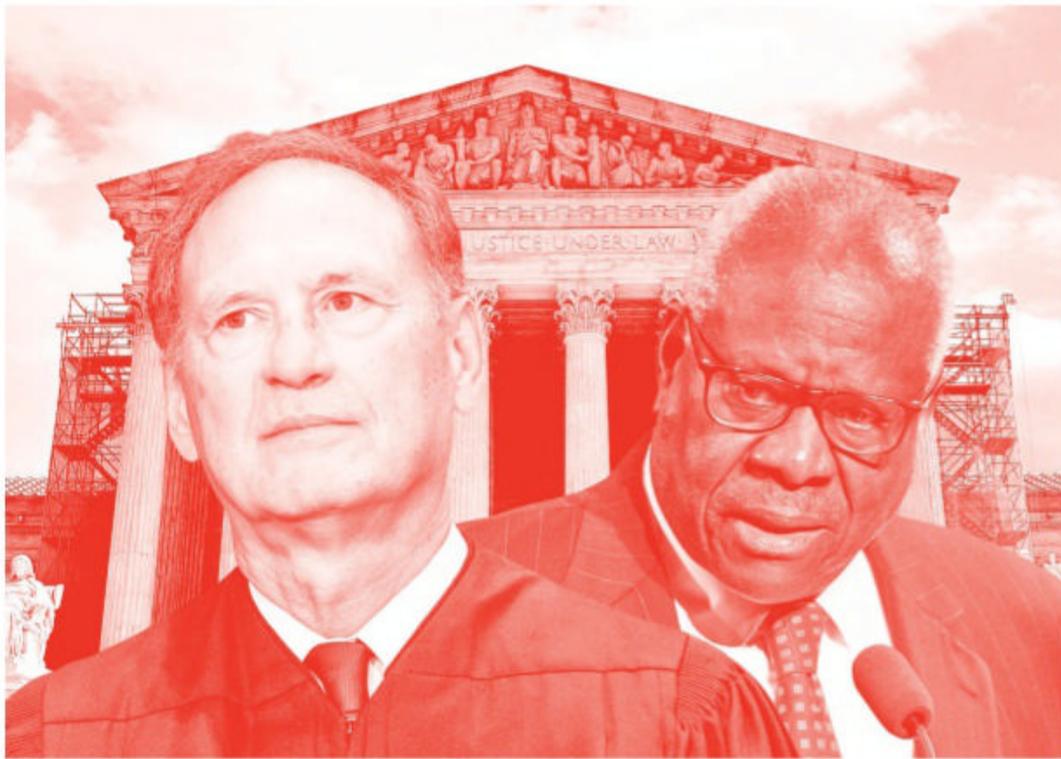
There's a lot going on in the menopause space, and knowledge is power. There is a school of thought that lifestyle changes will help most women pull through. The reality is that most women this age are already struggling - around 70% of women over 50 in the UK are overweight or obese, with all the health risks that entails, and antidepressant use is highest for women aged 50-59. HRT can often be the first step up to a healthier life. For many, like me, it's far more than that. Waking up every day with steady hormones, and no menopause symptoms whatsoever, is an extraordinary gift that this generation needs to use well.

KATE MUIR IS A WRITER AND AUTHOR ON WOMEN'S HEALTH ISSUES

While historically seen as a loss of fertility, we now understand menopause as a loss of the hormones oestrogen, progesterone and testosterone, which work in every part of the brain and body



ILLUSTRATION BY LISA SHEEHAN



ANALYSIS
UNITED STATES

Red flag? Alito scandal casts doubt on supreme court impartiality

By Ed Pilkington

With less than six months to go before America chooses its next president, the US supreme court finds itself in an unenviable position: not only has it been drawn into a volatile election, but swirling ethical scandals have cast doubt on its impartiality.

The court's discomfort worsened dramatically last week when the New York Times published a photograph of an upside-down American flag being flown outside the Alexandria, Virginia, home of the hard-right justice Samuel Alito. The photo was taken on 17 January 2021, days after the insurrection at the US Capitol and days before Joe Biden's inauguration.

At the time, upside-down flags

were proliferating as a symbol of Donald Trump's false claim that the 2020 presidential election had been stolen from him. That one of the nine most powerful justices in the country had a "stop the steal" icon flapping on his front lawn was, to put it mildly, incendiary.

"There's little doubt that the supreme court will play a large role in the 2024 election, and you have to now ask whether the flag incident will forever cloud the public's view of its impartiality in those cases," said Gabe Roth, executive director of Fix the Court, a non-partisan group advocating reform.

The supreme court memorably handed the US presidency to George W Bush in its 2000 ruling *Bush v Gore*. Though no individual case so far this year has risen to that level, there is no doubt that *the justices are deeply mired in the 2024 cycle*.

There is a possibility of renewed trouble in November. As one of the justices recently warned, further insurrections were not impossible.

"I don't know how much we can infer from the fact that we haven't seen anything like this before [that] we're not going to see something in the future," the justice said. His identity? Samuel Alito.

Until last Thursday, there had been plenty of talk about whether the supreme court was ethically equipped to tackle questions that could change the course of November's election. But most of it concerned Clarence Thomas.

◀ Ethical concerns have been raised around the political conduct of the wives of justices Samuel Alito (left) and Clarence Thomas

ERIN SCHAFF/REUTERS;
ROBERT FRANKLIN/AP;
MANDEL NGAN/GETTY

Critical judgments

The supreme court has already decided Trump cannot be ejected from the ballot for his role in the January 6 attack under the 14th amendment block on insurrectionists holding office. By the end of their term in June, they are due to rule on two other critical cases that go to the heart of Trump's fitness to govern. The first asks whether Trump has presidential immunity in the federal criminal prosecution over his "stop the steal" antics in 2020/21. The other, which could also determine whether he can be tried for his attempt to overturn the election, looks at whether January 6 rioters can be charged under the obstruction statute.

His wife, Ginni, is a hard-right activist who was an active participant in efforts to stop the certification of Biden's victory. Yet Thomas has consistently refused to recuse himself from supreme court cases relating to January 6.

We now have not one but two of the conservative justices whose spouses have engaged in apparent pro-Trump political activity. In his self-defence, Alito told the New York Times: "I had no involvement whatsoever in the flying of the flag," putting it all down to a spat his wife, Martha-Ann, was having with neighbours.

The highest court has taken such a battering over its ethical standards - mostly relating to private jets, vacations and other material benefits rather than political activities - that it has been forced to adopt its first-ever ethical code. It says that a justice must recuse him or herself from a case where they have a "personal bias or prejudice".

Given what we now know about the behaviour and convictions of both Ginni and Martha-Ann, it is arguable that there is at least a conversation to be had about whether Justices Thomas and Alito should disqualify themselves from any case relating to January 6.

Under the new code, the supreme court polices itself on all ethical matters. Not only that - each individual justice polices him or herself, in effect sitting in judgment on themselves with even their eight colleagues having no say.

Unsurprisingly, in the six months the new code has been in existence very few justices have recused themselves. Where they have, only the liberal justices Elena Kagan and Ketanji Brown Jackson have publicly explained their decisions.

It is now all but inevitable there will be calls for both Alito and Thomas to recuse themselves as election year proceeds.

"The fact that two justices live in households with people who believe the 2020 election was stolen is astounding and disturbing," Roth said. "Will they heed the calls for recusal? Probably not. Is there any way to force them? No."

ED PILKINGTON IS CHIEF REPORTER FOR GUARDIAN US

CANADA



Sikh activist death brings long reach of Indian gangs into focus

By *Leyland Cecco* and
Ahmar Khan TORONTO
Hannah Ellis-Petersen DELHI

Less than half an hour after the prominent Canadian Sikh activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar was shot dead outside a temple in British Columbia, Moninder Singh addressed a crowd near the site of the brazen attack.

“Make no mistake: this is a political assassination,” Singh told the agitated crowd in June 2023. “And it’s been carried out by India.”

Reaction from Delhi was starkly different. The government had long considered Nijjar a “terrorist” and Indian media wrote off the killing as a “fratricidal gang-world slaughter”.

The two narratives - of an India-ordered assassination and an underworld hit - appeared at odds. But the recent arrest of three men for their alleged involvement in Nijjar’s killing suggested an element of truth to both. A fourth man, already in custody in the province of Ontario on firearms offences, was charged on 12 May.

The men are allegedly linked to a criminal network with operations in Canada. And with more arrests expected, investigators and government officials are confident that India’s government used a tactic they claim it has often employed closer to home: using contract killers from a local gang to carry out a political assassination.

Nijjar was a vocal proponent of Khalistan, a potential independent Sikh state in India. The Khalistan movement is banned in India and India’s high commissioner to Canada, Sanjay Kumar Verma, recently accused pro-Khalistan activists in Canada of

crossing “a big red line” that Delhi sees as a matter of national security.

For many Sikhs in Canada, Nijjar’s death exposed the reach and ambition of India’s nationalist government, and its willingness to pursue and kill “terrorists” outside its borders. Since 2020, Pakistan intelligence has accused India of carrying out up to 20 targeted murders of terrorists and dissidents hiding out in the country, alleging that Indian agencies often recruited criminal gangs and local gangsters to carry out these murders.

Canadian investigators believe the men charged with Nijjar’s murder, Karanpreet Singh, Kamalpreet Singh, Karan Brar and Amandeep Singh, are low-level operatives of the Lawrence Bishnoi gang, a notorious group implicated in global extortion schemes. Bishnoi was jailed in 2014, but has reportedly continued to conduct his criminal empire from behind bars.

Bishnoi is believed to exert control over hundreds of members across north India and, with operations in North America, exert influence through the sizeable Punjabi diaspora. The gang has been implicated in several high-profile crimes, including the 2022 killing of the popular Canadian Punjabi singer Sidhu Moose Wala.

Gangs and organised crime syndicates with links to south Asian communities have long had a presence in British Columbia and Ontario and the Indian government’s decision to use those networks is a “marriage of convenience”, said Queen’s University

assistant professor Amarnath Amarasingam, who specialises in extremism and social movements.

“India will pay whoever will do the shooting and gangs like the Bishnoi gang will essentially kill whoever they are paid to kill,” he said.

Nearly a year after Nijjar’s death, mounting pressure within Canada to mend relations and restore trade talks with India has angered US-based activist Gurpatwant Singh Pannun. US prosecutors say Pannun was the target of a foiled assassination attempt overseen by an unnamed Indian government agent who directed a middleman to recruit a hitman.

After the arrests of the three men in Canada, India’s foreign minister reiterated his government’s belief that Ottawa is allowing criminals to operate in Canada.

“Somebody may have been arrested; the police may have done some investigation. But the fact is [a] number of gangland people, [a] number of people with organised crime links from Punjab, have been made welcome in Canada,” said Subrahmanyam Jaishankar.

The minister added that Canada had also given shelter to pro-Khalistan activists. “These are wanted criminals from India; you have given them visas ... and allow them to live there.”

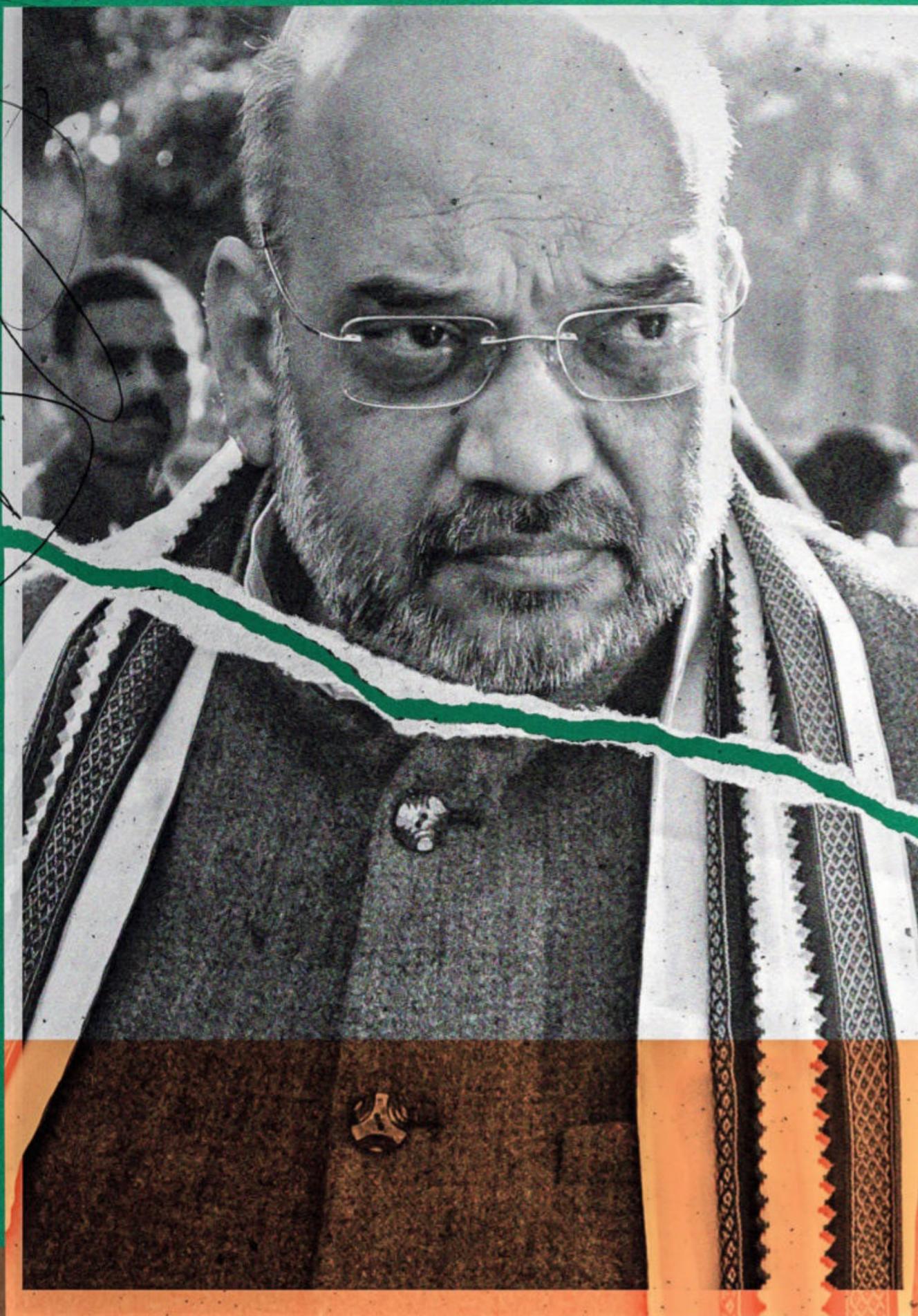
LEYLAND CECCO COVERS CANADA FOR THE GUARDIAN; AHMAR KHAN IS A JOURNALIST BASED IN TORONTO; HANNAH ELLIS-PETERSEN IS THE GUARDIAN’S SOUTH ASIA CORRESPONDENT

▼ Supporters of the Khalistan movement at the British Columbia courthouse hearing the case of those accused of killing Hardeep Singh Nijjar

CHUCK CHIANG/THE CANADIAN PRESS/AP

‘India will pay whoever will do the shooting and gangs will kill whoever they are paid to kill’





The enforcer

For 40 years Amit Shah has been at Narendra Modi's side, his confidant and consigliere. As India's second most powerful man, he is reshaping the country in disturbing ways. *By Atul Dev*

Late one night in November 2005, a small group of plain-clothed police officers pulled over a bus in western India. They escorted a man named Sohrabuddin Sheikh off the vehicle, who was joined on the side of the road by his wife, Kausar. Sheikh and Kausar were put into separate police cars and driven 1,000km away, across state lines, into Gujarat. They would never see each other again.

Sheikh had not been charged with anything. On reaching Ahmedabad, Gujarat's most populous city, Sheikh and Kausar were not taken to a police station. They were detained in separate bungalows in a residential neighbourhood. Two days later, on 26 November, Sheikh was driven to a highway intersection in south Ahmedabad and shot dead. Police claimed Sheikh was a member of an Islamist terrorist group and had been shot while trying to escape. Four days after Sheikh's death, Kausar was killed. Policemen allegedly poisoned her, then carried her body to the Narmada River, where they burned it and dumped the remains in the water.

According to records later obtained by central government investigators, the officers allegedly involved made several phone calls around the time of each killing. On the other end of the line, each time, was a senior Gujarati politician who ran the state's home ministry, which put him in charge of the police. His name was Amit Shah.

These details emerged in 2010, when the Central Bureau of Investigation, India's equivalent of the FBI, was investigating the killings. The CBI charged Shah with kidnapping, extortion and murder. It alleged that the officers who killed Sheikh and his wife were working on Shah's orders. The CBI found that Shah had exchanged five calls with the superintendent officer at the scene on the day of the abduction. Over the next few days, they spoke regularly. On the day Sheikh was killed, Shah spoke to the officer five times. The next call they exchanged was on the day of Kausar's killing. (Shah did not deny making these calls, but later stated they concerned another case.)

When a warrant was issued against Shah, in July 2010, he eluded arrest for four days, before surfacing in a press conference to deny any wrongdoing. He told the press that he was the victim of a political witch-hunt, orchestrated by the central government, which was then run by the Indian National Congress party, the main opposition to Shah's own party, the BJP. "The chargesheet had already been made at the behest of the Congress. It is fabricated and had nothing to do with my summons," Shah said. "I am not afraid of anyone. We will fight the legal battle, and expose those who have tried to wrong us in court." Shah spent three months in jail and was then released on bail with a condition that he stay out of Gujarat until the end of the trial.

Banished from his own state, journalists informally referred to Shah as *tadipaar*, the fugitive. Witness transcripts recorded by the CBI, which included claims that Shah had been running an extortion racket through the state police, were published in national newspapers. But four years later, in December 2014, all the charges against him were dropped. Echoing Shah's defence, the judge stated that the case had been "politically motivated". The CBI didn't challenge the court's decision.

Power couple

India's home minister, Amit Shah (left), and the prime minister, Narendra Modi

published in national newspapers. But four years later, in December 2014, all the charges against him were dropped. Echoing Shah's defence, the judge stated that the case had been "politically motivated". The CBI didn't challenge the court's decision.



Earlier that year, national elections had taken place and the agency was reporting to a new government in Delhi, headed by the former chief minister of Gujarat, at whose elbow Shah has spent his entire adult life: Narendra Modi. Shah and Modi first met as foot soldiers of the BJP, the Hindu nationalist party, in the 1980s. Over 40 years, they have made a great journey, together, from the foothills of Indian politics to its very peak. During this time, Shah has played the roles of Modi's confidant, consigliere, enforcer. It is impossible to chart the course of one's life without the other.

Today, Amit Shah is home minister for all of India. He is in charge of domestic policy, commands the capital city's police force, and oversees the Indian state's intelligence apparatus. He is, simply put, the second-most powerful man in the country. With the BJP poised to win the current general election, he is all but certain to remain so for at least the next five years. Over the past decade, he has been the key architect in remaking India according to the BJP's Hindu nationalist ideology.

A defining feature of life in India today is the suffocating atmosphere of menace and threat to critics of the government. Shah is the face of this fear, which lurks everywhere, from the newsrooms to the courtrooms, and which inspires a sense of alarm that is bigger than the sum of the facts and anecdotes that can be amassed to illustrate it. Suspended in the margins between what is known and what can be said, no individual story is more illustrative of contemporary India than that of Amit Shah.

Shah takes care of the details. He has the vast apparatus of the state at his disposal; an army of party workers await his orders amid the constant cycle of local, regional and national elections; he is a shrewd operator, always ready to weaken the opposition by forging new alliances and luring candidates away from other parties; he keeps tabs on the gossip.

One of his key roles is to be the prime minister's shield. Modi has attended only one press conference in India since he became prime minister a decade ago. In the summer of 2019, at the new party headquarters in Delhi, he sat with half a dozen leaders of the BJP. Right next to him was Shah, then the BJP president, who answered every question on his behalf.

In TV interviews, Shah speaks in a terse, streetwise tone, seemingly checking off bullet points prepared in advance. The news anchors thank him for "gracing" their stage and avoid interrupting his monologues. Partly owing to his days in Gujarat and partly owing to the Indian government's widely documented use of Israeli spyware to target journalists, activists and critics, the image of Shah in the public imagination is that of a man who holds everyone's secrets. "Modi has a certain charm, which is perhaps the most dangerous thing about him," the Indian novelist and activist Arundhati Roy told me. "Amit Shah is a single-string instrument: the only note he can strike is fear."

Shah has a personal website, which includes a page called the Lighter Side, featuring political cartoons that depict him. In one of these, the finance ministry's investigative agency is represented as a dog unleashed by Shah, chasing a leader of the opposition. "He likes scaring people," a lawyer who has known Shah for years, told me. "He likes the image that he has."

Shah himself initially agreed to meet me, I was told by a BJP spokesperson, but then changed his mind without any explanation, and the spokesperson stopped responding. This month, when I sent him a detailed list of questions, the spokesperson said it would be impossible to find time to comment before the end of India's elections in June.

"One really has to think about how to talk about Amit Shah," Roy said. "The things worth saying cannot really be said, or published." A few weeks later, halfway through a meeting with a senior member of Shah's own party, I heard the same thing again: "There are things about Amit Shah that cannot be said."

A "gruff man" is how Aakar Patel, former head of Amnesty

Modi has a certain charm. Shah is a one-string instrument: the only note he can strike is fear



Party faithful
A BJP supporter at a rally; Amit Shah addresses journalists at BJP headquarters

SAM PANTHAKY/AFP/GETTY; RAJ K RAJ/HINDUSTAN TIMES/GETTY

International in India, remembered Shah, having briefly met him two decades ago in Gujarat. Already, there was a brashness about him. A man of considerable girth and lazy posture, Shah dressed in ill-fitting kurtas. Now, at the age of 59, the kurtas are tailored and accented with Burberry scarves, and the eyes have settled behind rimless glasses into a fixed, unsettling gaze.

It was in the flames of the 2002 Gujarat riots that the current era of Indian history was inaugurated. Over the course of three days in Ahmedabad, hundreds of Muslims were killed by Hindu mobs. Police did little to stop the violence, even as Muslim women were raped and then burned alive. A recently disclosed 2004 inquiry by the UK government held Modi "directly responsible" for the "climate of impunity" that made this carnage possible. He was banned from entering the US or the UK for almost a decade. Modi has always denied any responsibility for the violence. Yet in a recent speech in Gujarat, Shah proudly told the crowd: "Modisaheb taught them [India's Muslims] a lesson, and no one has rioted since."

In 2002, immediately after the violence, Modi went on a "pride march" around the state. Shah was Modi's point-man for that campaign, which rallied the Hindu electorate and paved the way for Modi's first ever electoral victory in 2002. (Modi was originally appointed, not elected, to the chief minister role.) Shah, by then a member of the Gujarat assembly, was soon named Gujarat's state minister for home affairs.

Questions about Modi's role in the riots did not go away. Numerous sources accused him of having allowed, or even encouraged, the violence. Among the most significant sources was another BJP leader, Haren Pandya, a former cabinet colleague of Modi and his rival in the party, who repeated these allegations to the press and in sworn testimony. In March 2003, Pandya was found in his car with five bullets in his body. The case remains unsolved. Last year, a senior leader of the BJP wrote on X that he was worried that Modi and Shah might "do a Haren Pandya on me".



His father was the president of the Ahmedabad stock exchange, and the family business was manufacturing.

In 2016, Shah told the journalist Patrick French that he was “not keen on formal studies” and spent his time as an adolescent at the local *shakha* (school) of the RSS, the Hindu nationalist organisation whose political wing is the BJP. When Shah was a teenager, his family moved to Ahmedabad. There, he met Modi, who was twice his age. “Modi was in charge of three RSS districts in Gujarat,” he told French. “He had trained thousands of workers.” When asked to say more, Shah wrapped the subject up: “I am not going to speak about my personal relationship with Narendrabhai.”

Shah may have attended a *shakha*. There are many people in India today who claim to have attended RSS schools in childhood - to have basked in the atmosphere of Hindu supremacism is now a source of politically expedient pride. But there are no pictures of him in the distinctive uniform of the RSS. The RSS forces celibacy on its members, but Shah got married in 1987 and has a son.

Shah’s account of his early years is inconsistent. In a book published in 2022, Shah claimed to have met Modi in 1987, when he would have been 23, not 17. The relationship between Modi and Shah, among the most consequential in the history of Indian politics, is clouded in obfuscations and secrecy. Even where there doesn’t seem to be anything worth hiding, silence is the only credo.

Look at the story of Hindu nationalism in modern India, and you start to notice Amit Shah’s fingerprints everywhere. In the late 1980s, the BJP was rallying around the issue of building a temple at the supposed birthplace of Ram, a Hindu deity, which they claimed was at the site of an old mosque in the town of Ayodhya. In support of this cause, LK Advani, then the president of the BJP, went on a two-month journey across central India, making inflammatory speeches wherever he stopped. In the 80-day period covering the journey and its aftermath, the Indian historian KM Panikkar noted, Advani’s political theatre incited 116 riots between Hindus and Muslims, in which 564 people died.

Shah claims to have managed the “campaign to mobilise masses” during Advani’s journey, which culminated two years later, when RSS men demolished the mosque, sparking riots throughout the country. In 1991, when Advani contested his seat in the national election, Shah was his campaign organiser.

In the second half of the 20th century, Gujarat, today a Hindu nationalist heartland, slowly turned into a communal tinderbox. By the 1990s, the Gujarati historian Achyut Yagnik has noted, it was common for even women and children to be targeted during mob violence. These trends reached their apogee in the violence of 2002. The riots left more than 1,000 dead, but the aftermath left a further trail of bodies. Haren Pandya’s death was seen to be a warning shot. (Pandya’s wife has since publicly accused Modi of involvement in Pandya’s death.) In 2005, Sohrabuddin Sheikh and his wife were killed. Years later, during the trial of Sheikh’s alleged killers - by that point, the charges against Shah had been dropped - a witness testified that Sheikh had been involved in Pandya’s assassination, and had allegedly been acting on the instructions of a senior police officer. In 2006, Tulsiram Prajapati, an associate of Sheikh who was on the bus the night Sheikh and his wife were picked up by the police, was shot dead in police custody. He was the last witness to the abduction of Sheikh, and had allegedly also been involved in Pandya’s killing. Two years after being indicted in Sheikh’s case, in 2012, Shah was again charged with being “the kingpin of the conspiracy” to carry out the extrajudicial killing of Prajapati. Two years later, BH Loya, the judge in Shah’s case, was found dead under suspicious circumstances.

The precise circumstances around these deaths are murky,



In Gujarat, before his arrest and banishment in 2010, Shah effectively ran the state for Modi. In 2012, he was allowed to return when the supreme court transferred the criminal case against him, relating to the death of Sheikh and his wife, from Gujarat to Mumbai. It also instructed the lower court to ensure the case was seen through from beginning to end by a single judge.

Yet after Modi became prime minister, in 2014, the first judge hearing the Sheikh case was transferred out, shortly after having asked Shah to appear in court.

Six months later, in December, the second judge, Brijgopal Harkishan Loya, unexpectedly died of a heart attack - the facts surrounding his death have been disputed - while attending a wedding. The third judge to be appointed to the case dismissed the charges against Shah within three weeks of taking charge.

In 2014, Modi made Shah the president of the BJP. At the time, Shah was still charged with murder, but the party lined up behind him. He repaid their faith. Over the next five years, the party’s membership grew almost sixfold to 180 million. In 2018, thanks to Shah, the party was governing 21 out of India’s 28 states.

During Modi’s first term, Shah, as president of the BJP, was not technically part of the government. But a corporate lobbyist in Delhi told me that he had seen “cabinet ministers jump out of their chairs when a call came from him”. Rajiv Shah, a journalist who reported on the early years of Modi and Shah, explained the order of rule in Gujarat, which is a neat reflection of the way Delhi runs today. “No 1 is Modi, and because he is Modi, he has to be all the numbers from one to 10,” he said. “Then 11 to 30 is Amit Shah, and then there are a bunch of people who are told what to do.”

Unlike Modi, who relishes mythologising his life, Shah has cultivated an aura of total opacity, which makes it hard to establish even the most mundane details of his biography.

Here are the bare facts. Shah was born in 1964 to a prosperous, upper-caste Gujarati family. His great-grandfather was the *nagarseth* - a phenomenally rich adviser to the ruling king - in the small princely state of Mansa. His childhood was spent in a *haveli*, the family mansion.

yet it is within the bounds of possibility that they are all linked to the riots of 2002. Pandya was speaking publicly about Modi's allegedly deliberate inaction during the violence; Sheikh and Prajapati were alleged to have been involved in silencing Pandya; Sheikh's wife was allegedly killed because she was a witness to Sheikh's abduction by the police; and Loya was presiding in the court that was to hear the cases involving these killings. The government's consistent obstruction of transparency and oversight in these cases has allowed suspicions to persist.

Around the time of his 2010 arrest, other allegations were swirling around Shah. There are tapes of his deputies talking about how to sabotage a supreme court-ordered investigation into extrajudicial killings in Modi's Gujarat. (These were recorded by a government official and leaked to the media.) There are leaked tapes of Shah allegedly ordering an officer to put illegal surveillance on a young woman in 2009. (The BJP acknowledged that the woman had been surveilled, but claimed that it had been done at her father's request, so it was not a violation of her rights.) The body of evidence against Shah was convincing enough for a national magazine to put him on the cover in 2012, behind a headline that asked: "Why is this man still free?"

Twelve years later, it is unimaginable that the Indian press would publish such a headline about a senior BJP politician. India has never seen a crackdown on media freedom like the one under Modi and Shah. During the first term of the Modi government, it was Shah who rang up media owners when their coverage veered out of line. While the television news hyped and hailed everything that Modi did, newspaper editors who offended Modi and Shah were shown the door.

No better guardians of constitutional protocols were to be found in the supreme court. In 2018, several petitioners appealed to the supreme court to order an investigation into the death of Loya. The court refused. The judgment was written by the current chief justice of India, DY Chandrachud. "Utterly wrong and jurisprudentially incorrect," was how one retired judge of the Delhi high court described it.

Chandrachud, a graduate of Harvard Law School, had relied on the

written statements of four judges who were with Loya the night of his death. They all said that nothing suspicious had taken place, but there were internal contradictions in their own accounts. However, their written statements were not recorded on an affidavit, which means they were not made under oath. This was a serious procedural lapse, but Chandrachud felt, he wrote in the judgment, that these statements had "a ring of truth". When I put to Tushar Mehta, India's solicitor general and a friend of Shah's from his Gujarat days, the claim that the supreme court has failed to protect constitutional principles in recent years, he responded via email that such a view was "shocking". He wrote: "The Indian legal system and the supreme court of India have been upholding the constitutional principles much better than its counterparts in other parts of the world and the grievances of millions of citizens always reach the supreme court and are redressed by the supreme court exceptionally well."

Being a reporter in India is to frequently come upon the limits of what can be known. Over the past decade, I had several off-the-record meetings with supreme court judges. At first, I thought they wanted to reveal information the public needed to know. But these meetings often veered into three-hour conversations, sometimes over dinner. It dawned on me that I was being invited because these judges thought I knew more than them. I found it deeply unsettling that the judges of the supreme court themselves had no clear understanding of what was going on in the supreme court.

In the course of reporting the story you are reading, I had another of these absurd encounters. I went to see a judge to ask whether

Campaign trail

Amit Shah speaks during a BJP meeting in Varanasi in April

NIHARIKA KULKARNI/
AFP/GETTY

Modi's government influences the judiciary, and if so, how. The judge suggested I read a profile of Mehta, the solicitor general, published in the Caravan. When I told the judge that I had written that story, he did not believe me. He pulled out his phone, checked the byline, looked at me, and said: "Then you should be telling me how it happens!"

But I do not know myself. You can understand





When you make a man like Shah the president, it sends out a big clear message to the entire party

the long history of corruption in the Indian judiciary, the remarkable frequency with which judges who rule in favour of the government seem to land cushy post-retirement jobs. But who calls whom, whether a carrot is dangled or a stick, whether people are driven by fear or greed or ideology: these things remain in the dark, the protagonists never talk.

Such questions do not just surround the case of, say, the death of a judge in 2014. They sit there blankly unanswered about the outcome of the Bhopal disaster of 1984, in which an explosion at a Union Carbide factory exposed 500,000 Indians to toxic gas, for which the judges let the company off with a comparatively small fine; about the culpability of the Congress leadership in the anti-Sikh mob violence that followed Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984 and left more than 3,000 dead; about the role of Modi in the 2002 riots; and on, and on, right up to the present day.

If institutional frailty is not new in India, what distinguishes Modi from those who preceded him is his ruthlessness.

Since the start of Modi's second term in 2019, human rights organisations, thinktanks and international media outlets have begun to worry about India like never before. In many ways, the object of concern, each time, is Amit Shah: he has been the one engineering the events that make for the foreboding headlines.

In August 2019, two months after taking oath as the home minister, Shah announced that the government would be amending the Indian constitution to revoke the special protections given to Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state. The plan was worked over for months in secrecy by Shah and the national security adviser, with only Modi kept in the loop. Two hours before the announcement, the rest of the cabinet was "informed", a report noted in the *Economic Times*, and "asked not to speak to the media till Shah's address". Within hours, all of them would be lining up before cameras to praise Shah's move.

Foreign journalists were immediately denied entry into the region. The entire population of Kashmir was put under lockdown, with communication lines cut.

Before anyone could appreciate the consequences of this brutal social experiment, Shah was on to his next project. In October 2019, he floated the idea of a national register in conjunction with a new citizenship law, which would grant refugee status to Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians coming to India from neighbouring countries. Muslims were to be pointedly excluded. Earlier that year, during an election campaign, Shah had referred to illegal Muslim immigrants as "termites" whom the BJP would throw "one by one" into the Bay of Bengal.

In December, when Muslim students protested against this RSS-ification of India's citizenship laws, the Delhi police, now under Shah's command, stormed their university. In the following weeks, protests

spread all over the country. In Delhi, thousands of Muslim women occupied roads to get the state's attention. Leaders of the BJP incited Hindu mobs to thrash them away. The mob, unimpeded by the police, ran riot in the national capital for three days.

"When you make a man like [Shah] the president, it sends out a big clear message to the entire party. It pushes the limits of what is acceptable, or expected," a former BJP minister told me. Today, mid-level party leaders seem locked in competition to outdo each other's loutishness, in the hope of being noticed by the high command. In 2018, a junior minister publicly garlanded the people convicted of lynching a Muslim; in 2020, a cabinet minister at a BJP rally in Delhi called out the slogan "Shoot the bastards" in reference to Modi's critics; in 2022, a BJP legislator in Delhi openly called for a boycott of Muslim businesses in the city; a few months ago, an aide of a BJP leader was recorded urinating on the face of a tribal man. At the very top of this heap are Modi and Shah, personifying the ideals of impunity to which everyone aspires.

Modi will secure his third term next month. Though India remains an electoral democracy, if only occasionally a constitutional one, the process of holding fair elections has itself been deeply corrupted. Shah's well-rehearsed tactics of political extortion have found their clearest expression in a scheme that has earned the BJP about \$1bn in "donations".

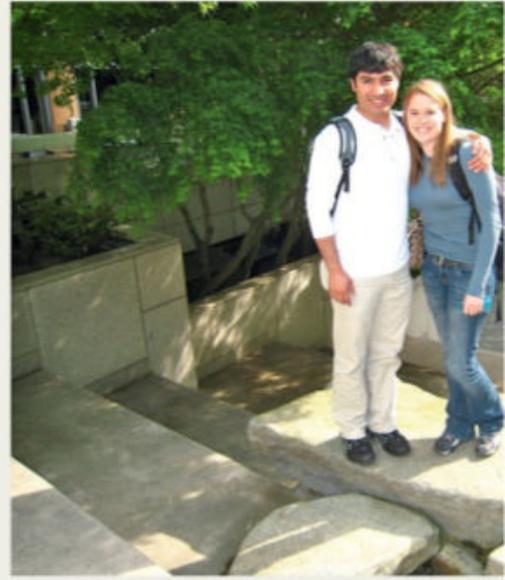
In 2017, the government passed a bill to introduce a new form of political funding, known as electoral bonds. These were promissory notes that could be bought by individuals and corporations from the national bank, and given to a political party without disclosing the identity of the donor. In February 2024 - after seven years, one national election and more than a dozen state elections - the supreme court struck down the scheme as unconstitutional.

By then, it was already known that almost half the total issued in these bonds went to the BJP, but when the court asked the bank to disclose the identity of the donors, an even more striking pattern emerged. Almost half of the 30 top donors to the BJP had made enormous donations shortly after they had been raided by the government's investigative agencies. Some of the bonds were bought by individuals and corporations in the very same week they were raided. On the day the details of the donations were released, a picture of an old headline from 2011 did the rounds on X: "Amit Shah headed extortion gang."

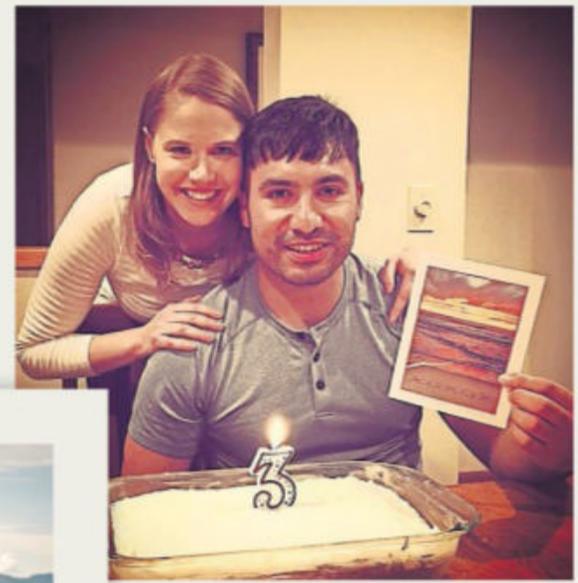
In March 2024, during an interview at the annual gala of India Today Group, a media conglomerate that owns several influential magazines and news channels, Shah deigned to address the issue. In response to a polite inquiry from a news anchor, he gave an eight-minute speech in which he listed the amounts received by other parties through electoral bonds (though the BJP received more money than everyone else), and claimed that the electoral bonds actually brought transparency to political funding (even though the solicitor general repeatedly opposed making the details of the transactions public, and it took seven years for this "transparency" to arrive).

The interviewer did not press Shah. That would have been risky. Shah might have been displeased; he might have been less inclined to attend the India Today Conclave 2025. Or worse, the owners of the India Today group might have been visited by a tax official the next morning. Instead, the public got something that looked like an interview, and everyone involved got to keep their job. With Shah, the undesirable consequences are always at the edge of the view, informing your thinking. Everyone holds an idea of him, of what he might be willing to do, and no one can be sure if there is anything that he won't ●

ATUL DEV IS A FELLOW AT COLUMBIA JOURNALISM SCHOOL IN NEW YORK
Support for this article was provided by a grant from the Pulitzer Center



'I believe that Ricky's law has saved lives, it has changed lives, restored families'



Ricky Klausmeyer-Garcia's friends struggled to get him addiction treatment, leading to the creation of a law in his name. But a year after his death, profound questions remain about how best to help those with substance use disorder in the US. *By Katia Riddle*

Sitting at his dining room table, Kelsey Klausmeyer, 41, looks at a picture of his late husband, Enrique Klausmeyer-Garcia, known to most as Ricky. He died almost exactly a year ago, at the age of 37. Kelsey can't make sense of it. When they met, Kelsey was awed by Ricky's story: his long battle with addiction, his years of sobriety, his advocacy for recovery. Now, after his death and in the midst of a nationwide addiction crisis, the narrative around Ricky's life is less tidy.

Ricky is the inspiration for a Washington state law - known as Ricky's law - passed in 2017 that enables loved ones and public safety officials to compel people experiencing substance abuse to undergo treatment, even if they are unable or unwilling to consent to it themselves.

The US has been experimenting with these forced-commitment laws for decades. The debate over their efficacy, practicality and ethicality is seeing renewed urgency in states such as New York, California and Washington, where addiction and severe mental health disorders have become a highly visible and highly political issue.

Ricky's story brings into sharp relief one of the fundamental and difficult questions that officials in these places are grappling with: to what extent should society override an individual's rights in the name of saving their life and protecting public safety?

For Kelsey, Ricky's story is not primarily about public policy. It's a story of immense personal joy and loss, laid before him in a handful of pictures. Here they are with their dog, Otis, whom Ricky "treated like our child", chuckles Kelsey. Here they are in 2022 on their wedding day, both smiling, fit and handsome at a sunny mountain resort 90 minutes from their home in Seattle. Two hundred of their friends and family came to spend three days celebrating.

Here is Ricky with members of his sprawling family. When the couple first started dating, they discovered, remarkably, that they were both from families of nine siblings, both raised Catholic. "We always thought we were kind of destined in a way," says Kelsey.

Kelsey grew up in Kansas; Ricky's family immigrated from Mexico. They met online. Ricky was direct about what he wanted, a quality Kelsey, a naturopathic doctor, found attractive. "He shared that his dream was to have a family, to have kids, have a dog, have a house, have a husband," remembers Kelsey. Those were prizes neither of them had felt certain were winnable. Together, they brought that picture into focus.

In those early, heady weeks of dating, Ricky was candid with Kelsey about his history with substance use disorder and his journey of recovery. Kelsey was undaunted. "I just

thought so highly of that, for somebody to have suffered with that disease as much as Ricky did, and then to turn around and do something for the greater good like he did," remembers Kelsey. "That got me. That was the moment I fell in love with Ricky."

But within the first year of their marriage, and despite Kelsey's relentless attempts to help him, Ricky would be gone.

With his good looks, his authenticity, his goofy enthusiasm for life and willingness to be vulnerable, Ricky was a charmer. Kelsey wasn't the first person to fall for him. More than a decade before he met his future husband, Ricky met Lauren Davis. Their friendship would become one of the most important relationships in his life, and the driving force behind the involuntary-commitment law created in his name.

The two were in their late teens in 2004, working as assistant preschool teachers in Redmond, Washington. "I had an enormous crush on Ricky and spent several failed years attempting to woo him," says Davis of their early friendship. Once they'd established she wasn't his type, Davis became his "wing woman" and accompanied him to gay clubs. "I'm a white girl who grew up in Washington," she says. "I can't dance to save my life, but I sure tried."

In the next few years, as the two grew into young adults, Davis would become a different kind of wing woman for her friend. Ricky spiralled into a serious problem with alcohol and occasional opioids. "I knew I was feeling depressed," he recalled years later, in a public radio interview with the Seattle station KNKX. "I was feeling really anxious. Most of the time I just wanted to escape all that. I just started to self-medicate and take whatever it took to escape reality."

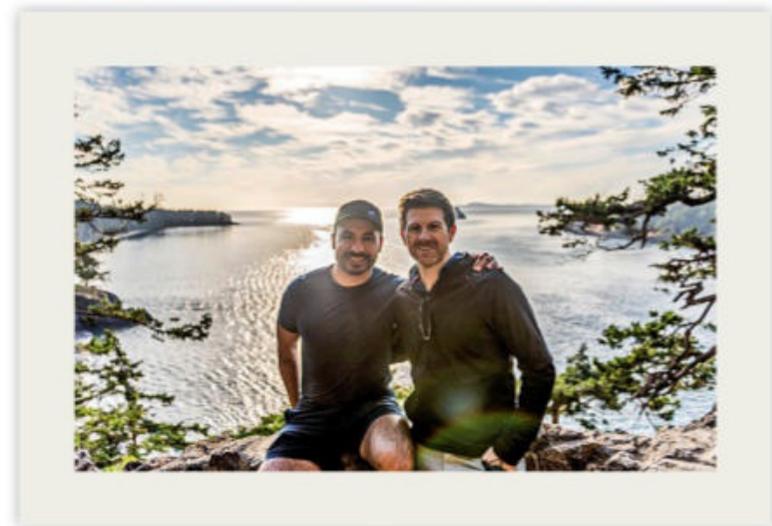
The first time Davis called 911 and had her friend taken to the hospital, she remembers his blood alcohol was dangerously high - she would find out



Happy snaps

Pictures of Ricky's life and marriage to Kelsey and his friendship with Lauren Davis

ENRIQUE GARCIA;
KELSEY KLAUSMEYER;
LAUREN DAVIS



it was at a near fatal level. He was admitted to the hospital's psychiatric unit. Davis sat with him in his room from 8am to 8pm. She described trying to leave Ricky's hospital room, "hugging him and he wouldn't let me go".

This episode set off a corrosive cycle of hospitalisation, brief sobriety and relapse. Eventually, Ricky became suicidal. "I found myself consistently in a position of trying to catch him, before he died, essentially," says Davis. "In the course of those two years, he was in the emergency department over 75 times. I was at his bedside for most of those visits." Numerous doctors told her to plan for his funeral. Davis refused. She would not stand by and watch her friend die.

Ricky's father had terminal cancer during this period and, despite family members' efforts to help Ricky, his addiction stressed relationships. Davis became his primary advocate and champion. Watching Ricky's struggle, Davis was horrified at how little she could do to help him. What she wanted was to put her friend into an addiction treatment facility, because he was too sick to do it himself. But at that time, in 2011, Washington law only allowed for involuntary commitment based on a psychiatric diagnosis, not for a substance abuse disorder. Other states had more expansive criteria.

Davis remembers Ricky on his sixth psychiatric hospitalisation. "He had this young psychiatrist who looked across at him and said, 'You know, if we were in another state and I could involuntarily commit you for your addiction, I would.'" But in Washington state, the doctor said "his hands were tied".

American public policy has grappled with the concept of involuntary commitment since at least the 1850s. As many as 14 states had laws on the books before the turn of the 20th century allowing for civil commitment for "habitual drunkenness". Often, offenders would be locked in asylums. Over time, enthusiasm for this approach began to fade "because of the lack of evidence that the facilities were really able to cure substance abuse", says the psychiatrist Paul Applebaum, who teaches at Columbia University and studies medicine and ethics. Legislators -

and the public - stopped supporting the investment. The country saw another wave of these statutes in the 1960s.

Today, although roughly two-thirds of states have civil commitment laws that specifically include substance use, many are rarely used. In part, that's because there is still little consensus about the efficacy of committing someone to treatment against their will. "There are almost no data indicating whether it works or for whom it works," says Applebaum. Policymakers, he says - chronically guilty of short-term thinking - have been reluctant to invest in meaningful efforts to evaluate these kinds of programmes. Those that have tried have shown mixed outcomes, and they often don't measure long-term results.

Many who study addiction and substance use have ethical concerns. Holding someone long enough for treatment to possibly be effective, say some, is immoral. Dr Liz Frye, who practises addiction medicine in Pittsburgh,



A lot of addicts want to stop but they can't. You could have loved ones tell you to stop and yet you won't

explains that substances such as alcohol and opioids hijack the brain's decision-making abilities. Regaining them can take months. "I have not seen an involuntary hold that would be long enough to help people regain their choice about substances," she says. "I have a hard time with involuntarily committing someone for that length of time."

Another complicating factor is that treatment and recovery itself can vary widely. "A lot of times, the perception is that everybody needs residential treatment," says Michael Langer, who works in behavioural health for the state of Washington. "That's not true." Often the best course of treatment, says Langer, is outpatient- or medication-based.

But staffing and funding for treatment facilities of all kinds is in short supply, and getting someone to a short-term treatment facility, with or without their consent, is only a first step on a successful path to recovery. Incentivising and supporting the individual's choice to maintain treatment is an equally critical part of the process. That can only happen with a robust and well-funded system that includes many different pathways and interventions.

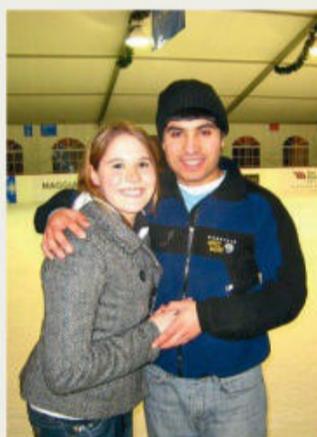
"I think people imagine there's this whole massive treatment system," says Keith Humphreys, who studies addiction and public health at Stanford University. The truth is, he says, most systems across the country - privately and publicly funded - for treatment of addiction are frail and underfunded and can't accommodate the demand, even from those who are pursuing it voluntarily.

In the US, a recent report shows that 43% of people willingly seeking treatment for substance use were unable to access it. "Ordering them into treatment is just based on a delusion that there's somewhere for them to go," says Humphreys.

Lauren Davis helped to save her friend. In turn, he laid out the path for what would become her life's work. "I started to tell his story to anyone who would listen to me," says Davis. Some of the people she demanded listen to her were legislators. They helped her introduce a bill for what became Ricky's law.

After he eventually found his own way into treatment and long-term recovery, Ricky too became an advocate for his bill and Davis's work. "If this law would have been in place back when I was in active addiction, I believe that my journey would have been cut that much shorter," he would say in the interview with KNKX. "For a lot of addicts, they want to stop but they can't. You could have loved ones tell you to stop. You could have all these consequences being behind your actions, and yet you won't and can't stop."

The law amended Washington's existing rule to allow for short-term, involuntary commitment not only for psychiatric disorders but also for those related to substance use. That meant people "gravely disabled" by addiction



Friends for life

Ricky Klausmeyer-Garcia and Lauren Davis met as teenagers in 2004 and she became his 'wing woman', going dancing with him at gay clubs

LAUREN DAVIS

- and considered a danger to themselves - could now be committed against their will.

It designated tens of millions of dollars to creating a kind of holding place for detaining people under the law; there are now close to 50 "Ricky's law" beds in four treatment facilities across the state. But today, who needs these beds - and how to get them there - is not always clear.

"Someone who comes into the emergency department intoxicated on any substance who is a danger to themselves could be referred right off the bat under Ricky's law," says Paul Borghesani, medical director of psychiatric emergency services at Harborview medical centre, Seattle's public hospital. "Practically, that doesn't happen."

The reasons are numerous, says Borghesani. Often after 12-36 hours in detox, people who were previously at risk of great harm to themselves "appear much calmer". Many even say they plan to quit using. This puts the clinicians in a bind, he explains, forcing them to reckon with a philosophical question: is someone a danger to themselves if they claim not to be?

The law is also dependent on a team of mental health professionals called designated crisis responders, employed through state contracts with regional behavioural health agencies and counties. These responders are deployed when someone - often a loved one, community member or medical provider, though it can be anyone - requests an evaluation of an individual in a substance use-related crisis. It's at the discretion of these crisis responders to decide whether that individual is in enough danger, or endangering others enough, to commit them to a treatment facility - sometimes for just a few days but up to several weeks.

But waits are long for these responders; some advocates for those struggling with substance use disorders report enduring weeks before a designated crisis responder arrives. Sometimes that's time they don't have.

Another reason Borghesani says the law isn't used: hospitals are busy. "Physicians are rightfully very eager to keep people flowing through the emergency departments," he explains. "So they might look at this as something that would just take a lot of time and not be beneficial."

Despite these obstacles, Ricky's law is put to regular use in Washington. According to the Washington health

authority, the state has been admitting roughly 700 people annually to substance-use facilities under Ricky's law.

That number does not reveal how many people have elected to stay in recovery after their forced detention - a fact that makes it hard to say with certainty how effective it has been in galvanising sustained recovery.

In 2024, the complex questions raised by Ricky's law - and what helpful, compassionate addiction policy actually looks like - are more relevant than ever across the country. Recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows a stunning national rise in alcohol-related deaths; more than 11% of adults had alcohol use disorder at some point in 2022, according to the National Institutes of Health.

A far more visible catastrophe of addiction is playing out in US cities overwhelmed in recent years by cheap, synthetic fentanyl. In Washington's King county, home of Seattle, there were more than 1,000 overdose deaths in 2023, a nearly 50% increase from the previous year. Whole blocks are taken over by people buying, using and selling fentanyl. Arguably any one of these people is a grave danger to themselves.

Some outreach workers and medical providers on the frontlines of this problem would like to use the law to help this population but say it's not currently possible. "We get stuck in this place of: what do we do?" says Cyn Kotarski, the medical director with a programme called CoLead, which helps people with housing and treatment. Kotarski often sees people with abscess wounds, days away from becoming septic. But with long waiting lists for designated crisis responders, there's no way to reach people in these crisis moments. "The option quite literally becomes: they stay outside until they die," she says.

Frye, the addiction-medicine expert, says the problem is one of more than resources. The US, she says, needs an entirely new orientation to addiction treatment to underpin public policy, one that embraces methods such as harm reduction. "We have to stop being the moral police of people," says Frye.

Public health addiction crises like the one that Seattle is battling, she argues, would be better addressed by tackling the surrounding problems - housing crises, trauma and mental health issues that give rise to



Complex crisis

Outreach with people living in tents in Seattle. Far right, police check on a man who says he has used fentanyl. Above right, Ricky and Lauren

JOHN MOORE/GETTY;
LAUREN DAVIS





I was in a position of trying to catch him before he died. I started to tell his story to anyone who would listen

Proud moment substance use disorders. She imagines Ricky and Lauren coupling this approach with accessible, the day she was sworn in as a state representative in 2019. ENRIQUE GARCIA

compassionate, therapeutic outpatient settings. “The best way to help people reduce or stop using substances is to put the patient in the driver’s seat,” she says. “And we as healthcare providers are working towards helping them identify their own reasons to want to come back and quit.”

Forced captivity, she argues, doesn’t meet that criterion. But even Frye acknowledges a utility to saving a person’s life in certain circumstances without their consent. Sometimes her own patients are facing imminent death otherwise. “Transporting someone to the hospital involuntarily, getting that condition assessed, and helping make the hospital stay tolerable for the person - that’s warranted,” she says.

The exact circumstances in which to make this call are hard to define. Maybe impossible.

Inspired by her work creating Ricky’s law, Lauren Davis decided to run for office and was elected as a state representative in 2018. She has focused her policy efforts on expanding the state’s fragile system of treatment for substance abuse, an endeavour she continues today.

Davis acknowledges Ricky’s law needs course correction to be more useful, and she agrees that even if it’s improved, the law is not enough to adequately address the scope of addiction in places like Seattle. “Do we just massively scale up Ricky’s law to address the scourge of fentanyl on the streets of Seattle?” she says. “No.”

Instead she’s focusing her efforts on building a robust system of treatment that addresses comprehensive needs including housing and access to medications like methadone and Suboxone that can be provided over the counter to treat addiction. This effort also includes expanding a recovery navigator programme, in which outreach workers build trust with people on the street and help them access resources - willingly.

Still, she firmly believes in the potential and power of Ricky’s law in certain circumstances. She’s seen it work first-hand, saying: “At the end of the day, I believe without a doubt that it has saved lives, that it has changed lives, that it has restored families.”

By late 2020, Ricky had been sober nine years. Then came an episode that would test both Ricky’s relationship with Kelsey and the law created in his name. Kelsey recalls coming home one day from work and finding his then boyfriend passed out in the stairwell of their apartment block. Kelsey believes the pandemic triggered the relapse. Ricky had built a network of friends and family in the world of recovery, support that quickly dissolved in social isolation.

“I had heard him talk about what active disease looked like,” says Kelsey. “When it showed up, I was like, ‘Oh my God, what is happening?’” During that event, according to both Davis and Kelsey, Ricky’s law worked the way it was supposed to. He was put in a temporary, involuntary hold.

After a number of days of sobriety, says Davis, her friend re-emerged. “His brain came back online. He was able to make healthy choices,” Davis recounts. Kelsey says: “He chose our life together.” Kelsey worked to help Ricky gain access to a residential treatment programme.

It was more than two years later, after he and Kelsey were married, that relapse came again for Ricky. To Kelsey, it seemed out of the blue. Ricky had gone back to education and had a new job working for an organisation supporting recovery for others. “We were really living the dream we always wanted,” he says. He wonders if his husband was suffering from a kind of existential vertigo. “The only way that I can make sense out of it is that sometimes when things are so good, it’s the fear of losing it,” he says. “That’s what Ricky would talk to me about sometimes.”

This time, in post-pandemic 2023, systems of emergency and crisis support were stressed. Kelsey spent hours on the phone trying to make the legal and healthcare wheels turn in his favour. One night, worried that Ricky was literally going to drink himself to death, he drove his husband to the emergency room. The following day, when there was a staff change, says Kelsey, “the attending physician was going to just release him back out on to the street”. “I would beg and plead with healthcare staff, police officers. I would say, ‘Ricky’s law is literally named after him,’” says Kelsey.

After Kelsey finally had him committed, Ricky became far less reachable, even after days of forced withdrawal and sobriety. At one point, he fled all the way to Oregon, out of the reach of his own law. Kelsey spent nights with no idea where he was. “I really can’t see anyone living on the side of the street or under an overpass without thinking about Ricky,” he says.

Eventually, Ricky ended up in a residential treatment facility in a Seattle suburb. He went there willingly; Kelsey was expecting to see his husband the next day. Instead, Ricky was found dead. The cause of Ricky’s death is under investigation. Kelsey is now suing the facility, alleging wrongful death.

Kelsey’s faith in the law named after his husband remains steadfast, as does his belief in the power of recovery. “For anyone dealing with this,” he says, “please know there is hope.” That optimism has not made his first year as a widower easier. It’s been “hell”, as Kelsey describes it. “I just miss him.” ●

KATIA RIDDLE IS A REPORTER BASED IN OREGON

THIS STORY IS PART OF A REPORTING FELLOWSHIP SPONSORED BY THE ASSOCIATION OF HEALTH CARE JOURNALISTS AND SUPPORTED BY THE COMMONWEALTH FUND

● In the US, call or text SAMHSA’s national helpline on 988. In the UK, Action on Addiction is 0300 330 0659. In Australia, the National Alcohol and Other Drug Hotline is 1800 250 015; families and friends can seek help at Family Drug Support Australia on 1300 368 186. Other international helplines can be found at befrienders.org

MARÍA RAMÍREZ

Catalan voters have rejected separatists

Page 47 →

Opinion



TECHNOLOGY

Forget connectedness – the internet makes juveniles of us all

Martha Gill



Illustration Dominic McKenzie

How will technology change us as a species? In Silicon Valley, all prophecies seem to have converged into one: that it will usher in some sort of planetary Buddhist revolution. To read its mission statements and watch its Ted talks is to hear phrases such as “connectedness”, “common understanding” and “overcoming barriers”. You could probably pitch a social media platform and a spiritual handbook simultaneously these days: “This will lead humanity to smiling, peaceful enlightenment.”

The soothsayers in Hollywood, meanwhile, see it differently. Introduce new tech within a blockbuster film and things tend to go one of two ways. Awe and then terror, as the product wreaks havoc on the planet; or alternatively, the rise of an emotionless new society, where, surrounded by intelligent machines, people start behaving a bit like robots themselves. The stereotypical sci-fi citizen is cold, sombre, aloof and efficient. In the minds of scriptwriters, at least, tech will at some point leach the very humanity out of us.

In the face of these three predictions, I give you the Portal: interactive sculptures set up in New York and Dublin with a live feed between them, so that passersby in the respective cities can see one another in real time. It was named like a sci-fi fantasy and made to look like one: a hole in the space-time continuum big enough to step through. According to the group behind it - Portals.org - its aim is to act as a “bridge to a united planet”, and to “invite all of us to meet above borders and differences”.

How did humanity react to this lofty concept? Within hours of going live on 8 May, a “very drunk” woman in her 40s was led away and arrested on the Dublin side after repeatedly “grinding her bum” on the portal for 20 minutes. Another arse-flashing “incident” from the Irish soon followed, and then a Dubliner took things a step further by brandishing his phone showing footage of a plane crashing into the twin towers. Another man (also a Dubliner) flashed up images of a swastika. Another made a show of snorting cocaine.

“Portal to hell: live video art installation already bringing out the worst in people,” lamented the New York Post. “Why did they put it here? At night-time it’s like The Purge,” a Dublin native told a newspaper. New York took matters into its own hands when a woman flashed her breasts at Dublin “in revenge” for the 9/11 image. “It was only fair I showed them my twin towers to save our city from harassment,” she explained.

“

Offered a ‘bridge to a united planet’, we react by flashing, making rude signs and ganging up against each other

It was this that finally caused the Portal to be taken (temporarily) offline. The woman later revealed to be an OnlyFans star, and to have made about \$10,000 in new subscribers from the stunt.

Flashing, swastikas, OnlyFans. Is the Portal not a parable for the internet itself? Forget enlightenment, terror or the robotisation of humanity. Here might be the real answer to how “connectedness” changes us. Offered a “bridge to a united planet”, we react by flashing, making rude signs and ganging up against each other. Far from pushing humanity into a higher level of sophistication, it causes us to regress into adolescence.

The evidence has been pretty much there from the start. In *The Psychology of the Internet*, published in 1999, Patricia Wallace noted that online life - back then limited to email and chatrooms - was doing something strange to us. “One of the first surprises for researchers investigating online behaviour was how disinhibited people sometimes became, and how their tempers seemed to flare more easily as they interacted with others,” she wrote. We evolved, after all, for in-person communication, with its body language, nuance, half-meanings and potential for physical consequences. We know that even small amounts of physical separation can radically change behaviour: road rage boils up in the isolated container of a car. Experimenters note, too, that empathy drops off a cliff when people are separated by a glass window.

How to summarise, then, the personality changes that the internet brings out in us? Tribalism, bullying, the wildfire spread of “crazes”, “instant gratification culture”, the triumph of the temper tantrum: future anthropologists may observe that the behaviour of adults online very much resembles that of children offline. Online, there is a level of adult sophistication that simply seems beyond us. Some call the internet a town square, some a wild west. In fact, it’s a playground.

The adolescent spirit of the internet is never more obvious than when it bursts into the real world. The 6 January 2021 attack on the Capitol was born online, which is why it appeared so strange: grown adults in fancy dress inflicting reckless damage and crying when arrested. With the Portal now closed, adult behaviour resumes around it.

On the internet, nostalgia fits here too: fantasy role play, video game characters, comic book culture, superheroes, all of these flourish. No surprise there: online life is infused with the morality of a children’s storybook: good and evil, and nothing in between. It is surely no coincidence that some of the personalities that triumph on social media - Andrew Tate, Jordan Peterson - find their strongest offline fanbase in pubescent boys.

How will technology change us as a species? Humans once took adult wolves and arrested their development, turning them into childish dogs. It’s how we domesticated them. Are we, in our turn, being domesticated by the internet? In the demand for content - silly, aggressive, playful, childish - are we gradually being turned into adult children? ● *Observer*

* **Martha Gill**
is an *Observer*
columnist

SPAIN

Catalans once longed for freedom, but it doesn't look so appealing now

María Ramírez



For the first time since 1980, parties opposing Catalonia's independence from Spain have the support of a majority of voters in the region. Elections on 12 May saw around 54% of the electorate return candidates from non-separatist parties across the political spectrum. The Socialist party scored a momentous victory for the first time.

The vote appears to draw a line under a tumultuous decade marked by a 2017 rush to independence that led to an illegal referendum, a unilateral declaration of independence, mass protest and the worst constitutional crisis since the restoration of democracy in 1975. The result shows most Catalans don't want a separate Catalan republic, but this is the first time the shift in opinion will be reflected in the Catalan parliament.

The Catalan autonomous region was created after the end of the Franco dictatorship. Today Catalonia, even more than other Spanish regions, has considerable powers in healthcare, security and education.

Despite autonomy, support for Catalan independence from Spain had steadily grown, reaching 49% in 2017. Now, only around 30% of the population unambiguously tick an "independent state" as the best option for Catalonia when pollsters offer a range of nuanced hypothetical outcomes including independence within a federal Spain. Turnout was low in the vote: around 58%, compared with the 80% record of 2017.

Overall what the result points to is that the so-called

procés (the "process" that separatist politicians embarked on to make Catalonia independent) may be dead, even if nationalist sentiment remains part of the culture and politics in Catalonia, as does the desire to break away from the rest of Spain.

Family origin remains the most significant predictor of secessionist sympathies, according to an analysis from *El País*. Older, wealthier people, residents of rural communities and those with multi-generational ties to Catalonia tend to be more supportive of independence.

Attachment to Catalan language and culture is still very strong. Catalan identity is, however, now more inclusive of other identities. The percentage of citizens who say they feel "only Catalan" has declined from 29% in 2017 to 17%, while the share of those who say they feel both Catalan and Spanish has jumped from 35% to 44%.

So what has changed since 2017? There are several factors, including a widespread sense of disillusionment following the chaotic aftermath of the 2017 vote.

Many people were alarmed by the lack of planning for independence and transparency surrounding the secessionists' plans that became evident in 2017.

Carles Puigdemont, president of Catalonia at the time

and now leader of the rightwing Junts party, declared unilateral independence after a vote with no legal consequences and a few seconds later announced it could not be applied. Then, as he was suspended by the national government, he fled to Brussels. Some of his colleagues in government were tried and went to jail.

Since then, concerns about the independence issue have been replaced in most people's minds by pressing global problems (from the pandemic to the threat of war) and local ones such as a crisis in public services provision and a prolonged drought. Tensions between the opposing camps in the independence debate have declined too. In pardoning the jailed politicians, the central government led by Pedro Sánchez has adopted a more conciliatory approach than the conservative administration led by his predecessor Mariano Rajoy. On the Catalan side, new separatist leaders, particularly Pere Aragonès from the leftist ERC, have also adopted a more pragmatic, conciliatory tone.

The Socialist leader, Salvador Illa, is well suited to lead a more inclusive era, promising, in Spanish, to include all Catalans, "no matter what they think, no matter what language they speak, no matter where they live and no matter what they come from".

It's not clear whether he will manage to secure a majority in the Catalan parliament, where rightwing parties have advanced, including a new far-right, Islamophobic pro-independence party. Puigdemont is still bidding to become president of Catalonia, perhaps in exchange for supporting Sánchez's national government.

Politics now reflects what reality on the ground has shown for a long time, and not just in Catalonia. Most people don't want political disruption, let alone revolution. Politicians, including messianic leaders, should acknowledge that ●

▲ A supporter of exiled Catalan leader Carles Puigdemont wears a cap with the Estelada, a separatist flag

NACHO DOCE/REUTERS



UNITED
KINGDOM

Tory war on overseas students is all about saving their own skins

Polly Toynbee

A key turning point in British politics was Tony Blair's famous priorities: "education, education, education". A giant step was his 1999 conference speech: "Today I set a target of 50% of young adults going into higher education in the next century." By 2017-18 that threshold had been crossed in England, with more than half of young people taking that leap forward. In 1980 it was just 15%.

But universities are falling into severe financial crisis. Unsurprisingly, the Tories are not unduly bothered. They attack universities all the time, calling for cuts in student numbers. Now they are plunging the knife into

vital funding from foreign students. They ignore pleas from major companies, which wrote to the government last week, to stop a migration policy that is threatening investment in the UK by blocking foreign students.

Tories and their pollsters see clearly that the growth in highly educated citizens is a social and political revolution not in their favour: the more educated people are, the less likely they are to vote for what John Stuart Mill called "the stupidest party". Graduates outnumber school leavers among those aged under 50, Prof Rob Ford's research shows, and education has become a strong predictor of vote choice and political values.

As Labour wins the graduates, "the Conservatives' base has shifted towards those with GCSE qualifications or less". And they are dying out, as the oldest cohorts, who had fewest education opportunities, are the most authoritarian on crime, migration and nativist sentiment. The young are not turning right the way previous generations did, and there are shrinking numbers of seats where less qualified school leavers are the majority. Ford predicts that by 2031, there will be 249 seats where graduates dominate. But this doesn't fix the future for Labour: once in power, if Labour disappoints, these are fickle voters likely to veer off to the Greens and Liberal Democrats.

The Office for Students' financial report published last

Illustration Eleanor Shakespeare

week found that 40% of English universities expect to be in deficit this year, with many more in cashflow trouble. The number of foreign students, who pay up to £38,000 (\$48,000) a year compared with home students paying £9,250, has fallen sharply this year. Admissions data finds 37% fewer acceptances for postgraduate courses next year from foreign students and a different survey shows 27% fewer applicants overall. Barring them from bringing dependants while they study, and raising the amount they must earn to take a job, is deliberately designed to deter them. It does nothing for what voters really care about, that futile “stop the boats” promise. It’s hard to think of a stupider policy, except as a way to cut the number of universities and UK graduates.

Never mind that higher education is a rare and envied UK asset. Last week a joint letter from Universities UK and Creative UK urged the government not to cut foreign student visas: international students are “integral” to the creative industries. They need the crucial visas to stay two years after graduating.

But this government, in its death throes, inhabits a realm way beyond considering the good of the country or listening to major companies. All that matters is immigration and culture-war sallies, so the home secretary, James Cleverly, duly commissioned a report from the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) “to ensure the graduate route is not being abused” by people using study visas as a covert route to immigration. What a disappointment when the MAC found no evidence of abuse of the scheme.

The Tories’ unpatriotic culture war fights against all Britain’s soft power assets, from museums and galleries to the British Council and the BBC and its prized World Service. How can this government not be impressed by the fact that a quarter of the world’s leaders have been educated in Britain? This is influence you can’t buy, yet they pay us for. Of course we need foreign students: a recent study suggests four out of five of them leave within five years, taking a British connection back to their influential roles at home.

Amid the Vesuvius of need that Labour will inherit, with every threadbare public service desperate for funds, universities will be low in the queue. (So they should be, since spending on education at the youngest ages yields most.) But at least Labour will do all it can to encourage lucrative foreign students and welcome them in. It would be wise to take them out of migration figures, too: the great majority are not migrants at all.

But living within the incomes they can attract, universities may reconsider how they are organised: some will question why degrees need three years with such short terms, why vice-chancellors’ salaries, some higher than £500,000, are much higher than their European neighbours’, why university teaching careers are so hard on beginners and why sixth-formers get so much more teaching time than university students at far lower cost. Whatever answers universities might come up with, a measure of radicalism looks inevitable. But at least under Labour there will be encouragement, not disparagement of this great national asset ●

It’s up to Israel’s allies to persuade Netanyahu to stop standing in the way of peace

The emotional vow by Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel’s prime minister, to “destroy” Hamas after it massacred about 1,200 people on 7 October 2023 was understandable. But it was never a realisable aim. Eight months on, more than 35,000 Palestinians are dead, yet Hamas is still fighting in parts of Gaza that Israel’s army thought it controlled, a new humanitarian crisis looms around Rafah, 640,000 people have been displaced again, and the agony of Israeli hostages and their families is daily renewed. Three more bodies were recovered last Friday.

Defeating Hamas remains a vital objective for Israel and most western and Arab governments. But Netanyahu has failed, or rather refused, to articulate a “day after” strategy for administering (and rebuilding) Gaza. He refuses to accept that military force alone will not work. Hamas’s defeat must be political, legal, economic and psychological as much as physical.

Netanyahu’s behaviour fuels suspicions that he seeks to wage war indefinitely, to extend the life of his fractious coalition - and his career. These tensions exploded into the open last week when Yoav Gallant, his defence minister, accused him of leading Israel into an open-ended, contested military and civil occupation of Gaza that would undermine its own security and produce an ongoing Hamas insurgency.

Gallant suggested that Israel agree to alternative Palestinian leadership in Gaza. This echoed previous proposals giving a lead role to Fatah’s Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority. Knowing

his far-right allies would rather collapse his government than concur, Netanyahu renewed his vow to fight to the end. This split at the top of Israel’s government, and deadlock in ceasefire talks, may encourage Hamas’s reported belief that it is winning the parallel war for international sympathy.

The international community must take the lead in pursuing peace. “Day after” plans already exist in broad outline. One centres on a proposal that Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Morocco lead an international force in Gaza to help prevent Hamas re-establishing itself politically. In a separate, linked move, the Arab League called last week for a UN peacekeeping mission in Gaza and the West Bank.

US officials are developing an ambitious “mega-deal” intended to finally resolve the Israel-Palestine conflict. On the table is Saudi Arabia’s normalisation of relations with Israel in return for all-round US security guarantees and ultimate recognition by Israel of an independent Palestinian state. The fabled two-state solution could become a reality at long last.

It’s a long shot. But amid all the blinding anger arising from the expanding assault on Rafah, mass starvation caused by blocked aid supplies, court action in The Hague over Israel’s alleged genocide, and Hamas’s cowardly exploitation of Palestinian suffering, it is important to remember there are still paths through this morass of misery. And Netanyahu, in particular, must be firmly told by Israel’s friends that it’s time to choose peace ● *Observer*



WRITE
TO US

Letters for publication
weekly.letters@theguardian.com

Please include a full postal address and a reference to the article.

We may edit letters. Submission and publication of all letters is subject to our terms and conditions, see:

THEGUARDIAN.COM/LETTERS-TERMS

Editorial

Editor: Graham Snowdon
Guardian Weekly, Kings Place, 90 York Way, London N1 9GU, UK

To contact the editor directly:
editorial.feedback@theguardian.com

Corrections

Our policy is to correct significant errors as soon as possible. Please write to guardian.readers@theguardian.com or the readers' editor, Kings Place, 90 York Way, London N1 9GU, UK

IPCC is wrong to claim the 1.5C target is achievable

It doesn't require a survey to know that the global mean temperature rise will breach 1.5C before 2030 (Age of fools, 17 May).

In 2023, American scientist Jim Hansen demonstrated that the rate of warming, 0.18C per decade since the early 70s, has increased to 0.27C per decade since 2010. The reasons for the acceleration in warming are not entirely clear, but two important possibilities are the rapid rise in atmospheric methane since 2008, and the loss of aerosol cooling from legislation limiting the sulphur content of fuels used for shipping.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is deluded if it is claiming the 1.5C limit is still achievable.

*Dr Robin Russell-Jones
Founder, Help Rescue the Planet, UK*

● No one set out to destroy the environment. Survival once meant doing everything the cheap and easy way. Now we can and must act differently; all of us must change our consumption habits. Billions of individual decisions put us in this hole; billions of individual decisions will get us out.

*Gregory Johnson
Bergesserin, Burgundy, France*

Why the House of Lords deserves our gratitude

When Edith Pritchett (A week in Venn diagrams, 3 May) likens the House of Lords to tabs open on her laptop, in that members are "there for a whole lifetime, many doing nothing", she may wish to consider that it was the Lords who made the UK government think, again and again, whether it really wanted the Rwanda bill to pass. And it is because the upper house is unelected that it can debate the rightness and morality of such a measure, untrammelled by considerations of populism.

*AG Rivett
Llandysul, Wales, UK*

Full marks to protesting students for learning well

The student protests are not about hate - quite the opposite, they are about justice for all (Campus protests, Spotlight, 10 May). We have taught our children and students about the universal values of basic human rights, equality and antiracism. But it seems that we are quick to forget these ideals when economical or political reasons make them inconvenient.

However, the students have reminded us that these values apply everywhere, including in Gaza. This is not about condoning violence on

either side. We should applaud the students for reminding us of what we taught them.

*Marianne Gemmeke
Chandler's Ford, England, UK*

● Robert Reich neglected to mention that the difference between the protest movements now and 1968 is that they are predominantly organised by women, a different target for a militarised police force (History rhymes, Spotlight, 10 May).

The fact that mostly women and children are dying in Gaza presents an obvious connection. I have concluded that they and their instincts are our only hope.

*James Fraser
Wellington, New Zealand*

MP who jumped from Tories is a switch too far

I'm tribal Labour. In my 64 voting years I have been Labour through good times and the worst. But I have finally reached my sticking point - Natalie Elphicke (UK report, 17 May). Sorry, Keir.

*Margaret Scorer
London, England, UK*

Corman the innovator was happy working in reverse

The American film director Roger Corman was a great innovator (Deaths, 17 May). He often reversed the process of

making a film. If someone came to him with an idea, he would give it a title, get a poster made, then test it on audiences. If they responded well, he would get someone to write a script based on the poster. The better I knew him, the more I admired him. I shall miss his advice and knowledge of film-making.

*John Boorman
Albury Heath, England, UK*

Just not cricket: Britain still lags in comparison

The letter from Shyamol Banerji says he perceives Britain as a "work in progress" but well ahead of the other mature democracies (17 May). Turning to the Weekly's United Kingdom pages, we find that after 26 years of opening its doors, women still only constitute 4% of full Marylebone Cricket Club members.

That sounds like work at a standstill. Surely some mature colonial democracies have "progressed" far better in this area?

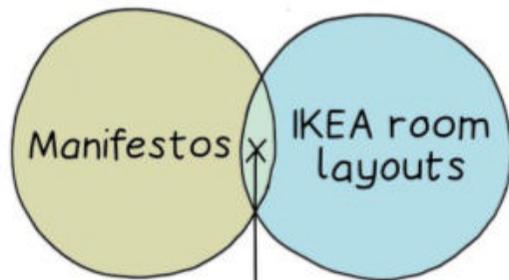
*Anthony Walter
Coldstream, British Columbia, Canada*

The bare truth about the performers on Eurovision

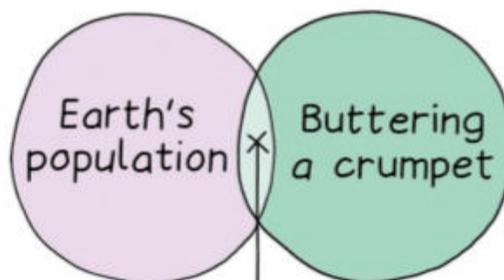
We very much enjoyed watching the Eurovision thong contest (Hit and miss, Culture, 17 May).

*Stevie Walsh
Kirkcaldy, Scotland, UK*

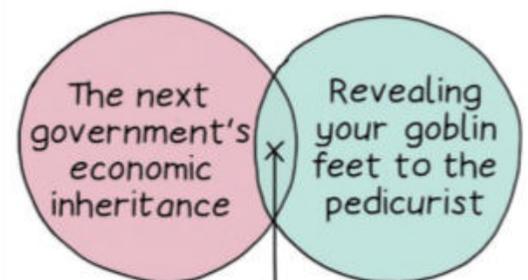
A WEEK
IN VENN
DIAGRAMS
Edith Pritchett



Sadly much of it can't be delivered



Reaching saturation point



Hideous task ahead

VISUAL ARTS

How gardens
nurture artists'
creativity

Page 55 →

Culture

*On a beer-fuelled tour
of Sheffield, Richard Hawley
discusses the magic of his
home city, his musical and
getting an Oscar nod*

Man of steel





INTERVIEW
By Tim Lewis
COVER
PHOTOGRAPH
Gary Calton

On 8 November 2007, the great Pelé visited Sheffield. The occasion was the 150th anniversary of the world's oldest football club, Sheffield FC, which was celebrated with a match between the hometown team and Inter Milan at Sheffield United's Bramall Lane. Pelé, by then in his late 60s, walked on to the pitch to a rapturous ovation, but then he did something unexpected: he knelt on the turf, took out a tiny pair of scissors, carefully snipped a few blades of grass and popped them in a bag in his pocket. "Without Sheffield FC, there wouldn't be me," he declared.

Richard Hawley, the 57-year-old singer, songwriter and longsuffering Sheffield Wednesday season-ticket holder, relates this story with care and wonder. But his point is a bigger one: Sheffield and football should be synonymous. The city should be home to museums, statues and walking tours. If Pelé wanted to make a pilgrimage to South Yorkshire, how many others who love the game would follow?

Except, of course, they don't. "If cities were cartoon characters, Sheffield would be Homer Simpson," says Hawley, with a wheezy, nicotine-revved cackle. "It's like, 'D'oh! We get so close and ahhh, we fuck it up because we get it a bit wrong. But as long as I've got a hole in my arse, I'll love this city. And I love it for its crapness as well. It's like how I love a three-legged dog. They'll still run for a ball."

Not everyone could get away with saying that, but Hawley, who was born, raised and continues to live in Sheffield, has earned the right. And even in a city with dense musical roots - from Joe Cocker to Def Leppard, the Human League to Heaven 17, and later Pulp and Arctic Monkeys - he stands out for the creative succour that Sheffield gives him. It's often upfront in his album titles: his 2001 solo debut, *Late Night Final*, was a throwback to the call of the city's newspaper vendors; 2005's *Coles Corner*, the first of two Hawley albums nominated for the Mercury prize, was taken from a famous meeting point for first dates in Sheffield; then there was *Standing at the Sky's Edge* in 2012, also Mercury

shortlisted, which nods to the brutalist Park Hill estate that looms over the city, and which became the inspiration for an Olivier-winning hit musical of the same name.

And it's there again in his new record, Hawley's 10th solo album, *In This City They Call You Love*. The title arrived fully formed, even before he had any finished songs to go with it, and refers to the linguistic trait in Sheffield of using the greeting "love", for everyone.

My day in Sheffield with Hawley begins "at the crack of midday" at an electricity substation on the edge of the city, where the photoshoot takes place. He arrives camera-ready: his trademark rockabilly quiff, streaked black and silver like a jackdaw's plumage, his indigo Levi's stiff and turned up, his black leather boots polished to a military shine.

We pretzel into his manager's Mini and head into the city to Marmadukes, a chichi cafe opposite the Catholic cathedral. Hawley likes it well enough there - they have an alcohol licence, for one thing - but does ask them to turn off the muzak. "Thank fuck for that," he says, as it goes silent. "Background music does my head in. That's why I've always loved drinking in old men's pubs. It's not because I'm an old man now ... though technically I am." He cracks a can of IPA and announces triumphantly: "First of the day!"

Hawley was born in 1967 and grew up in the Firth Park district, with two younger sisters. His mother, Lynne, was a nurse and singer; his father, Dave, sang too, and was a talented guitarist who worked at the local steelworks. That was until they closed in the 1980s, a painful downturn that the teenage Hawley watched up-close.

"One of my favourite achievements, if you can call it that, is never having a job," says Hawley. "And as a steelworker's son, who watched my father's entire generation get thrown on a scrapheap, I was determined never to work for the man. Never."

Hawley revisited this turbulent period when he started working on the *Standing at the Sky's Edge* musical. The action follows three generations of residents in one Park Hill flat, from the wide-eyed hope of the 1960s, through the economic crash of the 1980s, up to recent years when the Grade II-listed brutalist development has once again become a desirable place to live. Hawley's music provides the soundtrack - including his classics *Tonight the Streets Are Ours* and *Open Up Your Door* - and he consulted local playwright Chris Bush and director Robert Hastie on the book. The show, which ingeniously weaves upward mobility, immigration and gentrification, has been a smash: it started life at the Sheffield Crucible in 2019, before being restaged last year at London's National Theatre. It has now transferred to London's West End.

The critical and popular reception of *Standing at the Sky's Edge* is not something that Hawley saw coming. When the idea came up, from producer Rupert Lord, more than a decade ago, Hawley had an almost physical revulsion to doing it. "I hate musicals, hate them," he says. "With a passion. And I knew nothing about theatre. I felt like a cat



One of my favourite achievements, if you can call it that, is never having a job

▲ **City counsel**
Richard Hawley's new album is inspired by life in Sheffield

GARY CALTON

with the fur rubbed the wrong way. That was actually the reason that made me do it. That it didn't feel comfortable or right in any way at all. It felt wrong."

Hawley remembers feeling a similar gnawing uncertainty when he made another life-changing call: his decision, in the late 1990s, to go solo. After school, he spent a decade playing here and there, on and off the dole, before breaking through in his mid-20s as the guitarist for the Sheffield indie group Longpigs. It was peak Britpop and Hawley enjoyed himself: he has previously copped to an industrial-sized cocaine habit and use of "other chemicals". Today, he says of this period: "I was a nutter: rock'n'roll, a guitar player in bands. It was tremendous fun for some time. And then it stopped being fun."

Part of the reason Hawley pulled back was that he started playing guitar with Pulp. Another was that he had an ultimatum from his wife, Helen, a psychiatric nurse, with whom he has three children. "Me and my wife have held it together for 33 years," says Hawley, shaking his head in disbelief. "In the music industry that's unheard of. My missus needs a medal as big as a bin lid."

Working with Pulp happened organically: he met Steve Mackey, their bassist who died last year, on their first day of nursery school and he started knocking about with Jarvis Cocker when they were teenagers. It was an open secret that Hawley wrote his own material on the side, but what emerged in 2001, when Hawley was 34, was a revelation: velvet-lush vocals that were tender and flecked with melancholy, backed up with timeless guitar-playing that evoked both industrial Sheffield and middle America.

"What came out of that whole period of time [before going solo] was learning what not to do," says Hawley. "It was a good experience in the long run for me, because I just thought: 'If ever I get my time ...' And the music industry is so brutal. You basically get one bite of one cherry. I've eaten the whole fucking bowl!"

"When I made my first records, it was quite obvious to me it was the last roll of the dice," Hawley continues. "The main thing about the solo stuff was: 'If I fail, it's going to be on my terms.' For once, I was going to plant my flag in the fucking ground: this is it and this is what I want to do. But it was terrifying because I knew I was a salmon swimming upstream, because I was older. Then it was: indie guitarist goes solo and comes out with something that's so startlingly different from what I was thought to be, which was this rock'n'roll fucking monster."

The cafe is closing up, so we take to the streets on foot, stopping at a newsagents for Hawley to buy cigarettes. We pass a building where Pulp used to rehearse upstairs and enter the Irish Triangle, which is made up of three pubs: the Grapes, the Dog & Partridge and Fagan's. Hawley's destination this afternoon is the Grapes, a historic, 200-year-old drinking den. Hawley first came here with his dad more than 40 years ago, and calls the owner Auntie Ann. He hands her a crisp £10 note and brings back two Guinneses.

Hawley is loosened up nicely now and the stories are tumbling. We talk about this year's Oscars: he collaborated with Cocker on two songs for the 2023 Wes Anderson film, *Asteroid City*; one of those, *Dear Alien* (Who Art in Heaven), was shortlisted for best original song. "Jarv rang me and he says: 'We've been nominated for an Oscar,'" Hawley recalls. "And of course I was in my cups, as they say; I was five deep in my local, pissed, and I just went: 'What for?'"

Hawley cracks up, his head bobbing. "To this day, Jarvis

► Whole hog

Hawley (second left) with indie band the Longpigs in 1996

ANDY WILLISHER/ALAMY



will ring me or I'll ring him and say: 'Look, I've got an idea for a song and I think this is something you could do ...' We did that back in the 1980s. And he knows that, if there's a certain thing he needs, it'll be me that he calls. And when we get together, inevitably the guitars will come out. It's as normal for us as playing tiddlywinks."

Hawley has jotted down lyrics for as long as he can remember. At the end of working on the new album, he calculated that he and his band had amassed an unfathomable 86 finished songs to pick from. "I've never described it particularly as a talent," says Hawley of songwriting, "it's more a mental illness."

In *This City They Call You Love* finds Hawley on sublime form. There are the moments of sparse beauty you would expect, but his soulful vocals are perhaps given more room than previous records. "The new record represents a bravery, a rawness of spirit that I'm always striving to get to," says Hawley. "Because I can't hear it on the radio, so I think: 'Fuck it, I'll do it!' And if I'm in a position where people are kind enough to play my records, at least I can have the decency to actually play something fucking worth playing."

I make the mistake of suggesting that we should consider Hawley a poet of his home city. "I'm not a poet," he shoots back. "I'm no fucking poet."

Still, something about Sheffield has made it a lifelong muse. "I get asked about it a lot," says Hawley, draining his Guinness. "The answer is, it surprises me that I seem to be the only one - or one of the only ones. Why is not everyone doing that? Talking about what you know, rather than some bullshit that you've imagined." *Observer*

TIM LEWIS IS A WRITER FOR THE OBSERVER

In This City They Call You Love is out on 31 May

▲ Double act

Performing with Jarvis Cocker at legendary Sheffield venue the Leadmill in 2022

TOM SUNDERLAND/
THE LEADMILL

Water mark Opera tells of dam's destruction

Gaia-24, which has premiered in Kyiv, weaves musical styles together to explore the human and environmental disaster caused by Russia's invasion

By Charlotte Higgins

▼ Pulling strings

The second act of Gaia-24 begins with the performers naked on stage

JULIA KOCHETOVA

Taking a casual glance at the elegant Kyivans queueing outside the lemon-yellow neoclassical theatre perched above Independence Square, an onlooker would have few hints that there was a war on. But the opera that premiered at the International Centre of Culture and Arts earlier this month is inextricably bound up with the deadly events of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Gaia-24 was inspired by the destruction last year of the Kakhovka dam on the Dnipro River, and the resulting human and environmental disaster as waters from the 2,150 sq km reservoir flooded vast areas downriver.

The two-hour work is a musical collage of folk song and cabaret tunes; classical works such as Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* and Schubert's *Winterreise*; chunks of techno and death metal; and even snippets of Dua Lipa. A multi-talented cast of dancers, actors, musicians and singers performed much of the work naked - using violins, cellos and basses, not just as musical instruments but as elements in a complex choreography.

Gaia-24 is the latest opera by Roman Grygoriv and Illia Razumeiko. They also created *Chornobyl'dorf*, a work that has recently completed a European and New York tour and won the UK Royal Philharmonic Society's award for the best opera production of 2023.

Chornobyl'dorf, written before Russia's full-scale invasion, "was a story about an imaginary post-apocalypse", said Razumeiko. "And then, with the invasion, this imaginary post-apocalypse became a reality."

As Russian troops ploughed through the Chornobyl exclusion zone headed for Kyiv, and occupied the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, *Chornobyl'dorf*, which summoned up a dystopian future in which humans try to piece together fragments of cultural memory after a nuclear

catastrophe, began to seem horribly prescient.

When the invasion began, Razumeiko, Grigoriv and their colleagues scattered to western Ukraine and elsewhere in Europe, returning to Kyiv after the Russian withdrawal from areas surrounding the city in April 2022. At that point, "we didn't plan to make a big opera. We didn't have the resources, or the inspiration, to do that," said Razumeiko.

But then, on 6 June last year, the Kakhovka dam was blown up, "and our reaction was immediately that we must do something", said Razumeiko. "I visited these places already one week after the explosion," he added; his parents' village, Bilenke, is on the banks of what was the Khakovka reservoir.

"It's a complicated story because the exploding of the Kakovkha dam was ecocide. But so was the building of it by Stalin - it was bad for the river, the area, the historical sites that were submerged," said Razumeiko.

The dam construction began in 1950 and was completed in 1956, providing water for the Kakovkha hydroelectric plant.

Gaia-24 includes video projections of a piano sinking gradually into river waters and aerial drone shots of performers lying in the cracked, dried-out mud of the reservoir bed - filmed around the island of Khortytsia in the Dnipro. But the opera is far from a literal depiction of last summer's cataclysmic events. The first act is a wild tapestry of folk music and dance, drawing elements from Roma, Yiddish, Bulgarian, Crimean Tatar and other traditions, as well as cabaret songs.

The second act, the opera proper, begins with the performers lying still and naked on stage with their instruments. The sound begins almost imperceptibly as the cast draw their bows across their own skin, rather than the strings.

Shifting to their instruments, they begin to create a soundscape of high, uncanny harmonics. Gradually the action moves on and the performers begin a traditional Ukrainian circle dance, the *arkan*, but to an insistent throbbing beat.

The music and choreography for the piece were created simultaneously. All the performers, whether trained musicians or not, use musical instruments. Untrained musicians can "work with the instruments as sound objects, as choreography objects, as extensions of the body", said Razumeiko.

The opera's third part is a furious, joyous mix of punk, rock, rap and K-pop references, before the work comes to a melancholy, intimate close.

Gaia-24 opened Rotterdam's O. festival of opera and music theatre last week - albeit without two team members, men of fighting age who had not been granted permission to leave the country in time for the performance, in the wake of Ukraine's new mobilisation laws. It will tour to Vienna's Musiktheatertage in September.

CHARLOTTE HIGGINS IS THE GUARDIAN'S CHIEF CULTURE WRITER





Creativity takes root

From Niki de Saint Phalle's Tuscan Tarot Garden to Barbara Hepworth's coastal oasis, artists' green spaces are about so much more than plants

By Katy Hessel

I have a dream sometimes," writes Olivia Laing in her new book, *A Garden Against Time*. "I dream I'm in a house, and discover a door I didn't know was there. It opens into an unexpected garden, and for a weightless moment I find myself inhabiting new territory, flush with potential... What might grow here, what rare roses will I find?"

It's a beautiful book that explores the garden as a political site - of sanctified and at times selfish seclusion in an unequal world - but also as a place of healing, hope, creativity and renewal. Merging biography with art, Laing looks at the restorative power of gardens during times of distress and plague, from planting her own during the

pandemic to Derek Jarman's Prospect Cottage in Dungeness, Kent, where he settled after his HIV diagnosis and intertwined sculpture with growing santolina.

Reading this at the inception of spring, when plants are bursting out of their winter cocoons, reminded me of the artists who sought out gardens: as places of refuge, as places to exhibit their work, or, as Laing writes, to "obliterate the border between cultivated and wild". I love visiting artists' gardens. It's a way of seeing their work anew and can provide a fresh insight into their character, as both gardener and artist.

My favourite remains Niki de Saint Phalle's Tarot Garden in southern Tuscany. Saint Phalle was 25 when she declared, in 1955, that she would one day build a sculpture garden. She had visited Antoni Gaudí's Park Güell in Barcelona, having turned to art while in a psychiatric hospital. Twenty years later, she was hospitalised again, this time for a lung abscess. Forced to relocate to an environment with cleaner air, she started work on her "garden of joy".

For two decades, Saint Phalle worked tirelessly to craft her paradise. She filled it with her "nana" sculptures, bulbous female figures, giving them the form of the 22 Major Arcana tarot characters, from the glittering climbing structure that makes up the Emperor to the sphinx-shaped Empress. The latter served as Saint Phalle's home for

◀ Go figure

A 'nana' sculpture in Niki de Saint Phalle's Tarot Garden in Italy

ALAMY

seven years, its insides comprising bathroom, bedroom and kitchen coated in shards of mirrored glass that, when viewed from within, makes visitors feel as if they are swimming inside a diamond.

The garden, which opened to the public in 1998, was "a magic space" for Saint Phalle, who said: "I lost all notion of time, and the limitations of normal life were abolished. I felt comforted and transported. Here, everything was possible."

Like Saint Phalle, the US photographer Lee Miller turned to her garden in a time of suffering. But rather than showcasing her art, it was a place to grow food. After joining the surrealists in Paris and then working as a war correspondent for *British Vogue*, capturing haunting images of the death camps, Miller reinvented herself as a cook, with her garden playing a key role.

She blocked out her previous life (it was only after her death that her son, who was unaware of her career in photography, found 60,000 negatives in the family attic). In 1949, Miller, who had suffered from PTSD and postnatal depression, moved to Farleys Farm in Sussex. Declaring that "cooking is therapy", she grew "asparagus, artichokes and American sweetcorn". She even joked to her mother in letters, writing: "You'd laugh at me as a farmer's wife - drying herbs, pickling things and washing spinach." While it seemed worlds away from her previous life, I can imagine Miller relishing her time outdoors, building herself anew. Today, her garden lives on as the



▼ Garden party

A sculpture at Farleys House, former UK home of Lee Miller

REUTERS

▼▼ Bronze age

The Barbara Hepworth Museum in St Ives, Cornwall

ALAMY

site for the Annual Surrealist Picnic, which encourages visitors to dress in surrealist attire, honouring Miller as both an artist and food lover.

Barbara Hepworth escaped to St Ives in Cornwall during the second world war, where her garden became a site to install her sculptures. "I prefer my work to be shown outside," she said. "I think sculpture grows in the open light and with the movement of the sun,

its aspect is always changing; and with space and the sky above, it can expand and breathe."

I love to visit Hepworth's garden in different seasons, to see plants decay and regrow, with sprouting stalks that embrace her sculptures, but also to notice how the work changes: how the light hits the surface in the greyness of winter versus how it falls in the heat of summer; or if it's been raining, to see pools of water amassing in the grooves that alter the work's form.

Laing ends her book reminding us that gardens are a "common paradise". They are there to be shared, to gather in, to converse in, to share ideas and to have a dialogue with those past and present. They are sites to feel inspired by, places of possibility, and, ultimately, to see the beauty of the world anew.

KATY HESSEL IS AN ART HISTORIAN AND BROADCASTER



FILM

Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga

Dir. George Miller

★★★★☆

"My childhood! My mother! I want them back!" With this howl of anguish, young Furiosa, played by Anya Taylor-Joy, sets the tone of vengeful rage that runs through George Miller's spectacular prequel to his Mad Max reboot from 2015.

Furiosa is the origin story of the glamorous, one-armed badass from the first film. It is set in Australia's vast post-apocalyptic wilderness where warlords rule over precious resources. Furiosa, played in the first film by Charlize Theron, was notionally in the service of the hateful chieftain Immortan Joe.

Now her younger self is played by Taylor-Joy (and as a child by Alyla Browne) as a fierce warrior-survivor. Furiosa was once part of a quiet community of souls in a progressive, peaceable place. She is kidnapped and ends up enslaved by Doctor Dementus, a strangely hilarious villain played by Chris Hemsworth.

In a sense, Dementus is a character contrived to give Furiosa someone to face off with. But Taylor-Joy and Hemsworth are a great pairing and Taylor-Joy is a convincing action heroine. She sells this sequel. *Peter Bradshaw*
On general release

MUSIC

Hit Me Hard and Soft

Billie Eilish, Polydor

★★★★☆

Both soft focus and strobe lit, Billie Eilish's third album finds the former teen prodigy, now 22, possibly hedging her bets for what might be the first time. As the title suggests, *Hit Me Hard and Soft* is a combo platter, one that draws on signature elements of her previous works - the haunted earworms of her first album, the heady swoon of the second; it packs in epic crescendos and whispery restraint.

Musically, *Hit Me Hard and Soft* does break new ground - as you would hope from Eilish and her producer brother, Finneas, two of pop's great contemporary innovators. But it does so with less glee than previously.

Getting together, and falling apart, are abiding themes on a record about love, which Eilish explores with growing sensitivity. But there are no culture-warping gauntlets thrown down in the manner of 2021's *Not My Responsibility*, which stared back at the male gaze. And if it weren't for a subtle death wish running through *Birds of a Feather* and a giant mosquito-like solo, you might mistake it for someone else's work.

Hit Me Hard and Soft clearly wants to make a virtue of its subtlety, a strategy that Eilish gets away with, due to the chef's kiss production work and her lyrical zingers. But it would have been fun to hear this album's "hard" edit - to witness Eilish and her brother upend rave music and double down on analogue keyboards. The problem here is not a lack of cohesion between hard and soft, but the knowledge that Eilish, not lacking in courage, might have hit even harder. *Kitty Empire Observer*

Podcast of the week *Broomgate*

Never before has a broom been responsible for so much scandal - in 2015, the Canadian curling community was rocked by a team that used one instead of two. The full story has never been told, so comedian and curling geek John Cullen investigates the switch to the "super broom" that caused a furore. *Hannah Verdier*



Alice Munro

1931
-2024

The Nobel prize winner whose masterly accounts of ordinary lives in small-town Canada elevated the short story into the highest form of literature

By Lisa Allardice

Back in 2006, I visited Alice Munro in Ontario to interview her for the publication of her collection *The View from Castle Rock*. She had sworn off any future publicity and claimed she didn't plan on writing much longer - two more collections followed, along with the International Man Booker and Nobel prizes. She was a mere 74 then. The cult of Munro was something of a members only club at that point, with writers such as fellow Canadian Margaret Atwood (with whom she was friends for more than 45 years) and the late AS Byatt among her admirers, along with relative young guns such as Jonathan Franzen and Lorrie Moore.

As far back as 1997 the New Yorker critic James Wood declared her "such a good writer that nobody bothers any more to judge her goodness ... her reputation is like a good address". In 2004, in one of the most deliriously compelling pieces of criticism ever written, Franzen urged people to "Read Munro! Read Munro!", anointing her "the

Great One". Atwood noted Munro's ascension to "international literary sainthood" in 2008.

It doesn't get much higher than that. As Atwood pointed out, the great mystery of Munro was the prevailing sense that, however elevated her reputation, she still wasn't worshipped widely enough. There was a cry of "At last!" when she was awarded the International Man Booker prize, and "Finally!" when she won the Nobel. With her death last week, aged 92, there can be no doubt she was one of the finest writers of the past 50 years.

Partly this defensiveness arose from her genre and subject matter: *short* stories about *ordinary* lives in *small*-town Ontario - all those diminutives seemed to demand ever more outsized superlatives. She was herself petite, as self-effacing and unpretentious in person as she was on the page. In the relatively few photographs of her (she didn't really do publicity), she is always unfashionably smiling and is often wearing a hat or standing on a white wooden porch - giving the impression that she might have stepped out of LM Montgomery's Avonlea. All of which added to the idea that she was in some way a "modest" or "gentle" writer. Unless you had read her. Like all great writers, there is cruelty - as well as compassion - in her work. Not to mention sex. According to the American novelist Mona Simpson, Munro did "for female sexuality what Philip Roth did for male sexuality".

What accounts for this remarkable "goodness"? First, there was her mastery of form - Munro could stretch and contort the short story in almost shocking ways. She was undaunted by shifts of perspective or leaps in time that would be perilous to lesser writers. To read a Munro story is like watching a virtuoso pianist perform alone on stage, where novelists have the rest of the orchestra to hide behind. Every move, every note, is on show, yet it is impossible to know how she does it.

Her subject, as Franzen pointed out, was "People, people, people" - and because people have parents and children, need money, sex and dreams, her subjects were also family, economics, desire and ambition. These people came from Huron County, south-west Ontario, which has come to be called Munro country (Jubilee or Hanratty in her fiction), where the author grew up and returned to spend the second half of her life.

Her stories are small miracles of humane understanding. But don't be fooled into mistaking this for gentleness or sentimentality. Franzen nailed it when he called it "pathological empathy". Hers is an obsessive, merciless, probing of our psyches, rooting out all our small meannesses, insecurities and inconsistencies, our endless evasions and self-delusions.

LISA ALLARDICE IS THE GUARDIAN'S CHIEF BOOKS WRITER

FICTION

Home discomforts

Colm Tóibín is at the height of his powers with a sequel to Brooklyn, set 20 years later as Eilis returns to her home in Ireland

By Clare Clark

▼ Saoirse Ronan as Eilis in the film adaptation of Brooklyn



Asked recently why he had chosen to write a sequel to his much-loved 2009 novel, *Brooklyn*, Colm Tóibín said: “The answer is why not? The other answer is that there are very good reasons not. I mean, leave it alone - why interfere with people’s imaginations about what happens to the characters? Also, and this is not true for Hilary Mantel or *The Godfather*, but in general sequels tend to be pale.”

Not this one. While Tóibín’s palette may be rather lighter on vermilion than Puzo’s - or indeed Mantel’s - *Long Island* is anything but pale. As for the characters, it is pure pleasure to be back in their absorbingly complex company.

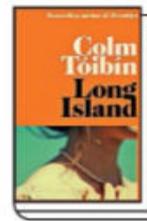
Twenty years have passed since Eilis sailed for America for the second time, leaving Enniscorthy barman Jim Farrell to return to Brooklyn and Tony Fiorello, the plumber to whom she was already secretly married. Since then she has not once gone back to Ireland. She and Tony live with their two teenage children on Long Island, in a suburban cul-de-sac built for the family by the Fiorello brothers. It is a stifflingly close-knit arrangement. Eilis’s in-laws can “almost see in through her windows”. Tony and his brothers work together. Their wives and children are constantly in and out of each other’s homes. Every Sunday the whole clan gathers. For Eilis, now in her 40s and the only one not of Italian extraction, the lack of privacy is sometimes unendurable. It is only slowly that she has carved a kind of peace for herself within it.

That peace is smashed to pieces in the opening pages of *Long Island* when a stranger, an Irish customer of Tony’s, turns up on her doorstep. Tony’s plumbing, he informs her, has proved “too good”. His wife is expecting Tony’s baby. Since the Irishman has no intention of raising a “plumber’s brat”, when the child is born, he will leave it on their doorstep. Recognising his obduracy - “She had known men like this in Ireland” - Eilis has no doubt that he means what he says. As the baby’s birth approaches, she seizes on her mother’s 80th birthday as a pretext to return to Ireland for the summer with her children.

In Enniscorthy little has changed. Gentle, serious Jim Farrell still runs the pub and has never married. Eilis’s old friend Nancy, five years widowed, manages the chip shop. The town is as cramped by convention as it always was. It is Eilis with her transatlantic gloss who is different, marked out by her clothes, her hair, the unpardonable extravagance of her shiny rental car.

Her children don their Irish heritage like a local costume, exuberantly, but Eilis, whose Irishness in *Long Island* has always set her apart, has become an outsider.

Tóibín is the consummate cartographer of the private self, summoning with restrained acuity (and a delicious streak of sly humour) the thoughts his characters struggle to find words for, those parts of themselves that remain resolutely out of their reach. Eilis has grown more self-possessed since *Brooklyn*, more direct in



BOOK OF
THE WEEK

Long Island
By Colm Tóibín

SOCIETY

Feline groovy

From nameless pests to pampered pets... how Victorian artist Louis Wain ushered in the age of the cat

By Sam Leith

Catland, as Kathryn Hughes describes it, is two things. One is the imaginary universe of Louis Wain’s illustrations - in which cats walk on their hind legs and wear clothes, and humans do not feature. In the late Victorian and Edwardian eras, these kitschy pictures were everywhere and he was world famous. He’s all but forgotten now, but his influence lives on. One of the ways it does, Hughes argues, is in the other “Catland”, the one we all live in. Wain’s career accompanied a transformation in attitudes between 1870 and 1939 in which cats went from being necessary evils or outright pests to pampered fixtures of home and hearth.

For much of human history, cats were nameless creatures who lived on scraps, caught mice and unsightly diseases, and yowled in streets, were familiars of witches, and had fireworks stuffed up their bums by cruel children. Now, flesh-and-blood cats are beloved family pets, selectively bred, and accustomed to lives of expensive idleness, while fictional cats are cute rather than vicious, cuddly rather than satanic. The small part of the internet

that isn’t pornography, it’s sometimes observed, is mostly cat pictures.

In 50 chapters, Hughes tours these two Catlands using Wain’s life story - “which runs, or rather zigzags, through this book” - to stitch it all together. We meet the first “cat-burglar” (a rooftop-crawling felon of feline agility); learn of the class-ridden civil war between different factions in the Victorian “cat fancy”; learn when “pussy” became a double entendre; encounter cats in the first world war trenches; and learn the dismaying reality of what the Feline Defence League actually did in “defence” of cats, which was round them up and gas them.

This is a darting, hobby-horsical, hugely interesting book with the feel of a passion project rather than a sobersides work of history. But its ease and authority come from how Hughes as a historian is completely at home in the era under discussion, offering feline sideways glances at class, economics, urbanisation, eugenics, gender politics and much else besides.

Is it eccentric that she pegs her story to Wain’s work? Even though Hughes argues that his work helped midwife



Catland
By Kathryn
Hughes

the American style, coolly capable of negotiating with her boss and standing up to her mother-in-law, but the habit of silence is hardwired in her. Back in her mother's house she is as disoriented by longing as she was 20 years before, but in middle age it is a longing that must somehow accommodate the life she has already made, a life that no longer begins and ends with the self. It is no accident that, while the triangular story of Brooklyn was told exclusively from Eilis's point of view, Long Island shares the close third-person narrative between Eilis, Jim and Nancy, drawing us deeply into the hearts of all three as they move inexorably towards a reckoning. There can be no happy ever after, not when happiness can be won only at the cost of another.

After its explosive opening, Long Island unfolds in a series of small events: a shopping trip to Dublin, a walk on a beach, a wedding. People gossip. Enniscorthy is not a place where secrets can be kept. Much of the novel's tension comes from the excruciating certainty that the steady accretion of small deceptions can only continue for so long, that sooner or later the delicate balance will be broken, and yet, when it comes, the breaking strikes like lightning, unexpected and shattering. This deceptively quiet novel is the work of a writer at the height of his considerable powers. In general, it is true, sequels are pale things, but the exceptions to the rule are glorious, contriving both to satisfy on their own terms and to deepen the reader's relationship with the book that came before. Long Island is among their number.

CLARE CLARK IS AN AUTHOR AND CRITIC

the age of the cat, Wain seemed always to be a bit behind the curve. He had a brief, not altogether successful stint in the US when Hearst, on a shopping spree for cartoonists, contracted him to produce syndicated strips (he struggled to get the hang of them). Three years after Wain returned to Britain, Hughes notes in an aside, Hearst signed up that stone-cold genius George Herriman to draw Krazy Kat.

By that stage, though, Wain had more to worry about. He had always been cranky in a slightly tedious, rambling-letters-to-the-papers way, but by the early 1920s he slid into mental illness. He seldom left his bedroom and seldom slept. He surrounded himself with bits of scrap metal to deflect electric rays, believed that the projector at the local picture house was sucking his spinster sisters' brains out, and was duly carted off to the local asylum.

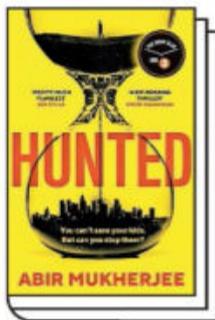
A visitor to his ward, as a famous story has it, came across "a quiet little man drawing cats" and exclaimed: "Good Lord, man, you draw just like Louis Wain!" To which the man replied: "I am Louis Wain." "You're not, you know!" said his interlocutor. "But I am," said the artist, and he was."

SAM LEITH IS THE LITERARY EDITOR OF THE SPECTATOR AND AN AUTHOR

BOOKS OF THE MONTH

The best recent crime fiction and thrillers

By *Laura Wilson*



Hunted

By *Abir Mukherjee*

For his first standalone novel, Mukherjee, author of a crime series set in 1920s India, has turned his attention to contemporary America. During the last week of a toxic presidential campaign, a bomb in a California shopping mall claims 65 lives. A group called the Sons of the Caliphate claims responsibility, but when FBI agent Shreya Mistry closes in on them, she discovers not jihadists, but something altogether more complicated.

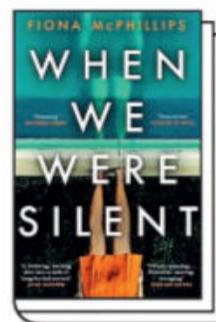
Meanwhile, the parents of two group members - Carrie, whose son Greg is a former US soldier, and British Muslim Sajid, whose daughter Aliyah was radicalised after her activist sister received life-changing injuries during a demonstration - team up to find their children before any more atrocities are committed, becoming fugitives themselves in the process. With multiple narrators, a fast pace and a horribly credible storyline, this white-knuckle ride grips from start to finish.

Bonehead

By *Mo Hayder*

Hayder's untimely death in 2021 robbed us of an imagination unparalleled in both its darkness and its audacity. Her final novel, Bonehead, is as haunting and distinctive

as its predecessors. In a Gloucestershire community years after a coach crash in which six teenagers were killed, blame and rumour still abound. Dogs go missing and the eponymous faceless woman drifts through woods where nature itself seems entirely malevolent. Survivor Alex, now a police officer, glimpsed Bonehead on the night of the crash seconds before the coach left the road. Although there is an imbalance to this book, presumably because of the circumstances in which it was written - the ending seems rushed in contrast to the expertly paced ratcheting of tension in the first half - the final page is a classic Hayder shocker.

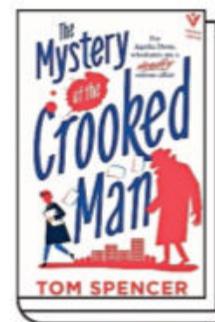


When We Were Silent

By *Fiona McPhillips*

Set in an exclusive Dublin school, Irish journalist McPhillips's debut novel is a story of consent, agency and the abuse of power. In 1986, 17-year-old Louise takes up a coveted place at Highfield Manor with the aim of avenging her friend Tina, who, pregnant as a result of rape by swimming coach Maurice McQueen, took her own life. When McQueen hits on Louise, no one believes her and her efforts both to avenge her friend and stop Shauna, who she loves, suffering the same fate, end in a fatality. Years

later, Louise is approached to help a 14-year-old victim of the current Highfield coach, but it soon becomes clear that somebody wants her to remain silent. Suspenseful and beautifully written, this novel perfectly captures teenage intensity and anguish, as well as the lasting damage done by predatory men and those who enable them.



The Mystery of the Crooked Man

By *Tom Spencer*

The central character in this refreshingly oddball homage to golden age fiction is cantankerous archivist Agatha Dorn, who is catapulted into the limelight when she discovers a lost manuscript by the famous Gladden Green, who bears a resemblance to Agatha Christie. Disgraced when the novel is revealed to be a fake, Agatha turns detective when her former partner, Amy Murgatroyd, is found dead with a scrap of the manuscript beside her. Whether or not you enjoy this will, I suspect, be largely down to whether you warm to Agatha, who is prickly and far too fond of gin; born in the 1970s, she seems to date from a far earlier time. However, the plot is nicely convoluted, and there are some surprisingly poignant moments.

LAURA WILSON IS A CRIME WRITER AND CRITIC

MODERN LIFE

Tim Dowling



My wife has a DIY job for me. I get to irritate her while I do it

It is Sunday morning. My wife and I are staying with friends, and she is telling them about the panic attack I had in the night.

"It wasn't really a panic attack," I say. "I just thought I was going blind."

"We had to sleep with the lights on," my wife says.

"You know when it's dark and you're in an unfamiliar room," I say. "And then suddenly you can't breathe."

"Still," my wife says. "At least I didn't wake up to him punching me."

"Punching you?" says our friend. I am conscious of the fact that we are beginning to seem like less than ideal overnight guests.

"Not on purpose," I say.

"He's asleep when it happens," my wife says.

"The people I'm fighting in my dreams deserve it," I say. "These are bad people."

As we leave for home my wife steps on my foot in a playful manner, but I decide to take it the wrong way.

I plan to remain aloof all afternoon. I have not, after all, slept well.

"Shall we begin?" my wife says, shortly after I sit down.

"Begin what?" I say.

"The curtains," she says.

"Oh my God," I say.

I forgot that my wife has three sets of curtains she wants me to install, using an innovative method of her choosing: the curtain rods are lengths of copper pipe, to be held in place using brass pipe fittings.

"So really, you're asking me to do plumbing," I say.

"It won't take long," she says.

"It will take all day," I say.

My wife shows me the piping leaning against a wall outside. The pipe has a weathered look.

"The man at the builder's merchant told me to paint flux on them to dull them down," she says. "So I did. I don't even know what flux is."

"Flux is a corrosive agent used in soldering and other ..."

"To be more precise," she says, "I don't care what flux is."

I locate a hacksaw and saw off an appropriate length. The cut is jagged, but it doesn't matter because I have caps to fit over the ends.

"That looks great," my wife says.

"Now to get it on the wall," I say.

What follows is my least favourite kind of DIY: drilling into walls to discover how insubstantial they are. As usual, I narrate every step of the process out loud. As usual, my wife pretends not to find this irritating in a bid to keep me on task.

"How perverse. With the first hole I hit brick straight away. Whereas with the hole below, I struck nothing but thin air," I say. "I think I may have drilled straight through the house to outside."

"Best to press on," she says.

We thread the curtains on to the rod and hold them up. I screw in one fitting, then the other.

"The cross-head screw is famous for its self-centring properties," I say.

"Interesting," my wife says, through gritted teeth. "Is it maybe a bit low on my side?"

"Too late to worry about that," I say. "It is what it is."

My narration continues as we progress. I sense that my wife's veneer of good humour is flaking away, but she remains determined not to let this project spread itself over half a dozen weekends.

"I've hit a joist, and now must switch drill bits mid-hole," I say.

"You're doing well," she says.

The final screw will not tighten, but the curtains appear to be held in place by the other three, at least for now. The main plank of my DIY philosophy is that nothing stays stuck on the wall for ever.

"Eventually everything clatters to the ground," I say.

That night, with the curtains in place, the bedroom is shrouded in profound darkness. My breath comes short; I have to open the curtains a crack to let in a slice of street light. Only then can I relax enough to fall asleep and dream of punching bad people.

As usual, I narrate every step of the process out loud

STEPHEN COLLINS



Stephen Collins COLLID.COM



ASK OTTOLENGHI



If you can't stand the heat, try some alternatives to chilli

So many recipes rely on chilli for flavour, but unfortunately I cannot eat spicy food. It numbs my mouth and I then can't taste anything, so it's a wholly unpleasant experience. What's a good substitute to ensure that such dishes still pack a punch, but not in a painful way?

Yvonne, Netherlands

Just fresh chilli or all chilli? Lots of dried chillies are much more about their smoky depth and the chocolatey, sweet notes they bring to a dish rather than being all about their kick - ancho and pasilla, for example, are wonderful.

Also, if a recipe calls for chilli flakes, try red bell pepper flakes instead, or smoked paprika rather than smoky chilli: both bring the colour and depth you don't want to miss out on, without the heat you do want to avoid.

If, on the other hand, you want to replicate the punch of chilli, a combination of garlic, ginger and spring onion will get you a long way. Add them at the start of cooking and sweat gently in oil, or use as a finishing touch, much as you would a tarka: soften in a little oil, then drizzle on top.

Smoked garlic is another ingredient to play around with to introduce big flavour to all sorts (while we're on the subject of smoked ingredients, smoked salt is another great option).

Citrus is also a good idea, not just lemon or lime juice, say, but also the flesh, roughly chopped - that's great in dressings and salads - while the zest is good for grating on top just before serving.

Moving away from the heat of chilli, miso, parmesan and anchovies are other fast-tracks to flavour. Stir miso into stews or braises, drop a chunk of parmesan rind into a soup, or stir in some chopped anchovy: all three will reduce your chances of feeling as if you're missing out by not using chilli.

And don't forget that finishing flourish, be it furikake, za'atar, dukkah or a crispy piece of thin, crumbled dried seaweed for a final burst of texture and flavour, along with a squeeze of citrus to give a savoury dish a bold, chilli-free ta-da.

YOTAM OTTOLENGHI IS CHEF-PATRON OF THE OTTOLENGHI DELIS AND THE NOPI AND ROVI RESTAURANTS



Got a kitchen question for Yotam Ottolenghi? Scan the QR code

THE WEEKLY RECIPE

By Meera Sodha

Nº 268

Sweet-and-sour aubergine orzo



Prep 10 min

Cook 1 hr

Serves 4

● VEGAN

Around this time of year in Britain, I like my meals to be more sympathetic to my plan to spend as much time outdoors as possible. Happily, this aubergine and pepper orzo, inspired by Italian agrodolce sweet-and-sour dressing, ticks that box, and in a very tasty way at that.

Ingredients

2 aubergines (about 700g), cut into 2cm dice
8 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
Fine sea salt
2 red onions, peeled and sliced into ½cm-wide half-moons
50g pine nuts
460g jar flame-roasted peppers, drained and cut into 1cm dice
2 tsp light brown soft sugar
2 tbsp red-wine vinegar
2 tbsp brined capers, drained
2 tbsp sun-dried tomato paste
300g orzo
100g baby spinach, shredded
10g (about 3 tbsp) picked fresh oregano leaves

Method

You'll need two large baking dishes of about 20cm x 30cm. Fresh oregano is fantastic, but you can substitute it with any soft, summery herb - basil or parsley, say.

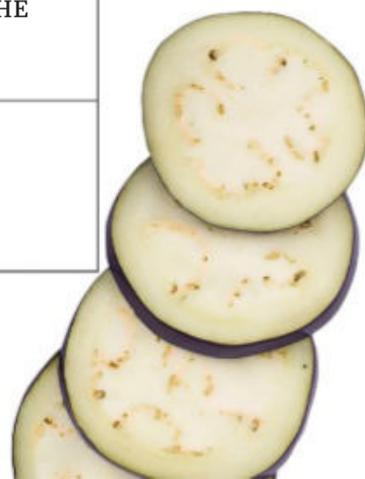
Heat the oven to 210C (190C fan)/gas 6½. Put the diced aubergine in a large bowl, add five tablespoons of oil and sprinkle over half a teaspoon of salt. Stir to mix well, then tip into a large baking dish.

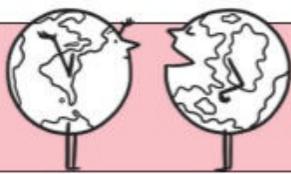
Put the sliced onion in a second baking dish, add three tablespoons of oil and a half-teaspoon of salt, stir to coat, then spread out so that the onion pieces are sitting toe-to-toe. Put the pine nuts in a small ovenproof dish.

Put both veg dishes in the oven and bake for 25 minutes, adding the pine nuts after 15. When the vegetables have had 25 minutes, take out all three dishes: the aubergines should be soft and brown, the onions reduced and caramelised, and the pine nuts lightly golden.

Tip the aubergines into the onion dish, then stir in the peppers, sugar, vinegar, capers, tomato paste, orzo and three-quarters of a teaspoon of salt. Pour over 400ml just-boiled water, then stir gently to mix well. Cover the dish tightly with foil and bake for 20 minutes.

Remove from the oven, lift off the foil, then mix in the shredded spinach, oregano and toasted pine nuts, cover again with the foil and leave to rest for five minutes. Distribute into bowls and serve.





Notes and Queries

The long-running series that invites readers to send in questions and answers on anything and everything

QUIZ

Thomas Eaton

- 1 The OED's first citation for "video game" mentions which Atari product?
- 2 Which river has Damietta and Rosetta branches?
- 3 Who were bribed in the 1950s payola scandal?
- 4 Which poet was nicknamed the White Myth of Amherst?
- 5 What athletics world record has stood at 7291 since 1988?
- 6 Which PM was described by Caitlin Moran as a "C-3PO made of ham"?
- 7 Which philosopher's brother was a celebrated one-handed pianist?

8 What brand name did M&S use from 1928 until 2000?

- What links:**
- 9 Bummalo; out first ball; Pacific burrowing clam; toilet cleaner?
 - 10 John Deydras; Lambert Simnel; Perkin Warbeck; Mary Baynton?
 - 11 Calderdale, West Yorkshire and Nova Scotia, Canada?
 - 12 The Night Manager; Conversations With Friends; Notes on a Conditional Form?
 - 13 Leda; Nut; Rebecca; Rhea Silvia?
 - 14 Beaded; flush; keyed; recessed; tuck; V-grooved?
 - 15 Relating to a city (8); devout (12); not guilty (13); merciful (14)?

PUZZLES

Chris Maslanka

1 Wordpool

Find the correct definition: **OOLOGY**

- a) speech of praise
- b) study of eliciting "wows"
- c) study of eggs
- d) qualification eliciting admiration

23-4-5

Roadside assistance

reversed vehicle (3)
Hear early Japanese greeting in this state (4)
Writer in drunken stupor (5)

3 E pluribus unum

Rearrange **ROPIEST TUNE** to make a word.

4 Wordcentre

Replace each asterisk with a letter to complete a word:

****PARIS****

© CMM2024

CINEMA CONNECT

Killian Fox

Name the films in question and the author who connects them.



Answers Quiz 1 Pong; 2 Nile; 3 Djs/radio stations; 4 Emily Dickinson; 5 Heptathlon; 6 David Cameron; 7 Ludwig Wittgenstein; 8 St Michael; 9 Ducks that aren't ducks: Bombay duck; fish; golden duck in cricket; geoduck; Duck brand; 10 Royal pretenders; 11 Capital is Halifax; 12 Englishmen romantically linked to Taylor Swift: Tom Hiddleston (TV series); Joe Alwyn (TV series); Mandy Healy (The 1975 album); 13 Mothers of twins in myth and religion; 14 Types of brick pointing; 15 Papal names: Urban; Pius; Innocent; Clement; **Cinema Connect** Jackie Brown, Get Shorty and Out of Sight (1998) are all based on novels by Elmore Leonard. **Puzzles 1** (c) 2 CAR, OHIO, PROUST; 3 PRETENTIONS; 4 COMPARISONS (any others?)

COUNTRY DIARY

GLYNN

County Antrim, Northern Ireland, UK

A dunnock is burbling from the tangled hedgerow. Across the field, a blackbird serenades. My mind turns to a snippet from an old book ... "Look at the birds of the air". I look up to see the raven winging towards Glynn Woods. My gaze drops to the cerulean waters of Larne Lough as Nuala points to the button of land that supports a tern colony. Behind us, Geoff and Martin are scrutinising species of solitary bees on the dandelion-spattered lawn. Then Matt, who coordinates Jubilee Farm's wildlife and wellbeing project, strolls across the yard to lead us on a walk.

This farm welcomes allcomers and is a living commitment to the inseparability of caring for people and caring for the environment. The community-owned farm was established in 2019; it sells its organic produce, hosts a farmers' market, and offers training in traditional farming practices.

It's good to be out in the sunshine. Passing an open-air chicken run, Matt stops to lift an escaped hen. We cross the grassed-over ridges of "lazy beds" (an old method of tillage), and a pregnant ewe, possessed of the confidence that only hand-rearing can give, rushes to greet us. The path descends to a fast-flowing stream. As we scan for the resident dipper, Matt remarks that a combined bird hide and meditation space might be placed in this meadow. Indeed, ornithomancy - the reading of omens from bird behaviour - was once thought to convey messages from the gods.

Today, quiet contemplation seems an inadequate response to our assault on the natural world. Then another snippet of verse comes to me. The part where a tiny seed grows into a tree that is large enough to shelter birds. *Mary Montague*

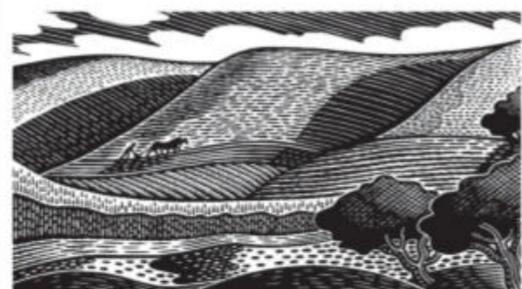


ILLUSTRATION: CLIFFORD HARPER

CHESS

Leonard Barden

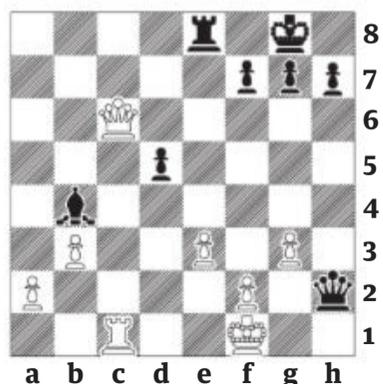
England seniors won triple European gold last Wednesday as the generation that was second only to the USSR in the 1980s and 1990s continued to show its enduring strength. The nine-day tournament at Terme Čatež, Slovenia, included 21 over-50 teams and 30 over-65s.

The next major senior event is the World Senior Championships at Kraków, Poland, in July. That is likely to be much harder, with the United States the principal rivals.

Since abdicating the

world crown last year, Magnus Carlsen has competed with a new freedom as if relieved of a burden. The No 1 triumphed in Warsaw in the Superbet Poland Rapid and Blitz, despite trailing China's Wei Yi by 2.5 points after four of its

3920 Aryan Chopra v Luis Quesada Perez, Capablanca Memorial, Havana 2024. Black to move and win.

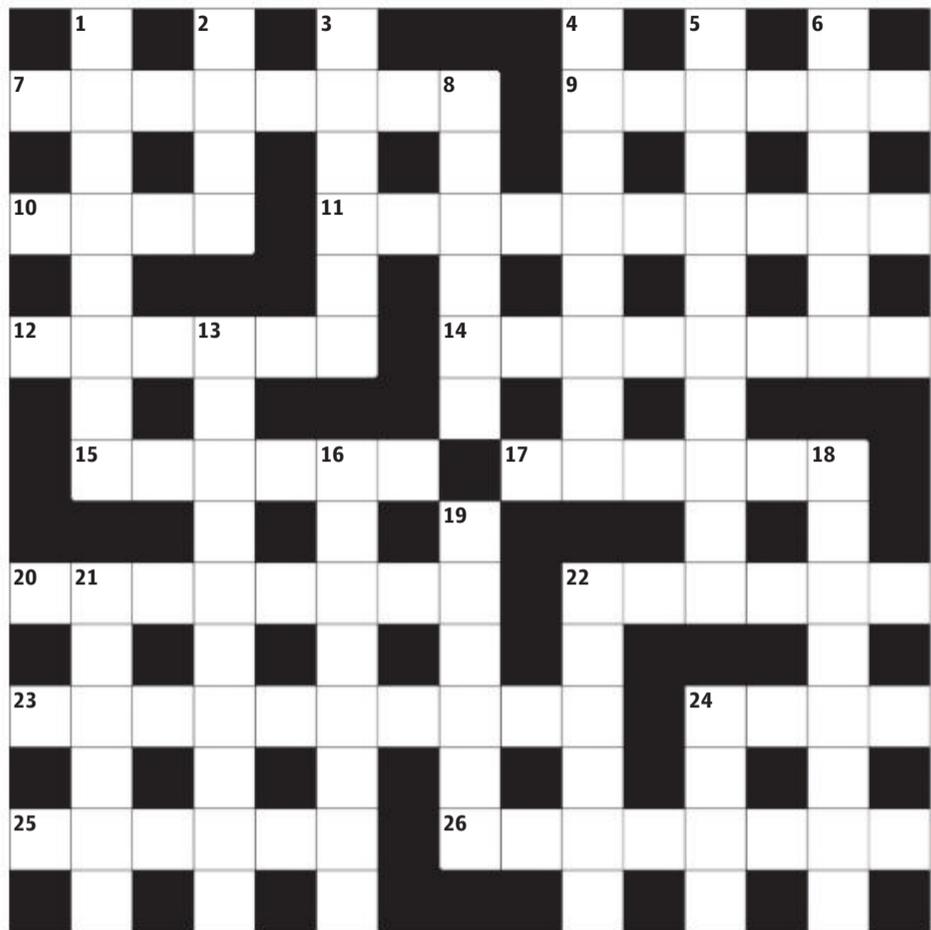


five days. Carlsen made a finishing burst of 10 wins in a row, including a defeat of his rival, then coasted in his final two games to win by half a point.

Wei was still a revelation. At 15, the now 24-year-old was the youngest ever to reach a 2700 elite GM rating, but then he gave priority to his maths studies for several years before his return to the tournament circuit this year.

Carlsen's next classical event will be Norway Chess at Stavanger starting on 27 May.

3920 It is mate in four by 1...Qh1+ 2 Ke2 Rxe3+! 3 fxe3 (3 Kxe3 Qe4 mate) Qg2+ 4 Kd3 Qd2 mate.



* All solutions published next week

The Weekly cryptic
No 29,382



By Fed

Across

- 7 Boring type of car - those who have one are certain to stay in the house (4,4)
- 9 Emperor penguins are rarely especially active taking just seconds at sea (6)
- 10 Adult whistled in audition (4)
- 11 Rock band's smooth cover of Madonna single, *Sanctuary* (4,6)
- 12 Place of worship is replacing a power tool (6)
- 14 Best ways to leave market (8)
- 15 Case of proper ladies men regularly getting compliment (6)
- 17 Means to honour dead from the war somehow (6)
- 20 Express understands seedy nightspot's sudden decline (8)
- 22 Lives happily in the middle of Pudsey (6)
- 23 Discourage explosive reaction initially following clincher (10)
- 24 Young animal's mother back inside pound (4)
- 25 Street artist's with it and sound (6)
- 26 Small issue causing insubordination (8)

Down

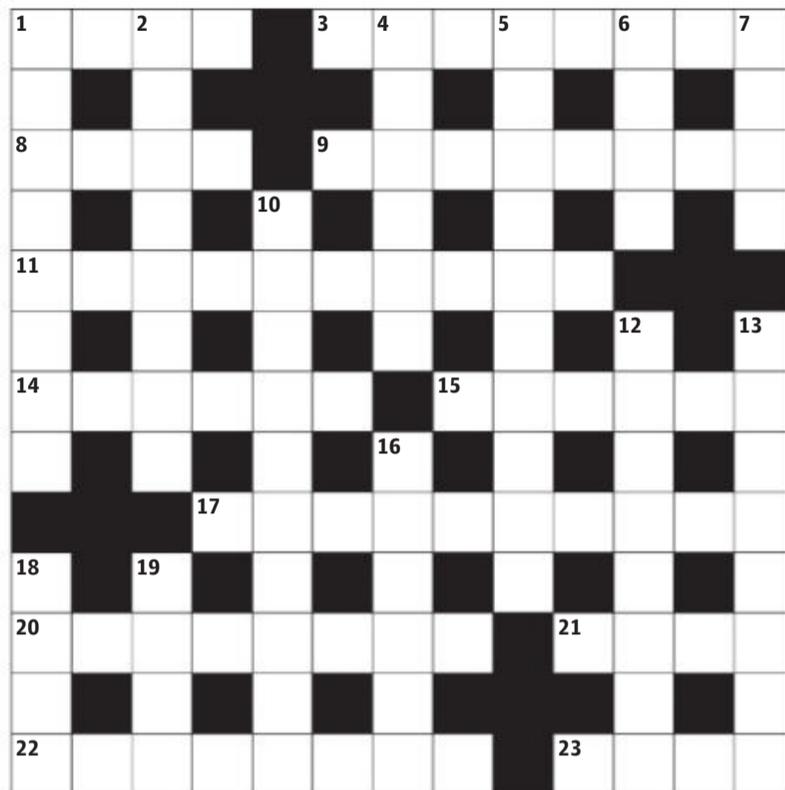
- 1 Craft lie making Tory cool (4,4)
- 2 Nice parent's bit of bedtime reading (4)
- 3 Refusal of nurse to wear ring (6)
- 4 I'm upset with racist getting weapon (8)
- 5 Type of radio produced by psychic with sway (6-4)
- 6 Calling about register - ignoring main point (6)
- 8 Employed and also working under king (4,2)
- 13 Feline's naughty, as eats mice (7,3)
- 16 Marks and Spencer's opening times assuming it's glossy magazine's accurate for starters - ace (8)
- 18 Fraction low on tip of nose like Dumbledore's glasses? (4-4)

- 19 Game and ultimately Margaret Thatcher maybe losing lead (6)
- 21 Retiring at 18 occasionally fears breaking mob rule? (6)
- 22 Mock German article English papers mis-ordered (6)
- 24 Departed and the others returned (4)

Solution No 29,376



Quick crossword
No 16,855



Across

- 1 Laugh - or cry (4)
- 3 Unambiguous (5-3)
- 8 Zero (4)
- 9 Powered flight (8)
- 11 Muscle and tissue at the back of the roof of the mouth (4,6)
- 14 (A) long way (3,3)
- 15 Luxuriate (in a bath, say) (6)
- 17 Nancy cedes (anag) - sway (10)
- 20 Not expressed (8)
- 21 Sit here (4)
- 22 British breakfast dish of fish, rice and egg (8)
- 23 Scottish hillside (4)

- 6 (Old-fashioned) copy (4)
- 7 Look after (4)
- 10 Overbearing (10)
- 12 Loud banging or ringing (8)
- 13 It's not played at home (4,4)
- 16 Worship (6)
- 18 Done for (4)
- 19 Enthusiastic (4)

Solution No 16,849

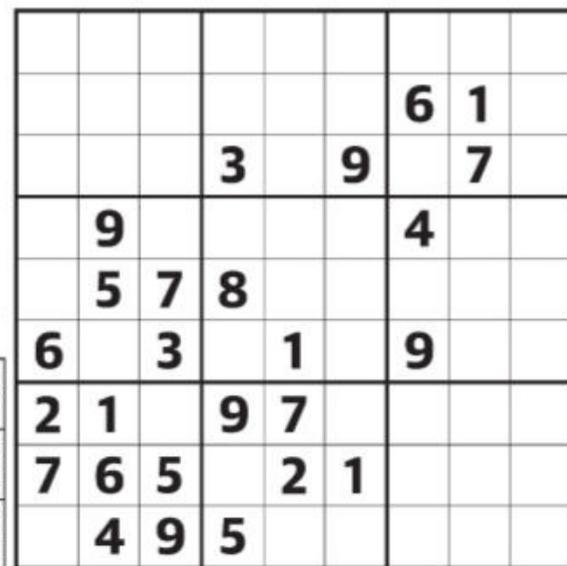


Down

- 1 Don't interfere! (5,3)
- 2 Electricity generator (4,4)
- 4 Pleasing (6)
- 5 Experimental - VAT a danger (anag) (5-5)

Sudoku
Hard

Fill in the grid so that every row, every column and every 3x3 box contains the numbers 1 to 9.



Last week's solution



Open up your world view



Get up to 41% off the cover price

Region	Retail price per issue	Subscription price per issue	You save
UK	£5.95	£3.53	41%
EU	€9.00	€6.24	31%

The Guardian Weekly takes you beyond the headlines to give you a deeper understanding of the issues that really matter. Subscribe today and take your time over handpicked articles from the Guardian and Observer, delivered for free wherever you are in the world.



Visit theguardian.com/gw-bp or scan the QR Code

The Guardian Weekly

Subscription rate is a monthly subscription payment of £15/€26.50, or annual rate of £180/€318. In the Rest of World, monthly subscription is \$33, and annual subscription is \$396. Currency will vary outside these regions. For full subscription terms and conditions visit theguardian.com/guardian-weekly-subscription-terms-conditions.